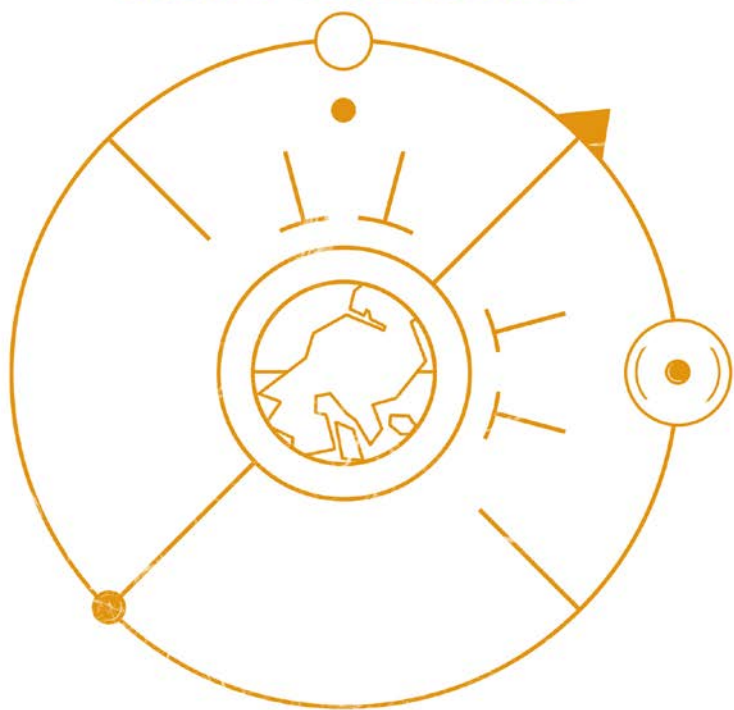


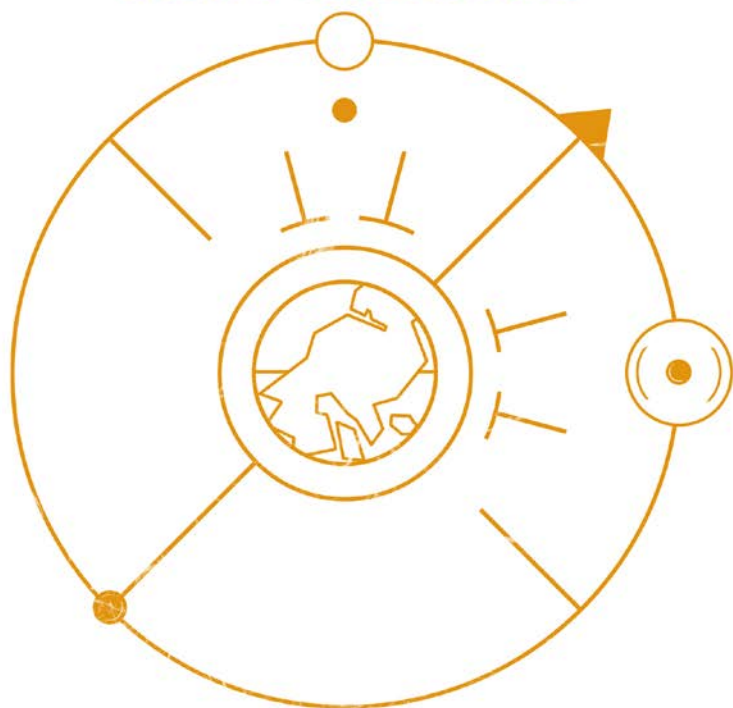
ORIGINS AND DESTINY THE UNRAVELLING

Book 1: *FOREBODING*



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L.A. DI PAOLO

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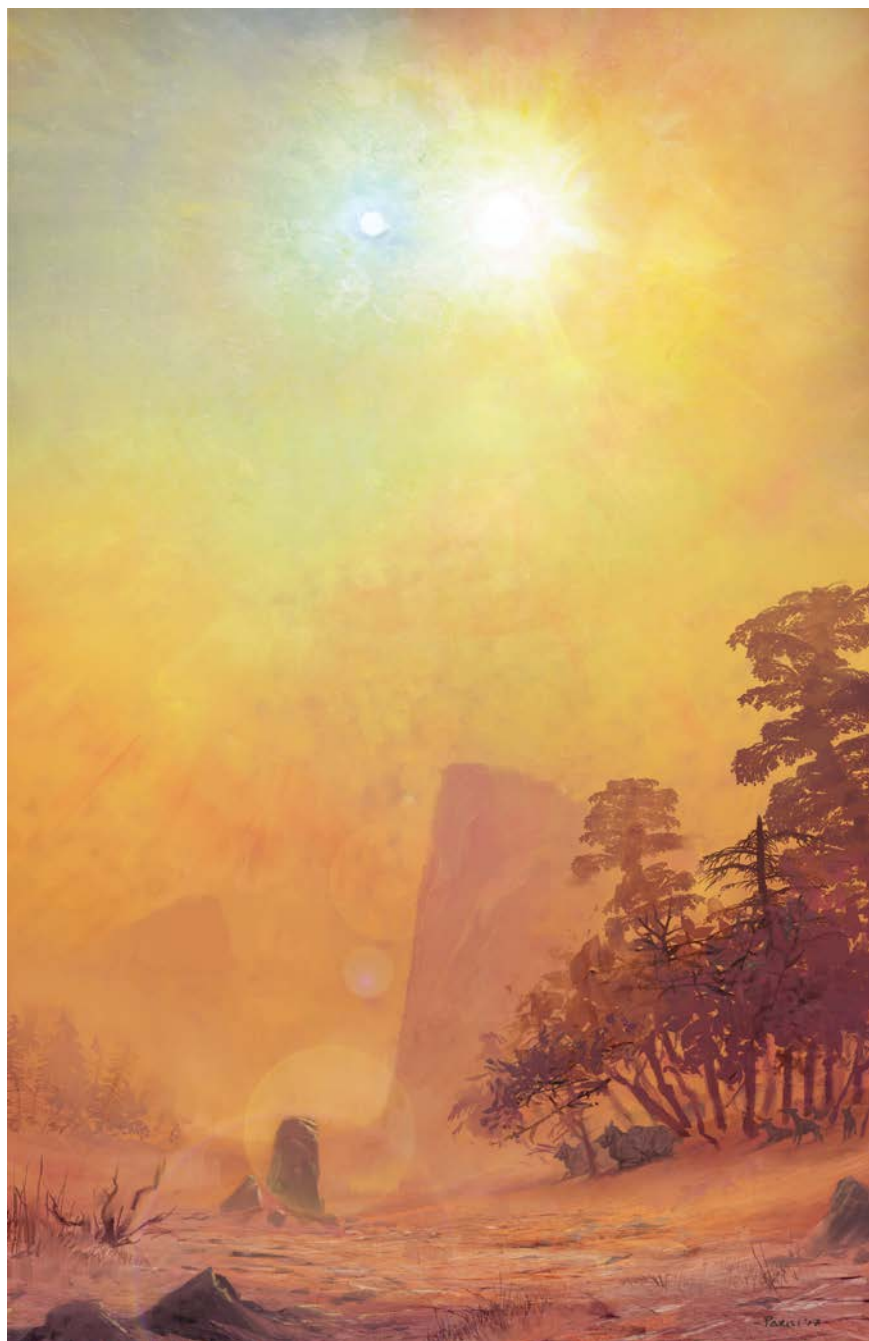
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I THE BOLINGARS

Toras's sudden screams shattered the dead calm of the midday hours. His skin was being split open and burned by the unforgiving rays of the twin suns which cared not who their victim was, or why Toras had lain there as they reached toward the zenith of their daily journey through the K'Taran sky.

But today was not the day the young Human would let the suns have his flesh. Screaming from the pain, heart racing from panic, mind numb from the heat, and his legs still unsteady, Toras shot-up despite it all and ran toward the woods as fast as he could.

Toras felt an immediate sense of relief upon entering the woods which enveloped him with cool, moist air. He looked down at himself and shook his head when he saw his skin covered with old, dried blood and dirt surrounding numerous, fresh blistering lesions on his limbs. He also felt throbbing wounds on his face. He realized that unless he washed and dressed his wounds quickly, they would surely become infected in this cool and humid environment, and he did not have the energy to fight an infection now.

Toras should have known better than to sleep out in the open, and he berated himself for it. But the exhaustion of the last few days had finally caught up with him, and upon landing in the middle of that clearing the night before, he had just thrown himself down onto the ground and drifted off into a deep sleep, trusting that he would wake before the suns reached their apex the following day. Unfortunately for him, he had not; the suns had begun to do their work and the storm, which always followed, could be seen in the distance approaching quickly.

Toras groaned as the novelty of the coolness passed and the pain resurfaced with renewed vigor. He shook his head and said aloud, "I need to clean all this, and bandage it...quickly."

Responding to a sudden realization, he said "Where's Scorch? Scorch!"

Some ten meters behind him, a curled-up form raised its head abruptly. When Toras shouted his name again, the proud creature stood on his four muscular limbs, sending a screech filled with concern, and started toward his master with a quickening pace.

When Toras saw the animal, it was with joy he said, "Scorch! For a moment, I thought you'd left me."

Scorch released short, tremulous rumbles, and backed away, resenting his master's insinuations.

Toras said in between groans “Come on, Scorch! I need the saddle...which I left on your back last night. I’m really sorry for that.”

Scorch sent an accusatory screech this time, but then approached his master to let him take the saddle. Toras thanked the animal with a pat on his smooth, ridged beak, grateful for having such a dependable companion. In fact, Scorch was his most loyal friend, taking him across fields and mountain tops, or unending miles of deadly waters, by day and by night, and in peacetime as in wartime without ever complaining. It was perhaps the fact that furan and prince had quite literally grown up side by side that bound them to one another so strongly, even more so than the utility provided by the furan to his master, or the food the latter provided in exchange.

As soon as the saddle was off, Scorch arched his back and made a strange moaning sound. Just then, Toras’s wounds fulminated with pain again, and he screamed. Scorch turned to his master with a worried look.

Toras said “I really need to take care of these wounds, Scorch... which means I first need to wash myself.”

Toras continued, “If I’m not mistaken, Aquilaqua¹ is about three hundred meters west of us, across the woods.”

Scorch nodded with the typical up-and-down motion of his head. Toras looked at him, wondering whether it would be fair to put the saddle back on him. But though he would have preferred to do just that, he decided to carry it instead. After all, this situation was entirely his fault. So, he picked up his burden, motioned Scorch to follow, and got going.

Ten minutes and a few more growls and curses later, Toras and Scorch stepped onto a pebbly beach. In front of them, a stream gurgled and splashed as it flowed over and between stones and boulders. Toras noticed a wide, calm pool, which looked like a good place to clean his body, not too far upstream of the rapids. He walked to it with an urgent pace, looking forward to finally washing and treating his wounds – and doing it before the storm hit. Having placed the saddle on a large dry boulder, he proceeded to undress, throwing his heavily soiled and bloodstained clothes onto the pebbly beach, and dove in. The prince swam to a sandbar, then stood and began gently rubbing and cleaning the fresh wounds, groaning every so often, while scrubbing the rest to remove the dirt and the old, dried blood.

Toras drew back in disgust when he noticed patches encrusted with a greenish cruor – the blood of the foul things that had attacked them the other night. The memory of the *Gnarlers* – that’s what he had decided to call them – assailed him suddenly and sent tremors through his body. The simple thought of them – the most grotesque and vile things he had ever faced – revived a fear in him which made him very uncomfortable, and he

shook his head to try and dispel the memory. The trick worked, if only for a moment, because as the foreign matter softened and washed away, an acrid smell invaded his nostrils and brought back memories of the foul creatures ripping through his men.

Toras grunted, and started rubbing harder and faster, eliciting new groans each time he got too close to a blister. When the water had eventually taken away all the impurity, diluting it until it was no more, his mind found some calm again and Toras turned on his back and just floated there for a while, letting the coolness of the water soothe his tired muscles. But, as he looked toward the sky, a dark cloud arriving in advance of the storm sent some strange shadows through the trees' branches which – combined with an unexpected, innocent screech from Scorch – brought back even more chilling memories, those of an impossible creature he had met recently, a terrible creature from the past known as *the Serpent*, though to most who saw it, it only looked like an abnormally large rokon². It was the encounter with this creature which had launched Toras on his deadly journey. The memory of the Serpent's blood-curdling screeches reverberated through Toras's bones and muscles just as the river swelled from an onrush of dangerous-looking waves, causing the prince to panic momentarily and to choke as water splashed into his nose.

Worried for his master, Scorch moved to jump into the water, but Toras stopped him with a shout as he began swimming back. Fortunately, the shore was only a few meters away, and despite the quickening flow, Toras got out safely.

When he walked out of the water, Scorch approached him and nudged him with his beak – his dark eyes worried again.

"I just had some unwelcome memories when you –" Toras was about to blame the furan for what happened, but he caught himself and said, "when the water rushed me, and I panicked for a moment. But thanks for your concern."

The furan replied with a deep purr and a nod, understanding from his master's tone and words that he was well, if in a bad mood.

"I think we should find somewhere safe to wait for the storm to pass. Come Scorch."

Toras hurried to his saddlebag, put on some clean clothes, stuffed the dirty ones in, winced as he put the saddle on his shoulder, and ran into the forest, with Scorch behind him.

After a few minutes, he found a large boulder which created a sort of cave, and they took cover underneath it just when the storm's winds, which ripped across the land as the Bolingars³ neared their end, tore a branch from a nearby tree. Fortunately for Toras and Scorch, today's Bolingars were not

as bad as they would be in another few days when they'd be right in the middle of the next Bolingar Fourth⁴.

Toras now did his best to dry his skin and dress his wounds, though the wind and dust made the latter somewhat difficult. As he applied the last bandage, he shook his head and said to himself "Damned stupid, is what I am. It might have been a fitting end for me to just die out there, turned to ashes by the suns, after all the men who lost their lives because of me this past fourth⁵!"

Toras spent some time thinking about all that had passed of late. After half an hour, when the winds quieted, Toras heard his stomach rumble a complaint. But he and Scorch needed to resume their journey, so they would have to satisfy their hunger with some dried mound grubs until they reached their destination.

The prince was on his way to Furan City, the capital of Alvinoria, to rejoin his eldest brother and father, and he still had some twenty hours to go. Fifteen days earlier, following the battle with the Serpent, he and thirty of his and his brother's guardians had left the fortress at Horn's Pass and flown south to look for the High King who had been missing. Toras had found his father, but most of the men who had accompanied him were now dead. Indeed, the day after leaving the fortress, the prince lost the first ten men when they made a detour to go defend the inhabitants of a village against the same rokon – or Serpent, or whatever it was – that had already attacked the fortress. A little later, due to a bad decision on his part – a very bad decision, which still knotted his stomach every time he thought about it – he lost another nine. And on the way back, after having found his father, another four men died at the hands of the vile *Gnarlers*. Only three men survived now, in addition to Toras.

The king, Toras hoped, was continuing safely toward Furan City. Indeed, when the *Gnarlers* attacked them, Toras begged his father to ride on toward the capital, while promising to catch up with him as soon as he and the men had dispatched the vile things. The king had resisted such an insulting request at first, but staying would have been foolish given that he was not dressed for combat, and that the company was being assailed by an unknown foe which had already killed a man and half of their mounts. So, with great reluctance, the king agreed to leave.

Aside from the grief that the loss of so many men still caused him, the equally large loss of furans angered and saddened Toras; they had not asked to be there, to die in incomprehensible agony. And yet, death had claimed them, as it had most of his and his brother's men.

The prince simply could not understand what was happening. He had never seen these creatures before and had only heard of one of them in stories people told each other around fires. All had had the same questions:

Where are these things coming from? Why are they here? A rokon which was not a rokon and which the Sisterhood referred to as “the Serpent”, and obscene creatures the guardians had had no name for until Toras had given them one. This had shaken the prince to the core of his bones, a sensation he had rarely felt. Only when he was ten, and had fallen off Scorch, had Toras ever felt such fear. Questions upon questions piled atop each other, none of which he had answers for.

The only survivors of Toras’s doomed company were one of his brother’s men, as well as his primus⁶ and one of his guardians. But given that their furans were dead, and that they were in no state to travel anyway, he had been forced to leave them behind at the southern end of the Colossi’s Peaks, two mornings ago. Primus Kendor had a festering wound on his torso, to which Toras had applied most of the salve a Lux Baiula⁷ had given him, hoping it would help heal the officer more quickly. The prince wasn’t sure, though, if the woman’s medicine was made for this type of wound. As for the other two men, they had several deep wounds and had been floored by a terrible fever; Toras and Kendor had done their best to sew and cauterize the gashes. As for himself, the prince had had his right arm cut by a *Gnarler’s* claw. However, and fortunately for him, the cut had been shallow, and his Halfling blood had been able to neutralize the venom.

After he swallowed the last of the dried mound grubs, Toras got up and prepared Scorch for departure. As he did so, he wondered whether the men were still alive; he hoped they were. In fact, he prayed they were, despite his agnosticism. Having checked the cinches one last time and finding them properly tightened, Toras hopped on Scorch, and without any visible cues, the furan took off. The wind felt good on Toras’s skin. He still winced every so often, but the pain was tolerable now. Twenty more hours to go, two days at most – less if Scorch could manage it.

¹ Aquilaqua: meaning “Water of the Aquilians.”

² A large reptilian flying predator from Mo’Tarkoth, a land to the north of the continent of Aquinos.

³ The Bolingars were the hottest hours of the K’Taran day, when the Blue Sun and Red Sun stood side by side, two fourths every month. The term Bolingars was an Alvinorian deformation of “Boiling Hours”. The Bolingars were accompanied by fierce storms.

⁴ A Bolingar Fourth was a fourth during which the two suns were side-by-side. Bolingar Fourths alternated with the In-Between Fourths during which the suns overlapped, with the smaller Blue sun or the larger Red sun in front; these fourths were cooler than the Bolingar Fourths.

⁵ A fourth was an 8-day period. The Alvinorian calendar had four fourths in a month, and ten months in a year. The fourths were based on the suns' cycle of rotation around each other, which lasted 32 days.

⁶ Primus was the highest rank in the Black Guard, after that of Lord Commander. In the Royal Guard, the rank of Primus followed that of High Captain and of High Lord Commander. A Primus's insignia consisted of a blue sun on red, and a red sun on blue, within a tall rectangle formed by blue and red embroidery.

⁷ Lux Baiula: Bearer of Light, a member of the Sisterhood of the Light.



II THE SERPENT

Toras had first met the Serpent at his fortress, the night before the Celebration of the Colossi, when it came looking for something...or someone. The howlers⁸ must have sensed its approach that evening because their low, continuous howls had pervaded the stronghold and nearby village of Horn's Pass. Some people simply believed that a very bad storm was coming, which would be a real shame with the festivities about to begin – they thought. However, there were those – the superstitious kind – who believed that something bad, perhaps evil, was approaching; they would be right, this time.

Despite the howlers, Toras and his brother Aithen were trying to relax in the dining hall. They had spent the day coordinating and helping with the arrangements to celebrate the liberation of the fortification by the Colossi during the Trionian War four hundred and sixty-seven years before, in 1333 CE. The most difficult part of the preparations was certainly the recreation of the battle scene in the village of Horn's Pass, just a kilometer south of the fortress. There, statues of the Rokothians and Zebulonians with wicked looks on their stone faces, of the glorified Colossi and Kynarians, and of Humans with their wondrous furans had been taken out of the barns and placed around the town green to represent the battle scene.

This was definitely hard work, especially with the statues of the Colossi weighing almost a ton each, but the men had performed it in song, sweating rivers all the while, as they did every year. The women, in the meantime, had busied themselves mending old costumes or sewing new ones similar to those worn by the Alvinorians and their allies during that war, as well as tired themselves butchering bleaters and cacklers for the feast. As for the kids, they had been left to their own devices to amuse themselves as they wished, running around, playing games of stones, or getting into one or another mischief. All in all, it had been a good and rewarding day, especially once all the statues had been set, and the brothers, heirs to the throne of Alvinor, were quite satisfied despite their fatigue.

Toras and his brother were the sons of High King Octavius I of House Coriolis, King of Alvinoria, and Overlord of the lands of Jarah, Pargah and Yerlah, and of Lady Darya of Laranir, a Kynarian noblewoman and priestess. They were thus Halflings.

Physically, both princes, and their younger brother Ori, exhibited a mixture of traits. From their Kynarian ancestry, they got height and a lean yet muscular build, a thin straight nose, and pale skin. From their Human ancestry, they received black hair and a hairy face. But their most

distinctive traits were the green eyes and eyebrows they received from their Coriolan lineage.

Despite their shared features, though, the two brothers were easily distinguishable from one another: the younger Toras had a squarer face as well as thicker bones and a heavier musculature owed to his more physically-active lifestyle, whereas Aithen sported a thinner build and smoother hands due to his more intellectual lifestyle. The brothers' mix of features combined to create figures which generally pleased Human girls, though not their Kynarian counterparts, and Toras often wondered why the latter appeared to disapprove of him and his brothers when they visited Kynaria.

Now, though the princes shared a physical resemblance, they were nothing alike temperamentally. Indeed, while Aithen was a thinker and strategist, his brother was a doer and sharp tactician. Toras also had a more difficult time than Aithen managing the conflict between their introverted Kynarian nature and their fierce and extraverted human disposition, a difficulty which resulted in a volatile temperament that often troubled those who did not know him.

Notwithstanding his shortcomings, though, Toras was, at only twenty-two years of age, Lord Commander of the fortress at Horn's Pass, which served as a barrier between Rokoth, to the west, and Lower Alvinor, to the east, where the capital city of his father's kingdom was located. The prince defended the pass with a force of one thousand men, known as the Black Guard, a guard which was – in the eyes of its members and even of some outsiders – as formidable as the Royal Guard itself, despite its smaller size. Whether this was true or not, it was the source of continuous friction between the two guards despite, or perhaps because of the princes' kinship.

But there was one period of the year during which the members of the Royal and the Black guards enjoyed and even sought each other's company, and that was during the five days of the Celebration of the Colossi. And this year had been no different with men of both guards laboring together and challenging each other with wide grins and good-hearted laughs – for the most part – all throughout the preparations.

Some forty minutes before the Red Sun set, as the soldiers were sitting for the night's pre-feast meal, and as Toras was pouring some more wine into his brother's cup, a jarring screech came from the north and startled everyone in and around the fortress. This screech was followed by several more ear-piercing cries, which alarmed everyone, and people looked up in the beginning darkness, wondering what was coming.

The princes put down their wine cups and ran toward the wide balcony that extended from the fortress's dining hall. From there, they could only see the jagged cliffs of the mountain upon which the shrieks continued to

reverberate. Aithen, perhaps responding to an instinct, said with some urgency in his voice, “Toras, I think we should put the guardians on alert.”

Toras gave him a questioning look and said, “You’re worried too? What with the howlers baying so strangely this past hour, and now these screeches? They sound like the shrieks of a rokon, but no rokon I’ve met has ever made me nervous, though I do hate them, and I’ve dealt with my share of them coming through the Pass.”

“I do not think it’s a rokon, Toras. And I do not know why, but there is something about these screeches that sounds wrong.”

Toras nodded in agreement and called the guardians posted at the entrance of the dining hall.

Two young men, with barely any facial hair, came in to take their commander’s orders. The assignment of such young men to guard the prince was a sign of the peaceful times. But Aithen remembered that more seasoned soldiers had been posted there before.

Addressing the taller of the two guardians, Toras said, “Parthos, please ask Primus Kendor as well as High Captain Harlion to put the men on alert. The High Lord Commander and I will be out in a few moments.”

As the young soldiers stepped out, a stunning woman appeared in the hall. She had long, wavy reddish hair and deep blue eyes. A purple cloak hung over her shoulders, covering a dark blue dress tied at the waist by a vivid purple sash with a piece of a red sash sewed onto it; the colors of her attire seemed to be made to dazzle and command the attention of people. The woman also had the allure of a person used to giving orders with her narrowly-spaced, high-arching eyebrows, and firm straight lips.

The woman was Elyana Lux Baiula, advisor to the High King and a member of a powerful and ancient Order, known as *Lucis Sororum Societas*, or Order of the Sisters of the Light. Its members, known as *Lux Baiulae*, were gifted with a biology that gave them abilities well beyond those of ordinary people, some of whom looked at them in awe, while the rest looked at them with a deep distrust. The Order’s head, known as *Magna Mater*⁹, was the next most powerful – if not the most powerful – leader in the civilized parts of *Terrae Regis*.

The woman entered Toras’s chambers without invitation, stopped in front of the princes and said, “Aithen, Toras, you must let me handle this!”

Toras started, “What—!”

“You have no idea what is coming, and I have no time to explain. Do not try to argue with me, Toras. Follow me; we need to organize the defenses.”

The princes eyed each other uneasily. Toras shook his head and caught up with the Lux Baiula who was already a few steps ahead of them.

“Elyana, what is going on? It’s not a rokon coming, *is it?*”

Without breaking her stride, the woman made to answer but then told the prince to just follow.

With an indignant tone, Toras said, “Elyana, I’m Lord Commander of this fortress, and I need to know—”

The Lux Baiula paused for a brief moment, and looked the prince straight in the eyes, “Toras, you are right. But something is coming which may very well destroy us all, so our priority is to get the fortress ready.”

“*My* priority will be to get the fortress ready once *I* know what is going on!”

With a grim look on her face, Elyana replied calmly, “Toras, you will not be able to defend the fortress against this – if I’m right. I will explain everything once the men are assembled.”

And with that, Elyana resumed her frenetic pace down the hallway.

Toras looked back at his approaching brother, shook his head again and ran after Elyana.

As they came down the large black steps of the hold, on either side of the Lux Baiula, the princes noticed the confused looks of the civilians, and the purposeful motions of the soldiers as they got their weapons ready and moved to their assigned posts under their commanders’ barks, despite their own misgivings.

When he noticed the princes come down, Primus Kendor started toward them, but Elyana Lux Baiula held up her hand, stopping the officer in his tracks. When she reached the bottom of the steps, she proceeded to call the princes’ respective ranking officers to herself. The men walked over with questioning frowns, but with calm and assurance, hiding the inner worries spurred by the Lux Baiula’s taking of command. Something terrible must be approaching. But what could it be? The cries were those of a rokon, weren’t they?

“High Captain Harlion, Primus Kendor, you will follow my orders. Please assemble your men immediately.”

When the men hesitated, Toras and Aithen nodded their heads. The officers gave a nod in return and did as the Lux Baiula requested.

It took the soldiers a few minutes to come together in the fortress’s plaza. Once gathered, the Lux Baiula wasted no time and gave all a description of the physical attributes of what they were going to face. Incomprehension flooded the men’s faces. All the members of the Black Guard had seen rokons before, as had many of Aithen’s Guard, and no rokon had been as large as what the Lux Baiula had just described. Moreover, the rokons they had encountered had never been the cause of such high alarm that two guard units had needed to be mobilized to defend against it.

Although he too was worried about this approaching rokon, something nagged at the younger prince. So, he approached the Lux Baiula and asked quietly, “Elyana, how can you know the physical characteristics of this rokon? It’s still kilometers away, and I know you *cannot* see things from a distance. There’s something else you’re not telling us.”

Just then, another hair-raising screech pierced the darkening skies, as if to reinforce the prince’s statement. The few civilians in the fortress, standing huddled to the side of the soldiers, jumped out of their skins, while the soldiers remained outwardly clam but were starting to wonder whether the Lux Baiula might not be rightly concerned.

Elyana knew Toras was right to demand to know more, so she motioned the High Prince and the two captains over and began, “My Princes, captains, listen closely, and do not repeat any of what I am about to tell you to anyone else; I do not want to paralyze your men or the civilians with thoughts of the supernatural. I am telling *you* because you should all be able to handle the truth, and having the information will help you stay safer. But there is no time for questions, so you will need to simply trust what I say, and then do as I ask.”

The four men nodded, more or less reluctantly, and Elyana proceeded to tell them what she knew of the *Serpent* – the name by which the supernatural rokon approaching the fortress was known in the Sisterhood. She told them of the legends, and the facts both, because she needed to make certain that they were ready to face the reality of it, as well as control what their imaginations might invent once they saw the creature. All four men stared at the Lux Baiula in disbelief, shocked and muted, but for various reasons: Toras and Kendor couldn’t believe such a thing really existed, while Aithen and Harlion couldn’t believe such a thing could have come back.

The Serpent was supposed to have died some six hundred years ago, at the Dark Battle, which meant that most humanoids only knew of it as a mythical monster – a terrible, frightful creature mothers told their children about to convince them to go to sleep when they argued. But the Lux Baiulae, and those few who were taught history by them, knew the Serpent to have been a real creature, one which had ravaged humanity in the service of an even greater evil, before it finally came to its end.

The various books in the Sisterhood’s library described the Serpent more or less consistently. The most detailed accounts had been pieced together by chance and science, and described the Serpent as measuring a good ten meters from wingtip to wingtip. It had five-centimeter long¹⁰, razor-sharp, forward-facing teeth covering the whole of its body – teeth with which it ripped the flesh of its victims. The snout had two frighteningly long fangs, and, based on wound and cadaver analysis, it also

had solid, sharp edges with which it crushed its prey's bones behind the fangs. All scholarly authors agreed that the Serpent fed on humanoids as well as on the occasional furan, while lay authors often described the creature as feeding exclusively on beautiful but impure maidens – or on disobedient children.

The most closely-guarded books of the Sisterhood also told of some unnatural abilities the Serpent seemed to possess. By some accounts, the creature had the ability to kill a humanoid by tearing away his or her soul, which soul could be seen resisting with terror, fighting to remain within its body. But the evidence accumulated by the Sisterhood's scholars presented a somewhat different reality, having more to do with some kind of energy that the Serpent used to attack its victim's brain and caused it to quite literally fry. This cooking of the brain led to the release of smoke and ashes, which the uneducated interpreted as the soul being pulled out through the victim's shrinking eyes. A few decades after the Dark Battle, a humorous scholar even coined a phrase for these attacks: Dark Energy Brain Surge Attack, or DEBSA. Despite the neat, natural explanation though, the supernatural beliefs about the Serpent had persisted in many circles because no one in the Sisterhood had been able to recreate the process, given that Lux Baiulae were barred from intentionally killing eyed organisms for experimental purposes.

The rokon, which the Serpent resembled – and was perhaps related to – was not as vicious as its evil counterpart and did not often feed on humanoids. It was also much smaller, measuring some six meters from wing tip to wing tip. The lizard was known to originate from the land of Mo'Tarkoth, to the northeast of the continent of Aquinos. It would kill its prey – typically a bleater – by knocking it over with full force to break its spine. It would then fly over it to tear its flesh with the enzyme-releasing teeth that covered its wings and body, thereby tenderizing the meat. A few moments later, it would fly by the agonizing animal, latch onto it and carry it off to its nest where its young ones would feast on the now tender flesh.

When the Lux Baiula was done describing the Serpent, the four men just continued to stare at her in disbelief. The princes were the first to shake themselves out of their shock, and asked almost as one, “What do you wish us to do, Lux Baiula?”

Elyana gave the princes what seemed to be a smile of gratitude, and replied, “High Captain, Primus, I need you to gather all the villagers within the fortress. Ask the men among the civilians to arm themselves, and have everyone else sent into the mountain. I need all the defenders – soldiers and civilians alike – at the ready within twenty minutes. Most importantly, instruct everyone to remain within three hundred meters of the central fountain. Aside from this, you may organize the various corps of the two

Guards, as well as the civilians, as you see fit to defend against aerial attack...and have the tall lanterns around the fortress lit so that we may better see our foe.”

The captains nodded and were about to execute the Lux Baiula’s orders, when Elyana asked, “Furans and vorans¹¹ are in their night stables, I assume?”

The night stables were stables built into the mountain itself. The Black Guard kept its mounts there at night to protect them from theft as well as from the occasional predator.

Primus Kendor replied affirmatively.

“Good. You must know that I will not be able to assist in the offense as I will be solely focused on protecting the defenders, and the princes in particular. To do that, I will establish a nebula¹² over the fortress to shield everyone from the Serpent’s mental attacks,” and in a rare moment of public self-doubt she added, “At least I hope I can make this Binding work.”

That caused the princes and the captains alike to eye each other nervously.

“You must also know that I will not be able to protect anyone, except the princes, from physical harm. But I will protect *you*, my Princes, with Bound Shields¹³.”

Kendor, always questioning things, like his commander, asked, “Lux Baiula. Why the three-hundred-meter radius around the fountain?”

“Simply because that is as far as I may be able to extend the nebula, Primus.”

The officer nodded.

Harlion asked, “Is that all, Lux Baiula?”

“It is, except for this: your men may see things tonight which they will not comprehend. It will therefore be important for the two of you to keep moving around the fortress to maintain your men’s spirits. You are seasoned officers, and I trust you can keep your doubts in check to preserve order even in the most desperate of situations.”

The captains nodded crisply to acknowledge her trust and went to do as commanded.

Meanwhile, Elyana gave the royal brothers some advice too, “As for you, my Princes, I would prefer you remained in one spot as it would be easier for me to keep you shielded that way. But the villagers will need reassurance too, and I do not believe they will respond to the military commanders as well as they will to you, so it would be helpful for you to go around the fortress to strengthen their courage when it starts failing. Just be careful, and do not let anything you see startle you; it would not help boost anyone’s confidence. Most importantly, be sure to stay within three

hundred meters of the fountain!” Then, she added with a finger on her red lip, as if speaking to herself, “In fact, it would be helpful if the limit could be delineated on the ground.”

Toras replied, “I will see to it that the safe zone is clearly marked, Elyana.”

“Very well, thank you Toras. And be careful, both of you.”

With that, Aithen and Toras left to see to the organization of the villagers who had started flocking into the citadel at the sound of the alarm.

Elyana looked toward the soldiers and noticed the questions on the men’s faces as their officers transmitted her orders. It was clear they did not know what it was that she expected from her tactic, but they obeyed their officers anyway. Satisfied, Elyana walked toward the central fountain. Standing next to it, she would be completely exposed, but from that position, she would be able to cover most of the fortress with an invisible nebula – if she was able to generate it. Indeed, she had never done it before, but the Binding came to her along with the memories of the Serpent, when she first recognized its cry. This knowledge was the result of the Memory Transfer she had received soon after becoming a Lux Baiula, an age ago it seemed. But she hoped against hope that the disruption field would be able to save the defenders from the horrible brain attack the Serpent was known to have used on its victims so long ago.

These memories also told her that many would die tonight. Yet, what other choice did she have? Perhaps, she thought, if the Serpent attempted to attack *her* with the DEBSA – how strange that Sisters from so long ago had already learned to coin acronyms – she might know what Binding it was using, and might then be able to create a more effective shield against it, if she survived the attack herself.

If the Serpent attacks me, I will survive, and I will protect the princes and the men.

Even if her nebula worked though, she could not keep the defenders from being terribly wounded or swooped up by the Serpent, unless she killed it, which was unlikely even for a Sister of her strength. She knew her energy would be strained beyond anything she had experienced in a long time because of the need to shield the fortress with the disruption field, while simultaneously protecting Aithen and Toras with a Bound Shield, even as they moved about the compound.

I wish there existed a way to give them the knowledge of the commanders who fought the Serpent in the Dark Battle. But K’Tara help them, the princes and their officers are just going to have to rely on their skills and present experience to fend-off the creature.

That night, then, all the men able to fight – civilians and soldiers alike – took part in defending the fortress and the village of Horn’s Pass that lay just outside the stronghold. About two thirds of the defenders were soldiers, and the rest were blacksmiths, farriers, peddlers, farmers, and other civilians. Fortunately, most had some experience with bows as they used them to hunt or to protect their herds or flocks from wild furans, as well as from the occasional rokon and other predators that roamed these wild regions of the kingdom.

As for the rest, women and children and all those unable to fight, they had been taken by the village healers into the caves of the great fortification, which had been built out of the mountain itself. The caves smelled strongly of vorans and furans, which brought a grimace on the healers’ faces as they pressed people forward. Some people complained about having been forced to abandon the cooking food, which everyone, including the guardians, had planned to enjoy together after the long and tiring day. Fortunately, there was food aplenty in the caverns – though it may not be fresh and warm – and there was more water than could be drunk thanks to the underground river which ran through the caves, so the complaints eventually subsided, especially when the creature’s cries increased in intensity.

Just before the Serpent arrived, Elyana – who had spent the last few minutes stilling her thoughts against the knowledge that many would die that night – clapped her hands and caused an unnaturally loud sound to reverberate throughout the citadel. Everyone turned toward her as if by force, and with a voice that carried just as unnaturally as had the sound of the clap, she gave the men her final advice. She urged the defenders to remain calm despite the great fear they might feel, and to focus on hitting the Serpent’s head and wings, always the weakest points on a well-armored, flying creature. The soldiers nodded, while the civilians stood there nervously, either tapping fingers on weapons or eyeing each other with fear. Dread permeated the fortress as if it were a physical thing.

Then it came. Many men simply froze, surprised and shocked at the sight of the gigantic lizard, while many of the younger ones could be seen turning toward their princes as if to ask, “How are we supposed to fight this?” Elyana also saw what seemed to be defiance in some men’s expressions. They appeared to be thinking “*Come, come you wretched thing! I don’t know what you want with us, but I’ll fight you to the death!*”

But the shrieks, the shrieks were now so loud and penetrating that they were even heard by those hiding deep within the caves. Babies started crying to the top of their lungs, and their mothers could do nothing except huddle them closer, while trying to contain their own desperate fears that

they were all going to die. Many, especially the older women, dropped to their knees and started praying to the Originator and the Founders.

Along the citadel's walls, a few villagers – unable to wait for the officers' signal and fearing that if they waited a moment longer they would die – released the first arrows on the Serpent. The creature responded at once with an angry shriek, diving toward the peasants who had shot those arrows. Seeing this, Harlion and Kendor gave the archers the order to shoot.

In the beginning, no one succeeded in lodging any projectile in the furious lizard. The civilians, spread among the soldiers, did their best to hit the Serpent, but their fear and the resulting tremors sent the arrows meters from their target. The soldiers also missed the Serpent initially, unused as they were to the deflecting winds it created with its wings.

But the guardians, split into archers and lancers, with the latter arranged along the high walls and the former along the lower ramparts, were better disciplined and equipped, and quicker to adjust their techniques, and they began hitting the Serpent. There were no shouts of joy, however. Instead, they stared with incredulity as the arrows simply fell to the ground after hitting the Serpent's body.

Toras was just as shocked. The guardian next to him said “This is no ordinary rokon, Lord Commander, on my life it isn't.”

Elyana, not wanting to weaken the nebula or the Bound Shields around the princes, resisted the urge to support the defenders with her own attacks.

After a few more, unlucky volleys by archers and lancers, the High Prince was finally able to pierce the Serpent's wings with an arrow each. The men shouted with joy. Seeing his brother not too far from him, Aithen shouted “The first true hit, Toras!”

Was Aithen mocking him? Toras just about hit the creature in the right eye, but it ricocheted off the scales just behind it; Toras looked at Aithen, infuriated at having missed, especially after his brother had had a successful hit.

A moment later, though, Toras succeeded as well, putting an arrow through the Serpent's left wing. Even a few soldiers got their lances to successfully pierce the Serpent's limbs, tearing through the right wing again. The Serpent's flight suddenly became jerky, and it gave an angry screech.

With all these wounds, the men were sure the rokon would slow down, but the lizard just shot itself upward, and then glided upon the winds for a minute. Could it be mending itself with some unnatural power? Toras and Aithen gave each other worried looks, refusing to acknowledge what they knew they must both be thinking.

Then the Serpent resumed its attack, taking several lives as it smashed into the citadel's walls, sending men crashing to their deaths below. As

Elyana had predicted, the fighters' courage – especially that of the civilian defenders – began to fail in the face of such an unstoppable foe. So, Aithen decided that it was time he and his brother go around the fortress to shore up the men's resolution. He called Toras and motioned with his head toward some farmers who had dropped their weapons despondently. Toras nodded and went to them, but not before yelling at his men to keep shooting at the creature, and yelling at the squires to refill the quivers.

As Aithen came to a middle-aged villager and what must have been his three teenage boys – all sitting with their backs to the wall and looking forlorn – he felt some anger well up within him. Here was a man who, because of his own fear and doubts, was now keeping three others from fighting! Aithen went down on his haunches to be at a level with the peasant, and said, “Good man, I need you to keep fighting. I need you all to keep fighting. I know it seems bad, but –”

The graying villager suddenly raised his head and asked angrily how they were expected to fight this monster. But when he saw the prince's surprise and disappointment, he felt deeply embarrassed, and apologized, promising to try.

Aithen helped the man to his feet, and that simple act gave the peasant more courage than words. He picked up his bow, called his sons, and all four returned to their posts more resolute than before. The prince continued his round, encouraged by this small success.

Elyana, alone in the center of it all, her face illuminated by the torches surrounding the fountain, could be seen sweating and exhausting herself to maintain the nebula above the fortress, as well as the shields around the princes. It seemed that the disruption field was working as she hadn't yet noticed anyone keel over inexplicably, or anyone falling to his knees in prayer at the sight of a “spirit” leaving his neighbor's body. As for the Bound Shields, they had already saved the princes' lives a few times, deflecting large, skull-crushing fragments of stone that the Serpent had torn from the fortress's ramparts. Aithen and Harlion turned her way every so often, wondering how much longer she could hold the shields.

Another hour passed, with hits and misses, but despite the best everyone did, despite the numerous wounds that had been inflicted on the Serpent, it could not be stopped, least of all killed. Every so often, it would fly to the top of the cliff facing the citadel, and rest. Every time it did that, Aithen stopped, breathed a couple of slow breaths, aimed for the head and shot an arrow. The prince should have been able to hit the mark, but each time the Serpent moved its head just before the projectile hit. It was as if it knew Aithen had released an arrow. All the prince could do was growl in anger.

After a few moments of rest, the Serpent would descend again to continue its attack with renewed fury.

By now, the creature had completely destroyed the outer northwestern tower of the fortress; three sweeps by it, hitting it with its tail as if with a gigantic sledgehammer, were enough to destroy the Bind-reinforced tower and send a dozen men to their deaths. Parts of the village were also ablaze after the Serpent tore through some homes where lanterns had been left burning. The animals – mooers, bleaters, and trumpeters¹⁴, as well as the howlers – were either dead, dying, or had gotten away. It was a good thing that the Guards' mounts were stabled within the protective walls of the mountain or they probably would have suffered the same fate as that of the villagers' animals.

To everyone's surprise, the Serpent suddenly let out a cry of pain and was seen tumbling toward the ground. Men on the inner ring of the northern wall cheered and shouted compliments. One of them had put a long arrow right next to the Serpent's wing joint. But as unexpectedly as it had tumbled, it rose back up, having pulled the arrow out of its limb, and it attacked the fortress with even more anger and viciousness. It descended on five men, four soldiers and a villager, and tore them to shreds with a spiraling motion. One of the men was hooked by the teeth on the Serpent's chest so deeply that he got stuck to it, causing the Serpent to jerk and slow down. The *thing* shook itself violently, unhooking the body and hurling it to the ground right next to Elyana. Blood and flesh splattered onto her; if she felt revulsion, the woman did not show it.

The rokon now flew up the cliff and stopped on a ledge to rest another moment. When it descended, it let out a screech so violent and deafening that many men fell to their knees from sheer pain and started to weep like children. Few were those who had ever faced anything remotely like this before.

Elyana, seeing the desperate situation, felt anger well-up inside of her. Questions and thoughts flooded her mind *Why is this abomination here!? What does it want? I need to put an end to this or else we will all be annihilated before the highnight comes. But I am so tired. Still, I must hold on. I cannot let it win, and I must protect the princes...I must hold on...* The Light Bearer finally decided that it was time to take some risks and begin attacking the Serpent. Yet, if she did, she would likely weaken the nebula and Bound Shields. Hoping to prevent them from completely dissolving, she focused on her metabolism and accumulated a quantity of sweet salt around the centers in her body that sustained the shields. That done, she took a deep breath and started drawing to herself the atoms from the air around her to form them into a dense, javelin-like fire bolt. Men

turned around and gazed in awe at the apparition of the bright, dangerous-looking form in front of the Lux Baiula.

Elyana launched the projectile. The fire bolt jolted toward its target with a burning hiss. To everyone except Elyana and the princes who also had enhanced vision, the bolt was there instantly. But regardless of the apparent duration of the bolt's flight, the result was clear to everyone who saw it vanish the moment it hit the Serpent.

Elyana's heart almost sank when she saw several men suddenly drop to their knees, without apparent cause. She realized then that her fears had come true, that the nebula had indeed weakened when she shifted her focus.

Men screamed to the top of their lungs, with their hands on their temples and in total terror, trying to resist something unseen. Fortunately for them, some might say, the agony did not last long, and after a few moments the poor men fell over completely, dead. Those standing next to them were gripped by a fear unlike any they had every felt before and froze where they stood, forgetting even the Serpent.

Elyana reinforced the nebula a little more, and then refocused her mind on the Serpent, despite something inside her knowing that she had just made a grave mistake and men were dying a horrible death because of it. *So long as it doesn't take the princes*, she thought. She formed new fire bolts, and launched them on the Serpent, ignoring the death and the sense of doom that hung around her. But the bound-bolts just continued to vanish the moment they touched the creature.

So, Elyana began launching enormous fire whorls, which she filled with flammable matter she picked up from ground. The flames surrounded the Serpent completely. This time, the Serpent let out cries of pain, as the scorching particles of debris cut and seared its skin. Cheers rose from the fortress's defenders in response to Elyana's first successful strike and the pause it caused in the Serpent's attacks. Elyana, herself, felt a tiny sense of hope arising within her. But the Serpent healed its wounds the moment Elyana stopped hitting it to catch her breath, and it resumed its attacks, this time spiraling through a dozen unprotected civilians and tearing them to shreds.

Elyana became desperate at the sight of her failure, and against her better judgement and despite the danger to herself, she decided to gather as much energy as she could handle, wishing only to blast the Serpent to the Netherworlds. As the flow of energy increased, her hair stuck out from her head and her face became as hard as marble. The woman became luminous as a faint bluish glow started radiating from her body. Soldiers and civilians turned toward her, mesmerized by what they were seeing, whether they had seen it before, or not.

But just when she was ready to unleash a colossal thunder-strike, a weapon of the Bind rarely used in battle because of the difficulty one had in aiming it accurately, the Serpent stopped itself in midair, turned toward the Lux Baiula, and fixed its gaze straight upon her. Arrows and lances stopped flying and all in the fortress, including Toras and Aithen stood transfixed. It was as if something momentous was about to happen; none dared speak, none dared ask a question and none moved – even the Red Sun seemed to have stopped descending to illuminate this crucial moment – but not a minute later, they saw the Lux Baiula falter in the middle of the plaza as an inconceivable amount of energy rushed from her, like water through a broken dam, and blasted the mountain wall. Rock shattered over a stretch at least thirty meters wide and blocks of stone came crashing down within as well as without the fortress. Dozens of men were hit by the stone and several were crushed where they stood.

The princes, who were standing next to each other, saw an enormous rock racing toward them, while another large stone sped toward Elyana. Toras and Aithen jumped back reflexively and fell, and at that moment they knew they would die. But the rock shattered two meters above them, stopped by the Bound Shields, which were evidently and fortunately for them, still holding.

As for the Lux Baiula, she was on the ground, wounded by a piece of rock which had hit her right leg when she let her own shield dissolve following the momentary panic she felt when the Serpent stopped above her. Nevertheless, she got back on her feet, and paused a moment to think. As no ideas came, she restored the nebula, and with another brain-draining effort, pulled moisture out of the ground to flood the citadel with a thick fog, hoping that it would give her a few minutes to regain her composure and think about her options. To Elyana's immense relief, when she heard the Serpent next, the beat of its wings and the sound of its screeches grew distant as it flew back to the top of the cliff.

Taking a welcome breath, a breath she had been holding for far too long it seemed, the Lux Baiula pushed away the desperation that had gotten the better of her earlier, and started running through countless tactics, looking for something that would keep the defenders safe while she *tried* to bring the Serpent down. But not even her Transferred Memories offered any useful solutions.

While Elyana racked her brains for something, some course of action that would allow them to defeat the Serpent, Harlion was running as fast as he could, bumping into men because of the fog, and jumping over them at the last moment or pushing them out of his way to get to the princes. Aithen, his blood drained from the near miss, was helping his brother get up when the High Captain arrived, panting.

Breathing heavily, Harlion said, “My lords, I thought that was the end of you.”

Aithen replied, “We are fine, Harlion, but what of Elyana?”

“Well, I saw her still standing near the central fountain just before this strange fog blanketed the fortress, and the *Originator burn me* if I know how she hasn’t collapsed yet. But Your Highness, from the look of her, I know the Lux Baiula won’t be able to sustain her efforts much longer, and our arrows and lances are of no use against the Serpent. We need something else!”

Aithen nodded his grim agreement and asked, “What do you propose, Captain?”

“My Prince, I would like to take some of our men to the inner southeastern tower.” Aithen was about to respond but let him continue.

“I know the tower is beyond the reach of the nebula, my Prince, but from there, we’ll be able to use the arbalests and hopefully kill this wretched thing as you and I did the varagoths¹⁵ so long ago. That is, as long as this fog lifts.”

Toras gave the officer a dubious look and said, “High Captain, those arbalests have not been used in ages, and I doubt there remains anyone who —”

“I’m sorry Lord Commander, but *I* do have men here who can operate the weapons.”

Toras frowned and was about to reply when a young squire arrived, panting.

Addressing himself to Aithen, he said, “My Prince, I have an urgent message from the Lux Baiula.”

Aithen asked more brusquely than he intended, “Well, what is it, Kil?”

Kildare was the prince’s squire. He was a young Human of eighteen, the son of a minor lord northwest of the capital. Aithen had taken him on as squire a year ago, at the king’s request, to thank the young man’s father for his support in a dispute. He had wild blond hair on his head, the beginning of a mix of blond and black facial hair on his visage. He also had a slender body with strong legs, but arms still in need of development due to the fact that he did not like training with the sword much, but preferred to develop his intellect, and spent much time learning everything there was to know about vorans and furans, as well as about leadership and the arts of war, when not running from one place to another to carry out his master’s orders. Aithen was fond of the young man, though he did not like the idea of taking on a squire at first. But Kildare was meticulous, always taking extremely good care of Aithen’s riding tack; was always ready and prompt whenever Aithen called; and he did have a bright mind which the prince

appreciated most of all, though he wished the boy was not as reserved and shy as he was.

Kildare straightened and replied, “The Lux Baiula wishes me to inform you that she has created this fog so that she may rest a few minutes and give us a chance to reorganize our defenses. She said that arrows and lances will not do anymore, but neither will her...*Bindings*. She suggests we use the...”

Toras cut him off, said, “The arbalests? How would she think of *them*?”

The messenger raised his brows and shrugged his shoulders.

Toras continued, “Well, no matter. High Captain Harlion has just had the same thought.” Then, turning to the captain, he said, “Very well, Captain. It appears the arbalests are it. How can I help?”

“I need the varagoth nets, and bolts for the arbalests.”

“We have both, Captain. The net is in the armory, and the bolts are already by the arbalests. I will have someone bring the net; but it’s heavy. My men will need a few minutes.”

“Thank you, Lord Commander. I have someone who can carry two nets while sprinting up the tower. If you don’t mind, I’ll send him to fetch what you have.”

Toras blinked in wonder. Varagoth nets weighed near one hundred and fifty pounds each! How can a man carry two up a hundred stairs? But he said, “Very well. Anything else?”

“Yes. I need the Lux Baiula to draw the Serpent’s attention such that it presents its belly or flank to us right before we release the bolt. I will give her this signal when we are ready.” Harlion made a sign with his arm.

Aithen replied, “I will have Kil take the message back to her, Captain.”

Aithen continued, “Be careful, my friend. And at the first sign of trouble, get out of the tower with your men and return to the safe zone.”

The High Captain gave both princes a nod, as well as a courageous but knowing smile and left as fast as he had come.

Aithen followed him with his eyes until the fog swallowed him, which was but a few paces away. He felt pride at having such a brave and wise man by his side, and he hoped Harlion’s plan would work and that the man would not fall prey to the Serpent.

Toras still had a doubting frown on his face, but it seemed High Captain Harlion knew what he was doing, so he decided to trust the old soldier and turned his attention to his own men after giving his brother a parting sign.

Having watched Toras disappear in the fog, Aithen turned to Kildare, who was still waiting for the reply, and said, “Kil, run back to Elyana to let her know I’ve gotten her message, and that I need her to lift the fog in ten minutes, at which point she should watch for the High Captain’s signal. The captain will be in the inner southeastern tower. Tell her that when she

sees this signal,” and Aithen repeated Harlion’s gesture, “she is to distract the rokon such that it presents its belly or flank to the tower. That is all, now go!”

The squire saluted and ran to relay the prince’s instructions to Elyana.

Meanwhile, Harlion was gathering his men, his heart pumping hard from the frenetic running. Because of the fog, he accidentally knocked over a few men, the last of whom was one of his officers, Secundus¹⁶ Loris, cousin to the princes. The man began to curse but excused himself when he realized who had bumped him.

With obvious urgency in his tone, Harlion said, “My apologies Secundus, but where are the twins?!”

“On the second level, Captain, toward the southern end of the inner wall,” replied the officer, pointing toward the location of the men, though there was nothing to see through the dense mist.

“Perfect!” was all that Harlion said, as he resumed his breakneck race across the fortress to gather his men. The twins, Mekiir and Urlis, were from Upper Alvinor. They weren’t tall fellows, but they had a frightening musculature which Harlion was going to put to proper use now. As soon as their commander arrived and asked them to follow, they turned around, picked up their lances and started after Harlion who was already running to get a third man on the northwestern side of the inner wall.

Kemir was from Shadin City. He also boasted a musculature as frightening as that of the twins, but to the contrary of the brothers, he was also a very tall fellow. And most of all, he was experienced with nets that required five ordinary men to handle and cast, having grown-up on fishing ships to help his father hunt sea leviathans, creatures eight to ten times larger than the Serpent.

“Kemir, I need you to get the varagoth net and carry it to the inner southeastern tower. Secundus Loris will show you where it is. You will load it onto an arbalest and use it to capture the beast if we can’t kill it. Hurry!”

Kemir responded only with a vicious twinkle in his eye and left to find Secundus Loris.

Harlion then sprinted to the tower with the twins. *We have to be there on time. We have to make it. The Lux Baiula will probably not hold on much longer, and we must find a way to destroy that wretched creature before she’s completely drained and falls down unconscious or dead, because if that happens, we are all doomed.*

It took Harlion and the twins two minutes to cover the five hundred meters between the northwestern wall and the top of the southeastern tower, which was a real feat for the aging captain. In fact, the man felt a sudden and brief pain in his chest when they reached the top of the tower, and for a

moment, he wondered whether his heart might not take him before the Serpent did.

However, the soldier in him immediately returned his attention to the task at hand, and he said, “Mekiir, Urlis, I need you because you are two of the few men who can still use these massive crossbows.”

The brothers looked at the weapons on their right: unlike the usual portable arbalests, these were mounted on a pivoting base. They measured three meters long and their arms were almost two meters wide. They were used only against the varagoths, but this large predator species had disappeared from the area fifteen years ago already and thus, none of the guardians currently assigned to the fortress had had experience with the weapon. The twins, however, had made a specialty of hunting varagoths since the age of sixteen, and continued to do so each year. Indeed, Harlion sent them throughout the kingdom for a month each autumn to hunt this carnivore, which was unfortunately incompatible with Humans. A mischievous smile painted the faces of the twins when they looked at each other.

Harlion continued, “My hope is that these bolts will be able to pierce the rokon’s hide, even at its thickest, around the belly and chest. To help you, the Lux Baiula will try to cause the rokon to present its flank or belly before you release the bolts.”

The brothers nodded.

Just now, Kemir arrived with the huge and heavy net, barely panting or sweating. The twins looked at the tall man with envious eyes.

Harlion nodded and said, “Get to your posts men, and let’s bring that creation of hell down!”

The three guardians were at their posts in a flash, Urlis and Mekiir taking the left and right arbalests and Kemir taking the middle one. As the men began loading their weapons, they wondered if the machines would function properly because it was obvious from the difficulty they had in cocking them that they had not been adjusted or oiled in over a decade.

Once all were done cocking their weapons, the brothers with heavy, barbed projectiles, and the fisher’s son with a varagoth net, they looked to their captain to signal their readiness and waited anxiously for the fog to lift and the creature to come.

Harlion closed his eyes a moment and felt that the ten minutes to Elyana lifting the fog had almost passed. The ability to tell time was something all officers had to learn but which not all mastered – Harlion did. Keeping his eyes closed, he said “Be ready”, and then started counting down quietly: “7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.” The fog lifted as soon as he said “one”, as if he had commanded it.

That startled the soldiers a little, because even though they knew officers were expected to develop the skill to tell time – or were they born with it? – the sudden disappearance of the fog seemed to have been caused by him. But they knew better, and they turned their attention to the top of the cliff, where the rokon still perched, and they wondered when it would descend again.

It was not long before the Serpent answered their question and sped toward the fortress. Seeing the creature apparently fully restored, Mekiir's and Urlis's hearts started skipping beats, and they said quick prayers, hoping the Founders would give them some assistance so that they wouldn't be forced to join their ancestors just yet. Their hands tightened on the arbalests, and their eyes now saw nothing else but their target.

As one, the twins shouted, "Come on, come on you damned beast! Let's finish this!"

Not a moment later, the unnatural lizard turned toward the southeastern tower, screeching and crying. When the Serpent was within fifty meters of the structure, Harlion gave the Lux Baiula the signal. Elyana receded into the Bind and called the Serpent toward her as forcefully as she could, causing it to veer west and expose its belly. At that moment, Harlion gave the twins the order to release, and the deadly javelins sprang forth and pierced the air, as if they had waited for ages for just this moment – and everyone held their breath.

However, the Founders must have found the prayers lacking because at the very last moment, the Serpent made a tight loop and dodged the bolts. The brothers fumed and cursed at the Serpent.

The captain, noticing the Serpent's sudden change of direction and realizing it intended to ram the tower, yelled, "Kemir, ready yourself! Mekiir, Urlis, hurry! Reload, and release again!"

The twins rushed to reload their weapons.

Mekiir yelled angrily, "Damnation! Damned be the Founders! My arbalest is stuck!"

The captain punched the wall, and asked, "Urlis, are *you* ready?"

Fortunately, Urlis nodded that he was, and Harlion made another sign for Elyana, immediately followed by an order for Urlis to release.

Urlis let go, and for a moment that seemed to last forever, he prayed he would hit the creature. But the bolt missed again. The Serpent had stopped too early, launching itself upward just before the weapon could hit, and the projectile continued until it hit the ground and lodged itself just a few meters from where Elyana stood.

Elyana thought, *How many more times are flesh and rock and projectiles going to land next to me?* whereas Urlis covered his face and shook his head, thinking of what had almost happened.

Kemir had been silent all this time, but just now yelled angrily that he could do it, he could hit the beast and asked to take Mekiir's or Urlis's place.

Harlion shook his head and said in a dejected voice, "No, better try —" As he spoke, the creature turned to come back again. Harlion noticed, and shouted, "The Dark One's in it. Kemir, the net! It's our last chance. Hurry!"

The whaler's son looked his target in the eye and readied himself; he would not miss! Although he wondered if those teeth the creature had all over its body would not simply cut through the net. But he had to hope, and he did, and gave the arbalest one final crank.

Mekiir said "Come on Kemir, throw!"

The man responded with a calm, "No, not yet."

Urlis too yelled for their comrade to throw the net, and still, Kemir waited – and Harlion held his breath, trusting the man. But the captain made note in his mind to talk to the twins – if they all survived – about their interference.

The Serpent was now only thirty meters from the tower when the twins made to shout at their comrade again, but Harlion gave them a sudden and severe look, and they bit their tongues instead. Everyone became tense to the point of tearing muscles when the Serpent looked like it was going to hit the tower if Kemir waited any longer. But at that precise moment, captain and twins heard Kemir pull the latch and launch the net, calmly and true. The net enveloped the Serpent, and Kemir shouted with indescribable exhilaration, "Yeah! I got it Capt'n! I got it!"

Harlion thanked the Founders, while Urlis and Mekiir cursed the fisher's son for giving them ulcers. The men screamed with joy when the thing began to fall. They had done it, and they couldn't believe it – and neither could the rest of the defenders. But the joy was short-lived because the Serpent started to twist its body and tore the net to shreds. It roared madly now, impossibly so, and flew back up straight toward the tower.

With all the force in his lungs, Harlion ordered his men to jump out of the tower, but before they could get out, the Serpent arrived and rammed into the structure. The roof shattered, and stones fell on their heads. A large piece of the collapsed roof cornered Harlion against the wall. But he quickly recovered his senses, heaved himself out from under the stone slab, and got back on his feet to look for his men. His heart sank when, in front of him, he saw Urlis, dead, his head crushed. For a moment, he couldn't see or hear anything else except the crushed body of his man, and the twitches of his limbs. But his senses returned – an officer was used to death – and he heard Mekiir's and Kemir's cries of agony coming from the right. Two men lived! Harlion rushed to them and pulled them from under the rubble.

Kemir was well enough, and he shoved him out the tower. Then he grabbed onto Mekiir and jumped out the tower with him.

Perhaps Mekiir's prayer had finally reached the Founders, because bales of hay received them at the bottom of the tower, just moments before the Serpent rammed into the turret anew, and this time destroyed it completely. Harlion thanked his luck when none of the stones fell toward them.

Meanwhile, the Serpent stopped in mid-air and scanned the rubble with an intense, malicious gaze, and everyone watched the creature, except for Elyana who, for some reason, stared at where the tower had stood with barely hidden shock and alarm. After a moment of paralysis, Elyana came to her senses and noticed the Serpent staring at the rubble. She couldn't see whether any of the men had survived the toppling of the tower, but when the Serpent suddenly shrieked and directed a hateful glare toward the far side of the debris, she knew that someone lived and that she had to do something before the Serpent went down to finish its work. The Lux Baiula decided to remove the Bound Shields from around the princes and to reform a larger one over the wreckage. A moment later, the Serpent slammed into the invisible barrier and was thrown off to the right. Enraged, it flew back toward the center of the fortress, intent on taking revenge. Elyana yelled to Toras to have him send some men to fetch the tower's survivors, after which she quickly restored the Bound Shields around the princes.

Despair returned to everyone's heart when the lizard grabbed six men, despite the hundreds of arrows and lances hitting it – some of which actually pierced its wings – and hurled them to crash on the cliff behind the fortress. Another half hour of deadly battle and continued destruction ensued, following which, the lizard flew to the top of the cliff, appearing to want to rest again. But the creature abruptly came back down, and dove toward Aithen. A futile barrage of arrows and lances formed to prevent the Serpent's descent on the prince; the Serpent either avoided the projectiles entirely, blocked them with its spiraling motions, or accepted the injuries so that it may reach its target.

Believing that the High Prince was doomed, everyone yelled for him to retreat from the parapet, but Aithen would not move. Then, when it seemed the Serpent was sure to crash into the prince, the monster veered to the left and grabbed another man. The poor soldier released screams of terror and agony as the creature closed its beak on his hips and flew back up.

The Serpent did not go very far though, and instead stopped a short distance above the fortress, and turned to face it. Horror paralyzed everyone when the Serpent flipped the still agonizing man in the air, caught him again, and swallowed him whole before finally turning to the northwest and leaving as it had come. As it did, it thrashed its tail along the walls of the

mountain in a final fit of fury, and its screeches – deeper than they had been because of its constricted airways – diminished as it disappeared.

At first, no one understood what had happened, why the thing had just turned and left. But after a few minutes of hearing no more of the creature's screeches, the fighters fell on their knees and prayed, or simply thanked the Founders or K'Tara – depending on their beliefs – for saving their lives. Soon, however, men started asking questions and voicing their worst fears, the civilians more strongly than the guardians: What was that lizard? Not a rokon, surely. A creature straight from the Nethers, yes! Come to destroy humanity. No, the princes. No, it had been called forth by the Lux Baiula! And emotions flared when no satisfying answers came from the princes, who did the best to reassure everyone without revealing the truth or seeming to hide anything. When calm eventually returned, the princes and their officers moved on to the task of assessing the damage.

The destruction was extensive: virtually every home in the village had been rendered to mere stones and broken planks, while the fortress had suffered much structural damage. Three of the towers had huge gaps in them where the walls had been shattered, while the fourth – the one from which Harlion and his men had hoped to bring down the Serpent - was completely destroyed. Several of the taller structures had been damaged as well. It was a fortunate thing that the fortress had been built with the help of Lux Baiulae who had used the Bind to harden the granite and fuse together the already large blocks of the stone; without this, the entire stronghold might have laid in ruins. Even so, the mere fact that the Serpent had brought down a tower and caused damage to other parts of the fortress worried many, especially Elyana – in fact, this sickened her almost more so than the deaths and the injuries. The Sisterhood's Stone Workings were supposed to be eternal, and so the structures built with them! Elyana did not dare think of the implications.

As far as the men were concerned, a large number had been wounded, especially the villagers, and some forty had been killed, again, mostly villagers. One of the dead was the princes' cousin Loris, a brave man and secundus in the Royal Guard. Aithen would need to inform his uncle. But for now, he needed to help his brother see to the injured, to *all* the dead and to the now homeless villagers.

Toras gave orders to get the healers and tell them that the Lux Baiula was going to help with the wounded, *civilians included*, just to be sure they did not cause an unnecessary scene when they saw her minister to a villager. He also gave orders to let the villagers out of the caves, in as orderly a manner as possible, so they may reunite with their dead, or injured, family members.

Primus Kendor and his men did their best to control the outpouring of villagers from the caves, but their arrival in the fortress still caused a terrible ruckus, with women, children, and elders crying for the injured or dead ones. After a couple of hours, though, after the dead had been seen to and prayers told, a semblance of calm returned to the fortress. It was now past the highnight, and linens were being retrieved from the caverns' storage rooms to give to the villagers who would be sleeping on the granite floors of the caves that night – if they could sleep at all.

As she took care of the wounded, Elyana Lux Baiula repressed the guilt she felt at having caused the death of so many men when she released the nebula, and then again when she lost control of the thunder-strike. But the guilt was there, nevertheless, waiting for a moment of weakness to assail her.

The princes and their officers did their best to stamp down any criticism of the woman, or any nascent anger toward her, and made certain everyone knew that had she not been there, none of the defenders might have survived the Serpent's mental and physical assaults. But, people being as they were, some could not help but assign blame to someone, who, in this case, was the Lux Baiula. In fact, Sisters often took the blame for things they had not caused, simply because they would not spend the energy defending themselves, and rather preferred to remain focused on their duties, regardless of the consequences.

Helping Elyana care for the wounded were the village's two healers, who also acted as medics for the fortress's Guard. Almost every village had one or two of these women, women who had learned about the healing powers of certain plants and insects. Their usual labor was to take care of the injuries and illnesses that their fellow villagers might suffer from every so often. But tonight, the task was quite a bit more challenging.

If one could hear the healers as they prepared some fresh poultice, one would hear them grumble about the Lux Baiula.

The shorter one, named Frelina, whispered, "Why is she here? We don't need her help, by Elande¹⁷!" She had the look of one who liked to be in charge, but who was never actually given the chance, perhaps because of her attitude.

Karista, the other healer, was a tall, large woman. Some, particularly the children, actually found her intimidating, especially with her hair tied in the back of her neck and pulling her face taut; she was First Healer of Horn's Pass. She replied, "I don't much trust her kind neither, and I'm not exactly sure that when they do what they do, they're not puttin' hidden evil things inside the minds of those they help. Once, in a village near Praeghe, a Lux Baiula went to heal a man whose leg had just been crushed by a farmer's

cart. The man's leg was healed all right, but during the following days, he began runnin' the streets, saying mad things I daren't repeat. One of the local healers told me that the man had always been a model citizen 'til he was treated by the witch!"

The shorter woman replied with a whispered curse and said, "I don't think they're just stories, Karista. An' have you heard what the soldiers say? That she killed a dozen men?!"

"I have, but the princes say it wasn' her fault, that the rokon deflected her strike. So, for now, I'll let it be. In any case Frelina, we have no choice; there are just too many injured. But if one of our people loses his mind after this, I can promise you *she* will regret it."

"I'm not cert'n I would be so trusting, Karista. She could do somethin' to the men but blame it on the creature."

The First Healer's reply left no doubt as to her view of her own skills, "Believe me, I will know if she does."

At the western end of the plaza, Elyana walked purposefully, if fitfully, toward Mekiir, the surviving twin. Another guardian was tending his wounds as best he could, while Mekiir did his best to contain his screams. Kemir was sitting nearby, apparently unharmed.

When she arrived, Elyana took a deep breath, put her doubts aside and said with an unusually caring tone, "I believe you are Mekiir?"

With a grimace contorting his face, the soldier nodded yes.

"High Captain Harlion asked me to look at your wounds." Elyana got down on her knees, assessed the man's condition, and then began rubbing his broken leg, as well as his bruised arm and torso. Saborin, Mekiir's companion, looked at the Light Bearer expectantly, hoping to see something magical happen. Mekiir felt his legs, arm, and chest warming up with each pass of the Lux Baiula's touch. The heat spread to his bones, and then he felt pain and his body tensed up.

Elyana now closed her eyes and felt herself reaching inside of Mekiir, opening her mind to the vivid colors caused by the fractured bone in his leg which cut at his muscles and nerves. After homing in on the region of interest, she looked for zones of silence, which were the pieces of crushed bone. Having found them, she formed a resonant beam and sent it in to dissolve the shards. Once the shards were all gone, she paused to think on what to do next. A medic would now have been able to regrow the bone as well as mend the torn muscles, blood vessels and nerve fibers. That was beyond Elyana's skillset. But what she could do was to prime the tissues to heal themselves, so she directed a tight beam of energy in the zones she knew to be zones of growth, and activated the cellular processes required in the healing process. If all went well, and with the help of medics from the capital, Mekiir would be as he was before within a few fourths.

Having taken care of the broken leg, Elyana gave another look at the soldier's right arm and torso, and, seeing that those injuries were only flesh wounds, she decided not to expend her waning reserve of energy on them. So, she removed her hands from Mekiir, sat back, wiped her brow with her handkerchief, and exhaled a long weary breath.

Mekiir still felt the heat in his muscles, but most of the pain was now gone. He wanted to ask what the Lux Baiula had done but kept silent; he just looked at the woman in wonder.

Elyana said, "Your leg is still broken, but you will be all right; your body should take no more than a few fourths to finish the repairs, now, though you will need to be seen by a medic once you get back in Furan City if you want your tissues to grow straight and strong."

The man nodded.

"I will let your Saborin, here, bandage your leg and dress your chest and arm."

Saborin nodded in appreciation of the Lux Baiula's trust.

Elyana gave him a smile and continued, "I am sorry for your loss, Mekiir. You and your brother were both very brave up there." Then, encompassing both soldiers as well as Kemir with her regretful gaze, she added, "You were all very brave." And with that, she got up and went looking for another man to heal. As Elyana walked, she put her thumb and middle fingers together. She then took several slow, deep breaths and replenished her tired body as much as she could. But she knew she would need some food and rest soon; if she let herself completely deplete her reserves, she would need several fourths to recover, and she could not afford that, not with the Serpent come back to K'Tara.

When the Light Bearer had gone, Saborin asked his companion what had happened and received a very disappointing answer. Mekiir didn't know, except that he didn't feel the excruciating pain anymore, and that he could breathe much more easily, now. Saborin found himself hoping that the next time he would be injured too so he could feel for himself what it was that Lux Baiulae did when they healed someone. But he quickly berated himself as he certainly did not wish to see that infernal beast again.

⁸ Howler: Large, domesticated predatory Flyer used by Humans to guard their property as well as for their companionship.

⁹ Magna Mater: Great Mother.

¹⁰ 5 centimeters is approximately 2 inches.

¹¹ Voran: A tall, domesticated three-toed herbivore, one of the many Trumpeter species, used for pulling carts or riding. Vorans had very beautiful trumpet-like calls.

¹² Nebula - A field of energy generated by some Lux Baiulae which could shield people from certain harmful cerebral waves; also known as a disruption field.

¹³ Bound Shield: An electromagnetic shield generated using the Bind, and which repelled physical objects.

¹⁴ Bleaters were milk-producing land flyers, having lost the ability to fly during the course of their evolution; mooers were large herbivorous, furred animals from which coonay, an edible substance, could be obtained; trumpeters were three-toed herbivores, recognized by their trumpet-like calls.

¹⁵ Varagoths were large carnivorous beasts, some seven meters long from head to tail, and three meters high at the shoulder. They had six long horns on the forehead as well as two long canines. Their body was muscular, and their leather so thick simple arrows could not pierce it.

¹⁶ Secundus was the lowest commissioned rank within the Guards. A Secundus's insignia consisted of a blue sun on red, and a red sun on blue, within a tall rectangle formed by white embroidery.

¹⁷ Elande was one of the Founders, Principle of Balance, a creation of early K'Tarans.

III BENEATH THE SOUND SHIELD

Dawn was only a few hours away when, seeing that everything was under control, Toras invited his brother to walk with him to his private quarters for some wine. Once there, Toras became visibly shaken. He looked around and saw rubble here and there on the floor of his day room. The physical damage that the fortress had sustained shook Toras. To him, Horn's Pass was a sign of the kingdom's strength.

The younger prince walked toward the large hearth that had just been lit by his housekeeper. Indeed, even though the days could be pleasant and reach four to five minutes-warm¹⁸ during the summer months, the nights always grew cold in the Pass, with the temperature frequently going down to a one howler-night¹⁹. Toras stared blankly into the fire. Aithen approached him.

"You look troubled."

"I—" Toras shuddered as the fear he had hidden from his men during the battle resurfaced. "The Serpent – I could feel it trying to tear my mind away. It was even more frightening than the thought of being torn to shreds by it. Didn't you feel it dig into your mind too?"

Aithen shook his head.

Toras continued, "It was horrible! It took every ounce of will I had to not let the men see my panic."

"And why was it here?! Why?! What does it want?!"

His arms crossed, and right hand on his lower lip, Aithen replied, "I wish I knew, Toras." Then, he added, "Father must be told of what's happened here."

Suddenly, Toras's anger flared. "Why isn't he back anyway!?! He's been gone for fourths, and still no word from him! He should have been here, yesterday!"

Aithen replied with more force than he intended, "It worries me too, Toras! But it's possible his business in Spiritii retained him longer than expected. There's no need to be so irate about that!" As soon as he said that, Aithen felt embarrassed. He understood his brother's fears – he felt the same way – but he simply did not like emotional outbursts. Still, after a moment, he added "I'm sorry."

It was perhaps the fact that Aithen was four years older than Toras, along with the fact that he was High Lord Commander of the Royal Guard and first heir to the throne that caused him to view fits of temper as a sign of weakness. Aithen was also a thinker and a strategist, whereas his

younger brother was a doer and a tactician. It seemed at times that the two might have been born of different mothers, and yet, they did share a number of physical traits. Indeed, Aithen was equally striking as Toras, though some women found the crown prince's paler skin somewhat less attractive and seemed to prefer his brother's darker tone. Like Toras, Aithen also had pitch-black hair, but Aithen's was straight and full, and tied in the back with a slightly longer tail as a sign of his rank in the royal house.

Toras now looked at his brother with a resigned look; his facial expressions could change so suddenly – and his temperament with it. He said, “You're probably right, Aithen. But this is still very unusual for him.”

Aithen, who had walked away when Toras became angry, turned and said, “I know.” He continued walking away, stopped in front of a desk and strewn with documents – reports it seemed. He picked them up, but did not read them and said, “Toras, can you send for Elyana? We need her advice, as well as some answers on what has happened here tonight.”

“I'll go get her myself.” As Toras walked out of the chamber, another guardian – older than the two who had been there the day before – started to follow him, but the prince stopped him with a brusque voice, saying, “Don't. I'll be right back.”

“But –”

“I said no, Rathos.”

And with that, the prince strode off, his face haggard and anxious, to find the Lux Baiula, uncertain whether her answers would help him find some measure of calm again.

Rathos exchanged worried looks with the other guardian on door duty, and both released a heavy sigh as they watched the prince go.

While Aithen waited for his brother to return, he went through everything he had learned about the Serpent, from his father as well as from the Sisterhood, hoping to make some sense of its presence, here, now. But it was a futile exercise, and it frustrated him. The creature was said to have been destroyed. So, unless the Lux Baiulae who had witnessed its end had lied or had been deceived, how could it be here?! Or perhaps – Aithen thought – Elyana was mistaken and this creature she referred to as the Serpent was not *it*, but only looked – and behaved – like the Dark Lord's Wings? But who would have created this copy? The Serpent was said to have been created by Noctiferus, himself, out of a young rokon. The logical implications of these scenarios were not ones Aithen dared explore further.

When Toras returned with Elyana, Aithen shook his worries away to greet the Lux Baiula. Toras stood next to her with a much calmer demeanor. Aithen eyed him questioningly, but he could guess what had quieted his brother's mind.

Though Toras had some misgivings about the Sisterhood, he did like Elyana, and had often found himself thinking of her as an older sister while growing up. How could he not? She'd been the king's advisor for forty years now, and had practically lived with them, in the Royal palace, for much of that time.

For sure, Elyana had not been there to entertain the princes, but rather to advise the king and help educate his children. She had done both remarkably well, despite the fact that the younger prince had always preferred physical activity to intellectual studies. In his early years, that had consisted of running around outdoors and chasing whatever creature he could find, while in his adolescent years, his interests had progressed to more strenuous activities such as the martial arts, flying furans in wild formations alongside the Royal Guard's furanback elite, and catching and taming belwohrs.²⁰

And Elyana, who had always had a keen sense of what motivates Humans, understood that to educate Toras, she needed to share in his own interests. So, she had taken to sparring with him every so often, which she was quite skilled at given that she had been a Red Sash prior to becoming the High King's advisor. The Lux Baiula's decision had of course shocked many, including the High King and his consort, but her stratagem had worked, and the prince had come to understand the things a person must know to lead others, even if his interpretation of the principles of leadership and government differed somewhat from the king's.

Looking at the Lux Baiula with a thankful smile, Aithen said, "I know you are exhausted, Elyana, but there are a few things Toras and I really need to know, and there are also some decisions we must make before we all retire for whatever remains of the night."

Elyana nodded her understanding. As she did, a patterned sequence of three knocks came through the door. Toras responded with a "Come in, Lenion."

A short, slightly bulky woman, with a warm smile, walked in with a jar of wine and three cups. The woman was Toras's housekeeper. Looking toward Elyana, the prince said, "Some wine?"

Elyana nodded yes, and Lenion poured each of them a cup. That done, she bowed respectfully toward everyone as she backed away and out of the room.

After taking a sip of the wine and enjoying its aroma for a moment, Aithen said, mostly to himself, "Strange that I should find pleasure in this wine...even after the night we've had. Will any of the civilian survivors find anything to enjoy?"

Toras had been about to take a gulp of the wine himself but stopped his hand. He turned toward Elyana, wondering what she thought of his brother's comment, but he only saw a blank expression on her face.

Aithen noticed the effect of his comment and rushed to add, "I did not mean to suggest that we shouldn't...be having any wine. I'm simply feeling dazed and out of sorts, and guilty thoughts are crossing my mind." Then, with a sudden change of tone and topic, Aithen said, "But, how is the Healing proceeding, Elyana?"

The Lux Baiula did not react with the surprise Toras felt. She said, "As well as can be expected, given the number of injured. But the village healers have some decent remedies for superficial wounds, and their assistance certainly helped me focus whatever energy I had left on the more serious injuries. But, I was unable to do anything meaningful for the men who were aggressed by the Serpent's mental attack – and survived." Elyana paused a moment, and with a grim tone, which seemed filled with her own feelings guilt, she added, "I think that they might have been better dead."

Hearing the Lux Baiula make such a statement troubled the princes. Aithen objected, "You know what happened wasn't your fault, Elyana."

"Thank you, Aithen, but I have no need for soothing. I made several errors in judgement this night, and it does not matter what ultimately caused the deaths and injuries." After a short pause and a rare sigh, the Sister added, "Your comment about the wine may have been appropriate...for me, at least. Still, thank you both for voicing your support earlier, as I very much doubt that anyone would have let me heal him if not for your intervention."

With a resigned shake of his head, Toras concluded, "Well, as Aithen said, we don't believe you are to blame, Elyana."

Elyana just gave her usual blank stare in response, and said, "One thing which surprised me but comforted me, nevertheless, is the fact that the Serpent did not use its mental attacks on Harlion or his men while they were in the tower."

Aithen said, "I wondered about that too. Could it be that the Serpent was so shocked or irritated by this new attempt to bring it down, that it simply *forgot* to use its mental attacks, as you call them?"

Toras interrupted with a chuckle, "Indeed! It happens to men, too, sometimes, especially the impulsive kind." The comment surprised Aithen and Elyana, but Toras continued, "You've seen it happen, Aithen, when a captain is so shocked by the enemy's tactics that he decides to charge at once, forgetting all about his carefully laid-out plans. Perhaps, it's a weakness we can exploit, if we ever meet the creature again."

Elyana let out a cynical grunt. "I do not know why the Serpent did not use its mental attack on Harlion and his men, as this would have killed

them more surely than attempting to topple the tower, but your hypothesis could very well be right, Toras. But I have no memory of such a weakness. Nevertheless, your suggestion is a good one, and I will keep it in mind, as we are certain to see the creature again.”

At that, Toras frowned. He then invited his guests to sit on the chairs by the hearth. Toras took the seat next to Elyana, leaving his brother to sit across from them, which, for some reason, irritated Aithen.

After a short silence during which the princes considered Elyana’s statement, the High Prince cupped his wine goblet with both hands, elbows on knees, and said, “Elyana, we need to understand what happened here tonight, and we need honest answers.”

Elyana considered Aithen’s request only a moment before deciding that he and his brother had the right to know everything she knew. Indeed, she had been sent to Furan City forty years earlier to counsel and advise the Crown, and that included the princes when they became of age; that is what she needed to do now. The practice of assigning an advisor to Alvinorian rulers was a requirement of the alliance between the Coriolan dynasty and the Sisterhood, and it had been adhered to by the Order for nearly five hundred years now. And for the most part, the practice had benefitted and continued to benefit both parties, even if there had been advisors who had been kicked out of Furan City after losing the king’s, the senate’s or the people’s confidence.

Lay scholars believed that the Order’s oath to protect all life was itself the cause of the distrust some had felt and still felt toward the Sisterhood, given that the protection of *all* life meant that a Sister might – under certain circumstances – decide in favor of non-Humans if she judged that a particular situation would harm the non-Human party more than it would benefit the Humans. But, given that the oath stood at the very core of the Order’s identity and behind their every action, it had remained unchanged through the ages, and it continued to feed the fears of the fearful, as well as the cynicism of the cynics.

After setting her wine cup down, and delicately putting a piece of a fleshy, dark purple fruit called sabara into her mouth, Elyana clapped her hands and, using painting motions, surrounded them with a distorting and strangely deafening energy field.

The princes had experienced this type of field often, when Elyana created it at their father’s request to discuss highly confidential matters. The field was a Sound Shield. Not the only kind, but one easily created by increasing the density of matter along the surfaces of a room, and causing said matter to vibrate in a distorting manner. Anyone outside the shield would only hear muffled voices. The disadvantage of this shield was that it also muffled sound in the other direction.

Elyana said, “What will be said here cannot go beyond these walls, not for a while in any case.” The princes nodded their understanding. Elyana continued, “Aithen, do you remember how the last battle against Noctiferus ended?”

Aithen pulled his head back in surprise, but replied, “I do. It has been a long time since you taught me this, but I do remember. K’Tara lost a great number of people – in the tens of thousands if I remember correctly, and your Order lost about half of its Sisters. At the end of the Dark Battle, the Serpent was captured by the Lux Baiulae and Luxori and taken to Aiala’Rhi’s²¹ temple where the Originator took possession of it. Aiala’Rhi, herself, is said to have captured Noctiferus whom she presented in chains to the assembled K’Tarans. The removal of the Serpent and of Noctiferus allowed Emperor Flavius the First, along with what remained of your Order and the Luxori, to eradicate the then leaderless forces that had served Noctiferus, although some remnants were said to have escaped to the recesses of our orb. It is also written that Noctiferus was stripped of all powers and taken to some remote corner of our universe, to remain there imprisoned on some unknown world. As for the Serpent, there exist eye witness accounts about its destruction by Aiala’Rhi.”

Toras asked, “How can the Serpent be here, then, if it was terminated?”

Elyana replied, “I do not know, but it *is* nevertheless. It was either resurrected, or the accounts of its destruction are false. Either way, it is here now, and it is searching for something.” The Sister hesitated a moment before continuing, a very unusual thing for a Lux Baiula. Elyana, especially, was a very confident woman and said things as they were, but now, an imperceptible tremor coursed through her. The princes eyed each other worryingly and looked back at her questioningly. Elyana exhaled with continued hesitation, “While I shielded us from the Serpent...I heard it talking to me. I was shaken by that, and you saw the result of it when I unleashed the thunder-strike on the mountainside. It repeated something in the Ancient Tongue, over and over: *‘Finem qui est, et consequetis ut interibitis!’* meaning –”

“I know,” said Aithen, with fear in his voice, “The end is here, and you will follow or perish!”

Dread, deep and unsettling, marred the brothers’ faces.

Elyana tried to lighten the mood by remarking on Aithen’s translation, “Your knowledge of the Ancient Tongue has much improved, my Prince.”

The High Prince shrugged his shoulders, not caring much for praise at the moment. Instead, he asked, “Will you inform the Magna Mater of this?”

“Indeed, I will. As soon as possible. The creature’s return is a threat to—”

Toras suddenly interrupted the Lux Baiula, shouting, “But what is the meaning of the Serpent’s words, Elyana. *The end?* The end of what? And *follow* who?!”

The Lux Baiula was about to berate the young prince for his impatience, but she let out a wearied sigh and said, “I know no more of the meaning of its words than I do of its reappearance. But its mere presence here is a sufficient threat to all of K’Tara, as I was going to say when you interrupted me...my Prince.”

The scolding caused Toras to stand abruptly, raise his arms in frustration, and turn toward the Lux Baiula with visibly tense features. “I’m sorry, Elyana. But you know how my mind races in the face of danger, until I’ve understood it.” To prove his point, Toras started pacing in the small space between the chairs, annoying Aithen.

Elyana regarded the prince knowingly, “What else is sprinting through your mind, Toras?

“I’m thinking that we need to find Father, and alert Mother!”

Elyana replied, “A sensible point, my Prince, and I will see to it that a message reaches the Lady Darya. But since it will need to pass through Kynaria’s Ruling Seat, I will not be able to reveal much in it. As for your father, he should indeed be brought back as quickly as possible.”

Toras, always prompt for action, immediately offered to do it, “I’ll go get him. I and my winged Guard know the land between here and the plains to the east of Spiritii better than you or the Royal Guard do, Aithen.” The High Prince’s annoyance turned to irritation, but before he could say anything, Toras asked him, “He’s escorted by the usual five²², I assume?”

“Yes, he is. But, Toras, it is *my* duty and responsibility to bring back Father, and the Royal Guard is more than capable—”

“My Lords,” said Elyana, stopping the beginning argument between the brothers, “in the present situation, I do believe it would be wiser for Toras to go south and bring back the High King, given that Aithen will need to see to the relocation of Horn’s Pass’s population, address the Senate about it, as well as bring the Union’s Council together to prepare the kingdom against a repetition of what happened here.”

The enumeration of all the things Aithen would need to do because of the Serpent’s attack deflated him, and he said, “Very well. Elyana is right. Go. But take fifteen of my guardians as well.”

Toras nodded his thanks and said, “Your fifteen and fifteen of my best flyers. We’ll leave at the break of dawn – that’ll give us a couple of hours to rest. I know I need it. Anyway, we’ll find Father and be back with him before you reach Furan City.”

A sigh was all Aithen gave in response. He knew Elyana was right about this. He just wished he had realized it, himself. He also did not look forward to dealing with politicians.

Elyana added, "I will *also* try to find the king – through the Bind. Should I locate him, I will have a message brought to him by the nearest Sister to inform him of your coming, my Prince."

"Thank you."

"Also, Toras, remember that what we have discussed here must be kept quiet – for now."

Toras nodded his understanding. He then approached his brother, put his hands on Aithen's arms and said goodbye with a look filled with a mix of fear and hope. Toras had always been very expressive, while his brother, on the other hand, would have been content with a simple farewell – an attitude which often frustrated the other members of the royal family. In any case, after Aithen returned his goodbyes with a grunt, Toras left, anxious to get things ready for departure – and to get some sleep. As he stepped out of the room, he felt the strange rumble on his eardrums caused by the Sound Shield's energy field, as well as the muffling of Aithen's and Elyana's voices. He thought, *I really wish I could learn to do that.*

After Toras had gone, Aithen said, "I just had a thought, Elyana. It is very likely that some peddler who was at Horn's Pass when the Serpent attacked is already on his way to the City to spread the news about it, unless he's among the dead or the injured."

Elyana nodded in agreement.

Aithen asked, "Can you send a message to Irania Lux Baiula through the Bind? We should ask her to intercept anyone coming from Horn's Pass to make certain they do not spread rumors. We should also ask her to visit First Senator Leo to inform him of the situation in case rumors *do* start spreading despite her efforts."

"I agree. We must avoid the spread of tales regarding the nature of the rokon at all costs, or the situation will quickly get out of hand. If it means replacing some memories, Rania Lux Baiula will do it."

This made Aithen shudder. Erasing memories was not very well viewed. Then, he remembered his younger brother and said urgently, "We need to send someone to Ori too. *I definitely* don't want him to hear rumors of death!"

"You are right. I could have Rania go see him. I think he has a liking for her. She will need to tell him that a *rokon* attacked Horn's Pass, mind you, but most importantly, she can reassure him that you and Aithen are both well."

Aithen nodded his thanks. Elyana continued, “As I said earlier, you will also need to convene a meeting of the Union Council to plan the defense of their lands and peoples, should the Serpent decide to attack them too.”

The High Prince heaved a heavy sigh.

Elyana let a moment pass, then continued, “I know you do not look forward to that – politics is not to your liking, but rational response to threats *is*, even if we have not seen much conflict in a while. This ability of yours, to reason through things even while chaos festers around you, is what your father’s vassals and subjects will need from you – until his return.”

Aithen let out another sigh.

“But, of course, I will be at your side, to assist you through these meetings.”

Aithen thought about that a moment. Did he want the Purple Sash, his father’s advisor, by his side, reading people’s emotions for him to make sure he did not make mistakes in his responses to the senators, or to the landholders? As bad as the idea seemed, he decided that he did not. He said, “I am sorry, Elyana. I need to do this by myself. But I will still welcome your counsel on the road to Furan City.”

Elyana nodded, feeling a strange sense of pride in the prince as she thought about how he had handled himself during the attack, and about what he might be called to do in following fourths and months.

She said, “I must say that it was...nice to see how you kept your wits through the attack; they will be essential to you, and to those who depend on you, including your father. And if – and I am saying *if* – we should not find the king, or we should find him incapacitated, your wits will serve you well given that you will need to become much sooner the leader that he has raised you to be.”

Aithen looked at her with conflicted emotions. On the one hand, he did not dare think of needing to take over his father’s mantle; Octavius lived, and they would find him, period! Nor did he know whether he was ready to take the reins of the kingdom, despite having been trained and educated by the best to do just that, some day. But he did not wish the crown, not now, not like this.

On the other hand, Aithen was touched by Elyana’s praise, and by her hesitation in giving it. It was almost as if she were hiding some feeling she had for him. This thought stirred Aithen’s own nascent feelings for her, feelings he had not yet learned to deal with. In fact, they made him right uncomfortable. Elyana was a beautiful woman despite the fact she was decades older than him. Indeed, she did not look a year older than himself with her firm and supple pink skin, long, wavy reddish hair, and the bluest

of blue eyes. This, combined with the woman's remarkable intellect, made the prince desire Elyana's company more and more each day.

While the prince battled with his budding feelings for the woman, the Lux Baiula was processing her motives for speaking as she when she praised the prince. But unlike Aithen, she did not wrap her reactions in emotional thoughts, but rather in rational ones, although one might wonder at that if one heard the debate she was having with herself: *He is a good leader, and he is an exceptionally intelligent man. I don't know why you hesitated, Elyana! Founder, I could whip myself for it!*

Finally noticing the awkward silence, Elyana said out loud, "I will retire to my rooms now and contact the Magna Mater. I must inform her of what has happened here...and who knows, she might be able to shed some light on all of this." With that, she gave Aithen a slight nod, dropped the Sound Shield, and left the room.

Aithen followed her with thankful and wistful eyes, and a silent sigh escaped him as one of his own guardians, who had taken the place of Toras's guardians, shut the door behind her.

¹⁸ One-minute warm was the temperature reached by a cup of water in one minute when subjected to the flame of a torch two hands away.

¹⁹ A howler-night was the number of howlers a woodsman would gather around his body to keep warm. The more howlers were needed, the colder the temperature was.

²⁰ Belwohrs were huge carnivorous animals of the Furan Peaks, the size of a battle horse, which often tried fed on young furans and sometimes on Humans.

²¹ Aiala (or Aiala'Rhi) was the Originator, the first Founder, and creator of all things in the Rhiian religion.

²² The king's personal guard was composed of Primus Julian, Jashan, Almiar, Kiron, and Merr, all young but highly experienced guards.

IV RIDE TO THE LAKE OF SHADOWS

Before the light of the Blue Sun lit the morning, Toras, Kendor, and fourteen of their best men, as well as fourteen men from the Royal Guard and their commander, Secundus Jamir, were ready to go. Toras had had a short and fitful sleep, as had Kendor, but short nights were nothing new to seasoned soldiers, and so, aside from being grumpy, all were alert and ready to go.

The prince, his officers as well as Secundus Jamir had just finished discussing the route they should take to get to Spiritii and had finally decided to fly along the eastern edge of the Furan Peaks. That would allow them to make an overnight stop at an outpost at the foot of the southernmost end of the Furan Peaks, next to a body of water known as Mountain Lake. Half a dozen of Toras's men took yearly turns there to relay messages to the Fortress in case of danger or need in the region. From Mountain Lake, the prince's company would need another three days or so to make it to the flatland between the Colossi's Peaks and Spiritii.

Primus Kendor had argued for flying nearer the top of the peaks given that furans fared better in the cool air of the mountains when crossing great distances, but the constant storms over the mountains at this time of year concerned Toras, and he decided against such a course, opting instead to fly along the foot of the mountain ridge. This option too, however, bore its risks, such as the biters which swarmed the humid lowlands along the foot of the Peaks. Some species of biters, in fact, could tear pieces of flesh from the bellies and napes of Humans and furans, leaving holes the size of a pinhead that bled a long while. These wounds invariably became infected, and certain infections were fatal.

Well, thought Toras, as long as we don't fly too close to the ground, we should be okay.

After all, he and his men were familiar with this terrain. The only real risk was crossing the prairie between the mountains and Spiritii, because the region was infested with *wrigglers*, an insect which came out at night in swarms of tens of thousands to attack any warm-blooded animal unfortunate enough to cross that area or stop in the otherwise lush and inviting prairie. It was said that being caught on those plains after dusk was pure suicide. Indeed, according to the rare survivors' accounts, the vile insects could eat away a human's flesh in a matter of minutes. No one had yet tried to capture specimens of the insects to verify the survivors' claims – not even the Sisterhood. But there was enough evidence about the

dangers of that prairie for the wise traveler to steer away from it entirely. Toras assured his brother and Elyana, who had become concerned about his planned itinerary, that he would avoid halting in the prairie at night.

The prince was now looking at the men while he rubbed his furan's head with gentle motions. The soldiers had finished packing all the essentials, as well as finished saddling their mounts, and it had seemed to Toras that they had done it with unusual spryness given their exhaustion. Perhaps, thought the prince, they were anxious to get away from the fortress and see better skies. Or perhaps Elyana had visited them all last night and taken away their fatigue. Either way, he was grateful for their promptness because he was just as anxious to get going.

He wondered if the animals, stamping their paws and snorting nervously, felt the same way. But they were probably just responding to the agitation around them. For sure, furans had an intelligence unlike that of any other animal species. They lived in structured societies, communicated complex thoughts to each other which they used to organize their hunts, and certainly understood humanoid languages as well as sign language. Unfortunately, their squawks and purrs were not easily understood by humanoids, though soldiers learned to recognize some of their vocalizations as well as the motions furans made with their heads and paws, and Kynarians were able to read their thoughts through the Bind. Unfortunately for Toras, the beast-reading skill was not one he had, despite being half-blood. Still, he could understand their vocalizations better than most, and he took pride in it. As he watched the furans squawk at each other, another question crossed Toras's mind. Would it have helped if they had used the furans to fight the Serpent? Probably not, he concluded, as that would have placed the furanteams outside the Lux Baiula's nebula. And yet, the Serpent had not directed its mental attack on Harlion or his men while they were in the tower. Perhaps. Perhaps.

The prince also wondered at the difference between his men and the Royal Guardians. Indeed, the latter were dressed in pressed golden uniforms, despite the previous night's battle, and carried spears and swords, while the former wore their usually stark black uniforms, which were more gray than black this morning, and they bore daggers as well as Alnoor longbows and yerlayan arrows for weapons.

Alnoor longbows were the most prized bows in all of Terrae Regis. They were made of the branches of a unique tree, the Alnoor, found only in the woods adjoining the Colossi's forest. Their fibers were long and resilient but highly resistant, which made for a bow that could project arrows at distances well over one thousand meters. Of course, Humans could not distinguish things that far, and so they rarely used the wood for their own bows, but Toras, whose Kynarian eyesight enabled him to mark a

target eight hundred meters away, did use the Alnoor longbow. He had also had the bow modified so that his soldiers could make good use of it too. The modifications allowed them to adjust the bow's tension according to the distance and size of the target. These technical modifications coupled with rigorous training had turned the guardians of the Black Guard into the most feared archers in all of Terrae Regis, second only to their Kynarian counterparts.

Just now, Primus Kendor approached the prince with a harrumph, "Lord Commander, the company is ready to depart. We are only waiting for your order to do so."

Toras pulled himself out of his thoughts and nodded his order to Kendor. With that, the stocky, square-faced officer walked to Secundus Jamir with an eager step and communicated the Lord Commander's order. Within a mere twenty seconds, all soldiers had mounted their winged steeds.

Just when Toras was about to give Scorch his cue, his brother appeared on the dining room's balcony. The young prince nodded toward his elder brother who responded in kind. He then gave Scorch a verbal cue, and the animal launched himself into the air with an excited screech, which was repeated by the furans of the Black Guard, which included two pack furans. A moment later, the screech was picked up by the Royal Guardians' mounts.

Aithen watched the furan-backed company with a mixture of apprehension and jealousy as they faded away. He then signed and walked back into the dining room to break his fast and start making his own preparations for departure.

At the end of the first day, having flown without rest since leaving, except during the two Bolingar hours around Highsun, the company stopped by a copse of trees in the middle of a prairie nestled between the north and south branches of the Great Torrent River. The prairie was splashed with sky blue, orange and purplish-pink flowers that lit the field in these waning hours. Toras would have normally circled the area a while before setting down, simply to enjoy the spectacle, but not tonight; the men needed to rest, and so did he.

After unsaddling their mounts, the men sent a pair of them to fetch some game. The idea of a nice bleater after what they had endured the previous night should have made the men sing with anticipation. But not tonight. Not even the sight of the furans' catch, or the cooking of it, which released pleasant smells in the air, or the eating of the tender meat caused the men to sing. Instead, the conversation quickly turned to the rokon and to

speculation about its true nature, as well as to remembering their lost comrades. The men did try to speak of more joyous things, but they simply couldn't. Even Toras, who often entertained his men with one story or another, couldn't liven up the mood.

So, when the moon was half way to its highest point, and stomachs had been quieted, the men laid down their blankets around the fire and went to sleep. But sleep came with difficulty to most men, and the sentries, hearing the frightful sounds emanating from those who did find it, wondered if it might not be better to stay at their posts until morning. Fortunately, the night terrors eventually gave way to the deep sleep welcomed by all tired soldiers. And it was a good thing, for only then did the Lord Commander let his mind drift away into slumber.

The next day, the furans' murmurs – a soft sound they made to greet each other when the Blue Sun was the first to rise in the morning – awakened the men. To everyone's surprise, their mood was better. The flowers, which had been colored in blue, purple, and orange hues the night before, were now all white and yellow, and released a fragrance that put smiles on the grouchiest of the soldiers. Even Toras caught himself smiling while taking a deep breath. Perhaps Elyana had been wrong and the creature that had attacked Horn's Pass was just a rokon; unusually large, but still only a rokon. At least, that was the thought that these heavenly surroundings put in his mind. But he knew better, and the smile faded – if slowly.

Before breaking camp, the men chewed on some of the left-over meat from the previous night; its taste was a little off – being cold – but the meat still satisfied the soldiers' appetite. Thirty minutes later, the company was back in the air.

The day would have been uneventful, if not for the ruckus caused by a flock of Horned Honkers anxious to find cover before the Bolingars, and the repeated ruckus when Toras and his men decided to take cover under the same copse of trees as the Honkers for lack of other suitable shelter nearby. The soldiers would have preferred to shoo the flyers away, but Honkers were one of the few large flyer families without Sunshields²³ and chasing them away would have been the same as sending them to their deaths. So, they made do with the noisy sheltermates. In fact, the Bolingars made temporary sheltermates of many unshielded creatures. This often led to strange assemblages of predators and preys, segregated but next to each other nevertheless, eyeing each other calmly in the first hour, but with increasing tension as the Bolingars' final minutes approached, until the preys dashed away in a mad escape the moment they felt it was safe enough to do so.

When the Bolingars passed, the Honkers honked fearfully toward the furans to keep them away, and then took to the air just as raucously as they had landed. Needless to say, furans and Humans alike were pleased to be rid of the noisy animals. A few minutes later, the company resumed its own flight.

Just before the second sun set that day, Toras found what he was looking for through the intense, reddish rays. He called to Kendor, who was flying some ten meters to his right, and pointed to the lake beneath them; at the western tip of it, the Mountain Lake outpost stood like a beacon. Kendor made a sign of the head and blew his horn to call the furanteams to attention. He then blew of his horn louder and longer so that the out-posted men might hear.

On land, one of the soldiers heard the horn, and shouted to alert his sergeant. The sergeant came out of a largish barrack, pulled out his looking glass, and quickly put it to his eye to see who might be arriving. When he recognized the riders at the front, he yelled for one of his men to bring him the flag. A soldier named Curos handed the flag to his officer. As soon as the man had it, he waved the Alvinorian flag to inform the incoming party that they were permitted to descend. Kendor waved back and looked to his commander who immediately raised a hand to signal the furanteams. Toras and his men dropped first, followed by the members of the Royal Guard and the two pack furans. The teams touched ground a minute later.

Sergeant Tamas walked toward his commander with a lively step and a wide smile. "Lord Commander, welcome! I was not expecting your coming. In any case, you will find the outpost in perfect order," continued the proud soldier.

The prince barked a laugh and said, "I'm sure your outpost *is* in perfect order, sergeant. But, as you can imagine, I am not here on an inspection tour. We're on our way to Spiritii and need to stop here for the night."

The sergeant gave his commander a questioning look, to which Toras replied, "We're flying with men from my brother's guard...on special assignment."

The middle-aged Tamas frowned as if skeptical. But he knew it wouldn't be proper to question his commander, and let his doubts be. Instead, he said, "But, you and the men must be hungry, Lord Commander. I'll send the furans out to find us some tender game." And the sergeant turned around and yelled, "Curos! Release our hunters to find us some nice grazers. And be sure they bring back the tenderest meat only!" And he laughed a joyous laugh.

That warm welcome brought another smile to Toras's face and he tapped the officer on the shoulder as he said, "Sergeant, Scorch will join

your furans; as you know, he enjoys hunting and though we've been flying since morning, I'm sure he has enough energy to bring back a belwohr!"

"Certainly, my Lord. And I will have one of my guardians bring out some shellies²⁴ for the other furans; they can start with that until the hunters are back with fresh meat."

The sergeant shouted these other orders to a young recruit who was being introduced to Toras's men by his companions. Without a moment's hesitation or a hint of annoyance, the man turned, acknowledged the order, and went to do as ordered.

Looking at the sergeant with an ever-widening smile, Toras found himself thinking that he really liked this Tamas. Looking at him, one would not suspect him to be of such a jovial nature. For one, the man was built like a belwohr. He was not very tall, but he was stocky, with trunks for legs and ropy arms, and hands that could crush a stone mug. In fact, sergeant Tamas had been the victor of the celebratory combat games that marked the yearly return of out-posted men for the sixth year in a row now. But for all his frightening appearance, he was a most jovial fellow.

Toras turned from the sergeant when he heard men laughing. It appeared his soldiers and those from the outpost, most of whom knew each other well, were now making fun of each other's condition.

The prince thought, *That's good. I'm glad they've found something to laugh about.* But he frowned when he noticed Jamir and his lot keeping to themselves. He knew they likely did not know anyone at the outpost, but he suspected that some of them, such as Jamir himself, did not think too highly of these "bags," as city soldiers were wont to call them, and were more than content to stay away.

Some of the furans knew each other too, and the "locals" greeted the approaching "visitors", led by one of the out-posted men, with short, repeated, tremulous chirps. Next to the paddock, Curo was giving the assembled hunters – ten of them, including Scorch – the command to return with food with a sign of the hand toward his mouth, followed by his finger pointing at them, and finally by both hands moving down from the sides of his chest toward the ground which was the sign for people. The animals nodded as they let out an excited cry. They then started flapping their powerful wings and were aloft a moment later. The furans would find food for themselves, which they would carry between their paws, as well as food for the soldiers, which they would carry with their beaks.

Three soldiers, twins from Toras's unit as well as a man from the outpost, now set out to prepare a fire with which to warm themselves and cook the meat when it arrived. They walked toward the back of the barracks where the logs and dry branches for kindle were neatly stacked. Once there, the local guardian, a slender but ropy, dark-eyed and dark-haired fellow in

his mid-twenties named Hanne, eyed the large logs tauntingly. Toras's guardians, the Falirin twins, also in their twenties, and good friends of the former, knew at once what Hanne meant with his provocative grin. They looked at each other with anticipation and promptly accepted the challenge. Upon Hanne's signal, each man rushed to grab five large logs, and then ran toward the fire pit as fast as he could. Hanne won, as he expected, but he grabbed Falor and Felor and gave both a good-natured slap on the shoulders. The men then got back to their task, lighting the fire, and placing the spits atop the flames to sterilize them.

Meanwhile, the rest of the men from both guards saw to their furans, unsaddling, brushing, and checking them for back sores. That done, they setup the prince's tent as well as the common tent for themselves.

Half-an-hour later, the hunters returned with a grazer and a large fish each. The furans dropped their catch in front of Curos, the furan-keeper, except for Scorch who landed in front of his own master to drop his catch. Toras thanked him but sent him back to Curos with his prey. Scorch went, although he seemed a little irritated. Once Curos had each furan's catch in front of himself, he thanked the animals, accompanying words with gestures as he always did, after which he had the cook and his assistants take the grazers away.

Curos then let the hunters into the paddock with the other furans, and with the help of another soldier, cut-up the fish in sufficient pieces to give each furan his share, including those who had not hunted.

In front of the fire pit, Hanne and the twins thanked the grazers for giving their flesh and went on to prepare them for cooking, returning the skin and inedible parts to the furans. Thirty minutes later, the food was ready, and Hanne called everyone to sit and eat. Toras, seeing that the men were looking to segregate themselves by Guard, called on Secundus Jamir and invited the officer to sit by him and Kendor. Jamir accepted the invitation, if begrudgingly, but this nevertheless forced some mixing. And it was good because once the eating and drinking started, the story-telling and singing followed, and the Royals – seeing their peers so joyous – joined in the reveling too.

This was a pleasant surprise to Secundus Jamir who glanced at the prince and nodded in appreciation of the Lord Commander's invitation. Toras smiled in return and then turned to look at the sky. In the distance, he saw a pride of wild furans flying over the valley between the Furan Peaks and the Colossi's Peaks. They looked small from here, but the reflections of the setting Red Sun on their bellies and wings still brought another smile to Toras.

There were three known species of furans on K'Tara. The smallest species, known as the Green Furan, had an average wingspan of two

meters, and with its mild character it made a good pet when Humans were able to capture a young one. Its range was centered on Unumia and extended toward the southwestern coast of the Yeltchek to the east of Unumia, and the eastern coast of Lower Alvinor to the west of the large island. The White Furan was a larger species; it had an average wingspan of two and a half meters, and lived in both Mo'Rokoth and Kynaria. It was a territorial species, with the males often fighting each other to the death, and could not be tamed. The largest of all furans – the species from which the Royal furans were selected and bred – was endemic to Lower Alvinor and was concentrated on the Furan Peaks; it was known as the Black Furan and had an average wingspan of four meters. Its size, fierceness and carnivorous nature should have made it incompatible with humanoids, but Black Furans fortunately disliked their flesh. Instead, the species preyed upon some of the quadrupeds that inhabited the slopes of the Furan Peaks as well as on the larger species of fish in the surrounding bodies of water. The Black Furan was long-lived, reaching seventy or eighty years of age. Because of its longevity, the bond it formed with its master could be very strong indeed, if it was treated with respect, and if the initial bonding was properly done. But most of all, the Black Furan was a highly intelligent creature, with a complex social structure and language which, when harnessed properly, were two very useful traits to humanoids.

Just as Toras let out a silent sigh in response to the spectacle offered by the wild furans, one of the outpost's soldiers – a tall and muscular man despite his old age – approached Sergeant Tamas.

He said, "Sergeant, there's someone coming who seems to be running his voran to death."

Tamas stood and looked down the hill to the east. "Hum, with the Second Sun almost set, it is hard to tell who might be coming. Why don't you go meet him at the top of the hill, Elmanon?"

"As you wish, Sergeant."

Elmanon went and put himself across the narrow road which led to the outpost. The rider was now but a short distance from Elmanon, and the soldier recognized him for a messenger with his flat, red and black-striped, narrow-brimmed hat. Elmanon raised an arm to force the man to stop his voran.

The rider halted his voran some three meters from the old soldier but did not step down. Elmanon did not ask any questions and watched the man with a borrowed air of authority for a moment. Meanwhile, rider and voran tried to catch their breaths, which they seemed to have been holding for far too long. Finally, Elmanon inquired about the man's business, and the rider – still gasping for air – replied that he had an urgent message for the post's commander. But Elmanon merely signaled the messenger to come down.

The rider was about to complain, but he did not wish to anger the soldier, so he did as ordered.

The rider was a short, stocky man, with a peculiar accent and an even stranger beard, which was cut to a point and pulled back to wrap around the man's ears.

Not understanding the soldier's lack of urgency, the messenger shouted, "I've travelled one hundred n' sixty kilometers to get here, guardian, and it's urgent I see the post's commander, now!"

But Elmanon was not one to relinquish an opportunity to exert authority over others, and so he continued to test the newcomer. "And what's this place you've travelled from, messenger?!"

The poor man let out an exasperated sigh and replied, "It's a village 'long the eastern coast named Galior, and if your post doesn't bring it help soon, it is likely all my people will be dead by the time I return. Please let me see your commander."

Elmanon raised a doubting eyebrow, but the messenger *had* ridden his voran like a madman, and now he was begging, so perhaps he was telling the truth. The old soldier beckoned the messenger to follow him, and they started toward the camp. The stranger followed with anxious motions, adjusting his hat and dusting his pantaloons repeatedly, wishing the soldier would walk a little faster.

By the fire, men still sat, finishing their meals or drinking a final mug of Breminese beer. Toras and the officers wondered why the newcomer was so agitated, and they watched him with either questioning or worried eyes. Sergeant Tamas excused himself and walked toward the approaching men to find out what catastrophe had brought the messenger to the outpost.

As the three got closer, Elmanon quickened his step. Upon reaching his commander, the old soldier promptly relayed the messenger's request. Tamas acknowledged the man who stood behind Elmanon and realized from his exasperated appearance that the soldier must have caused it, so he quickly thanked the guardian, and ordered him to see to the voran's needs. Elmanon obeyed, but not before shooting a displeased grin at the messenger and drawing an annoyed sigh from Tamas who had noticed the soldier's expression.

As Elmanon left with the voran, Tamas approached the newcomer and said, "My apologies for my man's behavior, messenger. He enjoys intimidating people when he gets a chance – a habit I haven't been able to rid him of."

The man made an uncertain nod.

"Now, what brings you here, messenger?"

Words rushed out of the man's mouth like water from a broken damn, forcing Tamas to slow him down more than once, especially when the messenger mentioned some unknown "evil creature."

When the messenger was done, Tamas shook an incredulous face and said, "All right. I think you had better repeat this to my commander. Follow me and remove your hat."

The man obeyed but did not understand why he should remove his hat; as far as he knew, one only did that in front of a noble. But he did as ordered and followed the sergeant.

Upon reaching Toras, who was speaking with his primus, Tamas leaned toward him and said, "Apologies Lord Commander. A messenger from...Galior," Tamas looked back at the man to make sure he remembered the name of the village correctly, "a small village along the coast. He has some rather incredible news, and I'm not sure what to make of them, but he came here to ask for our support."

"Well, let him step forward, sergeant."

Tamas turned around and said, "Come forward man, and make your case to our Lord Commander."

The short man looked suddenly nervous. He was not certain what titles identified whom in the kingdom's army, as he had never before dealt with any of its superior officers, but a "Lord" was going to be someone fairly high in the hierarchy, in any case. As he approached and looked timidly to see who it was he would be speaking with, he turned his hat nervously in his hands.

"Well, what is it my good man?"

"Sorry m'lord, 've been sent here to ask for hel—" The messenger suddenly took a step back and bowed low, very low, and looked to the ground. He might not know much about the world, but he surely could recognize members of the royal family given that every town and village had a painting of them hanging in their mayories. The man was taken aback by the presence of the younger prince right here, in front of him. After a few moments, he straightened himself, but kept his eyes on the ground, hat in hands, and rushed to introduce himself as Grom of Galior.

The prince said, "No need to look down, Master Grom. What is threatening your village?"

The messenger thanked the prince for his permission to look up but raised his head only slightly and proceeded to answer the prince's question. "M' Prince, a beast we never seen b'fore has been attacking villages on the coast, and it has killed many 'ready. Yest'day, it 'ttacked a village just twenty kilometers from ours. The mayor thought it'd probably attack us next. He sent me to get help before it's too late f'r us too."

The prince's reaction surprised all those who did not know him well when he growled, "Aghrrrr! Damn it! Why now?!? Why?!"

Grom backed away, thinking he had angered the prince.

Noticing the messenger's reaction, Toras quickly calmed himself. "I'm sorry, Master Grom; Horn's Pass was attacked last night, and I'm quite sure it was the very same...creature you mention – a large rokon."

Still looking half-way down, Grom replied, "'m sorry, m' Prince. But it can't be a rokon. Surviv'rs have spoken of people dying in ways no rokon kills."

Well, thought Toras, it appears it's going to be very hard to keep the lid on the true nature of our foe. And I wish we could tell the truth, but I will respect Elyana's request. I guess all I can do for now is give non-committal answers to everyone.

Toras said, "Master Grom, fear can cause us to see a ghost where a shadow has passed."

The messenger looked terribly contrite, as if he had just attempted to insult the prince's intelligence. He backed away and apologized for his ignorance.

"There's no need to feel so ashamed, Master Grom. Just don't spread any rumors; it isn't wise to do, especially not of a messenger. In any case, your mayor's request for support will be answered. Please give us a moment to confer."

Grom was more than happy to give the prince time to consult with his officers in private – and to have some time for himself to recover some dignity – so he bowed anew and went toward his voran, which had been tied next to the furan paddock.

Kendor spoke first. "Lord Commander, I say we split up. I know our orders, but it is the right thing to do. A third of us can go to Galior and the rest continue with you to Spiritii."

Jamir was shocked by the suggestion and said, "We can't do that!"

"You'd rather let another whole village be massacred?" replied Kendor with some heat in his voice already. "Sergeant Tamas and his men can't possibly take care of that thing on their own!"

With slight but definite mockery in his tone, Jamir said, "Our orders are to bring back the High King, *Primus* Kendor."

Kendor had to keep himself from hitting the idiot, but he stayed his hand and gave Jamir a look that would surely have slain him, if looks could kill. Toras cursed the Royal beneath his breath. He frankly did not know what made some Royals so prejudiced toward the Black Guard; certainly not his brother or Harlion. Both had served in the Black Guard and respected it. Was it jealousy that caused these men to be so ill-disposed toward them? Or just anger at being subordinated to a man other than an officer of the

Royal Guard? Either way, this Jamir certainly did not realize that his lack of respect for a man of the Black Guard ultimately insulted him, its commander, and under any other circumstances, Toras would have given the man a stern reprimand. But not today. There were other, more urgent matters to deal with now. Still, he promised himself he would speak to his brother about some of his men's attitude.

As he brought his focus back on the situation at hand, Toras noticed that Kendor and Jamir were waiting on him – rather impatiently – to make his own opinion known. So, Toras made a quick sign of his hand to stop the men from uttering any other complaint, and said, “Primus Kendor, I want you to take five of our men, as well as another five of Secundus Jamir's and go to Galior.”

Jamir started saying, “I must obj–” But Toras stopped him with an angry look, the same look the king always used when his sons or another man irritated him. That stopped the officer in his tracks.

Toras said, “Secundus! Defenseless people need our help, so we'll provide it. And since it is also the responsibility of the Royal Guard to see to the defense of the kingdom's subjects, I am sending some of your men along with mine.”

The officer stood there like a mute, with a startled look and injured pride. Well, there was nothing Toras could do about that. The man had asked for it.

The Lord Commander continued. “Primus, you have your orders. Secundus Jamir, please select five men to go with Primus Kendor.”

Both men nodded in turn, one with satisfaction on his face and the other with a blank stare which turned to surprise when Toras added, “And Secundus, I will need you to act as my second in command until Primus Kendor returns.”

Jamir looked totally puzzled by the High Prince's brother. Aside from the well-deserved praises for the younger prince's fighting skills, Jamir had heard mostly negative things about his tempter and his frequently rash decisions. But this way he had to embarrass people one moment, and grant them his trust in the next, confused him thoroughly.

Toras continued, “Primus, if you cannot kill the Serpent – which is likely – try to coax it away from the village at the very least.” Then he added, more as a statement than a question, “You know the risks?”

The soldier looked at him with a grimace which meant he knew very well what the risks were.

“Good luck, my friend, and may your body be worthy.”

The men shook arms, and Kendor informed Grom they would be leaving for Galior in a few minutes. Toras saw Grom's relief. He, himself, felt like his task just got that much more complicated and desperate. Toras

also noticed the agitation of the men who were told they would be departing for Galior shortly. Sudden changes in plans were never received as a good sign. The out-posted men and their sergeant helped Primus Kendor and his detachment get ready for departure, wondering all the while what-in-Dark-One's-Pit this talk of a rokon causing such destruction was all about.

Just now, Toras invited the officers to his tent to discuss the tactics for the Galior detachment. As soon as they were all gathered and Toras was about to begin, Secundus Jamir interrupted him – politely – to suggest that the prince should send a message to his brother to inform him of the change in plans and consequent splitting of the company, which caused Toras to release another growl, startling everyone within as well as without the tent.

It was not Jamir that had angered him, but rather the reminder that not everyone was going to defend Galior. *Why should I, or anyone else, stay here to sip tea, drink beer, or sleep, when the others will likely be facing the Serpent in less than an hour!?* Why!?

The desire to go to Galior and fight with his men was stronger than his duty to find the king. He *needed* to go to Galior. The situation there was simply too grave for him to let his men risk their lives while he went on safely. His father was important, but he was protected by some of the best men in the kingdom, and he was probably fine, wherever he was.

As these thoughts battled in his mind, the prince grew angrier and angrier, and Jamir took a step backward – just in case. Suddenly, Toras slammed his fist into the central pole of his tent with all his force, causing it to crack with a terrible noise – and the roof came down. In his rage, Toras pulled at the canvas, causing the rest of the tent to collapse. All the men could do was duck, to protect themselves from the falling poles.

Secundus Jamir – like the other men – was down on his knees, covered by canvas, and shaking his head. *So, this is what they mean by the prince being unpredictable and as dangerous as a raging Belwohr.* Just then, the officer heard the prince still growling not too far to his left. With a sigh, he unsheathed his longblade and started ripping the canvas to try and reach the prince. But it was no easy going with the many layers of material, and the poles crisscrossed as they were. Still, he did progress and a moment later, he found himself next to Kendor, who was also trying to reach the prince. Jamir thought the man would look embarrassed, but instead, he raised shoulders and brows in a sign of resignation to his commander's nature. Both men now shouted and asked the prince if he was ok.

The prince growled the reply, “Of course, I'm ok. Why wouldn't I be?!”

Jamir had to hold back a laugh as he looked at Kendor who was shaking his head. Kendor said, “My Prince, please move back. We are going to rip the canvas on this side.”

A moment later, the prince emerged from the debris, followed by the two officers. They walked out in front of bewildered men who had taken up arms, fearing that something or someone was attacking the prince.

A soldier asked, "Lord Commander, are you all right?"

Toras paused a moment but did not reply. He simply looked at the man with a clenched jaw, irritated that the soldier would ask him the same question about his condition. The soldier stepped back and mumbled an apology.

Toras resumed his furious walk and strode to the paddock to retrieve Scorch and prepare him for departure.

"Scorch, come here!"

Toras saw Scorch raise his head at the back of the paddock, but the furan made no move to approach. Toras called his name again, or rather yelled it again, and this time Scorch responded with a soft growl as he bobbed his head in refusal.

Toras was about to yell again, when he realized what was happening and said to himself, "Right. You're certainly not the one who deserves my anger. In fact, I'm sure that if it were up to you, we'd already be in Galior."

Toras called him again, but the furan still refused to go, until the prince realized he needed to take a deep breath, calm down and apologize. The furan accepted the apology with a reproachful purr, but finally approached his master who took him out of the paddock to saddle him.

By the crumbled tent, the soldiers had gathered around their captains. Those who did not know the Lord Commander personally wondered whether the man had gone mad. But Toras's men realized this was "simply" going to be another one of those days, or rather, nights. Grom asked a tall and wiry soldier near him whether the prince had lost it.

The soldier replied with an honest, "Nope, he just can't let his men put themselves in danger without him."

As for Kendor, he could guess what was going through the prince's mind, as well as what was going to happen next. So, he just waited with the soldiers, and reassured those who needed reassuring – especially the members of the Royal Guard. It did not take long before the prince's command rumbled through the camp.

"Primus Kendor, Secundus Jamir, get the men ready. We're all going to Galior! And I don't want to hear any argument or complaint!" Then, turning to Tamas, who had come to find him, he said, "Sergeant! Please send a messenger to the east to find my brother and inform him of what is happening here. The caravan is probably somewhere on the Capital Road by now."

So it was that Lord Commander Toras and his detachment made a fateful detour to Galior.

²³ 'Sunshield' referred to the covering membranes or chemical mechanisms, which animals that could not hide from the suns at midday, deployed over their bodies in order to protect themselves.

²⁴ Shellie: Small invertebrate creature with a thin shell on its back.