

Felix Nyenhuis

A SILBERHEIM FRAGMENT

DUNEBLIGHT



BEYOND WORLDS

DUNEBLIGHT

A Silberheim Fragment

Felix Nyenhuis

First edition 2023

Author: Felix Nyenhuis

Published by Beyond Worlds GmbH
Kaiserstrasse 50, 66849 Landstuhl, Germany
www.beyondworlds.de

Copyright © Beyond Worlds GmbH
All rights reserved

Cover illustrated by Cristiana Leone

This work and all its constituent parts are protected by copyright. Any use without the consent of Beyond Worlds GmbH and the authors is prohibited. This includes, without limitation, electronic or other reproduction, translation, distribution or public availability.

CONTENTS

1	Old and New Dangers	5
2	Within the Stonehold	16
3	Shadows of the Past	28
4	A Dreadful Suspicion	38
5	Hope in the Sand	45
6	An Unexpected Visitor	52
7	Through the Northern Lands	58
8	The Abandoned Pass	73
9	Garrison in the Twilight	83
10	Unequal among Equals	90
11	One Last Effort	101
12	The Price of Freedom	126
13	Among Royalists	135

OLD AND NEW DANGERS

skytide 416

They felt like clay vessels in a firing pit whose heat was slowly being stoked. At first, when they had left the Trer's shadow, the temperature had still been bearable. But in time the pleasant warmth became sweltering heat, and the once welcome sunshine a painful burning upon their skin. As in a firing pit, their world was bounded: great mountain ranges rose on either side, scarcely ten miles away, yet under the circumstances they seemed beyond reach. The dust-dry plain through which they dragged themselves shimmered hypnotically in the sun, while a hot wind blew fine grains of sand about their ears. They were thirsty and exhausted from a long pursuit. A pursuit in which they had been the quarry.

»We're lost,« Toben said aloud, wiping sweat clotted with sand and dust from his face. »We should have sighted Dourstedt long ago.«

»You can't know that,« Pantal replied, looking east towards the mountains from whose cool darkness they had emerged a few hours before. »We don't make the same pace on sand as we do on the Silverford.«

»Then at least let us go a little closer to the mountains again. I'll shrivel up like the desert grass at our feet,« Toben called, the desperation in his voice plain to hear.

»Do you want to be ambushed again? Guttled by that band of thieves like our comrades?« Pantal shouted back.

Dreadful memories came over Toben. He still could not believe what they had recently endured: an attack upon a well-guarded convoy beneath the king's banner. He had heard of such raids, but never believed those beasts would truly dare. They had left Dourstedt barely an hour behind when several of the torches along the roadside suddenly went out and shadowy figures appeared in the weak twilight. He and his comrades had tried to form ranks, but the attackers were already among them, as though they had always been there. The situation was hopeless. Not one of his sword strokes found its mark. Naked fear spread amongst the usually valiant soldiers and at last drove them to flight. Yet only he and Pantal reached the edge of the shadow in the west after a seemingly endless sprint. They leapt into the sunlight and ran on blindly to put still more distance behind them. At length they stopped, looked back and gasped for breath in relief. After a short discussion they agreed to make a broad circuit northwards and return to Dourstedt. But fear of another attack followed every step.

»Doesn't the heat trouble you at all?« Toben asked after catching up with his comrade with difficulty.

»Not been stationed in Karrmal long, have you?«

Indeed, Toben had only recently come to Karrmal. An easterly wind prevailed, but the temperatures there had seemed tolerable enough—within the shadow of the walls, at least. »I'm from Trermouth,« he replied.

Pantal gave a dry laugh. »What did you do to get sent to Karrmal—and put on duty along the Silverford besides?«

Toben pressed his lips together. »Long story,« he said. »Too long to tell without a drink of water.« He pointed at his empty flask.

»No concern of mine. We should keep north a while longer in any case. The filth from Grimshadow are everywhere now.«

»Everywhere?« Toben asked in surprise.

»Between the Ring Wall and the Trer, from Dourstedt to Karrmal. And it gets worse with every skytide.«

»So that wasn't the first attack?«

Pantal laughed again, cynically this time. »Do they tell you in Trermouth that there are no troubles in the Kingdom of Morgathal? Anyone travelling the Silverford with fewer than two dozen soldiers is lost. And even enough men offer no true safety, as you've had the pleasure of learning.«

Toben slowly began to understand why no one volunteered for a posting in this region. He meant to answer, but managed only a cough and a long clearing of his throat. His mouth was so dry he could scarcely speak. He tasted dust and felt sand between his teeth. Disgusted, he spat upon the ground. Then he looked at Pantal, who watched him without expression. »Have you a mouthful of water to spare?« he asked hoarsely.

»Not my problem if you can't ration your water,« Pantal replied curtly.

Angry and defiant, Toben unfastened his bracers and flung them aside. Then he tore the sleeve from his linen shirt and tied the rag around his mouth so that he would not have to swallow quite so much sand.

»Can we move on, then?«

»I won't stop you.«

»I'm certain of that,« Pantal replied and drank from his flask. »Come on. We're nearly there.«

They dragged themselves onwards and onwards. Though every step was more arduous than the last, neither wished to let the other see weakness. Meanwhile the ground had grown ever softer and sandier; not a trace of vegetation remained. The wind, however, played ever more tricks upon Toben. Again and again it raised little clouds of dust somewhere within his sight. Where the young man came from, such clouds were a sure sign of danger. Here dust was only dust, and nothing more. Yet he started every time.

They took turns looking east, raising a hand to their brows and squinting against the sun to make out the outline of the Trer. They searched for the »Unequal Brothers«, as the two moun-

tains were called whose foothills held the entrance to Dourstedt. Their outlines were almost identical, but they differed greatly in size; the northern mountain was surely three times larger than the southern one. Yet they found no sign of the formation.

»We've gone too bloody far,« Toben's low, muffled voice cursed beneath his makeshift face covering. »And unless I'm much mistaken, we've gone farther from the Trer as well.«

A trace of uncertainty now showed on Pantal's face. He looked east once more and tried to judge the distance, but a small dune hid much of the mountains. He strode towards it and climbed the sandy crest in great steps. Again he looked carefully around. *It all seems rather strange*, he thought, when the ground beneath his feet suddenly began to move. A loud, uncanny whirring cut through the air, and Pantal saw in astonishment that the sand beneath him was sliding down the little dune. He stumbled backwards and landed abruptly on his backside, stirring up the ground and ending in a cloud of dust, coughing. A malicious laugh sounded as he laboured back to his feet.

»Doesn't taste so fine, does it?« Toben asked, his broad grin discernible even beneath his face covering.

With deliberate show, Pantal reached for his flask, toasted his comrade and took a long drink. »Nothing a little water won't put right,« he replied acidly.

»Well? Can we finally walk towards the Trer now?«

»Yes, we're far enough north. If we're quick, we can be drinking pit ale in Dourstedt's upper mines by the next darkening.«

Toben's eyes searched sceptically for the moon, which already stood close beside the sun. *I'd like to see that*, he thought doubtfully.

They passed the little dune and walked straight towards the distant mountains. Time went by, and Toben noticed Pantal reaching for his flask more and more often. Envious and annoyed, he called, »But there wasn't a single mouthful left for a comrade?«

Pantal gave no answer and marched stoically on.

The heat grew ever more brutal, and the sun, now shining straight into their faces, sought out and evaporated every drop of moisture their bodies had to offer. Toben's lips felt like rough limestone, and his eyes, fouled with sand, burnt terribly. Breathing came hard, and not a moment passed in which he did not pity himself.

At last the darkening began and promised some small relief—and of course they had scarcely covered half the distance. »Let us rest a moment before we tread on some snake in the dark,« Toben panted softly. In truth he did not fear the animals of the desert. But the gathering darkness reminded him of the horrors of the ambush. It was a feeling of powerlessness, of helplessness and mistrust. He had learnt painfully that his senses were not keen enough for the dark.

»That's what we have greaves for. Better to cover some ground while it's cool,« his comrade replied irritably.

»But until we see the Unequal Brothers, we don't even know whether we ought to go south-east or north-east. We'll only lose ourselves farther.«

»As you please. Then let us rest!« Pantal cried grimly.

They removed the rest of their equipment and sat upon the ground. Pantal reached for his flask again, but by now it too seemed empty. Enraged, he hurled it away in a high arc and took up his sword instead, polishing it with his sleeve.

Toben would gladly have done the same, for everyone knew that care of weapons and equipment was amongst the foremost duties of a soldier of the Warrior Elite. But he had lost his sword in the fighting, which would certainly earn him a fair measure of trouble. *They'll have to find me before they can punish me*, he thought with some amusement, staring into the dark desolation.

The brief cooling did them good. The air itself changed little, but the absence of sunlight was a blessing upon their skin. Toben wiped the sweat from his brow and neck with the cloth

around his mouth. Everything smelt of salt, sand and metal. His thirst was dreadful, yet the vague hope of soon finding water—or even a beer—near the Trer made it all a little easier to bear.

Pantal had finished with his sword and now reached for a hidden dagger. Contrary to expectation, however, he did not begin cleaning it, but drove it into the ground over and over again.

»Everything all right, Pantal?« Toben asked warily.

The large soldier looked up in confusion. He seemed uncertain why he had been tormenting the ground with his dagger. Apparently angered with himself, he put it away and ran a hand through his short red hair. »I'm bloody thirsty, I'm telling you! Have you any water left?«

»It's a poor time for stupid jokes, don't you think?« Toben replied, plainly affronted.

»Have you or haven't you?«

»Are you serious?«

»Have you or haven't you?« Pantal repeated more loudly.

With deliberate emphasis, Toben took his flask, pulled the cork and turned it upside down. Not a single drop came out.

Pantal leapt to his feet in fury. »Everything's gone to shit! Wretched drudgery! Time the damned king did something about the vermin here! But what are a few soldiers' lives? Expendable!«

Toben did not know how to answer. The words surprised him. His companion had been grim until now, but controlled and resolute all the same. To speak so critically of the king was undisciplined at best and, under ordinary circumstances, would have earned him an immediate whipping. Yet Toben had neither the will nor the strength to discipline a man larger and stronger than himself—particularly since he was anything but a model soldier.

»Let us go and find water!« Pantal cried, and marched straight into the darkness without putting his equipment back on.

»Have you gone mad? Where do you think you'll find water here?«

Again his comrade gave no answer.

»Damn you,« Toben hissed, seized the abandoned sword and followed into the dark. Pantal was not difficult to locate: one had only to follow the curses he now uttered without pause. Even so, Toben struggled to catch him. When at last, after what felt an age, he drew level, he shouted, »Pull yourself together, soldier! You're a member of the Warrior Elite, not some vagabond!«

The words seemed to have the hoped-for effect. Pantal stopped, turned and came to attention. Yet when he saw Toben, his face darkened again. »Warrior Elite,« he said scornfully. »What does some soft boy from Trermouth know of the Warrior Elite? Nothing. Absolutely nothing!«

Toben meant to reply, but Pantal had already vanished again. *The sun must have melted his wits*, he thought and set off in pursuit once more. He found Pantal a few paces away, again stabbing his dagger into the sand.

»I can smell it,« the visibly confused soldier muttered.

»Smell what?«

»Sweet water, well hidden.«

»We should find our equipment and wait out the darkening instead of digging in the dirt,« Toben said, hoping he might yet reach his comrade through reason. But Pantal did not listen at all.

»It must be here. Shit!« he screamed instead and dug more fiercely into the dust-dry ground.

»Stop this nonsense!« Toben cried. Losing patience, he seized Pantal's arm. The other man did not respond. Toben pulled harder and said breathlessly, »Now get up!«

The scrape of the digging dagger ceased. With startling speed, Pantal sprang up, tore himself free and struck. A fist like a bear's caught Toben on the temple and sent him sprawling. The last sliver of light from the distant crescent sun vanished, and a deep, uncompromising darkness closed around him.

»The mountains sparkle in the north,« a brittle voice whispered.

Toben opened his eyes for a moment, but saw only glaring, indistinct shapes. The sun burnt upon his skin once more, and the pain throbbing beneath his brow was terrible. He blinked cautiously and tried to make something out. Very slowly his senses returned—and with them the memory of what had happened.

»A sparkle like water,« said the voice.

Frightened and bewildered, Toben struggled upright. He knew whose voice it was and looked carefully around. Less than three paces away he saw Pantal crouching before a hole in the sand, staring back at him. It was the face of a predator, not a man, that glared so venomously at Toben.

»Slept well?« Pantal growled.

Toben decided it was wiser not to answer. He touched his head and found the place where his supposed comrade's fist had struck him. A sharp pain shot through his skull and his sight darkened again. *Damned fool*, he thought when he felt the blood upon his fingers. He looked at Pantal once more and noticed the large ring on his right hand. Toben knew what the ring with its blue stone signified. It was an honour for ten skytides of faithful service in the ranks of the Warrior Elite. The soldier's conduct bewildered him all the more.

»Get up, you lazy dog!« Pantal shouted angrily.

»What in the world has come over you?« Toben asked timidly, and regretted the words at once. In a single bound Pantal

was upon him and hauled him to his feet. Everything spun and a dreadful nausea seized him. He fell to his knees and vomited. There was not much to bring up: bitter bile, a few drops of liquid and some sand. It tasted vile. When he was done, he collapsed onto his side and put his hands protectively over his head. The heat grew ever more unbearable, and in his condition he no longer held any hope of leaving the desert alive.

Pantal seemed untroubled by his comrade's state. He turned away and surveyed the land again, constantly clearing his throat and swallowing dryly.

Toben did not know how much time had passed when he suddenly felt a kick in his side.

»We've got company! White gleams!«

»Just leave me alone. Please.«

»Battle stance!« Pantal screamed and kicked him again.

With difficulty, Toben sat up. He was accustomed to hardship and had endured much in his short life, but never before had it cost him so much to summon one last effort. »Where are these white gleams?« he asked at last, looking around sceptically.

Pantal had recovered his sword and stood a few paces away with his legs spread. His eyes were fixed upon the north. »They're very close,« he said.

In the shimmer of the heat, Toben saw movement not far away, behind the crest of a dune. A circling motion, accompanied by a hissing sound. Before he understood what he was seeing, a small grey object came flying towards them. Startled, he dropped onto his back again, the sudden movement almost robbing him of consciousness once more. There came the dull sound of an impact, and only a heartbeat later he saw Pantal crumple limply beside him.

»See what's still of use. Look for leather and linen. Leave the rest here,« a strange voice called from some distance away.

Footsteps approached. *Those bandits again*, Toben thought in horror and decided to feign death. It would scarcely require much acting from him.

»This one has Duneblight, as expected,« said a second voice, apparently belonging to a young man. »His clothes are no use to us, then. Shall I put him out of his misery?«

»Save your strength,« said the first voice, now closer. »The sand will take him.«

A small shadow suddenly fell across Toben, and a woman's voice said, »This one still lives, but he's wounded and near his end. At least there's no sign of Duneblight.«

Two more shadows came between him and the sun.

»Not our doing. I only slung a stone,« said the young man. »Must have been the other one. We should make certain he's dead before we strip him.«

The first voice, evidently their leader's, spoke again. »He doesn't look as though he's been long in the north. Blond hair, but not bleached. Fair skin—burnt, yet not aged by the sun. Unusually young besides. No sandbone like the other.«

»Perhaps Morgathal is running out of butchers,« the woman said.

»Perhaps,« the leader replied. »If he comes from Southcrest, he may have useful information for us. The Black Maar must not remain blind when the signs so clearly speak of change.«

A sigh sounded. »Shall I unroll the travois?« the young man asked simply.

»That is why we have it, my son,« the leader replied.

Several rough hands suddenly searched Toben's clothes, but found nothing of value or danger. Then he was pulled with ease onto a thick sheet and something was tied around his arms. He heard the strangers' words only indistinctly now, for the pain in his head threatened to overwhelm him.

»He'll hardly survive the journey without honeyroot,« the woman said.

»Then give him a few mouthfuls.«

There came a crack, and a small piece of wood was placed against Toben's lips, drawing him briefly back into the present. He hoped the liquid would not run into his windpipe, but the

woman knew what she was doing. She tilted his neck back a little, turned his head to the side and slowly let the liquid flow into his mouth. It tasted sweet, but faintly musty too.

»Finished?« the leader asked. »Then move.«

They had to be travelling north, for Toben felt the sun only upon the left side of his face. He wondered how long the leader's son could carry his burden, but the young man uttered no complaint. Stoical and silent, he dragged Toben from one dune to the next. Toben would have liked to open his eyes and see his rescuers, but did not dare. *Were they truly rescuers? Or abductors?* he wondered, before exhaustion finally sent him into genuine sleep amid the monotonous rise and fall of the dunes.

WITHIN THE STONEHOLD

When he woke again, there was no trace of the merciless sun. Quite the opposite: it was cool and dim. He slowly opened his eyes and looked around with effort. In the half-light he made out the shape of a cave that appeared to have been fashioned and furnished by human hands. Tools hung from the walls, along with several unfamiliar implements and two peculiar slab-like objects from behind which some light shone. On a table he also recognised a linen shirt that looked very familiar indeed. Alarmed, he looked down at himself and saw that he wore nothing but his underclothes and that his feet were chained. He pulled hard, but the chains did not yield. Instead, the jolt through his body roused the wound upon his head. Carefully he felt the spot and found some strange resinous substance that had evidently been smeared over it.

Something suddenly moved in a dark corner of the cave. A small human figure detached itself from the shadows and darted past him. Without a word, it left through a tunnel to his right. »Wait!« Toben called after it, but it had already vanished. A few unintelligible words sounded outside soon afterwards and grew steadily louder.

»You're awake!« said a tall man as he entered the cave through the tunnel, accompanied by a young woman.

Toben strained to remember what had happened. Blurred images of the attack found their way into his mind. *They attacked us, yet they saved me*, he thought in confusion. A warning instinct told him to be cautious.

»You were almost dead when we found you,« the man said. »But fortune was with you, for Elissa has nursed you back to health.«

Toben did not know what to make of it. Bandits who first attacked him and stole his clothes, then played the rescuers. »My comrade was evidently less fortunate,« he replied, trying to discern the man's expression in the gloom. »Or where is he?«

»There was no saving him,« Elissa answered. »Duneblight.«

»Sadly so,« the man agreed. »But where are my manners? My name is Hatem, and I am the head of this little family. What may we call you?«

Again Toben hesitated. He knew that the two strangers were not telling the whole truth. Whatever had come over Pantal, the stone that struck his head had done the rest. »What am I doing here? Why did you save me?« he asked instead.

»So that we might talk,« Hatem replied. »Little news of the wider world reaches us here, and so any guest from afar is welcome.«

»Guest?« Toben asked, rattling his chains.

»Merely to prevent misunderstandings or accidents. As soon as we are certain you mean us no harm, they can come off.«

»Why should I wish to harm you?«

»Because Morgathal's soldiers never miss an opportunity,« Elissa called accusingly.

»Enough,« Hatem said quietly.

Toben sat up a little with care. »Can that surprise you, with all the raids you commit?«

The young woman made a sharp whistling sound to underline her outrage and folded her arms demonstratively.

»You must be mistaking us for someone else. We do not belong to the gangs of Grimshadow. You are amongst the people of the Black Maar,« Hatem replied.

»Does that make a difference? Where are my clothes? Where is my equipment?«

»One must take what one can find. Linen, fur, leather—none of it exists here. We do not rob. We gather what was lost.«

Toben only just kept his indignation at the lie from showing. *I see. Not thieves, but gatherers*, he thought scornfully.

»I shall find you other clothes. More suitable ones,« Elissa said.

Meanwhile Hatem crossed to the two slabs on the wall. He turned one, and Toben saw that it covered a hole in the wall and was fixed upon an axle through its centre. A little sunlight entered the cave. Then something remarkable happened: the incoming light caught upon the surface of the slab and was directed into the cave at an angle. Hatem repeated the process with the other slab, though he set it at a different angle. Now the entire cave was brightly lit.

Elissa did not miss the astonishment on Toben's face. Smiling, she said, »Gankrok plates. Never seen them before, have you?«

But Toben ignored her and looked curiously about the cave. In the light it seemed almost homely. Faces, unfamiliar animals and foreign signs had been artfully painted upon the walls. Other forms had been worked directly from the rock. Two finely carved arches spanned the ceiling above him, and ornamentation around the windows bore witness to great craftsmanship and loving attention to detail. He wondered who had made it all, for the work appeared old and almost masterly, not the work of amateurs.

When he had taken his fill of the cave, his gaze fell upon the two humans. The man was tall, powerfully built and marked by the sun. His hair was black and his face scarred. The woman, by contrast, looked entirely different. Her face did not suggest a child of the desert. Her hair was reddish-blond, her build slight and not particularly womanly. Yet both wore very similar garments. They looked as though they were wrapped in scales—very pale scales woven together with some cloth and re-

inforced with pieces of bone. Their clothing shimmered white in the sunlight.

»Is this how bandits live?« Hatem asked, indicating the room with a broad sweep of his hand.

Toben realised that the table upon which his shirt lay was evidently meant for cleaning and swaddling infants. There was some lime powder upon it, along with some sort of oil. Doubt did slowly begin to trouble him. »My name is Toben,« he said. »But I cannot give you what you seek. I know nothing of the deployments here in the north.«

Hatem laughed. »The secretive Warrior Elite. Have no fear. We mean neither to force secrets from you nor condemn you for the deeds of your commanders and comrades.«

»And what deeds would those be?«

Elissa's expression darkened, and she plainly meant to answer when Hatem raised a hand. »You have not been long in the north, am I right?« he asked Toben.

»Not ten days,« Toben answered honestly.

»Just as I thought. If I may guess: you come from the river. What do you call it again? The Victoryvein?«

»Correct. The Victoryvein. I come from Trermouth, where it flows into Lake Morga.«

»Ah, yes, I have heard of it. It must be a beautiful place. Why did you venture into the dry and hostile north instead of enjoying life by the waters of Southcrest?«

»Perhaps I enjoyed it a little too much. Now and then one needs some distance before one can value the virtues of the south again,« Toben replied.

»You have certainly managed the distance,« Hatem said with a laugh that concealed his doubts about what he had just heard. »But rest well for now. Elissa will bring you clothes and something to drink. I cannot release you, not yet, but I can make you a little more comfortable.« He went to a cupboard, opened it and brought out a thick pelt. With great care, as though handling something sacred, he placed it beside Toben and said, »A

good first meeting. We shall speak again later. Oh, and please do not try to free yourself. The chains come from your own forges and are indestructible, as I had cause to learn myself. But have no fear. We shall always treat you well, provided you cause no trouble.«

Toben still did not know what to make of it all. Yet what choice had he but to accept his new circumstances? In a short space of time he had already escaped certain death twice. Every further moment in the world was an unexpected gift, whatever might follow.

»What in the world were you thinking, dragging that scum into our home again?« Nima asked her husband furiously.

»He is scarcely more than a boy, probably without blood upon his hands. A lost soul like any other,« Hatem replied and swept an arm towards the desert at their feet. They sat a little way from their dwelling in the shade of a rock that formed part of the rugged sandstone range in which they lived.

»He remains a soldier of Morgathal. You cannot trust him! Besides, the Council will demand that you throw him from the great rock, and you will be fortunate if they do not throw you after him. If the boy escapes, he will betray us.«

»Even if he escapes us, he will never survive the journey home without help. If he is not caught, the sun will kill him—or a Gankrok, Duneblight, or someone from Grimshadow.«

»But what do you mean to do with him at all? He is only another mouth to feed.«

»We lack for nothing, Nima, my love. I hope to win his trust and then learn more from him about the situation in the south. I want to know whether my suspicions are true, whether strange things are happening there as well. I feel that something approaches. The wind writes it in the sand.«

Nima rolled her eyes.

»You were doubtful of Elissa at first as well. Now she is our son's wife and the mother of your grandchild,« Hatem said.

»But Elissa is no damned soldier of Morgathal. She is the very opposite,« Nima replied irritably.

»I still remember you saying that a servant escaped from the abbey could not be trusted.«

»Back then she was more beast than human!« Nima answered. »Hardly surprising, given what is done to girls in the darkness of Dourstedt.«

»And Toben chose his fate no more than she did,« Hatem replied.

»Toben?«

»That is the name of the soldier in our stronghold.«

»How lovely that you are already so well acquainted,« Nima said, aghast.

Hatem stood and looked indulgently into his wife's beautiful brown eyes. Her long grey hair stirred in the warm wind and blew repeatedly across her face. He simply could not resent her concern. Through all those skytides she had often held their position alone and faced dangers without him. »Have a little faith,« he said gently.

»That is what you always say when you have some foolish idea!«

»And have I not always been proved right?«

»Who was it nursed you back to health when you came home as a young man with a shattered arm and that dreadful wound on your head?« Nima asked sharply.

»With a shattered arm and two Gankrok plates,« Hatem added. »It was almost wor—«

»No, it was not! You were scarcely the same afterwards,« Nima cut in. »But never mind. Toben is here now, so I suppose we shall have to care for him—for now. Or throw him from the rock if he starts any nonsense.« She rose as well and turned to leave. »I shall see whether Elissa needs help with the little one. Your son wished to speak with you, by the way.«

»Be so kind as to send him to me,« Hatem replied.

Nima nodded, stepped from the rock's shadow and disappeared around a corner into the sunlight. Hatem let his gaze wander across the sandy plain before him. Down there, less than two hundred paces away, began a dead land stretching to the horizon. Only the distant ranges in west and east gave the eye any bearings. He wondered whether this desolate place had harboured life long ago. Green trees and bushes, birds and small rodents, such as he had once seen in Southcrest. The petrified remains of long-vanished vegetation, found here and there amongst the small scree fields and dunes as tall as a man, certainly suggested as much. *A green valley upon the slopes of the Trer*, Hatem thought dreamily. *What a world that would be.*

The people of the Black Maar did not truly lead a poor life. There was still enough water, and with the mirror-shields that directed light into even the darkest caves, they could grow vegetables and other edible plants. Even so, his mind knew little but the emptiness of the dry world outside and the damp, dusky darkness of deep shafts and caverns. Some change for the eyes—a forest or a steppe—would be a wondrous thing.

»Listening to the sand again?« a voice suddenly asked.

Hatem turned his head and saw his son. »Ah, Niam. There you are. What is it?«

»I only wanted to ask whether I may go into the city as planned and finish forging my Song. On our last excursion I gathered enough tinder and scrub to kindle another fire.«

»Finish forging it? You have come so far already? I am impressed. But yes, why should you not go?«

»Because of the stranger. Mother is worried.«

»She always is. I shall keep an eye on the soldier while you are away. Besides, Elissa is still here.«

Niam laughed. »True,« he said. »Really, you ought to protect the soldier from her.« He turned and set off. »I'll be back after the next darkening.«

Hatem watched his son go and was reminded of the young man he himself had once been: courageous, strong, full of drive, with no time for lengthy talk. But the many skytides had left their marks upon him. Unlike Niam, his hair had grown thinner and greyer, his back frailer and his step slower. In return, his interest in the world—and the world behind the world—had grown.

When Hatem returned a little later, Nima and Elissa sat with the infant before their house and prepared food. As he saw, there was dried lizard and some darkmoss from the city.

»You may take our guest a plate at once,« Nima called when she saw her husband. The word *guest* sounded unusually sharp.

»Gladly,« Hatem replied and took a finished plate. He crossed to the front door, made of pale, old wood. Apart from the doors and a few pieces of furniture, however, the house was made of the same ochre tuff as everything else here. To uninitiated eyes, therefore, it could not be distinguished at a distance from the rock against which it stood.

Hatem passed through the entrance room, then the living room, and went straight towards an opening in the rear wall of rock. When he entered the stonehold, he found a bewildered soldier. He laughed and set the plate upon the changing table.

»Trousers are difficult to put on with chains around your feet,« Toben said. He still sat on the floor in his underclothes. He had pulled on a shirt of scales—back to front—and looked thoroughly irritated. »Your daughter would not remove the chains when she brought me the clothes.«

»She is not my daughter, but my son's wife. But let me help you.«

Toben remembered the voice of the young man who had dragged him through the desert so effortlessly. »Ah, I see,« he

replied. »I have not yet had the pleasure of meeting your son. Is he like—?«

»Like Elissa?« Hatem finished. »No. He has no cause to fear strangers, or to treat them poorly.«

»Then I look forward to meeting him,« Toben replied.

»You will. At present, however, he is not here. He is in the Black Maar, forging his Song,« Hatem replied, unmistakable pride in his voice.

Toben was confused. *A rather burly fellow for a bard*, he thought. But he had heard what he wished to hear. Only the old man and the two women were here, then.

Something suddenly clinked at Toben's feet. »The key to the chains,« Hatem said. »You can put your trousers on now. The shirt is the wrong way round as well. Those are back pockets, not belly pockets. Lie down in a dune like that and you'll only fill them with sand.«

»I see,« the soldier replied curtly and reached for the key. He was astonished by how little caution the old man showed. But his astonishment ended abruptly when a long spear was suddenly levelled at him.

»Merely a precaution. You understand, I'm sure,« Hatem said pleasantly.

»Of course,« Toben said. He removed the chains and pulled on the trousers. They felt rough and uncomfortable, but that was better than sitting upon his near-bare arse. As he turned the shirt around, he said, »So your son is a singer? I wouldn't have thought such arts were practised here.«

Now it was Hatem's turn to be confused. »Singer?« he asked.

»You said he was forging his Song.«

Peeling laughter filled the cave. »No, no. This is the Song,« he replied and briefly indicated his spear. »My Song, at least. My son must forge his own, like every young man who means to amount to something.«

»That makes rather more sense,« Toben said, now amused himself. »But why do you call your spears *Songs*?«

Hatem hesitated, but found no reason not to enlighten the stranger. He pointed to the spearhead. Small holes could be seen there, and the head itself was twisted. »In truth, the name of these spears comes from the word *song* as you know it. When cast, they sing like the great dunes in the west. That is why one cannot hear them fly when they are thrown in the desert. It is the only way to bring down the swift beasts of the sand.« At the final sentence he nodded towards the mirror-plates upon the wall.

»Singing dunes? Like those where you found me?« Toben remembered the sound the sand had made just before Pantal landed on his backside.

»The little drifts in the south may be called dunes. No, the dunes in the west are majestic: mountains and valleys of light and shadow that move sluggishly through time like great waves beneath the sun. We call them wandering dunes. When the wind quickens the march of those sand giants, they sing in its measure. They sing dirges.«

»Dirges?« Toben repeated in disbelief. He did not know what to make of any of it.

»Our ancestors believe that one hears the voices of the dead who perished in the dunes. Many dead. Very many. The wandering dunes devour anyone who is not properly prepared. Most lose their bearings and die of thirst—or worse, fall ill with Duneblight, as your comrade did.«

Before Toben could ask further questions, Elissa entered the cave. She looked him over and said mockingly, »So you can dress yourself properly after all.« Then she set a cup of water upon the table and picked up Toben's linen shirt, the lime powder and the little bottle of oil. Without another word, she left again.

»Put the chains back on, please. Then I shall give you food and drink,« Hatem said, pointing the tip of his spear at Toben's feet. Toben obeyed.

Once the chains were locked securely again and the key retrieved, the old man placed plate and cup within Toben's reach. Toben was plainly ravenous and seized them greedily. He bit into the lizard meat and stopped. Carefully he took the piece from his mouth again.

Hatem watched him keenly. »Not to your liking?« he asked in amusement.

»This is raw!« the soldier replied. »And tough as old leather besides.«

»Not raw. Air-dried in the sun.«

»Do you not boil or roast your meat?«

»Very rarely. On special occasions,« Hatem said, returning the spear to the dark corner from which he had taken it. »Wood is precious here. One may build with it or burn it, but not both.«

»For the wood you use to forge those elaborate spears, you could eat hot food every day,« Toben replied uncomprehendingly.

»True. That is why the forges burn only wood and plant matter we find far out in the desert. It is a young man's duty to gather enough fuel to forge his own Song. Sometimes it takes many skytides. Some never manage it. No one would make such an effort for a little cooked meat, let alone expose himself to the dangers of the desert.«

»An interesting custom,« Toben said, looking sceptically at the darkmoss upon his plate. »What is that?«

»Moss from the Black Maar. It holds a great deal of water and makes the lizard a little more palatable when you eat the two together.«

Toben tried it, putting some of each into his mouth. It was disgusting, but hunger forced it down. »You speak constantly of the Black Maar. What is it?«

»The great shadow-hole. The dark giver of life. Hard to explain; better to show you. Have patience. If sufficient trust grows between us, I shall take you there.«

The words echoed through Toben's thoughts. *Great shadow-hole? Dark giver of life? These people speak the strangest nonsense,* he thought, and left it at that for the time being. »Good to hear you do not mean to keep me imprisoned here for ever,« he said instead.

»I hope not,« Hatem said, turning to leave and join the women. »You should eat everything. You need it. Until later.«

Toben nodded and managed a chewing »Thank you.« Once he had swallowed the stuff, he put the plate aside and examined his new clothes. *Now I'm a white gleam too,* he thought.

SHADOWS OF THE PAST

»Leave me alone,« he croaked when he felt yet another prod against his head. But they did not leave him alone. Another prod, harder this time. Then another. It made him very angry.

Strange voices said something, but the wind swallowed their words.

Another prod. Frothing with rage, Pantal tried to open his eyes, but could not. They were stuck together. He raised a hand to his lids and rubbed away the mixture of blood and sand. Then he blinked again. He saw two large figures whose bodies and faces were entirely concealed beneath beige linen.

Once more whispered, unintelligible words drifted through the air.

Pantal felt for his dagger, but did not find it. »I'll kill you with my bare hands if you don't leave me alone at once,« he wheezed.

One of the figures bent over him and asked, »Were you with the convoy that was attacked, soldier?«

So the filth mean to finish it now, Pantal thought, and decided on principle not to answer.

The other figure spoke. »The ring and the tracks are proof enough. He will be from Karrmal, and since he would not survive two days here, only the convoy can explain him.«

»He plainly has the desert sickness,« said the one stooping over him after a brief examination, quickly drawing back again. »He has surely lost his wits already.«

The anger in Pantal began to seethe. »I've lost my wits?« he spat. »Bend down again, you misbegotten bastard.«

Again there was only whispering.

With the last of his strength, Pantal sat up and examined the strangers more closely. Beneath their linen robes they carried long swords, well concealed. Swords like the one he had carried. He looked around for it and saw it half-buried in the sand some three paces away.

»Instead of cursing, you might render your king one final service,« said one of the voices.

»My king? He can eat dirt, the bastard!«

»We seek a young man with blond hair and fair skin. Not very strong and not long in this country. Probably dressed like you. Was he with you? Have you seen him?«

Pantal laughed. »That idiot Toben. You mean him?«

The two strangers exchanged knowing looks. One nodded; the other went to Pantal's sword and pulled it from the sand. As he did so, silver greaves and blue trousers showed beneath his robe.

»Yes, damn it, he was here. I think.«

»Thank you,« said the man holding the sword. »Allow me to render you one last service in return for your help.« He drew back, swung the blade and severed the old soldier's head.

»Death by one's own sword. The final grace of the Fifth,« said the other. »Come. The tracks lead north.«

For what seemed an age, Niam had followed a stony path northwards along the shores of the Black Maar. Only a small oil lamp kept him company and more than once saved him from accidentally tumbling down the steep bank into the water in the darkness.

After a final few careful steps, he reached the Beach of Songs at last. A small plain of dark gravel stretched before him, and

beyond it lay a smooth black surface from which rose a sweet, musty smell. A few fires glowed to his right. The sound of several smiths' hammers could be heard. He made straight for them.

»Back again already, young Niam,« came the rough voice of an old but vigorous man.

»Master Ebt,« Niam replied respectfully. »Yes. I have gathered enough fuel for the final work.« He took a bundle of wood and scrub from his back and handed it to the old man.

»I am glad of it. If I remember rightly, only the head remains to be shaped. This should be enough.«

»It should. I shall fetch my Song,« Niam said. He passed the forge fires at a run and went to a great grey rock that stood close to the shore at the far end of the beach. In the weak light of two small fire bowls, many dozens of spears gleamed against the rock face—most of them visibly unfinished. He took his spear and met Master Ebt at one of the empty hearths.

»Let us get the fire going, then,« the old man said with practised ease. He broke the bundle apart and cast the smaller twigs upon a bed of faint embers. »What is this?« he suddenly asked, drawing a long piece of cloth from amongst the wood.

»A pair of trousers,« Niam replied. »Too badly ruined to wear, but the cloth should burn well.«

»As you say,« the master replied and tossed the trousers into the little flames. Their blue colour showed clearly in the fire-light, and made the old man pause again. »Where did you get them, if I may ask?«

Niam hesitated. »I found them on a corpse in the desert, south of here.«

»How far south?« Ebt asked suspiciously.

»Far enough. Almost as far as Dourstedt. A soldier dead of thirst. We found him whilst gathering fuel for my spear-head.«

»That is dangerously far south. I hope you were not seen.«

»We were very careful. But nothing that will burn can be found close by any longer. It is slowly becoming a serious problem,« Niam said quickly, hoping to turn the master's thoughts elsewhere.

The old man looked at the rock face with all its unfinished Songs and nodded. »Indeed it is.«

Once the hearth was fully ablaze, Master Ebt took the spear, thrust its head into the embers and told Niam to work the bellows and rouse the flames. Niam needed no second bidding.

Together they completed the Song in scarcely thirty hammer blows. Proudly, Master Ebt handed the still-glowing spear to Niam. »You know what must be done, my boy.«

Niam nodded and removed his shirt. Then he raised the hot spearhead to his upper arm and pressed it firmly against the flesh. It took all his will not to scream. After a brief moment he pulled the point away and ran with the spear to the black, smooth water of the Maar. He plunged the glowing metal beneath the surface. A hiss sounded. When the hiss faded, loud cheering rose around him.

Master Ebt looked on happily. He remembered how Niam's father had once forged his Song beneath his guidance and burnt the song into his flesh. The song—the arrangement of tiny holes in the spearhead—differed slightly upon every weapon and so made a pattern all its own upon the skin, binding spear and bearer unmistakably for life.

»Thank you, Master. I shall be grateful to you for ever.«

»You may be proud of yourself. Now return to Eblin and show the city your song. And when you are home again, give my regards to your father, the old dreamer.«

»I shall,« Niam said jubilantly and lit his little oil lamp once more. None of the hardships of the outward journey could be felt on the way back. He reached Eblin's northern outskirts in no time and could scarcely escape the courteous and sincere attentions of his fellow citizens. Whoever saw the fresh burn upon his upper arm bowed, offered a few kind words or even

invited him to eat. But Niam only wished to return home and proudly show his father the completed Song.

He left Eblin in the west and followed an inconspicuous path that would lead him from the city's long shadow back into the sun. In high spirits he hopped from stone to stone, passed rocky outcrops and covered the first half of the six miles to his parents' house in great strides. He reached the sunlight and had just passed a pointed rock some ten paces high when a whistle like that of a Maargaper suddenly sounded. Instinctively, Niam crouched and pricked up his ears. The whistle came again, this time in two short notes. Niam knew what it meant. As a true child of the Black Maar, he knew those birds well; they uttered only single, drawn-out calls. Carefully he looked up and saw a pair of pale eyes. There, upon the rock above him, lay a Bodystone, one of the Wardens of the Waste.

»Step into the shadow and wait there,« the Bodystone said quietly.

Niam grew nervous, but obeyed and crawled to the shaded side of the rock. Only two things would move a Bodystone to abandon his concealment and address someone. Either danger threatened, or the person had been observed in some forbidden act, such as smuggling strangers into the country. *Did I hide the soldier too poorly beneath the scrub after all?* Niam wondered. His nervousness became unease. Ordinarily he was very good at giving the Bodystones a wide berth. As a child he had often amused himself by finding those watchers and letting them know it with a tossed pebble.

A breath of air brushed Niam's neck, and suddenly the Bodystone crouched beside him. Niam regarded the warden in awe. The man's clothes were coloured with the dust of the rock and made him almost impossible to distinguish from it. His right hand gripped a precious longbow and several arrows; his left held an old Song. Niam did not speak, for it was forbidden to address a Bodystone. One had to wait until he began the conversation.

The Bodystone examined Niam in a quick glance, revealing the black pigment applied around the man's eyes. »My congratulations upon your Song,« he whispered curtly. Then he raised his own Song and pointed its head southwards into the distance.

Niam felt bewildered and relieved at once. Evidently the Bodystone had not left his post on Niam's account. By the same token, however, it meant that they were in danger. He strained to see something out upon the plain, but saw nothing.

»Farther ahead. Nine hundred and fifty paces away, by the small circular field of stones,« the warden whispered. »Let us hope they noticed you hopping little scorch-mark no more than you noticed them.«

Now Niam saw what he was meant to see. Two beige figures, scarcely visible in the desert, were walking slowly towards them. »Certainly none of ours,« he whispered. »Water smugglers?«

»Wrong route,« the Bodystone replied.

»Lost, perhaps?«

»Possible, but unlikely. Far too powerfully built for people from Nyvil as well.«

»And far too tall for goblins,« Niam added.

»Truly?« the warden mocked.

»Then they can only come from the south.«

»The people of Southcrest generally keep away from the Black Maar, and with good reason.«

»We could simply ask them,« Niam said.

»We shall do nothing,« the Bodystone replied imperiously. »If those two have no marks of sufferance, you do not wish to take the burden of two extinguished lives upon your shoulders. Not even as a witness.«

Niam would gladly have told him of the recent encounter with the two soldiers and his successful attack. On the other hand, he had to admit that shortening the suffering of a man already condemned to death—particularly from ambush—was

something rather different from simply executing someone who happened to be in the wrong place. »Shall I raise the alarm in Eblin instead?« he asked.

»Not for two strangers. Besides, they would discover you. Stay here until I have reached them, then go home,« the warden ordered and stood. »Understood?«

Niam answered reluctantly, »Yes. Understood.« He would gladly have helped; he was no weakling and now even possessed his own weapon. But it was best not to contradict a Warden of the Waste.

The Bodystone left the shadow and descended the slope to the edge of the desert in gentle, unhurried movements. Even sand flowed more conspicuously down an incline than that man. Reaching the bottom, he concealed himself behind a stone and waited until the two figures had come within twenty paces.

Despite the Bodystones' excellent training, this solitary action seemed very bold to Niam. It was now plain how powerfully built the two strangers were. He readied himself inwardly to run to the warden's aid, but when the Bodystone at last revealed himself, two more rose to his left and right and drew their bows. Niam felt relieved. The situation looked markedly better now. He knew that this was the moment to continue on his way. The warden had ordered him to do so. But it was all far too exciting. His heart beat faster and he strained his eyes, determined not to miss what happened.

The Bodystone who had sat beside him raised a hand and signalled the two strangers to halt. The appearance of the three wardens had plainly surprised them. They stopped as though rooted to the ground and looked carefully about. Then one of the men raised his arms in reassurance and seemed to address the wardens. But at that distance, with the steady east wind, Niam had no hope of understanding him.

For some time they merely stood there and spoke. Then one stranger suddenly turned to the other and motioned for him to

do something. The man repeatedly reached beneath his robe as though searching for an object and slowly advanced upon the foremost Bodystone. Something flashed beneath the cloth. Then everything happened very quickly.

Two arrows shot past the forward Bodystone and struck the approaching man squarely in the chest. Contrary to all expectation, he did not collapse. Instead he drew a sword from beneath his robe. The other did likewise, and together they rushed the three Bodystones with astonishing speed. The wardens themselves now appeared visibly surprised. Before the two archers could change weapons, one stranger had already cut down the first. Two savage single combats began, spears against swords.

Niam could not believe what he was seeing. He had expected violence and, in secret, had even looked forward to it a little. But he had never imagined the two strangers would defend themselves so successfully. All his daring seemed to desert him. Instead of an impulse driving him boldly into the fight, he now had to overcome a paralysing shock unlike anything he had known. »Damn it, damn it, damn it!« he shouted several long moments later, seized his Song and finally charged. As he hurtled down the slope like an avalanche of scree, he thought through the many exercises he had performed with his father's Song. Yet now, when it mattered, he felt anything but ready.

By the time Niam had raced to within forty paces, the other Bodystone—the one unknown to him—lost his life. The stranger drew his bloodied sword from the corpse and turned towards Niam. Now Niam saw why the arrows had done no harm. Beneath the men's robes, torn and displaced in the fighting, thick silver armour gleamed. He raised his Song at once, aimed with care and hurled it with all his strength at the man already sprinting towards him. The spear did Master Ebt honour. With the force and speed of a Gankrok, it struck the attacker directly in the throat. The man died at once.

The other duel still raged with undiminished fury. The Bodystone skilfully evaded the sword or parried it with the point of his Song. Yet the stranger parried every counterstroke in turn, or his armour rendered it useless. The two moved about one another so swiftly that Niam did not know how to help without risking a blow against his ally or at least distracting him. Even so, he recovered his spear and approached the duel cautiously. When he was five paces away, the stranger virtually threw himself upon his opponent's spear. The weapon failed to pierce the breastplate and was instead deflected beneath the man's arm. He clamped his upper arm against his body, twisted sharply and tore the Song from the Bodystone's hands. His next movement was a dreadful sword thrust that drove through the warden's belly.

Niam was horrified, but this time he mastered his shock quickly. He took the opening, sprang forwards and swung his spear vertically through the air. Exhausted, the stranger raised his left arm and warded off the brutal blow, but paid dearly for it. Blood shot from a cleft in his bracer. *He'll not use that arm again*, Niam thought and drew back for another strike. This time he struck the man's shoulder. It did not wound him, but knocked him off balance. Niam drew the Song back to the centre of his body and thrust. Again at the throat. Again with the desired result. The fight was over.

»What did I order you to do?« the surviving Bodystone panted, vomiting a mouthful of blood. His condition was grave.

Niam tore a strip of linen from the dead man's robe, knelt beside the warden and pressed it against the welling wound in his belly. »We can mend this,« he said, utterly distraught.

»Do not make a fool of yourself,« the Bodystone contradicted him and looked Niam directly in the eyes. »It is a just tribute. A little red sand for the safety of thousands.«

»But I must be able to help!« Niam cried desperately.

»You can. Listen to me,« the warden said weakly. Again he turned his head and spat blood. »These two men tried to deceive us. They claimed to be merchants from Nyvil, seeking a partner supposedly lost near the Silverford.« He coughed and spat blood once more. »Rarely heard such nonsense. As though those cut-throats cared for one another.«

»Did you know at once that they were soldiers?«

»I told you to listen. Besides, they were not soldiers, but knights of Morgathal.«

The word *knights* meant nothing to Niam, but as instructed he asked no further question.

»They said the tracks last pointed in our direction. Their partner was quite young and not very strong, with blond hair. You must report this to the Council. They must discover what lies behind it. Do you hear me?«

Niam heard the words, and despite the sweltering heat a cold shudder ran down his back. His eyes glazed and panic began to spread within him.

»Understood?« the Bodystone whispered faintly and breathed his last.

Niam's feelings raged like a gigantic whirlwind across the dry plain. Everything spun and he did not know which urge to obey. He did not want to leave the wardens lying here. He also wished to honour the dead man's last request and tell the Council in Eblin what had happened. But there were Elissa and his son, his parents and that dreadful suspicion. He had to go home first, warn his father and put the soldier to the question. *The dead are patient. They have time*, he thought, turning towards the mountains—and suddenly found himself facing two more Bodystones who skidded to a halt before him. They had come from the east and had plainly endured a terrible sprint. Both panted heavily and were drenched in sweat.

»You stay right where you are,« the foremost called when he saw that Niam was on the point of leaving the scene.

A DREADFUL SUSPICION

»Is he your first child?« Toben asked kindly.

»Of course,« Elissa replied. She had briefly entered the stonehold with the little one in her arms to fetch a few things. »I have not taken leave of all good sense.« Then she remembered that the soldier knew neither their laws nor their culture. »One Child of the Womb, one Child of the World,« she added.

Toben had no idea what she meant, but he had only wished to be pleasant. »A handsome boy,« he said instead.

»He has a handsome mother,« Hatem said as he entered the cave.

Elissa was grateful for the interruption, for the stranger unsettled her. She took two small bottles and went outside again, casting Hatem a thankful smile as she passed.

»Now,« Hatem said to Toben. »Have you time to tell me a little more about yourself?«

»I had actually meant to go for a walk,« Toben joked, indicating his chains.

»Would you make an exception today and forgo it for my sake?« Hatem replied with a smile.

»Only today.«

»Most obliging. Do you feel you have been treated well so far?«

»I have never been imprisoned before, so I have little with which to compare it. But I cannot complain,« Toben answered truthfully.

»That means you have never been in trouble. Glad to hear it.«

»Correct.«

»In that case, you must be a sadist,« Hatem said unexpectedly, and achieved the desired effect. Surprise showed on the soldier's face, though only for a moment.

»I am certainly no sadist,« Toben replied guardedly.

»Then I do not understand what drove you to Karrmal. There are only two kinds of soldier in the Warrior Elite there: men sent as punishment, and diseased butchers who cannot sufficiently indulge their violent fantasies in the south. Which kind are you?«

»Ordinary soldiers are sent to Karrmal now as well. The attacks on the Silverford have cost too many lives,« Toben bluffed. »I was unfortunate enough to be chosen.«

»You?« Hatem's eyes passed over the prisoner's arms and chest. »With respect, you look more like a potter or tanner than a soldier—least of all one they would send to pacify the Silverford. How did you even survive Grindquarry?«

Toben grew wary. *He knows a remarkable amount about the Warrior Elite*, he thought nervously. He meant to answer, but feared he would only entangle himself in further contradictions. Instead he countered with a question. »And how would you know all this? Have you been there? Your kind, with all respect, are not tolerated in Southcrest.«

»Yes, that is true enough,« Hatem said. His face brightened, as it always did when he could tell a good story. Then he hesitated. »That was another life, in another time,« he said at last. »But I should very much like to know how matters stand at Loch Trer today. Is fishing still forbidden? Is the surface still kept free of all disturbance? Have there been any strange incidents?«

Toben had to think briefly before he realised the man meant Lake Morga, once called Loch Trer. »As far as I know, everything is as it has always been,« he said in confusion.

»Good. Very good. Then at least a few of the old rites survive in the Kingdom of Morgathal. I should not have wondered if your king had abolished them all.«

Toben wrinkled his nose.

»You do not disapprove of your king, surely?«

»Nothing could be farther from my mind.«

»Loyalty is a precious thing,« Hatem said significantly. »Even loyalty to a king who is no true king.«

»I understand that you Nyvilians—or whatever you count yourselves—reject the king. But I fear Ambher will not rise from the dead, however fervently you pray for it.«

Hatem laughed. »No, no. That is not what I meant. I meant that Davard is unworthy of the crown. He is not of royal blood, however much he likes to pretend. He is merely a steward, and a rather cruel one at that.«

For the second time, Toben was surprised. The truth was essentially an open secret, at least amongst well-situated citizens and senior officers, but a man still risked his head by speaking it aloud.

»It appears this is no news to you,« Hatem said with a grin.

Toben slowly understood that he had underestimated the kindly old man. Fear took hold of him, for he was no longer certain whose side Hatem truly stood upon or whose bidding he followed. One thing, at least, was clear: he knew far too much for a simple man from Nyvil.

Hatem, meanwhile, realised that he had made a mistake. He had confirmed that the young man was no true soldier, but that told him nothing he had not already known. The price had been the growing mistrust upon Toben's face. Too high a price. Seeking to save the matter, Hatem now bluffed in turn. »Do you believe the Black Maar has no spies? That it is blind and ignorant? The arrogance of southerners never ceases to amaze me.«

Toben hesitated. »I can assure you that you have nothing to fear from me. I bear your people no grudge, nor am I an advocate of cruelty,« he said at last.

»Nor need you fear us,« Hatem assured him. »But please understand that—«

At that moment a blood-smeared, raging giant stormed into the cave, seized Toben by the throat and shook him violently. »Who are you?« Niam shouted, beside himself with fury. »Speak!«

Toben was weary of that question. As weary as he was of all the violence, the constant fear and mistrust. He no longer even wondered whether the appearance of this man—evidently the son who was supposedly away—formed part of Hatem's plan, or whether he had simply lost his mind. The shaking brought back the pain of Toben's head wound, sharp as a heated needle. And the pressure upon his throat slowly robbed him of his senses. *So be it*, he thought, and yielded to his fate.

»What has come over you?« Hatem cried in utter bewilderment. He had never known his son so uncontrolled, nor could he explain the blood covering him. »What happened?«

»Three good men are dead. Three Bodystones. Because of him!«

»Release him. He can do us no harm.« Hatem seized Niam's arms and pulled him from the prisoner with all his strength. Toben gasped for breath and rolled exhausted onto his side.

»Dead. Because of him,« Niam repeated and fell to his knees. »And because of us,« he whispered in despair.

»What are you talking about?« his father asked, horrified.

»Two strangers—soldiers, no, knights—came from the south. They wore long robes and carried hidden swords and armour. I have never seen such steel.«

Now Hatem felt genuine concern. He knew what knights were, and he knew what training and strength of will it took to cross the desert unharmed in full armour and remain fit to fight. »You fought them?«

»I and three Bodystones. I managed to kill both attackers with thrusts to the throat, but it was too late for the others. With his final breath, the one from the pointed rock on the road to the city told me that the two strangers had asked after a young, slight, blond man they were seeking here in the north.«

»You believe Toben is that man?«

»Who else?« Niam screamed. »And we brought him into our home. It is our fault those knights are searching here for him. He must go.«

»Suppose he is the man they seek. Why would knights of Morgathal endure all the risks and privations of the north to catch this boy? They have better things to do.«

»No, they have not, unfortunately,« Toben said hoarsely. »And your son is right. You should rid yourselves of me, for once they have found the trail, more will come. Best throw my corpse before the gates of Dourstedt. But please make it swift and painless.«

»You see?« Niam said. »Besides, the Council has summoned me to recount everything once more. They do not yet know he is here.«

Hatem frowned. He had expected much, but not this. Knights did not search for simple deserters, outlaws or men who had forgotten discipline. »Who are you truly? What is happening in the south? What do you want here?« he asked the young man again. »I give you my word that I shall do everything in my power to spare your life, if I can.«

Toben laughed bitterly. »Even if you can, another man will take it.«

»Then you have nothing to lose,« Niam cried.

»Perhaps. Even so, you cannot expect me to betray my people. The steward may be a foolish tyrant, and yes, many soldiers of the Warrior Elite are cruel. But there is much good in Southcrest as well, and many people of honour. The sun may not torment us, nor another people, but our citizens suffer too. Believe me.«

Niam shook his head in incomprehension and pointed at his blood-soaked clothes. »You may tell yourself whatever you please, but I—«

»No one expects you to betray your people,« Hatem interrupted soothingly, striking *traitor* from his list in his mind. »As I

have said, we are not bandits. We do not go raiding or attack anyone. There is therefore nothing to betray. But I think you owe us an answer as to who you are. We saved you, and now we are in danger because of you.« He looked towards the cave entrance and saw Nima and Elissa standing there with petrified faces.

»There is truth in that,« Toben panted, carefully pushing himself upright. Then he hesitated for a long time, drew a deep breath at last and said, »The king—the steward—believes me a descendant of Morga, and therefore a rival with a lawful claim to the throne.«

»Withered and broken,« Niam breathed in astonishment.

»And are you?« Hatem asked quite calmly.

»I have no idea. It is possible. The king apparently employs several genealogists who regularly supply him with lists of potential descendants. Family trees, some many generations deep. If you ask me, most of the men upon those lists can have no connection to Morga. But the king expects results, and so the scholars give him some.«

»You know these lists?« Hatem asked.

»Only a handful. I actually work as a sculptor in Ninepasses. Perhaps you know some of my works, should you happen to have visited Ninepasses as well,« he said, with a hint of mockery directed at Hatem. »My patrons included senior officials and wealthy citizens. One morning, only a day after the visit of a very strange official, I found a stack of parchments in my workshop. They were family trees. Mine was on one page, my name heavily underlined by someone. It did not take me long to discover that most of the people on the other pages had already vanished without a trace.«

»How is it they did not make you vanish as well, when the others had already gone?« Niam asked, audible suspicion in his voice.

»I have no idea, if I am perfectly honest. Perhaps my family tree had not yet been shown to the king's servants. But I was not inclined to wait for my disappearance.«

»So you fled to the one place in the kingdom where no one looks too closely,« Hatem said knowingly.

»Correct. I stole a uniform and slipped onto a wagon bound for Karrmal. Once you are aboard, few questions are asked. But neither are you allowed off again.«

»It appears not to have been enough,« Niam said.

»The king has his agents everywhere,« Toben replied.

»What is your true name?« Hatem asked with genuine curiosity in his voice. »Surely not Toben?«

»My name is Artos.«

HOPE IN THE SAND

»Your son was summoned, yet you stand before us while there is no sign of him,« the old mother said. »Explain yourself.«

Hatem looked around the circle. All five members of the Council were present: Master Ebt, First Smith of Songs; Gatu, Bodystone of the Middle; Ramzi, Eblin's chief councillor; Taleb, Lord of Water and Trade; and Mother Seh, Voice of Time. Ramzi appeared to be asleep, though. At any rate, his eyes were closed.

»And let it be a damned good explanation,« Gatu added.

»I shall tell you the whole story,« Hatem promised. He began with their excursion onto the southern plain, continued through the fight against the knights as Niam had recounted it, and ended with young Artos's confession.

The Council listened keenly and did not interrupt him once. When he had finished, uncertain glances passed between them.

»And this Artos is still chained in your stonehold?« Gatu asked.

»Yes. My son is guarding him.«

»We should nail him to one of the great lanterns in Dourstedt,« Taleb said nervously but insistently. »Then Morgathal will know where he is and send no more warriors. Our routes must remain safe.«

»If he is indeed a lawful heir of Morga, that might be a little hasty,« Master Ebt replied calmly.

»You heard for yourself that this is by no means certain. And even if it were, what should we gain? We would only risk discovery.«

»What should we gain from a king in Morgathal who favours us and has himself felt the horrors of oppression? It needs little imagination, Taleb.«

Gatu cleared his throat. »An interesting thought indeed, but absurdly distant. Even if a lawful claim could be proved, the possible existence of a few parchments would scarcely suffice.«

»And first we must assume that this Artos speaks the truth at all,« Taleb added. »Nor do we know who warned him, or why. I cannot imagine that one of the senior officials would risk his head for a sculptor, even if he were the most gifted sculptor in the world.«

»May I say something?« Hatem asked.

All but Councillor Ramzi nodded.

»Could one of the genealogists not have warned him?«

»For what reason?« Taleb replied sceptically.

Mother Seh leant slowly forwards and said, »Because the scholar was certain that this family tree had truly revealed a lawful heir. Yes, the thought has occurred to me as well, Hatem.«

Master Ebt clapped his hands. »Now there is a hot iron.«

»Please,« Taleb replied. »Do you truly believe any real royalists remain in Morgathal after all these skytides?«

»I am certain of it,« Hatem interjected.

Gatu frowned. »How?«

»The backward gaze showed me much in Southcrest.«

»You must have dipped your hands too deeply into the silver-water again,« Gatu mocked. »Nothing has changed, I see. You still find signs in the sand and take dreams for prophecies. I thought you had finally renounced such things.«

»For visions of the past, not prophecies,« Hatem corrected him.

Before the others could deepen their mockery, Mother Seh joined in again. »You, Gatu, have plainly lain too long in the sun, and you, Taleb, been too generous with the grain-brew. Or what else has taken your memories? Memories of the legend of the Circle of the Seed.«

»A pale hope, nothing more. It was not religion and old tales that supplied our people through all those dozens of skytides,« Taleb replied. »Or protected them,« he added, looking towards Gatu.

»Hope and faith are the mortar that has held the foundation of our society together through all the ages. Your water is only one ingredient amongst many. You should show rather more reverence for our ancestors and their purposes.«

Master Ebt spoke again in a conciliatory tone. »Mother Seh, do you mean that Ambher's spirit may walk amongst us again if Morga's heir has been found?«

The old woman shook her head. »Either it is too dark at the bottom of the Maar to read the old lines properly, or you have not held them in your hands for too long,« she told Ebt. »But I shall gladly remind you. The words are: *Only when the seed of treachery lies bedded in blood shall the spirit of the righteous flourish.*«

Hatem's breath caught. He knew the line, but had never understood it as the mother now presumably did. Only a moment ago he had clung to the hope that Mother Seh, at least, opposed killing the boy. Now he was no longer so certain.

Taleb merely looked contemptuous and resolved not to be drawn into another religious dispute with the old woman. He had made that mistake too often.

»What is your opinion, Councillor Ramzi?« Ebt asked instead, nudging the apparently sleeping old man.

»Very well,« the old man said sourly without opening his eyes. »It seems to me that Hatem, through his unlawful rescue—for which, incidentally, a punishment remains to be determined—has brought us into a situation with no good

way out. If we release the boy, or exchange him for profit, he will talk and we risk discovery. If we feed the old legend, we may set events in motion over which sooner or later we shall lose control. That too would imperil our safety. If we kill the boy—for whatever reason—we violate our own laws. For, as you say, he is in truth no soldier of the Warrior Elite, but a simple craftsman who, as one persecuted, has a right to the protection of the Black Maar, provided he proves himself.«

»That right applies only to those fugitives who cross the desert by their own strength,« Gatu objected. »According to the account we have heard, that can hardly be said of him.«

»Quibbling. He is and remains a boy, probably free even of sin. Do you wish to take the guilt of his death upon yourselves?«

»Do not lecture me about guilt. Not me, who must secure our borders by every means whilst you stroll through your city,« Gatu replied furiously. »Then offer a better answer.«

»As I said, there is none. If the north is not to be searched for him further, he must appear somewhere else. But if he is alive when he does, he may betray us. If we kill him, his blood is upon our hands. The blood, moreover, of a man who might bring peace, however distant that dream may be.«

»Sending him south alive would likewise amount to a death sentence,« the old mother said dryly. »If his story is true, at least.«

»And if it is not true, he is a soldier after all—or at least a liar—and must die then as well. One way or another, his fate is sealed,« Taleb cried.

Master Ebt cleared his throat again. »It may be that we cannot determine his fate, that for the protection of many we have no choice. Yet in the end we would make ourselves Davard's executioners and render him a service.«

»That remains to be seen,« Mother Seh said significantly.

»Do not think me inhuman. This is not easy for me either. But we simply cannot risk the supply and safety of hundreds of thousands. That would be the far greater crime.«

Evil remains evil, Hatem thought, but wisely held his tongue.

»Then let us vote,« the councillor's voice sounded, and he briefly opened his eyes. »Who wishes to see the boy dead in Dourstedt?«

As expected, the vote was a death sentence. Three in favour, one abstention and one against. Afterwards, the Council turned to the question of Hatem's punishment.

Elissa lay upon the little rock near their house, in whose shade she so often listened to Hatem tell her all manner of things about the world. She looked east and watched the road to the city like a Bodystone. Her feelings raged within her, and she was still unsure what she would decide when the moment came: whether she would follow Hatem's instructions or yield to the mistrust born of many skytides of dreadful experience. Painful experiences that had ended only when Hatem and Niam found her all those years ago—however they had managed it.

A figure suddenly appeared upon the road at the horizon, still too distant to recognise. *Please let it be Hatem*, Elissa pleaded inwardly. Then a second figure appeared, then another. Three became five, and Elissa knew what it meant. The choice was now hers. Little time remained. *Who am I to deny another the chance that was given to me?* she thought bitterly and turned towards the house. A well-aimed stone gave Niam the signal.

»We are taking a little excursion to the city in the great river,« Niam said. He seized Artos and helped him to his feet. Then he shouldered a large pack, took up his Song and checked his clothing.

»The great river?« Artos asked in surprise. »That cannot be reached by any *little* excursion.«

»Correct. Because of you, I shall not see my wife and child for some time. I hope my father is not mistaken.«

Artos looked at the pack and slowly began to understand what was happening.

Meanwhile Niam set about adjusting Artos's clothing. »The mouth cloth must always sit properly, or Duneblight will take you. And do not let anyone see that the clothes are uncomfortable, or every Bodystone will know you for a stranger.«

»Duneblight?« Artos asked curtly. He had heard the word several times now and still could make no sense of it.

»Unquenchable thirst, frenzy, death. A terrible sickness. So keep the covering over your mouth. Now come. We have no time to lose.«

Artos remembered the deranged Pantal, and at last everything became clear. A faint breath of confidence touched him.

They left the house, and Niam made a brief but loving farewell to his wife, his son and his mother. Rarely had anything been so difficult for him. Elissa too had tears in her eyes, something no one had seen in a long time.

After the farewell, they set off at a brisk pace westwards towards the Singing Dunes. They hurried and constantly looked back for pursuers or Bodystones. At length they left the mountains of the Black Maar unchallenged and strode with purpose into the great expanse of sand and dust. The sun stood behind them and cast long shadows ahead.

When they had put sufficient distance behind them and still saw no pursuers, Artos asked, »Why do you take this risk for me?«

»Because my father is certain that this is the only right solution.«

»Will more knights not search for me at the Black Maar?«

»Only if we fail.«

Artos frowned. »What do we intend to do?«

»We shall have to let ourselves be seen on the road to the river city. We must speak with some very dubious people and lay a false trail. Preferably without dying in the attempt. Velor's Pass offers our best chance. Your king always has eyes and ears there. But first we must reach it alive.«

»It sounds a very perilous undertaking,« Artos said hesitantly. »I still do not understand why your father takes this risk for me.«

»Nor do I, but I trust him,« Niam replied curtly. »But know that you will bitterly regret it if you do not follow his plan to the letter. No matter how dangerous matters become, if you try to flee or fail to do as I say, the Song of the Dunes will be the last thing you ever hear. Understood?«

»I shall do everything. You have my word.«

»And one thing more: not a word about the Black Maar, no matter whom we meet. Clear?«

»Understood.«

»I hope so,« Niam replied and quickened his pace again.

Artos followed and let the impressions of the country wash over him. Despite the barren waste and sweltering heat, there was something peaceful about it all. For the first time in what felt an age, he felt a measure of hope. He even looked forward to the adventures ahead. The emptiness of the desert promised him a new beginning, one he was eager to seize.

AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR

The windows of his studio were coloured and filled the room with beautiful light. He had bought the special glass from a travelling merchant and took pleasure each day in the wondrous glow, which gave him a feeling of shelter. The bright panes were also a welcome change from the dreary grey of steel and stone that defined most of Ninepasses. Yet he knew these unusual windows were tolerated only because his studio stood at the edge of the city, far from every military and administrative building. He was fortunate to be on good terms with all his neighbours and that none had yet denounced him. Otherwise he would surely have been made to restore the old crown-glass panes.

The coloured light truly invited daydreams, but the day was drawing to its close. Artos turned away and took up a broom to sweep together the marble dust from the day's work. Several statues from the Victoryvein stood in his studio at present, awaiting cleaning and repair. It was not a glorious commission, but it kept him afloat. In general he was rarely entrusted with genuine work in marble, for the state preferred other sculptors when it commissioned portraits of its heroes. That left only the requests of respectable citizens, who at best had their likeness carved in wood, or bought finished limestone busts of anointed warriors so that all might plainly see their reverence for those vassals of the realm.

Artos's busts were quite popular, however, and had earned him a good reputation beyond the bounds of his own district. He offered almost every hero proclaimed by the realm, the

old such as Dreib Osmar as well as the new such as Lavru Unwill—and, of course, a likeness of King Davard in the finest Grindquarry marble, as the law required. On account of the high price of the stone, though, he had only ever stocked that one once.

When Artos had finished cleaning his studio, he gathered the mallets, club hammers, pitching tools, splitting chisels, droving chisels, points, tooth chisels and all the other clutter scattered everywhere and returned each to its place. Afterwards he considered whether to treat himself to a beer at the tavern during the darkening. *Something to eat would not go amiss either*, he thought and reached for his coat. Before he had crossed the ten paces to the exit, however, a sudden knock came at the door. Puzzled by the late caller, he went swiftly across and opened it with the practised words, »Welcome to Gleichklang Sculpture. I am Artos. How may I—« He stopped. A state official stood before him in the customary grey attire.

The official seemed to notice the effect of his appearance upon the young sculptor. »Do not worry. I am here on a private matter,« he said and entered without invitation. For some time he looked about the light-filled room in astonishment, then added, »Though your windows are bold. This glass comes from Bareground. Did you know that?«

»No, sir. What ... is ... Bareground?« Artos stammered.

»A city in Nyvil. The people there dye their inferior glass with some peculiar substance and then use it as supposedly valuable trade goods.«

»I did not know,« Artos assured him. »Otherwise I would never—«

»Spare me,« the official said. »Your windows do not interest me. I hear you are an excellent stonemason. Is that true?«

»I very much hope so, my lord,« Artos replied uncertainly. »I should gladly show you some of my work.«

»That will not be necessary. One glance around this room shows me artistry enough.«

»The marble statues are not my work,« Artos said quickly when he saw the official's gaze pass over the life-sized likenesses of fallen warriors.

»I should have been surprised if they were. But I speak of the busts and carvings upon the table at the back.«

»Yes. Those are mine,« Artos said cautiously. He could not fathom the man, nor had he ever heard of state officials attending to private affairs in person. They had servants for that. It occurred to him that perhaps the man was here in an official capacity after all. If so, he was probably one of the notorious Custodians of Custom, who rigorously enforced the correct interpretation of the realm's history and traditions. Yet Artos could not be certain, for all the king's officials wore the same grey coats and revealed their rank only when it suited them. One never knew whether one was dealing with a Custodian of Custom, a tax collector or a diplomat. »The stone busts also portray only heroes appointed by the realm,« he added quickly. »The faces of the Lowborn are all made of wood, as the law demands.«

»I do not doubt it,« the official replied absently. He crossed to a darker corner and examined a carving with interest.

»That is only a—«

»A likeness of your wife?« The official laughed. »If so, you are to be envied.«

»—only a project,« Artos finished, nervously throwing a white sheet over the wooden statue's naked torso. »How may I serve you, my lord?«

»I wish to commission a life-sized statue in marble,« the man replied with a trace of sorrow in his voice.

Artos was now utterly wrong-footed. It was the last thing he had expected. »Are you certain I am the right man? I seldom accept such work, if I am honest with you.«

»I am entirely certain that you are the right man.«

»Which of the famous vassals am I to fashion?«

The official reached beneath his coat and brought out first a scroll and then a mask. »My son,« he answered.

Artos knew masks of this kind. They were called *Everyyoungs*. During their lives, wealthy people had impressions of their faces made in clay or plaster and kept them so that likenesses might later be commissioned as needed. Anyone granted the honour of official herohood could thus ensure that his features were portrayed faithfully in later busts and statues—faithfully, and in his finest skytides.

Without ceremony, the official placed both objects upon the nearest table. Then he reached beneath his coat again and produced a purse full of coins. For a moment Artos saw his belt buckle, made of silver and bearing the symbol of a book wrapped in chains. »I shall pay you well. Consider this an advance.«

Artos now knew that the man truly was an official of the Custodians of Custom, and a fairly senior one at that. He glanced at the mask, then the purse. *I could make good use of the money*, he thought. Hesitantly he turned back to the official and answered, »My congratulations upon your son being granted herohood. I shall gladly accept the commission, though it would be easier if I could meet your son in person. Then I could take his measurements.«

»That will unfortunately be impossible,« the official replied sadly. »His widow is riveting the fallen man's ringmail.«

»I am sorry,« Artos said quickly. Like every inhabitant of Southcrest, he knew what the ritual meant. When a soldier fell in battle, his widow had to rivet a shirt of small iron rings during the so-called Mourning Skytide. Depending on the soldier's rank, the shirt could be exceedingly elaborate, for higher ranks required ornaments and other details. Once finished, this shirt—this coat of mail—was donated to the army as compensation for the fallen soldier. It was an open secret, however, that widows from wealthy houses had their servants perform the thankless labour. The widows themselves wore the riveting tools upon their bodies only as symbols.

»You need not be sorry. Some flames burn dimly but long. Others burn briefly, but brightly. In the end all have their place in this world. Some offer guidance, others inspiration. My son died a hero and slew many attackers before he fell.«

»What attackers?« Artos asked in confusion. He saw at once that the question was improper. »Forgive me. The duties and affairs of the army are of course no concern of mine.«

»The scroll contains all the necessary measurements and information, along with several sketches of possible postures. How long will you need?«

»Until skytide's end, I think.«

»Good. I shall send several servants to collect the finished statue and bring you twice the advance again. This commission, incidentally, is to remain confidential. No one may see the statue before the official honouring. Is that clear?«

Artos hesitated, then nodded obediently. The questions in his mind tumbled over one another.

»Very good,« the official said. He went to the door, pulled a hood over his thinning grey hair and turned once more to the young sculptor. »By the by, Artos is a most unusual name. Who was your father?«

»I do not know, sir. He vanished before my birth, on a journey to Thousandfires. I never knew him.«

Now the Custodian hesitated. »Most regrettable,« he said, then left the studio in thought.

He left behind a bewildered Artos, threatened by a powerful feeling of unease. He still did not know what to make of the official. Properly, he ought to verify whether the nameless son had indeed been granted herohood. Yet his patron had said the official honouring was still to come. Artos had no idea whom to ask whether this was true.

He returned to the table with the purse and looked inside. *The advance alone is a soldier's yearly pay*, he thought. *Was it a test?* a voice in his head asked. *A very costly test.* He sat brooding upon the freshly swept floor and looked up at his windows. *I*

have no choice in any case. If I disappoint a Custodian, the coloured panes will be the least of my troubles.

THROUGH THE NORTHERN LANDS

They could not yet have covered much ground. The mountains they had come from were still visible on the horizon, crowned by the merciless sun. The desert here was dreadful. Far worse than the sandfields in the south, and far worse than Artos could ever have imagined. It was not even the heat or the burning sun that troubled him so. It was the bone-dry air and the constant wind, which made every drop of sweat vanish at once. Artos had the impression that he was losing liquid faster than he could take it in. The soft ground and the laborious rise and fall of the ever-growing dunes only made matters worse.

»Stop dreaming,« Niam's voice drifted through the air.
»Don't fall behind. Not here.«

»I'm doing my best,« Artos replied irritably. He wished that, for all the supposed dangers, he had never left his lovely studio. Exhausted, he reached for his flask, took a sip and realised with horror that it had been the last drop of water it held. Frustrated, he stoppered it again and fastened it to his belt.

»Mask back on!« Niam called.

»All right. I'm out of water anyway.«

»You use too much.«

»How am I meant to use less in this heat and in these scales?« Artos asked in exasperation as he caught up with Niam.

»Your clothing is why you aren't lying dead in the sand. Whether from the sun or Duneblight.«

»Fine, but I'm still sweating like a pig.«

»Because you tire yourself needlessly. When we climbed that scree field earlier, you took the steep, direct way instead

of the longer one I used. When you cross the dunes, you all but throw yourself down them instead of taking your time and letting gravity do the work. This is no race. We still have many, many, many miles ahead of us.«

Artos looked doubtfully at the ground. »I'll never manage that,« he murmured.

»Possible, but not certain,« Niam replied. »I have another flask in reserve for us in my pack. I will give you something to drink, but only when it is absolutely necessary. We must hold out until the Darkening.«

»Agreed.«

»Good. Now stay close to me. The sun is the least evil in these lands.«

They dragged themselves onwards through the sand: up a dune, down a dune, up again, and down once more. It was a seemingly endless march through a world without bounds or features. A world that had fallen beneath the millstones of time aeons ago. Even so, they settled into a good rhythm, and slowly the mountains behind them vanished into the shimmering air. In their place, another range to their left grew ever larger. It ran alongside their path and was many times higher and more imposing than the few mountains by the Black Maar. It resembled a gigantic bulwark of stone stretching all the way to the horizon.

»Do we have to go through the mountains?« Artos asked, panting.

»No. Past them. Round them.«

Artos groaned. »That's no better, is it?«

»I don't know. I've never reached the end of the Ring Wall. I only know the directions, and they say it takes about six days before we can make out a vast old watchtower in the distance. It marks the end of the range.«

»Six days? We're going to walk through this scorching heat for another six days?«

Niam stopped and turned. »If no one stops us and we find enough water, yes.«

Artos stopped as well and knocked the sand from his calves. The confidence he had felt at the beginning of their journey had by now deserted him entirely. He felt only like a beetle being roasted by the sun upon one of the dark granite fronts in the heart of Clearwater. »Please don't misunderstand me, Niam. I'm very grateful to you and I don't mean to complain all the time. But I don't see how I'm meant to endure this for days.«

Niam frowned. »That is what I thought on my first journeys into the desert. You will be surprised how much more you can demand of yourself. Come. Another two thousand paces, then you may drink.«

Artos nodded, and a little hope stirred in him again. He did his best to ignore that his throat was drier than the ground beneath his feet.

They trudged doggedly onwards, the sun always at their backs. Whenever Artos believed they must have covered the two thousand paces and asked for water, Niam encouraged him to walk another two thousand. This happened several times, until thirst threatened to overcome Artos's ambition. »Enough!« he called hoarsely when Niam tried to move the mark yet again. »I can't go on. Truly.«

Niam stopped and looked around. The moon was already close to the sun; the Darkening could not be far off. »Let us descend into that hollow between the dunes,« he replied. »Then I shall give you water.«

»Very well,« Artos said, eyeing this very easily reached stage of the journey. He followed his companion and slid gently down the great dune upon which they had stood. At the bottom, the high crest of the sandy giant even offered a little shade. Exhausted, he sank to the ground and looked expectantly at Niam's pack. »May I have a sip of water now, please?« he asked plaintively.

»You must wait until the Darkening,« Niam replied.

»I am in no mood for jokes!«

»I never joke.«

»Can the flask only be drunk from in darkness, then, or what is the problem?«

Now it was Niam who looked visibly annoyed. He cast Artos a warning glance. »The problem is that the flask is empty at present.«

»But you said—«

»I said only that I had a spare flask with me, and that we had to hold out until the Darkening.«

»But you also said you would give me something to drink if it became necessary.«

»And I shall.« Niam opened his pack and took out a flask and a long, thin rope. He tossed the flask to Artos with the words, »Hold this.« Then he reached into the pack again and drew out some sort of plant fibres.

Artos, meanwhile, discovered with disappointment that the flask really was empty. »What am I meant to do with this?« he asked bitterly.

»Hold it. Watch. Learn.«

»And what is that stuff in your hand?«

»Moss from the Black Maar. You ate some wet only recently, remember?«

»Yes, unfortunately.«

Niam tied the rope into a noose, laid it in the sand a few paces away and brought the rest of the rope back to Artos. »Hold this,« he said again. Then he tore off some of the moss, strolled quite unhurriedly back to the noose and placed it in the middle. A moment later he dropped into the sand beside Artos and had him pass over the end of the rope. »Let us hope for the best,« he said calmly.

»What is this meant to be?« Artos asked, bewildered.

»Fishing in the sand.«

»What?«

»Watch. Learn,« Niam said again. »If you want anything to drink today, be quiet now, do not move and wait for the Darkening.«

Artos was too exhausted to object further. So he gave in reluctantly and watched the world around them turn first ever more orange and then dark. The great mountains of sand became black giants looming menacingly above them. The darkness made him drowsy, and he had to guard against falling asleep.

Time passed, yet nothing happened. Artos turned to his companion and tried to ask something, but no word came out. His throat was so dry that he could only croak softly. Niam put a finger to his lips in any case and motioned him to silence.

It was pitch-dark now; the Darkening had reached its height. Artos was already wondering how long it would take him to die of thirst when he suddenly felt the faintest tingling in his hands. Fearing that his body had begun to play cruel tricks on him, he lifted his hands from the ground and looked at them. The tingling stopped. He braced himself upon the sand again. There it was once more. As though he had laid his hands upon a beehive in which everything hummed and buzzed. But the vibrations grew stronger still. Now it was more like a hornets' nest. To his astonishment, even the sand began to dance. Tiny grains hopped up and down as if awaiting something with delight.

»When I pull the rope, take my Song and kill it,« Niam whispered. »Stab it straight through the head.«

Excitedly, Artos looked towards the spear planted in the sand some two paces away. His pulse quickened, and the tension drove away his weariness and exhaustion. *Straight through the head*, Niam's words echoed in his thoughts. *In this darkness?*

Suddenly there came a loud rushing, then a hissing sound and at last a cry. Horrified, Artos saw Niam, the rope gripped tightly in his hands, vanish into the darkness with a jerk. He snatched up the spear and rushed after him.

»Stab!« Niam shouted.

Artos struggled to see where he was meant to strike. Before him on the ground there was only a tangle of dark limbs thrashing wildly. He strained his eyes and made out something black, smooth and gleaming which, with a little imagination, might be a head. One of Niam's arms appeared to be wrapped around it. He hesitated.

»What are you waiting for? Do it, or it'll get away!«

»I can hardly see. I might hit you!«

»Risk it!«

Artos gathered his courage, raised the Song and aimed at the dark shape. Then he thrust.

As abruptly as it had begun, it was over. The writhing movements ebbed away and Niam rose with difficulty. »Well done,« he said, breathing hard. »Now you've earned your water.«

»What did I kill?« Artos asked quietly.

Niam shook the sand from his clothes and adjusted his mask. »I simply call the things *moondivers*. Their true name is *Alhamuas*, though, which in Middair means something like *bringers of life*. I think, at any rate.«

»And what exactly are moondivers?«

»Lizards that live deep in the sand. Wait a moment; the light is already returning. You'll be able to see for yourself soon.«

As if on command, the first rays of sunlight broke from behind the moon and bathed everything in a warm but pallid light. The surroundings revealed their outlines again, yet still concealed their colours. At his feet Artos saw a long, smooth, black animal which looked like a cross between a snake and a lizard. It was about as long as Artos was tall, had four small legs at its sides and a pointed snout. Its tail was shaped like a paddle, and a bulging swelling rose from its back.

»Help me. Take it behind the forelegs and hold it up,« Niam asked.

Artos set the Song aside and took hold of the animal around its forequarters. With some effort he lifted it as high as his waist,

but then it slipped from his fingers and fell to the ground again. »Bloody slippery thing,« he hissed.

»Behind the forelegs!« Niam said once more.

Silently, Artos tried again, this time correctly. Once he had raised the animal to chest height, Niam picked up the empty flask, drew a small, darkly gleaming knife from his belt and stepped beside Artos. He felt for the swelling on the creature's back and pierced a hole in its lower end. Then he held the flask beneath it. Water splashed into the vessel.

»Can you drink that?« Artos asked in amazement.

»There is no purer water,« Niam replied. He stoppered the flask and unfastened Artos's from his belt. Once that too was full, he finally reached for his own. »We are fortunate. This one must have replenished its store only recently.« He placed a hand over the puncture and passed Artos his flask. »Drink.«

With a final effort, Artos wrapped one arm around the animal and took the flask with his free hand. Niam was right: the water truly was as pure as spring water. It was bliss. He drank greedily in great draughts.

»Not so fast. Give your body time to take in the water.«

But the flask was already empty. Happily, Artos returned it.

»We should fill it once more,« Niam said with confidence. Indeed, the water remaining in the creature's body was just enough for one more filling. »You may put it down now.«

Artos did not need telling twice. The creature hit the ground with a thump.

Niam gathered up the flasks, coiled the rope and put away his knife. Then he cleaned his spear by rubbing it with sand. »Hungry?« he asked.

»Can you eat that?« Artos asked sceptically, pointing at the dead moondiver.

»You can, but I would not advise it. The flesh must first be cut into strips and hung in the sun for several days. Otherwise

it cannot be digested. But I still have some lizard meat in my pack.«

»That sounds ... good.«

»It is. Sit down. We'll rest until the Darkening is over. You can sleep a little if you wish.«

They sat in the sand and wordlessly chewed a few pieces of dried meat. When they had eaten, Artos asked, »Do you already regret listening to your father? I am surely no very useful companion in this country.«

»Spare me the grand language, please. I'm neither high-born nor are we in the southern lands. You can speak to me plainly.«

Artos nodded.

»To answer your question: no, I do not regret it. My father may sound confused at times, but he is generally proved right. There must be some good in driving you through the desert.«

»That sounds noble, but also rather mad. You have a wife and child, after all.«

»That is why I am going,« Niam replied sombrely. »All may seem peaceful and well with us at the Black Maar. But the water is running short and the sand devours more of us by the day. If nothing changes, when my son reaches my age there will be no place left for him in this world. Besides, we must lure your pursuers onto another trail, or we shall have quite different troubles.«

A crease formed upon Artos's brow. »I hope I can at least help you with the latter.«

»Our chances are not so poor.«

»You could improve them, by the way, if you taught me how to behave properly in this country.«

»Am I not doing so?«

»Well, you only ever tell me what I am doing wrong instead of explaining why the other way is right.«

Niam hesitated, began to speak, then fell silent again. »Perhaps,« he said at last. »Among our people, we learn by watching.«

»I understand,« Artos replied. »But some things cannot be learnt merely by watching. How am I to know, for example, when I must wear my mask and when I need not?«

»You can hear it.«

»Hear it?«

»Yes. The shifting sand. A whirring sound. But if you wish to be safe, keep the mask on whenever something stirs the sand. Whether it is the wind, you yourself or a moondiver.«

»How did you know you could catch a moondiver here?«

»I didn't,« Niam answered shortly. Then he noticed that this answer did not satisfy Artos either and added, »They can be lured with the moss, but only in darkness. There is never any certainty that one will come.«

»And if this one had not come, what would we have done?«

»Drunk our piss and tried again tomorrow. But I was confident we would catch one. There are many moondivers out here.«

»You do know how to hearten a man. Are there any other dangers I ought to know about?«

»Hmm,« Niam began thoughtfully. »Not here in the immediate vicinity, so long as you wear the mask and use your water sparingly.«

»A piece of good news, at least.«

»We should keep away from the Ring Wall for as long as possible, however. There are Gankroks there. And the mountains near the Grimshadow have eyes. But soon it will be far enough behind us.«

»Eyes?«

»Bandits. Bandits live there.«

Artos remembered. »Ah, yes. I have already made their acquaintance.«

For the first time, Niam looked questioning.

»I was with a convoy on the Silverford. We were attacked, probably by those bandits. It was fairly hopeless. A soldier named Pantal and I escaped. But the desert brought us to our knees and Pantal fell ill. He attacked me, and your people killed him shortly afterwards.«

»I had wondered what you were doing there.«

»I still wonder what I am doing here. Not long ago I led a carefree life and could even enjoy a few comforts. Then all at once everything collapsed around me, and to this day I do not know why.«

»Everything strives towards disorder, my father always says. You people in the south simply have not yet accepted it.«

Artos laughed. »I am beginning to think so too.«

The next three days all passed in the same fashion, as arduous as they were uneventful. During the Darkening they caught moondivers, talked for a while and then slept. Their last moon-diver had yielded hardly any water, but fortunately Artos had learnt to husband his share somewhat better. Niam slowly became more talkative and even spoke of himself now and then. Artos learnt that they were the same age—thirteen skytides—and that Niam had once wanted to become a master builder. But there was little need for master builders, as the town at the Black Maar was shrinking rather than growing. Thus Niam had been left with work as a water-guide, supposedly a very dull occupation concerned only with directing the Maar's water along narrow channels to various uses. Of late, however, he had devoted more of his time to forging his Song than to that work. In return, Artos spoke a little about his own craft: the different kinds of stone, the tools and methods used to work them. Niam appeared genuinely interested in all of it.

On the fourth day they passed the ruins of an old, weathered fort which must have lain abandoned for centuries. Artos had

the chance to show Niam examples of his craft, for several statues stood along the road to the fort and, despite their many wounds, still bore witness to great artistry.

»What manner of men do these statues depict?« Niam asked after enduring all Artos's explanations about the working of marble.

»I honestly have no idea. These are no heroes of Morgathal. The fort's architecture feels foreign to me as well. Its walls and towers are unusually ornate. There are many similar forts in Southcrest, but they were all built far more pragmatically. This one is somehow different.«

They approached the walls cautiously, and Niam's amazement only grew. »How could so mighty a structure ever have been destroyed?«

Artos let his gaze wander. The gatehouse was badly damaged, and almost nothing remained of the gate itself. The wall had collapsed in one place, and the bell that usually hung in the great bell tower of such forts lay half-buried in sand. »I fear the desert will keep that secret,« he replied. »Shall we go inside?«

Niam shook his head. »Gankroks love places just like this.«

To Artos's regret, they therefore skirted the ruin on its right. Many miles later, as the Darkening drew near once more, they finally rested. The great dunes now lay far behind them and the ground had grown markedly stonier. They sat upon small boulders and stretched their legs with groans.

»In a few hours we shall reach Velor's Pass,« Niam said. He turned south and pointed towards the mountains. »The pass must lie there, between those peaks.«

Artos turned as well and narrowed his eyes. »Where that cloud of dust is?«

»Yes, somewhere there,« Niam replied uncertainly.

»And what is that cloud?«

»I have no idea. Perhaps there is simply much traffic on the pass. I have never been there.«

Artos frowned. »Did Hatem tell you what we're to do there to lay the false trail? Who guards the pass, anyway? Who lives there?«

»According to my father, a small but well-trained force of soldiers from Nyvil watches it, and spies of your king have infiltrated them. There should be two great towers directly at the entrance to the pass. And one tavern or another where we might show our faces.«

»Should be?«

»Have you ever seen a gathering of soldiers without a tavern nearby?«

»No,« Artos replied, unable to suppress a smile. »So we show ourselves there briefly, then return to our route north of the Ring Wall?«

»Correct,« said Niam. »For all its dangers, the northern route is safer.«

Artos hesitated. »Very well, but how do we know they'll let us onto the pass tomorrow instead of simply putting us in chains?« he asked at last. »The guards will want to know who we are.«

»There is that risk, of course,« Niam replied dryly. »But we are not in your kingdom of Morgathal. So long as we do not look like a horde of goblins or bandits, the guards should leave us be. In Nyvil, not everyone meddles in your affairs. Behave peacefully and honour the Cupdo, and no harm will come to you.«

»The Cupdo?« Artos thought he had heard the word before, but could not remember where.

»It is the code by which the people of Nyvil live. That is why they like to call themselves Cupdorians.«

»Ah, yes, I have heard the term. No one in the southern lands uses it when speaking of the people in the north, though.«

»That does not surprise me.«

»And what exactly does this code say?«

Niam shrugged. »For that, you would have to ask a scholar from Ambherg. It consists of accounts of experience from which teachings and rules of conduct are drawn.«

Artos's expression revealed profound scepticism.

»As I said, we are not in Morgathal. But enough questions now. We shall manage. We must.« He handed Artos his pack. »Eat and drink a little more, then rest. If we survive tomorrow, we'll manage the rest of the way to the river city as well.«

After eating, Artos lay down at once. The ground was decidedly uncomfortable because of the many stones, and in the north-east the flicker of a distant thunderstorm disturbed the longed-for calm of the swiftly approaching Darkening. Yet after some initial tossing and turning, sheer exhaustion soon carried him into sleep.

Niam stayed awake a while longer and kept watch. Composed, he watched the last rays of sunlight stain the Ring Wall a faint red. When the sun had vanished entirely behind the moon, the light of the distant flashes at last prevailed. It cast a wavering blue and violet glow upon the northern mountain slopes. It was a beautiful, almost mystical play of colour, the sort for which Niam's father would surely have devised a splendid tale.

Hatem was known for his stories, and not merely within the family. Niam had always wondered how his father knew so many tales—enough, in their abundance, to fill three lifetimes. But whenever he asked, Hatem remained guarded. His mother had once told him that after Hatem returned from hunting Gankroks in the north, he suffered many nightmares, often even in the middle of the day. Some of these dreams had been so real and tangible that he often mistook them for truth. Several times he had even run to members of the Council to warn them of something. Most, however, had paid him no heed.

Niam suspected that his father's many stories were pieced together from fragments of his dreams. Perhaps this helped him

come to terms with them—or at least put them to some good use. As a boy, Niam had always taken great delight in listening to his father's fantastical tales. They were a welcome diversion from the otherwise rather bleak and isolated life by the Black Maar.

Since Niam had nothing better to do, he went through a few of the tales in his mind. There was the story of the realm beneath the black mountains, where silver flowed in contest with the sweat of the stonebreakers and, despite all that wealth, envy and mistrust guided every fate. Or the one about the city of great towers, where the Darkening lasted half the day and the king struck a bargain with the darkness to secure his power at any cost. Both stories ended exactly as one expected: in ruin. But what mattered, after all, was what could be learnt from them. So it was with Niam's favourite tale: that of the man in the flames, who surrendered himself utterly and thereby defied death. »What fire was to him, sand is to us. You must yield yourself to the sand, and then it will protect you,« Hatem always said. Niam had never quite understood how one was meant to do that without dying of Duneblight, yet the idea of becoming one with the elements fascinated him all the same.

The moon slowly released the sun again, and the gleam of the red crescent did not hesitate to reclaim dominion over the light in the mountains. The blue and violet of the lightning ebbed away, and a new day dawned. Artos sorely needed his sleep, so Niam decided not to wake him yet and instead lingered with thoughts of his family. He wondered how his son was faring and whether he had finally begun sleeping through the night. The little one was an utter torment, always hungry and over-tired. Yet Niam was glad to have him at all. The healer in Eblin had even spoken of a miracle, for Elissa had seemed far too sickly to conceive a child. But then, the old woman knew nothing of Elissa's strength of will. Only he knew of that—and sometimes more than he cared to.

For a long while Niam remained immersed in fond memories of his wife, but then it was time to continue their journey. »Wake up. We should go,« he called loudly as he struggled to his feet.

Artos started awake. He looked dreadfully sleepy and ill-tempered. »What?« he said, confused.

»We should go,« Niam repeated. »The sun has been back for a while, but I did not want to wake you sooner. You were sleeping so deeply.«

With difficulty Artos scrambled upright. »I'll go and piss, then we can leave.«

A short while later they were walking south together, straight towards the Ring Wall.

»There is no sign of the dust cloud now,« Artos observed once he had shaken off some of his weariness. »Do you think that is good?«

»I think we shall know soon enough.«

Artos rolled his eyes sourly. *One useful answer would be nice*, he thought with irritation. Yet he had to admit that his growing nervousness was making him thin-skinned, so he kept the retort to himself. Instead he asked, »Did you get any sleep?«

»I do not think so. But this is no country in which one should sleep without a watch. A few hours' journey north of here lies the lost city. Cursed country. I do not even want to know what dwells there.«

»Good to know,« Artos replied peevishly.

»Had I told you beforehand, you would not have closed an eye.«

»The lightning nearly saw to that anyway.«

»That need not trouble you. The dry storms over the Black-sand Wastes are two hundred miles away. Even though they have been spreading of late, that is still far enough. But come now. Let us explore the pass.«

THE ABANDONED PASS

The entrance to the pass had come into view. It was flanked on either side by two grey watchtowers which stood out clearly against the background. The pass itself must have been a mile wide and appeared to run in a straight line through the mountains of the Ring Wall. Though they were close enough to distinguish the battlements of the towers, they could see no guards.

»It is strangely quiet here, isn't it?« Artos asked uneasily. »I expected more upon so important a pass.«

»It is rather strange. Perhaps the soldiers are inside the towers; they are large enough.«

The closer they came, the greater their tension grew. Still not a soul could be seen, but many small footprints now marked the sandy ground. After another hundred paces or so, the tracks divided in two directions.

»The trails lead to the two towers,« Artos observed, stopping.

»Can you run quickly?« Niam asked without warning.

»Not particularly.«

»Then you should remain here while I inspect the towers.«

»Would you please tell me what is happening?« Artos asked anxiously.

»Those are goblin tracks. They run a little more slowly than men, but have greater endurance. If you see any coming, run into the mountains and hide. Do not go back into the desert, do you hear? They will catch you there.«

Before Artos could reply, his companion was already on his way to one of the towers. From where he stood, both towers

were perhaps seven hundred paces away, one to the west and one to the east. Niam ran towards the western one.

Nervously, Artos crouched and tried to keep both towers in view. Still there was nothing to be seen. Niam, meanwhile, drew swiftly nearer his destination. He was no more than a small figure now and must already have been close to the tower. In another moment he would disappear into its shadow. Artos's heart almost stopped with suspense when, a blink later, his companion's outline did indeed flee the sunlight.

Now there was nothing to do but wait and hope. Time crawled miserably by, and for all Artos's patience Niam would not reappear. *Come on*, Artos pleaded inwardly. *Come back into the light*. But nothing happened.

At length he had waited enough and could bear it no longer. Fearfully he leapt up, then stopped abruptly and peered hard. There had been movement by the tower. A figure broke from the shadow and ran east, straight towards the other tower. *Damn you*, Artos thought, half angry and half relieved. *What took so long?* At a swift pace Niam covered the nearly thousand steps and entered the other tower. This time he was not long. Only a moment later he appeared again and waved both arms. Artos understood and set off.

»No one there,« Niam said when his companion reached him. »The tracks lead away from the towers, straight onto the pass. Inside, everything appears to have been abandoned where it stood.«

»What took you so long at the first tower? I thought I might have to come and rescue you.«

Niam laughed. »You rescue me? Let us hope that day remains far off. I replenished our provisions.« He took off his pack and brought out a large leather waterskin and two bundles of linen. When unwrapped, the cloths proved to be long robes concealing two loaves of bread.

»Bread!« Artos cried with delight. »What a blessing.« He accepted half a loaf and began eating at once. When he had

finished, he reached for the waterskin and took a great draught. »That is foul,« burst from him. »Is it truly water?«

»Yes. Well water, I assume. No one catches moondivers here.«

»What are the robes for?« Artos asked after reluctantly taking another mouthful.

»We shall wear them over our clothes so that we draw less notice. Our clothing from the Black Maar is too unusual in this country. The people here wear cloth and leather, some even a little copper or iron.«

»But was the plan not to draw notice here?«

»Yes, here, and then back into the desert at once. But as you can see, there is no one here to notice us. We must take Velor's Pass, and I do not know how deep into Nyvil it will lead us.«

»I understand. It would have been too much to hope for an easy time of it. Give it here.«

They pulled on the robes and then took the path south. After only a few hundred paces they did indeed pass a tavern, standing half in sunlight and half in shadow. It looked makeshift, cobbled together from old barrels and planks. Yet at least there were several deserted seats which, for all their simplicity, appeared exceedingly inviting to any traveller. *What a pity*, Artos thought disappointedly as he followed Niam into the shadow.

»We should keep close to the rocks. It is harder to see us here in the shade,« Niam said quietly.

»Yes, and I am not burning to cinders here.«

»If we encounter goblins, you will wish yourself back in the desert,« Niam replied. »I hope we see them before they see us.«

»Have you ever seen goblins?« Artos asked. He knew little of the creatures. Only that they called themselves Skuhuks, were no taller than children and did not fear death.

»Only dried-out corpses. Dead of thirst among the dunes.«

»And what do they look like?«

»Beige skin, small and misshapen. Pointed teeth, almost as if filed by hand. They wear armour of wood, which suited my Song very well.«

»I once heard they had green skin.«

Niam shrugged. »Not the ones I found. But we had better be silent now. Our voices echo too loudly through the mountains.«

They walked on, passing abandoned tents, a small well and several empty weapon racks. They also saw a large empty iron bowl, black with soot and seeming rather out of place in those surroundings.

After another three miles the pass narrowed ahead of them to some two hundred paces. The steep slopes on either side bore small tracks running somewhat above the pass, but they looked treacherous and dangerous. The lower way, by contrast, lay in shadow and was difficult to judge.

»A good place for an ambush,« Artos whispered.

Niam nodded and tightened his grip upon his spear.

They approached the narrows cautiously. Sunlight no longer reached the ground, lending everything a dusky cast. The first hundred paces passed without incident, but then Niam stopped without warning and carefully lowered the point of his Song towards the ground. A dead goblin lay there in the dust, an arrow piercing its chest. Its eyes were bloodshot and its ugly face contorted in suffering. It could only recently have choked upon its own blood.

When Niam looked up again, he saw the others. Some distance ahead, strewn across the entire road, lay the small bodies of slaughtered Skuhuks. Some wore light armour of wood, others only a little cloth. Their weapons were mostly ill-forged axes, clubs studded with nails, or stolen knives and daggers.

»One could almost pity them,« Artos said, appalled. »They had no chance.«

»I would like to know where the archers are now. I see no one left upon the slopes.«

»I fear we shall find out soon enough. Let us hope they can tell us from goblins.«

They had no choice but to continue. Carefully they avoided the corpses and kept a watchful eye upon the slopes at either flank. When the pass widened again at last, they saw, some distance away to their right, a group of human soldiers standing in a circle before a cleft in the rock. There must have been thirty or forty men. They appeared well equipped, though they wore neither metal armour nor helmets.

»That must be the garrison from the towers,« Niam murmured. »We should go to them. If we try to slip past, we shall only make ourselves suspect.«

As confidently as they could, as though it were the most ordinary thing in the world, Niam and Artos strolled towards the men. Though the soldiers had their backs to them, the pair were noticed early. No one paid them any heed, however. They stopped beside an older man standing a little apart from the group.

»What happened here?« Niam asked with interest.

The man did not honour them with a glance, but after a brief hesitation replied, »Goblin attack. We had to improvise.«

»Successfully, I see. But why improvise?«

»Third attack since the wind changed. Ran out of tar. Couldn't send up the smoke signal.«

Niam remembered the burnt-out iron bowl. »So you lured them into an ambush for want of reinforcements?«

»Right.«

»What is in the cleft?« Artos blurted.

»One of the filthy beasts fled in there and is crouching in a blind corner. Too narrow for men.«

Niam went a little closer and heard strange sounds echoing from the cleft. It sounded like metal scratching over slate. »Krzsz-Tak aztur Sturmz.«

»Far from home?« one of the men suddenly asked. He wore thick leather armour and carried a broad, worn sword. Look-

ing Niam directly in the eyes, he let his gaze travel over the robe and the Song. »May I?« he said unexpectedly, raising his sword. With the blade he pushed up Niam's sleeve and exposed the branded song upon his upper arm. Then he nodded and lowered his sword. »We can manage here. You may continue on your way to the Drift. The passage is safe again.«

Niam hesitated, but then the man raised his sword once more and pointed unmistakably south. »With hope in our hearts,« he said in farewell, then returned to Artos.

»Have we shown ourselves enough? Can we go back into the desert?« Artos whispered eagerly.

»Did you have the impression that anyone noticed you?« Niam replied in a low voice.

»Not so far ...«

»You are welcome to stand before the cleft and introduce yourself to everyone.«

Artos frowned. »I thought you never joked?«

Niam gave him a spiteful grin. »Almost never. At any rate, it is too dangerous here, and we lack a fitting opportunity.«

»So we keep going south?«

»Yes. We shall hopefully find a few small settlements within the pass. We can linger there awhile and then return north.«

So they continued southwards. Mile after mile passed without any settlement appearing. Only one cart laden with tar came towards them, but its four pushers scarcely noticed them. Otherwise there was not a soul to be seen, which, given the size of the pass and the distance they had already covered, seemed ever more suspicious—especially since the sand bore an abundance of human tracks. Several burnt-out fire pits and some discarded rubbish also lay by the wayside.

At length the Darkening approached, and they decided to rest upon a boulder as tall as a man. They climbed it in the hope of seeing fires in the darkness that might betray the presence of people. And indeed, they found some upon the southern horizon, though only a few.

»How far do you think we have walked?« Artos asked.

»Farther than we intended, I fear.«

»Where can all the people have gone? Perhaps they fled south because of the goblins?«

»Perhaps. After the Darkening we are certain to find some, though. Those fires are barely three miles away.« Niam reached for his pack, handed Artos water and meat, then lay upon his side to sleep. »I need some rest. I would advise you to take some too.«

When they awoke, they were no longer alone. In the light of the new day, several dozen impoverished-looking figures milled about. Most were walking north, though some appeared merely to be loitering. Artos noticed them first and woke Niam very rudely with a kick.

»What is it?« he asked crossly.

»We are being watched.«

Niam sat up and looked around. »Hm.«

»Hm?«

»Hm. This is more or less how I always imagined it here.«

»They are all staring at us,« Artos whispered, nodding towards a group seated against a rock face some distance away. He could make out four men, two women and a child.

»They are probably only wondering why we are lying upon this rock. Let us see whether we can find clean water somewhere.«

»Good idea. My belly already aches from that foul water you found in the tower.«

They climbed carefully down from their rock, straightened their robes and walked south. Not for a moment did the watchers take their eyes from them.

As they passed the group, the child broke away from one of the men and came running over. She stopped two paces away

and studied them attentively. »You have had a long journey, haven't you?«

Artos was too taken aback to answer, while Niam first examined the child at length. She was a scrawny girl. Her matted, dirty blond hair hung to her shoulders and covered her ears. Her eyes were unusually large and light brown, with a distinctly alert look to them. She reached no higher than Niam's belly and could therefore be no more than five or six skytides old. Her face, however, did not look very childlike. It was stern and marked by life.

»Do you speak Middair?« she asked.

»Yes, we do,« Niam replied. »Can we help you somehow?«

»I was only bored, and you look interesting. What is that strange spear?«

»Do you have a name?« Artos asked kindly.

»Yes. Everyone has a name,« the girl replied with a grin. »You look rather pale, by the way. Are you well?«

»I am well,« Artos lied, noticing that the child's gaze had already returned to Niam's spear. »Would you tell me your name?« he asked to distract her.

»I am Anji. And you?«

Artos looked uncertainly at his companion, but Niam gave an encouraging nod. »I am Artos,« he said at last. »Pleased to meet you. My friend here is called Niam.«

»Artos is a lovely name,« Anji replied, somewhat surprised. »But Niam is too, of course.«

»How old are you, Anji?« Artos wanted to know.

The girl frowned. »What a strange question. I do not know exactly. Does it matter?«

»Can you tell us where all the people were yesterday?« Niam asked bluntly.

»You truly must have had a long journey,« Anji replied slyly. »You missed something, believe me. The scholars from Ambherg were visiting the Drift.« She looked up at the two men expectantly, but they did not share her excitement. »Do you not

understand? This skytide, someone from among us was chosen to add to the Cupdo. Of course no one wanted to miss it.«

»Ah!« Artos and Niam cried at the same time. It evidently did not sound very convincing, for Anji eyed them sceptically.

»And what are you doing here at the pass?« Niam asked, changing the subject.

»This and that. The Drift is crowded and dull. It is much more exciting here.«

»Kind of your parents to come here specially with you,« Artos replied, glancing at the group of ragged people, who still had not moved.

The girl frowned. »They are not my parents. Only friends.«

»Will your parents not worry, then?«

»The dead do not worry.«

»Oh ...« Artos began, then faltered. Plainly ashamed of having asked the question, he looked to Niam for help.

»Brave of you to follow the Cupdo at so young an age,« Niam said.

Anji nodded, then looked back at Artos. »Are you certain you are all right?«

Artos did not answer. Without warning he vomited directly at the girl's feet. She darted a step backwards and gave a loud cry of disgust.

»He has had a little too much sun,« Niam assured her. »He will recover.«

Anji approached cautiously and studied the vomit. »More likely he ate something that disagreed with him. You should see a healer. There are several in the Drift who know what to do.«

»Thank you for the advice, but we shall manage,« Niam said uncertainly.

Meanwhile Artos vomited again. His whole body trembled now, and despite the pleasant warmth he appeared to be freezing. »It will ... pass,« he gasped. »Forgive me.«

»Not unless you get a herbal brew. I know what happens otherwise. I have seen it. Truly unpleasant.«

One of the men in the group rose, but Anji waved him back and he sat down again.

Niam regarded his companion with suspicion. *It truly does not look good*, he thought uneasily.

Artos was sick again, though scarcely anything came from him this time. Anji shook her head and said, »Follow me. I shall take you to an experienced healer. If we wait any longer, you will have to carry your friend.«

Artos clutched his belly now and doubled over in pain. He was ashen and looked frightened. They had no choice but to follow the child.

GARRISON IN THE TWILIGHT

»Next!« called the officer at the head of the queue. »Name?«

»Rupta, sir.«

»Rank?«

»Veteran, four stripes, sir.«

The officer noted something upon a list. »Silverford escort. Next deployment in three days. Two days of combat drill beforehand.«

»Yes, sir.« The old soldier shouldered his baggage and walked towards the stone barracks in the shade.

»Next!«

»Toben, sir.«

»Did I ask you anything?«

»No, sir.«

»Name?«

»... Toben.«

The officer looked Toben up and down. »Rank?«

»First soldier, no stripe ... sir.«

»You weren't at Grindquarry, were you?«

»I was, sir.«

Again the officer studied him. »And what has happened since? Was there a famine in the south?«

Toben did not know what to say.

»Never mind. Silverford escort. Deployment after next. Combat drill tomorrow.«

»Yes, sir.«

»Soon they'll be sending us children ...« the officer muttered, writing something down. »Next!«

Relieved, Toben left the queue of waiting arrivals and wandered westwards, lost in thought. The combat drill worried him. He had no idea how he was to hold his own against experienced soldiers. His disguise was certain to be exposed.

After some thirty paces Toben stopped in surprise and regarded the misery before him: simple wooden huts and threadbare tents beneath the blazing sun. He remembered that this must be the camp of the men from Nyvil who likewise had to serve here in Karrmal. Confused, he turned and walked east instead.

»Lost, lad?« someone suddenly called behind him.

Toben flinched with fright, turned carefully and found himself looking into the sunken eyes of a gaunt man. The stranger wore only a few rags, a pair of badly worn leather boots and wooden guards upon his arms and legs. His face and hair were filthy with dust, though the skin beneath was far from pale in any case. A strange circular scar stood out upon his forehead.

»Bit caught between worlds, aren't you? Could almost be one of us, little ... soldier.«

»I was only lost in thought. It is my first day here,« Toben replied uncertainly.

»The first day is always shit. But shall I tell you something? So are all the others.«

»I had rather suspected it,« Toben said with a forced smile and turned to leave again.

»Where are you off to in such haste? I was just about to introduce myself.«

Toben hesitated, then continued on his way undeterred.

»Until soon, then, comrade!« the stranger called after him in amusement.

Toben hurried towards the Morgathalian side of the garrison. This garrison—called Karrmal—consisted of two halves. To the east, in the half-shadow of a great mountain of the Trer, stood splendid barracks of thick sandstone. The soldiers of Southcrest were housed there. In the west, where the sun once more un-

folded its full strength, lay a very makeshift camp filled with fighters from Nyvil. Curiously, the men in this garrison carried no true weapons, but practised with wooden swords and blunted arrows.

When he reached the first barracks, he stopped uncertainly and examined a sign by the entrance. *Tally 1 of 12*, it read. With interest he studied the building, which was some sixty paces long and ten wide. For a barracks it bore unusually well-crafted reliefs beneath the eaves. They showed naked people kneeling before several knights. *A strange manner of paying homage*, Toben thought.

»New here? Where have they assigned you?« someone asked.

Toben lowered his gaze and noticed a young soldier standing before him with a questioning look. »Oh, I am Silverford escort. With the escort, I mean.«

»Then you are in the wrong place. The beds in the twelve tally barracks are permanently assigned. Find yourself one in the barracks by the wall at the rear.«

»Gladly. Thank you for the help.«

»Think nothing of it ...« the soldier said hesitantly.

It took quite some time to reach the rear barracks. The first two were full, but the third still had plenty of room. Toben squeezed past several soldiers and laid his baggage upon a bed in the corner.

»That one's taken!« said an old but vigorous soldier, tossing Toben's belongings onto another bed.

»Forgive me,« Toben replied cautiously. »I did not know.«

»Do not hold it against him,« called another man who looked somewhat friendlier. »Our Borxul is always a *little* bad-tempered. You can sleep beside me.«

Gratefully, Toben moved his possessions beside the man. »Why are the beds here not permanently assigned, as they are in the other buildings near the front?«

»Because enough of them are always becoming free,« the man replied. »I'm Sebb, by the way. And you?«

»A—Toben is my name. Pleased to meet you.«

»Atoben?«

»Only Toben. I was merely surprised. No one here has introduced himself to me yet.«

»Yes, the men here by the wall are a quiet lot. You only truly get to know one another on escort duty.«

»Have you ever been on an escort?« Toben asked cautiously.

»Yes, I only returned today. It was my fourth. Fortunately, all went well again.«

»What is it like? I mean, how does an escort work?«

»Each day after the Darkening, a troop of fifty men sets out for Dourstedt to accompany a convoy of goods here to Karmal. When you return, your name is entered again and you have ten days' rest. The first time, they give you a day; that is how they fill the individual troops with newcomers as needed.«

Toben frowned. »As needed?«

»Yes. Now and then some of us vanish or are injured. It is a dangerous road. All of it lies in darkness.«

»And what does one do during the ten free days?«

»Eat, drill, eat, drill,« Sebb replied. »The training grounds and food stations are in the middle of the garrison, between the two camps. Only those who complete their drills receive food. We are really only back here in the barracks shortly before the Darkening, to get some sleep.«

»Yes, precisely!« cried a surly voice. »And perhaps now you'll finally shut your mouths, because I would like to sleep.«

»All right, Borxul. Calm yourself,« Sebb called back. »He is on escort again tomorrow,« he added, turning to Toben. »Let us hope he does not oversleep again. Last time they searched every barracks and found him snoring here in the corner. You do not want to know what they did to him.«

»Thank you for the short introduction,« Toben said gratefully.
»I shall lie down for a while as well. It was a long journey.«

»Go ahead. I shall turn in soon too.«

The Darkening drew on swiftly and the barracks grew quieter. Only Borxul's loud snoring broke the silence now and then. Toben could not sleep. He was too tormented by fear of the combat drill that would expose him tomorrow. He wondered whether he might somehow leave Karrmal, but remembered the thick walls and many guards. They would surely catch him. He also wondered whether anyone would miss him if he simply failed to attend the drill. But his growling stomach reminded him that in that case he would receive nothing to eat either.

The first daylight fell through the narrow windows of the barracks. Toben had not closed his eyes throughout the Darkening. Slowly, several soldiers rose, took up their weapons and armour and left the building. Sebb too was already on his feet.

»Where do I get a sword and armour?« Toben asked him quietly.

»They are assigned to you permanently at your first practice bout.«

Toben nodded and began making his bed.

»Borxul, you lazy dog, get up, or do you want to feel the lash again?« Sebb shouted.

Only a groan came from Borxul.

Sebb shook his head in disbelief. »What an idiot,« he muttered. »Could you wake him properly, Toben? I must go. Then I can still make the first drill and might get some of the fresh food.«

»I will ...« Toben replied uncertainly. The prospect of waking the curmudgeon did not delight him.

»Thank you. Until later, then.« Sebb left the barracks.

The room emptied steadily, and soon Toben was alone with the snoring Borxul. He went over and studied the man. The traces of time were clearly visible upon him. *Small wonder he is*

wearry of getting up, Toben thought. His gaze wandered to the foot of the bed. There lay a helmet with a nasal guard, metal bracers and greaves, and a blue, badly battered surcoat. Against the wall behind the head of the bed, meanwhile, leaned a sword in a leather scabbard.

Toben lingered thoughtfully beside the bed until a loud snore startled him and prompted a sudden idea. He took the sword and carefully belted it on. Then, very quietly, he donned the bracers and greaves and slowly pulled on the surcoat. Throughout these movements he kept a constant eye upon the sleeping Borxul. At last he reached gingerly for the helmet, and the leather of his sword belt creaked.

»Can I help you somehow?« a surly voice suddenly growled.

Toben nearly died of fright. He looked down at the old man, whose eyes remained closed and who nevertheless contrived to look annoyed. »I was told to wake you,« he stammered, lifted the helmet, offered a silent *forgive me* and brought it down upon the man's head with the same sure aim he used with one of his hammers. There was a clang and the snoring ceased. *I hope I have only knocked him senseless*, Toben thought. He put on the helmet, rolled Borxul from the bed and pulled him underneath it. He knew full well that this was no proper hiding place, but it would withstand a first glance from the doorway. Then he left the barracks and ran towards the north gate of the garrison, where he suspected the mustering ground lay.

Fortunately, his suspicion proved correct. Before the gate stood seven ranks of seven soldiers each. Only the final rank lacked one man. He hurried towards it while an officer before the square read out several names.

»Geog?«

»Present!«

»Pantal?«

»Present!«

»Then one more attempt: Borxul?«

»Present!« Toben called from beneath his helmet, quite out of breath.

»Miracles do happen, gentlemen,« said the officer. »Very well, then. March!«

The fifty men formed two files and left Karrmal heading north.

UNEQUAL AMONG EQUALS

When Artos awoke again, he felt wretched. His head ached as though after a drinking bout lasting several days, his stomach cramped and his throat burned terribly. He was still dazed and could smell dust, dirt and dryness.

»There you are again,« said a familiar voice.

»I told you he would recover. Healer Nemes has saved everyone,« a child said.

»Only everyone who could still be saved,« said a gentle voice.

Dazed, Artos rubbed his eyes and strained to remember what had happened. *This north will be the death of me yet*, he thought—for it was now the second time in short order that he had awoken after losing consciousness in unfamiliar surroundings.

»Not so fast,« a woman called when he began laboriously to sit up. She hurried to help him and supported his back. »First you must drink. A great deal.« She guided a bowl of greenish liquid to his mouth.

Artos had great difficulty forcing the substance down his throat. It was fiercely pungent. »What is that?« he gasped after several mouthfuls.

»A herbal brew,« replied the man who was evidently Healer Nemes. »It tastes foul, but cleanses the stomach.«

Anji stepped cheerfully up to the bed and said, »You simply collapsed before we got here. Your friend dragged you through half the Drift. Quite a feat.«

»Unfortunately, I have some experience of that,« Niam said with a laugh.

Artos too forced a smile, then reached for the bowl again and drank more of the vile stuff. It helped. Mouthful by mouthful, his stomach settled somewhat, and his throat no longer felt quite so dreadful. Only his head continued to pound terribly. »How long was I gone?« he asked.

»All of the last day and a Darkening. The sun has only just emerged again,« Nemes replied. »With a little rest, you will soon be on your feet. At any rate, we have averted the poisoning.«

»Poisoning?« Artos and Niam cried together.

»Yes, poisoning. Foul water may cause similar reactions, but not so violent. Not even in strangers to this country.«

Artos looked suspiciously at Niam. »Then why are you perfectly well?«

Carefully, Niam removed his pack and brought out the waterskin he had found in the tower. »I never drank from it,« he replied. »I still had some water in my flask. It was enough for me.«

Healer Nemes held out his hand and took the waterskin. He opened it and smelled the contents. »None of the poisons used in these lands. It may come from the goblins, perhaps a plant from the marshes in the north-west. I cannot say for certain. May I keep the skin here for further examination?«

Niam nodded thoughtfully, then turned to his companion. »I am sorry, Artos. In all the excitement, I did not examine the water—or whatever it is—again.«

»Speaking of excitement,« Anji said suddenly, no longer sounding childlike at all. »We have had enough of that since your arrival.« She went to the entrance of the tent and murmured a few words. A short while later she returned with three large men. Two wore dark veils before their faces.

»Hello, lad,« said the only unveiled man. »May I introduce myself this time?«

Artos narrowed his eyes and tried to recognise the stranger's face. Healer Nemes and his assistant, meanwhile, withdrew without being asked.

»Had a shitty day, have you?«

Artos had seen the circular scar upon the gaunt man's forehead before. Then he remembered. »You? How did you—«

»Yes, me. I am Wydus, an Eye of Ambher's Severance Tower. And what may I call you? Borxul of Karrmal, Toben of Trermouth, or would you prefer Artos of Ninepasses?«

»The latter, if you please,« Artos replied after a long pause.

»Pleased to meet you, Artos,« Wydus said with the trace of a smile. »You caused quite a commotion, striking down that old soldier ...«

»He ... is ... dead?« Artos stammered. Shame and horror flushed his face red.

»Dead? No, no. What did I say? Struck down? Knocked down, I meant. He still felt the lash, though. Quite a spectacle. Delighted the Cupdorians in Karrmal.«

Artos's relief was plain to see. He turned upon the bed and let his legs hang over the edge. Hesitantly he asked, »And what do you want with me? Why should a Morgathalian deserter concern you?«

»Deserter? Yes, that is what I thought at first. But shortly after you vanished, two fellows came to the garrison—two of the nasty sort. True elite, not loudmouths like the other soldiers there. They showed a remarkable interest in the incident, let me tell you.«

»You mean knights?« Niam now put in. »Blue clothing, armoured as well as a Gankrok?«

»The day may prove interesting after all,« Wydus exclaimed in surprise. »A man of the Old Spring who saw two knights? Tell me.«

»There is not much to tell,« Niam replied, suspicious and unsettled.

The strangely gaunt man studied him closely. One could almost have imagined that he was looking straight through Niam's clothes. »Then say little,« he said at last. »I shall simply ask you two questions. Agreed?«

Niam shrugged.

»Very good. First: are the knights dead? Second: was there any sign that they were searching for our Artos here?«

»Yes and yes,« Niam answered truthfully.

Without a word, one of the two veiled men detached himself from the group and left the tent.

»Thank you,« Wydus said pleasantly. »Back to you, Artos. Fate seems to be playing a game with you. How often have you escaped death now? Four times? Five?«

»I had good fortune and help. It would be presumptuous to claim otherwise. Fate has nothing to do with it.«

»Modest as a true man of the arts.«

Artos raised an eyebrow.

»Yes, we made enquiries. We traced your path all the way back to your studio in Ninepasses. Yet one question still torments us.«

»Why I left my home at all?«

Wydus spread his arms with delight. »Always a pleasure to speak with southerners whose reason has not yet been beaten out of them entirely. That is precisely the question.«

Artos hesitated. Despite his supposed friendliness, both the man and his equally tall veiled companion made him uneasy. Moreover, he had never heard of the Eyes of Ambher's Severance Tower. To his knowledge the tower did not even exist—or, if it did, it was no more than an unfinished ruin. »That question torments me as well,« he replied slowly. »I do not know exactly.«

»How disappointing, when we are so near the answer. Perhaps it is not a good day after all. Are you certain, lad, that you do not know why you abandoned your lovely home to seek

death in the north? To enter Karrmal willingly is most unusual, let me tell you.«

Uncertainly Artos looked at Niam, but he appeared equally perplexed.

»I would like to know as well,« Anji said suddenly. »You do not look like a spy, and believe me, I know how to recognise Morgathalian spies. Nor are you a soldier. What are you doing here?«

A very unusual child, Artos thought. He had already found the people by the Black Maar strange, but these two—Anji and Wydus—surpassed them.

»Would you like a Darkening to sleep upon it, lad?« Wydus asked undaunted. Something metallic clinked beneath his cloak.

»I had thought the people of Nyvil minded their own affairs and left others in peace. Why, then, am I being asked so many questions?«

»Because knights of the Fifth are looking for you. That is true of no one else in Nyvil,« Wydus replied emphatically. »Your presence here places us in considerable danger. And I should like to know why. Why should we risk our lives for you?«

»I do not expect you to risk your lives for me. Let me go, and no knights will come.«

Annoyed, Wydus pressed his palm to his forehead and pondered briefly. »It is far too late for that,« he said. »They are already on their way and will come here, wherever you may be by then.«

»When will they arrive?« Anji asked fearfully.

»If they drive their horses without rest,« Wydus considered, »then from Glanzend they will need roughly three days to reach us.«

The word *Glanzend* sent a chill down Artos's spine. Even so, he wondered how this so-called Eye of Ambher's Severance Tower meant to know that knights were truly on their way. Yet the man seemed so convinced that one could not help but be-

lieve him. »I am sorry if I have brought you trouble. I never meant to come to the Drift. I only wanted to draw a little attention at the top of Velor's Pass.«

The gaunt man's expression brightened again. »So you knew of your pursuers and the danger they posed to others as well? Tell me.«

»Well deduced,« Artos replied. »But I spoke truthfully when I said I did not know why I was being pursued. I may have an inkling, a suspicion, but certainly no assurance.«

»Assurance? That is one of those words which has no business in this world. What use is a word when its meaning does not exist? Inkings will serve me perfectly well, my lad.«

»How am I to know that you will not harm me, barter me away or abduct me if I tell you?«

»Were you not listening to him?« Anji asked tartly. »There is no assurance. You have long been at our mercy. Or do you believe one can simply leave the Drift?«

Artos massaged his temples. *How can a man forever fall from one hole into the next?* he thought bitterly. He raised his head and said, »Very well. I shall tell you my story. But please do not act rashly afterwards.«

He told them everything from the beginning: the curious contact from the Custodian of Custom, the parchments in his studio, and his harrowing flight. Only in matters concerning the Black Maar did he remain guarded, as he had promised, though no one appeared troubled by it.

When he had finished, Anji offered only, »Goodness.«

»As I said, I very much doubt that any such bloodline exists,« Artos insisted.

»So do I, my lad,« Wydus replied. »But what we think of it is unfortunately beside the point. Davard appears to believe in it ... and that creates facts.« He turned to the remaining masked man and nodded, whereupon the latter too left the tent without delay.

Artos watched the stranger go uneasily. »And what happens now?« he asked.

»I am having that ascertained.«

»By whom?«

»The scholars of Ambherg, of course.«

»Have we that much time?« Niam asked suspiciously. »Is the mountain not at least a day's march away?«

»It will not take long,« Wydus assured him.

»And why ask the scholars instead of simply acting?« Artos asked. »Can we not lure the knights into a trap if we know when they are coming?«

Anji laughed scornfully. »They would conduct a third Tally if we simply attacked them. Besides, we would not have the faintest chance.«

»Niam dealt with two of them,« Artos replied.

»Half-dead of thirst and exhausted from fighting,« Niam admitted.

»Anything else would have surprised me,« Anji cried spitefully. »Knights of the Fifth cannot be defeated. They know nothing but violence throughout their lives. They are as ruthless as they are strong, as cunning as they are battle-hardened. Believe me, you do not want to meet them.«

Artos's expression showed his final hope breaking apart. »Then what counsel can we hope for from the scholars of Ambherg if matters are so hopeless?«

»They will consult the Cupdo to learn how one should proceed in such a case. Whether sacrifices are justified,« Wydus said.

»Sacrifices justified? What sacrifices?«

»Human lives, naturally. Helping you will have its price.«

»I do not want anyone to die because of me,« Artos cried in horror.

»It is already too late for that, my lad. A trail of devastation is assured. The only question is whether we can give it meaning.«

»How can death and devastation have meaning?« Artos asked doubtfully.

»That is precisely what our Cupdo teaches us,« Anji put in. »We are well versed in suffering and have had to learn that pain and cruelty find us even when we strive with all our strength to avert our fate. Why not use that strength to do some good before the inevitable arrives?«

Artos looked visibly confused. »I do not understand. Does that mean you allow yourselves to be tormented deliberately?«

»It cannot be understood. It must be experienced,« Anji replied. »And no, not deliberately. But we turn towards suffering, defy it through acceptance and make it our teacher. We Cupdorian are like sand. Strike it, and in one place you make a hollow, but elsewhere there is now more of it; and time will level everything again in any case.«

»I told you, it is not easy to understand,« Niam said quietly.

»Very well. But this code, the Cupdo, says how much you may sacrifice for ... something? Guidelines, so to speak?«

Anji rolled her great eyes. »No. That is not right either.«

Artos was slowly losing patience. He was an open-minded and well-educated young man, but these answers were simply unsatisfying. »What does it contain, then?« he tried one last time.

»Accounts of experience. No more, no less. But I do not know all of them. Only the scholars do, and only they can claim to draw the proper conclusions from them.«

»One moment,« Wydus's voice suddenly interrupted the conversation. He placed his hand upon his forehead again, closed his eyes and appeared to concentrate upon something. It took an age, but then the gaunt man smiled and looked at Artos. »Your tale appears to have caused no small excitement among the scholars. Peculiar, let me tell you. Well then, it is time to go.«

»Where?« Niam and Artos asked together.

»To the Streamstriders in Bruck.«

Relief spread across Artos's face. »You are allowing me to continue my journey?«

»So it has been decided. But let it be said that your troubles will not end in Bruck. We shall watch you, to see what fate awaits you in the end. This promises to become an interesting time.«

»I am pleased you find my fate interesting,« Artos said, the sarcasm in his voice unmistakable. »May we go now?«

»Follow me.«

The Drift proved to be a dry, dusty, barren plain filled with tattered tents, wooden carts and people staring listlessly. Never before had Artos seen so many people in so confined a space. Their number must have run into the tens of thousands. Now and again there was a trough by the wayside which bucket-carriers kept filled with turbid, stinking water. Yet despite the heat, there was scarcely any crowding at the watering places. Only occasionally did someone fetch a bowlful and set it in the sand before them, where the brooding sun warmed the liquid to the temperature of tea.

Niam briefly considered filling his flasks at one of the troughs, but quickly discarded the thought. That water would probably disagree even with him.

As they followed Wydus and Anji through the seemingly endless Drift, neither Artos nor Niam noticed that, despite the inhabitants' supposed apathy, every eye followed them. The people appeared to sense exactly that something was afoot. They examined the strangers with quick glances, then lowered their heads and feigned disinterest once more. Only a few exchanged quiet words with their neighbours.

When at last they reached the edge of the wretched tent city, they saw one of the masked men again. He stood beside a small boulder upon which several objects had been laid.

»We have made a few preparations to improve your chances,« Wydus said. He took up two leather bags and handed one to Niam and one to Artos. »Water. A little sandy, but boiled.« Then he reached for a beige, close-meshed net. »Find a few sticks and stretch it over yourselves while sleeping. At some distance, at least an untrained scout will not make you out.«

The two men accepted the items with thanks. Niam stowed the net and water in his pack, while Artos fastened his little waterskin to his belt with great eagerness.

»Now for the unpleasant part,« Wydus said slowly, reaching beneath his cloak. He brought out two small glass vials, each perhaps the size of a finger. »So that the knights do not catch you—at least not so quickly—you should drink this. It will grant you strength and endurance for a time. But I warn you: the pain afterwards will be terrible. You will not close an eye during the next Darkening.«

Sceptically, they accepted the vials. The liquid within consisted of green and silver parts which apparently refused to mingle. Instead they drifted around one another in an eternal dance.

Niam wasted no time and tipped the liquid into his mouth. »Tastes of herbs and iron,« he observed.

Why not? It has been a while since I was poisoned, Artos thought, and drank as well. It took only seconds for the effect to begin. A chill ran down his spine, but he felt light and rested. His thoughts were forced into the background and he saw only his goal ahead: the distant city in the Elendar.

»Now run west. You will reach the Hammermark quickly, but do not stop there. Run as far as you can and rest only when the pain begins. Once you can walk again, keep concealed and away from people. Understood? Then go.«

Niam and Artos merely nodded, then raced away as if under another's control. Their speed was inhuman and their endurance knew no bounds. Only moments later they were no more than a small cloud of dust upon the horizon.

»I hope they are worth it,« Anji murmured.

»Not every seed rises, but when it does, it was always worth the sowing,« Wydus replied. »You yourself are the finest proof.« He drew a mask from his cloak, veiled his face and strode away with the other masked man.

ONE LAST EFFORT

Artos felt as though another will controlled him and ran effortlessly across the hot plains of Nyvil. He could see his legs moving without cease, yet felt no exertion, no weariness and no urge to stop. At first his thoughts drifted aimlessly, but then became ever more entangled in old memories. It was as though, freed from all bodily tasks, his brain could turn its full strength upon itself. His mind probed, searched and tore down barriers. It wanted to understand what he had failed to understand through all the many days since leaving Ninepasses. It wanted to know why he had been made to endure all this suffering. As time passed, his memories grew ever more vivid, tangible and clear. Even recollections from early childhood returned as though he had never forgotten them.

He saw himself seated upon a horse led by his mother. Everything lay shrouded in mist; the world had neither colour nor outline. Only his mother could be seen clearly. She had short blond hair, looked unusually young and wore a shoulder bag and her old travelling cloak. He wanted to speak with her, but could not; no words came to him. Instead, she began humming a melody that sounded like a lament. It reached for his heart and drew him deeper into the memory. The mist partly gave way to dark trees, stretching their eerie branches like long fingers above the narrow road they travelled.

There was a jolt, and Artos slipped briefly back into the worldly present. He must have taken a great leap, perhaps over a stone or a hole. From the corner of his eye he noticed small settlements some distance away, extending across the

entire northern horizon. There must have been many hundreds of houses and tents. Some buildings were unusually tall, though of very plain construction. He knew this must be the Hammermark they had mentioned, but cared no further for it. With all their strength, his thoughts grasped again at the old memory.

Once more he saw his mother, still walking before the horse. This time the surroundings were sharp and clear. They were passing through a great castle gate. He looked around in wonder. The castle nestled against a mighty sandstone crag which formed an integral part of its defences. Battlements crowned the rock, while passages had been hewn into it below. Artos strained to recognise the land around them. He turned and looked back through the castle gate. Several nearby mountains were visible and seemed familiar. *They might be the Pinnacle Blades*, he thought. Yet to his knowledge there was no castle near that range. When he faced forwards again, he noticed several men. They were dressed like officials of the realm, in plain grey coats. Yet their bearing was far less constrained and their faces unusually cheerful. One even spread his arms and hurried towards his mother, beaming. »Is that little Artos? He is the very image of his father.«

»Let us hope not too much,« his mother replied. »His face brought his father no luck. You have not grown younger either, brother. Still worrying too much, I suppose.«

»We do live in—«

»Difficult times? You have said that before. And every time you say it, you burden yourself with still more cares soon afterwards.«

The man shook his head, stepped forwards and embraced Artos's mother. »What I lack in youth, you appear to have claimed for yourself. You look well.«

A long while passed before they released one another. Then his mother turned to Artos and said, »This is your uncle Regam. When he is not talking politics, he is tolerable company.«

The other men still standing in the background laughed softly. Then they came to his mother one by one, introduced themselves and helped her with the baggage and horse.

»How was the journey, Louis?« Regam asked as they crossed the courtyard together towards the dining hall.

»Uneventful.«

»No trouble with soldiers or officials?«

»Of course. But nothing unfamiliar. They all become terribly agitated whenever they see a woman travelling alone. I know how to look after myself.«

»You should stay here. Here you are safe and always welcome.«

Louis raised an eyebrow. »And Artos is to grow up here as the only child? Condemned to a life forever on guard?«

»Very well. It was worth trying,« Regam replied. »We have had several new arrivals, by the way,« he said, opening the door to the dining hall. »Young knights from loyal families.«

Another jolt came, this time followed by a painful impact which dragged Artos brutally back to reality. It took him a moment to understand what had happened. Then the pain struck. He rolled hastily onto his back, clutched his legs and searched for an injury. There was none. Nevertheless, his legs felt as though filled with molten lead. He curled up and massaged his calves, panting. All sense of time had deserted him. He had no idea how long he had been running. Judging by the feeling in his legs, however, it must have been at least the whole day.

Uncle Regam, flashed through Artos's mind. He strained to call back the childhood memory, but could not. All that remained were images of the unknown castle and the men clad in grey. He knew he had an uncle named Regam, but had met him only briefly at his mother's funeral. During her life she had seldom spoken of her brother. Supposedly he had been stationed in Westgrub and was always very busy.

A long shadow suddenly fell across Artos. Startled, he turned and looked skywards. But it was only the moon's

shadow, ushering in the next Darkening. The feeling in his legs had been right, then: he and Niam truly had run for the entire day. *Speaking of Niam*, he thought in alarm, rose with difficulty and looked swiftly about. There was no sign of his companion. The plain around him was almost entirely empty. Only here and there stood a few lonely boulders and trees dead long ago. The ground was stony and covered in places by withered grass. To the north he could still make out the last foothills of the Ring Wall, though they were slowly vanishing into the rising shadow. »Bloody hell,« escaped him.

Artos knew he had to wait out the Darkening and find shelter before he could search for Niam. What he did not know was how he would find him. The ground revealed no tracks and, beyond a rough direction, he had no clue. *Problems for the twilight*, he thought, and limped westwards towards a cluster of small rocks.

Once there, he climbed the highest with his last strength and made himself a resting place atop it. He drank some water and watched the moon conquer the sun piece by piece. *I hope Niam is well*, he thought, massaging his aching calves again. Ordinarily he would have worried more and found no sleep, but exhaustion was so absolute that he simply drifted away.

Niam stopped dead and looked uncertainly around. Until that moment he had been lost in old memories of his wife, but now everything was suddenly dark, cold and frightening. He rubbed his burning thighs and tried to determine what had broken his rhythm. He had heard something, of that he was certain. He drew a deep breath and pricked up his ears. A quiet sound came from somewhere behind him. It was indistinct, but sounded almost like laughter. Niam turned his head and concentrated. There it was again, nearer this time. *Oh no*, he thought in panic and instinctively reached for his Song.

Weapon in hand, he searched the surroundings and fortunately found the dark outline of a dead giant of a tree, standing apart from the otherwise grey desolation in the pallid light of the Darkening.

Again laughter sounded, from another direction this time. Despite his aching legs, Niam sprinted towards the tree, whirling his Song above his head. The spearhead sent its familiar whirring into the darkness. It sounded like a warning, but the laughter only multiplied, as though mocking him and his conduct.

Reaching the tree, Niam swiftly swung himself onto a thick branch. Not a moment too soon. A pack of shadows reached the foot of the tree and circled it, slavering. *Tattle-Tatters. Just what I needed*, he thought with annoyance. He knew these beasts from the northern lands and had once observed them with his father. They were cunning, patient and cruel, always hunting in small packs, and looked like malformed dogs. They could not climb, but at waiting they were unmatched.

Carefully, Niam secured his footing in the old tree. Most of the smaller branches had already broken off and lay on the ground. He tapped several of the thicker ones with his Song. They sounded hollow and rotten. *The tree must have been dead for hundreds of skytides, preserved by Nyvil's drought*, he thought. With great care he removed his pack, hung it over his head from a branch and took out his leather waterskin. Now that the strange draught's effect had faded, he felt the thirst and pain of the long sprint. The water not only quenched his thirst, but cleared his thoughts.

»Artos!« he shouted suddenly in dismay, only to reap the Tattle-Tatters' mockery once more. »Quiet down there, you shit beasts.« He took his Song and thrust towards the wretched creatures. They did not dream of coming anywhere near his reach. They waited at a safe distance, as though they knew the sun would sooner or later do their work for them.

Niam searched his memories. Shortly before the Darkening he believed he had still sensed Artos beside him, if only dimly. *He cannot have come to a stop very far away. The draught must have worn off for him as well.* But that meant Artos too was in danger should the Tattle-Tatters catch his scent. Niam knew what he had to do. Despite his overwhelming exhaustion, he had to remain awake and hold the pack's attention. Carefully he leant forwards and counted the beasts. There were four: one large female and three males. The female, he knew, was the head of the pack. She commanded them and was far cleverer than the smaller males. It was her attention that mattered.

He reached into his pack and felt the other things inside: the camouflage net, his rope for hunting moondivers, his knife, two empty flasks, several strips of lizard meat and a little darkmoss, now completely dried out. Very slowly he drew out the net and stretched it above himself between several rotten branches. *At least that will afford some protection from the sun.* Then he took the lizard meat and cautiously sat in the great fork where he had been standing. With one hand he fed himself the meat; in the other he held his spear. »Want some too?« he called, waving the meat about. A growl answered from below. »You do not know what you are missing.«

When he had eaten the first piece, he clamped his legs more firmly around the tree and leant down. He held the meat out to the Tattle-Tatters so that they might have reached it with a leap. But the great female only giggled, and the males did not leave her side. They had evidently not overlooked Niam's Song, poised to strike in his other hand. »Then I shall eat it myself,« Niam said, and devoured the second piece. He carefully stood again, broke off several rotten branches and snapped them into pieces fit for throwing. »Would you like to play?« His first throw struck one male upon the skull. It howled and made to rush the tree, but the large female stopped it with a bite to the hind leg. »Come on, grant me a little amusement.« He threw

another piece of wood, but the Tattle-Tatters merely retreated a little farther and lay down in some dry grass.

»Have it your way,« Niam said quietly. He was running out of ideas for how to keep causing a stir. He leant against a branch and watched the pack wearily. Calm returned as the Darkening advanced. And with the calm came doubts and questions. He wondered whether his efforts for this strange southerner truly accomplished anything, or whether he was merely placing himself in danger for nothing and abandoning Elissa and their son. All because, in his hunger for recognition, he had once again followed one of his father's confused notions.

It must have been light for several hours, for the moon had already moved some distance from the pitiless sun when Artos awoke feeling as though he had been beaten. With great effort he sat up and rubbed his legs. »They will kill me yet,« he gasped in pain. Never had he suffered such aching muscles, though he knew them well enough from several larger works of sculpture. He reached for his water and took two mouthfuls. Then he turned where he sat and surveyed the surroundings. Not a soul could be seen for miles. There was only withered vegetation everywhere, broken here and there by sand-coloured rock. Yet when he studied the western horizon more closely, he saw something strange. Behind a small rise, a grey veil climbed into the sky. *Smoke*, Artos thought hopefully. He crawled to the edge of the rock and lowered his legs. Somehow he made it down upon trembling knees and miraculously reached the ground unharmed. Then he trudged towards the smoke as quickly as he could.

During the two miles he walked, the smoke steadily diminished. He wondered whether it truly was a signal fire from his companion, as he had first assumed, or whether something quite different awaited him. The nearer he came, the more his

unease grew. Carefully he climbed the rise, crouching lower as he neared the crest. At the top he lay upon his belly and looked into the distance. Before him lay a small valley scarcely different from the surrounding country. Only in its centre, some two hundred paces away, stood a striking dead tree. Black, smoking grass lay around it. And upon the tree: Niam.

Artos was about to rise when, fortunately, he noticed the strange animals lurking beyond the burnt grass. He had heard of these doglike creatures before, but could not remember their name. Their appearance, however, plainly said: keep away. The beasts had pointed snouts, powerful forelegs, high shoulders, worn fur and short bushy tails. Otherwise they looked gaunt and starved—almost like the people of the Drift.

Niam must have set the grass alight to drive them off, Artos thought. He strained to think how he might help his companion without offering himself as an alternative meal. He swept the surroundings for anything useful, but found nothing. Instead, he spotted a great shadow in the sky approaching from the south. Artos recognised this creature at once. It was an eagle from the Trer. He had carved several of the beautiful birds from wood; they always sold well. *What can it be doing here?*

Niam had to demand everything of himself to remain awake. He had given up trying to distract the beasts. It was not necessary in any case, for they would not leave him. Throughout the Darkening they had tested him, trying to leap at the trunk whenever his attention lapsed or provoke him into a reckless response. His last resort had been to ignite the remaining dark-moss with his flint knife and the point of his Song and hurl it at the Tattle-Tatters like a fallen star. But even that had met with little success, though nearly all the dry grass nearby had burnt.

The animals had simply avoided the flames as though fire were perfectly ordinary to them. Now they sat some distance away upon sandy ground and stared at him from yellow eyes.

Exhausted, Niam reached for his water and took a careful sip. When he tried to hang the skin from a branch again, it slipped from his trembling hand and fell. He watched its descent without feeling. An age seemed to pass before it struck below, stirring dirt and ash. Then mocking laughter sounded, and anger rose in Niam. »Laugh,« he shouted furiously. »I would sooner tie myself to the highest branch and rot in the sun than let you eat my flesh.«

One of the Tattle-Tatters approached the waterskin, but abruptly stopped halfway. The female growled. The Tattle-Tatters looked around frantically and sniffed the air. Something must have caught their attention. Moments later Niam's heart almost stopped when the pack, entirely without warning and at great speed, fled northwards. »Please, not towards Artos,« he pleaded as he took down the net and stowed his belongings. Once the Tattle-Tatters had vanished behind a rise, Niam climbed from the tree, picked up his water and looked about warily. He was ready to flee up the tree again at any moment should the treacherous beasts return. But nothing happened. Only an eagle circling high overhead drew his attention.

Niam wrestled with whether to leave the tree's protection and search for Artos, whom he suspected to be east of him. *Let it be east*, he thought. For in the north—this much was certain—his good fortune would soon be sorely tested. He could still hear the Tattle-Tatters' vile, mocking laughter in his mind. He shuddered.

»Oi, you fire-raiser!« a familiar voice suddenly called. »Why are you standing here in the middle of nowhere?«

Relieved, Niam looked east and saw Artos approaching, his legs stiff and heavy. »You've got some nerve,« Niam called back. »The Tattle-Tatters have not been gone five minutes and you limp straight over here. Did you not see the beasts?«

»The dog things? I did, but they seemed to know where they were going. I doubt they will return.«

»With Tattle-Tatters, never be too certain. They are devious beasts.«

»Wait until you have dealings with the king's officials. Then you will know what deviousness means,« Artos replied. »Why did they run at all? Your fire had already burnt out.«

»I honestly do not know,« Niam answered truthfully. He looked skywards and pointed at the eagle. »That is too small to drive them away, at any rate.«

Artos too looked up and watched the bird, still circling above them, with interest.

»Or do you think otherwise?«

»The eagle itself is too small ...« Artos replied hesitantly.

»But?«

»The creature might be a Mentaure. That is very unlikely, though.«

»Why?«

»Because Mentaures normally live and hunt only in the Trer. That is the range south-east of Southcrest.«

»And if it is one?«

»Then we should follow the example of those Shame—erm ...«

»Tattle-Tatters?« Niam supplied.

»Yes. We should do as the Tattle-Tatters did and leave.«

Niam's confusion and scepticism were plain, but he acted at once, shouldering his belongings and pulling Artos westwards with him. »What exactly are Mentaures?« he asked as they moved away from the tree.

»They are eagles, but unusual ones. Each is somehow deeply bound to a human heart. The people who lead such eagles are called the Remaining. They are usually old soldiers who have lost everything. Where they obtain the eagles, I cannot tell you.«

»What do you mean by *bound*?«

»Bound somehow. They hunt together, live together. One of these Remaining always loitered in the tavern near my studio. His eagle was never with him, though; it always flew over the roofs. The animals frighten people, I think, or remind them unpleasantly of their owners' bitter fates. At any rate, the man always sat alone in his corner, drank his ale and spoke only nonsense. Until that one day.« Artos paused and grimaced in pain.

»Yes? Go on.«

»A moment. Cramp in my leg,« Artos groaned.

Niam stopped and used the time to search the sky for the eagle again. He found it in the west, sweeping back towards them in a broad curve. In the sunlight one might have thought something blue adorned its plumage.

»Forgive me,« Artos said, straightening again. »Until the day Custodians came and tried to drive the Remaining from the tavern. His Mentaurs suddenly plunged from the sky, flew through an open window and threw everything into confusion. The Remaining used the chance to make himself scarce. I never saw him there again.«

»Is it usual among your people for officials to harass veterans?« Niam asked, almost angrily. »Merely because they loiter somewhere?«

The question surprised Artos and made him think. »Not really,« he replied at last. »At least not in Ninepasses. In Morgathal, Trermouth and Clearwater they may keep the streets *clean*, but in every place west of Ninepasses they abandoned that long ago. Maimed veterans, idlers and drifters are nothing unusual there.«

»So the Remaining do not generally work with Davard's henchmen?«

Now Artos understood his companion's concern. »Unfortunately, one cannot say that as a rule,« he replied. »I have heard of Remaining who still serve the king as mercenaries.«

»What sort of service?«

Artos shrugged. »Scouts, messengers, hunters, assassins? I have no idea. It probably depends on their former duty in the army.«

With great effort, Niam ordered his thoughts. Then he rubbed his tired eyes. »Even if the eagle is a Mentauri and its bonded human is somewhere nearby, I cannot imagine the Tattle-Tatters know that and fled because of it.«

»True. Besides, we should have a sufficient lead over the knights, should we not? What did Wydus say yesterday? Three days on horseback to the Drift?«

»Correct,« Niam confirmed with a yawn. »So they should be at least a hundred and fifty miles from us.«

»Then we do not know what drove the Tattle-Tatters away,« Artos said.

Niam nodded and headed towards another dead tree. There he broke off a long branch and took his black knife and the rope from his pack. He cut a length of rope and used it to bind the knife to the end of the branch. »Here. Your Song.« He handed the makeshift spear to Artos.

»This is probably the sorriest Song in human memory,« Artos said mockingly, though he accepted the weapon.

»You are probably right,« Niam replied with a smile. »But if the Tattle-Tatters return, a second spear cannot hurt.«

Artos agreed. To him the spear was above all a welcome support for his tormented legs.

They went on. The scant withered vegetation vanished entirely, and the country grew ever stonier and more broken. Despite their aching limbs, they dragged themselves bravely through the hostile expanse.

When clefts began to appear more frequently in the ground, Artos stopped. »Perhaps we should rest. If we stumble here, that will be the end of us.«

Niam would never have asked for rest, but he could not disagree. He desperately needed sleep and could scarcely walk straight. »Agreed,« he gasped. Then he pointed towards a cleft

in the ground roughly the height of a man. »Let us seek shelter there.«

They climbed inside and discovered with surprise that the cleft deepened in the direction of their travel. Every five paces a broad step lowered the floor by another arm's length. Moreover, the material beneath their feet was most unusual. While the walls of the two-pace-wide cleft were plain and grey, the rock of the floor was a beautiful white, veined here and there by beige structures.

»What giant carved a stair here?« Niam asked quietly, taking his Song firmly in both hands.

»A giant named *water*,« Artos replied with delight. »The rock underfoot is travertine.«

»Traver ... what?«

»Travertine. A very rare stone found only near hot springs. In Southcrest there is only one place where travertine occurs, west of Clearwater. I went there once with my master.«

»Hot springs? You mean hot water coming from the ground?«

»Exactly. Do you have such things as well?«

»Not that I know. I know only the Blacksand Wastes, and there the ground spits hot sand rather than hot water.«

»All the more interesting that such springs evidently existed here. If the people of Nyvil knew what prices this stone fetches in Morgathal ...«

Niam drew the net from his pack and stretched it over them between the rock walls. »What use is money if it buys neither food nor drink?« he said in passing.

Artos sat against one wall and reached for his water. »Did you also dream such confused things while we ran all those miles under the influence of that ... draught?«

»Dream? What do you mean?« Niam asked, though his face made it plain he knew exactly what Artos meant.

»I dreamt I was a child again, accompanying my mother to an unknown castle. It felt utterly real. It must have been caused by that stuff. Did nothing of the kind happen to you?«

Hesitantly Niam replied, »Mine were not dreams, but very vivid memories. I am certain I truly experienced all of it, even if I may not have understood some things so clearly at the time.«

»And what was yours, if I may ask?«

Again Niam hesitated. »A memory of my first meeting with Elissa.«

Artos thought briefly, then remembered that Elissa was Niam's wife. He nodded and asked, »Elissa was not born at the Black Maar, was she?«

»Correct. Sadly, she was not granted that good fortune. She fled the abbey of Dourstedt, where she had been made to *serve* since childhood.«

»What abbey?« Artos asked in surprise. »I thought Dourstedt was a mine.«

»It is, for the most part. But deep within the mountain there is also an abbey. The monks there are responsible for extracting a very particular ore.« Niam furrowed his brow and thought hard. »Elissa once mentioned its name. It was ...«

»Silver?«

»Nonsense. I know what silver is. No, there is something else. It glimmers green and blinds anyone who touches it too often.«

»Blinds them? How?«

»Atlanite. That is its name,« Niam suddenly cried. »I do not know why it causes blindness. At any rate the monks go blind, and each therefore has a young girl as an ... assistant. These girls are torn from their families at four skytides and usually come from Nyvil. They are condemned to spend their whole lives in half-darkness, serving their foul monks. They lead them, feed them, wash them ... and who knows what else. Elissa never speaks of it.«

Artos grimaced in disgust. »I knew nothing of that ...«

»I fear the ordinary people of Southcrest know little of what your king and his servants do in their name.«

»You may be certain of that. But believe me, many people in Southcrest also suffer beneath the king and his excesses, though of course not to the same degree as your people.«

»They too have my sympathy,« Niam replied, looking deeply into Artos's eyes. »At any rate, Elissa escaped and met my father and me on one of our journeys. Much as we found you: lying in the sand, nearly dead of thirst.«

»When was that?«

»Five skytides ago. I was almost a child myself. But while we ran, I remembered it as though it had happened yesterday.«

»What was she like then, and how did you come to take her in—or even gain permission to do so?«

»We took her in as our *child of the world*. The community of the Black Maar allows each family only one child of their own blood. But any who wish may also take in a child from Nyvil. Usually the water smugglers arrange these adoptions, though that is not the only way.«

»How old is Elissa?« Artos asked with genuine interest. He had tried to guess her age before, but found it difficult.

»Eleven skytides, two younger than I. Fortunately she spent only two skytides in the abbey, but it left marks enough, believe me. When we found her, she could scarcely see. Not because of the atlanite, but because she no longer knew the sun. Her whole body was covered in bruises and she was badly underfed. When she noticed us, she attacked like a wild animal and scratched a fine wound into my father's face.«

Artos remembered the scar upon Hatem's face and, for some reason, smiled.

»It sounds funnier than it was,« Niam said. »My mother had some work later keeping the wound clean.«

»Forgive me. Your father always gave me the impression that nothing and no one could endanger him.«

»If only,« Niam sighed. »Elissa was ready for anything then. But in her eyes I could still see the innocent girl she had been before her abduction. A good soul buried beneath horrors no human should ever endure. Once my father had overpowered and safely restrained her, I tried to calm her. It was not easy. I told her all manner of nonsense about our home to make clear that we were not from the south. Today I am certain she scarcely understood me, for her speech was badly stunted then. She had to learn much anew. But I must have done something right, because after a while she slowly grew calm. Perhaps it was simply the sound of my voice, or her utter exhaustion.«

»I do think you sound trustworthy,« Artos said.

Niam waved a weary hand. »Go on, mock me.«

»No, I meant it. I entrusted my life to you after only a short time.«

»You had nothing left to lose.«

»There is always something to lose. Elissa had something then too.«

Niam considered, shrugged and smiled. »Well then. Let us sleep. I would not mind a dream that carries me home for a while.«

It was still light when they awoke several hours later. The sleep had done them good, but their legs still felt made of stone. Groaning, they sat up, drank and massaged their calves.

»Have you anything left to eat?« Artos asked.

Niam opened the pack and brought out some lizard meat. »No darkmoss, unfortunately. I burnt it.«

»A pity. I was truly longing for moss.«

»Then occupy yourself with your second-favourite dish,« Niam said with a laugh, handing him a piece of tough, leathery meat.

»I only hope Bruck has proper food. A juicy roast of pork would please you too, I am sure, or a good hearty stew with

real vegetables. You have something to look forward to, believe me.« Artos put the meat into his mouth and chewed laboriously. Meanwhile he listed more and more delicacies, as though this might somehow improve the taste of the dry lizard.

»First we must reach it. Then we may gladly speak of food.«

»Always keep the goal in sight,« Artos replied, chewing noisily. »How far do you reckon Bruck is?«

»Three days, if we make good time. We must keep the sun away from our right ear. That should take us in the right direction.«

»Three days south-west, then. Surely we can manage that.«

»We have had so few difficulties thus far,« Niam mocked.

»What is our plan once we reach Bruck? How do we cross the river to the city at all?«

»There are said to be boats that travel from bank to bank along ropes stretched across the river. Once there, we must give you a new name and story. You have some experience of that. You will also need to find work so that you can afford somewhere to live. Preferably not as a stonemason, if you do not wish to make matters too easy for your pursuers.«

»Do you think they can find me even in Bruck? The city is neutral and independent of Morgathal.«

Groaning, Niam rose and put away the net that hung above them. Then he climbed one of the steps and looked over the rim of the cleft. »I do not know. I know little about Bruck, only what my father told me in haste before leaving for Eblin. But the question is: do you wish to risk it?«

»Not after all the sacrifices of this journey,« Artos insisted, forcing himself upright as well. »What else did Hatem say about Bruck?«

»As I said, not much. He stressed that his knowledge was many skytides old and he did not know how the city had changed. He said an Archivist and his followers keep the peace there, and that everything revolves around money, which is

why we must find you work quickly. We are also to keep away from the lower city, because everything there is—« Niam broke off.

»Everything is what?«

Niam reached for Artos, pulled him up and pointed into the distance.

Artos peered cautiously over the edge and tried to see what his companion meant. He saw only shimmering air above barren land.

»To the left of the two rocks that look like Gankrok heads.«

»I have never seen a Gankrok,« Artos replied nervously. But then he saw it. Perhaps a mile away, five powerful figures were approaching. He narrowed his eyes and tried to make out more. »I believe those are men on horseback.«

Niam carefully drew his head back and searched the sky.

»Do you think they are looking for us?« Artos asked without taking his eyes from the riders.

»It would be quite a coincidence if they were not.«

»Why? They might be riders from Nyvil.«

»How many horses have you seen since we began travelling through Nyvil?«

»None ...«

»Precisely. These riders very likely come from the south. I only wonder how they reached us so quickly. It should be impossible.«

»I wonder whether they know exactly where we are,« Artos added.

»I could no longer find the eagle in the sky. Do you truly think it was a Mentaure?«

»By now I am almost certain,« Artos replied. Then he watched the five riders divide and trot towards them in a broad formation. »They are spreading out.«

Niam gathered his things and pulled Artos deeper into the cleft.

»Where are you going?« Artos asked.

»In the only direction left to us.«

With great effort they descended step after step. Daylight faded swiftly, and the white travertine beneath their feet grew ever paler and more indistinct. It seemed as though they were gliding down a road of mist into darkness.

»I never thought the cleft was so deep,« Artos whispered. »And it is truly cold here.«

»The walls are damp,« Niam replied.

Artos placed his left hand against the rock. »You are right. Unusual.«

Niam jumped down another step and stopped. »I think this is the end. There is no further step.«

»Hard to tell in this damned darkness. Are you certain?«

»Come down and see.«

Artos obeyed. At the bottom he found himself before the mouth of a tunnel. »Oh,« escaped him. »I did not expect that.«

»Can your white stone shine?« Niam asked.

»Travertine? No. Why?«

»Because there is a light ahead.«

Artos squeezed past Niam and looked into the tunnel. Before them stretched a veritable river of gleaming travertine, and at its end, perhaps seventy paces away, there was indeed a light illuminating the way with an enchanted glow.

»I suggest we examine it more closely,« Niam said, fascinated.

»Is that curiosity I hear? From you?« Artos asked in amusement.

»Come on. We have no time to lose.«

They entered the tunnel cautiously, walking comfortably side by side. The nearer they came to the light, the more beautifully the floor gleamed. Artos's heart beat excitedly, and despite the threatening danger he could not master his delight. In his mind he saw only the many works of art he could fashion from this material.

When they were some ten paces from the end, Niam said, »I think that is daylight.«

»That would be bad,« said Artos.

»Did you expect more? Some wonder as the source of the light?«

»That is not what I meant. Daylight means there is an entrance through which the riders may find us.«

»Not necessarily,« Niam replied as they reached the light. »Careful. No farther.«

They found themselves in the inner wall of a vast circular pit, rising high above and plunging deep below them. The entire shaft was lined with the finest travertine, which scattered the daylight and seemed to draw it down towards them. Their eyes had to adjust to the brightness before they could find the upper rim. It lay fully in the sun and shone glaringly. Before their feet, meanwhile, opened a dark abyss whose depth they could not judge. Fortunately they had not fallen into it.

»There are more tunnels,« Artos said once he had collected himself. Indeed, dozens of openings like theirs pierced the walls at different heights.

Niam nodded. »Hard to reach. We would have to climb, but the walls look too smooth and damp.«

»At least no one can climb down to us either. Let us remain here and hope for the best.«

»Agreed.« Niam removed his pack, sat and leant against the tunnel wall.

Artos sat beside him and calmly regarded their discovery. His fascination with the wondrous structure was a welcome distraction from the fear of capture. It did not last long. Images of the strange riders returned to his mind ever more frequently. He knew who they might be at worst: knights of the Fifth, a division from Glanzend with—as he now knew—a dubious reputation. Among ordinary soldiers in other garrison cities, the knights and soldiers of the Fifth were held to be the elite of the elite. They embodied the ideal Morgathalian war-

rior. Among common citizens of the towns along the Victory-vein, meanwhile, images of Lavru Unwill were popular—the famous knight of the Fifth said to have slain more than thirty Nyvilans alone and unarmoured when they attacked him during a ride. Now that Artos had seen the Nyvilans himself, he could no longer imagine that they would attack a rider from Glanzend without cause. And even if they had: slaughtering thirty starving wretches held little heroism.

»Do you think the pit is natural?« Niam asked suddenly. He had noticed his companion's unease and, as Artos had once asked among the Singing Dunes, tried to communicate a little more.

Grateful for the renewed distraction, Artos replied, »It may be. It was certainly not made by human hands. Perhaps a hot spring once stood here. Though ... it would have had to be very hot, and under enormous pressure.«

»Where does the heat of such a spring come from?« Niam asked.

»In some places the earth burns underground. That provides the heat.«

»How can earth burn beneath the ground? And why does it?«

Artos laughed and shrugged. »You had better ask a priest versed in the doings of the gods. But be warned: their explanations are seldom convincing. Why does the sand of the Black-sand Wastes boil? How do your people explain it?«

»It is said the plain is an ancient battlefield upon which so many souls once burned that the heat can never fade. It remains an eternal warning against cruelty, greed and delusions of grandeur.«

»I like the message,« Artos replied. »Too much greed and cruelty permanently harms the ground upon which everyone lives—victor and vanquished alike.«

»That is precisely what it means,« Niam said, impressed.

»The explanation with burning souls is no more convincing than what our priests might tell you, though.«

Niam laughed. »Perhaps.«

A clatter sounded above them. Both looked up at the rim in alarm, but no one was visible.

»It sounded as though one rider dismounted,« Artos whispered. »I know that sound. Metal armour clattering.«

A moment later, a shadow appeared upon the upper western wall of the pit. It was the shadow of a tall, broad man. He made a gesture with one hand.

»He must be standing directly above us,« Niam whispered as softly as he could. »The sun is behind him.«

Artos tried to judge the distance to the rim. *Thirty or forty paces, certainly.*

Another clatter sounded, and a second, no less imposing shadow joined the first.

»Now that is one truly enormous ... hole,« a voice echoed from the walls.

»You don't say,« replied the first shadow.

»Ever seen a thing like it?«

»No.«

»Any idea why it is here? How it came to be?«

The first shadow hesitated. »I have been doing this shit far too long to wonder at anything. This pit is only one more of the world's many mysteries which we diligently ignore. What does it matter why the thing is here?«

»Did you sleep during the last Darkening?«

»Why?«

»Because your mood is bloody foul again.«

»Nothing to do with sleep. It is habit.«

Now the second shadow hesitated. »How fortunate I am that they sent me on this mission with you.«

»Only the consequence of many poor decisions. With your lineage, you could have donned an official's robe. Spend half

the day drafting documents, have others do the dirty work, put your feet up. Does that not sound pleasant?«

»The more often I speak with you, the better it sounds.«

»Believe me, I too can imagine better things than searching for the lad here in the middle of nowhere.«

The second shadow laughed. »Such as annoying people in some tavern with your pessimism?«

»Only if they want to hear it.«

»So what do we do? I see no boy in the pit.«

»The clefts everywhere here seem to open into the shaft below ground,« said the first shadow, pointing down. »He may be hiding in one of these tunnels.«

»There are rather a lot. Do you truly want to search them all? The men would be occupied all day, perhaps two.«

»No. We do not even know for certain that he was here. Old Menthalemm was never very reliable, even in his good years. Sometimes I think he uses the eagle only to catch rats.«

»We had better not return without the boy,« the second shadow said harshly.

»What is the boy going to do? Overthrow the king? This is the madness one gets when the grey robes take the helm. We are hunting ghosts, I tell you.«

»Orders are orders.«

»You don't say.«

»Well?«

The first shadow again took his time. »Did you ever hunt with your father?«

»There is nothing to hunt in Trermouth. Why?«

»I was stationed at Morga's Fist for several skytides. I could hunt along the Saabe as far as Splintercrest.«

»That is on the other side of the Elendar, by Twilight Wood, isn't it?« the other interrupted.

»Correct. One learns much about hunting there, for the animals are cunning. Follow a trail blindly and you catch nothing.

You merely become the quarry yourself, or tumble into some hole.«

»Come to the point.«

»The point is that one can predict with fair certainty where prey will be. All animals need water, food and shelter. But those resources are contested everywhere and therefore very limited.«

»Good. And how do you know where we should lie in wait for him?«

»A good official was truly lost in you, given how seldom you think anything through,« the first shadow replied disdainfully.

»Oh, forgive me for not spending skytides dealing with scum in the kingdom's furthest corners. Not everyone had so fulfilling a life as yours.«

The first shadow folded his arms.

»Please, enlighten me. Otherwise I shall sweat to death here and the others may enjoy your company alone.«

»We know he came through Velor's Pass into the Drift and left it towards the Hammermark. But he did not stop there. The fire and tracks showed that he continued west. So he is somewhere nearby.«

»And?«

»From here he might go north into the mountains, but worse criminals than those of the Grimshadow dwell there. He may not know it, but his mysterious companion probably does. To the south he would eventually meet our troops, and until then there is nowhere to hide, much less live for long. That leaves west. And what lies there?«

»Bruck?«

»Bravo. You have looked at a map, then. From his perspective, Bruck is the only sensible choice—as I have said all along.«

The second shadow groaned loudly. »Very well. Let us ride to Bruck and wait there.«

»Call the soldiers together and have them mount before someone falls into one of these clefts.«

The two shadows vanished from the wall and the sounds slowly faded.

Artos's heart pounded in his throat. »Damn,« he whispered. »What do we do now?«

»Go to Bruck,« Niam replied dryly.

»Did you not hear what the man said?«

»I heard him very clearly. But he was right: Bruck is your only chance. Look on the bright side. At least we now know they are waiting for us there. I always thought that a likely prospect anyway.«

Artos rose. »I wish I had your nerves.«

»It has nothing to do with my nerves. I have more to lose than you, if you recall. I simply do not drive myself mad over things I cannot affect. Be patient. Let events come to you and shape them when they arrive. We now know what awaits us. That is worth much.«

»A true child of the desert,« Artos replied, and walked back into the tunnel.

THE PRICE OF FREEDOM

They had left the strange pit behind and had met no one for a day. Despite the bleak prospect of further trouble at Bruck, the road did them good. Their legs recovered, and with every mile the heat grew more bearable.

Artos used the quiet to let his thoughts wander. Everything he had experienced still felt unreal: all the adventures he had not sought, but which had found him; all the dangers that had so nearly ended his young life. And yet he was here, alive and well. He knew he himself had contributed little to that good fortune. On the contrary, he felt like fate's plaything, though fate never seemed certain what it meant to do with him. Like a child beside the hearth, undecided whether his brother's toy was worth the brief flare. Even so, he felt grateful to have survived.

»Quiet today,« Niam said.

»Do you ever wonder why we cling so fiercely to life? Why, despite every hardship, we remain grateful for our existence? It is strange.«

Niam laughed. »No, but then I am a father.«

»One might think we owe gratitude merely for our souls being permitted to dwell in this world—knowing all the suffering that comes with it. Why?«

»Rather philosophical questions for a sculptor,« Niam replied.

»Forgive me. I am only trying to understand how—or why—I survived all this.«

»I can answer the *how*,« Niam said with a smile. »He is walking beside you.«

»And for that I am deeply grateful. But why help me at the risk of your life when your wife and child await you at home?«

»You have asked before, and my answer will again—«

»Yes, because your father had an inkling, or because he is simply a good man. I know,« Artos interrupted. »But where does that fundamental trust come from, that everything will prove worthwhile?«

Niam took his time. »Believe me, each day costs me an effort to continue. But what else can I do? For my people, that trust, as you call it, is all we have. We must wager upon chances such as this. When your people hold back part of the harvest for the next sowing instead of eating it, the next harvest may still fail. Yet they do so because usually it does not, and the small sacrifice is repaid.«

»The sacrifice in our undertaking is no amphora of grain in the worst case,« Artos replied. »And a poor harvest is far less likely than our failure.«

»Perhaps,« said Niam with a shrug. »Every people must work with the chances it has.«

»You remind me of my mother. She too always took everything as it came.«

»Must have been a wise woman.«

Artos laughed. »She truly was. Wiser than most. She taught me much and owned more books than all our neighbours together. I could read and write before I could hold a hammer. Yet she always encouraged my love of craft instead of urging me towards some office. That is why I became a sculptor.«

»Does she still live?«

Regret briefly touched Artos's face. »No. She died of a terrible fever two skytides ago, like so many at present.«

»I am sorry,« Niam said. »But be grateful for the time you had with her.«

»Not enough time, if you ask me.«

»And your father?«

Artos laughed bitterly. »He vanished before I was born.«

»Regrettable. No child should grow up without his father.«

»You are quite right,« Artos replied, looking ruefully at his companion. »So let us be careful.«

They spent the rest of the day on lighter subjects. When the Darkening came, they made their small camp one final time. They sat beside a withered bush and used their two spears to stretch the net above them.

Their food was gone, though they did not truly regret it. »When we reach the Elendar, I shall show you how to fish in water,« Artos said eagerly.

»Gladly,« Niam replied. »But first we should plan how best to approach the river.«

»I have thought about that too,« Artos said, reluctantly pushing aside the thought of fried trout. »The official crossings—those rope ferries—will certainly be watched by the knights.«

»We must assume so. I suggest we approach the river a little north of Bruck. There are said to be large rock formations which may offer cover. Can you climb?«

»A little. So long as you do not mean sheer cliffs, it should be fine.«

Niam nodded. »Good. Tomorrow we go straight west and should reach the river a few miles above Bruck. We shall see from there.«

»Sounds good.« Artos removed the cloth from his neck, crumpled it beneath his head and tried to make himself comfortable. »I wish we were there already,« he said wearily, and soon fell asleep.

The next morning they set out early and, as agreed, walked due west. Only a few miles remained before they reached the El-

endar. Low rises on the horizon probably belonged to the promised rock formations. The country also grew greener, though not a tree could be seen. Nothing offered cover, and so their gazes turned ever more often to the sky.

»I am surprised the eagle has not returned,« Artos said.

»It is all somewhat too peaceful,« Niam replied thoughtfully. »Near a city as large as Bruck, I expected more activity, even away from the roads.«

»As large? How large do you think Bruck is?«

»I have no idea, but surely as large as one of the cities in Southcrest.«

»I seriously doubt it,« Artos replied. »From all I have heard, Bruck is more of a town—and one full of dubious characters, many of them criminals.«

»The same is surely said of us. To southerners, every stranger is a criminal.«

Artos shrugged. »Let us hope the people of Bruck are better than their reputation.«

»It is enough if they are better than those hunting you.«

»True. How will you return home after taking me to Bruck? Is the road not too dangerous alone?«

»First I must take on provisions and rest a few days. Then I shall take the route we originally intended: north along the Ring Wall, away from Nyvil's settlements. Once I reach the desert, I shall be safe.«

»Looking forward to seeing your family?«

»You can wager on it,« Niam replied with unusual force.

»Please thank your father again for me. I hope he was not punished on my account.«

»He certainly was, but probably not severely. He has done much good for the Black Maar and is held in high esteem. They will consider that.«

»I wish I could repay it one day.«

»You can repay it every day by making something worthwhile of your life,« Niam said.

»I shall,« Artos promised. His thoughts turned ever more often to their near destination. He tried to imagine what awaited him in Bruck. The vague prospect of a fairly untroubled life among hopefully civilised people appealed to him. Yet despite all its dangers, he had come to value the wilderness. There, life was reduced to essentials; the ordinary problems of town life faded into insignificance. One felt alive and gained confidence from every danger overcome.

After roughly half a day's march, they reached the rock formations. They proved to be gigantic grey monoliths, about as broad as they were high. They varied in size and all stood upon green hills far better suited to the surrounding landscape than their grey occupants.

»Through or around?« Niam asked, more of himself than Artos.

»Through, for now,« Artos replied, pointing to a way between two monoliths. The smaller leaned with its upper edge against the larger.

»Good,« said Niam, and led on.

They walked silently among the strange grey forms. Whenever they passed through one opening, new passages appeared between other monoliths. The roar of the river grew steadily louder and guided them. After perhaps the eighth or ninth passage, the view finally opened upon the Elendar and left them staring.

»The river is enormous,« Artos said, stunned. »And the current is like a waterfall.«

Niam too could not hide his amazement. He had never seen a true river, and this surpassed even his boldest imagining. »The rocks here by the bank form strange steps,« he said when at last he could tear his eyes from the blue waters. »They remind me of the white steps in the cleft.«

Artos looked along the bank and understood at once. »Stone was quarried here. This is not natural; men did it.« Farther away he saw what the stone had built. Several miles off, in the middle of the river, a vast cliff rose as the northern cape of Bruck's island. Upon it stood a gigantic building, though only its upper half was visible. A wondrous dome gleaming in many colours crowned a foundation of the same grey stone. Artos knew at once it was stained glass, like the panes he had once had in his studio. To strangers, that mystical coloured shimmer must seem a hopeful promise, an invitation to a better world.

»Now that is something,« Niam said when he too discovered the dome. »We can use the steps to climb higher, then move towards the island from there. We shall see more from above.«

Without looking away, Artos said, »Very well.«

»Come on. The day is not growing younger,« Niam called, cheerfully climbing the chest-high steps.

»All right. You are in haste.«

»Remember who expects us here. We should keep moving.«

Soon they stood atop the roughly forty-pace monolith. From there they could follow the river from rock to rock, for small iron bridges linked the monoliths along the quarry. Artos guessed that the workers had used them to reach their current workings without risking the violent current at the bank.

Bruck came steadily into clearer view. They could now see that it was a densely built city, large enough indeed to rival some towns along the Victoryvein. Most houses were plain in form, but built of handsome pale stone. The whole island could also be seen: the Elendar divided at the northern cape and flowed around both sides. In the river's left arm lay a smaller island which must once have broken from the main one.

»The rocks seem to end ahead,« Niam said after they had crossed eight or nine monoliths. He went on and stopped at the next edge. There was no further bridge or rock, only steps descending again to the riverbank.

Artos crouched beside him. »The first ferry ropes seem to be over there,« he said, pointing to strange buildings about three miles away. »But we cannot see who is there.«

»We must get closer. The whole way offers no cover. We might keep by the bank among the rubble, but if we slip, that is the end.«

»If need be, we swim swiftly back to shore and hold on somewhere,« Artos replied.

»I cannot swim.«

»Oh. But is the Black Maar not a lake?«

»Yes, but swimming there is forbidden. Only a handful of rituals permit us briefly near the water, and only where it is shallow. Are you a strong swimmer?«

»As a child, I was forever swimming in the river. What dune sand is to you, the Victoryvein's water is to me.«

Niam regarded the Elendar sceptically. »Could you swim across it? It looks dangerous.«

»No. The current is far too strong. Reaching the far bank would be a miracle. Perhaps one might reach that little island, but even that I doubt.«

»Then we must be especially careful,« Niam said, descending the first step.

He has some nerve, Artos thought, following close behind.

The great river had carved a notch into the land. The bank resembled an earthen wall ten feet high, revealing all manner of secrets in the soil. In places it was almost level where sand and earth had slipped into the river. Elsewhere great rocks jutted from the ground and had to be climbed. The young men advanced only slowly, but without mishap.

After a good hour they risked a look. A great rock blocked the way ahead, so they carefully climbed the bank and crawled onto it. To their right the Elendar roared so loudly they could scarcely have spoken. They were near enough, however, for each to see. A stone's throw ahead stood the first building from which a rope stretched across the river. It resembled a boat-

house, half built upon the water, but an arm-thick rope fixed to its roof ran towards Bruck.

No one there, Artos thought in surprise. Before he could rejoice, the door opened. Six men emerged, apparently arguing from the movements of their arms. Three wore blue linen beneath simple armour. Artos knew at once they were Morgathalian soldiers. Two others wore thick brown clothing and strange hats, and plainly were not pleased by the soldiers' visit. The last looked almost like a vagrant, in worn, dirty clothes. Yet somehow he seemed familiar.

Niam nudged Artos and nodded eastwards. A shadow crossed the sun.

Mentauri, Artos cursed inwardly. Moments later the splendid eagle began its glide towards the men. The two in brown retreated into the building, while the vagrant ran towards the eagle with one arm outstretched. The bird landed gently and folded its wings. Then Artos understood. *That is the Remaining from the tavern in Ninepasses*. Before he could ponder the strange coincidence, events overtook them.

»They are here!« an old man's voice shouted behind them.

Artos and Niam spun around and stared into the face of a stately knight. It had to be the man who had searched for them at the great pit. He wore magnificent armour, though scratched and dented. Between its many plates showed the blue of the Warrior Elite, and beneath that lay mountains of hardened muscle. One might have believed him capable of killing a pack of Tattle-Tatters bare-handed.

Niam sprang up and seized his Song. The knight did not even trouble to draw his sword, but raised his hands in amusement. Niam wasted no time and attacked. Surprise flashed across the knight's face; then he lowered his hands and took his stance.

Niam thrust straight for his throat. The knight deftly evaded him, caught the spear, tore it from Niam's hands and hurled it into the Elendar. Niam watched his Song go in shock. Rage and bitterness surged through him and he attacked bare-fisted. He

met only a blow like an ox's kick. Blood sprayed from his nose and he struck the rock hard.

Artos had broken from his paralysis and risen. He held the makeshift spear Niam had fashioned for him.

The knight merely smiled wearily at the *weapon* and walked towards him. »Do not be afraid,« he shouted over the roar. »We ... ensure that you ...«

Artos could scarcely hear. »Ensure what?« he shouted back.

The man had almost reached him when Niam rose and placed himself between them. Blood covered his face, but his gaze held pure resolve. »I know what you do to people like us. Davard's butchers, Davard's torturers,« he shouted furiously. »You will not do it to him.« He turned to Artos, looked deep into his eyes and said, »Make the best of your rotten chances, as always.« Then he gave him a mighty shove. Artos fell screaming from the rock and vanished into the raging waters of the Elendar.

»No!« the knight cried angrily and stepped beside Niam to search for him. But Artos was nowhere to be seen.

Niam turned, ready to run for his life, but the soldiers had already surrounded him. They rushed in, seized him and forced him down. Niam struggled, but had no chance. He lay face-down upon the cold rock and saw only their boots. Moments later another pair arrived, likely a knight's.

»What happened?« asked a young man's voice.

»He pushed the boy into the river,« the old knight replied dejectedly.

»Can he survive?«

»No.«

»Regam will not like that at all.«

»You don't say,« the old man answered and walked away. Then he turned and called, »Bind him. We are taking him to Castle Nanstein.«

AMONG ROYALISTS

Niam found himself in a gloomy room, his feet in chains. His back, thighs and buttocks ached terribly after a long and merciless ride. His captors had put a sack over his head and spoken no more to him throughout the journey. Two hours ago they had led him down several steps and chained him here. They had kindly removed the sack, but that was the end of their courtesies. There was no water, no mat to sit upon and no blanket against the dreadful cold creeping from the damp stone floor into his bones.

Throughout the ride, Niam had gone over the meeting by the river again and again. He wondered how he had overlooked the knight and bitterly blamed himself for leading them both into the trap despite knowing better. The knight's strange reaction also troubled him: he had seemed genuinely horrified when Artos fell. Niam could make no sense of it, while the pain of the endless gallop and the fear that he might never see his family again prevented all clear thought. He could only hope the knight was wrong and Artos had swum back to shore.

Several more hours of misery, cold and darkness passed before the heavy wooden door opened and someone entered. From the silhouette, a large man. He stood in the doorway looking down upon Niam, then took an object from his pocket and stepped inside. Niam's heart nearly stopped, but it proved only a flint with which the man lit two torches beside the entrance. In their glow Niam recognised the knight he had fought. Anger rose within him.

»Calmed down a little, lad?« the knight asked with a smile.

Niam said nothing.

»Shall I return later?«

»What do you want?« Niam hissed.

»Answers.«

»I cannot oblige.«

The knight laughed. »We shall see.«

»Why are you holding me?«

»I ask the questions. Agreed?«

Again Niam remained silent.

»Splendid. Who are you?«

»A man from the north.«

»Name and birthplace?«

Niam merely shrugged.

»Listen, lad. This little dark world you live in now has simple rules. I ask questions and you give answers I like. If you fail, this door closes behind me for ever. You will die of thirst or cold—cold, judging by you. So again: who are you?«

»My name is Niam.«

»A pleasure, Niam. My friends call me Ano. You may too.«

Niam frowned sceptically. He could not imagine this curmudgeon had many friends.

»How did you know Artos?« Ano asked abruptly.

»I found him in the desert near Dourstedt. He was nearly dead of thirst and fleeing something. I helped him survive.«

»How was he dressed?«

»Like a southern soldier. In blue,« Niam answered hesitantly.

»And you are from Nyvil?«

»Yes.«

Ano folded his arms. »Since when do Nyvilans aid soldiers of the Warrior Elite?«

»He did not seem a soldier.«

»He was not. He was a fugitive servant from Morgathal. Did you know?«

»He told me he was a sculptor from Ninepasses.«

Ano smiled. »Where exactly are you from?«

»A small village in the Ring Wall,« Niam lied.

»I did not know there were villages there. Only bandit camps.«

»There are well-hidden villages. We have nothing to do with bandits and avoid them.«

Ano studied him. The linen robe from Velor's Pass was now so torn that the scaled clothing beneath showed clearly. »Interesting clothes. What are they made of, and where?«

»Nothing special. Lizard leather.«

»I can leave again if you prefer,« Ano replied sourly. »I am decidedly too old to spend my remaining time on lies and half-truths.«

»There is no more I can say. We make and use it in the desert. The leather protects against sand and sun.«

»And your spear—the thing with which you tried to kill me? Can such fine weapons be bought in your secret mountain village?«

At the thought of his Song, Niam's anger returned. »No. You must forge your own,« he answered defiantly.

»So you are a smith?«

»In a way,« Niam said ruefully.

»The spear mattered to you. You should have trained with it.«

»I had not yet had the chance.«

»You don't say,« the old knight replied, amused. »Where is your village?«

»I cannot tell you.«

»Still do not understand what is at stake?«

»I understand precisely. That is why I answer only what I can.«

The knight left, but to Niam's relief soon returned with a chair. He placed it before Niam and sat. »My back.« Then he looked deeply into Niam's eyes. »I have met many strange figures, from green goblins to black forest people, but never one

like you: dressed in lizard skin and armed with masterful smith-work. We shall save that for later. Why did you help Artos?»

»Because my father wished it.«

Ano breathed deeply. His look promised little good.

»My father hoped for information from Artos,« Niam quickly added. »He is greatly interested in news from afar, that is all. But we would have helped him anyway. We are not monsters.«

»Why accompany him to Bruck?«

»Knights were pursuing him. Two nearly found us, so we had to move Artos and lay another trail elsewhere.«

»Why not hand him over?«

Niam hesitated. »He might have betrayed our village. We did not know whether to trust him. And once we knew he was no soldier, we would not simply sacrifice him. He believed the knights meant to kill him.«

»Very noble. Why push him into the Elendar?«

»To save him from you,« Niam replied indignantly. »I have seen what knights do. He had better chances in the river.«

Ano shook his head. »I doubt that.«

»How do you live with yourselves? Hounding an innocent young man across half Isdraia because some genealogist made a ridiculous guess? Have you no other problems in this kingdom?«

»So he told you what drove him to flee,« Ano said thoughtfully. After a long moment he rose with a groan and placed the chair beside Niam. »You may sit.«

Niam could not make sense of him. He seemed a man tired of life who nevertheless continued for some reason. Fearless and ruthless, yet not indifferent to everything, however hard he tried to appear so.

»One last question,« Ano said suddenly. »Were those two knights you mentioned of the Fifth?«

»The Fifth?« Niam asked, confused.

»Were their suits flawless, fitting like a second skin?«

»Yes.«

»I thought so. Who killed them?«

Niam wondered how Ano knew. »You would not believe me.«

»You?« the old man asked, bursting into laughter. »They deserved it. Killed by a boy.« Still laughing, he left. At the door he turned. »I shall have food, water and a blanket brought. Perhaps we shall meet again, Niam, Bane of the Fifth.«

Ano crossed the courtyard and entered the lord's hall without hesitation. A servant at the inner door announced, »High Knight Anord of Ruhmscheid.«

»Spare me the nonsense,« Ano said, walking to the great table at the far end. Lord Regam sat at its head, bent over parchments.

»We are waiting for Holad. Sit.«

Ano obeyed. »Let us hope the birdman is punctual and washed for once.«

Before he finished, the servant announced, »Menthalemm Holad, today thankfully without his Mentaure.«

Ano watched the frail old man shuffle calmly towards them. He was indeed washed and even newly clothed.

»Lord Regam. Knight Anord,« Holad said simply, dropping into a chair. »What is it?«

»Ano has questioned our newest guest,« Lord Regam replied without looking up. »I want to fit the pieces together and learn how everything went so terribly wrong. Ano, tell us of the stranger.«

»A northern boy, perhaps twelve or thirteen skytides. Brave, but not the brightest candle in the chandelier. He does not know who we are and takes us for Davard's servants. For his sake I left it so. He is also a dreadful liar, which made matters easy.«

»Where in the north?« Holad asked.

»Supposedly a village in the Ring Wall, but—«

»Plainly nonsense,« Holad interrupted.

»You don't say,« Ano replied. »He would not answer on that matter, but it is secondary. Otherwise his account agrees with all we knew of Artos and his road. One might almost think they were friends.« Ano related the remaining details, fixing Holad with a stare to prevent further interruptions. When he finished, Lord Regam finally looked up.

»He killed the two butchers of the Fifth?« Regam asked in surprise.

»Not without help, I am sure. But yes, I think so.«

»No statue will be dedicated to them,« Holad said with amusement.

»How do we proceed, my lord?« Ano asked. »Without Artos, we have no legitimate claimant to the throne.«

A long, oppressive silence settled over the table. At last Holad said, »I should never have placed the pedigrees in his studio. I knew it was a mistake.«

»We have discussed this,« Lord Regam replied. »The Council decided unanimously. You are not to blame.«

»I should have known he would flee headlong.«

»No one expected him to board a wagon for Karmal. Otherwise we would have caught him again as planned.«

Ano cleared his throat. »The Custodian's visit left us no choice. How could we know it was only a private commission?«

»No one knew whose son he was. Even his father died without knowing Louis carried his child. We should have held our nerve,« Holad said angrily.

»Enough,« Lord Regam cried. »I know the boy mattered to you, Holad. You watched him all his life. But we have other troubles now.«

»My lord, let me go to Bruck and ensure Artos is truly dead. We owe your sister that much.«

Regam plainly disliked this, but after a struggle said, »Very well. Go to Bruck, but remain there. I may need you.« Then he turned to Anord. »You once mentioned involuntary contact with the Fenn north of Morga's Fist. Could you find them again?«

»The black forest people? Yes, if I must. Why?«

»Only an idea. Details later.«

Ano nodded. »What of the boy in the dungeon?«

»Does he have useful information?«

»Nothing he would willingly reveal.«

»And he knows nothing of us?«

»Nothing compromising. He wore a sack throughout the journey.«

Regam nodded thoughtfully. »Then Holad may take him to the banks of Bruck and release him. Keep the sack on until the Pinnacle Blades lie behind you. Once he begins for home, have the Mentaurei follow. I want to know where his strange people live. They may prove useful again.«

»Good,« Holad said, rising. »For the true blue.«

»For the true blue,« the others repeated.

The End