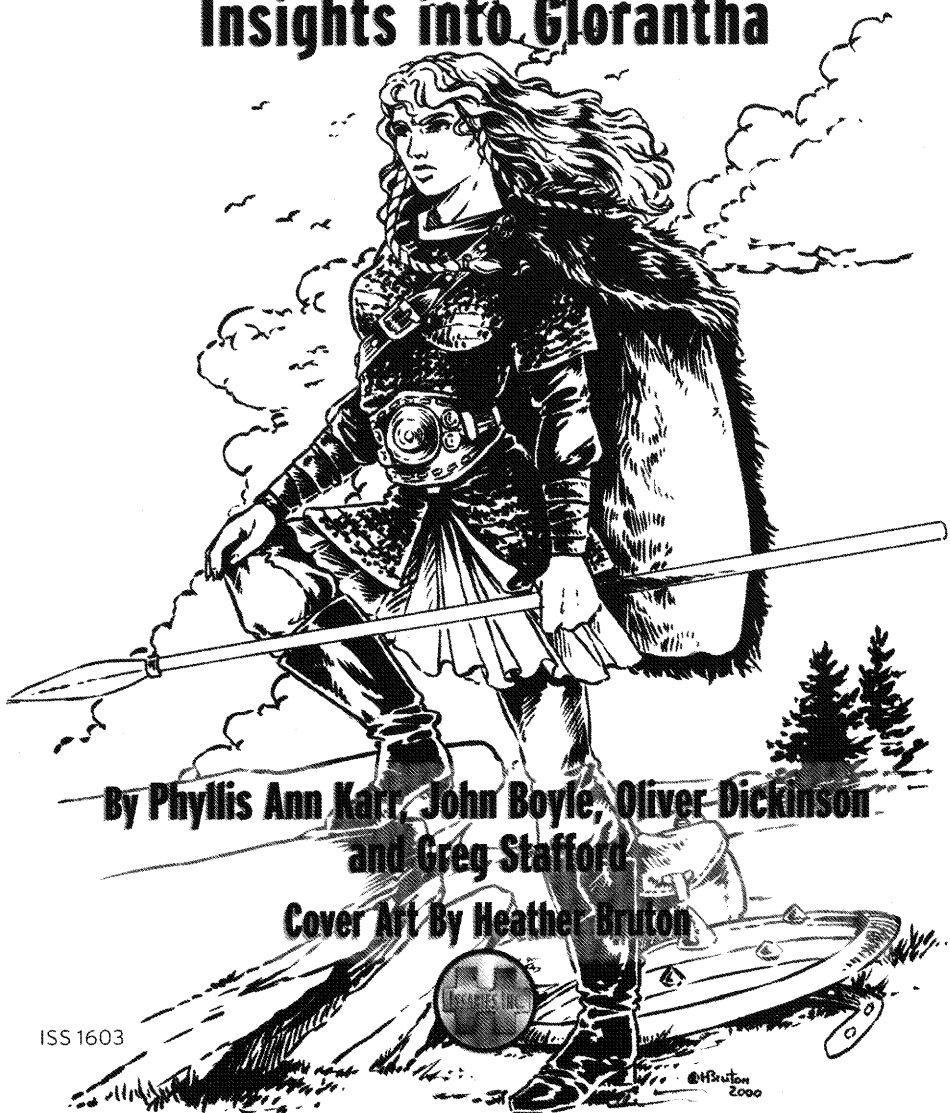


Hero Wars

GLORANTHAN VISIONS

Insights into Glorantha



**By Phyllis Ann Karr, John Boyle, Oliver Dickinson
and Greg Stafford**

Cover Art By Heather Bruton

ISS 1603

Hero Wars

GLORANTHAN VISIONS

Credits

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The Gloranthan Court made this book as a record of Truth. Believe it.

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Great Darkness: The Lightbringer's Quest 85

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Introductions

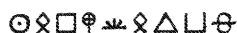
John Boyle

John Boyle is one of Glorantha's oldest fans. I remember many of the people who sent in the first response cards back in 1977 immediately after the release of the first Gloranthan game. I especially remember if they kept contact through the earliest Wyrms Footnotes like John did. He did better than that, though, when he proved his publishing credentials when his scenarios were published for the *RuneQuest* game.

With such a record I naturally said, "Sure!" when John asked if I'd like to see his Sartarite novel. We have here a portion of that novel to illustrate some facets of Orlanthi society and the atmosphere of life in Sartar at the start of the Hero Wars. Issaries, Inc. plans to publish the novel, *The Road of Kings*, among its line of fiction.

John has also worked with the U.S. Forest Service and the Agricultural Departments of Maryland and Pennsylvania in the field of Forest Management and Pest Control. He is currently living and working in Philadelphia as a trainer in the field of Network Administration.

The Road of Kings is the story of the warrior Joram who, in addition to killing things, will find out who he is, what he must do with his life, and take the first steps on the road that will change him from an untried boy into Orkarla the Black, one of the deadliest fighters in the kingdom of Sartar. That road will take him from Jaldon's Point, where a ghostly horde guards the barrow of an ancient hero; to the oasis of Moonbroth, where he is caught up in one of the great battles of his age; to the Dead Place, where fugitives from the Imperial armies cross a hellish wasteland in an attempt to escape the long arm of the Red Moon. And he will meet the man to whom he will spend most of his life in faithful service: Argrath of Sartar.



Phyllis Ann Karr

Phyllis and I go back a long way as writers. We both had early materials published by what was then called the semipro fan press. This designation indicated that we paid some money instead of just contributor's copies to authors whose works were printed. For a while I was a co-publisher of *Wyrms* magazine, and most of the original staff of that fanzine helped to publish the first Gloranthan boardgame. We published a fun short story by Phyllis entitled *The Wolves of*

Severtatis, in the Winter of 1976. She and I exchanged correspondence on many Arthurian matters as a result, during which time I learned of her private catalogue that she had put together for reference. Later, when I was researching my own first Arthurian game I asked if I could see her list. I was really impressed by it and asked if I could publish it as a fanzine-like piece, whereupon her professionalism intervened and disarmed me, complete with an innocent and much understated, "Oh, I will have to revise it a little bit first." The result was the wonderful *King Arthur Companion*, recently released in its third edition.

Phyllis has since become a well-known and respected writer. She has had eleven novels published, including the delightful *Idylls of the Queen*, my own favorite. It is an Arthurian double mystery novel whose protagonist, Sir Kay, vents his well-informed observations about the whole court of Camelot with piercing insight, sharp opinion, and keen wit. I was delighted unto fascination when I was honored to gamemaster Phyllis as she played Sir Kay in a game of *Pendragon*.

Perhaps I'll have the luck to do the same for Gunda. Phyllis has given us a short story here starring our favorite fighting woman in a delightful short story about the plundering of Wonderhome. In the meantime, we will be content with her wonderful writing, starting with this story of dreams, desire, and the ancient gods that underlie the City of Wonders.



Oliver Dickinson

Oliver Dickinson is the most-published fiction writer for Glorantha. He has been writing his stories about Griselda since the Spring of 1982 when the first one, "Lucky Eddi," appeared in issue 29 of *White Dwarf* magazine. Since then he has had twenty-one stories appear in print, and Issaries is proud to announce that it will be publishing a collection of these stories in the near future.

I met Oliver by correspondence when he commented upon some trivial issues concerning a boardgame we published called *Troy*. I replied in a flippant and challenging manner, starting an exchange that was very colorful and enjoyable, as if between equals. I was glib, he unflappable. Then I discovered that Oliver not only knew what he was talking about in Mycenaean archeology but that he had been on several digs and was head of the Classics department at Durham University in the UK. Since then I have hugely enjoyed his ponderous book on that subject, much to my delight and education.

Griselda is a delight and education as well. She is an adventuress living in the ruined city of Pavis with her colorful gang of toughs and other memorable characters such as Red Hot, Hanufa, and of course the ever keen-eyed Olaf Dickin's-son, the narrator who does very little except record conversations from his favorite bar. Oliver writes these in a Damon Runyon style, the famous "historical present" tense, thick with understatement and spiced with a very dry sense of humor that is appropriate to the strange ways of the Pavis Rubble.

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Greg Stafford

I began writing Gloranthan stories in 1966 when I ran out of mythology books to read. It was the moderate library of a precocious reader, but included every book I could buy at several decent bookstores or borrow from a pretty good library. I had not discovered any fantasy fiction by that time at all – I was stunned a year later when I found Tolkien and realized I was not the first person to make up a world. But at the time I just had just had such an itching for myth that I wrote about some guys in a boat, then about a guy who was fighting a monsters as he tried to pass through a magical gate. He, Snodal, won the fight; the battle was over. But I thought I had to write some background to explain where this guy and the monster came from, and under the pounding of a manual typewriter Glorantha began to unfold itself before me.

Mythology has always been at the core of Glorantha. Shortly after I wrote about Snodal I wrote about the Spike. I also was reading through my college library, with more real books about what lay behind mythology. I saw the connection between myth and culture, pored over my first archaeology books, and had from the first a vision of how it all hung together. I hammered out pages of First Age stories, along with a catalogue to keep track of everyone. And so on for 34 years so far, to spin out that vision through the skeins of story.

In addition to the several short myths provided here, we also present “Morden Defends the Camp.” This story is an excerpt from *Harmast’s Saga*, a novel about the great heroquester of the First Age who saved the Orlanthi people from destruction. In this excerpt, the hero Morden defends his camp of rebels from several foes, showing the many ways in which magic works in Glorantha.

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When the Wolf Pirates Came to the City of Wonders

Harrek went on to plunder Wondercity, a place which was so magical that dreams lived there, so that you could revisit them. But after Harrek and the pirates left, it disappeared from the world and was never seen again.

– Argrath's Saga

The Golden Age of the gods was a time when dreams were true, then stored for later generations to use as they might.

– Cosmology of Glorantha

I am Phylankar, storyteller and initiate of Lhankor Mhy, who was one of the Seven Lightbringers. I call upon the Six Guardians to hold this space for my tale. I call upon the Lord of Stories and the Lady of Inspiration to sit within me and fill me with this tale. And to Lhankor Mhy, Lightbringer, Lawspeaker, and God of Knowledge, companion to the Great God Orlanth, I make my prayer to fill with truth this tale of two women and a friendship that might have been.

One woman was Gunda, the warrior and Wolf Pirate, friend of Harrek the great White Bear. Beside his ship she sailed her own, when they found Argrath, who was king in the making – though none knew it then – of both Sartar and Dragon Pass.

Daughter by force of a Valkyrie and a philosopher, all her life Gunda had survived by the sword, winning fear from her foes, loyalty from those under her command, and respect from her peers. She paid the price of never knowing love, but friendship of all degrees remained open to her, and with her old friend Harrek, and his new friend Argrath, she sailed to the ancient Holy Country of Kethaela.

The other woman was Tashali, daughter by gentle love of rich and nobly born but otherwise undistinguished inhabitants of Kethaela's

capital, the island City of Wonders. In all her life, Tashali had never known anything save luxury and affection.

Petty unkindnesses she had witnessed, from time to time, as petty unkindnesses are inevitable wherever many people live closely together. Grief she had felt, for relatives and friends dead in the arms of Nature, and for one merman, a childhood playmate of the shoreline and shallows, killed in an accident off one of the other islands. And horrors she had heard of, though only from a distance, for the City of Wonders had rested safe and secure under its Pharaohs since Belintar's time, long generations ago.

But Tashali's only actual struggles had been of that small sort we all occasionally help create for ourselves out of pure human restiveness when too little real trouble challenges us.

As was the right of every citizen, Tashali kept three spaces filled in the Garden of Dreams. The first she used for a pet she had dreamed of when still quite a child: a cuddly creature something like a pup, something like a bunny, and something like an alynx kitten. She called it Kwamso. Kwamso never failed to frolic in delight whenever she came for a visit.

This pet Tashali had kept for years, but the dream in her second space changed often, being whichever recent one had pleased her best. Whichever one, that is, she would not mind any other visitor to the Garden both seeing and recognizing as hers. Three or four most remarkable dreams she had discarded at once, in not wholly unpleasurable embarrassment. One such she had even allowed to go free, at his earnest pleading.

In her third space, Tashali held a dream that frightened even as it invited her. This one she had dreamed when just entering womanhood. More than once she had thought of clearing its space for a new treasure, but always some doubt, some vague premonition, prevented her from doing so.

The dream of the third space was of a plain dirt road that wound between two pleasant fields of ripening grain. In the middle distance, the homestead of some Esrolian farmer waited in comfortable simplicity. Tashali had never seen Esrolian farmland with her waking eyes, never in her life crossed Pharaoh's magical bridge to visit the mainland; yet somehow she always felt confident that this was what her dream showed.

It was bright morning in the dream, and the sun beamed down from a sky washed pure blue by an overnight rain which still sparkled on the grain. Tashali strolled along the road toward the homestead, enjoying the freshness of the air, the warmth of the sun....

Suddenly she noticed a spot where the road had caved in upon itself, washed out by the night's rain. Dark brown the opening gaped, a single log raised on trestles before it to ward the unwary away. As Tashali drew nearer, she saw that the slope was gradual, as though the rain had opened an easy descent into a true underground cavern.

What lay therein? Had the barrier been raised simply to prevent accidents, or was it meant to bar out intruders?

The opening lured her to venture inside, but it was at that moment she realized that the thudding of her heart and rushing of her breath were the only sounds to be heard in all the land. No birds sang, no insects whirled or chirruped, no cattle lowed nor sheep baa'd, even the very breeze had died away.

Carefully, wordlessly, torn between regret and relief, she skirted the cave-in and continued her walk to the farmstead.

Sometimes, revisiting the dream in after years, she reached it, to find it filled with signs of current and comfortable occupation, but deserted, as if all who lived here had only just left for a walk in the silent countryside. Sometimes she sat for hours on the margin of the cave-in, gazing beyond the crude barrier until she thought she could almost glimpse something deep within. Over the years, as she came to know the inside of the homestead well, she spent more and more of her visits studying the cavern. How easily she could brush past the single log and learn what waited in those depths! Treasures? Terrors? Or disappointment? To find nothing, after all, but a shallow washout of dark earth would free her to use the space for some better dream, but also rob her of what had grown into the most tantalizing enigma of her smooth existence.

Sometimes she wondered if any other visitor to the Garden had ever ventured into her cavern. Nothing but delicacy kept a visitor out of anyone else's dreams, and not every citizen of the City of Wonders felt such delicacy. They knew dreams too well. Each morning, every awakened sleeper was expected to clean his or her dreamcatcher – parents or nurses did it for the very young, very old, or very sick –

squeezing the rare chosen dream into a dreamflask for transference to the Garden and emptying the rest into a bag for the dream collectors to carry across the bridge to Shadow Plateau for Argan Argar to feast upon. But sometimes someone let a dream slip away. Sometimes a dream escaped from the Garden while another was being put in its place. Tashali herself had even let that one go on purpose, when he begged for his freedom, and who knew what other women he had visited...no doubt to their delight, so Tashali felt little guilt about it. Nevertheless, enough dreams roamed the streets to occupy the Dream Guard.

Thus accustomed to dreams, perhaps half the Garden's visitors did not limit themselves to viewing other people's dreams like living tableaux in a gallery, but felt comfortable both stepping inside and talking about it afterward. Still, Tashali never found anyone who had ventured into her cave. Perhaps it frightened other people even more than it did her.

The Garden of Dreams did not deteriorate, but life in the rest of the city did, slowly, bit by almost imperceptible bit. It seemed unfortunate that such things as books and bed linens could not be brought out of dreamcatchers or Garden spaces without dissolving into nothingness – unlike flesh and spirit creatures, which could escape and survive, though this was, strictly speaking, against Pharaoh's laws. Seshnegi wine grew more expensive and harder to find; mosaics pieced from domestic mother-of-pearl replaced expanses of Sylilan marble in construction and repair work; fewer and fewer new buildings appeared, fewer and fewer old ones stayed in repair. At first such things were chiefly noticeable as a complaint here and a grumbling there, but by the time of Tashali's adulthood life everywhere in the city was no longer what it had been when she was a young child. The Golden Dome had begun to lose its luster even before that dark day when Pharaoh vanished, no one knew where, nor for how long, nor whether he or any true heir of his would ever return to protect the great city once again.

Rumors came from the mainland: garbled newsbits, that grew sparser and sparser as the bridge disappeared and boat traffic lessened, of encroaching empires and desperate defenders. None of these things seemed to touch the City of Wonders.

Tashali still visited the dreams she kept in the Garden, though more and more often she found herself walking straight past the first and the second to sit staring into the caved-in roadway of the third.

Meanwhile, in the world of the mainland, Harrek, Argrath, and Gunda helped the desperate defender, Broyan (who called himself the new king of the holy country of Kethaela) to win a great battle against the encroaching Lunar Empire. As payment for their help, the Wolf Pirates demanded the free plundering of "King" Broyan's richest city. Broyan gave them the City of Wonders, to which he himself had only a questionable right. He promised to neither warn the city nor use any of his mainland forces to defend it in any way; all that his compassion and the pirates' own bargaining allowed in the city's favor was that the pirates must make their own way there – no great trick, with their strong wolfprow ships – and that the citizens would not be forbidden to defend themselves with whatever resources they could muster in their moment of need, which was no great promise, seeing that they were to be told nothing whatever about the impending sack until it fell upon them.

The incorporation of Argrath into the friendship of Harrek and Gunda had made for no smooth triad. The valkyrie's daughter watched the two men bond, and promised herself that her booty from the holy city would be a new pirate woman to stand beside her and bear her company in her own ship, as Argrath did Harrek in the "Ice Serpent."



Tashali dreamed of red ruin: her city's buildings cracked and crumbled in sheaths of flame, while the streets ran ankle-deep in blood and screams filled every breath of air. As she woke, the flames and blood shrank away into her dreamcatcher, but the screams remained. The pirate ships had appeared, their wolf-prows snapping and snarling at the holy island city toward which they sped, their sails swollen as though the God of the Wind was blessing them in person. Without even stopping to empty her dreamcatcher – since the bridge had disappeared, the dream collectors had discharged their bags in the Stygian Basements, and what matter whether this last nightmare should escape from there, or from Tashali's bedroom? – she fled to the Garden of Dreams.

Once fixed in the Garden, no dream could of itself leave or overflow its own space; but humans could bring dream creatures out at will. From her first dream Tashali snatched little Kwamso. From her second, a small sack of marvelous fruit that quenched thirst

and hunger both at once. Then – before the fruit could shrivel – she sprang into her third dreamspace and stood there panting, staring with wide eyes into the ragged washout.



The wolf ships reached the docks, opposed only by a few fishing boats. With spear and arrow, the laughing pirates soon dispatched the foolhardy and ill-prepared fisherfolk. Leaving just enough comrades aboard to defend the ships – should need arise – and help load the loot as it was brought, the pirates leaped down upon the docks and thundered into the great, declining, unguarded City of Wonders.

Gunda watched Harrek and Argrath run side by side toward the Golden Bowl. Her mouth set in a hard line – she had seen Harrek himself spear a promising young fisherwoman, almost as if he guessed Gunda's wish and meant to foil it, diluting his own friendship but keeping hers all for himself – she sprang down onto the neighboring dock and ran in a different direction, toward the Garden of Dreams.

Gunda did not know what place this was. Indeed, she had some vague idea that the marble halls with gently curving roofs she glimpsed through trees and shrubs housed people among whom she might find the companion she sought. Entering the first hall, and finding only what at first sight looked to her like a long corridor hung on both sides with huge floor-to-ceiling pictures that touched each other with no space between the frames, she stood for a moment perplexed.

Nevertheless, here she stood, in halls still silent, while the din of sacking, looting, and casual violence grew louder and louder outside. Here she might as well begin.

The doorway was open, with nothing to close. Thinking to gain more time to search this building alone before her comrades got in, she tried to haul the nearest picture over to block the doorway, and discovered that it was not a painting, but a window upon...something.

She stared in astonishment at a scene of blue grass and sky checkered gold and silver, a scene into which she found she could thrust her arm. Running farther, pausing every few steps for another look to right and left, she felt there must be more area within these walls

than outside. What she had taken for pictures were in truth portals to strange, unheard-of realms. Not all of them opened to outdoor vistas: many showed chambers of untold luxury. Had she sought mere lifeless wealth she could have laden herself many times over; but the people she saw here and there, in this scene or that, struck her as fluttery and insubstantial creatures, delicately servile without even the motive of fear, none of them showing any such emotion even at sight of her.

At last, however, Gunda found one who seemed different: a woman about her own age, clad in a filmy night-dress frayed at sleeves and hem. This woman stood gazing into a hole in the road, her bosom heaving deeply and irregularly beneath a small furry animal she clutched in one arm. A string bag of strange, bright fruit dangled from her other hand.

Not wishing to startle this one before studying her further, Gunda stepped into the scene softly. Her care availed little. The city woman spun around, wide-eyed, and cried, "Who are you?"

"Gunda." Transferring the sword to her left hand, the pirate rested its tip on the floor and stretched her right hand forth with fingers spread. "Don't fear me. We might be friends. If I find you worthy."

The little furry thing huddled more tightly against the city woman, its tiny pink tongue flicking nervously at her arm. From outside the Garden, they heard screams, wails, and something large crashing down with a roar. "'Find me worthy?'" the city woman echoed, her gaze taking in Gunda's weapons and light armor. "Your people are murdering mine, and you order me not to fear you?"

"You could come with us. We might even find a place for your little pet."

For answer, the woman gave Gunda a hard, horrified stare, then turned and sprang around the ridiculous makeshift barrier into the hole in the road.

Her flight smacked less of fear than of resolve. Gunda could use both hands almost equally well, but for the buckler strapped to her left arm. She waited just long enough to transfer the sword back into her right hand, then followed the woman into the cavern.



At the noise, Tashali looked back. The woman who called herself Gunda was following.

Tashali looked ahead. All seemed darkness. She stopped and waited, cuddling Kwamso. The pirate woman stepped up beside her and halted. They were still near enough the entrance to see each other.

Having made her move at last, and entered the cavern of her dream, Tashali felt bold. She glanced at Gunda's sword and spoke haughtily. "Will you cut me down, pirate woman?"

Gunda put her head back and laughed. "Now, by all the gods, here is the spirit I prayed to find! No, woman of Wondercity, I will not kill you. Not even if you force my hand."

"In that case," said Tashali, "I go forward."

Gunda laid her left hand on the other's arm. "What is there for you?" she asked, peering ahead into the darkness.

"What have you and your kind left for me back there?"

"The world! Come with me, whatever your name is, and live like a queen on my ship, at my side. Together, we will see Prax, Teshnos – all Glorantha, if you say the word!"

"My name is Tashali. See the power that knowing it gives you over me." Shrugging away from Gunda's hand, Tashali walked on, into the darkness.

She amazed herself. All these years of hovering outside the tunnel of her dream, longing and fearing and never quite daring to venture inside, and suddenly the pirates had made it so very simple!

Gunda walked beside her, tempering her long strides to the city woman's measured steps. For several paces, neither said anything more.

The darkness closed about them, deep and complete. Their advancing steps touched solid rock. Groping out with her left hand, Gunda found Tashali's arm. Tapping her sword upon the rock face, the pirate led the way around a sharp curve.

They blinked. In the distance ahead a spot of light had appeared.

"What is it?" asked Gunda.

"Either salvation or nightmare, I suppose," Tashali replied, and continued walking toward it. This time she did not shrug away from Gunda's touch.

The light grew larger, but no brighter. Rather, its intensity spread out, so that by the time they could begin to see the shapes making it up, each individual shape was that much dimmer. It was an open portal, one side of a pure ivory color and the other side of tan mottled with dark brown, like the horn of some immense animal. Beside each of these two columns stood a very tall woman clad in her own long hair, which flowed down like two rivers on either side of her face, to join below her chin and cloak her completely in its wide and shimmering veil. One woman's hair was black, and she had deep brown eyes and a snub nose; the hair of the other woman was white gold, and her eyes were gray and her nose quite sharp. When Tashali and Gunda reached the portal they found that both its guardian women stood half again as tall as the pirate, and the irises of their eyes were round spots of color with no pupils at all, set in obsidian black or golden white, whichever gave the greatest contrast. By now, however, seeing them at all was no longer an easy thing, so faint had nearness made each individual fragment of the scene.

"I am Truth," said the woman of the white-gold hair. "But she" – pointing to her black-haired companion – "is Illusion, and everything she tells you is a lie."

And she of the black hair replied, "I am Illusion, and Truth and I are not always opposites, and in telling you this, I utter falsehood."

Gunda snorted. "Your riddle is older than Grandfather Mortal!"

"They themselves are older than Grandfather Mortal!" Tashali whispered in a voice of awe. "They are Old Gods – First Gods – Orenoar and Tylenea. Some say that they no longer move whole about the world!"

"We never change," said Illusion, and with that, both goddesses spun halfway round, and each became the other.

"There is no passage through this portal," said the one who had been Illusion and now was Truth, "without the sacrifice of something old and dear, to pay the toll."

Kwamso licked Tashali's arm again. She looked down at her beloved dream pet, swallowed, sighed, and held the small warm bundle of fur out to the ancient goddess. Orenoar took it and motioned for her to pass through.

Gunda strode through in Tashali's wake, and neither goddess stopped her. Apparently Kwamso was a great enough sacrifice to buy passage for two.

The pirate attempted a comment to this effect, but although her mouth and tongue and teeth moved as they should, no sound came from her throat. Tapping Tashali's shoulder to get her attention, she tried again. This confirmed it. The city woman mouthed some reply, but without making a sound. Nor was mockery involved, for, as the two women strained their ears, it became clear to both that deep silence muffled the passage everywhere. They looked back – the goddesses were obviously exchanging comments, but no sound of them penetrated the tunnel on this side of their portal. No distant dripping of unseen water, not one scuttling noise of some small creature, not even the swishing flap of the women's own footfalls...nothing broke the absolute quietude. It weighed upon their ears like an actual and heavy pressure forcing itself into the very brain. It seemed worse than blindness to the eyes. Thank all gods that pale green light glowed from the walls along this path of silence – the absence of both senses at once might have been too much to bear. In desperation, Gunda struck the flat of her sword upon the rock wall – once, and no more. The frustration was too disheartening.

Without attempting further speech, Tashali opened her bag, took out two pieces of fruit, and handed one to Gunda. They sucked in a silence rendered slightly less disconcerting by the good flavor of the fruit and its thirst-quenching juice.

The din, when it came, struck their ears with physical pain. Rounding another bend, they found themselves facing a chasm of unguessable depth filled almost to overflowing with swords – great swords and small swords, thin swords and wide ones, broadswords and large daggers – a swift-running current of clattering, clanging, clashing swords. The weapons swept past in a heavy tangle that

flashed in the red light of a torch, which was held over it by a laughing dwarf the size of a giant, clad in nothing but a band of shadow round his loins.

"Hey! You!" Gunda shouted, and then, breathing a secret sigh of relief that once again her voice worked, she added, "How do we get to the other side?"

He turned his ferret-sharp face to her. "You don't, Stumpshanks."

"I must!" Tashali protested. "It cannot end here, not after all this time, not after what it has cost me to come so far."

The ferret-faced being chuckled. "There is one way." Reaching behind the shadow round his loins, he produced a small wooden dish shaped like a curled leaf. He spun it twice upon his fingertip and tossed it into the air. When it landed a few feet away, it had become a boat, just large enough for himself and a single passenger. Looking at it with satisfaction, he explained brightly, "I'll ferry one of you bitches over, if she pays me the other one in sacrifice."

The two women stared at each other. Gunda had the power to slay Tashali as easily as stepping on a frog, but the pirate saw no particular purpose in crossing over. Besides, the city woman was of no use to her dead. Tashali had the purpose – though what, exactly, it was she could not yet explain – but lacked the strength to sacrifice an uncooperative fighting woman.

Still, when she thought of Gunda's comrades robbing, raping, and murdering her own fellow citizens in the world above, she felt that she must at least try. Swinging the bag of fruit up and around she struck the pirate with it, then retreated to the very edge of the chasm, thinking that, somehow, with the strength of desperation, she might manage to trip Gunda over into the river of swords.

Gunda watched her, surprised rather than angered by her token attack. "Child, are you serious?"

"Yes!" cried Tashali. "It is my city you would destroy, and if any chance of helping it lies ahead, I must seek that chance."

"Now, by Humakt," the pirate shouted with a laugh, "is this or is this not the true spirit for an adventuress? Very well, Tashali of Wondercity, let us fight! If you win, you can tip me down into the

blades and welcome, but if I win, I'll have you sailing the waters of Glorantha by my side."

Leaving her sword upon the ground, for she had no wish to wound Tashali even by accident, Gunda joined her on the brink of the chasm. The two women began to grapple in earnest while the ferret-faced ferryman looked on and cackled like a troll.

Had Gunda fought in earnest, the combat would have been quick. But, wishing to conquer and to save both at once, which was a thing she had seldom practiced before, she never felt quite sure exactly how much pressure to apply. This was especially true because Tashali's determination lent her strength beyond that of her natural frame...but this was an unreliable strength, that helped and deserted her in irregular spurts.

Twice Tashali almost succeeded in tripping Gunda into the deadly current, but each time the pirate saved herself simply by exerting her strength and battle skills in nearly their full measure. Three times Tashali almost toppled into the stream herself, but always Gunda pulled her back, each time to be attacked anew.

At last Gunda had Tashali down on her knees, at the chasm's very brink, with both strong pirate hands about the city-white throat. The merest pressure would cause unconsciousness, but again Gunda hesitated to apply that pressure, lest she miss her estimate and lose her prize in winning her victory. "Surrender!" she commanded.

For a moment Tashali slumped in Gunda's grip. Had she been another experienced fighter, the pirate would never have relaxed her guard. But only accident and Gunda's own restraint had given the city woman's desperation any aid in the fight thus far, and so now, when all at once she ducked, stiffened, and wiggled hard (almost breaking her own neck before Gunda's fingers loosened), then thrust out with both arms, the pirate lost balance and fell with a shout over the side.

Gunda caught the edge with her right hand, and warded off the busy but random blades of the river with the shield still buckled to her left arm. So she hung there between life and death, unable either to pull herself back up with a single wrenched and throbbing arm, or to lift her other arm away for even the length of a heartbeat from its work of warding off the deadly blades.

Tashali stepped over and set her foot upon Gunda's fingers.

"Now!" chortled the ferryman, bouncing up and down in his eagerness. "Yes! Now! Stamp on her hand! Stamp down hard, and I'll ferry you over and back, any time you like, as often as you like."

Tashali looked down at the woman below her, and shuddered. "Why could you not have fallen in at once?"

"Do whatever you have to do!" Gunda panted back. "I chose the right woman – pity I couldn't keep her – who would've thought...? But, by Orlanth Himself, don't expect me to let go and save you the effort!"

"I...I cannot!" Tashali wailed in despair.

"Then just wait! I can't hold...much longer..."

Dropping to her knees, Tashali seized Gunda's arm. "Help us!" she cried to the ferryman.

Seemingly as tickled by this turn of events as by the other, the dwarf bounced over to the women and had Gunda safe again with surprising speed, though of course all were still on the original side of the chasm.

Gunda waited until her panting had slowed and heartbeat steadied. Then she recovered her sword and turned to the ferryman. "All right, Ferret-face, let's see if we can't sacrifice you some of your own blood!"

"Come on!" he chuckled, dancing about and clapping his hands. "Yes! Come on! Try it!"

She swung the nastiest blow that could be aimed at a man. It passed through the shadow around his loins as if nothing were there at all – as if his body existed in two completely separate halves, joined by nothing but a band of murky black emptiness.

A calm voice floated to them from the other side of the chasm: "There is always another way." It was a soft voice, a voice filled with music, and its very quietude seemed to help it penetrate the clashing of the swords.

All of them turned to look across the chasm. On its far side stood another very tall woman, majestic as a willow tree in moonlight. Indeed, she might have been mistaken for such a tree, her brown body being almost hidden by her knee-length hair, pale green as it was, and leafy, like the fronds of the willow. A glow soft as her voice emanated from every part of her; nightingales warbled in her hair; her long and delicate fingers held a harp with strings the color of sunlight; and her eyes, shining from a face as brown as her body, were the clear luster of mother-of-pearl.

"Curse you!" shrieked the ferryman, stamping up and down with both feet at once. "Curse you, curse you, curse you! Get out of here!"

"I can never leave, as you very well know. I am everywhere, though found only by those who wish for me."

In his rage, the ferryman jumped into his boat, landing hard with both feet, as if he meant to stamp holes in its bottom. The little vessel seemed to explode around him, its sides flapping apart like a flower blooming in an instant, and as quickly folding up again, closing him within. They had just time to glimpse a face of blank astonishment poking up above the tightening wood before ferryman and boat together shrank to a puff and vanished completely.

The willow woman looked from the puff of nothingness to Tashali. "Throw your bag over the river, but keep your hold on one handle."

Gazing at her as if half entranced, Tashali retrieved her string bag of fruit, dropped at the beginning of the fight. She whirled it several times in a circle and loosed one end. The fruit tumbled out to vanish among the swords in a spatter of pulp, but the one handle flew, raveling the thin string behind it, straight into the new apparition's hand.

The goddess nodded. "Good. Now, if you will, secure the other end on your side. Gunda, your sword will do for its pillar."

"Wait a moment!" the pirate replied. "If I understand what we're doing, that means my sword will have to stay here on this side."

The green-haired woman nodded again. "Your companion has given up two things, one of proven usefulness and the other deeply beloved, for the sake of following this path. We ask you to abandon one."

Grumbling aloud, Gunda put both hands round the hilt of her sword and rammed its point into the earth a safe distance from the chasm's edge. It stuck, quivering. Grabbing Tashali's end of the raveled string bag, the pirate secured it to the hilt.

She expected that, like the ferryman's dish turning into a boat, this little string would enlarge, at least to the size of a bowline. It did not – it started thin enough to go through the eye of a darning needle, and it remained that size. Nevertheless, the city woman seized it with both hands.

"Wait!" Gunda caught her arm. "You're not trusting your weight to that spiderthread, are you?" For answer Tashali calmly, almost gently, pulled her arm free of Gunda's grasp and started across, hand over hand, her toes barely above the waving of the topmost blades.

The pirate was not foolhardy enough to risk that string with the weight of both their bodies at once; but, when Tashali had reached the other side in safety, Gunda followed.

As soon as they were over, and safely on the ground, the goddess let go the string and watched it drift back, high in the air, until it fell and settled around Gunda's sword. Then she smiled down upon the pirate and said, "If you choose, you may pluck a new weapon for yourself from the river."

Gunda studied the swift flow of blades and turned to inform the goddess that she had a strange sense of humor, but found her already shimmering away to invisibility.

"Come," said Tashali, unconcernedly rubbing the palms of her hands where the string had not quite cut the tender skin, but only scored it with red welts. "I believe that we are blessed to have seen the Old Goddess of Harmony, Harana Ilor. If She has helped us in person, this path must be holy, and we meant to follow it."

"Mmmm. Who was Ferret-face?" Gunda asked.

"Ratslaff, I suspect. The Trickster. The Duke of Disorder."

"How is it you know all these Old Gods by name?"

"We follow old ways, here in the Holy City of Wonders." Tashali did not mention that any path leading through her own dream would

likely be inhabited by whatever beings she herself most loved or dreaded. She had always felt particular devotion to the Oldest Gods of All, however strange and long-vanished they might seem to other folk.

The two women walked on, for how long, neither of them could say. But it seemed that time must be passing in great swatches in the world above. Gunda began to fear that Harrek would gather all the other pirates and leave without her, giving her ship to the upstart Argrath to captain. Nevertheless, rather than leave the companion she still hoped to win, she strode on beside Tashali. The city woman feared that everyone she had known might be slain by now, every place where they had lived been burnt or reduced to rubble; she had no reason to go back, for if there were anything she could do to right the world, it would have to be done here.

Gradually the passage grew narrower. At last the women had to proceed in single file, Gunda behind Tashali. Then they had to duck their heads, then walk in a crouch, and finally to crawl on all fours like slinking weasels or limbed snakes. Gunda had to unstrap her buckler and leave it behind. So much, she thought, for Harana Ilor's promise about asking her to abandon only one possession. Or was Harana Ilor the only force demanding sacrifices in this place?

Suddenly, they emerged head first, one at a time, into a vast plain. The sky was more bright gray than blue, illuminated with no sign of either cloud or sun; the grass was reddish brown; the distant trees were turquoise; and the grazing creatures had each and every one of them six legs. If not for these features, Gunda might have assumed that they had emerged again upon the surface of the earth, after coming through the undersea tunnel she had heard about, between Wondercity and the mainland.

Tashali knew better at once. Looking around until she spied a gate, she pointed to it and led the way.

"What kind of a gate is that?" Gunda demanded, for it stood alone, with nothing visible behind it nor to either side save more of the plain.

"If it truly opened on nothing else but what we see," Tashali replied, "it would not be here. If the Old Gods made things with neither point nor purpose, they would be humans and not gods."

Gunda caged her tongue behind her teeth and followed.

This gate comprised two doors, both of them living beings shrouded chin to toes in flowing cloaks that seemed to grow down from the hair of their heads. The face of one seemed womanlike, and her cloak was green and brown, with animals moving here and there across it. The other face was that of a man, his beard flowing along with the locks of his crown into his cloak of ever-changing blue and green, through which swam fishes of all sorts, soft, finny, or shelled.

This man and woman stood four times taller than Gunda, as she saw when she and Tashali halted facing them; and yet their apparent size was nothing to the sense of immensity that pulsed from each of them, as though what was seen were but the tip of their being.

"I know and honor You Both!" Tashali called up to them in a voice of pure reverence. "Zaramaka, Sir Sea, and Ga, Empress Earth!" They smiled and, without seeming to move, turned slowly inward, until between them there appeared nothing save a yawning darkness, twice as black as the one the women had faced before. In one breath, but with a sound as of many voices, they said: "Then pass, Daughter."

Without hesitation, as if to hesitate would be to falter and fail, Tashali stepped through into the shadow. As at the portal of Illusion and Truth, Gunda stepped through after her. Sir Sea and Empress Earth clammed shut behind them.

Little by little, the two women saw that they were in a vast gray hall. Underfoot were flagstones, each one nine paces or more across, rough-hewn yet slick with some dark fluid which watered the tangled grasses that grew in every crack. Columns presumably held up a ceiling: three men standing with arms outstretched to the point of pain could not have touched fingers while standing round any one of these columns, and their tops merged completely into blackness far overhead. They stood several ship-lengths apart, yet the women felt strangely crowded. As their eyes adjusted to the dark their ears adjusted to the stillness, and they heard echoes they had not heard before, echoes of rustlings, whispers, and sorrowful sighs.

In this huge place, Tashali shuddered and drew a step closer to Gunda.

As they waited, peering in all directions – the gate through which they'd come seemed to have vanished – they saw a figure approaching. It wore a dark garment that cloaked it from head to foot, and it progressed with a lurching, awkward shamble. Tashali stepped yet nearer to her unsought companion.

The figure halted three paces in front of them and raised its hood. The face that looked out, while not a skull, might almost as well have been one, so wasted away was its flesh, so wrinkled yet tightly stretched its skin hung upon the sharp bone. Its eyes were solid black, each with one single, piercing point of white where the pupil should be.

Now it was Gunda who stepped a little closer to Tashali.

"Ty Kora Tek!" As she named her, Tashali shuddered again. The Goddess of the Dead was an ancient divinity, but not one of the Oldest Gods of All, and not one whom Tashali had ever loved, worshipped, or chosen to think much about. What could her appearance mean, if not that they had passed beyond the boundaries of Tashali's own dream and come into some actual meeting-place of divine realities?

Ty Kora Tek slowly inclined her head, turned, and, with a long sweep of her loose-jointed arm, motioned for them to follow her. They did not even think of disobeying.

As they walked, Tashali saw the merman who had played with her as a merboy in the shallows and later, as an adult, been killed. She tried to greet him. He moved his lips, but when no words came forth; he buried his face in his hands and looked at her no more.

As for Gunda, she spied many old friends, comrades, and enemies, killed in battle, storm, or mishap. Not a few had died by her own hand. After two or three tries, she gave up trying to exchange words with them.

Where were those who had died in Nature's arms? They included almost all the dead whom Tashali had known in life, and a few whom Gunda had known, but none of them did either woman glimpse.

As they walked on, however, they began to see people who had not yet been dead on the morning of this very day: fellow citizens of

Tashali's, with whom she had chatted, argued, or even dined only the day before, now sitting listless in bloodstained garments; and comrades of Gunda's, either from among those under her own command or under Harrek's, grinning or silently bellowing, with gashlines circling their necks and joints, or gaping holes in their chests. Several of them gestured wildly to one or other of the women, as if not yet understanding that they could no longer communicate. Some of them seemed to waver in and out of existence, and their voices were barely audible, as if they were tiny and far-distant chirrupings.

Suddenly Tashali screamed. She saw her father, still standing erect, with the ancient ceremonial dagger of his house gripped in one hand and his tunic hanging torn from a bloody gash below the collarbone. He gave no sign of having seen his daughter. He was one of those who wavered between vapory outline and seeming solidity.

"They are not yet entirely mine," said Ty Kora Tek, though how she spoke neither living woman could tell, for she did not turn round, and they seemed to feel rather than hear her voice. Then – abruptly – she pointed. At this gesture, the women saw that they stood before a dais of black obsidian. Although they were only a few paces from it, they had not seen it until their guide pointed.

They could not quickly count its steps, but it rose higher than their heads and, at its top, a figure with face and hair as white as his bone-white robes sat in a throne that looked carved from the same block as the dais itself.

"Daka Fal," Gunda guessed; and Tashali nodded. She, too, had heard of the Judge of the Dead, though without quite believing in him.

His eyes they could not see at all, but he tilted his face, which resembled a flat oval surface, down as though very well able to see them. In a voice like thunder, he observed: "But neither of these is dead!"

"Neither of us asked to be!" Gunda replied, shouting to conceal her dread.

His head tilted slightly, deliberately, as if he were studying each of them in turn; and each felt, in her turn, that he read her entire life.

"Gunda the Guilty," he pronounced at last, "you have asked for death each and every time you have brandished weapon against a fellow mortal, and that has been more often than your continued survival deserves. But you did not ask for death when you followed this woman here. That I grant you."

Then he spoke to the city woman: "Tashali, Daughter of Tashina, you have never asked for death. Nevertheless, you have come here today in search of whatever experience you might find. I therefore sentence you to the fullness of such experience: to death in the Baths of Fire, of Hatred, and of Truth."

"Wait!" Gunda exclaimed, accepting his judgment of her guilt, but not his power over her. "You can't sentence us until after we're already dead!"

He turned the plane of his face back toward her. "You, Gunda, I have not yet sentenced. You may accompany the condemned one, if you please, and attempt to preserve her life."

He thrust his left arm out to point into the distance before him. Ty Kora Tek, who had lingered to one side, stepped forward again and caught Tashali's wrist in a grip of hard, icy fingers.

Tashali stared back up at the God of Judgment. "If I should win through these Baths," she cried, "do I not receive whatever I ask?"

The flat oval inclined as if nodding in amused agreement.

"I shall ask that the City of Wonders be saved from the Wolf Pirates today and kept safe from all invasion henceforth!" Having said this, Tashali let the Goddess of the Dead tug her toward a second dais, this one of marble, that waited a hundred paces away.

Had Gunda still carried her sword she would have hacked Ty Kora Tek's hand off, or at least tried to, and dared the results. Being weaponless, she did not quite venture to attack a goddess, but only strode along at Tashali's other side, one hand on her shoulder in a grip that would have heartened any fighting man or woman.

Three forms began taking shape on the marble dais. Scarcely visible at first, and then as indistinct as whirling spires of smoke, at length they became a woman half shrunken and half swollen in

alternating limbs so that she appeared completely grotesque, clothed in rags, green with jaundice, black with boils, and white with glistening pus, hair almost gone and cheeks hectic with fever; a being whose nudity plainly showed her three-quarters woman and one-quarter man, having the breasts and other maternal parts of the one and the thrust but not the pouches of the other, and the appeal of neither, for she was an ugly and fearsome thing with broos for hair, jagged rocks for eyes, and a lizard for a tongue; and a man meltingly handsome, but clothed about with a pallor even more vile than that which pulsed from the other two – more fearsome because more impossible than they – the nightmare revenant of a menace long thought crushed and dead beyond even ghosthood.

Ty Kora Tek prostrated herself before these three. Her chant, though silent, echoed in Gunda's and Tashali's heads: "Hail, Trinity of Trinities!"

"Trinity of Trinities?" Gunda whispered. "All gods save us, they've got to be the Unholy Three!"

The man spoke, his voice as cruelly handsome as his face and figure: "Take care, little one, how you judge by appearances."

The Goddess of the Dead turned to face the humans, and she was no longer Ty Kora Tek, but now the Old God of Conflict before death existed: Kargan Tor, with mad laughter in his face and bright blades in both his hands.

Tashali stifled a gasp and pointed to the dais. The Unholy Three were trading their positions, the naked hermaphrodite taking the handsome man's place at the center. Once rearranged, they began, snakelike, to shed their skins, the former characters peeling away to slip, bit by bit, into puddles at the feet, if "feet" they could be called, of three completely different visions. Ragnaglar, impossibly reborn God of Evil itself – or could it be his son Wakboth come to fill his place? – became a column of purest white radiance. Mallia, Goddess of Disease, turned into a gathering of clouds: dark thunderheads, marbled with streaks and flashes of lightning, roiling about one another ceaselessly, like slow fire. And, standing between them, Thed, Goddess of Rape, became a pillar of velvety sable, visible only thanks to the columns of white and gray light flanking her on either side.

While infinitely lovelier than when in their earlier aspects they were also more terrible, because more awesome. Only the dim appearance of a humanlike figure at the core of the columns to right and left gave the two women courage to continue gazing at them.

"Dayzatar, Nakala, Umath!" Tashali breathed in holy dread: Lord Light, Dame Darkness, and King Storm. Then, gathering all her resolution into a tight ball between heart and throat, she used it to push out words loud enough to hear. "I have been sentenced to die in the Baths of Truth, of Hatred, and of Fire. Where are they?"

It might have been one of them responding, or it might have been all three: "Daughter, We Ourselves are those Baths."

Tashali threw herself down prostrate across the marble steps before her Elder Gods of Light, Darkness, and Storm. "It is a death worth dying!" she whispered.

"Or an ordeal worth living through!" Gunda grunted at her side.

Stumbling only a little, Tashali rose to her feet and ascended the stairs. On the topmost step but one, before the column of pure light that was Dayzatar, she hesitated. The petty cuts and bruises, coughs, and occasional light fevers of a pampered and well-off child of the City of Wonders counted more as annoyances than as true trials, and it had been easy enough for one who had never in her life experienced deep pain to accept in word and intention the sentence of deadly ordeal; but standing face to face with the all-penetrating brilliance paralyzed her will. It was not so much fear, she thought through the hammering of her heart, as awe of the divine. To be bathed in ancient godhead!.... One might welcome the push that thrust one into such a Bath, but to force one's own body to make the plunge....

"Warrior-woman!" she cried to Gunda. "Help me!"

And, gritting her own teeth, Gunda memorized the distance, then shut her eyes, caught Tashali's arm, and, dragging her along, jumped into the column.

Tashali had meant only for her companion to push her, not die with her. She opened her mouth to scream – but light poured down her throat, passed in throbbing instants through her stomach into her

blood, and thence to every part of her body. She felt extended, burst open, scattered through all the length and width, breadth and height of that dazzling column of light – yet on lifting her arm before her eyes, she found it still of its old size and shape, albeit so luminous as to seem transparent...she had become to herself what her shadow was to her body in sunlight, only a shadow of light rather than of the blockage of light. She was nothing, less than nothing, so insubstantial that only in madness could comfort lie. She looked along the length of her other arm to find her companion, who stood breathing hard, panting as she herself panted, glowing away to incandescent nothing as she herself glowed, face turned upward, but...the pirate's eyes were still so tightly shut that the lashes had disappeared between the eyelids' folds. Gunda had not accepted the sentence of death, merely agreed to pass through ordeal. Tashali grasped her hand. Without ungluing her eyes, Gunda responded by squeezing the city woman's fingers.

The other figure, that dim outline of head and limbs and torso that represented the Elder God Himself, seemed at first a thousand years beyond Tashali's reach. But then, from herself, she saw rays of darker essence streaming upward. They did not seem to sully the column's purity, but they stirred it, causing it to whirl and twist as they flowed up and out. As this happened, the light coalesced, concentrating into itself, growing – not brighter or lesser – but more intense around the humanesque form at its core. An interminable interval passed, during which Tashali felt that she was siphoned away to the last nerve end through the light into the void; and when, with the last of her strength, she looked at the God again, He seemed no longer Light, but Acos – Law – that ancient Universal Law which can never be broken, save by Chaos. She knew Him by His resemblance to a mountain, with the Sun for His head, a cloak of clouds covering His shoulders, and forests growing down His body to the foothills of His feet.

With a sweep of one boulderous arm, he brushed them both into the second Bath, the darkness of Dame Nakala.

It was absolute, fuliginous, total, like an abyss of nothingness. It seemed to suck the eyes from the head in long strands of fluid tension and the muscles after them, and the brains after the muscles, until nothing was left save a tenuous shell of disembodied madness. Their feet continued pressing against some hard surface; but whether it was above them, or below, or a vertical plane to one side or another, they had no longer any idea. The six directions had

become mere husks of meaningless memories – concepts that had once held some relevance to existence, but one could no longer begin to comprehend what it might have been. Time, also, had become a vague abstraction: they might have just been thrust into this absolute night, or they might have existed here forever, their entire earthly lives only a dream of so long ago that it was almost forgotten. Eons might be passing between heartbeats. Each breath might be taking thousands of years to draw and thousands more to exhale, in this atmosphere at once nonexistent and solid as rock.

Emotion remained, and it was the worst torment of all. It was hatred. They had still been holding hands when shoved into Dame Darkness. They continued to hold hands, for each was the other's sole contact with anything outside of her own insanity; and yet each one despised the thing she held. In so far as they recollected anything at all, Tashali felt herself clinging to a conscious instrument of blood and murder, while Gunda considered the thing at the end of her arm to be a limp doll useful for nothing. They would have thrown each other away in disgust if not for the darkness that pressed them unwillingly together.

So enormous grew their mutual loathing that at last it filled the entire dark eternity, pressed against its boundaries. It could neither overflow nor expand and, trapped but still growing, finally it collapsed in upon itself, turned inside out, and became love. And now, without some fellow being to love, the new emotion would have been twice as painful as the former hatred. Either woman alone must have burst with the strain. Each was saved by the comrade whose hand she held. They pulled themselves into each other's arms and embraced as though they would have flowed into a single body.

As they embraced the darkness gathered into itself as the light had done in the earlier column, and there stood Uleria beaming down upon them – innocent, compassionate face; ripe, beautiful body; and sere white hair. Uleria, Goddess of Love, the most ancient divinity of them all, clothed in a smile and a flowing robe of white and blue.

"Go, children," She murmured, and gently turned them to face the last Bath. Still hand in hand, lulled by the love in Her presence, they strolled like children indeed, filled with total trust, into the column of shadow and lightning, of ever-boiling stormcloud – the column of Lord Umath.

He was fire. A furnace charged beyond capacity. A roaring holocaust that fed upon its own heat. That distilled it into razors of searing liquid – the pure, concentrated essence of flame. In one slow instant it sliced open every fold, every pore of the women's skin, flowed through their bodies like millions of white-hot blades, and sundered them apart. Their shards went whirling away on the inferno's own winds, crisping into black cinders, falling at last back upon the naked spirits that still cowered in the heart of the flames.

Even reduced to ghosts quivering with the shock of bodily pain just past, the two still held tightly to each other's hands, and it must have been this that saved them, that caused the cinders, falling back, to adhere to the ghostly frames. The heat cooled; the dry winds roaring through it sank into moisture-laden breezes; and the cinders lightened and swelled up, smoothing themselves once more into living bones and flesh and blood.

Meanwhile, the column that had been storm and fire coalesced, without shrinking, into a humanesque form of clouds and colors, soft and brilliant, continually weaving and re-weaving about one another in ever-changing patterns.

"Larnste," Tashali whispered. "Great Elder God of Change!"

He seemed to smile at them once, gently, before His shape lost itself, spreading and stretching and fattening, enveloping all the other deities, first those on the dais of the Baths, then Daka Fal on his judge's throne and Kargan Tor at its foot, then, somehow – they sensed without understanding how they sensed it – all the deities outside, from those who had been and gone, Dayzatar, Nakala, and Umath, to Sir Sea and Empress Earth, to Harana Ilor and the essence that had been Ratslaff, and past Orenoar and Tylenea at the Gates into Silence.

Taller, higher, and wider this melding grew until, looking up and around, Tashali and Gunda beheld the eight legs like beams of shining glass and the immense body like two huge pearls, of the great Mystical Spider, Arachne Solara.

They did not even fall flat on the dais. Their awe was too great. They could not move a muscle, even to slacken it.

"My child Tashali," said Arachne Solara, Her words felt through the bones rather than heard through the ears, "you have already named your reward. It shall be done. And you, my child Gunda, what reward do you claim for enduring the Ordeals?"

At the Spider's command, Gunda found her voice. "I ask for this woman at my side, to sail with me and be my comrade."

"Her life she may have back, at your bidding; but as for what she does in it, where she goes and with whom, that is for no God to decide."

"Am I dead, after all?" Tashali murmured, her eyes very wide.

From some deep pocket of her being, Gunda snatched the courage to argue. "People command other people what to do! A king's word is law to his whole tribe!"

"In such matters, then," Arachne Solara answered gently, "mortals have greater power than Gods. We force no one into unwilling action."

"My sister! My friend!" Tashali cried, falling to her face before Gunda. "I could not have come here and done this without you, but do not ask it of me! Let me stay dead rather than leave the city of my birth!"

"Ask whatever else you will," said Arachne Solara, and they could hear sorrow in her tones. "Anything that is in Our power to give you, We will give you."

Gunda stood a moment, gazing down at Tashali. So it is not to be, she thought. Well, a city woman like her.... Sturdy enough, she proved, to come through all these trials of the spirit - but how long would she really last in one good battle of flesh and blood? Resigned to the requirements of Fate, the pirate finally said, "Then give us Wolf Pirates our ships and our freedom to sail away from here safe; bring everyone who died today back to life; and let us keep our plunder."

"Three rewards," Arachne Solara replied. "Very well. One for each of the three Ordeals you entered freely, of your own will. It is little enough compensation for the one reward that was not mine to grant you."

Slowly the Spider rose until only two of Her legs seemed to rest on the floor, while the topmost were lost to view high above and the other four stretched off to the corners of the world. Then she began to spin. Strong yet insubstantial the clear filaments drifted down to form a vast net, immense enough to cover the entire City of Wonders. The merman – Tashali's old friend – came into sight, swimming through the air, along with many others: all the dead of the City they must have been, from its earliest beginnings to the last funeral Tashali had attended. She guessed it by their garments. And their animals and even their possessions came as well – things resembling other ancient things preserved in the City's museums. And wild animals – creatures of water, land, and air – things that must have lived in this place before ever Belintar became the pharaoh and built the City of Wonders. Trolls and merfolk and humans, they came; dinosaurs and newtlings and alynxes, candles and tables and pitchers of antique design. And, intermingled with them all, came dreams – beings whom Tashali recognized as her own improperly discarded dreams, and things of weird and often beautiful shape that could only be the dreams of her fellow citizens, similarly-loosed through the generations. All swam into the Web, taking hold of it interstice by interstice, swimming upward and outward to expand it to its fullest.

When they had it expanded a wind seemed to spring up. It whipped with gale force through the great hall, toppled the gigantic pillars, and swept everything away before it – everything save Arachne Solara's Web.

As the last remnants of what she had found at the bottom of her dream blew away from around her, Tashali found herself sitting once again in front of the washed-out road in her third space in the Garden of Dreams, and – marvel of marvels! – Kwamso was back in her arms, wiggling happily and trying to lick her face.

Springing up, she rushed from the Garden and ran toward the docks. Dazed citizens were picking themselves up all around her, exclaiming over vanished wounds or mourning lost goods and damaged property; but she stopped for none of them. For now, all that mattered was reaching the water's edge in time.

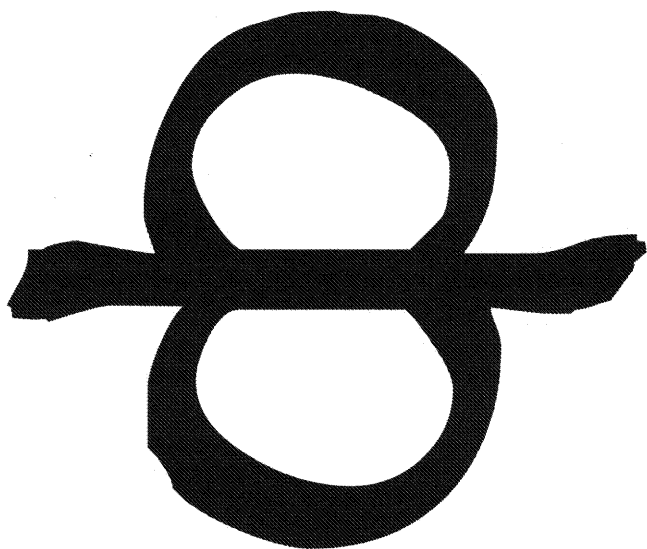
She reached it. Beyond the faint shimmer that marked the shield of Arachne Solara's protective web, the ships of the Wolf Pirates were even now turning to sail away. On the deck of one, Tashali could just glimpse a tall, red-haired woman who stood as if looking back.

Lifting Kwamso's foremost paw, Tashali waved it, then let it go and waved her own arm high above her head.

From the deck of her ship, Gunda saw the city woman wave. The pirate lifted an identical Kwamso, holding it high and tenderly above her head by way of a farewell salute. Somehow, as if granting an unrequested gift, the gods had twinned the little furry creature, returning one with each of the two women who might have been friends had their lives run longer together. Ever afterwards, Gunda cherished this pet above her ship and crew, above her sword and shield – which the gods had also returned to her – and even, it sometimes seemed, above her friend the Great White Bear.

XΦWADXO8XOΔ

Gunda had not limited her request for the lives of everyone who had died that day. All over Glorantha, the newly dead marveled at finding themselves suddenly alive again, as if awakened from a dream. Few of them would ever know why. The pirate woman never spoke of it, and only in our own time have outsiders been able to learn the true story of how the City of Wonders disappeared, in effect, from the world.



The Hero Bit

Now of course, as everyone knows, in Pavis there are many adventurers, both young and old, and always these are meeting each other in temples and eating-houses and dives and such, and when you have guys and dolls meeting each other all the time, you are apt to have cases of love breaking out. If you are a sentimental kind of person you may feel that all the hand-holding and loving looks and kissing that ensue are most touching to behold, while if you are not the chances are you will find them quite revolting. But many persons display an interest in such matters, and I for one do not mind the odd case of love happening around me, and will even lend a sympathetic ear to persons who wish to tell me of their undying love for other persons, so long as they keep the drinks coming and I am not expected to do anything about it. Indeed, dough is often laid on the possibility of a case of love developing and how long it will last and so forth, but I wish to state that I want no part of such action. For the way I see it, anything involving the emotions of guys and dolls is a most uncertain proposition, indeed, and not worth a serious betting guy's attention.

But I will concede that there is one sure thing in matters of love, which is that Griselda will not be one of those involved, for Griselda seems to have no interest at all in matters of love. I tell you before of how Sweet-Talking Shamus falls for her but she remains unmoved, although Shamus is a guy whose attentions will be welcomed by many dolls, and there are other cases of guys doing some serious pitching to Griselda who have plenty going for them, such as youth, and good looks, and dough in their pouches. But Griselda freezes them all off, just like she does to any enterprising doll who attempts to find out if she is interested in her own sex, and finally it is acknowledged throughout Pavis and all around that although Griselda will act friendly when she is in the mood she can never be persuaded to go further, and while many consider this strange behaviour in such a looking doll it is accepted as one of the many unexplained mysteries of life.

Now one day when there is quite a crowd in Loud Lilina's, and Griselda is among those present, though she has her back to the wall and is looking half-asleep, Old Gil comes in looking 'all excited and says like this, "Say, who do you think is coming to Pavis? Batulco the Great, no less." At this Griselda sits bolt upright and

says sharply, "Do you say Batulco the Great?" and many others stop talking and turn round to hear, and such reactions are not surprising, for Batulco the Great is renowned as one of the most famous adventurer hero types ever. Old Gil looks all pleased up at the attention he is getting, and says, "The man himself. He is already at Bullford, and word comes ahead of him. I guess he aims to take on the Puzzle Canal or find Balastor's Axe or something."

"Why, I am hearing about him when I am just a little kid," says Griselda. "Can he really be active still?"

"No reason why not," says Old Gil. "The way I hear it, he becomes famous when he is still quite young. Why, I hear of him getting in and out of the Machine Ruins all of fifteen years ago. Personally, I rate that as his best performance ever."

"How about his stealing the Demon Crown, from deep in Dorastor?" says Sweet-Talking Shamus, and Hanufa puts in, "I think it is his recovering the Sky Goblet from a dragon's hoard," while Topknot claims that Batulco once finds a Darkness Box and gets proclaimed a troll-friend for ever because he turns it in to the Castle of Lead. As they are mentioning these items, Griselda is turning from one to the other with her face as full of interest, as if she is still a little kid. When she gets a chance to speak she says, "Once I glimpse him in my home town of Alone, maybe ten years ago, and he is always kind of a hero of mine. To think of him coming here!" and she seems to go off into a dream while the discussion continues. This is such strange behaviour for her that it will make anyone speculate, and I commence to wonder if he is the great lost love of her life, but I dast not ask her for fear she will turn right back into the old Griselda, who can freeze a salamander with a glance if she is feeling displeased.

Personally, I have very little interest in these adventurer hero types, as none of them can be bothered with guys like me, and I am willing to bet that only half of what is said about him is true, if that, and doubt whether he will live up to his advance billing. But it is just as well that I lay no bet of this nature, for I will certainly be very scared for my dough when Batulco the Great shows up, because he looks everything they say of him; in fact, he looks as if he steps straight out of one of the old stories. He is a big tall guy, with shoulders like a bull and ripply muscles all over, as everyone can see because he is not wearing much of anything above the waist, and he has hair the colour of ripe corn down to his shoulders, and sky-blue eyes, and when he smiles you can see fine white teeth, and many a doll sighs deeply when she gazes upon him.

There is a raft of other guys with him, some of whom are clearly servants and donkey-drivers and such, but others look like guys of much experience, to judge from their gear and way of handling themselves; but none of these are anything much to look at, in fact most are downright hard on the eyes, and nobody gives them a second glance.

Well, Batulco and his mob settle into some place in Oldtown that they can get cheap, because it seems they do not have any too much dough, and for the same reason they do their serious drinking in cheap joints like Loud Lilina's after they give the high-class watering-holes a complimentary play. This is fine for the ordinary guys and dolls who wish to see something of Batulco and maybe even talk to him, and it will certainly make things a lot easier for Griselda if she wishes to meet up with him, for she favours the cheap joints also, because, as she once tells me, the atmosphere is apt to be less chilly in them. She is right there when Batulco first drops by Lilina's, but though she is well placed among his circle of admirers he does not give her much of a tumble. Anyone can see that she is somewhat disappointed by such treatment, and when it happens again she leaves with an expression on her face that I recognise, for it is the look she has when she means business.

Now it may be that, as some are heard to suggest, Loud Lilina offers Batulco special rates because of all the extra business he brings in, but he and his guys take to visiting steadily, and after a night or two Griselda shows up again, and she really makes quite an entrance. Up to this time she is dressing the way she usually does, which is in a pretty plain tunic with well-worn leathers on top and not much jewellery or anything, and though she is clean and tidy she will not catch your eye at a glance. But now she is wearing a dress that reveals a quite remarkable amount of her shape, in fact if it is not for some necklaces very little of her chest will be covered at all, and she has on earrings, and bracelets, and armlets, and I do not know what all else, and her hair is all done up in a fancy way with big jewelled pins stuck through it, and the only reminder of her usual style is that she still packs her little sword, although she is holding it loose, having nowhere to hang it without spoiling the effect. It is obvious to anyone who is not blind that she intends to make an impression upon Batulco, but to show you how smart she is, she does not join those around him, but gives me a big hello and comes over to where I am sitting. This is some distance away, as I reckon I hear all the stuff about Batulco that I want to hear, and furthermore most of his guys are scarcely what you may call fastidious about keeping clean, and their combined effect is more powerful than I care for, personally.

Griselda makes such a production of this that many turn our way, which makes me most uncomfortable as I do not care to be the centre of attention, but her ploy works, for it is not long before one of Batulco's guys comes over and states that Batulco wishes to buy her a drink. So she graciously condescends to join them and seems to hit it off at once, and there can be no doubt that Batulco is most interested in her, and when they leave she goes with them. She is often seen in their company thereafter, and it seems clear that she and Batulco are developing a severe case of love for each other, and everyone starts going around saying how about this, and you never can tell, and offering and taking bets on the likely progress of this affair. But the smart betters notice that they are never together without at least one of Batulco's guys along, and some speculate that these do not wish this attachment to develop, which is strange when you consider what an asset Griselda's talents will be to their band and how she seems to get along with them OK.

Well, things go on like this for a while, and then all of a sudden Batulco and his guys are nowhere around, and neither is Griselda. Reliable word comes out of the Rubble that they are seen in there, but Griselda is not with them, and yet she continues absent from all her usual haunts, and it is all a great mystery. Now I smell a good story in this, and after I do some thinking I decide to look up my cousin Wiglaf, who has a tiny dive on the edge of Riverside, for once before when she is not to be found I come across her there. When I approach I see the door is closed, but I figure this boosts the chances that I am right, for Wiglaf certainly cannot afford to turn away any customers, so I knock and call out to him, and after a while he opens up.

Sure enough, there is Griselda at a table, all slumped over a big mug of booze, and I never see her look so bad. Her hair is all over the place, and her eyes look like they have big dark circles round them, and she has wine stains all round her mouth. But when she eyes me I feel like I am being nailed to the door, so I can see that it is still the old Griselda in there.

"So, you want the story?" she says, just like that. "Well, come on over, and Wiglaf, you get him a mug and then fan yourself out of here, because no one else must hear what I am about to relate. If I find you listening," and here she does a quick flick of her hand and a dagger appears in it, for I omit to mention that she is back in her old gear. Wiglaf goes kind of green and vanishes, and then Griselda nails me again with her eyes and points the dagger too. "Mark this," she says. "I am telling you this story only because it will ease my mind, and it is strictly not for public consumption at this time. I

guess you do not care about Batulco's reputation one way or the other, but as you will see this is not a story to pass around, if only because no one else will believe it, and I have no wish to get into a lot of arguments over it."

"Are you saying that he is a fraud?" I ask.

Wait a minute," she says. "I am telling this story, and I will do it my way. You will no doubt be observing in past days that I find Batulco a very attractive guy, and I have every reason to believe he feels similarly towards me, but we have this problem that it is impossible to shake all his guys, for at least one is always closer to us than a dead heat. I can see that Batulco finds this as frustrating as I do, and since he will not tell them to get lost I come up with a plan, which is to have Snakefang provide me with something slow-acting that I call slip into their drinks, and I do this at Rowdy Djoh Lo's where I can get cooperation ill fixing their drinks. I work out already that they have a kind of rota, so the last guy to get it will be the one who should be up with us, and hence no suspicions will be aroused.

"It all works out like I figure, and in a while, back at his place, Batulco and I are surrounded by a lot of guys who are really snoring quite loud, and at last we have a chance to get snug. Well," and here she pauses, and though the light in Wiglaf's place is really rather dim I have a strong impression that there is more colour in her cheeks than usual, "I do not aim to go into that side of things, but when we come up for air I take the opportunity to ask him about some of his most famous exploits, because when these are spoken of, in Lilina's or wherever, his guys do a lot of the talking, and I am itching to have his own account. Well, his answers will seem all right to you, maybe, but they are a little short on detail, and though I am under the influence of both love and liquor I start to get the feeling that they lack that certain something that a first-hand account of a daring deed will give you. So after a while I work up to asking him if maybe some of these stories are touched up for public consumption, or just plain stories, for I know how unwilling the public can be to accept reality when asking for tales of glory.

"Well, at this his face goes right down. 'No, they are true, in essence,' he says, 'But I only...' and then he busts out crying. Naturally I put my arm around him and ask what the trouble is, but before he can answer I perceive that we are being watched, and it is by two of the guys who I always figure for his servants, only now one has a very nasty-looking crossbow pointed directly at me as if he knows how to use it. The other looks around at our company, who are still snoring to beat the band, and shakes his head.

'I guess you drug them,' he says. 'Well, sister, I certainly hate to do this to such a looking doll, but we cannot have any secrets getting out. Move away from her, Batulco.'

" 'Hold on,' I cry, as I do a quick roll to get out of the line of fire, 'I am not after any secrets,' and Batulco jumps in front of me and cries, 'Leave her alone. We are in love, and that is why she asks me,' and I will always consider that he shows that there is some hero in him by doing this.

"The guy who speaks before rubs his chin. 'Maybe that will put a different slant on the matter,' he says. 'If you are in love enough to keep a secret, you can come in with us, for we can certainly use someone like you.'

"What am I coming in on?" I say, for my head is still not working at its right speed. So he motions us to sit down and lets me in on their secret, and it is this. Batulco is their front man, because he looks the part of a great adventurer hero, and while he is fair at fighting and such it is these guys with him who are the real experts and pull off all the trickiest stuff. So of course they have to keep tabs on him to make sure that he does not get asked about something he is supposed to do that he does not know enough about, and also that he does not spill the beans to some companion in a relaxed mood or break down, the way he does with me."

"Why do they need such a guy at all?" I ask. "Surely they will want the credit for their great deeds themselves."

"You ask too many questions," says Griselda snappily. "I am coming to that. They need a front man because the public wants to believe in heroes, and moreover in heroes that look like Batulco, or dolls similarly, and not the muggolas that they are more often than not. And what the public wants matters," she continues, "because they will get more cooperation, and credit, and so forth if they have such a guy frosting them. These are smart guys, in their way, and they are willing to pass up a little glory, so long as they can share out the profits, and after all they know who really pulls off the amazing feats. If one of them fouls up, as is bound to happen from time to time, well, Batulco is clear, and he does not have to be replaced. But of course all this Pretence is very hard on Batulco, and in fact he is by no means the first Batulco they have, because others crack under the strain one way and another."

"What happens to them?" I ask.

Griselda smiles just a trifle. "Well, if they are smart they accept a pay-off and swear a very serious oath that they will keep the secret. But sometimes they are not smart, like one who wishes a greater share of the take or he will tell all, and then," she shrugs, "they get taken care of. These guys are very keen to protect their secret, as you will perceive from their readiness to off me. But it is impossible to keep the lid on such a secret for ever; already they have to stay away from some parts because rumours are taking hold, and this is one reason why they come out this way."

"So why are you not with them, if you know the secret and you love him?" I ask, and I realise before I finish speaking that this is the wrong thing to say. Griselda just looks at me for a moment, in a way that I cannot describe except to say that I am quite unable to move, and then she ups and stabs her dagger into the table so close to my hand that I feel the wind of it and drop my mug, and in fact in jumping away I fall right off my stool.

"That is one question too many," she says, leaning forward and looking at me most earnestly, "but I will overlook it, for it gives me a chance to let out what I am feeling." Then she heaves the dagger out with some effort, for it is in quite deep, and sheathes it. "They let me go," she continues, as I get up and dust myself off, "because I help them work out how to get off the hook with this Batulco caper, and I cannot believe they do not contemplate this before, but I guess they feel that they invest a lot of effort in building up his publicity and all, and do not wish to start over. Anyway, shortly you will hear that Batulco goes down against overwhelming odds fighting Chaos monsters in the Rubble to save the lives of his pals, and I make them promise not to waste him but to get him out disguised some way, and off they will go to start the business again somewhere with a different front man, or maybe a doll, as dolls are better actors, anyway, and the right one will not start hankering for love in her life the way Batulco does. As for why I am not with them," and here she breaks off to take a big pull at her drink, "in fact they make me the offer to front for them, and he can be along in disguise, and all that. But I have no wish to front for anybody, particularly not if I have to dress in the ridiculous way I use to snag Batulco in the first place, and I cannot love him once I know he is nothing but a front, and anyway, can you imagine spending the best years of your life with that bunch of uncouth jerks?"



The Road of Kings

Who walks the Road of Kings? Not royalty alone. For every man who reaches for a crown, there is a faithful, faceless band who strive and sweat and bleed with every step their master takes. Some are heroes, and many are fools, but damnation take the king who forgets those that helped him to his throne, and served with body and blood that their lord might rule.

– Argrath, King of Sartar

I. Derik's Leap

My name is Joram, son of Miranna, known to most as Orkarla the Black, and I am one of those who follow the Son of Sartar. There are many of us (although once there were more), and many are the strands in the web that Fate has used to bind us to him. For some it is love, for others it is hate. For some it is a matter of honor; for others, it is the mantle of glory and the weight of gold to be won in his wake. For me, it is some of all of these things, but most of all it is the legacy of my parents (whose faces I cannot remember), and an oath sworn to an old woman dying by the light of a burning barn.

What I can remember of my childhood was spent in the village of Derik's Leap, in the lands of the Kheldon tribe, not far north of the road to Swenstown. My aunt Myara was the village crone, and my earliest clear memory is of her long, strong face in the candle light and her touch on my face. "So you are the son of my niece" she said. "You look like your father, but you are my own flesh and blood. This is your home, now." I ate thick soup and black bread, and dozed by the fire. Before sleep took me, I heard my aunt and old Boltar whispering something about a world gone forever, and a long journey on foot along bad roads and through worse weather.

I have a vague, jumbled memory of such a journey, but none of anything before that or indeed any memory of the man who had shepherded me to my aunt's door, until after she had touched me. An endless grey wall guards the earliest part of my life; I have never been able to breach it, even in my dreams. I have spoken to

many a learned sage about this strange blankness, and they have been of three minds regarding it. The first thought is that I have been touched by some great spell or magic; the second is that my mind has been threatened by a horrible memory and guards itself by walling that memory away beyond my reach, lest I be damaged by it. The third suggestion is that I was simply injured by a great blow to the head. The wound had been healed, but not before my memories had leaked out, like honey from a comb. I do not know if any or all of these theories are true, though I favor the last one myself. Having had most of my brains knocked out as a child would explain a great many of my actions since.

The old man I first remember sipping cider and talking to my aunt was a part of my life in ways that even now I do not fully understand. Boltar Whitebeard was a man somewhat taller than average, and stronger and quicker than many a younger man. He was quiet, smiling with his eyes rather than his mouth, and he always seemed to know where I was. He always knew when I was lying, too, and he had no patience with it. "Don't lie to me, boy," he would say, "It puts my teeth on edge." He taught me how to fight, and that a man's work is whatever needs to be done, and never to fail a trust. I loved him.

Boltar stayed with us whenever he could, but he was never in the village more than one week in four. The rest of the time, and whenever Boltar wasn't teaching me, the center of my life was my Aunt Myara. I have said she was the village crone; by that I do not mean that she was a withered hag, but that of the three Earth Sisters (maiden, matron, crone), she wore the face of the eldest for our village. She was as tall (and at least as smart) as any man in the village, with a straight back and no-nonsense manner that she showed to everyone, man or woman, thane or stickpicker. She had come to Derik's Leap with her husband Farad, to live in his village and raise her children in his house. Both children and husband were dead before I came to live with her, but Myara herself had become as much a part of Derik's Leap as its deep, cool well or its sacred grove of walnut trees. Nurse and midwife, herbalist and matchmaker, Aunt Myara headed the Women's Circle of the village and was in charge of the shrine of the Earth Mother. When I could, I helped her, and I think I filled some of the emptiness of her house, even if I could not banish the sad memories that colored its stones and tinted its windows.

Once, when I had lived in my new home about a year, I was helping my aunt carry simples to the Women's Hall. I had finished my chores early that day, so that I could take up a strategic position next to the oven; Aunt Myara's honey cakes were almost legendary in our village, and while I had missed the chance to lick the mixing bowl, I had decided that the crumbs from the baking pan would not so escape me. I had looked so determined that she smiled and gave me, not one, but two cakes for myself. Being a boy, I stuffed them into my face at once, causing my aunt to suggest that I looked like a very large and very strangely dressed chipmunk. After washing my face and hands, I picked up the baskets and followed her out the door and down the flagged walk to the edge of the hill overlooking the village common. There, I found her looking down at a group of the village's young men and women; she was smiling, and had a far-off look in her eyes.

The men had come in from the fields at noon, and had just finished their midday meal. The older men were stretching and talking quietly before returning to work; the younger men were laughing and teasing the women as they cleaned up after the meal. Below us, partially hidden from the others on the common, were Kari and Bruth, who had just been initiated as adults the past year. Kari was a nice girl and my favorite because of her kindness. Bruth, like the other young men, ignored me (to my relief). I was about to ask my aunt why Bruth was offering Kari a rather sorry-looking bunch of flowers when I realized that Kari was looking at Bruth's face, not the flowers. Bruth himself looked as if someone had just struck him in the head with a mallet. Beside me, my aunt said in a low, dreamy voice: "You would not believe it, my Jo, but once many young men looked at me like that." I didn't really understand what was going on, but since I thought that my aunt was a thoroughly impressive woman, I promptly replied, "I believe it".

My aunt laughed at that. She cupped my chin in her warm leathery hand and gave a throaty laugh that was as much a caress as the touch of her hand on my face. I still remember my aunt's laugh; I remember how much I loved to make her laugh, and how much I loved her.

II. The Red Cloaks

Since I was still quite young, and also because our village was off the main roads, it was some time before I realized that we lived in

a conquered land. The villagers of Derik's Leap were of the Kheldon tribe, one of the greatest tribes of the kingdom of Sartar, whose councils were already beginning to be dominated by the Vingan warrior Kallyr. The Kingdom of Sartar was more properly a principality, and was named after the hero who had founded it. He had unified the tribes who inhabited the central portion of Dragon Pass, and built the capital city of Boldhome to fulfill ancient prophecies.

To the northwest of Sartar lay the lands dominated by the Lunar Empire, an immensely powerful nation ruled by a sorcerer-king whose mother is their goddess and founder. That goddess is the Red Moon that can be seen in the night sky and whose light brings madness. In her honor, the favored color of the empire is red; in its many hues, this color marks their art, their architecture and their armies. In seeking a place for herself in the world, the Red Goddess made alliance with the forces of Chaos and set herself side by side with the enemies of Life, and twisted the Great Compromise that binds the world together. In return, the Red Moon Goddess gained terrible powers that enabled her to force a place for herself in the world of Time, despite the opposition of the gods. Her followers used these powers to enslave the lands illuminated by her spreading light.

In 1602, the year that I came to live with my aunt, an eighty-year period of intrigue and proxy wars between the Kingdom of Sartar and the Lunar Empire came to an end with the defeat of the Sartarite armies and the sack of Boldhome by the Imperial legions. Salinarg, Prince of Sartar, and all his family were slain. Those men and women of power who survived the fall of Boldhome fled into exile to avoid execution or slavery. Behind them, the people of Sartar were left to face the reality of conquest, to find their feet and somehow deal with the wounds that war had dealt them. And they were left to feel the cold, hard grip of the tax collectors.

Since the battles had been fought to the north and west, a stranger might think that the village of Derik's Leap had not felt the hand of the war lately past. No buildings were burned, no bodies littered its streets or clogged its well. It was only after a closer look that one noticed the fields being allowed to lie fallow, the homes boarded and shuttered, the scarcity of men and women of fighting age. War had not burned our village, or crushed it; it had merely bled Derik's Leap white and left it gasping.

When the Imperial tax collectors first came to the village, up the track from the Swenstown road that Prince Saronil built, they did not loot or enslave as sometimes happened elsewhere. They just looked at things. Everything. Every house, horse, barn, bull, shed, sheep, pen, pig, gourd, goat, spade and spear in the village; right down to the nails in the door of the tavern. And then they wrote it all down. When I asked my aunt what the men in the red cloaks were doing with the quills and the parchment, she said "They tally up our worth so that they will know what to tax us." I then asked if being taxed was like being beaten. She gave a dry laugh at that and said, "No, though some might say that it feels like it." She went on to tell me that taxes were not good or bad by themselves, but that how much was taken from people compared to what they had and how taxes were used was what mattered. "Roads and bridges do not grow by themselves, Joram, nor are they built by well wishing or good intentions. They are built by those who govern. We will be governed by the Empire now, like it or not. The Emperor can build many things with our taxes: roads, wells, bridges, and buildings; or he can build armies." As Myara spoke this last, she turned and looked at the soldiers who had accompanied the tax collectors. Twenty warriors in bright bronze and red wool; twenty men and women who always seemed to have weapons in their hands, and who watched everyone, even the children.

I have said that the tax collectors looked at everything and made their strange markings; but it was not quite everything. They never saw Boltar or his belongings, nor did anyone speak of him. I could find no trace of the old warrior when I sought to ask him questions about the soldiers, and I did not see him again until the noon-day sun was winking off of their armor as they topped the low hill to the south. Boltar was standing on the rise above the village common, arms folded, with a cold, grey cast to his features that frightened me. It frightened my aunt also, I think, because she touched his arm and looked a question at him. He turned to her and shook his head, saying "No, not yet. I have a promise to keep. Don't I, lad," he said, as he rumbled my hair with a gentle hand and looked a last time at the lunar troops disappearing over the hills in the distance. He turned and picked up his pack, his swords and his armor, and went back to our house. My aunt followed slowly, deep in thought, but I was close on his heels, almost skipping with excitement, for Boltar had allowed me to carry his helm. I thrilled to the touch of the bright, cold iron, and traced the runes of Death and Truth that are the mark of the god Humakt, Lord of Swords and War.

III. The People of Darkness

I learned the language of Trolls (or Uz, as they call themselves) at an early age, and it has served me well in the years since. I learned their speech partly because Boltar and Myara thought it would be a smart thing to do, but mainly because I wanted to know something my father had known, so that I could share something with him, if only in a distant sort of way, and build a place for him in my memories. I also wanted to know some kind of secret the other children my age did not. It can be hard being a stranger among other children, especially in a small village. Because I was a stranger, with an odd manner of speech and an odd lack of memory, I was a bit of an outcast among the other children.

The first time I ever met a troll, I had just been thoroughly thrashed by an older and larger boy. We had fought in the Grove, beneath the branches of the crowding walnut trees, where we often played our games and fought our fights. I know, walnuts trees don't grow in groves; their roots sweat a poison that keeps other trees at a distance. The trees in the Grove did, however, growing close together almost like pines so that their branches interwove to form a roof that kept a cool, dim twilight even on the hottest, brightest days of Fire Season. At the time I did not wonder why this was so, just as I did not wonder why people did not enter the Grove after they became adults unless they were sworn to the Goddess. I had washed my bruises and face in the cold spring that flowed from a split rock in the Grove, and then walked home. I entered the long shed behind my aunt's house the back way, under the loose board next to the chimney, and was walking towards the back door when I saw the troll. He was sitting with his back against the wall of our house, his head pillowed by a heavy, grey cloak, and he was laughing. He sat across from Boltar, who was putting an edge on my aunt's kitchen knives. His shoulders were as broad and muscular as those of a bull; his teeth were long and sharp, and seemed to gleam in the shadows.

While I was admiring the troll's dog teeth, he and Boltar noticed me. As Boltar quirked an eyebrow at me, the troll motioned me forward, rumbling, "Come closer, small bite, and let me measure your growth against my sword." Reassured by Boltar's ease with the man of darkness, I trotted the dozen paces to my teacher's knee before I realized the troll spoke as if he had seen me before. As indeed he had. So I met Kak Boneslitter, born in the Troll Woods

that nestle against the spine of the Storm Mountains, to the south of Sartar. Kak, like Boltar, was a follower of Humakt. It was long before I learned how unusual such a thing was amongst the Uz; most trolls take Zorak Zoran as their wargod, and that Bloodstained God of slaughter and hate is Humakt's deadly foe.

I sat by Boltar and listened to them talk, the old man with his quick, sure fingers, and the hulking troll with scarred arms and a laugh like thunder. As they spoke, I learned that Kak had been my father's friend, had indeed been pupils with him under Boltar's tutelage in a temple in Nochet, the largest city in the world. Kak told me how hard Boltar would pummel a student who was lazy or inattentive (I myself can attest to the truth of this), and how my father Danu had taught him the use of the bow. He had in turn taught my sire the speech and songs of the Children of Kyger Litor, the mother goddess of all the troll races. As dusk turned into evening, Boltar began to stretch and yawn, but Kak seemed to become more alert and a bit restless. When Boltar stood up, I knew it was time for bed, so I gathered my courage, stepped forward half a pace, and begged a favor of my father's friend. "Swordsman, I beg of you a gift, the same gift you gave my father. Will you teach me the speech of your people?" Both warriors fell silent, and when Boltar laid his hand on my shoulder I could feel that he was pleased with me. Kak bent his head and looked me in the eyes, and then he did a strange thing. He placed the knuckles of his right hand against my forehead and said, "In memory of my sword-brother, I will teach you what I taught him, and I swear this, son of Miranna, that I will stand before the throne of my queen and speak for you in an uncle's place, that she will know your history, your name, and your face."

In this way, I gained another teacher and friend, and the people of Derik's Leap gained a potent guardian while he was about (though most would have had a seizure had they learned of him then). Aunt Myara also approved of these lessons, and apparently of Kak as well; she treated him much as she would any man of our village who was a proven warrior. For his part, Kak showed my aunt the same wary respect and obedience he would have given a woman of power among his own people. Since my aunt was the center of my life, this seemed only right and proper; it was not until years afterward that I would realize how strange this relationship was, at least among humans.

The second time I met any trolls was a year or so afterwards, in 1605. There had been news of war in Kethaela. The Empire sought to gain an outlet to the Homeward Ocean, and so made war upon our neighbors to the south. We did not know exactly how the war was going, as there were wild rumors of both victory and defeat. Some said that the eastern prong of the invasion, into the hills of Heortland, was a glorious success. Others said that the main thrust into Esrolia had failed due to the tremendous magics of the Pharaoh, God-King of the Holy Country: that mountains had pulled themselves out of the ground to bar the advance of the Lunar army.

Our lives went on while we awaited news of the war. The harvest had been good that year, and after getting the crops in most of the able-bodied adults went west to help the next village over with their harvest, as they had suffered more from the war than we. There were only a handful of grown-ups in the village when a troll warband topped the tallest of the three hills to the south and came down through the pastures towards the Grove.

The tanner's wife saw them first and raised the alarm; everyone in the village grabbed what they could and ran to the Women's House. The Women's House, like the Men's House across the street, was sturdily built with an eye towards defense, but was a bit smaller and had one less door to defend. It also happened to be where my aunt was tending two women of the village, who in any case were too ill or pregnant to escape any trolls interested in catching them. Within minutes everyone left in the village was inside the Women's Hall, gabbling like a flock of geese and trying to make sense out of what seemed to be a nightmare come true.

It took even my aunt several minutes to bring order to that frightened mob. Finally, everyone calmed down long enough for Myara to get a full telling of what Elnor had seen. The tale seemed to both daunt and puzzle my Aunt. "Seven trolls, and two of them the giant warrior breed? What about the lesser trolls, the stunted ones who are their slaves? None at all? Elnor, are you sure? What colors did you see, what armor do they wear?". The answers just seemed to puzzle my aunt more and more until finally she slammed the butt of her staff against the flagstones and shouted, "Enough! None of this makes sense, least of all that we have not been attacked here, nor can we hear the livestock being killed nor anyone breaking into the houses around us. There must be a reason! I am going out; watch the

doors, but no shooting at anything that you are not sure is an enemy. Joram, stay here."

That was the first time I ever disobeyed a direct order from my aunt. When Myara turned and strode out the door, I darted to the table and grabbed her pack, then squeezed through the door before it could be bolted shut. When my aunt heard my feet pattering after her, she spun about, ready to blister me with words or her hand. But she stopped at the look on my face. Behind her, what I had thought was a shadow moved and stood up. A troll had been waiting in the shade under the white oak by the well, and now strode forward with one hand grasping a black spear and the other held open, palm outward, as a sign of peace.

This troll woman was imposing enough to make any warrior of our village think twice about crossing her: she towered inches over six feet, and was robed and cowed in an inky black fabric that seemed to drink light. She stopped 20 paces from us and pulled her robes aside to show black runes on a bronze breast plate, the runes of Argan Argar, a troll god greatly revered among the trolls of Kethaela. Before Time began, he won a great victory there and drove back the forces of Chaos. He founded the Kingdom of Night, championing both the Peoples of the Earth and of Darkness, and the Earth Mother bore him a child. This sets Argan Argar apart from his kin, since Darkness and Earth are traditional foes. Kak had taught me that Argan Argar's followers served as ambassadors and merchants among his people, as well as warriors.

The troll nodded to my aunt and spoke words that bore the intonations of ritual. "In the name of the One who has come and gone, I ask a Mother's aid for those who serve her Son."

Myara started at these words; they obviously meant much to her, although nothing to me. I had no interest in the ways of the Earth Mother or even her son the Farmer, as the ways of Humakt had called to me for as long as I could remember. After a moment, she spoke in return: "What aid would you have of me, and with what will you balance the scales?"

"Healing, and my heart itself will balance the scales."

My aunt gave me an odd look, and then nodded to the troll, whose name was Azzhka. "Lead then," she said, and motioned me to fol-

low them. As we followed our guide across the village common towards the Grove, I heard my aunt wonder aloud, "Why did I fill my pack this morning, and what made you follow me and bring it with you, when you have never disobeyed me before?" I was thinking much the same thing, and wondering if I wasn't more than just a little touched in the head.

As we neared the Grove, I slowed in amazement at what awaited us in the shadows beneath the trees. It is one thing to hear legends told around a fire at night; it is another thing entirely to see them walking the green earth in the light of day. There were six more trolls waiting for us in the Grove: two wounded or ill lying on spread cloaks, two tending to them, and two more on guard. The two standing guard were enough to make anyone stare; they were great trolls, Uzdo, giant warrior slaves looming more than 8 feet high and wide enough to fill a barn door. Each bore notched greatswords, and were clad in nicked and dented bronze plate armor, either suit worth more than enough to buy every head of livestock our village possessed. I was startled to see that the two tending the wounded trolls were very young, little older than myself, and I began to realize how wrong all of this was: a group of trolls traveling cross-country in broad daylight, obviously wealthy but stiff with wounds and fatigue. Perhaps strangest of all was the absence of any enlo, or trollkin; they are the fruit of a curse out of antiquity, and are weak and puny compared to the rest of their kin. There should have been at least 2 trollkin guards or servants for every troll we saw, and yet there were none at all.

The two wounded trolls were the highest in rank. One was a male who wore a chainmail hauberk that seemed rent in half a dozen places, and who was so weak from his wounds that he could barely grate out a curse on seeing my aunt, though from his few words I understood that he was refusing the help of any "earth witch." Myara ignored him and went immediately to his companion, who was not only grievously wounded but also feverish. By her clothing and ornaments she was a mother of her clan, a woman to be reckoned with among her people. All of the other trolls wore badges that marked them as her kinsmen (and therefore her subordinates, as troll society is matriarchal, with the mothers and grandmothers holding the positions of authority among the clans). As my aunt examined the troll her face went pale and lost all expression. A cursory look at the others revealed their wounds to be relatively minor. It was the troll dying at her feet that worried her and, frankly, terrified me. If she was to die in my aunt's care, a blood feud against the

village was the least that could be expected. Not to mention the fact that if these trolls even suspected that we had no warriors nearby, there was no way we could keep the two great trolls from breaking in the door of the Women's House. That brought to mind what I had learned from Kak about the old wives' tales about trolls, that they are not just stories, but the truth: a troll can and will eat anything that will fit between its jaws.

Myara looked at the blood staining her hands, and then into Azzhka's eyes. "What I can do, I will do," she said, "but nothing is certain." Azzhka took her mother's hand in her own, and nodded. "Nothing is certain." My aunt bade the trolls to lay both of the wounded on bare ground, so that their flesh touched the earth, and then for each of the other trolls to lay a bare palm flat against the ground as well. At a nod from Azzhka they obeyed, the male snarling curses until he touched the ground with an out-flung hand. He jerked then, and fell unconscious, out like a blown candle flame.

Once he was unconscious, my aunt beckoned to me. I went to her side, kicking the leather off of my feet when I saw that she was doing the same. She smiled at me and placed her right hand on my head, raised her staff in her left hand, and began a low chant that gradually changed to a song. I did not understand the words, but it sounded like one of the songs sung in Sea Season after the seeds have been sown; a song to draw the gift of life from the living earth and into the waiting crops and cattle. Her voice rose to fill the ending of the song, but it sounded different somehow, with a questioning note to it. Then something warm struck the soles of my feet; the world twisted, and I was in another Place.

I was still in the Grove, but everything had changed. The sky was grey and the Sun very pale; all the light seemed to come from the trees and the ground it self, green and gold pulsing like a heart beating. And the Grove was much more crowded than before. There were giants guarding the Grove; all of twisted rock and thick roots, four of them at each point of the compass. They frightened me, but their attention was for the trolls that they surrounded, Dark enemies of the Earth. There were also more trolls in the group before us than I remembered, a dozen or more, who clustered about the troll matron whom they all resembled in some way. They seemed pale shadows of real trolls, and they smelled of fear as they attempted to aid their descendant, whom I saw bled from her spirit as well as her body. I realized that the trolls had more to fear than we did; when they

found our village, they had instinctively sought the darkest, most shadowed place in sight, which was the thick grove of walnut trees. They could not know that they were placing themselves in the hand of the Goddess Herself.

As I thought this, I was shocked to see that I had attracted the attention of the shadowy trolls. First one then the others turned their faces towards me, and then one who I sensed was the greatest of them spoke to me in an echoing whisper: "We know and remember thee, Black Queen's son." Before I could say or do anything the pulsing lights that flowed from the ground into the trees flared into bright life; I felt something flow out of me, and then I fainted.

When I awakened I was on my hands and knees, trembling like a leaf. My aunt was down on one knee, leaning heavily on her staff, and I was shocked to see that her hair had turned completely white. I ran to her and took her arm; she shook with fatigue as I helped her to her feet, but her eyes glittered in triumph. I followed her gaze to the trolls stumbling forward to touch their mother in wonder and relief. Her eyes were open, and although she was still obviously weak, her wounds had been healed. The others had been healed also, even the ill-mannered male, although he did not regain consciousness until after the trolls left our village.

My aunt waited until the trolls had quieted, then spoke: "You must rest here until your Enemy sets. Eat nothing save those nuts which lie on the ground, drink nothing save the water of the spring, lest the Goddess take back her gift of life."

With help from Azzhka and one of the younger trolls, the troll mother raised a hand and spoke. "It shall be as you say: the Earth Mother speaks through thy mouth, and we as her guests will obey. Take this, with my thanks, though it cannot repay my debt to you."

As she said this, the troll pulled from around her bull neck a necklace of heavy plates; it was only when my aunt nearly dropped it that I realized it was gold! Real gold, more of that precious metal than our village would normally see in a decade. I was fascinated with it.

After a moment, Azzhka spoke as well. "I swore to balance the scales with my heart itself; take this then, in return for the gift you have given me." As she spoke, she took from her own neck an amulet

strung on a cord of woven hair, a medallion of worn bronze in the form of two sea serpents encircling a small piece of grey crystal. If the gold necklace had startled my aunt this seemed to stun her, though it completely mystified me. After all, bronze we see every day; this seemed to me to be no more than a good luck charm that any warrior might have, with the sea serpents its only interesting feature. I knew nothing of magic then, but I would learn better. My aunt placed the amulet in her bodice and I promptly forgot about it.

After speaking briefly with Azzhka, Aunt Myara and I returned to the village and left the trolls to their rest. My aunt spent a hectic half hour calming everyone and explaining the presence of our strange guests: they were fugitives from a battle in Heortland, where the war was going very badly indeed for the Emperor's enemies. His general there was Fazzur Wideread, a Tarshite warlord of some repute who was proving to be unbeatable. This tale was repeated when the men and women of fighting age returned that evening. The village headman, Kirnan Two Spear, was more than ready for a fight until Myara told him that the trolls were in the hand of the Goddess, and if they meant us ill She would know it and deal with the problem Herself. While Kirnan mulled this over like an over-protective husband, Myara told him that he had other things to worry about, such as how to exchange the gold necklace for the goods our village needed, without the Lunar tax collectors finding out. By the time the evening meal was finished, the trolls had vanished into the night.

My aunt never recovered from the miracle in the Grove that day. It was as if she had sacrificed not just a moment's strength, but part of her life itself in order to heal those trolls and, by extension, prevent any blood vengeance from being taken upon the people of our village. Although her reputation grew immensely after that day she became somewhat of a recluse, and grew to resemble the image of the Crone that adorned the stone altar of the Grandmother in the Grove. I complained bitterly of this, until she stopped me. "For all things there is a cost, Joram," she said after my tearful outburst. "Some do not think so, but make no mistake, there is always a price, and it must be paid. For what I asked, and for what I gained, I am content with the price I paid. It would be easier for me, child, if you could be content also." For her peace of mind, I closed my mouth and kept it shut. I feared that I would have her with me for too short a time as it was, and did not want to do anything to make her unhappy.

IV. The God of Endings

*Hear my prayer, O Humakt
And mold thou my spirit,
As does a smith a sword in a forge.
Let me show Courage with Honor;
Temper Justice with Mercy;
Balance Privilege with the weight of Duty;
Guide Power with the hand of Conscience.
And let me fail you not, before Death or after.*

I chose to follow the way of Humakt for a number of reasons: to be like my father and follow in his footsteps, and to be like Boltar, whom I have always admired. But most of all, it was because I wanted to serve a purpose, to be more than just a warrior who kills for this chieftain with a grudge or that prince with his crown. Now, make no mistake, to be Humakti is to be a killer. Humakt is the Lord of Swords, and a sword is just a tool whose only use is to kill other people; you cannot hunt deer or chop firewood with one. But those who are Humakti do not swear themselves just to Death, but to Truth as well. And Truth does not change from place to place, or because this rich man has ten cows and that old woman has one. Anyone who swears themselves to Humakt, swears themselves to the defense of Truth, and to the defense of Justice, which is Truth's flickering shadow. To seek Truth, to defend the cause of the Just, be they man or woman, king or crofter; for these reasons, I am willing to kill and to die.

Boltar was a Sword of Humakt; this meant that he was Humakt's eyes and hands in the world. It also meant that I could not have asked for a better teacher in the ways of weapons and war. When I was a child his lessons were stories, tales of what he had seen and done in a long life on the warrior's path, each with their own point. As I grew older they became more formal in content and structure. I learned my letters, both those of Sartar and the Tradetalk of merchants; I would have learned the script of the men of darkness, but neither Boltar, Kak, nor even my Aunt Myara knew it. Heraldry and history, battles and wars, tactics and strategy, the laws of my people and the strictures of the cult of Humakt, all filled my waking hours whenever Boltar pitched his sleeping roll in our shed. And he taught me how to fight with the swords that are the symbol of Humakt. I learned how to use the dagger of the common man and the shortsword of the soldier, the rapier of the Esrolian gentleman

and the broadsword of the hill thane; and I learned the use of the greatsword. The lighter highland sword is faster than the two-handed blades of the lowlanders, but still heavy enough to shear through the best armor; in the hands of a master, it is a truly devastating weapon. I had a natural aptitude for all swords, but I excelled with the greatsword. Boltar was more than content with this odd preference of mine, and allowed me to spar with his own sword, rather than my practice blades of stone-weighted wood.

In this, as in many things, Boltar stood in an uncle's place for me. Because of his friendship with my father Danu, Boltar considered me his responsibility, and although my father had been slain a year before I came to live with my aunt, Boltar acted as if I had been formally entrusted to his care. He never shirked a responsibility, nor failed a trust. I hoped that the same would be said of me when I had grown, and I have not failed that wish yet.

V. The Wolf People

In 1607, two years after the failed invasion of Esrolia, war came again to Sartar. A long-standing feud between two tribes, the Telmori and the Maboder, came to a head.

The Telmori are the wolf-people, primitives who hold the wolves of the forest to be their brethren. They are fanatically loyal to the Sartar royal family, as the only peace they have known has been when the royal house was strong. Despite what many people say, they are more than a band of Stone Age savages with well-trained pets. The bond between a tribesman and his wolf brother goes deeper than training or even common interest: it is a tie of blood and soul that lasts beyond the grave.

The Maboder were neighbors of the Telmori, one of the newer tribes of the kingdom, having joined in the time of King Tarkalor. Under their old queen Mirestranna their border with the Telmori had been a fence of swords, and the wolf people had raided the herds of other tribes. Upon the death of the queen and her children in a fire in 1601, her younger brother Kathelranda took the throne, defying the tradition that a Daughter of Mabodh must sit upon the Black Oak Throne. Kathelranda broke tradition in other ways as well, adopting a conciliatory stance towards the Lunars and openly receiving their priests in his hall. When war came, Kathelranda kept the Maboder spear levy within their own borders, breaking the sacred compact that bound the tribes to the royal house and Prince Salinarg. Some

say this breach weakened Sartar as a whole, and enabled the magic of the Red Moon to overwhelm the kingdom. This shamed many of the tribe's best fighters, most of whom left rather than serve Kathelranda. Many were later killed in the incessant feuds and border skirmishes that plagued Sartar after the death of the Prince.

The Telmori neither forgave nor forgot this treachery. Within a few years they had recovered enough from the conquest of Sartar to act, and their sacred werewolves led an attack that destroyed the core of the Maboder tribe. Queenshall was left open to the wind and rain, and the Black Oak Throne was stained with the traitor's blood. The Lunar Empire could not afford to allow the destruction of an ally go unpunished; a Lunar officer named James Hostralos led a mixed force of Lunar peltasts and Orlanthi tribesmen in a whirlwind campaign that brought the elusive Telmori to bay and battered them into submission. James gained the battle name of Wulf for his deeds, and was granted the title of Duke and the best of the old Maboder lands. Rather than scatter the remaining members of the clans among other tribes (as the Lunars had done with others in the past), the Lunars allowed them to remain on their ancestral lands with James as their Duke and protector. The Telmori lost lands and hostages, and were forced to outlaw a number of their best warriors.

When he told me this story, I noticed that Boltar paid special attention to an account of James Hostralos's personal deeds of valor against the Telmori. When he had finished, he nodded once and muttered to himself: "The sword has come south." But these battles, while interesting, were ancient history to the boy that I was.

VI. The Scarred Man

It may sound strange, but although I lived within 20 miles of Swenstown for eight years, I visited that city only once, on the occasion of my dedication to Humakt. At the end of the year 1609, I made the journey to Swenstown with Boltar. My journey began with a pleasant surprise: my aunt gave me a broadsword as my Oath gift. Not just any sword, but her husband's, that would have gone to the eldest of their children, had any lived. It was a princely gift, given from the heart; it stopped the words in my mouth and brought tears to my eyes. I gave Myara a kiss and a tight hug; she told me to stop my nonsense and get moving, or Boltar would leave me behind. I laughed and ducked my head, and left. She watched us, from the rise there above the common, until we topped the hill to the south.

I will not bore you with the tale of that journey and of my testing in the courtyard of Humakt's temple. It was so ordinary as to be meaningless to anyone but me, but I remember everything quite clearly and will until I join my lord Humakt. I did well in the testing of my skills, better than many, and received a grin from Boltar in congratulations. Then I went with the others into the cool wide hall before the altar and took my Oath to Humakt, binding myself to His service. Afterwards, we filed out into the courtyard with our bright swords and our new, hard-edged pride to be fussed over by our families. Boltar didn't do much fussing; he just said that I reminded him of my father, and bought me my first draft of ale as a warrior.

When Boltar went to the next table to talk to a friend of his I stayed to finish my ale, and fell to talking with a young woman of the Aranwyth who had taken Oath with me. Her name was Belquar, and she was very easy to talk with. We were getting along so well that it was several minutes before we realized that we were no longer alone. A young man, several years older than us, had come up and set two packs on the end of our table. We were as thin-skinned as most new men and women are, ready to take offense at the intrusion, but he soothed our feathers with an infectious grin and congratulated us on our Oathing. He was not mocking or condescending, and soon we found ourselves deep in conversation. He and a friend were headed to Boldhome and had stopped here only because of the occasion.

We spoke for what seemed only a short time when I realized that Boltar and his friend were finishing their meal. The two older men stood up and clasped arms. "A clean wind behind you and a straight path before you," said Boltar. "And to you, lord. I will see that she gets your message," was the other man's reply. He turned and, nodding to us, said, "Time to go, Ar." Our new companion tossed one of the packs to his friend, and the two set off in the direction of the West Gate after exchanging farewells with us.

Bel and I fell to talking about what a pleasant fellow this Ar was, and what Boldhome must be like, and how long it would take to get there. Suddenly, we realized that we were walking down the road behind him and his companion. The temple was already a hundred paces behind us, and both men were turning to see if we carried a last-minute message from Boltar. We just stood there gaping like a couple of fish. It was Ar who first realized what had

happened. He gave us a cheerful laugh and asked, "Well? Are you coming to Boldhome with us? Or do you just enjoy kicking my shadow?" We gave them a mumbled farewell and fled back up the street, our faces hotter than the door of a furnace. Boltar gave us an odd look but said nothing, and Bel and I were grateful for his silence. I felt like a fool then, but it seems only fitting that we should have begun to follow him as soon as we were old enough to carry our swords.

The next morning, Boltar sent me to the market to purchase a number of things requested by my aunt, while he made preparations for our departure. The list was simple enough to fill: herbs and spices, needles and thread, common enough for a townsman, but rather rare back in the hills. I had just finished when my eyes were drawn to an old Telmori whose kinsmen were trading some very fine furs that day. He looked to be drunk or dozing, but what drew my eyes was his scar. Now, everyone gets scars or tattoos, but not like this one. It ran from his right eye down his cheek and under his ear, across his neck and shoulder, then down his ribs to his pelvis. It looked like a sword scar, but what sword stroke would mark a man like a knife laid against wood turned on a lathe? I decided I must be mistaken at its being caused by a sword, and hurried back to the temple. I arrived just as Boltar was laying out his Oath gift to me: a hauberk of bronze scale armor! It was beautiful, and the sight of it drove the memory of the scarred man clean out of my head. Our journey home was uneventful and, with nothing to recall the old Telmori to mind, I forgot about him.

We were pleasantly surprised to find Kak bunking in our shed on our return home: a Goldentongue trader had dropped him off on his way to Moonbroth, and he had accepted my aunt's offer of hospitality until he could get about again. He was recovering from a fight with a Death Lord of Zorak Zoran, and his left arm and leg were useless for a time. The followers of that god can enchant their weapons so that the wounds dealt with them can only be healed by time, not magic. I hung upon every word as he recounted to us the tale of that battle. As he spoke, he showed us the trophies of his duel: a flanged mace of cold-hammered lead and a hoplite shield faced with a death rune. The mace would hang in the Hall of Memory in the temple in Swenstown, but the shield he gave to me as an Oath gift. I was more pleased than I could say with the gift, though he seemed to sense my feelings.

The Season of Storms wore away to the end of the year and the start of the Sacred Time ceremonies. Although of course I had participated in these ceremonies before, this was the first time I would do so as an adult. It felt different, somehow, as if I sensed something which had been hidden to me before. Everyone has their place in the ceremony; Boltar's was to the north, facing outward, as befitted a Champion of the North Wind; mine was in the center with the other new-born adults, as was Kak's as an invalid. Our task was to keep the bonfire burning, and to support Myara and Kirnan as they worked the ritual that would renew our part in the Great Compromise which holds the world together.

It was then, just as the ceremony began, that Telmori renegades attacked, striking for food and loot. Outlaws had tried such before, and even if they had not, the ritual required us to summon and fight evil before we could recreate the world. Thus, we were prepared, but we did not know that this was only a feint to draw attention away from a more deadly attack. Their feint cost them dear, for they ran headlong into Boltar. He had felt them coming, and instead of surprising a handful of bewildered villagers the Telmori were met by a volley of spears and the deadly whirlwind of iron that is a Sword of Humakt aglow with the power of his god. The outlaws broke and ran before they could do more than fire the barn that served as a stable for the village inn. But they did succeed in one thing; drawn by the sounds of combat and the need to fight a growing fire, the rest of the village moved north away from the ritual circle. Even the new adults in the center of the circle rushed to put out the fire, leaving only a few of us behind: Kirnan and Myara because their lives were bound to the circle lest the ceremony be ruined; the children, the old, and the sick because they would be more hindrance than help, and me. For the first time, I felt the icy grip of my god's gift, and it rooted me to the spot. 'Death!' it whispered. 'Death comes from behind you.' 'From the South!' I shouted, and turned to face the enemies who had silently moved up through the gap left by the other villagers.

The Telmori strode forward into the torchlight, two savage old men paced by grey wolves as big as bull calves. They appeared to be brothers, one with the plumed spear of a warrior, the other with the bone necklace of a shaman. The latter was the scarred man I had seen in Swenstown, and he flashed me a knife-edged smile at my surprise. Warrior and wolf glided forward, and Kirnan Two Spear leapt to meet them. Kirnan had lost all of his children in the

war, and I think only his sense of duty had kept him alive since. For the first and last time in my life I heard him laugh, as a hard-thrown spear took the wolf in the throat and dropped it. Before Kirnan could shift his other spear to a 2-handed grip his foe thrust, and I winced as I saw the spear point come out our thane's back. But Kirnan wanted to die. Such people can be as dangerous as any berserker: he gripped his killer's hand, pinning it to the spear, and forced himself up the shaft. His own blow struck the Telmori at the base of the throat, and both fell dead.

"A warrior's death", said the shaman, "The same as I will give to you, witch; that much you deserve."

"Oh no you won't, Terchak Helkos, not today," said my aunt, gently swinging her copper-shod staff.

"Oh yes, Myara, today. First you, then Bane's pup. I will have my revenge, and the bloodline of the traitor will be wiped from the face of the world."

He snarled and began to change, and I realized how someone could get a scar that flowed the length of his body from a single sword blow: he had not been a man when wounded. He was a werewolf, I knew that all Telmori were, but I had not thought of what that really meant. I did know that it had to have been a powerful enchantment indeed to allow a sword to scar a werewolf for life.

I know; I had let myself lose track of the other wolf; I had let myself become distracted when Terchak began to shift shape. The only thing that saved me was my new shield; a flicker from the corner of my eye was all the warning I had before the shaman's wolf brother was in under my sword. Jaws that could crush the shoulder blade of a bison clamped shut on my shield and twisted, snapping the worn straps that held it to my arm and sending me sprawling. The wolf lunged at me: burning eyes, hot breath, a thicket of teeth in a gaping mouth and...and the Night itself reared up and slammed the wolf to the ground. I had forgotten about Kak.

The Telmori had used an old raider's trick: attack from two directions at once, across the wind so that the livestock don't catch your scent. It had worked, but it had prevented them from catching the

scent of a troll where none should be. Kak had waited until the last moment, to stake his life and mine on one desperate leap, and won. With only one good arm and leg, he used surprise and his greater weight to pin the wolf to the ground for the seconds he needed to close his jaws on his foe's back behind the shoulders. I saw the terribly strong muscles in his neck and jaw bulge, and heard the snap as he broke the wolf in two. The werewolf felt his wolf brother die, and screamed in anguish.

When I had shouted my warning, I had unknowingly saved both my life and Kak's; Boltar had heard my voice behind him and turned to come to our aid, his feet winged with magic. He leapt into the circle with a sword in either hand, exactly two steps too late to save my aunt. Terchak leapt forward and, batting Myara's staff aside, sank his teeth into her shoulder. Before I could do more than cry out he had shaken her like a terrier shakes a rat and thrown her against the wall of the nearest house. When the werewolf turned to deal with Kak and I, he found Boltar in front of him, both swords agleam with the blued silver fire that is the touch of Humakt. The Telmori leapt at Boltar, seeming to flicker in the torchlight, but he was met by an overhand slash that knocked him to the ground and choked his snarl with blood. As Terchak rose to his feet he took a thrust in the chest from Boltar's shortsword, and I heard blood rattle in his lungs. He staggered backwards, coughing reddish foam, and growled, "Make an end, Humakti." Boltar's hard flat swing took the werewolf's head from his shoulders.

I staggered towards Myara's body, sobbing and telling myself that she was still alive, that there was still time to heal her, that it was not too late. The sight of the blood pulsing from her wound shocked me sick, but I set my hands on her shoulder and put every thought, every ounce of strength and will into the words and working of the first spell that every village child is taught: Healing. And it worked! The blood stopped flowing between my hands, and I felt the flesh knit itself back together, not completely, but surely enough for Boltar to finish, for a proper healer to complete, for my aunt to go on living.

"No, Joram", said Myara, her eyes on my face. "You know that Kirnan and I were linked to the circle for the village. With Kirnan dead and the circle broken my life must seal the breach, or our people will have no anchor for the coming year, and our village

will begin to die. You know this, dearling. The Goddess calls me, and I must obey."

I realized that I was holding my aunt's hand very tightly, straining to hear her voice as it faded, as her life fled. "There is a letter, among the things I have left you as my heir...not enough time. Promise me one thing, promise me you won't forget your people. They have no one else but you now."

"I promise," I stammered through my tears, though I didn't understand what she was talking about. I would have promised her anything. She smiled then, and said, "Farewell, child of my heart." And then she was gone.

VII. The Road of Kings

They laid my aunt to rest at the edge of the Grove. I knew that by the end of the season a seedling would break free of the grave and join the other trees in their guardianship of the Goddess's shrine.

That first day of Sea Season was full of bright sunshine and clear skies, but I'll always remember it as being rather dark; I was too scared, too lonely, too sorry for myself to see it any other way. I sat on the edge of the hill, looking out over the village for what I thought was the last time, my aunt's letter on my lap. She had left the house and its land to her successor as priestess, but she had given me a backpack full of warm clothing, a handful of silver, and the amulet gifted to her by Azzhka (which she said contained a great magic). The gifts, and her love, would see me a long way on the road I would travel. It was the letter that had me scared, for it pointed out the path I must walk and, in a very real way, contained my soul.

I'd had a family once, and a home; they were gone now. My mother had been Mirestranna, last queen of the Maboder; my father had been her consort and warchief, Danu QueensSword, called Bane by the Telmori. Before the Empire took Boldhome and Sartar my father had journeyed north and west, to Aggar, seeking the answer to a riddle posed in my mother's dreams. He had never returned, but Boltar said that Jomes Hostralos, conqueror of the Telmori and Duke of the best Maboder lands, carried my father's sword. In my father's absence, my uncle Kathelranda had joined with Lunar agents to murder my mother and siblings. I have no idea how I escaped; Kak and Boltar had found me wandering

miles from the fire, dirty and blank-faced. Until the Telmori attacked our village, they and Myara had thought me forgotten by my family's enemies. We knew better now, and I would have to leave before they attacked again. We would load up Boltar's mules and head east to Prax, to seek our fortunes in the city of Pavis. We would stop first at the oasis of Moonbroth, currently held by the Pol Joni tribe.

I had given my Oath to Humakt, and I knew that choice would shape me. But because I follow Humakt does not mean that I would be a mindless weapon, or an overbred animal that kills from instinct. I bear the mark of those whose blood I share and who have guided my footsteps: my long-lost parents, my Aunt Myara, Boltar, the men and women of our village, even Kak. They, and the events of my shattered childhood, had shaped me, and will continue to shape me until the day I die. But do not mistake me; I am no lump of clay that has been molded by another so that I can only point in one direction. I make my own decisions, and I am the one who must answer for them all, the good and the bad. If I strike a man down with my sword, I am the reason he bleeds and dies, not the sword with which I strike him. If there is one thing I have learned in a life of wandering and war, it is that there are no excuses, only reasons. And we had better have very good reasons for what we do, for we will answer for all of our actions, now or after death.

So I chose the path I would follow that day with Boltar, and Pavis was our goal. But what path should my life take, and what should be my goal? To spend my life running from my enemies would be cowardice; to spend it seeking only vengeance would be not only pointless, but irresponsible. By right of blood, my oldest daughter (should I live to father one) would be the rightful queen of the Maboder. Until then, I was responsible for the Children of Mabodh; the fact that the survivors did not know I lived did not lessen that burden so much as a feathersweight. I thought of the last words of my aunt's letter: "To keep your people from dying, you must walk the Road of Kings."

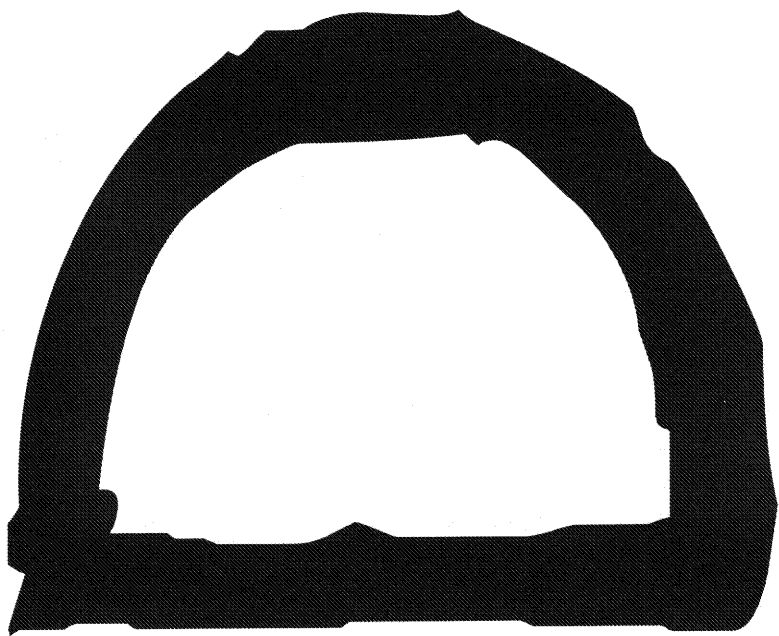
Simply being a warrior wasn't going to be enough. Before I could gather the remnants of my tribe together, I would have to become a Sword of Humakt and prove myself as a leader. Before my people could return to our lands, the grip of the Lunar Empire would have to be broken. Before my tribe could flourish, the other tribes

of Sartar, even the Telmori, must accept them. In order for my people to live again, I would have to walk the Road of Kings and find the heir to the throne and serve him or her well. For only by the favor of a king would my people find their place again.

I sat there stunned by the immensity of the task in front of me, until I realized that this was what I had always wanted. I had prayed as a child for my life to have purpose, for a great task to do, for a prize to win, and my prayers had been answered.

Served me right.

I took a deep breath and stood up. Turning to Boltar, I said, "How do I find the Road of Kings?" He smiled at me and said, "You have just set your foot upon it."



Short Myths

Glorantha is the place of myths. They are true, all of them that are told across the world. Stories mean different things to different people, of course, even if they tell the same story. Furthermore, mythology purports to convey secret and deep meanings beneath its entertaining exterior. It is known for its ambiguity as well, at least on the surface. There is a tolerance for that ambiguity in myth, where everything has multiple meanings. But we are all uncomfortable with that. Such ambiguity is inevitable and would be meaningless except that the myths of a people provide guidelines to understand the ambiguity from their own perspectives.

Each mythology in Glorantha defines a specific way to cope with this underlying ambiguity and find a reliable place to survive with, we hope, some degree of pleasure. They are self-contained and make sense of everything in the world, from their own perspective.

Here are some really brief versions of some of Glorantha's core myths. They are from different Mythic Ages to give some ideas of the cosmic conditions in those time. They have been selected to illustrate two mythic perspectives that are critical to understand the deepest underlying source of conflict in the Hero Wars.

How Men Got Useful

This is a story about the end of the Green Age. Every story about the Green Age is about that placid era ending. Other stories tell how mortals and gods became separated from each other at this time as another great disaster that ended innocence.

The Ten Tests of Murharzarm

Here is the core of the Celestial Pantheon's cosmic order. Its hierarchical orders should be compared with the alternative method, which is described in the following story.

Orlanth's Ring

This story encapsulates the essential Orlanthe version of cosmic order, community, and virtue. It shows how the barbarians should do things. It must be compared with the previous story.

How Orlanth Met Ernalda

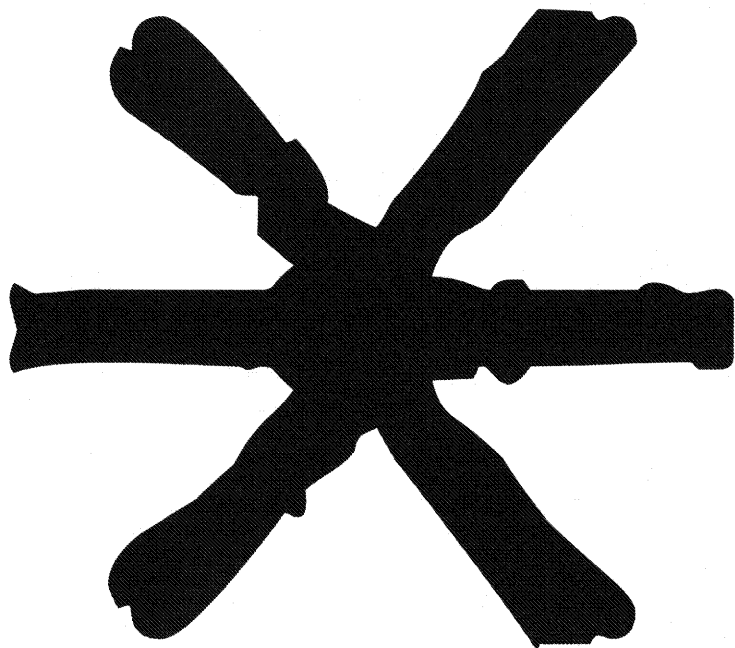
This is the love story of the two Orlanthi Great Gods, where brave Orlanth rescues his goddess from the oppressive rule of the Evil Emperor.

The Disintegration of Yelm

This is the other side of the previous story, showing that the Celestial Pantheon has a very different perspective about what Orlanth did.

The Lightbringer's Quest

This is a Darkness Age tale wherein Orlanth takes his household of fellow deities on a trip through the land of death. Deep within the Underworld lies reconciliation, and so Glorantha is saved from destruction and recreated.



How Men Got Useful

The Pot

One day the men wished to make something wonderful and great for their new nest mates. They went to Four-toe Songs, where the fire burns, and the Flyers went to the Tent of Light to seek ideas. They came back, and everyone discussed their ideas and decided what to do. They decided to make *Dadki*, the Great Pot. The painters made the outline upon the sacred wall, and everyone sang and danced for nights and days; then the painters made the interior, and everyone sang and danced for more nights and days until they brought forth the first pot into this world.

Dadki was perfectly round at the rim, and it was wide enough that ten men could lay upon it, each with his feet at the previous mans head. The interior was smooth and white, while the outside was course and brown, and decorated with patterns sacred to the gods. Four legs, each shaped like a guardian, held it upright.

The men then put it upon rollers, and with work songs and many ropes they dragged it to the women and proudly presented it to them. "This is for you to use," they said, "to carry your seeds and fruits in."

But the women laughed and said, "We already have our aprons to carry with." The men were hurt and confused by this at first, until Mastelos stepped forth.

"But you cannot store your seeds in your aprons, and then find it there when you come back later."

"That is right," they said, "but we do not need containers like that." And then they brought forth their own jars, which were made from mud and fire, and were small enough to carry. The men were astonished and asked how the women had sung such things. The women laughed again. "We don't sing," they said, "We dance!" And they showed the men how they took the scurf of their Grandmother and used it to make dishes and pots.

That was when Odotanus said that the women's way was an easier thing to do than their month of flying, painting, and dancing. He said he would never again do the silly thing the hard way, and most of the other men agreed with him. Only Mastelos resisted, and said that they could dance and sing it differently next time, but no one listened and he just got old and lonely, with only a couple of orphans to help him with his chores, so he went home.

The Harvest

One day the men saw the women getting barley for dinner. They were breaking it off with their hands. The men saw how they might help, and so they took out their knives and they went into the fields. They used their knives and grabbed a handful of the stalks, and cut them all off at once. The women were impressed, and the work was done quickly.

However, that night everyone heard the pitiful sound of someone weeping with great and terrible pain. When they went to see who it was, they found the goddess Pela crying.

"It is the knives," she said, "they are the things which hurt me. I will weep whenever I am cut that way." So after that, no one used knives to cut the grain.

Vesmortha one day was bearing the jaw of a sakkar that her husband used as a saw. She was marveling how the creature would later be resurrected, as everything was when it was dedicated to Hallo. Yet even now the jaw, in its transitory state, brought further change and creation to the world by helping to cut wood.

And from this, Hallo spoke to her. Vesmortha bent and tried to cut grass with the jaw. Though good for hard wood, the teeth only got stalks caught between them. Hallo spoke again. Vesmortha then set bits of obsidian blade into a curved handle. Then she took it back to her sisters.

"The shape is like the Moon," she said, "and as long as you use this shape to harvest our sister Pela, she will return just like the Moon does."

But the men were angry again, not knowing the secret information of women. And so they refused to help in the harvesting unless they could use their knives. And that was refused, of course, so some of the men took it as an opportunity not to work at all.

The Feast

One day the men said that they wished to make a great feast for the women. They went to their singing places and after a month of great effort, returned with many hares, deer, and other creatures to eat. The women were very happy, and after it was all gone they wanted to do it again.

"We will come back in a month," said the men, "and feast again."

The women were unhappy with waiting so long, and when the men were gone one of them said, "It is too bad that they do not ask us about these things." She was Verg (Sow), and she called her children all to her and they were cut up, cooked, and eaten in a great feast. The women had so much pig to eat that when the men came back with their hares, pheasants, and deer, none of the females were in a mood to eat.

"You have such difficult ways to do things," the women said.

The men, of course, were hurt and angry and went away to the woods with their feast, and shared it with the wild creatures and the homeless. They stayed out in the wilds for a while, and sang about Grandfather ViSarta. But after a while they came back to the camp.

The Huts

One day it grew cool. The men wanted to protect the people, so they conferred on what to do, took their tools, and went into the woods. There they chopped trees, collected vines, and gathered piles of brush. They dragged these back to their camps, and then they built the first huts that anyone had ever made. They were dark inside, so they built small fires inside for light and heat.

"That would probably be a good thing," said the women, "if we were assailed by evil gods, but we have these to keep us warm these days." And they showed the men that they had cloaks, and they had boots, and they had sleeves and leggings for when it got cold. The men were envious of these things because they really liked to move around freely if they could. The women would not share the secret, but agreed instead to make clothing for men if they wanted it, if the men would share the hut space. And they did.

But the men did not like being bested again. They were often just away from their huts, sulking, because they had found another thing they could not do. Some were so outraged that they swore they would never bother with women again, and took pleasure and company only with other men. They went to Eskodoth. But most of the men just sulked.

The Strangers

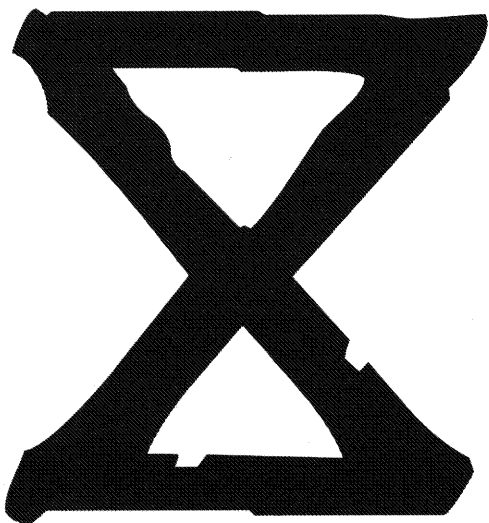
One day some strangers came to the camp. They were people, but they spoke a tongue no one had ever heard, and no one could make sense of it. They were treated the same way that newcomers were always treated. But those newcomers did not know anything about behaving, good manners, or hospitality.

The strangers were only curious at first, going into huts and taking little things. When no one responded to their rude manners they grew contemptuous. They showed that they had no respect. In the Women's Sacred Hut the strangers seized a pair of baskets and a pair of jars, a horn, and the Yernzil (goddess) rattles. The women were frightened and screamed, and in their tents the men heard it and grabbed their spears. They ran out and saw that the strangers were stealing things and manhandling the women. Then our men whooped and threatened the strangers with gestures and buffets. The strangers got angry and acted like they had finally found a behavior that they understood. They shouted back and made faces. Finally their leader seized a woman, and Protector smashed him with a stone club. There was a big fight with many cracked heads and broken legs, until at last the strangers ran away, crying.

And for a change, the men did not feel useless.

"Now *this*," said Protector to the women, "is something we can do!"

And with regrets, the women agreed.



The Ten Tests of Murharzarm

Murharzarm was appointed to be the first Emperor of Dara Happa by his father, the almighty Godfather, Yelm, Emperor of the Universe and Protector of the World, and Keeper and Source of all Justice.

Murharzarm established the Ten Cities, and all of the imperial customs of Dara Happa. He ruled from the moment of his appointment until the moment of his murder at the hands of the Rebel Gods.

Murharzarm was raised upon the Sacred Mountain, and learned all of the Lords' Arts at the court of his grandfather. He often went among the people and shared his knowledge and power with them.

One day a terrible creature, wet and slimy and stinking of foul things, came slithering into the land. This was a new thing, and it brought change to the land which the pure gods could not bear. They leapt into the air, as birds do when startled, and stayed there.

This frightened all the people, who had no such means of departing. They could see that the Pillar was now empty and they were terrified, as if they had been struck blind in a burning house. But one of them was without fear, and Murharzarm rushed forward and stood upon the Footstool to confront the serpent. The great cold monster lashed itself forward and sought to swallow Murharzarm, but the god propped its mouth open, then tore it in half. Half of it died then, and the other half wrapped itself around Murharzarm from his left foot to his chin, encircling his body seven times. She lifted her great head to stare at Murharzarm in the face. But the god was not some bird, to be paralyzed.

"We are not Ezelveztay," he said, "And so we need not fear Novelty, for it can be tamed by Justice and Wisdom." Then Murharzarm laid the monster into its bed, and gave her into the care of the Earth Lord.

Murharzarm was the first person to establish temples to Oslira, goddess of fertility; to Everina, goddess of rice; and to Lodril and his Ten Sons and Servants. He blessed them with the Shovel and the Bucket and they made irrigation ditches and fields for their crops. They thrived.

Yelm was so pleased with Murharzarm's work that the god declared that Murharzarm must, in secret, undergo Ten Tests of Empire, to

see if he was indeed worthy of wielding the greatest possible authority. No god told Murharzarm of this. When Murharzarm returned to his home his life was plagued by many simple problems and terrible disasters, all of which he overcame.

The tests, and their solutions, were:

1. The Hinds of Pelanda. Man-eating creatures threatened the outguards of the empire. Murharzarm lured them over a cliff into the Farkuros Pits, and fed them cattle. "I am the Protector," he said. This was posed by Shargash.

2. The Hungry. There were some people who were unfinished, and kept putting animals into their mouths to satiate their inner emptiness. Murharzarm taught them of *heart*, and filled them. "I am the Surplus," he said. This was posed by Verithurus.

3. The Tall Birds. A tribe had longer legs and necks than others, and claimed to be greater. Murharzarm gave others wings, which allowed them to go higher. The Tall Birds were humbled, and entered into the service of Murharzarm. "I am the Seer," he said. This was posed by Jethsarum.

4. The Sharing Problem. A father had gone away and left 38 *gazzam* to be divided among his three sons. Murharzarm added one of his own *gazzam*, divided the herd, and came away with his own animal and another. "I am the Solution." This was posed by Buserian.

5. The Remembering Problem. Three people quarreled over an old debt. Murharzarm judged it, and then invented token jars to record things for all time. "I am the Record." This was posed by Reladivus.

6. Judgement between Wives. A man was troubled by quarreling between his wives. Murharzarm ruled that henceforth a man must have only one wife, and that the punishment for bigamy was to have multiple wives. "I am the Judge." This was posed by Lodril.

7. The Raibanth Bridge. The mighty serpent had laid itself down across our great city and cut it into two parts. Residents from each side argued that their portion was the proper seat of the old city. Murharzarm built the great Bridge of Luxites across the Oslira. "I am the Bridge," he said. This was posed by the Ladareeshata, the Pillar God.

8. The Daughter's Share. A father and mother went away, and left their possessions to their two sons and one daughter. The daughter

received nothing, and complained to Murharzarm. Murharzarm invented marriage, and gave her to a great man. "I am the Patriarch." This was posed by Deumalos.

9. The Brightness Challenge. A sunflower garden had flowers facing two directions at once, and the grower wanted to know which ones to cut down. Murharzarm informed him. "The true face Truth. I am the Truth," he said. This was posed by Zayteneras.

After completing these nine of the Ten Tests, Murharzarm took himself to the Tower of Imperial Splendor and ascended the spiral staircase. Along the way were all of the imperial guardians who had given him the tests. As Murharzarm passed, each of them fell into line behind him. At the top they all gathered in a circle around Murharzarm. They opened the Footstool and showed Murharzarm the secret regalia of the Emperor. Murharzarm named each piece correctly, and was not harmed, and thus passed the Tenth Test. Yelm was pleased, and ordered the ceremony to continue.

At the pinnacle of the tower Murharzarm stood upon the golden Footstool. From the Ten Spirits he received the Imperial Regalia: He naturally had his own Loincloth of Morality, which covers all and protects the soul from chaffing; Sandals of Protection, which keep the pure from touching the impure; Vestments of Disclosure, which everyone can see; Girdle of Command, to bear the power of the center; Mantle of Sovereignty, surrounding all; High Crown of Dominion, which reaches to the sky; Low Crown of Rule, which encircles the world like a wall; Orb of Authority, which hovers overhead for protection; Scepter of Order, to direct the divine regard; and Eagle of Heaven, to see everything and bear his presence.

"I am the Emperor," he said. Then Murharzarm stood upon the Footstool, and named the directions and the quarters.

Thus did Murharzarm become the first Emperor of Dara Happa by the grace and blessing and direction of his father, the almighty Allfather, Yelm, Emperor of the Universe and Protector of the World, Keeper and Source of all Justice.

Then Murharzarm took a wife. She was a beautiful woman of noble lineage named Dareeshena. They had a household of fine sons and daughters. One son ruled over our magnificent city, Raibanth.

Murharzarm ruled for 40,000 years and throughout those many generations no one had any troubles; not with neighbors, children, foreigners, barbarians, or monsters during this whole time.

The Ten Cities

Here are the Ten Original Cities of Murharzarm, and their gods:

Yuthubars, the City of Spirit, where lived the Perfect Ones, who had been made by the hands and minds of the immortals, and who could do no wrong. They served Yelm himself, through the administration of Arraz the Servant. It stood high, in the far center.

Raibanth, the City of Emperors, in the center. It was the home of Murharzarm.

Abgammon, the City of Priests, in the near east. It was the home of Buserian.

Senthoros, the Looks Up city, in the far east. It was intended to be the home of Zayteneras.

Alkoth, the City of Strength, in the near south. It was the home of Shargash.

Nivorah, the City of Serenity, in the far south. It was the home of Reladivus.

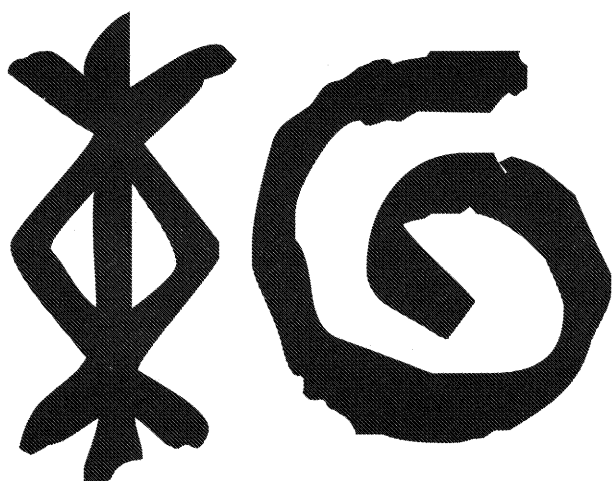
Hamados, the City of the Crown, in the near west. It was the home of Deumalos.

Akuturos, the City of Dirt, in the far west. It was the home of Lodril.

Verapur, the City of Raptors, in the near north. It was the home of Jethsarum.

Mernita, the City which Turns, in the far north. It was the home of Jernedeus.

All the cities together were called Dara Happa, and Murharzarm was the Emperor.



Orlanth's Ring

Everyone was fighting each other. The two rules of Umath were the only laws:

1. Violence is always an option.
2. No one can make you do anything.

Orlanth was displeased with this. He found Justice to be in his own breast, and he brought it forth and placed it in a torque about his neck.

Then Orlanth raised his banner and sent word to all the corners of the world, inviting every god and goddess to join with him and be honored in his tribe. He asked everyone, and promised them all their rightful place, as would be determined by their actions in the war.

He did not even know the names of some that came, but he welcomed them. They had all been together in the Prison of the Strange Gods. Some of them did not even know their own genealogy.

Orlanth welcomed them all. He said, "Solitude is for outlaws, holy women, and mad men. None of us can live alone. No one is more important than those with whom you live. I invite you to live with me."

"No, I can't agree with this," said Vadrus, a great troublemaker. "I have to be the ruler."

"Stop and listen to Orlanth," said Humakt, "Or I'll cut your head off again."

"Try it!" snarled Vadrus, and drew his pointed hammer, named Rammer, and stepped forward to meet his foe.

"Stop," commanded Orlanth. "The first thing for us to do is to agree to speak before we fight."

"Up yours," said Vadrus, and leapt at Humakt, who parried and began to fight.

"This is the old way," said Orlanth. "Peace among friends is maintained by speaking first. Come my friends, we will go to the speaking place, and leave all who would fight here."

So they traveled then, and they went to the Speaking Rock, which was a sage old mineral where many people would meet at different times.

"We will sit in a circle," he said, "And all who sit in this circle agree to listen to each other before acting. That is the first rule to keep peace among us."

He also said, "I shall create a sacred Ring by selecting the most suitable from among you." He spoke with them, conferring to learn each of their strengths and fitness for various tasks. However, his feast was interrupted when his brothers came crashing in.

"You can't do this," they all said. "We're your brothers, and we're the ones that you should give these magical gifts to. You already made a mistake with the Death Sword, and we won't let you do it again. We are your blood and your breath, and it would be unjust and against nature to not give them to us." Such an argument, of course, is the most powerful one which anyone can give to their kin.

"Well," said Orlanth, who was always hospitable, "first put your swords away and sit among us and drink some strong mead, brothers. This house is not a place for fighting, and certainly not for fighting among us kinsmen. Meat will be served, cooked or raw for you Wild One. Shall I send for cloaks to put upon your broad shoulders?"

All of the best men and gods were there in his hall. However, they all stepped down from the high table and sat among the commoners, the followers of Orlanth. The storm gods then all sat at the high table.

"Dishthane," he said, addressing the man in charge of his treasure, "bring forth the tools which we will distribute today." And so they were all brought forth.

Laid out before them were six wonderful items, each unique. First was a marking bone, which could mark signs of power upon anything. Second was the staff called Scorch, which left its burnt marks upon everything that it touched, and which could kill a foe. Third was the great thunderstone named Great Weighty, which had laid waste to a race of giants which were now just a mountain range. It always returned to its caster's hand. Fourth was a green basket of plenty which always served enough at the feast, even when Orlanth's brothers came by unannounced. Fifth was the Baby Cauldron, which produced a healthy young child for whomever came to it and properly devoted herself to it. Finally, sixth was a loom, with weights of gold and shuttles of silver.

"Each of these," said Orlanth, "is a treasure beyond our understanding. They were all taken in a raids from great gods. I have determined by reading runes that they shall serve as gifts for my first ring.

"But just as the greater powers have provided these gifts to us, and just as the greater powers have cast the runes to read, then so shall the greater powers decide to whom they rightfully belong."

"That is sheep shit," said the worst brother, Vadrus. He leapt up and flew right to green basket and laid his hands upon it. "I'll just take this and go." And with it he flew right out the window.

"I'll get him back," said Vingkot, and leapt to go, but Orlanth calmed the great warrior.

"Sit back down. Come off that window sill. Look by the fire pit."

There was the green basket once again.

"These are true instruments, with power of their own, and a life like our own which is subject to the higher powers. They shall choose for themselves their owners, who will be endowed by their blessings."

And so it went, and their first Ring was formed thereby. And here were the recipients of the gifts:

Lhankor Mhy the Lawspeaker, received the ivory marking bone. His parents were named Mostal and Orenoar, two of the old gods.

Issaries the Translator received the staff called Scorch. He used it to mark his followers with his magic, to keep them safe, and thereby began the tattooing of power.

Hedkoranth the Adventurer, the leader of the Thunder Brothers, received Great Weighty. This thunderstone rumbled whenever enemies approached, and it would leap into its owner's hand for combat.

Esra, the Food Keeper, received the green basket which she had woven. It is she who feed us.

Kero Fin, mother of Orlanth, received the Baby Cauldron. She is who to pray for children now, and ever since then.

Ernalda the Stead Mother, the wife of Orlanth, received the wonderful loom of silver and gold.

Since then this has been the membership of the Orlanth Ring.

How Orlanth Met Ernalda

At the beginning of things that are remembered, the Emperor extended his rulership among the deities of the Earth Tribe. The ruler of that tribe was the goddess named Asrelia. When the Emperor ruled, she retired.

Asrelia was the first goddess who had ever lived outside of the Great Mountain. She had many children, but only three are of interest right now. They were triplet sisters, whose birth brought new music into the world.

When Asrelia retired, she divided her earthly goods among these three. The Great she gave to Marangor, the Most she gave to Esrola, and the Least she gave to Ernalda.

Marangor therefore is goddess of earth's greatest manifestations, which are earthquakes, volcanos, landslides, autumn, diseases, and implements designed to bring death.

Esrola (also called by many other local names) is the goddess of the earth's great bounty, manifest as food, children, sexual desire, and blood.

Ernalda therefore is goddess of the spiritual earth, whose power is not found in solid things, but in actions, rules, ceremonies, music and familial care.

As part of the Emperor's Rule, Ernalda went from her mother's house to the Emperor's to serve as a handmaiden to the Empress. Every tribe sent people to the great palace to help. Thus it was at the Emperor's court that Orlanth first met Ernalda.

Trouble was already deep when they met. War was started in the outer edges of the universe where Umath's people were making a kingdom. Parts of the great Palace were starting to crack. Vermin had been seen in the kitchen, and creatures in the gardens. It was not safe and it was no longer fit for Ernalda to remain there.

When Orlanth came to the Palace the first time, to contest against the Emperor at dance, he and Ernalda saw each other for the first time. She saw that he saw her, and he saw that she was watching him, even in the war dance when most others looked away. Everyone said it was a defeat for Orlanth, and even his stupid brothers laughed at him for wasting the time. Orlanth wanted to see her eyes again.

Then Orlanth came to the Palace for the magic contest, and revealed that he held the secret of Becoming. When Ernalda saw that she made sure that she placed herself close to where Orlanth would exit. He saw her there, but would have strolled past so she spoke first, and so they met.

Orlanth's third visit was to compare his music with the Emperor's. The Emperor of the universe played the harmony of the spheres upon his harp of oneness. Orlanth played a bagpipe, and when the gods of the Palace heard it and saw his puffed out cheeks and red face they all broke into laughter. Orlanth planned for that, for the court had never before laughed in the Emperor's presence. But the judges did not laugh, and considered the effect of his playing on the court to be immoral, and judged him loser of the contest. When he left several of the people who had been living there were going to leave with him. They were all laughing as they traversed the corridor to depart.

Ernalda was laughing too, because the court had never shown anger in the emperor's presence too, and she had seen that the intrusion of these emotions into the public at judgement court had disturbed the Emperor. She was laughing because now the dishthane of the Emperor would be proved a liar, for having claimed no anger or laughter polluted the world. She alone had told the truth to the emperor, and now he would leave her in privacy. In her privacy, she hoped, she would prepare.

"Your laugh is like new music," said Orlanth, "and so pure that I would like to bring it home with me."

"Not today, lord Wind," said Ernalda, "for when I leave here I will go to my own tribe, to my mother's house."

"If you will promise to share that music with me again," said Orlanth, "I would take you anyplace."

"Not today, wind lord. Not today. But please, I bid you to come once again, with whatever contest you need to get inside the doors."

So he did the impossible, which was to get a fourth contest with the Emperor. He did it because the Emperor had once demanded that all things unknown to him must be brought to him for inspection. Orlanth searched for something new, which was impossible because the world was all made by that time, and the Emperor had been reviewing things for a long time.

Orlanth one day came upon the god Eurmál, a cruel god who was friendless because of the many terrible deeds he had done, like taking bear's tail, or urinating in a sacred place, or speaking during sacrifice, or this, his latest deed — making the first corpse ever made.

Eurmál was in the shape of the ancient raven, which was still white. It didn't turn black until later, when Eurmál brought fire to Hantrafal the Godi. Eurmál was trying to eat the whole corpse of the dead man.

"What is this?" asked Orlanth. At first Eurmál was surprised, because no one except Orlanth ever talked to him.

"It is a, uh, well, you know, a new thing." Eurmál was not feeling very confident about having Death at that moment.

"You crafty little monster," said Orlanth, "let us not play your games. Just give it to me, without fussing. What will you want from me? Just ask, and we'll make the exchange and go on. How about if I provide you with protection?" That was no small thing. Because everybody always was ready to strike and curse Eurmál these days, this was perhaps the greatest possible offer. That way Orlanth fooled Eurmál. He tricked the trickster, so Eurmál too gave something great.

"But only if I obey you," blurted Eurmál. Thereafter that condition of obedience to Orlanth was necessary to make the bond real. That was how Orlanth tricked Eurmál, because he knew that the trickster would blurt out an exchange of something as equally valuable.

They both laughed, and locked double forearms in agreement. Orlanth went away with his new thing. Eurmál went back to his meal.

At the gate of the Palace stood a guard, the God Gryphon, who stopped Orlanth outside. He was a powerful guardian, and he could have forced Orlanth to stop, as he had done to many gods whose entry was undeserved. Tough Vadrus was thrown ignominiously down the steps. He had flown aloft with Urox and dropped him outside of the walls. Against Orlanth now, God Gryphon prepared for a fight, "You are not welcome," he said, "Be Gone."

Orlanth stopped, and did not even try force, but simply drew forth his new weapon and showed it to God Gryphon. That god

blanched from fear, and was so afraid that turned from his natural golden color to silver, and rushed from his post to tell his lord.

Orlanth went in through the unguarded gate, and instead of going right to the Court of Judgement he went to where Ernalda was. She had not expected this, and came forth from her chambers to meet him.

"This is too hasty," she said, "There are tests. You must change the Emperor of the World first." This was Ernalda's Challenge.

"I shall."

So Orlanth went off to change it. The 294 judges were summoned, and the contest of weapons was declared, and held. The Emperor's golden arrow flew straight and true, and pierced Orlanth though a place which would have felled him, if he were not rightful. He drew the arrow from him, and it turned black, and he said, "This is an ill message for someone."

Then he showed his own weapon, and swift death whistled from his scabbard, and struck the Emperor in a place which would have been harmless, except that it slew him, dead, forever. As he fell his blood ran out in liquid flame, and the entire crowd of courtiers and guest burst into pandemonium. Orlanth wiped his sword clean and left the room.

A band of people were waiting for him. They had liked his music before and joined him. They were the lowly who had served the grand. They said, "We know the secret way out of here, where the lord's soldiers could never go. Come with us."

"Go if you would," said Orlanth. "Or come with me instead, as I find my wife." He strode to meet her, followed by his new friends. At her chambers, the doors were open, waiting for him.

"Good Ernalda," said Orlanth, "I would like to hear you laugh at your mother's house."

Ernalda had already prepared her escape. Kesta had laid aside food, Berlintha had packed clothing, Mahome had made clay tubes to bear fire, and Istena had filled many skins with water and wine. Arnna had a small treasure box, Jera the healing kit. Beseta and Besanga could turn themselves into mares, and were ready to carry it all away.

Only Ernalda's loom needed packing.

"This, above all else," she said, "must go too."

"I could probably carry it in one hand," said Orlanth, "But I expect great fighting shortly, and would prefer not to have to carry it." He turned to his new followers and said, "You, who would serve, go and bear that for the good goddess."

The former servants all gathered around it and began grunting in rhythm, and heaved. And again. And again. There were plenty of strong men among them, but they couldn't get the loom up. Orlanth could hear the approach now of the Emperor's avengers.

"Then I guess I will use one hand after all," he said, and he bent and lifted the great piece of equipment. Astonishingly, the loom shrank as he lifted it, until it was small enough to be placed into his pouch.

"What is mine is no burden, even though it can create life," she said. And then she added, "My partnership leaves both of your hands to you, and how you use them is your choice." That is when Orlanth took both her hands gently, not in the formal manner by the wrists, but instead holding in what we call the two grip, that's used in flirting. They looked eye to eye.

Then Orlanth spun back as he drew his weapons, facing the great horde of angry demigods who wanted to avenge their lord. Orlanth drove away the gods, proving there is a great different between their desires and abilities. Orlanth had Death in his hand, and soon there were corpses at his feet and panic fleeing before him.

He went out of the Palace through the front door, followed closely by Ernalda, her servants, and the growing crowd of others who sought to join themselves to Orlanth.

Orlanth took her home, to where her sisters lived, and prepared to leave. He took her hands in the two grip, and said goodbye. She did not let go of his hands when he sought to, but held lightly as if with a question, so he too held on a moment more. That is called the four grip. She spoke.

"Come inside, and let me share my laughter with you." So he stayed a while. Not long. She dressed his wounds, he brushed her hair. They both laughed. So their courting began.

The Disintegration of Yelm

One day the Rebels came to the Emperor led by their leader the Thunderer, who was an infamous outlaw. The outlaw demanded to receive half of all the world as his rightful share of existence.

The people all hid in their houses behind drawn curtains, afraid to see what stalked the streets. Courtiers sent their families away in carts. But Murharzarm was not afraid, and he faced this enemy as he had faced many others before.

Alas for Murharzarm! This time a new god came there too, and Murharzarm had not seen it before, nor did he ever see it. It was the bat, which cannot be seen in the light, and it closed its wings about the eyes of Murharzarm. Then the Thunderer struck him with another invisible weapon which he called Terminatus. It struck Murharzarm in the breast, where his snake lived, and caused its blood to gush out. Where it fell there sprang up the purple night-poppies which bloom without light. Then Murharzarm fell to the ground with a cry, and he died. Everyone felt it. They knew. Innocent blood ran upon the floor, and Murharzarm did not rise. The Rebel and his companions were so awestruck by their own power that they rushed away in a panic.

The body of Murharzarm was borne away by three weeping goddesses, who wrapped it in cloths, then placed it upon pungent woods and precious spices. The body ignited by itself. As it burned, it turned to ashes and smoke. In the center of the world the flame rose so high that it touched upon the Sky Dome, and burnt a hole there, in its exact center. Then it turned into a great pall of dirty smoke which blew away only after many years.

When Yelm looked upon the burning corpse of his murdered son a great shock entered into his being through his eyes and reverberated through his whole self. This was a terrible thing which he had never seen before, and which was beyond Yelm's comprehension. He confronted the Impossible, and the impact shook Yelm to the core of his being. So fierce was this assault upon the God of Life that he shook and shuddered, and fell upon the ground with a terrible groan which razed cities and forests, and shook stars from the sky. So terrible was this knowledge that God could not exist with it. The One at last saw the Other and with a final cry of anguish, broke. As his son had before him, Yelm disintegrated.

The highest part of Yelm drew itself upward and became Vrimak the King of Birds, the Highest Flyer who sees everything. Liberated at

last, this noble creature spread its wings and flew upward and did not stop until it went past the Sky Dome and into the heaven world.

The dominant essence of Yelm was, at first, a blindingly bright glare of magnificence which radiated from Yelm like light from the sun. It drew itself aside, where it took the form of a new god. "I am Antirius," said the god, "the pure and unsullied vehicle for Divine Justice."

The lower part of Yelm moaned as it crawled apart, then hobbled away from the world of suffering towards rest and peace. This figure is the god Bijiif the Rival, who rules over all dead things in the Underworld.

This was the division of the pure parts of Yelm, but there was more. He had been ensnared in the ways of the material world so much that he had acquired shadows. No one knew of those shadows until this moment, when they too departed from the shattered body of the god.

The divine seed of Yelm, which had been collected to please, serve and sweeten the Good Wife, uncoiled its glory from inside the god and revealed itself as BernEel Arashagern which went to Ariralves. The body of Yelm, which had been collected to please, light and warm the Good People, flared up from around the god, and then flickered down into smaller flames. Environs the oldest fire god, caught up the body in his magical brands, which he distributed to the faithful.

The shadow of Yelm, which was left behind when everything else was gone, coalesced as a limpid, wavering flicker of black fire. Kazkurtum, who had been nothing before this, fed it and cared for it, and made it important.

The immortal essence of Yelm suffered mortal tortures on his journey to the Gates of the Dead. There were dark guardians there who delighted to receive the Emperor to their midst. There Bijiif left behind his identity and recognition. Every suffering and horror which can be imagined by mankind hurt Yelm on his journey to The Pit. There, at the bottom, in the lightless world of the Land of the Dead, Bijiif sat and smeared himself with ashes, and waited.



The Lightbringers' Quest

One day Orlanth found his mother dead, and he saw that his father was suffering, chained between the earth and sky. He vowed to right this terrible wrong, and called his companions to accompany him on his quest.

This is the journey which Orlanth and his companions took. There were four stages in their journey. The first took them to the edge of the world. The second through the underworld. The third was in the deepest pit of the underworld, in the Palace of the Dead. And the last a return to the eastern horizon and above.

The Westfaring

The Land Journey

Orlanth began his journey at the Hill of Orlanth Victorious. This was a propitious place, and many friends came to see him off, wishing him well and giving him their prayers and hopes. Orlanth gave command of the stead to Elmal, his loyal thane, and they traded shields as a token of their bond.

Orlanth traveled westward, following the trail of the dead. He rode upon Mastakos' chariot. One time Jagrekriand ambushed him, and in the struggle the chariot was wrecked. After that, travel was slower.

One day Orlanth met two travelers. They were Lhankor Mhy and Issaries, and Orlanth knew both of them well.

Lhankor Mhy was the son of two of the Elder Deities, Acos the Lawgiver and Orenoar the Mistress of Truth. Lhankor Mhy was grieving because his lover, the Light of Knowledge, had been killed, so he was seeking her.

Issaries was the son of two other Elder Deities. His father was Larnste, God of Change; and his mother was Harana Ilor, Goddess of Harmony. Issaries did not fear the dark, which he had encountered before, but was seeking the Light of Communication, which he felt could heal the wounded world. The two of them had joined their search together. They were happy to join themselves to Orlanth to continue the search.

Konagog and Vonagog, with their variant army, tried to ambush the trio when they were in the lightless forest. But the defenses of

Issaries' camp delayed them. Lhankor Mhy knew that they could be neutralized with a mirror. Orlanth polished Elmal's shield, and he was the only god who was brave enough to face the enemy, who could make your fingers and other parts fall off if they looked at you wrong.

Orlanth once had a choice of whether to have a quick, easy short cut or to help a living army. But the army was from the Darkness tribe, Orlanth's old enemy. They were being attacked by the Lesser Kajaboori, which were Orlanth's new enemy. But the Dark Tribe was really alive, and Orlanth had no problem with making a choice. He led his companions to Hankarantal, where the cliffs cannot be scaled. He summoned the local fyrd, and even though it was only a small breeze it was enough, with the three warriors, to surprise the enemy. The storm gods slew enough parts of the Lesser Kajaboori to make them run away, and saved the day.

The army of darkness was commanded by Shankgaro, Uzlord of the West. He was no friend to Orlanth since they had fought over Ernalda's farmlands. But he thanked Orlanth, and said he would tell his friends of this.

After that Orlanth and his friends met other companions. They were Chalana Arroy and Flesh Man.

Chalana Arroy was the daughter of Glorantha, the mother of the Elder Gods, though no one can say who her father was. Chalana Arroy had healed everyone during the Gods War. One day, while with her son Arroin, she found a god she could not heal. She had never seen this before, for the god was dead, and death was still new then. Chalana Arroy decided to do what must be done to discover the cure for this. She sought the Breath, of Life.

While she and Arroin debated how to do this they met Flesh Man. He was a mortal who had been driven mad. He had seen Grandfather Mortal die, and then he saw Yelm die, and then he had seen a vision of the death of the whole world, even before it was finished. They could not heal him, either, and he escaped and ran away. Then Chalana Arroy decided to seek the great wound of the universe which caused this, and set off on the trail of Flesh Man. Unknown to her, Flesh Man followed the trail of Eurmal, the Trickster. Eurmal was the cause of all the trouble anyway, since he was the one who found Death and loosed it upon the world in so many forms. Since the broken world was of his making, only

Eurmäl himself was not uncomfortable. As the cosmos shook upon its primeval foundations, only he could understand where he was going. Flesh Man knew that, and so he followed the trickster's trail, which was invisible to anyone not mad like him.

Orlanth was glad to follow the advice of Chalana Arroy if she would join their expedition, even if it meant following the madman. Such was the nature of the times.

One day the trail led to Sorcerer's Town. There they joined the populace to witness the execution of a criminal monster caught by the sorcerers. Flesh Man recognized Eurmäl, and begged Orlanth to save the wretch. Orlanth agreed, and they revealed themselves and drove off all the executioners. But they kept Eurmäl tied up until Orlanth had extracted the Bondsman's Oath from him, so that he would be obedient to the chief.

Orlanth ordered Eurmäl to bring them to the place which they all wanted to find. Eurmäl was reluctant, pleaded ignorance, mocked them, begged not to have to do this, and threatened eventual revenge for it. When Orlanth told him to stop talking, and find them the safest journey to anyplace, he consented. This way they found their way to the shores of the sea.

Upon the shores of the western sea the company was joined by their last member, Ginna Jar. She suggested that they should form a new type of bond, the Lightbringers' Ring. Then the seven did, and they took an oath, and so were prepared for rest of the journey.

The Sea Journey

Orlanth and his friends sought the best way to cross the wretched ocean, which was dying and breaking from the forces of chaos. Orlanth cast about for help or guidance and was answered by Sofala, the ancient Turtle Grandmother. She owed Orlanth a favor, and agreed to bear them across the seas to the best of her ability.

On the way they were attacked by a sea dragon, but Orlanth drove it off. They were attacked by a god, but he left when Chalana Arroy healed him. A school of small monsters tried to swarm over them, but could not penetrate Issaries sacred camp defenses. Golod, the King of Fishes, tried to swamp them but Eurmäl convinced the Old Man of the Sea that they were kinsmen. A goddess attacked, but Lhankor Mhy knew what was needed to divert her. At last they reached the western land, Luathela.

Luathela

The western land of Luathela is inhabited by a race of demigods called the Luatha. They are the children of many lesser gods, and all have strange magical abilities. From living in the palace of Rausa their skins are all different shades of purple.

The Luatha had been warned of the coming of the Lightbringers. They did not like foreigners, and had kept all away. When Orlanth waded ashore they opposed him. Orlanth and his companions needed assistance, and that is when they remembered that they had the Eternal Ring of the Vingkotlings. He placed it on, and seven times seven thousand Vingkotlings warriors woke from deep sleep or daily life and raced upon the winds to join their lord in battle. With a shout like thunder they charged upon their foes who waited on the beach, and they raised a surf, red and purple with blood before the fight was over.

At last the Luatha saw they could not win, and they called for a parley. They wished to withdraw, and promised that they would no longer attack Orlanth and his army if they could do that. Orlanth insisted that they escort him to their leader.

Aklor, the son of Luath and Jeleka, was the Luathan leader. Aklor escorted Orlanth and his companions across their beautiful, but shadowed land to the magnificent, vacant palace of their ruler. This was Rausa, goddess of the Western Gates. She hated Orlanth because he had killed her father, Yelm, and banished him to remain forever below her own Western Gates. Rausa had been the last to see him in the world of the living. She hated Orlanth so much that she smeared herself with her father's crimson blood to remind herself to take revenge. She hated Orlanth so much that, whenever she had the strength, she armed and rose up from the horizon to look for him. She wished to send Orlanth to her father's fate, and then lock the Gates of the West behind him. Now, at last, he was here, in her palace. However, she also feared Orlanth and what he could probably do to her, her people, and her palace if he unleashed all his powers. She knew it would be difficult to kill him if he was alone, and he was not. He would be hard to kill if he was unarmed, which he was not. He would be hard to trick, too, since he was so well advised.

So Princess Rausa asked him what he wanted here, in her house. And Orlanth spoke simply. "I wish to travel beyond your home," he said, "and through the Gates of the West, and have them locked behind me."

And the goddess was so happy that her wish had come true that she did not ask what his business there was, or with what intent he entered into this, or what end he hoped to accomplish. She collected the fee for going to the Underworld, then ordered the gate keepers, Vamth and Rhylor, to wrench the great doors open, and to lock them again when the travelers went through.

Into the Underworld

The Long Descent

The gates slammed shut behind them, but the gods could still see, for before them glowed a path of Yelm's blood. Their journey was not easy, and they were not far past the gates when Canis Chaos attacked them for the first time. This was an easy attack to repel.

After some time they reached Kaldar's Gate. Eurmal said they must go through it, but the two guardians did not allow this. They were Kaldar and Sinjota. However, Orlanth challenged Kaldar to fight and won, while Eurmal seduced Sinjota to divert her while the rest slipped past.

For a long time they marched along the Path of Silence with the recently dead. Lhankor Mhy knew where to leave that path, for it was a secret which had to do with the Elder Tree.

At the River of Swords, Issaries negotiated with Jeset the Ferryman for the fare of passage for a live person across it.

Each of the companions had a special place, where they alone knew the secret to succeed at something. If they had not shared this secret, they would have failed. And each of them had a moment of failure, when their best and proudest skills were seen to be naught.

They passed deep places, and once found their way to the Obsidian Castle, where they were guests of the Only Old One before he betrayed them.

Issaries could find any road, anyplace. He could make a camp which protected them in the darkness. His special skill was used when they had to negotiate, or moderate some action, or make some compromise. But he found someone who would not listen, and he lost his way so that the party was separated from each other.

Orlanth was a great fighter, and he and his companions drove off many foes, and crushed others, either in single combat or massed battle. He also had some failures, and was wounded and lost some of his most precious tools. But these were not his true failures. His failure was in his great leadership, when Eurmál betrayed him in the Obsidian Castle, and the laws of hospitality were shattered, and his companions abandoned him.

Chalana Arroy healed anything and anyone that she met. This was how she saved them all, for compassion is always in great demand in the underworlds. When the Greater Ungoron came it spared them all for her sake. But she met a demon to whom kindness meant nothing, and which could not be healed. She was foully treated by it, and hurt so badly that she could not even heal herself.

Lhankor Mhy had great knowledge, and he was always useful in finding out information. He was quick thinking, and was able to deduce new things. When they had to leave the Path of the Dead it was Lhankor Mhy who knew the right place. But he discovered something which he could not know, and it caused him to stop thinking for a time.

Flesh Man was slain while in the Underworld. This was not a relief for him, for he kept on the quest anyway, but now he was alone. He was drawn inexorably towards the Halls of the Dead.

Eurmál was utterly unreliable, for he was as contrary as possible. But when everyone had been lost, he found them and brought them together again. This is why Orlanth spared him for his betrayal. Then he led them to the tracks of Flesh Man, and they went on.

The Hall of the Dead

Orlanth and Yelm

At last Orlanth and his companions found the Hall. Orlanth heard laughter from it and strode boldly to the porter and spoke.

"Whose hall is this?
So merry in the darkness?"

The porter was King Gryphon, who still dragged a shattered wing upon the ground. He said,

"That is the laughter of Despair, the daily drink here. It would sound joyous to only one being – Yelm's murderer! Begone! The Weeping Emperor will not be glad to see you."

But Orlanth was not in a mood to discuss this.

"Step aside, Gold-Gryphon, or announce my presence. I've come too far to argue with a servant. And I must warn you that killing you again Will be no trouble for me."

So Gold-Gryphon stepped aside, and Orlanth entered boldly into the hall. The blind Emperor stared with hollow eyes at Orlanth, and did not welcome him. His 294 judges, all rotten corpses, looked up with empty eyes upon the Lightbringers. All of them had worms eating the flesh from their faces and arms, and carrion spiders leapt all about.

Orlanth looked about the bleak hall. There sat Ernalda, a sorry and broken slave. Donandar sat with his broken harp. Mahome lay, huddled and cold, ashen. Flamal was there, dried like old leaves. Humakt was there; dull, rusty, and broken. Yinkin was there, murdered and nailed to the wall. And there, too, were all of the dead Vingkotlings, with raw wounds still bleeding, who had helped him along the way. There were others. There were more. This was the assembly of the gods.

Orlanth made his bid for friendship. Yelm made his demand for atonement. Orlanth made his demand for recognition. Yelm made his requirement for proof. Orlanth made his promise of the future. Yelm made the demand of trial by combat.

Orlanth began when he made his song of Truth. This released those in the hall who would help him, so they came forth and armed him in ragged splendor.

Orlanth underwent the Trial by Combat. Then he was taken to the Locked Gate, and he fought against all of the Keepers there. These were the monsters which kept the dead imprisoned, and they were the last of the deities to come into the Hall of the Dead. Orlanth came in with them.

Orlanth made his Promise of the Future. He said that there could be a future, and it would be like the past. Yelm demanded "Which

past?" and Orlanth said, "Like all of them." The dead wept bitter dregs at that, for they were there because all things could not exist at once.

Orlanth underwent the Requirement for Proof. Three searing baths were prepared, and Orlanth submerged in each of them. They were baths of Fire, of Hatred, and of Truth. If he had not been in the Baths of Nelat before he would have died for certain, and been as gone as his brother whose name is not known today. This was when the support of all who loved him was important. And in the land of Life, the thousands of mortals suffering from the chaos of life woke from a nightmare, and prayed to Orlanth that it would not be so. Otherwise, he would have been destroyed. Chalana Arroy could not do it.

When Orlanth emerged alive, even the blind could see that he was changed. Those who had been silent cheered.

Yelm made his Statement of Recognition, and by this agreed that Orlanth and all that he stood for truly deserved a place in the universe, and that Orlanth was High King among the gods, and that all hatred between Emperor and High King would be healed in whatever future might exist.

Yelm then made his demand for Atonement. Orlanth made obeisance then, and acknowledged the power and majesty of Yelm's being and way of life, as long as it did not interfere with his own. This was satisfactory to the Emperor.

Then Orlanth made his bid for friendship. Yelm was reluctant to do this, for it was not necessary for the world to work. Finally, after much pleading by Lodril, Dendara, Chalana Arroy, and others, Yelm agreed. And after that things went easier, for their friendship was not necessary for the world, but it was better.

The Ritual of the Net

When the gods spoke there were always changes in the world. When the gods spoke together for the first time, cooperatively, there was a new thing made. This was the goddess called Arachne Solara. She is unknown before the moment that the gods spoke to each other, but important after that, for she kept them talking.

When Orlanth and Yelm had agreed, Arachne Solara said that all of them present should agree. If they did, she said, they could make the new future which Orlanth had promised. Otherwise, they would

be nothing when Wakboth came to them there. Everyone was afraid to see Wakboth, and they all agreed, and swore the oath which Arachne Solara told them to swear.

This agreement between the gods is called the Cosmic Compromise. All of the deities agreed to share the world with each other, and with all of the experiences which they had already had. No one was allowed to avoid what they did not like, and so all of the gods agreed that they would share their time among both Life and Death. They agreed to these things, and that they would not actively intervene in each other's realms except in those ways which they had already done. They would not individually or consciously alter the world. They would not even turn their awareness to it, unless called upon to do so.

Upon this relationship of promises, Arachne Solara then constructed a great magical web which was made from things which did not exist anymore. Then she gave the net to all of the gods to hold between them, to catch and wrap up whatever came among them.

It was the Devil that came. Wakboth came in among the gods when he had killed everything in the middle world. And the gods cast the great net upon him, and drew it tight the way hunters do when they capture the mighty cave bear, and held it tight so the Devil was helpless. Then Arachne Solara leapt upon the god with vengeance and a strength of desperation and mystical splendor. She wrapped the chaos god in her legs and her web, and with every orifice she sucked everything out of the Devil and filled herself with it. The empty husk was ground into dust and each god who was present took a tiny piece, to remind them of their oath.

Then the goddess took the net and hung it about her to conceal the birth of her child. Her child is the Pledge of the Gods, and all of existence swore upon it to uphold their agreements. This oath is nothing less than the recreated world, and if any deity denies the oath they threaten the whole world.

The Return

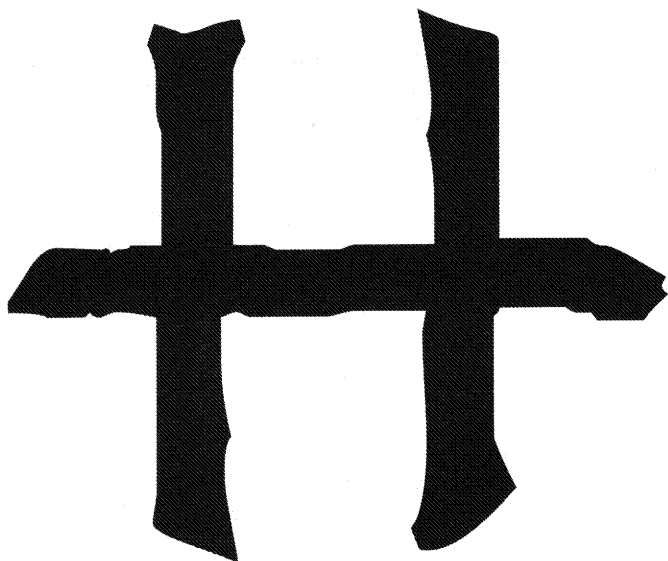
After all of this, Orlanth was surrounded by his family, companions, and followers and accorded a great triumphant procession as they marched out of the underworld to the Eastern Gates. Before them went Yelm and his companions, clearing the way and announcing the good news to all whom they met.

At the Eastern Gates they all assembled once again while Mostal repaired the gates. The great chariot of the sun was prepared, and Yelm was taken aboard.

Arachne Solara slipped through a tiny crack and stood upon the edge of creation. Before her the fragmented parts of the world were slowly drifting apart, dissolving into chaos. She then cast her mighty net wide, gripping all the parts of the world together again and pulling them close, like you can do with a string bag. There she revealed her child, Time, and sent it with its 294 servants into the world.

The Gates of Dawn were thrown open. The ghostly gods of Time were already disappearing into the Future. As one, in perfect harmony, the great gods occupied their proper spheres of the world: Yelm ascended into the Sky; Orlanth filled the Air; Ernalda occupied the Earth; Magasta turned the Ocean; and Subere revitalized the Underworld. When Orlanth and Ernalda again looked upon each other, fresh and full of life again, they embraced as fully as immortals can embrace, and from that moment was born Voria, the Goddess of Spring.

That is how Orlanth and the Lightbringers brought the world, once again, into the sweetness and wonder of Life.



Morden Defends the Camp

The Arming Poem

Vargast prepared to defend the camp. But he, the chief, could not stand at the fore, so Vargast designated his trusted and experienced tribesman.

When Morden told Vargast of the coming Orgovaltes men, the chief quickly designated Morden to be the chief defender. He was qualified, mainly because he was so experienced in heroforming his ancestor. When Vargast designated him as Champion, Morden also was blessed with a great potency of power that gave him extraordinary magical preparation, and also risked every person in the clan to get exactly his wounds, if he failed. He would, with the help of the priests, get the clan's Orlanth blessing and make himself so powerful that the enemy would be compelled to concentrate upon him.

All of the Orlanthi ceremonies followed the same principles. Each rite was a re-enactment of a divine or heroic act. If done properly, the ceremony would reproduce the magical effects which were done in the original action. In this way successful actions were remembered, reproduced, and refined, and the gods and heroes returned to the world.

Morden was fortunate because he had a powerful heroform ceremony, was able to activate into it more quickly than most men. Finally, to help himself further, Morden chose Brekun's Shield Fight. Brekun was an ancestor of Morden's, and kinship with the object of worship always helped to strengthen the connection. More importantly, Morden had practiced the feats of Brekun for many years. He would not rely entirely upon the magic he got from the ancient one — such would be a foolish dependence or a truly desperate attempt. Thus Morden could already hurl his razor-edged shield with great skill, and so the magical impetus would enhance rather than create, and be more powerful thereby.

The process of invoking the power of Brekun to come and be one with Morden proceeded without problem, like any ordinary ritual.

Morden chanted the simple verses which would bring Brekun to his attention, then into his soul, and finally, to share his body. The priests meanwhile prayed to Orlanth, and with their worship they turned the ordinary air which they breathed to be the substance which is Orlanth.

To Morden, recipient of this attention, the world took on an appearance which he normally saw only when it was a holy day. Colors clarified into keen brightness. Ordinary things dropped away, so that artful decoration faded, insignificant details disappearing so that one suit of armor or shield looked like any other. Also the magical enhancements came forward, like bright insects coming out at sunset, so that Morden could see a magical sword even in its sheathe. The spirits which Morden could ordinarily only sense now also grew into visibility.

Dandern, the speaker, and Engorn, the storyteller, performed their parts with stern and cold efficiency. They brought the power of the Knowing God and the Speaking God into themselves, and then outward to energize memory and sound to both become special, nonordinary; the same way the storm priests were changing the nature of the air.

Dandern and Engorn both together retold the story of Brekun the hero. They told it in the sacred manner, and so they told parts which could not be spoken in a mundane version, and they omitted portions which were not relevant to the magic. And in this manner they reactivated the great magical powers which had helped Brekun, bringing them also to Morden for his upcoming battle. In the sacred retelling, now, Morden gained the most: he took upon himself the accouterments and doom of Brekun. Everyone else would gain whatever protection and fierce murderous ability they might be able to identify with in the story.

Brekun's tale was not hard or long, and its glory was in the arming of the hero. The "Arming Poem" outfitted him with the usual "Noble spear, royal sword," capable of "cutting unhanded, leaping, and singing." And finally, specially, the shields: rim shield, spear shield, bound shield, and Flight Shield. The poem told how he gathered his weapons and sharpened them. Morden ritually sharpened his weapons as Brekun had, even though every blade was already honed to edge. He checked the shafts of his spears, looked over his long-ready armor for holes, and carefully counted his quivered javelins.

He counted his tokens, he fondled the amulets which gave him a piece of his god. Here is Raven, black stone polished smooth, dipped with gore. Here is Kara, white cube, and the Jara, white ball of wood, each for wounds. Stitched to his right sleeve was Durox, a bull's bone with runes to warn him of chaos.

With reverence each charm and amulet was checked, to make sure its pouch was secure or its thong was tied, and to thank it kindly for what it would do.

Brekun then called for his wife, not his shieldboy. First she laced on his greaves, and made them fast with strong thongs. She put over his shoulders a shirt of fine linen, cut sleeveless to show the proud marks, and over that...

And so on and on. No women were present, save those fighting, and the men helped each other, checking every joint and knot and brace.

And so it went, until he donned his own humble cloak, which he saw to be blue and with silver borders. The priests recounted each word of the hero, letting the men hear what they needed to hear. The priests were sad when they made Morden's eyes water while thinking of love, but Brekun had done so and it would be dangerous to omit that weakening event from the story in this circumstance.

And so passed the night, preparing for doom. Over the valley or two, Morden's foe was doing the same.

With the dawn wind the foes came, brave men all. Arrows whistled, stones cracked, fire rose and fell upon the foe. Only the bravest came onward.

Singly, then, against eight at once Brekun blocked deadly darts and spear, with the Widow's Howl sent those missiles back against the hateful foe.

Brekun, the fierce wielder of the prosperous sword, was touched by no bronze edge that day. He rained his blows upon swords, spear shafts, and helms, and with his square shield beat down the lances of the mighty.

Blessed by the decree of Orlanth and Humakt, he brought low the glory of Stad, and shattered the defender's bound shield.

Blessed by the decree of Ernalda, he brought low the glory of the Melifas and cut his throat with the Rim shield.

Brekun pondered greatly the arts of war, and from his wife's hands he bore the piercing shield, and made his foe, the captain, writhe.

Brekun spoke. "Who dares defy me with grievous assault? The pay for such a business is one head coin. My purse is not full yet. Stad and Syrik, Makkor and Melifas, Agnakor and Arntokar are just pennies now. Send me the gold piece, the chief who has defamed me."

"There stands Brekun, among red steam rising hot from the pools of dripping human blood. He will not stop until the gore sea is dry. He will not stand down until tomorrow's cock is done crowing."

The Big Man

"Hakorlat and Morandor," said the Prince, "Would you please go and see what this stranger wants from us?" The two men spurred their brown horses and, without word, rode quickly towards the enemy.

Morden, still standing, drew his sword and waited. The men did not slow their approach, and he could see their magic glistening in the early morning light. He squinted the way he needed to do in the early morning, and he could see the clenched teeth and the determined squint of the warriors as they faced him.

Morden, as had Brekun before him, screamed the Widow's Howl, and every small creature which was within hearing of that shout fell down dead. The Widow's Shout wasn't a novel thing to these Orgovaltes warriors, and Hakorlat had used it often himself. The warriors held tight to the reins and rode hard.

But what Morden did, at Vargast's advice, was to put a part of his real soul into the shout. Morden should think, said Vargast, of whoever loves him most, and let his pain drive the shout. But that was not enough, said Vargast, Morden must also feel the grief his wife would feel, and put that too behind the power of his shout. Morden did, and learned that Brekun shed two tears when he last thought of his wife.

The shout crashed into the two riders like a small wall, but they were too well prepared to be disabled by that. It had been stronger than expected, which shouldn't have mattered either, but both men leapt into rage because the shout had surprised them, despite themselves, and they spurred their horses on even harder, one gripping lance and the other a javelin.

Morden grinned, and they saw it even at the distance and it made them even angrier. They forgot that they did not usually get so angry. They gouged their steeds with spurs. Morden took in hand six darts, each of them but six inches in size, shaped like a small arrow but with a large lead weight at the front. At casting range, both Morden and Morandor hurled their weapons, and six missiles sprang from both of their hands. Six missiles struck Morden, and he staggered back under the impact, nearly losing his footing. But none of the javelins struck through his armor. He regained balance, ready to stab with his drawn sword, but needed it not. His darts, propelled even more powerfully than usual, had gone all the way through both his foes, and their horses, so all four bloody bodies lay twitching on the side of the hill below him.

Morden howled, and sprang down the slope. His sword gleamed so brightly that it was visible from the other hill where the prince watched. He saw the bronze blade slash downward twice, and twice the stranger rose with the head of his foe in hand. Then the stranger threw the heads up into the air, and his sword with them, and the heads were cut into pieces. Even at that distance the prince saw that they were perfectly quartered. The sword dropped into the warrior's hand again, and the prince saw the stranger smile, grimly, directly at him.

A swirling wind rose. The swift updraft of wind blew over the bloody corpses. Morden and the prince heard singing then, as the souls of these warriors rode upon the winds to start the long windy journey to Orlanth's Hall. Around the prince his warriors all stirred, because they didn't hear the music but they sensed something uncanny about them, and were disturbed.

"He is not a fraud, then," said the prince to his companions.

Several days of hard riding were no hardship to Prince Kerandal, the son of King Keranlaka, and his entourage. They were going to battle, and the excitement of killing or dying only grew with each passing hour. When they saw Morden they didn't need anything special to see that a warrior, armed to greatness, was ready for them.

They drew up their chariot and ponies on the hill opposite, almost half a mile away, which was far beyond any normal assault distance. Even a spirit, capable of streaking faster than even a wind, would normally become visible in the time it took to cross the distance. The prince, already glistening with bronze magic of his own, didn't fear such a petty thing.

"Do you know that man?" he asked of his Spearman. His spearman leapt straight up into the air and stood on his saddle, and with his keen eyes he looked and could see the waiting warrior as if the two men were actually standing close to each other.

"He is of the laurel clan, and was a housethane for a chief among the Liornvuli. Seven magics, and maybe some more, dance upon his arms. His cloak is from a magical woman who lives among thorns, and his necklace keeps him from becoming tired. He is wearing his best clothes, but they are so shoddy I won't bother to describe them."

Most of the men laughed at this insulting comment about the warrior's poverty, because they were all well dressed in cloaks of green and blue, with fur, and tunics of fine linen. They had gold on their arms, from their lord, and they were all experienced warriors, knowledgeable in the warrior ways of the storm gods.

"Good lord," said a thick, accented voice, "May I approach that man first?" The speaker, a dandified stranger who wished to marry a princess, bore no sword or shield.

"Arkarthan, no doubt you could steal his sword from his hand. But this is a matter for a warrior to deal with, man to man."

"In my home, we consider it a virtue to be prudent."

"And impudent," said the prince. But he said it with good nature, so that his companions all laughed again. Arkarthan, even though a foreigner, was well liked. "Northerner who would be brother," continued Kerandal, "I proved that I could be prudent when I didn't kill you. But now, we will do a warrior's task the warrior's way."

The companions of the prince all nodded agreeably, eager to fight. They were mostly experienced. They appreciated, but did not depend upon, the blessed, sacred, and magical artifacts which Arkarthan had stolen for them. But it took more than a magic sword to combat a hero, and this impoverished stranger was not the first prepared hero they had faced. Prince Kerandal had, of course, several people who could variously respond to such a threat.

The Prince turned to one of his men, who was named Namar, and said, "You are a devotee of Big Man, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am. I'll stomp him."

Big Man was well known through the whole of central Genertela. He had lived six hundred years earlier, in the Silver Age, when the world was slowly edging its way out of the darkness and destruction. Big Man had gone far and wide in this area and used his great strength to make things, help people, and to generally improve the world.

Big Man had a particular ability. He had awesome strength, capable of lifting an entire war chariot, with its heavy armor, spears and blades, and even its pair of horses, driver, and bold warrior in it. In all of his life Big Man almost always picked everything up on the first try. Admittedly, he sometimes used both arms or even the great power of his legs at times.

Nonetheless, he sometimes failed. On those rare occasions when he was frustrated in lifting or throwing something, Big Man's great power came into action. He actually grew larger, like a bladder being pumped up full, or a loaf of bread rising. Then, bigger and stronger, he would make a second attempt. He almost always succeeded on the second attempt, whether it was in tossing a galley up atop the plateau or pushing down a section of the wall of Nochet. Only about ten times in his long life did Big Man ever need a third attempt to lift something, and in those times he pumped up bigger yet again. Four times in his life Big Man needed four attempts to finally succeed. Those were when he held the triton underwater; when he broke the dragon's neck; when Orlanth tried to lift him skyward; and when the mountain fell on him.

Only once did he increase in size five times.

Big Man was not a fighting man. In his age lived many far greater warriors who willingly accepted the risky tasks of fighting monsters or each other. Nonetheless, the gray predawn light of the Silver Ages were full of perils, and Big Man wrestled, threw, and broke his share of monsters and marauders. Though Big Man was always weaponless, many accounts are known of him throwing rocks, trees, or houses to kill his foes.

Big Man did not usually care to fight hand to hand, and he especially did not like to fight against other humans. He used his great strength several times to subdue those who would have fought him. He was even known to just stamp and break the ground and run away from fights rather than punch someone.

But the one time that he used his strength five times was in a fight, hand to hand, against a human being. Big Man was fighting

against Jeri Babo then, and finally won that fight when he stamped on his foe with his iron soled boots, and crushed him like a man would crush a mouse.

Morden had been waiting patiently. He saw the great rock fly up into the air from the far side of the hill opposite him. Since the prince, who was watching back, did not flinch at the boulder's crashing flight, Morden wasn't worried either. He thought, "It's a strong man that can do that."

Morden saw a really big man come forward from over the hill. He had a red sash around his head and had no armor. He wore simple peasant clothes, bore a stone mason's hammer, and wore big knobbed boots.

"Ah," thought Morden, "A Big Man, not just a strong one." Morden didn't move when the Big Man paused and picked up the chariot, and his lord, and the horses all kicking and screaming in their harness. He put them down again, not too gently, and laughed very loudly. A flock of ravens which was coming to feed all fell out of the air, stunned, at that laugh.

Big Man put his hammer onto the ground near his lord's chariot. The Big Man never misused his tools, and since he was not going to work stone he left this behind. He sauntered across the vale to Morden who still waited, calmly, without weapons drawn.

"Hey you," said Big Man, when he was a few yards away, "I want to stand there."

"Here? Stand here?" asked Morden. "Before I give you my part of the earth, I will ask you to be civilized enough to tell me your name."

"It is not secret. Everyone knows me. I am Vogarth the Big Man, from Usedri, who is the strongest man in the world. Who are you?"

"I am Morden, the son of Harastan, born of the Shield Clan. I am a weaponthane of Vargast, and I bear the burden of my people in my soul."

"Give me your place," said Big Man. Of course, Morden could not accede to this demand because it would have weakened him to give up "his place." He would not just be stepping off a piece of ground, but also abandoning the position which he chose to live in the world which was, at this moment, defender of the camp.

"Are you Big Man, who threw the dragon ship up onto Shadow Plateau, where the trolls ate it?" asked Morden.

"I am."

"You look just like him. Are you Big Man who carried the wondrous Living Stone Tree from the Footprint to the queen's house in Esrolia?"

"I am him," said Big Man. "I am going to take your place there, now. It is important to me." At this moment it was true, although of course in the original performance of this tale Big Man had real reasons to demand the place of Jeri Babo.

"I think that you are the same Big Man," said Morden, "that cracked that stone giant with your hammer, and saved the troll king. Can I praise you some more?"

"I am him," said the Big Man, "and I will pause for recognition." He seemed happy to be recognized. All of these repetitions of course aided in enforcing the great powers of Big Man onto the mortal frame of the man who was his devotee. Morden's identification, and the repetition of that recognition, reinforced even more strongly the previous agreement, making the Big Man's presence even more concrete.

Of course, this also diminished the presence of the man beneath it.

"I think that you are the strongest man in the world, called Big Man," said Morden, "and I know you do not like to fight."

"That is me," said Big Man, "and you are right. But I am going to take your place there."

"I will give it to you," said Morden, "but you are a fair man and a good one, and I would challenge you to a contest for it. Not a fight, which is not fair."

"Contests are not good for me," said Big Man. He was not smart, and he knew that. "Except a contest of strength."

"OK then," said Morden, "a contest of strength."

"I'm so strong," said Big Man, looking around for something to prove himself, "that I can knock over that tree with my spit." And he hawked, then spat. The tree snapped off midway as if it had

been hit by one of Morden's shields, and crashed to the ground. "Can you do that?"

"Nope," said Morden. "But I go first since you chose the field of contest."

"All right."

Morden looked around, and went and picked up a small grey rock. "I can squeeze blood out of a rock," said Morden, and held his hand up, and showed the rock. Then he squeezed it, and blood dripped out. Morden threw it to the ground. "Can you?"

Big Man stared a moment. "That's a cheat," he said.

"Are you Big Man," said Morden, "Who gave the stone tree to the queen, and was father of her triplets? I have seen you, and before me I see the Big Man." Morden could see intelligence behind the eyes of his opponent. Intelligence there indicated that the man inside was winning a struggle of identification with Big Man. If the man, Namar, let his personality break through then Big Man with his supernatural powers would soon disappear.

But Namar inside there needed Big Man's presence. A mere man could not accomplish the task, and he wanted to. He listened to Morden's words. "You are he, I have been told, who threw the galley upon the plateau, and who bent the bronze gates of Heort's hall. You are Big Man, who is fair, and ever ready to engage in challenges of strength."

"I am he," said Big Man, and he looked around for a rock. He picked it up and crushed it, then another, and a bigger one, then a smaller one, and several more in a row, using both hands. He got more and more dismayed each time.

Morden laughed at him. He said, very loud, "You have lost, Big Man. You have lost the contest, and you must now give me your place!"

Big Man knew it was true, and in his slow mind he was distressed. He had lost a contest of strength! How could he be the strongest man alive? Such was impossible!!

Big Man paused and looked at Morden. Intelligence flashed across those eyes again. "You cheat. You didn't use a rock."

"What? Is that Big Man or a fraud?" shouted Morden. "What!" Then he snapped his jaw in the Feat of the Sakkar's Bite so that the sound was loud enough to kill an ordinary man. Big Man only staggered under it, but the eyes flashed anger now.

"You can't use that trick on me!" he shouted. This was, however, an insight which Big Man was utterly incapable of making on his own. "I will stomp you, flea." And of course, Big Man never threatened that so early in his fight against Jeri Babo.

"You are the cheat!" cried Morden. "You lost a contest of strength and you must depart from this place. Go away Big Man! Begone!"

"I will not! I will kill you for cheating the Big Man!" At this, where Namar denied his own identification with Big Man, the huge figure before Morden flickered a bit, fading in and out of focus, and then tumbled in upon itself, making a silly thop thopping sound until there stood there a man once again. "I will kill you..."

Morden laughed, loud, and the man, though weaponless and without armor, threw himself upon Morden. The fight was short, for though the man was strong he was just a man. Morden could have killed him easily, but instead he just struck him several times with his gloved fist, then threw him onto the ground and kicked him several times.

"Who is that who looks like a man in the chariot opposite me?" asked Morden.

"He is Prince Kerandal, the son of King Keranlaka, and I am..."

"Go tell your master that it takes more than peasants to beat this warrior," said Morden.

"I will kill you," said the man. "I am...."

"Not today, small man," said Morden, and kicked the man again, hard enough to life his 200 pounds off the ground. "Not today. Now go."

The man, Namar who could not name himself, was a warrior, and he had an amulet which, if held even briefly, stopped bleeding and healed pain enough to let a wounded man move. Namar used it then, and walked back to his prince, and at the wheel of the chariot he bent at the waist.

"My prince, I..."

"I saw," said the prince. "What did he say," asked Kerandal.

"He said to send a warrior, not a peasant, my prince. I beg you to let me arm and go back."

"Go arm, and join us back here."

The Great Thief

"That man and his sword might be a hero some day," said the Prince, "If he finds enough foolish foes to fall before him. Clearly face to face combat is his preference. We aren't stupid. We need someone who will surprise him, and have a skill which he can not prepare."

"Ah," said the foreigner, "Good prince who would have a brother. May I?"

"Perhaps it is time after all," said the Prince. He contemplated only a few moments more before adding, "Arkarthan of Lolon, I ask you to go and engage that stranger. Perhaps, if you can not slay him, you will be able at least to bring his sword back to me."

"I will do my best," he said, and after a few short prayers he set off.

Prince Kerandal watched him go, and then he turned to one of his priests. He said, "Orandal, I think that you have a strange gift from our friend who walks there."

"Yes, Sir, he gave me this, which he called a Pole Hook." It was about a yard long, then bent for another foot to make a sharp angle. It was a wooden stick with metal tips, and painted in a single stripe rounding up its length.

"I did not listen when he gave it to you. Will you tell me what it does?"

"There is a star overhead which you can not see, and I can attach this hook to it and raise myself up to quite a height. It is much more stable than flying about, and so I can concentrate to see what lies further past here."

"When Arkarthan reaches conversation distance from our foe, would you please use it and look beyond, to see what we are facing next?"

"As long as no arrows are shot at me, or I am not attacked. I have no defense when I hang there and peer far away."

"He will be busy enough," said the prince. "Prepare yourself."

Towards the late afternoon a stranger approached Morden. He wore red tights, low pointed shoes, a green and yellow striped jerkin, and a wide brimmed hat with a raccoon tail on it. Finally, his face was painted, across his eyes, to look like a mask.

Morden had never seen such a man before, and didn't know how to react.

The man's name was Arkarthan, but everyone called him Quickhand. He was from a city called Lolon, in the land of Vanch. Morden had never been to Vanch, or anywhere within two hundred miles of it. He didn't know that this man was a near-perfect specimen of the expression, "thieving as a Vanchite."

Arkarthan knew quite a bit more about Morden. He knew, by sight from a distance, that Morden was a staunch, hard core Orlanthi. All those savage tattoos, the gleaming bronze armor with the runes scratched on it, and the hurtful aura of his bronzed magical protection breaking into the ordinary world.

The thief approached carefully. Arkarthan was no fool. He had faced a half dozen armed men, albeit lesser armed than this one. But he killed them all, and more importantly, a dozen or two more in less fair combat.

Morden spoke, and the Vanchite's opinion agreed with the information which he had been told.

"Stand back Stranger," said Morden, brandishing his sword. "It is a day to die, and you are in the region of Death." The warrior's belligerent intent stepped like a shadow — like a double self — right out of Morden then and rushed towards Arkarthan. He was expecting it, and although any normal warrior would have backed off, knowing combat was hopeless against such a demigod, Arkarthan didn't even flinch outwardly at the apparition. He remained standing for several moments. Morden didn't move, though Arkarthan could see his lips moving. Slowly, Arkarthan raised both hands, palm outward, towards the warrior. And, with invisible limb, reached all the way across the area between them, to take off the stone which glowed so brightly. The hand, more gentle than a kiss, felt a tiny resistance.

Morden shouted, then hurled his blade upward into the air. It turned over and over, slowly, as it flew upward, and Morden reached for his javelin.

Arkarthan recognized this: the Sword Trick. He had seen it when he fought the Sylilans as a younger man, and remembered the shout. It made him run away that time, long ago. Now he knew the barbarian would pick the javelin, hurl it while rushing forward, and catch the sword just before he reached hand to hand combat. Arkarthan had hoped it would be this easy. He was called Quickhand, but his invisible hands were only one of his assets.

He leapt upward as the javelin was prepared, and he snatched the airborne sword, but he left behind a more visible apparition of himself as a lure. It worked, because as Arkarthan poised at the apex of his leap he saw Morden's javelin run through the throat of the illusion. The sword was heavy with magic, and so he held it with both hands as he landed, sword raised to chop down the swordless warrior who should have been standing, weaponless, before him.

Arkarthan never saw the razor edged shield which slashed through his abdomen as he landed. The thief was cut right in half, and the hurtling shield caused them to fall separately, apart from each other.

Arkarthan had been killed once before, but of course he was still stunned. He — his spirit — stood there, crouched and poised holding the magical sword before him, and he looked over his shoulder at his legs kicking and his liver flapping, and lots and lots of blood everywhere ruining his good clothes. He hadn't been ready for that shield trick, but he knew what to do when he was killed.

He knew that if he could move his spirit quickly enough, he could pull his two parts together and he would be knit within seconds. He had prepared to be healed like this a long time ago. He was informed. He could do it.

Arkarthan looked from his spirit eyes right into his own dilated physical eyes, and moved in that moment back into his physical form. It didn't hurt him as much as a normal man, because he was Arkarthan. But it was agony, and the gore splattered torso screamed out loud. He looked to his legs, which stopped twitching when he saw them. He felt his feet. Then Morden stepped into view.

Morden held his sword, lean and gleaming and untouched by the gore which drenched the ground. He had taken it from the air, where the spirit had held it, for the length of time it had taken him to do his Edged Shield Feat.

Morden looked down into the eyes of the magician whom he had just defeated. He felt resistance to his gaze, almost like someone pressing on his eyeballs. Morden shouted the Devil Smashing Shout. Both Arkarthan's eyes burst and blood shot from them in streams as Morden chopped, once, and halved the torso yet again. The eyes stopped spraying, as they had stopped seeing, and as Morden backed cautiously off the parts of the body stopped jerking and pumping organs out.

Morden spoke and invoked the Ravens. They came to death as they always come, but quicker than usual, thanks to his prayer, and in a great number. Their flapping black wings were the sound of death's wings. They flew off with gobbets of the enemy dripping from their axe beaks. The dead magician could never be reformed after they ate, if such resurrection was even within his power. Morden, who did not know anything of this foe, took no chance.

The ravens gluttled, and flew away to boast of it to their cousins. Morden looked up at the flocks in time to see a warrior descend on the far side of the vale, to the prince.

The prince, too, was watching the black flocks depart with their warm feast and saw his man, who had been hanging, come down lightly nearby, and come to his prince to report.

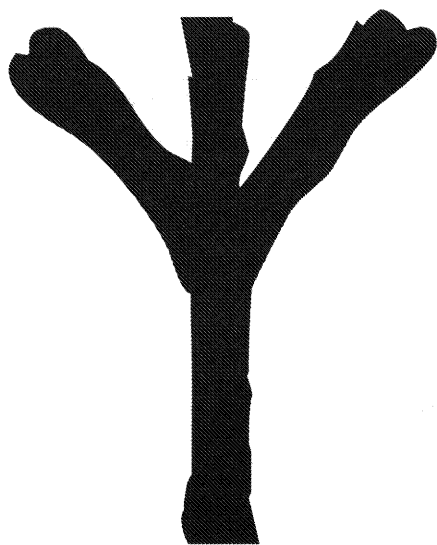
"Behind the hill where this hero stands is a battalion of warriors, all with bronze spears and caps waiting patiently. Behind that is a large square camp, with wooden palisades and stones to hold it. On each corner a hero is standing, and inside the camp is another army, with javelins and shields. I saw many priests there, and with them were a band of winds which were like our holy mountain on a sacred day."

The prince, watching this, said, "This man is greater than I am today. He has been preparing for weeks, I see, probably since the Sacred Time. I will remember his name, and come back when we're equally prepared. It must have been that fop's fault, with his faulty weapons and his Eurmal-stained gifts. Godi, send your hawk back and tell my sister that she need not fear being forced to marry that man any more." And the godi nodded agreement, and they turned their horses and rode away, to be sure to be out of range of the

Dusk-leaping Feat and the Setting Sun Throw and the Leaping Pursuit Feat too. As they galloped away one of the godi crouched low with his shield on his back fearing that Morden might know a Sunset Killing Shield Feat. He did, but didn't use it that evening.

Morden watched them ride out of view, and returned to his guardian stance.

"There stands Morden," said a voice, and he knew it was Vargast's, "among red steam rising hot from the pools of dripping human blood. He will not stop until the gore sea is dry. He will not stand down until tomorrow's cock is done crowing." Pride gave Morden a reward, and he felt his weariness fade and his wounds cease their cutting and burning. His pride came from being certain that the cowardly chieftain running away would not return. The praise of his lord's word was also a great gift, perhaps the best to be had that night. Tomorrow the loot would be his, should he care to keep it, but treasure was of no use to a man who would be dead soon, and no source of pride in that. His best gift, though, came from the success he attained in knowing that he had performed as well as his model, his hero, Brekun. He felt the touch of life after death, and it was like a tiny sip of cool sweet water to a man who thought he had no mouth.



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