

SPLINTERED SYMPHONIES  
THE MIGHTY SHALL RISE, VOLUME ONE

*Works by Matthew Roland*

INTRIGUING INCEPTIONS: ESSAYS IN FANTASY &  
SCIENCE FICTION

THE SPECTER, THE WASTREL, AND THE TREE



MATTHEW ROLAND

SPLINTERED  
SYMPHONIES

*The Mighty Shall Rise*  
*Volume One*

First U.S. Edition

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

THE MIGHTY SHALL RISE - SPLINTERED  
SYMPHONIES

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*A forest of masses gathering near;  
hearts beating with a wrenching fear.  
The vale is swept; shadows gnaw and devour;  
the blade gleams in crimson light dour.  
Thunder roars and lightning crackles;  
an austere voice laughs aloud and cackles.  
Beneath starry skies a cry does ring,  
of the mighty one: the dreaded dark king.  
A Shadow rises: defiant, unyielding,  
and the chosen fall into darkness dreaming.*

*This serialization features the first eight chapters of Matthew Roland's upcoming epic fantasy debut "The Mighty Shall Rise." Because revisions are still ongoing, the matter contained in this book (especially that of Chapter II) is subject to change between now and final publication.*

*In accordance with this statement, this serial shall continue to be updated as needed. For more behind the scenes information and updates, visit [matthewroland.net](http://matthewroland.net).*

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# PRELUDE

## SPECTRES OF MIGHT



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IT IS BELIEVED BY SOME, THAT SHOULD circumstances prove direful enough, a good man of high reputation can quickly turn into the vilest of rogues.

Regardless of the opinions of either party, both can agree that should the occasion by any chance arise, then those with the strength of mind can be most trusted to endure their hardships and temptations through sheerest will alone. In much the same way, those owning a sound body, but poor temperament, are more likely to break under even the slightest of afflictions.

These were the things that ran through the mind of a young boy as he watched and waited for his current calamity to reach its end. He stood upon the deck of a ship, eyes gazing steadfastly into the uttermost horizon, and his hand resting atop the polished wood railing that girdled the whole vessel. The boy's name was Endurian Stonehelm, and the ship that bore him ever westwards was called *The White Wing*—named not for any perceived likeness to those attributes, but solely due to its superiority to any other vessel in swiftness alone.

Here and there, the entrails of a heavy fog floated and wafted in spiralling patterns, only pushed aside by the soft breeze that was beginning to pick up in the salt-scented air. Dawn had come and gone. Yet that dense, ponderous gloom seemed resolutely adamant in shrouding all that would pass through its overhanging murkiness.

It had been ten days. Ten long days since they had fled the wrack of Orthalon, which was no more. Ten days since they had abandoned that once-fair city as it was kindled by its own sweltering flames. It had been ten days since Endurian's mother was lost at the Crossings of the Carandrian.

"I like it here," came a soft, lilting voice at his side. "This crisp, cool air is calming, after having spent so much time indoors."

Collecting his bearings, Endurian swivelled about to behold Aurelia, granddaughter of a dead king, standing beside him, her ruffled white mantle wound loosely about herself. "You should not be out-of-doors," he said, turning quickly away so that she might not catch sight of the faint blush spreading across his pale cheeks. "You might catch cold."

"But indoors, everything is so dreary and joyless," she replied, shivering. "Besides, why would it matter? What is the difference? I cannot sit, relegated to tight, cramped quarters, while everyone else quarrels with one another. It is all so exhausting. What shall serve? Who shall prevail? Why do we go thither?"

"It has none of it much to recommend it," said he, "but all the same, it is the best available to us at this present time."

"Alas! Would that we were back in Orthalon, where all was once fair and green!"

"Orthalon is no more." He turned again to face her. "You can never go back. From now on, things shall never be the same. The life we once knew is over, and but a distant memory."

Aurelia avoided his gaze and stood silently in repose, her complexion never wavering as she stared almost wistfully out to sea. The coiffure which framed her fair countenance, descended in a cascading fashion to the

lowest reaches of her shoulders, fluttering and swaying in the wind.

Instantly, Endurian berated himself. So possessed had he been by the events of the past days, that he had not taken thought as to how his words might rend! He was on the brink of saying some words that might soothe or alleviate her, when she said suddenly, as if out of nowhere, "Endurian, I am afraid."

The statement caught him by surprise, and his forthcoming words instantly died on his lips. After a time, he said, "Why is that?"

"I do not know." She turned her emerald-green eyes, undeviating in their unabashed fervency upon him and said, "I simply feel a dour foreboding: an apprehension that something shall go terribly wrong and that I shall forever be separated from my kith and kin, eternally doomed to the sorrow of abominable circumstances gone disastrous."

A harsh laugh escaped from Endurian. "What more could *possibly* go wrong, than that which has already come to pass? If things can grow darker than they are already, what then is worth the living of this life?" He blinked back sudden tears, as the tender strains of past reminiscences returned in full force: a rushing cascade of memories and sorrows long held back, but now let loose at the leasing of the tide.

He felt a small hand come to rest on his shoulder. "Courage now. You *cannot* lose hope. It is the only thing remaining to which we can still safely cling."

"Aurelia," he said in a quiet voice. "I..."

"What, Endurian?" Not for the first time, she shivered, and without thinking, Endurian drew closer to her, his breath coming in and out in short, sharp vapours.

"Wise words from one so young," said a deep voice from behind them. Endurian had a sudden intake of breath before he recognised to whom the voice belonged.

Khaderas Awyrge stepped down from the short steps that led from the foremost deck to the main terrace below. The vast, barrel-chested man looked more fatigued than Endurian had ever seen him, and his ordinarily well-spruced beard was unkempt. "It is a sorrow indeed that children like yourselves should already be so well-acquainted with such worries and anxieties." Upon reaching the last step, he sighed and seated himself atop the lowest of them all.

"I am not a child," sniffed Aurelia. "It is only some years until I am of age."

Khaderas smiled. "Fourteen fleeting years in this grief-trodden world are hardly that. Both of you are mere saplings in fertile soil, already forced to weather the world's storms, when it should be otherwise. Not

even I am that very old compared to others; in a sense, we are all still children, I guess. But enough of this talk! You should be indoors, the both of you. A chill wind blows at this early hour, and your elders will be wondering as to your whereabouts. Take care and let that not come to pass! They already have enough to worry themselves with."

"My father cares not in what way I choose to bide my time," said Endurian resolutely, his late surge of emotion melting away as quickly as it had arrived. "Moreover, it is grown cold to me wherever I go, and the frigidness of these dour conditions troubles me not. Rather, the chill is set within my marrow, and it is that which freezes the very heart of me."

Khaderas was making to respond, when a voice called out suddenly from on high, "Land ahoy! At long last, land in sight!"

At this proclamation, Khaderas swiftly stood to his feet and bestrode the steps to the uppermost deck. As the alarm was repeated and the word spread, a burst of noise issued from the vessel. Sailors sped to their ordained positions, feet thumping across the wood deck. Following at their heels, Endurian stood abreast of the outermost portion of the hull, eyes straining as hard as they could through the thick, grey fog, in hopes of glimpsing anything he could of the distant shore.

At first, he saw nothing that could fulfil his hopes, and momentarily, his heart sank to his boots. But then, as his eyes lowered in disappointment, he perceived an outcropping shape looming out of the fog-swathed clouds. Faint it was at first, then becoming gradually more discernible, the outline of something far-reaching, yet growing greater still, manifested itself in the gloaming dawn.

“How far off are we?” came the voice of his father, and Orendel Stonehelm leapt onto the deck, eyes scanning the horizon.

“Some twenty minutes, I would think,” replied Khaderas, lowering the spyglass through which he had been looking.

“That is well. My feet long for dry land. It has been too long.” Orendel wearily draped a hand in front of his tired eyes.

Moving towards them was Eldaros Orgrim. The grim Captain of the Guard eyed the looming shadow in front of them without expression. “We are come at last then.”

“Aye,” said Khaderas. “We are at that.”

Very gradually, the others were beginning to emerge from the innermost cabins. Aurelia had not followed them and now stood off to the side with her mother, the Lady Lindis. Endurian’s elder brother, Aulendur, drew near also, his dark hair falling all about his face.

“Brother,” he said, with a nod of his head. Endurian responded in kind.

In the ruckus, Endurian failed at first to notice that Lord Tyrelion, father of Aurelia, had also emerged from the cabins, for he stood apart from the others, his flowing green cloak falling to his feet. Regal and imperial, he managed to cut a striking and equally imposing figure against those near to him. Tyrelion Ivronwine—Heir Apparent to the throne of Galaeros, which was no more, son to the late King Ithírion, and direct descendant of Eldamár the Renowned—was a stalwart beacon of hope, when set against the raging tides of darkness that gathered from afar.

In all of his short, fifteen years, Endurian had never known nor seen any person who embraced the responsibilities and duties of his position so competently, or so honourably, even when accounting for Orendel, his own father.

But then Orendel had never fully embraced his heritage as Tyrelion had done. Instead, he drew himself to an opposite exclusion: one, who instead of conforming to the nature and expectations required of him, was more prone to avoid it whenever he could. A man who was rejecting his preordained destiny in favour of forging his own path.

As for Tyrelion, Endurian’s regard had only grown for the man during the past few days. Despite all that



had occurred, Tyrelion still kept his peace, never losing his sense of calm and self-command. And it seemed that no matter how low he fell, nor how high he was taken that, in the end, he was still the same man: uninfected and unperturbed by those tribulations brought by the bestowing of power that many seemed to fall prey to so frequently.

Such was Tyrelion, King's Heir.



Tyrelion Ivronwine, son of Ithírion and Heir Apparent, was not perturbed by the dismal atmosphere that made up the air about him.

At the present moment, Tyrelion and his companions were drifting through the Bay of Narothél to shore beyond, where they hoped to soon anchor their boat and set themselves ashore. Very few men ever visited these cold, icy regions, and not much was known of the geography and makeup of the land. Most men knew it to be a region prone to spells of severe cold, accompanied by winters that lasted much longer than was the norm elsewhere. During these frigid winters, the bay was said to be ice-bound. Fortunately, they had arrived just before the onset of winter, so they were at this present time, able to manoeuvre their ship safely through the bay.

They were come far since the Fall of Orthalon. So very far in such a short amount of time. If Tyrelion had been told several fortnights ago that he would be setting foot in the Northern Wastes, he would have laughed heartily and thought that the one who let such words slip free from his mouth to be quite absurd.

“Tyrelion,” said Orendel, appearing at his side. “The time is nigh upon us.”

Orendel Stonehelm, as Tyrelion had observed, was very different from most men. But then, as he had also found, no man could hope to match the unbridled passion that resided within him. For long as he had known the man, he had been continually amazed and taken aback by the strength of will and mind that indwelt those who were named Stonehelm.

“Indeed it is,” said Tyrelion, allowing a soft sigh to escape from between his lips. “Let us hope that all bodes well for us on this decidedly dreary day.”

They stood there for a time: solemn, motionless figures, with hands, clasped firmly behind their backs, as they drifted through a sea of blue. The breeze was beginning to bluster with a little more swell than before, and the spoken word was growing more difficult to make out in the forceful clamour that rang against their ears. Besides, no words—consoling or reassuring—could even begin to make reparation for what had befallen them all.

It was at that time that the incandescent glowing of torches lit with red fire sprang slowly into view, illuminating a cluster of buildings that encroached upon the far edge of the shore.

The village that rested upon the strand was known as Snowbourne. What its inhabitants chose to call it, Tyrelion himself did not know. The men of these lands were considered to be strange folk by the residents of the lower lands. Much of the hearsay and speculation concerning them was, of course, very likely absurd. However, in a pit of fabrications and exaggerations, one may yet find an inkling of truth. So it was that Tyrelion had cautioned those around him to take special care in everything they said and did, keeping in mind with due regard, what could befall them if they came across as churlish or over-brusque. They needed answers, and it would not do well for them at all, if they came back empty-handed, after being turned away at the doorstep stemming from some petty, perceived slight.

The anchor was soon planted, and from the ship's side, a rope was quickly thrown. Leading the way was Eldaros, followed by Orendel's eldest son, Aulendur, and with him, Khaderas. Lastly came Orendel himself and then his younger son, Endurian. This was intended to be an impermanent and cursory expedition, nothing more. As such, it had been decided that Lindis and

Aurelia—amongst others—would remain behind, not just for the propriety of it, but also due to the need for haste that permeated all aspects of their quest.

Tyrelion was preparing to drop down himself when a small rustle from not far away stopped him short. Aurelia, despite her mother's cry, came running his way.

Tyrelion held himself upright, saying nothing.

"I want to go with you," Aurelia said, coming to a stop before him, eyes hauntingly desperate.

"Not now, daughter. Not this time. This is too dangerous a mission. Stay here. Stay with your mother."

"But Endurian is allowed to go, and he is but a year older than myself! I promise that I shan't cause any trouble. I cannot stand the confines of this wretched ship; they close in about me at all sides as if to suffocate the life of me, and I cannot bear it any longer!"

*I know the feeling only all too well.*

Tyrelion shook his head. "Aurelia, enough."

Her eyes filled with unshed tears. "I am never permitted to go with you. I'm always the one left behind. *Always.*"

"For which there is good reason." He stepped forward and bent to a knee so that he might look her in the eye. "I well understand your despair, for I bear it as well as everyone else. But you must abide by my judgement. Trust me in this; it is for the best."

Aurelia broke away, her feet carrying her to the cabins beyond.

Lindis started after her. "Aurelia!" She turned back to Tyrelion, despair also lingering in her eyes.

"Look after her," he said. "I'll have to speak to her when I return. I'm afraid that I have not been attending to you both as much as I should, especially of late."

"You do what you must," said she. "That is commendable. These things will work themselves out in time. So I hope."

"I can only hope that is true."

Lindis drew closer, sadness overwhelming despair, and took his hands within her own. "Peace, husband of mine. All shall be well."

"I shall return when we have accomplished what we set out to do here," said Tyrelion, looking down. "You may have no fear of that. I will see you both then."

He turned, striding towards the rope that descended to the waiting boat below. Though she whispered it almost as if to herself, the wind carried Lindis's last word to Tyrelion's ears: "Farewell..."

As the small ship pushed away from its mother-vessel, gliding swiftly through the near-still waters, Tyrelion cast his gaze briefly to the vessel above. Seeing no sign of what his eyes sought for, he turned back to his task of propelling the boat forward, and with each

push of the oars, it drew ever closer to the waiting shore beyond.



Endurian stepped out onto the shore beside his father, boots making a firm indentation in the soft sand. Tyrelion came next, followed by tall Eldaros, and the others behind him.

“What shall we find here, I wonder?” Eldaros said softly, drawing near to Orendel and gazing upon their surroundings with a keen regard.

“We shall see what we shall see,” said Orendel.

Not so far away, a lone figure appeared before them, holding a flaming brand overhead. He drew near, gave one look at their approaching forms, then let out an exclamation of wonder and fear. “The Men of the Towers are upon us!” he cried, and turning back, disappeared into the village.



“We mean no harm to you or yours,” said Orendel, with grave propriety. “We simply need your aid.”

Aulendur Stonehelm regarded the strangely-clad, darker-skinned men before them impassively. It seemed they had been at this for almost an hour now. Upon

coming ashore, they had been swarmed upon by these same men, who at first, had treated them with a hostile indifference, that Aulendur had divined was partly ensuing from their fear of all others not their own. However, after they had been led to the foremost chieftain of their people—who dwelt within the smallest tent in the village no less—he had begun to understand them somewhat better.

The *Iniravym*, as they so named themselves, believed that the greatest amongst them should live in the smallest of houses, wear the poorest of raiment and be the most impoverished in the village. That was why they now found themselves face to face with a man who befitted all of these attributes. Their fear, Aulendur had begun to surmise, was founded on the stories they had heard tell relating to Aulendur's kinsmen. These were mostly tales of wars so great that stone—the very bones of the earth—was rent asunder, legends of men who fell from the sky endowed with powers beyond that of the common man, and of dread monsters so execrably terrifying that they were only to be found in the deepest chasm of one's darkest nightmares.

But as Aulendur was also coming to understand, their fear was only partly based upon these conjectured myths and was mainly founded upon their common consternation and dread of a nameless malice that

seemed to hover over their hearts like a black shadow, minatory and ominous.

At Orendel's statement, the Chieftain turned and began conferring with his confidants and advisors yet again. Then, when some time had passed, he turned back to Orendel and said in his accented voice, "We are most sorry. But we cannot give you the assistance and aid you have asked of us. *You*, Men of the Towers, Men of Crowns and Spears, run away from some bad thing; this much we have been able to perceive from the wariness of your countenance and the manner in which you carry yourselves. And this bad thing from whence you flee, it will come after our children and us also, if we were indeed to lend you aid. Therefore, to our great regret, this cannot be. And that which you seek is hallowed, but you are only men and cursed at that." The Chieftain folded his hands and looked up at them, reserved and compunctious.

Orendel was silent for a moment, face tired and weary from the exhausting and harrowing events of the past days, in addition to his mounting frustration. "You have discerned this first verity rightly and are wise to fear the darkness behind us," he said at last. "But of the rest, you are wrong and doubly so. I can assure you, *no man* knows of our coming, save us alone. And we are *not* cursed; that at least is certain."



"This bad thing," said the Chieftain, shaking his head. "It is no man."

"You know of it then?" asked Orendel, clearly surprised.

"Every man knows of him," said the Chieftain. "Even those men who say they are unaware, in truth, *they know*."

"Indeed," said Orendel thoughtfully.

"Moreover, he does not need man's help," continued the Chieftain. "He is in everything. He is *everywhere*. And he *sees all*."

"Not everything," said Tyrelion, stepping forward. "That is where you are wrong."

The Chieftain eyed him almost warily.

"He is powerful, yes, most very powerful; but all-powerful, he is not, though he most certainly wishes that were so."

"And what events have convinced you of these sentiments?" asked the Chieftain sceptically. "How can you say such things and know them to be true in your heart?"

"Because," said Tyrelion calmly. "I have seen him."

Several of the Snowmen gasped, and all of them eyed Tyrelion in sudden shock and horror. "You—" said one of those who stood close to the Chieftain. "You have *seen* the Nameless One?"

"I have," repeated Tyrelion. "I have seen the effects of his tireless exertions each and every day. I have seen his servants as they perform his bidding. I have seen him in his work carried out. I have seen his mark in the destruction of our fair city. I have seen the results of all his many works. And from these findings, I have concluded one thing: he is not immortal, and at the very most, he is not divine. He has blemishes, shortcomings, and weaknesses—the same as the rest of us—and in the end, he *will* fall, one way or another. He has fallen before. Fallen, he will be yet again, for Darkness was not wrought to stand long in trial against the Light."

"Be that as it may—whatever you may say—we cannot help you," the Chieftain insisted stubbornly. "*He* will find us out some way or another, for he *knows*. His eyes and ears are everywhere."

"I have not come through fire and ruination merely to bandy words about the nature of evil!" said Orendel, voice rising. "I have come to stop it! I have come to see if I might but play my part in *preventing* him from slaughtering and burning our people in the great fire. I have a purpose; I have an undertaking, and I *will not* be dissuaded in this. Men of the North! I call upon you today to give your aid, and you turn me down, citing reasons bordering upon the madness of absurdity, preparing to hide in the darkness of your caves. You

have declared repeatedly that you will not direct my path to the *Nyráthyr*, fearing for the lives of your kith and kin; but know this then! In the end, it matters not what you do. Whether *he* would come after you now, is indeed debatable; however, of one thing you can be wholly certain: that when many lives of men have perished under the might of his sword, he will come upon you all one day in the summit of his wrath.

“On that day, you will be destroyed like straw before the ravaging fire, and he will sweep the foundations of your beloved homes out from under your feet, bringing ruin and death upon you and all your kin. So the choice lies before you now! If you, knowing all these things, still refuse to lend us your aid, you will simply delay your own doom. In holing yourselves up in your caves, you serve only his purpose by doing nothing. However, if you help us now, you may yet be spared from the onslaught of death and destruction that is to come, for, in this quest, we might at last be given a fighting chance against him and those of him. So I say unto you, behold! The choice lies before you. Your doom is at the very door! Will you take it or leave it? Choose swiftly!” In these impassioned words, Orendel’s voice grew so powerful that those before him fell back in amazement, and the zealous passion that rose forth from within the confines of his soul made their fervency all the more potent.

The Chieftain and his advisors stared at Orendel, eyes wide. They had quite clearly, not expected this. After a time, the Chieftain said, "What do you need to know? What is it you want?"

"I need a map," said Orendel. "Or a guide. It matters not which. The only thing that is of any real import is for me to reach the *Nyráthy*—and soon. There is something I must do."



Endurian sat alone outside the Chieftain's tent, hands clenched and muscles rigid to keep from shivering. He did not know what it was they debated—he never knew it seemed—and whatever it was they were discussing was taking mighty long to cover. Several times he'd heard raised voices, most notably his father's, but it had been some time since he had heard aught else.

Aulendur was with them all, so there was none with whom he might pass the time. Not that he needed to talk to anybody. He was just fine saying nothing as the next person. But he *was* curious. As a matter of fact, Endurian was just contemplating listening in on their conversation when suddenly, the flaps of the tent were pushed forward, and Tyrelion, followed by his father and the others, came striding through, along with several of the enigmatic Snowmen.

Orendel was talking to a young Snowman—a boy really—who was in a deeply-accented voice, describing something to him that seemed very important. They quickly wrapped up their discussion though, and Orendel looked up, eyes searching about him, till they fell upon Endurian. With a fleeting smile, he strode towards him briskly.

“Come, Endurian,” he said. “I must be off. Khaderas will come with me, but the others will stay. Come! There has been a tent readied for you while I am gone. Get some sleep if you can; we may have a long day ahead of us if things turn out the way I think they will.”

With that, he turned, motioning, and led Endurian to a small tent not far away. Inside were several lanterns, and there was a small stool in the corner. The floor was strewn with straw and dirt. Endurian eyed the arrangement disconsolately; he wanted to be *doing* something, not sitting around *waiting*.

“Of what were you talking?” he asked. “What’s going on?”

“There are things that even I have difficulty understanding,” said Orendel, clearly not disposed to make any exact answer. “Maybe someday, when you are older, I will tell you the truth of these things. However, for now, be content in what you know already.”

Endurian sat down on the stool with a sigh.

Orendel tarried momentarily as if considering something. A thoughtful expression was upon his face, and he appeared to be moved by Endurian's morose demeanour. Then, as if coming to a decision in his mind, he reached to the back of his neck, undid a small clasp, and brought forth a silver chain upon which hung a single, circular pendant. Encased in the pendant was a small, black stone no longer than the width of Endurian's thumb, jagged and angular.

"Here," Orendel said. "Keep this as a promise. A promise that..." Again, Orendel paused for the briefest of moments, before continuing on. "A promise that all will be well."

Taking it from Orendel's outstretched hand, Endurian eyed it with unbidden curiosity. "What is it?"

"It is called a Nornstone."

"What is a Nornstone?"

Orendel bent low beside him; and for the first time in all his life, Endurian saw his face drop momentarily. It was as if the ravaging winds of time were stayed and even as Orendel laid his hand upon that of his son's and folded his fingers closed over the stone, he became gaunt and haggard: a shadow of his former self. "It is my inheritance to you. It seems little now, and indeed it would be so for many others; but for you, there is nothing greater I might bestow.

“A time will soon come, Endurian—whether now or in a hundred years—when you reach the end of all that you think and know to be true. A time will come when you cannot seek me out to avail you in your darkest hour. When that time comes, remember then these words: *Passing through death and into life is bled, three curses, each one spawning inbred. It is they that are fostered, they that are misread: the Hated, the Loved, and the Hidden Thread.*”

The moment passed. Orendel stood, betraying no sign of what had just taken place. He gave a small, remorseful shake of his head. “But...the time has come for me to take my leave, if for a little while. Until then.”

“Father...” said Endurian, looking up.

Orendel, who had pushed open the tent flap and was preparing to step out, looked back, smiling. “Farewell, Endurian.”

Orendel disappeared into the darkness, leaving Endurian by himself. With a small sigh, Endurian shifted his attention from the door to the pendant which Orendel had given him, turning it over, while eyeing it curiously. After a time, he took it by the chain and slipped it about his neck, clasping it tightly.

Endurian sat up straight, eyes flashing open.

Several hours had passed since Orendel had departed with Khaderas, during which he had contented himself

with fingering the pendant his father had bequeathed him, and not much else. Aulendur had dropped by several times to see if he needed anything, but beyond that, not much else of interest had occurred.

Therefore, when he heard the sound of someone moving about in front of his tent, he was only very naturally drawn to it. He eyed the opening and was just tentatively setting a hand atop the hilt of his knife when a flashing bundle of white, blue, and gold came crashing through the opening. Endurian didn't have to look hard to see that it was Aurelia.

"Aurelia!" he said. "What are y—"

"Hush!" she said frantically, righting herself.

"What—How did you get here?"

"I appropriated a rowboat, that's how," she said, smiling at her own cleverness. "No one even suspected."

"But you can't be here! Your father—"

"Worries too much," she finished, eyes flashing. "And I just couldn't stand it there any longer, Endurian! I just couldn't! Tell me truly, Endurian Stonehelm, if you were in my shoes, would you have done any different?"

"No," he was forced to admit, and then looked away; those vibrant green eyes of hers made it difficult for him to think straight. "Upon my honour," he said, once he had regained his composure. "I've not had the time to give consequence to *anything else* worth the doing; the



others have made quite sure that I stayed put. So, if you're thinking..."

"Oh, I'm thinking," she said. "I'm *definitely* thinking."

"What are you thinking?"

Aurelia set her jaw, brow scrunching as she contemplated something. Then, she said, "We could go exploring the ruins. They're only a little ways past the village. I *know* because Master Khaderas let me look over his charts and maps."

"The ruins?" Endurian shook his head. "I don't know, Aurelia. It doesn't sound very safe. Besides, Father won't be pleased if we go wandering off into the wild without informing anybody as to our whereabouts."

"True, true," she said with a sigh, eyes downcast.

"But we could go walking on the forest paths," he said quickly as he could. "Just not too long. We'll have to return ere the others discover our absence. Your mother will likely realise you're missing sooner or later, and make for the village in search of you."

"Yes," she said, frowning again. "That is true." Her eyes quickly brightened, however. "Let's go at once."

"We'll have to find a way past my brother and any others. He's likely to be somewhere nearby."

“We have a clear path if we don’t make any noise. I saw him talking with my father just a little ways up the hill.”

“That is better,” said Endurian, and making their way forward, they stepped through the opening and so passed into the cold morning air. Sparing a moment to look about themselves, they then started through the chorus of camps like quiet shadows, taking care not to make too much noise, until at length, they were safely past the village and at the borders of the surrounding forest.

Starting out on the path, Endurian quickly fell in beside Aurelia, all the while enjoying the shy smile on her face.

“Earlier, you were saying how much you missed Orthalon, when I blurted something about *Orthalon being no more*. But I realise I was all wrong. You *can* go back. In time, all that is now desolate and barren may yet be green, and like it was of old.”

“Orthalon *was* my home. It was truly lovely, especially in the early spring. It was one of the few things that made my heart sing within me for the joy of it. There, I was happy.”

“What other things make you happy?”

“Sunsets,” she replied, looking on as if admiring one even now. “There were the prettiest sunsets. When the rain ceased, I would go outdoors past the walls of the

city just to catch a look of them. They were such a glorious canvas of wonderful things: one smattered with bits of blue, orange, gold, and on the rarest occasions, purple. So very beautiful.”

“You can still look upon them if that is your wish,” said Endurian. “Orthalon may be gone, but the seasons shall continue to render themselves as they must.”

“*We* shall see them,” she said softly. “I will show you. One day.”

“That would be—that is, I would like that very much,” he finished off, grimacing at his own clumsiness. Aurelia glanced his way, then looked down, a demure smile on her lips.

The path they trod wended ever westwards, skirting about a whole width of trees, and gradually gaining in ascent. Endurian had to admit, spending time with Aurelia did much to take the edge off his sorrow.

“It helps to walk about,” he said, breaking the silence. “To walk outside amongst the trees and to feel the soft breeze caressing your face. Detainment at any place for any long amount of time makes everything seem harder and more oppressive than it ought.”

“I agree,” said she. “I would know too, for I have often done so near Orthalon. Sometimes it is a good thing to go outdoors and appreciate for a time, the wonders of the world around us. Though the days grow dark and all is overtaken and shrouded by shadow and

flame, there is yet beauty to be found if one has only the courage to seek it out.”

“Courage? Yes. But even that is hard to come by. It grows harder to find with every passing day. I fear that it will be soon lost to us forever.”

“Perhaps you are searching in all the wrong places,” she said simply. “Where does your journey take you? What does your heart most desire? What is it that men cherish above all other things? They are all of them intertwined and intermingled together. In twilight and in shadow, through death and through despair, courage can never wholly fade. There is wisdom even in that. There is wisdom in hope and memory.”

As she spoke, words flowing like the cadence bound in troth to a tranquil melody, an enervated sigh escaped from betwixt Endurian’s lips, and with that release, it seemed at least for a small time, that all his fears and sorrows were unhanded.

“Aurelia...” he said again, voice sounding faraway in another world. “I—”

And it was then, even as the words began to leave his mouth, that they both stopped short on the path, eyes widening.

A Hellhound had just howled. Close by.

It was only then that they realised how far they had walked. As he looked frantically about himself,

Endurian was unable to recognise any of their surroundings. He swallowed, then looked at Aurelia, whose face was also pale.

“We can’t have wandered too far...” he began.

The Hellhound howled again, even closer this time.

They ran, panic taking them in a single bound. They did not think about where they went. They simply ran to get away from whatever might be lurking within the shadows of the dark. Through clustered knots of dead leaves, they passed, over fallen boughs long lain in solitude, and through the overarching shadows of the trees that now seemed ominous and menacing, where once they had thought otherwise.

The path they took began to curl upwards in a twisting fashion, taking them up the slope of a high hill. Several times they halted to catch their breath, only to start anew when the howling sounded yet again. Endurian’s limbs began to burn, and he longed to stop and rest for a time, for he was winded, and his side ached. But the terror instilled within them was the greater force, and it pushed them on, yanking them further and further to the north, where at last, they came unto the Hill of Helíngrod itself, and like a spectre of might, it rose before them, baleful and forbidding.

So they passed, legs pushing them up the rest of Hill, faster and faster till they thought they might die, and

they came at length to the foremost mound and with one leap, vaulted onto the grey stone that stretched from the Hill and down to a large, ice-bound pool. There, they stopped at last. By now, the howling had begun to fade somewhat, and though they could hear it still, it seemed to them that the sound of it issued further and further away.

But this was not the worst of their troubles. They were just comprehending the actual severity of their plight—for they were lost with no way to go back whence they had come, unless that were by chance—when something drew near.

What it was Endurian did not know exactly. Whether it was some sound or passing shadow that alerted him, or maybe even it was the blood of his forefathers that rose from within to warn him, he could not say. But the hair standing on his neck told him enough, and that *sense* of danger was strong: stronger than anything he had ever felt in all his days.

Aurelia felt it also, and her frightened eyes darted about wildly in search of some hope of escape. Endurian drew back, bumping into her, and they gazed out into the blackness, small figures surrounded by a descending darkness. At that very moment, a horrible, blood-curdling shriek issued out of the shadows abounding. Aurelia clutched his shirt sleeve, eyes staring straight ahead of her in stark terror. "Endurian..."

Endurian, who had been momentarily distracted by a noise to his right, turned about to look upon what it was Aurelia had seen. His eyes widened as out of the shadows, a dark, terrifying figure appeared before them. He stepped forward with precision, his black cloak making it seem as if he were gliding towards them; his black blade gleamed like oil in the shrouded light overhead.

“Don’t be afraid, little ones,” said the dark figure, lips curling into a twisted smile. “I am here to protect you.”



Tyrelion stood atop the edge of the cliff overlooking the bay, hands clasped behind his back. For some reason that he could not understand, his mind had been filled with an itching consternation and worry that all was not right. As he contemplated whether he should turn back or not, the sound of pounding feet reached his ears. Quickly as he heard it, he turned and found Aulendur Stonehelm making his way up the slope at a fast run.

“They’re gone,” panted Aulendur, eyes frantic as he came to a stop in front of him.

“What?”

“Endurian and...Aurelia, your daughter. They’re *not here*.”

“Aurelia? What do you mean? She is back on the ship!”

“Nay,” said Aulendur, holding up a delicate white scarf. “Nay, I’m afraid it is quite the contrary. I found this in Endurian’s tent. She must have snuck ashore on one of the remaining rowboats. From there, I can only guess that she stole her way to Endurian, ere they went wandering off by themselves, spurred on by their boredom in every likelihood. This *is* something Endurian would do.”

The rush of adrenaline caused by this sudden unforeseen revelation had not yet hit his head before the sound of screaming pierced Tyrelion’s ears. The sudden ringing of steel against steel quickly followed. There was the sound of children crying out in the night.

*The children!*

Tyrelion sprang towards the noise, fingers instinctively grasping the hilt of his sword. “Aulendur, with me! We haven’t got much time!”

Turning, they ran together in the direction of the screams. Trees and brush whipped past them, many smacking them in the arms and faces, causing smarting bruises to pop up. Another scream echoed through the forest, this one coming from a wholly different direction than the first. Aulendur and Tyrelion came to a screeching halt, both bewildered.



“Which way?” asked Aulendur. “Which way do we go?”

The answer was out of his mouth before Aulendur had even finished speaking. “We separate.”

Aulendur nodded. “Right.”

Both of them separated, Tyrelion going to the left, while Aulendur vaulted off to his right. Darting through the open spaces, the son of Orendel raced forward, mind bent and focused on one thing only.

Aulendur was so intent on his dread premonition that he was not aware he was falling until he stumbled over the lip of a ring of stones that rested in the clearing before him. With a grunt of surprise, he found himself falling flat to his face before suddenly, everything fell still.

Whether he opened or shut his eyes, there was no perceivable difference: utter blackness enshrouded him at every which way. Thus he waited, impatient in mind and spirit, for something to happen.

The first thing Aulendur saw was a dark and desolate land stretched out before him. A ring of broken towers drew near, and he perceived that they were crumbled and beaten beyond all hope of repair. Indeed all that remained of them was grey rubble and dust, and soon that dust was carried away in the wind, leaving behind

no memory or vestige of what had once crowned that hill.

The earth was rent in many places and wholly laid bare of all things green. Here and there, great fissures oozed out of the rocky soil which spotted the blackened landscape: and like great streams of fire, they were, running red down the hillside. It was as if the earth had been marred and torn with a scarring decay, and now the very lifeblood of the earth was come pouring forth from its many dire wounds. But then, Aulendur wondered to himself, who was he who had marred it?

Yet as soon as it appeared, the scene was lost from view, for the land ran past him—although he himself stood still—and then all faded away into nothingness behind him.

He saw now a vast plain filled, as it seemed to him, with all the peoples of the world. The plain was very large, running fast beyond the reaches of his vision, strain though he might. Rising above the plain was a high mountain. Atop the pinnacle of its uttermost spire, there stood a black figure with his hand raised upwards, as if for the impending judgement.

Afar off, the light of the distant horizon was steadily fading. As Aulendur looked on, the vast sea of people swayed in the plains and slowly divided into two groups: one upon the right of the great denouncer and another upon the left.

The vision blurred yet again, and now Aulendur saw a mighty city rising in the distance. As it drew near, time and distance seemed to fade away into endless nothingness, and where he had once perceived rampant destruction, he now saw the whole land as it ought to have been.

Or so he thought.

For, as he drew ever nearer, he saw that the city was afire and the grass encircling it was not green, but red: red with the blood of his slain kinsmen. Dead kinsmen, whose fallen ranks numbered beyond all sorrow and grief. And Aulendur recognised the city and knew it for what it was, or what it had once been at another time not long past: Orthalon, chiefest and foremost city in the Kingdom of Galaeros.

Before he could see further, a searing flash of lightning lit all of his vision and Aulendur found himself falling into darkness: falling faster and faster, till he hit the ground on his stomach. There he trembled upon the cold, hard stone, breathing in and out heavily.



Endurian and Aurelia continued to back away as the dark figure drew ever closer.

“What are you doing out here all alone?” he said, voice hard like the coldest steel. “Are you frightened? It’s okay to be scared. I was once as you were.”

“Do not listen to him, Aurelia!” said Endurian. They proceeded to back away until Aurelia came to a halt behind him, and he realised that they had not only run out of time but room as well.

There they might have met their end had not someone come crashing through the trees to their right. The dark figure jerked about in surprise, blade gleaming wickedly in the moonlight.

Orendel Stonehelm stood tall and defiant.

Although he appeared more haggard and weary since Endurian had last seen him, he charged forward to drive their enemy back, hands wielding a bright sword. Just behind him arrived Khaderas. As the large, barrel-chested man engaged the dark figure, his broadsword spinning and whirling, Orendel focused his attention on Endurian and Aurelia.

“Children, flee!” he cried. “Get out of here now!”

Aurelia turned to do as he commanded, but Endurian held his ground. “No! I will fight with you!”

Sparing a glance at the two fighting behind them, Orendel bent low and looked Endurian in the eye. “I need you to do this. You must protect Aurelia. Protect her! Keep her out of harm’s way. Can you do that for me?”

Endurian nodded, eyes betraying his frustration. Orendel briefly nodded as well, then standing, pushed them away. "Now, go!"

Endurian gave his father one last glance before he and Aurelia turned and fled.

Meanwhile, Orendel circled back to the fight ensuing beyond him. Eyes settling in determination, he brandished his sword and advanced into the fray.



They ran as one through the dark forest, gasping and choking for the breath that would give them the strength to continue on. But despite all this, Endurian felt as though his mind would break, for he had left his father. Left him alone to face the dark figure. He had abandoned him.

*Forsaken* him.

It wasn't in his blood to do such a thing. How could he live with himself if things took an ill turn? *That* was a power he did not possess. It was at that time that a shadow fell upon his heart; and try though he might, there was no argument he could have conjured, nor anything anyone could have spoken that could have possibly allayed him.

By the time the Horn of Khaderas sounded, Endurian had made his decision. He drew alongside

Aurelia, slowing her down till she was forced to come to a halt. Not far through the trees to his left, he could see where the Hill sloped off, and the trees gave way for the village below. "What?" she said. "What are you doing?"

"I must go back. I cannot comprehend the consequences if I do not."

"But your father said—"

"I know what he said!"

Aurelia averted her eyes, biting her lip.

Immediately, Endurian regretted his words. "Forgive me," he said. "I just haven't got much time. Do you know the way back?"

"Y—Yes."

"Good. Go find your father and tell him what's going on. Tell him where to go. And take care of yourself!"

Aurelia nodded, her cheeks pale in the cold air.

Endurian drew the ornamental sword that was strapped to his side, preparing himself to take his leave; but he stopped when Aurelia said somewhat hesitantly, "Endurian?"

"What is it?"

"I feel...I feel afraid again. Like on the ship. Something dreadfully bad's going to happen. I can just feel it."

Endurian shook his head. "You can't know any of that for certain."

"Yes," she replied, nodding vigorously. "I do."

Endurian eyed her, unsure of what to say.

“I can’t explain it; I just...know. So if something does happen...if one of us is separated from the other or even killed, then I want you to know that I will never forget you. You’re a good man, Endurian Stonehelm. A *good man*—and those are becoming hard to come by.”

Endurian looked away, this time *even more* unsure of what to say. “Aurelia, I...”

“Leave it unsaid,” she said. “Go help your father while I go for help. As you said, we haven’t much time.”

Endurian nodded, afraid that he might make a fool of himself. At last, he managed a muttered, “Farewell,” then leapt away into the night, the same time Aurelia went off in the other direction.

With his mind, set and determined, it did not take as long to come back the way he had come—or at least it seemed that way, and it was not long ere he had entered again into the stone clearing that overlooked the cliff, which fell plunging into the rushing river below them.

He could see Khaderas further up the Hill. The barrel-chested man was surrounded on all sides by Dark Elves, thereby making him unable to aid Orendel, who was at that moment engaged in a fight with the dark figure. Except that he wasn’t just fighting.

He was fighting for his life.

In all his days, Endurian 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 at inhuman speed.

Eyes hot and burning with a rage he never before felt, Endurian leapt forward, swinging the too-heavy sword in a downwards arc at the dark figure's side.

He was anticipated, however; for while Endurian could hold his own with a sword, he was no match for the might and cunning of his foe. With a backhand flip, the dark figure sent Endurian's sword flying to the ground, whilst stepping back out of the way of a thrust by Orendel.

Silence fell. The dark figure *smiled* at Endurian. "Thank you."

Orendel turned to see Endurian; surprise and shock were etched onto his face. "Endurian?"

And then that fell enemy, seizing the opportunity granted to him by Orendel's distraction, coiled as a snake, and smote upwards, sending his blade plunging halfway into Orendel's gut.



In the distance, the sound of steel clanging against steel was growing steadily louder by the second. Not far off, a Hellhound howled.



Tyrelion, feeling winded from his frantic flight, was stumbling and staggering toward the source of the fighting when the sound of someone crashing through the brush caught his ears. He had just enough time to take a defensive position, when *Aurelia* came crashing into the open, nearly slamming right into him.

“Aurelia?” he began. “Whatever is going—”

“Endurian is in trouble!” she said, cutting him off. “He went back to help Lord Orendel, who saved us from...”

His eyes narrowing, Tyrelion asked, “Who?”

“It was...” Aurelia cut off again, looking at Tyrelion. A moment of understanding passed through them that words could not hope to replicate. “*Him.*”

Tyrelion’s blood ran cold. “Murazôr.”

“Yes.”

“Stay here,” he said, then shook his head. “Nay, return to the village. There is a chance your mother is there, waiting. Do not leave her side at all costs.” Again, a Hellhound howled not far from them. It was closer this time.

Much closer.

“But...” Aurelia looked around them nervously.

Tyrelion set his jaw, biting back words that he would regret if said out loud.

He made his decision, then strode past her toward the virulent struggling that ensued someways beyond them.

“Come with me.”



Orendel staggered backwards, gasping, choking, clawing for breath.

The dark figure advanced, wiping clean his soiled blade upon the hem of his cloak.

“No!” cried Endurian, overcome by sudden emotion. Scrambling for the hilt of his sword, he swept it up and lunged in front of Orendel.

The dark figure advanced upon him, preparing to deliver the final blow. Endurian held up a shaking sword. “No,” he said bravely as he could. “You can’t have him! You’re a monster.”

“I am *justice*,” said the other. “Tell me, boy, are you prepared for the judgement?”

“Father...Father says justice is what is right. He says that even when the monsters come to kill us, we have hope. We have hope even if we die...and because of that, we are not afraid.”

“Wretched fool! You believe in a false hope, one that would deceive you and leave you utterly bereft of the

very fidelity you so crave. Are you willing to die for *that*?"

The sword of the dark figure began to rise.

"Morgaris!"

The dark figure stopped short.

Orendel was on his knees. His sword lay at his feet, and his mouth coughed up blood on his shirt.

But even so, when he spoke, his voice was clear and steady: as loud and clear as the trumpets of Galaeros at the first rising of the sun, and the onset of battle.

"Stand aside, Endurian."

Endurian's eyes fell to the face of his father, full of fear and fright. But Orendel's eyes did not meet his own. They were fixed upon the dark figure.

Endurian fell back, a horrible, sickening guilt pervading all his thought as he realised the events he had wrought by turning back.

"You were always weak," spat the dark figure contemptuously. "Weak and foolish. Flawed and imperfect. Look now where your utter failure has led you! Surety you would crave of me as a boon, but this fate was decreed for you long ago. You have nothing left to you but your death!"

"Perhaps," said Orendel, and again he coughed, hot blood striking the cold grey stone beneath his feet. "I cannot deny the truth. I *have* been a fool, and my shortfalls remain to haunt me in my every waking hour.

I have failed you, Morgaris. I truly have if this is the road you have taken.”

“My road is my own. I have done what my forefathers could not: I have mastered my destiny. The deceits I once took so willingly for truth can no longer entreat me; time and vision have set me aright.”

“Morgaris,” repeated Orendel, stretching out a shaking hand, and Endurian saw that he was weeping, great tears running down his face. “There is a great danger here. You do not yet know your peril. If you continue on as you are in wilful contempt, a time will soon come when the door of return can only remain shut to you.”

“Save your words and your grief! The man whom you beseech is long dead! There are now none who might have once answered to that name. Those who live with a fool’s intent can come only to a fool’s end.” The dark figure shook his head, a single, gleaming tear sliding down his pale face. “I’m sorry. I truly am. But I do not ask you to understand. Believe me when I tell you that this is the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do.”

At long last, Orendel’s eyes strayed to meet those of Endurian. But shame and stinging remorse overbore all the desire he may have had to atone for his misdeeds, and in that fleeting moment, Endurian turned aside his face, and his sword fell clattering from his outstretched hand.

The blade of that terrible foe came screaming down.  
Orendel did not cry out.



“Hide here,” said Tyrelion, motioning for Aurelia to stay behind on the large outcropping of rock that surrounded the edge of the clearing. “By all means possible, do not move, and let no one catch sight of you. Do I have your word?”

Aurelia nodded.

“Good then.” Tyrelion turned to the clearing beyond. “It’s time to settle some unfinished business.”

And with that, he stepped into the clearing.

Immediately, he saw that things did not go well: Orendel Stonehelm lay prone—unconscious or dead he did not know—upon the cold stone. Beside him sat young Endurian, his head in his hands. Above them loomed someone *very* familiar.

Ir-Murazôr.

Tyrelion did not wait to see what happened when Murazôr brought his sword down.

“Murazôr!” he called out in a commanding voice. “End this now!”

Murazôr laughed grimly. “*That* I have already begun! In vain you have struggled, but it will not do! Try

though you might, you cannot hope to put an end to these things. It has begun. At last."

"And what is that?"

"The End. The End to the Endless War. And yet the Beginning to the War to end all wars. The game has changed, the clock is ticking, the pieces are moving: everything you know, all that you hold dear, it will be taken away from you forever. Know this! The Day of Doom draws ever nearer. Soon our time will come. Soon, all things will be as they should. Soon, every man who walks this earth will be given their due right: to act as they deem without interference and intercession."

Tyrelion began to close the distance between himself and Murazôr. "Your words betray your own folly. *Nothing* could be more deceitful. You would bring our doom down upon us all! And I *will* try, for you know as well as any other that you cannot hope to prevail against me in a fair fight. Not once have you triumphed over me, even in my weakest moments."

"I know," said Murazôr in a soft voice. They were so close now that with every word, Tyrelion could see the vapours of cold air that issued from Murazôr's mouth. "That is precisely what I should have supposed of you. Which was why I was forced to resort to *other* measures to ensure my triumph."

Tyrelion narrowed his eyes. "Wh—"

At that moment, several armoured men entered Tyrelion's vision from where they had been hiding in the ruins behind them. In their strong hands, they grasped the arms of a struggling woman, bound and gagged.

Lindis.

Sudden understanding sent terror seething and roiling through Tyrelion's blood.

Murazôr smiled sadly. “

We found her as she came ashore, in search of your truant daughter. Unhappily, I will tell you, we had no other choice but to take her as she was. I'm sorry, Tyrelion. I already regret the actions I'm about to take. But this is the only way you will ever understand my pain and see the truth for what it is.” By now, the two men had reached Murazôr and had stepped out in front of him, pinning her in place between them both. “You have forced my hand. Why could you not just give it up? Why did you not move on and not interfere? *Were you so foolish as to believe that I would not find you here?*”

“No...” Tyrelion struggled for words, his heart fixed in the cold grip of fear. “It doesn't have to end this way...”

But one look from Murazôr told Tyrelion his enemy was utterly implacable.

Tyrelion's eyes met those of Lindis for a fleeting instant—

—and then Murazôr struck down, plunging his sword through her chest.

Tyrelion doubled over, heart-wrenching sorrow washing over him in one, jolting wave.

Such pain. Such sorrow. Such grief.

Life...seeped out of him. He was drained. Utterly bereft of...of feeling.

Why.

Why?

*Why?*

Through his tears, he saw her where she lay. Hand stretched out towards him, fingers reaching, grasping, dying.

Eyes seeing but not seeing.

Life and soul gone forever.

“No!” screamed Aurelia. “Mother, no!”

Tyrelion watched as she leapt forward from the place he had bidden her stay hidden. He watched as Dark Elves descended from the hilltop in great wrath, brandishing their cruel blades. He watched Aurelia gasp in fear and run in the opposite direction.

Running away. Running toward the cliff that ended in a sheer drop hundreds of feet long into a violent deluge of rushing water.

Like a beam of hallowed golden light, life returned to him, momentarily filling the void that was his soul. Lindis may have passed from life into death, but she



would not have wanted him to look on in his grief and watch as their beloved child perished. She would want him to take action. She would have wanted him to save her.

So Tyrelion leapt to his feet, body coursing with newfound energy, and vaulted forward. Those foes that moved to intercept him, he slew without a second thought. Nothing could stand in his way.

He was inevitable, a very force of nature.

Yet even sheer might can do nothing to change an inexorable destiny, and outside forces often wreak more havoc than the greatest of powers can hope to overcome.

And as he drew near, coming closer and closer to his goal, a Dark Elf entered his range of vision, and with a cry of the purest hate, slammed into Aurelia, knocking her to the ground, just as the ground began to tremble: the bones of the earth shifting uncomfortably.

Rumbling and tumbling, the rock gave way, causing the young girl to go tumbling over the side of the cliff. Aurelia screamed, and Tyrelion lunged down, just barely managing to catch her arm as she fell.

“Hold on!” he cried.

Overhead, thunder roared, and lightning crackled, zapping across the sky and lighting up the grey clouds.

"I won't let you go. Just *hold on*," said Tyrelion, straining not to lose his hold. At that moment, the rock beneath Tyrelion began to rumble again.

Aurelia looked at him, tears in her eyes. "I'm sorry."

"No..." Sudden dread raced through Tyrelion's head as he realised what was happening.

"I should have listened...I'm sorry, Father. If it's not too late, tell Mother I love her."

"No!"

There was a sudden crash of rock. Before he could comprehend what was happening, Aurelia's wrist slipped free of Tyrelion's hand, and she let out a soft cry.

"NO!"

And Aurelia fell.

## NINETEEN YEARS LATER

The vision of the past faded as soon as it had begun, and Endurian Stonehelm awoke with a start, hands feebly clutching at the sides of his bed to steady himself. He sat still and in silence for a long moment, the only sound his shaky breath as it issued from his mouth and mixed with the muted sounds of the night. After a time, his thoughts coalesced, calming and forming, and his mind cleared.

But he could not erase what he had seen. What he longed to forget.

Thoughts still racing furiously, he forced his tired body to rise and walked slowly over to the nearby window that looked out over the surrounding lands. It was not until that very moment that he noticed the odd, unrhythmic, and feeble *tap* that beat against his breast. He looked down, eyes widening in a mixture of wonder and trepidation.

A pale, silvery light was issuing from the Nornstone that hung from the chain about his neck. Endurian stared, momentarily forgetting the vision. Nineteen years of failure to discern its secrets left him speechless. Tightening his mouth to avoid trembling, he raised his hands to lift the carved shard of stone up to the light of the moon, gazing at it with a sort of nervous anxiety.

The Nornstone gleamed with a soft, beating thrum, the light of its essence fading in and out ever so subtly. Then, as he gazed upon it still, a voice, a mutter, a soulless whisper reached out, and his ears heard, and his heart froze: *Bonds to break. Life to take. Thirst to slake.* The stone shone brightly on a sudden, Endurian gave a shout of strangled fear, and his mind was overcome by a series of rapid panning visions, not mere memories, but a variegated assembly of past and future, and things he could not name even if he durst.

*A wide, shadowy place. A glimmer in the darkling night. Fire and water. An ocean. An island. A tower.*

*Someone screaming. Stars falling from the sky. Rain pelting the sodden earth with a furious reverberation.*

Endurian found himself falling, trembling, shaking. He smote the floor with a low thud and heard a deep, ringing voice cry out his name.

*Darkness rising. Light springing to meet it. A lone wander wending his way down a winding road. A sword, shining like white fire, rising to strike down some unseen foe.*

He gasped, and between his clenched fingers, the stone shone with a brilliance hitherto unseen. And it was then that he saw it. It was then that he knew.

*Thunder rumbled above, rain falling ever faster. Wrapped in shadow, a figure rose before him, strong and terrible. His sword swung up and over to smite down the shaking form of Endurian Stonehelm. Then lightning smote from on high, and light shone in the darkness to illumine the awful face. Eyes tinged with scarlet. Mouth sneering with hate. Then...*

Endurian's fingers sprang loose from the stone with a muted cry, and it fell from his hand to rest upon the floor, steaming and roiling.

The light faded from it, and even as he stared, the vapours vanished, and it was as calm as before, leaving no trace of its former confictions. Without thinking, he stooped and lifted it up, expecting it to burn hotly in

his hand. Instead, however, it was cold and hard and silent.

Endurian slipped the chain back around his neck and returned to the window, but he was still shaking.

He had seen a face in the light. A face he knew only all too well. And try though he might, he could not extinguish that wave of awful, dreadful fear that now roiled up within him. He knew what he had seen, and he could not forget.

He had seen himself.

## REQUIEM PREREQUISITED



SPLINTERED SYMPHONIES

# SPLINTERED SYMPHONIES



VOLUME ONE





# CHAPTER I

## A DAY FOR THE DEPARTED



FIELD OF BAENNOR • 13 JUNE 6669

A COLD WIND WHISPERED AND STREAMED through the still morning, softly brushing back the edges of the hood that was drawn close over the face of Eldaros Orgrim. A rocky ridge that guarded the mountain halls to his left stuck out of the mountainside like a row of bristling bruises, and not far beyond it rose a defiant stone arch that stood tall among the ruin surrounding it.

The arch framed a doorway into the mountain, wherein existed a motley collection of dilapidated halls that had for some time now, served to refuge a solitary

group of Galaerian refugees. But now, the iron gates that had formerly barred that archway were twisted and broken: a crumbled ruin of melted steel and crushed iron ore.

Cloak flapping in the slight breeze whistling overhead, he made his way down a ridge and onto the field of battle, now long over. The keening of grieving mothers and spouses rent the still, dead air, as they bent over the bodies of their slain kinsmen.

Night had long since fallen when the last of their enemy had been vanquished and driven back into the hills. But there was no glory in that victory, for both forces, both Galaerian and Dark Elf had been nearly utterly destroyed, and the dead were beyond number or chance of reckoning. As he passed deeper into the places where the battle had raged the fiercest, Eldaros could not help but be overwhelmed at the sight of loss and despair that fraught everything about him.

But that, in truth, was why he was here. Eldaros had not taken part in the battle and had arrived but a little while before, striding the fields in search of someone he continued to hope beyond hope was still alive. When an hour of oppressive, fruitless searching brought nothing to light, he turned and made his way to the mountain halls and so passed under the archway and into the chamber within.

A wealth of bodies lay strewn about the grey stone, a literal sea of the dead. Stepping carefully forward, Eldaros made his way through the room, eyes searching for any sign of life.

“Heavens above,” he whispered, unable to help 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, Urathane Ivronwine stepped over one of the slain upon the stone floor.

“Urathane?” said Eldaros. “Urathane Ivronwine?”

The younger man nodded, coming to a stop beside one of the bodies. “Aye. I am he. It has been a long time, Lord Eldaros.”

“Indeed, it has.”

Urathane bent low and turned the body over, eyes grim, almost dour. For a short moment, he stared at the face as of a close comrade, saying nothing. Then, he reached into his trouser-pocket, pulled out a small, ornate knife, and placed it into the open hand of the corpse, closing the fingers about it at the breast.

“May you rest in peace, brother,” he whispered softly. With a small sigh, he stood to his feet.

“A friend of yours?” asked Eldaros.

Urathane’s eyes were hard. “Aye.”

“I’m sorry.”

“He’s not the only one.”

Urathane 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 seven,” said Urathane, still not looking to Eldaros. He knelt over the body of yet another numbered amongst 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, Urathane’s mask fell, betraying his utter weariness. “We have fallen far from renown. It deeply grieves me to see how our people have been reduced to so mean a state in so little a time. Once...once, our reign was glorious. Once, we were reckoned mighty in the eyes of lesser men. But now...now we are nothing.”

“So it would seem.”

Urathane raised an eyebrow. “You think otherwise?”

For a time, Eldaros did not reply, choosing instead to look out past the wrecked gates and into the sunlit lands beyond. At length, he spoke. “The very fact that Murazôr continues to harry us so, tells me that we *are*

something. Still, it seems, even after so many years, does he consider us a threat to his overriding ambition.”

“More of a nuisance, really.”

“No, Urathane, a *threat*.” He laughed quietly to himself. “For all he does, Murazôr can never wholly extinguish that strain of blood inherited from our forefathers unless he were to slaughter us all—to the very last Galaerian. He may say otherwise, but deep within the twisted confines of his mind, Murazôr fears us. As well he should; for to underestimate the tenacity of those imbrued with Eldamár’s bloodline is to act in folly. And it is this one thing which gives me hope, small though that may be.”

“He is close then, very close. If the Dark King is not thwarted, the flame of our house will be extinguished: a mere memory of what once was, and 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 stand, weak as we are, in defiance of an overwhelming darkness.”

“Yes,” Eldaros said softly. “Yes, he is close.”

“Why then are we destitute?” cried the other man. “Why are so many of our kin content to linger in the shadows, so afraid to stand: afraid to do what is right and true in spite of the consequence, whatever that may be? Why are so few of us disinclined to stand aside and accede to a law laid upon us all to our detriment?”

Urathane looked away, features contorted with anger and despair.

Eldaros breathed a soft sigh and turned from the view to face Urathane. "Yes, the question of our time. Hear me well, Urathane, for I too, have shared in your disheartenment. Why do our kindred stand aside and let be, you ask? Because we are without a home."

Urathane frowned, seeming taken aback by Eldaros's declaration. "A home? This is...was our home."

"Nay, it is not so! This, home? This is not your home. It *never* was. *Home*, I think, is an expression of who we are. It is a comforting agent, the chief emissary betokening our very identity as a people. And when one is rendered void of their identity by fate's guiding hand, such a person can only live his or her life without any true sense of purpose.

"We are divided, Urathane: 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 to avail us of our many enemies, who would prey upon us like wolves among sheep. But 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! Let that not ever be! I would see us under *one* banner, restored to our rightful place in this world, as we were of old."

"Noble words and you almost give me reason to hope. But this vision you speak of can never be. That hope was wrested from us long ago, and I do not think it shall be ever recovered in all our waking days."

"And with such words, you lend credence to the actions of the very one whom you lamented only a little while ago." Eldaros shook his head and took a step forward, eyes forcing Urathane to acknowledge the truth of his words. "Have you ever once supposed that this might be precisely what Murazôr wishes you to believe?"

Urathane's eyes dropped, troubled.

"He fears us, as well he should. So he cudgels our people with sword and spear, slaughters the strong amongst us, using our very despair as a hutch to trammel our assurance, a ploy wrought to utterly divest us of what hopes and dreams we may have once harboured: all with the intent of telling us there is *no hope*." He was quiet for a time, allowing his words to take their intended effect on Urathane, then began again. "No one is saying that attempting something akin to what I am now proposing will be amenable to our spirits. Far from it! Do not let me deceive you, unwittingly, for there will assuredly be *pain*. There will be bitter heartbreak. And yes, there will also be death; the lives of those friends and loved ones yet remaining to us will never hang so precipitously in the balance.

But more will die if we suffer the Dark King to exercise his uttermost desire without fear of consequence. Remember it well, Urathane, that all great things start out small in the beginning. Yet, in the end, it is the little things that will shape the fullness of time.

“Your kinsman, Lord Tyrelion, sent me thither to find you, and if I might, enlist your services for our common aim. He bade me tell you that our exile is over and that at long last, the time for retribution and recompense is come. And even now, Tyrelion makes his move, drawing others such as yourself to his side for one, last stand against the Dark King. The summons has been sent; the time is now come to right those wrongs performed against our houses, and we *will* have our revenge.

“Will you, Urathane Ivronwine, wilfully ally with us in this endeavour? Will you be united with our selfsame vision to reclaim our homeland of old from those who would durst lay claim to it? Will you disavow your former life of errancy to wrest back control of that which is ours by right, and thus free our people from the same bondage and despair which has held you captive, until such a time as this?” In token of his plea, Eldaros held out his hand to the stooping Urathane.

“Can you promise me that you have a plan? That we stand even a small chance of attaining to such heights? That this is more than an ill-wrought quest for glory? It



would be beyond cruel to offer hope to the despondent, only to snatch it away at the very last moment.”

“I can, and I will. This, I promise you, Urathane Ivronwine. We have a plan, a purpose, and the will to see it through to the very end and mark my words—we *will* see it through *no* matter the cost.”

At that moment, a savage snarl issued through the room. Beyond them, at the other end of the hall, a Dark Elf appeared, bleeding and dragging a shattered leg behind it. Urathane 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 Eldaros’s outstretched hand, a determined look on his face.

“Well then, let’s see this through.”



The sun was westering in the horizon when Urathane and the lately-retuned refugees finished gathering their dead. Because of the fear that their Enemy would return upon them whilst unawares, they took not the time to delve graves but piled the bodies of both friend and foe in two mounds to the east of the mountain at the very edge of a small dell that was situated in front of the foremost gate. With them, they stacked all their harness and weapons and various belongings not claimed by

loved ones, and so made a great hill of them. These were high enough that they can be perceived even from afar, but the mound of fallen men was greater than that of their enemy.

The Dark Elves and all their allies they set afire. But as for their own kindred, they left them there, desiring no longer to dwell in those halls for the memory of the horror of battle was still hot in their heads, and they could not for long, gaze at that hill of the slain. It is said that in aftertimes, grass grew there and covered that hill and much around it and so they were given their proper honour. But the grass grew not where the Dark Elves were burnt, but that was given a wide berth, and a strong wind came and blew away the ash and smoke of their ruin, till nothing was left in memory of them but a round, darkened circle, where no living thing dared tread.

Afterwards, Urathane gathered together his remaining people and gave to them the choice of finding yet another home where they might stay together as one people but risk annihilation, or to separate as they deemed and seek refuge in Iraeneus beyond the Gap of Beraegalas, the Eastern Sea, and so become as one of the other peoples. In this, he counselled them to seek the latter. "For," as he said, "as you well know, many of your men and fathers and husbands are no more, and can care for you no longer.

And as such, those that are left to us are now too few to protect us from the Wolves of Murazôr, and we would likely perish within the year. But perhaps the time has at last come to cease from our wandering and search out other venues where we might settle in peace among other peoples of the world. Sorrow and grief will be ours from this day till forever, but at the very least, we might find some comfort for our heavy hearts. But either way, I must now go and confront my own destiny, which I have for long put off. If, though, you should choose the former, know that I do not leave you alone as you are, but give to you Galadrys, my trusted comrade and lieutenant as your guide. What say you?"

Those assembled then conferred for a time before answering in reply: "Though our hearts say otherwise, we can still see reason when it shows itself: we shall take the latter course."

"Very well," said Urathane, and he stepped down from the rock upon which he had been standing. Then Urathane nephew to the king passed through the very midst of that surviving host of the old, women, children, lame, and the small few that had survived Murazôr's deadly onslaught. With him came Eldaros Orgrim, and others still would have followed him, but he would not permit it, saying that he walked not away from death, but to it. At length, they gave in to his request and prepared for the short march to the

settlement of Belegshire some days' journey to the west. Having said his final farewells, and grasped arms with those who could take it, Urathane Ivronwine at last took his leave of them, and so entered into the Company of Tyrelion Ivronwine, his kin and king.

But whether that was for good or for ill remains to be seen.

# CHAPTER II

## THE CLOUDS OF WAR



NAEGEAN SEA • 21 JUNE 6669

LIGHTNING SPLIT THE SKY IN TWO.

Tyrelion Ivronwine, once Heir Apparent to Eldamár the Renowned, took no notice of the shrilly, frigid, wind, and dived headlong into the ocean below him. The shock of the ice-cold water against his pale flesh threatened to freeze him in place, but gritting his teeth, he resisted any urge to linger and pushed himself through the choppy waters, one stroke at a time.

The sea covered a region that had once been a barren wasteland, devoid of life, or sustenance to give it beauty and form. But that had all been long ago, so very long

ago, and now the refuse of those lands had long since been swept away by the raging waters. What lands that had avoided such a fate were still grey, utterly desolated, and grim to behold.

Not far from Tyrelion was the fortress which he sought. Though the waters had long ago passed it by, much of the old castle was still visible; for it was called the Pillar of Ulinivir and it had once been a great fortress that had served as one of the chief defences for free men in the ravaging wars against Agandaûr the Black; and it was tall and huge in the eyes of men. Green, moulded moss marred what was left to be seen, high towers stuck out like grey thistles in the stormy sea, and the crooked ruins of ramparts and grinning gates loomed at every which way.

Swimming determinedly towards it, Tyrelion drew nearer and nearer. At last, as he came upon it, he reached out with his left hand, slipping and grasping for some handhold to pull him out of the water and into the blustery gale. With a forceful lunge, he pulled himself over onto the sodden, slippery patchwork of stone and steel wreckage that was piled up all about him. For a time, he stood alone in silence, a single figure atop a living memory.

There had been stories about what happened. Stories about what had happened here in this very fortress. They came from the distant regions of time uncounted,

but to many, were still as fresh and new and exciting as they were the first day they were told as tales to young children sitting about roaring fires.

Tyrelion gazed about himself, the wind whipping a light rain against him, matting his hair down and pouring down his face and breast into his clothes, which were already soaked. Eyes alighting upon a nearby walkway, which wended in an ascending fashion to a distant and remote corridor, he set out, booted feet leaving no trace on the wet stone as he took the path ordained for himself. The faint light of a dawning day and approaching sunlight shed just enough light for Tyrelion to see past the doorway and into the hall beyond: wreckage littered the ground, and refuse choked clear passage into the many dark corridors that populated the hall.

Soon, the path leveled out and then widened, clearing the way for the massive archway that now loomed before him. Stepping carefully through the wreckage of the destroyed gateway, he passed beneath the arch and so entered into the depths of Ulinivir. The egress opened into a vast cavern, many furlongs long, which then branched off into an assortment of tunnels, each of which led to a different level of the fortress.

The passage through which Tyrelion passed was lit by no light of day, nor candle, but by a small flickering torch he had wrought not long into his trek. When he

had traversed this road for some amount of time, he found himself in a wide corridor, surrounded at all sides by stone warriors with raised swords and plumed helms. With the light of his torch, he perceived them to be covered and ensnared in many cobwebs and much grime.

Foreboding taking him, Tyrelion drew his sword, brandishing it with his left hand. *One-handed* was he named, for his right he had no more, but his left only; and though that had once been the weaker of the two, he was now no less deadly than he had been before, and his sword was feared by many.

As he passed further and further down the corridor, he discerned a small glimmer of light ahead, and as he drew near, he perceived that it came from a side-door to his left. The door led to a chamber, but it was itself rotted and full of holes and hung loosely upon rusted hinges. With a short, swift kick, the door fell inwards with a crash. Tyrelion passed through the chamber, into the room beyond, and down another corridor, till he found himself within a wide vestibule with a sweeping, slanted roof and a grand, ornate shrine upon a stone dais at the far end of the room.

However, when he had drawn closer, he found himself faced with something wholly unexpected and unlooked for. The thing he sought was nowhere to be seen, and Meliaris Tyriage was standing in its place.



"It is gone," she said. "Look if you will, but I have only just arrived, and it is not here; somebody has taken the Anaeros from its resting place."

"That," said Tyrelion with tact, "is unfortunate." Then he bowed, saying, "Lady Meliaris, it is good to see you, alive and well. Considering the circumstances in which we last parted, *that*, at least, is fortunate."

"Likewise, Lord Tyrelion," said she. "Here, unlooked-for, we meet again. What news do you bring from your late journey? Plainly, you have had some success like as I, else we would not both find ourselves here, in this very room."

"I have done it at last," said Tyrelion. "I have done what Orendel Stonehelm could not. What he did not finish. I have corresponded with the *Nyráthyr* and made use of the answers given to me."

Meliaris was all grave astonishment. "This is news, indeed! Tell me, what did you learn? What are we to do?"

"I...I am not wholly certain. During my trial, I found that an act of that ilk is nothing like they say in the stories of old: I had not much time to think or speak, but of one thing I can be sure."

"And what is that?"

"I must find Endurian Stonehelm. I must persuade him to join our cause, unwilling though he may be. And

if I do not do so, then all our efforts will be in vain. Or so I was led to believe.”

“Endurian Stonehelm?” she said. “That *is* mysterious. I fear you may find that task over-difficult, even for one such as yourself.”

“Maybe so. But if our common quarry has truly evaded us and the promise of the Anaeros is wholly lost to us, then he may be our final hope—if what is said about him is true, that is. And considering our given authority on that matter, I have no reason to think otherwise.

“I have already informed Lofriel of what we are about. I must now take my argument before Endurian Stonehelm. For the time being, we move forward as planned.”

Meliaris turned to face him directly for the first time, pale-blue eyes scrutinising him acutely. “We must be careful, Tyrelion. Very careful. The King and his Counsellor will not be pleased with your recent actions, and although some of the nobility may sympathise with you and your cause, many will side against you—if not all—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 are well aware, he is not the only one we must watch out for. If what we have heard tell about

Endurian Stonehelm is true, Murazôr may soon make his way to Lysteria, one way or another.”

“Yes, that is true. I...” Tyrelion froze where he stood, hand immediately falling to his sword-hilt.

“What is—”

Tyrelion placed a furtive finger to his lips, eyes scanning the shadows that ranged about them. He had heard something.

“We’re not alone,” he whispered. He took a slow, calculated step forward, searching for the source of the disturbance. Then, one of the shadows *shifted*.

Tyrelion withdrew his sword and held it out in front of himself in a defensive posture. “Come forth!” he said into the darkness. “Do not hide in the shadows as only a common coward would do. Again, I say, come forth!” He was so intent on that one shadow that he was completely caught off guard when something slammed into the wreckage obstructing one of the many passages with a loud crash.

The silence that momentarily followed was cut short by the whizzing of an arrow strung from the bow of Meliaris. The arrow hit its target but came zinging off upon impact. A dark shape, wrapped in shadow, lunged forward at him. Tyrelion scarcely had 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.

Tyrelion picked himself up from where he had tumbled to the floor and thrust his blade at the beast. The sword smote the snout with a resounding *clang* and bounced off, no match for the creature's hide.

Adjusting quickly, Tyrelion 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 just now 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 Tyrelion 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. Tyrelion 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, Tyrelion 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 at his head, a dark, red tongue sliding in and out to devour him. In one desperate move, Tyrelion jerked his handleless arm forward, catching the creature at 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 from 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, Tyrelion lurched to the side and rammed the blade deep into the exposed section of the drooping neck.

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 that great hall. Its gaping maw snapped shut, teeth grinding, as its body wracked in agony from the pain of its mortal wound.

Tyrelion 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.

Nearby, Meliaris sat straddled atop another one of those foul creatures, swaying wildly, as she attempted to get a firm hold on the beast. Tyrelion 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, 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. Tyrelion wiped the blood from his dagger before returning it to its sheath and bent low to pick up his sword.

"What in Eldamár'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*."

Tyrelion felt a slight chill at the name. "A *Blodvkren*?"

"Aye." Meliaris wiped away the perspiration dripping from her brow with a sleeve.

"What," said Tyrelion, none too pointedly, "is a *Blodvkren* doing in these parts?"

“That I can and will not answer, for I am as helpless to know as you yourself are.”

Tyrelion grimaced again, then stepping gingerly through the wreckage, scanning 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, Meliaris at his side, and bending low, set his hand 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.

What first drew their attention, was what branded into his forehead. In dark letters, as black as night itself, had been formed the words: *Bölvadur*.

*Accursed.*

“There are many powers in this world, and not all of them share a love for mankind,” said Meliaris, slowly. “However, this was not done out of spite, I think, but as a warning.”

“A warning to whom, though?” muttered Tyrelion.

Meliaris did not answer.

Tyrelion warily examined the scene before him. Then, eyes catching a glimpse of something unnatural, he reached low and thrust the body aside to reveal what lay beneath. Meliaris gasped in surprise, but Tyrelion smiled knowingly.

He had found it at last. The key to his conquest. The key to his revenge. The key to Tirisfal.

The shield was the colour of a deep steely, bronze. The painted tokens and devices that had once overlaid its surface were now mostly faded of their former lustre, but for all that, one still could see that they had been that of some ancient house of Galaeros from days of long ago: a green background damasked in silver stars, and a spear crossing a three-pronged trident at the very centre formed the emblem of the House of Ivronwine.

There, Tyrelion's eyes rested, and he knew within his heart that he had found that which he sought.



Tyrelion was in the midst of strapping the shield safely to his back when Meliaris confronted him with a letter, that was, remarkably, completely dry. When he asked, she revealed she had appropriated the use of a small dingy for her passage to the underwater fortress.

Intuition told Tyrelion to disregard the minute details of his own journey.

"It is from Chiradain," she said. "Ere he departed to his own ways, he took me into his confidence, asking that I give it to you the next time we crossed paths, and impressing me with the need for urgency and pressing matters that could not for long be laid aside. But that is



not all. I have been beseeched to warn you to ever be on your guard, always aware of the hidden and unseen.”

“And he needn’t worry,” replied Tyrelion. “I know full well, the peril into which I have entered.” While Meliaris looked on, he turned over the thrice-folded parchment and opened it to read:

*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 this reading, 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 untold, and the old tales and lays of our past may be sung yet again in portents of a Lustrous Shadow. Show not your ignorance by disregarding the unhallowed 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.*

Below this was scratched very roughly:

*Kuoleman läpi kulkeminen ja elämään on vuodatettu,  
kolme kirousta, joista jokainen synnyttää sisäsiittoista.*

*Juuri niitä, joita vaalitaan, ne, jotka ovat väärin:  
vihattut, rakastetut ja piilotettu säiettä.*

Tyrelion's brow furrowed in consternation, eyes staring blankly at the parchment as he mulled over the enigmatic words. "I cannot make sense of it," he said, at length, handing it to Meliaris. "Perhaps the reading will come easier at a later time; I do not think present circumstances render the issue of problem-solving in a very favourable light. Perhaps you can make something out of it?"

But Meliaris was unable to make sense of it as well. Tyrelion accepted it back into his own hand, mild satisfaction tinged on disappointment. He expected her to make some remark regarding its contents but was unrewarded.

Instead, she turned and strode down the corridor to a wide chamber, filled with rubble. She slowed and came to rest her hand upon the outer rails that formed a

balcony to the outside world. An almost plaintive sigh escaped her lips as she said, "I'm afraid that I cannot linger here for long. The time has come for me to take my leave, and soon at that."

Tyrelion blinked, startled. "Whatever for?"

"My father has summoned me to return to him in Idumea," was her short reply.

"Ah, then. What of the quest? What of our endeavour? Do you not plan on aiding us after all?"

She shook her head. "Nay. At least I do not think so. My hope and present expectation is to rejoin you as soon as I can. Perhaps even within several months, if things go according to plan."

"And yet they seldom do. Such a thing may prove more unaccommodating than you might presume."

A small smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. "We shall see."

"Yes, we shall. But when must you depart?"

"By the morrow at the very latest."

"Very well. We must move along with our schemes and stratagems, regardless of this small hindrance. We must make our move, and swiftly."

She was silent for a time, before saying, "You *do* intend to go after him, do you not?"

Tyrelion nodded. "Aye. I do at that."

"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 lamely.

"I am aware. You must know that I have already taken that into full account."

"From what little Khaderas has told me, Endurian Stonehelm has grown hard in his young years. He is unyielding...wholly unwilling it seems to come forth into the world again. Aulendur himself endeavoured to sway his sentiments but has reaped only failure for his many efforts. You may be up for more of a challenge than you think if even his own brother was powerless to move him."

"I will find a way as I always do. I must."

"That is not yet determined," she said.

They fell silent, watching as dark, wispy clouds approached upon the distant skyline. They curled slowly, yet determinedly, the very edges spreading their fingers outwards as though they were grasping for something the eyes of mortal men could not see.

"It is time. I must be off," Meliaris said at last, turning to leave. She had made her way to the door which would take her away from that place, before turning again to Tyrelion, eyes troubled and shadowed in deep thought. "Take care, Tyrelion. Be ever on your guard. And keep an eye on Khaderas, for my own ease of mind: he means well, but on occasion, he can be

blinded by his kindly spirit, I fear. Again, take care. All is not as it seems in the world.”

“Never fear! You know as well as anybody the extent of my vigilance.”

“That is true, but I say so with good reason.” She gravely inclined her head. “Even now, the clouds gather from afar. Who can say how this will all end?”

Tyrelion averted his eyes, hearing her footfalls echo against the cold empty halls and steeling them as he gazed out upon the surrounding lands. To the west, the river Dwarthéa curled and twisted in a roundabout direction, tailing off into the mists which drowned much of the earth from mortal eyes. Southward he gazed to the distant Pëлиндori and their ice-capped peaks, which rounded off ever eastwards to the sea. Further eastwards, beneath the shadows of the Hills, he could just glimpse the wide green pastures of Karahs-Valré, and even further off, the roaring Falls of Mannadr, white and pure against the black rock that bore them ever downwards into white fury and foam.

This was a small hindrance, but his hopes and aspirations were still unwavering. The next stage of his plan called to him.

Which involved finding and recruiting someone, who in every possible likelihood, had spent the past four years avoiding being found and recruited.

He straightened. It was time to be moving.

# CHAPTER III

## THE SONS OF STONEHELM



TYRELOT • 9 SEPTEMBER 6669

WHEN ORTHALON FELL AND ITS LANDS were seized by the many allies of Murazôr, its peoples became dispossessed and divested of their ancient homes. Many fled to what had once been Eastern Galaeros, now called Ared'dor by its peoples; for it had seceded during the First Fracturing of Galaeros many ages before.

While Galaeros fell deeper into darkness, Ared'dor thrived under the rule of its Kings, the Naherrion, who were said to have descended from the ancient Northmen of old. Of these, Valgrim the Conquerer was

held the greatest, and under his rule, Ared'dor flourished, and after the Fall of Orthalon, it swiftly became the most dominant realm in all those lands. At that time, when the plight of the Galaerians was the greatest, Valgrim greeted his wandering kinsmen with open arms, offering them a place in his lands and so many that would have perished in the wild, found now a place where they might take refuge from the malice of Murazôr. And so, at the height of their renown, Valtagh son of Valgrim his father, acceded to the Sceptre. But unlike those before him, Valtagh was young and over-rash, and he took not kindly to the many outsiders that dwelt within his borders and disregarding the wishes of his late father, he cast many of them out back into the wild from whence they came.

But there yet remained a remnant of that people, small though it was, and they dwelt within the hill-country of Hirvion in the village of Tyrelot on the shores of the Great Sea and beneath the shadow of Lysteria, the chiefest seaport in those lands. There, after the fall of Orthalon when the line of kings was usurped by Murazôr the Accursed, Aulendur Stonehelm gathered what people that still held themselves loyal to his house and brought them through much peril to the safety of those lands. Despite his disdain of the Galaerians, Valtagh begrudged them that settlement, not daring to oust them; for, like Tyrelion and his father

before him, those with the name Stonehelm were of the line of Eldamár, and even after many long years, that name still held weight in the world of men.

They too had once a claim to the Throne of Orthalon through their ancestor Ilyentha, daughter of the King. But being the sister of two brothers, the kingship had passed over her to Indórion from whom were later descended Ithírion and Tyrelion. Much strife and bitter infighting had existed between those two families for several long generations, and as Orthalon fell deeper into shadow and darkness, it escalated beyond reasonable claims into deep-seated hatred and aversion. It was only through the efforts of Orendel and Tyrelion, heirs of their houses, who had met by happenstance and became fast friends, who strove to unite their fathers and families in the face the storm they knew was coming. Long did they endeavour in this ambition, and so it was that they went so far as to pledge two of their children to each other in matrimony: Endurian from his father, Orendel; and Aurelia from her father, Tyrelion.

But Ithírion was grown proud and haughty, and he refused to hearken to the pleas of his son, and they became estranged. Only later, when Orthalon fell into ruin and desolation did Ithírion beg forgiveness of his son; and so at the eve of his death, they parted amicably, but not without regret. Thus the designs of Orendel



and Tyrelion came to naught, for tragedy befell them both and as has already been recounted, Orendel and his wife were slain and Tyrelion alone escaped unscathed out of all his house. The grief of Tyrelion was very great at the loss of his wife and only child, Aurelia, and as such, much of the responsibility that should have otherwise been his fell instead to the shoulders of his nephew, Urathane, the last of his kin.

With the passing of Orendel at the hand of Ir-Murazôr, the lordship passed to his sons Aulendur and Endurian. Both brothers were held as lord, but only Aulendur accurately acquiesced to the duties of his title; and for many of his years, Endurian was ever at war, never tarrying for very long, but always on the move. Time passed him by, but the embers in his heart grew only hotter, and his anger at the wrongs made against his house spurred him ever onwards to outlawry and open hostility. But Aulendur was content to stay where he was and guide his few people through those troubled times.

Not long after the death of his father, Aulendur wedded Wylvild, the daughter of Talion Erskin, who had been a close companion of Orendel for much of his life. Wylvild was fair and beautiful, and for a time, she lightened the sorrows of the House of Stonehelm. But that happiness was not to last, for, young as she was, Wylvild's strength failed her in the bearing of their only

child; and after naming her son, she spoke no more and died soon after. The child, she named Irolas, and Aulendur took the boy and raised him, ever holding him close as the last surviving memory of her whom he loved above all else; but throughout all his years to the end of his days he remained deeply grieved and guarded, and he never fully recovered from that grievous loss.

During those days, Ared'dor flourished and grew in might; and though it could never wholly regain the splendour that had once befitted Galaeros, its sister-kingdom of old, it was still celebrated and renowned throughout those lands for its widespread prosperity and affluence. But as the long-standing tradition of men and their machines so dictates, the glory of Ared'dor allured the well-meaning and ill-favoured alike.

And the time came that there arrived upon the shores of Pergelion one such person clad in the guise of men. He called himself Surentûr the Mighty, and some men named him Maiaris the Golden and praised his name throughout the land. Valtagh the King took him as his chief counsellor and esteemed his instruction above all else. But not all men were at peace with these things, and they mistrusted the King's Counsellor, naming him Surentûr the Deceiver; and deep within the innermost parts of Ared'dor, restless malice and ill will festered and brooded.

As the wealth and repute of Ared'dor exceeded beyond what men deemed attainable, rankling resentment and bitter enmity transcended the lives of all, and the days slowly turned sour. And it is here, even as Tyrelion Ivronwine makes his way thither to plead his case before Endurian the Outlaw, that this tale begins in earnest.



Aulendur 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 glint of paleness, yet still gave off enough light to make the sparkling waters of the river shimmer in a somewhat mellow brightness. Around Aulendur, green bushes sprawled out of the fertile riverbank here

and there, whilst 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.

Aulendur halted his promenade to gaze eastwards. Slowly, his eyes passed over the distant Pëlindori, to the valley below, to at last the city of Lysteria, second in might only to its sister-city, Elgarost, in the north. There, his eyes lingered, and he looked upon it fixedly. Even from over several leagues away, Aulendur could see the uppermost spike of the high tower of Ephén-Laranal, wherein hung the bronzed bell that rang loudly for all to hear each time a new hour came to pass over the city.

For all sakes and appearances, his face bore no sign of the confusions 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. It was an unrest that fraught most all of his thought and served to agitate his heart and soul greatly.

But Aulendur 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 departed 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.”



Tyrelion Ivronwine strode up the dusty and gravelly road that served as the main thoroughfare of Tyrelot, the one thought on his mind to find himself a hero.

The sky was a pallid grey, and long slashes of darkened clouds were draped across it. Knee-high boots wrought sharp, grinding indentures within the ground as Tyrelion passed weather-beaten house after weather-beaten house. His authoritative gait made those that wandered the uninviting street look at him twice, then scurry off.

That was well. He was here to make a presence anyway.

To his right, he could see clearly the object of his exertions come into view. The Common Hall was, like the rest of the village, a drab, colourless building that was solidly rooted in the hard earth that made up the

land about them. Of note, it was much larger than those sitting alongside it, having been specifically designed—or thrown together—for village meetings, such as the one he intended to interrupt right now.

Two untried sentries stood in front of the doors, spears crossed at their sides in an indolent manner. At Tyrelion's approach, they wrenched themselves upright, low eyelids fluttering as they attempted to attain stately repose. Tyrelion paid them no heed and sprang up the creaky steps to the door beyond.

"Wait just a minute there!" said one guard, his helmet off-centred to one side of his head and a slightly bewildered expression on his face. "You can't just—"

Tyrelion didn't so much as bat an eyelash, marching right past the two blundering guards and leaving them slack-jawed and powerless to stay his coming. Perhaps it was his dusty attire, or maybe it was the jewelled sword strapped to his side, or possibly it was even the sharp gleam that resided deep within his eyes, which caused them to stop short. Whatever it was, it induced them to positions of mute incomprehension, and without a second look, Tyrelion slid past them to the heavy wood doors.

Setting his palms across the seams, he flexed and then pressed, thrusting them inwards with one, forceful push. The doors slid inwards, falling back against the

inner walls of the Common Room with a thunderous bang that shook the old building to its very roots.

At his ingress, many therein turned to eye him with startled expressions. Striding forward, Tyrelion again disregarded their many looks of surprise, marching through their midst to the front of the room. As one entity, they parted like water before a rock, leaving him ample room to walk. Gloved hand resting upon the pommel of his sword, Tyrelion made his way to the small platform that rose in the back.

Several men who stood at the front looked at him in amazement, their weather-beaten coats and ragged beards bespeaking of a hard life. Then, their eyes hardened into pointed glares.

“Excuse me, gentlemen,” said Tyrelion. “I hope you don’t mind if I take the floor for a moment?”

“Good morning!” answered one. “I don’t recall anyone of your ilk being invited to this assembly! We don’t take kindly to intruders, so you had best make a move on it if you understand my meaning!”

“My thanks to you as well,” Tyrelion replied with a grim smile. “I shan’t use too much of your time, I fancy.”

Another one of the men barked something at him.

Reaching into his side-pocket, Tyrelion withdrew his hand, holding out a small moneybag. Immediately, the men’s expressions lightened considerably, and one of them stepped forward, eyes eager. Without a second

thought, Tyrelion tossed it to the man who caught it with an outstretched hand. Upon this, the others rushed to his side, poking and prying, each one trying to claim a fair share for himself.

Tyrelion stepped past them to look upon the gathered assembly, who were eyeing him with interested expressions, some curious, others calculating.

"I have come here with a purpose!" he said. "I am looking for a man: one who makes his dwelling here amongst you all. I wish to meet this man; indeed, I am most interested in acquiring his distinguished services, if he were amenable. Is there any man here who is willing to tell me where I might find one Endurian Stonehelm?"

There was silence.

Tyrelion twisted his mouth into a hard line. This, it appeared, was going to be harder than he had anticipated.

"Come now!" he said in a softer voice. "I know the truth. You cannot hide him from me, whatever he may have asked of you. Stop hiding behind your closed countenances and render up to me that which I seek. There is much, much more available where that moneybag I proffered to your leaders came from." He eyed the crowds with a scrutinising expression.



He was just giving up hope when one of the men stepped forward. "There is one among us who bears that name," said he. "One who—"

"Mahurin!" yelled a voice not far from him. "Enough! *Vertu hljóður!*"

Another man stepped forward, the crowd making way for him. This man, though, Tyrelion would have recognised anywhere. With a long, well-maintained beard that reached nearly to his belt and a smile that would light any room, Khaderas Awyrgen was recognisable by his voice alone.

However, at the current moment, his usual smile was nowhere to be seen.

"Hail, Tyrelion son of Ithírion!" he said, eyes grim. "I have been expecting you. The Lady Meliaris was kind enough to warn me."

"That is not surprising," replied Tyrelion. "And it is well to you see you here. But urgent matters beg my attention, and I must see Master Stonehelm as soon as I can."

"I'm afraid I cannot help you."

Tyrelion opened his mouth to speak, but Khaderas interrupted him. "However, I can lead you to him, though it will do you no good. If even I cannot suffice to move him, then any chance you stand will be impossible."

“We shall see,” said Tyrelion, and at Khaderas’s beckoning, the crowd of fishermen stepped aside to let him through. Tyrelion could feel their eyes on him as the door shut behind him.



Upon hearing the voice, Aulendur started and looked around to discern from where it had come. 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 realisation, 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 writ upon his face.

In looking upon him, Aulendur’s heart filled with pride. Irolas was strong and hale; the vigour 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 ere 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 would 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 faltered, 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 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 Aulendur, 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," answered Irolas. "Indeed, there was once some hesitancy on my part in regards to him; however, my thought has since 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 ambience which fills my heart with a sense of peace and tranquillity of heart. But wherein this matter lies your distress? No justification can I perceive in regards to the dark portents which you have taken pains to evince."

For a moment, Aulendur'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 the other's presumptions, he said with deliberate intent, "Then is your outlook upon him good or ill, that being

so? Do you believe that he does well by men? That he is what they need?"

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

"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 such esteem by the neighbouring 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."

"In your words, you seem to forget that we are of Galaeros and not of Ared'dor, although once we were one people, as you well know. But when the mighty fall, another rises to take its place. 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 that 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 Aulendur, his trepidation growing tenfold with this unseen revelation. “And you have let your guard drop, allowing your mind to be deceived by falsities sent 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 held right in their own eyes; we are not exempt from this. *Truth* is what we make it to be.”

“No!” said Aulendur. 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 the same. Nay, but they are at great variance with the other. From whence has this lie come to enter your mind?”

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

Aulendur pressed onwards. "Though society as we know it may become so enamoured 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 unfavourably 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," Aulendur 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 allegiance to Lord Surentûr through such means! 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 yourself. Your utterances seem unfounded."

“No, you do not,” said Aulendur. “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 rumour: something whispered of 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?”



When they were outdoors and walking in the street where none could eavesdrop upon them, Khaderas said: “As I made known before, Lady Meliaris has already informed me of your plans. And it is with these in mind that I give you the same advice I gave Orendel Stonehelm nineteen years past:

“This is not the only road; other paths there are that you might take. Paths much more agreeable to you and yours. This place you seek, it can only be found by a lost



road: one forgotten for good reason. And though I do not know with any certainty what you shall find there, of one thing I can be sure: such a way bodes only ill, and I deem that these shadowy byways of which you betake yourself shall, in the end, lead only to your death.”

“My passing is counted for naught when set against the heavy toll of those who have already paid with their lives for the hope and freedom which we now possess. There is no other road, Khaderas. That choice was taken from me nineteen years ago. No, our reckoning draws nigh, and I must play the part ordained to me so that we are not all swept away in the intemperate storm that will soon come.”

Khaderas nearly snorted. “Easy enough to say, I guess. But there are others who will be affected by your actions: innocent lives that would be put in danger. And I say this: be warned! If you undertake this quest, fire will cover the lands, and they shall be burnt and scorched beyond cure for many years hence. No place will seem safe, and the peoples of these lands shall be caught between a rock and a hard place, and so be crushed. Here though, if not for a little while longer, we are safe and many leagues away from that which seeks to destroy us all.”

“Safe, maybe now, but not forever,” said Tyrelion. “Murazôr cares not for the lives of free men. He and those who carry out his bidding slay without thought or

pity for life. Believe me when I say that they will not for long ignore the settlements, small though they may be, to the east and north. They hate all that is good in this world and would sooner see it stamped out than let be to grow unchecked and without restraint. And for all that, there is Surentûr to think about.”

“Maybe so. But there is something more to life than this. I have fought enough battles to know when it is all for naught. Let men fight each other and let us not meddle in their affairs. So has it been, and so shall it always be until the end of time. As for me, I shall not leave, and neither, I think, shall Endurian. My place is here, till the end of my days when Death reaches out Her hand to take me away from the confines of this world.”

“You seem to forget that this is indeed, why we fight. If it were not for the valour of our people and allies, these lands would already be overrun. In your words, take care not to condemn the deeds of doughty 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 of which I speak,” replied Khaderas. “You know nothing but blood and battle: *it is you*. This is who you are. So it is with many men who live their lives at the forefront of battle: they know naught but

blood and strife. You solve your arguments with the blade, and he who fights by the sword must die by it as is only right. There is a consequence for everything, no matter how little it may seem in the present time. As for myself, I endeavour to solve my problems with words and sound council."

"You speak as one who has experience in these matters," said Tyrelion. "Yet by the words which you utter, you reveal your true ignorance. Save these matters for other minds best suited for them! And as for me, you deem wrongly. I was not always a man of war: as you should well know, I used to lead a simpler life." Tyrelion's eyes grew dim, and his thoughts drifted to an older time when all was well in the world, and he sighed.

"I once had a family, a livelihood, a purpose. I denounce not that which you strive to uphold; for I knew it well and fondly does it linger upon the edge of memory, though the remembrance fades by the day. But when all I once held dear was taken from me forever, I was left alone without hope. Since that day, I have led a hard life: bound by scarred memory to avenge those whom I loved. Alas! It is not my fate to dwell in such bliss. No, my wandering path leads me elsewhere, and my life is bound in troth with that of our kinsmen. I will live and die with them. Only once they are restored

can I be as I once was. There is no going back. Not now. Not ever.”

At these words, they both halted, each eyeing the other, and loth, it seemed, to give way for the other. Then, at last, Khaderas spoke: “Very well. Because of your name, will I show you where Endurian makes his dwelling, and not for any other reason. But again, I must warn you: any proposition which you will endeavour to entice him with will in every likelihood, be rejected.”

“I was already aware of that coming here.”

“Good,” said Khaderas, turning forward. “Then, you are already prepared to be spurned, although I will admit that it would do him much good to break free from whence he now dwells confined.”

Frowning, Tyrelion drew back alongside him. “Why do you say that?”

“I say it because Endurian has become, in essence, his own worst enemy. Over the past four years, I have seen his mind deteriorate to the point that, well...you will soon see what I mean for yourself.” The bearded man shook his head. “Regardless, any reasonable man would readily agree that holing oneself up and taking not an ounce of action for an extended period of time, can only be to their detriment. Which is what he is doing, for your information.

“You well remember Orendel. His sons have retained much of their father’s bearing, and Endurian most of all. He is like to grow moody and grim, at times; that has never surprised me any. But this time, though, there’s something...different. I’ll keep my own suspicions to myself, suffice to say that he’s afraid.”

“Afraid?” Tyrelion arched an eyebrow. “Endurian Stonehelm, who was for a time, the most notorious outlaw in the Darklands, is *afraid*?”

“Aye. He’s afraid; that much I know for sure, and he needs help desperately. I’ve tried reasoning with him, but he has grown too proud to realise the truth of things.”

Tyrelion walked onwards in silence, somewhat stunned by what he had just heard. Endurian the Outlaw, afraid? He was so wrapped up in that thought that it took him a moment to realise that Khaderas had come to a stop.

“There,” said Khaderas, pointing past the village, and over a long gap of shoreline, to a cliff that overlooked the swirling sea below it. “That is where you will find Endurian Stonehelm.”

Tyrelion looked in the direction of Khaderas’s hand and saw a large, rickety, yet ornate house perched atop the edge of the cliff, surrounded by a forest of trees. From what little was visible of it, the house was easily the most inviting in miles around.

“Just up that hill, you should find him. When you knock, give your name and state your business directly. Maybe one of old Aulendur’s maids will let you in. For now, farewell and good luck.”

Khaderas saluted him, then turning on his heel, strode back the way whence he came, leaving Tyrelion alone.



The eyes of Aulendur met those of his son, and a slow strained moment passed between them as dawning comprehension fell upon the face of Irolas.

“I am the son of Orendel,” said Aulendur, at length. “Even though I am removed from the House of my Fathers, my seat still resides in the hearts and minds of their former people, and the Lords of Galaeros 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 good 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? 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," Aulendur 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 thoughts, because I have seen such things ere now. 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. Think 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?"

"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 Aulendur'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 am stirred to doubt and wariness. Looks are deceiving. Just because all may look well and prosperous on the outside, that does not always 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 such lust and greed that they are no longer content with what they already possess.”

Irolas eyed him for a small while, and he seemed now to be almost leery of Aulendur. “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?”

“Certainly.” Aulendur found himself sighing. “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 I daresay your betters would 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 door rose before Tyrelion, solid and gleaming, with a large door knocker in the very centre. Just above it loomed a figurine carved in the likeness of a bear's head. A great black bear, it was, nose held high and teeth bared in a fierce snarl. It had a sort of noble and authorial air to it, portending peril to all who would enter.

Tyrelion eyed it in silence, a bemused look on his face, before pounding his fist against the door. There was silence. He beat again, and then a muffled noise sounded from behind the door, and it swept back to reveal a young scullery maid, wiping a dirty hand on her stained apron.

"Hullo?" she said. "The master isn't seeing anybody the moment. But if you could come back at another time, perhaps...?"

"I have a prior engagement," said Tyrelion firmly. "With one who is called Endurian Stonehelm."

The girl's face whitened. "Lord Endurian is...come in, Lord. I shall tell him you've come." She made way, and he strode through, entering into a large, open-spaced entryway. He wiped his boots on the mat and turned, when the maid said, "As whom shall I announce you?" She eyed him nervously, then added a hasty, "Lord."

"You may tell him that an old acquaintance has come to see him," Tyrelion replied, eyeing the room about him. "And that he would do well to come as soon as possible."

"You want me to say all that?" The girl put her hands to her mouth, seemingly mortified at what she had just said. "Sorry, lord. I'll tell him. Right, this way."

She led him down the corridor into a large sitting room, wherein were set several cushioned chairs and an oak table.

Then she departed. Or fled.

Tyrelion shook his head and made his way around the room, searching for a place to sit. At last, he settled upon a high-backed armchair that was nestled in the far corner of the room. Slowly, he sat himself down.

Then sat back up.

He *did not* need to be accustoming himself to comfort. The last thing he needed was to succumb to such temptations; there were important things he had

to be about. So, he made his way to the fireplace and leant against the stone there, arm resting against the inset beam of polished wood that stuck out of the wall.

“Who are you?” said a voice. “What do you want?”

Tyrelion turned and there, in the doorway, stood Endurian Stonehelm.

It was like seeing a ghost.

Endurian’s eyes were sea-grey, a trait that he had inherited from his father, but his hair was more brown than black, strained throughout with streaks of bronze—unlike Orendel or his brother for that matter. A thin layer of dark stubble coated his face, and his clothes were mostly unkempt.

When looking upon him, Tyrelion was faintly reminded of the boy he had once known so very long ago. But only faintly. For Endurian had changed in that span of years, and when looking into his eyes, it was immediately apparent that not much was left.

Endurian stiffened upon eye contact. “Lord Tyrelion.”

“Endurian Stonehelm,” said Tyrelion. “We have much to discuss.”

Endurian’s eyes immediately hardened. “What makes you so sure of that?”

“Many things.”

“There is naught to discuss. This conversation was over as soon as it began.” Endurian looked away, and it

seemed to Tyrelion that he was attempting to conceal some emotion, but when he looked back, his eyes had the same look as ever before.

“I assume Khaderas led you here?”

“After some persuasion.”

Endurian nodded. “Khaderas was staunch once upon a time, but his hold is beginning to weaken.” He looked Tyrelion in the eye. “I’m sorry, but you cannot stay. There is nothing for you here. Anything that you may have to say will prove to be utterly fruitless, and I am not in the mood to exchange discourse with anyone for that matter.” He inclined his hand to the door, motioning for Tyrelion to take his leave.

“As you will. Your wish is granted; I shall take my leave,” said Tyrelion, striding to the door—and subsequently to Endurian. “But first, you must allow me to say one thing.”

“Say it quickly, then.”

He came to a stop several feet away from Endurian. “I once knew a young boy who bravely stood over the bleeding body of his defenceless father. In spite of he who faced him, this boy stood firm in the face of those mightier than he, holding a shaking sword in defiance of the Dark: utterly determined to protect him who could not protect himself. Tell me, what happened to that boy?”

“You haven’t a clue as to what you’re talking about!” scowled Endurian.

“No, but I do,” he said. “However, I could say much the same of you.”

“I say that you should not have come here, and I stand by my word.” Endurian again beckoned to the door.

Tyrelion walked through the door and into the corridor, Endurian close behind to hurry his departure. Coming to the door, he opened it and stepped out into the cold outdoors. Somehow, he found that refreshing. Quickly, he made his way down the steps and then turned to look back.

Endurian stood in the doorway. “I’m sorry,” he said. “But the Endurian you seek is not here.” He prepared to close the door.

“Endurian Stonehelm!” said Tyrelion in a loud voice. “You cannot hide from the world forever. Sooner or later, it will find you, for you are apart of it just as much as it is apart of you. You cannot just disappear and decide that you are no longer one of us.”

The door swung back. “Indeed, I can,” said Endurian, as if through gritted teeth. “The world kicked me out. I know when the time has come to let go. Unlike yourself, I have embraced my destiny; do not think to convince me otherwise. Besides, you are wrong. I am *not* Endurian. Endurian is dead; he died long ago from

grievous wounds more horrendous than any mortal man could possibly hope to overcome.”

“I should imagine not.”

“Doesn’t matter. Don’t care.”

“*I* care,” replied Tyrelion. “And I think it *does* matter. I need you, son of Orendel. You have grown proud and haughty in your exile. Your maturity has brought its own wealth of complications, but do not think that you are any wiser than myself. I knew you when you were no more than an infant in your mother’s arms. I would not say that you are dead but in need of resuscitation. Remember, the world once greatly benefitted from your acts. They can again.”

“In doing so, I lost a large part of myself. The world can go to Múspell’s Abyss, for all I care. I am done expending myself for this ungrateful world.”

“And yet here, I find you spending your time with lowly fishermen. Rumour has yet spread of your applied skill, and these pathetic villagers have shown their loyalty to you, for having supplied food to those who might starve otherwise.”

Endurian laughed almost darkly. “They treat me in a much different fashion than all others did. Here, I am at least respected, not cursed, and blackened by my own name.”

“*I* respect you. Why else do you think I have travelled so many leagues to seek out your services?”

“Anything you have to say will only—”

“The time to redress the wrongs wrought against our people has come again,” said Tyrelion, voice rising in the cold clear air as he stepped forward. “Your people need you. The time has come that you answer their call.”

“Our people are dead, and you know it,” said Endurian. “They are an impoverished, weak, people who wander desolate lands in desperate search of something that shall never be. Their will is broken beyond remedy, beyond cure, and I consider it the greatest of luck to have never fallen into their present state of mind.”

“You are not wrong,” said Tyrelion. “But, like you, they need resuscitation. They have naught to strive for, precisely because they have naught to strive *to*. Only one such as yourself could help me fill that role.”

“You are deceived. You long for something that can never be! Our home was wholly and utterly destroyed. That which was once held fair and beautiful is now scarred beyond repair and can never be restored!”

“Others have said much the same, but they quickly realised it to be mindless speech and bereft of all wisdom. You—and our people—will continue to wander as you do, until you set yourselves to the grand task of reclaiming your lands of old. What is it to live? To die, knowing that you accomplished nothing, save for an unsated heart? Or to die trying? The latter is



much more superior, for at least you can rest with the assurance that you *tried*. And even if you should fail in the end, you can rest assured that there was nothing you could have possibly done to change things for the better.

“I myself will admit that I, Tyrelion Ivronwine, was once as you were: broken in mind, spirit, and yes, even in body. But as I lay gasping in my ruin, clutching for my every breath, I was able to grasp on to something. A thought, an idea, may it be. And since that day, that something has provided me with all that I have ever needed to persevere and move onward: to take that one, agonising, painful step day by day. You are not the only one who has suffered, Endurian, son of Orendel. I too, have suffered much on behalf of my kinsmen. I too, have lost that which I held most dear to me. But I have a goal: a motivation: a *purpose*. It is this that drives me forward every day. And every day, I tell myself that one way or another, I shall, in time, dethrone that wretch, Murazôr, curse his name. One day, I shall fell him from his high seat. One day, I shall have my vengeance. And on that day, my thirst shall, at last, be utterly sated, and my heart set at ease.

“Oh, of ease! Of comfort! Of rest! These things I have neither felt nor known for many a year. Of these things, I both long and hope for. *When shall I find rest?* I ask myself. The answer is clear: when I have toppled

that dark traitor from his accursed throne, then and only then, shall I find peace. So, tell me, Endurian Stonehelm, do you thirst for vengeance?"

For the first time in their encounter, Endurian looked to be somewhat uneasy. "I did...once upon a time," he said at length. "But now...now there is nothing. It has grown cold within me, like the very stone of this fell earth. And as I told you before, you should not be here. I exiled myself from the world for good reason. It would not be right for me to come forth as I once did in times past, though indeed, my heart yearns at times to do just that."

"You possess a Nornstone."

That stopped Endurian cold. "What?"

"Don't bother denying it; your brother suspected for the longest time that your father bequeathed one to you ere he died."

"Even if that were true, why does it matter to you?" Endurian said, voice like bitter steel.

"It matters to me because evidently, it matters to Ir-Murazôr. You are not safe, so long as it remains in your possession. No mountain, no hill, no cave will hide you from him."

"You present facts without proof. What makes you so very certain that Murazôr would be after something so small as this? And how can you be certain that he would know of my dwelling here in the first place?"

“Even the smallest of things can change the course of the future,” said Tyrelion. “And so many questions require so many answers. If you would but come with me, I shall illumine your thoughts when I can spare the time.”

“Nay.”

“You are not safe here; *he* will come for you, and soon. Yes, he will come, and when he comes, there will be no denying him. Not now. Not this time.”

“I should very much like to see him try,” said Endurian. “But my words are set in stone, and my will is adamant; I have no wish for vengeance or to join your band of foolish fugitives for that matter. My place is here, and here I shall stay, regardless of the chances fate may play me.”



The moment passed, and Aulendur withdrew from Irolas’s side and made his way back to the house shortly thereafter. The sun was sinking beneath the Pēlindori, when he encountered a stranger on the road. He was so deep in thought over what had just taken place, that it took him a long moment to realise that it was none other than Tyrelion Ivronwine.

“Lord Tyrelion!” he said. “This is a fine chance! Whatever are you doing in these distant parts?”

Tyrelion's eyes were dark and grim, troubled even, but stern all the same as he said in answer, "I come upon the wings of the wind to gather our people from the four corners of the world. Our time has finally come, Master Aulendur. At long last, we make our move."

"You come for Endurian, my brother, then," said Aulendur, understanding freeing his mind from the constraints of an unenlightened heart. "Or *came* for him, more likely. But I am not surprised at your lack of success. Naught can move him now, I deem."

"So Khaderas Awyrgeu told me, and so also did Endurian endeavour to make clear. We shall see, though. In time, he may come to change his mind."

"We shall see, indeed. Will you not stay for supper? There is more than enough room at my table, should it suit you."

"Nay," answered Tyrelion. "I cannot spare the time, I fear. There is further business that I must be about. There are others I must speak to."

"As you will. I cannot say that I blame you. My heart is also troubled, and my time is too often occupied with unsavoury matters. Not for long now will Ared'dor remain safe to us, and I must think to my people."

"You see to it! I will not entreaty you with proposals and promises, for I know already what your answer would be. Yet we are allies in this, and you serve well enough as it is. Whatever his full ambition might be,

Surentûr must be thwarted ere these lands are lost forever to our last alliance. Naggaroth, must be kept at bay and my thought is bent on Murazôr; we have not the means nor strength to foil both them and the Deceiver!"

"Truly," said Aulendur. "You speak my thoughts and fears as they are bred into being. Night has fallen on Ared'dor; the dawn will not be swift in coming."

Then Tyrelion and Aulendur grasped arms and with the gravest propriety, bade each other farewell and best wishes on the paths ordained unto them; and so they parted ways, each thinking to his own purposes and intents.

True to his word, Aulendur 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 Aulendur.

“My uncle may dwell within this house, but I know his presence lends little comfort to either you or me. I would not have that you were left unattended and companionless.”

“Endurian thinks to his own ends,” Aulendur said. “But he has suffered greatly, more than you or many others can give an account to; and I do not hold the consequences of his grief wholly against him.”

“But he is faithless to his friends nonetheless. As such, 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 Aulendur. “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 lend it.”

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

appreciative. He *did* mean it when he said he would welcome his company.

Thus, Irolas departed, and for a little while, Aulendur 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.

# CHAPTER IV

## SCHEMES & PLOTS



LYSTERIA • 24 SEPTEMBER 6669

IT WAS THE DAY OF DURIEL—THREE months since Tyrelion's excursion into the cold north; a fortnight since his confrontation with Endurian Stonehelm—and the last moon of autumn was shining through a blanket of pale stars over the city of Lysteria.

The cobblestone alley was cold and hard beneath his tired feet. The sound of the waves crashing against stone mingled with the sounds of celebration as men and women, both young and old, took to the streets to light their lanterns and uphold their flags in honour of



Duriel Durmstrong, who had driven off the fierce Vyrekäl in what now seemed so very long ago.

But Tyrelion was not walking out-of-doors to celebrate. No, he did not have that liberty. Another purpose dominated his thoughts. At the present moment, his mind was occupied by matters altogether removed from the festivities taking place, and he gave little thought to any of that which took place around him. His thoughts were dark as he jogged along the road: dark from contemplation upon various plots and schemes and worries. He was also very weary: he was overexerting himself, he knew, but knew not how to avoid doing so. Of rest, he longed, but he did not durst succumb to the wants of his mortal form, for fear of losing focus. That time would come soon enough. If he was patient. If he was steadfast.

Very soon, he found himself in a darker, grimmer part of the city, far removed from the sounds of merriment, and standing in front of a dingy, ramshackle inn.

He did not tarry long to gaze upon the rickety structure that seemed to sway softly in the cold ocean breeze, the cracked, sooty windows that spotted its exterior, or even the general air of churlish forbidding that surrounded it. The inn, known to all as *The Dreary Dragon*, was a familiar passing-place for those who

wished to confer on delicate matters without the threat of eavesdropping.

Indoors, it was neither rowdy nor tranquil. A flurry of dilapidated tables dappled the creaky floor. Tallow candles hung in iron receptacles on the walls, burning leisurely and sending off an unpleasant odour. Tumbledown chairs sat adjacent to the tables; and various persons could be found playing their hands at various games or drinking from mugs of ale, eyes boring aimlessly into the wall beyond them. A few distant others sat in huddled corners, whispering and muttering to themselves. Those trying their skill at gaming were very naturally, much more robust than the rest of the assorted crowd, and indeed, as Tyrelion moved down the room, he heard a loud cry of presumptuous laughter as one such person raised her hand in the triumph of her conquest. Following this, of course, was a low chorus of grumbling groans as the defeated, pushed their respective piles of coin to the victor.

Tyrelion largely ignored this, 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 Tyrelion rapidly bestrode the remainder of the room, sliding smoothly into the seat opposite that of the other man.

"I hope that I have not kept you waiting long," Tyrelion said in a low voice, settling himself in comfortably across from the man, who was hooded and cloaked in such a way that not much could be discerned of his features.

"Nay, do not trouble yourself, Lord Tyrelion," replied Eldaros Orgrim. "If you must know, I noticed not the passing of time; for my mind has been otherwise engaged in the pondering of those tidings which you felt so necessitated my attention."

"Yes, of course."

"I have just returned myself but several days ago."

"And my nephew?"

"His loyalty was easily acquired." Eldaros beckoned with his head to someone behind Tyrelion. "Urathane will be with us shortly. He is acquiring drinks for us three at the present moment." Turning in his seat, Tyrelion perceived the form of his nephew, son of his sister, and last remaining blood relative alive standing tall close by and chatting with the barmaid. One day, if Tyrelion succeeded in his quest and they all survived this, he would be king.

He only turned when he heard Eldaros speak. "What of Stonehelm?"

Tyrelion grunted. "Despite our differences, Khaderas Awyrngen made finding the boy easy. The only real difficulty lay in persuading him to our cause."

“And what was your success?”

“I regret to say that I failed.”

“But if what the *Nyráthyr* said was true, then—”

“I know,” said Tyrelion. “I have thought long and hard on the matter, but seeing his resistance, I just do not see how it can be possible. We will have to try again, of course, but if he refuses as he did before, we will have no choice but to go forward regardless.”

“That is unfortunate. Very unfortunate, indeed. I fear Master Stonehelm is in mortal danger if he truly retained the Nornstone Orendel bequeathed to him ere he died. If the suspicions of our friends are correct, then Murazôr will almost certainly find him out one way or another.”

“Yes. I said much the same. He is proud, though—and afraid. Although I do not think of Murazôr.”

Eldaros frowned. “Afraid?”

“Aye. Loth was he, hesitant even, to speak with me. Whatever it is he’s afraid of, its undoubtedly what’s keeping him from acquiescing to our offer. If only we could endeavour him to look past the veil in which he enshrouds himself. If only we could get him to see...”

“This does not at all sound like the Endurian of past times. If he was aught like his brother says—or like his father, no less, he would not have hesitated at a challenge, least of all the chance to reclaim his home and heritage.”

Their conversation came to an end with the arrival of Urathane.

“Uncle,” said the younger man, bowing. “It does me good to see you well.”

“And I, you,” replied Tyrelion, momentarily rising. He grasped the arm of his nephew, embracing him, then motioned for Urathane to seat himself. Urathane deposited three mugs of hot cider on the table and acquiesced.

Eldaros looked as if he intended to say something, but Tyrelion spoke first.

“Now, where might Darous be? I had hoped to meet him here this night to recruit him to our cause. Is he unwell?”

Eldaros barely sustained a roll of his eyes. “If you will believe it, I received word that he’s presently in the distinguished company of Lord Rinaldar, frolicking with the royalties at one of their parties.”

For the very first time, Tyrelion frowned. “He’s what? How on earth did he manage to—”

But Eldaros shook his head. “Don’t ask. I have not a clue how he got himself invited, and I can’t fathom why Rinaldar still stomachs him. Just consider it some of the baggage that comes with keeping tabs on his comings and goings.”

“Well, is he aware of the assault on Hroungard?”

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

"That is true. Any idea when he might arrive? I do not fancy to push off that appointment any longer than I must."

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

The doors to the inn slammed open, colliding against the walls they ran synchronously with. An effusive laugh rang out, instantly upsetting the monotonous mood of the room.

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

"You're allowed," replied his friend, as simultaneously with the motions of every other person within, he turned about in his seat to see who might be audacious enough to disturb their peace.

"Howdy there, lads and ladies!" The utterance came from a very handsome, personable man who quite clearly, didn't care a twitch what others thought of him—or his manners for that matter. Flamboyant in seemingly every possible way, he cut a dashing figure against everyone else in the room. A longish frock of golden-blond hair dangled in an untidy fashion over the right side of his face, and an overly cheerful smile

graced his pleasant features. He bore a short-trimmed, styled beard, and a pair of sideburns sped down from the upper tuft atop his head, just past his ears. His pale blue eyes gleamed scintillatingly in the dim light issuing from the tallow candles, and the ends of his greenish-black coat whipped back behind him with the sudden intake of air.

“You know, the other day, I was wondering when a door isn’t a door, and just now, I realised the full truth of this most deliberating conundrum: *when it’s ajar of course!*” he said aloud to no one in particular. At this, the hint of a smile played across Tyrelion’s face, while out of the far corner of his eyes, he caught Eldaros rolling his eyes. Urathane, who had remained quiet thus far, looked somewhat bemused.

Slamming both doors shut behind him, the latest addition to the ever-widening range of persons that made up the inn, passed into the room with an extravagant flourish.

It was, of course, Darous. Or Darous Fyndin as he preferred to be called. It mattered not which.

“Wonderful,” muttered Eldaros. “Now everyone in this area of town and their nephew will know he’s here and with us. Simply *wonderful*, that is.”

Tyrelion shook his head. “Ah, Darous. Well, at least you’re consistent.”

Darous stalked jauntily over to the nearby bartender and set his hands on the bar authoritatively. In response, the bartender ceased his spit-polishing of the glasses and glared at the other man, beady eyes purporting a look of seeming superiority.

“I suppose you’re wondering how it is I got this way,” Darous said, beaming from ear to ear.

“No, I—”

“Absolutely spiffing, my good sir! I’m positively delighted at your enthusiasm, though I regret to say the story shall have to wait till another day. Now, I was wondering, I was to meet some friends here in the most covert manner available to my good person. Could you perhaps go out of your way to point them out to me?”

When the bartender’s glare became more acute, Darous held up a hand. “Oh, never mind; I’ll do it myself then. Now be a good chap and fetch me a glass there—no,” he said with a small shake of his head, “not one of those you’re currently spit-polishing at the moment; an unsullied glass will do just fine—yes, that’s it. Now, just fill it up here with as much ale as you can manage. Fill it up now! Fill it up, man! No, really, I...”

Tyreliion averted his gaze from Darous’s wild gesticulations and momentarily turned back to Eldaros, letting the background noise of Darous apologising for the quality of his coins fade into the background.



“Here,” he said, taking Chiradain’s letter from his pocket and sliding it across the table to Eldaros. “I received this from our mutual friend some weeks ago. However, I can make neither heads nor tails of it. Tell me, what think you of its contents?”

Keeping the parchment fixed on the table before him, Eldaros looked it over in ardent fascination and then brought his finger down to the lines of poetry provided by Chiradain. “These are in Teghorëan,” he said at last. “As we are well aware, very few have a working understanding of that language.” He paused, finger on the paper, frowning. “I believe—”

He was cut off by the roar of Darous’s voice over the din. “I’m obliged, mate! That one’s on you.”

Tyrelion turned just in time to see Darous take two swigs from his glass, which had seconds before been handed to him by the bartender, immediately emptying it. “Thank you, sir,” he then said, swiftly exchanging his now-empty glass for another the flustered bartender had just finished pouring for himself.

“Why, you—” objected the now-furious bartender, pointing an accusatory finger at Darous.

“I know, I know. I do look quite familiar. Don’t worry yourself, happens to me all the time. Must be owing to the fact that I’m such an illustrious, sought-after figure on all the fronts.” Having finished the second glass, Darous set it down and wiped his mouth

primly with the embroidered sleeve of his dark satin shirt.

“You took more than one glass!” screeched the glowering bartender. “You must pay for the second one, also.”

Darous stared in shock at the outraged bartender. “Are you upside your barrel, man?” He pointed to the glass he had just set down as if completely taken aback. “This is the only one that I took! You gave me the other one.”

“Why, you—” The bartender lunged across the counter at Darous, who stepped smoothly aside, making room for the barreling man, who proceeded to tumble off the bar and onto the floor. A few scattered laughs spread through the room.

“Get out!” growled the bartender, struggling labouriously to his feet and pointing a twitchy finger towards the door. “Don’t make me tell you twice!”

“What, *already?*” Darous said, another one of his flamboyant smiles plastered across his face. His brow furrowed in mock consternation. “But I only just got here!”

“I said, *get out,*” said the bartender through clenched teeth.

“My apologies, mate, but you prompt me to think of the dragon who ate the heroes: you put a damper on all the fun.”

In response, the bartender snarled and took a vengeful step towards Darous, hand clenching an empty bottle between white fingers.

Darous raised a finger, stopping him in his tracks. "Wait!"

Withdrawing a gleaming, one-bladed sword from the sheath that hung at his side, he inspected it admiringly, then turned to the throng of faces, all of whom had his whole and undivided attention. "Now, which one of you ladies would like to clean my sword?"

Someone threw an empty bottle at him. A tomato quickly followed.

Ducking, Darous eyed the crowd in mild dissatisfaction. "Not one?" He scratched his beard in a perplexed fashion.

There was silence.

"Well, there certainly is a first time for everything," said Darous, sheathing his sword. "The roses are grey, the violets even more so, and I must be both dead *and* colourblind."

"You pompous noblemen are all the same," sneered the bartender. "You take what you want, upset everyone's—"

"Yes, yes," replied Darous, dropping not one but three gold coins into the bartender's outstretched hand. "We upset the balance between the laughable and absurd. And," he added, when the bartender's eyes grew

wide in astonishment, “in my own special case, overpay for everything. I know. It can be a bad trait.

“My thanks again are extended to you, my good sir,” he said, striding past him into the ensemble room beyond. “Now, you can all avert your ogling stares of admiration in the face of my incredibly good-looking person and go back to whatever humdrum and soporific things you were busying yourselves with, in the first place.”

Still gaping, the bartender managed to shuffle awkwardly back to his place behind the counter and returned to his former task of spit-polishing the glasses. Slowly, the rest of the assembly also returned to their original state, paying Darous and his absurd antics no more attention, as if they had never taken place.

“Ah, here we are,” Darous said, coming to a stop at their table and sliding with standard grace into the seat beside Eldaros. “I thought I might find you here.”

“Darous,” said Urathane.

“Cheerless Urathane! How pleasant it is to see you! I’m so profoundly delighted that in the face of overwhelming darkness, you have still managed to keep your irascible demeanour intact! A very admirable feat, I must say!”

“Serious matters are at hand, Darous,” interceded Tyrelion. “Time is wasting, and we, put simply, do not

have that necessity. I assume you have some idea why I asked that you attend this council?"

"I do, indeed," said Darous, nodding most solemnly. "Mashed turnips in the garden again, I assume? Those dratted thieves never know when enough is enough."

"Quite so," said Tyrelion, with a smile. "Our time has finally come. Ir-Murazôr has made his move. We must counter him in turn."

"Tell me, old friend," said Darous as without looking up, he diligently began giving his knife a new sheen. "You didn't really insult the Lord Counsellor to his very face, as the rumours infer, did you?"

Urathane sat up in his seat, complete astonishment etched onto his face.

"The rumours—" Tyrelion found himself stuttering, taken completely aback by this unforeseen revelation. "What...rumours?"

"Did you?"

Tyrelion was silent for a moment, Eldaros having caught his eye. Though they spoke not, unspoken words seemed to pass between them, till relenting at last, Tyrelion said, "Aye, I did, and I wouldn't hesitate to do so again."

"Why so?"

"Yes," followed Urathane. "Why? That is a dangerous move in any given circumstance."

“Because the Lord Surentûr, curse his name, is a fool. Or at least, that is the guise he has chosen to take for the present time.”

Darous feigned a grimace. “Harsh words, there. Yet not wholly untrue.”

“Furthermore, if you have not heard word already, Naggaroth has seized Hroungard. Without Lord Finruldûr’s armies to defend it, it was not much of a conquest I fear. And even if those armies had been there to avail the city, I know not if it would have made any difference. The Siege of Urugand is becoming more perilous by the day: Finruldûr’s army is hard pressed these dark days, his numbers are dwindling, and he is losing what allies he may have once had. No longer do three armies hold Naggaroth at bay; it was reported to me that the Lords of Bernalie have recalled what troops they had sent. I fear Finruldûr cannot hold off Naggaroth for long.”

Urathane’s already grim countenance paled. “It is worse than I had thought, then.”

“Yes,” said Tyrelion. “And if things couldn’t possibly get any worse, Valtagh...” Here, he stopped short, teeth grating. When he had managed to master his anger, he continued. “Valtagh has refused to take any measures to remedy our own circumstances. He must be an even greater fool than his counsellor, for he expressly warned me not to do anything that might possibly provoke

Murazôr to take open action against us. Such undertakings would, naturally, disrupt the peace.”

Darous smirked. “Thought as much.”

“Peace?” said Urathane, who was glowering. “He calls this *peace*? This warmongering spirit, this slaughter? And he, who sits back upon his plush thrones, taking no thought to the lives of the common folk, would *durst* tell us to step aside? He has not the right, the insolent fool!”

True solemnity finally conquering hilarity, Darous said, “I assume that you fully intend to circumvent their decree?”

“I do.”

“And what measures do you plan on taking then?”

“To our many displaced brothers and kinsmen, I have already sent out the call for recompense. Our time is come. There is now nothing left to us upon this earth but this resolve: We must take back our sacred homelands. We will cast down in ruin those who would wrongfully lay claim to them. And we kill the Dark King.”

“Bold,” Darous said. “I like it.”

“How, though?” pressed Urathane. “We would need an army for that, and as you well know, our people—weighed down by years of neglect and misfortune—have not the will to rise against such a foe. And I

correct myself, we would need not one, but *several* armies.”

“Very true. But the answer is simpler than you think,” said Tyrelion. “We use the armies of the Seven Kings.”

“Excellent idea!” proclaimed Darous. “Even more brilliant, especially considering that when I last checked, Surentûr threatened to bring you to trial if you so much as attempted to lay a finger on Murazôr. Excellent idea, forsooth!”

“A viable point,” said Tyrelion, nodding in agreement. “And in any other circumstance than this, you would also be correct. Which is why, my friends, we are going to retrieve the Sceptre of Anakämar from the fabled White Tower itself. Orendel Stonehelm started this nineteen years ago: he will forgive me if I *finish* it.”

Darous started.

Urathane’s jaw dropped.

Only Eldaros, who was already fully aware of Tyrelion’s intentions, gave no great exclamation.

On the other hand, Darous was overcome by a terrible coughing fit that wracked his entire body and took a moment to regain his composure. At last, he said, “Did my ears deceive me, or did you just say, *retrieve the Sceptre of Anakämar*? From the *White Tower*, no less?” He nodded to himself. “Perfectly safe. Perfectly normal. Very agreeable, indeed! I wonder why



it is that I didn't think of that myself. Oh, that's right: Death is the only mistress I absolutely refuse to court."

He turned back to Tyrelion, inclining his ear. "Excuse, if you will, my ramblings. Could I entreat you to repeat what you just now stated you intended on doing?"

"Certainly," answered Tyrelion, and repeated as he had been asked, word for word.

Darous nodded a little harder, then knocked himself on the head with the flat of his palm. Urathane eyed him almost warily.

"Do not mind him," said Tyrelion. "He's always been like this. As a matter of fact, I'm rather surprised he's taking this so well."

"Your plan is mad, absurd, and nonsensical all at once," cut in Darous. "However, at the same time, it's also clever, brilliant, and intuitive. By Gungnir's Crown, I wish I'd thought of it myself. Count me in."

"I knew you'd come around if no one else would," said Tyrelion, with a knowing smile. Then, omitting and disregarding all details of little viable consequence, he proceeded to fill Darous and Urathane on many of the notable events that had taken place in the past several months, not the least of which was the letter. Darous's eyes widened in wonder at his words, and he carefully examined the letter alongside Urathane and Eldaros, who again brought his finger to it.

*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 this reading, 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 Liar.*

*In doing so, you may yet preserve many fates untold, and the old tales and lays of our past may be sung yet again in portents of a Lustrous Shadow. Show not your ignorance by disregarding the unhallowed 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.*

And below it:

*Kuoleman läpi kulkeminen ja elämään on vuodatettu,  
kolme kirousta, joista jokainen synnyttää sisäsiittoista.*

*Juuri niitä, joita vaalitaan, ne, jotka ovat väärin:  
vihattut, rakastetut ja piilotettu säiettä.*

“As I was saying, Teghorëan is a language of yore and nearly foregone in its entirety, though there are assuredly some who would take issue with that occurrence. Very, very few have a working mastery of the language, and even fewer have much proficiency in translating it word for word. Very obviously, this is merely a fragment of something larger in the original working.”

“Can you read it?” asked Tyrelion.

Eldaros face twisted into a grimace. “I have some knowledge of that ancient tongue, and on occasion, if the wording is clear, I can make something of it. However, this is a higher form, and it is beyond my skill to discern it for its full meaning. I fear our best hope lies within the original author.”

“But why would Chiradain bestow you with only a fragment?” asked Urathane wonderingly. “It makes very little sense unless he were pressed for time, and the need was urgent.”

“He was,” said Eldaros. “Can you not see the slant of the writing? The scribbled words and sometimes half-

scrawled letters? This is not at all like Chiradain's wonted style. Verily, the manner of wording is much the same, and the writing is undoubtedly his; however, Chiradain always wrote very perspicuously, and each letter he transcribed was formed as elegantly as he could enable himself: a sort of idiosyncratic refinement he had, one in which he greatly prided himself."

"You speak truly," said Tyrelion. "And this much I was able to discern at the first reading. Yet Urathane hits close to the mark: Chiradain, evidently pressed for time, put pen to paper and gave us information: enough information as he deemed, or more simply, information with sufficient indications capable of pushing our intellect in the right direction. However, I simply cannot make it out. We are lost in a pit of unknowns, methinks."

"It may not be as arcane as you think," said Eldaros. "Look at the letter again! Is it not plain? Behold! The answer lies here, right before our very eyes: we need only ascertain what form it takes. As Chiradain has yet warned us, we must not act in ignorance. Can you not see? 'Show not your *ignorance* by disregarding the unhallowed blade,' we are told: what else can he be referring to? Again, 'Betake yourself to preserve that which may be lost forever if let rest in soiled hands.' It is a clue, I tell you!"

“A Thief and a Deceiver,” said Darous thoughtfully. “Do these refer to one person or two? I can think of several persons to whom they might be ascribed.”

“They are two persons,” said Urathane decisively. “One of them is Ir-Murazôr; that much is clear. As for the other...”

“That would be Surentûr the Deceiver,” finished Tyrelion. “It becomes clearer now what Chiradain was endeavouring to tell me. He is pointing us to some *thing* or artefact that is in danger of falling into the wrong hands. A sword or dagger, it seems this is, something that will direct our way to the Tower.”

“Sword or dagger?” said Eldaros, laughing. “*Unhallowed* he named it, and that is a simple byword for *Azigüir*, in the tongue of the Eluthians. This is no mere *item*: this is the Sword of Azigüir!”

“The Sword of Azigüir!” said Tyrelion. “Yes, yes, I believe you must be right. This certainly changes things.”

““Scour the Monuments of Memory,” said Darous. “Whatever does he mean? Is that an old reference? The name of a place?”

“The ‘Monuments of Memory,’” said Tyrelion softly. 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 or secret from them. Then, when he thought they would remain

utterly inscrutable, a sudden realisation dawned upon him, and he asked with renewed fervour, "What is the ancient Eluthian word for 'Monument?'"

"*Rimbēda*," said Eldaros slowly, beginning to catch on.

"Which translated, literally means 'holy place,' 'shrine of ancients,' or perhaps more precisely, 'temple.' The *Temple of Illurian* is the home of many trinkets and artefacts: a place where are preserved many 'memories' of things past. *This* is the resting place of the blade Chiradain wishes us to recover: the Temple of Illurian: the Black Stone of Argalónde: a *Monument of Memory*."

Eldaros nodded in agreement. "To his credit, once again, Chiradain has outdone himself and done all our work for us. The Blade of Azigüir lies within Argalónde; we need only find it now, and from it, discern the true place of the Tower."

"Last, but certainly not least, is this final fragment," said Urathane. "What does it mean? And better yet, what does it portend? Alas, I fear that we are left alone to guess what it betokens."

"For the present time, yes," said Tyrelion. "But I think we must try and make them out, and as Eldaros has already inferred: that would be to petition the one who wrote them. I fancy it would be wise if we were to take the northern route once we depart for Pergelion. That way, we can cross the Pelindori and so come to

Chiradain himself. Yes, I think that must be our plan. From there, we make for the Temple and to whatever lands the Sword points us to after that.”

So engaged had they been in their discourse, they failed to observe the cloaked figure that now bustled through the room and pulled up at Tyrelion’s side. With a curt motion, the figure pulled back his hood to reveal the face of a young, yet strangely stern person, who beckoned to Tyrelion.

“Yes?” Tyrelion said, momentarily perturbed, but lending his ear to the man all the same.

“Beogon is my name. I have come on behalf of my master, the Lord Stealthfoot. He has agreed to your terms and invites you and your friends to dine in the comforts of his estimable home in three days hence.”

“Has he now?” said Tyrelion, relaxing. “Very good! You may tell your master that we accept his most gracious offer, and will plan to arrive at, say, six o’clock. Send my regards.”

“I shall, indeed,” said Beogon and departed with a flash.

“What was that?” asked Urathane.

“That, my good nephew, was the emissary of Lord Branderion Urtagh. As you saw, he and I have recently reached an accord. He has agreed to aid us in our quest in whatever way he can.”

“Wait just a moment now! You mean to say *the* Branderion? The one who so openly and masterfully contests with the Lord Counsellor?”

“The very one,” said Tyrelion with a smile.

There was silence. Then Urathane spoke again, saying. “Your plan is a good one, Uncle. Better than I had hoped. But I fear that this task will not be as easy as it seems. Our road to the Argalónde and the White Tower beyond will be fraught with danger and despair and everything dark; that I know to be true. Uncle, I do not think we can do this on our own! We need the aid of some other kingdom or army or benevolent force. I do not see how it can be otherwise.”

“We have enough,” said Eldaros. “We have more than enough. We have each other. We are brothers, all of us, brought together by a common bond. Each one of us has lost someone or something to Murazôr or the enemies of this world. And so we go forth into the world, many that are one, with one goal, one motivation, one purpose.

“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 beacon of Light 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 that is within it to utterly destroy us.”

Darous inclined his head. “I concur.”

“And I likewise,” said Urathane after a time. “You are right.”

“So,” Tyrelion said aloud, eyeing each and every one of his companions, his face masked in solemnity. “Here we stand, united in the face of two powerful enemies. Though the powers that be may do all they can to hinder us in our great endeavour, they cannot hope to stay those with the will and determination to strive for better days. Together, brothers of mine in all but blood, we will take the Sceptre of Anakāmar from its resting place at the White Tower. Then, using the Oath sworn by the Seven Kings in ages past, we will use that Sceptre to marshal their armies for war, thus subverting their belligerent wills. With the aid of those armies behind us, we will then wrest back control of Galaeros from the Dark King and free its peoples from his tyrannical rule.”

# CHAPTER V

## THE DAYS DARKEN



TYRELOT • 26 SEPTEMBER 6669

FLEETING VISIONS SPED THROUGH THE troubled mind of Endurian Stonehelm as he nocked an arrow to his bow and let it fly loose at the target.

*Red and black. Screams on the plains. A dying child. A field strewn with the bodies of the slain.*

Endurian gasped, momentarily stumbling and allowing his arrow to fly off errantly. It whistled to his far left, missing the target by a full space of air.

Not far away, he could hear the booming laugh of Khaderas Awyrge. “Endurian, lad, you could have been aiming from three inches away and still missed!”

His voice grew louder as he drew near, and Khaderas's smiling face came into view.

"I still don't know how—" His voice cut short as he caught sight of Endurian's pale face. "Endurian? Are you—" He broke off, sudden realisation spreading across his face.

"It's not getting any better, is it?" he asked, at length.

Endurian shook his head, openly showing the agonising frustration he felt. Inside, an aggrieved anger was burning fiercely: anger at both the world and himself. "No, it is not. It's getting worse. I thought that I might escape it this time, but..."

Khaderas sighed, extending a meaty hand to help Endurian regain his footing. "I'm sure we'll find a way to disperse of this curse eventually, lad. You and I. Together."

"If only that were possible."

"Perhaps we should retire for the day. Dusk is falling; soon, night will be upon us, and it's been a long day already.

"Nay," said Endurian emphatically. "One more."

Khaderas eyed him, seeming unsure of how to respond. "Endurian, lad..."

Endurian clenched his teeth. "One. More."

"Very well."

As Khaderas handed him the arrow, Endurian could not stay the descending feeling that impressed upon

him the truth of the matter: the knowledge that could not be undone: the erudition that ever reminded him that though he knew many people who would call him a friend, Endurian was truly utterly alone.

Silently, he steadied the arrow against the notch set in the bow of yew, then drew himself back. He calmed the voices inside of his head, attempting to focus solely on the object his efforts: the target. His fingers holding the arrow in place on the bowstring began to slacken as he prepared to release. Then—

*A slew of screaming arrows cutting down rank upon rank of armoured soldiers. Blood coating the green grass. A sword thrust slicing down at Endurian's right. The sound of severed flesh and bone as Endurian retaliated, parrying the thrust and hewing swiftly back at his enemy's side. The sounds of war rent the evening air.*

The arrow went wayward again, this time screeching to the right. Endurian cried out and fell to his knees, his vision exploding in a dazzling outbreak of flashing stars. Khaderas's arm was there just in time to keep him from hitting the ground.

He had missed. Again.

Khaderas, having helped him back to his feet, looked at him, his face displaying unmistakable concern. "Endurian, that's enough. There's no need to torture yourself."

"Easy enough for you to say," spat Endurian.

“What?”

“That’s the fourth attack in twelve days, Khaderas, each one worse than the last!” Endurian said, shaking his arm away. “The fourth! Naught can change the truth of the matter. I am accursed! Cursed to relive my darkest moments over and over. Cursed to fear, such that all my days are an endless array of horrors. Ever since Nârac...”

He cut off abruptly, shaking his head in mounting bitterness. “You’re right, let’s go.”

That night Endurian did not find rest.

Instead, he found himself dreaming: dreaming horrible, nightmarish dreams that woke him panting, shaking, and sweating all over so that his whole body felt drenched and drained. He sat in a sitting position, breathing in and out heavily, as he reminded himself that it had only been a dream, nothing more; and that he was safe in the comfort of his bed, without enemies to harry him. Yet, for all this knowledge, he found himself unable to calm the turbulent emotions within him that crashed to and fro with every breath that passed through his breast.

At last, knowing within his heart that his anxious thoughts would deter him from any further sleep, he forced himself to rise. Tugging on his boots, he trod down the worn stairs onto the landing below and

passed through a side-door to the outside beyond. The light of the moon glistened palely through the grey, swirling clouds that lingered in the heavens above, mingling with the flickering firelight from the torches that burned hotly in their receptacles.

Endurian passed by the garden and up the green slope behind the house, which ended in a steep drop-off. 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 his face as it brushed softly by him, rustling his shoulder-length hair, and he spent a long moment basking in the cool darkness, breathing in the crisp, salty air.

But though he had come to escape his nightmares, he soon found his mind drawn once again to those selfsame visions of what had once been: the past, as he had known it, but dreadful and fraught throughout with grief and sorrow and sadness.

Instead of providing relief, the salt-scented air only served to remind him of another time, another age, another life it seemed of long ago: a time when all that he dreaded had come crashing down upon him and everything he knew and loved was gone: wrenched away from his grasp, and leaving him utterly lone: bereft of hope with only the wind to disperse of his tears,

taking them away into the storm that ravaged about them.

Even now, he remembered all that had happened. He remembered his mother and father and fair Aurelia with her golden tresses and bright eyes and kindred spirit. But that was all so long ago. And they were all of them now dead, taken by the void to a place he could not go. Those times had left none of them unmarred. They had all been changed in the twinkling of an eye. Aulendur was now a shadow of his former self, Tyrelion turned by grief to a worse man; not even Khaderas with his kindly spirit and booming laugh had escaped wholly unscathed.

When faced with such death and despair, what could he, what could *anyone* do?

A moment had not gone by when he knew the answer. He *could* fight. He could take a stand. A step forward was better than one backward, and the darkness was never vanquished without those who fought on, despite all the hardship they had endured. That was why they were heroes. Because they *endured*, fallen as they were. Because they had remained strong and steadfast, holding fast to their brothers for strength and courage, not allowing the cares of the world to weigh them down. Because they did what was right *because it was right*. A man's strength was never more strong than the strength of his friends to lift him up.

But in that respect, Endurian knew himself bereft. Those heroes of the tales and songs, they had *something* to fight for. Something they looked to that gave them their strength. Something that pushed them onward to their common goal: to finish the race they had started, whereas Endurian had none at all. Tyrelion had said much the same, but his motive was revenge. And for Endurian, that was not enough. He had once felt those same burning fires of hatred: he had seen them close and upfront like no other. He had looked into the hundred thousand faces of revenge, hoping beyond hope to slake his want, and found them lacking. There was nothing for him there. Revenge was a lie: it promised to sate an unquenchable thirst, but in the culmination of its promise, it left those it took in the throes of a despairing heart. Only emptiness awaited them. It was all of it vanity and endless striving for a promise it could not hope to keep.

These things Endurian pondered and time passed him fleetingly so that when his stupor left him, a new day was dawning in Pergelion. But even that hope could do nothing to alleviate him of his growing dread.



The door to the House of Eldaros Orgrim opened at Tyrelion's third knock, and the grimy face of a young,



red-headed boy peered out, eyes wide at the sight of Tyrelion and Urathane standing before his door.

“Father!” he cried. “Lord Tyrelion and a friend of his are at the door!” Then he slammed the door shut.

Before they had time to react, the door swiftly reopened, the boy saying, “Father bids you enter.”

Tyrelion acquiesced with a small smile, and they passed over the threshold into the room beyond. Eldaros greeted them gravely before catching Tyrelion’s eye. Even as a young girl, boy, and an older woman entered the room, Eldaros’s eyes briefly flickered to the rounded and black-swathed object that Urathane held loosely at his side. Urathane gave a barely imperceptible nod of his head.

“My Lord Tyrelion,” said Eldaros’s wife, a procedural smile on her face.

“This is Iltherh,” said Eldaros to his waiting companions. “And my three bairns: Heldra, Erik, and Byar.”

“Hail, and well met again!” said Tyrelion with a short bow.

But Urathane was not patient, and his heart strove within him to hurry and act, for the urgency of their quest weighed heavily upon him. “Enough now,” he muttered. “Enough of the pleasantries.”

“You have someplace you must needs be?” asked Heldra, her eyes sharp.

Urathane returned her gaze, but she matched it defiantly.

“Come,” said Iltherh, smiling in a move to break the tension. “You must be hungry, all of you. Let it not be said that Mistress Iltherh kept her guests wanting.”

“They would never say that of you,” said Eldaros, and they followed her to a large table at the far end of the room where they were soon seated.

“What are you doing here?” asked Erik abruptly. “Are you taking Father away again?”

“Erik!” said Eldaros sharply.

“Nay,” Tyrelion said. “I would say much the same in his place, and he has a right to know as much as any other.” Turning to the young boy, he said, “We will not be here for very long. Master Urathane and I have come only so that we may speak briefly in regards to a small matter betwixt ourselves, and then we shall leave. However, as for your second question...You will know the truth soon enough, so I shan’t hold it from you. Your father has agreed to help my friends, and I do something. Something very important. I’m afraid that I shall have to take him away for some time more.”

Iltherh had just reentered the room, and her face paled noticeably as she set several flagons filled with drink down upon the table. “You mean to say that you are not finished? But you’ve only just returned! I

thought that...with a month gone and all..." Her shoulders slumped.

"Nay," said Eldaros, setting a comforting hand on her shoulder. "Our task has only just begun."

"How long?" asked Heldra, shooting a pointed glare in Urathane and Tyrelion's direction.

"Several months at the very least," said Tyrelion, drinking a draught from the mug that had been handed to him. "Six, maybe. Perhaps even nine. I cannot say for certain. If all goes well, though it seldom does, maybe less."

"I see," Iltherh replied quietly. It was not very hard to tell what she thought of the matter.

"I do apologise for taking him away yet again. I hope and believe that this is the last time I will be forced to do so."

"Would that I could go to war with you, Father!" said Erik. "Would that I had a sword and shield, and then I could fight alongside you, and our foes would flee before our faces!"

"And I as well!" cried young Byar. "Take me with you, Father!"

"No!" cried Iltherh in answer, flinging her arms about her youngest son, protectively. "Don't even think of such things! I can't bear it. Don't you understand? Don't you remember what I've told you? War isn't like

what it is in the stories. It is a horrible, dreadful thing, and it takes more often than it gives.”

Eldaros sighed. “Your mother is right, lads. This life is not an easy one. Not every story has a happy ending. Where I go, you cannot come. Your place is here, with your mother and sister. Speaking of which...”

He turned to Tyrelion. “Is it your desire to speak in a more secluded manner?”

“Indeed, I must. Then we shall be gone.”

“As you will,” said Eldaros, rising from his chair, and he led them out of the dining room and down a hall into his study beyond.

“Now,” Eldaros said when they were again comfortably seated. “Has something come up? Are we still on schedule for later this night?”

“We are,” answered Tyrelion. “And to answer your other question, no, nothing has exactly *come up*. However, I have something I would entrust to you until such a time as I may have need of it.”

“And what is that?”

“It is this,” said Tyrelion, and Urathane, at a premeditated nod from the former, set the black-swathed object onto the table. The cloth and cords fell away to reveal the very same shield that Tyrelion had only lately retrieved from the Pillar of Ulinivir in all its glory.

By Giraumar had it been wrought in the deeps of long ago for the hand of the Champion of Galaeros, his very own son, Galdrion the Grim, whom men named the Green Knight. Long did tales and songs boast of him ere he was come to full strength, and Giramaur, being the greatest of the smiths of old since Istamár himself, forged the famous armour that was to symbolise his fate. More fine and beautiful than all the works of men in that age of the world, the Armour of Galdrion was much-sought-after and coveted in after-years. For, when Galdrion was yet a babe in his mother's arms, it was prophesied that a twofold destiny lay before him: that he would either ascend in might, growing greater in all renown as the fabled Green Knight of legend and strive with the Lord of the Dark upon the plains of Xexalae to the doom of many, or would else fall from grace into arrogance and meet his death at the treachery of his closest kinsman. But despite his renown, Galdrion failed, and as is elsewhere told, he conceived for himself his own doom, and the prophecy was repudiated, though some indeed say that a descendant of Galdrion will be borne again in his likeness and master that destiny to the very end.

But as for the shield which Tyrelion son of Ithírion laid before Eldaros Orgrim, it was the indeed the Anaeros of old, that which had once caused doughty men to tremble and quake before it; and being a man

skilful in the knowledge and erudition concerning works of old, Eldaros was swiftly aware of it. He rose from his seat on a sudden, eyes alert and wary, saying softly words of which they were aware already:

*Mark the black crows taking flight,  
they who invoke snowflakes of white.  
Woe! The cry of recompense shall ring;  
and the heralded storm it will bring.  
In emerald is cast a fearsome sight:  
a spectre bred of the darkling night.  
Beware all ye men this grave tiding:  
the news borne upon the eagle's wing,  
of the one which arises in fiercest might:  
he who shall be called the Green Knight.*

Then Eldaros said: "You...you found it? The *Anaeros*: Shield of Galdrion himself? But I thought your efforts were in vain!"

"So also did I," Tyrelion said. "But I have found it at last. Meliaris daughter of Menruldûr was kind enough to acquiesce to me. I will not hide the truth from you, my friends. I have been hard at work for many months now. I know I am capable on my own, but I also know that this quest will not succeed without the strength of many. The harbouring of secrets and mistrusts between friends will only serve to tear us down. And so, whilst

my efforts have yielded less than I would have liked, you must know that I have succeeded at last. My communion with the *Nyráthyr*, succinct though it was, has brought both verity and sincerity to this quest. At last, I know what I must do. Which is also why I now ask that you keep it safe until such a time as I deem worthy. You know that I trust you, Eldaros, like no other. Would you be willing?"

"I...I do not know, Tyrelion," said Eldaros. "This is dangerous, this thing. Such an artefact as this is not to be handled lightly. Hallowed and holy is the Armour of Galdrion, but being what they are, men have long coveted and slain for them. A curse is laid upon them, and I do not want any part of it."

"Yet we shall have need of it ere the end," said Tyrelion. "The *Nyráthyr* made that plain enough."

"I am uncertain of many things," said Eldaros after a time. "My mind is clouded: too clouded I fear to lend just reconciliation to such a request. However, though my heart warns against it, I will acquiesce. For your sake and none other."

"I thank you very earnestly," said Tyrelion. He stood along with Urathane. "But we must be off for the time being. We will meet back here at five-thirty tonight ere departing for the manor of our benefactor. Until then, Eldaros."

He turned, Urathane at his heel, and strode out of the study, leaving behind a troubled Eldaros in their wake.



The door opened at Endurian's touch to reveal Aulendur, stooped over his desk, quill pen scratching away at a scrap of parchment. The older man was so engaged in what he was doing that he failed to observe Endurian's quiet entrance. The room was shrouded in grey shadow, the only light coming from the smeared black window to his left that had been stained by the wispy candle below it that had long since burnt out.

Endurian grunted audibly, to make the other man aware of his presence. Aulendur looked up, momentarily startled, before relaxing upon catching sight of Endurian. "Ah, Endurian!" he said. "Come in!"

Endurian made his way inside. "Brother."

"What, may I ask, have you been about this fine and pleasant day?"

"Nothing much."

"I'm sorry that—"

"It is of little consequence. What are you doing at present?"

"I—nothing, nothing at all."



Endurian looked down at his brother, pity momentarily entering his already troubled eyes. Aulendur was a shell of the man he had once been. He was pale and wan; though only thirteen years older than Endurian, worry, anxiety, and illness had aged him by twenty years. In cases such as this, it wasn't the years but the measure of his days that had affected him the most. Endurian could scarcely remember a time when Aulendur's eyes were not surrounded by black circles, and he walked about the room with a limp—something he would have for the rest of his life.

"Aulendur," said Endurian, shaking his head.

"Hmm?"

"You were never good at lying, brother."

"I, I..."

Pity was quickly usurped by resentment. "What is it this time? Always going forward and leaving me in the dark, aren't you? Everyone has secrets. Everyone's always trying to hide something."

"Endurian," said Aulendur, a pained expression on his drawn face. "You wouldn't understand—"

"*Why?*" exploded Endurian. "Everyone says I am incapable of comprehension, but *nothing* could be further from the truth. I have seen things you can't even begin to fathom. I have seen nightmares and shadows take shape before my mortal eyes. I have seen people do terrible things. *I* have done terrible things!"

“Endurian...”

“My life is a living nightmare of endless horrors. And yet the answer is always the same: *you wouldn't, couldn't understand*. No more, Aulendur! I will not have it. I want to know *why*. I asked you before, and I will ask you again: what was it our father sought nineteen years ago? *What was it?* And why do you still refuse to tell me?”

“Endurian,” whispered Aulendur, and he collapsed in his chair, a fit of weariness overtaking him. “Sometimes...sometimes there are no good answers. Some things are better left unknown, and unsought, if you take my meaning. The world is changing; it grows darker by the day. There are...things, or forces if you will, at work within this world that reach beyond the understanding of the common man. There are some secrets that are not worth knowing: secrets that would tear you apart. In this present time, I fear...I fear that innocence is the higher virtue more often than not. And even were you to possess all the knowledge of the world, you would never be truly satisfied. Are you making any sense of what I'm trying to impart?”

Endurian shook his head, beginning to pull away.

At that moment, the young maid, Sigrid, slipped in through a side exit, a tray held between unsteady hands. “So sorry I'm late, lord.”

In an instant, Aulendur's expression flickered from irresolute assurance to a more amiable poise. "What? My good Sigrid, it's scarcely half-past three! You are entirely in keeping with the time, I can assure you of that."

Sigrid stopped short, the tea on her tray sloshing back and forth precipitously. She frowned in nervous consternation. "But...Well, I thought that...that is the others told me—"

"Oh, never mind what they said," interrupted Aulendur. "No harm is done. As a matter of fact, I had wished for a little something to prod my senses into subservience; I am somewhat tired this morning, and I fear that I was up for much of the night."

"Is that so?" asked Endurian, not really paying any close attention to see if Aulendur answered.

Aulendur nodded. Sigrid began pouring the tea into the cup. Her hands shook, and it sloshed at the brim.

"Sigrid, careful now! You'll get it all over my books!" said Aulendur.

"Sorry, Lord."

Aulendur's grim demeanour cracked again, and he smiled amusedly to himself. Sigrid finished pouring the cup, began to pick up the tray, then set it back down. "Would you like something as well, lord?" she asked.

Endurian was so focused on his inward thoughts that it took him a moment to realise that she was talking to him. He shook his head abruptly.

“No. Not at all. I’ve never had much of a liking for the stuff as I’ve told you ere now.”

Sigrid winced at her own seeming foolishness. Endurian ignored her, staring placidly into the wall across the room.

“Yes, lord. So sorry to have inconvenienced you.”

Aulendur observed her make her hurried exit, shook his head to himself, and proceeded to stir his tea with a small spoon. Having mixed the contents to his satisfaction, he lifted the saucer to his mouth, drank a small draught, arched his eyebrows, and drank again before setting it down beside him.

“You intimidate them, I think,” he said with a soft sigh, scrutinising a page in one of his many opened books.”

Endurian shifted uncomfortably, focusing his attention back on Aulendur. “What?”

“You heard me. You intimidate them: Father’s servants.”

“I certainly do not intend to.”

Aulendur smiled wanly. “Of course not. Yet you do so all the same.”

Endurian raised an eyebrow.

“But I’m not quite sure if that is the only particular involved. You see...” The older man paused briefly to take a small sip of his tea. “...all of them have heard the tales told of your feats and exploits in the Darklands. And naturally, to a small extent, most of them are greatly intrigued by you. For many reasons, I see a sort of awe in their eyes when they look upon you, bordering upon admiration. Sigrid, most of all. The others, they find you an enigma, I think. They wonder how the dark, sullen young man standing before them could be the one that the songs sing so highly of. Just an observation, mind you.”

Endurian grunted and turned to leave.

“Come!” said Aulendur, turning to him. “Let me show you something: something that may perhaps illuminate your thoughts.”

“I should imagine not,” muttered Endurian; but despite his better judgement, shifted back around.

Aulendur left his chair and walked quickly to the bookshelf that made up the entirety of the opposite wall, Endurian in tow behind him. He reached up with a shaking hand, running frail fingers over the many volumes and leather-bound tomes that make up the collection, till coming at length to a halt at one, uninspiring volume.

He carefully removed it from the wall and laid it on the table that was centred in the midst of the room.

“What is it?” said Endurian, unimpressed.

“Patience!”

Aulendur thumbed through the pages, fingers spanning pages upon pages filled with the tiny, cramped handwriting of some ancient scholar. “Ah, here we are,” he said, coming to the page he was searching for.

“Tell me,” he said, holding out the book in front of Endurian. “What do you see here before you?”

Endurian peered close, features working up and down in a feeble attempt not to glare at the old parchment. The upturned page was the backdrop for a painting: an artist’s rendition of an ancient hall.

“Well?” said Aulendur.

“It’s a painting.”

“Very perceptive. Do better.”

“Of a hall.”

“Not just a hall. Look closer and tell me what you *see*.”

Endurian sighed audibly and looked closer. “A vast hall,” he said, at length, “draped in shadow, save for the light falling through the cracks. There are wide aisles on each side, focus points of light that bleed through deep-seated windows in the high walls above. Tall pillars uphold the room, pinnacles of black, wherein are carved many ornate shapes and strange beasts.” He stopped, eyes growing dour.

“And?” pressed Aulendur.

“There sits a high throne upon a white dais. Many steps lead up to it, and they slant in such a fashion so as to be like to the crown of a king. The throne, though richly decorated, is yet bereft of someone to sit in it.” He stopped again.

“And?”

“Wispy cobwebs adorn the throne, lines of mottled grey, decaying and falling as motes of dust over that which was once beautiful. They have sat long in decay, left to deteriorate with the slow passage of time. Where there once was beauty and glory, there is now only sadness; for the throne is empty of its would-be-occupier; the hall, of people to echo laughter throughout its walls.”

“Very good,” said Aulendur in a soft voice. “Do you know what happened to his hall? This place of grandeur and majesty that was left to rot in solitude?”

“Nay,” answered Endurian stolidly.

“It was destroyed. Thieves came in and desecrated those halls, looting and pillaging the place of all remnants of its former glory. What had once been glorious to behold, fell deep into shadow. Such is the way of the world.” Aulendur looked at Endurian, eyes piercing him—as if burning through every mental defence Endurian had ever built up around himself. Wincing, Endurian glowered in return, then averted his eyes. Aulendur’s words struck too close to the truth.

“What is it you are saying?” demanded Endurian. “That I am a fool? That I will rot? That I will be my own ruin? Do you not think I have thought of these very things myself?” He laughed cynically. “Is that what you see when you look at me? A ravaged hall bereft of all beauty?” He bit back, realising that he was on the verge of intemperate rage.

Aulendur’s eyes were mournful. “I see a man who has endured far more than is just. I see one who has nearly been broken, not in body or mind, but in soul. I see one who has given up, instead, resigning himself to the grimmest of fates.”

Endurian turned away as he attempted to suppress the well of emotions rising within him. “You speak of that which you don’t understand.”

“Maybe so,” said Aulendur. “Yet my heart forebodes that if you do not do *something* to cure this madness you have brought upon yourself, then in due time, you will destroy yourself even as your enemy would destroy you. That, then, is your great loss. Those who are deemed mighty, rise because they summon the strength to forge ever ahead into the breach, even when all seems lost. It is they who are renowned as heroes because it is they who fight through their trials, persevering through darkness to the very end. And in the end, it is the mighty, not the self-pitying, who rise.”





Endurian strode along the garden path, frustrated, infuriated, disconcerted. With a barren, leafless branch he had come across not far from where he was now, he batted aside the leaves and bushes that made to bar his passage forward. He felt as though he were steadily sinking into a deep hole: a maelstrom of chaos and confusion that was pressing upon him from at all sides, dragging him deeper and deeper into despair.

And he was in the midst of it: the very centre.

Hearing a rustle behind him, he came to a sudden stop, eyes knowing, but betraying none of the inner emotion that swung back and fro within him, save for the dead, vacant look of one who does not know what to do.

"I know you're there," he said, without turning to face her.

Behind him, Sigrid emerged, face sheepish, and somewhat abashed.

"What is it you want?"

Sigrid fidgeted uncomfortably. "Nothing, Lord. Nothing."

"Then what are you doing here?"

"I was bidden to give something to you, but you didn't look as if you wanted to be disturbed..."

Endurian sighed wearily and finally turned around.  
“What is it?”

She handed him a letter, folded neatly. Endurian eyed it momentarily, then took it from her outstretched hand. Sigrid twitched uncomfortably, whilst Endurian broke the seal and unfolded the creased paper.

There was no secret to what had been written. Scratched crudely onto the parchment were the words:

*The Day of Reckoning sends its greeting.*

*It is time that you come into your own.*

*The Day of Destiny calls its chosen.*

*It is time you reach your journey's end.*

*The Day of Retention extends its hand.*

*It is time you be taught your story.*

Endurian eyes scanned it, heart racing as he took in the words, and then looked up, eyes suddenly sharp and alert, like a hunter waiting to pounce. “Where did you get this? Who gave this to you?”

“Well, I—”

“*Who* gave this to you?” He took a purposeful step forward, emphasising every word he spoke.

Sigrid was almost shaking. “I—I...It was a man, Lord Endurian. At the door. He made clear his intention that this be given into your keeping and left immediately once I had assured him I would do so.”

“When? How long ago did this take place?” He tensed, ready to spring into action as soon as she answered.

“I’m afraid to say it must’ve been a little over an hour ago.”

Endurian bit down, bloodying his lip, and stomped the ground with his boot, furious with the fact that he missed it by so long. After a moment in which he stewed, he said, “Why did it take you so long to deliver it to me? Why did you not take it upon yourself to bring it immediately?”

“I’m sorry, my lord. I was occupied at the time, and it completely flew my mind. If I had but known it was so terribly important, I would’ve—”

But Endurian’s mind was still racing, and the looming shadow of fear that now rose within him momentarily overthrew all restraint. “The man, what did he look like?”

“The man?”

“Yes, the man who gave this letter to you. What did he look like? Did he bear any discerning features?”

When Sigrid spoke, her voice was quiet, unnaturally quiet. “He was tall. Pale skin. Very pale. His eyes were light blue, almost as pale as his skin. He was hooded and robed in black.”

Endurian’s face tightened, eyes growing steadily more troubled. “Did he...did he have a white scar? One

that trailed from just below his left eye and down past his mouth?" He traced the pattern with his own hand.

Sigrid's eyes widened, but she answered him quickly. "Y—Yes. He did at that."

"Was there aught else?"

"That...that is all I can remember. That is all I *wanted* to remember; he scared me the way he talked and held himself, Lord Endurian. Made me uncomfortable."

Endurian lowered his eyes, mind drawn deep into contemplation over what he had just read and learnt. "He is come then," he muttered as to himself. "Now, we get to it at last."

"Lord?" Sigrid asked hesitantly.

Endurian looked up, absorbing himself back into the material world. "I'm sorry for speaking sharply with you, Sigrid; that was uncalled for. Sometimes, though, sometimes...I just can't seem to think straight. Especially these days..." He trailed off, hand wiping his brow wearily. Then, he stirred and began striding away, not looking back.

"I'm going out for a walk; I need some time to think things through. If Aulendur asks what I'm about, you may tell him that."

# CHAPTER VI

## THE WORDS OF AULENDUR AND PALISOR



TYRELOT • 27 SEPTEMBER 6669

IN THE DAYS THAT HAD FOLLOWED Irolas's departure to Elgarost, not much of importance occurred. Endurian had remained elusive as ever, secreting himself within his chambers for hours on end, or disappearing in the early hours of the morning to walk the grounds that existed outside of the house.

This was but another worry that burdened Aulendur's heart, and for long, he thought how he might avail himself of his brother, but his efforts proved utterly fruitless. Endurian was sinking deeper and

deeper into the darkness he drew about himself, and he would not listen to reason.

In the meantime, Aulendur had contented himself with various tasks to fill his time; and when those ran out, he spent his time reading from some of the books of scrolls in his small study. Palisor visited here and then, though most of his visits were unnaturally short; but still, he came, mostly it seemed to keep an eye on Aulendur and to see if he was in need of anything, or whether there was anything that warranted his attention.

The steward of his estate and his consort—Aulendur's chief 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 Aulendur'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 Aulendur in the maintaining of his house and the surrounding grounds.

That very same day, about a fortnight after Irolas's departure, Aulendur received a letter. It was from Irolas, surprisingly, and was the first tangible communication between them both since their quarrel overlooking the sea. When Sigrid had taken her leave of him, Aulendur opened it and read thus:

*THE SHIP-YARDS, ELGAROST. September the 23th, Yr. 6669, 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 post provides me with a much more substantial income than the previous had proffered. 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 see it in its full glory if it could even be called that. Amongst other matters that I find worthy of recounting is the news that was just lately posted by Lord Counsellor Surentûr some days ago. He wishes to greatly increase our naval arms and to change the way in which we fashion our ships. In this at all events, I am forced to 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 water 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 much of the glory which Ared'dor down 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 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 western seaboard, in hopes that they might have alighted there; but so far, we have received 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 script ended there. Aulendur set aside the letter and leant back in his armchair. "So a storm is coming then," he muttered—half to himself, half to the letter. "Or is it a feint? Who knows?" The air inside seemed suddenly stuffy and hot. He needed fresh air: a cool breeze upon his face and time to clear his mind and process all that had been imparted to him. Alwen and Indra were out in the marketplace, spending the afternoon at their own leisure; and Sigrid had informed him only a little while ago of Endurian's parting words, so he found himself alone.

Standing, Aulendur walked to the door, which led to the garden 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. But though they momentarily placated him, the burdensome weight which had fallen upon his heart yet remained.

Raising his eyes to the expansive clouded skies that stretched out far above him, Aulendur felt as though he needed to move his abode of residence from within

sight of Lysteria to someplace much further away: a place where he might live in peace without the strains and encumbrances of disquieting news, troubles, and all the subsequent anxieties which so naturally pertained unto these matters.

But alas! Where in all of Pergelion could such a place be found? Nothing came to mind. The wild, untamed regions of Pergelion were growing more unsafe by the day. Since the onset of the Second Epoch, after Eldamár 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 at long last fallen across much 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. As the years darkened, so also did the hearts and minds of men. 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, few now abstained from putting themselves forth to these things.

His deliberations were broken by a rustle sounding to his side. Looking around himself so that he might discern the source of the racket, Aulendur 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 Aulendur, turning to face the man. "Whatever are you doing here at this late hour?"

"Hullo, old man," replied Palisor, with a seemingly-forced smile. In truth, though, 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 it is that I find you here of late, it would seem. Yet, you look as though you are greatly troubled and weighed down by some heavy burden more and more these dark days, wherefore giving me cause to wonder."

"Wonder for what?"

"Why, wonder for the manner in which you conduct yourself, if not the reason for your troubled mind, of course. But enough of that talk! 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 tidings with which I might confer with you if you would be so inclined as to spare me some of your time."

To this, Aulendur 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 a tall, grey alcove, surrounded by several stooping elm trees. Aulendur waited in silence for Palisor to say whatever it was he wished to say. He did not have to wait long.

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

“Nay,” replied Aulendur. “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 rumours alluded to by those visiting me at my house, such as yourself. If I may be so bold, what is this ‘news’ you allude to? Does it bode good or ill for our welfare?”

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

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

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

“Naught,” said Aulendur. “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 exactly *what* is causing it; but whatever it may be, it's burning him up frightfully quick."

Aulendur's eyes had taken on a strange grimness. "That's what I would have suspected."

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

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

Palisor paused before seeming to resolve something in his head. "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, of course, left behind no heir to assume it."

"You need not tell me of that which I am already apprised of," said Aulendur. "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 waved his hand in a dismissive fashion. "Forgive me. I spoke more than was needed. As for the other matter, there is also talk that Lord Surentûr

wishes to break off all ties and alliances we hold with the surrounding kingdoms and realms so that Ared'dor might advance its borders."

"And what think you of this? Do you think it good or ill?"

"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 Galaeros, ere it fell," interrupted Aulendur.

Palisor eyed him, curiously for a small moment before continuing. "It once had ample room for its people; but as it has grown in affluence, so has the populace increased likewise. It has not 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 wholly approve of my reasoning.

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

"Again, that was the opinion I expected 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 three choices laid before us: expand our borders, place restraints on the number of offspring brought forth from the houses of our people, or other, more detestable alternatives."

Aulendur'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 Aulendur," said Palisor, impelling him to speak.

Aulendur stared at the younger man for a hard while, before finally speaking. "What is it that you are endeavouring me to say, Palisor? Your apparent exertion has not gone unnoticed by *me*. I begin to suspect you of trying to ensnare me within my own 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.

Aulendur 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.”

“Indeed we are, Master Aulendur. But 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 endeavours 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 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 dotage, Master Aulendur,” 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.”



Aulendur 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."

Centring 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 unsavoury, 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!" Aulendur's voice, which had at first been equable in its tenor, had slowly risen with the all-encompassing range of his wrath, until 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*. Unsavoury

or not, he is now the most powerful man in all of Ared'dor, and he *will not* be refused."

"Refused! Refused!?" Aulendur laughed almost bitterly. "Tell me, Palisor: when has he ever been refused?"

Palisor began to reply, but Aulendur did not give him that chance.

"Nay," he said, "We both know he *hasn't* been refused. Time and time again, 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, Ared'dor's fate has been sealed. Whilst our body may look strong in appearance, inside, we rot like a corpse that has been abandoned to weather the world's storms. As the hunted prey takes the bait laid for him, so was the King ensnared. Honeyed words are a snare for those who would thus be tempted to take them, and unwholesome company corrupts the best of people." Under his breath, he muttered, "But even that is not surprising."

Palisor's sharp ears heard him. "What is 'not surprising'?" he asked.

"We are *weak*," said Aulendur, almost disdainfully. "We are all of us susceptible and easily cowed: predisposed to succumb to the slightest of temptations set against us. Again and again, we are cast down in our great pride, only to rise in arrogance yet again. Will we not ever learn? I do not think it is possible. Our swift satiety with good is the defining mark of our race, I fear. It is such that one is almost forced to believe the downfall of our station in life to be more preferable to glory and renown in our perceived might. And so we fall and rise, over and over, without end, it would seem. Whenever Evil's dark hand is stayed, and the world is at peace, men will, one way or another, grow discontented and restless, eventually contriving the means to stir the Old Evil back to life.

"It is like unto a tree, which can never be wholly felled. For all our efforts, it continues to sprout forth dark fruit which fall 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. I fear that is how it shall always be, even should the end of all days be upon us, when the Day of Doom\* wreaks its

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

fated path." Aulendur 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 demeanour, 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 is simply the more able power, and these deliberations are disentangled by this one, singular truth: the truth that the Light is incapable of ever overcoming the Dark. There are many who speak of a 'Final Battle' or a 'Day of Doom' as you so purported it to be. A confrontation of the highest magnitude, where a final epic clash of Good and Evil shall take place: a struggle in which the Evil shall at long last be utterly overthrown. I wonder, though, if this is but a simple *ruse*: a lie: 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 fell upon his face, like an eye into his very soul.

What Aulendur saw there greatly disturbed him.

For a little while, he eyed him warily. "I have grown weary of this discourse," he said, at length, 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 very quickly, "You speak of a 'Dark Tree'."

Aulendur stopped dead in his tracks and turning midway around, inclined his head to Palisor, a chary expression upon his face. "Indeed."

Palisor's eyes grew ever larger, and so also did the strange leer that yet resided within their depths. Then, with a whisper as soft as the night itself, he said, "Then even your ears have heard the name of the nameless? You have heard of the *Vaulkren*?"

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, growing fouler, yet strangely vigilant. A hushed quiet enveloped the garden as if all had been turned into stone.

"*Vaulkren*?" Aulendur's eyes widened momentarily in the shadow of some ancient horror, but quickly steeled over. He said in a low, strained voice, "You should not speak that name with such flippancy; the mere utterance brings a black shadow down upon us all!"

He paused. "Tell me, *friend*, where do all of these prodding and probings of yours lead? 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 Aulendur; however, eventually, that past will match your stride. So it also is with the world. More so, you could say. That which was hidden ages ago now seeks to regain that which was lost."

"Why speak you in riddles?" said Aulendur. "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 several steps away from Aulendur 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. But we that are young look instead to the future and what lies ahead. The 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 act in ignorance, Master Aulendur; 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 Aulendur, a knowing simper on his face.

Aulendur leant 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, as each waited for the other to give.

"Neatly have you spurned my attempts for answers," Aulendur 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 stood silent, before saying slowly, "I will tell you all that you wish to know if you join me at the place of the Duar-Aranath 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 Aulendur's garden.

For a long while, Aulendur stood still as a statue, gazing into the grey sky, yet seeing nothing. Palisor's

words profoundly unnerved 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, Aulendur could not help but think that deep down inside, there was some truth to them, diluted by falsehoods, as they were. While the older generation looked 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 his heart thought of Irolas.



But then perhaps Aulendur was wrong. Perhaps he was so burdened by worry that he saw darkness where there was none; and in doing so, had wrongly discerned Palisor's motives. But even that argument could not sway the truth that rose in answer within him. *The mere blithe with which he had mentioned that dark name, the leering gleam that had seemed to lurk deep within his eyes...*

There was too much. Too much to go through. Whatever it was that was manifesting itself in Ared'dor, he did not know the purpose which dominated it with any sure certainty. 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, lest things took an unexpected or unwanted turn.

Deep, down inside, Aulendur 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.

# CHAPTER VII

## SUN, FIRE, AND SHADOW



LYSTERIA • 27 SEPTEMBER 6669

THE COMPANY OF TYRELION IVRONWINE found themselves standing before a grand manor house in the heart of twilight.

The manor was, all in all, a very impressive sight to behold—and that was as it should be, for it just so happened to be the home of a very distinguished and respectable person (at least in the eyes of some). One did not have to look closely to see that this person had a very fine taste in regard to his dwelling and domain. Bright, cheery lights flickered and glinted in the diamond-paned glass windows that spotted the house,

and a straight drive of stone led the way to the front-door beyond. Gravel surrounded the drive on either side, providing a sharp contrast with the flourishing green lawns that encompassed much of the manor.

Very quickly, they made their way to the door and sounded the bronze handle. They had waited no longer than a minute before the doors swept inward, and they were met by a short, bearded man, who bade them remain there in the room, whilst he informed his master of their arrival. The servant disappeared down the hall, and Tyrelion turned to the group of people assembled about him.

“I would like to remind everybody that we are about to be in the presence of Lord Branderion. Very fortunately for us, he is sympathetic to our cause and has offered us not only his services but his presence as well. That being so, it would really not do if any one of us were to—even by accident—insult him in any way, shape, or form.”

Darous raised his hand.

“You...Darous, there’s really no need to raise your hand.

Darous pulled his hand back down.

When Tyrelion realised that he had no intention of saying anything, he arched an eyebrow. “Was there some sentiment you wished to give voice to ere we enter?”

“Nothing important.”

“Idiot man,” said the woman leaning on his arm, and slapped his hand fondly. Then *she* raised her hand.

“What is it with the raising of the hands all of a sudden? Are you all in league or—”

“This ‘Lord Branderion,’” interrupted the woman, whose name was Endires. “He will be joining us? This? Whatever it is we are?”

“Aye,” replied Tyrelion. “He will be joining the Company, at least for now.”

“The Rebellion,” said Urathane out of nowhere. Everyone turned to look at him.

“That’s what we are: a rebellion.” Urathane shifted, almost uncomfortable with all the attention being directed at him.

“No,” said Darous, “not a ‘rebellion.’ You make it sound less grand and more like some petty group of persons who can’t let go of the past, which is, of course, absolutely ridiculous. This here is a *resistance*.”

“They’re synonymous terms,” cut in Eldaros before Urathane had a chance to respond. “There’s really no difference between the two.”

“They’re different,” said Darous as if the matter were not open for discussion. “Believe me, I would be the one to know. They’re—”

"The same," interrupted Endires, smiling sweetly at Darous and taking away the gloved finger she had put to his lips. "Sorry, dear. But you were doing it again."

"Doing what?"

"Turning a molehill into a mountain."

"I always heard it was a 'mountain into a molehill,'" muttered Urathane to himself.

"This is growing absurd," said Darous.

Tyrelion retook command of the room. "I agree. Gentlemen, Lady Endires, do you mind?"

The squabbling group quieted down.

"Now, I fancy our escort should—"

At that moment, the door to the room beyond opened wide, and a man stepped through, clad in leather. "Welcome to the humble dwelling of the Lord Branderion," said he. "I am called Erawulf. His Lordship will see you now." At his lead, they walked through the hallway, their feet sounding echoingly against the stone floor, only muffled by the richly-decorated carpet that covered much of the stone. At the heavy wooden door, they halted for a moment, waiting, as Erawulf pushed aside the door before stepping through.

"Remember," whispered Tyrelion. "Do your best *not* to insult him."

A long table laid with various dishes and foods and surrounded by many chairs filled the centre of the

room. To the side of the drawing-room, an elaborate mantelpiece overshadowed the roaring fire that burned beneath it.

And there, beside the fire and sitting in a richly-decorated chair, was Lord Branderion.

“That’s him?” Darous said, thoroughly unimpressed. “Certainly doesn’t look like much if you ask me! In fact, if I didn’t know any better, I might have thought him some overweight laggard at *The Bulking Boar*!”



For all its faults (of which there were many), *The Fat Toad* was the most popular hub of activity and personality in the entirety of Tyrelot. Many men who spent the entirety of their day hauling in fish, or working the fields came to get a draught of ale at the evening hour and mingle with various friends and acquaintances.

Endurian had come to get both, and he mulled over his drink while listening to Khaderas ramble on in his distinct fashion about his many hobbies and favourite assorted pastimes. Usually, Endurian found this to be quite soothing, and he often used to help calm his turbulent thoughts into some recognisable order. However, tonight of all nights, he found that it wasn’t working: his mind simply refused to compose itself.

That was why he chose to interrupt the kindly man.  
“Khaderas.”

“...But as you are aware, I’m sure, lad—ch? Are...  
what’s the matter?”

“There is something I must ask of you.”

“Anything, lad. Anything at all.”

“What...what was it my father was endeavouring to  
accomplish the night he died?”

Khaderas’s unassuming eyes widened in surprise and  
confusion. “I believe—that is, well, I...”

Endurian leant forward over the table, eyes gazing  
earnestly into those of the man sitting across from him.  
“Khaderas, I know this is...I know this is asking a lot of  
you, but I need the truth: I need to know what it was  
my father was doing. I must know. Once and for all.”

Khaderas held his stare, then looked away, eyes  
uneasy.

“Khaderas, you *must* tell me.”

“I...Lad, you don’t...you shouldn’t...”

“No! Not you as well! I won’t have it!” Endurian  
slammed his fist on the table. The dishes shook and  
shuddered at his fury, and several persons nearby turned  
to stare at him. They only averted their eyes when  
Endurian turned the full force of his burning glare  
upon them. He turned back to Khaderas, emotion  
impressing deliberate intent into his every word. “*Tell  
me the truth.*”



Again, Khaderas met his eyes, but this time they did not fall. "Very well," he said, at last. "I will tell you what little I know, though I must warn you it will not help you the way you think. Moreover, you must know there are other things I cannot tell you; for I have not heard a full account of everything involved, and I would not dilute your mind with false suppositions."

"You were his closest friend!"

"All the same lad, for all that, Orendel kept things even from me. Your brother, you might ask if you are interested in more...delicate particulars."

"I have already, but Aulendur refuses to acquiesce."

"There is nothing I can do about that, lad, but I will tell you what I can. Your father...he was seeking to commune with a *Nyráthyr*. That was why he insisted on making his way to Snowbourne, for we had heard tell that one dwelt somewhere in those regions, long hid away from the eyes of the world."

Endurian's brow furrowed. "A *Nyráthyr*? I thought those were a myth."

"So do many others. But no, I can say with verity in my heart that they are not that at all. The *Nyráthyr* are very real. Your father knew this to be true, and accordingly, he had a gift and three boons to ask of it: what those were exactly, none can ever know, unless you were to ask him yourself; and that cannot happen in

this lifetime. However, I can confess that I know at least one of them, or what it may have consisted of.”

“And what was that?”

“Your father desired to find the location of an ancient place, long forgotten in the eyes of the common man, but well known to those who are wise in the ways of the past. He sought that which was called Tirisfal: an island of long ago that was home to an ancient sanctuary called the White Tower.

“Most unfortunately, he died ere he could pass on what he had learnt, so for long, his quest remained unfinished. Now, however, I have come to believe that several others have since taken it up.”

“Who? And why was this Tower of such importance?”

“That is the question of our day, lad. I can give you the answer to both, but in order to understand the first, you need to first comprehend the second. There are some who believe that the White Tower is the final resting place of a legendary relic: the Sceptre of Anakāmar, forged by Istamár the Smith long ago, which was later used by Eldamár to bring surety and stability to his empire. None know the true power of the Sceptre, or if it has any at all. More likely than not (and to the disappointment of many), it is the bearer of no power but serves instead as a symbol to divine rule by whomever possesses it. However, one thing is certain:

the Seven Kings of Men swore an oath upon that Sceptre to Eldamár, promising that if the need ever arose, their armies would ever be at the service of the one who wielded it. Thus you can see the attraction to such a thing. And perhaps now, you can yourself see who might be most interested in acquiring it. Do I not speak rightly?"

"Tyrelion," said Endurian, as the pieces fell into place. "And...and—"

"And Ir-Murazôr. Yes, we must not count him out."

"But...but why would anyone try and hide this from me? Why was Aulendur so adamant in withholding this? It doesn't make any sense. Why?"

"As I said before, lad, there is more to the story than that, I think. I have merely told you the common, accepted knowledge. There are things that you, nor even I, to some extent, are unaware of concerning your own kindred: the House of Stonehelm, of which you and your brother are the final heirs. Again, your father was a very secretive man, Endurian—too discreet, some might say. But he was my friend, and I tried to help him as best I could despite his shortcomings."

Khaderas shook his head. "The world's grown darker and darker. It's frightening, really, how bad things've gotten so very fast. It seems more and more all that was once good is now either utterly extinguished or turned rotten. Pure, downright rotten, I tell you. And then, of

course...there is Murazôr.” Khaderas sighed, looking at the plate of food in front of him. All of a sudden, he didn’t seem all that hungry.

“Tyrelion has spoken to you as well, then?” asked Endurian.

“Aye.” Khaderas picked up his fork and lightly stirred the contents of his dish. “I *had* expected it, and I must confess that I made him aware of your whereabouts when he inquired. However, we didn’t exactly see eye to eye, though that’s not to be unexpected.”

“Tyrelion is a fool,” muttered Endurian, sudden, loathing anger coursing through his veins. Setting his jaw decidedly, he looked out the window to his left.

“Well, he is...determined, but he means well, lad. You must try and look at things from his perspective: to lose as much as he did is very devastating. Not to say that he’s any different from us; we lost nearly just as much, especially you, lad. But such things leave a mark on people. You used to be not too unlike him, you know. Ere...ere Kira...”

Time froze with those words, and Endurian swallowed hard, a hard lump forming in his throat, his eyes taking on a glazed, filmy look. “Don’t mention that,” he whispered fervently. “Don’t you dare. Don’t ever say that name again, you hear me? I...can’t...” He broke off, muttering to himself, and looked back out the window.

Khaderas's eyes saddened momentarily. "I'm sorry, lad; I ought to have spoken with more tact. Still, that *was* over four years ago. You oughtn't to let yourself dwell on such things for too long, else it will do you real harm. Scars take long enough to cure; they won't get any better with you chafing them as you do."

"Don't be a fool, Khaderas," Endurian said, eyes darkening.

Ignoring this slight, Khaderas waved his hand in a dismissive fashion. "As I said earlier. I mean no harm."

Endurian was silent.

Very suddenly, as if he could not help himself, Khaderas leant forward in his seat, eyes earnest. "You do yourself more harm than good, lad, holing yourself up from the rest of the world like this. It'll scar you more than aught else could hope to do! You're allowing old wounds to fester, whilst you sit alone in your caves, brooding over your misfortunes. Don't get me wrong; they are great misfortunes indeed—far worse than anyone should have to bear. But in your sorrow, you have lost sight of what's important. Your worst enemy is not Murazôr, not Tyreliion, not anybody. It's yourself, lad! You must take care and do *something*, not this foolishness of isolation! You *must* see this! Your father would say much the same."

Endurian rose sharply from his seat, and set his knuckles firmly atop the table, eyes blazing. "Leave me

and mine alone. I have enough trouble as it is without the thousand promptings of people who seem to think they understand me better than I understand myself. Leave me be to do as I deem!" He turned aside wrathfully, pointedly ignoring the hurt and sorrow on Khaderas's visage, and stormed out of the inn the way he came, all the while endeavouring to still the seething anger that had boiled up inside of him. Yet for all that, he could not erase that last glimpse of Khaderas's face: the pitying, commiserating look of one who knows only all too well.

Angrily, he stalked down the ever-wending road, thoughts racing furiously. They thought they all knew! They thought they *understood*! Hypocrites! They knew *nothing*! Endurian was alone, and none were accursed as he. His footfalls increased, booted feet pounding against the dirt-packed road that led to Tyrelot. Around the bend, it tailed to the left past a small overhang of rock, and then steadily descended to the long stretch of sand that ran lengthwise with the sea.

He made his way down this path, nearly stumbling in his haste, and when he did so again, forced himself to slow. His long-suppressed anger was, at last, beginning to press hard from within, and he struggled furiously to keep a firm hold on his emotions. Ignoring them as best

he could, he hurried along his way, and the world passed him by.

The sandy beach stretched out far before Endurian: a white blanket of sand opening onto the crystal blue of a squirming sea. Across the glittering seashore, waves broke gracefully with a soft, comforting thrum. The sky itself was grey and dreary—not particularly the best of times to be pondering the fate of the world.

With each lap of the waves, his feet stamped into the densely-packed sand, crunching it underfoot with no more thought than for the very air he breathed. He had abandoned the idea of taking the true road and had instead taken a western-wending path that passed by the sea, going in a roundabout direction.

Afar off, fire appeared to kindle in the darkening skies. The mountains that surrounded him encroached ominously: spectres of might and looming barriers that overhung so as to shut him in. To his right, the waves of the sea drew closer with every lapping.

Endurian was trapped.

Forces beyond his ability to command or understand were pressing upon him from all sides and directions. There was naught, it seemed, he could do to stay the tide.

What could he do? What could *anyone* do in his circumstances? What could one do when encroached

upon all sides by things beyond the comprehension and understanding of the common man?

Endurian was trapped.

From his place on the beach, he cowered, not caring who saw him. Not caring that some might call him a child. Not caring that some might call him a fool. He did not care, for no amount of embarrassment, humiliation, or discomfiture could hope to overcome the terrible, horrid sensation that now overtook him like a great wave, borne out of the Winterseas.

Endurian Stonehelm, renowned outlaw, master schemer, and heir of kings, was afraid. Dreadfully, *horribly* afraid.



“As Tyrelion has likely already told you by now, I steal for a living,” said Branderion Urtagh, nonchalantly cleaning the insides of his fingernails with the honed point of a jewelled dagger.

Inside, Tyrelion grimaced. He had already been aware that Branderion was somewhat...pointed; his reputation was relatively well known to those who knew to keep a good connection with the local crime-lord. However, he had not expected this particular aspect of Branderion’s character to manifest itself so soon. No matter, he would have to do. Branderion was



an invaluable—not to mention *unexpected*—addition to their company, which now consisted of six members.

“As a matter of fact, no, he didn’t,” said Darous. “In fact, he failed to mention that you know how you keep your belly well-stocked, which quite frankly, disgusts me.”

Branderion stopped his gruesome activity to glare at Darous from beneath a pair of dark eyebrows. “What’s that?”

“Nothing,” said Endires quickly.

“That’s what I thought,” grunted Branderion, returning to his work.

The Company was seated around a long, oak table that had been scrubbed so clean, its exterior gleamed like fresh sap in the firelight. The majority of them were busy eating what delicacies had been prepared for them.

“As I was saying,” continued Branderion. “I steal for a living. Or better put, I’m a smuggler lord and spymaster who works in direct subversion to Surentûr and his lackeys, always seeking to defy him and his express bidding in every area of my life. My peers refer to me as Lord Stealthfoot. You may have heard of me.”

“Never heard the name for the life of me,” intruded Darous, idly observing a mosquito buzz near the polished surface of the window next to his face.

Tyrelion coughed. *Ought to have expected that those two wouldn’t exactly get along, he thought to himself.*

Branderion glared at Darous again. "What was that?"

"Nothing," Tyrelion said this time.

"That's what I thought."

"Lord Branderion—" began Endires.

"Brandy!" said Branderion.

"Wh—" Endires frowned at the unexpected outburst. "What?"

"Don't call me 'Lord Branderion'; it makes me sound right like one of them noblemen, it does. If you must, then refer to me as 'Lord Smuggler,' or 'King of Thieves.' Or call me Brandy." He snickered to himself as if he had made the greatest joke ever. "Yeah, Brandy."

"I wouldn't think of it," sniffed Endires, plainly perturbed.

"Course you wouldn't," said Branderion. "That's why I just did and not the other way around."

"Regardless," Endires said, collecting her bearings. "I—and the rest of the Company—were wondering just how long you planned on remaining with us? We can certainly understand if you would rather remain behind. It is a long trip and very arduous at that, for we have much ground to cover. Therefore—"

"Are you off your rocker, woman? I have a substantial claim in this quest of yours, just in case you haven't noticed, and with that being so, you think I would just up and let you all make off without me? Hrmph! And

to top that off, you just had to go and assume the fact that because I'm venerable and greedy, I would prefer to sit back in my mansions with my gold, than manipulate men to do my bidding and pull the strings that change the world? Hrmpf!"

"I think you may have just insulted the intelligence of our host, my dear," said Darous.

"I certainly had no intention of doing so."

"Of course not. However, you ought to make amends."

Endires glared at Darous flatly, with a cynicism that strangely became her fair countenance. "Of all the people in this room, you should have the least to say regarding impropriety, Darous."

"True, true." Darous smiled in that annoying way of his. "But when we have someone as reputable as the Lord Smuggler here, we should do our best to behave as deferential as possible..."

Branderion nodded in agreement. "Hey, look here, the fashionable fop's right on that point."

"...Even if he is a fat, gourmandizing money-grubber."

For the third time, Branderion turned to glare at Darous. "What was that?"

This time, there was no one to intercede for Darous as he said before anyone else, "Even if he is a fat, gourmandizing money-grubber."

Branderion nodded as if he'd been expecting that the entire time. "That's what I thought."



Long after Palisor's departure, Aulendur was to be found in his study, his writing-table piled high with various books, and papers, and pens, and notes. His mind was weary. The day was waning. It would soon be night.

Where in Eldamár's name was Endurian?

He had not seen him since their ill-fated discourse earlier that day. Aulendur glanced at the time and frowned. It was past six-thirty; Endurian was never gone this long. He would prefer that his brother returned before he departed with Palisor, and did not find the idea of explaining all his intents and purposes very amenable. The deed was best performed with as little interference as possible. And moreover, he didn't desire to worry the boy; Endurian's mind was troubled enough as it was already.

Aulendur's eyes fell to the clock again. Time was wasting.

To settle his thoughts, he turned his mind from Endurian to what lay before him. Though he did not wish to worry anyone unnecessarily, he quickly came to the conclusion that to leave everyone in the dark was

unwise. Who then ought he to inform, in the event that he did not return?

He would leave a note for Endurian, that much he knew. But Aulendur was also aware that in his madness, Endurian was not wholly reliable and might very well miss such a communication. And for all that, Endurian was not well-versed at all in the troubles brought about by Surentûr, being preoccupied with his own grievances, and as such, could not be trusted to grasp or comprehend the motives of his brother.

That required Aulendur to consider who else he might trust. Blessedly, the answer came to him within the minute.

“But I have friends among the Steadfast!” he thought then to himself. “They are wise in these matters! They will know what to do.”

Picking up his pen, he began to rapidly scratch words onto a blank piece of parchment before him. Some minutes later, he folded and sealed the letter, addressing it in the very centre to one of the chief leaders of the Steadfast: *Eldaros Orgrim*.

Having delivered it to the post, Aulendur fetched the missive from Irolas to read once more, while he waited for nightfall. 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. On the hearth, wood was burning and crackling. Placing his feet atop the footrest, he settled back and 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 Aulendur; 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 neighbouring Aulendur's chair, while simultaneously sweeping off two books to make room for it.

Expressing his utmost gratitude, Aulendur 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 the 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 Aulendur 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 ought not to remain so in such a state.

He perused the letter again.



The last of day had nearly darkened into night when Endurian returned to the house. Setting his hand on the round doorknob, he entered therein, looking about for any sign of life. Seeing none, he breathed a soft sigh of relief. The last thing he needed or wanted was someone prying or asking questions about where he had been. He just wanted to be left alone.

He entered into the small hall and made his way quietly to the stairs just a little ways away. In the room to his right, the fire in the hearth flickered, and the sound of pages being turned echoed his way: a clear sign that Aulendur was reading. Endurian shook his head and set foot on the first step, which creaked beneath the tread of his boot.

“Endurian?”

Endurian stopped and took a step back. “I am here.”

Aulendur leant forward in his armchair, his book forgotten, as he squinted at Endurian. “Where’ve you been, boy?”

“I...I was out.”

Aulendur snorted. “I can see that! Are you well? Is there anything you require? Onár’s retired already, but Sigrid ought to still be up if you wish for something to sustain you.”

“I’m well,” said Endurian. “There’s really no need to trouble anyone else.”

Aulendur shrugged. “If that is what you wish, then very well.”

He turned back to his book, and Endurian turned back to the stairs. He quickly made his way to the second landing and passing down yet another hall, so made his way to his chamber. Entering therein, he closed the door as a precaution and made his way to the westernmost balcony that overlooked the city.

The sky was a blanket of pure, crystal blue as Endurian stood atop the stone balcony, eyes upon the city of Lystíria. The expansive blue held within its confines a wealth of shimmering stars. In the vast firmament, they glittered brightly, twinkling lights in a deep midnight blue. To his right, the *Miramûr* shone: the great bow was strung, and the string pulled taught.



To his left, the Hunter reached out with 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.

His house was not so very far away from the seaport. The village in which he resided was really just a few scattered shacks interlaced with the caves wherein many dwelt. But Endurian had no desire for the city; for it was dank and dreary to behold in his eyes and though from far off it gleamed pristinely from his vantage point, inside, he knew there was told a different tale altogether.

Endurian let out an exhausted sigh, the burdensome weight upon his mind pressing harder than it had ever before. He felt cornered, pushed into a crevice, and hemmed in at all sides by sharp spears, yet he knew with verity in his heart the dangers that faced him—and others—should he break free.

*He will come for you,* Tyrelion had said. *Yes, he will come, and when he comes, there will be no denying him. Not now. Not this time.* The words came unbidden to his mind, and he attempted to push them out as soon as they had flitted across his consciousness, for they troubled him.

Without thinking about what he was doing, Endurian put his hand to his breast and drew out from within the folds of his shirt, the silver chain that hung about his neck. Slowly, the chain links jingled over the

folds of his shirt one at a time, until at last, the object of his concern manifested itself before him. And with that manifestation, his wandering mind picked up upon a memory long laid aside.

*Orendel tarried momentarily as if considering something. A thoughtful expression was upon his face, and he appeared to be moved by Endurian's morose demeanour. Then, as if coming to a decision in his mind, he reached to the back of his neck, undid a small clasp, and brought forth a silver chain upon which hung a single, circular pendant. Encased in the pendant was a small, black stone no longer than the width of Endurian's thumb, jagged and angular.*

*"Here," Orendel said. "Keep this as a promise. A promise that..." Again, Orendel paused for the briefest of moments, before continuing on. "A promise that all will be well."*

*Taking it from Orendel's outstretched hand, Endurian eyed it with unbidden curiosity. "What is it?"*

*"It is called a Nornstone."*

*"What is a Nornstone?"*

*Orendel bent low beside him; and for the first time in all his life, Endurian saw his face drop momentarily. It was as if the ravaging winds of time were stayed and even as Orendel laid his hand on his son's and folded his fingers closed over the stone, he became gaunt and haggard: a shadow of his former self. "It is my inheritance to you. It*

*seems little now, and indeed it would be so for many others; but for you, there is nothing greater I might bestow.*

*“A time will soon come, Endurian—whether now or in a hundred years—when you reach the end of all that you think and know to be true. A time will come when you cannot seek me out to avail you in your darkest hour. When that time comes, remember these words: Passing through death and into life is bled, three curses, each one spawning inbred. It is they that are fostered, they that are misread: the Hated, the Loved, and the Hidden Thread.”*

*The moment passed. Orendel stood, betraying no sign of what had just taken place. He gave a small, remorseful shake of his head. “But... the time has come that I must go, if for a little while. Until then.”*

*“Father...” said Endurian, looking up.*

*Orendel, who had pushed open the tent flap and was preparing to step out, looked back, smiling. “Farewell, Endurian.”*

*Orendel disappeared into the darkness, leaving Endurian by himself. With a small sigh, Endurian shifted his attention from the door to the pendant which Orendel had given him, turning it over, while eyeing it curiously. After a time, he took it by the chain and slipped it about his neck, claspng it tightly.*

The Nornstone was thick, yet sharp, like *gyranite*. Though it seemed to have been wrought of pure obsidian, there was a crystalline hue to it that was embellished by the lighter tones running through its sheeny exterior, streaks of gleaming starlight in a sea of the blackest night.

Slowly, he held it before his eyes as he faced the skyline beyond. Eyes closed, he rhymed as he had so many nights before:

*Passing through death and into life is bled,  
Three curses, each one spawning inbred,  
It is they that are fostered, they that are misread,  
The Hated, the Loved, and the Hidden Thread.*

Endurian returned it to his shirt, a short, fleeting smile gracing his lips. Let Murazôr come! There was naught he could do, for Endurian would stop him if he so dared. No one would ever retrieve his weregild from him, the vestige of memory he yet carried from his past.

He would *not* give in.



Tyrelion looked on, watching in silence as Urathane stood by the window, arms clasped behind his back, face utterly devoid of expression. The younger man paid

no attention to the rest of the room, preferring instead to sink his gaze—and his thoughts—into more profound matters. What it was he was pondering, Tyrelion knew only too well.

For many long years, his people had been without a home. Those that were not yet enslaved by Murazôr wandered about in the desolate wilderness, the reminders of a once noble people brought low. They were both a subtle and stern reminder that no matter how well one fared in the world, at any given time, the ground could be swept out from under your feet in the mere blink of an eye.

Even the mighty will fall in the time.

For a small part, Tyrelion felt as though he could understand the reasons behind Endurian Stonehelm's adamant refusal to join them.

What Tyrelion was proposing was beyond anything they had ever hoped to achieve. He was offering the dispossessed *home*. Many of them did not understand what home truly was, having simply forgotten it as the years wore on. For some, home simply meant a warm place by the fireside, a soft covering, and a roof over their heads. For others, home meant glory, pride, and the prestige of being noble once again.

Those such as Endurian Stonehelm, who called him a fool and denied him, were undoubtedly afraid. And Endurian was afraid, although Tyrelion had not yet

been able to discern from what wellspring rose the most prominent threads of this fear. But, for a small part, Tyrelion knew that he was partly afraid of failure.

Of disappointment.

Even to himself, Tyrelion had to admit that the chances of them succeeding in their quest were relatively slim. Likely thing was, they would fail and die in the attempt. Yes, they would be martyrs. But for all the glory there was to be had, martyrs did not live as the living. To be a martyr was to be dead: a mere memory of what once was; a vestige, may it be, a thought of what could have been. And Tyrelion did not care what legacy he left behind; he had no doubt that one day he would likely fall to some mortal wound. Maybe even sooner than later. He considered it his foremost priority to do what he could *now* while he was alive. He could not wait. Someone, somewhere had to start sometime. And he was one of a slim few who had the *will* to act and take that initiative.

Being dead would do very little for his cause

“There are ships,” said Urathane quietly. The statement was so unexpected, so unlooked for, that for a moment, no one really paid any attention to it.

“There are ships in the harbour,” repeated Urathane.

“There are, indeed,” said Darous. “Forty-three of them to be exact, last I checked.”

“You should have checked sooner,” said Urathane, wholly unfazed. “Because these are just newly-arrived and *different* from the others. Much different.”

Tyrelion sat up in his seat, eyes suddenly alert. The rest of the Company turned to look at him. “What colours do they fly?” he asked, striding to the open window. Tyrelion’s eyes saw them just as Urathane said, “Red.”

“So they have come,” he muttered to himself. “At long last.”

“What is it?” asked Endires, rising gracefully to her feet.

“The King’s Ships,” replied Tyrelion. “Three of them.”

“Are you quite sure?” Branderion looked up from the scroll he was poring over.

“Beyond a doubt. Blood-red sailcloth, ten stars emblazoned on the flag. It’s them all right.”

“Downright inconvenient, that is,” muttered Branderion, turning back to the scroll. “And I was just hoping for a peaceful absconding.”

“Tyrelion?” said Eldaros. It was more statement than question.

“They’ve come for me,” he replied, not taking his eyes off the scarlet-draped ships. “And they will not stop pursuing me until they’ve accomplished what they’ve set out to do.”

Inside of him, a part of Tyrelion understood and sympathised with Endurian's predicament. He *did* fear failure. To fail was to lose everything. However, for all that, he would not, *could not* come to terms with why Endurian would outright reject such an opportunity; for the good that could be achieved by such a victory far outweighed the bad. Part of him understood.

The other part of him could not.



The sun had nearly set beyond the uttermost extremities of the sea, and eventide was nigh upon him when Aulendur departed from his house. Ere betaking himself of the eastern path, 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 steadily in, and it ruffled his hair and calmed his unquiet spirit to a point. As the sun disappeared below the distant horizon, Aulendur was struck by the beauty arrayed before him. Slowly, the sun sank further and further, hovering above the water's periphery, and engendering a fiery blaze that lit the blue oceans with a ghastly, red hue, that glistered 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 as 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. Aulendur sighed and left the tranquillity of those shores to take the path ordained to 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 sped through his mind like dark arrows of foreboding crashing against his soul with the breaking of the wave, some commanding in their plough, some deadened. For a moment, Aulendur 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 his sword-hilt, and he gripped it tightly while glancing back over his shoulder. Not seeing anything, he relaxed, if only slightly.

The Duar-Aranath was placed in the very midst of the small settlement of Tyrelot that existed only several miles downhill from Lysteria. 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 centre, so as not to appear fully in the moonlight, Aulendur peered into shadows which encircled about him, seeking for a familiar face. At first, there was nothing he could descry. 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 centre 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 Aulendur to see what lay within the enshrouding darkness. The figure in the shadows seemed to shift his weight.

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

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

"Yes, indeed."

"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 Aulendur; a pilgrimage you might call it, or a journey into the clandestine."

Aulendur did not stir from whence 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, Aulendur refused to betake himself of the path Palisor had indicated. "I would know where I was being led, ere betaking such a road. It is certain folly to walk blindly ahead and to place your trust in anyone and everyone who would durst to lead you down uncertain paths."

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

Aulendur 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 Aulendur 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 elsewhither. 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 Aulendur 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 Aulendur 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 Lysteria. In the murky windows inset within the enclosures, Aulendur 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 Aulendur found himself being taken.

Passing through shadow to the edifice, Palisor turned the door-handle, and they entered within. The hall was large enough to accommodate many people, and accordingly so, Aulendur 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, some few turned and spared a quick glance or two. However, many did not for some reason, instead, choosing to stay where they already stood.

All in all, it was a rather eerie and most disturbing sight to behold, and almost at once, Aulendur 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 Aulendur 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 Aulendur 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 Aulendur: 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!"

Aulendur 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 Aulendir 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:

*A forest of masses gathering near;  
hearts beating with a wrenching fear.  
The vale is swept; shadows gnaw and devour;  
the blade gleams in crimson light dour.  
Thunder roars and lightning crackles;  
an austere voice laughs aloud and cackles.  
Beneath starry skies a cry does ring,  
of the mighty one: the dreaded dark king.  
A Shadow rises: defiant, unyielding,  
and the chosen fall into darkness dreaming.*

Aulendur 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, whilst others eyed the oscillating assembly with either disinterest or intrigue.

However, there was one person who caught Aulendur'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, Aulendur left his place by the wall and silently crossed the space 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, Aulendur slid into an opening at the man's right. For a moment, the other regarded him almost contemplatively; but

eventually averted his gaze when Aulendur did not exchange eye contact with him.

After a time, Aulendur said in a small undertone, "I see that I am not the only one ill at ease in the face of such odious proceedings."

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 *unsettling*; 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 Aulendur, 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 folly 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 Murazôr," the man said. "But methinks darker still to come are the deeds of Ared'dor and its people. I deem these before us have drifted too far astray for there to be any hope of restoration."

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

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

"Palisor," said Aulendur in a decidedly equable voice. "You promised me answers, not the mere descrying 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 Aulendur. "The Ascension of the Unnamed; the darkness descending upon men." He turned and gazed suddenly at Aulendur; a glazed look was borne in the gloaming of his eyes. "The Songs of the Dead are the wherewith we avail ourselves of to bring forth our liberator."

Aulendur 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.

"*Thessu er lokid*," 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 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 thy 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, whilst 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 Aulendur's arm and thrusting him forward aggressively.

Verath's eyes darkened at the disruption. "Palisor, son of Saëgor, do you have an account for this unseemly behaviour?"

“I do,” said Palisor, undaunted. “This very night, I bring before you one Aulendur, scion of Orendel, and a direct descendant of Eldamár himself.”

A collective gasp sped through the crowd, and Aulendur, blood beginning to grow cold, wrenched his arm away from Palisor.

“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. “Yea! This man is a direct descendant of Eldamár himself. As such, you 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 thereby 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,” Aulendur 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 Aulendur 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 scrutinising 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.”

Aulendur 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 sombre bearing behind the table. Then, as he had done to the others before him, Verath asked Aulendur thus: *Wilt thou take an oath to forever conform thy 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 Aulendur. “I certainly shall not!”

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

“I am,” Aulendur replied defiantly. “Naught will sway me in this matter.”

“Then, you must forgive us for the actions which we must take forthwith.” Swivelling about on his heel, the man beckoned towards two acolytes who stood nearby. “Bind him to this table.”

The two acolytes drew their swords and advanced upon Aulendur, eyes callous and hard. Without taking time to further contemplate the situation, Aulendur leapt away and, snatching up the knife 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 Aulendur’s expected thrust.

But Aulendur 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 centre 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 receptacles 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. Aulendur seized the opportunity granted to him by the chaos and ensuing panic, to reach within his cloak and draw forth his sword, Durendurl. He steadied himself and gripped the sword tight as he limped forward. 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 underhanded blow, Aulendur 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.

Aulendur had seen more gravely wounded men cry far less.

The acolyte whom he had disarmed, stumbled backwards as Aulendur 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, wholly eradicating any chance there had once been of quenching it. Aulendur 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. Aulendur 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 Aulendur's torso.

Aulendur 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, Verath heedlessly brought his erstwhile blade down to bear on Aulendur's side. Recovering quickly, Aulendur stepped backwards half a step, parried away the blow and then—when the man



fell back from the force of Aulendur's lunge—hewed the man's sword-hand from his arm with one heavy 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 Aulendur to get, for three young acolytes, having heard their master's plea of help, swiftly took his place and set upon him without delay.

Aulendur had scarcely 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, even as he deflected a slice aimed at his shoulder, a scornful voice said from behind him, "Fool! So arrested is your mind in that which is before you, that you fail to behold that which is beyond you."

Aulendur 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.

# CHAPTER VIII

## THE DREADED DARK KING



TYRELOT • 27 SEPTEMBER 6669

IT WAS UNRESERVEDLY FRIGID, AND A biting wind was blowing rather fiercely when Aulendur 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 boughs managed to cloak him from much of the outside world.

The whole back of his head was fraught with a throbbing, stabbing pain, and his side ached terribly.

The blood had long since clotted, but it still caused him no end of discomfort.

How he had gotten to this place, Aulendur did not know. He remembered being taken to a gathering of fools who had wished to subject him to some dark ritual. He had fought back, though. Then he vaguely remembered Palisor uttering something from behind him before he felt a sharp pain in his head and everything went black. All that he could recall 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 ploughing out from under the shelter of the tree, faltered to his knees at the edge of the twinkling and splashing waters. Retrieving a pocket-handkerchief from his woollen waistcoat, Aulendur 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 inspiring, and it managed to revive him somewhat.

He was just 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 closer to where they appeared to be coming from, concealing himself behind a patch of foliage that ran abreast to the line of trees running down the riverside. Now, the voices grew louder, and Aulendur was able to perceive what was said, and it appeared that the persons who spoke them were steadily making their way to Aulendur'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 Eldamár's accursed 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."

"We almost got 'im though, and he would be in our hands *now* if it weren't for that stranger."

"Which stranger was that?"

"The one in the far back, on the right," replied the other man. "A grim look he had about himself and didn't take part in any of our rites. 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 can’t recall the sight of 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.”

“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.”

Aulendur 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 reckon 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 went about doing.”

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

“*Nothing* is what I heard. The Master actually paid a visit to the house *in person*, which makes it plain that

this is no small matter; but apparently, he wasn't to be found. He must have caught wind or suspected that would be the first place we'd look at, so I daresay he flew the coop and is trying to find a way past Lysteria at this very moment."

"Which then brings again to mind the question: what exactly it is we are doing here at this present moment if that is all true and good?"

"Well, we're here, just in case that *hasn't* been the case and the Heir's still wandering about someplace. 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 Aulendur freeze, his blood churning cold as sudden, wrenching 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 Eldamár'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 Aulendur's vision. One was tall and thin, like a rail and the other was short and squat, like a bottle-cork. They were making their way aimlessly down the river's edge, just opposite of Aulendur.

But Aulendur's mind was not upon the two men. No, his fixed upon another matter entirely. And it was then, even as he bent all his thought upon what he had just heard, that something in his mind clicked.

Suddenly and without notice, Aulendur *knew*.

He knew what it was that Palisor had been insinuating. He knew, in part, what the purposes and intents of the entity calling itself the *Dark Tree* were. And he knew what very well might be awaiting him should he be foolish enough to turn back to his house.

He *knew*. This precipitous knowledge induced a torrent of other memories bound in relation to this hitherto troubling tidings, to burst forth from within and come pouring forth unbidden; and even as the belabouring surge gradually subsided, Aulendur knew what he needed to do.

The two illuminating figures disappeared into the night. As if on notice, Aulendur grated his teeth and leapt to his feet, disregarding the sharp, stinging pain in his side, feet taking back down the path from whence he came.

His enemy of old was upon him, and the lives of those whom he loved: Alwen and Indra and Endurian, and many more were in direst peril. Maybe even mortal danger.

Aulendur ran faster, heedless of all aches and pains. 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 only then that he stopped short 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 observed.

Aulendur opened the door, and it declined inward. An ominous silence pervaded all the air, and suddenly, he 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 lend it sustenance and verity. Aulendur's breath caught in his breast, and he again hesitated, before entering the house cautiously, and reaching back to lock shut the door.

There would be no unwanted visitors, not if he could help it.

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

Passing from the room into the sitting room, Aulendur 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, Aulendur 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, Aulendur 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 receptacle, before moving onwards.

As he crossed this space of the room, a soft breeze pushed suddenly 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, Aulendur 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, Aulendur 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 Aulendur had ever felt before in all his waking days...save for one night, long ago.

And Aulendur remembered it even now.

Steadying himself on the rail to his left, he 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 threats of the sky.

Then, Aulendur stood straight and righted himself, endeavouring if he might, to breathe the fear out of him. He 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 thrust it quickly aside, like one does an adversary when rushing for the victory. An invigorating spirit consumed him and he sped down the hall towards the foremost of the rooms, candle in hand, and 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 the room within and the sinking feeling in his stomach crushed downwards in a descending spiral.

With it, fell his heart, in an irrepressible wave of despair that at last, overwhelmed and nigh on consumed him.

Within that room were situated two chairs and sitting within them were Alwen and Indra, motionless forms in the flickering light of his candle. Below them and upon the floor, a dark stain 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 Aulendur 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.

As grief threatened to eclipse all rational thought, his ears caught from nearby the sound of quiet, muffled sobs. He half-limped, half-sprang about, eyes crazed and bewildered. There, not far from where he stood and cowering in the shadows was the small form of a young girl.

Sigrid.

So absorbed in her sorrow and fear was she that she did not perceive him until he stood almost directly in front of her, and was bending low to extend a comforting hand.

“Master Aulendur!” she cried out in a half-choked whisper. “I’m sorry; I’m so very sorry!” She fell forward, and he caught her.

“Sigrid?” said Aulendur. “My dear Sigrid! What happened? What is going on?”

“Mistress Indra, and Master Alwen, they’re...I found them.” The girl’s eyes fell forward, awash in shame and discomfiture. “I was frightened, and I ran. And...and there was the man.”

“The man?”

She nodded, frightful trepidation conquering all contrition. “It was that dreadful man who came to the door yesterday. The one that set Lord Endurian off so. The one with the pale face and the white scar.”

Aulendur’s heart slowed in his throat, and he felt all the strength he thought he once owned, fail utterly. He sunk back, face pallid and wan.

But now another sound reached his ears. It was the sound of cold steel striking wood. It was the sound of wood crackling and breaking asunder in the night. It was the sound of feet pounding on the stairway, and of Ónar, and another servant crying out in alarm.

Aulendur rose to his feet on unsteady legs.

“The house,” he found himself saying as if in a dream. “It’s on fire.”



A wave of sudden heat blasted against Endurian, washing over him in languished waves and making his skin smart in the torrid heat. The fire was becoming rather hot, unusually hot actually, and was beginning to grow very uncomfortable. "For pity's sake, what's the matter here?" he muttered to himself.

He was sitting cross-legged, and just several feet away from the small fire pit; he was already drenched in sweat. Suddenly, a loud banging issued from behind him on the locked door, and then the wood broke asunder, splinters and wood flying in every conceivable direction.

Endurian awoke with a start. In the doorway hulked a massive figure, framed against a dim, red light, which was growing steadily larger by the second. Immediately, Endurian jumped back in his bed, hands grasping for a sword that wasn't there. The figure diminished in size, revealing himself to be Aulendur. Bolting across the room, he rushed to Endurian's side and shook him from the bed.

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

"What's going on? What are you saying?"

"No time," said Aulendur. "We must move. Quickly now! He is almost here!"

Endurian jerked his arm away from Aulendur and rose to his feet. There was no need to change attire himself as he had retired that night without having done so.

“Who is?”

Aulendur spared a quick, frightened glance at Endurian. His lips seemed to fumble for words, and his hands shook. “*Him*,” he managed to utter raggedly.

Endurian went numb.

Aulendur grabbed onto his arm, hand still shaking, and pulled him out of the room and onto the landing. They quickly began descending the stairs.

“A whole host is just outdoors, flaming torches and all,” said Aulendur. “They’ve set fire to the barn. My poor mares are trapped down there, all alone...” With shock, as if realising for the first time the shaken demeanour of his brother, Endurian realised that Aulendur was crying, great tears streaming down his face.

“They set fire to the house not long after, all the while screaming for our blood. Ónar was slain while trying to make peace with those monsters, shot dead with an arrow. Frár got knifed, I think, although he was managing all right last I checked. The others are downstairs, busy gathering things of immediate value, for the house is beyond any hope of saving. Alas, for my books...”

Aulendur, seemingly rendered nearly senseless with the full gravity of it all, suddenly collapsed near the foot of the stairs. Endurian almost faltered as well, and just managed to settle himself. He placed a hand on the fallen man's shoulder. "Aulendur? Aulendur!"

Aulendur shook his head despairingly. "We are going to die."

"Stop that!" said Endurian. "You're going to be fine! I'm going to be fine! We're all going to be fine! We just need a moment to gather ourselves. We *will* escape this—whatever this is. Aulendur, hearken to my words!"

Aulendur dropped his head in shame. "I'm sorry."

"Everything is fine."

He pulled the heaving Aulendur to his feet and sped down the last of the stairs. As they gained traction, Endurian became aware of the loud roar and crackle of bristling fire; and once they were come to the lower landing, the heat became almost unbearable. Upon reaching the floor, they sprinted into the room beyond and found Sigrid grabbing food and various other bundles, stuffing them into an already-bulging knapsack.

"Sigrid," panted Aulendur. "Time...to go."

"Yes, now!" yelled Endurian, sparing a glance over his shoulder as he made a quick survey of the situation. "This portion of the house may come down any minute



now! This old wood and timber won't last too long in this furnace."

"I am coming," she replied, gasping for breath while struggling to carry several of the bags she had packed. She stumbled in her nervous haste and nearly came crashing to her knees under the weight.

Grunting in exasperation, Endurian swivelled about on his feet. "Come on," he said. "You can't possibly carry all of that; let me help you with the rest." Rushing to her side, he helped steady her. Sigrid's breath was coming out rushed and fevered, and great beads of sweat clustered about her brow, causing a few wispy strands of brown hair to stick to her slick forehead. She wiped a tired hand across her face.

Endurian picked up several of the bags with no more difficulty than someone else would have in lifting a spoon to his mouth and turned about. "To the back!" he said. "We can take refuge in the back terrace!"

"But what of the others?" asked Aulendur. "We can't possibly leave them behind!"

"Give me a moment and just do as I say!" snapped Endurian.

The older man winced at the sound of his voice, and inwardly, Endurian felt immediate regret.

"Come now," he said in a softer voice. "Follow my lead."

As fast as he was able, he carried the bags to the back door, and out into the large, shaded alcove that hung in the back section of the property.

But still, there were others in danger: others he might yet save from the fire. He hesitated, momentarily torn on whether to stay with Aulendur or to return, even though the chances of survival grew narrower by the second. Again, he delayed. If he left, he left Aulendur to peril and uncertainty. But he could not abandon the possibility that there might be others more he might still save. It was a choice between wrong and right. Endurian knew the answer almost immediately. He made his decision.

“Stay here,” he bade them. “I’ll fetch the others.”

He turned to leave.

“No!” cried Sigrid suddenly.

He turned about suddenly. “What?!”

“Let me come with you.” Her eyes were pleading. “You might need my help.”

Endurian held her gaze for a brief second, then turned around. “Very well.”

He didn’t need her, but there was no time now to explain that to her. Haste was a necessity.



Endurian was gone. Aulendur fell to his knees, all the grief, all the pain, all the hopelessness bearing down upon him in one, single moment.

Alwen and Indra were dead. His friends and lifelong companions were being consumed by fire. It was the horrors of Orthalon and Snowbourne all over again.

It was...Aulendur froze, straightening on a sudden, eyes wide with understanding, with *knowing*. Not for the first time in the past hour, he found himself rising to his feet.

He stepped forward, eyes meeting the eyes of another.

“You,” he said. “*You*.”

“Me,” breathed his Enemy softly in return. “Yes, it is I. And here also are you. Long have I waited for this moment. It is time you said farewell to all that you think you know and love. There is something I require of you, Heir to the House of Stonehelm. There is something you must do.”



They ran fast through the burning building, passing below a smoking archway, and into a carpeted room dotted throughout with small, blazing fires. Through this, they hastened and through several more, till coming at length to a sudden, choking halt at the

foremost room separating them from the great, wood door that barred their enemy entrance. Or rather, the door that *had* barred the way.

Now, the door no longer stood.

In its place swarmed what looked like hundreds of that dreadful foe, known to the Sons of Men as the Dark Elves: the *Eijrenär*, who had in ages past descended upon the world in wrath and fury. Spotting the ground every here and there was a body of someone Endurian was assured that he had once known.

They were too late.

By an ill chance, he stood longer than he should have, and the Dark Elves quickly espied him. With ringing, savage cries, like those of the hunter spying the prey, they hurtled towards him.

Cursing, Endurian scrambled back, pushing Sigrid forward. "Go! Go! Go!" Not for the first time, he wished he had a sword handy. *Mustn't think about that*, he thought to himself. *Mustn't even consider it*.

With a loud cry, they barreled through the room, taking a confusing, swerving course in favour of the more direct route. By now, the heat was stifling enough that it seemed they could have been in the very heart of the fire and not felt any different. The ceiling sagged overhead, threatening to burst at any minute, and the fire burned so hard that there was not much Endurian could else hear. They had passed down the hall and were

on the verge of the cusping about to the back, when Sigrid, gave a sudden, anguished cry behind him.

Endurian cursed again, wheeling about just in time to catch the falling Sigrid. She fell into his arms, breathing already deeply ragged. A large splotch of dark red had already stained the front of her blouse, and below her left shoulder blade was buried a glistening dagger. Acting instinctively, he slid out his foot and reached down to the side of his boot.

With a whip-like jerk, he sent a knife hurtling at a fiendish Elf that was charging towards them. His aim was true, and it fell upon impact. Endurian looked down, his probing eyes quickly discerning what he sought for.

But Sigrid was already dead.

The shocking suddenness of it all fell upon Endurian like a crashing tidal wave. The fires burning about them; the monsters screaming for blood; the young girl now dead in his arms...It was just like what had happened at...

*Burning ships in the harbour. Nârac. The boiling rebellion. Secrecy and plotting at night. Khaderas's plan.*

*Her.*

*The blood. Everywhere.*

*The light fading from her eyes. A crumpled form on the stone, cold and lifeless, as a figure, draped in shadow,*

*stepped forward, wiping a bloodied blade on the hem of his cloak as he advanced upon Endurian.*

Endurian gasped, eyes closing in pain, whilst he tried to steady his now-fevered breathing. Ruefully setting aside the body, he rose and sprang back the way he had come, even as a sudden, horrifying thought dawned upon him. With a cry, he came crashing through the remains of the door and entered the courtyard, where he had last left Aulendur.

Except that Aulendur was nowhere to be seen.

The courtyard was empty, empty save for the trail of smeared blood that stretched from the back terrace, all the way to the stone arbour beyond. Grimly, Endurian sped down the path, following the stain of blood, booted feet pounding audibly against the hard stone. Turning the corner, he found himself standing face to face with that which he had been most dreading all along.

White skin. Pale eyes. A long, jagged scar that ran from the upper cheek down to the mouth.

Ir-Murazôr. Standing in front of him.

"Such a pleasant place to retire," said Murazôr, turning to gaze out of a nearby window. "'Tis a pity it should burn so."

Endurian stood motionless at the sight of that dark enemy. Somewhere in the depths of his conflicted

mind, some old memory stirred from whence it had long lain in solitude. Yet, as he reached for it, it dissipated: vanishing like dust in the outstretched fingers of his probing mind, snapping them shut at the release of thought and memory. As quickly as the memory had appeared, so also did it fade.

"You scum," hissed Endurian. "What have you done with him? Where is Aulendur?!"

Murazôr smiled and made his way through the host of Dark Elves that now surrounded him. "The cripple?"

"My brother!"

"I'm afraid to say that he is, well, no longer amongst us. It should suffice to say that I require his life for a worthy ambition. Do not mourn his sacrifice, *boy*, for where you see only that which goes amiss, I see purpose and intent. Someday, you shall understand this. Someday, you shall *all* understand."

"You," Endurian said through gritted teeth, "are a monster."

Murazôr laughed. "I find that assertion to be particularly intriguing, *especially* when considering from whom it is coming."

"You and I are different. Much different."

"Is that so? I will gladly contest that sentiment, foolish though it is."

Endurian, growling savagely, thrust the spear he had holding forward. With a casual flick of his wrist, Murazôr batted it aside.

Restraint vanished like slashed cords.

Roaring in sudden, invigorating anger, Endurian lunged at Murazôr. From his side, several Dark Elves charged his way, one of them barreling him directly in the stomach before he had time to react.

Grunting in pain, Endurian stumbled to his knees.

He was hit on the head. Another kicked him in the knees, and he lurched to the ground—only kept from face-planting into the floor by the forceful arms of another Dark Elf. His hair was pulled back, while a plated kneecap was pressed sharply into his back, causing him to grimace in rankling pain.

Murazôr laughed sardonically: a sudden, booming laugh that echoed loudly throughout the walls of the harbour. And as Endurian watched, he drew near, all former pretence gone.

“Ere he died the death he so richly deserved, Orendel Stonehelm, took possession of something that was not his to take. Something of great value. Something belonging to *me*. Very surprisingly, he bequeathed it to you, his youngest son: the last Stonehelm. Perhaps he suspected that I was drawing near even then to avenge myself. Maybe he foresaw the time of his death. It matters not. But to you, he gave it nonetheless: that



which was mine and mine alone, and so I was thwarted in my great purpose. Fortunately, I am patient. Long have I searched, and now it is here. The key to my triumph: the Nornstone.”

“You lie! It was my father’s, and I am his heir. I will not surrender it to you; I took it as a weregild, and it is the last heirloom of my house.”

“I do not doubt your ignorance in this matter. There is much he withheld from those who would call him friend, yes, even those that would durst name him kin. There is much he withheld from you.”

“You know nothing about my father!”

“Don’t I? Do not be so sure. But I’m afraid my patience is now wearing thin. It is time, and you *will* surrender.”

Murazôr drew closer, and Endurian endeavoured to draw back, but being held in place by Murazôr’s servants, was unable to move. Then, his enemy lunged forward and with a cry of triumph, pulled back the collar of Endurian’s shirt to reveal the shining links of the chain that held the Nornstone. Reverently, he withdrew it, and then with a sharp yank, ripped it free of Endurian’s neck. The sudden break caused Endurian to wince, then recoil.

Murazôr held it out in front of himself admiringly, then set it carefully within the confines of a satchel that was strapped to his side.

The crackling and crashing of burning wood pounded against Endurian's eardrums, threatening to knock him senseless.

It wasn't just the pain. It was the turmoil inside: the horrible, mind-consuming agony that raged within his head and threatened to tear apart his soul.

Endurian had failed. It was over.

Driven by his dark past to the lowest of lowest, he thought he'd at long last found peace: a place, a home, a last refuge where he was safe from all the hurts of the world.

Turns out, he'd been wrong.

"You have not the right..." said Endurian in a strained voice.

"I have the *only* right."

Murazôr calmly circled Endurian, a cold, calculating smile on his face.

"You know," he said in his thin, sadistic way, "for the longest time, I found you to be a competent adversary. Someone whom I could admire. Someone as cunning, if not more so, than myself. I will freely admit that I admired your efforts for the longest of times, insufficient as they were.

"But then something changed. You just...*left*. Something happened, something that I still do not yet understand. Some may say that you were broken over the tragedy of your loss at Nârac, but I fancy otherwise.

You were too fierce to be worsted by something that *low*.

“And now,” he said, motioning disgustedly to Endurian with a casual flick of his sword, “I find that you are reduced to *this*. This *ruddle*. This pitiful and abhorrent wretch of a man: one who no longer cares, one who has deserted all that he once held dear, and for what?” Murazôr’s words had taken a crueller turn, one bordering upon cold contempt.

“Tell me, Endurian Stonehelm. Why have you done this to yourself? What could possibly drive you to such a state as this refuse that sits now before me? Or is it hereditary, perhaps: an inherent fault of your own bloodline. Do you not remember the words of your father upon the eve of his death?”

Endurian made no answer, eyeing Murazôr sullenly, a deep cavity now residing where once his soul had dwelt confined.

“Bah!” said Murazôr, bringing about his palm. With a loud crack, he struck Endurian across the face. A small fountain of blood swiftly arose from Endurian’s nose and bled down his face, staining and imbruing his matted beard. “Like your father before you, you are a failure, Stonehelm. A brazen, disreputable failure.” He spat, drawing himself back. “What I’m doing now is far from mercy. I’m not going to cleave your soul from its

fleshly confines. *That* would be mercy, and at the present, I'm not feeling particularly merciful today."

Murazôr and his servants drew back. "As it stands, we have plans for you, Endurian Stonehelm. I'm not going to kill you...not yet: not until you force my hand. You're already doing a much better job at it than I ever could. I bid you a good day."

Then, they were gone.

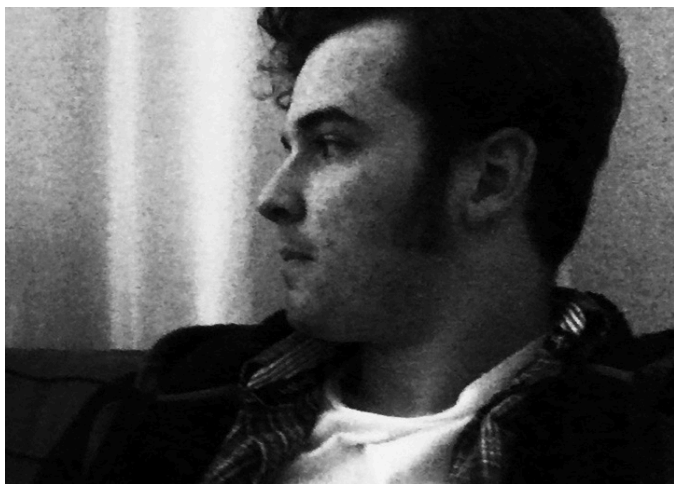
Throughout all of this, Endurian remained motionless, eyes like listless ships in a swirling sea: utterly devoid of life and meaning—as all the while, his whole world burned around him. He had nothing now, nothing to fight for, nothing for which to live or uphold. He was alone and freed from responsibility. Yet, somehow, that wasn't a comforting assurance.

He had failed to keep safe the one thing he had sworn to protect.

## THE END OF VOLUME ONE

*Here ends the first volume of The Mighty Shall Rise, wherein is chronicled the quest of Tyrelion Ivronwine to reclaim the fallen Kingdom of Galaeros from him whom was called Ir-Murazôr. In the second instalment shall be recounted the further adventures of Tyrelion, Endurian, and the rest of their companions.*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



MATTHEW ROLAND is the pseudonym of Matthew Starkey. Born in a dirty, ramshackle town in Northern California, he possesses an ardent regard for story and any form of writing—whether that be fiction or nonfiction. His further obsessions are ancient, archaic words that nobody uses anymore, reading liberal amounts of Tolkien when he can find the time, and searching for the perfect hat.

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