

ÒSome later age in some other body, I too will be a fighter. For that I am now building the foundation.Ó

Robert E. Howard, letter to Tevis Clyde Smith 1925.

He was nineteen at the time.

Tales of Raxana

(www.raxana.com/tales)

THE GOD UNDER

by I.P.Igo

Chapter one

Fire in the Snow

I

With great rush and thunder, a wind came. Her long ruby hair steered into a fire flaming over her pale beauty. Gradually, a cold comfort overtook the spirit of the woman. Her eyes closed firmly and she lifted her slim hands up. Then the ghost of hellish passion spoke its will through her:

ÒO, eastern winds and clouds of the western sky. O, northern snowy peaks and woods green of the southern slopes; listen to my oath!Ó Words of magic then she sang announcing her vengeance. Fire leapt from the dust before her bare feet, writing the red letters in the air: ÓSkira will have her vengeance. Skira will overtake the heart of the Lord Demon and make him her lover, forever.Ó

ÒBut know you, o mistress, witch of fire,Ó recited the eastern wind, whistling through the grass. ÒEseveles became the ruler by marrying Queen Anubis. Thus, there is not much room left for you in his heart.Ó

The witch raised her head, her red hair trembling in the whispering wind. ÓThat was an arranged marriage. It has nothing to do with true love,Ó said she and her voice quivered with the last word. ÓI know. He married the Anubi Queen only to unite the underworld for the final war.Ó

ÒYou speak rightly, Skira,Ó said the low voice all too familiar to her ears. It came behind her beehive-shape hut. She turned and a quiet cry of shock escaped her burning lips. A stillness shafted - no sound and no time to pass. Through the stupor, only wild beats of her heart made their way out. The wind blew them across the sudden guest's face and away. He revealed himself, stepping out from the shadow with no rush. His eyes, chasms black, flames dull with no sparks; his distant smile drew close - never near enough for love. Horns large to prod the sky he bore. Veins of passion and strength threaded his gigantic limbs. Convulsively, she stepped back, awe-struck, and whole her body steered to the bones. It was him ð Eseveles, the ruler of the underworld. Her lips slightly parted, eyes gave up to a grief - wet

with tears, like jewels falling into a silver lake. For months, she has been missing him so badly. The pain assailed her from the day she heard about the marriage. The pain so strong that she couldn't sleep for so many nights, making her cry over and over again. At the moment the Lord stepped before her, she was not sure if it was really him or the desire to see him again fooled her weary eyes. As he spoke, the wind stopped, the pale sky of the west become dark; fog covered the northern peaks, and the southern woods turned grey and lifeless.

“It is also true that you can conquer my heart and soul by doing what I ask from you,” said the Demon.

She looked at him, wanting to burst in tears, broken under the surge of feelings. He stepped closer and gently touched her chin. She entered the shadow of his mighty horns, and leaned her head upon his massive red chest. She shuddered as he hugged her.

“You will find that girl in the north,” he said. His husky voice pierced through her ears, rendering her even weaker in his arms: “Skira, my dear, you must find the girl and kill her. Only the high witches of the Brotherhood you belong to could do that in the right way – with the cursed arrow through which her soul can be hauled out and imprisoned on a safe place so that she will not be reborn.” He sparkled at her eyes and whispered: “My love.” Their lips searched for each other, but at that instant the wind rushed in again, the sky lightened, the distant mountain peaks became present once more, and the woods turned green again.

Only her love diminished, as if it was just a dream. The cold wind brought one snowflake from afar. Caught in her ruby hair, the tiny crystal faded away.

II

It has snowed all night and the world outside was clad in white. Ice gathered around the thick wooden window frames and large flakes turned into frosty white feathers. The ice cracked lightly, breaking the chill silence of the early morning, the wings swung open and the nanny removed its goat-skin curtain. It was snowing outside and winter painted each roof white as flurries were blown over a great slope down to the walls that surrounded the northern village. The hearth fire crackled, spreading its warmth to all corners of Gutherna, the long gathering house. In the caldron above the fire, golden-yellow porridge bubbled and the sweet steam of home-cooking lured the children. Red-cheeked little boys and girls jostled around, tapping their small wooden dishes. It was lunchtime and they were all hungry, waiting for their serving of porridge and pot of fresh milk sweetened with honey. Hunger did not prevent the kids from laughing or pulling their faces into all kinds of hilarious masks – their favorite game. Nanny put the caldron on the serving bench and the children gathered instantly like puppies, holding their pots high. She started filling their dishes with a large ladle, counting loudly: “One, two, three, four –” She numbered twelve, expecting fourteen, but no number thirteen or fourteen appeared. “What has happened to them?” she thought, turning around and looking under the table below the two empty dishes. “Ah -

those little foxes. They have fled again," she said, arching her eyebrows. She opened the window and called them: "Galtar, Anaya!"

It snowed again and flurries were blown over a great slope down to the walls that surrounded the northern village. A deer came to the edge of the forest and stopped, curiously watching the two children as they ran through the small vale between the village and the woods. They ran hand in hand and laughed. Snowflakes were in their hair: hers curly and puce; his ashen-gold.

"Look, Alu is there," said Anaya, pointing to the deer that stood at the brink of the forest. Above its eyes, which shone like two dark marbles, antlers branched to a great crown. The boy looked at it for a moment, straining his eyes to see through the snowfall and said quietly:

"That is not Alu, Anaya. Alu is pure white."

"He is so beautiful," she sighed amused. "Maybe he is Alu's brother then." Doe-bleats came from the woods and the majestic animal turned its head. It looked back at the children once again before springing away and vanishing among the trees.

"Fire in the Snow" they called their game. They ran to Grandpa Aitri's smithy to see and feel the heat of the furnace. The children adored the smithy for two reasons. First, it was always dangerously hot. Second, if they looked long enough into the embers that lived in the belly of the furnace they could see the Hell of Naroxa: the underworld. This was a silly idea, of course, but they were still young enough to take such an idea seriously. And just as no silly grown-up is ever serious about his reality, no serious child ever feels silly expressing what can be seen through his or her imagination. They snuck inside. Little by little, they walked towards the hearth, their glee growing with each step. From close-by they gazed into the flames. Waiting through many heartbeats, they watched the embers glowing through veils of heat. Finally, the Gate of Naroxa opened its door made of lava before their eyes. Suddenly, a little creature appeared in the midst of the fire. Small horns peaked from the top of its head and a pointy tail swayed behind its red cover. The doorkeeper, a demon cloaked in flames, welcomed the kids, bowing low, and showed them the door. The redness of the heat was mirrored in Anaya's eyes and its blaze danced in them. In her eyes, an incandescent iron blade was resting. Their heartbeats grew more rapid as their faces turned red and the whole game culminated in an unbearable hotness.

Grandpa Aitri came to the porch, seeing them through the opened window. "What have you two found in here that is so exciting? The blacksmith's powerful voice brought them out of their trance. The children sprang away without a word and ran outside throwing themselves onto the cooling piles of snow. Steam rose from their faces as they laughed, rolling through the large, layered mattress of white.

"Hooou!" shouted Galtar in bliss, "That was so good!"

ÒWe should do it again then,Ó exclaimed Anaya with joy. Snowflakes were threaded through her hair and her woolen dress glimmered, dotted with innumerable tiny crystals.

The old, bearded blacksmith came out to get them: ÒBack off, cubs!Ó Aitri clapped his large hands. ÒFire and snow - what a mixture! There is no unification there,Ó he grumbled, running after them as they dashed away like rabbits. Soon he gave it up, yelling: ÒRemember you kids, one element must always die in such marriage. Only cubs of a demonic sort can enjoy such a game. This foolishness will burn your little backs someday.Ó The game often ended this way. Did their parents and guardians punish them for leaving the village walls during the winter? Of course they did, but the children could not care less.

III

Dense pine and maple forests covered the surrounding hills, rich with many paths, each standing ready to lure into an adventure. High above the clouds, distant peaks called out: ÒDonÓt you wish to know what wonders may await you behind me?Ó What child can resist that? Everyone would go without hesitation if not for the grown-ups who spoke often about the dangers of the woodlands: the wolves, bears and wild boars. No child could go into the woods during the winter; that was the rule. Breaking that rule led to a severe punishment: cleaning the main horse-stable of the whole village, all alone. Additionally, if the parent or guardian spent considerable time worrying and looking for any lost adventurer, the event would take a painful toll on the outlawÓs little rear. In the summer, however, children were allowed to go into the forest in groups. They played many games, exploring, seeking and hiding or building tree houses - whatever their cunning little minds had to offer. There were many exciting activities available, but one claimed a greater rank than all the others. Deep in the green hills was a forest with large chestnut and birch trees called Ófairy-woodsÓ where one could find tiny creatures called fairies. At the time Anaya and Galtar were born, fairy sightings were becoming more frequent. Only a few were lucky enough to befriend a fairy. Anaya was one of the few who possessed the remarkable ability to move silently through the forest. She knew how to recognize which flower or tree a fairy would come to sleep in. She would position her palms like an open seashell and sing quietly a song of her own creation:

Light from you, here comes to me,

In darkest dark that I can see.

Light from me, here comes to you,

None can be lost,

When there are two.

Drawn to her enchanting voice, the little creatures would gather on the trees, flowers, grass, even on her shoulders, and they would listen to her at length. Among them, reflecting the light cast by

their small gleaming bodies, she looked like a fairy queen.

Galtar was not born with such a gift, but he often accompanied Anaya. She would allow him to watch the wonderful gathering of little beings, hidden in the bushes. He was very proud of his friendship with the girl and would watch these ceremonies with excitement. But it was not the forest that lively little Galtar liked above all, nor the longhouse Gutherna, the place where the old bard Olan told adventurous tales; neither was it the ruins near the river, which many believed dated from the time when gods walked the earth. The place he liked most -- where he felt entirely at home -- was Aitri's smithy. The blacksmith did not mind the boy's company, perhaps because he had been so fond of the boy's father, the great chieftain who had unified all Galds and died in the battle for Varas-Deen when Galtar was only two. While other kids called the old man Uncle Aitri, Galtar was the only one who called him grandpa, and the blacksmith, having no children of his own, accepted the boy with an open heart. He called the boy grandson and his successor. From his earliest days, the boy could make strikingly realistic wooden swords upon which he would patiently carve runes and the shapes of wild animals. Some members of the family wanted to send him to the coastal village so that the boy could learn the woodcraft of ship-making, but his mother had different plans for her only son: "Galtar's father was our chieftain and it was he who had the idea to unite all the tribes of Galda. The son shall finish what his father began." At the time, Galtar was too little to understand his mother's plans. He liked swords just as any boy of his age liked them, maybe more, as the making of real swords enchanted him.

Every spring dwarven merchants visited the village to trade their infamous ironworks and other goods with the people of White Deer. Galtar was seven when he first approached the dwarves and asked how they extracted iron from ore.

"Will you come and see, my lad? Bar we shall keep you there as one of us," spoke the bearded dwarf with a barrel-rolling voice. "Miners and diggers we are and the business of mining is ours. Here we bring bars of iron, the best and cleanest, to your smithies!"

There were two smithies. One inside and one outside the village. The one inside the village was run by the Delgo family, who took care of the majority of the villagers' daily needs making everything from cauldrons and horseshoes, to wheels and other household necessities. The smithy could also make swords and armor, but when it came to quality everyone generally preferred going to old Aitri. Aitri's smithy was located up on the mountain slope, northwest of the village: not particularly close but still visible from the northern gate. The owner himself was a strange, quiet old man, not always ready for visitors. From time to time the village druid would go to Aitri's secluded home for a pipe-smoke-talk. Word began to spread that the blacksmith himself was a druid. He was the oldest man of all Alu folks; although, he did not appear that way. He had wrinkles around his deep green-blue eyes, a long beard and dense ashen hair. He had strong arms and a chest as wide as a Kerebian shield. Once someone had asked the druid Helmold: "What concerns do you have that you must

speak with Aitri so often?Ó

ÒI like hearing stories about my father from somebody who knew him before I was begotten,Ó answered the wise old man, smiling mysteriously.

Some thought that Aitri was an unusually big dwarf, or at least that he was a dwarf-descendant. Others pointed to the possibility that he was of elven ancestry for there seemed to be something elvish in his eyes. These sorts of rumors had begun to blossom particularly several years ago when dwarves from across the mountains started to visit him more often. Nevertheless, from that time onwards, the son of the dwarven King Udar Sekire, named Lofar, became AitriÓs apprentice together with an elf named Eredian. It was the time when the Azmaran Empire had been approaching the borders of the land of Varas. Thus, the blacksmith probably picked out the two lads as talented students while he was searching for a mysterious element. It was an element that, if added to iron, produced steel Ð a strong metal that was hard to break. The two students were considerably younger, still juveniles in fact as the dwarf was in his forties and elf in his seventies, which, taking into account their respective race-appropriate life-expectancies, made them equivalent to a human in his or her twenties.

IV

A sledgehammer hung on the wall above the furnace of the smithy. Its iron head was carved with runes and its long handle gilt-worked at the end. Its name was Guldgrom. It hung there, too high for little Galtar to reach, too sacred to be a subject of enquiry. All he knew was that Aitri had inherited it from his father.

On rainy days, the boy would sit and count the beats of AitriÓs hammer as the blacksmith forged swords and shields. He watched zealously as the molten iron was poured into stone and clay molds. The blacksmith was usually quiet but sometimes would talk and explain to the boy what he was doing. ÓNo enemy can stand against the swords that you make,Ó said little Galtar looking at AitriÓs hands with admiration as they flew over the anvil.

ÒHo-ho. That is what you think, my boy,Ó said the blacksmith lifting the boy up and putting him on the table before him. He looked into the boyÓs dark brown eyes and said: ÓIt is not the sword that fights the battle but the heart that beats in a hero brave - our wise would say. I certainly make good swords and every one of them has proven - or will prove itself many times. But the old saying is true. I want you to remember it.Ó

ÒI will.Ó

ÒRepeat it then.Ó

ÒIt is not the hero who fights the battle but the sword my grandpa made,Ó the boy giggled.

ÒHo-ho. Funny, but wrong. Clever boy. Mess with the words of the

wise, and the wisdom of a wicker is what you'll get.

"Please grandpa, take me as an apprentice. I am nine now and they have already taken me as a helper in the storage."

"You are not nine, my boy. You are seven and I am not old enough to forget that. You are too young to hold a hammer."

"Won't you let me swing it just once?" the boy begged him.

"It is heavy and you can hurt yourself. Not to mention the dangers of the fire." The moon was young and pale and no other thoughts could penetrate through the boy's burning desire. He went up closer to the anvil. There the hammer rested and carefully he touched it watching for his grandpa's reaction. Aitri stood up:

"Quite determined, I see." He came behind Galtar and took his hand to guide him. "Grab it like this," he said, helping the boy to take the hammer and swing. Clang. Clang, clang! A wide smile appeared on Galtar's face and his heart beat with joy.

Chapter Two

Dead Diamond Alliance

I

"I have been descending; deep into my thoughts while a cold wind of nothingness blew over them. I have contemplated every picture that has been carved in the unshakable rock of my memory. I have been planning carefully," rumbled Rahug, enjoying the sound of his own voice, which echoed through his lair, a rock-strewn cave on Mount Satra-Kalum in the middle of the island of the Mourning Serpent. "You ask me to go and cross the sea that lies far from my beloved treasure? And lo, I say - No! Think, what would happen to all the treasure I had gathered through the ages?"

Skira the Witch did not see the dragon, for he stood wrapped in shadow, down in the cavern. She walked barefoot on the dark ice. Her long red dress clung to her body, outlining her feminine contours, and her long ruby hair blistered in the darkness. "It has been ages since you first fell asleep, Rahug," said she. "There is more gold out there than ever, waiting to join your pile." She was a witch of fire, high priestess of the secret order of the Red Triangle. Her sharp voice tolled like a bell made of glass in the cave: "You are mightier than any of my order. I do not understand why the dragon who slew many brave captains and their armies would imprison himself in this desolate place. Who you are afraid of?"

"Think!" erupted from inside the earth. "Think! Do not speak, Skira. I am the deep thinker and my thoughts fly over many particulars all the time. I am not afraid, but cautious. My enemies are stronger than before, be sure of that. Yet I know this: If I were able to see them first, before they saw me, victory would always be mine."

Skira smiled: "Would you be able to see your enemies with Allsea?"

Silence. Rahug sighed then slowly exhaled the name of the mighty jewel: ÒAllseaaa.Ó SkiraÕs slim fingers floated lightly over the icy wall of the cave. Behind the slippery surface, many grey and white veins grew in the dim light, living souls that would never reincarnate, imprisoned as they were in this half-life existence. ÒOnly with the Allsea, will I be able to see distant enemies and watch my beloved treasure from afar. Only then will I dare to leave this barren place. What is it that you want in return?Ó asked the dragon. His spiky, yellow eye cut the darkness.

Skira answered readily: ÒHere is my request: Far in the north there lives a girl named Anaya, who is said to be the one who will destroy my order. She does not recognize her purpose in this world yet, but soon she will be called upon, and it will be her duty to restore the Light of the Fairies and bring back the fire that my order took long ago. To stop her I need your help.Ó

Rahug stepped closer and the witch was able to see his great head, dark and wet as if chiseled from black marble. ÒI am listeningÉÓ said the dragon.

ÒAmong your treasure is the Dead Diamond,Ó Skira continued, now speaking hastily. I want to kill the girl and imprison her soul in the heart of your Diamond. Then, no magic would be able to resurrect her; nor could her soul return again to this world.Ó As the witch spoke, malice like flames burned in her eyes.

ÒThink, sister of fire,Ó said the dragon. Skira was now closer to him. His breath was dry, cold and heavy. ÒIf I ever decide to take the shape of a human again, it must be the body of a male, strong enough to withstand the power of your striking beauty. Your lust is strong.Ó Then he pulled his head back abruptly, swinging his long neck: ÒKeeping a soul inside the Dead Diamond is quite easy, once when it is placed there, butÉ Think. Here is the hitch, Skira: Who is going to penetrate the surface of the Diamond and how? I cannot do it nor do I know anyone who might develop such virtue,Ó he looked at her face trying to guess the answer, moving his head slowly left and right. Then he brought his head up, high above the witch and sudden curiosity flared in his eyes: ÒDo you have a magic or device for such a use, Skira?Ó

The witch stepped back and said: ÒThe virtue I have developed, the magic of fire I have and here is my device,Ó she showed him a black arrow, ornate with the symbols of her order.

ÒHmm, interesting,Ó said Rahug looking at the arrow. ÒBut Northern tribes are not easy to attack. The risk will be high.Ó

ÒWe are not alone. I have my pet, the fire-mane lion, a beast that I received as a present from the Lord of Naroxa, Eseveles. And to lessen your fear further, I have already arranged for AghabarÕs men to be hidden at Horse Shoe Hills in the north, ready to strike and draw attention away from the job you have to do.Ó

ÒSounds well-planned. I like it,Ó said the dragon. ÒCome and sit.

Let us take a look from the air, Skira.Ó She hopped on his back and black wings covered the gloomy clouds over the sharp cliffs of the island.

II

ÒClang-clang! Clang-clang,Ó danced a forging hammer on a heated blade. It looked small in LofarÕs hand, for his arms and fists were burly and massive. Yet, it loomed heavy and big in the slim hand of elf Eredian. Early each spring, the dwarf and elf would join the old blacksmith and stay for month or two to work together. Throughout the days they exchanged ideas and learned; through the nights they talked about distant lands and their exotic cultures. Little listeners, children from the village, would gather from time to time, always laughing at LofarÕs jokes. As they grew, new children would come to take their places, but one youngster was sure to stay.

That day they invited Galtar to work with them.

ÒVery good, my boy,Ó said Aitri, seeing how diligently his apprentice worked. The apprentice was pressing a blower strongly and thoroughly. ÒYou have just turned eighteen, and yet you do a job for two.Ó

ÒI have never seen a man with hands as powerful as a dwarfÕs,Ó said Lofar, ÒBut this fellow seems to have them.Ó The faces of the four smiths were red and beads of sweat poured off their brows. The furnace light sparkled in the drops.

ÒWe need more air to keep the fire alive,Ó said Galtar. Smoke, thick and black, rose through the chimney.

ÒYou have grown, my lad. Old enough to sing and drink with us,Ó spoke dwarf Lofar, standing on a stool mixing a thick stew in the cauldron. He sniffed the stew and slurped a sip from the ladle before exclaiming happily: ÒLots of onions - zak-zak-zak, then tomatoes Ð zuk-zuk-zuk. Beef and potato should boil in it. Not long, not short, just right. Red peppers, like this - zek-zek-zek.Ó He was very proud of his cookery, more than any other skill he possessed. ÒEredian, my friend, I need to add a little more of your red wine, please,Ó asked Lofar.

ÒNo more left, sorry chef,Ó said the elf.

ÒMaholdax!Ó shouted he, half-surprised, half-unhappy, quickly glancing at his master.

Aitri was busy teaching Galtar, but his nose, which was a little more reddish than usual, told plainly where the wine had gone. Maholdax - that was particularly heavy word among Goldpine dwarves, derived from: Maholdanaxe: Mama Holds an Axe - This term came from an anecdote about a mother and her naughty son. The boy would hide behind her skirt after he hit the point of annoyance to older kids. Dwarvish women are diligent and caring mothers who do all of the hard work to run the household. Since they are always working, it is highly probable that Mama is going to have some tool in her hand all the

time. Dwarves are berserkers, but hey, even they do not want to mess with dwarvish ladies, especially if one holds an axe.

A little boy and a girl came to the porch yelling: "Dwarves are coming, dwarves are coming!" The two children were Galtar's little sister and brother. His mother had remarried when he was twelve and the family had grown. She had moved to live by the coast with her husband, a renowned seafarer from the Sea-lion tribe, but Galtar had wanted to stay with Aitri. Now, the family was gathering again, as were the families from all the tribes. In a couple of days, the village of the White Deer would become host to the biggest fair in the north: Galdiciana, the festival that every merchant had marked in his schedule with capital letters.

Pinegold dwarves came first (as they were never late for this sort of event) dressed appropriately for the occasion wearing cowls and cloaks of bright colors, folly bells on girdles and neatly polished clasps on their wide belts. They came in a column of two. Coming down from the mountain, they looked like a large, walking rainbow. Soon other visitors began to arrive and more tents were set up. In a day or so the village was to be flooded with goods: fine ironworks from the land of the dwarven King Udar Sekire, cloths and clothes from the mid-eastern lands of Krot and Varas, fruit and strong drinks from Kereb, silk from the southeastern kingdom of Gob and luscious wines from sunny Initia that rejuvenated soul and body. Even the elves were expected to bring their healing herbs, toys, strong silver strings and infamous elven bows. Sometimes dwarves from Mount Frug would come, bringing their good beer and funny (but rarely useful) wheel devices. They dwelt quite far to the south and did not attend the fair every year.

That night was lively and cheerful, full of songs that even the stars could hear. Many campfires were set; hogs roasted and red wine flowed. The merriest talk and most hearty laughter circled with the mountain breeze around the longest table, which was laid close to the gate. Lofar and his dwarves were sitting beside Galtar, laughing and singing. They would usually drink beer from their own breweries, but this time an Initian merchant had lured them to try some of his wine. Not accustomed to the sweetness code, they started to sing early. The enchanting yet familiar sound of pipes and drums drew girls and boys, men and women to the dance, joining hand-in-hand in a wide ring. Carried by the vibrant music, Lofar became jolly and jumped up on the table to dance. Everybody laughed watching him. The chubby, barrel-chested, red-bearded dwarf pushed his fists into his hips, hopping between the plates and mugs. His demeanor was serious, as if he was a god-gifted dancer proving his worth.

"Hop ho! Hop-a ho!" he moved his head left and right, looking down at the guests.

All cheered: "Hop-a ho,"

Hands clapped,

To keep him go.

He gave his hand to a kitchen-maid
She shied away but he brought her up
To dance with him on the table laid
Then the music went faster.
She snatched her dress
and held it up.
Lit by fire, tapped her legs
right to the beat.
with graceful steps.

The music went even faster, people grabbed each other's hands once more and the merry ring swirled again. Galtar was about to join them when a sudden glimpse of Anaya's eyes nailed him to the spot. The little girl he had known had grown into a gorgeous young woman. They stopped by the gate, looking at each other. The flames of the campfire jittered in their eyes and her smiling lips loomed so close that he shied away.

“You are leaving,” said she, quietly.

“Yes. I am going to learn about mining from dwarves, but it will not last long. I will be back soon.”

“Will you come back soon enough to marry me?”

“Sure I will,” he answered readily.

She gave him her hands and he embraced them in his. Their eyes met again.

“I would marry you now, Anaya.”

“You are not yet twenty,” she smiled again.

“That law is stupid. I am going to change that.”

“I am sure you will, for your father was the one who introduced the rule. Yet, you cannot be the chieftain before you are married.”

All of a sudden, little twin heads popped up behind a barrel: “We pronounce you husband and wife,” exclaimed the children in ceremonious tone. Anaya and Galtar laughed. The purity of youth in love can barely talk, and if these two had had courage enough to tell each other what they felt, they would have talked much, much more.

CRACK was heard and a THUMP followed, and the music stopped. Unexpected silence drew their attention. Behind a broken table, a bearded head appeared and everyone started to laugh. Lofar scratched his bushy, ruby-coloured head: “I should’ve moved two to the right, not left,” he said and the kitchen-lady helped him get up.

ÒCome on, Galtar, eat and drink and relax yourself now, for the mining is going to be a harsh experience. Not easy, but valuable.Ó

ÒIs it harder than the warrior service I did?Ó asked Galtar, loud enough for his friends to hear. He was quite proud of his acceptance by the dwarven miners.

ÒOh, I do not know about that. I mean, I do not know if one can call those Galdian games ÒWarrior ServiceÓ bror, without battle and war... maybe only practice. Yes, call it practice.Ó said Lofar, ÒBut practice of mining it certainly tough. You will learn a lot. Cheers!

ÒCheers.Ó Many tankards went up.

ÒI know a bit about mining and working with dwarves,Ó said Dena, a young friend of GaltarÓs, who was a member of the Delgo family, and thus one of the village blacksmiths. ÒIt is tough but nothing exciting is going on nowadays. War is a thing of the past and the smiths are busy chiefly with the making and repairing ploughs, caldrons and horseshoes.Ó

ÒAnd buttons, armlets and buckles,Ó added Lofar. ÒNo more swords or axes.Ó

Galtar looked at Lofar in disbelief. ÒHey!Ó He protested. ÒI did not apply to be a cauldron-maker.Ó

Dena laughed at him. Anaya tapped Galtar on the shoulder: ÒThe warriorÓs son is not satisfied? What is wrong with making nice bracelets and rings?Ó She took the pitcher and filled his mug with dark-golden nectar.

ÒYes, Galtar. Do not come back without some nice things for your girlfriend,Ó added the kitchen-maid with a smile. ÒAnyone can make a sword but making fine jewelry is truly an art.Ó

ÒDo not despair, bror. The dwarves will start you on mining and tunnelling anyways.Ó Lofar said, giving Galtar a friendly thump on the back. ÒOnce you dig out enough iron-ore, youÓll get your chance to make whatever you like!Ó

Galtar raised his mug to Lofar: ÒI am eager to learn ironworks from the greatest, and sing the songs of my dwarven brothers.Ó

ÒAnd sure you will!Ó exclaimed the dwarf and many mugs of beer and wine clanged together.

III

In the heart of the Golden Pinetree Mountains, situated between two lakes and at the foot of a duo of ever-snowy peaks, there lay a little mining village called Pinegold. To the southeast, just behind the first hill and lake rested the dwarven city of Kayad-Dena, stronghold of King Udar Sekire. United dwarven architects and crafters of Pinegold and Frugi had built the city following the path of an old arid river bed, enclosing it with a stone wall. In the spring, the

down-flowing, snow-melting water would hit the tip of the pyramidal city walls, and creating a fork where two streams ran embracing the town before plunging down into the lake. Three towers stood on the three wall's corners. Large gears and wheels were set on the roof of each tower and the platform of the upper tower was linked to the two lower towers using long ropes. These ropes were used to transport habitants and their goods in carts. The whole apparatus was an invention of the ingenious dwarf Niktes, who combined dwarven crafting skills with elven mastery of strong strings and ropes.

Soon Galtar learned how to go down into the bell pit that was dug as a well, widened at the bottom to reach the tunnels with a coal. In the beginning, his job was to carry wooden beams and assist in building support for the roofs. Going underground was not a pleasant experience. In the pitch black, torches were the only light available and if the flames went out, he had to stay and finish the job, which could sometimes run half the day, in total darkness. The sound of the roof sliding or the timbers shrieking combined with the persistent patter of numerous rat families bustling around was all there was to hear. Therefore, he quickly learned the dwarven songs and began to understand how helpful they could be. "With a good song on your lips, and the right rhythm in your pike, no spirit will sink in the darkness cold," spoke the miner chief, dwarf Thek.

In the days that followed, Galtar befriended many dwarves and became closer to the elf Eredian, who was an Amasien elf from the western islands. His hair was long and of a dark-tint color in the middle and flaxen-pale at sides, around his long pointed ears. He often went riding on his silver-grey horse named Vinge. Then the elf would wear a fine linen tunic, a sky-blue cloak and a white scarf that encased his throat, the mark of the elven cavalry. He was the only elf accepted as an apprentice in the Dwarven School of Ironworks and Mining in those days, just as Galtar was the only human. The other miners took to calling them "the dwarf, the human, and the elf" "The Three Comrades". Elves' eyesight was much better than that of either humans or dwarves so Eredian's emerald eyes were able to guide them with very little light. However, if the tunnel they were mining was the dark end of a tunnel-tail, the blackness would become impenetrable even for his eyes.

Together, Galtar, Eredian and Lofar shared much work and many jokes. Since his two comrades had come to the world quite a bit before him, Galtar was able to learn many things from them. Lofar taught him how to fight with an axe along and how to grin, eye-pop and snarl like an expert dwarf-berseker. Eredian taught him how to ride in combat and how to fight barehanded according to ancient elvish techniques.

Chapter Three

Anvil's blood

I

"The finest sword I have ever made, I hammered for my dearest friend - your father," Aitri went silent for a moment, looking at

Galtar. Then he looked at the neat rows of swords, knives and helmets and continued with sorrow: "The sword went with him in the funeral-boat to the Great Sea." He looked into Galtar's eyes. "It is unfortunate for a son to lose a father and for the people of Galda to lose the chieftain who united us and made us strong."

A studded leather belt reposed on an altar in the corner of the smithy, before the statue of the god called Gald. The clasp of the girdle, wrought in the shape of a running deer, shone under the light of many candles that stood above it. Its unfilled, gilded scabbard was richly ornate with protective runes.

"Galds, Valdani, dwarves and elves stopped the Azmarans at last sixteen years ago at the battle of Varas," continued Aitri. "In the midst of the battle, the enemy's general Aghabar called for a negotiation. Our chieftain Orltar, your father, wanting to spare many lives on both sides, agreed to meet with him. At their meeting, Aghabar had another man dressed in his clothes to impersonate him, so that he might hide, unseen in the background. He killed Orltar with a crossbow shot to the back. He succeeded in escaping, together with his three high officers, thereby betraying his own soldiers."

"I remember when they brought him home," Galtar said. "His warriors laid him in the boat that was to bear him to the river. My mother was the one who drew the boat out into the water and that image haunted me for many years afterwards, as if she was going into the deep water together with my father, never to return."

"Let me see your hands," asked Aitri.

Galtar showed his palms, swollen and full of scars.

"Good hands. You are young; they will recover soon. Mighty Gal drew lines in them just as he did in your father's hands: signs of great strength and endurance." He closed youngster's hand with a care and looked back into Galtar's eyes again: "Child of the White Deer, I pray for you to be safe from the pain of a sudden loss." Aitri then took the belt from above the altar and handed it to his apprentice. "I made this for your father as a present, yet he never returned to receive it. I know that there must be no room left for the grief in our hearts, because those who left us with valor, we shall meet again in the green land of Everlasting Fields. So gird this belt, take the hammer and be ready to make the sword that should rest in there."

Under the keen eye of his master, Galtar started to forge his first sword.

II

Red-hot steel surged to the sword-shaped mold. Five days he worked. Seven songs his hammer sung each morning, nine at each sundown. Twelve times he reheated the blade, folding and beating it over and over again. The steam rose with a hiss when the iron blade was finally thrust into a pile of snow. The hilt was long enough to hold with two hands. He swung it a few times, feeling the powerful

steel as it obediently lay in his hands. For the final touch, he engraved in the blade the picture of Alu, the snow-deer, protector of his tribe.

Galtar went to sleep that night with the glorious feeling of completion, yet the dream that came brought something else to his mind. He dreamt that he was forging a sword, beating its blade with his hammer when suddenly the anvil turned blistering yellow in color, and then dark red. With his next strike, blood came from below the anvil, flowing to the northeast. The horrendous dream awoke him in the middle of the night. Covered in icy beads of sweat, he jumped out of his bed, his heart beating strong and fast.

ÒGaltar,Ó someone whispered from behind the window. Lofar and Eredian were both away this time of year, with their own people. He seized his sword reflexively and stood up.

ÒAnaya, is that you?Ó he asked, half whispering.

ÒOf course it is me, put that sword down,Ó her bright teeth shone in the moonlight. ÒI just wanted to scare you a little by making the v-o-i-c-e.Ó She stepped up to the window. ÒCome and help me.Ó

He recognized her voice at last, her curvy silhouette and her long, curly, puce hair. He put his sword away and helped her climb in. She stumbled causing them both to fall to the floor.

ÒI have got you now,Ó said she, holding him to his wrists. Her hair was falling on his face.

ÒYour parents are going to be madÉÓ

ÒI know,Ó she kissed him. ÒI hope your grandpa Aitri is sleeping, I do not hear him snoring as usual?Ó

ÒOh. It is strange. I do not hear him slumbering either.Ó

Suddenly, a crackling sound of thunder shook the house. They jumped up and made for the window. A cold wind came down and sinister clouds rushed from the east covering the moon. Red lightning tore the sky striking at the village. At the top of the hill a woman stood. Light hissed from her raised arms, red snakes scattered from a poisoned hank, hitting the tops of the houses and setting them to flames. Horses screamed and the village dogs started barking wildly. Wind blew, bending trees, pulling-up fence posts; tearing roofs. It thundered again as if the god Usud had come down at last to administer his heavenly punishment. Heavy rains slammed through the village. Through the darkness, people called to one another, bustling; men for their weapons, women and children for places to hide.

Then a beast came. The demonic fire-mane lion - a roaring hell hurling towards the gate. No one had ever encountered such a creature, not even those who had traveled far. Its muscular body rushed forward with an immense speed while it growled disclosing its long, sharp fangs. Its eyes glowed red and its mane was dragging long burning tail of flames behind. Ingel, a lancer, was the first to clash with it, and

also the first victim to fall under its fury. Screams ripped through the air.

Forty riders leapt from the forest, charging in two columns, one column riding hard for the village, the other towards the smithy. Wrapped in shady green, with their faces covered, the aslant yellowish eyes of the riders glimmered behind their veils. All as one, they raised their sabers, striking anything that moved. When they had reached the backyard of Aitri's house, a man was there, kneeling on his left knee, holding the sledgehammer Guldrom.

“Fear for your horses!” boomed Aitri's voice, and the runes engraved on his hammer flickered. The attacker's geldings pranced madly and three riders fell to the ground instantly, as they found themselves abruptly ejected from their saddles. Those who did not fall, fought hard to rein down their animals. Those who fell attacked the man on foot, only to meet with the crushing power of Aitri's sledgehammer. The leader of the raiders regained control over his horse and turned, holding his hand up, to give a new command. Then the man spotted Anaya and Galtar at the window.

“Go back! Do not come here!” yelled Aitri to Galtar who had his foot on the window frame ready to jump out and help his master.

The yellow eyes of the assassins turned to them and in the next moment the long-drawn sound of a horn broke out. The leader spotted the girl and blew the horn as strong as he could. Instantly, the lion left its prey and its predatory eyes spun to gaze upon the house on the slope. The riders attacking the village did the same. They turned their horses and ran from one gate to another following the beast. The rain made the ground wet with sludge and mud.

“Anaya!” her father, Anor, screamed desperately looking for his daughter. The wind snatched his screams away with no answer. He had run out from his house wandering through the darkness, and then scuttled through a sheepfold when the enemy riders passed by in a gallop. He quickly exposed his short axe just as a rider had begun to swing his great saber, but the northern warrior was faster. Anor struck the attacker's knee. The man screamed pulling the reins rapidly, forcing his horse to prance high. Thrown from the saddle, the rider slammed in the muck splashing mud.

“GALDAAA!” It was the war cry of another warrior, a member of the lancers – the elite guards formed of the village's fighting veterans. The lancer ran to meet another enemy horseman and in one swift move slid to his knees fearlessly before the hoofs. He pierced the horseman, throwing him into the air. Before the last of the marauders had dashed through the gate, Anor's axe flew through the rain. The enemy's cries faded into the thunder above and his body jerked backwards. He flipped from the horseback and hit the ground, dead. Anor went to grab the saddle of his fallen enemy until a stabbing pain in his neck stopped him. He turned. In the pale light of lightning flash, the rider whom he had hit in the leg was sitting in the mud preparing one more bolt on his crossbow. The old warrior grinned, ignoring the pain, and reached for the short thick arrow that jutted

from his neck. Then a blade burst from the dark and the head of the crossbowman separated from his body.

Up on the hill, Aitri was fighting, blocking and hitting with Guldgrom when the lion climbed over the top of the house. A roar rumbled and the beast leaped onto the blacksmith. It gnawed his right hand, clutching it in its jaws. At the same time Galtar flew through the window wielding his sword but alas; his heart was brave and dexterity sure but he lacked true combat experience. A thin rope fettered his wrists and he received two fast blows to his temporal bone. It was a bola, the weapon commonly used by Azmaran warriors. Galtar fell to his knees and the attacker swung a murderous blade aiming at his neck.

The song of Eredian's arrow saved Galtar's life. The elf kept on riding, sending his arrows, hitting - the midriff, the neck, the eye - sending three men to their deaths. No elvish arrow went amiss. Then a shrill cry came up from the hill; its pitch crawled fast across the ceiling of clouds. The smoke-cover fell now lower, and suddenly, a great gap swirled open. Through the hole, the moon and the stars appeared in the crimson sky. Something came down through the gap. An eagle-like shadow swallowed the moon, stars and sky. It swooped down toward Aitri's house, flapping its giant wings. The roof collapsed under the large claws. Anaya was inside, squatting in the corner, looking up in horror.

Aitri toggled his hammer and hit the lion on its snout while blood gushed from his wounded arm, still trapped between the beast's jaws. Only when the winged creature had taken flight once again, did the lion loosen his grip. The lion glanced up. On a distant command that only its cat ears could catch, it sprang towards the forest, running back to its master, leaving its prey to bleed.

Galtar was still faint, his face half-hidden in the mud when Anaya's scream pierced the air and the passing flutter of her dress vanished into the sky. The remaining raiders spurred their horses to flee, leaving more than half of their comrades behind, dead. The dark curtain of the rain continued to pound against the ground. Galtar felt the large cold drops as they were hitting on his back and the wallop sobered him up. He freed his hands and groped for his sword in the mud. A whinny he heard and caught a warm breath on his shoulder. It was Eredian's horse, Vinge. The elf dismounted and quickly went to Aitri who was half-conscious, for he had lost much blood. Eredian ripped a strip from his sleeve to wrap Aitri's arm.

ÒGald send you,Ó says Galtar.

ÒThe Gods are humming songs for all, yet only those who care can hear,Ó answered Eredian, giving a flask to the weakened Aitri.

Suddenly Galtar pushed his leg into the stirrup, flew up and astride the tall grey stallion. Vinge pranced twice, trying to throw the unexpected rider off his back. The elf jumped up and grabbed the bridle.

ÒWhat do you have in mind, Galtar?Ó asked Eredian, calming the horse.

ÒI must go after them right now or IÓll never see Anaya again!Ó

The elf gazed into his friendÓs eyes, seeking to disentangle therein feverish worry from amuck brought by the m•lŽe: the two forces that were together driving Galtar toward the path that he was to follow. Eredian saw a call of the heart in those eyes. Then he quickly looked at Aitri. His wounded master raised his hand, calling the young man:

ÒGaltar, my boy. Be calm. We will gather our strength and go together. Please do not go alone.Ó

The cry of a woman for her loved one lasted, coming from down the village, through the rain.

Eredian looked to his friend again and all he saw bespoke of a broken heart, asking for the horse.

ÒIt is not my will to give up the horse,Ó spoke Eredian, but the stallion suddenly sprung forward, carrying the young warrior into the darkness towards the eastern hills. Ó...Yet it is the will of Gods,Ó whispered the elf. He could stop Vinge with one quiet word, quieter than the hum of a rainfall. Instead, he spoke to the wind: ÓLet him be your master; wind-speed to your legs.Ó

Chapter Four

Young Swords are Riding

I

ÒListen,Ó said the dragon, ÓÉThe wind is squalling over barren mountain rocks.Ó

Anaya was lying at the mouth of the cave, barely alive, trembling in fear. The dragon stood beside her, talking to himself: ÓThe more I wait, the more I think about what I have gotten, what I have lost? I have got wings and power, but I have lost a human soul; I have got long life to live, but I have lost my freedom.Ó

Then the witch came riding on the black, fire-mane lion.

ÒIs this the right cave?Ó Asked the dragon.

ÒIt is. I have to perform the ritual while she is still alive,Ó said the witch hurriedly.

ÒThe AllseaÉ Where is it?Ó asked Rahug, looking at her beast with mistrust.

ÒAghabar is waiting for you as we agreed. Go and take it. Allsea is yours now.Ó

Stars glittered peacefully by the golden sickle in the sky, above the pale light of the rising sun. The monstrous storm that had raged over his land not long ago had left, leaving no traces behind. Galtar climbed down from the horse. The deep print of a horseshoe lay embedded in the ground. He rode slowly, carefully watching for more marks to guide him through his perplexities. Broken branches were scattered on the curve, some still hanging from the trees. The Azmarans had passed this way in haste.

The drum of many hoofs came from behind and he quickly hid in the forest. Soon, peering from the high bushes, he spotted five horsemen as they were approaching. The warrior that led them was one of Galtar's tribesman, broad-shouldered and fair-haired captain named Elgar. As Galtar exposed himself to the group, Elgar's persuasive face with its strong chin and sharp blue eyes grinned at him and laughed at once.

“Greetings, Galtar!”

“Hail brothers!” Galtar raised his hand.

“We saw you tracking the attackers, but your stallion seems faster than ours.”

“Nice horse,” said Dengo, the youngest in the group. “Where did you get it from?”

“I will tell you later. How many people have been killed in the village, Elgar?” Galtar asked.

“A dozen, I think, maybe more. Though the enemy may have caught us by surprise, we brought down many.”

“And we will get them all,” groaned Galtar.

“I hope so,” said Elgar. “There is no time to lose. We'll ride as one, let's go!”

Galtar shook his horse's strap and Vinge set out up the road.

They continued the pursuit together. Soon the group reached denser woods that stretched along the foothills of the Snowy Mountains. In the early morning, the riders of White Deer swiftly entered the forest, not paying notice to the ragged mist that floated between its naked shadowy trees. No other thought occupied their heads but their mutual desire to catch and slay the enemy. The thirst for revenge had led them this far, to the end of roads; their senses chorded and their bodies turned into primordial predators. They knew this land well and they all felt that the enemy could not be far off.

To the east, behind the wide mountain chain, the marshes lay, stretching many miles toward the Horseshoe Hills that surrounded the cradle of river Nira. Across the river, more dense woods ranged far into the distance. Then, at the far-off end of the woods and slopes of bright and yellow color, the whole land merged into murky greens and grays – the misty land of Huydoom with its legendary ruins of Hooydom.

Vaar. There, past the ruins on the hill, a steppe sprawled, which marked the beginning of vast Azmaran's land and its warlike clans.

ÒAlas,Ó screamed Dengo. ÒThe evil god Yezid must have helped the attackers. It was him who summoned the storm.Ó

ÒIt cannot be!Ó said another warrior. ÒYezid has no power in the land of our mighty god Gald.Ó

ÒIt was no god, but black sorcery!Ó exclaimed the third one.

Galtar was quiet, eyes drawn to the earth, checking for more signs. Then he slapped Vinge on his muscled neck: "All my hope is in your legs now.Ó He fastened the reins around his fists; inhaled the sharp mountain air deeply and said, ÒWarriors of the White Deer, let us heave their heads before the night!Ó

They spurred their horses once again. The animals leaped into a wild gallop, carrying the young swordsmen with heed. Throughout the day they rode, stopping every now and again to sniff the air and listen to the whisper of the trees. Still bitter from the clash, the warriors hurried - hounds on the scent of hunted game.

A new sun was rising, melting the ice on the lake they had reached. Icebergs were floating, scattering slowly. From the northern peaks, massive clouds came, rolling ominously down to the valley. The wind was displacing the traces they followed. A snowstorm was coming.

The whoop of the waterfalls grew stronger. At length they came to the foothill of a cliff, cut in a rocky hill by the river Nira, which splashed into a lake by way of three great, foamy waterfalls. Three radiant rainbows danced upon the fumes, rich with a scent that recalled images from their boyhood. Once, Aitri had taken Galtar here fishing, his first journey afar.

They found a few long pony hairs, undoubtedly from an Azmaranian bred of hairy-pony. Galtar dismounted to take a better look. He observed the path carefully, touching the ground, smelling:

ÒMore people awaited them here,Ó Galtar said. ÒThe Urezi tribe, I'd say, by the murky color of the pony hair.Ó

ÒAghabar's horde?Ó

ÒWho else it could be?Ó

Azmaran was a land of nomads, and Aghabar was one of their leaders. The Urezi tribe used two kinds of horses: The pony had solid endurance, suitable for long journeys through harsh, cold lands while the tall and strong steeds were well-suited for sudden attacks and raids where swiftness was of greatest value.

ÒHere!Ó Dengo suddenly announced, observing the ground before him. ÒThey split in two. They went south but the lion continued to the east. Look!Ó Deep prints of the large paws were still visible in the snow-cover. They all eyed each other in awe. The memories were fresh;

the images of the blood and skin ripped from the bodies of the villagers. Screams and faces of the people they knew, lacerated by the beast, emerged in their minds and they all stirred. Dengo drew his sword, pointing down to more prints: "They all turned south, exchanging tired horses for well-rested ponies. All but the lion. This is strange."

"The lion went east. Probably to reach the Scourge of Winds pass," said Galtar, "Scourge of Winds is the shortest way into Azmaranian land. That animal chose the fastest way, no doubt."

Elgar looked toward the mountains, shading his eyes with his firm hand and said: "It is a safe path for an animal, but not for a human." The captain then relaxed and turned to his younger fellow countrymen. As the oldest and strongest of them, Elgar expected to be listened and, of course, obeyed. Straighten in the saddle, he looked at them all from face to face and finally stopped his eyes on Galtar. "It is an animal," said Elgar in a lower voice now. He spoke slowly but in a tone which sounded rather demanding than friendly: "It went by its instincts, not by plans."

"It is not an ordinary animal, I am sure of that," answered Galtar, still gazing towards the snow-strewn peaks, not even looking back at Elgar. Since Anaya was taken, he did not intend to listen to any other voice but the one of his own heart.

"Scourge of Winds," Elgar repeated the name of the pass. This time he spoke louder and with less patience. "If you are thinking of going there, you should know that no living being could persist in its airstreams during this time of the year. We are at the doorstep of winter; I thought you know what that means Galtar, son of Orltar."

Galtar said nothing but he immediately realized that if he wanted to follow the path which led to the pass, he would have to do it alone.

No sunray could pierce the clouds the next day. It had started snowing again. No runaway here had to worry about traces, for snowfalls were frequent and heavy. One by one, the marks vanished in an all-embracing whiteness. The two mountain tops, giant murky guardians, stood in a gloomy light of the evening sun. Clouds were amassing between them.

Great snow-flakes melted on their faces. An encounter with nature, rough and cruel, was ahead. They did not fear it but still, they all felt the cold hand of despair seizing their hearts. A sharp pain in the chest startled Galtar and he nodded. He dismounted and laid himself on the ground for a short time. He had to do it. Their druids taught them so: "If sharp pain would flood the heart, Mother-earth has the power to ease the pain and soak it out of your body."

"Dark omen," he muttered.

Elgar watched him with worry. He decided not to argue for some time and remained silent. He gave the others the sign to dismount and

they all slid off their horses. Soon afterwards Galtar was up again holding his saddle ready to mount again, saying:

ÒThe abductors cannot be far.Ó

Elgar took the halter of Galtar's horse: ÒGaltar, you do not feel well.Ó

ÒI am good now.Ó

ÒThen of what abductors you are talking about?Ó Asked Elgar and it was not easy to evade his look.

Galtar jumped into the saddle, looking again towards the eastern peaks. It seemed he did not hear what his companion had asked him. Elgar pet the elven horse above its snout. In response, Winge snorted quietly releasing cloud of vapor as he was breathing out. Elgar searched for Galtar's unrest eyes and said with a trace of rebuke in his tone:

ÒThe abductor was a dragon, a winged creature that flies, not a man on a horseÉ or the lion.Ó

Galtar shook his head in disbelief: ÒAll because of herÉ They undertook such a long journeyÉ the lionÉ and the dragon?Ó

ÒIt is all about retribution, Galtar.Ó Elgar spoke resolutely: ÒThey wanted to horrify us, the sons of those who had beat them once. They wanted to bring a reign of fear upon us for sake of their revenge. That is why all of this has happened.Ó

ÒAghabar, their general, survived the battle against our army, that I know,Ó said Galtar. ÒIf Aghabar wanted to do this to me because I am Orltar's son, Anaya might still be aliveÉ I am sure that Aghabar wants me to beg him and crawl before his feet.Ó

ÒThe Druid Helmold said that Aghabar was expelled from his land when a Khan from another Azmaranian tribe took the lead,Ó said Dengo. ÒAghabar is Urez, but now the Yotomans are ruling there. The new Khan planned to kill Aghabar to eliminate the threat he posed, so Aghabar fled.Ó

ÒIt is true,Ó said Elgar. He raised a stick from the ground and pointed it to the east. ÒAghabar is hiding somewhere, gathering a new army.Ó The warrior turned back to his friends: ÒHe might want to go back to his land, but first, he will want to seek his vengeance.Ó

Suddenly, Galtar extended his arm, signing to all to be quiet. He looked toward the forest, stiffen and taut, sniffing: ÒI smell fire,Ó said he, almost whispering.

Chapter Five

In the Name of Yezid

Six horses grazed, all evenly tied to the long trunks of a few pinetrees. A man scooped a haystack from a hole that was hidden below the tree. Azmarans deployed number of such holes and filled them with grass, arrows and other things to secure the basic supply on their way back to the steppe.

ÒThis is all thatÕs left, boys,Ó said the soldier. Then he put his pointed helm on, took his spear and wrapped himself in a cloak made of goat skins. The vapor rose from his nostrils and mouth as he breathed the freezing air. The goat-skin cloak might have been enough to protect him from coldness on the steppe but here, in the land of the Galds, he needed at least three layers of them. Rubbing his arms, he moved nearer to the animals to catch some warmth. Though it was his turn to take care of the horses and guard the small camp; the soldier could not refrain himself from throwing envious glances toward his comrades who were sitting around a campfire that danced in a hole dug in the half-frozen ground.

ÒHey Zara!Ó shouted one of them to the watcher. ÒDonÕt look here! We wonÕt attack ourselves!Ó They were chatting, warming their hands over the flame. They all wore light, pointed helmets and chain mails. Their shields leaned beside them, neatly lined-up. Flames lit the paintings on them, a snake-like head with four horns - the visage of God Yezid. Another Azmaranian soldier came out of the forest, bringing more wood. He was taller and skinnier than the others and although he was an ordinary soldier, there was something dignified, almost venerable in him. It may have been his pointed chin, accentuated by a sharp goat-beard, that gave him that look. He put a large log on the fire and it crackled loudly. This angered his chief, a man with massive shoulders, widest of all:

ÒYezid burn you, Kaid, stop it.Ó He grumbled, almost yelling. You will set the whole forest on fire!Ó The angry leader stood up. His head was almost entirely shaven, except for a well-oiled, black horsetail of hair that hung loose at the back. Above his ears he had tattoos, the signs of an officer of the Urezian tribe. His dark mustache blended in with his side-whiskers and his thick eyebrows overshadowed his narrow eyes, which were carved deeply above his strong cheekbones.

Kaid stopped adding the wood immediately and removed the one he had just set down: ÒI wonÕt Ulda, I wonÕt. Why you are so mad about everything?Ó

ÒShould I remind you?Ó Ulda snarled.

Kaid did not answer. He looked down at the fire as did the others. They were all tired, exhausted from a full month of constant hiding and moving through this cold foreign land, only to rush from one disaster into another - now into the bitter chill of northern nights.

ÒWe came down too early. What if the other group did not meet the Aghabar in time?Ó asked Kaid, spreading the soot with an iron poker.

Ulda narrowed his eyebrows and his whole face turned dark: ÒI am

sick of Aghabar. I lost my brother there. For what? For an alliance with a dragon? Even if that dragon will help our people win the final battle, who can be sure that that very dragon will not turn against us one day? Nobody can tell such a creature what to do.Ó

ÒYou are right, Ulda,Ó said Kaid. ÒBut taking that girl from the north is of the greatest importance for the future of Azmaran, they said.Ó

ÒI do not believe that. I say: Aghabar is the only person who will truly benefit. We all know that his ambition is to put his dirty hands on our mother steppe and on the Urezian lands. He wants the same thing he wanted twenty years ago.Ó

ÒYes. But his father is Urez too,Ó said one.

ÒNo. His father is Yotoman and his mother Urezian. But he is a turn-shield anyways. He betrayed his own mother. And that is the worst kind, my brave warriors, steppe riders. My brother died for nothing, I can see that now. Aghabar is nothing but a servant to the dragon and to thatÉ that witchÉÓ

ÒSkira,Ó said Kaid

ÒWhatever he called that red tart,Ó continued Ulda and stood up, his anger burning hotter as he looked at the flame. ÒThen he serves, not to our people. His camp is far from Urezian land, far from the land of Azmaran. He has turned his back on Yezid. By the way he lives and fights, he spits on the sacred name, the name of our merciful and mighty god, the guardian of our fates.Ó For a moment, his voice went low: ÒWhy did he order us to break into small groups? To be less noticeable, you think?Ó With a long stern look he strikes his men, rumbling in rage: ÒNo my sons, sons of steppe! This whole thing was a trap. He wanted to do it on the fly: One arrow - two birds.Ó said Ulda and sat, crossing his legs, gazing to the fire again.

Kaid stood up and grabbed one of the spears that were lined-up next to the shields: ÒThen why did we not stay in the Valdic mountains to await and kill Aghabar?Ó

ÒHah, Kaid. You are so na•ve,Ó Ulda shook his bony head. ÒAghabarÓs group is large and count many good warriors, and not only humans, but orcs too and who knows what other wicked breeds.Ó

After those words, they all remained silent, and silently their faces scowled as if only one thought nestled in their minds: ÒSo be it - death to the traitor.Ó

Unexpectedly, all of the horses neighed. The sudden cry of the animals broke with a terrible sound, whirling into a piercing shriek.

ÒZara!Ó shouted Kaid, pointing his spear to the hostlerÓs direction. Other soldiers leaped up, swinging out their sabers. Alerted, they jumped forward a step or two, but then halted in dismay. ZaraÓs pale face met them, features disjointed with pain. He fell dead among the horses, still staring at his comrades, his dull eyes popped

wide. Their geldings scattered left and right revealing a fair-haired berserker in the middle that was coming straight to their direction. With an axe in one hand and a sword in another, the man strode firmly towards the Azmaranian soldiers.

ÒGALDAAA!Ó screamed Elgar attacking with both of his weapons. His enemies were veterans of the steppe, but this terrain was not like the green seas of grass they were accustomed to. This was the land of the Galds - people who knew how to sneak about and fight through ice and snow. At the same time as Elgar drew their attention, the others struck them from behind. Only Ulda evaded a blow that came from the back. His skills in combat were high and he was well-respected by steppe-riders and enemies alike.

He was about to show how he got the name Ulda, which in his language mean wind. He swiftly drew his zebra, the widest Azmaranian sabre, with one hand and a sizir with the other - particular knife with two blades, one long and one shorter - it was notorious knife of his tribe.

White Deer warriors attacked him all at once. A step back Ð a move to the left and then a quick crouch - every blow struck by the Galdic warriors went amiss. The warriors of White Deer downed five enemies immediately but the Urez who remained before them engaged them all in a furious fight. Ulda was no easy prey. He swooped down on young Dengo. Blood spurted from the boyÓs ribcage and he fell rolling to the snow before GaltarÓs feet.

These younger men took up the whole pursuit on their own, suddenly and unprepared. The older warriors, especially the lancers from the village tried to stop them. The only one in the largely juvenile group with any true combat experience was Elgar who had served as a guard on several journeys with the trade-caravans. He had lived through some serious fights there, but those had been against thieves, not against highly trained soldiers.

The Galds surrounded Ulda, pointing their weapons. He raised his wide saber in one hand, stubbed the sizir, which was smeared with the DengoÓs blod, into the ground before him, and took a shield.

ÒYou have taken my men. You, dogs from the north, will pay for this now!Ó He attacked Elgar and in that same moment, Elgar attacked him with both of his weapons simultaneously. He swung his axe from above while his sword flew up, but Ulda suddenly sprang back, as if changing his mind. In fact, it was his practiced trick. With a quick turn, pivoting firmly on his heel, Ulda surprised another warrior behind him. It was a completely unexpected blow. Blood sprinkled from the neck of the young man and he fell on the ground dead. Behind the fallen one, Dengo was still sitting on the ground in blood and pain, shaking, holding his wound. Elgar stepped closer to Dengo to protect him. Young Galdians now widened their circle.

Now Galtar attacked, swinging his sword high. Elgar and another warrior did the same. It seemed impossible to avoid three simultaneous strikes. Ulda was faster still. He dodged, blocking all three blows

with his own counter-attack Ð his saber swinging towards GaltarÕs neck. CLANG! Ð GaltarÕs reflexes saved his life as his bright blade met the blow.

ÒVery well. Gifted fellÕ a,Ó yelled Ulda attacking again, as Elgar extended his sword to protect Galtar from a murderous blow and swung his axe once again. Ulda braced against his shield, blocking the axe and bringing his saber down toward ElgarÕs head. This time GaltarÕs sword saved Elgar, who used that moment to make a somersault, managing to hit UldaÕs leg. The Azmar screamed, stepping back. He still held his ground but went now defensive. The waning strength of his leg would betray him soon; he knew that. He pulled his shield up, leaning the blade on its side then whistled two times. On the sound he made, a large black war-horse came drumming out of the forest. The Galds jumped left and right thinking that Azmaranian horsemen were coming. As they realized that it was only one horse, Ulda was already in the saddle. Once again, they charged him, but he reined his horse into the feral gallop, fleeing to the south. They now jumped to help Dengo. The boy was pale, fighting to get air into his lungs. For another comrade it was too late.

ÒThis hunt is over,Ó said Elgar. ÒWe were all in a fever for revenge. Now we must go back.Ó

Galtar was reluctant: ÒI must go after the Azmar.Ó

ÒYou are not going anywhere,Ó said Elgar firmly.

ÒYou are not my father,Ó protested Galtar.

No answer. Together Galdians took their dead brother, and lifting him with care, they put him on a horse. Then, they helped Dengo to sit straight while Elgar bandaged his wound, all around the chest. Carefully, friendly hands helped the weary young warrior to reach the stirrup and mount. Demoralized and tired, it seemed obvious now that the time to bring this pursuit to a halt has come. Such outcome seemed obvious to all in the group except for Galtar. He looked at them all eagerly, but thoughts of defeat seized their hearts and they all looked down, not meeting his eyes.

ÒI have to free Anaya,Ó he persisted.

ÒYou have to free Anaya, you said,Ó Elgar turned to Galtar once again, determined to stop the frenzy. ÒLook at Doran,Ó said he, pointing to their dead tribesman: ÒDoran cannot free anyone. He is freed from his life. Is that what you want - to be slaughtered like him?Ó

Galtar slid his sword to the scabbard and sat on a log, sinking his head into his hands.

Elgar came closer to him: ÒCome with us, Galtar. We must bring Dengo back to the village, or he will die.Ó

ÒYou can go but I cannot,Ó whispered Galtar.

Elgar stood for a moment, allowing the silence to settle his feelings. He understood Galtar's inner struggle but the call of a leader who cares about his men forced him to do or say whatever was needed to stop this fellow: "We will gather the army." He put his hand on Galtar's shoulder.

Galtar did not move: "I am sorry, Elgar. I have to free Anaya."

"You are not ready, Galtar. You have learned how to make a sword but you have not learned enough how to wield it."

Quiet and dry was Galtar's answer: "It is not the sword that fights the battle but the heart that beats in a hero brave."

Elgar mounted his horse: "I can only hope that the brave hero will stay alive. Shield of Gald upon you, brother."

No more words were exchanged. They spurred their horses and headed westward, leaving the rebellions young blacksmith's apprentice alone. As his friends were leaving, before he lost them, Galtar stood up, raising his hand. He wanted to call out to them and say a word about his other friends - the dwarf Lofar and elf Eredian who would certainly ask about him. They would not leave him, he thought. They would follow him in this pursuit. But it was too late for such words now. After all, he did not want to put them in danger when this might be a personal matter. "Why would anyone risk their life for something that should be my own to endure," he thought. "This quest should be my own - only."

Now he struggled with the dilemma - should he go after the Azmaranian leader or follow the tracks of the beast? He stabbed the sword to the ground, where the tracks forked to the east and south. Anger and worry did not leave any room in his mind for fear nor for rational reflection: he did not know how he supposed to win against such odds, alone... Nor did he care. Sunset was mirrored in his sword, which stood straight before him. On the blade, a drop of blood slipped to the ground. Revenge started here. The presence of many Azmarans, young men who might be of his age, lying dead beside his feet, drew a dark veil over his heart.

The messenger of death passed slowly by, riding on a shadow-mare. He watched Galtar with empty eyes, in patience. A wolf howled in the distance.

II

The fire had died out. Slow bat of hoofs came from the forest. Scattered Azmaranian horses were coming back unhurriedly, sniffing, searching for their silent masters. In the cold darkness, a whisper could be heard from one of the fallen foes. Galtar took a waterskin from the side of the saddle of the horse that stood nearby the man. He kneeled next to the man's head and gave him a sip.

"What is it that you are whispering, Azmar?" Galtar asked.

The man answered, stammering in pain: "I am praying to my god."

ÒWhat is your name?Ó

ÒKaid,Ó said the wounded Azmar. The man then took another gulp of water from GaltarÕs hand.

ÒWhat does that mean in your language?Ó The Galdian asked.

ÒIt meansÉ LuckyÓ

ÒYou are still alive which means that your name is true.Ó said Galtar. ÒYou are lucky that I have not the skill like your leader to kill at once,Ó

ÒI might be good to God only at that moment,Ó said Kaid. ÒBut you can finish me now.Ó

Galtar helped him to sit and said:

ÒI have lost my will to kill you, Azmar Kaid. All I want is to free the girl you took.Ó

ÒThe dragon took her. We were only there É toÉ help,Ó the man suddenly coughed and words barely went out from his weary mouth. Galtar paid no heed to it. He stood up and calmly continued with his inquisition: ÒTo help who?Ó

ÒOur Motherland.Ó

ÒIs that what Aghabar told you - That the land of Azmaran would be safe if you came here... and took Anaya?Ó

Azmar nodded positively.

ÒWhere is the girl now?Ó

ÒThe dragon took her to the White Mountains. Somewhere above the Scourge of Winds pass is a cave. They headed to that cave: the dragon, the witch and the beast. That is all I know.Ó

Galtar grabbed the man for his hair, his eyes flamed in anger: ÒIt is strange that you do not ask for mercy, dog!Ó Their looks met and to the Northman surprise, he found no fear or hatred in KaidÕs eyes at all. Instead, they loomed with strange, almost inhuman calmness Ð like the eyes of a sorcerer or a monk, rather than a warrior. Suddenly he released him, then took a linen shirt from a dead Azmar, ripped it quickly and tightened it around KaidÕs wound firmly. He grabbed a knife and another waterskin from one of the enemyÕs backpacks and put it beside him.

ÒWhy you are doing this?Ó asked Kaid, half conscious.

Galtar jumped on his horse and tighten the bridle in his fists: ÒYou have lost a lot of blood. Sabertooth tigers can smell you, so keep your sizir at hand.Ó He spurred his horse and disappeared to the east, towards the pass.

ÒOh holy Yezid, I was na•ve,Ó spoke Kaid in despair, laying himself down again, looking at the stars above. ÒNa•ve and stupid. O,

Yezid, please come and help me. It was the righteous name of yours that I came to fight for. So be merciful and do not leave me now.Ó

Chapter Six

Red Ice

I

The colossal Mountains, sitting giants with necklaces of clouds, looked prudently at the rider who dared to come uninvited to this bitter cold land of ice and snow. Vinge sank into the white cover, which was getting deeper with every step. Only a lone eagle high in the sky saw the vision of the horse that swam through the white sea, from sunup to dusk, along the sheer pale cliffs. Soon, weariness overtook the man and the animal and hunger started to bite. A rabbit came out onto the snow. The young man had put his sword away, observing every move of the little animal.

ÒAnaya is still in their hands. I shouldnÕt think of hunger now,Ó he rebuked himself.

The rabbit stopped, sniffing.

ÒHe may be looking for food, too,Ó thought Galtar, but untamed starvation slashed his empathy and he sprang and seized the rabbit. The white, long-eared creature shook helplessly in GaltarÕs hands.

ÒOh Gal, hunger is an awful thing. How could a man eat such a friendly looking being? But if I set you free, some other animal will eat you.Ó He would probably have come up with some more excuses, if his prey had not suddenly jumped out of his hands. The ill-fortuned hunter ran across the deep snow. Driven by painful need, he turned into the predator and soon his shadow enclosed the furry fugitive. But lo! A great blue wing swung through his fluttering hair and the silver-blue feathers of mighty wings covered his sight. An eagle dove, snatching the rabbit with its sharp claws, screeching victoriously.

Astonished, Galtar stood. The wide wings were vanishing gradually, carrying its prey toward the mountain crest. In this part of the world, nobody and nothing yielded to newcomers.

ÒDid you see that?Ó Galtar turned to his horse. VingeÕs snout was deep in the snow, digging for food. ÒYou found something there?Ó

A bright green bush of an unknown plant was there. The horse started to eat it.

ÒAt least, your dinner will not run away.Ó He plucked handful of leaves and began to eat hungrily. After several portions, a strange tickle crept into his belly. Then nausea attacked him. His tongue swelled: ÓWhat is this?Ó he said and put some snow into his mouth. It eased the pain, yet hunger came back with a great throbbing. Sunset poured its redness onto the cloud veils that floated before the pass. Icy winds blustered across sharp cliffs. The young man plodded, reining his horse through the white banks. Neither the whip of the

wind, nor hunger, nor the thick wall of snow that blocked the pass could break his will. The stronger the blizzard, the more disdainfully he rode.

Vinge stopped, exhausted. Galtar dismounted, almost falling. They stood then Ð the man and the horse - motionless statues of ice, buried in white. Numbness grew in their limbs and pain encased every bone. The animal fell on its knees and the proud head of the elvish horse dropped. The snowstorm had begun.

Galtar pulled the bridle to no avail.

ÒJust a step moreÉ WeÕll find shelter,Ó said he, fighting drowsiness. The wind swirled through cracks, striking in waves, screaming in his ears. ÓI beg you! Endure only a bit more,Ó yelled the man in despair while his voice was hacked by the howling wind. Vinge neighed, and the neigh was swallowed up in the pathless wilderness. The horse knelt, his head bowed. Without the horse, after crossing the pass, any further pursuit would be doomed. Galtar knelt down as well and took the horseÕs head in his arms. A quiet neigh came out. Tears froze at the corners of his weary eyes.

Blood that flows - a mountain stream - red ice on its surface.

Galtar now lost any sensation in his fingers and feet. Sleepiness cloaked the body and the warm hand of mirage dream lied on his forehead Ð warmth of a homely fire. Through the mirage, soft motherly voice was singing a lullaby. The wind was striking shrilly with more and more frequent waves.

ÒThis is not the endÉÓ uttered Galtar. ÓThe end does not look like this.Ó The easy crackle of the hearth had come again. Warmth rose through that obscure image and the song grew near. Gradually, the voice changed and it was not his mother who was singing the song any more but the girl he knew: ÓAnaya,Ó he maundered, half-conscious.

ÒGaltar,Ó whispered the wind. She was standing there, calling him. Her body loomed in from the blizzard.

He gathered his last drops of strength and began to drag his body forward. It was divine will that kept him going, step by step, through the snow that drifted to his hips. When he had reached the crack at last, with no strength left, he fell, giving his hands up to the blue vision. He rolled downward into the darkness of a crack. There, at the bottom of the cavern, he painfully gathered himself together: ÓMy horse!Ó echoed through his mind. ÓI cannot continue without VingeÉÓ he started to climb the frozen ground up to the mouth of the cavern but he could not reach the top. Tiredness overran his body. He slid back numb, his limbs like a string-puppetÕs, unhinged.

The pile of snow, layered at the entrance, grew to the size of a man. Half-dead, Galtar was lying on cold, rocky ground. The ill-fated scream of the wind blended into a long dragging sound of a beastly nature. Then it turned into a whinnying scream Ð the terrible sound that came from a throat of komia Ð the mountain nightmare made of

sharp wind and ice. Four of them are coming, carrying their masters - servants of the Dead Wind. The frost knights - ghosts of those frozen to death. The grey skulls grinned from atop their large spiky shoulders; great ice-scythes swayed in their arms. They were coming to kill the one who dared not to die in the snowstorm they had sent. Galtar closed his eyes, calling his god:

ÒO, Gald. I need your strength now.Ó

His nostrils flared like those of a wolf. Rage burst in him and his frozen fingers struck the icy ground like iron spikes of a plough. ÒGALDA!Ó boomed through the cave. ÒI am not going to give my horse to them!Ó He clenched his fists throwing himself into the snowstorm. A deep-throated war cry he released and it echoed through the mountains: ÒDIE, DIE YOU DEMONS!Ó He grabbed VingeÕs body and began to pull it towards the crack while the riders of white death gathered on the edge of the cliff above him. Then a great dark silhouette of an equestrian halted, gazing at him. It was their leader. A strong quivering cry broke out from it, summoning its knights to attack. All at once, they screamed horribly and their sharp scythes swung at Galtar. They rolled snow from their cloaks like avalanches down upon him and numerous darts of ice shot out from their dark eyeholes. Galtar was pulling his horse with heavy, painful steps when the shower pierced his hands and legs. Yet he remained stern, crying wildly:

ÒDie, you demons! DIE! I am not going to give you my horse!Ó

The large hands of skeletal arms grabbed the warrior by his neck while the cold hands of another grabbed the head of the horse, gripping its snout. The third one swung its scythe and its curved blade flashed out striving towards GaltarÕs chest. He bent backwards, avoiding the blow instinctively. He seized the handle of the chilly weapon and jerked it so fiercely that the rider flew out from his saddle and fell over the cliff into the dark abyss ahead. In the same surge, he hewed the head of the second frost-knight with the scythe. Another komia leaped, kicking its great hoofs in an attempt to smash his head. A cold breath blew from its nostrils. Galtar crouched, pushing the scythe under the rear legs of the monstrous horse so that it stumbled and fell aside, crushing its master against the cliff wall. He then grabbed Vinge once again and continued to pull him towards the cave. He had almost reached it when the frost-knights leader blocked his way, holding high its huge scythe, largest and widest of all. Great snowflakes fell sliced on its sharp edge. The wind quieted into a grave silence. Riding on his great mare, the leader neared. As if chiseled from an iceberg, the rider was all blue, gray and white. Its helmet glimmered with the flakes that had been caught in the wind and turned into ice. His armor flickered - hoarfrost rings, wrought and woven in numerous layers. His face was as frozen bog-water - molded to a human head. A grey smoky mass pulsed inside its body as it spoke in an eerie voice:

ÒIce-Lord I am and the cold hearts of those frozen to death beat within me. Your own heart shall stop now and become mine. Only then, will it continue to beat again.Ó

The pain went through Galtar's fingers and hands and he grasped that he was fighting with the scythe he had snatched. Immediately, he threw it away and grabbed his own sword from its sheath on his back. Yet, the pain entered his feet this time. He realized that it was not the monsters that would kill him but the cold, if he did not seek shelter soon. Yet the crack he had found in the cliff was blocked by the ice-lord before him. His will to attack the monstrous creature was strong, but his body betrayed him. No warm blood was left to flow through his veins, so he staggered, almost falling, before the hoofs of the beast. The ice-lord set down his scythe, sharp and huge, pointed to the heart of the young warrior and spoke again:

“Your heart shall stop now and become mine.”

Galtar fell to his knees. A dull heavy thud came suddenly. Something large, live and white leaped over Galtar. Out of nowhere, a deer charged at the ice-lord, throwing the rider and his horse to the frozen ground. The scythe crisscrossed with the great antlers of Alu.

II

Galtar was lying on the cold, wet rocky floor of a cave. An uncontrollable twitching in his muscles awoke him. He opened his eyes to see nothing but darkness all around him. “I must be dead,” he thought, lying still on the ground and staring into the blackness, dark like the bottom of a deep grave. He touched his belt and buckle and felt the shape of a running-deer. It was the White Deer, protector of his tribe that had saved him and pulled his weakened body into the crack. The smell of smoke wafted towards him. The twinkle of a small light appeared on the edge of the sword that lay on a few steps from him. He took the blade and spotted the source of the flicker in the distance, at the end of a deep passage. Slowly, he followed it along the smooth curtains of ice that threaded the walls of the cave to a mountain river trapped, frozen in time. From the ceiling, drops clustered like figures - statues of ill-fortuned fugitives caught by the ruthless wind. It still howled outside and a dreadful whining drew from the cave mouth. A worry that edged on fear shook Galtar's mind and he gripped his sword with both hands, carefully stepping on the slippery floor. The tunnel narrowed closer to a hole that led to a larger hall. There, a stone block stood in the middle. The body of a woman reposed on it, lit by a small fire-pot, which casted a flaming light on the wall above her. “Anaya?” her name tore through his mind. “It cannot be her,” he uttered, nearing the body, straining his eyes to see it better. The steps became heavy and worry tightened his heart while its beats resounded through the cave. His mind did not accept the horrifying truth even as he stood a short step away from her. Barefoot, clad in white, Anaya lay still. A golden aureole of her curly hair glimmered around her soft, pale face. In the middle of her chest a long black arrow protruded. “It cannot be her,” whispered his heart in desolation, beseeching the gods to turn back time. His thoughts faded into blackness that stretched into a sudden oblivion. Then, a light of the past surfaced, distant and unreachable: They were running together to Aitri's smithy to play their game of fire and snow. Anaya's tender face shone in the red heat, the flame dancing in

her eyes. In the flame, an incandescent iron blade rested. A cry from the wind scattered the images. The fire in the pot was the only light that remained. Galtar touched her forehead. There was no bloodstain where the arrow met the body. The arrow was black, engraved with unknown symbols.

He pulled it out with a yank. As he looked at her motionless face, white as snow, disbelief grew into grief. He did not accept what he saw, yet what he saw stabbed him like an arrow, deeply in his heart and he wanted to be awakened; pulled out from the dark torrent that had carried away everything he had lived for.

She looked as if she were asleep. He kissed her lips lightly. In the dithering flame above, a strange vista broke, opening a burning horizon. His hands flew to his sides out; sword tight in his right hand, the left clinched into the fist as his eyes wandered through the darkness above.

“O, Creator, O, Destroyer” The youthful sparks in his eyes had died away. Instead, the gloomy light of the ice-cave lit them; his nostrils tensed like those of a wounded wolf and the blood of ancient warriors flooded his whole being. From the burning horizon, a rumble of many hoofs came. The cavalry of revenge was coming, carrying banners of woe. “O, Gald,” he said and deep and clear was his voice. “Let the blood of those who have killed this girl be on my sword. And when my vengeance comes, let me die in battle. Then, I shall meet her again - in the afterlife.” He sat then, leaning on the throne and his head dropped on her shoulder. Blood that flows in river of sorrow. Red ice on its surface.

Chapter Seven

Devanas - Women at Arms

I

The fire in the pot died, leaving a smoky crimson curve that dissolved in the dark. When Galtar woke up, Anaya's body had disappeared from the altar. “An evil spell,” crept into his mind and he stirred. Black magic was perhaps the only think that can truly lapse people of Galda into dismayed silence, but his grief and thirst for revenge outweighed his fears. Shafts of sunlight pierced through the piles of white, illuminating the passage. He removed the snow-pile that had built up at the entrance to the cave and the brightness of the daylight blinded him. The sun was high, the sky was clear and the vast snow cover lay exposed for many leagues around. He looked for Vinge, but the horse had vanished without a trace. Cloaked in white, the mountain massif stood like an everlasting eyewitness watching the endless struggle for life. Galtar was uncertain, gazing to the distant peaks wishing to stumble on anything that would guide him. The Scourge of Winds lay behind him as a defeated enemy. He hurried through the snowy forest breathing the sharp mountain air and, with each gasp, images of the past haunted him - Anaya was singing her song for fairies: “Light from you, here comes to me...” Her voice then perished in the sound of many birds, the sound of his remembrance.

No birds sung here. In these slopes of ice and stone, only sound of life that could be heard was those of a solitary beast. Something was moving down on the valley below the narrow path he walked. From the trees it steered, snow fell in chunks. Growl that was released from its snout and clutch of a strong jaws could be heard - It was a lion; the lion. Its skin was dark as charcoal. Its mane and the end of its tail were fiery red. The animal was huge, much larger than the biggest saber-tooth tiger the villagers had killed once. It was sitting now down in a vale, eating, ripping the skin and flesh from its prey: a doe. The lion raised its head and looked up at the human that stood on the top of a cliff. Their eyes met. Galtar watched it, looking stoutly, gripping his hilt. For the first time he saw the eyes of the lion, and this one was not an ordinary one. Under its deadly-still gaze, he was prey; a meat to be eaten with bones to be cracked. Suddenly, the flashy eyes of the beast moved slightly as they caught something that stood behind the man. Then the lion growled, slowly backing off.

ÒI doubt such beast would fear a sword,Ó thought Galtar. He was right. It was no fear that pulled the animal away, but a silent command from its mistress, hidden among the rocks in the distance. However, there was a reason for the call Ð something that loomed mightier and more threatening to the beast than a sword of a human. Presence of another live thing, this time from behind his back, he felt now. A snarl, dull and deep, came from just a few steps away. At the sound, he slowly turned with the sword still out. What he saw astonished him so much that he almost fell over the cliff. White fur glistened in the sun. A large polar bear stood before him slowly swinging its immense ashen-pale head. Its braided bridle was ornate with the feathers of a gray owl. Pearls of many colors hung as a rainbow, loose from its clips. A woman rode on its back. Under her light burnished helm, her dark hair flowed in the wind. Her cloak was of a clean white fur, hung from shoulder straps with two large bear paws. A long spear reposed in her right hand. With the left she held the braided rein, and a rounded blue shield was slung at her left leg. A long, slim curved blade hung low from her belt. The womanÕs blue eyes observed him, reining down her bear to stay in place.

ÒPut your sword down,Ó said she in a commanding tone. Galtar hesitated. ÒPut it down, I am your friend,Ó her voice was as stern as that of a military leader. It resonated with gentle authority, the authority that is gained with wisdom. He obeyed her and his sword slid back into its scabbard. As the sword was put away, the animal stopped moving its head and sat, now motionless like a statue.

ÒYou must be from the tribe of Alu,Ó said the woman.

ÒYes. How do you know that?Ó

ÒI see your belt.Ó

Galtar had never seen her before, but he had seen Devanas, the female warriors of the White Bear tribe who rode on polar bears with ease. This she-bear was carrying the feathers and signs of a chieftain on her bridle. Since he realized that this woman must be the leader of

the tribe, he knelt on his left knee according to the rules and greeted her with respectful words:

ÒI salute you and your people, o well-regarded, Chieftain Mamaki.Ó

She nodded: ÒThat was a polite greeting, young warrior. May I know your name?Ó

Galtar stood up: ÒMy name is Galtar, son of Orltar.Ó

When she heard the name of his father, she looked at him more closely and said: ÒSon of Orltar indeed. You resemble your father. An honest and brave leader, he was.Ó For a moment, a remembrance awoke in her. She turned towards the horizon to the west, looking at its rocky, jagged outline as it disappeared waving into the distance. She knew his father well from the days of the war and earlier still. Her heart knew him from the time when childhood crossroads had met with the later life. Her voice became softer: ÒWhat goodness brought you here?

ÒIt is not goodness that brought me here, O mistress of the far North. Not good, but a terrible disaster has brought me here. So suddenly I came, and unprepared, to pursue the abductors who have killed the girl I love.Ó

ÒI see. You undertook the journey lightly dressed. This could easily have been your last journey, coming at this time of the year,Ó said Mamaki looking at the scars on his hands, arms and shoulders. On his flogged face, dark shadows were etched around his eyes. His attire was ripped, the tunic all in rags, his pants dotted with frozen bloodstains.

ÒI think I am lost,Ó his voice trembled. A sudden memory of his father and thoughts of AnayaÓs death pressed him so strongly that he wanted to scream. But he had no strength left, even to cry. He dropped his head, staring at the ground: ÒI donÓt know which way to go any more.Ó

ÒYour grief has led you astray. It is strange that you survived without guidance. You must be hungry too.Ó She took a fur cloak from the saddle and passed it to him. He put it on.

ÒI have never seen such a lion before,Ó said Galtar.

ÒIt is a breed that comes from Naroxa, the underworld. Their red manes can turn into fire,Ó she explained. ÒYou cannot go any further before you regain some strength. My camp isnÓt far from here. So I invite you to be my guest, Alu,Ó she called him Alu by the name of his tribe. Mamaki pulled the reins then speaking softly to her she-bear: ÒGomla, we are going to take Galtar, son of Orltar, with us.Ó She spoke few more words in another tongue that Galtar could not understand and the great white bear crouched tamely. Mamaki gave Galtar a sign to sit behind her and he did as she said.

ÒI will take you to a safer place, Alu.Ó

Gomla carried them through the deep snow with ease; winning vast

distances faster than any horse could gallop. Lightly and swiftly they traveled, as if it were not a bear carrying them, but a giant white eagle. Gomla was a polar bear of ancient kin raised by Mamaki's tribe. Her fur was white with azure waves and her eyes were a deep dark blue, like a polar night sky.

Many questions troubled Galtar, but he could not voice them yet.

Try not to think much now, said Mamaki. Do not think at all. Relax; let emptiness rest in your eyes. Breathe in deeply and feel serenity in it. Breathe out and think: Feeling serenity, I am breathing out. Can you do that? Mamaki spoke quietly and cleanly, with an unknown hum of an ancient magic in its wake. It snatched him and he fell into a dreamlike state of peace. The rhythmic thumps of Gomla's run - paws touching the snow stayed as the only sound in his ears. He remained present just enough to hold himself in the saddle, now wrapped in an odd and newly refreshing force.

The eastern wind blew across the slopes of the Snow Mountains above them. Night fell in large snowflakes, draped dark and dense so that only the gods could see through it. A few stars shone among the clouds when the bear entered a path that led down into a green valley. There, among trees, many stone columns loomed scattered in the forest.

What are these things that are rising from the shadows? asked Galtar, slowly coming to his senses.

Those are great pillars that in the distant past had held an ancient city-island. It was a long time ago when a sea covered these parts, said Mamaki spoke. Soon we shall arrive at the place, sheltered and snug, where my camp is set.

II

A campfire twinkled in the dark woods, beside a tent. The tent was rounded and stood as high as Galtar's shoulders, with branches and snow plotted around the edge - typical traveling pergola of Devanas. Two she-warriors were sitting beside the fire cloaked in bearskins. They stood up to meet their chieftain. Gomla crouched and Mamaki drew her high, cross-laced boot out of the stirrup lightly stepping down from the saddle. Galtar dismounted as well and one of the girls took the reins and made it fast to the branch beside a horse; his horse:

Vinge! shouted Galtar in a pleasant surprise.

It might cheer your heart a bit to see your friend alive, said Mamaki.

Galtar hugged Vinge around his gracious neck and a happy neigh came from his gob. How eh, you elvish kin How did you survive?

We found him surrounded by three does. They warmed him with their bodies, preventing the frost from killing his blood flow. He was weary and weak and at the doorstep of death. Then I gave him some herbs and Gomla lifted him up to his legs. We also found the prints of a deer nearby. It seems that the deer pulled you inside of the narrow crack.

It was wide enough for a human but too small for a horse.Ó

Galtar lightly rubbed the deer-clasp on his belt: ÒAlu, the protector of my tribe.Ó

ÒHe is also the protector of all people who have done good deeds,Ó added Mamaki. ÓGaltar, please meet my daughter Inah, and my cousin Arana. They are my guardians. Inah is the greatest sword-fighter I have and Arana is my best archer. Girls, this is Galtar. He is an Alu.Ó

ÒWelcome Galtar and nice to meet you,Ó Arana nodded.

ÒYou look like a Blackbird Field Survivor,Ó said Inah, noticing his battered arms and face. She was referring to the great battle at the Black Bird Field and fall of the land of Kereb. Although Kerebians lost the battle, further expansion of the Azmaran Empire to the west was put on a halt for almost a decade, because of tremendous losses on both sides.

InahÕs dark straight-hair was tightened high, hanging down in a long tress threaded with pearls Ð the mark of a skilled fighter and close guard of her chieftain. She was tall, close to GaltarÕs height. Her charcoal-dark eyes and long eyebrows contrasted her soft, round, white face. Her ripened-cherry red lips were smiling and her whole stature radiated with the unusual combination: The strength of a taught warrior with the elegance of a gorgeous woman. Both Devanas were dressed in skin-clothes tightened with many cross-laces on the sides following lines of their firm, feminine bodies. On their waists each wore a studded belt with a large bronze clasp over an open-bottom girdle made of sheepskin. Their boots went high-up to their knees and were filled with the fur of a gray wolf around the edge. Arana was of a smaller stature than Inah. Her curly chestnut-brown hair was tightened low, down from her neck. She wore a light archerÕs cap and a long quiver was slung at her back.

Gomla growled. Arana brought her a basket with three large fresh fish in it: ÒShhh, Gomla, I know you are hungry,Ó she spoke, and petted the animal between its tame eyes. ÓIt is all yours.Ó The bear started to eat gladly. They all sat around the fire. Mamaki cooked her healing herbs and treated GaltarÕs wounds with them. He told his story to them and they listened to him carefully:

ÒThe Azmaranians did it, the wild horsemen from the steppe. Aghabar is behind all of it. After many years, he has managed to acquire some powerful allies. I should have extracted more answers from the soldier I wounded,Ó GaltarÕs eyes went to the fire as if he were reading from the flame. He told them all about the attack and the pursuit. He spoke about his struggle in the mountains and how he found Anaya. After that he remained still with eyes nailed to the log that crackled. He gasped and his head hung low; his shoulders shook and two tear-drops hit the ground before him. Mamaki and her two Devanas listened to him with care and compassion. A tear slid down InahÕs cheek and dropped on her knee. She sat by him gently touching the bandages, passing her fingers over his arm to his palm.

ÒScourge of Winds was not merciful to you, Alu.Ó

ÒThere is no comfort for the grief you feel, but know you that since the body of Anaya vanished with no trace, it could be a sign that her soul is still alive,Ó said Mamaki.

ÒPardon my knowledge, Oh reverend chieftain, but what difference would it make?Ó asked Galtar. ÓWhat life can have a soul without a body?Ó

ÒThat may not be easy to explain for not many people understands karma and the way our consciousnesses works, but I will try. First, as you may already know, the soul moves from one life to another,Ó spoke the lady of the North. ÓSometimes it can be trapped between two lives and imprisoned inside the Diamond of dead. That is what the druids say. Black magic can seal the soul, but the magic of fairies can unseal it, allowing the soul to continue its journey and incarnate into a new body. Show me the black arrow that you spoke of.Ó He pulled the arrow from his bag and passed it to her. She took it in her palms, examining it carefully. Her eyes squinted over every symbol. Triangular shapes predominated many of the lines. ÓI saw these signs before,Ó said Mamaki at last. ÓThey belong to an order called Red Triangle,Ó

ÒCan you tell me what it says?Ó asked Galtar.

ÒThis is a ritual arrow. When a sorcerer kills someone with this arrow, he or she can see the soul of the victimÓ she paused closing her eyes. ÓGive me a moment now,Ó said she with her eyes still closed, suddenly sinking deep into her own thoughts. As she meditated, her palms reclined in her lap while her fingers slowly moved, making mudras Ó particular signs that helped her meditation. They all remained silent, waiting for her. At last Mamaki spoke with her eyes still closed: ÓHere is what I see, Alu. The girl is not dead in the way people normally understand the way of dying. In fact, her soul is imprisoned,Ó MamakiÓs eyelids went up disclosing her bright sapphire eyes like precious gemstones that shed new light into the dark labyrinth of GaltarÓs feelings. ÓBut, since she left no body in the cave, she must have been moved to some other place. That seems to be the purpose of this arrow.Ó

ÒWhat about the body then?Ó

ÒThe body is not the one who carries life though,Ó said she looking at him. He looked back to her eyes seeing an unknown, yet peaceful sea and he heard waves as they whispered: ÓHer body might be with her, or not, yet somebody wanted her spirit moved away. You must not despair too much, it is weakening your body. I will try to help you to find who did it and where her spirit went, but we need time and the patience to discover more clues,Ó her words floated, touching his heart, melting his pain.

ÒThank you, Oh reverendÓ he bowed to her twice. ÓYou have already helped me by explaining the signs on the arrow. It is a great fortune that I met you in the mountains. Can I ask what brought you here?Ó

ÒOf course you can dear boy. As a matter of fact, it seems to me that our stories are somehow connected. A hunter from the village of the Grey Wolf told me about how marauders from the steppe had plundered his hunting-lodge. It happened a few times. He came to me in secret saying that his own chieftain Rena was doing nothing to protect him. If that is true it means that a group of intruders is on the move throughout our land with the approval of Rena, the chieftain of the Grey Wolf.Ó

ÒCould it be the same group, the group that attacked my village?Ó asked Galtar.

ÒI believe it is,Ó said Mamaki with confidence. ÒIt looks like they are roaming throughout our lands in small bands of probably about a dozen each. We believe that all of this must be a part of some bigger plan, so we came down here to scout.Ó

ÒOnly three of you?Ó Galtar could not hide his surprise. ÒI must admit, it is a bit strange for an important person to wander through the wilderness in such a small group.Ó

A smile appeared on MamakiÓs apple-red lips. She took the small grindstone that was beside her, and laid her spear in her lap. ÒThis is the border of my land, dear Alu. I want to find what is going on here, in person,Ó said she checking the tip of the spear. ÒHowever, I have dispatched two groups of my Devanas and our men are fortifying the wing-post,Ó said she sliding the grindstone over the long iron spike of her spear.

Chapter Eight

Pigstone Head

I

Coming down from the mountain, a cold breeze slunk through the leafless, frozen tree crowns. The devanas lit a small fire inside the tent. It crackled quietly and an old log burned slowly. The smoke escaped through a hole at the top, filling the interior with the sweet scent of dreams. They sprawled around, enclosed in furs, and soon fell asleep. No one of them needed to keep a watch in the night because Gomla was the best guardian they could get already, even in her resting. Tired and drowsy, Galtar fell deep into slumber, but his mind did not remain undisturbed for a long. Little after the midnight hour had passed, the sharp knife of sorrow ripped his dream into streaks; the streaks of distressing imaginary that fluttered over the long gory strain of dream-events. A strange voice led him to the images, so live and current: ÒMy son, you are in the midst of a battle. Soon you will die, yet many of them will fall before that happens. This is the future I am showing you now, look. You are fighting your enemies furiously; you are killing them ruthlessly feeling their warm blood as it is sprinkled all over your chest while you slash them with your sword. Immediately after, just before the moment of the final triumph of your vengeance, you feel an inner pain and the unbearable feeling of a grand loss. It draws you down into an abyss. You are falling

downwards, deep in to an infinity of no-light and no-air. Falling, you go blind, you gaspÉ you are dyingÉÓ

MamakiÕs soft palm covered GaltarÕs forehead. He opened his eyes, breathing heavily, looking at her bright eyes. Fortunately, he found them and it was as if she had flown down there and saved him. She spoke to him with a quiet, melting voice: ÒYour broken heart needs answers to many questions. But it needs to rest too. Tired, you cannot do much. The grief is weakening you, I told you so. You must meditate on death and the uncertainty of life for all beings. You have to remind yourself that it is not you, but your consciousness that can change its state Ð it can be filled with physical pain and grief or with sensations that are pleasant to the body and mind. Be as it may, those feelings are only sensations and do not take them as ultimate reality. You have to remind yourself constantly that every living being is as sure to die as it was born. Still, there is no such thing as an absolute death, only everlasting change as your consciousness flits between states. The night is old and it is time to rest. Tomorrow, we will continue this pursuit together.Ó

He fell asleep at last, peacefully. Under the gentle touch of MamakiÕs hand that she had laid upon his head, the murky nightmare ghosts slowly vanished. She remained sitting with her palms now resting in her lap holding a long rosary that counted one hundred and eight pearls. Slowly, sitting still, she sank deep in her thoughts once again, following an inner sound of ancient and secret discipline Ð a meditation called Path of Death. The counting of the pearls and the magic mantra she chanted in an old language, with a strong music in it, gradually led her mind up, together with the smoke of the fire, and up through a little hole in the centre of the roof. For the moment, she could see the tent down bellow and her little company stretched upon the ground, profoundly resting, like children. Her astral body then turned her look up again, towards the stars, and she suddenly soared high above the forests and the mountains around. Snowy peaks with their sharp and uninviting rocky faces grew more tamed and familiar to her spirit. A feeling of belonging grew inside her heart and she started to sense an inseparable connection between this new being she acquired and her natural habitat below. It became a homely place to land and nest, for her spirit gained wings, and her eyes became the eyes of a hawk. When she finally possessed the bird of power, her wing sprawled and she flew away, heading towards a distant grey horizon above which a faint star reposed in the night. The star was actually barely visible ring of hue-purple light that tingled encircling a pitch black hole - the entrance of misty world of Bardo - a transitional state between two lives where, after death, consciousness travels towards new life to be reborn in a new body. She entered the blackness and continued to fly through a cold wind that seemed to bluster from the front. The bird flipped upside down flapping her wings towards a tiny dim-white line that now appeared in the center of the blackness before her. The bird released a loud screech out of her beak and she faced another, even stronger gust of wind that was amassing livid clouds next to her path. As the bird screeched for the second time, the line of clouds widened opening a

strange new space in the middle of them, and the bird swooped inside. The sky returned back to its normal view and her upside-down flight became straight again since the sky was now down and the land up. Hues of grey gloomed from distant shades. Storm wrinkled the surface of an ocean and foam sprinkled over the clouds. The wind changed its direction every now and again, blowing from the four sides of the world. Splashes of lights lifted from north to south and from the east to the west. Then a little higher, pearls of lights appeared, and began traveling in many directions. The innumerable beads formed columns, like star-ways; the paths of those had yet to be born again. First, by the nature of the lights, she distinguished those that belong to humans, from elves, dwarves and other races. Then, following the sound that was coming from the north, she recognized which pearls were coming from the direction of Alu. Its sign was now clear and visible to her among the stars. Mamaki dove and looked at faintly lit faces inside each of the pearls. All the faces were still and pale with their eyes closed. She carefully read their names from small symbols that floated over their eyebrows. She looked and looked but Anaya was not among them. Then she flew back. On her way, she heard a roar that was coming from the coast of Xa, the middle-world. The vision of the red-maned beast that brooded over her throughout the day was now back. She already knew that a few of those animals had come out so far, marking the presence of their creator Eseveles, the lord of Naroxa, the underworld.

II

Fog wrapped their tent in the cold morning. They hastily bridled Gomla and saddled her. Soon, sacks were packed, backpacks were bound and their weapons sharpened.

ÒThere are three of you but only one bear to ride,Ó said Galtar, saddling Vinge. ÒInah, I want you and Arana to ride my horse. IÓll be fine walking.Ó

ÒNo thank you. We will ride taking turns on the bear. Two of us can always walk.Ó

ÒI insist,Ó said Galtar. ÒYour mother saved VingeÓs life. And after all, I am a man.Ó

All three devanas looked at him, suddenly, catching the word man. A moment of silence passed and his face blushed in embarrassment.

ÒOh, are you really?Ó asked Mamaki, smiling. Arana and Inah giggled. Their laugh had rung enough to pull him in too and they all laughed together.

ÒGood idea, young cavalier,Ó said Mamaki. ÒI think the ladies are going to accept your offer, but you are going to ride as well,Ó At last, she and Galtar sat on the bear while Inah and Arana rode the horse. They headed southeast along the border of the mysterious land of Hoydoom. The barren ground of rock before them tumbled down into long, deep cracks filled with snow. From a distance, a lone wolf spied on the travelers. As the day passed, coldness diminished and the snow

grew less, making room for narrow belts of green grass and small number of trees with red and yellow leafs. The ice melted on the river which whooped freely to the south. Noon passed before they discovered any boot and hoof tracks.

ÒLook at the short and parallel imprints inside this boot-track,Ó said Mamaki pointing with the tip of her spear on the ground. ÒThe boot was laid in a nomadic way with banded sticks. This is typical of Azmaranians.Ó

The traces led them further to the place where the river wound around a great stone; a pig-head shaped rock. It sprouted up as if a giant animal had come from within the earth long ago and been turned into stone by some unknown magic of the past. No one knew whether human hands or nature had chiseled it. They knew only that the rock had stood there from a time out of mind. Devanas called it the Pigstone. The river turned here from its southern course to run southeast. Near the stone head, they found a pile of logs jumbled with animal bones. The bones were still warm. With their weapons at alert, the group continued to look around. Mamaki checked the pile thoroughly while Galtar and Inah examined the rock. Arana went farther into the trees with her bow loosened at hand looking for more signs.

ÒAny more traces of boots there?Ó asked Galtar looking toward the woodland where Arana was searching.

ÒHard to tell,Ó said she, touching the ground with her long arrow. ÒStones and rocks from the river were thrown into the mud here. I am going to take a closer look in the woods where the soil is softer. Inah, what do you see?Ó

ÒI see no sign of human feet but they might have been washed away,Ó said Inah watching the riverÓs bank.

ÒStrange. Four stones and four sticks have been placed in formation - the campfire was made in the Gray Wolves way. The fire-hole is deep, see, just as their clanÓs hunters would make it. Yet the prints belonged to Azmaranian boots,Ó spoke Mamaki, going around the stone head.

Galtar stepped into the river and walked until the water reached his knees.

ÒThey might ride through the riverbed,Ó said Galtar.

ÒThat would make them slower,Ó added Mamaki. ÒIf they did that, there is a good chance that we will catch them before dark.Ó

Suddenly, Gomla raised her head and growled. Mamaki hoisted her spear turning her attention to the woods. She went stiff, listening. The sound of branches crackling could be heard and Galtar gripped his sword firmly. The light scimitar of Inah glinted high above her head, ready to strike or block. Arana drew an arrow swiftly and lay it on her short slim bow, aiming into the shadows among the trees. Something was moving fast through the bushes rustling and snarling.

ÒIt is a hog!Ó shouted Mamaki. A large boar leaped from the bushes. Running frantically toward them, it started to squeal piercingly. Arana was the closest, and the animal charged straight at her, aiming its monstrosly big head. Its long sharp tusks impended dangerously. She let loose her bow and jumped to the ground in the same time, avoiding the direct hit of the head. Her arrow hit it straight between its great tusks, penetrating the throat. The animal tumbled into the ford with a large splash, grunting. For a few moments, silence covered them all. Gomla snarled quietly. The company waited, motionless.

ÒIs it dead?Ó asked Inah. One arrow would barely have been enough to kill such a huge boar, even if it had been shot directly into its mouth. Therefore, they all expected it to jump up at any moment. Nothing happened. The animal lay in the water, moving on its side, still gasping. Then it stopped breathing. Galtar stepped forward and touched his foot to its body. Pressing it hard, he turned the corpse over. Then they all saw how the beast had died so quickly - a bolt jutted from its stomach. The origin of the bolt was all too familiar to them. It was a pugat, the fabulous Azmaranian weapon, the deadliest crossbow ever made. Mamaki glanced at her bear looking for signs she could read from Gomla's sensitive nature. The she-bear sat back and remained quiet.

ÒIt must be dead,Ó Inah looked at the corpse with uncertainty.

ÒSure it is dead, Inah,Ó said Arana. ÒI made it swallow my arrow and it will need another life to digest it.Ó

Galtar crouched by the corpse, examining it: ÒThis bolt stabbed deeply. It hit at close range.Ó

ÒNot necessarily,Ó said Inah. ÒA pugat can penetrate thick animal skin, even armor, from further than you can imagine,Ó

ÒI know what a pugat is,Ó said Galtar. ÒMy father was killed with one.Ó

Gomla raised her snout. Mamaki glimpsed at her. All of a sudden, her polar bear pranced, releasing an immense roar that shook the air. Soon after, more sounds came out from the forest. This time the sound was not of an animal origin; they were human voices. From the shadows among the trees three men dashed out into the sunlight. Two of them had long black hair that fell, besmeared. The one in the middle was an older soldier, with a long moustache below his bony cheeks and aslant eyes. His head was shaved except for one black pigtail at the top. A taut pugat was in his hands. Pursuing their prey, the Azmaranian hunters had run into Mamaki's company unexpectedly. They instantly halted in place, surprised. The two on either side of the old soldier quickly eyed their leader expecting a command. Galtar used that moment and sprung toward the soldier closest to him. Handling the sword with both hands, he lifted the blade high above his head. The Azmaranian crossed his saber and a long curved knife to meet the vicious blow. Yet, Galtar tricked him. He abruptly let loose the blade, allowing it to lunge down and strike from the side. He did that wielding the sword

with his right hand, while his left hand remained high, distracting the enemy. The blade swooshed ripping the skin and flesh of the man's ribs. A horrible scream was released from his throat. Wounded, he jumped closer to his companions. He squeezed his elbow to conceal the gush, trying to keep his guard, but the pain made him throw his sizer on the ground.

Arana and the Azmar in the middle launched their arrows towards each other at the same time. She was hit in her hip and the enemy received her arrow between his shoulder and collar bone. The third soldier swung his great zebra a few times, moving left and right as he measured his distance to Mamaki, getting ready to slay her with one precise blow. Her long spear moved along with him, aiming, showing the soldier that she would not allow any closer approach.

Inah stepped in front of Arana, giving her a sign to stay back. The Azmar that had been wounded by Galtar suddenly sprang forward attacking him, lunging his saber toward the northman's legs. Galtar's straight sword flew down and blocked it with a loud clang. But the saber immediately climbed up the blocking blade all the way to Galtar's hands. The slash almost cut his fingers. He pulled back instinctively but to his shock, a third blow followed with immense speed. His sword remained low with no time to block. From the sidelines, Inah watched in horror, anticipating a terrible blow to Galtar's head, yet she was too far to do anything to stop it. What he could do? No block, no dodge and no jerk back would help him. In that fraction of a heartbeat, only one way out remained, and it was the spirit of a warrior in him that found it by sheer gut-feeling. Instead of stepping back again, Galtar stepped in - clinching, he hit the enemy in the face with his forehead. A thud and crack followed and the Azmar fell unconscious.

The crossbowman that got Arana's arrow was of large stature, strong enough to turn the pain from his wound into a flame of hatred that fueled his will to fight. Raging, he grabbed the arrow that jutted from his shoulder and broke it. Then he slung the crossbow at his back and gripped the sizer from his belt. This man was an elite soldier of the empire and his every move was deadly somber. But the elite were never trained to fight against the great paws and teeth of a polar bear. "Gomla attack!" commanded Mamaki and the bear charged at the two Azmaranians. They both hurdled behind large trees looking for protection. The crossbowman lost his fighting spirit instantly, he yelled something in his language to his fellow and they both fled to the forest. The bear ran after them. "Gomla, stop, come back!" Mamaki called to her and the animal reluctantly obeyed, sending a long roar after the intruders as if saying: "Come again and I will rip you apart."

"You taught them a good lesson," said Mamaki taking the baggage that hung from the saddle on Gomla's back. "Let me see your wound, Arana," she opened a bag and pulled out a few small sacks of healing herbs and a flask. Galtar wiped the enemy's blood from his face and cleaned his sword with a handful of grass. The hard head-knock had not only rendered the Azmar unconscious, but Galtar felt the need to sit

down for a while as well, feeling numbness in his forehead.

ÒStill breathing,Ó said Inah checking the fallen body. ÒHe looks young. They recruit them so early these days. Twenty years ago we beat their fathers and now their sons are still coming for more.Ó

ÒYou beat them?Ó Galtar gave her a skeptic look. ÒYou are not much older than me, IÓd say.Ó

ÒYou are being cynical for now reason now,Ó Inah slid her saber back in the scabbard. ÒMy tribe and Northern Alliance defeated them. Do not pretend as if you take me literally,Ó she said and then turned to Mamaki who was helping Arana: ÒHow is she?Ó

Mamaki took the arrow out of AranaÓs hip and cleaned the wound. She then started to lay herbs on the cut. After she had covered it, she floated her healing hands above the wound murmuring the words of curing. Arana was quiet, yet her pale lips and beads of sweat on her forehead told how truly painful the wound was.

ÒI am good,Ó she nodded. ÒI will be goodÉÓ

ÒShe will be fine,Ó said Mamaki pressing her fingers gently above the wound. ÒThe arrow was soaked with the oil of tagara flowers, which they use as a tranquilizer in hunts. How is that Urezian fellow doing?Ó

Inah checked the manÓs pulse on his neck. The heartbeat was still there.

ÒHe may answer us some questions before we leave this place,Ó said Mamaki.

Inah took a blanket from her bag, soaked it in the river then started to clean the blood from AzmarÓs face and neck. The man began to sob, eyes still closed. Mamaki sat and took his head in her lap. She was speaking words of magic with a voice that rang tenderly. As she spoke, she pressed his neck cautiously and then the back of his head. The man opened his eyes.

ÒWhy are you here?Ó she asked him in the Azmaranian language.

The man answered, half conscious, and although Inah, Arana and Galtar did not understand what he spoke, they recognized names such as ÒAghabarÓ, ÒTribe of the White DeerÓ and ÒHuydoom-VaarÓ. Mamaki was about to ask more questions when the man suddenly started to choke, his eyes popped out and he extended his arms up to the air. His fingers twitched into a claw as if he were gripping for something only his eyes could see; something that terrified him to his bones. His body was shaking like a twig in the wind and every muscle convulsed under the influence of an unknown power. His mouth oozed and a tiny string of red vapor came out with a shriek. Galtar grabbed his sword.

ÒYou wonÓt need it, Galtar,Ó said Mamaki, not moving her eyes from the body that had now stopped shaking.

ÒWhat was that?Ó asked Inah, shocked.

ÒMighty Gald,Ó murmured Galtar watching intently. Then he glanced at Mamaki. At an impulse, they all expected at least some explanation from her as each of them unconsciously presumed her great knowledge and her wisdom. Mamaki was not as much surprised by this unusual image, of course, yet she gave no clarification to her companions. She was puzzled by a hidden aspect of it and instead of giving the answer, she stood up catching in her gaze the tiny reddish cloud that had escaped from the body through the dead manÓs mouth. It passed through the crown of a tree and vanished up into the air. Her three young followers were still watching her. The vision of death that came from an unknown, unseen wraith suffused their necks and shoulders with cold dew. Only gods could perform a lethal accurse, and if the gods were in the mood to do such things, there was now the truly a reason to be scared. Even Gomla went quiet and bowed her head. Mamaki turned and strode to her she-bear.

ÒSorcery,Ó said she, taking the reins.

ÒWhat kind of sorcery was that?Ó asked Inah as her mother walked by.

ÒA curse, but we will talk later about it,Ó said Mamaki giving the pugat-bolt to Gomla to sniff. ÓDo not touch the corpse, kids,Ó she added. ÓWe must leave this place as fast as we can. Gear up and help me to put Arana in the saddle. Be quick.Ó

Chapter Nine

Midnight Screams

I

Innumerable dandelions greeted the forest at the place where she met the valley. Linden trees grew sparse, gently leaving room for grassy fields. Yellow leaves, easily detached from their little stalks flew with the breeze. Bathed in the sunÓs rays, they looked like a flock of golden butterflies. Arana rode wearily on GomlaÓs back. Her eyes were sleepy and eyelids heavy. They fastened her legs to the saddle with skin strips, so that she could rest her wounded hip. Vinge trotted alongside carrying sacks and bags. Mamaki, Inah and Galtar walked beside the animals, passing through the tall grass, deeply breathing in the air that was heady with the freshness of the greenery around.

ÒThis air rejuvenates,Ó said Mamaki. ÓWith its scent, pleasant memories from the past will soon fill your mind. That is why this valley is called Kidsdale Dream.Ó And lo; images from early days and the faces of dear people emerged before their eyes, awakened by the magical scents of the flowers, leaves and grass. The visions came alive, melting all doubts and fears from their hearts. Mamaki looked at her daughter. In her motherly eyes, she would always remain her little lively kitten, a polar bear cub. Inah then started to sing quietly:

ÒLife is as short as a dream,
A drop of dew,
A little crystal in a winter rime
Whatever you are,
You are only
At this time.

Everything is born to pass,
Yet green again will grow the grass
In autumn yellow, thou shalt see
New spring will always come to thee,

Life is as short
As a dream,
Drop of dew,
A little crystal in a winter rime
Whatever you are
You are only
At this time.

InahÕs soft voice floated in GaltarÕs ears carrying his thoughts afar. Everything changed. All of a sudden, instead of walking upon earthly green grasses, he was striding through the gardens of heaven. He looked at the girl-warrior from behind. Inah raised her hands and untied her black hair, letting it fall unruly, down to her supple waist. Her steps were light and easy. She did not look like a tough Devana anymore but somewhat elf-like. Galtar had never seen an elvish lady before, though in his mind they had always resembled the tender nature of a fairy. And fairies he had saw, many of them, because of AnayaÕs unusual ability to befriend them.

ÒHarsh she is when she talks and fights, but so fond when she sings,Ó thought Galtar, looking at Inah. ÒMaybe there are two girls in her, two sisters traveling the world together in one body.Ó GaltarÕs mother had sung that song at his fatherÕs funeral. Thoughts of death haunted him and the image of AnayaÕs dead body came back. ÒWhy?Ó he thought and the question broke out: ÒWhy did they do it?Ó

Mamaki only looked at him, silently. Inah neared him.

ÒThe power struggle inside Azmaran is at its peak these days,Ó

said she with worry. "It radiates to all sides of the world. Many evil spirits are on the move, everywhere. Even your village, far and cold as it is, was reached. Soon, the mighty empire of Azmaran will either crumble inside, or venture into another expansion."

Galtar nodded: "They already hold a great part of the world. Many races dwell under their rule - not only humans. Not all of them are happy to serve the Azmaran's Khan, I am sure of that."

"Souls rotten by greed," added Inah in bitterness. Her voice was determined, her tone a far cry from the airiness of the song she had just sung. "Blinded by the ill-joy that evil-doing brings to them, that is what the Azmarans really are. All three of their tribes."

"If anger possesses your spirit you will not be able to think clearly, my dear," said Mamaki, calming her daughter. "Many rich and self-centered folks live among them, true to be, but they are not all evil. They want to preserve the effortless and lousy life any overly rich, yet stupid person would do. If they really know where such life would lead them once, they would do it better. I figure out that the Urezi tribe is the most ignorant of them all."

"Not a question," said Inah. "Out of their three biggest tribes, the Urezi, Yotoman and Ogaman, I found the Urezi tribe the most aggressive. Like mad wolves, always hungry for blood and war."

Mamaki nodded: "The arrogant and violent attitudes of their Khans made them that way. The power of the Urezi clans is on the rise again and they will try to subdue the other two once more. If that happens, the little that is left of the free world will have to prepare to either resist another expansion or flee to barren lands. Their latest Khan, Ugdash Batra, whose father was Ogaman's prince and whose mother was the daughter of a Yotoman's general, expelled Aghabar from the land of Azmaran."

"I heard his warriors talking about it. He set his camp somewhere between lands of Varas and Initia," said Galtar.

"That ground is quite wide, with many forests, hills and ruins. He could be anywhere," Inah said. "And there are many caves too. No ruler has ever established anything there because it is the homeland of many creatures who are unfriendly to humans. It is said that more and more of the caves are controlled by demons. Is that true, mother?"

Mamaki sighted, thought a bit then answered: "Well, true or not, Naroxa is a very treacherous place and vast as well, do not forget that. Demons are busy fighting Anubis for caves and other places deep down that they found useful; and useful for reasons known only to them. I bid them to stay down there to the end of time."

"Mamaki, can you tell us more about the magic that killed the Azmaranian soldier?" Galtar asked. "I mean, the man died at the moment he was about to say some name, I think,"

"That was a curse and with that curse the enemy could have seen us," said she.

ÒUsing a crystal ball?Ó asked Inah.

ÒWith a crystal ball one can see afar, but with a stone called Allsea, one can see and set off the accurse,Ó said Mamaki and went into silence. This time she remain quiet for a longer time. She was thinking about something again. Neither Galtar nor Inah dared to disturb her thoughts. After a while, Galtar could no longer contain his interest so he turned to Inah:

ÒIs the Allsea not the legendary item that had once been used by ancient wizards?Ó

ÒAncient wizards orÉ a dragon,Ó answered Inah and glanced back at her mother hoping for more answers, but Mamaki was still deep in her own thoughts. No words came from her, only a long, quiet sigh.

ÒOh, mighty Gald upon us!Ó broke out Galtar. ÒHow we can defeat such an alliance - witches, demonic lions and a dragon?Ó

ÒI thought that dragons were scarce and small in number today,Ó said Inah. ÒDragons mind their own dealings, far from human treachery and petty plots. Do they not, mother?Ó Alas. Her mother remained silent. Inah sped up and stepped in front of her. Mamaki stopped. ÒWe have not had much time to talk since you became the chieftain, mother,Ó said Inah with a tremble in her voice. ÒPlease do not be so quiet, it makes me worry.Ó Mamaki looked at her dark wide eyes. She tenderly put her palms on her daughterÓs rosy cheeks: ÒI am sorry dear. I was absent for a moment.Ó

ÒDragons,Ó said Inah. ÒAre they not obsessed only with their own quests for gold and jewels?Ó

ÒI have never heard of any dragon making alliances with humans,Ó Galtar said.

Mamaki eyed them both. She sighed and said: ÒHow about a dragon who was once a human?Ó

Galtar and Inah looked at her in surprise. They waited for her to continue; they wanted to learn more immediately. Answer they got from Mamaki was far from being satisfactory: ÒThis is idle talk,Ó she said and turned to Arana who just woke up in the saddle. ÒSorry, kids, no time for the story at this point, but I promise I wonÓt forget to tell you all in detail... Tomorrow, perhaps. I have to take care of Arana now. Come on, Inah, I need your help.Ó Inah jumped instantly and took bridles of the bear. Gomla stopped and sat and Mamaki approached the weary she-rider. ÒHow do you feel, Arana?Ó asked Mamaki and checked her wound carefully. It seemed her herbs worked well. The rosy color of the skin had mostly regenerated, although the scar was still visible. The fever caused by the poisoned arrow had also lessened. ÒYou will be well again after one good nightÓs sleep, dear Arana,Ó said Mamaki holding her palms above the wound. ÒThe night is coming so as the time to rest. I feel quite exhausted too and I had to recuperate my healing power as well. Tomorrow we will go stealthily towards the ruins of Hoydoom-Vaar. We will probably meet some

unfriendly folks on our way soon again. So let us gather as much strength as we can. We might need it soon.Ó

II

They set their camp less than a day's ride from the time-worn gates of Hoydoom-Vaar. Rarely did anyone dare to venture there. Those that went, never returned. Although none came back with evidence of their adventures, stories emerged nevertheless, spreading and growing in mysterious and scary parts. No one could stop them nor could anyone try to lessen their horrendous tone.

ÓPeople's interest had no borders for such things, not even when the stories became ridiculous, like the one about the giant bloodthirsty flower that spits skulls after eating a human,Ó said Mamaki in rather cheering than serious tone and her companions laughed on her words. They rested by the fire, hushed under woolen covers and bearskins underneath a large tree. Through its branches and great leaves, stars could be seen. They twinkled faintly Ð many candles in the distant blue halls of the gods above.

Mamaki made them laugh once more, spicing the legend of Hoydoom with a new zest: ÓBesides, that monstrous flower has a soft-singing voice that enchants, making unwary people want to come and smell it.Ó A sweet laugh relaxed them all once again and soon they gave themselves up to the dreams they needed so much, after their long, cold days in the mountains. They felt safe with Gomla, their great white guardian-angel. Inah knew that her mother wanted to drive out any fear with a story that they had all heard before: A mysterious seed had been planted in the past underneath the city of Hoydoom-Vaar. The plants that ate flesh grew there and fed on the many reptiles and insects that nested in the darkness. Something lived and spawned beneath the walls and inside the numerous tunnels and hallways that had once bridged realms, paths now long-forgotten.

III

A dead and ominous silence prevailed throughout those days among the shattered walls, the ruins of Huydoom-Vaar, a fortified city built by Langvarian civilisation three thousand years ago. Shadows walked along its many stairways, broken and split by great tree roots. After its cracked stone bridge and the entrance gate, the main path went up to another gate in a semicircle. Three ridges overshadowed the tunnel-pass which was also the base of three upper levels Ð all ringed with parapets overgrown by the dark flora of a thousand years. Snake-like roots, grey mushrooms and pale shrubs crept through every tile. Most of the slim paths and bridges that led around the great rise had collapsed long ago during the many earthquakes that had shaken the hills of Hoydoom. The surviving pillars - scarce teeth in a gargantuan skull - poked out from the slopes. Through its eyeholes Ð the yawning halls of dead kings - smoke rose foretelling the birth of new volcano.

An Urezian Captain sat by his horse in the middle of a hall inside the ruin. He lit a small fire, and then unbound his long, dark hair,

letting it fall over his great shoulders. Removing the bandage from his ankle, he wiped the gore and stretched his leg.

“They left us some food, see,” said the man to his horse. “We will wait only this one night and then we will go back to our mother steppe and change the course of history.” The horse smelled the sack filled with oats and barley that his master had offered him.

“Eat, Meyna, eat. You are my legs and speed,” he said removing the saddle. A piece of a half-dried meat was underneath it. It had been pressed between the saddle and the horseback by many days of riding without a halt. He smelled it, quickly cleaned off the horsehairs and began to eat, ripping it with his strong teeth. He just swallowed his first bit when a voice came out from the dark hallway before him:

“To change the course of history? What a promise!” It was the voice of a woman. It sounded sharp and cold. Ulda seized his saber. As he gripped the weapon, she laughed at him. He sensed something inhuman in this sudden laugh that rang throughout the hall. She stepped out from the shadows. A diamond, glowing as if lit by candles, sat in the crown above her arched eyebrows. From the diamond, many sparks streamed down through her feral red hair. The icy white skin of her leg flared through her long blood-red dress. She wore black sandals made of bugantula’s spider-web, a venomous spider that lived inside the hill.

“You came, at last,” said Ulda.

She walked to him slow and light; her knees glimmered one after another passing through the long cuts of her garment: “I do not see your warriors?”

Ulda bent his eyes upon her. “Those that rode with me are dead, Skira. We were ambushed,” said he dryly.

Skira looked around swaying her head first to the left, disclosing her porcelain white neck, then to the right, and then finally looked straight at him smiling again: “Ambushed? How is that possible?”

“How?” Ulda rose, angrily. “Does that really surprise you? Then, I wonder where the others have gone, those who stayed in the valley & those that suppose to wait for me, Skira?” He suddenly exposed his blade and her neck was mirrored in it. But she did not fear it. She moved towards him yet closer and spoke quietly: “Everything is alright. Our attack on the White Deer was a pure success, my dear.”

Ulda gnashed: “My brother died. If you call that a success then one thing is clear: It was you who betrayed my men!”

Skira looked at his eyes speaking still quiet, but firm: “The raid went smoothly thanks to my magic and the storm I sent.” He stepped back and aside by the fire, extended her slim hand and pet his horse on the neck. The animal snorted sharply at once. “As I remember,” she continued as if she was speaking to the horse, not looking at the man again: “You were told everything about your enemy earlier.”

ÒNo, Skira. I was told that we were going to help the dragon to take some wench, so that the dragon would help us later in return. And if you really remember all that has been said that night, then you also remember my words: ÒOnly a lousy dragon would need human help.Ó Then what is the use of him later anyways. Where is the dragon now?Ó snarled the Urezian captain.

ÒHe went back to his lair,Ó she said. ÒYuo did not get it right Ulda. Rahug could have done it all alone, but you, the Azmarans, had to prove your loyalty to win him as an ally in the new and upcoming war.Ó

ÒHah!Ó He grinned. ÒIt is all rubbish, Skira. Dragon would help, of course. He would help Aghabar to fight his own people only to become our Khan. I figure that out. Otherwise you and him would have not restrict me on such a small group of warriors.Ó

ÒGaldian scouts wouldÓve easily spot a larger force long before you reach the village,Ó said she, but Ulda did not listen.

He smirked at her: ÒIf I had been allowed to bring more people with me, my brother would be alive now.Ó

Skira moved now closer. She touched his chest lightly and all of a sudden her face got an expression of empathy. ÒYou should have listened to me better darlingÉ my strong steppe rider,Ó her little finger went up and the flame of a campfire leapt higher. Ulda looked at it grimly. She laid her eyes on his lips: ÒI have burned the plants, so more of your soldiers can sneak through the hills of Hoydoom in the future.Ó

Ulda did not move and his face frowned. Skira continued cooing, even more softly: ÒIf Aghabar or the present Khan Ugdash Batra did not make this clear to you, I am willing to explain it all now. I want to offer you an allegiance in your quest for the throne of the great Khan.Ó

He smelled her warmth, then laughed: ÒHaha!Ó

ÒWhy do you laugh?Ó asked she, taken little aback.

ÒAghabar is the right one for the offer, not me, Skira. I am not a bribe-dog like him. I should have known what a dirty game you are playing.Ó

ÒIt is not a game, Ulda. I asked you to put your great skill as a headhunter to this. No one could do this better than you who had seized so many women and children from Gotan to Galda.Ó She rest now both of her palms on his chest, giving herself to his hug. Indeed, he embraced her slowly; his rough hand touched her back and started up to her dense curls. ÒYour success will bring a great ally to your cause,Ó said she.

ÒEnough,Ó he snarled then abruptly grabbed her thick red hair and pulled her head back lifting his saber to her neck.

Eyes wide open, she looked at the blade in fear and yelled: "Ulda, I just wanted to help you... I am not against you!" He pulled her harder. "Ulda, please..." she mourned desperately, but he pulled her once more exposing her white neck to the razor-sharp edge of his saber. "Do not defy your fate, Ulda!" yelled the woman.

He grabbed her with his strong arms and growled to her ear: "I will defy your body tonight, you red bitch!"

IV

A remote scream ripped through the air, awakening the little company. As they jumped, they all looked to the dark distant hill Mamaki was showing them, pointing her spear. Red fire shone from within the remote ruins, jittering along the cracked high walls of Huydoom-Vaar.

"What was that?" asked Inah.

"Looks like a company is running with torches in their hands," said Galtar.

"The blot of light is too big to be caused by torches," said Mamaki.

The scream comes again.

"Divine she-bear and ice, what a terrible scream! It is as if somebody is being skinned alive," added Arana.

Mamaki strained her eyes to judge it better and said: "True! A torture of some kind it may be: If anyone was not skinned alive, then he was badly burnt alive, at least."

"We must go there quickly," said Galtar, heading to his horse firmly.

"Galtar!" Mamaki called his name and he stopped, turning his eyes to her, his hands already on the saddle. Still, her voice was enough to stop all the stubbornness that was to bear him toward the unknown danger. "Do you know the way?" She asked, lowering her voice back to the motherly tone once again. Galtar's cheeks blushed. Feeling of embarrassment drove his look down to the ground and he quickly realized what the answer was: He did not know the way, of course. He knew nothing but that he must go forward, be it a trap or straight path to his enemy, constantly urged by the great burden - Anaya's death. Mamaki leaned on her long spear and looking tenderly for his eyes, she said: "We will go closer, but I will lead the way." Galtar still looked down. "Look at me," demanded she and he looked up at her deep blue eyes. Her soft voice become firm again: "I advice you to calm down, Galtar, son of Orltar. I took you with me because I wanted you to stay alive. I can see, young man... I know all too well that nobody can demand a broken heart to give up its quest, nor do I ask for it."

Galtar nodded slowly, admitting his fault. He felt uneasy about

his inability to manage himself. ÒI may lose my head before my vengeance is complete,Ó thought he.

ÒJust be calm yourself,Ó Mamaki whispered. ÒWill you?Ó

ÒI will, Mamaki,Ó he nodded solemnly. ÒI will be calm myself.Ó

The distant scream came again.

They all then watched together the distant ruins. The flame was moving in all directions on the plateau of the fortress, followed by the shrill cry. Then the flame vanished and the cry became a series of stammering moans.

ÒIt is not unusual for crooked minds to argue among themselves,Ó Mamaki said, and with her eyes on the far hills she appended: ÒAll they can speak is the fiery language of anger.Ó

The sounds from the fortified hill had finally gone dead.

Chapter Ten

Hair-trigger Temper

I

A rider appeared coming out of the forest carrying a banner with a flag with a green and blue color split diagonally. A deer-skull crest with great antlers was fastened at its top. A group of riders followed in a column of two. Dressed in fur and chequered linen quilts, they bore long swords at their backs and their long chestnut brown and reddish manes flowed behind. From their bony faces, bright and wild eyes surveyed the green planes as they galloped by. From the bushes, a doe watched in uncertainty the thirty Alu Galdians and an elf riding on tall steeds. The ground shook even more when a few moments later, eight dwarves riding on ponies came out of the woods and joined the other horsemen. The doe leapt and ran across the plane, passed a tall wooden structure of a watchtower and disappeared into the tree shades behind.

The raiders rained their animals in before the watch-tower. Their leader climbed down from his horse and removed his long fair braids aside. Then he gathered his hands to a call:

ÒHey guards!Ó he shouted. No answer came. ÒCan you hear me over there?!Ó he was louder this time.

A wolf-head appeared. It was the top of the hood of a man in the watchtower.

ÒWho are you and what do you want?Ó asked the watchman.

ÒI am an Alu, can you not see?Ó the man pointed to the standard-bearer behind him and the banner depicting the great white antlers. ÒI am a member of the White Deer clan,Ó he said.

ÒI can see that. I am not blind!Ó The watcher's rasping voice did

not sound welcoming at all. "I am asking for your name and what is it that you are looking for?" Another head now appeared beside the first watcher. The second one. The man's two squinty eyes hidden behind the tip of his axe looked down at the riders with no patience.

The leader opened his arms widely in a gesture that was to show his good intentions and spoke again in a friendly tone: "My name is Elgar, the leader of this group. We have come in piece. I must say, people of Grey Wolf have never sounded so unfriendly to us before. The way you greet us is strange. But aside your insolence. Finally, you are only a guard doing your job."

"My inso... What?!" The guard replied madly. "Watch your mouth!"

Elgar exhaled in dismay. He stood for a few moments silently, thinking what to do. The closest of his warriors noted how an expression of anger grew on his face as his diplomatic effort faded away. The horses neighed. Tension was in the air. Lofar was fingering the blade of his axe nervously. Elgar announced:

"We'd like to meet with your chieftain, the revered leader Rena..." He did not finish his words when the answer came:

"Hah! Reverend Rena did not invite you, as far as I know. Nor did he ask for your help. Or did he?" the watchman's tone remained the same - sour.

The dwarf leader and elf stepped closer to Elgar.

"I am Eredian, from the island-realm of Master Yidaman. A dragon and a red-maned beast attacked the village of Alu and killed many people there. They may attack you as well. We are in pursuit of the enemy, looking for signs to guide us."

"No lion or dragon or such have been seen here!" the man exclaimed back right away.

"No lion?" Elgar murmured softly turning to the elf. "You said a beast, Eredian, nobody mentioned the lion," he exchanged quick glances with Lofar and the elf.

Lofar lost his patience:

"Listen, you dreary grey coyote over there! I am the dwarf Lofar, son of King Udar. Does that mean anything to you?"

"O, suuuure," came from the top. "It means that you are likely to be the son of a be-beauuutiful lady and I could not care less," said the voice and a shrieking chuckle came down from the two watchmen.

"What?!" Lofar's voice pitched up. One third shocked, two thirds enraged he gripped his great double-headed battle-axe and strode straight to the base of the tower. With no hesitation he swung the axe, hitting one of the four supporting beams.

The watchman immediately strung up his bow aiming down at the dwarf: "Stop it or I'll kill you!" screeched the man. At that flash,

an arrow zipped through the air and struck the pole next to the watchman's nose. Shock and awe! He felt the feather from the arrow's tail on his cheek. His eyes popped out in fear.

ÒSo I shall kill Ôya too,Ó said Eredian laying another arrow on his bow.

ÒCome on lads, let us crop this craw-house down,Ó Lofar called to his dwarven brothers. They all gripped their axes and hammers and hopped to work zealously.

ÒThat is what I call a hair-trigger temper,Ó said Eredian.

Those dwarves with single-headed axes hit the pillars while the ones with hammers pounded the axes to cut deeper, alternating the strikes in the one single rhythm: ÒHay ho, hay ho!Ó

ÒStop it, or IÓll give the signal!Ó yelled the man in the tower.

ÒGo ahead!Ó Elgar yelled back and his men laughed. The watchman then pulled out a long banner with a yellow flag on it and started to wave madly: ÒAttaaack, attaaaack, we are under attaaaaack!Ó But just as the watchman's screams started up, filling the air, the dwarves stopped, their job finished.

ÒTimbeeeeer!Ó shouted Lofar as the base cracked and the whole structure collapsed to the ground with loud crash. The dwarves whooped cheerfully. The poor guardians fell, rolling out with double somersaults. As they found themselves sitting in the wet grass, weary, shaking their heads, a horse appeared before them. They looked up and stirred.

ÒListen, you watchers,Ó rumbled a voice from above. It came from a great bearded figure that overshadowed them both. The menacing voice belonged to the blacksmith, Aitri. He slung his sledgehammer on his big shoulder saying slowly: ÒWe are going to withdraw ourselves and set up camp down there, near the forest, see - over there. Soon, I expect you to come to us with an answer from your chieftain; either he will agree to let us in for a talk or not. Is that clear?Ó

ÒOf course sir, yes!Ó both men jumped to their feet instantly.

ÒGo now,Ó commanded Aitri. The two watchers bumped into each other as they both lost the course. Then they ran as fast as their legs could carry them, up to the knoll towards the fortified village.

II

Snow melted soaking the old barks. Its floated on the light wind. Fallen leaves rolled among the trees, down to the path. The Alu warriors and dwarves were setting their camp. Their hands worked laboriously. A herd of sheep was moving towards the village, passing them. Elgar waved, greeting an old shepherd with words: ÒGald be with you, good man,Ó he shouted, but the shepherd did not answer. Instead, the man urged his sheep and dog to go faster. Then a small herd of cows passed by, led by two young herders, a boy and a girl. The boy

stopped, curiously watching the dwarves as they worked. He stared intently at their sturdy but shiny helms and axes, which were all neatly piled. It was quite an affair for the boyish eyes: Shields engraved with fine runes, belts with large clasps richly gild-worked and decorated with gems. Lofar handed the boy a piece of dwarvish cake, but the girl grabbed her younger brother's hand and pulled him away to walk up with the herd, towards the village. Aitri noticed all of it, sitting by the fire, smoking his pipe. "Humm, humm" hummed the old blacksmith, slowly exhaling the smoke through his nose. Worry was etched on his face.

The moon was up when a group of a dozen Grey Wolf warriors approached Aitri and Elgar, saying that their chieftain would meet them, but due to the "sensitive" time of their arrival, he would allow only four people to enter the village while the rest waited outside. Their front-man then finished by pointing to the dwarves: "Be aware - no meeting will be held if the dwarves don't fix the watchtower they overturned."

"Maholdax! Why would I fix that birdhouse? They insulted the King's son," argued Lofar. He spoke to the messenger shaking his lion-head: "You should be happy that your watchmen still have their coyote-heads on their shoulders."

To Lofar's surprise, Aitri stepped in and said in a willing tone: "We'll settle it all. Dwarves would be happy to build you a new and better one. The old one was quite rotten," his piercing cobalt-blue eyes gave Lofar a look that cut short any further argument. Then he smiled again and said: "Dwarves are good craftsmen and I am sure that Rena would be happy with their service."

Lofar muttered something into his beard but the dispute had been put to an end.

III

Four guests were seated at the thick oaken table. Vegetables and soup was brought before them together with two roasted hogs.

"The mugs are here but I see no gild-nectar," mumbled Lofar to Eredian who was sitting beside him. The elf quickly responded: "No grape elixir neither." Elgar signaled them to remain silent. The two captains of the Grey Wolf, a treasure man and the village blacksmith Ulbe, were also seated at the table. Ulbe was glad to see his old friend Aitri again.

"What happened to you, dear Aitri?" Asked Ulbe's wife when she spotted his right arm bandaged.

"A neighbor's cat, nothing serious," Aitri smiled.

"You must come and be our guest after the meeting," said Ulbe.

"Oh, thank you for the kind invitation Ulbe, but we are after an important business, as a matter of fact"

The large door of the gutherna opened and people stood up. Surrounded by his guards, the chieftain came in. Below his short ashen beard, a clasp made of large grey paw held his dark fur cloak. Lamé, he walked with the help of a long wooden staff with the symbol of a wolf at its centre. Behind the guards walked the village druid, his apprentice and the chieftain's wife. Rena, the chieftain, walked toward the top of the table without saying a word or looking at anyone particularly, and set. One of the servants immediately filled his mug with wine and he started to drink – contrary to the manners of good hospitality, without any greeting words. On the other end sat his wife, a fat bright-haired woman whose thin lips started to ask Elgar many questions:

“Who is your father and what does he do? – Do you have horses? – Does your mother carry the keys of the house?” – These were the sort of “status” questions that only certain people were happy to answer. She sounded hospitable but her eyes were cold.

“I am always ready to meet with the alderman of Alu but I would have preferred to have known about this visit in advance,” spoke Rena, moving only his lower, angled lip so that it seemed that his white goat-beard was trembling with every word. “We foment friendly feelings and we can understand any problem that may occur within the Galda tribes. We trade goods with everybody and we help others just as others have helped us through times when harsh weather did not allow for a better hunting seasons or harvests. We understand the needs of Alu the same way we understood it twenty years ago, when our own problems were set aside by your chieftain.”

“With all respect, Rena, which one of your problems did we set aside?” asked Elgar.

Rena looked at him, sloping his short eyebrows above his watery eyes and said: “You may be young, but I believe that you are aware of the events that preceded the unification. We agreed to unite and we gave our men to the army led by a chieftain of yours, Orltar. Am I right?”

“The army was assembled for the protection and benefit of all of us,” said Elgar.

This answer angered Rena. He thumped his staff on the floor and yelled: “That was said then, but you continue to repeat it!” The chieftain's wife waved to the servant who stood behind him holding a jug of wine, and Rena's mug was immediately filled again. Rena drew a long gulp, burped and continued, now in a less nervous tone: “My opinion is very important to my people. And here is what I think - we are here, exposed, while your home lies far away. My wish is to lead my people toward better life. Not isolation, but open hands and friendly ties I want...” He suddenly took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. Then his eyes stumbled upon Eredian's face. The eyes of the elf gave him questioning look. Rena sips a bit of his wine once more and said: “Our guardsman told us what you had asked him, but we have seen no trace of such beasts or armies. All together, that would be all that I have to say at this meeting. Though, I may have one

question. I wonder why the representatives for elves and dwarves come to me led by an Alu man?Ó

ÒReverend chieftain Rena,Ó spoke Eredian. ÒWe are not here as representatives of our people, but as friends of Galtar, son of Orltar. He is in search for Anaya. She is taken by a...Ó he stopped for a moment, eying Aitri.

ÒA dragon...Ó Aitri finished the word for him.

Rena turned his face into a grimace of surprise: ÒHow unfortunate! That is awful. So, where is that fellow, Galtar... Where is he now?Ó

ÒHe went before us, pursuing the abductors, but we lost track of him,Ó answered Eredian.

ÒI am terribly sorry,Ó said Rena. He wanted to sound sympathetic. ÒI really cannot help you. Though I want to mention that, personally, I hold the greatest admiration for the elven master Yidaman, as well as for the dwarves of King Udar Sekire. The things I was discussing here were addressed to the Alu and they are more of an internal nature, easy to solve, I believe. I am here to represent my people, but I am not the wisest here. I would like to hear what Aitri has to say.Ó

Aitri showed no emotion on his face yet. To Rena, he seemed quite indifferent throughout the conversation thus far. Because of it, the readiness of his voice surprised the chieftain, his advisors and his wife. At their side, only Ulbe smiled, for he knew Aitri well. Of course, AitriÓs companions were not surprised at all with what he said: ÒWe are on a quest to find my young apprentice who is as dear to me as my son.Ó As he spoke, he looked Rena incisively into his eyes. Dead silence emerged after he stopped. ÒTherefore,Ó he continued suddenly ÒTherefore, I would leave the matter of unification, or separation if you will, for some other time. I can only remind you and your captains of what is left of the once proud, grand land of Kereb, which we all respect highly. They were the first to dam the unstoppable flood of the Azmaran Empire. They fought bravely yet they lost the war. They are now enslaved and their boys are recruited into Azmaranian armies nowadays. Their city had to change its name from Singid to Ulan-Az. It became the center for the new Imperial power that had hit us. And if we had not been united at the time, if the Galds had not had a leader to unite them, where we would be today?Ó Aitri then looked into the eyes of the two young captains of the Grey Wolf who stood close by: ÒDivide and conquer Ð that is how Azmaran defeated Kereb. That is how they wanted to defeat us twenty years ago. That is what they will try to do once more. Unite, or be on your own - the decision is yours.Ó

IV

The highest tops of the mountain chain blended with the clouds. The grey mass then slid across the peaks, farther to the east, carrying its rain to the land of Hoydoom. The group left the village and joined the others at the camp nearby. The only favour Rena had

agreed to give them was to grant Elgar free-travel through his land with forces no larger than those he already led. At this point, Aitri wanted to continue the journey south-east, to the land of Varas but Elgar wanted to halt the search because of Rena's betrayal, which was so plain to them.

«Rena obviously knows about the attack,» Elgar spoke.
«Fortunately, his guard was stupid enough to give us all we needed to know.»

«He might even have been giving the Azmarans shelter,» said Lofar angrily.

«That is possible too,» said Eredian. «Rena definitely knew about the attack.»

«To be honest, his idea of independence scares me,» said Elgar. «I must go back now and inform our council and the other chieftains about this.»

«What about Galtar?» Lofar asked glancing quickly at Aitri. He looked at the blacksmith keenly, but the old blacksmith did not respond. Instead, he smoked his pipe slowly, staring at the campfire.

The dwarf stood up. «Humpf!» he snorted loudly and his great moustache shook over his lips and beard. Lofar's impatient nature and loyalty to his friend steered his dwarvish temper once again. «Shall we go together or are the dwarves the only ones with the guts to continue the search for Galtar?» grumbled Lofar at least supporting his burly fists at sides, into his wide buckled belt.

Elgar raised an eyebrow at him and said: «Are you trying to say that I am some sort of coward, Lofar?»

Then Aitri spoke, still looking to the fire, holding his pipe high: «I would not say that the decision of continuing the search for Galtar is a question of valor, Lofar. We must decide without being hasty and taking into account all that we have learned so far. So, Elgar, what is it that you think is right to do now? Let us hear your opinion.»

«Thank you for not getting me wrong, Aitri. I believe that I have to move from Rena's land quickly and gather more warriors. I do not feel safe anymore here. Moreover, in this situation, our own people might need us at home. I am afraid that another attack could happen.»

«What about Galtar then?» Lofar asked Elgar now even more anxiously. «He is your kin, after all.» Then he turned to Aitri: «Galtar is like a brother to me, but you; You call him your grandson. And for a thunder's sake, why are you giving me such a humble treatment all this time!?»

Elgar answered promptly: «I know Galtar well. He is my kin and he is a bit of an adventurer too. I understand his grief but it would be too risky to follow him further.»

ÒLet us conclude this, then,Ó said Aitri. His calm voice cooled them down a bit. ÒElgar, you want to pack your gear and go back to your village, right?Ó

ÒPrecisely,Ó confirmed the Alu warrior. ÒBut what would you do, Master Aitri?Ó

ÒIf I were you, I would do the same, Elgar,Ó

Lofar could not believe his ears. He looked at Aitri with dismay. The dwarf shook his head and jumped in place as if the fire had burned his back:

ÒWhat? With all respect to you, master, but that isÉ unlawful.Ó

Thereupon AitriÓs bushy eyebrows arched and the campfire shook before his voice: ÒI am not asking for your respect this time, but for your patience and that you start acting with your head, not your temper!Ó On these AitriÓs words, the dwarf sat back reluctantly, staring at the burning logs. ÒElgar has the right to do whatever he thinks is best for his men. So, they can go back. Considering us: Eredian, me, you and your dwarves - we are not accustomed to this territory. You know very well that moving through a land in which we are not welcome can lead us all into trouble. However, despite to the danger, I DO plan to continue the journey and keep on to the south towards Varas and their Wing Post and I am most certainly glad to have you, your dwarves and Eredian with me.Ó He glanced quickly at the elf, who nodded shortly in agreement with the plan. Then Aitri spoke to Lofar again: ÒBut you better cat your group in half. We have to remain stealthy. The others can go back to your father King Udar, with the message I have to send. Now, Lofar, you can speak.Ó

Lofar was a little upset by the harsh tone his Master had used in rebuking him, but since the resolution was satisfactory, he calmed down: ÒI agree.Ó

ÒAnd?Ó

ÒAnd it is just as you said. I agree that I and my dwarves continue the search. Elgar can go back.Ó

ÒI thought you may want to apologize for your behaviour?Ó

ÒOh, yes of course. I apologize, master. Pardon my tongue,Ó the dwarf nodded.

ÒNot to me, Lofar, but to him,Ó he pointed to Elgar with his pipe.

Redness flushed across LofarÓs face, yet he managed to control his anger: ÒI apologize, Elgar,Ó said he and mumbled something into his beard. Elgar accepted it. He waved his hand quickly saying: ÒThat is all right, Lofar. We are all a little tense these days.Ó

Cheerful laughter came from the other part of the camp. The dwarves and ElgarÓs men had just finished erecting the watchtower. At the same time, from the gate, a few young men appeared rolling a large

barrel, full of red wine, towards the camp. With them was Aitri's friend, the blacksmith Ulbe with his wife and four children carrying two skinned lambs on sticks ready to be roasted as well as many buckets full of vegetables and apples.

“I cannot help but notice that it is quite an advantage travelling with Master Aitri,” said Lofar eyeing the little column of people coming down.

“I am ashamed of Rena's behavior, dear Aitri,” spoke Ulbe. “Please receive this modest sign of care from my family. I will never forget what you did for me when I was your novice.”

“You did not have to do this, Ulbe,” said Aitri. “It was your hard work and talent that made you my first apprentice ever.”

“Though, I must go back now,” said Ulbe. “I hope you will come again. We will sort this out, I promise.”

They lay their hands on each other's shoulders.

“Of course we will,” Aitri smiled at his friend. “Just do not expose your politics too much. Be careful with your chieftain. A time will come for everything and by the next gathering of the Ironguild we will have a peaceful solution, I am sure of that.”

They bid each other farewell and Ulbe went back to the village with his family and men. Dwarves and Alu men then set around the fire all together, chatting and getting their mugs ready to fill.

“If that is it, tomorrow we will set a foot. Let us join the party over there now,” said Lofar eagerly, groping for his large mug.

“Of course,” said Aitri and gave the sign to Eredian and Lofar letting them go. “I will stay with Elgar to discuss some details and to write a letter to your father, King Udar.”

“With your permission, master,” said Lofar. Eredian and the dwarf bowed quickly to Aitri and Elgar before going off to join the jolly assembly.

V

After a few good gulps of the red wine, the anecdotes and jokes started to float freely and the freshness of the night repelled whatever they had been brooding over during the day. One of Elgar's men, a tall and slim, fair-haired warrior was telling a joke: “I will tell you how lazy the people of the White Deer are: When our women want to hide a sack of coins they put it under the dirty dishes.”

“Ha,ha,ha,” burst from all. Then another man went up. He was shorter, red-haired with long red side-whiskers. Swinging his half-full mug, he said:

“Do you know where the devanas of White Bear hide a sack of coins from their husbands?”

ÒWhere? Tell us!Ó people exclaimed.

ÒThey put the cask on the table and say: Take it if you dare!Ó

ÒHa,ha,ha,Ó the bunch cheered loudly.

ÒGreat! But how about the dwarves?Ó asked Lofar. Everyone went quiet waiting for more. ÓWe, the dwarves, are so fond of reading and learning anything written that our women hide money in books.Ó

ÒAAA, HA,HA,HAA!Ó

ÒIf they can find any!Ó bawled Lofar over the bursting sounds of joy. Some grabbed their stomachs, unable to stop the laughter.

ÒHow about the elves?Ó Lofar restrained his hilarity for a moment. ÓWhere would an elvish lady hide coins from her husband? Tell us, Eredian!Ó

ÒWellÉ In the bed, I guess.Ó

ÒOh, do you lay with your own wife that rarely?Ó

ÒNo; you dully! That is how rarely elves slumber at all.Ó

ÒHoo, ho, ho. Haa, ha, ha!Ó They all laughed together, the elf, the dwarves and the men. Together, with their jovial spirits united, the voices swirled up with the campfire, to the stars.

Aitri smiled, looking at them over his smoky pipe. He was writing a letter to King Udar. ÓHmm, true,Ó he muttered to himself: ÓHow many dwarves do I know who can write? Well, I knew my father and I know Kiril, the KingÓs advisor. Even his majesty does not know how to read or writeÉ For anvilÓs sake, to whom I am writing this letter then? We must do something about it, in the near future.Ó

Farther up the hill, inside the guard tower of the Gray Wolf, the two watchmen had climbed back to their newly fixed post. They were half sitting, half laying there, listening to the distant laugh. ÓI am telling you - drink with dwarves and no joke will go amiss,Ó said the watchman gathering his cloak around his shoulders to protect himself from the cold breeze.

Chapter Eleven

Polar Dream

I

Mamaki held her spear firmly and all her senses were on alert as she led the small company through the forest. Gomla was tapping along beside her, moving perfectly quiet despite her great size. Galtar followed her on foot. His right hand was up and ready on the grip of his sword, which was slung at his back. With his left hand he held the reins, leading his horse. Arana walked behind him with two arrows placed on her bow. Although not completely healed from the wound, she felt much better and could walk now. Inah was behind, holding her

light scimitar loosely. Galtar turned back for a moment and, in his eyes, Inah resembled a lioness on a hunt. She moved with sudden stops checking sounds, continuing gracefully, stepping over logs, branches and large stones barely touching the ground. They headed to the hills of Hoydoom, avoiding any road or open spaces. After a couple of hours running without a halt, they stopped for a short rest. They sat or lay in the grass or leaned on trees, wetting their dry mouths with the water they carried in their water-skins. Mamaki stepped aside, observing the wall that frowned before them in the mist. Its remnants extended from the hill, down to the valley. She gathered them once again to give more instructions.

“We will leave Vinge here, and continue alongside the stairs, all the way up to the first level,” spoke Mamaki, half-whispering. “If we run into an ambush, or should the enemy attack us in any way, we shall all move towards the southern slope. That way we cannot be trapped. Keep your weapons ready. We will continue to move in a column. Galtar, you will be last, so watch for any followers. Arana, you are going to watch our right side. Inah, you will watch the left and I’ll keep my eyes on the front to lead you. Gomla will walk in the middle. We will remain quiet; so no talking until we reach the entrance. Is that clear?”

“All clear,” they confirmed. Vinge stayed where they left him, so they did not need to tie him up. The clever animal was of the Vranates breed, elven stallions who were able to learn and comprehend more than any ordinary animal.

They reached the first level. Near two pillars, wide and tall and built of dark greenish marble blocks, lay the massive stone remnants of the old gates. As soon as they had stepped through, they met eye-to-eye with the statues of the last two kings. The soundless faces loomed proudly, yet solemn. Each statue held a book in the left and the sword in his right hand – symbols of knowledge and bravery, the two principles that a true leader have to combine. The tiled floor was paved with great stone hexagons. The blocks were built up in the middle to create a three-step platform on which a large dragon statue stood. It was chiseled out of black granite, and although its eyeholes were empty (for the red crystals had been stolen long ago) and its body and wings severely damaged by the hammer of time, it still looked threatening. Just above its head, in the middle of the roof, a big hole yawned through which they could spot a lone star. In the next, adjacent hall, they found the leftovers of a campfire: a pile of branches and horse gear, and an empty bag. They continued to walk along the wall towards the third door. Mamaki lit a torch. The polar-bear’s eyes shimmered in the darkness and her nostrils flared. “Gomla smells something,” whispered Mamaki. Then the wind brought in the stench of half-burned human flesh. Soon after, they approached its source.

Like a black mummy, wrapped in scorched strips of skin and tissue, a human skeleton lay near a wide pillar, smeared with blackened blood. Galtar walked closer to the corpse. It was still warm. The seared skin crackled quietly. The mouth gapped, caught in time, its final cry

etched on its skewed lips. Its arms reached out as if seeking to hold on to the life that had left it. Mamaki pointed her spear to the dead man's head: "The shape of his earring tells us his rank. He was an Urezian captain." She went to her bear and pet Gomla on her snout: "Stay here and guard us," whispered Mamaki and the three devanas continued walking towards the entrance. Galtar watched their back, but his attention was still partially on the body on the floor. Inah turned toward him, waiving her hand showing him to follow them faster. He was about to obey her when his eyes caught a tiny glimmer between the fingers of the scorched hand. It was a medallion.

Approaching the great stone frame of another door, they saw engraved ancient letters, written on it in the Langvars tongue. Galtar checked them closer. Few symbols in the corner were similar to those from the black arrow that killed Anaya. Through a large crack in the eastern wall the tip of the lower hill could be seen, upon which stood the half broken silhouette of a tower, bits and pieces of a deserted stronghold. Mamaki touched the wall and black soot stained her fingers: "It looks like all those plants and giant bugs have been burned."

"It is cold. They may have been burned days ago," said Arana, but Mamaki gave her a sign to remain quiet. They both went stiff for a moment, listening.

"We are going back to Gomla," said Mamaki at last; quickness and haste in her voice. She was alarmed. Something moved in dark before them. "Let's go back," said she.

"Shall we not go to another hall?" asked Inah.

"No. It is too dark, and a torch would reveal us to the enemy's eyes," Mamaki hastened towards Gomla and continued to the gate, the way they had entered. "We have seen enough. Obviously, something went wrong in their alliance. Hurry up; we shall go back to the plateau."

They went out into the weak moonlight which lit the path just enough for Mamaki to lead them without a torch. At the end of the path, they climbed down from the stony terrace floor and proceeded into the forest. It was menacingly dark and cold. Only tips of the trees could be seen down before them, raising from the slope; their trunks wrapped in blackness. Galtar looked around, trying to see more but as much as he tried, the trees and branches loomed more and more balefully; they took the shape of humans, crossbowmen who aimed their deadly pugats at him. He moved closer to Inah and asked her quietly: "With all respect to your mother, don't you think that walking through this unknown place in the dark is a little risky?"

"This part is known to her," said Inah.

"I know that but—" Galtar hesitated. He wanted to gather his thoughts in order to voice his doubts, but he did not want to sound scared.

"Are you afraid, Galtar?" her question hit him like an arrow, so

he answered it instantly:

ÒOh, no - no...Ó It was exactly the conclusion he wanted to avoid. He sank into self-pity, stepping away from her, ashamed. He heard her giggling.

ÒQuiet you two, if you do not want to die before your time,Ó said Mamaki. ÒHere,Ó she showed them a large stone-well from which rose a thin strip of barely visible smoke. ÒI see that more of the plants have been burned. It seems that somebody was cleaning the paths for some new use.Ó

Her words surprised Galtar. ÒSo you werenÓt joking about the plant that eats humans and spits out skulls?Ó Asked he.

ÒYes, I was,Ó

Galtar looked at her, confused a bit. Little smile appeared on her lips:

ÒSometimes, it is good to joke about serious things, Alu. It helps you strengthen your spirit,Ó said she.

ÒInside the hall, I spotted symbols on the wall that are similar to those from the arrow,Ó said Galtar. ÒMaybe we shall take a better look on them.Ó

ÒNot tonight. We shall go back to the place from where we started.Ó Mamaki walked toward the stairs and they went after her. While they walked, more thoughts surged in to the young manÓs head. He thought of his tribesman, Elgar, with regret now: ÒI should have listened to him. I would be back in my village by now gathering warriors if I had. Then I would have been able to see my friends again too - Lofar would not have been afraid to go through these tunnels and Eredian would have been able to see down there better than any humanÓ

ÒIf you had not stayed on the path to which your heart had led you, you would have not found Anaya or have met me and learned about the arrow,Ó spoke Mamaki to him, as if she were reading his mind. That shocked him but he managed to hide his reaction. She looked at him with motherly eyes. He nodded, though still puzzled by this demonstration of her intuition. ÒShe must be more than a druid,Ó he thought. For some strange and inner reason he stopped and turned. Stiffened, he stood for a moment looking back toward the plateau. It was entirely unconscious reaction. Galtar found himself fighting the sudden desire to run inside and continue his pursuit whatever danger may await him. If it was fear that stopped Mamaki from leading them there, then it stemmed from desire to care for her charges. She decided that they would set up camp farther down in the valley and her plan was to come back in the morning to investigate the hall, alone. Yet, whatever the chieftain of the Devanas had in her mind was about to fade away before the will of Gods: Like a colossus snowball from a catapult, Gomla suddenly growled and leapt into a wild run.

ÒGomla!Ó Mamaki called her, but the bear jumped on the stairs and ran up to the plateau. The she-bear loped through a porthole as if

some powerful god of snow-realm was calling her. "Gomla stop, do not go there!" Mamaki yelled. She commanded with as much authority as she could gather. Her voice boomed, but the command had no effect. Dreadful coldness walloped Mamaki for she had never seen her bear so dazzled. The polar-bear disappeared into the blackness. "Gomla, wait!" yelled Mamaki again. She raised her spear then and dashed through the dark entrance. Galtar, Inah and Arana grasped their weapons and ran to Mamaki's aid. But the chieftain turned to them abruptly. She looked at them persuasively demanding: "Go back. Do not follow me!" Her eyes sparkled as she shouted: "Go back I say, down to the vale and wait for me there."

"But mother—" Inah protested. Although she knew well that she had to obey, her heart spoke differently.

"I will come back to you soon. Go now," Mamaki insisted. Galtar grabbed Inah's hand and pulled her away. Relieved by his gesture, Mamaki turned to the entrance and ran inside.

"Mother!" cried Inah as Galtar was pulling her to opposite direction. "Leave me alone," she snapped at him, "Let me go or I'll kill you, you coward!"

Galtar freed her hand and said: "I only wanted to ease your mother's mind. Let her believe that we have done as she asked." He pulled out his sword: "Of course I'll help her," he said and leapt into the darkness, to Mamaki's aid.

II

They ran across the large stone tiles into the darkness. Every sound echoed through the great passage. It was vast so much like the tomb of an ancient giant king. Behind Mamaki, Alu and two Devanas ran, breathing heavily, trying to keep up. Arana was slower because of her wound. Focused on the minute sparkle of Mamaki's spear that faintly shone in the blackness afar, Galtar forgot to pay attention to the distance growing between all of them. As he was speeding, in his eyes, the walls appeared left and right, narrowing gradually from ten to a five foot wide corridor that steadily extended forward. Channels stretched along the base of the walls. Suddenly, lava poured through those channels giving off a weak radiance of light and heating the heavy air. Running madly, Galtar lost count of time and space. The bear ran incredibly fast but Mamaki spoke the magic words of Gompa-run falling in a trance through which her feet started to move as if she were flying, barely touching the floor. Soon she caught up to the she-bear. Running, she approached the animal; she threw her spear on the ground and grabbed the saddle with both hands. Then she flew onto Gomla's back, pulling the reins, slowing her down to a final halt. Panting, Mamaki gasped for air while beads of sweat clustered on her forehead, flowing down her face. Gomla breathed heavily too, swinging her weary head. In the blackness before her, something was moving. It was the size of a cat, live and furry, white in colour. Mamaki strained her eyes to see it better. The red light shimmered vaguely. It came from the lava that floated through narrow channels at the base of the walls. In an iron cage that hung from the ceiling was a little

polar bear cub. It moved its small snout between the bars toward Gomla. She tried to reach it but the cage lifted up with the sudden iron-shriek of chains. The cub made a quiet sound; as if asking Gomla for help. From the darkness below, two red aslant eyes emerged. They loomed with an unearthly menace. A wave of heat from the lava streams hit Mamaki. Gathering herself together, she recollected that her spear had been left behind in the moment she had jumped on Gomla's back. Yet, the scabbard remained fasten to the saddle so she groped for the hilt and drew out her scimitar. An enormously large lion's paw stepped into the light. The magma radiance glittered on its black skin and in its crimson mane. The beast stared at Gomla, spellbinding her. On the lion's back, a woman sat, legs crossed.

“Wake up, Gomla,” Mamaki called, holding her scimitar forward, keeping her eyes on the woman and her lion.

“Awake she is,” said the red-haired rider. Her voice was hoarse. “Awakened by the nature that calls her.”

“You are speaking nonsense,” said Mamaki, moving her left hand cautiously to the height of her heart, getting ready to call on her power - the power of the Water-Elemental.

“I know that move,” said the red witch. She climbed off the lion, keeping her right hand on its rich mane. “Your magic is not going to work here, Mamaki.”

Mamaki opened her hand and a thin, subtle gleam appeared on the thenar of her white palm. “It is all nonsense, Skira,” said Mamaki.

“Nonsense? Hah. You use that word to destruct inner connections of my sorcery with Naroxa,” said the witch. “How shallow. Look at her then.” The witch lightly opened her left hand showing the blush that gleamed on her nails. Then her fingers formed a claw. On that gesture, from the cracks in the walls flowed even more lava. Mamaki jumped off the saddle and extended her arm before her. A white light flashed from her hand to counter the witch. Skira reacted. With a yank, she raised her arm more, aiming at Mamaki. Snakes of flame let loose from her fingers, darting on the white Devana. Between the two, a sudden blast emerged with a sound of hiss and crack. The whiteness of ice and the redness of fire collided. Another immense flash followed forming a great ring in the smoky air. Its bottom half was formed of fire and its upper rim formed of ice. The red-maned lion sprung throughout the ring attacking the white she-bear.

III

A horrid roar of two beasts thundered shaking the dark halls of Hoydoom-Vaar. Galtar stirred. “Mother!” screamed Inah. The hot air was burning their lungs. She spotted something long at her feet. It was Mamaki's spear. She took it. Arana came to Galtar and Inah at last and sat down, almost falling, holding her hip. She was in pain again. More lava was coming through the channels, casting shadowy light on the walls and illuminating the ancient drawings, half-covered with soot and ash. Tongues of flame rose up, licking the walls up to the

ceiling. Galtar and Inah helped Arana to stand up and move away from the fire. It poured into the rims and rivets between the floor-tiles. The long run had tired them, and the heat and smoke was making them cough while fighting for air. Then, unexpectedly, a beating sound came from behind. It was getting closer. Something was moving rapidly: ÒTa-ka-dam, taka-dam, taka-doom!Ó the hoofs of a galloping horse echoed. They could not believe their eyes. From the darkness, girdled with fire, Vinge was coming - the great elven horse - running to its master. The fire swirled left and right of the animal as if drawing the wings of a Pegasus. While the horse was still in the move, Galtar slung the sword on his back, seized the saddle, thrust his foot into the stirrup and bestrode the horse.

The bear sparred with the lion. Jaws to jaws; claws and fangs at each others necks. Gomla was larger than the lion, but the lion had a larger head and its fangs were bigger. They hit and held, smacked and ripped each other with their strong paws. The animals raved with rumbling roars while blood dribbled from their snouts. Blood spouted out from many wounds in GomlaÓs white fur. Skira raised her hands high, swirling a body of fire before her - a blazing demon. It exposed its monstrous body, compound of dense smoke and fire. It crouched, bending low on all fours, ready to attack its prey while releasing a heinous scream from its gaping jaws. As scourge of fire, its tongue whipped out reaching for Mamaki. She dodged. While moving backwards, Mamaki swiftly put her scimitar back in its sheath. Retreating from the blazing monster, she spoke the words of magic ÒPlava voda, kyeri snega, kinma Gomla ni mu koti: JIN O LEDA ye nyen sen! (Blue water, daughter of snow. Mother Gomla gave him birth. Frost Giant, is her son.)Ó

It created a water-elemental giant that was even bigger than the witchÓs demon. The bluish-white body of the water-giant clashed with the demonÓs flames. He clutched the demon tight with its great arms. The red demon wrestled to escape the squeeze, yet the blue giant was stronger. At last, the water-giant let the fiery body of the enemy dissolve in his powerful arms. They both vanished into smoke and steam. With a loud hiss, the lava, which perpetually ran through the channels began to lose its heat and rapidly went out. Skira grabbed the lionÓs mane and pulled it back, hard. It was the move of a magical ritual. An inferno burst out - the lionÓs mane blasted into an huge fire. The animals clashed once more. Gomla roared as the fire-mane began to burn her skin, but she continued to fight stoutly. Mamaki could not call upon second water-elemental immediately, for she had lost much of her magical power. To perform the magic again, she would have to meditate but she had no time. So she pulled out her saber and jumped onto the sizzling beast, striking, thrusting and slashing. The smell of GomlaÓs burning flesh started to spread. Although in pain, the bear still fought, trying repeatedly to stab her fangs through the blistering fire mane, into the lionÓs neck. MamakiÓs hands were badly burned as well but she ignored the pain, continuing to deliver sharp blows. The beast hit Mamaki with its paw and her body rolled down towards the hot liquid. She groped the rims of the floor in the last moment but the ends of her long hair were caught by the fire. Skira

swooped down on her like a fulgent crow. Then Gomla gathered all the strength that was left in her to attack the lion once more. They both spun to the ground wrapped in smoke and flames. At that instant, a white horse entered the infernal haze. The silver glowing body of Vinge appeared, galloping onward. The rider that held his sword up jumped from the saddle, striking the lion, stabbing the blade deep in its body. Its flesh ripping, bone cracking.

Gomla fell down exhausted; skin half burned. Galtar avoided the lion's paws and managed to slash another deep wound, this time hitting in its leg. Dark and murky blood sprinkled out. The lion roared, attacking, swinging its paws at the man. Skira now raised her arms resurrecting the fires around and the mane of the lion turned into a fireball, even stronger and bigger than before. From Skira's hands, lightning struck at Galtar. He jerked back exposing his sword, blocking the blow impulsively but the blade instantly became so hot that he had to throw it to the ground.

An arrow hissed through the darkness towards Skira. She jumped back to avoid it, but the arrow hit her arm. She screamed and ran behind the lion. Arana let her bow loose again, hitting the lion's side. The animal turned to her in madness. The beast rose to the assault when Inah ran in, ahead of Arana, revealing a long spear. She ejaculated strong, high-pitched war-cry, piercing the spear firmly through the ribcage of the beast, right into its heart. The lion slid down, growling, waning—dying. The fire grew dim and quiet in the wall channels, disappearing, leaving only soot and ash. The lion's mane smoldered, hissing into a cloud of smoke that clung to the ceiling. The beast was defeated at least. The witch had gone away with no trace. Weary and slow, Gomla sat down. She was hardly breathing. Terrible burns gaped from her neck, paws, and the side of her head. Mamaki hugged her tight. She pressed her face to the bear's head and held her for awhile. Gomla felt Mamaki's skin on her face and the tears that moistened her fur.

Inah and Arana neared. Their heads bowed low in grief. Galtar released the chains and the cage, with a little bear in it, landed on the floor. His sword had cooled, so he took it and broke the lock with the blade. The little bear climbed out. It walked gawkily toward Gomla and put its small paw on hers. Gomla lay down, barely able to hold up her head. She licked the cub's face gently. Her eyes - blue stars, faded. She then laid her head in her mistress's lap, giving in to the everlasting polar dream.

Chapter Twelve

Dragon Swan

I

The rest of the night passed in stillness of sorrow. Cold dawn illuminated the marshes of Hoydoom before them. Here and there, a lonely naked tree branched by grey-stones, scattered shrines with soundless birds resting on them. It was not till noon that Mamaki spoke few words as she decided to lead the company towards the border

of Varas. There, she new a man who might know something more about the intruders. They had all been walking in silence through the marshes. Gomla had been an extraordinary bear, clever and dear to Mamaki. She had found her as a lost cub a long time ago. She walked now solemnly, carrying the new cub in her arms. Somehow, everything reminded her of her she-bear. She breathed hard, thinking of the passing nature of life. Slowly, anger was sneaking in past her grief. Then questions: How had she been tricked so easily? What kind of simple, yet powerful magic had lured her bear into death? Were we all so vulnerable? Were we all so easily trap with needs that we are born with? That primitive power, the very same power that made us live, kills us as well.

ÒThis is the land of takans,Ó said Arana. She wanted to give Mamaki an ease and change her thoughts, at least for a moment. ÒI wish we could see one while we are traveling through it.Ó

ÒTakans?Ó Galtar turned to the lady-archer. ÒOh, the dragon-swans, is that what you mean Arana?Ó

ÒYes, the dragon-swans,Ó she said. ÒThe peaceable dragons. The kind you can tame and ride, just like horses, or like the polar bears of my tribe.Ó

ÒJust like Gomla,Ó Mamaki said. Galtar looked at Mamaki with worry and compassion. He wanted to cheer her soul: ÒWhen we were kids, during long winter nights, we would sit by the fire in Ghuterna with the old bard Olan,Ó said Galtar. ÒHe taught us a silly song that gave us so much of excitement.Ó

ÒLet us hear it then,Ó Arana said.

ÒYes, yes, let us hear the silly song, we like silly songs!Ó said Inah, pulling his hand gently, while still watching at her mother with care.

ÒWhy not, Alu. Let yourself live that song once more, dear boy,Ó said Mamaki, trying to hold her grief for a bit. ÒAfter all, you do not want to disappoint my girls, right?Ó

ÒSure he doesnÓt,Ó said Inah still holding his hand, looking now at him, pleased.

ÒI mean, the song I remember is not the original one, because the day I heard it, the bard Olan was little drunk,Ó spoke Galtar. ÒBut we liked that version and remembered it. Olan himself denies having told us the story that way ever, but it is still the version we liked best. Here it is (he changed the voice sounding like a somber drunken bard):

ÒAcross the ocean vast and deep

Terrible dragon

Attacked our ship.

Giant jaws rose above the ark

To take the ship down

to the abyss dark

But look,

all hope is not yet gone away: For a hero came

To save our day.

And with the day, our lives, of course,

he'll do that by using ð force.

The force was in his high-pitched voice

For he sung so badly

that the dragon had no choice Éleft

But to go back deep down,

never to return,

to our town

What? The town?

Hey. It all happened on the sea!

I know, but it sounds better.Ó

ÒOh my white and fur divine! That sounds terrible!Ó said Inah and laughed. ÒIs that it?Ó

ÒThat was the song,Ó Galtar shrugged and they all laughed together.

ÒI fought many dragons back then, for I was a little boy,Ó added Galtar.

ÒWe all sang that song too,Ó said Inah with a smile. ÒBut the real one, and we even did a little performance,Ó her long eyelashes trembled as her face shone with pride. ÒI also liked the song about legendary golden dragon; what was his name... Gilpa - something...Ó

ÒGilparespas,Ó said Galtar. ÒThe father of dragons. Apparently, he still lives.Ó

ÒOlan also sang about the land of Umla where elves tamed takans and bred them for riding,Ó added Arana.

ÒNot many tame dragon-swans exist, though,Ó said Mamaki. ÒBreeding and training takans is not an easy task, for they are even more impetuous than horses. Some can be found at the wing-posts, though.Ó

ÒI know that wing-posts have hawks, as well as fast horses.Ó

ÒYour father was one of those who organized such posts. After the war, many chieftains and lords built them, so that they could serve us all. Recently, two wingposts received takans, so that the messengers

could fly on them.Ó

Of course, Galtar was excited to learn about such things. For a moment the sadness that gripped his heart vanished and he thought about the new world, a world in which words could be spread with such speedÉ ÒGaltar,Ó Inah called him. She stopped, looking at the edge of grassy field where it met the marshes. ÒYes?Ó

ÒI want to tell you something,Ó she looked into his eyes. He stopped, wondering.

ÒI want to apologize,Ó she said.

ÒApologize? for what?Ó

ÒBecause I called you a coward,Ó she paused. ÒAnd for laughing at you before andÉÓ

He took her hand lightly. ÒShhÉÓ he almost touched her lips with his finger. ÒI have already forgotten it all.Ó She looked at him, then at the green grass again: ÒThank you,Ó said Inah and her cherry lips smiled in relief, disclosing her pearl-white teeth.

Dark clouds, cut off by high mountain peaks, gathered into one large and weighty mass that rolled down into the valley. Lightning ripped through its grey rain-fraught belly and thunder boomed. A heavy rainfall followed instantly. In the south, behind hoary-green swamps, an unusual bird appeared. It flew over the large pine forest that gleamed in the distant mist. Then, another one appeared, remarkable in shape and size. ÒLook, Alu,Ó Mamaki pointed her spear toward the remote winged creatures. ÒThese are takans!Ó

Two takan-dragons, like majestic giant silver swans sailed through the mist, underneath the dense clouds. In the flashes of lightning, wings that barely moved, glimmered, and their long tails streamed in the wind. It was awakened image of the primeval world. They turned slightly to the south, and disappeared in the far-away haze. ÒThere is another one!Ó shouted Inah. Under the clouds, a third reptile was gliding to the end of the forest. Suddenly, thin long lightning whipped from above and across the takan's back. Stricken, its wings weakened immediately and the poor creature went down. It lost height rapidly, nose-diving towards the earth.

ÒIt fell close, to the beginning of the woods!Ó yelled Galtar. ÒI want to see it from near!Ó He flew up into the saddle and spurred the horse. Vinge went to gallop hurrying through the marshes as if it was him who wanted so eagerly to take a closer look at the magnificent creature.

ÒAlu!Ó Mamaki's call disappeared in the all embracing roar of yet another thunder. Vinge galloped throughout the grey rainy mass. Red scourges were striking above while the elvish horse was groping forward splashing through the puddles. Galtar's heart drummed faster as if it was going to jump out from his chests in this childish excitement that had grabbed him. Inah ran after him. She could not resist the experience of the new discovery too. Finally he reached it.

The man and the horse observed the fallen dragon-swan, marveled when Inah joined them. Glee sparked in their eyes. The large smoothed head of the taken was half-sunk into the bog, to its big, rounded eyes. Its heavy eyelids blinked slowly. A white teardrop-shape mark gleamed between its eyes. It closed them at last. Its wide wings, filled with skin, lay lifelessly.

ÒA teardrop, distinctive sign she wears. None of those I have seen it before,Ó said Mamaki and entered the water to her knees to check the eyes and nostrils of the dragon-swan. She lifted its eyelid and said: ÒShe is still alive. If we can pull her into deeper mud, we may be able to save her.Ó

Galtar took his vest and tunic off. He tightened the tunic around his waist and placed the vest on his shoulder. Then he dragged the takenÓs tail over it. Inah grabbed one leg and Mamaki and Arana another one so that they could pull the taken out together. Rain washed the sweat off their faces and from GaltarÓs wide shoulders as they pulled the creature. Muscles of his back corded. His heels stubbed deeply into the bottom of the swamp, seeking for firm ground. Finally, they reached the nearby mud. ÒThis mud is like a cure for her,Ó said Mamaki. She scooped the mud with her hands and started to rub the animal with it. ÒCome on, dear, wake up.Ó

The little polar bear watched them curiously, straining its little paws wanting to help too. The rain stopped. They were now all standing in the mud, pushing it in layers over the takenÓs body. ÒTogether, water and earth will win over the fire. This way, the mud will suck out the power of lightning from her body.Ó And lo! They did not wait long; the dragon raised its head, opening its wide, round eyes.

ÒShe is alive!Ó Arana exclaimed. The taken climbed out of the mud, shifting its body onto firm ground. ÒIt is a female,Ó said Mamaki. ÒSee, this scar on her belly is going to be the skin-bag where she will carry her young one day.Ó Mamaki moved closer and cleaned the front of dragonÓs head, removing the mud from her eyes and from the sign in-between. ÒA tearÉ I will call you Tear, my dear.Ó The taken shook her head, dispersing the wet dirt around, sprinkling her saviors. They did not mind, of course; on the contrary, they cheered. She looked at them, blinking. The sun peered through the slow scattering clouds illuminating new sparks in the takenÓs eyes. A long drawn call went out from her throat while she ran, springing up into the air, her wings spread wide. Soon, she had vanished, high among the clouds.

ÒShe can go as far as she wants,Ó said Galtar, watching the creature as it was flying away. ÒIf I could have a gotten a ride from her, I might have been able to reach the enemy sooner. I could have reached him at any range.Ó

ÒTo the south, after the marshes, lies the land of Varas,Ó said Mamaki. ÒI have to inform their council about these events as soon as possible. On our way, we will pass the One Eyed Moose tavern. The owner is a good friend of mine. We can rest there and learn what we can about the enemy, for the tavern is the place to which

word-of-mouth spreads most quickly.Ó

Chapter Thirteen

One Eyed Moose

I

The first stars were already up when the small company reached the stony road that wriggled from the woods to lead them to the inn. The tavern of One Eyed Moose was located on a quiet green slope and partially built into the hill. On its grassy roof a long chimney stood, greeting travelers from afar. In front, a small pond lay where animals would come to drink in late summer. When the snows would melt in early spring, water would come rushing down into the pond, filling it. A small bridge entwined with dark-gold tree-creepers led across the pond to a porch and the entrance to the tavern. On one side of the thick door hung three iron tablets carrying the emblems of the Frug-Ale dwarvish brewery, the Elven wine named Vranates and the famed strong alcoholic Initian drink called Tear-Drop-Plum. On the other side of the door was written: ÓNever mix them all together!Ó - with exclamation mark serving as an iron door-handle. Above this, was a woodworked model of a great moose head with an eye-patch over its left eye. Inside, only three out of nine tables were occupied. In the corner, three young rangers sang quietly. According to their fair-brown hair and long straight noses, they were of Varasian folks. Closer to the door, at a long table with a view out the window, two couples were sitting; two families with children who seemed to be Kerebian refugees. Since their land had been taken by the Azmarans, many of those Kerebians who could not stand the new rulers, had made the decision to move westward, looking for a new life. On the other side of the room sat two women - the wives of the ownerÓs two oldest sons. They were busy chatting about the ownerÓs third and youngest son, making a list of ladies they knew, of which the younger one could marry, eventually.

ÓGald and the rest! What a surprise!Ó said the owner, a corpulent man with a black eye-patch over his left eye and a wide white swathe tied around his bald head. A long grey mustache twisted below his round cheeks and big red nose. ÓI heard you enter, eh, but I thought it was the dwarves - my beer deliverers whom I am expecting. What a pleasant surprise, eh!Ó

ÓIs it really? You will not call me a carrier of bad news again, will you, Moose?Ó said Mamaki, smiling at her old friend.

ÓOf course not, it is a pleasure to see you again my dear Mamaki,Ó he embraced her in his big arms. ÓBut, what is the bad news?Ó he asked, widening his only eye. Mamaki grabbed his massive shoulder.

ÓThere is no bad news,Ó said she calming his worries. ÓI have some questions, though, and a few things to tell you that may sadden you a bit, but not much; not much at all.Ó

ÓIt has been ages, eh?Ó

ÒTrue. It has been a little less than two years, my dear Moose. How is your wife?Ó

ÒOh, my wifeÉÓ his face faded and his eye dropped down, as if he were looking for something he had lost. ÓOf course, you do not know. When you healed her last time she was better for a whole year. But then, last summer, she became feverish again and died soon afterwards.Ó Mamaki looked at him, grief-stricken. Moose continued quietly and his voice lost its cheerful tone: ÓOh, my dear and good Mamaki, the older sons were away with me and the young one was with her when it happened. He called a vicar from the city of Varas-Deen and he came, but she did not want anyone to help her this time. She had been sick for years. I think she had just had enough of it and decided to give in to the Messenger of Death, hoping for a better new life.Ó

ÒThat is very unfortunate, dear Moose. I am deeply sorry to hear that. She was a good woman and a great mother to your children. I am sure she gathered enough good deeds to make her next life better and free of suffering. Was anyone here to help her die?Ó

ÒYes. The head of the order of White Shields, his greatness, priest Nyardi.Ó

ÒThat is good. You could not ask for a better guide through the bardo-stage. Nyardi is among the wisest of all people who walk the earth.Ó

ÒBut what is the matter that has brought you in today?Ó asked Moose, ÓYou look exhausted and troubled, Mamaki.Ó

ÒEvil spirits have crept into our lands and struck the tribe of White Deer.Ó

ÒOh, I see. The boy who came with you - he is an Alu, right?Ó

Mamaki called her companions forward. ÓDear Moose, I would like you to meet my daughter Inah, and Galtar, son of Orltar from the northern tribe of White Deer.Ó

ÒIs itÉ Is itÉÓ

ÒYes, thatÕs her. The little girl you and your wife found.Ó

ÒFound?Ó Galtar wondered.

ÒThey found me and saved my life many years ago, the time I got lost on my childish adventure, my only travel afar up until now,Ó said Inah. ÓI was not the best child, you see.Ó

ÒWell I never! A girl of striking beautyÉ and strength, I would say you have become,Ó said Moose. Inah hugged him: ÓI am sorry about aunt Menya, uncle Moose. She was a great woman.Ó

ÒAnd I am sorry that she is not here to see you,Ó said Moose and a tear slid down his cheek. ÓShe loved you so much and talked about you often.Ó

ÒI should have visited her more oftenÉÓ said Inah quietly.

ÒMy sons are outside, waiting for a wagon of fresh beer from the Frug Dwarven brewery. They are late. But - hey, you are all hungry,Ó said Moose and called over two chatting women, giving them quick orders. They went into the kitchen hastily.

ÒWe have some beer, but I would recommend waiting for the fresh stuff that is just about to arrive from my Frug brothers.Ó

Soon, the ladies were back with lots of food on plates. While they ate, Mamaki told Moose about their journey, and her friend was more than sad to hear about GomlaÕs death. As they were talking, a mouse zipped suddenly across the tavern floor but was instantly caught by the cat who was patiently waiting in the corner. The cat proudly placed her paw on the helpless, little creature. Suddenly the polar bear cub jumped out from MamakiÕs hands and ran towards the cat. He bumped her and they both rolled down. The cub obviously thought that there was some sort of the game afoot, and wanted to join in on the fun. The cat pshaw at the little bear and walked away angrily, for her prey had used the opportunity to run away. The scene made everyone laugh.

II

ÒThose hoodlums were here,Ó said Moose. ÒBoth of them, I would say, though the woman was hooded and quiet. The black bearded, tall Azmar asked me about Nyardi and his temple of White Shields, but not much else. He ordered a south-eastern drink called Zakirya, which I did not have, and so he left without drinking anything. That is how I realized that he was not a merchant, as he had introduced himself, but a soldier. Merchants from Azmaran do not drink beer but are usually happy to buy some wine. This manÕs manner was more typical of the Azmar men-at-arms who despise anything lighter than their bitter, burning drink Zakirya. The tavern was full of guests at the time, but these two did not come near anybody else but me. They probably did not want too much of exposure. On the other hand, who could possibly know more than me? Oh, Wait. I remember now. Once the dwarves, my beer merchants, arrived the Azmar left immediately. The woman stayed for some time more though, and she approached one of the two dwarf brothers.Ó

ÒDid you hear what they talked about?Ó

ÒHuh, no. It was a busy night, eh. Nevertheless, the dwarf was very drunk so I really doubt that he was able to tell her anything.Ó

ÒThat must be the reason why she drew close to the dwarf. Drunken tongues wag, not sober ones,Ó said Mamaki.

ÒBut what could he have told her?Ó asked Inah. Galtar stopped eating, listening carefully.

ÒThough, the Azmar asked me about Nyardi, as I told you,Ó said Moose. ÒOn their way here the dwarves will have passed by the high slopes, atop of which is the temple of White Shields. But we wonÓt

have to wait long for an answer, for my dwarves are just coming. Let's ask them. Through the window they saw a wagon. It had been approaching from the other side of the small bridge, pulled by four ponies. The wagon was loaded with many barrels, stacked high in a pyramid. Two strong fellows, the Moose's sons, ran out to help the dwarves with the unloading. Soon after, together, they rolled the barrels over the bridge towards the side entrance, and into the storage rooms.

Be careful with them, fellows! shouted the dwarf Hali, stepping down from his seat. Precious nectar is inside; do not break my heart today.

Be quiet, Hali. You will awaken the bad-luck booger with your words, said his brother Oli. Just shut up, and let the boys do their job. You can go knock at the front door. I see a light inside. The old Moose must be awake. The two dwarves walked across the bridge. As they entered the owner introduced them: Dear Mamaki, Galtar, Inah and Arana, please meet my friends, the Ektun brothers: Hali and Oli.

Ektun, oh, that is a famous surname among dwarven folks from Frug, said Arana. If am right; ek-tun means Oakencask.

Correct, Milady. Furthermore, my name is ol-i-ek-tun, which would be beer-in-oaken-cask; but my brother's name is a little more unfortunate: Hal-i-ek-tun which is hole-in-oaken-cask in our language.

It is not an unfortunate name, bror. This is a drinking hole, and not an unlucky one, said Hali so that laughter snatched at them all. Yet, we prefer to be called Oli and Hali or simply the Ektun brothers, if you will.

Not much time passed before they touched on a matter that was troubling them all, as they sat together at the three joined tables.

Well, now, you people can talk while I bring in some of the fresh Frug Ale the dwarves have brought me, said Moose and disappeared into the storageroom at the back.

I would say the man you described was the one traveling with the red-haired lady, spoke Oli stroking his beard, trying to recall all the details. I do not remember his face, but Moose told me that he looked Azmaranian. I mean, I might have seen him too but I did not notice, for it was the night after a long, hard day and I had a lot of beer flowing through me, if you understand what I mean. It is suspicious that an Azmar would be here, even if he calls himself a merchant. And certainly, no merchant would ask about the temple of the White Shields. Of course, I did not say a word to them.

Moose and the two women came back carrying more wooden plates filled with all kinds of food and his sons brought the beer. The first mug to be filled was Hali's.

That is what I would call the truth, said Hali. The Azmar was a merchant just as I am an elf, with my beard and clumpy ears, he let

his mug, full of foaming beer, tap on the table.

ÒI smelled an evil spirit in her red hair. I know the difference between good and evil spirits, as hard as it is to distinguish one from the other sometimes. Richness and beauty shone in the large Azmaranian city that I had visited long ago, but I was able to see through that opulence, and see the true state of empty souls. Ó

ÒYou were there, selling your drink?Ó asked Galtar.

ÒAnvil, hammer and my beard in-between - NO! And what was that you just said? Were you trying to insult me?Ó snapped Oli at Galtar.

ÒOh no, not at all. I am just curious. I only wanted to know how you got there.Ó

ÒThe Azmarans do not drink beer anyways,Ó said Oli.

ÒWhich is a shame,Ó said Hali. ÒAs that is what I would call Óbad tasteÓ to their side.Ó

ÒHaha!Ó Galtar laughed fully at this. Others as well. Good mood was back and up. Oli then told them of his journey to the affluent city of Ulan Az, where he had been sent by his lord Tolmek, the king of Frug. He had travelled there, long ago, with emissaries from the land of Varas. After the fall of Kereb, the Azmaranian Empire had reached their borders, so the rulers of Varas and the dwarves had tried to reach an agreement with Azmaranian Khan, to buy some time for themselves.

ÒOur mission failed. I realized that not we, but no one could persuade their Khan to halt his expansion to the west. However, I was there, in the once great city of Singidun, and the impression of misery that struck Kereb was profound, so profound that I almost shed tears. I watched as the Azmarans threw the old Kerebian relics into a fire and smashed the altars, turning their old city of Singidun into Ulan Az. In less than five years, new temples - shinier and with even more gold and jewels had been topped - were erected on the ashes of the old to worship the new god Yezid. They also built a movable bridge, more walls, houses and roads. Azmaranians had come to stay, that is for sure, and now many Kerebians bow to their new god and listen to the Azmaranian songs, forgetting their own,Ó so spoke Hali looking at the surface of the table, at the mugs and plates, observing them as if they were a map of his memories charred on its edges, with rue. Galtar, Inah and Arana were particularly interested in his story, which sounded to their ears like a history lecture taught by a wise and solemn teacher. Hali paused. The others all remained quiet. A little Kerebian boy came closer to pet the cub that sat in AranaÓs lap. Both families in the corner were now also looking at the dwarf, listening about their motherland - the story they knew all too well. Three rangers from Varas stopped singing, turning their attention to HaliÓs table. He continued: ÓSince the Azmarans had suffered a great loss at Blackbird Field, we realized then that they were not likely to continue their invasion that year. One year later, their Khan died and the inner struggle that followed shook the Empire to its foundation.

Soon afterwards, the Azmarans were faced with a series of uprisings, which together caused them to put on a halt on their dreams of expansion. However, ten years later, they took Initia and did the same as they had done to Kereb - they flooded the Initian land with migrant Azmaranian families and replaced the Initian God with Yezid. Finally, a few years later, they arrived at the gates of Varas-Deen. But this time, Varas was ready for the upcoming siege of its capitol. The city had been additionally fortified and stocked with provisions, and the Frug dwarves were stationed inside the city and in other posts, waiting alongside the army of Varas. They endured the first strike, waiting long enough for the unified tribes of Galda, led by Orltar, to come. Orltar had assembled his army and trained it in secret together with King Udar's dwarves and Yidaman's elvish cavalry. With that victory of ours, at the gate of Varas-Deen, where the Azmarans were finally stopped.

With those words, Hali shook his head lightly, lifting his eyes as if awoken.

And in the name of the brave defenders, said one of the rangers lifting his mug up. Drink for everybody. They all stood up and cheered together.

I have rooms prepared for all of you. Not much is booked these days. I gave two to the Kerebians. They are good craftsmen and are helping me to repair the roof and build a new stable in exchange for shelter and food. Nice, honest and hardworking people, I would say. I will give you, Mamaki, a separate, quiet room so that you can rest and meditate in peace.

Thank you, Moose. I really need to meditate over some matters. If our enemies are looking for the Nyardi's temple, then that is something I will have to think about. Things may be worse than I thought.

III

It was early morning, fresh and cold. The sky was clear, promising a sunny day. Birds sang merrily hidden in the trees above the pond. Pearls of the sunlight splashed its surface. Mamaki stood on the porch. In the distance, Valdic Mountains loomed; their peaks wrapped in mist.

We do not have much time to waste, she thought. A new trip was before them. All of her companions waited patiently to hear her judgment: I have concluded that our enemy had found out that Nyardi and his White Shields possess the magic jewel Allsea. They will most likely try to get it soon. According to the last words of the cursed Azmaran warrior, the Allsea may be already stolen.

I would not worry that much, Mamaki said Moose. It was only the day after that I warned one of Nyardi's hunters who visited me. So the White Shields are aware of it.

Still, I have a bad feeling about it, Mamaki whispered.

ÒOh, IÕve heard about the stone,Ó said Hali. ÒI believe it is safe there. Only a mountain goat could walk the high paths to the temple. High rocks, sharp cliffs - it is impossible to invade. Though, I would not mind paying a short visit to check on him anyways. Nyardi is a good friend of us and it has been a long time since our last visit.Ó

ÒThat is a good idea,Ó said Mamaki. ÒHere is what I think we should do then,Ó her rejuvenated little company was sitting assembled, eagerly listening the chieftain. ÒIf you and your brother Oli are willing to go there, Galtar and Inah will go with you. Arana you will stay here for two more days, for your wound still does not allow you to climb the rocky mountain. After two days, Moose will give you a horse so you can leave to find our post in the north and tell them the news. Dakmema is in charge while I am away, so you can give the bear-cub to her.Ó

ÒI will do as you said, Mamaki,Ó said Arana.

The tree rangers were coming down the stairs, wearing their backpacks. Their plum-blue cloaks, which fell to their knees, shimmered in the sunrays. They all wore soft black leather boots. Long bows and dark-red quivers were at their backs.

ÒWe can guide you to the city of Varas Deen, oh reverend Mamaki,Ó said one of them. ÒMy name is Vela, son of Yurel,Ó he bowed shortly.

ÒThank you, Vela. That is good. I am glad you approached me, for IÕd ask you for a small favor, can I?

ÒAt your service,Ó said the Varasian.

ÒI think, it would be better if you and your two rangers go as quickly as you can to Varas Deen and ask your master to dispatch more scouts towards the border,Ó Mamaki said. ÒLater, I can meet with your Master and discuss what other steps we should undertake.Ó

Inah entered the conversation: ÒWhat about you then, mother?Ó her voice trembled. She could not conceal the fact that the whole plan troubled her.

ÒOh, do not worry about me, my dear,Ó she touched her hand and hold it. ÒI will travel as fast as I can to the south-west, towards the closest wing-post. From there, message will be sent to their rulers and to the others so that they may prepare for the coming battle,Ó

ÒThe battle?Ó asked Hali, astounded. They all looked at Mamaki somberly.

She surveyed their faces for a few moments, with her eyes gravely still: ÒThe battles, more precisely,Ó said she. ÒAnd a war that will be bigger than any we have seen before,Ó her look gripped them tightly. They nodded, solemn and quiet. ÒOnce you reach the temple, Galtar, wait for me. I shall be there only a couple of days after you. Then, with NyardiÕs wisdom at our side, we shall come up with a new plan.Ó

ÒIf that is your arrangement, I would ask you, Mamaki, to take my horse,Ó said Galtar. ÒI will have no use for him in the mountain paths, which are more suited to ponies. And since Vinge is the fastest horse around, he will be of much more value to you, for speed is what you need now.Ó

Chapter Fourteen

White Shields are Marching

I

The day descended into dusk through a persistent drizzle. Grass sprouted through the mist that covered the sides of a muddy road. Four voyagers walked over the sticky ground; skidding and sinking into the dirt. As they climbed, wet rocks replaced the slippery grass. One by one, four figures, two dwarves and woman and a man, were vanishing into the cloud of cold fog. They walked cautiously, keeping their hands on the cliff. Finally rising out of the fog, the clouds spread before their feet like a great floor.

ÒI feel like a god!Ó said Hali, amazed by the vision. Stars were sprinkled throughout the sky like pebbles, peering over the rocky peaks of the Valdic Mountains. The white temple jutted out from the rocks in the distance like a fang in a large tigerÓs skull. They entered a sparse forest beneath the gargantuan cliff heading to its base. The road wound up and up through a small cave-like tunnel in which they decided to rest for the night. The place was secluded enough to hide the little fire that they lit. They made tea, warmed the bread and cheese that they had gotten from Moose. The group ate quietly and went to sleep. But, only a couple of hours later, Oli awoke, glimpsing the sky throughout the gap of the small tunnel. The fire was still alive and its embers shone silently as he began to sing in a whisper:

ÒOh, little fire,
In the last pipe I smoke
I could see a holy pyre
And diminish in it so easily.Ó

He wrapped himself in his blue cloak, took his pipe and filled it with care. A little bit of the embers was enough to light the pipe. He then sat at the entrance, gazing at the stars.

ÒWhat is that smell, Oli?Ó asked Galtar half-awake with one eye open. Oli leaned toward him, whispering: ÒWhat smell?Ó

ÒI may be dreaming. It was the smell of ripened cherries,Ó said Galtar, turning and looking for a more comfortable position in which to fall back asleep.

ÒOh, you were not dreaming. You must have been smelling my pipe-smoke; tobacco mixed with dry, minced cherries. Do you want

some?Ó

ÒI don't know. I have never smoked a pipe.Ó

ÒNo worries, I have an extra one,Ó said Oli and started to dig through his backpack.

ÒYou do not have an extra one,Ó said Hali. His bushy head rose up from behind his green cloak, eyes half-closed. ÒThe second one is mine,Ó

ÒCome on, Hali. We will lend one to this lad. If you join us, you and I can share mine.Ó

ÒHrmph,Ó Hali laid his head back under his cloak, thought a bit and then showed his face again. ÒAll right,Ó he mumbled and got up to join them. So they sat together at the entrance of the tunnel, smoking pipes.

ÒGaltar, here, like thisÉÓ said Hali, teaching him the art of pipe-smoking. The young man coughed a little.

ÒHold it here, to the bowl. Do not inhale; just like this - look,Ó Oli made a few puffs that faded away above his hood. ÒNot bad, eh?Ó

ÒNot bad at all,Ó Galtar said.

Still sleeping, Inah moved a bit and the pipe-smoking trio went quiet.

ÒShe will not ask to join us, will she?Ó said Oli. ÒShe is a girl.Ó

ÒYeah,Ó said Hali. ÒGirls are fragile. They should not smoke or drink.Ó

ÒÉOr fight,Ó said Oli.

ÒThey should not be soldiers, I agree,Ó added his brother. ÒI mean, not that they are bad fighters,Ó he pointed his pipe toward the sleeping beauty. ÒIt is just a pity, if you know what I meanÉ for such a pretty specimen to be wasted in a battle.Ó

ÒYes, better to be a mother.Ó

ÒYeah, a mother of twoÉÓ

ÒOr fourÉÓ

ÒOr moreÉÓ

ÒSure,Ó

ÒOf course,Ó

II

The next day, they continued to climb the trail that went meandering up along the cliff. The pathway had become very narrow.

From now on, they could only walk leaning close against the rocky walls. They looked through scattered clouds down at the dense forest. As they climbed, the trees beneath them seemed to grow smaller, seeing the forest as would a mountain eagle, high above. A thin layer of fog condensed under their feet. The path became wet and dangerously slippery.

ÒDo not look down,Ó Oli warned them. His steps were certain. ÒKeep your hands on the rocks.Ó

ÒI cannot help but look down,Ó said Hali. It was a hell of a temptation to jump. ÒSacred beard and anvil, keep my knees unshaken.Ó

Galtar walked behind the dwarves, turning his head, looking back for Inah every now and again. Yet she was fine, following them with ease. A dark bird flew near by, unleashing a lengthy screech. Inah gripped GaltarÕs hand.

ÒWas that an eagle?Ó asked she.

ÒA hawk,Ó said Oli.

ÒItÕs hard to see, but it seemed too small to be a hawk and its head looks too strange to be an eagle,Ó said Galtar.

Soon, the temple of the peaceful highlanders, order of the White Shields, appeared before them. Erected on an almost inaccessible top, it looked like a natural extension of the surrounding rock. Tall wooden gates, decorated with two large and rounded white shields, gaped open in ghastly silence. Dark birds circled above them. Their occasional screeches disrupted the stillness of the air.

ÒThe birds!Ó uttered Galtar grabbing his sword. ÒThose are mountain vultures.Ó Then he pulled the shield from his back and Inah drew her scimitar. Oli drew his short, one-handed light axe from his belt and his brother gripped his hammer. They all went stiff, eyeing each other, stepping forward cautiously. At least, the path become wider.

A hissing sound came from under the thick wood-planks of the gate. A long snake slithered out into the daylight. Its reddish-brown body, with black zigzag stripes running the length of its back, writhed. It lifted its head, size of a fist. The dark stripes behind its eyes and the horn on the tip of its nose loomed menacingly. All of a sudden, as if performing some unintelligible waiting game, the snake slinked into a pile of stones before them. The hissing sound remained. They all stood still, knowing that one wrong move could still be fatal. Galtar shifted his balance slowly, bending forward a little. The viper again exposed its head, this time under a different stone. Its eyes gleamed cold while its forked tongue moved forward between its fangs. The now head rose again. It glided slightly, aiming at the place it was to strike. InahÕs scimitar rose as well. The snake turned its head towards her immediately. Galtar snatched that moment - he leapt and swatted the snake with his shield. He then stared anxiously to the edge of the shield holding his sword ready above it. Now it was a

waiting game. Stiffened, he squinted, waiting... and waiting for the snake to show its poisonous head again. It finally crawled out, with incredible speed, almost flying towards Inah. Galtar swung, cutting the snake in half, but the head kept on its course, its fangs almost striking Inah's boot when suddenly her scimitar came down, hewing its head. Sparks followed the ringing sound of the blade as it hit the rock below. The snake's head rolled down before Oli and Hali's feet. They eyed each other with a mixture of shock and amusement:

ÒMalt and water!Ó shouted Oli

ÒHops and yeast!Ó added Hali. A vulture cry burst forth above their heads. Its shadow slid down toward the gate and the bird landed behind walls. The dull sounds of skin ripping and bones cracking could soon be heard. They walked inside.

ÒThe air is sour and bitter,Ó said Oli, protecting his nose with his checkered neckerchief. ÓI can feel it even in my mouth.Ó

ÒIt is gore that I smell,Ó said Inah. ÓHuman blood.Ó

When they entered the inner, smaller gate, the source of such the stench was revealed. The terrible image left them breathless. Ten dead men were lying, scattered in the yard. Their white robes were now grey, soaked with blood and rain; their bald heads ashen, pale and stiff. Still, on their faces floated not the misery of pain but the freedom felt only at the unwinding of a soul. Only those who attain wisdom in life, can let everything go while dying. It seemed - they had given themselves to death like a dreamer to a dream, like a saint to his prayer. Strange, almost pleasant countenance of their features shocked the group of four. The priests looked as if it had not been sharp weaponry that had quieted them but the peace of meditation. The thick bolts of Azmaranian pugat-crossbows jutted from their bodies. Vultures ripped apart the dead, digging in yawning wounds - the terrible cuts made by zubras and sizirs.

ÒThese monks did not sell their skin cheaply,Ó said Inah, looking at the traces of blood, pieces of armor and other tattered attire on the ground.

ÓI hope they did not,Ó said Oli, gripping his little axe. ÓThe Azmaranians must have removed their dead.Ó

ÒAghabar tricked them,Ó said Inah. ÓThey probably allowed him to enter in peace.Ó

Hali and Galtar examined the barrels before the entrance inside the temple, half full with rainwater.

ÒIt is strange that monks were not alerted by the Allsea,Ó said Galtar, watching at his own face, which was mirrored in the murky water of the barrel.

ÒThe Allsea is cursed. It always has been,Ó Oli answered.

ÒIt is strange, anyway,Ó said Inah. She looked up, above the

entrance door. There was a shield made of stone with a sun, twelve rays and a cross carved into it - symbols of unity and infinity. Unfortunately, my mother was right.

Galtar pushed the door. It was unlocked. Hanging on the side pillars of the entrance, a few of many oil lamps still twinkled dimly, dying slowly. Down the hall, near a small wooden statue, flames of five candles trembled, casting shadows on the wall. With occasional movements of the air that streamed through the windows, the flicker of the lights projected a grotesque image - the deaf dance of soaring ghosts. On the cold marble stone of the altar, a white shield reclined, splintered. Behind the altar, lay Nyardi's body. Several terrible wounds covered his head, shoulders and arms. Obviously, he had fought barehanded, holding only his white wooden shield, which lacked even an iron-trim, and was fasten with ropes. He had fought honorably, as a true leader and high priest of his order - with no metal or any kind of weapon at all. After defeating him, Aghabar's men fettered his legs. They knew that the followers of the White Shields buried their dead with a pillow below their feet. The priests believed in that the March to Enlightenment would lead them to the Gate of Infinity, after death. That is why they often walked barefoot, and the Earth was their elemental. Those who had killed Nyardi had chained his legs only to make his last moments that much more painful. Galtar freed Nyardi's legs. He took then the two parts of Nyardi's shield, put them together and laid it underneath the brave man's feet. Although death had left the monk's face a mass of sores, peace still radiated from his closed eyes and from his lips that smiled at its corners, for his soul had already found its way. Galtar looked then into the hallway between the two tall statues - the two monks, brothers, who had founded the order. They were sitting in a posture of deep meditation. In the darkness of the hall behind them, something stood Ð a deeper black in the blackness - a rider and his horse.

No hoof sounds could be heard. Silence. There was nothing to see, and yet it was there: The messenger of death, watching Galtar with no eyes.

III

Two days had passed and Mamaki still had not arrived. Images of the ruthlessly killed priests smoldered in Galtar's thoughts creating an uncanny throng. Mourning souls called him: "Avenge us, young man from the north, avenge us!" And that was becoming hard to bear; and harder, as the day grew old.

They gathered branches and tall sticks and build some sort of improvised burial platforms. Then they laid the dead on them. Carefully, one by one, they set the lifeless bodies on fire. Galtar looked at the flames, giving his thoughts to the pyre: "All fled, all gone! I had come too late for Anaya; I came too late to save Nyardi. I am doomed, cursed by demons to arrive in time only to bury all my hopes." He knew: The journey must be continued soon. He did not want to be late again. Something urged him to carry on southward, towards the land where the killers dwell. He could not wait for Mamaki any

longer. Going forward, that was his way of fighting misery. Not giving up, but perpetual moving with a stubbornness that verged on madness. On the other hand, what kind of madness could he be drawn into if he stayed? Dangerous thoughts crept into his mind, a horrendous image of his own sword striking his heart - with his own hands. The inner struggle turned into a real headache as if his thoughts were looking for the way to cut his head inside-out, to escape the mad cycle.

Another morning came. With the coming of the new day, he felt even worse. Thorny impatience taunted him. He needed to continue his quest as soon as possible.

“You cannot go just like that,” said Inah.

“Why?” asked Galtar. He breathed heavily, barely controlling his feelings. “Like what?”

“Mamaki told us to wait. Remember?” Inah crossed her hands before her chest. She did not like the way the conversation had started, but she could not rein herself because Galtar’s sudden will to continue the journey alone was unexpected and had astounded her. At least, she had not expected him to come up with such idea so abruptly. Even if Mamaki were not coming, Inah assumed that any further action would be a matter for discussion, at least, and that a decision would be made collectively.

“Things have changed. I cannot wait any longer, Inah,” said Galtar, leaning on his sword, looking somewhere behind her back.

“Hey, I am here,” she caught his eyes with hers. “You will put us all in danger,” said Inah.

“What are you talking about?” asked Galtar in a rebuking tone. He buckled his belt tighter and put his sword back into the scabbard. “I have no time to lose, Inah,” he said, turning his eyes to the southern edge of the cliff.

“Time? You are talking about, time?” Inah shouted angrily. “We have lost our time helping you!”

Galtar raised his eyebrow. He looked at her disagreeably, yet a bit surprised. He certainly did not expect such a verbal onrush from her. Now he was the one taken aback by the tone. He never argued with a she-warrior before, though.

“Yes,” Inah continued, evidently with no intention to give up her anger. “My mother and me - WE helped YOU only to find out how disrespectful you are. If this is your final sign of appreciation, so be it. I do not care! I am sorry that we ever let you join us.”

Galtar stood still, his mind stoned. He knew that Inah was not going to embrace his decision with open arms, but this rebuking tone was not what he had expected at all; not with such intensity, leastways. “If that is the case, then I am sorry to—” he did not finish what he wanted to say as Inah chose that moment to burst into a wild rage: “You are so selfish and so self involved! You have your own

quest and nobody else is important,Ó her eyebrows flared up and down like a bird of prey.

ÒThenÉÓ he wanted to calm her but she did not let him talk.

ÒThen GO! I do not mind,Ó Inah almost screamed her words. ÒYou do not know anything about Aghabar, you are too proud - so selfishÉ Ah!Ó

ÒI will not listen to this; I cannot listen,Ó said Galtar and turned his face away from her flaming eyes. But then, she came closer without fear, obviously waiting for an answer.

Oli and Hali watched them all this time.

ÒWhat a shrew,Ó said Oli, his eyes blinking fast. ÒI will let a hundred barrels overrun me if this does not sound like a fight between newly weds, don't you agree Hali?Ó

ÒYeah, bror. It is a sort of love-in-a-mug brawl,Ó said Oli, shrugging.

Inah sat on the stone and let her face fall into her slim hands. Tears flowed through her long fingers. Galtar neared her, slowly. He lay his hands gently on her round shoulders. She trembled at the touch. ÒPlease, Inah. Do not do this to me,Ó he whispered looking for her eyes. She would not look at him so he knelt and took her hands from her face and their eyes met. She eyed him through her tears. ÒI am sorry,Ó he said. ÒPlease, do not cryÉÓ he wiped off the tear that coursed down her cheek. She let him embrace her hands in his and she knelt down as he did. They were kneeling before each other, broken-hearted like two kids in the sand whose castle had just been destroyed by a wave. It was the wave of destiny.

ÒI onlyÉ I only wanted you to stay, cannot you see that?Ó She said. ÒI mean - to stay alive.Ó

ÒI know, I know,Ó he wiped the tears from her cheeks and hugged her. She hugged him back, tightly.

ÒI am sorry, I am so sorry. I feel stupidÉÓ Inah whispered. ÒPlease forgive me.Ó

ÒNo, I am sorry, Inah. If I could resist the urge I feel, I would.Ó

ÒIt is all fine now,Ó she said and stood up. Slowly, she took off her necklace, which carried an azure medallion. Her fingers opened his hand, and she placed the medallion in his palm. ÒI only beg that you please survive, do not dieÉ And that is all.Ó

Chapter Fifteen

The Wing-Post

I

Something live and silver-gray was laying on the road. Eredian

stooped near the body that pulsed in the dust. Gore was threaded through its feathers. Its little eyes looked at the sky above, reflecting the deep blueness, in which its mighty wings would never fly again. Aitri and Lofar came closer to the bird. They waited a bit for Eredian to say something about the wounds on the dying hawk.

“The hawk came from the Wing-Post we are heading to, no doubt. It looks as if it was attacked by a larger, stronger bird.”

“Carrion - The Crowmaster” said Aitri, looking toward the southern sky. “We better hurry up. Some evil spirits are on the move there.” At sundown they arrived at the grassy top of the last rise of the Snow Mountain slopes - the border of Varas. A flat land of sparse forests stretched along the river before them. Although still far to the south, the Wing-Post was clearly visible in the distance. The roofs of many little lodging houses that stood near the base looked from afar like a group of small, sleeping porcupines. From the roofs, two barely noticeable strips of smoke wound up and to the west over the slim line of a long bridge. Under the bridge, a river forked into two streams embracing a forested hill. It was the first hill of a new mountain chain - the Valdic Mountains. Lofar and his dwarves had begun unpacking their ponies and mules. Though tired, they whistled or sung quietly, happy to be taking a long rest. Eredian walked farther down the grassy slope, searching the area on his own. He stepped on a flat rock and leaned on an old coarse-bark oak tree gazing into the valley. Something he spotted. A shadow moved among the distant trees. He immediately climbed the oak and crouched on a branch, continuing to watch allowing the warm southern breeze to lave his face. Lofar looked at him from below, hunkered down, quiet in the lengthy boughs and the tree’s roots. He wondered whether Eredian was simply enjoying the gift of his exceptional elven senses, or had he noticed something disturbing enough that he, a dwarf, would not be able to see it. He decided not to ask about it, at least not right away, for he knew that his friend did not like being disturbed while meditating. “He may be thinking of his past, or about his family; his brothers and sisters. If I ask a question now, it would undoubtedly upset him. Hm” But what if he smells danger? Oh, yes. He may actually have sensed some malicious creature and is now thinking about how to tell us without disturbing us too much. Hm” No. If he had spotted anything like that, he would have told me at once, of course - I am his friend,” thought Lofar, and the flow of his thoughts would have continued on and on if his own tongue had not wagged suddenly:

“What, for hammer’s sake, are you doing up there?!” exclaimed Lofar, helpless to control his curiosity. “Is it some threat you sense? If it is, I would appreciate it if you alerted me to it. If not, well” his eyes went down to the valley. “Let’s just say then, I am sorry.”

“Do not be sorry, Lofar, for you may be speaking for your own inner sense. Somebody is coming, you are right. It could be a man, or an elf” I am not sure, yet I do not feel disturbed as I should be when sensing danger.”

Lofar looked up again, straining his eyes. He could not see the elf clearly anymore, for Eredian was wrapped in a shade that was growing between the branches and leaves as night approached. "Pardon my tongue. Sometimes it is like a foal before a yoke," said Lofar. He felt relieved of his quirk but little ashamed as well. However, no embarrassment could prevent his curiosity to speak out, and that was Lofar's nature: "Tell me, bror - what do you see?"

"I see nothing, but I hear voices," answered Eredian.

"Voices?" the dwarf now strained his ear and cupped his hand on it to hear better.

"It is the whisper of a woman," said the elf.

"A woman?" Lofar's eyes widened, staring at the forest in the vale before him. Shadows grew long and dark there. "Do not say it is a witch whispering some nasty words to turn us all into stones and trees."

"Not at all, brother. I would not say that she is a witch or an enemy of any kind."

"Do you hear more voices? If it is not a witch then it could be a mistress murmuring to her lover, hidden in the forest, far from all eyes, huu-hu-hu." Lofar chuckled, leaning the face of his axe to his mouth.

Somebody's hand slapped him lightly on his head from the back: "Shut up, Lofar!" Aitri scolded him. "Eredian might give us more guidance if you would stop bothering him with your stupid questions," said the blacksmith who came, looking for them. "You two better join the dwarves; we all need a good rest."

"But first, I want to go and find out who whispers in the forest," said Eredian. He climbed down at once from the tree and ran downhill into the young woods of the valley. After only a few quick steps he reached the forest, hopped swiftly on the fork of a sapling and went on over the branches. The elf then disappeared in the gloom of the tree-crowns.

II

Two young women, clad in bear skins, crouched behind a great mossy stone.

"Those are the dwarves of King Udar," whispered the first. "I saw the standard with a mattock and a boar-skull; it is their symbol."

Neither one of them could see or hear the shadowy figure that passed climbing a tree behind their backs. Eredian listened, hidden among leaves above them. According to their attire and speech, he was quite sure that they belong to the warriors' clan of White Bear.

"Udar is our ally," whispered another one. "Should we approach them and warn them about all of the suspicious night-creatures around,

before they set-up their camp?Ó

ÒI am not sure. We can go back and ask Lindin first. But then, the night may catch us, so we would not be able to warn the dwarves anything before sunrise.Ó

ÒThat would be too late,Ó said a voice above them, hidden amid tree-leaves. The girls leapt in surprise, not being sure about the direction the voice has come. Elves are good at such tricks. ÓWho are you?Ó They asked in unison. Eredian did not prolong their uncertainty. He went down immediately, making a somersault in the air and landing on his feet before them.

ÒLet me introduce myself, O devanas - children of the polar light. I am Eredian from the elven realm of Yidaman,Ó he said, removing his cloak and showing his open, unarmed hands.

They stepped back but gripped no weapon. Elf could see now better - both of them had dark hair. DolmaÓs was dark brown and long, confined with a band of silver-worked purple satin. She carried an elven bow similar to EredianÓs. SenyaÓs hair was tint-black, cut square across her bright hazel eyes and falling to her naked shoulders.

ÒWhat are you doing here, Eredian? Your home is very far.Ó

ÒI came with the dwarves and my master, Blacksmith Aitri, looking for our friend named Galtar,Ó answered Eredian readily and added with obeisance: ÓI bow to your tribe.Ó

ÒA bit tall for an elf, isnÓt he, Dolma?Ó said the first devana.

ÒTall and handsome with loving manners, Senka,Ó said the another one. ÓWe should grab him and keep him as a live trophy.Ó

A naughty smile appeared in the end of his lips and his eyes moved quickly from one girl to the other: ÓI wonder what kind of joke is that, though I wouldn't mind the play.Ó

ÒSenka is mischievous. But since you do not mind the play, be ready for a role,Ó said Dolma eyeing him from the feet to his greenish eyes. ÓWe eat smoked elves in winters.Ó They all chuckled then.

III

Shimmer of a small fire danced on the rims of dwarven shields, tidily lined on the large flat stone beside the old wide oak. Aitri and Lofar were sitting beside a fire while the rest of the dwarves slept, slumbering deep in their dreams. It was a young company of dwarven fellows, strong and brave, yet still not fully accustomed to long marching. This was the first long journey any of them had ever made.

ÒThey dream about homely cooking,Ó said Lofar.

ÒThey may dream of a warm bed, as well, son.Ó

ÒNay. They are miners, they can sleep anywhere. I can tell by the way they snore.Ó

One of the dwarves suddenly snored loudly and the sound faded through a few sweet chomps. ÓI told you,Ó said Lofar. ÓIt is all about food.Ó

Aitri smiled. Light wind brought a sound of steps through the grass. Lofar took his axe. Three slim figures moved from the forest in the vale into the moonlight and continued to walk uphill towards them. Aitri signaled Lofar to put his axe down. It was Eredian coming with his two new friends.

ÓLet me introduce to you these two devanas, warrior-princesses from the clan of White Bear,Ó said Eredian. The gentle faces of the two girls came to the light of their fire. At the first moment he saw them, Lofar blinked couple of times, not knowing what to say. Then he gathered himself quickly:

ÓI bow to your beauty!Ó exclaimed Lofar bending low. He could not take his eyes off SenkaÓs face. Her bright silver eyes and straight nose gave her a glorious look, the physiognomy of a sorcerer rather than a warrior.

Aitri slapped Lofar upside the head and said: ÓI bow to your clan - that is what you are supposed to say. I wonder what your father Udar would think if he could hear such blasphemy from your mouth,Ó said Aitri then bowed to the young women: ÓI bow to your clan and I apologize for the foolishness that slipped out of my apprentice.Ó

ÓOh, I do not mind his words at all,Ó said Senka pushing her fists against her hips. Then she stepped closer to Lofar and snatched his beard gently saying: ÓYou really know how to talk to a woman, eh?Ó

LofarÓs nose went red as if his head was a furnace with smoke flying out through his ears. Aitri only looked up, turned his eyes and murmured to himself: ÓBlood flows faster, long before spring, with todayÓs kids.Ó

They sat around the fire and Dolma told them the news that had come to them from the Wing-post of Varas: ÓMamaki sent us here five weeks ago when a messenger from Varas reported that some strangers were roaming through their land. The wing-posts are fairly deep inside the territories and not all of them are yet fortified. We heard rumors that the Azmarans were gathering for the new expansion to the west. That means all kinds of diversions are possible. For the last few days we have been scouting around together with soldiers from Varas. There are about thirty Varasians stationed at the wing-post. For now, hey have four fast horses and a few ponies, though only one eagle and two hawks in the birdhouse. Master Yidaman has sent a takan with the rider, elf Lindin.Ó

ÓOh, I know Lidind well,Ó said Eredian. ÓHis whole family is devoted to the virtue of taming and riding takans. Is he in the post now?Ó

ÒHe arrived yesterday but when he was about to land, a cloud of large carrion birds swooped on the taken and wounded the dragon-swan badly. It fell sick and it may die soon.Ó

ÒWhat about the rider, then?

ÒLindin went through it with injuries as well; but he is fine now. He is sitting there, trying to cure his taken.Ó

Aitri smoked his pipe, listening to Dolma's words carefully.

ÒIt would be good to have some druid's power at hand now,Ó Lofar said.

ÒIf the elf cannot cure his taken, a druid cannot do much better,Ó spoke the old blacksmith. ÓIt is quite clear to me that he was ambushed by the creature called Carrion - The Crowmaster.Ó

ÒIf it is as you speak, Master Aitri, one thing bothers me here then,Ó said Eredian. ÓAnd that is: how did the Crowmaster know about the coming of the taken? Isn't it a bit strange?Ó

ÒStrange, indeed. We both know that Carrion dwells far in the south. Someone must have called him for the task,Ó the blacksmith released a puff of smoke, looking into it, as it soared above the fire. ÓStrange and frightening coincidence,Ó he muttered. ÓWere those birds around here before, Senka?Ó

ÒYes. And actually, there is one more thing,Ó said Senka. She eyed Dolma who nodded.

ÒTell me all, Senka. I have to know everything to be able to help. So go on, what else happened?Ó asked Aitri. He moved his pipe from one corner of his mouth to the other, gripping it in his teeth, looking at the cinder. Then he lifted his eyes up from the fire and looked at her again, waiting for more information. Senka continued: ÓOnly a day before the taken arrived, a man came to the Wing-Post. He was a priest of white shields. He escaped the massacre in the Valdic Mountains. Their temple was attacked by orcs and Azmarans led by Aghabar. The man was able to escape the slaying because of the confusion that ensued when the dragon arrived. He told us that the dragon was angry with the attackers because they had not conquered the temple earlier, so it ate two orcs and one human from the Azmaranian lines to punish them. After that, the White Shields were attacked again by the joint force of orcs, Azmaranians and the dragon. The monks were finally defeated by the end of the day. This monk managed to sneak through the encirclement and fled. On his way through the land of Varas, he was attacked by carrions but somehow managed to reach the post. Unfortunately, he fell ill from seemingly the same sickness that has hit the taken.Ó

ÒHumm, HummÓ Aitri looked towards the post. A young bright moon shone above it. ÓObviously, the Crowmaster's birds followed the priest here. And the Crowmaster must be around still, hidden and close enough to attack, yet far enough away to remain unnoticed by your friend Lindin or Eredian.Ó

ÒMaybe it is the time to go forward then, and move out from the open space,Ó said Lofar.

Aitri glanced at him and his dwarves. They all slumbered, snoring deep in their dreams.

ÒLook at your dwarves, Lofar. I do not think we should continue right now. The boys are tired.Ó

ÒIt should not be a problem, I will wake them all now, if you wish, Master,Ó said Lofar.

ÒMy dear, Lofar,Ó said Aitri quietly, looking at him with worry. Dark rings circled LofarÓs eyes. ÓYou yourself are tired, your tongue has gotten slower and your eyelids are as heavy as a sawmill stone. We marched all day long and we all need to rest. Though, we will gear up soon. YouÓll wake them before sunrise, then weÓll go to the wing-post.Ó

IV

Mist floated on the river which murmured behind three little cottages. Three great beams supported a tremendous wooden frame of the structure in the middle. It soared high, holding a great platform on the top. A man was climbing down from it. As he descended, he examined the joints on his path, shaking some of the rods, checking their strength. Long iron-nails, deeply hammered, held it fast. He grinned with satisfaction. Aitri, who just arrived, waited patiently for the captain to climb down. The man was commander of the post; broad shouldered with fair-brown aslant eyes, high forehead and nose straight as an arrow.

ÒGreetings, Aitri the Blacksmith,Ó said he. ÓLong time no see! Gald must have been bored up in his land of Rank and his towers of Katagala!Ó

ÒHeil Neva,Ó said Aitri. ÓWhat about your god, Varan? I heard about some birds, flying around, uninvited. Apparently, the birds ruined his heavenly garden. Is that true?Ó

ÒI wish I can laugh on this one,Ó said Neva, squinting. Two of his rangers drew a canoe out of the river, looking questionably at the group of dwarves. He wave to them and they swiftly ran to join him. Soon after, they all gathered in the biggest cabin, which served as the storageroom and had a kitchen. Several women were cooking the morning meal and Dolma went to help them.

ÒLook who we have here, a lady warrior,Ó said the woman in charge, who wore a white muffin cap and a bright blue plaid apron over her large breasts and wide hips. ÓYou better take that blade and cut some veggies here, sister.Ó

ÒOf course,Ó said Dolma and drew her sword out. ÓThat is why I am here.Ó

ÒOh, I was just kidding, my dear,Ó said the lady, as the blade

shone before her. 'I know you were out all night, don't bother yourself with the kitchen work.'

'But I would like to help,' said Dolma.

'If you want, then just sit here and watch. You may learn something.'

Dolma leaned by the corner and watched them work. The three younger ladies glanced at her often, but she could not tell whether it was out of curiosity or dislike. Devanas were an entirely matriarchal clan. It was still common in other Gald tribes to have women at arms as well. The people of Varas, however, had a different and more distinctive approach to soldiery – that job was reserved solely for their men.

The hall at the base of the structure served as a stable. The level above was a bird-house. Long wooden pillars protruded out into the air, holding the landing platform. At the corner of the platform, and a bit higher, was seated a small watchtower. From there, hawks, eagles or pigeons were sent with messages. The elvish master Yidaman had agreed to give one precious dragon-swan to each of the four wing-posts the alliance had built. Therefore, the alliance started to build bigger platforms (like this one) for the takans.

Eredian met with the elf, Lindin the takan-rider. Lindin was of a smaller stature than Eredian. He had dark blue eyes, deep as the Osohor Sea. Eredian had met him before. Lindin was the youngest son of Liden, the renowned takan-trainer. His family had long held the tradition of taming and breeding takans.

'Where is your horse, Vinge?' asked Lindin.

'I lent it to a good friend of mine; it is a long story. I hope he is good, though. Tell me, how is your takan?'

'Not good, Eredian. Not good. My takan lay in the stable now,' said Lindin. 'But first, let me take you to the house where we keep the monk from the White Shields. Master Aitri is already there.'

The sick man was lying in a dark room. Women from a nearby village had changed his cloths and bandaged the wounds, and made sure that there was always someone there to take care of him. He was still unconscious; his body covered in scars, particularly his head and hands. He slept uneasily, suffering from a strong fever through which he muttered to himself in a delirium: 'Black wings... their beaks... I have to watch for my eyes.'

Aitri sat, checking the priest's pulse on his neck and hand. The blacksmith gently lifted the man's eyelids and glanced at his pupils. Then he looked in the man's mouth. Even the untrained eye could see how swollen his tongue was. 'Poor young monk,' said the woman who was placing a wet cloth across his forehead. Eredian and Lindin entered the room.

'We sent our fastest grey hawk yesterday,' said Lindin. 'It is a

pity that our birds are only weak little message-carriers. The alliance should find a way to strengthen their wings. It would be nice if we could train some war-birds, fighting eagles or something like that.Ó

Aitri still looked at the weary man: ÓNot good. He may die soon if we do not find a healer.Ó He then spotted something wrapped in goatskin. It lay there, on a little bench beside the bed. The object was the size of a human skull. ÓWhat is this?Ó asked Aitri?

ÓIt is the gemstone he brought with him,Ó answered Neva, the captain. It seemed to be something very important. Anyhow, We decided not to unwrap it before he woke. If he does not recover, we will wait for someone who knows how to deal with magical stones. I mean, one can never be certain with those magical things...Ó

ÓIt is good to be cautious,Ó said Aitri and eyed the monk again. ÓThe White Shields know how to help those who are dying. They help people surmount the journey of the soul, and yet I can do nothing to help him live,Ó AitriÓs voice trembled in despair. He took the manÓs hand in his own and whispered: ÓI hope, at least, you know how to die. Yet I pray to Gald that I may bring you back.Ó Aitri then closed his eyes murmuring the words of his prayer.

Suddenly, a horn sounded. It came from the watchtower above them. The watchmen shouted in alert: ÓA flock of crows! They are attacking a horseman coming from the eastern road!Ó

Chapter Sixteen

Carrion The Crowmaster

I

Mamaki was riding hastily on the filthy road along the dense woods of Varas. She was approaching the Wing-Post tower when dark, menacing clouds of birds appeared. They rose from the tree tops before her, gathering into one gargantuan flock, and flying down on her. She wielded her spear above her head in a circular motion keeping the birds at bay for a while. The keenest of the crows - those who dared to come too close - had their wings slashed and their feathers dispersed into the air. The others flew up higher, trying to attack her from above, swooping down on her head and the hand that gripped the spear. The attack went without success. Vinge was carrying her at the same pace. Then, the largest crow of all made a huge circle, as if signaling to others some new tactic they are about to use. It flipped on its back and dove down attacking the horse, aiming its sharp beak at VingeÓs neck. A piercing neigh broke out from Vinge and his eyes widened in pain. He stumbled, gripping the giant crow in his teeth, breaking its backbone. Blood sprinkled onto VingeÓs neck. The horse fell, squeezing in agony the dying, black, feathery monster. Mamaki tumbled from the horseÓs back, falling into a cobweb of tree roots. Then the crows pounced on her even harder, seizing the chance. Mad and wild was their victorious screech.

ÒCome on chicken. It is not all over yet,Ò she spoke as blood oozed from her nose and lips. Her spirit was high but her weary body did not respond. She reclined limply in the bushes, waiting for the final punch. A great crow landed on her chest, swinging its beak to hit her in the face. Suddenly, an arrow zipped and stuck in its neck, throwing the feathery body on the tree-root beside. Another bird came from behind MamakiÕs back, but squeaked immediately when a second arrow swept it away.

Eredian was firing his arrows, running with incredible speed across the field, jumping over the large rocks and bushes. Arrows flew from him as if he had not two but four hands or more. Fifteen arrows he had in his quiver and one by one, all of them streamed away sending fifteen carrion-birds to their deaths. Then he pulled out his scimitar, still running swiftly.

The birds that attacked the fallen Vinge scattered before Lofar and his dwarves. He led six of his dwarves to MamakiÕs aid while the rest of them remained at the post in the case of a flank attack. LofarÕs dwarves had followed Eredian, swinging their mallets and axes, crushing and hewing the heads of many crows. The remaining birds backed away to the forest screeching and flapping their wings in panic. Soon, Aitri and Vara arrived with a group of men and a little wagon pulled by two ponies. Quickly, they all lifted the wounded horse. Eredian was happy to see Vinge again, yet sadness overtook him as they placed the animalÕs weary body onto the wagon. The ponies pulled it, and the small column headed back to the Wing-Post.

Eredian placed his hand on VingeÕs neck: ÒYou have a bad wound. But you are a Vranates, a strong breed. You will survive. Soon, you will gallop again, even stronger than before.Ó

Two Varasians helped Mamaki to walk. As they passed by Eredian, Aitri and Lofar, she heard them talking. They were wondering if their friend was still alive.

ÒDo not worry,Ó said Mamaki. ÒYour friend is alive. He is waiting for me in the Valdic Mountains.Ó

ÒThank you, Mamaki,Ó said Aitri. He drew closer to her, giving a sign to the two soldiers that carried her to speed up. ÒWe will talk about it later, once we reach shelter. WeÕll wait for you to get better. Then you can tell us everything you know about Galtar.Ó The group headed to the wing-post in haste.

A sudden sound from behind stopped them all for a moment. It was a high-pitched bird-cry that echoed shrilly in their ears. They all turned back to the east, looking for the source. The shocking vision froze the blood-flow of every one of them.

ÒMama holds a battle ax!Ó shouted Lofar, widening his hazel eyes.

ÒMaholdax!Ó exclaimed another dwarf as his jaw dropped down.

A shadow loomed over the wavy outline, traveling the eastern horizon. There stood a figure, dark and threatening, taller than the

tallest man. Crows, thousands of them, rose high above the forest. They were gathering into a gigantic flock that spanned for miles. Then the flock rolled down, toward the company with a horrendous screech. The sounds mixed into one queer noise that forced them to cover their ears.

ÒRun, quick!Ó Shouted Aitri. ÒNeva, take care of Mamaki. Save the horse as well!Ó

The captain did as Aitri demanded. He and his men immediately hurried with the wagon towards the post. Eredian collected his arrows in a rush, plucking them out from the feathery corpses. He found twelve arrows undamaged, and placed them back into his quiver. The then elf raised and, looking grimly towards the flock, he announced: ÒReady for another throw,Ó

The flock was fast approaching them.

ÒWe must take good care of her, boys,Ó shouted Neva to his soldiers who were helping Mamaki walk. She was pale with drowsiness, barely held her eyes open.

ÒI will be fine,Ó she whispered in a fatigue.

ÒSoon, we will need your healing skills more than anything in the world, Mamaki. I will carry you,Ó said Vara and took Mamaki in his arms.

ÒYou are right, Vara,Ó said Aitri. ÒShe may be the only hope for the ill-fated priest, the horse and the dragon-swan. Many of those birds have venomous beaks,Ó he stopped and turned for a moment towards the east, looking up at the giant flock that was approaching them. ÒNo time for retreat, they will get us on our way. We will make our stand here, then continue to retreat slowly, while you and your frontiersmen escort her to the wing-post. Do it as I say. Go!Ó Neva obeyed. He and his men hurried down the road with Mamaki and Vinge.

II

Aitri went down on one knee, leaning the top of his sledgehammer, Guldgrom, to his forehead. He began to speak words of magic, gathering his secret power: ÒXa sretni se sa Rank, Rank day ruku Xa. U dodiru tom, snagu groma - Guldgrom nosi!Ó (ÒXa, let the Rank fall inside; Rank, give your hand to the Xa. At the touch - power of thunder, let me wield it through this hammer and set the thunder free)

The flock was getting closer. The runes on Guldgrom remained unchanged, not flickering as they should. Aitri looked to the horizon and saw Carrion the Crowmaster. The creature spread its black cloak while the dark crest of feathers swayed over its head.

ÒHe is blocking my magic,Ó thought Aitri. ÒI cannot cast fear on his birds yet.Ó

ÒTo the death!Ó uttered Lofar and kissed his axe.

ÒTo the death!Ó six dwarves that stayed with him repeated kissing their weapons. The shadow covered them all and the gargantuan flock plunged down on them. EredianÕs arrows flew into the midst of the flying mass, killing many instantly. Some of his arrows soared so powerfully that they penetrated two crows at once. The dwarves grinned, gripping their axes, mallets, mattocks and maces. Before the clash, each of them exclaimed their own name, ejaculating it as a war-cry:

ÒLofar, son of King Udar!Ó - ÒMirge, son of Entu!Ó - ÒBeara, son of Yonhar!Ó - ÒIrdfun, son of Redgap!Ó - ÓNengo, son of Deldar!Ó - ÓPeyda, son of Grimi!Ó - ÓVuk, son of Antak!Ó

The birds screeched sharply. Aitri swung his sledgehammer, slamming the spirit out of the leading crow. EredianÕs scimitar hewed the wing of the second one and his slim elvish knife cut off the head of the third. The dwarves met them with the same valor. Feathers and blood sputtered all over their shiny buckles and helms. In the distance, the Crowmaster was making particular movements above his head, performing magical commands. The largest birds of the flock then rolled down aiming their claws towards the dwarves, gripping their beards, ears, noses... Obviously, the command has been received: Attack the enemy in their heads first. Birds pounced on NengoÕs helmet from behind, pulling the helm over the dwarfÕs eyes. Blinded he was for the moment, and the birds pecked at him mercilessly. Under the attack of many beaks his helm flew off at last. Instantly, he received a terrible blow to his scalp. Nengo fell on his knees, raising his arms to protect his face. Peyda leaped up to help him, swinging his mace and smashing the birds, then slicing them with the edge of his shield. A sharp pain at the back of his neck stopped him. He turned and many blows met his face too.

ÒMy eyes!Ó Peyda screamed in pain. ÒThey have gouged my eyes!Ó

From that moment on the company joined together more tightly; body to body, protecting each othersÕ back. The dwarves brought their shields up collectively making them look like a live, fighting turtle, with their weapons protruding whenever the chance arose to slice at black feathery monsters. In that formation, they moved above their two fallen comrades to protect them. Alas. It was too late; Peyda and Nengo were dead.

III

Dolma and Senka were running through the forest, carrying their weapons tightly, ready for a fight. They were masked with foliage and their faces and hands were painted. Their mission: to flank the Crowmaster and either kill him or else interrupt his magical control over the flock. They were going to attack him from a distance with DolmaÕs bow and then, if the arrow went amiss, they could engage him into a close combat, and disrupt his mind long enough for their friends to regain the initiative.

ÒI see him,Ó whispered Senka. ÒOver there,Ó

Dolma climbed a great tree, crouched on a long branch and checked her balance. The distance was still fairly large, and so she needed a steady support below her legs to taut the bow with enough strength to cover the space. To her right, in the remoteness, the fight was at its peak. She heard screeches, but could see nothing through the black cloud. Carrion the Crowmaster stood, moving his body from time to time exerting his mysterious control over the flock. Large feathers bent on the wind at the top of his black helm while his eyes were in the shade of a beak-shaped visor. Senka crouched beside the tree, touching the ground. She groped for her scimitar preparing to spring forward and attack the Crowmaster as soon as Dolma had released her arrow. Dolma drew an arrow from her quiver and quickly licked the white feather of the arrow's tail. Since the distance was greater than usual, she stroked the feathers with her fingers making them narrower. Her hands taut the bow. She held her breath. The tip of the arrow was aligned with the target. She heard the zing of the wind as it met the tightened string by her ear.

"Add some feathers to your ass, chicken-master," said she and the arrow zipped out. Carrion was hit. They could not see clearly whether his hand, part of his cloak or even his leg had caught the arrow, yet Senka charged at him readily. She leaped towards the enemy, screaming powerfully. The Crowmaster pulled two black sticks from his belt. The sticks were one-handed mattocks with beaks fixed at the tops. Dolma jumped down from the tree and ran to help Senka in the attack.

On the other side, half of the birds dispersed. Some started to fly back to their master, some continued to attack the group, but the intensity of the assault abruptly subsided. Aitri noticed two silhouettes and perceived them to be the Crowmaster and Senka fighting. Immediately, he knelt down, leaning the blood-stained Guldgrom to his forehead. It stuck to his face, as tarnished as it was with bloody feathers. He spoke the words of magic and the runes started to gleam.

"FEAR TO YOUR BIRDS!" thundered his voice, laden with power. An outburst of white beams flew through the cloud of birds, penetrating many of them, carrying them away and reaching their master. Aitri's spell caught the Crowmaster's attention, who was still entrenched in battle with Senka. Parrying and attacking her, he fought for his own life, slowly retreating, weakened by the arrow that had struck in his waist. The greater part of his crows started to flap, flying chaotically in every direction. Many collided with one another or fell into the trees, ramming with the earth. A small number of crows - those who were out-of-range of Aitri's magic - flew back to their master, swooping now on Senka. Dolma joined her, attacking the enemy fiercely. Finally, the crows became defensive. They attacked the two devanas once again in an attempt to protect their master as he ran away from the battlefield. When Aitri, Eredian and the dwarves reached the amazons, Carrion the Crowmaster was diminishing in the misty, remote woods, followed by the tattered black pillow around him. The blood-soaked ground was strewn with dead crows.

"After this, I won't be eating chicken-soup for a while," snarled

Lofar, spitting out in disgust a feather that had stuck to his lip.

Chapter Seventeen

Fire-cry

I

Galtar climbed down from the cliffs, carefully looking for holes and cracks, using them as support. Below him, the cold river splashed against the rock. He was still quite high up, at least twice his own height, when his handhold gave way. He let himself fall into the cold current. His body met the river with a large splash. Every muscle twitched in the freezing water which swallowed him and gripped his heart with coldness. He swam swiftly to the other side. As soon as he had stepped out of the water, he quickly unpacked his backpack, pulling out a flint-bag and his cloak so that they might dry in the open air. He took his clothes off and managed to light a fire. Spreading his wet attire around the little flame he noticed a sign carved into the bark of the tree that stood before him. It was the sign typically used as a pointer when a large group or an army moved through the land.

Soon, he dressed himself again in clothes that were still partly wet and hid his backpack in a hole among the roots of an old tree, covering it with his shield and piles of leaves. The talisman he had received from Inah he fastened to the base of his blade, just above the hilt. As he was doing this, a light wind brought a strange stench. He checked around and found horse droppings. They were still wet. He moved from one tree to next, stopping and listening. Large deer with a crown of great antlers, watched him with curiosity. Two little boars, who had been busy digging under the root of a big stump, stopped for a moment, then dashed into the forest.

Galtar then began to travel south, climbing steadily up to a large forested plateau. There, the wind brought a human voice to his ears, so he crouched and snuck through the bushes towards the sound. The point of an Azmaranian rounded hut appeared among the trees. He looked at the road and decided not to go forward, but back, then around. As he did so, a palisade wall emerged before him and he spotted more tents. dozens of them. A dog barked and the pounding of many feet could be heard. The tips of numerous spears appeared behind the bushes. They passed him by, but then more of them came, streaming in a long column. Their officers bellowed, shouting commands and the soldiers dispersed, running around. They gathered together waiting for another command.

ÒA combat exercise,Ò thought Galtar. As night approached, he withdrew deeper into the woods. ÒI should go closer, but the dogs will smell my presence. Not an easy task at allÉ What if Inah was right?Ó Whispered a new voice in him. ÒWhat if your impatient nature really has endangered your friends Galtar? What are you trying to achieve?Ó

ÒI am trying to find Aghabar,Ó he argued. ÒNo,Ó continued the inner voice. ÒYou believe that you can find and beat the dragon. But

know you, this is not one of the bard Olan's fairy-tales. This is real life, Galtar! If you continue this way you will soon find your own death.

But at least I have found this camp, he answered. Not all has been in vain. I found them and I can look and find out more. Mamaki and my people will be able to use whatever information I find, I am sure of that. As night closed about him, all sounds sank into a whisper of the wind in the tree-crowns above. He was lying hidden in a hole next to a living tree with scented leaves and grass laced underneath. Tired and weary he was; the stillness made him forget about the enemy and he slowly fell asleep.

The coldness of new dawn awoke him, bringing a fever that shook his whole body. Since his clothes had not been entirely dry, parts of it had frozen in the morning. At the moment, the only thing his feverish mind could think off was fire. He needed its warmth desperately, but then he grasped that the smoke would reveal his presence to the enemy. The coldness in his limbs attacked him so strongly that he decided to go back to the place near the river, where his search had begun. And so he did.

Back and forth, back and forth... I feel lost, thought he, rubbing his arms, sitting by the small fire he just lit. The fever was gone now. His clothes dried thoroughly in the heat of the flames. Fearing to be spotted, he kept the fire low, scattering the smoke with leafs. To his shock, a small flare before him suddenly turned into a burning hand. It groped for the leafs he held. Like a fiery animal, the flame then leaped up on him. He jerked back as it soared out from the soot almost catching his hair. Then a laugh could be heard. A ghastly laugh which came from behind a wide tree, broken in half by a thunder.

Who are you? asked Galtar, looking around in dismay.

Skira is my name, said the woman who came out from behind the broken tree. She moved her hair aside with her long slim hand, unveiling her face. It was pale, in sharp contrast to the redness of her full lips. The spiky lines of her eyebrows and grey eyes wrought something inhuman in her beauty. Galtar stood up, sword in hand.

She nodded, as if she knew him and smiled. Her voice was quiet at first: Ah, the sword is in the hand. It was almost a whisper; words drawing menacingly slow from her lips, as crawl of a snake. She posed a bit, then asked: Would you be less of a man without it?

Galtar did not answer. He stepped back surveying quickly around.

Don't worry. Aghabar's men are far from here, she said, now walking slowly towards him. A red triangle shone from her necklace. Her long black dress was wrapped tightly around her, and her untamed red hair came down to her waist. From there, the dress cut open, revealing the white curves - knees, long legs. Thin black laces wound around her ankles holding her sandals in place; she made no more sound than a cat when she walked. We are alone here, and the forest is so

cold, Ó she spoke, half-whispering, leaving her lips slightly parted.

ÒYou killed Anaya, Ó said Galtar. His voice shook uncontrollably with sudden ire.

ÒI keep her soul encased. She is free from suffering, Ó she said.
ÒThere is nothing for you to worry about, Ó

Silence.

ÒLove is suffering, Ó she added.

ÒYou made us suffer, Ó said Galtar. ÒWhy, Skira? Ó

She smiled at first then frowned: ÒYou have to hate your enemy to be able to kill him. Ó She looked straight into his eyes. ÒOr because I am an evil witch, jealous of her beauty, and I wanted you for myself. Is it what you want to hear? Is it what man like you want to hear before they kill? Ó

ÒYou are a beautiful woman, Skira. I do not believe that you were jealous of her at all, Ó

ÒBeautiful you say. Oh, am I? Ó the last thing she had expected from this young, wild looking Galdian was a compliment. ÒHis thoughts are more mature than his look, Ó she thought. ÒWell, thank you, Ó said the witch. ÒYour entire life you have wanted to kill Aghabar, the man who had killed your father. Ó Closer and closer still, her hand frivolously touched his shoulder and she whispered: ÒYou are so close to getting your vengeance now. Ó

At those words, the image of Anaya lying dead struck his mind and he jumped back, raising his sword.

ÒI will have my vengeance now! Ó

ÒYou remind me of one Azmaranian fool, Ó said Skira and shook her head. ÒWhat a waste. Ó Her long leg stepped aside; as she walked behind the campfire that still burned quietly, smoldering. Their eyes met. For a small fraction of time, the flames inside hers seemed tamed, like in those of an ordinary woman. At that instant, not hatred but love in her eyes lay still. It was her true past, the person she once was, a long, long time ago. ÒI am looking at your long arches above your chestnut-brown eyes, Ó said she. ÒYou are clever, good-natured, yet so wild. I hear your voice and I see the way you move. You are a man of raw strength, but soft of heart. No wonder these feelings overtook me. Is it jealousy? ð I am not sure, any more, Ó she sighed and trembled. She spoke again and it appeared to Galtar that not anger, but sadness trembled in her voice: ÒIf I could have any man love me as you love her, only for a day; I would not mind it if the end of that day were to be the end of my life. With sundown, my light will expire. Ó Her eyes now wandered over the cinder before her, as if she was looking for something or someone that may live deep down, under the ground. She cried out loud, gazing into the smoky remnants of the campfire: ÒOnce more, you seized my soul; for I madly wanted to feel the grip of your red, powerful hands over my waist. My lust was

to blame for parting of sisters, yet yours is to blame for Anaya's death!

Galtar stood, motionless. He did not know what to think. Who can be the person she was talking to?

“Whatever, nothing is left,” said Skira, raising her head, looking at Galtar sternly. “You may kill me now.”

“I am man enough not to fight a woman,” he said, then slung his sword at his back and strode thither into the forest.

She watched him walk away. Her face scowled: “You killed my pet!” her voice swirled up like a stormy wind before a cold rain, and with one movement of her hand, fire rose from the soot before her, becoming a fireball as it flew through the air. Galtar turned, swinging his sword in a wide semi-circle. The fireball hit the blade and bounced back to her with a loud crackle and hiss. Skira was shocked when the flame came back to her, yet she allowed the fire to dissolve in her body. The bluish-white symbol, attached to the base of Galtar's blade, glowed. It was the talisman of the water-elemental, a protection from fire that Galtar had received from Inah.

“Curse you!” she yelled. “Here is magic you will not resist,” she crouched down, touching the earth, whispering her magic. At her command, grey smoke whirled up from the ground under Galtar's feet. His legs started to sink into the soil, which had suddenly changed into quicksand. “Show me the warrior spirit now!” Skira rose exultantly, watching him as he sank to his knees. He tried to escape the mud and reach terra firma, but every movement drew him down deeper. Soon, the mud had swallowed him to his waist. He clinched his teeth and snarled at her. “The wolf is trapped,” she laughed, watching him. “I would kiss you now, sincerely; so sweet and so wild you are at the door of your death. But I am afraid you will bite me,” she laughed showing her teeth and in her eyes, her pupils turned into flaming needles. Galtar had sunk to his chest, deep in the mud. The red-haired woman was vanishing among the trees, behind long hands of bushes and grass, when he screamed her name:

“SKIRA!”

She turned, expecting him to beg for mercy. But it was no mercy this warrior would ask for. Instead, with all the strength he could gather, Galtar swung his sword madly with both arms, throwing it ahead. The blade flew reeling like a boomerang. It hit the witch straight in the chest and the sharp steel penetrated her body, nailing her to a tree. A horrendous cry was severed from her throat and her whole body turned into a fiery tornado - living fire elemental. It swirled around the sword and, in agony, her fiery hands tried to close around the hilt. But the talisman that was fastened to the base of the blade formed an impenetrable mist around it. She wanted to grab the sword and pull it out badly, but her hands were shook more and more each time they came near the hilt. Finally, her body collapsed, leaving only a pile of soot on the ground. At the same time, the earth around Galtar solidified. Going back to its natural state, the ground

pinched him around his chest with a strong grasp. He felt enormous pain, as if he was being cut in half, and unconsciously he uttered a loud cry. His hands were barely free. In despair, they scratched at the ground before him. Then a heavy boot stepped on his shoulder.

ÒWhy such haste, north-man?Ó said someone, with a voice like a crude saw scraping a thick oak. Galtar recognized the Azmaranian accent in it.

Chapter Eighteen

Dead ManÕs Word

I

Aghabar stepped before Galtar. Four tall guardians followed the general. Broad-shouldered, they wore dark green tunics, with wide, white trousers tied under the knee and light leather boots with horn-like endings on toes. Black hair streamed down below their pointed helmets. From the sides and back of the helmets, a fine chainmail veils fell as far as their gild-worked shoulder-plates. Aghabar leisurely moved aside his green cloak which was threaded with fine needlework, revealing his body armor. It carried two crossed moon sickles at the front Ð the symbol of YezidÕs four horns. On each shoulder-strap, he wore a human skull that was painted black and through which protruded an iron pike. AghabarÕs aslant eyes had no color. His thick eyebrows and prickly nose resembled a screaming eagle streaming down to strong, sharp lips. His spiky cheek bones jutted above his thick, charcoal-black beard. He grinned, showing his burly teeth. GaltarÕs sword was still stuck in the tree. The bark was charred black, still warm and smoke rose from it. Aghabar gripped the blade and pulled it out.

ÒI cannot believe Skira burned herself,Ó said the tallest of AghabarÕs officers.

ÒPronunciation mistake in the magic words. It happens,Ó AghabarÕs ironic tone made his men laugh. He then walked slowly and proudly back towards Galtar, as if he were inspecting an army. With a sudden jerk, the Azmar crouched, setting the edge of the blade under GaltarÕs chin.

ÒIf I slit your throat now, you would die ten times slower than if I were to cut it with a fine Azmaranian saber. Straight-bladed swords like this one are the proof of Galdic primitivism.

ÒThose primitive swords slew your ass in the past,Ó Galtar answered readily. Such words, given calmly from a defenceless man stuck in the ground, left the Azmarans disquieted. A murky veil fell over AghabarÕs features. He rose slowly, grinning as if considering what sort of torture such insolence deserved. Then, he kicked Galtar, full-sole, straight in the face. Blood gushed from his nose and lips. Galtar grabbed AghabarÕs leg and tugged it. The general fell with a large thump that shook the trees around them. Despite the many situations he had thus far encountered, this one, which left him grounded, with no chance of fighting, did not lower GaltarÕs spirit.

Instead, the young man's hard-bitten nature did not care about the consequences. Aghabar's men seized their sabers and sizirs ready to butcher him. Aghabar stopped them with one sharp movement of his hand.

“Well, well. Full of temper, aren't you?” The black bearded general stood up, wiping dust from his clothes. He did it leisurely, lending each of his movements a special importance; although, inside, he was boiling - his little eyes give him away. “You should know that between bravery and stupidity there exists only a thin line. You should not cross it when you are on the edge of the cliff. It could be dangerous,” he said, talking so closely to Galtar's face that he could smell the garlic and zakirya on the general's breath. “It is so easy to fall, you snort, so easy!” He rose again. Once more, his boots were menacingly close to Galtar's face. “You are not in the position to perform such pranks,” said Aghabar, extending his hand to one of his men, “Give me your sizir, Guna.” The man passed a curved dagger to his master. Aghabar took it and started to clean his nails with the tip of the blade: “How about rethinking our problem? Let's say, I give you an eye in the eye. Maybe you will behave yourself then.” he pulled Galtar's head by his hair, forcing him to look up. “I will dig out one eye from your skull and throw it before you, so you can look into it - eye in the eye,” he laughed, turning to his people, repeating as a reminder that the whole thing was supposed to be humorous. His men laughed hoarsely. The tip of the razor-sharp blade shimmered in front of Galtar's eyeball.

“I have another idea,” said one of the guards.

“What did you just say?” Aghabar asked his officer.

“I said I have an idea. We can take him with our troops to the upcoming battle against his pack, march him at the front of our line. His men will be less cheerful when they see their comrade spiked, half-alive.”

“That is not a bad idea,” said Aghabar. “I like it, Kaid. You are very imaginative. I have gotten a little nervous here.” He got up, making a short cut on Galtar's cheek. The red line of blood streamed down his face, but he made no sound. “A little warning mark,” snapped Aghabar, losing his patience. “Call Durgmak to dig him out!”

“General,” said the officer named Guna, showing his big teeth, what few were left to him. “How about we leave him here so his sacred deer can piss on him?”

“Haahahhhaaa,” Aghabar laughed with his officers.

Their laughter mixed with drumming of a distant thunder. In the east, murky clouds drifted over the setting sun. The wind neighed, swaying the tree-crowns above the thirsty ground.

II

They drew him through the mud. Though the grey mist and drizzle Galtar's steps shuffled with the horseshoe prints. The muddy road led them through the camp. A skinned lamb, spiked on a bloody rod, stared

at him with its dead eyeballs. Everywhere he looked he saw slant-shields, pointed helmets, zubras, sizirs and pugats. People were lining up and piling their war-gear, making a great deal of noise & rattling sound which was telling all about the great plan the Azmananian general bear in his mind.

Animals. Sheep and cows, war-horses and mules, so many of them. Then soldiers - their stretched faces with wide cheekbones grinned, wondering and frowning. Yet only some of them greeted Aghabar, bowing with the words: ÒVermek Yezid, (Hand of Yezid) O, Aghabar & Vermek Yezid,Ó they saluted while their Vermek rode proudly with his prey fastened to his saddle.

They went toward the walls of the fortified city, which vaguely resembled the much larger and richer center of power, Ulan Az, the city where Aghabar had once been greeted as a hero, but from which he had since been expelled as traitor. The column approached the gate and entered the fort. On one of the balconies, two women spoke to each other, pointing to the prisoner. Through the obscure blend of sounds the voice of children could be heard, though somewhere in the distance. First, they took him to the blacksmith and threw his sword into the furnace, before his eyes.

ÒSay goodbye to this piece of garbage,Ó said Aghabar. ÒIt will serve us well as a horseshoe, ha-haÓ

That night, they left him chained in a cage, exposed as exotic game, at the city square. When curious crowd went away at last and darkness covered it all, he looked up in the rain and whispered: ÒO, Gald, do not leave me now.Ó

A hooded man approached the cage. He spoke not, but left something before the nauseous prisoner and shook his shoulder. It was food - a loaf of bread, a good chunk of salted beef and large goblet of fresh water. Hungry as he was, Galtar wolfed it all down, then drew large gulps from the goblet. Soon after he fell fast asleep. The mysterious man came once again, picked up the empty goblet and vanished.

III

ÒHe is weak enough. We can free his limbs now,Ó someone said. Galtar opened his eyes. Shafts of sunlight penetrated through the clouds that slowly drifted away.

ÒOnly hands! Leave the chain on his legs,Ó said another man. Galtar knew the second voice. It belonged to Aghabar.Ó

A soldier freed his hands and drew the Galdian out from the cage. With his ankles in iron grips, he dragged himself forward, lurching. From somewhere, an old man drove a fat hog with a stick. As the frightened animal ran, it hit the prisoner. Galtar fell over its back, causing soldiers to laugh.

Clanging of hard metal bolts could be heard followed by shriek of a heavy door and he was taken into a dark, foul-smelling tunnel.

ÒTake him down, Durgmak,Ò he heard Aghabar saying. At that instant, massive inhuman hand gripped his neck from behind and forced him to bow. The creature threw him down into the cellar with such strength that he stumbled over the slippery stairs and fell to the bottom, into darkness. A sharp stench mixed with heavy moisture hit his nostrils. Below the stairs, in a hole, half in the water, lay the partly eaten body of a wild dog. Rats swarmed around it, ripping the corpse with their spiky teeth.

ÒAghabar, you shame of Yezid!Ó Shouted Galtar. ÒLet me ask you one thing!Ó

Aghabar was about to leave and was busy thinking of his many plans. He would not pay attention to the call of a prisoner normally, but GaltarÕs voice crackled through the dark halls like thunder, biting at his vanity. From other cells, prisoners rushed at the bars. Aghabar stopped. He stayed for a moment and went back.

ÒAsk. But you will not get an answer!Ó said Aghabar, slamming the heavy door.

ÒI want to know how you killed my father!Ó Galtar threw himself to the door, grabbing the iron bars in the narrow hole in the thick wood.

ÒHah!Ò shouted Azmar. ÒI have killed many fathers, just as they have killed many Azmaranian sons! See, I even gave you an answer. Now enjoy your meal down there. I hope the rats will share it with you. Just ask them nicely, hahhh. Thats it, I am done with you,Ó said he and strode back to the narrow tunnel, towards the door.

ÒMy father defeated you, Aghabar! He wanted to negotiate your surrender and you killed him. You are a coward, the shame of Yezid!Ó

One of the steps that were walking away halted. Aghabar stopped again. His beard shook in a sudden fury and he grunted: ÒI had it enough.Ó The general came back once more. His enraged eyes bent on Galtar through the slit as he thundered:

ÒListen, you snot of a spy! Whoever I killed, I killed in fair combat - with my hands and with my saber.Ó

Now Galtar grinned in the face of his captor: ÒYou are a liar. You killed him with a pugat. You had another man disguised as yourself to negotiate in your stead. You sacrificed many of your men, many sons of Azmaran, only to save your own ass from the battlefield!Ó

ÒOpen the door!Ó screamed Aghabar and the guardians did as he ordered. They never hesitated to do what their leader commanded, especially when he was angry. Taller than Galtar, Aghabar was among the tallest and strongest Azmarans in the whole empire. His arms, wide like bulks, were ready to strangle and squash. At that moment, all he wanted was to feel GaltarÕs bones cracking under his fists. Galtar stepped back. He stood to attention with his rounded shoulders braced yet relaxed. He clinched his teeth; mouth closed and eyes squinting firmly, fixed at AghabarÕs eyes. Their flickered under the trembling light of a torch on the wall. The general caught the look and moved

his eyebrows up and down, popping his eyes out, teasing the young man. Galtar was looking at Aghabar's eyes while his actual attention was on his limbs. Eredian taught him that.

When Aghabar moved his front foot only a little bit forward, Galtar knew what that meant. The Azmaran has been creating the right distance for an attack. Taller than his opponent, Aghabar's arms could reach Galtar with one quick extension and hit him at any time. After all, a guard stood ready behind his back, armed with spears, ready to prod the captive at any time.

"You called me a coward. Now you will see what I can do with my bare hands," said Aghabar and his mace-fist sprung towards Galtar's face. At the same time Galtar stepped aside, just enough to avoid the blow and move his left hand up to grab Aghabar's wrist. As fast as a mountain stream, Galtar's right hand flew over Aghabar's arm, swinging as a blade, striking his Adam's apple.

Aghabar fell, eyes bulging, face blue and white. The fight was over. Galtar remained still. Not a move. Muscles tense, shaking from the amount of unlashd willpower. The guardians aimed their spears toward the prisoner.

"Will of Yezid," a strong commanding voice echoed from the darkness. "Cowards can trample words of honor but righteous Azmaran warriors cannot," spoke young Kaid raising his saber high while holding a blazing torch in his other hand. He stepped in front of the three guardsmen. His dark, greased hair fell braided over his shoulders. He revealed his noble face, which sported a neatly cut dark mustache and a short, pointed beard. At his side, two of his men stood ready to fire their crossbows at the guards. The guardsmen gazed at Kaid's fighters with dismay. Then, from the other part of the hall, more of Kaid's men came, aiming their pugats and sabers. They were easy to recognize by the braced teardrop-leaf at the front of their pointed helmets. Before, they had served Ulda and now they gave their allegiance to the young man named Kaid, Ulda's successor. They headed towards the exit, taking Galtar with them.

The group was just about to step in the daylight when something stopped them. A large sturdy orc-foot blocked their path. In the backlight, its massive murky-green body overshadowed the door.

"What is going on here, Kaid?" grumbled the orc.

"Who allowed you to come here, Durgmak?"

"Captain Durgmak! You should call me by my rank, officer Kaid. And the one who allowed me to enter the prison was not you. That is for certain. Where is Aghabar?"

"Aghabar is away."

"Away? Then, I want this Galdian he caught," said the orc captain pointing the handle of his flail toward Galtar. "Aghabar said that every man he catches goes to us."

ÒYour beloved mentor is gone Ð dead.Ó

The orc blinked at those words, yet showed no other sign of surprise.

ÒAghabar may be dead but not his word!Ó growled the creature, showing his big fist. From his other hand, a flail hung low on its chain, casting shadows on the blood-stained ground. A few more orcs showed themselves from behind their captain, nodding and murmuring in agreement at what their chieftain had just said. They brought up their shields, holding up their spiky mace-clubs.

Kaid swung back his cloak, exposing the long gem-worked hilt of his saber that waited in a richly engraved scabbard at his jewel-crusted girdle:

ÒCaptain Durgmak,Ó spoke Kaid, in a tone of new authority, ÒAghabar agreed that only humans captured in battle would go to you. He also agreed that not all of them would be given to you. Since no battle has yet occurred and no prisoner of war has yet been captured, no man will be delivered to you.Ó

Captain Durgmak watched the human before him. Gems from manÕs belt shone onto the orcÕs face, bothering his eyes while he looked at Kaid with disdain.

ÒI want this man,Ó snarled the orc captain and his soldiers pointed their weapons to Kaid.

Kaid spoke briefly: ÒWe taught you, orcs, who threw stones, to use bows and arrows; we brought you up to be an army with true combat abilities, when you were no more than a wild horde. You are no better than the dog which bites the hand that feeds him. You had your deal with Aghabar, but you have no deal with me. You better go back now to your camp.Ó

The orc frowned, wrinkling his nose and grumbling through his teeth: ÒYouÕll be sorry for this no-respect,Ó he turned to his orcs and gave them the sign to follow him out.

IV

The rumors about AghabarÕs death spread quickly through the settlement. The following day Kaid called for an assembly of the high-ranking officers and the people whose reputation was of importance in the colony. Great tensions rose between the two currents, Ogaman and the Urezi. It was not only their tribal origin that dictated the difference but also the recent struggle between the two different visions of the future for the AzmaranÕs empire. The settlement held the largest population of those who embraced the old Azmaran protectorate of the Urezi tribe. People from all sides of the Azmaran Empire had established this place in their search for a refuge after a new Khan, Ugdash Batra, had come to power. When Aghabar was expelled from the Empire he came to this settlement, showing himself to be a capable leader, promising a glorious return to all. To fulfill this promise he had allied with the orcs and with some of the

inhabitants of Naroxa Ð the underworld. However, these alliances had not been approved by all members of the settlement. On the contrary, the idea strongly divided them into more factions.

Birds sang in the sunny afternoon. Several Azmaranian children were raising little clouds of dust under their small feet, shouting while hitting a wooden ball with long sticks. They played along the road that led from the camp to the woods. Galtar and Kaid walked among the trees, followed by three guardians.

ÒI have called you lucky because I was not skilled enough to kill you. Now I am the lucky one,Ó said Galtar.

ÒFailing to love in peace is like missing to hate in war. I have challenged this old Azmaranian saying, saying that, if we fail to love in peace, we already have war and if we have war, that means that already we did not miss to hateÓ said Kaid.

ÒHm, very philosophical,Ó said Galtar ÒDid I miss to hate the night when I met you?Ó

ÒYou did not kill me,Ó said Kaid.

ÒYet god sent you in time to save me,Ó Galtar said.

ÒIt may be god. True. Or it could be only the fact that you entered at the time when our Azmaranian factions were coming to a crossroads.Ó

ÒI see. My hands were freed before I was thrown into the cell and I was given food the night before.Ó

ÒWe are all part of a greater game, Galtar. Skira visited Aghabar from time to time, and my scouts informed me when they spotted her. But it was the AghabarÓs man who found your tracks. Once we found you, I realized that I could use you as an excuse to get rid of Aghabar. I just did not know how,Ó said Kaid. He walked unhurriedly, with his hands at his back. He glanced at Galtar, expecting him to add something. Galtar nodded shortly but said nothing, so Kaid continued: ÒBut your words of anger sped things up.Ó

ÒI am not sure that I killed him, Kaid,Ó said Galtar.

ÒArenÓt you?Ó Kaid raised his eyebrow. ÒAghabarÓs arrogance let himself loose, yet your spirit prevailed.Ó

ÒHe got a dagger in his back, Kaid. We both know that. I was not that fast.Ó

Something like a smile flew over KaidÓs face. He stopped for a moment. The small wooden ball rolled before his feet and he kicked it lightly, back to the kids. The tallest of the boys took it in his hands and bowed his head, thanking. Kaid nodded shortly and the boys turned back to their joyful game. ÒWhatever,Ó said Kaid. ÒAghabar is dead now. I remember, he used to talk about himself and how he would meet a heroic death. Yet, he got it in the way he deserved - killed in

a cell by barehanded man, in the very cell where he had tortured many men.Ó

ÒLet me guess then,Ó said Galtar. ÒIn this sensitive time of change it would not have been healthy to keep a man like me alive, and around.Ó

ÒYou guess right, Galtar. But I do not want to kill you. I owe you my life, after all. Furthermore, I do not see you as a threat to the Azmaran Empire, neither inside nor anywhere outside. The real enemy is within. However, it would not be wise to keep the killer of yesterdayÕs leader under the protection of the new one. Factions inside the Empire, in and out of Azmaran, grow in number and the need for strong leadership is more urgent than ever before,Ó spoke Kaid. Then called one of his guardsmen. The soldier came, giving Galtar a backpack, studded body-armor, a small wooden shield, a saber and solid boots.

ÒI personally packed it; food and water for some time, a rope and a few other things you may find useful.Ó

ÒThank you,Ó said Galtar looking around. They were deeper in the forest now, quite far from the settlement. ÒIs this the moment of our parting?Ó

ÒAlmost. Only few more words, my friend from the north, if you do not mind.Ó

ÒI do not mind at all. It is my pleasure to talk with such a bright person like you.Ó

ÒHa-ha. Bravo, Alu. You yourself would make a great leader some day,Ó said Kaid and pulled out something from his pocket. It was the amulet Galtar have found on UldaÕs scorched body in the ruins of Hooydoom Vaar. ÒTell me, Galtar, who gave you this? We found it in your backpack.Ó

Galtar told him then about his adventure in the ruins and how he and Mamaki had found the body. Kaid listened to him with curiosity. Then he drew out another amulet from his pocket and studied its silver-bluish surface in the daylight. Galtar recognized the talisman he had received from Inah.

ÒI thought it had been lost down in the furnace, together with my sword, for it was attached to it,Ó said Galtar in surprise.

ÒYour sword melted but only when we finally detached this from it. This talisman resisted the fire,Ó he handed the amulet to Galtar. ÓWell, you brought me the UldaÕs amulet of speed, so you deserve to get your own back. I believe that would be fair.Ó

ÒI guess so,Ó Galtar smiled, putting it around his neck ÒShall I go now?Ó

ÒNorthman, you are of an impatient kind. I will let you go soon. Just one more thingÉÓ

ÒYes?Ó

ÒYour godÉ He carries a massive hammer, right?Ó

ÒThe Tar, yes,Ó

ÒAnd what is that Tar chiefly used for? For crafting iron or for smashing the heads of his enemies?Ó

ÒBoth, I think,Ó said Galtar. ÒHow about your god? What does he carry?Ó

ÒYezid holds nothing. He has the body of a horse, the torso of a human and the head of a snake with three eyes and four horns. The horns are not there to ram, but to defend our people when the time will come for the sky to fall down. Though many in Azmaran today believe differently. The new Khan Ugdash Batra is calling for a new Yezid, turning all of Yezid's divine attributes to his own needs. Batra is exploring a new, more war-like message in the stature of our beloved God and I worry about it. Aghabar was very much like Batra.Ó

ÒI see what you mean,Ó said Galtar, thinking over his own picture of the god's presence in his life, as well as in the lives of all Galds. He never actually thought of it much, for Gald was there, always sitting on his throne, leaning on his long handled hammer Tar. He was there as a protective but strict father-figure, better to obey. ÓWell, maybe Gald uses his hammer more for iron-craft, but he certainly could smash the heads of his enemies if he needed to,Ó said Galtar at last.

ÒOh really,Ó said Kaid. ÒThen let me tell you that Yezid could prod anyone with his horns, too. Yezid can run even faster than anything on two legs and see farther with his three eyes than those with two,Ó he looked at Galtar with a phony irony, challenging him. Then both warriors laughed loudly.

ÒI dislike long farewells my friend, and this one threatens to become one,Ó said Kaid.

ÒYezid upon you, Kaid!Ó

ÒGald upon your paths, Galtar!Ó

Chapter Nineteen

Naked Sword

I

Galtar marched swiftly alongside the lake, which wound smoothly in the shape of a sleeping snake. The clear water allowed sunrays to reach the bottom, rich with life. Fish of all sizes were trolling among the stones and grass. A high forest surrounded the lake. Among the many birch and pine trees, massive boulders lay between the tree roots. Here and there, willows hung over the water leaving their lazy limbs to float on the clean and quiet surface of the water. From the other bank, hidden behind a rock, someone was watching the Galdian.

Two eyes flamed behind a dark veil. Those were eyes of a widow who just spotted the killer of her husband. She turned to the orc Captain behind her.

ÒI want his head on my lap, Durgmak. Then I will help you get rid of Kaid,Ó said the woman quietly; eyes red with sorrow and abhorrence.

ÒAt your service Hanim of Vermek Yezid, (Woman of YezidÓs Hand)Ó said Captain Durgmak and gave a sign to his four lieutenants to follow him.

ÒNo foolish decisions anymore,Ó Galtar spoke to himself. He had decided not to rush into danger again by traveling alone. It would be better to reunite with his friends, so that together they might come up with a plan to free AnayaÓs soul. After all, Skira, Ulda and Aghabar had already paid the price. Satisfied with this conclusion, he felt a new strength flowing in his veins. A jolly whistle came out from his lips as he walked; then he stopped to take a gulp from his water-skin and crouched down to cool his neck and the face in the lake. Suddenly, in the surface of the lake, he noticed a flock of birds flying up and away in the direction he just come. From across the lake, rustling sound of bushes could be heard. He stiffened and his eyes quickly examined the area. There, a deer was running, frightened.

ÒI am surrounded,Ó swung through his mind and he pulled out his sword and in three jumps reached the top of a rock. He crouched, gazing to the north, south, then north again shading his eyes with his hand. Nothing yet. A menacing silence. He jumped back to the ground, promptly laying his ear on the grass. Now he heard it: the uneven stomp of many feet in a great haste. They were coming from north and south, so he sprung away from the lake, towards the east and ran. He was running through the forest and could hear them screeching and howling after him. He was faster still, but how long could he run like this? Many thoughts swarmed in his head: What should he do? Should he stand and fight? Maybe, but against how many? More than fifty, he was sure of that. Should he climb a tree? No, they would smell him and tear the tree down. Could he dig himself a hole to hide in? There was no time to dig anything deep enough. Just run.

RUN! Galtar reached a little hill and climbed up, breathing hard, his face from the rushing blood. He leaned on a balk. On the raised grassy ground before him he spotted three large column-like stones. They were gravestones, twice his height, erected on a circle made of tiled rocks. Remnants of ancient times - the three stones had stood there for hundreds, maybe thousands of years. Their position reminded him of a story, which he once heard from Aitri, about three wise men discussing infinity and death. Moss climbed their edges partly covering the rune carvings. They were still readable. On the inner side of the first stone was written:

Be merciful to those

who are merciless

and thou given shall be
the greatest sword of all,
which will slay any enemy.

The runes on the second stone read:

Be naked in battle
and thou given shall be
the armor of venerate, helm and shield
that no mortal can penetrate.

On the third gravestone, these words had been engraved:

Be the one who leads and bears
those who cannot walk or see
and a stallion that flies
will be the tribute paid to thee.

The screeching and growling sounds got louder. The headhunters were approaching the hill, marching in four columns. He watched them coming and what he saw distressed him intensely. It was not fear, however, for he had left fear behind in the Snow Mountains. It was the shock of something never seen before. Of course, he had seen orcs, but he had never seen or heard of an orc wielding anything more than a club. His eyes had probably caught them in the camp before the Azmaran settlement, but at the time he had been preoccupied with thoughts of his own survival. These orcs wore chain-mail and iron helmets, all shaped to fit their sturdy heads. They came in four disciplined columns, which was unusual for orcs who were typically unruly and chaotic. This is what Ugdash Batra and Aghabar had done, preparing for the new expansion to the west: they had taught the orcs tactics and fighting techniques. They had given them armor and tools and skills advanced enough that the orcs could now build their own weapons. Each of the four columns numbered forty orcs, armed with wide sabers, spears and maces. Their leaders swung their two and three headed flails, grinning, boosting the courage of their soldiers with wild barks. Their captain climbed before them. He was halfway from the top when he stopped, looking at Galtar who stood in front of the gravestones.

ÒThis is it!Ò said the orc captain. ÒYou choose this old grave to be your own!Ó

Galtar looked down at him, hardly understanding what the captainÕs nonhuman voice had proclaimed. He was about twenty steps away from him. Galtar could barely see his eyes.

ÒYes,Ó shouted Galtar. ÒThis is where I have decided to die,Ó he said, suddenly assured that what he spoke was the truth. He was going to die here. That was his decision and he was not bothered by it. On the contrary - a calm rage began to grow inside him. He shortly eyed at the gravestones behind him. At the other side of the stones, a horseman stood. Not one who would help him in the upcoming battle, but one who had come to claim his human soul. The Death Messenger. No face, no eyes, no sound. Galtar looked at the horse. No eyes, no whinny, no snorts.

The stillness of death.

ÒIf this is the will of GaldÉÓ he turned to the orc captain, ÒSo be it!Ó

The captain raised his fist. The orc lieutenants quieted their noisy soldiers. Soon, the only sound was that of the wind howling through the gravestones. ÒBe nakedÉ in battleÉÓ Galtar thought of the runes. The orc captain was watching his prey. And then, something strange happened. Something that only the mind of a true warrior could grasp. The man on the hill put away his shield. He took off the armor and armlets that Kaid has given him. He took his clothes off and neatly stacked it all onto the shield. He held the saber, the long curved blade he had been given. He had never used such a weapon before.

ÒYou should drop your sword too. No use fighting. You have only one blade, and we have many,Ó said the Captain.

Galtar stood, upright, naked, his hair fluttered on the wind. He gazed above the orc captainÕs head, past his army and down into the vale, beyond the forest, and into his memories. From there, the voice of Airti floated up to his ears, reminding him of the old saying. He extended his arm, in which every muscle twitched bulging and the blood rushed into his veins like a wild torrent. He whispered:

ÒIt is not the sword that fights the battle but the heart that beats in a hero brave.Ó Then a primeval war cry rose up from the naked man; bursting out of his throat, rumbling the air, shaking the ground, tearing the sky: ÒIT IS NOT THE SWORD THAT FIGHTS THE BATTLE BUT THE HEART THAT BEATS IN A HERO BRAVE!Ó

The vision of a bare bodied human male challenging them with a blade in his hand drove the orcs livid with battle-rage. They charged, screaming, shaking in ecstasy. And he rushed towards them, running across the slope, down, to slay and to be slain. He sprung up in the air; opening his arms to embrace death, throat open to drink blood, eyes wide to see hell. Falling, swooping down like an eagle, his saber

claimed the captain first. He ran down, suddenly moving aside, swiftly attacking an orc lieutenant. Half conscious, half in trance he was. Now the mace of a fallen enemy was in Galtar's left, and the saber gripped in the right hand. The blade was flailing over the iron-piked ball of his mace. He wielded it madly and his mace was slamming and crashing a shield, helmet, arm, head, blade, leg, arm again, helm again, head again - and again - and many, many times an eye, a throat, a bone. The saber and the mace became his arms; his fangs became sharp daggers. Every of his strikes was worth three blows, every one of the blows claimed a life, and every life claimed fed his rage with a bizarre joy. Demonic fire blazed in his eyes.

Then suddenly, surrounded by numerous orcs who wanted nothing less than to rip him apart, Galtar lost his ground. The whole orc pack began to roll with him down into the valley - a giant wave of bodies, war cries and screams. They were pushing him, charging over and over, while he hacked and slashed at them, madly wielding his blade, which seemed to be everywhere at once. The fight carved a beastly grin deep into his face and he looked even more frightening than the bloodthirsty battle-orcs. Gore spattered his body.

II

He was hacking and slashing at them madly, yet strength was slowly fading from his muscles. He wielded his blade again and again, red with blood, yet after soon it lost its sharpness and was no longer deadly. His weapon flew less and less around him, only in front and at the sides. The beastly grin carved into his face turned into the grim face of time, suffering with no end. He was fighting with more ferocity than the bloodthirsty battle-orcs, but numbness assailed him. His eyes roamed, looking for another target, when suddenly, he felt a terrible blow that broke his left shoulder. He was aware of his arm separating from his body but no real pain came. It got worse. A spear prodded his chest, a mace broke his skull and a saber cut his hand. He witnessed the laceration of his own body. Then, who was this? Who was this that floated around believing that it had a body of its own? Death came. The death of the body; but what is going on in his mind?

"What is going on in your mind?" asked the man without a voice - The Death Messenger.

"You want the answer? Do you really want the answer, you nothingness, you emptiness? Here is the answer that I have had ready for you for as long as I can remember!" shouted Galtar awakening from the horrendous reverie to which the battle had driven him. With one great swing, he hewed the head of the Death Messenger. With this, his saber broke at its base and remained stuck in the ground together with the dark skull of the creature.

Gore spattered his body, spouting out from their broken snouts while he lacerated his enemy...

He had killed many. The murky bodies were so densely mounted, wide around, that no ground could be seen. Some were still stammering, badly wounded - the gruesome pile resembled a colossal sea-monster

twitching in its terminal pain. Remaining orcs stood down before him, gasping. Alas, no strength was left in him. The nightmare of his own death overtook his soul. But who had been fighting in his stead? Who had wielded his body while he was experiencing his own death?

ÒAm I a demon or a man?Ó he thought and then shouted: ÒWho the hell I am?Ó

ÒYou are a man of enormous strength and will,Ó said the last captain of the orcs. ÒBut we have beat you at last. The price was high, but your death is going to be certain now.Ó

Suddenly, a shadow covered them all. Something like a giant eagle came down from the clouds. Great wings flapped above him and the creature uttered a cry that made all of the orcs halt and grow stiff. The orc captain stepped back in fear. A dragon-swan landed beside Galtar. A white teardrop glimmered between its great eyes.

ÒTear? My takanÉÓ murmured Galtar with disbelief.

Chapter Twenty

Naroxa

Large, long horns hung over his yellowish eyes. He was the oldest of the demons in Naroxa as was commonly known to be a Vrag Philosopher, the assigned teacher and personal guardian of little Volos, the son of lord-demon Eseveles and his wife Anputa, the jackal-head queen of the Anubis.

ÒWe are living in the dark,Ó spoke Vrag Philosopher and his voice echoed before diminishing into the shadows. ÒOur home is this deep abyss, the yawning emptiness of mother-blackness.Ó

His apprentice, little Volos looked over the edge, down into abyss, amused.

ÒThe red radiance is looming from below,Ó said the boy. ÒDoes it come from the fire that gave birth to the world?Ó

ÒThe rosy redness that you see, fresh and bright like your young skin, comes from hell.Ó

ÒHell? What is that place?Ó

ÒCome with me,Ó the teacher gave him his hand. ÒI will show you what kind of a place hell is.Ó

Together, they walked to a boat, which was long and narrow and made of numerous skeletal hands that gripped each other in a bizarre cobweb of bones. The boat crawled on the lifeless water, through the tunnels that went slowly down in long spiraling circles. On their way, they passed the five halls of hell. The first one was the ÒHall of Noise and Relentless CriesÓ. There, people were extracting screams from each otherÓs throats, reaching with bare hands into eachothersÓ mouths. They were pulling out strips of smoky matter, which they then fastened onto a long, thin needle. With the needle, each one pierced

his own ear painfully and deeply. The boy demon stirred.

ÒWhy are they doing that?Ó asked the boy.

ÒIt makes it easy to extract the scream out again,Ó answered the teacher. ÒThey are prompted by an immense need to feel the pain, because of the life that they chose to live before - causing pain to others. Therefore, they have to spend some time with us and pay for what they did. Each of these halls is filled by these kinds of creatures. The majority of them come from the realm of humans. But, you can see many races here, even fairies and elves, although it is very rare for those races to fall this deep. However, it is our job to keep a steady stream of souls flowing down here.Ó

They paddled the boat by the rest four halls - nightmares sealed with unbearable horror. As he watched the souls torturing themselves, Volos was greatly distressed. He felt as if he himself was falling into the dark abyss of sorrow, together with others.

ÒIs that a compassion you feel, Volos?Ó asked Vrag.

ÒI donÓt know,Ó answered the boy, thinking. ÒMaybe. I feel strange.Ó

ÒCursed by ignorance they are, Volos, by the ignorance they adored. They never wanted to be awoken, they turned blind and deaf to The Knowledge and they thought of themselves as perfect. And as perfect as they thought they were, they believed they have right to judge and right to kill. So this is what they deserve.Ó

ÒWill they have to stay here forever?Ó Asked Volos. ÒI mean, will they ever pass on into some better existence?Ó

ÒWell asked, clever boy. Once they pass through all five of the halls, they can be born again in the upper worlds, like Rank or Xa, but we try to keep them here, reborn as one of us, in the world of Naroxxa.Ó

ÒOne of us? Can they choose what they really want, eventually?Ó

Vrag now paused, looking down at the surface of the water: ÒCan they choose? Hmmm.Ó

Little Volos was not sure if his teacher does not know the answer, which would be strange, or he simply tried to avoid it. So the boy continued, pointing towards the last hall: ÒI mean, once they pass all of the halls, they may be free to go back. If they choose to do so, weÓll be gone, extinct, right?Ó

ÒWell,Ó says Vrag bending his large horns upon the boy, ÒSince there is so much treachery and evil-doings on the surface, we do not have to worry much about keeping our halls full. With the way people live nowadays, more and more demons are coming to life, making ready our day of final triumph. The upper realms will be swept away before our god, quite simple.Ó

The boat reached a large plateau and a great, heavy door opened in front of them with a long drawn screech. "Here we are at last. Your parents are waiting for you."

The teacher and his apprentice walked onto a granite platform, then up across a wide stairway to the gallery which looked out onto a great gathering hall. From there, six hundred and sixty six pillars of gargantuan size scraped high, holding the livid ceilings of Naroxa. Dimly lit, only a dozen of them were visible to their eyes. They were all richly carved, and the first six held the images of Judgment Day on their bases: People looking in horror at giant waves of water and fire, mothers carrying their children, villagers trying to protect their livestock in vain, the sky pouring heavy rain and earth gaping.

On the upper balcony, Lord Eseveles and his wife Amputa were sitting in their high thrones, ready to review the troops that would soon march through the hall, down before them. Their marriage united, for the first time in history, the two largest clans of the underworld, Anubi and Demons, into one army. The union was still not perfect or complete, but through large-scale joint exercises progress was being made. Two thousand Anubi jackal-heads marched in four columns. Their fur glistened, lit as it was by many fires that burned from the great pillars along the hall. They showed their white fangs proudly, stepping to the beat of the drums. Beside the columns marched a drummer, a standard-bearer, a horn blower, and five captains with their leader. Then, in the similar formation, two thousand red-skinned demons entered the hall. Horned and with furry, muscular legs, they marched, their hoofs striking as one. Following them, three massive demonic vanguards stepped to the front. Great hoofs drummed, heavy and furry legs straddled. Their gigantic torsos and immensely strong arm muscles loomed as virile bulls skinned to the naked flesh. Their mighty tails, red slit eyes and horns were ready to drill and kill. On their wide girdles, fiery scourges reposed, three heads on each.

"Impressive," cheered Amputa. "When are they going to take command of their orc units?"

"Soon," answered Eseveles. "I am still waiting for Skira to arrive. The Azmarans have trained orcs long enough. I am sure they are ready to join us, so we can advance their skills further more to our needs. These three elite officers will take good care of it." The fanfares now became louder and the drumbeat stronger: The black lions walked in. There were sixty-six of them, saddled and bridled. On their backs, long-haired demons, cloaked in red, rode armed with long spears and lion-head iron shields. Behind them, five more lions entered. These five were much bigger than the others; they were red-maned Ognabeasts. Their manes were smoldering, ready to burst into wild combustion. Walking gracefully, unbridled, they passed the gallery. Beside each walked a sorcerer, three men and two women - high priests of the Red Triangle, dressed in over-embellished, darkly red and black garments. After them, the fires at the entrance were extinguished by a cold wind that rolled down from the gate. Emerging from the darkness, snow flurried inside and a grayish shapes came forth at the gates. The icy surfaces of the helmets and armor shimmered. Their faces were like

skulls of ice. They rode on komias, mares of the winter-mountain's nights; mares of wind's deadly chill.

“Look at them, Anputa,” exclaimed Eseveles and stood up exuding a great confidence. “These are the only ones prepared and ready fully to my taste, dear. I am still waiting for more. The dragon will join us soon, as will the Goblin king. The sorcerers of fire are bringing more good news about our allies among the people of Azmaran too. Our time is coming.”

Anputa took her husband's hand: “What a mighty army you have gathered, my dear.” She then took her son's little hand in hers. “Nobody can beat such an army. Freedom and control, eternal life, are these not the feelings you have while watching this parade, Volos my son?”

“What about the sword?” asked the boy. He was a half-breed; a clever creature who possessed his mother's head and the horns and tail of his father. Yet, his wit was something exceptional, a fact his teacher had noticed from the beginning. This was not the first time that her son had asked a question that the adults of Naroxa had had to answer with caution, thinking twice before giving their answer. This time however, his mother did not think about the answer, for she was rather troubled by the matter.

“The sword? What sword you are talking about, Volos?” she asked, looking at her only son with care.

“The one that can kill us all, as the story says,” said the boy looking at his mother's eyes. Even his childish mind could recognize the abrupt flare in them - a mixture of fear and worry.

“There is no such sword, my child,” she said, trying to sound perfectly calm. But when she said no, it was the “no” that trembled a moment, as a yellow leaf in the early autumn just before it falls to the ground. Eseveles hunched forward, taking the boy's tiny shoulders in his hands:

“That is the story about the end of the old world, right?” asked the father demon, but Anputa interrupted him quickly, her words trampling each other: “That is only a story, more like a legend—something that is imagined.” She did not want her child to be bothered by such a terrible subject, one that could possibly grow into a great fear. She knew how sensitive little Volos was. Her husband stopped her. He thought differently. According to Eseveles, if his son is asking something that serious, then he deserves an honest reply. It can be answered directly, as the Lord would prefer, or cautiously as the mother would, though in both cases it must be the truth. The father spoke to his son: “The sword you are asking about is broken, but we take good care of its shards. You should know that part of the story then, too. The only thing that may bother your little impish mind is that you cannot see it.”

“Father, I have already seen it.”

ÒNo, you did not.Ó

ÒI have held it in my hands, father.Ó

ÒYou are making this up, aren't you?Ó Eseveles quickly eyed her wife, lowering his mighty horns. She was shaking, for she knew her son well.

ÒNo,Ó said the boy. ÒI tricked the guards; I snuck in and took a quick look. Come what may, I could not resist itÉ so I held the shards shortly.Ó

ÒWell, my son, I have just caught you in a lie. If you did that, you would have fallen sick. Very sick. And if you had touched it, you would have died. Those heroic demons who brought the shards down here from the bottom of the sea died soon afterwards, for that sword is a Demon Slayer. That is why we keep it here, locked up so well.Ó

ÒThat is exactly what I am trying to say, father. Firstly, it was not locked up well enough because I reached it. And I did touch it. I mean, I could not help myselfÉ and then I expected to fall sick, yet I did notÉÓ

Eseveles stared to the bright red-gold eyes of his boy. To his deep shock, he could only read one word in them: Truth.

The Demon now rose, crying out loudly: ÒGUARDS!Ó

ÒYes master!Ó

ÒGather all your soldiers, quickly!Ó All present stood in silence for a bit. ÒWhat happened?Ó Asked one of the red sorcerers. ÒThe sword has been stolen!Ó Shouted another one, lifting his hands up.

ÒButÉ but the shards we have are locked awayÉÓ

ÒThose are fake! The real one has been stolen. Call the damn GUAAAARDS!Ó The Lord's voice drummed throughout the great corridors.

Chapter Twenty-one

Lenen She

I

Foamy waves stretched afar, traveling to the east to greet the rising sun. Two seagulls screeched above, calling to each other, circling in their search for fish. Great wings disturbed the birds, climbing up from behind the waves. It seemed as if the uninvited creature was coming out from the deep blue sea. The taken flew across the water, through the clear sky of a new dawn.

The wind quieted and the taken slid lower. Now it was flying close to the water again, almost touching the waves. As if made from the white sea-froth, dense clouds floated on the surface far away. The dragon-swan turned slightly towards them. Soon the long white streaks of the mist - hands of countless sea-ghosts - extended forward to

embrace the rider. They entered the whiteness and suddenly the thick foggy mass was all that Galtar could see. Yet, the taken was flying onward surely. Soon it landed, touching the ground, running shortly to a final halt.

Although the taken landed fully and stopped, Galtar could not see the ground yet. He waited a bit until the fog dispersed. Warm air started to bathe his naked body. His taken stood on bright silken sand. Before him stretched a forest packed with unusual trees such as he had never seen before. Almost every tree was rich with fruits in bright, warm colors.

As he looked back he felt a light wind blowing in his face. It carried some strange, yet refreshing scent. Rustling of the tree-crowns could be heard while the picture he saw caught him short of breath. Hundreds of glimmers jittered in the foliage. The small lights moved so lively that it seemed as if numerous golden bees scattered suddenly awakened.

ÒGald!Ó he shouted in amazement and climbed down from his winged mare immediately. ÒGolden apples!Ó the two words slipped off his mouth as he walked closer.

ÒTake one, if you are hungry,Ó a new voice twinkled from somewhere. It sounded cheerful and familiar to his ears, somewhat sisterly. He turned around in a full circle. The voice, melodic and soft seemed as if it was coming from everywhere. Not far, to his right, the sea waves flowed onto the sand at a slow pace. ÒWhat a peace,Ó he thought.

A slender silhouette of a woman shimmered in the distance. The misty figure walked toward him, slow and light, as if gliding on the tip of the waves. Soon, her contours took a full, solid shape. Her dress has been lit with an unearthly light of which Galtar could not figure out the source. She was dressed in a rainbow. It was almost as if her presence was merely a mirror of her being somewhere else and far, in a heavenly place where no human ever stepped. Golden locks were strewn throughout her thick hair which almost reached the ground. It radiated. Her smooth skin was olive and translucent. Three green jewels shone in the top of her slim crown. The two marbles of her eyes, glistened peacefully beneath the gentle curve of her eyebrows. A placid smile floated on her lips.

ÒWelcome to the island of Arank, Galtar,Ó she said.

ÒWho are you?Ó he asked, enchanted by her appearance.

ÒI am Lenen She, the green fairy-queen.Ó

He stood speechless, awe-struck by the light that exuded from her. Inside her aura, at once he spotted many tiny, winged creatures, no bigger than the tip of her finger. They were flying around her waist. Lenen She gave him her hand.

ÒCome with me,Ó she said. Bemused, he took her hand without thinking and let her lead him to the forest. At first, his sense of

directions was confused but that did not deter him. His mind was at peace and free. Deep inside, something was telling him that he can believe this woman. They walked on a narrow road, among tall birch trees. A fresh after-rain scent was spreading. The song of birds mingled in the branches, blending into one unified tone, like music. The melody was new to him, yet it sounded pleasant and dear and, in some unexplainable way, familiar. A sweet daydream enwrapped his mind.

“What is this music Lenen She?” he asked.

“This is the music of Mother Earth,” said she, her silvery voice flowed as a fountain of heavenly garden. She crouched and landed her palm down, touching the tips of the grass. “If you bend your ear to the ground, you will hear it even better.”

He did as she said, stooped and laid his head on the grass. And lo! The music sprouted up, climbing the flower-petals. Then, the melody was spreading from their little crowns, up and into the air. Then the fairy queen led him deeper into the forest. Yellow and red leaves fluttered on the wind, swirling around their feet. Above them, branches intertwined, forming a roof. All on their path and through the tree-roof, shafts of daylight decanted on the ground, picking up the colors of the leaves. Here and there, butterflies flew, while the sunlight shone through their tender wings. From flower to flower they moved leaving colorful traces in the air. The road led to a lake; its water crystal-clear. The brightness of the blue sky sparkled on the surface of the lake. The light descended through the water, reaching all the way down. Galtar could see the silver-gray pebbles and plenty of colorful plants at its bottom. There, fish of many sizes meandered freely. Across the lake, a tall waterfall splashed down into the water with the perpetual hum. From its foamy curtain, a long rainbow rose up, and vanishing high into the sky. At the birthplace of the rainbow, two horses, white and snow-maned, stood. Each had a large horn that protruded between their ears, on the top of their proud heads.

“Gald... Unicorns!” exclaimed Galtar. The unicorns looked at the two visitors quickly then continued to drink from the lake. Lenen She spoke to him:

“You have to swim and then dive through this waterfall. Once you are behind it, you will see a short tunnel. Walk through it and at the other end you will find your new attire. Take it, dress yourself and follow the two unicorns. They will await you there.” She raised her arm to Galtar’s forehead, extending her fingers and making a subtle movement like a small sea-wave. Her fingers flowed in the air as if she were playing an invisible harp, and he felt a strange tingle between the eyes. Her body vanished, leaving a green aura, which ascended, fading into the rainbow high above Galtar’s head. Galtar did as she said. He went into the lake and swam to the waterfall. He dove, enduring the wallop of the slamming water and came up again on the other side. A smooth rock appeared before him. Several gems twinkled, strewn about its edges. As soon as he stepped on the ground, a familiar voice came through the whoop of the waterfall behind him, calling his name. “Galtar.” He turned. From the white haze that

shimmered before the large wall of water, a girl walked toward him. It was Anaya; beautiful as only he, who loved her so much, could remember. She stood before him - alive and real.

ÒWith a free soul, one can learn the secret of life,Ó she spoke. For a moment, her voice echoed gently making all other sounds dim. ÒWith a free soul, one can learn how to come down to an earthly life, without losing the knowledge.Ó She laid her hand over the wide scars on his chest. ÒI have only ten heartbeats of time left to be with you.Ó Galtar took her in his arms. They hugged each other tightly, never to let each other go. They kissed through their tears. The scent of their native land was in her hair: the northern forests in which they had played together as children.

II

When Galtar passed through the tunnel he found his new attire laying on a rock. He checked it carefully. It looked the same as the clothes he had worn he had first left his village, except that these was newer, without any rips or signs of the journey he had undergone. Two things were entirely new: the sandals and the belt. The footwear was, in fact, a combination of light boots and sandals; covered at the sides and at the back but open at front to be fastened by straps. The sole was layered with soft skin. He put them on and noticed that, with them, he walked with strange easiness. The belt was a fist wide with runes written inside. Its golden buckle was in shape of a dragon. He put it on and continued to walk, following the two unicorns. They brought him before a roundhouse made of stone. Its roof was grassy with a hole in the middle that served as a chimney. The roundhouse was a smithy. On its door was written part of the poem he had found at the ancient mogila:

ÒBe merciful
to those
who are merciless
and thou given shall be
the greatest sword of all,
which can slay any enemy.Ó

He tried to open the door, but it was locked. Suddenly, he felt someoneÕs hand on his shoulder.

It was Lenen again. ÒDo you understand these words, Galtar?Ó asked Lenen She.

ÒIt is hard to be merciful to those who hurt you,Ó he said.

ÒIt is very hard, indeed, especially when the knowledge is not acquired in full,Ó she said.

ÒBut I understand that one who can control his anger has a better chance of survivingÉ Although you may miss the chance to kill your

enemy, then.Ó

ÒTrue. Did you ever miss such a chance in controlling your anger?Ó

ÒYes. I missed once, Lenen,Ó he said.

At that moment, the door opened before him by itself.

ÒGood. This door would not open if you had not told the truth. There is a task inside that you have to accomplish in order to have a better your chances of surviving, as you would say.Ó They walked inside. The room was filled with blacksmith tools, neatly deposited. It seemed that no one had touched them for decades. In the middle was a furnace, cold and bare. At one side of the furnace was hung a long iron poker and, at the other side, a blower. A large blade-mold lay at the entrance, wrapped in a dense cobweb. Everything was more or less similar to AitriÓs smithy except one thing: the anvil. It was big, bigger than any one he had seen before. The shining shards of a sword lay on it. The handle of the sword was gild-worked at its base and the pommel, and was well-hilted in the middle. The runes that ran across the lower part of the blade looked similar to those he had seen on AitriÓs sledgehammer, Guldgrom. ÓIf you want to continue your quest, you will certainly need a sword,Ó said Lenen She. ÓThis is the only one I have, so I hope you will be able to repair it.Ó

ÒTo repair the sword?Ó he was still looking at the shards with admiration, not clearly aware of her words. He had been taught to be a blacksmith, after all. He had learned from the greatest of the great iron-crafters, but how many swords had he made alone? Only one. And that one had been easily melted in the fire of the Azmaranian furnace, once the amulet had been detached. Now he realized that his amulet had been lost as well, during his battle against the orcs. He turned to her but she was not there any more.

ÒLenen She?Ó

No answer came. He went outside and looked around, calling her name but could find neither Lenen nor the unicorns. The merry chirping of birds was the only sound he could hear now.

Then he went back inside the smithy and started to observe the sword more closely. He checked the room for the other tools he would need to do the job. Firstly he un-hilted the broken sword, removing the long, thin skin-strips. Then he removed the wooden cover of the handle. It took him almost half of the day to do that. The blade fit in the mold and he allowed the shards to overlap a bit. Before he put it into the fire, he struck the shard-ends with the hammer he had found near the anvil. He struck each one several times to make it thinner. Then he made deep, teeth-like cuts on the overlapping parts. He lit the fire and when the furnace became hot enough he put the ceramic mold in, letting the handle remain outside. He watched carefully, following the changes in color on the blade, waiting for the right moment to take it out. It should not be too early nor too late. Heated to welding hotness, steel could be burned easily, so he had to be very, very cautious. Finally, he pulled it out and laid it

on the anvil, helping himself to the long iron tongue and clincher. He started to beat with the hammer the overlapping parts, thoroughly. When the metal went colder, he repeated the whole process again.

The next day, he did the same, the work was repeated four more times and at the end of the day, the blade was straight again Ð all in one magnificent piece. The third day he spent grinding away at the left-over ends and hilding the sword as it had been. The fourth day, one of the unicorns came back to him. This time the divine animal was saddled. The unicorn neared and stopped before him. At the side of its saddle was hung a scabbard. Rune signs, much the same as those engraved in the blade were written on the scabbard. Galtar slid the sword in and it fit perfectly. He placed his foot into the stirrup and astride the unicorn. The horse trotted towards the forest, without waiting for the rider to rein him. It carried him for awhile on the narrow road by the lake, passing the waterfall. Soon it reached a small plateau on the other side of the lake where a stone monument loomed in the middle of the grassy highland. The unicorn halted lowering his head, and Galtar dismounted.

ÒGald,Ó he said in awe, gazing at the statue before him.

III

It was his god before him. The dour figure was sitting on a throne, chiseled in gray granite. His feet were overgrown with green creepers, which crawled up to his knees. Tamed under the helm, his dense hair fell to his shoulders. It seemed to Galtar that the godÕs sullen eyes reposed on a horizon far beyond the earthly life. ÓHe looks after his peopleÓ thought the young warrior. Pertinacious determination was molded on GaldÕs face with a moustache, thick and long, and an opaque beard over a strong chin. His arms rested at his sides Ð the left one on a shield; the right one on his great sledgehammer. On the pedestal, a familiar text was imprinted:

Be naked in battle

and thou given shall be

the armor of venerate,

helm and shield, that no mortal can penetrate.

Sun shone down between branches laying its golden hands on the statue. Suddenly, the godÕs armor began to shine, changing color from gray to a glittery gold. The same happened with the helmet and the shield. Rays of light came from the top of the helm where the figure of a golden dragon was made as a crest. The same happened with the dragon incurved in the middle of the shield. The front armor was all made of shiny scales Ð golden dragonÕs skin. He realized: the helm, armor and the shield were now detached and can be taken off.

ÒGilparespasÉÓ he whispered the name of the legendary golden dragon. Shaken with awe, he extended his arms forward, carefully taking the helm from the statue. Then, he took the armor and put it on himself, part by part, checking every strap and joint: the

breastplate, the armlets, the tassets and the greaves. Lastly, he stepped away and swung his new blade a few times, checking his flexibility.

ÒIt suits you well,Ó said Lenen She, coming from behind the statue.

ÒIt is incredibly light too,Ó said Galtar, still astonished. ÒI must be dreaming. Tell me Lenen, was I actually killed by the orcs and this is some kind of heavenly garden?Ó

ÒThis island is part of the Rank realm. I brought you here from the earthly level of Xa. Since the lord of Naroxa, Eseveles is determined to come out, I have also decided to take some action. He found his allies among the Azmarans; I have found mine among people of Galda. Your fate and mine are intertwined, Galtar. I could not do this without you, nor can you continue your quest without me. Yet the future is still unwritten.Ó She moved towards the daylight that spread across the plateau and looked up, chanting in a half-whispering tone. Suddenly, flapping of gigantic wings could be heard. A great bird-like image overshadowed the sun above her. The winged creature came down from the sky and landed. It was the takan that had brought him here. This time it was saddled and bridled. Lenen petted the takan between its eyes, then turned to Galtar once again: ÒShe will carry you to the Island of the Mourning Serpent at the mouth of the Ocean of Infinity where Rahug lives. Though, I would not recommend that you fight from the takanÓs back for you have not been trained for such fighting. Elves and smaller people are easier to carry on, so she may not be able to maneuver fast enough for you. Therefore, you better proceed on foot once she lands. This armor should protect you from the acid that the dragon spits, at least, from several blows. He spews acid either as a narrow spout up to sixty steps away, or wider, but then up to thirty steps in range. Each time he throws out the load from his jaws, he must re-stimulate his gut to refill it. He will do that by raising his head high and jerking it up. That would be the moment to strike. If you do so, try to stab your sword from the bottom up, between his scales. If you hit him straight, the blade may slip aside. Be cautious, for he is incredibly fast. I put a spell on the sandals and belt that I gave you, to help you with your speed and balance, yet its power is not inexhaustible and it may not work all the time for the demons have probably sent various curses to the island.Ó

Galtar approached the takan and pet her above her wide eyes, which watched him happily.

ÒGood natured creature,Ó he said, slapping her on the neck and took the reins. Then he mounted the saddle and the takan made two short moos as a sound of approval. He slung his sword at his back and fastened the shield aside, over his leg.

ÒMost important of all, you must find the Dead Diamond and break it,Ó spoke Lenen She as her hair fluttered on the wind that came from the sea. ÒIf you find it inside the dragonÓs lair, you should bring it outside and break it in the open field. Know that only the sword you carry now can cut that diamond. That is why I wanted you to fix the

blade. It is not an ordinary sword but a living power. Yet, your spirit has a connection with it from the past, although you may not remember it now. Anaya's soul must be freed, not only for the sake of your love, but for the sake of all sentient beings as well.

Galtar shook his head. At once, he was fully conscious of his role - he was part of something larger and he did not like it much. The idea of having Anaya and his life used as pawns in the game of gods startled his mind and he rebelled, grinning at the fairy queen: "For the sake of love I'll do it, but others can pray to their own gods. If the mighty folks of Rank want to play, why they don't come down themselves?"

"I will pass your concern. They may come down indeed," she smiled on him. As she spoke, he caught a trace of a strange enigma in her eyes.

"I lay my fate in you, Galtar, son of Orltar," said Lenen, bending her head lightly and those were the last words before her slender figure faded away.

Chapter Twenty-two

In the Dragon's Den

I

The sea waves battered the walls of the High Cliffs, the granite vanguard of Mount Satra Kalum. The taken circled above the rocky coast for a while. When he had finally chosen a place to land, Galtar pulled the reins firmly:

"It is time to touch the hellish place Tear!"

Tear, the dragon-swan, bowed her head going down. At length, she landed on the plateau above the precipice, balancing with her long wings, taking the ground firmly on her braced legs. The rider drew his sandaled feet out from a silver-worked stirrup and swung down from the saddle. He turned about. Fractured, barren ground was thrown up before him and extended all the way towards the sullen mountain in the distance. Its highest peak vanished behind slowly moving strips of murky clouds. Their shadows crawled over the foothills like giant ghosts of dead serpents. A song-like sound was coming from the peak. A pleasant, dreamy sound. A chorus of fairies were singing the melody that he had heard on the Arank Island, while walking with Lenen. But his current scenery differed in look and feel from the island's. One would expect to hear cries, not music, in such a gloomy place, dry and creased, cut with bottomless long cracks which laid out before him now. Remotely, in the foothills of the mountains, two pale dots were moving in his direction: two trotting horses, as white as snow.

"Unicorns?" thought Galtar, spotting the long shiny spikes between their eyes. "What are such noble beings doing here? Could it be that the dragon has imprisoned them too?" The unicorns arrived on the rocky plateau and continued to pound towards him. His taken moaned disturbingly, waving its head. The unicorns broke into a wild gallop.

Suddenly, Tear uttered a long warning cry. The unicorns charged fiercely.

ÒDEMON TRAP!Ó cried Galtar, gripping his sword.

A bolt of lightning shot out scourging from the tips of their horns, hitting his sword. The ground started to shake, rumbling deep beneath the rocks. Black steam sprung out from the cracks with a loud hiss. The unicorns now ran left and right, through the beams of black steam. Each one they touched turned into a tall cyclone. Stronger and stronger the winds came, swirling and neighing horrendously while the many cyclones gathered, forming two large whirlwinds. His sword became immensely heavy. Then it flew unexpectedly up, by itself, as if some godly hand had grabbed it. Though Galtar was gripping it fast still, it pulled and jerked him repeatedly to all directions. The unicorns now changed their direction once again. They started to run in wide circles, around him, and with every full circle, the wind blew stronger. Galtar still held his sword firmly when the strange power in the blade threw him straight into the heart of the tempest. It made him tumble, shaking his body violently; yet he would not give up the sword. One cyclone squeezed him while the other wrapped its windy tendrils around the sword, pulling. Two powers were attacking him at once; one was pressing his body toward the edge of the cliff, and another one was trying to extract the sword from his hands, pulling towards the mountain. The sword became hot and was set ablaze, sending sharp pain through his palms and arms.

ÒGald!Ó he cried. ÒO, help me GALT!Ó howled the man helplessly as the wind sucked the strength out of his shoulders, arms and hands. The sword was swinging frantically every which way so much that he thought his wrists would break. Every joint in his body turned livid with sore.

ÒNO!Ó he shouted, and his fingers loosened.

II

Chasms of infinity went quiet,
while snowfall painted all roofs white.

She is walking, leaving footprints,
small steps in the snow.

She is singing,
shedding small tears into the sea.

As they are falling, ripples were born to travel far
across all seas.

The ripples will unite us all into one great water
Into the ALLSEA.

At a time long-forgotten, a myriad of souls voyaged to Nowhere!
Yet each tear, lonely wanderer, knows about the coasts.
And who is the Master, then?
Who is the Master in this ocean of fate?

III

ÒGALTAR is my name, and I am your Master!Ó bawled the warrior, overpowering the whirlwindÓs scream. ÓMy thoughts are your thoughts; the tear in my eye is the tear in your eye and my heart beats in you!Ó

Powerful, dazzling light flashed from the sword and the whole desert was lit, as if three suns had appeared suddenly in the sky. The whirlwinds were gone, diminished to the clouds, and the sword was brought to a standstill, obediently.

A strange, hoarse cry now hooted before him. The skin on the unicornsÓ heads was gone, laying bare its murky-red muscles. Their horns had been cloven in two, and their eyes were the color of pus. Fiery mists spate of their nozzles. Without hesitation, Galtar ran forward to meet them, swinging his sword above his head with both hands. Steel flared, breaking the horns of the first monster-horse and, with the same momentum, hitting the second one at the back of its neck, hewing it, so that the head remained hanging only on a few ligaments. The beheaded monster continued its run tumbling over the high cliffs, down to the waves. The second monster, with both horns broken, charged at Galtar once more. Through its nostrils, a red flame leaped, but Galtar dropped and rolled, slashing at the forelegs of the demonic-animal. It stumbled into the cloud of black dust that gathered from the dead whirlwinds, its body slid through the sooth several feet in length and stopped, dead. Galtar remained still, watching his blade. Peace came back to him and he felt the sword to be an extension of his own hand, or better yet, an extension of his heart and soul. The distant black mountains were reflected in the blood-threaded steel. The runes at its base glimmered.

IV

A crack yawned in the middle of the sheer cliff before him - A cave. He stepped into the darkness. His legs moved cautiously over the slippery ground while his shield was up and his sword prepared. A cold mist wrapped around his feet. The coldness climbed, seizing his limbs. His muscles quivered and vapor escaped from his mouth and nostrils. As he walked deeper into the cave, the chill grew, and with each new step it grew harder to withstand. The floor become more uneven, threaded as it was with razor-sharp points. Soon, the tunnel widened into a hall of many levels interspersed with stony cascades. Long spikes of rocks protruded from the thick layer of ice. Underneath the ice, strange symbols glimmered faintly. He looked at them, trying to distinguish their shapes, but they were unlike any signs he knew.

ÒThese may be the souls of people killed long ago and imprisoned here,Ó thought Galtar. A blue light ran fast across the walls, coming from a hole in the floor, which led into the level below. He knelt down and bent over looking inside, but the blue light vanished. He entered the hole. As soon as he touched the ground a minute flicker passed and clink of metal sounded from underneath his foot. Ducats of many sizes lay on the floor stretching before him into a large pile of jewels, silver and gold. The image startled him: blazing mount of dragonÕs hoarded wealth grew in his eyes. Among countless golden and silver coins he saw gild worked Gotan swords, Kerebian shields, Initian spears and high helms. There were also dwarven clasps, Azmaranian tassels and jeweled horse gear, like stirrups and saddles. The treasure shimmered, reflecting a pulsating light that was coming from the top of the pile. He looked at the source of the strange light. It was an octahedral gem-stone.

ÒThe Allsea?Ó he muttered. He had never seen the Allsea, yet the sea-like color of the stone left him in no doubt. Something was moving inside the stone and so he climbed the mound to get a closer look. It was an image of Anaya in it. He realized: ÒNot the Allsea, but the Dead Dimond this is.Ó She was still a little girl, looking at him. Tears ran down her cheeks as if she was feared him.

ÒDonÕt touch me,Ó she said.

ÒIt is me - Galtar,Ó he said, suddenly appalled and deeply saddened. Anaya was shaking, looking up at him. She looked lost and terrified. In her eyes, he was a menacing shadow Ð a monster that was going to hurt her. He gave his hands to her but she started to cry:

ÒNo! Please, please go!Ó she cried almost hysterically.

ÒBut it is me,Ó he said, stammering, broken inside. She screamed. He could not bear the sadness that gripped him and he cried loudly with her, grabbing the diamond with both hands, letting his sword slide down the mass of gold. Abruptly, as he took it, the diamond became pitch black. The image of Anaya vanished and instead of her face, the empty eyes of a dark skull watched him. The skull... he knew that face and its empty eyes. He saw them before. The massager of death.

ÒYou cut my head off, Galtar,Ó an eerie whisper came. ÒGood job.Ó Then it broke into a husky laughter which echoed of the icy walls. The laughter faded away. Silence crept in again. From the darkness behind his back, he heard something crawling.

ÒWhat is going on in your mind?Ó asked a strange, low voice.

Galtar looked into the darkness trying to distinguish the shape in front. It was large. The voice spoke again:

ÒYou do not fear death so much as the possibility of losing your mind. DonÕt you agree, Galtar, son of Orltar?Ó The eminent silhouette of a wyvern appeared, drawn by the weak light at the entrance. Black scales, like wet tiles, shimmered before the gold. A sticky gunk fell

from a great head that came lower, bending its long snakelike neck. A smoke rose from its nostrils. From two narrow slits, a lava-like redness peered out Ð the dragon's eyes. "So, what are you?" its voice now sounded like two giant rocks scraping each other. "Tough persona? Oh, you must be extremely tough when the golden scale-armor was given to you. But Lo! What I am? A tough persona, as well? I must be, for I wear the scale-armored skin of the black one, HOO-A, hoo-a, hooo-a," laughed the dragon.

Galtar went stiff. He left the diamond slowly, searching with his eyes, looking for his sword.

"Lenen She! She knows? How terrible," continued the dragon. "She knows my weakness. I am lost." said Rahug, trying to sound pathetic before breaking into mocking laughter again. While Rahug laughed, Galtar quickly rolled himself down to the sword, reaching for it. Jumping up again, he swung wide aiming for the diamond. Suddenly his sight blurred as a terrible blow to his chest caught him unexpectedly. In his great desire to free Anaya's soul he had forgot all the warnings he had heard about the dragon's speed. Rahug's tail was there instantly, throwing him to the wall. Galtar's body slammed into the rock, but he was quickly up again. To Rahug's surprise, Galtar turned toward the entrance and ran. In the narrow hallway, the dragon could not open his wings, but he could run faster than any animal. The warrior sprang outside when the dragon's jaws opened wide, throwing up an acetous liquid. The green load hissed behind Galtar's feet burning the ground. Running for his life, Galtar realized that he was actually sprinting toward a deadlock: the sheer cliff of rocky wall.

The dragon launched himself, groping the land with his mighty claws while the ground shook underneath his massive body. Galtar did not slow down. Instead, running like the wind, he climbed the wall, straightening his body. Then he sprang in the opposite direction, catapulting himself with his strong legs. Galtar had the inborn nimbleness of a mountain tiger, yet with the magical belt and sandals given to him by Lenen, he was even more agile. Rahug jolted back his neck as his head aimed for the running swordsman. But the dragon's big, muscle-laden body and his heavy belly were already moving with the rush of its own inertia, so the dragon lost his ground. He fell, cracking the cliffs around him and many stones rolled down as the land started to slide.

Galtar stood, ready to fight now, extending his sword toward the monster. Rahug jumped up and shook his head. They looked at each other for three heartbeats: One— Two—

É

A sudden crack broke through the air when Rahug's large wings came into view, scooping the air, and his shadow closed over Galtar. Black claws extended and Rahug swooped down on his prey as swiftly as an eagle. Galtar threw himself to the ground, evading the claws. The deadly nails passed him by, but the dragon's large pointed tail whipped through the air, downward. On instinct, Galtar thrust his sword up at an angle so that the blade penetrated deep inside the

muscles of the tail, all the way down to its hilt. The dragon screamed and flew up, lifting the man by his sword.

Galtar held his sword firmly, hanging high in the air. Rahug carried him for a moment or two more, his lizard face grinned malevolently. Something he had in mind. Flying over the high rocks, the dragon glanced down confirming his position. It was a cursed bog down there. The dragon shook his tail violently and the sword slipped out of the wound. Galtar fell, splashing into the shallow swamp. A flock of startled carrion birds took off into the air and numerous snakes scattered, crawling around and away. Mud entered his armor and murky water poured into his ears and mouth. He spat the dirt out, trying to stand up, but he could not move. Leaning on his sword, he finally stood up feeling as if all his limbs had hardened. The dragon landed near the swamp.

Galtar now walked with difficulty, barely holding himself straight. His left leg hurt whenever he leaned to that side. His right knee disobeyed him and he fell in the mud again. Every single scar and scratch that he had gathered from the beginning of his quest began to burn. Many of the wounds started to bleed.

ÒThis mud...Ó he muttered ÒThis mud is cursed.Ó

ÒSoon, you will feel the soreness,Ó said Rahug, ÒLike a burn of a branding iron is going to feel. This is nothing more than the tickle of a mosquito bite comparing to the pain you will feel soon,Ó said the dragon and his head came down closer: ÒVery soon!Ó Galtar was breathing heavily, fighting to get more air into his lungs. He felt as if the skin of his chest has been stripped by many invisible nails. Blood streamed over his limbs and the sudden desire to strip off his armor stabbed into his mind, overcoming all other thoughts.

ÒYou feel something?Ó said the dragon, letting the irony bell together with his words as he walked around the swamp. Step by step, he moved shifting his mass leisurely, observing the prey.

ÒI see that my consciousness is filled with pain, but not I,Ó gasped Galtar.

RahugÕs head flew close to GaltarÕs face again: ÒYou feel it, do not try to fool me with those druidÕs tricks. I know what you feel now.Ó

ÒIt is only my consciousness that is filled with pain,Ó Galtar repeated, ÒNot I,Ó he walked slowly towards the edge.

ÒOnly consciousness, you say,Ó RahugÕs voice turned into a frantic screech, ÒI will fill your consciousness with acid that will burn every part of your skin.Ó The dragon pushed him back into the swamp with his muzzle and Galtar tried to hit him back with his sword, losing his balance helplessly. The man set in the mud. ÒLook at that golden body armor? Where has all the shine gone? Come on out; you piece of a rotten pride. I was waiting for you just as I have waited for many before. You think you have fooled me? No. I will kill you and

continue to wait any self-proclaimed hero that comes after you.

Death awaits us all, sooner or later," said Galtar, quietly as if such thought will ease the pain somehow.

"How wise," said the dragon. "I know what awaits me a thousand years into the future, that is certain, but you; you gave your life to uncertainty, to what? Love? That was it, wasn't it?"

No answer. Galtar was sitting in the mud, gasping.

"Was that a mistake?" asked Rahug.

Galtar raised his head slowly. His eyes were squinting, trying to see the dragon once again. Rage died on his swollen lips and he said nothing. Clouds whirled above him and all of the surroundings seemed to tumble upside down. A great black shadow swallowed him.

Chapter Twenty-three

The God is Dead, Long Live the God

I

The clouds, like the mad ghosts of heavenly giants, charged over the sky above the dragon. Red smoke rose from the cracks in the surrounding cliffs and the air became unbearable hot. Something large and dark was splashing in the water beside Galtar. It was a hoof; the leg of an immense horse. It came in-between him and Rahug. Its body was that of a gargantuan horse but its torso human, muscular and male. It had the head of a snake of which four large horns rose. The mighty creature looked down at the dragon with its three gloomy eyes. From its rear legs, which stood in the murky water beside Galtar, ashen pale ripples spread along the water's surface. As they reached Galtar, he suddenly felt relieved of pain. Rahug moved aside, shocked by the appearance of this big centaur-like being. Yet, the dragon was cautious enough not to question whether this uninvited guest was a friend or foe; instead, he extended his long neck, jerking his head to trigger and spout a new load of acid from his dragon-gut. Although weary, Galtar was still alert enough to make a sudden decision.

"The final blow!" echoed through his mind. He pulled out his sword and rolled himself into a somersault, passing under the belly of the horse-creature. Rage erupted through Galtar's arms making his veins swell within and all over his muscled limbs. His war-cry blended with the thunder as his sword-blade gloriously blazed. Thrusting his sword upwards, the blade penetrated the base of Rahug's neck, precisely between two scales of his skin. The powerful steel went deep, up to the hilt, before Galtar jerked it away again. The skin cracked and dark blood gushed out. Rahug screamed horribly, trying to swing his head and seize Galtar in his jaws, but the creature before him took hold the dragon's neck and seal it with its stone like fingers. Rahug was losing blood rapidly, shaking, flapping his wings, but the creature took an ever firmer grip on his neck, choking him to death.

The dragon finally collapsed.

“What are you?” asked Galtar, looking up at the creature in awe. With this creature, the curse was defeated, the pain was gone and he was strong again. No answer came. The monster gazed somewhere, off into the distance. Galtar observed its face – a strange mixture of snake and human features. Its eyes wandered far, as if it were waiting for someone to come. Behind its four horns and over its great shoulders and muscled back, its long black hair fluttered in the wind. The ground started to shake again. Horse-hoofs drummed in the distance.

“Hide behind the dragon’s corpse,” said the creature, with voice as deep as a canyon. It did not look at the swordsman, but continued staring at the horizon. Galtar obeyed. He could hardly stand the smell of the dragon’s intestine as it poured through the wound on the lower base of the dragon’s neck. Then, another creature appeared, much like the one that already stood before Galtar – the body of a horse, torso of a man, four horns and snakelike head. At last Galtar recognized the visage of the iconic figure: the god Yezid.

Two Yezids, actually, now standing before each other as close mirror images. While the flanks of the creature who had helped Galtar was grayish-green, this new Yezid was darker with lengthy black markings. The new Yezid looked down at the dead body of the dragon and said:

“So, this is what you have decided – to waste the last spark of your power in killing this unworthy lizard. Not clever at all. Who cares about Rahug, the aged dragon, ruined by his own madness? At least, you finally came down. I smelled you. I waited for you. This will be your last battle. You lost. The victory is mine.”

“No. It is you who has finally come down and it is me who speaks through your mouth. What victory would it be – one God killing himself?” spoke to one who helped Galtar.

“It’s a lie,” said the dark one. “We are not the same. We never were.”

“Know you we are one body! A body with four legs that can run freely across our mother steppe.”

“LIE! With those four legs, I must pursue the enemy!” said the black one.

“With these four horns I will defend my people when the sky crumbles,” said the first one.

“LIE! With these four horns, I will rip and slash the enemy!”

“With these three eyes, I see the past, the present and the future.”

“LIE! With these three eyes, I mark the enemy from far-away!” said the black Yezid then dug his massive powerful arms deep into the

cracks in the ground. From down the cracks, he pulled out two great lava-stones. They burned and crackled in his hands.

ÒDo not use that lava,Ó spoke the fair one. ÒThe lava belongs to Eseveles and the hellish world of Naroxa. We are guardians of humans, not demons!Ó

But the black Yezid did not listen. Instead, he threw the lava-stones straight at the heart of the Yezid before him. The grey Yezid stumbled and fell on his front legs. A large wound yawned in his body. He looked back at his mirror image again, at the new Yezid who had come to kill the old one. No words came out. He looked into the otherÓs eyes as trying to understand this betrayal. Then his head dropped. The new Yezid raised his arms in victory and howled:

ÒThe god is dead. Long live the god!Ó

An odd music came from beneath the largest crack in the ground and a swirl of murky haze covered him. A chorus of fallen souls sung, following him as he descended slowly into the crack. From his open palms, red smoke rose. As he gave himself to the abyss, the crack closed after him.

Galtar drew near the fallen God. He was lying on the ground, looking up at the man, with his three fading eyes. ÒHave you betrayed your people by helping their enemy, or have I betrayed my own god, by letting the god of my enemies help me?Ó asked Galtar.

ÒThere is no betrayal here, only a misconception as to who the enemy truly is,Ó spoke the dying Yezid. ÒWe, gods, were born out of the beliefs of our followers. We fed on their hopes, prayers and calls. We have no power that was not first given to us by our believers; our very images were crafted in their hearts and minds. And that is why I now stand defeated. The new Yezid is rising, for poisoned hearts have called him into being, and I have become weak. There is no speed left in my legs to run, no strength in my horns to defend, and darkness is falling on my eyesÉÓ he stammered. Then something like a smile lit his face, as the last of his words came out: ÒAt least, I was able to foresee the fall in timeÉ early enough to trick the demons and steal the sword-shards from themÉÓ

III

The westering sun was still covered by a veil of clouds when Galtar brought the Dead Diamond outside. He placed it on a high stone and swung his sword, striking it in the middle. It cracked and bright white god-light blinded him for a moment. Then all went quiet again. The clouds slowly dispersed. He walked now weary, passing the two great shadows, the two corpses: the body of the dragon and the fallen god.

ÒIs she free now?Ó Empty-hearted and exhausted Galtar strode toward the coast. There he sat looking at the sea-waves, gazing into the sunset. ÒIs she?Ó He spotted a bird-like silhouette in the backlight of the sinking sun. Or was it a bird? A dragon-swan flew

towards the island, floating on a gentle sea wind. It moved its wings with ease, then glided gracefully closer. Sitting on its back, dressed in white, Anaya smiled at him and her curly puce hair trembled in the wind.

The End of Rank Xa Naroxa, book one, The Good Under