



Felix Nyenhuis

A SILBERHEIM FRAGMENT

A SIGN FROM FATE

BEYOND WORLDS

A SIGN FROM FATE

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

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	The Flight	5
2	On a Secret Mission	11
3	Old Knowledge	30

THE FLIGHT

Mid-skytide 412

Something alien lay in the air; Drok could almost scent it. He had been hunting game south of Fennspring, but now stopped without warning. He pricked up his ears, straightened and let his gaze roam across the trees of the dense forest. There was nothing to see and nothing to hear. Yet something was amiss, of that he was certain, for his instincts never deceived him. A faint unease stirred within him. Carefully he drew his bow and nocked an arrow.

Again he listened into the forest. Nothing. Not even birdsong could be heard. *It is too near the darkening for glimmerwolves*, Drok thought, looking skywards. *And roguebears and bentos do not lie in wait for a man, at least not in an east wind*. Yet the warning signs were unmistakable; even the familiar gooseflesh slowly crept over his skin.

Carefully, without making a sound, he turned. Again nothing. He blinked. *Am I losing my senses? Going mad? Growing too old for this work?* he wondered. He listened inwardly, exploring his feelings. It was like a soundless scratching at the door of his mind, as though something evil sought to enter his thoughts, faint though it was. The Fenn drew a deep breath and swiftly suppressed the sensation. *Do not drive yourself mad*, he urged himself, and cautiously continued on his way.

Drok was held to be the most experienced and successful hunter of the Rawrise. For almost thirty skytides he had roamed the forests around Worldridge. He lured dangerous

animals away from the settlements with bait, hunted game for his small shop and always kept an eye upon the health of the forest. For all the recognition his talents brought him—talents of which he was well aware—he had rejected every opportunity to put them in the service of a greater cause. He had even refused to found a family of his own, which ultimately condemned him to remain Ever-Unbound. His passion was the forest, and he liked that on his wanderings he need care for no one but himself.

After several paces he stopped again. Not far ahead, between two bushes, a large silhouette could be seen. Drok's heart began to race. He knew that coat too well. It was the thick, greasy fur of a stormboar. He was already preparing to flee when he noticed the reddish discolouration. Puzzled, he bent for a stone, sought a suitable escape route and threw it at the animal.

The stone struck, but merely fell to the ground without response. The boar did not stir. Drok knew what this meant, for stormboars always answered a provocation; cunning and the laying of traps were utterly foreign to them. So he approached slowly and with due care. When at last he reached the animal's body, he frowned. The massive creature had plainly fallen prey to another predator. Deep cuts ran along its exposed flank. *What monster has claws so long?* flashed through his mind as he noticed that none of the boar's flesh had been eaten.

His gaze found the corpse's long tusks. They were coated in a viscous black liquid. Thoughtfully, he took several steps back. It dawned upon him that the discovery was meant to tell him something, and he dug furiously through his memories. *Where have you seen that black substance before?* Then understanding struck. He spun around in panic and raced back towards Fennspring.

Never in his life had he run so swiftly. He leapt over roots, rocks and streams, accepted scratches and bruises and granted himself no rest. When the forest finally thinned, the first

screams reached him. They were cries of naked terror and pierced him to the marrow.

Another sprint confirmed his worst fears. Four naked, faintly blue figures were tearing apart a young farmer who had placed himself protectively before a woman frozen several paces behind him. Her scream bore such utter despair that nothing could have been crueller.

Drok drew his bow again and took aim while still running. He chose the Render whose teeth were buried in the man's throat and loosed—but stumbled. With a heavy thud he fell face-first into the tall grass. At once he rolled over to see what had tripped him. It was the body of another farmer, twitching and bleeding, hidden in the grass. Horrified, Drok seized his bow and sprang up.

Too late. Those spawn of death had already fallen upon the woman, who drew her final breath without resistance. Arrow after arrow struck the Render with little effect. Drok was reaching for his last and beginning to fear for his own life when a battle cry rang out and seized the Render's attention.

Several lightly armoured men came rushing over the crest of the meadow. Fortunately, they bore the one weapon that appeared at least somewhat promising against these loathsome beasts: long, pointed spears, which they levelled together at the four creatures.

The monsters abandoned the woman and scattered. Two swept in a broad arc to attack the men's flank, while the others charged head-on. Just before the latter pair reached the deadly spearpoints, they sprang. The men raised their weapons and impaled one in mid-air. The creature behind it, however, was pierced by only the single remaining spear, the only one held back amid the confusion. The Render seemed little troubled by the iron point in its belly and eagerly hauled itself along the shaft towards the bearer.

Drok nocked his final arrow, aimed with care and released the string. Hissing, the missile sped towards the struggle and

tore clean through the Render's throat. Black blood sprayed across the young spearman's face before he fell to the ground with the beast. The arrow had struck him squarely in the chest.

The other men were pulling their weapons from the first attacker when the last two Render came upon them from the side. It was dreadful to watch the remaining half-dozen Fenn fight for their lives. When at last it was over, only three stood. Drained and overcome by unspeakable horror, Drok collapsed and lost consciousness.

»Describe once more exactly where you found the dead stormboar,« said the captain of Fennspring's small barracks.

Drok repeated himself. »South of here, in the Err, halfway to Duskfall. Barely off the road. Simply follow the scavengers.« A sob shook him.

»Did your men not inspect the palisade only recently?« an old woman asked from the background.

The captain turned and nodded. »Yes. Reliable men.«

»Send them again, please,« the old woman replied.

»You heard Garda,« the captain called to a guard, who immediately left the room in obedience.

»By Fendiril, what are these monsters doing so deep within the realm?« Drok asked in a trembling voice.

The captain shrugged helplessly and looked expectantly at Garda.

»That is a question I cannot answer,« the old woman replied. She turned to go and murmured, »Forgive me. I must write several letters.«

»What of the child?« the captain called when she had already reached the door. »Alvin and Senon had a young son. He was with the other children by the cradle-tree when the attack occurred.«

Garda looked back. Deep concern marked her face. »I shall see to it,« she said quietly, and left.

The captain looked again at Drok and studied him closely. The face of the very tall, lanky hunter looked as though it had aged ten skytides since the fight. His eyes were fixed and empty, his brow deeply furrowed and his mouth hung slack. The captain knew that expression and guessed what thoughts lay behind that ghostly look. »You need not blame yourself,« he said carefully. »Your arrow did not alter his fate.«

Drok barely stirred. »I know the man's family. They live only two Lend away and regularly buy game from me,« he whispered in a broken voice. »What am I to tell them?«

»The truth,« the captain said very clearly. »That in a hopeless situation you did your utmost to save their father after all.«

»But I did not do my utmost,« Drok replied, sobbing. »I hesitated too long in the forest and recognised the signs too late. And for a hunter I was far too clumsy in the fight. Had I arrived sooner—«

»Nonsense,« the captain interrupted. »Do not load the guilt of the whole world upon your shoulders. The protection of Fennspring is mine alone to answer for. No one expected Render here in the Rawrise, myself included. The last known encounter with these monsters was somewhere between Kuer and Grazeholt. That was several skytides ago, and a brave officer destroyed every last Render. Otherwise their traces are exceedingly rare and found, if anywhere, only along Duskfringe.«

Drok listened, and something stirred in his eyes again. »Thank you for your words, Captain,« he said without feeling, took up his bow and walked towards the exit.

When the heavy door closed, unease crept over the captain. He scratched his nose and turned towards the great map upon the wall. A moment later he rushed after Drok. »Wait!« he called. »What you intend is pointless and suicidal.«

»I know how to look after myself,« Drok replied.

»Even if you survive every danger of Duskfringe, the Green Brigade will catch you and imprison you in Kuer,« the captain said.

Drok stopped. »Nothing holds me here,« he said sadly. »I have no family, my hut means nothing to me, and another can practise my trade.«

»That is still no reason for a reckless adventure,« the captain said, panting after catching up. But he saw the resolve in the hunter's eyes and knew no words would sway him.

»Only there can I make some amends for my guilt. Only there can I keep such calamity from our people.«

The captain sighed. In some fashion he understood him well. »Remain for nine more darkenings,« he said firmly. »Then a small troop of recruits leaves here to join the Green Brigade. You may accompany them. You are rather old for the forces of Canopy Ward, but with your skills they will find a use for you.«

»Thank you for the offer, Captain, but I mean to hunt Render, not gather herbs.«

Laughter sounded. »Only cowards are sent to gather herbs there,« said Garda, approaching along the road with a small, shaken boy by the hand. »Join the recruits if grief drives you afar. I shall give you a letter for the commander. She will employ you to your taste.«

Drok hesitated, then nodded in agreement. Like everyone, he knew the old wise woman could be trusted—and if need be, he could probably still begin the hunt on his own. »I shall pack my things. Make whatever use you wish of my hut. I no longer need it.«

Garda showed a rare smile. »I know a family who could make good use of it,« she said, looking down at the little boy. »They have a son about Miko's age.«

ON A SECRET MISSION

Late skytide 420

»Sir,« said a voice. »Sir, we should leave.«

Drok started awake and rubbed his eyes. Fragments of dreadful dreams flew through his thoughts and held him a moment longer. Sleepily he looked around. In the entrance of his purple tent stood one of the twenty Green Brigadiers under his command for this mission. »Thank you, Embra,« Drok replied softly. »Have the camp struck, please.«

»At once, sir,« Embra answered, and vanished.

Weakly Drok rose. The brief rest had not brought the hoped-for relief. Too heavily upon him lay fear of the risks ahead. He did not fear for his own life, but for the men and women accompanying him. He was an old man with nothing left to lose. Yet the busy Fenn outside the tent were young and had many skytides before them. All belonged to the Wildseer branch, which meant little experience of battle; the light pieces of metal armour they had exceptionally donned would not change that. »Enough,« he told himself, reaching for his sword and venom-green shield.

»The crates still have to go onto that cart. And take down those damned tents,« Embra shouted as Drok emerged. »Hurry, unless you mean to take root here.«

Drok looked over the faces of his followers. He saw fear, nervousness and incomprehension. *No wonder, he thought. For many this must be their first undertaking north of the Eimh.*

To the Fenn, the region north of the Eimh—called the Spearhills—was an abomination. The Green Brigadiers knew the forest of Duskfringe like the backs of their hands, but the forests, plains and mountains of the Spearhills were largely unexplored. Its dangers were beyond counting. Little was known of the hunting grounds of wild beasts, and almost nothing of the paths and hiding places of the goblins who increasingly made mischief there.

»Embra, once the loading is finished, assemble everyone. A speech seems fitting.«

»Gladly, sir,« Embra replied. He too looked in urgent need of a few encouraging words.

It was his sense of responsibility that allowed Drok to ignore his own cares and fears. He too felt the shadow lurking between the trees: an evil foreboding, as though they were constantly watched. He walked past the carts and took his place at the edge of the clearing. Only with effort did he stand straight, preserving an appearance of authority and resolve.

»Form ranks!« rang over the heads of the Fenn. Without hesitation the Green Brigadiers lined up before the gaunt man.

»Thank you, Embra,« Drok began. »Brothers and sisters, I know your worries and doubts. For most, this is surely your first mission north of the river. But remember your courage. Every one of you volunteered for this task. Every one knows the dangers of our undertaking. And yet you are here. For you also know the importance of our duty and what it means for our people's safety. Know that I am proud of you, and have seldom stood among Fenn so brave. A few goblins will no more stop us than roguebears, glimmerwolves, bentos or tales of ghosts. Stand together, keep your eyes open and your blades sharp. Then before long we shall drink a well-earned penja liqueur together in Canopy Ward. Treetops at Your Back.«

»Treetops at Your Back,« the company repeated before scattering to finish the remaining work.

I shall be glad when this misery lies behind us, Drok thought when he saw that his speech had done little to improve the troop's mood. He had not expected much more. He did not himself know the precise purpose of their mission. That it protected the realm was a phrase borrowed from Commander Lulluh. How leaving crates of material in goblin country was meant to help the realm remained a mystery even to him. Among his followers, however, several theories circulated and were readily shared around the campfire.

The most popular held that these crates of foreign and valuable wares were meant to sow discord among the goblins. Little was known of those small, cruel creatures, but they were divided into tribes which—especially in the Spearhills—readily warred among themselves. So long as they fought over the spoils, they would not cross the Eimh. That, at any rate, was the hope. Another, less popular theory claimed the crates were tribute or gifts and that Lulluh was secretly seeking contact with the goblins. This bold suggestion was fiercely disputed. Many Fenn did not believe goblins possessed anything resembling language, let alone an understanding of diplomacy.

»We are ready to march,« said Belina, who had approached Drok with two other Green Brigadiers.

»Good,« Drok said, searching for Embra. But Belina had already found him and beckoned him over. Drok nodded gratefully to the brunette Wildseer and raised his hand to give the marching order. »We have no time to lose. Let us go.«

Several Fenn hurriedly loaded the last crates and barrels onto the carts and pulled them onto the eastward road. The carts were wretched labour. To keep them from sinking into the damp forest soil whenever they rested, the entire load had to be removed and then replaced before departure. Nor were there oxen or other beasts of burden to draw them. Deep in the forest, away from paved roads, such animals caused more trouble than aid. More than once an ox had bolted at the scent

of a predator. So the Green Brigadiers had to pull the carts themselves, which they thoroughly resented.

They followed the Eimh. On the horizon stood the mighty Thorn, casting its shadow over the forest to their right. The steady clatter of cartwheels and the rushing water formed a monotonous rhythm for their equally monotonous march. Drok and Embra walked at the head of the convoy, while Belina and two other Wildseers formed the rearguard.

»Belina, what do you think?« one Wildseer suddenly asked. »Why are we taking these crates east?«

»Oh, Krimo, spare me your wild theories,« Belina replied harshly. »Have a little faith in our commander. That is all you need.«

»I do, believe me. But surely no one can fault a little curiosity. We are the ones risking our lives for this strange mission.«

»North of the Eimh, curiosity is the swiftest road to the grave. Follow your orders, talk less and remain vigilant, and you risk nothing at all,« Belina replied.

The other Wildseer behind them cast Krimo a furtive look which plainly said, *I told you not to ask*.

But Krimo had no intention of abandoning the conversation. »I think we are poisoning the goblins with whatever is in these crates and barrels. Not one of the swift poisons, though. They will not even know what is slowly killing them. My cousin keeps a little shop in the great Fallen Redbark in Kuer, where he—«

»Where he sells potions, mushrooms and other occult rubbish?« Belina interrupted. »Just like you to let an oldfaith fill your head with such nonsense.«

The other Wildseer laughed.

»What has that to do with belief?« Krimo replied, visibly wounded. »Poisons are poisons, and my cousin says some

kill so late that no one can connect them to the source of the harm.«

»And how would you know that goblins died of a poison we supplied? Do you know any who seize our crates and barrels? Do you know any goblins at all?«

Again the other Wildseer laughed. »I know one,« he said, pointing spitefully at Krimo.

»Shut your mouth, Eless,« Krimo and Belina said together.

»Of course I do not know any goblin personally,« Krimo replied. »But my cousin knows someone who—«

Belina had had enough. She quickened her pace and slipped past the carts to the head of the convoy.

»How are matters at the rear, Belina?« Drok asked when he noticed her. »Anything unusual?«

»Unusual, yes. Nothing to trouble us.«

Drok was briefly confused, but then saw who walked at the end and smiled. »It is time to exchange positions in any case.« He glanced at Embra, who knew at once what was required.

»All halt,« he called. »Change at the carts. The others take their turn again.«

Two kinds of groaning passed through the company: relief from some, dismay from those who now had to pull the heavy carts.

»I shall take the rearguard for a while,« Embra said, making his way to the end of the line.

Belina watched him gratefully, then at Drok's signal gave the order to march.

»Was he babbling about poisons again?« Drok asked once the troop moved.

Belina's surprise showed. »How do you know what the ordinary Brigadiers whisper about?«

»I do not know every tale that is told,« Drok replied wearily. »But I know my troop and all their peculiarities. Often, one need only look closely.«

Belina nodded thoughtfully, but did not dare ask further.

»If you wish to know for certain with Krimo, test it yourself. Have you ever offered him anything to drink?«

Confused, Belina shook her head. »No. Why should I? We all carry our own flasks.«

»During the last darkening, when we waited at the Oathward in Kuer for Beltim's men to deliver these wares«—Drok indicated the carts—»several of the men slipped away to the Wall-tankard, remember?«

Belina did. The Walltankard was a small soldiers' tavern built into the city wall, still within sight of the great gate. »Yes. You allowed it.«

»I did, but that is not the point. Good Krimo stood at the tables too, yet unlike the others drank none of the many delights. They even had fresh penja juice from Fennspring—so shortly before the skytide, a rarity. But Krimo drank only from his own flask and refused every offer from his comrades.«

»I did not notice,« Belina replied as understanding dawned. »You mean Krimo fears being poisoned? Does he have enemies?«

Drok laughed. »Enemies? No. He is a simple Green Brigadier. What enemies should he have? He merely has a mortal fear of poison. I do not know whence comes that pitiable habit.«

Belina went over all her encounters with Krimo, trying to recall ever seeing him drink from any vessel but his own. *Drok observed that well*, she thought, still surprised by her leader's unexpectedly precise conclusion.

»We all have our fears,« Drok said quietly. »We must not let them rule us, or we shall never become the Fenn we need to be to master all this world's trials.«

Belina frowned. She had no particular fears herself, but thought she understood. »At any rate, Krimo believes we are delivering poisoned wares to the goblins,« she suddenly blurted. »Rather far-fetched, is it not?«

»Compared with other theories I have heard, not especially,« Drok replied. »If it came from anyone but Krimo, it might even

merit some speculation around the campfire. Be that as it may. You Fenn from Wardvale are far too curious. At Worldridge there would be no room for such theories and speculations amid all the work. One might hear such wild tales at one of the few feasts in the village elders' tent, and only after a great deal of penja liqueur had flowed.«

Belina actually came from Midmeander, but did not care to contradict him, still less revive the ancient rivalries between the Fenn regions. She let it pass and changed the subject. »Do you think we shall reach our destination by the next darkening?«

Drok looked towards the distant Thorn, beside which sun and moon stood a little apart. He raised an arm, spread his fingers and covered both heavenly bodies with his hand. »Not this time, I think. We left far too late and are making poorer progress than we should.« He turned and looked into the exhausted faces of his troop. »We must rest again at the next darkening, but then it will not be far.«

The next several thousand paces passed in silence and without incident. Now and again a loud curse split the air when a cartwheel lodged between stones or became tangled in roots. Embra hurried to help and scolded the offender for making such noise far from safe walls.

When the moon almost touched the sun upon the horizon, an Wildseer from the vanguard sprang from the forest before Drok and Belina. »Sir, stop the convoy at once,« he called, quite out of breath.

Drok raised his arm and roared, »Halt.« Again two kinds of groaning passed through the company; they evidently thought it time for another change. »What have you to report?« Drok asked swiftly.

»A large group of strangers is camped less than twenty Lend ahead.«

For a moment the image of Render came to Drok, but then he remembered that Render did not make camps, and his Wildseer would scarcely have returned if he had discovered them. »Remember your training,« he said irritably. »Report properly.«

»Yes, sir. Makeshift camp twenty Lend ahead, raised for a short rest. No tents or shelters visible, only several small fire pits. Strangers are short and heavily armoured, probably goblins of some kind. Exact number unknown, certainly more than thirty.«

»Probably goblins of some kind?« Drok asked. »You have seen goblins before?«

»Yes. I have observed small passing bands from afar. They are certainly goblins, but this troop is different. These goblins are either very well fed or very heavily armoured.«

A whisper passed down the line of carts and Wildseers. Unease spread. A man at the first cart forgot himself and called, »Perhaps it is an unknown northern tribe that heard of our deliveries and wants its share. Sowing discord works, only this time at our expense.«

»I told you there was something to my theory,« another man called from farther back.

»Quiet,« shouted Embra as he hurried from the end of the convoy. »What is it, sir?«

»Strangers ahead. We know little more.« Drok turned back to the reporting Wildseer. »Where is your companion?« he asked, remembering that two had been assigned to the vanguard. The question answered itself when rustling announced the missing man's arrival.

»They are moving. Breaking camp,« he called. »I watched as long as I could.«

»Which way? Towards us?« Drok asked.

»I do not know, sir,« the man panted.

Unease rose in Drok. He had to decide quickly. More than once he had read the signs too late, acted too late. He would not forgive himself a third failure. Fear stirred, but he crushed

it ruthlessly. *Calm yourself*, a voice in his mind cried. *There is still time to act.*

»Orders, sir?« Embra asked.

Drok turned to the troop. »A larger number of unknown persons has been reported ahead. They may be hostile. We are not equipped for a proper battle, so we shall first turn north and wait.«

A murmur passed through the Green Brigadiers; concern showed plainly upon their faces. »Do we leave the carts?« one Wildseer asked.

»No. They come with us,« Drok replied. He had no desire to explain their lost cargo to his commander, still less to that ill-tempered master-at-arms from Kuer.

»Pulling the carts through the forest will be very difficult, sir,« Embra said quietly. »Progress is nearly impossible even here beside the river.«

»If the strangers follow the river towards us, I do not mean to leave them evidence of our presence,« Drok replied. »We may still abandon the carts and flee. No one can catch true Green Brigadiers in the forest, least of all goblins.«

Embra looked sceptically into the wild, nearly impenetrable forest to their left. »I agree we should leave no sign, nor abandon our mission too readily. But I suggest we turn back. Less than five Lend behind us I noticed an old path north-west. We would make faster progress and put enough distance between ourselves and the Eimh to avoid the strangers.«

Drok remembered the path. He too had noticed it. He wondered whether they could reach it in time. On closer inspection, the forest to their left did seem almost impassable. »That might work,« he said thoughtfully. »Let us try.«

»Understood. I shall put some speed into the troop.« Embra immediately unleashed a torrent of orders.

The carts were turned where they stood and hauled westwards in great haste. Embra darted among the Fenn, lending aid wherever a wheel became stuck. They covered the short

distance surprisingly quickly and found the well-hidden turn. The path was difficult to make out and vanished north-west into the deep forest, but it was broad enough for the carts and easier than the way along the river.

As the carts were drawn onto the path one by one, Drok watched the river closely. No one had appeared. »Belina, you and the other two form the rearguard again. Wait here a moment, then follow us.«

Krimo and Eless looked anything but eager. Belina felt the same, though not from fear of pursuit. Once the last cart was almost out of sight, they too took the path.

»I tell you, this will end badly,« Krimo hissed when the river could no longer be heard. »I was suspicious when they ordered us to wear the Wardens' armour. That has never happened. Strange, is it not?«

»Be quiet and keep your eyes and ears open,« Belina demanded. »This is no time for discussion.«

Krimo had no intention of stopping. »Eless, you agree with me, do you not? Eless?«

But Eless did not seem to hear. He had stopped and was looking into the treetops.

»Have you seen something?« Belina asked. »What is there?«

»Nothing, I think,« the Fenn replied hesitantly. »I thought I saw a shadow in the sky.«

Belina raised her eyebrows. »So what? Perhaps it was an Arak. They are harmless.«

At the word *Arak*, Eless flinched.

»He is terrified of Araks,« Krimo put in. »One seized him when he was a child, but let him go at once. You are no fish, even if you are just as stupid and silent. Right, Eless?«

Eless was plainly in no mood for coarse jests. He ignored his friend and slowly began moving again.

What did I do to deserve this? Belina wondered as it dawned on her that neither companion was quite right in the head.

»The troop is exhausted. Do you think we have put enough distance between us and the Eimh, sir?« Embra asked, breathing heavily.

It had grown quite dark by then, and there was no sight or sound of pursuers.

Drok nodded and turned towards the sun, which had almost entirely vanished behind the moon. »I think we have covered more than enough ground. Yes, we should rest here. The darkening forces us to in any case. Afterwards, we shall find our bearings anew.«

»Everyone, halt!« Embra called as quietly as he could. »We stay here until the darkening ends. You two from the vanguard, take up watch five Lend back along the path. The rest of you secure the carts; at least get the heaviest crates down for me, but leave the barrels aboard. The ground is firm enough here.«

Relief swept through the company. The men and women unloaded the carts and laid down their equipment.

»Belina, you and the other two, please gather some firewood. We can risk a small fire in that hollow ahead, enough to brew some tea at least,« Embra said when the rearguard had caught up with them. »But keep to the north!«

»Of course,« Belina replied wearily. »Come on, you two!«

They hurried, for the dwindling light made it increasingly difficult to find suitable twigs and branches among the roots and rocks away from the path. The few remaining rays of sunlight seemed like slender threads, reaching desperately for one last touch of the pale trunks of the ancient trees. Cold slowly rose from the earth and worked its way into the Fenn's bones. The prospect of a small fire became a most enticing thought.

Once they were beyond the others' hearing, Krime said, »I hate tea. Why must I of all people gather the wood for it?«

»We! We have to gather it, you mummy's boy,« Belina cried, thoroughly exasperated.

»The very thought of tea makes me ill. I cannot understand how people can boil up any strange leaves, herbs or fruits they happen upon and drink the stuff.«

»There is nothing strange about them if you buy them from a merchant you trust. They know what they are selling.«

Krimo laughed bitterly. »Yes, of course ...«

»Then drink the poison from your own flask,« Belina snapped, pointing a stick at Krimo's flask.

All colour drained from Krimo's face at once, and Belina regretted the words before they had fully faded. Krimo looked down at himself and stood rigid for several moments. Then he suddenly tore the bottle from his belt, hurled it away in a high arc and was violently sick.

Belina could scarcely believe her eyes and took a few steps towards him.

»Did ... you ... poison ... me?« he stammered between retches.

»Have you lost your mind entirely?« Belina asked. Despite his obvious fear of poison, even she found the reaction rather excessive.

Krimo sank to his knees and began to tremble. »Please, no, please, no!« he whimpered, and was sick again.

A cold shiver ran down Belina's back. Even she, to whom fear was all but unknown, began to feel uneasy. She could not tell whether her companion was merely overreacting or whether something truly serious was wrong with him. She turned to Eless for help. »Does this happen often?« she asked uncertainly. But Eless was no longer there. Confused, she looked around and at last found him a few paces away, crouched at the root of a great tree. »Are you all right, Eless?«

»There!« the young Fenn cried, pointing into the sky.

Now he is starting as well, Belina thought, though she searched the treetops and the sky to be safe. »There is nothing there! You are surely only seeing shadows again. Come with me; I need your help.«

But Eless merely screamed, threw his arms over his head and crawled closer to the trunk.

»By Fendiril,« she gasped. »I am fetching the others. You had better not be having me on!«

She hurried southwards, back towards the camp. Her thoughts tumbled over one another. She desperately hoped the pair were only playing a cruel trick on her, one they would of course come to regret bitterly. Yet something told her it was serious, and fear took an ever firmer hold. It was like an evil, dark, shapeless foreboding that kept growing and threatened to swallow her otherwise steadfast nature. She quickened her pace.

»Sir, something is wrong with the troop,« Embra whispered.

Drok looked up. He had not heard Embra approach and had been utterly lost in thought. Once more he was plagued by the fear that he would fail in his duties, that he could not protect those under his command, and that he would not make important decisions in time. But it had not been this bad in a very long while.

»Sir, do you hear me? Some of the Wildseers are babbling nonsense. More nonsense than usual, I mean. One of them has climbed into the treetops as well.«

»What? What is happening?« Drok blurted in dismay.

»You must do something, sir. I have already tried to bring the troop back to its senses, but I failed!« Embra said remorsefully. »I have disappointed you, sir!«

»Do not fear, Embra. You have never disappointed me, nor will you ever,« Drok replied, rising from the crate on which he sat. »I shall see to it.«

He walked a few paces and searched the darkness for his Green Brigadiers. When he found them, his astonishment was plain to see. One was indeed sitting high in a tree and even try-

ing to climb higher. Another had built a small rampart from several crates and was hiding behind it. The rest sat on the ground with fear-filled faces, whispering agitatedly. They did not seem to notice him at all.

»We walked straight into their trap! You must believe me,« one of them said.

»Whose trap? The goblins'?« another asked in a brittle voice.

»No, glimmerwolves. I am certain of it!«

»Do not be a fool. They do not hunt during the darkening,« a third replied. »But the hairs on my neck are standing, as they only ever do when a traitor is near!«

»Not this again,« a fourth said in exasperation.

Drok cleared his throat loudly. »What in Fendiril's name and by the honour of our Brigade has got into you?« he cried, aghast. »You there, come down from that tree. Those slender branches will never bear your weight!«

»There is something out there,« someone whispered from behind the wall of crates. »Great yellow eyes. I saw them!«

Drok had to struggle not to lose control and surrender to his fears of failing as a leader. He could not comprehend where this sudden lack of discipline had come from. He drew a deep breath and said, »I know recent events have been rather much for some of you, but there is no cause for panic. We have posted guards, and the goblins do not appear to have followed us either. So calm yourselves!«

But the Fenn would not calm themselves, or could not. The naked fear that was breaking inexorably through threatened to suffocate them all. It was as though something lurked out there in the forest. Something alien, something impossible to name. It was a dreadful feeling that flooded them without mercy and slowly drove them to madness. Drok, too, could no longer withstand its influence.

»And the yellow eyes?« the man behind the crates called now. »I know what I saw! I know how to read the signs!«

Read the signs, echoed through Drok's head. *Read the signs! Read the signs! Read the signs!* Suddenly and without warning, a powerful wave of remorse came over him, dragging his mind into a deep whirlpool of memory, despair and fear. He heard his heartbeat like a loud pounding at a door and briefly closed his eyes from exhaustion. When he opened them again, he found himself in a forest, yet to his astonishment bright sunlight reigned. Screams reached his ears. Terrible screams, full of pain. In the next moment he had already hurried to the forest's edge and was looking out over strangely familiar fields and meadows. In the tall grass, several bluish creatures glided as fish glide through water. They made unerringly for three defenceless farmers who, only a moment before, had been working together in peace. He wanted to help, but discovered in horror that he could not move. His legs would not obey him; he was frozen fast. »No, do not!« he screamed bitterly as the first farmer vanished in a red spray. He wanted to do something, anything, but could not. At last he saw soldiers on the horizon. They drew nearer swiftly and brought a glimmer of hope for the two remaining farmers. »Faster!« Drok shouted, but before the soldiers came within fighting distance, they died one after another to arrows loosed at them. Drok realised it was he who was shooting the arrows. »Stop! Do not! No! Stop! Stop it!« he ordered his hands, utterly appalled, but they too refused to obey him and tirelessly continued their work until the last soldier had fallen dead into the tall grass.

Loud footsteps rang through the darkness towards the group of Wildseers. The Fenn grew still more afraid, but it was only Belina, appearing unexpectedly between the trees.

»Sir,« she called excitedly as she came to a halt. »I need help. Krimo is puking his guts out, and Eless has plainly lost his mind and is seeing shadows in the sky. Someone has to fetch them.«

No one replied. Dumbstruck faces stared at the young woman as though she were some foreign object.

Belina let her gaze pass over her companions. She noticed that one of them was perched dangerously unsteadily in the crown of a tree. Another crouched behind a wall of crates. »What in the world is happening here?« she asked uncertainly.

»Glimmerwolves are stalking us,« an Wildseer whispered.

Belina looked around for the unmistakable glow these animals gave off, but everything was dark. She brushed her long hair from her face and drew a deep breath. *Something is very wrong here. They cannot all have gone mad at the same time.* Her gaze travelled over her companions once more and then to their leader. Drok was trembling almost imperceptibly and seemed entirely lost in thought.

There was a loud crack. »Can you not hear the voices in the ground?« the man in the tree cried as he sought a better hold.

Leaves and small branches rained down upon Belina, and she prudently took a step aside. She felt fear threatening to overwhelm her as well. Everything felt so strange, wrong and unpleasant. It was like a tingling beneath her skin that kept growing stronger. Her instincts were all but begging her to flee. Yet she resolved to stay and do something.

»Sir, can you hear me?« she now shouted so loudly that her voice echoed through the forest. But her leader did not react. She thought hard about how she might bring her companions back to their senses. *Fire is best fought with fire,* she thought.

»The crates are giving off a poison that is driving us all mad,« she shouted. »There are no glimmerwolves and no voices in the ground. You are only having terrible visions. Because of the poison! Fight it!«

Several of the Fenn looked up at her now, though not all of them. Belina took a run and threw herself against the wall of crates with all her strength. The structure collapsed with a

mighty crash, and the Wildseer who had hidden behind it leapt clear at the last moment. Now she had their full attention.

»What are you doing?« Drok asked suddenly, in a brief moment of lucidity. »You will break the crates if you are not careful!«

»Then at least you will see that I am right,« Belina replied. »We must get away from these crates!«

Agitated whispering broke out. Only their leader was still not wholly himself. His face bore an expression of doubt and grief, as though he remained caught in some dreadful dream.

»Sir, we truly ought to leave this place!« said Embra, who had been standing unnoticed directly behind Drok. »I shall arrange everything. I shall not disappoint you!«

Another loud crack. Then another, followed by a rush and a dull impact. An agonised scream came from the man who had been sitting in the tree a moment before. He clutched his leg in pain.

Drok blinked in confusion. Then his face changed all at once, as though he had suddenly remembered what justified his very existence. »Belina, bring your two companions back! Embra will help you. The rest of you, clear the rear cart and put this fool on it!« He pointed to the writhing man. »Gather your equipment. Leave the other carts and the goods here!«

Only slowly did the group begin to move. But move they did. Drok bellowed further orders and seemed so resolute that the men and women briefly forgot their fears and obeyed. Within moments the Fenn were ready to march.

Belina and Embra returned. They carried an unconscious Krimo and had Eless in tow, darting in a zigzag from tree to tree instead of simply following them. They laid Krimo beside the man with the broken leg on the cart and declared themselves ready to leave as well.

»What is wrong with him? Is he still alive?« Drok asked.

»Yes, sir, he is still alive,« Embra shot back.

»Embrea knocked him unconscious because he was entirely out of his mind,« Belina added, though her attention lay elsewhere. Beside the cart stood the crates and barrels that had been thrown down in their haste. One of the crates had cracked, and something within shimmered strangely silver. She wanted to look more closely, but there was no time.

»Very well,« Drok said. »We shall return to the Eimh, examine the situation and then make straight back for Kuer!«

The troop and the remaining cart set off. Embrea drove the Green Brigadiers on without pause and, by his standards, with unusual roughness. Yet it helped: they gained speed and soon covered the first five Lend.

»Are we setting off again already?« asked one of the two guards posted farther south when the group reached them. »It is still far too dark. And where are the other carts?«

»Is everything all right with you? Are you both well? Has all been quiet?« Drok asked.

The guards looked at one another in bewilderment.

»Make your report!« Embrea said loudly.

»Yes, all quiet,« the other guard answered quickly.

»And we are well too,« the first added. »Why should we not be?«

»I am glad to hear it,« Drok said with relief. »You two go ahead. When you reach the river, search the area thoroughly. If you notice anything suspicious, fly back to us like lightning and make your report!«

Still confused, the two guards ran ahead as ordered.

Belina, who had overheard the exchange, had to restrain herself from asking questions. *Not here, not now*, she thought. Yet the thoughts in her head would not cease. *Why are those two entirely normal? What was that silver shimmer in the crate? Will I be in trouble because my ruse denied the troop leader the chance to save the goods after all?*

With every Lend they travelled, the light grew a little stronger, and little by little Belina's worries and that strange

fear fell away. She looked over at the still-unconscious Krino and even felt a measure of pity for the incorrigible quarreller. Then she glanced around at her other companions, the terror still written in their faces. Her breath caught. Quickly, she counted the Wildseers. There were only seventeen. Three were missing!

OLD KNOWLEDGE

Early skytide 421

A cold wind swept through the great inner courtyard of Kuer's imposing Citadel. Drok shivered and drew his cloak more tightly about him, but it helped little. In any case, he was uncertain whether the shivering came from the cold wind or from the thought of what awaited him. The master-at-arms had summoned him to give his report on the events of the last darkening in person.

After their return to Kuer, they had received makeshift treatment, been questioned briefly and then dismissed until they were summoned. Drok had used the time to sleep a little and bathe. Yet it could hardly be called true sleep. The impressions of the last darkening remained too vivid and denied him any deep, restoring rest. It had been more a twilight state, regularly broken by sharp, violent starts whenever another terrible memory found its way into his mind.

When at last he found some peace in the warm water of one of the bathing room's pools, the master-at-arms's adjutant had suddenly appeared in the doorway and ordered him to present himself at the Citadel shortly.

And so here he was, standing cold before the building commonly called the Partag. This great stone edifice was some forty paces long, twenty broad and perhaps fifteen high. It had massive walls and three storeys, though the upper two had no windows. Only on the ground floor, where several offices lay, could one peer through the milky glass. On the two upper

floors—so people said, at any rate—the finest weapons from every corner of the Realm were stored. Weapons for the direst need.

The Partag was one of four buildings forming a rectangle around the Citadel's inner courtyard. The other three looked much alike, though they had windows on every floor and were rather more ornate overall. Kuer's banners flew from those three buildings as well.

Drok noticed that the banners had recently been replaced. The cloth was thicker than before and the colours more distinct. He remembered that it was tradition in Kuer to change the banners at the Turning of the Wind. In keeping with the weather, sturdier cloth and brighter colours were used for the west wind so that the banners could endure it and remain clearly visible even in foul weather. With the east wind, by contrast, lighter cloth was chosen so that the banners would still fly handsomely in the warmer but gentler breeze.

Amid all the horrors of late, Drok had quite forgotten that the new skytide had begun even before the last darkening. *In Fennspring, they will be boarding up the windows on the western slope now and preparing for snowstorms*, he thought, remembering his old home. *The Fenn in Kuer have no notion how easy their lives are here. They know neither the merciless cold of the Rawrise nor the dangers beyond their great walls in the east.*

»Master-at-Arms Beltim will receive you now,« a harsh voice said suddenly. »Follow me!«

Drok started, and his thoughts sprang back to the dreadful events for which he would presently have to answer. His stomach turned hollow. Reluctantly, he followed the adjutant through a heavy, iron-bound wooden door. They turned right, passed a staircase which, to Drok's surprise, was barred by an iron grille, then entered a large room where Beltim was already waiting.

»My lord, I bring you the officer of the Green Brigade whom you wished to see,« the adjutant said, laying undue stress upon the word *officer*.

Beltim looked up from the desk behind which he sat and pointed towards a corner.

Before Drok could wonder what that meant, the adjutant hurried past him, sat at a small table in the corner and reached for paper and quill.

»We keep a record of everything here,« Beltim told Drok when he saw his questioning expression.

»I understand, sir,« Drok replied uncertainly. He had never dealt with the master-at-arms in person, though he had been able to observe him and his moods from close at hand—when he gave orders to his subordinates on the great parade ground, for instance, or made known his displeasure. Yet it was not so much his imperious manner that made him intimidating as his appearance. The tall man had unusually deep-blue eyes and straight white hair that fell beyond the shoulders of his leather armour. His gaze radiated great resolve, and his bearing was ever watchful.

The master-at-arms looked Drok up and down. »Tell me what happened,« he said at last.

Drok cleared his throat and had to summon considerable will not to surrender to guilt, tension and uncertainty. *Pull yourself together*, he told himself.

»You had best begin at the beginning,« Beltim said when he noticed Drok's nervous hesitation.

»As on the previous two occasions, we received the laden carts from your soldiers in Kuer, along with the papers bearing our orders and directions. As commanded, we followed the Eimh eastwards. Shortly after our first rest, our vanguard reported a horde of goblins. They had made camp some twenty Lend ahead of us.«

»Directly beside the Eimh?« Beltim asked.

»So it was reported to me. These goblins were also said to be unusually well armoured, which gave us cause for concern.«

One of Beltim's eyebrows rose almost imperceptibly. »How many goblins were there?«

»The scouts were uncertain, but at least thirty. More, most likely. We therefore decided to withdraw and avoid them.«

»Why?« the master-at-arms asked sceptically.

Drok did not understand. *Should we have entered battle?* he wondered doubtfully.

»You said the goblins had made camp. Why did you not continue watching them and wait?« Beltim clarified.

»Ah,« Drok breathed, relieved. »Because they were striking camp, and there was a chance they might come along the river towards us. With the heavy carts, we would have been easy prey. We therefore chose not to wait any longer, but to use the time to put sufficient distance between us while we still could.«

»I see,« Beltim replied. »That was the correct decision. What happened next?«

»We turned about on the spot and followed the Eimh back for a way. On the outward journey, we had seen an old path by which we meant to make a north-westerly detour. When we reached it, we followed it until the darkening. Then we made camp, posted guards and planned to judge the situation anew with the first rays of sunlight, so that we might continue the mission as before if the way was clear.«

The master-at-arms raised a hand, bidding Drok pause. He turned to his adjutant and made certain that everything had been written down. »Continue. How did the losses occur?«

»That is difficult to say ...« Drok began cautiously. He simply lacked the words to describe what they had lived through. But when he noticed the piercing gaze of the man opposite, he tried nonetheless. »The longer we rested there, the stranger the troop became. I do not mean poor morale, the effects

of too much penja spirit or some quarrel. They were simply afraid—unusually afraid.«

»Afraid of what?«

»Of ... everything. Different things. It was as if a dark, crushing shadow lay upon us. One of the Wildseers even climbed a tree, fell and broke his leg. Another could not stop being sick. Some claimed to see glimmerwolves; others suddenly mistrusted their companions. I have never experienced anything like it, sir!«

»Calm yourselves,« Beltim said when he saw that the old Green Brigadier was in danger of losing his composure. »The troop fell into a panic, then?«

»Yes, one might put it so. I wish I could explain it better, but one had to be there. The Wildseers were listless and consumed by fear, no use at all. Somehow it was unreal and spectral.« Drok drew a deep breath and tried once more to suppress the dreadful memories.

Beltim appeared thoughtful. Nothing in his face revealed whether he believed the tale. »What did you do then?«

»As the situation only worsened, we resolved to return to Kuer. Two brave Fenn helped me bring the troop back into—«

»So you left the carts and goods there?« the master-at-arms interrupted. His gaze promised nothing good.

»We had no choice, sir. The troop was convinced that something in the crates and barrels was causing this excessive fear. A poison or something of that sort. They would not have pushed the carts another step.«

»Were you convinced of it as well?«

»Certainly not. But it was the only way to channel their fears and lead us away from that place. You would never have us transport poison, sir.«

The questioning note in Drok's last sentence did not escape Beltim. His face showed a mixture of genuine annoyance and

a malicious smile, though he seemed unsure which feeling prevailed.

»Forgive me, sir,« Drok said quickly. »Such curiosity is unworthy of a member of the Green Brigade and was not my place.«

The malicious smile suddenly became a contemptuous laugh. »Curiosity unworthy of a Canopy Watcher? You jest! The Green Brigade draws your sort as a ripe penja tree draws sun gliders. The children you continually pick up outside the walls are your recruits of the future. A Brigade of oldfaiths, paupers and far-roamers. Yet you are right that it is not your place. Even so, I will assure you there was no poison in those crates, nor anything of the kind. My first and last thought is always for the welfare and stability of the Realm. I would never do anything that endangered our people, nor would I carelessly risk the lives of our soldiers—not even those of the Green Brigade.«

»I never doubted it, sir!«

»Be that as it may. Let us remain concerned with the matter at hand. I am told that three men went missing. Somewhere near the place where you made camp, I presume?«

»I do not know precisely. But somewhere nearby, at least. The farther we went from the camp, the less power the dark shadow held over us. I should like to search for them, sir.«

»Do not trouble yourselves. I shall have them sought. You ought to rest; you look as though the last time you slept properly was in your youth. Plainly several dozen skytides ago.«

Drok thought that the master-at-arms might even be right in his disparaging remark. Yet the prospect of a search party gave him some hope.

A throat was cleared in the corner. »My lord, shall I fetch the cartographer?« the adjutant asked.

Beltim nodded his assent, whereupon his subordinate hurried out through the door. When he returned a few moments later, he had a small old man in tow, carrying several rolled

maps beneath his right arm and shuffling into the room at a most leisurely pace.

»What is it now?« he asked in an aggrieved tone.

»I need the map of the Spearhills—the large one. This *Wild-seer* must show us where he lost his companions.«

Drok flinched almost imperceptibly at the words. Again he had to summon all his strength not to lose his nerve. The pain of failure lay too deep. But the prospect of rescuing his companions allowed him to keep his composure.

»You might have said so at once,« the old man cried, glaring angrily at the adjutant. »I shall have to fetch it.«

Spellbound, the three watched the old codger amble out of the room in perfect tranquillity, turn left and follow the corridor. He must have reached his destination several rooms away, for alongside a few curses came the sound of drawers opening and paper rustling. A small eternity later, the cartographer stood before them again, this time with only one map in hand. »Spearhills, large,« he said simply.

Beltim regarded the small, frail man with unusual affront. »What are you waiting for?« he asked, visibly exasperated. »Spread out the map.«

»You command, I obey,« the old man replied, carrying the map to the great desk, where he unrolled it very slowly and carefully.

»Now, where was your camp?« the master-at-arms asked impatiently. »Simply point it out on the map!«

Drok bent over the great sheet of paper and let his gaze travel from Kuer along the Eimh towards the Thorn. »We were roughly here when we turned back,« he said, indicating a place beside the river. »And the old path north-west must have been somewhere here. We cannot have gone very far along it. Perhaps as far as this.« Again he pointed, this time to a spot north-east of Kuer.

»Are you certain it was there?« the master-at-arms asked.

»Yes, that must be it. We should therefore have lost the missing men somewhere between that place and the Eimh.«

»By Fendiril, that is not good,« the old cartographer said suddenly.

»What? What is not good?« Beltim asked, unusually loud and uncontrolled, making Drok and the adjutant start in alarm.

The old man remained unperturbed. He sauntered around the table to the master-at-arms and bent down to whisper in his ear. With every word, his listener's expression darkened further.

»There too, already? Are you certain?« Beltim asked quietly.

»Of course,« the cartographer replied as he straightened.

With a jerk, the master-at-arms rose from his desk, went to his adjutant and had the record handed to him. »You may go,« he said in passing. When Drok did not move, he added, »Do not worry. I shall have your companions sought. I shall also inform your commander.«

»I should like to help with the search, sir,« Drok replied.

»I understand, but it is unnecessary. I have capable men. Remain in Kuer with your Wildseers and rest. If I have further questions, I shall need you nearby.«

»Very well,« Drok said, disappointed. He turned on the spot and left the room in the adjutant's company.

When Drok left the arsenal a short while later, he paused in the inner courtyard. He was unsure what to make of the encounter with the master-at-arms and, above all, what he was to do in Kuer now. He had expected punishment; indeed, he had hoped for it, to satisfy his desire for penance and purification. Instead, he was condemned to find some other distraction lest he drown wholly in guilt and self-doubt.

He looked around absently and wondered where to go. None of the many diversions Kuer offered seemed inviting. What he needed was a task. Yet he did not dare set out alone in search of the three missing men. He had already done enough harm. His hopes now rested with Beltim's followers, who at least had a reputation for carrying out their duties with the utmost discipline, unwavering purpose and resolve.

Slowly, Drok moved towards the exit, which lay in the middle of the inner courtyard and led down into the ground. It was a gate passage four paces wide and some thirty long, sloping steeply out of the inner part of the Citadel. This inner section was itself a small spur castle, well fortified upon a rock called the Delvstone. The Delvstone was the only noteworthy rock of its kind for a great distance and had therefore, countless skytides ago, been made quite literally the military cornerstone of Kuer.

Lost in thought, Drok passed through the gateworks at the end of the passage and noticed neither the guards to either side nor the wolby that darted past him from behind. Several streets farther on, the great parade ground opened before him, with the enormous city gate on its opposite side. *Here we began the mission. Here all the misery began*, he thought dejectedly. He turned left and crossed the square towards the barracks, where his guest quarters were located.

He had scarcely gone the first Lend when someone suddenly called his name. Blood rose into his face, and his ears and cheeks grew hot. It was shame, growing stronger each time his name was called anew. From the corner of his eye, he saw Belina hurrying towards him from the right. For all the gratitude and affection he felt for this brave Wildseer, he had no desire for her company just then.

»Sir, how are you?« Belina asked when she caught up with him.

Drok stopped and tried to look surprised. »Ah, it is you, Belina,« he said uncertainly. »Well. I am well.«

»You were in the Citadel with the master-at-arms, I presume? I hope you did not land in trouble because of me!«

Now Drok truly did look surprised. »Trouble because of you?« he asked.

»Yes, because I put it into the troop's heads that the crates and barrels were poisoned, and then you had to leave them behind.«

»Ah. No, no, there was no trouble. Beltim is sending men to search for our missing companions.«

Belina looked relieved. »That is good to hear.«

»The idea about the poison,« Drok began hesitantly, »was very good, as it happens. We could not have got the carts back to the Eimh in that condition anyway. So do not trouble yourself over it. You acted admirably.«

»Thank you, sir,« Belina replied. »Since you are here already, would you not come with me to the Walltankard? Several of the other Wildseers are there as well.«

»Thank you, but I would prefer some rest.«

»One can rest over a penja liqueur too,« Belina said with a grin.

Drok noticed how much that show of cheer cost her. The face of the otherwise very pretty Fenn bore the marks of recent horrors and exertions. Her large brown eyes looked weary, a poorly tended scratch crossed her left cheek, and her dark curls had been tied into a braid with a scrap of cloth.

»Come on,« she pressed. »The troop would be glad of it. I would be glad of it. Besides, there is something I should like to discuss with you.«

»Very well, but only one glass.«

They walked the short distance to the Walltankard and sat at a small table outside. The Walltankard was built directly into the outer city wall known as the Oathward and stood about half a Lend north of the city gate. It offered a good view across the great parade ground, whose bustle one could observe over a companionable drink. Whenever the square was not being used

for military purposes, the landlord was permitted to set several tables outside. Within, there was room for no more than six guests in any case, for the tavern did not reach especially deep into the wall.

Drok looked cautiously about and recognised several Wild-seers from his troop, whom he greeted with a short nod. Krimo sat alone at the neighbouring table. He looked terribly exhausted and kept his eyes lowered. His hand gripped a flask with iron force, and by all appearances it was brand new.

»Well, you two look every bit as worn out as the rest,« an unfamiliar voice said suddenly. »Seen Fenn dug out after a landslip looking better than you, believe me.«

»As friendly as ever, Futti,« Belina replied to the landlord.

»Oh, don't be like that. But truth now—is there a war somewhere, or what happened to you?«

Drok and Belina exchanged uncertain looks.

»Aye, keep mum like the rest of 'em. Maybe I'm better off not knowing. Here, two penja spirits, on the house. You need 'em more than I do.« He set two small cups of liquor upon the table. »If you want aught else, just call me. Couldn't possibly miss you with all this merriment.«

Before they could thank him, the landlord had hurried away again. They raised the cups to their mouths, met one another's eyes briefly, and drank in unison. It tasted divine. For one brief moment, every care and dark thought seemed to vanish. Drok knew at once that this spirit must have come from Fennspring.

»That must be the finest penja spirit I have ever tasted,« Belina said in astonishment.

»Yes, the landlord treated us to a rather noble drop,« Drok replied. He felt quite guilty that he had not thanked the man at once.

»Futti is a good sort. He always knows what his guests need. I wish he worked in Canopy Ward.«

At the mention of Canopy Ward, Drok's thoughts returned to his missing companions and the failed mission he still had to report to his commander. His expression darkened.

Belina did not miss it and thought it better to remain silent for a while.

»You wished to speak with me about something,« Drok said at last, ending the long silence.

»Yes. I wanted to tell you of an interesting observation,« the young Fenn said hesitantly. »Perhaps it was nothing at all, and it is none of my concern in any case.«

»Do not be shy.«

»I only thought that perhaps you might make more sense of it. When we loaded the two injured men onto the emptied cart, I happened to look at a crate that must have cracked when it was unloaded in haste. A bright silver light shone from within. It wavered, like light reflected from bathwater onto the ceiling. I could scarcely tear my eyes away. It was strangely beautiful.«

Drok frowned. »To be honest, I have no notion what that might have been. Are you certain it was not some illusion caused by that ... thing back there?«

»I cannot be certain, of course. But apart from a foul and fathomless fear, I did not truly suffer any problems. No visions or the like, I mean. Well, that was all I wanted to say.«

»I am glad you told me. I shall keep it in mind. The master-at-arms assured me, at any rate, that there was nothing dangerous in the crates—no poison or anything of that kind.«

A scornful laugh suddenly sounded from the neighbouring table.

Belina turned to Krimo and said angrily, »One does not eavesdrop upon other people's confidential conversations!«

»Hard not to eavesdrop on you in the deathly silence here,« Krimo said bitterly. »As for your silver glow, I happen to know someone who might be able to give you answers.«

»Let me guess: your cousin?«

»Exactly.«

Belina rolled her eyes. »No, thank you. After the madness of the last darkening, I need no further dubious encounters.«

»Fine. Not my problem,« Krimo retorted.

»Your cousin has a shop in the Old Redbark, if I remember correctly?« Drok asked, having turned round as well.

»That is right. He is the finest potion-maker in the whole city and knows all manner of peculiar things besides.«

Drok considered. As an old Fenn of the Rawrise, he knew—unlike the city folk of the east—that one ought not banish everything strange to the realm of myth. More than once, he had learnt painfully that disbelief was no shield against calamity.

»You are not truly considering taking him up on that offer?« Belina asked sceptically.

»Indeed I am. I should very much like to hear Krimo's cousin's opinion,« Drok replied. He saw Belina prepare to answer and added, »Besides, have you anything better to do? To be honest, it would be a welcome distraction for me.«

»You need not come, Belina,« Krimo said.

»Do we not have to state our business to the city guards if we want to enter the Healers' Quarter? What are we to tell them? That, on a confidential military mission, I saw a silver shimmer in a crate we were forbidden to open, and now we wish to take an oldfaith into our confidence and question him about it?«

Krimo smiled. »I would not say that, but leave it to me. Nor need we tell my cousin anything about the mission. He never asks needless questions anyway.«

»Very well. Let us get it over with,« Belina cried, rising and turning towards the Eimh to take the direct road to the Healers' Quarter.

The Healers' Quarter lay south of the Military Quarter, on the opposite side of the river that flowed through the heart of Kuer. Like every quarter, it was enclosed by a small city wall, though its gates were guarded. It was not subject to restrictions as strict as those of the Military Quarter, but anyone entering

had to give their name and the reason for their visit. Strangers such as travelling merchants were denied entry altogether.

»No, not that way,« Krimo said when he saw where his companion meant to go. »The guards at Lockbridge take their duties somewhat too seriously, if you know what I mean. Just follow me. I know a good way.«

They therefore went westwards and first reached the Merchants' Quarter, which was positively overrun with visitors. Black tracks like veins crossed and recrossed the ground between the stalls and little depots—trails of coal dust spilling from the fully laden wagons visible everywhere. Charcoal from Weiler, along with thick blankets and furs from the Worldridge, were plainly the most sought-after wares at present. But many kinds of food that kept well were traded too: smoked rieling, salted ox meat and great bowernuts. A cobbler offered his services as they passed. »Long journey behind you? Let me inspect your soles.« They waved him away, for the leather boots of the Green Brigade were known to outlast their wearers.

With difficulty, they pushed past the crowded market stalls, declined still more offers, then turned left to cross the Eimh by the so-called Trunkbridge. On the far side lay the Residential Quarter with its pointed roofs and narrow lanes. They kept east and tried to match Krimo's pace. He plainly knew the district well, turning first here and then there without any discernible pattern. After a small eternity, they at last saw the gate of the Healers' Quarter at the end of a narrow street.

Before they reached the guards, Krimo drew Belina aside.

»I shall not let anything slip,« she said irritably before he could begin.

»I know. That is not what I mean. I only wanted to thank you briefly and apologise. Eless told me that you fetched us. And of course I know you did not poison me. Somehow panic simply took hold of me. I do not know why.«

»It is all right. You were not the only one,« Belina replied, surprised.

»It would be kind of you, by the way, not to tell my cousin about my fear of poisons. He would not understand.«

Belina raised an eyebrow. »I cannot make you out, but very well. As you wish.«

Krimo thanked her and continued purposefully. The gate was only a few paces away, and only one guard could be seen.

»Name and business?« the man asked when they came within earshot.

»Greetings, Tito,« Krimo called.

»Ah, long time no see, Krimo. How goes it with the forest-hoppers?«

»Wildseers, Green Brigadiers or Canopy Watchers, if you please,« Krimo said with a laugh. »It goes well. Always plenty to do.«

»Glad to hear it,« Tito replied. »What brings you back here after all this time?«

»I have to help my cousin again. One of the heavy shelves has fallen from the wall, so I brought reinforcements.« Krimo indicated his two companions.

»Aye, all manner of things are falling off the walls in this quarter now, regrettably. Well then, make yourselves useful! Good to see you again.«

»You too! Until next time, Tito!«

Without further questions, they passed through the gate and made for the mighty Fallen Redbark at the centre of the Healers' Quarter, easily visible from a great distance.

»Now I understand why we took the long way round,« Drok said to Krimo. »Well handled.«

»I more or less grew up here and often helped my cousin. Tito has been at his post for many skytides. One gets to know each other in time.«

Belina, meanwhile, looked about thoroughly. She had never been in this quarter before. Its best days clearly lay behind it. Many buildings stood empty; some were boarded up or badly decayed. Yet one could imagine how beautiful the district must

once have been. Almost every building had small extensions, balconies and artfully carved doors. There were little green spaces everywhere too, though they had not seen a gardener in a very long time and were quite overgrown.

After several hundred paces, they passed a large stone building with barred windows that did not seem to belong in its surroundings. It looked like a cross between an old, once splendid school and a prison. Columns adorned the entrance, where several guards stood in visible boredom. »That is the library,« Krimo said without interest. »Hardly anyone visits it now.«

They followed the road south-east from the library for some time, then suddenly stood before their destination. Belina marvelled. It was a truly gigantic trunk, at least thirty paces across and four Lend long. Its surface was almost entirely overgrown. In places, small trees had even taken root, their roots reaching down the trunk into the soil. Only here and there had the growth been held back. Candlelight flickered from small round windows in those patches.

»Follow me. The entrance is at the tip,« Krimo said, turning left and following a paved path beside the Redbark.

When they shortly reached the northern end of the trunk, they saw that another such path ran along the far side, so that the two paths enclosed the fallen giant lengthwise like the setting of a precious stone.

The tree's former tip had been cut away. In its place was a broad wooden face displaying hundreds of skytide rings. At the foot of this surface, a man-high passage had been hewn into the trunk, its end hidden in darkness.

»I hope you are not afraid of the dark,« Krimo said with a smile and strode ahead in good spirits. Within moments he had vanished into the passage's shadow. Only his footsteps still echoed from the darkness.

Drok wasted no time and followed him directly.

Belina hesitated, then reluctantly set off. The light from outside quickly lost its power; only the outlines of the passage re-

mained faintly visible. She must have gone ten paces when it grew a little brighter for a brief moment. Confused, she continued carefully. Again the passage brightened for an instant, this time close before her. Fewer than five paces later, her outstretched hands found a soft, pleasant material. It was a thick curtain, which opened beneath a little pressure and released her into a long, well-lit hall.

»The passage as far as the curtain used to be lit,« Krimo said. »But no one sees to it any longer. Without the curtain, however, the draught here is worse than in a chimney, so the old thing has to stay.«

Belina was not listening. She had eyes only for the fascinating hall before her. It was like looking down an enormous wooden tunnel. Doors and windows had been set everywhere into the outward-curving walls, apparently belonging to small shops or dwellings. Narrow shafts pierced the ceiling about every twenty paces, admitting a little light and carrying stale air away. Candles shone everywhere, though each was enclosed within a small lantern. The glass of the lanterns came in every colour imaginable, bathing the whole hall in beautiful, many-coloured light.

»My cousin's shop is just ahead,« Krimo said, pointing to an unremarkable door on the left. »Come. He will surely be glad of our visit.«

»A spotwasp must have stung me,« a voice called towards them as they entered the little shop. »Well, this is a surprise, Krimo!«

»Greetings, cousin,« Krimo replied. »How is business?«

»To call it poor would be flattery. The guards admit fewer customers all the time; I receive no interesting wares from afar at all; and all people still buy are a few tinctures and healing draughts.«

»So much as ever, then,« Krimo said with a smile.

»Regrettably. Who are your companions?«

»Comrades of the Green Brigade in search of answers. This gentleman is Drok, one of our Silverleaves, and this is—«

»I am Belina,« the young Fenn said curtly, studying the stranger at length. He was considerably younger than she had expected, no older than she herself. His clothes were tasteful and plain, his gaze alert and open. He possessed a calming, trustworthy air. In short, he was the very opposite of what Belina had imagined.

»A pleasure. I am Ador, potion-maker in the fifth generation and proud proprietor of this magnificent establishment,« Ador said, with a liberal pinch of irony in his voice.

Belina looked around. The shop had certainly seen better days. It consisted of little more than several empty shelves along the walls and a counter behind which Ador stood. One of the shelves had indeed fallen from the wall, though it was so dusty that it must have lain there for many skytides. A few wares lay here and there, most of them directly upon the counter. Belina recognised several full little bottles, some herbs and roots, and a few small tins. Linen ribbons hung from the ceiling with various stones fastened to them. One ribbon, however, bore several empty glass spheres fitted with small stoppers.

»My uncle—his father—died two skytides ago after a long illness,« Krimo said sadly. »Ador had to care for him for a long while and run the business besides. That is why I often helped here.«

»I am sorry to hear it,« Belina said. She was slowly beginning to see Krimo in a different light.

Ador waved it away. »One cannot cheat fate,« he replied. »Not even with the finest draughts in the Realm.«

»Did you join the Green Brigade only after your uncle's death, Krimo?« Belina asked with honest interest.

»Yes, shortly afterwards. I needed some distance.«

»He fairly fled,« Ador cried tartly. »You might at least bring me a few herbs from the Duskfringe now and then.«

Drok, who until then had stood silently near the entrance, suddenly stepped forwards and pointed at the counter. »Those roots moved just now—or have I quite lost my wits?«

»Oh, did they?« Ador asked delightedly. »That is entirely possible. Roots from the Sprout Ground move from time to time, though less and less often as they age. The last time must have been early in the previous skytide. Chopped and boiled, they make a very effective remedy against the forgetfulness of old age, incidentally.«

»I could make good use of that,« Drok murmured thoughtfully. »Then I might remember where I have seen them before.«

»I should be most surprised if you had encountered such roots already. They belonged to my grandfather. He bought them from a travelling merchant countless skytides ago, in better days, when merchants bearing truly interesting wares were still admitted into the Realm.«

»Perhaps it is better so,« Belina blurted. »I mean, there must be good reasons to keep certain things at a distance.«

»Do you think so? That is an unusual opinion for a member of the Green Brigade. Ordinarily, I hear such things only from the city guards.«

»Belina does not like oldfaiths,« Krimo said pointedly.

»I prefer facts to faith,« she replied.

»As do I,« Ador answered. »But every tale has a kernel of truth. I did not always believe everything my father or grandfather told me, everything written in old books or carved into the bark of a tree. Yet if one remains open, if one permits oneself to think the unthinkable, one sometimes discovers that beneath the surface of material things lie other truths worth exploring.«

Belina turned to Drok for help, but he merely shrugged and said, »Let us permit ourselves a little curiosity after all we lived through last darkening—and after all I have been forced to experience over the skytides.«

»You come from the Rawrise, do you not?« Ador suddenly asked after studying Drok briefly.

»What betrayed me?«

»Strong legs and thin clothing. Too thin for the west wind, at least for folk from here.«

Drok nodded. »I was once a hunter upon the Worldridge. For almost all my life.«

»And what brought you here to the east, if I may ask?«

Krimo and Belina looked expectantly at the old man, whose face now showed discomfort. It was a question they had long wished to ask him themselves.

»You need not answer if it displeases you,« Ador said when he noticed how the troop leader felt.

»It is all right. An answer for an answer. After all, we too have come bearing a difficult question. I came to Canopy Ward because grief and self-doubt drove me there. Good Fenn died because of me in a Render attack I should have foreseen. The signs were plain, but I understood only when I was all but made to stumble over the proof: a dead stormboar. By then it was too late. When I found the Render, they were already falling upon several farmers. I tried to help, but one of my arrows struck one of the brave soldiers rushing to their aid instead.«

An oppressive silence suddenly filled the little shop. Several breaths later, Ador spoke carefully. »I am sorry. Yet from all I know of Render, I do not think you should judge yourself so harshly, though of course I can understand the horror and suffering of such an experience. No one knows whence Render come, what drives them or how they may be tracked.«

»No one but me,« Drok answered quietly.

Silence ruled the shop again, this time from surprise.

»How?« Ador asked in astonishment.

»Because the attack upon the farmers was not my first failure. Perhaps twenty skytides earlier—I was still a young hunter myself—I lost an assistant during a hunt in the Abandoned Land. He had gone to gather firewood while I worked hides

in our shelter. After a time, an ill feeling crept over me. It was as if something dark wished to enter my mind, as if the warming rays of the sun suddenly passed through me without effect. I hesitated and tried to fathom the feeling. When at last, fool that I was, I understood that it was an infallible, indeed almost panicked warning of my own mind, I had already seen the monster. A hulking figure clothed in rags was moving through the undergrowth half a Lend from me. At first, I thought it must be a lost human from the south. But then I saw the bluish cast of its skin and remembered the old songs. I reached for my bow and hid behind a tree. The Render did not seem to have noticed me and strode purposefully in the same direction my assistant had taken into the forest. I was frozen. I considered loosing an arrow at the Render, but I did not dare. The moments passed, and the creature vanished from sight.«

»It was wise not to shoot. Arrows rarely suffice to kill a Render. So the old writings say, at least,« Ador said softly.

»Wise?« Drok asked bitterly. »It was my assistant's death sentence. My fear, my hesitation cost him his life. I heard only the screams. Brief, dreadful screams. Then it grew quiet—very quiet. I crouched behind my tree for an eternity before I finally found the courage to search for my assistant. But I found only what the Render had left behind: the body of a Fenn far too young, mutilated almost beyond recognition. For all that, he did not yield without a fight, for black, viscous blood clung to his knife.«

Krimo was visibly shocked by the tale. »Had you fired, the Render would surely have killed you both.«

»They told me much the same in the village afterwards. Yet no one wished to believe that a Render had attacked him. They laid everything at the feet of a roguebear and decided that terror had merely confused me. Instead, they told me not to blame myself: the forest was dangerous, and my assistant had known what he was undertaking. In time, I wished to believe it too. But I never hunted in company again. I lived my life and did my

utmost to keep roguebears and other dangers from the settlements of the Rawrise. Across the many skytides, my memories of that dreadful attack faded.«

»Until the incident twenty skytides later, I presume?« Ador asked.

»Exactly. Again that dark feeling crept over me, and again I acted too late. That is what I mean. Deep within one's soul, one feels the presence of these unnatural monsters. One must only refuse to ignore it, for disbelief is no shield against calamity.«

Krimo nodded in agreement. He seemed to understand Drok well and to feel the weight of his experience. Honest sympathy and some sadness marked his face.

Belina, by contrast, was deep in thought and seemed unsure what to make of it all. She trusted Drok, yet despite her recent experiences, stories of Render and dark forebodings still warred with her view of the world. No Render had ever been seen in Midmeander, where they were dismissed as old nurses' tales. Her father, first chairman of Weiler's charcoal-burners' guild, had driven such fancies from her at an early age. »A proper charcoal fire is the only truth that need concern you,« he always said.

»I grieve for your losses,« Ador said respectfully. »Even so, I wish to thank you for sharing this experience and what you learnt from it. One hears such stories at first hand only very rarely now—if one hears them at all.«

»Not everyone has as much good fortune as I,« Drok replied with a sarcastic undertone. Yet it had done him good at last to tell someone of both events and their connection. Something told him that this was the right place and time.

»True enough, true enough,« Ador said with a smile. »Now, to you three. What brings you here? What do you wish to know?«

Drok looked kindly at Belina. »Would you like to tell him?« he asked.

»Where should I begin? Well, yes. It concerns something I observed recently. A silver light inside a crate. Regrettably, I had no time to examine it more closely. But of all the colours of light I know, I have never seen anything like it. Have you any notion what it might have been? What in the world gives off silver light?«

»Where was this crate?« Ador asked sceptically.

»I may not say. It is a military secret.«

Ador laughed cynically. »Yes, the military. They forbid us everything, yet no one hoards secrets more jealously than they. But no matter. A silver light, you say. What else?«

»There was nothing more, really. It was bright enough to be clearly visible, but not bright enough to cast light like a lantern. It wavered somewhat and changed in strength. It was strangely fascinating to watch. Do you know what it might have been?«

»Not with certainty. Your information is rather sparse.«

»And if you had to speculate?«

»As I said, despite every prejudice, I prefer to keep to facts. I can tell you of a substance that may fit your description, but I would be greatly surprised to see it in a crate connected with the military.«

Belina's tension was plain to see. Long-suppressed curiosity broke free, and she urged Ador to tell her everything he knew.

»Very well. There are many names for this substance. My grandfather called it silverblood, though sometimes earthblood or simply Flux. I do not believe he knew much about it, however, or he would have passed that knowledge to my father and me.«

»What does this silverblood do?« Belina pressed.

»I told you, I know little about it. It is kept in glass spheres such as those,« Ador replied, pointing towards the ceiling, from which the linen ribbon bearing the peculiar empty vessels hung.

Belina seemed most unhappy with this lack of information. »Do you know whether it is dangerous?«

»Dangerous? Difficult to say. Many of the herbs and extracts here can be dangerous if wrongly used. When I was a child, another such ribbon with spheres hung there. One of them even held a little silverblood, if I remember rightly.«

»And where is that ribbon now?« Drok asked.

»My grandfather sold it at some point, I think.«

»Do you remember to whom?« Belina asked in turn.

»No, I do not. I was perhaps four or five skytides old then. But certainly not to the military.«

Drok and Belina's disappointment was plain. They now knew several names for the substance, if indeed it had been that substance at all, but were little wiser otherwise.

»Shall I speculate again?« Ador suddenly asked, unable to suppress a smile.

»Please,« the two replied in unison.

»Even in former days, most customers cared only for our herbs and draughts. Few bought wares from distant lands. Yet one person remains in my memory, though I no longer recall her name. Whenever the Council of the Wise met in this quarter, as it did in those days, a woman from your home region would visit us«—he looked at Drok—»and buy whatever caught her interest. It is at least conceivable that she purchased the remaining silverblood. She seemed to have a passion for exceedingly rare things; after all, she always carried a very peculiar root staff. I do not know whether she still lives, however. She has not been here in ten skytides or more and must surely have departed this world by now.«

Drok's gaze fell once more upon the roots from the Sprout Ground lying on the counter, and sudden understanding dawned. »By Fendiril. You mean Garda Thornring!« he exclaimed in surprise.

»Possibly. The name sounds familiar, at least. Do you know her?«

»Indeed I do. She is the Wise of Fennspring. It was she who opened the way for me to join the Green Brigade after the Render attack upon the farmers.«

»Then I was probably able to help you after all. I am glad,« Ador said happily. »You should seek her out. Perhaps she knows more of silverblood.«

After several more pleasant words and a promise to share any new discoveries upon the matter with Ador, Drok and Belina left the Healers' Quarter, this time taking the direct road across Lockbridge. Krimo wished to keep his cousin company a little longer and had therefore remained behind, though naturally he was keenly interested in his companions' next steps.

When they stood once more upon the parade ground, Belina asked, »That feeling you described—when Render are nearby. Did you feel it last darkening as well?«

»No, those were two different things. On the old path, I felt only naked fear of failure and relived the dreadful memories of those days. I sensed no Render.«

»Then we ought to discover whether it was connected with the crates after all. I think we owe our companions that much.«

Drok nodded. »I should like to travel to Garda, but we were ordered to remain in Kuer for further questions. If we leave for Fennspring now, we risk being unable to contribute anything to the search for the missing men. Besides, I do not know whether you ought simply to leave without consulting the commander. They would call you derelict in your duty and probably punish you besides.«

»As they would you,« Belina replied.

»True, but I am old. I do not still have my whole life and career before me. I have nothing left to lose. My joining the Green Brigade was more flight than calling in any case.«

»You know, Drok, I think people are mistaken. Most Canopy Watchers do not join the Green Brigade from a thirst for adventure, but because they are fleeing something or someone. It was no different for me.«

»What were you fleeing, if I may ask?«

»You may. My father, with his domineering, stubborn and narrow-minded ways. He took it for granted that I would assume control of the charcoal works as soon as his breath grew too black for it. If I refused, he threatened to sell my inheritance to his rivals. Let him! My heart always told me it was wrong and unnatural to burn all those trees.«

»It is indeed unpleasant to see how bare the country around Weiler has become,« Drok replied. »Without the charcoal, however, many Fenn would quite literally freeze to death in the icy west winds.«

»That is true, but far more coal is produced than is needed for heating. Twice as much as only a few skytides ago. The wasteful Gaulanders buy it all. With no regard for anything, all that matters now is money. So I told my father he could keep his inheritance and left in anger.«

»And here you stand, once more in the company of an old man, once more burdened with unwanted duties,« Drok said ironically, hoping to lighten the mood.

Belina laughed. »That is entirely different. But back to the matter. I can gladly remain here and answer the master-at-arms's questions. I know as much as you do about the events of the last darkening. At least that way I shall not go anywhere near Weiler!«

Hesitantly, Drok accepted the offer. »You had best seek Embra. The master-at-arms will summon him if I cannot be found. You can then stand by him. But tell no one where I am going or what I seek there.«

»Of course not. That goes without saying. Very well, I shall find Embra and hold the fort with him.«

»And please tell him that I am well and that he need not worry. He will blame himself in any case if I simply vanish.«

»I shall,« Belina assured him. »Send word, and take good care of yourself. I hope we shall see each other again soon!« It was plain how hard she found the farewell and how much she would have liked to go with him.

Drok took Belina's hands in his and said, »I hope so too. Take good care of yourself and remain true to who you are. There are far too few Fenn of your sort. All the best!« He turned towards the barracks and strode away to pack for the journey.

Belina was astonished and touched by the warmth of the gesture. »One more thing, Drok,« she called after him. »Stop doubting yourself. You are a good leader, only somewhat plagued by ill fortune.«

Black mountains of cloud towered upon the distant horizon when Drok left Kuer through the western gate a short while later. He knew those clouds heralded a fierce storm, one that would bring the first snow near the Worldridge. Such storms were nothing unusual around the turning of a skytide. They were battles between the winds: east against west, warmth against cold. This time the west wind would emerge victorious and punish the world with cold; next time, the east wind would prevail again. Such was the way of things.

Though the next darkening was already close and the storm would cross his path, Drok forbade himself any hesitation. He drew the hood of his thick coat over his head and quickened his pace. With every step, a little of the burden fell from his shoulders. It was good to be alone again—not because he shunned responsibility, but because the quiet of a solitary journey gave him time to order his thoughts and ask the right questions.

Before long, nothing remained of his ceaseless doubts and worries. The cold west wind had swept them away. In their

place, he felt a deep-seated certainty unlike anything he had known before: that he was doing the right thing. It was not yet even certain whether Garda had answers for him, or whether she would be willing to share them. Yet something told him that the dark chapters of his life had led him upon this path for good reason, and that soon he would understand everything.