

The Runes of Norien

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Prologue

Vast is the world, and numberless its mysteries.
But none greater than Norien.

Sages well versed in the study of reality, and of the wonders hiding in its folds as pearls in the garments of a queen, dismiss Norien's existence, deeming it a worthless tale fit for the minds of fools and madmen—and it is true that the humble narrator of this chronicle has often been accused of being both. And yet, since foolishness and madness stand apart from what the common mind perceives, couldn't it be that they are best equipped for the understating of things so great that they surpass the common man's perception? Not that it would ever be possible to contain the essence of the Ever-Shifting Sphere: it is uncertain if the Gods themselves, who chose it as their dwelling, could ever fully fathom the changing currents of its soul.

But every story, every myth, begins by acknowledging the parts of it that shall never be known, and which govern what little is known, much like an ant's fate, as it trails the hills and valleys of a human hand, is governed by whether the mind ruling the hand will order it to close into a fist.

So let us plunge, unknowing, into the unknown.

When the cosmos sprung from stillness into sudden life, most celestial bodies and the worlds they made up and were made of tore through the blackness urgently, frantic to put the terrifying memory of nonexistence as far behind them as possible—and rushing so, they lost that shimmering, fast mutability that was their primal state and became fixed entities, ruled by fixed dimensions of space and time.

Yet along with them another world was born, which, devoted as a child to a dying mother, remained steadfast, close to that daunting birthplace that almost stands outside of everything that 'everything' denotes. And as a parting gift, or curse, this sphere of existence maintained the ability to change, to bend or break the dimensional laws, and shift through more selves, in an instant, than a legion of lunatics.

That was, and is, and ever shall be Norien, mystery-world without end.

Imagine a field of pink flowers; a blink of time, and it becomes the rosy tongue of a young boy, stuck out in playful defiance; a shimmer of time, and, diving into the darkness of the boy's throat, there emerges a watery star that hovers in black emptiness, and somewhere on it—in another wink of time—lies the corpse of a beast which, even as it decomposes, turns into a sea made not of water but of wood, great still sharp crests of wooden waves, tree rings in a widening pool as made by a cast pebble, the fine grain of oak, intricate like the white lace of oceanic foam. Norien was a bustling galaxy one moment, and a tiny grain of rice the next.

But the Gods, children of the same birth though rendered grim, arrogant and unforgiving by the immensity of powers that allowed them to rule all Creation with a blink of their all-seeing eyes or a snap of their immaterial fingers, could not abide Norien's inconstancy, if for no other reason because, like insidious illness manifesting in distant relatives and offspring, the rabid volatility of the Ever-Shifting Sphere infected the rest of the universe to its furthest corners and deepest recesses, breeding chaos.

Thus the Runes of Norien came into existence. Their precise nature is as impossible to describe as an aeon of feverish dreams, but it is said they were crafted partly in firm matter, so as to be able to connect with, and govern, the material world. The same is believed of the Gods: that, binding their essence to Norien, the better to tame its waywardness, they too became in part corporeal, and therefore exposed to the inevitable erosion of physicality, the wear and tear of mortal mass.

In »The Eyes of the Gods«, the legendary epic poem which is considered to be Norien's earliest written document—and of which, sadly, only fragments survive, preserved through the oral tradition of Norienic lore and the painstaking work of adepts in the Original Language—the nameless poet, narrating the early Ages of the Ever-Shifting Sphere, speaks of the Runes as actual, precious stones, engraved with the infinite wisdom of the Gods, who used them to oversee and reign the cosmos. They were three, one for each God and the powers It commanded: the Rune of Life, the Rune of Death, and the Rune of Fate and Chance. The well-known verse illustrating their purpose, salvaged intact from *The Eyes of the Gods*, goes like this:

*In these Runes Three, all things once made reside,
And their unmaking, such as it may be.
And from their light, no one can ever hide.
And in their dark, no one can ever see.*

However, says the poet, the use of the Runes over the millennia made the Gods' own, true eyes idle and dim, corrupting their omniscience as flesh, with its alluring senses and primitive pleasures, can corrupt the mind. So, when, according to the poem, they came to after a small eternity spent in their usual surfeit of godly debauchery and found that the Runes had been stolen, they fumbled in furious blindness, realizing that, along with their sight, the greater part of their powers was gone.

Incensed, the God of Life turned against the God of Death, blaming It for the theft of the Runes. *You are an insatiable pit of destruction, It said, and now you are bent on our own undoing.* To which the God of Death replied, *It is you, and your creatures' mad desire for immortality that has brought this plight upon us.* Finally, reaching a tentative agreement that neither of them could profit by the other's extinction, they both attacked the God of Fate and Chance, who was responsible for the ruinous randomness which poisoned all existence; but the third God smiled at their accusations and remained serene, knowing that no force in the universe could ever predict and preclude every single event. *I am content with being blind, It said, for we know not if what befell us is unfortunate; it may well prove to be a blessing, a burden lifted from our minds and souls.*

What they all agreed on, however, was that the thief, either made of flesh or of pure spirit, must be a dweller of Norien, the erratic ancestor and heart of the cosmos, where the Runes could be most securely hidden, and, through the ethereal tendrils connecting Norien with the rest of reality, exert the greatest power.

Thus they unleashed what was left of their still potent godliness on Norien's three realms—Lurien, Feerien, and Ienar Lin—to seek out and retrieve the Runes, before the dominion over which they held sway brought about the end of all things.

And it is in those times of fear and uncertainty, while the Eyes of the Gods were lost and the spectre of doom hang over the entire Creation, that our story begins.

PART I

The Hidden Nowhere.

Chapter I

I

Please don't die, Gallan willed the tiny blade of grass, squatting beside it in breathless concentration, his white finger hovering tremulously over its green tip. Next to it, two other blades lay withered and bent, their vivid green turned to uncolour—the colour of a cellar's extremity—by Gallan's fleeting, fearful touch.

His fingertip was almost grazing the sharp, erect blade, when Raddia's voice filled his head, harsh and frightened. *Have you lost your mind?* she said, while casting her own mind around to make sure no other Mates or Makers were listening. *Put your glove on*, she said, her voice growing both frantic and plaintive. *And dispose of the dead grass before someone sees it. Things are bad enough without provoking our Makers' wrath.*

With a single soft puff, the shriveled blades scattered in a thin cloud of particles, their telltale uncolour quickly disappearing into the living grass. Then Gallan turned to his Mate, although his eyes rose no further than Raddia's red-shod feet.

But I came so close to succeeding! he said, his tightly-shut lips quivering like a beast's from all the excitement. *I managed to—contact. And it didn't die at once! For a while it stayed alive, and green, and—*

Nonsense! Of course it died. It's just some lowly weed. Your Substance is killing it.

For a moment, Gallan contemplated the untouched blade, the skin of his finger tingling with illicit desire. But Raddia's mounting distress was affecting him, and so, with an inner sigh of defeat, he put on his white glove, and saw it turn instantly red.

As he got to his feet, he picked up a Maker's hoarse voice, speaking to her old Mate about an abortive Surfacing Rite, the latest in a series of failed matings that had cast a pall of unease over Lurien. Gallan wiped his mind clean in a hurry, concealing his thoughts about the grass with a trivial, guiltless statement.

I'm famished, he said. I crave a hearty supper.

The two Mates supped on rabbit, cheese and white bread. While his fingers—ungloved, as was allowed while eating—deftly stripped the flesh from the small sharp bones and conveyed the succulent morsels to his lips, Gallan thought of

this permissible touch; his thinking was quiet and withdrawn, no louder than a hum, and yet he soon felt Raddia's words, uttered softly as ever, cutting into it.

It is safe, she said, because the meat is dead, and thus devoid of Substance.

And yet it nourishes us and our own Substance, Gallan replied. The same way grass nourishes the rabbit we're consuming.

His Mate fell silent, hastening to empty her plate, and Gallan's eyes, teasing, strayed to her face, making Raddia wince.

Please avert your gaze, she said curtly. You're making me old.

Gallan obeyed, though still grinning with mischief. *What's the harm?* he said. *Don't you want to be a Maker eventually?*

Raddia stopped eating for a moment, hang her head and drew a deep, troubled breath. *Certainly I do—becoming a Maker is my life's sole purpose.*

And then they both thought of their Surfacing Rite: sitting in the Sacred River and waiting, observed by all of Lurien while their Substances struggled to blend; what if they didn't? What if, as they had witnessed a few reddenings ago, their hearts growing cold with dread like those of the luckless Mates, nothing emerged?

Better to think about the food, safe in its deadness.

By the time they settled out on their cabin's porch, seated on opposite sides of the bench with a goblet of whiteberry wine each, the heavenly dome illuminating the Sphere of Untouch was a vivid, fire-like red.

Nights, vernacularly known as *reddenings* or *red skies*, were every Mate's secret delight, because they were the time all Makers grew drowsy and retired, thus allowing young Lurienites—who, by tacit agreement, never listened in on each other once reddening had fallen—to let their minds, (and, for those daring enough, even parts of their bodies) frolic around, free from the numerous constraints of the day.

Transgressions included self-mating—performed under the cover of their robes or with their genitals exposed to the nocturnal coolness and to their own avid, fascinated gaze—liberal running of bare hands across things already dead or insignificant enough to not be missed, momentary locking of the eyes that made the bold Mates' hearts leap with sweet terror, and, most roguish and dangerous of all, open-mouth speech.

It was this last vice that Gallan most frequently indulged in, even though (or precisely because) he knew how wicked and beastly it was. As in every Mate, mind speech had been beaten into him by his Makers, who had also taught him that to make loud, rude sounds befitted only animals, so stupid they didn't know that by keeping one's lips parted, one's Substance leaked out irreversibly like warmth from a rapidly cooling ember; breathing and eating, though necessary, were damaging enough without submitting oneself to the relentless wear of time by bleating like a sheep.

But again like many Mates, Gallan was enthralled by the sound of his own voice, even if he'd never dared raise it louder than a breathy whisper; it was as though another self, strange and alluring, resided in his bosom, longing to be let out and take possession of his white-sky, tame and timid version. Moreover, unlike mind speech, open-mouth voices couldn't be detected by thought, and were

only audible by direct hearing, a fact which, given enough distance, made the utterance of even the most unthinkable things perfectly safe.

So now Gallan, taking a sip of wine to steel himself, pushed the tip of his tongue between his lips, pried them open with heart-quickenning slowness, and drawing in a mouthful of milksuckle-scented air, he let it out again and said, "Raddia?"

He felt his Mate shifting her weight further away from him on the bench; then he waited, while Raddia waged her usual inner, losing battle; and then, her voice as hushed as the rustle of milcloth lace, she whispered, "What?"

Emboldened by her response, Gallan ventured a whole sentence. "Do you ever think of our Makers' Surfacing Rite?"

A pause; an audible breath; and then, "Why would I think of it?"

"Because of how different we were, even if briefly; I remember looking straight into your eyes, then speaking my name open-mouth, and then, before our gloves had yet fully formed, trying to touch your face."

"That was because we were as animals; we didn't know better."

Gallan drained his wine. "But why is it better?"

"*Why?* Well, for one, would you rather live a long, dignified life, or end your days in disgrace, submerged before your time, leaving me old, alone and useless?"

"You know I would never do anything to cause you pain; but sometimes I think that maybe those early moments, while we could barely stay erect... what if that was our true nature, which we were never allowed to explore? We think we know ourselves because of what our Makers have led us to believe, with thrashings, food deprivation, and backbreaking chores—all the while claiming it was for our own good. But why would the Sacred River's milk give us eyes if we cannot look at one another, mouths if we're not meant to speak, and hands we must never touch with?"

Gallan's outburst, though no louder than the Sacred River's distant murmur, made the ensuing silence heavy and ominous, and when Raddia spoke again, she lapsed into mind speech, if stentorian enough to ensure that the chance eavesdropping Mate would think that nothing reprehensible was being discussed.

To touch is to die. To touch is to kill. To live is to be an island. But even as she recited the Three Doctrines, she realized, to her horror, that anyone listening would imagine them to be a stern reprimand to something bad, whispered in the redness.

Lurien was such an island, they'd been taught, surrounded by hostile worlds of unimaginable filth, decay and pain; and yet, wasn't an island touched from all sides?

II

In the beginning, said the legend that had been passed on from Maker to Mate since time before time, the world was pure Substance, invisible and everlasting, and so immense that no two particles of it touched one another.

But then, even though no one knew how, death was introduced into the world's sublimity, an evil, brutal force whose purpose was to bring folds of the Original

Substance together, contaminating them with visibility, weakness, malice and mortality.

It was then that colours first appeared, ranging from white, the colour closest to the original perfection of existence, to the uncolour of death itself; the darker the hue, the viler its bearer; in the subworlds most akin to the deadly power of touch, of matter befouling matter, the short-lived, suffering mortals, lived in constant darkness.

And since that ancient, violent rupture, only Lurien, the Sphere of Untouch, had retained the lightness of purity, even if the Substance of its dwellers had ultimately been unable to escape the deadliness inherent in the abrasion of the physical world.

We have been blessed with whiteness, the Makers told the young Mates time and again. *We are made of Substance and milk, nourishments of spirit and body. To sully ourselves with touch is to spit in the face of life itself, to invite devastation and death.*

And still the odious little beasts, left unsupervised but for a moment, would tear off their gloves and grope themselves, each other, anything and everything at hand.

Raddia stood outside the coop, trying to stifle her dread. Despite the protective overgarment covering her head, torso and extremities, which ensured that the stench and foulness of the chickens wouldn't come into contact with her milcloth, she always dreaded entering the cramped, gloomy coop to gather the eggs; of course she had long ago accepted that this was part of her duties, just as Gallan's was the far more hideous butchering, bleeding and skinning of the animals they ate, but still she would give anything – if she *had* anything, which she didn't – to be relieved of this particular task.

Part of her fear was the structure itself, built of murkwood, whose bark was the toughest and darkest material found in Lurien, and thus considered suitable only for beasts; once she stepped inside, stooped and cringing, the coop felt like a trap, the only way out of which was by confronting an even greater fear: to shoo away the hens, who never abandoned their nests peacefully, stick her hand inside the putrid tangles of excrement-spattered straw, and collect the eggs carefully, all the while being attacked from all sides by the fluttering monsters and their leader, a brown rooster who often flew as high as her head, perched on her shoulder and jabbed relentlessly at her mask, trying to tear through the hardcloth mesh and poke her eyes out with his beak.

And the deceptive quiet and stillness—as if nothing lived inside—heralding the havoc that would break out moments later, always brought to Raddia's mind the hush that came over everything (the rustle of the bushes, the buzzing of the bees, even the Sacred River's flow) immediately before a shower of ether milk: countless drops that fell from the sky rapidly, cold and completely transparent—a fact which many Lurienites took as a sign of primordial purity, letting themselves be drenched by the clear liquid and even drinking it, but which Raddia feared beyond words, thinking it an onslaught from an alien world she knew nothing about and couldn't trust.

Raddia held her breath and listened; nothing stirred within the coop; the hens were still asleep, but soon they'd be up and fighting her with all their might, like fierce, feathered Makers defending their young. The words of Navva, Raddia's female Maker, echoed in her mind: *Plants and animals are vile, envious creatures; their inferior Substance will leap inside you and destroy you given the slightest chance; killing them is the only choice.*

And yet these crude and stupid creatures had claws and beaks, hooves and horns, sturdy barks and untearable roots—and what did they, so wise and superior, have in their lieu? Protective garments and the terrible knowledge of their inescapable mortality. In the middle of the red sky, when half-thoughts and dreams ruled the mind, Raddia often imagined being a flying bird or one of the ancient murkwood trees which grew in the Southern Mists and which no one dared approach, much less cut down; rumour had it that they had been there since Lurien's earliest days, and that their real name in the Original Language meant *'that which cannot die'*. (Though no one knew for sure; certainly no Maker would ever proclaim a mere tree to be so powerful).

Looking up, Raddia saw the redness of the sky dissolve in widening pools of white, like a milcloth glove slowly pulled off a hand. She shouldn't dally any more; soon the rooster's piercing call would awaken the hens, and her task would become ten times harder. So, bracing herself, Raddia opened the small door, crouched inside and closed it behind her; then she stood motionless, letting her eyes and nostrils adapt to the dimness and the stink; and then she noticed something strange.

It appeared that, for some reason, the hens had laid their eggs on the coop's bare earthen floor. Raddia took a step and felt one of them, unseen, get crushed under the heel of her boot—but instead of the sickening crack and the stickiness she expected, the thing, though squeezed, felt curiously resilient. She cautiously stepped back, and then a beam of whiteness snuck through a gap in the wooden wall, illuminating the centre of the coop—and for all her wariness, Raddia couldn't help gasping in terror.

The thing she'd trodden wasn't an egg but the severed head of the rooster; and scattered about lay the heads of the hens, their lifeless eyes glinting horribly and their carcasses strewn all over the coop, as if death, in claiming them, had gone mad.

Perhaps it was the work of a fox.

That is most unlikely; foxes, rats and suchlike vermin have long been obliterated.

Maybe there still remain some in the Mists.

What lives in the Mists, keeps to the Mists.

Gallan and Raddia sat opposite to each other at the dining table of Lorn and Navva, slowly and soundlessly consuming a bowl of whiteroot soup. As all Mates in the presence of their Makers, they didn't speak unless explicitly addressed—which suited them fine, especially on an occasion like this, when there was an important matter for the elders to discuss. At first, Raddia had been apprehensive about reporting the bizarre and ghastly slaying of the fowl, (in fact, it was Gallan

who broke the unfortunate news), but no suspicion had fallen upon them, for no Mate could ever conceal an act of such irrational cruelty and its emotional repercussions from the penetrating mind-dissecting his or her Maker.

A trick learnt instinctively by all Mates in their childhood was to concentrate on the image of a specific thing, because wordless thoughts were harder to perceive. Gallan, for instance, was at present thinking hard of the whiteroot plant, its sharp sour taste when eaten raw and the surprising sweetness brought out by its cooking. However, the mind being a skittish beast, the moment he heard the word 'fox'—a creature he knew only by description, as a voracious killer—a sentence formed before he could stop it: *But the chickens hadn't been devoured.*

Instantly, Lorn turned his long, wrinkled face and his moist eyes (showing a faint spot of grey in the centre, though Gallan had only overheard about it in a fragment of Navva's thought—for there was no greater impudence than to look one's Maker in the eye), settled upon Gallan's face; he could feel the touch of the old man's inquisitive gaze making his skin dry, as if by a thin coating of grit. *You mean the carcasses were intact?* Lorn enquired.

Indeed they were, o Wise and Noble One, Gallan replied, frenziedly trying to decide whether he should go back to thinking about whiteroots or if it would seem suspicious.

Don't fear, Navva said, her whispery voice filling his mind like sweet-smelling smoke; though it was easier said than done, for Navva, like many women her age who considered the gradual colouring of their eyes a very private affair, to be shared solely with their Mates, wore a long veil that hid her face completely, so that whenever she spoke, the words were for a moment indistinguishable from the sound of her breath and the rustle of the milcloth, like an obscure utterance in the Original Language. *Give us a thorough account of what you saw, she added.*

As you wish, o Wise and Gentle One. I searched the chicken coop meticulously, using our brightest glowstone; at first it appeared that someone or something had merely cut the fowl's heads off, without harming their bodies; but in the corner of the coop, half hidden beneath an upturned nest, there was a hen whose head was still connected to its neck by a tendril of bloody gristle.

Obviously bored with the subject, Lorn sat back, took his bowl in his hands and tipped its contents into his mouth, noisily draining the soup despite Navva's quiet tutting.

And how do you interpret this fact? she asked Gallan.

It was a fox, I tell you, Lorn insisted, but was ignored.

I—I thought... Gallan faltered, *that perhaps the chicken... attacked each other?*

The Makers briefly considered this in silence; then Navva spoke again.

Granted, they are revolting things, little better than the worms they kill, and prone to eating their own kind—but only if they're starving. I take it yours were sufficiently fed?

Though shaking from her own insolence, Raddia jumped to her Mate's defence. *Forgive me for speaking out of turn, o Wise and Gentle One, but they most certainly were. Their feeders were brimming with corn, as always.*

It's a mystery then, Lorn said. *Or, should I say, another mystery. Oh dear; I suppose we shall have to inform the Circle.*

One should refrain from speaking of the Circle beyond the Domicile, Navva chided him, like she often did, as if she were not Lorn's Mate but his Maker; a quick mind-grin passed between Gallan and Raddia, who enjoyed these reprimands, as well as the fact that, for all their wisdom, nobleness and gentleness, Makers were equally unable to mask the sound of their mind-talk. Then the red faceless form sighed and said, *You two, finish up and hurry home to pluck and cure the chickens; there's no point in wasting the meat.*

They both muttered obediently, but the thought of the beheaded hens made Raddia's stomach turn; all food was dead, but there was eating a dead thing and then there was eating a corpse.

That night Gallan and Raddia saw their first suicide.

A cold wind had been blowing since redball, and the two Mates sat on their porch, huddled in their sheepskins and sipping warm turnip beer from a flask they passed between them—a practice frowned upon, though not forbidden; after all, their Substances were meant to merge at some point. And since open-mouth talk might be carried off by the gusts that swept the porch, biting at their exposed legs like invisible teeth, they conversed in quiet mind-speech.

What do you think Lorn meant when he said 'another' mystery?

Raddia took a swig of beer and shivered. *Judging from Navva's reaction, maybe he was talking about all the fruitless Surfacing rites we've been hearing about.*

Do you think there have been Mates who failed twice?

I should hope not; it doesn't bear thinking.

Can you imagine, though? What happens to them? I mean, we all know what happens to them, but how can they go on living, knowing the fate that awaits them?

Well, not all of them go on; and could we please talk of something else?

I'm sorry; it's just that being with them brings back all these memories; like the muzzle. Do you remember the muzzle? Though Gallan knew the question didn't require an answer; no Lurienite could ever forget the taste of raw hide and the humiliation of being treated as a mad dog just because you hurt yourself and cried out, or merely gave a shout while playing with other children. *It's for your own good, your Makers would say. So you don't go around wasting your precious Substance like a leaking bucket.*

Navva's eyes must be filling up with colour, Raddia said. *The veil she wore today was even thicker than the last one; it's a wonder how she manages to get anything done—she's virtually blind.*

Gallan snickered audibly. *I imagine she just bullies poor Lorn around, like she always did.*

Speaking of which, I stole a look at his eyes while he was mopping up his bowl with bread; they've grown so grey in the middle, you can almost discern the end spots. I guess it won't be long before their Submergence.

I thought you didn't want to discuss disagreeable things; although, truth be told, holding Lorn's head down—or, even better, Navva's—well... it does have a certain, shall I say, charm?

Gallan! You're awful! Wait till our Bitter Day comes—let's see you jesting then!

Ah, that won't be for many red skies... and then we can always lie, and say everything tastes sweet as honey.

Not if our Makers are gone; and anyhow, aren't you curious about what the little ones will look like, be like?

To be shatteringly honest, not a bit; all children are the same—pests that intrude into your life and offer nothing besides bringing your submergence closer.

Raddia laughed with relief. *I'm so glad to hear you say this! Because, frankly, I could care less about mating. Especially—*

And then she fell suddenly silent, her voice gone from Gallan's head as if whisked away by the wind, leaving him to wonder what she intended to say. *Especially if it fails?* That would be understandable; few things were more feared than unsuccessful mating. But what if she meant, *Especially with you?* Gallan didn't dare think of the latter, because it was a secret he'd been harbouring too, and for so long, he had learnt to bury it in the deepest fathoms of his mind: being a Denier, a creature so loathed that even the traditional cautionary poems denouncing them were considered poisonous, and were recited rarely and secretly, lest they infect young minds.

It was in that guilty, ponderous silence, that they heard the suicide's cries.

The sound, although extremely unusual, was unmistakable: a wail of despair, such as very young Mates emitted in moments of childish anger, anguish or physical distress, before their acquaintance with a willow switch that scarred the skin of their backs for life and taught them to rein their feelings no matter how overwhelming.

And then they saw her too, a blur of reversed colours: waist-long white hair and face tinted a luminous red by the sky, billowing milcolth robes turned searing white. She was running and sobbing, and then suddenly she tripped, flailed and collapsed on the glistening grass, just a few steps away from the Sacred River's bank.

For a moment, Gallan and Raddia forced themselves to think nothing and do nothing, except hope that this disturbing mess of beastly loudness and disgrace would pick her sorry self up and be gone from their sight. But it seemed that the dread or the sorrow—whatever had sent her into such a pitiful state—had exhausted the woman's powers, for she merely lay where she'd fallen, heaving and producing muffled sobs.

They could always pretend the whole thing never happened, go to bed and sleep; sympathy was not a common sentiment in Lurien. Yet something, some fear of their own (their Makers' ageing? the prospect of their Surfacing rite?) responded to the sound of the woman's agony. So, warily, looking around to make sure no one else was up and about, they crossed the expanse of moist, fragrant redness and stood before the woman. Her sobs had subsided, and now she merely lay there, face buried in the grass, shaking from the cold. Fleetinglly, Gallan considered placing his sheepskin across the woman's shoulders, but Raddia dissuaded him by taking hold of his hand and squeezing it—a thing she almost never did. And after a moment or two, sensing their presence, the woman climbed to her feet and stood there, crouching with shame.

Raddia recognized her from her unusually large feet, which she'd seen many times while fruit-picking in the orchards; Gallan knew her too, though from her very big and very sagging breasts, that hung as low as her waist. Her name was

Tulanda, and a few days ago—according to the half-uttered gossip Gallan had overheard at the pasture, for rites were private—she and her Mate Gorfen had had their first, botched Surfacing, which meant that their next and last attempt was imminent.

At first they tried to mind-speak with Tulanda, but her agitation was so great it was impossible to make sense of her jumbled thoughts, so ultimately Gallan asked her to whisper, since the Sacred River's babble would surely drown the sound before it could be picked up by the wind.

"Gorfen!" was the first thing she said, many times, as if he might hear his name and save her from this misery. "Gorfen! He—he left me!"

"Left you?" Raddia said, sensing the woman's greater affinity and trust towards her. "Why?" Though of course she couldn't hide from Tulanda the fact that she already knew why. "You still have another chance."

"That's what I told him, begging him to reconsider; but he said he couldn't risk another failure—he was too young to, you know... our Makers had their Submergence a while ago, and he said he'd be damned if he let the same thing happen to him."

"But where did he go? Surely he knows what will happen to both of you if he's found and branded a Denier!"

"He said he would rather take his chances in the Mists! I didn't believe him, didn't *want* to believe him; that he'd leave me all alone..." And once more Tulanda's body shook with sobs she stifled by biting on her fist.

"Don't tell me you mean to go after him!" Gallan said. "It's madness!"

Because, even if you survived the vicious things that lived in the Mists, there was Mirror Mountain—the threshold between Lurien and the hell-worlds of touch—whose every surface reflected your face and stole most of your Substance, leaving you a mindless husk that crawled on all fours before being devoured by the monsters living in the Mountain's caves. To be driven there by force was the greatest possible punishment inflicted on a Lurienite, reserved for the most heinous malefactors of myths and lore; no one would choose such a fate instead of peacefully becoming one with the Sacred River.

Yet Tulanda, beside herself with terror and despair, seemed willing to follow her foolish Mate. "Perhaps I can convince him to come back, and try again, before the Circle learns of his desertion and sentences me to a dishonourable dissolving!"

And turning on her heels she set off again, walking with the blind determination of budding insanity, forcing Gallan and Raddia to follow her and try to talk her out of it—for what if the stupid woman somehow survived and implicated them into her and her Mate's flight, claiming that they did nothing to stop her?

But as they hurried after her, mind-calling her to stop and reconsider, and beg the Circle for mercy (knowing of course that nothing could save her if bloody Gorfen never returned, as was most likely to happen), suddenly there appeared in the dark red distance a wisp of shimmering stuff that whirled and thickened, sinuously slithering towards Tulanda's white form, as if conscious of her presence—and then, fast as a beast of prey, the Mist leapt high and pounced upon her, swallowing her up along with the sound of her final scream.

Horried, Gallan and Raddia stood and looked at the Mist that seemed to wait for them, pacing left and right and thrusting tongues of grey towards them.

Never had they felt so cold.

III

Gallan awoke a little after whiterise, and promptly forced out of his mind the remnants of last night's disquieting encounter. Then he lit the hearth, placed the kettle in the midst of the glowing coals, and while waiting for the sweet lily petals to brew, wishing to chase the staleness of sleep from his mouth, he took a bite off an overripe fig—and spat it out at once, doubling over and retching, retching empty.

He had never tasted ashes, but they couldn't be more bitter than this.

Meanwhile, Raddia was writhing in the web of a dark folly—as dreams were known in Lurien; for even with a glowstone by your pillow, at some point your eyes closed and plunged you into darkness, which, being the opposite of pureness, was filled with foul thoughts and feelings that crept in and took hold of the defenceless, sleeping mind.

But this was an especially unsettling folly, for in it Raddia found herself, naked and small as a newborn chick, curled up inside a dark pouch next to an equally bare and tiny Gallan. What was more, the pouch was filled with a liquid like thickened ether milk, which their minuscule selves somehow breathed in and out without drowning.

And then something changed, and Raddia's discomfort at the confinement of the pouch and her terror of touching Gallan's naked body were replaced by a feeling of safety and bliss unlike anything she had ever experienced; because the pouch was in fact the belly of a woman, (though not Navva's; Raddia couldn't say how she knew this, but she did) who spoke to them soothingly, her voice—a real, audible voice—resonating in their every bone, the beating of her heart filling theirs with warm blood.

You cannot ever mate, the woman's voice said, *because you are already as one.*

Lurien. A name like a reluctant whisper, teeth, tongue and palate barely touching, as if in mortal fear of one another.

Once the Sphere of Untouch was created, said the legend, the Original Language, the part of the Original Substance that gave names to things, was rapidly consumed by the distant worlds of darkness, for they knew not themselves, leaving only a small number of words for Lurien. But this was evidence of its supremacy, because what is a word but an immaterial rope that ties two formerly free entities—a thing and a thought—together, weighing them down with a crude, specific sound? To need as few words as possible, to set your mind free from their restraints, was one of the highest virtues; the Sages of the Circle prided themselves in using no more than a few hundred words.

Yet of these necessary if ignoble clusters of mind-sound, there were two which were held holy in Lurien, believed to be directly derived from the Original

Language: *Substance* and *milk*—for these made up the essence of the Pure Realm’s dwellers.

Peculiar creatures, the Lurienites; born out of the Sacred River’s milk, and thus so very much resembling it: their skin, pure white, with the merest rosy sheen, their eyes like beads of an unbroken opalescence, their seldom-parting lips like petals carved out of snow-coloured, yielding marble. And the course of their lives, an immaculate cycle.

Though badly in need of comfort, Gallan and Raddia stood as far apart as the size of their cabin allowed—because the moment their minds met in mutual knowledge of each other, the combined revelations made them petrified with fear.

But no matter how hard she tried to disbelieve it, shirking all nourishment—she wouldn’t even take a sip of milk—Raddia knew that their Bitter Day, with terrifying prematureness, had arrived; after seven days of fasting and mind-silence, they would be taken to the ritual grounds by their Makers (the shame, that Lorn and Navva should still be alive to witness, unthinkably, obscenely, their mating!) for their Surfacing rite.

And yet her dark folly, and the happiness, the pleasure it had given her, was even more terrifying to Gallan, because it seemed to speak of the feelings that had stricken—and eventually sealed the fate of—the Nameless Mates.

Their fable was by far the most frightening thing a child of Lurien could be told, and that was why Navva, the more forbidding of their Makers, had made sure they were familiar with it at an age so young that its memory still made Gallan and Raddia weak at the knees.

The Nameless Mates, went the fable, owing their namelessness to the atrocity they had committed, were Deniers—but unlike their wicked kind, instead of repenting for their evil ways and begging for a merciful death, they had shown the most flagrant contempt for the laws of Lurien, pridefully declaring they would never become Mates or Makers, because they were something altogether different (a thing there was no word for), and were bound to each other with unbreakable bonds of a feeling, also bereft of a word, which forbade them to let their Substances unite.

And so they got their wish, and rather than quickly and painlessly dissolving into the Sacred River they were exiled from Lurien, stripped off their robes, nude and filthy and shaking like hunted beasts, and driven through the Mists and up Mirror Mountain—and thence finally cast into a world of touch, where, thinking they could outsmart their punishers, they embraced the barks of two massive trees that stood side by side, hoping they would remain together till the end of time, their roots and branches touching in undying, nameless bliss. But the next day a company of lumbermen came and felled the tree that had absorbed the female Mate’s Substance, and proceeded to cut it up, deaf to her screams, which her Mate, immobile and helpless, could do nothing to stop, thus having to suffer in silence the sounds of her excruciating pain as she was chopped up with axes and sliced with saws, thereafter to be tossed into the flames as firewood, pelted by the rain and lashed by the wind as roof rafters, trod and spat upon and riddled with woodlice as floorboards, eaten up by mould in attics and cellars. No matter how far her parts would go, the shrieks of her abuse would always reach her Mate’s

tree, until they were both driven mad, forced to spend an eternity in unremitting agony.

Would this be their own fate? Gallan and Raddia wondered, when suddenly, while their minds were still brimming with damning thoughts about the Nameless Mates and their own untimely Bitter Day, a voice like a wailing wind intruded, sweeping everything aside and compelling them to a panicked alertness.

The Circle demanded their immediate presence at the ritual grounds.

It was an unprecedented sight, even if glimpsed surreptitiously: it seemed that every Mate and Maker in Lurien had been summoned to the Sacred River. And though occasionally a Surfacing or a Submergence—usually one serving as an example—might be attended by uninvolved viewers at the Circle's behest, this was doubtless a rite of the utmost importance to one and all.

Raddia had never felt more desperately in need of a mask or a veil—anything that could spare her the acute embarrassment and numbing fear of being forced to look; but that was why, of course, hoods, caps or other means of concealing one's face were forbidden to Mates: not only to banish furtive open-mouth speech and eye contact, but also to ensure that, when necessary, they would have no choice but watch.

What terrified her most was the tall, gaunt, pallid figure standing in the middle of the Everbridge; for neither she nor Gallan—nor, for that matter, many Makers, who were also struggling to look and not look at the same time—had ever set eyes on a Sage.

These strange and feared members of the Circle were chosen as soon as they surfaced by the whiteness of their milcloth garments, which attested to a purity of Substance so great, that not even the cloth spun from the Sacred River's milk could touch the blood beneath their skin. They were led to the Domicile, a stone building at the outskirts of Lurien devoid of windows or furnishings, and lived there, avoiding all thought and mind-speech amongst them, and never eating, touching anything with their hands, or mating, a preservation of Substance which granted them exceeding wisdom, mind powers, and longevity.

Makers sometimes sought the Circle's advice, or reported incidents of gravity, by standing outside the Domicile and mind-speaking in tones of humility and reverence, although they seldom received a single word in answer—for rare was the chance that anything truly significant, thought of or performed within the boundaries of Lurien, escaped the Sages' preternatural keenness.

But surely, Raddia said to herself—hoping this brief half-thought would be lost amidst a hundred others like it, as everyone wondered in dread whether it was their own disobedience that would be punished by the Circle—surely a few butchered hens couldn't warrant such a momentous gathering.

And then—relief, sweet and tingling, as the assembled Makers and Mates, many amongst them similarly relieved, saw a woman escorted to the opposite bank of the Sacred River by two veiled Makers. Yet Gallan and Raddia's peace was short-lived, for as the woman approached they both recognized her: it was Tulanda, though in such a state of dishevelment it looked as though she'd been to a cesspool-world of touch and back: her face was smeared with dark brown dirt (a sure sign of the miasmatic Mists; Lurien's soil was pale yellow), thorny twigs and

dead blackened leaves were entangled in her matted white hair, and her left foot was bare, forcing her to hobble on her right leg—although her skin grazing the grass should be the least of her concerns.

Because, since the Denier Gorfen was absent, and presumably dead, it was safe to assume that his ill-fated Mate had been brought there for a public, shameful, solitary and premature Submergence, a punishment intended for Makers and Mates alike—a reminder of what awaited the former and what could happen to the latter should they choose to disregard their duties and scorn the laws of Lurien.

Raddia had never beheld a Submergence, she hadn't even once prepared herself in thought for Lorn and Navva's rite, but what she dreaded most at the moment, wholly indifferent to Tulanda's glaring panic, was the chance she might disclose last night's encounter and their failure to prevent her from fleeing, hoping to lessen her penalty or simply out of spite, to do blind damage and not be alone in her degrading death.

While Tulanda was forcefully plunged into the Sacred River and held in place by the veiled Makers, splashing and flailing and even whining disgracefully, it felt as though they were all holding their breath, waiting for the man with the long hair and beard and the striking robes—sky-white and glowing like the indestructible milkwood of the Everbridge, existing since the dawn of time and not built by hand—to pronounce the foolish Mate's crime; but no matter how they hushed their minds to harken, the Sage remained silent, which was somehow even more intimidating.

Raddia's shaking hand shot out and grasped Gallan's, and together they forced themselves to stare, craving the moment when the Makers would seize Tulanda's head and thrust it into the agitated milk, when suddenly a commotion broke out amongst the ranks of the anticipating crowd, a flurry of wincing and sidestepping—some even gasped in fright and disgust, before the Sage turned and fixed his blank gaze upon them, commanding instant silence—and through the hastily vacated space there emerged, guided by two male Makers and gawking around, a thing that made Gallan and Raddia's previous astonishment and horror pale in comparison: a grimy, foul-smelling, hideously deformed Fault.

Since they almost never left the quarry, the fields and the lumber grounds, where they toiled their whole lives till they dropped dead and were buried (or, as some maintained, devoured) by their equals, Faults rarely entered the thoughts of pure Lurienites; in fact their very existence was kept secret from young Mates, so that their curious, restless minds wouldn't be polluted by thoughts concerning these thoroughly despised creatures. As their name denoted, they were the fruit of spoiled Surfacing rites, born without a Mate and also without Substance, and afflicted with horrendous flaws; their Makers, forbidden from mating again, were forced to inhabit inferior homes, shunned by other Makers, and they usually reached Submergence age not long after the birth of their defective offspring, performing the rite alone, beyond the ritual grounds and out of sight of the Everbridge.

Amongst their own kind, though frequently copulating by carnal contact like the animals they were, Faults were sterile, so the only reason why they still existed was their use as beasts of labour, for which purpose they continued to be bred, carefully so their population wouldn't get out of hand, with Lurienites who had

debased themselves – such as Deniers, or their Mates—and whose Substance was deemed defiled and thus excluded from a proper Surfacing rite. It was an abhorrent thing, no better than to let oneself be ridden by a donkey, but nonetheless it did occasionally happen.

And this particular specimen, besides the usual beastliness of Faults—the fact that they gabbled loudly and nonsensically, and shoved their grimy paws, on which milcloth never grew, everywhere they could, like monsters from the worlds of darkness who fumbled stupidly about – was made even more repellent by a purple, hairy blemish that covered the right half of his face, and by his incessant, raucous laughter, as he was led, stark naked, his private parts dangling horribly, through the red-clad figures who flinched from his touch and averted their eyes from his abominable countenance.

And when Tulanda realized the nature of the stir, and saw the Fault reach the edge of the Sacred River and, breaking free from his escort, jump into the milk with a roar of glee, she was instantly transformed into a beast as well, frenziedly fighting the Makers' grip, screaming to be submerged, and struggling in vain to dunk her own head into the milk. But before long her milcloth garment began to dissolve, which meant that her Substance, despite her frenzied resistance, was leaking into the Sacred River, and merging with whatever coarse and primitive spirit inhabited the monstrous Fault, who, aroused by the warmth of the milk, was stroking himself and moaning with pleasure.

Poor Tulanda, Raddia thought, quite safely, for every female Mate was no doubt thinking the same, along with, *Thanks be to fate it isn't me*. And yet not one of them could tear her appalled and greedy eyes from the horrific spectacle; if this were a regular rite, after a while two small, plump, rosy-white bodies would rise to the surface, then glide to the bank, crawl out, stand up on wobbly legs, and coughing out the milk speak the name given them by their Makers' Substance and the Sacred River. But in this pitiful mating, while Tulanda wept aloud, at last surrendered to her ignominious coupling, and the Fault splashed about and guffawed, the surface of the milk remained unstirred.

And then, as everyone waited with bated breath a quick, merciful submerging of both parties, a string of bubbles rose and burst in the middle of the river, followed by a curiously-shaped thing which bobbed and then finally emerged: a Fault if there ever was one: a two-headed creature, hirsute as a shaggy sheep, with a single circular eye in the centre of each head, tainted with its Maker's deep brown colour and black end spots—the eyes of a thing already dead, and yet suddenly the two misshapen mouths sprung open together and let out a piercing double shriek.

Raddia couldn't say exactly what happened next, because like many Mates and Makers she had promptly fixed her eyes on the grass she stood on, to avoid sullyng them with such a ghastly sight. Later on, Gallan, who had stepped in front of her to hide her and kept watching, would tell her that Tulanda and the Fault were held under the milk but didn't dissolve, their corpses ultimately floating away whole, while the abomination, milcloth-less, whining and squirming, was seized by a handful of Makers who, at the Sage's command, drove knives through its eyes, cut off its heads and limbs and tossed them into the Sacred

River, its whiteness momentarily maculated by a blood as dark as the excrement of a cow.

There was, however, a thing he wouldn't need to tell her, for it affected both of them at once, while the crowd dispersed as quickly as possible: the Sage's voice, cutting like a blade into their horror, to speak five ominous words.

Seven days. No second chance.

IV

They forced down the food despite the revolting bitterness, for they would have to go without a breadcrumb or a drop of milk until their rite.

Which they tried and tried to banish from their thoughts, to no avail; the Sage's voice still resonated in their heads, though for the life of them they couldn't understand why they had been dealt with so severely. Could it be that the Circle had divined their unspoken (and unspeakable) reluctance towards their alarmingly imminent rite, their earlier preoccupation with the legend of the Nameless Mates? Had they learnt of their nocturnal meeting with Tulanda? Raddia even wondered if it was because of what she'd dreamt, but dark follies were not the sleeper's fault, and besides, what with all the grim rumours going about Lurien, red skies must be teeming with disturbing follies.

"Why do you think they didn't dissolve?" Raddia said, deflecting. They were cooped up in their cabin's kitchen, where it was safe to speak aloud.

Gallan took a sip of white ale, grimacing at the awful taste. "As we were leaving, I heard a Maker think that maybe it's because we have somehow become too tainted, too unclean for the Sacred River to accept our Substance."

"Did the thing really have two heads? Or no, I'd rather you hadn't told me at all; the whole ugliness makes me positively ill to contemplate."

"Perhaps someone saw me fooling with the grass the other day, like you said."

"Oh, I'm sure it has to be something worse than that; maybe it's not just us—if the Sacred River has been rejecting the bodies of Makers, the Circle may have decided to turn rites into some trial of pureness; weed out inferior Substances."

"At least, no matter what happens, we shall be together," Gallan said.

Raddia smiled faintly, and then she blinked in sudden remembrance. "I almost forgot—I was meaning to ask you about it, but then havoc broke out and it slipped my mind. It was before they brought the Fault; a Maker was standing to my left, and she had the most peculiar thought: *The Ghosts have forsaken us*, she said to herself."

"The *Ghosts*? What's that?"

"I have no idea; I've never heard the word before. You haven't, either?"

"Not that I recall; it may be a thing concerning only Makers, like end spots."

Then, having taken a spoonful of goat cheese, Gallan suddenly bit on something hard, and exclaiming in pain, he spat it out; it was a thing they'd long been resigned to, their old goat's proclivity for swallowing, along with the grass she grazed, all sorts of teeth-hurting odds and ends, from gravel and sticks to apricot pits and wood chips. But this time she had outdone herself in dietary weirdness,

for the object on the table, once cleaned from the white stuff, was the strangest thing Gallan and Raddia had ever seen.

It was perfectly round, its colour like honey pierced by light, and despite its smallness it had to be made of stone, because it was quite heavy—and yet it *couldn't* be, for neither glowstone nor dullstone (of which most tools in Lurien were fashioned) had this particular glinting hue. But even more unusual and intriguing was the image carved on both sides, which Gallan and Raddia stared at for quite a while before realizing what they were looking at—for there was no reflective material to be found in Lurien, and its dwellers spent their lives avoiding the sight of one another's face.

The carving was of a long-haired, bearded head seen from the side, and atop it rested an odd creature that resembled a porcupine with its quills raised in defence. But as to whom the face belonged to, and why he should adorn his head with a frightened porcupine, Gallan and Raddia couldn't begin to imagine.

They only knew, at once, that, whatever it was—a thing not of this world? an omen?—it should be kept secret; which shouldn't be too hard, for although its discovery filled their minds with awe, there existed no words to describe it.

One of the tacit rules of Lurien dictated that, for reasons of decorum, Makers never returned to the humble dwelling they shared as Mates; and it was quite sensible, really: would a grown butterfly ever deign to enter the tiny chrysalis cocoon of her past?

So that, when Gallan and Raddia, while settling on their porch to have a last red-sky glass of whiteberry wine, saw Lorn approach their cabin, they both rose to greet him with barely suppressed apprehension. But their Maker smiled their fear away, saying he was merely visiting to wish them luck in their oncoming Surfacing rite—which, thanks to the crowdedness of the morning's spectacle, appeared to be common knowledge.

However, the moment he stood at the foot of the stairs, and his wrinkled face was lit by the flickering flame of the lantern, both Gallan and Raddia stepped back and bowed their heads—though not before glimpsing the last, chilling change that had come over Lorn's weary eyes: two large holes of uncolour in the center of the grey disks.

Don't be afraid, he said. *You can look all you wish; my draining old Substance can do you no harm, and to be honest I would welcome some of yours, if only to feel young for a moment.*

Yet just as they had noticed his end spots they now sensed the worry in his voice; something hastily hidden, threatening to burst out of its mental cage.

And then Lorn did something that made them shiver despite the mildness of the red fall; letting out a rasping sigh, he said, "It is better that we step inside."

Though they had spent their childhood concealing this particular thought, it was true that Lorn had been Gallan and Raddia's favourite Maker. For even when he administered a punishment—fastening the muzzle's straps, or making them kneel for a beating—he didn't do it with Navva's impassivity, but with perceptible displeasure and even a hint of regret, as if he recalled all too well his own pain as a child and wished he could spare both them and himself the pointless misery.

And a few times, when Navva happened to be out on some chore, he had even soothed their tears by whispering words of kindness and comfort—a transgression unthinkable for a Maker.

That was why it took a while for the fact of Navva’s absence to dawn on them, and even then they asked no questions, glad that the sour old woman was away and unable to hear their hushed, conspiratorial talk.

It was Raddia who spoke first, tickled by the untought-of audacity of not just looking her Maker in the eye, but also of addressing him in audible speech.

“What are Ghosts, o Wise and Noble One?” she said.

“Well, apparently I’m not so wise, for I don’t really know; it is a word the Sages of the Circle sometimes use, but like so much that comes out of their minds, it seems to be a riddle. Some claim that these Ghosts were the first inhabitants of Lurien, and that they were extremely powerful; they could speak the Original Language, and so were able to alter the world according to their whim. Until something terrible happened, and they left. But I, for one, never truly believed this particular legend; it doesn’t make sense: if they could rule us all, why would they ever leave?”

“Is it true that the Sacred River no longer accepts our Substance?” Gallan asked next, and only when Lorn grinned at him did he blushing add, “O Wise and Noble One?”

“There are rumours, but then there are always rumours—life is too tedious without them. I think you shouldn’t take today’s unfortunate incident too gravely; after all, the woman was the Mate of a Denier, and the Fault was unbearable to behold even by a Fault’s standards. At any rate, you shall find out soon enough.”

These last words made Gallan and Raddia tense—thinking of the Sacred River’s surface staying horribly still while their Substances strove to merge in vain, and then of strong hands holding them down until they drowned and were carried off naked and intact like logs—but Lorn once more relieved their dread.

“I wasn’t speaking of *that*, you dumb little beasts! Haven’t you noticed my end spots? They’re half the size of my ugly head.”

Yet their Makers’ submergence (which they might not even attend, if their own rite failed first) was hardly a lighter topic, and so Gallan’s thoughts strayed briefly to the peculiar thing they had found in the goat cheese—but an instant was all Lorn’s mind, honed by age to a hawk’s precision, needed.

“May I have a look at it?” he said, and Raddia hastily obliged him, taking the circular object out of her pocket and giving it to Lorn, who proceeded to examine it by taking off his right glove and toying with it, gauging its weight in the hollow of his palm and turning it over to study the engraving. “Fascinating,” he mumbled after a while. “I’ve never seen anything like it; its substance feels potent, more than a beast’s I’d say, and yet it doesn’t show the slightest desire to leak into mine, any more than it would allow *my* Substance to pass—it’s almost as if... it *scorns* me.”

“You mean it is alive?” Raddia whispered, equally enthralled by Lorn’s words as by the sight of his bare hands, the long pale fingers like flower stems bending to some inner breeze.

“Honestly, I can’t say. It certainly feels more alive than any piece of stone I’ve ever touched; the only comparable thing I can think of is the Everbridge.”

“Maybe we should toss it in the fire, to see if it’s indestructible as well,” Gallan said in a tone of childish excitement.

But Lorn seemed unwilling to part with it, opening and closing his fist around it and gazing thoughtfully into the thing’s mysterious shininess. “It reminds me of another myth about these Ghosts of yours,” he said. “*The Three Circles*, it’s called. Ages ago, goes the story, while the Ghosts still lived in Lurien, each of them had a third eye, with which it could see into the past, present and future and know everything that had happened or would ever happen. But one night, while they slept, someone stole these precious eyes—and the Ghosts have been looking for them ever since. And when they find them, they shall destroy the thief and the entire world that contains him. Now some believe that the eyes of the Ghosts are hidden in Lurien, and that someday they are going to appear in the form of three circles, heralding Lurien’s doom.”

Gallan and Raddia considered the tale in silence, and then Raddia said, “And you believe that this—thing—is one of those circles?”

Lorn gave a small puff of laughter. “Not really, no; I do think that it’s mightily strange, but it’s ludicrous to believe that all-knowing creatures wouldn’t know their eyes would be stolen, and by whom. No, I simply think your goat wandered off into the Mists, where things from other worlds are said to occasionally appear, rolling down from their threshold at the summit of Mirror Mountain.”

“So, should we report the circle to the Circle?” Gallan said in jest, but suddenly all the quiet mirth was gone from Lorn’s face. Dropping the thing on the table, he hurried to put his glove back on, fumbling because his hands shook badly.

And in that instant, while their Maker’s mind was too much in turmoil to keep such a momentous thing hidden, Gallan and Raddia knew right away the reason for his unprecedented visit: Navva was dead.

Lurienites were powerless in the face of tears; intense unhappiness was thought to leave the Substance defenceless, and so, besides a soothing word, all that was allowed—or rather tolerated, and solely among Mates—was the holding of hands, with gloves on.

And that was all that Gallan and Raddia, appalled by the sight and the sound of Lorn’s uncontainable sorrow, could do: grab a hand each and squeeze it, all the while filling the old man’s mind with the cooing of empty solace, till finally the sobs abated and Lorn, hanging his head in shame, delivered the ultimate blow.

“She—she cut her throat,” he croaked. “She cut her throat with a knife.”

They’ll put her in the ground like a Fault, was Raddia’s first, horrified thought, while Gallan, like a boy who hears of death and tries to picture a face, a voice, a colour, was thinking of Navva’s robes: did they turn white for a moment, when the blood gushed out of her, severing its bond with the milcloth, and then turn red once more as the fabric soaked up the blood?

“Don’t think about it!” Lorn begged in a choked whisper. “Speak your minds aloud before someone hears!”

Yet panic, after a lifetime of forcible silence, had sealed their lips, and no matter how hard they tried to unthink Navva’s suicide, it kept rattling madly in their heads.

And then, while they hovered in this wild state, dreading the first cut of a Sage's knifelike voice, they started to pick up other thoughts, growing in number and volume until they became a deafening din out of which they could only make out nonsensical words—*a hole... a celestial end spot... an invasion of alien darkness...*

The sky, in all its glorious purity, young Mates were instructed, is what you should strive for, and all that you can hope to attain in life. Because unlike the skies of inferior worlds, Lurien's firmament was unblemished by stars, moons and clouds, spreading in seamless white or red magnificence.

That was why, when Gallan and Raddia stepped out of the cabin, and following the collective gaze of the people crowding the scarlet gardens and flower copses looked up to the sky, they were seized by an unutterable fear. The plan they had quickly agreed on was this: they'd steal away to Lorn and Navva's home and help carry their Maker's body to the Sacred River, there to be joined her old Mate—for Lorn had nothing to hope for, and dreaded being put to an undignified death or, worse, forced to mate with a Fault.

But there were things greater than life or death, and one such thing had suddenly, inexplicably, occurred.

A great circle of uncolour had opened up in the centre of the heavenly dome, slowly but visibly sucking its surrounding redness like milk seeping away through a hole in a bucket. And as the width of this unnerving void expanded, the light in which everything around them was bathed in up until moments ago grew dimmer and darker—from ruby to crimson, maroon, brown—till finally whole pieces of the landscape (birch groves, whiteberry shrubs, even the edges of the Sacred River) were swallowed up by creeping shadows, seemingly lost forever in the thickness of uncolour.

And standing in a knot that shrunk as fear pressed against them like a second, palpable darkness, Makers and Mates were mind-murmuring or outright open-mouth speaking of the Sages' silence in their hour of direst need, for it seemed that no word had come out of the Domicile despite the frantic pleas for guidance, help, support.

In a way, this senseless disruption in the order of the world offered the three conspirators the ideal diversion—when the heavens themselves were bleeding into a vortex of nothingness, no one would care for a stupid old bat who had ended herself out of fear; they could carry her corpse to the Sacred River naked as a skinned goat's and no one would spare a single glance; and the stony silence of the Circle wouldn't hurt.

But as they laboriously turned their eyes away from the hole in the sky—surely so much exposure to uncolour was harmful to the Substance – and crept away from the crowd, Raddia heard a thought that had briefly entered her own mind and then been expelled as a needless burden of gloom uttered from the lips of an elderly Maker.

“The eye of a Ghost is upon us. Fate have mercy on us all.”

Like those of most Makers, Lorn and Navva's cottage was situated further away from the Sacred River—for it was Mates who needed its beneficial presence most—and by then it had been almost entirely claimed by the slithering shadows, which

Raddia's glowstone was far too weak to dispel. All they could make out were vague shapes that seemed, against all reason, to be stealthily advancing towards them.

And as silence made one of their minds, Gallan and Raddia could feel not only Lorn's desolation, but Navva's despair as well, her horror of being drowned into the Sacred River like a cat in a sack, of her last moments being suffused not with peace but with the shameful insanity of panic. And then trepidation for the crime they were about to commit finally and brutally set in, and despite their wish to aid their devastated Maker, Gallan and Raddia couldn't help thinking—and thus passing the thought on to Lorn—that if the Circle came out of its slumber and caught them in the act, even the fragile hope of redeeming themselves with tomorrow's Surfacing rite would be gone.

It was because of this collective brooding, worsened by the growing murkiness, that they were so unprepared for the attack, quick and violent as an evil thought.

One moment they were dragging their steps through leaves and grass, and the next two beastly sounds erupted at once, a hostile growl and a retching—and suddenly Lorn was on the ground, clutching his slit throat in a vain attempt to stop the river of blood that leaked through his fingers, while a few steps away, head lowered and knees bent in an attitude suggesting both fierce defence and ferocious enmity, stood a female Fault, naked save a sheepskin out of which her grimy udders spilled and swung, stinking of dung, and brandishing a blade darkened by Lorn's blood.

The three of them stood in suspended motion, considering the enemy. *You think it's the Circle?* Raddia asked Gallan. *You think they knew, and sent this animal to dispatch him in the same way as Navva?* *Can't say,* Gallan replied. *Maybe the Faults somehow got wind of what happened to one of their own, and decided to rebel against their masters.*

However, it was clear that, even if she weren't going to attack them as well, they must avenge their Maker's murder; and one didn't have to be a Sage to do that—Faults' minds were as easy to bend and command as a lamb's that strays from the fold.

Thus, looking straight into the eyes of the beast, Gallan and Raddia's Substance leapt and filled her, ordering her will into submission and her blade-wielding hand to sink into the filthy flesh of her abdomen and cut, slice, eviscerate.

And the murderous Fault, unable to resist their mental sway, obeyed, falling to her knees and roaring with pain as coils of bloody gut sprung from the jagged wound across her belly like snakes; then she collapsed on her face, groaned, writhed, and died.

Then Gallan grabbed Raddia's hand and pulled her away from the corpses.

"We have to leave at once and act as if none of this happened."

"But Lorn and Navva? We can't—"

"We can and we must; their Substance is gone; we now have to protect our own."

And so they hurried back to the sky-gazing throng, and thence, keeping their minds as blank as possible, to their cabin. They had gone completely unnoticed; no one had seen. *Except the eye of the Ghost,* Raddia thought. *The second circle.*

V

Their sleep was infested with the grimmest dark follies: snatches of nakedness and pain that made their bodies twist as though they felt it, filth that seemed to fill their mouths and make awful rasping sounds as it got caught in their grinding teeth.

Such was their desperation, that before sinking into this torturous slumber, they had wordlessly, with no more than a shared, fleeting thought, agreed on what they would do if the rite was unsuccessful: they would pretend to put up a weak fight while their heads were thrust into the milk and then go limp, rise face-down to the surface, and hope that the current would remove them from sight before they had to come up for air. What might happen afterwards was too terrifying to consider in detail: perhaps they would end up in the Mists or beyond, at the foot of Mirror Mountain; but since no one had ever returned from these places of dread – at least not in living memory—to verify their existence, what would become of them was ultimately uncertain; there were even some who believed that the Sacred River had neither source nor outlet, and flowed, as life, between two boundaries of nonexistence.

And as these dismal contemplations tormented what little of their minds was not under the follies' assault, they both woke up before whiterise, and stayed in their beds breathing and looking at each other's darkened yet faintly reassuring shapes.

Yet the gloom had a peculiar quality, as if it wasn't absence of light but rather a slightly brighter shade of uncolour, sneaking into the bedroom through the shutters.

And Raddia suddenly recalled that other source of insidious fear, lying beneath their own personal terror: the hole in the sky. Had it grown overnight? Had Lurien the Pure turned into a realm of shadow?

Sitting up, she brought the two small glowstones together and lit the bedside candle—and saw in its wavering halo something that made her gasp and flinch, crawling away till her back was against the wall. *It's the third circle!* she thought, hardly believing it herself; but how else could such an unthinkable disaster be explained?

What is it? Gallan said, sitting up too. *What circle?*

But Raddia's mind could only spit and crackle sparks of panicked confusion. For Gallan's left eye had turned blue.

Chapter II

I

The poor thing was dying, and there was nothing Yern Kobold could do. Though she was ultimately destined, as all their animals, for the butcher block, he had a great affection for the sow—a majestic yet gentle creature, with bright, intelligent

eyes—and the sight of those eyes gazing up at him in agony, as the spark of life dwindled from them, filled Yern's heart with sorrow.

He'd had no reason to be hopeful, of course, no reason whatsoever why the Shy Death should spare his sow, but still he'd been foolishly hoping that she had one last litter in her, five or six piglets that would keep hunger and despair at bay, and maybe, just maybe, restore some of the rosiness that had so heartbreakingly faded from his children's wasting faces.

But the moment the weary beast collapsed from the throes of labour, and her distended belly shrunk to half its size in a single breath—her womb releasing nought but air, an air that smelled neither of dung nor of decay nor of anything at all, a lifeless smell like that of marble—Yern knew that soon she'd be delivered not of a healthy pink brood but of her rapidly waning life.

And now with a groan and a shudder the blood came gushing out, black dead blood lacking the stench of disease, till there was nothing left inside the sow but a heart whose maddened beating slowed and slowed and then with a final spasm went still.

Yern, who'd been unwittingly holding his breath, let out a sigh. A rivulet of blood was still leaking from the the animal's insides and settling in a dark pool; if this had been the old days, those blessed days that seemed so faraway, no sooner would the blood begin to thicken than a swarm of flies would be upon it; but there were no flies in Feerien anymore—nothing for them to feed upon. Who would have thought that the day would come when they'd miss the accursed vermin?

Wiping the dirt off his breeches, Yern stood up and waited for the spell of faintness, of the sad world spinning around, to pass; he hadn't the strength to pick up the dead sow and cart her all the way down to the road. Not that anything would happen to the carcass; foxes and jackals had long retreated to the woods, seeking what live prey they could find. It would remain there, its flesh unchanging in colour and substance, till old Durgall, who had no home and traded with the Scavengers, would come by and toss it on his dilapidated wagon and drag it all the way to the Waste Valley, there to be sold and devoured even though it could offer the Valley's miserable dwellers no more nourishment than the likeness of a pig carved on a piece of wood.

From the cottage came the sound of Yonfi's shrill laughter, fleetingly lifting Yern's spirits; Yonfi was his youngest and dearest, and it killed him that he couldn't plump up the pallid, gaunt little face—and yet listen at him laughing, as if life was kind like his boyish heart!

Along with the gleeful sound came the waft of boiling cabbage, wretchedly familiar; of course they should be grateful that the earth continued to give them what little sustenance it could. Rumours said the Miners had taken to eating weeds and stones, and some even their stillborn babies.

Yern thought it unlikely—after all, the Miners' services were still valuable to the King—but the appalling thought gave him some wicked comfort.

Misery loves a good rival.

Yenka was at the kitchen table kneading a ball of dough, carefully scraping off the least trace of cornmeal from her fingers, lest the precious yellow powder—sparingly pinched from the tiny sack Yodren had procured for them—go to waste.

Since most of the increasingly meagre crops were seized by the Castle, flour was getting harder and harder to come by, so that a loaf of freshly-baked, wholesome cornbread was almost as valuable, and difficult to obtain, as the gold whose colour it resembled.

Blessed Yodren, their firstborn, Yenka's pride and joy: the first Scribe in the history of the lowly Kobold clan. Even though being taken care of by his son pained Yern, he couldn't help feeling grateful; food was far more dear than his foolish pride.

"One of the eggs wasn't empty, thank the Spirits," Yenka said without taking her eyes off the dough. "I boiled it and tried to make them share it, but Yofana wouldn't hear of it; It's for my little brother, she said, so that he'll grow up big and strong."

"She's such a darling soul," Yern said. "Not ten years old and already behaving like a grown woman—like a mother, even."

"Well, she's neither, and if she keeps this up I honestly don't know if she'll ever live to be one; she's got thin as a stick, all skin and bones and eyes as big as lanterns in a face like an old woman's. I have to beg her to have a bite of food, but unless Yonfi is fit to burst she won't accept a single crumb—which means that she's constantly starving herself."

Yern sat on a stool, lit his pipe and feasted his eyes on the little boy, who sat on the floor of the bedroom they all shared, drawing intently with a piece of coal on a broken roof tile, his shoulder blades poking pitifully through his flimsy linen shirt. So much of their lives had come to revolve around food, and the lack of it, it was hard to believe that a mere six months ago their household was as happy as any hard-working Farmer's. It was as if the Shy Death had taken away the air they breathed.

And it had to be a six-moon year, with no more than a couple of hours' greyish dimness every night. At least darkness would make the children drowsy, so that they might sleep and forget their gnawing hunger for a while—whereas now, with days stretching in a seemingly endless succession of inescapable moonglow, Yofana and Yonfi couldn't be coaxed into bed, staying up till all hours and working themselves into a frenzy of childish bustle and mischief that made their stomachs groan with pain.

At that very moment, Yofana burst through the door yelling, "Mama! Papa! Look what I found! Look!" and thrusting her grimy little palm at Yern, beaming with pride, she presented him with a handful of snails. "So Yonfi can have some meat with his supper, right? Oh, and there's more! The lettuce patch is crawling with them!"

Having abandoned his drawing to see what the fuss was all about, Yonfi stood on his toes to inspect his sister's great find—but he didn't seem to share her excitement. After taking a single look at the sluggishly crawling snails, he frowned, pursed his lips, and declared, "I'm not eating *these*. They're nasty!"

"No, silly!" Yofana said, ruffling her brother's thick, straw-coloured hair. "They might look a bit slimy, but when they're cooked they're lovely! Right, Papa?" she said, turning to Yern and nodding urgently.

Yenka was right, Yern thought, forcing himself to smile and mutter approvingly. Their beautiful, fair-haired, green-eyed daughter looked like a skeleton come to

life, a fact made even more heartrending by her unwavering cheerfulness and the way she so obviously adored her little brother.

“You eat ’em, then,” Yonfi said, and went back to his drawing.

But Yofana wasn’t disheartened a bit; carrying the snails to the kitchen, she dropped them in the pot that Yenta had already set on the stove, and dashed out the door, shouting that she had to get them all before they ate up all the lettuces.

“I don’t like lettuce either,” Yonfi said, his tongue sticking out in concentration.

Yern took a drag off his pipe and tried to shove the thought of the snails out of his mind; but, the Spirits forgive him, how he craved them!

*A Farmer’s life is hardship,
a constant, grueling fight,
but better than a Miner’s
who lives in endless night.*

This nursery rhyme, which she had taught Yonfi years ago, was going around Yenka’s mind like a trapped bee while she prepared her family’s scant supper.

In fact, it had first resurfaced around the same time the plague that would be known as the Shy Death had reared its invisible head – and ever since, stubbornly like a prayer, she kept repeating the words to herself, finding in them a modicum of solace.

For Yenka Grindloss had been born to a family of Miners, and so she knew the truth contained in the frivolously arrogant rhyme.

Looking back, her childhood seemed indeed to have gone by in uninterrupted darkness, under the thick shadows cast by Mount Copper, Mount Iron, Mount Silver and Mount Gold. By the time she was Yonfi’s age, she had lost both grandfathers and three of her six elder brothers to the mines, their bodies never recovered to be given a proper burial. And even those who survived the beastliness of toiling away at the mountains’ innards, were worn down so young and suffered such painful, bedridden deaths, it didn’t really seem preferable to perishing swiftly in a caved-in tunnel.

Yenka, for instance, couldn’t remember her father’s face, nor his voice – all she could picture of him were two grey, weary slits in a mask of coal dust, and the horrible sounds he made in the back yard, bringing up thick gobs of the black phlegm that, slowly yet surely like poison, was draining the life from his battered body.

As for the women, even though they didn’t live and breathe the ore that would be made into weapons and coins for the King, they also ended up looking grey and bitter like the men they tended to. And even that shred of hope they harboured as girls—that, by some incredible stroke of luck, they would be courted by, and wed to, a dweller of the Castle (no matter how poor and ordinary)—were soon drowned in the cloud of soot that hovered in their homes, ineradicable like despair. At fifteen, Yenka’s sisters were indistinguishable from their ageing mother.

However, despite the gloom of their lives, Miners held Farmers in extreme contempt, calling them names like *rose trimmers* or *chicken fondlers*, which implied at the same time that their work wasn’t manly enough and that they lay with their animals, which accounted for their women’s legendary promiscuity and

the shamefully few children they bore—though of course, even when she was a little girl, it was obvious to Yenka that Miners bred like rabbits because so many of their offspring were killed, and that life amidst meek beasts, fragrant flowers and an abundancy of good food (since Farmers kept their prime eggs, meat and produce for the Castle, leaving the wives and daughters of Miners to root through carts of half-rotten vegetables and barely edible meat) would exceed her best and most tantalizing dreams.

That was why, when she first saw Yern Kobold hawking his shiny red apples and cloth-covered pails of sweet-smelling cream – for he was one of the few Farmers who, in spite of the Miners’ rancour, did his best to offer them a fair deal on decent goods—Yenka had vowed to become his wife, even though her father had already been approached by suitors hankering after his resplendent youngest daughter.

For days and nights on end she couldn’t stop pining for the young Farmer’s fair hair, rosy face and dark blue eyes, his bright ringing voice (untouched by the vileness of metal or coal) and the very essence of happiness—like moonglow that hasn’t known the oppression of towering mountains—that his presence exuded.

And then one blissful dreamlike day the Farmer reciprocated the feelings that fluttered so madly in her heart, by kneeling in front of her, holding out a magnificent yellow flower that looked like a black moon set on fire, and saying that never in his life had he set eyes on such a beauteous maiden, and that she shone in the murk like a pearl. (And then of course he had to explain to her what a pearl was, for Miners led a frightfully ignorant life, and also to paint her an image of the sea, which Yenka wouldn’t see till the eve of Yodren’s twelfth birthday, when they would take their son to the Scriptorium.)

And even though Yenka feared her family’s response to Yern’s proposal—a fear confirmed by the reaction of her mother and sisters, who had taken the news with wordless austerity, as if they’d been told that a stray dog had pissed on their door—Father Grindloss, upon hearing from his prospective son-in-law that not only was he relieved from coughing up a dowry but was to receive, as a gesture of gratitude for allowing the marriage, a monthly supply of suckling pig and beer, was so overjoyed, he nearly threw his own wife into the bargain.

Thus Yern and Yenka were married—he in his finest black outfit and she with her long blond hair adorned like a Noblewoman’s by a string of pearls that Yern had bought in exchange for two dozen sheep and an entire crop of barley—and lived in love and happiness that swelled with the birth of each of their beloved children.

And look at us now, Yenka thought, fighting back her tears that so terrified little Yonfi, the last and brightest pearl to have emerged from the endless sea of her love, and which still lit up, despite all the adversities—Yern’s defeated look, Yofana’s obstinate fasting and Yodren’s absence, its pain undiminished by the years—the dark, turbulent waters of her soul.

The smell of the corn bread was mouthwatering, but Yenka swore she wouldn’t touch a piece of broken crust until her babies were stuffed—even if it meant raising their clothes to make sure their pale, hollow bellies were bloated.

Always be thankful to the Spirits, young Feeres were instructed, for even a pittance of Their mercy can lift the direst curse.

And as he lay in bed with his family—Yenka and himself half-hanging over the edge of the mattress to make room for their children’s restless sleep—Yern Kobold sent his silent thanks to the Spirits; for even though there were many who claimed that these celestial rulers of life had abandoned Feerien even before the outbreak of the Shy Death, perhaps as early as the Disaster that had struck the ancient world, Yern knew that his day, which had begun in grave discontent, was now ending in something akin to happiness.

And like everything lately, this uplift in his family’s fortune and spirits was related to food—for while she was roaming the garden in search of more snails, Yofana had come upon a hare (and a big one at that, almost the size of a wildcat) which, having grown lazy and careless by the lack of beasts of prey, was caught unawares and promptly delivered to the kitchen where, amidst the gleeful shrieks of Yofana and Yonfi, it was swiftly killed and skinned by Yenka, overwhelmed to the point of tears by their good luck.

So they had had a proper feast, even eating some of the hard cheese that Yern had been saving, for once without anyone thinking of everyone else’s hunger but attacking the food with joyous greed, till they could barely breathe from the fullness.

Moreover, the six-moon year that many took as an ill omen, saying that the Shy Death was a harbinger of the dreaded Seventh Moon, meant that the weather was constantly mild, so that Yofana and Yonfi, even when half-famished, didn’t have to endure a single-moon winter’s chill as well.

Yern could feel his daughter stirring and muttering in her sleep, and to make sure the moonglow didn’t wake her before she could get some decent rest, he carefully got off the bed, went over to the front windows and drew the sackcloth firmly across them; then he did the same with the back windows, and once the bedroom was sufficiently darkened, he tiptoed back to the bed.

But as he made to raise the sheet that had come off Yofana while she tossed and turned, his eyes caught something that glistened between her thin legs—and bending over he saw to his horror that the bed was soaked from the blood that kept spouting out of his daughter’s faintly moving body; and then, noticing a solid thing in the growing black pool, he picked it up and held it in his shaking hand: it was a stillborn baby, tiny as a clothespin, with the body of a man and the head of a pig.

Yern woke with a start, sweating and panting. He jumped out of bed, heart racing, and saw that nothing was wrong. Yofana was even smiling in her sleep.

All’s well, he kept saying to himself. It was just a dream. All’s well.

And yet another, inner voice kept saying, *No it’s not.*

II

Yodren Kobold, Scribe of the Order of Divinators, pushed the untidy mound of scrolls aside, and letting out a sigh of exasperation he leaned over his desk until his feverish, throbbing forehead touched the soothing smoothness of the wood. At

times like this, contemplating a life of herding sheep and churning butter almost made him cry out at the cruel perplexity of his fate.

Although deep down he knew he should be grateful for his gift; the haunted, ashen faces of the people in the marketplace, their guardedness and the fear in their eyes—an overhanging haze of premonition, that seemed to thicken every week—could only mean that things in the Farmlands and the Minelands were getting worse and worse.

And like smoke trapped inside a tiny room, the air in the Scriptorium was rife with rumour, speaking of indistinct yet certain troubling times ahead. The Shy Death seemed to have touched even the Cave of the Seers, or so the story went—for the last Seer had appeared on his own and vanished without a word, despite the offerings in clothing, food and gold. Talk of the Seventh Moon was equally widespread, even though Yodren privately dismissed it as an old folks' tale that had been going around forever; unfounded fear was the spice of security, and Scribes were insatiable gossips, dispensing dread amongst them like wine. (And yet some nights, while sleep eluded him and dark thoughts flapped their wings in his head, Yodren couldn't help wondering what would happen if the fable came true; if the first Disaster had rendered Feerien a speck of life surrounded by the immensity of the Dead Lands, the thought of what the Seventh Moon's rising might result in was utterly inconceivable). And of course, as an imaginary savior much-needed in these dark times, the tale of Royen the Eternal, and his potential birth to their generation, was now more popular than ever.

What made matters worse, and drove the exhausted Divinators to daily bouts of despair, was King Fazen's sudden, unrestrained desire to know what lay in store for him – an obsession that led him to give frequent, clandestine (though of course everyone in the Castle knew) audience to Spirit Servants, as if he were a common charwoman worrying if her homely daughter might fetch a prosperous betrothed. As for the root of this evil, it was equally unthinkable and humiliating for a King: because, as soon as the first wave of stillbirths had been acknowledged—and since the Queen was long past her childbearing years—King Fazen had begun hectically planting his ageing seed in the wombs of a horde of maids, ladies-in-waiting, palace concubines and alley whores, not one of whom had managed to produce a living bastard.

Thus for the past few months the Scriptorium had been in a state of unceasing hustle and bustle—Historians toiling night and day to find some precedent of the plague in their predecessors' writings, Healers trying to concoct a potion that might restore the King's fertility (and possibly save Feerien from dying out like a flame), and Divinators struggling to come up with an ancient prophecy, incantation or enchantment that could help fathom the cause of the Shy Death and hopefully predict a future rid of it. But whereas all other Scribes dealt with the common tongues spoken in Feerien, Divinators had to tackle the shifting, shimmering conundrum of the Divine Language, in which many of their arcane books and parchments were written.

Think of it as water running through your hands, the apprentice Divinators were told by the Master Scribe upon their first encounter with the language of the Spirits, whose quicksilver words had shaped the world. *To grasp it is to accept that you can never truly grasp it.* And to their young, excited eyes, those mysterious

scribblings that glimmered as if the ink that formed them wouldn't dry, and the fact that they followed no rules, but flowed in and out of their minds like vapors of knowledge and feeling, seemed like the greatest of miracles. It was only after years of agonizing work, steeped in frustration and bafflement at the infinity of riddles contained in a mere sentence, that they came to see their adeptness in the Divine Language was a curse in disguise.

Like the document Yodren had been struggling to decipher the entire afternoon, and which still refused to yield the least bit of meaning, its evanescent words forming new phrases every moment, ornate phrases speaking incoherently of a place that stood between life and death being at once everywhere and nowhere. At one point his tiredness was such, he thought he saw the name Royen near the bottom of the page – but of course by the time he put his finger underneath it, the word had changed to the name of his younger brother, for the Divine Language was as much a thing existing outside and beyond its reader as it was a product of his own fancies and longings.

Little Yonfi, whom Yodren had never seen, because the last time his parents were allowed into the Castle for the septennial meeting with their older son, Yenka wasn't even pregnant yet. What did he look like, this six-year-old boy that shared his blood? Was his laughter as ringing as Yodren imagined it, his eyes as warm and kind? Though he shouldn't indulge in such thoughts, for the truth might be entirely removed from them – sunken eyes and no reason or strength left to laugh; in fact, it was quite possible that he'd never have a chance to meet Yonfi outside the realm of painful dreams, in which case it would be as if the poor thing, the dream-child, had never existed.

But that was too awful to consider—for where would all his love go then? No, somehow or other he would make sure that Yonfi stayed alive, he'd spare no expense in the food he sent to his family, even if he had no way of knowing that it really did reach them and wasn't consumed or sold by the shady messengers.

And then, suddenly overwhelmed with yearning for his childhood home and the simple pleasures of life on the farm, Yodren sat up, closed his eyes, and leaning his face against his crossed hands he did something that no Scribe would ever deign to do, much less confess to: he prayed to the Spirits that They keep his beloved family safe from hunger and harm, and fill little Yonfi's heart with hope and happiness.

It was surprising, how easily the prayer's words, taught to him by Yern, came back to him—and how sadly little he believed in them.

Time hardens a story as it does a tree; a few centuries, and it may grow to be a towering thing of solid, unyielding belief in its truth. And amongst the numerous myths that warmed the nights of generation upon generation of Feeres, feeding—and feeding on—their sweetly tingling dread as they huddled by the fireplace, grateful for having been spared of its hair-raising horrors, the story of the Disaster had become such a powerful presence.

For long before it became Feerien, the Sphere of Toil, the world of the six moons was a world of great fertility, prosperity and beauty: great peaceful seas of bright blue and sprawling forests in a thousand shades of green, purple mountains, golden fields and silver rushing falls and lakes, the lot of them a splendour to

behold, and, scattered among them in a seemingly inexhaustible abundance, fruits of the earth and beasts whose flesh brought bliss to the palate.

Three kingdoms ruled this marvel of a world, each of them strong and affluent enough to never seek more; and yet it's in the nature of man to always seek more, to steal what lies within another's grasp if only for the pleasure of the theft. Weak minds, urged by ill and devious counsel, started to prevail, till the three Kings, founding their acts on irrational fears, and dreaming of conquest idly as though digesting too rich food, they declared war on one another's kingdoms.

And while this senseless war raged, nature was ravaged first of its magnificence and then of its very life; luscious woods were obliterated for the making of arrows and spears, glorious, timeless mountains were gutted out for the forging of swords and shields, and rivers that once ran fresh and clear as crystal were darkened by the blood of slain warriors whose bloated corpses infested the land.

Until, seeing no end to the erect beasts' stupidity and fearing that their eternal home would end in lifelessness and filth, the Spirits of Life and Death summoned Their celestial destroyer, the Seventh Moon. A year it burned, next to its six pale siblings, and beneath the fire of its gaze all living things withered and died; onetime thriving plains were turned into deserts, oceans dried up and massive waves of scorching heat swept across the kingdoms, leaving nothing but dust in their wake.

And when the Seventh Moon finally, mercifully set, all that had survived its devastation was a shadow, a vague dream of that former paradise: some patches of earth that, over the centuries, would grow into the Farmlands and the Minelands, a seaside castle all but broken into pieces, and all around them desolation as far as the eye could see: Waste Valley, the Drowning Isles and the Dead Lands.

Thus went the story of the Disaster, handed down along the ages like a legacy of caution: *Be prudent and frugal and try to do as little harm as possible*, it seemed to say, *for no one can imagine the horrors a second Disaster might bring*.

But as the Shy Death crept across Feerien—and in a six-moon year at that—many were those whose existence had been obscured by apprehension, and who, while waiting for a fitful sleep to claim them, or just as they emerged from it, frail and despondent, would look up fearfully at the sky, to make certain that no vast eye of red and black had risen to lay waste to the tatters of their lives.

“The Scavengers forming an army? Impossible! The miserable bastards are little more than skeletons!”

“Well, if wielded with enough strength and hatred, a bone is as powerful a weapon as any.”

“But isn't the Princess supposed to be guarding the passage to Waste Valley?”

“Hush, you fool! You fancy joining the meat-heaps anytime soon?”

“Oh, rubbish! The old fart couldn't hear a thing if it were chiseled right onto his big ugly ears!”

However, all four of them turned and glanced at the end of the long dining table, where the Master Scribe sat, toothlessly chewing his food like a goat, while his eyes, two beads beneath the bird's nests of his brows, darted here and there with the mistrust and hostility of the thoroughly deaf.

Yodren sat next to the jesting Scribes, sipping his wine and soaking up the chatter without giving the appearance that he was in the least interested in what they were saying; Diviners were expected to be aloof, even to one another – but these four were Advocates, and as such, paying frequent visits to the Palace for the King to seal the laws, decrees and proclamations they prepared for him, they were notorious gossips.

Thus, by pricking up his ears to the tales they brought back to the Scriptorium, Yodren had learnt things that, if openly disclosed, would earn the tattler a swift execution.

For instance, one of these impudent pieces of knowledge was that King Fazen, like his father before him, couldn't read or write – and so, whatever scroll was given to him, he pretended to peruse, frowning and silent, and then signed with a shaky scribble that supposedly stood for his name. In fact, rumours said that a few years ago, a reckless Scribe had fooled the King into signing a contract by which he granted the entire Order of the Advocates limitless rights of sexual congress with Queen Firalda.

An even more daring, malicious and amusing hearsay, which by now was common knowledge among the Scribes, concerned Prince Fantyr, and his long absence from both the Castle and the Palace.

For King Fazen's first and only son and heir to the throne of Feerien, ever since he was a toddler, had been a source of grave disappointment and shame to his father, falling disgracefully short of what is expected from a future monarch.

Because, for reasons no one could explain, from the time he was able to walk little Fantyr refused to unfasten himself from his mother, moreover demanding that her handmaids dress him up in queenly attire, complete with powdered face and painted lips and as many jewels as his tiny frame could support.

At first the King was uninterested in his son's mischief, thinking it a result of overindulgence that, given time, would pass. But when the little runt began parading himself in pearl-embroidered gowns and introducing himself as Princess Fanyria, it was obvious that some remedy ought to be found, and quick.

However, despite the Healers' potions, the Spirit Servants' prayers and charms and the regular thrashings administered by the fearsome executioner—the King in his despair had even had him thrown into the dungeons—the Prince gave no sign of amending his aberrant ways. By the time he was twelve, he had managed to corrupt the executioner, his jailers, and nearly every other male who set foot in the Palace.

Thus King Fazen, despite the Queen's vehement pleas and threats, decided that their only hope lay in the Army, whose rigid discipline and morals might rouse their son's dormant manliness. And when even this failed – for the incorrigible Prince would intimidate both peers and superiors into submission by threatening to exterminate their entire families—the King had special barracks built at the desolate fringes of Feerien, manned by soldiers who would guard the kingdom from Scavengers attempting to cross the borders, and where Prince Fantyr, unseen and unheard, could debauch to his wicked heart's content.

And there were many more diverting tales in store, which the four Advocates, flushed with drunkenness, proceeded to exchange in raucous voices—but Yodren had stopped listening, not feeling quite up to all this mirth. Because no matter

how many venomous laughs they had at the expense of nearly everyone else but themselves, Scribes were, in essence, pampered prisoners, their whole lives dedicated to a kind of work that most of the time seemed utterly pointless. They were only allowed to leave the Scriptorium once a week, and even then they were forbidden to step outside the Castle's walls; their fine robes were tailored and their sumptuous meals prepared by others, regardless of their personal taste; and as for the Scriptorium itself, it was a gloomy, dank tower at the very edge of the Castle, its only view – and that from its top, for the Scribes' chambers were windowless—a grey expanse of sea and sky stretching as far as the foggy bank that hovered above the Drowning Isles.

Yet all these things would be bearable if they were permitted to see their loved ones more often than the seven years the heartless rule decreed, to be able to embrace their fathers and bury their faces in their mothers' bosoms to weep as when, little more than boys, they had been snatched from their loving arms.

Like every other Scribe in history, Yodren could vividly remember the moment his gift had first manifested itself. He had just finished feeding the chickens, closely followed by three-year-old Yofana who was eager to shoulder her womanly duties but still too clumsy to do so without instruction, when suddenly a brightness burst before his eyes like a lightning, dazzling him so profoundly he collapsed to his knees, scaring poor Yofana out of her wits; but while she ran off to the house shrieking for help, Yodren, the movements of his body not entirely of his own will, grabbed a stick that was lying to hand and began carving big, trembling letters on the dried mud, and by the time Yern and Yenka came rushing to his aid, he had written four words, the names of all four of them, though of course to his parents and Yofana's startled eyes they were just a bunch of incomprehensible symbols that seemed to slither about like long, invisible worms, leaving an ever-changing trace—for Yodren, despite his youth and the humility of his roots, had been further blessed by being an adept in the Divine Language.

Of course his parents knew what had befallen their son, even though it was extremely rare amongst Farmers, Miners and others of lesser stock; most Scribes were born inside the Castle, and were usually the offspring of other Scribes and the whores they patronized to compensate for the fact that they were not allowed to marry. And they also knew the rules concerning this elevated caste were strict: once a boy showed possession of the gift of literacy, he had to be brought to the Scriptorium posthaste, under penalty of lifelong imprisonment, although no Farmers who had the fortune of producing a Scribe would ever turn their backs to the favours such a parentage could afford them. Yet that was the last thing on Yern and Yenka's minds as they struggled to conceal their heartbreak over having their firstborn torn from them under a mask of prideful overjoyment. So they had bought Yodren the finest, dearest clothes the Castle peddler carried, and then, along with little Yofana, who understood nothing but was nonetheless excited to a frenzy, they made the four-day journey to the Castle, till they reached the Scriptorium, which none but Yodren was allowed to enter.

Up until that moment, Yenka had managed to sustain her pretense of cheer, waiting for her children to doze off in the back of the wagon to wipe away her silently shed tears—but as they stood before the stark tower, and it suddenly dawned on her that the next time she'd be seeing her precious boy, the light of her

life, he'd be a man of nearly twenty, she crumpled to the ground and began to wail, moan and claw the dirt with her fingers, a pain so raw that Yern's tight embrace did nothing to console.

The memory of that day was still so hurtful to Yodren, he couldn't recall if he'd been forcibly led away from his family and into the Scriptorium, or if he'd caught a last glimpse of his mother's tear-streaked face. Thus now, to dull the pain as he had often done before, he filled once more his wine goblet to the brim, vowing it would be his last.

But just as he was taking a sip, his mind still foggy with remembered anguish, Yodren was approached, stealthily and suddenly, by Harfien Griff.

Even by the enigmatic standards of Divinators, Harfien was a riddle. He was the eldest of the Order, and yet instead of bullying his subordinates like others of his status did, he was withdrawn and taciturn as a novice Scribe of twelve, so that even his physical presence seemed to blend with the Scriptorium's thick shadows. Some said that this was due to his exposure to the Seers' alleged mind-bending powers—for Harfien, by virtue of his seniority, was the sole Divinator who was allowed to enter the Cave of the Seers, in order to converse as best he could with these otherworldly oracles. Yodren had never seen these strange, almost mythical creatures, but he always pictured them as sharing Harfien Griff's long blond hair, nondescript face and unnatural pallor.

So when he realized that the weird man was standing behind him and addressing him in his low, whispery voice, Yodren was greatly surprised.

"...and I thought I saw the name of Royen," he was saying.

"What?" Yodren said, turning around to face Harfien, who stepped back and looked down at once to avoid his gaze.

"Royen the Eternal. I was going through an account of some great drought that had struck the Farmlands about two centuries ago, and suddenly, near the bottom of the page, the word 'Royen' flashed before my eyes."

"But then you blinked and it was gone; I know; I've seen it too; must be because of all this nonsense talk about the Shy Death and the Seventh Moon and whatnot. You of all people should know that sometimes our weary minds simply play tricks on us."

"I thought so myself; but even when it changed, the name was a familiar one."

"Oh?" Yodren said, turning his back to the Scribe's tiresome talk to drink. "And, pray tell, who is our saviour supposed to be this time around?"

"I know it will sound strange," Harfien said. "But the name—it was yours."

III

In the valley's early-morning mist, it looked like something that had escaped from a nightmare world of behemoths: a monster to make one's blood run cold.

As it drew closer, its shape was reminiscent of a horse, though it was thrice as big as the mightiest stallion—and then, emerging slowly into the light, the beast showed its true nature, more formidable than any imagined terror.

Half of it was made of wood and metal: planks and beams jointed with thick nails and bolts, pulleys and chains; that most of these materials were rotten or

rusty, rubbish salvaged from the valley's heaps of refuse, made the whole construction even more imposing, as did the fact that those who had conceived of it and put it together were considered savages. Yet despair can make the dimmest mind ingenious.

Ingenious as the giant creature's other half, which consisted of human beings, strong men chained together shoulder-to-shoulder to form the horse's legs, dividing thus its great weight and lending to its movements the fluidity of an actual, living animal.

Last, like all horses, this too served as a beast of burden and transport, and it unthinkingly obeyed the will of its rider, who sat upon its creaky wooden back, reining its trot with thick harnesses of rough leather tied around the human forelegs and correcting or hastening its pace with a bullwhip that cracked like thunder.

And the reason for all this inventiveness and backbreaking toil was the fact that the rider was the exalted leader of his people, his eminence apparent not only in their blind, frantic wish to please him and do his every bid, but also in the rider's girth—a veritable mound of human flesh that no garment could stop from bursting out of the seams and overspilling in thick, long folds of grimy fat—which rendered walking impossible. Moreover, this extreme obesity, far from being viewed as monstrous, was in fact regarded as proof of the man's sacredness – for whereas most of his loyal subjects were bags of bones who often succumbed to a ravaging hunger, the rider grew heavier by the day, as though amassing the wasted strength and volume of the dead.

The secret that had granted him these superhuman qualities had been revealed to him in a dream, from one of his forefathers who had been a King when the valley was still a vibrant, fruitful land. To escape this new pestilence that made dead meat useless—said the King to his distant heir—he had to feed on flesh while it still throbbed with life.

The revelation had proven miraculous: within a matter of months, he had grown from a skeletal wretch into a man of monumental proportions, revered by every single man, woman and child of his nomadic tribe and believed to be able to confer protection from death by the mere touch of his massive, kiss-anointed hands.

Thus now the sonorous rumble of his stomach made both the horse and the procession in its wake stop dead, as if his insides had issued a roaring command.

And no sooner had he extended his hand than a ragged waif stood on his toes and pressed into it a scraggy hen that writhed and clucked madly, trying to claw at the rider's face—till he, gripping the bird's neck in his fist, sunk his teeth in its belly, spat out a bloody mass of skin and feather, and then dug in, sloppily devouring the hen's innards while it still gave a weakening, losing struggle.

Then the rider let out a thunderous belch, flung away the carcass (which was instantly beset and fought over by a dozen skinny women), and with a violent thwack he brought down the whip on the two men fastened to the horse's left foreleg.

But after the horse had taken a few staggering steps, one of these men gave a piercing howl as his backbone was shattered by the weight and he collapsed, squirming and screaming with pain, forcing his partner and the bearers of the

right leg to kneel as well, lest the horse's balance be upset and its glorious rider tip over.

At once, with awesome speed and competence, a group of men rushed to the side of the injured bearer, cut him loose from his straps, and while one of them hurried to take his place, the other two held the useless invalid down and a third, without a moment's hesitation, plunged his knife into the man's abdomen, ripped him open (all along oblivious to his shrieks), and with a few expert thrusts of the blade removed the dying man's liver—and then, with a quick bow, he held it up to the rider, glistening with fresh blood and still pulsing.

Velius the Vast, he called himself; the rightful King of Feerien.

Veig Treth was a man forever haunted by ambition. When he was an orphan of five, following his father—a travelling Spirit Servant—across the Farmlands and the Minelands, where Treth the Elder provided his humble, low-earning services (that mostly consisted of invoking the Spirits to help cure misery and affliction too great to be dispelled by mere hope), he constantly dreamt of one day having a house of his own instead of sleeping in barns and chicken coops or, when not even those were available, out in the open like a vagrant, in the mercy of the elements; then the sufferers would come to him, and thus he could demand heftier payment than a basket of eggs or a head of cheese to undo hexes, protect from ill will and pray for prompt marriage or greater cattle fecundity.

And when his wish came true, by his marrying into a family of relatively wealthy Miners, he couldn't stop dreaming of someday making the leap that divided ordinary Feeres from those privileged or fortunate enough to be living on the inside of the Castle's walls, where one could procure the finest goods, drink the best wine and ale, and most importantly, if he were a Spirit Servant employed by the Spirit Home, earn heaps of gold, avail himself of first-rate whores and even—if sufficiently determined—make his services indispensable to the nobility residing in the Palace.

So, when his mousy, unsmiling wife grew fat with child—a child that Veig saw as a chain that would hold him a lifelong captive of the gloomy Minelands and their dull-witted, coal-dust-retching dwellers—he gathered (that is, stole) what coin was at hand and fled to the Castle, where, after eagerly (if not enthusiastically) pleasuring a rich, well-connected widow for an entire month, he was granted rights of residence.

Any other man in his place would be content and wish no further betterment—but Veig Treth, unlike most men, was plagued by ambition as one is by an incurable ailment: the mere thought of waiting for the childless widow to croak and then spending the rest of his days merely enjoying the benefits of her bequest made him physically ill, robbed him of sleep and left him yearning for the life he truly desired: being not merely one of the Spirit Home's Servants but High Servant of the Castle and of all Feerien.

And this he pursued most deviously, aided by the inheritance of the widow, whose passing he had hastened with arduous lovemaking combined with goose-like fattening; first he found an elderly Scribe drowning in debt from a life of dissolution, and paid him to forge a document by which the King appointed him successor to the High Servant; then, after King Fazen had unknowingly placed

him in this eminent post, provoking the low-ranking Servants' justified wrath, Veig unleashed a pest of discord, suspicion and outright hatred in the Spirit Home, by slandering, bribing and threatening various Servants, all the while making himself the High Servant's pet with shows of gratitude and servility—such as personally preparing the old man's elaborate meals and mulling his wine with strong spices, whose flavour covered the acrid taste of the powdered mushrooms with which he was slowly but steadily poisoning him (at least his humble past on his father's side had taught him a thing or two).

Then the blessed day finally arrived, and Veig Treth found himself living in the High Servant's palatial quarters, visited by the noble folk, bowed to at the Castle's market, and having exclusive and liberal use of the Spirit Home's considerable purse. For the first time in his life he felt as though he could breathe freely, while trying to convince his giddy, greedy self that there were no more steps in Feerien's ladder to climb, no grander life to crave. And when Queen Firalda herself summoned him to her regal chambers and asked him to say a benediction for her long-banished son, his bliss was so immense it felt like peaceful death—at last, he could lay his ambition to rest.

However, for all his intelligence and ruthless determination, there was one thing Veig Treth had neglected to nurture, deeming it irrelevant to his ravenous aspirations—he had never quite decided whether the Spirits to whom he owed his good fortune were real to him or not; belief in them had always seemed secondary to believing in himself; and by the time he was resting on his laurels, the essence of his vocation had become so unimportant to him that he inwardly scorned Servants like his father, who sat around chanting nonsense and burning herbs and waiting for a response that never really came instead of using their craft to make their own lives—and not some ignorant Farmer's—better. So, while he was cunning enough to give regular performances of faith for the Spirit Home's congregation, in his heart he doubted that the Spirits existed at all.

And then, like massive and horrific retribution for his life of unbelief, the Shy Death had struck, forcing him to grapple with an outbreak of terror, anger and grief he was far too jaded and self-absorbed to know how to efficiently address.

It had begun with throngs of women suddenly flooding the Spirit Home night and day, wailing and gnashing their teeth and tearing off their hair because of the dead infants they carried like so many bundles of bloody meat. Naturally, they were all convinced that the Spirits were punishing them for some grave transgression, and so Veig was not only obliged to officiate the dozens of burials and spend hours on end kneeling in front of the altar and pretending to beg the thin air for mercy, but also to offer consolation and assurances—none of them genuine—that this evil would stop.

But then people started noticing that the supply of meat from the Farmlands was steadily decreasing, and also that corpses discovered by chance, human or not, weren't putrefying as they should, as if the death that had claimed them was indeed too shy to bring its duties to fulfillment. And so Veig, by then equally helpless and panicked as the stricken worshippers, had to attend the unearthings of the babies, some of whom were burned as a gesture of atonement for sins unknown, while others were taken back to their homes, where a gruesome practice had begun to surge – for since the dead neither stank nor wasted away,

many grieving parents, spouses and siblings kept the deceased in their homes as if they were still alive, clothing and bathing them, carrying them from room to room, putting them to sleep and sitting them at the table, and some even bringing them to the Spirit Home to be blessed and prayed over.

And as if the madness of the simple-minded people wasn't bad enough, King Fazen, till then as firmly indifferent to the doings of the Spirits as Veig himself, after fathering a score of stillborn babes, decided that as ruler of Feerien he should make himself wise in the ways of their celestial punishers—overnight making the High Servant his sole and constant counsellor, confidant and consoler.

There was only one way for Veig to maintain both his position and his sanity – and that was, once again, to give into fantasies of a life better than the one he was living, without furious crowds beleaguering him with questions he had no answer to, and where the royalty would be dignified and grateful and not unconfident fools blabbing about sacrifices to the Spirits and spells of protection against the Seventh Moon.

In other words, he was determined to defeat the Shy Death on his own, even if he hadn't the faintest idea as to how he would achieve such a feat, or even if it were feasible at all. But what the High Servant lacked in faith, he made up for in shrewdness—for Veig Treth hadn't been born with a silver spoon in his mouth like these blue-blooded dimwits who were unable to solve the tiniest problem unless it could be bought off, nor had he been granted the gift of literacy like those pompous Scribes who thought that the solution to everything lay in the pages of their ancient, useless books. He had begun his life sleeping in haystacks and hollowed-out trees like a dog without a master, and look at him now, advising the King of Feerien like the wisest of the wise.

No, he wasn't going to allow this dire misfortune, nor the frenzy it had brought on, to taint the fruits of his ambition—whose new goal was to restore order to the realm, even if it meant producing bloody Royen the Eternal out of the nothingness of his profound disbelief.

As happens with legendary figures whose powers transcend the human nature, there was no consensus as to whether Royen the Eternal had ever actually existed.

However, there were references of this unique hero and his astonishing deeds in the writings of Scribe Historians dating dozens of centuries back, and the story of Royen had been part of the oral tradition since time immemorial, growing in elaboration and popularity when Fate showed Feerien and Feeres her hard, cruel face.

According to the earliest documents, Royen had been born in the aftermath of the Disaster, while the world struggled to recover some shred of its former glory. Depending on the teller of the tale, he was the youngest son of an extremely poor family of Farmers or Miners, and he had shown the first signs of his preternatural abilities when, as a lad no taller than a goat, he could wield a spade or a pickax with twice the strength of a burly labourer, provoke terror in the most aggressive sheepdogs, and beat older, bigger children black and blue—for belligerence seemed to run in little Royen's blood; what was more, the boy was invulnerable to illness and pain that would have a grown man writhing and moaning in his sickbed.

And as he grew, so did his powers, until they had surpassed those of normal men so greatly, people started to fear him, thinking he was some evil Spirit that had lingered after the Disaster to do even more harm. So they tried to kill him, many times and in many ways, but Royen couldn't be killed: he would tear down the sturdy bricks behind which they had walled him in with his bare fists; hold his breath under the water they'd cast him in till he could brake the chains he was tied up with; uproot and bring down a great oak on whose branch they had hung him—and then he would slaughter those who had tried to murder him, rip them from limb to limb till their own mothers couldn't tell them from the carcass of a cow devoured by wolves. Not even Nature could overpower Royen: fire couldn't burn him, he could go about naked in the most brutal cold, or get struck by lightning and carry on as if he'd merely been bitten by a gnat.

And then one day he disappeared and was seen or heard of no more. Some said that Time, that relentless destroyer, had finally caught up with him, and he had died of old age as all men did. Others believed that he continued to rove across Feerien righting wrongs and bringing life where only death reigned, his immortality making the barren soil blossom with flowers and the dry rock bleed water and even, some said, raising the dead as though from sleep. And still others claimed—and this was the version of the tale that had gathered the most believers over the ages—that Royen was born time and again, once in every generation, even if most of the time, being ignorant of his true origin and the powers it bestowed upon him, he lived the simple life of a Farmer or a Miner, marrying and having children and being distinguished only by his great strength, his imperviousness to sickness, and the way that things, both living and inanimate, seemed to bend to his will.

He was a force of nature, Royen the Eternal; a man who stood between life and death without quite belonging to either—for he who cannot die cannot be said to live as well, at least not as humans do.

And as the Shy Death spread its evil fingers across the realm, the storytelling thickened like smoke rising to the heavens in the hope that someone—man or Spirit—will see it, and come to the people's help. "Royen walks amongst us," they said, willing their words to be true. "He'll awaken the dead and save us from a Second Disaster."

IV

"You are to stand guard *outside*; if I need you, I shall call for you."

"But, Your Majesty," said the bigger of the two guards, bowing his head as he did, "His Majesty the King ordered that we keep an eye on you at all times."

"Very well, then; if you insist on disobeying my orders, I shall tell His Majesty that you left me alone for hours to wander in the wolf-infested woods."

"We humbly beg Your Majesty's pardon; we shan't follow you inside."

"But if Her Majesty finds herself in any danger, we've sworn to come to –"

But Queen Firalda had already turned her back to them and entered without the least trepidation the fabulous and feared Cave of the Seers.

For the past six days, Queen Firalda had woken in the dead of night, drenched in sweat, her heart hammering and her mind overflowing with awful, vivid dreams in which Fantyr, her beloved son, was murdered in the most hideous ways: stabbed in the mouth with a sword, burned alive, and even, once, most horribly, roasted on a spit like a pig, while a fat, vile man tore off chunks of his poor flesh and ate them.

Fearing thus a seventh night spent in similar agony—for something inside her told her that this final nightmare would come true—she stayed up till the rising of the first moon, and then called for her maids, asking that they dress her in travel attire, alert a couple of guards for an escort and fetch three tame horses from the stables—for there were many reasons why she wished her departure to go unnoticed, the most important of which was the fact that (although she would never openly admit it, lest she be taken for a fool) the Queen was a deeply devout woman.

Because, prior to her thirteenth birthday, on which occasion she had captivated the attention of the King during a ball, Firalda had been the only daughter of a Spirit Servant, raised to venerate these supreme, life-giving beings, to fear their wrath and to know when she had erred or sinned and must supplicate for their forgiveness.

Yet, as luck would have it (and despite her good fortune, for which she never forgot to be grateful, expressing it in frequent prayer), the crass man she had married was no more faithful to the Spirits than he was to her. And so Firalda had placed her hopes on the children she would have, and whom she would raise—secretly, if need be—to be righteous and thankful and pious. However, for all her lifelong and passionate adoration of them, the Spirits hadn't granted her a fruitful womb: after Fantyr, her precious, was born, her insides had dried up like an old well, so that she had to resign herself to her barrenness, while Fazen lavished his potent seed on his odious mistresses, filling the Palace and the Castle with filthy little bastards whom Firalda, along with their mothers, was forced to exile to the Minelands—or, sometimes, if they became too greedy and contrary, even dispatch through her loyal henchman—adding to the weight of her remorse and her fear of the Spirits' reckoning.

Her piousness seemed to bring her nothing but misfortune—because by raising Fantyr as the daughter that fate had denied her, obsessing over his manners and his least misconduct, she might have unwillingly deprived him of the rough, sinful masculinity she so despised in his father but which was expected in most men. Thus she had created an abomination, a man who lay with other men (and plenty of them, the evil tongues said) as if he were a Scavenger harlot forever hungry for male flesh. Of course at first, after days of unceasing prayer and fasting and repentance that left her knees raw and her head swimming, she had tried to blame the Prince's aberrant behaviour on the King—for she recalled, from when she was little, a man who often visited her father, seeking absolution for his crime: the unnatural yet overpowering lust he felt for his youngest son. Could it be that, on one—or, the Spirits forbid, more than one—occasion, while staggering through the Palace in the small hours, drunk and desirous of whatever female lay at hand, Fazen had, mistakenly or not, fornicated with his own son?

Though Queen Firalda didn't need any more sorrows than those she'd already been afflicted with—for one day Fazen, oblivious to her initial pleading and then to her growing anger (in a moment of madness she'd even threatened to slit his throat while he slept), decided that he had had enough with Fantyr's atrocities (your cocksucking, gown-wearing puppet, he had called their child, though the Spirits knew how hard Firalda had tried to eradicate her son's love of crossdressing), and cast him out of the Palace and the Castle, sending him to live at the very border of inhabitable Feerien, at the mouth of Waste Valley, where only destitutes and Scavengers trod. And even though the Queen had covertly—and heavily—bribed a soldier, swearing him to send word of the Prince's health every other day through a cart-driver, the thought of Fantyr's bright blue eyes and flaxen hair and of his exile to that desolate place wrenched her heart.

And then the Shy Death struck, a plague Firalda was convinced, like thousands of Feeres, was the work of the Spirits, the price that the Sphere of Toil must pay for the wickedness of its dwellers – their lewdness and profanity, their incurable avarice and unrestrained adultery: all that the Disaster ought to have taught them to refrain from, and that they'd persisted in doing, as if oblivious to the Spirits' all-seeing, all-knowing, all-powerful presence. The blow was even harder for the Queen, for the rapidly growing scarcity of food meant that most horses (at least those that escaped being eaten by the famished multitudes) were engaged in carrying provisions to the Castle, so that the messages from the barracks became first weekly, then monthly, and then dwindled to a silence she was too terrified to ponder, because to even fleetingly think of her beloved Fantyr lingering out there, gaunt and hollow-eyed, while those revolting Scavengers were said to be building an army, was so painful she wanted to die.

And for once her faith couldn't console her, at least not without the guidance of a virtuous Spirit Servant—a man like Beriton, the late Head Servant of the Spirit Home whom Firalda sorely missed, for, despite the old man's grim, unforgiving glare and icy speechlessness, confessing to him and receiving his sage advice always gave her a feeling of great calm and security. His successor, on the other hand, was a repugnant creature, and though she couldn't prove it, Firalda was certain he had something to do with old Beriton's allegedly curious demise. The few times she had requested Veig Treth's counsel, she could see through his display of piety, and pick up, like an actual stench, his complete and utter faithlessness. That a vermin like Treth was telling people how to pray and atone for their misdeeds was proof of the Spirits' justness in visiting a Second Disaster upon Feerien.

Thus, having nothing and no one else to turn to, Queen Firalda had decided, after much deliberation, to seek the advice – and hopefully the help – of the Seers.

Although their ephemeral existence had been known for centuries, no one quite knew exactly what these most peculiar beings were; the commonest belief was that they were Spirits who had somehow fallen to the earth—and that was why their appearance was so startling and their sojourn in the human world so very brief; this was also the reason why so many Feeres worshipped them, considering their inexplicable, unpredictable manifestations a sign of their Spiritness, and why the cave where they always materialized had over time become a sacred place, visited by hundreds of people even though most of the time it was empty, and suggestive

of the Seers' passing only by the desiccated flowers, rancid food, long-extinguished molten candles and numerous votive objects and valuables left there by previous believers - offerings which (or so the stories went) remained entirely untouched by the Seers, as though they were afraid of sullyng their heavenly essence with the taint of all things human.

However, amongst the Spirit Servants there were many who refused to accept that the glorious creators of the world would ever deign to show themselves, especially in the depth of a filthy cave, like overwintering beasts. This faction believed—and often vocally promoted their belief, hoping to stifle the iniquity of Seer-worship—that the pale, weak, naked men and women were in fact common mortals, most likely Miners (for the cave was situated near the border of the Minelands), who had spent so many years underground, burrowed in the bottom of dark shafts, that they had gradually lost their humanity—the color of their skin and hair, their sight and speech—and reverted to animals, living in caves and feeding on the scraps the foolish pilgrims left. As to why they never let themselves be fed or touched, and why they vanished so suddenly, well, so would moles or bats if their lairs were invaded by crowds of idiots.

And yet there were other Servants who, based on the tenet that both the nature and the doings of the Spirits were incomprehensible to man, neither denounced nor embraced the Seers, preferring to regard their mystery as something that should, like faith, be privately and carefully considered. Their dispassionate approach was further supported by certain Scribes who had actually been to the cave and spoken to the Seers, and who, despite the arrogance inherent to most Scribes, claimed that these creatures were indeed extraordinary, and possessed powers beyond the human scope—the most amazing of which was their ability to read one's mind and respond directly to the questions therein without parting their lips (and this claim was also substantiated by many common pilgrims, who said they had felt as though the Seers knew everything about them at first sight, despite the blind-looking milkiness of their eyes).

Finally there was a third group of Feeres—in which Queen Firalda belonged at the moment, deameaning though it was—who, especially since the outbreak of the Shy Death, were so desperate for anything that might afford them release from fear and the littlest peace of mind, they clung to the Seers with fervour, angry and disillusioned with the Spirit Servants who had so thoroughly failed them.

These clashing thoughts preyed on the Queen's mind as she slowly made her way along the cave's uneven floor. A part of her that still unthinkingly conformed to old Beriton's admonitions (who wouldn't hear of the Seers, nor speak a word concerning them), told her that she was adding impiousness to her sins; *This cave is as empty as your head*, it said. *You might as well be seeking help from its rocks*. Yet another part kept lit the flame of hope; Scribes were gifted, intelligent people, and though she had never quite grasped the point of their endeavours, some amongst them were said to be able to read, write and speak a language—Divine, they called it—which was purportedly that of the Spirits Themselves, and whose words had created the world. *They're far from foolish*, these Scribes are; *they wouldn't waste their time on something worthless*. Moreover, a few months back she had eavesdropped on her maids while pretending to sleep, and had overheard one of them (Gendya, a kind, bright girl) say that her mother had gone to the Cave

after her little boy was bitten by a snake, and that the Seers had given her some sort of magical potion, a few drops of which had cured Gendya's brother overnight.

And beneath this fog of hopefulness and hopelessness throbbled the vein of a mother's mad longing for her son: *Fantyr, Fantyr, Fantyr*, her heart and breath and all, for whose safe return Firalda wouldn't hesitate to offer up her own life, plunge a knife in her heart even though the Spirits punished those who took the life They alone could give or take away more harshly than any other sinner.

Suddenly the Queen realized that the light from outside had waned to next to nothing, and that if she took the turn that led further into the cave she'd have to proceed in pitch-black darkness. Curse her feeble mind! In her haste she'd forgotten to bring along a torch or a lantern. She'd have to go out and tell the guards to build a fire using sticks, which would take forever seeing as it had rained all night. But just as she made to turn around, her eyes, somewhat accustomed to the darkness, picked up a faint source of light issuing from the depths of the cave—no more than a pale flicker on the dark stone walls but enough to venture ahead by.

Yet though at first she'd thought the glimmer must be coming from some candle that hadn't yet burnt out, after a couple of yards she noticed something that made her go suddenly cold: the colour of the light wasn't yellow but blue, a blue that grew brighter and deeper with every step she took. Instantly, her composure was gone. What would she do if she found herself face to face with a pair of Seers, their bodies emitting this eerie glow as if fashioned by such stuff as moons are made of? Never had she felt so heady a mixture of fascination and dread; her years of praying before the altar of the Spirit Home couldn't begin to compare with what now set her heart aflutter.

Without a second thought Queen Firalda sank to her knees, then prostrated herself on the cold hard stone, and then, like the most abject of supplicants crawled towards the strong blue light until she felt it pierce her shut lids like fire.

She slowly, shakily got to her feet—but instead of the wondrous creatures she'd been expecting, she saw that the glow came from a stone that lay at her feet. She picked it up and held it in her palm; the stone was smooth and flat, no bigger than a chestnut, and yet it cast the Queen's heart and mind in fresh bewilderment. In her years as wife to Feerien's sovereign, hundreds of precious stones had passed through her hands, gems of all shapes and hues, some of them even believed to originate from the Kingdoms that vanished in the Disaster; but nothing came close to the marvel of this luminous stone. It was clearly a thing not of this world, and thus touched by the Spirits.

So Firalda kneeled once again, set the glowing stone exactly where it lay before, and then she produced from her cloak the ingredients required for the ritual: a sprig of nightshade and a dried daffodil, the two of them bound together with twine soaked in a virgin's first woman blood. These she gently placed upon the stone as if on a tiny altar, and then she crossed her hands, closed her eyes, and whispered the words of the prayer:

*O Spirits wise and knowing
Of what is and shall be,
Extend Thy love, I beg Thee,*

To those most dear to me.

When she opened her eyes, the stone seemed to have grown even brighter, its blue light making the wall of the cave shimmer like a rippling pond of fresh water.

And then an actual drop shone briefly before rolling down the rock, followed by another, and another, forming a steady trickle that gathered in a small pool behind the Spirit stone. Her hand trembling, Firalda dipped a finger into the pale bluish liquid and brought it to her lips. It took her a while to place the mild sweetness, but when she did, it left her breathless with awe.

It was a miracle. The rock was shedding milk.

“Again!”

“But, Your Majesty, it is far too heavy! It won’t budge!”

“Scribe Kobold, quit whining! I said, try again!”

Though he tried his best to hide it, seated on his high throne, scowling, growling and issuing commands by snapping his ring-bedecked fingers, King Fazen was scared out of his wits. For last night a terrible thing had happened.

He was returning from a lengthy tryst with one of his latest mistresses—a lady-in-waiting who couldn’t wait to give herself to him, even if it meant (for she was getting on thirty and showing signs of staleness) throwing her fifteen-year-old twin daughters into the bargain—his legs weak as sticks, his loins hurting from the exertion, and his bladder bursting from the vats of wine he had drained. So, as he did when he was so blinded by drunkenness that pissing in his chamber pot would be as feasible as shooting an arrow through a needle’s eye, he merely unbuttoned his trousers and relieved himself right on the floor of his bedroom. The smell wouldn’t bother him—in a few moments he’d be dead to the world – and as for the maid, well, it was her duty (if not her privilege) to clean up after his royal messes.

Yet a little after daybreak King Fazen had awoken, parched with thirst, and having forgotten all about his filthy little feat, made to stagger to the commode where he kept a jug of water for his (rather infrequent) ablutions—and slipping on the wet marble floor, he found himself face-down in his own stinking piss, recting and cursing and feebly calling for help that wouldn’t come. And after he’d finally managed to hoist himself up, while he was struggling to crawl out of his soaked underclothes, a pale ray of moonlight stole through the curtains, illuminating a scene of ineffable horror: the garments he held were drenched in bright red blood, while the floor looked as though the bedroom were a slaughterhouse. The sight of his own blood, so much of it, and the thought of bleeding profusely without even realizing it were too much, and the already lightheaded King collapsed once more onto the bloody pool.

Thereafter things had gone from bad to worse. First he was brutally wakened by the shrieks of the maid who had found him and thought he’d been stabbed, and her terror had stirred up his own, reminding him of the fact that he might quite possibly be dying. So he had had to yell for his guards, to help him up and slap the accursed wench around to stop her screaming—perhaps he should throw her in gaol just to be on the safe side; rumours of his imminent death was the last thing he needed—but the damned fools, seeing their lord covered in blood, drew

their swords at once, and before King Fazen could explain that the maid hadn't tried to assassinate him, they'd butchered the poor silly girl, inundating the floor with a fresh river of blood.

So then he'd been forced to bathe, scrupulously—and, to avoid further fuss—on his own, a thing he hadn't done once in his entire life, and which left him exhausted and fragile and thoroughly vexed.

As for an explanation of what was happening to him (let alone a suggestion for a cure) every single person he had secretly consulted had proven utterly useless. The Head of the Order of the Scribe Healers, a bald, extremely fat man who seemed on the verge of death himself with every laboured breath he drew, was clearly at a loss about the nature of the King's sudden illness, stammering fearful nonsense about kidneys and the need to replenish the lost blood by consuming great amounts of raw veal heart and cow's afterbirth, till King Fazen grew so nauseous he chased him away with a cat-o'-nine-tails he sometimes used on his more adventurous courtesans. Then Veigh Treth had come rushing in, to assure him that he'd been ceaselessly mediating to the Spirits on His Majesty's behalf, and claiming that perhaps losing all that blood was a good thing—for it might be bad blood, like the one sucked by leeches or let out by a healer's blade—but his manner was so obviously shaken and unconvincing, the King promised to pray and sent him away before he lost his temper and had the deceiving little bastard hung from the spire of the Spirit Home. In his desperation, King Fazen had even summoned a midwife – under a veil of secrecy, to assumingly assist in a chambermaid's labour—yet the old woman's babbling was equally unhelpful, her sole suggestion being that His Majesty eat a hearty breakfast of liver and kidneys (which he detested, even if she, at least, allowed for them to be cooked).

Having no other recourse, and terrified of drinking a single sip of water despite his tormenting thirst—for the thought of pissing yet more blood was unbearable—King Fazen had even briefly considered sending for word from the Seers, but the trip would take hours and besides the Cave might be empty. And then an unexpected visitor had come knocking at his door, having been allowed entry into the Palace by claiming that he possessed firsthand knowledge of a prophecy regarding Royen the Eternal.

He was a stooping, bashful man with chalk-white skin, yellow hair and watery eyes, and like most Divinators, the more he said, the less sense he made. Barely suppressing his royal irritation, the King suffered through the man's rambling about the Divine Language and how it could seem to speak of one thing while meaning another, and just as he was about to call for the guards and have them torture this dithering fool till he come to the point, the Scribe gave the name of the person he had reasons to suspect might be an incarnation of the fabled Royen. He was another Divinator by the name of Kobold, the son of a lowly Farmer (just like the folk hero himself) who possessed an uncanny fluency in the Language of the Spirits, and whose name, in one context or another, had been recently appearing in numerous prophetic scrolls and books that his fellow Scribes pored over.

Now King Fazen was a man whose beliefs were guided solely by his senses. If he couldn't confirm the existence of something or someone—be they the Spirits or characters in legends—by his own sight, hearing or touch, he simply rejected it as the stuff that imbeciles and paupers fill their heads with to feel less miserable. Yet

his potentially lethal haemorrhage, evident still in the blood caked under his fingernails and clotted in his hair, (for like many a royalty he'd never quite mastered the art of thoroughly washing himself) gave him pause to reconsider. After all, stranger things could happen; for instance, everyone was convinced that this blighted Shy Death business was a magical suspension of the natural laws; moreover, Royen the Eternal was supposed to turn up whenever the fate of Feerien was at stake. So, who knew? Perhaps all those invisible forces the King had never credited were real, and this was their way of restoring the balance: an all-powerful hero to beat an all-powerful foe.

Thus, since Royen the Eternal was also said to have been able to cure the sick by the mere touch of his hands, King Fazen ordered that this Kobold lad be brought to his chambers forthwith, to demonstrate what miracles he was truly capable of.

However, once he arrived—clearly panicked by being dragged to the Palace without knowing the nature of the King's bidding—and was rapidly and aggressively interrogated about his past (had he ever fallen ill as a child? was he unusually strong? did wild beasts fear him and brutes twice his size flee at his sight?) the young Divinator began to passionately protest his being mistaken for the immortal champion. Sadly, yes, he'd been a frightfully sickly child, and so weak that he was unable to perform the easiest chores his father set him; no, he'd never so much as stood close to a fistfight, and as for his relationship with animals, he was terrified of most of them, cringing at the thought of even a bad-tempered rooster.

But the King would have none of it; he had already let his hopes carry him away, and no amount of prattle could dissuade him – he demanded to be healed, damn it, and without another moment's loss! Thus, raising his hand to silence the young Scribe who had worked himself into a state, he ordered him to approach the throne and touch him.

"T-touch you, Your M-majesty?" the Scribe stuttered. "Whatever for?"

"You dare question your sovereign? Come here this instant!"

Bowing his head and wringing his hands to stop them from shaking, Yodren Kobold slowly made his way to the throne, and then fell to his knees.

"Did I tell you to kneel?" King Fazen bellowed. "Stand up and touch me!"

Shaking even more, the Kobold lad obeyed, and then, his eyes fixed on his feet and his voice no louder than a whisper he asked, "W-where on Your Majesty's p-person should I place my unworthy hands?"

The King felt his face flush with blood; he'd been so consumed by thinking of being instantly cured, that he'd forgotten where on his body the root of the evil lay. And no matter how madly he wished for his health to be restored—so that he'd finally be able to indulge himself, down a barrel of beer, and let a river of bright yellow piss rain from the Palace balcony on the heads of his subjects—he couldn't allow another fellow to feel his private parts in front of his guard and the yellow-haired Divinator.

So instead he ordered Kobold to go over to the entrance of the throne hall, where stood a marble statue of his father, King Falcyen, regally astride his stallion, and try to move it—which was yet another disappointment, for despite the Scribe's huffing and puffing and reddening and moaning it was painfully clear that

he lacked Royen's wondrous strength. His hopes had been pathetic and ridiculous, and in his renewed frustration he was tempted to have the Divinators' heads, if only to ensure that they'd never reveal this morning's audience to anyone, when suddenly the piercing blare of a trumpet burst through the air of the hall, making them all turn their heads at the rarely-heard sound.

And moments later there came a sound of frenzied footsteps, precipitating the sudden, unannounced dash into the hall of a diminutive sentry in a uniform so big and sagging it could accommodate three of him. He was such an odd little thing, the guards were at a loss as whether to arrest him or literally kick him outside like a ragball.

"Your Majesty!" he cried out in a thin, breathless voice, and kneeled in front of the throne so deeply that his head met his feet, and his big loose helmet rolled off his downy head and came to rest at the base of the throne, where he was far too mortified to reach out and retrieve it. "The Prince!" he muttered to the floor. "The Prince is nigh!"

"Stand up and speak up, you fool!" the King shouted.

The sentry did so at once, and then, his voice still reedy from fear and excitement, he repeated his glad tidings: that the sentinel stationed at the lookout tower had moments ago seen through his spyglass a horse approaching, a red gelding upon which sat a rider in full armour, with a scarlet tuft at the crest of his helmet and the royal insignia on the pennant he carried. There was no princely escort, a thing rather unusual, but then, as the horse came closer into view, the sentinel discerned the braided gold reins and the jewel-encrusted grip of the sword, and convinced the rider was Prince Fantyr, he sounded the trumpet.

For a while King Fazen's mind felt empty like a sucked-out egg; he didn't know quite how to greet this astonishing news; on the one hand, he was still too preoccupied with his blood-pissing to give a hoot about his son's sudden return—for ever since he'd sent Fantyr away, his feelings for him had gone away as well: out of sight, out of mind. On the other hand, however, and although he'd never imagine it could happen to him, to a man strong and wise enough to be able to rule his heart as strictly as he did his kingdom, the thought of seeing again his son's pretty face, of hearing his crystalline laughter and holding him in his arms as when he were a rosy, blue-eyed, sweet-smelling babe, filled him with such an unexpected swell of fatherly love, his old eyes filled with tears.

And once King Fazen allowed this surge of affection to make the tiniest crack in his heart, its coating of coldness instantly melted away, and he was overwhelmed by the loving worry and the crushing remorse of a father who's been grossly, shamefully unfeeling towards his only child. Sure, he still loved himself immensely, but now, as if by the lifting of the veil, he could see that part of the self he so loved—perhaps the best part, and certainly the one that would live on after he was gone—was at this very moment trotting into the Castle. And suddenly everything that wasn't Fantyr seemed utterly trivial; he must hasten to welcome his son the Prince, who all this time had been gallantly defending Feerien from the Scavengers. And the next thing he knew, he was rushing down the Palace stairs, oblivious to decorum, for the thought of the Scavengers had brought back the recent rumours of their planning a rebellion—and what if those heaps of human filth had hurt his son, injured him in an ambush? Could this be why he was riding

alone? That every other soldier had been slain? Oh, blessed Spirits, no! He would fetch every healer in Feerien, flood the Spirit Home with gold, shed his own sick blood if need be—anything to keep his precious Fantyr safe from harm!

Then out into the midday glare he burst, breathless and giddy, and lo and behold there he was, shining like a moon atop his horse, the scarlet plumes and flag fluttering in the breeze. And all around him a thick carpet of people, men and women, young and old, face flat on the ground in deference to their Prince.

Hand on his chest to still his maddened heart, King Fazen stood before his son and shouted, “Welcome, most valiant son of Feerien and heir to its glorious crown!”

But Fantyr remained speechless and unmoving, his iron-gauntleted hands gripping the gelding’s reins and the eye-slits of his helmet staring blankly ahead.

For a moment the King was nonplussed; why didn’t his son reciprocate his warm greeting, why hadn’t he dismounted yet? Was his silence in response to long-harboured feelings of resentment? Did he expect his own father, the King, to bow before him and ask for forgiveness? Was this another of Fantyr’s old, spiteful tricks?

And then a raven that had been circling the Castle’s battlements swooped down and alighted on the Prince’s right shoulder, where it proceeded to snap its long black beak at the helmet’s plume as if it were a moulting chick. *Tok, tok!* went the beak, as it missed and struck upon the glimmering helmet.

What was the matter? Why didn’t he swat the damn bird away? Could it be—? And all of a sudden King Fazen was seized by a dread so great and overpowering, he felt his face go numb as though from a gust of snow. “Kill that fucking raven!” he roared.

But before the archers could take aim, the raven gave another sharp peck at the helmet, and, horror of horrors, it came off and fell, striking the cobblestone heavily and cracking open to reveal Prince Fantyr’s pale, severed head.

Yonfi was chasing a butterfly. It was almost as big as a sparrow, and its wings were a deep, striking blue that caught the moon and shimmered like the smoke from Papa’s long wooden pipe in the darkness before bedtime, so that Yonfi thought that if he tried to grasp it the butterfly would melt in the air—which made his desire to catch it even greater.

And running after the pretty butterfly through tufts of weeds and wildflowers, Yonfi soon found himself in a place entirely familiar, even though Mama and Papa didn’t want him playing there anymore: the wild-grown garden of Master Gaddel. They said it was a dangerous place for a little boy, because it was full of nettles and thistles and thorn bushes, amongst which snakes and rats might be lurking. But Yonfi didn’t think of himself as a little boy, nor did he fear being pricked or stung or bitten; he wasn’t a cry baby—whenever his arms and legs were grazed, he merely wiped the blood away and carried on, sometimes even bringing his bloody fingers to his lips to taste the strange salty stuff that was inside him.

But the main reason why Mama and Papa didn’t want him ‘frolicking around over there’ was because Master Gaddel was dead.

Now Yonfi knew about death and dying, yet he wasn’t sure he understood just how it worked. It meant that someone had stopped living and gone to the sky to be

with the Spirits—but then why say that this someone *was* dead? It was like saying, Mama was angry, or Papa was tired, or Yodren (his big brother, whom Yonfi had never seen and wanted more than anything to meet) was far away being a clever thing called a ‘Scribe’. So if Master Gaddel ‘was dead’, maybe not all of him was gone, maybe a part of him was still there, sitting around and not talking or eating but sleeping all the time and never waking—being dead.

What was even more intriguing to Yonfi was the way Master Gaddel had ended up being dead: he had died of sadness. When he’d first heard this—by Yofana, who was older and smarter and knew a heap of things, secret things she’d learnt by pretending to sleep while Mama and Papa talked quietly (he had tried that too, but he always fell asleep) —Yonfi was terribly worried, because both Mama and Papa were sad a lot of the time, but Yofana had told him not to worry, and that Master Gaddel’s sadness had been a thousand times greater than theirs; and then she had told him why.

It seems that, before he was born, (a time Yonfi couldn’t imagine very well, but since everyone agreed there had been such a time, then it must be true), Master Gaddel had a wife and two sons who were twins, which meant that they looked exactly alike and only their parents could tell them apart. These twins were all grown-up and big and strong, but they didn’t want to be Farmers like their Papa because they said that if they were Miners they would earn more money and be able to buy a big house and have all sorts of pretty things that only the rich could buy. (Here Yonfi usually pictured a big room filled with fancy toys like the red rocking horse his big brother Yodren had sent him from the Castle). So they went off to the Minelands, and they became Miners, and got married to the daughters of a rich gold Miner (were these twins as well? Yonfi wondered). And then one day while they were digging for gold in a tunnel, very, very deep inside a mountain, the roof of the tunnel fell down on them and killed them.

After that, Master Gaddel and his wife were terribly unhappy, but the wife must have been even more terribly unhappy because after a while she hung herself—which was an awful thing to do if you weren’t a very bad person who was hung by others; Yofana said Spirit Servants didn’t pray for people who hung themselves, for they were cursed—leaving poor Master Gaddel all alone. And the garden of their house, which was once beautiful, filled with rose bushes and lemon trees and singing birds, had gone to weeds, because Master Gaddel was too sad to care, too sad to do anything, like eat or drink water or go to bed at night, and so after a while he died too, of his huge sadness.

Thinking about these things had taken Yonfi’s mind off the butterfly, and by the time he remembered it and looked around, trying to spot it, all he could see were the purple flowers at the top of the thistles and the thickets of dried grass that reached as high as his head. But he didn’t mind losing the butterfly, because now something far more tempting had dawned on him, something he wanted to do for a long time but didn’t dare to because he knew, even without telling them about it, that Mama and Papa would be terribly mad at him for even thinking such naughty thoughts. What Yonfi craved, what he sometimes even dreamt of doing, was to sneak inside Master Gaddel’s house and see his dead body. Part of him was also a little frightened, for Yofana had told him that dead bodies were really scary, and that’s why people buried them, so they wouldn’t have to see them and get scared

all the time. Yet somehow even this fear was part of why Yonfi was so thrilled at the thought of making his bad-boy, naughty wish come true.

And before he knew it, drawn towards the old, crumbling house like a dog after a hidden juicy bone, Yonfi suddenly realized he was standing on Master Gaddel's porch and looking with big, hungry eyes at the front door, whose lower half had rotted away, leaving a gap just big enough for him to squirm through.

Straining his ears in case Mama was calling for him, Yonfi plucked up his courage (though it didn't take much; he was a brave boy, Yonfi was) and thrust his head in the gap, squeezed his shoulders together to get them through, then spread his palms on the dusty wooden floor and finally, sucking in his belly, he pulled his lower half inside, tumbling across the creaky planks.

After he'd shaken the thick dust off his face and hair, Yonfi pricked up his ears, but the only thing he could hear in the murky silence was the sound of his own excited heart. He then sniffed the air, sneezed, and sniffed again; Master Gaddel's house smelled like their cellar, only without all the nice smells from the food Mama kept down there—the jams and the pickles and the slabs of cured pork and heads of hard cheese and the sweet prune wine that they let him have a sip of when he was a very good boy and did all his chores—although lately the shelves seemed to empty a lot more fast than Mama could fill them up again, which made Mama worry even though she tried to hide it by laughing and saying he was eating them out of house and home.

But the thought of all that food, especially as it was getting late and close to suppertime, made Yonfi's empty belly groan with hunger, and so, before exploring the house to look for Master Gaddel's dead body he made his way to the kitchen, guided by the rays of the afternoon moon that snuck through the cracks in the rotting wooden walls. He could tell he was getting closer, because he could hear the scurrying of the rats who'd heard him approach and were diving for their nests and hiding places. The kitchen was bigger than at home, and like most of the house he'd seen until now, it was covered in cobwebs, thickly-woven sheets of delicate white strings stretching between the ceiling corners and the table, chairs, stove and cupboards. Yonfi found cobwebs fascinating, mainly because they seemed to magically appear without anyone having actually seen the spiders spinning them; he had tried to catch a spider at work many times, staring at the little things to see how fast they could weave their white yarn, but it was as if they didn't want him to see, like their webs were a secret—and so Yonfi had decided that they worked at night, when no one was around to catch them in the act.

There was no way of snooping around without getting tangled in the cobwebs, but Yonfi didn't mind (in fact he liked tearing through them, although he felt a little sorry for the spiders, having all their hard work torn apart), and he was instantly rewarded—for in the back of one of the lower cuboards, protected from the rats in a big dusty jar, he found something that looked like sugar. The only trouble was that the jar had one of those thick wooden lids that grownups used to seal jars really tight, and which not even Yofana could pry open. And Yonfi could neither take the sugar back home, nor did he like the thought of breaking it; this was still a strange house and it wasn't right to break other people's things even if they were dead like Master Gaddel.

But then, trying against hope to open the jar, the lid came right off in his hand, to Yonfi's immense surprise. Was it already loose, or had he grown suddenly stronger? Choosing to believe the latter—this proved that he wasn't a little boy anymore!—he stuck his hand in the jar, took out a scoop of white grainy stuff, and tasting it with the tip of his tongue felt the delightful sweetness of sugar.

Though he knew that what he did was stealing and also that it would spoil his appetite, Yonfi couldn't resist, and soon his face and his hands were all sticky from the sugar he hungrily munched and licked off. Now all that remained for this to be a perfect day was finding Master Gaddel's dead body and seeing if he really was all that scary or if Yofana was lying to make him feel like he was a baby and she a grownup.

Most people died in their beds, or so he'd gathered (maybe because dying, like Papa said, was like falling asleep) and so he thought that he would have to look for Master Gaddel in his bedroom. But the moment he walked into the room close to the front door—a big room with another, bigger table and more chairs, not wooden ones like they had but big ones made of plump dusty cushions—he saw Master Gaddel's dead body, not lying down but sitting in one of the big plump chairs, his face turned towards a shuttered window, which convinced Yonfi that even if he wasn't in his bed Master Gaddel was definitely dead, because if he were alive he would open the window to be able to see outside. He just stood there for a while, gazing at poor Master Gaddel and turning his tongue around to get the sugar that had got stuck between his teeth.

And then, wiping his hands on his shorts, he placed down the jar and began to walk towards the dead body, taking small, slow, quiet steps although he knew nothing could stir Master Gaddel from his deep sleep. Once he was standing before him and could examine his face more closely, he noticed two things that were strange: the old man's eyes were open and white like milk, and a long strip of cobweb stretched from his parted lips to an oil lamp on a low table nearby. Could the spider have made its nest inside Master Gaddel's mouth? Yonfi shuddered at the thought, but his curiosity was greater than his aversion, and so, standing on the tips of his toes, he reached out and touched the old man's lower lip, to see if he could scare the spider out.

Then suddenly he gave a gasp of fright and pulled back—but even as he heard it Yonfi knew the gasp wasn't his, because he'd been squishing his lips together to keep his breath from disturbing the cobweb. And then he heard it again, a long, rattling gasp for air, and looking up he saw Master Gaddel staring at him with wide, terrified eyes.

Chapter III

I

For seven days in a row, Wixelor the Dreamer had been vomiting a smooth black stone the moment he awakened. It was odd, and not a little painful, but Wixelor,

like any Linner, was no stranger to odd things. And so he merely kept the stones in the drawer of his nightstand, intending to examine them at some point and perhaps find out an explanation for their existence. But after a couple of weeks, living from one dream to the next, he'd forgotten all about them.

And then one night he came to from a particularly horrible nightmare—an antelope dreaming of being devoured alive by a pack of hyenas—and sought the comfort of a candle. And as he rifled through the contents of the drawer looking for a match, he came upon the smooth black stones, which he then set, one next to the other, on his bed.

Now Wixelor had turned them over in his hand for a while when he had first disgorged them, but because of his profession and also due to the peculiar nature of his homeworld, Wixelor had extremely poor eyesight.

But now, observing them through his magnifying glass in the candle's amber light, he noticed that each stone had a letter carved on it, the shallow grooves sparkling with something like gold dust. Growing more and more curious, Wixelor started moving them around, and soon he found the word the seven letters spelled—though it was no less perplexing than the provenance of the stones.

The word was **NOWHERE**.

II

There never was a world whose superior beings—if knowing that life is destined to death can be said to be a superior thing—haven't wondered about, looked for and craved the existence of a God or Gods who would give their own existence meaning and immortality, despite the abundance of myths describing the dire consequences of a creature seeking to probe the imponderable mystery of its Creator.

And as though by some universal benevolence, these burning questions and the quests for godliness they engender have always been met with a silence unbroken by mortal intelligence, by religion, philosophy or science.

Throughout the vastness of Creation, there has been only one exception to this strictest rule—a cautionary tale, as it were, though one kept forever secret from the rest of the cosmos, because to know for a fact of a thing's immense, destructive power, would be the same as revealing its undeniable existence.

The world in question was Ienar Lin, the Mad Sphere, whose dwellers had been aware of the Gods, of their presence and the demands they made of them, ever since they had crawled out of non-being into being.

And for this very reason, as the name of their birthplace signified, the people of Ienar Lin were all completely mad.

For to be truly God-like, the Gods had to be omniscient. But once the original matter exploded into billions of worlds, and they in turn into yet more billions—like an ocean becoming spray whose every droplet holds another ocean—it became apparent that, if they were to really know everything that happened everywhere, every thought and occurrence and feeling and fact, they'd be forced to spend all

eternity sorting through things that, concerning vastly inferior beings, didn't interest them at all.

And so they took the last remaining part of Norien that hadn't settled yet, and populated it with creatures whose function—whose whole existence—would be to amass this infinite knowledge, divide it between them and store it till further notice, thus making Ienar Lin the brain of the Ever-Shifting Sphere, albeit a brain permeated with insanity.

However, since knowledge confers power even to those overwhelmed by its sheer immensity, Linnners, as the Mad Sphere's inhabitants called themselves, grew over time exceedingly powerful and wise, even if their powers were erratic and their wisdom clouded by the mental exhaustion of constantly having to sift through the lives, hopes, fears, dreams, desires and accomplishments of millions of faraway creatures from faraway worlds.

And as the Gods rarely, if ever, bothered to inform themselves of what Linnners were supposedly keeping in store for their lofty scrutiny, this race of divine lunatics also acquired certain godly qualities, such as a supernatural longevity and prescience, which, combined with the skills they learnt from the intellectual influx from advanced civilizations, allowed them to transcend the planes of reality and the boundaries of time and space, and to transform their selves and their surroundings at will—till Ienar Lin became a bizarre paradise of clashing eras and surroundings, of distant worlds lying at hand, opening and closing as easily as doors which admitted every sort of alien being, environ and contraption.

But then the Runes of Norien were stolen, and the Gods, fumbling through the darkness, turned to Ienar Lin, hoping to retrieve part of the sight they'd lost—and found it to be even more chaotic than the object of its purpose: legions of crazy buffoons playing at being gods. And so they punished Linnners for their audacity, and they punished them severely, cutting down their eonian life spans to a few short centuries, seizing their transcendental powers and giving the Mad Sphere a dreary, primitive, unalterable form that would become known as the Eye.

And ever after the Eye would blink, open and shut at the passing worlds and all they contained, and in its dusky orb hunched creatures would meaninglessly rummage through minds and hearts, galaxies and climates, strange deaths and stranger lives.

III

Wixelor, two hundred and fifty-seven years old at the time of the black stones incident, was the son of Dreamers like himself. While he was still a child, his parents made sure to filter through the dreams that flooded their minds but also their tangible reality—fleeting forms that shimmered in the dimness of their home and vanished –, so that little Wixelor would only be visited by mild, harmless and pleasurable ones, the dreams of otherworldly children or fantastic animals, some of whom Wixelor would chase around to play with, until, with a sinking of his boyish heart, he'd realize that they were nothing but illusions. This often made him feel lonely, and squatting near the edge of their island he'd make short-lived dreams of his own, in which he joined his ghostly mates in worlds of bright green

fields and sunshine, amongst colourful birds and trees laden with apples red like rubies, and then they'd all sit around a great big table and eat, oh dear Gods, *food*, endless in abundance and variety—instead of which he had to make do, like every other child of Ienar Lin, with the wilted, bland vegetables that his mother grew in their garden and with the occasional of stale bread and petrified cheese peddled by the Boatmen, and which tasted more punishment than nourishment.

But once he was old enough to understand and accept his Gods-appointed duty, and shouldered the full weight and diversity of the dreams his frail, ageing parents could no longer bear or protect him from, Wixelor's world became even drearier, and he would spend days or even weeks at a time lying flat on his bed and staring at the ceiling, while his mind was assailed by swarms of dreams, some of them so vividly terrifying or heartrending, he almost felt as if they were part of his own sorrowful life, and he would even forego food and water, wishing to die and thus put an end to this madness, to this ceaseless procession of agonizing fantasies, of shattered hopes and boundless fears.

And then his parents died and were lowered into the stillness of the Dark Lake, and Wixelor, having no living soul to share and relieve his bouts of desolation and heartbreak, developed, as all Linnars did, a way to be able to perform his compulsory dream-sieving without losing himself entirely in its torrents: he found a specific passion of his own and nurtured it with all the strength that was left in his beleaguered mind—and like many a Linnar, he chose as object of the obsession that would define him and keep him marginally stable that tantalizing bygone era before the Runes of Norien had gone missing, when Ienar Lin was a world of wonders. And at night, before sinking into the few hours of sleep he could steal between dreams, Wixelor briefly indulged in his own wild fancies, in which he escaped the Godsforsaken Eye, shooting through the Lids on the back of a flying beast such as alien dreamers rode: griffins and dragons and pegasi and gold-winged eagles, the cold wind like the breath of life on his face.

To this end he needed to delve into the Mad Sphere's distant past, the lore and the history, the salvaged memories of that blissful time – a thing for which Wixelor was ideally equipped, since, as a Dreamer, he could enter the dreams of his fellow Linnars as easily as a hand dipping into a bowl of water to retrieve the marbles lying in the bottom. Those especially precious to him were the private dreams of Rememberers, whose job was to keep fastidious records of the past; thanks to them, Wixelor had learnt all about the mythical prehistory of the Ever-Shifting Sphere and of the other two worlds that had been moulded of its original substance (Lurien, a world of fearful simpletons, and the barbaric Feerien), and, most importantly, about anything in the universe's long past that might point to where they Eyes of the Gods had been hidden.

All in all, he mused, while gnawing on a rock-hard piece of cheese like a rodent and shooing the animal dreams—canaries chased by cats, dogs beaten by their masters—to the back of his mind, being a Dreamer was not so cruel a fate. Sure, it might fill you up with inexplicable thoughts and yearnings and snatches of magnificent realities that made life in the gloominess of the Eye seem even more unbearable, but it was better than being a Worrier and having to suffer a constant assault of anxiety and dread, or, even worse, an Ender, whose task it was to share the worst possible moment in the existence of any living thing, the pain, regret and

raw panic as it felt nothingness creep up on it. Those unfortunate Linnners usually ended up without a shred of self-awareness, and in time became so violently mad they often threw themselves into the Dark Lake.

And all the while, Wixelor kept his mind's eye alert, ready to pick up even the faintest sign of the stolen Runes, or a change in the matrix of Creation that might hint at the long-disappeared Three Gods—anything that could hopefully aid him in his secret plan to not merely imagine and crave but, if possible, *regain* the paradise that was.

What he hadn't expected, however, was that the first such sign would come from neither the Rememberers nor the Foreseers (whose minds were far too muddled by the deluge of innumerable and incomprehensible futures to make much sense), nor even from some tucked-away, remote part of the cosmos, but from the sister worlds of Ienar Lin: the Shperes of Toil and Untouch.

Up until then, Wixelor had been treating the dreams of Lurienites and Feeres with utter dismissiveness, deeming them little more important than those a clever ape or pig might dream. And then, early one morning, a few days after he had found the stones' weird message, he was suddenly visited by two brutally lifelike dreams, brimming with the loud, breathless confusion of worlds on the brink of some cataclysmic event. The first concerned a pair from Lurien who were somehow linked with a change of massive proportions about to befall their calm, peaceful realm, and the second a young boy of Feerien who had suddenly and unknowingly come into the inheritance of supernatural powers that might avert the devastation intended to strike his homeworld.

And in a single moment, the black stones and the word '*nowhere*' acquired a huge significance, being part of the omnipresent rule of three: Three Gods, Three Runes, the three realms of Norien; and now three omens, whatever they might mean.

IV

The first thing Wixelor needed to do was learn as much as possible about the nature and the provenance of the seven black stones—which, unfortunately, he couldn't without leaving his island, for the amassed knowledge of Dreamers was notoriously unreliable, since the reality of a dream is nearly always distorted by the underlying feelings of the dreamer. For instance, even after more than two centuries on the job, Wixelor was still unsure as to whether the flying creatures that soared through strange skies in their sleep could actually fly or were merely craving the ability. Thus, in order to obtain some potentially accurate and useful information about the stones, he had to talk to one of the Naturers, whose task was to keep painstakingly detailed records on the origin, qualities and properties of anything and everything residing in the countless physical worlds.

However, this posed numerous problems, not least of which was the actual trip to another island—for Ienar Lin, after the Gods had wreaked their vengeance upon it, was a dismal place, designed for extreme and often lifelong solitude.

The Eye was indeed globular, though this wasn't apparent from the concavity of its walls—whose size and distance was immense, like a circular horizon of

impenetrable blackness—but from the Lids, two vast, sky-high plates which drew apart slowly and unpredictably, making the Mad Sphere tremble to its foundations and admitting, for as long as they remained parted, a frantically flickering view of other firmaments: endless stretches of black space studded with brilliant stars, bright blue skies across which fat white clouds chased one another, suns of searing violet setting above worlds of luscious green. And while this marvel lasted, all Linnerns came rushing out to stare in painful wonderment – for once the Lids closed again, the light of those beautiful worlds would vanish, plunging them in their usual gloom, with only the weak glow of candles and small fires to see by, and glimpse, in pinpoints of yellow, the existence of others.

As for the islands, they were more like mushrooms or trees: a sloping piece of black rock barely wide enough to accommodate a tiny house and garden, sitting atop a tall thick stem that dove into the unfathomable depths of the Dark Lake—an enormous expanse of still, black water, tepid and unfresh and incapable of ever truly quenching one’s thirst, because (or so was believed) of the countless corpses rotting at its bottom, poisoning the water with lifelessness and eventually killing its drinkers.

However, if one desperately wished to visit another island, to keep company, copulate or procreate with another Linnern, it was possible to do so, even though it involved a vertiginous climb down to the Dark Lake and consorting with a Boatman, neither of which were particularly desirable. And then of course one had to confront the ultimate and hardest problem: intruding into another’s private madness and—if the visitor was unwelcome or the request somehow offensive—suffering the consequences of two hostile lunatics confined to a very small space.

Yet even as he was weighing these considerations, Wixelor was suddenly seized by a dream like a vice gripping his mind: the fleeting image of a grotesque, gigantic man called Velius eviscerating a soldier with his bare hands and conveying the slippery innards to his sharp-toothed, putrid mouth—and doubling over he threw up, though this time, fortunately, without bringing up anything other than spit and bile.

And as he gradually calmed down he remembered that the monstrous cannibal, riding a strange human horse, was framed by the lilac sky and the six moons of Feerien.

There’s no time to hesitate, he told himself, and pocketing the stones he walked to the edge of his island, made sure the rope was fastened firmly to the tall sharp rock that grew out of the ground like a horn, and grabbing it with both hands he started his slow descent.

Luckily, just as he was nearing the surface of the Dark Lake, unnerved by the density of the darkness, Wixelor saw a faint orange light hovering in the distance, and watched it grow bigger as it came his way: the lantern overhanging a boat’s prow.

Praise the Gods for their puny mercies, as his mother used to say. For boatmen were indeed a mercy, and in fact, in the same way other civilizations owed their thriving to beasts of burden, so did Linnerns owe their meagre comforts to these dumb, unlikable men.

No one knew about their origin, or even how they had come by their boats; they had always existed, rowing across Ienar Lin and performing their task, the only one that was purely menial and didn't involve the accumulated knowledge of the universe. What *was* known was that they were (again like otherworldly beasts) extremely short-lived, rarely exceeding the age of seventy, and that they carried in their boats, rummaged from the remote shores of the Dark Lake, every single object that Linnars used to feed, dress and house themselves, everything that made their lives somewhat tolerable: seeds and lumber, cloth and coals, glass, matches and ossified bread. (Where all this had come from was another puzzling question; some Rememberers said that they had all been claimed by the rising waters of the Dark Lake after the Gods had exacted their punishment, and were slowly rising to the surface and washing up on the shore, while others believed they continued to arrive, even though erratically, from one or more doors into alien worlds that had grown scarce but never wholly vanished).

Be that as it may, Boatmen and their wares were essential to the Linnars' survival, and for this reason they always got what they demanded, which was invariably one of two things: either divulge what the Gods were telling them (for in their great obtuseness Boatmen thought the Gods were still not merely present but talkative), or shed a little blood, which Boatmen believed could prolong their lives.

And Wixelor, swinging on the thick knot at the end of the rope while the boat drew closer, had come prepared, carrying a vial of salted beetroot juice that could pass for blood in the dimness, because, although he didn't know why (perhaps from the residue of syringe-related nightmares?) he had a horror of needles.

Then the boat came to a stop and floated before him, and in the lantern's glow he made out the sorry sight of a typical Boatman: a very old and wrinkled man, bald and toothless, stinking of urine and glaring at him through the slits of his hollowed eyes, as if Wixelor was about to inflict on him some evil deception.

"What you looking to buy?" he said, his voice equally filled with suspicion.

"Nothing," Wixelor said, still swinging to and fro. "I want you to take me to another island."

"Well, come aboard, then; I don't have all day!" the Boatman grunted.

Gathering momentum, Wixelor leapt and landed on the rickety boat, staggering left and right till he gained his balance and eliciting croaks of rebuke from the old man.

"Where to, then?" he said.

"Do you happen to know a Naturess named Moraxa?" Wixelor said. "She's an extremely obese woman who lives on an island somewhere nearby."

"One that goes about like the Gods made her?"

"That would be the one, yes."

"Oh, sure I know her," the Boatman said, leering. "Know her real well." And when Wixelor's stony face refused to acknowledge his lascivious jest his grin faded, and taking hold of the oars he began rowing.

"So," he said after a brief silence, "any word from the Gods about the treasure?"

This was another fallacy shared by all Boatmen, and cultivated by Linnars to give themselves an advantage in the bartering of goods: that the Gods had hidden some huge, mythical treasure at the bottom of the Dark Lake, a trove of untellable

riches for the Boatman lucky enough to find it and dredge it up with his winch and hook.

“Still nothing, I’m afraid,” Wixelor said, shaking off the dream of a woman who was baking a cake intended for her husband, and whose secret ingredient was a hefty dose of rat poison. Why did so many people dream of killing each other? Wasn’t there sufficient killing going on while they were awake?

“So, what are you?” the Boatman said after a while.

“I’m a Dreamer,” Wixelor said, blinking a frog’s dream away.

“You’re *what* now?”

“A Dreamer; I collect dreams.” And when this failed to register on the old man’s scrunched-up face, he added, “Those things you see when you’re asleep?”

“Oh, *that*. Why, sure, I get them all the time; but what use are they?”

“The same use as that hideous mole on your forehead, I suppose,” Wixelor said, instantly defensive of his life’s work and hoping to shut up the intolerable fool.

But the Boatman’s skin must be thick as it was filthy, for after a moment or two he asked, “Ever seen what I see when I’m sleeping?”

“Something concerning the treasure, perhaps?”

“Well, yes, but that’s not *all* I see. I’m a man just like yourself, if you know what I mean. And there’s this one lass who buys up all the soap I can get her; goes by the name of Lanxa and she’s pretty as anything, and sometimes she comes to me in the middle of the night, in these there dreams, and she’s all naked and sweet-smelling... So, any idea on what she might be seeing when she closes her eyes? Does she ever, you know, dream of ole’ me?”

Oh dear Gods, Wixelor thought. The detestable old wretch wanted his vanity stroked! However, hoping against hope to stop the Boatman’s chattering (for his breath was where all things fragrant go to die), he invented a temptress named Byxila, ten times more gorgeous than the soap-lover, and who constantly dreamt of being ravaged by a wizened, stinking brute just like himself. But the trickery had the exact opposite result, for now the Boatman wanted to know everything about this fictitious woman, so Wixelor had to keep inventing, a process doubly arduous as he was simultaneously fighting back the grandiose and gory dream of some primitive warlord.

So, when he saw the telltale rope ladder dangling from Moraxa’s island—an easy means of access for whomever wished to partake of her enthusiastic hospitality—he stood up and leapt from the boat into the tepidness of the Dark Lake, while the Boatman called after him for ‘a wee bit of blood to spice up the old juices’. Wixelor felt not a bit of regret for deceiving the Boatman, nor any fear that he might discover he’d been played for a fool – for even if the scum-loving Byxila did exist, the Eye was so immense a Boatman might spend his whole life paddling around without even covering a hundredth of its vastness.

No, Wixelor, while climbing the rope ladder, was entirely focused on the greater problem at hand: how to extract the information he needed from the notorious Naturess without being driven to the very edge of his endurance.

Because Moraxa’s passion, the private purpose of her whole existence when she was not wallowing in the infinite minutiae of millions of physical worlds, was having wild, compulsive, indiscriminate sexual intercourse with any man who stepped on her island. This Wixelor knew from her dreams, which were always

suffused with the feverish breathlessness of carnal excess, but also from the dreams of many a Linner who had sought her out for whatever reason and had ended up rolling on the hard black rock with a woman whose startling obesity was rendered even more fearsome by the fact that, to be able to indulge in her fixation without a moment's loss, she never wore a stitch of clothing, plodding about like an extra-Norienic beast in heat.

Of course Moraxa was not alone in devoting all the strength she could muster in pleasing her voluptuousness. Countless Linnners were similarly inclined, figuring that, since the greatest part of their lives was lost to a relentless mental preoccupation, what little time and vigour remained should be spent on things that involved solely the body and its gratification. To this end, many amongst them paid frequent short visits to one another's islands, while others, whose lust over time bred feelings of intimacy and affection, paired up and had children whom they grew to love as real parents (though it was not unheard of to sleep with one's child if the desire was too strong).

But to Wixelor, surrendering to the craving of the loins seemed an ill remedy, one which, instead of bringing calm and relief, burdened you with yet another master, another obsession against which you were powerless. He'd seen enough Linnners' dreams of sexual yearning to know that life in the Eye could never fulfill them. And even in the case of those mates fortunate enough to turn their frenzy into the quietude of love—his parents, for instance, who had most likely become a couple in the first place to satisfy their lust —, there still loomed another threat: that of losing your loved one—again like his parents, who had died within a week of each other; the thought of his bereft father in those agonizing days, the emptiness and desolation in his gaze, as if his own heart too lay in the depths of the Dark Lake, still brought tears to Wixelor's eyes. Thus he had decided early on that, whenever visited by sexual hunger, he would tend to it on his own, without binding his happiness and fate to those of a stranger's.

However, by now he'd reached the top of the ladder and his challenge lay before him; and upon seeing it Wixelor felt faint with fear and his body recoiled, as if trying to separate itself and flee from the imminent ordeal.

For the creature who stepped out of the house—a house made neither of wood nor of bricks but of countless thick tomes filled with Nature's infinitude—smacking her thick purple lips as though at the arrival of some delicious meal, was far more revolting than the image Wixelor had painted to prepare himself.

Trudging on legs thick as pillars of flabby, pockmarked flesh, in front of which drooped two massive, loose-skinned udders and numerous long and grimy folds of fat, Moraxa was vileness incarnate—and this without taking into account the ravenous look on her bloated face, nor the hidden, unimaginable cleft between her thighs.

And then the horror spoke, in a deep, predatory growl. “Well, well, what have we here?” she said. “I knew I smelled a Dreamer.”

Wixelor was unwittingly backing away, but soon he found himself teetering at the edge of the sloping rock—and despite his revulsion, he couldn't very well swim back to his island. He felt the stones in his pocket to brace himself; he must have an answer, no matter what the price.

Meanwhile Moraxa had stopped, and stood there ogling him while running her pudgy hands beneath her breasts and greedily sniffing the sweat she reeked of.

“Come on, then,” she said, “don’t be shy. I’m not gonna eat you.”

Let’s hope so, Wixelor thought, and began to undo his shirt with shaking hands.

As it turned out, mating with Moraxa wasn’t as horrible as he feared. It didn’t resemble so much sexual congress as the energetic toying of a very big animal with one of its young: he’d been tossed this way and that, pounced upon, rolled across folds of soft slippery flesh, squeezed and playfully bitten, slapped and slobbered over, and only once or twice had he felt his penis, as unresponsive to the rough play as a boneless finger, enter the moist softness of Moraxa’s mouth and genitals.

And to her credit, once it was over, the wanton Natureess—her insatiable appetite somewhat appeased—got up and proceeded to repay Wixelor’s favour by taking the black stones back to her house of books, emerging after a while with a thick stack of yellowed paper bound with string. Then she squatted on the comfortable cushion of her buttocks, and using a magnifying glass she began to scrutinize them one by one, every now and then turning to the volume to consult its densely-scribbled pages.

Then she looked up at Wixelor, who was eagerly staring at her. “You said you vomited these?” she said. “Are you absolutely sure?”

“Yes. But why do you ask? What’s the matter?”

“Well, I suppose I *could* be mistaken, but the gold dust in these letters has the greenish hue of Feerien gold. As for the stones themselves, they’re made of a kind of obsidian indigenous to the volcanic layers of Mirror Mountain.”

“*In Lurien?*” Wixelor said, astonished. “But I thought there existed no black objects in Lurien.”

“Oh, sure they do; it’s just that Lurienites are too stupid and cowardly to cross the Mists, which they believe to be populated by man-eating monsters. Ridiculous—and I’m speaking from experience, since I’m a man-eating monster myself.”

But Wixelor had stopped listening, and so didn’t notice the desirous gleam in Moraxa’s eyes. A stone from Lurien, with traces of gold mined in Feerien, had found its way, magically, to Ienar Lin, and specifically into his stomach.

If this was not a portent, nothing was.

V

The Boatman whose vessel Wixelor boarded next was even worse than the one before: a hideously deformed man of indeterminate age, whose scarlet-skinned face looked as though it were a mask of wax that had been held too close to a flame, the left side of it sagging an inch lower than the right and stretching the left halves of the nose and mouth to a pair of downward-sloping slits, while the runny left eye seemed about to fall out of its distended, permanently parted lids.

And as if his appearance wasn’t torture enough, the monstrous Boatman hadn’t been fooled by the beetroot concoction, tossing the vial away and grunting

incoherently for more, till Wixelor was forced to drag the sharp nail of his index finger across his left palm and then hold out the hollow of his palm—all the while keeping his eyes closed and trying not to think of the tongue that was noisily lapping up his blood.

But there was at least one upside to enduring the hardship of this boat ride: the further they got from his island, the weaker the dreams got, until he could almost sweep them away like flies, before they had a chance to overtake his consciousness.

What if he never went back, he wondered, if somehow he kept moving on, from boat to boat and island to island? The prospect was extremely tempting, (even a few days of unbroken peace of mind seemed wonderful), and yet Wixelor knew that this was an idle fantasy, shared by nearly every Linner at one point or another. Because what would he spend his endless days and nights doing? Staring into the darkness, rowing aimlessly along the Lake and growing steadily madder from inaction? The only life he knew was the life of a Dreamer—it was all he'd ever been, even if at times it became a veritable torment.

And besides, this was no time for foolish daydreaming; the goal of this journey wasn't the pursuit of pleasure (a fact made crystal clear by Moraxa and the Boatmen) but the possibility of solving a mystery that grew more obscure and fascinating at every step, and which demanded tackling yet another riddle.

The riddle that was Huxor the Ponderer.

One of the oldest folk tales of Ienar Lin, carried across generations of men and women who took comfort in thinking that the madness of others was worse and sillier than their own, was the tale of the Three Ponderers.

Once upon a time, the story went, there lived upon an island three brothers, the lot of them Ponderers. One day they woke up and found three loaves of bread lying at the foot of their beds. And so, hoping to solve the mystery of the bread's almost magical appearance, they sat and contemplated it, each one gazing thoughtfully at his loaf.

The first brother wondered, *What is bread?* But instead of taking a bite of it to find out, he sat around and mused about the nature of bread, how it was first conceived as an idea and then had become reality—yet that didn't answer his fundamental question of what was the essence of bread, not its taste or its ability to assuage one's hunger but the very breadness it possessed even before the wheat was reaped and the dough baked into crust and crumb. And as the days turned into weeks, the Ponderer was so consumed by the profundity of his thinking that he forgot to eat and starved to death.

The second brother considered the loaf and wondered, *Why is there bread?* But instead of eating some to satisfy his curiosity, he looked fixedly at the bread and tried to imagine its purpose in the greater scheme of things, why it was this and not something else that had resulted from man's taming nature to fulfill the need to feed. Could there be planes of reality where bread does not exist, and where his agonizing question would be moot? And as time forged ahead, so lost was the Ponderer in his cogitations that he neglected to tend to his own great hunger and perished from it.

Finally, the third brother looked at the loaf and wondered, *Is this bread real?* But instead of touching it to discover whether the bread was real or not, he kept staring at its shape and colour, smelling its aroma and imagining its taste, and all the while thinking, were these senses in accordance with reality, or were they mere illusions planted in his mind by the same cosmic conjurer who had made the nonexistent loaf materialize? And if the bread was unreal, how sure could he be of his own realness? What if both the bread and the man gazing at it were both figments of some otherworldly imagination? And as night gave way to day and one month to the next, the Ponderer still tried to decipher the mystery of the by now stale bread, till his empty stomach devoured itself and he died.

And once the three brothers met again, as souls in the afterlife, they were greeted by other souls and shown to a vast table where they all feasted for eternity. But just as they were about to take their seat, the Ponderers saw a great basket on the table, and pointing at it they all exclaimed together at the abundancy of bread—whereupon their tablemates exploded into laughter, for the basket was filled not with bread but with onions! And the three Ponderers hung their heads in shame, realizing they had died in vain, pondering about bread when there hadn't been any bread to begin with.

Though this was a fable, it wasn't too far removed from fact—for Ponderers were laden with a task most abstruse and time-consuming (and, in many a Linner's view, perfectly futile): the gathering and solving—if there were a solution, which often there wasn't—of the Creation's most profound and perplexing questions. Is there an absolute truth, and what may it be? Is existence inherently good or bad, and is it better to exist and live through bliss and misery, or not to exist and be deprived of bliss but also elude misery? How infinite was infinity, and how could one ever be sure that the infinity at hand wasn't one of an infinite number of infinities? Ponderers spent their whole lives immersed in puzzles such as these, yet unlike other Linnings, who could save up some modicum of time dedicated to their own real life and its pleasures, Ponderers often couldn't rid their minds of the staggering cognitive burden, so that they ultimately lost touch with reality, both inner and external, and like the brothers in the tale, some died of thirst or starvation. As for interacting with them, (though it was very rare that anyone sought their help, as their profession was considered dreadfully boring) it was almost impossible, for Ponderers were the embodiment of absent-mindedness, their mind constantly absent from the surface of awareness.

Yet a few weeks back Wixelor had been visited, thrice in a row, by a confounding dream—and not one of the myriads that streamed through his daily consciousness, but one that came to him at night, during the brief repose which was almost never encroached by dreams other than his own. But somehow Huxor had appeared three times in his sleep, standing before him and speaking two strange words, the same in all three dreams: *Erat Rin*, he said, and then he melted away into the haze that shrouded him.

And once Wixelor had obtained proof of the black stones' mystifying passage through the realms of Norien, Huxor's odd dream-message instantly became part of the same enigma. Wixelor was convinced that if anyone in Ienar Lin could help him grasp the meaning of the word *NOWHERE*, it was Huxor the Ponderer.

And now his island emerged from the darkness, recognizable from the spiral wooden stairs leading up the black rock pillar—for Ponderers, lost in their interminable musings, were often known to walk off the edge of their islands and plummet into the Dark Lake, and if it weren't for steps like these most of them would drown simply from being too startled to react.

Wixelor, stepping out of the odious Boatman's vessel, also felt grateful for the stairs; after his encounter with Moraxa, he didn't think his worn-out body could handle the exertion of rope climbing.

One had only to take a glance at Huxor to know at once that he was a Ponderer, and while looking at his unconscious antics, it was all that Wixelor could do not to fall down laughing.

For one thing, his appearance was comical to the extreme, and reminiscent of some great wise ape leading a life of solitude in the heart of a deep dark forest: being surely no less than five hundred years old, Huxor had probably never bothered to cut his hair, which had grown, mane and mustache and beard, into a long white mass that covered him almost completely—and since he didn't seem at all aware of the fact, he was constantly tripping on the thick strands that fanned out round his feet, falling down hard on his face, picking himself up, tripping and falling again, and so on, the result being that what little could be glimpsed of his face was a map of bruises, his nose crooked and caked in dried blood, his eyes black and swollen and his forehead covered with bleeding bumps, as if a dozen horns were trying to sprout from his brow. And all the while he kept a soft steady murmur, his lips, tongue and mouth working at the obscure ponderings as if they were a piece of food that could never be thoroughly chewed.

Wixelor was at first reluctant to disrupt Huxor's trance, but after a while the hilariousness of his repeated falls faded, and feeling sorry for the poor old man he slowly approached him and tried to help him up. But although Huxor accepted his assistance, once he was up again he didn't seem to perceive Wixelor's presence beside him, picking up his endless trail of thought and pacing on. And when Wixelor tried to stand in his way, the Ponderer merely kept bumping into him like a sleepwalker, or tried in vain to sidestep him, and twice Wixelor had to catch him in the nick of time as he was about to fall off the island's rim. So eventually he decided to leave Huxor be for the time being, and wandered into his dilapidated house to look for some food for the both of them, since the old Ponderer, besides his battered face, was frightfully gaunt.

And as he was coming out of Huxor's home, blowing away the dust on a stony slice of bread, Wixelor started—because his host had ceased his pacing and stood a few steps away, staring at him with a small boy's disbelief at something alien to his narrow world.

“Are you real?” he said, his voice husky.

“Yes I am,” Wixelor said, smiling to dispel Huxor's wariness, and reaching out he touched him softly on the shoulder. “And so are these,” he said, and from his pocket he produced the seven stones and proffered them to Huxor, who, again like a child, goggled his bruised eyes at the smooth obsidian discs and then, without asking, he snatched them away, scuttled to the centre of the island, and crouching

down he placed the stones before him—and after quickly rearranging them he turned and beamed at Wixelor.

“Nowhere,” he said. “A most interesting word.”

“What can you tell me about it?” Wixelor said, squatting across him and praying that Huxor’s spell of clarity would last long enough for him to get some inkling of an answer.

“Well,” the Ponderer said, wrapping a strand of his blood-spattered beard around a bony finger, “essentially, nowhere is a paradox. Its literal meaning is a place that doesn’t exist, the total absence of a point in time and space. And yet anything that can be put into words, anything that can be conceived of, may be said to exist in one form or another. In this aspect, *nowhere* is a concept similar to those of *truth* or *life*, which can only be somewhat accurately judged when they are missing. And like them, it may have many interpretations, which vary according to the thinker; to the dweller of a populous castle, for instance, nowhere may be a tenebrous woods, where nothing stirs but beasts of prey, while to a fish nowhere is a place devoid of water and its sustenance.”

Wixelor was trying hard to apply Huxor’s words to the mystery of the stones, but he was either too tired or not bright enough to make a connection. So, sensing that the Ponderer, if uninterrupted, might embark on an even vaguer monologue, he cleared his throat and said, “Do the words *Erat Rin* mean anything to you?”

Huxor frowned momentarily, but then a playful gleam crossed his deep-set, discoloured eyes. And leaning close to Wixelor as if about to divulge a great secret, he whispered, “You know of the Forgotten Sphere?”

Wixelor’s heart was beating fast and hard. “No,” he said, “but I would love to hear everything about it.”

According to an apocryphal text of the Norienic cosmogony, kept scrupulously secret because it was considered extremely (if not dangerously) heretical, before the world was created there existed only One God, the God of Fate and Chance, who begat the Other Two. But whereas the First God had allowed the nascent cosmos to behave as its countless entities dictated or desired, never intervening no matter how unruly the worlds and their creatures, the Begotten Gods of Life and Death revolted against their Maker and demanded that order be restored to the universe, and that the chaos yield to their will. Yet over time, ruling the Ever-Shifting Sphere and its progeny like ruthless tyrants, they became blinded by their power to be the beginning and the end, to give life and take it away. And so the God of Fate and Chance decided to blind them for good, and stole their eyes, and hid them in the one fragment of Norien that had escaped before being shaped by the Begotten Gods in Their image, and which had since then fled far, far away, to the edge of everything and nothing. This distant world was called *Erat Rin*, the Forgotten Sphere, and despite its smallness it was believed to harbour not merely Two but all Three Runes, for the First God, to further punish Its arrogant Offspring, had chosen this tucked-away, seemingly abandoned star as Its dwelling.

However, if the Runes of Norien were truly hidden in so remote and unstable a realm, one governed solely by wild chance and unknowable fate, it meant that if *Erat Rin* was somehow or other destroyed, it would bring about the End of All Reality.

“And thus, ever since the Gods of Life and Death lost their all-seing powers,” Huxor said, still speaking in a hushed, almost fearful voice, “sages and seers in all three realms—even the Circle, made up of Lurien’s wisest dwellers—have been harkening to any grave change in the Ever-Shifting Sphere, hoping that they may be able to tell from it whether Erat Rin is in any danger, even though nothing concrete is known about it, nor would it ever be possible to avert our doom if its eventuality lay in the destiny of the Forgotten Sphere. However, there have been signs, since ancient times, which mystics familiar with this particular version of our past take to be reflections of catastrophes that struck Erat Rin, and which brought the rest of Norien to the brink of ruin. For instance, the Disaster that destroyed most of Feerien, or our own fall from the Gods’ grace to this gloomy world we call home.”

Listening to the old Ponderer’s narrative, Wixelor had been growing steadily afraid, and by the time he reached the part about the world’s potential obliteration, he was on the verge of panic—because from the depths of his mind there suddenly rose the memory of hundreds of recent dreams, dreams of Lurienites and Feeres to which he’d barely paid attention at the time, but which now weighed on his heart like a veritable quarry of black stones. And since it was only fair that he repay the favour of Huxor’s elucidation, Wixelor told him how both Lurien and Feerien had been and still were in a state of dire disquiet, the former stricken by infertility and the latter by a suspension of life and death alike; how a hole had appeared in the immaculate sky of the Sphere of Untouch and how the Sphere of Toil was dreading the return of the evil Seventh Moon. And as he spoke, his own voice now hardly more than a terrified whisper, he saw the dread leap from his soul and take hold of the Ponderer’s withered face.

Then suddenly Huxor started muttering to himself, “Nowhere... of course... for nowhere lies between life and death... out of nowhere we spring forth and into nowhere we return... and what could be a clearer manifestation of nowhere than a world that can never be reached or known, and yet holds the power to let us live or perish...”

And before Wixelor could draw back, Huxor had grabbed him by his shirt and was shaking him and raving, “You must prevent this! You must! There are still so many questions that haven’t been answered, so much wisdom! It can’t go to waste, it can’t!”

“But what could I possibly do?” Wixelor cried, trying to free himself from the Ponderer’s grasp. “I deal with nothing but dreams! How am I to travel where no one can and stop what the Gods Themselves are unable to stop? All I can do is sit and watch!”

“You have to go find Zaepix!” Huxor said, releasing him with such force that Wixelor fell back onto the hard ground. And by the time he got to his feet, the Ponderer was once more up and about, pacing frantically and mumbling to himself.

“Wait! Who is this Zaepix?” Wixelor said.

“He’s a Foreseer!” Huxor said, without turning to face him. “The best of them all! He can tell you if the end is near, and how it may be averted!”

“But what Foreseer will consent to allow me on his island out of nowhere? And even if he does, what am I to tell him?”

“Tell him I sent you!” Huxor said, walking in circles and holding his head as if it were about to burst. “Zaepix is my son!”

VI

Although it would be fair to say that all the inhabitants of Ienar Lin were more or less mad, their madness usually gave no outward display, and was more a detachment from the outer reality and a lifelong withdrawal into the private reality of their minds, where emotions ran wild like torrents or stagnated like a swamps.

However, in those unlucky few whose lot in life was to be a Foreseer, the Mad Sphere found its true incarnation. For whereas the unknown depths of the past and the present may be sounded in relative calmness—since, by the time something is observed and contemplated, it has already receded to the past—the future is by nature a thing of obscurity and uncertainty, a fabric made of countless interwoven strands which spread in every imaginable direction to form yet more fabrics, distant and unreachable. Thus to know what will or may be, one has to transcend time and exist apart from it and all the firmness, the stability it affords, and that is why oracles and prognostics have always been depicted as creatures divorced from the matrix of their tangible worlds, closer to Gods than to mortals.

Yet the Foreseers of Ienar Lin were no Gods; they were thoroughly mortal and frail, and for as long or little as they lived their minds, weak as any creature’s bound to the material world’s dimensions, were assailed by a neverending, never-ceasing mayhem of future events and eventualities, of alien fates that barely began before splitting into thousands of possible destinies. And slowly but surely this havoc reigned and ravaged their sanity, till they became helpless, listless husks, living under the relentless agony and terror of strange worlds blossoming or dying, of hapiness denied and lives oblivious to the evils that were to befall them, while they themselves lay, spent and senseless, praying with what dregs of strength were left to them for the swift relief of death—which many sought actively, either to escape a worse death they’d foreseen or simply to flee the onslaught of prescience, and for this reason the islands of Foreseers often resembled empty cages of black rock, so that their howling dwellers wouldn’t harm themselves.

The way that the rest of the Linnars regarded these tortured men and women varied greatly; some feared and despised them for their powers, while others—treasure-hunting Boatmen chief amongst them—revered Foreseers for their godly ability to predict the future, and sought them out to benefit from their wisdom, wishing to know, for instance, whether a longed-for mate would reciprocate their feelings, or curious about the date and manner of their deaths, or, most often, eager to discover if an afterlife existed, and what it was like; but rarely did any of these idle wonderers manage to set foot on a Foreseer’s island, which stood out because of the unusual height of its pillar and the absence of means to ascend the vertical rock. Moreover, rumours said that those few who did manage to clamber their way to the top, were either attacked and killed by Foreseers who’d been completely severed from reality and saw everything as a threat, or, touched by the

onrush of the future that swirled around Foreseers like a poisonous cloud, took leave of their minds and jumped to their death.

Thus, the first thing Wixelor thought when Huxor urged him to visit his son, was, *This has gone on long enough. It's time I went back and resumed my dreaming and forgot about this whole outrageous business.* For even if he found his way to his island, Zaepix might be too far gone to understand or care that he'd been sent by his father to help ward off the End of the World – a concept that seemed more ridiculous the longer Wixelor thought about it—and murder him, believing he was Death come to take him away.

However, something kept tugging at his heart, a strange, sudden need which Wixelor knew he must heed or else live out the rest of his days in regret. For one thing, unlikely though it seemed that he should be the harbinger of the End, the thought of everything and everyone disappearing, of all these innumerable lives being abruptly snuffed out, filled him with sadness and fear. He even felt an unexpected sympathy for the dreamers whose dreams he collected, no matter how tiresome the fantastic eruptions of their sleeping minds might be. How could he bear the guilt of knowing that he had the chance to save them and decided against it? Even his own existence, whose monotonous stretch into old age sometimes felt insufferable, had all of a sudden become infinitely precious, its few tepid pleasures unthinkable to lose.

But what ultimately convinced him that he must act upon Huxor's entreaty was something he couldn't even repeat to himself without feeling a delicious coldness descend on him, as if his very soul were touched by a ghostly hand. For even in his most heartfelt, passionate flights of fancy, Wixelor knew the object of his obsession—the *Runes of Norien*—were as intangible as the ancient yearnings that had born their myth. Yet if a Ponderer of Huxor's wisdom believed in their actual existence, (albeit in a faraway, unattainable world) then surely the Eyes of the Gods were more than a tale. His own experience had taught him that even the wildest dreams are up to a point based on fact, on palpable, material objects invested with intense emotion.

And if this Erat Rin—home to the God of Fate and Chance!—really existed, and there was even the slightest chance of him getting there to help keep doom at bay, he couldn't in all conscience refuse to act! Because who knew what lay beyond the Eye and its endless drudgery? Even Lurien and Feerien seemed heavenly in comparison—imagine, then, a world unspoilt by the grimness of the Mad Sphere, allowed to govern itself and blessed with the Runes' all-powerful magic; and then imagine him, a lowly Dreamer, somehow finding his way to that remote paradise, and living like all those creatures he'd spent his whole life envying, free to roam lands of green and skies of blue, to savour the taste of warm fresh milk and indulge in forms of love vastly superior to the desperate gropings of beastly Linnners like Moraxa!

All these thoughts had been spinning in Wixelor's head in the brief time it took him to descend the steps of Huxor's island, and by the time he reached the creaky wooden landing his mind was adamantly made up: he would find Zaepix and ask for his guidance whatever the cost. And then, he thought, waving his candle about to attract some passing Boatman, he would somehow manage to retrieve the Runes of Norien, even if it meant travelling to Nowhere and back.

It felt like an eternity before he found a Boatman who not only knew where Zaepix's island lay but was willing to take him there. The first ten or so, upon hearing his name rowed instantly away, grumbling fearful, unintelligible words, and of the next ten only one had the decency to tell Wixelor why this particular Foreseer was dreaded so.

Apparently, or so the Boatman said—and he seemed young and innocent enough to be telling the truth—Zaepix was rumoured to be the maddest madman in all of Ienar Lin, a thing apparent from his island, (specially made so by the Gods? chosen by other Linnars as a sort of exile that would keep them safe?) whose stem stood so incredibly high it was invisible, merged with the darkness of the Eye's dome. Moreover, Zaepix was different from other Foreseers in that he didn't merely lie down and let the future rain on him, but used what he saw to construct alien devices, which he then tested on unsuspecting Boatmen he lured with promises of the treasure's location, and which invariably caused them to die horribly. And as if this wasn't bad enough, whenever the hateful man knew the precise details of someone's death, he would send out this knowledge to them like a venomous arrow, driving his miserable victims to obsess over the ominous date and the manner of their dying so much, that most of them killed themselves just to fool fate and escape a more painful end.

However, the Boatman said, lowering his eyes to hide the embarrassment of bargaining for something obviously valuable to him, he would consent to take Wixelor to the island of the evil Foreseer, if he—provided he made it back alive—promised to ask Zaepix a question most dear to him. Apparently, there was a fair Ender who lived near the centre of the Eye, whose melancholy eyes and nightly sobs made the young Boatman's heart swell with loving sympathy, and ache to know whether his secret longing had any hope of being returned. Wixelor hastened to vow that he would do his best to find out, and so, sitting and staring at their feet in their respective preoccupations, they set out for the island of Zaepix.

The boat glided silently along the still black water, from darkness to deeper darkness. After a while, the last reflected glimmer from the islands' lights dwindled and vanished, and they were left to drift almost blindly. And while they both waited for their dark-accustomed eyes to begin to discern the vague shapes around them, Wixelor was once again beset by doubt and fear. Was he truly willing to risk his life because of a few dreams and their wild interpretation by the—possibly senile—Huxor? Did he dare involve himself in the mysterious workings of the Gods? And what if all this was an insignificant fiction, like the dreams of legendary power, dreamt by weaklings, that had been coursing through his mind for two and a half centuries?

But then he thought of the smooth black stones, placed inside his very body (by what hand? what divine will?), as real and undeniable as the heartbeat that throbbed in his ears.

And suddenly the water and the boat were illuminated by a soft yellow glow, and looking up Wixelor and the Boatman saw a ring of pale fire, burning so high up it seemed to hover in the air—and little by little they made out the formidable pillar that loomed before them, crowned by the flames and made of a rock so

perfectly smooth that even the most gifted climber could never scale its astonishing heights.

How am I supposed to get up there? Wixelor wondered, staring with awe at the unique island. *And do I really want to?*

It was then that he noticed a faintly gleaming rope-like strand dangling beside the full length of the pillar, and asking the Boatman to row them a bit closer, he realized it was a thick chain, splitting into four and fastened with sturdy bolts around the rim of a wooden barrel, big enough to fit two men of twice his girth.

Of course. After all, Zaepix was a Foreseer. He was expected.

The first thing Wixelor's anxiously blinking eyes fell on the moment he pulled himself out of the barrel and stood on the island's slippery ground was an enormous device unlike anything he'd ever seen, even in the most exotic alien dreams.

The top of it looked like a huge flower, its long thick petals made of wood and its stem connected through a complex combination of ropes and chains to a cylinder; the wondrous contraption also had a pair of long leather wings hanging limply to the ground, a fish-like tail, and a seat attached to a long vertical stick and wooden treadles.

For a moment Wixelor contemplated the device, trying to guess what it was meant for, and suddenly the young Boatman's warning came back to him; could this be an apparatus of torture? Was he about to have his life cut excruciatingly short?

Thus when he heard a hoarse voice from behind him, he jumped in terror, and turned to look; but no one stood there.

"Pray lower your gaze, Dreamer Wixelor," the voice said.

Wixelor did, and was confronted with a sight even more startling: his host, Zaepix the Terrible, was short as an infant, but one with the face of an impossibly old man – a tiny, shrunken creature, with a soiled piece of sackcloth hanging loosely on his skeletal frame and toenails long and hardened like claws. It defied belief that this was Huxor's son, for Zaepix seemed ten times older than his father, of an age so overwhelmingly advanced it was almost reminiscent of the legendary Ancient Linnors, whose lives were said to span hundreds of centuries.

And just as those ancestors could commune with one another unhindered by such barriers as actual speech and distance, their minds linked in a single entity of wisdom, the minuscule Foreseer appeared to have read Wixelor's thoughts at a glance—for first he dispelled his apprehension with a wide warm grin, and then he said, "Fear not, my friend; that is no instrument of cruelty. As to my, well, let's say, fossilized appearance, it is so for the very same reason that you can be on my island without being driven to the edge of your reason from the outpour of future events rushing in from a million different worlds. You see, long ago, when I first foresaw the End of Norien, I struck a sort of bargain with the powers whose bidding I do—that I would shoulder the knowledge of ten lifetimes in one, even if it meant withering away from the burden, so long as I could always be aware of changes in the Ever-Shifting Sphere, and its distant child Erat Rin, changes grievous enough to herald the doom of all existence. And thus a few centuries back I became aware of some Dreamer who was to play a most crucial role in our

collective salvation—even though you, dear Wixelor, were still a mere child at the time. And ever since I’ve been keeping an eye on you, especially after some recent visions of the three realms’ destruction, which, I’m afraid, both in Lurien and Feerien, is already under way, following a nearly catastrophic blow that brought the Forgotten Sphere to the brink of extinction. I trust you know of the things I speak – the message of the stones?”

Wixelor, still a bit dazed, nodded.

“Splendid,” Zaepix said, beaming once more. “Then we won’t be needing these,” he added, and pulling a lever he released the chain which had brought up the barrel from its winch, causing it to slide off rapidly and noisily, till the very last link was swallowed by the blackness. Wixelor looked on, when suddenly, staring at the empty block round which the chain had been wound, he realized what had just happened: the barrel was gone! Which meant there was no way off the island, for standing next to one of the many great torches that lit its circumference and seeing nothing but an endless black void, he knew that if he jumped the height of the fall would kill him.

“And now if you would kindly follow me,” Zaepix said, and turning around he began to drag his bare feet toward the centre of the island, where the device stood. “I’m dreadfully sorry for the briefness of the hospitality I may extend, dear Wixelor, but there’s no time to spare. The Lids should be parting any moment now.”

Fearful yet also strangely intrigued, Wixelor followed the tiny Foreseer, until they were both standing before the machine.

“This,” Zaepix said, running his wrinkled hand almost tenderly across a length of polished wood, “is a flying machine, which I constructed by elaborating on the designs of an Oblivian who won’t be born for another five thousand years or so.”

Wixelor gaped. “*Flying* machine?” he said. “What for?”

“Why, for flying out of Ienar Lin, of course!” Zaepix said with a croak of a laughter. “To be specific, it is intended to carry you to Feerien, where I believe the threshold to Erat Rin lies—even though, sadly, I’ve been as yet unable to support my belief with a precise prediction.”

“Fly out of Ienar Lin? But that’s impossible!”

“Oh, no, it’s not; far from it. You see, dear Wixelor, our somewhat dismal world owes its name not to the madness of its people, as is widely presumed, but to the mad, incessant movement of Ienar Lin itself, which every moment passes through countless dimensions and realities. Thankfully, we do not feel this constant motion—but every now and then, when the Lids open, we are briefly graced not merely with views of other worlds, but with their actual skies and landscapes. Thus, if one were to fly through the Lids while they drew apart to reveal the heavens of Feerien, one would physically cross over to the Sphere of Toil. And this someone shall be you, Wixelor the Dreamer, as it’s been long foreknown by your humble and most grateful friend Zaepix.”

Though unassailed by visions as his host had promised, Wixelor’s mind was reeling. Leave Ienar Lin by flying through the Lids? Preposterous! Everyone knew that what they saw was no more attainable than the dreams he so casually swept aside. But even if Zaepix was not as mad as his words sounded, what could he, a Dreamer, possibly accomplish in the uncivilized realm of Feerien? Gain passage to another world, one so alien and distant it seemed utterly unreal, through a

gateway that Zaepix himself had been unable to locate? No, this was nonsense. And besides, it was as likely that he would ever fly in this unwieldy thing as if he merely flapped his arms.

“Give it a try,” Zaepix said, seeing him staring doubtfully at his invention.

“Why don’t *you* try it?” Wixelor said with sudden anger. “Or, for that matter, since you seem to know everything, why don’t you save Norien by yourself? What do you need *me* for?”

Zaepix smiled at this outburst, though now his smile was tinged with sadness. “Because, dear Wixelor, I’m not long for this world – nor for any other, if you should refuse to fulfill your fate-appointed task. By this I do not mean to burden you with guilt, for after all you are sole master of your life, and I shan’t lie to you by saying you won’t be putting it in harm’s way. Ultimately, the decision lies with you.”

That’s easy to say when you’ve cut off all other means of leaving your freakish island, Wixelor thought, but before he could stop himself, prompted by curiosity rather than belief in the machine’s capacity to fly, he was already settling in its hide-covered seat and trying to work out the leather straps that were supposed to fasten him to it. The treadles he was familiar with, for he had seen similar mechanisms in dreams whose dreamers rode vehicles of leisure operated by the turning of pedals. And so, unaware of Zaepix staring at him with wide-eyed hope, he placed his feet on the pedals and started to spin them as fast as he could, grabbing the steering rod and pulling it towards him.

And then the impossible happened: the machine started to shake, the wings moved up and down like a bird’s, and the wooden blades at the top began to revolve with a loud whirring—and the next thing he knew, Wixelor was soaring in rapid ascent, the island’s torches reduced to a ring of flickering candle flames and Zaepix’s cries of exaltation barely reaching him.

“Farewell, heroic Wixelor!” the shrunken Foreseer yelled, leaping up and down. “And do not fear! You shan’t be alone in your quest! Your fellows shall be revealed to you! Seek out the threshold, and an Oblivian by the name of...”

But Wixelor couldn’t hear him anymore, as much because of the elevation as by the frenzied beating of his heart, even more deafening than the sounds of the flying machine. Like any creature blessed with the gift of flight, Wixelor couldn’t contain his glee, looking down at the yellow dots of the islands and roaring with laughter. Could he locate his own island? he wondered, but then again, why ever go back to that gruelling life that didn’t even properly belong to him, infested as it was with other people’s bliss and sorrow, when he could fly, higher and higher, tearing through the air?

However, just as he had managed to calm himself a bit, and gain steadier control of the machine, Wixelor realized that even those tiny dots had disappeared, and he was flying in utter darkness, whose sheer unknown immensity suddenly filled him with dread. What if Zaepix was wrong and the dome of the Eye wasn’t a physical barrier but an illusion, going on forever? And what if he got lost in this abyss and was unable to find his way back to Ienar Lin, flying till he was overcome with exhaustion and plummeted to his death?

So gripping was this fear, that he relented the turning of the pedals and was about to see if he could guide the machine gently downwards, when the blackness

was abruptly filled by a rumble so deep and reverberating and seized by a tremor so intense, Wixelor felt like a tiny bead inside a gigantic rattle, shaken in every direction at once.

And then the top of the machine was struck by a clatter that came pouring down: a hail of rocks—dislodged from the inside of the Eye's dome? Wixelor was in such a state of panic he couldn't say which way was up—till with an even greater shudder the darkness turned a deep and then a lighter grey, as the Lids began to pull apart.

Wixelor could hardly believe what he was seeing, yet despite his terror he knew he should keep pedaling and fly towards the light that was growing brighter by the moment, until a vast expanse of pale violet sky was framed by the slowly settling Lids, a sky set alight by six tremendous moons.

And just as he flew towards them, two frail dreams came to him, like rags clinging to him before being carried away by the wind: a girl's dream of longed-for love and a hungry man dreaming of freshly-baked bread, both of them as meaningless and moving as life itself.

Then with a final thrust he flew through the Lids, and as a cry of joy left his lips, Wixelor's mind was swept clean. He was free.

PART II

Crossing the Threshold.

Chapter IV

I

And then their heads were forcefully plunged into the milk, blinding them and depriving them of breath; and in their dying horror they flailed and fought, until their thrashing weakened and ceased, and they went still and limp.

Finally, they were let go, and the Sacred River whisked their disgraced corpses swiftly away.

Or that was what the handful of witnesses perceived.

For the moment they were submerged, Gallan and Raddia gripped one another's hands beneath the surface of the milk and did as they had agreed upon: counted to ten while tossing madly about, then to twenty while their writhing appeared to grow weaker, and finally to thirty, at which point they stopped moving altogether, and waited for the hands of their drowners to release them. And once the current swept them along, they half-turned their faces to the surface, wide-open eyes unblinking and lips parted, and breathed as surreptitiously as possible.

Whatever was in store for them after they washed up in the Mists, they would confront in time; for now, the important thing was they were still alive.

Of course Gallan and Raddia's botched mating and subsequent submergence might have turned out quite differently if it weren't for the fact that, at the time of their humiliating death, the people of Lurien were distracted by their imminent doom.

Things had begun to unravel the moment most Lurienites, emerging from their troubled sleep, were greeted by an alarming, unfamiliar greyness in the air, and stepping out of their homes saw that the eye of the Ghost, if such it were, had grown overnight into a great round chasm of uncolour, tinging the sky a shade that was neither light nor darkness but a dreary in-between. If fear had colour, this would be it.

Thus, in so dire a predicament, the Surfacing Rite of two Makerless Mates, one of whom had to keep his head hanging to conceal an eye of blue, drew a very slight crowd—it wasn't even attended by a Sage, since presumably the Circle was struggling to cope with the looming disaster.

Yet even so, Gallan and Raddia's mating wasn't merely fruitless but the height of impurity and failure. For one thing, and although they were secretly hoping that

the Rite would be abortive (for how could they possibly manage to raise a pair of Mates in a world that looked as if it were coming off at the seams?), when they'd been sitting up to their shoulders in the Sacred River's milk for quite some time and the milcloth of their robes showed no sign of dissolving, they realized that nothing, not even a Fault, was forthcoming. And for another, though she managed to hide it by shaking her head till a lock of hair dangled before it, Raddia's right eye—as Gallan told her, mouthing the words while blinking his own eye—had suddenly acquired a large green spot.

The assistants to the Rite, themselves terrified and gazing skywards instead of at the barren smoothness of the milk, were quick to lose their patience.

The milk has been corrupted, one of them—a fat tall woman holding Raddia's shoulders firmly—said to the others.

No! Never! Gallan's equally forbidding helper barked. *The Sacred River is pure and potent as it is eternal! It's these two whose Substance is corrupted!*

Indeed! chimed in a third woman who stood aside. *Just look at them! Not enough Substance in them to melt their rags of milcloth, let alone give surfacing!*

And their eyes! a man's voice came from the back. *They're as good as submerged!*

*Let's be done with them, then; we each have our own kin to tend to –
If the Ghosts let us live.*

And so the women thrust the worthless Mates with all their strength into the milk, and Gallan and Raddia, who by then had had ample time to take as deep a breath as their bosoms allowed, began to count the precious moments.

They had agreed that they would only flip over and swim to the bank after they had passed the thick veil of the Mists, but just as they did the Sacred River entered a forest so impenetrably dark, that they were seized by panic and dashed to the bank.

Then they shook themselves and wrung their robes and stomped their feet in the grass—unfamiliar in colour and height—but when all these failed to warm them they did what they needed most: dove into each other's arms, holding tight and stroking away one another's sobs of fear and joy.

However, once they had somewhat recovered their composure, and cast their eyes about, they found themselves in an extremely joyless part of Lurien (if this were still Lurien, a question they both shrunk from considering).

To begin with, even though they'd been expecting some measure of darkness at the other side of the swirling wall of mist where they now stood, the woods around them were so dense, and the trees so formidably tall and massive, that their canopy all but eclipsed the sky. And if it were so murky in the day—even on this dreariest of days, when the white light had given way to an ashen dimness—they didn't dare imagine what it would be like after redfall.

Moreover, it was biting cold and damp, and soon Gallan and Raddia were shuddering in their still-soaked clothes.

What are we to eat? Where are we to sleep? How can we stay alive in this horrid place? These anxious questions flew back and forth between their minds, till

suddenly they were distracted by something that made them briefly unmindful of their wretchedness.

First they heard its soft treading from behind a clump of tall weeds and then, as the sound grew louder and the thing was about to emerge, the two Mates stepped back and once more fell into each other's embrace—for Lurien abounded with stories about the hideous, predatory monsters that lurked in the Mists.

But the moment it stepped out of the weeds, its sight instantly filled them with relief, though neither of them had ever beheld such a creature.

It wasn't remotely monstrous—in fact, it resembled a kid, although its coat was reddish and the timid gracefulness with which it approached wasn't goat-like at all. And the creature's eyes, despite being two orbs of glistening uncolour, exuded a kindness that could calm the most cowardly heart.

Still, seeing that its pace hadn't relented at their sight, and that it was coming purposefully towards them, Gallan and Raddia retreated again till their backs came up against the coarse bark of a tree.

Then the creature stopped and looked up into Raddia's eyes, prompting her by some suddenly and inexplicably obvious feeling of safety to extend her hand and softly stroke its downy head.

What are you doing? Gallan said, alarmed. *Don't touch it! It may be dangerous!*

But, look! Raddia said, her mind's voice light as laughter. *It's rubbing its little head against my knuckles! No beast as gentle as this can be dangerous!*

And before she knew it, the kindly creature had taken two of her gloved fingers into its mouth, sucking on the milcloth as if it were its mother's teat and tickling Raddia into a burst of giggles—which Gallan, staring at the absurd display, soon joined in.

A few moments passed in this soothing state of amusement, but then the beastling released Raddia's glove, and turning around it started to walk towards a pathway that was concealed by a thicket. And acting upon a deep trust, the mutual trust of living things who sense no harm can come from their contact, Gallan and Raddia followed it.

It led them into a clearing surrounded by bushes, whose spiky leaves were sprinkled with small round fruits of a colour so dark it might as well be uncolour, and glancing at them with its glowing, friendly eyes, the creature stretched its neck and started to pick off the fruit with a swiftness and determination suggesting great enjoyment. So after a while Raddia walked over to one of the bushes, and begun to pluck the soft beads, gathering them in the hollow of her palm—and then, selecting the tiniest one, she gazed at it and slowly brought it to her lips.

"No! Don't!" Gallan shouted, and darting towards her he managed to knock off the handful of fruit just in time. "Don't you see how dark they are? They must be filthy—deadly, even!"

Raddia frowned, and nodded at the beastling. "This little fellow seems fine to me," she said, and kneeling she started to pick up the scattered fruits.

"But—but it's an animal!" Gallan said, kneeling too.

Right now I daresay we're no better than animals ourselves, Raddia said, looking him in the eye. *And famished ones at that.* For indeed, what with Lorn and Navva's

brutal deaths, their Surfacing Rite and the eye of the Ghost, they'd gone for more than a day without a bite of food.

And despite its darkness, the fruit was not merely safe but delicious, sweet and sour and tangy and mouthwatering, so that soon both Mates were on their knees, picking the bushes clean and consuming the round beads voraciously, by the handful, until their faces and gloves were smeared and dripping with uncolour juice which, just like hungry beasts, they sucked off with moans of delight.

When next they looked, their four-legged friend was gone, seeking perhaps its Makers—but Gallan and Raddia didn't mind, for the clearing, with its perimeter of tall trees intertwined at the top to form a dome of thick entangled branches, seemed, if not the ideal place to spend the night, the best they could hope for under the circumstances. Thus they began to build their little nest, breaking off leafy boughs and arranging them on the ground in a makeshift bed, and then making a fire by rubbing some glowpebbles together and using their spark to ignite a small pile of the driest twigs they could find.

It was almost beautiful, this peaceful, fragrant nook, and as they sat and felt the fire's lovely warmth creep inside them, the two Mates couldn't help but wonder why this part of the world had been invested with so much ugliness and terror, of which, at least till now, they hadn't seen or felt the slightest hint. Even when reddening had claimed the unseen sky, the reddish tinge of what little light broke through the canopy gave the clearing an appearance of some slowly breathing, living creature—as though these weren't real woods, but the insides of some immense body lying silent and still, a body that would no more hurt them than one would cut off a limb because a butterfly had alighted upon it. So why all these lies? Raddia thought; why all this fear of the Mists when in fact they were—the wildness of nature aside—so like the rest of Lurien?

But her musing was cut cruelly short, for suddenly the sky erupted in a rumble so loud it shook the ground they sat on, and moments later ether milk was pelting down on their arboreal roof, slipping through the branches' gaps and falling upon them hard and fast, forcing them to flee before they were drenched to the bone.

Yet as they tore blindly through the wilderness, groping around for any kind of shelter and finding none, it became bitterly evident to them that, for all their desperate will to survive, they couldn't live as animals; they had no pelt to warm and protect them, no claws with which to burrow into the ground, no wings to carry them swiftly to a place of safety—a home, like the one they'd been so painfully forced to abandon.

It was in this state of breathless misery that Gallan and Raddia first came upon the thing that summed up all the fears concerning the Mists: Mirror Mountain.

By then they'd been completely disoriented by their frantic, sightless running, so when they suddenly darted to a spot of lessened dimness and found themselves past the border of the woods with its trees' relative cover and wholly at the mercy of the pouring ether milk, they were so taken aback by the mountain's abrupt appearance—its invisible summit blending with the tainted brown sky—they simply stood and stared, oblivious to the coldness of their sodden, clinging garments.

They had been told that it was made of a strange, unclean rock that showed you your image, which, at a single glance, would drain all of your Substance and leave you a babbling fool, dumber than the dumbest beast. That inside it, protected by hosts of man-eating monsters, lay the doorway to the worlds of touch, filth and madness.

And yet the looming mass of Mirror Mountain was nothing like the Lurienites' collective object of dread. Its rock was strange indeed, resembling neither glowstones nor dullstones, but its uncoloured vastness, rendered slick and gleaming by the deluge of ether milk, showed no image other than its own imposing self. As for its size, twice as immense as all of Lurien's hills and pastures and quarries and woods put together, it brought to one's mind not a squalid place of exile, but the centre of a world so awesome and untamed, it might well have been the origin of all things, Lurien among them.

And as if to further belie the rumours they'd been brought up to believe, when a rope of lightning shot across the sky, briefly illuminating the scene, Mirror Mountain, through the mouth of a cave they saw at its foot, offered Gallan and Raddia safe haven.

So great was their joy and relief at finally finding refuge for the night, the two Mates, once inside the cave, started to shriek and jump and dance about, blessing their good fortune. Admittedly, the air of the cave had an unpleasant smell, and they would have to sleep on bare rock without even the comfort of a fire, but all these things were unimportant when compared to braving the elements without the least cover.

And as they felt their way to the depth of the cave, whence came a strange but highly pleasurable warmth, Gallan and Raddia literally stumbled upon a real monster.

The reason they hadn't perceived its presence till that very moment, was the creature's astonishing size, which made it seem as one with the surrounding dark stone walls, and its breath sound as part of the wind that blew through the cave from outside. But when they collided with it, their faces plunging into its thick fur, and in their terror backed away gasping and screaming, it let out a deep moan of distress over being so rudely awoken, and uncurling an enormous body it stood on its hind legs before them.

And though there was only the dimness from outside to see by, it was enough to realize that they were in the company of an otherworldly, terrifying beast.

So tall was it, it had to crouch to be able to stand inside the cave, thus dropping its head so low they could feel its hot, foul breath on their faces. And what a head it was! Thrice as big as the biggest bull's, with yellow eyes filled with murderous wrath and great jaws armed with teeth so big and sharp, the merest bite could chop one's head right off. And from its mighty shoulders there descended two forelegs, thick as tree trunks and equipped with massive, sharp-clawed paws.

And while they stared, too petrified to flee, the monster had advanced towards them, and placed its arms around them, trapping them in its deadly embrace.

There was no time to think, and though Raddia knew well how dangerous it was to use your mind to curb the will of a large beast – the sudden rush of Substance could provoke a violent reaction—she saw no other chance of survival, and so,

mustering her courage she commanded the monster to release them and go back to sleep.

But this had no effect on the alien brute, or rather the reverse effect—for, bringing its paws closer and making its grip even tighter, it started to walk backwards, dragging them to the blackness of the cave.

This is it, then, Gallan said, holding Raddia's hand and shutting his eyes; they'd escaped being drowned in the Sacred River only to be devoured alive by this vile thing.

Then the monster stopped, and placing its forelegs on their shoulders, it forced them to kneel and then to lie down, and lay down itself; but instead of tearing them apart with its claws or biting their faces off as they expected, it moaned a bit, its huge torso moving this way and that, until it settled in the same position from which it had risen. And then it let out a deep loud yawn, laid its head on the stone floor, and drawing them closer to its chest it fell asleep.

Gallan and Raddia were so dumbstruck, it took them a while to realize what had just happened: the monster didn't want to eat them, but to send them to sleep, as if they were its offspring, little monsters that had wandered off and come back drenched and shivering.

Nothing – not their Makers' death, not their near-fatal Surfacing Rite, nor even the prospect of the uncoloured hole swallowing up the sky and obliterating Lurien—had caused them as much bewilderment. In a single moment, their world had changed forever.

Because, ever since they had emerged from the milk, they'd been taught to dread the touch of even a flower on their bare skin; told that contact begets perdition. *To touch is to die. To touch is to kill. To live is to be an island.* Thus the Three Doctrines dictated—and how silly, how preposterous they seemed right now, when their faces were buried in the fur of a beast holding them tight, and not a bit of their Substance was lost to its tender touch, a tenderness moreover which, although extended by an animal, was greater and more heartwarming than anything Lorn or Navva had ever given them.

But before long the tangle of their thoughts began to fade, as the beast's deep, calm breathing and the soft throb of its heart against theirs began to lull them into a state of absolute safety and physical bliss – and cuddling up against the monster's warm pelt like sucklings, Gallan and Raddia fell into the sweetest sleep.

Three days they spent in the lair of the monster—though soon they ceased to think of her (she was a female animal) as such, for her affection was so great it made them feel ashamed for their initial horror and mistrust.

Not only did she cradle them to sleep, lying with her back turned to the cave's drafty mouth to shield them from the cold, but each morning she left and came back with what nourishment she could procure: empty beehives dripping with honey, large, queer-coloured fowl, and a peculiar breed of animal they'd never seen before, which she caught in a large pond of ether milk that lay near the cave: creatures flat and shiny, with round milky eyes and spiky skin which, sliced in the middle by a single cut of her claws, revealed a pale reddish, soft, delicious meat they'd roast on small glowstone fires that their self-appointed protectress, unlike any other beast, showed not the least fear of.

However, after a while it became quite obvious that the frequent hunting and the forfeiture of sleep and sustenance—for she wouldn't touch the food she brought before they were done eating, by which time there was little more left than gristle and bones—was taking its toll on the selfless, loving beast. A sluggishness began to claim her, a weakness apparent even in the dimming glow of her eyes. And the same way they had felt the benevolence of her Substance, they now sensed its gradual dwindling.

And meanwhile the eye of the Ghost grew bigger and bigger, and the sky, be it day or night, darker and darker. There was no point in hiding and driving the poor beast to death from exhaustion, especially if Lurien itself was coming asunder.

So on the ashen break of the fourth day, after gathering what provisions they could carry, Gallan and Raddia set out along the steep, narrow path ascending Mirror Mountain. Their guardian, clearly distraught at their departure, first tried to stop them by emitting plaintive moans and by softly nudging them back to the cave with her head, and when eventually it was obvious they were bent on leaving, she stood at the bottom of the winding path and looked on with mournful eyes.

Yet something of her Substance must have seeped into their own, for although the mountain was filled with hostile monsters, four-legged, crawling and flying, they'd merely bare their teeth and beat their wings and hiss and growl at them and then, sensing some great fierceness they couldn't contest, left Gallan and Raddia alone.

Still, it was a gruelling ascent, made even more so by the ether milk storms that broke out and lasted for hours, and by the fact that there were very few caves in which to take cover, so that they were often forced to spend the night out in the open, soaked and shaking and terrified of the precipices yawning before the rough, narrow ledges they had to rest or sleep on.

There was no turning back, however, no hope whatever in the world they were fleeing, even if their destination was unknown and shrouded in a lifetime's worth of fear—for the quadruped Maker (as they thought of her) had dispelled their greatest fear, showing them that a world of touch was no more deadly than one of untouch. After all, it was Lurienites just like themselves, pure creatures of untainted Substance, who had sought to end them with such casual cruelty.

It was a little after they had consumed their last bit of food—some white roots, sour but substantial—that they suddenly reached the top of Mirror Mountain, and the sight awaiting them was a grisly one, enough to rekindle their longstanding terror of all things lying beyond the Mists: the body of a man they could only assume was Gorfen, for he had been mauled beyond recognition, skin, bones, limbs and innards scattered in a wide circle of dried blood and strewn with rags of white, lifeless milcloth. The monsters that had kept clear of them apparently hadn't spared Tulanda's ill-fated Mate.

And surrounded by shreds of flesh and smears of filth, there stood before them the mouth of an even greater cave than the one they'd briefly occupied, as dark and still and menacing as the unthinkable realm Gorfen and all the dead inhabited.

But despite their fear of what mortal danger might be lurking in the gloom of the cave, when they turned around they saw that a thick wall of mist had risen from the foot of the mountain, moving as fast as a creature of harmful intentions,

and that if they didn't make a run for the cave, it would soon surround them completely.

So in they hurried, taking out the glowstones they carried and hoping that the cave's dweller, if there was one, wouldn't tear them to pieces like Gorfen.

They had been going for quite a while, wondering at the depths they penetrated—seen from outside, the cave hadn't appeared to extend to such a great length—when suddenly they saw a glimmer up ahead and stopped dead, instantly reaching for each other's hand.

Had the glowstones' faint blue light caught the alert eye of a monster? To make sure, they quickly pocketed the stones, and were at once immersed in total darkness. So out they brought them again, and at the exact same moment the glimmer reappeared.

Could it be—us? Raddia said, gripping Gallan's hand.

Our own image? Gallan sounded doubtful, but then, closing his fist around his glowstone, he saw the light ahead grow promptly dimmer.

Dared they approach, and confront their reflections? A surge of mutual panic seized them at the thought. Of course they had seen the faces of countless Lurienites since their surfacing, even if glimpsed furtively, and knew that their skin and hair was white, their lips a pale greyish rose, and their eyes—well, that they didn't wish to think of. But even so, they dreaded the prospect of looking at themselves, for in doing so they would become as others, strangers observing the countenance of strangers – and what if those two images, albeit their own, were truly able to rob them of their Substance? Maybe that was what had befallen Gorfen as well, and led to his brutal death: he might have come out of the cave helpless and empty, a mass of meat for beasts to feed on.

But then they felt a cold breath of air at their feet, and looking down they saw to their horror that the mist, like a hunter, had followed them into the cave.

So on they went, the glow becoming steadily brighter, when all of a sudden, having for a moment looked back to see whether the mist had caught up with them, they turned around and saw that they could go no further—for a few steps ahead, as tall as they behind a sheet of shimmering uncolour, their reflected selves stood and stared at them, their faces frozen by the same terror they felt.

And though they had at once lowered their eyes, in that brief moment they had seen that their images were identical to themselves, from their disheveled garments and the leaves and twigs caught in their long hair to the way they held hands and the grasp of their fingers around the glowstones.

Fearful of the sight, yet at the same time deeply drawn to it, they slowly raised their heads—and so did their doubles. They were in too great a state of agitation to perceive any shift in their Substance, but one thing the reflections did captivate was their mind; because, after all, it didn't feel at all like gazing at a stranger, a usurper of your life's essence, but as if, for the first time in their life, they knew not merely their exact appearance but what made them—their fear, and will to live, and boundless love for one another—who they were. And so they looked and looked, and then they raised their free hands and touched fingertips with their harmless, timid selves.

They spoke as one. *You're beautiful*, they said.

II

Feerien was rapidly devolving into chaos.

It had all begun with the decapitation of Prince Fantyr and the brutal massacre of his men—discovered by scouts King Fazen had dispatched at once, who had returned so horrified it took threats of flogging to get them to talk, and who described a scene of such unimaginable savagery, it was like coming upon the carcasses of deer slain and devoured by wolves. Apparently, the murderers, after sending off their horrid message, had torn the soldiers from limb to limb, and then—judging from the remnants of numerous fires the scouts had found across the barracks—had feasted on their flesh.

Of course, since the task of those unfortunate souls had been to guard the mouth of Waste Valley, the first suspicion fell upon the Scavengers, who'd been known—or so the rumours said—to resort to cannibalism when there wasn't enough of the refuse they fed on to go around. But though reviled, Scavengers were thought to be weak, fearful creatures, always lingering at the fringes of civilized Feerien; certainly no one would ever imagine them capable of butchering dozens of strong, armed men.

But then reports began to arrive from various places across the Farmlands and the Minelands, brought to the Castle by terrified peddlers who often begged to be allowed to take shelter with their families behind the fortified walls, even if they were to have no home and live outside as dogs; and these reports spoke of a growing army of Scavengers, led by a colossal warlord carried around on the shoulders of his men as if astride a horse, who attacked at will, pillaging homes, annihilating households and eating the corpses (even those of babes), a practice which, according to those lucky few who had witnessed such assaults and stayed alive, gave them a strength no other meat provided ever since the Shy Death had rendered dead animal flesh near useless.

And as similar stories grew in number and ghastliness, Feeres everywhere began to dread another, ancient rumour, which said that the Disaster hadn't entirely erased all realms beyond Waste Valley, but that pockets of people had survived, and that during the long centuries of poverty, hunger and disease they'd been made to suffer, they dreamt of one day joining forces and going to war, to avenge the Vanished Kingdoms which had been so cruelly abandoned by the rest of Feerien. There were even mentions of this myth in some of the prophecies pored over by Divinators, though in the end the bringer of the dreadful truth was an ignorant Miner named Tellur Trenn.

Despite the terror that was spreading fast, the Minelands were said to fare better against the Scavengers' attacks, for, unlike Farmers, who were completely exposed and had nowhere to hide besides their attics and cellars, Miners could take refuge in the depths of the mines, where even the most vicious killer would hesitate to venture. And yet the Trenns had been too late to leave their home, and were captured by men and women brandishing bludgeons and axes; and Tellur, the tragic father and sole survivor, had been bound in chains and forced to watch as these savages raped, killed, skinned and ate his wife and seven children—and

once his inconceivable ordeal was over, he'd been dragged on all fours before the leader of the slayers; true to the claims, he was a mountainous ogre who, while gnawing on a bloody shinbone, told him his own pathetic life would be spared if he hastened to the Castle and announced to *'that cowardly bastard of a King'* that Feerien's one and only ruler was he, King Velius the Vast, and that unless he surrendered, his legion would see to it that every last resisting Feere would be slaughtered and roasted on a spit. By the time he delivered his message, of course, Tellur Trenn was raving mad, and soon afterwards hung himself; but his words were to be proven true, when, within days, the Sphere of Toil was visited by famine.

Because for thousands of years the Castle, home to the Crown and thus the undisputed heart of Feerien, had subsisted, heart-like, on the sustenance flowing to it from every corner of the kingdom. Yet as the Scavengers swiftly seized control of the land and plundered its supplies to glut themselves, while at the same time cutting off most access to the Castle by killing peddlers and taking hold of their horses, what little food was left was hoarded by survivors to feed themselves and their families.

And as it slowly dawned on the Castle's dwellers, noble or not, that their home was turning from a stronghold to a gaol where they would most likely waste away from hunger, an unprecedented panic overtook them. Ladies of the court were trading their finery for bread, storekeepers struggled in vain to protect their wares from the growing crowds of famished people turned thieves, Spirit Servants consumed the herbs used in their spells and tried to grow more on barren patches of earth, Scribes boiled and ate their parchments, household animals disappeared into the bellies of their owners, while even more desperate people were seen at the shore that spread behind the Scriptorium, trying to fish in waters that, since the Disaster, were as lifeless as the Drowning Isles.

And while the summer's warmth gave way to the first spells of autumn chill, all these frightened men and women, from their homes or hideouts, would turn their eyes to the darkening skies, counting with bated breath the slivers of the moons.

The Kobold family had been fatally stricken by the onslaught of the Scavengers, torn in half like a tree severed by lightning to its roots.

What had ultimately undone them was their faith in Yodren's stature, so that even though word of an approaching army of murderous barbarians had reached them, they still expected word from their eldest son, inviting them to the Castle to weather the assault in safety. Little did they know that in the time since his last communication, the young Divinator, because of the King's desperation and the madness of the Queen, spent his days locked up in his cell because of some prophecy concerning him.

However, once it was obvious that unless they fled they would die a horrifying death, the Kobolds devised a plan which, unlike hiding in the basement of their home or taking to the hills—feeble solutions, that were said to have been the end of many a Farmer—would shield them from danger and keep them alive the same way it had been keeping generations of Farmers alive: they would take cover in the earth itself.

And so, after gathering all the provisions they could find and wrecking their home themselves to give the appearance that it had been already attacked and raided, they retreated into the furthest, darkest corner of their earthen cellar, and began to dig a tunnel into the soft soil. So great were the fear and hope driving them, all four of them took turns diggind, even little Yonfi, who, unaware of the imminent danger, showed great enthusiasm and surprising strength and resilience, burrowing with his tiny hands in a frenzy of exhilaration, like a mole which, after years of living aboveground, has suddenly discovered his true nature. And after a few days of nearly ceaseless toil, they had managed to excavate a hole big enough to fit them if they crawled about, supported by wooden beams, laid with cloth for them to sleep on, and connected through a second, sloping tunnel to a part of the woods concealed by thorny shrubs and undergrowth.

And though they weren't very comfortable—indeed, at times, the hole became suffocating, making them feel as if they'd been buried alive—at least they were secure, invisible to the approaching army except for brief, speedy trips to the surface, to get a breath of fresh air or fetch water from a nearby brook. What was more, although its entrance was hidden under a pile of dead leaves, the burrow provided the Kobolds with an unexpected bounty of small, wild beasts of the woods, which ventured into the hole thinking it uninhabited and were promptly caught and devoured, even if their raw flesh was bitter to the taste and hard to chew without a carnivore's sharp teeth.

But after the novelty of their shelter had worn off, Yonfi became restless, constantly begging to be allowed to climb out of the hole to bring water, mushrooms or berries, so that they had to keep an eye on him, lest he unwillingly give them away.

And then, early one morning, tragedy struck, in the guise of a squirrel who had climbed into the Kobolds' burrow to escape death at the paws of a lynx. As luck would have it, he was a particularly handsome squirrel, and Yonfi, whose senses as of late had been unusually heightened, stirred from his slumber and saw the critter's beady eyes staring at him, filled with innocence and terror. Now Yonfi knew that if the others woke and saw the squirrel they would breakfast on his meagre meat, and so he chose instead to scare the endearing creature away by chasing it up the tunnel and into the woods.

It was his son's laughter that broke through Yern's uneasy sleep, and as he groped around a sprinkle of soil, displaced by Yonfi's energetic climbing, fell on his face. For a moment he saw the beloved shadow outlined in the morning light and then both he and his boyish giggle were gone.

Beside himself with fear, Yern clambered to the top of the burrow, just in time to see Yonfi scampering down the slope, heedless of the mortal danger his cries of glee and noisy dash upon the dry leaves invited. And fearing that calling out his name might seal their doom, Yern ran after him, despairing at his son's incredible speed.

Over the brook he chased the boy, and into thorny thickets that tore through his clothes and flesh but which Yonfi crossed without slowing down at all. Finally, as he scrambled up a hill, breathless and faint from the exertion, Yern gave up and bellowed at his son to stop, come back this instant. Which, obedient as ever

despite his devilish race across half the Farmlands, Yonfi did, holding the precious squirrel by the tail while the poor thing screeched and clawed at the air in vain.

“Look, Papa! Can I keep him? Oh, please say I can keep him! Look how tiny he is—there’s hardly any meat on him! Papa? Can I—”

Still doubled up and panting, Yern told the boy in a stern voice to hush and let the squirrel go, and when Yonfi kept pleading and whining, Yern gave him a slap across the face which he instantly regretted, for Yonfi raised a hand at his red, smarting cheek, his lips quivered, and shutting his watery eyes he set off a heartbreaking wail.

Yern, for once forgetting the risk of being heard, took the boy in his arms and kissed his tears away, whispering a thousand contrite apologies. And when the sobbing subsided, he raised Yonfi, surprised by how heavy he’d got, and started slowly back, determined to carry him all the way while stroking his back and head and planting more remorseful kisses all over his face.

It was the smoke he saw first, rising from the woods like the black trail of death itself. And then, rushing ahead in mad, blind panic, Yern caught the horrible smell.

For some accursed sentry stationed near the burrow must have seen father and son emerge from the shrubs, and trying to smoke out anyone left at the bottom of the hole he’d set their cave on fire. And all Yern could do now was hope, *pray* that Yenka and Yofana, the love of his life and the apple of his eye, had perished from the smoke before they had time to feel the excruciating pain of being burned alive.

There was no one around, but even if there were, Yern didn’t care anymore. Half his heart urged him to run to the burrow, see if by some miracle it wasn’t too late, yet the other half dreaded to approach the unthinkable source of that smell.

It was all he could do not to crumble and die in misery, but though he hadn’t fully come to his senses—perhaps he never would—Yern knew he must protect his son, who was stubbornly dragging him towards his mother’s and sister’s corpses, asking why Papa was on his knees, was he tired, and what that nice smell was.

That nice smell! For in his childish goodness, poor Yonfi, orphaned and sisterless in one fell swoop, couldn’t conceive of the evil in the world, the horridness of man, and thus his empty stomach craved the tang of burnt flesh that wafted from the woods.

Ridding as best he could his mind from the agony that clouded it, Yern picked up Yonfi again, placed him upon his shoulders, and began to briskly walk away from the hole where a part of his heart, torn off and bleeding, would remain for as long as he lived.

“Papa!” Yonfi shouted at him, “Turn around! It’s the other way!”

A *lie*, Yern thought, and at once it was presented to him, like a beacon of hope: Yodren, his firstborn, the Spirits bless him; Yodren who was safe, who *must* be safe, and who could ensure the safety of his little brother.

“Remember how you always said you wanted to meet your big brother?” he said, trying to stop his voice from choking.

“Yodren?” Yonfi cried. “We’re going to see Yodren?”

“Yes, we are. You saw the smoke back there, didn’t you? Well, it was a signal your mother and I had agreed on. If, for any reason, they thought they weren’t safe

in our secret place anymore, they would set off for the Castle and light a fire so that we'd know not to go back but follow them, and meet up at the Castle's gates."

Yonfi mulled this over for a moment. Then, "Why weren't they safe?" he asked.

"Well..." Yern said, racking his brains for a reason, "...because of the bear."

"*The bear? What bear?*"

"Oh, in the night, while you and your sister were asleep, I heard a scraping from above, and looking up I saw the muzzle of a bear, who probably thought our hideaway was a rabbit nest, and was trying to make the hole wide enough to crawl through. Lucky for us, bears sleep during the day, but Mama said that if it came again we should leave, before the tunnel caved in and we got buried like earthworms. So I imagine this morning she came out and saw the bear sleeping nearby, and decided to take Yofana and head to the Castle, where Yodren lives and where we shall all be perfectly safe."

Yern's heart stung at the lie, for he knew that, if they survived and did reach the Castle, he'd be forced to deliver the awful truth to Yonfi like another slap, whose pain would never leave him. But for the moment the poor love seemed thoroughly convinced, bombarding him with questions about Yodren and Scribes and bears and the King and Queen and asking how soon they'd get there to meet Mama and Yofana and how come they didn't all go together. And even though after a while his back began to hurt from Yonfi's weight, Yern was grateful the boy couldn't see the tears that streaked his face, and confused the heaving of his stifled sobs with the bounce of his shoulders.

However, despite his devastation, Yern had to keep his promise, and make sure they weren't roaming blindly but were actually headed towards the Castle. From the last time he had traveled there, he recalled it was a two-day journey by horse (and thus possibly three or four times as long on foot) and that he'd been following the second moon as its roundness waned and gave way to the waxing of the third. And judging by the time of day and the shape of the moons, if they stayed on this path, at some point they'd see up ahead Mount Copper looming, and the edge of the deep dense forest that encircled the Castle—provided they weren't slain by the Scavengers in the meantime.

At first, even though he took care to make his way through the most overgrown and arboreous patches of the Northern Farmlands, sticking close to rivers they could dive in or rocks they could duck behind, Yern was constantly terrified of hearing the sounds of imminent bloodshed: the war cry, the galloping of horses, the whistling of an arrow. But it seemed that after showing them its cruellest face, Fate had at last relented, for no matter how hard and long he listened, nothing stirred, not even runaways like them. So after a while, to spare himself the exhaustion and satisfy Yonfi's curiosity, which prompted him to shriek, "*Look, Papa!*" every other moment, he agreed to let him run ahead if he promised he'd remain within sight and wouldn't chase after anything.

And then something very strange happened. As swiftly and unknowingly as he had handed his mother and sister over to their slayers, so now Yonfi seemed suddenly possessed of some profound knowledge of their surroundings, a wisdom, almost, though he had never been in this part of Feerien before. Urging his father to follow, he would lead him to brambles laden with fruit not merely edible but delicious, indicate trees in whose hollows they could rest while nibbling on the

mushrooms that grew on their bark, and communicate with the animals they encountered in a way so immediate and wondrous it bordered on the magical.

First it was a beautiful fawn, which, after nuzzling affectionately against Yonfi's extended hand, trotted slowly ahead and took them to a grove where lay the carcass of a grown deer (its mother?), fresh as if it had just succumbed to the Shy Death, on which father and son feasted heartily. This was followed by a groundhog that, upon emerging from its hole, instead of disappearing at their sight scurried over to Yonfi, sniffed his bare, earth-caked feet, and led them to a cavern formed by an eroded rock and the roots of a gigantic oak—where, snug on a thick layer of moss as if on actual bedding, they spent a peaceful, restorative night. And the morning after, while they crouched by a creek to drink and wash themselves, Yonfi was approached by an otter, followed it to a spot where the water deepened and ran beneath a bridge formed by the interwoven roots of two willows, and promptly returned with an armful of writhing trout, whose fishing not even he could explain. "They jumped right into my hands, Papa, like they *wanted* to be caught!" It was so odd, this bounty of nature revealed to them, that Yern decided it had to be the spirits of Yenka and Yofana watching over them—and so, his eyes welling with tears at their thought, he thanked them in a silent prayer.

Yet his belief in some such otherworldly force protecting them, and his blindly following Yonfi whichever way his tiny feet guided them to, after a while dulled Yern's alertness. And on the third morning of their wanderings, when the blanket of clouds obscuring the first three moons cleared, he saw to his great consternation that the hulking mass rising in the distance hadn't the brown-reddish hue of Mount Copper, but shone in the moonlight, as its name denoted, like gold.

He'd let himself get stupidly disoriented, which would cost them at least another week of walking along the Minelands, which Yern had never much liked, and liked even less now that they were said to be overrun with Scavengers after the precious metals that had been forever denied them. Of course, with a little more of the luck that had kept them safe thus far, they might chance upon one of the mines the Miners were hiding in, and even if they were unwilling to share their scant food and confined shelter with him, they would hopefully be kind enough to let Yonfi lay low amongst them.

And there was another possibility, remote though it seemed. For the Cave of the Seers was rumoured to reside somewhere between Mount Gold and Mount Silver. No one was certain exactly where that was, and there were even some who believed it could magically move from one place to another depending on who sought it, and whether he or she was truly needful of the Cave and worthy of conversing with the mind-reading Oracles. Could it be that Yonfi's peculiar intuition hadn't led them astray but in fact towards the fabled abode of the Seers, drawn by their power which many considered equal to the Spirits'? Well, one way or another, they would soon find out.

Though Yern could not imagine how terribly soon this would be.

The sixth moon had just set, and they were squatting under the overhanging roots of a great redwood, roasting chestnuts on a small fire, when they suddenly heard the sound Yern dreaded so: the canter of an approaching horse.

At once he turned to Yonfi with wide eyes and a finger to his lips, and gestured him to take cover inside the small wooden cage formed by the redwood's roots and the ground. Then he quickly put out the fire, though by now there was little chance that the rider of the horse hadn't noticed the smoke, and flattened himself on a bed of wet leaves, holding his breath although he felt the throb of his heart was louder than a drum.

Letting out a whinny, the horse came to a stop just behind the tree; Yern could hear the animal's breath. And then a voice, a woman's voice said,

"Where is that light coming from?"

Yern turned around, terrified that in his haste he'd missed some still-glowing ember, but saw none. Then another voice spoke; this time it was a man's voice, and to Yern's utmost confusion, the man sounded as scared as he—if not more.

"Who-whoever you are," he stuttered, "sh-show yourselves! The High Servant commands you, by order of King F-fazen! Show yourselves I say!"

So they weren't Scavengers. But before Yern could decide whether to obey or to grab Yonfi and flee to be safe, Yonfi had already snuck out of his hiding place, and was shouting, "Papa! Come see the strange Master and his Lady!"

That left him no choice, so he rose and came out of from behind the redwood, bowing his head and mumbling words of humility and supplication.

But when no further order came, and Yonfi was dragging him towards the horse and urging him to look, Yern at last raised his head and looked.

Never in his life had he set eyes on a stranger sight.

"But look how rosy his complexion is!"

"That is because you have him painted like a bloody buffoon!"

"Oh, my Lord, don't be silly! It's clear that Royen's ministrations have worked wonders."

The King grunted in scorn. "That worthless fool who's filling your empty head with lies? He should be put to the sword. One mouth less to feed."

"Hush, my Lord; we're at his presence. Pray do not anger him."

For a moment King Fazen seemed on the verge of fresh abuse, but then, stifling a grumble, he turned on his heels and stormed out of the dining hall.

"Don't mind your father," Queen Firalda said in a conspiratorial tone to the motionless man sitting at the other end of the grand table. "He's always been a stubborn man; but he loves you dearly, and soon he'll come around and accept the miracle."

The gaunt, hollow-eyed young man standing with his head respectfully lowered at the side of the Queen gently cleared his throat. "Will her Majesty be needing my services any further?"

The Queen turned to him, a bit startled, as if she'd forgotten he was there—for her eyes hardly left her still and silent fellow diner. But then she beamed at him.

"No, dear Royen; you are excused. Oh, and you can clear off my plate; I'm quite full." And she delicately nudged the dinner plate towards the young man.

"But, Your Majesty, you've barely touched your food!"

"I most certainly did; gluttony is unbecoming to a lady. Besides, how goes that saying? Ah, yes! *When the heart is full, the stomach knows no hunger.* And my heart is positively bursting, thanks to you, my darling Royen."

Queen Firalda had left the Cave of the Seers in a beatific state, her hands cradling the marvel of the glowing stone, whose silent wisdom she trusted completely. Fantyr, heart of her heart, would be restored to her safe and sound.

Thus when she and her escort crossed the Castle gates and saw the black banners of mourning rippling from the turrets of the Palace, and the people who had been about their business dropped on their knees at their sight till their heads touched the ground, the Queen, as surely as if a piece of glass had been shattered in her mind, knew.

She dismounted and walked to the burial chamber without listening or speaking to the sentries and ladies hanging their heads and murmuring condolences. The Prince lay atop his marble tomb for the mourners to pay their respects; he was covered with a gold-embroidered shroud and surrounded by a sea of wilting, pungent flowers. Queen Firalda noticed nothing; she merely strode to the corpse of her son, took his sword that had been placed across his chest, and holding it with its blade upturned she fell on it—or she would have, hadn't one of the guards caught her in time.

King Fazen, informed about her act of despair-born madness, had the windows of her bedchamber walled at once, and while she was restrained, flailing and wailing and cursing everyone who wouldn't let her die, a Scribe Healer poured a powerful sleeping draught down her throat. The Queen slept for two days and two nights, and when she finally awoke she hadn't the least desire to end her life.

For in her sleep the glowing stone had spoken, and told her that all was not lost, and that Fantyr could be saved, reclaimed from the clutches of death by a magus who lived in the Castle. In fact it had been one of the handmaids attending her slumber, who, while the Queen briefly hovered on the brink of wakefulness, had been gossiping to the guard, her secret paramour, about a Divinator the King had ordered to be confined to the Scriptorium, and who rumours said might be Royen the Eternal.

So upon awakening, her smile and obvious joy alarming her maids as further signs of lunacy, Queen Firalda asked that the body of her son be brought to her, along with a change of his finest clothes and the most gifted seamstress of the Palace.

First, the seamstress attached Fantyr's head to his torso by sewing the skin flaps and the underlying flesh together with thick white thread. Then the handmaids came, and after bathing the Prince with sponges dipped in rose water, they dressed him in the regalia that had been fashioned long ago, and kept in pristine condition, for his rite of coronation, the ruffled collar concealing the stitches on his throat. A slight difficulty occurred with the Prince's eyes, which refused to stay open, but it was overcome by the industrious seamstress, who, using a gossamer filament, sewed the lids to the underside of his brows. Finally, the Queen, gently applying her own face powder, gave Fantyr's face a lifelike rosiness. And then she called for the Scribe.

When he first stepped into her bedchamber, looking harassed and fearful, and falling to his knees he avowed that he wasn't Royen the Eternal, Queen Firalda was a little dismayed. And yet, when obeying her instructions he placed his shaking hand on the Prince's heart, she could swear that, for a fleeting moment, Fantyr's pale blue eyes—so similar to the magical stone it amazed her she hadn't

noticed the likeness – twinkled with the spark of life. It might take time, she told herself, and perhaps her beloved boy might never be the same, but who could return from the dead entirely unaffected?

And so began the Queen's passionate relationship with her son, which saddened and embarrassed her servants, exasperated the King, and terrified the sorcerous Scribe. There was no separating her from the unresponsive puppet everyone except herself saw as such. In the mornings she attended, often on her own, to his ablutions and dressing, and after they breakfasted in her bedchamber, where no one could listen to their private chat—even though Queen Firalda did most of the talking, while Fantyr responded with imperceptible nods and slight flickers of his beautiful face—they went for a long stroll around the Palace gardens, the Prince carried in a chair by four strong bearers. This was followed by an afternoon nap, in the Queen's own grand, four-poster bed, because her poor baby tired very easily, and needed to replenish his budding vigour; these hours she'd spend lying on her side and watching Fantyr sleep (with a silk mask covering his never-closing eyes), her own eyes trained on the weak yet clear rise and fall of his chest. And once the sixth moon started to set, she had the Prince transported to the dining hall, where, after Royen performed his magic, they would have a quiet dinner. At first Queen Firalda was worried by her son's lack of appetite, but then he'd always eaten like a bird, a trait possibly heightened by his still-frail constitution. However, she wouldn't allow his leftover food to be consumed by anyone; she didn't care if it was wasteful, or if there were people dying of starvation in the Castle, but she always had it thrown away; no one would fill their belly with the future King of Feerien's meal. (And as for those desperate enough to rifle through the rubbish, well, what can one expect of animals?)

The happiest time by far, thought, came at night, when the Queen and her son would lie next to each other in the quiet haven of the bed as if they were the only people in the world. These precious nights were so reminiscent of that loveliest of times, when Fantyr was an infant, falling deeply asleep at her side moments after nursing, it was all the lovestruck mother could do not to remove her son's nightshirt and cradle his head in the cleft of her bosom. What she did instead—for it was impossible to not touch him at all—was run her hand across his face and chest, carefully so as not to disturb his much-needed sleep, and shiver with delight at the warmth his skin gave off, as sure a sign of life as any. Oh, if only she could make him small again, enough to fit inside her womb! She'd given life to him once, and was convinced she could do it again.

But she shouldn't be ungrateful. Fantyr was back, and besides her own adoring care he was receiving the exclusive attention of a miracle-working Immortal. And she had the magic stone, which she never parted with, its warm light like the gaze, the sweet and tender gaze of her beloved son, its silence filled with the softness of his voice.

The poor woman was starving herself to death, Yodren thought, nonetheless sucking with a shiver of delight the marrow out of a braised veal shank. Her once pretty face had sunk into itself so terribly it resembled a thinly-fleshed skull, while her dainty, lilac-scented skin had turned an unhealthy shade of yellow, and was stretched here and there by protruding bones. Worst of all were her eyes, sunken

and rimmed by wrinkled, bruised-looking circles, an effect made even more harrowing by how often they shone with unadulterated bliss over her pitiful delusion. It caused Yodren enormous guilt, his flagrant impersonation of Royen the Eternal, and yet he felt so sorry for the Queen, he hadn't the heart to crush her fragile fallacy when it brought her so much joy. And the fact that, even though still sequestered, he openly enjoyed the favour of Queen Firalda, had in more ways than one saved his life. If it weren't for her unflinching belief in his deception, the King would doubtless have had him dispatched; and the generous offer of her rich, delicious food, no matter how regrettable its procurement, was a gift that Yodren couldn't deny – not when food was so dreadfully scarce that even other Scribes, not by far the most undernourished denizens of the Castle, cast envious glances at the dishes he carried upon returning from the daily perpetration of his sham. All in all, the Queen's madness, though sad, had been a veritable Spirit-send.

But if the food was enough to stave off his hunger, it did nothing to diminish his profound fear and worry over a matter Yodren thought so unsafe, he didn't even dare think of it too much, lest by some mysterious way it be disclosed.

Because on that fateful morning, before the King summoned him and demanded that he demonstrate a superhuman strength he clearly didn't possess, and before the decapitated corpse of the Prince arrived and confirmed his apprehension, Yodren had just deciphered part of a prophecy that had been resisting him for long. It once more spoke of Royen, and how he would lead the war against some 'grimy tribe' that would try to invade the sole standing kingdom—and Yodren had quite frankly had enough of this mythical saviour that only utter fools could possibly believe in, when, as he was about to swipe the parchments away in disgust, the last line of the text shimmered and became a name, a name he knew all too well and which he never once left out of his prayers.

Yet still it was more with weariness and irritation than with actual alarm that he once again bent over the parchment and reread the prophecy's conclusion.

And this time he did feel the cold hand of dread seizing him till he gasped—for the last two words, *Yonfi Kobold*, weren't written in the quicksilvery letters of the Divine Language, but in all Feeres' plain mother tongue, as if the prediction was so unerring it had made the very ink settle, revealing without the least doubt his little brother's name.

At that exact moment Harfien had knocked on his door, making him jump, and when he entered to deliver King Fazen's urgent summons he looked even more pale and fretful than usual. Luckily, Yodren had still had time to thrust the telltale parchment in the pocket of his robe before turning to face the Head Divinator, but Harfien's flitting glance and obvious edginess made him wonder whether he, too, had come upon some unmistakable proof of Yonfi's fabulous bequest, a fact which Yodren himself was still unable to wrap his head around. *Yonfi?* Six-year old Yonfi was Royen the *Eternal?*

As it turned out, Harfien had been distressed by a prophecy quite similar to his, concerning the Castle's invasion by 'muck people', though fortunately it didn't mention Royen at all. However, even as they climbed down the Scriptorium's winding stairs, Yodren, following behind, had stuck his hand in his pocket and torn the old parchment to shreds; it was a grave transgression to destroy a

document, especially an ancient one written in the language of the Spirits, but Yodren simply couldn't risk it.

And then the dire events had swept them all up in a whirl of terror. When he had crept down the Palace stairs and come upon the horrible scene—the King down on his knees, holding up Prince Fantyr's head while the flattened crowd around him heaved and wailed and butted their heads on the cobbles—Yodren thought, I'm as good as dead. For once the King recalled that he was supposed to be Royen, raiser of the dead, he'd surely order him to somehow attach the Prince's head to his body and stir him back to life; great grief could breed madness, and when Yodren failed to perform this miracle, as he surely would, King Fazen would have him executed on the spot.

But, horrible though it seemed to call such carnage fortunate, Yodren had been spared because the King's madness was too ferocious to be quelled by the death of just one man. Cradling the head of his son in the crook of his arm, he rose unsteadily to his feet, drew his sword, and while his subjects were too distraught and terrified to react, he let out a roar of wrath and began to bring down the long sharp heavy blade on the heads, necks, shoulders, backs, torsos, arms and legs of the men, women and children around him. It was as if his fury, despite his paunch and the fact that he had never been to war, had transformed him into a score of savage warriors. The guards rushed to his aid, kicking people away to spare their lives and stop them from fighting back and hurting their liege, but no one dared lay a finger on the howling King, who kept striking blindly, till he was drenched in blood from head to toe and there was nothing left to attack but a still or faintly-moving mass of mutilated bodies, too weak to even scream in pain.

Praying that his drab Scribe's robes would make him inconspicuous among the people who'd leapt to their feet at the first spray of blood that hit them, Yodren had run to the Scriptorium, and instead of going to his cell where he could be found and dragged back to the Palace, he stole into the deep dark cellar where the Scribes kept their casks of wine and ale, great sacks filled with flour and wheat, and clay vats of honey. He was horrified by the King's rabid brutality – he'd slain small children as if swatting gnats—and appalled by the fact that not one person had stood up to him, let alone responded in kind, though they'd been probably as petrified as he; after all, here he was, hiding like a rat between the sacks. In the event, he had kept up this rat-like existence, nibbling on wheat and honey and sucking wine straight from the barrel, until Celes the Head Scribe came looking for him, shouting earsplittingly as always because of his deafness.

"*There you are!*" the old man bellowed, even though the fact was plain enough as they stood less than a yard from each other. "You are to present yourself at the Palace!"

Those moments, as he padded across the darkening marketplace, convinced that he was walking towards an agonizing death, were the worst moments in Yodren's life; so when the chambermaid awaiting him at the Palace gates, a girl even younger than he and twice as skittish, lead him wordlessly to the dimly-lit dining hall, where the Queen was having a quiet if one-sided conversation with the luxuriously bedecked corpse of Prince Fantyr, Yodren's relief and astonishment had been so sudden and profound, he'd nearly broken out in laughter. Oh, yes! Of *course* he was Royen the Eternal! Touch the Prince's heart? Why, it was his

privilege and pleasure! If it pleased Her Majesty, he'd gladly feed His Majesty the Prince a chunk of his own flesh! Anything to stay alive!

But now he knew; he was shaken and astounded and not a little doubtful, but in his heart of hearts, in that place where love resides, along with the living ghosts of our beloveds, Yodren knew that the prophecy didn't lie. The fate of Feerien was in the tiny hands of his little brother, who most likely was unaware of his daunting legacy. Because a day or two after what came to be known as 'the King's wrath', reports began to inundate the Castle, speaking of the Scavengers' sudden, bloody rampage, that no force seemed able to withstand. The '*filthy tribe*', the '*muck people*' were upon them.

And now this. *Little Yonfi*. The darling boy whose face he didn't know, whose hair he'd never tousled, the brother he hadn't held lovingly in his arms outside of dreams, was Royen.

Did that mean that the rest of them—Father and Mother and sweet Yofana—were safer? Or would Yonfi's powers, because of his youth and the playfulness of boys, attract the attention of the killer hordes? (For even if he did reluctantly accept that his brother was the actual incarnation of so much extravagant folklore, Yodren couldn't quite see a mere child pitted against an army he could vanquish on his own).

However, and even though the thought of his family wandering the Farmlands, scared and hungry, plagued him and robbed him of his sleep, Yodren knew that no one must ever find out the truth about Yonfi. And it wasn't only that such a revelation would make the Queen cast him out as an impostor, and earn him the excruciating death the King was more than eager to mete out; Yodren would readily give up his own life for the boy's. For what if the hero of fables was no more than a fable himself? What if Yonfi was unable to bring the Prince back to life? Would anyone's life be spared then?

Yodren didn't think so. He had always thought King Fazen a dull-witted man, cruel and vindictive, but after his latest atrocity, (no matter how the cowardly Castle-dwellers tried to justify their monarch's gross injustice as part of the same pitiless fate they bowed their heads to) Yodren would rather die a thousand grisly deaths before letting the King lay his filthy hands on Yonfi. And to this purpose, claiming that he needed to study the legends of the hero whose destiny and deeds he must fulfill, he had the other Divinators hand over to him every text telling of Royen even in passing; and during his sleepless nights and long, idle days, he would peruse the obscure documents, seeking his brother's and family's names—but even when he found no mention or hint, he still kept at it, for the Divine Language couldn't be trusted to not change from one moment to the next.

Thus now, licking his fingers clean and wishing that, like a dog, he could eat the bones as well, Yodren looked despairingly at the stack of books and parchments on his desk, repelled by the prospect of spending yet another night reading about how Royen could subdue dragons and dethrone wicked kings and venture into the heart of winter naked as his mother bore him.

Oh, what he wouldn't give to be with his family! Even in these darkest of times, with throngs of Scavengers hot on their trail, their love would be the balm he so needed, the bliss he so desperately craved! What good was being safe if you couldn't protect the ones your heart ached for? Come to that, what good was the

'gift' of reading if all it got you was a locked cell and knowledge which frightened you more than it soothed you?

It was this bleak frame of mind that led Yodren's steps to the narrow window of his cell, his worn-out mind's sole release when he wasn't at the Palace deceiving the Queen or at his desk scrutinizing ancient ramblings. Not that it had much to offer in way of a view; the rear of the Scriptorium, where his cell was, looked out on the sea, as well as, whenever they chose to surface, on the Drowning Isles. Luckily, Yodren could enhance this rather uninspiring seascape thanks to a spyglass smuggled out of old Celes' quarters and slipped to him by Harfien, "*to pass the time,*" as he'd said, oddly blushing.

Yet the spyglass wasn't the extent of Harfien Griff's recent kindness towards him, a fact Yodren felt grateful for even if he couldn't quite explain it. For one thing, he was almost certain that Harfien, by far the most diligent Divinator, knew about Yonfi, but for some unfathomable reason had decided to keep this knowledge secret rather than share it with the King and Queen, who would surely and generously reward such a display of loyalty. Moreover, Harfien was the only Scribe who didn't seem to begrudge him the Queen's favour, not once staring at his plate of leftovers or raising a scornful brow, as did many, when they crossed paths on the stairs. And when the time came for the door of his cell to be locked for the night, Harfien, who alone had assumed the task, looked ashamed of it, as if it were he who had ordered Yodren's confinement, keeping his pale eyes fixed on the floor and murmuring "Good night" in the voice of a child who has been chastized so many times he mistrusts his own trusting nature. (And there was something more, some intangible quality to the rare moments when Harfien, thinking himself unseen, would cast a furtive glance at him, filled with a longing Yodren could feel even without fully grasping it, similar perhaps to the urge, never indulged in by himself, that drove other Scribes to seek the company of whores).

The final moonset had left the sky a deepening violet; soon it would be dark, and Yodren, sighing at the vagaries of life, stood before the window and gazed through the spyglass at the slowly vanishing view.

All three isles were visible, a peculiar thing; they usually seemed as though shy or afraid of one another, surfacing only when the other two were sinking or about to. But in the last light Yodren could discern the three jagged peaks, and the—

Wait. Didn't the middle one look somewhat taller? Stepping closer to the vertical aperture, Yodren trained his eye on the Drowning Isles. And, sure enough, the one in the middle was taller. But that wasn't all that was strange about it.

At first he'd thought it was his own exhausted mind making him see things that weren't there. Yet now, rubbing at his eyes, he looked again, and drew a sharp breath of surprise.

A fountain of fiery sparks gushed from the second island's peak.

Veig Treth paced at the entrance of the cave, his heart gripped alternately by anger and terror, self-loathing and despair. Every now and then, some sudden sound—the hoot of an owl, a fox rustling through the undergrowth—made him jump, yelp and take cover behind a bush that grew next to the cave's mouth, a bush which (as if things weren't rotten enough) was filled with big sharp thorns that got caught in his vestments and pricked him all over like a pin cushion. Yet

despite the pain he couldn't risk it, for what if one of those swishes and crackles wasn't a nocturnal beast but a Scavenger scout?

That was why he hadn't yet lit the lamp, even though he dreaded the dark. Of course he could enter the cave, as his mission decreed, which would be a far better hiding place than the accursed bush—but Veig also feared what might lurk in its yawning depths.

What incensed him most, however, was that he had only himself to blame. For if it weren't for his insatiable, stupid ambition, he wouldn't be here now, his life hanging in the balance between an army of savages and mind-reading freaks from another world.

Things had already begun to unravel when that effeminate fool had come home minus a foolish head. Veig had observed the entire scene and its gory conclusion from the window of his chambers atop the Spirit Home, cringing behind the thick red drapes and praying that someone would seize that idiot of a King before he butchered all of his pathetic, dimwitted subjects. And when at last the corpses had been dragged away from the pools of blood that had gathered among the cobbles, and a pair of burly guards was stealthily advancing towards Fazen, just as Veig thought the whole beastly fit was over—not that it hadn't an upside; less useless mouths in these lean times—the King had taken him and the guards by surprise, whirling around and delivering a fatal blow to both men, who fell to their knees, choking and clutching their blood-gushing throats, and then, with a fresh roar of rage (would he *never* tire?) he charged at the Spirit Home. Luckily for the High Servant, at the time the Home was empty of worshipers, and its sturdy doors were shut and barred from the inside, but that didn't halt the King's insane attack; still yelling, he hacked at the doors with his sword, kicked them and pummelled them with his fists, and even butted his blood-soaked head against them, till Veig was so terrified that the mad King would succeed, and then rush to his chambers to slay him for the Spirits' failure to watch over Fantyr, he felt his anus painfully constrict around a haemorrhoid that had been pestering him for weeks.

In the end the use of his head as a battering ram seemed to disorient the King, for after staggering a bit, he took one final swipe with the sword and collapsed face-down. But even though Veig's life had been spared for the moment, that had been merely the beginning of his troubles, and of the ill fortune that had ultimately brought him, in the black of night, to this remote, unnerving corner of Feerien.

Early the next day he'd been brutally awakened—kicked out of bed by the hard boot of a guard—and hauled to the Palace to officiate at the Prince's funeral rites, his groggy mind striving to recall the exact sequence of inanities while through the corner of his eye he kept a fearful watch on the defeated King who slumped on his throne, lest he suddenly recover his murderous vigour and dice him into pieces like a turnip. And after the ordeal was over with no dicing, and Veig Treth dragged his weary steps back home, dreaming of locking himself in his room, drinking as much wine as was humanly possible without dying and then falling into the sweet oblivion of sleep, he found the Spirit Home invaded by a host of people who implored him to intervene on behalf of the loved ones they had lost to the King's massacre, men and women pulling their hair and gnashing their teeth and wailing and clawing at him like famished beggars.

The High Servant, by then already thoroughly repulsed by his vocation, had spent an interminable day muttering prayers and blessings, and reassuring the unwashed bereaved that their relatives were basking in the warm light of the afterlife bestowed upon the virtuous by the Spirits. And when at long last he was allowed to stumble up to his bedchamber and let the horrors of the past two days be snuffed out like a candle's flame, Veig dreamt that all was well again, going so far as to imagine (for his ambition knew no sleep) that with Fantyr dead, he would manage to regain the King's trust and slyly ascend to the status of successor to the throne. And in his slumber he grinned.

Little did he know that the grin of self-aggrandizement would be once and for all wiped off his face. For in the course of the following days, while Velius and his army ransacked the Farmlands and the Minelands, unbeknownst to the Castle whose means of sustenance they cut off one by one, people began to sense that things were seriously amiss—an apprehension that was soon confirmed, when no cart or dray would pass the expectantly open gates, an absence brutally felt once the sixth moon set and households all over the Castle had no food to replenish them and no coals to warm them.

It was only natural then that, having no one else to blame for the cold and the hunger and the toll it took on themselves and their whimpering children—not even the King, for despite the luxuries of the Palace, its residents too relied on the wagons that no longer arrived—the Castle folk turned on the Spirits, their aloof and inscrutable punishers, and on Their earthly middlemen, who had failed to warn them.

And though most Spirit Servants of lesser rank were all too glad and quick to slink away from the people's growing fury, Veig Treth could hardly deny responsibility when he was the one supposed to have the Spirits' ear. Overnight, the believers' abject beseeching turned to outright hostility. People began to abuse him in the market, some even spitting at him; children threw rocks at the Spirit Home's windows and snuck into his quarters to steal his valuables and leave piles of excrement on his pillow. The High Servant was terrified, even fearing for his life, but no matter how many appeals he sent to the King, entreating his protection, they were all met with the same stony silence.

In the throes of utter desperation, Veig decided to plead his case to the Queen, who rumours said was ecstatically happy if stark raving mad. And Queen Firalda, having grown generous and merciful ever since her son had been brought back from the dead, consented to grant him an audience—for after all he was a representative of the Spirits who had been so charitable towards her.

"They have spoken to me, you know," she had said, looking up at him with her moist, luminous eyes. "Well, not exactly spoken, but showed Themselves—They made a rock produce milk! Sweet, warm milk, as from a mother's breast!"

"I'm certain They did, Your Majesty," Veig mumbled noncommittally, keeping his head down to avoid the ghastly sight of the Prince's primped-up corpse, upon whose stuck-together lips crawled a big, revolting blowfly. He felt like being sick.

"And they also gave me this," the Queen went on, and showed him a stone she'd been clenching in her fist. "Look how it glows! It's Spirit magic, plain as day!"

Veig merely nodded without looking; this was getting him nowhere. And then, just as he was brooding that things couldn't get any worse, they suddenly did.

“I know what you must do!” Queen Firalda exclaimed, bringing down her rock-clenching fist on the table and making him start. “You must go seek Their advice and assistance yourself! I’m sure They’d listen to someone of your eminence and faith!”

Now Veig Treth, who never had a grain of faith in his heart and who had lately come to hate his eminence, would rather poke his eyes out with a smoldering iron than travel all the way to the Cave of the Seers while Feerien was under attack by hordes of man-eating heathens. Moreover, although his faithlessness extended to all supposedly ‘otherworldly’ entities (as if the world wasn’t cruel enough without their retribution), he reserved some doubt as to the exact nature of the Cave, and what transpired within it. In all likelihood the Seers were figments of minds as greatly disturbed as the Queen’s, sheer inventions of the desperate, but over the years Veig had heard many Scribes—whom he regarded as his intellectual equals despite the uselessness of their scribblings—talk of those strange creatures, who never lasted long enough to be brought out of the Cave, but nonetheless wielded great power over your mind, so great, some claimed, that to be in their presence could rob you of your senses forever. And though the death of her son had been most likely what had driven Queen Firalda mad, listening to her as she harped on about milk-welling rocks and magic stones, Veig couldn’t help wondering whether it had been her visit to the Cave of the Seers that had left her in this pitiable state, having dinner with Fantyr’s carrion while flies were laying eggs inside his mouth.

However, his fate had been decided, for the Queen suddenly got it in her head that the High Servant, by far the most appropriate and gifted in communing with the Spirits, might bring back from the Cave something even more miraculous than an enchanted stone—perhaps a Seer in the flesh, whose powers, up close, could further heal her poor boy who sometimes looked so lost in thought and melancholy. And so,

“I’ll have his Majesty order preparations for your journey at once!” she said, and before Veig could utter a word of disagreement, she bolted from the table and left him in the dining room, in the sickening company of the Prince’s cadaver; although, thinking of the dreadful venture that had been forced upon him, and which quite possibly might end in his own corpse being dismembered, disemboweled and devoured, Veig couldn’t help envying for a moment the eternity of calm into which Fantyr had vanished.

He’d had barely enough time to pack for the journey when he was summoned to the Castle’s gates. The fourth moon had set, but it was still light enough to appease his fears, and as he made his way across the emptying marketplace, Veig, by force of habit, had once again indulged in a flight of fancy: he could bribe the men of his escort with some of the gold he had saved for a bind just like this, and instead of going all the way to the Cave—which would be asking to be ambushed and slain—they’d seek out the Scavengers themselves, offering, along with the rest of the gold, to defect to their side and help them seize the throne of Feerien, if they would vouchsafe their security. Sure, it would be a heinous act of treason which, provided the barbarians didn’t butcher them on sight, would probably result in the obliteration of the Castle and its dwellers, but Veig Treth was a man who put his life above the lives of all mankind; he was also quite intelligent, enough to sense that the balance of power had been upended. Any day now the Castle folk would

begin to succumb to the famine, and the same would apply to the King's small, depleted army; and having no allies, how could they possibly defend themselves against a well-fed, bloodlusting legion? No, Veig would make sure that, before the war that was imminent broke out, his lot would be cast with the victors.

And then he reached the gates and his traitorous fantasy crumbled in a single stroke—for instead of the four-horse carriage and the armed and mounted escort he'd been expecting, there stood before him an old, black, mangy mare, with a filthy pile of sackcloth in the place of a proper saddle, and, hanging from a sheath across her flank, a sword so tarnished and blunt that even if he'd been a master swordsman (which he was most definitely not; carving knives were the closest thing to a weapon he had ever held) he could inflict with it as much injury as with a willow switch or a sprig of rosemary.

So this was King Fazen's revenge, his final act of resentment and scorn: sending him to his death unarmed and on the back of a dying horse. Then a gruff voice spoke out of thin air, startling the edgy High Servant.

"She'll have to graze, poor old girl," said the voice, which belonged to a wizened, toothless old man who stank of horse dung. "King's orders. Can't spare the hay; there's hardly enough to go around in the stables. Oh, and one more thing," he added, stepping over and handling the worn, frayed reins to Veig. "King's orders too."

That I must copulate with the horse and breed? Veig wondered bitterly.

"You must return with at least one living Seer," the old man said, mashing his shrunken jaws around the words. "Or don't dare return at all."

And yet the Spirits he'd never believed in had showed him a scrap of mercy in his time of ineffable misery. For one thing, the mare had clearly made the trip to the Cave of the Seers before, and seemed to know the way—which Veig could never have found on his own; and for another, the beast's dull black coat, the same as his hooded cape, made them practically invisible so long as they kept close to dark, wooded areas.

But after an uneventful day and a half, which had brought them to the foot of a slope of bare black rock, the horse came to a halt and refused to budge despite Veig's pulling sharply at the reins and kicking at her flanks. It was clear that he would have to go the rest of the way on his own, and in the end, shaking with tiredness and fear (for the last two moons had set together, ushering a premature night) he'd done just that.

And here he was now, caught between surges of dread as strong as ropes pulling him this way and that. Because what if he did overcome his fear of the Seers and went looking after them and found the Cave empty? What would become of him then, banished from the Castle with two days' worth of rations, a sickly horse that could neither gallop nor be traded, in an unfamiliar land overrun by ferocious warriors?

Oh, if only he could sacrifice his years of hectic rising for the life of the most wretched beggar living in the Castle's vilest corner!

It was while he wallowed in this state of self-lament that the screams erupted from the Cave, so sudden and piercing they were indistinguishable from his own.

III

They had never felt, could never conceive of, such terror. Even when they were struggling not to drown—and hoping they wouldn't dissolve—in the Sacred River's milk, it had at least been a familiar terror, one they had witnessed before and which was part of the world they'd been born to.

But when, drawn by the amiable look of their reflections, they had crossed the shimmering sheet and found themselves in total darkness (for somehow Gallan had lost the glowstone he was holding), whose cold, thick air was fraught with odors they had never smelled before—when, in short, they realized that, just as their Makers had warned them years ago, by entering the Mirror Mountain they'd been expelled from Lurien forever, they instantly became as beasts, howling and beating their fists against the unseen wall of rock into which the shining threshold had disappeared.

Then they heard a voice calling, "Is anyone there?" over and over.

And although, with each repetition of the call, the voice sounded more fearful, Gallan and Raddia hushed at once, gripping each other and shuddering with fright – for who knew what the creature whose voice they heard looked like, and what harm it might be able to inflict on them?

However, the moment the creature fell silent, a faint, wavering glow appeared in the distance, and straining their ears they heard the scrape of approaching footsteps. Whatever it was, it was coming towards them, so holding back their dread they thought in unison, hoping their voices would sound somewhat commanding, *Stop! Don't come any closer! Don't make us hurt you! Turn around and begone! Begone! BEGONE!*

And for all their hopelessness the trick worked, and powerfully.

"No!" the voice called, now clearly filled with panic. "Forgive me, O most noble Seers, for disturbing your peace! Don't drive me mad! Spare this humblest of wretches!"

So Gallan and Raddia advanced, slowly at first, and then, sensing the fierceness of the creature's fear in the muddle of its thoughts, with growing confidence.

It was a man, down on his knees, with his head touching the floor of the cave and his hands crossed before him. Next to him stood a plain lamp, shedding yellow light. From what little they could see, he didn't appear either monstrous or much different from any grown Lurienite, except from his hair and garments, which were both the same deep uncolour, and the fact that he wore no gloves.

Looking at his bent, shaking body Raddia felt almost sorry for him.

Don't fear, she said. *We mean no harm.*

But the man shrieked again, curling up into an even smaller ball and imploring them to take pity on his misery and spare his poor, frail, stupid mind.

It was their mind's voice that terrified him so, the way their words reached him without their opening their mouth; so as well as pitiful and frightened he was primitive.

"Fear not," she said. "We shan't hurt you. Stand up so we can see each other."

Still shaking and heaving with sobs of fear, the man obeyed. He was as big and tall as they; his skin was dark, as were his gleaming eyes, but other than that his features were those of a regular face, if one contorted by horror. Did they perhaps,

and their own pure whiteness, seem hideous to him? Was that why he bowed his head so deeply?

“Thank you, O most majestic Oracles...” he muttered near inaudibly. “May the Spirits whose eminent agents you are, show equal lenience to my fellow Feeres.”

Gallan and Raddia stared at him blankly; so many strange words! What could he possibly mean? But when, mistaking their silence for displeasure, he went on, calling them glorious Seers and mighty Oracles and Emissaries of the Spirits, Gallan raised his hand, a gesture that made the man fall silent at once, and bow his head till his chin touched his chest.

“We know not of the things you speak of,” he said in a level, non-threatening voice. “We are neither noble nor glorious—far from it; we are but outcasts of our world, a pair of Mates not pure enough to become Makers.”

The man raised his head a bit, a frown of puzzlement creasing his brow, but then resumed his air of servility, saying, “Be that as it may, please know that you shall always have the gratitude of your most humble servant, Veig Treth.”

“You have two names?” Raddia said. “Why is that?”

Again a look of bafflement rippled across the man’s face, and there was disbelief in his glance. “Because,” he said, “one name was given me by my mother, and the other by my father. Does that—appear odd to you? Is it not the same in your... world?”

“No,” Gallan said. “Lurienites have but one name, which they utter themselves at the time of their Surfacing. I am Gallan, and this is my Mate, Raddia.”

“And our Makers, in turn, were Lorn and Navva. They died,” Raddia said.

This time the twice-named man’s bewilderment was so great, he raised his head, stared at them, and with trembling lips, as if he were afraid of offending them he asked, “Forgive my denseness but—you mean to say you’re Mates born to the same Makers?”

“Yes,” Gallan said. “This has been the way of our realm forever.”

Veig Treth stared at them some more, and then, lowering his head, he buried his face in his hands—in sadness? disappointment? Raddia listened to his thoughts.

“What is a bloody inbred?” she said.

What a strange world this Feerien was!

When they made their timid way to the mouth of the Cave, where Veig Treth awaited them holding his lamp, and stepping out they saw the abyss of uncolour gaping as far as the eye could see, Gallan and Raddia were too fearful to proceed—but after they explained the cause for their reluctance to Veig Treth, he laughed heartily and told them that the thing they’d lived in dread of, thinking it a sign of grave impurity, was in fact a colour among many, named black, which, besides being prevalent in all of Feerien, was completely harmless to see and touch. And recalling the fruits they had consumed beyond the Mists, and the dark-furred animal’s kindness, Raddia first and then Gallan took a few more steps, gazed at the black sky that was scattered with shiny specks called stars, and removing their gloves they touched the black rock—and nothing happened to their Substance. This might be a world of touch but it wasn’t deadly, at least not immediately.

So down the slope they followed Veig Treth and the light of his lamp, and once on level ground they heard a soft breath and saw, emerging from the midst of trees and bushes, another strange beast, tall and black (how quickly had their fear of the uncolour dwindled once it'd been given a proper name!) and instantly submissive to their presence—for the moment it saw them, the animal went down on its forelegs, waiting for them to climb on its back, as Veig Treth explained. And so they did, and although when the beast stood up they were afraid, they could feel in its every breath and movement that it was a gentle creature, whose only wish was to carry them safely ahead. It was called a horse, (and also a mare, which meant it was female) and after they'd been bumping up and down on her back for a while, with Veig Treth rushing and panting in their wake, they began to enjoy the ride so greatly they briefly forgot they were aliens in an alien world.

Though before long they had to check their enjoyment, for poor Veig Treth had fallen behind and was breathlessly calling at them to stop, wait for him; and no sooner had Gallan taken hold of the horse's—reins?—that the kindly creature halted with a shake of her handsome head. There was no room for all of them to ride together, so they agreed to continue on foot, all the while showering Veig Treth with questions. There were so many things they knew nothing about, so many new peculiar words to try their minds and mouths around! It was as if they were little again, listening to this man of *Feerien*, whose manner towards them had changed quite a bit since they had met in the Cave, and was now reminiscent of Navva's air of impatience and disappointment, as if he, too, had been expecting more and better of them.

They'd feel horribly ignorant and ashamed of how little they knew, if this fresh knowledge weren't so utterly fascinating. For instance, as Veig Treth told them in a weary voice, they weren't—and *should never be*—Mates, for they were *siblings, brother and sister*, and to have bred would have been an appalling sin, which meant that their unwillingness to merge Substances, unthinkable by the values of Lurien, was in fact a great virtue called *morality*. (Gallan and Raddia had some trouble grasping the precise meaning of vague concepts like this, but what they didn't get from their guide's words they gleaned from the unspoken wealth of his thoughts, which they delved in very gently so as not to disturb his mind). But there were also as many, if not more, childishly simple words and things, which Veig Treth had a hard time explaining to them without grinning or bursting into outright laughter of derision. Surely they jest! They didn't know what *water* was? Or a gold coin engraved with the likeness of a king wearing a *crown*? And did they really believe that to have normal, coloured eyes, was a sign of *impurity*?

Yet their respective realms were not without their similarities, which grew even more pronounced as the three of them conversed about the grave misfortunes that had recently befallen them, and the doom they might be heralding. Apparently, just like the surge of fruitless matings and suicides that had afflicted Lurien, disturbing the natural circle of life and death and raising questions as to the purity of the Mates' Substance and even that of the Sacred River, so had *Feerien* been plagued by this Shy Death, whose growth and advance posed an equal threat to the survival of the *Feeres*. Moreover, these ill omens were thought to be ushering greater calamities, if not the complete destruction of both Spheres: Lurien's sky had already been invaded by that spreading black hole, while the

people of Feerien dreaded the reappearance of something called Seventh Moon, which could obliterate every living thing once and for all. At that point their discourse strayed to the subject of higher powers, beings capable of creating worlds and tearing them asunder at will. Gallan and Raddia suggested the legend of the Ghosts, but Veig Treth dismissed it with a wave of his hand, ("There's no such thing as ghosts," he said) and as they sat down in a clearing for a brief repose, he told them about these almighty Spirits, Whose supreme Servant he was, and how, despite the believers' earnest prayers, They seemed to have withdrawn Their grace, and abandoned them to the mercy of an army of deplorable brutes called *Scavengers*.

These sounded a lot like Faults, so Gallan told Veig Treth—or *High Servant*, as he clearly preferred to be called—about the one that had murdered their Maker (*father*) Lorn, and how easy it had been to bend his lesser Substance with their own.

"Really?" said he, though it wasn't so much a question as an expression, his first since they'd met, of admiration, coupled with an underlying motive that Raddia picked up behind the sparkle of interest (or self-interest) in his eyes. *If this is true*, he thought, *and they can do the same with those revolting savages, I might win my way back into the King's good graces. These two might be dim as the night, but they might prove useful after all.*

Raddia was indignant, and would very much like to cut into the High Servant's thoughts in a loud mind voice to recall to him of their vast superiority, but instead she and Gallan were suddenly offered a chance to give their guide a display he wouldn't soon forget—for while they sat, each one immersed in their own musings, a dark shape pounced at them from behind a shrub, causing Veig Treth to shriek and jump for cover behind them.

Their ambusher was a short, hairy, stinking man, naked but for a grimy loincloth despite the chill, and he growled at them, baring his black rotten teeth like an animal ready to attack, while in his raised right hand he brandished a bone sharpened into a blade.

And then in a single leap he was upon them, swiping his weapon at them and forcing them to recoil until they backed up against a tree. Gallan and Raddia tried to make this obviously primitive foe yield to their combined Substance, mind-shouting commands at him, but it was hard to aim their counterattack when at the same time they were struggling to avoid having their throats slashed by the frenzied swings of the blade. But it wasn't merely the element of surprise and fear that had unnerved them and robbed them of their power, but the knowledge, certain as something they could touch and weigh, that this filthy creature's Substance was far stronger and more dangerous than those of ten Faults put together.

And as they writhed and wrestled, the beast-like warrior, while trying to twist Raddia's forearm, pulled off her left glove, glanced at it momentarily, and then threw it away, to land on a bed of dead leaves where it became instantly white. But that moment had been enough for Raddia to strike back. In a swift single motion, she peeled off her right glove as well, shot her arm and grabbed the much shorter man by the throat; she had no clear concept of what she was about to do except

maybe shove him away, but to get better purchase she pressed against the tree's gnarly bark with her bare right hand.

Then something extraordinary happened, taking them all by surprise. Suddenly, Raddia felt a flow of great strength but even greater peace fill her up; she felt rigid and immovable—almost eternal. So overwhelming was this feeling, she failed to notice what was happening to the assailant she was still choking, nor had she the presence of mind to realize that what coursed through her was the massive Substance of the ancient oak.

When she came to, as if from a powerful dark folly (because dream, Veig Treth's suggested word, seemed hardly adequate to describe the experience), all three of them were standing above the Scavenger's corpse—though this wasn't the appropriate word either, for what lay on the ground resembled neither a dead man nor anything anyone of them had ever seen. His skin had turned into a dark, rough bark, a mass of leaves had sprouted all over his face, and his limbs had been hardened into firm, twisted roots.

Raddia's touch had transformed him into a tree.

After that incident, the High Servant grew fearful of them, allowing the horse to carry them off as fast as she saw fit while purposely keeping a distance from them.

In a way, it was to be expected that he should be wary of them; Gallan, and even Raddia herself, had also been shaken by the manifestation of a power they had never imagined they possessed. If anything, during their last days in Lurien, they'd been told in more ways than one that their Substance was weak, so weak it could produce neither Mate nor Fault. Could it be that in this world they were stronger? Or was the Substance of the tree the sole force responsible for the vile man's transformation?

Yet if this was so, wouldn't Raddia too have become a stiff corpse of wood and leaves? No—on the contrary, during those amazing moments she had felt stronger than ever, her will to cause harm, as sure and lethal as the warrior's weapon, rushing through her arm and shooting off her fingers in a dazzle of exquisite emotion.

However, as they silently went over the event, they both agreed that Raddia's feat, even if achievable by Gallan as well, would hardly suffice to keep at bay an army of men as physically strong and determined as the one who had nearly undone them.

And the High Servant was thinking the same thought exactly, and privately—or so he believed, for although he kept lagging behind, Gallan and Raddia were delicately probing the fever of his mind, their presence felt only as a slight ache in the back of his head. And if they had been somewhat inclined to dislike the man before, because of his haughty manner, what they learnt now from his hidden self made him seem utterly detestable.

First of all, he was clearly intending to present them as a pair of prize beasts he had captured thanks to his great wits and bravery, in order for Fazen—the *King*, a man whom all Feeres seemed to regard as their leader and protector, even though he did nothing at all to defend them from the Scavengers—to restore him to his former state of prosperity; and this regardless of how many people must starve so that he, Veig Treth, could stuff himself, and despite the fact that he held the

Spirits he supposedly served in the same indifference and disdain he reserved for anyone other than himself.

Then these putrid thoughts were succeeded by an even more appalling scheme, wherein the High Servant had Raddia reduce the King into a lifeless effigy of stone, from whose head Veig Treth removed the crown and placed it upon his own. And once he became Supreme Ruler of Feerien, he could strike a deal with the Scavengers, offering, along with the throne, as much wealth and as many slaves and whores as their hearts desired, so long as they allowed him to live out the rest of his days in comfort.

He was an evil, dangerous man, and Gallan had a good mind to prod the horse to break into a run, leaving him to fend for his own—but at that very moment they heard a soft rustle from somewhere nearby, and turning towards the sound they saw something that was at once so strange and familiar, it was as though a part of Lurien, which they'd only begun to accept as lost to them forever, had somehow trailed them to this place.

It was a rosy-red glow, which they both instantly knew came neither from those stars up there nor from a fire, but from the inside of an extremely powerful being.

The last time they'd beheld this formidable sight had been long ago, when they were still children in pursuit of childish mischief. They were supposed to be at bed after their midday repast, a practice they always fervently bemoaned, for having their bellies full only made them more lively and playful than before. But while they sat in the dark, making up nasty rhymes about their Makers, there came from the kitchen a snore loud enough to bring the roof down—for Lorn, who was supposedly keeping an eye on them while Navva went about the rest of her daily chores, had dozed off in his chair.

They could hardly deny themselves such an opportunity, so mere moments later they were sneaking out the back of their Makers' home, which was partly concealed by a handful of trees and which led, through a secret path amongst more and shadier trees, to a bend of the Sacred River a dozen houses or so away from their own – a place special and thrilling for being within view of the Domicile.

Now the Domicile, and the Sages of the Circle within it, had been forever the object of terrifying desire and extravagant bragging amongst young Lurienites. One of the games they played, whenever they could elude for a while their Makers' attention, was daring one another to get as close to the circular building as possible, before losing their nerve and bolting back in a state of sweet panic, as if hunted by Fear itself. But the older children went further than that, and in their games, which required far greater courage, some of them actually entered the Domicile—or claimed so afterwards, since most times seeing someone cross the dreaded threshold sent the rest of the teasers running, lest they be linked to a transgression so unthinkable that even Makers with a matter demanding the Circle's wisdom avoided the task if it could be avoided. And from these acts of self-proclaimed valour were born countless myths about what might—or had already—become of foolhardy trespassers.

According to the most popular story, the Sages, owing to their supremely pure and noble Substance, gave off such a blinding light, that to come upon them uninvited was to lose your sight forever. Another version claimed that intruders were punished by losing their mind, and yet another that the Sages made them

grow instantly old and fit to be submerged, while some said that Faults didn't surface this way but became thus after having accidentally entered the Domicile when they were too little to know better.

Gallan and Raddia knew all these tales, and believed each and every one of them, overlooking the obvious question—namely, that if such horrible things did occur, why wasn't Lurien crawling with blind people, madmen and Faults? But it is in the nature of a child to choose an exciting lie over the tedium of truth.

So on that day, while they hid behind a shrub and gazed at the Domicile through its branches, their fear was as deep as it was delightful. Casting their mind's ear about, they heard no talk – there was no one around, a thing not surprising, for Makers never came near this place if they could help it. Of course, it would be better if there were more young Mates to dare and egg on, or to witness their bold act (the precise goal of which they were still uncertain of themselves) and be able to attest to it later on.

Yet the temptation was too great, pulling them towards the abode of the Sages like a physical force, an inner wind carrying their steps away before they had the time to grow too scared and reconsider. Dashing hand-in-hand, eyes darting here and there, they crossed the expanse of waist-high grass and weeds—for no one dared bring their sheep and cattle to graze there, to a place so charged with fear that possibly the beasts themselves wouldn't pasture—they reached the side of the Domicile, and with their backs against the smooth, cold, curving wall they quickly stole to the entrance.

The mere fact that this building, the greatest of Lurien, had no door or gate, but stood as though accessible to anyone brave enough to penetrate the gloom awaiting on the other side of the arched ingress, was petrifying in itself—and so for a moment, the longest of their young lives, Gallan and Raddia had been glancing at each other, trying to decide if they should proceed (and possibly rue the day forever), or turn around and keep running till they were in the safety of their bedroom (and afterwards regret this moment of cowardice, when they had come so close!). Moreover, they both thought, by this time the Sages had most certainly become aware of their presence, and so they could either run away and risk unknown and potentially horrible repercussions, or just step inside and humbly beg the Circle's forgiveness for their grave audacity.

And so they crossed the arch, shaking all over, and the darkness that greeted them was so thick they briefly panicked, thinking they had been blinded as the stories said. But then, as they fumbled along, a faint red light appeared in the distance, and then another next to it, and suddenly, like candles lit by a breath of fiery wind, there stood around them a circle of glowing spheres, which then grew into elongated columns of transparent redness, each one emitted by, and enclosing, an unmoving, unblinking Sage.

Their escape had taken place in such a state of mind-numbing terror, that the next thing they knew they were back in their beds, panting and shivering despite the mildness of the weather. It was all they could do not to wake the still-snoring Lorn and ask to be held like babes, and as for Navva, she was never quite convinced that the fear they struggled to contain was caused by being chased by a big, ugly Fault.

So, *Where is that light coming from?* Raddia asked of Gallan, but before he could answer, while Veig Treth (who had come running after them the moment he saw the red glow) feigned fearlessness, and poorly, a little boy sprang from a bush and stood before them, gazing at them with wide-open eyes—a gaze they couldn't return, for the globe of light surrounding the boy was so bright, it was bedazzling.

IV

Yern felt such gratitude, he was moved close to tears—but no further, for to shed a single tear of joy would tear apart the still gaping, still bleeding wound of Yenka and Yofana's loss. Fate had at long last shown him her smiling face, taking pity on him and his poor orphaned son, though only after displaying her grimmest countenance.

When he had run after Yonfi, and seen the red-clad riders with their long white manes and luminous skin, he knew at once that they were Seers—and yet instead of succumbing to the fright the spectacle of such fabled creatures should inspire, he felt a profound warmth fill his heart, as if a voice had whispered in his mind, *Don't fear*. Even more astounding, though, was the fact that the Seers appeared almost timid, their heads and eyes lowered as if it were *they* who felt in awe of him and his son.

"We are Gallan and Raddia of Lurien," the man said, in a voice like soft music. "Greetings to you and your—progeny. Know that you have an extremely gifted son."

Now it was Yern's turn to bow his head and mutter thanks, but in the meantime Yonfi had decided to introduce himself to the horse, standing on his toes before its head and rubbing the animal's muzzle, thus earning copious tongue-lapping which sent him into a frenzy of giggles. "Papa!" he shouted, wiping his face. "Can I ride the horsey?"

"Excuse me," said a cold voice, and turning around Yern saw a man in black, the same one who had declared himself High Servant. "Who are you? State your names and purpose at once! And also why you're not kneeling before me as you should."

So Yern, who knew a thing or two about prideful Spirit Servants and felt hugely grateful that they hadn't been ambushed and killed by the Scavengers, went down on his knees, kissed the muddy hem of the man's cape, and said their names, adding that they were on their way to the Castle. "Pray forgive us for intruding on you and your exalted company," he said finally, "but if your lordship, too, is heading to the Castle, could we accompany you for the rest of the journey if it's not too great an imposition?"

The High Servant frowned at this for a moment, and then consented in not too generous a tone, on condition that he and the Oracles wouldn't have to share the horse or their provisions with them. Then something seemed to cross his mind. "Kobold, you said? Are you by any chance a relation of a youth by the name of Yodren Kobold?"

Yern sprang to his feet, and it took all of his restraint not to grab the pompous fool by his robes and shake all knowledge out of him. "Yes! I'm his father!" he said,

his voice suddenly faltering with fear, for what if the man's impassivity meant that Yodren was dead? "He's – he's my firstborn. A Scribe. Your lordship knows of him?"

"As a matter of fact, I do. He serves at the pleasure of Queen Firalda, may she live and prosper." It sounded as though he found the service he spoke of distasteful.

Yet nothing could lessen Yern's enthusiasm, his breathtaking bliss at hearing that his beloved son was alive—and attendant to the Queen at that! "Did you hear that, Yonfi?" he said, turning around. "Your brother—"

But Yonfi was asleep, his head resting on the horse's neck, while the female Seer (Raddia, a name as pretty as her alabaster face), cradled his body gently in her arms, her eyes peacefully closed. It was a scene of such immense tranquillity and beauty, that even the High Servant didn't object to it. Yern's heart swelled with love.

Then the woman turned towards him and opened her pale, blind-seeming eyes. And this time he knew the voice in his mind belonged to her.

Yodren, she said. The Queen believes him to be someone called Royen the Eternal.

A little before the first moonrise, while they were crossing a wilderness near the foot of Mount Copper, the drowsy company came upon an abandoned horse cart that had been spared the destructive rage of the Scavengers. But when Yern suggested that they attach it to the mare so the Seers and Yonfi could lie down for a spell while he and the High Servant take their place on the horse, Veig Treth (an oddly disturbing name) wouldn't hear of it. "She's run-down enough as it is," he said, "and even if the Oracles agreed to dismount, which I would never allow since they are glorious guests in our poor excuse of a world, you had better recall your station before proposing that you and I ride together."

Yet once more his authority was thwarted, for suddenly the mare, as though indignant at her being called frail, rose on her hindlegs, let out a powerful neigh, and backed up to the cart, beating her hind hooves on the ground and clearly demanding that she be tied to it. While Yern connected the straps, the Seers climbed down, Raddia still holding the sleeping Yonfi in her arms, and lay across the cart, pushing their bodies close so that Yonfi would be cushioned instead of lying on the bare wooden planks, and covering him up to the chin with their red robes. Looking at them, Yern was once again overwhelmed by a feeling of thankfulness; his poor son might have lost his family, but now he was given a new one, strange to behold but nonetheless brimming with tenderness.

Seated on the horse behind the High Servant, whose silence was as gloomy as the blackness of his cape, Yern tried to resist the lull of the mare's slow trot in order to make some sense out of what the Seers had revealed to him, first openly—*Know that you have an extremely gifted son*, Gallan had said—and then secretly, about Yodren being Royen the Eternal. It was the latter Yern couldn't wrap his head around, no matter how proud the mere thought made him. Of course Yodren was gifted, or else he wouldn't have become a Scribe of the Order of Divinators, who could read the prophecies of the ancients. But to think that he, a humble Farmer, had fathered the hero of so many legends—legends which Yern, like most

Feeres, had always thought the product of imaginations seeking comfort in the myth of an immortal hero born to the same lowliness as the imaginers'—sent shivers down his spine. However, even if it did defy belief, he was presently in the company of two equally unbelievable creatures, who not only had appeared as the army of the Scavengers drew near (on the same year the Shy Death had struck, raising the fear of the Seventh Moon), but also knew of his son. After all this, was it really so impossible that his son was the fabulous Royen?

But even if it *were* true, Yern couldn't bear to think of Yodren, the flesh of his flesh, fighting the Scavengers single-handedly, immortal warrior or not. It was he who should thrust himself into the battle before allowing those pieces of filth to lay a finger on either of his sons – whom, being a loving father, he often found hard to not think of as tiny defenceless babes still smelling of their poor mother's milk.

(And there was one last consideration, although it was so laden with the despair of wild hope, he shied from articulating it even in the privacy of his mind. For according to the folk tales, amongst his formidable powers, the undying Royen could also raise the dead. Thus, if Yodren possessed the same magical, Spirit-given gift, maybe he could climb into that burrow and—But no, he mustn't hope. Nothing good could ever come out of that smoking hole. *It is the living who need my love and protection*, he told himself).

Suddenly, a strong acrid smell roused Yern from his musings, and looking up in the pale blue moonlight of dawn, he saw, to his horror, a great pillar of smoke rising in the sky.

The Seers had awakened at once, and shielding Yonfi's face with their sleeves from the bitterness that was rapidly filling the air, they looked intently at the mare, who broke into a frenzied gallop through the last stretch of the Minelands.

Yern could barely hold on to the running horse, for the sight had drained him of what little strength he had left. Any moment now he expected to see the Castle wrapped in flames, and the horrible smell of burning flesh descend upon them like death.

Not Yodren too, he pleaded with the silent Spirits. *Let me burn, but spare my boy!*

However, when the walls of the Castle emerged in the distance—sooner than he thought, for the black mare was dashing forth so swiftly they might as well be flying—Yern could discern no tongues of fire rising from the battlements, and so, along with everyone else (the High Servant, the Seers and even Yonfi, secure in Gallan's embrace with a look on his boyish face that wavered between terror and excitement) he turned his head to the right and saw the origin of the thickening, choking smoke.

The crescent of forest surrounding the Castle was on fire, the tall trees alight like towering candles. The Scavengers were trying to smoke the Castle-dwellers out, then to unleash their final assault. Yern closed his eyes and prayed. *Not my sons. I beg of You.* And then, blinking through the tears of his soot-stung eyes, he saw Yodren.

His heart knew it was his boy even before the face of the purple-robed figure became visible – just as it had throbbed with pain when he'd seen the smoke rise from the burrow, it now throbbed with rapture. "Yodren!" he called. "YODREN!"

But before the man who stood alone outside the Castle's gates turned at the sound of Yern's call, a smaller figure, moving so fast it looked like a blur to their teary eyes, shot past the horse with incredible speed, shrieking Yodren's name as well.

By the time they reached them, the Seers removing their gloves as they jumped from the cart, Veig Treth unsheathing a sword that looked as though it would have trouble cutting through water, and Yern nearly falling off the horse, Yodren had raised his little brother high in his arms and was spinning him round and round, his grown man's laughter as blissful as Yonfi's ecstatic screams. They all stood and watched them in silence for a while; even their own father didn't want to spoil this moment, which both his cherished sons had been dreaming of and craving for so long.

Yet finally he was unable to fight the raw surge of love; collapsing on his knees, he buried his face in his hands and began to sob, and suddenly the boys were kneeling next to him, hugging and soothing their father and crying tears of regret and joy with him. However Yern knew he must let go, become once more the strong one, for the agonizing thought that the boys' mother and sister would never again feel their loving touch and hungry kisses was too unbearable, and too tempting to divulge while they wept together as if they shared one single heart.

And it was high time he regained control of his emotions, because as soon as they stood up Yodren asked the question that Yern both dreaded and anticipated.

Luckily, Yonfi was still under the spell of his big brother's presence, prancing around him and trying to climb on his back and squeaking like mad, and so Yern managed to answer his son's question merely by biting his lip and bowing his head and shutting his eyes—a silent display of grief Yodren picked up at once, stepping back and clutching his heart, as though in a desperate attempt to keep it whole.

Suddenly, a man began to yell, "Let me *in!* I brought the bloody Seers! Open the gates this instant, or suffer the wrath of the King and the Spirits!" And turning around, they saw the High Servant banging at the Castle's tall wooden doors, which weren't just shut but further shielded by an external gate of thick and latticed iron bars.

It was then that Yern became aware of the dreadful fact that, for some reason, his son had been expelled from the Castle. "What is the matter?" he asked in a low voice.

Yodren approached and whispered, "The Prince died, and the Queen went mad. And somehow she got it in her head that I am Royen the Eternal, which I am positively not, because if anyone can be said – "

"Papa? Where is Mama and Yofana?"

Father and son turned toward Yonfi, with instant forced smiles.

"Why, they're inside!" Yern said, "Isn't that so, Yodren?"

"They most certainly are! By the King's orders, all women and child – and girls will remain protected in the Castle, while us men stay and fight the enemy!"

The last part was enough to send Yonfi into the throes of fresh exuberance, allowing them to resume their talk, which had been joined by Veig Treth.

“Kobold! What is the meaning of this?” he barked at Yodren, gesturing at the barred gates. “I demand to be let in! I have fulfilled my task and must speak to the King at once!” Then the obvious dawned on him. “Why did they lock you outside?”

“Sadly, the King wasn’t convinced that I am Royen—”

“No one but that crazy sow does! But how is this *my* concern? *Answer me!*”

Yern was itching to knock the odious man to the ground if only to shut him up, but at the same time he was very proud to see his son wasn’t in the least daunted.

“Well, as King Fazen put it, if I really *am* Royen the Eternal, then I should have no trouble defeating the Scavengers’ army with my bare hands—to which he added that, in the event I should find myself in a bind, I could count on your lordship to summon the Spirits’ power to our aid. In other words, he’ve been left out for dead.”

It was almost thrilling to see the fury drain from the High Servant’s face to be replaced by the petrified pallor of panic. Without another word, he turned around and ran to the Castle gates once more, beating at the doors and hopelessly trying to climb the rails, all the while screeching to be let in. And when he realized the futility of his efforts, he bolted for the horse, grabbing her reins and cursing her and struggling to mount.

But the old mare had no more sympathy for the cowardly fool than anyone else did, and when her pulling back and neighing angrily at him had no effect on his frantic grabbing and swearing, she rose on her hind legs, and before he could extricate himself from the reins and back away, she let her front right hoof fall with all its force on his skull, shattering it like a pomegranate. And once Veig Treth fell down and lay dead, for good measure, she trampled on what was left of his head.

The three Kobolds were staring at the horror with wide-open eyes—even Yonfi, though Yern had tried in vain to shield him from the gory sight—when suddenly a gust of wind swept through them, clearing the air from the smoke.

Then they all heard together the voice of the Seers. *They’re upon us.*

And so they were, emerging from the flaming forest as if made of smoke and fire themselves: the sons and daughters of the Vanished Kingdoms, and Velius their Lord.

If Yonfi was almost entirely unafraid as he stood there, gazing at the seemingly endless army of the Scavengers as it deployed and filled the view of the burning forest, it was because Mistress Raddia stood beside him, holding his hand and speaking to him in that voice that felt like Mama’s kisses when she tucked him in at night.

Of course he had known the strange pale lady was a sorceress the moment he’d seen her on the horse, when she had turned her head towards him without quite looking at him and said, *Greetings, little one. I am Raddia. Be not afraid of me*—all the while keeping her smiling lips closed. That had been the beginning of their fast friendship.

Because it appeared that Mistress Raddia could also read his thoughts and what he meant to say, so that although they rode in silence they were in fact talking in this delightful, magical way. Master Gallan, her brother, was a sorcerer as well, and he and Yonfi had exchanged greetings but little else, for he seemed too preoccupied with the man in the black cape—a very bad man, according to

Mistress Raddia—and, moreover, Yonfi had been missing Mama and Yofana so terribly, he relished the peaceful voice and gentle touch of the Seer's dainty hands, enclosed in wondrous gloves that changed colour when she took them off and smelled like fresh milk. Feeling cherished and safe, Yonfi had been dozing on and off in the cradle formed by Mistress Raddia's arms and the horse's swaying trot, and often upon waking he thought the person holding him was Mama; and since the Seers were said to know everything, he had asked after his mother and sister, for despite his father's assurances Yonfi was worried about them.

They are in a place where no one and nothing can harm them, Mistress Raddia had replied, and when Yonfi asked if she meant the Castle she said perhaps, adding that if worse came to worst, she would know they were in trouble and would at once transport them to her and Master Gallan's world, where peace and happiness reigned eternal.

Could you do a magic trick for me? Yonfi had asked next, and at that very moment a white-winged butterfly alighted on the mare's black mane. And granting his request, Mistress Raddia had removed her gloves, and untangling a blade of dry grass from his hair, she held it in her palm, while with the forefinger of her other hand she touched the snowy wings of the butterfly—and to his utter amazement, the lifeless grass had turned into a bright red butterfly, which flew away with the white one while Yonfi cheered and clapped his hands. If she could do that, why, she could do anything!

Then, after they had woken in the cart, as the horse pulled them slowly across the Minelands, Mistress Raddia had asked him about Royen the Eternal, and Yonfi had duly answered by reciting part of a poem that all children of Feerien knew by heart:

*Born of man and Spirit,
With wits as quick as breath,
This hero who shall save us
Knows neither fear nor death.*

“And I know who Royen is!” he had exclaimed, forgetting in his excitement that he had but to think of the words and the Seers would hear him. So—after making them promise they wouldn't tell Papa—he told them about their neighbour Master Gaddel, and how he had snuck in his home, and how he thought the old man was dead, but then when he touched him he had sprung to life and chased him out.

He stirred when you touched him? Mistress Raddia asked. *And not before?*

No! But he looked dead, and his house was filled with cobwebs as if no one lived there! And Royen the Eternal can't die, see? Not even of the Shy Death, so it must be Master Gaddel!

That is why he shines so bright, Master Gallan told his sister.

But his father mustn't know about any of this—we promised, remember?

And then they saw the fire, and the horse started running like the wind, and then Yodren appeared, wiping away every other thought from Yonfi's mind—such was his overwhelming joy at finally meeting this longed-for brother, a man every bit as nice and handsome as Yonfi had imagined him, whose embrace filled his heart to bursting.

It was a little sad when Papa and Yodren began to cry, because they made Yonfi cry too, and so when he asked about Mama and Yofana and saw how they both tried to hide their sadness, he knew they weren't in the Castle but in the marvellous world of the Seers, where everyone was happy. It was terribly hard not to share this knowledge with them, but Mistress Raddia had told him he must keep it secret, for Lurien—the magical world—was so big, that if his father and brother went there before the time was right, they might get lost and have trouble finding his mother and sister.

But now everyone (except for the mean old man in black, who had got what was coming to him) was looking at the Scavengers and their imposing leader.

At first Yonfi could hardly believe that the creature sitting upon the horse—the strangest horse he'd ever seen, made of wood but also of men tied together to form its legs—was a single man, for he was so huge it looked as though he had eaten ten men and bloated up as their bodies pushed and fought for room inside his mountain of a belly.

And when he spoke, his voice sounded indeed like a dozen thundering voices.

“WHAT IS THIS SORRY SIGHT?” he bellowed. “IS YOUR FALSE KING SO COWARDLY THAT HE LEFT YOU TO FIGHT IN HIS STEAD?”

Oh, if only they had Master Gaddel on their side! Yonfi thought. Then this fat disgusting man and his filthy warriors would think twice before offending them so!

Master Gallan and Mistress Raddia had been standing protectively before him, and now Yonfi heard them speak as one. Leave, they told the beastly foe, *And no one has to die. There are forces at work here you don't want to challenge.*

However this seemed to amuse rather than scare him, for he exploded in a laughter so loud that, joined by the laughter of his army, it made the ground shake.

“YOU'RE NOT COWARDS, I'LL GIVE YOU THAT!” he roared. “BUT IF YOU THINK YOU STAND A CHANCE BEFORE VELIUS THE VAST AND THE LEGION OF THE VANISHED KINGDOMS, YOU ARE MAD AS THAT BASTARD FAZEN IS YELLOW! NOW OFF TO THE HOLE WHENCE YOU CRAWLED OUT, AND YOUR LIVES SHALL BE SPARED!”

Then Yonfi heard Papa shout, “No, Yodren, stop!” and turning to his left he saw his big brother stride to the corpse of the bad man and take his tarnished sword. Then he stepped forward, and brandishing the sword he called out, “Begone from my sight, or you and your grimy carcass-eaters shall know the wrath of Royen the Eternal!”

But he's not—! Yonfi thought, but Mistress Raddia told him to hush, and she and Master Gallan drew closer together to shield him while they took off their gloves.

“YOU?” Velius said. “YOU ARE ROYEN? A PATHETIC SCRIBE WITH A BREAD KNIFE? WELL, THEN THIS WON'T HURT A BIT.”

And with an unsuspected quickness, the monstrous man produced a long sharp spear and cast it as if it were a splinter; and so fast did it fly and find its target, that for a moment Yonfi, struggling to part the Seers and see, thought it had shot above the Castle and disappeared. But then he heard his father howl, “No! Noo!!!” and saw Yodren take a couple of shaky steps and then collapse, the spear sticking out of his heart.

And then, at the sight of his brother's dead body, something happened to Yonfi which he could neither explain nor control. It was as if some madness that had been lying in wait deep inside him, in that dark place where love and sorrow and everything that was himself resided, all of a sudden exploded, gushing out of him as uncontainably as the fire consuming the forest. Remotely, another Yonfi he no longer was felt the Seers and his father trying to hold him back, their hands clutching him and their desperate voices begging him to stop, be still—but they were too weak, or he too strong to be stopped, dragging all three of them along and finally breaking free.

With a savage cry of hatred, of a loathing so powerful it felt as though his skin was on fire, Yonfi charged at Velius, bent on avenging Yodren's death if it meant taking the lives of everyone at sight. But suddenly something arrested his furious dash, and he realized he was running on air—for some unseen Scavenger had pierced the back of his shirt with his sword, and was now raising the blade up to deliver him to the fat beast.

Yonfi's scalp screamed with sudden pain; Velius had grabbed him by the hair, and was holding him at arm's length, laughing at the frantic swipes of his tiny fists and at the rabid snarling and kicking, his foul breath adding insult to injury.

"YOU'RE ONE FEISTY MORSEL!" he chuckled, and opened his mouth in a taunting show of hunger, smacking his lips and drooling, his big violet tongue as long as a dog's—till Yonfi surprised him, grabbing the tip of his tongue and pulling hard.

It was an act of panic meant to delay the inevitable, and Yonfi didn't even think he'd used such great force, and yet the next thing he knew he was catapulted backwards, flew in an arc and hit the ground painfully with his skinny bottom.

What did just happen? he wondered in a daze, but as the dust he'd raised cleared, he felt his right hand grasping something thick and slithery—and looking down he saw that he was holding Velius's tongue, to which were attached his gullet, his lungs, and his huge, still faintly-beating heart. Then from somewhere close Yonfi heard the sound of wood creaking and splintering, and then came a great thud that raised even more dust. And through the settling cloud he saw the astounding result of his single pull.

Velius the Vast lay vastly dead upon the wreckage of his horse, while his bearers groaned and struggled in vain to prevent his immense weight from crushing the life out of them. However, before long they too went still, and the entirety of the Scavengers' army, after taking a single look at their eviscerated warlord, retreated a few steps, their former confident cheering replaced at once by the speechlessness of dread.

All the while, Mistress Raddia and Papa had been yelling at him to come back, and Master Gallan, standing a little behind him, was trying to bend his will and make him obey his magic – but Yonfi gave heed to none of them, instead walking over to his brother's body. Yodren's beautiful green eyes were wide open, gazing horrified at the abrupt nothing of death, his parted lips lay frozen at the moment his soul had left him, and on his chest a pool of dark blood lay still around the handle of the spear.

By now Yonfi was wailing, and though he knew there was nothing he could do, he nonetheless grabbed the spear, drew it out and cast it away with a grunt of

rage. His brother, whom he'd dreamt of meeting all his life, had known him for less than an hour. He sobbed and sobbed, and thus his bleary eyes failed to notice the miracle: for every tear he shed, falling into the blood sizzled and hissed like drops of molten gold hitting water, making the wound on Yodren's chest shrink till it vanished altogether.

Yodren sat up with a sharp gasp, his hand seeking the gash from which his life had leaked—and finding nothing but a hole in his tunic. “Yonfi?” he croaked.

Yonfi opened his eyes, shrieked, and fell into the arms of his brother, who was still bewildered as to what had happened. But when he slowly got to his feet, with Yonfi clinging on him as if they shared a heart, he saw the viscera on the ground, and then his eyes strayed over to the remains of Velius and his terrified warriors, who stared at him and muttered, “He's alive! He's alive!” while retreating further away.

No one needed say anything, for it was now obvious to everyone—even to Yonfi, who had just witnessed the resurrection of his brother brought about by the mere touch of his tears—that they stood before the manifestation (no matter how unlikely) of a legend, to whose side Yern and the Seers instantly gravitated in silent awe.

Yet the Scavengers, despite their evident fear, didn't seem quite ready to lay down their arms and flee. After all, they'd been promised a life of plenty, a home inside the Castle, and all the comforts they'd been forever denied. And though they had been rendered headless, they couldn't surrender this dream of an easy, dignified existence—not yet. So they lingered in aggressive indecision, weapons still raised and faces flushed with enmity, eyeing the little boy who was Royen and wondering how many of them would have to die before they could subdue both him and his handful of fighters.

It could have been a vicious battle, and quite possibly a losing one for the three Kobolds and the Seers—for how many times and how successfully could Yonfi raise them after they'd been slashed and smashed over and over, while being simultaneously beset by hundreds of wrathful men and women thirsty for his immortal blood?

But the battle wasn't meant to happen, for just as the Scavengers were bolstering themselves for the attack, the Monster came down from the sky.

V

Having spent his whole life in the darkness of the Eye, Wixelor was unprepared for the brightness of Feerien's sky, avidly gazing straight at the two rosy moons till he suddenly realized that, no matter how hard he blinked, he couldn't see a thing.

Thus blinded and gripped by terror, he started to pedal like mad, hoping that he could prevent the flying machine from plummeting and crashing down and killing him in the process. He just had to remain afloat long enough to regain his sight.

And then things took a dramatic turn for the worse, as the headily fresh air he'd been breathing was replaced by a mass of smoke so bitter, thick and scorching it was like inhaling fire. Wixelor coughed and retched, and cursed Huxor and Zaepix

and his own stupidity for listening to them instead of resuming the dull but safe life of a Dreamer.

But the deluge of tears brought on by the smoke seemed to have a healing effect on his blindness, because he could now discern the vague shape of the smoke and pedal around it, and when he looked down to avoid the glare of the moons he saw a great mass of fire whence the smoke rose, and on one side of it a great structure he'd seen in plenty of dreams to recognize as a castle or fortress—which meant that people must live there.

So he directed his descent towards the grey, walled edifice, and little by little he made out the tiny specks between it and the burning forest as humans; and by the time he could distinguish the details of the gathering, Wixelor had recognized another thing that, though unheard of in Ienar Lin, was common in most other worlds: war. He was looking at two opposing parties standing their ground on the verge of bloodshed.

However, it seemed like an unfair, uneven fight: a few people against a throng. Wixelor's instinct told him to land the machine on the side of the former, and rightly so, for now he could discern the red garments of the Lurienites he knew from their dreams. Of course warfare supposedly relied on the element of surprise, and descending from above in a noisy flying machine wasn't exactly stealthy – and indeed, as he steadied the steering rod and slowed down his pedalling, Wixelor saw each and every head turn up and stare at him. But there was something strange about these human beings, something not quite right in the way they didn't grow any bigger, as they should, the lower he got.

And then the machine hit the ground, hopefully without any damage to its inner workings, and Wixelor unfolded himself from the seat and stood up, looking towards the group of warriors whose bulging eyes were fixed on him in mortal terror. He didn't mean them any harm, and was about to tell them as much, but with the first step he took in their direction they let out a collective scream, and dropping their weapons they swiveled around and bolted, many among them running straight into the fire.

Wixelor was appalled by the effect of his presence, and even more so when the warriors (wretched creatures called Scavengers, if he recalled correctly) began to howl as they were burned alive. It was unbearable, and so Wixelor turned around, hoping he wouldn't inspire the same panic to the people he had left his very world to seek.

Only then, when he saw the five of them gaping at him in fear and disbelief, did Wixelor finally realize what was off in their proportions. For although he'd spent two and a half centuries immersed in other people's dreams, watching other people live and die, laugh and cry, love and hurt each other, he was never in those dreams himself—and so he was utterly clueless as to their actual size compared to his.

But now he knew, and was amazed as the Feeres and Lurienites before him: he was at least three times taller than the tallest of them, towering above them like a giant.

Chapter V

I

In the course of the next few hours, the motley company could have risen, if they so desired, to the station of nobles and lifelong revelers of the Palace and its luxuries.

For once the sentinels up in the turrets had witnessed the succession of wonders—the killing of Velius, Yodren rising from the dead, and finally the landing of the flying giant whose mere appearance had driven most of the Scavengers to a fiery death—the gates which had been standing shut were thrown apart to welcome the saviours of Feerien.

And if the heroes hadn't been themselves too stunned and woolly-headed by the turn of the events, they might have spat at the King's hypocritical, belated generosity. But they all felt grateful for their miraculous survival, and were thus inclined to accept the adulation that was showered on them, and on Yonfi in particular.

Because as soon as it sank in that he was the Royen of fables and epics, and that he was consequently able to bring back the dead, he started running from one house to the next, touching the lovingly preserved corpses and lifting the pall of the Shy Death off of them, all the while pursued by more people who wanted to be touched by him and be relieved from illnesses and griefs, men, women and children laughing and sobbing and throwing themselves on the ground to kiss Yonfi's bare, ticklish feet.

Then the Queen herself came down the Palace stairs to bow before the little boy, whom she proceeded to take by the hand and lead to Fantyr's bedchamber, a thrilling trip for Yonfi, during which he also discovered that he could restore the wholesomeness of food—meat, eggs and dairy—which until that moment had been lying untouched for lacking the merest trace of nourishment. And when the Prince blinked his eyes and rose from the bed, frowning and confused and pulling at the stitches on his throat while both his parents stood at the door holding each other for the first time in years, Yonfi was made Lord Kobold on the spot, by King Fazen who, with shaking hands, took off and bestowed upon him his own signet ring.

Meanwhile, the marketplace was crawling with people who wished to see—and, if possible, touch—the Seers and the gaunt giant who had descended from the heavens. But by then Yodren had silently advised Gallan and Raddia to hold their silence, while Wixelor, obviously ill at ease in the midst of this sea of midgets, had a rather erratic effect on those who gazed up to his face: for while many kept staring, in thrall of his glaring otherworldliness, some let out piercing screams and ran away. It took the six of them a while to discover the cause of this terror, identical to that which had seized the Scavengers, and it was once more Yonfi who unveiled the mystery to them.

The little Lord had just returned from the Palace to give them word that they were welcome to dine with the royal family and stay as their honoured guests for as long as they wished, and spotting Wixelor he ran to him and threw his hands

up to be lifted and placed upon his vertiginous shoulders. It was an endearing moment—he might be Royen the Eternal but he was still a boy—and Wixelor smilingly obliged; but no sooner had he taken hold of Yonfi's hands than young Lord Kobold squealed and sought cover in his father's arms. "Papa!" he cried, "It's that monster I told you about, that wolf with the red eyes!" And while Yern was stroking his back, telling him it was just a dream and that his eyes were playing tricks on him because he was tired, Raddia whispered to him in her mind's voice that she, too, had just glimpsed the slain body of her Maker Lorn.

For Wixelor was a Dreamer. And looking at him, one might fleetingly see—like a brief vision blurring reality—either a cherished dream or a dreadful nightmare.

Though nothing quite so dreadful as the news he was about to deliver.

In order not to be disturbed, they asked and were granted consent (grudgingly, by old Celes the Head Scribe, who had no choice but to oblige the King's favourites) to use the spacious if somewhat drafty top floor of the Scriptorium—while another group of Scribes, in worldless wonderment at being in the presence of Royen, the subject of so many a prophecy, carried the flying machine (yet another wonder) to the Scriptorium's cellar, lest it become the plaything of the teeming children.

And after a modest meal—for the hunger of their curious minds had displaced that of their bellies—they sat in a crescent around Wixelor, who, squatting down to be able to look at them and avoid knocking his head on the chandelier, commenced on the long and bewildering narrative that was to change their lives forever.

The company's overall feeling as they listened with growing fascination could be likened to that of a mind which, after having spent all its life in a sort of slumber, is suddenly stirred by another, wakeful, attentive and brilliant mind, to be exposed to the astonishing facts of the reality it had never quite known in its lifetime of haziness.

After all, Wixelor came from a world where the wisdom of every other world was stored and interpreted, and during his long years (longer than those of them all put together) he had seen and known a virtual infinity of things—and even that, he said, was but a particle of all the knowledge that coursed through existence.

To begin with, and even though by then they had all seen things that defied the firmness of their previous convictions, it was hard for them to fathom that Creation (a word puzzling by itself, since it implied the existence of one or more Creators) wasn't limited to Lurien and Feerien, but included countless other realms, strange and faraway and all comprising the offspring of the inconceivable thing that was Norien. Then came the mystification of the Three Gods, and the way they ruled all existence through the Runes—which furthermore, as if things weren't perplexing enough, had been stolen! Of course Gallan and Raddia had heard of the Ghosts, who, apart from the Feeres' habit of worship, sounded more or less similar to the Spirits, but to listen to a man from a world as obscure and fantastical as Ienar Lin speak of the Three Runes as actual, tangible stones which held the power to make and unmake the dizzying vastness of the universe left them all gaping at Wixelor, their overtaxed minds bursting with questions.

How could the Runes have been stolen and hidden from the Gods if they were truly all-knowing and all-powerful? Why should the God of Fate and Chance conspire against Its siblings? Didn't fate and chance already govern life and death? What was this Forgotten Sphere whose existence even Wixelor ignored until now, and how was one to ever find it—find nowhere as an actual place when its very notion meant no place at all?

However, above all other puzzlements and considerations, what Gallan, Raddia, Yern and Yodren couldn't bring themselves to accept was the fact, confirmed not just by Wixelor's testimony but also evinced by the black hole in Lurien's sky as well as by the Shy Death and the dread of the Seventh Moon plaguing Feerien, that unless they acted, and soon, their worlds and every other world would be destroyed. It seemed hardly fair that such an overwhelming—if not impossible—task should fall upon their shoulders; how were they to travel to this Erat Rin, and what were they to do once there? Would they be able to return to their homelands, or would they be forever banished in this so-called nowhere, without ever knowing what happened to their loved ones?

And yet that final question, as soon as they had spoken it, was answered by the truth most obvious to them all: the only ones they truly loved were present.

Lastly, they had to come to terms with the fact—hardest to bear for Yern and Yodren—that Yonfi, being the immortal hero of the same myths that Zaepix's vision of the imminent future supported, was to play a part, perhaps the most important, in the still-unbelievable mission they had to undertake. And this dismal thought was further aggravated by the fact that, during Wixelor's entire recounting, Yonfi had been noisily and thoroughly engaged in a game of childish cruelty: namely, the chasing of a moth which he kept stomping with his foot only to revive moments later to chase after again, the same thing over and over, to his undiminished, screeching delight.

"No, I couldn't possibly—" Yern muttered. "He's a *child!*"

I mean no disrespect, Yern Kobold, Raddia said, but I believe we have all witnessed that your son is far more than the little boy he seems.

"She's right, father," Yodren whispered. "Yonfi is invulnerable; he *cannot* die—and, by extension, neither can anyone at his side."

"But what if this—forgotten place at the other end of the world is filled with beastly creatures like the Scavengers, or worse?"

That is indeed a concern, Gallan said, looking at Wixelor. Is there anything we know about Erat Rin's inhabitants? Do they resemble us? Will we be safe amongst them?

Wixelor sighed, and lowered his eyes at his bony hands, whose long, thin fingers he kept fiddling. "What I do know," he said, "is that Erat Rin was a piece of the original Norien, though one which broke off and vanished before the Gods could mould it to their liking. That means its people may differ in appearance as much as you from me or from one another – and possibly more. It is also believed that Erat Rin was struck by a catastrophic event similar to the Disaster of Feerien, and that the only thing that kept it from coming apart was the presence of the Runes, and more specifically the Rune of Life. However, it seems that the Forgotten Sphere lies once more in peril, grave peril, and that if this time it is destroyed

along with the Runes, so will everything that, in the beginning, was part of Norien.”

“Forgive me,” Yern said, with an expression of unyielding resolve, “but that is not enough. For all we know, this sphere might be home to monsters, or men in such a state of desperation, misery and terror that they are worse than monsters.”

But in his vehemence, Yern had made the mistake of raising his voice. And now here came Yonfi, the padding of his tiny feet making the wooden floor shake more than his slightness warranted, his face aglow with merriment.

“Monsters, Papa? I wanna see monsters! Oh, can we please go see the monsters?” he cried, throwing himself on Yern’s back and nearly making him topple over.

“I see someone’s grown fearless,” Yodren said, smiling at his brother.

“Oh, yes!” Yonfi said, assuming what he thought was a majestic pose. “I’m Lord Kobold now,” he said, proudly holding up the King’s ring, which the Queen had hung on a golden chain around his neck so as not to lose it. “And I’m also Royen the Eternal! So I *have* to be fearless, and fight monsters till I’ve killed every last one of them!”

“Is that so?” Yodren said with the same teasing smile, and without warning he snatched Yonfi, held him firmly in his lap, and tickled his belly till he started to wriggle and screech. But still he wouldn’t stop, for it was obvious Yonfi didn’t want him to stop. “Does that mean you now sleep without a candle burning at your bedside, eh? And what about that big old scary wolf with the red eyes? You’re not afraid of him anymore?”

Yern looked on this scene of brotherly affection with so intense a heartbreak he actually felt his chest constrict with pain. *My boys*, he thought, *my treasures*. They were all that was left of their family, and poor Yonfi didn’t even know it. And to think of them in another world, an alien place fraught with danger... No, he just couldn’t let go of them.

Forgive my intrusion, Raddia said, cutting into his thoughts and making Yern turn to face her. *But wouldn’t that be going against Yonfi’s destiny? Shouldn’t he be at least told?*

“Told what?” Yonfi suddenly said, startling them both. He still sat in Yodren’s lap, but now his expression was inquisitive and suspicious. “Told *what*, Papa?” He stood up, frowning at Yern, and when his father didn’t answer, he turned at Raddia. *Please tell me*, he said. *I’m not a baby. I want to know! Is it about the monsters?*

Raddia, shaken by the fact that Yonfi had heard her even though she hadn’t been addressing him, fell silent; then, *It’s not my place to tell you*, she said. *Only your father may*.

“Papa? Is it about the monsters? ’Cause if it is, you *have* to—”

“These aren’t matters a child should be concerned with,” Yern gravely replied.

“Ugh! Why won’t anyone tell me?” Yonfi yelled, and suddenly he went into a fit, let out a penetrating whine, and charged toward the wall, butting his head against it.

It all happened so quickly, no one had the chance to even cry out. And now no one needed to, nor would they be heard over the howling wind that came rushing

through the hole in the wall—where Yonfi’s head had crushed two great stone blocks.

On top of the daunting nature of their task, however, they were faced with yet another serious problem, and one to which not even Wixelor could provide a solution: where the threshold to the world of Erat Rin lay, and how it might be crossed.

“I’m quite confident it is somewhere in Feerien,” he said. “The Sphere of Toil has always been the most solid, stable realm of Norien—and as we all know, there are portals connecting it with both Lurien and Ienar Lin. But as to where exactly this other entry can be found, I’m afraid I’m as clueless as you. I’d merely venture to say that it must be a place equally tucked away as the Forgotten Sphere, one that flickers between existence and non-existence, that is as much a somewhere as it is a nowhere.”

Yodren’s face suddenly lit up with a thought so hopeful he had to stop himself from leaping to his feet and arousing Yonfi’s curiosity again. For Wixelor’s description had brought up the mislaid memory of an image, whose oddness had only been ignored because of the onslaught of oddities that had succeeded it: standing at the window of his cell and seeing a spring of fiery sparks illuminate the darkening sky.

“I think I know of just such a place,” he quietly said.

According to the legends, before the Disaster that gave them their name, the Drowning Isles had been the first part of Feerien to emerge from the roiling waters that covered the rest of the sphere, back when the future Kingdoms were still but ocean floors and ridges.

And it was on those three islands that the first human beings had appeared – though how this had come about remained to this day a mystery which not even the most astute adepts in ancient texts had penetrated. Some went as far as to say that the Isles were the original abode of the Spirits, and thus a place of great enchantment; but so little was actually known about them, that they next appeared in post-Disaster myths, which claimed that the rising of the Seventh Moon had first caused them to sink, along with their dwellers, then to rise again, lifeless and barren, and ever after to surface and submerge in a pattern no one could ever decipher—though never all three at once.

As one would expect, over the centuries there had been many attempts to solve the riddle of the Drowning Isles, yet none had ever come to fruition, while some forays had been the end of those brave and foolish enough to undertake them. The Feeres had never been accomplished seamen, after all, and the Isles, apart from their erratic rising and falling (which had been the cause of every fatal wreck, when the poorly-made boats were shattered to pieces by the emerging reefs of jagged black rock) were surrounded by another gloomy myth, suggesting that they were still haunted by the souls of all the drowned ancient islanders, whose only release was to drag whomever approached down to the same watery grave.

“And you say you saw them all together, and one of them gushing fire?” Gallan said in a low voice, to avoid being overheard by Yonfi who was still sulking at a

corner of the room, banging the broken shards of stone together like a much younger child.

“But where could they possibly lead you to besides the bottom of the sea?” Yern asked with visibly growing concern. “And what if they truly are haunted?”

“Well, perhaps I can answer that,” Wixelor said, bent in a conspiratorial posture that somehow made him look even more huge. “You see, the dreams of most people are very often about the souls of their lost ones, and this need to know what becomes of us after we die is so intense that the same souls may visit their waking hours as ghosts, friendly or fearsome depending on their own feelings about mortality. However, even though no one knows if there is a life after this one and what it’s like, I’m fairly certain that the souls of the departed cannot return—for otherwise their sheer number and the resentment so many of them must surely bear would make life unlivable.”

Yern accepted this plausible truth in silence, though from the pain that crossed his face it was clear that he was thinking of his own two cherished souls, wandering in that ominous uncertainty, that awful possibility of everlasting death.

“How can we reach these islands?” Raddia asked, at the same time letting part of her Substance waft towards Yern’s mind to console him. “Should we go on one of those vessels? Because, from what I gather, they don’t sound very reliable.”

Yodren shrugged in equal ignorance; if boats still existed in Feerien, or boatmen to sail them, he knew nothing about them.

Then Wixelor cleared his throat—a sound quite normal to his own ears, but in truth loud enough to rouse even Yonfi from his show of moodiness—and made another helpful suggestion.

“It might not be very comfortable for too long a journey,” he said, “but judging from your—well—modest size, I think we can try to get there by flying.”

It was not an uneventful parting.

The one who most fervently objected to their departure—and uncertain return—was the King, who worried that, should the remaining Scavengers decide to unite and strike again, the absence of *‘the greatest heroes in the history of Feerien’* (as he extravagantly put it, in a desperate attempt to dissuade them) might render the attack fatal. The Queen was of a different opinion; her beloved son had just been restored to her, and she couldn’t risk losing him in a second Disaster – the threat of which made Fazen finally yield and accept the necessity of this quest, incomprehensible to him but nonetheless essential to the survival of the realm itself. After all, he, too, had just witnessed things equally strange and formidable as the much-dreaded rising of the Seventh Moon.

To further reassure the fearful monarch and the people of the Castle, who were also loath to see their saviours leave so soon, Yodren effected an ingenious plan: he had everyone gather at the Palace steps in an orderly fashion along with their pigs, cattle, sheep, horses and fowl, and one by one to come forward so that Royen—seated atop a miniature throne from one of Prince Fantyr’s several dollhouses and giggling at the hilarity of his powers—might lay his hands on the animals. And no sooner did Yonfi’s paws touch the beasts that (to the crowd’s wild cheering) their abdomens swelled with offspring, their udders with milk and their skinny, malnourished frames with firm muscle and fat.

And after the Merry Eternal had thus singlehandedly ensured the rebirth of the Farmlands and that no Feere should go hungry again, the Seers—whom people still ran ahead of to strew lily petals at their feet, startling them to no end—made sure that the Castle itself would also live on in security. To this purpose, Yodren had the blacksmith and his son carry their heavy anvil and place it next to the Castle wall. Then Gallan and Raddia removed their gloves, and each lay one hand on the sturdy wrought iron of the anvil and the other on the stone wall. By the time their miracle was done, and they stood, panting and spent and awash in the crowd's renewed cheers, a yard or more of powerful iron alloy, its thickness invulnerable to any and all man-made weapons, surrounded the Castle, forming a shield not even a second Disaster could put a dent in.

However, the hardest part of this ceremony of farewells was the parting of Yern from his two sons, which, as soon as the downgazing father, with visible reluctance and heartbreak, announced his decision to remain in Feerien, was met with Yodren's angry protests and Yonfi's furious denial. Oblivious to his own greatness and the importance it held for the mission, the little boy, who had been so abruptly deprived of his mother and sister, clung to Yern's legs, sobbing and wailing and stomping his feet.

But for all the sorrow it caused him to see his boys so miserable, Yern was firm in his refusal, which he explained by saying that, unlike every other member of the team, he had no special ability to offer to the quest, and would only be a burden.

It was Raddia who ultimately managed to soothe Yonfi, and none too soon, for his fit of temper had given birth to a sudden wind of rapidly growing strength.

Listen to me, my sweet, she said, and the boy stopped crying almost at once, turning to the sole female presence like a light-starved flower towards the sun. And promise me you won't speak a word of what I'm about to say, because not even your brother knows. Remember Lurien, the blissful, peaceful realm I hail from? Well, your father is going there to meet your mother and sister as soon as we leave, so that he, too, may be utterly safe till we return. But this has to remain a secret, for if word got out, the people of Feerien would flock to my world, which sadly isn't big enough to accommodate quite so great a crowd. So you may trust your father, and know that he and the womenfolk will be waiting for you and Yodren with open arms!

Yonfi, who'd been listening with round and trusting eyes, wiped his little nose on the back of his hand and nodded, convinced if not entirely happy.

Right then a group of men appeared, carrying the flying machine, and Yonfi's attention was instantly grasped by the fascinating contraption.

"Can I go play with it?" he said, raising a rapt, pleading face at Wixelor. "I swear I won't break anything!" To which the kind giant gladly agreed, though first he scooped Yonfi off the ground and bounced him up and down in the hollow of his enormous hand, teasingly asking how come such a great hero couldn't fly on his own.

It was all Yern could do not to succumb to his shattering grief—for in his heart of hearts he knew that this might be the last time he'd ever hear his son's heartwarming laughter. He'd known this as soon as Wixelor's narrative was over: Yodren and Yonfi would never come back. He had tried telling himself that it was for their own good and for the good of every living creature, that he should be

immensely proud of them—which he was—and that, for all his misery, he was lucky to have been the father of such glorious progeny. Yet deep down he was already resigned to a life of quiet mourning.

But then, while he'd been standing at the Palace stairs, hardly believing what he saw, he had briefly entertained the fantasy which he had sternly warned himself against: seeing in his mind's eye Yonfi crawling down the burrow and moments later emerging in the company of his mother and sister, disoriented yet bursting with life. It wouldn't take more than a couple of days on horseback, would it? Of course the thought of making his poor boy confront the charred remains of Yenka and Yofana, when he believed them to be alive and well, was selfish and atrocious—unthinkable. And yet Yern held out hope, till that old woman stepped forward, cradling in her gnarled hands an old wooden box containing the bones of her only son, dead for more than twenty years. And to Yonfi's consternation, (short-lived, for a guard presently came and shooed the woman away) his touch had no effect on the bones other than a faint, fleeting glow that faded as quickly as it appeared. For though he might be able to banish the Shy Death, the other, crueller Death would not be fooled and—sadly but certainly—could never be escaped.

So now Yern knew how he would spend the remainder—hopefully not too long—of his days. He would take a few animals, a horse and a cart (gifts they surely wouldn't deny to the father of Royen the Eternal), return to his ravaged home, and resume the life of a Farmer, albeit a lonesome one. And each day he would go to the burrow, which he would fill in and adorn with a bush of blue roses (favoured by mother and daughter alike, and much better than any grim tombstone) and talk to them, relating Yodren and Yonfi's great adventures in worlds beyond this one, worlds which might even include a place where the dead lived again, happy and serene, listening and awaiting.

By the time they joined Wixelor at the shore, the fifth moon had already set and the sixth was waning, shedding the last of its lilac light on the melancholy gathering.

Gallan and Raddia, although the whiteness of their faces and the transpience of their eyes did not betray it, were in fact terrified by the immensity of the sea, and by the prospect of not only crossing it by air but actually landing on an island in its midst—an island, furthermore, that rose and sank entirely unpredictably, and which would take them (if not to the bottom of the sea) to an even less familiar place at the other end of the world. Their simple, sheltered life in Lurien had hardly prepared them for such daring feats, and not for the first time they both longed for the uneventfulness of that old life, which seemed so distant even though it was less than a week ago that they'd been just another pair of placid Mates, drudging through their destiny as if it were a long, bland meal.

Yodren was equally distressed, for in the past few hours he'd been subjected to so many, intense and upsetting emotions, he felt his very heart groan under their weight. First he had struggled in vain with his father, begging Yern to reconsider and come with them—because, no matter how hard he tried to drive the thought from his mind, he, too feared that they were never coming back, and that Feerien, with winter and the new year drawing near, would be swept away by a Second

Disaster. But, “You have to go!” Yern had insisted. “You can read the language of the Spirits, boy—of the Gods! How are they to make way in a world whose people might speak as the ancients?” And even if he wasn’t wholly convinced of his own usefulness, Yodren couldn’t leave his little brother alone, invincible hero though he was. And as if all these worries weren’t enough, while he was in his cell, packing the bare necessities for the journey (which frightened him as it would any man), Harfien Griff had come knocking at his door—to offer his farewell, Yodren thought. But instead, the always restrained and undramatic Divinator had caught him by surprise, falling to the floor at his feet, burying his face in the hem of his robes and soaking it with a stream of tears, while Yodren, stunned and appalled, could do nothing but stand there and wish this outburst over, for despite his mortification he hadn’t the heart to pull from, or push away, this pathetic bundle of human misery. And just as his sobbing and heaving was becoming truly unbearable, Harfien had suddenly leapt to his feet and run away without a word, the choke of his grief trailing off.

However, of them all, it was Wixelor who felt the greatest foreboding at their imminent voyage to another plane of reality—for as he waited for them to make the trip around the Castle which would take them to the seashore, his mind, blessedly idle ever since he’d left the Eye, was suddenly gripped by a dream suffused with dread.

And even more unnerving than the usual elements of nightmares he’d learnt to endure—which almost always contained at least one person the dreamer perceived as a foe or a fiend, some monster reflecting the suppressed fear of his or her life, left to roam free during sleep—was the fact that this dream was an image of utter lifelessness.

Whereas Wixelor’s actual surroundings overflowed with colour, the place that had seized his mind’s eye was the essence of greyness and gloominess: an oppressively ashen sky spreading above a field where only dead, gnarly trees and skeletons of thorny bushes stood. Even the air felt dead, for no breath of wind stirred the dry leaves rotting on the ground amongst pools of black, stagnant water and mounds of an equally dark sort of mud or slush—its origin explained when, looking up, Wixelor (or the dreamer) noticed a slow yet steady snowing of some jet-black stuff he recognized to his terror as flakes of soot: as if the sky had been consumed by fire and then burnt out.

He’d come to shaken and alarmed, blinking the awful vision away—and then it occurred to him that this disturbing dream, so unlike anything he’d seen before, could have been dreamt by an inhabitant of Erat Rin, who had witnessed the devastation they were now too late to, and could no longer, avert. What if they were about to cross over to a dead or dying world, and meet their own end from lack of living matter to support them? Of course he might be wrong (and passionately wished so), and there was also a paradox in his reasoning—for the existence of just this one dreamer surely meant that the destruction of the Runes and the End of All Things hadn’t happened yet.

And then he turned and saw the company approaching, and tried as best and fast he could to drown the jarring memory of the greyish nightmare in the depths of other thoughts and concerns, lest Gallan and Raddia, already looking numb with fear, pick up on it and panic. As for his face, which he knew not how to

control (centuries of solitude can do that to you, when there's no one around to protect by concealing your anxiety), luckily it was too high for the others to observe comfortably and at length.

The boarding of all five of them on the flying machine was also a stroke of luck, for the clumsiness it entailed offered them some much-needed levity. First they had to explain to Yonfi that he wasn't big enough to drive the machine—while the boy swore up and down that since yesterday he'd grown a head taller, if not more—and then they began trying various seating arrangements, many of which ended up with someone face down in the still-warm sand. It was Yern who finally came up with the best possible solution, since, in his many years as a wandering Farmer peddling produce and animals, he'd learnt how best to make them fit in his cramped and creaky cart.

Thus Wixelor sat in the middle of the seat, with Gallan and Raddia on his sides, half sitting and half holding onto the machine's wooden frame, while Yodren crouched between Wixelor's huge bony legs with Yonfi curled up in his arms, still leaving room enough for his feet to turn the pedals. And then it was really time to go, because with the darkening of the sky and the mist that hang in the horizon, veiling the Drowning Isles, they would have to be able to see, and be quick—and hopefully lucky.

Yonfi's shrieks of delight erupted the moment the blades began their noisy whir, and then drowned them out, squealing, "Look, Papa, *look!* I'm *flying!*"

However, what Yern had glimpsed before the machine rose too high and turned its rear to him, was not merely the smiling faces of his sons as they waved him goodbye, but also, in Wixelor's mild, compassionate gaze, his fleeting though rapturous dream: the whole Kobold family, once more together, happy as can be.

As nightfall cooled the air, making them squeeze even closer together to steal a bit of one another's warmth, the wildly different companions, children of realms which had never before come together—much less joined forces in a common enterprise—felt for the first time that, no matter how unexpectedly their fates had crossed paths, they were now united as one, embarking on a journey with no discernible return.

And this feeling in turn bred sudden yet strong alliances amongst them, bonds that, though barely understandable, made their hearts throb with affection. Yodren was thinking of the awkward incident with Harfien, and what it might have led to if he were of the same predilection; it wasn't desire, for he knew desire even if he'd never shared it with another; but it was nonetheless a sentiment both strong and darkly alluring, which, for no reason he could think of, brought Gallan to his mind: Gallan of the alabaster skin and ice blue eyes, who, from what Yodren understood, should have lain with his sister Raddia, but had never done so out of some profound and powerful aversion.

Raddia was at the same moment occupying Wixelor's thoughts. Wixelor, who, though a Dreamer, had scarcely ever made dreams of his own, still less ones involving a woman who would fill the resounding hollow of his loneliness with her love. And now this magnificent creature, small and dainty as a blossom, stood with her back against his knee, hanging on the slanting wooden beam for dear life, and there was nothing Wixelor would like more than have her sit on his knee, and

then slowly slide into his lap, while he bent over to bury his face in the smooth, silken nest of her lily-scented hair.

And little Yonfi, drowsy from the rocking of the flight, was thinking of them all as his new family, who would love him and fulfill his every wish. The Seers were like his parents, always knowing what was going through his mind and yet hardly ever strict with him, Yodren was, well, himself, his beloved big brother who was so clever he could read those funny black things and know what they said, and Wixelor was his—what was the word? ah, yes—a *grandfather*, an old, wise man who would spoil and spoil him. Of course this didn't mean he'd forgotten his real family; in fact, it was hard to think of his Mama and Papa and Yofana without tears welling in his eyes, but, like Mistress Raddia said, he was a hero now, and heroes didn't snivel because they missed their Mama. And since they would all be together again, and soon, there was really no reason to whine like a baby; he was lucky to have this second family, who cherished him so.

Then the five airborne travellers were suddenly wrenched out of their musings, for with a last beating of its wings the flying machine had crossed to the other side of the foggy bank that hid the Drowning Isles; within moments they'd be right above them.

By then night had settled, so that only Wixelor, used to peering through the dark, should be able to make out the sharp, barren masses of kelp- and limpet-covered rock. But to their astonishment, where the middle island (or its void) ought to be, there hovered a bright transparent sphere that revolved with a dancer's languid grace.

There were odd shapes scattered around it, patches of green and grey and white, but most of it was blue, so much and so intense a blue it felt as though the sphere was an eye before whose gaze they were helpless: they couldn't escape it, and the closer they got to it the more they felt its draw; and every time they blinked, the blackness of their lids was pierced by countless luminous pinpricks, dazzling and formidable as life.

Chapter VI

I

Gallan! she thought, and sitting up with a jerk she coughed up brine and tendrils of seaweed, nasty things that stuck to her palate like flat worms, making her retch.

Through a film of salt water and tears Raddia could make out a beach similar to the one they'd just left from, but one look at the sky was enough to realize they were no longer in Feerien. Never before had she seen a sky like this, so filled with massive grey clouds it seemed that any moment now their weight might bring it crashing down. And the sea, spreading as far as the eye could see and tossed this way and that by great wild waves, was equally dismal a sight. One would think this a world made of dullstone.

It also felt as though the ground was trembling slightly, but then Raddia heard the chatter of her teeth and realized it was her own body shaking from the vicious cold. Her clothes were soaked and the sand she sat upon was also wet, and hard, and freezing. She hugged herself as tightly as she could, and rubbed her arms and legs, but still she shook violently, and had to squeeze her lips together to stop her teeth from chattering, which made her whole head vibrate painfully. Oh, what she wouldn't give for a moment under Lurien's white sky, for the mildness of its air, its warm, soft grass! Their Makers had been truthful in this, at least: beyond the Sphere of Untouch the world was *cold*.

But they were futile, these thoughts, for she had no way of knowing if anything she loved about her realm existed still, and as she remembered it. And oh, selfish fool that she was, she had forgotten all about Gallan and the rest of them! Luckily, one look around sufficed to convince her that they had all made it to Erat Rin—if this was indeed the dreary world around them—and, although not in perfect shape, they were all very much alive. Gallan was on all fours vomiting sea water, Yodren and Yonfi were still curled up as one, forcefully rocking back and forth to warm each other, while Wixelor was sprawled across the sand, coughing and bringing up great jets of salt water along with clumps of the revolting wormlike stuff, and even some of those flat silver animals—fish?—which fell on the sand and flapped in agony.

However, the flying machine hadn't fared as well across the threshold, for it lay smashed into pieces, strewn along the shore and beaten by the constant breaking waves. Raddia sincerely hoped that there might be some other way of going back.

I wouldn't bet on it, came Gallan's voice. Are you all right?

So cold! she said, while he crawled over to fall, shuddering himself, in her arms.

Do you remember anything from—whatever it was that just happened? Because the only thing I can recall is that blackness with all those blinking lights, and then I was falling...

I felt that, too; in fact, I remember thinking that we'd never survive the fall.

Well, it appears that we did—though for better or for worse, it's too early to tell.

It was then that Raddia, her chin resting on Gallan's shoulder, noticed that small peculiar creature plodding near the still-sluggish Wixelor. At first she thought it was Yonfi, restored to his usual inexhaustible vigour, but Yonfi was still cuddled up in his brother's embrace; moreover, as she observed its slow coming and going—it seemed that it was picking up the fish that lay around Wixelor, unfettered by the enormousness of his supine body and the powerful rasping of his breath—she realized it wasn't bending its body up and down but was constantly stooped, like certain old people they'd seen in the Castle, whose bones had been distorted by disease; yet the creature's face, which she had glimpsed once or twice (looking right back at her with the same fearlessness) was decidedly that of a child, flashing the quick brazen grin of childish mischief.

The little one's mind was humming with merry thoughts, but they were voiced in a language neither Raddia nor Gallan understood; however, since young minds often tend to think in images, the same ones they've only recently learnt to associate with words, they soon picked up three things: first, that although the extreme deformity and gauntness made the child's sex indeterminate, she was

actually a girl; second, that she was positively thrilled with all the fish Wixelor had swallowed and regurgitated; and lastly, that when she thought of them, she used a word that sounded like sun.

Raddia was trying to decide whether it would be better to call out to the girl, lest her mind's voice scare her, when Yonfi, having quickly recovered from the cold, saw her crooked form, jumped to his feet and rushed towards her letting out inarticulate cries of joy; Yodren was trying to call his little brother back—the poor thing seemed no more dangerous than a turtle, but who knew? Perhaps Yonfi wasn't as powerful in Erat Rin.

Yet to keep children apart is as impossible as separating drops of water: they are so fundamentally alike, their very nature draws them together. And the girl didn't seem afraid of Yonfi, either; in fact, when he reached her and stood before her panting and blinking, she beamed at him, and taking one of the fish from her basket, she offered it to him. Yonfi tried to explain that she could keep it, and that if he wanted to catch fish he had but to stand by a river and they'd leap right into his hands, but the girl, despite her grinning and nodding, made few utterances, all of them incomprehensible.

So finally Yonfi shouted in frustration, "Yodren! She speaks funny, and I can't understand a word she's saying! Please come tell me what she's saying!"

Yodren already stood behind him, hands resting protectively on Yonfi's narrow shoulders, and reassured by the girl's obvious harmlessness, he asked her her name.

And though when she began to talk Yodren couldn't comprehend a thing, with every passing moment, to his astonishment, he was making out more and more words, a feeling he had last experienced at twelve, when he'd suddenly realized he possessed the gift of reading and writing. Even more incredible, though, was the fact that this piteous creature spoke in a tongue which, for all its strangeness, was utterly familiar to Yodren: the Divine Language; a thing which took him completely aback, for up until now he had only encountered it in writing, and to hear it spoken, the words as mercurial as those of the ancient texts and prophecies, was nothing short of a marvel. What could this mean? Wixelor had said that the Forgotten Sphere had been among the first worlds created by the Gods, and also the first to be separated and driven far away from Norien. Of course all these concepts were equally confusing to Yodren, but one thing was certain: if what he'd been raised to consider as the language of the Spirits could fit inside the mind of a child of Erat Rin, then it was quite possible that the Spirits were mere figments, and that the humpbacked little wretch speaking to him descended from his own ancestors.

By then the rest of the company had gathered around, shivering still but curious about the first person to encounter in this grim, alien place. What was her name? What had happened to her? Had she been born like this? Were there other people close by?

Yonfi, feeling potentially upstaged, stood on the tips of his toes and said, "I am Lord Yonfi Kobold, though many call me Royen the Eternal, for I am an immortal hero who can raise the dead! And who might you be, little girl?"

Grasping the meaning of the question by the pomposity of Yonfi's posture, she replied in her arcane, melodious language. "She has no name," Yodren said after

she was done. “Her parents abandoned her when she was a babe, so they never gave her one.”

“Poor dear,” Wixelor said in his booming voice. “How dreadful.”

“But surely she must call herself something,” Gallan said.

Yodren asked her again, still amazed at how fluently his mind formed and his mouth produced the ancient words, and listened to the girl’s reply. “She says she doesn’t need one,” he translated to the others. “If someone wants to speak to her, they can bid her to approach; she herself knows who she is, and it can’t all fit in a word; names, she says, are for animals and things, which can’t speak for themselves.”

“What if someone’s looking for her?” Raddia asked.

“No one would ever go looking for her,” Yodren said after a bit. “She says she’s far too sickly to be of use to anyone, either as a companion or as food.”

“As *food*?” Yonfi exclaimed. “Her people *eat* one another?”

This took longer for the girl to explain, while they listened, all besides Yodren mystified; but once or twice she pointed at the sky, and said the word ‘*sun*’.

“She was thinking of that exact word before,” Raddia said. “What does it mean?”

“It means He who gives life,” Yodren interpreted as the girl spoke. “I gather it’s their version of the Spirits, or Gods; either way, she says that a few years ago it suddenly vanished behind the clouds; and then... and then ashes started to fall from the sky, bitter black ashes that poisoned the trees and the grass and the flowers—till they all died; and then the animals died too, for they had nothing to feed on... and the only creatures that survived were men and fish; if it weren’t for the fish, she says, man would have died off as well, and not just from hunger, but because... many took to eating human flesh. She’d have probably met the same fate, but luckily they only fed on the healthy, and she, being born after the black snow, was, like most children, disfigured; so they spared her.”

For a moment they all fell silent at the horror of it all—a dead world populated by cannibals, where weak, malformed children were left to fend for themselves.

Wixelor was dumbstruck; it was that awful dream, down to the last detail.

“But how did this happen?” Raddia said, her voice hesitant and numb. “Why did this—sun—disappear? And where did the poisonous snow come from?”

Yodren asked the girl, and in replying she pointed once more at the sky. And as he listened, his face grew sombre, then fearful, and finally petrified.

“A stone,” he muttered, avoiding the gazes turned upon him. “She says the Gods cast a huge stone that fell from the sky; the Stone of Death, her people call it.”

To flee the biting wind that blew from the sea, they wandered away from the shore till they found a clump of dead trees, whose great trunks, though drooped as if in acceptance of defeat, formed a sort of shelter that made the cold bearable.

Yonfi, after promising to Yodren that he would stay in sight and come running back if he saw anyone approach, was noisily chasing the nameless girl, who, despite the misshapeness that forced her to run with a hobbling gait, was surprisingly fast, darting across the familiar dunes and patches of marshland as if her life depended on it.

If only we could share the boldness of their youth, Yodren mused, and they all nodded in agreement; they had decided to speak in thought, a thing achievable

since the bond between them had grown to the point that, by sheer proximity to the Lurienite siblings they could all engage in one big cloud of understanding; furthermore, it was still cold enough to set their teeth chattering and render any attempt at normal speech pointless.

And the silence also befitted the glumness they had all felt descend upon them after listening to the girl's account, whose implications they were still trying to fathom.

Do you think, Raddia said to Wixelor, that this stone she spoke of could be – One of the Runes? Yes, it seems quite likely that it was the Rune of Death.

But does that mean it is already over? That this is—the end? Gallan asked, his mind's voice faltering from conflicting emotions, angry disbelief foremost among them.

Not necessarily. You see, for Erat Rin—if this where we're at, and I believe it is—to still exist, even as a shadow of its former self, it means that the destruction wasn't complete; which in turn probably means that the devastation was somehow counterbalanced by an equal force.

The Rune of Life, Yondren said. But there's supposedly a third one, right?

Yes—the Rune of Fate and Chance; however, as my parents taught me early on, the will of the First God is so obscure as to make the greatest darkness appear blinding in comparison. There really is no telling what fate and chance may bring. Yet I wouldn't be too quick to despair; after all, there have been enough fortunate omens to give hope that ill ones won't prevail. The mere fact that we're all here, together, is an utterly miraculous twist of destiny: Gallan and Raddia are the first children of Lurien to conquer the fear of touch and survive in a world they'd been raised to dread; and the same goes for me: not long ago, leaving the Eye was an impossibility I wouldn't entertain for a moment; and then of course there's Yonfi, whose illustrious fate I think gives ample proof—

But Wixelor's reasoning, which had just begun to thaw their icy core of fear and doubt, was suddenly disrupted by a bloodcurdling shriek. At once they all leapt to their feet, bracing themselves against a band of man-eating savages, but then the scream was heard again, and this time it was followed a burst of joyful girlish laughter.

And then Yonfi appeared at the top of a nearby dune, accompanied by a girl it took them a while to recognize as the miserable creature they had encountered on the beach. Even when she stood before them, still giggling and overflowing with happiness, they couldn't believe her utter transformation. For she was now straight and sprightly as a young cypress tree, a good head taller than Yonfi, and her face, which had been mostly hidden by lank strands of hair draping it because of her crookedness, was one of exquisite beauty: heart-shaped, with rosy, radiant skin, a perky nose above a perfect set of ruby lips, and gorgeous, captivating eyes the colour of honey. And though she still wore the same drab, shapeless thing – which hadn't begun life as a garment – beneath it now there swelled the plumpness of a body on the verge of womanhood.

"I just grabbed her," Yonfi said, aglow with pride, "and she changed!"

The girl suddenly snatched him up, raised him high and gave his exposed belly loud, ticklish kisses that sent Yonfi into a yelping ecstasy; and then she put him

down, kneeled so they were the same height and held him in a fierce hug of gratitude.

Yonfi was still breathless from the abundance of female tenderness he so clearly relished, but he had more important news to impart. “Oh, and she showed me the sun!”

They all stared at him. “She—*showed* you?” Yodren said.

“Not the *real* sun! But she drew me a picture on the ground, and then she pointed at it and then at me. I think she believes we have come from the sun.”

Hearing the word repeated, the girl nodded frantically, pointing at all of them and making swooping gestures, as if to say that they had fallen from the sky.

Puzzled, Yodren asked her to draw the sun again for them, which she promptly did, using a stick to carve a big circle where the soil was dryer; then she added lines that emanated from the circle, which they all took to be rays of light—all but Wixelor, who was staring at the crude design with an expression of profound dismay.

“What’s wrong?” Raddia asked him. “Have you seen this picture before?”

But Wixelor didn’t seem to have heard her; turning to Yodren instead, he said, “Can you ask her to describe what this sun looked like? Was it very bright?”

“From what she’s heard,” Yodren said after the two of them spoke for a bit, “she says it was bright enough to warm the entire world – so bright, in fact, that half the year it could turn your skin red, and blind you if you looked at it for too long.”

“Is any of this familiar to you?” Gallan said, wary of Wixelor’s obvious alarm.

However, Wixelor was already pacing to and fro, his towering figure like a tree that had sprung back to life, while from his lips came an anxious, self-intended mutter. “...first a devastation here... then the Disaster... and now once more Erat Rin lies in ruin... but how could it travel so far away so fast? Unless the threshold works both ways...”

And as he paced, they all took a step back and averted their eyes, for as Wixelor struggled through a dense web of worry, he fleetingly assumed the form of bad dreams, of private terrors none of them wished to face at so portentous a moment.

Yet Yodren, even though he dreaded the Dreamer’s string of thought, which he, too, was starting to follow, felt compelled to ask. “What’s the matter? Tell us, please.”

Wixelor stopped, drew in a deep breath, and keeping his eyes firmly fixed at his bare, gigantic feet, he said, “I’m afraid their sun may be your Seventh Moon.”

We are defined by the world we live in as water by its vessel; it may slosh about, thinking itself fluid and free, but it cannot escape the confines of what holds it without spilling and becoming something else entirely: mud, steam, the blood of a thirsty beast.

So when Yodren suddenly pictured Feerien marching towards inexorable doom while its people still rejoiced at the Scavengers’ defeat and the vanquishment of the Shy Death, oblivious to what awaited them once the six moons completed their annual cycle and their evil sibling rose, his heart, already heavy, plummeted into a bottomless pit of anguish. For once neglectful of keeping appearances so as not to scare his little brother, he crumbled to his knees, teetered forward till his face

touched the ground, and let out a violent wail, banging his head and his fists on the soil in an agony of mourning.

For a moment they all stood and gazed at him, feeling utterly helpless in the face of such harrowing grief—even more so since Yodren's outburst had seized their own hearts in a grip of sympathy; for they, too, felt forever banished from their worlds.

Trying to shoulder the duty of the hero everyone expected him to be, Yonfi took a step towards his brother who writhed and heaved and wailed till the sound became as raw as the cry of some great wounded beast, and awkwardly patted him on his head and back, saying in a voice that wavered close to tears, "Please don't cry, brother. If it's Papa you're worried about, you can stop worrying, because by now he's surely gone to meet Mama and Yofana in Mistress Raddia's world, where no harm can come to them."

But this display of affection from the boy he was supposed to protect and soothe and keep a brave front for, sent Yodren into an even harsher fit of self-pity. Because the reason he wept wasn't merely the loss of his family, which he had more or less come to terms with, but the loss of his own life, whose course had been decided when he was still a child, torn from the bosom of his loving home to become a pampered prisoner poring over ancient nonsense. And now the pain had unlocked the door which kept that child tucked away in the silence of memory, and it couldn't stop weeping, as it did in the cold hard bed of his cell during those first, excruciating nights at the Scriptorium.

And Yonfi's words of comfort, a lie he himself had ruthlessly fed him, suddenly made Yodren conscious of an even greater offense he had unwittingly committed: that, in the years he had spent severed from his mother—whom as a boy he'd loved more than anything in the world, more than his own life, often thinking that he'd rather die young than have to suffer the unthinkable horror of her death—he had completely forgotten her face. It was this second death he wept for, which he, aloof and careless and unloving, had allowed to pass: the obliteration of his mother's face from his heart.

Seeing that Yonfi's caresses and Raddia's mental cooing had no effect on Yodren whatsoever, Gallan did something that surprised him as much as it did everyone else: he kneeled behind Yodren, locked his arms around him, and rocked him gently back and forth. Had Lorn done the same with him, when, as a child, he wallowed in the desolation Navva so often provoked with her carelessly cruel words? Or was it a need some part of him responded to without the least involvement of the mind, something as powerful as his urge to protect Raddia at any cost? Whatever the case, before long Yodren seemed to succumb to the lull of his embrace, and wiping the slime of misery off his face he fought for breath. And then, just as he was about to let go, Gallan's lips accidentally brushed the nape of Yodren's neck, and some of the gifted Scribe's proficiency passed through him in a flash—and suddenly he was able to understand the thoughts that frothed and bubbled like milk foam on the surface of the girl's mind and which, by the mediation of Yonfi, she was anxious to share with Yodren in order to lessen his sorrow.

“The sun may not be gone, she says,” Gallan whispered his ear. “That’s why she thought we came from there—her people believe there’s a land which wasn’t destroyed by the Stone of Death, where the sun shines still. She calls it No Place.”

As darkness thickened and the cold became insufferable, the girl led them to a grotto at the foot of a nearby hill, where they could pass the night in relative comfort—to which she saw at once, experienced as she was in living on her own, by lighting a fire with branches and driftwood and roasting the fish and some mussels she’d gathered.

And then, fed and rested and finally, mercifully dry, they huddled together and formed a chain, so that they could listen to more of the girl’s revelations; this they did by placing Yodren in the middle, with Gallan and Raddia sitting on either side of him and holding his hands, while they in turn held Wixelor’s and Yonfi’s hand respectively. Within moments they were all fluent in the Divine Language.

The girl began by offering a brief, simple version—the only one she knew, a fact for which she apologized—of her people’s religious beliefs. Unlike the other realms of Norien, the Gods of the Forgotten Sphere were extremely human-like: not only did they possess well-known and frequently depicted forms, but they were men and women, and indulged in all the vagaries and vices of their genders. Most importantly, however, Erat Rin was ruled by three major deities: the God of Life, the God of Death—both men, and great enemies—and their Exalted Mother, the Goddess Luck, without whose consent they were absolutely powerless. That was why, when sacrificing animals to ask a favour of the Gods, Oblivians always cut off the choicest part and burnt it on Her altar.

Of course, the girl said, all this was passed on from one generation to the next as a sort of tale to teach men, women and children to be more fearful and virtuous, but that no one truly believed that these fantastic entities roamed the world picking fights and luring people into ruin. But when the Stone of Death came hurtling from the heavens, killing hundreds of thousands of people in an instant, those who had survived clung to the ancient religion with fervour, either seeking absolution by starvation—or, if hunger got too painful, by suicide—or imitating the Gods’ worst iniquities, reasoning that, by resembling them in cruelty and foulness, they became godlike themselves. The girl, for instance, had learnt most of the olden myths from a blind old man who lived in a cave and sung of the Gods’ heroic deeds to the awful strum of a broken lyre, and who, though subsisting on what the girl caught or gathered for him, thought that she should be so grateful as to repay his wisdom by offering up herself to his lecherous gropings—a fate she avoided for months by digging holes in pumpkins and placing them between her legs, so that the abominable old man unknowingly copulated with his dinner while she whimpered and moaned to the rhythm of his huffing and puffing.

“What about No Place?” Yodren asked, for although they could all understand what the girl was saying, he alone could articulate her language.

No Place, apparently, was part of yet another ancient myth, according to which, between the realms of existence and nonexistence there hovered a world unknown even to the Gods of Life and Death, where the souls of the unborn originated from and where the dead went after they were free from the mortal coil. Since the

Oblivians, for all their vivid imagining, didn't believe in an afterlife of either sumptuous reward or everlasting punishment, they invested No Place with every pleasure, dread, hope and wonderment of life, so that over the centuries and despite its name, it evolved from a vague concept to an actual place, where everything was so different it resembled a dream: something that flees the mind even as it stirs within it the vibrant pangs of fear or desire.

And, as was to be expected, in the daze that followed the near-total extinction of life on Erat Rin, this mythical nowhere became more popular than ever, encompassing every survivor's frail hope that somewhere, somehow, a pocket of the world they knew had managed to elude the annihilation of the Stone of Death.

"You see," the girl said, her beautiful eyes gleaming in the firelight, "those who had seen and lived to recount the disaster, were of three different minds as to what had actually happened." There were those who claimed to have seen the Stone remain intact all through its deadly fall, crashing into solid ground and causing massive earthquakes, tidal waves, as well as raising the soot-snowing clouds that still overcasted the sky and kept the world in the grip of an endless grey winter. Others, however, said that, as it tore through the sky, the Stone had split in two, and that the resulting pieces collided in both the earth and the sea, so that entire landmasses had sunk forever into the furious waters. And there was still a third group who believed that the destruction, doubtless the work of the cruel Gods of Life and Death—killing most people while letting some live just to suffer—had been at the last moment influenced by the Goddess Luck, who, livid at the wickedness of her Sons, had torn off a third piece from the fragment that was supposed to ensure the survival of some people, and let it drop, gently as the planting of a seed, in a land which, by grace of Her mercy, was left unscathed. And since it was the warmth of the sun and its life-giving presence that the blighted Oblivians missed and longed for the most, that haven was woven into the myth of No Place, renamed as Land of the Sun and populated by the Sun People, blessed by the Goddess Luck and her bounty.

Since their minds were as united as the warmth of their breathing, they all heard Wixelor thinking, *The stolen Runes! They're all here!* Which made perfect sense: the Rune of Death had done its damage, partly mitigated by the Rune of Life, but what had kept these infinitely powerful objects from neutralizing and destroying one another, what still maintained a certain balance in this shaken, shattered world, must be the Rune of Fate and Chance, sent by Its God to prevent the End of All Things.

"Where is this sunny place?" Yonfi asked, yawning and shaking himself awake lest he be taken for a sleepy babe. "Because I would really like us to go there!"

But this was something neither the girl, nor anyone she had ever met seemed to know for sure. Some believed it was just another fable meant to console the miserable people of Erat Rin—the bereaved, the perpetually hungry, the wretched children with their skewed spines and lame feet—with the dream of some far-fetched wonderland.

What she knew for a fact, since every older person she'd ever met seemed to be in agreement about it, was that they were on an island that once boasted one of the world's greatest kingdoms, which had perished in a single sweep of the sky-high waves, sparing only those who lived up in the mountains: the shepherds and

villagers who, in the bitter aftermath, once plants had been killed by the ashes and the sunlessness, and their flocks had to be butchered and eaten before they died off too, degenerated into monsters.

However, the girl went on, her voice tinged with hope, those who had been to the island's south coast after the disaster, looking for more fish or mushrooms or perhaps even some resilient animals that had survived and could be bred or eaten, claimed that sometimes the cold was pierced by a balmy gust of wind, carried across the sea from beyond the horizon—and possibly originating from the longed-for Land of the Sun.

Which sounded just like the Hidden Nowhere they'd come so far to find.

The rub was this: no one among them could tell where this southern coast might lie. To Gallan and Raddia, the mere concept of south seemed obscure, for theirs had been a world of boundaries that shouldn't be crossed; and although Yodren had been taught by his father how to find his bearings in relation to the four points of the horizon, he could only do so by estimations based on the position of Feerien's moons.

But as sleep finally claimed their huddled knot, Wixelor was visited by a dream.

It was the dream of a bird, and like those of all beasts it was at once very simple and extremely lifelike, consisting mostly of visceral, powerful feelings.

He was a raven, flying above the desolate greyness. He was cold and tired, and wished he could rid his plumage of the peristing stench and moisture of the sea, whose salt now caked his once shiny, beautiful wings. He resented the sea, and deeply, but the only way to stay alive was by stalking its shallows and shoals for fish, while at the same time making sure that the repulsive flocks of gulls and albatross wouldn't attack him for poaching their prey. He could always join an unkindness, but he mistrusted his own kind no less; if food was scarce, it wouldn't be above them to feed on their weakest.

Oh, how he missed the good old days! Lazing around on the branch of a pine, warmed by shafts of sunlight and nibbling on blackberries or the occasional squirrel! Flying effortlessly for no reason other than the pleasure of it, aloft on wafts of wind as mild and fragrant as a bed of budding hyacinths! And then, well-fed and rested, seeking the company of a luscious female for some idle preening and mating...

Nowadays his poor, weary body could never get enough satisfaction to make up for the strain it had to suffer every single day. The few dead trees still standing offered no shelter from the bitter, endless wind, and most of their hollows were occupied by big, unfriendly owls. Carcasses, once an abundant source of flesh—the rich flesh of animals so huge their fat could sustain you all through the harshest winter—were now either too hard to come by, or dangerous, for men, most desperate of all beasts, often used them as decoys. Just the other day he'd seen a crow, too young and hungry to be wary, swoop down on the eviscerated corpse of a badger, only to have a band of grimy children who lurked behind a boulder pounce upon it and break its neck to feast on it.

But now his chilled body and worn-out wings were pleading for some rest, so that the raven had to make up his mind as to where he'd spend the night.

Yesterday he'd been lucky, and found a cave that wasn't crawling with hostile bats, but this could have easily changed; and besides, though he'd been forced to make many compromises in the last few months, some part of him still revolted at the thought of sleeping in a deep dark hole, out of which he couldn't fly away at once if some unknown danger presented itself. He was going in circles above the bent husk of an olive tree whose gnarly roots formed a cavity and wondering if it would be vacant and spacious enough, when he was suddenly struck by a blast of wind as strong as the beating of huge wings, so that he had to make a dive to keep his balance. But the wind came rushing again, an invisible wall that pushed him back—and this time he realized what was most shocking about it.

For one thing, it was warm, decidedly warm, shrouding him in a sense of delight he hadn't felt since that last time he'd basked in the sun; and for another, along it came an unmistakable aroma, zesty and lovely: the smell of a eucalyptus tree.

The raven had no clue as to the origin of the wind, but even so he let himself be tossed to and fro by its powerful currents and undercurrents, happy as can be—for this was how the old world, the old, wonderful life felt like.

And plummeting and rising once more, he let out his happiness in a screech.

Wixelor woke with a start, the raven's call still ringing in his ears.

And then, turning around, he saw that it wasn't all a dream: for through the dim light he saw the actual bird, sharp-beaked and black, sitting at the mouth of the grotto.

There couldn't be more definite an omen.

He awakened the others gently by wrapping his long bony arms around them, and once they began to stir he wordlessly told them of his dream and how, since it had come so startingly true, it could only mean that they should try and follow the raven.

And despite their sluggishness, they all realized how imperative it was to do as Wixelor suggested, and so they untangled their intertwined limbs and got to their feet as noiselessly as possible, lest they frighten the bird that stared at them with the shiny beads of its eyes. Even Yonfi, whose immediate urge would have been to run at the bird with widespread arms just for the pleasure of terrifying it, understood the importance of keeping quiet all too well: the cold he'd woken to was so piercing that, if there was the slightest chance that the raven should lead them to a place where the wind blew warm and smelled of trees, he was determined to refrain from so much as looking at it.

But their cautiousness proved unnecessary, for just as they were trying to decide how to best approach the bird without scaring it off, the raven let out a loud squawk and with a single beating of its wings flew at Wixelor and alighted on his shoulder.

Raddia smiled to herself. "He thinks you're a tree," she said.

Climbing the mountain at whose foot they'd spent the night, and which formed part of a range that spread across the great island like a jagged, formidable wall, would have been a near-impossible affair for Norien's questers if it weren't for the girl, who, in spite of her former disability, was thoroughly familiar with the paths,

ledges, footholds and hollows of the imposing slope. Because, as she explained with the smile of someone who has learnt to meet adversity with forbearance and appreciate life's small blessings, over the years she had often had to escape the carnal intentions of men desperate enough to overlook her crippledness by taking refuge on the mountain and its numerous hiding places.

"It wasn't that they couldn't come after me," she said, "but I guess they thought I wasn't worth the trouble."

"Have you ever been to the other side of the mountain?" Gallan asked.

"I've thought about it," said the girl, "but because that part of the island didn't sustain so devastating a damage—at least that's what they say—it's where most of these wicked, man-eating monsters live. I'd never survive, let alone make it to the southern coast, on my own."

"Well," Yodren said with a smile. "It appears that now you finally will."

The cold outside the cave was bracing, but that only strengthened their resolve to climb the mountain no matter how tall and steep it looked.

And true to her word, the girl led them along its trails, shelves, handholds and footholds with the assuredness of a nimble, hooved creature; she knew by sight which parts of the vertical rock were treacherous and shouldn't be held on to, what wide and sturdy-looking ledges were in fact ready to crumble at the slightest pressure, and where the granite was coarse enough to sit and rest without fear of slipping off.

As for the others, they seemed quite well-equipped for the climb. Gallan and Raddia had already scaled the heights of Mirror Mountain, and moreover, by removing their gloves and shoes and allowing their bare skin to touch the mossy rock, they were instantly suffused with an affinity to its surface, as if the precipice were a pliant beast they had subdued. And Wixelor, with his tremendous height, spidery limbs and giant's fortitude, turned out to be ideally suited for the task, which he accomplished with the ease obtained by two and a half centuries of climbing up and down his solitary island—and this while carrying both Yodren and Yonfi on his back at the dodgier parts of their ascent. However, they all cast envious glances at the raven, which, by a mere flap of his wings, perched higher and higher, waiting for them with the impassiveness of a superior being watching the slogging of dumb, incompetent creatures.

By nightfall—a thing perceptible only by the darkening of the stagnant clouds—they reached the mountain's summit, but their achievement felt hardly rewarding—for the sudden exposure to the full strength of the biting wind and the damp mist snaking around them made the prospect of lying down on the bare rock to sleep, even in a heap of tangled bodies, as inviting as death (which didn't seem out of the question).

They were even thinking of proceeding to their downward climb despite their exhaustion, when, as they shuffled about, treading slowly because of the hovering mist, they heard the raven's squawk—and stepping towards it they found themselves before a most peculiar construction: a tall, roughly-cubic tub of stone, hollow on the inside and with three great stepping stones extending stair-like to the rim of the structure.

No one, not even the girl, had any clue as to the purpose of the strange vessel, but once they climbed inside they found that its cavity was filled almost to the middle of its height with many years' worth of thickly-layered ashes, comfortable enough even for Wixelor to curl up and lie down upon, shielded by the wind. But just as they were shifting and settling and aching to sleep, Raddia felt something sharp poke her back and sitting up she saw a white thing protruding from the ash, and extracting it she realized with horror that it was a long flat bone, not unlike the ones in her own forearm.

Yodren, sensing her alarm, crawled over and took the bone from her trembling hands—and understood at once that they were inside a sacrificial altar; Spirit Servants all over Feerien had been burning animal offal upon or inside similar altars for centuries, to appease the Spirits. But he also knew, from folk tales, that the people of the Vanished Kingdoms, before the Disaster ended them and their wicked ways, would often sacrifice human flesh as well, such as the dismembered corpses of their enemies after a battle, or even innocent babies, to placate the Spirits during a draught or a pest.

And then he recalled what the girl had told them about the survivors of Erat Rin's devastation, and how in the despair of the growing famine many had made prey of their own kind. Which meant that, judging also by the bone he held with rising distaste, that they might be sitting upon the remains of devoured men, women and children.

He tossed the bone outside, and lying down again to wrap his arms around the soundly-sleeping Yonfi, he tried to toss the thought aside as well, not wishing to alarm Raddia who seemed also on the brink of sleep. Yet as he closed his eyes, Yodren thought of the Scavengers, who, for all their vilification, had been driven to cannibalism by the sheer immensity of their hunger, a hunger he had never known nor ever wished to know.

For no one is truly superior to one's most desperate self.

By a stroke of luck—perhaps the Goddess was at last gracing them with a smile—their descent was far more painless than they expected, for in the ebbing of the tidal waves that had laid waste to the island, one or several great buildings (castles? palaces? temples?) had been uprooted, swept back and shattered against the mountain, creating a massive heap which, after years of accumulating ashes, had turned into a smooth black slope, its provenance evidenced only by a few pillars and granite boulders jutting out of the ashes. They merely had to lie down and let themselves slide to the ground.

And the Goddess kept smiling; for once at the foot of the slope, they discovered a hidden treasure that could alleviate the cold which was still their greatest enemy. It was Gallan who first spotted an unfamiliar spear-like thing protruding from the ashes—and pulling it out he unearthed a kind of goat with great sharp horns, which turned out to be just one of a flock that had been buried under the ash and thus remained perfectly intact. The carcasses were too desiccated and unappealing to eat, but their hides could be made into some sorely-needed capes. It took them a while to think of a way to skin the corpses without the aid of tools, till Yonfi simply walked over, grabbed a goat by the neck and tore off its coat with a single pull of his small hand as if it were paper.

Thus cloaked and still refreshed from their sleep, they set out in the wilderness, guided solely by the raven which would fly ahead, perch on a rock and wait for them.

It took them three long days to reach the southern coast, during which they were waylaid three times by groups of bandits and savages. The first two took one look at Wixelor, even more forbidding in his goatskin, and fled in a panic. The third group was either more courageous or completely desperate, for despite their obvious dread on seeing the monster at the rear they still charged on the travellers, letting out war cries and waving about their makeshift weapons in a display of ferociousness that was meant more to embolden themselves than to terrorize the curious company. However, it was the tiniest traveller they should have feared, had they known the power he wielded. And Yonfi, always happy to unleash Royen upon unsuspecting foes, brought his bare foot down, and instantly a crack tore through the ground with a rumble, rushing towards the bandits in a rapidly widening chasm that swallowed them and their howls of terror.

Hunger was a far greater source of distress, for after they had gone through the scant provisions the girl had gathered—mostly fish and mollusks—they could barely get enough food to suppress the groaning of their empty stomachs. The wasteland they were crossing was entirely barren and lifeless; even its ponds and creeks, which Yonfi and the girl spent hours wading about, yielded nothing but tadpoles and lichens, so that they had to make do with the odd mushroom or bulb, devoid of taste and sustenance.

And so after a while they all turned their hopes to their feathered guide, waiting for the rest of Wixelor's dream to come true. But, alas, no warm gust of wind pierced the freezing cold, and no matter how often they stopped to smell the air, they could detect no pleasing scent—only the earthy rankness of the goatskins.

And then, on the dawn of the fourth day, by which time they had grown so weak and weary they could scarcely stand, the raven flew ahead with greater speed than usual, and disappeared behind the top of a hillock instead of staying in sight. Such was their horror at the thought of finding themselves lost in this endless desert, they darted after the bird despite the feebleness of their quivering legs—whereupon, reaching the top of the mound, they saw the sea. Yet it was with a sinking heart that they regarded it.

For though they had no reason to anticipate a magnificent sight, deep down they had invested the southern coast with the last of their dwindling hopes, dreaming of a view that would justify their arduous journey, and which would bear some sign of the marvellous land lying beyond. But all they could see was a vast expanse of sea and sky as bleak as those of the coast they'd left. And once more they envied the raven, which, its mission fulfilled, had already shrunk into a tiny black spot fading into the clouds.

Yonfi had run ahead to call the raven back in vain, and by the time they caught up with him, standing with shaking legs upon a large rock, he had dissolved into tears of utter desperation. Yodren climbed on the rock, wrapped him up in the goatskin that had slipped off his thin, heaving shoulders, and gathered him into his arms, telling him it would be all right, and that they'd meet with the raven again at the other shore of the sea. He had knelt down to better cradle Yonfi, and when he felt his legs grow damp he thought it was because of the proximity of

the sea; but looking down he was amazed to see that, where Yonfi's tears had dropped, the rock had split apart, and from within it flowed a steady spring of fresh water, precious as life itself.

They drank avidly, filling up on water, while the girl wandered about the dunes, looking for anything remotely edible—but not even moss grew on the desolate ground. And since there was nothing left to do, swollen like wine sacks, they set off for the sea.

As soon as they reached the coarse grey sand, moist from the sea whose breath they could feel on their faces, the girl got down and started digging holes at the edge of the waves, and before long she came up with handfuls of thick brownish worms which, despite their horrid appearance, were quite pleasing to the palate—so soon they were all on their knees, frantically digging up more. And once the beast of hunger was finally appeased, they nestled at the foot of a dune and considered their next step.

For there it lay before them: the final threshold to the Hidden Nowhere and the Runes; and yet they might as well lie in another world, for unless they magically grew wings or fins and gills, there seemed no conceivable way of crossing the great wild sea.

And that was not the grimmest thought to darken their souls. Because once hope has been shattered again and again, putting it back together becomes almost impossible, so that hopelessness seems not just invincible but, as the mire of misery drags you down, increasingly tempting: the urge to give up fighting, and peacefully surrender to defeat. For what if Wixelor's dream was no more than a dream? What if there was no Land of the Sun, and the same inescapable pall of death shrouded Erat Rin in its entirety?

Yet still in their hearts they couldn't accept such a prospect any more than utter it aloud—and the reason wasn't so much the dread of their own slow, torturous deaths, but the thought of Yonfi, unable to die, roaming this aptly named Forgotten Sphere in complete and eternal solitude, perpetually hungry and cold, afraid and miserable. They had to keep on hoping and fighting, even if they feared that all was lost.

So they all got to their wobbly feet and began a slow search along the stretch of the beach, looking for wrecks of vessels on which, according to what the girl had heard, many people in straits like their own had tried to sail across the sea; and failed, was the unspoken implication, as befits any myth: try to cheat death, and see what happens.

However, when Wixelor, scanning their surroundings with the advantage of his height, spotted what looked like a heap of broken wood, their spirits were somewhat lifted: at least it wasn't all a fable: people had actually tried to navigate to the land saved by the Runes, making it – even with their failure, and implied death—seem more real.

Sadly, the wreckage in question had sustained too great damage to be salvaged; the wooden planks were rotten through and through, crumbling at the slightest touch, and the wide fabric lying next to the remains of the boat, stitched together from smaller pieces of cloth—presumably the sail—had been torn to shreds of no possible use.

And then Yonfi—who had instantly perceived the search as a treasure hunt, and dared the girl to a race over and across the next three dunes—gave a cry of triumph that sent them all running after him and to the raft on which he bounced with loud giggles.

Of course, it took them a while to recognize the precise nature and usage of the flat structure, made of thick logs bound together with rope and a black substance. But when the girl called from the other side of the sandy hill, where she stood next to a long, solitary trunk of wood to which was tied another great piece of thickly-woven cloth, Wixelor, unearthing a seaman's nightmare from his memory, explained to them how one could sail on the flat vessel by raising the fabric on the vertically placed log and letting the wind do the rest. Yet in the process of the raft being tossed and smashed against the shore, the tall trunk—the mast, Wixelor remembered at last—had broken in half.

Disappointment dragged them down once more, aided by their great tiredness, but just as they shuffled listlessly around the severed trunk that seemed a reflection of their own broken spirits, they were roused by the girl's lively, almost cheerful voice.

"Look!" she said, and turning around they saw that she was holding up the sail—or as much of it as her smallness allowed – between her outstretched arms. "And I bet you're taller than this tree," the girl said to Wixelor. "So maybe *you* can be the—"

Wixelor, intrigued at the thought, took the sail from her hands, and spread it to its full width and length, while holding down the bottom of the fabric with his feet. And just as the girl had guessed, it seemed as though the maker of the sail had made it to fit his height and arm span with perfect precision. They were all looking up hopefully, and then an even more fortuitous thing happened: a gust of wind swept the cleft between the dunes where they stood, filling the sail with its breath and tugging it forth as if Wixelor were indeed the mast of a raft standing tall and strong against the elements of the sea.

But while the children were prancing about, cheering and clapping their hands, Wixelor's smile faltered and was gone, again in accord with the wind, so that the swollen sail emptied at once, drooping sadly around his feet. "This won't do, I'm afraid," he said.

Yonfi had to be hushed by his brother, and then Wixelor explained that which, had any one of them come from a seafaring world or people, should be obvious: namely, that he would never be able to remain standing and holding the sail while the wind and the waves tossed them this way and that. "I'd have to be nailed to the floor of the raft."

Then they all felt that peculiar, not entirely pleasant quivering of their minds as Gallan's voice breezed through their thoughts saying, *Perhaps I could help.* "Although," he went on as they turned to face him, "I'll probably need some help myself."

Yet when he sought Raddia's thoughts, he realized she wasn't there.

She had to get away to think, without alarming Gallan with the confusion which churned about inside her, mixing hope with dread and momentary relief with agonizing uncertainty. Over the past few days so many and so different things had

happened to her—to all of them—that she just needed to spend some brief time to try and sort them out.

For one thing, her feelings towards their birthplace had changed dramatically. At first, when they had unknowingly crossed over to Feerien and were beating at the cave wall like mad beasts, and later on, while they were facing the army of the Scavengers and their odious leader, Raddia's thoughts had many times fled to the remembered safety of Lurien, possibly forever lost to them; it wasn't a rational longing, for to their people she and Gallan were dead, killed for the impurity of their stubbornly unmerging Substances. Even if by some unforeseen miracle they could return to their homeworld, and found it intact, they would never be accepted and allowed to contaminate the unblemished Lurienite race.

But then, as her senses got used to the novelty of a realm where touch was not a curse but what brought things and people splendidly together, and they, the outcasts of their world, were hailed and welcomed as heroes, Raddia began to warm to the prospect of never going back, even if they were successful in their quest to save Norien. And even now, despite the bleakness of their imminent fate, she was determined to stay wherever the future might take them. Anything seemed preferable to that land of frigid fools.

However, what had truly brought on this change of heart, even, to a point, from the moment she first laid eyes on his pretty face, was the way she felt about Yonfi.

She hadn't dared to call it love, although she'd been instantly drawn to the boy, because love wasn't the thing defining Lurien nor the relations of its dwellers. So alien were both she and Gallan to the concept of holding another person's life as dear as your own (if not more), to a bond forged not by tradition, necessity and blind luck but by an overflow of emotion between men, women and children who might be complete strangers, that they had had to be taught the very *words* describing every such bond and its strength.

And the Kobolds had been an astonishing lesson in love.

First Yern, the father, and the way he rushed after his son when he sensed a potentially harmful presence; how he had placed himself in front of Yonfi, even though he had no means of knowing whether the strange riders were hostile or not. It was as if Yonfi belonged to him, yet not in the sense of a precious possession but rather as if the boy were part of Yern's body, his own beating heart which he'd readily tear out himself before letting anyone to lay a finger on his child. Raddia had felt the strength of Yern's devotion like a blow, an invisible, impenetrable wall of passion the likes of which she'd never even imagined possible—for even in his kindest moments, Lorn's feelings toward his offspring had the distinct air of being the result of obligation rather than choice.

Then came the encounter with Yodren, which had stunned her even more, as much because of the way love seemed to bind all three of them in an almost separate world of affection, as for the fact that it made her own relationship with Gallan seem pitifully weak. For they were siblings as well, brother and sister, and although they had always cared for and protected each other—and always would—the aloofness of their upbringing and the strict roles they'd been born to fulfill as Mates (a quality she'd come to view as increasingly shameful when compared with the fierce adoration that flowed between Yodren and Yonfi, even though they'd

never seen each other before) made of Gallan and herself sad, incomplete creatures: Faults of this warm-blooded world.

So, by the time of the Scavengers' doomed attack, when she had witnessed Yern's devastation at the sight of his slain firstborn, and the subsequent fire of his bliss when Yonfi had brought Yodren back to life, Raddia had already made up her mind as far as her own being was concerned: fate had given her a tepid heart, and the only way that she could ever hope to feel a shred of such worship lay in denouncing her old life, and trying with all her might to teach herself how to love, and be loved back.

(And then of course there had been that other most formidable absence: the dead mother, a woman Yonfi painfully missed, for her own unimaginable love had been forged even in the way she gave him life—not by immersing herself a river and waiting for her Substance to bear fruit, but by carrying a tiny version of Yonfi inside her very body, feeding him with her very flesh, and her own kind of life-giving milk. It was almost terrifying to Raddia, the thought of her flat belly swelling with a child like Yonfi, but the more she thought about it, the more she envied Yenka and the shadow she continued to cast.)

Yet even if none of these people had ever existed, Yonfi, in and by himself, was more than enough reason to learn the ways of love he was accustomed to and demanded. The aura of light surrounding him when she'd first seen him might have dissipated after a while, but its brightness persisted in his every trait: in the ardour of his hugging, the startling warmth his small body gave off as he'd nestled against her bosom and gone to sleep, in the way he sought her with sudden urgency, craving her endearments and caresses, and most of all in the spark that lit his eyes as he returned her smiles.

All of which meant that Raddia knew one thing with unwavering certainty: no matter what hardship lay ahead, she would never, not for a moment, leave Yonfi in need of her; she would strive to live as long as possible, surrounding him with what frail love she could muster, and before reaching the end of her mortal days she would somehow make sure that Yonfi would spend the eternity laid upon him in happiness. (And who knew? Perhaps Gallan shared her feelings for the boy up to some point, and might agree to replace the father he had lost upon their leaving Feerien—though even if he didn't, it wouldn't change Raddia's determination a bit. She was extremely fond of her brother, and wished he'd stay by her side forever, but her passion for Yonfi was stronger).

If only the Gods, Spirits or whatever they were could give her one sign, just one, that the life she dreamed of was possible! Standing a little back from where the waves lapped the shore, Raddia fixed her gaze on the ashen horizon, waiting for the sign she so desired. It was then that she first noticed the white bird flying amidst the clouds. Yet though she knew nothing of seabirds, there was something strange in the way the white dot floated upon the wind, hurling downwards one moment and shooting up the next, as if it were no heavier than a feather. Please let it not be wounded, sick or dying! she prayed, but as it approached she became aware of another peculiar thing: the speck of white didn't grow bigger as it should, but remained a tiny thing tossed this way and that.

And before Raddia could make out what it was, a sudden breeze grasped it and sent it flying right at her, so that she barely had time to duck or cover her face—

neither of which were necessary, for as the small white thing alighted on her left cheek, and from there fell and rested on her shoulder, its fragrance gave its secret away. It was a petal, a single flower petal, and there couldn't be a surer sign than its wonderful smell.

"I simply hope you appreciate the danger involved; you might end up with a wooden foot—or worse."

"Well, even if I do, I think I can learn how to live with it. Who knows? It might serve me better than the real one. And it's not as if I could be more conspicuous."

"But what if this—*milk* cloth doesn't stop the spreading of the wood? What then? Aren't you the least bit afraid?"

"It will. Stranger things have already happened. I threw up seven stones spelling *nowhere*, for pity's sake! I trust this is part of the reason why; that it has all led up to this moment. So no, I'm not afraid."

Gallan's plan went thus: first Wixelor would step on the centre on the raft and stand on one foot; then Raddia would wrap his milcloth robe around Wixelor's calf, while he, gloves off, would place one hand on the Dreamer's bare foot and the other on the logs of the raft; and if all went well—and he saw no reason why they shouldn't—Wixelor's foot would become one with the raft, allowing him to hold the sail up without slipping or losing his balance, while he could use his other foot to partly swivel about, according to the changes of the wind's direction. And hopefully, once they reached the shores of No Place, he and Raddia could reverse the effect by joining hands in order to absorb the wood's Substance without sustaining any damage to their own.

Wixelor had agreed at once, almost as eager to set the plan in motion as Yonfi, but Yodren had serious misgivings, which he hastened to express, his main concern being that if Wixelor turned into a wooden statue and perished, they would lose their greatest asset—a rather heartless, hasty remark, which sent Yonfi in a tantrum, for how could his own brother say such a thing? Did he forget that he had Royen's ability to raise the dead? Why, Wixelor could be transformed into a turnip and he'd still be able to turn him back into his normal self! To put an end to the argument, Gallan tried to explain, as calmly as he could, the great power inherent in milcloth, that it was pure and eternal like the River whose Substance it shared—but Yodren was still hesitant, which made Gallan quite cross with Raddia who'd chosen this of all moments to wander off.

However, since the decision ultimately lay with Wixelor himself, there was nothing Yodren could do. And when Raddia returned, and felt Gallan's resentment like a slap across her mysteriously dreamy face, she took his side immediately, exhibiting her own garments, gloves and shoes—which, despite the hardship they had undergone, remained free of the slightest wear or tear—as proof of milcloth's durability. (Though deep inside, no matter how hard she tried to hide it from him, Gallan could sense a trace of doubt. Yes, they'd been taught early on by their Makers that the red stuff covering their bodies was indestructible, and that it should never be removed, for it was the only thing separating their Substance from the world—the greedy, lifeless world that craved to seep in. But ever since they'd left Lurien they'd seen so much of what they held as the absolute truth being the product of wild exaggeration and downright deceit, that part of her was

swayed by Yodren's reluctance. And there was something more, Gallan was sure of it, a secret, tangible thing obtained during her absence and concealed on her person, yet for all his probing Raddia's mind wouldn't yield its identity).

"Shall we begin?" Wixelor said, balanced upon the raft on his right foot with his arms outstretched. "I just hope it won't take too long, for I'm not sure I can maintain this pose indefinitely—and two wooden feet would be overdoing it."

In the event it all went smoothly, though Gallan's resolve had wavered once or twice. For one thing, he clearly didn't relish the prospect of baring himself in front of everybody, and he was very slow to do so, which only made the cold wind seem harsher; and when he'd finally decided to take the plunge and peel the robe off, Wixelor had lost his footing and collapsed face-down in the sand, causing Yonfi to explode with laughter and reaffirming Yodren's apprehension. But even after they had all turned decorously around (even Raddia, kneeling in front of Wixelor to wrap the robe around the trunk of his leg, had averted her gaze) Gallan felt his nudity acutely, almost more sharply than the chill, and for some inexplicable reason this surge of discomfort was focused on, and seemingly reciprocated by, Yodren's stiff shoulders, as if he could still see him through an eerie set of eyes, eyes which roamed across Gallan's body with a strange, powerful intent. So, crouching at once, he took a deep breath and proceeded with his plan.

It was only after the whole ordeal was over, and Wixelor was turning this way and that on his dark brown wooden foot while the children cheered on and clapped their hands, and after Gallan had pulled on his clothes, looking away from Yodren's tensely bowed head, that they became aware of an unanticipated setback – that with Wixelor fixed on it, the raft was far too heavy to drag to the sea. And when he tried to move on his own, Wixelor found that his leg of flesh wasn't long enough to reach beyond the raft and take a step. They were all looking about for some means to solve this new problem, when suddenly the raft seemed to move by itself across the sand; for once more they had forgotten Yonfi's legendary strength, which allowed him to drag the raft by a dangling piece of rope as if it were no heftier than the wheeled wooden ducks and horses Yern used to carve out of red cedar for him when he was little.

"He's not all that heavy, you know," he said over his shoulder.

At first the whole experience—gliding swiftly across the water while a fair wind, like a strong yet gentle hand, pushed the raft ahead—was so utterly novel and pleasant, they had all, even Yodren, given in to a childish exhilaration. Part of it was the speed of their sailing per se, for after endless days of trudging forward they were finally making headway at a pace that didn't seem like a prelude to death; and death, moreover, seemed for the first time to be a thing of the past, of the barrenness they'd left behind—not that there was the slightest evidence of life in the dull grey waters they tore through, but life is a contagion: the more animated they felt by the wind tousling their hair and stinging their cheeks, the more these things appeared as conscious, and intensely alive.

But what they had all failed to take into account, keen to set off on their journey and thrilled by the fast success of its outset, was the vastness of the sea, and the fact that, once the shore they'd left had receded into nothing, they had no way of

knowing which way they were—or should be—heading, being thus wholly at the mercy of the wind and its whims. Unaccustomed as they were to the geography of Erat Rin and the labours of navigation, they had perhaps been expecting that the coastline of No Place would rise in the horizon before long, figuring that if they had crossed the entire island in a matter of days, slowly and on foot, at this rate they might attain their goal within a few hours.

However, it soon became apparent that they had raised their hopes far too high. Yodren and Gallan, who'd been squatting near the bow of the raft, their eyes trained on the distant line of darker grey where the sea and the sky seemed to touch, soon realized that their zealous gazing not only didn't prompt the Land of the Sun to materialize, but on the contrary made every moment they spent in steadily growing disappointment feel longer and longer. And Yonfi, who had clambered on Wixelor's back and sat on top of his head so that he might be the first to sight the fabled shores, was gradually deflated, till he climbed down to seek comfort in Raddia and the girl's company.

And then, just as they were all huddling in a tight knot around Wixelor's legs, like sheep in a shelter seeking one another's warmth, the storm broke out.

Like a beast the wild sea heaved and roared, a beast as massive as a world and suddenly aware of the six specks of foolish life that dared disturb its sleep. Yet even more terrifying than the mountains of churning water rising beneath and around them was the response drawn from the sky. Streams of great black clouds rushed from every corner of the heavens, making the darkness so thick as to feel tangible; then, heralded by bolts of lightning that flashed their fleeting, blinding light upon a scene of utter chaos, and by a chorus of thunders that made every single particle of reality reverberate with their bellowing, the blackness above began to vomit sheet after sheet of rain as cold and hard as ice, that lashed at the wave-tossed raft and its panicked passengers.

To prevent the violence of the sea and the howling wind from tearing him clear off the raft he was part of, and offer what protection his size could afford, Wixelor had knelt down at once, gathering everyone in the crooks of his long arms and beneath the collapsed sail, so that the torrential rain wouldn't carry them off. But even so they were all beside themselves with terror, grabbing at each other in the brief moments of purple-white blaze shed by the lightnings, while at the same time, and despite the impossibility of their being overheard in such havoc, they kept screaming one another's names.

But there was one name they couldn't scream, because they simply didn't know it—and by the time the storm began to gradually abate, and they could shout and grope in return under the drenched canopy, the girl was gone, swallowed by the sea.

Yonfi was inconsolable. When he first realized the girl's absence, he tried diving into the sea to retrieve her, and it took all of their combined strength and vocal loving to hold him back. Once again, it was Raddia who finally undid the clasp of the boy's wrath, releasing the heartbreak within, and as he clung to her bosom, sobbing "Mommy!" over and over, she cried with him—lamenting the girl's loss, the knowledge that she'd never fill the hole left by the death of Yonfi's mother, her own motherlessness, and even, with a part of herself so unfamiliar and cruel she barely

recognized it, the fact that she'd been resenting the girl's attraction on Yonfi, whose love she wished lavished on her alone.

Was it the boy's tears, whose magical effect they had witnessed more than once, that ultimately bid the endless waters to be still? Or was it the sea itself, which, having sensed immortality in the touch of his flesh, had quietened out of respect? Whatever the cause, after a while the last remaining storm clouds dissipated, and the gale died down to an almost gentle breeze that inched the raft onward with small, lapping waves.

And in the arms of Raddia, Yonfi slept the easy sleep of children, that so quickly and enviably transports them to the safe, peaceful darkness of their recent nonexistence. Yet unlike their previous moments of endearment, as she now sat in a contentment akin to the maternal bliss she couldn't even name for being such a stranger to it, Raddia felt her Substance close around Yonfi's, like a dullstone with a hidden glowstone within.

For while Gallan, struggling to adapt to a world of loudness and tactility where everything and everyone touched you in one way or another, had remained steadfast in the austerity of his Lurienite past, mind-speaking and -listening and thinking himself vaguely but surely superior, Raddia, from the start, had begun a process of remoulding her habits and convictions in compliance with all the strange, magnificent things that so intrigued her. And as part of this assimilation, perhaps the most important one, she had slowly taught herself to use her mind neither as a sharp and fitful mouth nor as a rudely inquisitive ear, but rather in the manner of the Feeres—that is, as a hermetically sealing refuge for all the thoughts that were meant for no one other than herself. It hadn't been a smooth transition, and it was still far from complete; Gallan had been alarmed by her abrupt and inexplicable decision to fashion her intellect after primitive minds relying on a host of things—even brutal force—instead of reason to express their needs and urges, and was deeply, perceptibly hurt that she, his other half, should choose to exclude him from the workings of a mind he'd been sharing from the moment of their Surfacing; and Raddia, aside from the guilt over Gallan's wounded feelings, had to learn how to cope with powerful emotions—such as extreme fear, or sadness—without them bursting out of her head and scattering like flocks of frantic birds to beat their wings and screech and peck at the minds of others. Thus she had reached a point where, as now, she could shut all access to her Substance save for Yonfi's, embracing his soul as tightly as his body.

And besides the boy's precious love, what consoled her for leaving Gallan out of her innermost musings was the fact that he had also been, secretly, almost unwittingly, on a similar path of transformation, involving not his mind but his body. Raddia hadn't yet fully grasped how this had come about, or where it might lead to, but she had sensed the change as surely as if it stemmed from her own flesh. After all, while they were small and stupid and prone to furtive gloveless touching, they had both had chance to observe the differences of their anatomies: Gallan's member, tiny as a slug yet able to grow and harden at the slightest grazing of her fingers, as opposed to her own peculiar apparatus, a cleft concealed by a pair of petal-like, extremely sensitive folds of silken skin. And as it had been in her nature to keep this aperture protected from intrusion (her whole body recoiling at the thought of it being penetrated, closing in on itself like a budding

flower in reverse), so had Gallan's fleshy protuberance sought, despite the fear of their Makers finding out, the release of being rubbed and squeezed, moistened and caressed.

And though nothing had come of it as yet—for Gallan would never be able to keep an important event secret from her—it was this aggressiveness of his body that had drawn him to Yodren and his own male flesh with steadily increasing power, till Raddia had felt it as definite and unmistakable as a pungent new odour: the smell of something close to desire. It was quite reasonable, of course; in many ways, Gallan and Yodren were similar: the loving, protective brothers of siblings who had stunned them by revealing a side, a self, they had never suspected, and in the face of which they felt wary, ill at ease; moreover, neither of them had fulfilled the role that was expected of them in the eyes of their respective worlds. Gallan had been both unable and secretly unwilling to produce offspring by merging Substances with his Mate, while Yodren, cloistered in that dreary tower since he was but a child, had never really matured into a man – whose task, at least from what Raddia understood of the customs of Feerien, included mating with a woman and fathering children, just as his father Yern had done. Furthermore, it appeared that any man who didn't thus conduct himself, copulating with one or more women once he reached maturity, was in the eyes of Feeres a lesser (if not downright contemptible) man; that was why so many Scribes—whose thoughts, like Yodren's, Raddia could pick up on instantly, for they were men conditioned to spending most of their lives inside their heads—afforded themselves the company of poor women they paid to be their mates for the hour or the night. And yet Yodren had never partaken of such pleasures, though not for lack of wanting; it was simply a matter of lust confused, even more so when Gallan was near, or in the presence of that other Divinator, whose paleness was so startling he could pass for a Lurienite, and from whose mind Raddia had gleaned the clear, intense desire to shed his clothes and pounce on Yodren like an amorous beast of prey.

All these thoughts coursed through Raddia's mind as she half-dozed, waking every so often with a start to make sure Yonfi was still safe and snug in her arms—and each time she did so, the thing she felt for next was the petal, clinging still to the soft, wrinkly tip of her finger after having almost miraculously survived the storm. And just as Yonfi's smallness belied his powers and his equally amazing capacity for love, so did this frail and tiny proof of life contain the sum of Raddia's hopes and dreams.

Suddenly the raft wobbled, wrenching her back to reality and making Yonfi stir and mumble in his sleep. Luckily, it was only Wixelor, who, waking up under the sail, had tried to stand up, forgetting in his haziness that his right foot was one with the raft. Turning around, Raddia smiled at him and said, quietly so as not to rouse Gallan, *Good morning, dearest Wixelor—and once more, thank you for saving us from the wrath of the sea.*

The sleepy giant returned her smile and shook his big long head as if to say that it was nothing, but then, as he was scanning the horizon through a thin veil of mist that hovered above the water, his eyes gave a sudden blink and stared at something with such intensity, that for a moment Raddia worried his stare was one of fear.

But then she turned too, and saw the glorious sight just as Wixelor said, “Nowhere. It really exists. And—we’re there!”

II

Bliss. It was absolute bliss that seized them the moment the sea, with one final gentle push, deposited them on the shore of a place that could have been no more real than a dying world’s desperate dream. Shouting with uncontrollable joy, they pranced and danced and rolled on the sand—even Wixelor, having forgotten in his rapturous state about his wooden leg again, had broken free of the crumbling raft with an entire log still attached to it, dragging it along till Gallan and Raddia, laughing out loud as he did, hurried to place their bare hands round his leg, whereupon their Substances, made even stronger by their glee, caused the wood to disintegrate into a pile of wet sawdust, freeing Wixelor’s still-numb yet intact, majestic foot.

Only after they had sufficiently rejoiced, and spent a few sad silent moments in remembrance of the girl who had saved their lives by paying with her own, only then did they begin to take in the details of the land they’d been washed up on, and notice how—though by no means a splendour to behold—greatly it differed from the dispiriting deadland they’d departed from.

First and most prominent were the trees that surrounded the beach—whose sand wasn’t grey and hard but soft and yellowish: tall and curved, with huge drooping leaves amidst which hung brown hairy spherical objects, gigantic seeds of some sort, which, according to what Wixelor recalled from a dream, might be edible. Arguably, some of the trees looked more dead than alive, their wilted branches grazing the sand like the hands of a blind person struggling to stand up, and most of the clumps of grass that grew here and there had a withered, sickly look—but nonetheless they were green and orange and yellow, and after a seeming eternity crossing a bleak world where black and grey reigned supreme, to see these distinct signs of life filled them with new hope. But it was when they finally turned their eyes to the sky that another colour, even if no more than a hint of it, seemed the surest promise of the fabled Sun: for though a layer of pale ashen clouds covered most of it, there were small narrow rifts in the grey that opened up here and there as fast as they closed, through which they could glimpse a pale blue dome, its light faint yet certain as a stubborn spark in a hearth full of cinders.

And after Wixelor had put his knowledge to the test, plucking the hard seeds, splitting them open and passing them around, and they had all feasted on their delicious white flesh and milk-like juice (and asked for seconds and thirds which Wixelor and Yonfi were more than happy to provide—the latter climbing on top of the biggest tree faster than a squirrel despite Yodren’s protests, and having a jolly good time throwing the furry fruits at them, oblivious to the fact that, unlike him, their bodies could still feel pain, and sustain injury) they were in such excellent spirits it seemed as though, for once, the legendary quest they’d undertaken might have some chance of success.

But then, still from atop the tree, Yonfi—not giggling anymore—said, “Smoke.”

In mulling over the disturbing dreams that flowed through his mind in his life of darkness and isolation, Wixelor had always been impressed not by the flights of wild imagination—end-of-the-world visions, horrendous monsters and suchlike—but by nightmares in which the dreamers saw that there was someone in their home, hiding in a closet or standing above them and staring at them silently while they were too paralyzed with fear to pull the sheet off their heads and find out if this were real or not. But even more puzzling was the fact that, despite the terror that gripped their sleeping minds, the intentions of those phantom trespassers was not at all clear: they weren't thieves robbing the sleeper's house (for if they were, why should they dawdle by their victim's bed and risk being caught in the act?) nor vicious rapists or murderers, for rarely did one dream of one's brutal violation or death without the mind jolting itself awake in self-defense. No, what so perplexed the lonesome Wixelor, who, like most inhabitants of Ienar Lin, would often crave the company of another, even a complete stranger, was the fact that humans, of all types and eras, seemed inherently, deeply afraid of their own kind.

It was this precise pall of dread that the thin, rising wisp of smoke cast instantly upon the company, so overjoyed moments ago. Up to a point it was understandable, for the army of the Scavangers and the bands of cannibals they'd come across in the wastes of Erat Rin were still fresh in their memory. And yet this land they stood on, whose life they had just fed on, was supposedly a haven in this ravaged realm, populated by people who might be no different than themselves and whom, thus, they had no reason to be frightened of. It was he who stood out, the freak from another world.

But while Wixelor wondered at this most peculiar trait of humankind, his wary companions—even Yonfi, held close by his brother—had taken cover behind him.

Did you see how many they are? Gallan asked Yonfi.

Yonfi shook his head, made to speak, and then replied silently, *No. But I think I saw a man on top of another tree, looking at me with a—oh, like that thing Yodren had in his room!*

A spyglass, Yodren said. *So, no matter how many, they already know we're here.*

Raddia, kneeling next to Yonfi to caress his cool cheek with the back of her hand said, *Why should we presume they mean us ill? They may be travellers just like us.*

In any case, we'd better prepare ourselves for the worst, Gallan insisted, but his tone, cautiously aggressive, prodded Yonfi to a heroic disregard for any and all strategy.

"WE SHALL DESTROY YOU!" he yelled at the top of his lungs.

Their presence thus given away, they had no choice but to proceed through the path that led between a clump of trees to a grove of shorter ones, growing on a reddish-brown soil and bearing dense, massive clusters of dark purple fruit.

It wasn't long before they reached the spot whence the smoke came, from a small camp fire mostly reduced to embers; there was a straw mat next to it, with a blanket on top and a pair of worn leather sandals placed neatly beside. Other than these, there was no sign of the man Yonfi thought he'd seen, though by now they were all—even Yodren and Gallan, the overly protective brothers—more or less

convinced that no evil enemies were lying in wait; even the blanket, folded into a tidy square, looked reassuring.

Then, "What are *those*?" Yonfi said, pointing with a dirty, sticky finger.

Back away, Gallan said, though he needn't have, as they'd all backed off already at the sight of the two great, fantastic beasts that had appeared from behind the trees.

They were at once formidable and ludicrous, repulsive and strangely familiar—as if nature had taken parts of animals they knew and tossed them playfully together.

Nearly twice as tall as horses, they stood on slender but wiry-looking legs with bulging knees; they had thickly-built bodies with a strikingly big hump in the middle of the back, and their neck, long and curvy and adorned with a beard-like tuft of hair, ended in a head whose shape and facial mobility undermined their overall fearsomeness: long and flat, with heavily-hooded, kindly-stupid eyes and a comical set of lips which never ceased to move, as if the beasts were mindlessly munching on stones. No creature with such an expression of utter idiocy could be conceivably dangerous.

For once it was not Yonfi but Raddia who first burst into howls of laughter, and soon they all joined her, roaring, bending down and holding their sides, then pointing at the beasts and starting all over again. And far from taking offense at their unrestrained ridicule, with only a hint of curiosity in their eyes—perhaps they looked as strange and unintelligent a bunch to them as well—they came over with a lazy, sawying walk, their fat lips still puckered and moving. They all took a step back (after all they were too big not to), apart from Wixelor, who was a little taller, and Yonfi; but it was these two the animals seemed to have in mind, for as soon as they reached them the one on the right grazed the side of Wixelor's face with the gentleness of a timidly courting mate, while the other bent its shoulders and lowered its head till it hung right in front of Yonfi, who took the hint at once and clambered along its neck and on top of its hump before Yodren had time to stop him. "Look!" he cried, and from the beast's flank he unfastened what they had at first mistaken for a natural protuberance but which in fact was a huge skin bag filled with water, from which Yonfi drank avidly, before throwing it to Gallan, who had already unfastened and passed around an identical bag, this one containing wine.

"Don't you think we should wait for whomever these belong to?" Raddia asked, but no one seemed to care, and when the wine sack reached her she couldn't resist taking a hearty swig—for it was the same as the wine she had first tasted in Feerien, made from some fruit called grapes and infinitely better than the tame whiteberry stuff Lurienites drank and whose effect on the drinker's mind was nothing compared to the fast elation this pungent red wine brought on. Soon they were all tipsy, staggering and falling down flat on their bottoms with hiccuping laughs—even Yonfi had some, for once half-drunk Yodren could no more deny him than tolerate his screaming, "But I'm *Royen!*"

Such was their joyful overindulgence, that when an ululation suddenly erupted, they all assumed it was one of them who'd broken into shrill song, or that maybe it was the cry of the droll-looking beasts—but then, raising his head and blinking his bleary eyes, Yodren motioned them to hush and listened at the continuous,

high-pitched cry, trying to make out the words and whether it was singing in jubilation or belligerence.

“...here go the People of the... *the blinding stone?*” he whispered, “then something about—about someone called... *Iadi? Iabi?* and how... oh, damn it!”

But now the beasts, having already raised their heads upon first hearing the cry, turned around and began to walk slowly away, prompting them to stand up and follow them towards the sound that grew louder by the moment. Yodren, holding Yonfi’s hand tight, kept mumbling about a camel herd by the name of Iabi, and how he was the most fortunate of all the sentinels of the Sun for having cast eyes at the people of the blinding stone. And after a short walk, stepping out of the grove and into a vastness of yellowish dunes whose only distinct feature was an extremely tall tree like the ones growing on the beach, they looked up and saw the person whose shrieks had led them there.

It was the man Yonfi had seen—despite the great distance, for amongst Royen’s many gifts he possessed the eyesight of a hawk—a small dark man in a long green robe, perched on a wooden platform built around the top of the tree, who, along with his cries, was constantly, rapidly kneeling till his face touched the wood and then raising his head and hands skywards, not unlike the way the Castle folk had done after the Scavengers had scattered and they were welcomed as the saviours of Feerien.

“Is he doing this for me?” Yonfi asked of his brother, smiling in perplexion.

“Well, dearest brother, don’t be mad,” he said, “but I think it’s meant for us all.”

After he’d climbed down the tree and humbled himself in front of them with yet more passionate kneeling and praising, the man – not much taller than Yonfi up close, though definitely older – introduced himself; his name was Iabi, Yodren interpreted as he spoke, which in the language of his people meant *weak*, something self-evident in his small stature, he added with a rueful smile. He was a camel herd—camel being the name of the bizarre beasts—and ever since he’d reached the age of twelve and thus become a man, he’d been serving as Sentinel of the Sun, a monthly duty undertaken by the men of his tribe since the time of the Ashen Curse, when the Blinding Stone had saved him and all the dwellers of the land he called Dwanar from certain and complete obliteration.

Iabi could scarcely hide his happiness and pride at the blessed honour of being the one to first set eyes upon the long-awaited People of the Blinding Stone, and the way he gesticulated wildly with his tiny hands and stood at the tips of his toes when the verve overtook him made him so look like an eager, trusting boy, no one had the heart to say that, despite their unusual appearance, they might not be the ones his tribe expected.

Then their diminutive welcomer gave a smack of self-reproach on his forehead so loud that it must hurt, and bowing frantically he dashed to one of the camels, climbed on its back with incredible speed and agility, and from a thickly-folded piece of coarse wool serving as saddle in the hollow between the beast’s neck and hump he produced and brought back to them a parcel wrapped in white cloth and tree leaves containing two loaves of bread and a head of soft cheese, provisions—he explained—which he received once a week; luckily, the man appointed the task of delivering the food had come early this morning, so that they were still fresh

and warm, with a mouthwatering smell. These he offered them with the graciousness of a wealthy host, and when Yodren made a weak protest, saying that they had already abused his hospitality by guzzling his water and wine without asking and that they couldn't possibly consume all of his food, poor Iabi looked as if he were about to cry, insisting in a torrent of objections Yodren was unable to translate on the spot that it was them he waited for, and that he'd rather die a hundred starving deaths before even sharing food intended for the People of the Blinding Stone. In the end they gave in—far from reluctantly—and Iabi was finally mollified by Yonfi's earnest pleading to have a morsel of bread. There was also a pot of milk, buried in the sand to keep cool (camel milk, they all imagined, though none wished to know for sure) and after they had eaten and drunk to their heart's content, Iabi, ever generous, brought over more blankets, kept at his sentinel's perch for the long cold nights of gazing at the sea, and they all sat around a new fire he'd built, the camels grazing idly nearby.

By then they were all exhausted and sleepy, and the warmth of the crackling fire, fragrant with cedar kindling, was more than enough to carry them swiftly to oblivion—and yet their curiosity was greater than their desire to rest, so, joining hands to be able to comprehend his words, they listened to Iabi's extraordinary tale.

He was a boy of eight, he began, when the world almost came to an end. On that dreadful, unforgettable day, he and his friends had shirked their herding chore, leaving the camels in the care of an old man who was also mute, and thus could neither chase nor tell them off, and come to the sea—to the very beach they'd landed themselves—to swim and fish and frolic in the sand, still burning from the noon sun. But before they could do any of these things, a roar erupted in the pale blue sky, louder than a hundred thunders, so loud the very earth shook with its mighty rumble, and suddenly the bright sun was obscured by an immense black sphere with a tail of red that tore through the heavens.

So big was this terrifying mass (which Dwanars also called the Stone of Death), that its plummet must have been visible from every corner of the world, and seemed to last forever, so that by the time they had fled in a panic to the date palm grove they were met by their parents, too frantic to scold them and equally unknowing of what to do.

Most of the animals—even the fattest, slothful calves – had taken to the hills as soon as the ominous black thing appeared, and though the nearest hill was an hour away on foot (for the camels they'd tried to mount had shaken them off and fled as well), and they'd have to abandon the old and the infirm to their fate, perhaps there was still time to follow suit—but right then the shaking ground beneath their feet began to burst open like a vast, festering wound, wide long chasms and gashes ripping in every direction and letting out thick white jets of steam, boiling water, and fiery chunks of molten rock.

Thus they were driven back to the shore, where they were confronted by an even more petrifying sight: the sea, its turquoise waters calm as a lullaby so little ago, raged now black and blue, while tall waves like rabid frothing mouths agape crashed brutally against the beach, so that they had to scramble up the palm trees, lest they be dragged in and drowned—and high above the sky, dim as dusk

in the burning stone's dark shadow, yet moonless and starless as if put out, extinguished, dead. They'd all be dead, and soon, not just the few men and boys clinging to the gale-swept trees, nor just the womenfolk with their babes and the old, perhaps already vanished into the crumbling ground, but all and every man and beast across the world would die, killed by this horrible thing the God of Death had sent their way without any more sense than that with which the God of Life had moulded them out of the lifeless clay and given them breath.

Oh, and how long it lasted, that awful, unspeakably awful time of hanging by a branch and praying it would withstand the violence of the wind! Knowing that this was the end, for that was how the world behaved, as if it was about to be finished: even the great fearless sea, one moment charged at them and the next was drawn back like a sheet by some invisible hand, ebbing so fast and far away it left whole schools of fish flapping on muddy ground that had never before lain thus naked. As for the wind, Iabi said in a low voice, a spark of the old terror burning still in his wide-open eyes, it was like being a thought in the mind of a madman: it struggled to tear them away, storming one way and then another, till some unlucky souls were sucked into its fury, disappearing in the sky as if drawn by celestial strings before they could even scream. And all the while the hateful black invader seemed to hang mockingly at the exact same spot, so certain of their doom it merely hovered, an evil eye relishing at the devastation it was bringing.

But fall it did, even if slowly and agonizingly, for in the distance of the madly swirling sea they could make out the horizon speckled with bursts of fire and smoke, as mountains exploded and islands sank and life of all kinds came to a brutal end. And the more it approached, the louder its plummet became, till all was trembling to a deafening din, while the stone's maliciously glowing red tail broke into giant shards which in turn burst into a rain of burning stone, whistling down to earth and blasting whatever lay in their paths. Till those who could still bear to look saw the Stone of Death, by then big as the world and wider than the sky, strike some unthinkable place in the distance.

Then everything—*everything*—shifted: the air, their tiny insignificant beings, the heavens themselves, inert from time before time, groaned as the impact moved them out of balance. And the sea—or rather what was left of it, some pools of water across an emptiness of mud and a thin grey line far away—was sucked even further away, but not just the visible part of it but the very ancient Mother Sea which hugged the world, it all came rushing towards the stone's ill-fated landing place, discernible by a pillar of black smoke rising higher and growing vaster by the moment. And with a final shudder of the dying earth they saw all this unimaginable quantity of water rise as well, and form a mountain white and grey, a mountain more towering than any in existence.

This was the end, no doubt about it, and in the sudden stillness of the air, as if the spectacle had robbed reality of its breath, they wept and wailed and sliding down the limp palm trees they fell on their knees and sobbed, because the aquatic mountain range had slowly begun its fatal progression towards them, and before long it would descend upon them like Death itself, on this day they had never known would be their last.

But then! Iabi said, stirred into wild-eyed excitement by these memories, as if he lived them anew through his narrative—but then out of the heavens came salvation!

It took them quite a while to become aware of the faint whistling sound, for they were utterly dazed and spent and their ears still rang from the dissonance of the world's final agony, but little by little they all raised their heads, first hearing the eerie silence and then, in its depth, as though coming not from some external source but from within their own frenzied souls, a faint, high-pitched whistling that grew steadily louder.

However, in the throes of the overall havoc every change signified a new terror, and so they stopped their ears just as they'd shut their eyes against the nature's ruin and cried aloud in panic. Iabi remembers his father crawling about, blindly as a babe ripped from the womb before its time until he somehow sensed him and drew near, and covered his convulsing little body with his own, as if this were enough to keep him safe, and then in a voice he didn't so much hear as feel through the strength of his embrace, he told him not to fear, and that soon they would all awaken in the wondrous Nema Koth, the place of bliss and magic where nanna had gone to, yet far from being soothed this sent Iabi in an even wilder state of dread and misery, for he'd been told of Nema Koth when he was little, grief-stricken by the death of his cherished grandmother, but over the years it had become a tale of empty cheer and false assurance, a tale he himself had passed on to his three younger sisters to console them when their pet mouse had been devoured by a neighbour's cat, *Don't cry*, he'd said, *he's happy now, playing with other mice at Nema Koth!* and to hear his father speak the same untruthful words of comfort was an even greater devastation, for deep down he believed that nanna was nowhere, she had lived and then died, forever, and he didn't want to surrender his own young life to nonexistence.

And still the whistling became louder—was it perhaps Death approaching, and shrieking with greed at the prospect of so many lives to reap?—until Iabi did something his father tried to stop him from doing: he slid through his arms and looked up. He was half-expecting to see the sky crashing down upon them (an ancient fear, for they were all covering their heads), but instead he saw the sun, or at least that was what it seemed like to him, the white-hot sun of noon tumbling from the firmament, and instantly he bowed his head once more though he'd already been dazzled, seeing only darkness with a light blue circle blazing in its midst, and now his father seized him again, muttering the same nonsense till Iabi screamed, *Damn Nema Koth—the sun is falling!*

Yet instead of rising to an earsplitting pitch, an invincible warrior's battle cry, the whistling had suddenly changed, becoming not shrill but mellow, musical almost, a seagull calling its young or its mate so that the sharpness of its cawing is transformed by the sweetness of longing and love—and then despite the hands blocking out sound they all heard it land, even though it struck the sand as softly as a ripe fig falling on grass.

It was the thing's warmth that first drew them to it, for ever since the black stone had appeared, concealing the sun, it had grown punishingly cold. But now, as if indeed Iabi was right and Sun the Sustainer of Life was right there before them, the shuddering men and boys felt gentle waves of heat waft towards them,

caressing the cold off of their skin and entering as deeply and delightfully as the bone. Sunshine at hand.

So it was only natural, since so sudden a pleasure in the midst of such horror was reminiscent of the salvation at the end of a nightmare (a notion they had all been secretly entertaining, for what could be better than to wake up and find out all was well?), that they took heart, stood up, and opened their eyes to this source of sweet warmth.

Iabi had retained his sight purely by chance, because in his dazzlement and the confusion of the voices that babbled with growing confidence he didn't know which way to turn, and was facing away from the stone, stumbling amongst torn branches and roots and calling his father. Yet he, and several others, had already taken their first and last glance at the Blinding Stone, which, true to its subsequent name, robbed whomever cast eyes upon it of his sight forever. However in times to come, when the voice of divine madness ceased to pour from their lips, allowing them some respite and soberness, not one of these men would recall having felt the slightest pain or fear, but on the contrary, they all described that moment, that final sight before becoming sightless, as containing the greatest happiness the mind can conceive, a feeling of knowing at once what life was, and why it was good, and how all existence possessed not just an underlying order but a neverending nourishment of love: Love made the world and love *sustains* it, the white-eyed men would say, and then once more slip into tongues and states of godly insanity.

What this ecstasy meant at that crucial moment, though, was that they all leaped at the Blinding Stone, not to spare their sons—they weren't even *thinking* of their sons – but wishing merely to possess it, to feel its heat directly on their bare skin and its light shine through them as if through parchment and its heart of bliss beat to their own. Of course the little ones, those who could still see at least, protested loudly and violently, trying to break up or wrestle through the heap of male bodies that covered the sun-like orb, but then they felt drops of cold water fall on their heads and a thin spray of brine on their faces, and looking up they beheld the wonder of wonders: Death denied passage.

A wall of sea so tall it hid the sky, visible only in the beams of light escaping the mens' firm hold on the Stone, towered before them, its crest of foam curled above them like the lip of a snarling beast of prey which, for all its viciousness, is tethered to a chain that can't be broken. For where the sky-fallen Stone was, this mountain of furious water could not go, even though their fathers' heads lay not an arm's length from its quivering dark surface, through which the awestruck boys could discern floating shipwrecks and boulders and the shreds of dead flesh—belonging to men or fish, no one could say.

Almost unafraid they stood and stared with gaping mouths, although they knew they should flee, run away from this colossal, murderous wave that would squash them like blood-filled lice given a moment's chance, for this was the way of nature, what rise must fall, so in their childish brashness they were all but willing it to happen, taunting the sea to smite them, because they knew it couldn't. And so they laughed in its face, and as if mortally offended, the waters roared once more in livid impotence and then began to lower and subside, lower and subside, until

all became as before, the sea a windswept expanse and the sky a grey clouded canopy, while the boys cheered frantically on.

And then, Iabi said, it was time to resume their interrupted lives, or rather what could be salvaged from them. First the men who hadn't gone blind wrapped the Stone in many layers of cloth and hide, and guiding their unseeing, ranting friends by the hand, they began to make their slow way back to the village. But despite their hopefulness and joy at having eluded, along with Creation itself, certain annihilation, despite the miracle that had saved them, sent doubtless by the God of Life and cradled in their very hands, it was not a sight of life unharmed and triumphant that awaited them.

For all they encountered on their sorrowful journey home was the aftermath of the destruction visited upon the land. Where only that morning thrived luscious woods thick with life, now there was nothing but trees torn clear off their roots, leaving great holes where not even a worm stirred; gone were the birds, the hares, the deer and all the other creatures of the wild; not a single peep or rustle greeted their passing, made slow, hard and perilous by the chasms that forked here and there like evil lips, still spewing a stench of sulphur and turning the desolate plain into a veritable maze.

And when at last they gained the outskirts of the village, so tired they couldn't wait to lie down and sleep this terrible day away, they realized that no such comfort was forthcoming—for there was no village anymore, only the ruins of homes and families. Of those who hadn't perished under the heaps of broken roof beams, bricks and stones, some had been stampeded by panicked cows and camels trying to break free, others had been killed by tree limbs cast by the gale like spears, while a tragic few, mostly mothers of infants and babes, had first killed them and then themselves, cutting their throats to avoid the much crueller fate they foresaw in the black stone's fatal plummet.

Of Iabi's family, only his mother and his youngest sister had survived, yet when they reached them—his father speaking incoherently at the sky, completely unaware of their blight—it was her two dead daughters that his mother, covered in blood and soot and mad with grief, held tight against her bosom, while her youngest, reduced to utter infancy by so much terror, was sucking her tiny fist with passionate intensity.

And as if they hadn't suffered enough, the massing clouds began to disgorge the ceaseless rain of ashes that would, in less than a year, devastate the plant life of Dwanar, decimate the animals, and plunge the few survivors in famine, sickness and death.

However, just as humankind had always managed to endure the adversities of fate, the people of Iabi's tribe somehow found the willpower to build on what little was left and persevere through the sorrow of loss, through the cold and the hunger, and still think of themselves as fortunate to be alive—for they had been blessed to have and keep the Blinding Stone, even though it was a decidedly mixed and ambiguous blessing.

For one thing, most of the men who had survived, and who would otherwise be the ones to bear the brunt of restoring the village to liveable conditions, were blind and mad, rambling on about fantastic prophecies (and then only when they spoke their own tongue, which wasn't often), with brief interludes of clarity, during

which, however, all they would talk of was the Stone—protecting the Stone, trusting in the Stone, even if all it seemed to do was emit an uncomfortable brightness despite the sheep and camel pelts heaped upon it at the back of a tiny, empty hut, guarded day and night by fierce-looking fools that stared at the sky with clouded eyes. Stranger yet was the fact that, although they had no way of knowing it even existed, people from all over Dwanar occasionally appeared, exhausted by weeks and sometimes months of walking the increasingly bleak and barren land. What they sought of the Stone was never clear; some would steal but a glance through the door and flee with words of prayer on the lips; others, like the tribe's children, would spend long hours squatting on the hut's bare mud floor, gazing at the Stone as if expecting an answer to unuttered questions, or some sort of revelation.

But despite the attention and reverence it received, the Blinding Stone couldn't stop the ashes from precipitating and snuffing out life under and over the ground: the crops kept shrinking and eventually dying off, the meek herbivorous beasts, famished beyond endurance, turned on and savaged one another, and mere boys like Labi, become men from necessity—though most of them had been stunted by lack of proper food and sunlight—saw their families lose hope and felt even more helpless and miserable.

So as time passed the living, gaunt and hollow-eyed and perpetually ravenous, began to envy the dead, and to resent the Stone for saving Dwanar only to make it suffer a prolonged and agonizing death. Crazy fools, as the blind men were spitefully called, started disappearing, their bodies, when found at all, burned and clearly missing chunks of flesh or entire limbs. Babies continued to be born, lust being the only way the people had of pleasing their wasted bodies, but most were said to be stillborn, and were spirited away before anyone could confirm it—and then for a few days a thin broth appeared on the table, which no one wished to question or refuse, not even the mothers themselves.

It was the end of the world all over again, Labi said, his eyes now guiltily cast on the ground and his voice no louder than a sigh; but then he raised his head, and with a faint smile he added, "Until one day, incredibly, we were saved by a dog."

No one knew where the dog in question had come from, or how it was even alive—for dogs, trusting by nature, were among the first victims of the famine. The only one to have actually seen it go into the hut and come out with the Blinding Stone gripped in its jaws, had been a girl of five looking after her father, who at the time had been asleep at his post. It could almost be a myth, if it weren't for the ample proof and the tangible result, which had kept Labi and his people alive to this day. According to the girl, (who had only taken furtive peeks through her woollen cap, lest she lose sight and reason) the dog, behaving as calmly as if the Blinding Stone were a bone he didn't want to share, had taken his trophy to a gnarly olive tree, bent over like a cripple and slowly dying as even the hardest of trees did, and buried the Stone in the ground, amongst the roots. And the next morning the villagers, braced for yet another day of starving, were confronted by a scene right out of their collective dreams: the olive tree, grown overnight to an amazing height and robustness, was laden with fruit—and not just olives but dates as well, and almonds, peaches, apples, pears and coconuts; and from the soil around the tree, bare as bone until the night before but now thick with bright

green clover, shot the sprouts of beans and onions, garlics and turnips, carrot leaves and heads of dew-beaded lettuce.

For a while they could only stare in wonderment, fearful of disturbing what was so completely inconceivable, that the slightest touch could very well make it disappear like a mirage. Even with the Blinding Stone shining from beneath the soil like a bulb of pure light, this was a miracle so tempting, the urge of profiting from it was as strong as the urge to leave it be. But then Iabi's sister, a tiny bag of bones with bald patches on her egg-thin skull and the face of an old woman, stepped carefully among the lettuce, stood on the tips of her toes, and plucked a shiny purple plum from a low-hanging branch.

It was the sign they'd been waiting for; within a moment, screaming with joy or sobbing with gratitude, the skeletal women, men and children fell upon the magical tree and its bounty like a swarm of locusts, wolfing down whole apples, devouring oranges complete with their bitter, moist peel, and swallowing apricot pits as if their stomachs were the seed-hungry earth, while others, down on all fours like grazing cattle, pulled pungent onions and blood-fleshed beets and gobbled them up still caked in soil. Soon people were rushing off to be sick yet kept returning for more, until their bodies, weary from such sudden satiety, began to lose what little strength they had, forcing them to lie down on the grass—tall fragrant grass that wasn't there before—and give in to the first decent, restorative sleep they had enjoyed since before the catastrophe. And while they slept, they felt a tingling warmth creep along their skin and stroke their faces—and with blinking eyes they sat up and saw the sun shine upon them from a clear blue sky.

Of course, the clouds weren't gone, and over the next few days they spent hours of staring hopefully at the solid greyness, willing the reappearance of the Sun who, after more than a year of cringing behind the ashen mantle of the sky, had grown as if timid, showing himself erratically, uncertainly, and briefly—and yet these peeps were enough to bring on the rebirth of nature. In the days and weeks that followed the magic tree, its constantly budding flowers seized by the breeze and carried off across the dead fields, became the first in a spectacular orchard, while the fruit of the soil spread as quickly as the verdant carpet above them. And then, as suddenly and mysteriously, young animals began to emerge from the reborn woods, wandering in a daze as though just abandoned by their mothers: thin, bleating lambs, throngs of loud chicks and goslings, piglets, kids and calves, seeking food and shelter and soon thereafter mating and breeding. And all the while the Sun continued to pay his invaluable visits to the prospering land.

Thus Iabi's home, growing to and surpassing by far its old size and population, came to be known as *Vistri-rah*, The Land of the Sun, and they, finders of the Blinding Stone that had saved the human race, as the much-lauded *Khum-rah*—People of the Sun. Crowds of travellers from all over Dwanar, drawn by rumours and distant sightings of the precious sunlight, kept arriving, and on the shores of the sea, once more filled with fish like the rivers and ponds, often there lay the flotsam of makeshift vessels, although to the generous tribe's chagrin, there were never any survivors amongst them.

And there was yet another thorn in the people's happiness: the handful of blind men still alive—who, after being reviled and killed, were now treated as actual prophets and holy men (for, after all, it was they who had brought the Stone of

salvation)—were dying; the same light that had taken their sight and replaced it with an obscure wisdom, had drained the life out of them, and though on that fateful day they had all been men in their prime, not two years later they seemed ancient, withered, toothless and bald, frail shadows that dwindled fast. And each of them, in dying, seemed to take with him a part of the Stone's power: where once the ground was so soaked by its light it could scald the bare foot treading upon it, now, with every death, the brightness and warmth seemed to wane. Yet for all their alarm, there was nothing the people could do to stop this.

Perhaps because he'd been the first to touch the Blinding Stone, Iabi's father was spared, even if temporarily, and was the last one to remain alive. By then the poor man had become a veritable fright: a bent, shrivelled, completely hairless creature with sharp claws and talons and great white globes for eyes, whose only evidence of humanity were the barely audible words that sometimes came out of his blackened lips. Furthermore, the old man had grown possessively attached to the Stone, spending all his time seated at the roots of the olive tree and gruffly resisting any attempt to either move him to the warmth of his home or to make him more comfortable with pillows and blankets.

And since there seemed no reason anymore to keep the Stone buried if all it did was produce increasingly fitful peeks of the sun which resulted in crops and beasts that diminished in number and vitality, they decided to unearth the venerated object and let the old man hold and treasure it – which he did, living in the back of the Stone's old hut, gazing at the ebb and flow of its light with wide, unsleeping eyes, as though fearing that a single moment of carelessness on his part might extinguish its magical glow forever.

Four long years Iabi's father lasted in this fashion, in obsessed isolation, and his only interaction with the villagers – and not all of them; he seemed to prefer speaking to children—was through his occasional mutterings, which concerned a group of heroes he called „The People of the Blinding Stone“ and who, according to his repetitive rambling, would one day arrive to dispel once and for all the dangers of an endless, sunless winter and of another, this time fatal, famine, that still loomed from time to time. And though at first it was hard to make out his half-whispered words, soon there appeared a pattern in the old man's prophesying, and instead of vague or fable-like predictions he began to speak of five specific people, whose traits were so distinct and remarkable the children turned them into a rhyme which spread among the tribe like a prayer or incantation:

*One of enormous height,
And two more, amazingly white.
The two gifted fruit of one womb—
These shall come and lay waste to the tomb.*

Thus the Sentinels of the Sun came into existence, because in the aftermath of the old man's death the instability of the sunlight and the vegetation dependent on it became so alarming, the people began to feel once more the chilling breath of extinction on their necks. And so they laid their hopes on the five saviours of the prophesy, and kept watch upon the nearby shores with fearful faith, gazing at the grim horizon for a sign.

“And now here you are, sitting before me,” Iabi said, his voice breaking and tears of joy and gratitude rolling down his cheeks. “My poor father was right after all.”

The last smoldering logs were breaking off into chunks of white ash by the time his story reached the present, and the heroes neither looked nor felt particularly heroic, for they were all in the process of falling gently, imperceptibly asleep.

Standing up and yawning himself, Iabi looked up and saw a hint of dawn in the sky, a faint rosiness behind the dove grey, and bowed his head in deference even to such little light. Then he went around picking blankets and hides and pelts and covering the blessed visitors, who, huddled close together with faint smiles on their sleeping faces, were the picture of peace. Yet one of them, the little boy named Yonfi, shook his head and blinked at Iabi as he was tucking a camel’s hair rug around his chin.

“And what happened to the Stone?” he asked, his voice thick with sleep.

“Sleep, now, noble Yonfi,” Iabi said. “You shall be needing your strength.”

But the boy sat up, frowned and said sulikly, “My strength is infinite.”

Iabi knew this, from one of his father’s last utterances, but still had to suppress a smile. “Well,” he whispered, squatting before the boy, “the Stone is still in the hut. But it glows no more, and it has grown so impossibly heavy that no one can remove it.”

“I shall fix it and bring back the sun,” said the boy, and fell asleep at once.

Iabi eased him back into his brother’s arm. “I’m sure you will,” he said.

That night Wixelor was visited by four fiercely vivid dreams, at turns arousing, disturbing, grotesque and mysterious. This shouldn’t have surprised him, for less than a month ago he was a Dreamer leading a Dreamer’s vicarious existence, but so much had happened since then, his mind had forgotten itself, caught in the thrill of real life.

The first one seized at once his—in more ways than one—dormant masculinity, for it was Raddia dreaming of herself in a dim warm room, baring her bosom and then getting into bed. But just as Wixelor expected some imagined lover to materialize from the darkness of the bed’s other side (her brother, perhaps? Yodren? himself?) Raddia, with a tenderness unfamiliar both to herself and to the spying Dreamer, welcomed into her arms a younger version of Yonfi in the nude, though not so young as to be devoid of male desire, for as soon as he nestled against Raddia’s flesh his thin little cock hardened, pressing against the taut skin of her flank as keenly as his mouth sucked the breast that had been offered him, biting so hard the sweet watery milk was mixed with blood.

Then another dream of fantic passion suddenly elbowed its way to the forefront of Wixelor’s mind—this one dreamt by Gallan, or that was what he thought at first, for this was a darker dream, alien to the previous fantasy’s motherly warmth, in which two bodies rolled and wrestled on bare ground, uttering the growls and pants of animals in heat. Besides the disorienting factor of the Dreamer’s own stimulation, this imaginary mating was further obfuscated by not knowing whom the feelings belonged to: was it Gallan’s breathtaking desire he felt, or was the object of it, the shadow lover, the one in control of the dream—even, perhaps, the mind that had created it, masking its identity to placate a shame than ran deeper

than the passion? But as the dust began to settle, and the naked limbs became distinct, Wixelor realized that it was Yodren, sitting astride on Gallan's heaving chest—and knew at once that two exceedingly rare things were staring him down from this shadowland of lust: first, the coincidence of two people grasped by the same dream simultaneously, and second, the terrifying intoxication of the dreamers' mirrored virginites: not knowing how to quell the hunger of their quivering flesh.

The scene changed just as the onlooking Dreamer wished it gone, to be replaced by a dream of such incongruous sexual longing, Wixelor knew his sleeping self must be laughing aloud: the female camel that had courted him awkwardly a few hours ago, was revisiting the encounter, but her imagination had adorned his lanky anatomy with a big hairy hump, and similarly altered his nether regions, replacing Wixelor's penis with a male camel's alarmingly smaller one. Finally, adding insult to injury, the ruttish beast sprayed him with urine, whereupon he made his quick departure from the dream.

It was the fourth and final dream that drew him more forcefully, however, even though the woman unconsciously weaving it was a stranger not merely to Wixelor, but to the very fabric of time that contained him. He didn't know *how* he knew it—even back in Ienar Lin, he'd never known for sure; maybe it was her unusual clothes, or the elaborate way her flaxen hair was fashioned, or the lush red-cushioned seat on which she reclined, but somehow he could tell she belonged to the distant future, yet not the future of some other, equally distant world, but of a different place in Erat Rin. And in her dream, this woman (in whose mind stirred a great power, which made Wixelor wary of disturbing it with his presence) was obsessing over an object, a unique, precious but also somehow dangerous object, hidden where no one could ever find it. And yet she knew that it must be found, at all costs, for if allowed to stay where it was, this thing, though small, could breed such chaos and evil that the world itself lay in peril. And while lurking quietly in this tangle of worries, Wixelor was suddenly convinced that the dreaded object, despite its tiny size, was indeed the seed of all devastation; it was the Rune of Death.

They set off around noon, after waking to the much-needed warmth of the fire Iabi had built early on, made even more delightful to the senses by the fragrance of a hot beverage he was brewing: a thick, spicy, richly-scented drink made from a flower's dried tuber. "One has to be resourceful when there's not a single grain of wheat for months," Iabi chuckled to Yodren, gesturing them to wait a bit lest they scald their tongues.

With Iabi, Yodren and Yonfi leading the way on one camel and the rest of them following atop the other, they rode in silence and with heads bowed, for the desert wind blew puffs of stinging sand against their faces. However, they were all musing on Iabi's tale of disaster and hope, whose explanation, in light of what they knew, was horribly simple: the Runes of Death and Life had struck Erat Rin in close succession, (hurled by their respective Gods for some unfathomable reason? cast like dice by the God of Fate and Chance in a spirit of divinely playful indifference the human mind couldn't bear to think of?), bringing the Forgotten Sphere to the brink of complete destruction only to save part of it and leave its

people to fight their own painful way towards rebirth. It would be far more preferable to think of the God of Life intervening at the last moment to undo the evil of Its Sibling, but all of them—even Yonfi, in all his innocence—knew that life could be just as cruel as death. As to their hopes, they were all fixed on Royen’s gift of resurrection, although they couldn’t help fearing that to restore one of the actual Runes of Norien might prove quite harder than to raise the puny dead.

And as they rode, now and then they all raised their eyes to the clouded heavens, yearning for some sign of this wonderful, warmth- and life-giving sun. But if there was light behind that lid of fluctuating greyness, it seemed as powerless to break through as a baby bird that hungers for the world outside the egg its soft beak cannot pierce. Yonfi could actually remember such a scene from their chicken coop in the Farmlands, where he’d been to feed the hens while one of them was hatching her eggs; she was ruffling her feathers as the movement beneath her increased and the first muffled peeps were heard, uttered by the litter of chicks that soon squirmed free from the nest, adorable little balls of yellowish fluff Yonfi couldn’t help snatching and holding inside his cupped hands. But then his eyes had strayed back to their mother, who had stepped outside the nest as well, and was pecking hectically at a single light brown egg that was still intact despite the clear movement within. For a terrible moment Yonfi had thought the hen was about to eat her lastborn chick, but then he realized she was in fact trying to help it come out of the egg, which, to their mutual relief, she’d managed shortly thereafter. Yet thinking of the whole—rather insignificant—incident now, suddenly filled him with an unbearable longing for his mother, and the reality of her absence struck him for the first time as something potentially irreversible. And so, as he had done before, he turned and cast a baleful look at Raddia, a look containing all the pain of his motherlessness.

But as luck would have it, this was one of the few times during which Raddia’s eyes weren’t lovingly trained on Yonfi, because for a while she’d been engaged, with her brother and Wixelor, in a silent conversation regarding the Runes.

For as soon as he’d climbed behind the hump, his feet hanging almost as low as the ground, his puzzling dream was so prominent in his thoughts, Gallan had grasped it as quickly and surely as if it were a fretful insect buzzing inside his own mind.

And you’re certain she’s from the future? This world’s future?

“That was how it felt,” Wixelor said; as a former inhabitant of the Mad Sphere, he wasn’t thrilled by the sound of urgent voices in his head, but Gallan was too wound up to be placated into normal speech. “Judging from the elegance of her clothes and her surroundings, her civilization must lie quite a few centuries in the future.” To which he maliciously added, *Compared to it, Lurien and Feerien seem as primitive as beast’s lairs.*

Raddia turned around and smiled apologetically. “So Erat Rin is saved?”

“I suppose so,” Wixelor said. “Although in her dream she was thinking—”

Of a small, evil thing, yes, Gallan cut in, his back still facing them. *But are you sure it was the Rune of Death? Because from what it sounds like, it must be anything but small.*

Perhaps it was fractured in the collision, Wixelor replied, tiredly giving in.

But why now? I mean, it has to bear some significance to this quest.

It doesn't work like that; I don't choose what I dream. Dreams just come to me.

For a while Gallan and Raddia shut their minds to him, most likely pondering this distant future. From his long experience, Wixelor thought he knew the reason for this abrupt silence. Human beings, regardless of what world they hailed from, almost never dreamt of the future; for one thing, it was hard to imagine; and for another, the thought of a world in which they wouldn't be alive wasn't particularly appealing.

"And what did this woman look like?" Raddia asked. "Did she resemble Iabi?"

To his surprise, Wixelor found he couldn't recall straight away; the ominously obsessive subject of her dream had superimposed itself on the woman's face like a dark veil—but he remembered her still, slender hands were much whiter than Iabi's.

As white as we are? Gallan asked, so perplexed he actually turned around.

I don't think so, but the colour of her skin was decidedly light; oh, and she had blond hair.

Maybe there are other tribes of Oblivians who differ from Dwanars, Raddia ventured.

The important thing is that Erat Rin will still exist for many a year to come—thousands of years from now, possibly, Wixelor said, hoping to bring the discussion to a close.

We can't be sure of that yet, Gallan said grimly. *It all depends on the boy.*

Now it was Raddia's turn to be indignant – like a real mother, who cannot abide a slight on her son. "I trust Yonfi completely," she said. "I know he can do this."

Wixelor liked to think so, too; the possibility of Yonfi's failure influencing the future of the Forgotten Sphere to the point of annulling it altogether hadn't occurred to him till now, and it was dreadful. So, "After all, he is Royen the Eternal," he said.

But it was clear that Gallan—facing away and falling silent—was doubtful.

Their arrival was heralded by a startling blast of horns, drums and ululations, for Iabi's triumphal return had been spotted by child-scouts perched upon tall trees. All the villagers, from the babes who still crawled to old men and women leaning on gnarly sticks, had come out to greet their eminent guests, so long and desperately awaited they had grown into deities, whose sight, in the flesh, almost defied belief—a thing evident in their brown faces which, despite the wild joy, couldn't hide the stupefaction shining in their big, dark eyes. In fact, most of the children were subtly yet visibly backing away as the People of the Blinding Stone approached, while many toddlers cringed behind their parents, uncertain of whether to take part in the cheering or to whimper with fear.

The village itself seemed part of the land it sprawled across, the thatch-roofed huts that stood amongst the sparse vegetation like protrusions of the clay soil they were made of. In their centre, however, the people had laid out—with surprising speed, since the visitors' journey hadn't been a very long one—everything needed for a proper feast: an great wooden table made up of smaller ones, with five high-backed chairs facing and surrounded by stools fashioned from stumps, and laden with loaves of bread, heads of cheese, bowls of fruit and vegetables and jugs filled

with milk, wine and a hot drink made with honey, cinnamon and clove, whose smell hovered invitingly about. Near the table the villagers had built two great fires, with on them a tall cauldron, steaming and bubbling with some deliciously-smelling stew and three spits with huge slabs of camel, boar and deer meat, their shiny skin blistering and sizzling as they slowly roasted.

And yet, for all the effort that had been put into welcoming the mythic travelers from another world, there was a nervousness in their hosts' faces and posture which they were unable to disguise; some of them, after the songs and the music died away into an awkward silence, began to cast furtive looks at the sky, as if expecting the Sun to add his own precious light to the festivities; others couldn't resist glancing at the roasting meat, which, judging by their collective thinness, was not a thing they frequently enjoyed. So, after some brief introductions, Raddia, Wixelor and—after some pressuring—Gallan stayed with the villagers, mostly to accept their cups of wine and entertain the little ones with their outlandish looks and mind-meddling abilities, while Yodren and Yonfi were led by Iabi and an old, bald, wizened man to the hut where the Stone was kept.

Yonfi, thrilled beyond measure but trying hard to appear more composed than the barefoot children that stared at him with blank astonishment, couldn't wait to work his magic and receive the praise and veneration such a feat deserved, but his brother, as they neared the tiny, unremarkable hut at the far end of the village, was experiencing an inner storm of fascination and dread. For unless they were wrong, – and by now he was convinced they weren't; just as Wixelor said, all that had happened to them seemed to be part of a carefully studied, exceedingly precise plan—in a few moments he would stand before the Rune of Life, an actual, tangible object which was supposed not only to rule a realm as vast and wondrous as Norien, but to have been the source of all life, containing the essence of a God so powerful, Its will had forged everything out of nothing.

So it was with a sudden sinking of the heart that, upon entering the dim hut, he beheld the fabled Blinding Stone—for as it lay on a bed of straw, it looked no different than the opaque glass spheres that Spirit Servants sometimes used for their invariably worthless predictions. Even Yonfi seemed a little crestfallen, turning around to look at him as if saying, *This is it? This will save the world?* But when Iabi handed him a piece of black cloth to tie around his eyes (which both he and the old man did next, because if the Stone was restored to its original brilliance it would blind them), Yodren urged himself to be confident, if for no other reason because to show a lack of faith now could worsen Yonfi's already diminishing spirits and influence the effect of his powers—powers that shouldn't be toyed with, powers to which he owed his very life. Thus he gave Yonfi an enthusiastic wink and nod, tied the cloth around his head and lowered it over his eyes.

But after a few moments whose sightlessness was made even more unbearable by the deafening din of the blood in his ears, Yodren heard his brother grunt in frustration and then shout, "Nothing! The stupid thing won't shine! It won't do a damn thing!"

Warily, the three men raised their headbands, and saw Yonfi pat the Stone, then slap it impatiently, and finally drive his clenched fist against it—none of which had the slightest effect on the whitish sphere. Then Iabi diffidently

suggested that it might help if they carried the Stone outside, where it could potentially interact with the hidden sun, something they'd thought of doing before but were unable to because the Stone was too heavy to even pick up. When Yodren passed on this suggestion to his brother, the frown disappeared from his face and once more he smiled superiorly, placing his hands around the Stone and fluttering his fingers, eager to impress them with his prodigious strength. But when he grasped and pulled, expecting the load to be no heavier to him than that of an apple, the Stone didn't budge, making him fall back hard on the floor of the hut.

Yodren rushed over and kneeled next to the boy, whose face had turned into an unmoving mask of amazement and wrath. "Maybe you've strained yourself too hard," he said, but Yonfi pushed his caressing hand away, stood up and planted his feet before the Stone, breathing heavily through the nose, while his brother looked at his back with alarm, desperate to help but afraid to intervene. His skittish mind tried to recall all the Royen lore he had read during his Divinating days; had there been anything about the hero's powers waning? Could it be caused by the environment of Erat Rin, by the Rune of Death resisting all efforts to revive its counterpart? But Yonfi had been all-powerful before and during their journey across the sea—he had even defeated the storm! *Except if...* Except if there were bigger forces in existence than those of Royen the Eternal.

However, when he swiveled his heads towards Yonfi's roars of effort, he saw to his overjoyment that his brother had managed to lift the Stone and was holding it in his hands, even though he'd been forced to double over, his fingers hanging only an inch or two above the floor. Grunting and panting, Yonfi staggered for a few steps, and then the Stone slipped from his grip, falling down with a loud thud; so impossibly heavy was it, that this tiny drop made a deep hole in the bare mud. Once more Yodren's impulse was to make sure Yonfi was all right, tell him to pace himself and that he was doing a superb job—he had just lifted the bloody Rune of Life!—but his brother, still mad at the Stone for its unwillingness to obey him, and having rolled it out of the hole, was now kicking it forward like a rag ball, cursing under his breath at the slowness of its progress.

But before long he'd kicked it outside the hut, where, to their surprise, a crowd had formed. Raddia had hurried over first, sensing Yonfi's sullen mood like an icy draft of air, to be followed by Gallan and Wixelor and at least half the villagers, who, for all their scrawniness, seemed fully ready to forgo an unprecedented feast if it meant being there at the blessed moment when the Blinding Stone would at last illuminate the dreary gloom, and bring back the sun for good. Many were already holding their hands before their faces, taking fearful peeks between their fingers, but their overall anticipation, like a hum that, although silent, still made the air vibrate, was no help whatsoever to Yonfi, who seemed all the more angered by the fact that, no matter how urgently he kicked and rubbed and punched the accursed stone, it failed to give off the tiniest gleam, and, what was worse, was making him look like an incompetent fool in front of all these people.

Finally Raddia was unable to stand still, and tearing off her gloves she went and stood behind Yonfi's shoulder, whispered something in his ear, and when he responded with a shrug, she squatted near him and touched the Stone with her bare hands.

It all happened so suddenly, it looked as if Raddia had received one of Yonfi's unnaturally strong blows—for one moment she was kneeling close to him and the next she was flying backwards before she could so much as scream. Then she landed hard on the ground, and Gallan rushed to help her up, casting murderous glances at Yonfi and mind-muttering terrible oaths that shocked Raddia as to how he'd come to know them.

It wasn't him, she said, her hands still numb and her heart throbbing. *It's the Stone! Its Substance must be so great it can't be tampered with any more than—than a mountain's!*

Gallan was still glaring at the boy however, who looked more and more furious, dejected and embarrassed by his so very public failure. Because, feeling neither sunlight nor warmth from anywhere, one by one the villagers had begun to lower their hands and exchange looks of puzzlement and profound disappointment, while others let out quiet sighs or whispered about trifles that had nothing to do with the Stone. And yet, despite the shameful dissipation of his active powers, Yonfi's heightened senses could pick up every critical muscle twitch, every mouthed word of disapproval and every breath that betrayed a loss of faith in him, and it was as if with each of these letdowns he became the small insignificant child he'd thought belonged in the past, before Royen came along—and then to this feeling of infantile anger and powerlessness was added the mortification of a squirt of urine in his pants, as though his body had already reverted to that age.

And so, dry-eyed and stone-faced, he got to his feet, gave the hateful Stone a last kick and walked quickly away, indifferent to the placating words of Raddia, who did all she could not to run after him; Raddia, whose belief refused to be shaken, and secretly hoped his storming off might bring about a similar disturbance in the weather: a sudden gale or a shower of rain—anything to convince the Dwanars of Royen's true nature.

But even after Yonfi had disappeared into the village, nothing happened.

That night Gallan couldn't sleep. He was exhausted, and drunk on that honeyish concoction, and despite the bareness of the hut all five of them shared the straw mattress was soft and gentle to the body – but nonetheless he couldn't rest, and sleep eluded him.

He knew that this was mainly because of the rage he'd been harbouring for quite some time now, and which, perversely, kept his mind awake to further prod and irritate it. And the rage, in turn, was the product of the many insults he had suffered ever since leaving Lurien with Raddia. It was as if, by crossing over into Feerien and then to Erat Rin, they had also left behind their freedom of choice, and had been acting on the wishes and commands of others like a pair of idiots. First it had been the bloody Kobolds and the misfortunes of their primitive realm, then the annoyingly all-knowing Wixelor, then a nameless girl, and finally a tribe of savages, who had placed all their hopes on a stone that fell from the sky. And all this time, what had he and Raddia been to them? No more than conduits of thought and Substance, instruments to do as they were told.

As to Raddia's infatuation with the boy, Gallan had come to resent it so greatly, he'd even taken a grim satisfaction in his incapacity to dazzle them yet again with his miraculous powers. At times – as in this very instant, when, raising his head

slightly, he saw Raddia holding Yonfi's hand while they both slept—he really, fervently hated the little brat, and was sure his eyes gleamed with the same detestation they would often see in Navva's face many a year ago, whenever she'd catch them gloveless or barefoot. But letting his mind drift to Lurien made him even angrier, because it brought back the memory of his first and bigger failure: their pathetic Surfacing Rite, and his inability to become a Maker. Not that he had ever even remotely desired to have Raddia's Mates—in fact, it was almost certainly this lack of willingness that had impeded the merging of their Substances—but to see his own Mate (for he still baulked at the concept of *sister*) slip with such easy passion into the role of Yonfi's surrogate mother made him livid.

And there was something else nagging at him, some crucial detail that had been overlooked, which he felt sure he could recall if only he could silence the inner turmoil for a moment and think. After all, as it usually did, his anger had blinded him to his and Raddia's far from inconsequential contribution to the whole quest. To begin with, if it hadn't been for their intervention, that dimwit Veig Treth would never have agreed to offer the boy and his father a ride to the Castle, the father would have perished, and the glorious Royen would still be wandering the woods like a lost gosling. And even after the boy's powers had been revealed, and up until this very moment, it had been Raddia who had been keeping his impossible temper in check, since his brother, aside from his interpretive skills, was useless in this aspect—and who knows what might have become of them if Yonfi had been let loose? They'd all be rotting at the bottom of the sea, most likely—which reminded him of his own inspired idea about the raft. Now if he could apply the same cool-headed logic to the problem of the Stone, and pinpoint the missing connection, perhaps they wouldn't have to spend the rest of their miserable days in this dreadful place, perpetually cold and hungry and under threat of extinction.

So he conjured up what had followed Yonfi's tantrum and flight. First Yodren, convinced by Raddia to leave the boy alone for a bit to calm down, had asked Wixelor if he could think of a way to invoke the spirit of the God of Life, on the off chance that It might somehow reignite the Rune, but all Wixelor could think of was a rhyme he knew which, despite the earnestness of his chanting, had no effect whatever on the Stone. Then Raddia suggested that they both try to control the thing's extraordinary Substance, but Gallan had been adamant in his refusal, and to prove his point he had—rather foolishly—touched the Stone with the tip of his gloved index, and despite the milcloth it had felt as if a great hammer had struck his finger, so hard it was still sore. But all of these were mistakes that had been made *exactly because* of neglecting that one invaluable detail.

His eyes blinking in the dark, he repeated to himself the story of the Stone as it had been recounted to them, from the moment it had brought salvation from high above to its present, dormant state: first it had been placed in the hut, guarded by the blind madmen, but it had done nothing to protect the people or the land from the ashes until... *until a dog had buried it!* It was then that the regeneration had begun, spreading fast from the roots of that olive tree... and then the fools had dug it up again, and left it to dwindle aboveground till the sun had all but disappeared. The more Gallan thought about it, the more he was convinced his theory was right. He clearly recalled Wixelor, when he first told them of the Runes' existence, saying that they had been fashioned out of matter to control the material side of

the ever-shifting Norien. But then Erat Rin had broken off and wandered to the other end of the physical world, and for some reason that wasn't of the essence right now it had been followed by two of the three Runes. And if the Rune of Death had been as immense as Iabi had described it, then it had most certainly burrowed itself deep into the ground—Norien's ground, which the Rune of Life sought as well, so much so that it had grown weak without its enveloping presence; that was why the Stone was so incredibly heavy that even the boy could barely carry it, and why, according to Yodren, it had made such a deep dent in the ground when Yonfi had dropped it: because all this time it was longing to be once more inside its life-giving element.

Taking his glove off, Gallan touched Raddia's bare neck and she started, turned her sleepy face towards him and muttered, *What? What is it? Something's wrong.*

Wake the boy, Gallan said. *Nothing's wrong; we just have to bury the Stone.*

At first Yonfi was groggily reluctant to try his luck again on the thing that had brought him only frustration and ridicule, but when Raddia calmly explained Gallan's plan, the idea of digging a huge hole in the ground proved very tempting to his playful, boyish side, and soon they were on their way to where the Stone had been left.

The sky, though dark and clouded, had certain patches of violet that reminded Raddia of Feerien's moonlit dusk, and once more gave her hope that this Sun she had come to regard as the most magnificent thing imaginable might in fact be up there, just hiding and waiting to be properly summoned, like a proud (if not pompous) guest.

Gallan's idea made perfect sense, and Yonfi was of course capable of digging his way to the other side of the Forgotten Sphere, and so she tried, again, to strengthen her own confidence in this undertaking, but she couldn't help thinking that this was the last resort, and that if it failed, there was no conceivable way—at least not to her—to fulfill the Dwanars' expectations. Fortunately, Gallan was too preoccupied with elaborating on his plan to hear the timid voice of her uncertainty, yet this was not as comforting as she'd expected; because by now Raddia was exhausted of stifling thoughts and feelings from her brother, Yonfi and everyone else, of keeping a courageous front and a hopeful heart, and of subsequently having no one to soothe her fears as she so badly needed. And so, for the first time since Wixelor had told them of the Three Gods, she decided to do what she would do, had she been raised to believe in Them: turn to Them as if They were the all-powerful beings They were supposed to be, and hoping They were listening, and willing to grant her wish, pray to Them with all the fervour she could muster.

But the more she thought about it, the idea of such entities, able to do absolutely anything, was terrifying, as was the prospect of addressing Them—she couldn't think of the appropriate words (though actual talking might not be necessary: if Lurienites were able to read people's minds, then surely the Gods could, too, from any distance), and the concepts They encompassed daunted her. Life, for instance, could be so wonderful—as she had discovered from loving and being loved by Yonfi—that it seemed ungrateful to ask for more; Death, on the other hand, was such an unthinkable notion (no matter that sooner or later it

happened to everyone; even on the brink of certain death, one hoped to be spared), that its God must surely be merciless and cruel, and no use pleading with.

Which left the God of Fate and Chance, who was even harder to imagine than Its Siblings (or, as Wixelor said some believed, Its Children). First and foremost: which of the two was stronger, and if they were equally strong, how could they possibly coexist? For if there was a fixed fate controlling all that had happened (and would happen) from the beginning of the world to its end, and there was also a God who had created this fate, and knew every single twist and turn it would take, then existence couldn't even serve as entertainment to It. And if, on the contrary, all was chance, things occurring without the least control, reason or purpose, then what use were the Gods Themselves?

Yet Raddia was abruptly dragged from these confusing ruminations by Yonfi's determined grunts – for in the meantime they had reached the outskirts of the village, and Yonfi was kicking the pale Stone along, so very slowly it was excruciating to watch. In explaining his plan, Gallan had said that they should move the Stone as far from the outermost, abandoned huts of the village as possible, so that if its power was restored it wouldn't cause any harm to the children and the overly enthusiastic villagers who were bound to rush to any sudden source of light; he had also added that the distance would be useful in case his idea proved unsuccessful, for it would give them much-needed time to come up with an alternate plan without the vexing hindrance of an expectant audience (though he had said this in thought alone to Raddia, so as not to dishearten Yonfi).

However, what worried her now wasn't the possible result of burying the Stone. For as they left behind them the clayish flattened mud of the village, the ground became cold and hard. And how would Yonfi dig it up without hurting his bare little hands?

All of six years old in his latest incarnation, Royen the Eternal was enjoying this nocturnal adventure so much, it was all he could do not to cry out in exhilaration. And it was high time he had some fun, for lately he had suffered an abundance of grief.

For one thing, aside from a few instances of usefulness, ever since they'd arrived in this aptly named forgotten place, Yonfi had on many occasions felt like a helpless boy instead of an immortal hero, and he loathed this feeling with all his heart. Because while they were still in Feerien (which seemed a world of utter bliss compared to this gloomy realm), he'd seen his powers thrive, and bring great happiness to himself and to others, with feats such as scaring off those filthy Scavengers and raising all those dead people—his own beloved brother first and foremost. However, just as life and warmth had been drained from it, Erat Rin seemed to have had a similarly harmful effect on his abilities, condemning him to enormous depths of self-doubt and misery, and affecting others like a curse: first he'd been unable to save the nameless girl from the storm, and then to the guilt of her death had been added his lamentable failure to live up to the legends written about him by being unable to illuminate the Stone and letting down so many people.

But the moment he first attacked the sandy soil, burying his fingers in it with all the pent-up fury he'd been feeling, and seen the ground crumble and sink at his touch as though afraid of him, he had laughed triumphantly and fell upon the task with double the self-confidence and vigour, digging and digging and digging in such a state of wild abandon, that when he next heard Raddia's alarmed voice he looked around and realized he stood in a pit so deep, her and Gallan's faces seemed as small as waning moons.

So with a few quick leaps he climbed to the surface, and when he asked Gallan if he thought the hole was deep enough, he was so shocked by how fast this yawning crater had opened up before his startled eyes, he could only nod wordlessly in reply.

"Can I kick the Stone inside, then?" Yonfi said, not even panting from the effort.

Raddia beamed at him. "Of course you can, my sweet. Have at it."

So down went the stupid stubborn Stone, its great heaviness making it sink even deeper into the soft exposed ground, so that after a few of moments it had vanished into the unfathomable darkness. And then, his gleeful furor renewed by seeing Gallan nod at him encouragingly while a rare smile broke on his pallid face, Yonfi began to fill up the pit—an even easier thing, for all he had to do was push at the seemingly weightless piles of dirt his excavation had produced; and as soon as this was achieved, he was joined by Gallan and Raddia, and they all stomped on the earth till it was smooth and even.

But now came the hardest part, and the one for which Yonfi, caught up in all the heady enjoyment of his restored amazing powers, had least prepared himself for: sitting and waiting to see whether the buried Blinding Stone would draw out the Sun.

And as the three of them had turned their gaze up at the overcast sky like the villagers had the night before, each passing moment seemed longer, and harder to bear, and Yonfi, besides his rising impatience, had to fight the irksome voice of doubt as well. So when Raddia came up from behind and wrapped her hands around his chest, laid her head softly upon his shoulder and gave his ear a tiny, tender kiss, Yonfi not only let her, but relished in her unfailing ability to make him feel loved, precious and strong.

And then Raddia's hope in him entered him subtly, as if by her breath which he felt become one with his own, and so without lowering his head Yonfi shut his eyes tight and willed the Sun to appear like Feerien's first moon did at the break of dawn.

"The air..." he whispered. "Is it just me, or does it feel a bit warmer?"

So it does, my love, Raddia said softly, and then the balm of her words was all of a sudden combined with a faint but growing warmth which set the skin on his face atingle, and Yonfi's eyes opened slowly and then wide to the first unmistakable ray of the Sun.

It was but a single ray at first, a taut string of light extending between the earth and the clouds as if the sky was an immense kite of rosy grey—but then this up till that moment seemingly unbreakable fabric began to slowly tear, and thin out like windswept smoke, so that the ray thickened into a beam and then into a column and finally, as the initial break in the firmament's mantle grew into a

gaping, still-widening hole, into a tall luminous pillar that shed a blissful warmth to the air and the ground it lit up.

And as Yonfi, Raddia and Gallan squinted at the Sun-made hole that with every passing moment destroyed the clouds as fire does darkness, too stunned to even think, the range and intensity of the warmth grew bigger and wider, until it finally reached the village, seeping into rooms that had long been dark and cold and making their dwellers stir from their sleep, warming up gardens and orchards and beasts in pens which had all but forgotten what it felt like to be awakened by sunlight, and giving the appearance of life even to things lifeless, to barren ponds and sparks of shiny mineral in the soil.

Thus the three who now deserved to be called People of the Blinding Stone were soon joined by a sleepy crowd of men, women and children, so astonished they'd almost dismiss this wonder as a dream if it weren't for its blessed warmth and the brightness of the light, of the Onf-Rah who, as they barely recalled from long ago, one had to be a god to be able to look at without averting one's gaze at once. The Sun had finally returned.

Then Yodren pushed his way through the motionless people, knealt before his brother and embraced him, whispering words of love and admiration; and after Raddia had explained how Gallan's brilliant plan and Yonfi's heroic execution of it had brought about this miracle, Yodren stood before the crowd and, aglow with pride and happiness, shared the glad tidings with them—whereupon the villagers, first the children and after a moment every single one of them, burst out in wild cries and sobs of triumph, dancing and prancing and hoisting up the Khum-Rah, their beloved, blessed saviours.

So loud and frenzied had the celebrations become, that the thud of his enormous body hitting the ground went unheard, but when Wixelor began to groan and then howl as he writhed on the dirt, the people stepped quickly aside while his distraught friends rushed to his aid. But despite their eagerness to help him, even Yonfi had trouble trying to keep him still, while Raddia stroked his wrinkled, sweaty brow and Yodren, stooped above Wixelor's rapidly moving lips, struggled to make sense of his ramblings.

"Something about a monster... and legions of people arriving here..."

"Could it be the Sun?" Raddia said, remembering the darkness of Ienar Lin as he had described it to them. "Should we take him inside, away from the light?"

"But he was fine in Feerien," Yonfi said. "Even at full second moon he was."

However, after a while Wixelor's wild shudders began to abate, and he lowered the hands he'd been keeping pressed against his temples, and finally he was able to sit up and accept the flask of water Iabi had hastened to bring, draining it in a single gulp.

"I'm sorry for alarming you, dear friends..." he wheezed. "It was just that this—this thing hasn't happened to me in a very long time, and I'd forgotten how awful it is."

And then he explained to them how, when he was still a young Dreamer learning to cope with the countless dreams of beings from all over and beyond Norien, he would sometimes be assaulted by swarms of images and feelings stemming from a single place in time and space—a battlefield, or the site of some great disaster, which the defensive faculties of his poor brain were insufficient to

protect him against. And just now, when he walked up to the sunlight, he'd been overwhelmed by such a massive swarm.

"Do you think this means something horrible will happen here?" Yodren asked, seeing the question written on Iabi's worried face. "A war, perhaps?"

"And what about the monster?" Yonfi asked. "Was it killing people?"

"That's the strangest thing," Wixelor said, getting to his feet and smiling at the crowd to show them there was no need for alarm. "It wasn't an actual monster; it looked more like the statue of one, for though it towered over me, it stood perfectly still."

"And the people—what were they doing?" Gallan asked. "Fighting?"

Wixelor shook his head. "It seemed as though they simply gazed at it."

"Do you remember what the monster looked like?" Raddia said.

"It had the face of a man, but its body was one of some reclining beast."

Iabi was speaking urgently to Yodren. "He asks if the statue was built here."

"It must have, for the swarm attacked as I was looking at that place over there," he said, indicating the approximate area where Yonfi had buried the Stone.

And now Yonfi broke his thoughtful silence. "What if the dream is a warning? Maybe it means that this statue has to be built to make sure nothing bad happens."

They all stared at him—all but Raddia, whose face lit up by their amazement at the boy's simple wisdom; for what better way to ensure that no one would ever unearth the Blinding Stone and cause it to lose its power than to cover it with a huge statue?

"Iabi says his people shall erect the statue if that's what the prophet decrees."

"Tell them I'm no prophet," Wixelor said with a dismissive laugh.

"But it makes sense even aside from the dream—doesn't it?"

"Well, then by all means let them build one; just not on my account alone."

Iabi was already in deliberations with a group of elderly tribesmen, explaining Wixelor's fit and what it might suggest, and they all turned and nodded at the Dreamer, unshaken in their belief that his vision was prophetic and should be carried out.

"Can I help them?" Yonfi said, lifting a boulder to display his strength.

"But what shall it look like, this reclining man-beast?" Raddia asked.

However, Wixelor couldn't recall any more details; the onrush of dream images had been too overpowering; he only knew the beast part rested on four great legs.

"But there are a million four-legged beasts!" Yonfi complained.

At that very moment, a booming sound erupted, silencing everyone and making them turn towards its source—and as they did, the villagers broke into a panicked run, for where the Sun had first shone upon, on the flat soil that had begun to crack from the heat of the light, there now stood a big, strange animal, the likes of which most of them had never seen before. It was a little shorter than a bull, with a muscular body covered in sand-coloured fur, four powerful legs whose paws were armed with huge sharp claws, and a beautiful imposing head, framed by a nest of long, dense, golden hair.

Yet despite its formidable appearance and obvious strength, there was nothing in the beast's demeanour to suggest that it was even contemplating an attack. It

merely uttered another ground-shaking growl, and then lay down to bask in the sun.

And meanwhile, one of the villagers, a stooped old woman as dark and wizened as a raisin, was talking heatedly to Yodren, her toothless mouth working over the words while at the same time she cast fearful, astonished glances at the reclining beast.

“She says it’s an omen,” Yodren told them after a while, “because everyone in the tribe believed that the last of these animals had perished during the Ashen Curse, when there was almost nothing left for them to feed on. But before the Stone of Death struck, she says this was the strongest, most-feared beast in all of Dwanar. And she also insists that its appearance cannot be a coincidence, but is a sure omen affirming your vision.”

Wixelor was staring at it too. “It’s extraordinary...” he muttered.

“What? *What?*” Yonfi shouted, jumping up and down. “You know what it is?”

“Sure, I’ve seen its kind before, but what’s amazing is that—the monster? The statue... What I saw... it looked exactly like it, only on a much larger scale, of course.”

Yodren was still nodding at the old woman’s words; then he came back to them.

“It’s called a lion. Apparently, it’s considered sacred—the king of all beasts.”

And as if in deference to a king, the sun was showering the lion with gold.

Epilogue

The schoolroom emptied as it usually did, with a din of perky voices and dozens of stomping footsteps, as the children hurried outside to kick the ball or go to the river to fish and swim or simply do nothing except enjoy the rest of the day’s freedom.

And with a sigh of contentment, Yodren sat behind the desk, resting his head on his elbow and closing his eyes, the better to appreciate the loud yet marvellous music of the children’s shouting and laughing. *Another good day*, he said to himself.

Another day of teaching the little ones the ‘*language of the Sun*’—as the common tongue of Lurien, Feerien and Ienar Lin was called by the villagers—and of instructing them in the History of Norien, such as he knew it from his years as a Scribe and from Wixelor’s great wealth of knowledge. But, more importantly, another day of *being taught* by his students, just as he was by their parents, the instinctive, practical wisdom of Erat Rin: the simplicity of the Divine Language if one merely immersed oneself in it through speech, without overthinking every minute change or potential double meaning, and the equally—if not more—astounding way one could sustain oneself with a little hard work and patience: knowing when, where and what to sow, how long to wait before reaping a harvest or plucking ripe, edible fruit from a tree, when to collect honey from a beehive and the uses of animals at various ages, as well as the proper way to kill, skin, pluck

and bleed them without becoming too attached to the fact that they were living things.

Thus by a twist of fate he'd never have imagined possible, he, Yodren Kobold, a weak, sheltered creature till only a few months ago, a man who lived exclusively in and through his head and feared the brutal world, was now fast becoming a Farmer just like his father, learning all the things poor Yern had never had the chance to teach him.

Yodren's thoughts turned often to the family he'd lost twice in his life, as he was sure Yonfi's thoughts did, too. Presumably, by saving Erat Rin they had also saved the rest of Norien, but there was no way to tell for sure; even Wixelor, in an apologetic way, said that Feerien was too far away for the dreams of Feeres to reach him. Whatever the truth, Yodren chose to believe his father was still alive and well, and that perhaps some day, just as wondrously as they'd been separated, they might be together again. Besides, he had his little brother, who more than sufficed to heal and warm his bruised heart.

Just as the land and its living creatures had been flourishing ever since the Sun had returned, so had Yonfi thrived almost impossibly, as if he weren't a boy but a young tree, or some singular, mythical beast. Within a couple of months he'd shot up at least a head, and his skinny frame had filled up with muscle from working long, tireless hours at the statue's building site; his pale complexion had taken a light brown sheen, the blue of his eyes had darkened, and even the pitch of his voice had dropped, alarmingly, save from some shrill notes that still escaped him, betraying the fact that, although to look at him one might easily say he was a youth of twelve, he was not yet seven. As to the village children, they worshipped the ground his bare feet walked on, as much for his powers as for the fact that he never used them to hurt, taunt or cheat in a game—only when fishing did they ask of him to perform his magic, never tiring of seeing the trout leap out of the water and into his beckoning hands. So wherever he went he was always surrounded by a throng of friends and playmates, sticking out by his height and white-blond hair.

And in the meantime Dwanar was on its slow but steady way to recovery, aided by a mission from Iabi's village on which Gallan and Wixelor had gone as well. Taking with them sacks of seeds and saplings, cattle, sheep and fowl, they planned on visiting as many populated areas as they could find along the way, and help the people make their land once more a source of sustenance. The two Khum-Rah had offered their assistance, which might prove of very high value to the mission; besides their imposing appearance, Gallan could speak to the minds of people and help if a change of Substance was needed, while Wixelor was extremely knowledgeable and, from their dreams, he knew what most people truly desired. There was no telling how long the mission would last, (more than a year, maybe) and Yodren's heart had tightened at the thought of being separated from Gallan for so long, even though the attraction between them had never been acted upon or even openly acknowledged; moreover, it was unthinkable to join the mission himself and leave Yonfi alone, even if he was certain his brother could manage just fine without him, and Gallan, until the time to leave came and he shot Yodren an intense, melancholy gaze, hadn't spoken a word about their separation, either silently or aloud.

But now was no time for useless brooding; this afternoon he was to take his first lesson in camel riding, a thing he dreaded and had thus put off for a ridiculously long time; and then it would be time to head home for supper, lovingly prepared by Raddia, whose kindness and companionship Yodren had come to regard with infinite gratitude, as that of a caring, dutiful wife he didn't think he'd ever done anything to deserve.

Suddenly, Yonfi's manly-boyish voice was heard above the children's prattle.

"Hey, brother!" he shouted. "Leave your precious parchments for a moment and come kick the ball with us! I promise I shan't take advantage of your clumsiness!"

Yodren let out another sigh of satisfaction, and rose from the desk with a smile.

"That's what you always say!" he called back.

Raddia waited another moment and then tossed the spices into the burning pan—first the yellow and then the red one, and stirring them swiftly with a wooden spoon she lowered her head and took a deep breath, inhaling greedily the wonderful smell. What a magical place this Erat Rin was turning out to be! Oh, let it remain forever forgotten, a nowhere no one knows about, lest strangers flock from other worlds, less beautiful, and ruin it! It stunned her still, how lovely something as trivial as food could be, if prepared with the right ingredients and a little care. For, reaffirming the importance of untouch, food in Lurien was usually a rather plain and bland affair, a simple process to satisfy the base need of hunger, and the meals rarely touched you more than literally, for the brief time it took for them to be ingested. Whereas Dwanari dishes seemed to Raddia made to cause one to moan with delight, from the moment the mouthwatering smells rose from the stove to the moment one collapsed on a chair, fit to burst and stupidly happy.

And food, with its countless varieties and secrets, was the profoundest way with which she communicated with the womenfolk, and felt she belonged with them, because when it came to the language of Iabi's tribe—to Yodren and Yonfi's constant teasing—she hadn't made much progress. Maybe it was the fact that she'd spent almost all her life amongst people who thought it wise to speak as little and with as few words as possible, or maybe it was the Dwanars themselves, whose thoughts were usually quite simple and easy to grasp even without knowing the actual words. Be that as it may, Raddia still got on perfectly well with the villagers, and had compensated for her reticence by letting the women teach her wordless, manual skills—such as cooking and knitting, herb growing and clothes making—pastimes she enjoyed hugely, and through which she was able to please *the men of the house*, as she jokingly referred to Yodren and Yonfi.

Tonight she was making mutton with small sweet onions, Yonfi's favourite. She wished Gallan and Wixelor were here, to sit at the table too. There were times when she missed her brother so bitterly, it took effort not to burst in tears; they'd never been apart before in their lives, and sometimes his absence felt as if she were missing a limb, or as if a great stone weighed down on her chest, so that she could barely breathe. But Yodren's companionship was thankfully more than enough to ease the pain, and over time they'd established a pattern of togetherness, a daily routine, which afforded them many shared pleasures—such as eating breakfast together and talking silently while Yonfi still slept, or sitting

outside the hut near sundown to gaze at the beauty of the world, she with her knitting and he with some of the (frankly, horrid) wooden toys he'd taken to whittling, and which he invariably inflicted on his students as gifts. Raddia had grown quite fond of Yodren, and in fact, according to the customs of both Feerien and Dwanar, they were of an age when men and women living together marry, breed, and raise their usually big families—something she sometimes saw in the women's faces when talk turned to men, though they were too in awe of her to ever make an actual suggestion. Save the breeding part, Raddia wasn't hostile to the idea, and neither was Yodren, but it wasn't a pressing issue, and they didn't wish to upset their pleasantly simple life in any way. Being Yonfi's carers, his unofficial parents in a sense, was all the family either of them needed.

Ah, *Yonfi*... Sometimes his mere thought was enough to make her all tearful, and Raddia sniffled and laughed at herself as she added the strips of fatty lamb meat to the sizzling brownish onions. How incredibly tall he'd grown, her darling boy! Soon she'd be able to rest her head against his big chest and feel his arms go all the way around her... Though for the time being, like all children, Yonfi intensely disliked to be hugged (let alone fondled, or kissed) even without others watching, and Raddia had to be extremely careful even when gazing at him or thinking of him too keenly, for Yonfi had as of late developed the uncanny ability to feel her eyes or her mind upon him, and he'd suddenly turn around and catch her staring and blushing and tease her to death, "his lady"!

This pet name had also been a recent invention, for when she'd first suggested that he call her Raddia, Yonfi had said that in Feerien—and as it turned out, in Dwanar as well—it was considered disrespectful to address an elder by his or her name. And so, thinking back on the night when he'd first seen her, and called her *a strange Lady*, he took to calling her '*My Lady*', which he found amusing and Raddia so heartwarming she had to pretend to find it funny as well, lest he quit using it. The dear, beloved boy!

As if summoned by her love, Yonfi walked through the door right then, brown with dirt from top to bottom, barefoot and bare-chested, as the men went about when it grew too hot. With a short, comical bow and a half-uttered "M'lady," he took the jug of water and drained it, and then attacked a bowl of black figs till it was picked clean. Then he let out a loud belch, scratched his belly and his head (gestures of crass manliness he'd picked up at the building site and took care to repeat at any given chance), and informed her that he might be late for supper, for he and some of his friends were going hunting.

"Just be careful, my love," Raddia said, before she could stop herself. Of course it was the beasts that should be careful, but still she didn't like the thought of all those boys (children, really) being attacked by huge-tusked boars and big-antlered deer.

Instead of mocking her as she expected, Yonfi behaved as if she hadn't spoken at all. "Till tonight then, mut," he said, and turned to leave.

"Wait," Raddia called, as he was walking out the door. "What does *mut* mean?" What happened to '*My Lady*'?, she wanted to ask, terrified that he'd given her some new name, meaning, in the language of the locals, '*old woman*', or something equally awful.

Yonfi turned around again, looking at her with an amused scowl. “I can’t believe you still haven’t learnt a single word of Dwanari! Even babies know what *mut* means.”

“I know *many* words, thank you very much! Just not this particular one,” Raddia said, though something inside her fluttered, fluttered, and wouldn’t be still.

Yonfi sighed, and let his shoulders droop. “It means *mother*, silly,” he said.

