

Helden



John Hughes



the liberation of Sartar has begun



Humakt guards this book. Honour its truth. Accept its discipline.

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This story is dedicated to those *Heroes of the King*, and to Greg Stafford, who taught me to trust my visions.

Heiden

Fires of Mist and
Wind-blown Snow



John Hughes

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A tale of death and laughter from the Hero Wars

Bound I to Humakt
Serve in awe
yet practise double labour.

With skaldic verse, and tales of war
I also serve Donandar.

after Archilochos of Paros
c. 660 BCE.

The heroes filled their drinking cups with wine
Sainted with water, which is best, and sipped;
And what in them was noble, grew;
And truthfulness, with many meanings, spread
Over the slopes and through the leafy spears
As Priam thrust the knife into the white lamb's throat.

Christopher Logue
War Music.





Stasis

Far Point, dark and broken, is full of wolf packs.
An angry wind sweeps down the gors,
 broo howl about the gallt,
the dark deer bellows across the frozen heights.

The hail is fierce upon the roof.
The storm wild lashes — our god is angry!
The land-spirits mock at the groans
 echoing through the walls of the palisade.

We are storm-shattered, wind-battered,
Oh Mighty Lord of the Air!
Your wind has engulfed us like twigs
 swallowed in a red flame.

Want and Winter are upon us.
The lake side is flooded.
Thunder Brothers blast the mountainside.
How long must we endure their fury?

The Travail of Taros Ridgewalker,
from *TarosKarla: The Lay of the Ancestors*,
as recorded in Alda Chur, 1635.

°^Who was that woman in your dreams?^°

The voice broke my perfect darkness, perfect silence, perfect peace.

I hated that voice.

In that same instant daylight found me, fought me, and dragged me back into wakefulness with a bitter blade-touch of ice and hoar frost. Caught between two worlds, a refugee from both, I stumbled out of my rough-bound shelter into a storm-wracked mountainscape of snow and sleeping forest. No longer afforded the refuge of sleep, I coughed blood, forcing chill air into labouring lungs.

Breathe... breathe... breathe....

Where was I? Lingering cast-off fragments of dream confused me. Were these the proud red hills of Ralios, my tribal homeland? The coastal hills of Maniria, where I'd made my marriage bed? No, these were the jagged hills of Far Point, guardians of my exile, silent keepers of my slow and self-appointed death.

Icy spearpoints punctured my lungs. Slow... Deep... I gasped, coughing, seeking to draw clean breath. Clouds of pain formed on the frozen air. *Breathe damn you! Move... breathe... move...*

The tide of nightmare receded, leaving memories and feelings carved deep by repetition. It was always the same. Every night the same bloody scene, the same searing ritual...

Seabirds circle in a foreign sky. A woman ascends the headland alone, chestnut hair billowing in the ocean breeze. Five sails dot the distance. I scream against the rising wind. Warning her. She does not hear.

°She seemed very beautiful.°

I tried to ignore the intrusive voice inside my head, familiar flat tones without emotion or inflection. *Be quiet!* The last thing I wanted right now was Karis and her meaningless interruptions.

Damn her to silence!

With wakefulness came despair, the old comrade ever at my neck. Yet as the coughing passed, a semblance of clarity settled on my racing thoughts. I stood watching as the dragon-heights discarded their tattered cloak of darkness, greeting the cold dawn with a moment of perfect stillness. Drawing careful breath, I sought an inner silence to match the moment of tranquillity without. To the south, Kero Fin towered over the fledgling peaks of the Dragonspine, crested by the Orlanth Cloud, attended by gusting daimones of storm and snow. The peaks of the Ancient Mother rose up to touch the Skydome, while her breasts reached deep beneath the earth to succour bloodless hells. At my back an angry skywound bled down in torrents to the churning waters of Skyfall Lake. And to the west shone the Goddess Moon, half obscured by cloud, staring a baleful blood-red, all trace of the white halo vanished.

The glaring moon was another bad omen in a long season scarred by bad omens. As I glanced upwards to its twisted features, a skald's warning, long forgotten, came unbidden to my mind. 'For the land is afflicted by a hero.'

Bad omens.

My cloak of burdens lay discarded by the ashes of my campfire, all feather and thorn, the filth of four seasons exile. I shouldered its yielding bulk, grateful for the scant and grudging warmth it provided. No longer a warrior, I dressed now as a *gelt*, a wild man of the wastes. Woven thorns and shameful colour scratched rough comfort against my upper arm.

I shivered as a chill son of the Air Tribe speared me with his frozen lance, stirring dead leaves about the camp in a slow encircling dance. The blast reminded me of my need for the warmth and protection of a lowfire's flame. Bending forward, I fumbled for the charm at my belt. Frozen fingers found it, a fine-carved fetish of burnished salamander blood. Focussing my concentration upon tinder and coals, I made a clumsy gesture, word and thought and action as one, patterns in the eternal web.

"Mahome's daughter, friend and helper, Rise!"

The kindling erupted, released its inner flame, spurred to flickering life by the power of my will. Huddling close, I felt the lambent blaze drive the worst of the chill from hands and face and bones. *Easy now... breath deep.*

As the flamechild grew, the worst of the coughing subsided, and passing warmth brought a sense of self-discipline. I retrieved my iron blade from the muddy shadows of the shelter, an act of long habit as much as conscious will. The sword's once-familiar weight seemed heavy and unbalanced in my grasp.

Hefting it high, I circled windershins, invoking the daimones of blade and battle, calling upon the guardians of the six directions to sanctify my offering ground. Then in a solemn voice that belied my present wretchedness, I intoned the ancient phrases of the Dawn Muster.

"Death Lord of the Long Road, Humakt, Name-Quester, cut short my days, destroy me..."

For all of its tradition and power, the invocation seemed an empty one, the words tumbling from my lips as ice water over the bare rocks of a mountain height. Yet the ancient phrases retained their potency: familiar words and gestures invoking a sense of calm, a discipline, a clearing of my mind. They reminded me of the man that once I was; Helden Aringorson, called Broken Tongue, Sword of Humakt, Arkati, proud hunting dog of the Keonos tribe. Helden Broken Tongue, who once guided the river barges as a weaponcarl of the Trader Princes, who upheld the power of Death as Shield Arm of the Alda Chur Sword Temple.

That man was gone: even the reminder bit deep: a mocking accusation. The shell that remained was pitiful: weighed down by wyrd, victim of memory, unable to laugh and unable to cry. Wilderness *gelt*, talker to spirits, unsure of who he was or what he might become.

"Let fate's fierce frenzy dye my blade blood red, that I, enduring, suffer into truth..."

Concluding the invocation, I solemnly lowered my blade. Silence returned, the only answer to my call. *Always silence.* Four full seasons of silence, four seasons of solitary exile on the edge of madness, tossed back and forth between the false visions of spirits and the deceptions of memory. All because an old woman had come to preach the hero...

A fishing village amidst the limitless islands of Mournsea. Five sails. Blue waters, smitten by many oars, foaming forward. Wolf Pirate raiders, the totem prows of their ships howling hate and bitter anguish. A woman alone. A husband who is elsewhere, chasing falsehoods and the promise of heroes...

°She seemed... somehow familiar. You dream much of late. Sad dreams.°

The voice of Karis echoed again inside my head. *Damn you!* Distracted once more from reverie, I grunted, angry at her stubborn persistence. Karis was all that kept me sane these last seasons, but that didn't lessen my resentment at her presence. No peace. Never alone. Reminding me...

The woman is trapped on the headland while her village burns below. She sees the slaughter, hears the shouts and screams of kinfolk, witnesses the feeble resistance of bronze against iron. She bears no weapon bar a blunted mussel knife...

No. *Enough.* Answer Karis.

"It was my wife. Am I to understand that even my dreams are no longer private? That my most secret thoughts are now yours as well?"

°Only the strongest ones. The ones you think about. Most dreams come from your body, and I don't understand them very well.°

As usual, Karis had completely missed my irony. I'd wanted to jibe, to silence. But she'd never taken physical form, and the emotions of man and beast were alien to her. Even the femininity I'd assigned to her in my thoughts was arbitrary, and often misleading.

I gave long pause before replying. The flame beneath my fingers flared weakly amidst the kindling, struggling to draw life from indifferent wood. Forces of fire were eternally weak in this land, for the tribes of Air and Earth and Water were the sole rulers of Far Point, and they jealously guarded it against all intruders.

"Well then, beneficent ally, bright essence of all that's holy and true, what in your wisdom do you think the dream meant?" I was angry now, angry and resentful.

°I think that your wife's death gifts a truth beyond your capacity to understand.°

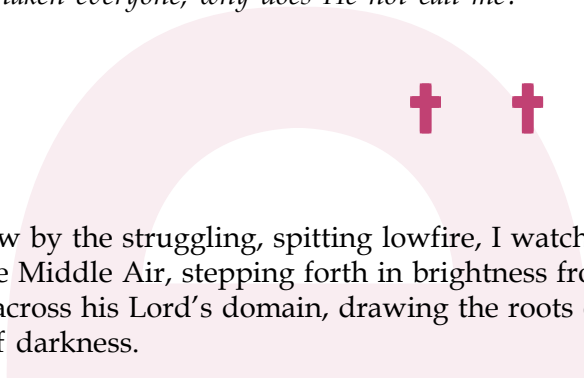
Damn her. I fought against a burning that cut deep into my gut. Karis's statement had been a simple one. A truth. 'Beyond my capacity to understand'. But no mention, no comprehension, of the empty days, the haunted nights. So cold. So inhuman. *Damn her to silence.*

"Damn you all!"

The surrounding hills were indifferent to the scream, well used by now to my all too frequent rages. The icy stream trickled as before, its sleepy water-sprite utterly apathetic to petty human concerns. Leaf-bare oak and birch and alder whispered in a private language to the sylphs playing about their moss-furred roots, patiently awaiting the coming snows. In the marshes below, the spirits of the wilderness dreamed on. Valind's icy breath cut fresh from the north, feeding on my echo, fresh promise of misery to come, rain and sleet and perhaps snow, the gelid chill so common to these hills. *Bad omens.*

My sword tip trailed the mud.

Death has taken everyone, why does He not call me?



Seated now by the struggling, spitting lowfire, I watched in silence as Loyal Elmal returned to claim the Middle Air, stepping forth in brightness from the Doorway of Voria. He cast a fiery gaze across his Lord's domain, drawing the roots of a new day from the fleeting shadows of darkness.

Stand strong on dark earth

see in the sunrise

Web weaving windward

wyrd writhing round.

Another fragment of ancient skald song came unbidden to my mind. The skalds and their word hoard belonged to another time, and were gone forever from my life. Gone too was the mead hall, the roasted joint, the weaponcarl's portion, the company of warriors. All I had now was waste and wilderness.

My back rested against the rough bark of a towering yew: a fungi-festooned death tree, sacred to Humakt. The tree was of my tribe, but even so I'd long ago hammered a copper spike into its trunk, protection from the slow effects of its creeping vapour.

I broke my fast with the remains of the previous day's gleanings: pricklemelon, winterbloom and wild seeds pounded into a bland and tasteless porridge. Sheltered beneath the spreading boughs of the yew, I fed the struggling lowfire with dry wood, boiling an infusion to ease the blood and spittle. In an effort to add potency to the mess of herbs and willow bark, I chanted a healing verse that I'd learned from a world-blind shaman on the Noshain River.

So long ago, so far away. And how different those verdant rivers of Ralios and Maniria from this ice-bound dragon-height. All around me valleys brimmed with mist: fog banks overflowing like clearwine from a dark goblet. Under Elmal's strengthening gaze the landscape glistened with frozen rain; the fierce white rime that burns the stony soil. Below me stretched the gors and the gallt: the forests and waste of the Far Place. There among the tendrils of the oak the winterblooms were coming into full flower: uzfriends and wild dark, spores and fungi that fed on darkness and cold as surely as the springblooms of Sea Season fed on sungift and daylight. Their darkness dazzled with an iridescent blue-black intensity, swallowing the wasted blooms of kinder seasons.

I pushed stale air from straining lungs, attempting to force the weight of despondency from my soul. There were traps to check, snares to set, firewood and victuals to gather. Yet I was hesitant to move, caught in the campfire's fragile warmth, still dazed by the confusion of images and violent emotions that haunted my sleep, collecting moondew...

She carries only a mollusc knife. The raiders are drunk, weighed down with weapons and spoil, blades already slick with the blood of the innocent. She has only a knife...

She takes three slow days to die.

°Tell me what you see around you.°

Karis again. A deliberate interruption. She must be sensing when the memories stole my soul, trying to bind me to the here and now. *A pointless exercise.* Pointless and futile.

Yet my anger was gone. I gazed across my cliffs of shadow and gave reply, voice tinged with weariness and regret, remembering again the skalds and vision poets of distant Ralios. "I see beauty in solitude and desolation. I see dancing shadows in a stormscape... fires of mist and wind-blown snow."

°Look to the world. Is all as it was?°

A strange question. These heights were eternal, planted long ago by an ancient god to force apart the races of men. Not even the unspeakable upheavals of the Greater Darkness had disturbed their ancient beds. I could not believe that anything in these hills would ever change.

"All is as yesterday. Nothing has changed. Why?"

°I felt it again in the night. Changes... great waves coursing through the fabric of what-is. Waves of power... the Runes of Motion are cast again upon the world. It was as last season, when the Glowline faltered and died till the red moon's cycle waxed anew. I sense enormous energies being loosed to the six directions. The old world is dying.°

I grunted, unsure what to make of such potent mystery. What might have caused it? Some heroquester returning from the harrow-paths of hell? A Lunar ceremony intended once more to chain the Wind? An awakening dragon, like the monster that had brought salvation at Windtop? Or had Great Arkat himself returned to the world of men, offering Liberation to those who dared the struggle? My own Keanos tribe awaited his return, though the prophecies whispered he would appear in strange and unfamiliar forms.

Anything was possible. The Orlanthi tribes of Sartar were locked in a bitter life and death struggle against the Empire of the Red Moon. It was a struggle of blades and spirits, of ideas and customs and world-tearing magics. Even Far Point, the seat of my exile, was torn by divided loyalties, setting Moon and Sun against Wind, tribe against tribe, clan against clan and sister against brother. Once I had been part of that struggle, a Sword of Humakt, Hundred-thane, bringer of Death and Truth. *No longer*. Whatever the upheavals that swept the outer world, nothing would reach this hidden fastness amidst the gors and gallt. The battles raging here were solely my own.

I picked a greasy bone from the fireside, all that remained of the witchbird that was last evening's meal. The bone was pocked with hollows: even my meagre sustenance brought omens of foreboding. As the dark season deepened, I was slowly starving, slowly freezing, slowly coughing away my lungs. I, the far-travelled earth-stepper, wretched now and winter-wearied. Would a lonely death overtake me here, caverned forever under the drifted snow? Or could I yet reach the God, force myself from this paralysis of will, guide myself to a true and proper death?

I swore then, raging against my life, my misfortune, my weakness and crippling anger. The inner desolation seemed complete. I was trapped in a net of my own creation, neither living nor dying, merely marking time, waiting and hoping for some resolution whose form I could not even imagine.

The pins of my sword were rusted.

Just how much could one soul bear? *Just how much could one soul dare?*



✠ Runo II ✠

Spirit

Lord of the Long Road, Humakt, Name-Quester
Cut short my days, destroy me.

Master of Silence, Bronze-Dyer, Illusion Render
Betray my hope, destroy me.

Wielder of the Truth that cuts
the pain that frees
Destroy me once, destroy me twice
till only you remain.

Great Ironbroker of corpses, Straight-Will,
Terrible Secret
I do not claim to judge you
to proclaim, 'this is just' or 'this is evil'
for you alone know Truth.

I know only to obey
surrender to your sharp command
that I may walk the long road, hear the silence
and free myself from life.

All I have is death, and company of swords
to lift the weight of falsehood from my soul.

May fierce fate's frenzy dye our blades blood red
that we, enduring, suffer into truth.

The Dawn Muster.
Highblade Cohort,
Alda Chur War Temple, 1624.

Huraya and her mist children had fled before the brilliance of Elmal's Golden Shield; the merest wisps now lingered along the ridge tops or curled about the lower valleys. It was the way of things, first laid down in the timelessness before the Dawning. I still had not stirred from my place by the lowfire. All around me the mountain landscape resonated with the life-pulse of animals and elements and spirits; forces and powers, all the magical possibilities of life and growth and change.

They were as nothing to me.

Other matters occupied my attention. Karis—more correctly, the sword into which she was bound—lay cradled in my arms.

“Were you born, Karis?”

“I was... conceived, yes. But not in a way that you could understand. I am a breath of iron, iron in essence and iron in purpose.”

“And will you die?”

“I will cease; perhaps by the action of another, or, if Will triumphs, when the Thought becomes the Deed. But ceasing is different to dying, and dying different from incarnating death. I have become death... many times.”

At times like these, the gulf between us seemed insurmountable. The God had gifted me with an ally who possessed neither shape nor body, a spirit without experience or comprehension of the physical realm. Karis was a daimon of iron, a living drop of Humakt’s holy blood. The world in which I suffered and toiled was something akin to a dream to her, while she perceived obscure spiritual truths as shapes and sounds and movements, mysteries I could not begin to comprehend. Only the God united us, the God and our commitment to the triple mysteries of Truth and Death and Honour.

Yet whatever the truth in Karis’ deceptively simple words, I could not understand the meaning behind them. Why did I bother?

Because she was the only other voice in my universe.

“You... You truly have no emotions, no being?”

“I *am* an emotion, a sentient expression of the God, incarnate hope and will.”

I’d do better talking to the firesnakes nesting in the yew, or to the spirit of the yew itself. But there was something here I had to understand, that I needed to grapple with.

“I’ve wandered from the path. Utterly lost. You must know that.”

“And the fish in the river is thirsty. You know the litany as well as I; ‘Our lives are pain, what part not come from God?’ The path that you have chosen demands that you must endure into truth.”

“What would you know of it!”

“I stay with you. I am now a part of you. And the god knows. Humakt knows. Humakt is the blade, the bearer, the victim. He is the act and the essence. He is Death.”

“But I am no longer capable of following the god! My blade has rusted. I’m trapped, paralysed. It’s been four long seasons.”

“Your sword has not shattered. The god has given permission to find the truth of what you are. Only that is real.”

My ally, the temple catechist. These were the self-same words I might mouth to a young initiate more interested in sword play than the disciplines of the Long Path. Yet in Karis’s toneless and unaffected delivery there was no trace of irony. If I had still been capable, I might have laughed out loud.

And there *was* something in what she said. I knew the words by rote, though it was obvious I still did not understand them.

"So why do you persist with me?"

°Because life and death are full of surprises. And you too are an expression of the god.°

There was kindness in those words, and I dwelt upon them for a time in silence. Karis did not again intrude upon my reverie, even when I found myself lost once more to memory and regret. The flames subsided to dull red embers, unfed and unnoticed. I watched in idle fascination as a mountain haggard despatched a hare on the open slopes below. Proud-swept wings, a sudden darting dive, flash of blue light as killing-magic rent the air, then a triumphant caw as death-sharp talons grasped the prey. Despite the season, the hare was as black as the days before the sun.

Another omen.

In the forest beneath the braich, my company of white-necked ravens lifted in great circles, disturbed by the passage of something large through the undergrowth. Some horned boar, muddy and rooting in the beech wood? A roe deer perhaps, a solitary wolf... or something else?

"Karis?"

°I sense it too.° I waited long moments as her awareness lifted from my soul, focussing on the disturbance below. I felt the subtle flow of energies, my backbone tingling as she wove her spells, reaching across two worlds.

°A... human I think... a woman. Power full. A train of horses... too many for one rider. If there are others, they are prepared and hidden from my touch. The woman moves directly up the allt.... And the messenger bears two banners.°

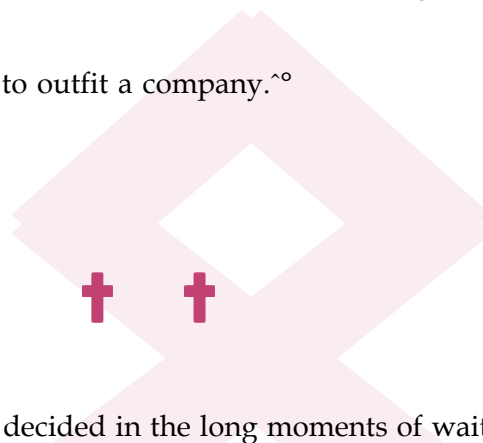
This was sword cant; it meant that Karis had both bad news and good.

"The red?"

°She bears enough tempered iron to outfit a company.°

"And the white?"

°She is not wearing any of it.°



Oft times, victory or defeat will be decided in the long moments of waiting *before* a battle. Every warrior knows this truth. Waiting casts seeds of fear, of doubt, of uncertainty. I waited now, listening, watching, waiting... for movement, for action, for the sudden clash of sword against shield, the bloody explosion of violence that promises honour or death. I'd already rubbed chalk between the palms of my hands, roughening my grip, unsure of what might pass in the uncertain minutes ahead. As taught to me by men now dead, I cultivated calm, tried to still my thoughts, accepting the silence and seeking within it a death song.

I didn't want this. I wanted them gone. *Leave me.*

The landscape, alive with an ancient presence, reacted in its own way to this new intrusion. Raw powers of elemental disdain flowed across my spine; I felt anew the violence this place expressed toward anyone who infringed its ancient solitude. Mortals mattered little here, be

they Bluefoot Orlanthi feuding in their mountain steads, the Dark Uz raging in their shadow lairs, or the unfathomable dragonewts in their nested cities of bone. Far Point was littered with the twisted debris of fallen empire; testimony to the folly of those who stood against the elemental powers of Wind and Earth and Water.

An intruder appeared at the bottom of the slope, a single leather-clad figure picking her way towards the camp. A woman, blade-thin and determined, leading two Kurian mounts and a pair of Adari pack horses. Her style of dress was neither Far Walker nor Aldachuri. A southern Sartarite perhaps, though her leggings were cross-gartered in the Praxian style. The horses had the look of good Elmali stock, strong in limb and spirit. The dried mud on their flanks told of recent passage through the marshes. Whoever they were, my unwelcome visitors were determined and wise in the ways of the gors and gallt.

There was no sign of a second rider—I imagined him keeping silent vigil, an arrow notched ready to his bow. My god-gifts could not sense him, but I was unsure what remained of those long-neglected powers. All in all, this was not a good sign.

Taking comfort from Karis' iron presence at my side, I squatted with my back to the yew-kin, taking note of the cover, the lines of sight. There was no easy shot for a hidden archer, no covered approach for an assassin. I had chosen this place well.

The stranger ignored me completely in her final approach, concentrating on guiding her horses up the treacherous slope.

She seemed perhaps thirty winters in age, a Sartarite by her look if not her dress. Lean and wiry in appearance, her faded tan riding leathers were embellished with intricate Praxian knotwork, and adorned with red-black feathers and beaded amber. She wore no armour, but a very competent-looking sax blade hung easy at her hips. It was an ancient weapon, the pommel flecked in silver, the hilt carved in twin likeness of a wyrmish monster. From her saddle hung a wind-fed spear, crenellated with recurring hooks: an ugly weapon.

The woman's tattooed face had been toughened by long exposure to wind and sun. Some of her tattoos were warrior marks, others were unknown to me. Obviously this woman was no native Far Walker. Her hair, dyed with henna to a deep and luxurious red, hung devoid of tribal topknots. She wore it about her face in thin braids, Praxian fashion. A wedding torc of blackened copper-gold dangled from her neck on a twisted scarf.

Who was she, this strange intruder? There seemed few ready clues. The figure of a bull had been worked in white across the leathers at her breast. The feathers adorning her hair were red vulture, death aspect of the Earth Goddess, also worn for safety in childbirth. Symbols of life and symbols of death.

Of course. A Red Woman. A Vingan, warrior-daughter to the Wind.

A Vingan.

Reaching the level ground at the top of the rise, the woman paused, seemingly unsurprised by the grim-visaged, outlandishly dressed figure glaring across at her. She smiled naively, perhaps nervously, glancing around the muddy disorder of my camp. Without a word she strolled to the fire and lowered herself down, unhooking her scabbard to place it on the ground by her side. She gave no greeting! Pulling off her dew-swollen boots, she warmed bare toes by the sullen flame. All this was done with an easiness, a light-heartedness that I instantly resented. How dare she impinge thus on the dignity of a Death Lord!

My voice crackled with barely suppressed violence. "Stranger, its considered polite, and prudent, to announce yourself when approaching an unknown camp. What if I'd taken affront?"

That smile again. "I'm safe enough. No one seeks a Sword of Humakt across the gors without knowing something of his temperament. And there is always another way."

Her answer stunned me. I frowned, all thought of my indignation vanquished by the revelation contained in that casual reply. She smiled again, gently, wiggling her toes. Laughing? Laughing at me! I remembered how I must look—some bush-wild gelt, semi-starved, bone thin, rough-bearded, wrapped about by a stinking cloak of feathers.

"Who are you?" I tried to keep my voice slow and even. It stumbled, cracked, betrayed me.

Her eyes met mine. "Once I was Oranda Ellasdotter, called the Horsebreaker, but now I am simply Cradledaughter. My clan is the White Quartz, my tribe the Kheldon. I am pledged in bondservice to Kallyr Starbrow, Queen of the Kheldon, now Free Prince and Warlord of the Sartari."

So Starbrow, the giver of gifts and oaths, had finally made claim to Sartar's throne, and was styling herself a Prince. There surely had been great and bitter upheaval, for such an action meant open rebellion, a rising of the tribes. *From warriors ravens grow red.*

"Do you journey with a companion?"

She glanced back to the two riding horses. "No." A pause. "Not yet."

The stranger's eyes flashed brilliant green, impish and full of life. She spoke in fluent Tarshite, though with the Sartarite inflection, braying her vowels and grinding her consonants. Doubtless she found my accent strange as well.

"You're a Vingan then, like the queen you serve."

"I worship the Red-Haired Daughter above the other gods of my people, yes. And the queen herself...", she faltered a moment, evading my question, "the queen leads my lodge by power and example."

Her hands trembled as I shifted weight, still squatting with the yew brother at my back. She hid her fear well.

"But don't worry Death Lord...", her voice became serious, "unless of course you've been making widows lately." For a moment or two her eyes lost their laughter, and her voice softened. "I can well swing a sword, if that's what you mean. And in close fighting I can dance more steps than even Roitina."

I did not doubt it, despite the boastful pride in her voice. In that at least she was a typical Heortling. But her name puzzled me. 'Cradledaughter'? Why had she taken that title in her widowhood? Weren't all women daughters of the cradle?

The woman rose effortlessly, barefoot now, taking in the snow-crested landscape spread wild before us. Her sword remained on the ground. I too rose; slowly and not a little stiffly.

"Good greetings in evil times. I am called Helden Broken Tongue, Sword of Humakt, formerly Hundred-thane of the Alda Chur Temple—the Highblade Cohort. Though it seems you know this already."

"Yes. Though I'd have to say you're not what I expected. I was told to look for a big sulking behemoth in iron armour, with a sword this long..." Her hands stretched wide as she pivoted her hips backwards and forwards, rising on bare toes. Laughing again. Vulgar. *Mocking.*

I ignored her ribald gesture. This strange woman confused and disturbed me. "So what is it exactly that you want?"

She stared westward, in the direction of the hidden towers of distant glass-walled Alda Chur. Before her stretched the forests and marshes of the Far Place, hard-won home to exiles and rebels, solitary sentry-land on Snakepipe's Edge. Dark and broken... full of wolf packs.

"Why you of course. Not personally—I really don't think that you're my type." Persistent, world-wise, inviting me to laugh at her gentle ridicule.

I had no laughter. Damn her insolence! Either this strange woman really did know something of me, or else she was a dangerous fool. Her insistent levity was straining the limits of my considerable patience. I knew several in my temple who'd cut her down for such impudence.

Yet indignation demanded strength. I had very little.

"How did you find me?"

"Where else would I look for one such as you but in the Lost Man Hills? I didn't need to summon up ancestors or trust a kolating's vision to tell me that. Your mount made it back to Fort Engoli during FlamalTame last year. A herder informed sword-kin from your temple. Then I saw the smoke of your fire in the dawn. You're growing careless."

I shrugged. "There is nothing here worth taking." The excuse was unworthy, and it shamed me.

Her tone became serious, chiding, yet with a fierce intensity and compassion. "You think that do you? 'Not worth worrying about.' 'Trust to the gods.' Well tell me, good Sword, since when have the Children of Malia been choosy? This place is but a few day's journey from Snakepipe itself!"

I had no answer to her accusation. Yet rather than confront me again, Cradledaughter motioned to my pit-burrow, the muddy thatch of its roof. Her tone softened.

"Cosy, is it?"

The question answered itself. The camp made my misery, my sickness, all too plain.

She paused then, again taking in the sweep of the land before us, its stark beauty and indifferent terror. She flicked the hennaed braids from her face, a nervous gesture.

"What in all the seven lies of the Red Mask made you want to choose here? *Don't you know what this place is?*"

There was an edge to her question, anxiety and a hint of genuine fear. It puzzled me.

"What do you mean? This is the Stone Bow Mountain."

"Down there." She pointed south, to a great bend of water half-hidden amongst the trees of the lower valley. Perhaps unconsciously, she fingered an amulet that hung about her neck, a green jewel carved in the likeness of Ernalda the Earth Queen.

"They used to call it High River's Prayer, but now it's the Ghost Gors. It happened in my father's time, before Starbrow's first gathering of the tribes. Three thousand Lunar infantry died down along the river, so the skalds tell. Trapped and picked off in the gors during Dark Season, driven to drown in the gallt. A generation ago, before they learned to fight in high country. There are still bodies and pickings aplenty down there, the local clans say, though none would dare touch it. An evil place."

I realised the source of her anxiety, even if I was unable to share it. I'd heard of the Ghost Gors of course. It was perhaps the only time the local tribes had inflicted substantial loss on the Lunar invaders of their land. But I'd had no idea that this was the place.

She searched my eyes, questioning, surprised. "You truly didn't know this? By all the Sons of Umath! The Lunar auxiliaries left without properly burying the dead. Even Dragonewts avoid the valley now. The silver crescent and the battle horns of the Quarter Come Corps and the Jintori Heartlanders are still missing, and worth a king's horde for their return."

Just who was this woman? She belonged to a Sartarite clan, wore Praxian clothing, and possessed an intimate knowledge of the Far Point wilderness. There was mystery here, heartfelt and far reaching.

Cradledaughter gazed down in silence, *feeling* the wind-scarred textures of the eternal gors, the drowning gallt. "Down there is where the hatred really began. The Ghost Gors led to the rise of Harvar Ironfist and on to the Righteous Wind and the massacres that followed. The Lunars never ventured into the uplands in force again, and they learned the wisdom of hiding behind palisades during Dark and Storm. Now they leave most of the dirty work to Ironfist and his Bearded Storm."

Listening to her grim litany, it seemed to me that the wind carried distant voices, the clash of bronze on iron. I shivered, pulling the feathered cloak about my shoulders. Cradledaughter felt it too.

"The place is haunted. I could never stay here. It's full of ghosts and worse."

Ghosts and memories. Again I shrugged, surprised but not really caring. "I've been safe enough. I have birch twigs above the entrance-way of my hut to protect me. I've sanctified my lowfire, and rush plants grow in all four corners of the camp." *And I have ghosts enough to deal with already.*

Her look defied description. Once again I felt shamed, like some brash initiate before a weaponsmaster. Yet I could not understand why I should feel this way, and my patience was close to breaking.

"Look what is it exactly that you want? I've no wish for idle company."

"Oh?" Those laughing eyes: a thousand tiny wrinkles tracing out the form of a spider's web. "What exactly are you doing up here alone, dressed fit for Trickster's Wildday?"

I drew the feathered cloak about me. "I heal a wound. I wait."

"Too much longer and the healing will kill, by the look of you. If I were going to die tomorrow, I wouldn't be hiding in a place like this. Have you no kin to shelter you?"

How dare she. "I am Humakti. I have no kin."

"Your Cohort?"

"The wounded make their own way, that the strong endure. For honour, I chose to leave my temple until the wound is healed."

"And what if the wound won't heal? Would you die out here, alone and forgotten? That would be the waste of a half-decent sword master, if what I'm told is true. What's the honour in that?"

So that was it. I ignored the woman's clumsy barb. It seemed she was trying to recruit mercenaries for her queen. I sighed, shook my head.

"I'm sorry to waste your journey here. My blade is not for bidding." *What dream could your world hold to lure me from these dark slopes?*

She seemed to shrug. It was a calculated though casual gesture, one that caught me completely unprepared.

Burning bronze, a blur.

The throwing knife was in her hand before I realised what was happening, her arm flashing forward to launch it on its fateful flight. I shouted as I drew Karis up and out, half-forgotten instincts bursting forth like flame. Deathlight flashed as my blade drew bare, breath burning with the blood of battle.

The blade thudded squarely into the ground between my feet. The air blurred softly as Karis conjured charms of protection about my body, too late to know what was really happening.

I knew that knife.

'Hold!' I screamed in battle brogue lest Karis attempt further spells. Pain came flooding in, my heart beating like a war drum midst the wasted hollows of my chest. Deep... breathe deep. Cradledaughter, hands draped on hips, stared into my eyes, watching, assessing my reaction.

I lowered my blade, relaxing my guard, letting her know I understood. An unfamiliar laugh sprung from the depths of my throat, harsh and alien and grating.

My impulsive visitor also seemed satisfied, and somewhat relieved. She let her own breath out slowly, once again flicking braids of hair back from her face. With arms held wide, she walked cautiously towards me, bending forward to retrieve the knife. Holding it by the blade, she presented it to me, a solemn object, an offering. Then, with careful attention to every syllable, this far-ranging messenger intoned a temple cant, a ritual summoning to duty.

"Helden Broken Tongue, the call is upon you. A war ring has been forged. The order comes: gash flesh, gore shield, make iron ring. Glut the wolves and birds of prey with fat and flesh of foe. The Highblade Cohort has gathered. Loyalties ratified in wine before the standard and pledged with our right hand will soon be put to test. Harmast your captain bids you come. I place this geas upon you—follow me faithfully to the place appointed; then your wyrd will be your own."

The handle of the knife was polished uzbone, carved in the shape of an auroch's head, lined with alloyed gold and inlaid with flecks of blood-red enamel. More than once its sturdy blade had cut arrowheads from my flesh. Harmast Hatchet, First Sword of my Temple Ring, had summoned me through this laughing woman.

I took the blade. It offered a chance to change, to succeed or to fail. It offered a chance to die. Perhaps my long exile, for better or for worse, was over.

Yet my head spun with the play of enchantment about my body; the sudden rush of blood. I returned to my place by the fire, hoping to disguise the sudden pain, the waves of weakness that coursed through my body.

Cradledaughter continued, her heartfelt passion shaping every word. "The moots are rising. The black arrow passes from stead to stead. Starbrow has united the clans against the Lunar foe. She has rekindled Sartar's Great Flame in Boldhome. This time neither scimitar nor treachery nor bat will keep us down. A freedom wind is blowing across the land, no longer a hidden wind. The Hurricane Rebellion is upon us."

I frowned, spitting clotted blood. I'd heard such words before. Many times. "That trick with the knife. It was a damned stupid thing to do."

Again that mischievous smile, full of life and laughter. She walked to her mount, and taking a saddle bag, eased herself beside me at the fire. "I've always had a weakness for dramatic gestures. One day no doubt it will be my undoing.... Come on, take salt with me. I've got sweet crimp and collop. There's a half joint of mutton, honestly come by, and roasted cuckbird, sticklepick, honeybread, rivershell, cheese and curd, and even some corncake if my horse left you any. A banquet to rival Ironfist's own table! Now are you going to rake those embers, or do I have to do all this myself?"

The meal conjured from Cradledaughter's packsaddle was rich and sweet and overpowering. I'd forgotten just how good food might taste. More seriously, I realised that I'd have to regain strength, and quickly, if I had any hope of honouring my duty.

The wind blew about the fire with increasing strength, cold and wet, tinged with the promise of an afternoon storm. To the north, far-goaded sons and daughters of the Air Tribe streamed forth, bearing roofs of water beneath the sky dome. Biting heavily-salted grey chunks of mutton from the bone, I pondered why Harmast had summoned me. Surely he knew I was still stricken, otherwise I would have returned of my own accord. Was his truth greater than mine? *Or was he merely desperate?*

My new companion watched as I gorged myself, a fitting sign of gratitude amongst the people of my tribe. She would not match my eating, but I had long learned to forgive the insufferable manners of her people. Pouring crimp from a weathered skin, she passed a carved wooden cup into my hands. The sweet aroma of honey and cleargrape awakened memories I'd long forgotten.

Replete, I lifted my bowl in a toast to my unlikely summoner. A journey beckoned. A journey and more.

"May our trail be straight and the Wind ever at our back.' Now, do we journey to Harmast?"

She lifted her flask, returning my salute. Crimp rolled in drops from her mouth to stain the white bull stitched across her breast. The totem was ancient, already faded and pocked by long wear.

"No. Though he has left instruction for you."

"To Starbrow?"

"No. The Queen is still raising the tribes in the south."

"Who then?"

“ I’m taking you to her Consort.”

Caught up in the sleepy afterglow of the meal, I gave scarce thought that I’d never heard of the Queen’s Consort. A recent marriage no doubt, some much-needed tribal alliance. I could name several kings desperate enough for such a match, men who’d lost power and land and worse under Lunar rule. Starbrow was not a woman to do anything by halves. To join with her meant you had little to lose.

“I sometimes believe”, mused Cradledaughter, “that our lives unwind like ritual before the altar. Everything goes on and on and on; then suddenly you break through into something unexpected and wondrous and beautiful.”

I nodded politely, not sharing her vision, for I’d experienced rituals of a different kind. I had stood alone beneath the Cliffs of Shadow, the blood of the fallen lapping against my ankles. There was little there of wonder or of beauty.

Warmed by the crimpy, I fought against myriad voices in my head, voices of doubt and fear and refusal. And amidst the murmurings of the stormgust, I thought for a moment that I heard another, quieter voice, whether god or ancestor or mere echo I could not say. The voice of wyrd perhaps.

A voice that whispered, “Liberation.”





From tulas harsh-stripped
 streamed the strong called to battle,
Spears each held ready, shield-clash they sought!
Fyrd-fierce and fearless, from hearth called and harstings
Fashioned they feasting for Humakt's dark-swans.

My kinsmen, my comrades, they budged not in battle
Brought courage to combat, feat-strong and fierce.
Like berries in harvest, bright red their bounty
they made shame of armies, caused red moon to flee.

KallyrKarla: The Song of the Betrayed.

It was a haunted trail: I could sense baleful and pernicious powers lurking behind each shadow, sullenly observing our cautious progress. And what shadows! Even at noon, our forest path was dim, as though we drowned in some great green whispering sea. The Mournsea perhaps.

17.

tangle of briar and bramble. Realising the danger with a start, I clenched my fists in the warding sign, fearful that my thoughts might call lost spirits or ghosts to my side. *Night and mist, what bones have you eaten?*

After several hours hard slog we reached a place that Cradledaughter called Aurochmire, a brooding damp wetland, rank with the cloying sweetness of decay, sanctuary to many a bizarre tribe of insect, bird and animal. I'd heard boasts among the Far Point tribesfolk of hunting the giant aurochs, no longer seen in southern lands, but had never judged their troth. The scattered bones that littered the bog edges might belong to any sort of beast, and some glowed with the faint copper-green luminescence that indicated great age or dragon-touch.

I regarded the way ahead with distinct unease—treacherous patches of mud and bogpeat set amongst towering stands of rush and leachlily. Rotting hunks of dead trees stood in isolated clumps, overgrown with moss and vine, their branches festooned with a bizarre fungi that carried the likeness of a leering human face. *A primal place.* Yet I was no stranger to ground such as this, for I'd spent five years on the edges of the New Fens in Wenelia.

Despite my increasingly insistent protests, Cradledaughter mounted and pushed confidently forward. Often we had to ride directly through the watery slush, with mud reaching to the horses' knee or mid leg, or even at times to the belly. In answer to my fears, she laughed and said that there was firm goddess rock beneath, with no danger of sinking further. How she came by such supposed knowledge I dared not ask, but by skill or gift or wyrd we did eventually emerge at the northern edge, sodden and covered in stinking brown-green mud.

Emerging from the mire, we chanced upon a clear brook, and with it an easier path along its bed. The bank was pocked by snaking roots of hazel, shagbark and elm. Occasionally I caught a glimpse of dragonewt plinths or kygerliths, long forgotten, abandoned to the ravages of storm and seed. *Different races, different ages.* Bare ruins, forced long ago by the power of earth and water. How long would it be before the steads and hill forts of the Far Walkers were likewise piles of forgotten stone?

After a time, the way grew rocky again, the valleys carved by the brook growing deeper and more rugged. Our path was made precarious by misshapen roots and shake holes, and we often had to lead the horses by hand through twisted mazes of rock and bracken. In the shadow-darkened wood, wisps of fog scouted between the dark trunks, carrying with them a distant odour of brimstone.

Coming upon a relatively flat, open glade by a river pool, Cradledaughter bade me dismount. The pool was wide, with jagged banks rising to twice the height of a spear. It was obviously the source of the fog, which rose in ghostly tendrils from where a side stream tumbled into the main flow.

A hot spring. And a holy place as well, for crude runes and images were chipped into the rock, and bark-tied tripods bore the simple gifts of Odaylan hunters—Tovtaros clansfolk, most likely. I recognised the blade-etched images as Daughters of the River, those immortal water children who dance forever on the icy streams. Perhaps the carvings dated from the time the first Far Walkers arrived out of distant Saird and Bilini, when they forged their elemental compact with the powers of the land.

Atop a wooden tripod hung three rough-hewn figurines of wood, and long-decayed offerings of pelt and fruit and flower. Bundled at its base were blessing gifts—a spear, long-used, worn-edged; the tatters of a hunting net, throttling nooses, trip snares. A deer hide pinned to a leaf-bare birch beside the tripod completed the simple offering.

Cradledaughter poured crimpy from her flask over the tripod, a generous libation. As the sweet liquid gushed forth, she spoke aloud, petitioning in prayer the gods and powers of the river.

“Life-Makers, vaster than forest, older than heroes, hear us. Immortal guardians of this perfect and holy place, gentle bringers of bounty, hear us. Your beauty and power ease the sorrows of our journey. We, travellers in your ancient realm, ask only that you accept our humble gift.”

It seemed that Cradledaughter was calling upon the powers of life to guide us onward. Stupid woman! Had she forgotten that I was given to Death? Or did she in her wisdom perceive what I could not—that the Death Lord had abandoned me? Was that the lesson of my exile?

Her simple rite concluded, Cradledaughter set a campfire burning, piling it high to create a roaring flame. I had no idea why, for there were still several hours of daylight left. Finally, she joined me on the rocky bank, where I stood staring down at the steaming waters, entranced by the gentle murmur of water on rock.

She stared across the pool to the rough-etched carvings on the rock wall opposite. “The uplander clans have always had special reverence for water, ever since the crimes of Taros Ridgeleaper against the Ice Daughter of the Mountain Stream. That treachery caused the first Lagerwater to be flooded beneath the Lagertarn, and brought the Tearing Claw Season down upon the first Far Walkers. They have enough enemies here, without the powers of the land itself turning against them.”

I nodded, scratching at my arm beneath the burden cloak. I had a distrust of running water, as any man does, but the steamy pool beckoned, and I was all too well aware of four season’s mud and grime upon my aching limbs. Not that most would care or even notice, but Harmast was cut in the Tarshite style. If we were to wait here, perhaps I might wash in the crystal waters below.

In retrospect, I still wasn’t used to Cradledaughter’s *other ways* of doing things. She also had similar ideas.

She pushed.



“Haaiiii!” Arms flailing wildly, I pitched forward into the steaming pool. I was terrified by the sudden and unexpected immersion in an alien element.

“Pwwaaa!” I swallowed, panicking, surrounded by a murky cloud of discoloured yet surprisingly warm water. My cloak of burdens had literally dissolved, spoiling the water around me with a cloud of broken feathers. Swirling, arms askew, I kicked wildly, regained my orientation, pushed upward.

“Hoooo!” I broke the surface, arms thrashing, diseased lungs gasping – tortured by water and the shock of sudden drenching. Somewhere above me a woman laughed. The surface of the pool was littered with feathers and scraps of thorn, floating around me in silent disarray. Recovering, I watched in silence as they drifted with the current, each one a burden, a reminder of my exile.

There, there floated my youngest initiate, Hu-Vinina, turned by cowardice from her god and an honourable death. And that blue flecked feather, the priestess Jareena, trapped in a burning stead as I slashed at broo-kin in a holy fit, uncaring of her fate. There – from raven’s wing – there, my vision of Arkat returned, when in my terror I could not lift my face to see his form. *Feathers and faces, failures and fears.* There, that one, the day I – I, a hundred-thane! – awoke screaming and could not move, could not speak, the day of ignominy when I fled to present exile. And where?there, there, twisting round and round in an eddy as it twisted in my soul, there was the day I left my wife alone in our cottage by the Mournsea.

Seabirds circle in a foreign sky...

The waters of the pool mirrored the rocks and sky above, distorting the figure of the watching woman. No birds circled. Ruffling outward from my now-stilled body, the ripples expanded outwards till lost in the gentle eddies of the stream. Relaxing somewhat, head throbbing, I let the soothing warmth ease away the tired knots in my muscles and in my mind.

Perhaps with this new impetus, the burdens of my past might dissolve as well, granting me again the chance for an honourable life and honourable death. Was this too much to ask? If only my life could be like running water; swift and sure, moving inexorably towards its final destination.

Do not deny me your blessing. Destroy me once, destroy me twice. Lift the weight of falsehood from my soul.

Cradledaughter waited by the shore, laughing afresh at the incongruous figure that stumbled dripping from the waters. Once again I was surprised at her planning, if not her execution. She draped a tattered bearskin cloak over my shoulders. *My cloak* – for the beast had offered itself to my spear during the forest initiation rite. By the fire were other familiar objects, clothes and belting and iron armour, riding cloak and dress blade, even the thirsty craiseich carved from the oak of my father’s forest. The woman had retrieved my war gear from the Cohort.

A pot of water boiled merrily midst the flames. Wrapping the great skin about me, Cradledaughter motioned to a calf hide laid before the blaze. She wiped the remaining mud and dirt from my skin, stripped off my tattered fragments of cloth, then bid me lay down. Untopping some foul-smelling unguent from a tiny clay jar, she applied it to my prone and naked body. Humming gently to herself, she occasionally spat onto my bare back. I recognised the tune as a healing song.

*‘Untangle tangled veins, unbreak the bones,
Healing comes with my soft touch and with my spittle.’*

Her touch was gentle, sensual, the massage deeply soothing. It was as though the seventh wind, the inner wind, blew about me, reviving me from a deep and bitter swoon. *Many the skills of the Red-Headed Daughters. Gentle the touch of the Laughing Women.*

Finally Cradledaughter took a razored shaving stone, and hacked its crystal edge with gusto into my tangled hair and beard. She seemed completely one with her actions, as though leading some temple rite. Perhaps she was, for she collected the scraps of my hair upon a piece of bark, as though it were my first beard to be offered in the age rite. When the task was complete she offered the cuttings silently to the flames, followed by another libation of crimp from her flask.

I smiled, feeling more relaxed and content than I had for seasons. "Can the sacrificial victim take a swig of that?"

"Oh course." She returned the smile. "I hardly recognise you. Looks like you're human after all. And all this time I thought I'd a mountain troll in tow."

Familiar clothes beckoned, bearers of clean memory and familiar smell. Glancing at the pile before me, I threw the coarse hair inner-shirt to one side. *I'd done enough penance.* Sliding eagerly into my trows and dark tunic, I felt the soft and tender embrace of wool and linen and fur. I then secured my unbleached corselet, marked with the potent sigils of my Cohort. Cradledaughter remained silent, assisting with quiet dignity, like Heler arming the Great King for war.

Fitting the moulded breastplate made my head spin with the sudden proximity of so much magical iron. Karis felt it too, and yelped, upsetting the quiet dignity of the occasion. I'd lost a great deal of weight, and this became obvious when I finally buckled and strapped my armour into place. It hung loose, feeling heavy and unfamiliar, weighing down my shoulders and chest.

I clipped on my greaves, belted the chain-linked groin protector round my waist. I did not strap on the dress-blade, but instead hefted Karis from her resting place on my saddle. Kissing the longsword's fine-wrought pommel, I secured her with dog hide thongs behind my shoulder. Soon I would set her free from long repose, scabbard-weary as she was, edge eager for blood in the coming fray.

My great hollow iron-scarred shield lay waiting on the ground. I hefted its comforting bulk, curved and defiant, crafted from the hides of four mighty bulls, sanctified with their blood. Its surface was overlaid with an fifth layer of bronze, and there shone Talor the Laughing Warrior, engraved in crimson-washed, sword-dinted glory. Talor the Cleanser, Laughing One, Sword Leaper, who'd led my people north from Ralios to cleanse the world of Gbaji's stinking curse. Talor, depicted during the Ritual of the Six Stones, already bleeding and wounded from the weapons of hell, laughing in ecstasy with blades held high. Talor, my patron, guide, and solace. To see that image again was like returning home to my lodge from a long and bloody campaign. For one brief moment I felt complete.

So. With slitted cloak, and horse-maned iron helmet by my side, I needed only to plaster my hair with oil, swish my teeth with urine, and I might proudly walk the forecourts of Ironfist's gilded nest in Alda Chur.

I would ride this afternoon in full armour. I'd pay the price in chaffing and broken skin of course, but the gesture seemed well worth the slight discomfort. Tomorrow I'd dress sensibly for hard riding, but today, if not once more the Sword, at least I would look the part.

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Truth

One for sorrow
 Two for mirth;
 Three for a wedding
 Four for a birth.

Far Point Children's Song.

Snow, hail and smut the sky, dazzle and thunder the cloud. We'd reached the so-called Safe Trail, a twisting and rutted trackway that stretched from Fort Engoli to the magical shard at Ironspike. The gors on either side comprised oaks and alders, interspersed with sedges and clusters of purpled blue-black darkbloom.

I knew the track passing well, and now could give form and name to the lands on every side. Through the gathering cloud I spied dancing pinpricks of orange and red to the south, among the hills that bordered the Valley of the Chalk Man. I thought of the steads there—Arden's Gors and BroadChalk, Slough Hall with its gold and silver decked shrine to the Loyal Thane. Was it merely clansfolk burning off heather for the new year's ploughing, or something more sinister?

To the west, over well-walled Alda Chur, magical pillars of fire rode high in middle air above the distant towers, casting a ruddy glow down upon the LongDoe Hills. Harvar Ironfist's work no doubt, but to what purpose? And to the north, storm clouds massed dark and brooding amidst the heaven gash of Skyfall Lake, as if gathering to do battle with the upstart element that ranged defiant over Yelmario's golden city.

Bad omens.

Cradledaughter glanced upward to the looming storm. "Orlanth has returned early to his stead."

"And caught his wife at play with Elmal, by the sound of it. We've a wild night ahead."

She nodded, singing a few lines from some ribald hope-and-laughter song.

*"While Orlanth fights his battles dear
 Ernalda loves the Sun Carl's spear."*

I winced, wondering if it was wise to proclaim such secrets aloud while the Husband-Thane gathered his tribe above our heads. Cradledaughter merely giggled.

Above us, the first skirmishers of the tempest ranged in fury, angry bolts of the Thunder Brothers blasting down upon the surrounding hills. The wind was rising, a frozen torment even in the bristling warmth of my bear cape.

I raised my voice against the gathering gale. "You obviously know these uplands well. How do you hold this land on Snakepipe's edge?"

She scowled, glanced again to the bolt-bearers above. "Too cold, too many Uz."

"The two are linked." I smiled softly, aware of the unfamiliar set of my face.

"I think you're right. The further north you go, the wilder it gets, the colder it gets...", she slapped her hand hard against her neck, "...and the bugs get bigger and bigger. Some fool of an Odaylan guided me north of the Cholanti once... never again, not for all the amber in Far Point!"

I wondered what might lead a woman such as her into Dagori Inkarth, the troll heartlands to the north of the Cholanti River. No steads were cut there: it was a fungi-infested wilderness given to Elder Races and the elements. It is there that lay, midst the twisted ruins of ancient empires, gorges overcast with sentient darkness and centuries of web, groves of chill shade where dwell the spider spirits that unite all of nature. *Thus it had been told to me.*

We rode on in silence for a time, at ease in each other's company, despite the wild weather gathering above. Words did not come easy to me, but Cradledaughter seemed to sense and respect this. It had been nearly a year since I'd shared conversation with anyone except Karis. Harmast had chosen his messenger well.

I turned my attention to the blade that hung easily at her side. It was an ancient weapon, well-formed and richly decorated. The hilt and pommel were lined with traces of silver. Twin dragon heads formed the guard, richly carved and elaborately intertwined. It was a chief's weapon, or even a king's.

Cradledaughter noticed my interest. "The heart of this blade is a fragment of dragon's tooth, and so it is named. It belonged to my husband, to his father and his father before him. It is carved with many runes, and every jewel upon it marks an honourable life.

"Surely you mean an honourable death, for only in death can we draw measure on a life."

She shrugged. "What is life? What is death? In times like these..." She shivered. "My goddess teaches the paths of life, and I bless her ways. There is death in my spear, right enough, and in my blade. But a Vingan casts death in the service of her family, her clan. We cast death in the service of life."

I knew this, of course. Did she think me some child at the hearth, to listen to the eternal stories for the first time?

"Whence your sword?"

"It was forged in the dawn lands, before the tribes came east. My first duty as a Red Woman was to find this sword, lost with my husband on the Giant's Cradle."

Ahh. *Cradledaughter*. So that was why she's taken that name.

"For honour?"

"No. For life."

I grunted and said no more, but she seemed reluctant to let silence intrude again. "Why have you spent so long in exile? Are you locked in bloodwyrd with some powerful clan?"

It was a stupid question to ask of a mercenary blade, even if he no longer enjoyed the honour and resentful prestige that came from a Humakt temple. I evaded the question.

"No one seeks my blood." *None living, anyway.*

"Then why your exile?"

Considering the trouble she'd gone too in finding me, she must surely know the entire sorry tale. Why did she want to expose such a wound now? Perhaps, in her own way, she was prepared to brave the dangers of unlocking my word-hoard.

"I was entrapped by visions." *Careful woman.*

"Your wife?" Her voice was tentative against the rising gale.

She dares too much! "So you do know the story."

The wind tossed red-dyed braids about her face like dancing serpents. "From your temple kin. Tell me... after all this time, have you found your way free?"

Seabirds, wheeling against a foreign sky. Smell of burning. Sounds of screaming.

"I truly don't know. Karis—the power in my sword—she always talks about learning the difference between what ceases and what does not cease. Sometimes it just sounds like meaningless temple cant." *Careful.* I mustn't talk lightly of the inner mysteries of my cult. "All I do know is that a man must be who the God has chosen him to be. That's the way of Humakt. If I can live—and die—by what I say and believe, then I will call myself whole. This test is forced upon me..."

I found myself saying things to this stranger I had dared not even think. I looked away to the hills, blinking back tears.

"The Cradle that gave you a new name also took from you a husband. So you've also faced such loss." My words drifted above the stormwind, their hoarseness masked by the rising gale.

It was her turn to look away. "I loved Orngarin, the man who was. But now, all I have are memories, and his sword. Why should I weep? It's over for him, for us. His life... his death, was an honoured one. I treasure the time we had together, even if it was torn by the black arrow and the call of my queen. And now I have another marriage. I am a bride of spears."

Red Woman. Vengeance-Seeker. I nodded, sensing the wisdom and depth of feeling behind her simple words. "The dead can rest, no need to call their muster."

She didn't seem to appreciate my response. Her eyes came alive with something... disturbing. "You know, I could never be a Humakti, nor can I understand your ways. I'm driven by revenge. It's pure, it comes from my gut, and it respects the power of life. Whatever I think of you, I know you as a man, a man who is turning back into a Death Lord right before my eyes. I don't like it. I hate your god, your strange ways, your fierce neutrality! *I hate the way you let Lunar prisoners live!*"

So. Her wounds must also burn deep. Had she rehearsed this outburst?

My reply came sharp, not temple cant, but something harder-learned.

"The truth is never neutral! And death is too important to have it obscured by hatred. If your enemy know they might be spared, they surrender the more readily. Even your clan weaponthanes know this! It makes sense to a mercenary, and to a man who values honour. Humakt teaches the seasons of life and death. He anoints the hour. We know when it is time for someone to die."

I tried to soften my voice, difficult as it was in the growing gale. I breathed deeply once, in for truth, out for honour. My lungs did not rebel. "If I've learned one thing these last seasons, its to beware of excess passion, even if your cause is good. Passion leads you to destruction. Only truth can guide you to proper death."

The crash of waves on surge-carved rock. Drunken laughter. Clear waters, running red. But what if honour is denied? What if the chance is lost, because you were not there when you should have been? And what if someone you love dies a slow and horrible death because of your failing?

There were still some things I could not say. There were still some things I could not think.

Cradledaughter, perhaps misreading my face, also made an effort to lighten her tone. "I've not heard your sword kin speak like this. Not that many of them speak at all. 'Least not to unenlightened stickpickers like me!"

I shared her nervous laughter. It was gentle, healing. "My way is doubtless one amongst many."

A distance came into her face then, and she nodded. "Perhaps we're not so different, you and I. For any one coin shows two different faces."

I had no idea what she meant.

As the sky darkened, Cradledaughter led me onto a scarce discernible side trail, overgrown with vegetation. We passed a gigantic chalk figure carved into the landscape, spear and phallus erect. Another relic of the Dawn Ages, when this place was a proud fortress of the Youf.

The trail followed a swift flowing stream. We passed tula boundary stones, overgrown and bereft of blessing-blood, then smashed weirs and ruined fish traps. No spirits challenged us, nor wyter called our measure. As the first sentry stars glared down through the streaming clouds above, I sensed broken drum towers midst the gathering gloom, a burned and broken palisade. We'd reached the ruin of an uplander stead, broken and laid waste by chaos, Ironfist, or a rival clan's jealousy.

The Thunderer choose that moment to assert his dominion. The magical pillars of flame that rose defiant over Alda Chur faced battle charge from the hosts of the Air Tribe. Sons of the Storm called combat above, rolling swift in waves against the pillared fires of Ironfist's fortress city. A torrent of hail burst upon us, sharp spear shafts stinging down from an angry sky, clouds colliding, dark drops descending. We pulled our hoods down about our ears, huddling in the saddle, shivering despite the furs wrapped about our shoulders.

"This is no ordinary storm", whispered Cradledaughter, her voice tinged by awe and terrified exhilaration. "The Righteous Wind is unleashed against our ancient foe!"

We quickly found shelter from the wild onslaught midst the razed ruin of a lodge, divided into hearth and byrne in the manner of the uplands. The solid earth walls stood blackened and desolate, but seemed sound enough to grant protection from the storm and dangers of the night.

The Righteous Wind! A full generation ago the tribes had called the Righteous Wind against Ironfist and his Yelmalian. That rebellion had failed, and led to much bloodshed and death among those loyal to the Wind Lord and his Than. Ironfist's grip had grown across the land: he took the title of Lord of the Far Place, and called Gargarthi and Bearded Storm and the false Bigger Wind to strengthen and extend his reign. If Cradledaughter was correct, and the Righteous Wind once more blew free, then a great battle was upon us all. *From warriors ravens grow red.*

We set a fire inside the byrne, its rotted rush floor thick with mud and bone and cattle droppings. In a dusty corner a rough mattress lay stuffed with corn husks: other travellers had sheltered here before us. Learned travellers; for the runes of their naming were scratched with knife points on the smoke-blackened rafters, simple prayers against coming oblivion.

The tiny byrne became, after a time, warm and fairly dry, its smoke-filled air sweet with the scent of burning wood and dung, roasting meat, of damp woolen cloaks and sodden boots. Awed by the fury of the storm, we ate slowly, sipping crimp from clay cups. Wrapped in our furs, we huddled against the violence of the night, watching the play of lightning and earth-bolt through the half-shuttered wind-eye. Across the byrne our horses stood silent, coats steaming, mute witness to all that passed.

At our sides, both Karis and Dragontooth burned with the cold blue flame of a stormlight. The Air Tribe had descended against Alda Chur in force, Alda Chur and half the land besides. Heler's rams roamed the heavens dark, and all about the Thunder Brothers ranged, shriving enemy spirits, spurting thunder-flames, shooting their sharp spears. Then Vinga flew out of the north-west midst din of destruction, (so Cradledaughter called) the wild though warmer air of the Defender Storm enveloping the fiery pillars that still rode defiant over Alda Chur. Midst the sky-stream, dark bodies hastened to grim purpose. With rain and gale and lightning bolt, the troops on high now proved their noisy mettle. Our tiny shelter seemed a broken reed against the fury of such immortal power.

After long hours of battle, hail and thunder again ruled middle air over the distant city. The strange pillars of fire were vanquished or destroyed. The great storm calmed, and Heler's rain made gentle victory song against our shelter's roof. Tonight the storm, tomorrow – the battle. *For as the storm, so the tribes must follow.*

Cradledaughter sang exhortation and thanks to her goddess. She was exhilarated by the storm, pacing back and forth, hair full and thick with rain, feeling the promise and story of every breeze and billow. Finally, as the winds abated, she rested, and – sipping crimp from a cup as she curled close about our fire – was persuaded to tell me of recent events.

The Vingan had the skald's gift, and her tale was rich with inner music. It fell from her lips like a hero saga, though the theme was a grim one. Sartar and the Grazelands were aflame with rebellion this last season. The Wind was free, and the Hurricane Rebellion upon us all. The Lunars were still sore wounded by the disaster at Windtop. Pavis had fallen, and Moonbroth razed by Praxian tribes united under the White Bull. (There was great pride in her voice as she told of that, and she knew the details well). Now Boldhome was also free, and the Lunar army faced invaders from Prax and from the south. Starbrow had rekindled the Flame of Sartar, proving her claim to the high kingship. Already there had been a great

battle, at Dangerford, and the Queen's victory had forced the Lunars north. My own Highblade Cohort had fought there, to great honour and skald-praise. Mighty signs now beset the land; not the least being this terrible storm-driven winter. An entire village had vanished near Clearwine, night rainbows blazed over Boldhome, and a dream dragon hovered over the ruin of the wind temple at Swenstown. A war ring had been forged, the black arrow passed from hand to hand, for Starbrow was calling the clans. Even as we spoke the moots were rising, spear and shield in hand. The Powers of the land were rising too, for everywhere ghost drums could be heard in the distance, and supernatural carnynxes trumpeted across the valleys at night. And now, the Righteous Wind! This was surely the great reckoning.

For me it was an old familiar tale: troops cut down, terror of armies, clash of kings, spears snapping in the death rites. *Grim Lord, to whom all flesh must come, the harvest is upon us!*

Cradledaughter ended her tale with news of the local clans. "The Bres rebel leader called Dancing Storm has been taken by moonshadow. She now wears linen and proclaims the peace of the White Moon. The exiles and rebel camps are in disarray, fighting among themselves to decide who will lead in her place. Alda Chur has become even more divided; and with tonight's storm the reckoning will be bloody and terrible. Yet the Bigger Wind and Yelmario's false sun still rule the lowland plains. The city has grown fat under Ironfist and the Lunars, and with the Field of the Tents of Silver it seems every crafter in the city is working for the Lunar army. Many in your own temple switched blades to Yanafal Tarnils when Helarnu Truespear became Scimitar of the War Temple."

She used her tunic sleeve to wipe meal-grease from her lips. "We travel to join a hosting. Our task will be to hold the Tarsh Road beyond Alda Chur for a few days, while Starbrow brings her forces north to Herongreen. I don't know exactly what your orders are; the Queen's Consort has them. Our numbers are pitifully few, but we have some Tres, Amad and Tovtaros clans on side, as well as your Cohort and the remaining exiles. Even Praxians and some of Harrek's Wolf Pirates have responded to our call."

A wind from some nameless hell shivered down my back. "There will be Wolf Pirates there?"

"Perhaps."

A mussel knife, a mussel knife, a mussel knife of blunted bronze. Tearing...

III RUNO V III

Harmony

Uleria grant me
 if fired by you
 Oh Loosener of Limbs
 in this our only temple
 Neither
 Honey sweetness
 nor bee sting.
 Priestess of Life and Pleasure
 Most terrible of runic powers.

Poem scratched upon the
 wall of a stead. Far Point, 1629.

We shared our bodies that night. I believe it was shadow love, unintentional and spontaneous. Huddling together beneath our furs, one thing led gently to another. Few words were spoken. Cradledaughter took my hand and pressed it to her breast, then guided it over the contours of her body, moaning softly. She told me I had cold hands. I told her that her tunic scratched. She removed it.

Our love was gentle and unhurried, sensuous but not passionate. We were companions in arms, clinging to life as death beckoned. We were afraid, and in our fear we reached out for comfort. We sought a moment free from the looming terrors of the morrow.

Karis intruded to ask if I'd ever heard the stories of Vinga Sharptooth? I swore loudly in reply, with sufficient force that even Karis understood. There was no further interruption. Cradledaughter merely laughed, guessing the cause of my sudden outburst. Could a bodiless spirit—a temple spirit at that—be jealous of the simple reassurance of human touch?

Vinga Sharptooth? *Brrrrr*. Either the campfire tales were false, or Cradledaughter considered I had a clear conscience.

In time there was rest. One of the horses kicked against its stall in the darkness. Somewhere a guilt-cursed owl screeched above the now gentle murmur of sleet on thatch and leafbed. Cradledaughter lay silent, lost in her own memories. Eventually we slept, spent and perhaps momentarily at peace. But still I dreamed.

Great Arkat, how I dreamed.

❧ RUNO VI ❧

Disorder

'Tween red sky-wall and lake of rain and Mother of all Peaks,
The clans cringe low before the tainted prince.
The heirs of the Ridgewalker and those of Terasin
swear oaths before the altar.

The Righteous Wind calls combat!
In Alda Chur and Herongreen,
fighting shakes the ancient walls.
A wind-rushing hurricane, fyrd cry of vengeance.
Hero bands stream forth, champion seeking champion.

Hear the voice of the Raven.
'These are the seasons of thunder!
Slaughter of enemies
armies ravaging in packs
affliction and outcry and war!'

The cloaked one's hero heat shakes wide the city wall.
With feat and spear and magic bolt the final rite begins.
War-band's white bull, a dragon in strife,
Feeds he most fulsome the dogs of the Death-Lord.

The Righteous Wind returns!
Open your arms, let it hurl against your faces,
Hair and eyes streaming. You have breath,
voice, limb and power.

Hurricane rebels, what you must.

The Raven Speaks.

The dawn was wolf-winter in its roughest mood; gifting us a frozen land locked in a deep, unnatural chill. The interior of the byrne was bitterly cold, even after I'd raked and banked the lowfire embers, fed fresh wood and dung into its hungry maw. I coughed away the worst of the night, clouds of moisture mixing with fresh fire smoke. Beyond the rough entrance of our shelter, Huraya claimed dominion: a silent and absolute bank of fog obscured the landscape, white on endless white. For a time we were locked in our own private kingdom.

Both of us were loathe to move, despite the long journey still before us. Wrapped in blankets and furs, we were content to take our ease, waiting for the fire's warmth to spread. I combed and deloused Cradledaughter's hair, and in doing so, saw the scars and the rune tattoos carved into her flesh. She was a woman of power.

As I went about my pleasant labour, I spoke of Talor, the Laughing Warrior. She did not approve, calling him a typical Humakti (how little she knew!), and so told me of Red Vinga, Orlanthdotter, protector of the hearth. She spoke with her usual passion, and it seemed I recognised the woman in those tales.

We left the ruined stead with scarce a backward glance, pushing through long-abandoned pastures till we rediscovered the Safe Trail. By noon we'd reached Fort Engoli, its high wooden palisade still besieged by ice and glistening frost. The worst of the headaches associated with my redonning iron had passed, and our horses made spirited advance despite occasional rain of hail or sleet. Beyond the Fort lay a real road at last, a full wagon wide, with gnome stones and wardings to keep capricious elements at bay.

Cradledaughter named the clans and local steads and their bloodlines as we rode; the dialects of Tarsh rolling off her tongue. Here stood BearDance and NutRich Edge, ExileStead and StenchMud, Geo's Big Gamble, StillFightWillWin and TurtleSnack Creek. Each stead had its story, its founding tale, and my companion helped pass the freezing hours with boisterous tales of the Far Walkers and their myriad quarrels.

I found that her insistent humour no longer irritated. She was after all, a laughter-smith, true to the ways of her Goddess. To each the rite chosen.

Testing her knowledge, I asked upon which tula the abandoned stead where we had sheltered stood.

"Are you sure you wish to know?" Her voice suddenly edged in bronze.

"Is it important? Some sordid clan scandal? Kinstrife? Yelmalian? Lunar converts? Ghosts? Give me the truth."

"The stead belonged to the Black Plough bloodline of the Lardarnos clan. Koreng the Plough Bull cut the founder's stead. His great grandson Orngarin Holdfast spoke both the ancestor rites and led the *fyrð*, though in his later days he joined the thunder rebels in Pavic exile." A pause. "Orngarin was my husband."

The world stood still.

No breath, no heartbeat, just the sudden and ungodly shock of realisation. And then the grim revelation became a burning sword blade in my gut.

Superior and Obscure Gods, what had I done! In her own marriage bed, when her husband had died honourably in a far off land. Damn life and its treacheries!. How I wish his ghost had struck me down, rather than let this deed pollute my breath. Her Sartarite ways might be different, but I still followed the customs of the Keonos, and in Ralios we do not forget loyalty to the noble dead.

My face reddened, burning with shock and humiliation. "Why didn't you... If I'd have known I..."

"Don't!" There was sudden anger in her face. "What happened, happened. I certainly don't regret it. Orngarin feasts in Orlanth's hall, and you and I both have lives to live. Short lives perhaps, and all the more reason to drink the wine when offered. I won't be held captive to the past!"

As I was? Damn her insolent tongue. If I knew only one thing, it was that I would never touch her again. Honour demanded it be so. And if I lived to visit a shrine of her husband's clan, then three bulls and two fine blades I'd dedicate to his breath and memory. A noble memory that I had dishonoured and befouled.

Damn life and all its treacheries. Death and Truth were the only sureties. I'd been a fool to think otherwise.

Cradledaughter persisted in her anger, twisting her horse around to face me, shouting now against the gusting sleet. "Don't let me lose you. *Please*. Don't lose yourself again. You're healing, your wounds are knitting. Follow your god and his stinking ways if you must, but keep your heart. By all that's good and holy, keep your humanity!"

Karis flashed death light from her scabbard. My reply to Cradledaughter came slow, even, cold as iron. The unemotional chill of battle-rage stirred in my breast, ready to cut her down if she persisted in this blasphemy. "You *stupid* woman. You know nothing. *Nothing*. Humakt sacrificed his Heart that he might better know Truth and Death. And as the God, so all who follow him!"

"I don't believe it!" Shock and rage battling for supremacy.

My anger burst forth. "What would you know! You've too much of the Earth in you to think as a warrior should. For all your mastery, you'll never extinguish that!"

"What has that to do with our making...!"

"You seduced a stranger on the altar of your husband's memory! Did it excite you to lie with death? In joining, we've mixed essences. We're both polluted."

"Seduced!? Gods of wyrd and beauty, do you think that I..."

"My honour is hostage to my truth. Or are you calling me a liar?" My voice even, cold, expressionless.

She searched my eyes, confused and suddenly afraid, feeling my rage, doubtless sensing Death's cold hand about her. Yet still she persisted. Her voice too became chillingly even, a harsh whisper. "No. I accept what you say. But don't mark the runes on my feet just yet, Death Lord. Remember you're under geas to follow me, on command of your captain, Harmast of the Weeping Wound. And if what you say is so, then why are you so crippled by your dead wife, and torn by my dead husband? I could let it go... why don't you follow your god's example and do the same?"

Silence.

Her words cut to the quick, unleashed a thousand sutured wounds of anguish. The rage left me, for in her harsh mockery I heard the voice of wyrd, the command of my god. His sword withdrawn, I was thrust back to an uncertain fate.

We rode apart, each lost in inner battles. Tension and a cold formality fell between us, all efforts of the night undone. Looking back, I saw the skill with which she had set her Vingan trap.

Damn her! This journey would be long and hard.



The gelid, aching hours dragged out in heavy silence. It was late afternoon when we finally reached the Great Road stretching between Alda Chur and Herongreen. Built by King Terasin when the Far Place tribes joined his kingdom, the highway is a wonder of godi magic and engineers' craft, full wide enough for two columns to pass at the march.

Yet it was not the road that held our attention as we gazed down from that last sleet-crested ridge. Something was obviously wrong. *Terribly, terribly wrong.*

In a strangling line that stretched out of sight to the west, the road overflowed with a pitiful human burden. Groups of men, women and children were fleeing east out of the ancient city. Already cold and exhausted, they bent their bodies forward against the constant sleet. Each traveller clutched at their pitiful burden—bags and bundles of clothes and household treasures. Scattered amidst the crowd were wagons and barrows, the occasional overburdened ass or horse.

These miserable souls were fleeing Alda Chur, heading east to Herongreen and imagined safety. *They might as well seek Solace.* The fools were risking more amongst the elements than if they'd stayed within their huts in the traitor's city.

They seemed to be townsfolk for the most part—Yelmalian crafters and traders and their families, Orlanthi weavers with their kin, Tarshite and Heartland settlers from the *colonia* surrounding the city. Few were armed, and fewer still travelled in any sort of order. A bandit gang could have taken them all in just a few short heartbeats.

It made me angry to see among the crowd many who might bear a spear or sword, men and women both. What had happened to these people that they had nothing now to die for? *So many.* I could not believe life had dishonoured so many.

Reaching the highway, we pushed our horses forward against the miserable human tide. Demanding answers of a terrified few, threatening and cajoling, we sought their reasons for flight.

By the five hidden names of Arkat, the telling was a grim one. We learned that most of the Lunar regulars stationed in the city had been deployed to Herongreen to face the southern rising. A sudden and mysterious plague had erupted among the remaining troops at the Field of the Tents of Silver. Two days ago, Orlanthi tribesfolk had begun rioting and killing within Alda Chur itself, seeking to finally overthrow Harvar Ironfist and his Golden Octad. The running battles had intensified during last night's storm. After two long decades, the Storm folk had indeed called down the Righteous Wind once more.

Harvar's own Bigger Wind had been loosed upon the Sharl Plains by the Air Tribe's assault, and the storm ram now roamed untamed and unguided, weaving destruction on Princeros allies as well as its Orlanthi foes. Of Helarnu Truespear there was no word. It was said that Wintertop was sending fighters into Tarsh to delay possible reinforcements. However, Heartland Corps led by the Razoress herself were moving to put down these invaders, and these legions would then advance to Alda Chur. Tusk Riders were heading south under Lunar ordinance. Praxian raiders had been seen on the Pavis Road by the Solflint River,

taking usual advantage of the confusion. Most terribly, it was whispered that the Red Emperor had ordered the Crimson Bat to be unleashed, solving the Sartarite problem once and for all.

I believed perhaps half of what I heard. I knew how such stories took root—fear feeding rumour feeding misery feeding further untruth. Those who would not fight often created excuses for their cowardice, urging even the courageous to drop their weapons and flee. It was a common affliction of these treacherous times. *Great Arkat, Liberator, cleanse us all with your Indomitable Will. Return to us soon!*

Our path was blocked for a time before a roadside shrine to Ernalda. Around the simple clay and stone altar there milled a crowd of wailing men and women, with numerous children sprawled in the mud at their feet. I dare not look into their faces, lest anger take me. Pitiful prayers and supplications rent the frozen air.

A pair of overturned and abandoned wagons lay just a few measures from the shrine. Scraps of rag and broken wood littered the highway's drainage ditch, where a few children picked over what little remained. Several bodies also lay half-submerged in the ditch, abandoned in the panic, hacked by blades and torn by grasping fingers. I could well imagine what had happened here.

Cradledaughter was spurred to action. How typical, I sneered to myself. Foolishly, the Vingan tried to deal with the crowd as though they were a market-day throng. Dismounting, she doled out the remainder of our corncakes from her saddlebag, then began to bully some of the better provisioned into sharing out warm clothing. It was an empty gesture, like Avranos fighting the Storm. Finally, perhaps realising the futility of what she attempted, Cradledaughter took to shouting, ordering them to move on, to get the children to shelter. Deeply ashamed by the unfolding farce, I led the horses forward.

"Listen! The gods speak! Listen!"

Beyond the wrecked wagons, a tragedy of another kind was gaining pulsion. A mud-stained ancient—inspired or possessed by drink or fear or spirit—had begun an impromptu summoning dance.

The ritual was building into power, fed by fear and the hopelessness of those who watched. One by one they joined in the shambling steps, abandoning themselves to the ecstatic numbness of the rite. I could sense powers gathering, drawn by the energies of the dance, feeding on the crowd's panic and hysteria...

The godi leading the ceremony was frothing from his toothless mouth, aura burning for all with the gift to see, aflame with the energies evoked by rough ritual. Screaming, he fell to his knees, calling down the powers of Wind and Storm as the ragged dance stumbled to a halt around him.

He shouted above the crowd, eyes wide, bony arms lifted stormward, withered body trembling in the wild throes of possession. "Listen! Stand all and listen! The old things blow away! An Age passes into ruin! I have seen the secrets of the runes! If you have planted thorns, will you now gather grain? If you have spun coarse wool, will you now weave fine brocade?!"

I made the gestures of invocation on my chest. Before me, the crowd stirred nervously, perhaps afraid of the energies they had unleashed. The godi whirled like a wind dancer, screaming out his vision, voice tinged with the strains of judgement and command.

"Listen! I see kinship broken by foul incest in the city of glass... I see a man worshipped as a god, false son of the Talastari, his land in turmoil, clanging shields, companions trampled by iron blades, men in bronze, screaming the ancient rites. I see a baleful red moon in the sky, married to the false prince, her dowry—death. Death! I see the Third Daughter stride triumphant through the Victory Gate! What hope? What hope?..."

"Listen! I see a man come out of the south, deception his trade, but anointed with the mark of Orlanth... Battle axe and sword shall rule, split shields asunder. Listen! Flee to the uplands with your children! Listen to his words. I hear him; he speaks... 'I will bring down her palace, blackened with smoke, I will tear down her gates in flames, I will rip the tunic of her breast with iron.'"

Untamed magic pressed upon me now, caught as I was in the spell of his voice. Wild power hung heavy in the freezing air, dread energies seeking to manifest. At this moment, anything was possible.

Shrill viper whistle, cutting air.

From somewhere behind me a bronze-tipped javelin whistled through the crowd, shearing the godi's shoulder. He screamed in shock and sudden agony. In that scream all power vanished, our collective trance evaporating, the energy dispersed to winds and storm. Spinning around, suddenly aware of the danger I had been in, I saw Cradledaughter mounted in her saddle. Grim as death, she already had another shaft poised to cast. *Her face aglow with power.*

The crowd milled in fear, the godi suddenly just a fearful old man clutching to a shattered shoulder. *It then occurred to me he had not mentioned Starbrow.*

Cradledaughter grimaced. "Suddenly everyone's a prophet. If the trance was truly from the god, then even a charging berserker couldn't stop his ranting and raving. He's just a rabble rouser, wasting people's time. They have to keep moving, find shelter. There is so little time... If they don't know the signs already, there's no hope. No hope at all. We've all got to keep moving, keep moving..."

Her anger burned as strong as the wild magic invoked by the ritual. Perhaps by her action she had called its power to herself. Certainly, her words incarnated terrible purpose. Seated high in the saddle, she seemed to me like the goddess called in the inner rite, the grim Bringer of Mysteries.

I found myself smiling at her, chastened by her wisdom. She returned my smile, strained but genuine. It seemed that in his own way, the Death-Wielder could touch her as well.

I remounted, while all around the endless throng streamed onward into uncertainty. Forcing a way forward against the pitiful procession, I came to realise I was not alone in my struggle. Whatever their circumstances, everyone was scarred. Everyone was afraid. Only in touching the gods might we find the strength and the wisdom to endure.

↑ RUNO VII ↑

Kinship

Argrath, Iron-quester,
 First among heroes,
 Slew with the sword edge,
 the spear point, the spell.

Vanquished the Red Ones, brake we their life-wall,
 Hacked through the crescent ring,
 hewed through the shield.

The Ten Sorrows of Alda Chur.

For two days we rode hard, fighting mud and sleet and flooded streams. The beast within my lungs grew stronger with each frozen morn, and the icy chill that numbed my hands and feet seemed to spread into the darkest recesses of my soul. We avoided Alda Chur completely, cutting a muddy path northward to rejoin the Tarsh Road upon the Sharl Plains, hard-won home of the Yelmalian Princeros tribe. The prosperous steads and villages that straddled the highway showed evidence of a recent storm's fury, but whether it was Righteous or Bigger Wind I could not tell, and cared not enough to ask.

The incident by the shrine had taken the edge off our mutual anger, so the Loyal Daughter and the Sword fell to talking once again, though never with the same honesty or openness. Cradledaughter sought to hold me one evening, and I allowed myself a brief embrace, but soon convinced myself that sentry watch was more important than rest. I would not let her within my guard again.

Towards evening on the second day we approached a Lunar customs house, a fire-blackened ruin that had once marked the border with Tarsh. The Glowline shimmered sullenly down upon us from across Dwarf Run, a blood red, shimmering curtain that subdued the land beneath it to the power of the demon moon. I had long learned to ignore it, but Cradledaughter gazed up despite herself, entranced by the sky-palisade and its ever-changing folds of scintillating light. Enticing, hypnotic, deadly... terror wrapped in seductive beauty, the promise and reality of Red Shepelkirt. No wonder the Vingan harboured such deep hatreds.

We were challenged before the ruin by a sentry troop of Arinstoli Sable Riders—Praxian warriors armed with lance and hatchet. One of them recognised Cradledaughter, and an animated conversation ensued in some coarse desert dialect. Despite their animal skins and woolen trousers, they shivered constantly in the unfamiliar cold. How strange, how disturbing it was to see warriors with short hair and shaved faces.

The customs house huddled atop a desolate hogs-back ridge on the lower reaches of Cursed, a barren sky-scarring peak. It had become the centre of an armed encampment commanding the Tarsh Road's long descent into Dwarf Valley. Some sort of ambush or armed action had already occurred here, for I could see blackened skeletons of Lunar supply wagons littered across the mud-soaked flats below. I could also see, across the valley, the fires and defensive palisades of the Lunar position, with hundreds of wagons drawn in crescent shapes within.

My Cohort had obviously been at work on the building's defences. Earthworks were already in place: a trench and rampart, protected by a half-completed palisade twice the height of a man. Added to the thorn hedges and fences of the original building, they comprised a formidable defence.

A number of standards stood defiant over the makeshift encampment. Beside the stark rune and raven standard of my Cohort (Praise the Death-Wielder!) were wind banners and badges of horned boar, bear and alynx—Orlanthi tribal totems. A golden sun standard indicated at least one mercenary phalanx, and a rearing iron horse the presence of an Elmalí suncarl and his troop. The honour standard was of silver cloth, billowing in the storm-gust. Three red deer, a single star—Kallyr Starbrow's personal device! Since Cradledaughter had told me that the Kheldon Queen was still in the south, it must signify the presence of a member of her household.

As yet, neither sign nor stench of Wolf Pirates.

Glancing across the nearer campfires, I recognised some former companions-in-arms. Young Balin Godgift, moodglad and iron-bright, eager for fame, still three years short of a beard. Junj'gra Many-Step, Balin's bondfather, flashing wargear, flushed with wine-pride. They led a few dozen Tovtaros Windleapers, rowdy in their cups. And sharing their meal, Honarious Fly-From-Fornication—so it was his standard! The aged Sun Domer commanded three companies of the best mercenary spears in Far Point.

Yet most of those gathered round the cooking fires were strangers to me. I saw an Elmalí suncarl, his shield and armour aglow with a yellow blaze as steady as the stars of love and war. His followers wore their hair in locks that fell down their backs, a disciplined and steady bunch by their look. Beyond them sat morose Exiles from Wintertop with topknots on their heads, playing tarchat by threadbare tents. Round neighbouring flames gathered a motley collection of Bluefoot Orlanthy—fenlanders, thanes, and beardless youths, Odaylans, acorn eaters, Vingans, Sartarite exiles and lesser outlaws. The Uplanders had been fighting Ironfist a full generation, and there were few in the fyrds left to answer the call of the black arrow.

Standing solitary amidst the warriors, I noticed a few seemingly-bewildered kolatings and bush shamans. And ascending from their muddy sun pits, a troop of Uzko, rising loudly with the night. Set apart from the Orlanthy, Praxian Khans sat in dignified counsel with their sable and zebra and bison riders. *Ale thanes and forest children, maltworms and mosstroopers.*

Most of those present in the camp were already scratched and scarred, filthy, stinking of fear and sweat and urine. It was a familiar and I must say comforting scene; the quiet and profound beauty of weapon racks and wagons, canvas and hide canopies. I sensed the breathless communion of huddled men and women waiting fretfully for their hour of death.

And every one of them, from Praxian Khan to ragged moss trooper, wore a sprig of humble winterbloom.

Weighing what I saw, I sensed that this gathering comprised a desperate and unreliable band. Despite this, the defence itself seemed to have been carefully planned. A spring had been evoked beneath the highway at the top of the incline, and its muttering stream had transformed the road's surface into a twisting and treacherous mud slide. The base of the hill was now a morass of clinging mud, as difficult to cross as any palisade. There were Earth altars dedicated at various points around the mountainside, indication of more ritual activity, though I could not understand their purpose. Four straining oxen pulled a sturdy cart towards them, bearing the largest woman I have ever seen.

Four curse towers towered above our front, some swaying treacherously in the wind. The bodies of sacrificed prisoners hung bloody and naked from the framework, suspended by ropes spliced through their heels. Atop the towers, power-bright godar faced the enemy camp, already weaving their wyrdwork.

I paused a moment, opening my senses anew to the sights and sounds and smells of the camp. I heard the over-brash banter of fearful men, the soft cursing of the weary, the scraping of blades on whetstones, the quiet drone of temple chants, the brighter melody of boasting songs. From further down the slope came the mournful drone of battle pipes, and melancholy clansfolk singing of cold winds and rivers roaming free. On the hill crest, Sun Domers hymned their departing god, while Elmali clustered close about their fire, exchanging nervous laughter and pretending not to hear. I smelt woodsmoke and wet wool and the faecal stench of the thunderpits, undercut by a heady perfume from the Bevaran healers as they prepared wound plasters, soaking spider webs in vinegar and oil. And cooking smells!—goodwill mush, sheep heads being singed over an open campfire, mutton broth and sticklepick, the bittersweet fragrance of wood ash on the evening air.

The Sable folk left us, leading their curious mounts forward, no doubt seeking the warmth of a friendly campfire. Cradledaughter surveyed the confusion about us with a critical eye. "I need to make my report, and you'll no doubt wish to rejoin your Cohort."

She dismounted to face me, placing a gloved hand upon my head, uncomfortably formal. "Helden Broken Tongue, I release you from the geas I've set upon you. Go now free and unfettered, your duty done."

The Vingan lowered her hand. "You've shown courage and restraint in obeying the summons my friend. I'm... grateful. I know that the journey has been a painful one, and I hope some healer can help you with your ..." She blushed, skin rivalling henna-rich hair. "With your lungs, I mean.... You'll receive Harmast's instruction from the Queen's Consort. He'll probably send for you this evening. I... I hope to see you again soon."

I could not meet her eyes. "You've never mentioned his name. The Queen's Consort."

"He... he doesn't exactly have one. Listen..." My companion glanced about, then drew me close, fingers curled into a warding against intruding powers. Her voice was a cautious whisper.

"This story must not fall on idle ears. It's... well, I'm sure you'll understand. You can imagine what Kallyr faced when she finally claimed her high crown. A generation of Lunar enslavement, then the Storm Himself imprisoned by the treachery of Red Shepelkirt. The Queen gave and lost so much just to claim her rightful throne, that long hard bitter path from Swenstown to Pavis to Whitewall to Boldhome. And then she had to gamble, to risk everything on the Other Side—to journey through the hero-paths of hell."

"The Queen chose six of her closest companions, champions and heroes all, and together they embarked upon the rituals of the Short Lightbringers' Quest. Her Consort, who used to bear the name Kareth White Bull, he was one of the seven. They were attempting to retrace Orlanth's darkness-journey and birth-struggle, to win again some of what He first won. None had dared attempt such a dangerous and desperate quest since the Lunar invasion. All of the omens foretold a great and terrible struggle."

"The quest... well, things went badly wrong. The Moon's Daughter appeared to block their journey, and some of the questers were killed before she was vanquished. The rituals were eventually completed, but some came back... *changed*. The White Bull was one of the ones who were changed. There's nothing tainted or impure, he's simply different from the man he once was. You'll meet with him tonight. He's renounced all of his old names, and is still to receive a new one from the God. For now he is simply 'the Queen's Consort'."

It could not be so. I stared across the valley to the Lunar lines, trying to conceal my racing thoughts. I had to say something, anything...

"His title is an honourable one... you can be sure that I'll respect his trust. And I hope that he finds his new name soon, for I've been taught that nothing can exist fully without uttering their true name."

Cradledaughter reached forward to hug me, a difficult task considering the layers of armour and fur that enshrouded my body. She bit my ear for luck, and then was gone without a word into the gathering dusk.

The lunar fires were red pinpricks in the thickening gloom.

"Karis?"

°I heard. The bright-woman flashed something strong for a moment, but it didn't linger.°

I would never be able to comprehend a godling's perception of the twin worlds. "What do you think? Doesn't it remind you of something?"

°Perhaps it does. Or it may mean nothing. We both know that the godar of this land don't practice Arkati rituals.°

"But it was a Lightbringer Quest! Who knows what they might have brought back, knowingly or not."

°A man can only think as far as he sees. We must watch and wait. And perhaps the Liberator will touch us once again.°

Let times and tides of crimson dye our blades blood red.



The Highblade Cohort had set its lines, as was tradition, on the extreme right flank of the encampment. I entered through the sentry lines as Cold Elmal dipped below the western hills. The Loyal Thane left his land a parting gift—lingering sprays of golden light on an iron sky.

As I approached the central mess fire, I found myself surrounded by familiar faces, my heart warmed by the raucous and often bawdy greetings of sword kin. There was genuine pleasure in their faces and their grasp, though it was mixed with that distance and curious indifference shared by all Humakti. It never pays to get too close to those touched by the death wyrd.

"So Hundred-thane, you still live! Our Broken Tongue has returned to us!" In our own company, and free from the formality of ritual or parade, we used our regimental nicknames. Kinless, we were sword kin.

It was easy to respond in kind. "Hreidar Hornleaper! I've returned to die in decent company. From your cooking no doubt. Do you still enjoy the Solar vice?"

Hreidar was stringing his polished bow, sixteen hands across, made from the horns of a giant bull he'd slain amongst the gors surrounding Alone. He beamed, a ruddy giant of a man. "No captain, I'm woman-mad now—from scabbard to thimble go I!"

I dissolved into laughter so deep that it strained my tortured ribs. What madness had driven me so far from these people for so long? Most of the mess crowd joined in, though a few by the fire, the life-sick, continued to stare listlessly into the darting flames.

"Hel! Captain, you're turned thin as a mauled trollkin. Still, I'll always keep a spot under my blanket for our favourite Shield Arm."

"Vangira of the Twelve Spears! I've missed your ugly face. The spear gash is healed I see."

"Better than ever, Captain. And its Fourteen Spears now. You've been gone four seasons. Too long."

"Keros the Unready! You're wearing iron!" He stood bristling with buckles, reeking of braised onions. Like me, he wore a bearskin on his back.

"Last Sacred Time, Captain. Thanks in part to you. I lead the Fifth Gathering."

For all I have is Death, and company of swords.

It seemed that most of the First and Fifth Gatherings were present. The rest of the Cohort must be with Harmast and the Starbrow. Here were the other hundred-thanes; Orlstein of the Five Members, Rarta Blade-Bender, old Broddi Clapsaddle. The stark beauty of Nalda Who Shines In Starlight, the Cohort's Healer, wearing a silence sash. Our proud Standardbearer, Tarman FriendlyLay, guardian of the Cohort's wyter. Arkondos Helwalker, the Quartermaster, half his jaw lost to some ancient skirmish. The battle flautists—Lankel the Long and Aife the Manmaker. Orlgein the Belcher, our Paymaster, standing proud after forty winters, an ancient among us.

The Shieldbearer, Huma Saved by Bears, stood apart, grey-eyed and untameable. Hers was the sacred duty to protect the standard, and often I'd faced spear and blade with her on my right side. She was polishing a great pavis shield like a tower. I remembered that shield: a master currier at Herongreen had crafted it for us with the hides of seven bulls, and overlaid it with an eighth layer of glittering bronze.

But where were Forth the Wake and Yrda Walk-In-Rain? Part of me hoped that they had not yet found final release. A man should bid proper farewell to his teachers.

These were my sword kin. The Companions of my Cohort. These were my only blood, my family. This was a good place to die.

Kiomar She-Viper, her broad high brow as white as any leper's, rose from the fireside and draped a command cloak about her shoulders. She was a cold one, never known to join the games or the communal marriage of the hoods, grim and formal in the raising of the wyter. She appraised me silently, taking in the wreck of my shattered body before greeting me with cold reserve.

"Helden Broken Tongue. So our Shield Arm lives. I've been expecting you—it has been too long. Too long." She made it sound like an accusation. "Let's fetch some mulled wine, and you can offer a libation to the One who has returned you. Then, if you like, enjoy a drink yourself. As you can see, there is much before us."

Every member of the Cohort wore a sprig of winterbloom.

Praise the God; the joy is worth the labour.



✱ RUNO VIII ✱

Fate

My blade is my meat.
My ashen spear my mead.
I face the foe and take sustenance.

Humakti Wisdom Verse.
Sartar, 1627.

"To seek for death yet call it life."

"This prolongs the bondage."

Under the dreadful waste of a bitter-black sky, the Cohort gathered. The First Circle stood before the sacred iron-ringed standard, newly purified with holy salt. Behind us ranked the rune-kin, splendid in armour and sturdy on parade, row upon row of shieldboard and spear. Ours had been the sacred meal of fish and bread, sign and signal of our unity. Now came formal sacrifice; two black rams for honour and for death.

"To walk blind in darkness while carrying a torch."

"This prolongs the bondage."

Kiomar She-Viper, terrible in armour, cut some wool from the rams' heads, distributed it among the Circle. Then, when sentries had pronounced the area clear, we proclaimed the sacred oath, invoking aloud the secret name of the God. Kiomar then slit the victim's throats with relentless iron, dropped them gasping on muddy ground. Finally each of the Hundred-thanes drew wine from the altar bowl in cups, and also poured it onto the earth.

"To call on the gods while refusing the blade."

"This prolongs the bondage."

With the sacrifice complete and parade dismissed, the First Circle retired to Kiomar's command hut. Great bronze braziers burned within, but despite their labour the pavilion was draughty and chill. We crowded together on the benches in semi-darkness, our gathering lit only by a few rush tapers. Hot sweet vapours twined upward to gather in thick cloud above our heads. Most of the Circle sipped mulled wine, or, if geas forbad it, then hot salted *kodal*. The Cohort Healer had prescribed me a hot soup of animal marrow, rich in raw essence, fortified by magic song.

Clapsaddle noticed my unusual broth. "Enjoy it while you can. You'll be chewing lentils with the rest of us soon enough."

"Lentils!" I had no taste for such exotic Lunar fare.

"I'm serious". The old man flashed a toothless grin. "We've liberated pulse from the looted wagons, but scarce little else. Food will be a real problem, soon enough. Another poor harvest too: the stead granaries are but a quarter full, and the tax agents want it all!"

Kiomar called us to order, and formally accepted my blade in the presence of the Circle. Then, for my benefit, she recounted the bloody tale of the Cohort's last season.

Kiomar's story was frank and unembellished. With the growing turmoil in Alda Chur, and the defection of so many sword kin to the Lunar War Temple, Harmast had withdrawn the Cohort to Dangerford. There, in early Earth Season, he had pledged us in service to Starbrow. We had held the centre in the stand against the Tarshite legions, and, with great loss, turned the Silver Phalanxes. In hard order there followed forced marches to Jonstown and Runegate, putting down pro-Lunar clans with fire and with sword. With the prospect of a harsh winter campaign looming, half the Cohort had made the long march north with the Queen's Consort, while the remainder under Harmast quartered in Dangerford to prepare for the great battle ahead.

"A hard road, and a long one, if truth be told."

I nodded. Kiomar gave little detail, but I could read the exertion in the faces of all those present. My own experience supplied the rest: stone rations thick with dungson, gear and scalps crawling with lice, uncooked millet pounded between stones, frostbite, nights spent sleepless in the guard. Whatever miseries might break a man, each day, our bread.

And now the prospect of another battle, another forced march. Best not dwell on that just yet. "The Queen's nameless Consort, what do you know of him?"

Kiomar scowled, motioned for Orlgein to reply. His voice rasped in the close and flickering darkness. "I wish to the Grim Feast he'd find himself a name. He's not a tribal king, or even a Boldhome temple thane. Colymar, we think, perhaps one of the Pavis refugees. We see little enough of him, though I suspect he's the one behind the Queen's strategy. Wily as a fire snake in heat. One of the leaders of the Seven Animal Horde that drove the Lunars from Pavis was a Sartarite called Kareth White Bull—that's the name he once had—but Huma doesn't think it's the same man."

Should I tell them of what Cradledaughter had revealed to me? *No*. Not yet anyway. There were no other Arkati here, and my suspicions would mean little to them. I'd learned to be circumspect in such matters: Arkat was not well-loved in these northern lands.

"And what is our duty here?"

Kiomar shrugged. "Basically a holding action, to give the rebels in Alda Chur some breathing space, and to further the nuisance to Lunar Command in Furthest. I would never had believed something this large would be possible so close to Dark Season, and you can wager it counts double for them. Half the Provincial Army will be out of barracks! And the supply train is important in itself. Its carrying silver ingots for the Alda Chur mint, some medicine and leather, and ritual components for the College of Magic. Strange stuff, powerful, needed in the south. And according to the Consort, hidden somewhere amongst the wagons is something *powerful*. Something intended to consecrate the Lunar War Temple in Alda Chur."

The desertions from our Cohort to the Lunar Temple had hit us all hard. We'd fight to destroy the wagons if we could.

"We'll hold here for as long as we can, till Lunar reinforcements arrive in force or until we receive word that Alda Chur is free. I see little chance of extra troops arriving in the next few days, and when they do... well, we'll assess the situation as it comes. We may defend the hill in open battle, but more likely we'll withdraw and join the main army to the south.

Once again, Kiomar had left much unstated. I knew who'd fight the rearguard as the others made their escape. The honour would be ours.

"So who is it that we face?"

"The wagons are guarded by Tarsh regulars from the Silverclad Corps. There's also a regiment from the Devastation Legion out of Furthest—tough veterans, well-disciplined. Several companies of light cavalry from the Jintori Heartlanders. They'll doubtless want to settle the old feud, since they're facing the same clansmen who claimed their standard at Ghost Gors. A few College of Magic reinforcements destined for The Silver Fields—we don't know if they're operational or not. And a cohort of Glamour War Dancers—that should upset the Sun Domers!"

Laughter and a few ribald comments split the smoky air. The War Dancers were a warrior elite who fought completely nude. Before battle, they also carefully removed all body hair in accordance with Lunar taboo. Their appearance often provoked laughter—until the scimitars began their deadly work.

The enemy facing us were impressive of themselves, but hardly likely to join battle across a muddy plain to take a heavily defended hill.

"And what do we have?"

The laughter ceased. Kiomar poured herself another cup of *kodal*. "To put it frankly, we've got a love temple on a holy day. Precious little in the way of experience, and even less in the way of discipline. I can count on Fly-From-Fornication, and the Elmali, but little else. The Blue Ridge Mountain Queen is here with her bodyguard and fifty concubators, all of them skilled in the twisted bow. They might count for a lot when the war drum sounds."

"The only short swords I know who use a bow in battle!" Wolf-witted Broddi again. The joke was a tired one, and few laughed. Kiomar ignored him.

"You've seen the camp. A few Wind Walkers, some thanes and Vingans, and the Praxians if they don't all succumb to frostbite. But most of the clansman are farmers and hunters. They have families back in the steads, and many of them would rather be fighting with their kin in Alda Chur, or back home, especially now its open war. Hatred for Ironfist counts for a lot among them, as you well know. If we don't see action in the next day or so, I fear most of them will slip off into the night."

So it was to be a waiting game, our combined force one insignificant white-bronze piece in a greater game of princes' *fidchell*. We were a clever feint perhaps, or a sacrifice to distract the enemy. Yet we were something more than pawns. Our position was secure, our defences strong. Barring unforeseen reinforcements, our chances were good. And there were very few Lunar regulars, allies or even mercenaries able to operate in the soul-chilling extremes of Dark Season. Broo from Snakepipe? Dragonewts from the Egg? Uz out of Dagori Inkarth? We had to at least consider the possibilities.

Of course, there was at least one mercenary force to whom Dark Season was the favoured time for war and raiding. I recalled the frightened whispers of the refugees. And when we finally dispersed, I joined those casting nervous glances northward into the darkness, in the direction of the Stinking Forest.

● RUNO IX ●

Darkness

Where do our myths come from? They are eternal, but we must also dream them anew in every generation. They come to us in new robes, though their truth is unchanging. When one of our tribe is sanctified, or initiated, when they go off alone into the wilderness, or into the depths of the temple, there they will dream a truth. It might be song or story or vision or spell. That truth is holy, and it must be shared with the entire tribe. So our myths live.

Share what you can of that truth. But do not worry if your words seem inadequate; we all know that more was shown to you than you can tell.

CloudStrider.
Wind-Shaman of Far Point.

“Neither slumber nor sentry watch for you tonight my friend! It’s time to receive your orders. Bring your heaviest cloak, but no armour that might make noise as you travel. Be sure you wear no silver.”

Cradledaughter’s summons was expected. What was *unexpected* was the path on which she led me. Not to the Orlanthi thane-fires in the centre of our camp, but rather beyond the rear sentry posts and palisades, turning north to face the towering dark mass of Cursed. *What manner of meeting was this?*

We carried neither torch nor light-charm. As we passed beyond the Praxian picket fires, my companion bade me not to speak, nor draw a weapon, nor even to look behind as we journeyed. I sensed from her stern tone that we intruded upon wanton powers.

So prepared we entered into a night torn with cries, into a winter-dark realm where elemental and ancient powers ranged triumphant in the star-hung waste. Often as we edged forward I felt the raw tendril touch of their gaze. Immortals tamed to silence in the wet woods below rove unfettered here.

The darkness was broken only by the occasional gentle intrusion of glow worm, by distant thunder flash or by ruddy reflection of moonlight on powdered snow and ice. An owl screamed hatred at our unwelcome intrusion. Each breath came danger-keen. About me I sensed rather than saw nameless colours, brooding pools, gashed trees, broken rock. *This I remember.*

Something pale drifted through the air above us, following our path.

I stumbled rather than strode. Darkness fell complete; moon and star dome obscured behind dark masses of rain-pregnant cloud. My world narrowed down to the pale outline that was Cradledaughter, the stinging whip of branches as we climbed the twisting slope, the squelch and tug of boots through rain-sodden mud. I became nothing more than chilled bones and dagger-drawn lungs, the chant-like rhythms of walking and breathing.

As we climbed I sensed figures in the fog about us. It was as if I journeyed in a dream: the landscape around me timeless, silent, collapsed to formless mists and nameless presences.

We must have walked for several hours, circling as much as climbing the jutting height. Occasional thunderbolts tore at my night vision, stark colours lingering with the afterimage—browns and greens and weathered purple.

Once, the moon broke through the massed cloud. I saw her trembling on the crag's brink, bearing away plunder between her horns. *Such a beautiful young girl.* By her fleeting light I glimpsed... I do not know.

The distant fires of both camps were spread below us as a tapestry—we had completely circled the mountain. Still Cradledaughter did not speak. We stood upon a storm-barren braich, its stony floor littered with wind-carved colgs and ancient dragon stones. To our left, a black spring bubbled silently, overshadowed by the coal-glowing branches of a cypress, its trunk burning but not consumed. To our right, a similar pool, overshadowed by hazel thick with verdant leaf.

Above me, shrieking birds flitted through the darkness. *Karis, where are we?*

°This is a natural opening, a holy place, a link between the worlds. Some god's blood is smeared across the ground.^°

An earth navel. Yet all I could see were chron holes and egg stones, wind-carved images of divine stallion and mare, and two flickering campfires. Had they been there a moment before? The world seemed out of kilter, rippling. I could sense the coils of something monstrous twist about me.

I must be even more tired than I realised.

Three old women huddled by the first fire, roasting a dog, silent as I made my slow approach. One of them crouched forward, casting the runes. Before the second flame, a pair of surly Praxians picked the flesh from a one-eyed salmon. They stood as we approached, each emblazoned with the mark of a white bull across their chest. One exchanged a few curt words with Cradledaughter. The second, bald and scarred, stepped forward, motioned to take Karis from my keeping. Obviously the woman was a simpleton, and did not know who I was. She would soon learn...

"Let him keep the blade."

The voice was Sartarite, tired and hoarse, like one worn out from constant shouting. It rasped into my consciousness like the presence of naked iron. I spun to face the man who had stepped behind me from the darkness, wondering why Karis had not warned me of his presence.

And found myself staring into a limitless expanse of liquid blue-grey eyes.

He was dressed in a simple grey kilted tunic and cloak. No weapon was visible, though three enormous carved teeth hung from his woven belt. He stood half a head shorter than me, though well-muscled and limber. Thirty winters perhaps. His hair was black, already etched with grey, slicked back against his skull with rancid oil. The edges of his face were plastered with white ochre, and his hair and nails were long and unkempt. The effect was ghostlike; he seemed a lonely shaman rather than a warrior.

"Come with me. You must be tired."

I followed the stranger down through the web-plastered rocks and boulders that littered the braich. Part of me hoped that this was another servant, leading me into the presence of the Consort. Yet I already sensed the truth, even before my ally confirmed it.

"Karis, what do you see?... Karis?"

°I do not know. I perceive... a multitude.^°



W RUNO X W

Mastery

I am the leaf caught upon the breeze.
I am the falling stone.
I am the taste of blood in the mouth
of the predator.

I am the rain before it forms into drops.
I am the brother who is not kin
Parent of life, life's child.

I am the taste of water,
the light in sun and moon
the silence between the crashing waves.
I am the murmur of the bellows.

I am the cry of dreams on waking
the name in the hero challenge
white bull in valour
dragon 'neath the hills
blade point in battle.

I am in everything,
and everything springs from me.
Neither revealed nor unrevealed
Neither manifest nor hidden.

Name me.

The Seventh Meditation on the Blade.

We stood together, side by side, rooted at the iron heart of ancient hills. Behind us, some damp and crouching cave tunnelled down into unknown depths. To my left, a collapsed dome of turf and stone, the remains of some long-abandoned sweat lodge. To my right, the abyss, a cloud-wrapped visa extending west to the very boundaries of Furthest. The plain below sparkled with ten thousand jewels.

A shaman's place.

The Queen's Consort crouched by a dying fire, rebinding with thong the grip of a great two-handed sword. Totally absorbed in his task, he let the silence grow. I sipped impatiently from a pannikin of mulled wine.

When he finally spoke, he did so without glancing up from his labour. “Do you know of Gamla’s Leap, that last bitter battle of the Righteous Wind? Harvar Ironfist’s wind-borne thanes led a Lunar hero band into the heights north of Chalk Man—they were seeking vengeance for the Ghost Gors. They had it too—matched it blood for blood and head for head—a massacre.”

He inspected his handiwork by the ember’s flickering glow. Satisfied, he wiped down the blue metal of the blade with an edge of his cloak. “It’s said that many of the final survivors—devotees and godi all—swore terrible oaths together. Rather than give up the struggle, they willed their breath and their souls into a single blade. That blade was taken from the place by Balin Stormstrong, a lawspeaker of the Tresdarnii clan, one of the few who lived. He was the oldest, and perhaps the wisest amongst them. It is said that the blade will be used in the great battle to free the Far Place from Moon Woman and her kin.”

Old Balin Stormstrong, whose god-gifted grandson bore his name and, some said, his memory and wisdom. The forces were gathering.

“A battle such as the one we face below?”

“Blocking the Tarsh Road is merely a holding action for Kallyr and for Alda Chur, as well you know. But it is an important one, perhaps a critical one. The balance is so fine—a day or two’s difference may mean life or death for Sartar, and for the Far Place. But the great battle is coming. The forces gather. Soon enough the battle-bird’s cry, the hoar-wolf’s howl. The first blows have already been dealt. Shield will answer shaft.”

I nodded, hearing screams of bronze and wood and flesh carried upon the ghost wind. Quickly I made warding with my fingers. “Our present situation is a good one. Our defences are sound. Perhaps the skalds will one day remember a victory at the mountain called Cursed. They will recite our names and count us among the heroes of Kallyr’s Rising. No warrior could ask for more.”

He stared beyond me, to the lights of the camp below. “I think the skalds will name us all as one, if they remember us at all.”

He rose then, testing the balance of the great blade. Hefting it with ease, he set it dancing on palm and fingers. Despite his odd appearance, this man was a master of the iron edge. I laughed gently to myself, thinking of another wild bushman who was not what he seemed.

The Consort laid down the heavy blade. “I agree with your assessment of the defences. Your Cohort have done well. But tell me Sword, what do you think of the *hosting* gathered below?”

He knew as well as I our major weakness. “I think that if hopes and hatred could win battles you’d be king of Dragon Pass.”

He laughed at that. “I was told your mind was as keen as your blade. Excellent. But remember sword brother, sometimes hopes can take solid form, march out and take the foe by the throat. Hatred too. I learned that well enough in Prax, and again when Broyan of the Volsaxi took hopes and hatred and a hundred men and marched north into Heortland. I know the clansmen below won’t wait forever, and that war, despite the horrors of a generation, is still a kind of sport to many of them. But you’re a foreigner, and know the more of them in dying than in living.

The Consort lifted one of the rune-carved teeth from his belt, and whispered to it softly before placing it on the ground next to his sword. "I know the mettle of these people. They're wilful and undisciplined and fickle as a storm gust, but they'll fight for the warrior to their left and to their right, the brothers, fathers, sisters and lovers who've left the steads and hunting camps to join them. They have something to fight for here that those of us who make war our bedmate can't really understand. They're our greatest weapon."

I barely heard beyond his first few sentences. *Broyan*. Anger was rising within me again, deep-welled and poisonous. Had my hand been clasped around a fetish when I gave reply, the venom in my voice might have killed him.

The air crackled and sparked as I spoke. "I seem to remember that Broyan had more than a hundred; he made pact with Harrek and his Wolf Pirates. Little enough concern for the clansfolk then."

In the brief silence that followed, anything was possible. My hand itched, watching, ready for the great double blade to fly through the air towards me. Or perhaps I'd draw Karis and make justice myself.

He shrugged, those liquid eyes gazing into mine, unflinching. *They were not a warrior's eyes*. There was patience in his voice. And weariness perhaps.

"Hundred-thane, you're a mercenary yourself. Do you pick and choose who will fight beside you? Of course not! The gods have their own ways of judging men and their deeds. It's for us to strive as they did, and then to dare as even they cannot. That's the song-lesson of our heroes – Harmast, Arkat, Alakoring, Sartar, Kallyr."

The world spun on the point of a weighted knife. In my anger I did not full notice who he named as heroes.

"Arkat didn't lift his kilt and bend to the Wolf Pirates."

Once again those silent eyes sought mine. I turned away, unable to bear his gaze, troubled and shamed. I'd regretted those words as soon as they'd left my mouth. He knew: I knew. Arkat did worse. *Much worse*. Blessed be the terrible sound of his name.

As had I. As had he. *The land is afflicted by a hero*.

Blessed be the Mystery of his returning.

"I'm sorry... Consort. I spoke in haste, from an angry wound. Such words are unworthy of you."

He crouched by the fire, poured himself a horn of some dark liquid. "We are not so different, you and I. Not even the gods go through life unmarked."

How dark his will, and iron-like.

Words came unbidden to my lips. "Who are you?"

He smiled; a sad, distant smile, full of long journeys and dead companions. "I've been called the plague that summons the healer, and the healer that summons the plague. Sometimes I'm forced to be the thunderbolt that scalps your naked soul. At other times I feel I'm a solitary leaf tossed before the storm-wind. Like life and death, I'm whatever you want me to be. I'm a blade to be used."

He truly doesn't know!

"And what should I call you?"

"I would you call me friend, and kinsman too."

Was he playing with me? His soft blue-grey eyes sparkled in firelight.

"Lord, my god is truth, and he names all things with the eye of truth. What sort of name do you seek?"

He smiled. "As you say, the gods will reveal it. Perhaps your god, on the coming field of death. What would you call me?"

Should I tell him? *I dare not presume.*

"I don't know. I will call you friend, and Consort both". He smiled at that. "I cannot call you kinsman, for I am Humakti, I have no kin."

The Consort took a sprig of winterbloom, that fragile blue-black flower that thrives in want and darkness. He pinned it to my shoulder broach. "We are all kin in Sartar's cause. That is Starbrow's gift to us all. The Freedom Wind blows on Sword and stickpicker, on cottar and king, Kheldon and Colymar. It makes us one. It makes us kin. Just as death makes us kin."

I reflected a moment in silence. "You have orders for me, Consort. From Harmast the Hatchet, First Sword of my Temple."

He nodded at the mention of my captain's name. His voice became more formal. "Harmast offers you a choice, according to your honour and will. Kiomar will lead the Cohort in this place. If you desire a battle, you may stay here. Or if you believe you can serve better elsewhere, you should return to his side at Dangerford."

A Thousand-thane does not ask his Shield Arm if he desires a battle. Harmast's message was clear: *Are you ready to die?*

"I have little strength for further travel. Perhaps I can be of some small use here." *And may the God grant me the courage to do what I must.*

"Strength is not everything, Death Lord, as you well know. Your blade is still sharp. You have wisdom, you know when to advance and when to fall back. I myself could use such as you."

"Why would I serve you?"

"I truly have no answer. I can offer no scutage, no thane's gift at Sacred Time. We who follow the Thunder's path have neither hoard-share nor horse-giving. Not that I would attempt to buy you with silver. Nor would I order you, though Harmast has granted me that power. Instead I ask you – ask you to cast death in the service of life. If you do, you will do it not for me but for these people and their freedom. Not for the god, or the Cohort, or because it is your wyrd to fight. You will cast death in the service of life."

Cradledaughter had used such words. They no longer seemed so strange. "Yes... my Captain." I nodded my assent. I would serve him because of what he was, and what he might become. I would serve him because I was Arkati.

I realised at that moment I would die for this man.

From beneath his cloak the Consort took a tiny animal fetish, carved from some rare jewel that even in darkness held all the secrets of the morning sun. "I would that you have this. A friend gave it to me. He had... journeyed across the ocean, far beyond Magasta's Pool, to the great southern land at the edge of the flame. Its image is an animal of that place... I do not know what it is called. This charm can swallow bad dreams. Perhaps it will help you sprinkle salt on the witchbird's tail."

I realised that silent tears were running down my cheeks. He took my hand in his, gripped hard, led me back toward the twin fires and the burning tree.

I heard the voices of many women.

"Wait for my word. Commit... no fornication. Gather the energies of death about you. Nurture your strength, prepare yourself. Become a perfect instrument of duty. When the gathering is complete, then we will strike. When that time comes, I will show you my great secret."

"And what is it you require me to do?"

"You will do what you do best. You will play the part of Death in ancient rite."



⌘ RUNO XI ⌘

Fertility

Hail Guardians of the Six Directions!
Hail Tribes of Earth and Air!

Wild Winter Warrior
In the air that is your breath
we share the sacred wyrd.

We invoke and call you down
to this our stead, our rock, our gathering.
Lightbringer, Iron-thane, Lord of Middle Air
Touch us with the strength of Storm and Hurricane!
Air Breath! Womb Water! Earth Body!

The Winter Sowing.

Three cold and listless days followed. Days of neither rain nor snow, but a storm-driven sleet that kept the mud full-loose and liquid.

The foul weather bit hard, with sickness and misery and hacking coughs that rent the chill air. Food became scarce, and Kiomar's prediction soon proved itself true. The curse towers howled, and earth priestesses continued their long ritual by mist-shrouded ridge altars. A biting tension gripped the camp, the clansfolk battle-eager, wanting to engage the hated foe so close at hand. They loosed their growing frustration with brawling, drinking... and desertion.

The Lunars attempted to set time and place for formal battle on the plain. Their Bearer of the Three Sticks was the Etyries merchant Octavian Redwheel, well-known to both sides, with kin in either camp. The Pelorian rune-priest had devoted his life to absolute fairness in all dealings, as many an Ironspike weaver and hunter could testify. Yet this very dedication to his goddess now made him perhaps the most hated man in either camp. His effort was of course, repulsed—for no appeal to honour or glory would us lure from our hill-top eyrie, despite the howling of the clansfolk. Having declined formal battle, we were now bandits in Lunar eyes, outlaws without shame or honour, to be offered neither quarter nor surrender. *Yet the road remained ours.*

I devoted those long days to weapon play and training; seeking to find the strengths and limits of my tortured body. I found my swordplay smooth, though I could not long lift the shield.

As I gave my time again to discipline and renewed focus, I thought little of Cradledaughter. Nor did I see her about the camp. The Consort made infrequent appearances to stir the clans and lead in sacrifice. Bedecked in savage iron, with a great dragonhead helm, he seemed a true vision of the warrior thane, battle-eager and deadly.

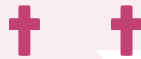
With the Consort's frequent and unexplained absences, effective leadership among the Orlanthi thanes rested with Rostakos of the Entan. This proved intensely frustrating to Kiomar, who was attempting to coordinate plans for the coming battle. Rostakos led the priests and godar of Orlanth Thunderous, and so was engaged in constant rite to call and concentrate the storm. He had little time for tactics. It seemed that when the moment came, the Orlanthi would simply scream and charge, as was their age old custom. *Straight into the waiting spears of the Lunar phalanx.*

My nights were broken by suffering owls and groaning Orlanthi, and the harsh unremitting chants of taunting Uz. And by the old enemy, though I clenched the Consort's charm so tight my palm drew blood.

A woman stumbles through the breakers of a southern shore. She reminds me of someone I once knew, but the currents of dream deny me a name. Her face is sometimes Cradledaughter's; her voice the toneless inner whisper that is Karis. She calls against the thunder of the waves. She carries a mussel knife that is sometimes a sword, that same sword that I try to throw from my side in order to reach her. She is calling out a name, someone's name.

I did not know the name.

I awoke sweating by red moonlight, wrapped in dirty hide within a freezing flapping tent. A fear spirit clung about my spine. Huddling Karis to my breast, I cast it aside, laying in uneasy wait for a distant dawn.



The Consort's summons came at sunset on the third day. Not through Cradledaughter, but the bald Praxian woman I'd nearly cut down on Cursed. She bade me don full iron, then led me beyond the lines.

Rather than climb the peak, we travelled to a ragged and twisted pant that hid about its foot. Within the pant lay a stone-sentried barrow; ancient and obscure, with the stump of a petrified tree deep-rooted upon its rounded hump. A bonfire burned there, and I felt the presence of powerful daimones gathered all about.

The Consort stood in the midst of an assembly of thanes and earth priestesses from the camp. Kiomar stood amongst them, fell and daunting in her long white cloak. To one side stood the Consort's retinue: Praxians for the most part, and a few iron-girded Sartarites bearing the Colymar tattoo.

It seemed hard for me to believe that this was the same man I'd encountered three nights previously. His aura crackled with grim power and will. He seemed larger, stronger—forged invincible by iron and enchantment and strength of arms. He incarnated Wind and Storm.

And his voice was the voice of the hurricane gale. "Our gathering is now complete. Listen and heed. Even as we speak, moonboats descend upon the enemy camp. Kulbrast Swiftfoot brings news of Tusk Riders in battle array advancing from the Stinking Forest. They are only a few hours away. In Alda Chur, the struggle continues. The balance within the city is a fine one, the outcome still uncertain."

He paused to let the news take full root. The tainted half-trolls were among the North's most hated foes. Their Cult of the Bloody Tusk glorified the worst kinds of pain and torture. Atrocities I had long sought to forget loomed large again in the soul-eye of memory. Even in victory this would be a filthy fight.

"Either we invite battle on the morrow, or face the Dark Men on their terms when the sun has fled. The omens of sacrifice and divination are in our favour. The thanes have decided. We will fight!"

Wild cheering erupted from the warriors—war whoops and thunder shouts, the thump of spear on shield.

"We will shatter their shield walls. Remember now your speeches pledged over mead and mulled wine, your battle-vows before the moot, your hero-boasts in hall. Now shall we prove the courage of those words. Prepare your companies for battle at dawn. Rouse your warriors with strong words. Each now to your duty. Let us show the gods victory!"

Again came the thunder shout, and again, and again. Three times the assembly saluted its war leader, and each time the hills echoed and redoubled their call.

The thanes then dispersed, as did the Consort's retinue. As she departed, Kiomar flashed a hand signal—do what you must. Her look told all: the Cohort would soon enact its sacred purpose, strife-eager for the bitter battle-clash.

The darkness swallowed iron: soon all that remained were a hand and a half of earth priestesses, three solitary kolating, and myself. The Consort beckoned us all fall in behind. "Tomorrow we will lock spears with those who oppress us. We shall fight, and we shall curse them. But tonight... tonight we are going to grant them a blessing."



A Sword is trained to obey without question. I am a warrior who has opened his heart to the secrets of the Runes. I have walked the timeless paths of the Other Side, spoken to the gods themselves when summoned in ancient ritual, touched the Heart of Truth. I am Victor of the Altar, and have joined the Many as One in fighting the armies of dissolution. I have even braved the hero paths of hell, following in the tracks of Arkat the Liberator. Yet I had no idea what this warrior without a name intended. *To bless the foe?*

We stumbled deeper into the rocky crevasse. I sensed the sharp stench of pitch, of rush lights and burning hazelwood. Three white wolves stared down from the shadow-deep slopes above. In the gullet of the pant a cave tunnelled deep into the heart of the mountain. *Navel and Womb*. Perhaps it was part of the same labyrinthine maze that opened onto the peak

above, and down into deepest hell for all I knew. Earth was not my element. Within its gaping mouth, serpents glided about a rough-hewn altar stone. And attending the altar, silhouetted by low fires, a crowd of chanting women.

So this was his great secret.

Within the cave sat women old and women young, ancient crones and shivering virgins. Women dressed in kilt and belted robe, in plaited rush and savage shaman's cloak. I saw copper-clad warriors and milk-fat priestesses, red and yellow striped Gori and fierce-visaged bringers of the quake. Weavers and herd mothers, Vingans, viragos, healers and helmet girls. A few men were also seated midst the many—scarred and tattooed shamans or godi. Priestess and Staff-bearer, acolyte, kolating and Axe: before my bewildered gaze the assembled powers of the Earth.

For the most part, these were not warriors who sought the spear thrust and bronze song of battle. These rather were the ones who waited at battle's end, to bury the dead or perhaps appease a victorious foe. Not for them thane-gold and plunder, but rather burned villages, violation, funeral wail, frightened orphans, hunger and casual death. These were the patient ones, the rebuilders. These women *endured*, turned death into life; maintaining the eternal cycle.

My companions passed within, to the fire-bright crystal shelter of the womb cave. I made to follow, unsure of my role, when I found my entrance full blocked by an axe-dancing demoness.

"Hrrraaiiiii!"

It leered, screaming at me in some ancient and unhuman tongue. Karis flew into my grasp, raised to cut the monster if it advanced. I glimpsed violet, pupil-less eyes. Pale green-brown skin, knotted and rough, intergrown with shining sheets of copper. *Otherness*. A burnished axe festooned with grisly trophies—scalps, genitalia, finger bones.

°A Mreli. Earth Guardian. Pure with Death.°

I stepped backwards, aware at least of the sentry's role, if not the full import of Karis' cryptic assessment. *Or did I?* The copper axe weaved its dance, threatening, testing my intent and resolve. I sought to calm my racing heart, to assess the strange woodbeast before me.

It stood small and light, whip-thin even by Aldryami standards. Tan-bark skin was etched by whirling tattoos on face and hands. Those searing alien eyes. A face framed by strands of lichenous hair, festooned by winterbloom in such a way that it was difficult to perceive where one ended and the other began. Its speed and strength were extraordinary for one so small, though I could detect no haze of enchantment about its twisted frame. The guardian swayed from side to side, hissing, daring me to strike. There was something...

Mreli! The Dark Season was upon us—this creature must be avoiding its annual sleep at terrible cost. And for what purpose? I looked again into those eyes, saw them crazed with carnage, flecked with blood and the madness of long-waking. This one was wildly unbalanced. Death-pure indeed. And unlikely to be led or reasoned with...

I dropped down slowly to one knee, placed Karis flat upon the ground in front of me. Tense, trusting to the gods now, expecting the copper blade at my neck, the bitter edge. However, the Earth Guardian seemed to understand my obeisance, and wooden teeth chattered loud and long in that same alien tongue. I needed no translation.

The Consort stepped between us, lifted me to my feet, nodding his agreement. "You must not pass within. Our ceremony will summon death in the service of life, and life for death. We will raise a new kind of wyter—a group spirit—and our power will be the power of one. But you—you and this Axe Sister—your role is pure unfettered death, unmixed with life. Your essence must not be polluted. When we are complete, you will be the eyes and ears of the ritual, our axe and blade. But you must not partake in the inner rite, least life pollute the purity of death. Listen to our summoning, give of your power when asked, but do not enter the cave. And beware—you must not look upon things forbidden. Put out your companion also, let it patrol the boundaries least it perceive what it should not."

"I still do not understand..."

"You will know what to do when the time comes. Listen to your inner voice, when it becomes the voice of the wyter. Don't be deceived by thought or expectation."

He turned then and entered the rocky maw, discarding his armour and sword. The Mreli had lowered her axe, though she continued to threaten with those harrowing pupil-less eyes. Within the cave, a shower of sparks rolled roofwards. A wave of heat billowed outwards from the exposed embers, accompanied by the pine-rich tang of burning incense. *And so it began.*

*"The storm has folded around us,
The earth has swallowed us,
We stand in sacred space and time.
Ours is the High Path,
Gatherers of the Blessed Crop."*

I despatched Karis to roam the realms untamed, disquieted by her unaccustomed absence. The subtle interplay of awareness between us had become as familiar as the pumping of my heart. I then turned my back upon the cave and the rituals within, became a second sentry to hold the enveloping dark at bay.

Behind me, the nascent ritual gathered strength. First the came the blessing and invocation to the Earth, familiar from many a communal sacrifice. Next the summoning to give the Goddess form. Then the creation of the wyter, prefaced by that which cannot be told.

"Life and Death, sword and cup, axe and plough, blade and board, stone and egg, sow and serpent, stag and stallion, haggard and teal. These the implements of our summoning."

Once, despite myself, I glanced back upon the rites. Surrounded by godlings, possessed by ancient powers, a young woman, scarce a maid, had taken her place at the centre of the gathering. She was naked, clothed only in clinging mud and leaf, in dazzling beams of power that radiated from her brow. Plump and butter-rich, her breasts stood proud, painted with runes, her shoulder and neck noble and strong. Seeing my lapse, the Mreli screamed unintelligible threat. Black decay befouled her mouth; her breath a baleful blight.

I quickly turned away.

Even in that brief contact with the powers of the ritual, I had touched an animal, woodland, ploughfield essence that was startlingly unpleasant, yet also profoundly arousing. A heady brew of life and sex and death. Disturbing. *Enticing.*

"Leaflight, bloodroot, grain reborn. Grow. Reap. Receive."

Finally came the embodiment of ancient powers, for a purpose still unclear. I caught the pungent smell of dragon's breath, found myself open-mouthed in unbelief. *How dare they tamper thus!*

Yet the wyter was formed, and when the time came I gave of myself to it. My spine stood straight and proud, I sensed the mind-bright flow of communal energies. Roots reaching down, sap rising, branches intertwined with those around me.

Then the chant within me building, spiralling upward, driven by that pulsating life rhythm that infuses all. I/We the ancient powers, I/We the eternal-dance.

We were as one. The air was lightless: nothing kept its form. I raised my ancient shrunken arms, letting the wind hurl against our faces. Deep-rooted, Self and Other, I was timeless, many-breasted, perceiving and acting in a hundred different ways. Foreign and familiar magics flared within my brain. I was the seedbearer, the storm dance. *And I was still the blade.*

Let gods breathe power through my song, my fighting strength.

Everything around and within me was a swirling pattern of energy. Perhaps it was as the gods perceive; seeing now as Karis might. Colours-not, patterns-not, vibrating voids and falling soundless music.

I was Many. I was One. *And I knew what was required.*



R RUNO XII R

Magic

Death feeds us, keeps an eye on our weight
and leads us like lambs through the abattoir gate.

Tarshite Orlanthi saying.

It seemed there were a thousand fires burning across the muddied plain, and round each one huddled fifty Lunar warriors and priests, waiting for the dawn and all that it might bring.

Part of me stayed within the womb-cave, weaving spiritual fogs and diversions. Part of me was lost in the timeless pulse of being, striding the ancient hero-paths of the godplane.

And part of me led four women and a child-anointed through the darkness, while a copper-clad Mreli scouted somewhere to our left. Soldier, warrior, patient and cunning, my blade naked and wound-ready. *The role of Death in ancient rite.*

Karis returned: one voice amongst the many.

A woman screams in terror under a foreign sky. Arms raised high, she cries out the name of a man who no longer lives. A dozen hands reached out to cradle her, to soothe her sobbing heart.

There was something breathing under the night's shroud; our godar had summoned powers of mist and freezing sleet. Then came screams and shouting to the south; the flash of spell and fireblade. Orlanthi clansmen, battle-eager and spell-drunk, surging forward in a diversionary raid again the Lunar camp. Above them in the darkness, sentry spirits clashed and found oblivion. Salamanders flickered into being above the Lunar lines, seeking out the hidden foe. The night unleashed itself with swift intrusion of edge and iron. *Death takes aim at those who murder many. The bolt of God will strike you at a glance.*

Our own goal lay not in the enemy camp but somewhere beyond it. Seven yet many yet one, we edged our way forward, seeking the omen of the Goddess. The stumbling feet of my companions echoed within my own head and limbs. I willed them courage and balance and calm.

I walked by deathlight, Karis naked by my side. More than once I heard the muffled clank of armour or whispered voices in the darkness, and saw frightened faces by a light none else could see. I diverted my charges around such scattered Lunar outposts.

The lights of their camp were behind us now, a flickering firescape to our left. A rocky knoll sloped heavenward ahead. The Mreli flitted back and forwards, silently probing the paths on either side. I shuddered at its presence within me, alien and wilful, consumed as it was by a coarse and hateful obsession.

It was Clearwater who discovered the place we sought. *The Axe Sister*. Clearwater Running Red—its name came to me unbidden from the memory of the many, just as our purpose and mission had sprung full-formed into my mind.

The Mreli stumbled upon the decaying corpse of a sow, untouched by scavengers, already ghosted white by night rime. And within the corpse's bloodied breast, a hive of winterbee, soft wax shaped in the form of a hollow square. Death and Dark Earth, sweetness and rebirth. This was the sign of the Goddess; this was where the final Blessing could take place.

I looked to the young girl, chosen instrument of the Blessing. Tears streamed down her cheeks, a sign that part of her was human still. Anointed to power by her sisters and spurred on by their chanting prayer, she began the final wanton dance of life and death.

I remember the way she tossed her head and hair, her streaming hair.

Unrayed she danced, proud and majestic. Pulse, power and purpose swayed in her mud-clothed body. *The new greening of our hope.*

With the ritual renewed, the power of the wyter lifted me once again. On this lonely sleet-shrouded hill, our purpose advanced to terrifying conclusion.

Naked shone the goddess. I felt the blood spurt of desire, the multitudes of my flesh awash with cedar smoke and fire, salt and blood and wine and a drumming muse. The night shone splendid like the sun, a green and angry flood. Mute before the power of her dance, I drowned in longing, in fecund anticipation, a slave to rhythms best left sleeping, helpless to commands of hurting flesh.

Around us oak and ash were shivered to their roots, stirred from winter sleep by the raw power of the sacred dance.

I/We now lost on waves of sensation, awash, adaze, seeing only earth and storm and sky; hearing only the hidden chambers of the earth split wide, banshee howl of riotous profusion. Remembering the earth, the worm, the serpent within. Seeking release that the cycle might continue, the Blessing complete.

I realised then with sudden shock what I had to do. The wyter screamed its sharp command, demanded obedience and action. Act! Yet my limbs froze, remembering her face, her streaming hair.

Seabirds circle on a foreign sky. A woman's voice, calling out a name. I am that voice. I do not know the name.

A multitude of voices shouting at me to move, to act. Karis calling from an infinite distance. The chant losing power, faltering as the spreading hesitation and confusion infected my companions. Then screaming from my left, the looming presence of a copper-clad demoness. The Mreli, racing forward, its copper axe, claw of earth, raised high.

'Sever the link! Embrace your God, wield death!'

The Mreli's eyes shone purple as she rushed forward, fluid as a nightmare. Threatening me, inhuman as the darkness, inhuman as the Lord I served.

"Humaaaaakktttttt!!!!!!!!!!"

Limbs moved, sword swung. A horrifying scream, matched by an all-but-forgotten howl from my throat. Falling body, winter-spent. Karis keening, warm with oozing blood.

And the night rejoiced, and the sleeping earth, and the wyter all.

Death for life. Death for Death. I moved again, freer now, raised my eyes to see the Axe Sister lifting the dancer's decapitated head in triumph.

Thus we bartered life for leaf. The Blessing was complete.

The Mreli's violet blood-flecked eyes met mine, its copper claw impatient for the foe. Did they accuse? Or bless? It didn't matter. I had remembered who I was.

The creature advanced, holding aloof the young victim's head, her noble features frozen in the final rapture of the dance. Lightning flared to our right, an omen. Below me, I felt the earth stir from winter sleep, woken by blood to an agony of life. Forced to put forth sap and seed, despite the snow, the cold, the air of death. *Such seeds she planted in your fertile earth.*

With the Blessing complete, the wyter began to dissolve. In terror, I faced the infinite loneliness of separation. I faltered, collapsing into a lonely shell of bone and knotted flesh.

I was myself.

Alone.

The remaining priestesses looked to me, sharing in the horror of separation. Alone again.

Yet not the same.



The night screamed summons to battle. I caught the sharp retort of foreign voices: other ears had heard or felt the victim's final scream.

I assessed my foe with calm and new-found certainty. I knew my duty. *Death-born now and terrible.*

The first Lunar fell swiftly, for Karis flew forward. Blood eager, she guided herself in the lunge, my limbs following in well-patterned drill. Another sensed our charge, raised high his shield; he did not seek to flee. A darker night descended on his eyes—he fell with a thud, his armour ringing out. It was a good death for him, a growing death for me.

There were at least four others advancing on foot up the hill, shouting in the night. I felt the play of enchantments, glimpsed scimitars and bronze-tipped javelins.

A young officer was first upon us, seeking to slay my companions. She felt the anger of my blade, fell back, a battered oak blocking her retreat. Soon oak and officer were nailed together.

Clearwater screamed, keening in triumph. As practiced as I am in dyeing bronze, I have never met such a perfect and tireless emissary of Death. Its copper claw danced from side to side, splitting shield and plate and helmeted head. The foe fell before us.

Two more blocked me; young and afraid, their moon-curved shields held high. I parried wide and feinted, striking low. I did not wish to kill: they were not ready. One retreated before my blows, pale cheeks awash with fear. The other, more stubborn, poured his own wine upon the earth as libation to my Master.

Together we led our companions back towards the ridge encampment. They also fought bravely, with spell and feat and knife and grim determination. One was sore wounded, carried by her sisters. It seemed the Orlanthi adventure to the south had been effective, or perhaps the first fruits of our Blessing had already touched the Lunar camp. Terror gripped the enemy, bathed now in the sudden radiance of a storm, gored by the rush and bulk of hurricane pounding rain.

I felt alive again, ecstatic, a perfect instrument of duty. Laughing, I felt the touch of Talor upon my spirit, the old ecstasy welling from within. I surrendered willingly to the lessons of long training. Karis danced in my hands without conscious command. Fighting in bolt-swept darkness, my world narrowed to the thought-swift dance of action and response, the flash of deathlight. Fighting with my ears, my intuition. Parry and strike, spin and step, waiting for the opportunity, sensing the moment. *Listening to the silences.*

Around us burned the firefly fury of magicked blades and auras bright with enchantment, the searing flash of spells midst thunderbolt and salamander glow. Somewhere midst the dance a blade broke my defence; burnished bronze bit my flesh. In a moment's quiet I found the place where the sharp point had pierced, whispered the healing charm, spat. *It would hold enough for now.*

The numbers of the foe increased as we crossed the muddy plain: our enemy was well awake. Clansmen were visible further south, fighting homeward after their shadow battle. Clearwater swooped and howled, a demoness conjured by the night, holding aloft the head, axe-dancing in blood-splattered triumph.

I heard harsh barks and whoops from Orlanthi sentries, calling from our palisade. Close now, the fighting thick. I sent the women running, holding back the bronze and silver that beset us. Seeing them safe, Clearwater threw her blessed burden after them; rushed back towards the Lunars, howling in grim exaltation. The last I saw was that sacred axe held high, gifting Death to all who opposed it.

Companions called to me from the shelter of the rampart. The foe faltered, cautious of entrapment so close to the Orlanthi host. Before me a salamander advanced in blazing fury. Behind it, the steady march of veterans' spears. My enchantments gone, exhaustion hung heavy on my limbs, my heaving chest.

I paused, screaming out Clearwater's name. When no reply came, I dropped my heavy shield and ran.

:: RUNO XIII ::

Illusion

To seek for death yet call it life
This prolongs the bondage.
To walk blind in darkness while carrying a torch
This prolongs the bondage.
To call on the gods while refusing the blade
This prolongs the bondage.

The Ninth Meditation on the Blade.

“Guuuuzzkallakakakagurd! Your mother toothless; she fall pregnant under red moon! Your daughter chew fat of her uncle’s gut! Your values all yellow fungi on throat! Gurakakgur-ki!”

On the rampart above me, a dark troll warrior hurled insults to the confused enemy beyond. A sling hung ready in his fingers, and night was no obstacle to his marksmanship. He was a making a fine noise, but I wondered if the cold blood of his curse-tongue did not perhaps lose something in translation.

“Lost your shield captain?”

The watchman was a Tovtaros weaponthane, clan tatoos blazoned across his forehead. He was grinning, caked with sweat and clotted blood: the night had been good to him. Suddenly finding it difficult to stand, I leaned against his shoulder, stumbling. He stunk of sticklepick. Steadying me, he overcame his fear of death to kiss my cheek for healing.

“In a tricky spot I’ll keep my hide intact. Good shields can be bought.”

We laughed together as he supported me to a nearby watchfire. I gave him crimpy from my flask, he helped remove my heavy iron breastplate. I would miss that shield, emblazoned as it was with Laughing Talor’s image. Perhaps I should retrieve it.

No. The time of attachment to things had passed. The way ahead was clear.

My wyter companions were also gathered by that fire, attending to their wounded sister. Clearwater’s burden was discretely wrapped within a heavy muslin cloth. One advised me, “Sink to the ground, and place your palms flat upon it. Give the remaining energies to the keeping of our Mother. It’s over for now. The blessing is accomplished. Dawn will judge it.”

We talked together some little time. Finally, embracing, we took our leave. Hoisting my armour, I wandered through the confusion of the sleepless camp. Round the night-fires, I saw beaming battle-glad warriors recounting the exploits of the night. The wounded lay moaning and listless, uncertain of their fate. The wyrd-struck stared listlessly into embers, awaiting with grim heart the coming dawn.

Cradledaughter waited by the Cohort's night-fire. Proud she stood, full-armoured and battle-ready. Girdled in an iron corselet, her feet shod with iron wings. On her targe the image of a woman, hair ablaze, armed with sword and spindle. Resting against iron-clad hip, her helmet mane burned henna-red. *She was beautiful in firelight.*

Greeting me, the rune daughter asked for report of my mission. I replied in detail, knowing she listened for the Consort. Cradledaughter seemed full content when I told of the ritual's outcome, knowing as I did the possibilities it promised. During the conversation, her eyes kept gazing into mine, searching, querying, demanding. I laughed inwardly, knowing what she must find.

Finally she turned away, warming chill hands by the struggling coals. Her voice was measured, distant. "Change is upon you, Death Lord. Some grim and terrible transformation. I can hardly bear to match your gaze. Once again you've become a stranger to me."

I could not disagree. The God was close. "Each has their appointed wyrd. Mine is now at hand."

Did she hear? Or did she merely ignore the implications of what I said? Turning to join her by the fire, I stared into the glowing embers, contemplating my chance for true fulfillment. *Flickering coals, soul dance of memory.*

My companion's voice intruded as if across a great distance; "Tomorrow we will face the foe, and finally destroy them. There can be no quarter, no truce of the three sticks. I will fight with the Tovtaros Windleapers, as will the Consort. Then we must travel north to play the diplomat amongst unwilling allies." A pause, heavy with both possibility and denial. "Perhaps we will meet again when the season is done."

She spun a slender thread. I nodded, "Perhaps." There seemed no need to say more. Death shielded me.

We warmed our hands awhile in awkward silence. I sensed she had wanted to speak further, but Cradledaughter finally wrapped her cloak and faded quietly into the darkness. She gave no farewell greeting.

It did not seem to matter.

In time I returned to my wind-torn shelter. Dawn was still distant. All around me the Cohort slept: here at least were warriors secure in the acceptance of death. I collapsed, exhausted, and dragged the muddy calf hide round my cloak. Sleep took me then, deep and full and dreamless. No nightmares, no voices intruded.

Peace comes in darkness.

I awoke to a moment of absolute acceptance, eager and ready for the battle ahead. Drum and carnyx greeted me; the sudden explosion of movement that was a war-ready regiment called to parade.

It was time to die.

∞ RUNO XIV ∞

Infinity

"Praise not a day till evening; a woman till buried, a man till burned. Praise not a horse till broken; a sword till bloodied; a youth till married. Praise not gors till it has been crossed; gallt till it has been hunted; beer till it has been drunk.

Praise not a life till death has judged it.
Thereafter, nothing can change the story to be sung of our valiant dead."

The prisoner Balin Godgift's speech
before the Golden Octad,
Alda Chur, 1630.

"Sartar's freedom is the prize of our blade. This day we fight with honour to loose the Wind, to unleash the Hurricane!"

We stood in perfect symmetry, row upon row of bronze and blue-dark iron. The Highblade Cohort on parade, sentry-proud, displaying our arms before Humakt's holy standard. We had eaten and offered sacrifice. Now came the glory-trial.

Kiomar She-Viper addressed us, fearful in her rune-wrought armour. It seemed that she too had fallen beneath the Consort's spell, for I had not heard her speak such words before. It was as though killing the enemy was no longer enough.

"We are ravens perched on the palisades of Firststead. In death this day our dust and deeds will summon others to duty. So sharpen your spears, adjust your shields, listen to the voice of the battle flutes and drums. There may be no respite till night parts us in our fury. Your shield straps will be soaked with the sweat of your breasts; your hand will weary on your sword. Even so, we will prevail!"

Humakti do not cheer on parade, nor pound their spear on shield. Nevertheless, I could feel my comrades respond to her exhortation with growing battle-eagerness. In silence we waited, impatient for the fray.

"Remember what you are: do nothing to disgrace the name of your god! Fear nothing but dishonour in each other's eyes. When warriors fear disgrace, then more are saved than killed. We are Humakti, we do not yield! And if your roster is called, Death Himself will guide you to your glory. Now Hundred-thanes, to arms!"

We ran at a jog to our appointed position at the crest of the long ridge, beyond the sturdy defences of the camp. As tradition and sound strategy dictated, we held the extreme right. There was no palisade behind us, but a series of gigantic posts dug vertically into the ground, adorned with carved boxwood runes of death. The posts contained a warding, but our battle plan included a more practical use as well.

Behind us, Elmal rose steady, fighting through thick clouds 'neath Clayday's bitter sky. Silent silver shields hovered on the sky-track, while above the Lunar lines, piercing the pale mist, a lesser red-tinted sun turned baleful eye upon us. Reality rippled around the stout defence of our standard. Hell Sisters danced above the nearby hills. Red vultures stared down from the high trees of the gods. *A battle-day indeed.*

The Cohort formed itself into a rune-hearted phalanx, twelve warriors deep, bristling with great spears of ash and oak. Ten anointed heroes formed our runic blade, six sanctified godi made the guard, sword sign of our strength and warding. The jewel and pin of our hero-forged death rune was the battle standard, iron-blue pillar of our honour, set by our ceremony into the bloody soil of the Cliffs of Shadow. Initiates and truth-tellers packed tight about the rune shape, guardians of our battle wall.

This was not our chosen way of battle, for neither skill at arms nor courage can help you in the wild crush when shield walls crash. It was, however, the Lunar way, and the only tactic to break their crescent wall was with similar formations of our own. And when the spears were shattered and the line broken, then warrior fought warrior with naked blade and spear. For this we hungered.

My appointed position was behind the phalanx, with the standards, their protectors, the battle flautists, the commander and shieldbearer. I would fight by Kiomar's side until such time as the shield wall was broken and the gatherings might pursue their separate objectives. Behind us the weaponthanes commanded their swift-heeled flankers, and behind them Bevaran healers and sword godar waited with moss bandage and totem banners.

The plain below us still swirled with thick banks of fog. The ground seemed mud-slick and treacherous, soaked with expanses of icy water. The foe would fight hard even to reach us.

With our sacrifices complete, there was nothing to do but pass the herb-mixed wine. We lay our heavy shields to ground and waited for death.

Most of our host waited behind the palisade and ditches of the hill top camp. I could see little, and knew that those within the phalanx could see nothing but the rank ahead; row on row of shining bronze and spear. Kiomar knew this as well: calling for silence, she explained the disposition of our forces.

Praxian beast riders waited on the ridge behind us, beyond the formal defences. The mounted bison and zebras would charge and fight as opportunity and courage permitted. They were brave though unpredictable, and would probably make for the plunder of the Lunar camp at the earliest opportunity.

To our immediate left stood the main defences, a rough palisade atop a mud-strewn slope. Behind the rough-hewn stakes waited most of the Orlanthi tribesmen, Aldachuri and southern Sartari both, many stripped for battle, woad-painted, anointed with laurel leaves as ward against thunderbolts. Behind the palisades also waited the archers of the Blue Ridge Mountain Queen, ready to sally forth and harass the advancing foe.

On either side of the muddy stream that was the Tarsh Road stood twin formations of Sun Dome templars. Like us, they had ventured beyond the palisade in phalanx formation. Honarious Fly-From-Fornication and Vega Goldbreath led them, resplendent in gold and yellow. They had often trained our cohort in the way of spear and shield, and were as steady and dependable as the Star Captains to which they prayed. Finally, behind them, ready to give support, a single squad of Elmali cavalry, with swift footrunners to follow through.

Elmali and Yelmaliens fighting together 'gainst a common foe. I knew in that moment that Far Point would be free!

I was concerned for our far left, for it seemed that we were vulnerable to a flanking attack. A row of earth altars stretched upon that ridge, still attended by small groups of priestesses. Whatever the purpose of their week-long ritual, I hoped that it could contain charging Lunar cavalry.

Long minutes dragged on. Finally, there came the bitter sound of battle horns, echoing across the plain from the enemy camp. The rising mists revealed the Lunar palisade, seeming flecked with branches of spring green. Our previous night's desperate ceremony had obviously bought the blessing we wished, but had it accomplished its full purpose? Only time would tell.

Then the first sign of advance; a silver-braced moonboat rising through the mists above the Lunar camp. I'd seen such craft before, but this one seemed sluggish and wayward, already listing badly to one side. Its carved wooden decks were fresh adorned with foliage—Ernalda's living green. The war craft slid forward in silence, braving the godi-gathered storm above. All about it thunder brothers hard-hurled their blazing bolts. Flashes fused silver: spikes of flame rose spluttering from the spring-touched craft. The moonboat's path curved, its advance no longer true.

The lightning ceased. The strange craft now seemed surrounded by a swarm of darting insects. I caught a rare sun-gleam of metal, the flash of powerful magics, realised that Windleapers were boarding the craft. In a silent slow motion dance the gory blood-feast had begun.

"Cut short my days, destroy me..."

Within the Orlanthi palisade a battle thane raised his horn, a hollow-spiralled whorl. Once a wilderness warrior's weapon, it now drew breath anew from a brave man's lungs. The great summons sounded, a call to battle. Long-necked carnyxes and horns of ivory repeated the call, and soon surrounding ridges and peaks resounded with the echoing blast. *The brave to battle called.* 'The enemy advances.'

The mist thinned as great weather magics wove themselves in twisting fury across the plain. I could see lines and crescents forming beyond the Lunar palisades, watched the slow advance of spears across the mud. Rank upon rank they came, like the darkened surface of the Mournsea when the storm wind begins.

"Betray my hope, destroy me..."

Above us, invisible, spirits and powers clashed in the storm-thick air. I heard howling horror, the din of destruction. Raw bursts of elemental power scorched the sky as ancient warriors seared each other into nothingness. The Tribe of the Storm contended with the Tribe of the Moon for majesty of Middle Air.

Skirmishers clashed upon the muddy plain. Archers and slingers surged forward to vex and prick the foe. Before us now, a troop of zebra riders shook their dark-dyed reins, charging forward with bow and shaft at the ready. Finding range of the foremost phalanx, they bent the springing crescent, clove the air with far-travelled force. The piercing shafts flashed from the string. While only few found flesh amidst the shieldwall, the thick death-rain forced high the heavy shields. The skirmishers did not relent: our enemy would face us tired and worn by the exertions of their advance.

“...the truth that cuts, the blade that frees...”

Behind me, a bearded raven screamed omen of dark death. Across the plain, the foremost Lunar phalanx advanced now at a run.

“Destroy me once, grant death its blade to free me...”

From altars within the palisade, the storm-god unleashed the fury of the Lord of Middle Air. Tribal god-talkers and the Consort’s Brown Eagles together danced the Thunder. Boiling blue-black clouds congealed across the plain, the wind a screaming fury from the east. With searing *crack* the vengeance-cloud spat forth its arsenal—stinging spears of hail, sharp pain pellets to confuse and blind the foe. It clattered against the armour at my back, violent and loud.

The Righteous Wind, most terrible in glory!

Lunar magicians answered with fury of their own. The baleful pale red globe above their camp held the clouds at bay, defending its perimeter. Now it spat forth foul magic upon our defences. Screaming red-gold fireballs shot forth to burst upon the palisade, moon-summoned meteors tinged with madness and death. We sheltered ‘neath our shields, lest one burst down upon us. Within the wooden wall, the clansfolk howled, diving for shelter. Some panicked and ran, caught in the spreading lune-fire. On the edges of our own position, warding standards glowed white hot.

The deadly bombardment soon ceased, whether by countermagics or exhaustion I did not know. The foremost enemy phalanxes had reached the base of the ridge, victors of the boggy plain. They now faced a long slope before they could engage, blinded and stung by the oncoming hail. I could make out individual shields and standards, identify the nearer units ranged against us.

Silver serpents twined upon a moonstone pole. Howling bat shield devices. We faced the spears of the Devastation Legion, veteran campaigners, with scarlet cloaks and long hair. The god’s bounty would be great.

Yet their formation was deeper than it was wide, and many in the further ranks carried neither spear nor pike. Of those that did, some hoisted training poles quick-capped with tips of bronze. Another outcome of our wyter ritual. Praise the Earth, and all the fertile blessings of her touch!

Kiomar was patient and unhurried, using long experience to judge the correct moment. Finally, the signs stood correct. “Cohort, prepare for battle! Orderlies depart from the ranks. Silence, pay attention to command! Take up your spears!”

A veteran of several of these terrible clashes, I did not envy my brothers and sisters in the ranks. Just breathing and hearing were difficult enough in the close-packed mass of the phalanx, let alone with roar of thunder and the insistent clatter of hail on armour. Our front

formed with much rubbing and jostling of breastplate, shield and spear. Battle-wise veterans rested shield-rims on the lip of their shoulder-armour, saving strength for the crucial minutes ahead.

Then came the fear of which the skalds do not speak. The terrible fear, the chattering fear, the fear that runs down the legs. That gut-twisting anticipation of battle, awaiting the terrible moment of blind slaughter when phalanxes collide, the dread crush of friend and foe. A fear that settles on Sword and initiate alike—for I had seen veterans of a hundred battles break and run under that terrible pressure.

A few enemy skirmishers shot shafts into the phalanx from downslope. Salamanders flamed into existence before the advancing foe. A summoned lune locked itself in desperate battle with Hail Children between the two shield walls. Shields came up, locked into place: a seamless wall of hide and burnished bronze.

Kiomar spat, shouted above the gust-driven hail. Her voice echoed within my head, heard also with Karis' spirit sense. "Take a wide stance; stand strongly against them! Dig your heels in the ground; beware you do not bite your lips. Brandish your war spear and shake the crest above your helm! Remember - your armour and breastplate are your own, but your shield protects us all. Hold firm! The shield wall must not break! To the standard now our strength and offering! 'Grim Sword this day...'"

"Grim Sword, this day we smite the foe, honour is our shield..." Our battle chant began, slow and sonorous, strength and magic now centred on the death rune formed at the heart of our phalanx, energies and spells wound about the cohort standard, our temple and our only treasure. For those of us with godi-sight, the Cliffs of Shadow revealed themselves about us, its soil running thick with blood of foes eternal.

The next few minutes held the measure of victory or defeat. I glanced with mortal eyes across the battlefield a final time before giving myself completely to the chant and the advancing wall of spears.

The Praxians to our right had gone; I could not sight them on the hail-swept plain. Behind the approaching phalanx, I saw Lunar troops in open order struggling through the mud: they carried no spears. Capricious winds assailed them, knocking men about and wrenching shields from arms. A great mass of riders advancing at a trot from further up the valley. Their bulk was immistakable: *tusk riders*, half troll mercenaries of a bloodthirsty torture god, borne upon battle boars. A grim day indeed.

The palisade to our immediate left burned and splintered. From within I heard screams mixed with the sharp *crack* of thunder stones; saw the soul-bright flash of spell or spirit. Enemy troops had struck that hill of swords and spears; probably War Dancers using motion magic, seeking to kill our commander. While the blood fray would be terrible, I knew the Orlanthings preferred it to the battle dance we faced. They despised the collective march of formations, the discipline of columns and spears. *Good fighting, friends.*

The Sun Domers had marched their spear forest to the base of the hill: they too were moments away from the terrible clash. The Elmalı cavalry still stood steady behind them, even though several lines of Lunar cavalry were advancing at a charge to flank the mercenary ranks. How could they ignore such peril!

I'd forgotten the altars on that further hill. The ground trembled beneath my feet, grim rumble of the Dark Earth. I watched in open-mouthed astonishment as a great portion of the hillside detached itself, surging downward like a wave over the terrified Lunar cavalry beneath. I involuntarily touched the charm at my neck, fearful least the ground open in gaping seams before us, and the fury of the battle stream down to bitter hell.

Yes! The chant around me faltered, recovered. The earth sisters had once more done duty fit and well. I saw now the purpose of those days before the altar, undermining the hillside with spirits of earth and water. The Earth Shakers had done the rest.

Below us, the enemy surged forward. I knew that this day would bring me release; I now felt a chance it might bring victory as well.

Our own elementals fell upon those of the enemy. Gnomes rose through the ground to bite at the feet of the phalanx, causing the spears to falter and sway. The battle chant grew to a towering crescendo.

Any... moment... now...

Karis screamed across two worlds as the auras of the opposing standards touched and flared. A mighty flash of energy seared our senses, our own screams in unison with those of the enemy. I glanced to my right, eyes blurred and hurting. Our standard stood, though its lesser icons glowed with a fierce red heat. I could not see the standard of the foe.

"Cohort, step back! Retreat!"

Now the gamble. We streamed back between the warding posts, shields up. *Quickly, they are close.* If panic caught us now, our deaths would be for naught. Several stumbled in the rush, trodden by sword kin who could not break formation. Through the blinding hail I heard the first Cohort screams, saw the first of Cohort blood. From the palisades I also heard howls of derision and horrified disbelief from watching tribesfolk.

Sword kin streamed past the posts as I guided them through. A spearman broke rank in panic, herald of a growing rush that would cause the formation to collapse, signal of needless death. Karis danced: I cut him down without thought or prayer.

I dare not look at his fallen face.

The foe were nearly upon us, surging forward, shouting in triumph, eager for our blood. The last of the Cohort passed between the posts. I followed, rushed to our left flank, where Kiomar waited.

The first of the enemy streamed past the warding posts. Their spears were low slung, hungry for our backs. Yet their ranks were broken as they passed between the wooden defences.

Their crescent wall was weak. Confusion reigned. Screams and shouts rose in terrible array.

"Now! Turn and form! Shields up! Advance!"

"Humakt!" Deathsong ringing from one hundred throats.

And the moment upon us. I watched the cohort turn, spears set and lowered, advancing upon the milling and suddenly terrorised foe. It seemed to me then our phalanx became a solitary being; spear-rich, all long beard and stinking armpit, heaving breast and iron-steady limb. Dressed in bronze, cloaked with hide and iron. *And hungry.* Blood hungry.

Then the furious collision. The shield walls met, a clash of bucklers, spears, and bronze-clad warriors. The bosses of our shields collided: a great roar went up, terrible cacophony of smashed bronze and wood and flesh. Spears snapped. Spirits keened. The ranks fought toe to toe and shield against shield. Screams of the dying were mingled with the vaunts of their destroyers, and the earth ran thick with warrior's blood.

I watched in morbid fascination, helpless till the grim task was done. I caught the battle-smell of sweat, odour of blood and entrails, the hard whiff of excrement.

The ranks pushed forward, heaving and grunting, pressing their very flesh face to face, a single great mass of screaming humanity. The foe rallied briefly, but their rear ranks were caught beyond the posts. In that terrible mindless crush the wounded and wyrded were trampled down and suffocated, grim broken bodies crushed in huge collapse.

Our strength triumphed. Suddenly we broke their crescent board-wall, burst in among them. The foe's entire line shuttered, shield wall shattered, bone-shielding boss boards split.

The enemy faltered then, all order gone. Panic bit them, they turned and fled, a sweeping madness starting from the rear. Warriors trampled each other in the ravening rush. Screaming again the name of the God, the Cohort swept forward past the warding posts, pushing, jabbing, killing... and dying. Those of the foe brave enough to rally against us were quickly despatched; the grim impersonal push of the shield wall allowed no room for hero play.

All around me, death sounds of battle, screams of the dying, storm of spears and hail, wyrd-rain of blood. Everything seemed stained, a broken husk, pulped flesh and bloody bone, broken spear and excrement.

Amidst mass death, I lingered on a single shameful sight. A dead sword-sister sprawling in the mud, driven through from behind by an enemy spear. Why should I notice this one amongst the multitude? *Perhaps because her hair blazed henna red.*

Our enemy was routed. Our flankers, fresh, with lighter armour and shields, streamed forward to pursue the fleeing foe. The battle flautists gave hoarse assent to the chase. Our shield wall paused, exhausted. We would follow them soon enough. There was still death a plenty to deal this day.

From the palisades there came a Thunder Shout, blessed with all the force that fury gave. Clansmen were streaming forth from behind the defences, screaming the names of their ancestors at the tusk riders locked in battle with their kin below. I could not see the further flank, but guessed the foe were broken there as well.

The Cohort dropped its spears, regrouped. The sounds and sights of the battlefield had their own tale to tell, and both Kiomar and I could read it. The foe were faltering, the wildfire panic spreading. Their wyter was broken.

"Honour Lord! Bronze-Dyer! Blade Truth! Victory!"

Kiomar called the First Gathering, followed her flankers at a run towards the Lunar camp. Good hunting! I took the Fifth and led them across the muddy slope in open order. Our chosen foe were tusk riders—troll men atop screaming, grunting giant boars—surrounded now by howling Orlanthi and panic-stricken Lunar infantry.

All down the blood-slick slope isolated groups stood defiant against the rout; Lunar veterans drawn into defensive circles. The fighting there was fierce; death given and taken freely. This was war in the Orlanthi-style: hero against hero in wild disarray.

And gods themselves had come this day to fight for Middle Air! Orlanth Himself, gigantic, furious, indomitable, clothed in lightning and armoured by the Storm, strode forth amongst the clouds to smash the Lunar foe. But no! It was the Consort, surrounded by flying Windleapers, grim embodiment of the Hurricane Rebellion. Amidst the clouds he faced a Lunar hero, a woman armed with razored blade and baleful blood-red fire. They slashed and pummeled midst the hail-store, the bright flare of their magics blinding and burning those who flew beside. On ground below the tribesfolk paused and raised their voice in shouts of exhortation.

And the name upon their lips, the name they gave their battle thane, was 'Liberator'.

The moon woman fell, or fled, I could not tell. The Liberator, his lightning sword all bright with battle-glee, descended with his Windleapers to final bloody confrontation midst the confusion of the Lunar camp.

On the plain behind our swords swung free: the play of spears was over. Karis flashed eager in the fray, forged of fire and file, firmly fastened, embellished and bolted.

Talor's wild blessing was upon me.

All around me now the clatter of blades, shriek of sharp edges, scream of the dying. All around me severed heads, slaughterhouse of heroes, soil streaming blood. All around me the fierce confusion of Death.

My body faltered, failed me. Exhausted, I sank to the mud-stained turf, the sword kin streaming by. A blade had pierced my chest. It did not seem to matter.

Death stood at last in his true rank and order. It was time.

"Karis, I love you. Let's die."

I took two coins of bronze from the birch bark wallet corded round my neck. Kissing them, I uttered the secret name of the god, calling down my death song. "Darkness free me, cut me, bleed me." I felt the blood-spell take me, lift me, push me forward. *Time to be complete.*

Karis keened, something beautiful and wordless and holy.

The fit mastered me. I surged forth in fury towards the hated foe, death-ready and laughing. Laughing so hard my throat spewed blood.

It seemed a woman fought beside me. I caught the flash of blunted mussel knife.

I could see forgotten faces pass before my eyes. I heard them laughing, calling out my name. I could smell the sea wind, see the birds of another country, once my own, but in a foreign sky. Senses awash in ecstasy, I surged forward, the bloody sword play a slow motion dance on every side. I was complete in every way. *He who gives the warcry has been born!*

The foe fell: my funeral sacrifice, my offering. Wolf Pirates loomed where half-trolls and Lunars had threatened but a moment before. Blades flashed. Iron rang. I gave them what was due.

A woman who once walked in dreams fought beside me in those last precious moments, blunted mussel-knife ablaze. Her shining hair fell about her head in braids, henna-rich, luxurious. We danced, we laughed together.

Liberation was upon me. The world was complete, perfect, keening a war-song in rhythm to my blade. Darkness beckoned. I was longing to die, perfect, complete, confident of victory. I would go to my god laughing, knowing that Arkat the Liberator walked once more the paths of men. And knowing too, by the Earth's Blessing, that the pikes and spears of the Lunar army, their wagons and moonboats, had taken root and sprouted in the night.

So Death draws his darkness.

Complete.

