

Across The Ages & Book One

# SEER



JOSH MALCOLM

**Across The Ages ≈ Book One**

# **SEER**



**JOSH MALCOLM**

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*To Andy and Miss Janz*

*Your prodding me into my first steps of writing  
have resulted in more than I could have imagined.*

*Thank you.*

Other Books by Josh Malcolm

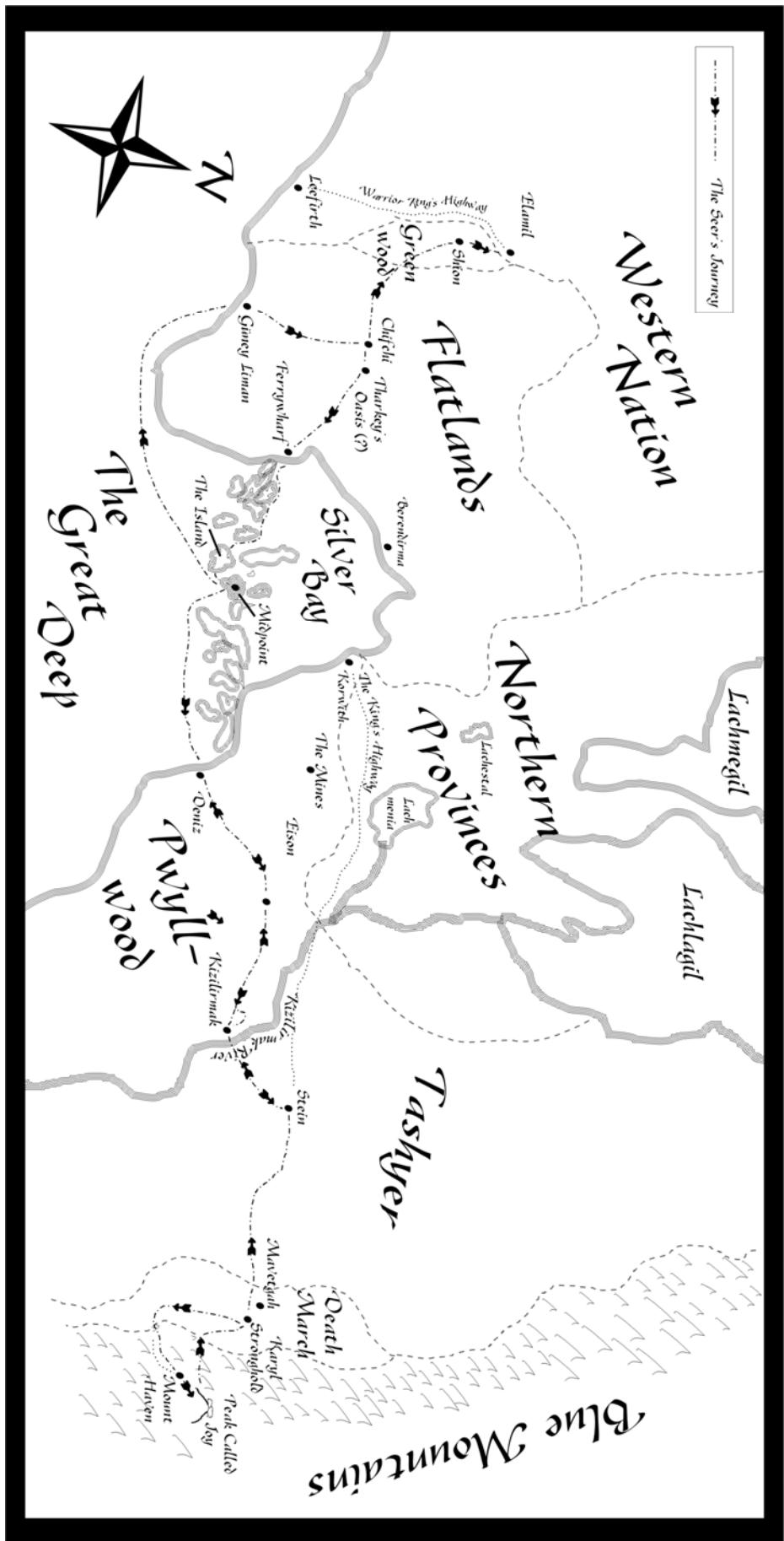
*The Wager*

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# *The Seven Nations*

*The Seer's Journey*



## THE SEER PROPHECY

*The Word of the Almighty came to Yedutun the high priest during the reign of Diblah the King in Shion and he prophesied concerning the Warrior King and the Seer.*

*Fallen, fallen is Shion from her sins. The King is gone, the corrupted Council disbanded, and the city cursed.*

*He has risen from the west and has stretched forth his hand to grasp the shining sword. With its flame he has struck the lands and subdued them. He has taken the throne in a city of sin. He has proclaimed his god, the Destroyer, to be the Most High. He has blasphemed the Holy Name. But that is not all. He will persecute my people, says the Almighty, they will fall to his sword.*

*Yet I have not forgotten them. I have raised up one from among their brothers to seek my face. I have called him from among the people of the wood and yet he is not one of their own. He has come to my holy mountain and has taken my commission. He has gone forth in power and with great strength to smite the dark and cast down the iniquitous.*

*The evil ones tremble in their strongholds. Of them will be one slain and then one more, one pardoned, one returned to the dead whence he came, two slain and one raised to the throne. When the first is fallen he shall look upon my face and know me well.*

*He will smite the shining sword. Its flame will die. And yet in the time of need it shall burn once more.*

*He will cast down the man of evil and raise up the King and the Council. Peace will be his banner and under his hand all will prosper.*

*Wait patiently, says the Almighty, the Creator, the Sustainer, for the time is soon at hand.*

*Here end the words of Yedutun. [...]*

*After the fifth Generation following Diblah, the Warrior King arose and overthrew the Nations and they awaited the arrival of the one known as the Seer.*

— A Historic of the Nations Seven, Book IV,  
by Jon son of Ethan



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**Part One:**  
**THE ACOLYTE**

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# One: Land of the Weary

## The Old Man

**B**rightly blazed the sun in the noon-day sky, hammering the barren land with his white rays. The reddish sand reflected the heat back in heavy waves, buffeting the traveler as he made his way along the rutted track which formed a highway through the Flatlands. He was old and yet not, walking tall, hardly using the staff that he held in his right hand. Most any robber would shun this man, not because he looked poor, but because of the silent power that radiated from him. He had a sack over his shoulder, a bow and a quiver full of arrows slung across his back, and a water skin at his side. He wore a robe of coarse, brown wool cloth, bound at his waist by a thick leather belt. His feet were sheathed in a pair of open sandals whose thongs criss-crossed up the old man's calves. His gray hair and beard were cropped short and around his neck he wore a leather thong with a curious blue stone attached to it. His skin was browned and weathered, creased from many journeys. Indeed, he was known to be a wanderer, one who knew the Nations intimately.

He squinted hard against the sun, gazing into the distance at a large rocky cliff that rose some way before him. The flatness and heat waves made it difficult to discern the distance, but the old man judged that he would reach it within the hour. He unslung his water skin and took a quick pull at it before pacing on. High above him a few birds of prey circled, looking for carcasses, grouse or pigeons who build their nests on the ground, or the small ground-hogs that lived in the reddish sand. He ignored them and the area around him, a barren land covered in places by small, thorny plants, his mind fixed solely on his destination – on his quest. Twenty years had passed since he'd last visited the hidden valley, twenty years since the vision and the utterance of the prophecy. The child should have been born by now and would be ready. *Will they be ready for it?* he wondered. Would he have to pry him away from them as he feared, or would they let him go willingly? What if he hadn't been born yet?

Such thoughts plagued him as he finally reached the great cliff. It was part of a high, rocky formation that from a distance seemed to be a giant table set into the starkness of the expansive sands. Few knew its secret, though. Within the center of the great rock lay a fertile valley, teeming with life, an oasis jealously guarded by its inhabitants. He followed the pathway to a large cleft in the cliff.

He fully expected to be challenged as soon as he slipped through the fissure, but the only one to greet him was a ten-foot carving of a man set into the living rock. He was clad only in a loin cloth, his giant muscles chiseled in by some ancient craftsman. He held a pitchfork over his head and balefully stared down at the intruder with sightless eyes.

"Tarla," the old man muttered to himself. He made to spit in the dust beneath the carving, but then refrained. There were too many who still worshipped the god of fertility here and if he were seen he might be condemned to death. He looked over his shoulder to see another carving opposite the man. It was a naked woman, as tall as the man. She gazed up at the heavens, a tree in one hand, a bloody knife in the other. At her throat she wore a necklace of skulls. Ebediyen was she, consort to the god Tarla, mother of the earth, destroyer of the ages.

The old man fidgeted beneath the weight of their presence. Images only, he knew, but images that portrayed a dark, evil force, one that would be reckoned with soon. And with that the prophet could no longer hold back.

"Hear, o gods of stone," he roared into the cleft. "Hear the word of the Creator, the One God. You will meet your doom! The day will come when you will fall, the day when the Seer arises to proclaim truth and justice. It is close at hand, so weep in despair, you false gods. Your time will come!"

He wound his way through the great chasm, unchallenged. The gods had not risen to his cry, nor had any man come to see what madman had come to defame these deities. The path climbed up between the walls of stone until they were no more than shoulder high. And then he came to the top of the rise and stopped, gazing down upon the verdant Chifchi. The hills were covered with terraces of lush green fields, the small plants waving softly in the breeze. About fifteen or twenty huts were clustered in the center of the valley. There were also three larger compounds at distance from the village proper. Woods surrounded three sides of the village and trees stood about it giving the place a very cozy look. A small lake bordered it on the north-east and a stream flowed from it into the valley and out of the eastern pass.

The old man smiled to himself grimly and strode down the road. It was no more than two ruts through a field, grass growing up the center of it. He knew by the feel of it that it had been some time since anyone had passed through here. The soldiers of the Warrior King, perhaps even the king himself, had forgotten about this hidden valley and that was good.

A little farther on, the path cut into a better-kept road. Here he could pick up his pace. He glanced up at the sun. There were many hours yet before he could visit them. They would be in the fields now and it would not do to disturb them. He would wait for sunset, but he had time until then, time to find out what had happened in the years past. And he knew just the place where he could learn all he wished.

The inn was small, but well-kept. The old man gazed around it with appreciation, enjoying the cool of the room. Light slanted through open windows and dust danced in the beams. The common room was fairly empty, one table occupied by an old man who seemed to be dozing, a jug of ale at his elbow. Two youngsters were off in one corner whispering and laughing at something, and there were a few who seemed to be the regular ne'er-do-wells that would be found in such a place on mid-day, regardless of the time of year.

He took a table off to the side, yet in a place where he could watch and bide his time. He had just settled himself when a side door opened and the innkeeper hustled in. He glanced around, noticed his new guest, and came over.

"Welcome, sir," he droned in a high-pitched, officious voice. "You look like you might like a drink."

"That I would," the old man replied.

"I'll have one for you in just a minute," the innkeeper intoned, glancing up and down his new customer. "You been traveling far?"

"A good ways," the priest returned good-naturedly.

"I haven't seen you here before," the proprietor explained, then suddenly became thoughtful. "Or have I?" He rubbed his beefy, unshaven chin with one hand and squinted.

"I have come from outside," the old man explained. "It has been a long day for me so far and I would appreciate a good jug and perhaps some bread and meat." He fished in his belt and produced a coin, which he flipped at the innkeeper. The heavy-set man caught it quickly and turned it over in his hand.

"King's mint sliver." He grinned. "That'll do." And with that he hustled off, calling for his serving girl to take care of the old man.

When the meal came he ate slowly. The bread was very good, the salted meat old, though, probably from a winter deer. The ale, on the other hand, was better than he remembered it. *Andronicus has certainly improved on his father's craft*, the old man thought, nursing his jug.

By the time he had his second one brought, the inn began to fill up more. These were some of the workers who had quit early. There were also a few who might be sons of the richer farmers and merchants in the valley. They talked loudly and yelled for the barmaid to bring them their ale, taking a long table near one of the front windows. The old man glanced at the men who had entered and thought he recognized one. He gently touched the stone at his throat, silently willing the man to come to him. After a few moments, the one called

pulled on his comrade's sleeve and gestured towards the table where the old man sat. A few words passed between them, too low for him to hear, but then they came towards him, each with a jug in their hand.

"Hello, old man," the younger of the two said with a grin. "What's new in the out-lands?"

"Much," he replied. "Sit, if you will, and I will tell you the news." The young men settled themselves in the other chairs and set their jugs down on the table. *Where to begin?* the old man thought to himself as he regarded them.

"Where'd you come from?" the older of the two asked.

"From Peshwar, beyond the rim," the old one answered and sipped at his beer. "It's not much larger than here."

"I know Peshwar," the younger replied, loosening the cloth vest he wore. "I've been there once."

"Peaceful?" the older queried.

"There is no peace." The old man made an angry throw-away motion. "The soldiers had only just come through, ravaging and burning."

"Barbarians!"

"No, the soldiers of the Warrior King himself." The priest sighed. "They take death and destruction wherever they go. And this was the second time since the first snowfall."

"They burned Peshwar in winter?" the younger man cried incredulously. "Are they insane?"

"No, just bored and evil."

"May Tarla protect us from them and their ilk," the older man muttered. "It's only the protection of the gods that keeps the Warrior King from discovering us."

*Or the protection of the One,* the old man thought to himself. He related more, feeding the eager men with stories of the injustices done by the warlords. He told of the collectors, of the new taxes that were imposed on the temples and the worshippers, and he told of rumors that the Warrior King was to declare himself a god.

"Only a fool would do something like that," the older listener muttered into his jug. "Who does he think he is, anyway?"

"He is king – by the power of his own hand, no less," the old man explained, "and that can go to any man's head." The two men thought for a long moment, considering those words.

"And now," the foreigner said, changing the subject, "I have told you of the out-lands. Tell me of what has been happening here in the past few years."

"Well, not much to tell you the truth," the older native replied after another large swig. The alcohol was beginning to tell, the old man knew. He would hear what he wanted.

"Belik died four years ago. His son Jimri is the head of the village now." The youngest man shook his head and leaned in, his voice lowered to nearly a whisper. "He makes his father look like a wastrel and Belik was already tight-fisted. But at least he pays well enough for good grain and he likes his ale. It's good for the inn and for us brewers." He winked at the old man and leaned back again.

"And what of Adem, son of Peleg?"

"What's your business with Adem?" the older informant demanded.

"He is an old friend of mine," the traveler explained.

"Oh. Well, he married the daughter of Zorian. That caused a storm." The two locals chuckled at the memory, but the old man stayed sober. This was what he'd predicted.

"That fool Rikel wanted to have her," the youngest explained. "He would have been content to bed her one night and send her packing to the farmer the next. But, no, she would have none of it. She was to be a virgin on her wedding night and she brought nothing but trouble on her marriage."

"How so?" The old man was intrigued. This was more than he had expected from Mikela.

"Well, Rikel took the offense personally, and being Belik's grandson he had a measure of power. Adem was not all *that* well off to begin with, but Zorian's gifts and Peleg's inheritance gave them a more than comfortable living standard – until Rikel got his grandfather to lower the price on Adem's produce. He gave Adem one quarter what it was worth and ordered that no one should buy from him. Still, it took him nearly four years to

finally scare all the other buyers off." The older local snorted in disgust and glared over at the table where the rich young men were partying. The old traveler noticed how one was particularly harassing the young serving maid. He might have been handsome, but he wore a few pounds to many and his face was already reddened and sagging, speaking of overindulgence in the good innkeeper's product.

"Yes, that's Rikel," one of his companions affirmed, "the scourge of Chifci. I loathe the day when *he* becomes ruler."

"What happened to Adem?" the old man pressed.

"What should happen to him?" the younger native demanded, swinging his ale jug. "He did his best to provide for his family."

"The god was at least not so bitter towards him as to condemn him completely," the older man explained. "Peleg's tracts of land had always been some of the most fruitful in the valley and Adem is very skilled. He produces three times what any of us can, *and* he works in other men's fields when his own are taken care of." He shook his head and lowered his voice. "I swear, if we were to reward a man for his labors, he would be prince of the village." He nodded meaningfully.

"So he gets by as well as he can. He had to borrow money from Jimri this year," the younger explained.

"And that is bad," the priest surmised, nodding.

"Yes, Jimri will make it so that Adem will never be able to pay." The speaker shook his head. "And all because his wife was so foolish."

"She was honorable," his younger companion exclaimed. "And she held to her religion, which is more than any of us can claim!"

"That's what *you* think," the older snapped back.

"Right, me and half the village. They respect Mikela for it. I wouldn't be surprised if there are those who give Adem and his sons *more* than their wage, simply to counteract their bad luck." He glared at his friend, challenging him to answer.

"I don't want to anger the gods," the other protested.

"You mean, you don't want to anger *Jimri* and *Rikel*, eh?"

"What's happened to *them* can happen to anyone. We must be careful. The gods treat a man well if he bows to his rulers." The younger man made to reply, but the old traveler cut him off.

"What of the sons of Adem?" he asked.

"Oh, he has three. They're good boys, except some people say that Rikel has been after the eldest for some time. Something about breaking into Jimri's garden?" The old man smiled at that. Rikel and his father would destroy Adem and his family if they could. He'd foreseen it, but he also knew that this would not be possible. The gods may be fickle and punish those who disobey corrupt earthly authorities, but the One God would reward those who held to his decrees. Mikela had done that. But was her son ready? He would soon find out.

"What do you know of Adem's eldest?" he pressed.

"What does anyone know? He is a hard worker, but he doesn't care for his father. Anyone can see that. I know he's got a penchant for getting in trouble. He's almost of marriageable age, but no one would consider giving their daughter to him. They say his family is cursed and no one wants to get caught in that."

"Is anything else said about him?" the old man questioned. He still hadn't heard what he was hoping to.

"What *should* be said of him, old man?" the elder native demanded. "He gets in trouble and if you ask me his destiny is to stay in trouble."

*So no one knows about him*, the traveler thought. *It will be as I feared.* He looked up at the lengthening shadows. It was time to go and find the house of Adem and the son of Adem. He thanked his friends for their news and passed them each a silver coin. Then he rose and left the inn. He turned and walked down the dusty road, enjoying the lengthening shadows. If he timed it right, he would be there when the evening meal had been taken. If anything, Mikela was a creature of habit.



## The Boy

Dinner had been a quiet affair that evening and Mikela had just finished telling her twilight tale. Tonight it had been of the great king Artus who had ruled a hundred years in justice and prosperity. Her children loved the stories – all save Creon. How often he'd told her he was too old for those? Her heart ached for him as she watched him leave when he'd finished his meal. He would be out by the lake again, in his favorite bower. There was no keeping him once the snow had thawed. She sighed to herself.

"All right, children, bedtime," she ordered. Her little flock moaned their protests, but her youngest daughter had already nodded off in her arms. And they all knew there was no discussion: when Mom wanted them to do something, it must be done. The two boys climbed the ladder to their loft and her younger daughters padded off into the small bedroom that Adem had added many years before, when the twins were first born. Mikela followed with her little one.

Life had not been kind to them, but Mikela bore it with a stoicism coming from knowing that she had done what was right. How easy it would have been to submit to Rikel's request, but it would have dishonored her, her parents, her future husband, and her God. No, there was nothing wrong with suffering, as long as honor was retained.

*If only Creon could see it that way,* she thought to herself. He was the one who suffered the most from it, the first issue of Adem's loins, the first fruit of her womb, the greatest target of Rikel's animosity. Oh, that she could tell him the truth about his destiny. She sometimes still wondered if the prophecy would come true, or whether it would simply remain unfulfilled.

She quickly bedded her girls down and then returned to the main room. Sarina, her eldest daughter, a precocious fifteen-year-old, had finished clearing off the table and washed up and now was humming to herself as she put the wooden dishes back into their places on the shelves by the indoor water pump. That was the one luxury that Adem had been able to provide his wife with at the beginning of their life together. Nineteen years together and Mikela, now going on towards forty, did not regret a moment of it, despite the hardships. The priest had been right: they were happy, at least somewhat.

"How was the village today?" she asked her daughter as she sat down to do some mending.

"All right," the girl answered, coming to the fire herself. "Irfan was there again. He says that he's going to marry me when I'm old enough." She pushed her lower lip out as she grabbed a piece of cloth. "Creon won't allow it," she stated resolutely.

"Your father might have other thoughts," Mikela pointed out.

"My father doesn't care!" the girl exclaimed. "All he thinks about is his work. Look, he's not even *home* tonight! I bet he's gone off to slave in someone else's field after dark again."

"That's not true," the mother sighed. They'd had this discussion too many times. Adem did care – as a matter of fact he cared too much. That was what drove him to go to the great house tonight, drove him to seek a resolution to his debt.

"Sometimes I wonder why your God keeps doing this to us," Sarina exploded after a few minutes of silence.

"Doing what?" the woman asked in a soft voice. The girl put down her sewing and glared.

"Giving us all this trouble! It's not like we deserve it!"

"Oh, you're right, my dear," Mikela replied. "We deserve much more trouble." That was a new one for the girl.

"What?"

"Everything he gives us is a blessing. We have a roof over our head and food on our table. We have one another. What more do we need, Sarina?" She gazed at her daughter with large, liquid gray eyes and the girl fell silent. Mikela waited a moment.

"And then there's the promise." Sarina knew what she was talking about. She was the only one that the woman dared voice this to. Adem had expressly forbidden her to tell anyone about the prophecy.

"One day Creon will go away and when he returns everything will get better." The girl shook her head. "You don't really believe that, do you?"

"I do, my dear, I do. After all, I married your father and *that* was part of the promise, too." The two of them were silent for some time, sewing away, before Sarina began singing in a quiet voice, only to be interrupted by a pounding at the door.

"Who'd be coming at this hour?" Mikela wondered.

"I'll get it," the girl answered, leaping up. It took her a few moments to release the old bolt and the door swung wide to reveal a stranger standing on the doorstep. He was a good deal taller than her, gray-haired and bearded. His clothing was a robe made of some coarse material and he had a thick belt around his waist. Sarina only noticed his appearance momentarily, because she had suddenly become captive in the look of the man's warm blue-gray eyes.

"Blessings upon you, child," he greeted her and pulled her out of her reverie.

"Who are you?" the girl demanded.

"Your mother knows who I am," the old man replied. "Don't you, Mikela?"

Sarina looked over her shoulder to see that her mother was now behind her, a strange mingling of joy and dread playing across her even features.

"Hrosca?" she cried softly. "You've come!" And then she was in the old man's arms. He patted her back like a father.

"It has been some time."

"Come in, old friend," the woman said with a smile, stepping back. "Come in and tell me how you've been."

"I have been away long," he sighed, stepping into the room. "I see you have not fared too poorly." He gazed at her. She had matured much and was dressed in the garb of a farmer's wife, not at all like the well-to-do girl he'd known twenty years earlier. Her hair was still blond, tied back in a single thick braid that fell to her waist. Her face had the beginnings of fine lines creeping in along the eyes and touching her forehead and her gray eyes were soft and warm.

"It's as you predicted," she replied.

"Difficult?"

"Yes."

"And that's not the half of it!" Sarina burst out angrily.

"I know, child," the old man replied, acknowledging her. "I have heard of the injustices done to you and your family. But be assured, they will pass soon. I have come now." He turned back to Mikela. "You know why."

"You've come for Creon," she whispered, placing a hand over her mouth.

"Yes, it is for him that I have come."

The darkling hour had come and the sun had gone to his bed, calling his sister, twilight, to paint the skies in hues of crimson. The boy sat outside a bower of small birch bark, knees drawn up, nursing his right hand. Irfan would be going home with a black eye tonight. It would teach him not to speak like that about Sarina.

For a moment Creon wondered where the anger had exploded from that had caused him to strike the grandson of Jimri. Well, the boy was an arrogant jerk. To think that he would cast an eye on Sarina irked Creon to no end. It was like Rikel looking at his mother at the same age. It would *not* happen again, if he could help it.

He looked out over the lake, which now mirrored a few of the lazy clouds that made their way across the sky. Suddenly he wondered if his father had sat here, looking at the clouds this way. The thought left him cold. His father was the one person he did not want to think about. It was his *father's* fault that they lived the way they did. At least that was what everyone said. That and saying the gods had cursed them. None of his father's sacrifices had worked to change anything. His mother's belief in the Creator God had also proved impotent.

"Oh, blast you gods!" he muttered under his breath. They were useless. His father had him roped in, working in the field from sunrise to sunset, then often making him work after dark, too. And what did that accomplish? Jimri would never give them what was their due. It was a gift that Adem had gone to Jimri's tonight. At least he could sit here and watch the rising night.

"Curse you, Dad," he growled. "You ruined my life before it began. And you'll never be able to make it right." He looked up at the clouds. How would it be to fly away from here? What lay beyond the high, cold walls of his prison? He thought of a simple prayer that he'd uttered to the Creator God many years before.

"If you really exist, then take me away from here," he'd whispered into the stillness of the night. "Take me to a place where I can *change* things, where I can make things better." It was a silly prayer, he decided, a child's prayer, destined to do nothing but disappoint him, much like this god had done for his mother. As he thought of this, the anger began to pulse. He felt his ears burn, ringing from the fire in his bones.

"Creator God!" he roared, leaping to his feet. "Why? Why do you delight in *tormenting* us like this? Why is it that I can't have a *loving* family? Why can't I *change* things, God? Why?" For an instant there was a whisper in the air, as if Creon was going to get his answer, but then stillness enveloped him.

"You won't answer either," he muttered, making to sit down again. "You can't even hear me."

"Oh, that he can, my friend," came a quiet voice from a few yards away. The boy started, glancing over to see an old man emerging from among the trees.

"Who are *you*?" the boy snapped. "And what right do you have to speak for that – that *fraud*!?" The old man gave a slight bow.

"I am Hrosca," he said. "I am a priest of Creator God and he has spoken to me. He has sent you a message."

"A message for *me*?" the boy gasped, incredulous.

"Come, let us go to where we can talk," the old man gestured. Perhaps it was the astonishment at the old man's words, perhaps it was another, more subtle power that enshrouded the priest, but Creon followed without question.



## Revelation

**T**hey sat in a private corner of Adem's house, where they would not be readily seen from the doorway. The old man regarded his charge thoughtfully as he fidgeted in the hard chair. The boy was a good deal taller than Hrosca and probably would grow taller still. His hair was dark, almost black; it fell loosely to his shoulders and the fuzzy beginnings of a beard covered his upper lip, chin and cheeks. He was well built, his body powerful from the years of working in the fields of his father and of others. His skin already had begun to turn bronze, even though the first half of spring was hardly past. He was dressed as a farmer of the valley, in a coarse tunic and breeches with a sash around his waist. His feet were bound with cloths. But what intrigued Hrosca the most were the boy's steel-gray eyes. There was a strange mix of contempt, fear, and pain in them. *Just like mine must have been while I was still searching*, the priest found himself thinking.

"You said you wish to change things for your family," the old man began after a long moment.

"Yes, I would," he could see a glow light Creon's eyes, but his features and voice stayed stony.

"You have been chosen to do so," the Hrosca stated matter-of-factly.

"Bull!" the boy exclaimed with an oath. The priest glanced over at the mother, who stood there, wringing her hands.

"You haven't told him?" he asked, surprised. She shook her head.

"Adem wouldn't allow it. He said it would keep him from thinking about work."

"He was right." Hrosca looked back at Creon. "And yet not." He leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands in front of him.

"What I am about to tell you, Creon son of Adem, is all true. It concerns two people very close to you."

"My parents?" he asked.

"Yes. There was a time, many years ago, when they were young and in love. As you know, your father was a farmer and your mother's father was a merchant. Your father had enough to provide for a family and your grandparents were all pleased with the match. But there was a problem."

"Rikel liked my mother," Creon injected impatiently. "Yes, I know!"

"But that was only part of the story, Creon," Mikela soothed him. "Your father and Hrosca were good friends."

"He was my student, actually," the old man put in.

"And your father asked him what should be done," the woman continued.

"And?" The boy had scooted to the edge of his chair.

"And I gave him a prophecy, Creon," Hrosca said. "And this is what it said: 'Adem son of Peleg, take the woman you love and wed her. You will suffer because of it, but I have chosen it to be so. Your firstborn son will be mighty. He will hold the fortunes of his people in his hand. He will seek my face and I will show myself to him. I will take him from his home and give him the Nations. I will cause his name to be greater than any gone before and higher than those who come after. This is my promise, my gift to you, Adem son of Peleg.' Thus spoke Creator God, may his name be praised."

"May his name be praised," Mikela echoed. It was the first time the prophecy had been spoken in twenty years, she knew. Creon looked at the old man, then at his mother.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asked breathlessly.

"Your father..." Her voice cracked. She reached out and touched his hair, a tear rolling down her cheek. "And now the time has come," she whispered.

"Are you serious?" the boy demanded looking back at Hrosca. "You want *me* to come with *you*?"

"There is also a prophecy for you, Creon son of Adem," the priest intoned. "It was given me before I left the Halls of Knowledge in the west. Hear the words of Creator God." As he spoke his voice took on a different aspect, expanding and filling the house. "You, o son of Man, are my chosen one. You will take my Word to the Nations and make me known to all that live in this world. You will stand against the Warrior King and all his legions. I will make you a blessing to all people. So, come and seek me," says the Lord of hosts. "Come and seek my face so that you may truly know me. Seek me and you will find me. This is your charge." Thus says Creator God, the Lord of all creation, may his name be praised for ever and ever." He fell silent and gazed into Creon's eyes.

"I am to defeat the Warrior King?" he whispered. "Me?" The old man nodded. Dread and delight gripped the boy. A call, someone who wanted him. A god he'd challenged had answered. No, *the* God had answered. Would he go?

"But what about my family?"

"They will be safe until you return," the priest assured him. "No harm will befall them that they cannot deal with. It is all in the Creator's plan."

*No harm will befall them*, was all Creon heard. His first thought was, *They will be safe if I leave. He must go, especially if it would save his family.*

"Mom?"

"This is your destiny, Creon," she whispered.

"Creon?" He looked over to see his sister standing there. "Don't go, please!" He rose and gently took Sarina into his arms. She clung to him, hiding the cold fear that she would never see him again.

The clicking of the door handle made all of them turn. A large man entered, clearly the father of the boy. His dark hair hung lank around his shoulders. He looked at Creon, at Sarina, and then at his wife.

"Why are you here?" he demanded of his son.

"I came to say good-bye," the boy explained, letting go of his sister.

"But I'm not going to let him have her!" Adem exclaimed angrily.

"What?" Mikela walked forward. "What are you talking about, Adem?"

"About Jimri. He said that if Irfan were to marry Sarina he would forgive us our debt."

"And?" Creon interjected.

"And I said I'd think about it." The father glared at his son. "Now don't tell me you disapprove of my choice."

"A simple 'no' would have fit the man I knew better, Adem son of Peleg," Hrosca exclaimed, rising from his chair.

"You?" The farmer recognized the priest instantly. "What are you doing here? Haven't you ruined my life enough already?"

"I have done nothing of the sort, Adem." The old man stood his ground stubbornly. "I have come to fulfill the prophecy."

"Prophecy shmophecy," the man of the house roared, striding forward. "All you ever did was bring a curse on this family. Your taking my son away is the *last straw*. He will not go!"

"Adem, it's not our choice," Mikela interjected. He glared at her and made to answer, but she raised her hand.

"You know it was Creator God speaking. You're the one who told me!"

"That was before he abandoned us to the whims of a lustful monster and his money-grubbing father! He's done nothing but disappoint us!" Adem looked at his son and daughter. His eyes softened as he noticed Sarina's pained expression.

"You're not...?" she whispered.

"I don't know, dearest," he answered truthfully. "Jimri told me that if I didn't let Irfan have you, he'd sell you to pay off the debt." He looked at the priest. "I can't let that happen!"

"He will hold the fortunes of his people in his hand," Mikela quoted the prophecy. "If we let Creon go, perhaps Jimri will relent?" The man thought of that for a moment, looking at his son, then at the priest.

"I see that I am going to lose him anyway. Do you think that if he goes Sarina will be safe?" For a long moment the priest was uncertain of how to answer. Answering "yes" would most probably guarantee his being allowed to take Creon to the Blue Mountains, but at the same time this future was closed to him. He'd begged the Creator to reveal it to him to no avail. It was unclear what it meant for Creon to hold the fortunes of his people in his hand. He'd explained it to Mikela once as that upon Creon's return from seeing the Creator, he would set all things aright for his family. Would that mean the girl would be spared? *Give me wisdom, my Lord*, he prayed silently. Then he spoke.

"I cannot answer that question with certainty, Adem. But I pray that it would be so."

The farmer growled, glaring for a minute. He weighed his options. He was going to lose his son anyway. Best let him go without a fight. It would appease the God more and perhaps would save his daughter.

"Then go," he muttered, turning away. "Do as you must."

Creon turned to the old man, feeling once more the strange mingling of fear and joy. Hrosca's face split into a small, sad smile.

"You have done well, Adem," the old man affirmed. "Creator God will bless you."

"I think I've had enough of his blessing for now," Adem snapped. "He can bless someone else for awhile. I just want some peace for my family!" And with that he stalked off and planted himself by the fire, staring into the flames, brooding.

"When are we leaving?" the boy asked after a long moment.

"Tomorrow, as the Lord wills." The priest looked at the mother. Tears were running freely down Mikela's face. She impulsively reached out and held her son. Creon let her, realizing somewhere deep within that this would be the last time for a long time. Then Mikela let go.

"You will go to the Creator," she said with feeling, "and you will return to us a man of strength. I know it."



## First Lessons

**T**hey left just before dawn, making a hasty, teary farewell. Creon's mother presented him with new clothes and even with leather strips to tie his foot cloths. His sister favored him with a string of semi-precious stones on a leather thong.

"It was for your birthday," she told him, "but since you won't be here, remember me by it." He slipped it into the pouch at his side.

Adem did not appear, having left for his fields with his second son, Jokhan. The fact that his father would not even say good-bye struck the boy deeply. Did his father not believe in the prophecy? He stuck that with the many disappointments about his father that he'd already gathered, dark treasures hoarded and locked in the deep recesses of his mind.

They took the little-known south-eastern pass out of the valley and for only the second time in his life, Creon glimpsed the stark emptiness of the Flatlands. It filled his heart with thrill, but also prompted a strange anxiety. He glanced back over his shoulder, into the Rivulet, back towards the home of his entire life, the home of his disappointment and pain. It was behind him now. He cast it away from himself like a heavy stone and strode forward, following the old man.

"It should take about six months to reach the Death March and from there we'll have to see," Hrosca told him as he stepped up to his side. "The Blue Mountains are uncharted and none that I know have ever traveled there."

"Have you?" Creon asked.

"No. The Death March is said to be enchanted, forbidden to all humans. Only the Werebeasts and the Karyl live there."

"What about the other Nations?" the boy pressed. "Have you ever seen them?" The priest smiled at that.

"Yes, I have, many years ago. They have changed much." He gestured forward, into the rising sun, as they walked. "We will be traveling roughly east. Maybe even a little south. At the edge of the Flatlands is Silver Bay. It is a very large bay, many miles from end to end with many islands across it. On the other side of the bay is a great forest. It is called the Pwyllwood – or the Pwyll for short – and it's not somewhere you'd want to travel alone."

"Why?"

"When I was young it was a hideout for thieves. It probably is even worse now." The old man paused for a long moment. "But, it is still a very beautiful place, especially the large open spaces across it. Much more beautiful than Tashyer, a great stony desert on its south-eastern border. Beyond Tashyer is the Death March and beyond that the Blue Mountains."

"And you were there, in the Pwyll and in Tashyer?" Creon let the strange names run over his tongue. Hrosca nodded.

"Yes, but it was a very long time ago, when the Warrior King's grip was still not quite as strong." He sighed. "Back then everyone could travel in peace, well, except for certain parts of the Pwyll. We would often follow the King's Highway through the Northern Provinces then. People were helpful and hospitable. Now they will go out of their way to see you come to harm." Hrosca shook his head. "You see, Man is evil and when he does not follow Creator God's directions, then everything goes bad – as with Rikel and Jimri." Creon looked away, thoughtful for a moment. He could accept that not following the Creator's directions caused evil, but at the same time he wondered what all-powerful God would allow evil to continue unchecked.

"Don't you think that Creator God would *punish* people for not doing what he tells them?" he asked of the priest.

"That he will, Creon," the old man exclaimed with feeling. "And you will be his instrument of justice." A strange chill ran over the boy's shoulders. He didn't accept that – *couldn't* accept that, at least not yet. Perhaps it was best not to think about it.

"So what's to the west?" he asked, changing the subject.

"To the west are the Greenwood and the Halls of Knowledge, where the priests study and keep the writings of the Lord of Hosts. A week's journey to the north of the Halls is the city of the Warrior King. It is a giant fortress full of evil, where any one who follows the Creator is instantly caught and put to death."

"It can't be *that* bad!" Creon protested.

"Well, maybe it isn't," Hrosca agreed. "Maybe there still are some of those who believe left within the walls, but who knows? I have not heard of any in many years, neither have my fellow priests." He remained pensive. Creon allowed him the silence, mulling over the vastness of the land that they would have to traverse. The sun's light was beginning to tell and they traveled through the waves of heat that began to pound towards them from the crimson sands.

"Why aren't we taking the King's Highway in the north?" he queried after some time of silent trudging. "Wouldn't it be easier?"

"Ah," the old man replied, "the King's Highway has fallen into disrepair in the last years. Even when I was young and traveled it, the wild lands had begun to reclaim it. The Warrior King doesn't care for roads or for building things. He only cares about war, and bloodshed, and quickly gaining riches. He cares about power and he will squash anyone to maintain it."

"Much like Rikel again," Creon muttered through his teeth. Hrosca heard it, but kept his peace. The boy had his own specters to deal with. It was enough that he would have more to talk about when the time came.

For three long days they trudged through the wasteland. Creon was grateful for the head-covering his mother had given him before he left. It was a broad-brimmed hat of felt, much like the one that he'd seen Jimri wear when he left his house.

"This was my brother's," she told him. "He has a new one now and gave it to me for your father. But he said it was only for rich men and won't wear it. You take it now. It'll help you on your journey." And so it did, keeping off the sun's glaring rays. Hrosca covered his head and face with a blue cloth that he tied with a strip of much-used, pliable leather. They spent the days wandering through the desert, as there was nowhere to give them shade, and slept at night in small dells around a fire kindled from some of the plants that grew here and there.

"It's because of the jackals," Hrosca explained. "They will attack sleeping men if there is no fire to ward them off. They fear the light."

Then on the third night, the old man woke the boy soon after they had dropped off.

"Look," he said, pointing. What Creon saw took his breath away. It was full moon and the light fell on maybe fifty or sixty strange animals. They stood erect on two hind legs with long, stiff tails balancing them. Their heads were long and lizard-like. They held small forearms tightly to their bodies as they bounded across the Flatlands. They made no noise except for the quiet thud with which their feet hit the soft, sandy earth. And then they were gone.

After what seemed a long time the boy turned to his companion.

"What was that?" he asked. The old man turned suddenly, as if startled.

"They are called *raptors*. They are strange and secretive creatures. Only Creator God knows where they go and how they live."

"*Raptors*." Creon let the strange word roll across his tongue. "What does it mean?"

"We do not know," the old man admitted. "Once a Voyager came to this place, where he saw them pass. It was he who gave them the name."

"Oh." The boy thought for a moment. "But if it was just a regular traveler, wouldn't he have used one of our languages?"

"No, Creon," the old man laughed. "He was not a traveler as you and I are. He was a Voyager and Voyagers are a strange order of Man. They are said to be able to travel between worlds. They are also said to be wholly devoted to Creator God in a way that unable to be." For some reason that ended Creon's desire to ask any more questions and they rolled themselves in their blankets.

It took Creon a long time back to get to sleep. The Voyager would just not leave his thoughts. Traveling to other *worlds* was inconceivable to him. It was enough that he might walk through his own lands. From what Hrosca said it would take a lifetime just to know them. Why would anyone *want* to travel to another world? Would he ever be called to do so? Then he thought of his mother and his father and his sisters and brothers. A strange twinge struck his heart and he missed them all, even his father. He tried to push the thought away, but it returned to him with an intensity that he had never experienced. What if he never saw his father again? Would he ever be able to tell his father how he really felt? And at that moment, Creon realized that deep in his heart, beneath all the hate and disappointments, he really loved his father and wanted to be loved by him. A tear slipped out from beneath his eyelid. He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to stifle them, trying to be a strong man, but could not. And so he cried silently until he drifted off.

Soon dawn peeked over the horizon and gently woke the travelers with her song. Hrosca shook the boy awake, who sat up, bleary-eyed, uncertain of where he was. The priest noticed the tracks on his cheeks and the redness of the eyes, but was silent, pretending that nothing had happened. They breakfasted on some of the dry bread and fruit that Mikela had packed, each took a healthy swallow from their water skins and then left their hollow. Creon stopped and noticed the deep tracks in the sand where the strange creatures had passed the night before and looked back towards his companion.

“Creator God certainly made some strange creatures,” he muttered and then followed the old man.

“What do you know of the Creator?” the old man prompted him after they’d walked for a while.

“What do *I* know about him?”

“Aye.” Creon searched his mind for what his mother had once taught him.

“Mom always said that he’d made everything and that he keeps everything going. I guess there were a lot of people who worshipped him at one time – the old Kings and the priests did anyway. *I* know that he gives people a lot of trouble and doesn’t seem to care when the people over them hurt them.” He glared at the old man.

“Actually the Creator *does* care,” the old man pointed out. “That’s why he chose you.”

“Right! He chose me for his personal whipping boy!” Creon stopped and glared at Hrosca. “Look at my life: my father has to work all the time to make ends meet, just because that beast Rikel hates him and my mother. I have to work with him all the time and all that I ever get for it is people making the sign against evil when I walk by. I can’t even look at a girl in my village without one of her brothers coming and trying to kick my tail. My whole family is unlucky like that and now that jerk Irfan says he’s going to marry my sister! It doesn’t look to me like Creator God cares.” He turned and strode on. “If that One God cared, then our lives would be easier. Why should we suffer?”

“Because your mother did what was right,” the old man answered the rhetorical question. “She knew that if she said no to what Rikel wanted her to do that she would be in trouble, but she loved her God more than herself.”

“She loved him more than she did *us*, then!” the boy growled.

“That is true.” That stopped Creon cold.

“What did you say?” he asked in a hoarse whisper, glaring out from under the brim of his hat.

“Your mother loves her God more than she does you and that is the greatest way that she *can* love you, Creon, by loving and serving her God.” He placed a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “You will understand some day.” He turned and strode on. Creon followed hesitantly.

“Let me tell you what Creator God is like,” the priest continued. “He is like a real father, one who loves us and gives us what we need, not necessarily what we want.” He glanced over at his charge. “Tell me, Creon son of Adem, what do you think your answer to your call would have been if you would have had an easy life?”

The boy thought for a moment, glaring. *I wouldn’t have gone*, he knew, but didn’t say anything, steely eyes fixed on something far away on the horizon. The old man smiled slightly. Then touched the boy on the shoulder.

“Come,” he said.

“What’s that?” Creon returned, not moving from his spot.

"What?" The priest looked towards where his companion thrust out one finger.

"That." Creon squinted into the east. "It looks like something is moving." He glanced at the old man. "Do you think it's those creatures again?"

"No, they only travel at night." Hrosca squinted, his lips moving silently. Then he opened his eyes wide. Instantly he grasped Creon's shoulder.

"Whatever you do, do not move – and do not make a sound," he whispered. The boy felt something pass over him like heat and then felt cold. The old man's arm around him was like a vise.

And then the train was upon them. It was perhaps fifty men. They were all armed, clothed in rough garments. Some had helmets on their heads, and most carried long lances. Creon thought he could make out swords. He could hear some speaking to each other in rough voices. There was coarse laughter and soon afterwards he saw the slaves, hands tied together with ropes that were looped around the waist of the person in front of them. There were men, women, and some children, most half-naked, skin blistered by the merciless sun. The image burned itself into Creon's mind as he watched one look towards him. But the man's eyes didn't focus on anything as he was jerked forward. Two wagons followed, pulled by oxen and then they were gone. And still Hrosca stood still. Then, finally he released his charge.

"Slavers," he answered the unasked question, "and mercenaries. They probably are in the pay of some petty lord near here and it looks like they've just burned a village. Come, we must be off quickly." He turned and strode away. Creon looked after the train and then hastened to follow.

"Why did they do that?" he asked his teacher when he caught up.

"What? Burn the village?" The old man sighed. "It's because their lord wants money and slaves make good money, especially if they're young."

"But isn't the lord supposed to protect them?" the boy demanded, the heat now rising between his ears.

"Oh, yes, but he doesn't. He is out for himself – much like your Rikel."

Creon growled to himself and pondered that for a moment.

"That's not justice," he hissed.

"No it isn't. But justice is something that does not really exist under the Warrior King's rule. The weak ones are exploited by the strong. The strong make themselves stronger and delight in all kinds of evil. They run the weak down."

"Can't we do anything," Creon asked, looking over his shoulder. "Maybe we can free them." Hrosca gave him a half-smile.

"They are beyond our reach right now, Creon," he sighed. "But one day, when you return, you will have the power to free slaves – not just these few, but *all* slaves."

"And then the strong will protect the weak," the boy surmised.

"Yes, and we will have returned to true civilization."



## The Voyager

**I**t was already getting dusky and, since they were on the fourth day of their journey, Creon found himself becoming a bit footsore. He longed for the darkness to set in enough so Hrosca would call a halt, but the old man pressed on, just as quickly as ever. They had been heading towards a small group of tall rocks, quite similar to those that surrounded Chifchi. Twilight was fading and the first stars were winking at them from the brilliant dark blue sky.

"Isn't it time to stop yet?" the boy sighed.

"Just a little further, Creon, just a little further," the old man replied, gazing into the rising darkness. "Tharkey's oasis should be right here *somewhere*." He stopped and looked around at the circle of stones, muttering to himself, "Never can find it when we need to..."

"That, old man, is because only friends are welcome at my oasis," came a deep voice from just behind them.

"At last!" the priest laughed, turning and facing a huge shadow that detached itself from the rocks. There was just enough light to make out a man of nearly seven feet in height, almost as broad and strong as he was tall. Creon wondered why it was so difficult to see him. Surely even someone who was bronzed by the sun would be visible by the last rays of twilight. But this man seemed to be made of night himself, except for the white tunic he was wearing.

"It has taken you some time," the big man said to Hrosca. "I was expecting you before dusk."

"We ran into a little disturbance early this morning," was the reply. "Slavers."

"Oh yes." Creon couldn't tell if the man was smiling, but there was amusement in his voice and a quick white flash where his mouth should be. "They tried to water here," the keeper of the oasis continued, "but they found nothing – as usual."

"As usual," Hrosca echoed, then turned and gestured to Creon who had been standing a half-step behind him.

"Tharkey, let me introduce you to Creon son of Adem," he began and the chuckled. "He is the one."

"Welcome to my oasis, Creon son of Adem," the big man replied with a little bow, pressing one massive hand to his chest. "I am Tharkey. Let me be your host for tonight."

"Th-thank you," Creon stammered. The strangeness of this encounter robbed him of any coherent thought. Their host turned and let them past the rock that he'd been leaning against. As they passed it, Creon suddenly felt moisture in the air. It was as if a veil had been drawn back and he was walking into a fresh valley. Soft sounds of animal life could be heard, including the creaking of crickets, though they had not heard anything only moments before. Also, the stone circle seemed much larger than it had been. Creon wondered at this.

Tharkey led them to one of the rocks, where the light of a fire was flickering through the open doorway. He bowed slightly and gestured them through.

"Mind the steps," he directed.

Creon stepped through the entryway and down three stairs into what was a room cut out of the rock surrounding it. There were two windows, both hung with curtains and in one corner was a huge pallet, most probably the resting place of the guardian of the oasis. Farther over there were twin bunks, much like the ones the girls slept in back home. A beautifully carved table stood in the center of the room along with high-backed chairs, all made by a skilled craftsman. A pot boiled over the fire that was set in an open pit in the center of the room, the aroma enticing, mouth-watering.

"I have kept your supper warm, friends," came the deep voice behind them. Creon turned and gasped as he finally realized why their host was so hard to see in the dark outside. The firelight reflected against his deep ebony skin. His hair was short and curly, kept that way. Strange scars were marked on his bare arms, and he wore a dark pair of trousers and heavy boots. His eyes, though a deep brown, were gentle, though his whole demeanor encouraging. Still, the boy felt a bit menaced by this mountain of humanity. The other-worldliness of this man scared him, but he did his best not to show it.

The giant bade them sit at the table and then dished up a fragrant stew that included some early spring vegetables. There were also large slices of rich, dark bread, and two cups and a jug full of clean, clear water. Creon ate with the appetite of one who had not tasted a full hot meal in days – which was the case. As he gobbled down his food, Hrosca and Tharkey spoke in low voices. A few times Creon heard the name Elam and once Warrior King, but besides that he couldn't really understand what they were saying. Not that he cared anyway, he had a hot meal in front of him.

He finished quite quickly and leaned back, stifling a belch. He glanced over at the big man and the priest and for a second time was struck by the other-worldliness of Tharkey. He'd never seen a black man before, nor had he ever heard that one existed. Might this be one of those Voyagers, those world-travelers that Hrosca had talked about?

After a few moments the two men noticed that he was finished and wrapped up their conversation in Common.

"Well, for all we know he has yet to prove himself," Tharkey observed.

"That's true," Hrosca agreed, covertly eyeing his charge, then he changed the subject. "What has been happening here lately?"

"Nothing much," the big man replied. "The Portal hasn't opened since I returned last time and I think my task is to simply guard the entrance and wait for someone to arrive." He shrugged. "It is a very peaceful existence and I can't complain."

"Portal?" Creon interjected. "What's that?"

"A Portal is a gateway between the worlds," the priest explained. "Tharkey is a Voyager."

"What?" the boy exclaimed in surprise. "You're a Voyager? Is that why you're so *different* from us?"

The black man chuckled at the question.

"No, my young friend, I was born and raised here in the Seven Nations. My homeland is far in the south of the Flatlands, where they border on the Great Deep. Down there we have many men and women like myself. As a matter of fact people with such light skin as yourself are very rare and as much a curiosity there as I am here."

"But how did you end up being a Voyager?" Creon pressed. "Was it some kind of test or something?"

"No, it was simply a call from the Creator," Tharkey replied. "One night I had a dream that said I should come to this oasis. I spoke with my elders, who thought I was mad, but I obeyed anyway. It took me three months to find the oasis, but when I did, the Portal opened and I went to that other world where my expertise as a warrior and hunter was needed."

"What was it like to journey between worlds?" the young man wanted to know.

"It is a feeling that is impossible to describe, friend," the Voyager said after a long pause. "But it is also impossible to forget. To break free of the bonds of Time and space and travel to another place where Time runs differently ...." He shook his head. "I cannot describe it." An intense longing played over his dark features. "Some day I will feel it again, maybe not again in this life, but definitely when the Creator gives me the final call and I will go to be with him. Then Time will have no meaning at all!" There was a long pause. Creon pondered the statement about going to be with the Creator. His mother had never really talked about what happened after the death of a person. The people in Chifchi believed that they simply ceased to exist and that their bodies must be returned to the earth, which had borne them in the first place. Being with the Creator after you die was a new concept and not an altogether unpleasant one.

"Well, it is late," Hrosca prompted. "We should sleep, because we still have a long way to go."

"Yeah," Creon muttered, pushed himself away from the table and got up. He turned towards the doorway and started up the stairs, pushing the door open. The walls of the cave had begun to descend around him now that the conversation had stopped and he felt that he absolutely must get out in the open air.

"Where are you going?" came Tharkey's amused voice.

"I'm going to sleep outside," the boy replied over his shoulder. "I only sleep indoors in winter."

"Well, it is going to get very chilly tonight, I believe," the big man pointed out. "You may like a nice warm bed rather than the hard sands outside my humble home, but that is up to you." Creon hesitated.

"I'll go outside and get some fresh air, then," he said.

"Watch out for the jackals," Hrosca called after them. "Tharkey's power only keeps out Men, not animals." The boy nodded, more to himself than to his teacher's remark, and stepped out into the darkness. He could see the bright moon above in the cloudless sky, shining down on him with serene indifference. A large pool reflected her face back to the heavens and Creon thought he could see several animals furtively drinking at the water's edge. He went over, bent and sipped some himself, splashed his face in the pool, then sat back and watched the stars and the moon. His thoughts turned once more to the idea of being with the Creator. What would that be like? It was probably a good thing, though from what his mother said, it would probably be pretty scary, too. Did he really want to see the Creator face-to-face? As he thought over all that his mother had told him, he felt that, yes, he would, if only to ask about why he'd been given so much trouble in his life. Hrosca's assertion that the trouble had prepared him still stung, but now, in the cool rationality of the evening,

he realized that the old man was right. If he'd had an easy life, he would never have left his family as readily as now. He would have tried to remain. And then he thought of his "childish" prayer from many years ago.

"Creator God," he whispered into the night. "I guess I really ought to thank you for all the difficulties that you've brought on me. After all, you used them to answer my prayer from all that time ago. Since you answer, I hope it's okay if I ask you something. Since I've given myself to your quest, please, please don't let anything more bad happen to my family while I'm gone! Please let them be safe from Rikel and Jimri."

The silent stars stared down at him, not answering, and yet in his heart he sensed that he'd been heard. A slight breeze blew around him, making him shiver. He decided to take Tharkey's suggestion and returned to the bright refuge of the cave.

Long habit brought him awake as dawn shook out her skirts and began her dance across night's blue-blackness to herald her lord the sun's arrival. The boy blinked at the pale shimmering shaft that lanced through the circular window to the east, lighting the upper bunk that he had taken the night before. He heard a quiet humming over to one side and glanced up to see Tharkey already setting out breakfast – a large hunk of bread, with some cheese and salted meat, as well as three large earthenware mugs. Creon noticed that the fire had already been stoked and there was a pot over it. A rich aroma wafted over to him. He smiled to himself and stretched, letting out a contented yawn, and then rolled out of the upper bunk, landing on his feet, betraying an innate athletic ability.

"Good morning, friend," the big man rumbled as he caught sight of his guest. "I take it you have slept well."

"Yeah," Creon replied. "I'm gonna wash up." And he slipped out of the cave. In looking back he noticed by the early morning light that the "cave" actually was a hut made of rough stones. The inside must have been daubed with clay or something and whitewashed. The boy turned towards the oasis, knelt by the pool and splashed himself with the water. As he looked up, he noticed a strange formation in the center of a rock. It was a rough circle, just about the height of a man. The bottom of it was about a handbreadth from the ground and Creon got the peculiar feeling that this was more than just an opening. He walked over and thrust his hand into it, then stepped through. Nothing happened. He looked back and saw Tharkey's hut through the circle, then shook his head. He walked around the rock and back to the house. If that was indeed the Portal, it didn't work. Maybe there were incantations that had to be made before it would "open," as Tharkey put it.

Creon returned to find Hrosca already up and at the table, hands wrapped around one of the mugs. The boy joined him for breakfast, which consisted of the bread, cheese and salted meat, along with some sweet preserves from the fruit of the trees that grew around the oasis and a rich, hot brew from Tharkey's pot that invigorated and satisfied.

"So, old friend," the priest said around a morsel of the thick bread, "how long do you think it will take us to the closest landing on Silver Bay?" The black man smiled as he peeled a slice of cheese from the hunk in front of him with the practiced motion of a knife.

"That depends on where you want to end up. If you're going north through the Provinces, you might want to head directly east from here to Berendirma where they'll take you on a quick boat to Korwith. From there it's only two days' march to the border of the Provinces and the Old King's Highway. It'll take you five weeks to the harbor and the ships don't go regularly anyway..."

"I have business in Eison," Hrosca interjected. "I think we're going to have to go across to Deniz."

"Then you'll be wanting to head south-east to Ferrywharf, as you should have been from Chifchi," their host explained after consuming his cheese. "You just lost about three days of travel coming here."

"And how long will it take?" Creon asked.

"Five weeks, perhaps, four if the going's good and you don't meet any slavers." He gestured towards the sands. "Of course, if I still had my horses we could cut that in half."

"But you don't..."

"No, one ran off and the other one got ill so I had to slaughter her." The black man grimaced. "It was a pity, too. They were good company." He sighed. "At least I still have the sheep, goats, and chickens." The old man nodded and muttered something in agreement.

And so the two of them left, freshly provisioned with Tharkey's dark bread and rich cheese. There was also a good amount of salted meat and two extra water bottles to supplement their skins. The black man sent them on their way at the south-eastern edge of his oasis, right past the rock with the ring in it. Creon shot one more questioning look at it before following his guide back out into the desert.

"The Creator protect and go before you," he heard their host call from behind them, but when he turned back to see him, there was nothing but a small ring of tall rocks visible. He shook his head and hastened to catch up with Hrosca.



## Of Life

This day there was little time for talking, as Hrosca wanted to hurry along. Creon did not enjoy the faster pace, but kept to himself, once more mulling over the idea of an after-life. He knew that what Tharkey had said struck a deep chord within him. He wondered what the priests taught about such things. He formulated several questions while he was walking along and that evening put them to his teacher.

"What happens after we die?" he asked once they were seated around their small fire, chewing meat and bread.

"That is a good question," the old man replied after a few moments.

"You don't know?" The notion that this wise man might not know something shocked the boy to no end.

"No one knows for sure, Creon," Hrosca replied. "We have a few hints in the sacred writings and as far as I know no one has ever come back from the dead to tell us about it." He sighed. "Well, there are two ideas I have heard. The priests believe that when we die we sleep until the Creator causes us all to rise again and live with him as peaceful subjects under his rule. When that happens we will never die and no one who was evil or who did not believe in the Creator will be raised up."

"That sounds good," the student affirmed.

"Yes, but the Woodfolk say that when we die we go to be with the Creator right away. We live with him forever and never see any pain. But those who don't follow him see pain and anguish as long as we see joy." A chill went down Creon's back.

"I'm not sure what I should think about that," he said after a long moment.

"Each man must decide what he himself will think about such matters," the priest replied. "No man should impose his own views on others."

"But what about truth?" the boy shot back.

"Truth is another matter." Hrosca pondered for a long moment, wondering how to put what he knew. "All we can do is present it to someone else. They must form their own ideas about it and then accept it in their own time. We cannot impose what we believe on others. If we did that, we would be as bad as the Warrior King and his wanting to be worshipped as a god."

"The Warrior King thinks he's a god?" Creon echoed, incredulously.

"There are those who say so," the priest replied quickly – perhaps too quickly. "But that is not our concern – yet. What concerns us now is getting to the Blue Mountains. And it also concerns your education." That last word sent a chill down Creon's back. What was there important to learn that he didn't already know? He had gotten what answers he'd wanted for the evening, and, besides, he was very tired from the trek.

"Tomorrow, I hope," he muttered.

"Tomorrow then, as we travel," the old man affirmed and they bedded down for the night.

They rose with the first light of the sun, breakfasted on some of the dried fruit given them by their host the night before and resumed their journey just as the full orb of light was peeking over the horizon. At first the priest said little, but then after a time he gestured Creon to walk beside him.

"Things are best learned while walking," he told the boy. "And so I think we will begin now. Have you any questions?" The boy thought for a moment.

"Who are those Woodfolk you talked about last night?" he asked after a moment.

"Ah, the Woodfolk." Hrosca smiled to himself. "That is an interesting place to begin. They are one of the Three Races. They are a very secretive people. They live mostly in the forests of the deep Pwyll and in the Northern Provinces, but they can also be found in small communities in the south of the Flatlands near where Tharkey is at home."

"Tharkey's one of the Woodfolk, then," Creon surmised.

"No, he's a Man, like you and me. A Woodman or a Woodmaid will have features different from ours. The easiest way to distinguish them from us are their pointed ears. Many are fair-skinned, except for those that live in the Flatlands. They are dark, though not quite as dark as Tharkey's people."

"Where did they come from?" the boy wanted to know.

"That is another thing that is uncertain. They were first discovered at the time of the first great King, Artos, when he slew the Tyrant of Tashyer. It is the only time that the Woodfolk were ever known to have been in battle. They are a peaceable people for the most part and hold life very sacred. They are wise in the ways of our world and they will teach those who ask them." He paused for a moment. "I remember reading somewhere that they were a race that was uniquely blessed by the Creator to protect the woods and the animals. There are a good many legends as to how they came to be in this world, but I will not talk of those now."

"Why not?" Creon suddenly felt very upset at his teacher's unwillingness.

"Because they are precisely that – *legends*. When we have spoken of *truths* and *facts* we will take time to focus on legends. Knowing the truths and facts will help you to decide what in legends is true and what is not."

"Oh." The boy pondered this for a few moments before asking, "What about the other two Races?" Hrosca cleared his throat before continuing.

"The second race is that of the Werebeasts. Their history is strange, for it is said that they were once Men who delved into the Dark Arts until the Creator changed them to be the beasts that they are now."

"Isn't that legend?" Creon asked pointedly.

"Not really," the priest defended himself. "It is what has been handed down as their origin for centuries and it is well-documented in the sacred writings of the priesthood." He paused for a moment and then continued.

"But the most obscure history is that of Man himself. It is said that Man is not even native to this world, but traveled here from his own place, Earth, to live here. Man's origin is said to be the Blue Mountains, where a small group of men and women broke through one of the ancient Portals. They made the Seven Nations their own, by slowly conquering the land."

"Who were the original people?" Creon queried.

"No one knows if they even existed." Hrosca shrugged. "They are thought to be a peaceable people akin to the Woodfolk, but, as I told you, the Woodfolk as they are weren't discovered by Man until years after he made the land his own."

"So we are all Voyagers," the boy mused.

"Not exactly," the priest interjected. "We are the *descendants* of Voyagers. But this is now *our* world and we belong here as much as do the other Races."

"Fine, what else do you have to teach me?"

"Let's talk about the gods," Hrosca said with a slight smile.

"The gods? I thought I was going to meet the One God!" Creon huffed. "What do I have to know about those petty idols that my father's people worship?"

"It is good to know about the false gods and where they came from. You see, most were originally real people of one Race or the other who made some great exploits and then were deified by later generations.

"That's how it is with Tarla. Tarla was a Man, one of the first to enter this world. He accomplished some more or less important things in the area of field work and several generations after he died, he became a god. That's how it was with most of them. I know Stahl, the god of ironworks, was only a great artisan who worshipped Creator God. As for the others, there is some record of who they really were and why they are now revered as gods.

"Then there are others that are thought to be embodiments of elemental powers of the world, imagined by Men because they feared what they could not control. One such goddess is Ebediyen, the Mother of the World, or Istek, the Queen of Love.

"And then there are those who are really dark, evil forces who are unseen, but powerful – the dark lord Dehshet and his minions. They are worshipped mainly by the Werebeasts, but some men, both civilized and uncivilized will bow to the Dark Ones, because they want their power."

"So what makes *us* believe in One God?" Creon queried.

"Why do you think we do so?" The boy thought for a long time before he answered.

"Maybe because these 'gods' are all just *parts* of something he created?" he ventured. "They only control a little part of nature, but there must be something or someone that originated it all, right?"

"That is a good reason. We also know that Creator God is who he is, because he has revealed himself to us through the writings of the priests and kings. He has his prophets, and," here he paused for a moment, "you will see him face-to-face."

"But why me?" Creon glared at Hrosca. "Why not someone else?"

"That is something that is in the Creator's hands, Creon," the priest replied. "He can do as he chooses, but he will never do anything that will harm you."

"And the fact that he made my life difficult is not harming me?" The boy laughed derisively.

"No. It was for your good. See, the difficulty made it easy for you to leave and the work has made you strong and able to bear burdens that you could not otherwise. You already have the makings of one who is compassionate towards those who need help, would you not agree?"

This assessment took Creon by surprise. He was silent for a long time, quietly mulling this over. When he looked at himself, he found that perhaps the old man was right. He was much stronger than most of his peers and he could work longer hours. He was usually compassionate towards those who were getting beat on and he remembered more than one situation where he had defended a weaker child from Irfan and his fellow bullies, though these had become less as he would then at best be yelled at and sometimes even be beaten by the father of the child he defended. The only ones he could defend without getting in trouble were his sisters and brothers. He was a defender, he knew. And by Creator God's power he would be even more of one.

Aside from history, Hrosca taught Creon a great many practical things, such as how to hunt (the meat they ate often was that of small birds or ground-hogs and their kin), how to cook the meat, which herbs were good for healing and which were poisonous. He also taught Creon a small amount of archery, something Hrosca himself was skilled at. Creon saw himself as the parched soil of the Flatlands, that greedily sucked up learning instead of water. But he also found he had this yearning to share of himself with Hrosca. *Maybe later*, he always told himself. *I'm not sure if I'm ready to do something like that yet.*



## Silver Bay

**T**hey traveled through small villages along the way that were mainly an odd assemblage of huts either of wood or of sod, each with a thatched roof. There they replenished their food and water. The first time they stopped was more than a week out of Tharkey's oasis. The small store of the town was not well kept and

smelled of mold, mildew, and the manure pile leaning against it outside. The owner was a squat man with stringy black hair, a greasy beard, and a countenance that suggested he was not too interested in trade with strangers. He only grunted when Hrosca asked him for some dried meat, cheese, and fresh bread, before he shuffled out of the room into the back. He returned after several minutes and unceremoniously plunked the requested food on the counter.

"Any fruit?" the priest asked. The store owner shook his head.

"Four silver pieces for the meat, two for the bread and three for the cheese," the man muttered. "That makes ten in all."

"Nine," Hrosca corrected and passed the money to the man who greedily let it disappear in his grubby belt. They left the hut and Creon felt better to be away from that smelly place.

"Nasty piece of filth," was all he muttered.

"He sold us food and at a good price, too – for the Flatlands," the old man corrected. Creon just shrugged.

As he bedded down for the night that evening he realized that his clothes smelled like that greasy store. *Great, he thought, now I'll stink for a week. There's no water out here anyway!* And with an unhappy heart he drifted off to sleep.

Day followed day, each much the same as the last, but Creon now began to notice that the land around them was changing. Something was coloring the scent of the air, the lichen had faded, and scrubby bushes of the Flatlands were beginning to get larger. Here and there were now some trees and large areas of tall grasses. More birds flew overhead and one hunting foray even brought down a good-size buck deer that they spent the better part of two days butchering and smoking.

"No use in leaving it for the jackals," the old man told him as he instructed the boy in how to build a small shelter to put the meat in for smoking. "They don't come around here and we don't want to pollute the beautiful world the Creator has given us." When they were finished, Hrosca decided they should bury the carcass and they continued on their way with enough meat for nearly a month's travel. This they would often stew in the evening and eat with roots and some of the early fruits that were beginning to ripen on the trees. Creon proved an able cook and the old man was surprised to see him improvise a few simple but very tasty meals from the few ingredients that they had with them. When he commented about it, the replied depreciatively.

"I don't do much cooking. Don't really have to, but I use what's there."

There were times when the old man tried to probe the situation with Creon's father, but the boy held back, not wanting to broach the subject.

"There will come a time when you have to face him again, Creon," he told his charge one evening. "You will have to learn to put this situation behind you and get it right with the Creator."

"I'll wait until the time comes," came the stoic reply and – as often – he refused to talk about anything else that evening and rolled himself in his cloak by the fire.

The freshness in the air increased, as did the trees around them and then suddenly, one afternoon, they stood on the edge of a steep hill that ran down to a wide, silver expanse that looked to Creon for all the world like sand, and yet it rippled. Then it reminded him of the lake at Chifchi, but it was so much larger!

"What is that?" he demanded of Hrosca.

"That, my boy, is Silver Bay," the man replied with a laugh. "It is an arm of the Great Deep that breaches far inland and separates the Flatlands from the Pwyll. Isn't it magnificent?"

"Yeah!" was all the boy answered, absorbed by the playing of the waters.

And so they turned southward, heading towards Ferrywharf, the closest landing where they could get a boat to take them across the waters to Deniz.

# Two: The Island

## The Ferry

**T**harkey had predicted the time it would take to reach Ferrywharf accurately, and it took them a little more than fourteen days of traveling southward to reach the large jetty just north of the mouth of the bay. Hrosca stopped and spoke with one of the men who were waiting near the jetty. He came back to where Creon had seated himself and told him that the ferry would arrive the next day shortly before noon. They quickly decided to see if there was any room in the single inn that had been built near there.

The inside of the place was gloomy with only a few shafts of the warming sunlight falling through slits in the walls. The rest of the illumination came from sickly torches clinging to the walls. There was a long table at which Creon and Hrosca sat down and were brought some food. The meal consisted of rough cornmeal cakes, fish, and a strange dish of something shaped like cones and stuffed with chopped meat, served with small raw vegetables. Creon gingerly picked one of the cones and tried it. It wasn't bad, but it had a strong fishy taste.

"What is that?" he asked his teacher.

"That? Oh, it's called squid," the man replied. Creon looked at it with an approving glance and finished it. He was helping himself to a piece of the corn-bread when Hrosca grabbed his hand.

"I don't think we should be eating here," he muttered.

"Why? The food is fine," the boy shot back. "And besides, I'm hungry."

"I just have a sense..." Just then the innkeeper came over to their table.

"Sir," he said to Hrosca, "it is best you leave. We have the Dark Plague in the house. You needn't worry about the food." Hrosca thanked the man and motioned for Creon to follow.

"The Dark Plague?" Creon asked. "What's that?"

"It is a terrible sickness that gives you a high fever and dark sores all over your body," Hrosca explained. "No Man knows the cure, only the Woodfolk may know it and that isn't even certain."

"Is it really *that* dangerous?" the boy questioned.

"Yes, it is." The old man shook his head. "When one person has it, soon everyone who comes in contact with them or anything they touched will get ill." Creon shivered. What if he had gotten that disease? If that were the case, then good-bye Blue Mountains.

"I don't think that you would die from it if you got it," Hrosca consoled him when Creon mentioned his concern. "Nothing and no one is greater than Creator God and he will protect you, since he has chosen you." That quieted the boy a bit and he bedded down for the night.

They were up with the first rays of dawn and shortly afterwards the jetty began to bustle with life. Men and women slowly came into the town, either from the tent villages outside it or from the houses where they'd been staying. It was a chaos of colors and languages, not all of which Creon could understand. There were men in flowing, rich robes, simple peasants from the Flatlands and a good number of soldiers of the Warrior King wearing uniforms of black cloth and leather. Many had silver studs worked into them and the commander even wore a breastplate of strips of iron. The uniforms were generally known as the "black-and-leather." All wore cloaks, those of the lower ranks were black and those of the higher sported shades of crimson and maroon.

The churning, bustling crowds made Creon curious. His interest finally overcame his apprehension and he began walking among the people. There was a group of ribald soldiers sitting off to his left, with women at their side, laughing and drinking. A young man among them with long, golden hair caught his eye. He turned

just slightly to glance at him. He must have been only a bit older than Creon, but there was something hard about his face and his blue eyes, even as he laughed at the jokes that one of his older comrades were telling. Somehow the boy had a feeling that something tied him together with this young man. Suddenly the blond one glanced in his direction. Creon turned his head quickly and disappeared among the people.

He moved on, deep in thought. A man's voice humming stopped him. He turned to see the singer, dressed an a bright red garment, kneeling on the ground in front of a strange figure made of some kind of metal. He had long sticks of smoldering incense in his hand and was waving them back and forth. He chanted his strange melody and then bowed down in front of the figure for a moment. He straightened up and then bowed twice more, before putting his incense sticks into a jar in front of the idol and opening a small vial of oil, which he then poured over the metal figurine's head. He bowed once more and then carefully placed his god in a small wooden box. He called for a servant who reverently picked up the box and then followed his master towards the quay, not noticing the boy watching them. Creon thought about this in silence and walked on.

"Looking for some company, handsome?" came a seductive voice from beside him. Creon jumped and glanced to the side to see a girl about his own age. Her hair was carefully arranged and her clothing revealing. Never had any girl approached him in this way, especially not in Chifchi. The feeling was flattering and disconcerting at the same time.

"I—" he stammered, trying to find a way to get away.

"You can have everything you want, for a price of course." Her smile was enticing. "Or do you not like girls?"

"Well, no – yes. Sorry, I've got to go," was all he could say and then he shook her hand off his arm and rushed into the crowd. By the time he had reached the place where Hrosca was waiting at the landing he had control of himself again. Life outside the valley was worse than he'd imagined.

"You look a bit shaken," Hrosca said after greeting the boy.

"I – it's nothing," he hedged. The priest slowly nodded.

"It's terrible among the people," he mused quietly. "Idolatry, prostitution, lawlessness. While you were away someone was nearly killed no more than five paces away from me. It shakes me every time I think about it. The Warrior King's rule encourages such things. It is what happens when civilization crumbles."

The ferry finally reached the harbor just a short time after noon. It was the strangest craft Creon had ever seen, a floating platform about eight paces wide by ten paces long. In its center was a large turntable with two horses on it. They were tethered to the ends of the crossbar of a large T made of wood. On either side of the ferry was an immense eight-bladed water-wheel. The rudder was a long oar stuck between two upright pieces of wood at the rear. There was an identical set of the uprights at the side closest to Creon. A wooden railing ran all the way around the platform, with movable crossbars at the near and at the far end. The whole craft was open, except for a small tent near the turntable, in which some of the more valuable cargo was stashed. The boat was run by five rough looking men, two of them standing by the horses and the others at the stern, handling the rudder. One of them wore a red seaman's cap and was clearly in charge.

The craft finally nosed it's way up to the jetty and docked. The crossbars at the near end of the platform were flung open and the passengers got off. Several men worked to unload the cargo and as soon as the deck was clear enough the horses were untied and moved off the boat. A new pair was brought in and tethered facing the opposite direction that the first pair had been. The large oar that served as the rudder was pulled out of its holder and taken to the other end of the boat, where it was inserted into its proper place. Only then was the cargo loaded and the passengers permitted to board the craft. The ferry had only been there an hour when it departed and headed out into the bay.

"Pretty efficient," was Creon's remark.

"Yes," Hrosca replied, "keeping to 'business as usual' is what keeps Man from going insane under the Warrior King's rule."

"How long this going to take us?" the boy asked.

"Well, the ferry should hop from island to island," the old man explained, "and so I think that we should be in Midpoint in about a week, if the weather is favorable. From there we can get a ship that will take us to Deniz in about two days."

"That's certainly faster," Creon said.

"At this time of the year the wind comes from the west. With that we can sail quickly." Hrosca glanced at the horses. "A horse-ferry is good for moving people, but it is a rather slow means of transportation."

The craft carried them across choppy waters to the first of the thirty-odd islands that were serviced by the line. Creon began to feel a bit woozy as the ferry left its first docking point out of Ferrywharf. Hrosca noticed the green shade his face had taken on.

"Seasickness," he said. "It'll pass."

"Or maybe it was that squid," the boy muttered back

"That is a possibility. Just let me know if you throw up."

He didn't, but neither did he feel any better. The third night out Creon realized that he had a slight fever, but, as with most things, he kept this to himself.

It was early evening of the fourth day and they were running towards a port approximately half-way across the bay. They had just passed a large island presumed uninhabited. Creon's stomach continued to gurgle and it was with supreme effort that he could keep his fever-wracked body upright at the railing. Most of the time he slumped on one of the bales of clothing, looking out at the water, but seeing little, listening to the conversations around him, but hearing nothing.

Hrosca, on the other hand, noticed how the captain of the ferry had been talking softly with his men quite often – more often than would be needed for a well-trained crew to run such a vessel. Each time he thought that the men glanced his way when they spoke. He had reached into his power and had attempted to listen from distance, but something blocked him from doing so. Before boarding the priest had moved a long knife, his only weapon other than his bow, from his belt to a special sheath strapped to the inside of his left leg. He quickly moved past the other three passengers, to where his charge was leaning listlessly against the railing, looking at the island they were passing with dull, glazed eyes.

"Watch your step, Creon," he warned. "These fellows are up to something and I think it might get quite nasty." The boy just nodded dully and continued to stare at the island, only thinking, *Get me off this blasted boat!*

The attack came so quickly that even the wary Hrosca was taken by surprise. The two men who were holding the horses' bridles suddenly let go of the animals and flung themselves onto two of the passengers. The beasts reared in fright. The third passenger, a woman, backed away against a bundle of clothing. One of the men who had been helping out with the rudder slowly edged toward her, a long, cruel knife in his hand. She screamed and flung herself over the railing into the icy water.

The captain himself took on Hrosca, swinging a large club. The old man blocked the blow with surprising strength and yanked his knife from its hidden sheath. The captain leaped back with an oath, bumping into Creon, who tumbled to the floorboards. The big man again charged toward Hrosca, who brought up his right fist, and scattered a silvery powder all over the ferry around him. Instantly flames welled up, engulfing the craft. The men screamed and tried to get off the boat. The passengers and the crazed horses were unaffected by the fire. The captain leaped over and grabbed Creon.

"Put out the fire or he dies," he screamed at the priest. Hrosca sighed and made a circular movement with his right hand, palm down, and the fire vanished instantly.

"Wizard!" the captain growled through clenched teeth. "Say goodbye to your buddy! He's getting it 'cause of you!"

Creon watched the whole happening dazedly, suspended by his belt above the water. He felt strangely calm, even though another part of him was screaming at him to fight back. *It's so hot!* he thought. He could feel the big man shaking him, but couldn't get his leaden extremities to react. The captain grinned maliciously and released his grip on the boy. He landed in the brine with a splash. The cold instantly brought him back to

his senses, and with his last reserves of strength Creon was just able to bring his head above the water. He paddled himself back towards the boat, not seeing the large water-wheel of the boat churning towards him. The swell made him turn and look, suddenly mesmerized by the rhythmic motion of the instrument of his death. The paddles came down and around, down and around. And then the wheel was upon him. It struck him full force, drawing him under into the deep.



## Stranded

The young Man lay back on the beach gazing at the slowly lightening sky. His gray eyes were fixed, looking straight up, seemingly staring past the heavens into some void beyond. His dark hair was matted with saltwater and there was a blood-encrusted wound on his forehead.

Slowly the sun began to creep up the edge of the horizon, pouring his life-giving rays over the island. The light slid over the body, gently caressing it, warming it. The young Man squeezed his eyes shut and opened them again, blinking. He sat up and instantly put a hand to his head.

"Ow!" *What hit me?* he wondered. He gingerly pressed his fingers against the gash in his forehead. Where did *that* come from? Where was he, anyway? How had he gotten here? And then slowly the recollection came back to him: the ferry, the crew's attack on the passengers, Hrosca using that strange fire, falling into the water, the water-wheel looming over him.... He suddenly realized that he must be on the island that they had been passing when the crew had tried to rob the passengers. He also realized how hot he was.

*Gotta get some water!* Creon staggered to his feet but collapsed instantly. He pushed himself up on all fours and crawled up the beach towards the line of trees. He made it into a small bower out of the sun's brightness and collapsed, the remainder of his strength gone.

Dreams assailed him, dreams of deep horror and unspeakable darkness. He saw his mother torn away from him and his father in a burning house, dying before he could make peace with Creon. Hrosca's silver flames reached out to consume him. The captain of the boat was choking him and then he was in the icy water of Silver Bay again, sinking, sinking. He shivered, pulling himself into a fetal position.

And then there was a moment where it was not clear whether he was dreaming or awake. He felt a gentle hand shake his shoulder and he opened his eyes. There, in the rays of the setting sun was a girl. She was speaking to him, but he couldn't understand the words. She was beautiful, with red hair spilling down beyond her shoulders. The sun had crowned her with shimmering gold and with his heightened yet blurred fever-vision, he saw high-arched, pencil thin eyebrows and pointed ears. She spoke to him again and gently laid a hand on his forehead.

*A goddess, he thought to himself. A goddess has come to me!* He tried to form words, but they just fell from his lips without any effect or sound beyond a soft groan. She grew hazy in his vision. *Don't go, he thought he said. Stay with me, please.*

And then there was darkness.

Soft firelight lit the room, casting much of it in shadows. Directly across from the fireplace a small bed was set in the wall in which a boy lay, unconscious. There were dark purple lesions on his arm and on his forehead. A girl was there with him and she sang to him quietly, at times wiping his feverish forehead with a damp cloth. Twice a day she gently lifted his head, carefully pouring warm and soothing liquids down his throat. He swallowed mechanically, never coming fully awake. She dozed only intermittently, focusing all her attention on her patient. And as time went by the boy's lesions began to shrink and vanish.

She was dozing again when a bright shaft of light split through the dusk in the room. A small woman stepped through the doorway and dropped the heavy curtain back in to place. She looked at the sleeping girl

and lightly lifted the boy's wrist, feeling for the pulse. Next she checked his temperature and then straightened and turned towards the girl.

"Aspen," she said, shaking the girl lightly. A pair of forest green eyes fluttered open. Aspen stretched, stifling a yawn.

"Oh, no! I've been sleeping again."

"You're working too hard, dear," the woman told her, pulling up a stool next to her. "Perhaps you should let someone else watch over him while you take a rest." The girl just smiled and ran her hands through her rusty hair.

"You were the one who told me that when you start something you have to finish it, Mama," she countered. "I found him and so I'm responsible for him." She again stroked the boy's forehead with her cloth.

"Yes, I know, dear, but sometimes your sense of responsibility gets too much of you and you don't take a break when you should. You've been in here for more than ten days now and I can tell you haven't gotten much sleep."

"But he's sick," she answered, shrugging.

"Yes, and if the Creator hadn't let you find him, he'd be dead by now." She took her daughter's hand in her own. "But if you don't take a rest, then soon you'll get sick too, Aspen." Aspen sighed, put down the cloth and in the same motion withdrew her hand from her mother's grasp.

"I just can't bear to think that he would wake up without my being here," she finally admitted, folding her hands and squeezing until the knuckles turned white. The mother shook her head.

"What surprises me is that your father even allowed you to bring him here. After all he is a Man."

"You know the pledge of the Woodfolk," Aspen countered. "We must preserve all life as far as it is possible." She looked down at her patient and picked up the cloth again. "I have never seen a Man before, but this one has something special about him. I don't know what it is, but I think, *think*, that it has something to do with Creator God. Maybe that's why I feel it's so important that he gets well." Again she sponged his forehead. Her mother looked at her thoughtfully.

"Yes," she finally agreed, "perhaps now I see why he is so special to you. Maybe your father saw it, too. Maybe that's why he allowed this boy to come here." She stood and looked down at the girl, then reached out and stroked her daughter's hair. "I'll bring you some breakfast, dear," she said and left the room.

"Please, o God," Aspen whispered, as soon as her mother left, "please let him get better soon." Again she looked at him. Then she placed her hand on his forehead and an almost invisible glow surrounded it. As she hovered over him the last of his lesions shrank and vanished. She stayed like that for a few seconds and then withdrew her hand again. *Did that help?* she wondered. *O Creator God, heal him, please.*

Creon drifted. Intermittently he saw shadow-like figures carefully lifting him, feeding him, caring for him. Amidst all this faces appeared and disappeared in frenzied dreams. He saw Hrosca throwing silver powder around and it igniting to consume him. He saw his mother trying to reach him from across a deep ravine, ultimately plunging into it and falling to her death. Amidst all the dreams again and again a face appeared: the face of a Man, beaten brutally, bleeding, with eyes full of sadness, love, and a deep fire. Then suddenly there was another presence there with him. He could feel it, but could not pinpoint who or what it was. Then it was gone and with it the dreams.

The boy's eyes blinked open, instantly squeezing shut again. Even the soft firelight was too much to look at after a long time in darkness. He slowly blinked them open again, letting them adjust as he gazed around the room. Most of it was dark and he could only guess what was in those hidden corners. The fire was burning in a fireplace set in the far wall. A multicolored rug lay on the floor, and beside his bed was a small night stand with a couple of bowls and a cloth on it. Beside the stand was a chair and in it sat a girl, asleep. Her auburn hair was tousled and the light fell on her face just so that he thought she had dark shadows under her eyes. She was dressed in a long white gown, unlike any he had seen before....

*Wait, he thought, haven't I seen her somewhere before?* A hazy image floated before him of a girl kneeling beside him, lit by the rays of the setting sun. *Just like a goddess, he told himself.*

He watched her for quite some time before she took a deep breath. Her eyes fluttered open and looked at him, surprised. They gazed at each other a few moments and then she smiled.

"Do you always stare at girls like that, or am I just a special case?" she asked.

"What?" Creon's voice was hoarse. The girl just replied by laughing. She touched a hand to his forehead. Her touch was soft and thrilling to him.

"Well, at least your fever is gone," she said.

"Fever? How long have I been in here?" he asked.

"Oh, a bit more than two weeks."

"Two weeks?!" He tried to struggle out of the bed. "I've got to get to Hrosca. He must be worried sick about me." The girl pushed him back again.

"You're too weak. You need to rest before you are strong enough to get up again. The Dark Plague definitely takes its toll on you."

"Dark Plague?" he gasped. "Then you must be..."

"A Woodmaid," she finished. She turned her face towards the light and flipped her hair back over her shoulder with a practiced move. He instantly noticed her ear was different from that of a Man. It was pointed, no larger than a man's ear, but pointed, not round. Then he noticed that her eyebrows were thin and high-arched, almost invisible in her fair-skinned face. Again his golden fever-vision flashed into his memory.

"You found me," he whispered.

"Yes." There was something in the way she looked at him that chased away the last lingering vestiges of the fever chill.

"What's your name?" he asked her.

"Aspen."

"I'm Creon."

"It's good to know your name, Creon." And again the look she gave him raised goose bumps on his skin. "But now I believe you need some rest." With that she left the room. What was it that made her so attractive? he wondered. Normally he didn't care for girls, either his age or any other. He couldn't dare to because of his ill fortune. But this one held his attention, despite his misgivings. Why?

*Only Creator God can answer that question,* he heard a voice from his past. Hrosca. *I hope he's all right.* Creator God, please let him be all right, Creon prayed and drifted off to a deep and dreamless sleep.



## Among the Woodfolk

"Up and about?" Aspen asked, as she swept into Creon's room. He looked up from where he was sitting in front of the fireplace, whittling away at a piece of wood and smiled. He was clad in a robe similar to the one Hrosca wore. Almost a week had passed since he had woken up from the sleep of the Dark Plague. He had spent most of his time sitting and carving or listening to the stories that Aspen or the other girl (what was her name?) told him of the forest and its inhabitants. The rest of his time was spent eating, sleeping, and walking around the room for exercise.

"What are you doing?" the girl asked him, peeking over his shoulder.

"I – uh, well – it's nothing much," he apologized, showing her a half-finished carving of an old man.

"Wow!" she said. "I've been meaning to ask you where you learned that."

"My uncle Alessander taught me," Creon began. "It was that summer when my father came down with a fever...." The voice in the back of his mind began screaming, warning him to be careful, but he couldn't stop talking. "I was only thirteen." He shook his head. "It was the best year of my life since Dad took me into the fields...." He suddenly realized what he was doing and went silent. *If I get to close I'll bring her bad luck, too,* he reasoned. *I'd better be careful.*

"So, how old are you now?" she asked, green eyes intent.

"I've lived seventeen springs this year."

"Wow! Me too!" she exclaimed. Creon noticed that she had changed since that night when he had awokened. The shadows under her eyes had disappeared and she always looked fresh, no matter what time of day it was. It seemed that there was always a slight pine scent when she came into the room.

Aspen set down the bundle she had been carrying. "Here is a new set of clothes for you," she said, pointing at the bundle. He stood up and opened it.

"Why brown?" he wanted to know.

"Brown is the color we give to all our visitors," the girl explained. "I guess it has something to do with tradition. Each family has one or more family colors. Mine, for instance, is white and green. Holly's is blue, violet, and yellow. Since people from your Race who visit us don't have a color, we give them brown, just like the earth." Creon's brow furrowed.

"Oh, no," she continued, "for us it is an honor to wear that color. It reminds us of the fertility the Creator has instilled in the earth, on and from which we all live." The last line had sounded like a litany.

"Really?" he asked, a bit bewildered. Aspen nodded.

"Call me when you're finished." She turned to leave, then suddenly remembered something and turned around. "This is yours, I guess," she said, handing him a small cloth pouch. "Bye," she called over her shoulder and disappeared behind the curtain.

Creon spread the clothes out and took a careful look at them before dressing. The pants were a made of a soft leather-like material and were colored a medium red-brown. The tunic itself was beige and the jacket was a deep chocolate brown. There was also a leather belt and a pair of boots. Each piece of clothing fit perfectly, right down to the boots. He then opened the cloth pouch. Inside it were his two private articles: a knife with a blade as long as his hand in a leather sheath and the string of semi-precious stones made for him by Sarina. He suddenly felt an impulse to give the string to Aspen, but again something held him back. He sighed to himself as he put the things away. Just then the curtain rustled.

"Finished?" Aspen asked.

"Yeah, I guess."

"Good, then let's go." She pulled back the curtain.

"Where to?" he asked.

"To see Kavak."

"Who?"

"Our leader."

They stepped out of the small bower and into a clearing. For the first time in weeks Creon saw the warm late-spring sun. It took his eyes a few moments to adjust to the light, but when he could see clearly he found that he standing was at the edge of a small clearing where there were several houses built of logs and sod. He turned around to look at the dwelling he had been living in and was surprised to see that it was actually a small cave. He hadn't even registered that the seamless walls of his place of healing were living rock.

Aspen didn't let him ponder this too much, but led him through the village, most of which was built in and among the trees. She took him along a path that seemed to be the main thoroughfare. The people looked at him curiously as he passed, and some even looked openly hostile. After a few minutes they came into the shadow of a great oak tree. In its boughs was a skillfully built house with a ladder leading up to it. Near the ladder a Woodman was seated, dressed in green and white clothes, similar to those Creon wore. He had a rolled up cloak of brown thrown over his left shoulder and fastened into his belt, to which a small brown pouch was attached, and, unlike any of the other Woodmen that he had seen while coming through the village, this man had a thin chaplet of vine across his forehead. Like all Woodfolk, he had pointed ears and fine eyebrows. His hair was a rich dark brown with a slight reddish tint and calm eyes of aquamarine peered out from under a smooth brow.

The Woodman rose and strode toward Creon. The boy saw both grace and strength in the man's gait, but was surprised at the Woodman's size. He was a bit shorter than Creon, about the size of Hrosca, but from the way he had been sitting, the boy had expected to have to look up to the man.

"You are welcome among the Woodfolk, friend," he said in a calm, yet powerful voice. "I am Kavak, leader of the Woodfolk of this island." He gestured toward the place where he had been sitting. "Come and seat yourself, and tell us what brought you to us."

At first Creon hesitated; after all he hardly knew these people – would they pose a threat to him? All of his experience with leaders of men so far had been bad. But there was something about the man standing across from him that made him trust Kavak instantly, so he followed the Woodman and was seated. Twelve more Woodmen sat down with them. And there was a ring of younger people who stood around the outside, listening.

"These are the Elders of the village, friend," the leader of the Woodfolk explained and proceeded to introduce them. All of them had the names of plants or animals in various languages. "Now, tell us about yourself, friend," Kavak prompted.

*Here goes, Creon thought to himself. "I am Creon, the son of Adem, the son of Peleg, who is descended from the very first valley farmers. I am from the village of Chifchi, in the Flatlands. About two months ago a man by the name of Hrosca came to me and said that he had a message for me. It was to go to the Blue Mountains. So we left and headed out across the Flatlands. We reached the Silver Bay about two months after we left the valley. While we were awaiting the ferry I, uh, got sick."* He paused to organize his thoughts for a moment, folding and unfolding his hands. "Hm, I think the crew of the ferry tried to rob the passengers. Hrosca did something with fire and I got thrown overboard by the captain. I think I fainted, but then woke up and swam to shore. That's where Aspen found me." Another pause. "Well, and then she and another girl – Holly, I think – helped me recover and here I am."

The men began to discuss among themselves in a language Creon couldn't understand for a few minutes, before their leader called them to order.

"Creon Ademolu has told us some very interesting and important things," Kavak said in Common. "The first of these is that our old friend the Wanderer is abroad again. If I know him well enough, he will not come here, knowing we will care for his charge. Undoubtedly that is what the message that the albatross brought was about." The men nodded their agreement. Then a young man by the name of Lynx stepped in from outside the circle.

"The message, the albatross brought, was this," he began in a resonant voice. "I am again among the peoples. Care for the Seer, for he is holy. Teach him your ways, as you taught me, and return him to me when the time is ended. Then the prophecy will be fulfilled." He went back to his place and the men began to converse with one another again. Kavak called for silence.

"There are two more things that this young man's story tells us. The first is that the Wanderer is still using the Arts, for good, but they are of the Arts none the less. The second is that the Warrior King's downfall is imminent. Perhaps not now, but within a few years." Creon listened with interest, wondering what the "message of the albatross" really meant. Was the "albatross" really a messenger from the race of Man, or even a spirit being? Who was the "Wanderer," and what did he have to do with the Dark Arts? And what was that about a prophecy? He did not get a chance to answer the questions, because Kavak continued speaking.

"Now, Woodmen of the Island, your decision. Does he stay or not?"

An old man called Eike held his hand out at chest level, palm up. His hair was the color of new fallen snow and his eyes like coal. Kavak acknowledged him by touching his forehead with his hand and gesturing towards the old Woodman. The Elder struck the ground twice with the staff he held in his hand.

"I have lived longer than any of you here," he began in a firm, but aged voice. "Even when I was a child the prophecy of the Seer's triumph over the Warrior King and the reinstatement of the Council of Elders, was an ancient one. But now I believe the time has come. The Man-child has not told us why he wishes to go to the Blue Mountains, but I know why." He looked at Creon with his dark eyes. "It is to look upon the face of the

Creator." The gathering gasped. Creon shivered. *How can he know?* he wondered. *I never let a word drop about it!*

"All of us know," Eike continued, "that Creator God dwells atop the Peak Called Joy among the Blue Mountains. The only reason anyone would ever venture among them is to seek the Almighty himself, for if he did not come for that reason, the Karyl would close the way through the Death March.

"The message that the albatross brought is clear. We are to teach the boy our ways, and then return him to the Wanderer. If *oul* Adem is really the Seer is another question, but the Wanderer's wish comes from the Creator himself, otherwise he would have brought the message personally.

"Therefore, brothers, we must not say no to this request, not the request of a Man or Woodman, but a request of the Maker of the Universe and the One who holds the worlds in his hand." The old man gave a half-bow, touched his forehead and then pointed to Kavak to say he was finished. Creon's thoughts were spinning so much that he didn't even listen to the others' speeches for and against his stay. *Am I the Seer, or is it just a fantasy?* he wondered. *Why would Hrosca, if that is who the "Wanderer" is, want them to teach me their ways? And why, for that matter, was I chosen to see the Creator?*

"The Man is not welcome among us," a sharp voice cut though his reverie. He looked up to see Lynx glaring at him. "He is one of them that will bring the corruption of the Warrior King among us and poison our society. Be he Seer, or not, he is not welcome among us."

"This is not the voice of reason, *oul* Birch," Kavak returned smoothly. "It is merely fear of the unknown, and fear of not obtaining the things you wish." The young man glared, his face red.

"Now, brethren," the leader decided, "we shall vote. Those who agree that Creon Ademolu, *oul* Peleg, should remain among us cast the chestnut, those against cast the beechnut." The nuts were quickly cast into a small bag and then given to Eike to count. The final vote was a clean six-to-six. Kavak sat for a long moment, quietly pondering the result.

"There is one more vote we must ask for," he said after a long pause. "That of Creator God. Bring the staff." One of the young men in attendance nimbly climbed the ladder to the tree house in the oak and returned moments later carrying a package of cloth. All of the men rose in reverence as the servant handed the bundle to Kavak, who unwrapped an ancient staff, cleanly polished. One end was rounded and the other was honed to a blunt point.

"Those who say 'aye' to my right, those who say 'nay' to my left," Kavak commanded. He then took the staff, strode into the middle of the two groups, held the staff above his head, and raised his eyes to heaven.

"Creator God, Almighty Ruler, we call upon you to decide this matter. Show the group that holds your wish in their hearts. *Sana hamd olsun?*" With that he swung the staff into the ground, point first, and let go. It quivered for a moment. Creon held his breath as the staff stood perfectly still. Then slowly it began to lean towards Eike's group, until it finally leaned that way at an angle that should have caused it to fall, yet it remained standing, as if an invisible hand kept it upright. Kavak addressed the group again.

"The Creator has spoken. Creon Ademolu, *oul* Peleg, shall be taken among us and taught our ways. We are all witnesses of this." He turned to Creon and extended his arm. "Welcome among the Woodfolk, *oul* Adem. May your stay be pleasant." Creon grasped the Woodman's hand, and Kavak put his other hand on top of it.

"Thank you," Creon said, a bit bewildered. "Thank you for – everything."

# Three: The Way of the Woodfolk

## Changes

In the next few days Creon was given a new place to stay. It was a small tree house, which he shared with two other Woodmen who were a bit older than himself. For some reason his fear of enclosed places had disappeared with his sickness. He wondered if it might be because the house itself was open to the surroundings and so gave the feeling that he was really outdoors. He was given more sets of clothing, all of them in shades of brown. With time he got used to wearing that color, and was continually amazed at all the different shades that existed and at how well they all went together.

As Creon watched his new roommates, he noticed that before they lay down to sleep they would stand by their beds, facing east, and recite some strange words. He noticed that though the men and women seemed happy and at ease, there was always a tension in the air. Once when a young woman tripped over a root, a man helped her up and then stepped back, bowed to her, touching his chest, but carefully kept his eyes averted before going his way. *That's strange*, Creon thought. The people in his village would probably not even have noticed.

His real training was to begin five days after the Council of Elders had decided to allow him to stay. The day before, though, the whole community gathered together on the clearing. Before his roommates went, however, they rose earlier than usual and spent a long time in silence. Not knowing what else to do, Creon joined in on the silence and waited for what would happen. Finally they stood up and said something musical to each other in their strange tongue and went out to the clearing. Creon flowed unobtrusively. There the Woodfolk sang in their own language. The songs had a wildness about them, but also a beauty that focused all toward the Creator himself. Then Kavak had them all sit down in a circle. He stood in the center of the circle and began to speak of Creator God, gesturing, stepping, almost acting out a dance as he spoke. The whole thing was like a poem, and at times the group chimed in with short choruses of praise. Finally the leader of the Woodfolk raised his eyes to heaven and lifted his arms, palms pointing towards heaven, and spoke a long and solemn prayer. He then stretched his hands out over the group, finishing with more words in their language and then the group dispersed. As Creon turned to leave, Aspen caught his arm.

"Kavak told me that you are to break bread with him today," she told him. And so Creon found himself inside the tree house of the Woodman. It was much larger than his small quarters, but was just as airy as the place he was staying in. The house was much more like a home, but it was still quite spartan in contrast to the house of Jimri, the lord of Chifchi. Creon was welcomed warmly by the leader and a slender woman, who was just as tall as his shoulder, with blond hair and coal-black eyes.

"This is my wife, Savannah Eikekizi," Kavak introduced her. Creon touched his forehead and bowed slightly, as he had seen the Woodfolk do when greeting each other, then looked to his host uncertainly, unsure of what to do next. Kavak gestured toward several mats laid out on the floor around a low table and Creon moved to take his seat. Aspen turned to go.

"Kiz – Aspen," Kavak seemed to catch himself and continued, "would you join us?" The girl looked from the leader to Creon for a moment, playing with the edge of her green and white dress. The boy wondered what was going on behind those green eyes as they rested on him.

"All right," she finally agreed.

"Thank you," Kavak said with a warm smile. Then they were seated and the meal was brought. It consisted of tasty roots and different vegetable dishes, some sweet some savory. Creon found himself enjoying it, despite

the absence of meat. After they finished the meal, Kavak called to one of his two men-servants and whispered something to him. The young man nodded and left, returning shortly with a simple jar of clay. The leader of the Woodfolk then poured small amounts of a milky liquid from it into tiny cups. Each of the four at the table took one and held it between thumb and forefinger.

"Now, *oul Adem*," the Woodman said, "you will learn of our welcoming ritual. This is *salafl*, a drink for special occasions such as this one." He paused for a moment and then raised his cup. "Maker of all," he prayed in a quiet but clear voice, "we praise and thank you for our guest. May he follow your path and seek your face. May he be blessed in his coming in and going out, in all things may he praise your name. *Sana hamd olsun!*" He then raised the cup to his lips and emptied it and the rest followed suit. The liquid was sweet, but it had a slight sting as it went down.

"You are now one of us, Creon Ademolu, *oul Peleg*," the leader of the Woodfolk declared solemnly. Creon tried to hide a grin, speechless at that pronouncement. In one way he felt jubilant that he could be counted as one of their community, but in another way he felt ashamed that he kept so much about himself in the dark and that he'd been so mistrusting of their motives. He looked around the table, his eyes finally coming to rest on Aspen. She had a strange smile on her face and her eyes sparkled. He suddenly felt as if he must say something.

"I, well, I don't know what to say," he began haltingly. "I guess I'm not very good with words, but I want to say thank you." He paused, looking for what to say next.

"You are welcome, *oul Adem*," Kavak laughed, quickly dispersing the awkwardness. "Tomorrow we will begin your training, but now let us celebrate!" And for the rest of the day they ate, drank, and sang together. Kavak told a story about how the bear finally became a friend to the Woodfolk, even to the point of acting out parts, putting all of them in stitches. Creon offered up a short story that his mother had once told about how the great King Artus had dispensed justice to his people. The Woodfolk listened intently.

"You have the makings of a story-teller," Aspen whispered to him when he finished. Creon blushed at that, not knowing how to react to such praise.

It was quite dark when Creon finally returned to his own house. He fell onto his low bed and thanked Creator God for his wonderful day.

The next day he began his training. For the next two weeks he walked and talked with Eike, repeating many things that Hrosca had already taught Creon.

"Repetition is good," the old man said. "It is the only way to truly learn." He told of the opening of the world by Men and that the Woodfolk had miraculously been created by the One God. Creon learned about the Woodfolk society. It was based on the Council of Elders, who were ruled by a leader selected from among the people. This leader held his position until his death or until he chose to step down, unless he turned out to be a bad head of government. In such a case he was replaced by a better man. Creon also learned that the Woodfolk had a set of laws by which they were to live. These governed many things of the daily life.

"These were laws given us by Creator God himself," the old Woodman explained. "They give us a way to please him with our lives. But it is all summed up in one central thing: We are to love Creator God with our whole being – mind, will, emotions, and strength. It is true that Man can do it also, but only incompletely, because they do not have the laws that the Creator revealed for living as we should."

"Combined with that, our first pledge is to preserve life in every and any way we can," Eike told him. "This is a pledge that cannot be taken by a Man in the same way as we do, because he is not born with powers of healing as we are." He went on to explain that there were many different kinds of "healers" among the Woodfolk. There were those who healed the sick and the injured, and those were mainly women. Then there were those who looked after the plants and trees, ones who took care of the water and whatever lived in it, and a third group that tended the animals. These three jobs were mainly done by men, although there were crossovers in both groups.

Then finally Creon was turned over to Kavak. Together they took many walks and Creon recited what Eike had taught him.

"Very good, *oul Adem*," Kavak said in his calm tone. "But now we will begin with a new part of training, that of tracking and self-defense."

"Self-defense?" Creon asked. "I thought you were a peaceful people. Why do you need to fight?"

"We all need to fight sometime, friend," the Woodman replied. "With our way the other is not hurt much, and the fight is ended quickly. It is part of our way, so you must learn it also." Creon thought about this for a minute. *It might be a good idea to learn how to fight*, he thought to himself.

"All right," he said. "Teach me."

Later that day Creon began helping out with some of the projects that were being done around the village. A couple had been married a few days earlier, and the whole community turned out to build them a new home. Creon found himself enjoying the work, even though some of it was harder than the work his father had made him do back home. The house was to be built in the limbs of a tree, so first all of the wooden boards had to be moved to the base of the tree and hoisted up to make a platform. Creon ended up on the hauling team, and after a while was cursing his weakness from the sickness. The only thing that kept him going was that every once in a while Aspen would come around and give him one of her wonderful smiles. Every time she did he felt strengthened.

Then, finally, at sundown all of the boards had been moved and the platform had been erected. Creon sat on a rock with a ladle full of water in his hand, looking at the boards and the platform. The rest of the workers were standing around, singing one of the beautiful and wild songs of the Woodfolk. The boy felt tired and sore, but was also uplifted in spirit by the wonderful songs and ways of his companions.

"You worked hard today, Creon," came Aspen's voice. Creon turned to look at the Woodmaid. She was standing next to him, her face flushed, and eyes sparkling.

"I'm proud of you," she said. The light reflected off her long, red hair and he wondered if he had ever seen so beautiful a person before. And somehow she was wild, like the song that the men were singing. Then he felt something tug inside him. *I want to give her something, tell her something*, he found himself thinking. He opened his mouth to speak to her, when suddenly Kavak stepped into the midst of the men, his rich baritone singing a whole new harmony to the already magical song. The Woodmaid and the young Man sat spellbound as the song soared to new heights, and then slowly wound down and ended.

"You have worked well today, brothers," the leader of the Woodfolk complimented them, "and I'm sure Kartal and Fenchel will enjoy the house. But it is late and tomorrow we shall finish the work." Then the men dispersed and returned to their own homes. Creon again turned to say something to Aspen, but before he could begin, Kavak came over to them.

"It was good to see you work and fellowship among us, *oul Adem*," he said with a warm smile. "It is not often that Men have appreciation for the Woodfolk."

"I'm glad I can be a part of it, sir," Creon returned sincerely. "I like it among your people."

"They are your people now, too, Creon," Aspen interrupted, as she took his hand and squeezed it. Creon felt his heart leap.

"What Aspen says is true, *oul Adem*," Kavak agreed, "these are now your people also. And we see you as one of ours. Now tomorrow we continue with your training."

"But the house?" Creon protested.

"We won't start until after noon," Kavak promised, "and there will be plenty for all to do." He put a hand on the young man's shoulder. "And now you should get some rest. We have a big day tomorrow."

It was shortly after dawn that Creon found himself running through the woods with Kavak. The lithe Woodman took the young Man through the woods, quickly covering a quarter of the island's circumference. Then, finally, Creon was allowed to rest. He was covered with sweat, and bent over, panting hard.

"Why the running?" he groaned.

"You need to grow strong again before you can really commence your training, *oul Adem*," the Woodman explained. His fair face was also flushed, but his eyes sparkled with exhilaration. "Now come, we still have a ways to go." And they resumed the run.

That afternoon Creon continued helping with the house-building project. He was sore from the run, and found it painful to lift the boards, but worked on doggedly. By the time they were finished his shoulder-length dark hair was matted with sweat and he could hardly stand.

"Hey, Creon," Aspen called, running up. "Want to go for a swim?" Creon nodded gratefully and followed Aspen to a pool that lay in another clearing surrounded by carefully cultivated hedges. He quickly stripped to his trousers and dove into the cool water. The Woodmaid had changed into a short trousers and a tunic and came charging in after him. As they swam together other Woodfolk joined them and by the time the sun went down almost the whole village had come together. The young people were splashing around in the pool, while the older ones lit fires and prepared meals. Then when the food was ready the happy swimmers gathered around the campfires and began to eat.

"Is it always like this?" Creon asked Aspen.

"On most summer nights," she said. "But what this actually is, is a time of praise that we finished the house for Kartal and Fenchel." As she finished speaking, a shout went up from another one of the campfires, and a young man stood, erupting into melody. Across from him a young woman stood and began singing harmony to the song. The rest of the people joined in, the men singing the melody and the women the harmony. After they had gone through the song twice Creon found himself joining in. The leading couple began describing a slow circle around the fire, opposite from each other. One foot stamped down, followed by a step, broad arm gestures, a twirl from the woman, then from them man, a bow, a curtsey, another turn, stamp, step, twirl, gesture, bow, gesture, step, stamp, turn... On the next repetition of the melody others joined in, making their own dancing circles around their fires. Aspen was one of the dancers at Creon's circle. The rhythm reached into their bones and spun them around faster and faster, into more and more intricate patterns, and even Creon began tapping out the beat with one hand on his thigh. Then, after two more times through, the melody and harmony switched, and the first couple began singing a whole new melody and harmony. The speed increased and the less skilled dancers began to fall away from the fires. The experts began exaggerating their movements, hands, feet, hair and garments becoming a mesmerizing, exhilarating blur. Stamp, step, turn, gesture, bow. All Creon could watch was the flaming red hair and supple form of one young Woodmaid who, to his mind, far outshone the others. Part of him longed to leap up and join the dance, but at the same time, a weight in his heart and his hands held him back. Then, suddenly the song and the dance ended, the dancers falling back in ecstatic exhaustion, finding their places.

Aspen sat down, breathing hard, face flushed, the magic of the dance still clinging to her like an ethereal garment, enfolding her in such a way that Creon felt inexorably drawn to her. He wanted to speak to her and tell her what he felt. And already his lips were moving. But then came the shout. One of the people called for a story, then more joined in, until old Eike stood and went to the largest campfire, where he seated himself on a low stool, so all could see him.

"He's the best story-teller we have," Aspen whispered to Creon.

"It is time that I tell of the beginning of our people again," he began, his old yet young voice powerfully carrying over the hushed audience. He paused and it seemed to the young Man that the whole world became still, ready to hear the words of a master story-teller. Eike closed his eyes for a long moment and then opened them and gazed firmly at the people around him. The whole air seemed to vibrate around him as he began his tale:

*In the days of old, not long after Man had first broken through the Portal into the Blue Mountains to the east of the Seven Nations, a small group of them left the Mountains and went to live on the border to the Death March. Among these was a girl named Ishik. She was the most beautiful of the maidens who lived in that company and pledged to be married to a man named Yahya. As she lived and wandered among the Death March, one of the Karyl, Timuel, saw her and wished*

to take her as his wife. Now the Creator had forbidden the 'Karyl from touching the daughters of Man, yet Timuel burned with longing and disregarded that command. Having the patience of the 'Karyl, he merely waited for the opportune time and soon it came.

'Yahya was called away to battle with another tribe that had settled in the Death March. He was slain in battle and Timuel watched it. He then hurried to the village where Ishik lived. Finding her alone, he took the form of 'Yahya and showed himself to the girl. She was overjoyed at seeing her lover and gladly gave herself to him. She returned to her village and kept that meeting secret, especially after she learned that 'Yahya had fallen in battle. But soon she learned she was with child and the secret could no longer be kept.

Fearing the penalty for her actions, she fled into the Death March. Timuel followed her and found her asleep under the boughs of a great tree. When she awoke, she saw the great shining being and was afraid.

"Do not be afraid, Ishik," Timuel comforted her. "I will not hurt you."

"Who are you?" she asked.

"I am the father of the child you bear," he answered. "I took up the form of your lover so that I would not alarm you. I will care for you as I can." She still shook with fear and now with anger at the deception.

"You took from me what belonged to another!" she cried. "Leave me. The Creator will watch after me and not you!" The 'Karyl sadly turned and left. The ancients tell that he was then called before the Creator for judgment and banished to the pit for his action.

And yet the Creator decided to change this evil to good. In the night after Timuel appeared to Ishik, the Creator gave her a dream: Ishik found herself standing in the forest, a girl-child in her arms. Above her was a warm and loving light.

"Ishik, daughter of Man," came the divine voice.

"Here I am, my Lord," she answered.

"The child you hold was destined to die, for the union out of which it was born was evil. And yet I have decided to use it for my purposes. This child will be the mother of a great race who will be the cause of much grief and joy for Man. In her veins runs a blood yet unknown. She will have power over the forest and the animals, to care for them and heal them. Return to your village and bear your child. I will bless her and she will be blessed, though hated by your people. I will care for her that she will not be hurt. Now go."

Ishik awoke and obeyed the dream. When the time had come she gave birth to a girl-child. From the beginning her features were strange. Her ears were pointed and her eyebrows nearly invisible. Her mother called her 'Yasham, for she said, "My God has given you life. That life will be his forever." The child grew and became beautiful, more so than all of the daughters of Men, which created great envy among the people of Ishik's village. This envy caused the daughters of Men to rally their husbands against 'Yasham and her mother. They stormed Ishik's house, seeking to kill the child, but she had been sent to the forest by her mother. Ishik was slain by the maddened men.

At the time 'Yasham fled into the forest, she had lived twelve summers. There she lived for four more springs, learning to live from the wood and the animals that lived there. She never touched meat and loved the beasts of the forest, caring for them and keeping them well.

In those days the Men of the Blue Mountains and of the Death March often did battle with each other, often far into the forest itself, even to where 'Yasham lived in secret. One day a battle raged close to her home and she watched as Man pursued Man and many fell. Then suddenly they were gone, leaving one of their number fallen on the forest ground. The child of the forest had never seen the death of Man before, so she went forward to see the fallen one. A blow had been struck to his shoulder and his lifeblood flowed from the wound. As 'Yasham looked at him, her heart was moved, for he was handsome to look at and his face portrayed a gentleness and nobility that she had never seen in a Man before. She knelt beside him and healed the wound. Then she cared for him until he regained consciousness.

The first meeting was a strange one for the young Man, for he had never seen such a strange woman before: her skin bronze from living in the forest, her dark hair long and tangled, clothed in cloth woven from plants of the forest, and above all else bearing the features of the Woodfolk. At first the girl wished to run away from this man, but she pushed her fear away.

"Who are you?" he asked her.

"I am 'Yasham,'" the Woodmaid replied. "I have been watching after you since you fell here. Who are you?"

"I am Lif, the second son of the king of Mount Haven. I thank you for saving my life." The appearance of 'Yasham had a strange effect on the young man and he began to love her. She took him and showed him her forest and the animals. As she did, he began to wonder if he might not take her as his wife and yet her strangeness was enough to keep him from doing so. So, after she had shown him all she knew, he took leave of her to return to his home. When he had reached it, the Creator gave him a dream and spoke to his heart.

"Return to the Maiden of the Forest, Lif," he said. "Take her as your wife and I will make you into a great race. I will give you care of the forests and the fields, of the beasts and the birds, to watch over them and heal them, also to heal the sons and daughters of Man."

When Lif awoke he bade farewell to his family and returned to the forest, where he wed 'Yasham. As they lived together the Creator reformed Lif's features, so that he looked like a Woodman.

To them were born eight children, all twins - four sons and four daughters. The sons took their sisters as wives and from them came the four great lines of the Woodfolk: from Aer and Bulut the Woodfolk of the West; from Toprak and Su the dark-skinned Woodfolk of the far South; from Wald and Atesh the Woodfolk of the North; and from Kuvvet and Tikvah our forefathers - the Woodfolk of the Center.

"And so our people came into being," Eike closed his tale. The story over, the people slowly departed to their homes. Only a few remained, among them Creon and Aspen.

Creon found himself seized by that same strange wish to share something of himself with the Woodmaid, but wasn't sure where to begin, or what to say.

"Aspen," he started. The girl looked at him and smiled, back at the stars above.

"They're beautiful, aren't they?" she sighed.

"Yeah." He gazed up into the azure dark, noticing the pinpricks. There were a few constellations he noticed, from the few nights when his father sat out and watched the stars with him.

"There's Stahl's Hammer," he said, pointing. "And the Great Plow."

"How do you know of the stars?" she asked, gazing at him in wonder. "I thought Men didn't care about such things."

"My father knew some," he said. "He taught me." There was a quiet lull and at that moment Creon knew that if Aspen asked him anything, he would have to answer it truthfully. No more hiding behind "secrets." The thrill as well as the terror shook him slightly and he hoped that she wouldn't notice.

"Why did you leave your home, Creon?" The question caught him quite by surprise.

"I - I left because I had to," he stammered. She said nothing, only fixed him with a gentle, emerald gaze. He took a deep breath.

"My family has had trouble since before I was born," he began and told her of his history, his parents' courtship, Rikel's desire, the trials and troubles of his life. He told her of the way the townsfolk treated him.

"I honestly never talked to a girl at length other than my sister before I met you," he admitted, blushing.

"Why not?" she wanted to know. "You are definitely a handsome man. Couldn't you win any girl over that you chose?"

"Because I would bring her bad luck," he sighed after a moment and his heart ached with the admission.

"Well, I don't believe in bad luck," she stated resolutely and smiled. A warm feeling extended from his heart all the way down his body and he found his hand creeping closer to hers, but stopping before he touched it. He looked away.

"Well, if it's not bad luck, I guess it's that the Creator has a bone to pick with my family." He glanced back at her. "Why would he send such evil to us?"

"Creon!" she exclaimed, sitting up. "The Creator never sends anything bad our way. The bad comes from the Dark One, not from him. He only ever sends good things to us."

"Don't talk to me about that," the boy snapped. "I lived my whole life hearing about how 'good' and 'loving' the Creator is. My mother told me that, but even when I prayed to him, he didn't answer!"

"I thought you just told me he *did* answer you – with letting you come here." The thought stopped him and a chill spread about him. She was right, she was so right and suddenly he felt like he were a lump of soft clay in her hands. In this moment she could make or mar him for eternity.

"What do you think I should do, Aspen?" he whispered, desperate for a kind word.

"Once a long time ago, when the Woodfolk were still young," she began after a long, deliberate pause, "a leader of the Woodfolk said something very wise. This is what he said, 'If you have cares or pain, cast them on the Creator and he will set your free from them.'"

"Tell him about them?" he asked.

"And let him have them. Don't worry about them any more." He looked at her and she at him, silent, then Aspen leaned over and kissed his cheek.

"Good night, Creon." There was a warm tone in her voice that she had never used before and then she vanished into the night. Creon still sat there, pondering what she had told him. Then he realized that what she had given him, a sympathetic ear and a nudge towards Creator God, had been worth so much more than the worries and cares that he had given her.

"Oh, God, what can I say?" he whispered, dropped his head forward and wept. The words and thoughts were incoherent, but in all of it he felt himself wrapped in a warmth and joy that grew until he thought he could hear the stars singing.

It was nearly dawn when he finally walked back toward the small tree-house. After a long time before the Creator he had been able to make peace with himself and his God. Now he returned, feeling as if he had just been reborn. There was the exhilaration of that night when he saw the *raptors* on the Flatlands, but aside from that he now felt a deep peace. He nearly reached the house when he noticed a slight figure clothed in a white gown standing in front of him – Aspen. Long russet locks fell free beyond her shoulders, her brow was creased, and her lower lip thrust out slightly, giving her almost a child-like appearance. Her eyes were in the shadows, as she came towards him. Creon smiled uncertainly.

"Are you all right?" she asked, her voice betraying her worry.

"Yes, I'm much better, much better."



## The Art of Defense

For Creon the summer continued with much physical training. Kavak took him on long runs daily, and he spent most of the rest of the time doing hard manual labor. Not only did his immense strength return, but he found he could work harder and longer than he had before. At Aspen's suggestion Creon had his hair cut short, and the beginnings of his beard shaved off, and so found himself fitting in better with the Woodfolk. It was shortly before the onset of fall when Kavak finally began teaching him the self-defense techniques of the Woodfolk.

"Much of the fight is in the mind," he told the young Man. "You must learn not to let your adversary make you uncertain. You must always be thinking about what his next move is and be able to counter it." The fighting technique itself was mainly learning to parry the thrusts of the other using hands and feet.

"Can't I fight back?" he asked Kavak.

"All in good time, Creon," the Woodman said. "If you learn to stop the other from coming close to you, he will do something foolish. Only then should you counterattack."

And fighting was not all he learned. Kavak insisted on teaching him to track and to cover his trail so none could follow him. It was usually done in the form of a game: Kavak or sometimes Aspen would run out into the wood and Creon would have to follow the trail. He was quite successful at this, and slowly a special bond formed between the leader of the Woodfolk and the young Man.

Finally Kavak began to teach Creon how to fight back. Much of it was done with quick blows to specific parts of the body. While Kavak would sometimes let Creon strike him, he would more often block or dodge the young man's inexpert blows. The first few days of this, the young Man told himself that it was merely part of the training and that he would get better, but a week had passed and he still hadn't contacted with his opponent even once. The tempo of the dull thrumming in his heart increased, and as they fought it was all he could do to keep it under control and from turning into the red-hot rage that would lay him low. Suddenly he noticed what he thought was a weakness in his opponents defenses and charged his strike with all of the anger he could muster. It blazed past Kavak's usually adequate parry. Just as his fist was about to connect with the Woodman's shoulder, Kavak twisted aside. His arm came down on the young Man's and he knocked his feet out from under him. Creon thought quickly and even as he fell retaliated by snapping a blow to his teacher's midriff. The Woodman doubled over grimacing. A fierce pride flashed across Creon's face. *That one was for you, Dad*, he thought, feeling for a moment that he'd struck his own father.

"It's time to stop for today," the Woodman said after a long moment.

"Why?" Creon demanded, sitting up. He was finally getting somewhere!

"You're angry," Kavak explained matter-of-factly. "It is not good to fight when you're angry." The words had no sooner left his mouth than the dark throbbing began to turn red behind Creon's eyes.

"What? If I weren't angry I would never have gotten through your defenses!"

"True, and that's what you were *not* supposed to do yet, Creon." He sighed. "It takes a long time, and a lot of patience to learn the Art of Defense. It is never to be used in anger or with hatred." The words stung and Creon turned away.

"What do you know about hate anyway?" the boy muttered, sullenly glaring at the woods.

"More than you know, Creon *oul* Adem, more than you know." There was such a soft tone in the Woodman's voice as he said it, that the young Man turned involuntarily to look at his mentor.

"Sit down and let me tell you a story, Creon," the Woodman sighed. "It is time you heard what hate does to those around you." Creon did as he was told, sitting down and forcing the darkness out of his mind and away from his heart.

"Once there was a Woodman born with every conceivable privilege that our society could offer," Kavak began. "His father had been the leader of his community for many years, as had his grandfather before him. He was the eldest of all of his brothers and was certain that he was destined to take his father's place one day. He sought after it and tried to be the best at all he could. He excelled in just about everything he put his hand to, including the Art of Defense, and the lore of the plants and the woods. The only thing that was lacking with him was a closeness to the Creator." Kavak sighed, as if remembering something, paused, and then continued his tale.

"This Woodman married when he came of age and his wife was a lovely, well-spoken Woodmaid to whom he was well-matched. She bore him three daughters, then a son, and finally another daughter. He could not have been more proud of her or of his children.

"As the years went by, the Woodman began to get impatient for his father to step down, to give him the leadership of the people, but his father was wise – oh, so wise." Again he sighed. "He refused his son's desire and the young Woodman first became angry, then bitter towards his father. He even began to hate him for

standing in the way of what he wanted.” His voice cracked and Creon was forced to look away, thinking of his own bitterness towards his father.

“Then, one day, soldiers, Men who were in the pay of the Warrior King, attacked the village of that community of Woodfolk. The Woodfolk did what they’d often done and hid themselves away until the soldiers were gone. But these were particularly ruthless. They searched everywhere and found first his father and then his son and youngest daughter. The boy had much of his father in him,” here Kavak smiled wistfully, “and defended his sister well against men twice his size and strength, but finally they overcame him and he was killed.” The Woodman’s voice cracked. “The Men never were able to lay a hand on any more of the Woodfolk – we don’t know why, but I believe it was the Creator who intervened. But the boy was dead and the girl survived because of her brother’s care.” He drew a deep breath to steady himself and Creon noticed tears glistening in his eyes.

“I – the Woodman was heart-broken, because of the loss of his father and his son. He did not rejoice in the fact that his wife and daughters survived. He did not rejoice that he – that he could now be the leader.” He shook his head slightly. “He began to hate more, Creon. He began to hate more.” He fixed his moist hazel gaze on the young Man. “He hated the Men who slew his family, he hated the Council of Elders that passed over him and awarded the leadership to another, he even began to hate the girl that his son had rescued at the cost of his own life.” His eyes now held an intensity that Creon could only guess at. “His hatred was such that he neglected his duties and gave himself solely to the idea of revenge – something that is forbidden to us Woodfolk. And then it happened: my – his daughter fell ill. I do not know when it began but she fell very, very ill. It must have been only a short time after the attack.” He sighed and looked away.

“She wasted away and that finally got my – his attention. He was losing another of his children and I couldn’t bear another such loss, I just couldn’t. I went out to the woods, to a secret holy place where my father had once met the Creator and there I prayed. I prayed and railed against the Creator. I blamed him, I poured out my hate like gall on the earth.” His voice rose in intensity and pitch as he recounted it, his gestures becoming large. “And then, in the stillness after I poured out my heart so, he came to me.”

“You saw the *Creator*?” Creon asked breathlessly.

“No.” Kavak shook his head with a small, sad smile. “I never saw him, but I felt his presence and I heard his voice here.” He touched his chest above his heart. “I remember the words to this day.

“My child,” he said to me.” And his voice cracked again. He drew a hand across his face. “My child, why do you hate?” he asked.

“I hate because I have lost my father and my son,” I told him. ‘I hate because I am not the leader.’ And then it came to me. ‘I hate because I have never learned to love.’ I tell you, Creon, that was the worst confession I have ever made. But he was so gentle, o so gentle.

“My son,” he said, ‘I will teach you to love. Go home and love that girl-child who is dying. Love her back to health. Forgive those you hate and love them.’

“But I can’t!” I told him.

“I will help you,” he told me, ‘if you will let me.’ And I told him I would, Creon.” He sighed. “It was not easy. Every time I felt hatred towards anyone, I went to my place in the forest and poured out my heart to him. He never came again as he did that once, but he healed my heart. And today I know how to love.”

“But what about the girl?” the boy asked.

“The girl?” Kavak smiled and brushed at his moist eyes. “She healed when I learned to care for her and love her as a father should. And she grew to be the most beautiful maid in the village, Creon, the most beautiful and the most joyful.”

“And you never had another son?”

“No. But I don’t begrudge that to the Creator, because he has given me something much better than a son, Creon. He taught me to love everyone as he does – if only in a small measure.” The young Man thought for a long moment.

“Perhaps you do understand,” he said after a while. “I hated my father because I felt that he was treating me unfairly. I could not forgive him for that. Now I see that my hate turned my sister and brothers against

him. It was tearing the family apart." He looked up at Kavak. "Do you think that the Creator can help *me* forgive my father? Do you think he'll help me heal my family?" The Woodman reached out and laid a hand on Creon's head.

"Doubtless, if you ask him and are willing to work hard."

"Then I will." He paused and looked at the gentle warmth in Kavak's eyes. This man, though not from his race, had shared more with him than his father ever had and at that moment Creon realized that he loved this Woodman as he should a father. He thought to keep this to himself, but at that moment a thoughtful expression crossed Kavak's face as well.

"Perhaps, Creon, the Creator has granted both our desires," he said after a moment and Creon immediately understood.

"You're like a father to me," he admitted with a half-smile.

"And you as a son to me, Creon Ademolu." The Woodman smiled broadly. "So be it, son of Man, so be it."

The incident with the fight brought about a great change and an advance in Creon's learning the Art of Defense. Having begun to conquer his hatred allowed him to progress quickly and within two months he had covered more ground than he had in all of the time prior to that. Then about midday one day Kavak and Creon were circling each other in a mock-fight. Creon calmly watched his older partner, waiting for him to make a move. Suddenly Kavak launched forward, Creon stepped back and caught the blow from the Woodman's foot with his left hand. Then he launched an attack, which was skillfully stopped by Kavak. The fight raged back and forth, until suddenly Kavak reached forward with his right hand and jabbed Creon's shoulder where it met the neck. He kept driving his fingers into the nerve center and the whole meadow started spinning, but then the pressure suddenly vanished and Creon was able to regain control.

"What was that for?" he demanded, panting.

"I'm sorry," Kavak apologized, "I got carried away." He paused, looking at Creon. "I should have taught you this grip before." He took Creon's hand and placed it on his shoulder. "You place any finger here and press – the thumb or the index and middle finger work best." Creon did as he was told. "You're too far to the right," the Woodman directed. Creon shifted his grip, and the Woodman suddenly staggered. The young Man instantly drew back. Kavak righted himself.

"You've got it, *oul Adem*," he exclaimed.

"Is there any protection against this?" Creon asked. The older man shook his head.

"No, just make sure that no one can get it on you. If done right it can knock a person senseless, and go so far as to kill him." Creon shuddered at that remark.

Suddenly a young woman came running up from the village.

"Agam," she cried, coming to a stop in front of Kavak. "Melissa is having trouble with her childbirth. If you don't help, both she and the child will die."

"I'm coming," Kavak said, grabbing his brown cloak. He turned to Creon. "You should come and see this, son. Here is something that few may ever know about the Woodfolk." With that the Woodman turned and ran in the direction of the village. Creon followed as fast as he could, reaching the low wooden house only moments after Kavak. The leader of the Woodfolk was already inside and kneeling beside a Woodmaid with charcoal-colored hair. He whispered to her in his language and then turned to one of the young women who were standing by.

"Get me some water," he commanded. The girl left and returned moments later with a cup full of the lukewarm liquid. Kavak then reached into the pouch that was always at his side and took a pinch of a silvery powder. He sprinkled this into the cup and gave it to the young woman. She drank the now silver water and lay back. Kavak motioned Creon.

"Come now, *oul Adem*, from here it is the duty of the women." They left the small hut together.

"What was that stuff you used?" Creon asked.

"It is a gift from the Creator," the Woodman explained. "It is a medication of great potency and can heal almost anything. It is used only when lives are threatened in ways that the healers cannot protect us from. And though the pouch is small, it never goes empty."

That evening there was a great celebration among the Woodfolk, for another child had been born among them. Young couples danced together, while the older folk sang. Creon watched from the side of the circle, as the pairs whirled around each other, creating intricate designs with their footsteps. Someone gently touched his arm, making him turn. It was Aspen. She was dressed in her most festive gown, white, with a green tree embroidered on it and a green belt around her waist. It left her arms bare and fell to just below her knees, so she could dance more easily. Her face was flushed and her eyes sparkled with joy.

"Come on, Creon, let's join the dance," she invited him, taking his hand.

"But I don't know how," he protested lamely.

"I'll teach you," she said, pulling him in among the other dancers. "It's easy." She began to instruct him in the steps, then suddenly he got the hang of it, and they both began to spin away in the dance. All Creon could see was Aspen, as she gracefully leaped around, in perfect cadence with the rhythm of the song. He thought he had never seen her happier than she was now. And the happiness made her all the more beautiful. Suddenly he wondered, *What does she think about me?* But the thought was lost in among the joyous dance to the Creator.

From among the people seated around the dancers one sandy-haired young Woodman glared at the red-haired girl and her dark-haired partner. He watched for a few more moments, and then rose and left. No one saw him go.

The next day while Creon and Kavak were taking their morning run together, they stopped at a small spring to slake their thirst.

"I'm very happy to see you are really becoming part of our people, Creon," Kavak told him.

"What do you mean?"

"The dance last night, was a special one, one that is danced only by those who are married or destined to be so." Creon suddenly went very red, realizing what really had happened between him and Aspen the night before.

"You might say that you publicly declared your love for each other," the Woodman pointed out.

"I guess I shouldn't have been in that dance then," he returned sharply. *She took advantage of me*, he thought, half angrily, but the thought pleased him at the same time.

"I have known Aspen – for – a long time," the Woodman countered, ignoring the outburst. "She has always been one of the most beautiful and sought-after Woodmaids in the village, but she always refused the offers made to her by the young Woodmen. I remember she told me once that she would really know who was for her, and I think she's found her only one." Creon, looked at him, stunned.

"I can't believe that," he finally declared. "I just can't believe it! A Woodmaid and a Man, that is unthinkable!"

"And yet you feel differently," Kavak observed pointedly. Creon grew very red then very white and very red again.

"I don't think I can accept something like this," he snapped. "Not yet anyway, for me she's just another girl, and I don't have anything to do with girls, period. They're just a pain in the posterior when it comes to big plans, and I have big plans, too big to be held down by a girl, especially one who isn't even from my Race." There was suddenly a rustling of bushes across from him, and Creon saw Aspen staring at him incredulously. Creon suddenly wanted to sink into the ground and disappear.

"Aspen..." he tried to apologize, but she wouldn't listen. Her green eyes brimmed with tears, overflowed, and she ran from the spring. Kavak looked at Creon sadly and – so he thought – reproachfully.

"Did I really mean all that?" the young Man asked.

"Only you can answer that question." The Woodman stood. "I think you should think your 'big plans' over again, son. Are they really yours or someone else's?" With that he left Creon alone to puzzle over his inability with words.

Quite some time later Creon left the spring and went in search of the Woodmaid. He had finally come to terms with himself, suddenly realizing that what he had said had been one of his old emotional barriers, trying to hide his real feelings toward Aspen, trying to conceal the rapture of learning to care in the dark cloak of hatred.

He finally found her sitting atop a cliff at the edge of the island, pointing towards the open ocean. He approached her from the side, so she could see him, but she quickly turned and looked the other way. Creon clenched his teeth and walked forward resolutely. *All right, Creator God, he prayed silently. I'll do what I can. You've got to change her, though.*

"Aspen?" he asked.

"Go away," was the answer.

"All right, I will, but please listen to me first," he tried a bit more persistently. "I want to say I'm sorry for what I said. I wasn't right and I didn't want to hurt your feelings, honestly."

Aspen looked out at the choppy waters and at the last few leaves on the trees. Then she glanced at him.

"Go jump off the cliff," she growled and picked up one of the fallen golden leaves.

"Okay, I'll go," Creon sighed, a great emptiness yawning in him. *Well, Creator God, he prayed, I tried.* With that he turned and walked toward the cliff. It wasn't very far down to the water, but there were jagged rocks sticking out of the surf. Creon closed his eyes and took a deep breath before turning away and walking back into the woods, leaving Aspen to cover her face with her hands.

As the days wore on the distance between Creon and the Woodmaid seemed to grow. Their past routines had brought them together on many of the same tasks and so it was difficult to avoid each other. While they still exchanged courtesies, the young Man was pained that the girl would not look at him. Night after night he rehearsed his apologies while lying on his bed, his heart filled with an unnamed yearning.

Finally, nearly three weeks after his rash words, he and Aspen were carrying large baskets of nuts to the village from where they had been harvested. She walked along aloofly, trying to ignore him, but he noticed that she often glanced at him. He attempted a small smile and to his surprise and joy she smiled back. He wanted to speak, but there was no time because they broke from the woods and walked into the village. She walked away from him towards Kavak's house then paused and turned back, giving him one more shy, warm look, before disappearing around the tree. Creon felt elated as he hurried over to Eike's with his basket. Perhaps they might get together after all.

No apologies were exchanged at that point nor within the next few days and, while there was still some sort of separation between the two young people, Aspen now began to join in on the long, hard runs with Creon and resumed talking with him as once before, trying him to help as he struggled to learn the language of the Woodfolk. As Kavak continued the lessons in tracking, Aspen became a favorite and extremely elusive target, never getting caught.

It was the one of the first days of winter, and for once Creon was alone. He was heading toward the clearing where he and Kavak still practiced daily. Today he was supposed to track Aspen and Kavak at the same time. He was already forming plans in his mind, of how he would go about it, when suddenly someone called after him.

"Hey, Man!" Creon spun around. A sandy-haired young Woodman was coming towards him. There was a long staff in his hand, and Creon suddenly recognized him as Lynx.

"Well, hi," he greeted him with a friendly smile, but the Woodman just glowered back.

"I have come to warn you," he said.

"What does that mean?" Creon asked, puzzled.

"Keep away from her," Lynx hissed through his teeth, "or chosen or not I will kill you." Creon's brow furrowed.

"I thought Woodfolk aren't allowed to kill."

"We are not allowed to, unless we are in a fight," Lynx retorted, "and I challenge you to one, here and now."

"Wait, wait, wait!" Creon put his hands up. "Why do you want to fight? I don't quite get it. Why me?"

"Because you stole her."

"Hm," Creon returned thoughtfully. "I'm not sure. We're barely on speaking terms. Besides, don't you think Aspen should decide that?"

"Ha," Lynx laughed, "all Woodfolk know that anyone who has lived under the Warrior King's dominion can warp the minds of others. Aspen is not trustworthy."

"And what about Kavak?" Lynx just glared at Creon.

"All right," the young Man agreed. "If it's a fight you want, we'll fight, but I'll choose the place."

"Agreed," Lynx growled. "Name it."

"The clearing just up beyond." The Woodman nodded his assent and the two adversaries headed up the rocky path to the clearing. Kavak was already waiting, and beside him Aspen. Creon noticed she was dressed in tunic, pants, and boots, but all of a much finer cut than the ones the men were wearing.

"Hello, *oul* Birch," Kavak said. "Will you join us?" The young Woodman refused to answer.

"We have a small problem, Kavak," Creon told him. "Lynx here has challenged me to a fight over Aspen. I'm not exactly sure what to make of it." The leader of the Woodfolk became thoughtful.

"This is no small problem, my son," he said to Creon, "this is a breaking of the pledge of the Woodfolk. I hope you didn't accept."

"Sorry, sir," the young Man replied glumly, shifting his gaze to the ground. Kavak sighed.

"Then, according to our laws, you must fight." He paused and looked seriously at them. "You may not fight with any weapons, only with your hands and feet and only Lynx may kill."

"What?" Creon asked, surprised. "Why can't I kill *him*?"

"Because you, even though you aren't under the pledge, have been challenged. The challenger is the only one who may attack and therefore kill. You win if he yields to your prowess. Now ready yourselves." Even though it was cold, both young men threw off their cloaks, jackets, and tunics and removed their boots. Aspen grabbed Kavak's arm.

"This is idiotic!" she exclaimed. "Everybody knows I love Creon! Can't you stop them?"

"No, I can't, dear heart," he answered sadly. "You know our laws say that if such a matter is brought up and the challenge is accepted, there must be a fair fight. It is only decided if Lynx yields or Creon dies." He stepped forward and addressed the young men, "May Creator God show the better of the two. Fight."

Creon and Lynx circled each other for a few moments. The attack came so suddenly, it almost caught Creon off guard. He parried blow after blow from the Woodman, constantly looking for a chance to stop him. Then suddenly Lynx leaped on top of him, looped one arm around his neck, and jabbed his shoulder at the crucial spot with his other hand. The whole glen began to spin. *I must not give up*, Creon thought. *I must not. Help me, Creator!* he screamed silently. Then suddenly, almost without thinking, he swung his fist into Lynx's stomach. The young Woodman staggered back, his grip broken, his hatred spent. Creon wanted to stop, but pressed him hard, knowing the Woodman must yield before this was over, and Lynx could not parry the blows. Creon's foot caught him on the side of the head and the challenger fell to the ground.

"I yield," he cried, and Creon finally relaxed. Aspen came running up to Creon, put her arms around his neck and held him tight for a long moment. It was the first overt act of affection in months and it shot a warm feeling all through his body. He gently returned the hug.

"Why'd you do it?" she asked. "You could have been killed."

"I don't know, Aspen," he answered and pulled her back slightly so he could see her. "Maybe because the Creator wanted to teach Lynx a lesson." He thought for a moment and smiled to himself. "Maybe because I couldn't resist the challenge."

"But you prevailed well," Kavak said, warmly. Aspen let go and Creon went over to help Lynx up, but his enemy shrank back, glaring at the young Man.

"Leave me alone," the Woodman snapped.

"Oh, come now," Creon coaxed. "As a wise man once said," he continued, winking at Kavak, "you must learn to be humble and love as Creator God does. Please let me be your friend." He extended his right hand to his fallen foe, who looked at it with disdain.

"That's easy for you to say. After all, you got *her*!" The Man felt himself bristling and was about to retort angrily.

"That is beside the point, Lynx," Kavak said, stepping in. "He could have easily killed you. He's not under the pledge, but he honored *our* laws in only disarming you. You have broken your pledge and would have deserved it. Accept his forgiveness." There was a long hesitation, the battle between pride and shame showing clearly on the fallen one's face.

"Come on, Lynx, let's be friends," Creon intoned again.

"Oh, all right," the Woodman sighed and put his hand in the young man's. Creon pulled Lynx up and then hugged him. The young Woodman was surprised, the last bit of his anger fleeing at his adversary's readiness to forgive. Truly a man such as this deserved a woman such as Aspen!

"Why do you do this?" he asked.

"Because Creator God wants me to," Creon laughed. "And after all, girls aren't something to fight about, they're someone to fight with."

"I heard that," Aspen laughed, hitting him in the shoulder.

"And how about the training today?" the young Man asked.

"We're going through with it," the Woodmaid promised with a grin, "and you'll never find me."

Unfortunately Aspen wasn't quite right about that, since now the young Man doubled his efforts to find her. He passed through the woods almost like a shadow, picking up the signs of her passing with a practiced eye. Then the trail disappeared and he stood still, gazing around. The bushes were dense here, keeping anyone from scaling a tree without his seeing some disturbance. He checked the tracks again and this time noticed that there was one boot-print in the path, just marginally deeper than the others before, pointing towards one of the trees before the bushes. He looked up, but couldn't see anything. Not that he would have anyway, he chided himself, and decided on a ruse. He began searching around the bushes, before turning and going back down the path about six trees. Then he slunk into the underbrush, silently crawling beneath it until he'd made it to the tree. Now as he looked up he thought he could see a slight form bending down and peering through the leafless branches. How she had hidden herself up there was beyond him, but now he'd found her and he'd get her.

He leaped up with a loud cry and Aspen jumped, her hand slipping, so she bounced down a branch before she caught herself and glared at him.

"Don't you ever do that again!" she snapped, unable to hide a smile.

"Eh, if you're so good at hiding, how come I found you?" he asked her, smiling back impishly.

"Oh, be quiet, Creon. You won after all," she laughed in return and swung herself out of the tree with ease, landing right next to him.

"Am I forgiven?" he asked.

"You never asked to be," she returned haughtily, but here eyes betrayed what was already decided inside.

"Will you forgive me, Aspen?" he asked. "I shouldn't have said what I did back there. After all these aren't my plans." The answer was a warm hug from her and suddenly he thought he could smell pine. She stepped back after a moment.

"I also have to ask your forgiveness, Creon," she said, looking at the ground. "I should not have invited you to dance with me without telling you what it meant."

"That's okay," he told her. "I'm glad you did. I wouldn't have known my own heart." He smiled and took her hand. "After all, you saved my life. I am obligated to protect yours."

"We'll see about that one, Creon oul Adem," she said with a smile and led him back to the village.



## The Pirates

The final days of autumn passed quickly and before Creon knew it the ground was covered with frost. That brought an end to the early morning runs that had become such an important part of his daily program. Still the hours of practice continued. And when the practice was over, there were hours of work, when they did nothing but finish readying the village for the real brunt of the winter. Then one day Creon awoke to find thick, white flakes of snow drifting down among the trees. He quickly jumped up and dressed in the cold room. Then he slid down the ladder and out into the lovely cold air. He stood still and just let the soft, white crystals cover him. After a few moments the sound of laughter caught his ear. He followed it and suddenly came out into the clearing. Most of the younger Woodfolk were there, throwing snowballs. The mood was joyous and Creon found himself joining in. He just took aim at a red-head, when a snowball hit him in the side of the face. He turned and saw a young brown-haired Woodmaid laughing at him.

"I'm sorry," she laughed. "I didn't mean to hit you." Creon laughed and looked her over. From her physical figure he thought her to be about fifteen or sixteen, but from the way she acted, he decided she was younger.

"I'm Ashley," she said, "and you're Creon, right?" He nodded. "Nice to meet you!" she called and disappeared among the flying snowballs.

Creon quickly looked to reacquire his target, when someone struck him full force from behind, sending him sprawling in the snow. His adversary tried to get at his face with a handful of snow, but the young Man was quicker and rolled out of the way, pulling the other down. Only then he realized that it was Aspen, and exploded into laughter. The Woodmaid didn't give up, though and still tried to get him with her fistful of snow. He quickly grabbed her arm, and pushed his own snowball into her face. Only then did Aspen yield, collapsing into flurries of laughter. A few moments later he helped her up, and they brushed the wet snow off of their clothing.

"Tell me, Aspen, how old is that girl, Ashley?" he asked her.

"She should be about twelve or thirteen," she answered.

"What?!"

"We mature faster than Men do," she finished with a shrug, and launched another snowball at him. The fight resumed, and didn't break up until quite some time later in the day. Then they all gathered in the cave where Creon had spent his first few weeks, and had hot drinks and refreshments.

The day continued much the same and as dusk left her home early to bid her brother, the sun, farewell and usher in her older sister, night, Kavak and Creon were out in the woods on another tracking lesson.

"It's much easier to track in the winter than in the summer, especially when it hasn't snowed for a few days," the Woodman told Creon. "See here," he said, pointing at some tracks, "a snow-grouse went by here, and here a mouse." He continued to point out tracks, and then asked Creon to identify some of them. The young Man quickly did. As they continued on in the forest, Creon suddenly noticed some other tracks.

"Kavak," he called. The Woodman came over.

"Yes?"

"These certainly don't look either like animal or Woodfolk tracks," the young Man remarked. "They could be a Woodman, but they're much too heavy and I haven't seen any boots with heels yet – you know, it looks almost like a rider's boot." He shook his head. Kavak stared at the tracks, drew a sharp breath and clenched his teeth.

"You're right, son," he said seriously. "These are tracks of Men."

"Men? What are Men doing here?" Creon asked incredulously

"That I cannot tell you," Kavak answered, shaking his head. "Let's see if they are still on the island."

The two followed the tracks carefully, and a short ways farther on they heard rough voices. Both of them dropped to the ground. Creon peeked through some of the brushes to see about twenty tough-looking Men sitting around a large fire. Meat was spitted on sticks and hung over the flames, creating an enticing aroma. Their conversation was quite base though, touching only on women, wine, and robbery. With a shudder the young Man realized that these were outlaws of some sort. He motioned to Kavak that they should leave right away, but the Woodman told him to stay put.

A few minutes later Creon began feeling the cold, wet snow soaking into his clothes. *I can't stand this any longer,* he thought, and just as he was about to crawl away, one of the Men pointed toward the seashore.

"Here comes the capt'n," he yelled. Creon looked up and instantly recognized "the capt'n" as the man in charge of the ferry that they had taken across the bay.

"Evening, men," the capt'n growled. The ruffians roared their welcome.

"Capt'n," one of the Men complained, when the leader had seated himself, "what are we doing here anyway? There are ghosts and monsters on this island."

"Shaddap, Weirding," the capt'n snapped, grabbing one of the spits of meat from the fire. "I've got my orders."

"From whom?" Weirding demanded.

"From as high up as you can get," the capt'n growled back. "And my orders are to find that brat that fell over board this summer."

"Ain't he dead?" another man asked.

"Not according to the boss, he ain't," the man in the red cap answered after he'd eaten some of his meat. "He's supposed to be on this here island. And tomorrow we start combin' it for him." The Men nodded their assent.

"Hey, capt'n," another one of the Men called out, "tell us how the whole thing started." The rest of the Men also shouted for the capt'n to tell his story.

"All right," the capt'n agreed and began. "Last summer I got news from the boss that there was a boy and an old geezer, who would want to get passage across the bay, an' I'm told to stop 'em. Well, I get 'em both on the boat, you know, pretending like I was an honorable man." The Men laughed at this. "We made it just out around the south side of this here island, when I give the order to attack. And wouldn't you know it, but the old guy is a wizard. Throws fire around the boat. I grab the kid and hold him over the edge and the wizard puts out the fire. I drop the kid overboard. I was supposed to get rid of 'em, right?" The Men grunted their assent.

"Well, I thought, one down, I'll take the other, but the old guy does something to me, and the next thing I know we're in Midpoint and the old geezer is gone. Then I get news that the kid's still alive here, so I rounded all of you up to help me find him." The Men nodded and growled in response. Kavak decided he'd heard enough and motioned Creon and they crept away and quickly ran back to the village.

Kavak called the Council of Elders together as soon as they reached the village and explained the situation. The Council was silent for a long time, then Eike looked at Creon and then at Kavak. He held up his hand to be acknowledged and then struck the ground twice with his staff, as was his custom.

"We must fight and protect him," the old Woodman said calmly.

"But we are under the pledge, we may not kill," Kavak objected. Eike gave Kavak a long, queer look

"We are under the pledge, Kavak, you aren't." Creon sat up straight and looked to his mentor then back to the old Woodman. How could Kavak not be under the pledge that bound the Woodfolk? The leader of the Woodfolk sighed.

"You are right Eike," Kavak agreed slowly. "I am not under the same pledge that you are, and yes, we must protect *oul* Adem from any harm that might come to him. We will fight." The Woodmen nodded their agreement and the Council disbursed, each to his own home to ready the people of the village.

"What do you mean that you aren't under the pledge?" Creon asked Kavak as the other men left. The Woodman looked at Creon sadly.

"It means that I have the power to take a life".

"Why?"

"Why? Because I must protect my people," Kavak answered. "This medicine that I have here," he patted his pouch, "is not only for healing. It is also for defense against our enemies. If you watch, you will understand."

Most of the women and children then were taken to the cave, though a few of the younger unmarried women stayed with their fathers, brothers, and betrothed ones. Creon stood a short way off, leaning against the staff he had been given as a weapon. He felt strangely detached from the whole thing that was happening, even though it was because of him. He had never realized how important the pledge was to the Woodfolk, and the fact that he could not take the pledge was gnawing at his inner self. He realized that, unlike the Woodfolk, he would be able to take the life of one of these Men, evil though they were. And that thought scared him – it scared him more than he wanted to admit.

As he stood and pondered this a gentle hand rested on his shoulder. He turned and saw Aspen looking at him, green eyes melancholy, her soft lips turned down at the edges.

"Aren't you going to wait in the cave?" he asked her. She shook her rusty head.

"I want to stay with you."

"But what if something happens to you?" he protested. "You could get hurt."

"It would hurt me more if I knew that I could help you and the others and I didn't. Then as a result of that you would get hurt." She shook her head again. "I will stand by you Creon and help you with this heavy load you have to bear."

"Aspen, you don't have to do this," he pressed, still trying to persuade her to stay. "Please stay."

"No, Creon, I won't," she stated resolutely. "I love you and that's why I will come and help you." Creon finally realized that there was no way that he was going to change the Woodmaid's mind and so he took her by the hand.

"Then let's go," he sighed.

The guards were posted around the village for a full day and night before any the pirates came close enough to be a threat. Early in the morning Lynx ran into the village, where the Woodmen and Woodmaids were gathered.

"They're almost here," he reported breathlessly. Kavak rose, shoulders stooped, then straightened. To Creon it looked as if the leader of the Woodfolk had a very heavy burden to bear. *And I'm the one who should be bearing it*, he thought to himself. The warmth spread about his chest and he suddenly realized that this burning was his deep love for this man.

"Then let's go," Kavak said, and the whole company went to the southern edge of the village.

"Remember," the leader advised, as they took their positions, "keep yourself between the Men and the cave, even if it costs your life, and whatever you do, remember your pledge!" Then he turned to Creon and his voice was grave, brittle. "Only you and I can kill another man, Creon, but do not do so unless you absolutely have to."

Only moments later the capt'n stepped from the brush to survey the village. His bearded face did not revealing any sign of surprise or fear at the large group of Woodmen who stood calmly in front of him, holding wooden staves as their only weapons. One or two of the younger ones spun their staves around in anticipation. Creon thought he could see the other Man's eyes light up when he spied Aspen and the other girls in the group. Then Kavak stepped forward.

"You and your Men are not welcome here."

"We ain't welcome anywhere," the capt'n grunted. "We come and we go as we please, and you ain't gonna stop us." He motioned his Men to come forward out of the bush. In the light of day they all seemed much wilder and more unkempt than they had two nights before. All of them carried long knives, and some even had swords in their hands. Creon tried to suppress a shudder. Both thrill and terror passed over him, but he mastered them as he often had to when dealing with his father or with Irfan.

"If you come any closer you will lose your life," Kavak warned. "Go in peace and no harm will come to you."

"A Woodman threatens us with *death*!?" the capt'n roared in laughter. "Everyone knows a Woodman can't kill. Go and get him, boys." The pirates ran forward with loud yells, the anticipation of the slaughter written on their faces. Kavak did not move. He put his hand into the pouch at his side and drew out a handful of the silver powder.

"Forgive me, o Holy One," he prayed, and flung the powder at the first of the Men. The pirate suddenly halted and fell forward, face to the ground, unmoving. The second and third only got a mere whiff of the powder that had felled their companion and also fell to the ground, dead. Several of the Men faltered, then spun on their heels, and ran from the place. The capt'n yelled after them, cursing and threatening, but fear stopped their ears. The chief pirate then gave a loud yell and the Men charged forward. They reached the line of Woodmen and the two forces crashed into each other. Creon found he had his hands full, trying to defend himself from one of the attackers. He quickly jabbed the other man's shoulder and he fell to the ground, unconscious. He paused, looking for Aspen. He spotted one of the Men dragging her off toward the woods and sprinted after him. He just barely caught up with the pirate, who turned to face him. Creon didn't even pause to think, but just slammed his fist into the man's face. The pirate lost his grip on the Woodmaid, and tried to defend himself from Creon's attack. Creon quickly got the better of him with the Art of Defense and turned to Aspen.

"Are you all right?" he asked. She didn't answer, just spun around, and kicked another pirate who had come up from behind in the throat. Then she collapsed into Creon's arms. He repeated his question and she nodded, a sickly smile on her lips.

"I've got you now, boy," came a voice from behind him. Creon looked over his shoulder and saw the capt'n looming over him. He tried to push Aspen up and away from him and face his adversary, but her knees were still weak and so he held on to her for dear life. The capt'n's knife came down in a blinding arc, right towards the young Man's spine, but someone leaped into the way. Creon felt himself falling, as a tremendous weight crashed into him, somehow pushing Aspen away, so he wouldn't fall on her. He rolled out from under the body that was on top of him, and gasped. Eike lay there with the knife stuck in his chest.

"Eike," Creon cried.

"Go ahead and get him, my boy," the old Woodman groaned. "Go ahead or you will loose what you treasure the most." With that he lay his head down and died. Creon didn't understand, when suddenly he heard a scream. He turned around and saw the capt'n dragging Aspen away. He quickly leaped up and sprinted after the Man, but the capt'n was smart. He quickly moved on ahead of the young Man and reached the cliff where Creon had found Aspen after his disagreement. Here he stopped and turned to face the angry son of Adem.

"One more step and she dies," he threatened. Creon slid to a halt, his mind racing.

"She's not the one you want," he began, "I am. Let her go."

"I don't think so," the Man snapped. "I have plans for her when I'm finished with you, that is if she's still alive then." He grinned maliciously. *Creator God, if ever I needed your help, it's now*, Creon prayed silently.

"What do you care for a Woodmaid, anyway?" Creon asked suddenly. "She wouldn't give you pleasure."

"We'll see about that." The pirate grinned. "I'm gonna take you out now, boy, and ain't no one gonna stop me."

"My God will," the young Man shot back.

"Gods! There are no gods, except for the Warrior King!" The pirate yanked back Aspen's head and poised his knife at her throat. "I think I'll make a sacrifice to him right now, to assure my success and your death." His ghastly grin ignited the dark throbbing in Creon's chest again. *I'm bringing her bad luck!* he thought to himself.

"Creator God, help me," he whispered, "just this once, help me!" And then the words began to flow.

"Your sacrifice is ineffectual," he thundered at the pirate. "Did your sacrifice keep you from being bewitched by the wizard?"

"What does *that* have to do with anything?" the pirate growled.

"Well, for one thing, it shows the weakness of your god. If he'd been strong you would have killed the wizard."

"He was stronger!" the pirate spat. "What are we doing here? Discussing gods! What does this have to do with the crimson blood of a Woodmaid. She's mine now and I will do her right here, right now in front of you!"

"No!" the girl screamed and in that moment she reacted with a speed Creon hadn't imagined possible. She slipped sideways enough to set a powerful blow to the pirate's groin with one hand. He gasped and loosened his grip on her hair enough so that she was able to fall forward and escape. In the same motion Creon leaped at the capt'n. His shoulder contacted the man, who reeled backward. They crashed into the ground. The man now hanging over the cliff. His knife spun out of his grip. The young man lay astride the pirate's legs, but the rest of him hung over the cliff.

"No!" the evil Man screamed. "Don't let go!" And in that moment the edge of the cliff began to give way, the ground dropped out from under Creon's chest and he watched his enemy fall down and crash into the sharp rocks. And then he was falling, too, but someone grabbed the back of his tunic and steadied him enough so that he could scrabble backward onto more solid ground. He rolled over to see an ashen Aspen kneeling behind him, looking at him. He could see the beginnings of tears on her cheeks.

"Oh, Creon," she whispered and then she began to cry. He pulled her to himself and rocked her back and forth.

"It's all right," he crooned. "It's all over now. It's all right."

The burial of Eike and the two other Woodmen who fell during the battle was held early in the evening. The three biers were borne by the strongest among the Woodmen to a place in the woods. Creon helped with Eike's bier. There were several simple mounds of earth here and there and three new holes in the ground. The biers were set down, one in front of each hole, then Savannah stepped into the center of the group. Her eyes were puffy and reddened and she was still trying to compose herself as she began her song. The melody came, thin and wavering at first, but then stronger. Aspen leaned close to him and whispered that this was the traditional song for the dead. He could only understand parts of it, and, even though the tune was melancholy, Creon thought he could detect a small spark of hope in it. As Savannah continued the spark became a flame, and the flame a blazing fire. When she finished the Woodfolk turned quietly and left the small clearing. Creon walked slowly, hand-in-hand with Aspen.

"What did she sing about?" he asked her. Aspen thought for quite some time before answering.

"Hm, she started with telling how sad death is and the pain it causes those who are still alive after the loved one is gone." Aspen paused. "Then she sang about the beauty of life and how death is a part of it, and finally about the life after death, when we go to be with the Creator in the place he has prepared for us." Creon pondered this as they walked, glancing at the Woodfolk around him. Suddenly he stopped, noticing one man in particular, beaten and bowed down, leaning heavily on a staff, with a tired, weary face, smeared with blood and grime. A circlet of thorns was pressed onto the brow, and his eyes were filled with sadness, pain – and love. Twin tracks of tears made their marks in the dust on his face. The young Man tried to reach out to the man, but just as suddenly he wasn't there any more. Creon blinked. Where had he gone?

"Creon!" Aspen's voice jerked him back to reality. He turned and looked at her. She was frowning, worried.

"Are you all right?" she asked seriously.

"Where did he go?"

"Who?"

"That Man, the beaten Man?" She looked at him and he suddenly thought she was thinking he'd gone mad.

"Forget it," he muttered. "I must be over-tired." And they wandered back to the village together.



## Winter's End

The Winter went by slowly, too slowly for Creon. Much of the time was spent in the cave, listening to stories, or, on nice days, practicing the art of tracking. Sure, there was plenty of time to spend with Aspen, but not alone. They were always around people. As the days grew short and then longer Creon's claustrophobia began to return. He would wake up screaming in the night, fearing that the walls were going to crush him. His roommates were usually able to quiet him. The times when it came on most, were when he was in the cave. Often he would have to leave abruptly and stand out in the freezing wind and snow until he could breath easier again. He consulted Aspen about a cure.

"This isn't something that the Woodfolk can cure, because it's not a physical sickness," she explained sadly. It was then that he noticed how pale she had become, with shadows under her eyes and a seeming listlessness. He wondered if she was suffering with him as he fought against his condition. Spring approached, the days became milder and the claustrophobia lessened, because he could spend more time outside.

In the long evenings the Woodfolk told stories from their endless repertoire of lore. The stories ranged from fables to epic tales (these usually took several evenings to tell) to history lessons. The storytellers all had a specific talent of being able to make what would be the most boring narrative into a gripping tale. When the long epics were recited the listeners would usually join in at times with short liturgies or choruses. Creon soon learned these and by the time the weather grew warmer he could also sing or recite along with the others. Aspen also continued to teach him the language of the Woodfolk. Over the summer he'd learned it well enough to make himself understood, but it wasn't until the winter that he finally made the break-through to really speak it. The Woodmaid helped him iron out things, as well as learn the script of the Woodfolk. There weren't many writings, but the few that they had to practice from were enough to get him more familiar with the ideographs and the structure of the language.

And so Master Winter yielded his place to Lady Spring in the unending dance of the days. Her gentle song and life-giving breath called the beasts forth from their dens. She clothed the trees first in lovely blossoms and then in a soft green and sprinkled flowers across the brown hills. And when her magic reached its height, casting each tree into its most festive garment, the young people of the Woodfolk performed a special dance, greeting springtime and the new year. In a way each mimed the name given them by their parents. Creon identified birds and beasts, trees swaying and blooming and thought to himself how good it was that he didn't have to join in. After all, his color was brown – earth – and so he'd have to lay down on the ground and let everybody dance over him. He suppressed smile at that thought. The dance sped up and the melody sung and clapped out by the elders became more intricate.

*To the Maker of all  
Our voices we raise  
We bow down before him  
And give Him all praise.  
It is he who grows  
The tree and the flower  
He gives us  
The springtime shower  
  
Awake, o earth.  
And join in the praise  
Sing to our God  
Your voices raise.  
Oh, birds and beasts  
Great and small.  
Woodfolk and Men  
Let us praise him all.*

The dance ended abruptly, as if someone had just commanded the dancers to stop. Then from among the dancers one voice rose in praise.

"Praise the Creator, for he makes all things new," the voice said.

"Give him praise!" the other dancers retorted. Then a second voice came into the silence.

"Praise the Creator, for he is the giver of life," it said. The others answered, and one dancer after the other sang a chorus of praise, which was echoed by the others. Then the whole community joined in a song of worship. Creon had learned it over the winter and joined in with his whole heart and voice, a melody like a sunrise, like a newly blossoming tree. And with that the time of communal worship ended.

Creon stayed where he was, waiting for Aspen to return from the circle of dancers. When she came, he noticed her face was flushed, joyful, and her gait was bouncy. The shadows beneath her eyes had smoothed out and her cheeks were now a healthy pink. Even her hair seemed to glow in the soft sunlight.

"I want to show you something, Creon," she said, taking his hand. She led him away from the others and into the forest. After a short walk she stopped and whistled quietly. From among the newly-grown ferns a small furry face poked out.

"Come on," she coaxed the animal in her language. It came to her, a round creature with gray and brown fur, a ring tail, and a black mask around the eyes. The Woodmaid stroked the soft fur and spoke quietly to the animal, it chittered back, and then disappeared into the underbrush again.

"What was that?" Creon asked.

"A raccoon," Aspen answered. "They don't live in the Flatlands, I don't think."

"And you can speak to it?" he queried incredulously.

"Sure. All Woodfolk can understand the speech of the animals. You might, too, some day."

"And the albatross Lynx spoke about?"

"Was an albatross, you know, the sea bird." Creon shook his head. He'd dreamed of speaking to animals when he was a child, but had written that off as reality had set in. Now reality was his dream? That was something he couldn't quite grasp.

Meanwhile the raccoon reappeared with something between its teeth. Aspen reached down and took a small plant from the animal, stroked its head and back and the furry little thing trundled off into the underbrush. She then turned and showed the plant to Creon.

"Do you know what this is?" she asked. His brow furrowed.

"Snowweed?" he finally said. "It's poisonous, right?"

"Yes and no," Aspen returned. "It is snowweed, and it's not poisonous to any human. Only to small animals. It heals the Dark Plague within fourteen days and is also very good as a salve when mixed with several other herbs."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because this is the next part of your training. You must learn what plants can heal, so you can help others with this knowledge." And so for the next weeks he spent much of his time in the woods, on his hands and knees, looking for small plants, some in bloom, some not. Aspen usually accompanied him on these forays, aided by the raccoon. Other times Savannah went along with him. He usually found it very painful to stand up straight after hours of bending over. Through this time he learned to identify a plethora of small plants he had once thought unimportant. There were some that he had been told were poisonous, that he learned were very good in salves or when brewed into tea, others that had been said to be harmless had to be measured just right, or they would be lethal to the patient.

Aside from this, the practices with Kavak recommenced and after a long day of hard work Creon usually found himself soaking in the cool water of the pool. Day followed day, and Lady Spring began to flirt with her Lord Summer until he enfolded her and took his throne once more. The sun smiled down on the Woodfolk laborers and students and the moon cast her serene glow over the tale-smiths and song masters.

Aspen had counted two weeks more than a year since she had found Creon, when he first began to dream. It was often a dream where someone was calling him, sometimes it was Hrosca and other times it was his

mother. He mentioned them to Aspen and Kavak, but neither of the Woodfolk knew how to explain them. Then one night during a late time of praise, Creon was given a very lucid dream.



## The Dream

**C**reon sat silently, listening to the melancholy tune of one of the Woodmaids as she sang of her longing to see her God. Her words lulled him and after a moment he noticed the voice had vanished. He leaped up and looked around, realizing he was no longer in the circle of worshippers. He was atop a high cliff and spread out beneath him was a broad wasteland, then farther on he could see great desert, beyond which was a high plateau with forests, clearings hills and more. Beyond that he could clearly see the island he'd been on. Farther north-west he recognized Chifchi. Beyond that everything was unclear.

*Where am I?* he wondered and glanced around, suddenly giving a shout of surprise. Beside him stood a Man, his body beaten and blood on his torn beige clothing. A circlet of thorns was on his head, making little rivulets of blood run down his weather-beaten, bearded face. His eyes were full of sorrow, fire, and love.

"It is time, Creon," he said in a tired, dry voice.

"Creon!" came another voice, echoing the Man's final words. "Creon!" And suddenly he realized that he was lying on his back. Aspen was bending over him.

"Creon, are you all right?" she asked, her face mirroring her worry.

"I – yeah, I guess," he muttered and tried to sit up, but the girl pushed him back.

"Maybe he had a seizure," he heard someone suggest and recognized the voice of Crocus, Savannah's cousin, one of the foremost healers in the village.

"Hey, I'm fine," the young Man protested. "I just had a dream, that's all!"

"A dream?" Kavak asked, now intrigued. "Tell us about it."

"Let me sit up first, and I'll tell you, okay?"

Crocus protested at first, but the young Man prevailed and he sat up. Kavak motioned to one of the other young Woodmen who gathered a few of the Elders around and Creon then began to tell his dream.

"I've seen him quite often," he said of the Man. "The first time was when I was knocked out on the beach, then again and again while I was sick. I have also seen it while I was awake, like a vision, you know?" He turned to Aspen. "Remember right after Eike's funeral?" The Woodmaid nodded. "I saw him then, too."

"I believe this is a dream of great meaning, my son," Kavak said at length. "We must discuss it before there can be an explanation." Creon nodded.

The Elders withdrew to Kavak's house and the rest of the people went home. Crocus insisted upon examining Creon one more time, and he submitted to her skillful hands.

"You're just fine," she told him after she looked him over.

"It was just the Light of God coming upon him," Aspen protested. "We've heard of people passing out like that when it did."

"True," the healer replied, "but it was so sudden, I wanted to be sure that he hadn't hurt himself." The two young people then were allowed to depart and they walked back to the village, hand-in-hand.

"You really gave us a fright there," the Woodmaid said after a few moments.

"Hm," he replied, lost in his thoughts.

"Do you think you'll have more?" she asked a bit later.

"More what?"

"More visions." He shuddered at that thought.

"I hope not! I can't even explain them myself." By that time they passed beneath Kavak's house, from which men's voices were filtering down in deep discussion.

"We should at least go home and sleep some," Aspen suggested.

"Or pray," he amended.

"True." And they bade each other good night.

The following morning, the Elders met at daybreak, after only a few hours of sleep, prayer and pondering. They continued their discussion well into the morning, and Creon slowly began to feel that they were wasting time.

"How much longer?" he demanded of Aspen, where they were working at carefully weeding one of Crocus's herb patches.

"Have patience, Creon," she encouraged him with a smile. "The Creator will make all things known in his own good time."

They took their midday meal at the pool. Creon was just taking his first bite of a wheat cake, when Kavak appeared out of the forest, his face softened by concern and sadness. Creon jumped up as he approached.

"Is someone hurt?" he asked Kavak.

"No," Kavak sighed, "I've come to tell you the meaning of your dream."

"It's bad?"

"Well, it's sad." He reached out and gently put a hand on the young Man's shoulder. "Creon, you must leave us."

"What?" Creon's belly twisted and he bit his lip.

"Yes," the leader of the Woodfolk replied. "The time allotted for your training has ended. That is what the Man's words mean."

"And the rest?"

"We don't know, Creon. The only thing the Creator opened to us was what I told you." The young Man's grimaced. Somehow he had forgotten the reason for being here, and almost forgotten why he had left Chifchi. He looked over to Aspen.

"When?" he questioned.

"When you are ready, perhaps one or two weeks." Creon took a deep, shaky breath. So soon? he thought.

"Thank you, Kavak," he finally said. The Woodman placed both hands on Creon's shoulders, looked into his eyes with a small smile, then nodded and left. The young Man sat back down next to Aspen.

"So? What do you say?" he asked her. She turned her deep green eyes toward him, and they were shiny, though he could not tell with what emotion.

"I want to go with you."

# Four: Into the Forest

## Farewell

“W

hat?” Creon demanded, unsure if he’d heard correctly.

“I want to go with you, Creon,” Aspen repeated more firmly. His mind began reeling. *She wants to come with me!* he thought and the thrill shot up his spine, but at the same moment, he knew it was impossible

“But – but you can’t,” he protested.

“I can’t? Why?”

“Well, it’s dangerous out there, you could get hurt, and....” Words failed him. Somewhere deep inside he knew he’d hoped that Aspen would agree to go along, but now that she offered to do so he found he could not accept it.

*Why cut a tree off from its only source of water?* his father’s voice came back to him. He could see himself standing beside an indignant Adem, who was yelling at Rikel.

“I told you, this tree is staying here,” Adem shouted.

“It is useless here, you know that as well as I,” Rikel countered, round face red.

“If this were your tree would you cut it off from its only source of water?” Adem demanded vehemently. “Of course not. But this isn’t your land, or your tree, or your well, so get out!” Though he’d been only eight at the time, Creon could remember the reason for the debate to that very day. The tree was a rare kalbedan tree, one that bloomed beautifully in the spring and gave large blue fruits in the late fall. It was very hard to grow and had been a wedding gift to Mikela from her father, planted there by the old man himself. Now Belik wanted to add the tree, the only kalbedan in that part of the Flatlands, to his large botanical garden. That meant that Adem would not only lose an important source of income (the fruit could be sold at high prices), but the tree might die in the transportation. And if Mikela found out all hell would break loose.

To make a long story short, the tree stayed where it was and Belik had one mother of a fit. Some said that the tree incident was what had finally gotten the old man to try to squash Adem completely.

To Creon, it was as if Aspen was the tree that was supposed to be moved. *How can I ask her to leave her family and the place she grew up in?* Creon asked himself. No way. And didn’t he also have the obligation to protect her, since she’d saved his life?

“Aspen,” he said resolutely, “I won’t let you.”

“But Creon...” she began. The young Man shook his head.

“You can’t. I couldn’t bear it if anything happened to you.”

“That’s not a good reason, Creon,” the girl returned. The son of Adem slowly began to turn red, the darkness now pulsating inside.

“Don’t you understand I want to protect you?” he demanded. “It’s for your own good.”

“Aha,” she came back, “and you don’t think I can’t decide for myself what’s good for me? You think that I am something like a little child who can’t take care of herself and needs someone big and strong to lean on!”

“I never said that!”

“You didn’t, but that’s what you meant.”

“Aspen....”

"Oh, just be quiet and leave me alone." She was silent for a moment, tears of anger and frustration beginning to trickle down her cheeks. Then she reached out and grabbed his arm, looking into his face, lower lip thrust out slightly.

"Creon, don't you see I love you?" she pleaded. "I can take care of myself. I can even help you...." Creon put his finger to her lips and then took her into his arms.

"Sh," he said, trying to soothe her. "Aspen, I love you, too, and that's why I want you to stay. Many of the things your stories about the outer world say are true. I've been there." As he began to think of them he already began to miss the peace and contentment of the Woodfolk's island. "We eat meat out there, animals are hunted and killed just for fun. Men butcher each other and fight over petty things, such as gold, silver, and jewelry. There are many Men who would want to have a pretty girl like you and I don't want you to have to run any risks of getting hurt out there." Aspen had never thought of that and as he mentioned these things her revulsion and her fear of leaving became stronger. And besides that she wanted to please her Creon.

"All right," she whispered through her tears. "I'll stay."

The next week went by very quickly for Creon. Savannah helped him collect a few things together in a tight bundle to carry on his back and he spent the days working as usual, though some time was spent discussing the routes he would take with Kavak or another Elder. For some reason he and Aspen stayed out of each other's way and he wondered if it was her way to cope with the problem of his leaving. Two days before the set departure Kavak took Creon aside.

"Creon," he began in the tone of voice that made it clear that he was being very serious, "I want you to know something." He paused and Creon nodded for him to continue.

"I – have been thinking quite a bit about you and Aspen," the Woodman went on. "I was wondering if you had ever considered marriage?"

"What!?" Creon drew back, stunned.

"What I mean to say isn't that the two of you have been," Kavak made a sweeping gesture with both hands, "destined for each other, but I have been thinking of the way it has been for ages among our peoples. Since you two are obviously very much in love with each other, I thought I might ask." The young Man wanted to draw back into himself, to hide from the thought that summed up what he'd desired, but he'd never dared voice. Now, here was his closest friend besides Aspen suggesting what he would never have even mentioned. After a few more moments of back-and forth, he decided to be honest.

"I can't say that I didn't give it some thought," he said, "but what with all the traveling I have to do, it wouldn't be wise right now, I don't think." Here he paused and looked uncertainly at his mentor. Kavak nodded, satisfied.

"I thought so. Aspen was just as surprised when I asked her. But perhaps you should speak to her about it before you go. It couldn't hurt." With that he left Creon a bit perplexed and uncomfortable. *Kavak is right*, he thought to himself. *I should ask Aspen about it and really say good-bye.*

After some searching he found her sitting by the spring, collected, calm, skillfully weaving together rushes to form a basket. He stopped and took a long look at her before entering the clearing. She was sitting down, facing him, but her face was averted. Her long red-gold hair hung loose, most down her back, the rest over one shoulder. He could see the fine curve of her chin, her well-formed nose and lips, the high forehead and a single pointed ear. He remembered more than saw the thin, high arched eyebrows and the green eyes. She was dressed in a long green dress with a white sash and a white, gauzy shawl around her shoulders. He thought back to all the fun times they had together, now wondering if maybe he should ask her to go along. *No, it's better the way it is*, he thought and stepped into the clearing. Aspen immediately looked up. This time no smile came to her lips. The forest-green eyes looked at him dolefully, almost demanding why.

"Hi," he said shyly. The girl didn't answer, just looked back down and continued what she was doing.

"Aspen," he tried again, suddenly feeling very small.

"What do you want?" The reply was curt, given without looking up. Her stand-offishness suddenly worried him. Had she changed towards him?

"I want to talk with you," he pushed out timidly. She looked up at him.

"So start talking," she demanded. Creon had never seen her like this before, not even after the little tiff they had so long ago.

"What's happened to you?" he asked, wiping his moist hands against his pants.

"What do you mean by that?" Creon found himself desperately searching for words.

"After all the time we spent together," he began lamely, "I thought I'd get a different reception." Aspen gave a short hard laugh, giving him the impression that she was making fun of him, and the red mist began rising between his eyes.

"Listen," he snapped, "the real reason I came was to say I'm sorry." The words were delivered in a harsh manner, but they suddenly changed Aspen's whole attitude toward him.

"What?" The question was hopeful.

"I'm sorry," Creon answered, a bit more softly and suddenly she was in his arms.

"Does that mean I can come?" The green eyes sparkled with anticipation.

"No," Creon said slowly, watching her face fall into a frown. "But I don't want to leave here when we're still mad at each other." He paused. "I will promise you something, Aspen. I will come back for you, no matter what happens." She looked at him critically.

"Can you keep that?"

"With the help of the Creator." She smiled and he kissed her.

"So is this good-bye?" she asked.

"No, that was my pledge, dear. A pledge that will last a lifetime." With that they left the spring hand in hand.

The final farewell was tearful on all sides. Creon was dressed in the Woodfolk garb, his hair trimmed short and beard shaved. He looked around at the faces he had learned to love. First there was Kavak, his new father, the staunch Woodman with brown hair and aquamarine eyes. He still wore the circlet of vine on his head and still had his pouch at his side. Beside him stood Savannah, black eyes and blonde hair. Across the circle the cunning face and sandy hair of Lynx, and at Creon's side Aspen. Kavak raised his hand in a blessing.

"May the Creator God protect you, my son," he said in a rich, deep voice. "And remember you are now also a Woodman, you may seek refuge with any of the Woodfolk anywhere in the Seven Nations."

"Thank you, for everything." Creon grasped his hand and then hugged him warmly. Savannah embraced him, then he slowly went around the circle. When he came to Lynx, the young Woodman held his hand out uncertainly. Creon grabbed it and pulled his friend into a bear hug.

"Take care of Aspen for me," he requested, after Lynx had stepped away.

"I will," the Woodman assured him. Then he turned to Aspen.

"I will miss you," she said shyly, tears in her forest green eyes, then hugged and kissed him. A joyous "Oh!" went up from the crowd as she did. Creon could sense the thrill that went through both of them at that moment and he knew that his heart would remain here, captured by this Woodmaid. He finished his goodbyes and after a prayer and a song climbed into one of the small boats and he and the two Woodmen who steered it set out for Midpoint.



## Reunion

**T**he old Man sat at the edge of the dock, his hands meticulously running over the shaft of his arrow. He paid no attention to his surroundings, the great ships, the small fishing boats, the rafts that were used as ferries. He sat here days, doing nothing but making arrows, and helping people – a strange thing for a Man to do in such times. The children loved to gawk at him; his hair was almost totally white, his robe coarse, of brown wool. His sandals were strange, with the laces criss-crossing up his calves. Around his waist he had a thick belt

of leather and around his neck a leather thong with a blue stone on it. He was a wild man, it was said. Even though he had been here for three months he just calmly sat and kept to himself, ignoring the civilization of the Warrior King's rule around him, but the children loved him. Often he would tell wondrous stories while he was working with his arrows, and sometimes he would give an arrow to one of the children.

He continued to weigh the arrow in his hand, making sure it was balanced just right, honed to the maximum point. Calmly he put it aside and picked up another one, starting to shave off long, thin strands of wood with a razor-sharp knife.

"Well, old man." The voice made him jump and his knife bounced against the shaft making a nick in it. He looked up, glaring, a word of reproach on his tongue, but it died when he saw the tall young Man before him dressed in the garb of the Woodfolk, with a tunic of beige, pants of deep brown and a jacket of old rust. His feet were sheathed in finely worked boots of leather and around his waist was a thick belt, from which a knife hung. On his back there was a skillfully made pack. His smile was warm and his eyes were a keen, steely gray, gazing out from under a single eyebrow and a thatch of short, dark hair. The old Man immediately recognized the one in front of him.

"Creon son of Adem!" he exclaimed, rising, his wrinkled face breaking into a smile.

"How are you, Hrosca?" the son of Adem laughed, shaking the old Man's hand heartily.

"I've been waiting for you, my friend," Hrosca told him, beaming, "and it was about time you returned." He looked up at the young Man. "You've grown, Creon," he remarked.

"In more ways than one," Creon affirmed wistfully. The old man laughed and clapped the young man on the back, then bent to gather up his things.

"Come," he finally prompted, "there is much to be said, and this isn't the place to do it." With that they turned and walked through the crowd. The children stared after the strange pair. An arrow maker and a Man dressed in strange clothing. Would there be something to talk about at home this evening!

The inn was almost empty and Creon and Hrosca sat across from each other. In front of each was a small pot of wine. Creon enjoyed the taste, but drank sparingly. Food was brought and set in front of them. It consisted mainly of thick slices of dark bread, smoked fish and meat, sausages and onions. Aside from this the young Man recognized the dish with squid and instantly remembered the heat and darkness of the Plague. He shuddered and pushed it away, but heartily tucked into the rest of the meal. After a year of eating little meat, he tasted it only sparingly, at the same time realizing how much he had missed it. After they had eaten they moved over to two more comfortable chairs in the warm sun.

"So," Hrosca said, "tell me about your year." Creon frowned.

"Don't worry, friend," Hrosca laughed, "I know there is much to tell, but this time it's your turn to begin." Creon smiled to himself.

"It's not that, old Man," he replied amiably. "I've already decided to tell you everything. It's just that I'm not sure about where to begin."

"How about with when you fell off the boat?" the priest suggested.

"All right," Creon affirmed and began his tale. He held nothing back, the heat and pain of the Dark Plague, the goddess who found him and then turned into his healer and later his beloved.

"Well, I should have known that there was a young woman the instant I saw you," Hrosca remarked good-naturedly. "That has made quite some changes in you."

"Actually it wasn't really only Aspen," Creon admitted. "It was the Creator himself." With that he told of the evening when he had poured out his heart, first to Aspen, then to Creator God.

"That was only the beginning," he said thoughtfully. "It was Kavak who really taught me about forgiving my father." The old man raised his eyebrows.

"Kavak?" he asked, tone colored by his surprise. "Kavak *oul Dere?*"

"Well, I never heard of his father's name, but I figured there was only *one* Kavak in the village."

"Well, the Kavak I knew," the priest returned, "was a proud, foolish young man who hated Men to the point that he would not even talk to me."

"He changed," Creon pointed out. "He told me about how the Creator almost took away his youngest daughter, before he learned to forgive. It was not easy for him."

"I should think not." Hrosca gazed at Creon shrewdly and ran his finger around the top of his wine bowl. "I do not think it was so easy for you, either."

"No," the young Man admitted, "but I have forgiven him and that is that."

"That is good." The old man smiled broadly. "Tell me more." And Creon continued, told of the fight with Lynx, and the attack of the pirates. Hrosca nodded somberly as the young man mentioned them.

"I should have warned them when I sent the albatross," he sighed, rubbing a hand over his beard. "I just didn't realize that it would take that long for the Warrior King to find you."

"He knows?" Creon asked, leaning forward. The thought struck him like a fist to the chest. What would the Warrior King want with *him*?

"Of course he knows!" Hrosca returned, holding out both hands. "Why else do you think he would have sent those Men." The old man leaned forward and lowered his voice. "The Warrior King knows as well as you and I do that you are on the way to the Blue Mountains. He has spies everywhere, even in Chifchi. Someone in the village talked about you and so he knows where and why you are going and he will do everything to stop you. You must not let that happen." He leaned back again. "Please go on with your story."

"But who's the spy?" the young man demanded. "Will he harm my family?"

"I do not know and, no, I do not think he or she will harm your family. They are safe because you are here." Creon blew out a breath, relaxed and continued, telling of the last days with the Woodfolk. When he finally finished it was getting dark. Hrosca nodded to himself.

"I have much to tell you, as well, Creon, but it must wait. We must get our rest, because our ship is leaving for Deniz at the entrance to the Pwyllwood as soon as the tide comes in. I have already obtained passes for you and me, but," he chuckled, "I think they will be a bit surprised by you. The description doesn't quite match." That brought a chuckle from both of them and then they retired for the night.

The ship left shortly after midnight and a two days later they found themselves in the seaport of Deniz. They only stayed long enough for Hrosca to buy some bread and salted meat, and then moved on into the Pwyll. They presented their passes to a sullen soldier clad in a dirty black and leather uniform. He glanced at Hrosca's pass without any problems, but took two long looks at Creon before grouchily motioning them to move on. The forest began a bit more than a mile from the city and the two travelers entered it quickly. The rest of the day they walked eastward, sometimes bearing a little north. By evening they had reached a small farm where the suspicious farmer granted them two nights' rest only in return for a day of work in his stony fields.

"Look at this!" Creon exclaimed as he looked at the fallow ground the farmer showed them to. "This land hasn't been cared for correctly." He bent and picked up a handful of the earth, letting it run through his fingers. It was rich soil, all right, almost as rich as his father's lands, but it hadn't been tilled or cleared. The young man shook his head.

"This will not be finished in one day," he said to his companion. "It is already late in the season and I think we may just be able to get some wheat out of this, but nothing else."

"Perhaps we can ready it for further use?" the old man asked.

"That is always a possibility, but land like this," he shook his head, "land like this would yield for ten years before it would need to lay fallow." He threw his hands up and then stripped off his tunic. "Let's get to work, then."

And so they labored for the rest of the day. Creon immediately took charge and roped the farmer's children into the work, making a game of collecting the stones in the ground. He ran the oxen and the plow over the ground, turning the fertile, dark soil to the sun. He felt the rays on his back, the sweat on his brow and smelled the richness of the land around him and for the first time thanked his father in his heart for training him in the ways of the earth.

By evening they had completed two thirds of the field under the young man's apt direction, and the farmer looked on, clearly impressed at the way the land had changed.

"One more day," the young Man promised him as he wiped the sweat off his brow and upper body with his tunic. "Tomorrow we can sow wheat and I can promise you a harvest like you haven't seen in years."

"You are truly a man of the land," the farmer returned, "and I will not reject such wise help. As a matter of fact room and board do not even cover what you've done for me today! I will pay you..."

"Please, no!" Creon interjected, holding out his hand. "We are doing this because of our love for our God and because we can serve you. What you have given us is sufficient." The farmer did not want to be deterred, though, and Hrosca watched with some amusement as Creon finally agreed to take seven silver coins for his labors.

That evening Hrosca, after dinner, gathered the farmer's younger children around himself and told them stories, while the farmer, his wife, and their older son and daughter talked with Creon.

"When I saw you out there," the farmer was saying, "I believed Tarla himself had come to resurrect my father's best field." He shook his head. "He knew so much more than I and he could coax any plant from that land, but I have struggled over years to do so and all of it has come to nothing."

"How long has it lain fallow?" the young Man asked.

"Seven years this spring," the farmer admitted.

"Then it is time that it be farmed again. When you get your children to help you, the work goes better." He leaned forward. "My father is a great farmer," he explained, "and he taught me how to run the furrows. See, the hill runs this way." He began describing it on the table. "You must run your furrows along the hill, even though that is harder. If you run them up and down, the seed will wash away." He also schooled the farmer in more things about how to care for the land until all who were with him were amazed at his knowledge.

"Who are you really?" the eldest daughter questioned, paused, and then her eyes widened at the thought. "You must be Tarla himself to know so much about the land!" Creon had to laugh at that remark.

"No," he answered with a slight shake of his head at her naïveté, "I'm just a Man, but I serve a powerful God, the God of all Creation." The farmer looked at the young Man and ran his hand over his rough chin.

"God of all Creation, eh? What's his name?" Creon bit his lip at that question, wondering what to say.

"I don't know if he has a name," he admitted after a few moments.

"The nameless God," the farmer mused. "Perhaps that's why he has two servants with no past or home." Inside Creon let out a silent sigh. Now he could stay the way he was, an anonymous stranger.

The following day passed quickly and Creon finished the plowing and sowed the rich golden kernels into the earth. Hrosca had spoken of the Creator to the farmer as they had worked and the man was greatly intrigued by his words. When they were finished, the priest strode to the middle of the field and said a blessing in the name of the One God over the land and promised the farmer the richest harvest he had seen in years.

"That will prove to you that the One God is worthy of being worshipped," he intoned.

In the evening then, Creon taught the children one of the Woodfolk songs. Hrosca noticed how the farmer's eldest daughter was looking at his charge, and chuckled. It would be a long time before she would forget the strong young farmer who had resurrected their richest field.

The next morning Creon and Hrosca said farewell to the family and continued on their way. The sun sped along his high course and dusk slipped into the sky without announcing her presence, beginning her silent dance across the western horizon, painting red, purple, and crimson hues with the Creator's paintbrush. The small cotton wisps in the heavens caught the sun's parting rays and were turned to pure spun gold. The sweet south wind picked up, gently caressing the two travelers as they made camp in a clearing, lit a small fire and settled down for the evening. Hrosca opened his pack and took out some food and Creon brought out a small package of nuts and dried berries given to him by Savannah. After they ate Hrosca leaned back and gazed at the starry sky.

"Tell me," Creon called across the fire, "how was *your* year?" The old Man smiled.

"Well, I visited your family."

"Really? How are they?" the young Man asked, sitting up straight. Did his leaving have the desired effect?

"They seemed to be doing better – at least where Jimri was concerned," the Hrosca said. "Sarina left the family, Mikela didn't want to say any more, but I think it had something to do with Jimri's reconciliation with your father.." Creon nodded.

"You mean Irfan married her?" he pressed, worried.

"No, she had left the valley completely." The old man shrugged. "It may be she ran off rather than face that fate." Creon grimaced. If his sister had run off, things must have been very desperate. Something deep inside him warned him that something else had happened, but he couldn't tell *what*.

"Well," Hrosca continued, "I think I should start with what happened since you landed on the island. I went to Midpoint from where I received a message that Tharkey needed to talk to me. Before I left I sent the albatross to tell the Woodfolk about you. I knew Eike very well." He shook his head sadly. "Anyway, I visited Tharkey and he told me that he needed to go through the Portal for a few weeks. I spent a two months there, resting, meditating. When he returned I quickly went to visit your parents. And, by the way," he chuckled, "you have a new baby sister."

"Another one!" Creon exclaimed, delight mirrored in his eyes. "I hope they can raise her well."

"She was well when I left," the old Man assured him. "I don't think she is any worse off now than then. After that I went to the Halls of Knowledge for a few days and gathered up a few things. Then I traveled to Midpoint and waited for your return."

"I guess you got your fill of traveling, then," Creon remarked.

"No, I can't travel enough. I did a lot of traveling as a young man, and saw most of the world. You should travel, too, Creon, you will see many interesting things." Suddenly the young Man put his hand up.

"What is it?" the priest asked.

"I have a feeling that someone is watching us," the other whispered. "Wait for a minute." With that he vanished into the dark with scarcely a sound. He returned a few minutes later, brow furrowed, steely eyes serious.

"Whoever is out there is hiding well," he observed. "It is hard to miss anything after the lessons the Woodfolk gave me."



## Eastward

They pressed eastward just as dawn began to kiss the skies. Throughout the whole day Creon had the uneasy feeling that they were being followed. The instincts given him by Kavak's training continued to warn him and so, about midday, he whispered to Hrosca that he was going to quickly backtrack and see if he could find anyone. He slipped back among the trees, waiting for their pursuer to come into view. When he didn't the young Man quickly walked back along their own tracks, searching for those of another he presumed in hiding. There were none. That perplexed Creon even more. The man, he was sure was out there, was good, *But*, he thought, as he quickly strode back up the path, *I'll get him yet*. He didn't. A week went by, then two. Creon backtracked at irregular intervals, waiting for his quarry, searching for tracks, but never found anyone or anything. When evening came he sat down next to the fire, tired and worried.

"Nothing again?" Hrosca asked him, passing him a piece of bread. The young Man shook his head.

"After all I learned from the Woodfolk, I should be able to get whoever is behind us," he said in frustration. "The only time anything like this happened was when practicing shortly before I left. Kavak .... Oh, no!" he exclaimed suddenly. "What if it's a Woodman? Have any of them sworn allegiance to the Warrior King?"

"It's possible," Hrosca sighed with a sad face, "but I know of none who had." He paused. "But trackers aside, Creon. It's time for your training to continue." Creon gave him a questioning look as Hrosca pulled several scrolls made of parchment from his pack. He selected one and passed it on to his student. The young

Man turned it over in his hands twice before untying the leather thong that bound it. The scroll was covered with strange symbols. Some of them he knew from his mother, who had tried to teach him to read. The rest of them were a mystery.

"Read it," the old Man prompted him with a smile. Creon tilted the scroll toward the flames.

"The – words of –" He squinted at the small characters. "Eli – Elian?"

"Quite plausible for the first try, Creon," Hrosca said gravely. "And this is only the first of the scrolls. Here," he said handing him another one, "read this one." Creon easily recognized the script. It was the language of the Woodfolk. He scanned the first entry and began to read.

"*Habikht ve Ayi*," he read. Then he read the story fluently, only breaking at points where there were words that he wasn't sure how to pronounce. When he finished he looked up at Hrosca. The old Man was smiling broadly.

"The Woodfolk have truly taught you all their lore, Creon," he commented. "You can read like one and you sound like one." Creon smiled in return.

"Actually I know this story," he confessed. "Kavak told it when I first arrived." Hrosca nodded again.

"This is just one of the seven languages you must learn, Creon," he explained. "Three of them are preserved in writing only. The others are all still spoken, though only our language and the language of the Woodfolk are known widely. Now, we will begin with Common. You already know a bit how to read it, so we should be able to get past that quickly." And so the lessons began.

A few days later they came upon a small village, where several Men were standing at the entrance with drawn swords, as if guarding the place.

"Halt," the first of them called. "You cannot enter here. The Dark Plague is in the village." Creon looked at Hrosca. The old man stepped forward.

"We only wish to draw some water and go on," he explained. The leader shook his head.

"You cannot enter, or else you will be die also."

"I know a cure for the Dark Plague," Creon ventured, his own experience moving him to pity. The leader of the Men laughed.

"So do I. Death."

"No, I mean really," the young Man corrected him, just a bit annoyed. "It's a powder of snowweed." The Man looked at him quizzically, doubt and hope fighting in his eyes.

"Really?" he asked. "You can cure the Dark Plague." But the doubt won and he laughed harshly. "You lie, be off with you!"

"But it cured *me*," Creon protested. The villager growled something menacing and raised his sword. Hrosca laid his hand on the young Man's arm and shook his head. Then they turned and walked off into the wood.

"Why didn't they believe me?" Creon asked his friend, his anger now rising to the surface.

"Because they believe that there is no cure for the disease, Creon," Hrosca sighed sadly. "The people in this part of the Pwyll don't even believe in the existence of the Woodfolk."

"You're so thoughtful this afternoon, Creon," Hrosca said quietly as they continued their walk. The young Man just shrugged and looked at the ground beneath his feet. He knew the question had been burning in his heart since he'd heard the story from Eike so long ago, but he'd been afraid to voice it to anyone – much less to any of the Woodfolk. Also he, remembered how Hrosca had put off talk of the origin of the Woodfolk as a myth. Even so, after some more back-and-forth, he decided to ask Hrosca anyway.

"I've been thinking a lot about the Woodfolk and what you said at that village back there made me think even more," Creon began. "While I was on the Island Eike told the tale about how they came into being. He said that a Karyl – whatever that is – deceived a girl into sleeping with him and from them came the mother of the Woodfolk who in turn married a Man. From them came the race of the Woodfolk. How can that be? Creator God forbade the Karyl from doing something like that and yet he allows the girl to live and even

blesses them! That's not possible!" The old Man was silent for a very long time and Creon was afraid that his question would go unanswered, but just as he was going to tell Hrosca to forget it, the priest answered him.

"That is a very difficult question to answer, Creon. I have read much about them and have met different tribes from different parts of the Seven Nations. All of them have a similar story about their origin, but in each one there is one difference: The question who this Timuel is." He brushed his beard thoughtfully. "To be honest with you, I have heard that he was a great lord from among Men, I have heard he was a Karyl. There are tales that he was a Voyager and many, many other explanations, even to saying that he was a manifestation of the Creator himself!" The young man stopped and stared at his teacher in shock. The thought of the *Creator* stooping to such an act brought bile to his throat and his stomach constricted.

"No!" Hrosca looked back seriously and nodded.

"Yes, Creon, I heard that from the mouth of a Woodman and a very respected one." He began walking again and Creon fell in beside him.

"I can only tell you what the oldest and best tradition in this case is," the priest continued. "It reaches back much farther than Elian and it is said to be engraved in a great rock in the Blue Mountains, where Lif and Yasham were wed by the Creator himself." He paused thoughtfully and then turned to look at Creon to make his point.

"Now, Creon, I want you to remember that this is *tradition* that we're talking about. It is very difficult to substantiate and the great rock has been lost to generations of humans. It may be that even this tale is twisted in some way. We must proceed with caution. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I do," the young man replied impatiently. He wanted to hear the story and judge for himself afterward!

"In the days when Men were young," the priest began, affecting a tone very much like Eike's when he'd told the tale, "a hermit named Timuel took a girl called Ishik from among the daughters of Men to be his wife. He was very old and she bore him only one child – a girl, whom he named Yasham – 'life'. It is said that Timuel was promised a specially blessed child from the Creator as a sign that Man was welcome in this world. That girl was that child. From the very first she had the strange features of the Woodfolk. After the death of her husband Ishik returned to her village and raised the girl and she was truly exceptional in all respects – beauty, grace, character and she even had the power to heal Man, beast, and plant. That raised the envy of certain women in the town who tried to have the girl and her mother both executed as witches. The chieftain refused to do so, but banished both from the village. Ishik died soon afterwards."

"Now the strangest part of the tradition was that a few years before Yasham was born, a boy was born as the son of the first King of the Blue Mountains. He was also a miracle child, because his mother had been barren for years. He was to be dedicated to Creator God and the Creator gave him the same strange features as he did Yasham. The child's father, Carmi, gave him the name Lif – which *also* means 'life' in the language of the Men of the Blue Mountains. It was said from the beginning that from this young man would come a great race, the only stipulation being that he found the right wife, who would have the same features."

"So Lif left his father to find that girl when he was only sixteen years of age. It took him four years and then it was that she found him in the Death March after he'd fallen prey to some robbers. She nursed him back to health and from her appearance he realized that this was to be his bride. He took her and returned to his father to receive his blessing. Carmi blessed his son and it is said that even the Creator himself appeared in the form of a shining Man to bless their marriage and so the Woodfolk were born. They returned to the forest and were forgotten by all, even though Carmi had engraved their history in the great stone. When the Woodfolk were discovered many, many generations later, they were what they are now, with the tales that they have now." The priest fell silent and thought for a long moment.

"That is a much nicer and more realistic story," Creon said after a while.

"That's true. It's much simpler, too, because the Creator is the real actor."

"Then why don't the Woodfolk tell it as their history?" Creon wondered out loud and Hrosca sighed.

"In all the years someone slipped a lie into the story and the lie grew." The old man looked at his charge critically. "You see, Creon, there is an evil spirit who stands against the Creator who is much stronger than we.

He is called the Dark Lord or Dehshet. Perhaps he wished to take the glory from the Creator for making these people and told them these lies. But our God is almighty and Dehshet is only created. He can't stand against the Creator and one day our Lord will defeat him. As for these questions, we can't know their answer here and now, but one day our God will make all things clear." Creon nodded, thinking of Aspen's brief mention of the Dark One that evening by the pool. Evil flowed from him, just as good flowed from the Creator. Did that mean that he had a greater enemy to deal with than the Warrior King? He shuddered to think of it and pushed the thought away from himself.

The weeks slowly passed and Creon and Hrosca continued their trek eastward. In the evenings the old Man continued to teach his pupil to read and write. They often stopped in small villages, sometimes working for a meal, sometimes paying for it from Hrosca's sack or with the money that the grateful farmers gave Creon for his knowledge of the soil. Only one other time did they come across a village where the Dark Plague was and again the men wouldn't let them enter the village to draw water. This time the young Man held his tongue about the cure for the Plague. They wouldn't believe him anyway.

Throughout the whole time the uneasy feeling that they were being followed plagued Creon. He often backtracked, searching for a sign of their pursuer, but never found even any.

The green leaves turned golden and began to fall. The air, kissed by Mistress Autumn, grew chillier and Creon was thankful for the warm cloak given him by Savannah.

Early one morning he decided to backtrack before leaving and maybe catch their shadow off guard. He left Hrosca, asleep, and slipped into the twilight, welcoming her as his friend. The path they had followed was clear and he silently passed along it a short ways, still not finding any tracks. He was just about to return when something caught his eye: it was a small green leaf with prickly ends.

*A holly leaf?* he thought, scanning the path for a holly bush. There was none. *Is this a sign of some sort?* He slipped the leaf into the pouch at his side and headed back to the camp. Hrosca was now up and was just tossing fine dirt on the fire-pit to completely smother the ashes..

"Find anything?" he asked.

"No," Creon said, instantly feeling guilty about the lie. "Actually, yes," he corrected himself. He pulled the leaf out of his pouch.

"A holly leaf." Hrosca shrugged his shoulders. "They grow around here. It's not so important." Creon looked at the leaf quizzically and tossed it into the ashes.

"In two weeks we'll reach the place where we'll winter," Hrosca told him as they started on their way.

"Where's that?" Creon asked. Might it be a village or town – perhaps even a city?

"You'll see," Hrosca answered with a smile.

# Five: City of Iron

## The Blacksmith

**M**istress Autumn had worked her magic and the leaves had turned golden, red, or brown and many of the trees were already quite bare when they reached the small valley. In comparison with Chifchi it couldn't even be called a valley, being more of a depression in the landscape. In the center of this dip several hundred houses were clustered close together with a wall pulled around them. Many of them had smoke coming from their chimneys which made Creon want to sit beside a warm fire again.

Hrosca led the way down the bank and to the gate of the city where only a couple of bored guards were leaning against rough spears with rusty heads. They gazed dully at the strangers who passed through the gate. On the other side of the gate there was another man, dressed in a tidy black and leather uniform, sitting at a small desk. The hilt of a broadsword protruded above his right shoulder and he had a scarlet cloak draped around him. The two travelers halted in front of his desk and Hrosca produced their passports. The guard calmly read them and then gazed intently from Hrosca to Creon and back.

"These are useless here," he said gravely. Creon immediately began to protest, but a hand from Hrosca on his shoulder silenced him before he got more out than a "but."

"We are a separate province," the guard explained, "and that means that we need to fill out a few more papers." He snapped his fingers and a well-dressed, disciplined soldier behind him handed him a thick book made of parchment. The captain took and opened it, then transferred their names from the passports to the leather book, along with their physical descriptions, changing them so as to be accurate. He looked at Creon for a long moment.

"You a Woodman?" he asked.

"Yes, sir, in a way," the young traveler replied, just keeping the tremor of relief out of it.

"In a way?" The guard's eyebrows went up with an amused smile. "Ah! You're one of their adopted sons. That's not good," he continued, shaking his head and making a note in his big book. "If they found out about that in the Pwyll, you'd probably get killed. Anyway," he finished, finally closing his book and giving back the passports, "welcome to Eison."

They slowly wound their way through the cramped and filthy streets of Eison. Everywhere Creon noticed beautiful ironwork, even the poorest of houses had grilles in front of windows, ornamented shields above and on doors. Above one inn there was even a long sword that was made to be used with both hands, which people of Eison usually called "bi-handers." Creon wrinkled his nose at the stink of the rotten garbage that mingled with a heavy, sooty smell, making the air difficult to breathe. He already wished he could be out in the plain before the gates again. He stuck close to Hrosca, though, and the two of them continued along until they came to a simple door in the wall. Above the door there hung a large shield, ornamented with a sword and a line of characters superimposed over it. Creon didn't have time to stop and figure out what they said, because Hrosca hustled him through the door and into a small tunnel. They quickly walked through it and came into an expansive courtyard. Loud hammering and an even more powerful voice singing off key hit Creon's ears and he grimaced.

"What is this place?" he muttered to Hrosca.

"It's a smithy, my boy," the old man laughed in return.

"As if I couldn't already see *that*," the young man muttered under his breath. *Just what does it have to do with me? I hope to God we don't winter here!*

They crossed the courtyard and entered a broad doorway. A the thundering roar of a fire shot towards them and searing heat poured across Creon, instantly making him want to go back outside into the foul air. In front of them there was a man, no taller than Savannah. His arms and shoulders pumped rhythmically as the heavy hammer crashed down on the piece of metal he was forming, making an odd beat to the song he was belting out. Creon took a closer look at the blacksmith. Even though he was short, his hands were huge and his shoulders, arms and upper body packed with rippling muscles. From what Creon could tell, the rest of him was just as well-muscled. His head was completely bald, except for a well-groomed gray mustache and goatee. He was dressed in a pair of leather breeches and boots, his chest and arms bare.

Aside from the blacksmith there was one other man with blond hair dressed in much the same way, except for a long leather apron. But unlike the compact, bulky strength of his companion, this one was tall and wiry, though most certainly no less powerful than the bald one.

Behind the two a great fire roared in large forge, sending the blazing heat out into the fall coolness. Swords, spears, halberds, shields, cups, bowls, and other vessels stood around the room along with a large amount of horseshoes, fire pokers, and other household articles. What the master blacksmith was forming now, Creon could not make out.

They had to wait until the blacksmith had put the glowing iron back into the forge to heat it again before Hrosca could address him.

"Master blacksmith," the old priest shouted. The master blacksmith turned around.

"What do you want?" he demanded. "We aren't open for sale, and orders are only given on the seventh day of the week!"

"Perhaps," Hrosca yelled, "you remember this?" He untied the leather thong around his neck and threw the blue stone into the forge. Instantly the fire froze in icy flames.

"Wha...?" the question died in Creon's mouth and he blinked at his teacher, agape. The blacksmith looked from the fire to the priest and laughed loudly, shaking his finger at Hrosca.

"Well, I'll be," he roared, "the old wizard himself! And with a fledgling, too!" He leaped across the room and grasped Hrosca's hand, pumped it so vigorously that he nearly shook the priest off of his feet, then went to the forge, reached in with his hand and took the blue stone out. He returned it to Hrosca and when the old Man had fastened it around his neck the fire began to blaze again, hotter than before.

"So," the blacksmith demanded, "what brings you here?"

"I'm pulling in a few favors!" Hrosca yelled. The blacksmith laughed at this and turned to Creon.

"That's the way he is," he thundered, "whenever he helps you, he says he'll keep a favor." He laughed again. "Come, let's go to where it's quieter." He turned to his friend. "Hey, Donovan, we'll call it a day for now, all right?"

The blond man nodded and retrieved the metal from the fire and dropped it into a vat of water, sending steam billowing into the evening. Rushtu then stumped out of the forge and across the courtyard, seemingly oblivious to whether or not his guests were following him.

The blacksmith's house hadn't seen the ordering hand of a woman in a long time, with all kinds of weapons, ornaments and articles lying around. He lovingly picked many of them up off a table and a few benches and carried them into another room. Creon took that moment and turned to his teacher.

"I've been meaning to ask you, how did you do that? And the fire on the boat?" The priest smiled wistfully.

"That was a dark chapter in my life," he sighed, blue-gray eyes distant. "Before I found the Creator, I dabbled quite a bit in the Dark Arts. I was quite good at them, as a matter of fact I even won a duel with the Warrior King's head magician, but when I found the Creator I tried to put off the power. However, once you have worked with them you still have things you can do, and once you start you can't stop. You see, the Arts are addictive, and they eat at your inmost being." Looking at his teacher, Creon wondered if it was merely his imagination or if Hrosca's face really had become more lined, his hair whiter, and his gait more stooped than only moments before.

"Then why don't you stop?" the young Man asked.

"I don't know," the old Man answered. "Perhaps it is because I sometimes need to rid myself of some of the power. I can't explain it in any other way." In that moment the blacksmith reentered the room, carrying a large pitcher and three metal mugs in one hand. He thumped them down in front of his guests without any ceremony and Hrosca set about pouring the thick, frothy ale, while their host returned with a large haunch of smoked meat, a wheel of cheese and several thick loaves of bread. He set them in front of them, sat, and began to talk with Hrosca, not much more quietly than in the smithy.

"So what are you doing here in Eison?" he thundered, then noticing that they hadn't touched the meal, urged, "Eat! Eat!"

"We need a place to stay for the winter," Hrosca answered, pulling out his knife and carefully carving a piece of cheese. He bowed his head slightly and said, "Oh, Creator, who brings bread forth from the earth, we thank you," then continued, "Also young Creon needs to learn something from you."

"Ah, yes," the blacksmith said soberly, lowering his voice a few notches. "The art of smithing and sword fighting." He nodded to himself, cut a large slice of meat, and popped it into his mouth.

"I should have thought you would want something like that from me," he roared, hitting Hrosca on the shoulder. The old Man winced. The smith then turned to Creon.

"So, you're the son of Adem," he remarked loudly. "I'm Rushtu."

"At your service, sir," Creon said timidly around his piece of bread, uncertain of what to make of this man.

"Yes." Rushtu gave him a sly smile. "You will be. So, Hrosca," he thundered on, grabbing at the bread and tearing off a huge hunk, "tell me what you've been up to!" The priest summarized their journey quite neatly, mentioning Creon's training with the Woodfolk only in passing, but the young man thought he noticed a strange glint in the blacksmith's eye at that point. Then they spent the rest of the evening recounting tales of Hrosca and the Rushtu's exploits. What Creon gleaned from the conversation was that this little man, a native of Eison, was not only a master blacksmith, but had mastered the art of almost every weapon created in the Seven Nations. However, he still held most to the sword.

"There is no dispute that an honest blade can't settle easily," he roared good-naturedly after a huge swig from his beer mug. "There's just something about it being in your hands," and he held his up, as if grasping an imaginary sword in front of him, "that makes you able to overcome just about anything." He went on to tell of the many battles he'd been in, mostly against the Warrior King's armies, some against the barbarians and mercenaries that were overrunning the Seven Nations.

"Yes," Rushtu remembered loudly, "it was almost thirty years ago, when we had to fight the Warrior King himself. We had knocked back many of his other armies and now he came himself. You should have seen him. Huge! (Of course everyone is huge to me.) And his horse!" The blacksmith let out a low whistle and rolled his gray-green eyes. "I'd love to have that sword of his in my hands for just a moment! It burned like a torch, but a thousand times brighter than my forge! A real weapon of power!" He shook his head.

"Anyway," he continued, "we knocked 'em back. But not without the wizard doing his part!" He punched Hrosca in the shoulder, who grimaced painfully. "He called down fire from heaven and destroyed the first wave of men!"

"Not really," Hrosca interjected. "It was only that powder. And it didn't destroy them, you did!" Rushtu turned an embarrassed red.

"Well," he tried to defend himself, "it wasn't only me. Without Creator God we'd've lost." All this time Creon had been rolling the blacksmith's name around in his head and wondering why it was so familiar. Suddenly it clicked: the tales his mother had told him!

"You're Rushtu Silver-Sword, aren't you?" he asked. The blacksmith blushed again and nodded.

"It wasn't a title that I wanted," he explained soberly. "I'd rather be known as Rushtu the Blacksmith, or even better, Rushtu, Servant of the Creator. I only fight when I have to."

"But he *does* enjoy it," Hrosca said quietly to Creon while Rushtu paused to collect his thoughts, and then returned to his story with vigor.

"As I said, we knocked 'em well," he thundered. "And when the Warrior King saw he couldn't defeat us, he gave us the status of a province, and since then we've been ruling ourselves, just as happy as can be. Except when Hrosca comes through," he roared, slapping the priest on the shoulder so that he almost buried his face in his jug of ale, "then everything turns upside-down!" Creon smiled wanly at the joke, caught between really liking and absolutely despising this little Man.

"Well," Rushtu finally ended, "so much for this evening. Let's get a room ready for you and tomorrow I'll see what you're made of, my boy." With that he slapped Creon on the upper arm with such force that he nearly fell off his stool. He picked himself up with a wry smile and they retired for the night.



## Between the Forge and the Blade

The next day Creon had to admit Rushtu was right, he was at the blacksmith's service all day, and the next, and the next, carrying large loads of wood and coal, helping drag the ore in from a huge pile of rock Rushtu had in one shed. Aside from all the work there was Rushtu's constant yelling and off-key singing and the awful noise of the forge, hammer and anvil. It sent Creon to bed with a splitting headache every night.

Day followed day as Mistress Autumn turned the days over to Master Winter, the noise becoming bearable to the young Man and the heat of the forge was even enjoyable now that winter spread his white cloak over everything, and he learned much. And so, under the patient tutelage of the small blacksmith, Creon became adept enough as an apprentice that Rushtu's partner, Donovan, was able to set up a second anvil and fill his own orders, effectively doubling the output of the shop.

"Ah, I knew I should have gotten me an apprentice a long time ago," the little Man roared good-naturedly as he watched Donovan at his work. "It would have made life easier, but who has the time to go out looking?"

Throughout the winter Creon's world was shared by the flaming heat of the forge, the searing edge of a sword, and the deep thoughts of Hrosca's books. In the beginning the old man would take the evenings to instruct his pupil, but Creon would often fall asleep, so tired was he from the day's labors. So the priest had a word with Rushtu and switched the language and book lessons to the morning, after which Creon usually wanted to do some serious physical labor.

"It's just to get the kinks out of my head," he told Rushtu at one point, who laughed loudly.

"I'll put some in your arms then," he bellowed in reply.

At first the sword-smith taught the young Man to fight using sticks of wood. This sort of sparring almost always happened shortly before noon and were quite short, but with each lesson Creon learned more about the art of sword fighting, feeling that it was much like the Art of Defense, except for the sharp, elongated arm. Rushtu was a wise enough teacher that he taught his student much about thrusts and parries by the every-day work of the smithy, never having to take a blade in hand.

From the beginning Creon wanted to master the hammer and tongs, but first he had to learn to melt the ore and separate the different metals in it. Then Rushtu added a few flecks of a ground up metal.

"It hardens the iron," he explained. "This way it won't rust." After that the iron was poured into molds and cooled. When the molds were broken apart there were rods in them. The master blacksmith cut them apart into smaller pieces with a pair of heavy metal cutters.

"We'll start with horseshoes, Cree," he thundered. "It's more important to shoe a horse than to make a sword!" After that it was nothing but hours of beating the heated pieces of metal into a U shape and cooling them. Creon's back and shoulders ached, but he worked doggedly, making horseshoe after horseshoe. Every once in a while Rushtu would take one and put it aside, but the rest were melted again. After a while more and more of them were put aside for shoeing the animals that came in. Creon also learned this job. At first he was quite shy around the large, graceful animals, worried they would step on him. He slowly learned to trust them, though, even to the point that he laughed at himself for ever fearing them.

Rushtu would speak to the horse quietly before hobbling it and putting its head in a collar. Then he picked up one hoof after another, fitted a shoe to each and beat the nails into them. When Creon was finally allowed to attempt the job Rushtu nodded satisfactorily. The job was beginner's work he remarked, but very good none the less.

By the end of winter Rushtu judged that Creon had progressed enough that he could have his first *real* sword-fight. The blacksmith first picked an older blade that he judged to be just right, if not a bit heavy for the young Man. He tossed the sword across the room and Creon caught it by the hilt. It was already quite dull, but the two still donned thick leather breastplates. Then Rushtu drew his own famous sword, chipped and notched from battle. Something about the blacksmith changed the instant the metal came into his hand and he swung it around in the air to test its grip and the young Man realized that this really was Rushtu Silver-Sword.

"Get ready," his compact adversary warned, gray-green eyes glinting, and they began to spar. Even though he'd had quite some practice during the winter, Creon had to work hard at defending himself. The real sword was different from the wooden ones they'd used and Rushtu was more at home with his blade than Creon was with his. But the young Man held on doggedly, using quick steps and movements that he had learned from Kavak. At one point he was even able to launch a feeble attack, which was immediately stopped by his mentor. The dark burning came alive in his belly again, but this time Creon's training with the Woodfolk prevailed and his head stayed clear. He realized that Rushtu was pushing him towards a wall to corner him. The son of Adem suddenly had an idea: he threw his sword out at Rushtu and ran towards him full tilt. The old master let out a yell, and swung to parry the blow, but Creon suddenly slid sideways, zipping around the blacksmith with great agility. He pivoted on one foot and backpedaled a bit until he was a good distance from the sword-master. Rushtu lost no time in following his apprentice's movements and they resumed their fight until Creon's heel caught in a crack in the flagstone, he threw up his arms and regained his balance, but left himself open to the master's blade.

"I give up!" he cried, as Rushtu pointed his sword at his chest. The sword-master lowered his weapon and grinned broadly.

"That was a good fight, boy," he thundered. "You're coming right along. Just don't lose your balance like that in battle, or you'll get skewered!"



## Trouble

**M**aster Winter was slowly being overcome by the intoxicating magic of Lady Spring when the large mountain of ore had dwindled to a small heap. Rushtu explained that it was time to go and buy more, since with the approaching season the governors and henchmen of the Warrior King and their enemies began to crawl out of their high and mighty castles, full of energy that was usually spent in spilling the blood of their servants and their servants' servants on many a battlefield, all merely for the lust of war. Weapons would be needed, and the best of these were forged here in Eison. Many a lord would have given half his lands for a blade forged by the famed hands of Rushtu Silver-Sword and even more for one made by his dearest friend and greatest rival, Meshek-Tual.

So the master blacksmith prepared his wagons and horses, packed up his coins and vessels, and went north to the great mines of the Pwyllwood. He took Creon and Donovan along, each of them driving one of the high wooden wagons. The evenings were spent around blazing fires, Rushtu or Donovan telling stories of times past, such as when Rushtu and thirty-two other Men held back great hordes of Werebeasts from conquering the mines, or how Meshek-Tual had created a silver puzzle that had so baffled the high priestess of Istek that she stepped down and yielded her place to one less cruel, or how Alrig, King of Smiths, had formed a weapon of beauty and power, that had won him the hand of a princess. Rushtu also told of his greatest masterpiece, a sword forged for the last son of the ancient Kings who had ruled with the Council of Elders.

"It is a wonderful sword," he bawled. "I can still see it before me. Justin, he called it, but never drew the blade. It is light as a feather but harder than steel. It took me years to find the secret ways of forging it, my boy. But what I'd really love to learn is how the Warrior King's own sword was forged."

"They say it was made as a weapon for justice," Donovan put in mildly, "but that Man of evil turned its holy flame to his own use and corrupted its bright shine to the evil that is hidden in his own heart."

During the first few months of his stay Creon had gotten to know Donovan a bit. The assistant blacksmith was just the opposite of his master. Golden haired, he was taller than Creon, serene, but strong as the steel he worked on. His favorite boast was that he had never drawn a weapon to harm another human and the young Man easily believed him. Behind his calm blue eyes there was the gentle wisdom and great creativity of a master artist, and, even though he stood in the shadow of Rushtu, Donovan's quiet soul never seemed depressed. He simply created his masterpieces, often with more detail and creativity than the old master. Rushtu always encouraged him to continue.

"I can't wait until he's greater than I am," the old blacksmith would say, "then I can tell the world that this was my student!" He then clapped Donovan on the shoulder and laughed loudly.

The wagons finally wound their way up the last few miles of rutted road to a large plateau cut into the side of a mountain. Creon's eyes widened as they topped the rise and came out onto the flats. Caught between awe and revulsion at the scene before him, he gazed this way and that, uncomprehending, unable to move. Rough Men slogged through the mud, pulling great wagons along wooden rails. Men dressed in splendid silver and black uniforms bawled at the laborers from horseback or the tops of wagons. Shabbily dressed women walked back and forth among the ranks, passing water to the thirsty, food to the hungry, and a kind word to the tired. And everywhere half-naked children ran along with mangy dogs, yelling at their fathers, brothers, uncles, and friends, often trying to help pull the loads, often stopping to play in the mud. Creon stood transfixed at the horror of the mines as Man after Man poured in and out of the black holes in the mountains, tirelessly and without a glimmer of hope on the darkened brows.

A hand touched his shoulder and he turned and saw Donovan's sad face.

"What...? Why...?" Creon stammered.

"I felt the same way the first time I saw it, Creon," the golden blacksmith answered. "It is a horror, and though we do all we can to help, life up here seems to get worse daily." He sighed. "That is also part of the Warrior King's evil. Now come," he ended and turned to go toward a fair-sized cluster of muddy wooden buildings a short ways away. Creon turned to follow him, but then noticed a small boy tugging at the stirrup of one of the splendid foremen. The foreman barked at him and the boy held out his small, dirty hand. The rider slammed his reigns in the boy's face and called one of his henchmen over, who began to slap the young boy. Creon instantly recognized the darkness rise inside him and he let it to the point where it was searing red behind his eyes. Before he knew what he was doing he began running across the muddy flats. He reached the big man just as he set to hit the boy's already bloody face again. Creon's iron fist flattened the henchman. He then spun around, grabbed the foreman's leg and yanked him off his high horse, into the mud. The Man stood up, screaming for help, before he was silenced by a clean upper cut to the jaw.

"That was for the boy," Creon hissed, reached down, picked up the boy and melted into the crowd.

His step was fairly unsteady as he waded through the masses, looking for someone to give the child to. The red mist had vanished, replaced by a mingling of fierce pride and disgust for what he'd done.

The whole thing had all happened so quickly that no one had really noticed Creon's appearance, even though there were hundreds of witnesses. As he staggered towards the buildings, one of the shabby women came running up to him, screaming for her son. The young man stopped and passed the unconscious boy into her arms.

"He's alive," he told her, then reached into the pouch at his side and extracted a packet of carefully dried herbs.

"Here," he continued, passing her the leather packet, "boil these in water and put the brew on the wounds. He'll heal quickly." The woman looked at him, surprised.

"May whatever god you serve bless you," she said, then shyly added, "unless you are a god yourself." She then turned and disappeared among the people.

A few minutes later Creon rejoined his friends, who had just started bargaining with one of the foremen. A horn sounded and the foreman excused himself.

"That's going to be a while," Rushtu muttered. "Let's go to the inn for now." And so they did. The inside was brightly lit and men and women milled around rough wooden tables and a long wooden bar where a heavyset man was passing out drinks. In the center of the room there was a bare strip of floor where two men were wrestling to loud applause from the people.

Neither Rushtu nor Donovan seemed to have noticed the incident with the boy and the foreman, or if they had they didn't care comment. That made Creon feel a bit more comfortable, since he didn't have to deal with the implications of his actions at that moment.

Within less than an hour the news about the attack on the foreman had almost become a legend. People were talking about a god (or at least a demigod) who had appeared, struck down the two men and given the child back to his mother. Others said they had seen a lightning bolt from heaven strike the two hated men and the child being lifted into the sky. However, they couldn't explain how the child had been returned to his mother.

Near the entrance to the inn sat two young women, both of whom were much better dressed than most of the others in the hazy room. The younger had hair of ebony and deep, dark eyes. Most men would have found her stunning, and she dressed to reveal that fact. Her face was smooth, young, hardly out of childhood, but she already scanned the men in crowd with a practiced eye. Her older companion was almost as beautiful, but it seemed that the beauty had been partially wasted. Her clothing was not nearly as open, and her platinum-tinted hair was carefully arranged to conceal. Their conversation was the same as everyone else's, or at least nearly.

"For me," the younger said, "there is only one 'god' here. Him." She swept her hand toward a young man with short dark hair, who was leaning against the bar, talking to a short muscular man with a bald head.

"I must admit, Lilya," her friend answered, "you have taste, more than most of us."

"I just keep my eyes open, Tsigane," Lilya sneered at her. "Now, I wonder, wonder." She tapped her well-formed lips with a long, fine finger.

"How do you think he'd do in the ring?" she finally asked.

"Or you mean how does he look under all that?" her friend interpreted.

"Hm, yes, that too," Lilya agreed, almost dreamily. Tsigane shoved the girl a bit.

"Don't let your taste get away from you, Lilya," she chided. "You're young and still a bit green."

"Don't you patronize me, you witch," Lilya came back, her voice full of poison. "I may be young, but I always get the ones I want. Even at my age you didn't." She turned and called towards a table near them, "Shau-nee!" A big man with a barrel chest the size of an oak tree and muscle-packed arms rose from a table nearby and sauntered over to Lilya.

"Yes, o priestess," he said with a bow, but his face betrayed mockery. Lilya ignored it.

"There's a young man in strange clothes at the bar," she told him.

"The one talking to the blacksmith?" Shau-nee asked.

"Yes. Challenge him to the ring." The big man spread his shovel-sized hands out toward the girl.

"You demand much from me, priestess," he wheedled, grinning. Lilya new what he was thinking.

"What would the reward be if I win?" the would-be challenger asked. An almost invisible shudder went over the girl.

"The usual," she replied in a choked voice.

"For that," he returned with another smirk, "he's dead." With that he sauntered away to the bar.

"All that talk about the 'god' who saved the kid," Rushtu thundered, shaking his head. "You don't know anything about that, do you?" he asked Creon. The young man tried to hide the red creeping into his face by looking away.

"So you do know!" Rushtu laughed. Creon felt like his insides had just tied themselves in knots.

"Yeah, I do."

"So who was it?" Creon took a deep breath. *Do I have to tell him?* he heard himself ask.

"Me," he answered and the knots vanished. Rushtu looked at him, surprise and amusement mingling in his round features.

"You?" Creon nodded, blushing again.

"What went through your head, boy?" the blacksmith demanded.

"I don't know," Creon admitted. "I saw him hit the boy and then I lost it." Rushtu looked at him, a funny smile on his face.

"What?" the young Man asked.

"You're a fool, Creon," the blacksmith said, still grinning. "A fool, but one with a very good heart. And I like that, it reminds me of some people I like very much."

"Like yourself?" the young Man parried with a half-smile.

"Now don't make fun of me," the blacksmith tried to defend himself. "I may have a good heart, and I may be crazy, but I'm not stupid." Creon just shook his head and picked up the bowl of water standing in front of him. A heavy hand rested on his shoulder. He turned to see a man, the same size as him, but twice as wide.

"You're new here, aren't you?" the big man asked.

"Yes," Creon answered. "Creon, son of Adem." He extended his hand to the big man, who ignored it.

"Shau-nee," he grunted back, then turned to the bartender. "Ale." He then turned around and looked at the ring in the center, where two men were punching each other. Creon turned around also and began to watch.

"Looks fun, doesn't it?" the big man commented.

"Hm," was all Creon answered, wondering what the big man was trying to get at. The tension that he'd just released began edging in again. What was this man up to?

"Wanna try?" came the question, as the two men finally left the ring.

"Against whom?" Creon asked, feeling something familiar tug at him. Rushtu clear his throat loudly.

"Me," Shau-nee said, flexing his huge muscles. Creon shot a glance at Rushtu, who just pointed at the young Man and shrugged his shoulders. *You decide*, he seemed to say. The dark strength came awake in Creon, the same feeling that had made him fight Lynx and the pirates, the feeling that had made him pound the two men that day.

"Okay," he finally agreed. The big man gave him a nasty grin.

"Clear the ring!" the bartender yelled from behind them.

Creon quickly stripped off boots, jacket and tunic. As the big man stepped across from Creon in the ring, something inside him said that he'd made a mistake. He swallowed the feeling. It was too late now: he must fight.

Shau-nee ducked his shoulders and rushed at the young Man. Creon moved quickly, the way Kavak had taught him. *The fight is mainly in the mind*, he heard Kavak's voice out of the past, pushed his fear and anger away from him with bodily effort, and concentrated on the fight.

Lilya and her friend had moved closer, the former carefully watching her prey in the ring.

"Hm," she analyzed, "not bad. Looks really good. A real man."

"Not like Shau-nee, huh?" Tsigane agreed. Lilya just shook her head.

"A bit cowardly, though, don't you think?" the elder asked.

"I think I saw something like it once before," Lilya answered.

"The Woodman in the marketplace! With the soldiers...!"

"Yes." A little smile came to her lips. "Now, Tsigane, if he wins how about you and I make a little bet?" Her companion laughed.

"And that would be?" she asked, already knowing the answer.

"I'll bet you that I can get *him* to sleep with me before he leaves Stein. If I win you will give me that information that you promised me, but kept secret."

"And if you lose?" Lilya looked back, haughtily.

"I'll take your place next time the priestess calls on you."

"Fair enough," Tsigane replied and focused on the fight.

For Creon the cat and mouse game was beginning to get dangerous. Shau-nee was getting mad, and started to use his fists aside from the rushes. Creon stopped the well aimed punches a lot more coolly than he felt, carefully watching his adversary for a sign of weakening. Shau-nee was not only tireless, he was also cunning. He quickly cut Creon's feet out from underneath him, but Creon was back on them before he could pursue his attack. The young Man's defensive stance revealed the practice he had taken. He kept his fists raised loosely, moving smoothly, a lot more smoothly than he felt, around the ring.

He suddenly noticed Shau-nee wink at someone behind him, and four strong arms grabbed him. Across the long side of the rectangular ring the big man got ready to charge. *What to do?* shot through Creon's mind. Suddenly a picture popped out at him, Kavak in the air in a full salto mortale. Instantly his powerful right arm shot up, hammering the man at his right in the face. He then quickly swung the other over his shoulder, landing him hard on the wood floor. He gauged the distance to the charging man, waited until the man was about six paces in front of him. The rhythm was right and Creon took two short, fast steps. His left foot came down on right leg of the big man just as he raised it and he vaulted over Shau-nee, flipping over in the air, landing on his feet, facing his adversary. The spectators erupted in applause and loud shouts. The big man came charging back, all reason flown in his boiling rage.

*That's it*, Creon said to himself and stood still, calmly awaiting the man. In the blink of an eye before the big man reached him he swung out of the way and aimed a crushing blow at the side of Shau-nee's head. The bull of a man collapsed and slid across the ground into the group of people. The men and women screamed with delight and came to Creon, clapping him on his bare, sweaty back. An elation shot through him like he had only felt when he was near Aspen and he raised both fists, uttering a cry of triumph. He expelled his breath, punched the air a few times, breathed out again, and walked back to where Rushtu was leaning against the bar.

"I'm impressed," the blacksmith admitted, much more quietly than Creon had ever heard him speak. The young Man smiled and slowly began pulling his tunic and boots back on.

"First the foreman, now the bull. Not bad." Rushtu turned to the bartender. "Some of your best, bartender," he ordered. He turned back to Creon.

"You deserve it, Creon," he said with a smile.

"And a lot more," came a voice from behind the young Man. He turned around to see a young woman, no a girl, a bit taller than Creon's shoulder with coal-black hair and eyes of deep brown. Her dress had a deep décolleté and didn't seem to be made to keep warm, but to display. Something about her caused the young Man to want to run from her, but he managed to smile, taking her extended hand, meanwhile trying to figure out what it was.

"Lilya daughter of Muriel," the girl introduced herself.

"Creon son of Adem," he replied with a little bow.

"Creon? Adem?" she asked, squinting at him. "Those aren't Woodfolk names."

"No, I'm from the Flatlands," was the curt reply.

"Ah, yes," the girl answered.

*What do I do now?* the victor mouthed to Rushtu. The blacksmith motioned with his hands, palms down. *Stay calm.* He then lightly touched the drinking bowl with his fingertip.

"Can I – would you like a drink?" Creon stammered, trying to hide his confusion, but failing completely.

"Actually I should buy you one," Lilya said with a radiant smile. "It was my fault that you ended up in the ring." Creon felt an old wall slowly coming up inside of him and he calmly let it, feeling that this woman – sorry, girl – was dangerous.

"Oh," was all he answered. Rushtu cleared his throat.

"I see Donovan over there," he said quickly. "I think I'll leave you two kids alone and see what he wants."

*Don't leave me,* Creon implored silently, but the blacksmith was already shouldering his way through the crowd. The silence slowly became uncomfortable.

"So, what about that drink?" Creon finally asked, trying to break the ice.

"The usual," she told the barman, who bowed slightly and scurried off behind the bar.

"You're new here," she remarked, when a silver bowl of wine had arrived for each of them. "Are you his apprentice?" she asked with a jerk of her pretty head.

"Yeah."

"You don't seem to have much to say," Lilya said, giving him an admiring look he had only known from Aspen. "I like that."

"You do?"

"Yeah, muscle and words don't mix," she laughed, running her fingers up his arm. He pulled it away. Again he felt that there was something wrong with the situation, as if he were betraying Aspen by simply being here. But he still felt that there was no way to extricate himself without looking the fool, so he played along.

"So," he began, "what do you do?"

"I'm a priestess," the girl answered, but before she could go on, Donovan appeared from within the crowd.

"Time to go, Creon," he announced calmly. "Rushtu's waiting." Creon nodded and pulled a few coins from his pocket, which he laid on the bar. The bartender greedily shoved them into his bulging purse.

"Will I see you again?" she asked.

"If you come to Eison, maybe," he answered and instantly regretted it.

"I live there!" she exclaimed. "So, I'll look you up." With that she turned and vanished into the crowd, as quickly and quietly as she had come.

"There's something about her," Creon told his friend, frowning.

"Yes, she's very pretty, if that's what you mean," Donovan answered. "But no one compares to my little wife."

"Pretty, yes," Creon answered, "but dangerous."

"Didn't you know that all women are dangerous, friend?" the golden blacksmith said with a smile and they turned and left the inn.



## Priestess and Woodmaid

Throughout the whole return trip Creon sat lost in thoughts, trying to figure out what had bothered him so much about the young woman he had met. The only antidote to her seemingly deadly beauty was letting himself get lost in the warm memories and green eyes of Aspen.

"I think our friend has been hit hard," Rushtu told Donovan one evening.

"By whom?" Donovan asked. "By that girl?" Rushtu nodded.

"No, not by her," the golden blacksmith said. "He loves another, I know that."

"And who's that?"

"I don't know, but I saw it on his face the moment he entered the smithy. You yourself said that he only met the dark girl that evening."

"Hm," Rushtu grunted, stroking his gray beard, "I believe he's got a problem."

Problem indeed. Creon once more felt the old insecurities creep up and he found the darkness was playing with him again, exploding out once or twice during his practices with Rushtu.

"You've got to control that temper," the blacksmith thundered, "otherwise you'll get yourself killed."

"Tell me about it," Creon snapped, threw down the sword and stalked off to find Hrosca. He finally found the priest feeding the horses in the barn. The old Man stopped his work to listen to him describe the forces he thought were tearing him apart.

"Bah," the old priest waved the subject away with a flick of his wrist, "don't worry about that. I myself went through it and if you're strong enough in your character, then you can stand."

"I don't think so," Creon answered truthfully.

"Well, then you have two things you can do," his mentor said, folding his hands and then pointing his index fingers at the young Man.

"And those are?"

"Lean on Creator God and stay out of *her* way." So Creon did both, at least as well as he could. It worked quite well throughout the spring, since they were busy from dawn to dusk, forging swords, polishing and sharpening them, carefully making steel armor, shields, and spears. Creon sank himself into the work, keeping his thoughts far from both Aspen and Lilya. They only came to torment him at night when he had nothing else to think about.

But the time of sweet seclusion came to an abrupt end in the summer. It was the third day of the week when Donovan poked his golden head into the large courtyard, where Creon and Rushtu were sparring.

"Good morning," he called. The two fighters stopped and Creon reached up to wipe the sweat off his brow.

"And to you," Rushtu roared. "Come to pick up the wares?"

"Yeah," Donovan said, limping over to a the wagon that was piled high with weapons, ornaments, vessels and other things forged by the blacksmiths.

"But I think I'd need some help today," he confessed, favoring his right leg. "I twisted my leg while playing with my sons." Hrosca smiled from his corner where he was working on cleaning some vegetables for the noon meal.

"Creon, you should go," he offered.

"Me?" the young Man asked reluctantly.

"Yes, you. You haven't been out of the smithy in months. You need a break." Creon looked imploringly at the master blacksmith.

"Fine with me," was all Rushtu answered, sheathing his sword and heading back into the quiet smithy. Creon suddenly felt quite unhappy. Going out there would expose him to *her*.

"She could have come here just as well," Hrosca said as if sensing his thoughts. "She knows you work for Rushtu. Maybe she forgot, hm?" *I hope so*, Creon thought.

"Okay," he agreed grudgingly. "Let me put this stuff away."

The market was a lively place, and Creon's spirits instantly lifted at the anonymity he saw and felt there. Men and women bustled all over the place, carrying everything from baskets, shawls and sacks, to full-sized crates and packages that needed to be hauled by several men or put in a cart. People were shouting, praising their wares, bargaining in loud voices, arguing. Creon saw mounds of all colors: fruits and vegetables being sold next to cloth, fur, leather, and clothing. Next to them a potter was at his wheel, creating masterpieces out of shapeless clay, while children and adults alike watched him. There was a man selling fine jewelry and another displaying a strange assortments of skins and furs. Then again there were the people who were selling cows, sheep, goats, pigs, and other meat animals, both dead and alive. There was also a poultry and egg salesman and a pretty young woman selling milk.

The people there were as colorful as their wares. Creon recognized the rough clothing of the Flatlands beside the stately robes of the people of the Northern Provinces, the black and leather uniforms and scarlet cloaks of the soldiers and ....

"Woodfolk!" he cried, pulling on Donovan's sleeve.

"Yes," Donovan answered with a smile, "they are very welcome here, with their fine wood and cloths. But they're mainly entertainers." Now Creon noticed the musical notes of the songs of the Woodfolk wavering in the din. He sat back and happily hummed along. Perhaps Hrosca had been right and his heart soared again.

After he and Donovan had brought their wares to a stand, where they were immediately put on display next to works of other greats like Meshek-Tual or Alrig, Creon left his friend and began walking through the crowded marketplace. After quite some wandering around he found himself standing in front of a curiosity stand, where the man was praising his wares. Strange jewelry was piled around skins and furs. Rare woods, carved into wonderful figures, both mythical and real competed for room with outlandish weapons and trinkets.

"This," the salesman was saying, holding up a skin that looked like that of a snake, only much larger and broader. "This is the skin of a *raptor*, one killed by the hand of Lord Dushman, the Warrior King's champion. The *only* one ever killed! And this," he laid the skin aside and held up a carving of a strange being, half cat, half human, "is a figurine carved by Baltar the Great himself. But here is the greatest treasure, and I only show it to you, dear people." With that he carefully opened a tiny silver chest. Inside the velvet case lay a strange instrument. It was as long as a man's middle finger, thick as a board, and red on the two long sides with a silver band around the narrow center. On one side there was a silver ornament, a cross in a shield. The merchant reverently picked up the instrument and carefully unfolded a silver blade from the top of it, smoother and thinner than any Creon had ever seen.

"This is a sacred instrument," the merchant continued in a nearly breathless voice, "left here by a Voyager. It was created in another world by a great barbaric people. Only Stahl, our great god of iron, knows what it was meant for." He carefully hid the treasure away again and went on praising his wares. As Creon turned to leave, a thin silver chain on the stand caught his eye. There was nothing unusual about it, except for its being very old. Creon thought for a moment. *Should I or shouldn't I?*

"How much for that chain there?" he asked.

"Ah, I see the young gentleman has taste," the salesman pounced on him in a silky voice. *Great!* Creon thought disgustedly, suddenly wanting to forget about it and melt into the crowd. And yet there was something inside him that held him there, that caused him to fight for the chain.

"This chain is one that once belonged to the greatest of the ancient Queens," the salesman said, "the usual price is very high, but for you, dear friend, merely 40 gold pieces."

"You must be kidding, sir," Creon bargained with a laugh, "the silver in that isn't nearly worth one gold piece. I bid 10 silver coins." He had seen better worked chains in Rushtu's neighbor's shop and hoped that he hadn't bid too much.

"I see the gentleman is an expert. Seeing as it is an object of such rarefied antiquity, thirty silver coins surely isn't too much," the vendor crooned.

"Fifteen," Creon returned.

"Twenty-five," the salesman barked. *Good profit for him, but okay,* Creon thought.

"Sold." And he left with it carefully packed in a small leather pouch, itself nearly worth fifteen silver coins. The small amount of pay he received on his journeys had finally found some use.

Creon continued mingling with the crowd of buyers and sellers, sometimes stopping to listen to the people, as they praised their wares. He slowly neared the edge of a small open space in the market. He heard the sparkling tones of a Woodfolk melody wafting over the crowd. He carefully wound his way into the second row and watched the graceful Woodmen and Woodmaids as they performed their dance. In some ways it was similar to those on the island, and yet he sensed a different flavor in their actions. On the island the dance had been for the Creator alone, here it was for the people watching. Creon wasn't exactly sure if he liked that.

They ended their performance, and after a short applause the people began moving on their way. Creon shouldered his way through the crowd to where the Woodfolk were standing, talking to each other and packing up a few requisites.

"Esenlikler?" he said in the Woodfolk language, approaching the oldest Woodman, one with a slight graying at the temples of his golden hair. The man turned and looked at him a bit surprised for a moment, then noticed his clothing.

"Peace be with you, friend," the Woodman returned the greeting, gently touching his chest with his right hand. "I did not know that there were other Woodfolk here."

"Well, I'm not exactly a Woodman," Creon confessed.

"But your clothing is. Let me see ...." The other tapped his chin thoughtfully. "I believe it is from the Silver Bay, eh?" Creon nodded with a smile.

"Creon, *oul Adem*."

"Altin, *oul Cham*," the Woodman answered. "You weren't born among Woodfolk, were you?"

"No, I lived among them for five seasons."

"Yes," Altin said warmly, his face breaking into a smile, "you've learned our language well. You have talent *oul Adem*. So what are you doing here?"

"I – I'm an apprentice of Rushtu Silver-Sword," the young Man answered.

"Ah, yes," a younger Woodman joined the conversation. "The birds told me of a young Man with Woodfolk clothing in Eison." He touched his chest. "Doan."

"Creon." The young Man did likewise. "I have a request."

"Ask, friend, ask," Altin prompted.

"I'd like to send a message to Aga Kavak in the Silver Bay."

"No problem," Doan answered, "just tell a couple of birds, and they'll take the message."

"I never learned to speak with animals," Creon confessed.

"Oh," the younger Woodman replied. "Well, then we'll tell them for you." He looked up and whistled. A couple of sparrows dropped from a rooftop and settled on Doan's hand. He spoke to them calmly and then turned to Creon.

"They can understand you if you speak our language," he directed. Creon nodded, gathering his thoughts.

"Tell Kavak," he began, "that all is well here. We've been in Eison since the beginning of winter, where I'm working as an apprentice to Rushtu Silver-Sword." He paused. "And greet – Aspen, and tell her that I miss her." He paused again, thinking of the red-gold hair, clear oval face, and bright green eyes of his beloved. And for the first time in a long time her memory did not conjure up the dark beauty of Lilya.

"Is that all?" the Woodman asked. Creon nodded.

"We'll tell, we'll tell," came two high voices, making Creon jump, making him stare at the two birds in Doan's hand. Had they really talked? Then suddenly they spread their wings and flew off.

"They'll tell bigger birds, who will tell yet bigger birds, who will take the message to Kavak. And don't worry," Altin encouraged him, "your secrets are safer with them than sealed in parchment."

Creon thanked the Woodmen and slipped back into the crowd. He cast one last glance over his shoulder. Just then one of the Woodmaids bent to retrieve something from the ground. Red-gold hair peeked out from under the hood she was wearing and Creon turned around.

"Aspen?" He tried to make his way through the crowd, but the Woodfolk disappeared among the stands, as if melting into the forest. Creon began to follow, attuning his senses to the surroundings so he could track them, when he felt someone pluck at his sleeve. *Not now!* was all he thought, turned to see what was up, and nearly jumped out of his skin.

"Hi," Lilya said with a smile. "I didn't mean to startle you." She had changed since he had seen her. For one thing she was fully dressed.

"You don't seem too happy to see me," she remarked, putting on a pretty pout.

"Well, I..." Creon began, looking for the right words, "I wasn't expecting you."

"But I was expecting you," she answered, smiling again. They turned and began walking back through the crowded marketplace.

"I thought you said you were from the Flatlands," she told him.

"I am."

"But you certainly weren't speaking Flatlandish with those Woodfolk. I couldn't understand a word of what you said." Her voice seemed to betray distaste.

"I lived among them for some time," he returned vaguely. "And in the Flatlands we speak the same language as you."

"Aha," was all she answered. They walked along silently for a short time. Creon finally decided to get a question off his chest that had been bothering him since he had first met the girl.

"You said you were a priestess. Priestess of what?" Lilya smiled.

"Of Istek," she answered.

"Who?"

"Istek, the goddess of love." Creon forced his memory back to the lore of the gods that he'd known before he'd left on his journey. He remembered that Istek was a daughter of Ebediyen, the goddess of love, whose worship generally involved immoral acts. That this girl would be her priestess sent a chill down his spine and he suddenly wanted to get away, but once more something held him fast.

"Aren't you a bit young for that?" he asked uncertainly.

"Oh, no!" she laughed. "We start when we're twelve, sometimes even eleven. It's quite – some training."

"Aha!" Creon grunted to himself, remembering the few things he'd heard when no one thought he was listening and his distaste heightened.

"And now you tell me something," Lilya prompted. "Why does an apprentice to a blacksmith need to speak the language of the Woodfolk?" *Be careful*, Creon heard a warning voice inside him. *What can I say?* he asked himself, fumbling for words.

"I don't need to know it," he finally answered. "I just learned it while I was living among them."

"And why did you live among them?" she questioned further.

"I was stranded on their island and got sick. They healed me," he returned vaguely.

"Oh." They continued on and passed the curiosity stand. Lilya stopped in front of it and scanned the display.

"It's gone," she said sadly.

"What?"

"That silver chain," she pouted. "And I'd saved up my money for it." Creon instantly felt guilty about having bought it, but something else warned him not to give it to the girl. *She might misunderstand*, he warned himself.

"Oh, well," the girl sighed, "you can't have everything, hm?" With that she slipped her hand into his arm and they continued on down the pathways. The thrill of her touch ignited something in him that had only come when he'd been with Aspen, but strangely this time the guilt stayed away. Suddenly Lilya stopped.

"Uh, oh," she said.

"What?"

"Tsigane, over there." She pointed at a woman with dark blond hair, who was scanning the crowd.

"If she sees me here I'll really get it," Lilya whispered. "I'm supposed to be in my room at the temple. See you later." With that she let go of his arm and disappeared into the direction they had come from. Creon shook his head, the spell wearing off, and was happy to be rid of her, but at the same time he wondered what kind of a person she was. Who was beneath that carefree attitude? He was afraid to find out.



## Summer Daze and Winter Blues

The Lord Summer's reign in Eison produced a beauty that Creon had never experienced before, the light, dry atmosphere of the high Pwyllwood and the nearly always clear days making it a time to cherish. The evenings were like an elixir, the air almost drinkable, much different from the salty breezes of the island or the sweltering heat of Chifchi. And it would have all been perfect, but for Lilya. After that short walk in the

marketplace he had to admit that he somehow liked the dark beauty, but it also woke a feeling of guilt towards Aspen, as he found her sneaking into his fantasies. They were different he reasoned, Aspen like the day, and Lilya like the night. Each was beautiful in her own way, and as night and day each have their secrets, so did these two.

Back at the smithy he tried to sink himself back away from thoughts of either of the young women, because a thought of one brought up the other. He was afraid to leave the place, afraid that he would have to face Lilya again, afraid that he would break something with Aspen – indeed, afraid he'd already done so. But it came differently than he had expected. The seventh day of the week, a day that the priest dedicated to rest, had passed and Creon was sitting with Hrosca, reading in a scroll. It was written in the language of the Werebeasts.

"This sounds like someone with a throat problem," Creon commented with a chuckle.

"Yes, but it also gets your mouth working in a different way," the old priest said gravely. "That is important for learning the other languages." Just then the silver bell suspended above the tunnel to the street rang and Rushtu appeared in the gateway to the smithy, where he had been cleaning up.

"Wonder who that is?" he bellowed and went to open the gate.

"I've got a bad feeling about this," Creon muttered and continued deciphering the strange characters in the scroll. A few minutes later Rushtu reappeared with Lilya in tow, dressed modestly like in the marketplace. Hrosca leaned close to Creon.

"I can see why you're worried," he whispered in the young Man's ear, "she really has something about her." *If only I knew what,* Creon thought to himself.

"Hi!" Lilya said, with a smile.

"Hello." Creon's answer wasn't nearly as enthusiastic, while he desperately scrambled for something to say.

"This is my friend and teacher, Hrosca," he introduced the old Man, trying to get the focus away from himself. Lilya instantly became silent and drawn back as the old priest rose and bowed. Creon noticed the old priest looking at her pensively.

"And you must be the young lady Creon has told me about," he remarked warmly, but Lilya just nodded silently.

"I wonder," the old man continued, "don't I know you from somewhere?" Lilya just shook her head, still mute. The old man looked at her a moment longer and then turned to go.

"I'm just bothering the two of you," he said and added in the language of the Woodfolk, "Watch out, friend, she's not what you think she is." With that he left and instantly the girl began to breathe easier.

"So," Creon asked, trying to make conversation. "How've you been?"

"Fine, fine." Lilya was still looking at where the old man had been. She then turned back to Creon.

"There's a big fair on the meadow in front of the city," she began haltingly. "I was going to go and wondered if you might like to go along." Creon wanted to say no, but the little part of him that was fascinated by the girl prodded him to go. *What harm could it do?* he reasoned, silencing the little voices that were screaming that he was making a mistake.

"All right," he agreed, suddenly feeling relaxed at having made a decision.

"Great!" Lilya answered and gave him a dazzling smile. And a few minutes later they wandered down the empty streets arm in arm.

The fair was actually just a giant market on the open plain before Eison, but, unlike the market in the city, there were great tents pitched and all kinds of people who could do amazing things. One man juggled flaming torches, another swallowed swords, or stuck nails up his nose. There was a woman who could twist and turn her body, so that her feet hung over her own shoulders, and a man who could do magic. There were fortunetellers and storytellers, singers and dancers, but Creon noticed that the Woodfolk were missing and suddenly felt uneasy. What kind of a festival was this?

After wandering around for a while, he and Lilya sat down in one of the large tents and ordered something to drink. Creon looked around, drinking in the strange sounds and sights.

"Well, look who's here," came a voice, making him jump. There was another woman standing in front of the two of them. Creon instantly recognized the flagrant clothing and became very uncomfortable, wondering where he might have seen her before. After searching his mind for a moment, he recognized her as the same woman from whom Lilya had run in the marketplace.

"Creon," Lilya said amiably, "this is my friend, Tsigane." He nodded as the woman sat down. Just then a man came up with two bowls of wine, placed one in front of Tsigane and sat down next to her.

"This is Kypros," she introduced him, patting his hand. Creon nodded.

"I didn't find you at the temple," she began, turning to Lilya, "so I thought I'd look here." She then switched the language. Creon instantly recognized the harsh tongue of the Werebeasts.

"You certainly are taking your time with him," she snapped at Lilya.

"Well, he's different than most," she countered in the same language. "I think I should be gentle."

"All right," the other woman sighed. "But don't forget your job." Creon tried to look indifferent, not letting them notice that he had understood every word they had said. Lilya gave him a radiant smile and apologized for being rude, but he felt cold, knowing that she was hiding something.

"Let's go," he said, rising. The girl nodded.

"Have fun," Tsigane sang as the two young people left.

They continued through the fair, looking at the different stands. The curiosity salesman was there, displaying the same old things like in the marketplace, and so was the potter. They stopped at both places to watch and wonder at the strange trinkets and crafts. A short ways farther there was a small arena that was roped off with a tent at one end.

"Come and see the unbeatable Parthach," a man bellowed. "One silver piece to wrestle him, forty gold pieces if you win."

"He certainly is sure of his business," Creon commented. *Unbeatable, hah! No one's unbeatable.* However, wisdom made the young Man first wait for a contender – a man of humongous proportions.

"I can beat anyone," he boasted. "Let's see if he can beat Urs, the champion wrestler of Eison!" He paid his silver coin and entered the lists, his chest bare. From the other end a little Man with yellow skin and stringy black hair appeared. He looked around shrewdly, spied his adversary and bowed. The command to fight came and the little man took a stance similar to that of the Art of Defense, but Creon's trained eye instantly saw that the little Man did not want to end the fight quickly. Though smooth and cool, he stopped Urs' rushes and punches by hitting and kicking the big man, not through stepping out of the way. Each blow was punctuated by an ear-splitting cry. Finally Urs collapsed and the little Man grabbed his neck. The crier said something in another language Creon did not know and the little Man pulled back, leering, the heat of battle still on his forehead. The way the little man acted, so cruel in his fighting, so abandoned to torturing another, made the darkness rise inside him and Creon felt it tugging him towards the ring.

"Are there any others?" the crier called. Creon let the darkness rise, a grim smile of his own lighting his face as his brow furrowed. This one was begging to be taught a lesson and so he pulled off his jacket and handed it to Lilya.

"You're not going to fight him, are you?" she asked, affecting the airs of someone supremely concerned for another.

"I am," he returned in a voice that just barely betrayed his excitement, "but only to teach him a lesson." He stripped off his shirt and boots and went to the crier. The Man looked him over and laughed.

"Go home, boy," he commanded disdainfully, "or else Parthach will rip your guts out." The darkness now had reached Creon's temples and had slowly begun turning red.

"We'll see if he can," was all he said. He paid his coin and entered the lists. The little Man stared at him for a moment, gave a short, cynical laugh and bowed. The command to fight came and Creon calmly took his stand, fists raised in front of him, one leg forward, the other back. His adversary mirrored his stance, except for the way he held his hands, the fingers straight up. The little Man leaped at him like a panther, quick and

powerful. He tried numerous kicks and thrusts, all calmly warded off by the Art of Defense. They struck and parried for a few moments, trying to measure each other.

Creon slowly began to worry as his adversary had given no sign of openness or anger so far. But, unlike his opponent, Creon was merely standing still, warding off the thrusts. Finally the little Man gave an opening and Creon grabbed it. That was his first mistake. The little Man seemed to have sensed his move and landed a quick jab to the ribs that really hurt. Creon instantly shifted his stance back to defensive, now quickly moving around the ring, trying to tire his opponent. The prizefighter continued the relentless attack, but however hard the hits, jabs and kicks were, they couldn't measure up to the intense pressures that had formed Creon in his training in the Art of Defense or behind the anvil. Though not as strong as Urs, he was cooler and had more endurance than the wrestler. The little Man, however, seemed able to outlast even Creon.

The red behind his eyes was becoming an all-enfolding mist, making Creon nearly launch a stupid attack, but in the pivotal moment Kavak's image and words broke through, and he contented himself with a quick kick that flew high over his adversary's head. The little Man shouted something derisive in his language and pressed to retaliate. The fighting became more serious as each tried to trap the other, attacking, defending, striking, parrying. Then, suddenly the little Man broke through his defenses by switching a kick in the air and pummeling the side of his head. Creon crashed to the ground trying to regain his concentration. He saw the small fist coming toward his neck and was able to roll out of the way in the last second.

His training began to snap into place again as he realized that the little Man was so busy trying to knock him unconscious, that he wasn't watching what Creon was up to. The young Man firmly planted one hand on the ground, leaped back on his feet, then dropped, weight supporting on the outstretched hand, at the same time kicking out with his right foot. The little Man was down in an instant and back up just as quick, but that millisecond gave Creon the chance to slam both thumbs into Parthach's shoulders; he pressed, subconsciously tightening his stomach muscles. The expected punch came, but bounced off his iron abdomen. The little Man jerked back and fell into the dust, unconscious. Creon straightened, shook his hair back and let out a little gasp of triumph before returning to the crier, who was gazing wildly at his champion. Meanwhile two men hurried into the lists and picked up the cataleptic fighter and bore him to his tent.

"He's not dead, is he?" he demanded. Creon shook his head.

"About three hours," he panted. "His shoulders will really hurt, but he'll be fine otherwise." He turned and slowly went back to where Lilya was.

"Wait, your prize," the crier called after him, visibly regaining control of himself. The forty gold pieces were handed to Creon, who accepted them and the cheers of the people with a little bow. Lilya ran up to him, threw her arms around him and kissed him, much to the delight of the people. He was too stunned to push her away, but she broke quickly and bit her lip.

"Sorry," she apologized, looking away.

He dismissed it with an amused smile and pulled his tunic over his head. No sooner had he slipped his arms into his shirt and pulled it on fully than someone tapped him on the shoulder. He turned to see the crier standing there, avarice gleaming in his narrow eyes.

"Excuse me, sir," he inquired, "but would you consider taking over Parthach's job? You could make a lot of money." Creon shook his head.

"Your little Man likes to hurt people," he told the Man seriously. "I thought he needed a lesson that only I could teach him. Maybe he'll give his opponent more of a chance next time." With that he turned and went through the crowd, oblivious of the admiring and jealous glances of the spectators.

Lilya led him to a small tent and sat him down at a table, sliding into the bench next to him, placed her arm in his and leaned her head against his shoulder. Her closeness sent a thrill through him, but now that the redness had dissipated, he felt its old partner, regret, sneaking up.

"I'm sorry I did that," he confessed. "I think I let my pride get away from me."

"But you were wonderful," Lilya said, lacing her fingers through his. He withdrew his hand and slid away slightly.

"Why did you kiss me?" he demanded vehemently. "Do things run that fast around here?" Lilya looked at the ground guiltily, folding her hands in her lap.

"I wasn't thinking. I was just so happy that you walked out of there and not that little *beast*."

*Does she really mean that or is she just "being gentle" to me?* Creon asked himself cynically, remembering Lilya's words to Tsigane before. Then she looked up, a strange, seductive light in her brown eyes.

"But did you like it?" she asked, now gently reaching out and touching his hair. A thrill went through him and he knew that, yes, he had liked it, and yes, he even wanted more. Instantly a voice at the back of his head screamed that he was betraying Aspen.

"I would lie if I said I didn't." He hoped that was evasive enough and tried to change the subject.

"What else haven't we seen here?"

"I think we've seen just about everything," she answered and brushed her fingers against his cheek. And suddenly she was so beautiful in his eyes. It was as if some kind of magnet had been turned on in her and he wanted passionately to kiss her. He called up the red hair and fair face of Aspen, but it didn't seem to work. *I've got to get away!* he thought, and looked away from Lilya noticing the curiosity stand. He focused on the things there and his gaze fell on a small wooden statue of a – Woodmaid? The guilt in his heart doubled.

"It's getting late," he finally told her, "and I should be getting back."

"Okay," she said, but her magic continued to emanate from her. Creon decided he needed to get away and went to pay the bartender. No sooner was he done than a gentle hand slipped into his arm and he looked down to see Lilya staring up at him. Her seductiveness was veiled once more and he relaxed a bit, knowing all along that he shouldn't.

They walked back through the narrow streets of Eison and came to the back entrance to the smithy.

"Well," Creon tried to find a fitting good-bye, "it was a very nice time."

"Let's do it again, hm?" Lilya said, looking up with alluring eyes. *Uh oh*, Creon thought. The magnet was on again and he felt powerless to resist. Lilya wound her arms around him and kissed him again, this time a lot more passionately than before. Then it was as if there was two of him: the first wanted to flee, to get away from this girl, while the latter wanted to stay, find out where it ended. As she pulled away from him for an instant, the first part finally won out and he gently but forcefully extricated himself from the embrace.

"I'll – uh – I'll see you later," he stammered and slipped through the gate.

"I hope so, son of Adem," she whispered to herself. "I really hope so."

"Have fun?" Hrosca asked a bit later, having found Creon was sitting at the kitchen table, playing with the gold coins he'd won. *You of all people should know I didn't*, Creon thought angrily, knowing full well that yes, he did have fun – in more than one way.

"I guess," was all he answered. The old man sat down across from him.

"I'm worried, Creon."

"About what?"

"About you. You've been so drawn back lately. Is there anything you want to talk about?" Creon looked up and saw the old man looking at him with what at any other time he would have recognized as concern, but now felt was condemnation.

"Do you know what happened today?" he hissed. "I beat up a Man. I told myself he needed a lesson, but no it was because I wanted to show my skills and I thought it was fun. I even made money out of it." Hrosca looked at him calmly.

"We all make mistakes, and often they're ones we enjoy."

"Don't you start that!" Creon snapped, pointing a finger at the old man.

"Actually, Creon, I made a much bigger mistake, and a child resulted from it."

"What!?" The young man nearly leaped up from the table. Hrosca looked away, clearly embarrassed at the revelation.

"That's right, I – well – had a relationship with a woman and we had a child," he looked back. "As a matter of fact it was here in Eison."

"But why didn't you marry her?" Creon demanded, stupefied at this revelation.

"I was young, irresponsible, stupid, and afraid. It was before I became who I am," Hrosca answered. "I'm telling you this, not so you will feel better, but so you will see failing is human, even in places where you have made promises to others. Creon there are times to build walls, but not in the way you are now. Build protective walls, walls that will protect you from falling, that keep you from betraying yourself and your promises. You may need to end relationships or not see another person who tempts you. But always, always stay open to others who need you." The old man looked at the table then got up and left. *Build walls*, he had said. Creon decided he'd do just that.

Lord Summer soon graciously yielded his place to his beloved younger sister, Mistress Autumn, and she in turn was being overcome by the cruel hand of Master Winter, before Creon had even noticed it. He had a couple more outings with Lilya, all of which were her suggestion, and she had attempted to touch and seduce him more than once, and, despite Creon doing his best to keep his distance, she sometimes succeeded in exciting him, but many small, propitious incidents kept anything serious from happening. Her persistence scared him, made him think she was desperate for something and that he was the answer to it, but he was afraid to be overcome by her, even if that was the only way to help her. And the worst part about it was that it was now she, not Aspen, who haunted his most private dreams and fantasies. He hated himself all the more for that, wanting to be innocent and to bend his whole desire towards the Woodmaid he truly loved.

"I can't stand it anymore," he told Hrosca. "It always seems one more time and she's got me."

"Lean on the Creator, Creon, lean on the Creator," was all Hrosca answered.



## An Unexpected Friend

Dusk had arrived early, spreading a tinkling chill with the waking of the stars, bringing Mistress Autumn that much closer to transferring her scepter to Master Winter's icy grasp. Creon and Rushtu were cleaning up in the smithy, the young man having thrown a heavy pelt around his shoulders to keep off the chill as he trundled several useful household items across to a storage shed, when the blacksmith came across a brass goblet that he'd created some time ago. He picked it up, admiring the smooth, even proportions. It was unfinished, the inside still needing to have a coating of tin before it could be used, but that was the way it had been ordered. The little man polished it lovingly with a cloth, turning it this way and that to catch the light of the dying fire in the forge.

"Creon!" he bellowed and the young Man came over from where he'd just finished hanging one of the new swords on its rack.

"I have a favor to ask of you," Rushtu thundered, passing the cup to Creon. "This was ordered by Meshek-Tual and I'd like you to take it to him for me." The young Man's eyes grew wide as he turned the plain masterpiece in his hands.

"Meshek-Tual ordered that from you?!" he asked, gaping.

"Sure he does! I order things from him, too, sometimes. Now you'd better get going. The streets of Eison are not exactly safe at night." Creon nodded, dropped the cup into a small sack and hurried to get his heavy winter cloak before braving the chill of the evening.

He left the smithy through the small side gate and went up towards the center of town, passing the market place, where there still was quite a bustle, as the merchants tried to get their wares put away before the last rays of day were gone. Once through the market, he came past the great complex of the Temple of Istek, a many-columned building of white marble surrounded by many smaller buildings of gray and a wall of black stone with great gates made of gold. A *gilded cage*, came the thought, and he wondered where he got the idea. Then he remembered that Lilya might come through that opening any moment and hurried on, around the vast temple compound, where he once again dove into the many small and tangled alleyways. After some searching

he found himself in front of a high wall of stone, very similar to Rushtu's, in which was set a small gate with a handle for a bell beside it. A brass sign declared *Meshek-Tual* in simple yet elegant characters. Creon swallowed once to calm the fluttering in his stomach and pulled the bell. It was the first time he would see this man, this master of the craft, whom Rushtu had told him so much about.

After a few moments he heard the sound of footsteps behind the doorway and then it opened to reveal a boy of perhaps fourteen years of age holding a torch in his hand.

"Yes?" the boy asked, looking up and down his visitor.

"Uh," Creon stammered, trying to remember what he wanted to say. "Rushtu sent me with something that Meshek-Tual ordered." He numbly held out the sack with the goblet.

"Come in," the boy said with a quick smile. "My father will want to receive it from you himself." The young Man stepped through the door and passed into the shadowy corridor that, to his surprise, led right into the house and not into the courtyard as Rushtu's did. *Different builder, different house*, he reasoned.

His young guide swiftly lead him through the passage, and through a store-room where he paused to set the torch into a bracket, after which they stepped into a large, lighted room. A woman was standing by the fire-place preparing a meal and a man sat by the table, writing something on a piece of paper. His face was smooth, clean shaven and his gray hair cropped short. He was rather thin, but his arms and hands were huge, telling of his skill. Creon sensed that there was something gentle about him as he scratched at the paper with his reed.

"Father!" the boy called, perhaps a bit overly loud. The man looked up and glanced at the boy, at his guest, then back at the youngster, and signaled with his free left hand.

"This man is from Rushtu!" his son continued in the same loud voice. The smith turned his soft eyes towards Creon with a smile and gestured.

"I have something for you," he said, holding out the sack. Meshek-Tual cupped one hand to his ear and looked sharply at the young Man.

"You have to speak up," the boy advised, "he's a bit hard of hearing." Creon repeated his message louder and the blacksmith nodded and rose. He was about the same size as Creon and his eyes had a strange quality in their deep blue – a blue that almost looked violet. He touched his right hand to his forehead and then gestured toward the young Man.

"He says thank you," the boy interpreted and Creon suddenly realized that this man could not speak. He passed the sack to Meshek-Tual, who opened it and carefully examined the large cup. He turned it in the light and the brass sparkled. He nodded to himself, set it down and began to wave his hands.

"It is good work, as always," his son translated for Creon. "Rushtu is a master in his art." Then the smith picked up the cup and left the room.

"Can't your father speak?" the young Man asked the boy.

"No, not since he was a child. But in writing and in his art he can speak better than most men with their mouths." *Such deep words from a boy!* Creon thought, forgetting that the age difference between them was not that great. At that moment the blacksmith returned carrying a small leather pouch that looked heavy. He passed it to Creon, who peeked in to see the glint of silver, then glanced back at Meshek-Tual to see him signaling again.

"He says this is something that Rushtu ordered even before my father ordered the goblet. He says to apologize that it took so long, but there were many orders." Creon nodded and smiled.

"Thank you," he called out. Meshek-Tual put his large hands over Creon's and shook them with a broad smile and then his son lead the young Man back out of the house.

"Take care," the boy said as Creon stepped into the street, "and stay away from the temple. The women are very active tonight. It is the festival of winter's beginning."

"Thank you," Creon replied and walked off into the night.

Creon did as he was told and picked his way through the darkened alleys, wishing that he was carrying a torch. Just as the thought came his foot caught on something in the path and he fell flat on his face. As he

pushed himself up off of the grimy street he heard snoring from the obstacle and smelled wine. It was merely a drunk who had fallen asleep after drinking more than his fill. The young man shook his head in a mixture of amusement and disgust and walked on more cautiously. He passed a tavern where loud singing could be heard and then suddenly he saw a light to his right and heard rough voices.

"Aha! There you are at last, Savash. Come, we have something to discuss with you."

"I have nothing to say to you, scum. Now get lost." The voice was angry but it had a much more pleasant quality to it than the first. Creon looked over, curiosity piqued, and saw a young man with long blond hair and the black and leather uniform and red cloak of an officer in the Warrior King's army. He was about Creon's age and stood against the wall of a house with five others surrounding him. One held a torch, the others mostly just stood with their hands at ready. They were dressed in rough clothes, one of them even in the baggy trousers and tight shirt that they wore around the seaport at Midpoint. The one that had his back to Creon was concealing a small club behind him.

"But it's not for us," snapped the man with the cudgel. "My boss says that you owe him for that horse you stole. He wants you to pay up now."

"I have told you 'no' already," the blond man snapped. "I don't owe your boss anything, especially not for that horse. He's a liar and you know that better than I do. Now let me go!" He took two steps forward but was immediately pinned to the wall by two of the men. The leader clicked his tongue and shook his head.

"I see we will have to teach you a little lesson that I was hoping would not be necessary, but you've asked for it." the leader intoned in an overly fatherly voice, and Creon thought he could detect a note of twisted delight in the way he said it and once more the burning started. The ruffian brought out his weapon, shoved it under the blond man's chin, and pushed up slightly. "Now, Savash, you will tell us where those forty thousand gold coins are kept and we'll let you go."

"No!" The stick swung down into the young man's stomach. He nearly doubled over, but the two other men held him straight.

"Where are they? Tell me!"

"No!" The club swung forward again.

"Good evening, gentlemen!" came a good-natured voice from the entrance to the alley. The men all turned and stared at the tall young man with the short, dark hair and a steely gaze.

"Get lost," the leader growled. "This isn't your affair."

"I don't mean to interrupt," Creon said pleasantly, "but I do think it is a bit cowardly for five full grown men to pick on one."

"We didn't ask your opinion," the man in charge snapped and waved one hand. Instantly one of his men leaped at Creon, who merely stepped out of the way and landed a stunning blow to the back of his neck. He collapsed on the spot.

"Any more?" He raised his hands and beckoned, a mocking smile on his lips. That was too much for the leader who rushed at him, swinging his stick wildly. This time the son of Adem did not move, but merely threw one arm up, catching the arm of the other as it came down. He grabbed the wrist and gave it a mighty twist and suddenly the cudgel was on the ground.

"Had enough?" he asked, not even winded. The other man growled and swung his fists at him. Creon dodged them, noticing that his adversary was now drawing his dagger and that the torch-bearer was coming to help his boss. Without warning the young man leaped forward, diving into his adversary's belly and propelling him backwards into his own man. The man with the torch could not get out of the way fast enough and fell down, losing his torch. His leader went down on top of him. Creon jumped over them and retrieved the burning piece of wood. He held it out in front of him like a sword.

"I think that ought to do for tonight," he said, straightening up and taking a single deep breath. It looked like he was only concentrating on the two men in front of him, so one of those holding Savash let go and sprinted forward, but Creon turned and shoved the flame at his chest. Instantly the jacket caught fire and the man worked to tear it off, screaming.

The instant one captor had let go Savash swung his left fist into the chin of the other one, landing a knock-out blow, then grabbed a bucket of stinking water. He emptied it over the head of the man with the burning jacket and pounded it onto his skull in one swift, merciless motion. The man hit the ground with a sickening thud as Savash reached back and drew his silver blade from its scabbard.

"Get out of here!" he snapped at the two men in front of him. They didn't need any more invitation, instantly turning tail and running. Savash turned to Creon who was breathing evenly again and was brushing off his cloak and settling it back into place.

"Thank you, friend," he said with a smile and a little bow.

"Oh, it was nothing," the son of Adem answered placidly, masking the excitement in his voice, but not his eyes. "I thought the odds were unfair and decided I'd even them up a bit."

"You did more than that," Savash chuckled, replacing his sword. "They would have killed me, but if I'd given them what they wanted my commander would have killed me." He paused with a smile. "I like the way you took out that first one!" He laughed again and then stuck out his hand. "I'm Savash."

"Creon," the other answered, taking it.

"I have to thank you, Creon, you saved my life." He hit the young Man on the shoulder and then said, "Come on, I'll buy you a drink." Creon smiled.

"Sounds good." And so they both went into the tavern. It was fairly brightly lit but full of smoke, the haze clouding the faces of most of the patrons. Savash paused, looked around, and noticed a couple of men at the bar. He immediately went up to one of them and slammed his face into the wooden drinking bowl in front of him. The man swung around face red with anger and suddenly went white.

"Hello, Pirath," the blond man said with a grin. "I didn't think you'd still be hanging around here. After all your men *could* have failed." Pirath glowered, trying to keep his composure, but not quite doing so. Savash grabbed his shirt and shoved his face in close to the other's.

"I've decided this is the last time I'll let you go," he hissed. "You try to steal the company's wages one more time and *you are dead*, is that clear?!?" Pirath merely nodded. Savash stepped aside and the thief bolted from the tavern.

"Every man has his enemies," the blond man explained to Creon. "Mine happen to be stupid, inbred, greedy cowards." He turned to the bar, where the bartender had already placed two mugs full of ale. Savash picked them up and led his new-found friend to a table where Creon sat down just a bit uneasily.

"Here's to my rescuer," the blond man said with a grin and raised his mug. Creon just smiled ruefully and took a drink. The ale tasted rather stale, making him decide that this place was *not* a good tavern at all.

"I take it you're not from Eison," Savash prompted.

"No, I'm from the Flatlands." Creon pushed the mug off to one side. "Chifchi." Savash shrugged.

"Never heard of it. I'm from the Western Nation myself." He shook his head. "Man, what a world: a Flatman and a Wessy in the Pwyll. You can't get much stranger than that."

"What did they want from you anyway?" Creon asked.

"Them?" the other grunted derisively and jerked his thumb towards the door. "They wanted me to be a traitor to the army and tell them where we keep the wages of the soldiers. I can't do that." He drew himself up straight, blue eyes serious. "As an officer you always have to be loyal, even when there is a lot of money behind the offer."

"Aha." Creon sat back, now at ease.

"It's good to know your enemy and if he's as good as you or better – make peace!" Savash leaned forward. "To tell you the truth, Creon, after what I saw tonight, I don't think I'd like you as my enemy. It would be too dangerous. Just think of you with a sword!" He shook his head and leaned back again. "And what do you do?"

"I'm a blacksmith's apprentice." Savash eyed him carefully.

"Wait, let me guess, you're the guy that is living with Rushtu Silver-Sword, right?" Creon nodded and swallowed in a small pang of fear.

"Ah, yes, I bet the old man isn't only teaching you about horse-shoes, hammer and tongs. He's an excellent sword-master."

"True." Something about this man now made Creon wary. He seemed so frank and open, but his blue eyes had a hard quality to them, making it seem as if he wasn't looking at Creon, but *through* him. The young Man pushed the thought away from himself, deciding it was merely his imagination and that Savash was one of the few people in the army that possessed a good heart.

"Oh, to think I'd find *you* here!" It was a girl's voice that interrupted his thoughts and he turned to see Lilya standing there in her revealing dress, eyes shining with delight. Savash eyed her shamelessly.

"Hello there, Lilya," he said with a grin. "Are you looking for work?"

"I'm not talking to you, handsome," she returned with a wave of her hand and bent down in front of Creon, giving him a full view of herself. He swallowed and looked away, hoping she would leave. Guilt dug its claws into him as he tried to stave off the fantasies. *Creator God, get her out of here before I lose control!* he screamed silently. Savash suddenly grabbed her around the waist and sat her down on his lap.

"Let me go, Savash!" she squealed.

"I thought you wanted some company," he answered with a lusty smirk, trying to nuzzle her.

"Not yours, stupid. I was just saying hi to Creon. And anyway someone's waiting for me upstairs. Now let go!" The blond man sighed and let the girl go. She stood up and angrily brushed her hands against her dress, then smiled at Creon and blew him a kiss before floating off into the mist. He breathed out and suddenly realized he'd been holding his breath.

"Ah, yes, Lilya," the other said with a dreamy smile. "She's the life of the party."

"I don't care," Creon returned and then took a deep draught from that tasteless ale. Anything was better than having to deal with Lilya right now!

"Hey, I think she likes you, Cree," Savash pointed out. "And she's not bad, either – well, except for her job, if that bothers you. But you can't have everything, you know."

"I've heard that from her once and I wish she'd realize that she can't have me!" the son of Adem snapped back, still bristling. It was with supreme effort that he finally brought his quills back down.

"Oho, so you've already got one!" Savash laughed. "And...?"

"I don't want to talk about her."

"Okay, I won't probe any deeper." The blond man leaned forward, now serious. "Creon, I want you to know that I really appreciate your risking your life for me. They would have killed you for sure if you'd failed. I hope that we can be friends." Those hard eyes had suddenly gone soft and were now frank and clear, seemingly unable to hide anything and Creon decided that his assessment of the soldier was correct.

"Yes, Savash, I think it would be nice." The other leaned back and smiled.

"There are few people who would admit to being my friends. It's often lethal."

"Well, you've got to start somewhere. I don't have many either." Strangely Creon knew that he must open himself to this man. He needed help. *What is it, Creator God? How can I help him?* He sensed that this was merely the beginning of something greater, and so they spent some more time making small talk and suddenly Creon found himself telling about his home and his parents. A strangely empty feeling washed across him and he suddenly realized that, yes, he did miss them. He went silent and stared ahead of him thoughtfully.

"I guess your Dad isn't that bad after all," Savash remarked after a few moments. "You look like you miss him." Creon just shrugged, not wanting to answer that, because right now the hatred was pressing back again, despite his efforts to control it and to forgive.

"There are times when even I miss my father," the blond man continued. "And that's hard to do." The dark one looked up, surprised.

"Yeah, when he ignores you it isn't easy, but then again he's a man with a passion and I hope that I at least have gotten that from him..."

"Commander Savash!" They looked up to see a smart-looking soldier standing beside their table. Savash glared at him.

"Yes?"

"This message just came in. You ordered..."

"I know, I know. Now get back to camp. I'll be coming along." He snatched the roll of paper from his subordinate and broke the seal. His blue eyes flashed across the paper and suddenly became very hard and cold again.

"Well, that does it," he growled. He glanced at Creon. "I've been ordered back to Elamil. I have to leave in the morning." They both rose. "Sorry that our meeting was only this short." Creon nodded and they left the small inn, where they shook hands once more.

"You think we'll see each other again, Creon?" Savash asked.

"I am certain of it," the son of Adem answered, not knowing where his certainty came from. Savash nodded with a smile and they parted company.

"What took you so long?" Rushtu demanded when Creon finally got back to the smithy.

"Sorry, I just had to help someone who had a big problem with some thugs."

The blacksmith shook his bald head and grimaced.

"And who was it?"

"A guy named Savash." Rushtu spun around in shock.

"Who?"

"His name was Savash. He's an officer in the Warrior King's army."

"Well, I'd say!" The blacksmith's voice was really loud now and full of agitation. "That 'officer' happens to be the Warrior King's own son. Good job of you to save *his* life!" Creon's mouth dropped open. The Warrior King's son! His enemy's heir and he'd become friends with him. What was he *thinking*? Then he remembered that feeling he'd had and knew that this time it was right to be friends with a potential enemy.

"Sorry to disappoint you, Rushtu," he said quietly, "but I'd have helped the Warrior King himself if he'd been in that situation. And if I know you, you'd do the same." The blacksmith just grunted, threw his hands up and went back into the house, muttering something about good-hearted fools. Creon stared into the night.

"You really have a strange way with us, Creator God," he whispered. "To think that I should be a friend to one of my greatest enemies." He shook his head and went in out of the cool.

As the days passed Creon stayed out of Lilya's way as much as he could. He only met her twice more, each time in very public places so that she could not tempt him too much. He declined her invitation to head off somewhere "more private," frustrating her so much that it just exploded out of her one evening when she was sitting with Tsigane.

"I can't understand it," she confessed. "No man has ever been able to stand against me. Why can he?"

"Now you understand how we feel sometimes," the older priestess answered vehemently. "But," she said a bit more gently, "I think there's more than usual involved. You love him, don't you?" Lilya blushed. *How does she know?* she asked herself, but then instantly the old feeling of disdain snapped back in place.

"I'll show you how much I love him," she hissed. "I'm going to give him one invitation and if he resists again...." She drew a finger across her neck.



## Dance and Die

**M**aster Winter's tyranny had spent itself and he was just yielding to the intoxicating airs of Lady Spring when Rushtu announced that he'd taught Creon all that he knew.

"You are an amazing student, boy," he roared, thumping his pupil on the shoulder. "When it comes to the sword you've learned what most men take years to perfect in just under a year. I've never seen anyone do that before! But smithing, eh..." He shook one hand back and forth. "You have the muscles, but I think you lack the heart." Creon smiled at that.

"I'm a farmer at heart, Rushtu, just a farmer," he admitted.

Still, Creon sank into his bed thankfully that night, because Rushtu had pushed him harder than ever before, driving his skill to the brink, simply to test if his instincts had been true. He came awake at midnight, hearing a soft voice call his name. Almost involuntarily he rose, dressed, and silently left the smithy, slipping down the ethereal streets until he found himself at the city gate. The guard was dozing, so Creon slipped through the small portal, keeping it from latching so he could return. He stopped and looked around and was instantly transfixed by what he saw.

There before him was a Woodmaid with flowing red-gold hair, dressed in a knee length, sleeveless dress with a green tree embroidered on it and a green belt, stepping her part out in the spring dance. He heard her humming the melody, remembered the harmony that the men had sung, and joined in. She stopped and he called her name.

“Aspen.” She smiled and began singing another tune, Creon recognized this also, the tune to the dance that they had danced when the child had been born. He joined in and took his part in the dance, this time realizing the significance of each and every step, each movement. Aside from brushing fingers and lifts, they hardly touched, but a broken bond formed again in Creon’s heart, and the guilt of his meetings with Lilya became all the more poignant. And yet he couldn’t stop, he had to go on, had to declare his love to this woman fully. Then suddenly Aspen stopped, dizzy. Creon caught her up in his arms.

“I thought I’d never see you again,” he whispered in her ear.

“Me neither.” The voice was like music to him.

“Oh, Aspen, forgive me,” he said. “I have betrayed you.”

“How?” she asked. He sat down on the soft new grass, pulled her onto his lap, and began to tell her about Lilya and the things that had happened since he had met her. Aspen sat quietly, stiffening a bit as he described what he’d done, but then relaxing once more as she heard the contrition in his voice. His guilt came to the fore and he buried his head in her shoulder, tears flowing freely.

“Forgive me, my darling, forgive me,” he sobbed. “I tried, oh, I tried so hard not to let anything happen.”

“Creon,” she whispered, gently stroking his dark head. “It must have been hard for you, love, but remember this, that I love you and that I forgive you for anything and everything you have done.” He looked up at her, tears still running. She then kissed him gently and he knew that all was well.

“I missed you so much,” she told him breathlessly, her own emotions choking up her voice. He then noticed that she was shivering.

“You’re cold.” Aspen said nothing, just held on to him, her head resting against his and they were quiet for a long time, just enjoying each other’s company. Then Aspen looked up, noticing that the moon had nearly run her course.

“I’ve got to go.” She pulled herself away.

“But you just got here,” he protested, rising with her.

“Creon remember me,” she pleaded. “I’m thinking of you always.” With that she kissed his cheek and vanished into the dark.

“Don’t go!” he cried, reaching out towards the form that now became a wraith, vanishing into the spring mist rising from the field.

“Creon!” Someone was shaking his arm, but he just rolled over and tried to continue to sleep.

“Creon!” He recognized Hrosca’s voice and opened one eye.

“Whaddayawant?” he mumbled sleepily.

“The sun’s been up for a quite a while and you’re still asleep,” the old man chided. Creon rolled on his back and looked up, remembering the dream he had.

“Man, what a dream!” he said, happily looking up at the ceiling. He sat up and winced, suddenly realizing he was sore.

“Ow, I feel like I’ve danced all night,” he groaned, pressing a hand to his aching back.

“With Aspen, I suspect,” Hrosca surmised with a smile. Creon blew out a little chuckle.

“How’d you know?”

"If it had been Lilya it would have been a nightmare," the old priest said with a shrug. "Now get ready for the day. Rushtu's waiting for you." Creon happily got out of bed, sore as he was, and suddenly noticed that he was fully dressed. *Was it really a dream?* he wondered, uncertain. He felt light, his guilt gone, knowing that Aspen had forgiven him and still loved him dearly. *Today is going to be one excellent day!* he decided and went to the well to wash up.

As he went through his routine something kept coming to mind about Lilya and her persistence in trying to seduce him. He found himself working alongside Donovan, carefully polishing a set of helmets that Rushtu had poured the night before.

"Donovan, what do you know about the priestesses of Isteck?" he asked and the golden smith grimaced.

"Too much, I must say. My mother's sister was one for a while, and my wife's cousin still is." He held up the helmet he was working on and let the light reflect in the clean surfaces before going on, "Why do you ask?"

"Well, I've been thinking about Lilya and how she's been after me," the young Man admitted, picking up another helmet and carefully applying his rag and polish to it. "I just wondered if that was normal for a priestess to do." That brought a laugh from his companion.

"Normal for a priestess is to wait for the men and women to come and worship the goddess." He shook his head. "I have heard of priestesses on the prowl, but I think that is a breach of their duties and could lead to excommunication. They are holy to the goddess not to a single man." Creon grimaced at that thought.

"Do you think you could find out *why* Lilya is after me?" he asked after a moment. "You know, your wife's cousin...."

"Sure, that shouldn't be a problem," the blacksmith replied. "Just give me a day or two."

Winter was officially over before Creon saw the priestess again. This time it was he who looked her up, at the temple none-the-less. When Lilya saw him coming her heart leaped, thinking, *He's finally coming to me!* But then she noticed the serious look on Creon's face and drew back.

"Hi," she said shyly.

"Hello," Creon returned evenly. "Lilya, I've come to tell you something. You probably won't like it." There was a gravity to his voice that she'd never heard before and a chill ran down her back. She hid it as best she could, gave him a questioning look and gestured towards a large, U-shaped marble bench, where they sat down.

"I think I may have been leading you on that I am interested in you," Creon began. "That's not true. You see, when I was living with the Woodfolk, I met this girl, Aspen. We fell in love, and I –" *Was it really that much?* he wondered, but then decided it was. "I promised I'd marry her when I returned." *There, I've said it,* he told himself triumphantly.

"So?" Lilya asked, nonplussed. That shook his resolve just ever so slightly, so his reply was a bit harsher than he had originally intended.

"So, I don't think you should look me up any more!" Lilya just looked at him and laughed, carefully covering up the anger that was now rising in her chest.

"My dear Creon," she said in an almost motherly tone, "I can see you really are out of the sticks. Marriage has never been a barrier to worshipping the goddess – never, and every man needs to worship her at least once in his life. It ensures his fertility and," here she looked down for a moment, "the blessing of a priestess on his marriage to come." Creon cringed at those words. *Lies, all lies*, he heard a voice screaming inside him.

"Now I can understand that you love this girl and would want your first time to be with her, but don't you think I'm beautiful, too?" She aimed her seduction at him with all her strength, reaching out to rest a hand on his thigh, but this time the attraction bounced off without effect.

"Yes, Lilya," Creon affirmed, gently but forcefully taking her wrist and placing her hand back into her lap. "You are beautiful, but I also heard that your seeing me has to do with a specific wager, something about me getting to sleep with you."

"Wha – how did you find out?!" she demanded, going completely pale, her eyes burning, and her little fists coming up, ready to strike.

"I asked. Listen, priestess, I know your views on marriage, relationships and so on, and they don't match up to those of Creator God. He decreed one man must love one woman for life and have no other, whether in thought or in deed. For that reason I will tell you that, whatever you do, I'm not interested."

"Well, at least let me explain," she interjected angrily, wanting to justify herself.

"I don't need an explanation," he retorted. "I know all about it and what the motivation was."

"But you *don't*!" she sputtered. "*I love you, don't you get it?!*" She was now on her feet, glaring at him. He looked up at her and sighed, realizing that, for once, she was telling the truth.

"I don't want to hurt you, Lilya," he told her gently, "but I've given my heart away and I can't do that twice. And as you once said, you can't have everything. So good-bye." He got up and turned to leave, not noticing the ugly look that now slipped into her features.

"Creon," came her sharp voice from behind him, "if you leave now, you'll never see your Woodmaid again." Creon turned just enough so he could see her and there was a calmness inside him, greater than he had ever felt before.

"Priestess," he said with conviction, "I'll see her again, some day." With that he turned and left. Lilya stared after him, eyes smoldering with the rejection. She then buried her face in her hands and cried for a while, but when she finished her resolve had hardened beyond breaking. *If I can't have him, no one can*, she thought and returned to her cubicle.

Creon thought he could take off and fly, such was the relief when he left the many-columned temple at the edge of the city. He had finally confronted his problem and solved it and he returned to the smithy humming the tune to the dance. Everything was all going to be right.

When he returned Hrosca received him at the gate.

"Did it go well?" the old man asked and Creon nodded with a smile.

"I think it's over," he affirmed.

"Good, and just in time," the priest returned. "We're leaving in two days. You'd better get your things together." Creon did as he was told, collecting some of the small things that he had made, brought, or bought during his stay. While he was cleaning up he came across a small leather pouch. He carefully opened it and out tumbled the tarnished silver chain he had acquired from the curiosity stand. *Why'd I buy this?* he asked himself. But try as he might, he still could find no explanation, so he just put it back in the bag and slipped it into his belt. The rest of the day was spent cleaning up and finishing the most important work in the smithy. The following morning he was helping out in the smithy, shoeing his final horse when Donovan called to him.

"Yeah?" he answered, looking up briefly.

"There's someone who wants to see you in the house," the blacksmith told him and Creon nodded.

"I'm almost done here. I'll be right in," he called back.

As soon as he'd completed his task, he went into the house and headed toward the room where they usually ate. For some reason he halted before entering the room and that saved his life. A huge blade swung across the opening of the doorway and buried itself in the wooden doorpost. He shook, wanting to get away, but at the same time the darkness began to pulsate inside him and his curiosity arose. Who was that and what was going on? So he ducked under the sword and into the room. There was a short person in a dark cloak, face covered with a cloth and gloves on the hands trying to pull the big bi-hander out of the door. He reached over to pull the mask from his adversary's face, but just in that instant the sword came loose and swung towards his head. Creon dropped to the ground and rolled sideways. The sword pinged off the flagstone behind him.

*I need a weapon*, he thought, wildly looking around the room. There were none in the usually cluttered room – he and Hrosca having recently cleaned it. So he dodged, ducked and leaped the sword, frantically looking for a weapon of some kind. Suddenly he spotted one: it was a sword on display above the fireplace. Rushtu had never touched it, and neither had he, but he needed it now. In that moment the sword hit his left arm, cutting into the flesh. Creon let himself fall away from the stroke, minimizing the damage and landing on the flagstone. Blood poured from the wound and he quickly rolled away. The sword was still hanging on the wall across the room. He remembered the trick that he had used against Shau-nee. It should work now, too.

Adrenaline poured through him and his pain diminished, so he let go of his bleeding arm and started running across the room, just before he reached his adversary's sword he vaulted over the small person in a full salto mortale, landing in front of the fireplace. He grabbed the sword with his right, and for an instant was amazed at how light it was. The big bi-hander was swinging towards him and he blocked the blow easily. His adversary was clearly tiring, while his surging adrenaline dulled the pain and enhanced his strength. He kept up the defensive play for a few more minutes, then swung the light sword with all his might. It struck the big sword and the room was filled with a sound like the peal of a bell. The bi-hander broke in two, the shorter end with the hilt spinning out of the little person's hand and crashing into the wall. The little person turned and tried to run, but a sharp point in the back made Creon's adversary stop.

"Turn around and take off the mask," Creon ordered. The little person pulled one big glove off a small white hand, then reached up and jerked the cloth away from the face and the cowl down. Ebony hair fell down the back and dark brown eyes looked at Creon with a mix of fear, disdain, and mockery.

"Lilya!" he exclaimed, dropping the sword.

"Didn't I tell you you'd never see her again," the girl growled, putting up a front, but for the first time in his life Creon saw past all that. He saw the hurt little person, who was angry for having lost the love and knowledge she had wanted.

"Oh, Creator God," he whispered, "she must really hurt."

"What did you say?" the girl demanded.

"You must really hurt," Creon repeated, and suddenly realized that he had hurt in the same way, losing the love he had wanted from his father.

"Lilya, you're hurt," he told her. Her smile was mocking.

"I'm not hurt, you are," she retorted. Creon touched his bleeding arm and shook his head.

"Not in that way, Lilya. You're hurt in here." He pointed towards her heart.

"You know?" The dark eyes now grew wide. Creon nodded.

"Creator God showed me and I've been hurt in the same way, though not by a girl, but by my father."

"I never knew my father," Lilya confessed, breaking into tears. Creon's being able to identify with her broke down the carefully constructed façade. She then touched his arm and he winced.

"You're bleeding," she said. "Here, take off your shirt." He painfully peeled the tunic off and pulled his pouch from his belt. He opened it and took out some herbs.

"Put these in some hot water and put it on the wound," he directed. "It'll help it to heal." Lilya did as she was told while Creon reached into a box behind him and retrieved a needle and thread. The girl then washed, stitched, and bandaged the wound, all the while telling about herself.

"My mother was a priestess," she began, "the daughter of a freed priestess. She only fell in love once and I'm the result. I never knew my father, but I hate him for leaving my mother. It seems all men are like that."

"No," Creon cut in, "not all men."

"That's easy for you to say," the girl said bitterly. "You're a man."

"True, but I know men who stay with the women they love, my father for one, and his father, and Kavak." He leaned forward and took her hand. The words he spoke seemed to come from some other source.

"Listen, Lilya, we all get hurt, often. All I was to my own father was a slave. He never once told me he loved me, he never once held my hand, he never once let me do something that I wanted to do. It was hard for me. It was through Aspen that I learned to love and through Kavak, the leader of the Woodfolk, that I finally got a father, but it was Creator God that engineered it all. I know you've served the goddess of love as a 'priestess,' no, more a prostitute. All the while you were seeking true love. That's why you wanted to find out the identity of your father. But let me tell you about the *real* God of love. He doesn't have anything to do with the physical 'love' that people seek from you 'priestesses,' he *is* love, all you have to do is believe in him and serve him."

"But how?" she asked.

"I – I don't know," he confessed, "but as soon as I find out, you'll be the first one I'll tell."

"I can tell you," came another voice. They turned to see Hrosca was standing in the doorway.

"You need to live a pure life before him," he explained, "keeping from the sins of this world."

"But how?" Lilya asked again.

"It is written in the books of the law in Shion, *'Love the Creator with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbor as you love yourself.'*" the old priest explained. "Basically you must believe that he is the only God and that he will carry you through all walks of life, hm? That is easy enough. The rest will come by itself." Lilya looked a bit perplexed, but her face cleared after a moment.

"But I don know how to love," she sputtered. "I never had anyone show me!"

"Well, it's something that's learned," the priest replied. "Our parents teach us..."

"But I never *had* any parents!" she growled, eyes flashing. "How could I have learned?" She then buried her face in her hands. "And all I wanted was to know who my father is," she sobbed. Creon glanced at Hrosca who hesitantly put an arm around the girl's shoulders. She instantly melted into his fatherly embrace, her tears staining his dark robe.

"The One God is a father to us all," he sighed softly. "He has said many times, *'I am a father to the fatherless and a husband to the widow.'* He takes care of us, each and every one." And then he was silent, gently rocking her back and forth until the pain began to decrease and she became still. She rested against him, relishing the warmth of someone who loved her – not as the worshippers of the temple did, but as a father might. She sniffled and then sat up, pushing back her hair and looked at Hrosca.

"Thank you," she whispered, then paused. "Is your Creator like you?" The priest looked at Creon and the two of them exploded into good-natured laughter at the innocent question. Lilya looked from one to the other, bewildered.

"Did I say something wrong?" she asked timidly.

"No, my dear," Hrosca replied, gently resting a hand on her shoulder. "It's just that I've never been asked that before." He sobered a bit, but the mirth still tugged at his lips. "It's not that the Creator is like me, but perhaps that he has made me like himself." He gently mussed her hair as he spoke and Creon noted the warm delight that settled in her eyes. "He became a father to me, just as he can become yours," the priest explained. "My father was killed by a jealous friend when I was ten, so I didn't know him and for years I searched for a father, finding one first in my teacher in the dark arts, then later in the priest who told me about my Creator. But they all died and I found myself fatherless again." He sighed. "It was then that the One God taught me that he was to be my eternal father, the one whom I could always trust in to be there, who would always listen to me."

"But I can't see him!" Lilya protested. "I need someone to see and touch!"

"Perhaps now you do, child," the old man said in a warm, fatherly tone. "He will provide you with a father-figure when you need it, if you'll let him." She looked at Hrosca and blushed.

"All right," she said after a moment. "I'll give him a try." Creon smiled broadly. "But there's still a lot to learn about, isn't there?" she wanted to know.

"Well, yes," the priest agreed, "but there are able teachers, Donovan and Rushtu being two of the many in Eison. They can teach you about what a godly life is. They can help you." And he leaned close and whispered in her ear. Her eyes first became guarded.

"You're kidding!" she exclaimed.

"No, I'm not," the old man replied. "It's true."

"If you say so," she muttered, pushing her lower lip out.

"All right," came Rushtu's loud voice. "Mushy reconciliation scene is over, let's get back to work." Creon turned to Lilya.

"And what about you?" he asked. "Where will you go, back to the temple?" Lilya shook her head.

"No, I'm not a priestess any more," she admitted. "I neglected my duties by chasing after you and Tsigane was going to tell the high priestess, so I turned in my belt and my robe and was discharged this morning." She sighed. "The only way I know how to earn wages is with my body."

"You never learned any other tasks while at the temple?" Creon asked, surprised. What kind of lunacy was that?

"Well, sure, every once in a while we had to clean and wash and cook just like any other woman, but that was just something along the side. My talents really aren't that great."

"That's not a problem," Rushtu bellowed. "With Creon and Hrosca leaving, I'm going to need someone to take over the wizard's duties in the house."

"You cooked?" she asked Hrosca who gave a little smile.

"And cleaned a bit, but it wasn't what you might call perfection," he admitted.

"Well, if *he* can do it so can I," Lilya exclaimed with a broad, open smile that sent her eyes a-dancing. "I'll be glad to stay." At that moment Creon sensed something had changed about her. She was no longer a "dark" beauty, an evil beauty any more, but a "light" beauty, a clean beauty. He smiled to himself and picked up the sword he had used.

"A true masterpiece," he said, more to himself than to anyone else.

"Yes," came Rushtu's loud voice. "That's Justin." He was now standing next to Creon and gently, lovingly took the blade from him, weighing it first in one hand, then the other.

"That?" Creon asked. "I thought that you gave it away."

"Yes, but the prince died and had it returned to me. I decided that it would belong to the first to use it. So now it's yours." He passed it back to Creon whose mouth dropped open.

"Mine?" Rushtu nodded with a broad smile, his bald pate glowing with delight.

"Thank you," was all the young Man could stammer and he swung the sword around with his uninjured arm, relishing the balance, the swing, the lightness.

"You're welcome," Rushtu grinned, "but I need someone to hold the next horse, so let's get moving. You're not out of my service until tomorrow morning."

# Six: City of Stone

## The Shadow

Dawn was wearing gray this morning, hiding behind the clouds, seemingly sad at the fact that the two travelers were taking their leave from Eison. Donovan had come over just to see them off. He, Rushtu, and Lilya stood in the small entrance to the smithy while Creon looked around at the streets that had become so familiar to him. He shifted the new weight of the blade on his back, thinking wryly how that was something he would have to get used to. He then looked at his friends and one-time enemy and began his farewell with Donovan.

"Creator God protect and guide you, my friend," the golden blacksmith said.

"And you," Creon replied and turned to Rushtu.

"A sword is only worth its warrior, Creon," the master blacksmith bellowed, "so don't forget what you learned."

"I won't," the young Man affirmed and then turned to Lilya, unsure what to say to her.

"This is good-bye, isn't it?" she asked. Creon nodded.

"Thank you, Creon." Lilya was smiling. "You've given me much more than any others have without giving me what I thought I wanted." She shook her head. "It really wasn't even what I wanted, was it?" The young Man shook his head, a broad smile on his lips.

"I'll miss you," she whispered and kissed him again. He let her, knowing she needed it as a symbol of the end of their relationship.

"I won't forget you, Lilya," he promised when she pulled away. "Some day you'll find your man." Lilya nodded and brushed at her face. Creon and Hrosca looked at each other.

"Shall we go then?" the young Man asked. His mentor nodded and they began to walk away.

"May the Almighty Creator protect and guide you," Rushtu called after them. The travelers turned back for a moment.

"And you," they echoed and then faded into the gray.

They moved along quickly, sleeping under the stars and eating from the earth. Creon delighted in being in the wild woods again, relishing the open air and lack of walls. He had forgotten about their shadow a year earlier and was quite surprised when his instincts warned him that there was someone following them once more. He began to backtrack again and the same old game of hide-and-seek began. The only difference was that he often found single holly leaves on the ground. These certainly must point towards something, he reasoned, but what?

"Maybe our shadow is trying to give a clue about himself," he suggested to Hrosca.

"That would be a strange shadow if he did," the old priest answered. At that point Creon recalled an idea he'd had while they were in Eison, but he had pushed it back out of his mind. Now he wondered if it would work.

"How long 'til new moon?" he asked Hrosca.

"Two days, why?"

"Even the best Woodman can't see when there's no light," the young Man answered with a wink and a sly smile.

The two days passed quickly and in the evening of the new moon Creon went into the wood ahead of them to "gather wood." He went along, picking up some dead branches here and there while carefully looking for a good place to hide, and spotted a small bower, right next to the path, but almost invisible to any traveler. The young Man decided that he'd gathered enough fuel and turned back, carefully counting each step he took. He came back to the camp, where Hrosca had already kindled the fire and was already getting out supper and the customary scroll.

"I think your plan is good, Creon," he told the young Man, "but the straw dummy isn't really going to work. I wonder if...."

"No!" Creon cut the old Man off, guessing what he was thinking. "You promised you'd never use the Dark Arts again."

"All right, all right," Hrosca said, holding up his hands. "It was only a suggestion."

Night soon spread her cloak over all and the two Men went through the usual motions of reading in a scroll. By now Creon had mastered the three of the languages that were still alive, and had a rudimentary grasp of two others and one of the easier ones that weren't spoken any more, and was now trying to comprehend the complicated language of the priests. He didn't like it very much and was happy that even Hrosca was too excited to pull a full lesson through. They rolled themselves in their blankets and Creon found himself asleep, even though he hadn't thought he could close his eyes for a second.

A light nudge awoke him, and he blinked his eyes open, pulling his cloak more tightly around him. After a few moments he realized that it was the darkest part of the night, shortly before dawn. The fire had burned down low and he carefully rolled away from it into the shadows. He then silently stood, turned, and entered the woods behind him. He felt the first tree and began counting.

"One ... two ... three ..." The forest was so dark and quiet that a chill ran over his back. He blinked back the fear and continued keeping track of his steps.

"Ninety-seven ... Ninety-eight ..." *Am I going in the right direction?* he wondered.

"120 ... 121 ..." *Almost there ...*

"127 ... 128!" He dove into the brush to his right, felt around, and let out a sigh of relief. It was the bower he had picked. He quickly turned his cloak inside out, exposing a patchwork of greens, browns, and grays of its inside, created just to hide a person in the woods. He wrapped himself in the wide, warm cloak and laid his head down.

He even slept some and came awake with a start, looking around, trying to remember where he was. Pale light was slipping through the trees, mingling with the ethereal mists to make him wonder if this was a dream, but then he heard footsteps along the path. He hunkered down again and cautiously peeped out among the bushes to see two Men coming along the path. He could hear them talking. He instantly recognized Hrosca's voice and, with a chill along his spine, realized that the other was *his own* voice. The two Men strode by the bower and headed off into the forest. Then all was silent for what seemed a long time. Stiffness began to set in and Creon was just about to shift his position when he heard a light, almost silent footfall. He again peered out among the branches and saw a cloaked figure nearly floating along the path. There was a familiar aura to this person, but he couldn't quite place it. He moved as silently as he could into a crouch. The shadow didn't seem to have heard. Creon again looked at the person coming along the path.

*I know that gait!* he said to himself, but this was no time to think, just concentrate on the right moment. The shadow was nearly there and Creon moved again, shifting his weight so as to jump better. The dark figure paused.

*He heard me,* he thought and cursed silently. But no, the shadow began walking again. A few more steps....

Creon suddenly let loose, crashed through the bushes, and bowled the light figure over. The shadow just used his own momentum and hurled him off. The young man instantly was on his feet, ready to fight and finally took a look at his adversary. The hood had fallen back and the face of a Woodmaid stared back at him, set in an angry, determined scowl. Creon blinked, looked again, and then his mouth dropped open, even as his hands lowered.

"Aspen!" he demanded "What are you doing here?!"

The two walked along the path, Aspen looking at the ground in front of her feet and Creon staring straight ahead, right fist opening and closing rhythmically. It took some time before Aspen dared steal a glance at him. His dark hair had grown longer again and the new beginnings of a beard dotted his face. She could see him clench his teeth and felt the heat of his anger.

"You're mad at me, aren't you?" Aspen finally asked.

"Your powers of observation are overwhelming," he snapped back.

"But why?" The absurdity of his feelings suddenly became apparent to him and he had to laugh at that but she continued before he could answer.

"I thought you'd be happy to see me." That stung and the young Man found himself looking down into his feelings. Why wasn't he happy that she was here? After all he had fought a great battle with his feelings over Lilya and Aspen and the Woodmaid had won. Why was he now mad that she'd turned up? He couldn't answer that question and decided it was irrelevant. He forcibly pushed his anger away and turned to her.

"I don't really know why I was mad, Aspen..."

"Was?" A wry smile played around her lips. "The Creon I know wouldn't squelch his anger *that* quickly."

"Well, this one does and, yes, I'm very happy to see you." And with that he took her into his arms and she let out a little sigh, resting her head on his shoulder.

"I missed you, too," she whispered.

"Hm," he replied, relishing the smell of her. "Let's hurry up, though, Hrosca will be waiting for us." And so they walked ahead quickly, hand-in-hand, in a short while entering a clearing where Hrosca was sitting, eyes closed, meditating on some portion of the writings of the priests. He opened his eyes as he heard their low voices. Ah, yes, he thought, *this must be Lady Aspen*. She was just a bit shorter than Creon, rather tall for a Woodmaid, but it suited her none-the-less, just like her red hair. The young Man seemed happy to have her near him, but his mentor could detect a small spark of anger beneath the smiling face. He rose and bowed as the two came to a stop in front of him.

"You must be Lady Aspen," he greeted her with a smile

"And you're the Wanderer," she answered. "Creon told me about you but I see his words hardly did you justice."

*Flattery*, the young Man thought, grimacing.

"And?" Hrosca asked, turning to Creon.

"This is our shadow," he returned, and, unaccountably, his anger began to boil again.

"You seem a bit peeved at the fact that a girl outsmarted you, hm?" The old Man raised one eyebrow and in a flash of insight, Creon knew what had bothered him then and was suddenly bothering him now.

"It's not that. It's just that she promised to stay on the island and here she is, a long way from where she's supposed to be."

"One thing, Creon," Aspen interrupted, tapping him on the shoulder, "I never *promised* to stay – and anyway, I missed you." He turned to face her.

"I thought I asked Lynx to look after you."

"You did and it was his idea that I come." She cocked her head and looked at him sweetly.

"But why?"

"Because I love you and I missed you," was the answer. The words were sweet, but they left a bitter after-taste, making him realize that he didn't want to have responsibility for her at this point, not now.

"Well, you're here now, but I think you ought to go back home," he said, crossing his arms with an air of finality. She grabbed his arm and looked into his eyes.

"Oh, Creon, please let me stay!"

"You wouldn't want to if you knew." He turned away and looked at the ground, glad that he could hide in the supposed guilt of his relationship to Lilya. Maybe that would make her go home.

"Knew what? About Lilya?" He jumped and stared at her in disbelief.

"You know? Who told you?"

"You did, silly," she answered with a laugh, gently slipping an arm around his waist. "That night on the meadow – or did you forget?"

"It wasn't a dream!" he breathed, eyes suddenly shining. Aspen shook her head. *It wasn't a dream!* He let his head sink down and closed his eyes, joy and shame fighting for control of him. *It wasn't a dream!* That meant it was all right between him and Aspen and he'd run out of excuses. He glanced down at her and saw her sparkling emerald eyes gazing at him.

"I don't want to disturb," Hrosca's interjected, "but it's nearly midday and we still have a ways to go." Creon looked back at Hrosca and stepped away from the Woodmaid, and made to gather up his pack.

"And what about me?" Aspen asked, eyes still pleading.

"You can stay – for now," the young Man answered, secretly happy that he didn't have any reason to say no, that he could forget his responsibility for the moment and just enjoy her company. She bounced up and down and clapped her hands together, much like a delighted child, then hugged him tightly, more like the woman she was. Then he took her hand and they followed Hrosca into the forest.



## A Warlord's Welcome

Eamil shimmered under darkly the Lady Spring's bright sun, the large walls made of black marble enclosing strange spires and pinnacles of magnificent, yet hideous buildings. It looked almost as if some mad artist had painted a picture of the ultimate metropolitan nightmare. Savash breathed heavily, gazing at it from the entrance to the plateau. He had no idea why he'd been ordered to return to the capital of the Warrior King. Perhaps he'd done something wrong or his father was planning another campaign. Whatever the reason, the young Man felt like a whole flock of birds had somehow found their way into his stomach. This was going to be tough.

He raised his right hand in an order to begin marching again and the company of soldiers headed down the last feet of the pass and onto the plateau. They entered through the great southern gate, bulwarks many staves high, and forced their way into the press of the crowds. The people on the road ignored the dusty group in black and leather making it difficult for them to make headway, but the horses earned some respect and so it wasn't too long before they reached the first gate of the palace. Here the soldiers were dispatched to their quarters and Savash rode on alone, through the first gate and past the great courtyard of the Nations. He reigned his horse to a halt and got off, then gently stroked the white nose, spoke quietly to it, and passed the reigns to a stable-boy who had come up as he dismounted. The prince went through the second gate and up several flights of stairs. He paused for a moment, standing before the massive door to the throne room, and with a heavy heart walked up to one of the guards.

"Announce Commander Savash," he ordered. The guard saluted and slipped in through one of the doors. A few moments later they opened wide to reveal a magnificent room, a full half-mile long. Men and women from all Nations were standing there arrayed in splendid clothing. The vaulted ceiling was covered with gold leaf and pictures of mythology: there Stahl stood working in his smithy; here Tarla sat with his consort, Ebediyen; there lay Istek. Many of the pictures were lewd, if not pornographic. The walls were covered with many-colored tapestries and seven great flags hung in the hall, each one representing one of the Seven Nations. But all this splendor focused one's vision to the far end of the hall, where the high throne was, with an eagle perched on the back-rest, his wings overshadowing the person sitting in it. As Savash walked forward, the man rose. He was huge, nearly seven feet in height, black hair wreathed with a heavy golden crown. A few steps before him stood a tall woman with long platinum hair, arrayed in a long golden gown with a very deep cut and around her forehead was a diadem set with a large gray pearl.

When Savash reached the bottom step to the dais, he fell down on his knees and bowed his forehead to the ground.

"Rise, my son," the Warrior King thundered. It was only instinct that caused the young Man to comply and only discipline that kept his mouth from dropping open. This was the first time that his father had ever acknowledged him in public! The King beckoned and Savash slowly climbed the stairs until he was at the step below the lady. There he stopped, head bowed.

"We have heard good things about your zeal for our throne, my son," the Warrior King began, "and as Lormar has grown very old we have decided to name a new Warlord over the Western Nation. This Warlord is to be my son, my own flesh and blood." It was all that Savash could do to keep from looking up, something the custom forbade.

"Now, Savash," came the great voice, "prepare yourself. The ceremony will be tomorrow!" The young man bowed and backed down the stairs before turning and marching out of the hall. He had not said a word, nor had he been asked if he cared. It was not that he did not enjoy the great honor, but something twisted in his stomach, the unnamed sense that came whenever he was near his father.

He walked through the long and luxurious corridors until he reached the northern wing of the palace where his rooms were. It was strange to be back in all this luxury, especially after the simplicity of Eison. Now as he looked at the tapestries and rich rugs he suddenly wished that his new friend Creon could be here – or at least Lilya. The few nights they'd spent together had allowed him to look behind the businesslike coolness that she'd displayed at first and see the gentle and insecure core. She was much more natural than the many women who were here at the palace.

*Wait a minute, why am I thinking like this? he wondered. I am going to be receiving the honor of being a Warlord! I can't be weak!* He clapped his hands and one of the slaves bolted into the room, fell to his knees and bowed his forehead to the ground before his lord.

"Prepare the bath," Savash ordered. The slave rose and rushed out of the room. Savash went out of the front room and into his bed-chamber where two female slaves removed his clothes and then laid a scarlet robe around his shoulders. They then walked into the bath room ahead of him, where a huge basin was built into the ground, filled with warm, pleasant-smelling water. The slaves removed Savash's robe and helped him into the water and picked up sponges and the semi-circular cleaning knives. He waved them away and just sat for some time, leaning his head back, letting the water strip away the filth and sweat, before finally calling his attendants to scrub him clean. Then he relaxed some more and one of the girls served him a goblet of rich red wine. Suddenly there was a bustle at the entrance.

"The Lady Alman," a slave bellowed and the splendid woman who had stood a few steps below the throne swept into the room.

"Mother!" Savash exclaimed, sitting up and putting down his cup. "What are you doing here?" It was the first time she'd come to visit him in a long time.

"I merely wanted to talk to my son," she answered and snapped her fingers. One of the female slaves scurried forward with a low chair for the lady. Savash eyed her thoughtfully for a few moments, before motioning to one of his attendants and having her take his cup. He sat back slowly and rested his arms along the edges of the large pool.

"I am quite sure that you are behind my being called back," he said in a voice that betrayed just a hint of his annoyance.

"Yes and no," Alman answered, seriously contemplating if she shouldn't join her son in the bath. "Your father was about to call you back, but for another reason – he still believes you are inept."

"Ah yes, and you were the one who talked him into calling me to be a Warlord, right?"

"Perhaps. Lormar also played a big part in it." She leaned forward and gazed into his hard, blue eyes.

"My son, your father still hasn't forgiven you for refusing to put that traitor Anduin to death."

"After all, he was my half-brother – and he was my only real friend." Savash made a sweeping gesture and fixed her with a piercing gaze. His mother leaned back and waved her hand disdainfully

"Yes, but only *partly* of noble blood. As soon as it is mixed with the commoner's it is worthless. It was very difficult to convince him to call you back, but at least *you* are now the only child of noble blood that can inherit the throne." A shiver went down the young man's back.

"You mean Clarisse is dead?" he asked in a choked voice.

"Yes. I killed her myself."

"But why?" It was all he could do from jumping up and strangling her. Clarisse was his half-sister by a high-born lady from the Northern Provinces.

"Because it must be *my son* that takes the throne and no other." Alman's tone was vehement. "Your advancement to Warlord is the greatest thing I could do for you and if Lormar hadn't suggested it also, your father would never have accepted it. Not even because I am his favorite woman."

*He loves her and for that reason he hates her all the more,* Savash thought.

"And now you hope that my becoming crown prince will secure your position in the kingdom?"

"My position is already secure. Elam would never try to kill me: I control him far too well for that. The real power is not in the Warrior King, but in the people who advise him and as soon as you are in that circle I will have the majority among the Warlords." She leaned forward again and fixed him with her eyes. "And if you don't take my side, you will fall, Savash, as Clarisse did, as Anduin did. You won't be worth the grave they put you in. I have engineered your rise and you will thank me for it!" With that she rose and swept out of the room. Savash numbly stared ahead of him. Clarisse was dead. She had only been a girl of twelve and was very pretty – a real flower among all of the fake vines in this palace. He'd loved her as much as any man could love his sister. He would have given his life for her and now she was gone and with her the only friends he'd ever had here – except for...

Savash rose abruptly and the two girls jumped forward to dry him off. Then they led him back into his bed-chamber where he was dressed in his royal clothes. He then hurried out of the room and down the halls to a small tower where he hammered on the door. After a few moments it was opened by a man just a bit older than himself.

"I wish to speak with Lormar," Savash announced and pushed by the officer, who left, closing the door behind him. There was only one other person in the room, a bent old man who was sitting in a large chair facing the fire. This was the real brain of the Kingdom, the first Warlord, Lormar the Westron. He had seen more seasons than any man alive and his wisdom was praised by all, even the Warrior King himself. The King would never consider Lormar a threat to his power, so dedicated was he to the cause of the Warrior King. After a moment the aged general turned and gazed at Savash who walked over and took up a seat at his feet.

"Savash, what is it you want?" His voice was brittle, yet held the edge of one accustomed to command.

"How did it happen?" the prince demanded. The old general sighed.

"She fell into the fountain and drowned. It was an accident."

"That's not true, old man," Savash snapped, jumping up. "Clarisse could swim better than most girls. I taught her myself."

"If Alman hadn't killed her, she would have probably become your consort when she came of age, correct?" The old man asked dryly, raising one eyebrow.

"Maybe. I hadn't thought that far yet." The young man turned and looked out the small window at the complex below. "She was the last friend I had here, Lormar. And now you turn your back on me by forcing me to take an office that I don't care about. *Why?*" He spun around and glared at the old man, who sighed slowly.

"It was the only way to keep you from dying, too. Your father doesn't care much for you and your mother only thinks of you as something that will allow her to keep her power over your father. If I hadn't supported you, my most adept student would have died." He smiled sadly. "Even though you don't enjoy drawing the sword, I don't believe there is one man in the Seven Nations who could fight you and win."

"Yes, there is," Savash answered, unaware of what he was giving away. "A young Man in Eison. He took out four armed men on his own that were about to kill me – without a weapon! He saved my life and now I believe we have become friends."

"And his name?"

"Creon." The old man suddenly looked very thoughtful.

"Any more?"

"He never said anything about his father's name. Only that he's from the Flatlands."

"Hm." Lormar stroked his beard.

"Is there anything wrong with that?" Savash demanded.

"No, no. I just am surprised that you would trust someone that quickly."

"Oh, it was something about him – I don't know!" The young man suddenly remembered how they'd talked in the tavern and with the picture suddenly his affection for that strange Man returned. "Perhaps we are soul mates – you know, like the twin gods: born of two different women, but of one source in spirit."

"Perhaps. But that is all esoteric flim-flam and only the *gods*," he raised his hand and grinned, mocking, "know those answers. We are in the here and now, in the world we can see and *touch*, so listen, Savash, take the hand your father is offering you and you will save your life. If you prove to him that you are trustworthy, then he will most certainly consider you as his heir. And you *must* be that heir, is that clear? If you lose that position, then the Kingdom will fall with your father. There *must* be someone as strong as him to take the throne and I read in your eyes that you are that man. The oracles have spoken that way often, and no one but your mother and I know that. *You* are the future of the Seven Nations. Now take your sword and be the warrior that you are. Your father will be impressed." The old eyes flashed with the spark of his speech and for a moment he had straightened himself somewhat. But as the words left him, he sank back into his bent posture, still fixing his pupil with his sharp gaze.

Savash sighed. Even his old teacher was on his father's side. After all, who would stand against the will of the Warrior King?

"All right, Lormar, I'll do as you say." The old man nodded and Savash returned to his chambers without even taking leave. It was a terribly hard path to take, but he knew he must, to save himself and perhaps meet that strange man again.



## Just a Hut in the Woods

The pale hues of twilight were just fading in the west and the first few stars were flashing sequins in night's dark dress as she smiled down on the small company. They had pressed on a good distance that day, making up for the time lost when Creon caught Aspen that morning, and now they were happily seated around a merry fire, the Men chewing on their dried meat and bread while the Woodmaid contented herself with her daily fare of bread made by the Woodfolk and some dried fruit.

"You see, Lynx just had enough of my 'moping around the village,' as he put it," Aspen was saying, "so he suggested I go find you."

"How long did that take?" the priest asked, rather amused.

"Only about two days," the girl admitted. "I would have gone, whether or not Lynx had suggested it. He just made me leave earlier." She sighed and shot a glance at Creon, who was sitting half beside, half across the fire from her. His eyes were shining and soft as he gazed at her, now certain that he was glad she had come.

"I didn't have much trouble finding your trail," she continued. "All I had to do was listen in Midpoint." Here she laughed. "The kids are still talking about the crazy old man who made arrows in the harbor. They keep telling about the stories he told them..."

"Good," Hrosca muttered. "You never know whether what you say will stay with someone or not."

"Yes," she laughed. "I continued on to Deniz and there I almost lost your trail when you entered the Pwyll, but I ran into a community of Woodfolk who talked about a Woodman traveling with an old man who had never learned the forest craft and who made more noise than a company of soldiers while traveling." The priest colored at this, but smiled, and Creon couldn't decide whether he was embarrassed or angered by the assessment.

"And?" the young Man pressed his beloved.

"Well, from there I followed you pretty easily. I stayed with other Woodfolk communities along the way until you made it to Eison." Here she shrugged. "My mother's grandmother's brother was from the settlement

near Eison, so I had a place to stay. I helped out as a healer in the village and sometimes went into the city with the dance group to make sure that you hadn't left."

"You know, I thought I saw you in the market that day I sent the message!" Creon exclaimed, eyes brightening at the memory.

"Yes, you might have," she affirmed. "I know I was there when you talked with Doan and Altin."

"Why didn't you tell me you were there?" he demanded. She shrugged and looked at him.

"I really don't know, Creon," she admitted. "Something held me back, I guess. It was as if I knew it wasn't the right time to tell you I was here."

"The Creator moves in mysterious ways," Hrosca laughed. "I take it that you were responsible for the holly leaves that Creon found?" The color rose to her cheeks at the mention of that.

"Well, yes, I was hoping Creon would figure out who was behind him."

"Eh, he had the right idea," the priest laughed, and then looked at the Woodmaid for a long moment, silent. She fidgeted under his gaze.

"I have been thinking," he said then, "trying to remember what family you were a part of on the Island." Aspen lowered her eyes and looked into the fire, and began nibbling her lower lip. This was something she did not want to talk about – not now! But it had to come out some time and perhaps it would be easier if the Wanderer brought it out, rather than having to tell Creon herself.

"You were on the Island?" Creon interjected.

"Yes, I already told you as much, didn't I?" the old man replied, just a bit impatiently.

"Sorry, I guess all those languages displaced that fact."

"I was on that Island, oh, about sixteen summers ago, I believe." He looked at Aspen again who now fixed him with a green gaze, trying to tell him to leave it alone, but he continued on, oblivious. "I knew Eike quite well. There was also an arrogant young Woodman named Kavak, whose father, Dere, was the leader at the time. If I remember correctly, there was only one girl named Aspen at that time, and she was Kavak's daughter, a very bright three-year old." Here he smiled at the girl. "I remember that she often used to bring me flowers and herbs. They said that there were few who had her healing gifts, even at that age. I believe that she might be your age now, don't you think, *kiz* Kavak?" Creon noticed Aspen stiffen at that appellation and his brow furrowed. Was she Kavak's daughter?

"Aspen?" he asked, leaning forward. She shook her rusty locks and looked into the dancing flames.

"Yes, Creon, Kavak is my father and Savannah is my mother." She said it as if it were something she didn't want to admit. His eyebrows shot up in surprise and now, in the play of the firelight, he could see the similarity to Kavak in her oval features.

"Why didn't you tell me, Aspen?" he demanded.

"Because – because it wasn't important," she pushed out, looking away, but then making eye contact, "and you would haven't ever loved me the way you do if you'd known!"

"That's not true!" he exclaimed, his voice shrill with the denial.

"Creon," she said quietly, and there was a sweetness to her voice that he knew would have won him over in any situation, "I know you, better than you think." She smiled. "I know that's true." And as much as he hated to admit it he knew she was right. He looked away for a minute, then looked back.

"You did that for me?" he asked, his heart swelling at thinking he knew what she'd given up.

"Well, not entirely." She blew out her breath, and looked away, for an instant reliving things long buried. "You see, Creon, my daddy was different when I was a little girl." She looked back at him. "I don't remember much before I was sick. I do remember that I had a brother and that he went away and then I was sick. I know that the people have told me that he died in my place when the Warrior King's men raided the Island, but I don't remember it. Try as I might, I can't." She sighed. "I always remember my daddy as a kind, loving man who would have given his life for me, but then, sometimes, there's this shadow, as if I know that he wasn't always like that..." She raised her hands as if to start forming what she was to say with them, then dropped them into her lap. "I can't really explain it."

"But what did his changing have to do with your not wanting to be his daughter?" Creon asked.

"That's just it," she replied after a moment, "it shouldn't have! All that I know is when I began to change – you know, become a woman – I felt that he was smothering me. I told him that I didn't want to live in his house any more or be called his daughter in public. I wanted to be Aspen, not *kiz* Kavak or Kavak's daughter. There was a time when I didn't have any other name." She looked at him. "You have no idea what that's like, to not be your own person!" He opened his mouth to retort that, yes, he did know, but then paused and thought about it. No, he couldn't know what it meant to her. He had been Adem's son, had lived in his father's shadow, been under Jimri's curse, so to speak, but he'd always felt like he was his own man. At least his father had left him that. When he'd turned sixteen, his father had for the first time given him leave to do as he chose, briefly, but still, it was an affirmation of him being himself, and not his father's slave. *Odd, how I decided to forget that when I thought they all hated me*, he said to himself.

"I guess you're right, Aspen *kiz* Kavak," he told her. "But I'm glad to know that my Woodfolk father is your father, too." He reached out and gently grasped one of her hands.

"Then I think I'll be happy to be *kiz* Kavak again, *oul* Adem," she whispered. Hrosca merely sat there and smiled to himself. *Lady* Aspen, it was, much more so that she could ever imagine, her blood flowing down on both sides of her parents was that of the families of the greatest leaders the Woodfolk history. And then, as he had been given to see during the time when Creon was on the Island, there was much more to come in her history that would yet be revealed, that would yet make her a true princess among her people and his.

The following few days settled back into a routine, the evenings full of learning, the days full of travel. About a week after they had met Aspen, the three travelers came to a pause in a clearing where immediately the Woodmaid sat down with her back against a tree, leaned her head back, eyes closed, and soaked in the warm rays of the sun. Creon settled down a short ways away from her and began scanning the cloudless sky for any sign of birds. He suddenly noticed a gray column of smoke rising from among the trees a short way ahead of them.

"Hrosca," Creon called. The old Man grunted in reply, not moving from his place.

"Is there a village near here?" he asked. The priest shook his head.

"That's smoke from one chimney only. Probably some old hermit," he concluded.

"Or worse," came Aspen's voice. The young Man glanced at her and wondered why she would say such a thing. There was nothing to worry about!

"Shall we go take a look?" he suggested. "Maybe we could get a meal for some work." Hrosca shrugged and they rose and walked off toward the smoke.

A short time later they came upon another clearing, larger than the first. There, in the center of the clearing, was a small hut of rough logs, the holes patched with grass and mud, topped by a clumsily thatched roof that reminded Creon a bit of the hat he'd worn across the Flatlands. It also seemed to him that the owner of the hut didn't really care about its condition and the young Man would have figured it to be abandoned, if it hadn't been for the gray, foul-smelling fumes that poured out of the low chimney.

Hrosca glanced at his companions, shrugged once more, strode up to the small door and knocked sharply. A few minutes later an unkempt woman came to the door.

"What do you want?" she muttered, glowering at the wayfarers.

"We're travelers and we were looking for a meal," the old Man explained. "We can either do some work to compensate or pay you, which ever you wish."

"Let me ask the old man," she replied gruffly and vanished into the hut and a few moments later a man appeared. He was better dressed than the woman, though all in black, had gray hair, and a single bright orange stone on a leather thong around his neck. There was something about him that instantly raised Creon's hackles. He tried to calm that first instinct, telling himself that he was only imagining things.

"You are looking for a meal, friends?" the Man asked. "Come in, come in." Creon looked at Hrosca, and the old Man motioned him in ahead of the others.

The hut was much larger than Creon had expected, with a table in one corner and a corner bench around two sides of it and stools around the other two. A fire burned in the hearth at the far end of the room and there

was a door set in one wall leading to a second room. The rest of the room was pretty bare, except for a rickety spinning-wheel and a loom, that looked like it would collapse if touched. Their host motioned them to the table, where they were served some warm stew. There was a strange after-taste that Creon couldn't place. *Mandrake root?* he wondered, remembering the one time he had nibbled on some as a child. The taste might be right, but he finished his portion anyway. The man introduced himself as Mercius and the woman as Eunice.

"It is strange for a Woodmaid to travel with Men, don't you think?" Mercius commented, sitting beside them, but not touching the meal.

"Maybe," Creon said warily and changed the subject. "How shall we pay you, sir?"

"We can discuss that all in good time, young friend, but I think you should first take a rest, you must have come a long way." It was only then that Creon noticed that Hrosca's chin was resting on his chest and he was snoring peacefully. Aspen was also asleep and used Creon's shoulder as a pillow. That puzzled Creon, but he decided to play along and so pretended to drop off. He soon felt himself being lifted and carried into another room.

"Let them sleep," he heard Mercius say. "The spell will have taken full effect by evening." Creon shuddered inwardly at that remark. As soon as he heard the door creak shut, he opened his eyes and found himself in a side room of the house, resting on a heap of hay. Aspen was curled up next to him, one arm under her head, the other stretched across his chest. Hrosca's snores came from another hay pile across the room. Creon stared at the ceiling, wide awake, and, try as he might, was still unable to sleep, so he began to recite the language of the priests to himself. How long he did that was unclear, but quite some time later he heard the door creak open. He instantly snapped his eyes shut.

"It's time," he heard Mercius say. "Wake them." Someone shook the young Man's arm.

"Master Creon," came a voice. "It's time to get up." He cracked one eye open and saw another Man, not Mercius, standing beside him. Something was familiar about this fellow, but Creon couldn't remember where he might have met him. The young Man rose, stretched, then bent down and nudged Aspen. The green eyes fluttered open, and he instantly knew that something was not quite right with them.

"Oh, hello, Creon," she yawned. "What a great rest." With that she got up, brushed the straw out of her hair and clothes and walked into the next room. Hrosca also awoke and sat up, blue-gray eyes dull, rose and shuffled off after the Woodmaid. Creon followed, seemingly indifferent, but inwardly praying. They were again served stew, but this time the young Man noticed that the strange after-taste was gone.

"So, now," Mercius began, when they had finished. "Tell me about yourselves." With growing concern Creon listened to Aspen and Hrosca tell everything about themselves and what they knew about the journey. *Play along*, he thought again, wanting to find out what was going on, and so told Mercius most of what he knew, hiding the fact that he could speak more than two languages, as well as not admitting to how well trained he was in the Art of Defense. Then the dark Man turned to his companions and began speaking in one of the "dead" languages.

"What shall we do with them?" he asked.

"We could always use a few more slaves," Eunice suggested.

"No, that's not sweet enough," Mercius objected.

"How about a crazed young Man killing his friends and then committing suicide?" the third Man asked.

"I love the way your mind works, Kypros," the dark Man exclaimed. "That will also erase all traces of our being here!"

"Are you sure they are fully in our control?" Eunice asked.

"If they aren't now, they'll be by morning," Mercius laughed and toasted his friends, oblivious to the fact that Creon understood most of what he'd said.

Aspen seemed strangely over-affectionate that evening, always trying fondle and kiss him, reminding him a lot of Lilya's tactics of seduction. It repulsed him to think she, whom he had thought purity incarnate, would act in such a way, especially in public. Had he not known better, he would have thought Aspen was drunk. Her

speech was slurred and her eyes shone, but were glassy at the same time, as if she weren't really looking at him. He purposefully slid away from her, but she came after him.

"Aspen, not tonight," he said firmly. "I don't really feel like it." He could see a struggle in her eyes and after a few moments she relented, settling back and gazing at him, picking at her pant legs, sometimes rubbing them with the palms of her hands and sometimes hugging herself, all the while sporting a queer smile. She slowly became drowsy before falling asleep, the smile not fading, though she was now completely unconscious. Creon then rose and carried Aspen into the other room, gently bedding her on the hay, and returned to the main room. When he returned he found Hrosca loudly expounding on the healing virtues of certain herbs. Mercius wore a rather bored expression and gently touched with the orange stone at his neck. Hrosca's voice slowly began to get quieter and after a few moments his chin sank to his chest and he was sleeping peacefully, just as Creon took his seat again. He acted as if nothing were unusual, and ignored Kypros as he reached under Hrosca's arms and dragged him off.

Mercius looked at the young Man for a long moment.

"You are a most unusual person, Creon son of Adem," he said slowly, a small smile playing across his face. "I believe I could make use of you yet. Perhaps you will live after all." He waved his hand in the air and Creon felt something touch him that caused a slight drowsiness, but instantly vanished. Still, he let his head sink onto his chest and allowed himself to be lifted and carried to the side room, where he was gently laid down in the hay. He cracked an eye open to see Aspen already lying there. The smile was gone and he suddenly thought of how lovely she looked, fast asleep like that. He sighed, knowing it was an enchantment of some sort. Could a kiss wake her? He did not dare, especially after the way she'd been acting, because he knew that there would be no restraining either her or himself here. So he rolled over and tried to sleep some.

Night was just bidding farewell when he came awake. Pale light snuck into the room through the high, narrow windows and he lay still for several moments, before finally decided to act. He shifted as silently as possible, preparing to rise, but then noticed Kypros sitting against one wall, dozing. Creon rolled onto his back and felt for his knife on his belt. He was surprised to find that they hadn't relieved him of his weapons, and slid it free of its sheath. He quickly grasped it by the blade and flung it across the room, where it embedded itself in the door with a solid thump. Kypros sprang up, still half-asleep, gazing around wildly, trying to understand what had happened. Creon was on him in an instant and jammed his thumb in to the nerve spot on his captor's shoulder. The man collapsed back onto his stool and Creon let him rest there.

Then he turned to see his friends. *We've got to get out of here!* he thought to himself. He looked from Aspen to Hrosca, wondering which one would be easier to wake, then decided to go for his teacher. He could carry the girl easily. The old man, though fairly lithe and thin, would probably be more difficult to sling over his shoulders and take away with him. So he silently stepped across the room and gently shook him.

"Hrosca," he whispered hoarsely. "Come on, wake up, old man!" The priest stirred, muttered something and made to go back to sleep, but Creon wouldn't let him.

"Hrosca!" he hissed again, this time more insistently. "Wake up! We're in deep trouble and I need your help."

"No trouble at all." The priest slurred the words together. "Just a little hut in the woods. No trouble at all. Is it morning yet, Ambrosius?" His head rolled back and forth like one in a dream and his eyes wouldn't open.

"Creator God, help me!" the young Man pushed out between clenched teeth.

"Don't you dare say that name!" The priest eyelids suddenly snapped up and he sat up and grabbed his student by the collar of his tunic. The madness was apparent in his eyes and a chill raced down Creon's spine. He grasped for words, but the only thing that came to him were the ancient words of a creed that he'd been working on memorizing in the language of the priests.

"Creator God is one God, the only God, maker of the Heavens and the earth. Ruler of the Nations and the worlds. Sustainer of all Creation. Everything that lives, he has made, and he created Man as the crowning piece of all that he made, to rule the lands and subject the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and the fish of the seas under him. He created Man, so Man can worship him. Praise the Creator, for he has opened the hearts

of Men and chosen from among them those who will walk in his Light. He was and is and will be eternally. Praise be to him!"

As he began to recite it, Hrosca first put his hands to his temples and let out a howl. He rocked back and forth, as if fighting something, sometimes speaking in one voice, sometimes returning in another. The second voice always had power while the first was whiny and begging. Then, as the creed ended, the strong voice – Hrosca's voice – won out and when he looked up his eyes were clear again.

"It has left me!" he exclaimed. "The enchantment has left me!" And he lay back, breathing heavily. "Oh, what wonders the word of God can do!"

"What happened?" Creon asked, eyebrows lowered.

"Mercius put a spell of control on us. For some reason you were immune to it, and that is good," he smiled in his beard, "because now we have a chance to get out – immediately!" He struggled to get up, failed at first, but then climbed to his feet unsteadily.

"What about Aspen," the young Man pressed, holding up his mentor. "Can we heal her, too?"

"I don't know," the priest admitted, looking over to where she lay. "It took me all of my strength and my command of Arts, both dark and light to break it. I've struggled since it first came over me, but if you hadn't used the power of the Creator over me with that creed, I would not have broken it. Aspen does not have the resources I do. The spell should wear off if we get her away from Mercius." The priest shook his head and snorted, now disgusted. "He is a sniveling, conniving, petty wizard, whom I could have easily broken if I'd had notice."

"Then let's get her out of here," Creon exclaimed. "And the sooner the better."

"You aren't going anywhere," came a voice from behind them. They spun to see Mercius standing there, face twisted in hate. Creon reached over his shoulder for his blade, but saw it resting on the hay. The wizard gestured and suddenly Aspen rose, her fine fingers quickly closing around the hilt and pulling bright Justin free from the scabbard.

"Mercius, I command you to stop!" Hrosca roared, bringing up his right hand.

"You've put off the power, old man," the man in black sneered. "I haven't, so shut up and lie down!" He flicked his wrist and Hrosca grimaced. His eyes burned blue as he himself made a gesture and Mercius cied out and fell to his knees, as though under a great weight.

"That's enough!" Aspen cried, rushing up and aiming the sword at Hrosca.

"Aspen, no!" Creon shouted, reaching into his belt for his knife. But the blade was still stuck in the door. He found himself retrieving the silver chain that he'd purchased in Eison instead.

"It's not Aspen," the priest hissed, lowering his hand. "It's Mercius, but he's even more dangerous as her, because if you hurt her, it won't harm him."

"Yes," the black wizard laughed, rising again and pulling the amber stone from his throat with his left hand, as Hrosca's power over him vanished. "And now she will kill you, both of you!"

"No!" the young Man exploded, suddenly feeling something stir inside him. It wasn't the darkness that he was used to feeling, no, it was more like a bright light that had invaded him.

"In the name of the Creator, I command you to desist!" he roared. Mercius staggered back.

"How dare you!" he spat. "I will not wait any longer. You are dead! By my hand!" And with that he pulled a black dagger from his belt. He sprang at Creon, who instantly lashed out with the chain. It curled itself around the wizard's hand like a serpent and touched the stone. Instantly a brilliant light flashed through the room and a blood-curdling shriek rocked Creon back. He fell as a great weight landed on him, tumbling into the hay. He instantly shoved at the body lying on him, waiting for Mercius to grapple with him, but he lay still. Creon rolled him over to find his eyes fixed, cloudy, gazing up at the sky. His skin had taken on a strange texture, much like finely woven cloth and the color of sandy earth. The chain was still wrapped around his hand, but then began to uncoil itself, once more like a living being, and slipped off onto the ground, where it lay. Creon gathered it up and stepped back from the body, then turned to his friends. Aspen had dropped the sword and was pressing both hands to her face, shaking her head back and forth.

"Are you all right, Aspen?" the young Man asked, stepping over to her. She raised her face and her eyes were clear.

"Yes, darling, I am," she sighed. "He's gone. He's not in my head any more." She smiled. "It was so strange – I knew what I was doing, but I knew it wasn't me... I can't describe it."

"It's not worth talking about," the priest interjected. "And we should forget about it."

"Ugh! What's that smell?" the Woodmaid asked. Creon sensed it, too, and turned to see that Mercius' body had suddenly gone black. There was a sizzling sound and then the body turned transparent and sank into the ground, leaving a black shadow. Only the dagger lay there, where his outstretched hand had been, and a bright orange spot where the stone had lain in his left hand.

"What on earth...?" the young Man asked, starting towards the charred spot.

"It is the way of one killed by the Dark Arts," Hrosca sighed. "The body is destroyed so that they will not rise again to see judgment – or so they believe." He shook his head. "Nothing will grow there for a year and a day now."

"How on earth did you stop him?" Aspen asked, now curious.

"With this, I guess," he replied, opening his hand to reveal the chain.

"Let me see that!" Hrosca exclaimed, taking the silver from his pupil's hand. He turned it over and examined the links carefully.

"By the Nations Seven!" he exclaimed after a moment. "It wasn't lost after all!"

"What?" Creon and Aspen asked out of one mouth.

"This chain is one of the greatest treasures in all of the Seven Nations," the priest explained, eyes shining. "It is as old as the Warrior King's sword, a gift from Creator God to the first King of the Nations. It protects its owner from any enchantment cast on him or her and if attacked by the Dark Arts, has the ability to destroy them and the one who wields them. That's why you weren't affected when Mercius cast those spells. I had thought it lost, but praise the Creator it wasn't." He shook his head and passed the chain back to Creon, who looked at it curiously and returned it to its place in the pouch.

"Well, let's get out of here, then," the young Man muttered. "It doesn't pay to be around enchantments too much, even if we do have protection."

"What about that man, Kypros, and the woman?" Aspen asked, walking towards where their captor's male servant was still unconscious. "Don't you think they were under that enchantment, too?"

"Maybe. He should be coming around any moment now," Creon pointed out. "I only jabbed him lightly."

"Perhaps we can help them," the Woodmaid ventured and walked over to Kypros. She shook him lightly, then bent and looked at him closely.

"He'll be all right," she sighed, straightening up. "Let's go find Eunice." And so they did, some time later. She was hiding out behind the building, disoriented, afraid that someone was out to get her. It took all of Hrosca's oratory skill to convince her to come out and that they wouldn't hurt her, but when she did, she looked a bit more relaxed. They then quickly gathered up Kypros and hurried back towards the clearing where they'd first seen the smoke two days before.

On the way the two others told their stories. Kypros had been abducted by a priestess of Istek in Eison and that was the last he remembered until waking up that morning. Hrosca told him the way back to the city and he quickly disappeared into the forest, taking some provisions with him.

Eunice's story was a bit more complicated. The daughter of a rich merchant, she had been kidnapped for ransom and when the payment was delayed she was sold to Mercius. She had never been forced to wear the slave ring in her ear and the dark Man had treated her with dignity. She never suspected that he was a wizard, until one day she surprised him during his devilish practices and that was the last she remembered clearly until that morning.

"Where are you going from here?" she asked the priest.

"We'll be going east," Hrosca explained.

"Is that the way to Bitter Creek?" The old Man thought for a good time.

"I believe it's north-east of here, not too far out of our way. We'll take you there." Eunice smiled broadly and pushed back her loose hair from her face. Creon noticed how much younger and prettier she seemed now and mentioned it to Aspen. She became strangely silent and had a faraway look in her eye.

"You're not jealous, are you?" he asked.

"Who *me*?" his beloved countered with mock indignation.

"Aspen," he said, not sure if she was playing with him or not, "you of all people should know that you're the only woman who'd fit in my heart."

"Hm, I wish I had that carved in stone," she told him. "It might have simplified things with Lilya."

"Yes, it would have, and some day I'll carve it for you," he returned with a smile.



## The City

Two weeks passed quickly as they headed through the last reaches of the Pwyllwood. The ground was already getting more stony and the villages were getting scarcer. They'd made it to Bitter Creek a bit more than a week earlier and returned Eunice to her aging yet joyful father. They had only stayed a night and quickly pressed on through the woods, Hrosca driven by a strange urgency. He also stepped up the pace of the lessons, now teaching Creon the language of the Kings. It was similar to the priest's language, but much simpler in vocabulary and sentence structure.

"How are all these languages supposed to fit in my head?" the young Man complained. "As if I didn't have enough trouble with the ones I already know!"

"You are very talented in this study, Creon," the priest encouraged him. "You learn much better and much more quickly than any others that I have taught."

Creon also noticed that Aspen did not seem to be feeling well. She often was tired and clung to his arm, face white and covered with perspiration.

"Are you all right?" he asked her. She nodded.

"It's something that happens every month, if I don't get enough rest," she explained. Hrosca looked on with sympathy at that.

"Tomorrow we will reach the Kizilirmak," he said, gently patting Aspen's shoulder. "We'll rest in the small town there for a day or two while I get passes to Tashyer."

The small town bore the same name as the turgid river that flowed north, ending in the Bitter Lakes, four great, landlocked seas. It was colored a reddish-brown from all the mud it brought with it from the rich southern lands. Even though it gave life to the people on its western border, the eastern border was barren and rocky, seemingly devoid of life. Hrosca explained that it had to do with a curse that had once been spoken over Tashyer and since then it had been fruitless and few people lived there.

The town of Kizilirmak was a bit larger than Eison and seemed to be made of dirt. Dust welled up in the streets, covering the houses with grime, especially where water had splashed against the walls, whether from people tossing it out the window, or from rain drops. But when they got to the center of the city, the streets were carefully swept and the houses gleamed white. A broad, pristine avenue lined with birch trees led east toward the river and another ran north-south through the town. They found room in a small but very tidy inn and the following morning, when they met for breakfast, Hrosca explained how he'd planned the day.

"I will go and get our passes from the city chambers. I should be finished about noon and then we can go to the baths. It will do you good."

The town of Kizilirmak was known for the hot springs that brought vitalizing water to the surface. The baths had been built to give all people the possibility of enjoying the warm water. That afternoon they went into the great building with a sign that said "Thermes." Men and women each had their own sections and Aspen was at first a bit afraid to go by herself, but Hrosca said a few words to one of the ladies in waiting and she quickly looked after the Woodmaid.

Creon and Hrosca were by no means the only men in the thermes and they found plenty to talk about with their fellow bathers. What interested Creon most was what one soldier had to tell them while they relaxed in the steam bath. Word had it that the Warrior King had finally acknowledged what the whole Seven Nations knew – that Savash was his son and in the same breath he'd been promoted to Warlord. The "old man" had "gone into retirement" and was now some sort of adviser. Savash now was supposedly taking care of a small insurrection in the Western Nation by a few "loyal followers of the old way" who were led by a Man called Gurion.

"Strange," Hrosca remarked, "I once knew a Gurion. He was a priest like I am, but then 'was enlightened' and began preaching some strange religion that called for destroying the Warrior King and his corrupt regime."

"What is this religion?" one of the others wanted to know.

"Oh, they say that the body is evil and that only the spirit is good. They hope to escape the body by asceticism and meditation. After countless rebirths they supposedly reach a state of nothingness and that is the end of everything." The men shook their heads in disbelief and turned to other things.

It was mid-afternoon before the three travelers met in front of the great house, all cleansed and refreshed. Aspen had even dug out one of her dresses and Creon thought that her color was definitely much better than before. She even coaxed him into a short game of tag, which ended with them nearly toppling into the rich earth divider that the birch trees grew in. Hrosca chuckled at their antics and they returned to the inn, where they spent the evening with the language of the Kings again, much to Creon's chagrin.

The following morning, just as dawn was unfurling her pink skirts, they left the small town and crossed the narrow wood and stone bridge that spanned the great river and entered into Tashyer. On the other side a guard barely glanced at their passes and quickly waved them on.

Tashyer was a place of utter desolation and Creon thought he could feel the ground trying to suck life out of him. Not a blade of grass or even one plant poked its tender shoots out of the rocky soil. The sun burned hotter over the rocks and the three travelers plugged on doggedly. They rested in the shadow of several great rocks, building a small fire of sickly lichen that grew in the shade. Creon gazed around unable to comprehend the barrenness.

"Hasn't anyone ever tried to farm this place?" he asked, digging his fingers into the dirt and bringing up a hand-full. It was fair soil – he'd seen worse in Chifchi – but it would need a lot of cultivation.

"Of course," Hrosca answered, "but it takes a lot of work, a lot more than most people want to invest. The ground has to be cleared of rocks and plowed, but once that is done I'm told that it is the most fruitful soil in the Seven Nations."

"The Woodfolk have a story," Aspen recounted in a sing-song voice, "that once this land was covered with plants and grass, until a great and evil lord arose and began to conquer it. The land became dry and barren and he turned his eyes first towards the east, toward the land of the immortal ones. But they repelled him, so he went west and subdued all the nations. He was then conquered by the first ancient King and the Council of Elders was set up."

"Yes," Hrosca continued, "and they ruled quite well until the Warrior King fell in from lands even farther west and conquered everything from the Western Nation to the Death March."

"But listen, I remember an old song that tells the story of this man. I'll try to sing it for you." He cleared his throat and began, voice scratchy at first, but then gaining strength.

## The Dry-Land King

*In the days of old, when the Land was young  
and the barren, dry lands green.  
A man decided he must be the one  
to become the king, to become the king.*

*Ho deedle dum da rum dum  
Hey deedle dum dum doo  
Let's sing the songs  
of tales so old  
Ho deedle dum dum doo!*

*So he began to take by force  
what was not his own  
When battle raged he never lost  
oh he always won, yes he always won.*

*Ho deedle dum....*

*But when he had taken the land  
it began to dry  
The water gone, there was only sand  
all the plants had died, all the plants had died.*

*Ho deedle dum...*

*So he turned to the east  
but lost to the shining ones.  
Then he turned his face west.  
There was Land to be won.*

*Ho deedle dum...*

*But the men of the west elected a King  
to fight the evil lord.  
He battled him and struck him down  
with his sharp sword.  
with his sharp sword.*

*Ho deedle dum...*

*And so do the ancients sing  
of how the Kings did rise.  
The Elders came along with them  
and ruled for a long long time.  
and ruled for a long long time.*

*Ho deedle dum...*

By the time Hrosca had finished both Creon and Aspen were singing along with the chorus. Their voices echoed among the stones, but the sound was soon lost in the far reaches of the desert of Tashyer.

Fourteen days later they were still journeying across the wasteland. They sometimes found a few small herbs and roots among the great stones and once a lone tree, misshapen and dried out. The food and water they had brought along began to dwindle and even Aspen was forced to eat some of the salted meat to stay alive. And then Creon saw the city. It stood against the sweltering yellow sky, black and ominous and inside him rose a loathing and a warning to stay away. Hrosca also raised his eyes and gazed at the city.

"Stein," he breathed, shading his eyes with one hand. "A city of great cruelty, but an oasis of life, none the less." He gestured and the weary travelers strode forward as best they could, the Woodmaid leaning heavily on the young Man.

They entered the great city just as the glowing white ball overhead had reached his zenith. Creon was thankful for the cool shadow, but chills of apprehension tickled his spine as it seemed that the whole city was empty. He did not see one person walking the streets or in front of the houses. *Where are they?* He wondered. *Where have they all gone?*

They walked up narrow streets toward the great black fortress at the center of the city, like intruders in an ancient crypt. Aspen clung to Creon's arm, her green eyes like those of a frightened deer, staring around her, trying to get away. Finally, after what seemed to be hours of walking, they found a large building of stone with a faded sign proclaiming vacant rooms above the door. Hrosca knocked lightly, but no answer came, then Creon stepped up and pounded on the door with his fist. They were about to turn when he heard something move inside. He pulled his knife out of its place and banged on the rough boards with the hilt. The sound rang through the streets, a thundering echo in the deathly silence. There was a quiet shuffling behind the door and after a moment it creaked open just wide enough to reveal a large, meaty face, clean-shaven and ruddy with

exertion and indulgence. The man stared at the three travelers for a moment before asking what they wanted in a cultured, yet rough tone.

"We need two rooms for one or two nights," Hrosca explained.

"The inn is closed!" the meaty face returned, tiny blue eyes glinting maliciously. At that moment Aspen let out a sigh and collapsed. Creon caught her, gently lifting her into his arms like a sleeping child.

"The lady needs to get out of this murderous sun, sir," he demanded. "We'll pay you well."

"Indeed." A smile appeared across the man's fleshy lips, drawing his cheeks back into folds and displaying his yellowed teeth, and yet his eyes remained cold as he carefully examined the unconscious Woodmaid.

"Come in," he finally said, opening the door all the way, allowing his guests to enter. Creon was surprised at the inside of the inn. It was two stories high and had probably been the house of a lord at one point. A balcony ran around the walls, and the stone ceiling was a good ten ells or more above the ground in the center of the room. The house was clean, cleaner than any the young man had seen in months, and the wood and walls had intricate gold designs on them, giving the inside a royal look.

"This way," the beefy innkeeper directed, waddling up the stairs against one wall. Creon followed him to the second floor, where the Man opened a room facing north. The windows were open and a breeze that had been unfelt in the street below rushed in through them. The room was painted in light colors, airy and cool, and the bed was a great pile of cushions, richly covered with rare furs and skins. Creon gently laid Aspen down and poured some water from a golden jar on the side table into a small crystal glass. He lifted it to her lips and wetted them a bit, but she didn't wake up. He felt her pulse and was relieved that it was normal. He gently laid a hand against her hot face, thinking how the flush in her cheeks made her look all the more lovely.

"You had best let her sleep, Creon," he heard Hrosca behind him. The young Man nodded and left the room with the innkeeper and Hrosca, silently closing the door behind him.

"And now for your room, gentlemen," the innkeeper said unctuously.

"What's gotten in to him?" Creon whispered to Hrosca in the tongue of the Woodfolk. "First he doesn't want to let us in and now he's treating us as if we were lords. It doesn't make sense, why is he doing that?"

"Perhaps he hopes to get a lot of money out of us," the priest answered.

"Or worse," the young Man countered, thinking of how the fat man had been looking at his beloved.

The innkeeper let them into their room with a great show of courtesy and then left them alone, after inquiring several times if there were any way that he could be of service to them. Their quarters looked north and west and were right next to Aspen's, with two great piles of cushions, just like in the last room, both richly covered with skins and furs. The windows were also open and looked down on a wonderfully blooming garden, the first plant life they had seen since entering this city of stone. Creon also discovered two curtains against one wall. Behind one there was a small wash basin and toilet and behind the other a wooden door that led into Aspen's room. Creon cracked it open, so he could hear when she stirred. Then he poured himself a glass of water, kicked off his boots and settled down on one of the large beds. The light dimness and fresh wind lifted his spirits and the cool water revived him so that after a few moments he had dismissed his misgivings.

"I must've been wrong about this place," he commented to Hrosca. "I haven't been in any better one, except for the Island," he added hastily.

"Don't be too quick to dismiss your inner sense, son of Adem," Hrosca warned, lying back on his cushions, having removed his sandals. "Often the Creator works through hunches and feelings. But don't trust your feelings alone, weigh them out with reason." With that he rolled over on his large bed and began to snore. Creon smiled to himself, put the glass back on the side table, and lay back, thinking he would just rest his eyes a while.



## Kidnapped

The last rays of the sun slanted through the windows facing west when Creon awoke, bidding farewell to the day and promising his imminent return the next. The young Man stretched and sighed contentedly, feeling quite refreshed. He couldn't remember having slept that well since leaving Eison. He glanced over to the other pile and noticed Hrosca wasn't there, but he knew the old man well enough to immediately assume that he'd gone in search of a quiet corner to read and meditate. Perhaps the garden? It would be as good a place as any.

So Creon rolled out of the bed, rubbed his eyes and went to the large windows, looking down into the garden, drinking in the lovely smells floating up from the flowers, now closing for the night. It was strange how such rich verdancy could bloom in such a desolate land, especially in such a great city. Creon shook his head at the thought.

A quiet rustle of the curtain made him turn his head. Aspen stood there, red hair tousled, eyes still full of sleep. She had changed from her tunic and trousers into a long, flowing dress.

"Hi," she mumbled, looking around the room sleepily. "Where are we?"

"In the inn," Creon answered.

"Which one?"

"The one you collapsed in front of," he returned. "Do you remember." She nodded, pressing a hand to her forehead.

"I think so. I've got a splitting headache," she moaned, sinking into a large cushion that served as a chair.

"You've had a massive sun stroke," Creon diagnosed, sitting down on the window sill across from her. "And the healer says a good, long night's rest will cure it."

"I'm the healer here," she returned, half playfully.

"I know, but right now you're also the sick person, hm? So please go and lie down." A light tap on the door made the young Man jump.

"Yes?" The innkeeper stuck his huge head through the doorway.

"Ah, I see the lady is up," he remarked. Aspen smiled and nodded.

"Very well," the innkeeper said, still eyeing Aspen. "The evening meal is served in the garden." With that he turned and disappeared. The two of them left the room and picked their way down the stairs and to the rear door. Aspen mostly walked on her own, but occasionally would lean on Creon for support.

The evening meal was a rich assortment of rare fruits, meats, and pastry, all of them fresh. This astounded Creon, who hadn't seen but one drop of natural water in the wastelands of Tashyer. The innkeeper must have seen his surprised look.

"We have a deep well with much water in it in this city, my lord," he explained with a bow. "There is more than enough for all who live here." The innkeeper's wife, also quite rotund, kept going to and fro, alternately filling glasses with fresh juice and replacing empty bowls with full ones.

"We should stay here another day, Hrosca," Creon said, biting into one of the juicy apples. "I know that Aspen could use the rest."

"And so could you, for that matter," the Woodmaid told him, looking up from a kalbedan fruit.

"All right," Hrosca agreed after pondering for a long moment. "We'll stay tomorrow and leave the day after." Creon wondered what the strange tone in his mentor's voice was. Resignation? Perhaps even fear? Then, out of the corner of his eye, he noticed the innkeeper smiling with satisfaction. *I wonder what he's up to*, he thought to himself.

After breakfast the following morning the innkeeper asked if they would like to take a bath. The travelers agreed and one after another were taken down to the cellar. The bathroom itself was a large room of pure white marble, with a huge hexagonal basin filled with steaming water set in the center of it. The water reached Creon's shoulders and it was broad enough to swim across easily. The bath was very refreshing, and after it they spent the rest of the day in the wonderful garden, talking and enjoying the beauty. In the natural surroundings Aspen opened up like a rare flower and for once she was her old, carefree self as Creon knew her

from the island. The day passed much too quickly for the two young people and they were sad to see the setting sun flash his rays between the dense green of the trees. The evening meal was wonderful again, but Creon sensed an uneasiness overcome Aspen whenever she noticed the innkeeper. He asked her several times if she was all right, but she would not tell him what bothered her. When they headed up to their rooms Aspen grabbed at Creon's arm.

"Creon," she asked, "can I sleep in your room, with you, tonight?"

"What? Why?" he stammered, caught off guard that one of his fantasies were being answered.

"I don't know," she answered. "I'm just scared."

Torn between the desire to say yes and knowing what propriety demanded, Creon looked over his shoulder, to Hrosca. The old priest merely shook his head.

"No, Aspen," the young Man said firmly, "it wouldn't be right."

"But...." the girl began to protest.

"No," he reaffirmed, shaking his head, "it wouldn't be right." So Aspen, frightened and sad, went to the door to her room. She turned and looked at Creon, her eyes brimming with tears.

"I'm scared," she whispered. The young Man took her in his arms and planted a kiss on her forehead.

"Of what?" he asked.

"Of him." She motioned downstairs.

"The innkeeper?" The Woodmaid nodded. "I don't like him either," Creon confessed. "But the best thing you can do is trust in the Creator. He'll carry you through." She smiled.

"I'll trust you, too," she whispered fiercely and laid her head on his shoulder. He brushed the long red hair back behind one pointed ear. She was so different and yet so dear. *Kavak was right*, he thought. *Very much in love*. He finally let the Woodmaid go and she slipped through the door into her dark room. Creon looked after her for a long time, before he, too, returned to his room and lay down on his bed, memories of times past flitting before his mind's eye. Aspen, Kavak, Savannah, Rushtu and Donovan were there and his father, Adem, his mother, Mikela, Sarina, but finally a single face burned out at him, the face of a Man, tired, sad, blood running down a brow crowned with a circlet of thorns, and fiery eyes full of infinite love. The image shook him from the inside out. There was something about the Man, he was sure he knew this Man, but from where? And when? The answers refused to come and he fell asleep still pondering them.

His dreams were restless, unclear. All he knew was that he had lost something very dear to him and that he needed to find it. At one point it seemed to be Aspen, at another the old priest, then his mother. But throughout the whole dream he found himself, only a small child, clinging to the strong, gentle arms of the bloody Man. The Man's hands and bare feet had wounds in them as if someone had driven something through them. The crown of thorns was still on his head and the blood gently trickled down on the child in his arms. He set the child down.

"Quickly," he said. "There is someone who needs you, and remember, I'll always be with you." And Creon woke up.

Dawn was dancing on the rooftops and smiling into his room and beautiful smells came floating up from the garden, but a strange urgency filled the young Man's heart. He jumped up, gazing around. Hrosca was still there, snoring peacefully.

Creon's eyes strayed to the curtains against the wall. He went to the wash basin and splashed some of the cold water in his face, but still the worry persisted, driving him to the other curtain and into Aspen's room. He instantly noticed that something was wrong: the bed was empty. Creon's heart leaped in fear. *Don't worry*, he tried to calm himself. *She's probably just down stairs or in the wash room*. Then his eyes fell to where her cloak had been hanging. It was *missing!*

"Wake up, old Man," Creon's voice came, urgent. Hrosca rolled over, and instantly noticed worry on the young Man's tanned features.

"What's wrong?" he asked, blinking the sleep from his eyes. *As if you didn't know!* Creon thought

"Aspen's missing," was all he answered, biting down hard on the darkness rising within.

"What?! Are you sure?" The old Man was fully awake now, and sat up.

"Yes," the young Man affirmed. "Her cloak is gone, but everything else is here. The innkeeper and his wife aren't here, either." Suddenly he paused, distinctly hearing the heavy front door of the inn creak open.

"Wait here," he told his friend. Hrosca nodded and Creon slipped out of the room. He moved silently on bare feet, reaching the railing. He carefully looked over the edge of the balcony to the floor below. Down there was a cloaked figure, cautiously looking around in the inn and instantly his alarm sense began to tingle. He could tell that it was a woman by the way she walked but was it Aspen? He gauged her height with narrowed eyes. No, she wasn't tall enough and the cloak was different, too. He quickly estimated the height to the ground and perched on the banister. The woman was right below him. He took a deep breath and let fly.

The landing was much harder than he expected and it startled his adversary completely. She fell to the ground instantly, but slipped out under his arms as he tried to pin her. Creon rolled over and leaped to his feet. The cowl had fallen back to reveal shoulder-length dark blond hair. Brown eyes burned with anger and a youthful face was tightened into a scowl. A bright knife flashed in her hand, but Creon, though only wearing his breeches, was quite capable of handling her bright blade. In his heightened state of awareness he took a moment to study the angry face. It popped out at him from his memories, a bit younger, but often set in the same scowl – especially when her father was mentioned.

"Sarina!" he exclaimed, fully surprised that he had recognized her. The scowl tightened and the eyes narrowed, now suspicious as well as threatened.

"Who are you?" she hissed. It was only then he noticed the tiny gold ring in her right ear. *Slave!* he instantly realized. His gut tightened and the risen darkness began to turn red as he realized that she didn't recognize him, her own brother.

"Come on, Sarina," he coaxed, forcibly driving down the anger and smoothing his face, "it's only been two years. It's me, Creon." The dark brown eyes slowly gained recognition and the scowl loosened itself just a bit.

"Creon?" she asked almost hopefully, but then her brow snapped back down and her voice hardened once more. "No, I won't fall for that one again!" she spat. It seemed to him that a hole had suddenly opened beneath his heart, threatening to suck his resolve away. He once more twisted his will around his emotions and raised his hopes.

"What do I have to do to convince you?"

"The string of stones I gave him," she demanded. *Nuts*, he thought.

"It's upstairs," he said, slowly turning to go. The way the knife lay in her hand still bothered him, and even more the poisonous looks that she gave him. He watched her out of the corner of his eye as he turned, then suddenly noticed a silver blade falling from the balcony. Instantly Justin was in his hands. *I don't need this*, he thought.

"Not the sword, Hrosca," he called, "the pouch." The old Man nodded and vanished into the room. Sarina's stance had become even more defensive, when she noticed how comfortably the silver sword rested in her brother's grasp. He carefully laid it on a table beside him and then stepped away, out of reach. *A gesture of good-will*, he thought. Just then his small leather pouch came sailing down from the railing above and he caught it as the old Man started down the stairs.

"I'm sorry, Sarina," his apologized, pulling out a silver chain with the stones carefully strung on it. "The leather got wet and broke, so I put them on this chain." But the girl wasn't looking at him. She had noticed Hrosca, who was now standing next to Creon. Her mouth dropped open.

"The priest," she stammered and turned to the young Man. "It really *is* you!" she breathed, dropped the knife and hugged him. *What did you think?* was all he said to himself, wrapping his arms around her and squeezing back.

"You're so different," his sister told him, stepping back and looking at him up and down. "What's happened to you?"

"It's a long story," Creon returned, "but not now. We've got to find Aspen."

"Who?"

"Aspen, the girl ..." Uh, oh, he thought, noticing Sarina suddenly draw back into herself again.

"That is also a long story," Hrosca quickly cut in. "Let's just say that Aspen is a very special friend of Creon." Sarina's face stayed cold.

"I – I'd better get my stuff on," Creon finally stammered and headed up stairs.

"That's my brother?" she asked the priest, her surprise at her brother's alteration overcoming her forced chill. "What's happened to him?"

"He's lived with quite a few different people and matured a lot," the priest said slowly. "Many old wounds healed and some new ones were opened, but at the core he's still Creon – perhaps more so than he was before." He shook his head. "He was only a boy when we left, but now, now he's a man."



## The Architect's House

Creon's felt his mind was like a husk of chaff plucked up by the strong storms that raged over Chifchi to be driven wherever happenstance might take it. Aspen had disappeared unexpectedly only to be replaced – even more surprisingly – by Sarina. *The Creator definitely does some strange things*, he found himself thinking.

He quickly pulled a new tunic out of his pack and slipped it over his head and shoulders, then pulled on a pair of rough socks and stuffed his feet into his boots. The rest was tied up quickly in his pack and the scabbard and pack were quickly strapped on. He came downstairs again, Hrosca's bundle in one hand, Aspen's in the other. The two were talking quietly, but stopped the instant he approached. He could tell Sarina was trying to look distant and non-committal, but, as usual, she was failing.

"The Warrior King knows you're here," Hrosca said in a low voice, drawing them closer together, "and I believe that it was the innkeeper that told his servants. The most important thing right now is to get out of this house before the guards come. But where should we go?"

"I know someone," Sarina pushed out, each word costing a great effort. "I'll take you there." Hrosca nodded, but Creon just looked at her, eyes narrowed, the questions apparent, but unasked. *If only I could take one look inside, like with Lilya*, he sighed to himself and picked up Justin. He looked at the blade, took a couple practice swings, and then slid it into its sheath.

They left the inn in a hurry, quickly looking around the streets, and yet Hrosca took the time to carefully close the door.

"It'll delay them," he explained.

Then Sarina began taking them down the alleys and byways of the city, amazing Creon at how well she knew her way around. He wanted to comment, but their pace did not allow for any talking. After many twists and turns they stopped in front of a low house made of brick. It was totally unadorned, but its construction told of a master architect and a master mason. Sarina quickly stepped up to the large wooden door and pulled an artfully crafted handle in a recess next to it.

"Yes?" Creon heard a voice come from the wall beside the door.

"It's me," was all Sarina answered. The door opened silently and they entered quickly.

"This way," Sarina directed, leading the way down a broad corridor, finally stopping in front of one of the many doors and touching a small marble block set in the wall. The door swung inward without even a whisper. The room was well lit from high windows, filled with expensive clear glass and Creon was surprised to note that there were even windows in the ceiling. At the center of the room there was a great desk and all the walls were lined with bookshelves. When they had entered, the door swung shut on its own and became invisible, the back of it being covered by a bookshelf. A Man was seated behind the desk and gazed up at them from the papers he'd been working on. His hair was so blond it was almost white and his features were regular, almost like a sculptor's picture of Notan, the god of art and poetry. Calm eyes of blue looked at them, curious about the two Men, but then turned to the girl with obvious pleasure.

"Hello, Sarina," he greeted her with a smile. "I wasn't expecting you this early."

"I'm sorry," the girl answered, "but I had a little emergency." The Man nodded and turned to the other two.

"Welcome, friends," he said with another smile, also friendly, but not quite as warm as the one given Creon's sister. "Forgive me for not rising." With that he suddenly began to float out from behind the desk and Creon noticed that he was sitting in a curious metal and cloth chair with wheels on it.

"I am Baltar," the Man in the chair introduced himself.

"Creon son of Adem," the young Man returned, "and this is Hrosca, son of Estefan, a priest of Creator God." Baltar looked at them thoughtfully.

"Son of Adem ..." he thought out loud. "You wouldn't be Sarina's brother?" Creon nodded, giving a little half-smile. The kinship that had so often been lauded by some of the people in Chifchi had been lost in the past two years, especially as many of Creon's mannerisms had changed.

"Ah, yes," the Man in the chair continued, "she told me quite a bit about you. But you are quite different from her descriptions."

"Well," Creon began, a bit uncertainly. "It's been about eight seasons since we last saw each other. I would have described her differently, too." The blond Man nodded and turned to Hrosca, sizing him up with a piercing gaze.

"A priest of the Creator," he said at length. "I've never met one before. But perhaps you knew my grandfather, called Baltar the Great?"

"Ah, yes," Hrosca laughed, blue-gray eyes lighting up with the memory. "Baltar the Great, what an artisan." He turned to Creon. "He was a great wood and stone carver and created many beautiful and useful things. I believe his grandson has followed in his steps?" Baltar smiled wistfully.

"Not really. Even though I carve, I'm not nearly as good as my grandfather and I actually am an architect – and also one who stands against Dushman and his compatriots." He looked around the room calmly and smiled. "What better place to hide than in the house of the evil lord's most trusted architect. Follow me," he finished and turned his chair and rolled across the room to where they had entered. He pulled a small, artfully carved statue and the bookcase swung open toward them. Baltar rolled out into the hall and the others followed, the door once more closing silently behind them. The architect led them three doors down to another entryway that also opened at the touch of a marble slab. It revealed a large room with a good many couches and a cool fountain bubbled in the center of it. Baltar quickly rolled in, up to one couch, and heaved himself out of the chair and onto the divan with surprising strength.

"Please," he invited them, "be seated." They complied, each on his or her own couch while Baltar pressed a small metal eagle set in the wall behind him. A few moments later a hidden door opened at the other end of the room and several servants, both male and female, entered, each one carrying a plate or bowl of food. They were set on the low tables beside the couches and the servitors all returned to where they'd come from. Creon, Hrosca, Sarina and Baltar began to eat after a brief blessing by the priest. There was silence during the meal, something that Creon was unaccustomed to, but that, for once, he enjoyed, as it allowed him to watch Sarina. He noticed once more a new hardness in her, especially around the eyes and the lips, but he also saw how it softened when she glanced towards their host and instantly he wondered what their relationship was. She certainly didn't seem Baltar's slave, but why then would she wear the ring in her ear? Might she be his concubine? The thought made him shiver, and he realized how little he knew of the architect and wondered how forthright he should be.

"Now," Baltar instructed when he had finished with his portion and picked up his wine glass, "please tell me how you came to Stein and why the Warrior King is after you." Creon thought for a moment, trying to decide what to say and what not to say, but then decided, for the benefit of his sister, to be honest in what had happened to him. He began with the events after he left his home in Chifchi, briefly describing his travels in the Flatlands, telling of the island, the voyage through the Pwyll, and the stop in Eison, all the way to that very morning. He noticed Sarina frown and look away whenever he mentioned Aspen and asked himself, *Why is that?* Baltar was silent throughout the narrative, though the young Man was sure that he hadn't missed even

one little thing that had been said. When he finished the architect leaned back and pursed his lips before commenting.

"I see, the Woodmaid has been kidnapped." He nodded again. "That means that there is only one possibility of where she is: the castle."

"What?" Creon sat bolt upright, the dread that had gathered in his gut now spreading all around as a chill.

"Yes," their host sighed, blue eyes fixing Sarina for a moment, "in the castle. You see, Dushman has quite a taste in women. Basically anything that is beautiful and free-born is kidnapped or bought and added to his 'collection.' Every once in a while he will set one of the newly acquired ones as a 'prize' for the Man who wins his bloody fighting games. But from what I remember no one ever got the prize." Creon felt his blood run cold after hearing that and silence rolled into the room like a thick cloud. Sarina fidgeted under the oppressive stillness and cleared her throat.

"I – you told me all about your time, Creon," she began slowly, searching for the right words to say. "I think I should tell you about what happened to me." She put her hands together and looked at the ground.

"It was the summer after you left," she started her tale, "and I was taking lunch to Dad, when suddenly I thought I saw you walking up the path." She looked at her brother and for a moment the dark eyes took on their old delighted shine, which dulled instantly at the returning memory. "I – well, I ran to meet you, only you weren't there and then suddenly someone caught me from behind. I fought him, but he was stronger. He threw a sack over my head and carried me off. When he put me down, I was standing in Jimri's ante room. He told me that I was the payment for a debt that Dad had made with him and that I would be sold at the next market day. So I was sold to a guy from out east. He took me back to his place." Her face betrayed her distaste. "What a Man," she hissed, eyes like dark pools of ice, hands coming up like claws, ready to strike. "He did – I can't even tell you all the things he did to me and all the other servant girls. Anyway," she continued, forcibly calming herself, "last year I tried to escape with two other girls. We were caught and were given fifty lashes each! My back still hurts when I think about it; and that wasn't all he did, so last winter I finally got up the nerve and left again and made it!" A triumphant look crossed her face, which sobered again.

"I didn't know where I was going, but thought that if I went far enough, I'd eventually find Chifchi again. I didn't have much food or water, but each time I ran out, I found more. And the most amazing thing was when I met the Woodfolk!" Her voice took on a thrill Creon hadn't heard in a long time. "I had been without food and water for three days when they found me and helped me back to health. They warned me about the desert ahead, but I didn't listen to them." She sighed heavily. "It wasn't easy, but I made it here, only to find that I'd gone the wrong direction. Baltar took me in and I've been here ever since." Sarina closed her tale with a glance of appreciation to her host.

"That was the shortened version," Baltar commented. "She was nearly dead when my servant Silvanus found her. He brought her here and she healed. She's been here ever since. I made her keep the slave ring in her ear, because it protects her from Dushman's people. They only take free women – they say slaves are too base." He looked toward the large windows where the late afternoon rays danced in, gently gilding everything, making it almost a dream-land.

"The board will be here in a short time," he said, turning back to his guests. "I'll have my servants give you each a room and you have free access to the garden. All you need to do is ring for a servant and he will take you to it." He turned and pressed the silver eagle again and one tall man entered.

"Yes, my lord," he said with a bow to the host.

"Take these gentlemen to the eastern rooms," Baltar commanded. The servant bowed again and motioned them to follow. Hrosca and Creon thanked their host warmly and followed the tall servant who led them through several long, straight corridors to two large rooms, more spartan than the inn, but also much more elegant and more tastefully decorated. Creon sat down on the bed, staring out of the large window. Aspen was in the hands of the dark lord. Every fiber in him wanted to storm the great castle and get her out of there and back into the nature where she belonged, but he couldn't, at least not now.

*What can I do?* He moaned silently and then remembered what he had done during his problem with Lilya. *Creator God, he prayed silently. Get her out of there before anything happens, please!*



## The Prize

The castle was pure horror for Aspen. She was curled up in the corner of an expansive room, where women of all ages and colors did each other's hair, played games, gossiped, and slept. The nightmare had begun for her early that morning when the innkeeper's wife roughly woke her, pressing one hand over the Woodmaid's mouth. She was gagged, then had been made to get up and her hands were tied behind her. The woman threw the wide cloak over her and pushed her out of the room, out of the inn and into a wagon. It bounced over the dirt and cobblestone streets and up to the large black citadel at the center of Stein. They knocked on the door and she was given to a guard, who handed her over to another one, who finally passed her on to Karasel, the woman in charge of the harem. She had Aspen stripped, then examined her carefully, before she was given a bath and new clothing: light gauzy robes that revealed while covering and which did not keep one warm at all. Aspen had never been treated so in her life, and while Woodfolk women were fairly free amongst themselves, she was very ashamed to have anyone looking at her in this dress.

Now she was just sitting here, detached, watching the many women as they went about their daily activities. How she missed the calm running waters, open fields and wooded stretches of the island where she had grown up! How she wished Creon or her father could be here at this moment. The shame and loneliness began to bubble up in her, pushing at her eyes and they overflowed. She cried silently into her hands, shoulders shaking with sobs, and deep inside she began to ask of the Creator, *Why me?*

"Now, now, dearie," came the deep voice of Karasel. "We can't have you crying, or else his lordship won't be pleased at all when he arrives, hm?" The Woodmaid looked up, for the first time taking a good look at the corpulent woman with henna-colored hair and bright dark eyes who was standing next to her. There was something motherly about her as she left the girl and moved among her other charges. Aspen tiptoed over to a water basin at the side of the room and quickly splashed her face with the lemon-scented water. She took a few deep breaths to compose herself when the doors crashed open, making her spin around, instinctively drawing her arms across her front. Two tall men in the garb of soldiers dragged in a limp shape and deposited her unceremoniously on the marble floor.

"What did she do *this* time?" Karasel demanded, walking over to the guard.

"Galba says she refused the lord," the soldier replied with a shrug. "He says she's not to be touched."

"Then why bring her *here*?" the mistress of the harem snapped angrily. "She's only going to make a mess, bleeding like that and it's going to hurt the constitution of the other women!"

"It's a warning," the soldier shot back, not much friendlier. "If you refuse the lord, you die. It's as simple as that." He nodded to Karasel and left, the great doors closing behind him. The woman rolled her eyes, raised her hands in silent supplication to the gods and padded away, leaving the girl on the ground, as had been ordered. The other women took no notice of the dying one, but the injustice of the situation burned in Aspen's breast. She hurried over to see find a slim girl of about fifteen with dark hair and large, pleading, dark eyes, bubbling out her last breaths through a cut throat.

"No!" she gurgled, as the Woodmaid knelt over her.

"Stay still," she ordered in return, "you're going to be all right." And with that she laid her hand across the gash and pressed. Her eyes closed and her healing powers flooded to her finger tips, igniting the halo of silver light. The girl grew still and when Aspen drew her hand back, nothing remained of the wound, but a darkened scab. The girl gasped and wanted to rise, but her healer pushed her back gently.

"I'm not finished yet," she said softly, now picking at the scab. She slipped one fingernail under it and pulled it back, revealing fresh, pink skin underneath it. The girl cried out as the dried blood was torn away, but then blinked, reaching up and touching the spot where her wound had been.

"What did you *do*?" she gasped, sitting up.

"I healed you," Aspen returned matter-of-factly. "Now let's get something to clean this blood up."

"How?" the newly-healed one asked, unable to comprehend.

"I'm a Woodmaid," her healer said simply. "We can heal most things." She rose and helped her patient to her feet. The blood on the girl's dress and the floor was still wet and Aspen's hand was smeared from where she'd touched her. The girl was still weak from the loss of blood, but, with Aspen's help, she staggered across the room, much to the surprise and comments of the other women. They slipped through the curtain to the general bath where the girl tossed her dress aside and washed herself, while Aspen did her best to clean the few bloodstains from her garments.

"And exactly *what* did you think you were doing, young woman?" came Karasel's voice from the doorway. Aspen turned back, questioning.

"Washing up?" she said lightly.

"Not about that!" the mistress of the harem snapped, walking into the room. "About *her!*" She pointed an accusing finger at the healed girl, who was now selecting a new dress from the ones hanging there.

"She was hurt," Aspen returned with a shrug. "I healed her. That's the way of the Woodfolk."

"The way of the Woodfolk," Karasel mimicked angrily. "By all the gods of the underworld! Do you know that it's not only going to cost her life, but yours as well, now, dearie? I can't afford to lose two girls in one day!"

"No one else saw it happen, Karasel," the once-wounded girl snapped, now dressed, and coming over to where the two of them were arguing.

"Now there you're wrong, Temar," the older woman shot back. "The other girls are talking of nothing else. Your miraculous recovery will most likely prompt something more painful than simply having your throat cut!"

"It was a gift of the gods," Temar replied vehemently, "even that bastard lord can see that! I doubt he'll say anything."

"Very well, but don't you ever refuse him again, girl," Karasel growled. "I don't want to lose you. There's no one else with your touch with the sick." Here she glanced at Aspen and her voice softened. "Except for this one maybe." With that she swept around and stalked out of the room.

"I owe you my life," Temar said as soon as the curtain had fallen again, making to kneel in front of the Woodmaid.

"No you don't," Aspen replied, grabbing the girl's arm and pulling her upright. "I'm Aspen."

"Temar," the girl returned, "only I guess you already know that." The Woodmaid smiled and was about to answer when a loud gong pealed from the other room.

"Lord Dushman is coming!" Temar whispered. "Come on, or else he's going to get even angrier."

"Girls!" came Karasel's voice. "Get ready." The two girls walked out from behind the curtain, but lingered by it, hoping to not attract too much attention from the others. At that instant the large doors at the far end of the harem opened and three Men entered, the first a small, thickly built man with an untidy thatch of brown hair. He walked with a certain careless arrogance and even from that distance, Aspen thought she could see the marks of his debauched lifestyle on his face, and she deduced that this must be the lord of Stein. He was attended by two tall, dark-skinned men dressed in scarlet and yellow robes. One had a small wooden board in one hand and a stylus in the other. The other unrolled a scroll and looked over it.

"Hello, my pretties," Dushman laughed as he scanned the ranks of women. Aspen drew her arms across herself, trying to look natural but cover as much as she could. Tamar shot her an amused glance.

"You'll get used to it," she whispered.

"No, I won't!" the Woodmaid shot back.

Then the lord began walking among the women, followed by his minions.

"This one on the third day," he said of one and "Sell that one, she's been here too long," of another. "I think these will decorate the evening meal tonight." Finally his black eyes rested on where Aspen was standing. She found herself praying that the ground would open up and swallow her.

"You there, red-head," he demanded. Aspen pointed at herself, questioning, stalling for time, hoping for a miracle.

"Yes, you, get over here!" One of the Men in scarlet bent and whispered something in the dark lord's ear and he nodded. Aspen shook as she walked over, silently praying for Creator God to get her out of this fix. Karasel was suddenly there next to her, gently but firmly pulling her hands back and holding them to her sides.

"Woodmaid, eh?" she heard Dushman say to his servant. "What dimwit would bring *me* a Woodmaid?" Then he turned to her.

"Let me see," he said, looking her over carefully. "Turn around," he commanded, making a turning motion with his right index finger. Aspen obeyed, feeling more and more revulsion each second as she was being forced to display her charms to one who had no right to see her. *I belong to Creon and to no one else*, she thought vehemently.

"Well, since we've got a Woodmaid here, why not?" he muttered to himself. "You certainly are a lovely specimen," he continued, leering at her. It was only Karasel's firm grip that kept Aspen's hands where they were. Then Dushman turned to his lackey.

"All right then, we'll take her as the prize for the next games." Aspen's drew a sharp breath. *What does that mean?* she wondered. More indignities? She could feel herself getting light-headed and her knees began to buckle, but the mistress of the harem supported her easily.

"See that she's made ready," Dushman directed Karasel, then turned and left the hall, never having noticed Temar, who had remained in her place, head lowered, afraid that she was going to be killed.

"Come, dearie," Karasel said gently and led the shaking Woodmaid out a small side door, down a long corridor and into a small, lavishly decorated room. She gently let Aspen settle down on the bed and, noting the pallor in her face, enfolded her in a motherly embrace. Aspen relished it, feeling even a small amount of comfort from this woman, as she rocked her, whispering, "Sh, it will all be fine, just you wait and see."

Then, when Aspen's breathing had calmed, Karasel let her go.

"I will leave you now," she told the Woodmaid. "This will be your home for a few days, dearie. If you need anything just pull the rope," she directed, pointing at a long scarlet cord hanging from the ceiling and left the room. Aspen sank back on the bed gazing at the ceiling, feeling very alone, and very exposed.

"Creator God, where are you?" she whispered towards the ceiling. "Where is Creon? Please let him come and get me!" The last bit was pushed out in a wail and she rolled over, fuming at the indignity, sobbing until she had no more strength. She then lay there for a long time in the stillness that comes after the storm passes and it seemed to her that there was a presence in her room – a calming presence of one who cared. She was too tired to even raise her head from the tear-stained covers to see who was there, but the comfort of that presence enfolded her like the light creeping over the land at sunrise. She sighed, stifled a half sob and slowly drifted off to sleep, nestled in the reassuring calm of the Creator.

The sun was laughing through the open window, bidding her good morning, when she finally awoke. At first she didn't remember where she was and blinked at the decorated walls and gauzy drapery, then looked down at her clothing and felt the lump in her throat and the stickiness of tears on her face. At that moment all of the events of the previous day rolled over her and with it the shame and revulsion at her present state. But in that darkness and fear, a tiny light sparkled as she remembered the very tangible presence of the Creator as he had come to comfort her in her time of need. *I'm protected*, she decided and arose from her bed, feeling quite a bit better than she thought she might.

She glanced around the room and with delight noticed that it was private, a good deal smaller than the great hall where she had been yesterday, but much better furnished, and above all else it promised solitude. In one wall there was a curtain-covered entryway which she peeked through to find a bath room, bigger and more luxurious than the one in the inn. The basin was already filled with warm water and had been readied for a bath, complete with a tray of bath pearls and a washing sponge beside it. As she was alone, Aspen gladly stepped into the room, disrobed, and slipped into the water. She enjoyed the fact that she could swim back and forth through the warm water and found that the fragrance of the bath pearls reminded her much of her namesake tree. She slipped out much refreshed, dried off using one of the large, soft towels laid out for her and kicked her soiled dress aside, noticing several more hanging on pegs at the side of the bath room. They were all

like the one she'd worn the day before and she angrily pulled one on, annoyed that she didn't have her own, warm clothes made by the Woodfolk. *What wouldn't I give for my cloak right now*, she thought wistfully, looking around, then picked up the towel, thinking it might do, but for being wet. She sighed and discarded it and walked into her bed and living room, wondering what she would be doing for breakfast. Immediately she had to stifle a cry of surprise. There was Temar, dressed in a demure, white gown, leaning over a low table, neatly arranging an assortment of fruit, cheese, and flat bread.

"What are you doing here?" Aspen exclaimed. The dark-haired girl looked up.

"Oh, good morning, m'lady," she laughed, dark eyes sparkling. "I am your humble servant for the time that you occupy these rooms."

"I don't need a servant," the Woodmaid shot back, trying to hide the pleasantness of the surprise under her anger. "I'm perfectly capable of caring for myself!"

"All right," Temar shrugged. "If that is what you wish." She straightened and made to leave. "But, remember, I owe you a debt of gratitude – after all you saved my life, and," here she paused meaningfully, "this keeps me away from Dushman." She bowed her head humbly and made to leave.

"I'm sorry, Temar," Aspen sighed, now glad for the company. "I was startled. Please don't go."

"All right." The dark-haired girl brightened. "Let me serve you, then."

"No, please, just join me for now," the Woodmaid insisted, seating herself at the table, where she raised her eyes and said a brief blessing on the meal in her own tongue.

"And may all your gods bless me, too," Temar put in.

"I've only got one God," the Woodmaid pointed out, reaching for an apple.

"Only one?" There was something between disdain and interest in the girl's eyes.

"Yes," Aspen explained, as she skillfully peeled and cut the apple, "we've always had only one and he's real."

"What do you mean by that?" Temar pressed.

"Well," the red-haired girl replied, thinking of the evening before, "he comforts us when we need it and he's with us, even in the most difficult of times."

"If he's like that, then why are you *here*?" The other girl snatched up a grape and popped it into her mouth. "Wouldn't he keep that from happening?" Aspen cocked her head to one side, thinking hard, and then the answer came to her, as if it had been whispered into her ear by a wiser mind.

"He's got a reason for it," she said after tasting from her apple. "I don't know what it is yet, but it'll turn out all right." She paused. "What brought you here?"

"I was born here," Temar answered, taking an apple for herself. "Here at the castle, I mean. My mother was in the harem." The Woodmaid raised her eyebrows.

"Is Dushman your *father*?" she asked.

"I don't know and I don't care." The dark-haired girl's voice was flat, making it clear that she didn't want to discuss the topic. "I just know that I really don't want to leave here, regardless of what kind of a monster the lord is."

"Hm," was all Aspen answered. They ate in silence for a while, the Woodmaid wistfully thinking of Creon when suddenly a thought came to her mind.

"Temar, what does it mean for you to be my servant?" she asked.

"Well, I pretty much have to do anything you ask," the other girl replied with a shrug. "What did you have in mind?"

"Can you get a message out of the castle? I have friends..." Aspen bit her lip, unsure of what else to say.

"Friends?" Temar smiled knowingly. "I think I might be able to tell your *friend* about you, if I knew where he was. Of course, I know that a Woodman can't kill." The Woodmaid colored at that.

"He's not..." she blurted, then snapped her mouth shut, blushing all the more at letting that out.

"So, he's not a Woodman?" Temar queried, eyebrows rising in surprise. Aspen just shook her head mutely.

"Well, as said, I could get word to him, if I knew where to find him."

"That I don't know," Aspen sighed. "I wish I did, but I don't."

"Well, I'll see what I can do," the servant girl said, rising. She began to clear away the breakfast. "I guess there are some channels that I can put word out through, but," and here she fixed the Woodmaid with a firm gaze, "don't think that he could make it in here without getting caught. Dushman is much too smart for that."

"You don't know Creon!" Aspen shot back. At that Temar softened a bit.

"No, I don't. And may your God enable him to help you." With that she left the room and Aspen to ponder why she was putting her fate in the hands of a girl she hardly knew.



## Rescue

"I have news, friends!" Baltar exclaimed, rolling into the room where Sarina and Creon were having breakfast together, bantering about unimportant things, and the young Man amazing his sister with his dexterity. A day had passed since Creon and Hrosca's arrival in Baltar's house and the siblings had reconciled somewhat.

"What?" Creon cried, nearly leaping from his couch.

"The Lady Aspen is going to be the prize in the games the day after tomorrow," the architect said, pulling his wheelchair up next to the two. Creon frowned, eyes betraying his puzzlement. Was he supposed to be happy or even more worried?

"Perhaps it's time to rescue her," the priest suggested, entering the room from the main doorway.

"Hrosca, you're a genius," Creon exclaimed, his heart swelling. Now he could finally get Aspen out of there – but how?

"I have a plan," Baltar said calmly. "Follow me." He quickly led the three back into his great study, where he rolled across to the other side and pressed on a cross-section in one of the shelves. Again the shelf swung open, this time revealing a tiny cubicle that was hardly big enough for the four of them. Baltar rolled his chair into it next to a crank set in the side wall. Sarina and Hrosca followed him, but Creon remained behind, his old fear of small places beginning to creep up again.

"I – I can't," he stammered.

"Oh, come on, Creon," Sarina snapped at him. "You aren't scared, are you? We used to crawl into places smaller than this all the time!" His sister's words stung and he stomped into the tiny box, glaring at her. She smiled smugly and the door swung shut on them.

Light came from a small lamp suspended above their heads. Baltar turned a crank and Creon felt the tiny box descend into nothingness. He could see a strip of rough stone wall slide by the open side of the box and then they came to a halt at another wall of wood. Baltar reached out and touched three studs set in the wall. It swung open to reveal a long corridor lit by torches set in evenly spaced brackets along the walls. The architect quickly rolled out of the box and into the hall. The others followed, Creon last, hesitant, feeling the walls would descend on him at any moment.

"What I have here few people know about, friends," their host began, stopping in front of a section of stone wall. "But I will show it to you, because it is very important if you want to save the lady." Baltar's mentioning Aspen sparked Creon's excitement again and the walls did not seem as oppressive as before.

The architect pushed a stone in the wall and it slid open sideways revealing an expansive room in the center of which was a large stone table with a scale model of a giant citadel. The architect pulled a small statue standing in a recess beside the door, which slid shut. In the same moment the room was suddenly lit brightly, though Creon couldn't tell from where. The size of the room calmed his heart somewhat and his interest piqued as Baltar rolled over to the model of the castle.

"This is a model of Dushman's castle, correct in every detail," he explained turning a crank on the side of the table. The model rotated around facing the small group.

"This is the way you would see it if we looked at it from here," Baltar said, pointing to the south side. "And this is where the prize is usually located." He turned another small crank and the battlements and the top

inner floor swung away to reveal a detailed floor plan. He pointed to a small room facing west with an adjoining bath.

"And what are these?" Creon asked, pointing to tiny halls between rooms, where one would have imagined solid walls.

"Those are secret passageways known only to my family," the architect explained. "This one opens here in the bath next to Lady Aspen's room. Now, if you are going to enter the castle there are two ways: either from the main gate, facing north." The castle closed itself again and spun around to show the great entrance. "The other way is to go in through a secret entrance here." The castle rotated again, this time the west side towards them. Baltar pointed to a small cluster of rocks at the base of the hill.

"There is a small cave behind these rocks which takes you into the maze of secret passages," Baltar continued his explanation. "I can't give you a plan of them, but I can tell you how to get through them to the lady's chambers." Then he proceeded to describe the way from the secret entrance, telling the exact number of stairs, the number of steps before the next turn, and so on. Creon listened as carefully as he could to all of the instructions, but at times was distracted by his desire to rescue Aspen. He tried recounting them and made a good deal of mistakes, which Baltar corrected patiently until Creon knew the way perfectly.

"The best time to enter the castle is right before dawn," the architect explained. "The guards are tired and the watch isn't over until sunrise. You will have to wait until the darkest part of the night and go then."

"I'm doing this alone," Creon said, turning to the others. "After all, Aspen is my responsibility." Hrosca shook his hoary head.

"No, son of Adem, I must go with you," he replied firmly.

"But ..." Creon began to protest, not wanting to cast any other of his friends into jeopardy, but the priest raised his hand, demanding silence.

"No, it is something that I must do," the old Man returned, a strange look of sadness and rapture passing over his face.

"All right," Creon finally agreed, annoyed that he would have to share the glory, but at the same time happy that he would not have to go by himself.

"Me, too," Sarina said, pulling his sleeve. This time her brother shook his head.

"Two is already too many, sis. You'll have to stay." Her brow furrowed and eyes flashed, and she opened her mouth to protest, but Creon gave her the look that told her that there was no arguing with him. She glowered for a moment and then muttered something about only being left out because she was a girl! Creon smiled in spite of himself – that was so much like the Sarina he knew.

"Very well," came Baltar's voice into his reverie. "We must make ourselves ready then."

The rest of the afternoon was spent carefully planning every last detail of the operation. They were to enter the castle right before dawn and take the fastest way to Aspen's chamber, retrieve her from there and get her out the same way they came in. Sarina would be waiting at the cave with a couple of armed servants to escort them back to Baltar's from where they would leave the next day. It was simple and perfect in every detail. But it could go wrong. *I won't worry about that*, Creon thought to himself. *It can't go wrong!*

Hrosca slept very lightly that night and Creon not at all, sitting at the edge of his bed, worrying, praying, and it was not long before they rose to leave. Creon strapped on Justin, the silver sword, and took his knife and the protecting silver chain. Baltar himself let them out a hidden door into the alley and Sarina quickly guided them through the black, silent streets to the base of the castle. Creon's heart pounded so hard the whole time that he was afraid that the mere noise of it would wake the entire city. They carefully circled the citadel until they reached the west side where the young Man recognized the rock formation right away. He looked up towards the battlements, but it was the deepest part of night, only a few stars sparkled in the heavens, and he couldn't make out anyone. Being in the shadows, they wouldn't be able to see the intruders, either, and so he and Hrosca sprinted across the open space and squeezed into the tiny opening. Instantly Creon felt he couldn't breathe.

"I've got to get out," he gasped.

"No," Hrosca whispered emphatically. "You're staying here." He pulled the young Man through the tiny cave and to the other end, where a smooth stone wall rose before them. Creon ran his shaking hands over the rocks until he found a tiny depression. The instant he touched it the wall swung away to reveal a pitch black, square hole. There was a scraping sound and a flaming torch was pressed into his hand. He glanced at Hrosca, swallowing on a dry mouth. The old man looked ghostly in the flickering light as he reached out with another torch and ignited it with Creon's burning one.

"Let's go," the priest whispered. "Lady Aspen will be waiting." And the two Men entered the small, dark tunnel.

Creon immediately began counting the paces, seeking the turns and stair ways, pushing his excitement and fear down and keeping his head as clear as possible. After what seemed to be hours of twisting stairways and crooked halls, he finally found the piece of wall they were looking for: a single character marked the wall where the door was. He pressed his eye to the peephole besides the letter and saw a splendid room of marble with a great basin of water in the center. There was no one in sight. He quickly touched the letter engraved there, the wall swung away from him and he stepped into the room, handing his torch to Hrosca. The old Man followed, touched the mark on the door again and it swung shut, leaving no sign of its existence except for the same mark at the same place on the wall. The priest touched Creon's arm and motioned him to go.

"I'll wait here," he mouted. The young Man nodded and silently slid across the marble floor and to the curtain-covered doorway. He stole a glance through them. There was a young red-haired woman sitting with her back to him, but it looked like she was alone in the room. A thrill shook him slightly and he took a deep breath to calm his churning stomach and parted the curtains.

Aspen heard a rustle and swung around. Her eyes instantly widened in joyful surprise. There was Creon! She leaped up and suddenly was in his arms, heedless of the dust that covered his jacket and shoulders. He closed his eyes and felt his fear and tension fall away from him like chains – he was free once more.

"I knew you'd come," she said, stepping back from him. It was only then that he noticed the dress she was wearing, which thrilled and sickened him in the same thought.

"What happened to your clothes?" he asked, forcing himself to look into her face only.

"They took them," she replied. Thinking quickly, Creon swung his own wide cloak off his shoulders and draped it around Aspen.

"Thank you," she sighed. Creon looked around, the urgency returning, the sense that they must leave immediately.

"There's no time anymore," he said insistently. "We've got to get out of here."

"Yes," came a third voice, making them jump, "but the only one who will leave here today is *you*, son of Adem."



## Into the Arena

Creon turned and saw a small, heavyset man with brown hair and black eyes grinning at him. Almost involuntarily he reached for Justin, but restrained himself from drawing the silver blade.

"Dushman!" he breathed, dropping his hand.

"Precisely," the little Man laughed, taking a step closer. "I was sure that you were going to come, son of Adem."

"What do you want from her?" Creon demanded, but the answer never came. At that moment Hrosca was shoved through the curtained doorway by two massive guards in black-and-leather uniforms with orange cloaks around their shoulders. The cold began settling in Creon's belly and turning black.

"As you see, you aren't the only ones that know about the secret passages in this castle," the lord of Stein grinned.

"Sorry," Hrosca whispered to the young Man.

"You shouldn't be here in the first place," Dushman continued. "You know that it is forbidden to enter these chambers. The penalty is death." Now the darkness jelled, rising up, reddening, and Creon straightened his shoulders and tightened his jaw.

"Then I'll choose what kind," he snapped.

"Be my guest," the evil man laughed.

"In the games, protecting my lady's honor," Creon returned.

"Creon, no," Aspen protested.

"You stay out of this," Creon told her angrily. Aspen stepped back, green eyes wide and mirroring more than a little anger.

"Wait a minute," she demanded, "this is *my* honor we're talking about and I'm in fairly good condition to defend it myself."

"Yes, but you don't know how to use a sword and you can't kill," he returned evenly, understanding his purpose: he would slay the man who had done this to her.

"You don't mean ..." Aspen asked, shocked.

"Maybe, but I pray to Creator God that it won't happen. And besides, I have debt to repay." He saw in her eyes that she understood.

"Very well then," Dushman agreed, his black eyes glinting maliciously. "You may have your wish, son of Adem." He then turned to Hrosca.

"And you, old Man?" he asked. "How do you wish to die?"

"Protecting the son of Adem," Hrosca answered, a strange steely look in his blue-gray eyes.

"Hrosca, no!" Creon shouted. It was enough that he had to deal with this for Aspen's sake. He didn't want to have his teacher in the way, too!

"Yes, Creon," the priest said calmly, "you'll need my protection."

"Two fools in one day," Dushman exclaimed, shaking his head. "That's a rare one. You will fight together, the son of Adem for his lady's honor and the old Man for his friend's life. Take them to their quarters." The guards grabbed Creon and Hrosca and muscled them out the door.

"Creon," he heard the Woodmaid call. "I love you!"

"I love you, too, Aspen," he whispered to himself, feeling warm and secure in her words.

The cell they were thrust into was small and dark and Creon immediately felt the walls descending upon him. He paced the small cubicle incessantly, his eyes wild, looking for an exit, his heart throbbing, fear rising minute by minute. Hrosca sat in one corner, his eyes on the ground, silent.

"Creon," he finally said. The young Man continued pacing.

"There is something I have to tell you." Creon stopped and looked at the old priest.

"I won't leave this castle again," Hrosca began, pulling his pupil down next to him. "For that reason you must learn something." He held out his hand and suddenly a light appeared in the middle of the room. It turned and began to form the image of a hill with a walled city on top, which clearly wasn't Stein.

"Shion," the old Man explained. "It is forbidden to enter the great city, but you will have to know the entrance to the Halls of Knowledge. There is only one entrance to the valley from where Shion's hill rises, here." He pointed to a small pass to the east of the city. "The road runs up the hill to the city, and you must bear from it here." He pointed to a small path leaving the main road about a third of the way up. "Follow the path to where the eagle flies and the lion rests. There is the entrance to the Halls. You will show the priests this." The image vanished as he unfastened the bright blue stone from around his neck.

"Give me the chain, Creon," Hrosca commanded. "The time has come."

"For what?"

"You will see; give it to me!" Creon hesitated, still trying to comprehend what the old man had said about the Halls of Knowledge, but then slowly drew it out and placed it in the old Man's hand. Hrosca gritted his teeth and slung the tarnished strand of silver around the stone. Instantly a bright flash erupted in the cell and Creon was blinded for some time. When the dancing white spots subsided he saw Hrosca sitting there, the

chain in one hand and an opaque navy-blue stone in the other, so still, that the son of Adem thought he was dead. Then the blue-gray eyes shifted slowly and fixed on the young Man.

"I've done it!" he said, his voice strangely changed. "I have finally broken the hold of the Dark Arts. No, not me, the Creator!" He moved forward and Creon noticed that the old Man's skin had taken on the same unusual consistency as that of Mercius. He shrank from touching Hrosca, in whose face now youth and age mingled strangely.

"Take them, son of Adem," the priest commanded and the young Man picked the chain out of one hand and the stone out of the other. He carefully threaded the stone onto the chain and placed them both into the pouch.

"What's happened?" he asked, finally recovering his speech.

"Your chain has broken my powers, Creon. I no longer command the Dark Arts. That means I am now a normal Man again." The priest laughed and his delight was so apparent that Creon could not help but rejoice with him.

"Remember," the old man sighed as his mirth subsided and his mind returned to things at had, "where the eagle flies and the lion rests, there is the entrance to the Halls. Take Aspen with you when you leave Stein, go east over Tashyer and into the Death March. You will find help there and will be guided to the Peak Called Joy, where Creator God dwells. You will face many dangers on the way there and back, but then you must go to Shion and the Halls of Knowledge. You will then be told what you must do."

"But what about you?" Creon asked.

"I will never leave this castle, my friend," the old Man replied sadly. "But you will. And then you must follow all my instructions." He paused, thinking. "One more word of advice. The Warrior King may seem to be powerful, but the spirits that now serve him will destroy him some day." With that he fell silent again.

The rest of the day and night was spent without saying a word. Creon pondered Hrosca's prophecy and repeated the words over and over again. He also remembered the promise of the bloody Man in his dreams.

"Creator God," he whispered. "Please go with me." And while the fear squirming in his gut didn't exactly vanish, it did still enough and he knew that he would be safe.

The cell door creaked open, the torch of the warden casting flickering shadows on the two prisoners, the elder still sitting against the wall, the younger pacing back and forth. Creon turned towards the door, a sharp pang hitting his stomach for a moment, knowing it was time. Now he must fight, for Aspen, for life itself.

"You, move!" the warden shouted, gesturing towards the doorway. Hrosca rose and strode forward, followed by Creon. Up the long, winding stair and through endless hallways they went, Creon trying to keep from trembling at the oppression of the walls, at the darkness and the enclosed spaces. Finally, they stopped in a large ante-room and Creon could see a gateway through which poured the hot rays of the late afternoon sun. He desperately wanted to rush over and gasp the sweet air of the open field, but was able to control himself.

The warden shouted at the armorer there in the entryway to the arena and he handed the two prisoners their weapons. Creon weighed Justin's silver blade in his hands, delighted that he could wield his own sword on this, his day of destiny. Hrosca strung his bow and checked his fine arrows. Aside from that he had a long dagger in his belt and also selected an iron stave from one of those resting against the wall. Now in the warm, golden light he looked stronger and more youthful than Creon had ever seen him, his hair white as snow, his skin like leather, the lean muscles filled with a strange power. The old Man brushed the folds from his robe and straightened the leather belt.

Creon ran a hand through his dark hair, flicked his wrist and let Justin sing through the air. He then pulled off his jacket and prayed again, the feeling in his gut intensifying with each breath. Hrosca smiled encouragement.

"He will protect you, Creon," he said firmly as the iron bars swung inward. "And now we must go." They strode out into the arena to a fanfare of trumpets and a powerful voice began to announce them.

"And now, people of Stein," it bellowed, "a special treat. Two tried and true warriors to face off with the champion of the day to defend today's prize!" Thundering applause and shouts ran around the great arena.

Creon scanned the many faces for those he knew, but couldn't find any. He shot a disdainful glance at Dushman's great pavilion and noticed Aspen sitting there, a few steps below the evil lord. At first he didn't even recognize her, arrayed in fine garments that were a bit more modest than what she'd been wearing that morning, but at the same time much more revealing than what she usually wore. Her hair was carefully arranged around her head and sparkled in the light, as did her wrists, ankles and something around her neck. He surmised it must be jewelry to complete her costume and wondered what she was thinking at the moment, looking at him like this. He nodded to try to encourage her that he would not fail. The great voice sounded again.

"And now, today's champion!" Again applause and cheers as a Man not much taller than Creon emerged from the same entrance they had used. He was dressed in a pair of fur leggings and shorts, chest bare, a great bi-handed sword resting comfortably in his hand. Creon's stomach churned again and he grimaced.

"Courage," he heard Hrosca whisper. The champion turned and saluted Dushman with his sword, shot a glance at Aspen and then turned to face Creon. The young Man's face folded into a determined scowl as he weighed Justin in his right hand and flicked the sword around in a show of his skill. The champion grinned maliciously, now closing his other hand around the hilt of his sword.

"You are trying to defend the prize, eh?" he laughed. "You know, I've never had a Woodmaid before and I wonder what it's like." Instantly the darkness turned crimson behind Creon's eyes and he thought his blood was about the boil over. His face turned red and he nearly launched an attack, but a light tap on his shoulder stopped him. The champion swung the broad sword around his head twice and the fight began.

Creon parried the thrusts with the great skill he had acquired from the best sword fighter in all of the Seven Nations. His gray eyes were flashed with steely determination, his arms and feet worked in the rhythm of his anger as his enemy attacked him. There were loud cheers and boos as the two fighters circled around. Hrosca merely stood, leaning on his staff, watching and waiting.

Creon had both hands full trying to keep the other Man's sword from him. But he also noticed that his adversary was tiring a bit. The lightning-fast steps of the Woodfolk kept the slower champion at bay and Rushtu's sword fighting stopped the great blade from coming near him. Finally Creon saw an opening and he swung around under the singing blade, kicked the champion's feet out from under him, so that he fell forward, and hammered Justin's hilt into the base of his skull. The champion collapsed, unconscious. The crowd roared, some in fury, some in elation as Creon bent and checked the Man's pulse. Yes, he was still alive. *The worst is over*, he thought to himself and turned to the great dais, where Dushman was sitting. Behind the young Man two slaves rushed in and removed the unconscious warrior. The lord of Stein rose and silenced the audience with a gesture.

"Very good, son of Adem," he said with a grin. "I'm happy that you finished him off so well. Now I have the chance to fight you." The crimson haze exploded in his head and Creon went white with anger.

"You – I was supposed to defend her against the *champion*," he yelled, swinging the sword around in a blinding arc.

"I am the champion, scum," Dushman roared, equally angered. He leaped off the dais, down onto the circus floor and grabbed the champion's sword.

"And now, son of Adem, to the death," he hissed. "No cheap tricks to save your life or *mine!*" The giant blade sang and Creon had trouble stopping it. Though smaller than the champion, Dushman was tougher and much more skilled with the great bi-hander. Creon felt every parried blow shake his whole frame. Then suddenly the blade flashed brightly, swinging in a deadly curve towards his head. Creon swung Justin to parry and leaped up into the air. At the same instant the bi-hander connected with his sword, which only slowed Dushman's sword's descent. The searing blade bit into his right upper arm, cutting through to the bone. Creon flew a few feet and crashed into the ground, blood spattering all over his arm, shoulder, face, and chest.

"Well, son of Adem," the evil lord laughed, "it looks like this is the end of the road for you." He raised the sword to deliver the final blow. The great blade swung down and Aspen screamed. Before it could strike the young Man it was parried by the iron rod that Hrosca held in his hands. Dushman glared at him, eyes narrowed, trying to place the face of the man that now opposed him and suddenly he had it.

"You!" he thundered, recognition finally reaching his dark eyes. "The wizard!"

"Yes, Dushman, it's me, Hrosca son of Estefan," the old Man said, his face set like stone. "You once swore you'd kill me and now you have your chance." Dushman roared again and the great blade bounced off the rod. Hrosca swung around, leading the evil lord away from the fallen young Man. Creon raised his head feebly and amid dancing red and black spots he saw a monumental fight between two titans. Again and again Hrosca stopped the big blade. Suddenly Dushman reared back.

"You're finished, wizard," he shouted, "and I shall be avenged!" The great sword swung down, broke the bar and slashed deep into Hrosca's chest.

"No!" Creon screamed, the strength of anger and fear shooting into his weary bones. He pushed himself up with his left arm, Justin still dangling in his now useless right. He switched the sword into his left hand and Dushman turned to face him.

"Not dead yet?" he sneered, eyes spitting forth his hatred.

"You killed him," Creon hissed and Justin swung. Dushman parried blow after blow, but Creon's anger gave him great strength, and his hatred fueled his skill. The lord, despite his being unharmed and much more battle-hardened, began showing signs of one who might be faltering under the heavy hand of fear. His parries were as strong as ever, but it was as if he could not attack against the whirlwind of the young warrior's skilled swordplay. Then Creon swung his blade and it connected with the bi-hander causing the whole arena to ring as the great blade fell into two pieces. For an instant their eyes met, those of Dushman boring into his own. The evil Man sneered as Justin's bright blade swung back and his headless body sank into the crimson sand of the arena.

Creon dropped the sword and knelt beside Hrosca, fierce triumph and pain mingling in an exquisite, heady draught.

"Hrosca, please don't die," he cried, cradling the old Man's head in his left arm. A pair of glassy blue-gray eyes opened and looked at him strangely.

"First blood, son of Adem," the priest said in a cracking voice. "It will be hard for you, but remember ..." The body shook with a cough. "The Creator will – take – care – of you." Again he gasped. "I leave – no regrets – behind, Creon." His voice gurgled and died, and his body threatened to cave in on itself, but with one last supreme effort of will he drew himself back from the brink to utter four final words, "Until – we – meet – again." The priest's eyes rolled back in his head and the old body collapsed. Creon bowed his head, gently touching his forehead to that of his beloved mentor, hot tears streaming down his, splattering on the dusty, care-worn face that now looked so peaceful. He felt alone, as if he and Hrosca were the only two left in the world.

Then another sound reached his ears: the sound of a roaring tide. It was the people, cheering their new champion. Men ran down and lifted the young Man onto their shoulders, tearing him away from the body of his friend and teacher. Someone pressed Justin's hilt into his hand and they carried him around the arena. He waved the sword weakly. Then they set him down in front of the stairs leading to the dais and he walked up them, pausing, looking around in a daze. He saw Aspen at the top, a goddess, he thought, a goddess of – wrath? Her brow was furrowed, lip curled up, green eyes spitting fire. The golden pins in her hair, the pendants in her ears and chains around her neck only enhanced picture of a deity come down to mete out justice on the wicked.

"What?" he asked.

"You killed him!" she shouted, pointing a finger at him. "You killed him and the pledge is broken!" With that she turned away and buried her face in her hands and it finally dawned on him.

"Oh, my ..." he sobbed and then his knees buckled, Justin slipping out between his limp fingers, as his strength left him. The last thing he felt was his head hitting the hard stone of the dais and then all went black.

# Seven: Where Death Walks ...

## Pondering

Sarina stomped into Baltar's garden where Aspen was sitting, mending Creon's clothing, torn and cut from the fight.

"It's been three days since he woke up," Sarina fumed, brow furrowed, face tight, "and he won't speak to anyone. He just gives me this funny look and then ignores me." Aspen just bit her lip, blinked back the tears, and continued sewing.

"Aren't you going to say anything?" the young woman demanded, brown eyes burning.

"What do you want me to say?" Aspen asked, her voice brittle, yet clearly upset. "He hasn't said a word to me since he woke up, either and I can't force him to speak with me if he doesn't want to."

"But, but, you're his woman," Sarina stuttered, dark eyes flashing. "You're the first one he'd speak to!" The Woodmaid shook her rusty locks sadly.

"No, the first person he'd talk to is lying outside the walls, facing east. It's my fault, that he's in that mood. I shouldn't have said what I said to him out there ... ow!" She stuck her finger in her mouth and glared at the needle she had pricked it on. Sarina took the tunic from her and quickly closed the tear with practiced stitches.

"It's nothing," she said, brushing away any questions that Aspen might have had. "I had to do it a lot at home and don't really care about doing it at all." She passed the cloth back to the Woodmaid and sighed softly, her eyes taking on a soft, faraway quality.

"Thinking of home?" Aspen asked, thinking Sarina might be reliving happier days with her older brother, but the blond girl merely shook her head.

"No, of B..." Sarina bit down on her lips, hard, glared at Aspen, reminding the Woodmaid much of her beloved, and then the blond girl shot away, rushing into the house. Aspen looked after her, puzzled. Who would be so much on Sarina's mind that they would intrude even when she was angry? It would certainly have to be someone of high importance, but the Woodmaid just shook her russet locks and rose to take Creon his daily meal, which a servant, as usual, had laid out for him in the dining room.

As she walked, the Woodmaid reflected on her actions that day, reliving for a hundredth time the battered, bloodied warrior climbing the steps with the last reserves of his strength and facing her, the one he'd fought for. In that instant all she could think of was that it was his sword that had cut the head from the shoulders of their enemy. She was fiercely elated that they were free, but at the same time repulsed that her beloved would breach the pledge. The latter emotion burst forth in her in all its poison, to her mind causing his collapse in front of the whole city. It was only with greatest difficulty that she had been able to keep the doctors from smothering him and was able to perfunctorily close the wound in his arm, so stitches would be unnecessary and the normal healing process could commence.

It took her days to finally understand why she'd reacted that way. To her mind Creon was a Woodman much as if he had been born on her Island. Part of her knew that this was not true and that he was a Man, one who was not under the pledge, but the emotional part of her was unable comprehend it. Oh, that it hadn't taken something as severe as the death of a human being to jolt her back to the reality that she and he were from vastly different races! She paused for a moment, thinking of how much she loved him anyway. It was precisely the fact that he wasn't a Woodman that attracted her to him and she knew he cared for her. And with that the decision came. It was time to ask his forgiveness. She straightened her shoulders, strode to his room with the new-found resolve, and raised a hand to knock. At the same moment doubt assailed her and, try as she

might, she could not push it away fully. So her knock ended up being a bit more timid than she had wanted it to be. She elbowed the marble block by the doorway and it swung inward to reveal Creon standing at the window, looking out into the lush garden beyond. Suddenly she wondered if he'd seen or heard her interchange with Sarina. She once more buried the thought and entered the room, hoping the sound of her footstep or the rustle of her dress would cause him to see her, but he remained unaffected, wholly distant. She put the tray down on the low table and walked over to him, pressing her hands together in front of her. Then she was standing next to him.

"Hello," she said, shyly attempting a smile. Creon just barely glanced at her and stared through the glass, not saying a word. *I've got to do this*, she thought, sucking her lips in and trying to strengthen herself.

"Creon," she began again, attempting to look into his face, "I want to tell you I'm sorry for what I said and did out there. You already went through enough..." He just stood, silently gazing out the window, as if in another world.

"Creon?!" Aspen asked more loudly. "Did you hear me?" He turned and looked at her and she shuddered at the vacant look she saw in his gray eyes. *What has happened to him?* she asked herself. A chill shook her and she could not suppress it. Might he have gone insane?

His eyes shifted to the table across the room, where Justin was lying, untouched, next to the tray of food she'd brought him. *Come on speak to her*, he said to himself, but nothing came. She turned to leave and he tried to call after her, but again it was as if his tongue had been torn out. The door closed silently behind the sad Woodmaid, leaving Creon alone with his thoughts. He touched the bandage on his right arm. After all she had cared for him when he was sick, but it was her fault that he felt so rotten, wasn't it? No, what had Hrosca said? *First blood...*

The thought of the old Man made him remember the pack resting on the table next to Justin and he left his place at the window and went to the table. At first he just ran his hands over the old wool sack, remembering Hrosca's gentle, cultured voice. What wouldn't he have given to had the old Man here, rather than this sack. Then with clumsy fingers he untied the knot in the top. There were mainly scrolls in the bag, all of them carefully labeled. Creon knew most of them, having read in them during his lessons, and for the first time he felt a stirring of pain in the dull void that filled him, hot tears springing to his eyes. He quickly wiped them away and pushed the scrolls aside. There were also a good number of other little things inside, like an extra robe, a pouch with gold pieces, and several small capsules of wood, sealed with wax seals all imprinted with an arrowhead. There was one that had his name carved on it. He put the others aside and broke the heavy seal. There was only a small sheet of paper inside it and Creon unrolled it, curious.

*Creon, son of Adem.*

*Hrosca.*

*Greetings.*

*I will be dead when you find this message. I will explain to you why it had to happen. Many years ago, when I was still strong in the Dark Arts, I was challenged by the Warrior King's chief magician. We fought, as wizards do, and I defeated him - I killed him. The magician had a child, a boy who had lived about twelve winters. This boy swore to kill the man who had slain his father and to avenge his father's death. He swore by the highest king to do so, little realizing that while he meant the Warrior King, he was swearing by the Most High himself. That boy was Dushman.*

*For nearly forty years I have lived in dread of coming face-to-face with him, because I knew we would have to fight and I would die. As you see it has come to pass. But I was also given to see that you will have killed Dushman. First blood is hard, Creon, and you must carry the burden, but know this, that he has been marked with death from the day that he pledged to the Warrior King. His father once prophesied over him: the day he raised a Woodmaid to the throne, he would be killed by a wanderer. I know that has happened.*

*Take heart and hold on to the Creator. He will carry you through. Finish your mission and take Aspen with you. She needs you and you will need her. Do not tarry too long, for the Warrior King's arm is long and he will do all he can to destroy you. Creator God be with you. Peace.*

Creon bowed his head, the numb void vanishing into pulsating heat, and steaming tears spattered onto the rough paper. A cry of anguish tore from his throat, and then a single word, the first he'd spoken since his collapse on the dais at the golden goddess's feet.

"Hrosca."

The numbness and fear of Creon's rejection of her ran cold through Aspen's veins and she thought she must pour herself into someone else before she herself went mad from grief. Sarina was to her the logical choice, the sister of the man she loved, twisted in as many ways, hurting, needing a friend, just as much as Aspen needed one now. She decided to look up the girl and after some searching found her in the library, running her hands over the ancient leather-bound volumes and scrolls. She had taken the gold slave ring out of her ear since Dushman had died, no longer having to fear the woman hunters.

The people of Stein had elected a king over themselves, a young Man who belonged to Baltar's "board." That meant that the Warrior King was bound to come back soon and would try to recapture the city. But neither of the girls cared about that fact. Their thoughts were far away, each in another world of her own.

"Sarina?" The blond girl turned to see the Woodmaid looking at her. *What does she want now?* she asked herself.

"Can I talk with you?" Aspen asked.

"About what?"

"About whatever." Sarina noticed something she could not really place in the Woodmaid's eyes and suddenly felt drawn to her. Here was one who was suffering as much as she. Should they not share what they were going through?

"All right." Aspen nodded.

"Come with me," she said and the two of them left the library and headed toward the garden. Sarina noticed that the instant they left the building the tall Woodmaid's whole demeanor changed. Her step became lighter and she instantly seemed more at ease, though the sadness still lingered. She quickly led her friend through the ferns, trees, and flowers to a small, hidden bower, crawled in and sat down with her back against an old oak tree. Sarina followed and knelt down across from her.

She regarded the Woodmaid before her for a good time. The red-gold hair hung loose, pulled back behind one pointed ear and she wore a lovely dress of white and green unlike any that Sarina had seen before. Before meeting Aspen, the younger girl had never seen a Woodmaid, and she wondered if they were all like this one. She found herself looking up to Aspen, not only physically, but also admiring her, wanting her to be her friend, yet not daring to ask, much like Creon felt about Hrosca during the first weeks of their journey.

Aspen viewed Sarina as her younger sister, a natural thing for one of the Woodfolk, as the family of the man she had chosen would become her own. The girl sat beneath the trees, outwardly relaxed and calm, her dark blond hair pulled back and fastened in a pony tail, brown eyes coolly regarding the Woodmaid. She was dressed in trousers and tunic, as always.

Aspen found quite a few similarities between the young Man and his sister. They were both really closed up to the outside and both had a very strong sense of right and wrong. She admired that in the other and wanted to learn more about her, just as she had wanted to with Creon, oh so long ago.

Sarina finally leaned back fully, wondering where to begin.

"Is everything all right with you?" she asked Aspen after a moment.

"No." The Woodmaid looked away. "Creon is not reacting, he is not communicating with the world and I don't know what I can do to bring him back." She glanced back at Sarina.

"I think it's my fault he's like that," she admitted.

"How so?" Creon's sister asked. "You healed him."

"But I accused him of breaking the pledge, Sarina," Aspen returned vehemently. "I don't think there's anything comparable to that for a Woodman or Woodmaid. It was as if I was telling him that he had died for me." She sighed heavily.

"Well, if it makes you feel any better, I pretty sure that he doesn't think that," Sarina offered. "From what I can tell he's pretty much like always – well, except when it comes to you." Here her face flushed briefly and she looked away.

"Perhaps you're right," Aspen said after a long moment, pondering on her friend's words. "He must be taking the fact that he's killed a man much harder than either of us can understand."

"Creon's pretty sensitive," his sister confessed. "He'd never let it out, but I knew about his soft core," and here she grimaced, "and sometimes I exploited it."

"Don't we all," the Woodmaid sighed. Sarina nodded in return and they were quiet for a moment, realizing that they'd found a common point and had so formed a bond.

"How did you come to be here anyway, Sarina?" Aspen asked softly, looking past the Man-girl to the opening of the bower. Creon's sister stiffened, afraid to open herself to the other girl, but a strange force made her want to do so with all her heart and so she began the account of how she was born into the family of Adem and Mikela. She described her difficult childhood, that was full of incessant work and lacking a father's love. She told how she had mainly gleaned it from Creon, but it was never enough. She told of the "curse" the village had put upon her family and of Irfan's incessant infatuation with her. With the tales of the hard times came many stories of small every-day adventures and the blond girl's roaring feelings often came to light as tears and laughter mingled.

"Then there was that time," she told Aspen, "when Creon and I went into the village crypt. If Dad had caught us there, we'd've been in big trouble. You know, it is an absolutely *amazing* place. The bodies don't rot, they just look like they did on the day they were put in there. Creon said it had something to do with the stone ..." She continued with her view of the young Man's leaving home and her own kidnapping and captivity. This was told in much greater detail than she had told Creon and the cruelties that she had been subjected to made Aspen shudder. Sarina also told of her escape and flight across the Pwyll and finally of her arrival in Stein and first meeting with their host. A light shade of red ran over her youthful features.

"The first time I saw him it was like – like – oh, I don't know, like being hit by lightning. It was just wow?" Her eyes shone brightly and she broke into a big smile. "It's as if I've got to be around him all the time and I just can't get enough of being near him. Why is that?" Aspen laughed.

"You're in love, dear," she said.

Sarina's face fell and she shook her head emphatically.

"I'm not." She blushed again. "I *can't* be!"

"That's what I said to my mother when she told me that I was in love," the Woodmaid returned, also turning red.

"Really?" Sarina asked. "Was it just," she snapped her fingers, "like that?" Aspen looked thoughtful.

"No, not really 'just like that.' It took some more time. But when I acknowledged it, it was – indescribable." Sarina weighed this in her mind, and suddenly the brown eyes went cold.

"No, no, it *can't* be," she chanted to herself. "I just *can't* be in love."

"Why not?" Aspen asked.

"He wouldn't – couldn't return it. All men are *beasts*. I ought to know."

The Woodmaid shook her head, knowing that Sarina had touched a deep chord in her own heart.

"That's not true," she returned. "Creon isn't that way ..."

"He's different!" Sarina tried to defend her brother.

"But don't you think that there could be other Men that are that way? I know quite a few men who are faithful and kind to their women, take my father for instance..."

"He's a Woodman," the other spat, "that's different."

"Oh, no it's not!" Aspen came back, slowly getting heated. "There are those even among my people who will take what they want from a girl and drop her. But those are very few, and you know why? Because we worship Creator God and when *he* controls things they work right."

"Now don't you start about *that*?" Sarina nearly screamed. "The last thing I want to hear about is some Divine Being out there who is going to reach in and take control of *my* life. *I* am in perfect condition to do

what I want and decide what is right!" Aspen's look of anger suddenly became one of pity as she realized how small and lonely the other girl felt. She quickly reached across the small bower and hugged her angry friend. Creon's sister remained stiff at first but melted a bit and put her arms around Aspen for a moment before letting go.

"Listen to me, Sarina," the Woodmaid said, pulling back. "You can tell me very easily that you want the Creator to stay out of your life, but can you tell him?" The other girl was silent and then shook her head. "Why not?"

"I – I just can't. It's wrong."

"Why?"

"I don't know, it just is."

"Then maybe you should do the opposite and *let* him take control of your life, hm?" Aspen suggested and Sarina shuddered. She knew the resistance inside her was wearing down, but did not want it to.

"Think it over," the Woodmaid said and left the bower. Sarina looked after Aspen for a long moment, then at the trees.

"If you're out there somewhere," she finally whispered, "give me a sign. Make Creon talk again and I'm yours."

That evening Aspen pushed the marble block next to Creon's door and entered, tray in hand, wondering what she would find. Much to her surprise her friend was sitting at the table with a scroll seemingly reading. At the sound of her footstep he looked up.

"Hello," he said and she nearly dropped the tray.

"You're talking!" she exclaimed.

"I'm talking," he replied, having to smile at her surprise. "I'm much, much better now." He patted the chair next to him and Aspen sat down, sliding the tray onto the table. She looked into the scroll he was reading, but could not decipher anything. She could only guess that it was a language she'd never seen before.

"What is it?"

"A book of poetry, written in the language of the priests," Creon answered. "I found it in Hrosca's pack. Look what it says here: *Blessed is the Man, whose sin the Lord does not count against him.*<sup>1</sup> And here: *You will tread our sins underfoot / and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.*<sup>2</sup>"

"What does that mean?"

"That means that I'm free!" Creon exclaimed, eyes shining, voice laughing, the very epitome of delight. "Listen, let me tell you what happened. I read this letter from Hrosca and I felt so – sad. I cried for some time and then fell asleep. Suddenly I saw that Man in front of me, all bloody and beaten. He was *here*, in *this* room! He picked this scroll out of Hrosca's sack, opened it, pointed at these two lines and said 'read.' I woke up then and did as he said and I understood! Creator God has forgiven me and I'm free now!"

Aspen saw the look of rapture on his face and stared at him with wonder, unable to fathom how he had bounced back from the deepest melancholy to these heights of happiness. Was that normal? But the joy was so great in him, that he leaped up and pulled the girl out from behind the table, picked her up and swung her around.

"I'm free, free," he laughed, eyes moist. She could not but laugh with him, discarding her thoughts and her fears, happy to have him back. He saw her eyes light up and heard her delight pour forth and his laughter became louder to the point where they began to dance around the room, their joy their music. Suddenly the door swung open and Sarina was standing there, mouth open. Creon noticed her only after a few moments and came to a halt, Aspen beside him, her red hair a bit tousled, eyes shining, a broad smile on her lovely face.

"Have you gone *mad*?" Sarina demanded.

"No," Creon roared in delight. "I'm free and I'm so happy about that! *Blessed is the Man, whose sin the Lord does not count against him!*<sup>1</sup>"

"What?!" Creon repeated the phrase and suddenly all of the color drained from his sister's face.

"Is everything all right?" he asked her.

"I – uh – just remembered something," she said quickly. "Please excuse me." With that she disappeared from the room.

"By the way," Aspen added, a bit breathlessly. "Baltar wanted to talk to you as soon as you 'snapped out of it,' to put it in his words." Creon nodded and left the room whistling. Aspen stared in wonder at the scroll on the table. How could it be that a simple piece of writing could change a person so much?

Baltar was in the study when Creon found him, in another chair, stranger than the one he was usually in. It had a platform that could be raised, so that he stood, leaning against the back-rest, and he was raised up, carefully replacing a volume that he'd just been studying. He turned as he saw his guest coming into the room and Creon wondered why the architect's eyebrows rose and his eyes suddenly filled with questions. Baltar pushed a lever beside him and sank into a sitting position, shaking his head slightly.

"What?" Creon asked, puzzled.

"You've changed," was all the architect could say.

"Yes, by the grace of the Most High," the young Man replied.

"Would you tell me about it?" Baltar asked, gesturing towards an old, cushioned bench. Creon sat down and the other rolled his strange chair across from him and Creon told him the story quickly, excitement pouring into his voice, joy splashing over. Baltar kept shaking his head, making little noises of amazement, still trying to hide how impressed he was by the peace that his guest exuded. It was with a visible effort that he returned to his businesslike self, but the young Man could tell that the calm his host displayed was like a thin cover of ice over a raging river, ready to break apart and display the turmoil within. Creon's eyes narrowed slightly as he wondered what Baltar might want and why he would be so agitated.

"Creon, do you think a crippled Man should marry?" the architect queried after a long moment of silence, searching the floor. The young Man couldn't believe his ears.

"What!?" he asked, wondering where the question came from.

"Do you think a crippled Man should marry?"

"I don't see why not," Creon said with a shrug, still puzzled at his host's question.

"I – ah – Ever since your sister has been here, I have – ah – taken a – fancy to her," Baltar began haltingly. Creon nodded for him to continue, slowly understanding where he was going and a queasy feeling settled in his stomach. Was he proposing to marry Sarina?

"She's been through a lot, I know that, and I wouldn't want to be overbearing, but I – I – oh, how do you say something like this?" The architect pushed a hand through his white-blond hair and stared at the floor between his feet. While one part of Creon didn't want to hear this and protect his sister, another knew what he'd seen at the beginning, the way Sarina looked at Baltar, the way she interacted and he knew there was something there. The only question was, would she be happy? Well, there was only one way to find out and so he supplied the words for his host.

"You care about her." The blue eyes looked up, shining.

"Yes, and more, so much more!" Baltar exclaimed. "But I can't tell her. I just can't."

"Why not?" Creon asked, suddenly feeling amused. Maybe he didn't have anything to worry about.

"I just – don't have the courage to do it." Suddenly something stirred inside Creon and he saw a little bit of himself in the other: a small person, too afraid to come out of his comfortable shell, who would rather suffer in self-pity than let himself be hurt by others.

"Baltar," he began slowly, feeling a whole new source of words and knowledge opening up inside him. "I was – am that way, too. I am a very insecure person and it has something to do with the way I grew up, but I found Aspen and I finally told her everything about myself and it became the most meaningful relationship in my life – that is among people." He looked up and fixed the blue eyes with a luminous gray stare and a brief smile flicked across his lips.

"You believe in the Creator, don't you?" Baltar nodded, face shining in wonder.

"What I learned today is that *he* will pull you through if you lean on him," Creon continued, voice lowering. "I finally leaned on him fully and I'm free. Try it. Say, 'Creator God, I can't do this on my own and I

need your help.' He'll hear you and help you, if you believe it." The architect leaned back, blue eyes glowing with revelation.

"Creon, I have never heard anyone speak like this before. This is *not* Man's knowledge, this is Creator God's knowledge. I will try what you said."

"I hope you do, Baltar. I took the greatest risk in my life, opening myself to Aspen and it resulted in the most beautiful relationship ever. You should know Sarina well enough by now to realize that she has a heart of gold under all that roughness." Baltar smiled.

"Yes, that's right," he affirmed. "I will do it." He paused. "Will you stand by me?"

"As you wish," Creon answered. Baltar smiled again and motioned for him to follow. He rolled towards the door and was just reaching for the release when it swung open to reveal Sarina.

"Baltar ... oh, I thought you were alone," she stammered, going pale as she recognized her brother.

"I was just going," Creon told her and walked out of the room.

"Baltar, I need to talk to you," he heard Sarina say.

"Sarina, I need to talk to you," Baltar said at the same time.

"You, too?" they asked each other and Creon heard the door click shut, cutting their voices off. He smiled to himself as he passed down the hall, knowing in his deepest soul that this was good for his sister – very good.



## The Summons

**S**avash thundered through the imposing front gate of the Warrior King's palace and leaped off his horse. Something terrible had happened, at least that's what the messenger's words suggested. All Warlords were to return to Elamil at once. It would take longer for the others to come. Only Lormar would be here at the time, Savash knew. He didn't even take time to remove his shining armor, but quickly jingled his way through the corridors and up to Lormar's old tower. The old man was not sitting in his chair, as usual, but leaning over the table looking at a map.

"Lormar!" Savash panted "What happened?" The bent old general turned from the table and squinted at the intruder.

"Ah, Savash, I'm surprised you are back so quickly," he said and flashed a smile. "Sit down." The young man took off his helmet and did as he was told.

"Why was I called back, Lormar? What happened?" he repeated, this time with more insistence. The old man sighed and hobbled over to his chair, slowly settling himself into it, grimacing and muttering as he did so.

"The Seer has killed Dushman."

"Dushman of Tashyer!?" Savash cried, jumping up.

"Yes, he is dead. It's been about twelve days now." The blond man shook his head and took a few steps forward then rocked back.

"But that's impossible! How could the King know that so quickly? It takes four weeks of the hardest riding to get from Stein to here!" Lormar gazed at his pupil thoughtfully, hooded eyes revealing nothing, but seeing much.

"Your father has powers that you know nothing about, Savash. He has messengers that aren't bound to horses or to the land. He knew only hours after it happened that Dushman had died. Now he's certain that the Seer is here." The young man shook his head and sank down into the chair again.

"And just *who* is this 'Seer'?" he wondered after a few moments.

"It is an ancient prophecy, Savash, from even before I was born." Lormar leaned back as best he could and warmed to the tale. "The prophecy begins about a mighty king who will rule the Nations with an iron fist. That would be your father. Then it tells about an even more powerful man who would rise from the Flatlands, journey to the Blue Mountains and see the 'Creator' face-to-face – that is *if* he exists..."

"You sound like you believe it," the blond man remarked pointedly, noticing something change in the lilt of his mentor's voice.

"Maybe yes, maybe no," Lormar answered, waving his right hand slightly. "Anyway, this Seer supposedly will have great power and overthrow the Warrior King and usher in a time of peace."

"Does that mean the 'Seer' will take the throne?"

The old man shook his white head.

"The prophecy is vague, but it talks about the fact that another king will arise – a 'good' one, mind you, who will rule with the Council of Elders, but that's it." Savash bowed his head and thought for a long time.

"So Father is trying to stop this 'Seer.' But how does he know that Dushman was killed by him?"

"It has something to do with an obscure line in the prophecy that says, '*one slain and then one more, one pardoned, one returned to the dead whence he came, two slain and one raised to the throne.*' And directly after that it goes, '*The first will have fallen, then he*' – that is the Seer – '*shall look upon my face*' – that is Creator God's – '*and know me well.*'" Lormar looked at Savash critically. "Your father believes that these lines talk about his Warlords. The only one that would be in the Seer's way is – I mean, was Dushman." He sighed. "Look, Savash, not too long ago the King got word that the old priest, Hrosca, who had killed the head wizard, Dushman's father, had left the Halls of Knowledge. It was a long time since the old man had been out of the Halls and Elam was quite certain that he was up to something. Then came word that the old man had picked up a young one somewhere in the Flatlands. Your father kept his name to himself." Savash raised his eyebrows critically and Lormar felt a sudden tightening in his chest. *No, he can't know that I know the name as well*, he thought.

"Anyway," the old man continued, skillfully hiding his anxiety, "there have been people following this young man and often there was word that he was learning the languages of the Nations and for a time he even disappeared all together and when he reappeared he was wearing the clothes of the Woodfolk. Your father nearly went mad when he heard that, because the Seer Prophecy also says something about that: '*I have called him from among the people of the wood and yet he is not one of their own.*' After that he was seen in Eison and after being the apprentice of a master swordsman there he went on the Tashyer, where he killed Dushman. *It had to be him*, because otherwise no one could kill that man. You knew him yourself."

"That's true. He *did* have a liking for women and 'winning' them in his games," Savash agreed, thoughtfully. "As far as I know he was unbeaten."

"Yes, and being the first one to fall, it seems that we have a problem on our hands."

"Hm." The young man thought for a while, eyes cast down, tracing the design in the heavy carpet on the floor. Then he looked up and fixed his teacher with a penetrating gaze.

"But tell me, Lormar, who is the one '*raised to the throne?*'" The old man just shrugged his shoulders.

"There are seven Warlords, Savash. It could be any one of them." That did not quite satisfy the blond man, but he didn't press any farther, knowing that Lormar well enough that he wouldn't answer anymore, and went to get himself cleaned up. After he had gone Lormar mopped his brow, blowing out his breath heavily.

"At least he didn't ask me if I knew about Creon, son of Adem," he muttered to himself.



## Fellow Travelers

A single covered wagon drawn by two heavy horses jounced its way across the barren lands, driven by a paunchy man with almost no hair and three days' growth of a beard. He had a broad-brimmed leather hat on his head and a piece of straw sticking out the side of his mouth. Beside him sat a girl of about eight and a woman walked along beside the wagon along with a boy of about fifteen and another girl who must be nearing seventeen.

"Olek!" the woman called to the driver. "Let's slow down. I think Katinka is getting tired."

"It's not Katinka who's getting tired, Brynn. It's you," the man grunted and slowed the carriage. "You drive for a while. We still have a ways to go before Rimmon's Rock and we have to make it there by night." The woman grumbled as she got up on the wagon and took the reigns. The horses plodded on their way again and Olek walked along beside his two children.

"Is it far yet, Pa?" the girl asked.

"No, we'll be there by sunset if we make steady time and rest only for an hour at noon." He glanced up at the sun. "Too bad Tyrone didn't want to come along. It's always easier to travel in groups."

"Then maybe those two don't know about the bandits," his son Raul said pointing at two figures a good ways ahead of them.

"Well, I'll be!" Olek exclaimed, shading his eyes with one hand. "Those two look like they are making quite a pace... No, look, one of them is sitting down. Perhaps they need help. Brynn! I'll run on ahead with Raul. You follow!" And with that he rushed off, his son on his heels. As he came closer he noticed that the taller of the two bent of the sitting one and was saying something to which the sitting figure shook its head. Olek couldn't make out the words and wondered if they were even speaking Common.

The standing one must have heard their steps, straightened up and reached over his left shoulder.

"Do you need help?" Raul called. The standing one relaxed and dropped his hand to his side. Now Olek could tell that it was a young man of about twenty, dressed in brown clothes, his hair of medium length and with a light beard. The one sitting on the ground was definitely a girl. *Perhaps they're eloping*, the traveler thought.

"I guess," the man answered in the common tongue. "The lady needs a rest in some shade." *Strange, thought Olek, I've never heard that accent before and no one around here calls his girl "lady."*

"My wife is coming with our wagon," he said instead. "It's about noon anyway and we were planning on a rest. Would you join us?" The young man glanced at the girl and nodded with a warm smile.

"Certainly." He then bent and gently picked up the girl. She protested in her strange language and he spoke back gently and then they turned and walked towards the approaching wagon. The girl laid her head on the young man's shoulder and he hummed something as they walked along.

"You come far?" Raul asked.

"Stein," was the answer.

"Well, that is nearly three days away!" Olek exclaimed. "And you came all alone?"

"We're well protected," the man returned curtly.

"Ah, so you're a warrior!" the boy surmised with a laugh.

"No, just a farmer's son."

"But he can use a sword," the girl chimed in for the first time, a gentle accent coloring her voice which Olek had never heard before, either. It made her speech sound almost like she was singing. The young man just grinned at that remark and reddened slightly. By that time they had reached the wagon, which was still steadily lurching along.

"Brynn! We're going to break for lunch!" Olek roared roughly.

"Great!" his wife shot back in the same tone of voice. "At least the dust will settle again and I'll be able to rest my feet." Then she noticed the young man who was carrying the girl.

"Oh my!" she breathed, reigned the horses to a halt, jumped off the wagon, and rushed over to the girl.

"Is she all right?" Brynn asked.

"She just needs some shade," Raul answered.

"You weren't asked," his mother snapped.

"He's right," the young man answered. "She just needs some shade." With that he moved to the wagon and gently set the girl down under it. He stood up and stretched himself, before turning to the traveler.

"I'm sorry I didn't introduce myself," he said with a smile. "My name is Creon and this is Aspen." He lovingly laid one hand on the girl's shoulder. She reached up and stroked it with long, fine fingers.

"I'm Olek," the father returned, "and this is my wife Brynn, my son Raul and my daughters Katinka and little Cleo." Creon half-bowed to each of them and tousled Cleo's head gently.

"Hey, I'm not that little," she protested in good humor.

"Well, I'll prepare something then," Brynn said, wiping her hand on her dusty apron, then she climbed into the wagon and began handing out some foodstuffs. Olek and Raul stuck two poles in the ground and undid one side of the covering of the wagon. They stretched the canvas out and fastened it to the two poles making a low, but very functional roof. They made small talk while the woman and her girls prepared the meal. Aspen volunteered to help, but Brynn would have nothing of it.

"You rest," she ordered and then passed her a cup of water. Aspen did as she was told, a look of contentment gently laying itself across her pale features. Olek regarded her and thought that there was something wrong with her face, but he couldn't tell what. Perhaps it was just because she was from another part of the Nations, he finally decided. Other people look different.

"So what brings you out here so far?" he asked the young man cordially, one traveler to another in a strange wasteland.

"Oh, we're just traveling east," Creon answered vaguely. "And you?"

"We're on our way to Killings Waters, a little city about two days north-east of here. We'll be traveling east until Rimmon's Rock, if you wish to join us."

"Perhaps," Creon answered with an uneasy look toward Aspen who merely nodded, settling herself more firmly against the wheel she'd been propped against. "Yes, I think we'll travel with you as far as Rimmon's Rock."

"From there it really is more of a rock desert if you continue east," Raul informed him. "Pa says there's robbers there."

"Oh." The young man looked neither impressed, nor scared, just tired.

They reached Rimmon's Rock just before sunset. It was only a low boulder that had been given that name, because some traveler named Rimmon had once carved his name into it. Olek offered the two young people a bed in the wagon, but they politely declined and said they would sleep outside. Creon took a bow out of his pack, strung it and then leaned back against the rock, but not before drawing his sword and laying it beside him. Aspen lay down at his feet and wrapped herself in her cloak. The traveler shook his head and bedded down with his family.

The following morning the two young travelers were gone, but there was a piece of paper stuck to the side of the wagon with an arrow. Olek grumbled to himself as he freed it and opened it up.

"Katinka, get down here and read this for me!" he thundered. The girl climbed out of the wagon, still half asleep and took the paper. The handwriting was very neat making it easy for her to read the message.

*Thank you for your kind help. We had to continue on before sunrise. You will find some money on the seat of the wagon. May the Creator go with you. Creon and Aspen.*

Beside the second name there was a little tree drawn. Olek hurried to the front seat and found a leather pouch filled with about ten silver coins – a small fortune in comparison to what little help they'd given the two travelers.

"Well, I'll be," he exclaimed and gazed off towards the east.



## At the Edge

Tashyer's cruel sun shone down on the two travelers as they clambered over a great barrier of rocks. Dryness was all around, and no water could be found, except for in one or two oases. It had been three weeks since their departure from the cruel city, a bit more than two since they'd met Olek and his family. They had stayed in Stein for just over a month and Creon's wounds, both physical and emotional, had completely healed. The ordeal had given his youthful face a more melancholy cast, which to Aspen made him seem more manly.

Now as they traveled through the torturous landscape he remembered the good times they'd had with Baltar and Sarina during the last few weeks. After that talk in the library everything had changed between the two of them, and, though too shy to even hold hands in front of Creon and Aspen, Baltar and Sarina now spent much more time together. Shortly before the two travelers left, the architect and Creon's sister announced their decision to get married and it was done in a very simple ceremony in Baltar's garden. Creon and Aspen left them, happy as could be.

They had come across Tashyer's barren wasteland quite quickly and had grown weary of all the grit and dust that settled everywhere. The sun pounded on them during waking hours and the moon laughed at them as they huddled against the chill breezes that day kept hidden and night couldn't contain. Creon got very little rest, letting Aspen sleep at his feet, while he sat against one of the countless rocks, dozing, Justin at his side, Hrosca's bow and an arrow across his lap.

They pressed on due east, following the paths that went that way and, when the paths faded away, pushing on through the wilderness. Every morning, as the sun crept over the horizon, chasing his sister dawn off to rest for the long day, Creon would arise and make sure that they were heading in the right direction.

This day they finally reached a resting place as evening overtook them, a small cleft in the great rocks. It was the one time during the day that they truly enjoyed, as the coolness began to settle in, but the rocks still gave off enough heat for them not to freeze.

Aspen slumped down in the crevasse, her fair brow wet with perspiration, red hair matted and covered with dust. But even so Creon found her beautiful. He sat down next to her and freed the water skin from his pack. Aspen took a long drink, passed it back to him, and stared east into the rising darkness.

"How much longer?" she asked wearily, closing her eyes.

"I don't know," Creon confessed after his drink, putting away the water skin "I hope it's not much more." She leaned against him and he took her hand. She became so still that he wondered if she'd fallen asleep.

"They looked so happy," she finally sighed, giving him a slight start.

"Who?" he asked quietly.

"Baltar and Sarina."

"Yes," he answered, remembering them in the glow of the afternoon sun, two golden children, pledging their lives to one another. She turned weary emerald eyes to him.

"Will it ever be that way for us?" she asked.

"I hope so." He stared into the twilight, a tight pang gripping his heart, knowing he'd never thought that far ahead. "When it's all over ..."

"What?" She straightened just enough to see his dust-encrusted face.

"I – I'll take you to meet my family and then we'll see what happens." Thoughts of the future helped pass the short time of half-light. Aspen wrapped herself in her wide cloak, propped herself against Creon's side for a change, and went into an exhausted sleep. Creon leaned his head back against the hard rock and tried not to sleep.

It was shortly after midnight, when he saw the great, silent bird. He thought it must be an eagle and his hand closed around the sword at his side, ready to defend himself, but it merely settled on the rock across from him and looked at him with a golden eye.

"It's not far now, son of Adem," the bird said in a man's voice. "No more than seven days and you will reach the end of Tashyer." Then it took flight again and vanished into the distance. Strange as the encounter

was, Creon found its ability to speak and the message almost natural and found himself thinking of his mentor's words of many months past. *You can ask Creator God about even the smallest things.*

"Creator," the young Man prayed. "Give us the strength to make it, please!" He leaned his head back and thought to close his eyes for but a moment. Then his head slid sideways and rested against the red one that rested on his shoulder and he knew no more.

A gentle stirring woke him and he noticed that the dawn's gray light had spread across the lands. Aspen had just woken up and was blinking at him.

"Good morning," he greeted her and smiled. Aspen smiled back, drawing a hand across her face and stifling a yawn. The young Man's eyes wandered to the rock where the eagle had landed the night before and he blinked, not sure if he was waking or sleeping. There stood a large clay jar and a flat wooden plate with steaming bread on it. He jumped up with a shout and leaped over to the rock. His fingers closed on hard pottery and soft, warm pastry. He looked into the jar and found it full to the brim with precious, fresh, water.

"Aspen, it's real!" he exclaimed excitedly and brought her the jug. She took a sip.

"Oh, it's so fresh!" she gasped and drank fully, then handed it to him as she recited a blessing over the bread and broke it. They shared the meal, feeling as if they had never tasted food this fully ever before. Then they broke camp and took the rest of the bread with them, emptying the rest of the water into their water skin.

They wandered on and day after day they found food and water provided for them. Then suddenly there it was before them: Tashyer ended as if a great artist had drawn a straight line on a sheet of parchment. Across the line mist and great rows of trees rose, ancient trees, like none either of them had seen before. Instantly they knew what they were looking at: the Death March.

They slipped in among the great, twisted, and vine-covered trees, following a path so narrow that they had to go single file, Creon often having to draw his sword to cut their way through the dense brush. It could not have been past mid-afternoon when they staggered into a broad clearing, surrounded on all sides by an impenetrable wall of foliage. Creon could smell a freshness in the air, but wasn't sure exactly what it was.

"Water?" he asked Aspen.

"Maybe," she replied and headed towards a low barrier of brush at the far side of the clearing. Behind it was a fresh stream fed by a spring of water issuing from a low rock and splashing into a broad rock-lined pool that looked to be about knee-deep. Creon came up behind her and they looked at each other in surprise.

"Who built *that*?" he wondered out loud.

"Whoever did, I'm awfully thankful for it," the Woodmaid replied. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to take a swim." The young Man smiled, just slightly embarrassed and backed away as Aspen stepped around the bushes and prepared for her bath.

Creon sat down for a few moments, listening to the splashing behind the brush, but then decided he would make a fire and so went about collecting some of the dead branches he found at the edge of the clearing, making sure to give Aspen her privacy. He just had it going when something cold tickled the back of his neck. He jerked away and glanced over his shoulder to see the Woodmaid behind him, fully dressed, hair still damp and water droplets still clinging to her face and skin. She was gently touching him with her cool hand, a playful smile on her face.

"Hey, stop it!" he laughed.

"It's your turn now," she replied, taking her place at the fire. "I'll take care of the rest." He hurried to the pool, stripped off his clothing and submerged himself. When he returned a short time later, Aspen had already laid out their supper: the rest of the bread from that morning and dried fruits they had with them.

When they were done Creon lay back and looked up into the sky, where the mist was suddenly parted by a blast of air to reveal thousands of sparkling stars in a myriad constellations. Many were unfamiliar, but he recognized the Unicorn and the Maiden. Then he noticed the exceedingly bright North Star, called the Promise by the Woodfolk. He wondered why. What promise had been brought with that star?

"What are you thinking about?" Aspen asked dreamily.

"The stars," he answered. "The Promise." Aspen rolled onto her back and stared at the bright point on the sky.

"What was promised with it?" he whispered.

"The Woodfolk tell a tale," Aspen said in hushed awe, "that the Promise reminds us of the greatest King to ever walk the world. It is promised that some day he will rule all of this place, in wisdom and power and without a Council of Elders. The Woodfolk fear that."

"Why?"

"Because they held power in the Council and they don't want to lose it."

"It's strange how the wish for power possesses people," Creon mused. "The Warrior King, Dushman, even the Woodfolk – and there's no escaping it." Aspen rolled over again and rested her chin on her fists.

"Maybe that's why some people are afraid of the Promise," she surmised. "It threatens their power." He nodded and looked back up at the sky.

"What do you think about it?" Aspen asked. The young Man mulled over her question for some time before answering.

"I really don't know," he admitted. "I didn't know anything about it until this evening, but I'd guess that King be someone who is really ... well, great! Someone like – Hrosca or Kavak." Aspen smiled at that.

"And you?" he asked.

"Me?" Aspen pursed her lips. "I think that he'll be someone like you."

*What?!* Creon thought, a chill striking him that someone would think of him in that way. Granted, Aspen was in love with him, but that still would never qualify him, with all his weaknesses, to be the model of a great king.

"No, no," he defended himself, "not me. I couldn't ever be king. Ever." He sat up and fell quiet, still wondering at the Promise. Aspen looked at him a long time.

"What?" he finally asked.

"Nothing," she answered, smiling. "I was just thinking how much you really mean to me." That made him smile. He leaned over and kissed her on the forehead.

"You're special," he said and she smiled and a closeness developed that was wonderful and disconcerting at the same time. Creon strongly desired to take her into his arms and hold her close, but decided that it would be too dangerous, rose, and moved around the fire, so it would be between them. Something shimmered in Aspen's eyes as he did so and he wondered if it was disappointment or relief.

"Good night, Aspen," he whispered and rolled himself in his cloak, back to her. She sighed and lay down as well, watching him through the flames, at once both impressed at his self-control and saddened that he would not hold her close, but she knew that it was right and loved him all the more for it. It was with such thoughts that the gentle veil of sleep finally overtook her as well.

Dawn had no sooner announced her presence by sending her lord, the sun, up over the trees than Creon and Aspen rose and continued on into the Death March again, hacking their way through the dense brush. Except for the noise the two travelers, all was silent, and Creon's stomach roiled at the stillness. He kept this to himself, but also prayed for protection. That evening they took their usual positions, sleeping among the great trees and then rose and departed before the first light even fully penetrated the foliage, continuing on through the woods.

"Are you sure we're going the right direction," Aspen asked about mid-morning.

"Sure, why?" Creon replied shortly, wiping his sweaty brow with his sleeve.

"I don't know. I've just got the feeling that we're going around in circles," she admitted. He shrugged it off and pushed his way onward until they stumbled into another large clearing late that afternoon. Creon straightened and looked around, his heart sinking.

"This looks awfully familiar," he muttered.

"I should say it does," the Woodmaid replied, walking over to the charred remains of the fire they'd lit there only two nights before.

"Why'd we come back here?" he demanded, gray eyes flashing. "Am I so stupid, that I can't even keep going in one direction?" Aspen turned back to him, shrugged, and smiled, a new thought occurring to her.

"Don't look at it that way Creon. Maybe we're supposed to wait here until the help comes, that Hrosca told you about."

"Maybe," he returned grouchily and sighed. "What wouldn't I give for the old Man to be here now." Aspen nodded, her own yearning for the priest clearly etched in her even features. They decided to get cleaned up anyway, Creon once more gathering fuel and lighting a fire while Aspen took her dip. She silently thanked the Creator for the luxury of being able to bathe twice in three days, something that she'd missed greatly during their long sojourn through the deserts of Tashyer. When she was finished, Creon contented himself with splashing his face and upper body with the fresh water before returning to the fire. The Woodmaid had been busy, gathering berries, herbs, and roots. She kept up a happy banter as she stewed their meal in a small pan they'd found among Hrosca's things, trying to cheer her friend and rouse him from his morose introspection. Still, Creon remained silent for much of the evening and as the darkness fell he stared up at the sky, but the lovely silver stars were hidden by a dense mist. He sighed, wondering what he must do and it came to him softly, almost as if someone whispered it in his ear. He opened his pack and, after rummaging in it for a few moments, retrieved a scroll, which reverently opened. It contained the poems of the priests, and he began to read them, translating them for Aspen as he went along. The words lifted his spirit and after a while he put the scroll away again, lay back and looked at the overcast sky.

"Creator God," he whispered, "send us some help, please."

"He will, son of Adem," he suddenly heard a voice say. He sat up instantly, recognizing the tone and stared at Aspen, who looked as bewildered as he.

"No, it can't be!" he cried in a strained voice. "Hrosca?"



## The Traveler

**T**here among the trees before them glinted a strange white light. It came closer and emerged from the trees, appearing to be an old Man, semi-transparent, but lit from within. Creon recognized the shimmering figure as that of his friend and mentor and that sent a chill down his back. It seemed that the whole air was charged with some sort of energy that made the young Man's hair stand on end. He felt something grab at his arm and glanced over to see Aspen, her face pale, green eyes wide, holding on to him for all she was worth. The apparition seemed unconcerned with the effect he was having on the two young people, but merely walked up to the fire and looked down on them benevolently.

"Hrosca?" the young Man repeated again, his voice shaking slightly. "I thought you were dead!"

"I am," the old Man laughed. "This is only my spirit you are seeing." The shade sat down across from Creon and he backed away a bit.

"It's a lie," Aspen whispered in his ear, squeezing his arm all the more. "People can't come back from the dead."

"It's no lie, fair maiden," the ghost replied amiably. "I am here, am I not?"

"But why are you here?" the young Man demanded.

"This is where I live now, son of Adem," the apparition laughed. "That is what we Karyl are, the spirits of the dead who did great things for the Creator."

"You told me that no one ever came back from the dead," Creon said pointedly.

"I told you that because I hadn't died yet!" Hrosca's spirit exclaimed. "I have learned new things, many new things, things that the scrolls cannot tell you."

"But you said they contained all we ever needed to know in about the unseen world," the young man pressed. "You said they were complete!" The shade made a demeaning gesture with its hand.

"Bah, you can't believe them anymore. They are old and out of date."

"That's not what you told me," Creon snapped.

"As I said, I've learned much since I've been here," the shade returned, its voice betraying just a small amount of ire. "I have found that the scriptures are not trustworthy. I will have to lead you personally to the Peak Called Joy. That is my new mission."

Creon looked at Aspen and could read in her eyes that she was not buying this and while he wanted to believe this *thing*, at the same time he felt a small spark of light inside him was beginning to stir and his hand curled around Justin's hilt, lying next to him.

"It's a lie," he growled. "The scriptures are trustworthy, they say so themselves." With that he quoted from the songs of the priests "*The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. / The precepts of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple. / The commands ...*"<sup>3</sup>

"Shut up!" the shade screamed and leaped to its feet. Creon was on his own at the same time, the silver sword pointed at the being before him.

"What are you?" he demanded in a pressed voice. "By the Creator, I demand to know what you are!"

"You really want to know?" the shade cackled. And in an instant it went from a radiant being to the most hideous creature Creon had ever seen. Strange, highly pointed ears protruded above the black, bald head. The face was all fangs, except for two glowing red eyes and the body, tough humanoid, was hunched forward, twisted. The firelight did not reflect off of its body, making it seem a shadow of the night, but for the pale glint of the amber teeth, the crimson eyes, and the flames that it held in each of its four hands.

"This is the end of you, Seer," it cried in triumph, "of you and your little consort!" Before it even finished its taunt, it launched one of its balls of fire and Creon swatted it away with his bright sword. The being roared with laughter as the sword cut through its midriff, as if it would cut through air.

"I am not human, Seer," the being said in a hideous voice. "I have no flesh. Your sword cannot harm me! But *I* can harm *you*!" With that it leaped forward, diving straight towards Creon. Something drained all strength from his arms and legs, rooting him to the ground as it shot towards his chest.

All at once the being bounced back, as if it had hit a wall. A quiet grunt made the young Man turn and he saw Aspen standing with her lips pressed together tightly, eyes narrowed in concentration, her hands held out in front of her, palms toward the being. An almost invisible silver aura surrounded her fingers. She gave a little cry and suddenly her eyes rolled back in her head and she collapsed on the ground.

"Aspen!" Creon cried, uncertain what to turn his attention to as the being resumed its attack.

Suddenly, out of nowhere a bright blue light split the darkness and the black thing went flying backward among the trees. It screamed in anger and shot back towards where the light had come from, slowly disintegrating into a black cloud with two glowing red eyes. From among the shadows came another figure, this one surrounded by a brilliant blue light. It raised one hand and the light shot from its fingertips and lanced into the black thing, turning it fully into mist. It became strangely silent and made one last desperate dive at the shining figure, before being hurled among the trees by another beam of and vanishing into the night. The figure then turned to Creon who was just bending over the Woodmaid and helping her sit up. She put a hand to her head, blinking her eyes, trying to get her bearings.

"I'm glad I found you, son of Adem," the intruder said calmly, the light around it fading. "It was high time."

Creon saw that it was a Man with bright, blue-gray eyes, his golden-brown hair and beard cut short in a strange, outlandish style. He was wearing clothes unlike any Creon had seen in the Seven Nations: a heavy leather jacket with metal studs on the shoulders, a single line of which ran down the sleeves, underneath which he wore a white tunic and blue pants of a strange cloth and cut and his feet were sheathed in heavy black shoes that were laced up the front. The only ornament he wore was a silver chain with a pendant shaped like an upside-down equilateral triangle. The darkness inside Creon was screaming to beware, but that still, small light suggested that this was one to be trusted. Still, the young Man decided to be cautious.

"Who are you?" he asked, raising Justin just a bit.

"I am Ethan Defender," the Man said. "My friends call me the Traveler." The name said nothing to Creon and he kept the sword raised, his eyes narrowed slightly.

"You can't harm me with that sword, son of Adem," Ethan laughed. "Others have tried it and were not successful." The blue light suddenly began to sparkle around him again and the young Man lowered his weapon in resignation. He decided to ignore the man for a moment and turned towards his beloved.

"I'm all right," she muttered, shaking her head back and forth. "Just tired..." She stared at the fire dully, seemingly unaware of their guest, who now took a place by the fire, his light veiled once more.

"You are wondering who I am," the Traveler began pleasantly. "Very well, I'm not from your world." His accent was unlike any Creon had ever heard before, his R's strangely soft and he often mispronounced his A's and E's.

"A Voyager!" the young Man exclaimed.

"If that's what you call them," the other returned. "I was only told about you, Creon-Se. I did not know that you had a lady-friend with you." Creon colored at that.

"This is Aspen *kiz Kavak*," he introduced the Woodmaid, who was slowly becoming more aware of their surroundings. She glanced up at the Traveler, noticing him for the first time and gave a little cry of surprise.

"Who is he and what is he doing here?" she asked Creon, sliding close to him. "He's not another one of those *things* is he?"

"No, Aspen-Sere," the Traveler intoned politely, "I am merely a man, not an Abadonnah."

"Aba-what?!" Creon asked, bewildered. Aspen sat up, her head clearing.

"What's that?" she asked, equally curious.

"Abadonnah, Abadonnim in the plural," the Traveler repeated. "They are evil beings and the mortal enemies of the Karyl. You will get to meet both, I'm afraid, but it can't be helped." He looked up into the skies. "Falk will be here with our dinner in a short time," he said and turned back to the two. "Would you tell me of your journey? You are the first humans I have met since setting foot in this world and it is a joy to hear words from a mouth of flesh-and blood."

"What are the Karyl anyway?" Aspen put in, trying to appease her curiosity.

"The Karyl?" The Traveler's eyebrows went up and he seemed genuinely surprised at their lack of knowledge. "Do they not teach you what the Karyl are?"

"No," Creon said softly, "my people have never heard of them. The Woodfolk know about them, though."

"The Woodfolk know about them," Aspen admitted. "We know that they are powerful servants of the Creator, and Eike says that one of them was the father of our race, but I've never heard anything else."

"Well, then let me tell you," the Traveler said softly. "The Karyl are a race of spirit beings whom Ya-Rab has made to serve him and his creations. They were the stewards of this world until the first humans were allowed to enter and they have kept watch over the proceedings of the nations, sometimes coming to the aid of the good Kings, sometimes even serving as counselors in their courts or as chiefs of their bodyguards. However, they owe their highest allegiance to the King of all, to the God that made them – Ya-Rab." Aspen and Creon looked at each other, deducing that this "Ya-Rab" must be the Traveler's name for the Creator.

"So why aren't they out in the Nations, fighting the Warrior King?" Creon asked after a few moments.

"That is because the Warrior King's rule has confined them here, to the Death March," Ethan explained. "They cannot leave until the fortress is breached, but when that happens, his downfall will be imminent."

Just then a quiet sound in the air made Creon turn his head and he saw a large bird descending from the skies. It settled on the Traveler's outstretched arm and then the young Man noticed that it had a bag tied around its neck. The Traveler removed the bag, opened it and produced meat, pastries, and fruits, along with a good-sized wineskin and dishes. While he was carefully dividing up the meal, Creon took a closer look at the bird. It was a hawk, but about twice the size of a normal one. It stopped preening itself and fixed Creon with a luminescent eye for a moment, then went back to arranging its feathers. The Traveler had finished distributing the food and passed the plates and goblets around, asked a short blessing and they began to eat. They spoke little, Aspen still being moody and so tired that she nearly fell asleep while she was eating. Creon gently bedded her down beside the fire and kissed her cheek, before going off briefly to relieve himself. The Traveler gathered up the dishes and replaced them in the sack

"You know, Falk," he said quietly. "I wish Artemis were here. It's only been a bit more than a week, but I really miss her."

"Take heart, sire," the bird comforted him, in a soft, whistling voice. "I miss my mate also. It won't last long." The Traveler nodded.

"Ya-Rab," he prayed quietly. "Help me to endure."

Creon awoke early, before the first rays of the sun peeked through the mist. He blinked around, bewildered, wondering where he was. He sat up and noticed Aspen lying next to him, her mouth slightly open, nostrils flaring and contracting with her gentle breaths. He looked up and recognized Ethan the Traveler, sitting near the brush wall and the memories of the evening before came to him. He looked around, wondering where the bird that had come the evening before was.

Creon rose and gently woke Aspen with a soft kiss on the cheek. She drew a deep breath and her emerald eyes fluttered open, recognized him and went soft.

"Good morning, *sevgilim*," she whispered.

"Good morning, dear heart," he replied and brushed at her hair with his fingers. "I'm going to see what the Traveler's up to." With that he rose and walked over to the Traveler. As soon as their new-found friend noticed his approach he snapped shut a small volume that he was reading and hid it in his jacket.

"Good morning, Creon-Se," he said with a smile. "You are up!" Creon nodded, a half-smile slipping across his own features.

"Where's the bird?" he asked, making conversation.

"Falk?" Ethan asked. "Oh, he'll be back shortly. He just took a message to the Karyl and went to get our breakfast." Creon nodded again and went and washed his face and arms in the pool. He wanted to trust the Traveler, but the strange power that he had made the son of Adem wary, as did most things he did not know or understand. Aspen was sitting and talking with the Traveler when he returned. She was gently running her fingers through her long hair, removing some of the tangles. Creon thought she looked paler than usual and wondered exactly *what* she had done the evening before that would have drained her strength so.

"Have a seat, friend," Ethan called to him. "Aspen-Sere was just asking me about myself." Here he chuckled. "I was only able to hold her off until you returned." Creon seated himself, suppressing a smile at Aspen's curiosity.

"I am Ethan Defender the son of Lloyd Defender and Stephanie Healer out of the line of Kefas, Enchanter of the Ocean." The Traveler began. "I was born in our world, called Diyar, and grew to manhood there, except for three years I spent on Earth, where I met my wife, Artemis. About fifteen years ago, shortly before my father's death, I went to Earth a second time to take her with me to Diyar. After my father died we were married and have been living at peace for many years now, which is why Ya-Rab has called me through the Portal." He smiled, thoughtfully. At that moment the great Hawk swept down over the crown of the trees and landed on Ethan's shoulder. The traveler winced slightly under the weight. Again there was a bag around Falk's neck and again there was a good amount of food in it for all of them.

"Any news, friend?" the Traveler asked as they ate. The bird fixed him with one golden eye.

"Yes, sire," it said in its whistling voice. "They told me that the Abadonnim and their Werebeasts are abroad. They are searching for you."

"Your bird can talk?!" Creon interjected, shaking his head slightly.

"Yes, I can," the Hawk returned with just a bit of ire. "And I am not merely a 'bird,' I am a Hawk, Falk by name."

"There are many animals in my world that can speak," the Traveler explained. "Are they unable to do so here?"

"Oh, they can speak," Aspen replied, giving Creon a searching look, "though not everyone can understand them. It takes practice." The Traveler nodded to himself, filing the fact away for later pondering.

"Very well," he said, glancing up at the sky. "Let's be off before that Abadonnah finds his associates and tells them where we are. Come!" Creon and Aspen quickly gathered up the leftovers and stowed them in their

packs, before kicking out the fire and taking the path that Ethan had followed. He quickly and carefully led them through the great woods, making sure that they could keep up with his pace. The Hawk flew away over the trees and Creon thought he could hear its keening cry far above. They rested in the shade of great tree at midday and ate from what was left of their breakfast.

Twilight came quickly in the woods and the shadows were long and dark as they neared another break in the forest, when suddenly their enemies were upon them. Dark figures leaped out of the bushes and trees.

"Werebeasts!" the Traveler cried. Creon had no time to draw his sword, but the Art of Defense made quick work of the first of them, that tried to attack him. They made strange animal-like noises as his swift blows rained down upon them. He took a swipe at one closest to him, but his fists simply passed through something like a cold mist and he recognized the red eyes and hideous faces of the Abadonnim. He could feel the chill creeping up his spine, once more frozen in the place where he was standing as it streaked towards him. Suddenly fell back, again hit by a wall. It thrust itself against it a second time only to disintegrate into the silent, angry cloud and vanish. Aspen was standing there, palms spread in front of her, her mouth slightly open, teeth clenched. She let out a little moan, and dropped her hands, breathing heavily, but then, her eyes rolled back in her head as before and she fell to the ground with little more than a sigh.

Creon cried out and yanked Justin out of its sheath, swinging the blade around him. It bit into one of the mortal figures, sending a hot spurt of blood into the night. He leaped over to where Aspen lay and stood over her, like a lion protecting his pride. He only caught a mere glimpse of the Traveler, once again sheathed in the blazing blue light, sending the beams into Werebeasts and Abadonnim alike, but Creon could tell he was tiring. If only help would come!

"Creator God," he cried into the battle, "protect us!" As if in mockery of his prayer, one of the beasts hurled itself at him. Justin swung around and the beast cried in pain, crashing into the ground. The young Man looked down the sword's crimson length and raised it to finish the job when suddenly he was caught from behind. Before he could move, the enemy was hurled off, not by his strength or the Traveler's, but by Aspen's. She was on her feet again, unsteady, but using what force of the Art of Defense she could muster. As she moved, her strength returned and none of the Werebeasts could come near the red-haired valkyrie. Now that she was fully fighting the, attackers vanished as suddenly as they had come, leaving only the dead and wounded behind.

Creon leaned back, running his hands over his arms, feeling a stickiness along one shoulder where a Werebeast had embedded its claws. Aspen gave a little moan and sat down beside the path resting her head in her hands, rocking back and forth. The young man dropped his sword, and knelt beside her, putting an arm around her.

"I'm sorry, son of Adem," the Traveler apologized, letting the shine abate. "I should have seen it coming."

"No, don't say that," Creon told the Voyager. "We would have been caught, sooner or later, even if you had known it before." With that he turned to Aspen. "Are you all right?" She looked up, extreme fatigue speaking out of the forest-green eyes.

"It's that time again," she said with a sickly smile. He nodded, quickly picking her up, ignoring his own weakness and exhaustion. The Woodmaid leaned her head on his shoulder as the Traveler bent to retrieve Justin. They quickly went a bit farther and came out into the clearing, no larger than a room in a hut. They settled down here and the two Men started a small fire. Creon finished cleaning the silver sword and stuck it back in its sheath, while Aspen gently wiped at the scratches on his shoulder and put a bandage around the wound. They finished the provisions from that morning, as Ethan promised that Falk would be back with more the next day. After they had finished, they lay down to rest, Creon taking the first watch. During that time he calmly kept the fire burning, reciting poems from the priest's scroll, and waiting for Ethan's turn. The Traveler woke on time, took over the watch, and Creon rolled himself in his cloak. Sleep was slow in coming and he found himself thinking of the battered Man whom he had met in his dreams. Who was he? Would the young Man ever find out? He finally fell asleep, still pondering this.



## Stronghold of the Karyl

They traveled as rapidly as with Aspen's condition would allow, striving to reach the center of the Death March. Twice more the Werebeasts and Abadonnim attacked, both times at dusk, twice they were repelled, each time leaving the three humans and the great bird even more battered and bruised. By the sixth day Aspen could hardly walk, much less fight and the Men had to take turns carrying her.

They had nearly reached their destination when the fourth attack came and the four of them could hardly hold their own. Though the Traveler now extended his shining shield around Creon and Aspen, it only served to hold off the Abadonnim and the young Man had to fight bitterly to keep the Werebeasts from getting at him or the Woodmaid who sat behind him. He could feel the shield weaken with every blast fired by the other Man. Then the shield around the Woodmaid and the young Man deteriorated completely and the Abadonnim turned their attacks on them. The first of the spirit beings had nearly reached them, when out of nowhere a huge, shining man appeared with a blazing sword in his hands. The Abadonah screamed as the sword cut through it, turned to mist and fled into the night. The Werebeasts slid to a stop when they saw the big man and ran off into the forest, screaming like frightened cats.

Only the Abadonnim continued their attack, and as they did more warriors appeared, some male, some female, all shining like beacons in the darkness, their swords were perfectly balanced for their size. The Abadonnim charged into them, slicing two of them down. These two turned into pillars of white flame and vanished into the night, but within minutes the Abadonnim were beaten back, most having been disintegrated by the blazing swords. It was only then that the first of the great warriors turned to Creon.

"The Creator prompted us in time," he said, his voice deep, resonant and yet otherworldly. He motioned for the young Man to follow. Creon turned to pick up Aspen, but she was already cradled in the burly arms of one of the other shining men. He followed the great man, limping from the fight, hardly able to carry the pack and the sword he had. Elation was rising from the numbness and deep inside he knew that these Shining Ones were friends and he would gladly trust them.

They walked for only a few hundred paces before coming into a huge clearing. A great, single rock extended into the heavens, and a waterfall poured down from the top of it to settle in the pool below. Large stepping stones led up to the base of the tumbling waters. The commanding warrior led the travelers around the broad pool and into a cave set in another rock, a good deal lower than the one with the waterfall. Creon drew a breath, knowing that if he stepped through that hole, he would immediately lose all of his cool and collapse into a sniveling heap, so he hesitated, trying to think of a way to politely decline, but one of the big men gently pushed him through the opening and instantly he found himself blinking in the light of a great room. The walls did not close in on him and he felt like his heart was soaring. The room reminded him of the descriptions of a banquet hall of a king, but something spoke of a much higher majesty than any other the young Man had known. He had no time to marvel at it, as the travelers were quickly led though that hall into a smaller passageway and from there they split up, each into their own room.

The first warrior took Creon into his room and closed the door behind him.

"I must speak with you now, son of Adem," he said quietly and yet it felt to Creon that the ground trembled at each word.

"Who are you?" Creon asked, wanting to stand upright, but sinking into a chair.

"My name is Krieg," the big man said. "I am the leader of the Karyl." At first the darkness inside Creon screamed to get out, but then he remembered the quiet sense of trust that had risen in him as he'd watched them defeat the Abadonnim.

"Fear not, son of Adem," the Karyl encouraged him. "My orders are to protect you from all evils until you and your companions are well enough to complete the journey. We Karyl are not what the Abadonnim make of us."

The young Man forcibly relaxed himself and took a better look at the being in front of him. He was nearly eight feet tall, with broad shoulders and a large chest. Everything about him bespoke strength and majesty, his sparkling robes lending an even more impressive air. His hair was a white-gold and his eyes a strangely burning blue, and at his side there was a long sword, hidden in a sheath of silver. What startled Creon the most was that the Karyl was so much like a man, while the Abadonnim were so inhuman.

"The – the Abadonnim are responsible for all those tales?" he finally asked. The Karyl nodded.

"Or the lack of them, if you will," Krieg replied evenly. "What we really are, are beings that serve the Most High God, whom you call Creator God. Many of us have been bound here since the Warrior King allied himself with the Abadonnim and subjected the Death March nearly 150 years ago. There still are a few who roam the Nations, but they cannot enter the Death March, just as we cannot leave it, but soon the barrier will be broken. When you return ..." He trailed off, not letting the thought finish.

"Why are you speaking with me first?" Creon questioned him then.

"Because I know that you are strong and the leader, though you may not have thought so." Krieg delivered the words evenly, without any facial expression and the young Man wondered if he could even show any emotion.

"Tell me of your journey since you entered the March," the commander of the Karyl prompted and Creon told it as precisely as he could. The giant being stood there calmly, listening, his face betraying nothing of what went on inside him until Creon finished.

"Very well," he said, with a brief nod, "I will then go and speak with the others. There is a bath at your disposal though that curtain. You will be called when the evening meal is ready." With that he departed, going directly through the closed wooden door. Creon let out a little cry as he saw that happen, but quickly regained his composure. He stood painfully and removed the bloodied and torn clothes, then entered into the large bath hall. He soaked in the water for some time, feeling the life-giving liquid wash away the soot and grime. He welcomed its sting in his shallow wounds and was almost sad when another Karyl appeared and to tend to him, as he had to leave the water. Still, when the big man had finished Creon felt much refreshed and it was with new vigor that he returned to his chamber and found new clothes waiting for him. They were of a lovely cloth he had never seen before and wonderfully warm: a pair of white shorts, over which a white tunic was worn which fell to his knees. There was a silver belt for his waist and over that came a navy-blue cloak, which he threw over one shoulder and tucked into his belt. The sandals were of finely worked leather and very similar to those that Hrosca once wore. Finally there was a thin silver circlet. Creon wondered if it was for him, picked it up, but didn't put it on. There was a knock on the door and another Karyl floated through, this one a female with long, dark hair.

"The evening meal is prepared, sir," she said with a ringing voice, elegant and straightforward. Creon nodded and turned the circlet in his hand.

"Is this ...?" he began to ask.

"It is given to all our guests," the Karyl explained. "It is a sign of honor." She gazed at him with deference in her burning blue eyes. "A sign of honor for the Creator's highest creation." Creon thought about this for a moment, feeling unworthy, but then pressed the silver strand onto his dark hair anyway and followed the Karyl out of his room.

The banquet hall now had a table placed in the center of it set with three places, all of them empty. Creon had to wait a bit, so he took to wandering around the great room, marveling at the beautiful tapestries that covered much of the walls. Creon recognized one as recounting the tales of the ancient Kings, but there were just as many that were scenes at whose significance he could only guess.

A quiet rustle behind him made him turn and he gasped as he found himself staring at what must be the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. Aspen was there, utterly changed from how she had been only mere hours ago. She was now dressed in a long, white and green dress in a different cut than that of the Woodfolk, not unlike the robes of the Karyl. A silver and green belt lay around her hips, her red-gold hair was carefully arranged around her shoulders and her green eyes sparkled in a mix of delight and melancholy. Around her

brow there was also a circlet, only hers wasn't closed like Creon's was. It was open at the front, the two ends curling around themselves. He waited for her to say something, but she just stood there, one hand gently playing with the edge of her dress, staring at him, eyes shining in the torchlight. Not knowing what else to do, he bowed to her.

"My lady," he said. She curtsied to him.

"My lord," she answered, her voice just above a whisper. He offered her his arm and they made their way to the table, where they stood at the two chairs set across from each other, unsure what to do next.

Then a fanfare broke the silence, and they turned to see that two of the giant Karyl men had entered the hall and were standing on either side of the doorway to the living quarters. In their hands were long, golden horns and when they finished, the Traveler strode in to the room. Both Creon and Aspen gasped. He had changed so much that neither of them would have recognized him, except for the mighty Hawk on his shoulder. He was now dressed in a white tunic similar to Creon's, over that a scarlet jacket and a purple cloak, edged in gold. His feet were sheathed in golden sandals and a thick gold circlet was on his brow. He had a regal bearing about him that made Creon instantly realize that Ethan the Traveler was much more than he had told them. He strode up to the table and stood before the high chair at the end. He looked calmly at the young Man and the Woodmaid, then raised his hands and looked into the skies.

"Ya-Rab," he began. "I praise you for the wonderful blessings you have bestowed on us. May we worship you with all your creation." Then they sat down and the meal was served. Throughout it Creon was unable to turn his eyes from the Woodmaid, and the more he watched her, the more he sensed a purity which he'd only experienced back on the Island – the purity of the gentle healer goddess. He smiled to himself, thinking that she had been returned to her own element.

They finished their supper with almost no discussion, only Ethan sometimes talked to the great Hawk, now perched above and behind him on the high back of his chair. When they were finished, the two young people excused themselves and walked toward the mouth of the cave to "get some air." The Traveler and his feathered friend watched them go.

"So young," the Hawk said, cocking his head to one side. "They are only chicks." The Traveler shook his head.

"No," he returned, his voice full, rich and deep. "They are no chicks, Falk. Creon is a young eagle trying his wings, flying high and Aspen is like the lark, gentle, but full of will. A royal match. No king's house could have done it better." He laughed and shook his head. "They are young Falk and they have the whole world at their feet. I pray to Ya-Rab that they will never have to find out how hard it is to be separated for a long time."

The full moon laughed down into the broad clearing, singing her midnight song, as the two young people wandered toward the waterfall, hand in hand. Creon had no other wish right now than to be with his beloved. His heart was too full to speak, but tonight he felt a deeper kinship with her than ever before, and suddenly wondered if Aspen felt the same way.

They reached the edge of the pool, where she stopped and sat down on one of the rocks that encircled the pool. He remained standing, looking across at the waterfall.

All evening Aspen had felt very shy around him, thinking that he had changed as much as the Traveler had, if not more. A royal aura had laid itself around him as the light sparkled on the silver circlet in his dark hair. Creon felt the Woodmaid's eyes on him and smiled at her. She could not but smile back. He sat down next to her and took her hand in his.

"What would I do without you?" he asked, watching the stars sparkle in her eyes.

"Live on, I guess," she whispered. He shook his head, his heart filled to bursting.

"I don't think I could, not after tonight anyway." He fell silent, looking at the great rock, where the waters rolled down the front.

"Do the Woodfolk have any tales about this place?" he asked. Aspen shook her head.

"Perhaps Krieg would know." She gazed at him longingly.

"Hm." He paused, then looked her full in the face. "What did the Karyl tell you anyway?" A dark shadow crossed the Woodmaid's face and now it was her turn to look towards the waterfall.

"He – he told me that..." She turned her tear-wet eyes on him. "Creon, I can't heal anymore."

"What?!" He sat back, unwittingly letting go of her hand.

"I can't heal anymore." Her voice was extremely brittle, reminding him of Sarina's when she'd had a good cry or had fought with Irfan. "It's because I defended you with my healing powers. I used them up or something and now I don't have them anymore."

"Oh, Aspen," he breathed and reached out to draw her to himself, but she remained stiff and unyielding, green eyes deeply melancholy, and he suddenly realized what was paining her.

"Aspen, I don't want you to think that I love you any less now that you can't heal," he whispered into the night. "You are and always will be special to me."

"Really?" she asked in a child-like voice, eyes softening, realizing that he had just voiced her thoughts. He nodded and pulled her close and kissed her, realizing that what she needed right now was a strong someone to lean on. She laid her face against his shoulder and held on to him, quiet sobs escaping her mouth, shaking her whole body. It was some time before she wiped her eyes and sat up, gently extricating herself from his tender embrace.

"Are you going to be all right?" he asked, looking into her emerald eyes. She nodded with a weak smile, drawing one hand across her cheek.

"Good night," she breathed, leaped up, and ran away, back to the cave, leaving him to look up at the starry skies and ponder the gift he'd given her.

A quiet rustle behind him made him turn around. The Traveler was standing behind him, still dressed in royal robes, the Hawk on his shoulder. He jumped to his feet.

"Sir, I –"

"Sit down, son of Adem," Ethan said gently, taking the rock across from him. Creon stiffened, feeling the old darkness rise inside him, making a shield between him and his companion.

"You aren't who you said you were, are you?" he asked, a bit pointedly. The Traveler laughed.

"You aren't quite right there. I'm more than I said I was."

"Perhaps you should tell him, sire," the bird said. Ethan began to shake his head.

"Why does your – Falk always call you 'sire'?" Creon asked, the edge still in his voice.

"Because he's the King!" the Hawk returned.

"The King?!" Creon gasped, slipping off the rock and sinking to one knee.

"Stand up, son of Adem," Ethan commanded and Creon stood, trying to hide the shaking of his knees. He had been sure that there was more to the Traveler than he had known, but not this much. Why would such royalty would come to help *him* of all people.

"I am only King in my own world," the other man continued softly. "Here I am merely the Traveler." He looked at the young man critically before continuing, a bit more loudly.

"Creon, I am not royalty by birth," he pointed out, "it is because Ya-Rab has made me so. All true royalty comes from him and much of that has absolutely nothing to do with where you were born." Creon eyebrows rose in question and the Voyager looked toward the silver falls.

"You will understand some day, friend," he finally said. "But it is late now." With that he rose and returned to the cave.

Creon sat for a long time, thinking over the many things that he had heard that evening. *There must be someone I can talk to*, he reasoned. Suddenly he remembered something that Aspen had once told him. *Cast all your cares on the Creator ...* Yes, Creon thought, *I'll do that*. He sank to his knees, raised his hands to the heavens and prayed. As he poured his heart out, he felt something like a warm, comforting blanket wrap around him and pierce into him, causing the light inside to coalesce and grow. He breathed deeply, opening his eyes once more, but seeing no one. And it was with a new heart that he returned, fell onto his cot and into a deep, dreamless sleep.



They stayed in the beautiful clearing for another two days, resting, recuperating. However, Creon found Aspen drawing away from him. He'd thought that the evening beside the fountain, her crying in his arms, would have made their relationship closer, but she repulsed any advances he made. He wondered if she was angry that she'd been so vulnerable. Or might it be something else?

"Just wait," was what Ethan counseled. "Aspen may be mature in many ways, but it seems she doesn't even know her own heart right now." That didn't sit right at all with Creon, so he went to the only one left who would listen to him and perhaps offer advice – Krieg. The mighty Karyl stood across from the perplexed young Man and calmly listened to his story.

"Ah, yes," he said softly, his words once more making the earth tremble. "I believe you are trying to get from Aspen what you have given her."

"Is that wrong?" the young Man asked, taken aback by how easily the great spirit being understood him.

"No," the Karyl answered, "but that is human love: give so you can get more. The Almighty has a different love. It is boundless and only gives without wanting anything in return, even recognition."

"Is that possible?" Creon asked, suddenly feeling very small and inadequate. "I mean, is there *any* Man that can love that way?" The Karyl shook his head.

"No, son of Man, there is no *man* that can love that way. It is impossible for him, but with the Almighty, all things are possible!" The young Man thought about that for a moment.

"I think it's the same way for the Woodfolk, isn't it?"

"Yes," Krieg answered evenly, his stoic facade not cracking for an instant. "They are human also, and so they are finite in their love to each other and imperfect."

"Do you think that's why Aspen was afraid I wouldn't love her any more after she told me that she had lost her healing powers?"

"Perhaps," the Karyl answered, eyes narrowing just a bit as he contemplated that. "You and I have no way of understanding how important that quality is to the Woodfolk. Also she has not *lost* her powers of healing, she just doesn't *command* them any more. There is a difference there. She won't regain command until the allotted time is up."

"But she will again one day?" Creon asked hopefully. The great being nodded.

"Yes!" He laughed, but the joy abated as quickly as it had arisen as another question came.

"When?" Krieg shrugged.

"That is not for us to say," he rumbled. "It is all in Creator God's time." Creon nodded and made noises as if he were to leave, but the commander of the Karyl held out one hand.

"Stay, son of Adem, I have much more to discuss with you," his voice lowered even more, "and you will not like much of it." The rest of the day the two of them walked the halls of the stronghold, the Karyl telling Creon important things about the Death March and the rest of their journey to the Peak Called Joy. He was right in that Creon did not like much of it. While the journey would be hard on all of them, it would not be too long. The hardest part, however, would be at the very end when they reached the Peak Called Joy, and no one would be allowed to follow him. He would have to ascend the slopes alone to stand before the Most High God.

"All alone?" Creon asked in a small voice, his insides suddenly feeling like they'd been filled with lead.

"No, you won't be alone," Krieg consoled him. "The Almighty will be with you, Creon. He will protect you."

The young Man was only able to derive a small amount of comfort from that fact. And in that moment a secret doubt, harbored, hidden within the darkness of his heart arose to torment him. What if the Creator wasn't really there? As he passed down the hall, he took stock of what he and his companions had been through since entering the Death March: they had been attacked from every side, Aspen had lost command of her healing powers and had pulled away from all of the others. The Traveler was closed up in his own thoughts and Creon was left alone. Was *that* what Creator God had for him?

*If that is the way following him is, then I don't know if I want to complete this journey,* he said to himself. He could almost sense the light inside him dimming as he accepted the thought. He sighed heavily as he pushed the door to his room open and stepped in.

*Just give up,* a little voice whispered inside him and a strange cold crept over him. *Leave the others here and go home, they can't help you anyway.* His eyes rested on the thick scroll that was lying on the small table in the center of the room. He left the doorway and stood by the table, gently laying his hands on the aged vellum. *You don't need this,* the little voice cried out.

"Oh, shut up," Creon muttered and rolled the scroll open. His eyes dropped on the block of writing directly before him. And he read out loud.

*Where can I go from your Spirit?  
Where can I flee from your presence?  
If I go up to the heavens, you are there;  
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.  
If I rise on the wings of the dawn,  
if I settle on the far side of the sea,  
even there your hand will guide me,  
your right hand will hold me fast.<sup>4</sup>*

"Is that true?" a voice asked behind him. He turned around to see Aspen behind him. She was wearing the darkest clothes she owned: dark green trousers and tunic and a green belt. There was nothing white about her except for her pale skin. Even her eyes seemed dark empty holes to Creon as she stood there, like a lost little girl, trying to find her way home.

"It's written here," Creon said, unable to keep his own doubt out of his voice, "so it must be true."

"You are not sure, are you?"

That struck Creon hard and made him think. He should be sure about it, because he believed that this was the word of Creator God. He could feel the light inside battling the darkness. *Why can't I make up my mind?* he asked himself. Either he would have to just accept it or throw it all away ... Then the light blazed brightly and his head snapped up. He raised his fists and gestured upwards.

"YES!" he thundered into the silence. "It is true, from the first to the last word!" He looked around, the light inside stirring, calling forth the words. "Do you hear me, you unseen forces? This word is *true*. It is given of the Most High God! There is nothing in it that can be disproven and none can cause it to pass away!"

Aspen shrank back as she saw him, feeling much the shadow in a blazing light, the brilliance threatening to vanquish her for all time, while at the same time defining her more clearly than ever. For a moment she'd thought she felt a kinship with him, sensing his loneliness, thinking they could comfort each other, but now he was strong again and she weak. She wanted to turn to go, but something held her in her place, the something that wanted to rush to him and be with him, to be *like* him.

*Can I believe it, too?* she wondered, but was unable to come to a conclusion. It was so futile, so empty!

Creon saw her lips move slowly. Empty... In that instant he realized that he felt the same way. *There is only one way to fix that,* he heard the light voice inside him whisper. *I've got to go on!* His shoulders squared with new resolve and he turned to this woman he loved, more deeply than life itself.

"Aspen, we – I'm leaving for the mountains tomorrow," he told her, coming towards her. "All of the answers are out there, with Creator God and I want to see him, talk to him, and learn from him."

She could sense the strength of his certainty and at that moment decided that she would push the doubt away and cling to *his* faith. If he could go, so could she. She set her jaw and her eyes steeled as she herself straightened.

"I'm coming," she said resolutely. "You won't make it there without some moral support." *I think* you're the one who needs the support, Creon thought to himself. He reached for her and she yielded willingly, folding into his embrace.

"I'll be glad to have you along," he whispered in her pointed ear. She smiled and closed her eyes, drawing the strength she would need from him, from his firm resolve. It flowed easily and only moments later she straightened and he let her go.

"Now let's go find the Traveler," he said and they hurried out into the cave.

# Eight: ... and Life Begins

## Into the Mountains

Savash came away from the morning meeting feeling supremely unsatisfied. His father had become very friendly and “fatherly” toward him, something that Savash had often desired, but now that he received it, he sensed it was hollow and put-on. The Warrior King’s reaction and sudden change of temperament when the warlords had gathered suggested so and so the prince had merely stood in his place in sullen silence.

Elam wanted to raise up an army of Werebeasts and wipe out the Seer before he reached the Blue Mountains, but Lormar pointed out that this was impetuous and that the laws kept the Werebeasts from breaking through to the Blue Mountains. The winning suggestion had come from Alman again.

“Force him to take the south pass,” she’d said. “It will make him pass by Mount Haven. Maybe he’ll get stuck.” The Warrior King had liked this and consented to wait a bit longer until the last of the Warlords, Keritos and Tolgar, could arrive.

So now Savash returned to his chambers, rather dissatisfied and feeling very lonely indeed. His parents’ sudden affection did not give him one bit of security that he’d thought he’d find if they would give him attention. He stopped short of the doors and then turned and marched out of the palace and into the garden to where a low white stone was set in one wall. It was quite new, set there by the prince himself in memory of his beloved half-sister. It bore only her name and a small, but artful carving of her head and shoulders, hair blowing in the wind and a beautiful, childish smile on her lips.

“You see now, Clarisse,” he whispered brushing his hand against the portrait, “now I am all alone. Even my best friends get taken away from me.” He sighed and sat down on the ground, put his face in his hands and almost wanted to cry. It was just not fair. He knew that he had only three now that he could call friend, but Lormar was more of a mentor anyway and he was always busy with the Warrior King’s new campaigns. That left Lilya and that strange young Man, Creon. He had been so different – so otherworldly. And his clothing reminded Savash a bit of the drawings he’d seen of Woodfolk. Could it be that *Creon* was the Seer?!

“Nonsense!” Savash mumbled and shook his head. If and when he could get out of here, he’d return to Stein and look up that girl. Maybe then at least he’d be able to find some company and fill the emptiness inside.

“If only it were now,” he whispered and slowly rose and returned to the castle.

The morning gray washed around the four as they headed through the mist. Four days had passed since they had left the clearing at the center of the Death March. None of their enemies had found them yet, but the Traveler was sure that they would come soon. Each of them had received new suits of clothing similar to the ones that they’d been wearing when they’d arrived. Creon let Aspen shorten his hair again and shaved off his beard. The Woodmaid seemed to have recovered from her bout with depression and pressed on, more determined to see this to the end than Creon had ever been. However, the young Man still caught her gazing off into the distance with a stony face that made him realize that she was trying to beat it by force of will alone and he wondered how long it would be before she ran out of strength and would become dejected again.

The path they were following eastward was wide enough that they could walk side-by-side and the Woodmaid and her friend went along hand-in-hand. The Traveler walked just behind them, humming softly to himself, and Falk flew high above, scanning the woods with his keen eyes. By evening weariness began to set in again, causing Creon to lower his guard just a bit as he stopped to stretch.

In that instant the Werebeast sprang and it was only the quick instincts wrought by his training that caused the young man to step aside and let the monster go careening off into the woods across the path. The blade was out only a moment later and the first of them fell at the young Man's feet. Aspen cried out angrily and took her stand beside Creon, fists raised, ready to fight. He couldn't see any Abadonnim among them, but that didn't mean that the messengers of darkness weren't there. After all, the Karyl had told him that they could masquerade as anything.

The twilight vanished as the Traveler built up his glowing blue shield. The Werebeasts screeched and fled back into the shadows.

"They're afraid of the light!" Creon exclaimed, elation flooding in as the four quickly moved on.

"True, but not for long," Ethan confirmed. They didn't find a clearing to camp in, but lit a fire anyway, making sure that the Werebeasts couldn't get at them. The hideous beings followed them day after day. They hurried on through the Death March, hoping to gain the border to the Blue Mountains soon, where no Werebeast could pass.

"They're waiting," Aspen said one evening, cold emerald eyes peering into the darkness.

"Yes," Creon affirmed, trying to hide his agitation, "but for what?"

"We will know soon," the Traveler answered calmly. The following morning they left earlier than usual, hoping to catch their pursuers off guard. It seemed to work, especially since Aspen and Creon hid their path according to the Woodfolk lore and for days they were alone, especially as they varied their traveling time, hid their tracks as best they could and made their way along silently.

"Don't relax," the Traveler warned them. "They'll be back before you know it." He was right. Exactly seven days later Falk reported dark figures ahead of them.

"Isn't there any way we'll get away from them?" Aspen asked, sitting down, her voice heavy with her despair. The Men shook their heads.

"They must know where we're going," the Traveler surmised, "so all they have to do is cut off the path before us."

"Let's hope they don't think of that!" Creon exclaimed, brow furrowed, teeth clenched.

"Let's hope not," the other affirmed. One day passed, then two, three, and on until it was a week. Another three days went by. The whole time the Werebeasts moved on ahead of them, not stopping or hindering them.

"What are they doing?" Creon wondered out loud.

"I think they're just supposed to watch us," Ethan said. "They don't seem ready to attack at all."

"They're waiting," Aspen told them again, her voice still dull, but firmer. Creon just nodded. *They're waiting for backup*, he thought.

It was just a bit more than two weeks since they had left the Karyl stronghold. The great trees were slowly getting less dense and the ground was beginning to rise. Aspen also pointed out that the trees themselves had changed. The ancient, twisted trunks had been replaced by those just as old but of another type. Creon thought he could recognize a few oaks and maples. The Woodmaid showed him a good deal more trees that they knew from their home.

"We're nearing the mountains," Falk reported that evening.

"There isn't much time left," the Traveler said slowly. He turned back to the Hawk.

"What ways are there over the mountains?" he asked.

"There are two," the bird answered. "One is directly ahead of us, but we would have to fight our way through the Werebeasts. The other is a half-day journey to the south. It is both more accessible and easier to cross." The light inside spoke and Creon instantly knew where they must go.

"We've got to take this pass up here," he said quickly.

"Why?" Aspen asked. The Traveler raised an eyebrow, and Falk cocked his head to one side.

"It's clear that they won't let us pass here," the young Man reasoned. "I think it's just a ploy to get us to use the southern path. There must be some danger down there." Aspen slowly nodded then suddenly cried out.

"Look out!" A Werebeast sprang onto Creon from behind. Instinctively, the young Man ducked and the beast flew over his shoulder into the small fire before him. Its fur instantly caught fire and it ran off into the night, shrieking. Then the rest of the Werebeasts were upon them from all sides.

"Ya-Rab protect us!" the Traveler gasped, a bright blue beam lancing from his hand and into the nearest Werebeast. The thing crumpled into the ground. Aspen grabbed a staff she had been carrying the past couple of days and stopped the beasts from coming at her. Justin flashed in Creon's hand, but there was no stopping the hoards of Werebeasts. They were slowly pushed away from their camp, southward.

After some time there was a lull in the fight and the three humans stood back to back.

"We have one chance," the Traveler panted, his shield pulsating with his breathing.

"The southern pass," Creon finished, gazing down his bloodied blade at their enemies.

"No," Aspen said, shaking her red tresses. "It's bad if we go that way."

"But there is no other way," Creon shot back and braced himself. The Werebeasts had regrouped and were now rushing back towards them.

"How far is it?" the Traveler cried to the Hawk.

"Not far," the bird answered and in that instant their enemies were upon them. Wood, steel, and light bit into the charging hordes, but there was no stopping them, much less an advancing northward. Again they were pushed south. Out of the corner of his eye Creon saw two Werebeasts dive at the Woodmaid simultaneously. She cried out and fell under the weight, the staff spinning out of her hands. There was no way that even the Art of Defense could help now.

Justin sang through the air, split the skull of a Werebeast and Creon leaped over to his beloved. One of her attackers fell, lacking a head, but the other looked up for an instant and Creon was shocked at how human the face was, but he gritted his teeth and kicked the beast off Aspen. It rolled to the ground, unconscious. He helped Aspen up, now cut, bruised, and half unconscious. He supported her with his left while swinging at the Werebeasts with the sword in his right.

"Falk," he cried. "Get us to that pass!" Aspen shook her head numbly.

"No, no – it's wrong – it's wrong," she mumbled and lost consciousness as he jerked her upright. Creon ignored her words, this was no time for right or wrong choices – this was a time for life or death and the pass meant life, no matter *how* dangerous. They turned and sprinted forward, Ethan continuing to blast away at the Werebeasts as the bird led them to the pass. It was a nothing more than small opening in the side of a hill and for an instant Creon felt that Aspen was right, but he pushed the feeling down. *Our lives are more important now!* he told himself.

The Traveler leveled one more blast behind them, then slid through the hole. Creon passed the now unconscious Woodmaid to his friend and crawled through himself. The tunnel was not long, only about ten paces, but it was tight none-the-less and Creon thought he was going to get stuck, but he gritted his teeth and pulled himself forward, watching Aspen's boots make marks in the dirt before him. He was out in moments and immediately began looking for something to barricade the entrance. There was nothing there, so he crouched by the opening, waiting for their pursuers, but none came. A keening cry made him look up and he saw Falk drop from the sky and alight on a rock next to him.

"They won't be coming," the Hawk announced proudly. "They have all gone away."

"Well, that's good news," the Traveler muttered as the bird began to preen himself. Creon nodded his assent and then bent to check on Aspen. There was a gash on her forehead, but he was quite sure that she would get better quickly. He pulled a salve she had given him from his pouch, cleaned the wound with a bit of water, and rubbed the ointment over it. Only then did he lean back and look at his surroundings.



## City of Glass

They were in a narrow valley with sheer cliff walls rising many hundreds of feet above them. The valley floor ascended gradually and headed towards a bend in the walls about two hundred paces away, where he couldn't see any farther. At the Traveler's suggestion they moved a short ways farther into the valley, lit a fire from some of the meager brush they found and bedded down for the night.

*I don't see what's so bad about this pass, Creon said to himself. Maybe it was a wrong feeling.*

The following morning Aspen was awake again and sat numbly at the fire, munching on a dry cake they had brought along. Creon sat down next to her. His heart warmed as he saw her, delighting in her presence, though she did seem a bit out of sorts.

"How are you doing?" he asked. She ignored the question.

"This is the southern pass, isn't it?" Creon nodded, his heart sinking.

"Then why did we come here?" she snapped.

"It was the only way out," he returned lamely. "If we'd stayed out there you'd've been killed – and us, too." Aspen just looked at him dully for a moment, letting the thought sink in. Finally she gave him a little half-smile, letting him know that he was forgiven.

"What's done is done, isn't it?" she sighed. He nodded soberly, wondering why she was so moody. Might she still be fighting her depression?

"I guess we'll just have to live with it, but let's be careful, hm?" She reached into her satchel and tossed him a cake, then reached out and curled her fingers around his free hand. He smiled contentedly, wondering what he'd done to win this girl's affections. She most certainly was a gift from God to him. Ethan returned from scouting out ahead of them and sat down by the fire, extricating a cake for himself.

"This isn't good," the Traveler muttered, gesturing back towards the bend.

"In what way?" Creon asked innocently.

"We'll be going south and I can't tell how far we need to go until we reach the end of the valley," Ethan replied. "We're going to be far off course when we get out."

"At least we know that," Aspen said, pulling out the water skin and washing down the last crumbs of her cake. "We can turn north when we get out then." The simple logic of the Woodmaid's suggestion satisfied the Traveler, who tipped his cake in her direction with a half-smile. They broke camp then and made their way up the valley, reaching the plain in only a short time. Ethan looked around and nodded, a smile of satisfaction on his lips.

"Well," he continued, "we are off course and we'd better start heading north-east." As they turned that direction, Creon once more began to get a twisted feeling in his stomach. He wondered if the light was trying to speak to him again.

"Maybe we shouldn't head north quite yet," he suggested.

"The sooner the better," was all the Traveler answered, cutting him short and they trudged on, Creon getting more and more uncomfortable with each bowshot they left behind them. He prayed about it silently when he rolled himself in his cloak, sensing they would really need protection.

As the sun rushed across the sky the following day, Creon remained silent, covering himself with it like with armor. He answered his companions' conversation with mere grunts and monosyllabic words and it wasn't until they made camp that Aspen was finally able to get him to talk.

"You worried?" she asked, sliding up next to him, green eyes soft, her smile inviting.

"Yes, and I don't even know why," he answered with a heavy sigh, glad to be pushing out what bothered him.

"Creator God is with us," she said quietly and he nodded. She gave him a short, hard kiss on the mouth and rolled herself in her cloak. Yes, *he's with us*, Creon thought, *but this route is still wrong!* And how would that affect them? He wasn't sure and prayed for protection and for mercy.

The Traveler had his own thoughts about this route, slowly beginning to feel that Creon was right, but it was too late to go back. What if the Werebeasts had broken through? They could all be killed. The best thing

was to continue on in the direction they were going. He turned and looked toward the east and could see a great mountain with clouds glowing crimson, orange, and gold around the tip.

"That's where he is headed, sire," the Hawk cut into his thoughts.

"So that's the Peak Called Joy," Ethan mused. "Perhaps we should have gone straight east, but now I think it's better to follow the path we're headed on and not get lost in this wasteland."

"You are right, my lord," Falk acknowledged with deference. Still, Ethan's brow furrowed as he pondered his predicament.

"I wonder what Artemis would say now, or Derek," he said presently. "They always have good suggestions."

"His highness Lord Derek has been dead for more than two springs now, sire," the Hawk reminded him, head cocked to one side.

"Yes, I know," the King replied, almost impatiently, "but I'd still like to know what he'd think."

"If I may, sire," Falk began, his puzzlement evident in the way he eyed his sovereign.

"Go on, my friend, speak freely."

"I don't ever think I will understand man, sire. You always wish that those who have left this life and gone to be with Ya-Rab would be back. Why is that?" The question forced a half-smile to the man's lips.

"I don't know, Falk. I believe that it has something to do with the way man was created." The bird was content with that answer, put its head under its wing, and went to sleep, leaving Ethan Defender, called the Traveler, to stare at the skies, wondering what would come next.

Creon was wakened by someone shaking his shoulder. He blinked around, dazedly, muttering something about not being time to wake up yet, but then as he focused on the one who had disturbed his sleep he gasped. It was the Bloody Man!

"Be quiet, son of Adem," he whispered. "I must warn you. Look around you." Creon did as he was told and instantly leaped to his feet. He was no longer with his friends in the wilds of the Blue Mountains, but in a vast hall where men and women of all ages were eating, drinking, and enjoying themselves in various, mostly illicit, ways.

"What... where?" he stammered, looking at his companion, who merely pointed to something at his feet – a statue made of clear glass. It was in the form of a scantily dressed young woman, sleeping.

"You must leave here at once," the Bloody Man commanded, his voice a whisper, but holding the power of a rushing wind in it, "or else you will become like her." Then Creon awoke with a start, gasping for breath. Both the Traveler and Aspen were still asleep with Falk calmly sitting on his rock, gazing into the quickly lightening sky.

After that dream, the young Man knew that there was no sleeping any more, so he rose, rearranged the cloak, and sat down by the newly lit fire, pondering the dream. He couldn't make anything of it and kept it to himself.

Soon the others awoke and broke their fast. Creon kept to himself most of the time, and, as he'd been silent and moody for the last two days, none of his companions thought anything of it. They did not tarry long, but continued on north-east, cutting a quick path across the wastes.

"It's almost as if someone built a road here," Ethan remarked at one point, looking at the long, straight track that pushed its way through tall boulders, down eddies and up little hillocks. Somehow that remark unsettled Creon even more as pondered what he'd seen the night before. By now he'd concluded that it must be a warning, but a warning against *what?* He tried to recall the room, but could not beyond the fact that it was large and full of people. The sleeping girl was the only thing that remained clear in his mind. So he continued to work on the problem as a dog worries a bone.

"What are you thinking about?" Aspen's voice cut through his thoughts.

"I – ah – nothing important," he hedged, his ire rising at being interrupted.

"You can tell me," she whispered, nudging him. He looked at her and realized that there was no way that he could say no to the questioning look in those green eyes. He sighed and described his dream to the

Woodmaid, and as he did her face fell, eyes narrowed and she tapped her lips thoughtfully with a slender finger.

"It's a funny dream," she mused after a while. "What could it mean?"

"If only I knew," he returned, unable to keep his frustration out of his voice.

"But it's a warning," Aspen decided after a few more minutes, confirming his own idea.

"We should keep our eyes open," Creon surmised. "There's no telling what we might run into."

Two more days passed uneventfully, following the wide track through the wilderness. Even though there were often little copses of trees and some bushes to either side of the path that they followed, it remained even, simple dirt and stone where nothing grew.

"From what Hrosca said, no one has lived here in ages," Creon pointed out to his companions. "Why would this road be so well kept?"

"If it *is* a road," the Traveler put in with a shrug. "Perhaps this is merely the way some of the vegetation is in your world."

"Oh, it's a road all right," Aspen interjected. "This whole area should be covered with more than just rocks and dirt." She swept her arm across the vista before them. "Look, we've got the pine trees and I've seen brambles along the whole way, but none of them even poking so much as a branch into this area." She shook her head. "I can't understand it."

"Magic?" the young Man suggested and a chill went over all four of them as he said the word.

"If you believe in such things," Ethan said, trying to lighten the mood. He was quiet for a moment and then began humming a tune, rather off-key to Creon's ear, but it was better than having to puzzle over what caused this road.

They read from the scrolls in the evenings, Aspen leaning against Creon's shoulder, eyes closed, simply enjoying the sound of his voice, even if she didn't listen to the words. Part of her didn't want to listen to the words, as they reminded her of her unhappiness. It was with supreme effort that she still kept it under control. Thinking about Creon's dream and the condition of the track they followed were welcome diversions. It was only at night that she had trouble pushing the despair away, so she devised little mind-games to keep herself happy and so far it had worked admirably.

Dawn tickled their eyes and laughed in the east. It was the third day since Creon had dreamed of the great hall and by the time sun had climbed to his highest point and was hurling his brightness down on them with all the force he could muster, they saw a sparkling spot on the side of one of the mountains directly ahead of them, the destination of the road they were on.

"What is that?" the Traveler asked, shading his eyes with one hand.

"I'll go see, sire," Falk called and winged his way toward the glimmer. At that moment strange feeling swept through Creon, making him shiver, even though the day was quite warm. Aspen squeezed his hand and smiled at him and he figured she was trying to comfort him, missing a strange gleam in her eye. The Hawk was back within minutes.

"It is a city, sire," he reported, after he settled himself on one of the rocks.

"A city, *here*?" Creon asked, incredulous.

"That is right, my lord," the bird returned, causing Creon to shake his head in confusion, again thinking of what Hrosca had told him about this place being deserted.

"Let's go take a look," the Traveler suggested.

"Yes, let's," Aspen agreed almost instantly. Something about the way she said it struck the young Man strangely and he thought, *Something's not right here!* Somehow he knew they should stay away at all costs, but the same strange force drew him toward the city. They were nearly running as they neared the shining walls, then Creon slid to a stop and his mouth dropped open.. The others followed his example and stood gaping at the place. The whole city was made of glass! This material was expensive enough that only the rich could really afford it for their houses and here was a whole city made of it.

Milky white blocks formed the city walls and the road led directly to gates of a black volcanic glass called obsidian, which swung inwards ponderously to admit the three wayfarers. They slowly, hesitantly entered the walls, looking around all the time. As they passed under the lintel and through the gatehouse, Creon felt the chill a second time, like talons trying to drive deeper into his flesh. But the instant they did so they released and fell away from him.

The houses were of semitransparent brown glass, empty, except for the glass furniture, also mostly brown, but some in other tones. The sojourners continued down the broad avenue that was paved with small glass stones of various colors and sizes. Glass trees stood along the way and small, colorful glass birds peered out from among the green branches.

"What happened here?" Aspen asked in a hushed whisper.

"Somebody spent an awful lot of money to build a monument like this," the Traveler observed.

No, Creon said to himself, *it wasn't that*. The strange cold that consistently tried to sink into his bones told him otherwise and then he remembered.... He quickly reached into his belt and pulled out a small leather pouch from which dumped a tarnished silver chain with an opaque, navy blue stone on it into his hand and then fastened it around his neck. As he did so, it felt as if a warm shield had wrapped itself around him and he could feel the light inside grow stronger.

They walked up the central thoroughfare, passing glass houses of all colors, a sand-colored fountain of cut glass with petrified crystal water flowing from it, statues of gods and men on pedestals, as well as strange-shaped monuments. Most had something engraved on them, but Creon could not decipher the characters, nor understand the language. But what scared him the most was that there was not one living soul here other than themselves.

*Where have all the people gone?* he wondered silently. True, he liked to be alone, but there was something wrong about this loneliness. He couldn't decide what or why and wondered if it had anything to do with the dream he'd had.

"Look!" Aspen was pointing towards a majestic palace of cut white crystal. Again the magical tug took over and the Traveler and Aspen bolted towards the door. Creon walked after them, a lot more calmly than he felt. Suddenly he heard a flutter beside his ear and the Hawk alighted on his shoulder. He staggered under the weight, caught himself, and continued on.

"There is something wrong here, my lord," Falk whistled in his ear. "I have never seen the King act so before." Creon nodded, his churning stomach betraying more and more of his anxiety.

"At least you and I have protection," he told the bird, his voice echoing hollowly down the vast hall they had just entered. "We need to thank the Creator for that." Falk looked at him curiously, but said nothing. Aspen and the Traveler were slowly going along the hallway, staring at the exquisite artwork, silent.

And then they entered what must have been a hall of images. Men and women of all ages, sizes, and nationalities were pictured in clear glass. Aspen walked among them staring at them, touching them gently. Creon followed her, wary, wanting to draw his sword, but restraining himself.

The statues were of marvelous detail, much more exquisite than any the son of Adem had seen in his entire life. There was a man, lifting a bunch of grapes to his mouth, a woman was frozen in mid-step of a dance. There were couples everywhere, sitting, dancing, eating, laughing, and .... With a look of disgust on his face, Creon turned away from an image of a man and a woman holding each other, their faces ecstatic. How could it be that an artisan would go so far as to show something like *that!*? His gaze followed the Woodmaid as she found an empty glass couch and sat down on it. His eyes scanned the rest of the room and then rested on an image right before his feet. A scantily dressed, sleeping young woman. And then he *knew!*

"The warning!" he cried but Aspen and Ethan ignored him. He ran over to the Traveler and shook him.

"Traveler, we've got to get out of here!" he demanded.

"Why should we?" Ethan asked indifferently. "It is a nice place for the night. No, I'd like to stay *here* for the rest of my life."

"As an image?" Creon snapped, in that instant realizing that these "statues" had once been real, living, breathing people, turned into glass by some foul spell. He did not know where the knowledge came from, but was certain that it was true.

Ethan made no reply, but simply began reclining on a couch. The young Man wracked his brains furiously, growing more frantic every moment. *Creator God help me!* he cried out silently. Suddenly a name came to his mind.

"And what about Artemis?" he finally demanded of the Traveler. The name that the son of Adem had heard but once worked wonders.

"Where is she?" the Traveler asked, sitting back up and looking around the hall.

"She's back in your own world, I guess," Creon returned. "You have to get out of here to see her again." Recognition came to Ethan's eyes.

"You're right, son of Adem," he said rubbing his face and blinking his eyes. "This place must be enchanted." He put a hand to his head. "I'd forgotten ... We've got to get out of here!"

"That's what I've been telling you," Creon cried, feeling something bear down on him, causing him to shake. "Let's get Aspen and go! It's nearly evening!" Ethan looked up to see how long their shadows were, the waning rays of the sun pouring through the semi-transparent walls.

Once more revelation struck Creon and he knew that they had to get out before the sun set. He leaped up and over to where Aspen had seated herself. She had let her hair down and loosened her tunic.

"Aspen," Creon called, "we've got to go, now!" She looked at him, a lusty smile on her lips.

"You must have lost your mind, luv," she drawled, patting the bench beside her. "This is were we can be happy for the rest of our lives." She batted her eyelashes at him and whispered, "You and me together."

"That's a lie," he shot back, the light inside slowly prompting the red mist to form behind his eyes. "This place is certain death. We have to leave without another delay."

"Very well," the Woodmaid returned. "You can go without me."

"No, I won't!"

"Then you'll have to stay here, 'cause I'm not going anywhere!" She raised her head haughtily and looked at him under half-closed eyelids. That was too much for Creon and he slapped her across the cheek, hoping it would bring her to her senses.

"How dare you," she hissed, drawing back her fist.

"We don't have any time, my lord!" Falk cried.

"Come on, Creon-Se!" Ethan said impatiently from beside him. The men each grabbed one of Aspen's arms and forced her up from the couch, while the Hawk pounced on her belongings. She kicked and screamed at them to leave her alone, but Creon held on for dear life and tried not to listen. They dragged her from the palace, Falk following behind with her pack and cloak in his talons. They reached the square in front of the palace before they realized how late it was.

"The gates close at twilight," Creon panted, the knowledge once more rising inside him.

"Then run," the Traveler gasped back. They lifted Aspen high enough to keep her feet from touching the ground and sprinted down the boulevard. The obsidian gates were already beginning to close and Creon imagined he could see dark shapes pushing at them. Once more the light inside him spoke, driving the words to his lips.

"In the name of Creator God, hold the gates!" he cried. They froze where they were and Falk flew through, Aspen's cloak blowing in the wind. The gates began to creak shut again just as they reached them. The two Men hurled themselves through the portal, still holding the thrashing Woodmaid. Behind them the gates closed with an awful thud, making the whole valley echo.

Creon finally let go of the girl's arm. Aspen turned on him, emerald eyes burning with anger, her teeth bared. She snapped an obscenity at him and struck him in the jaw with her fist, knocking him down, and ran back to the city gates and pounded on them.

"Let me in!" she cried in desperation. "Let me in!" Creon gathered himself up and walked over up to her, ignoring the throbbing in his chin. He gently reached out to touch her, but she jerked away, turned around, and leaned against the black gates, tears running down her cheeks.

"Why?" she sobbed. "We could have been so happy there – forever." Creon searched for words, his heart aching with an unspeakable emotion.

"It's because," he began lamely, "because I – I don't want to loose you." The words slowly began to flow. "If you'd stayed there you would have died." Aspen looked at him, confused.

"Is there anything wrong with being happy?" she asked, the spell slowly wearing off.

"No," he answered, recalling how joyful they had been when on the Island, in the natural surroundings. Aspen had really bloomed there and, oh, how she had changed. Maybe Lynx was right when he'd said that all who lived under the Warrior King's rule became corrupt.

"Remember," he said lowering his voice to a near-whisper, "how happy we were on the Island?" She nodded and he reached out and touched her face with his finger tips, tracing her cheeks her chin.

"I remember those songs and dances. It was so simple, so pure, just like my Aspen." He touched her shoulder and gently drew her forward. She accepted his embrace woodenly at first, listening to him as he continued, even more softly. "But everything has changed. Ever since you left the Island you've become so – so different. What happened to you?" The girl's arms came up around him and she suddenly pressed herself against him, silent.

"Will you ever be that way again?" he asked. "Will we ever be that way again? I pray to Creator God that it will be," he whispered. Aspen suppressed another sob.

"Oh, Creon," she sighed, slowly melting into his arms. They stood there for a long moment before he picked up his beloved and carried her to where the Traveler was sitting beside a newly-lit fire, face ashen, eyelids drooping.

"Falk will hold watch tonight," he announced, slurring the words together. Creon nodded.

"I'll join him, Traveler," he said, the excitement still rolling through his veins, the light strong in his heart. Ethan nodded in return, wrapped himself in a cloak and went to sleep. Creon laid Aspen down and spread her cloak over her, then just knelt beside her, watching the gentle rise and fall of her chest, paused to trace the line of her chin, gently stroking across her rose-bud lips with his thumb.

"Aspen, dear Aspen," he whispered. "I love you so!" He sighed softly and then sat down with his back against the rock. The Hawk settled above and behind him as he unclasped the silver chain from around his neck and returned it to the pouch in his belt. He looked at the city glinting before him in the moonlight, the white stones and black gates eerily reflecting the flickering of their fire.

"What happened to you?" he mumbled. "Why is it that you are like that?" The milky walls remained silent, as if mocking him. He pondered on his question for a few more minutes before reaching over to where he had set his pack. The first scroll he drew out was "the Chronicles of Elian." He rolled it open and found the place he had once read with Hrosca a long time ago. Melancholy wrapped itself around his shoulders gently as he thought of the old Man. It was a strangely comforting feeling, as it brought back fond memories of their times together. Creon found himself smiling as he tilted the scroll towards the fire and began to read.

*In the days when Man just arrived in this world he began to build a mighty city among the Mountains of Blue. Hanock laid its foundations and his son Lehab set its gates in place. The ancient writings say that thousands upon thousands of Men lived in the gates of Mount Haven and they elected Carmi the son of Balak as first king. Under his command the walls were strengthened. He did what was good in the eyes of the Creator, worshipping him with all his life. Are his achievements not written in the book of the Kings of Mount Haven?*

*Carmi died and was gathered to his people and in his place his son Notan-Gelder came to the throne. Notan-Gelder was a king of great wisdom and a wonderful musician. He lived an upright life before the God of all creation and was gathered to his fathers at a good old age. As for what he achieved, are these not written in the book of the Kings of Mount Haven?*

Notan-Gelder died and was gathered to his people and in his place his younger son Bozrah took the throne. Dishon, the first-born of Notan-Gelder, had done evil in the eyes of the Creator and was executed by the hand of his brother Bozrah. Bozrah did not follow in the ways of his father and his father's father before him. He turned from Creator God and proclaimed himself to be the Most High. It is from Bozrah that the Werebeasts have descended, for he and his wife worshipped the Dark One and practiced the Dark Arts. The sons of Bozrah were Turhan, Koran, Raama and Gatam. He also had four daughters who wed their brothers. The appearance of his children was that of the Werebeasts and because of this they were cast out of Mount Haven and traveled away into the Death March. As for Bozrah's other achievements, are they not written in the book of the Kings of Mount Haven?

Bozrah was killed by the hand of Creator God and 'Uz the son of Hori took his place. In his early years 'Uz followed the ways of Carmi and Notan-Gelder, but then he listened to the advice of the wizards and sorcerers and turned from the Almighty. He strengthened the walls of Mount Haven and built the great palace that bears his name. At the end of his days he made a great feast to his gods and all the godless people of Mount Haven came. As they were feasting the word of the Creator came upon Reuel the son of Reutei and he prophesied. He stood before the people and spoke:

"Thus says Creator God: I will bring calamity upon 'Uz and his people for they have forsaken me and set up false gods before me. I will strike this city and all in it shall die. Therefore hear me, all you who believe the words of the Almighty. Leave Mount Haven and turn your faces west, for there is a land of beauty that I have given you. Leave this city of evil and never return to it." The people of Mount Haven listened to the words of the Creator as spoken through Reuel and left the city. As he was feasting, 'Uz, the fourth and last king of Mount Haven, invoked a spell to preserve the city for all ages, turning the city and all who were inside its gates to glass. To this day it stands, a city of glass and a reminder of what the Creator has done to those who mocked his name.

Thus the decree of the Almighty was fulfilled and Reuel son of Reutei spoke a curse upon the city in accordance with the evil called upon it by 'Uz son of Hori.

"Thus says Creator God: This city shall be an abomination until the end of time. It shall be a warning to all who pass by it. Woe to him who enters the gates and sleeps there. Woe to him who sees the sun set and is within the walls. The curse of 'Uz shall rest upon him, he shall be as the last king of that city."

— From *The Chronicles of Elian*, Book I

Creon rubbed his eyes and rolled the scroll shut. So the city was cursed, not merely enchanted. The power of the city was to draw the unwary in and to attempt to trap them. How many had succumbed to its power in the ages past? How many had died there? Was Mount Haven why the Blue Mountains had been abandoned?

It was with a thankful heart that Creon reached over and stoked up the fire. The Hawk shifted uncomfortably and continued to gaze into the darkness, while the Man mused over what it was that had saved them. The chain, yes, had been of some use, especially against the enchantment that had engendered the curse, but it was the Light Within – the true gift of the Creator – that had prompted him. He sat quietly and sought for it, but, as so often in the past, it had done what needed to be done and had gone again. And in that moment the longing first consciously struck him: *I want it with me always.* It was a beautiful thought, but at the same time it scared him deeply.

A gentle rustle beside him made pulled him from his musing. Aspen was awake, up on her knees. She slid over to him, drawing her cloak around herself more tightly and rubbed the heel of her hand across her face.

"What are you reading?" she asked, settling herself against the rock. He smiled at her, with her wan features, the bags under her eyes, the spent look in those pools of green. He lifted his arm and she slipped under it, snuggling close.

"About the city," he answered then and told her about what he had read and what he had realized.

"And we were almost caught there," she said, fear her voice choked. She was silent for a long moment and then continued, more clearly.

"It's funny, I felt so happy and – oh – content. But it was all a lie, wasn't it?"

Creon nodded.

"Thank you, luv," she whispered, and pressed her lips to his.

"You're welcome," he replied when she pulled back again. They were silent for a bit before he found the courage to ask.

"And are you happy now?" A smile dawned on her face.

"Yes, Creon, I am happy now." She sighed, closed her eyes, and became still. For an instant he thought she had fallen asleep, but then she roused herself a bit.

"Would you read to me?" she asked and he did as she requested. The Woodmaid fell asleep with her head on his shoulder and soon his eyelids began to droop. Dawn found them still so, nestled against each other in the shadow of the City of Glass, but free from its curse.



## Peak Called Joy

The next seven days came and went quietly, but the traveling grew more difficult as they left the road that led to Mount Haven and set out across the wilderness to the greatest mountain of them all, the Peak Called Joy. Every time Creon caught a glimpse of the crag his heart did a strange thing in his chest, skipping with delight one minute and squeezing tight with dread in the next. He knew that this was his destination and soon he would be all alone. The other three seemed to feel his uneasiness and said little to him.

The Traveler and Aspen both seemed much more cheerful. At times he would tell of his three children and she would then banter on about the Island, recalling the first time she'd found Creon, giving his heart a start and for just a brief time it was to him as if his old Aspen had returned. But then there were also the moments when she would get incredibly moody and downcast and nothing that he could do would cheer her up.

In the afternoon of the eighth day out of Mount Haven they found themselves reaching the foothills of the Peak Called Joy. They had just been picking their way up a fairly rough shale slope when Aspen came to a stop.

"Do you hear that?" she asked, eyes suddenly going wide.

"What?" the Traveler asked, also halting. Creon paused and listened and it took him a long moment to realize what it was he was hearing.

"Birdsong!" he exclaimed.

"Birdsong," Aspen confirmed. "The first since we entered the Death March!" They looked at each other, eyes wide, hearts pounding with delight.

"C'mon!" the Woodmaid cried, suddenly feeling a fresh energy rush through her. "Let's go find it!" And with that she rushed up the hillside, her friends following close behind. Moments later they crested the rise and stood still to drink in the most beautiful sight they had seen in ages. Below them lay a small, verdant valley, protected from the harsh climates by the slope of the mountain and the hillock they were standing on. Trees ran down the sides of the hills, both conifers and leaf-trees, all clothed in deepest green, even though the first days of autumn had arrived. As they watched and drank in the sights, Creon heard a rustle in front of him and a deer paused to peek out from among the bushes at the travelers, then it flicked an ear and bounded off through the brush. They smiled at each other and slowly, deliberately walked into the vale, drinking in the sounds and the air which seemed lighter. The trees were well-grown and rich, and while Creon could detect no pruning marks on them, they also looked as if they had been cared for meticulously. Aspen grabbed an apple off one tree as they passed by and tossed it to her friend before snagging another one for herself and for the Traveler.

As they wandered into this haven of life, Creon wondered why it was that the Death March and the Blue Mountains were so devoid of life and in that instant the thought came to him that soon he would have a chance to have all his questions answered and he wondered how it would feel.

Aspen guided them down the slope until they reached a stream.

"Which way shall we go?" she wondered, glancing left and right along its bank.

"Let's go upstream," Creon suggested, feeling a strange calling in his heart.

"All right," the Woodmaid said, and led the way along until they could hear a rushing sound. She hastened forward and pushed her way through a curtain of leaves to find a large clearing with a large pond in the center of it from which the brook flowed. The little lake was fed by several small waterfalls tumbling down the valley's side.

"I think I'd like to take a swim," Aspen said, sitting down and pulling off her boots. The two Men nodded and went back the way they came, setting up a camp in a bower next to the curtain to the clearing. It was a tiny cave of branches and leaves woven so thick that no rain could pass through them. Three soft patches of heather were on the ground and a small depression had been scooped out of the center with a natural vent in the middle of the ceiling. Creon shook his head as he dumped his pack onto one of the beds and sat down on it.

"This can't just have grown this way," he commented, overwhelmed by all of the things that he had seen that day. "It's as if it were a house made for travelers!"

"Why not?" the Hawk asked evenly. "Nothing is impossible for Ya-Rab." Creon glanced at the bird and realized that it was right. He smiled to himself as he helped the Traveler light a fire.

"You've been very quiet lately," the young Man observed. Ethan smiled watching the red flames lick at the dry branches.

"Yes, I've been thinking of home," he said wistfully.

"It must be hard for you Voyagers to be away from what you love so much," Creon surmised. The Traveler nodded.

"But whenever it's over you only feel the joy of being at home again." He rocked back on his heels. "Even though I met Artemis on Earth and lived apart from her for years, I was more content in my own world than I could have ever been living with her on Earth. Praise Ya-Rab that I was able to take her back to Diyar with me."

"I've heard about Earth," Creon said, settling himself by the fire. "What's it like?" The Traveler thought for a long moment.

"It's not too different from here," he began slowly, "but it's a lot less clean. Man has found ways to take hidden treasures from nature. He has learned how to make carts that don't need horses, machines that fly, and so many other things that you couldn't even imagine even if I described them to you. The people there are just men and women without any healing powers like the Woodfolk have. Some believe in Ya-Rab and others don't, just like here." He shook his head. "It's strange how every world where Man is slowly becomes a mirror of Earth." Creon mulled over that for a few moments.

"You mean some day we'll be able to fly?"

"I wouldn't say no to the possibility," Ethan said, "but I wouldn't suggest it either. If knowledge is gained for the prestige of man, Ya-Rab is often forgotten. And that is dangerous, because then man becomes a god." The young Man nodded again. He knew that only too well.

At that moment Aspen appeared in the entrance to the bower. She fairly sparkled, her skin shining a healthy pink and her red hair glowing after she had brushed it out. She was dressed in one of her old green-and-white dresses and the young Man thought of an image of innocence, wreathed in the light of the setting sun. The Traveler insisted that Creon go next, and so he grabbed his pack and headed to the clearing. He stripped and plunged into the water, letting it wash away all the sweat and filth that had gathered during the last weeks, sensing this was preparatory to his encounter with his God. When he was finished he pulled a new set of clothes from his pack, which he pulled on quickly, surprised that they were a bit too large for him, even though he was *sure* that he'd brought them from the Island. He used the lake surface to make sure that his hair

was nicely groomed and shaved off the three-week stubble that had gathered, feeling now that he was more of a man again, ready to face what he must do.

He returned to the bower to let Ethan have his turn, and as twilight delayed her coming that day, he and Aspen decided to take a walk along the edge of the valley. They went along hand-in-hand marveling at the trees and bushes, delighting in the birdsong and animal noises and enjoying each other's company. As they were going along, Creon's eyes strayed to the great mountain looming over them.

"I wonder how I'll get up there," he mused, more to himself than to her.

"Maybe through there," she said pointing ahead at the jagged maw of a cave. Creon's heart fell as he looked at it.

"Through *there*?" he asked, unable to keep his voice from shaking. "I'd rather climb the side."

"But there doesn't seem to be another way," the Woodmaid reasoned and he had to admit she was right. That thought ended any desire of his to go further, so they returned to their camp where the Traveler had already prepared a meal of fresh fruit and newly-baked bread.

"Where'd the bread come from?" Creon asked as he tore a piece from it, feeling the delight of the warm crust in his fingers.

"I don't know," the other Man admitted. "I just found it on one of the beds." Creon smiled to himself, remembering another time when he had found bread and drink without any apparent origin.

"Creator God watches after us," Aspen said, eyes sparkling. "And tomorrow we'll see him!" Creon clenched his teeth, knowing that he would have to leave the next morning, knowing that *this* was the time he must tell them.

"Tomorrow I've got to go on, alone," he said slowly.

"Why can't we come?" Aspen asked, the shine leaving her eyes, face falling.

"Krieg said that this something that *I* must do, because it is my call," Creon explained, avoiding his beloved's gaze. He knew he'd hurt her by saying she couldn't go along, but it was between him and the Creator. No one else would be able to join him.

"Tomorrow then," the Traveler said slowly, closing the conversation.

The next day dawned early and the four of them went to the cave entrance. Creon had left all of his weapons and belongings in the bower, except for the small leather pouch. The Traveler took Creon's hand in a manner unknown to the young Man and wished him well.

"Please look after her," Creon said softly. Ethan smiled slightly.

"She'll be all right," he told Creon. Then the young Man turned to Aspen, unsure what to say. Her face was pinched with her grief but she did her best to smooth it away, reached out and hugged him tightly.

"I'll miss you," she whispered.

"I'll be back soon," he promised and kissed her, then withdrew the pouch in his belt.

"Here," he said, dropping the chain into his right hand. "Keep this until I get back." Aspen nodded as he clasped it around her neck. She smiled briefly, touching the chain, understanding the significance of the charge, and kissed him again before he turned toward the black opening.

*It's so dark in there*, he thought to himself, *but I've got to do this*. He took a deep breath, straightened his shoulders, and walked into the dark mouth of the cave.



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**Part Two:**  
**THE PROPHET**

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# One: Tolgar

## The Warlords

**T**he Warrior King paced along the broad balcony, brow furrowed, hands clasped behind his back, brooding. It was said among the people that the Man who stood nearly seven feet tall and could snap a log with his bare hands, was one hundred and fifty years old. They were nearer the truth than they thought. Elam, the Warrior King, was more than two hundred years old, even though he hardly looked over forty-five. He carefully kept himself in good shape through trials and mock-battles, wielding the heaviest and deadliest of weapons to make himself the strongest man in the world. His face and arms were pocked from battle and his black hair was cut short. The most disturbing thing, people said, were the blue eyes, pits of ice, fully devoid of any feeling and warmth. The Warrior King was evil, more evil than anyone would want to believe. The six Warlords standing at attention knew that, that was what had drawn many of them.

"It is nearly too late," the Warrior King rumbled in an impressive bass. "He has reached the Mountains and is perhaps already at the Peak Called Joy." He stopped walking and fixed his eyes on the six standing there.

"He must be stopped," the evil Man continued, his voice but a low growl. "You've already seen what he has done with Dushman, my most trusted servant." He closed one huge hand into a fist. "You *must* stop him at all costs."

He pointed to the first, a warrior no taller than five feet. A light brown fur of short hairs covered his whole body, brown hair hung to his shoulders and his form was lithe, sinewy, reminding one of a large cat. A pair of pointed ears stuck out of his head, where a cat might have its ears and feline eyes of gold gazed at the world disdainfully, but held only reverence for his king. He flexed his right hand, claws springing out of his fingertips and a long tail flicked back and forth behind him. He was dressed in a single piece of finely worked leather, held at the waist by a belt of the same material.

"You, Tolgar, are the first one he will meet," the Warrior King said. "You hold the Death March, you and your Werebeasts. You also hold the Karyl captive. Your stronghold must *not* be breached. Go now!" The Werebeast bowed to his master.

"I hear and obey, sire," he growled and slipped down the hall, a silent shadow.

Elam turned to the second, an old Man who stood stooped over, leaning his weight on a beautifully crafted cane. His hair was as white as snow and he was dressed in ancient leather armor. A helmet with a high red brush of hair was under his left arm, a heavy battle-ax at his side, his only weapon. Keen hazel eyes looked up at the King.

"Lormar, you are the most learned of all my men," the dark lord began slowly. "Therefore it is your job to retake Stein before he returns from the Mountains. You must hold it, make it look peaceable and kill him as soon as he enters your gates. Go now!" The old Man set his helmet on his head, switched his cane to his left and struck his chest with his right hand before then turning and hobbling down the hall.

The Warrior King approached the third, one was almost as tall as the Warrior King himself and dressed all in black, his only color a red arrow was emblazoned on his light breastplate. His face was hidden behind a black mask and a pair of bloodshot green eyes gazed out at the world malevolently. He held a javelin in one hand and a club set with iron spikes hung at his side.

"Keritos, you are in charge of the Pwyllwood, if he makes it that far. Stop him at Kizilirmak if possible, but your final stand *must* be in Eison. He *must not* make it past you! Go now!" The Warlord saluted and left the balcony, his heavy boots thundering along the halls of black marble.

The next warrior was a small man, his skin tinged yellow. Long stringy hair hung down his back and a thin beard adorned a face set with malicious, almond-shaped, brown eyes. His armor was made of small metal plates like scales and sparkled a dull gray in the evening light. He held no weapons in his hands, only a small sword strapped to one side of his belt and several triangular blades at the other.

"Pan-Tao, you are to station yourself in Deniz. Your lands beyond the borders will be safe enough under the command of He-Nam. It should not be possible to beat Keritos and so you are to wait until my black Warlord sends you word that our enemy has been vanquished. But *if*," here the blue eyes narrowed ever so slightly and the king's voice shook with fury, "he makes it past Keritos, stop him from boarding any ships. He *must not* make it to Midpoint."

"I pledge my life on it," the little Man said with a small, malevolent smile.

"You already have, Pan-Tao," the Warrior King laughed. "Go now!" And Pan-Tao scuttled down the hallway.

Elam turned to his fifth war leader, only this one should be called a Warlady. As he gazed at her his eyes softened infinitesimally, drinking in her beauty. She stood tall with her platinum hair tied in a single braid down her back. Her finely cut face could easily pass for a picture of Istek, goddess of love, but the gray eyes were as cold as a winter's night in the deep northern reaches. A single gray pearl was set in a golden circlet on her brow. She was dressed all in gold, the hilt of a broadsword poking above one shoulder and a quiver of arrows behind the other. In her hand she held a bow and at her side a whip was curled.

"Alman," the Warrior King began, just a hint of warmth creeping into his voice, for this was after all his chief consort. "You have the most pleasant task of all of us. You are to hold Midpoint, which is fairly easy."

"And there are a lot of passers-by," Alman said, licking her lips, eyes lighting up.

"Yes, but beware the Woodmaid. She will destroy you if you don't stop her!" And here he reached out and gently touched the woman's even features.

"I'll rip her heart out," the warlady answered with a laugh, batting his arm away.

"Go now!" the Warrior King commanded, stiffening. Alman turned and glided silently down the hallway.

Elam turned to the last of the six, this one a man with a clean, almost innocent face, except for the hard, blue eyes. He looked much like the Warrior King himself, the same proud look on his features, but at the same time something about the way his mouth was set and the gaze in his eyes reminded one of Alman. Shorter but no less powerful than the king, he was dressed in silver armor, a helmet with the wings of a mighty eagle on his head, a sword strapped to his back, and a thick battle-ax at his side. Both hands were free, held palm down at his sides. The very image of a well-trained soldier at full attention, he stood completely still, only his eyes fixing the Warrior King disdainfully.

"Savash, my son," the king began, his voice affecting a slight lilt that in many other men would pass for warmth, but in combination with the icy gaze made mockery of any emotion that would be deemed fatherly. "You are the last line of defense before myself. I do not want you to die, for I need someone as powerful as I am to come after me. I want you to scour the Flatlands, north to south and east to west. If he triumphs over you, return to Elamil at all costs, do you hear me?" Elam's voice had lowered to a guttural growl at the end, teeth clenched, brow furrowed.

"I hear and obey, my father," Savash answered in a cold voice, raising his head just slightly to show he was aloof from his progenitor's baiting.

"Then go now," the dark man commanded harshly. Savash saluted as he'd been taught, striking his chest with his left hand, resisting the urge to spit at his father's feet, then turned on his heel and marched down the hallway to where he would call his men together.

Elam turned and looked toward the east, raising his head just slightly. A mocking smile slid across his lips as he contemplated his enemy.

"Come and get me now, son of Adem," he whispered. "I'll be ready for you. And when you are gone *all* will worship me."



## The Living God

The inside of the cave was filled with icy blackness, heavy, clinging, suffocating. The small spot of daylight that marked the entrance had disappeared long ago and Creon pressed on in silence, sweat heavy on his brow. He could feel that the ground sloped upward, but what if the ceiling didn't? He'd be crushed sooner or later. He reached up and felt nothing. That let him calm himself for a few minutes, but the panic set in again, his chest heaving as he began to pant, gazing around into the underground night. He came to a halt, trying to still his beating heart, doing his best to keep his cries of anguish from his lips. He looked back over his shoulder to where the entrance had been. Perhaps he should turn back? No, if he tried that he might get lost and die in these caves.

*I've got to go on!* he thought and continued his ascent in total darkness. Soon he began to see dancing white lights before him. Wondering what these were, he tried to touch them, but his fingers just waved through them – fingers he couldn't even see. He stopped again and squeezed his eyes shut only to find they were still there! He gasped for air deeply and relaxed, realizing that his light-deprived eyes were playing tricks on him.

He staggered on when suddenly a strange red glow began dim in the shadows ahead of him. Again he thought it was just a trick of his own mind and closed his eyes, and instantly the light vanished. A smile crossed his face. *This light was real and he hastened towards it.*

*Is it already evening?* he wondered, trying to concentrate through the terror and fatigue. Sweat broke out on his skin again and he found himself wiping his hands on his cloak. As he went towards the light, the cold began to warm. And then he entered a cavern and was instantly struck by a blast like from Rushtu's furnace. He snapped his eyes shut against the glow of a large pillar of fire that shot out of a hole in the center of the room. He blinked his eyes open and then shaded them against the glow with his hand and noticed that the path curled around the edge of the pit. Creon then looked back at the fiery pillar and saw that it was actually pouring down into the great opening from higher up. The darkness wrapped around his heart again and he found himself breathing heavily. He called up the images of as many of his friends and loved ones as he could, dwelling especially on his beloved Aspen, but none of them helped. He looked for the Light Within, but it was gone, only the darkness of terror remained. Part of him just wanted to lie down and die, but he knew he must go on, the problem was that is feet wouldn't move.

"Creator God," he whispered hoarsely. "Help me!" The fear didn't go away, but he found that he could move again and it was with rubbery legs that he staggered towards the narrow ledge around the pit. He pressed his back against the hard stone wall and inched by the mighty firefalls, his heart beating so hard he was afraid that it would burst. Only three more steps, two, one ... done! He took several deep breaths, looking back at the obstacle, glad to be past it. He slowly turned towards the cold, black hole in front of him and was almost reluctant to leave the life-giving light of the flames, but he remembered how the courage had flowed into him as he had asked the Creator. *He's brought me this far, the young Man reasoned, and so he'll take me the rest.* He closed his eyes and plunged into the darkness.

He had already lost count of the steps he had taken. The blast furnace had abated, but in the stillness of the dark there was some warmth, not like the icy depths prior to the firefalls. He was glad for the small patches of light coming from phosphorescent rocks here and there, making it easier to see the uneven ground. He followed the path more easily, but he tripped more frequently, real exhaustion setting in and the only thing he could think of was setting one foot in front of the other. Suddenly he slipped, small stones rolling out under his boot, and he fell hard on the ground, splitting his lip, but pushed himself up again and pressed on, dabbing his wound gently with his finger and then the edge of his cloak.

Slowly the light became more and he realized he was coming out of the cave. The ceiling became higher and higher and disappeared altogether. He looked up and saw a gray sky above him and knew the tunnels

under the rock were over. To his left the mountain still rose and to his right a high rock wall hid the view. He continued on, the open sky above him causing his heart to beat more easily, his shoulders to straighten.

The climb now began to get more treacherous and the young Man at times had to crawl along on his hands on knees to make it. There were times when he simply lay against the rough hillside, trying to regain his strength. Once he even fell asleep for a few moments and came to himself with a start, wondering how long he'd been lying there. He pushed himself up and clawed his way along.

Then before him was a small plateau, the path continuing along ahead of him. Here a grapevine grew, with thick red clusters of grapes hanging on it. It was only then that Creon realized how hungry he was. He picked a bunch of grapes and popped several in his mouth, chewing, savoring the sweet richness, feeling them give strength to his weary muscles. When he opened his eyes he noticed a small spring gushing out from among the rocks. He fell to his knees beside the fountain and drank, interspersing the deep draughts of the life-giving water with the strengthening sweetness of the fruit. As he finished, he looked up saw a simple line of characters engraved above the spring.

*"I am the living water,"* it said. *"All who drink of me will not thirst again."* He wondered at the words, rose and continued on, refreshed and strengthened.

The gray turned brighter as he continued his climb, only to mute again into a somber darkness, hinting that twilight had once more come out to play with her beloved day before he went to his bed. Step by weary step he dragged forward, falling twice, three times as his foot struck a rock or a dip on the uneven path. And so it was a bedraggled, exhausted Creon that finally staggered off the narrow path onto a high plateau. He looked around, dazed, eyes gathering in the balcony effect of the flatness he was standing on, the highest peak of the mountain still rising maybe a hundred ells above him, shrouded in dull clouds. He looked back along the path he'd just labored up, gauged its steepness and it struck him that he could never have made it on his own. *Who helped me?* he wondered. Echoing the question came the second one, *Where is the Creator I have come to see?*

As if on cue with his question a dull rumble emanated from the mountain. The ground shook, catching him unawares and sending him sprawling onto the dusty rock. The tremor was light and brief, so Creon thought nothing of it and he pushed himself up, looking around, annoyed.

The second shock caught him off guard as well, thrusting him to the ground once more. This time it was much more violent and within the quaking a new sound caught his ear. Looking behind him, he saw that a giant boulder had loosened from above and was rolling towards him. The danger warmed him, sending adrenaline surging through him, and he quickly rolled away from the mighty rock. It bounded past him, making a large crack in the plateau before skipping off the edge and down the steep mountainside. He lay there panting, his heart pounding at the danger he'd faced and it was only after a long time of agonized waiting that he dare to rise and to peer around cautiously.

He fully expected a third tremor to arise, but instead there was the low, menacing growl of an impending thunderstorm. He felt the strong wind surge across him and saw raven clouds traveling towards him across the vast open expanse of sky before him. A cry of dismay tore from his parched throat as he witnessed the brilliant arcs of lightening leaping between the clouds. One flashed down and struck the earth. The awesome, fear-inspiring power of nature swept over him, the giant drops first merely splattering around him and then on his body.

"This is a deluge!" he cried out, glancing at the peak behind him. The earthquake had shaken a bolder loose. Might the rain not cause a mudslide?

"Creator God, protect me!" he screamed into the howling wind as the thunder crashed above him and the lightening crackled in a white arc. The rain continued, hard as ever, the forces of nature displaying their full might around him, making him seem small and insignificant. The fear that had been mounting since the two tremors now grew as Creon realized that he was a perfect candidate to be struck by the lightening, standing tall as he was in the center of the plateau. He hunkered down and tears of terror and exhaustion began to slip out. Never had he felt so alone, never had he needed a warm embrace more than at this moment, never had he felt

so insignificant and at the mercy of nature's awful power. A sob escaped his throat and then a second one as he wrapped his arms around himself in a futile effort to stave off the chill of the blinding rain.

"Where are you Creator God?" he choked. "You said you'd be here. Where are you?" As if in response to his tears, the hardness of the rain began to relent as it slowly turned to a soft drizzle, light and warm, wholesome, refreshing as in the spring, gentle as a loving father's touch. He relaxed, the terror subsiding and with it the tears.

"Creon," came a quiet voice, a gentle murmur among the falling drops, almost lost in the staccato of the rain's rhythm. He cocked his head.

"Creon!" This time the whisper was clearer.

"Yes?" he answered, whispering as well.

"Take off your shoes, Creon son of Adem, you are standing on holy ground." He fumbled with the heavy, waterlogged boots, finally succeeding in pulling them off. All the while his heart began pounding hard again as he sensed a presence behind him. Was this some hoax? Was this really the Creator or merely a horrific trick of his imagination? The instant he had taken off his shoes he spun around to face whatever it was and stopped, gaping at the scene before him.

As the glistening, silver drops fell, Creon thought he was looking through a hole torn right in the fabric of time and space, an image that seemed to be built from the rain. And yet somehow he knew that this was true Reality that was facing him, wreathed in light more brilliant and more real than any he'd ever known before. Compared to this the sun was only a flickering lamp in a midnight sky!

As he took in the scene, the silence vanished into a million voices chanting,

"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty. The worlds are filled with his glory!" Wide-eyed, mouth agape, and trembling, the young man gazed at beings that seemed made of pure flame, flitting back and forth on six blazing wings. They repeated their call again, one to the next, now increasing in resonance, now falling to a whisper.

But then he beheld the One at the center, a glimmering, shining figure, brighter than the white-hot metal in Rushtu's furnace, full of more power than the noon-day sun falling on the Flatlands on the summer solstice, more holy than any he'd ever seen before. The fear that had seized him became so violent that he trembled all over, pitching forward and covering his face.

As he did he felt like the darkness within began to rise and envelop him, despair gripping at his heart and tearing at his mind. Never had he felt such white-hot purity, never had he sensed such power, beauty, and awesome majesty. And never had he felt such a desire as he did from this strange apparition on the throne. The One who had no form had appeared to him. Who was Creon son of Adem of the line of Peleg? How would he dare enter such a presence? He was nothing but a proud liar, a cheat who thought he could do everything. He was a worthless son who despised his father and brought his mother nothing but grief. He was a lover who was in a relationship with a wonderful girl for selfish motives. He was a self-centered fool. He was a murderer with blood on his hands. He was an abomination before God. As these realizations washed over him a strangled cry came from his throat.

"Oh, God, go away from me. I am a sinful man! I am doomed to die!" And he wept into his hands, fearful of the fate that awaited him. It surprised him to feel a gentle hand on his shoulder. And he looked up to see one of the Fiery Ones before him, a bright coal in its right hand.

"He will cleanse you if you ask him," the being intoned gently, echoing words that Creon had heard from his mentor.

"How do I dare?" the young man sobbed. The flaming one did not answer but stepped to his side and once more Creon beheld the Eternal One on his throne. How dare he ask for such an audacious thing? But now with this second look he felt even more the all-pervading emotion that radiated from the One on the throne; and then he knew to interpret it: love. He bowed his head.

"I am unworthy, o God," he whispered. "I am unworthy."

"It is I who makes worthy, son of man," came the Voice from the throne, deep, soft, gentle, inviting. "Ask me." The last words were a murmuring as quiet as the rain that still pattered around him. It would mean to lay

down his pride, he knew, and yet within the desire to shrink away into the darkness, there now burned a desire to be one with the One before him and Creon found the words rising to his lips on their own. They rolled off his tongue, bitter and yet sweet, terrible and yet wonderful at the same time.

"Cleanse me, O God. Cleanse my hands and my lips. Only you can." The instant he uttered the words something seared his lips and he jerked his head back to avoid the pain, but as it had come it was gone and he saw the burning one who had spoken to him flying back to the throne with the coal in his hand.

"You are clean, Creon son of Adem, and now you are mine," the One on the throne said quietly. "Ask of me what you will, and I will answer you." The offer was amazing, delightful, and in an instant a million questions leaped into Creon's mind, only to be replaced by the one that seemed most pertinent.

"Who are you, my Lord?"

"I am the Only One, son of man. I am God, the living, the eternal. There is none besides me. I am the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet I do not leave the guilty unpunished; I punish the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.<sup>5</sup>" And he paused. "Above all, child, I am Love and I am Creator. Come, look upon all that I have created."

In that instant Creon felt himself caught up in warm, loving arms, feeling the embrace he had longed for. And suddenly he was flying across the nations: there below him the Death March, Tashyer beyond, then over the Pwyll and the Northern Provinces, the Flatlands, over to the Greenwood and the Western Nation. Even farther west, where the territory of the Seven ended the journey went on.

"I have made the lands, son of man," the Creator's voice came, this time not in his ears, but in his heart. "I have also made the animals, look upon them all." In that instant it seemed that he was standing still and before him paraded the entire flora and fauna of the nations. With wondering eyes he beheld animals in all shapes and sizes, horses, dogs, mice, raptors, whales, guppies, deer, lizards, frogs, locust, flies, spiders, and many more, some he could name and some he couldn't.

"I have also made humans in my own image, to rule the lands." And now he looked and saw the three Races before him, each in their perfections and flaws. He saw Man in his arrogance and selfishness, his technological wonders and building prowess. He saw the Woodfolk in their aloofness and superiority, in their gentleness and caring for nature. And he saw the Werebeasts in their cruelty and bloodlust, in their desire to protect, defend, and nurture. With wide eyes, never before having seen them so, he watched.

"And I have made the worlds," the Creator whispered. "Come, Creon, come, let me show you." There was a thrill in the deep voice that rippled through the young man's body and once more his heart pounded heavily, though this time not in fear, but in excitement.

In that instant all time and space around him vanished and there was nothing but the warm, loving presence of the Creator. Then they entered in again and he was flying over another place. It was breath-taking as he came across an azure sea, beneath him a giant ship of metal, carrying many small things on its flat surface. But at his speed it was left behind and moments later he saw a coastal plain. Up and over it he found himself soaring over a city with high, shiny buildings that seemed made of glass and steel. There were long, black roads with strange devices traveling on them. He slowed to see men, women and children in the cities, people of all colors and facial features, speaking in languages he did not know.

Then he was off again, across the plains and over high, snow-encrusted mountains, down across a vast flatland, in some areas dry as a desert, high rocky table-tops soaring above the ground, much like in the Flatlands. In other areas it was green with the early summer grain. He flew on, the land and cityscape below him a never-ceasing wonder. In his amazement he saw animals and humans in their habitats, in their various tasks given by the Creator. He slowed to watch different forms of worship, though only briefly. He could sense that his Guide was pleased with some and saw others as evil.

And then he flew out past a long coast again, skimming over the statue of a green lady holding high a torch with a gilded flame. Across the water they came to another land, similar to the first, but everything more compacted and much older. It took his breath away as he flew on, circling lands of brown and black peoples, of

people who were white, of those who were olive-toned and of a yellowish tint in skin. The Creator showed him their achievements: giant pyramids of stone, cities, some centuries old and some only having been there a few decades, strange vehicles and devices that made the young man's head spin.

"This is Earth, child, the place that I created all mankind in," the Almighty explained gently. "This is where all humanity came from and populated the worlds. This is where I will rule the universe from. But there are more worlds, many more..." And in that instant time and space vanished once more.

Then he entered a second world. The light played over countless horses frolicking among the waves. He could hear them singing to the Almighty Creator in a strange tongue. Then he found himself speeding over land again, men and women living in relative happiness, a golden castle on a hill and people living in it. More towns and villages, similar to the Seven Nations.

A third world followed, unpopulated, but with a strange, eight-sided, giant building. Then one with two vast empires separated by a large wasteland where there were few dwellers. Next there was one where simple dwellings and amazing technology coexisted. World after world cascaded before his eyes and in each one he was exposed to the evil and the prowess of man. The more he saw of his own species the more he became aware of how evil it was.

"Yes, son of man, the man's heart is utterly wicked, but they try to deny it." The Voice was tinged with sadness as they traveled again to another place. This time Creon found himself floating in utter darkness. He could feel heat around him and hear the cries of people, but could see nothing. He sensed that he was utterly alone and in that instant fear washed over him, as well as a searing pain.

"My God, where are you?" he cried out and then he felt the Presence once more, shielding him from the hurt and the loneliness.

"You have felt for one moment what these souls will feel for eternity, son of man," the Voice told him gently. "This is what is in store for those who don't hear me or follow me." There was a quality of infinite sadness swinging in those words.

"But why?" Creon asked, still pained from that moment of torment.

"Because I must be just. I must be true to my character and the only way that man can atone for his sin is eternal punishment. But if blood fills the gap, I can forgive and I will forgive. Never, ever forget what you have seen here, but let me show you something greater." At that moment the darkness vanished and he was in a place of beauty, surrounded by the presence of the Creator himself. It permeated everything and the men and women he saw here were perfect. There was no physical or mental defect among any of them and the way they were living, laughing and working made it clear that each act was seen as worship to the Creator. He looked and saw a magnificent city of gold, shaped as a giant cube, the twelve gates standing open.

"Where are we?" he gasped in wonder.

"When are we, child," the Creator reminded him gently. "We are in a place I am preparing for all who serve me. Here in this day, one from eternity, you will be, I promise. Each of these was a man and a woman who served me among the worlds and whom I redeemed and took for my own. They are as I had created them, perfect." He paused and chuckled joyfully and all creation laughed with its Maker. Creon found himself focusing on one man. "That one was killed by wild men, his body pierced over and over by arrows, because he told them of my love and many accepted." Then Creon saw a woman. "She was gored by a bull, because she would not disown me. And this one," here he saw a young man with dark skin and eyes, "died as a child, crucified by evil men, because he honored my name. There are many more, son of man, many whom you will meet. And they are reaping the reward I gave them. Now come, we must return."

Creon's heart sank as he felt time and space vanish and re-form and he stood back on the high plateau of the Peak Called Joy. The rain was gone, but in the dark clouds fantastic hues of crimson, gold and purple played, declaring along with the Presence that, indeed, the Creator was here! Creon fell on his face before the Eternal One.

"Son of Man, I have shown you the need of the worlds. I must send a new messenger to this one. What shall I do?" The young man lifted himself enough to declare quietly,

"Here I am, Lord, send me."

"You have great faith, Creon, son of Adem and great courage. On such a faith I will build my people and they will hear your testimony spread among the Nations. You will be called Kaya, the rock." And the majestic Voice rose in volume as it continued. "You will be a light to them. You will speak, but they will not hear. You will show them, but they will not see. You will do wonders in my name, but they will turn away. You will be rejected and suffer, but *I will be with you for all time.*" As the mighty Voice rang out over the nations it seemed to Creon that all creation paused for a moment, to share in the joy of the promise of the One who had spoken. "And when the days are complete you will receive your reward. Blessed are you, Creon Kaya, son of Adem of the line of Peleg, for your eyes have seen what few have seen and your ears have heard what few have heard." And Creon Kaya, the Seer, worshipped as the voice died away, abandoned in the moment, for the first time in his life knowing the power of pure worship that focused only on the object of his devotion, not upon himself or what the Creator had done for him, but on the God Most High alone, meditating on him, for the first time truly *knowing* him.

A gentle hand on his shoulder roused him and he was surprised to find a man standing next to him, clothed in white robes much like that of the Karyl.

"Rise and eat, Creon Kaya," he said, "for you will need strength." There on the ground was steaming bread and a jug of pure water. The young Man did as he was told and then stood up, brushing the bread crumbs from his clothing.

"Now then, prophet of the Living God," the Man addressed him, "there is the pathway down the mountain." Creon Kaya looked and saw that on the other side of the peak was an open pathway. He started down it and gazed out, seeing the Seven Nations spread before him like a patchwork carpet. Something tugged at his heart and he knew about all the people that were there. They needed to know the Creator, hear what he had heard and feel what he had felt, the nearness of the Divine One in such a way that was indescribable.

"Here I go, Lord God, for you have sent me," he whispered and started his descent.



## Back to the Death March

Dawn's soft rays gently slipped their way through the tight tangle of the bower where Aspen sat, already awake, leaning her face in her hands. The shadows under her eyes and pallor of her face were ample evidence of the fact that she had spent the night in wakeful vigilance. Being alone she also made no attempt to hide the deep, growing despair that had crept out of its cage in the past days of her sojourn. It was bad enough that Creon had gone up the mountain alone. After all, Aspen had offered up everything to come follow him – even her power to heal. All she wanted was to stand at his side when he faced his God and then she was denied even that. But added to that was that a Karyl had unexpectedly come to call the Traveler had back to the Stronghold for a conference with Krieg. And so she had been alone for thirty days now. By her reckoning Lady Autumn's reign must have already begun, but the valley beneath the Peak Called Joy showed no coloring of the trees. All was as fresh and green as if it were high summer.

Small comfort. She had wandered the valley from one end to the other, seeking some sort of companionship, but not even the animals would stop to speak to her, so she withdrew into herself and the darkness inside fed on anger and sadness. At first she'd called out to Creator God, asking him to speak with her, to help her, to comfort her, but he remained silent and so she'd ceased thinking about him, sullenly ignoring the little things that still told her that he cared about her, such as the fresh bread that appeared daily by her bed in the bower. She still ate it, but without giving thanks. She drank from the stream and took from the fruit, but forcefully ignored their maker, pulling into herself, wrapping her disappointment and anger about herself like a cocoon. She did not sleep much any more, as she was plagued by wild dreams in most of which Creon left her alone, never returning for her. And in a way she began to hate him, too, even though she did her best to remember he'd promised to return.

If that's so, whispered the small, dark voice inside of her, where is he now? Wouldn't he have returned by now? She sighed, shoving the thought away, trying to curb her melancholy mood with a song from the endless repertoire of her people, but all that came was a lament.

*Where are you, O my God.  
Can you hear my sighing?  
Day and night I cry out to you  
But all I hear is silence.*

*Will you not answer, O my God.  
Will you not comfort me now?  
I am crushed by sorrow and care  
My soul is so weighed down  
My soul is so weighed down.*

"Aaagh!" she cried out as the song ended and grabbed up a short branch with which she'd been keeping track of the days since Creon left. She took the time to count the notches. Thirty-nine. This was the fortieth day, the fortieth day that she was alone.

*I will only wait today,* she decided. *After that I'm going home.* She took Creon's knife from its sheath and cut deeply into the wood, a defiant mark, a symbol of the end of her vigil. If Creon did not return she would leave and let her love for him consume her, turn her insane. She found the thought strangely comforting. Perhaps then she would no longer feel the pain of loneliness.

With that she rose and decided to at least take a bath in the pool behind the curtain. It would be a good preparation both for her journey and also if Creon returned today. She smiled wryly. Of course he wouldn't return. Hadn't he forsaken her like the Creator had?

She stepped from the bower and glanced up at the top of the mountain, thinking once more to see only the dark gray clouds. The purple, gold, and crimson bands had left two days after Creon had entered the cave and the Traveler had said that the Creator must be holding a private conference with his servant. At the time she'd thought that was plausible and had grown used to the drabness that surrounded her people's God's home. But now as she looked her heart leaped and a thrill went through her, momentarily piercing the blackness that she'd wrapped herself in. The clouds were shining again, this time brighter than before! Had the Creator returned? Was Creon returning? If so, she must be ready!

She rushed through the curtain, tore off her dress and plunged into the waters, washing herself quickly, trying to clean away the weight she felt, to smooth out the darkness beneath her eyes, to wash away her anger. The shock of the cold pool had the desired effect in most ways and it was with pride that she clothed herself in the rich robe given her by the Karyl when they'd sojourned in the Stronghold. She walked up to the edge by the cave and sat down to wait for her beloved. Her heart swelled, thinking that she would no longer be alone. He was returning and he would banish the darkness inside her! He and none other could do that, not even the Creator!

No sooner had she seated herself than the whole valley rocked with thunder that exploded from the top of the mountain, throwing her down on her face before the cave entrance. She looked up to see that the colors had dimmed again and for a moment was stricken with the fear that she was wrong. Creon was not returning. She pushed herself up and fought back the tears. No, he wasn't coming. She must prepare to leave. She would do so tonight. But at the same time she found she didn't have the strength to leave the spot. She tried several times, but each time something held her back. She didn't know what it was, but decided to submit.

The shadows were already growing long when she finally decided that it was enough. She would wait no longer and with all her might she pushed against the invisible bonds that tied her down and found that they yielded. She rose and brushed off her dress, looking once more longingly towards the cave entrance whence she believed that Creon would appear. There was no one.

"So it is time," she muttered bitterly, threw her head back and turned to go down the hill to her bower – and screamed aloud. Before her stood a figure clad in brown clothing, tall, imposing, humble, sweetly familiar.

"Creon!" she cried out angrily.

"Hello, Aspen," he replied, pulling back the cowl that covered his face and in that instant the twilight of the glen was washed away as brilliant light shone from his face as if he himself had become the sun. She staggered backwards and fell onto the grass, staring, uncomprehending. He caught the movement and went forward quickly, gently grasping her arm and raising her to her feet. The anger transmuted to fear and she tried to draw away, heart pounding wildly, wondering who or what this was.

"Aspen, it's me, it's Creon," he said gently.

"No! You can't be Creon, he doesn't shine like that," she screamed.

"Like what?" he asked, puzzled.

"Your – your face." She pointed one shaking hand at his glowing countenance which had taken on a different aspect. His beard and hair had grown again making him look older and wiser than she'd ever seen before. His eyes were still gray, but they glowed with an inner light, a light she instinctively knew was *good*, but that equally scared her.

"It's his glory," he told her gently. "Some of it has rubbed off on the outside. It will be gone by morning." He let go of her arm and turned away, heading back to the bower. She looked after him. *What in the Nations has happened to him*, she wondered. *Is that even my Creon?* she wondered, a chill taking her. But regardless of who it was, at least she wasn't alone any more, was she? And with that she made up her mind.

"Creon! Wait for me!" she called after him, gathered up her skirts, and ran after him. Now as he turned his shining face towards her it warmed her heart. She could see him smile and flung herself into his arms, taking the embrace as the greatest gift she'd ever received. She was no longer alone! He was with her.

They stood like that for a long moment before he gently pushed her away.

"We must leave now, Aspen," he said softly.

"But you just got here!" she pouted, remembering her fantasies of what they would do when he returned. They should be enjoying this valley, one another's company, and here he was wanting to leave already? It wasn't fair!

"I know, but the Traveler is in danger," he told her, brow furrowing. "That was no Karyl who called him back to the Death March. It was an Abadonnah masquerading as a Karyl."

"How – how did you know that?" she gasped, incredulous.

"The Creator told me," he said simply. "Come, we've got to get ready immediately. I'll tell you all on the way." With that he turned and strode towards the bower, from where he retrieved his pack. As she came in she saw him draw his sword and weigh it in his hand. A small smile of satisfaction crossed his lips and he began a series of quick swings with it, betraying his skill and the art Justin's forging. In that moment she felt that, yes, perhaps this was her Creon after all.

"If you don't mind," she told him, "I'd like to change." He nodded, sheathed the sword and left the arbor while she put on her traveling clothes. When she emerged a few moments later she noticed him standing completely still his eyes closed, lips moving silently. He did not move, even when she came close to him and it wasn't until she gently touched his arm that he turned to her, his face still glowing brightly.

"Oh, Aspen," he said with a smile. "I was praying."

"Praying?" She cocked her head to one side with a cynical smile.

"Yes, for our journey. Are you ready?" There was nothing she could do but nod.

"Good." He straightened himself. "Then let's go."

They quickly left the valley, Aspen pausing to look out over the lush greenery before plunging back into the trackless wastes of the Blue Mountains. Now that she was going she felt a strange melancholy wash over her at leaving this beautiful haven. After all, it had been home for more than a moon-cycle. But, it was time to move on, so she turned and walked after Creon, catching up with him quickly. She glanced up at his shining face and was surprised to see the grim set of his mouth and firm gaze of his eyes.

"Creon," she asked, "are you all right?" He turned to her and once more a smile brightened his countenance.

"I am fine," he replied quickly. "I was just thinking of the best way to find the Traveler." He shook his head. "No matter, the Light will guide us."

"The light?" she queried, wondering what he was talking about.

"The Light Within." He said it simply, as if everyone had it, then noticed her puzzled look. "I'm sorry," he laughed. "It's such a wonderful experience that I keep thinking everyone knows it, just as I do. Perhaps I should explain." And with that he told her of his journey to see the Creator. He described his ascent through the darkness, past the fire-falls and out onto the plateau in detail, making Aspen tremble, realizing that she could never have made the climb.

"It's strange," he mused, stroking his beard. "It's as if I left the more insignificant part of myself in those caves, just like my sin ..." He shook his head and continued, describing the things he'd seen and the beauty of the communication with the Creator. As Aspen watched him she suddenly realized that he'd grown, not physically, but there was an authority on him, similar to the one she'd felt when around Hrosca or Eike, but much greater. His beard and hair had grown again, but now they matched him, because he had passed from being just a youth to being a real Man. She sensed that much more had changed than she even wanted to realize. Whatever the change, it had been it was so great, that she wondered if she even knew him any more.

"When he took me across the worlds, I can't tell you how much it thrilled me, but seeing the place of punishment was what I think impressed me the most," he continued and his voice cracked. He stopped and gently touched her arm. "Oh, Aspen, I wish I could make you understand what one moment of eternal torment without the Creator's presence was like. I wish I could make *all* of them understand!" He clenched his fists in frustration. "It would turn them to him so quickly..." He turned and strode on and she followed, trying to hide the deep impression that those words had made on her. The place of eternal punishment. Eike had often told her about it, but had assured her that she, as a Woodmaid, would escape it, simply because she had grown up among the Woodfolk and was guaranteed a place beside the Creator.

"Who do you mean by *all*?" she asked him when she'd caught up. "You don't mean the Woodfolk, too, do you?" It was a challenge made to discredit what he'd seen and heard and they both knew it. He sighed heavily, stopped once more and looked straight at her.

"I mean everyone, Aspen *kiz* Kavak," he said evenly, but there was a brittle tone in his voice that chilled her. "Everyone, including my parents, Kavak, Rushtu, and even you." He looked into her eyes, his gray gaze oh so gentle. "It comes down to us submitting to the Creator, Aspen, believing that he is and that he wants to reward those of us who really look for him and want to be with him. It's not like what you're doing, trying to wrap yourself in anger and despair, looking for me to fill your loneliness. I can't do that, and I know that. Only he can." His words stung and sparked the darkness that now whispered to her so easily.

"How *dare* you say that I'm not right with the Creator!" she snapped, trying to hide the fear kindled by his accurate description of her condition. "That's between me and him!"

"True, Aspen, but it is my duty to warn you and to call you back to him." His voice was soft and inviting. "That's my commission, to tell everyone I meet about him, and to draw them to him and I'm beginning with you, my beloved. I'm beginning with you." He reached out to touch her face, but she jerked back, glowering.

"Just stay off my back, all right?" she growled. "I will deal with this when I feel like it." With that she turned and strode away, working off the heat. He caught up to her and passed along behind her for some time while she tried to sort out her anger. She didn't quite know *why* it had sprung up, after all he only wanted to help her, but the change in him and the change in her were direct opposites, diametrically opposed, and it was difficult to overcome. She smoldered for most of the rising night as they tramped on. When they halted shortly after midnight she once more couldn't sleep, even though he dropped off easily, unafraid. She angrily jabbed him in the side and he awoke with a grunt, eyes betraying just a bit of his annoyance.

"Aren't you going to keep watch?" she demanded testily.

"Here?" He gave her a bemused smile. "There's no danger here, save the Glass City and we're not going anywhere near there." He sighed and continued gently. "Sleep, Aspen, you need it. You'll be strong in the

morning." And slowly she felt sweet drowsiness pour over her, as though someone had wrapped her in a warm blanket and were singing her to sleep. Her eyes closed and for the first time in many nights she tasted oblivion.

She slowly drifted upward through the vapors of slumber, sensing once more the form of her own body, feeling herself rise into consciousness once more. Her eyes blinked open and she found herself wrapped in her own cloak, curled against a rock, the mid-morning sun pouring over her, a mother's tender embrace. She wondered at it for a moment and then rolled over to find her friend bent low over a fire, humming to himself as he toasted a few pieces of bread on spits. The aroma brought her fully awake and she sat up.

"Good morning, Aspen," he laughed. "Come and have some breakfast." She slid over to the fire and accepted one of the warm pastries. She bit into it and hummed with delight as the soft gooiness of berries and fruit mingled with the crunchy crust. The bread was soon gone, but Creon had made enough for her to eat her fill, the first food that she really enjoyed and for a moment she almost felt like thanking the Creator for it, but the darkness rebelled and pushed the thought away. Even as she finished the meal, she could feel it reclaiming the ground lost by her sleep. She shoved it away as best she could, but it merely cowered back, waiting to pounce again.

"Creon," she said, looking up at him. He gazed back expectantly, yet distantly.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"You're welcome." He smiled, more to himself than to her and then announced, "We've got to get going." She nodded and they rose, carefully stamping out the fire and moving across the rocks.

"We should make good time to the Stronghold," he told her as they strode on. "This way is shorter by at least a week. The Werebeasts probably didn't know that, but they did a good job of delaying us." Aspen made no reply, thinking again about the remarkable change she'd witnessed in her friend. True, his face had lost its shine and in many ways small things still reminded her that this was Creon, but it was as if he was *more* than Creon. It was almost as if he were a new person.

"Creon," she called to him after a time. "Is that still your name?"

"Yes," he answered quickly. "But I was given another one by the Creator."

"Really?" The admission didn't surprise her. The Woodfolk were known to change the names of people after special rites had been given them.

"Kaya," was all he told her.

"The Rock," she translated, not quite comprehending. Why would he be called a rock? He was so gentle now. But at the same time his iron will poured out, pushing both of them to the brink. She could sense his urgency, see his far-seeing gaze and they almost ran onward. She knew that he was the same and yet not. He was still Creon and yet he was now Kaya as well. What had she lost now? Had she lost him as well? But to what? To his power? To his God? The answers to such questions were not forthcoming, but the darkness began to creep in again and when they finally made camp long after moonrise, she dreamed.

She was traveling down a roaring river, towards a waterfall. The water surged into her mouth and nose, causing her to splutter and cough as she desperately tried to swim across the current to one of the sides of the river.

"Help!" she cried, but the thundering waters swallowed her voice, mocking its weakness. Whenever she could pull herself above water for a moment she screamed for help, but no one heard her. Then she heard a shout above the roar. She could see a powerful, cloaked figure standing on a rock. She would be by him in a moment, so she paddled as hard as she could and neared the rocks.

"Take my hand," the stranger commanded, and she looked up, she was about to reach out, when she noticed that the hand was glowing, she jerked back.

"I can make it," she hissed into the water, but at that moment the current grabbed her and swept her away. She could hear the thundering getting louder and louder and saw a waterfall in front of her. She screamed as she passed over the edge and fell towards the jagged rocks below ... and woke up, drenched with sweat. She pressed her hands against her face and realized that she was on solid ground. *What a dream!* she thought. *I*

wonder... A gentle hand on her shoulder interrupted her thoughts and she found herself staring into Kaya's soft eyes.

"Are you all right?" he asked seriously. "You just screamed for help."

"I – I did?" she stammered. "It was – just a dream." She raised her chin and peered down the length of her nose at him.

"Yes, Aspen," the young Man agreed slowly, "but you never were this frightened of any dreams that I can remember." She smiled feebly.

"Those weren't nightmares," she returned, trying to pull away from him, but could not.

"Yes, but this one was," he prompted. "Will you tell me about it?" Aspen opened her mouth to do so, but suddenly thought, *Why does he have to know? This is my dream, isn't it?* She knew it was the darkness speaking that was taking her away, making her alone again. *Down beast*, she thought and recounted what she'd seen and felt.

"I – I know the meaning of this dream, Aspen," he began slowly, "but the Creator forbids me to tell you any more than that you have little time to decide. If you don't..." He stopped abruptly and she saw tears in his eyes.

"Is it that bad?" she asked, her heart leaping into her throat. He only nodded. She bit her lip, but said nothing as he turned away slowly and sat down against a rock, tears flowing freely. She wondered if she could comfort him and put her hand on his shoulder.

"What are you crying about?" she asked as gently as she could.

"About this whole fallen world," he answered. "If they don't listen, like you, they'll go down that waterfall with the Warrior King and the Abadonnim." He turned to her and took her hand in his own.

"Aspen, you've got to decide, or else..."

"Or else what?" she demanded. She could feel him shake as he spoke the words.

"You'll spend eternity in the place of punishment, away from Creator God." She pulled her hand away from him, face now pale as the moonlight that covered them. He had said it with such a broken voice, that she could not bear to listen to him. She turned away from him and lay down again, trying to think of nice things, but Kaya's voice echoed in her mind, chasing away sleep. She lay awake and listened to him quietly praying, his voice growing stronger as he continued, but still cracking intermittently. At the same time she seethed at the suggestion that she, a Woodmaid, would go to the place of punishment. The darkness gripped harder, whispering into her mind, prompting her to doubt and fear and hate. *I can't hate him*, she told it. *I love him. He's the only one who can keep me from being alone!* She clung to that lie as a drowning man to a punctured bladder, unaware that at any moment it might burst and drag him down with it.

Five days they rushed through the wilderness, so fast that all Aspen could do was keep up. She was thankful for the rush, because it kept her from thinking, kept the dark beast at bay, and made her nights blessed times of oblivion. And so it was with a heavy heart that she watched Creon Kaya point upwards at a shape descending towards them from the heavens.

"It's Falk," he told her and in only an instant the great bird descended, perching on one of the great boulders near them.

"My lord," the Hawk whistled, inclining his feathered head.

"Hello, Falk," Kaya returned quietly. "Where's the Traveler?"

"He waits a short way below, my lord," the Hawk returned. "He is wounded. The Werebeasts..." Concern furrowed the young Man's brow, narrowing his eyes just a bit.

"Show us the way," was all he said. The bird quickly winged his way down to a small valley at the mouth of the Death March where the Traveler was propped up against one of the rocks. He had a tourniquet around his left arm, face pale. He looked up with glassy eyes and at first didn't recognize the two. His light fizzled around him just a bit, but he did not have the strength to raise his shield, much less send a beam into them.

"Traveler!" Creon Kaya called quickly. "It's us." Recognition registered in the blue-gray eyes and Ethan let his hand fall upon the rock.

"Creon-Se," he sighed, voice cracked, "and Aspen-Sere." He tried to smile, but grimaced with the pain.

"How long has it been?" she asked, dropping to her knees beside him, her healer's instincts rising to the fore.

"Three days," he rasped. "At least the bleeding stopped." He nodded towards his arm. The Woodmaid drew a little breath as she noticed the bone sticking out of the flesh. Both it and his wrist were already showing signs of gangrene. Even if she could heal, it was hopeless. She looked over at Kaya who knelt beside her.

"It's too late," she whispered. "We'll have to cut it off." The young Man closed his eyes to avoid the pained look that he knew the Traveler would have. He looked deep inside, consulting the Light Within. Was this a time for healing? Might this be the first? The Light stirred and he raised his head again.

"Traveler," he said, looking into the Traveler's eyes. "Do you believe that the Creator can heal you?"

"Yes," the wounded man returned, "but..."

"Then be healed," Kaya said, lightly touching the Traveler's arm. He could feel a pulse of energy go through him and Ethan cried out. He brought his arm up, flexing the fingers of his hand.

"How?" the Traveler gasped, lacking words. Kaya smiled, just as excited as his friend.

"The Creator promised that I would do wonders – his wonders. He's the one who gives the power; it isn't my own." The Traveler nodded.

"You've changed, son of Adem," the Traveler observed evenly. "Will you tell me about it?"

"I will," Kaya affirmed, "but first let's set up camp." They did so and Kaya told what had happened to him on the Peak Called Joy. The Traveler nodded in acknowledgment.

"You truly have had an extraordinary encounter with Ya-Rab," he said when Kaya had finished. "The only person I can think of off-hand who might have been that way is my forefather Kefas. It is said that he spoke with Ya-Rab the way you did." Ethan shook his head.

"This encounter doesn't take away the fact that I'm human though, Ethan," the young Man told him slowly. "I may have been forgiven my sin, but the scroll of the priests speaks of constant cleansing. I pray that Creator God would show me what needs to be changed." His eyes rested lightly on Aspen as he spoke and she squirmed under his gentle look. The darkness was gnawing at her again, she knew. It must be kept at bay and she found herself silently reciting one of the Woodfolk litanies.

"My only hope is that all people would be able to encounter the Creator the way I have," Kaya finished, looking into the fire. "Or else..." His voice trailed off as he thought of the vision of the fiery torment that waited for those who didn't love the Creator. A heavy silence rested on the small group for a while, before Aspen finally excused herself and wrapped herself in her cloak. She shivered, trying not to think of the gentle, sad, and yet prodding looks she had received from Kaya. She knew what he was praying for, *but why can't I do what he asks?* she wondered before falling asleep.

The sun looked down suspiciously at the cohorts of the Warrior King's main battle force, nearly 40 000 soldiers resting on the plain before the Silver Bay. Tolgar had gone the very afternoon of the meeting, having come alone by the secret paths of the Darkness and would be back in the Death March by now. Pan-Tao had already left with his troops the day before and Alman had just ordered her companies to go to Güney Liman, from where the big ships would take them to Midpoint and from where they would spread out over the inhabited islands. Savash watched a dark figure climb onto a horse next to his mother, was dressed all in black, his face hidden in his cowl, even his hands sheathed in gloves. Something about that dark man made the prince shudder, even more than at Keritos, who was ordering his troops to follow Alman. *Strange*, the young man thought, watching the warlady and her escort leave, *how that Changeling really stays with Mother*. But, no it was more of a mistress-slave relationship, he knew. After all, Changelings were known to be sexless.

Savash walked back through the camp where he would remain with his troops. Lormar, the one with by far the largest company of 20 000 soldiers, would be marching along the King's Highway in the Northern Provinces to sweep down on the unsuspecting Stein from the north. It was a good deal faster, shortening the travel by nearly three weeks as there was no need to cut a path through the forests, but was more dangerous for people who traveled alone and didn't enjoy the protection of the northern Woodfolk. Even the Northern

Provinces had their share of highwaymen and robbers, most of whom loved to prey on the people traveling the King's Highway.

"Ah, Savash!" the old man called from his carriage. "I thought I wouldn't see you before I left." The wrinkled face looked at him compassionately. "Will you be all right while you are here?"

"I think so. I probably will follow you as soon as I have organized the soldiers into smaller groups. I have something to take care of in Eison that I missed out on doing last winter." The old man smiled.

"Do I see a good friend behind this?" he asked.

"Two to be exact."

"Ah, yes. Well, be careful whatever you do. I'll send word when I reach Stein. Farewell!" Then he motioned to the driver and the carriage slowly moved forward into line among the troops that had already pulled out. Savash watched them go with a heavy heart. He had a strange feeling that this was the last time he would see his old friend.

The gray mist of the Death March enveloped them as they went through the pass. Kaya came last, thinking about the words he had received from the Creator in his dream.

"Tell the Nations," the Voice had said, "that I love them and that I want them to return to me. There is no other salvation!" Did the "Nations" mean the Werebeasts, too? Kaya felt deeply torn, having experienced their hatred and blood-lust firsthand, but at the same time having seen them through the Creator's eyes on his journey. Despite their beast-like looks, they were still elegant, and he had felt that some of them didn't want to do what they were doing.

"Them too, Lord?" he asked silently.

"Yes," the Light prompted, "them too." Kaya pondered this as they left the hill country and descended into the jungle, still unhampered, following a rough, but well-trodden trail into the valley. The Traveler and Aspen were going along together, chattering about all sorts of things while Falk had been dispatched to the Stronghold with the news that they were returning.

The shadows beneath the trees had almost turned completely black when something within him stirred, that sixth sense of impending danger. He quickly strode to the fore of the group, just as Aspen cried out.

"Werebeasts!" And instantly the darkness subsided as the Traveler built up his shield.

"Wait," Kaya called out. "Let me talk to them."

"Speak to them?" the Traveler demanded sharply. "Can they even understand you?" The young Man ignored the question and stepped out in front of his companions and raised his hand. Instantly the beasts came to a halt.

"Stop!" the Seer roared, gray eyes burning with anger, not at the Werebeasts, but at the Abadonnim who began shed their shapes as they were pummeled by the awesome force of his authority.

"What are you doing here?" one of the black beings hissed at Kaya.

"I was going to ask you that," he returned sharply, a commander speaking to a disobedient subordinate. "You were to give us free passage."

"We know nothing of such a thing," the Abadonnah growled. Kaya gave a half-smile.

"I was sure that you would say that. But I have a command from the Creator and my friends are under his protection, so get out of the way and don't bother us anymore."

"How dare you, a mere Man, command the greatest power in the Nations!" the evil being cried, floating forward, raising one of its fiery hands. Kaya raised his chin just slightly, eyes narrowing to dangerous slits.

"Who is God, you or the Most High?" he demanded. The Abadonnah cowered at that name and suddenly Aspen felt a great Presence resting on the whole area and for an instant she thought that Kaya had begun to glow again. The Abadonnim began to squirm and shriek, echoing the silent protests of the darkness inside her.

"Get out of here!" Kaya thundered, drawing himself up fully, and all of their enemies fled. The Presence lingered on for a few moments more and Aspen suddenly felt very small and insignificant, the darkness cringing within her. Again the sharp urge was there to give up what she was clinging to and give into the Creator, but the Presence that she felt lifted as Kaya turned to the other two.

"They won't bother us again – if we stay close together," he concluded evenly. The Traveler was still shaking and it took him two tries to ask the question that was burning in his heart.

"Does it always come and go like that?" His voice shook slightly, revealing the awe and fear that caused his heart to want to leap out of his chest.

"What?" Kaya wanted to know, puzzled.

"That – that Presence." There were no other words to describe it. The young Man smiled.

"It's always there," he answered, "at least I can feel his presence now. It seems weaker some times than at others, but he has promised he would always be there. I felt no different than other times."

"But I felt it, too," Aspen declared, vehemently, not wanting to be left out.

"Have you decided?" was all Kaya asked in a soft, expectant tone. Aspen looked at the ground, guilt suddenly pouring over her and she remembered the waterfall over the protests of her internal enemy.

"No..."

"There isn't much time left," Kaya said sadly and they continued on their way.



## The Werebeast Stronghold

**B**y the time night had fully set in the companions had made camp beneath the aged trees of the Death March with a small fire. Falk returned with dinner from the Stronghold which the Traveler set about distributing. Aspen sat a short way away from the two Men, pensive. Though the darkness within had been dealt a decisive blow by the Presence that had descended and so was silent, she still meditated on how things had been reversed between her and her beloved. Before she had been the one with the direct line to Creator God, or so she thought, but now it was Creon – sorry, Kaya. At first she had the strength of character, but now it was Kaya. Kaya had more than she would ever have and that galled her. The change was so great, that it not only affected the young Man, but all those around him. There had been a sort of rough grace around him, but now it seemed that all of the rough edges had been smoothed off in one blow.

She had no idea how wrong she was, for Kaya himself knew that the smoothing process had only just begun. It had become clear to him, that he still had much to learn when he had confronted the Abadonnim earlier that day. His heart pounded heavily and the panic was in danger of overwhelming him, but he also knew that the Creator was with him. At that point he had just allowed the Light Within to do what it must. Kaya could never have mustered the courage out of himself and he knew that only too well.

He looked at the Woodmaid, sitting with her back against a small tree, and with a heavy heart noted how lost she looked. From the outside she had become more mature than before, dressed again in the finely cut tunic and pants, a green jacket over it and the wide, brown cloak draped over that. Her red hair was pulled back to keep it out of the way as they traveled, but still it loosely covered her ears, her green eyes were so hopeless. And yet the hope was there for the taking.

"Creator God, what's wrong with her? Why can't she just accept you?" he asked silently.

"Child, do you really need to know?" the Voice said quietly. "It is *her* life and she must live through it. You can't make the decision for her." Kaya sighed helplessly as he watched her lay down and go to sleep. *All I can do now is pray*, he thought and did so.

They advanced quickly through the Death March, finding that they were now able to move much more quickly as they didn't have to worry about their enemies. There was no question in any of their minds, though, that they were being followed and closely watched. While Kaya and Aspen got along, the Woodmaid still felt herself drifting from him and while there were times that he seemed familiar to her, there were other times when he was a stranger. One evening when he'd been especially distant, talking about how he needed to seek out the Werebeasts and tell them about the Creator, too, she couldn't stand it any longer.

"Why can't you just be the way you *used to be?*" she wailed, got up and stomped into the shadows where she sat against a tree in a huff.

"Like I used to be?" he wondered, looking at his other companion, confused. "Have I changed that much?"

"Oh, yes!" the Traveler said with a knowing smile. "But I think you'll find the change will fall into balance with time. Just let her wait."

That evening Kaya mused over Aspen's complaint, wondering at the words and it allowed him no sleep. He found himself praying about it, staring at the fire and then began to realize that he was very happy about the change. He knew that it was only beginning to take hold and that there were still things that would have to come under the command of the Light Within, but now that it had begun, he decided that he didn't *want* to be who he was before.

The following morning the Traveler figured that it was no more than a day's march to the Stronghold of the Karyl. After the difficult session with Creon the evening before, Aspen decided that she needed to be alone for a few minutes and collect herself before she could face him again, and so tiptoed off into the forest. Being alone in the leafy silence rested her troubled soul just a bit, letting her once more feel as if she was in control of things. She stopped and raised her face toward the hidden sky and closed her eyes. A rustle made her look around, afraid that something was after her. No, nothing ...

She closed her eyes again. Again the rustle and then she was wrestled down by four strong arms. She looked up and saw two golden, luminescent eyes, lost all nerve and screamed.

Instantly Kaya shot up from where he was sitting and dashed toward the forest, drawing Justin. He had nearly reached the trees when Ethan caught his arm and yanked him back into the clearing.

"Aspen..." Kaya choked with rage, gesticulating with the bright blade. "Let me go!"

"It's a ploy, Kaya," the Traveler warned, unfolding his blue shield just enough to keep from getting hurt. "You know that the Werebeasts are out there, just waiting for you to make a mistake like this."

"But Aspen..." The young Man's mouth opened and closed helplessly and then the perfect excuse came to him, "But I'm protected!"

"Kaya, you are the one with more wisdom, what does Ya-Rab tell you?" The question stung and Kaya shook himself angrily. Of course it was stupid to rush out there, especially if there were Werebeasts waiting for him. Tempting the protection of the Creator was foolish and from what he'd experienced so far, he knew that the Most High would allow him to live out the consequences of his stupidity. So, though he hated to admit it, he decided couldn't help Aspen right now. *All right, Creator God*, he thought grudgingly, *I'll let you do what you must.* With that he slipped the sword back into its sheath.

"Fine," he growled, "let's go to the Karyl. Maybe Krieg has an idea." The Traveler nodded and they hurried off to the stronghold. As they went along Kaya kept questioning his decision wondering if Aspen would *really* be safe. Would the Werebeasts hurt her? He kept hearing a little jeering voice telling him that he had abandoned the person that meant the most to him, but didn't recognize it as his darkness rebelling against the direction of the Light.

"Why, oh why can't I just go help her now?" he demanded. The Voice didn't answer.

"Come on, talk to me, please," he pleaded of the Creator, but the Voice remained silent. *It must be easier to trust when you're hearing and seeing than when you aren't*, he concluded. Hadn't it been that way with life before? He had felt more afraid when Hrosca had died, more alone, but he had trusted anyway and it had turned out for the best, right? Still there was that nagging doubt that he had made a mistake. And it was with those thoughts that he finally followed Ethan and Falk into the Karyl stronghold.

The Karyl were already waiting for them and conducted them back into the Stronghold, where they were first bathed and fed. All this time Kaya tried to calm his impatience to see Krieg with small success, and had just reached the breaking point when the Karyl captain glided through the door to the young Man's chambers.

"Greetings, Seer," the great warrior rumbled.

"Well, it's about time," Kaya snapped. "The Werebeasts have taken Aspen!" Krieg's face remained impassive, but his voice betrayed just a bit of agitation.

"What?" And Kaya repeated the whole thing. For the first time he'd known this powerful being a bit of emotion bubbled to the surface in an almost imperceptible furrowing of the shining brow.

"That is not good," he muttered, so low that Kaya felt it more than heard it. "The Werebeasts know they must not lay a hand on a Woodman or Woodmaid. I think Tolgar is starting to get desperate."

"But what can we do?" the young Man demanded angrily.

"Do?" the Karyl asked, face smoothing again.. "We cannot do anything until the Almighty prompts us." He gently reached out and placed one hand on Creon Kaya's shoulder, a strangely human gesture for one so other-worldly. "My friend, you must learn that the Almighty has a long arm, longer than you can imagine. He will shelter the Woodmaid, he will protect her. You will see. Now you must rest. By morning you will see things more clearly." The young Man turned away, angered and disappointed by the Karyl's words and his companion left.

"Why is this happening, Creator God?" he demanded after a few moments of frustrated silence. "Why has Aspen changed so much? Why can't we just be the way we were before? Why did she have to get kidnapped and why do I have to wait?" The Voice was silent.

"Why aren't you talking to me?" he finally asked, slowly breaking into tears, and in that one moment he felt as if he was all alone. But hadn't the Creator said...?

*You're don't believe that, do you? that small, jeering voice came back at him. The Creator sometimes makes mistakes. He's no different from you.*

"That's a lie," Creon Kaya hissed, pressing both hands over his ears. "The Creator doesn't make mistakes, otherwise he wouldn't be God."

*Who told you that? the little voice asked. Your mother, or that lily-livered priest?*

"No...no, the scriptures..."

*They are just fairy tales, the little voice whispered persuasively. Ignore them ... forget it all ... go save Aspen, you can do it. You're young and strong, talented. You don't need anyone's help!*

"That's not what the scriptures say," Kaya countered. "That's not what the Lord says. I need his help and now!" He got up and started pacing the room, claustrophobia coming back, the Light silent, veiled.

*I've got to get out!* he thought and headed for the door. He passed through the silent halls and found himself on the meadow in front of the Stronghold. Instantly he felt he could breathe more freely, closed his eyes and soaked in the gentle warmth of the sun. After a few moments he walked to the pool the waterfall tumbled into and remembered the time when he and Aspen sat under the sparkling stars here. She had been beautiful, but her innocence was lost, so different from the island.

"What happened to us, Creator God? Why aren't we the way we were before?" he asked out loud.

"Because you've changed, Creon Kaya," came a voice from behind him. It seemed familiar to him as he turned around. Before him stood another Man, a bit older than himself, another human, not a Karyl. And yet, somehow, Kaya was not surprised at his presence, the only Man besides himself and the Traveler in this jungle.

"I changed? What do you mean?" the young Man asked. The other gestured toward some rocks, they sat, and he spoke in a rich voice.

"Look at yourself, you have met Creator God, face to face. No man can do that and come away unchanged. Either he dies, or he is forgiven and lives on, not for himself but for others. That is what happened to you."

"And Aspen?" The question just popped out. She was a part of him now, after all.

"Aspen is still struggling, Creon Kaya. Though her time is short, it is longer than you think. There will come a point where it will be all or nothing. Until then..." He fell silent.

"But what shall I do?" Kaya asked.

"Trust me, my friend. I have put a plan in your heart already." Suddenly he recognized the rich Voice as the same one he had heard on the mountain. At that instant the Man before him vanished.

"My Lord and my God," Kaya whispered and fell to his knees, worshipping the Creator. When he arose some time later he knew exactly what he must do.

Aspen sat on a wide satin-covered bed, shedding angry tears, simply because there was nothing else she could do. After all, she had screamed for help! Why didn't anyone come? After she was knocked down by the Werebeasts, she felt a sharp prick in her arm and slowly the world had darkened around her, unconsciousness closing in. The next thing she knew, she awoke on this wide bed, unmolested for the moment, but definitely a captive and alone. She'd searched the room for possible ways out. There were two doors, both locked and a window that looked out on a courtyard from a height that none could survive jumping from. So now she sat on her bed, frustrated, not knowing what was coming next.

She reached back, pulled the thong out of her hair, and let it cascade down her back. She bowed her head forward, letting her hair become a curtain between her and the rest of the world.

Suddenly she felt someone lightly touch her head. She jerked back reflexively, threw her long tresses back over one shoulder and glared in the direction the touch had come from. She gasped involuntarily. A Werebeast was sitting there! The poor thing pulled its hand away from Aspen looked just as scared as the Woodmaid herself felt. Aspen took a better look at the being in front of her, for the first time seeing a Werebeast up close in full light, and what she saw both surprised and delighted her.

The Werebeast was quite petite and carried many characteristics that the Woodmaid associated with a cat: the ears, the eyes, and especially a long, smooth tail that was curled over its lap, and its visible skin being covered by short, orange hairs. But aside from that the body clearly also had human characteristics, like the basic form of the face, the positioning of the arms and legs, the fact that the Werebeast would have walked upright and the fact that it was dressed in a soft leather dress that fell to its knees, held at the waist by a belt of gold. The slight bulges at its chest suggested to Aspen that this was a female and this made her also notice that there was something definitely feminine about the face and posture. The Woodmaid wondered if its long hair, which was more brownish than its fur, was kept in what for the Werebeasts would be considered a female style, because it certainly did seem longer than that of the ones which had attacked them in the forest. What perplexed her the most, though, was the soft admiration in the bright blue eyes, which was clearly mixed with a bit of fear.

"I'm sorry," it whispered in Common. "But you looked so beautiful." Aspen was unable to suppress a little gasp of surprise at the gentle words of this thing she had always thought to be an unfeeling beast.

"I – I'll go," the Werebeast said and rose gracefully, once more reminding the Woodmaid of a cat.

"No, wait," Aspen pleaded. "Please don't leave me alone." Though only few words had been exchanged the two of them had suddenly become friends. The Werebeast slowly inched back, uncomfortably perching on the end of the large bed, her long, orange tail flicking back and forth. They regarded each other for some time before Aspen suddenly smiled. They were both afraid of each other, but they also didn't have any intention of hurting the other.

"I'm Aspen," the Woodmaid said. The Werebeast picked up on her friendliness and smiled back uncertainly, the tail slowly becoming still, except for the tip.

"Rory," it replied, voice still just above a whisper. She looked at Aspen for a good moment again.

"I've never seen a girl from the race of Man before," she confessed, voice rising some to reveal a slight trill in the pronunciation. "My mother always told me they were ugly and wanted to kill us. But you aren't ugly..." Aspen shook her head.

"I'm a Woodmaid, not from the race of Man," she admitted. Rory crouched down as if wanting to spring up and run away, her chest heaving in and out and tail swinging back and forth again, but as Aspen continued speaking softly, trying to be conciliatory, she settled back down again.

"My parents told me the same thing about you Werebeasts. I guess we were wrong." Rory's eyebrows shot up.

"Really?" she asked, a smile playing at her lips. Aspen nodded. The other threw her head back and laughed. Aspen lowered her eyes and suppressed a shudder when she saw the fangs that Rory had instead of teeth.

"Then maybe we aren't so different, are we?" Rory asked her. Aspen merely shook her head, not knowing what to say. The Werebeast girl inched closer and Aspen thought she could hear a quiet purring. *Just like a great big kitten*, she told herself.

"What is the race of Man like?" she asked the Woodmaid.

"A bit like us Woodfolk, only they're taller and have round ears and thicker eyebrows."

"So they must be beautiful, too," the Werebeast girl concluded. Aspen nodded. "And what are the men like?"

"Handsome," Aspen answered, thinking of one Man in particular, ignoring the change.

"You've got one, don't you?" the other asked, a secretive smile crossing her lips. Aspen blushed a bit and nodded.

"You're lucky," Rory told her. "Most of the men in this castle are nothing but monsters." She shook herself. "And I have no intention of becoming a second or third wife! I'm going to find my own man." She smiled fiercely, making Aspen think that she must definitely have someone in mind and was about to voice it when the Werebeast girl interrupted her in a most off-hand way.

"Would you like to take a bath?" she asked.

*I must look terrible,* Aspen thought, remembering that she was still dirty from the journey and nodded. Rory motioned for her to wait and disappeared through one of the doors. She was back in a few minutes, giving Aspen enough time to quickly go through her pack and find one of the long Woodfolk dresses. She then followed her new-found friend through the doorway and down a hall to a room a bit smaller than the one she woke up in. There was a good-sized basin at one end and warm water poured into it from an artfully carved spout. Where the basin overflowed a small half-pipe in the floor directed the water to a second, cooler basin, which overflowed into a small hole in the floor.

Aspen wasted little time, quickly undressing and soaking herself in the warm water. As she sat the thoughts of the past few days came back to her and she became more melancholic. She tried to shake them off, calling up memories of the times on the Island, during the journey, in Stein, and even the wonderful evening in the Stronghold of the Karyl, but they all seemed so empty. She was alone once more and the one who she thought would cure her loneliness had not come to her aid when she'd needed it.

Aspen decided she'd had enough and got out of the water, dried off and dressed, then followed Rory back to her room, where a meal for two had been readied on a small table. The Werebeast girl motioned for her to sit and took the place across from her. The meal consisted mainly of meat and Aspen tried to avoid most of it, eating the garnish, fruit, and rough bread, but then took a few bites of the meat in an attempt to be polite when her friend asked her how she liked it. She did explain then that the Woodfolk didn't usually eat meat. Rory laughed at that again, remarking how strange the Woodfolk were. Aspen felt her ears burn at that wondering if the Werebeast girl was trying to bait her, but her eyes betrayed only good humor and a bit of puzzlement. *How strange to find someone like that here*, Aspen thought, amazed at how dainty the Werebeast girl really was in everything she did. *Are they all like that?* she wondered.

"Why am I here?" she asked as they concluded their meal to which Rory just shrugged.

"I don't know," she admitted, "but my uncle was really mad when they brought you in. I think he was waiting for a man. He ranted and raved so loudly that the whole castle shook and then he had you put up here."

*At least they didn't catch Creon yet*, Aspen said to herself, her thoughts being interrupted a loud horn being sounded outside the window and Rory stiffened.

"Oh no, the evening prayer!" she gasped. "I – I've got to go." She leaped up and took a few steps towards the door, but then thought better of it.

"They won't notice," she said with a shrug and took her place again. "And I don't even pray to their gods anyway."

"Their gods?" Aspen asked, not quite understanding.

"Yes, Dehshet and the Abadonnim, they worship them." She paused and gave the Woodmaid a long, searching look. "Who do you worship?"

"Creator God, the maker of this world and all that lives in it," Aspen answered automatically. Rory sat up straight, blue eyes sparkling, eager.

"What's he like?" she asked, her tail now flicking back and forth, betraying her excitement.

"He's, well, he loves us and he takes care of us. He gives us our food every day and ..." Aspen bit her lip, looking for what to say. What *did* she really know about the Creator anyhow? *Creon, where are you when I need you?* Aspen asked.

"Wow!" the other exclaimed, scooting forward on her cushion, whole being trying to absorb this intriguing new information. "How do you worship him?"

"We sing and pray," the Woodmaid began uncertainly, "and – and we live our lives before him," she finished, remembering the old litanies taught her by her parents.

"Do you sacrifice?" Rory asked pointedly.

"What?" The question genuinely shocked Aspen. *Sacrifice?* Who ever said anything about *sacrifice*?

"Do you sacrifice?" the Werebeast girl pressed. "You know, animals, food. My uncle sometimes even sacrifices babies."

Aspen knew that she was unable to keep the horror of that thought from rising to her fair cheeks. Child sacrifice! So it was true!

"Your – your own?" she asked in a shrill voice. Rory nodded sadly.

"And those of the other races, if they can be found." She sighed looking out the window. "He sacrificed my little sister for the gods to help him stop the Seer." She looked back at Aspen whose face had gone utterly pale and whose lips were trembling. "Needless to say it hasn't worked!" The last word was pushed out angrily. "Gods, I hate him!" the Werebeast cried, slashing at the air with one hand, claws springing from the tips of her fingers. Aspen flinched, afraid that Rory would try to attack her, but the storm subsided as quickly as it came and the blue eyes fixed the Woodmaid intently, questioning.

"Aspen, do your people do it?" Rory pressed.

"No – no, not children ... Woodfolk can't kill." The old excuse was a welcome place to flee to.

"Oh," the other answered and leaned back, contemplating this. "So your God doesn't want you to destroy life?" Aspen shook her head.

"What a God!" Rory exclaimed, countenance brightening, tail dancing behind her, her purr rising up so loudly that the Woodmaid thought it would shake the table between them.

"I wish I could worship him, too, instead of Dehshet," the Werebeast girl sighed after a few moments, her voice falling into sadness. Aspen had no answer and let the Werebeast girl's remark just hang in the air. When Rory saw that her friend was going to remain silent, she began to collect the dishes from the table and drop them into a basket, meanwhile changing the subject.

"You know, I'm happy that my cousin let me take over this job," she said, pausing to pop a piece of meat from Aspen's plate into her mouth. "She's not very nice to anybody, not even her man. I think she would have killed you, but I won't let that happen."

"Is she really that nasty?" Aspen asked.

"Huh, *she* was the one who suggested offering up Zaina." She caught the Woodmaid's puzzled glance and added hastily, "My little sister."

"Oh," Aspen mouthed, feeling ashamed that she'd had to press her new friend so.

"That and also this grudge she's got because my father refused to take her as a second wife." She shook her head. "That girl only thinks about what makes *her* feel better and she'll slit the throat of anyone who gets in her way." She looked at Aspen critically. "I suspect your people aren't like that?"

"Not in *killing*," the Woodmaid had to admit. "But there are plenty who will resort to any means they think necessary to get what they want." She thought of one particular young Woodman who had challenged Creon to a life-and-death duel because of his ardor for her. Perhaps it would have been better if she'd stayed with Lynx? Aspen's lip twitched at that thought and she shoved it away from herself. She was a Woodmaid! Woodmaids only loved one man in their lifetime, ever. Only death could heal them from that love, and even then many lost their minds and went out into the wilderness where they died soon after their mates. She shuddered to think that something like that might happen to her – indeed it might already be happening with her even considering another man. Reflexively she thought, *Creator God, please don't let that happen!* Oddly,

the darkness within did not rise up to jeer at her feeble faith. It was as if it delighted in her weakened state of mind, even if she turned towards the Creator.

Rory took the leftovers of the meal and bid her a good evening, promising to check in on her again before she went to sleep, but Aspen decided not to wait, undressing and slipping under the heavy covers of the bed. She lay on her side a long while, watching the friendly moon shine for her through the open window. Once more she felt so utterly alone, but the thought came to her that whenever she'd needed someone to be there, they'd come. First, Creon had returned just at the right time and now Rory had come to be her companion in this trying time. Perhaps, just perhaps the Creator cared after all? She reached out and grasped at that spider-web of hope, thinking it would dissolve even as she took hold of it, not realizing all along that it was really a strong cable that would carry her through anything that would threaten. And so it was that she fell asleep peacefully, deciding to be thankful at least for that moment.



## Tolgar's Fall

**W**hen the sun peeked in through the broad window the following morning, waking Aspen, she felt almost fully rested for the first time in many days. Her acceptance of the Creator's caring for her the evening before seemed no more than a sleepy memory, though, and as the morning progressed without Rory appearing, she slowly began to get more apprehensive, pacing the room, wondering what she should do. It never occurred to her that waiting was precisely what she must do at this time.

Rory arrived about mid-morning with breakfast, but apologized that she couldn't stay, having been called away for a special sacrifice. Aspen shuddered to think of what that might be and set herself to playing mind-games again. The darkness was still strong within her and it constantly tried to loosen her grasp on the Creator's caring nature. And slowly, tendril by tendril, the thought slipped from her mind and despair crouched, ready to pounce. She found herself thinking of the image of the waterfall, the destruction that awaited her in her dream and shuddered, desiring to cling to Creon and let him soothe her fears, but Creon had changed into Kaya, a change from the rough youth, who was in charge of his life to something – greater, yes, that was the only word for it – something so great, that she didn't have the courage to reach out to him.

"Time is short," she muttered to herself, echoing his words. Did that mean that she had little time before she lost her mind to her desire for him or what? *I must not let it take me*, she thought, sensing the darkness beginning to rise and with visible effort grabbed onto the thin hope of her God's care. To her it was as a tiny beam of light about to be smothered by inky blackness, but as long as it was there, the evil within would not overcome her.

She'd just taken comfort from that thought when Rory suddenly broke into the room, her blue eyes flashing, her fur standing on end.

"I've got bad news, Aspen," she spat, tail whipping back and forth. "My uncle has decided to sacrifice you for good fortune at dawn tomorrow before he attacks the Seer." A chill sprang up around Aspen, making her rub her arms, the darkness mocking the slender ray inside her. She was going to die! Was that what Kaya's words meant? *Oh, Creon*, she thought, *I don't want to leave you, yet!* She could feel the despair sink its claws into her.

"Good God!" she whispered. "What should I do?"

"Do?" Rory cried angrily, grabbing one of the Woodmaid's arms. "Don't you have any friends?"

"Yes – but..."

"So tell them and they'll get you out." Aspen took a deep breath, trying to stave off the inner cold that was now enfolding her.

"I can't," she said, voice betraying her hopelessness.

"Why not?" Rory asked. "Doesn't your God care?" The question stung.

"Of course he does," the Woodmaid snapped back. "But I don't know where I am and I can only guess where they went. For all I know they're out scouring the countryside looking for me! It's only been two days."

"They would have found us by now if they'd had two days," the Werebeast girl informed her. "Mavetgâh is not easy to miss. Besides, I know my uncle has patrols out looking for them and they haven't found anything."

*Is it just a ploy?* Aspen wondered, hope dawning again. Could Creon and the Traveler be still out there. They would be with the Karyl, wouldn't they? And the Karyl would know where the Werebeast Stronghold was. Maybe they were preparing something.

"Could you get word to them?" she asked her friend. Rory flashed a brief smile, eyes bright.

"I thought you'd never ask," she laughed. "I assume they're at Karylbgâh?"

"Where?" Aspen shook her head.

"The Karyl Stronghold – Karylbgâh."

"That would be my guess." She looked at the Werebeast girl intently. "Could you get there?"

"I'll find a way," she replied and rushed from the room.

From his perch next to the small window Falk spread his wings. He'd heard enough.

The captain of the Karyl and his commanders stood around a low, wooden table with a map etched into it along with Kaya and the Traveler. Falk perched on the edge of the table, eyeing each one of them, having delivered the conversation between the two girls word-for-word.

"It's a ploy," Ethan finally burst out, "it *must* be."

"Even if it is a ploy, it's about time we act," Kaya said slowly, trying to hide the excitement that lit his gray eyes. "I've told you the plan the Creator gave me. What do you think?"

"The Almighty has prompted me," Zafer, one of the Karyl commanders, replied. The others muttered in agreement.

"What about the Werebeast girl?" Kaya asked in general, wondering how they would keep her safe.

"There is very little chance she could make it in time for you to keep the sacrifice from occurring, as the plan the Most High gave you demands," Krieg answered evenly. "You and the Traveler will have to leave within the hour to make it there by sunrise. I will send a guide." A slight flash of excitement went through the commander's eyes. "We will be ready to take on the Abadonnim. You will have your hands full with the Werebeasts." He raised his hands and declared to his fellow Karyl, "The time has come!" The commanders nodded, turned and vanished through the walls of the Stronghold to rally their troops.

Meanwhile the Traveler turned to the Hawk.

"You have one more mission, my friend," he said with a smile, laying a hand on the bird's back. "Find the Werebeast girl and warn her to return. We're on the way."

When dawn arose, she chose to cloak herself in a chill gray, anticipating the tragic events of the day. Almost even before she had properly arrived, Aspen was torn from her bed by two Werebeast women she'd not met before. Rory wasn't there, but one of the two had facial features that were similar, though her fur was darker. She tossed a red dress at the Woodmaid.

"Put that on," she growled in Common. The roughness of her treatment brought Aspen fully awake and the defiant streak within her swept to the fore.

"Can I at least have some *privacy*?" she demanded, pulling the sheets around her.

"Shut up and get dressed," her captor snapped and so she underwent the indignity of having to expose herself to those whom she despised the most. It might have been different with Rory, but now she felt violated by the hungry gazes of her tormentors. While the elder held back, the younger took the time to carefully dress Aspen's hair with a garland of flowers. When she was done she looked up at her companion who nodded and muttered something in her language, before calling towards the doorway. Immediately two Werebeast men strode in and grabbed Aspen by the arms, rushing her out of her room and down the hallway. She didn't have time to think or even breathe. Her heart pounded against her ribcage and her mind kept going to one thing: *I won't ever see Creon again!* That fear haunted her above all and the dark beast within drove its claws into her

heart. She allowed herself to be pulled along, not noting the passageways that they passed through, the stairs that they descended until the blinding light of day broke upon her and then she saw what was awaiting her and screamed.

In the center of a throng of Werebeasts there were two pieces of wood set cross-wise into the ground, tied at the center with rough ropes. They were leaned back just a bit so the victim would be upright enough for her blood to be caught, but far enough back so she couldn't easily see what was going on around her. A male Werebeast with brown hair, clad in fine leather worked with gold, was standing beside the instrument of torture, fingering a bone knife. The Woodmaid began to struggle against her captors, trying to draw back, get away from this, her death.

*Not this way!* she screamed silently. *Not this way!*

Her guards mercilessly propelled her forward, spun her around and thrust her down upon the wood, binding her ankles to each log, stretching her hands above her head and tying them to the wood as well, before passing a cord around her midriff. They drew back and she knew that this was the end. There was no way she would escape now.

The well-dressed Werebeast raised his knife above her and said something in his strange tongue, a chanting recitation. It was echoed by those in the group. Then he lowered the knife again and an angry muttering arose from the throng. Aspen could hear a growling and spitting like that of an enraged cat. She raised her head just enough so she could see what was going on and beheld her friend Rory being pulled along by two guards. The leader of the Werebeasts said something to her, to which Rory replied in Common.

"I will never harm the life of my friend! I spit on you, Tolgar, on you and your gods!" She spat at him, but it fell sort, splattering on the dirt before him.

"Very well, then," Tolgar replied in Common. "The gods will have two sacrifices and that will ensure my victory." He turned away and Aspen let her head fall back. *Creator God, how can you do this to me?* she cried out silently and in the background the heavy beat of a drum began to mark the time until her demise.

Just about the time when the guards where dragging Aspen down the corridor to the sacrificial courtyard, two young Werebeasts were leaning on the parapet of Mavetgâh, idly watching the mist above the gate. The lighter, taller of the two wore the red sash of the captain of the fortress over one shoulder and across his chest.

"I honestly don't see what Tolgar thinks to accomplish by sacrificing the Woodmaid," the captain muttered, lightly tapping his bow on the stone in front of him. "We are after all forbidden to touch them."

"Tolgar does what the Abbadonim tell him to do," the other said with a growl. "I keep thinking about the days when we held our own destiny in our hands." His companion barked a laugh and shook his head.

"You don't remember any of that, Burhan. Those days were before we were even cubs!" The black Werebeast looked up at his friend.

"But I do know that those days existed and I want to be my own master, not doing what those Abadonim say. It's demeaning!"

"There you have a point." The light one looked out over the field. "I sometimes think that there is someone *other* than those monsters, someone who would care about even us."

"Arslan, you're nothing more than a dreamer," Burhan snorted, waving a hand in disgust.

"Am I?" The taller one turned to his friend, golden eyes flashing. "And what about the legends of the God who created everything? What of what my mother taught me that he created even *us*? What of the legend of the Seer who would give every man freedom?"

"Those promises are for Men, not for Werebeasts," the dark one snapped back. "We are cursed and you know that it's because Dehshet made us, not any good god." He lowered his eyes. "And yet, to be free...."

"Ho, there!" a voice interrupted from below and the two Werebeasts jumped, staring down through the bright morning fog to see two tall figures at the gate. Just then a blast of wind swirled around the base of the stronghold, pushing away the mist, making the callers fully visible to the guards.

The taller was dressed in a leather jacket and blue trousers, his golden-brown head bare, and on his shoulder sat a large Hawk. The other was shorter, but clearly the more powerful of the two and even from up

on the wall the Werebeasts could sense a great authority emanating from him. He was dressed all in brown, his face hidden in the cowl of his cloak and the silver hilt of a sword stuck out over his left shoulder.

"What do you want?" Burhan called down, clearly unsettled about *Men* not being afraid to approach the feared Mavetgâh.

The Man pulled back the cowl of his cloak to reveal dark, shoulder-length hair and a well-groomed beard.

"I am Kaya," he answered plainly. "Open the gate and take me to Tolgar." The Werebeasts instantly leaped at his command, not knowing why, and within moments Kaya and the Traveler had been let in. As Arslan led him through the warren of alleys towards the courtyard of sacrifice he felt a subtle pull towards this strangely powerful man. The Presence that emanated from him was so different, so peaceful, so inviting, so threatening to all he'd ever known, and yet Arslan wanted to lose himself in it, to serve this Man who commanded with such easy authority that didn't hold the threat of death at disobedience. *I would serve him and his gods immediately*, he thought to himself. *Anyone like this must be worthy of service.*

On his part, Kaya had been carefully watching his guide, sensing an urging of the Light Within. This one was special. This one had potential. This one was a *friend*. There was no sense to doubt the Creator, but his long-standing animosity towards Werebeasts caused him to pause inwardly. How could this *Werebeast* be a friend? Was he misunderstanding the Light?

*This one is a friend.* The thought came more insistently this time and Creon Kaya submitted. *I will seek him out then.* And in that moment they passed through a gate and the young Man's blood began to boil. There was Aspen, dressed in a garish red gown, strapped to two pieces of wood planted cross-wise in the ground. A Werebeast clad in an ornamented leather tunic stood over her, his tail quivering with excitement, mouthing words in the language of the Werebeasts.

"Powerful master, Dehshet, dark lord, accept this offering from our hand. Give the Seer and the Karyl into our power even as this pure blood of the Creator-born is shed." At that moment, Kaya stepped forward and roared into the crowd, his voice projecting the immense authority bestowed upon him by the God of all creation.

"Stop!"

The Werebeast shuddered as the massive Presence laid itself across the courtyard. Aspen sensed it, too, and looked up to see Creon! She gasped, struggling against her bonds.

"This sacrifice is not acceptable," the Seer thundered again, striding past his guide and coming face to face with the Overlord of the Werebeasts, Tolgar of Mavetgâh.

"How dare you interfere with our time-honored worship!" Tolgar growled. "I will have your head on a spit for that, Seer!"

"Interfering with your worship is *precisely* what I'm here for, Werebeast," he snapped back, feeling the Presence guiding him. "Your days of power are over and so is your rule." The Werebeast stepped back and sneered.

"And just *how* are you going to do this? Alone?" He shook his head. "I think not!"

"One who is with the Creator is *never alone*," Kaya said softly, but so distinctly that every person in that place heard him. Then he raised himself up and thundered into the crowd, his voice taking on a new aspect, a tone that made Aspen involuntarily think that this was the Creator, the God of her fathers talking through her beloved.

"This is what the One who formed these lands says, 'You still have time, though it is short, so now I call you to leave your old gods and follow me, the true God, the only God. I have sent my servant to teach you. If you listen you will find an eternal peace, but if you don't you will be destroyed forever.' This is what the Lord God Almighty says. Glory be his."

"How dare this god of yours usurp the authority of Dehshet and the Warrior King!" Tolgar hissed, stepping forward, his knife at the ready. "For that you shall die!" He crouched and moved forward swiftly.

"Creon!" Aspen screamed, drowning out the twang of a bowstring. The Overlord of the Werebeasts staggered back, a black-feathered arrow protruding from his chest. His golden eyes widened.

"You, Arslan?" he gasped. "My captain?"

"You have heard the Seer, Tolgar," the young Werebeast replied evenly. "And you've rejected his words. I do not." And with that he released a second arrow into his erstwhile-leader. This one caught him square in the throat hurtling him back into the crowd. There was breathless silence for a moment, silence that Arslan quickly seized.

"This is the Seer, prophesied by the ancients!" he cried, pointing at Kaya. "If any wish to harm him, they will fall by my arrows!" Kaya gently laid one hand on the Werebeast's shoulder.

"Thank you, my friend," he said with a smile. "What is your name?"

"Arslan," the warrior answered, shaking his golden head. Kaya looked at his tawny fur and nodded.

"Yes, you are a lion and you will rule your people in justice." He drew his sword and quickly turned to the Werebeasts. He noticed that a female had hurried to Aspen and was loosening her bonds to get her away from the sacrificial pyre. Tolgar's body lay in the center, still twitching a bit, a challenge to everyone there: join the Seer or die.

"What is your answer, Werebeasts of the Death March?" the Seer shouted across the assembly. "Are you for the Creator or against him? Let all who are on his side join me!" There was a ripple in the crowd, those who had heard the old legends, who yearned for freedom wondering if this was true. By now Aspen was free and she rushed towards Creon, trying to fling her arms around him. He gently placed one around her shoulder and then drew her aside.

"I will not ask again," he called out simply. Rory looked towards the Seer and towards the captain of the Werebeasts and made up her mind. She bounded forward and with two steps stood beside Arslan, whom she gazed at, purring softly. Her lead was followed by more and more of the Werebeasts until only one-third remained on the side of their fallen leader.

"We will never bow to you," one of them hissed. "Prepared to die!" With that he launched himself forward, dropping his Werebeast form and becoming what he really was, an Abadonnah. In that instant the air before Kaya blazed and Krieg appeared, his sword neatly slicing the attacker in two. The other Abadonniim dropped their disguises and sped forward only to be engaged by the Karyl. The Werebeasts under the dark sway joined them, crashing into the group that would side with the Creator and the battle began. It was short, but extremely fierce and extremely bloody on both sides. In her elation from being set free and in her anger at her indignity Aspen lashed out hard against the Werebeasts with the full force of the Art of Defense, feeding the enemy warriors to the sharp blades and arrowheads of the others. Arslan, the captain and mightiest warrior of Mavetgâh, showed his prowess by battling several at once, but when one launched himself at him from behind, it was Rory's quick dagger and sharp claws that saved him. The eyes of the two met for an instant, then Rory smiled and vanished back into the fight.

Kaya felt the sword sing and bite, sing and bite while the Traveler's bright beams sent his attackers flying, crumpling against the wall. Everything dissolved into a blur around the Seer and he felt himself being pulled away by the circumstances, almost a drunkenness developing as he fought. He pushed against it and in that instant he felt the enemies give way. He drew back, letting the Werebeasts finish their work. He found Aspen there only a few paces beside him, dropped his sword and held his arms out to her. Her face was still flushed and angry, but he could see the elation in her eyes, the fierce defiance, the delight at seeing him again. And then she was in his embrace and he pressed his lips against hers. Aspen melted against him with a sigh.

"Thank you for coming, Creon," she sighed, then asked more sharply, "What took you so long?"

"We had to wait for the right moment," he replied. "If Tolgar hadn't attempted to sacrifice you, I doubt this many would have joined us." He motioned towards the victorious Werebeasts who were standing there, hooting and chanting a victory song in their own tongue.

Arslan strode to the corpse of Tolgar and looked down on it.

"Now we are free," he exclaimed and spat on his once-Overlord's face. He turned towards one of his friends.

"Let's burn it," he said in a low voice.

"No!" the Seer exclaimed, coming up, the Woodmaid still holding on to him. "He deserves a decent burial. After all, he was a true and loyal warrior, as were the rest of these." He swept his hand out toward the rest of the bodies in the courtyard. The Traveler nodded, as did Krieg, who had just approached.

"The stronghold closing off the Death March has fallen, my friend," Krieg said with a smile. "My warriors have already gone into the Nations to prepare your way." Kaya nodded thankfully then turned to Arslan.

"You have fought well, my new-found friend," he commended him with a smile. "And for your bravery you have the kingship over your people." The Werebeast's golden eyes grew wide.

"There – there has been no king over the Werebeasts since the fall of Mount Haven!" he gasped. "Why me?"

"Because you chose to believe, Arslan," the Seer answered, letting go of his beloved and placing both hands on the new king's shoulders. "For that reason the Creator has given you this new responsibility. Take it seriously."

"I will," the Werebeast responded, striking his chest with his right hand. "May the Creator guide me." Aspen stepped back and noticed Rory next to her.

"You know, Aspen," she purred, "if you weren't my friend, I'd take your Man away from you." The Woodmaid wondered if that was a compliment, and smiled.

"I think that you already have your man, Rory," she said, thinking of the way her friend had been gazing the new Werebeast king. Rory just squinted at him and purred.

# Two: Lormar

## Conquered City

The forbidding walls of Stein seemed surrounded by ants. The army had appeared suddenly over night, giving the inhabitants no time to prepare for a siege. They could make it about two months on close rations, if the many gardens held up, but one of the two wells was outside the walls and usually was concealed before a siege. This time, however, they weren't fast enough and the Warrior Kings multitudes had taken the well before anything could be done.

Lormar commanded the army, was the word on the streets, and the people were already trembling. The new lord of Stein, who styled himself king, tried to comfort them, but in reality he was just as uneasy as the rest of the people. It was going to be difficult to withstand any direct attack from the siege-works that Lormar's soldiers were now completing. Perhaps it would be wise to capitulate...

The "board," chaired by Baltar was strictly against that suggestion and so the siege works were built and the militia spread out on the walls, scarcely enough to cover its circumference, much less able to repel a direct attack. All seemed hopeless as Lormar and his troops settled down to wait.

The day after the fall of Tolgar the Traveler sensed that the time had come for him and Falk to return through the Portal. Kaya and Aspen stood on the meadow of the Karyl Stronghold, in front of the great waterfall along with some Werebeasts and the commanders of the Karyl. Ethan Defender grasped Kaya's hand.

"Ya-Rab be with you, my friend," he said with a smile. "You have changed greatly since I came to know you and I'm sure that there will be more changes." Kaya smiled sadly.

"I hope to see you again some day, Traveler."

Aspen then hugged the big Man.

"You came just at the right time," she exclaimed, pushing her hair back, behind one pointed ear.

"Thanks to Ya-Rab," the Traveler countered. He had a word for each of the others in attendance, then turned and walked, with Falk on his shoulder, across the large stones to where the waterfall thundered. The waterfall split down the middle, opening a dry gate. Kaya could see a shallow cave behind the waterfall which suddenly lit up with light, blotting out the Traveler's form. The brilliance vanished as quickly as it had come and with it the Traveler. Then the opening in the waterfall closed again, making the meadow seem as before.

"He has gone back to his world," Krieg rumbled, his voice making a queer harmony to the waterfall. "And some day soon we will meet him again." Kaya nodded at that and they all returned to the Stronghold, where they rested for a few days. The next week was quite intense, as Kaya taught the Werebeasts from the scroll of the priests. He spent the nights copying it into the language of the Werebeasts. He was finished in a very short time, every word on the new scroll the same as on the old.

On the last day they spent in the Death March, Kaya passed the scroll on to Arslan.

"Read this to your people daily," Kaya directed. "It'll keep you close to the Creator."

"Thank you, my friend," the king said to him, "you have given us the greatest treasure that any one could have given." Kaya smiled and nodded.

"Knowing the Creator is the greatest gift, and only he himself can give that one."

"What about you, Aspen?" Rory asked Aspen, fixing the Woodmaid with luminescent eyes. "Have you fully turned to Creator God?" The question stung and the Woodmaid bit her tongue, wondering if her struggle was that apparent. Rory looked at her for another moment.

"You'll decide," she said with a half-smile and went over to Arslan, slipping one hand into his arm. Kaya raised both hands in a blessing as Aspen stepped to his side.

"The Lord of the universe keep and guide you all the days of your life, King and Queen of the Werebeasts," he blessed them with a resounding voice. "Remember his words. Engrave them on your hearts, carry them with you at all times, and think of them day and night. For then the Lord will bless you until the day you die. All the glory is his!" He lowered his hands and took Aspen's hand in his right. They said farewell once more and vanished into the forest.

"The Creator be with you!" the Werebeast King called after them.

Sarina fumed at what she perceived to be the new injustices of the regime. For one month the Warrior King's troops had surrounded Stein, before Lormar and his men finally breached the massive walls and conquered the city. Now all had been repaired and Stein seemed as before – way before, when Dushman had ruled, except for the fact that Lormar was a just governor, withholding himself and his men from the women of the city. Only periodically the soldiers committed murders or raped women, something that had belonged to every-day life under Dushman. Still, there were injustices, plenty of them. The first struck Baltar, who now sat in one of the deep dungeons of Stein's castle, awaiting the death sentence. There was nothing Sarina could do, under house-arrest in her own home.

Twice she had tried to escape and twice she was caught. Lormar had threatened to have her clapped in irons if she tried again, so she very wisely stayed where she was. Even so she sent messenger birds out, hoping to warn Creon from returning to Stein. The birds returned, their messages still intact, and she felt left alone. She carefully hid her fears behind the rough, proud exterior that only her closest friends knew wasn't real. At night, in the privacy of her bedroom, she cried herself to sleep, wishing that she could cling to her husband who was locked away from her. She prayed constantly now, hoping for some kind of help.

Help was not too far off. Creon Kaya and Aspen quickly traveled westward. Two Karyl guards accompanied them to the edge of the Death March, from where they went out into the rocky plains of Tashyer. The heat was tempered somewhat by the coming of winter and there were even a few snow flurries. Their food was supplied daily in the form of bread and water and what they had in their bags stayed fresh and never got any less. Even Kaya wondered at this and praised Creator God for his provision.

They hurried across the wastelands, making much better time than before, the food given them strengthening their bodies in a way neither of them had felt possible. Even so, they did not talk much, each one wrapped in their own thoughts. In a way Aspen was glad for the distance as she felt her heart grow cold, though she tried to fan the embers of what she felt for Creon Kaya. Besides that she knew that her ardor for the Creator had undergone a similar change. Unknowingly she now clung to Creon's presence to assuage her loneliness rather than the Creator's. She looked at him as distant, caring perhaps, but not interested in dealing with one lone Woodmaid. The waterfall still haunted her dreams intermittently and at other times she would come awake with a start, feeling the darkness within grasping at her, hearing a still voice saying, "Time is short." She shivered at that and tried to push the thought away, becoming more moody, swinging up on some days, dancing and laughing, and on others plunging to the depths of melancholy.

Kaya watched this with increasing concern and at times tried to confront her with it, but those instances only turned to shouting matches that got them nowhere and slowed down their progress. And so about a week into their trek, he gave up trying to change her altogether. He knew there would come a time when she would have to find her security with the Creator, not with him, and that would be all that was left.

Additionally, a premonition began to plague him about Stein, something in the stirring of the Light Within.

"Something's wrong," he told Aspen. "I have this feeling that the city has fallen." With that feeling came fear and now the old Creon became more evident. Aspen was consoled by that fact, finally finding what she thought she wanted. Her friend now sat up, awake, sword at his side and bow and arrow in his lap. Something of the old memories were coming back to her, but the Kaya's new strength of character surfaced in that when she awoke he would often be sleeping lightly.

"What's the matter with you?" she demanded one night after she'd found him asleep again. "Aren't you afraid someone's going to attack us?"

"If they could find us, perhaps," he acknowledged. "But I know that we're well-protected." His gray eyes were hidden in the shadows of his face as the moon flashed down on them. "You would do well to remember that." She growled something derogatory in return and rolled herself in her cloak again. The Seer shook his head sadly and set back to his lonely vigil.

Inside Kaya constantly prayed, even more now that the black silhouette of Stein was before them, framed in the rays of the setting sun.

"Tomorrow," he said, more to himself than to Aspen. The Woodmaid just nodded.

As night bade farewell to her sister, dawn, the two of them slipped through the rocks, creeping up towards the city, staying out of sight among the rocks. All seemed as they had left it, the militia guards patrolling the walls, a few peasants leaving the city for a journey to somewhere and just a lot of noise in general. Suddenly Aspen spied something out of the ordinary: one of the soldiers was wearing the black and leather of the Warrior King's army! She pulled Kaya's sleeve and pointed toward the wall. His brow furrowed and he motioned her to get back. A short ways away they rested in an alcove of a man-high rock.

"So?" Aspen asked, hoping that Kaya would decide to skirt the city.

"We're going in tonight," he said slowly. "This is the next bastion that must fall – but not like Tolgar's." Aspen looked at him curiously.

"What do you mean by that?"

"No bloodshed, no fights," he answered curtly, shifted the sword on his back slightly and fell silent. The silence was hardly broken as the day wore on and Aspen took a lot more time of self-reflection. Her reasoning had changed. *After all, she told herself, I've always been a good girl – except for one or two little things – so why does Creator God need complete control of me? I do what he wants anyway, right?* Well, maybe. There was another part of her that knew that wasn't true, but the side of her that wanted to keep control won out – for the time being.

Kaya sat there, planning, praying. There had to be some way to get into the city without being seen and he had a plan, yes, but was that Creator God's plan also? *What do you want, Lord?* he asked. No answer came. He thought over every detail again and finally decided that it would work.

Night had spread her black cloak over Tashyer when the two travelers crept up to the walls for a second time. Kaya scanned the massive heights and slowly began to walk along them, one hand touching the rough rock. Somewhere there had been a low turret, he remembered, but where? He kept looking up, ignoring what was in front of him and suddenly stumbled over a fair-sized rock. He pushed himself back up from the ground and heard Aspen snicker quietly behind him. *It's not funny,* he growled to himself. He ran his hands over the smooth, round stone and suddenly felt that letters had been cut into it. He tried to make them out using his hands and the meager moonlight and realized that he'd stumbled over Hrosca's grave. The turret must be very close to here! He stood again and stared at the silhouette of Stein.

"Creator God, help me to find it," he whispered into the night. Aspen touched his shoulder.

"There," she whispered, pointing to a place just ahead of them and Kaya saw it too, a mere shadow against the black of the wall. He quickly brushed Aspen's hand in thanks and went up to the wall, slipping his pack off and pulling out a long coil of rope with a strange hook on the end given him by Krieg. Kaya motioned for Aspen to step back, then whirled the end of the rope around his head and let fly. The hook pinged on the rock above him, but stayed up. He breathed a sigh of relief and began to pull on the rope. First there was a scraping sound and then a quiet click as the hook caught on the battlements. He tested the rope twice with his full weight, tied a loop in the bottom of it, then climbed the sheer wall, pulling himself up by the rope. When he reached the top, Aspen slipped the loop around her waist and began to climb, while Kaya also pulled her up. She reached the top breathless and a bit dizzy.

"So far so good," Kaya whispered. "Now we should be able to make it to the top of the walls." Aspen just nodded, her face pale in the moonlight. The whole procedure was repeated once more and they reached the top

wall. Kaya looked around warily, expecting the Warrior King's guards to jump out at them any moment. No one came, and yet there was a queasy feeling in his stomach that wouldn't allow him to breathe any more easily. They slipped along the wall until they found one of the towers with a staircase in it. The door stood just slightly ajar, beckoning them and they entered into complete darkness.

Almost instantly Kaya felt his claustrophobia creep up on him again. *Creator God, he gasped in himself, I can't make it!*

"I am with you, Creon Kaya," the still Voice said, comforting him. He breathed an audible sigh of relief and continued down the stairwell, the Woodmaid lightly resting a hand on his shoulder for security.

Aspen began to feel the confines of the rock wall weigh down on her. Her fear was so intense that it was beginning to make her feel giddy and she almost wanted to laugh out loud. She suddenly stopped and stared around. Had she seen something move in the dark in front of her? No – no – nothing. A loud flapping and screeching startled her. She suddenly screamed, swinging her hands in the air. Her fingers struck something soft and furry that suddenly shot away, screeching angrily. She sank into Kaya's arms, breathing heavily.

"Bats." From the quavering in his voice she could tell that he was quite scared also and that comforted her just a bit. *He's still human after all,* she thought wryly.

They continued on down the spiraling staircase to the bottom of the tower where Kaya took a shaky breath as he drew the bolt of the door, expecting the soldiers to be awaiting them on the other side. No one was there...

"So where to now?" Aspen asked after drawing a deep breath of the cloying night air, her heart fluttering like a wounded butterfly.

"Baltar's," was Kaya's curt reply.

Sarina leaned against the wall of the study, gazing at the many books and treasures. She often spent time here when she couldn't sleep, looking at these things that reminded her so much of her husband. She ran her hand over a small statue of a Werebeast, carved by Baltar's grandfather. *Why?* she asked herself again. *Why did they have to take him?* After all, he'd kept peace in the city and had proved an able leader of the board of regents. She sniffled and drew a hand across her face, trying to keep her big brown eyes from filling with tears, something she would allow no one to see. *I've got to be strong,* she decided. *Creator, help me be strong.*

In the stillness of the house she heard the nearly silent mechanism of the door to the study click and turned to see the door swing inward, framing a tall figure with a familiar bearing. The light of her single candle kept it as a silhouette until it stepped through the door. The hair and bearded face reminded her a lot of her father, but it couldn't be ... could it?

"Creon?" she whispered, hand closing around the dagger hilt at her belt.

"Hello, little sister," the low voice was unmistakable and her heart leaped. She broke into a wide smile and flung herself at him with a cry of delight. He was here! It would all be well again!

Creon Kaya enfolded her in his strong arms as she pressed her head against his chest. It was so good to see her again.

"They've taken him," she said after a moment, voice quavering with her unshed tears.

"I know," he whispered.

"How?" She pulled back, her surprise clearly written on her youthful features.

"The Creator told me." It was simply said and for the first time she realized *why* it was that she'd been so puzzled by him at first. He was different. She couldn't put her finger on how she knew, but there was something about him.

"What happened to you?" she asked, her fears momentarily swept aside by her awe.

"I met the Creator face-to-face," he explained, as if it were an every-day occurrence. "And that's why I came back. To help you and Baltar and this city." His heart stirred as he thought of the one other revelation given to him, the one he knew he could not tell anyone.

"Is Baltar all right?" he asked after a moment.

"I don't know," she began, lower lip trembling, unable to stop her tears from brimming over now. They traced two rivulets down her face and it was in a weak voice that she continued, "They have him in a dungeon in the castle. You *know* he can't walk! I have no idea how he's getting on. Please, Creon we've got to help him!"

Kaya nodded thoughtfully, moved to see Sarina this way. She had *never* cried before, but then again she had changed, nearly as much as he had. *She already is one of Creator God's real followers*, he told himself, heart swelling at the revelation.

"Listen, Sarina," he said softly, "we can't get him out yet. Creator God wants to make a powerful change here. I'll explain tomorrow, but you need to get some rest now." The young woman nodded, wiped her eyes and opened the door. Aspen was standing there and Sarina drew a breath, noticing the vacant coldness in her green eyes, the pallor of her face and the shadows under her eyes.

"Aspen?" she asked. "Is everything all right?"

"Yes, yes," the Woodmaid answered, waving her hand, all the while trembling from her exhaustion.

"Would you tell me what's bothering you?" Sarina pressed gently, took her friend by the arm and led her away. Kaya smiled as he watched them go. Maybe this was what Aspen needed, a female who could convince her to turn to the Creator.



## The General

**S**ir?" The question was accompanied by a gentle knock on the massive oak door of a study in the castle, one that had remained unused for most of Dushman's reign. The bent old Man at the desk quickly rolled up a scroll and pushed it aside. He straightened as much as his condition allowed him and answered in a clear, strong voice.

"Come in, Debus." The door opened and a young Man in an officer's uniform entered.

"Report!" Lormar commanded. Debus made a half-bow.

"They have arrived, sir," the officer said.

"And where are they?"

"At Baltar's house, sir. Baltar's lady is the Seer's sister."

"Yes, Debus, I know that," the general answered in a soft tone. He pushed himself away from the desk and hobbled across the room, leaning heavily on his ornate cane. He stopped at a detailed map of Stein, brought here from the Warrior King's castle to aid in the conquest of the city. He studied it for a few minutes before turning to his officer. Debus stood at attention quietly, waiting, knowing that the old man would continue when he was fully ready and not a moment sooner.

"I believe we should extend a cordial invitation to the Seer and those with him," he said slowly, thinking of something. He turned his keen hazel eyes on Debus and studied him for a minute, watching him stiffen.

"You do not approve?" the general asked quietly.

"No, sir," the officer answered immediately. His commander would take nothing less than the truth, an admirable quality. Even though Lormar served the Warrior King to the best of his abilities it was well-known that the old man rubbed the other Warlords the wrong way because of his extreme honesty and "old" morality – that is from before the fall of the last Council. What few knew was that Lormar had been one of the elite soldiers of the last King, Ula, and had studied under the some of the greatest warriors of the Seven Nations before defecting to the Warrior King and helping him in his uprising against the King and the Council, proving an able and brilliant strategist as well as a loyal soldier. It was arguable that much of the loyalty of the Warrior King's armies was given to Lormar rather than to Elam, simply because of the old Warlord's even-handedness and penchant for winning. Debus often thought over this, especially since he'd surprised the old man that day not too many months ago...

"Explain," Lormar cut into his thoughts, hobbling back to his desk and sitting down at it.

"The Seer is our enemy, sir," the officer said, raising his head just slightly. "He has come to destroy us. We should be arresting him and sending him to the King in a wagon, not entertaining him in our castle! He is highly dangerous and subversive and must be silenced. Look at what he's already done to Prince Savash. He hardly knows friend from foe anymore!" Debus fell silent, looking for another argument. Lormar cocked his head to the side, amused.

"That is very admirable logic, Debus," he chuckled, "with the exception of your remark about Savash. Creon son of Adem was merely a catalyst to bring him where he is sooner than he would have been if he hadn't come." He shook his head. "Being the son of the Warrior King is a loneliness I would not wish upon my worst enemy, much less on my most adept student." He looked up and fixed his lieutenant with his most piercing gaze.

"Let me tell you *why* we are going to invite the Seer, Debus," he began. "There are two reasons. The first is the public one that you are to tell the soldiers and the second is between you and me. *No one* is to hear of it, is that clear?"

"Understood, sir," Debus replied stiffly.

"Very well," the general continued, settling back into his chair as best he could. "For all the men know, this is to be a trap for lulling the Seer and those around him into believing that we are considering rebelling against the Warrior King. For that reason I want you to release Baltar the Architect from the prisons and have him cleaned up. He will be joining us tonight as well." He laced his fingers together. "Our objective is to overpower him as he leaves the castle, secure in the knowledge that he is an honored guest of Lormar." He shook his head and muttered, "That should be devious enough for Elam's twisted mind." Then he grunted in disgust before looking at his lieutenant again. "Any questions?"

"None, sir."

"Here then is the *real* reason we are asking him to come." He paused for a long moment before pushing the words out in his most measured tones, as he often did when sharing something highly important with a subordinate. "I have questions that only he can answer and I *must* have them answered." He glanced sharply at Debus who instantly deduced what he meant.

"The scroll, sir?"

"Yes, Debus, the scroll." He gave a half-smile. "That and this Creator God." He looked at the young man sharply. "You and I, Debus, are looking at changing allegiances because we know that the Warrior King is a man, not a god. We know that he is fallible and we know that in 150 years his only accomplishment has been to pretty much destroy the Seven Nations and ravage their riches for himself and those around him. That must stop and this is the first step to doing so."

"If I may, sir," the lieutenant ventured to which Lormar nodded once. "From what I understand the first step was made a long time ago, sir, by this Creator." That caused the general to chuckle again.

"Yes, there you have a point, a very salient point, my young friend." He became grave once more. "Let us proceed with caution, Debus. Plots against Elam are very dangerous, but this is something that *must* be done."

"Yes, sir!"

"You are dismissed, Debus," Lormar said so softly that it was almost a whisper. The officer snapped fully to attention, striking his chest with his closed right fist, before turning and swiftly marching out of the room.

Lormar looked after him thoughtfully. That Debus was a complicated one, but to be implicitly trusted. He, as all of Lormar's personal body-guard and many of his commanders, were loyal first and foremost to the general and only secondly to the Warrior King and his regime. That was good, at least at this point. That meant that his planned treachery against his sovereign would remain secret a while longer. But how would the armies react? There was only one way to find out.

*Surrender without any conditions or total destruction*, he thought to himself. *How often did I give cities those conditions? Now it's my turn. What will I decide?*

That past night Aspen had hardly been able to sleep, still trembling from the fright in the tower. The hurried rush through the city and near-brushes with the guards had rattled her nerves even more. Then having

to deal with the gentle prodding of Sarina before crawling into bed and staring at the ceiling, shivering under the covers one moment then thrusting them off the next as she felt the heat of a fever rush through her body. When the gray of morning arose to peek through the windows she finally fell into an uneasy sleep, awakening when the sun began to shine fully through the east-facing glass. She rolled out of bed, staggered to her feet and went to the low washbasin across the room where she looked into the polished silver plate that was used as a mirror. For a moment she didn't recognize the face that stared back at her, haggard, green eyes hopeless with dark bags under them. She turned away. *Creon can't see me like this*, she told herself. *It would hurt him too much.*

For some reason, though, she found herself going through the motions of dressing, her mind in a haze, wanting to see her beloved, yet not, wanting not to be alone, yet desiring solitude. She walked out of the room, uncertain of where she was going. Her feet directed her along the hall to the room where she'd regularly broken fast during her last stay here. She touched the marble block and the door swung inward to reveal Creon and Sarina sitting on low couches across from each other, sharing a breakfast of cheese, bread, fruit, and olives, along with a tall clay pitcher that Aspen knew to contain goat's milk.

"Here's our sleeping beauty," the young Man laughed, nodding at her, then becoming grave. "I say, Aspen, are you sure you should be up?"

"I'm fine," she muttered, taking a step into the room, her head swimming all the more. She closed her eyes, just for a moment, and suddenly all was darkness.

Kaya watched her close her eyes and crumple to the ground, strength having vanished. He leaped up and bounded over to her, bending down, gently checking for a pulse. There was a very weak one, but her wrist was hot.

"She's burning up," he muttered, stomach suddenly feeling queasy. "We'd better put her to bed."

"Will she be all right?" Sarina asked, now beside him as well.

"Yes, this evening she'll be fine," he answered. "She will have to be." He picked her up gently. "We'll let her sleep it off."

"Aren't you being a bit harsh on her?" his sister pressed as they walked down the hallway. Kaya shook his head.

"She has to come along this evening," he explained evenly. "She has to see what is going to happen there, regardless of what the outcome is. It has something to do with her struggle." He placed her back on her bed and glanced over the dress.

"I'll take care of it," Sarina said. "You'd best wait outside." He nodded and walked out the door, pacing back and forth, frustrated that things had to take this turn. Why was it that Aspen couldn't realize that her clinging to her limited control, to her own useless righteousness was what was bringing this on her? And all she thought about was assuaging her loneliness, using him as a balm for that. *It's not right!* he thought to himself vehemently, hand balling into a fist. *Can't she just understand that? Is she even going to surrender or is she going to go over that waterfall?*

"Don't let that happen, Creator God," he whispered, his heart suddenly slowing, then thundering hard against his ribcage. "Let her come back to me."

"That is not for you to decide," the Light Within whispered. "You must give her to me. Only I can heal her of this." The tone was gentle and instantly Creon Kaya felt the shame of his selfishness pouring in.

"Forgive me, Lord," he prayed. "You're right and I give her to you. Please heal her. And even if you don't," he sighed heavily, "even if you don't, I'll still follow you and praise you." Even after those words, which he knew he meant with his whole heart, he didn't feel much better. He decided that he would go take a walk for a while and went out into the garden. Waiting was what galled him, he knew. Always waiting. Today had to be the day, but at what time would the message come? And so he resigned himself to praying and pondering in the garden.



## Enemies and Friends

**I**t was only an hour to dusk by the sundial in the garden when Kaya walked into Aspen's room, face grim. Sarina was perched on the edge of the bed, wiping at the Woodmaid's brow with a moist cloth, humming a melody that her mother had always used when caring for one of her sick children. She looked up when her brother stepped to the couch and gently reached down to touch Aspen's forehead. She watched his lips move silently, then he bent and kissed her brow.

"It's time to wake up, Aspen," he said just above a whisper. "You will be well long enough to see what you must."

"Creon!" the blond woman exclaimed angrily. "She needs to sleep!" He looked at her sharply, something playing in the gray eyes that caused Sarina to shiver.

"She *needs* this more, Sarina," he snapped and raised a hand as she was about to reply. "Don't question me, sister. I *know* this." The woman in black sighed and stroked the Woodmaid's brow again. Kaya bent once more.

"Wake up, Aspen," he called, more insistently now. Her head rolled back and forth and she muttered something. He rested his hand on her and for an instant Sarina thought she could see something flow from her brother into his beloved. The Woodmaid's green eyes opened slowly.

"Creon?" she asked in a husky voice. "Where am I?"

"You're in your room at Baltar's," he replied.

"I don't feel so well," she muttered. "I think I'm just going to stay here tonight."

"I'm afraid that's not possible." There was a command in his voice, not masked by the gentleness that Sarina heard as well. "The Warlord is going to call for us shortly and you will have to come along." He reached out to touch her hair, but Aspen pulled away.

"You'll have the strength," he told her simply, then turned to his sister. "We will not have too much time before they come." He smiled at Sarina. "You'll want to wear something nice – for Baltar."

"For Baltar?" The shine was back in the blond woman's eyes and she turned to the Woodmaid. "Did you hear that, Aspen? I'm going to see Baltar!" Her enthusiasm was infectious enough that Aspen decided to get out of bed once Creon Kaya had departed to get himself ready. He was right, she was feeling better and something inside her told her that tonight was important, though she didn't know why. It was time to dress and go to the castle. The thought of that made her shiver. What if they were to be made captive? She felt the heat rise with that idea and pushed it away from her bodily, the fever subsiding as well.

Debus trembled slightly as he stopped in front of Baltar's impressive house. The last time they had come with half the army. Now he was here with an honor guard to escort the Seer and those with him to the citadel. *Odd*, he thought, regarding the massive oak door, *last time we had to force that door. Now we have to knock.* He fought with his pride for a bit, finally stepped up to the door, and raised his fist to announce himself, but the portal swung open before he could touch the wood and he found himself looking into the face of a Man that both terrified and captivated him.

"Peace be with you," the face said, slowly breaking into a smile. The Man stepped aside to let Debus into the building. The officer recovered quickly and pulled a small scroll out of his belt.

"I have a message for Creon, the son of Adem, called the Seer." The Man looked at Debus quizzically, giving the officer a few moments to study him more closely. He was a bit taller than Debus, who stood just under six feet. His hair was dark and neatly trimmed, just barely touching his shoulders. A thick, well-groomed beard covered his cheeks, chin, and upper lip and the soft gray eyes had a mix of gentleness and power in them that Debus had never seen anywhere before. He was dressed in brown clothing, clean and foreign to the officer's eyes, but they had an air of elegance about them, as if he was waiting for an audience with a high lord.

"I am Creon son of Adem, called Kaya," the dark-haired Man answered, his voice a high baritone, carrying a soft quality that Debus hadn't heard anywhere before. "There are also those that would call me the Seer."

It was all Debus could do to not draw a sigh of relief. How could this be anyone else, but the Seer?! And it was with a smile that the officer handed the scroll to Creon Kaya.

Kaya broke the seal calmly, almost knowing what he would read. He unrolled the sheet of paper and skimmed over the words casually.

*Creon son of Adem, called the Seer.*

*Lormar.*

*Greetings. I have long awaited making an acquaintance with you. Therefore we extend this humble invitation to you and yours to come to the citadel as honored guests and collect 'Baltar, the architect, in whatever condition he may be in after his trial. Peace be with you. Hail the Warrior King!*

The Seer winced at the last line and then stopped to look at the officer. He was just a bit shorter than Kaya, with brown hair and brown eyes, dressed in a black and leather marching uniform. The young Man was unsure of how to place Debus' sympathies. *Please protect us, Creator God,* he prayed silently, then straightened up and looked the officer in the eye.

"We'll be glad to join you," he announced evenly. "Will you come in?" Debus drew a sharp breath. He had no wish to enter that house again.

"No – no, we'll wait here," he answered stiffly, as if gasping for air. Kaya nodded and closed the door. He leaned against it, trying to steady himself, before going to Aspen's room and knocking.

"Come in," rang Sarina's voice. Kaya pressed the wooden block beside the door and it swung open silently. Sarina was standing there, dressed ladylike in a black gown. Beside her stood Aspen, a bit pale, arrayed in a dress Sarina had supplied for her, dark green with a white sash. The Seer smiled at her. The edges of her lips turned up just a bit and the fever-haze was still there in her eyes.

"Let's go," he sighed and took Aspen's arm to steady her.

The small troupe went up the winding streets of Stein as fast as Aspen's condition would allow. Even though Kaya offered to carry her, Aspen walked on her own with hard determination and frequent rests. They reached the high castle shortly before the evening meal. The Warlord's elite guards were assembled and in dress uniform, ready to salute the Seer and his companions. It was impressive, but Kaya somehow knew that it was not real – not yet.

Debus escorted them up the stairs, where a bent old Man stood, leaning on a cane. Standing up straight, he would have hardly reached Kaya's chest, so that in his condition he had to stare at the young Man's belt buckle. Creon Kaya instantly realized that this was the third of the Warrior King's Warlords that he would meet. A calm spread through him that he knew could only be the Creator's hand.

"Welcome to Stein, your honor," the Warlord greeted him with a bow, making the old white head stoop even lower. Kaya instantly held out his hand, almost offended at the old Man's reception.

"Please, I'm only a Man. I'm Creon, the son of Adem, called Kaya."

"I am Lormar the Westron, the first of the Warlords of the Warrior King," the old Man returned, his voice still firm despite his age. "Please enter." He gestured toward the wide portal. Creon Kaya followed him in, followed by Sarina and Aspen.

"We will dine in my quarters this evening, Lord Creon Kaya, after we have collected your brother-in-law," Lormar said evenly. He led them up several staircases, painfully leaning on his cane, bringing Kaya to pity his enemy. He silently wondered if he could help the other, turning the thought into a prayer.

Then they reached a level of the castle that Aspen knew only too well. She wanted to run up and hold on to Creon, but she was afraid that he would send her away. Lormar led them along the hall and stopped in front of a door, where two guards were posted. He snapped the fingers of his free hand and one of the guards swung the door open. Sarina let out a cry of joy and rushed into the room, into her husband's arms. He kissed her and

then they realized that they weren't alone. Both turned red, but still held on to each other. Kaya entered the room, smiling as he remembered how shy they had been to show their affection for each other in public.

"Hello, Baltar," he said, striding up to the crippled architect. Baltar was propped up in a bed, rather thin and pale, but beaming at having his young wife by his side again.

"Creon," he laughed, pushing himself away from the cushions and grasping his friend's right hand. "Welcome back to Stein. The conditions are a bit worse than when you left, I'm afraid." Kaya looked at him quizzically.

"Maybe not," he answered slowly. He was kept from continuing by a young woman with black curls entering the room, pushing Baltar's wheelchair.

"I hope you will forgive us, my lady," Lormar addressed Sarina from the door, "but we took this from your house when we last took you back. I thought it might be appropriate for your husband to join us." Sarina merely nodded in reply, fixing her gaze on her husband.

From her corner Aspen looked at the servant girl and wondered where she'd seen her before. Somehow she remembered healing someone like her. The girl spied the Woodmaid and laughed.

"Aspen, you're here, too?" she cried. "Wow! What a day! First I get to take care of the most important prisoner of the castle and then you come back." The Woodmaid still couldn't recall the other girl's name and slowly felt the heat of the fever creeping up on her again.

"Not yet," Kaya's voice came, gentle, but commanding. The heat disappeared and she was aware of him holding her up.

"Is she all right?" the servant girl asked.

"She's a bit sick, Temar," Kaya answered.

"Oh." Temar left it at that.

"My lords and ladies," Lormar interrupted with a slight bow, gesturing toward the door. They followed him along that level of the castle and into a large room with an expansive balcony looking out on the courtyard. A table was set with places for them all. Lormar took the head seat with Kaya in the seat of honor at his right. Kaya asked Aspen to sit next to him and she did so with a bit of uneasiness.

As the meal was served Lormar began asking Kaya about his journey to and from the Blue Mountains. Kaya openly told most of the story, much to the shock of his friends. Sarina tried to hush him up once, but a simple look silenced her. Lormar listened intently and leaned back as far as he could when the young Man had finished.

"Leave us," he directed the guard. Debus also turned to leave.

"Debus, you stay here!" the general commanded. "Sit down." The officer numbly took a seat at the far end of the table. Lormar leaned forward and looked at Kaya.

"I wish to speak with you on an important matter, Lord Creon Kaya," he began, drawing the scroll out of his cloak. "It was many years ago that I found this scroll in the library of the Warrior King. The moment I touched it, I knew it was something special, something that was different from all the rest of the books I had ever seen or held. I had just been having a particularly painful bout with my sickness and I thought this might give me some comfort. When I opened it and read the first words, my first thought was, 'Blasphemy!' It said that Creator God was King, not the Warrior King. I couldn't understand it and nearly tossed it into the flames, but then I remembered the feeling that I had, when I first picked it up. I hid it from Elam's eyes and began reading it; and so became a traitor to my king." The old Man looked up, eyes stained with tears.

"I have come to believe that Creator God is stronger than the Warrior King," he continued. "But there are many things that scare me, because I really am an enemy of the true King. This scroll gives me no further answers. All truths are veiled to me except for two: that I am against Creator God and that that means that I will be punished for eternity. Now tell me, Lord Seer, *is there any way to escape this punishment and be with Creator God?*" The question rang in the empty air. Kaya was silent as he picked up the scroll that Lormar had gently lain on the table. He rolled it open and instantly knew that it was a copy of the book of the Kings. Having read Hrosca's copy he rolled through it to the place that had been taken from the Book of Priests, the place that had given him such comfort.

*"Blessed is the man, whose sin the Lord does not count against him,"<sup>1</sup>* he read and then slid down the column. *"You do not delight in sacrifices, or I would bring it; / you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. / The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; / a broken and contrite heart, / O God, you will not despise."<sup>2</sup>* He rolled up the scroll and looked at the general.

"Do you understand what is written here, General Lormar?" he asked quietly, his voice soft, deferent, a subordinate to his leader. The old Man pondered it a bit and suddenly realized that, yes he could understand it. A change of heart was needed.

"Yes," he said haltingly. "I believe I do understand. I must decide that I will follow the Creator. Is that right?" Kaya nodded, a smile brightening his countenance. But the old man's brow remained furrowed.

"But how can he accept me?" he queried "I am his enemy!" He banged his cane against the ground angrily.

"The Creator is compassionate and forgiving, General," the Seer replied, authority shining through his voice. "He has told me so himself. You have the chance to change your allegiance to him. If you do that he will accept you."

"Then I must." The old man sighed, eyes now shining as the fact that he could be forgiven dawned on him.

"You have understood," the Seer affirmed "You've told me that you want to be on Creator God's side. Have you ever told him?" Lormar shook his head.

"How can I?" he asked.

"Talk to him, just like I'm speaking with you."

"I can do that?" the general asked, surprised. "He'll here me?" Kaya nodded.

"Let's do it now." Uncertain what to do, Lormar pushed himself away from the table and fell to his knees, his head nearly touching the ground as he placed his palms down to hold himself up.

"Creator God," he began in a halting voice. "I want to pledge my allegiance to you and make you my King. I am unworthy to come to you, but I swear I will never betray you if you take me as your servant. So here I am, take me." Suddenly a great Presence rested on the room and Kaya arose, gently holding his hands over the white head.

"Rise, Lormar, and be the Warlord of Creator God," he rumbled into the stillness, "to smite the evil with your sword as you cut down the good with the sword of the Warrior King. You are his servant now!" He touched the general on the shoulder and repeated, "Rise!"

The old Man pushed himself back up and slowly rose and then straightened up until he stood as straight and tall as any Man. He felt his back.

"I – I am healed!" he cried joyfully. "I am healed. Praise you, Creator God."

On his side of the table Debus had watched, knowing that it would come to this. He had pledged himself to go where his leader would. If Lormar would accept this Creator God, then he would, too. He stood and strode to Creon Kaya.

"Seer, I, too, believe that Creator God wants me. May I do the same?" Kaya nodded and smiled as Debus knelt and prayed a prayer like Lormar's. When he rose again Kaya looked into his eyes and the Light within him moved again, whispering the words.

"Thus says Creator God," the Seer declared in the large voice, "I will use you as a hammer against a foe, a hammer that will shatter the rock and then be broken by the shards. You are to stand in the evil day and prevail, then I will take you home." Debus blinked. He had understood the words clearly enough, but not what they really meant. However, something told him that he should not ask. He would understand when the time was right.



## Aspen's War

Lormar's conversion quickly put the rumor of his popularity among the troops to the test, but it also displayed his brilliant mind for strategy. Before even calling the Seer in, he'd culled the ranks, putting his

most loyal officers in charge of the castle itself and positioning most of those whom he was uncertain back in the large tent city to the west of Stein. He then assembled the commanders of his body-guard and of the army. He received them standing in his office, unaided by the cane, strong and virile as he hadn't been for years. The commanders were wide-eyed at the transformation and Kaya noted to his satisfaction that some were whispering to each other, but they became silent as the old man raised a hand.

"I have called you here to announce that I have changed my allegiance," he announced boldly. "I no longer serve the Warrior King." There was some mumbling among the commanders of the army about this, as they still felt that they owed the Warrior King something.

"The Seer's God healed me, showing me that *he* is a real God, not like Elam," Lormar continued. "Besides, it is not meet that the Warrior King would declare himself a god. He has not given us anything but war for 150 years. It is time we did something about that."

"Rebellion, sir?" one of the commanders asked, his voice tinged with excitement.

"If that is what you want to call it," the Warlord replied calmly. He gave each of them a piercing glance. "I will not command anyone to join me. You know that I have never done that." The officers present nodded at that. Each of them had come into this company because of their love for the old man.

"When have you ever heard of Lormar the Westron to fight a lost cause?" one of his bodyguards pointed out to the others.

"Never," affirmed another commander and Kaya watched a little smile play around the old man's lips.

"The Warrior King's cause is lost," Lormar announced boldly. "The Seer is here and he will see to overthrowing Elam and ushering in an age of peace. Our task is to see that the Warrior King's army and Warlords don't offer any resistance."

"That is good," another officer said with a savage grin. "Finally we'll get to fight some *real* warriors rather than these pansies that the Warrior King has been siccing us on." There was quite vocal agreement to this among the others.

"But what about the men, sir?" another officer asked. The old man motioned to Debus who stood at his right hand.

"You will go and give them a choice," the lieutenant explained. "They may join us or leave. Those who don't wish to stay have until sunset two days from now to clear out or to be detained by those who are loyal to Lormar."

"Sir?" one of the officers demanded, surprised. "You're going to give them a *choice*?"

"You heard me correctly, Pendran," Lormar replied. "I have *never* forced anyone to fight for me and I won't do so now, either." Pendran shrugged.

"As you say, sir. We're all with you."

"Thank you, men," Lormar said with feeling. "We will have a strategy session tomorrow afternoon. See to your men." The officers of Lormar's rebel army saluted and quickly left the room.

"So what do you say now, Lord Seer?" the old man asked, turning to his guest. Kaya smiled into his beard.

"I think that the Creator has a mighty Warlord at his disposal," he answered and gave a half-bow. "Now, if you'll excuse me, General, I have a sick Woodmaid to tend to."

"As you wish, Lord Seer." And here the old man bowed. "I wish to thank you, Creon Kaya," he said warmly, taking the young Man's hands in his own, hazel eyes glistening with unshed tears. "You have set me free from Elam's yoke, in more ways than one."

"I was just the vessel," the Seer replied evenly. "It was the Almighty who did that for you, General Lormar."

"But the vessel must be thanked for his willingness to carry the Creator's strength within him, must he not?" Kaya colored at this.

"Perhaps," was all he muttered, an embarrassed smile on his lips.

"For certain," the general pressed and let go of his new friend's hands. "Now, go see to your Woodmaid."

To Aspen the evening had carried the quality of a dream, the haze in the back of her head often threatening to overcome her. Somehow she knew that it was only Creon's will that kept it back and that when he released it, it would consume her again. The healing of the general and the prophecy over Debus did not leave her untouched, burning themselves into her mind and with it the thought that if the Creator could heal one of the Warrior King's henchmen and bring two of them to his side, couldn't he do the same for her? She tried to push the thought away, but it would not release her, not even as she started back to the house, stomach churning, the heat rising within. She hardly made it home before she threw up all she had eaten and collapsed. Sarina and Temar undressed Aspen and put her to bed, the dark-haired girl taking the first watch over the stricken Woodmaid. When Kaya returned it was clear he already knew that the Woodmaid had relapsed. He just nodded sadly at what his sister told him and sat down at Aspen's bedside.

Aspen could feel the tendrils of a familiar, but unknown sickness clinging to her. She was tossed to and fro between memories, hearing voices, faces, then her mother peeled herself out of the murk.

"Mama!" she cried out, but her mother's face just looked at her sadly. She could see her father behind Savannah. Their conversation was indistinct, but as she watched, she saw Kavak lay his hand on her mother's shoulder and the two rose, out of her line of sight. Another person came into the room, spoke briefly to Kavak and fell down next to Aspen. She could hear the person sobbing. He looked up for a moment and she saw the features of Creon Kaya, twisted in grief. He mumbled something and she wanted to reach out and comfort him, but she couldn't move. It was all so cold, as if – as if she were – dead.

"No!" No one heard the silent scream. As she watched, she felt her lifeless body be picked up by other young Woodmaids, stripped, gently washed, and then dressed again. Then she was laid on a low bier and borne up. It was not four men that were carrying her, but one alone. She tried to turn her head, but couldn't. The man bent his face and with a shock she saw Kaya. He'd shaved off his beard and cut his hair short – just like on the Island. He gently laid her in the shallow grave and turned. She could hear him say something and then he turned back. This time she could hear what he said.

"Farewell, my beloved," he sighed and dropped some of the rich, moist dirt on her.

"Stop it! I'm alive!" she screamed, but suddenly realized that it wasn't dirt, but water. She was thrashing through that hellish river again, only somehow she knew that it was real this time, not a dream. She tried to swim against the current, but couldn't make it. She felt herself drifting toward the waterfall and suddenly saw the big figure on the rock. *I can't do this alone*, she thought within herself.

"Help me!" she screamed.

"Take my hand!" the figure called, thrusting out his shining right. Aspen tried to swim over and reach up.

"I can't," she cried, "I'm too far away. Help me, please."

"You aren't that far," the figure encouraged her. "Reach out, Aspen, I'll catch you." With her last strength she reached up and the shining hand closed over hers, as strong as steel, but soft as a fawn's fur. She felt herself pulled up and was suddenly standing on a plateau, high above the Seven Nations. She could see the Death March and Tashyer before her. She even thought she could see the Island that was her home. She looked around the plateau and saw no one. A chill of solitude stole over her and the darkness within rose, whispering, *He has saved you only to leave you*. She pushed the thought away.

"Is – is anyone here?" she asked timidly.

"Yes, Aspen, I'm here," the voice of her rescuer came.

"Where?" she asked, staring around wildly. Suddenly the gray clouds filled with a shining and shimmering collage of colors and light. The Voice spoke again.

"I am here, Aspen, everywhere," it said. "I am the one who made you." Aspen's mouth dropped open and she sank to her knees. Only then did she sense the great Presence that she had felt around Creon Kaya. Guilt and shame weighed down on her and she thought of the battle she had fought. She remembered how she had viewed Creator God: a powerful force somewhere out there that controlled the most important things, but who never had time for one person alone. Suddenly she remembered the advice she'd given Creon so long ago: *cast your cares on Creator God....* Had she really believed that? No, she hadn't, and that fact added to her shame.

"Please go away or kill me," she whimpered. "I – I can't stand in front of you, because I'm sinful." She broke down on the ground and let her tears flow freely.

"Child of the Wood," Creator God asked gently, "don't you believe that I can heal you?"

"My parents said you can," Aspen sobbed into the dirt, "but I don't know." She drew a shaky breath, ready to place her whole self into these next words. "Please heal me, if you can." The words were said from her heart and suddenly she felt herself being lifted up. It was as if a great, gentle hand reached out and wiped away her tears and the grime on her face. With it the feelings of guilt and shame vanished.

"You are mine now, Aspen," the Voice said and laughed. "And you will *never* be alone again, ever." Aspen filled with such joy that she laughed along and she could feel all creation joining in her bliss.

"I am your security, Aspen *kiz Kavak*," the Creator whispered gently. "No one else will be as I am. Where I am there you are safe, regardless of the dangers you will face. Remember that."

"But, sir, am I dead?" she asked timidly, remembering what had happened to her.

"No, I have work for you to do, my child," she heard the Creator say. "Your time will come, but it is not for you to know when. You must help my servant, Creon Kaya, with all of your strength and what I will give you. Join him and heal those who need it. Your command of your healing powers is restored now, my dear one." The Light paused, giving her a moment to absorb what he'd said. Then he spoke again, a strange heaviness tinting his words.

"You will see and hear things that you will find hard to understand or believe, Aspen, but don't be offended at them, for they are my secrets." Again she felt the gentle touch of the Creator and closed her eyes.

"So my child, you must return to your home. Your beloved is praying and waiting for you. Never forget, my child, that you are mine and I will never leave you." The words echoed gently in her ears as she felt herself drifting for a moment, the moment between sleeping and waking. Then she took a deep breath and opened her eyes.

# Three: Keritos

## Plans

The room was shaded, pale winter light just barely peeking in around the heavy draperies over the window. Aspen found herself lying on a low bed, covered with a white sheet. She looked around and recognized the room that she had stayed in at Stein. She pulled an arm out from under the sheet and put it to her forehead, wondering exactly why she was here, forcing her sluggish mind to go over all that had happened in the past few days. The thrill of her meeting with the Creator still lay across her and she felt like she was floating. She grasped the edge of her sheet and was about to get up when she heard a quiet mumbling next to her bed. She looked over and saw Kaya sitting there, his head resting on his right hand, asleep. She hesitated, but then decided to get up quietly and dress and was just about to do so, when the young Man's gray eyes blinked open. He stared around the room a bit bewildered, before letting his eyes rest on the bed. At that instant their eyes met.

"Aspen!" he cried joyfully. "You – you've made it! You're alive!" He sank to his knees beside her.

"I'm alive," she affirmed breathlessly, suddenly wanting him to enfold her in his embrace, but all he did was take one hand briefly.

"Praise the Creator!" he said, tears of joy in his eyes, and his voice failed, gazing at her for a long moment.

"I'll go so you can get up," he told her then. "Should I send Sarina?"

"No – no thanks," she was able to say, his delight leaving her speechless. Kaya smiled, gently stroked her hair, and left the room. As soon as he was gone Aspen got up, washed and dressed herself in the beautiful gown given her by the Karyl. With that she stepped out of the room.

It took her a while to find anyone in the house, but she finally was able to locate Kaya in the library. A thrill took him as he looked up and saw her standing in the doorway. Just from the way she walked into the room he could tell that this was *his* Aspen, the one he had known on the Island, pure and a servant of the Creator. Even so he felt exceedingly shy as she approached. It was as if his even talking to her might mar the purity that she now had and he wondered if she felt the same way. To him it was as if they were just about to meet each other for the first time.

Kaya took a deep breath and decided to make the approach.

"Hello," he said timidly. Aspen smiled.

"Hello." Her voice was soft, carrying a note of admiration that Kaya hadn't heard before. The two of them gazed at each other, speechless, unable to think of what to say.

"Shall we sit down?" she suggested after a moment, gesturing towards one of the benches that Baltar kept in the library. Kaya just nodded, relishing at the shine in her eyes and the soft luminescence of her face. She led the way to the bench and the young Man followed, unable to take his eyes off of her. Aspen had *returned!*

"What happened?" he asked once they sat down on the bench.

"I met Creator God, just like you did," Aspen answered and told him of her dream – or was it reality?

"Wow!" was all he said, shaking his head, remembering his own experience with the Creator

"How long was I sick?" she asked, cutting into his reverie.

"About two weeks," he began and suddenly stopped, thinking how there was so much to fill her in on. He only now realized all the things he had discussed with Lormar, Baltar, and Eli, the new Lord of Stein. Aspen leaned forward to look into his face.

"What?" she asked playfully.

"I – I'm trying to figure out where to begin," he explained. "So much has happened. The strangest thing was what happened to you. At first you were very hot and couldn't lay still. We had a lot of trouble feeding you. Temar and Sarina just labored over you most of the time..."

"And I bet you did, too," she interjected with a smile. He colored slightly.

"As much as was proper," he mumbled, unsuccessfully trying to hide his embarrassment.

"Hey, it's all right," she said, gently laying a hand on his shoulder. "I know you cared." He nodded, brushed the feeling away forcibly and continued his narrative.

"About four days ago you stopped moving totally and hardly breathed. We all thought you were dead, but somehow we didn't have the nerve to bury you. Praise the Creator we didn't." He grasped her hand briefly, then drew back. "I sat by your bed from the moment I found out until today and you're well again." He stopped again, his heart feeling like it was going to burst with joy, then impulsively he reached out and drew her to himself in a warm embrace her.

"Welcome back!" he laughed. She sighed, enjoying the freedom of the contact between them and was almost sad as he pulled away again, this time grasping her hand, not letting it go.

"What else happened?" she wanted to know.

"A lot," he continued. "I've been talking with Lormar and some other people. We've been trying to decide what to do next, aside from praying for you. They'll be amazed at what happened to you. We're getting together tonight for another planning session. Will you be there?" Aspen nodded.

"If you want me to," she said, inclining her head and looking at him through her lashes. They were quiet then and Kaya reached up to touch her red hair which she had tied back loosely with a white piece of cloth, so as to cover her pointed ears. The soft green eyes looked at him full of admiration in her fair, oval-shaped face. She smiled at him, inviting, and he leaned forward to kiss her.

"Oh, here you are!" Sarina's voice cut through the still of the library. The two turned as if waking from a dream. Kaya's sister walked up, dressed in her customary trousers and tunic. She stopped short as she saw the Woodmaid sitting there.

"Aspen, you came through!" she cried, rushing to her friend and giving her a quick hug.

"Are they here?" Kaya asked after Sarina had straightened up. She nodded.

"They're in the study."

"Then let's not keep them waiting," Aspen suggested and the three hurried off to Baltar's office.

Aspen's appearance caused a bit of a stir among those who knew where she had been the past two weeks. Baltar rolled his chair over and in an uncustomary gesture of affection kissed her hand. Temar rushed in to give the Woodmaid a hug before vanishing off to her new tasks in Baltar's household. Lormar, ever the reserved strategist, asked her for a report on her condition, which she obliged them all with. When she was finished the general nodded gravely, though a smile played at the edges of his lips.

"It is a miracle, Lady Aspen," he summarized, "one far greater than the one that happened to me." She blushed and smiled at that comment, unsure of what to say.

"Well," Kaya picked up the thread of the meeting, "now that Aspen's better, we should finally decide which plan to put into action."

The discussion was rather confusing for Aspen who hadn't been in on all of the planning, but after a while it became clear to her that there were basically two plans, the first being that they would move forward with the bulk of Lormar's army, leaving about a quarter to guard the fortress. Baltar and Debus strongly favored this plan, along with the two other commanders of Lormar's forces. Kaya pointed out that it would take too long to get the army mobile, and besides, he had business in Eison which would not allow them to take the faster road through the Northern Provinces.

"Not to mention that it's the dead of winter and it doesn't thaw there until the fifth moon-cycle after the Dark Day," Lormar agreed.

The second plan, the one that was finally agreed upon, was the one that the Seer and the general had hit upon separately but at the same time. Lormar, Debus, Aspen and Creon were to travel on into Pwyllwood with a small contingent of Lormar's bodyguard. Meanwhile the army would winter in the more moderate climate of Stein, before preparing to march back to Elamil in the late spring.

"That way Elam won't get word about our change of heart too soon," the general pointed out.

When the small company reached Eison, Lormar and Debus wanted to head north and pick up some people they knew were against the Warrior King.

"So what about this Keritos?" Baltar asked, echoing the Seer's question from an earlier session that had gotten interrupted.

"He is a very dangerous Man," Lormar sighed. "Sometimes I even wonder if he is a Man anymore. He seems to be – less than human – that's the only way to describe it. It is even said that he is a corpse brought back to life by Elam."

"Isn't that just a rumor?" Kaya returned, stomach roiling at that thought.

"There may be some truth to it," the general answered. "For one thing he never sleeps and never eats. He doesn't even enjoy women. The only thing he does is kill, kill, kill. I had him in my ranks once and he was so savage that I told the Warrior King that Keritos would make a good Warlord. He was the last to join us before Savash." Kaya clenched his teeth and glanced at Aspen. His one look made it clear to her what he was thinking: this was not going to be easy.



## Sundering

**E**ison hadn't changed at all, a light dusting of snow just barely covering the grime and grit of the iron city. Savash slowly dismounted and looked around the temple complex, wondering where Lilya might have gone to. He had exchanged his silver armor for the black-and-leather with the crimson officer's cloak, so as to be able to mingle among the people normally. He tied his horse to one of the rings supplied for that and slowly ventured out over the vast marble courtyard.

"Hello, handsome!" called one of the priestesses. "Are you looking for some company?" This girl was very young, probably just initiated. Somehow the thought of that gave the prince a hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"No – well, yes. I was looking for Lilya."

"Who?" Her suggestive pose failed as it seemed to her that this man had a special woman to worship with.

"Lilya, she's a priestess here." The girl shrugged.

"Never heard of her. After all, I've only been here a few months. Perhaps the high priestess...?" And with that she drifted away, looking for different quarry.

Savash turned and marched up the first set of marble stairs, walked around the right side of the building to a large, ornate door. He paused, remembering his earlier dealings with the high priestess. They had not exactly been pleasant, but this must be done, so he gritted his teeth and knocked. After a few minutes the door was opened by a girl child of about twelve, who was wearing a loose-fitting, see-throughish crimson dress. Her eyes were strangely tear-stained and her voice quavered as she asked Savash what he wanted.

"I wish to speak with the high priestess on a personal matter."

"Your name?" It was accompanied by a sob.

"Savash, son of Elam." The girl turned and relayed the message, a shiver from the cold catching her. The young Man could hear a voice from inside say something and slowly the girl opened the door all the way. Savash entered into the lavish quarters of the high priestess of Istek, the incarnation of the goddess. She was dressed in a light white robe, a gold ring on her right hand, rich jewelry around her neck. Her long, brown hair was loose down her back and it was clear that this woman did not know what shame was as she greeted the Warlord.

"What is it you wish, my lord?" the priestess said, motioning for the girl to come to her. The child obeyed and the woman took it on her lap and wrapped her arms around it. Savash could tell that this was not a mother holding her child.

"I'm looking for Lilya," he explained evenly, looking away from the woman.

"The daughter of Muriel?" The priestess raised one eyebrow. "Ah yes, she's been gone for some time now – I believe it's been nearly a year. She had served her term and left of her own accord. Perhaps it had something to do with a young man?" A sad look crossed the woman's face. "And she was so talented. She might have been high priestess some day."

"Where might I find her?" Savash pressed, leaning forward, glaring back. All he wanted now was to get out of this oppressive room.

"I don't know. She might have left Eison, she might still be here. You will have to find her. But, dear lord," she gave him a seductive smile, "aren't you going to worship the goddess herself while you are here? There is no greater blessing for a man or woman!" *The goddess herself* – the high priestess viewed herself as Istek incarnate, Savash knew.

"Perhaps later, my lady. I am in the middle of preparing for a battle and you know that my namesake, the god of war, does not consort with the queen of love when he is doing battle." He hoped that the religious language would impress the priestess and it seemed it did.

"Very well, Lord Savash," she said raising her head and giving him a long, nearly hypnotic look. "But return soon." And with that hurried from the room to reclaim his horse and return to his troops.

As Savash turned to leave he noticed that his horse was limping. Slowly he lifted the wounded hoof and saw that it was missing a shoe. Well, Eison was full of blacksmiths. It wouldn't be difficult to find one who would fix the problem. So perhaps it was fate that led him right to Rushtu's smithy. The blacksmith seemed friendly enough, but Savash still thought that the little man with the bald head eyed him suspiciously as he led the horse into the stall, where it was hobbled and held by two new apprentices. Savash then slowly walked back out into the yard, dwelling on the fact that this mission had failed. Lilya was gone and with it his friendship with her. *Am I fated to be alone?* he wondered.

Someone laughing and chattering in the house tore him from his reverie and a short person came bustling out, a basket full of wet clothing in her arms. Savash didn't have time to step out of the way and the little woman walked right into him. She turned shining dark eyes on him and said, "Sorry." *Wait a minute!* he thought staring at her.

"Lilya!"

"Oh, Savash!" she answered with a radiant smile and set down the basket. "You're back again. For long?" He took a good moment to look at her, noticing how she had grown and was a bit rounder than when she'd been in the temple, but that made her all the more beautiful. Her hair was pulled back, her sleeves rolled up, and her hands rather damp.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"Oh, I'm taking care of Rushtu's household. Sort of a servant." She picked up the basket again and walked across the yard to where the clothes lines hung.

"So what brought you back to Eison?"

"You – and Creon."

"Oh." Lilya bit her lip. "You know, Savash, I don't do that any more," she said, bending down to take the wash out of the basket.

"I heard," he returned just a bit harshly. "But I wanted to see my friends once more."

"Your friends?" she asked, hanging up what she was holding.

"Aren't you one of them?" he wanted to know, unable to keep the accusation out of his voice.

"Of course, of course." She suddenly seemed very perplexed and put her hands on her face.

"What is it?"

"It's just that I was wondering what you mean by friendship – at least between you and me." She dropped her hands and looked him squarely in the face. The eyes were more serious than he'd ever seen them before.

"You see, Savash, I'll be your friend gladly, but not your consort. I can't do that anymore. I'm waiting."

"For Creon, I suspect," he snapped at her, suddenly becoming very sullen.

"No. Not for Creon. He already has a girl and he's going to marry her. I'm waiting for *my* man."

"So who is it?" He made a movement as if he wanted to draw his dagger.

"No one, at least not yet."

"And me?" She looked at him very sadly.

"No, at least not yet." She took a step forward and gently laid one hand on his arm. "Listen, Savash, our different views of the world keep us apart. I can't be your consort, because it's wrong. The Creator forbids it. I could marry you, but I know you don't want that and I'm not sure I want it either. It's only been about a year since I left my old way of life and I need to learn the new one better. Forgive me."

"So I've lost one of my only friends," the Warlord snapped, face taking on a cast as if he'd just had to swallow something exceedingly bitter. He stepped by her and marched back across the yard. Lilya looked after him and pressed one hand to her mouth, suddenly wondering if she'd made a mistake.

"Creator God," she murmured. "What can I do to help him?"

The horse was already finished and Savash then quickly paid Rushtu and mounted his steed. Lilya came over and grabbed the halter of the horse.

"Savash, will I see you again?" she asked just a slight quaver in her voice.

"Maybe," he snapped and charged out of the compound.

"Poor Savash," she sighed as she stared after him.

"And why is that?" the blacksmith wanted to know.

"He thinks that he's lost all his friends, but doesn't understand that his best ones are still here and worry about him." She quickly wiped at her eyes. "I just hope that Creon can find him."

"Yes, maybe," Rushtu thundered back. "He would make a fine man if only he knew the Creator."



## The Welcoming Committee

A company of about ten mounted travelers halted at a large overhanging rock close to the edge of Tashyer. Kaya gratefully got off his horse, stretching his legs to ease the stiffness in his thighs, pressing a hand to his back. He would have much rather driven a wagon, but that would have given them a lot more problems in crossing Tashyer, and so he was forced to ride, something he had only done once or twice before. He painfully settled down beside one of the large boulders and looked across the plain to where the Kizilirmak ran. Only a matter of a league separated them from Keritos' grasp. Kaya was optimistic as he thought of the black Warlord. After all he had taken care of three up until now, why should there be any problem with the fourth?

"Hungry?" Aspen sat down next to him with her saddlebags in her hand.

"Yes," he answered, clenching his teeth as another pang assailed his lower back. He watched her a bit enviously as she unpacked the foodstuffs. She didn't look one bit sore, no, she even had good conversations with her horse! The bay mare Aspen had been riding came over and laid its long face over her shoulder. The Woodmaid laughed and pushed the horse away gently.

"Sorry," she said in her language, "I can't give you anything. You've got grass to eat."

"And precious little of that," muttered the horse. Kaya blinked and drew a sharp breath. He had understood it.

"And you?" the mare asked him kindly. "Would you have anything for me?" Kaya was too surprised to answer at first, but then recovered his speech and told her no.

"It can't be helped," the horse answered and trotted over to graze on the coarse, brown lichen of Tashyer.

"You've finally learned to understand them!" Aspen exclaimed, passing him a piece of dry bread.

"I guess. It just surprised me so much when I understood what the horse said." He shook his head, still unbelieving and bit into the bread.

As twilight came out to play, light clouds obscured the stars, letting a light rain mingled with snow drift down from heaven, making an already miserable day worse. Lormar sent one of the soldiers ahead to scout out Kizilirmak. Kaya stepped out of the shelter of the rocks to watch him go, then stepped back beneath the shelter where Lormar and Debus were already discussing their next plans. The general looked up and noticed the Seer.

"Come sit down, Kaya," he invited. "We want to know what you think about this." Kaya nodded and sat down. Lormar spread a large piece of paper out and the others inched closer curiously.

"What is it?" Kaya asked, noticing a lot of strange lines and shapes on it.

"It's a map of the eastern parts of Pwyllwood," Debus explained. "We were trying to decide what to do here. Now there are two possibilities of how to get to Eison: The one with the least risks is to run up to the Bitter Lakes in the north and cross through them." His finger traced the route on the map. "This would take two or three weeks longer, but it would be safer from Keritos and his army. There is one other drawback about the north and that is the snow. It doesn't thaw up there until about the fifth month and so is dangerous for the horses. The other way is straight across and through Kizilirmak," he jabbed at the dot, "but this carries the greater risk of encountering Keritos."

*Why should we run away from that guy anyway?* Kaya asked himself. *There should be no problem with him.* Aspen seemed to know what he was thinking and laid her hand on his arm.

"I say north," she said. Kaya paused for a long moment trying to discern what it was the Light wanted, but the only thing he sensed was urgency.

"No, we don't have any time to loose," he declared. "We'll go south."

"You know the risks?" Debus asked pointedly.

"Of course, don't you think that's why we took such a *small company*?" the Seer snapped, angry that the Light was not answering him.

"You have a point," Lormar said thoughtfully. "You know my mind on this mission, but I see the urgency. So be it, let's go south."

Kaya still didn't feel comfortable with the decision or the urgency burning in his chest as he flopped down in his place, far enough from the others to be alone, but close enough to the fire to still feel some of its warmth. Why was the Creator not answering. *I need your wisdom, Lord*, he prayed silently.

"Hey," came a soft voice beside him and he looked over to see Aspen who had sat down next to him, a cup of steaming soup in her hand. "Have some dinner, luv," she told him and he took the cup, cradling it in his hands.

"You're not sure about this are you?" she asked gently when he'd taken a few sips.

"No," he admitted grudgingly, "and I'm not sure why."

"It will work out," she whispered.

"But at what *cost*?" he demanded, voice rising just a bit. He remembered the others and lowered his voice again.

"Aspen, I can't seem to get the Creator's opinion on this," he told her, trying to keep the panic from his eyes. "It's like he won't tell me. All I know is that it's important we get to Eison as fast as humanly possible – before winter is out!"

"Then hold on to that, Creon dear," she told him. "Sometimes the Creator makes us use our own judgment rather than rely on him for all the answers." The wisdom of her words dawned on him and he took her hand.

"Thank you, beloved," he said softly and she smiled. "We'll see in the morning."

The messenger returned at daybreak, saying that all was clear at Kizilirmak. That bothered Lormar, who said so, and Kaya, who kept it to himself. Even so they left for the village. By early afternoon they had crossed the bridge and entered the town. Nothing looked out of the ordinary.

"That bothers me," Kaya mentioned to Aspen.

"What were you expecting?" she asked him.

"Oh, I don't know – anything unusual." They dismounted in front of an inn and rented rooms for the night, pretending to be merchants on their way to purchase iron-ware in Eison.

"If Keritos isn't here now, he'll be here by nightfall tomorrow," Lormar cautioned that evening. "Let's be ready to go early tomorrow morning, almost as soon as the sun rises. We'll rest here, because we'll need all the strength we can get for the time ahead."

Kaya nodded, trying to brush away the uneasy feeling he had. *Why do I feel like this anyway?* he asked himself. *This one shouldn't be any different than the other three...* He didn't realize how wrong he was until he met Keritos.

A blast of chill air woke Kaya the following morning. He looked up to see his roommate, a man called Burne, had opened the window.

"Cold air always wakes us easily," the soldier exclaimed, tending to his clothes. Kaya sighed, shook his head and got up to wash and dress. He felt they might make it out before Keritos and his scouts arrived. He stole a glance out of his window and his heart stopped ...

"Burne," he called softly. Lormar's man came close enough to see what Kaya saw and let out a low curse. The whole inn was surrounded by soldiers dressed in black and leather uniforms.

"Get your pack, maybe we can get out of here," he snapped. The Seer nodded, reached over and picked up Justin. The weight of the silver blade resting on his back gave him a sense of safety.

"Creon Kaya!" the gentle Voice called, but the young Man ignored it as he left the room. They needed to get out now. He swung his pack in place as he rushed down the stairs after Burne who stopped short. Kaya bounced into him, catching his balance on the wall. Aspen, Debus, and the five of the others were surrounded by more of the Warrior King's soldiers. The Woodmaid shot an imploring look at him. He reached back to draw his sword when a hand grabbed him from behind.

"Don't do it, Kaya," Lormar hissed in his ear. "Keritos will make short work of you."

"Where is he?" the Seer whispered.

"There," Burne said nodding towards a giant figure rising out of the crowd. There was something wrong about the way it walked, making Kaya think of a marionette whose strings weren't adjusted correctly. It was tall, just under seven feet and all dressed in black, with a mask of the same color covering the face, only revealing a pair of bloodshot green eyes. A crimson arrow was stitched on the light breastplate.

"Well, well, Seer," came a deep, gargling voice. "I see you have made it this far, but you can't go much farther anymore. I have you in my clutches."

It was all Kaya could do not to tremble, realizing that this was Keritos. The Warlord unhooked the heavy club from his belt.

"I have a proposition to make," the Warlord rumbled. "You and I will battle. If you win, you and your companions go free. If I win, we will feast upon your flesh tonight."

"Don't do it," Burne hissed.

"I don't have a choice," Kaya countered, feeling the chill in his stomach. It seemed to him that the darkness had extinguished the Light and that he was alone now. *That can't be true*, part of him whispered. *Be with me now, Creator God.*

"Very well, Keritos," the Seer snapped, stepping out from behind Burne. "I will agree, if you will allow my people to come to *this* side of the room by the stairway."

"Fine," the Warlord motioned his men and they stepped aside, letting their captives join Burne and Lormar, who wisely hid himself behind his man, not wanting to draw attention to his presence. *Elam must not learn of me yet*, he thought to himself. Aspen shot a glance at her beloved as she walked past, gently brushing his arm. Kaya just nodded, not taking his eyes from his enemy.

"Shall we have a bit of one on one?" Keritos gargled. The young man wondered if he was laughing. *Lord, I got us into this fix*, he prayed silently, drawing the silver blade. *Get us out of here*. There was no answer from the quiet Voice and the young Man suddenly wondered if he even felt the Creator's Presence. Was he still Kaya or only Creon again?

As soon as Kaya stepped out to meet his enemy, Aspen knew she had to act. *We've got to do something now!* she thought and slipped up next to Lormar, whispering something in his ear. The general nodded almost invisibly, his eyes not leaving the battle. They whispered quietly for some time, watching Kaya dodge and parry the heavy club.

"Now!" Lormar said. Aspen set her jaw and let her revived healing powers chorus through herself. She knew that she would have to do this one last time, even if she would never regain them. She slowly raised her hands in front of her, palms outward, fingers spread and concentrated...

Creon Kaya began to feel the unfairness of this battle the instant he drew his sword. The great club sang threw the air and only Kaya's quick feet saved him from being mashed to pulp. Again and again Keritos came at him, the bloodshot green eyes alive with twisted pleasure. Kaya felt his strength waning quickly. The drain of horseback riding had weakened him enough that his step faltered and he just barely escaped his enemy's weapon. He stepped back, missed his footing and fell. Keritos gargled again and threw his head back, raising the spiked club above his head to deliver the final blow. Suddenly he faltered, losing his grip on the club. He spun around, but lost his balance and crashed into the ground, unconscious. Kaya stood up as quickly as his weariness would permit him and grasped his sword again. At that instant one of the soldiers leaped forward to grab Aspen's arms and tried to pin them to her sides, but she arched her back, used his momentum, and flung him over her shoulder, right into Lormar's soldiers who made quick work at him.

Kaya had only a moment to look at Aspen in surprise, before he had to slash at another soldier, who came running at him. In an instant they were enveloped in a wave of warriors. Kaya fought his way to his companions.

"We've got to get out of here!" Lormar yelled.

"Yes, but how?" Kaya returned, slicing through another enemy.

"I've got an idea," Burne cried and picked up a fallen spear. "Cover me!" He leaped on a table and took aim at the rope holding the heavy iron chandelier. An instant later it sailed down on the soldiers surging around the room and in the same motion one of Keritos' warriors went flying on top of it, unconscious. Kaya shot a surprised look to the Woodmaid behind him and she smiled back primly.

"Now!!" Lormar yelled and the small group charged over the fallen soldiers and out the door. The perimeter outside had been depleted and only a few soldiers remained, watching the horses. The animals panicked at the yelling fugitives and two of Lormar's elite bodyguards quickly took out the men. Kaya replaced his soiled sword during that pause. They were mounted within moments, Kaya behind Aspen and they charged off through the woods on their steeds, gasping for breath.

"Scared?" she asked over her shoulder

"Yeah," he panted back, feeling the adrenaline rush subside. "I'm scared all right." He trembled in the grip of naked fear as he said it.

"Me too," was all she answered through clenched teeth. He could feel her shaking also.

"Take the reigns," she ordered and he grasped them as she leaned back against him.

"We'll get out of this," he said. "Somehow..." She just barely nodded, trying to calm the violent trembling that overtook her.

"Keep going due west," Lormar's shouted above the thunder. "Debus grew up around here, he can guide us safely." Kaya nodded wearily. *What have I done?* he wondered, counting those around him. Two of their number had fallen and two were wounded, shallow, but it was enough to weaken them. And where was the Presence and the Voice of the Creator that he had learned to trust? – Gone?

"Please, no!" he whispered and pulled Aspen closer "No..."

The rest of their journey across the Pwyll was little more than a mad dash for safety. Creon Kaya was constantly looking over his shoulder, fearing that at any moment a whole hoard of armed men would round the next bend, the monstrous Warlord at their head. It never happened. That should have calmed him, but the Seer was feeling very lonely and scared at the moment. He hadn't heard the quiet Voice since the battle in the inn and that scared him to death. Was the Creator still with him, or had he left because Creon hadn't listened?

In order to atone for his wrong, Kaya kept watch most of the night himself, although there might be others who could do that. Even Aspen's pleas for him to slow down and rest went unheeded.

The days consisted of relentless riding, the company barely stopping to eat, and the nights of constant vigilance. Only the old general seemed unaffected by the journey and as the days went on the company grew sallow and hollow-eyed from lack of sleep and nutrition.

Two and a half weeks after the flight from Kizilirmak they were beset by a small contingent of soldiers that Keritos had set as a rear guard. Though outnumbered two to one, they were able to completely annihilate their enemies and flee towards Eison. The attack cost them the life of one more of their company, Aspen feeling that she bore the major responsibility, since she wasn't able to heal him. The man was hurriedly buried at the side of the trail and the companions rushed on, afraid that more soldiers would pursue them.

Finally, just as winter broke, they reached the safe haven of Eison, disheveled, disheartened, drained, and especially Creon feeling total defeat.



## An Unforgettable Meeting

The cold winds of Eison's early spring whipped through the deserted streets, not having any effect on the few spots of grayish snow that dotted the ground here and there. Kaya stared at them dully, leaning against the frame of the window to an upper room in Rushtu's complex. Out there, somewhere, was his enemy. He shivered at just the thought and turned back into the warmth of the room, closing the heavy iron shutters. He slowly sat down on the couch and stared at the floor, reviewing the three years he had been underway because of this call. He wondered what use this journey was, since now there was almost no way to escape the impending fist of Keritos.

"What now?" he asked himself. A light tap on the door made his head snap up and his hand close around the sword hilt beside him. He tried to calm himself, telling himself that the Warlord would wouldn't knock.

"Come in," he called out shakily.

Aspen stepped in, carrying a large tray, which she placed on a low table in the center of the room, and set to arranging the evening meal she'd prepared. Kaya noticed that she looked pale with shadows under her eyes and there was a general listlessness in her movements. The anxiety of waiting for the unknown was beginning to weigh on all of them. Finally she beckoned and he joined her, kneeling down beside the table. She quickly recited the Woodfolk blessing on the meal.

"I wonder if this really was so wise," Kaya muttered as he picked up a piece of the flat bread.

"What?" Aspen asked, brushing her red hair back over her shoulder.

"This whole trip. I mean, look at us. It's been three years since I've seen my parents and I haven't gained much, only enemies. What's the use of going on? – I feel like I want to give up on this, or die, or both!" He sighed sadly. The Woodmaid looked at him sharply.

"You did not mean what you said, did you?" she asked, a bit perplexed.

"I sure did," he growled, picking up a piece of the roasted meat.

"Then let me tell you something, Creon Despair," she shot back. "Nothing that you could have done would have changed the Creator's plan. If you hadn't taken this trip you would still be slaving away for your 'old man' and wishing you could get out of it. You would probably be married to some poor girl and be a mirror image of your father. You wouldn't have acquired any of the skills you have and you wouldn't know Creator God the way you do now." She paused at the next thought, tears coming to her eyes. "And I'd never – never have met you... Oh, Kaya, don't you see you're not only tearing yourself apart?" she sobbed. The young Man stared at her, slack-jawed. None of these things had ever dawned on him before. He stood up, walked around the table and put his arms around the crying Woodmaid. She tried to shake him off at first, but then submitted to his gentle, comforting caress and let him wipe her tears away.

"I'm sorry, Aspen," he said, his own voice choking with tears. "I'm sorry I said those things and no, I didn't mean them. Oh, I'm such a fool!"

"Getting to know yourself is the first step to improvement," Rushtu's loud voice cut in. He strode into the room, a grim smile on his face.

"I remember telling a young buck somewhere, that he was the most kindhearted fool I know." His keen green-gray eyes bored into Kaya. "I think the fool is more prominent than the kindness." Kaya had to smile at that.

"You certainly haven't changed, friend," he said.

"But you have," the blacksmith answered, sitting down across from them. "And you've been on the go too hard and too long. You're looking for enemies around every corner and I'm going to tell you again: the instant the dark man gets into town, I'll know it. From what the scouts say he won't be here for another four weeks. Something about having lost his elite raiding party?" Kaya and Aspen had to smile at the way Rushtu raised his eyebrows as he said it.

"Now you two love-birds need some rest," the small man continued.

"You're right, Rushtu," Kaya sighed. "We both need to get out of Eison. The Pwyll is very nice in the spring and Lormar is planning a journey to the Northern Provinces. I think we'll go along with him. Keritos will take care of himself for a while." Rushtu smiled.

"Well, I've got a forge to tend to." He looked at Kaya. "If you ever want to – you know..." He pumped his arm up and down as if swinging a hammer.

"Thanks, maybe later this afternoon," the young Man replied with a slight smile. The blacksmith nodded and left the room muttering something about good-hearted fools and lack of optimism.

"So you don't want to be alone with me?" Aspen chided playfully.

"It's only for our own protection, dear lady," he whispered in her ear. "We'll have enough time alone yet."

Three days later the small company left the gates of Eison, seemingly a group of merchants on their way to trade somewhere else. Though Lormar knew the way, and Debus knew the Pwyll very well, he was persuaded to hire a guide, Shimo, who was a good friend of Rushtu and a native of the Northern Provinces whom Kaya had met during his first stay in Eison. Aside from being an excellent guide, the short but burly Man was a great cook and had provided wonderful meals for them without fail. To Aspen's delight he could cook in the manner of the Woodfolk and so brought back memories of days long past in her home village on the island. Even Lormar was impressed.

"After all these years of either rich palace food or bad camp meals this is a real treat," he commented after a meal of especially tasty roots and vegetables. Shimo just blushed with delight, stuttering his thanks in his simple way.

They followed a long valley that ran roughly north, known as Ebediyen's Fault, for the goddess of fertility and Time. A stream flowed northeast through it, rushing to join the Kizilirmak somewhere near its mouth at the Bitter Lakes. Majestic conifers and other evergreens overshadowed the valley and here and there stood a leafless tree, looking lonely among its green cousins. Bare rocks jutted out of the steep slopes and valley floor at irregular intervals. The grass was short and coarse, just barely noticing that spring had come. Creon Kaya's spirits were instantly lifted by it and the clear air of the high Pwyllwood gave the whole world a freshness that he'd not noticed before.

Their surroundings and the life outdoors had an especially invigorating effect on Aspen. Her face had returned to its natural color again, the pallor it had displayed in the walls of Eison fleeing from the freshness of the wind. Her step was bouncy, she sang a lot and, when she thought no one was looking, she'd take a few steps of the spring dance.

They slowly traveled up the Fault for half a week, taking long rests but still moving at a fair pace, before they reached a small pass that would allow them to cross over into the Northern Provinces directly. Shimo guided them through the dizzy climb up slippery paths. They nearly lost a horse more than once, but Lormar's

men were skilled with these animals and by the time it was evening they found themselves looking out over wooded slopes similar to those of the Pwyll.

"Th-this is the southern t-tip of the P-Provinces," Shimo explained in the stutter that his companions had so come to love. "We are here in D-Dalcia. It's w-well known for its - its h-horses."

"We will have to travel on into Menia," Lormar commented. "That will be another week or so." Kaya nodded. There was a different quality of richness to the air on this side of the mountains. He'd heard that five of the nine Provinces were flat and bordered on the Bitter Lakes. It would be a joy to see these large bodies of water.

Two days later they stopped in a large clearing. In it there were a good number of great stone pillars, all standing in a perfect circle. Across the top of four or five of them were lintels, also of massive stones that no man could have lifted.

"A majestic place!" Kaya commented, patting one of the great rocks.

"Yes," Shimo answered. "Th-this was an ancient p-place of worship in this P-Province. N-no one is certain if - if it was a t-t-temple to the C-Creator or to the D-D-Destroyer. P-perhaps it was originally the C-Creator's. It - it - it's said that th-there once w-was a Portal here."

Kaya raised an eyebrow and slowly walked into the circle. In the middle was a large square stone. Behind it were two low stones that formed two sides to an empty doorway without a lintel. The young Man brushed his hand against one of them and felt characters. He paused and knelt. They were hard to read, but then finally he could make out the words. It was written in the language of the Woodfolk, but in the characters of the common tongue. His lips began to form the words.

"In the days ... Creat... spok... to Carmi. Thou shalt have ... before me ... be great and produce a great race. Find ... wom... like him. They will be a blessing..." He scanned the stone and a bit farther down he halted in surprise. "Wait! *Lif?* That's impossible!"

"What?" Aspen came over and peered over his shoulder. Kaya pointed at another name.

"And there, Yasham, and there Timuel." He glanced at Aspen. "This is a copy of the great stone of Carmi with the origin of the Woodfolk - the *real* history!" The girl stood up and gave him a questioning look.

"The ancient tales of the Woodfolk aren't quite correct about your origin, Aspen," he explained gently. And then he told her the story of Lif and Yasham the way he'd heard it from Hrosca. As he spoke her mouth dropped open and she stared at him in surprise.

"You mean what Eike told us isn't true?" she demanded, eyes flashing.

"Well, parts of it are, but only a small amount of it." He gently laid one hand on her shoulder. "Don't worry, Aspen, he didn't want to be incorrect. He just didn't know the true story, just like very few of your people do. Perhaps we need to return it to them." He looked at the stones. "I wish I could take time to copy the whole inscription. It would be easier to convince them. Ah well, later." The Woodmaid followed him thoughtfully and almost a bit unhappily, realizing that all she had ever known about her people was different and perhaps untrue. That hurt, but she kept silent.

Evening came and Kaya found that he couldn't fall asleep. Those stones were drawing him. He must look at them again. He got up and lit one of the torches they'd brought along for patrol in the evening. He patted Burne on the shoulder, who was keeping watch, and told him that he was going to take a look at the stones again. He slowly walked into the large circle of stones and towards the two low ones. He had just reached them, when suddenly he felt that the whole area was charged with energy. He looked up and saw a curtain of a low azure light descending on him. It came down slowly, like flakes of glowing snow and as it did, its glow intensified. Slowly it began to wrap around Creon Kaya like a gentle blanket.

Burne leaped up with a shout. The whole circle of stones was glowing blue! He rushed forward and could only see a wall of shifting blue-green light that gently swirled around and slowly began to rise again, vanishing into the air. An instant later it was gone and the clearing was empty. Creon Kaya was not there anymore! The soldier instantly returned the small company, shouting that the Seer had vanished. The others were on their feet in a moment, scrabbling for their weapons.

"My general," Burne panted to Lormar after describing what had happened, "could this be a foul sorcery of the Lady Alman?"

"No," Aspen answered, shivering. "It's a Portal." The others stared at her, their disbelief clearly written in their faces. She looked back at them and hugged herself, closing her eyes. That stirring within... She knew that she was being called.

"I've got to go, too," she finally said and slowly walked towards the circle.

"Lady Aspen, no!" the Lormar cried, grabbing at her shoulder. "It is much too dangerous." She turned back.

"I know that, general," she answered. "But I also know that I've got to go. I don't know how, but I've got to!" She took the old Man's hand in her own. "Please wait here until we return." With that she let go of him and rushed into the circle. As soon as she'd passed through the stones, the blue glow began again. This time it moved quicker, as if it knew that the men would try to stop her. Moments later it lifted and the clearing was empty.



**W**ake up, brother!" came a rough, but well-meaning voice. "It is not safe to rest here." Irritated, Kaya cracked open one eye and saw a shadow bending over him. He blinked against the backdrop of bright light and slowly sat up, taking in his surroundings. The hills were barren, except for a few thorny bushes. He was lying in a small bend of a steep and windy road on the eastern slope and the mid-morning sun beat down on him. He thought he could glimpse a valley somewhere below the road. Finally he turned his eyes on the man who woke him. He looked like a good-natured type with dark hair and suntanned skin, much like the farmers of Chifchi. A thick beard covered most of his face and he was dressed in what Kaya thought to be the oddest clothes. He wore a long garment that normally probably fell to his ankles. It was now pulled up between his legs and tucked into a cloth belt. He had a cloak rolled up and thrown over one shoulder, the ends again sticking in his belt and a piece of cloth on his head, fastened with a thong of leather, much like the one Hrosca had worn. His feet were sheathed in rough sandals. He blinked at Kaya kindly and offered one hand to help him up. In the other the man carried a rough sack.

Kaya had to laugh in spite of himself as he took the hand and stood.

"You ought to know, brother," the man said good-naturedly, "that it is dangerous to travel up to Jerusalem alone."

"Eh – what?" Kaya finally asked, recovering his speech.

"You are on your way to the holy city, aren't you?" the other asked.

"I – I'm not sure," the young Man answered, still bewildered. Suddenly he remembered: the blue light, then that floating sensation, just like when he had been borne up in the Creator's loving arms, then finally he found himself in this bend in the wee hours of the night, where he had fallen asleep, exhausted. *Where am I?* he wondered, his thoughts slowly clicking into order.

"Well, wherever you're going, you won't get there without some breakfast, will you, brother?" his companion said, sitting down and opening his sack. Kaya sat down next to him.

"Why do you call me brother?" Kaya asked. "I don't even know you!" The other man gave him a sharp look, which then disintegrated into gentle humor.

"You aren't a son of Abraham?" he questioned. "All Jews are children of Abraham and I take you to be one of us, brother. That's why I call you so." He suddenly checked himself. "I am Nathan Bar-Shallum."

"Creon son of Adem," Kaya answered. "I am called Kaya." Nathan looked at him quizzically as he fished some dry bread out of his pack.

"Creon ... Kaya ... hm," he mused. "Those are very strange names, not Greek or Roman I suppose, though your first ... hm. Maybe your mother named you," he dismissed it with a wave of his hand and passed the bread to Kaya. "They always think up strange names for their children. Your father, however, must be a son of Abraham. His name is like that of the first man, Adam." He passed Kaya a couple of dried figs. The young Man noticed that these tasted different from the figs he'd eaten back – there, where ever he came from. Sweeter maybe? He couldn't decide.

"What tribe are you from anyway?" Nathan asked, biting into a piece of bread himself.

"I – I'm not sure," Kaya began, his mind racing furiously. What *tribe*? This was getting to be too much. First a "son of Abraham," now a tribe?

"I don't know," he finally admitted. "I'm not even from around here!" Bar-Shallum looked at him, amused.

"Are you from the Diaspora?" the other man asked. "You certainly look like one of us." He cocked his head to one side. "Well, perhaps your mother was a foreigner, but that's no matter. You're circumcised aren't you?"

Kaya colored at that question. Yes he was, in his mother's family's tradition, but that was beside the point.

"Yes, but..." He sighed, there was no way around it. "Let me put it this way," he pushed out. "I'm not even from your *world*."

"Now, that, brother Kaya, is the farthest out Diaspora I've ever heard of," Nathan replied good-naturedly. "You, my friend, are circumcised. You are dressed like one of us and you're on the road to Jerusalem. What more evidence can I have that you're one of us – even if you *have* forgotten your heritage? That we can remedy after we go worship, eh?" It was all Kaya could do not to roll his eyes.

"Now have a fig, my friend," the Jew pressed, "and let's get on the road before it gets too hot."

The city of Jerusalem was ancient, far older than either Stein or Eison could have been. Thick walls surrounded it and the packed streets did not smell welcoming. Nathan and Kaya shouldered their way through the masses that flowed in and out of the gateway.

"I have a real brother living here," Nathan shouted to his companion over the din. "He will be glad to put us up for two nights. While we are here, we must go up to the temple and worship." Kaya nodded, wondering who or what they worshipped. Was this God at all like the Creator? He began to get some answers that evening, as the small family sat together on the flat rooftop of their house. Yehuda Bar-Shallum, their host, greeted them warmly, then had a young boy wash their dusty feet. They washed their hands before the meal and then sat down together to "break bread," as Yehuda called it. That made Kaya suddenly think of that first time he'd dined with Kavak and he smiled to himself.

During the meal Nathan and Yehuda spoke about the temple and the happenings around the area. They often referred to "the Lord," whom Kaya took to be their God. But who was this Lord? He didn't dare voice the question, since both Men believed him to be a "son of Abraham."

"So where is that brave Rabbi, Yeshua?" Nathan finally asked.

"He's gone back to Galilee," Yehuda answered with a wave of his hand. "I think the priests and Pharisees are glad to have him out of Jerusalem, especially after what happened up at the temple near the end of the feast."

"So what happened?" Nathan asked.

"Ah, I remember," Yehuda said slyly, "you were visiting that young woman's family at that time. Anyway," he continued, re-gathering his thoughts. "I was there in the front row, listening to those old hypocrites accuse that young Rabbi of breaking the Sabbath by healing a man. And then Yeshua has the gall to proclaim that he and the only God are working on the Sabbath. 'My Father's work,' he called it.<sup>7</sup> Declaring himself one with God, that is blasphemy!" Nathan shook his head.

"I have seen this Yeshua and have heard him, right there in our home town of Bethsaida. He is no fool and I would almost believe him if he said he was the Son of God. We have waited so long for the Messiah. Could this be he?"

"Bah, he's just like the rest," Yehuda dismissed the thought. "They come and go like the morning grass. He won't last much longer."

"Perhaps," Nathan said.

From his place Kaya remained silent, taking in this interesting discussion between his host and his new friend. As he searched his mind, he found that the priests had often referred to Creator God as "Lord." It would not be surprising if those who believed in one God would use the same epithet for the true God in other worlds. The Invisible One being worshipped here was conceivable, but a *Son of God?* Impossible! Creator God was *one* God. All of the liturgies he had learned from his mother and from Hrosca said that. So what was this now? He bedded down with these thoughts in his mind and with an uncomfortable feeling he was missing something or someone. Finally as he drifted off, he remembered: Aspen.

The visit to the temple of Jerusalem would stay with Kaya forever. He remembered walking up the vast steps, then going through the purification rituals, always letting Nathan go first, so he could see what to do. Finally they sacrificed the prescribed offerings. Both were poor, so they offered two doves each, one as a sin offering, the other as a burnt offering. Kaya was impressed by this way of worship and in his knowledge of the prescriptions he'd read in the Scroll of the Priests found that his forefathers had probably worshipped the Creator similarly in his own place.

He watched old men sitting together and discussing strange things. They were splendidly arrayed, long blue shawls over the shoulders, sporting long tassels, and thick beards. They looked very proud of themselves as they discoursed on subjects like what a man may carry on the Sabbath. He did not understand why they discussed such things, but then remembered that Nathan had also called the Sabbath "the day of rest." From the parallels he'd seen so far he figured it was similar to their own day of rest. *Does the Creator deal the same way with all humans?* he wondered as they returned to Yehuda's house that evening.

The following morning they were on their way again and Kaya had finally thought of a way that he might be able to get Nathan to tell him a bit about the history of his people.

"Tell me about your history," he said to his friend as they trekked back down the hill toward a city Nathan called Jericho.

"You don't *know* your history?" the Israelite asked sharply.

"We don't talk about the sons of Abraham in our world," Kaya explained lamely.

"Your family truly must have drifted far from their study of the law." He shook his head. "And yet you perform the rites correctly and even know the words we say." He shot a curious glance at the Voyager. "How could you know the Law without the history that goes with it?"

"I have only ever read parts of the law," the young Man explained evenly. "It's the way it's been passed down among my people."

"Well, I'll teach you then, brother," Bar-Shallum said at length. "And you'd better remember to tell your parents when you return, eh?"

"That I will. That I will." *If I ever do return,* Creon Kaya thought wistfully, suddenly longing for Aspen's company.

And so the following days were a time of learning for Kaya. Nathan quoted from the scriptures and told him the story of Abraham's journeys from Ur of the Chaldees and from Haran. He told of the promised son, Isaac, who fathered Jacob, called Israel. He told of the twelve tribes of Israel, of the great leader, Moses, of the Judges, of Samuel and the King David, of the Kingdoms, the Captivity and the final release. Kaya was amazed at his companion's store of knowledge.

"I am studying to be a teacher, my friend," he explained. "It is a great honor to understand the Scriptures, but no one does so as well as the Rabbi Yeshua. I have never seen a teacher with such authority."

"Tell me about him," Kaya requested.

"He is the son of a carpenter in Nazareth," Bar-Shallum began. "He appeared a bit more than a year ago, preaching along the Jordan river. I was there listening to the one called Yohannan the Baptizer. Then *he* appeared. Yohannan called him 'the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.'<sup>8</sup> I still don't

understand what he meant by that." He shook his head. "But then he began to do miracles in Galilee. We were all excited and many still are. This was the hand of *God* after so many years!" His eyes flashed joyously. "There is still so much he teaches, so much he does that I cannot recount even a small amount of it. But there is one thing many are asking: could this be the Anointed One, the Messiah, spoken of by the Prophets?"

"Is he?" Kaya asked, a strange hope rising in his heart.

"I don't know," Nathan admitted. "Maybe he is, maybe he isn't. Perhaps you will find out for yourself. I hope you can see him."

"So do I," Kaya answered. "So do I."

Their journey took them along the shores of a broad lake, which Nathan called the Sea of Gennesaret. They passed several villages, and were just going to skirt one called Capernaum when they saw the crowd. Nathan stopped and asked one of the bystanders what was going on.

"Yeshua the Nazorean is up there," the man explained, pointing to the hill behind the village. "He's teaching the people." Kaya felt a tug at his heart. He knew he must go up there and see this man.

"Come on," he said to Nathan and began to ascend the slope, his friend trailing a short ways behind him. As they climbed they began to hear the voice of the young Rabbi. He was speaking clearly, so that the multitudes could hear him, and what words they were!

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy," he said. "Blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God..."<sup>9</sup> Kaya found himself sitting down as he listened. These were words of power and of wisdom, just like the words of Creator God!

It was late when the Rabbi finished teaching and rose from the place he was sitting. Kaya rose, too, watching the teacher descend with a small group of men behind him. As he approached, Kaya noticed that he looked familiar.

"I think I know this man," he told Nathan. The Rabbi and his disciples came closer and closer and for an instant Kaya's eyes met with Yeshua's and that instant became an eternity. As Yeshua continued on, Kaya knew that he must follow this man. He turned to Nathan.

"Nathan, here is what I've come for, to learn from the Rabbi." Nathan nodded.

"Then this is where our way parts, friend Kaya," he said sadly. "I will miss you."

"And I you," Kaya answered. They embraced in the customary style and then the young Man plunged into the churning masses to follow his new master.



## **Man of Wisdom, Man of Sorrows**

The days passed quickly as Kaya followed the young Rabbi, watched him perform miracles and listened to him teach. With every day, Kaya became ever more sure that he knew this man, but from where? The days turned into weeks and the young Man became ever more absorbed by Yeshua and his teaching. He wished that the Rabbi would stop and talk to him, just for a moment....

He found friends among the traveling companions of the Rabbi, becoming a quiet outsider. When pressed as to what he did for a living he said he was a scholar who had come to learn from the Rabbi. Yeshua did not single him out, but within a few days of at least hearing this man talk and being around him, he became reconciled to that fact and drank down this wonderful man's wisdom like a man dying of thirst would fresh water.

Only at night he thought of Aspen, whom he had left back – there, wherever that was. He sometimes thought he could sense her presence close by, as if she were just beyond those people, or just behind him, but no one was there when he looked. *Am I going crazy?* he wondered, but got no answers, so he decided to put those feelings aside and concentrate on his master.

It was a few weeks later, in the town of Capernaum that Kaya again sensed Aspen's presence. They had just left the synagogue, where Yeshua had been teaching. He furtively glanced over his shoulder and into the crowd, noticing a small group of women moving among them, all of them with long shawls over their heads in the custom of the land. He slid out of the crush of the crowd and quickly found himself standing against the wall of a house. The women would swirl by any second now. There they were. *Could it be?* he thought to himself, the sense of the Woodmaid's presence becoming ever stronger. Suddenly they were in front of him, talking quietly. One of them raised her head and looked straight at him, forest green eyes full of joy and wonder. Aspen! In an instant she was swept away in the crowd. Kaya dove back into the swirling masses and let himself be propelled along. Closer and closer, only a bit more...

"Kaya, my friend!" called a voice. *Not now, Nathan!* the young Man cried silently, but stopped. The throng pressed around him, muttering unhappily at the obstinate roadblock. He only began to move again when Nathan Bar-Shallum had reached him.

"Hello, Nathan," he said in greeting.

"Peace be with you," the Jewish man ventured.

"And you."

"You don't seem to happy to see me," Nathan observed.

"Sorry," Kaya muttered, a bit ashamed of himself. "I – I thought I saw someone I knew."

"From the look on your face it must have been a very special someone," Bar-Shallum said with a smile. Kaya nodded sheepishly.

"There's nothing to be ashamed of, my friend. After all, didn't the Lord create us male and female?" Nathan laughed and stroked his beard. Kaya found himself caught up in the mirth. *She's here*, he thought to himself at the same time. *She's here, seeing what I'm seeing, hearing what I'm hearing. What a wonderful thing to share!*

"You won't have to worry about catching up with her," his friend continued, "almost everyone knows everyone in this town and finding her is a mere question away, but you should consult her family beforehand." Here he nodded conspiratorially.

"Nathan," Kaya said as gently as he could, "she's – she's not from here either."

"From where you come from, I expect?"

"Exactly." Nathan shrugged.

"So, you wait until you're back. No harm done." *If we ever get back*, Kaya said to himself, and suddenly was not so sure he wanted to leave.

"Well, we'll see," he said. "Let's find the Rabbi."

The journey turned them south again, toward Jerusalem. Kaya followed along in the masses, alone, pondering the things that had happened in the past months. At first the solitude in the multitude bothered him, but he soon became accustomed to it, enjoying the chance to meditate on what he'd heard and seen: so many words, so many miracles that he could hardly remember even a fraction of them.

One incident, however became hammered in his mind: The Rabbi had been teaching in Capernaum and then "cast out" an evil spirit, which the people called a demon. It had made the man who had it deaf and dumb and the instant Yeshua commanded it to leave the man had begun to speak! Kaya marveled at this, believing now more than ever, that Yeshua was all he claimed to be and *more!* But then the Pharisees accused him, saying he was in league with those evil spirits! It shocked the young Man so much that he had hardly understood the defense that his Teacher had given the teachers of the law.<sup>10</sup>

Even though that accusation shook every fiber in his being, it couldn't stop him from continuing to believe that Yeshua was something far beyond a normal Man. But what was his, Kaya's, purpose for being here? What did he have to learn from the Master? Was he to assist in setting up the Kingdom? These and many other questions bothered him at night, when he tried to sleep and during the day when he journeyed with the multitudes, always keeping as close to Yeshua as possible.

They finally arrived at a small town called Bethany. Kaya's thoughts were still far off in the distance, when he suddenly sensed a familiar presence. In contrast to the times before, he could tell exactly where it was and turned towards it. He could see a group of women sitting a short way off, laughing and talking quietly. He shrugged his shoulders: maybe it's just an illusion. He was about to turn away, when one of the women rose gracefully.

*There's only one person who moves like that,* he told himself, as she came towards him slowly, looking around to see if anyone had noticed them. It didn't seem anyone had, but Kaya still walked away from the people slowly, heading towards a nearby small grove of trees. Then he turned and leaned against one, hoping that the woman had followed him. *Could it be?* he asked himself again. Yes, it must!

She came towards him, now walking with a bit more determined stride. She drew to a halt in front of him and raised her head. For him it was like a dream-come-true. Every fiber in him wanted to reach out and hold her, but he restrained himself, not wanting to break any customs.

"Hello, Aspen," he said, his voice shaking with joy.

"Hello, Creon Kaya," she answered after a long pause, trying to contain her emotions. From her shining eyes and radiant smile he realized how happy she was.

They seated themselves under the grove of trees, holding hands, the most that they would allow themselves in this setting. Aspen let the heavy shawl slip down off her head.

"What have you been up to?" Kaya asked.

"Same thing you've been doing," she answered, "following *him*." Kaya nodded.

"So how did you get here anyway?" Aspen suddenly got a faraway look in her eyes.

"It was the night you disappeared," she began slowly. "The guard saw you go. I felt that I was called to go, too, so I entered the circle and ended up in a little town called Nazareth, where I was taken in by a lady called Miriam. That's where I first heard about *him*." She gestured toward the village. "Then a couple of Miriam's friends told her that they were going to take some food to the Rabbi and I asked if I could go along. That was the first time I saw *him* and it was like – like when I met the Creator." Her eyes sparkled with delight. "I just knew I had to follow him and several of my friends did so, too, and here we are." She fell silent, looking at Kaya happily. He cleared his throat and told of his own adventures.

"I just keep wondering why we're here," he said more to himself than to the Woodmaid. She looked at him quizzically.

"And for that matter, why is Yeshua so familiar?" he asked. Aspen just shrugged.

"You tell me."

"I don't know," Kaya answered truthfully. "But I have a feeling that something very important is going to happen soon..."

The multitudes were moving on to Jerusalem, Yeshua somewhere among the people. Kaya and Aspen had caught up with Nathan again and the three of them followed as closely as possible. Suddenly two of Yeshua's closest followers shouldered their way past them, pulling a donkey colt along.

"What's going on?" Nathan asked, just before his voice was drowned out by a loud shout from Yeshua's followers.

"Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the Lord!"<sup>11</sup> they called.

"Hosanna to the Son of David,"<sup>12</sup> echoed the crowds.

"It is the King!" Nathan cried joyfully. Yeshua was now coming towards them and Nathan freed his cloak, spreading it out on the ground in front of the colt's hooves. Others joined in with him, carpeting the King's way with cloaks and palm branches.<sup>13</sup> In the instant that Yeshua passed them Kaya got a look at his face: he was smiling broadly, but at moments his eyes flashed sadness, as if something terrible was going to happen. Suddenly the young Man remembered the words he'd overheard Yeshua telling his friends shortly before they headed to Jerusalem.

"We are going to Jerusalem," he said sadly, "and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be handed over to the foreigners. They will mock him, insult him, spit on him,

flog him and kill him. On the third day he will rise again.”<sup>14</sup> If Yeshua was the “Son of Man” that meant *he was going to his death*. The awful realization struck Kaya with the force of a boulder and he nearly collapsed among the other people.

“No!” he whispered. “Don’t go, please don’t go!” But his voice was lost in the crush and he was carried along among the crowds of people and through the gates of the city.

Kaya spent the following week at the temple with the other followers, watching Yeshua, listening to him. On the second day of the week Yeshua entered the temple and looked around at all the vendors. Kaya watched the color rise in his face as the Son of Man took in the extent of the trade. His eyes flashed with fire and he rushed forward, grabbing the desk of the closest money changer. With almost superhuman strength Yeshua lifted the table and flung it into the one next to it, sending the money flying all over. He purposefully strode to a pen full of sheep and goats and tore the gate right off its hinges, letting the animals rush out. A dove seller’s stand was next and after that another money changer. Then he paused for a moment.

“It is written, ‘My house will be a house of prayer,’” he thundered at the angry people, “but you have made it ‘a den of robbers!’”<sup>15</sup> With that he turned, threw over several more stands, drove the merchants out, and stopped anyone he saw trying to carry a load through the temple courts.<sup>16</sup> Kaya was impressed at the power and determination displayed here. Beside him Yehuda shook his head.

“The chief priests will want Yeshua’s head for sure now,” he said with regret. “They make handsome profits off this business.”

Day followed day and Kaya watched Yeshua refute different religious groups and baffle the leaders of the people with his wisdom.

Finally the fifth day of the week came and Kaya and Aspen celebrated the Passover with Yehuda and his family. The following morning a loud tumult woke Kaya who was sleeping on the roof. It was shortly after sunrise and a young man was pounding on Yehuda’s door. They rose, went downstairs and opened the door. Kaya recognized the young man as one of Yeshua’s closest followers. His face was white and eyes full of fear.

“What’s the matter, Andrew?” Nathan asked. “Where’s Simon?”

“They – they took him!” Andrew panted.

“Who? Simon?”

“No, the Master!”

“Where?” Kaya demanded, girding himself.

“To Pilatus, at the castle,” Andrew answered.

“Kaya, no,” Nathan said, grabbing Kaya’s arm.

“I’m sorry, Nathan, I’ve got to go. I think this is why I came.” He tore himself away with that cryptic remark and ran into the empty streets, heading toward the Roman citadel. Here and there a store owner was setting up shop, oblivious to the young Man hurrying along the small streets. He finally slid to a halt, seeing a mob of people in front of him. They were shouting something, but he couldn’t figure out what it was at first. Then he understood the words and a chill ran over his back. They were shouting: “Crucify him!”<sup>17</sup>



## The Death of a King

**H**e was pressed against the walls in the swirl of people. He watched the soldiers shove a battered body that was barely alive out the gate of the castle. A heavy beam of wood was tied to its shoulders and it staggered along. As the procession came closer and closer to where Kaya stood, the beaten man tripped under the weight of the cross. He fell down, but the merciless soldiers prodded him back on his feet. He took a few more steps and fell again, just in front of Kaya’s feet. The officer hit him to make him rise, but the only result was a weak struggle. The soldier looked around and pointed in Kaya’s direction.

“You!” Kaya pointed to himself questioningly.

"Yes, you, the black one!" the soldier shouted. Kaya turned and saw a huge black man move forward.

"Carry his cross," the officer demanded and the big man bent, loading the heavy beam on his shoulders.<sup>18</sup>

"Now get up," came the command and the bleeding man rose to his feet. He glanced in Kaya's direction just for a moment. The face was puffy and discolored from being beaten, the beard matted with spit and blood. A crown of long thorns was rammed down on his head and it made little rivulets of blood run down his forehead and into his beard. The eyes burned with a sadness and a fire that the young Man had seen somewhere. Then suddenly Kaya *knew!* The Bloody Man! This was why he had come, to meet the man. He pressed on behind the train of soldiers.

They came out of the narrow city gate, the mob still shouting angrily, and reached a hill that looked roughly like a skull. Kaya stood a ways off as they stripped off Yeshua's clothing and threw him onto the ground across the cross-beam he'd been carrying. They hammered big iron spikes through his wrists and into the wood, then lifted it up and placed it on an upright that had already been driven into the ground. There was a little stool that he could just barely sit on. The soldiers bent his legs as if he was kneeling and drove two nails through his heels, each foot was on one side of the pole. Kaya shuddered at each blow of the hammer and Yeshua's every cry caused his heart to wrench. The young Man from the Seven Nations was unable to contain himself, tears now flowing freely. He could vaguely hear the voices of the men on the crosses from where he was standing, but could not understand what they were saying. Suddenly darkness fell, just as if the sun stopped shining and he heard Yeshua's tortured voice.

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"<sup>19</sup> At that instant something broke in Kaya, too. The wholeness he had felt since his meeting with Creator God was suddenly gone, the Light departed, and he felt empty and useless. Yeshua's voice thundered triumphantly over the hills of Jerusalem, cutting into the numb void that had engulfed him.

"It is finished!"<sup>20</sup> And then more quietly, but still clearly to be heard, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."<sup>21</sup> The ground shook and lightning split the sky and then it was over. Kaya stood there, numb, just staring at the cross. *Why did he have to die? What did he do wrong?* He just couldn't understand.

A quiet rustle beside him made him turn and he saw Aspen standing there, her own face full of the horror she witnessed. Her shawl had slipped down off her head and she looked as lost as she had before – before Stein. She quietly slipped her hand into his and they made their way up to the hill, where they looked at the dead body of the Son of Man.

"It is finished," Kaya whispered and sank onto one of the large rocks there. They sat there a long time, lost among their own thoughts.

"Move along!" came a voice, waking Kaya from his reverie and he found a soldier pointing a sharp pike at him.

"All right, we're going," Kaya said, pulled an incoherent Aspen from the rock beside him and guided her down the hill. The last hues of day were coloring the western sky, drawing bands of gold, purple and crimson into the clouds, banners for the slain King. Kaya stopped and turned back to look at the Master once more. He saw that there were still several people on the hilltop and then watched a soldier raise his spear and stick it into Yeshua's side. Then the soldier nodded to another one and they lifted two poles and took the crossbar down from the upright. The body of the Son of Man fell into the waiting arms of his friends.

"Let's see where they put him," Kaya suggested to Aspen. She nodded and they followed at a discreet distance. They watched two men carry the lifeless body to a nearby tomb with several women following behind. Kaya and Aspen slipped in behind them, hiding in one of the alcoves. After a few minutes and a few words the people departed and the two Voyagers went forward to look at the body. They were just able to notice that it was wrapped in heavy cloth and covered with a sticky substance before a heavy stone fell into place over the door.

A grinding sound made Kaya jump up. The rock was being moved! He and Aspen quickly jumped into one of the alcoves to hide and slip out when the people had come in. But only a shadow bent over the doorway and said something like, "It's still there." Then the great rock fell into place again.



## The Return

**T**he hard, cold floor brought Kaya awake again. He opened his eyes and only saw a thin shaft of light peeking through a tiny slit beneath the rock door. *Where am I?* he wondered and sat up. An unhappy moan from next to him reminded him that Aspen was still curled up there. Then his hazy mind recalled all of what had happened and he suddenly remembered that they were still in Yeshua's tomb. It was cold, so Kaya stood up and stretched. He slowly walked back and forth, beginning to feel the gnawing edge of hunger, but more than that thirst. He didn't have anything from which he could drink, he sighed and lay back down next to Aspen.

A light nudging awoke him. He squinted at the dying light and concluded that it was evening again.

"I'm thirsty," came Aspen's dry voice from the darkness.

"So'm I, but there's no water." Aspen was quiet and then suddenly pressed against him.

"Are we going to die?" she asked, voice quavering in the dark.

"No," he whispered, thinking it was just a little lie to quiet her down. *But we are*, he said to himself. *Here at the feet of the one person that could save us. This is where we'll die.* He liked that thought.

Once more they were woken from their slumber by a strange stirring in the air, an energy that was now permeating the crypt. Kaya scrambled to his feet as a bright light began to form above and behind him, right where Yeshua's body lay. Aspen was next to him as they both fearfully stared at the wrappings. Then Yeshua sat up. The wrappings didn't move, but he came through them and they collapsed, empty but intact. At the same instant the ground shook and the stone rolled away, sending bright light into the dim vault. Yeshua stood up on his feet and turned to where the two Voyagers stood, shaking, mouths agape.

"The work is complete," he announced. "And you have seen what no eye in your world has seen." They shivered, thinking it was a ghost.

"Oh, you with small faith," he said lovingly, "come and feel me and see that I am real. See the nail prints in my hands and my feet. Feel my side. I am alive!" They did as they were told and finally Kaya sank to his knees, the girl beside him.

"My Lord and my God," he whispered.

"Now at last you understand, Creon Kaya son of Adem," Yeshua answered. "There are many things you will endure for my sake, even unto death. But I will be with you always." Then he turned to Aspen.

"And you, Aspen daughter of Kavak, will be spurned by your own people for your beliefs, but count it all joy to suffer for me, for greater is your Father in heaven than your troubles on earth." He turned to both of them.

"Remember my words, my friends – for you are my friends," he commanded them a smile lighting his face. "Teach what I have taught you to those in your world. They must know me as well. I will reveal myself there in a little while, so wait patiently."

"But what about the Warrior King?" Kaya asked haltingly. "Will he – will he be spared?" Yeshua shook his head sadly.

"No, Creon Kaya, my command still stands. You must face him and his people and destroy them, but don't be afraid because I am with you. He will be judged, because he has done many evil things. You will be his judge in this world and I will judge him when my kingdom comes. And now rise and go!" They stood and Yeshua breathed on them, restoring their strength. They turned and walked hand in hand toward the shining doorway.



**“S**ir!” Debus cried. Lormar turned from where he’d been surveying the road in front of them and gasped. Even in the cloudy light of day he could see that the great circle of stone was suddenly filled with a shining, shifting white light. It slowly faded and was gone. The old man and his soldiers rushed forward and into the ring. Kaya and Aspen were standing there, hand in hand. A strange aura around them made the men stop and stare. There was a shine in their eyes and on their faces that had to do with a rapture none of them had ever known.

“We’re back,” Kaya finally said, breaking the silence. “And we have something wonderful to tell you!” They sat down around the fire and together began to tell of the Son of God and his life on Earth and his death and resurrection. That brought strange responses from some of the soldiers. Lormar’s answer was simple:

“If Creator God wanted to become Man, he could do that. And if he did, then I would become his enemy again if I didn’t believe it.” Only Debus stood against it, voicing Kaya’s own words of some time ago.

“There is *only one God!* It is insane to say that he could have a Son. That would make two gods!”

Kaya pondered Debus’ remark. There was nothing that could make him stop believing that Yeshua was the Son of God and therefore Creator God himself, but he couldn’t understand how there could be one God, but two persons. Could it be that they were one in a way Kaya couldn’t imagine? He finally dropped the subject, remembering Hrosca’s words: “Then again he’s so great, no one can really know him.” *Creator God was what he was, is what he is and will be what he will be*, Kaya decided, *and nothing can change him, so if he’s two persons, but one God, then that’s the way he is, even if I can’t understand it.*

The next morning they left for an inn a day’s march to the north. Kaya and Aspen had only been gone a day and a half, whereas they knew that they must have been on Earth for nearly two years of the time there. Kaya then remembered what a Voyager had once said about Time running differently in a different world. Perhaps that was the answer. Still, he had a feeling that he’d grown much older than just two years. It was something about meeting Yeshua. It had transformed something in him and now he felt that the Creator was closer to him than before. The Light he felt before blazed more brightly and he could feel its influence more powerfully than previously.

They reached the inn by early evening and bedded down for the night. The innkeeper mentioned that there was one other tenant, but this one had requested not to be disturbed and the travelers gladly stayed out of his way.

Kaya did not sleep very well that night, the excitement of Yeshua’s resurrection still fresh, and rose before dawn, slowly making his way down into the great room where they’d had supper the night before, thinking he could be alone and pray a bit. But the room wasn’t empty. There was a person sitting in the shadows, his hands closed around a large mug. Kaya just glanced in that direction and suddenly his gaze caught the profile of the man who was sitting there.

“Savash!” he said, walking across the room. The other sat up as if he’d been pricked and glared at the Seer.

“Who are you?” he demanded coldly.

“It’s me, Ka – Creon!” the young Man cried spreading his arms wide. Suddenly a smile washed across the sullen face of the other.

“Creon! It is you! I hadn’t recognized...” With that Savash leaped out from behind the table and hugged his friend. They sat down. Savash regarded Creon Kaya for a long moment.

"You have changed," he finally remarked.

"Yes, I have. I have seen and heard many different things. I have met someone who changed my life."

"Another girl?"

"No, a Man like no other." Savash raised his eyebrows.

"Maybe I'd better start at the beginning," Creon said warmly and began with what happened since he'd left Eison. He told of the journey across Tashyer and slowly a suspicious expression washed across Savash's face.

"Stop just one minute," he said, his voice menacing. "Tell me, did you kill Dushman?"

"Yes, I did."

"And Tolgar?" Kaya nodded, gray eyes now veiling themselves slightly.

"Lormar?" the blond man asked.

"No, he's alive. He's upstairs and I'm very certain he'd be glad to see you..."

"Answer one more question, Creon." The prince's voice had gone icy cold. "Are you the Seer?" Kaya was silent at first, thinking that this was the moment that could make or break everything between them, but he couldn't help but be honest. Savash needed to know.

"Yes, Savash, I am," Creon Kaya said evenly. "I have looked on the face of Creator God. I have been given the charge to end your father's reign. I have seen the Son of God die and rise again. But, above all else, Savash, I am your friend, even though you might not think it's true." He looked at his friend, but now there was only burning hatred in the blue eyes.

"I see, Seer," the Warlord snapped. "You have stolen all of my friends through your lies. Lilya. Lormar – ha, don't think I don't know that he has changed sides! Now you have stolen yourself from me and I am alone." He leaned in and grabbed Kaya's tunic. "How can I be the *friend* of the Seer who would kill me? Only one way. With a sword between the two of us. You are marked for death and it will be here and now."

"No, Savash, not yet." Kaya's voice was calm and so full of authority. They stared into each other's eyes, blue against gray, hate against love, and slowly Savash let go.

"The time has not yet come for us to do battle," the Seer intoned. "I will tell you one thing, Savash, son of Elam. You now know who I am. I knew who you were a long time ago and I decided that we should be friends anyway, with or without a sword between us. If you want to fight, so be it, but it won't be before the Warrior King falls, I will guarantee you that. The Creator will make sure of that." Kaya rose and looked down at his once-friend, a very gentle, loving look in his gray eyes.

"Now go, Savash, before Lormar finds out you're here and takes you as a hostage." The blond man looked shocked. "Yes, Savash. This is war and only one will win – the Creator. I will see you again."

"You will and then you will die, Seer!" the prince hissed, jumped out from his place at the table and bolted from the inn. Slowly Lormar stepped into the room and gazed at Kaya sadly.

"I believe his father has gotten into him," the old Man said quietly.

"No, he just longs for a friend who will love him and does not realize that he already has three. He does not realize that there is Someone who loves him, who is greater than us." Kaya bowed his head. "Now I know why I had to come north, Lormar. My work here is finished. Keritos is waiting in Eison. Aspen and I will leave after breakfast."

Evening had settled and the three of them sat in Rushtu's living room, discussing what to do next. Rushtu regarded Lilya and Donovan, eyes smoldering. Keritos had arrived only a few days before and it was only a matter of time before he found out where Creon Kaya had been hiding.

"So what if he gets here first?" Rushtu asked for the fifth time.

"We will have to tell him the truth," Donovan answered. "That is all we can do and then he'll kill us and we shall see the Creator that very night."

"I don't want to die yet," Lilya said in a quavering voice. "It – it's too early, I just know it."

"We all felt that way once," Rushtu answered, "but when the time comes there is nothing that can stop it, only the Creator." The other Man nodded. Suddenly a loud thudding echoed through the courtyard.

"What...?" the blacksmith demanded, leaping from his seat and out the door. The others followed. They reached the courtyard in the instant the large front gate splintered and fell. A huge soldier strode in, his black form blinking menacingly in the falling light.

"Where is he?" came the rasping voice. "Where is the Seer?"

"We don't know where he is," Donovan answered.

"You lie!" Keritos yelled, backhanding the golden blacksmith across the face. Donovan hardly flinched. "Tell me where he is!"

"I'm right here, Keritos," came a quiet voice from behind them. They turned to see a tall young Man stride across the courtyard, dressed in brown Woodfolk clothing, the glistening hilt of a sword protruding from behind his back. Accompanying him was a graceful Woodmaid. Keritos' face twisted into a nasty grin as Creon Kaya came to a halt in front of him.

"Then prepare to meet your judge," the evil Warlord laughed.

"I already have," Kaya said matter-of-factly. "And you, spirit, will no longer control this corpse, because there is one greater than you who has already won!"

"And who would that be?" Keritos sneered.

"Yeshua," was the answer. The Warlord staggered back as if having received a mortal blow. He shook himself and but drew his club.

"You must first defeat me," he screamed in an unearthly voice. "I am more powerful than you in every respect." Kaya drew his sword and nodded.

"You are correct. You are more powerful than me, but not more powerful than my Lord and God!" The Warlord just roared and swung the huge club. Kaya blocked it with his sword, shuddering under its weight. Keritos snarled again and they began to fight in earnest, swinging back and forth at each other. Suddenly Kaya's sword flashed up and severed Keritos' right arm. The smell of rotting meat filled the night sky and the huge Warlord laughed as he picked up the severed arm and pressed it back against his shoulder, where it reattached.

"You cannot destroy me, son of Adem," the being laughed.

"You are right, I can't do anything on my own," Kaya told him flatly. "But in the strength of my Lord Yeshua I can do *all* things!" With that he swung Justin back and plunged it deep into Keritos' chest, right through the red arrow. The Warlord cried out and clawed at the air. Kaya quickly pulled the sword back out and the evil being fell forward, face down on the ground.

"Keritos has met his judge," Lilya said quietly.

"He's only meeting him now, Lilya," Kaya answered, unable to keep the triumph from his voice. He turned to the others, eyes shining. "I have to tell you where Aspen and I have been and what we've seen and heard!"

# Four: Pan-Tao

## Besieged

**A**rslan, King of the Werebeasts, hurried down into the throne room, fastening the belt around his leather tunic, to find all four of the Werebeast generals already there. Rory would be coming presently.

"So the Abadonnim are trying to attack again," Arslan muttered, sitting down in the only free chair at the table. Another seat stood a bit farther back, but not out of earshot.

"Yes, Duin Khan has returned," one of the generals said. Duin Khan was a long dead Werebeast Overlord, one of the first.

"It must be that an Abadonnah is manifesting him," the King surmised as his Queen walked into the room. The men quickly stood in honor of her, before she took her seat a bit behind her husband.

"True," returned the general, "but you know that then it can be wounded just as we can. Duin Khan is Duin Khan until he dies."

"That means we must do battle," Arslan surmised. "I will lead the troops."

"My lord!" the general cried. The King held up one tawny hand.

"Burhan, I know that you are afraid that something will happen to me, but I must lead the troops, otherwise we might have desertions. You know that the Abadonnim are still powerful among us. A dominance of several thousand years does not break over night." The other generals muttered their consent and Burhan stroked a hand through his gray and white hair.

"Liu!"

"My lord," said one general. His hair and whole body were of midnight color and his eyes a deep, luminescent green flecked with gold. Only his right hand was white.

"I want you to personally go to the stronghold and ask for assistance. If the Abadonnim take this fortress, the Karyl will be captive in the Death March once more. Now, Wedwyn, you are in charge of the archers. Have them ready!" A general who looked very much like a tiger nodded.

"Cedric, you will gather the marching troops by afternoon." A small, brown Werebeast nodded here. "Then go." The three generals left. Finally Arslan turned to his dearest friend.

"You have the most difficult task of us all, Burhan," he said.

"Anything, Arslan. I owe you my life."

"I want you to be ready to lead the other contingent of ground troops in battle after the siege has begun. We will have to harass them continually, because there are still more Werebeasts that will serve Dehshet than those who will serve the Creator. Can you do that for me? It will be dangerous." The other Werebeast smiled.

"We have been through too much together for me to say no, Arslan. I am ready."

"Good. Then let's prepare. I'll be mustering the palace guard." Burhan nodded, rose and left. Rory came over from her seat and laid one arm around her husband's shoulders.

"And me?" she asked.

"You will have charge of the castle, dear, at least as long as I'm out there." He sighed and pulled her into his lap. His tail lightly wrapped itself around her waist.

"I wonder if it will ever be safe enough to raise cubs here in the Death March, Rory," he said sadly.

"It will," she whispered in his ear. "You yourself once said that it would be called Liflan in the old tongue – what it once was, the garden of life!"

They had been besieged for seven days now. The fortress was firm, but the most dangerous thing was the messages that kept coming over the wall from Duin Khan, calling the Werebeasts to return to him. Arslan brooded over that as he walked the walls. It seemed that only his strength of character kept his people from deserting. He lived with them, slept on the wall, took his own shift on guard, and, when alone, went through the castle and the village around it, checking on his subjects and helping where he could.

*This is dangerous, he said to himself. We have to attack now, or else we won't stand this siege.* But the Karyl hadn't come. He finally turned to Burhan who was right behind him.

"It's time, friend," he sighed.

"But, my lord, the Karyl..."

"I know it's time, Burhan," Arslan cut him short. "I believe the Creator is urging me now. Let's get ready."

"Very well," the general answered and rushed below. In less than a half an hour two contingents of a hundred Werebeasts each were ready, all of them armed and some even wearing armor, something the Werebeasts had only done before the dominance of the Abadonnim.

"Let's pray before we go," Arslan called to his troops and fell to his knees. After bowing his head for an instant, he raised his eyes to heaven and spoke a very short, but heartfelt prayer for protection. He then bowed his head to the ground and rose.

"Let's go. Open the gates!"

The attack was a complete surprise to their enemies and before they knew it, Arslan and Burhan's troops had cut a wide swath through the ill-prepared foe, but then the Abadonnim rallied their slaves and the battle was on, one to one. Slowly and methodically they tried to strip away the King's body-guard and suddenly he was standing alone in the middle of the fray, surrounded by the enemy. His short sword was already bloody and his fur matted in places. The iron helmet with the crown ridge weighed heavy on his head and he longed to throw it off to battle his enemies more easily, but it was protection. Parry a blow, strike back, push to the side, try to gain the gate. Suddenly he found himself face to face with an Abadonnah. The evil being leered.

"This is your end, King of the Werebeasts and a pitiful one at that," it sneered, but couldn't move as Krieg's blazing sword sliced through it from head to toe. Instantly it turned to a mist and fled away into the Death March.

"You came!" Arslan cried.

"Yes, the Creator prompted us. We've been watching for some time. Let's do battle now!" The shining warrior laughed, swung his sword around his head and cried out loud.

"The sword of Creator and Messiah!" It came down, slashing at the Abadonnim. Within a short time the attackers returned to the castle, victorious. Duin Khan was forced to withdraw for the time being. The Werebeasts were ready to go out and help the many wounded of both sides. They had won against a majority that should have crushed them, but Arslan knew that it was the Creator's doing and not theirs. That evening many of their enemies switched sides and pledged allegiance to the King and his God.

"We must be prepared to leave for Elamil soon, King of the Werebeasts," Krieg said when he finally could speak to Arslan alone. The tawny Werebeast put down the drink horn he'd been nursing and frowned.

"Why is that?"

"That is where the final battle will be. You must be there as well, for each of the races must have their representatives. My Karyl and Burhan will keep the strength of your people up. Don't worry." Arslan pondered this for a moment. If representatives from the Werebeasts were needed he would be the logical choice, but it still galled him to leave his people. But if Krieg asked....

"When do we leave?" he queried.

"Within the month, as soon as the way is cleared enough. We will have to battle Duin Khan once more before we leave, but you will win, for the Creator is with you, Arslan." The King merely smiled at that. Now he and his Queen would learn of the rest of the Nations and see some of them. Perhaps after this the Death March would really become Liflan.



## Through the Forest

They were alone again in the vastness of the wild Pwyllwood and Kaya counted thirteen days since leaving Eison. The going had been very good up until now and they usually spent time with Woodfolk along the way. But somehow he felt he'd left part of himself back there, in that other world. He could understand Tharkey and Ethan better now that he'd stepped through the Portal himself. He remembered Tharkey's words from so long ago: "It is a feeling that is impossible to describe, friend, but it is also impossible to forget." He also remembered the huge black man's longing to feel it again and Kaya found he wanted to experience that sensation again also, but most of all he wanted to see Yeshua again. The few words that the Son of God had spoken directly to him had cut themselves deep into his soul and he wanted to hear that voice again and feel his comforting touch.

He remembered how his friends had listened to their tale after burying the body of Keritos. Lilya had accepted every word, immediately pledging her life to Yeshua, called the Messiah. Rushtu had been skeptical at first, until Kaya pulled out the old scriptures, passed on through the Ages and proved to him, that Yeshua was to come. Donovan had said nothing, except that he would have to think it over.

The Pwyll had gotten worse since they had left it a year ago. Twice robbers had attacked them, but then fled the instant they looked into Kaya's eyes. There was something about him that scared most people and yet they wanted what it was. They passed several villages with Men standing guard to keep people out – villages where the Dark Plague had settled. Kaya and Aspen stopped at an old hermit's hut for the night and discussed the situation with him over a meager supper.

"Yes," the hermit said, "in the past year this sickness has caught on faster and faster. Even what little I possess of the Arts is insufficient to heal those who need it. What is needed is a miracle to be worked by the Everlasting Light." Kaya tried to tell the old Man of Yeshua, but he just shrugged the Messiah off.

"I'm too old to change anymore, young Master," the hermit answered. "The Everlasting Light has revealed to me that there is nothing left but the darkness of death before I will be rebirthed in another world. There is no need for such a 'Messiah,' as you call him." Kaya finally gave it up and the two bedded down for the night.

The next morning they left the old Man, paying him for the night's rest with a stag that Kaya shot in front of the house. He was surprised that Aspen now ate meat without any problems. When he commented about it she smiled at him.

"I remember Yeshua saying that he came to fulfill the law, not to get rid of it. If that was so there, then it's the same for the laws of the Woodfolk. I live by Yeshua's law now." Those words opened a new vista for Kaya. He had often listened to Yeshua, but was unable to understand much of what he'd said about the law, since he hadn't needed to follow it. Aspen, on the other hand, was under a law similar to that of the Israelites and its fulfillment meant much more to her than to him.

A small town lay before them again. This was larger than most and it wasn't surprising to see armed Men standing at the entrance. Kaya strode up to them confidently.

"Stop!" the leader bellowed. "You cannot enter. We have the Dark Plague."

"I see that, my friend," the young Man answered politely, "but my lady friend and I need a rest and a drink of water. We've come a long way, our water skin is empty, and there's no other water for miles around." The leader of the Men saw that Kaya was speaking the truth and decided to allow them into the town to draw water. He even went so far as to accompany them to the well.

"Who's sick here?" Kaya asked as they began drawing the water.

"My only daughter," the other answered. "She is only fifteen and now it's the end of her life. I often wish that Notan would send Men a way of healing this evil sickness. And yet it is his judgment on us." Kaya smiled sadly, suddenly feeling a nudge from the Creator.

"I will agree with you that it is a severe judgment, but it isn't from Notan. It's from Creator God, the *only* God." The chieftain looked at him, at first incredulous, then his face began to redden.

"That is blasphemy!" he cried. Kaya shook his head.

"I'm telling the truth," he stated firmly. "Notan-Gelder was once a Man, one of those who lived before the fall of the Blue Mountains. He was a great musician and healer, but he was never a god! I will prove to you that the Creator is God! Take me to your daughter." Aspen grabbed his arm and hissed in his ear.

"Are you sure about this?" she demanded. "You almost died of it once and I don't think I could cure you of it again!" Kaya smiled at her.

"Yeshua is protecting me, luv," he said gently and turned back to the leader. "Take me to your daughter!" The Man began to protest, but something in Kaya's gray eyes made him reconsider. He just nodded curtly and motioned for the two to follow. They were taken to a house that was by far not the nicest in the town. It took Kaya's eyes a moment to get adjusted to the gloom inside. When they did he saw a young woman lying on a low bed covered with a single sheet. Her face and arms were covered with the ugly purplish splotches that gave the plague its name. She moaned and tossed her head in tortured fever-dreams while an old nurse tried to comfort her with a soft, wet cloth and quiet words. He took a side glance at Aspen who trembled as she clung to his arm. She had seen him in a condition like this and he suddenly wondered *how* sick he had been when she found him. With some effort he brushed aside all horror and fear that he felt at seeing the tortured girl and sat down on the edge of the bed beside her. A short, quiet prayer streamed from his lips. He then grasped the girl's hand.

"Get up in the name of Yeshua, the Messiah, and his Father, the Creator," he said gently. Immediately she lay still and in an instant all of the dark spots on her skin faded away. She slowly drew her breath and opened her eyes. For a moment she was bewildered about her surroundings, then noticed Kaya. She smiled and saw her father. A look of great joy spread across the face of the Man and he knelt beside the bed and hugged her tightly.

Kaya and Aspen quickly left the little hut and headed toward the edge of town.

"What happened there?" she asked him after they'd gone a ways.

"The Creator told me that I should heal her," Kaya replied with a laugh. "Did you see the joy it brought them?" Aspen smiled and nodded, now beginning to understand that whenever Kaya healed, he did it as a way of giving some of his joy to others, making it even more than it had before he gave it away.

"Wait!" a voice called behind them. They turned to see the father and his daughter rushing towards them. She had dressed and looked as young and healthy as any girl her age should. The Man finally reached them, breathing heavily from his run.

"I want to ask you to stay," he stammered. "You have saved our town – and my daughter – from something that would have killed us all."

"I didn't do anything but pray," Kaya answered. "My Lord did the rest."

"Then tell us about your God," the Man pleaded. "May we know him, too!" Kaya smiled and they walked to the Man's house and Kaya began his tale.

"It all began, when Creator God became a Man ..."



## Pan-Tao's Oath

**P**ace had settled on the city of Stein and what with its lord being a very good man at politics and fiscal policy, the resupply of the rebel army went along at a steady pace. The board of regents ruled quite competently now, allowing Baltar to set aside many of his responsibilities and so spend more time with his young wife.

Twilight had just come out to play as the two walked – that is, Sarina pushed Baltar – in the garden.

"I've been thinking about your legs," she was saying.

"And what about them?" he asked sharply. She was touching a raw nerve and she knew that.

"They aren't as weak as you think, dear," she returned, stopped in front of a bench and sat down on it to look him in the eye.

"You told me yourself that you could walk until you were twelve," Sarina continued. "Did you ever try since then?" He sighed heavily.

"Once."

"And?"

"And I didn't make it. I took one step and broke down." She suddenly smiled.

"But you stood."

"Yes, I stood, what about it?" Her eyes sparkled brightly.

"Don't you realize what this means? It means you could learn to walk again. I'll train you!" He shook his white-blond head.

"I can't, Sarina. I've tried. I just can't." There was resignation in his voice as he looked at the ground.

"Baltar, please look me in the eyes and tell me that again," she said. "I want to know it for sure." He was silent and continued looking at the ground. "I'll help you if you want me to." Still no answer. Finally she decided she'd have to prod him to it.

"Listen, Baltar," her voice was sharp now, "you thought you couldn't ask me to be your wife, but you did. Before that you didn't think you could be an architect, but you became the best. You didn't think you could lead the board, but you did and it came through. You don't think *enough* of yourself. You think it's humility, but it really is fear and selfishness. You don't want to hurt yourself and not hurting others is just something that's included in that. I can't help you if you don't want it, but I'm here for you." He still didn't answer, his eyes closed. Every word had been like a blow to the face because he knew she was right. Sarina sighed and got up and left. Baltar didn't stop her.

He slowly raised his hands and looked at them and then down at his legs. No, they were useless, ever since that runaway cart had gone over them. He *couldn't* walk. And yet, Sarina was right. He'd stood once. He'd done it. He remembered the pain.

Slowly he reached down and pulled the brakes tight on his wheel-chair. Then he moved his feet out of their resting place and slowly, gently placed them on the ground. He grasped the armrests and pushed himself up. As the weight shifted to his feet it felt like knives were going into the soft thighs and calves. He gasped, but continued until he stood rather straight, yet leaned forward to keep his equilibrium. He tried to straighten out, lost his balance and fell forward, only to be steadied by Sarina.

"I knew you could do it," she laughed and eased him back into his wheelchair. "Now if we practice this every day, you just might learn to walk again and wouldn't that be wonderful?"

"Yes!" he laughed. "Then I'll be able to carry you the way I'd always dreamed."

"*That*, dear husband, is a long way off," she returned and kissed him. He pulled her onto his lap and then wheeled them both back into the house.

Creon Kaya and Aspen left the town a bit less than a week later. The miracle prompted the people's curiosity about what the Seer had to say about Creator God and Yeshua and many believed. Still, there were those who were against their message and some of the resisters had even gotten violent, but their host kept them from being harmed. Finally they left with some gifts and much thanks from the townsfolk.

Now they were nearing Deniz, the port on the edge of the Silver Bay. Kaya began to get worried again, knowing that he would soon face Pan-Tao, the fourth of the Warrior King's Warlords. What would this man be like? he wondered. Lormar had never said anything about this one, except that he was from the farthest reaches of the western lands. So what could he expect?

"Don't worry, Kaya," Aspen told him when he finally voiced his thoughts. "The Creator will take care of it like he did the last two times." Kaya nodded absentmindedly. They were sitting in a large inn about a week's march away from Deniz. The front door was open to let the warm spring sun stream in and the patrons sat in the beams of light that shot through the many windows.

"I sometimes wonder if I trust him enough," Kaya admitted. "I know him, but not so well. He fills me with so much awe, but I still have trouble letting him handle everything." He shrugged. "I just think I need to learn more."

"Then take this as a learning experience," the Woodmaid suggested. Kaya smiled and took her hand into his, squeezing it gently.

"I thank the Creator the most for having you for a friend – and more," he said quietly. She smiled at him and laid her other hand on top of his. Silence reigned for a few moments.

"You know," he finally began, "I feel like I'm crazy to go on a mission like this. Everyone seems to be against us."

"Everyone, but Creator God!" she reminded him. "And often wayward madmen are the most useful people anyway."

A shadow suddenly darkened the doorway and the two young people turned to see someone enter the inn. When he finally stepped out of the light, Kaya recognized him.

"Debus!" he called, jumping up.

"Kaya!" the ex-officer laughed. "It's so good to see you and Aspen again!" They took him over to where they were sitting. At first Kaya and Aspen told of what had happened in the last few weeks, while Debus hungrily ate the food that the innkeeper brought. When he had finished he leaned back and ran a hand over his rough chin.

"It's been some time," he finally said. "I think I should tell you what happened to us up in the north." He leaned forward again and put his arms on the table. "We had only just left Dalcia when we ran into a small contingent of resisters. They wanted to kill Lormar, but he explained that he was against the Warrior King, too. These men became part of our group instantly, but I'm not too sure I like that. They were in this whole business for other reasons than we are." He shook his head sadly. "Anyway, we continued on north-west and finally found some of Lormar's old friends. It was about that time that he sent me to rendezvous with you, but I couldn't catch up with you. Finally I believed you were behind me, which you were and my doubling back gave you time to pass me. That was about eight days ago. I followed you and here I am." Kaya smiled. This time his instincts hadn't warned him of a tail. Maybe he was too preoccupied with his worries. *It would have been better if I'd been thinking of someone else*, he told himself, looking at Aspen who was smiling at him.

"We're heading towards Deniz now," Kaya said slowly. "I believe that's where the next of the Warlords is. I hope we won't have any problems."

"That's why Lormar sent me," Debus answered. "I'm supposed to help you two."

"Thank you," Aspen said with a smile.

"Don't mention it," Debus returned. "When do we leave?"

"Tomorrow," Kaya answered. "Aspen and I need a rest."

"I would say!" the ex-officer exclaimed. "You've been moving across the Pwyll like the wind!"

The border of the Pwyll moved closer rapidly. During the long days and short evenings Kaya and Aspen explained to Debus why Yeshua had to come. After a small amount of resistance the ex-officer began to listen more intently to what they had to say.

"He came to forgive our sins," Debus mused one evening. "But hasn't the Creator already forgiven them?" Kaya thought for a moment.

"I think he could only forgive our sins by looking at what Yeshua was *going to do*," he answered. "So now that you know, the next logical step would be to thank Yeshua for doing what he did."

"But how do you explain Yeshua being Creator God and yet not?"

"Perhaps," Aspen said slowly, "it's like water. In the winter the liquid water becomes hard ice. Ice *is* water in nature, but it isn't liquid, it's solid. Perhaps that's the way the Father and Son are different: they're both God in nature, but the Father isn't the Son and the other way around." Debus nodded at that. Maybe that was the way it was after all. Kaya looked at Aspen for a long time, before realizing that she had finally given a solution to the problem he himself had had.

"That's it! I think that Creator God gave you that insight." Aspen just smiled shyly.

"So then there's nothing more that can stand in the way of my accepting Yeshua," Debus exclaimed with resignation. He looked up and smiled at his friends.

"All right, I accept him!"

"Did you tell him that?" Kaya asked.

"How?"

"The same way you speak to the Creator," the Seer answered quietly, the light of joy brightening his countenance. Debus looked at the sky and silently moved his lips for a short time. When he finally focused on Kaya and Aspen again, they could see something had changed: Debus had met his King.

The three travelers entered the gates to the busy harbor city of Deniz and halted, gazing around at the bustle and press. Aspen bit her lip at the uncomfortable atmosphere in the city and quickly took Kaya's hand. He squeezed it gently in acknowledgement, noticing the merchants unloading their wares, and wondered where he should go for obtaining passes to Midpoint. Debus pointed out that this was usually done at the docks. None of them noticed the black-and-leather clad sentry that hurried away into the city.

They slowly made their way down to the quay where the ships were docked and purchased passes to go to Midpoint. As Kaya turned away from the merchant, he heard Aspen cry out softly.

"Kaya!" He spun around and saw a big soldier holding her tightly with a dagger pressed against her throat.

"She's dead if you make a move," he hissed. Kaya read the soldier's determination in his face and just nodded as several other soldiers surrounded them. Kaya's hands were roughly tied behind his back and Justin was confiscated. They were quickly marched through the city to a fairly large house near the northern city wall, taken in, and thrust into separate cells.

Kaya staggered forward, lost his balance and plowed onto the rough flagstone, face-first. He groaned as he rolled on his back, trying to move his fingers. His hands were tied so tightly that he could hardly feel them and his head ached from where he had cracked it on the stone floor. Light fell into the room from a hole in the ceiling and he was able to make out a small heap of hay in one corner. Other than that and a broken clay jar the room was empty. The jar gave Kaya an idea, though, and after some maneuvering he was able to get the rope up against the sharp edge and began to saw away at it. The concentration on his task did not allow him to think of anything else of anything else for a while, which was just fine with him, but once the last strands broke away and he was able to rub some life back into his hands, his thoughts strayed to his comrades.

"Protect them, Lord Yeshua," he whispered into the darkness. The Light Within stirred gently, reminding him of his comfort and so it was a calm Creon Kaya that threw himself onto the hay, exhausted from the effort of severing his bonds.

He was incredibly thirsty when he awoke and looked around to see if he could find any kind of water, but the cell was dry and so he had to contend with the discomfort in his mouth and throat. As he sat there, waiting for something to happen, his thoughts strayed to Aspen. Where was she and what was happening to her? He was quite sure that those soldiers would gladly have their fun with her if they were allowed. A chill swept over him and he began to nibble at his lower lip. Then, unable to stand it any longer, he stood up and began pacing the cramped space, the worry picking at his sanity. His dying or not dying wasn't the point, Aspen's safety was and at this point he was unable to protect her the way he desired. Despair beckoned, but Kaya turned to his God instead.

"Yeshua, Lord, don't let them do anything to her, please!" he whispered into the gloom.

"I'm protecting her," he heard the quiet Voice say and drew his comfort from that.

A heavy boot jabbed him in the side, making him grunt with pain. He was jerked to his feet by two guards the instant he opened his eyes and dragged out of the cell, where they poured a pitcher of water over his head, the precious liquid running all over his clothes, making little rivulets in the wrinkles. Kaya was thoroughly awake by now and stood up straight, sucking at the moisture on his moustache to slake his thirst, only a little

irritated at the treatment that the soldiers had given him. His mind was really on Aspen and what had happened to her. Was she well?

He got his answers only minutes later, when he was marched into a large room, filled with about thirty men, all soldiers. Aspen was standing there, looking none the worse. Kaya couldn't contain himself, but tore away from the guards and took Aspen up in his arms. She leaned into him with her eyes closed.

"I missed you," she whispered.

"Are you all right?" he asked, pulling back.

"A little bruised from being tossed into that cell, but otherwise fine," was her crisp answer.

"Enough!" came a sharp voice from the front of the room. They turned to see a small man standing at the front, leering at them. His skin had a yellowish tint and his black hair was long and stringy. A scanty black beard adorned his face and several triangular blades hung from his belt. Pan-Tao!

"Welcome to Deniz, Lord Seer," the little Man said, voice cutting, sarcastic. "I hope your short stay was pleasant." He sneered at the two of them, leering at them as if they were large heaps of gold.

"I have done what none of my other rivals has done," Pan-Tao boasted. "I have captured the Seer, his woman, and a traitor, all in one fell swoop." He laughed and suddenly let a sword sing through the air. Kaya shuddered as he recognized Justin's bright blade, silver hilt, and blue stone.

"A magnificent sword, Creon, son of Adem," came the little Man's cutting voice. "It will be a great pleasure to kill you with it and so fulfill my oath to the Warrior King! But first I have something I must attend to." The Warlord signaled to his guards and the door that the prisoners had entered by was swung open again. Debus was dragged in, black marks and dried blood marring his face. The guards let go of him and he fell to the ground. Kaya stepped over and helped him to his feet.

"I'm fine, friend," Lormar's lieutenant said, his speech slurred. He paused, then spat on the ground. Aspen grimaced as she noticed the blood mixed with his saliva.

Pan-Tao snapped his fingers and a guard brought the heavy battle-ax that Debus had been carrying. The Warlord stuck Justin in the wood floor and picked up the ax.

"I believe this is yours," he coldly addressed Debus who nodded silently.

"Perhaps you would like to take up your old duties." It wasn't a question and Debus knew exactly what that meant.

"I don't do that anymore, Pan-Tao," he returned. "I belong to Creator God and to Yeshua." The answer was quiet, but certain.

"Then die, maggot!" the Warlord howled in rage and hurled the ax. It was well thrown, but for some reason the heavy shaft hit Debus in the head, the blade missing him entirely. He crumpled to the ground and the ax fell to the floor only inches behind his head. Kaya turned to the little Man, his eyes ablaze with anger.

"You have murdered one of the best Men this world has ever seen," he thundered. "You'll die for that!"

"Who is going to kill me? You perhaps?" Pan-Tao mocked. Aspen screamed his name and Kaya dropped to the ground, one of the sharp triangular blades whizzing over his head and into the throat of another guard. He spun around and kicked towards Pan-Tao's legs, but the little Man was too quick, leaping out of the way, landing with his back to the wall. Kaya was on his feet in an instant, rushing towards his enemy, only to have to duck another flying blade. This time he wasn't quite quick enough and it gashed his upper arm, spinning off at a crazy angle. He rose immediately, ignoring the sting as his shirt rubbed against the wound, and very quickly moved towards Pan-Tao. The crimson haze was beginning to burn behind his eyes again and all he could think about was getting his hands around that scrawny neck and wringing it for all he was worth.

"Kaya, look out!" Aspen screamed again. A third blade was whistling towards him, and there was no escaping this time.

A loud clang startled him. A battle ax blade was between him and Pan-Tao, as Debus struggled to stand upright.

"What!" the evil Man cried, eyes wide. "You were dead!"

"Not yet, I'm not," the other returned with a determined face. He limped forward, the grasping the battle-ax with both hands. Pan-Tao's hand went to his belt and a small blade went spinning towards Debus. At the

same instant he swung the large battle-ax back with his right hand and threw it at the Warlord. It crashed into Pan-Tao's chest, passed through it and nailed the man of evil to the rough wall just as the little blade struck Debus in the belly and he collapsed on the floor. Aspen rushed over to him and bedded his head on her lap. Kaya knelt next to him and grasped his hands. The ex-officer's eyes were clear as he looked at his friend.

"It's over, Kaya," he said with a strange mix of joy and sadness. "The hammer has shattered the rock and then was broken by the shards. I'm dying and I won't live to see the sun rise again, but – watch your back!" Kaya slipped sideways and a sword embedded itself in the ground. The Seer swung his fist right into the man's groin and the soldier went down in an instant. Both Kaya and Aspen were on their feet, whirling, punching and kicking, the way they had learned. Kaya spied Justin sticking in the floor, took one leap, somersaulted over a soldier and landed beside his sword. He pulled it out of the floor and an instant later an attacker fell, lacking a head.

"Now, come and get me!" he roared in challenge and took another swipe at one of the other aggressors, but with Pan-Tao's death and seeing that Kaya had his bright blade in his hand again, the will to fight drained from the soldiers and they turned and fled in disorder.

It was only then that the two weary warriors turned to their fallen friend. There was a peaceful look on his face, but Debus, the chief officer of Lormar and hammer of Creator God was dead.

# Five: Alman

## Back to the Island

The fresh wind whipped across the wide deck of the ship, ruffling Aspen's hair as she stood in the bows, facing Midpoint. Her wandering mind kept coming back to Debus' death, which, try as she might, she could not block out. She had liked him and now he was gone, in the most violent way.

That was what sickened her about this outside world, all the violence. If she had wanted to she could have remembered that the Woodfolk were also violent at times, but she chose to ignore that fact. Even Kaya was a man of blood. He had killed several Men – all in self defense, of course, but killed them none the less. Suddenly she wondered if she loved him anymore. Hadn't this last year changed her view of him? Yes, she told herself, *but he's changed, too. Why, oh why, Yeshua?* she prayed silently. *Why does he have to be that way? Didn't you always speak of peace? Where is it now? All there is, is bloodshed and death. When will there be peace?! When will Kaya stop killing to stay alive?* She sighed sadly, finally remembering the chaos of the Warrior King's rule.

"Ah," she whispered, "I understand now. Only when the Warrior King is dead, will there be peace."

Suddenly a strong arm gently wrapped itself around her and she let herself lean on Kaya's shoulder, realizing how much she *did* love him.

"Are you all right?" he asked, his voice concerned.

"I guess." *Should I tell him?* she asked herself and decided she'd have to trust him.

"I was thinking about all of that killing you've done in the last year," she told him. "I just can't understand why."

"Because the Creator is judging the Warrior King and his rule," her friend returned. "He's decided that the Warrior King's got to die – I don't understand why and even less why me – after all Lormar changed – but that's the way it is."

"That's not too good an explanation," the Woodmaid chided.

"It's the only one I have, girl," he said seriously and sighed heavily before changing the subject.

"We're going home, Aspen." Suddenly he thought about what he wanted to ask her and all of his words left him. He found himself questioning his love for her, thinking of how long it was since those magical first days. They had grown up now and were both more rational. They had lived through very difficult times and had overcome them with the help of Creator God. But weren't some of those about their relationship? Hadn't it deepened after each event had passed? With that realization Kaya knew that along with himself his love had matured.

"Aspen – I – I..." *How do you say this?* he asked himself. She slipped away and turned to face him, waiting for him to speak.

"I – when we get back – uh, do you think..." He had already resolved it in his heart since he'd had that problem with Lilya, but why couldn't he voice it? *Creator God, help me!* he cried silently.

"I know what you want to say, Kaya," the Woodmaid whispered.

*But I've got to ask it myself,* he thought.

"When this is all over, Aspen, would you – would you be willing to spend the rest of your life with this wayward madman?" It wasn't quite the way he had meant it, but it was the essence that counted. Aspen laughed and hugged him tightly.

"This girl is absolutely crazy about this wayward madman," she answered. "Yes." That was the answer he was hoping for, but he hadn't dared to dream that it would really happen. Then he was kissing her. When she pulled away from him, her eyes were sparkling.

"You know what this means to the Woodfolk, don't you, luv?" she asked. He nodded slowly. Maybe that was why he'd asked: the Woodfolk's laws said that there should be at least nine months of betrothal before marriage. If they went through with that part now, they'd be able to marry as soon as Kaya was free of his charge to face the Warrior King.

"I wonder, will we get old and gray before then?" he asked the girl.

"Let's hope not," she whispered as they stood together in the bows, the wind whipping around them. They were nearly home...

That evening, when the ship arrived at Midpoint, two figures were waiting on the dock. One of the two was quite tall and the other one stood about to the shoulder of the first. They were both dressed in long, dark cloaks, obscuring their features and yet a trained eye could tell from their stature that they were both warriors. The shorter one glanced at the big ship impatiently.

"When are they coming?" demanded the impatient whisper.

"Patience, my lady," the taller said in a deep, quiet voice, but the woman wasn't in any mood to be patient. She stood up straighter and raised her head. The last rays of the sun reflected off even features and a gold circlet set with a gray pearl. She gritted her teeth, glared at the ship and then settled back down to wait.

The sun was already well down when two figures finally disembarked from the ship, also hooded and cloaked. They were nearly the same size, but still she could tell that the shorter one was a woman by her walk. The woman's companion turned his face their way for a moment and it was caught in the light of a torch. Alman caught her breath sharply. *The Seer!* She hadn't imagined him to be so handsome and suddenly began making plans of what to do *before* she killed him. She smiled wolfishly and rose slowly, motioning her companion to follow, whisking down the dark streets after the Seer.

Through her Arts Alman made herself invisible. Her companion seemed no more than a floating cloak, so silent were his footfalls. They watched the two curl up in the shelter of a large tree in the fields beyond the city.

"Shall we take them, my lady?" her companion asked.

"Yes, Changeling, take them," she instructed. "Kill the girl, but leave him alive!" She grinned again, thinking of the pleasure. "I have plans for him." Changeling nodded and his form began to shrink and lengthen until he had taken on the dark, sleek form of a wolf. He slipped forward, anticipating the blood of the girl on his tongue. Suddenly the whole glen was alight with big warriors standing in a circle around the tree with blazing swords drawn. Changeling squawked with fear and fled, changing into a raven as he went. Alman also fled, using her Dark Arts to transport herself to the inner room of her headquarters. Once there she stood, breathing hard. *What was that?* she asked herself. *It can't be the Karyl. They're captive in the Death March – or are they?!* Then she remembered that Tolgar had been defeated and with him the Abadonnim and so the Karyl were free to roam the Nations once more. She cursed into the darkness as a raven landed on the window sill. It hopped into the room and once more took on the tall, cloaked shape of Changeling. Alman turned and addressed him.

"I have a new plan," she began slowly. "Go to the Woodfolk and hide yourself among them. Search them out and cause them to come here, no matter what it takes. Only bring *him* alive, you hear me?"

"I hear and obey, my lady," Changeling said, once more his form flowing into a new one. Now he was a great winged eagle and took off into the cold night air. Alman affected her thin, predatory smile again, imagining that the Seer was already before her.

"Come into my bedchamber, Lord Seer," she mocked at the air, "and I will allow you one more time of pleasure before your death!"

Kaya leaned into the oars of the coracle as they slowly made their way to the island. Aspen sat in the bows, directing his course. Kaya smiled to himself as he thought about how they'd slipped through Midpoint in the

dark of night, completely unnoticed. They'd spent the night in the fields surrounding Midpoint and in the gray of the morning they found the little craft that Aspen had hidden there nearly two years earlier. Now they were almost there, only a few more strokes and they nosed up on the beach on which Creon had lain – so long ago – before he'd known Aspen – before he'd become Creon Kaya. He shook his head at the memory as he pulled the boat onto the sand. They just stood on the beach at first, each remembering all that had happened here. Kaya reached out and took Aspen's hand. She looked at him and smiled.

"Welcome home," he said to her. She just smiled again, blinking away the tears from her eyes.

"Come on," she prompted, pulling on his hand and the two weary travelers began to walk into the island.

Kavak slowly walked along the center street of the village, hands behind his back, looking more at the ground than at his surroundings. He was feeling old again, like so often since his little girl, his Aspen, had left home. Of course he had other daughters, but Aspen was special and he probably even loved her a bit more than the other four. He sighed. It hadn't been a good year, anyway: not enough snow in the winter and several of the Woodfolk had died of an illness. Two of them had even been in the Council. Now he needed to be alone for a while, just sit down and let Creator God listen to his heavy heart again. He breathed out heavily again and looked up. He had reached the edge of the village already and he turned around to look at his home.

*Maybe I don't want to be the leader of these people anymore,* he said to himself. *I'm just getting too old. It's time I retired and spent more time with Savannah.* But – no, that wouldn't do. He was needed, now more than ever with such a young Council of Elders. He sighed again and turned his back to the village. Suddenly he noticed someone running towards him. It was a girl, red hair flying in the wind as she ran.

"Daddy!" she cried and an instant later she was in his arms.

"My Aspen!" he answered, tears of joy pouring down his cheeks. "Here, let me look at you." The Woodmaid stepped back, eyes glistening with joy. She'd grown and was now taller than him – or maybe he'd shrunk. What impressed him the most was her bearing. It had always been elegant, but now she had changed, become even more beautiful and graceful. There was something about her that he couldn't quite place. *She's become a woman,* he finally said to himself. A tall Man came up behind her, dressed in Woodfolk garb, his hair and beard dark and thick, and a silver sword hilt protruding above his left shoulder.

"Who is that?" he asked his daughter. She giggled, putting her arm around the Man, who put his arm around her shoulders.

"Don't you remember Creon, Daddy?" The Woodman's mouth dropped open.

"It can't be!" he stammered. "He's changed so much."

"I grew up, Kavak," the Man answered. "I met Creator God and saw many things. I am no longer just Creon, son of Adem, I am Kaya, called the Seer." The words came from a powerful voice that was familiar and yet different. Creon's had been higher and sharper. Now there was a strange gentleness in his voice and a fire in his gray eyes that Kavak couldn't remember. But as he regarded Creon Kaya he couldn't help thinking that this was more than a Man – the boy had become a Man of God! Kavak also marveled at how Creon Kaya and his daughter fit together now. Before they would have made a handsome couple, but now it seemed that they were created for each other. He shook his head again, just to clear it.

"Welcome home," he laughed, finally regaining his composure. He then gestured and led the two travelers into the village, where the Woodfolk began to stream together to greet them.

The bright morning air of the Island reinvigorated Kaya thoroughly. Here was living memory, he told himself, the beauty, the quietness, and even in some places the loneliness. Soon he found his way to the cliffs at the southern end of the island, watched the open ocean beat at the rocky cliffs and the gulls circle above him. This was a place where he believed he could *feel* the Creator's presence all around him – in the beauty, in the sounds, and inside himself.

*Thank you, Lord,* he thought, *thank you that you created all of this beauty.* His mind wandered back to when he stood on top of that mountain. He could hear the Creator's voice again: quiet and calm as a soft breeze and yet rushing like the thundering tide. He remembered the intensity of it and of the Creator's gentle

and warm touch as he carried Kaya beyond the boundaries of his world. He laughed aloud, the sound snatched up by the wind and carried off over the water, and began to sing a song of praise to his maker.

Aspen took up her old duties in her mother's household joyfully, much to Savannah's surprise. Before the girl had tried to stay away from home, taking other chores in the community and doing them to perfection, much like her mother had taught her. Savannah couldn't remember one time when Aspen had joyfully helped her since she had entered puberty. The change was uncanny, disconcerting, and Savannah was uncertain if she really liked this new, improved Aspen.

"What's gotten into you?" she asked the Woodmaid that afternoon. Aspen just laughed and sang as she helped her mother and the servant girl prepare the evening meal.

*It must be that boy, Savannah told herself. He does seem to be a good influence on her...* But then the little nagging voice in the back of her head began talking back. *Yes, but is it only his influence on her or something more? Are they already lovers?* The thought chilled her and her demeanor towards her daughter as Aspen aided her.

Kaya came over for the evening meal, his eyes sparkling, unable to contain herself. Aspen dropped what she was doing, ran to him, and hugged him tightly. Savannah watched from the doorway, thinking she was seeing signs of inappropriate contact. Kavak would have to deal with this.

"Where were you all day?" the Woodmaid asked her friend.

"With Creator God and then with your father," he said with a wink.

"You asked him?" she questioned. He just nodded.

"And?"

"You'll find out," was his answer.

"Oh, Kaya, please tell me," she pleaded. He stood there, eyes twinkling, mouth open, as if he was going to begin to tell her, but then shook his head.

"No." He put a finger to her lips to shush her protest. "He wants to tell you himself."

Kavak arrived a short time later, also full of smiles. They seated themselves around the table and one of Savannah's servant girls brought in the meal. The lady of the house was silent throughout the whole meal, shooting dark glances at her daughter and the young Man with her. The others remained oblivious to her mood, talking about trivial subjects. When they had finished, Kaya excused himself with a show of deference – *guilty* deference, Savannah thought – and left for the house he was staying in.

Aspen then leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees and her chin on her fists.

"Well?" she prompted her father. He laughed, picking up his cup of juice.

"Well, what?"

"What about what Kaya asked you?" she demanded excitedly. Kavak took a sip and looked at her over the rim.

"What did Creon ask you?" Savannah asked sharply. Could it be he had the audacity...? No!

"He asked me for Aspen's hand in marriage," Kavak finally answered.

"He wants *all* of me, not just my hand!" the girl joked. Her father laughed again.

"And?" Savannah pressed, sitting up straight and glaring.

"I said yes," Kavak returned. Aspen bit her lip, blinking back the tears of joy. It was too good to be true! She leaped up and began to go toward the door.

"Where are you going?" Savannah snapped.

"To see Kaya. I've just got to be with him now," the girl answered.

*So that's how it is,* her mother thought, trying to suppress a cynical smile. *They're going to celebrate, eh?*

"You can't be alone with him until after you take the pledge, dear," Kavak reminded her gently. "You know the law." Aspen bit her lip again, this time a twinge of sadness creeping up on her. Even though she knew she wasn't under the law of the Woodfolk anymore, she knew she must do as her parents wished her to – that's what Yeshua wanted. So she restrained her impatience and nodded.

"All right." She began to clear the table along with the servant girl and, when she was finished, left the house to find her friends and tell them the good news. Kavak looked at where she had been standing only moments before.

"She's changed so much," he finally said. Savannah nodded absently, trying to find a way to introduce her suspicions.

"Kaya told me something strange," the Woodman continued slowly. "He asked me – if – I believed in other worlds." Savannah looked at him quizzically, her train of thought lost.

"Other worlds?" she queried.

"Yes," he continued. "I said I hadn't thought about it. He said it didn't matter, then began to tell me that he'd been to another world – and Aspen, too. He wanted to tell me what he'd seen there, but somehow I couldn't listen. Something is so – so different about both of them now."

"So you've noticed, too," she said, satisfaction evident on her face. "Where do you think it came from?"

"What are you talking about?" Kavak asked, frowning slightly.

"I wonder if something happened between them."

"Like?"

"You know..." She gestured with one hand.

"What?" Kavak shook his head trying to understand what she might be referring to. Then it dawned on him. "You mean..." The words failed him. She just nodded.

"No! It couldn't happen," he snapped. "I know both of them well. They may be changed, but that wouldn't be the reason that they are so *completely* different! It must be something else."

"Like what then?" she demanded. "The way they act towards each other – it must mean *something*!" He paused and pondered on it for a long moment.

"They're different, but not in *that* way," he began slowly, the thoughts forming as he spoke. "It's too wholesome, Savannah. I've seen what love-making before marriage does to a couple and that's *not* happening to them. I know that." He raised his hands groping for a way to say what he only now felt, but the words just wouldn't form.

"I would say its something – much – deeper," he pushed out. "That's it. They've deepened in their love and that doesn't have to involve sleeping together." Savannah glared at him.

"You don't have me convinced," she snapped. "She's been in the outside world nearly two years now. Maybe she can *hide* it better than our girls can."

"A Woodmaid is a Woodmaid, Savannah," he replied, "and there are certain things that a Woodmaid *can't* hide. You know how it is when you finally allow yourself to fall in love. There is no other man any more, only madness."

"Then maybe it's because she ate meat," the woman said, grabbing on to another idea. "That would change her, too."

"In this way?" he asked.

"What else?" She glared at her husband.

"I agree, she's taller, stronger and somehow more – oh, well nourished," Kavak intoned, "but a change of attitude wouldn't come from eating meat...."

"But from breaking the *law!*" She nearly screamed out the accusation. Now he felt his anger stirring. He'd not seen his wife this irrational in many, many years – not since before his transformation. He breathed out heavily to control himself.

"Savannah," he said firmly, "what you are saying is nonsense. If Aspen chose to eat meat that is between her and the Creator, but that would not cause her to change in the way she did. She is changed for the better and that *is* Creator God's hand. You should know that." She looked down, coloring at his gentle reproach.

"Now let it go and thank the Creator that she's so agreeable, all right?" She strained against his better logic, but her emotions would not accept it. Maybe if she pacified him....

"All right," she muttered and rose to leave.

"And Savannah," Kavak called after her. She half-turned. "Don't mention this to Aspen. I'm not going to unname her because of your suspicions. If you can prove them bring them to the Council, otherwise keep quiet. Is that clear?" His voice was firm, commanding, unequivocal. She bristled at it, knowing that he was anticipating her. He knew her too well.

"Yes, husband," she snapped back, turned and strode from the room. Kavak looked after her, his heart heavy. What was it that made his wife so dissatisfied with her daughter? She should be happy about the transformation.

*Ah, women! he thought to himself. I'll never understand them.*



## "I Pledge my Life – Forever"

The day had finally arrived. Kaya felt very strange, knowing now that he was going to enter into the first part of the commitment he had waited so long for. He would have to wait another year for it to be really fulfilled.

"Can you wait that long?" Kavak asked him several days earlier. The pointedness of the Woodman's question escaped Kaya as he looked at Aspen and nodded.

"I think we can. We've already waited until now and I believe the Creator will help us to wait until the end." Kavak had nodded, satisfied.

The whole village assembled on the wide clearing in front of the cave. Aspen and Creon Kaya stood there, resplendent in clothing the Woodfolk had never seen before. He had cut his hair and shaved off his beard and was dressed in a white tunic that fell to his knees with a silver belt around his waist and a deep blue cloak over one shoulder, tucked into his belt. His legs were bare and his feet were sheathed in fine leather sandals. Aspen was wearing a green and white dress of what the Woodfolk thought a strange cut, modest and yet accentuating her femininity. A belt of silver and green strands woven together was around her waist and she had small, white sandals on her feet. Her hair hung loose beyond her shoulders and she wore the traditional wreath of white flowers. To many it looked as if a holy aura had settled on the scene. *They look as if they've been made for each other,* Kavak thought as he stepped forward, trying to ignore the sullen look on his wife's face.

"Today, my friends," he began, "we will witness the pledge of betrothal between Creon *oul* Adem, called Kaya, and my daughter Aspen *kiz* Kavak." He turned to the two and nodded. Kaya then reached forward and took Aspen's hands in his own.

"I, Creon son of Adem, called Kaya, pledge my life to you, Aspen, forever," he spoke the ritual words. "I pledge to hold and keep you as dearly as my own life. I promise to be your friend and protector, to love you until the time of death and beyond, so help me Creator God." Aspen's eyes sparkled with joy as she began her pledge.

"I, Aspen *kiz* Kavak, pledge my life to you, Creon Kaya, forever. I pledge to hold and keep you as dearly as my own life. I promise to be your friend and helper, to love you until the time of death and beyond, so help me – Yeshua!" Kavak gave her a sharp look.

"Sorry," she mumbled and continued a bit louder, "so help me Creator God." The leader of the Woodfolk saw that the people hadn't noticed the slip up, or so it seemed. The ceremony continued on as it always had.

"Let this be the sign of my pledge," Kaya said, letting go of Aspen's hand and carefully placing a circlet on her head. It was the same one that she had worn at the Karyl Stronghold in the death-march, a fine silver strand that was stronger than most metal, the front of it open with the ends curling around themselves.

"Let this be the sign of my pledge," she repeated and lifted an arm band. It was about three fingers wide and made of fine leather, embossed with the priest's symbol for Creator God in bluish steel: an equilateral triangle surrounding three intertwined rings. Aspen placed the arm band around his right wrist, threaded a leather thong through the holes, and tied it tight. She smiled and all Kaya saw was her shining face.

"And so," came Kavak's voice, "let no one tear apart this union, save the Creator. Let him be the one to build the home of these two as they wait for their time of marriage. Let him grant them strength in the time of trial before them to be pure for their wedding day." He turned back to the two, who were holding hands again, placed his right hand on top of theirs and spoke the blessing.

"Let the Creator guide and keep you in all your ways. May his face shine on you and may he uphold you for all times. Praise be unto him." The official part of the ceremony was over and the couple was almost lost in the throng of well-wishers.

It was dark and late when Kaya and Aspen finally were able to slip away from the festivities for some much needed time alone. At first they just walked aimlessly, finally finding themselves at the small spring that had seen their fights and reconciliations. Aspen sat down on the large rock beside the splashing stream and watched Kaya as he gazed up into the sky. He looked younger without his beard and long hair, but she still could see the maturity he had gained in the last year. She marveled that he loved her so much, after all he was a Man of stature, strong, well-built, and handsome to most. Lilya had proven that. But he had held on to what he knew to be right the whole time: his simple, pure love for Aspen. Maybe that was why she loved him more now.

He then turned and regarded his beloved, wondering how he deserved her love. She was a Woodmaid, different from Men not only by her physical appearance. She was also the daughter of the leader of this tribe of Woodfolk – something like a princess and he was only a farmer's son. *What makes me worthy of her?* he asked himself. The answer was simple: nothing, only grace! He smiled at that, remembering a discussion with Hrosca.

"We would really be poor without grace," he heard his own voice from the past. This was grace, not only on her part, but also on Creator God's. Of course she could have chosen someone a lot more worthy of her position, but she loved Creon Kaya, the son of the poor farmer Adem. *Thank you, Yeshua,* he prayed silently. *Thank you for such a wonderful woman to spend my life with.* He sat down across from her and looked into the verdant depths of her eyes.

"I missed you," she said, reaching out and taking his broad hand in hers.

"It was only a week and a half," he countered. She laughed.

"It seemed like longer than that to me," she admitted and intertwined her fingers with his.

"Me, too." They sat for some time hand-in-hand, the silence more eloquent than a thousand words. Finally Aspen broke the quiet.

"You spoke a lot with my father. Did you tell him about Yeshua?" He nodded, his brow furrowing.

"He couldn't understand it. It was as if – as if I had backed him into a corner. He called it blasphemy that Creator God could have a Son. He didn't even let me explain the example that the Creator gave you. He finally told me he'd think about it, but that I shouldn't tell anyone else." Kaya sighed. "Why can't they just accept him like we did?"

"Because they didn't see him like we did," Aspen answered. "My mother was exactly the same way. She just couldn't understand it. Then she began to rant and rave and told me –" She couldn't continue and put a hand to her face. Kaya put an arm around her and could feel her shake.

"She told me," Aspen said in a choked voice, "that she and Daddy thought that we – we didn't wait. That she could think something of that of us. She knows me better than that." Kaya's mouth dropped open and a light died in his eyes. That these people could think something like that!

"You say they thought we slept together?" he demanded breathlessly. She nodded and bit her lip.

"Oh, Yeshua, can't you open their eyes?" he pressed out after fighting with himself. "Why can't they understand how you protected us?" He sighed, an insight coming to him. "Aspen, I think they were just trying to rationalize the change that Yeshua made in us." She looked at him.

"But it makes me so sad and so sick that they don't trust us any more," she answered. "I overheard Mama tell Daddy after our discussion that she thought it better if you were to go on to face the Warrior King alone. 'She needs to get away from him,' was what she said. It makes me want to cry, Kaya."

"Oh, Aspen," he whispered and drew her close, she nestled in his arms for a moment, then he said, "I wish we could make her understand..."

"It's not that easy," the Woodmaid replied. "Mama never liked the idea of you and me being together."

"What?" He straightened up and looked at her. Aspen nodded.

"She never said anything because Daddy had forbidden her to interfere with me, but she's always wanted me to marry some good, upstanding Woodman – like Lynx."

"Why didn't you tell me this before?" he demanded, letting go, just a bit miffed at being left out of the loop.

"Because it wasn't *important*," she told him, gently took his arm and linked it under hers, tracing the veins in his forearm with one finger. "Creon, nothing I've ever done has been good enough for her, don't you see?" She looked up, green eyes pleading. "That was another part of my wanting to be away from my family. There was a lot less pressure...."

"I know how that feels," he muttered, then sighed. "I guess you were right in not telling me, dear, but let's not do something like that again."

"Hm-hm." She nodded and leaned against him. He laid his arm around her and sighed. This was all so complicated. He'd always thought that he'd gotten along well with Savannah and now this.

*Things certainly are different than they look on the surface*, he said to himself. Suddenly he felt Aspen's shoulders shake.

"Aspen?" he asked, looking down to find her with her face buried in his chest, holding on to him, trying to stifle the sobs.

"Aspen," he sighed and straightened her up. "Come on, you shouldn't cry tonight." He gently wiped away the tears that were streaming down her face. "This is supposed to be a happy day, hm? We took the pledge and now it's nine months until we can finally get married." She smiled at that.

"It's so long." It came out in a whisper, trying to hide the choking in her voice.

"Just watch, it'll be time before you know it," he assured her with a soft chuckle. "And now let's look happy, at least for the others." He winked and she nodded, echoing his smile with a small one of her own. He bent his head and kissed her lips gently before they rose and returned to the festive circle.



## War Lady

The Warrior King angrily strode back and forth along his balcony, a misty shape that looked like Alman hovering in the background.

"He's killed Tolgar, evaded Lormar, taken Keritos and even Pan-Tao!" the king roared. He turned and pointed a finger at the image.

"We must do *something*, Alman. We must."

"Perhaps he has help from people who worship the Creator, Elam," she suggested in a whispery, seductive voice. "Perhaps it is time you implement your greatest plan."

"Yes, we'll make what is already happening official, Alman." A grin came to his face. "All must worship the Warrior King. He who doesn't will die. Yes, yes, let's have it ratified and we'll begin with Tashyer and the Pwyllwood!"

A month slowly rolled past as Kaya and Aspen stayed with the Woodfolk. They both tried to keep their mouths shut about Yeshua, only speaking of him when they were alone, but at times his name slipped out of them. One time was shortly after their betrothal, when Kaya was speaking with Lynx. Much to Kaya's surprise the young Woodman asked to hear more and so his friend began to tell him of Yeshua's great sacrifice. Amazingly enough Lynx was not against one word that Kaya said, he even went so far as to accept Yeshua as

his Lord and a few days later, his wife, a girl named Hazel, also believed in Yeshua. Together the four began to pray for Kavak, Savannah, the Council, the Woodfolk, and the whole world.

A second month was nearly over. Kaya slowly walked back from his work in one of the few fields the Woodfolk cultivated. There was an uneasiness in the air and he suddenly reached over his shoulder to draw Justin, but the silver sword was lying in his room. He could feel a cold perspiration begin to form on his forehead and a strange chill ran down his back. Though he knew his instincts were warning him, he could not see anything out of the ordinary, but when he sniffed the air he perceived the sickly-sweet smell of rotting meat. He quickly followed the stench to a low hedge of bushes. He pushed the branches aside to find the body of a Woodman, killed some time ago, now mostly eaten by the animals, but the smell was still strong. Kaya stepped back to get some fresh air before carefully examining the body. He first noticed the red and gray clothing, the colors one of the less well-to-do families in the town. Even so, they wouldn't have left him unburied. Kaya figured that he must have died violently, noting two long tears in the dead man's tunic that did not look of animal teeth. He shook his head, rose and hurried back towards the field where he found Lynx and a few other Woodmen and called them to see his discovery. Once there Lynx immediately recognized the device on the belt of the corpse

"This is Habikht!" he said. "But I just saw him go back to the town! What...?"

"We'd better stop asking questions and get this body buried," Kaya answered, "then we'll take care of that impostor."

While Kaya and his friends were burying the body, Changeling walked up the road in the form of Habikht, secure in the knowledge that no one would recognize him. He reached Kavak's home and looked around, making sure that no one was in sight, then ominously his shape shifted to become that of the leader of the Woodfolk. Changeling scaled the ladder quickly and entered the house, knowing that Aspen would be alone here, taking care of chores for her mother. Savannah's antagonism to her daughter and future son-in-law remained unchecked and meanwhile the whole village whispered about it. It was known that the leader's wife found ways to keep Aspen virtually a prisoner in her own home throughout the day and it was only Kavak's intervention that bought her the time to leave and be with her beloved. That would suit Changeling just fine, Savannah being off on an errand now.

Changeling looked in to see Aspen was sitting at the window looking out to the north, from where Kaya was going to return, humming happily as she carefully worked on embroidering a dress for her mother. He smiled to himself and then affected her father's stance and gently reached out and touched her shoulder. She turned her head, green eyes widening in surprise.

"Daddy!" Kavak's face was grim.

"Get up quickly, Aspen," he said. "Kaya just got hurt and he wants you to come to him."

"Oh no!" she gasped, immediately put down what she was doing, rose and followed Kavak down the ladder. The two of them began to head east, towards the cliffs.

"Wasn't Kaya working in the fields?" she asked. Kavak nodded.

"For some reason we found him out to the east, unconscious and bleeding. I came for you as soon as he woke up and asked for you." Aspen looked at her father quizzically, sensing that there was something not quite right about his explanation, but right now it was more important that she find Kaya and help him.

They broke from the forest and came out onto a bluff that was only a short way from the sea.

"Where is he?" she asked.

"This way," her father answered and pulled her along southward.

"I hope he's all right," she whispered to herself, not noticing the very strange smile that Kavak had on his face.

Having buried the remains of Habikht, Kaya hurried back to the village, a foreboding suddenly filling his heart. He ran through the streets, ignoring those calling to him and within moments was at Kavak's house. He scaled the ladder and peeked through the doorway into the empty living-room.

"Aspen!" he called, looking around, but there was no answer. *No matter*, he told himself, trying to calm the rising panic. *She's just out doing something for her mother*. But the nagging doubt wouldn't settle and so he decided to find Savannah and ask her where his beloved was. While he was looking for her he ran into the leader of the Woodfolk who was speaking with one of the elders.

"Is Aspen with you?" he asked.

"No," the Woodman answered, "she's back at the house."

"I just came from there," the Seer replied. "She's not..." And then he was interrupted by a boy of about ten years of age who pulled lightly on Kavak's sleeve.

"Aga Kavak, what are *you* doing here?" Both the young Man and his older friend looked at the boy, bewildered. "I just saw you leave the village with Aspen."

"They've got her!" Kaya cried suddenly and sprinted to his tree house. Moments later he came down again, Justin strapped to his back.

"Kaya," Kavak said to him. "You won't need that."

"Let's hope not," was the curt reply. "Let's go!" With that the two of them took off running.

Aspen struggled against the iron grip with which her father held her wrist, the sense that something was wrong growing on her.

"What are you doing to me, Daddy?" she demanded, trying to slow down and resist. He just leered at her, grinned strangely and pulled her along toward the south. A loud shout rang from the forest and she saw Kaya and – her father?! – running out of the forest. The thing that looked like her father cursed and began to change. The hand remained, but wings grew from his shoulders and his face took on the look of that of an eagle. An instant later he lifted off, pulling Aspen along with him. Kaya roared in anger and hurled Justin after Changeling. The sword missed its mark by inches, dropping to the ground again and then sticking in the soft turf. Changeling was gone and with him Aspen.

Kaya pulled Justin out of the ground with an imprecation and glared after the fleeing Changeling.

"What was that?" Kavak asked, coming up beside him.

"I don't know," the young Man admitted, "but I know where it came from."

"Where?"

"From the next Warlord. I've got to go to Midpoint." With that he turned and walked back to the village.

The crimson haze had clouded his reason as he entered the port, making him just barely notice the soldiers before they saw him. He slipped into hiding and then began to follow them, hoping that they would lead him to their headquarters. Suddenly a quiet Voice stopped him.

"Where are you going, Kaya?" He knew that Voice and stopped, cowering against the wall of a building.

"I'm going to rescue Aspen," he whispered.

"Don't you believe that I'm protecting her, Kaya?" the Light whispered sadly. "Didn't you give her up to me?" Kaya remembered when he and Aspen had spoken the morning after their betrothal, promising that they would first and foremost let the Creator protect the other, in life or in death.

"I'm not living up to that, am I?" Kaya asked timidly. The Voice was silent and the twinge of guilt became stronger.

"Lord, please forgive me," he prayed. "I tried to get my hands into something that should have been under *your* control, not mine." The Voice was still silent, but Kaya knew that he was forgiven, the guilt assuaged by a calm assurance from the Light Within. He slowly turned away from the soldiers and began to head toward the western gate of the city, fading in among the buildings.

"You there!" The rough cry startled Kaya and he looked over his shoulder to find a soldier pointing at him, gesturing for him to come.

"You're under arrest," the soldier snapped and suddenly Kaya felt that he very much would like to resist the arrest. He needed some more time to plan, so he just turned his back to the soldier and nonchalantly walked toward the gate. A heavy hand rested on his shoulder.

"Didn't you hear me?" the soldier demanded, but Kaya merely pushed the man's hand off his shoulder and made to walk away again. A sharp pain on the side of the head made him wince.

"You must be deaf, huh?" The soldier cursed and punched the young Man again and an instant later was lying on the ground, jaw throbbing.

"Get him, boys!" he yelled and ten more Men jumped on top of Kaya. He doled out the blows, feeling the strength rise in him, but ten to one was too much for even an experienced fighter like Creon Kaya. One of the men struck him hard on the back of the neck and he staggered, trying to regain his composure. That instant was all it took and they converged on him simultaneously, thrusting him to the ground, four of them holding him down while another tied his hands behind his back.

"You certainly make things hard for us, pal," the commanding soldier snapped, grabbing Kaya by the chin. "And if I wasn't ordered to bring you in perfect condition, you'd be mashed to pulp right now."

"It's not very courageous to mash a single Man with the help of ten others," the Seer said with a half-smile, his voice mocking. The soldier grew red at the biting scorn, but restrained himself from punching Kaya.

"We'll let Alman deal with him first, but then I get what is left."

They dragged him along the streets at a very brisk pace, finally stopping at a large mansion of uncut stone. The commander nodded to one of the sentries who opened the massive front door to let the escort in. Kaya was then taken to a large room on the ground floor, where the guard left him alone. Even though at first glance he was the only one in the room, he could sense that there was someone else there, too – no, two someones. Then he realized that he knew one of the two. The memory came back to him, the crowded streets of Capernaum, the mob, and...

"Aspen?" the question was quiet, but distinct. The only answer he got was a muffled sob. A curtain in one corner of the room was parted to reveal two women. Aspen was standing there, silent, her green eyes full of fear, but hopeful as she looked at Kaya. The other woman's appearance instantly riveted Kaya's eyes. She was tall, as tall as Creon, and dressed in long, flowing robes of gold. Her face was as finely cut as any could be, almost a work of art. Platinum hair hung loosely around her shoulders and she wore a gold circlet with a single gray pearl set in the center. She wore no visible weapons, making Kaya even more wary, knowing that what was hidden was usually more dangerous than what could be seen. Beside her stood a table with a red silk pillow on it and on the pillow rested Justin. The woman in gold let her left hand play over the silver hilt and the bright blue stone set in the base of it. She smiled at him and he shivered slightly, feeling as if some enchantment were trying to touch him.

*Protect me, Yeshua,* he thought and became still, turning his gaze toward the Woodmaid with great effort. He would *not* let her do anything to him but kill him.

The woman stopped examining the sword and strode across the room, still smiling, coming to a stop in front of him, just close enough to touch him.

"Welcome to my home, Creon," she said with a smile, then waved her hand. "You won't need those anymore." Instantly the ropes around his wrists became charred flax and fell to the ground. The only movement that came from him was his rubbing the life back into his wrists. His eyes stayed on Aspen.

"I may call you Creon, may I?" the woman asked. He didn't answer, not wanting to provoke this strange woman, not even wanting to acknowledge her.

"Ah, I see you're the big, silent type," she laughed. It was like silver bells tinkling. "I'm Alman." Kaya drew his breath a bit more sharply, realizing that this was the "Warlord" he was to face – and not only that, but consort of the Warrior King as well! *Creator God, help me now,* he prayed.

"Come now, Creon, we needn't be shy," she coaxed, gently laying a hand on his face. "I have wonderful things planned for you." She laughed again and then kissed him, but he remained impassive, his eyes all the time on Aspen, who had paled at the woman's audacity. Now her face flushed and her brow furrowed, one hand almost involuntarily creeping towards the pillow where Kaya's sword lay.

"Look at me, Creon," Alman whispered. "Look at me." His eyes stayed where they were, staring at the Woodmaid. The war lady stepped back and a hint of anger slipped into her eyes.

"Don't you want to see how beautiful I am?" she asked, putting just a bit of a pout into her voice. It was only then that he spoke, never taking his eyes off his beloved.

"Beauty is only in the eye of the beholder, Lady Alman, and real beauty comes from the inside." He knew the words were coming from the Creator again. He was fighting this battle, not Kaya. Even though her smile stayed warm, her gray eyes went cold as granite.

"Are you telling me that I'm *not* beautiful?" she asked. He was silent.

"Well, Lord Seer," she mocked. "Whatever else you are, you are persistent and you are tiresome. I had planned some very wonderful things for you."

"What you had planned wouldn't sweeten the way to death, my lady," he returned evenly. "I will go to a better place when I die, somewhere where your 'pleasures' are not needed. As for dying, I'm not afraid of it." Here he smiled. "You see, I've already met my judge."

"I am your judge, Creon Kaya," the war lady responded vehemently. "I and only I can tell whether you are worthy to go on to the next life. The Masters tell me that clearly."

"Did they tell you where you will be when they're through with you?" he asked. She stared at him, her face slowly becoming a mask of anger and hate.

"I see," was all he said after glancing at her. "They didn't." Her breath came sharply between clenched teeth, her face flushed, seething.

"How dare you mock my Masters!" she hissed.

"Lady Alman, I would never mock your Masters. I respect their power too much to do that, but I serve the Champion of them all!"

"And who would that be?" Her voice became a mere whisper, full of danger.

"Your Masters know him. He is called Yeshua." The instant that name fell she leaped forward and grabbed his neck, knocking him to the floor. She sat astride him, pressing with all her might. Kaya grabbed her wrists, trying to pull her hands away, but found she was much too strong. It was as if he was a child fighting a trained wrestler.

"Creator God, Lord, Yeshua, help me!" he choked instantly felt strength seeping into his body – more strength than he'd ever felt before. He grasped the woman's wrists so hard, she screamed in pain. He got his legs under himself and stood up, pushing back and hurling her across the long room like a rag doll. She picked herself up from the ground and mumbled something. Suddenly she was no longer clad in the robes, but in golden armor with a whip at her side and a sword on her back. She drew a dagger from her belt and began to advance toward Kaya.

Aspen still burned at the woman's audacity of kissing her man. She would have to pay for this. Her hand closed around Justin and with one step she was between the war lady and Kaya.

"Stop!" she commanded, leveling the sword at Alman. The warlady stopped, her face mirroring her surprise, but it lasted only a moment as it turned into a malicious grin.

"I finally get to see what really is in you Woodfolk," she mocked. "You are no different than the rest of us." Aspen was flustered, but decided she had to save Kaya and avenge what this woman had done to him, be it with her own life. She continued pointing the sword at Alman's breast.

"Aspen, drop the sword," Kaya said behind her. She struggled against his insistence, wanting to run this beast through!

"Aspen, drop the sword and she can't hurt you," he repeated. Alman laughed and pulled the whip out.

"DROP THE SWORD!" Kaya thundered, all of his authority projected into that one sentence. Aspen's whole body jerked with his roar and she lowered Justin, letting the tip touch the ground, then let go with a sob. The silver sword fell away, out of her reach. In the same instant the war lady snapped her whip forward and the leather cords cut into Aspen's left upper arm. The Woodmaid's face contorted and she let out a little gasp, clenching her teeth.

"I can't hurt you, eh?" Alman laughed. "Of course I can. I can even *kill* you!" She drew the whip back and muttered something then swung it forward. A deadly red glow formed around its tip as it hurtled toward Aspen's face. But suddenly it snapped back, less than an inch from the Woodmaid's nose and flew towards the

war lady. She shrieked, seeing where it was headed, was unable to move, feeling as if a pair of mighty arms had rooted her to the spot. The blazing tip of the whip struck her forehead and shattered the pearl. She cried out again and fell to her knees at Aspen's feet, before crumpling on the ground, eyes staring off into the distance, fixed, glazed over. The Woodmaid blinked and stared at the body of the warlady and then was suddenly caught up in Kaya's arms. He held her against him and she laid her head on his shoulder.

"You came just at the right time," she moaned. "That – that woman had things in mind, I – I can't tell you."

"Sh, it's over now," he whispered, stroking her hair. "Don't be afraid anymore." She took comfort in that and leaned into him, closing her eyes. An acrid smell and a quiet hissing made them both look towards where the body of the war lady was lying. They saw it turn black, seethroughish, and then sink into the ground, leaving only a black shadow with a white spot in the forehead.

"She's gone," Kaya whispered, "and we should go, too." Aspen just barely nodded. He let go of her for a moment, retrieved Justin and slid it into the sheath on his back. Then he picked her up and passed her out the window. She leaned against the wall to steady herself as he jumped out behind her.

"Can you walk?" he asked softly.

"I don't think so," she replied, feeling the wobbliness in her knees. He quickly took her into his arms and slipped away through the gathering dusk, passing through the streets like a wraith.

"What stopped her?" Aspen asked as he carried her through the alleys.

"Yeshua," was all he answered. "He's stronger than any enchantment and he won't let anything evil happen to us." Aspen sighed and buried her face in his cloak. *Thank you, Yeshua,* she prayed silently.

# Six: Savash

## Returning Home

The edict of worship was issued in all Tashyer but Stein, the once-capital. The Lord of Stein immediately had the messengers arrested and interred in very nice quarters until the battle with the Warrior King was over. However, worship of the King on penalty of death brought many problems with it in other parts of the dry lands. The believers in Creator God began wondering if their faith was right after all. Some burned the incense and then returned to their old religion with an unfulfilled feeling. Others were dragged from their homes and condemned to death, regardless of age or sex. Even children who couldn't speak yet were beheaded for their parents' refusal to burn the incense.

In the Pwyll only Eison was exempt from the edict, being recognized as a sovereign province. When the messengers had come, the high priestess of Isteck had personally torn the piece of parchment to shreds and fed it to the flames.

"If the Warrior King thinks he can break the covenant with Isteck that Eison be her city and her city alone, then he will feel her wrath!" she cried. "If they must worship him, let them do it outside Eison." So Eison became a haven for fugitives who served the Creator and would worship the Warrior King.

When Lormar got wind of the new law, he merely shook his head and thanked the Creator that he'd gone through the Northern Provinces on his way back to Elamil.

During the next week Kaya found himself thinking more and more of his parents and how they were, rather than enjoying his time in the village, and he began to pray for his Lord to show him what to do – leave now or later? In a discussion with Lynx, Hazel, and Aspen, he decided that it was time to become bolder in telling his friends about Yeshua. He and Aspen told anyone who would listen about what they'd experienced and slowly they began to sense the hostility of many of the Woodfolk towards their message. Then, early one evening, Kavak came to him.

"Kaya, I want you to leave," he said, coming straight to the point. The young Man raised his eyebrows and rubbed his chin.

"Why?"

"Your name came up several times in the Council this last session," the leader of the Woodfolk began. "Yours and Aspen's." He looked hard at Creon Kaya. "They have asked me to unname her."

"To what?" Kaya hadn't heard about that yet.

"To disown her and throw her out of my family. I won't do that." He shook his head and breathed out heavily before reaching the real core of what he wanted to say. "There are also those who are openly speaking of killing you – in the *Council*!" A chill ran down the young man's back as he watched the anguish mount in his friend's face.

"Killing is against our laws," Kavak sighed heavily, "and it would hurt me even more if you were to be killed by my own people. If it were just another Woodman it would be bad enough, but not you, my – my son. That is a whole other matter. So I ask you to leave to save your life." Here was the answer to Kaya's prayers – he was going to go home! But there was one thing he wanted to hear yet.

"Tell me why they want to kill me," he said, knowing the answer full well.

"It's because of Yeshua," Kavak returned. "They are accusing you of blasphemy."

"And you, do you believe that?"

Kavak looked away for a long moment and when he looked back his indecision was apparent in his green-blue eyes.

"I'm not sure yet, my son, but soon I will have to decide. I already dread that day, but I pray that I will decide correctly when it comes." The young Man nodded.

"Do you want me to take Aspen, too?" he asked. Kavak's mouth compressed to a thin line and his eyes suddenly seemed so vacant. He opened his mouth to reply, then closed it again and clenched his teeth before finally giving his answer.

"It's her choice."

"Thank you, Kavak," Kaya said with a nod. "I'll go ask her."

"Steer clear of Savannah," the Woodman warned as the Seer rose. "She will do everything to keep Aspen here and to reform her."

"I understand," Kaya replied and went in search of his beloved.

She was at her parents' home, doing some minor chores, humming a melancholy tune to herself. The young Man looked around furtively but saw no trace of her mother, so he came up behind her and gently put his arms around her.

"Hi, luv," she said with a smile, turned her head just enough so she could brush his rough chin with her lips. Kaya smiled sadly in return, let go of her and led her out into the sitting room.

"Aspen, I – I just had a talk with your father and he asked me to leave – for my own good." Here he faltered.

"Go on," she prompted.

"I wanted to know if you want to come along with me." A bright smile sparkled on her face.

"Oh, yes!" she answered. "I would love to go with you. After all – we do belong together now." Kaya nodded, more to himself than to her.

"Right."

"When do we leave?"

"Within the next few days," he told her. "I need to get some things ready and so do you." Aspen nodded.

"I'll be along then," he said, hugged her again and left. Aspen breathed a sigh of relief. He had offered to take her along! Now she could leave this place, its pressures, and its foolish hatred and see parts of the world she'd never seen before, but often dreamed of. Best of all she'd see Creon's family! *Thank you, Yeshua,* she prayed silently and the song she hummed the rest of the evening was a joyful one.

The high council of Stein called an emergency session to discuss a new threat that had just materialized outside the eastern wall. For about two days now a small contingent of Werebeasts and Men had set up camp and one of the tents was flying what seemed to be a royal banner, but no one was certain of that fact. Now they were called together and only one very important guest was missing – Baltar.

"I thought he was coming!" the Lord of Stein groused.

"He said he'd be here, my lord," one of his men said apologetically. "Perhaps he's on the way." He wasn't far wrong, because two floors down Baltar had just sat down on a bench to take a rest. The pain of walking wasn't quite that bad anymore, but it was still very tiring for one who had not done so in nearly fourteen years to go even from the front room to the council chambers.

"M'lord, gentlemen," the marshal finally announced, "Baltar the Architect." The doors swung open and the men gasped to see an upright figure leaning on an ornate cane of rare wood. The architect limped forward, leaning heavily on the stick.

"Baltar, you can walk!" one of the men cried in surprise while the rest merely stared, stupefied. The blond man didn't answer until he sank into a chair that was quickly brought for him.

"Yes, but it's not easy. Now what's the problem?"

"We have Werebeasts outside the city. They asked to speak with the lord, but we didn't allow them until the council could gather." Baltar shook his head.

"Sometimes I think that Lormar was right when he said that this council is inept," he remarked. The men started to their feet in anger, only the Lord of Stein remained seated and called to order.

"Sir Baltar, please say such things!" he implored, his voice a high-pitched whine.

"If I weren't here you people would not even have the courage to make a decision on the fiscal policy!" Baltar snapped. "Now why not let the Werebeasts see the lord? After all they *have* a King now. And if I remember reading the report correctly the two at the gate said that the King himself would want to talk to us. Or am I wrong?" The men grumbled in assent. "Well, this King is waiting outside the door right now and I think we should invite him and his Queen in." He motioned to the marshal and the door opened to display three figures. In front were Arslan and Rory. He was dressed in a simple leather tunic, only a short cloak over one shoulder displaying his royalty. She wore a rusty dress with a light cape of white. It matched their fur color nicely and even though they seemed strange, all the men rose in their honor and even more in honor of the massive Man who stood behind them, his face hidden in a beige cloak.

"Welcome to Stein, King and Queen of the Werebeasts," Baltar greeted them. Arslan smiled.

"I'm happy we can finally meet," he returned in Common, with a very small accent. Chairs were brought, but the big man remained standing.

"We have come to ask for assistance," Arslan finally began when they were seated. "We are on our way to Elamil to help challenge the Warrior King. I only have a hundred of my men with me because the rest are needed to protect the stronghold in Liflan."

"Where?" one of the council members asked quietly.

"Liflan is the old name for what you call the Death March," the big man explained, speaking for the first time. "You see, not only the Werebeasts are on the move, but the Karyl as well. The Seer needs military assistance and only we who stand against the Warrior King can help him."

"You *do* remember that two thirds of the army were slated to go and join Lormar when the northern road thaws," Eli began helplessly.

"That's a good idea!" one of the council members chimed in. "Send them!"

"You'll have to help outfit them from your own pockets," Baltar interjected. "We don't have the funds in the treasury to do something like that." Several of the council members bristled at that thought, as they had been wealthy under Dushman's rule and had only increased their treasures in the aftermath under Eli and Lormar. If there was anything that they were interested in it was money and that would have to be pried from their tight fists by major force.

"That is out of the question," one of the councilors sniffed. "I will not be party to this. After all I *do* pay my taxes."

"Which are a lot lower than the ones to the Warrior King," Arlsan's tall companion put in. "You should be giving this as a goodwill offering to keep your freedom."

"Who are you?" another council member asked disrespectfully. "And what right do you have to ask us to participate in your war?" The big man threw his cloak back and suddenly the room was filled with blazing light. At his right side was a mighty sword sheathed in silver. His hair was the color of midnight and his eyes a burning blue. His face was finely cut and his flowing white robes emanated light.

"I am Zafer," he thundered into the hall. "I am a commander among the Karyl and the protector of the King of Werebeasts. I have come with a command, not a plea. It is from the Creator. If you do not accept it, your city will fall to the Warrior King before he is destroyed." The threat and impressive presence of the Karyl helped. Within minutes the whole council decided that they would give what was needed to outfit the army as soon as possible.

"I will take stock of the funds and I will be going along with the army," Baltar said calmly. "I think it would be better for you to stay here." Though there was no open response, many of the men were nodding in their cowardly hearts. It was easier to let Baltar go. Perhaps he would get killed in the process and they could rule as they pleased without the constant conscience of the architect to bother them.

The Karyl threw his cloak back around his shoulders and suddenly looked very much like a Man again. Baltar leaned on his arm as they walked out of the building.

"They would never have consented if you hadn't done that," he commented.

"They are fickle and I think that Stein will be a very difficult part of the Nations to keep under control when the Warrior King falls," Zafer returned. "I sometimes wonder why the Creator does not put a few Karyl here to keep order."

Kaya and Aspen's leaving was a hush-hush affair, not at all like it had been last time. Savannah was not told of what was going on, so only Kavak, Lynx and Hazel were there to see them off.

"Creator God go with you, my children," Kavak said.

"Daddy, I've been meaning to ask you something," Aspen told him. Her father nodded.

"What happened to Mama?"

"She has a lot of trouble with what you said to her," he sighed, "and I think she has cut both of you off from our family ties because of – Yeshua." She looked at Kaya, finally understanding what happened. The penalty for blasphemy was life-long separation, and that meant that Savannah now considered her youngest daughter and fiancée dead. It also meant that they might never be able to return to the Island, especially if the Council spoke the ban upon them. Perhaps they wouldn't if Aspen and Kaya left now.

The Woodmaid tried to hold back the tears as she hugged her father good-bye, but they escaped from beneath her lashes and her lip trembled as she tried to be strong. Lynx and Hazel were also teary-eyed.

"We'll keep on telling about Yeshua, even if they *do* kill us," the young Woodman said. "He means more to me than life itself." Kaya smiled.

"Just remember what I taught you," he warned, "but study your scriptures, because everything given by Creator God will point to his Son." Lynx nodded and hugged Kaya and then Aspen. Finally they turned and stepped into the small boat that would take them to Midpoint.

As the Island vanished behind them, Aspen let herself really cry a bit. Kaya sat there numbly pulling at the oars.

"We can't go back, ever," she sobbed.

"We will, some day," he said. "The Light promised me."

"Really?" He nodded.

"But it may be years away, luv. Can you bear that?" She smiled through her tears.

"Yes. My home is where you are, Creon Kaya."

From Deniz they caught a ship to Güney Liman, a large port on the south end of the Flatlands. Once there they joined a caravan and began to travel northward through the vast savanna. Living outdoors began to lift their spirits again and they moved north-west continuously.

"I wish we could visit Tharkey," he told her one evening, "but I'm not sure we could find his oasis, even if we tried."

They passed many small villages, one much like the other. The people of the Flatlands didn't care about strangers and made it plain in the way they treated the travelers. As long as they were ready to buy and sell the Flatlanders were cordial, but the instant they said they were merely passing through the old indifference popped up again. The caravan often found it more comfortable just to pick up some provisions in one small town and spend the night a short way away in the wilderness. Though they were in a larger group, Kaya and Aspen never were invited to the fire where the merchants sang, ate and drank, always being pushed off to one side on their own. It was sad but typical, Kaya observed.

"The jackals are better companions than those Flatlanders," Aspen remarked bitterly. "They would just as gladly watch you curl up and die as help you."

"And these are my people..." Kaya let his voice trail off sadly.

"I didn't mean to hurt you," she apologized, his sadness stinging her.

"It's all right. For the first time I've realized how evil Man really is."

"Not to forget the Woodfolk." He looked at her sharply.

"Well, we're only human," she returned. Kaya finally nodded.

"I guess all humans are evil. I never thought that even Werebeasts and Woodfolk were human, but look at us: we all think, we all feel, we all have a will and a mind – and we all can worship the Creator. We are also all evil."

"Tell me, Kaya, did you ever tell Daddy that your Mom believes in Creator God?" Aspen asked. He thought for a good while, poking at their small fire.

"I'm not sure, but, no, I don't think I did. Why?"

"Well, I've been thinking – about Creator God," she told him. "I've noticed in those last three months how we Woodfolk seem to think he is our God only. Every one else has to cater to us to know him. Mama couldn't understand how any Men could claim the Creator as their own, much less that Yeshua was a Man and not a Woodman. But he's not only for the Woodfolk – he's for everybody." She slipped around the fire and snuggled up to Kaya. "Especially for us." He smiled and nodded, putting his arm around her.

"You know, we're almost at my home," he said. "We should be there within the next week."

"I wonder what it's like," she whispered. "You've told me so often, but it just is so different from the island that I can't really imagine it." He laughed.

"You remember Ebediyen's Fault?" She nodded. "It's a bit like that, only a lot bigger with less rocks and trees and more terraces of fields." He looked at the stars dreamily. "I didn't think I'd ever miss it when I left my home."

"But you do now."

"Yes, I know exactly how you feel about leaving your home now," he continued. "I want to see my parents again, even if they only throw me out of the house again like – like the Woodfolk did." She bit her lip and blinked back the tears, trying not to let him notice, but he caught the glint as one droplet made a trail down her cheek.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, brushing at the tear. "I didn't want to hurt you. After all, they're my people now, too." She just nodded and leaned her head on his shoulder. He gently stroked her hair, which she had pulled back into a pony tail. *Here I come, Mom, Dad, Licia, Jokhan and all of you others*, he thought. *Please let us get there quickly, Yeshua.*

The eastern sky just showed the palest hues of dawn, tickling Kaya's eyelids, calling him out of the slumber of one who had traveled far and long. He murmured to himself, tossed his head from side to side, then gave into day's gentle prodding and opened his eyes. He rolled his head to the side, watching the light rise in the east, then turned and looked north-west and his heart leaped. He was on his feet in a moment, recognizing the giant rock formation as the one that he'd left three years earlier. It was his home, Chifchi!

"Aspen!" he called, reaching down to shake the Woodmaid's shoulder. She came awake, bleary-eyed.

"What?" she muttered. "Can't it wait a little longer?" And she tried to roll over and go back to sleep, but the young Man remained insistent, eyes shining brightly, his hands shaking with excitement.

"It's Chifchi, Aspen," he nearly shouted. "We're almost there! We're almost *home!*"

"What?" she repeated, sitting up and looking towards the great rock walls that he now pointed at.

"Let's get going," he urged. "We'll be in the valley by this afternoon if we leave now."

"Not until we've had some breakfast," she replied, brushing the sand out of her hair, rising and stretching. They did as she suggested and then Kaya went and paid the caravan leader for the protection and struck out on their own across the savanna. He set a furious pace at first but then slowed down as the walls didn't seem to draw closer.

The sun had clearly passed its zenith when they finally entered through the south-eastern pass, laughing as they got their feet wet in the small brook. And then they came out into the valley. Most of the green had vanished as the last days of fall approached, but it was still breath-taking. A few fields were painted golden with a late harvest of grain in those balmy days. Many of the trees still had their beautiful garbs of golden, red, orange, or brown and here and there a dark green pine tree poked its branches into the sky. The small lake sparkled a rich dark blue and the cozy houses snuggled in among the trees, warm, inviting, speaking of hearth and home and protection from the elements.

"Fall is the most beautiful part of the year here," he remarked, the thrill making his voice catch. The Woodmaid nodded, drinking it all in with each breath, gaze sweeping left and right, green eyes shining with delight.

"Come on," he said, took her hand and tugged her along the bank, crossed through the small paths between the harvested fields where black earth looked skyward, preparing itself for the winter rest. Kaya drank in the smell of rich earth mingled with the sharp odor of manure that had been spread to increase the fertility. These would be Gavin's fields and those over there belonged to Jimri. The thought of him and his son Rikel made Kaya's stomach churn, but he pushed the feeling away. He quickly steered them onto a main road, paved with gravel and white sand, the ruts from wagons clearly cut into it. They only followed it for a short ways before he turned aside onto a well-worn path beneath tall trees robed in gold and crimson, the sun sending his bright beams through the foliage to give the path a speckled effect. The lights shifted as a slight breeze ruffled the trees' plumage and Aspen breathed deeply, feeling energy flow into her again as she was beneath her beloved trees.

The trail ended in a small clearing at the center of which a hut of a good size huddled. Kaya stopped for a moment regarding the low structure of stone, boards, and mud with a thatched roof. It had been quite tumble-down when he'd left it with the old man, oh, so long ago, but now it was clear that someone had labored hard to improve its condition. Much of the thatch was fairly fresh and he even noticed an additional side structure on one side. He smiled to himself, thinking that his leaving the family had brought them the peace that they needed.

Finally he worked up enough courage and stepped up to the door. At first he was tempted just to open it and go in, as if nothing had happened, but then decided to knock. The door creaked open and a dark-haired girl looked out, her brown eyes suspiciously regarding the two strangers. Kaya figured her to be sixteen or seventeen and mentally went through the list of his siblings.

"What do you want?" she demanded. Then he smiled; he knew her.

"Hello, Licia," he said gently.

"Who are you?" she asked. He suddenly realized that his beard and hair had grown again. He smiled.

"Quiet woods and empty places are where I live," he quoted a children's rhyme he had made up for her. Her eyes narrowed.

"Who are you?" she asked sharply.

"Come on, Licia, you know the rhyme," he pressed, trying to suppress a grin.

"The trees have so much shade to give," Licia returned haltingly, the recognition slowly dawning on her face.

"My home is up beyond, a glen so nice."

"I live on roots, my friends are mice!" she finally laughed. "Oh, Creon, you're home!" She rushed forward and hugged him.

"I didn't recognize you," she confessed.

"A lot of people have had trouble with that lately," he admitted with a laugh. Licia nodded and glanced at Aspen who was standing just behind Kaya.

"Where's the old man and who's *that*?" she asked, pointing unashamedly.

"That's a long story," her brother admitted, "but this is my lady friend, Aspen." And he gently drew the Woodmaid forward and laid an arm around her shoulders possessively. Licia looked from her brother to his beloved and back.

"You mean they *let* you have a girl?" she asked, dumbfounded.

"Yes." He raised his eyebrows, then laughed. "There never was any curse, sister dear, at least not outside of this valley. It's over now and I believe you know it, right?"

"I guess," the dark-haired girl said, flipping her long tresses back over one shoulder, staring at Aspen again, uncertain of what to make of her. She was different, but she fit with her brother....

"Am I that much of a novelty?" the Woodmaid asked, just slightly nettled at Licia's indiscretion, to which the girl flushed a bright red.

"Oh, I'm forgetting my manners," she stammered. "Will you come in?" They nodded and went into the dusky house after her.

Only the two youngest girls were there. Kaya figured that the rest of the kids had probably gone off to play with the others in the village. The older, Ionis, stared at the strange Man and Woodmaid, backing away from him, but the youngest turned from playing with a small piece of wood and smiled brightly. Aspen let go of Kaya and linked arms with Licia, asked her about her chores, and so began to make friends with the younger girl. Creon Kaya's sister brightened and took the Woodmaid over to show her some of her projects while Kaya knelt down beside his youngest sister.

"Hi, there. What's your name?" The little girl just smiled.

"That's Enna," Licia called over her shoulder.

"Hi, Enna," he said with a smile. The little girl smiled even more broadly, cooed, and suddenly stretched out her hands toward him. She giggled with delight as he picked her up.

"You really are a little sunshine," he told her and she laughed again. Ionis still stared at him, afraid.

"Hey, Aspen," he laughed, pointing to the little girl. "What do you think?" The Woodmaid laughed back.

"She definitely is your sister, Kaya," she remarked. "Even the same eyes." It was quite true. Enna was a dark-haired cutie with happy, innocent gray eyes and a soft smile that reminded him so much of his mother. It was only then that he realized she was missing. He sat down at the long table and little Enna giggled and babbled to herself as she explored the depths of his jacket.

"Licia, where's Mom?" he asked. Sadness washed over her face and she screwed it up the way you do when you are trying to keep from crying.

"She – she's dead," she said in a broken voice, her lips trembling. "It's only been a two days, but still..." Here she couldn't go on and broke into tears. Aspen put an arm around her in a gentle embrace. Kaya's mouth dropped open and his heart felt like it had just dropped from his chest into his feet. His mother had died and he wasn't even here. *Yeshua, if I'd just left a few days earlier, maybe you could have healed her,* he prayed silently.

"Patience, my friend," came the quiet Voice. "Patience." He hid his real feelings behind a practiced façade, but then wondered how his father was taking it.

"I've got to go find Dad," he announced and left the girls in Aspen's care.

He finally found the small field where his father was working to get the harvest in. It was Adem's favorite tract of land, one of the few that produced a harvest four times a year. This would be the last one before the winter storms came. It sparked melancholy memories for Kaya as he watched Adem bend and cut the grain stalks. His hair had gone quite gray already and his movements were without energy. Only a boy of about eight was helping his father, cutting and bundling sheaves of grain himself with practiced ease. It reminded Creon Kaya of himself at that age and he thought that this boy had the makings of a natural farmer about him.

The farmer finally noticed the figure standing beside the kalbedan tree that grew at the edge of the field.

"A good evening to you!" he called in a tired voice, slowly coming over to where Kaya stood. "How may I be of service to you?"

"I was looking for Adem, son of Peleg," Kaya hedged, wondering if his father would recognize him.

"That's me," his father answered. *No, he doesn't recognize me,* Kaya thought. Perhaps he could find out what Dad really thought about him....

"That's a big field, sir," he remarked.

"True, but I can handle the work." Kaya had to suppress a smile – how like his father!

"But I only see one boy helping you. Don't you have other sons or servants to help you in the harvest?" The other smiled sadly.

"I am too poor to have servants, young sir. As for my sons, the oldest left on a foolish journey three years ago and my second son is now working as a house servant for that cut-throat Rikel."

"Tell me something, sir," the young Man asked, "what would happen if your oldest son were still alive and returned." Adem looked at him, eyes full of surprise.

"What I'd do?" he demanded. "What would any father do, but to welcome him with open arms? He may have run away with that old wizard, but he is always welcome here at his home." *What happened to my father?* Kaya wondered. This change – or was it? He had always imagined that his father would boot him out of the door the instant he set foot on the doorstep of his house. He clenched his teeth, forcibly wrenched himself away from the feelings of regret, doubt, and fear and looked at the older Man.

"Please look at me," was all he said and leveled a slow, gentle gaze at his father.

"Why?" Adem asked at first, suspicious, then began to notice the lines of the face, the set of the jaw, the steel-gray eyes.

"Could it be?" he stammered. "Could it really be? Oh, Creon!" He leaped forward and hugged his oldest son. "You've come home!" Kaya smiled, joy mixing with the pain of his mother's death.

"Everything will be fine now," the father muttered clinging to his son like a drowning man to a piece of wood. "Everything will be fine." The Seer gently eased his father back so he could see his face.

"Dad, where's Mom?" he asked. Adem's face fell and turned away.

"Let's not talk about that," he sighed, trying to finalize the subject, but Kaya wouldn't let go, following him around and looking straight into his eyes.

"Dad, I know a lot has happened since I left. I've changed – a lot, but I see that you haven't changed much. Mom is dead, yes, Licia told me and here you are in the fields instead of comforting your family." Adem's dark eyes slowly flamed with anger.

"What else am I supposed to do, Creon? Just sit around with the girls and sob? There is only one place where I can forget that she is gone and that's here, working. If I go home I know I'll die of grief." Kaya could tell that his father was exhausted.

"You know, I cry myself to sleep at night," Adem admitted, voice heavy, slow, words slurred. "I just can't bear it."

"You need to rest, Dad," Kaya said slowly. The older man shook his head and tried to return to the field, but his son held on to his arm.

"Dad, you need to rest now and I need to talk to you – about us, please?" Adem shook himself. There was something in those gray eyes, so unearthly and yet so warm and loving.

"All right, son, we'll talk, but let me finish tying this sheaf."



## Open Tomb

The three of them slowly walked down the small pathway, Adem silently marveling at how much his son had changed. He was no larger than Adem was now, but he had a greatness about him that made the older Man wonder if this really was his eldest son. The instant they left the field, Kaya began to tell of his journey, making all three of them forget the present. He hardly had begun to tell about his first visit to the island of the Woodfolk when they reached the small hut. Adem swung the door open and entered, stopping suddenly when he heard Aspen's quiet and happy voice telling the girls an old Woodfolk tale. Ionis and Enna were sitting on her lap, listening raptly, it seemed, until Ionis broke into the story.

"Miss Aspen, are you a princess?" she asked. The Woodmaid blushed.

"Something like that," she answered. "Why?"

"You're wearing a crown," the little girl answered. Aspen laughed at that, touching the silver circlet on her forehead.

"Oh, your big brother gave me that..." At that moment she looked up and saw the three men standing in the doorway. Enna squealed with delight, wriggled off Aspen's lap and ran to her father. The Woodmaid gently set Ionis on the floor, rose and stepped up next to Kaya, slipping her hand into his.

"Dad, this is Aspen *kiz Kavak*." He smiled at her. "We're pledged to be married." Adem's jaw dropped at that remark and he took a few minutes to regard the girl. She was almost as tall as Kaya, with long, red hair

loosely cascading over her shoulders and back. Her clothes, like Kaya's, were of outlandish origin. She wore a silver circlet in such a way that it was invisible under her hair, except for at her forehead. The thing that captivated him most was the face. At first he thought there was something wrong with it, but suddenly he realized that her eyebrows were different from normal Men's. At the same moment she pushed her hair back over one shoulder, revealing a pointed ear. The older Man gasped.

"She – she's a Woodmaid!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, she is," Kaya answered happily. "She's the one that Creator God planned for me from the very beginning." He gazed at Aspen lovingly. Adem visibly softened at that remark and Kaya suddenly wondered, *Does he believe in the Creator after all?*

"If that's the way it is," he mumbled. "Then welcome to my humble home, fairest of all Woodmaids," he said with a bow so gallant – that is for one holding a small child – that even Kaya wondered where it came from. Then he remembered his mother once or twice telling him how different his father had been in the first few years, before the twins, Licia and Jokhan, were born.

Enna squirmed in her father's arms, reaching out to her big brother. Creon Kaya took her gladly, thinking, *Children are so special. This is one of the greatest privileges that Creator God could ever have given us.* Then he turned to his father.

"Do you think we can go and talk somewhere?" he asked, heart pounding, his stomach churning at the thought. Adem nodded curtly and they left, taking Enna along. After a few minutes they reached the small wood where Creon had often spent the night. As the little girl played in visible distance, the two Men began to talk. First Kaya finished telling of his journey, except for Yeshua. There was an awkward pause for a few minutes as the young Man prayed silently for wisdom and courage and tried to calm his fluttering nerves.

"Dad, I need to tell you something that is – very – difficult for me," he began, stopped and swallowed, mouth dry. Adem motioned for him to continue. Kaya fixed his eyes on Enna as he went on.

"There was a time in my life when I absolutely hated you." He stole a glance at his father, but he was only sitting quietly, listening. "It was back – before I went away. I often wanted to even kill you." He smiled sheepishly. "Some son, huh?" Adem was silent, only his eyes narrowed slightly to show he was listening.

"Anyway, I've been able to think about my attitude and Creator God showed me – showed me that the real problem was my relationship to him. I was discontent with my life, but I blamed you for my discontent. I was bitter with you and I really hated you, just for being my father and for being in the position you were in back then. I often called you a slave-driver." Kaya fixed his eyes on his father, tears coming to them. "I was wrong, both in my attitude toward you and toward Creator God. I've made amends with the Creator and now I want to tell you I'm sorry. I was not a good son or helper. I did not respect you and I know it was wrong. Please forgive me for that." Adem reached forward and hugged his son fiercely. When he let go, Kaya saw tears in his eyes.

"My son, my son, it's not you who needs to ask for forgiveness, but me." His voice cracked and looked at the ground, trying to compose himself before continuing. "Your mother's death gave me a lot to think about, especially about the days before – when you and Sarina were our only two children and we spent so much time together. That was before the old cut-throat stole what little dignity we had." He looked up at his son again. "Ever since that day it was more important to me to get back what we lost than to be a father. I failed you there. Would you forgive me?" Kaya nodded.

"There is nothing I can do but forgive you, Dad," he said. They sat there in silence again for a while, just happy to be real friends at last. Finally Kaya broke the silence, asking a question he dreaded, but that he knew he must have an answer to.

"What happened to Mom?" Adem grimaced and sighed before answering.

"She got sick, very sick and no one knew how to cure her – or maybe no one wanted to know for fear of Rikel. She just wasted away for a month and then, two days ago, she died. Only Enna is happy and she doesn't understand yet. The rest of us just pretend." Suddenly he looked at his son. "You've traveled far and wide, Creon. You've spoken to Creator God. Why did he let this happen? No sooner do I believe in him, than I lose what I value most: my wife. Why?"

"I don't know," Kaya admitted after searching for an answer, disappointed at the silence of the Light Within.

"Sometimes I wonder if I was a fool to leave Tarla's cult," Adem said bitterly.

"Don't you ever say that!" his son snapped, shocked. "There is *nothing* that can be better than believing in Creator God, even if it hurts. That's what Hrosca prophesied over me – rejection, death, and many other things. Perhaps he wants to teach you something – teach you to trust, no matter what. I remember a time when I was at the very end and I even gave up trusting. It was the coldest and longest night in my life – and even though Aspen was with me, I was alone." With that he told of the wonderful story of Yeshua, eyes shining and voice alternately cracking then growing strong. At first Adem listened intently but slowly there a quality rose to his features that made Kaya think his father thought that he'd lost his mind.

"I – I just can't believe that!" Adem kept interjecting. Finally when Kaya told of Yeshua's resurrection, the older man cut in abruptly.

"That can't be! Death is the end of all things. There is nothing beyond!"

"You can't say *that* if you believe in Creator God," the young Man corrected him quietly. "It is what happens *after* death that is more important than blessings here. That's what Yeshua taught me. He helps me live now, but my hope is for *after* I die, not what is now." His father just shook his head.

"Death is the end," was all he said and the discussion was over.

The late morning was cold and clammy as Creon Kaya made his way over the rough rocks and through the trees toward a very particular place. He knew that his father would think him a fool to go there, but there was no other choice. Kaya was content that he had been able to convince his father to stay home today and rest, but that was mingled with a sharp pang of melancholy over his mother's death. She was gone and he wanted to say good-bye to her one more time, before he would see her again in eternity.

*But that's such a long way away, he thought. Years perhaps and I'll not be able to say one more kind word to her. Why, Creator God, why?* His question remained unanswered and suddenly he was there. The yellow stone was as it had always been, shot through with the gray tendrils of another rock. He could see the carvings of Tarla, god of life and fertility and his consort, Ebediyen, goddess of times, seasons, and death. He was a man of humongous proportions, holding a pitchfork over his head. She was a naked woman who was beautiful and grotesque at the same time. Around her neck she wore a chain with skulls; in one hand there was a tree and in the other a bloody knife.

*The cycle of life and death, Kaya mused, and all of it excludes Creator God and Yeshua. I wonder why?* He reached up to grasp Tarla's pitchfork, remembering the first time he had been in here alone. He must have been ten – or maybe eleven. Somehow he'd snuck away from the field and met with Sarina. The two of them played truant most of the day and ended up here in the mid-afternoon. Kaya remembered joking about the dead bodies. He had seen a burial a few days earlier and noticed that the few bodies in the cavern hadn't rotted. He also remembered Uncle Alessander's explanation: it was something about the gray stone. Now the two of them wanted to see for themselves. Maybe there would even be treasure in the cavern!

They had somehow gotten the door open and slipped in, but Sarina tripped a hidden lever and the door swung shut on them. The two children would have died there if Uncle Alessander hadn't followed them, opened the door again and let them out, giving them a stern lecture, but never telling either Adem or Mikela.

Kaya smiled at the memory, as he pulled on the end of the pitchfork. Something in the rock wall clicked and the door swung in with a deep moan. There were torches and a small oil lamp by the entrance, kept burning by the priests of the valley. Kaya quickly took a torch and lit it, entering the ancient crypt. Here and there bleached skulls stared back at him, cultic sacrifices to Ebediyen. Hundreds, no, thousands of urns, pots, and vases stood around, holding the ashes of Chifchi's dead. Kaya sighed thinking how here the people believed the way his father did: death is the end, so they cremated the bodies. Maybe it was the fear of the resurrection, making them think, like some people he had met on his journey, that if there is no body there would be no resurrection.

There were also several slabs of stone in the cavern, most with a body on them, all of which were perfectly preserved. He looked at the corpses, looking for one in particular until his eyes fell on one slab near the back. Slowly he made his way forward and then stopped in front of it.

There lay his mother, dressed in a festive gown that spoke of her well-to-do parents. Her dark blond hair was carefully arranged around her shoulders and her lips and cheeks reddened to give the effect that she was still alive. Kaya carefully set the torch in a bracket above the table and sank down next to it. He couldn't understand it. Mikela was here and yet not, so lovely and yet so hideous. Death spoke out of every line in her face. The tears welled up and couldn't be stopped as Kaya grasped the cold hand.

"Oh, God," he sobbed. "Why? Why?" And then he haltingly poured his heart out, crying, not bitterly, just not comprehending.

A gentle hand reached out and smoothed his dark hair back. The tears still came as the hand stroked his head slowly. Then, finally, he felt the soft touch and looked up, astonished. Mikela smiled at him, her soft gray eyes full of joy. Kaya's mouth dropped open and he drew back his hand from hers. Could it be...?

"Mom, you – you're alive!" he exclaimed. Mikela yawned, stretched and sat up. Kaya thought he had never seen her so well, so full of life. She just swung her legs down off of the slab and smiled at him again.

"Yes," she finally said, "I'm alive." He could hear the boundless joy in her voice. "And you're here again, my son," she whispered, hugging him. "All will be well now." He laughed, tears running down his cheeks again, but this time for joy.

"You're alive, you're alive!" he cried. "Thank you, Yeshua!" Then he realized where they were.

"Let's go," he said. "This place is just so – so dead." His mother nodded and they left the cavern, hand-in-hand.

Mikela just looked around in a daze, drinking in the beauty of the land. Suddenly she looked at Kaya.

"You've changed so much, Creon," she observed slowly. "I wonder how I recognized you." He smiled at that, but left it unanswered and changed the subject.

"What was it like?" he asked.

"What?"

"Death; what did you feel?" Mikela sighed.

"At first I was hot and in bed, in a lot of pain and suddenly there was cool and pleasant darkness. It seemed only minutes later and I was lying on that slab with you crying there." Kaya smiled.

"I should have known," he said. "I should have known that Yeshua really *is* the Master of Life."

"Who's Yeshua?" his mother questioned, a slight irritation in her voice that her son would put someone else equal with the Creator. And he slowly began to tell her all he had seen and heard.

The door of the small hut cracked open, a shaft of late morning light cutting through the gloom. Adem looked up, irritated wondering, *What now?* Then he noticed a familiar silhouette in the doorway and yet – and yet he didn't want to believe that it was there. He rose slowly, still staring. The children saw the shadow, too, but they were too afraid to move. The farmer walked toward the door and the silhouette took another step in.

"Mikela?" he whispered, half-afraid that he was hallucinating, half-hopeful that it *really* was her. She nodded.

"I'm here," she said and he rushed to her, catching her up in his arms and kissing her. A moment later the children ran over to her and she bent to hug each one of them individually.

Kaya slipped in unnoticed and sat down on a bench leaning back against the wall. Aspen came over and sat down next to him.

"I never thought that caring for a family could be such hard work," she confessed, putting her head on his shoulder. "I always thought that seven or eight kids would be nice." Kaya chuckled.

"Changed your mind?" he asked.

"No, but I think I'd rather wait a while before having *so many*." He laughed and put his arm around her, hugging her. "Now what surprises me is that you don't seem surprised to see my mother." Aspen looked at him warmly.

"I prayed for this, Creon Kaya," she whispered. "I knew you'd be back with her." That caught the Seer off guard and it took him a long moment to process what she told him. But when the realization struck home, it was all he could do to chuckle gladly, squeeze her even tighter and place a kiss on her fair forehead.

By then Mikela had extricated herself from all embraces but Ionis' and Adem's and came over to where her oldest son was sitting. Kaya and Aspen rose too greet this one newly returned from the dead.

"I see you've finally found a girl-friend," she laughed, gray eyes shining. Kaya smiled proudly and nodded as Aspen introduced herself with a Woodfolk style curtsey.

"Welcome to the family, Aspen," she said, embracing the Woodmaid with one arm. "Now – about lunch..."

"Oh, we'll take care of that," Licia cried and pulled her next youngest sister toward the fireplace. Paltrik, Kaya's youngest brother, was sent to get wood and within the hour they were all eating out in the sunshine. Kaya and Aspen then finally told their adventure to the whole family, including what had happened in that other world. The parents and older children frowned at Yeshua being the "Son of God," but said nothing.

"You believe in Yeshua?" Licia asked Kaya.

"Yes, I believe what I saw and heard with my own eyes and ears. I also believe that I'll see him again soon."

"But why did he have to die?" Paltrik asked, face scrunched in thought.

"Because we're bad," Aspen answered, "bad all through and that kept us from coming to Creator God. The *only* way to come to him is through Yeshua. Then he will forgive your sins and you can live with him forever."

"But how could he forgive your sins *before* you knew about Yeshua?" Mikela asked.

"Perhaps," Adem answered for Kaya, "perhaps he could do that because of what Yeshua was *going* to do. Creon said that Creator God told him, 'Sin parts Man from me and only blood can fill the gap.' Perhaps Yeshua's future blood sacrifice was sufficient for forgiving those who really believe in the Creator." Then he looked straight at Kaya.

"I have seen Yeshua's love and mercy to me in returning Mikela, my son, and I want to believe in him. What do I have to do?" The young Man smiled as he said the words.

"Kneel and tell him that you accept his gift, that you now believe." Adem did as he was told and looked up after a few moments.

"You are now changed, Dad," his son laughed, hugging him.

"I don't feel any different," the older Man confessed.

"You won't, but Yeshua will change you at his own pace." Adem nodded. The others, however, including Mikela, said they had to think it over for a while, but that hardly put a damper on Kaya and Aspen's joy of knowing that Adem had joined them in their faith.



## Dealing With Irfan

Irfan slowly drummed his fingers on the table-top in his corner of the inn as his uncle discussed business with a few of his cronies. Ever since Rikel had become the leader of the village things had been going better for his clan, but Irfan found himself growing increasingly bored. Wine, women, and food were only filling out his waistline, not his interests, and, having enjoyed the charms of just about every female he'd desired, he was yearning for a new challenge.

Since Mikela had died earlier that week, Rikel felt Adem had received his just deserts and had turned his attention to squeezing other areas of business, mainly that of the few traders who came into the valley. It wasn't that the ruling clan hadn't done so before, but since Jimri's death the previous year and Rikel's accession it had increased to a measure that only the direct associates of the village leader could buy from the caravans at

greatly reduced prices before selling the goods to the villagers at four times their value. The scheme was good, but it was also making the people discontent, not that Rikel or Irfan cared. The first now only had his eye on increasing his gold, with an occasional thought to his one obsession, Mikela, and the other focused on feeding the lusts of his flesh. The problem was that there wasn't anything new to stimulate those desires.

And so it was with a languid eye that Irfan glanced towards the entry of Andronicus' inn, hardly noticing the house slave that came up beside his uncle and whispered something in his ear. The corpulent leader of the village nearly exploded from his place.

"You're lying, you filthy scum of Adem," he swore at the young man at his elbow. "That isn't possible!"

"But, my lord," the servant stammered, "I swear its true! I saw my mother with my own eyes. She's alive and well!"

"You saw her?" Rikel snarled and rose abruptly. "We must take care of this," he snapped and waddled out from behind the table.

"My lord, listen to reason," one of his toadies began unctuously.

"Reason?" Rikel screamed, cuffing the man. "She comes back from the dead – which is against all reason – and you ask me to listen to reason! I'll have you fried in your own fat!" Irfan watched the display, rather amused. This was the best entertainment he'd had all day. Maybe they should do things like this more often.

"You, Jokhan," the leader of the people snapped, pointing one chubby finger at his slave, "how did it happen?"

"Well, sir," he began lamely, "my mother died three days ago, as I told you. My brother returned yesterday and went to visit her grave..."

"He desecrated the *crypt*?" the priest who was in attendance gasped.

"It's not desecration to visit your dead relatives, idiot," Irfan interjected here.

"Shut up, Irfan," Rikel snapped, then glared at Jokhan. "Go on!"

"There isn't anything to tell, sir," he answered, trembling. "When he came home, she was with him – alive and well." The fat man stared at him, glassy eyes looking about ready to pop out of his head.

"I'm going to kill her with my own hands!" he shrieked. "I don't care who brought her back, I swear by the gods she will not live another hour!" He continued his imprecations, his voice rising in frenzy until suddenly, his eyes rolled back, a moan escaped his lips and he toppled over, foam forming at his mouth, limbs twitching.

"Holy mother of time!" the priest cried and bent over his lord, muttering incantations and fumbling among his clothing for a drug he sometimes administered as an antidote, but before he could get the vial unstoppered, the seizure passed and Rikel lay still. He breathed in and out heavily and his physician bent over him.

"He will be well when he awakes," he pronounced. "We'd best get him to his room. The gods obviously don't want anything to happen to the woman. She must have merited something special for Ebediyen to allow her to return from everlasting nothingness."

*Right, Irfan thought to himself with a wry smile and sipped his ale. As if the gods did that. It was nothing but a sham. Mind you, it was interesting to see Uncle collapse like that – but, by the goddess of love, who is that?* he wondered, noticing a young woman just coming through the door, one he'd never seen before. She was red-haired and moved with a lithe grace. Interestingly she was dressed in a tunic and trousers, but that made her all the more delectable to the playboy. This might be a challenge, he thought, licking his lips lightly. He did not notice the dark-haired girl who was her companion, but was absorbed by the red-head's beauty as she stopped at the door to the kitchen.

Aspen looked around the inn uneasily. She'd never liked places like this, especially as she'd noticed a group of people carrying a fat man out a side door to one of the out-lying bed-houses. He must have had too much to drink, but *now?* It was hardly half-way between noon and dusk! People like that sickened her and now she regretted following Kaya's advice to accompany Licia to buy the bread they needed for dinner. She noticed one young man ogling her from the corner and turned a cold shoulder to him, focusing on her beloved's sister as she spoke with the innkeeper, a short, stocky man who seemed pleasant enough.

"Hello, beautiful." The voice came from right beside her ear and might have been pleasant, except for the decadent slurring at the edges of it. She looked over her shoulder to see the young man who had been gazing at her. He was still fairly well-built, but there were hints around his eyes and at his belly that he did not live much of a life of discipline and Aspen thought his nose betrayed a special liking for alcohol.

"What do you want?" she snapped.

"What does anyone want when they see someone as lovely as you," he drawled, reaching out to touch her chin. She jerked back, glaring, and bumped into Licia. The girl looked over at her and was about to say something when she noticed the young man.

"Go away, Irfan," she crowed. "Aspen's not interested."

"Shut up, you little whore," he snapped at Licia. "If you weren't under age you'd be coming with me next."

"How dare you call her that?" the Woodmaid growled, a mixture of both anger and dread causing her stomach to climb her ribcage.

"I will call her anything I like, beautiful," Irfan replied imperiously. "And I think you and I should take a walk and leave this *trash*," he reached out and shoved Licia hard, "here. What do you say?"

"I say that boors like you belong somewhere else," Aspen snapped. "Now, if you'll excuse me..." She made to walk by the young man, but he grabbed her arm, causing her to wince.

"You aren't going anywhere until I say so," he said with a grin. "And the only place we'll be going is out back." It was only now that Aspen realized his full intentions and all color drained from her face.

"No!" she whispered, then screamed out, "No!" Her fist came up quickly and struck Irfan across the face. It wasn't hard, but enough to take him by surprise and he loosened his grip just a fraction. It was all Aspen needed to extricate herself and scamper across the crowded inn and out into the sunshine. She ran until she couldn't go anymore and collapsed by the side of the road, shaking and sobbing.

"Aspen," came a gentle voice beside her and a hand rested on her shoulder. She jerked away reflexively, crying out in panic.

"Aspen, it's me, Kaya," the voice repeated, concern now clear in it. She looked up to see her beloved bending over her, his eyes gentle.

"Oh, Kaya," she whispered, grabbed on to him for a moment, then thrust him away.

"This is all *your* fault," she snapped, leveling one finger at him.

"What?" He shook his head, not comprehending.

"You're the one who said it would be all right to go to the inn!" she wailed. "And it wasn't. That beast was there and ... and ..." She gasped for breath, eyes burning.

"What beast at the inn and what in the Nations happened?" She glared at him, then composed herself and with great revulsion began to tell of her experience with Irfan. As she did, she noticed the storm clouds gathering on Kaya's brows. He got up abruptly when she finished.

"Come on," he said curtly.

"What's going on, Creon?" she demanded. "Where are we going?"

"To have a little word with Irfan," he replied and began walking away. She ran to catch up with him.

"What are you going to do to him?" she demanded. "This isn't very smart."

"Oh, yes it is," he growled back. "Irfan has had a tendency to pick on me and my family. It's time he stopped."

"Kaya, don't do this!" Aspen said, coming to a stop. "This isn't the way to go about things." He turned and faced her full. His beard and long hair gave him a grim aspect, and though his eyes burned with the pent-up rage, she couldn't help but notice that there was something calm and calculated about his demeanor.

"Maybe not among the Woodfolk," he returned evenly, his voice betraying his suppressed anger. "But here we do things differently. When Irfan insults my betrothed and attempts to rape her, he deals with me." With that he turned on one heel and strode on quickly. Aspen looked around, panic-stricken, but decided she should go along. It was only fitting.

Irfan had just settled himself again after checking on his uncle who was sleeping off his seizure and had just gotten a new mug of ale brought to him when the front door of the inn flew open. He looked towards it to see a tall man in unusual, brown clothing step through. The man looked left and right and then strode right over to the table where he was sitting.

"Hello, Irfan," the intruder said, his voice just barely concealing his rage.

"Do I know you?" the young man asked with mock innocence, reaching for his beer. The man before him was well-built, kept his hair shoulder-length and had a thick beard covering his cheeks, chin and upper lip. There was something unnervingly familiar about the steely gray eyes, but he couldn't place it.

"How's your black eye?" the man in brown asked with a mocking smile and then it hit Irfan.

"Creon son of Adem!" he laughed and leaned back. The poorest farmer's oldest son was no match for him.

"Get out of here, twerp," he drawled, "before I sic my men on you."

"I don't think so," Kaya replied evenly. "You and I have business." He jerked his head just slightly to indicate the young woman beside him. Irfan's eyes grew wide as he noted the defiant features and crimson hair of Aspen.

"Oh, *her*," the dandy sighed, trying to look unaffected, though something in the pit of his stomach was starting to move. "What about her?" He shrugged and made to sip from his mug. "We were going to have a quiet afternoon together," he said over the rim, "just her and me, but we got interrupted."

At that Kaya moved so quickly that it surprised even Aspen. He grabbed Irfan by the neck and lifted him out of his seat, knocking over the heavy chestnut table and hoisting him up so his feet barely touched the floor. He drew his nemesis so close to him that his nose was almost touching Irfan's, the steely gray eyes boring into the wide gold ones.

"Listen to me, Irfan," he growled. "I don't care who you and your uncle think you are. You mess with my family or my girl and I will personally rip your throat out, get it?"

"What makes you think you can do that?" Irfan replied, still defiant, then gagged as the Seer's powerful grip began to choke him.

"What makes you think I'll stop?" Creon Kaya returned through clenched teeth.

"Kaya, please don't," Aspen cried out, grabbing his free arm. "It's not right." The thought that Kaya would kill someone in cold blood chilled her heart.

"Now, Irfan, did you understand what I said?" the Seer pressed. It was all that Irfan could do to nod. Instantly Creon Kaya relaxed his grip and his enemy collapsed on the floor.

"Good, now remember that," Kaya growled. "I'll be watching you." With that he gently took Aspen by the arm and led her to the door. Behind them spontaneous applause broke out and within hours it would be spread over the entire community that Creon son of Adem had returned, a mighty warrior, and was intent on restoring his family's fortunes. The gods were now surely smiling on Adem's family and Rikel and Irfan had better lay off persecuting them.

As they left the inn, Aspen looked up at Creon Kaya.

"Was that necessary?" she snapped. His rage spent, he sighed heavily and looked at her, gray eyes soft.

"I'm afraid so," he told her evenly.

"But why?" she demanded. "Couldn't you have *talked* about it?"

"No." His voice was tired as he walked along, fighting with what had driven him to do this. Was it the Light or was it his own anger? He couldn't tell, but he knew that if Irfan hadn't been cowed enough there would be repercussions and he might have to make good on his threat. *Oh, God, please don't let it come to that*, he prayed silently.

"Creon?" Aspen interjected angrily, drawing him back to the present.

"Huh?" he grunted.

"Why couldn't you talk about it?" she demanded and he sighed.

"Irfan and I have a long history regarding Sarina," he explained. "His uncle was the one who stirred Jimri up against my family and so he always made it a point to say that he was going to marry my sister just to spite

me – believe me if she'd married him she wouldn't be more than a worthless house slave. It was time they realized that things are going to change." He shook his head. "Unfortunately the only language Irfan understands is violence."

"Well," the Woodmaid sighed. "At least that's over with." Then she looked at him and smiled. "And thank you for defending my honor."

"You're welcome, beloved," he replied with a smile of his own and laid an arm around her shoulder. "It's the least I could do."

A change slowly came over Adem's household with Creon's return. The people whispered about Mikela rising from the dead, calling her Reborn, and about the strange healing powers of the young Man. What scared many was his authority.

"Where did he get this power from?" many asked. The only answer they received was the rising esteem of Adem in the community and Rikel's ignoring the family altogether.

Meanwhile, Adem's house became a sunnier, more joyful place, mainly due to the father's change of heart. A few days after the confrontation with Irfan, Aspen and Mikela had a very long talk, which ended with the older woman also accepting Yeshua.

Kaya often was at the inn, speaking with people there about his faith and trying to convince them that there is no other way. Most people just laughed him off, but some of the priests threatened to get violent, so Andronicus was forced to ask the Seer to leave. Meanwhile he worked on translating the book of priests again, this time into Common. One evening his father came home a bit later than usual.

"What're you doing?" he asked, looking over the young Man's shoulder.

"Open my eyes that I might see wonderful things in your law,"<sup>22</sup> he read. Kaya looked up, surprised.

"You can read that?" he asked. Adem smiled, more to himself.

"I wasn't always a farmer, son. At one point – more than twenty years ago – a priest passed through here and taught me how to read this language."

"Wait, let me guess," the young Man said, leaning back to look at his father's face with a small smile, "it was Hrosca."

"You're right," Adem laughed.

"Then why did you almost throw him out of our house when he came to take me with him?" The older Man sighed.

"He told me he would keep a favor for the lessons and I didn't want to pay up at that point," he admitted. "I think that the Creator had something better for me." Kaya nodded, while his father scanned the translation.

"Oh, look here," he said, pointing at an earlier line. "That word you translated as 'clean' should be 'pure.'" His son looked at him, surprised, but happy.

"Would you help me with this, then?" he asked. Adem nodded and sat down next to him. From that point on father and son worked together to translate the scroll into their own language.



## No Honor

The bell in Rushtu's hall clanged loudly, causing the blacksmith to wrap himself in a warm cloak before leaving the searing heat of the smithy to let the caller in. It was Burne, one of Lormar's officers, quite frozen from the brisk ride. He was quickly ushered into the kitchen where Lilya served him a cup of hot tea to warm him up.

"What brings you back here?" Rushtu thundered good-naturedly.

"The general sent me with a message for you," the man answered and sipped at his tea before pulling a packet out of his jacket and handing it to the blacksmith. He opened it and began to read.

*Rushtu Silver-Sword.*

*Lormar.*

*Greetings.*

*I know that it will be late fall by the time this reaches you, but we must act quickly. We must meet in Elamil by next spring at the latest. The Warrior King's fall is imminent. The worship edict has also been issued in the Northern Provinces and it will be implemented in the Flatlands on the Dark Day. We must hurry. It would be best if you leave as soon as you get my message. That way we will reach the city on time. The Messiah rules!*

The blacksmith ground his teeth and crumpled the message.

"That Man is crazy," he bawled. "We can't leave now! We'd get caught in winter before we reached Deniz. No ships run out of there at this time! Anyway it would take weeks to get the passes."

"They are in that package, sir," the soldier informed him, "signed by Lormar himself."

"What?" Rushtu shook the package and an official paper fell into his hands. He quickly unfolded it. It was a pass for two people to have free travel from the Pwyll to Elamil. It guaranteed them best lodging and the lowest costs in housing. He shook his head.

"That old nut thinks of everything," he growled. "But who's the other pass for?"

"I don't know, sir. I have my own. I'll be accompanying you as your body-guard."

"But nothing runs out of Deniz in winter and we won't make it there before the first snowfall," the little Man protested.

"That's not quite right, sir," Burne answered respectfully. "There is a courier ship that leaves once a month. It moves slowly along the coast and ends in Leefirth in the Western Nation. From there it is an easy ride of two weeks to Elamil. We could make it before spring."

"Well, then we'd better get ready." Resignation was in Rushtu's voice, but his eyes flashed at the thought of going into battle once more.

"Can I come?" Lilya asked. The blacksmith shook his bald head.

"No. It's too dangerous."

"Rushtu, I need to," she pleaded, coming over to him. "It's about Savash." The little Man thought for a moment and then softened at the pleading in her brown eyes.

"All right. But we will be traveling light."

"That is something I can manage," she laughed.

"Good. We'll leave in two days time." The eyes of the little Man began to shine. "I'll finally be able to try my sword against the Warrior King again," he laughed and left the room.

The priests mounted the platform in the village square, followed by a wheezing Rikel and a procession bearing a fifteen-year-old girl on a throne of woven rushes. It was the Dark Day, the shortest day of the year when the priests would sacrifice the old sun-child and instate the new one for the following year. The pagan practice had been handed down from the Northern Provinces and their worship of Lieht, the sun god, who was thought to be Tarla by many of those living in the Flatlands. The old sun-child, dressed in black robes, stood on the podium, her face positively gray with knowing what would happen with her as she watched her white-clad successor step off her throne and onto the stage. She knew that this girl would do what she had done the year before: plunge the ceremonial knife into the heart of the old year and usher in the new by anointing herself with the old sun-child's blood.

Down in the crowd Creon Kaya was glad that he'd convinced Aspen to stay home for this. He knew both girls up there, having played with them at times when he was younger. This practice was going to stop here and now. All he needed to do was wait for the right moment. He watched as the priests began their circuit around the platform in front of the garish idols representing Tarla and Ebediyen, humming and chanting in the language of the priests. It chilled the Seer to hear such blasphemies being uttered in that holy language. Then the girl in black was brought forward. Rikel reached up and laid a hand on her forehead, said a blessing, and

thanked her for her benevolent rule that year. Then he stepped back as two priests seized the girl's arms. The leader of the village grasped the black robes and tore them open, baring her chest so her successor would strike well. The girl in white moved forward, obviously trembling at what she must do. She raised the knife, looked at her friend and whispered, "Forgive me."

"Stop!" came a thundering voice from among the crowd. The shock shook both victim and murderer so much that the knife clattered to the ground.

"Who dares interfere with the holiest rite of the year?" screamed the high priest.

"I do!" A figure clad in brown vaulted onto the platform and with a quick thrust of his foot sent the ceremonial knife skidding across the planks and off into the funeral pyre set up beside the podium.

"The son of Adem!" Rikel hissed. "Get out of the way before I kill you myself!" Kaya leveled one sharp gaze at the leader of the village, his authority apparent, and the fat man instantly grew silent. He then turned to the waiting crowd.

"Listen to me, people of Chifchi," he thundered, his voice taking on that powerful aspect when he was speaking for Creator God. "I have a message from the Creator for you. 'Do not waste the blood of your daughters in sacrifice to worthless gods,' he says. 'I have a better way, a way that leads to life and peace. Seek me and you shall find me. I will show you life without fear, life in peace without having to offer the life of my best creation to the whims of dead idols who cannot hear, cannot speak, and cannot act.' These are the words of the One who rides the wind, who holds all times and seasons in his hands, the true God."

"How dare you?" one of the priests screeched. "You have blasphemed against the gods! Because of you this next year will bring nothing but poverty and famine to us!" Kaya turned to the man and answered gently, but loudly enough that everyone could hear him.

"Why don't you try the Creator and see if what he says is true?" The message was simple enough that at first the priest didn't know what to say, but then someone else cried out, "Blasphemer!"

"Who are you anyway, that you blaspheme against our gods?" came another voice.

"That's Creon, the son of Adem," roared someone else.

"The cursed farmer's son?"

"Yes!"

"Get him down from there!" Kaya was so stricken he couldn't move. He had been so sure that this was the time to tell them and had felt so strong at that moment. Now no one was listening.

"Stone him, stone him!" the crowd screamed. The priests rushed forward, striking at Kaya with their bare hands. He tried to defend himself, but there were too many and then they thrust him backwards off the platform where he hit the ground hard. The blow winded him and before he could gain his feet, the maddened people began to swing their fists at him and tear his clothing. A blow to the ear, then an explosion in the groin. Kaya rolled over, folding into a fetal position to protect himself. The crazed rabble closed in around him, now hurling stones, now punching him, now beating him with sticks.

Then the head priest called for quiet, raising his hands above his head.

"The blasphemer has been dealt with!" he thundered and the people shouted in triumph. The priest turned to the white sun-child, who was still standing there, shaking.

"Now, child, do as you must," he said, raising his chin and producing another knife, but when they looked for the girl in black, she had vanished.

"The curse of the gods is upon us!" someone cried from the crowd.

"The gods have chosen to take her up to themselves to spare their holy one from this blasphemy," Rikel interjected, his mind working quickly. "Let us enthrone our new sun-child and celebrate!" The priests agreed and a pregnant goat was brought to supplement the blood of the old sun-child and the girl in white was forced to take the life not only of the animal, but its offspring as well, before being anointed in blood and carried off for the orgy that would follow on this Dark Day.

Aspen was once more entertaining the younger children in one corner of the house when the front door was positively wrenched off its hinges and a slight figure dressed in sable rags flew through. The Woodmaid

noticed the girl's tear-stained face just briefly in the firelight before she turned towards Mikela who straightened from where she'd been stirring a pot where they were boiling wash.

"Jeordin!" she exclaimed as she recognized the girl. "What are you doing here? Aren't you...?"

"No, I'm not!" the girl cried out, flinging herself at Mikela's feet. "Hide me, Reborn!" she howled, using the name that the townspeople had adopted for Adem's wife. "Hide me or they'll find me and kill me." She looked up, pleading. "Only you can be strong enough to fend off the gods."

"Child," the woman said, kneeling beside the trembling Jeordin, "I am not any stronger than you. It's just that I know the Creator and his Son." She smiled softly and stroked the girl's face. "You are safe here and you are safe as long as my son is here."

"Then we should leave," the girl wailed. "They're *killing* him out there."

"What?" Aspen cried flying from her place among the girls, almost dropping little Enna off her lap. Licia reacted quickly to grab her sister.

"That's how I escaped," Jeordin explained between sobs. "They were beating him, saying he deserved to die for his blasphemy of the gods."

"Oh, Kaya, no!" the Woodmaid breathed and was out the door in an instant, not hearing Mikela calling after her to wait. She flew down the rutted path as swiftly as her feet would carry her, her long hair blowing loose in the wind, exposing her pointed ears for all to see, but she did not care. All she wanted to do was be with her beloved. He *must not die!*

She rounded a corner and pounded up the street and past some of the last devotees of Tarla and Ebediyen who were leaving to give themselves to the pleasures of the flesh, breaking out into the nearly deserted square. She immediately recognized the huddled heap near the podium and rushed over, falling to her knees beside Kaya. She put out a hand and gently turned him over. A quiet moan escaped his lips and she gasped for joy. He was *alive*?! *Praise you, Yeshua*, she prayed silently, thinking of the mission he had yet to fulfill and the protection the Creator had promised. She relaxed a bit when Kaya suddenly shook.

"Dear Lord, no!" she prayed and bent over him. A strange rasping came from the young Man's throat and vanished as quickly as it had come – a death rattle, something she'd heard many times before.

"Dear Lord, no!" she whispered again, wishing she could stop this. Suddenly she remembered – she could still heal. *Will it help now?* she wondered.

"Sweet Yeshua," she said quietly. "Please let it." She bent over him and gently touched his chest with her hand, letting the healing power stream from her slowly. Suddenly she felt as if she had become a small channel with a lot of water rushing through it, a healing power flowing through her like she'd never experienced before. The usually nearly invisible glow intensified to a strong silver radiance and then was gone. Aspen marveled at what had happened and then bent to see if it had helped. Kaya was still lying there, eyes closed, unmoving, but she could see that he was breathing. His chest rose and fell and then he took a deep breath – and opened his eyes.

He slowly shifted his gaze until he saw his beloved.

"Aspen, what are you doing here?" he exclaimed, trying to get up. "Ow!" He immediately put a hand to his head and sat up slowly, pausing to let his churning stomach subside.

"Can you stand?" Aspen wanted to know.

"I really don't know," he admitted. "Let's try." The Woodmaid helped him to rise and supported him as he nearly bent double from a wash of pain and nausea.

"What happened?" he groaned, then slowly the memory came to him ... all of those people beating him ... the cry of "blasphemer" ringing in his ears.... He limped forward, leaning on Aspen's shoulder.

"Why did they do that?" she questioned. He said nothing for a time, panting hard.

"Because – they – didn't – want – to – believe," Kaya finally gasped. "I need a – rest." The Woodmaid helped him sit down with his back against a tree and inspected him more carefully while he tried to explain.

"The Warrior King – and whoever is behind him – is really trying hard to kill me. They nearly did it back there." He groaned with pain as she carefully touched his left arm, now hanging limp at his side. *It's probably broken*, she thought.

"Why didn't you fight back?" she asked.

"I don't know. I just don't think I was meant to." He gritted his teeth again as the gentle hands probed his body, looking for broken or cracked bones. "And anyway, Yeshua once said that a prophet is without honor only in his home town."<sup>23</sup>

"Where did you hear that?" Aspen wanted to know.

"From Levi," he replied. "He told me of an incident – ow! – when Yeshua was in his home town. They nearly threw him off a cliff, when he told them to their faces who he was.<sup>24</sup> You see they thought they knew him so well ... they didn't understand ..." His face was sad for a moment, but then showed intense pain as Aspen touched one side.

"You probably broke a rib there," she said, "but I can't tell here. We need to get you home. Do you feel strong enough, or should I get your father?" Kaya shook his head.

"I can make it." He gritted his teeth and climbed to his feet with Aspen's help. Slowly, step by painful step, they made their way through the village to Adem's house.

That evening they were huddled around the fire with one person added to the circle. Mikela had given Jeordin, the sun-child, a robe that had once belonged to Sarina. She gratefully sipped broth from the common pot and ate the heavy bread that Licia and Aspen had baked that morning. She gazed at Kaya, almost a bit fearful of him. No one could have endured such a beating and live, and yet he had. He sat on a low pallet in one corner, letting Aspen feed him from a bowl. She'd carefully set his arm in a splint and had bandaged him up quite well, but he still wasn't feeling himself.

Just then the door blew open and all of those in the room looked towards the doorway. Adem recognized his son before anyone else.

"Jokhan!" he exclaimed, his face mingling joy with suspicion. "What are you doing here?"

"I've come home," the boy remarked evenly, then looked aside at Kaya, "if you'll have me, that is." Adem merely smiled, rose and closed the door, then laid a hand around his son's shoulder.

"Come on over to the fire," he said and Jokhan obliged gladly. He was given a spoon and allowed to eat his fill from the pot before anyone asked questions. Kaya was glad for the quiet, but at the same time was burning to hear his brother's story.

"I thought you were working for Rikel," Mikela said to Jokhan when he laid his spoon down.

"Not any more," the boy answered, just a bit of a smirk coming to his face. "I finally realized what all of that babble about getting even with Dad was about. It took Creon being beat up for me to understand how much Rikel hates you." He looked at his oldest brother self-consciously. "I guess I wanted to be better than the rest of you all." Kaya smiled.

"That's normal," he answered. "I'm happy that at least one person profited from that beating." Jokhan shook his head.

"No, I don't mean that as a joke – I'm serious. After they finished with you, Rikel and the rest of them finished the ceremony and then left for the traditional orgies. I stuck around and hid behind the platform. I saw your girl-friend do her magic – or whatever that was – and you got up and walked away. I followed you and heard the talk you had." He looked up, the question burning in his gray eyes. "What did you mean – we don't understand?" Kaya sighed and slipped his good hand into Aspen's. Jeordin sat up, looking straight at the Seer as well, clearly interested in the answer.

"It means that the people – and perhaps you, too – think they know me so well that they can't imagine what kind of a change Creator God and Yeshua made in me," the wounded man explained.

"What were you going to say before they thrashed you?" Jeordin wanted to know.

"I was going to tell them about Creator God's wonderful plan – how he sent his Son, Yeshua, to die for all of our sins." Kaya saw the questioning look on the sun-child's face. "Sin is missing the mark that God has set for us. There is no way that we could pay that debt, so Creator God sent his Son to die for us and so covered the debt. But the best part is that Yeshua didn't stay dead, he rose again. I've seen him and so has Aspen." The young Man's battered face shown at the memory. "He lives and he wants to make you live – live forever."

"You mean I won't die?" Kaya's brother demanded, astonished.

"No, no," the older brother laughed, then grimaced at his pounding head.

"Your body will die," Aspen picked up the thread, "but when it happens you will be with Creator God for eternity. He will not only settle your eternal future, but he will help you to live life the right way. The only thing you have to do is believe that he has saved you."

"I want to take that for myself." The two young Men turned their heads toward Licia.

"I want to believe in Yeshua," she said quietly, tears choking up her voice. Kaya smiled and nodded to his beloved who took the girl's hands in her own.

"Then let's tell him, all right?"

"I want that, too," Jeordin called out, rushing up to join the two of them. "Any God who has such a brave ambassador is worth being worshipped." The girls knelt and followed Aspen as she spoke to the Creator, then each voiced their own prayers, Jeordin using some of the rote language she'd learned when praying to Tarla, expressing her feelings fully even so, and Licia haltingly forming what she wanted to say in her own words. And then they looked at each other, eyes shining, both now a new creation. They leaped up and danced around the fire, delighted at their new freedom.

Jokhan couldn't understand as he bowed his head, alone with his thoughts. He knew he wanted this gift, this eternal life, but it was just too simple – or was it?

"Creator God, you've done all kinds of things," he whispered. "It is hard for me to accept how easy you make it, even so I want it. I want to be yours and be sinless like you and your Son. Please make me so." The prayer was simple and heartfelt and in that instant Jokhan knew that everything had changed. He was now someone with honor, with life, with joy.

"Praise the Creator!" he cried, expressing the feelings of those assembled. He leaped up, took his sister's hands, and began to dance with joy. Kaya laughed, pressed a hand to his head, and leaned back against the wall. Now there really was joy in his home.



## The Village of Dehshet

Jeordin's secret kept for a grand total of four days after the Dark Day when one of her former friends noticed her feeding Mikela's chickens out behind the hut and so it was just about dusk when a sharp pounding on the door bothered the family's dinner yet again. Adem rose and opened it to find Rikel and four priests standing there, along with a two militiamen.

"To what do I owe this honor?" Adem asked pointedly before the fat man could even open his mouth.

"We hear you are harboring a fugitive," the high priest called out from behind his ruler.

"Shut up, Kabus," Rikel snapped. "This is my job, all right?" Then he turned back to the farmer and eyed him suspiciously. "Well?"

"I would hardly call my second son a fugitive, Rikel," Adem said with a shrug. "After all he *voluntarily* entered your service...."

"We're not talking about your brat, fool," the fat man cut him off. "I'm talking about the old sun-child."

"And what about her?" came a soft voice from over Adem's shoulder and he turned to find Kaya standing there. "The ceremony is over. She is released, you know that."

"That can't be possible," Kabus the high priest interjected. "The old year must be laid to rest before the new can begin her reign."

"That practice is over now," the Seer said evenly, stepping past his father. The men involuntarily took a step back at the authority pouring from this young man.

"Who are *you* to make such demands?" one of the other priests snapped. "You're only a farmer's son! You have no call to say any such thing!"

"You're right on the first count, priest," Kaya replied, the calm in his voice enhancing his power over the men. "But on the second one you're very wrong. I have the authority from the Creator to say such a thing and my simply being alive today should be enough proof for *you*." He looked the man straight in the eye and he immediately looked away. The Seer straightened and his voice deepened as he continued.

"Jeordin Sun-Child has been bought by the most precious blood that has ever flowed on any world," he pronounced. "She is set free from you and your false religion. You will not seek her out, because if you do, you will come to a swift end at the hands of your *friends*."

"You dare curse *us*?" the high priest shrieked.

"Only a deserved curse will take hold," Kaya parried. "You tell me if it's deserved or not." Kabus' jaw sagged, unable to think of something to say in his own defense. The young Man turned to Rikel.

"What do you say?" he asked the leader of the people who had been watching passively.

"I still say you and your family are cursed, scum," the fat man spat. "But you're right about the sun-child. If she wants to live under your cursed roof, that's her choice. As you said she's bought with blood – *your* blood. She will no longer be molested."

"And neither will we, Rikel," Kaya said softly. The fat man glared at the insolence, but the strength in the steely gaze overpowered his hatred in a way that he'd never known before.

"As you say," he growled, then motioned his men. "We're out of here." And they turned and marched off.

"They won't be back," Creon Kaya announced as they closed the door.

"How do you know?" Jokhan interjected. "Rikel won't rest as long as Mom is alive!"

"He will," the Seer replied coming back over to his place at the table. "I don't think he wants to tangle with two Reborns as well as a sun-child who has been pardoned by the gods. The people are too afraid to let him do that." He glanced over at Jeordin who just smiled.

Winter came to an end and the first tender shoots of grass poked out of the ground. Kaya stood looking over the blue lake, his sword resting lightly in his right hand. There was peace in the air and he could hear one or two birds singing. As he looked back over the last three years of his voyage, he was amazed at how much had changed for him. He knew Hrosca had been right in encouraging him to travel. Seeing different places, hearing new languages – all of these things also changed him, just like the Creator had. Most of all Kaya longed to see Yeshua face-to-face again, but he knew it would be a while yet.

He flicked his wrist and let the sword sing through the air, then began his practice dance as Rushtu taught him, letting his fingers grow used to the weight of the blade again. His arm had healed fully that winter, but he had lost some of his immense strength because of the inactivity. Now he needed to regain it. He worked up quite a sweat and, after some more strength training, he leaped into the frigid waters of the lake to clean up and then sat on the grass to catch his breath.

"Kaya!" he heard a quiet Voice call. He sat up straight.

"Here I am, Lord," he answered.

"The time has come for you to go and complete your mission," the quiet Voice told him. "Then the land will have peace and I will reveal myself to the Nations through you and yours."

"I will go, Lord," the young Man prayed, his heart happy and yet troubled as he rose and headed toward his father's home. All of the plans they made to repair the house and enlarge it would have to be delayed a little longer, but he knew that the time would come when they could work together again, this time in peace without the constant threat of war.

They left the next morning at dawn. This time the good-bye was easier for the most of them. Little Enna was saddest to see Creon Kaya and Aspen go and cried as her big brother passed her to their mother.

"I'll miss you all," he said sadly.

"You'll be back soon enough, son," Adem reminded him with a smile and then hugged his son and the Woodmaid.

"I have a feeling that you'll be coming to see *me*," the son laughed.

"It'll take something very strong to get me out of this valley, son," the father replied soberly, "especially when this year promises to be a good one!" The young man laughed in reply and turned to his mother.

"You've brought so much more back than we could have ever given you," she whispered. "I thank the Creator for that." Kaya smiled and nodded.

"Sarina said that she would be coming by sooner or later," he told them, remembering something his sister had told him, "but traveling is hard on Baltar." His parents nodded. Then they prayed together and the young couple left.

"I'm really going to miss them," Aspen admitted as they left the valley and entered the desolate Flatlands. "Perhaps even more than my own parents."

"So will I," Kaya answered, "but we know that Yeshua holds them in his hand and that they are safe, no matter what. We are the ones that are entering danger."

Again the weeks moved on and they approached the western border of the Flatlands. The landscape became friendlier, but the Flatlanders stayed as sullen as ever, if not became more so. About four weeks after they left Chifchi, Kaya and Aspen approached a small village about two weeks from the border to Greenwood. For some reason Kaya wondered if it was wise to enter the small enclave of houses. Was it something that was warning him about danger ahead or was he merely getting tired?

"Are you okay?" Aspen asked.

"Yes, but I wonder if we shouldn't stay out of this village," he answered, his gray eyes mirroring his uneasiness.

"Oh, come on," she returned, "we need water and food. What's one more village anyway?" He gave her a sharp look. Was she becoming too accustomed to the Flatlands?

"All right," he agreed and they walked in. The instant they passed the first of the houses Kaya thought that he could feel a clammy coldness close around him and looked around, trying to find something to base his feelings on. This village was the same as any other, or so it seemed. Aspen gripped his hand ever tighter the farther they went into the town. Suddenly something caught Kaya's eye. It was just a slight movement behind a trash pile. He turned around and his eyes focused on a slight form trying to hide behind the garbage. Slowly the young Man edged over, letting go of Aspen's hand. As he came closer he heard a quiet sob from the figure. A few more inches... and he stopped, shocked. It was a boy of no more than eight or nine years of age, dressed only in a dirty loin cloth and covered with sores from head to foot. His head was shaven clean and his eyes had only a vacant stare in them. A warm pain flooded Kaya's heart as he looked at this young, suffering child and he went down on one knee.

"Hello," he said gently, smiling uncertainly. The dark eyes were full of fear and apprehension, but the Seer thought he could detect a spark of hope in them. He held out one hand, palm up.

"Come here." The boy shrank back. A quiet rustle and a sharp gasp above and behind Kaya made him realize that Aspen had come up to him. The boy looked at Aspen and Kaya glanced up at her as well. She smiled at the child in her most loving fashion, then walked forward and gathered him up in her arms. He whimpered as a few of the sores ruptured, spilling ugly brown fluid over Aspen's green and white clothing. She spoke quietly to him, stepped back a few feet and sat down on a stump across from the trash pile.

Kaya sat down next to her and gently touched the boy's head. Aspen turned and looked at her friend.

"Kaya," she said sadly, "he's going to die. I have seen this sickness among my people and this is the way it looks in its final stages: festering sores, then comes a fever and usually within a day, he's dead." Her green eyes looked at him dolefully. "Not even my healing powers can heal this sickness, unless it is caught very early on." The Seer sighed.

"I believe that the Creator has a purpose in bringing us here, if only to heal him." He looked at the child.

"Would you like to be well and like the other children?" he asked gently. The boy nodded just slightly.

"Then, in the name of Yeshua, be well." His hand rested on the child. One instant he was lying there limp, weak, covered with sores and the next he was completely healed. The boy looked at Kaya, astonished. Then he crawled out of Aspen's arms spun around and laughed, a genuine, joyful, child's laugh. Only the dark spots on

the Woodmaid's clothing showed what he had once been. They stood and smiled at each other. She bent and kissed the boy on the forehead and they headed through the town, looking for a place to buy food or a well from which to draw water.

And then they entered the square. Kaya halted, astonished at what he saw there. A single black pillar of some kind of shiny rock jutted out into the sky. Hanging all around it were skulls, some fresh, some still with fragments of skin and hair on them. A short ways away was a heap of wood with two thick posts set in the center of it. There were chains fastened around the poles, making Kaya realize that this was a grisly instrument of torture. He shuddered at the thought and decided that it really was foolish to come into this village at all.

"Let's get out of here," he said to Aspen. She nodded silently, horrorstricken at the display of severed heads. They turned to leave.

"You there!" someone thundered. Kaya turned around and saw a group of Men was coming towards them, all of them armed. It was all that the young Man could do to smile cordially and not reach for Justin's hilt.

"Who are you?" the leader of the Men demanded. He was an extremely powerful Man with an unkempt thatch of flaxen hair and a thick beard that reached to his chest. In his right hand he carried a huge spiked club.

"I am Creon son of Adem," Kaya answered. "My friends call me Kaya. And this is my betrothed, Aspen *kiz* Kavak. We only wanted to draw some water and buy some provisions."

"Well, you won't find that here!" the leader returned menacingly and seemed about to let them go when suddenly one of his men shouted.

"Lord Erdal! The woman, she's a Woodmaid!"

"What?!" Erdal stared at Aspen and instantly noticed the high, almost invisible eyebrows and pointed ears.

"Take her and her friend, men!" the leader roared. "They are a sacrifice to the Destroyer." Finally Kaya reached back and closed his hand around the sword hilt.

"Creon Kaya, no!" came the quiet Voice.

*But,...* the young Man tried to interject. The Voice didn't come again, but the Seer knew that he was not to resist. He sighed and let the Men take hold of him.

The two travelers were taken and thrust into a small shed that smelled of rotting hay and old urine. Light came in from one small window, illuminating a patch on the floor. Kaya found a log standing on end against one wall and moved it into the light. He sat down on it, full of questions, fear and confusion. Aspen sat down next to him.

"Why?" she demanded.

"I don't know," he answered. "He," Kaya pointed skyward, "just told me not to do anything. I guess it has something ... wait a minute!" He picked his pack up from where he had put it, opened it and retrieved the precious scroll of the priests. He rolled it open on his lap, going to the end.

"Here it is!" he exclaimed. "*There is a time for everything, / and a season for every activity under heaven:...*"<sup>25</sup> His eyes slid down the column. "Look, Aspen! ...a time to be silent and a time to speak,..., a time for war and a time for peace."<sup>26</sup> Maybe that's why we shouldn't resist now. It isn't time yet." Aspen's frown still wouldn't relax.

"But aren't they going to kill us?" she asked vehemently.

"Maybe, but Yeshua has the power to raise us to life again. He will protect us." He smiled to himself as he put his arm around her shoulders. "I have a feeling that we won't die until the Warrior King is defeated and the Nations are at peace again." She smiled at that thought, too.

"Whatever happens, we are in Creator God's hand," Kaya continued. "Yeshua has promised that *no one* can snatch us out of his Father's hand and that means that even if we die, we will be safe." The Woodmaid nodded and laid her head on his shoulder.

"I sometimes forget that he is always with us," she whispered. "But now I know. We are safe."

Early the following morning a heavy boot kicked Kaya in the side. He cracked one eye, irritated. The guard cursed and kicked him again.

"Get up!" he bawled with another obscenity. Kaya nudged Aspen, who was sleeping next to him. She grunted crossly.

"Come on, girl, they're here to pick us up," the young Man said, standing up and shaking the dust out of his cloak. He bent and picked up Justin, slipping the sword into its sheath. He shook the Woodmaid again and after a bit of unhappy moaning she got up and ran a hand through her pulled back hair. Kaya bent to get his pack from the ground.

"You won't need that where you're going," the guard grunted and took both of the packs. Aspen looked at Kaya, green eyes betraying her unease. He took her hand and they were shoved out of the shed and conducted to a small, dark hovel where a little man with no hair on his head and a lot of it on his face sprinkled them with some odd smelling liquids. He muttered strange words that Kaya recognized as an incantation in the language of the Werebeasts, calling on their dark lord for his blessing. *Creator God, protect us*, he prayed. After that they were taken to the mansion of the lord of the village, where they were given a good meal.

"Your last one," the servant said dolefully as he brought them the food.

"No," Kaya answered with a smile. "If we die we'll feast with the Creator himself!" The servant stared at him for a moment, surprised at his sureness, but then only shook his head and left the room.

"Are you sure we won't die?" Aspen whispered to him. Kaya smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

"Not quite, but whatever happens, it will happen to the glory of Yeshua!"



## Love Your Enemy

It was shortly before noon when the two travelers were taken to the square of the village where they found themselves in the midst of a teeming throng. Everywhere men, women and children had appeared. Many laughed and gawked at the two walking with their heads erect. Justin was still strapped to Kaya's back and no one dared take it from him. Others looked at them sadly and the young Man thought he could even see some tears being shed.

"They look so peaceful," he heard someone say. Suddenly a loud screaming came through the crowd. The child they had helped came running up to them he grabbed Aspen's pant leg and held on to it.

"Don't go, please!" he cried. "They'll kill you!" Aspen stopped and bent to speak to him, but one of the guards hit her, knocking her off her feet and into the dirt. Kaya moved to help her up, but she was already on her feet. She turned around and punched the guard in the face, then turned back to the child.

"We'll be fine," she said. "Creator God is protecting us. There is nothing that they can do to us." The child looked at her, believing every word, as the guard recovered from his shock and prodded them on. They were taken on to a low platform in front of the black monolith, where the ruler of the village was already standing. He smirked at them and then turned to the people.

"People of Dehshet," he thundered. "These intruders have come to break our customs and to destroy our religion. And the woman! The woman is a Woodmaid!" A roar of indignation went up from the crowd. "She has come to bewitch your children and to steal their hearts away. She and her companion will destroy us all. Only the great Destroyer can help us now. What is your verdict?"

"Death! Death!" the crowd screamed. Kaya looked down and saw that only about two thirds of them had called for their death and some of those crying out looked like they were doing it half-heartedly.

"Death it is," Erdal continued. "They will be burnt offerings to Dehshet! Take them!" The guards strong-armed the two travelers to the wood pile and closed the chains around their wrists, fastening them to the poles.

"Well, Aspen," Kaya said, as the Men left them, "this is the end. I guess we'll see each other over there." Erdal raised a torch.

"Let the sacred fire make them one with our dark master," he chanted.

"So let it be, let it be so," the crowd returned. He opened his mouth to continue, when suddenly a shout rang through the crowd.

"The army of the Warrior King!" All heads turned to the young Man who pushed his way through the crowd. He came to a halt in front of the lord of the village.

"My lord, the army of the Warrior King is approaching."

"Then we will welcome them," Erdal answered. The messenger shook his head.

"They are destroying every village in their path. I only escaped from my home in time. My friends, my family, my woman – all of them are dead. The Warlord is in a fury. I slipped into the camp last night and heard him tell his people that he would level every town in his path to find the one he called the Seer. He will be here within the hour." Erdal blanched.

"We must send someone to greet him, someone to speak with him." The messenger shook his head again.

"It won't work, we tried it." From his vantage point, Kaya saw the crowd was getting very uneasy. *What can I do?* he wondered and then suddenly knew.

"But someone *must* go," the leader insisted and then addressed the people. "Who will go to save our village?" There was a shuffling of feet and people looked left and right but no one answered.

"Please," Erdal pleaded, "for your wives and children, who will go?"

"I'll go," Kaya said calmly. All eyes turned on him.

"You?" Erdal demanded. Kaya nodded.

"But why? We want to kill you. Why help us?"

"Because my Lord has commanded me to," the Seer answered, sensing a peace rising in him. At the same instant the chains fell from his and Aspen's wrists.

"I will go."

"Kaya, no!" Aspen gasped, grabbing his arm. "He wants to kill you!"

"I know, luv, and I think we've had this discussion before. The Creator will protect me."

"Then I'll go with you," the Woodmaid said.

"No, you'll stay here. I've got to face him alone." Aspen opened her mouth to protest. "Alone!" Kaya said again, raising one finger, and that silenced Aspen. He turned and walked up to the platform.

"I will go, Erdal," he repeated.

"Who are you?" the leader demanded.

"I am a servant of Creator God and his Son, Yeshua," Kaya answered. "And I won't fight the battle on my own. The Creator stands with me and when I return you will know that he is God and not Dehshet." Then Kaya turned and strode through the crowd. Aspen looked after him. *I can't help but admire him*, she admitted to herself. *He's just so strong and calm. I wish I could be that way.*

Kaya didn't feel strong and calm at all. He could tell that something was going to happen that he didn't like very much. He walked until he was about a quarter of a mile from the village, still clearly visible across the expanse of the Flatlands. *Why did I agree?* he wondered. *It would have just been easier to run.* He sighed. *Lord, protect me. I'm here to make peace, as you have commanded.* He looked to the skies as he felt the Creator's peace take the place of the agitation. Yeshua would protect him, he knew.

Creon Kaya, called the Seer, reached back and drew the silver sword, pointed its tip to the ground, turned and faced north-east.

Savash spurred his horse on at a tremendous speed, making it hard for his generals, much less the army, to keep up. His face was flushed with fury, his fists clenched tightly around the reigns. The wind rushed through the mighty eagle's wings of his helmet, giving him the feeling that he was flying. He would find Creon and destroy him. That fool had taken away his last hold on any kind of kinship with people. Lormar was gone. Lilya was gone. And Creon was at fault. It didn't matter much that he was to destroy the Warrior King. It was just personal hatred. It was a need for revenge. *And I will have it!* Savash thought bitterly.

As he thundered forward he ignored everything in his way, running down animals and humans, if need be. He could see the figure of a Man before him. *Get out of the way, fool*, he thought, or *I'll run you over.*

"Stop!" the Man commanded. Involuntarily Savash jerked the reins back.

"Who are you?" he demanded, regarding the other carefully. The Man was dressed in brown, in the style of the Woodfolk. His head was covered with shoulder-length dark hair and he had a thick, well-kept beard. A naked sword in his right hand was pointed at the ground. His gray eyes looked up, boring into Savash's. He knew that face. The inn...

"Creon!" Savash realized.

"Yes. I have a command for you," Kaya returned. "This is what the Creator says: 'Leave this place, now. Return to your father and tell him that I am sending my servant to judge him.'"

"How dare you threaten me?" the Warlord cried. "Get out of the way or I'll run you down!"

"Try it," Kaya answered, raising Justin just slightly. "Try it and you'll walk home, shamed that you couldn't defeat a Man on foot." Savash turned red.

"This isn't the last we've spoken, Seer," he hissed and turned his horse. "Men, we return to Elamil," he commanded and turned away. Kaya looked after him thoughtfully.

"You are correct, Savash, son of the Warrior King, this isn't the last time we've spoken. I pray that the next time I will be able to show you the way and my true friendship."

# Seven: Elam

## Where the Eagle Flies and the Lion Rests

**T**hey stood at the top of a ridge that marked the border between the Flatlands and Greenwood. As Kaya looked over the lush landscape his mind involuntarily ran over the last three weeks. He remembered the surprise of the people as he strode back through the crowd, his outside showing less of the elation that he had felt. He remembered taking Aspen in his arms again, her telling him how much she had worried about him. He also thought about the many people who believed after he told them of Creator God. He wanted to tell them of Yeshua, but he knew that would be dangerous at the time and that soon there would be possibility to tell all of the Nations about their Savior.

At the end of a week they encouraged the men and women in their new faith and then continued on their journey. They traveled quickly over the last bit of the Flatlands and now were here, looking into Greenwood. For all of the Flatlands' desolate plains and high plateaus, Greenwood was a country of soft, rolling hills, most covered with grass and the others with woods. There was a small lake a short ways off, on which lay a village of quaint stone houses with thatched roofs.

The two travelers descended into the valley, drinking in the beauty around them. Aspen pulled the leather thong out of her hair and let it tumble down her back to give it a chance to soak up the sun. Kaya whistled as they entered the village hand-in-hand and went to find the registration office. The guard in the village was friendly, glancing at and stamping the passes Lormar had given them without a second thought. He even pointed them to the small, clean inn where they rented two rooms for the night. After cleaning up and changing they walked along the edge of the lake, enjoying the evening sun and the fresh late-spring air.

"It's so beautiful here," Aspen remarked. "I have hardly seen anything of this country, but I already love it more than the Island." Kaya nodded, feeling the serenity of the darkling hour flow over him in this place.

"I once read that this is called the 'Blessed Land.' I can understand why now." He smiled to himself. "When this is all over I'd like to live here and maybe even move my whole family here!" Aspen smiled at the thought.

"I wonder if it is all like this," she said. "If all of it is so beautiful."

"No, friends, it gets more beautiful the farther west you go," came a familiar voice from behind them. Kaya turned around to see a tall Man with golden hair coming towards them.

"Donovan!" he cried. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm going to visit my parents," the blacksmith returned, shaking their hands warmly. "I was born in a town near the Forbidden City."

"The Warrior King's city?"

"No, Shion. I take it you are headed for there?"

Kaya nodded, eyes twinkling.

"Well, friends, let's return to the village and you can tell me of your voyage," Donovan suggested. Aspen and Kaya smiled and did as their friend said.

The next ten days passed quickly as the three traveled westward. Donovan was right – Greenwood became more and more beautiful the farther they entered this small Nation. Several low mountains appeared before them as soon as they left the valley that lay on the border to the Flatlands. The Woodmaid and the Seer found that the people here were totally different from the cruel natives of Tashyer, the indifferent ones in the Pwyll,

and the sullen Flatlanders. They were always friendly and ready to help and here in the direct shadow of the Warrior King they were surprised and pleased to find many, many souls who knew of the Creator as their true King.

They finally reached Donovan's village, which lay a day-and-a-half's walk from Shion. The blacksmith's family gladly put them up for the night and would have loved to keep the young couple there for a few days, but Kaya's heart was filled with an infectious urgency that drove Aspen to agree with him. Time was growing preciously short. Over the past weeks they had heard rumors that the Warrior King had issued an edict demanding people to worship him and was planning to overrun the Woodfolk. The dark shadow of full control of the Nations was getting darker still, but light would soon be dawning.

Donovan guided them to the entrance to the pass to the city, spent the night with them, and then left them to go on alone.

"What will we find here?" Kaya asked his beloved, wiping clammy hands against his cloak. "What will the priests say?" Aspen shrugged, fingering the tarnished silver chain around her neck remembering the history of it.

"Here, you'll need this," she said, unclasping the chain and passing it to Kaya. The young Man smiled.

"Right," he said, "this is how they'll know who I am. I nearly forgot." With that they left their camp and headed into the pass.

"How will we find the Halls of Knowledge?" she asked, walking next to and just a bit behind him as they threaded their way through the rocky canyon.

"They are on the eastern side of the hill on which Shion lies," Kaya explained. "Hrosca told me that, Where the eagle flies and the lion rests, there is the entrance to the Halls of Knowledge."

"What does that mean?" she wondered.

"I don't know, but we'll find out now."

They continued on through the pass and came into the valley of Shion. It was a lush valley, encircled by mountains, in the center of which was a high hill crowned by the high white walls of a large city. Its gates faced east and stood wide open, at the end of a broad street that zigzagged up the side of the hill. Kaya's heart began pounding as he walked up the steep road, looking for the path that Hrosca had told him about. They nearly missed it, but Aspen's sharp eyes picked out the small opening between the rocks along the road. They had to go single file and Kaya began to search for the eagle and the lion. They walked by several caves, but saw nothing, then suddenly the path ended, dropping off a steep cliff.

"I guess we missed it," Kaya surmised, turning around.

"Look there, Kaya," Aspen exclaimed, pointing above him. An eagle wheeled above him in the sky and just a short ways below the live one was a carving in the rock: An eagle with wings wide-spread in flight.

"Great, Aspen!" he said. "Now to find the lion." He turned back to the cliff and looked more closely over the edge. He suddenly noticed that steps were cut into the rock, leading down along the cliff face. The height made him dizzy, but he gritted his teeth and started down, leaning against the rough rock with one shoulder. Aspen held on to him to steady herself, not too comfortable with the long drop-off to their right, either. Suddenly Kaya cried out joyfully.

"There it is!" In the step in front of them was the carving of a majestic lion facing into the cliff, head held erect above its paws. Kaya looked to his left. There was nothing but a cliff wall. He walked down another step – and suddenly noticed it. There in the rock was a cleft, just wide enough to admit one person.

"Here we are, Aspen," he said turning around and grasping her hand. "This is where the adventure really begins."

The cave was small and dark and Kaya almost backed out, but Aspen, already panicky from the height behind them, pushed him ahead a bit, making him go in. The narrow shaft was only a few feet long, but it was curved, making the light from behind vanish almost instantly and they had to continue in complete darkness for a short ways before light came up from before them. A few more steps ... a moment later they stood blinking in the light of many torches, staring into a long hall with many pillars. The floor was decorated with

rich mosaics, depicting the symbols of Creator God and pictures of times long past. Behind the high pillars to their right and left there was only darkness. Statues of the ancient Kings stood guard in front of each pillar.

The intruders hesitantly took a few steps forward, awed by the magnificence of this underground realm.

"Halt!" Kaya spun around, reaching back to draw his sword. His adversary was faster and a sharp sword-tip was already pointing at the Seer's heart. The young Man did his best to relax and took a moment to regard the sword-bearer. He was short of stature, dressed in the same coarse robe and sandals that Hrosca once wore. His hair was a dirty yellow and was cut in a strange circle around his head with a bald spot shaved in the back. His eyes were dark and threatening, set in a round, almost pudgy, pink face.

"Who are you?" the guard demanded. Kaya opened his mouth to speak, but found it totally dry, so he licked his lips and swallowed against the cotton.

"I am Creon Kaya son of Adem," he answered hoarsely. "There are those that call me the Seer." The guard looked at him critically.

"Can you prove that?" Kaya reached to his belt and retrieved the chain with Hrosca's stone on it.

"Hrosca, son of Estefan, gave this to me," he explained, holding it out to his erstwhile adversary, who took it, lowering the sword. "He now lies outside the walls of Stein, facing east." The little Man looked up.

"Hrosca is dead?" he asked. Kaya nodded sadly. The dark eyes looked at him dolefully.

"How?"

"Dushman killed him with the sword in the arena." The little guard wiped a tear from one eye.

"So if he sent this with you, he really must be dead." He raised the opaque blue stone up. "Yes, it has his mark. Welcome to the Halls of Knowledge, Creon Kaya. I am Ambrosius."

Kaya expected to be taken straight to the high priest himself, but Ambrosius silently led the two along a shadowy corridor to a room with a rough table and benches in it. After he closed and barred the door he turned to the other two.

"I am sorry we have no better accommodations for the lady," he apologized, "but priestesses are not allowed, due to what they stand for in the other religions. We are also not allowed to have any wives." Kaya nodded.

"I found out about priestesses," he said curtly, causing Ambrosius to look at him curiously. Kaya laughed and gazed at Aspen.

"Don't worry, that priestess turned to the Creator before she could seduce me," he said. The little priest's face still betrayed his puzzlement.

"This is Aspen *kiz* Kavak, a princess among her people and a true lady among ours," the Seer introduced his fiancée. She smiled at their host and stroked her hair back over one pointed ear.

"Ah, a Woodmaid, I see," Ambrosius laughed, his cheeks piling up against his ears. "She can't be the priestess then. Very well." He pulled up a stool across from them and frowned again.

"Creon Kaya, I have bad news for you," he began. "I praise the Creator that I found you before the other guards. Hrosca told me that you would be coming along sooner or later, so I took duty at the Door of the Lion as often as I could. It hurts me to hear that he is dead. He was my teacher, you see – and a real friend."

"Mine, too," Kaya answered wistfully. A sad silence rested on the room, making Aspen fidget.

"And?" she prompted the priest.

"Oh, yes, the high priest," the little Man remembered. "He is not very interested in your coming. You see, he is more preoccupied with his own pleasures, especially power. He believes he can overthrow the Warrior King and take his place. For the past years, since the ancient Kings have been gone, the high priest has been priest and king at the same time, an unholy combination, which led many to believe that they are more than they really are. So it is with Haddas. I believe that he would rather kill you than let you face the Warrior King." Kaya's face brow furrowed and he stroked his beard thoughtfully.

"The lust for power," Aspen threw in. "Even here. Dear Yeshua, why?" Ambrosius looked at her sharply.

"Who is this Yeshua? Is it another of your names for the Creator?"

"In a way," Kaya interjected. "We both have seen some strange and wonderful things." With that he began to tell about the story of Yeshua's life and death to free humankind from the bonds of sin. The little Man's face was troubled at first, but it slowly began to glow as Kaya finished telling of what he'd seen and heard.

"I truly believe," he cried. "It is a miracle, Creator God coming to live among men. It is what I've been waiting for all my life." He leaned forward, his face full of meaning. "All of my life in the Halls, I knew that there was more to the Creator than any of these here could tell me. I could not read the scriptures often, being one of Haddas' chief servants, but Hrosca told me of what was written in them and I have memorized them. I was empty, but now I know! Yeshua is what I was waiting for. Now he has come and I am full!" The little Man laughed. "I wish that my old mentor could hear this."

"He's already there, with Yeshua," Aspen told him. "He can see and speak to him – and one day we will, too."

"Now then, about the high priest," Kaya said, focusing back on the subject at hand, "I've got to see him, even if he kills me. Yeshua has protected us so far and will do so until I stand in front of the Warrior King himself."

"Very well," Ambrosius sighed. "But who will then tell the others about the Son of God?"

"You will," the Seer answered. "You know of him, know his story. Now you can tell others, too." The little Man nodded, then rose and opened the door. Then he led them out into the dark Halls of Knowledge. Countless corridors and doorways later they came to the center of the Halls: the audience hall of the high priest. The little Man spoke with one of the guards, who went in through the large doors and returned a few moments later.

"He will see you now," he said and the three passed through the dark doors into a large circular room whose ceiling went up many ells. Sunlight fell in from an opening the roof, illuminating a large square marble altar. Behind the altar was a dais with a chair on it, on which a tall man sat, all clad in white. He wore a strange circlet on his head, with two wings reaching straight up, joining at the front. The light made his face look like it was cut in stone and only the movement of his bright green eyes showed he was alive. A long, well-kept silver beard fell to his chest and his silver hair was cut short. He glared at the little priest.

"What do you want, Ambrosius, and who are these people?" he demanded.

"Your eminence, this is the Seer and his lady, Aspen of the Woodfolk," Ambrosius answered, making a slight bow, and motioning for Kaya and Aspen to do the same, but they stood tall and straight. Kaya looked straight into the high priest's face. Haddas stared at him, eyes and face full of unmasked hate.

"What?" he roared. "How dare you lie to me, Ambrosius? It will mean your head."

"He isn't lying," Kaya's quiet, authoritative voice cut in. "I am Creon Kaya, called the Seer, appointed by Creator God to stand before and destroy the Warrior King." The young man's audacity caused a tightening of the jaw for the high priest and the hatred vanished, washed over by a warm smile that chilled Kaya all the more as he knew that it was utterly fake.

"Welcome, welcome," Haddas said, coming down off his dais. "It is a pleasure to have you here, Lord Seer. This means that the fall of the Warrior King is imminent."

"And so is yours," the young Man returned, sensing the Light Within guiding his tongue. The high priest's eyes flashed with anger, but only for a moment. He smiled cordially, deciding to ignore the comment.

"My servants will show you to your quarters. It is late and tomorrow we'll discuss your business." He clapped his hands and two priests appeared to lead them away. Kaya took one more good look at Haddas, his eyes boring into the older Man's.

"Remember that Men look at the outside appearance, but the Creator looks at the heart," the Seer warned. "He will judge you, not men." Then he took Aspen's hand and they followed the servants of the high priest. He stared after them, dismissed the little priest and then cursed violently. What to do? Suddenly a thought came to his mind and a cruel smile spread across his lips.



## Shion

Kaya paced across the room he had been given, a magnificent suite within the Halls of Knowledge, complete with a long shaft that allowed light and fresh air to come in from above. The walls were carefully plastered and decorated with mosaics depicting symbols for Creator God, but the Seer felt strongly that these were as false as the high priest's devotion to the One.

"Two days," he muttered. "Two days we've been here and no action. Why?" Aspen looked up at him from where she was sitting, working on braiding several threads into a bracelet, a craft she liked to do when there was nothing else available.

"Kaya, calm down, you're too tense," she told him. "Please sit down."

"I can't," he returned. "This place feels to me like I'm living in a crypt."

"How do you think I feel?" the Woodmaid demanded, voice sharp. "Caves aren't my usual home either!" Kaya just shook his head and glared at her for a moment. Aspen tried it with a gentler touch.

"Luv, you are the one who always tells me that everything happens in the Creator's time. Don't you think that it is that way now, too?" That stung even though it wasn't meant to.

"But there's so little time!" he protested, the urgency of the worship edict pulsing behind his eyes.

"The Creator has protected the Woodfolk and his believers for the 150-some years that we've been under the Warrior King's shadow. He's protected his other followers, too. He can do that for a few more days. We have time!" The Seer sighed. This girl was right and he was wrong. *What's gotten into me?* he wondered, seeking the guidance of the Light Within.

"You're right, Aspen," he admitted, sitting down next to her at last. "The Creator is in control of this whole mess and he'll get us out of it in time." Just then a knock sounded on the door.

"Yes?" they both called at the same time and one of Haddas' personal servants entered the room.

"His eminence wishes to see you now," he announced. Kaya glanced at Aspen, one side of his mouth upturned in a lop-sided grin.

"All in *his* time!" she said with a smile.

The high priest awaited them in his own personal chambers rather than in the circular audience hall. Kaya looked around in amazement as he took in the plushness of these rooms in contrast to the others he'd seen in the Halls. Large tapestries covered most of them and there were beautifully painted portraits in places, as well as well-formed busts of various high priests and Kings before Haddas. The chairs were made of expensive mahogany and the table was of a heavy oak, inlaid with other woods and precious stones to form intricate patterns in which Kaya noticed the image of a serpent showed up several times. That sent a chill down his spine and he found himself longing for the soft, rolling hills outside of this mountain.

"Lord Seer," the high priest greeted him cordially. He nodded briefly at Aspen but refrained from speaking to her. He was still dressed in white robes, though these were looser than those he wore in the audience hall and instead of his crown he wore a small white and gold skullcap.

"I was hoping that you and your lady would like to dine with me tonight." Kaya smiled back.

"Of course, your eminence," he answered with a slight bow. Haddas gestured for them to sit at the table and a magnificent meal was brought. They ate, making small talk, but Aspen was entirely ignored by the high priest. As the table was cleared, the he finally came to the point.

"I'm sorry I didn't take the time to meet with you in the past two days," he apologized. "I was discussing with the council of priests what steps we should take now that you are here. It is a pity that Hrosca isn't here to give you his credit. He was most probably to be the next high priest, you know."

*Not that you would have wanted him to be,* Kaya thought.

"I understand," he said out loud. "He gave me something to prove who I am." With that he pulled the silver chain and blue stone from his pouch and laid them on the table. The high priest picked up the stone and scrutinized it.

"I see that it is Hrosca's stone," he began slowly, "but I'm not sure if I can trust this as your only testimony. How do I know that you didn't steal it and with it the identity of the Seer?"

*Now I see what you're getting at,* the young Man said silently. *You want some visible sign of power.*

"What do you want me to do?" he asked. Haddas smiled slyly.

"I see you catch on quickly, Creon Kaya," he answered. "Very well, I won't keep from you what the council and I decided. Long ago, during the reign of the last King, before Shion fell and became the Forbidden City, a Voyager placed four books in the Rock of Ages, the house of Creator God. He then said that the Man who had seen and heard what was written in these books would retrieve them. At that given time the old order would break away and the new order would begin. We believe that the Seer is the Man who has seen these things. So if you really are the Seer..."

"...I should go into Shion and get the books without getting hurt and so end the curse, right?" Kaya finished, sensing a gentle prodding within to accept.

"Precisely," Haddas said with a cunning smile. "What will you do?"

"I'll go," Kaya answered.

"No!" Aspen protested, grasping his arm.

"And Lady Aspen will come with me, that way you'll be rid of us for a while."

Haddas blanched and his smile slipped just a fraction. *Can he read my mind?* he wondered, but steeled himself and brought up his mask again.

"So be it," he returned.

"We'll leave tomorrow at sunrise," Creon Kaya announced and rose. "Thank you for your hospitality and the wonderful meal."

"It was a pleasure," the high priest said smoothly.

*Right,* the young Man thought to himself.

As the two travelers followed the servant back to their quarters, Kaya could almost feel Aspen's anger flow off her in waves of heat, but she wisely held her tongue until they had entered the room and he had closed the door behind them.

"Why did you say 'yes' to that insane demand?" she asked vehemently, glaring.

"Because – oh, I don't know," he returned with a slight smile. "I guess I just couldn't resist the challenge."

"Just like against Dushman and all of those others, right?" Aspen cried. "You must be crazy to think that you can go into that city, where no one has ever come out of again, and leave *alive*. What do you think that means to me?" A pang of shame touched his heart at her accusations, knowing that she was right in some respects, but he also knew that the decision to do this hadn't come on his own, he had sensed the Light Within prompting him to agree. He wanted to appease her, and yet he knew that he had to do what he'd said he'd do.

"Aspen, It may seem to you that I acted too fast there, but I believe that it is time for change, in many ways." He looked up and away from her and suddenly he knew why...

"The priesthood will fall."

The Woodmaid's eyes widened and she felt a chill rush down her back and along her arms. Kaya's voice had changed again, the way it had when he spoke for Creator God. He was staring at a point above the wall.

"The high priest will be condemned," he continued, "because he withheld the light from the Nations. The time of grace will begin and there will be peace, but for that the books must be retrieved and Shion opened." The pronouncement ended as suddenly as it had begun. Kaya looked back to Aspen. She had collapsed onto one of the benches against the wall and was covering her face with her hands.

"Are you all right?" he asked, sitting down next to her and putting his arm around her shoulders.

"Oh, Kaya, I'm sorry for what I said there," she said in a shaking voice. "I don't think I quite understood." He gently lifted her face towards his.

"It's all right, luv," he told her quietly. "I didn't understand why until I saw that vision just now. Sometimes I don't understand why either. The time will come when all of this skulking around will be over. Times will be easier and we will have peace."



Dawn was just coming out to play as they bid good-bye to Ambrosius at the Door of the Lion.

"We'll be back by evening," Kaya told the little priest. He looked at the Seer, his fear apparent in his eyes and his voice as he spoke.

"Do you know what you are going into?" he asked. The young Man shrugged.

"No, and I don't want to know. That way I really know that Yeshua will protect us." Ambrosius sighed.

"Then may the Creator go with you," he said sadly. Kaya grasped his hand firmly and then vanished through the tiny opening, followed by Aspen. They silently walked along until they reached the large road leading up to the open gates, where the young Man stopped and looked up towards the city on the hill.

"Aspen, let's pray together before we continue on," he suggested. "We will need the Creator's help." She nodded and they knelt there at the edge of the road. They each prayed a short, heartfelt prayer before rising and continuing on hand-in-hand. The more they advanced up the hill, the larger the city loomed above them. Kaya began to feel very intimidated by the size of it. Suddenly they were at the gates, coming to a stop before entering. Kaya looked around, feeling very small under the giant arch, when something golden caught his eye and he turned to look at it better. It was a golden plaque set on the right wall of the gate. He gently pulled on Aspen's arm and she looked at him questioningly.

"There," he said pointing to the plaque.

"I wonder what it says," she returned and walked over to it with Kaya in tow. A loud thud made them both spin around. A huge rock was lying on the spot that they had been standing. The two travelers looked from the rock to each other and back.

"Another moment there and we'd have been dead," Aspen declared. She had a strangely giddy feeling about this whole thing. Kaya nodded.

"I'm really starting to think that we are meant to go in here," he commented. "After being protected from something like that." He shook his head and turned to look at the plaque.

"Let it be known to all," it announced, "that Shion, called the Holy City, is forbidden to all but them who are to take what is theirs."

"What does that mean?" she asked.

"It means we are going in," Kaya returned, took her hand and strode through the gate. He expected the walls to cave in around them any moment or for lightning to strike them or anything to happen, but nothing did. With pounding hearts they slowly made their way up the main street. There was not one human soul anywhere, making the young Man think of a city of glass far to the east. They silently passed by many dark doorways, fearing to look through them, worried about what carnage they might find. Their eyes were fixed on the great shining building at the center of the city. Slowly it came closer and then they found themselves in front of the great golden gates. They looked at each other.

"Do you think it's right?" Aspen asked.

"I believe it is," Kaya returned. "We were told to enter the Rock of Ages, the house of Creator God, and this must be it." He reached out to push one of the gates open, but in the moment that he touched them, they swung in by themselves and the two stared into a vast courtyard of marble, gold and silver. They made their way in, hesitantly, full of awe, afraid that their steps or their voices would disturb the holiness of this place. The real Rock of Ages was the giant rectangular building in the center of the courtyard. It seemed to Kaya that he'd seen it somewhere before, then slowly the memory returned.

"Jerusalem!" he whispered, his voice still echoing off the high walls. "The temple of the Living God! That's where we saw it. And that must be where the books are." He began to walk toward the steps to the temple.

"Don't you have to clean yourself before going in?" Aspen asked, remembering the complicated rituals of the Jewish Law. Kaya shook his head.

"Do you remember what Yeshua said about the law?" The Woodmaid nodded.

"That he has fulfilled the law..."

"And I am cleansed by his blood. That means that I am free to enter this place," the Seer concluded, turned and walked up the stairs. He passed through the gold-plated doors of the temple, which also opened by themselves the instant he touched them, and entered into the darkness, surprised to find it completely empty. The only thing that was there was a large curtain with a huge tear down the center of it. He walked forward, the light from behind him throwing long shadows into the Rock of Ages. With a trembling hand he parted the curtain and saw nothing but a low table there with four scrolls lying on it. *The books*, he said to himself and picked one of them up, reverently unrolling it.

*"In the beginning was the Word,"* it began, *"and the Word was with God and the Word was God."*<sup>27</sup> He rolled on farther and found himself reading about the things he himself had seen and heard. These were scrolls written about the life of Yeshua, brought here for all to read. *Through you and yours*, Kaya remembered the Creator saying. Could it be that he and his would simply be translating and distributing these to the peoples? Perhaps.

"It's time to go, Kaya," came the quiet Voice. He nodded, rolled up the scroll and then picked up the other three. He left the temple and found Aspen still standing in the courtyard. With shining eyes and radiant face he told her what he had found and then passed two of the scrolls to her. She slipped one under each arm and the two of them left the great complex.

The sun was setting when they finally reached the pass to the Halls. Kaya walked ahead, ready now to confront the high priest and take the final step. He remembered that the plaque had vanished when they had left the city, as had the giant rock that had fallen from the wall. Leaving, they sensed that a peace had settled over the city. It was no longer forbidden.

They slipped through the Door of the Lion and were received by a surprised and joyful Ambrosius. Kaya showed him the books.

"Now let's go to the high priest," he said. "It's time that we leave for the City of the Warrior King."



## Days of Preparation

The audience hall was awash in the dying light of the setting sun, which Kaya found fittingly symbolized the message that he was to give the high priest. Haddas was again dressed in his ceremonial robe and crown, sitting on the elevated chair of the high priest, the stone altar before him smoldering from the incense he had just offered for the evening prayers. Kaya could see the anger on the old Man's face as he stepped forward with the scrolls in his hands.

"I've brought what you asked for," he said. "These are the scrolls about the life of Yeshua, the Son of Creator God." The high priest bolted from his chair.

"How dare you blaspheme against the Creator!" he cried. "He is only one and he is not Man! How can he have a Son?"

"I could explain that, your eminence, but we don't have the time," the Seer stated coolly. "What I do have time to tell you is, what is found in these books and what I have seen and heard. Read for yourself: these are words given by the Lord God Almighty." Haddas tried very hard to control himself in front this unashamed young Man.

"Very well, we will place them in the library with the other sacred books." At a clap of his hands another priest appeared and reverently took the books from Kaya's hands, kissing each one as they were given into his custody. The Seer shook his head at the reverence accorded mere books, the Word of God though they were. It would be better they accepted the message and spread it abroad rather than kissing it and hiding it away.

"You have fulfilled your duty, Lord Seer," the high priest continued in a cold tone of voice. "You may go."

"I have one more thing to say before my duty to you is finished, Haddas, high priest of Creator God," Kaya returned calmly, the Light Within now stirring, calling forth the words. "This is what Creator God says:

'You and your fathers have broken your vow to me to teach the Nations what is written in my Word by hiding it in this mountain. When my servant returns, your priesthood is forfeit and your chair will be overthrown. It will be given to one who will teach of my Son to those who will listen.' So speaks Creator God. Praise be to him forever and ever." As the Seer began his prophecy, the high priest sank into his chair, shaking from the impact of the voice that had become so much larger and more commanding. He couldn't move or say anything until the prophecy was over, sensing a giant Presence that had laid itself across the whole room. Only when Creon Kaya continued in his own voice did he come to himself again.

"Tomorrow we leave for the City of the Warrior King," he announced. "When I return, the prophecy will be fulfilled." Kaya bowed to the high priest as was the custom and walked out of the hall, leaving Haddas the high priest a shaken, pitiful Man.

"Did you know what you were going to say to him when you walked in there?" Aspen asked Kaya the next morning as they left the pass connecting the valley of Shion with the rest of Greenwood.

"Not really," he admitted. "I had a vague idea of what the Creator might want me to say, but the words didn't come until I was just standing there." He paused, reflecting on the previous evening. "I'm not sure that I even wanted to say them myself. They were hard words, but sometimes they must be said, otherwise people won't listen. I just pray that Haddas won't harden his heart." Aspen nodded in agreement as they returned to the small village of Donovan's parents. The old couple received them gladly, saying that Donovan had just gone south to visit his brother.

Twilight had come out to dance in the grandeur of an early spring night, flinging crimson, gold and purple across the sky before gently laying out a cloak of gray that muted into the softest dark blue and faded away into black. Kaya and Aspen were sitting on a bench in front of the house, watching the magnificent display. She glanced up at him and noticed that he was resting his chin on his chest, eyes just barely open and she thought that he looked a bit pale despite the magnificent hues of the falling evening.

"Are you all right?" she asked, gently reaching up to touch his forehead. He jerked at her touch, looking at her with glassy eyes.

"Huh?" he grunted, blinked.

"You're not getting sick, are you?" she pressed, noting that his forehead was warm, but clammy at the same time.

"I don't know. My head hurts," he muttered. "Maybe I'm over-tired."

"I think you've got a fever," she told him and gently laced her fingers through his, "and I know you need some rest. We won't leave for the Warrior King's city until you get better." Kaya began to protest, but she laid a finger on his lips.

"You have to be strong to face the Warrior King and what better place is there to heal up than here?" He sighed. Of course she was right and he needed a rest, so he grudgingly gave in and turned in for an early night.

The next week-and-a-half was a time of quiet in which Kaya spent much time with his Lord and with Aspen. They had fallen in love with the little town the moment they first set foot in it and with each day found more and more little secrets that gave it an even more special place in their hearts.

"You know," Kaya told Aspen as they were walking the soft hills one evening, "I think I'd like to live here when this whole mess is over. It's just so quiet and peaceful." Aspen nodded dreamily.

"Just the place for children to grow up," she said in a sing-song voice, "a place where a family can have joy and peace." She turned and looked at her strong friend. "The people here are so different, so friendly and helpful. It's almost as if they were all real followers of Yeshua." Kaya nodded back.

The days went by quickly and it seemed that almost no time had passed, when Kaya found himself strapping Justin to his back again, shouldering his pack, and bidding good-bye to Donovan's parents. The old folks were sad to see the young couple leave, but they knew it was for the best.

Their journey took them to the north and a bit to the west through the hills of Greenwood. The hills began to become more rocky and more mountainous the nearer they came to the City of the Warrior King. It was a

bit less than a week later that they stepped onto the King's highway and passed through the valley leading to the plain where the city stood. Kaya drew his breath as they stepped out onto the precipice overlooking the lands. This was the northern edge of Greenwood, where it joined with the Flatlands and the Western Nation, where Elam, the Warrior King, had risen from.

The sun stood to their left, casting an eerie shadow over the black bulge of pinnacles and walls before them. There was something sinister about the city and Aspen grasped Creon Kaya's hand tightly. He looked at her and saw she had gone pale. Sweat showed on her brow and her eyes were filled with fear as they stared at the dark city.

"Shouldn't we go back to the last village and you stay there?" he asked gently. She shook her head.

"Where you go, I'll go," she answered, her voice both desperate and determined. He sighed sadly, knowing that she would not be persuaded otherwise.

"Very well, then." And they descended onto the plain.

Even though the night was closing in fast and the shadows lay across the roads, pockets of impenetrable black, there were still many people on the streets. Black and leather-clad soldiers were everywhere, causing the two travelers to pull their hoods closer around their faces and try to not seem obvious. Kaya uncertainly presented their passes to a sullen-looking guard. He merely glowered at them and at the signature admitting them to Elamil, then waved for them to pass. It was a miracle that he hadn't recognized the names.

People jostled all around them, making Kaya almost loose the Woodmaid several times. So when someone pulled on his sleeve, he thought that Aspen was merely trying to make him slow down until he realized that her hand was grasped tightly in his own. He turned his head and just barely stifled a yelp. A tall Man dressed in a beige, knee length, hooded cloak was standing there beneath which the young Man could see the tip of a sword-sheath. Heavy leather boots covered the feet and the face was hidden in the shadow of the cowl.

"Welcome to Elamil, Creon Kaya," came a quiet voice. The Seer grasped for words, to deny, to delay, whatever. How did this Man know who he was?

"Your life is in danger every moment we are in this street," the Man continued quietly. "I'll take you to safety. Follow me." With that he moved into the crowd. Kaya looked at Aspen questioningly, she shrugged and they followed after him. Their guide quickly led them through the packed streets and suddenly they turned into a small alley that was nearly empty. Only one or two drunken citizens were sprawled around, sleeping off the booze and there were a few children picking through the garbage for scraps of food. The whole place stank of rotting trash, vomit and human feces. The young Man sickened at the sight and smells.

"The black quarter," their guide explained. "This is where the homeless and hopeless live. There are also many robbers, so let's not stay here long." He turned and continued on. They followed him through the nearly empty alleys, hearing shouts and screams every once-in-a-while and passing by drunkards, wounded, and dead. No one cared about them, just let them rot where they were. Aspen pressed her free hand to her mouth to stifle a sob and Kaya numbly stared straight ahead.

It seemed an eternity later that the Man in the beige cloak raised a fist to knock on a door. They were still in the black quarter, but this house was clearly better kept than most of the others. A small window in the door opened for a moment, letting the young Man only see a pair of brown eyes in a pale face for an instant, before it slammed shut again. There was a scraping on the inside and the door swung open. Again Kaya balked at the blackness, but this time a panicky Aspen bodily shoved him through it. The door thudded shut and it took a moment for their eyes to adjust to the gloom, broken only by a soft glow somewhere above and beyond them. Aspen pressed a hand to her heaving breast and leaned against the door, eyes closed. Kaya turned to the person who had opened the door, let out a joyful cry and a moment later was hugging his younger sister. Sarina then embraced Aspen who was slowly coming to herself again.

"What are you doing here?" Kaya asked.

"That's a long story," the girl answered, "and I can't tell it now, but I'm not the only one here. Come on!" She took Kaya's and Aspen's hands and pulled them up a set of steep stairs, down a hall and into a well-lit room. The two travelers stared at the people here. Kaya instantly recognized many of them: Rushtu Silver-

Sword was leaning against one wall, his face grim. Lormar stopped talking with one of his officers, turned and nodded at Kaya with a brief up-turning of his lips. A purring close to his arm made him turn and he gave a surprised shout as he saw the cat-like features of Arslan, King of the Werebeasts. Lilya came running over from one corner to hug him and he noticed a tall, muscular black Man coming to greet him.

"Tharkey!" he laughed.

"The same," the Voyager answered. "I see you have been beyond this world, too, little one. You have the mark of the Voyagers, and your maiden does also." His white teeth flashed briefly, before he turned and gestured towards the others in the room "Look, friend, there are far more people here."

Kaya's mouth dropped open as he saw several Woodmen coming towards him. One was Lynx, who embraced his friend joyfully. He recognized two of the others as people from Aspen's community. Then there were two he had seen somewhere, far away from here and suddenly he knew.

"Doan and Altin!" he laughed. "I didn't think I'd ever see you again."

"The Creator's ways are strange, *oul Adem*," Altin said with a grim smile, "and not always pleasant."

A sharp rapping on the table made them turn and Kaya saw their guide and two others dressed like him sitting at the end. Baltar was also seated there, but not in his wheelchair. Kaya wondered where he'd left it.

"Welcome, Creon Kaya," one of the Men in beige said, pulling back his hood. Instantly Kaya recognized the features, though the last time he'd seen them they hadn't looked quite so human.

"Krieg!" The leader of the Karyl nodded.

"Come take your place, Lord Seer," he said, stepping aside from the head of the table. Kaya numbly walked over to the place the Karyl showed him. *Am I supposed to lead this?* he wondered, suddenly feeling completely inadequate. He stood there for a moment, looked to the sky and sent a short prayer toward heaven. *Yeshua, I can't do this on my own. Please help me.* He instantly knew that his prayer was heard as he felt the Light Within rise to the challenge. The stillness overtook him and he knew the words he must say.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please take your seats," he said. Aspen stepped up next to him, amazed at how suddenly he had taken control. The Woodmaid sat on Kaya's right, Lormar on his left, beside him Arslan, Rory curled up next to him, then Tharkey and two of the Woodmen. Baltar and Sarina sat beside Aspen, then Rushtu and Lilya, Lynx, Doan, and Altin, and finally the Karyl took their place at the far end. The general's officers stepped back and stood with their backs against the walls.

"So, what has been happening?" Kaya asked.

"Much," Lormar began. "The rumors that you may have heard are reality. The Warrior King has attacked the Woodfolk in many places and they are fighting back. That is why our friends are here. You already know about the worship edict. It has finally been issued in Elamil, Greenwood and the Western Nation as well."

"The Abadonnim have attacked my people," Arslan took up the report, "and we were just able to make it here with a small contingent of Werebeasts. I pray that the others can still stand."

"The Karyl are helping them," Krieg threw in.

"When did this start?" the Seer asked.

"Just shortly after Keritos was defeated," the leader of the Karyl answered. Kaya gave a low whistle. So they had just been moving ahead of the rushing tide. *What are we getting into?* he wondered, cleared his throat and quickly told of what had happened to him and Aspen. The silence following his report sent tingles down his spine as he felt an uneasiness in the pit of his stomach that even the Creator's presence couldn't dispel.

"We are here for battle," Tharkey finally said making the young Man looked up.

"I thought that this was going to be something between me and the Warrior King," he interjected. The men at the table shook their heads.

"The Warrior King may be the ruler, but there are many who would try to make his kingdom prevail even after he is dead," Lormar explained. "These are the commanders of the army and the lords. They have control over the people and the only way they can be defeated is by open war." Kaya shook his head. He wasn't buying this. He needed some time to think.

"I think we'll continue this tomorrow morning. Aspen and I have come a long way and we need a rest." The people of the council nodded and after a leisurely supper they turned in for the night.



Kaya sat on the edge of his bed, staring at the wall. He just couldn't understand it. War. He shook his head. He could reconcile the fact that the Warrior King had to go, but why did there have to be a war?

"Why, Lord, why?" he asked. "You proclaimed peace, but now we have to fight. Why?"

"There are times when it is necessary to fight, Creon Kaya," came a voice that he'd often heard, but it wasn't the quiet Voice he knew so well. He looked up and gasped, his face brightening and a smile of delight spreading across his cheeks. Yeshua was standing there, arrayed in shining white robes, the marks of the crown of thorns clearly visible on his brow, but now as scars not as the deep gouges from before. The young man fell to his knees. He could see the marks of the nails in his Lord's wrists as he reached out and touched the young Man's shoulders, gently raising him up and then making him sit back down on the cot. Yeshua sat down next to him.

"Do you remember my people, the Israelites?" the Risen One asked and Kaya nodded. "Remember how they were told to destroy the Canaanites?" Again the Seer nodded. "Why?"

"Because they were evil and you judged them," the young Man answered.

"Precisely," his Lord continued. "That's what must happen here: the Warrior King and his people must be judged and you have been chosen as his judge in this world. When he steps before me I will judge him for eternity. When the Warrior King has fallen there will be a time of peace in which you will reveal me to the peoples through the word of your testimony and through the books you took from the Rock of Ages. But then there will be a time of trouble, for the servant is no higher than the Master. They rejected me and they will reject you likewise, but don't fear, because I am with you always." Then suddenly the vision was gone and Kaya sat up, blinking at the soft rays of morning that tiptoed over the window sill and spread themselves over the floor, turning the dancing dust to glitter. A quiet tapping on the door captured his attention.

"Come in," he called and Aspen stepped in, wearing in a long dress, face drawn, bags under her eyes and clearly not in a good disposition. Kaya squinted at her, then at the light coming in from the window and concluded that it was very early in the morning indeed.

"I didn't sleep much," the Woodmaid mumbled. Kaya swung his legs over the side of the bed and patted the seat next to him.

"Why not?" he asked as she sat down.

"I've been thinking about that war," she confessed.

"Me, too. But I got an answer from Yeshua." The girl looked at him, surprised.

"Yes." The Seer nodded. "I saw Yeshua. He told me that this was his judgment in this world and that he would give us a time of peace after that." He paused, a frown crossing his brow. "The only thing I'm worried about are the Woodfolk. They aren't allowed to kill."

"But they are still very competent fighters," Aspen reminded him. "You know the Art of Defense and remember the pirates?" The Seer's eyes had a far-away look in them as he remembered the first small battle he had fought. *That seems like it was so long ago*, he thought. *I'd almost forgotten...*

"Yes," he finally said, "I remember and I think that they'll be fine." He looked at her for a moment. "But what about you, you're not going to come, are you?" The Woodmaid's mouth dropped open as she paled, then her face flushed, making the silver circlet on her forehead stand out even more.

"Of course, I'm coming," she returned, almost a bit angrily. "I was with you in all of those fights before. I'm not afraid to be in this one either, even if I die." Kaya nodded slowly, sadly.

"Very well," he finally answered. "It's going to be dangerous, and I pray that you will be able to stand it emotionally. Even though we are safe in Yeshua, I sometimes still feel that these constant battles hurt me inside." He sighed. "Praise the Creator that they'll be over soon."

After taking a very early breakfast, Kaya and Lormar retired to a corner to discuss the aged general's plans. Everything that he had laid out pleased the Seer immensely, as the old Man had obviously thought of almost

every contingency. Even the fleet wasn't exempt from his careful planning and so when Lilya gently tugged his sleeve some time later it was a very relaxed and cheerful Kaya she found.

"Creon, I need to speak to you," she said in a small voice. He nodded, excused himself from Lormar, and walked over to one of the windows with the girl where they sat down across from each other.

"It's about Savash," she told him quietly.

"I see," he said with a smile and she blushed. Kaya noted that she had definitely matured in the last year and had become even more beautiful.

"It's not so much *that*," she continued, "but it's that he came to visit me shortly before you arrived last year."

"Why didn't you tell me before?" Kaya asked.

"Because I needed time to think about him and me and you." She sighed and brushed at her trousers. "I think he really wanted a true friend, Creon. When you became the Seer and I took the faith I think we lost him."

"Yes, Lilya," the Seer answered in a comforting tone. "I know that. Do you remember that I spoke with him once during our short journey to the Northern Provinces? He doesn't understand that his three old friends, though changed, are even more his friends now. He also doesn't understand that there is Someone else who would like to be his friend."

"Have you been praying?" she asked timidly. He nodded.

"And you?"

"Yes, off and on." Suddenly tears came to her eyes. "Oh, Creon, I couldn't bear it if he was killed in this battle. Please, please protect him if you can!" He gently reached out and wiped the tears away. Then he smiled.

"I promise I'll do my best, Lilya, but he will have to make the decision to accept life himself. I can't do that for him." She just nodded sadly, rose and left. A twinge of melancholy washed over Kaya's heart as he thought about his strange friend. It would soon be time to confront him as well. That was an even more painful prospect than facing the Warrior King.



## The Warrior King

**T**he council was seated around the table again, the sun having just reached its zenith, only a few hours before the Warrior King would open his gates for judgment. The time to stand before the usurper had come. Kaya stood and committed this battle to their God in a short, but heartfelt prayer. Then they rose, ready to do what must be done.

Seven people strode down the main street of Elamil, led by a Man dressed in a beige cloak. All of those whom they passed could tell by their bearing that these were warriors. But even the soldiers sensed that they were not to be stopped. The authority flowing from them was too palpable for even the most brazen of fighters to stand up to them. What scared them the most about these people was the Man in brown walking just behind the guide. His cowl was up, obscuring most of his face, so only the dark, thick, well-groomed beard was visible. Still, they could sense a power and an authority coming from him that would rival that of the Warrior King. The hushed whisper was that this must be a challenger to the throne. Yes, the palace – that's where they are headed!

As they neared the impressive structure of black and gray marble, Kaya's face became even more impassive. His right fist clenched and unclenched in agitation.

"Creator God, Lord Yeshua, go with me," he whispered. The uneasiness about what he was supposed to do did not vanish, but he still knew that he could do it. They reached the front stairway and Kaya nodded to Krieg, who looked around cautiously, then suddenly vanished into the stone steps. Now there were only six of them until they caught up with Baltar, who was already in the palace. Kaya turned and looked at his five companions: Aspen, Lormar, Arslan, Rushtu, and Lynx. The others were all in position and these five would

make an impressive vanguard, especially with the now healed Baltar standing with them. Kaya took a deep breath and started up the stairs.

The Warrior King had just taken place on his royal throne, ready to begin the day's audiences. There was a certain uneasiness in the air and he had sensed it for several days now. *The Seer must be here*, he reasoned. Yes, the Seer must be here, seeing that Savash had returned without being able to challenge the Man of God or bring him to his knees. *But I will*, Elam told himself. *I am lord of this place, supreme ruler, and holder of the flaming sword. No one can defeat me!* He leaned back in his throne, on whose back a giant eagle perched, wings outspread. This was the throne of the ancient Kings, captured and brought here for the new monarch. The Warrior King gestured to his marshal of protocol, who turned to the people.

"The audience shall begin," he announced. The door swung open to admit two men who had a serious disagreement. The sentence was quick: the object of the quarrel, a woman, was "confiscated" and the men put to death. So the hearings continued, almost always ending in death.

The guard at the door was approached by a servant who whispered something in his ear. The Man blanched.

"It can't be!" he whispered. At the same instant both of the great doors were flung wide, banging into the walls beside them, striking the honor guards and knocking them over. Seven people strode in, all cloaked and cowled. Three carried swords on their backs, one had a bow and a quiver full of arrows, one was armed with a battle ax, and one with a steel rod. One of the sword-bearers limped, leaning heavily on a cane. The Warrior King's face turned red.

"What is this interruption?" he roared, half rising from his chair. "How dare someone enter without permission when the Warrior King is judging?"

"Judgment is precisely what we're here for," the leader of the Seven said matter-of-factly, "but not in a matter of our own." He pointed at the Man on the throne. "You are to be judged, Elam!" Murmuring broke loose in the great hall. How could a mere Man dare speak to the Warrior King in this way? Elam fidgeted on his throne.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"You know exactly who I am," the speaker said, pulling back the cowl. There was nothing out of the ordinary about him at first glance: just a young Man with dark, shoulder-length hair and a thick beard that made him look older than he really was. On second glance the gray eyes had a fire in them that was far more intense than the evil glimmer in the Warrior King's eyes.

"The Seer!" Elam cried, half rising.

"You are correct, King of the Seven Nations," Creon Kaya answered. "We are here to judge you in this world. If you pass this judgment alive, then you will have nothing to fear. But if not, you will stand before the last Judge." Elam's face didn't show how deeply the words really affected him.

"Who is 'we'?" he wanted to know. Kaya gave a little half smile.

"Delegates from among the Nations," he returned. "From Liflan, once called the Death March: Arslan, King of the Werebeasts." The Werebeast pulled his hood back, letting light fall on the furry human face, long tawny hair and cat ears.

"From Tashyer: Baltar." The architect pulled back his cowl to reveal white-blond hair, bright blue eyes, and a face set in a determined frown.

"From the Pwyllwood: Rushtu, called Silver-Sword." The Warrior King blanched as the blacksmith uncovered his bald head, gray goatee and bright green-gray eyes.

"From the Western Nation: Lormar the Westron." The old Man displayed his shaggy white head and the Warrior King started from his throne.

"You!" he screamed. "You are my greatest Warlord. How could you?"

"Not any more, Elam," the general answered a bit sadly. "I am Creator God's Warlord, but that only until his time of peace dawns." The huge Man sank into his throne, frustration written all over his ruddy features.

"From among the Woodfolk," Kaya continued, "Lynx oul Birch." The Woodman let the hood drop back and ran a hand through his sandy hair.

"And Lady Aspen kiz Kavak." A slender hand reached up and drew the cowl away to reveal an oval face with deep, forest green eyes, a high forehead and the typical eyebrows of the Woodfolk. Her red-gold hair was pulled back, letting everyone see her pointed ears and a silver circlet crowned her head. For an instant Elam found himself captivated in the pure, wild beauty of this woman, wishing that he could destroy that innocence.

"We are here on a commission from Creator God," the Seer cut into his thoughts, taking a step up onto the dais. "You have been weighed and found wanting in every respect. Now you have one last chance: repent or face judgment." The Warrior King's face grew red at the Seer's bold words.

"How dare you speak to your *king* this way, scum?" he screamed.

"I dare to speak this way, because it is the truth," Kaya countered. "And no man is above the truth!" He took another few steps up to the dais. To the people around it was a real clash of titans. The Warrior King stood tall, his large figure overbearing the Seer's by far. His black hair was cut short and his blue eyes were like crystal clear pits of ice. He was dressed in a tight shirt, making every movement of his muscles visible, long pants, leather boots and a wide scarlet cape. His head was bare.

The Seer on the other hand was wild to the people: his hair was long, he was bearded and his clothing of brown shades, though clearly clean and well kept, was of outlandish origin. The gray eyes had the fire in them to counter act the Warrior King's iciness. Finally the Warrior King broke the silence.

"Do you even know who I am?" he demanded. "I am the one who built this empire, the one who has this world in his hand. I hold the flaming sword. I am king – the Warrior King. At my whim men rise and fall and I command the times of the nations. I control all in this world – the wind, the stars, the moon, and if I and my Arts didn't exist, they would stop shining."

"Be careful, Elam," the Seer intoned quietly, but clearly enough for all to hear. "The judgment is about to come. It is at the door."

"Judgment from whom?" the king laughed. "I am the only one who judges. Where is there another who can fight me, mortal or immortal?"

"Creator God will judge you, Warrior King." Creon Kaya's voice rose to a warning. "The judgment is here. Prepare to meet your Judge, the only God!"

"How dare you!" the giant screamed, reaching to where his sword lay. He drew it in one swift motion and dazzled all around with the brilliant flames – all save the Seer.

"I am God!" Elam roared, eyes flashing in his insanity. "There is none above me. All that were before have passed away and now I am in control for eternity. So die, minion!" He swung the sword behind his head, gripping the gold hilt with both hands and letting the ruby in the base sparkle brightly.

As Elam swung the sword back Kaya stepped forward, reached up, touched the Warrior King's eyes and ears and breathed out gently. The blue eyes widened for a fraction of a second, the sword fell from his hands, clattered on the dais and slid down the stairs. Kaya stepped aside and the Warrior King fell on his face to never rise again.

The crowd was stunned for a second, but then the lords and generals of the Warrior King roared and rushed toward the Seven, swords drawn. At the same instant the room exploded in the light of a million Karyl becoming visible. The Abadonnim dropped their human guise and the hall shook as the forces of the spiritual beings clashed. The great doors broke open and a whole army flowed in under the command of Tharkey the Voyager.

A wicked growling beside Kaya made him turn and draw Justin. At the same instant someone struck him on the arm, making the sword spin from his hands. It pinged against the metal throne and dropped onto the dais, far out of reach. The Seer found himself staring into the two bloodshot eyes of Changeling. He was in his real form: the dark, cloaked figure. His right hand formed itself into a long white bone with barbed edges which would enter cleanly, but tear the flesh coming out. Kaya leapt back to avoid a stroke that the strange being swung at him. Only the quick thinking and Art of Defense the Woodfolk had taught him saved his life.

Changeling went in for another stroke and Kaya ducked, the bone missing him by fractions of an inch. He tried to slip around to where Justin lay, but Changeling was too cunning to let him do something like that, carefully keeping between the Seer and his sword.

Aspen looked up from where she was fighting at the foot of the dais and saw the dark figure take another swing at the young Man, this time just barely grazing the shoulder, slashing the brown cloak. *He needs help*, she thought and noticed Justin lying on the dais. Too far. Another Man leaped at her and she spun out of the way, landing a quick blow to his stomach. The Man doubled over, gasping for air. At the same instant the Woodmaid saw the golden hilt of a sword lying untouched, just below the bottom step of the dais. She kicked her way by another of the Warrior King's men, bent and picked up the weapon.

"Kaya!" He turned his head just in time to see the sword spinning towards him, caught the hilt and swung it around. Changeling's eyes widened for an instant before the weapon passed through his midriff, cutting him in two. A sharp sizzling was heard and all that remained of Changeling was a heap of ashes. Kaya stared first at the heap of ashes and then at the sword. A strangled cry escaped his lips: it was the burning sword of the Warrior King. He could feel it calling him, making him want to kill, kill more. *Use me and my power*, it seemed to say.

"No," Kaya hissed and jammed it into Justin's scabbard. The call vanished, but somehow he knew that it was still burning, just waiting for him to draw it again, so it could demand its fill of blood.

"No," the Seer growled again, took two steps forward and picked up Justin. He turned and was just able to bring up the sword to stop the harsh arc of another blade seeking his throat. The young Man found himself staring into the angry features of Savash.

"Now is the time of reckoning, Seer," he said grimly. "You've condemned me to loneliness, so prepare to die!" The prince's sword whizzed around, but stopped dead against Creon Kaya's silver blade.

"I haven't taken your friends. We are still your friends, even more than before," he answered quietly.

"Liar!" Savash cried and thrust only to be parried away.

"No," the Seer pushed out through clenched teeth. "Creator God gives us the power to love you and help you even more. He wants to be your friend and Lord."

"Liar!" The swords met again

"I tell the truth and if you don't watch yourself, you will become like your father." Kaya thrust the prince's blade away.

"What do you mean?" Savash grunted.

"You are the last person with whom I will fight, Savash, son of Elam," the Seer intoned, blocking another swipe. "I know I will be alive at the end, even just barely, but you may be dead. It's your choice."

"Ha! You just say that because you think you're better than I am," the other laughed. The blades pinged off each other.

"The Creator has promised that I will grow old, Savash, but you might not." Kaya parried another thrust. "You have one last chance to repent, and choose the right God." The swords clashed again. "He has been looking for you for a long time. He doesn't want you to have to be judged the way your father was." The prince let his sword drop slightly.

"What?" he asked, blue eyes mirroring his surprise.

"Creator God wants you for his own, the way he wanted Lormar. This is your last chance: either take the Creator or die – I'm not making this offer, he is!" An intense longing played across the Savash's face. Here was finally someone who wanted him. To his father he'd been a nuisance until he'd learned to fight, but inside he hated war as much as anyone could hate anything. His father had never said a kind word to him. All his thoughts had been on how to keep his kingdom under control, never on his son. He had destroyed all who were close to the prince. Now someone wanted Savash – really wanted him! But then a nasty thought occurred to him.

"How do I know you're not lying?" he growled, raising the sword a bit.

"Try it and you'll find out," the Seer answered. A great pain ran through Savash's body. Someone clearly greater than all he had loved, Someone who wanted him, was calling. He finally decided, reached up and tore the winged helmet off his head, letting golden hair fall to his shoulders.

"I am his," was all he said and Kaya's face burst into a glowing smile. Then both turned and waded into the fray.

Within minutes of the mighty Savash switching sides the battle was over, but not before the prince had saved Kaya's life by dispatching a would-be attacker. Most of the warriors dropped their weapons and fled the palace. Huge holes had been torn in the walls from the cataclysmic battle of the Abadonnim and the Karyl and the dark spirits were the only ones who continued to put up any resistance, only to quickly be vanquished by their foes. As daylight poured into the hall, Kaya turned to Aspen, finding her standing there, face ashen, clothing spattered with blood. Her lower lip trembled a bit and she swayed unsteadily, seemingly about ready to pass out.

"Are you hurt?" he asked, reaching out to grasp her.

"It's not my blood, if that's what you're wondering about," she said in a trembling voice, "but the sight of it still makes me sick." He gently took her in his arms.

"It's all over," she sighed, eyes shining.

"Not quite," he answered and kissed her tenderly.



## The High Priest

Lady Spring and Lord Summer were hand-in-hand as the small company of travelers and soldiers emerged from the pass into the valley of Shion. Kaya reined his horse to a halt and stared at the city, white walls now golden in the evening light.

"An impressive sight," he said to no one in particular.

"If you say so, sir," the horse answered evenly. "I still prefer a nice cold brook and green grass to cities." The Seer smiled.

"I understand, friend," he told his steed. "It won't be long now." No, it wouldn't be long. They were nearly at the entrance to the Halls of Knowledge. What would happen? Would Haddas greet them joyfully? A rising pain in Kaya's heart told him that, no, the high priest wouldn't be happy. He turned a bit in his saddle to survey the little group with him. All of his friends were there – and Savash. This would be the one that the high priest wanted to see least of all. *This is going to be hard*, the young Man thought. *Help me, Yeshua. This battle is yours.*

"Let's go!" he cried and they thundered into the valley and up toward the city.

Haddas sat on his splendid throne, looking at the last wisps of smoke of the evening offering. He grimaced, knowing there was something wrong, but he couldn't tell what. It had been nearly two weeks since that nuisance of a Seer had left and no news. Now, some may think that no news is good news, but Haddas was too wise to even begin to do so. No news was almost always bad news for him.

A side-portal opened to admit Ambrosius.

"What is it?" the high priest demanded.

"Your eminence, the Seer and his companions," the diminutive priest said and stepped aside. The doors opened wide and a group of about twenty people came in, at the head of them the unmistakable stride of the Seer himself. He now wore two swords on his back, one silver and one gold.

"You!" Haddas cried, rising from his throne.

"Yes, I have returned." Kaya's voice was even, and yet a bit sad. "The Warrior King is dead, judged by the hand of the Creator." He pointed at the old Man. "Now it's your turn! You have withheld the light of the

Word of the Creator from the nations. If you had done what the Creator had commanded, then the Warrior King would never have taken the throne. It was because of the ignorance of the peoples that he had so much power. You and your predecessors are at fault and you will be judged for it."

"You aren't going to kill me, are you?" the high priest demanded. Kaya shook his head and a small, mocking smile slid across Haddas' thin lips.

"Then I will ask you to prove to me that the Warrior King is dead, just like with your status as Seer." The Seer stared him in the eyes and the high priest was tempted to drop that penetrating gaze.

"Very well," the young Man finally answered. "I have three proofs. First: myself. I am alive and anyone who challenges the Warrior King and loses is dead. Second: Savash, the son of the Warrior King." The tall young Man who was standing to the left and behind the Seer stepped forward, pulling his cowl down. Haddas cried out in fear. It was as if Elam himself was standing before him, except for the gentle warmth in those blue eyes and the long, blond hair.

"Third," Kaya continued, "the burning sword of the Warrior King." He drew the blade with a swift motion and the whole hall was illuminated by the white flame that sometimes flickered red or yellow, making Haddas think of a fire that was dying.

"Now, your priesthood has fallen, high priest Haddas. The Creator has *one* High Priest – an eternal one, who is the real King. You have lost your honor and with it have corrupted your religion. Now it is over!" With that he swung the flaming blade over his head and it buried itself in the still smoldering altar with a loud crunch. A bright explosion rocked the hall and an instant later the white flame of the sword was extinguished. Kaya uncurled his fingers from the hilt, stepped back, and looked at Haddas one more time, this time gently.

"Take the hand that Yeshua offers you, Haddas. You have the knowledge and the wisdom. Search the scriptures and you will find. Perhaps then you will regain your honor." With those words he turned and left the hall, his companions following him, as Haddas sank into his seat, a broken man.



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## Part Three: THE ELDER

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# One: The Rebuilding

## Coronation

**N**ews of the Warrior King's demise spread among the nations like a wildfire, igniting pockets of resistance against those lords of his who still held sway and for a few weeks the more cosmopolitan parts of the Nations burned in an anarchy not experienced before. In his foresight, Lormar had planted wise and able soldiers in the various places he'd passed through and they immediately worked to quell the problems. In the more rural areas life went on as usual, except for a sense of freedom that arose from the fall of the tyrant.

The next order of business was the recreation of the Council of Elders and the selection of the new King by ancient rite. It was decided that the principal players of the rebellion would appoint a temporary Council until the various Nations would be able to elect their own officials. Lormar wryly commented that it could take some years before things went the way they had in ages past, but until then he and those around him selected twelve who would have the Nations' best interests at heart.

Not surprisingly, Lormar was the first called for the Western Nation, he himself having masterminded much of the takeover. Rushtu was selected for the Pwyll, Tharkey for the Flatlands, Baltar for Tashyer. Even before the fall of the Warrior King, Kavak had been summoned for the Woodfolk. One of Lormar's close officers, a Man named Yotiri, took the seat for the Northern Provinces. Arslan was the logical choice for the Werebeasts. He protested this at first, but then agreed to take the seat until his replacement could travel to Shion from Liflan. Ambrosius presided for the Priests. Another of Lormar's officers, Niles, was elected for Greenwood. Zu-Thal represented the people of the far west. The other two called were named Ivrit and Demis, from the coast of the Flatlands, as representatives of the armies. They had commanded the sea battle against the Warrior King's flotilla. Kaya had been asked to take a seat, but he turned it down.

"I am too young to do that," he reasoned. "I may have seen the Creator face-to-face, but I still have much to learn. Later maybe. Now I have a wedding to worry about."

The more difficult question was who was to be elected as King.

"The council cannot stand without the King to lead it and to carry out its decisions," Lormar said. "We must find someone who is worthy of that position." The first name that fell was again Creon Kaya, but the Seer declined once more, this time quoting the prophecy.

*"He will strike the man of evil and raise up the King and the Council."* That basically means that I am not to be the King. Look into what the prophecy says about choosing the King." That perplexed the council quite a bit and the discussion became quite heated until Arslan rose, having been silent for most of the proceedings, carefully looking over a copy of the prophecy that he'd had a priest draw up for him in the language of the Werebeasts.

"I think I may have hit on something," he called out after he'd gotten everyone's attention. "Lormar, what does it say about the evil ones who fall?" The old general shrugged.

*"Of them will be one slain and then one more, one pardoned, one returned to the dead whence he came, two slain and one raised to the throne."* No one knows what it means."

"But what about the Warlords?" the Werebeast King suggested, his tail flicking back and forth. The men looked at each other and then Baltar's eyebrows shot up.

"Wait, wait!" he exclaimed. "I think I know. 'One slain' – that would be Dushman – 'then one more' – Tolgar."

"One pardoned," Lormar breathed, beginning to comprehend. "Why, that's me!"

"Then 'one returned to the dead whence he came,'" Zu-Thal took up the thought. "The word about Keritos was that he was a corpse brought back to life by the Warrior King!"

"That is true," Rushtu affirmed. "I saw it with my own eyes."

"Good, then 'two slain?'" Arslan prompted.

"Pan-Tao," the yellow man ventured.

"Alman!" Ivrit cried.

"And what does that leave us with?" the Werebeast King asked triumphantly.

"One raised to the throne..." You can't be serious!" Tharkey interjected.

"I am," the Werebeast returned, voice determined.

"You mean we must elect Savash?" Kavak demanded. "He is the son of the Warrior King!"

"And the only one left who is of noble blood," Lormar reminded them. "His father is descended from Melech, one of the many sons of King Diblah, if you remember. And Alman, his mother, is of the royal family of Stein."

"No, no, that is impossible!" Rushtu roared into the group, jumping up and pumping his fists into the air.

"It is true," the general snapped back. "I myself introduced Alman to Elam. I knew of her background. I selected her as the only woman in the circle of the Warlords. A pity that we became enemies." Tharkey reached out and pushed his diminutive friend back into his seat while Ambrosius excitedly broke into the debate.

"The prophecy clearly says 'one raised to the throne.' There is only one choice and that is the Creator's: Savash, son of Elam. He is the last of the line of the ancient Kings. He is the only one we can choose." At the mention of their God the Men, Woodman and Werebeast became silent and reverently bowed their heads. That summary ended all discussion about this theme and Lormar called in the secretary.

"Write the decision of the Council," he ordered. "Savash, the son of Elam of the line of Melech, the son of Diblah the King, has been selected for the office of King of the Seven Nations."

Creon Kaya and Aspen were staying with Donovan's parents again and two other families had kindly put up Savash and Lilya. While Kaya and Aspen were going over the logistics of their wedding and receiving some of the early guests and friends, Savash attempted to find a way to get closer to Lilya again. A week after Haddas was deposed Savash finally worked up the courage to invite her out on a walk. At first they ambled aimlessly, the prince seeking for words to say, but finding none. His shyness around her was a paradox to him, after all he'd known her intimately and he knew of her past. But now she had changed and all of what had been had been washed away and she wore her purity like a mantle for all to see. He could not but watch her simple grace as she strode along and desire her for himself – not as a concubine, but as a life mate.

They passed through a copse of trees and came out on a small lake that sparkled deep azure and reflected the trees around it. The soft light of the late afternoon sun enfolded them, smiling down benevolently and setting the scene for all that was to come. Lilya, found a place beside the lake and sat down, dipping her feet in the shallow waters.

"It's so beautiful here," she remarked with a smile, breaking the long silence. "Much nicer than the Pwyll – Eison especially. I kind of envy Kaya and Aspen."

"Oh, why is that?" he asked in return and she sighed.

"They'll get to stay here and I have to go back to Eison as soon as the Council chooses the King."

"Hm." Savash stared into space in front of him and struggled with his feelings of inadequacy. He knew what he wanted to say, but also lacked the courage to say them. Then he thought of what Kaya had told him about the Light Within. *Please help me Creator God*, he prayed silently and then pressed forward.

"Lilya," he said softly, "I want to apologize for the way I acted the last time we saw each other. You were definitely right about me there." She turned and looked at him, suddenly sad.

"I guess we were both a bit tense. I might have been a bit hard on you." Savash finally sat down next to her.

"But I have been thinking a lot about what you said and I think I have changed somewhat." He looked away over the lake. "I don't want to rush you, Lilya, but..." Suddenly he felt like he couldn't go on. It was almost like something was stuck in his throat. She was just quiet, waiting for him to continue. He put one hand up in front of his eyes.

"I think of you as more than a friend," he finally said and dropped his hand and glanced at her. The dark eyes had suddenly gone wide and a little smile was playing around the corners of her mouth.

"You mean...?" she asked and then he reached out and took both her hands in his own.

"I want us to be together again, Lilya. I don't mean I want you as a consort – I want you as my wife." He looked down at her hands and brushed his thumbs against them. "I finally realized that you really loved me more than those other girls. When you said what you did back there..." He swallowed once to keep the tears from coming. "You were just so right. I just pray that you may have changed like I did." Lilya bit her lip, her heart pounding. This was too good to be true – just what she'd hoped and dreamed for. She gently pulled one hand out of his grasp and pressed it against his cheek. He looked up and found her smiling.

"Savash, I'd be delighted," she whispered and then leaned forward and kissed him.

"My lord!" came a voice from in the thickets. The two young people jerked apart, and looked towards where the sound came from.

"Who are you?" he thundered, rising, subconsciously going for the sword that wasn't there. His hand closed around nothing but air and he dropped it his side as two soldiers wearing the blue uniforms of the Council Guard stepped into the glen. As soon as they saw Savash they went down on one knee.

"Sire, we have a message for you," one of them said, holding out a white capsula.

"What is this?" Savash demanded, thinking they were mocking him. "I'm not king and I'm not called to be one, either." Then he opened the seal of the capsula and pulled out the paper. He unrolled it and began reading. Suddenly his eyes grew wide and he sank down onto the grass, shaking his head, speechless.

"What?" Lilya wanted to know. Savash raised the paper and read the message out loud.

#### *Edict.*

*The Council of Elders of the Seven Nations has elected Savash, son of Elam of the line of the ancient Kings to take the throne of the Seven Nations as supreme ruler. The choice was in accordance with the prophecy of the Seer.*

"And look at who signed it!" he cried and held it out so the girl could see it. Lilya stared at the twelve names. The topmost was Lormar.

"Sire, we are to take your answer back to the Council," one of the soldiers ventured. Savash shook his golden head.

"I need time to think. Please, at least until tomorrow." The soldiers nodded, rose and bowed, and then walked off into the bushes leaving the two alone again.

"I need to talk to Kaya," Savash said grimly and began to walk off. Then he stopped and turned back.

"If I accept this, Lilya, would you become my Queen?" he asked. She ran to him and threw her arms around his neck.

"I'd marry you if you were the poorest beggar in the Nations, Savash," she whispered. "I love this man and not his position." He smiled at her, enjoying her closeness, then tore himself away to speak with Kaya.

Savash was unable to find the Seer at his regular lodging, but Aspen sent him out to find Kaya at one of the outlying fields where the blond man found him stripped to the waist, spreading seed for one of the local farmers while the man plowed. Savash could hear his friend's rich voice echoing across the field in a good-natured song as his hand flew back and forth with the rhythm. The prince hesitated for a moment before hailing Kaya. The Seer smiled at him and shouted for him to wait a few minutes. He finished the furrow, then told the farmer that he was going to take a break. The man stopped the oxen and made for a tree where they

kept their refreshments. Kaya followed him, gesturing for Savash to follow. They reached the shade and the two field workers took a moment to get some water and douse themselves with a small amount of it.

"Sorry to interrupt you," Savash said.

"You're no interruption," Kaya laughed. "We needed a break anyhow. Sit down." They took their places on the ground and the farmer shared out some of the rough bread while the dark man scrutinized his friend's face for a moment.

"What's bothering you?"

"Read this," the blond one returned and tossed the edict in Kaya's lap, who picked it up and read it. He lowered the paper, smiled and then rose and fell to one knee.

"Kaya, stop it!" Savash ordered. "I am not the King yet."

"But you have been chosen, Savash. Not by the Council, but by the Creator himself." The prince regarded the Seer for a long moment as he rocked back into a sitting position again. The farmer looked from one to the other, uncertain of what to make of this exchange.

"You knew all along, didn't you?" Savash said pointedly.

"Yes, I did, but not by any revelation," Kaya explained with another chuckle. "I merely went through the Seer Prophecy again and I came across who is to be King. In the list of how the seven Warlords of the Warrior King are struck down it is said of the last '*one raised to the throne*.' You were the last Warlord I confronted before the Warrior King fell. You and Lormar are the only ones who are still alive. It can't be Lormar, because he was the '*one pardoned*'. That leaves you." He shrugged and bit into his snack.

"Did you tell the Council?" Savash asked.

"No, they figured it out on their own." Kaya leaned forward. "Take it, Savash. It was given to you by the Creator. He was the one who chose this for you."

"I'm not sure I can do it right, Kaya," the blond man said quietly. "I'm not worthy of it."

"And that makes you all the more qualified. That way the Creator can really use you. Take it and you will be doing the Nations the greatest favor that you can imagine." Slowly a smile spread across the prince's face.

"I guess I don't have any other choice," he sighed. "I'll do it, but only if you'll stand with me." Kaya reached out and grasped his hand.

"That is what my new task is Savash. To help you rule the Nations well."

The Council chambers were located in a small building just at the foot of the Rock of Ages. Kaya and Savash had ridden in early in the morning and Savash was feeling a bit giddy about what he was about to do. He wished that he had his friend's calmness, but then again Kaya wasn't the one who had been called to take the crown. It was a great step that Savash had chosen to take. He was still dressed simply though, looking more a farmer than a prince who was about to take the crown offered him, but he felt that it was a better way to face the Council: humble and as a mere man, not someone who came from any royal line. He remembered what Kaya had said to him the night before.

"A Voyager once told me that true royalty is something given by Creator God and not something that you're born with."

"Creator, Yeshua, I pray that you would give me that royalty," Savash now prayed as they waited in the ante room to the Council chambers. Finally the door opened and the two Men rose and entered. The Twelve all stood. Kaya stepped forward.

"Honorable Elders, Prince Savash has received your summons and is ready to answer your call." Several of the men drew their breath sharply and Arslan's tail began to flick back and forth in excitement. Savash stepped forward.

"I have decided to accept your calling," he said much more calmly then he felt and – he hoped – humbly. As one man the Council sank down on one knee. Lormar rose first again, being the eldest and the chairman of the Council.

"Then, Prince Savash, we will set the date for the coronation," he announced with a smile. "Please take your place in the Council." Savash did as he was told, assuming a chair that was just a bit behind and above Lormar's place. Kaya smiled to himself and turned to leave. The King was chosen.

It was decided that in one month Savash, son of Elam would be crowned King of the Seven Nations, giving time for some of the more distant dignitaries to make the journey to Shion. When the day arrived, the whole of the already magnificent Rock of Ages was decked out with great banners and the marble fairly shown with the momentousness of this event. This was the first king to be crowned in the ancient temple in more than four hundred years.

The prince was dressed in chain mail with the royal blue underneath it and a wide cape of crimson around his shoulders. On his chest was the insignia of his ancestor Melech's house, a lion resting beneath a great tree, and a short sword was strapped to his belt. Kaya stood not far off, wearing his customary brown – the sign of his office as the Seer, Aspen at his side, resplendent in a white gown with a green sash at her waist and over one shoulder. The Elders wore their best and over their clothing the long white robes with the red hem.

Savash was called forward and he knelt before Ambrosius who had been raised to the office of chief priest. He held out Justin, the Seer's sword, in his left hand and the book of the Kings in his right.

"Savash, son of Elam of the line of Melech," he began in a solemn tone of voice. "You have been called by the Creator through the Council of Elders and the word of the Seer to take the throne of the Seven Nations. We are here to witness this. Do you swear upon this Book of the Law for the Kings to serve and protect the peoples, regardless of their standing or wealth, regardless whether man or woman, male or female Werebeast, Woodman or Woodmaid, free or slave, Elder or noble-born or commoner? Do you swear to serve the Creator as your first lord? Do you swear to lead the Council in righteousness?"

"I swear it, so the Son of the Creator, Yeshua the Messiah, help me." There was some murmuring among the throng at that answer, but the priest continued, unruffled.

"Do you swear upon the Sword of Justice to uphold the integrity of the Nations at all costs, to deliver the punishment for wrong, regardless of the standing of the guilty person and to deliver the reward for right, regardless of the standing of the person to be rewarded? Do you swear upon this sword to allow the Council to watch and judge your actions to keep you from slipping?"

"I swear it, so the Son of the Creator, Yeshua the Messiah, help me."

"Then Savash, son of Elam of the line of Melech, hear the words of the Creator about the King he has chosen." Ambrosius passed the sword and the book to his attendant priest and placed both hands on the King's head, speaking the ancient words of inauguration.

"Justice shall reign through you. Righteousness be your throne, your right hand mercy and your word law. In all you do may you be a King as the Creator wishes. May you walk in the footsteps of Artus, the first of the Kings, and in those of Yeshua, the King of Kings. And now, before the Nations Seven I crown you as monarch and King, as lord and protector." The small priest lifted an ancient golden crown and gently placed it on Savash's brow.

"Rise then, King of the Seven Nations," he closed and the King slowly did as he was told. As he turned and faced the people loud cheers broke out.

"Hail, King Savash!" He motioned for silence, but it was some time until the cheers died down. Finally he could speak clearly.

"It is an honor to take this office to serve you. I am weak in my office, because I am only a Man. I will need your help as my subjects to reign well and that of the Council of Elders." Here he laid one hand on the shoulder of the priest.

"I will now make my first declaration to the Nations," he continued, brightening. "I have chosen someone who can carry this burden with me, someone to be my Queen." A loud murmuring went up from the people and the Elders looked at each other in surprise. Only Kaya and Aspen smiled knowingly.

"Come here, Lilya," Savash called quietly and the girl shyly slipped out of the first row of spectators. She was wearing white, so her dark hair was accentuated all the more. She stepped up in front of Savash and

curtsied. He turned to Kaya, who had come forward, and took a blue cape from his hands, which he laid over her shoulders and clasped shut. Then he took her hand and turned to the people.

“People of the Nations, this is to be my wife and your Queen, Lilya the daughter of Muriel.” Spontaneous applause went up from the people as the royal couple walked forward to the carriage that was waiting at the entrance to the Rock of Ages. But though the King had been chosen, peace was not yet in the Nations.



## Two Weddings

The doors to the council chamber of Stein were thrown open by Lord Eli himself as he barged into the room where the men had just gathered. Slowly he glared around the circle, before taking his seat at the head of the table.

“Well, what do you make of it?” he demanded, hurling a piece of rolled parchment onto the already high stack of papers on the table. “Savash is crowned *King* over the Nations and we were not asked!”

“That is true, sire,” one of the older councilors ventured, “but he was chosen according to the old rite, from the time of the Ancient Kings. The Council of Elders chose as they saw fit for the Nations.”

“Then *I* should have been on that council,” the lord roared, his square face burning with anger.

“You yourself authorized the choice of Baltar...”

“...As an ambassador, yes, but not as an Elder to the Council!” He pounded his fist on the table then turned away, trying to calm himself.

“What are you planning to do, sire?” another councilor asked.

“We will simply continue to take the steps needed to make Tashyer an independent state. No directives from the Council at the other end of the world!” He turned back to the seven members sitting in at the table. The older ones were pulling their beards thoughtfully, and the younger men had a fiery look in their eyes. Not to be under the restrictive laws of the Council of Elders who policed the very moderate taxes so that the provincial governors could not make themselves rich and who forbade many activities that these men had their fingers in, such as slave trade – ah, to be free of those laws was something to think about! The Lord of Stein was right.

“Sire,” said one of the younger men, rising and bowing. “If we can break away from them, we will have a state where your word is law and you will be true king, able to do as you please.” The lord smiled at the smooth tongue of this man.

“And you, my dear councilors, will reap the benefits of that reign, I promise you,” he answered with a smile. “You will be free to do as you please – in all things. That scum below us will *learn* that we, the nobles, are high above them.” He leaned back, grinning to himself. “We will build an empire greater than all before. Savash will cringe.”

Dawn was just kissing the morning awake when a small procession of women left a little house nestled in the Councilors’ District of Shion. All were clothed in gray, except for one, wearing a simple beige dress. Her red-gold hair was carefully hidden under the hood she had on her head. The women progressed along, quietly singing a solemn tune, taking Aspen to prepare for her wedding at the house her father and mother were living in. This was the beginning of the ceremony of the Woodfolk wedding. Creon Kaya was already in the great city at the Rock of Ages, beneath the mentorship of Kavak. The rituals for the Woodman were less elaborate than for the Woodmaid, but just as important. Both had to bathe before they could don the white ritual clothing, over which the bride wore a two-sided cloak. The outside was in the colors of her father’s house, surrounded by a white edge, symbolizing her innocence and purity. The inside was usually colorful, reminding one of the forest. It took the Woodmaid most of her life before marriage to weave, sew, and embroider the cloak. And yet Aspen’s had been finished long before she met Creon.

As she reached the house where her parents were staying, her mother opened the door to admit her, face pale and coal-black eyes distant. Aspen tried not to sigh, knowing that Savannah was not happy with this match and it was only Kavak's insistence that brought her here. The bride entered, her gray-garbed companions following her in and sitting down in the living-room to wait. Only two removed their gray cloaks to reveal the splendid colors of their houses. They took Aspen to the ritual bath in the pool behind the house. These two – Lynx's wife Hazel and Aspen's best friend Holly – would remain with her for these rites. She was to submerge herself three times while singing songs remembering the three parts of the life of Yasham, the mother of the Woodfolk. After that she was dried off by her maids and dressed in the white gown, a silver sash tied around her waist. The two then took the time to dress her hair with fresh seasonal flowers. Then the heavy bridal cloak was placed around her shoulders and a veil of green was laid over her head, covering the face. Holly and Hazel left her alone in the yard where she would wait until her bridegroom would come to take her to the temple at noon.

The excitement made it difficult to sit still as she should and her thoughts flitted about in an ever maddening circle, remembering the many years in which she had gotten to know and love Kaya more and more, the journey and most often she thought of their engagement about a year before on the Island. She wished that she could be married there, but both she and Kaya had thought it more appropriate to have their wedding in Shion, before the Rock of Ages. After all that was now once more the center of worship in the Nations and the Seer should set an example of serving the Creator the way he was served once, many years ago. In the past days they talked about Yeshua to whoever would listen, but those were only few and many were still caught up in the pagan ways of their forefathers. This wedding would mark a changing point, this one and the King's two days hence. Since the Woodfolk wedding lasted one week, the King had decided to place his – in the traditional style of the Nations – in the middle of the Seer's celebration. It would turn the already joyous city into one great big festival. Aspen smiled to herself at that thought, but brushed it away to consider her soon-to-be-husband. Now her secret dreams would come true.

Meanwhile Kaya went through the rituals for the men, taking a bath and letting himself be dressed in white with a golden belt at his waist. His head was crowned with a chaplet of oak leaves and he wore a brown cloak over one shoulder to symbolize his office as Seer, something that was uncommon for the groom. Then he and his two friends – Lynx and Savash, whom he had asked to take that honor – sat down with Kavak and Adem, who had arrived nearly two weeks ago, to have a time of worship and preparation.

"Remember," Kavak instructed the Seer, "you will be entering into the most holy covenant set by the Creator with this act – the bonding of man and woman to one flesh. This step will last until death. You will be married under the blessing of the God Almighty alone." Then he went on to once more describe the responsibilities of the Woodman husband to his wife – the first being to love her as himself, for now he would belong to her as she belonged to him. Their home must be open to all and their family be a blessing to all. He must support his wife and love her with all his heart. He must protect her from all evil, be it with his very life. Kaya had heard these many times as the ritual had demanded and he answered with the ritual words.

"My father, I hear. Your words are true. May the Creator help me fulfill them. I hear, my father." They sat together, going through the laws again and again until just before noon. Then Adem rose and picked up a small bowl of perfumed water. He dipped a branch with fine leaves on it in the water and sprinkled it over the bridegroom three times.

"My son, go and find the bride that the Creator has for you!" he cried. Kaya bowed his face to the ground and rose, remembering that this was symbolic of the Creator's sending Lif to find and marry Yasham. He and his companions turned and left the inner court where they were joined by a train of well-wishers, all dressed in gray as the custom demanded. They made their way the house where Kavak was dwelling, solemn, yet joyful. Three times during the procession a maiden dressed in a colorful gown with her head covered stepped out and called to the bridegroom, reminding of the long search and trials that Lif had endured to find his wife. The Seer ignored them and they stepped into the throng, now singing along. Finally they reached the small house where the bride was. The crowd became silent, as if on command. Savash and Lynx stepped forward, threw open the door and charged into the house, followed by a slow and grave Creon Kaya. He walked forward as

his friends symbolically held the gray-clad maids at bay until the groom returned with the bride. Kaya quickly walked through the house and came to the door where Hazel and Holly stood, each holding a branch in one hand.

"Halt and stand, man!" they cried together. "The bride awaits her lord."

"I am he," he answered in the ritual fashion and tossed a small sack of flower petals to each. The girls knelt before him and he opened the door to see the bride sitting there, dressed in the splendid robe. Slowly he walked forward and knelt before her.

"Who is this man?" she asked quietly, her voice betraying her joy. "Is he not the one I healed? Is he not the one whom my heart desires?"

"I have come, lady of the forest, to take you to the house of my father," he answered, his heart pounding hard and the thrill taking him as he heard her voice.

"Is this not the man whom my heart desires?" Now it almost sounded like a song.

"Arise and come, my love. Come and know me."

"He calls from afar and I hear. I will come!" She laughed and rose with him. He bowed to her and she curtseyed before he picked her up and carried her through the house, where the throng waited silently. As he stepped through the front door, followed by his friends and the bridesmaids, all around erupted into a joyous shout. He gently set the bride on her feet and the two of them marched up the long path to the Rock of Ages. The procession was often stopped by small groups of men and women who would leap out of the alleyways and throw flower petals on the couple. This reminded of the difficulties of returning to Lif's home where they were married. Finally they reached the great building where they entered, accompanied only by their four friends. Kavak and Adem were already waiting, dressed in brown. Slowly the six walked to the two men and knelt.

"We have come to ask you for your blessing," the couple said in unison. Adem placed his hand on his son's head while Kavak laid his on his daughter's.

"Be blessed, child of my loins," the men said and then changed places.

"Be blessed, child," they repeated and then stepped back. The two young people stood up and faced each other. Kaya reached out and lightly took hold of the veil.

"I swear to give my all for you, to keep my pledge to hold and love you and protect you from all harm," he recited in a low voice, eyes shining. "May the Creator be my guide and my helper."

"I swear to give my all for you, to keep my pledge to serve and love you as the days turn into night and as night turns to day until the end," she answered. "May the Creator be my guide and my helper." Then he gently lifted the veil from her face and head. He passed it to his father who held it while Kavak gave them a small cup full of red wine. The Seer took hold of the cup.

"May this cup show our unity before the Most High," he said solemnly and held it out to her. Aspen drank from it from his hands and then took it. Without a word she held it to his lips and he drank. Kaya then poured the remaining wine on the ground and placed the cup upside-down on top of the wet spot.

"May no other drink of either of our cups until the end," she told him. He nodded and took her right hand in his left. Adem then passed one end of the green veil to Kavak and the fathers gently tied it around their children's hands. The Woodman then knelt and scooped up a bit of dirt from a pile on the marble floor and placed a small amount on the couple's heads.

"May the Creator make you fruitful like the earth on which we live." Then Adem raised a bowl of water and sprinkled some on Kaya and Aspen.

"May the Creator make you fruitful like the earth after the rain." Then the two fathers placed their hands on the children again.

"May the Creator give you peace and comfort in times of trouble and times of plenty and joy in days of difficulty and days of ease," they said together. "So may it be in his name." Then Adem turned to the four who witnessed the ceremony.

"You are the witnesses who have pledged to help them in the days of their troubles. Do you do so?"

"We do," the four answered. Kavak raised his hands.

"Then may the blessing of the Almighty be upon you, children of my heart. May it be he who builds your home and may your love to him and each other blossom and grow like the oak." The two newlyweds bowed and curtsied, before turning to be taken from there to the bridal chamber where the marriage would be consummated. They left through another entrance while Kavak and Adem announced the ceremony complete to the guests. They scattered to their houses until the festivities of the evening.

When they reached the small house where Kaya's mother and sisters had painstakingly created the bridal chamber, they bid their honored guests farewell and closed themselves in.

It was late evening when the guests, having shed their gray clothes, finally saw the wedded couple emerge from their chamber. Aspen had reversed her bridal cloak and the beautiful embroidery now showed her to be the wife of the man beside her. His chaplet of oak leaves was gone, according to custom. Her silver circlet sparkled into the night, yet it was outshone by her eyes. Then the two of them made their way to her parents and passed the carefully folded white sheets of the bridal bed to her mother.

"Now let's begin the feast!" Kaya cried, picking her up and swinging her around. The feasting would last for seven days, most of it courtesy of the King.

On the third day Lilya and Savash were married according to the customs of the Kings. The entire city was there along with many ambassadors from all Nations to witness the ceremony, including Kaya and Aspen who were still wearing the traditional wedding clothing of the Woodfolk, as the custom demanded. The King waited on the steps of the Rock of Ages, two steps below Ambrosius, who was clad in the white of the chief priest, the circlet with the wings on his head. Savash was dressed as at his coronation and wore his heavy golden crown, which looked to be a part of him, blending in with his long, golden hair.

Now the bride approached, led by Rushtu Silver-Sword. She was wearing a dress of silver, woven in part with real strands of the metal. Her hair was pinned up and decorated with many pearls. She had a short veil over her dark, shining eyes. The two climbed the stairs and Rushtu placed her hand in the King's before the two of them knelt.

"My friends," Ambrosius began, his round face shining with delight, "today the King takes his Queen before you, the witnesses of the Nations. He does this before the Lord, the Creator of Heaven and the worlds, as well of before the Nations. My King..." He bowed his head and then Savash spoke to Lilya, his strong voice echoing across the courtyard.

"Lilya, I take you to be my wife and my Queen. I will hold you until my death, sharing my best times with you in joy and help you when you are hurt. I will cherish you as my own and love you. I pledge this to you." She bowed her head slightly, her smile broadening at his words. It was a few moments before she could get her breath back and make her vows.

"Savash, I take you to be my husband and my King. I will remain loyal to you until my death and no other will take your place in my heart, in all of the times of the future, difficult and simple, joyful and not. I pledge this to you, my lord and King." She bowed her head low again. He slipped a golden ring onto the ring finger of her left hand and she did the same to him.

"So hear, O Nations," Ambrosius cried. "The King has taken his Queen." With that Savash rose and took an ancient crown of silver and diamonds from the hands of the priest. He gently placed it on Lilya's head.

"Come and be Queen of the Nations, Lilya, daughter of Muriel," he said. She smiled and rose. At the same moment two maids stepped forward and fastened a long, blue cape around her shoulders to show her royalty. The two of them turned and walked down the stairs hand in hand, followed first by Ambrosius and then by the Seer and his wife, then by the Council and the other guests.



## Trouble in Stein

**B**urhan, the Werebeast Elder-designate to the Council, hurried into the Council Chambers, quickly nodding to the blue-clad guards. The doors were opened for the black and white Werebeast whose hair was bristling in his leather clothing, making him seem larger than usual. The long tail flicked back and forth as he surveyed the eleven that were already there. The King's chair was vacant, Savash being away on his honeymoon. He nodded to Lormar and sat down in what was once Arslan's place.

"Welcome, Burhan," the old Man said, rising. He was dressed in black, as usual, making his white hair and beard and silver belt stand out more than ever. He brushed his tanned, wrinkled hands together and bowed his head to ask the Creator's blessing on the meeting.

"We have grave news," he said after his prayer. "Citing a breach in protocol on our part in selecting the preliminary Council of Elders, the high council of Stein has declared that Tashyer is a sovereign state. Eli, the Lord of Stein, has crowned himself emperor." Looks of shock registered on the faces of the Elders as they began to mutter among to themselves. Only Burhan remained silent.

"Burhan, will you please tell us what you have seen?" Lormar prompted him.

"I will, sir," the Werebeast answered, rising. "I was traveling here and I stopped in Stein for provisions when the edict was issued. I left the city as quickly as possible and was only able to cross the border with great difficulty. All who adhere to Savash are arrested and tortured." He held out his hands, claws bared. "The lord styles himself not king, but *emperor*, something that only one has done before him." He didn't need to mention the name, for all were thinking of the tyrant king who was defeated by Artus at the beginning of the Ancient Monarchy. "He is preparing for battle, perhaps to subjugate all the Nations in an effort to duplicate the Warrior King's rule. Already the Werebeasts who are following Dehshet have been sneaking into Tashyer to join him. My King is careful about who leaves Liflan. We cannot afford a second tyrant ruler, my friends." His fur slowly went down as he was talking and he looked almost gentle as he sat down now, but his blue eyes were still livid and alert. The old Man sighed.

"Any questions for the Elder?" he asked quietly. Ivrit leaned forward, stroking his small beard thoughtfully.

"How great is the strength of his army?" Burhan shrugged.

"I can't tell you that. I was just able to escape into Elwin of the Northern Provinces before the borders closed. There were very many."

"If we struck now, I doubt he'd be ready for it," Demis mused.

"But we can't without the King and he isn't due back until two weeks!" Tharkey countered. Many of the others nodded, knowing what the laws of the Council dictated.

"But we *can* prepare the armies for him," Baltar pointed out.

"I love this," Rushtu grinned. "Battle!"

"I hope it won't come to that," Ambrosius moaned. "There has been too much bloodshed already."

"And there will be more, undoubtedly," Burhan warned. "Eli is crazy. My King saw him and spoke with him."

"The high council is as fickle as well," Baltar said in disgust. "They'll go along with him as long as no one stronger comes along."

"Let's hope the King and the Seer will return soon..." Lormar began when the doors suddenly flew open to reveal Creon Kaya. The wedding and honeymoon over, he was once more dressed in brown. The long, dark hair and carefully groomed beard gave him the look of something above a human as he walked into the room, a grim, determined look on his face.

"I only just heard," he said, nodding to the other men.

"Then you know it all?" Burhan queried.

"Yes, I had a vision." He fixed each one with his eyes for a long moment. "We must act *now*. Prepare the armies, but in secret. Perhaps a force from the east and one from the west would be best. Aspen has already sent word to Arslan for me. The King should be returning soon and all must be ready when he arrives." The Council members nodded at that.

"Thank you, Lord Seer," Lormar said for all of them. "You have just simplified our work."

"The Creator knew that you would need help," Kaya answered with a half-smile and left. The plan was quickly drawn up: the Northern Provinces, the Flatlands, and the Pwyllwood would raise most of the soldiers, along with some small contingents from the Nations farther west. The most important thing was to close off the sea routes to and from Tashyer and Demis was put in charge of that until the King reversed the order. Then the Council was dismissed, leaving only the Werebeast and the architect behind, who still had trouble walking.

"This is terrible," Baltar sighed, leaning heavily on his cane. "It's worse than my dream."

"Your dream?" Burhan asked, ears perking up. The other nodded his blond head.

"Yes, I saw the whole of the castle on fire. It was short, but I woke in a sweat and woke Sarina, too. It took me hours to get back to sleep. I have this premonition..."

"So do I, friend. So do I."

The month in the northern mountains of the Western Nation was pure bliss for the royal couple, closed away from all others in a small valley. There were no servants and they lived off the land around them, simply.

"This is the kind of life I love," Savash admitted as they finished dinner on the small patio outside the hut. "No trouble from the outside. Just you and me and the world around us." Lilya smiled, brushed one hand against her black hair, and stared out into the gathering darkness. The top of the mountains seemed to burn in the sunset. The glimmering made her think of her own heart that now glowed in the love and acceptance of her husband.

"I wish we could just stay here," she sighed. "Except..." She grew silent, her eyes suddenly taking on a slightly fearful look.

"What?" he asked playfully, taking her hand.

"Oh, even so I think I would like more people around," she glanced at him. "Don't get me wrong, but sometimes I'm scared of this place."

"City girl," he said with a laugh. "Don't worry, I'll protect you..." His voice trailed off and he rose, staring to the south. Lilya looked up at him.

"What is it?"

"Horses' hooves," he returned, blue eyes now fixed on something in the distance. Now she could hear the thudding as well. It was only one horse.

"Something must have happened," the King mumbled as the animal and its rider came into view. It was one of Savash's personal servants.

"Evryn!" he cried. The man reigned his horse to a halt, leaped off and bowed.

"My lord," he gasped. "I am sorry to disturb you, but it is a matter of great importance." He held out a white capsula like the ones the Council used. Savash took it and opened it. As he read his face grew very grim.

"What is it?" Lilya asked.

"Eli of Stein has declared himself emperor and seceded from the Nations," he growled and then slammed his fist into the table in frustration. "The enemy always seems to want to attack when we are at peace and unsuspecting."

"What will we do?" his wife demanded.

"Well, first we'll get Evryn something to eat and then we will get ready to return to Shion. They will need me." He shook his head as he turned towards the hut to get some food for his servant. "There are times when I wish I wasn't King."

The hot summer wind of Tashyer blew around the King as he stood some way off from the great city of Stein, reflecting on the weeks past. He remembered the hurried return to Shion and the briefing he'd received from the Elders. Creon Kaya was there as well, but remained silent the whole time. Savash remembered the quick conversation he'd had with the Seer afterward.

"Perhaps we should just let them go their own way for a while," the King had mused. "After all they haven't threatened us."

"That's true," Kaya answered, his gray eyes inscrutable, "but the problem is not only that they are setting themselves apart from us, they are also building a large army. Some of those who escaped mentioned that at Eli's coronation, he swore he would 'get back' the rest of the Nations. I know that we *must* strike first if we want to win the war. We already have troops on the way. You will have to lead them."

"And that is exactly what I don't want to do," the King cried. "I thought I was to establish peace."

"And that you are." Kaya jabbed one finger at him. "But sometimes force must be used to do so. A loving father will spank his child if it does something wrong, but not because he hates it, but because he loves it and wants peace in his home." Savash sighed.

"I guess we'll have to fight." He placed one hand on his friend's shoulder. "Will you be coming?"

"Yes, both Aspen and I."

"But the battlefield is no place for a woman," the King protested.

"She fought in the battle with the Warrior King," the Seer reminded him gently. "And she helps me to understand what is going on around me. Since we are married, she asked me if she could come along." He smiled to himself. "She would have come anyway, even if I'd told her not to."

The Seer had his way and his tent stood farther back in the encampment with his wife. There were women among the soldiers and also the ever-present prostitutes that not even the best of kings could keep out of his ranks. Savash sighed at that thought. Even though his men were loyal to the death, many were not true believers in the Creator and so did not adhere to his moral standards. Yet this time the King felt that somehow the men did not make quite as much use of these freedoms as they once has. Perhaps it was the King's example, along with that of his officers and the Seer. *Strange, he thought, how a few men can influence many others, be it for good or bad.*

The army easily made its way into Tashyer and the citizens either fled or immediately joined them. Arslan and his warriors forced themselves into the barren lands with a large army. They were the only ones who had seen real action in this war of power, having to clear some of the obstinate Werebeasts out of the way who had joined Eli and his men. So far they were the only real prisoners of war in this campaign.

While the armies of the Nations had not moved very quickly, the emporer, in his lack of foresight, had not secured his outer water source from the troops. And while they had planned far enough ahead to stockpile food and step up production in the gardens, the mood of the council was still black as they hunkered around the large marble table in the castle.

"So, what are we to do?" one of the councilors muttered toward where the emperor was standing, glaring at the tapestries. Eli spun around, pounded one fist on the table.

"*You are supposed to tell me that, fool!*" he roared.

"Perhaps we should surrender," another man ventured.

"*No!*" It sounded a bit like a spoiled child crying at his parents. "No," the emperor reaffirmed in a deeper voice. "We have come this far, we will not back down."

"But – but the people love him," one of the older men whined. "Perhaps you can get some liberties for us." He rubbed his hands helplessly. "Have him make Tashyer a free state within a Federation, just like the Death March is..."

"That's enough!" his ruler thundered. "I will have no more talk about *surrender*. No emperor surrenders. He conquers and he *wins*. I will win over Savash, son of Elam." He struck his chest. "I will be supreme ruler of the Nations, but for that we must be fearless and never ever think of going back, is that clear?" He waved one finger in the face of the man who had last voiced the thought. "If I hear you – or any one else even *consider* a surrender to that usurper, then I personally will remove your head, is that clear?" With that he glared at them all and swept out of the room.

"I believe the power is getting to his head," one of the councilors whispered to another.

"Perhaps he should be removed before we all die," the other one muttered back.



## Conflagration

The scouts returned from the city and presented a very bleak outlook to the young King and his officers. The people in Stein had enough food to last them more than a lifetime and everyone knew that the water in the city well was more than enough for its residents. Kaya sat in the corner, numb after hearing those words. He had felt so sure that they would take the city in a snap when he'd advised the King to attack. Why all this delay now? *What is going on, Lord?* he prayed silently. *What is to happen?*

"Very well," Savash finally broke the heavy silence, "we will advance against the city. It was taken more than once and the walls are not nearly as strong as they once were..."

"It will cost many men," Arslan warned.

"I know that, but I'm afraid we have no other choice." Savash sighed sadly, making Kaya's heart ache. "The only way to achieve peace is to win Stein, be it that we must raze her to the ground."

"My God, no!" Baltar cried, thinking of the priceless treasures in his house and in the castle. "The castle and the library, there is no equal to them, except at the Rock of Ages."

"He is right," Kaya finally cut in. "The city must not be destroyed – for the generations to come. We'll need the knowledge."

"Yes, but we *must* fight," the King returned, his right hand tightening to a fist and blue eyes flashing. "There is no other way. However..." He paused for a long moment. "I will do *everything* in my power to protect those priceless pieces of history from being destroyed." The men nodded in relief.

"Then let's get ready for battle," he said with a sad voice. "Horace?" One of the officers picked up a map of the city and the vicinity.

"Sire, the city used to be impregnable," he began, "until your father broke down the walls by sheer force of will."

"Or magic," Burne said with a laugh. Savash glared at him and he fell silent.

"Then when Lormar broke into the city, here, here and here," his finger jabbed the map in the three locations, "he left the defenses even more crippled..."

Kaya sighed and got up. He left the tent silently, letting Horace's voice fade behind him. He still wore the sword Justin on his back, even though he knew he'd never draw it to fight again.

"Here I am again, Lord," he whispered as he walked towards his tent. "Here I am on the verge of war and I'm afraid." Few would have noticed anything was wrong, except for the heavy silence that rested on and around him. He thought back over the past years, the beginning of the voyage, when he was just a teenage boy in that hidden valley in the middle of the Flatlands, when he had been called out of a monotonous life to be perhaps the most central figure in world history. It was a surprise, too great to understand, and the voyage had not only had given him a wisdom and understanding greater than that of a mortal man his age, but also a lovely wife and a relationship with the supreme Creator of the universe that few men had known, no matter what Race they were from. The Woodfolk certainly had tales of such great men, but it seemed that none of them would ever come close to the mighty figure of Creon Kaya. That would be enough to make any man proud, but for Kaya it only made him more conscious of his inadequacies. He knew that he had little experience, his twenty-one years hardly enough to compare with those of any of the great men. Savash himself must be several years older, but he trusted Kaya like one would a father. Perhaps it would be good to go into seclusion for some years, to take time to come to grips with himself...

No, that would be dangerous to the monarch who was just barely on his throne and weak. He needed someone outside the Council who could help him with the heavy decisions he must make. At least now...

He had finally reached the tent and stepped into it to find Aspen there, slightly winded. She laughed as he closed her into his arms.

"Where have you been?" he asked.

"I've been riding around the camp. I needed to get out some." Her smile and green eyes shone, making the tent seem so much brighter than before. But the shine subsided as she began to notice the worry etched on his brow.

"What is it, luv?" she asked quietly, drawing him towards a chair. He sat down in it heavily. She pulled up another one across from him.

"Savash has decided he will attack the city."

"When?"

"Tomorrow."

"Then why aren't you planning with him, dear?" she demanded. He looked down at his broad hands and folded them, pressing his fingers together so hard that the tips turned white.

"Because I'm not to fight any more, Aspen." He looked up. "I feel so inept and inadequate, like I'm too young to help here at all. My real time of action has come to a lull. I stood against the Warrior King and now I feel that I need some time of rest before..."

"Before what?" He shrugged.

"I don't know, whatever the Creator has for me." She reached out and took his hands in her own.

"Are you planning to leave here?" she asked.

"No, I'll stay until the end of the campaign, but then we must go. I'm certain we need more rest than our short time alone granted. Perhaps time to build a family and to grow up."

"We're already grown up, silly," she said with a laugh.

"I certainly don't feel that way," he admitted.

"Perhaps you aren't trusting the Creator enough." She reached up and stroked his bearded cheek. "He's helped you this far."

"Yes, maybe you're right," he answered. "But let's pray about what will happen next. I'm certain that he's got something in store, I just don't know what."

Dawn just began to throw her gray cloak over the black of night when a loud booming woke the entire city. The soldiers rushed from their barracks at the barks of their commanders. Within moments the walls bristled with the crimson-clad soldiers of the empire of Tashyer. Panic erupted on the walls as they stared into the mist, trying to pinpoint the soldiers. Savash had wisely clothed his men in earthen colors, using huge stone blocks as battering rams against the two principal gates of the city. Panic swept the city, especially among the fickle members of the council, who were just aching to let their flags blow in Savash's wind and have this whole thing be over.

"Perhaps we should..." one of the tousled members began to mutter and then suddenly reached for his gaping throat. Eli's dagger was faster than his words had ever been. The blood ran down the front of the councilor's gaudy gown and he slowly sank down into his seat, speechless, lifeless.

"Anyone else want to *surrender*?" the emperor sneered, his face a mask of hate. The men shook their heads, their fear written all over their faces.

"Good," Eli snapped and clapped his hands. Instantly two gold and crimson clad guards stepped into the room. He gestured towards the dead man.

"Get him out of here and throw him over the gate, nearest where that fool Savash is," the ruler ordered coldly. "Keep these dolts in here until further notice. No food. Only water."

"But, your worship," one of the younger ones whimpered.

"Silence, dog," Eli sneered, leaning into his face. "Do you want to die, *too*?" He leaned back with a smirk on his face as the other one cowered into his seat. "I didn't think so." And with that he swept out of the room, leaving the grim sentries to seal it off.

The citizens of Stein finally rallied their forces enough to get the water and pitch boiling to use as a defense against the gates. Savash stood there in the thick of the fray, right at the gate, using his shield to cover his men, cheering them on. The arrows bounced off him uselessly. He was the only one with his head bare, his golden

hair shining brighter than the dull iron caps. Somehow it impressed the men on the wall. Down there the King was in the thick of the fray, leading his troops, not far off, giving orders. And where was that fool of an emperor, anyway?

Savash glanced up at the men on the wall and shouted something to them. It was lost in the thunder of the great ram, but the defenders knew that it was a summons to surrender peaceably. There was a pause in the thorny hail of arrows as the men looked at each other, thinking. Should they open the gates?

"Get on with it, will you?" came the shrill, angry voice of Eli right behind the archers. He leaned down and leered at the attackers, then motioned over his shoulder. In an instant the dead body of the councilor flew over the ramparts and landed right in front of Savash's feet. The ram halted instantly and the King's eyes locked on those of his counterpart. Rage twisted his face and he roared something that couldn't be heard over the din. Then he made a signal. Two men rushed forward to retrieve the dead body, only to be felled by sharp-shooters. The King leaned down and picked up the dead man himself, surprising his opponents so much, they forgot to shoot. He said something over his shoulder to the leader at the ram and the block of stone swung into action once more. Savash walked away and no one dared to assault him, no matter what their emperor screamed.

"He is more of a man than you are, if I say so," one of the archers yelled back and then went flying over the ramparts, right onto the great stone, where he slid off as it rushed forward to strike the huge gates again.

"The pitch, the water!" Eli screamed. In moments it came raining down on the men, killing the foremost, scarring the others. The huge stone block plummeted on top of the fallen, slaying even more. The men who rushed up to help their comrades were felled by the arrows of the men on the walls. The cries made Savash turn around and stare. Instantly he knew that this gate was lost for the time being.

"Retreat!" he cried and the living men slowly moved back, sending back arrows of their own.

"Defeated," the King muttered, staring glumly at the city through his tent doorway. Kaya stood quietly, leaning against the center post.

"Only in this battle," he returned. Savash just shook his head and stared at the city.

"He has no regard for the lives of his people, Kaya! Did you see that he just threw that dead man over the wall. Baltar said it was one of the councilors and then that one Bowman. He is going crazy."

"Yes, and he knows that you love your people." The Seer's voice was grim and brittle at the same time. "He used the care you have for each other to slay even more." The blond man nodded. Suddenly a smallish shadow appeared in the doorway and entered the tent.

"Hello, Arslan," the dark man greeted the King of the Werebeasts. "How was the eastern attack?" The Werebeast just shook his tawny head.

"It was no better than yours, even though we just marched over the dead and continued ramming at the gate." There was pain etched in the golden eyes as he turned towards the entrance and looked at the city. "He killed some of my best men. Baltar was right in calling the place evil."

"It is only the people that make a place evil, friend," came a gentle voice from inside the tent. An old man stood and stretched.

"Lormar, when did you get here?" Savash demanded, turning around.

"Oh, about the time when they started raining the pitch on you." He pressed a hand to his side, as if in pain, and then wagged a finger in the King's face. "I thought I'd taught you better about how to lay a siege."

"It was well planned," the King answered.

"Yes, but you missed on crucial factor: the power of an insane leader." The blond man nodded and looked at the walls again.

"Tomorrow I will get a preliminary cease-fire to gather up the dead and dispose of them properly."

He stood on the wall of the city, looking over it. The sun rising in the east colored it as if burning. Small clouds seemed to erupt from the windows of the citadel. He looked down and saw people running in panic. *What is going on?* he wondered and walked along the wall. Then he realized: the castle was on fire. He rushed

forward and suddenly was standing on the walls, staring into the window. There the emperor of Tashyer was flinging a torch from side-to-side, igniting the precious tapestries, destroying the castle...

Kaya sat up and stared at the dark canvas wall. He pressed one hand to his chest to calm his heartbeat. It was only a dream, only a dream. Aspen stirred a bit and snuggled up to him as he lay back down, pulling the covers up against the chill desert night air. He stared at the ceiling, shivering as sleep overtook him again.

Suddenly he was rushing forward, Justin in his hand. The great gates loomed before him, empty, except for a few guards and the emperor, watching as men lifted something and carried it away. He slid to a stop and slammed Justin into the ground. The impact shook the gates and they caved in. In the same instant the army surged forward with him at the front. They flew up the street towards the burning citadel. Now he was racing up the stairs, afraid of what he would find. Two great doors in front of him, wide open, the flames issuing from them like the tongue of a great beast. He could hear maniacal laughter from within and in an instant a burning body came flying at him and fell down, still shaking with an unearthly mirth. It rolled over and he found himself staring into the blazing face of Eli.

"I have won, Seer," he laughed. "I have won!"

Kaya's eyes snapped open and he leaped out of the bed.

"No, I must warn them!" he cried.

"Warn them of what?" came a sleepy voice from the cot. Aspen pushed herself up on one elbow and brushed her hair back.

"Eli, he'll burn the castle." He dressed, telling her of his dreams, then sat down on the low bed. "I'm afraid we won't be able to save him or the castle," he whispered.

"Don't worry, dear," she whispered back. "I know you can." Then she kissed him gently. "Now hurry up, so that we can get this business over with." There was a playful look in her emerald eyes. He nodded, grabbed his cloak, and quickly left the tent.

Savash and his men were up early, walking towards the gate, carrying a white flag. The sentries on the wall instantly recognized the calm man in the black-and-leather with the blue cloak around his shoulders as the King.

"What do you want?" the sergeant demanded, leaning over the battlements.

"We wish a cease-fire for a day to remove our dead and give them a proper burial," Savash explained.

"You'll have to wait until we can ask his worship," the sergeant snapped back. "We will inform you. Now be off before my men decide to add to the number of *your* dead." The King turned in a dignified manner and strode back to the camp.

By mid-morning word came that "his worship has graciously granted your request; however, none of your men may carry a weapon or we shall shoot." The men made themselves ready and slowly began to remove the bodies from the gate. There were several of the enemy's men as well, left there to rot. Savash had them all taken to a cave some ways away.

"I'm afraid that we will be having to put more people in there," he told Baltar, who was helping oversee the work. They were half-way finished when the emperor of Stein regally strode out on the ramparts, as if along the balustrade of a palace. He languidly glanced over the rim and began making snide remarks about the men hauling away the bodies. Suddenly he noticed something sparkle in the early afternoon sunlight. He leaned forward and looked harder and recognized a silver sword hilt on the shoulder of the only man dressed in brown.

"Take him out," he said to an archer. In the same moment the Man in brown straightened and walked towards the gate. He stopped just below the emperor.

"Hold your fire," he thundered with an authority that Eli could not place.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

The man in brown drew back the cowl of his cloak and looked up. His face was bearded and impenetrable. His dark hair reached to his shoulders. Recognition stirred in the demented emperor's mind, memories of a man such as this before he'd been given power... But the name would not come.

"I am Creon Kaya, called the Seer," the man in brown returned. "I have a message for you, Eli of Stein." He reached back to draw his sword. The man on the ramparts stepped back and wanted to scream for help, but couldn't get his lips to move. The silver blade slid from its sheath and sparkled in the sunlight. At the same moment Savash noticed what his friend was doing.

"Kaya, no!" he cried. The blade hovered in the air for a moment and then came down into the ground between the Seer's feet.

"This is what the Creator, King of all kings says," the Seer roared in a voice much larger than his own. "This sword is a witness between you and me, Eli of Stein. Surrender to the King of the Seven Nations – to my chosen one – before the sun sets. If you do not, you shall be consumed. Your end will not be quick, nor honored." So speaks the Lord, the Creator of all." With that Kaya released his hands from Justin's hilt, turned and walked back to help carry the bodies away. On the wall, Eli shook, his face alternately pale, then flushed.

"Don't just stand there," he screamed at his attendants, "do something!"

"Your worship, we have a cease-fire agreement until sundown," one of his generals ventured. "It is an ill omen to kill a man during such a time."

"Shut up and do as I say!" A small line of spittle was forming at the side of the emperor's mouth. One of the sharp-shooters picked up his bow and strung an arrow. Savash saw it first.

"Kaya!" Everything seemed to happen in slow motion from there. The arrow released as the King rushed towards his friend. The Seer just turned enough to see the sharp point coming for him. He shifted his weight and the bright tip sank deep into his left shoulder, making him collapse. Several Men and Werebeasts dropped what they were doing and rushed over to him.

"Kaya!" Savash cried, kneeling beside him. The Seer sat up, gritting his teeth.

"It's all right. He only got my arm." He looked over his shoulder sadly to where the emperor stood. "He will fall, Savash, he will fall."

"We must be ready for an all-out assault tomorrow," Savash told Lormar that evening. "That maniac nearly killed Kaya. He has not answered the call to surrender. The Creator has decreed his end."

"But not by your sword," Kaya interjected, shifted his arm slightly in its sling and grimaced. Though Aspen had healed the wound, it was still rather sore and needed rest.

"The Lord has decreed he will die in the fire," the Seer continued. "We'll need to put them out as quickly as we can."

"You mean, *Eli* will set the fire?" Baltar said with a gasp. The Seer nodded.

"We'll have little time." He turned to the general. "Lormar, where did you first breach the wall last time?" The old man looked thoughtful for a moment and then gestured at the map.

"Right about here, to the south, at noon, when everyone was too tired to stand any more. We have enough men to use the same tactic." Then he smiled. "We even have Werebeasts with us." Arslan nodded.

"Yes, we have more endurance than Man does, but we couldn't do it alone."

"True," Savash answered, "all parties must be involved. Once in the city, we must reach the castle first and rescue what we can."

The sun had hardly risen when the banging at the eastern gate began again. The entire army rushed around there, leaving the other three sides only sparsely armed. They did not notice as many Werebeasts and Men began setting up at the south wall.

The thundering continued all morning. In the castle, Eli rushed about in his chambers, back and forth. The boys and women brought for his enjoyment cringed in the corners as their maddened emperor continued to pace.

"Stop that noise!" he screamed, pressing his hands to his ears. "Stop it!" He rushed over to one of the guards.

"Go tell them to stop it," he ordered, his voice shrill.

"Yes, your worship," the soldier answered and left the room.

"I can't stand it," the crazed monarch screamed and rushed from his chambers, up the stairs and into council chambers where the councilors were being kept for the third day now.

"I believe the end is upon us," he heard one of the men say as he had the door opened.

"So, you believe it is over, do you?" the Lord of Stein demanded. His eyes bulged out of his head in his madness and his hair was in disarray. His robe was spattered from the previous night's orgy and he was now drooling openly. He wiped at his mouth and leaned in to the man who had spoken.

"You think they are going to free you, don't you," he said with a grin. "Well, they won't." He leaned back and gestured towards all of them. "Not one of you will be freed. You helped me up here, you're all going *down* with me!" He laughed, sounding much like a bird choking on something. He went over to one of the soldiers and drew his sword from his side.

"Thank you, pretty boy," the emperor snickered, patted the guard's cheek, and walked back to the council. "No one will escape and they won't get my castle." He put the sword up and touched his chin lightly with the flat. "Now, who will go first." He grinned and walked around the men, leering at them.

"Perhaps you, old man," he whispered to one and then he looked at one of the younger ones. "No, I think you, after I've had you." He laughed at his perverse joke and then looked at the blade in his hand. "Yes, old man, you'll go first!" The sword snaked out and cleaved the old man's skull. In an instant the room was in a disarray, the councilors trying to get away from the maniac that their emperor had become. It was over in a matter of minutes, the last one being cut down from above the fire-place where he'd hidden. Then Eli sat down on the table and stared at the carnage. The two guards hadn't escaped his madness either. He rocked back and forth, the bloody sword on his lap and began to snicker. Slowly it turned into a roaring, maddened laughter.

The second assault on the brittle south wall came precisely at noon with Lormar himself at the head of the armies. He launched two wooden towers at the wall for the men to get over and then they swung the second battering ram at the wall. It only took two heavy hits against the stones for it to cave in. Eli hadn't thought to have that breach reinforced again. Within moments the army swarmed into the city.

"Your worship?" The messenger stared into the bloody room where the emperor was sitting, still rocking the sword in his lap.

"What?" He turned his crazed eyes on the young man in the doorway.

"The wall has been breached. The city has fallen, your worship."

"Good, then die!" Eli screamed and hurled the sword at the man. It felled the soldier and the madman leaped off the table. He rushed to the wall and grabbed a torch.

"It's time for the fire dance!" he cried, tore his robe off and set fire to the tapestries. He whirled around in the flames, laughed like a delighted child and rushed to the next room.

The soldiers were surging into the city and had opened all of the gates to the outside. Savash pushed his way through the masses, Kaya and Baltar at his side.

"Hurry, to the castle. We must stop that maniac," the King cried. Horace leaped to the front and shouted at the soldiers.

"Make way for the King!" A pathway opened among the men and they rushed towards the citadel.

"You there," Savash said, stopping and pointing at a young officer to his right. "What's your name?"

"Tomek," he answered.

"Officer Tomek, form a fire brigade and meet me at the castle. We will need the water." With that they hurried on. They could already see smoke rising from the windows and hear the screams of the people.

"We're too late," Savash moaned.

"No we're not," Kaya encouraged him. "Let's hurry." They rushed up to the gates and pushed their way through and into the citadel.

"Do you think we can find him?" the King panted.

"The council chambers," Baltar puffed back, leaning heavily on his cane. "We'll make it." He quickly led them up the stairs and towards the intense inferno three floors above.

Eli danced in and out of the rooms, naked, oblivious to the fact that his hair had already been singed off and that his skin was blistered. In his madness he paused for a moment before the awful din of the council chambers.

"Eli!" he heard a powerful voice from behind him. He turned to see Baltar limping his way up the stairs, the Seer and the King behind him.

"Goodbye, Baltar, this is your grave!" he screamed and leaped into the flames.

"Quick, the doors!" Savash cried.

"No, here," the architect panted and slammed his fist into a marble plate in a pillar. In an instant a wall descended in front of the chambers, locking the fire in.

"The walls are of solid stone," Baltar explained. "It won't spread from there. The other rooms are another matter. We must hurry."

It took them two-and-a-half days to put out the thundering flames of the inferno and many beautiful works of art were destroyed, including the wonderful chambers that had once been the prize room. Aspen sadly walked among the smoking remains with Kaya.

"Too bad," she sighed. "The memories of these rooms aren't nice, but I would have liked to share them with you." He smiled sadly.

"Yes, perhaps. There will be much to repair." He straightened. "Tonight I will speak with Savash about our departure."

"Are you sure it's wise, dear?" she asked again. Part of her agreed, but part of her wanted to stay with her new-found friends. His visions of traveling for a time were not sitting well with her – especially since she was now wanting to settle down and have a family.

"Yes, the more I think about it, the more I know that it is important," her husband sighed. "The Light Within will prompt me when the time comes for me to aid him once more, but for now," he turned and took both her hands in his, "you and I will belong to each other and to the simple people. They need someone to help them understand about Yeshua." She smiled and nodded.

"So you are going," Savash said in a sad voice. "Just when I need you." Kaya shook his head.

"No, friend, you don't need me now," he returned. "You needed me to stand by you in this crisis and I did. Now the Nations need me. I have to tell them about Yeshua and I need to get out and live away from cities again." He smiled, more to himself and brushed one hand against his beard. "It's time that this country boy went home." The King smiled at that as well.

"Very well, Creon Kaya, I won't hold you – not that I could anyway. The Creator go with you."

"He will. And he'll be with you for as long as you live." The King nodded and the two men embraced before the Seer left the King's tent.

"I will miss you, dear friend," the blond man said quietly as he watched his friend vanish into the night.

*In the following years very little was heard about the Seer and his wife. It was known that they spent a long time in Liflan. Then they traveled the Nations. The Woodfolk tell of the Seer's return to the Island in the bay, where he was finally reconciled to his mother-in-law. There were reports of his being in the Flatlands and among the other Nations. [...]*

*The years passed and Savash came to be an able ruler. The Rebuilding progressed slowly but surely with some minor insurrections that had to be put down. [...] In the course of time three children were born to the King, his eldest was called Barish, peace. The second was a daughter and the third again a son.*

– From *A Concise History of the Rebuilding and Second Golden Age*  
by Gaspard of Kayail



## The End of an Era

M<sup>a</sup>ster Winter had spread his cold cloak over the soft hills of Greenwood, turning the verdance to a brilliant white. The soft hills were rolled in their pale cloaks, hiding the many hollows and dips. The road was fairly clear though, as there had been no snow-fall for several days and the sun smiled down upon the traveler and his son as they walked through the newly-opened gates. *It has been so long*, the Man in brown thought, looking up at the great walls.

"Dad, is this really Shion?" the boy asked, staring around. He was perhaps seven years of age with bright green eyes and dark hair that shone with a reddish tint. He had the pointed ears and nearly invisible eyebrows of the Woodfolk, but the determined, squarish jaw of his father.

"Yes, Ethan, this is Shion," the Man answered. "This is where the King lives." The two of them slowly walked through the gates and up the broad avenue. People were already coming out of their homes and horses slowly moved by. Quite a few of the citizens ventured out into the cold. The light and fair skies promised a beautiful day and besides, it was market day. There would be quite a bustle by mid-morning. The Man and his son walked along the street, the child gawking at all that was around him, while his father remembered the empty streets and abandoned houses he'd seen when he'd first walked the streets of this city about ten years ago.

In those years the Rebuilding had progressed. Savash had done some renovations in the city and was busily adding his own buildings. The palace was to the east of the Rock of Ages, a magnificent structure that had just been completed. The second great project, a huge complex to house the Council, was still under construction, though work was paused over the winter. The city had outgrown its walls and new ones were being built, more for show than for battle, since the whole of the Nations now enjoyed peace.

But something sad had brought this man back to the great city. An era was about to end and he knew that he needed to be there once more.

Somewhere a bit farther away, another couple walked through the snowy streets. They were followed by two men wearing dark cloaks, far enough behind to see the couple, but not close enough to look suspicious. Lilya smiled to herself as she held her daughter's hand, looking at the huge construction site that would be the marvelous Council halls. She'd seen the magnificent model that stood in Savash's study. He dreamed of leaving the Nations a legacy that would endure time. Perhaps he would succeed...

"Mom." The little girl's plaintive voice brought her back to the present.

"What is it, dear?" she asked.

"I'm hungry." The Queen smiled.

"Then we'll get you something to eat." She pointed to a man setting up a stand a short ways away. "Look, there's some bread."

"Goody!" the girl said with a smile and the two of them went off towards the vendor. It was not unusual for the Queen to walk the streets with her children. She loved the smells and the sights which made her feel like a little girl again. Most people didn't even realize that the splendid lady that rode in the coach was this same woman who seemed to be someone from the middle class – perhaps a merchant's wife. There were a few who knew, but they kept silent out of loyalty to their monarch.

They had just reached the stand at the same time as a tall Man and a boy. Lilya just glanced at him for a moment before greeting the salesman.

"And a good morning to you, lady," he said with a smile. "And to you, sir." He nodded to the big man.

"I would like something fresh for my daughter," the Queen told him. The man nodded and pulled out a good-sized loaf of sweet bread. Lilya reached for her purse under her cloak.

"No, m'lady," the big Man interjected with a smile, "let me pay for it." He turned to the vendor. "One more like it please."

"That's four coppers for the lot," the baker announced with a smile, passing another steaming loaf to the boy.

"No, I really must protest, sir," Lilya said, finally pulling her purse free. The man shook his head.

"It's been a long while since I've treated you, Lilya," he objected with a broad smile. "Let me do it once more."

"Who are you?" she asked, her eyes narrowing.

"Can't you guess?" Strangely the bearded face and gentle gray eyes looked familiar, but they seemed so much more mature than she remembered them. His dark hair fell to his shoulders. He just inclined his head a bit. Then she realized.

"It can't be!" she gasped. "Creon Kaya?"

"The same." She quickly hugged him, dark eyes dancing with delight, then noticed her bodyguards approaching, wary. She shooed them away with the wave of her hand and turned back to her old friend.

"You've been away so long!" she said with a laugh.

"Well, we only just returned to Greenwood a few months ago. But wait, I've got to pay." He turned and passed a silver coin to the man at the stand and then took his son's hand again.

"This is my son Ethan," he introduced the boy and then turned to him. "This is Lilya."

"You mean the Queen?" Ethan asked, eyes wide.

"Well, yes..." Lilya's face turned a bright crimson. "We'd better be off before the crowds gather." The Seer nodded and they walked back up towards the castle. Kaya looked towards where the little girl was munching on her bread. *She must be about Ethan's age*, he thought.

"And what's your name?" he asked her.

"Clarisse." It was pushed out of a full mouth, rather unladylike. He glanced at her mother.

"Savash's choice. She reminded him of his half-sister when she was a child. It fits nicely." Kaya nodded.

"So what brought you back?" she prompted.

"Well, it was time," he answered simply. "We've been here in Greenwood since early fall, have built a house in the village and are living quite happily. Aspen wanted to stay home with Nathan, our younger boy. She watches after him especially closely since she lost two children."

"That was hard on her," the Queen sighed.

"Yes, Nathan was a godsend. His name means 'he gave.' It also reminds me of a very dear friend in another world." The man stared at the horizon. "I wonder how he's doing, if he believed." He shrugged. "Well, some day I'll find out, when I can ask Yeshua."

"So how old is he?" the Queen wanted to know.

"Two. He was born shortly before my father died. I've never seen Dad so happy, as when he held little Nathan for the first time." Kaya smiled at the thought. "He couldn't get around much since he'd fallen and broken his leg. You see, it never healed right. It was sad to see him go, but I'm glad we'll see each other again." Lilya gently laid one hand on his arm.

"I'm sorry about your father," she said. "I don't think I ever really got to know him. How was he?"

"He changed a lot." A tear crept into one eye. "A whole lot. It was the greatest miracle the Creator did in my family." That comment brought a pause to the conversation and Kaya just looked away towards the Rock of Ages, deep in thought.

Meanwhile Ethan was inquisitively peering around his father and the Queen to where the little girl was walking. Her hair was quite long and of a honey gold, now hidden under the cowl of her cloak. Though her blue eyes and fair hair reminded one of the King, her features were fully those of her mother. There were those who called her the Karyl of the city when she could be seen in full royal regalia. Clarisse blinked and looked back over to where he was and ventured a small smile.

Lilya finally brought herself under control again and changed the subject.

"You do know about Lormar?" she said in a subdued voice. Kaya sighed and nodded.

"Yes, that's part of why I'm here."

"Will he live on?" she asked timidly. The Seer stopped, looked at her gently and then took her hands.

"There comes a time when we all have to go, my Queen," he began in a quiet voice. "Lormar has had a very long and very fruitful life. Don't begrudge him his fortune of finally leaving this world behind and going to be with the Creator."

"So he won't live," she returned with a slight sniffle. The Man shook his head, face and eyes filled with an infinite sadness.

"Come on, let's go," she said, pulled her hands away from Kaya and took her daughter's hand to continue on to the castle.

Savash stood in his study, leaning on the heavy stone table that bore the model of the Council chambers. They were vast, designed by Baltar, with enough room to house all twelve of the Elders and their families in large, sunny apartments. They held a courtroom of Lormar's design – a giant circular room with a high, round stage for the twelve elders to be seated at a semi-circular marble table. Behind them was a small dais with the King's throne. The two accesses were either by an elevated walkway or by a small staircase next to it. There were many benches for the people to attend the court hearings. There were also the Council chambers, patterned similarly to the courtroom, only the table was perfectly round and the room was a good deal smaller. The eldest sat facing the door, with the King on a low dais behind him. Both were at opposite ends of the great complex, with a vast hallway connecting each other. Two long hallways branched out from each of the circular rooms to the two parallel buildings, one that housed the Elders and the other that held their offices. One of the giant courtyards would be the People's Park, a place of enjoyment, with amazing fountains and plants from all over the Nations. The other courtyard would be used for important political events that were not important enough to be held at the Rock of Ages.

But the King's thoughts were not on his great building. He was wondering how he could help his mentor and dearest friend. Lormar was merely weak, not sick, he told himself. After all, he was very old, having seen nearly three hundred winters.

"It is a blessing and a curse at the same time," the general had told him shortly before he'd become bedridden. The craggy face split into a smile, as he leaned heavily on Savash's arm while they walked down the steps to the entrance of the palace.

"I have tried old age and don't recommend it." The King had to smile at that remark. It would have been more humorous if the old Man hadn't fallen ill shortly after.

"If only Kaya were here," the blond Man muttered and stood up straight, slowly walking to a window and looking out on the waking city. "He would be able to heal Lormar."

Kaya and Lilya passed through the gates to the palace and the Seer stopped in awe of the building of gold marble. It was shaped like a cube, as high as it was wide as it was long. The front gates were open at all times, showing the King's constant availability to his people. There were many windows and the bottom floor was a columned walk with several doors into the building that were now shut. They walked through one of these side doors and into a large hall. A guard bowed to the Queen as she threw back her hood and took her cloak off, revealing a white dress held at the waist by a gold belt. The guard took the cloak as Lilya clapped her hands. In a moment a woman appeared, dressed in a light blue.

"Tima, take Clarisse and Ethan to the nursery, please," the dark-haired woman said. The servant bowed and held her hands out the children. Ethan hesitated, glancing at his father.

"It's okay, son," the Seer encouraged him with a smile. "Go along with her." Clarisse had already taken her nanny's hand.

"C'mon, we can play together," she laughed. The boy smiled and went along with the blue lady and the princess.

"Come, Kaya," Lilya said, taking his arm and leading him through the long hallway to a small door that let them into the central courtyard. Here Kaya could see that only the first two floors went through all the way.

The third and fourth floor were arranged in stair-step fashion, the roof of the fourth slanting inward. The courtyard was a beautiful garden, now dormant beneath the cover of snow. They passed along the swept pathways, by a fountain frozen in crystalline drops of ice that now sparkled in the sun that barely peeked over the roof, and back into the building. They climbed the stairways to the top floor and then paused at large double doors. Lilya turned to Kaya.

"This is Savash's private study. He usually is alone here in the morning," she explained. "Perhaps we shouldn't..."

"Go ahead," the Seer urged her and she raised a hand to knock.

A knock on the double doors made the King turn his head as he gazed out the window to the east. He straightened and called, "Come." One door opened and he smiled as he saw Lilya enter. How lovely she looked in that white dress and golden belt. White had always been her favorite color. He opened his arms and drew her into a warm embrace.

"How are you, my dear?" she asked.

"Not too well," he conceded. She stepped away from him.

"We have a visitor," she said with a melancholy smile.

"Who?"

"You'll see." She turned to the door. "Come on in." A tall, figure in brown clothing stepped through the doorway. He hadn't even bothered to remove his cloak. The hair was long, dark, and rich, the face covered by a thick beard and the gray eyes twinkled with a sad joy. A smile spread across the King's face. This was the one man he'd hoped would return.

"Creon Kaya, my friend!" he cried and rushed across the room to embrace his friend.

"I missed you, Savash," the Seer answered.

"You could have returned any time," the King answered stepping back. Kaya took a moment to regard him. Small lines had already crept into his face, but there was also a firmness there that told of one who could make tough decisions and stand by them. This was accented by the golden moustache that reached down along the sides of his mouth to his chin. His blond hair was of a medium length and he wore his customary dark blue tunic and breeches, girded at the waist with a silver belt, with a jacket of maroon and black boots. Only the golden crown was missing, but royalty streamed forth from him even without the symbol of his office.

"It wasn't time yet," Kaya sighed.

"I understand, but it is so good to see you!" He clapped his friend on the shoulder. Lilya smiled and stole out of the study, closing the door.

"What have you been doing for so long?" the King asked, offering his friend a chair.

"Teaching the Nations, traveling, learning," the Seer answered, sitting down. Savash turned to pour two goblets of wine.

"I heard you returned to the Peak Called Joy some time ago." He passed one cup to the Seer. Kaya shook his head as his friend sat down.

"I was not called, but I did spend two years in Liflan, reflecting and resting." He bowed his head in the memories. "Praise the Creator, Savannah made peace with me and Aspen."

"Has she become a follower of Yeshua?" Savash inquired. The other shook his head.

"Not that we know of. It was the birth of Ethan, our older boy, that brought her around." He smiled. "Children often do that. She just couldn't stay away from her grandson."

"That means your boy must be about the age of my daughter," the King calculated.

"That's right. I met her with your wife this morning. She is a beauty."

"Just wait until she grows up," Savash countered and the men laughed. Then the King leaned forward.

"Why did you return now, Kaya?" he asked seriously. "Is it to heal Lormar?"

"No, Savash," the Seer said, meeting the blue eyes with his own. "Lormar's time has come. It is the end of an era. His leaving is the reason I returned."

"For good?" the King asked.

"Until the Creator prompts me to move on." The blond man leaned back and relaxed just slightly.

"That is a comfort." He folded his hands, index fingers extended and tapped his lips with them. "In case of Lormar's death I would have summoned you anyway and asked you to take his seat on the Council of Elders."

"I would take a place in the Council, Savash," Kaya answered. "But I would not lead it. Tharkey is next in line to be the head Elder. I am still too young."

"Ah, don't be too unhappy about your youth, Seer. You have wisdom beyond your age."

"Yes, but that doesn't mean that my elders won't take offense at my advice. They see the age of people as what gives wisdom, not the Creator." The King nodded and sipped from his drink.

"Perhaps you and I should go call on the general together," Savash suggested. "He is here at the palace so I can care for him." They rose and left the study, walking along the hallway and then descending to the floor below. Kaya was awed by the marvelous simplicity of the building and mentioned it to his friend.

"Yes, I believe that the Creator inspired it," he answered. "I saw it in a dream. It was much vaster there, many miles long, wide and high, all shining and sparkling. It would have been too expensive to build. This one already cost too much for my tastes." He smiled to himself. "Baltar designed it after I described my dream to him. I wanted two floors, three at the most with low ceilings, so that it would be simple."

"You are King," Baltar objected. "I will build you a palace fit for a King!" Savash laughed and Kaya with him.

"That sounds like our master architect," the Seer said. The blond man nodded.

"He split it up in four concourses. The entire bottom floor houses offices of some of the ministers. The west side with the gate holds my body-guard and the stables. I thought it insane to put the horses on the second floor of a building, but Baltar had such wonderful ideas about keeping the stalls clean with as little maintenance as possible. And it works!" They reached the end of the hall on the third floor and turned left into the south concourse. "He gave me and my family the three floors of the east side. The north side houses the great audience hall on the second floor and offices on the third. The fourth has servants' quarters. On the second floor of the south side and on this floor we house the guests. Up above there are more servants' quarters, as on the top floor of the west side. The kitchens are underground, underneath this wing. That way the servants can make their way around all of the palace without being seen, that is except by my study and the children's playrooms which lie on either side of it. It would make too much noise."

"You don't seem to mind being bothered by your children's noise," Kaya remarked. Savash laughed.

"My study is sound-proof, except for the front door. That way we also have access to each other at any time we wish." He then stopped in front of one of the many rooms and sighed heavily, his mind returning to what was at hand.

"This is where Lormar is staying. I know he's awake. He'd be up if he could..." He paused and then simply said, "Come on, I'll show you." He knocked on the door and opened it without waiting for a reply. The room was not large, with a low bed against the far wall, just beneath the window. The old man lay, propped up on pillows and swathed in white sheets. He turned from gazing out the window, his bright hazel eyes regarding the two men who entered.

"Good morning, Savash," he greeted the King in a quavering voice. "And Creon Kaya, I was not sure I would ever see you again!" The lined face broke into a broad smile as he weakly lifted one pallid hand. Kaya took it, unable to keep from smiling himself.

"I was certain of it, general," he answered, his voice just tinged with sadness. He sat down on the edge of the bed.

"So you have come to see me off on the long voyage?" Lormar asked quietly.

"In a way," the Seer said as Savash quietly drew up a chair.

"Much still lies ahead," the general continued, now shifting his gaze to the window. He coughed. "It will not be easy."

"You had a dream," Kaya returned. "Tell me about it." The bright, old eyes turned back to the Seer, the shine fading a bit.

"I saw the funeral of the King," he recounted quietly. "He was followed by his sons and daughter and your sons and their children. Then a short time after Barish was crowned I saw a man rise up – I couldn't make out his face..." His brow wrinkled even more in a frown. "He was dressed as an Elder. I saw him kill Barish and his brother. The princess escaped, as did you and your family, but only for a time. Then I saw your lovely wife die, a dagger in her heart. I saw your sons fall into the hands of that evil man, but then escape and finally you yourself were taken, old and full of years. Peace was gone, but in the darkness I suddenly saw a light, a young man on a horse, a flaming sword in his right hand. He spoke, 'The flame will be rekindled and the evil smitten!' With that he hurled the sword and there was light all around. Then I awoke." He gazed at the Seer. "What does it mean?"

"The future will be painful," Kaya answered. "There will be peace until the death of Savash, after that the Persecution will begin." He glanced at the King. "Your children are followers of Yeshua?" The golden man nodded, a smile lighting his face.

"Don't worry, old Man," the Seer encouraged. "Savash will not see those days. Sadly, I will."

"Then I will pray for you," the general said. "It is the most I can do now."

"That service is greater than any other," Kaya said gravely, a smile lighting his face. Lormar nodded and leaned back, blinking his eyes.

"Strange, I feel tired, and yet, the call..." He reached up with his free hand. "I'm coming!" Then he sank back against the pillows, his hand fell onto Kaya's arm and the sparkle left his eyes as he expelled his last breath. Savash bowed his head in grief as the Seer closed the old Man's eyes.

"Don't grieve, my friend," he said, putting one arm around Savash's shoulders. "He is much happier now." He smiled. "Can you hear the Karyl singing?" The King raised his misty eyes.

"Yes, I think I can!"

# Two: Persecution

## The Final Journey

**T**he years between the end of the Rebuilding, marked by the death of Lormar the Westron, General of the King's armies, and the death of the King himself were titled the second Golden Age. Peace and prosperity flourished and the worship of the true God, the Creator of all things was preached throughout the Nations. However, the Followers of the Messiah were few and hidden, for the Woodfolk talked against the teaching of him. The Seer himself made many enemies through his insistence upon the Truth, the Truth he had seen with his own eyes, touched with his hands and understood with his heart. Creator, we are few, how are we to live? [...]

In his reign of more than sixty years, Savash, King of the Seven Nations, built many buildings. In the fourth year after the death of Lormar, the Hall of Elders was completed and dedicated. Baltar the Architect rebuilt the castle of Stein upon the King's command. The small home town of the Seer slowly began to grow into a prosperous city known for its yield of crops and fine linen and silk. [...] The blessing of the Creator lay upon the Nations in these days and all were happy.

Upon coming of age Ethan son of Creon Kaya was wedded to Princess Clarisse daughter of Savash. Four children were born to them: Murron, a daughter, deemed to be the most beautiful maiden of the Nations, Astra, a second daughter, Luc, their eldest son, a warrior. [...]

In the sixtieth year of Savash, King of the Seven Nations, upon the night of the festival of winter's beginning another child was born to Ethan son of Creon Kaya and Clarisse daughter of the King. He was called Jon and from his youth was brought up to learn of the true God of his fathers. [...]

Yet, as the King and the Seer grew older, neither losing the strength of his youth, some evil men began to arise, plotting to take power of the Seven Nations and to restore the evil empire of the Warrior King. [...]

Savash died in peace and rested with his fathers. He had ruled the Nations in wisdom and peace for sixty-two years. His greatest achievements were the construction of palace of the King and of the Hall of Elders. [...] His son Barish, succeeded him as King at the age of fifty-four. He ruled in peace for two years before being struck down by Elamin son of Parah. Incited by Elder Elamin, the Council of Elders falsely accused Victor son of Savash of the crime. He was sent into exile upon the Great Deep and Yilmaz son of Barish was given the throne. He was a weak King, fully under the sway of Elamin and his Council.

Upon the death of King Barish a great persecution broke out against the Followers of Yeshua. Elamin and the Council of Elders proclaimed the Faith to be heresy. One of the first to fall was Lady Aspen, wife of Creon Kaya and a princess among her people. She was tortured and killed when she refused to renounce her faith. Creon Kaya and his children and grandchildren were also captured, but freed by the Karyl. The Seer took with him his sons, their wives and children and fled to Liflan, where they lived under the protection of Alahan, son of Tarkan, son of Arslan, King of the Werebeasts. [...]

Once more the Light Within spoke to Creon Kaya, saying, "Return to Shion, my city, and tell the people there about Yeshua. There you will fall by the sword as a witness to what you have seen

*and heard. ‘But fear not, for I am with you.’ So Creon Kaya arose and took with him Jon son of Ethan and Kithra daughter of Ilyas, son of Nathan, and returned to the City of Shion.*

— From *A Historie of the Nations Seven*, Book V  
by Jon son of Ethan

Cold Master Winter spread his wings over the reaches of the Pwyll, causing the three travelers to huddle around the fire, trying to keep warm. Jon reached over and poked at an ember that tried to escape from the life-giving flames. His cousin's daughter Kithra had her cloak wrapped tightly around her and shivered against the cold. The young man suddenly had an impulse to get up and put his arm around her to warm her, but his grandfather was faster.

“Come child,” the old man beckoned, opening his cloak. The girl gladly let her great-grandfather wrap her up in the warm folds of his cloak.

“How far are we from Silver Bay, Grandfather?” Jon finally asked, his impatience surfacing. Creon Kaya smiled.

“A few more days.” He regarded his lanky grandson with a quiet thoughtfulness. Jon was now twenty-two. Precisely that many years had passed since his nephew Elamin had come to power. The son of Kaya's sister Licia had definitely taken after his father, a rich merchant. Elamin wanted power and had gotten it – lots of it. Now he was the most powerful man in the Kingdom, even King Yilmaz fearing him and bowing to his wishes. It had been twenty years since the death of Aspen and the escape to Liflan. He remembered that hurried flight with his family. Jon was merely two and Kithra hadn't even been conceived yet.

A sad, rueful smile crossed Kaya's face as he thought of the peace he'd lived in under Alahan. He was certain that his God was not pleased about his flight. He should have stayed and not merely made forays into Tashyer and the Pwyll, only to return to safety at the first hint of danger. He had disappointed his Lord and he was determined to make it right. Now was his chance – his chance to speak one last time to the Council of Elders, his chance to die for his Savior. Why had he taken Jon and Kithra he did not know. It had seemed right at the time. Could they be the next ones to take his and Aspen's place?

“Grandpa?” Kithra whispered.

“Yes, child?” He stroked the auburn hair lightly with one aged hand.

“Tell me of how you met my great-grandmother, please?” Her bright green eyes reminded him of Aspen, so many years ago. Her smile did too. Her hair was too dark, though, and only slight vestiges of her Woodfolk heritage were apparent. They had remained in ears that were slightly pointed and in an unusual beauty. For her eighteen years of age she was extremely mature in body and spirit. Kaya smiled to himself. There were so many similarities. It could very well be that Jon and Kithra were destined for each other, *But, he said to himself, I have been wrong before.*

“It was a long time ago, Kithra. I was about your age and seeking the Creator...” He found himself wrapped up in the hazy memory, shaken by the hand of the Dark Plague, being awakened a Woodmaid so innocent and pure that he thought her to be a goddess. *Strange, he thought, it wouldn't have surprised me if she was then, but how she changed – for the better.*

“Grandfather!” Jon interrupted. “There's someone coming!” The Seer heard it as well and rose. Two shadowy figures came close to the fire.

“Hello!” called one of them. “We come in peace!”

“We welcome you in peace,” Creon Kaya answered. “Come join the warmth of our fire.”

They came forward and Jon cringed inwardly at them, a stillness within warning him that they were not to be trusted. They were rough-looking Men, wearing mismatched clothing. One of them had the tight shirt, baggy trousers, and boots of a sailor under his multi-colored cloak. The other wore the garb of a Northlander. Both were bearded and something glinted in their eyes that the young man did not like. They surveyed the small group: the young man dressed like a Werebeast in a light tunic of leather that fell to just above his knees with a belt around his waist to keep it together. A heavy cloak with a hood was worn over that. The girl was

dressed in Woodfolk style as was the old man, who also wore the white robe trimmed with red that marked him as an Elder.

"Come sit," the old man beckoned. The two rough travelers did as they were told and the others followed suit.

"My name is Garth," the man in the Northland garb said, with a slight bow. "This is Nephil. He does not speak much."

"This is Jon son of Ethan," Creon Kaya began, gesturing to his grandson and then indicating his great-granddaughter, "Kithra daughter of Ilyas. You may call me Kaya."

"You are an Elder?" the man called Garth asked. Kaya merely nodded.

"As I see a small group like yours needs protection in these wilds," the rough man answered.

"We have all we need," Jon shot back.

"Oho, a young warrior, I suspect, eh?" There was a mocking tone in his voice and a malicious glint in his eyes.

"No, he is a scholar, Garth," Kaya answered evenly. "We are protected in a different manner."

"Nephil and I are bodyguards," Garth explained. "We are seeking work with good pay. I believe that we may have found it, eh, Nephil?" The other man grinned, displaying crooked, yellowed teeth. There was something about this silent man that Kaya did not like. It was too like a being he'd once known, too many years ago. But Changeling was dead, killed by the flaming sword. Could it be that this was another one?

"We are not in need of such services, sir," the old man returned evenly. "Enjoy the company of our fire tonight and then we will discuss anything else in the morning. I will keep the first watch tonight." The men grumbled but lay down to sleep. Jon protectively moved closer to Kithra, whose eyes clearly portrayed her fear.

"These men are bad," she whispered to him.

"I know, cousin," he answered. "I'll protect you, though, and so will Grandfather."

At about midnight the old man woke Jon and he silently took over the watch. The two men were lying by the fire, faces towards the darkness, heads next to each other. Jon sat silently and watched the moon rays fall through the clouds and the tree limbs. It seemed like an eternity and he closed his eyes for a moment.

"Is he asleep?" he heard a voice whisper.

"I think so," the other answered. It had a strangely deep ring to it, giving it an inhuman cast. Jon cracked one eye open to see the two men sitting upright, still facing away from the fire, oblivious to the fact that the young man was listening.

"So, shall we kill them here or take them back to Shion?" Garth asked in a whisper.

"I think you would like to do the first and have your fun with the girl," the deep unearthly voice returned.

"You want to fulfill your duty?"

"Of course, fool," Nephil snapped. "It is my essence to fulfill my duty to my master. He wants them alive. They will arrive alive."

"But I may have the girl?" Garth whined.

"Perhaps later. We must take them at dawn. They must not escape." Suddenly the form of Nephil began to flow and shift.

"I will attack as a wolf. You must pretend to defend them. Then we will have reason to 'escort' them." A slight laugh sounded as a wolf now sat erect where Nephil had been only a moment before. "Understand?"

"I do," Garth returned. "I'm ready." The wolf rose and trotted off into the wood. Garth lay back down and pretended to sleep. Jon moved ever so silently to his Grandfather in the way that the Werebeasts had taught him as part of his training.

"Grandfather," he whispered. The old man's eyes blinked open.

"I heard," came the reply.

"You weren't asleep?"

"I need very little sleep," Kaya answered. "It is a part of old age. Don't worry, Jon, that Changeling won't harm us. We are protected." A slight smile crossed his lips. "Go and watch and don't let them notice anything."



Morning came too soon, casting scarlet stripes across gray clouds. Garth awoke with a start and stared around the fire. The three were gone and he leaped up. Why had he fallen asleep? That was not the natural way of things. He stared around in the mist. Where were they? He drew a dagger from within his cloak and stalked forward, looking for tracks. Suddenly a dark shadow leaped out of the white and landed on him.

"Fool!" Nephil hissed. "You let them escape!"

"I had nothing to do with it," Garth howled, trying to push the Changeling off himself. "They put a spell on me."

"Fool! Your life is forfeit!" the wolf growled in return.

"Nephil! No!" the fallen man gasped. The cry turned into a gurgling as his compatriot sank his teeth into the bared neck. Garth shook and clawed at the wolf and then lay limp. Nephil released his grip and got off the dead man. He laughed at the intensity of the kill. That was the best part about this – killing. He would find the three, he knew.

Nephil had been following them for four days now. He knew they were ahead and that it was high time to corner them. They must be captured and taken to Midpoint quickly. They must not be allowed free access to Shion. It was already growing dark and suddenly he found them, asleep, oblivious to the danger. The best thing to do would be to attack the girl. The others would bow to his will then. He rose and took on the shape of a Werebeast, moving forward silently, long tail whipping back and forth.

"Halt!" Suddenly, out of nowhere a huge man appeared, brandishing a shining sword. His hair was white-blond and eyes burned like blue fire. Karyl! Nephil turned and try to flee, only to find himself surrounded by three others like the first.

He leaped at one, but was easily thrust back into the center of the circle. Never had he encountered anything so pure and powerful before. He sank down, taking on his real form, a dark-cloaked humanoid figure. He cowered before the giant with the sword.

"What do you want?" he whined.

"Go and report to your master that they are on the way," the Karyl answered.

"But he'll kill me!" Nephil cried.

"If he will, he will. If you touch the Seer or his children, I will kill you."

"Who are you?" the Changeling howled.

"I am Krieg, commander of the Karyl," the shining man answered. "Now begone!" The other three Karyl had vanished. Nephil leaped up and winged away in the form of a black eagle. He would not be back.



## Captured

**S**hion lay before them. Kaya gazed at the city on the hill, suddenly feeling very drained. The journey on the ship had brought them there in only a few months and Lady Spring was just beginning to clothe the brown hills in a delicate green. Savash's transportation system obviously still worked very well, despite the heavy taxes levied upon it by the Council. Jon and Kithra stood beside the old Man, awestruck at the magnificence of the city as it shone in the early spring sun.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" he asked. The two young people nodded. Kithra gently slipped her hand into Jon's.

"This is it, where I must go once more." Kaya sighed and then straightened. "Come, children." They walked up the steep road to the city.

They found refuge with a family where they rested silently for a few days. There was the news of an execution of one of the King's men who'd been tried for spying some days before.

"I never really did like that Nephil," the wife of their host told them. "He was so strange." She shuddered. "I only met him once, but still..." The two young people shivered at the mention of that weird man. Only Creon Kaya was still. The time to speak had come, but he was afraid.

"Will you go with me, Yeshua?" he whispered. No answer came, but he was suddenly at peace. This would not be easy, but rewarding.

Elamin sat regally in his office, the largest of the twelve in the Hall of Elders. He felt the reins of power in his hands and liked that fact. There was only one thing that still bothered him, that Creon Kaya was still on the loose. He'd catch him, though, no matter that Nephil and Garth had not succeeded. He reached up and brushed one hand against his long, graying hair. It was carefully arranged and his moustache was perfectly trimmed. He was a man of medium height, still very well built, even though now in his late fifties. He kept up a healthy balance with plenty of exercise and not too many women at a time. He suddenly thought of the girl that Nephil had described as being in the company of the Seer. Perhaps she...?

"No, all who are with the Seer are contaminated," he said to himself. "It would not do." A knock startled him back to the present.

"Yes?" His secretary hurried in.

"Elder Elamin," he said, prostrating himself on the floor. "Did you not hear?"

"What?" The Elder rose, his eyes filled with alarm.

"The Seer is here. He is speaking in the marketplace."

"Well, then arrest him!" Elamin cried. "I will lead the soldiers myself!" He rushed by the man on the ground and hurried to gather the guard.

They marched down the street at high speed, one hundred men to capture one. They could already hear the powerful voice of the Seer telling the story of Yeshua to the gathered people. He'd taken a seat on an old cart, his voice aged, yet strong. Several hundred stood and sat around him, listening intently.

"As he hung there on that cross," the old man was saying, as the company came around the corner, "he prayed to his Father to forgive the sins of his enemies. Then he died. My lady and I followed those who buried him to the place where they would lay him. There we spent three days at his feet, waiting for death, but something better came." He turned and fixed Elamin with his blazing gray eyes. "Yeshua, the Son of Creator God, rose from the dead before my eyes. I cannot and will not recant what I have seen and heard and touched. You, my friends, must believe and he will forgive you as he forgave me. He will change your life." As he finished it seemed that a spell lifted off Elamin who'd been standing rooted to the ground.

"You are under arrest, Creon Kaya," he called, striding through the people. "For treason and heresy!"

"Ah, Elamin," the Seer returned warmly. "I see that you have brought a whole company to arrest one man. That reminds me of the leaders at the time of my Lord. Perhaps you fear me?" He laughed. "There is no need, nephew. I am harmless. Let the children go. I will come."

"Take them, too!" the Elder ordered in rage at the gentleness of his uncle. "I will not bow to your wishes, heretic!" he cried. "Take them all and make them recant!"

The dungeon where they threw Jon and Kithra was cold and dank. There were already others there, chained to the walls and the two new prisoners drew away from them, huddling in one of the far corners of the room. Kithra pressed herself against the young man, shaking for fear.

"Are they going to kill us?" she whispered.

"No, I won't let them do anything to you!" Jon growled, holding her tight.

"I know," she returned. "But I'm still scared, scared of that Elamin. He's evil!" The young man nodded and stroked her hair.

"I want to protect you my whole life, Kithra," he whispered. "Not just now." She looked up at him.

"I want to let you do that," she said with a smile. He gently lifted her chin and kissed her lightly. A warmth developed as she nestled against him, strangely peaceful. Suddenly the door to the cell was thrown open and a large man entered. He held a torch high, scanned the people there, spotted Kithra and Jon, and walked over.

"Jon son of Ethan?" he asked.

"Yes?" The young man had trouble keeping his voice from shaking.

"My name is Timon. I am the guard of the dungeon." He smiled and leaned forward. "I am a Follower." The young man's eyes went wide. "I will take you to a safer place. Come." The two young people rose and followed the big man with no hair on his head but lots of it everywhere else. He was dressed in leather armor and a dagger and a heavy ring of keys clinked against his belt as he hurried them along the dark hallway. He took them up two flights of stairs and showed them into a large room. It was sunny and there were several people there as well. A door led to another chamber at the far end.

"These are friends," Timon told them. "Go in, they will help you." Jon and Kithra hesitantly did as they were told. Instantly the people rose and came to greet them.

"Praise Yeshua that you were brought here!" one woman cried.

"You will be all right," a Man answered. "You are Jon son of Ethan, correct?"

"Y – yes," the young Man stuttered, not certain what to say.

"I am Germanicus," the man said with a bow. "I was a friend of your father's before you fled. I have been preaching Yeshua here and standing against Elamin."

"This is Kithra," Jon said, squeezing the girl's hand.

"Ah, yes..." There was a slight sparkle and knowing look in Germanicus' eyes as he regarded the young couple.

"Where is Grandpa?" Kithra asked.

"Who?"

"My Grandfather, Creon Kaya," Jon said.

"We don't know," Germanicus sighed. "Elamin took him. He'll be working on him in the dungeons. It is good that Timon brought you. Now that man won't be able to find either of you. You're safe now."

"But what can we do for Grandfather?" the young Man demanded.

"Nothing but pray," Germanicus answered sadly. "Only pray."



## The Seer

The door to the rear cell creaked open to reveal the old Man sitting in a beam of early morning light. He wore many things showing that he once had been greatly honored by the Nations, the most prominent being the brown clothing of the Woodfolk. He had a long oak staff in his right hand from the Northern Provinces and around his left wrist was a thin band of snake-skin leather from the Flatlands. He wore a small ceremonial dagger at his belt, a gift from the Werebeasts. A gold medal around his neck was from the Western Nation and a long, white, sleeveless coat with a red trim marked him as one of the honored members of the Council of Elders. Around his right wrist was a thick leather arm band embossed with the priests' symbol for the Creator in bluish steel. He looked to be asleep, his head resting against the wall. The light played off his long white hair and beard and Jon looked at him for a long minute, admiring him before stepping in. The clear, gray eyes snapped open, fixing the lithe young Man in a friendly, yet penetrating gaze.

"It's morning, Grandfather," Jon said slowly.

"Ah, yes, so it is," the old Man said, rising slowly. Jon noticed that he looked stronger than the evening before. Those guards had nearly beaten the old Man to death, but now he stood without any help.

"I was just enjoying the sun, Jon," he said, walking forward, leaning on the staff just a bit. "It's the last time..." He caught himself. "Are the others here?" The younger nodded.

"They're waiting in the front cell." Creon Kaya went forward to the door.

"Grandfather," Jon's voice stopped him. He then noticed that Kithra had come up next to his grandson and taken his hand.

"Will you bless us?" The Seer smiled.

"Kneel down, children," he said. They did as they were told and he placed a hand on each of their heads.

"The Creator bless both of you. Let his face shine upon you and let him give you peace. May the abundance of Yeshua rest on you and Light Within bind you together as you walk as one. Love one another as Yeshua loves his people. The blessing of the God of peace be on you. So be it." He withdrew his hands, raised them to their feet, and embraced each of them "You will be happy together, I know that. Now we must go and see the others."

The old Man went through the door to the next room where about fifteen people had gathered, all good friends, but none of them were of the Heroes. The old Man sighed and suddenly wished that one of them would have been here, especially...

"My lord," Germanicus said, "they say they are going to kill you. Is that true?"

"Yes, my friend, it's true." A gasp went up from the others. "The trial is today."

"But – but they can't do that to you, the Seer!" one woman exclaimed. The Seer smiled.

"They did it to my beloved Aspen and forced me to watch, some twenty years ago. Praise the Creator that my sons and Jon and Kithra survived the purge. Now it is my turn." Creon Kaya smiled at his friends. "Yeshua promised I would grow old – and I am now ninety-seven. I have suffered much, but nothing compares to what he has done for me. I am now waiting impatiently for my death. Then I will see them all again: the Heroes of the Rebuilding. I am the last and to tell you the truth, I almost wish I'd been one of the first to go." He sighed. "Dear children, these Nations rejected what I had to say and so rejected Yeshua himself. Our Lord said that if they rejected him, how much more would they do so to us. But be strong, little children, he will hold you fast, even after I am gone. Don't be afraid of what to say when they arrest you, because the Light Within will give you the words to say. Hold on to the teachings and rejoice in your difficulties, because he will care for you. Jon has the writings that the Creator gave me for you. Read them and be comforted. As for me, I am a flame that is weakening, threatened to be snuffed out, only to be rekindled again in glory with the Creator. So, farewell, my friends. We will meet again."

The great circular court room of the Council was located in the Hall of Elders just east of the Rock of Ages in Shion. The twelve members of the Council entered and were seated at the semi-circular marble table on a large circular dais that was approachable only from an elevated path directly in front of the table and by a low staircase on one side of the platform. Large throngs of people were packed into the area below the dais, waiting for the trial of the Seer. At precisely midday the sun beamed down through the colored glass dome and flooded the room in beautiful colors. In the same instant the door opened and four soldiers came in slowly, the Seer walking in their midst with a dignified gait. All of those seated rose, including the Council members, who were impressed by the natural authority of this, the last Hero of the Rebuilding. Next followed King Yilmaz, a grandson of Savash son of Elam. He took a place of honor, just behind and a bit above the Council. Finally the Chairman of the Elders, Elamin, rose and addressed the Seer.

"Creon Kaya son of Adem, called the Seer, hear the charges made against you." A scribe stepped up with a piece of paper and began to read.

"The charges are: first, blasphemy against the Creator in saying that the only one has an equal among Men, said to be called Yeshua, the Son of Creator God. Second, treason against the Seven Nations by propagating the belief that the Council of Elders is not fit to rule. Both of these charges deserve the death penalty." The scribe stepped back and King Yilmaz rose.

"Lord Seer, how do you plead?"

"Not guilty." Kaya leveled a withering gaze at the twelve members.

"You have heard the charges. Do you wish to defend yourself?" Yilmaz asked pro forma. Elamin glowered, hoping that the old Man would shut up.

"I do," the Seer answered resolutely. The King nodded.

"Members of the Council, your majesty," Creon Kaya began. "I am standing here on trial for two charges, neither of which can be supported by the law of the Kings. The ancient law says that you cannot charge a Man

with treason for criticizing the Council of Elders or the King. That is the right of Man, Woodfolk and Werebeast. Therefore this charge is negated by the ancient law itself.

"As for the other charge, blasphemy, that is something that your own conscience will have to convict you of. As I have told you before: search the scriptures, of which our law is a part. They tell of Yeshua. I have seen it and I have seen him, heard him, touched him. He is Man and he is God. He is the Son of God. I cannot recant what these eyes have seen, these ears have heard and these hands have felt."

"But now for you. You believe that I am on trial here. No, members of the Council, *you* are on trial. I will tell you that I have been a Man of more integrity than any of you could ever be. I was in this Council for forty-seven years, longer than any of you. I know the laws that you are breaking in your own private homes. I know that many of you accept bribes. I know that you pervert justice, so becoming a stench in the nostrils of Creator God. I saw the first Council of the Rebuilding. I knew all of them: Lormar, Tharkey, Kavak, Rushtu, Baltar, Yotiri, Burhan, Ambrosius, Niles, Zu-Thal, Ivrit, and Demis. Then when they grew old I took my place among the members. That was when some of you were young and some of you not even born. I watched you come to power. I saw you murder Barish at the beginning of his reign. I was there when you sent his brother to his death in the Great Deep beyond Silver Bay. I was forced to watch as you tortured and killed Lady Aspen, my wife. I saw all the evil you have done, and not only I, but the Creator did so as well. And in his power I have forgiven you in my heart. Even for this greater evil – my own murder. The Creator will forgive you, too, if you embrace the Son." He looked up, beyond the shimmering stained-glass dome, into the very heart of heaven itself.

"I see the days coming when one of you will arise, murder the King and disperse the Council. He will declare himself to be the Creator, just as the Warrior King did. In that day the flame will be rekindled by one from beyond this world. That evil will be shattered and a fragile unity will be formed once more. But the days will be even more evil after that and the flame will be broken, but not extinguished. It is only then that the end will come."

The hall was silent for a long time after the Seer had ended his prophecy. Finally Elamin rose.

"Is your defense ended, Seer?" he demanded. Kaya's gray eyes settled on him with a gentle, loving look.

"Yes, Elamin, son of my sister Licia, it is." The Man stiffened at the mention of his mother, but instantly brushed the feeling away and turned to his colleagues.

"Your verdict, members of the Council? Those who say guilty rise." Eight of the twelve rose. The other four who stayed seated were glared at by their fellow councilors. Elamin looked at the King. He sat there, struggling against what he knew was right and his fear of Elamin and his followers. Finally he rose.

"The verdict is death by beheading," he said in a choked voice. Kaya nodded.

"Then grant me one last request, your highness."

"Anything you wish," the King answered, only a bit too quickly.

"I wish to be beheaded by my silver sword Justin, which is in your hand. Then break the sword to show how justice has been broken in the Seven Nations." They looked at him, astonished.

"Very well," the King said. "May it be as you asked."

And so Creon Kaya was slain at the age of ninety-seven. He was laid in the crypt beneath the Rock of Ages where he had placed his wife, Lady Aspen *kiz* Kavak. He journeyed the Nations for four years before destroying the Warrior King, taught the Nations for seventy-six years, served as a Council member for forty-seven and was a fugitive from the corrupt justice for twenty years.

As for Justin, the sword had a curious fate. After the Seer was beheaded, the executioner wiped the sword on the white robe and turned to show the Council members that it was unbroken. As he turned around, the silver blade slipped out of his hands, clattered to the ground and broke in two, right at the center. The two pieces spun around and ended up with the tip and the hilt both pointing east. No one had the courage to touch the sword and remove it, so the King had a box built above it to preserve it for all times and to ease his conscience. And it is still there to this day.

The burning sword of the Warrior King rests in the altar in the now abandoned Halls of Knowledge, waiting for the prophecy to be fulfilled.

*So this battle's done,  
but the war still rages  
across the worlds  
and across the ages.*



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# ADDENDA

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# Glossary

## How to Use This Glossary

This is not an exhaustive piece of work. It only includes some of the more or less important terms, places, and characters found in this book.

Words in square brackets ([I-kuh]) are pronunciation helps. All make use of standard American English sounds to express how they should be said. However, there are some sounds that cannot be approximated in English due to their not being used. The pronunciation guide will give the best possible equivalent for the English tongue. The easiest way to get the pronunciation straight is to use the European pronunciation for the vowels.

For the pronunciation of Woodfolk terms, see Appendix C.

Words in italic with an arrow before them ( $\Rightarrow$ *Abadonnim*) are references to other entries in this glossary.

**Abadonnah** [uh-BAH-don-nuh] plural: ***Abadonnim*** [uh-BAH-don-neem] – A spirit being of utmost evil. They are immortal and are bitter enemies of the  $\Rightarrow$ *Karyl*. They can take on any form they wish, but in their normal form appear as hideous, black, humanoid figures with glowing red eyes and four arms. Their name essentially means "towards destruction" or "those destined for destruction"

**Adem** [AH-dam] – Father of  $\Rightarrow$ *Creon Kaya*. He is a farmer by trade. A hard man, he is at first hated by his children, until he turns to  $\Rightarrow$ *Creator God*. He is married to  $\Rightarrow$ *Mikela*.

**Alman** [ALL-mun] – Second of the  $\Rightarrow$ *Warrior King's* warlords, though actually she must be termed a war lady. She is a witch, who commands the  $\Rightarrow$ *Dark Arts*. It is also said that she was a long-time consort of  $\Rightarrow$ *Elam* and the mother of  $\Rightarrow$ *Savash*.

**Art of Defense** – As the name implies, it is the self-defense technique of the  $\Rightarrow$ *Woodfolk*. It is designed to end a fight quickly, without too much pain to the other party.

**Arslan** [ARE-slun] – A young Werebeast warrior and later King of the  $\Rightarrow$ *Werebeasts*. He is married to a Werebeast named Rory.

**Aspen kiz Kavak** – Daughter of  $\Rightarrow$ *Kavak* and Savannah. She is a Woodmaid from an island in  $\Rightarrow$ *Silver Bay*. She accompanies  $\Rightarrow$ *Creon Kaya* on his voyage and later marries him. She is also a  $\Rightarrow$ *Voyager*. She is martyred by the  $\Rightarrow$ *Council of Elders* at the age of 77.

**Baltar** – An architect by trade, he is descended from a family of great artists. Though a trusted servant of  $\Rightarrow$ *Dushman*, he is a secret resister of the  $\Rightarrow$ *Warrior King's* regime. He later marries  $\Rightarrow$ *Sarina*,  $\Rightarrow$ *Creon Kaya's* oldest sister.

**Blue Mountains** – They form the eastern border of the  $\Rightarrow$ *Seven Nations*. The history of  $\Rightarrow$ *Man* indicates, that he first appeared among them in that world. That is also where the first Kingdom of  $\Rightarrow$ *Mount Haven* was founded. For further information see Appendix D, Section I.

**Changeling** – A creature about which very little is known, except that it has the ability to take any shape it wishes and is inherently evil, like all humans. It is believed that Changeling was once a child of the  $\Rightarrow$ *Warrior King*, which acquired its strange power by stepping in league with the  $\Rightarrow$ *Dehshet* and the  $\Rightarrow$ *Abadonnim*. It is later killed at the fall of the Warrior King by  $\Rightarrow$ *Creon Kaya*. A second one appears in the time of Persecution under  $\Rightarrow$ *Elamin*.

**Chifchi** [chif-CHEE] – A hidden valley in the  $\Rightarrow$ *Flatlands*. It situated just west of center of the Flatlands in a large formation of rocks. It is the birthplace of  $\Rightarrow$ *Creon Kaya* and his family.

**City of Glass** –  $\Rightarrow$ *Mount Haven*

**City of the Warrior King** –  $\Rightarrow$ *Elamil*

**Council of Elders** – The ruling body of the  $\Rightarrow$  Seven Nations. It consists of 12 men of the different races and Nations and has one King over it, which they elect from among the Nations. For more information see Appendices C and D.

**Creator God** – The only living God who created the worlds.

**Creon Kaya** [KREE-on KAH-yuh] – A young Man from the  $\Rightarrow$  Flatlands. He is called to be the Seer, who is to overthrow the corrupt regime of the  $\Rightarrow$  Warrior King and set up the old  $\Rightarrow$  Council of Elders. He is a skilled sword-fighter, taught by  $\Rightarrow$  Rushtu Silver-Sword and is also an adopted son of the  $\Rightarrow$  Woodfolk. He is the firstborn of  $\Rightarrow$  Adem and  $\Rightarrow$  Mikela. He is also a  $\Rightarrow$  Voyager, having traveled to Israel to meet  $\Rightarrow$  Yeshua. He later marries  $\Rightarrow$  Aspen, serves in the Council of Elders for 47 years, is a fugitive from the corrupt justice of the Council of Elders under  $\Rightarrow$  Elamin for 20 years and is then executed by the Council of Elders at the age of 97.

**Dark Arts** – Also called magic. It is the power and ability to do things beyond normal human strength, such as fly, control other humans, become invisible, etc. It is a direct link to the forces of Darkness led by  $\Rightarrow$  Dehshet.

**Dark Plague** – A sickness that is very contagious and almost always fatal. Basic visible symptoms are a high fever and the appearance of dark splotches on the skin. The  $\Rightarrow$  Woodfolk have a cure for it.

**Death March** –  $\Rightarrow$  Seven Nations

**Debus** [DAY-boos]– An officer in the army of the  $\Rightarrow$  Warrior King, serving under  $\Rightarrow$  Lormar. He later changes sides and dies in a battle against  $\Rightarrow$  Pan-Tao.

**Dehshet** – The name of the lord of Darkness and leader of the  $\Rightarrow$  Abadonnim. He is worshipped by many  $\Rightarrow$  Men and by the  $\Rightarrow$  Werebeasts.

**Deniz** – The eastern-most port of  $\Rightarrow$  Silver Bay at the entrance to the  $\Rightarrow$  Pwyllwood.

**Dushman** [DOOSH-mahn]– Fifth of the  $\Rightarrow$  Warrior King's warlords. He is lord of  $\Rightarrow$  Stein. Is later killed by  $\Rightarrow$  Creon Kaya.

**Ebediyen** [eh-beh-DEE-en]– Goddess of times, seasons and death. She is the consort of  $\Rightarrow$  Tarla. According to some sources she is one and the same with  $\Rightarrow$  Istek. Among the rituals of her worship is also child sacrifice and self-mutilation.

**Eike** [EYE-kay]– The oldest member of the Council of Elders on  $\Rightarrow$  Aspen's home island at the time of  $\Rightarrow$  Kavak. He is killed protecting  $\Rightarrow$  Creon Kaya in a pirate attack.

**Eison** [EYE-zone]– A city-province in  $\Rightarrow$  Pwyllwood. It is well known for its ironworks and the names of the great blacksmiths Alrig, Meshek-Tual, and  $\Rightarrow$  Rushtu synonymous with it.

**Elam** [EE-lum]– The Warrior King. He is from the  $\Rightarrow$  Western Nation and held the power over the  $\Rightarrow$  Seven Nations for 162 years, having subdued them over a period of 32 years. He is a warlock, in league with  $\Rightarrow$  Dehshet and the  $\Rightarrow$  Abadonnim. There is very little peace during his regime, as he himself fosters the constant warfare among his lords. His rule is a corrupt system of extortion and the very poorest of the people feel his hand the most. Religiously seen, he is something of a demigod, just below Dehshet. Under his hand worship of  $\Rightarrow$  Creator God is all but forgotten, forcing the priests to hide in the  $\Rightarrow$  Halls of Knowledge. He is judged for not following the Creator and is executed by  $\Rightarrow$  Creon Kaya at the age of 210.

**Elamil** [ee-lum-EEl]– The capital city of the  $\Rightarrow$  Warrior King. Situated in  $\Rightarrow$  Greenwood, where it borders on the  $\Rightarrow$  Western Nation in the west and on the  $\Rightarrow$  Flatlands in the east, it is said that it was built by the  $\Rightarrow$  Abadonnim in one night. It is destroyed by  $\Rightarrow$  Savash shortly before his death.

**Elamin** [ela-MEEN]– Son of Par'ah and Licia, the sister of  $\Rightarrow$  Creon Kaya. He comes to power in the last two years of  $\Rightarrow$  Savash's reign and is largely responsible for the death of King Barish,  $\Rightarrow$  Savash's son. His personal vendetta against his uncle  $\Rightarrow$  Creon Kaya and against the Followers of  $\Rightarrow$  Yeshua is a mark of his time as head Elder. He dies of a heart attack four years after the death of  $\Rightarrow$  Creon Kaya, having wielded power over the Nations for twenty-four years.

**Ethan Defender** – A ⇒ Voyager who comes to help ⇒ Creon Kaya cross the Death March. He is King in his own world and is accompanied by a talking falcon called Falk.

**flaming sword** – A weapon once forged for one of the ancient Kings, it is a sword whose blade burns with a white flame. It was meant to be used to fight the powers of Darkness in justice. The ⇒ Warrior King steals it and begins to use it to his own goals, corrupting its real purpose. After the Warrior King's death, the flame is extinguished by ⇒ Creon Kaya by ramming it into the altar in the ⇒ Halls of Knowledge, where it still rests. Creon Kaya prophesies that one day it will be rekindled by "one from beyond this world."

**Flatlands** – ⇒ Seven Nations.

**Greenwood** – ⇒ Seven Nations.

**Güney Liman** [goon-AY LEE-mun]– A port in the ⇒ Flatlands, farther north than the northern point of ⇒ Silver Bay.

**Haddas** – The last high priest of ⇒ Creator God. He is deposed by ⇒ Creon Kaya because he neglected to teach the Nations about the Creator.

**Halls of Knowledge** – A maze of caves beneath the city of ⇒ Shion, where the ⇒ Priesthood of Creator God fled after the ⇒ Warrior King sealed the city with a spell.

**Hrosca** – Son of Estefan. He is a priest of ⇒ Creator God and ⇒ Creon Kaya's teacher, mentor and friend. In his earlier years he was an accomplished warlock and has still retained some of the ⇒ Dark Arts. He is killed by ⇒ Dushman protecting Creon Kaya in the arena of ⇒ Stein.

**Istek** [EE-stack]– Goddess of love and mother goddess. She is often identified with ⇒ Ebediyen. Temple prostitution (both male and female) is among her worship rituals. Though "love" is her religion, her priests and priestesses are not allowed to fall in love with any one person. They are only to "glorify" her.

**Jon** – Son of Ethan, son of ⇒ Creon Kaya. He is a historian who wrote down the story of the ⇒ Rebuilding and the biography of his grandfather. He married his cousin's daughter Kithra and in his old age became one of the principle members of the Council to oppose those who are against ⇒ Yeshua.

**Justin** – ⇒ Creon Kaya's sword. It was forged by ⇒ Rushtu Silver-Sword for the last of the descendants of the ancient Kings. It is completely silver with a blue gem set in the base of the hilt. It is broken at the time of ⇒ Creon Kaya's death to signify the breach of justice by ⇒ Elamin.

**Karyl** [CARE-ill]– Spirit beings that are the antithesis of the ⇒ Abadonnim. They also have the ability to take on any form they wish, but are normally seen as huge men and women, dressed in blazing robes with eyes that shine a strange blue. They are captive in the ⇒ Death March until ⇒ Tolgar is defeated.

**Kavak** [KAH-vuk] – Leader of the tribe of ⇒ Woodfolk on the island in ⇒ Silver Bay. He is the father of ⇒ Aspen and is married to Savannah kiz Eike. He is also in charge of the training of ⇒ Creon Kaya.

**Keritos** [care-EE-tus]– Sixth and most brutal of the warlords of the ⇒ Warrior King. He is a creation of the ⇒ Dark Arts, a corpse that is preserved and brought to life. He is later destroyed by ⇒ Creon Kaya.

**Krieg** [KREEG]– The leader of the ⇒ Karyl.

**Liflan** – ⇒ Death March

**Lilya** – Daughter of Muriel and a priestess of ⇒ Istek. She meets ⇒ Creon Kaya and falls in love with him. She tries to get him to sleep with her and to forget ⇒ Aspen. She tries to kill him after he turns her down, but then turns to ⇒ Creator God and lives as a servant to ⇒ Rushtu Silver-Sword. She later marries ⇒ Savash and becomes Queen of the Seven Nations.

**Lormar** – First warlord of the ⇒ Warrior King. He is a complete soldier, staying away from the ⇒ Dark Arts and any religion whatsoever. He has a painful sickness that keeps him from standing up straight. He is the mentor of ⇒ Savash. He turns to ⇒ Creator God when confronted by ⇒ Creon Kaya and is healed. He serves as chief Elder in the first ⇒ Council of Elders of the ⇒ Rebuilding.

**Lynx oul Birch** – A Woodman from ⇒ Aspen's home island. He is also in love with Aspen at first and challenges ⇒ Creon Kaya to a fight. He loses, but becomes a good friend of ⇒ Creon Kaya. Later he becomes leader of the Woodfolk of the island where ⇒ Aspen grew up.

**Man** – The principal race of the  $\Rightarrow$ Seven Nations. He is not from the world of the Seven Nations, but from another place. See Appendix D.

**Midpoint** – A port on an island in the center of Silver Bay, from where the great ocean-going ships leave for other lands.

**Mikela** [mee-KAY-lah]– Mother of  $\Rightarrow$ Creon Kaya and wife of  $\Rightarrow$ Adem. She is a devout believer in  $\Rightarrow$ Creator God and tries to raise her eight children to believe in him. She later dies of a sickness and is raised again by the Creator.

**Mount Haven** – A city in the  $\Rightarrow$ Blue Mountains. It is the first and greatest city built by  $\Rightarrow$ Man after arriving in that world. Though those who lived there were at first worshippers of  $\Rightarrow$ Creator God, they later turned away and followed  $\Rightarrow$ Dehshet and his hoards. Then the last king invoked a spell to preserve the city for all times, turning it to glass. Anyone found within its gates after sundown also turns into glass.

**Notan** – Also known as Notan-Gelder. He is worshipped as the god of poetry, music, and medicine. In actuality he was merely a wise king of  $\Rightarrow$ Mount Haven, who worshipped  $\Rightarrow$ Creator God.

**Northern Provinces** –  $\Rightarrow$ Seven Nations.

**Pan-Tao** – Third warlord of the  $\Rightarrow$ Warrior King. He is from a land farther west than the  $\Rightarrow$ Western Nation. He is later killed by  $\Rightarrow$ Debus.

**Peak Called Joy** – The highest peak among the  $\Rightarrow$ Blue Mountains. Around its base is a lush valley buzzing with life. Though it is high, snow never rests on it. It is the home of  $\Rightarrow$ Creator God.

**Portal or Portal of Time and Space** – An opening between worlds. There are many of these and they are used by  $\Rightarrow$ Creator God to send  $\Rightarrow$ Voyagers to do his bidding. See also Appendix A.

**Priesthood of Creator God** – An order of closely knit priests who live in the  $\Rightarrow$ Halls of Knowledge, keeping and studying the scriptures.  $\Rightarrow$ Hrosca belonged to them. The last high priest was Haddas. After the fall of the Warrior King the priesthood is still recognized as a principal group who are devoted to the old style of worship of the Creator. Ambrosius is elected chief priest after Haddas.

**Pwyllwood** –  $\Rightarrow$ Seven Nations.

**Rebuilding** – The first 10 years after the fall of the Warrior King in which  $\Rightarrow$ Savash and the  $\Rightarrow$ Council of Elders begin to put things back into order. The Heroes of the R. are:  $\Rightarrow$ Creon Kaya,  $\Rightarrow$ Aspen ,  $\Rightarrow$ Lormar,  $\Rightarrow$ Arslan, Rory,  $\Rightarrow$ Baltar,  $\Rightarrow$ Sarina,  $\Rightarrow$ Tharkey, and  $\Rightarrow$ Rushtu Silver-Sword.

**Rikel** – The lord of Chifchi. At the time when Creon Kaya leaves on his journey, R.'s father, Jimri, is still alive and lord of Chifchi. R. is madly in love with Mikela and can't see why she would go and marry Adem, so he tries to take revenge on Adem's family. In his later years he runs various rackets for making money in the village, but leaves Adem's family alone.

**Rock of Ages** – The temple of Creator God, located in  $\Rightarrow$ Shion.

**Rushtu Silver-Sword** [ROOSH-too]– He is a master blacksmith and the best sword-fighter in the  $\Rightarrow$ Seven Nations. He is well-known to the  $\Rightarrow$ Warrior King as a resistance fighter. He teaches  $\Rightarrow$ Creon Kaya the art of sword-fighting and smithing. He serves on the first  $\Rightarrow$ Council of Elders of the  $\Rightarrow$ Rebuilding.

**Sarina** [suh-REE-nah]–  $\Rightarrow$ Creon Kaya's oldest sister and second child of  $\Rightarrow$ Adem and  $\Rightarrow$ Mikela. She is kidnapped by Jimri and sold as a slave girl to a brutal man. She escapes and flees to  $\Rightarrow$ Stein, where she is found by  $\Rightarrow$ Baltar. She later marries him.

**Savash** – Son of the  $\Rightarrow$ Warrior King and  $\Rightarrow$ Alman. He is also the seventh of the Warrior King's warlords. He later turns to  $\Rightarrow$ Creator God and becomes the first King of the  $\Rightarrow$ Rebuilding. He reigns in peace and prosperity for 62 years before dying of old age.

**Seven Nations** – Another world, much like ours. The term actually only applies to the seven best known lands in that place, but is used as a collective name for the whole world. These lands are:

**Death March, the** – A jungle that runs between Tashyer and the  $\Rightarrow$ Blue Mountains. It is the home of the  $\Rightarrow$ Karyl and of the  $\Rightarrow$ Werebeasts. After the fall of the  $\Rightarrow$ Warrior King  $\Rightarrow$ Arslan renames it Liflan [LEAF-lan] the way it had once been called before the rise of the tyrant from  $\Rightarrow$ Tashyer that brought the first King about.

**Flatlands** – The largest of the Seven Nations, it is mainly a huge desert-like area with large rock formations, in which there is often water and fertile soil. Far in the north it is very cold and there is perpetual ice. In the south it borders on the ocean and is sub-tropical. It borders on Greenwood and the Western Nation in the west and on the Pwyllwood in the east and closes off the northern and western border of the Northern Provinces.

**Silver Bay** – A province of the Flatlands, a huge bay that is more of a coastline, than a bay. There are some thirty-odd islands dotted across its mouth.

**Greenwood** – The smallest of the Seven Nations. It lies between the Flatlands, the Western Nation and the ocean. It is the most beautiful of the Nations and  $\Rightarrow$ Shion, the city of the  $\Rightarrow$ Council of Elders, is located there.

**Northern Provinces** – An area of nine provinces directly north of Pwyllwood. It is bordered by Tashyer on the east and the Flatlands on the north and west.

**Bitter Lakes** – An area of five large salt lakes in the center of the Provinces fed by the Kizilirmak.

**Pwyllwood, the** – Also known as "the Pwyll" for short. This Nation is set on a high plateau with a lot of wild forest. It is well known for being very dangerous for travelers. On the west and south it borders on the Flatlands, on the north on the Northern Provinces and north and east on Tashyer.

**Kizilirmak** [KOO-zool-ur-muk]– A river that forms the natural eastern border of Pwyllwood, flowing north into the Northern Provinces.

**Tashyer** [TAHSH-yair]– A great wasteland of stone and sand that stretches from Pwyllwood in the east to the Death March in the west, from the high north to the ocean in the south. Though it may seem infertile at first sight, it is actually quite fertile, if the land is farmed and wells are dug, since the lack of water keeps plants from growing.

**Western Nation** – The westernmost of the Nations, it is surrounded by water on two sides, borders on the Flatlands and Greenwood in the east. Only a small strip in the north connects it to lands even farther west, which are hardly known to the Seven Nations. It is from these lands that  $\Rightarrow$ Pan-Tao comes.

**Shion** [SHEE – on] – The capital of the  $\Rightarrow$ Seven Nations at the time of the ancient Kings. The  $\Rightarrow$ Warrior King put a curse on it, making it impossible for anyone to enter, except for the Seer.

**Silver Bay** –  $\Rightarrow$ Seven Nations, Flatlands.

**Stahl** [Stall] – God of fire and ironworks. He was once only a great artisan who worshipped  $\Rightarrow$ Creator God. Rituals are kept secret by the blacksmiths who serve him.

**Stein** [st-EYE-n]– The capital of  $\Rightarrow$ Tashyer and home of  $\Rightarrow$ Baltar. This city is built on a great oasis and it was under the hand of  $\Rightarrow$ Dushman.

**Tarla** – God of life and fertility. Lover of  $\Rightarrow$ Ebediyen. Religious rituals for T. are the same as for Ebediyen, since they are always worshipped together. He is sometimes identified with Lieht, the sun-god of the Northern Provinces, whose worship includes the consecration of a sun-child, a girl of 15 years of age, who reigns for a year before being sacrificed by her successor.

**Tashyer** –  $\Rightarrow$ Seven Nations.

**Tharkey** – A  $\Rightarrow$ Voyager and general during the fall of the  $\Rightarrow$ Warrior King. One of the members of the first  $\Rightarrow$ Council of Elders during the  $\Rightarrow$ Rebuilding.

**Tolgar** [TALL-gar]– Fourth warlord of the  $\Rightarrow$ Warrior King. He is the last  $\Rightarrow$ Werebeast Overlord and holds the  $\Rightarrow$ Death March under his control, holding the  $\Rightarrow$ Karyl captive. He is killed by  $\Rightarrow$ Arslan.

**Traveler, The** –  $\Rightarrow$ Ethan Defender.

**Voyager** – A man or woman who has stepped through the  $\Rightarrow$ Portal of Time and Space and traveled to a different world. See also Appendix A.

**Warrior King** – Title of honor of  $\Rightarrow$ Elam.

**Werebeasts** – One of the three Races of the  $\Rightarrow$ Seven Nations. They are a mix between cats and men. They live in the  $\Rightarrow$ Death March along with the  $\Rightarrow$ Karyl and are the captors of the Karyl at the time of the  $\Rightarrow$ Warrior King. For more information see Appendix B.

**Western Nation** –  $\Rightarrow$ Seven Nations.

**Woodfolk** – A secretive people who live in small tribes scattered among the  $\Rightarrow$ Seven Nations. Men are called Woodmen and women Woodmaids. See Appendix C.

**Ya-Rab** [yah-ROB] – Another name for  $\Rightarrow$ Creator God.

**Yeshua** – The Son of  $\Rightarrow$ Creator God, who came to Earth to die for all humankind. He didn't remain dead, but rose again and now sits at the right hand of the Father in heaven. Only through faith in him can anyone have eternal life.

# Appendix A: The Voyager

## I. Description

A Voyager is a man or a woman who has traveled to another world by means of a Portal of Time and Space. While some will allow this designation to be applied to all who have stepped through any kind of Portal, the narrower definition is applied only to those who were called by God and stepped through a “natural” Portal, rather than a man-made one.

While we generally use the term *Voyager*, the inhabitants of other worlds have their own descriptions. Best known are those of Rush-Ara and New America. The Kurashi and Anjin call the Voyagers *Black Wanderers* or *Sky-Cleavers*. The Meydjen of New America are a bit more poetic, calling them *Wind-Riders*, from the fact that their ancestors fell through a Portal that was high in the mountains.

## II. Characteristics

Much can be said about Voyagers and the reasons that they are transported from their own worlds to ones unknown to them are varied, but often they come to avert a disaster that is beyond the regular populace's ability to control. While some only stay briefly, appearing and then vanishing again, others stay in the new world until they die, often settling down and getting married to locals.

In general the Voyagers come in pairs. These might be male and female, male and male, female and female, or human and animal. There are some records of lone Voyagers or larger groups, though both are very, very rare. The latter often appear at the opening of a new world.

A Voyager always has the ability to identify another Voyager who is in the vicinity. It is usually described as a sort of sixth sense that enables them to pick up the other one's presence, sometimes strong enough to pinpoint the exact spot they are standing in.

Language is another interesting thing to note. Those who enter through “natural” Portals will often immediately be able to understand and speak the language or languages of the nations they come to. So with Creon Kaya, Aspen, and Ethan the Traveler. However, Drake Masters records that his aptitude for acquiring the languages was highly enhanced, allowing him to learn in days what would usually take months or years to acquire. He also lists examples of several other Voyagers who had the same experience. The methods and results are varied, but full communication ability is always achieved at the very latest within two months of arrival.

The question of call is raised here and most Voyagers will attest to a sort of drive or feeling to go to a specific place where they were then transported to their destination. However, Masters mentions Rose Kartalkizi who stumbled through a Portal “by accident.” Salim Abu Dunya also describes several “accidental” entries into other worlds, most of which ended up in a populating of that world by humans.

On a side-bar it is interesting to note that in all of the worlds described there are no sentient beings besides humans. The Ikitir of Rush-Ara and the so-called Sea Stallions of Diyar may be the only exceptions, but their forms of communication don't allow us to really ascertain whether it is true sentience or they are merely very intelligent animals.

For those who have more interest in Voyagers, consult the sources below.

### III. Portals

Defining a Portal precisely is difficult. Basically it is an opening in the fabric of time and space, similar to what scientists think happens in a worm-hole. However, these are located on planets rather than in outer space. They are stable enough for someone to pass through and arrive on the other side unharmed. Descriptions of them vary, but often they are accompanied by a strong light.

Portals are situated in many, many different places. Sometimes they are found in physical formations looking like doorways. Drake Masters describes one in Rush-Ara that looked like a floor made of crystal that lit up when the portal opened. The Portals in *Seer* are based on the sketchy descriptions given by Jon son of Ethan who presumably had Creon Kaya describe them for him. Masters also writes of one in an alcove of a man-made cave, as well as one that was simply a grassy knoll on a hill. He mentions that the *Chronicles of Braemoor* have a whole list of known Portals in that world two of which are underwater and one is in the center of a lake, on its surface.

Man-made Portals exist. There are several references to them both in Masters' writings as well as in Salim Abu Dunya. Masters attributes them to technology and Abu Dunya to magic. It is clear, though, that these "artificial" Portals are dangerous to the balance of Time and space and they can only be used a few times before they are destroyed, often by Voyagers who were sent for precisely this purpose. Masters mentions two on Earth, one developed by his son Eric that Masters himself destroyed upon his son's insistence.

There is still much that is not understood about Portals and even Drake Masters' attempt to explain it in scientific terms ends up being more confusing than helpful. The phenomenon exists as do the stories. Masters and Father Andropov both point to the fact that the "natural" Portals are controlled by God, saying that he decides who will enter the Portal and when. Beyond that it can only be said that nothing more is known.

### IV. Sources

There are basically three sources on Voyagers, ranked here in reliability

#### A. *Notes on Voyaging* by Drake Paul Masters

Drake Masters was himself a Voyager who traveled to quite a few different worlds, in one of which he met his wife. His writing was not meant to be published, being more of a manuscript for his immediate family. It describes the worlds he'd been to, about six in all, as well as giving a scholarly evaluation of Salim Abu Dunya's *Journeys in Twilight* and Father Andropov's *A Treatise on the Existence of Parallel Worlds and the Inhabitants Thereof*. His careful objectivity makes his *Notes* perhaps the best current source on Voyaging. However, there are only three copies in existence, all controlled by the Masters family who are very careful about whom they allow to look at them. The copy I read was given to me by Drake Masters himself with the promise that I could keep it, but after his vanishing with his spouse, his children asked for it to be returned.

His descriptions of other places are remarkable, and his attempt to explain a Portal scientifically is intriguing, though very confusing. He has had opportunity to look into three or four annals kept in other worlds, such as *The Chronicles of Braemoor* kept in the Voyager school there (which, by the way, is the only world that has such an institution), *The Journeys of the Ancients* in the possession of the Murronites in Rush-Ara and several of the ancient scrolls kept in the Halls of Knowledge in the Seven Nations, one penned by the legendary Creon Kaya himself. For those interested in Voyaging, reading this manuscript is a must.

#### B. *Journeys in Twilight* by Salim Abu Dunya

An eighteenth century Muslim mystic, Abu Dunya records his discussions with two Persian Voyagers of his day and age, setting down much of what they learned from their travels. The authenticity of this book is somewhat debated, but the Arabic of the original is judged to be very scholarly and there are many things that speak for it being considered seriously.

Several groups have accepted this as the *de facto* source for all things Voyager. What Masters' Notes makes clear, though, is that there are quite a few errors in Abu Dunya's account, such as his claim that only men can be Voyagers, women having been excluded by "the Maker". He also describes several magical rituals that might be used for opening a portal that some enthusiasts have tried unsuccessfully.

The descriptions of the worlds within his book closely match those that Masters calls Diyar and Nur-Van.

This one, while very rare, is more readily available than the *Notes*, and will make a fair source if what is in it is taken with a grain of salt.

### C. *A Treatise on the Existence of Parallel Worlds and the Inhabitants Thereof* by Father Andropov

Probably meant to be a scholarly work to be presented to the Metropolitan of Moscow of the Russian Orthodox Church, this is the oldest available book dealing with parallel worlds. It is not well written or well-documented, making many errors, as Father Andropov cites only tertiary sources and legends.

However, there is a passage that describes a place very similar to Braemoor, especially its capital, Freewill, which to Drake Masters' mind might be of some use. Also Andropov doesn't limit Voyaging to men and he attributes the opening of Portals to God much in the same way that Masters does.

The bottom line about this poorly written treatise, which undoubtedly ended in the Father's trial for heresy, is that it is only worth reading for finding a misguided attempt at describing a phenomenon that is not so easy to grasp. The two passages that are of interest occur early on and the rest ends up being drivel concerning supposed journeys to places that have strange, sometimes monstrous, sentient beings. Hence the value of this manuscript is close to nil.

# Appendix B: The Werebeasts

## I. Origin

The Werebeasts are human, descended from the Men who first entered the Seven Nations. According to the Chronicles of Elian they come from Bozrah, the third king of Mount Haven, as a judgment for his involvement in the Dark Arts.

## II. Physical Appearance

In brief their physical features are a mix of cat and human. They walk upright and are more human than catlike, bearing the same primary and secondary physical distinctions that men and women have. Their bodies are covered by a short fur and their ears and eyes are like a cat's. Most have a tail and all have retractable claws instead of fingernails and fangs instead of teeth. Werebeasts have hair on their head very similar to that of humans' and it is usually a lighter or darker variation than their fur. Males have no beards. Their average body height is about five feet.

## III. Society

### A. Religion

According to their chronicles they believed in the Creator for the first few hundred years, but then turned to Dehshet and worshipped him until the fall of the Warrior King after which the majority turned to a faith in Creator God and his Son, Yeshua. Many still clung to pagan practices, though, and over time a syncretistic semi-pagan, semi-monotheistic religion emerged from the two, where Yeshua was viewed as the chief god with many demigods attending him.

### B. Government

#### 1) Early years.

Their government was based on a tribal system for the first few hundred years, where the oldest in each family had the say and these would then get together for other important decisions.

#### 2) Second Age.

When they turned to Dehshet, they found themselves being lorded over by the Abadonnim, who sometimes took on the form of the ghost of a long-dead Werebeast or possessed one among them, making him "Overlord" or leader.

#### 3) The Rebuilding and years following.

After the fall of Tolgar, Arslan was set up as King and the government basically went back to what it was before the long domination of the Abadonnim. Though the King has ultimate say over any matter, it is his responsibility to listen to the elders of the people. The Kings following Arslan were Tarkan and Alahan.

### C. Language

#### 1) Spoken.

Their language was often described as someone with a throat problem. It is merely a variation of the oldest language of Man, though many of the sounds have gone quite gutteral.

**2) Written.**

Many Werebeasts can read and write using a phonetic alphabet similar to cuneiform writings of our world.

## IV. Home

Though they may be found throughout most of the Nations, they mainly live in the Death March.

## V. Relation to the Other Races

Until the Rebuilding and Second Golden age they did not have much contact to the other races, due to legends that they are wild, bloodthirsty creatures, most of which aren't true. Because of their appearance there is hardly any intermarriage. They are also not allowed to touch the Woodfolk, who have been their mortal enemies for centuries. During the Rebuilding and the Second Golden Age, Werebeasts integrated themselves into all parts of society as equals. Then during the Puppet Monarchy under Elamin many were banished by pressure from the Woodfolk, as the Werebeasts turned out to be some of the strongest proponents of the Messiah. At one point the seat of the Werebeasts on the Council was empty for a period of nearly six years before Creon Kaya was able to convince Tarkan to send a new member. Even so, Men continued to regard the Werebeasts with great suspicion and the Woodfolk increased their antagonism towards them.

# Appendix C: The Woodfolk

## I. Origin

The Woodfolk themselves are human and are said to come out of a relationship between a woman of the race of Man and one of the original inhabitants of that world. Some speculate that this may have been a Karyl. Even the Woodfolk aren't sure about their origin, but this is their favorite explanation, since they are clearly human. According to the oldest chronicles, however, they are a race called into existence by the Creator from Yasham, a child of the Death March, and Lif, son of Carmi. The features and healing powers are gifts from the Creator himself.

## II. Physical appearance

Physically they are not large, the average height being about five feet six inches. Most are fair skinned, some darker ones can be found in the south of the Flatlands and the Western Nation. All have pointed ears and high, nearly invisible eyebrows. They mature much faster than Man does, usually reaching full physical maturity at the age of 16. Average age for marriage is 15 for women, 17 for men.

## III. Society

Though at first glance the Woodfolk may seem to be very free and joyful people, at a closer look it is clear that they are under a great number of laws that govern every aspect of their life. Basically most are a happy and very musical people.

### A. Religion

They have a strict religious system, worshipping Creator God. Their laws were given by him and they follow them very carefully. Much of worship time is spent in singing and dancing, each the dances bearing a special meaning according to its history. Their religion also forbids them to kill, though they have been known to do so.

### B. Government

The Woodfolk live in small independent communities throughout the Nations. Each of these communities has a leader elected from among the people by the Council of Elders. This Woodman has this position for life and is only replaced during his lifetime if he is found unfit or he decides to retire himself. The Council of Elders is headed by the oldest member. Still, the leader has final say to anything the Council decides to pass. All of the groups have a central government, where each of the leaders will meet once every three years. During that time a principal leader over them is chosen, who traditionally will represent the Woodfolk in the international Council of Elders under the King of the Seven Nations

### C. Language

#### 1) Spoken.

The spoken language of the Woodfolk is very poetic, even in every-day speech. It is not at all similar to the languages of Men or of the Werebeasts.

### 2) Written.

The Woodfolk do not write much, though they have a form of written communication using ideographs, most of which are symbols based on plant and animal life around them. Most of their lore is passed on by word of mouth.

### 3) Titles and Terms.

- a) *kiz* [KUZ] or *oul* [OH-l]- These are titles that mean "daughter of" or "son of," respectively. They are a term of respect and are used like "Mr. so-and-so", "so-and-so" being the father's name. In a shortened form they are added onto the end of the fathers name in the following form: *Ademolu* [AH-dam OH-loo] or *Kavakkizi* [KAH-vuk KUZ-uh].
- b) *Ona hamd olsun* [OH-nuh HUMD ALL-soon], meaning "praise be to him." Usually used in the services, saying "praise be to Creator God."
- c) *Sana hamd olsun* [SAH-nuh HUMD ALL-soon], meaning "praise be to you." It is the personalized form of the above.
- d) *Aga* [AH-gha] Means as much as "lord" and is used as a term of respect for the leader.

### D. Names

- 1) *Woodman*. Term for the males, married or unmarried.
- 2) *Woodmaid*. Term for the females, married or unmarried.

### E. Family symbols

Each family among the Woodfolk has its own color combination and own symbol, e.g. the family of Kavak wears green and white and has a tree as a symbol.

## IV. Home

The Woodfolk are scattered around the Seven Nations in communities. The only places that they are aren't found are in the Death March, Tashyer or the north of the Flatlands.

## V. Relation to the other Races

Though they seem secretive to Men, they are really a very hospitable people, if they are needed. They generally will not volunteer their help (as volunteering is viewed as a negative form of pride), though will provide it gladly when asked.

Intermarriage between Men and Woodfolk is something that doesn't happen very often, but after the Rebuilding mixed marriages became more common. The physical features of the Woodfolk are more dominant than those of Man.

However, once in contact with Man, the Woodfolk often try to dominate them, many having a sense that they were selected by the Creator to be the rulers of the Nations. During the years of the ancient Kings they held sway over the King and the Council through their influence in their respective Nations. During the Rebuilding the first Council very carefully limited the power of the Woodfolk in the Council to give equal votes to all Races and all peoples. However, as the Puppet Monarchy arose, the Woodfolk made their pressure known again, especially in their antagonism against the Followers of Messiah and the Werebeasts. While Elamin acquiesced to some of their desires, he and those following him in leadership were too strong to be pushed around by the council of Woodfolk, much to the chagrin of those who wanted more power.

## **VI. Special Abilities**

### **A. Healing**

All pure Woodfolk have healing powers, though they are only over one specific point in nature. For instance, many Woodmen can heal a sick tree with a touch or make infertile ground farmable. Woodmaids are more healers of people, being able to speed the healing process of minor wounds or light sicknesses by their powers. However, much of their medical prowess is the knowledge of plants and herbs.

### **B. Speaking to Animals**

All Woodfolk can speak to animals. Many Men can do so, too, if they can speak the language of the Woodfolk.

# Appendix D: Man

## I. Origin in the Seven Nations

According to the most reliable traditions, a small group of men and women came through a Portal in the range of the Blue Mountains and settled the Nations from there. Most probably this happened sporadically and from different parts of Earth, since all different races of people of this world are found there.

## II. Society

### A. Religion

Most Men are polytheists, believing in a multitude of gods. There is also a strong group of those who hold to a form of monotheism, believing in a personal Creator who made the world and them. With Creon Kaya's return from Earth the faith in Yeshua began to spread, freely at first, but then under great persecution. By the time Jon son of Ethan died, polytheism was slowly giving way to general monotheism and a form of materialism among some people, but the ancient gods were stubborn and would not die out easily, despite Savash's, Barish's, and Freed's efforts to do away with some of the more odious practices of the pagans, such as human sacrifice.

### B. Government

#### 1) Mount Haven

When Men first broke through into the Seven Nations, they built a city called Mount Haven that initially had a tribal chieftain and council model similar to that later adopted by the Woodfolk. As the city grew, they elected a king who would function both as political and religious leader. The first few kings were strict monotheists, who worshipped the Creator, but they were later supplanted by ones who began worshipping power and other gods. The evil in the city came to such a point that the Creator judged it by turning everyone who lived in the walls to glass. The survivors of the cataclysm dispersed from the Blue Mountains into the Death March and other modern-day Nations.

#### 2) The Dark Years

The time following the fall of Mount Haven was designated the “Dark Years” simply because little was known of them. During most of this time Men were governed by tribal leaders who made war against each other until the time when a king arose out of Tashyer and subdued the nations.

#### 3) The ancient Kings and the Council of Elders

The first of the ancient Kings overthrew the conqueror and set up the first Council of Elders after the pattern of the Woodfolk. At first the Woodfolk dominated the Council until the sixth dynasty during which they were banned from the Council by King Tarz II who was a strong racist and believed only Men should rule the nations. This state of affairs remained until the end of the rule of the Kings and the Council.

The King was elected by the Council of Elders and his dynasty was carried on as long as possible, until either none of his sons judged were fit to reign or he had only daughters (both of which happened). Then a new King and new dynasty was chosen. The period classified by Jon son of Ethan as the first Golden Age began with the election of the second King, Urender, and lasted about 300 years until his dynasty was replaced.

#### 4) *The Warrior King*

Elam of the line of Melech rose up and overran the Seven Nations starting in the Western Nation and driving all the way across to the Death March. His regime was a totalitarian monarchy with all of the important decisions landing on the Warrior King's table. With his reign paganism, idolatry, sexual immorality, corruption and violence increased greatly. This empire lasted 162 years before being destroyed by Creon Kaya, called the Seer.

#### 5) *The Rebuilding and Second Golden Age*

During the next ten years the unfairness of the Warrior King's regime had to be ironed out and the power of the Council and the new King established. This was done by Savash and a very efficient Council comprised almost totally of Heroes of the Rebuilding. This was later known generally as the Council of Heroes.

The reign of Savash lasted 62 years. Technically the second Golden Age lasted on into the two year reign of Barish, son of Savash, who was murdered, it is said, by the cohorts of Elamin.

#### 6) *The Puppet Monarchy.*

With the expansion of the power of the Council of Elders a government very similar to that of the ancient Kings arose, however the Council had almost all the say and the King himself is nothing but a figurehead. Usually the Chairman of the Council was de facto leader of the Nations, Elamin son of Par'ah of the Flatlands holding that position first for twenty-four years, Khan One-Arm of the Pwyll for the next fifteen, and finally Mantonius the High Priest for the last nineteen.

#### 7) *The Ashtlandi Dynasty and the New Council of Elders*

After a period of 58 years under the Puppet Monarchy, the line of Savash was set aside and Freed Ashtlandi was elected King. He set about to purge the Council according to his right as King, had Mantonius executed for high treason and reinstated the Council according to *The Statutes of the Council of Elders* drawn up by the Council of Heroes. The New Council made one change, though, replacing the representative of the priests with the First Knight of the Ki-An Baht Knights, thus removing the tainted priesthood from ruling the nations.

### C. Language

The principal language of the nations is thought to be related to the great Indo-European languages of Earth and uses an alphabet similar to Greek or Cyrillic. However, there are many dialects spoken and there is a less well-known language of the Northern Provinces that seems to be related to Mandarin. The other languages are hardly spoken at all and have similarities to the first two.

## III. History

This can be covered only very briefly. After the arrival in the Blue Mountains, Man lived there for a period of six or seven hundred years, this time ending with the fall of Mount Haven. Those left over from that colonized the Seven Nations. The length of the period between the escape from the Blue Mountains and the establishment of the Council is uncertain, though some historians (Elian) figure it to be about 2500 years. Others who cite Jon son of Ethan, son of Creon Kaya, as their source, say 3000 - 4000 years. The only things that are certain, is that the Woodfolk were rediscovered during this time and that the first Werebeast Overlord came to power about half way through.

At the end these "Dark Years" (called so, because so little written material is found about it) a tribal leader in the area later known as Tashyer became king. Because of his cruelty and the abomination of his rule his name is not preserved and he is simply known as the Tyrant or the Emperor. He conquered the land and began to exploit it to its fullest extent. When he had done so, he tried to conquer the Death March, but was defeated

by the Karyl. Then he turned west and began to conquer the Nations. The tribes did not want to be subjected to him, but were unable to resist his army alone, so they formed an alliance and elected a man called Artus as their leader, who later became the first ancient King. Elian states that he was half Woodman, but that is questionable as he is the only one who makes this claim and Jon son of Ethan flatly rejects it in favor of more ancient sources preserved during his time.

Artus defeated the conquering army and was crowned by the people. He based his government on the Woodfolk principles (see IIB2) and reigned for thirty years. He was the only one of his dynasty, however, to take the throne. Then followed a time of relative peace that lasted nearly 1500 years. At that point the Warrior King came to power in the Western Nation and overran the now rotting and corrupt Council of Elders, setting up his empire for 162 years.

He was defeated by Creon Kaya and after ten years of Rebuilding under the wise leadership of King Savash son of Elam and the Council of Heroes, the land was at peace until the King died at the age of 83 from natural causes.

In the second year of his reign King Barish, son of Savash, was then murdered by Elamin, son of Par'ah, the husband of Licia, sister of Creon Kaya. Barish's brother Victor was condemned for killing the King in a mock trial, put on a ship and sent into the Great Deep. Yilmaz, a weak grandson of Savash, was selected as a figurehead and Elamin and his friends effectively ruled the council.

Jon writes that a 58-year period of massacring the followers of Yeshua began with the death of his grandmother Lady Aspen, two years after the death of Savash, King of the Seven Nations. This was ended after the death of Elamin (who died about half-way into the persecution period) and his friends in the Council. Though Jon says Elamin's death was from natural causes, many other historians claim that it was poison, probably administered by the son of Ethan himself. Whether this is true or not, no one can tell.

The persecution continued another 34 years at the hand of Khan One-Arm and then under Mantonius the High Priest until the Council elected Freed Ashtlandi out of the line of Adem's son Paltrik as King after Yilmaz's grandson Korkut died without leaving any children. Mantonius supported this, thinking that he could abandon the line of Savash and set up a line that he could control even better than that of Savash, whose stronger descendants now vied for the throne. Unbeknownst to him, Freed was a man of utmost integrity who had been brought up under the tutelage of Jon son of Ethan from his youngest years, who taught him of Savash's reign and the true place of the Council of Elders. Freed had shown himself as an able and incorruptible ruler in his Countship of the Province of Arinur and hence, upon coming to power, tried Mantonius for treason and breaching of *The Statutes of the Council of Elders* and had him beheaded.

After a purge by King Freed there was a period of relative peace and economic freedom, which dwindled as the elderly King's death approached and his four sons vied for power. The *Historie of the Nations Seven* by Jon, son of Ethan, mentions the rise of Victor, the eldest son of Freed, and the onset of a major battle against his two brothers Arik and Mosa who claimed Tashyer and the Pwyll as their kingdoms. According Gaspard of Kayail, a later historian, Jon son of Ethan was killed in the battle mentioned, but here the most accurate chronology of the Seven Nations ends.

## IV. Historical Sources

There are basically three sources that detail the history of the Seven Nations. They are listed here according to age, not reliability.

### A. The Chronicles of Elian

Originally written in three volumes, these Chronicles are the oldest of historical records available in the Seven Nations. Unfortunately they are only partially available today, some of the material dating from the Dark Years and the rule of Artus having been lost in the shuffle. However, they contain the first hints of the rise of the Seer and so make for interesting reading.

Elian was thought to be one of Artus' close friends and his book does contain some clear references to the rise of the first King and Council, including a brief documentation of the battles at the beginning of Artus' reign.

The Chronicles begin with the rise of Mount Haven, containing detailed lists of the first people who broke through into the Seven Nations, presumably taken from the Chronicles of Mount Haven themselves. There is no equal to these lists anywhere in the history of the nations so many scholars look on them skeptically. The book continues with various vignettes from the life of the people in Mount Haven, explains the fall and contains a large number of legends from the Dark Years, including stories about Tarla, Ebediyen, Stahl and other "gods", which later were converted into legends. Elian tends to debunk much of the legend surrounding these "deities" and tells the events as they were. He also goes on to describe the Tyrant's advent, his rise to power, and his conquest, first of Tashyer, then later of the Seven Nations. Arthus' battle against the Tyrant is described and the best-preserved Chronicles end with his coronation, though there is one copy extant that also contains events from the early years of Arthus' reign, including a very interesting retelling of his first real fight with the Woodfolk in the Council of Elders. The fact that this is only attested in one copy of the Chronicles, especially one that is missing several other key parts, makes most scholars – regardless of what Race they're from – leery as to its authority.

All in all the Chronicles of Elian make for a good primary source on the Mount Haven and Dark Years periods of Seven Nations history and should be considered when trying to reconstruct the past of that world.

## B. *A Historie of the Nations Seven* by Jon Son of Ethan

Jon son of Ethan's ambitious eight-volume work is to this day considered the definitive source on the history of the Seven Nations. Most of it was penned by Jon himself, though it is clear in places that Kithra had her hand in it, too. There is no doubt that the authors had access to many writings that are no longer available, probably due to the destruction of the Halls of Knowledge. Some of the modern scholars in the Nations have looked on some passages in Jon's work with skepticism, as there are no other records of some of the events, but on the whole these books are often viewed not only as authoritative, but even divinely inspired. In some way they comprise part of the holy writings of the Followers of Yeshua, especially as they contain most of the writings of Creon Kaya and the Four Scrolls from the Rock of Ages. Below is a breakdown of what is contained in each of the eight volumes.

### 1) Book One – From Arrival to the Fall of Mount Haven

The first book covers much of the same material found in the Chronicles of Elian, though Jon often supplements it with information he took from Woodfolk lore and Werebeast sources, as well as some of the other older writings of Men in the Halls of Knowledge. He pays special attention to the creation of the Woodfolk, listing the most ancient tradition of Lif and Yasham's origin as authoritative. He does quote Elian directly about the fall of Mount Haven, leaving no doubt about what he thought of Elian's work.

### 2) Book Two – The Dark Years

Jon carefully organizes the materials from this age into truth and myth, comparing the two. He covers some of the same ground as Elian, but deepens it. It is clear that he includes the sources of the Werebeasts and the Woodfolk, citing their own histories of this time as well as their interaction with Men. Much of this book is broken up into little vignettes.

### 3) Book Three – The War of the Tyrant and the Rise of Artus First-King

Beginning with the background to the Tyrant's reign and continuing on into Artus' war with the Tyrant and his establishing of the Council of Elders, this is considered the definitive version of the events of the first King and Council. Jon's research is painstaking and this is where Kithra's hand is first

clearly seen in her assessment of some of the happenings surrounding Artus' struggles with the Woodfolk in the Council. The book ends with the death of the childless Artus and the battle within the Council to elect the second King, Urender.

#### 4) *Book Four – The Kings and the Council*

The longest of the eight, this book is perhaps the driest of all to read as it is mostly a listing of each King and what the major events and accomplishments of their reigns were. The most important part of this book is the Seer Prophecy given by Yedutun the High Priest. The book ends with the rise of the Warrior King and a brief description of his reign. Jon sums the whole of it up as a “corrupt time, which should not be preserved in writing so those following after will not seek to emulate it.”

#### 5) *Book Five – The Seer Chronicle*

Beginning with Creon Kaya's birth, this volume details his life from childhood to death, including many things not mentioned in this book. Jon's dry, factual style is often broken by Kithra's more energetic hand, especially when telling some of the most-loved parts of the story, such as Lady Aspen finding Creon Kaya on the beach and their early romance. It is clear that she also did much of the writing of Creon's encounter with the Creator, but in the bottom line it is Jon who carries the story, pointing back to the many prophecies made during the period of the Kings and even in the Dark Years and how Creon Kaya fulfilled them with his office.

#### 6) *Book Six – The Four Scrolls and the Writings of the Seer*

This book is simply a copy of the Four Scrolls about the life of Yeshua that Creon Kaya retrieved from the Rock of Ages, as well as most of his writings instructing the Followers how to live their lives and setting down much of the doctrine of the Creator, Yeshua, and the Light Within, or the Three-In-One, as Creon Kaya liked to call his God. There are basically three versions of this book in circulation. The most complete has twelve short treatises written by Creon Kaya. Another lacks three of these but adds another, much longer manuscript which covers much of the material in the missing sections. The third contains only four treatises, one being the long one in the second version, two being found in the other two, and the fourth being Creon Kaya's account of his journey. This last part is sometimes viewed as apocryphal, but it is clear that Jon and Kithra drew heavily on it while writing the Seer Chronicle.

#### 7) *Book Seven – The Years of Persecution*

Beginning with the Creon Kaya's final journey to Shion and his beheading, this is a first-person account of what happened during the following fifty-eight years. It reads much like a diary, which it probably was at one point, before someone other than Jon, presumably Kithra, formed it into the seventh book of the Historie. It is one of the more enjoyable portions of this work, containing a lot of small personal vignettes that allow the reader to glimpse what society was like under the Persecution.

#### 8) *Book Eight – Freed Ashtlandi and the Brothers' War*

Jon returns to a more historical mode here, describing the last years of Mantonius' rule through the Council and Freed Ashtlandi's election to the throne. It is clear that he describes the fall of his persecutors with some zeal and that he has a high opinion of King Freed.

The book continues with a summary of Freed's reign and tells of the beginnings of the Brothers' War. During the description of the first crucial battle, the hand changes again, undoubtedly Kithra's, detailing the war to its conclusion.

At this point the hand changes again to one unlike either Jon or Kithra's, but similar to that found in the Code of the Grey of the Ki-An Baht, making many scholars think that Daymon the Grey, a close friend of Jon son of Ethan, penned the following paragraphs. Many historians discount this section,

which recounts the death of Jon son of Ethan during the first battle, as the two oldest extant manuscripts lack them.

### C. *A Concise History of the Rebuilding and Second Golden Age* by Gaspard of Kayail

Gaspard of Kayail's book is brief, concise, as the title suggests. Little is known about him, but there are suggestions that he is descended from Jimri son of Belik. His writing style is engaging, and he makes no attempt to hide his dislike of Creon Kaya. He is very fair in his assessment of the King and the Council, though, and that makes his book worth reading.

The title is a bit of a misnomer, though, because the chronicle continues on to the end of the Brothers' War, at which time it is thought that Gaspard penned it. He covers much of the same material that Jon son of Ethan does in his fifth, seventh and eighth volumes of his *magnum opus*. He does continue on until Kaya the Red, the son of Freed Ashtlandi, defeats his younger brothers and restores peace to the nations.

Gaspard is the historian who most unequivocally points the finger at Jon son of Ethan as the cause for Elamin son of Par'ah's death during the Persecution, but his evidence is sketchy and his animosity towards Creon Kaya's clan is well known. For that reason most scholars discount his accusations and are very careful about taking everything he writes at face value. It is clear that he has an agenda to discredit the Seer, though he is much more positive about the Ashtlandis, trying to prove that they are of no relation to the Seer, something that he is not quite successful at. Unfortunately his assertions have muddied the historical waters enough that some modern historians question Jon's family tree for the Ashtlandis. In the end it is up to the reader to decide what he or she thinks of Gaspard of Kayail.

# Bible References

- <sup>1</sup>Psalm 32:2
- <sup>2</sup>Micah 7:19b
- <sup>3</sup>Psalm 19:7f
- <sup>4</sup>Psalm 139:7-10
- <sup>5</sup>Exodus 34:6-7 (altered)
- <sup>6</sup>Psalm 51:16-17
- <sup>7</sup>see John 5
- <sup>8</sup>John 1:29
- <sup>9</sup>Matthew 5:7-8
- <sup>10</sup>see Matthew 12:22-32
- <sup>11</sup>Matthew 21:10
- <sup>12</sup>Matthew 21:9
- <sup>13</sup>see Matthew 21
- <sup>14</sup>Luke 18:31-33
- <sup>15</sup>Luke 21:46
- <sup>16</sup>See Mt 21:12-16; Mk 11:12-17; Lk 19:45-46
- <sup>17</sup>See Luke 23:21
- <sup>18</sup>See Luke 23:25-26
- <sup>19</sup>Matthew 27:46
- <sup>20</sup>John 19:30
- <sup>21</sup>Luke 23:43
- <sup>22</sup>Psalm 119:18
- <sup>23</sup>see Luke 4:24
- <sup>24</sup>see Luke 4:1-28
- <sup>25</sup>Ecclesiastes 3:1
- <sup>26</sup>Ecclesiastes 3:7-8
- <sup>27</sup>John 1:1

# Author's Note

Fantastic fiction is like chocolate: it is harmless in small doses and at times can even be beneficial. However, the tantalizing sweetness can quickly turn to a habit and a habit to an obsession. Just look at the cult following such great authors as J.R.R. Tolkien, Marion Zimmer Bradley, Terry Brooks, and their sci-fi counterparts such as Frank Herbert, Isaac Asimov, and George Lucas enjoy. People who live, eat, drink and breathe imaginary worlds, such as that of Star Wars, Star Trek, or Middle Earth have succumbed to the power of fantasy, losing touch with the real world.

Then why should I even be attempting to write a book in the genre of fantastic fiction? There are several reasons. First of all fantastic fiction can be a mighty tool in the right hands. It and its sister allegory shed light on reality in ways that escape us. They allow a simplification of reality where concepts and ideas that are often submerged in every-day life can come to the fore. They allow for the happenings of things within paranormal realms that excite and catch the reader's attention, letting their God-given imagination play an even greater role in their understanding of life. They allow both the author and the reader to clothe their understanding of God in robes that will give them a deeper vision of how He works, be it in the hearts of men or in the happenings of nature.

Secondly, the realm of "Christian" fantasy has been quite neglected over the past few years, with few works that hold Christ in the center, whether in His true form or in an allegorical one. This is especially true for the adult reader. I hope that my meager attempt at presenting a Christ-centered fantasy, rooting it in reality as far as it is possible, would begin to fill this gap, spurring many other aspiring authors on to build their own worlds where the Living and Reigning Jesus Christ can be seen and preached.

Third, we who are Christians should attempt to make inroads into every area of life, attempting to bring Christ to those in all walks of life, from the video game addict to the Trekkie, from the movie nut to the bookworm. But the necessity is not just to have the materials available, it is to create in them materials that are vastly superior to that of the world's. Our message is the best message of all. It must be presented in the best way possible, sparing no expense. Mediocrity causes more harm to us than we realize.

I realize that my work will probably fall short of this goal of excellence, but as there might be many things within this tale that will seem simpler and less deep, I hope that you will understand the good intentions behind it and take it as a work in progress, the first step of a long journey to excellence.

Last of all, I wrote this because it enabled me to process some ideas that had struck me while reading both C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* and John White's *Archives of Anthropos*. It became an outlet and sharpening tool for the strong imagination God has given me.

But I would like to ask that this book not be over-analyzed. There certainly are pertinent points in it that might want further analysis and probing of the author's thoughts. Above all, though, this is a work created for the enjoyment of others, granting an opportunity to step back from reality and look at it from another perspective, hopefully freshening that of the reader to appreciate reality even more. It did so for me. Especially my understanding of Earth as the central home of mankind and his imaginary dissemination from here seems pertinent to point out the special place that "Thulcandra" (as C.S. Lewis calls our home in his amazing *Space Trilogy*), the Silent Planet, has in God's heart and plan. Where else would He endeavor to walk as man? What other race could experience such a redemption, save humanity? For, as it is written, "*Nor did he [Christ] enter heaven to offer himself again and again, [...] Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; [...]*" (Hebrews 9:25,27-29) Christ's sacrifice was once and final. None other is needed, whether depicted allegorically or not.

I would like to thank all of those who helped me labor through the writing and editing of this volume, of which there will hopefully be more. But above all else, I thank God that He gave me both the ability and imagination to attempt such a thing. So, in the immortal words of Johann Sebastian Bach, *Soli Deo Gloria*.



The Warrior King holds sway over the Seven Nations and all is firmly within his grasp. Relishing his reign of terror, chaos, and war, Elam fears nothing. To him the gods are petty annoyances that merely help solidify his reign and he regards himself as all-powerful. There is no threat to him, save one. An ancient prophecy tells of one who will rise to defeat the Warrior King and reinstate a government of peace and justice. He will dispense Truth to the Nations and teach about the One God, the Creator. He is called the

# SEER

The prophecy is about to come true in a hidden enclave deep within the Flatlands as an aged priest seeks out the man who is chosen to become the Seer. Together the old man and the young step from the safety of the shadows of history to walk in the danger of full light in a quest to meet the Creator face-to-face and to carry his judgment to the Warrior King and the Nations.

But just as the forces of good and light are beginning to stir, the lord of darkness is marshalling his troops to stop this single threat at any cost.

This is the first book in the Across the Ages series. Look for the sequel, *Envoy*, coming soon from Hawke AI E-Publishing.

#### About the Author

Josh Malcolm grew up in the Middle East where he was exposed early on to the fictional writings of C. S. Lewis. J. R. R. Tolkien and Stephen R. Lawhead later became two of his favorite authors. Like Tolkien, Josh enjoys reading and studying history, whether real or imagined. A web site developer by trade, Josh currently resides in New England.

For more stories and novels by Josh Malcolm, please visit <http://www.wolfhawke.com>