

Eight (Phil) The Tree

Arat stretched out his own blanket next to his saddle. He was about to lie down, but spun and walked away from his companion. "I'll be right back..." he trailed off.

The elf had a good ideal of what his friend was going to do. He gave it little thought, though. His mind raced with possible scenarios and out-comes... not to mention grave reality. If they had been found out, they were in great peril. Even as he lay there resting, thousands could be looking for what he bore. That could be if they only suspected he carried but one of the items he now carried, when, in fact, he now had three. Rathcar liked not the explosions and smoke, fearing that it could be a signal to the enemy indicating directions. If that were the case, he and his companion were found out, it would certainly mean death not only of the two, but of populations.

Rathcar knew what he was agreeing to when he accepted this mission. That he would once again risk everything to see that *evil* does not dominate. It would take a great deal of power to accomplish this. The elf also knew that he could not undertake such a mission alone. He therefore knew that any comrades he brought into to this must also be willing to lay down his or her life... the type of individual that understood the great conflict, heroic efforts, and necessary sacrifices. Fortunately, the elf knew many such folk. It took a great deal of meditation, searching the future and seeing whose paths were interwoven into the fabric of this event. A hand full of individuals came in the first wave, each face familiar, each intent clear. The second wave washed hundreds even thousands of faces in a rush of confused races whirling past in such a way that was intolerable even to an elf. The sheer vastness of cause and effect had nearly driven the elf mad until he once again had gained control of his mind. The consequences of this task were enormous. He could not fail. He and his associates would succeed or die in the effort. And if they died, so would Arth.

Upon leaving the White Council, Rathcar sent a score of messages. Some were sent via bird, others by rider, and yet others by runners. There was one that the elf knew he would have difficulties contacting. He would have to use psychic powers to reach the massive, elusive holy woodsman. That is if the woodsman wanted to be contacted at all. Rathcar knew that what would be would be. He sent the message with no confirmation. He hoped to again work with Mäch.

The winged one returned to Timberwood, his beloved home and Palace of *East'ondyl*, the Elven Eastern Kingdom. His trusted confidant and general, Dsunta, was saddened to here the news his *Lor* had brought. He listened carefully to Rathcar's instructions and set off without question. The Lordshire then had an audience with his advisors and courtly officers. He carefully and explicitly laid forth plans to mobilize warriors and healers. He instructed his staff as to how and when transport was to take place. Security of the Kingdom was doubled. The borders sealed from non-elven kind save *vloija*. He called for the harvest accountancy. Dsunta had returned from his errand and entered with a small, purple velvet pouch that appeared empty. The old, bald general, the oldest elf in *East'ondyl* and still physically capable of defeating most any challenger, quickly delivered the pouch to Rathcar's waiting hands. In a series of quick hand movements to pouch disappeared from view of those at court. The Lordshire gave his final instructions and left Timberwood on the first leg of his journey.

Norindyl was his first stop. With the help of a hasten spell, his mighty wings carried him to the Northern Kingdom in just under three turns. Eelo, his old friend and Lordshire of *Norindyl* welcomed Rathcar. Eelo was a manheight tall with long golden hair dressed in a bright green

cloak over his tightly woven shirt and trousers. His eyes, a brilliant ruby red, sparkled with life, even when faced with the upcoming conflict. All who witnessed the two together could not get over the apparent contrast between the fair northerner and half-breed easterner. The two Lordshires met immediately, their conversation brief. Eelo promised to deliver what Rathcar sought only after several spans of meditation. Rathcar had no choice but to agree, for his powers were drained.

Once refreshed, having meditated and eaten, Rathcar accepted what Eelo produced. Again, Rathcar made the small, purple velvet pouch disappear with swift, nimble movements of his hands. He was off without delay.

It was a risky move using the ring of power to teleport Arat and the third item, which also was in a small, purple velvet pouch. Rathcar hoped that all who noticed, and quite a few did, saw it as a human subject and possessions only, and overlooked the hidden item. The aura of the spell was tremendous; Rathcar had no reason to doubt that it overshadowed the magically concealed object.

The sound of Arat's return brought the elf out of his thoughts. Rathcar watched as the human approached. Arat walked stiffly from being in the saddle for so long. Yet there was something youthful about the middle-aged man. Something Rathcar could not place.

The elf had found common ground for a strong bond with this human from the moment they first met. In fact, the strongest bond Rathcar had ever had with a human. He had known Arat for a relatively short time, by elf standards, but knew the mettle of which made up this man.

The elf did not like keeping information from Arat. He saw little choice in this matter, however. There were only a dozen creatures of this or any other plane that knew the truth of this mission... knew what objects Rathcar carried. He prayed to his gods that the secret would stay hidden until all of the objects were together. Soon Arat would know everything. Certainly by the time Rathcar took possession of the fourth item. The effort to conceal the pouches was beginning to wear on the elf. The constant expenditure of magical energy to hide the items from the enemy was draining. If, for some reason, Rathcar's magic to conceal the items failed, the enemy would be drawn to them like insects to the lamp.

Arat's night vision had returned fully. As he approached, he realized that Rathcar was staring at him. Feeling a little self-conscious, the human checked to make sure he had redone his clothing properly. He had.

"Speak what is on your mind, elf" Arat said flatly, "I like it not when you look at me in such a way."

"My apologies, friend Arat. I mean not to offend," Rathcar replied. "I was just thinking that I would not prefer any other as my companion in this venture. Yes, it is dangerous. But no more so than any other matter of great import. Part of the reason that I have not told you what I carry is that I fear others may overhear." Rathcar paused, as if to emphasize his point. "I ask that you be patient and trust in me. The answer you seek shall be given shortly. For now, I recommend that you eat and sleep. I shall wake you when it is time to leave."

The elf stood, grabbed his saddlebags, and walked into the night before Arat could say anything. Frustrated with the stubbornness of the elf, he settled into his blankets.

Many ticks later, when Rathcar returned, the human was asleep. He checked on the horses, using what magic he had to improve their condition. Then he sat on his still outstretched blanket. He began to meditate. The elf had many objectives to complete before their journey continued. First, he checked on his Kingdom. All was well. Next, he focused on his kindred from *Mathyol*. He saw the procession that even now made their way toward the meeting point. As far as

Rathcar could tell, no one suspected the party of any covert action. Thirdly, the elf scanned the surrounding lands. The enemy had indeed pushed into Nemar. The initial rush was devastating to the defending forces. But they had regrouped and were holding fast. For how long, the elf knew not. He could see that the invaders were very strong. Among the assault force were ogres, trolls, orcs, giants, and many other unspeakable creatures.

As Rathcar surveyed the enemy, he felt a sudden, intense pressure inside his head. It promptly turned to pain so extreme, the elf cried out. His essence was drawn back into his body violently. An evil presence had abruptly invaded the elf's mind. Rathcar fought it, but with every effort the barbs of pain grew stronger and deeper.

"*Foul elf!*" the intruder's voice screamed inside Rathcar's head. "*Leave me and mine alone!*"

Each word was a flash of more intense pain. "*Your kind cannot defeat me! STAY AWAY!*"

With that, the presence was gone.

Rathcar opened his eyes, his meditation and spirit broken. Arat was standing over him, bared steel in hand. Arat's seasoned eyes studied the immediate areas, looking first this way then that into the darkness, a concerned look on his bearded face.

"I am ... unharmed," Rathcar said shakily. His head still hurt, throbbing with every heartbeat.

His delicate fingers massaged his scalp. "But I fear we have been found out."

Arat was stupefied. "What in the nine hells is going on?" he said as he sheathed Orthinel. "First, you won't tell me what you are carrying. What I'm helping guard. And now, I am awakened by a cry of pain! More importantly, that cry of pain came from you... an elf! Damnation! Tell me what is going on!"

The man was nearly shaking with concern turned to anger. Rathcar knew that he could not put-off his friend any longer.

"Gather your things," the elf said still holding his head. "We'll speak as we ride."

Arat started to protest. Rathcar stopped him, explaining that he healed the horses.

The two adventurers quickly and silently packed and set out. Arat could see that whatever hurt his companion sustained still lingered within his friend. Rathcar's movements were slow and deliberate. He was clearly not unharmed. The man did not press the issue. He knew the elf too well to do that.

They kept the horses at an easy gait since they were not entirely rested. The two fell in next to each other. Arat had enough time to have cooled off. When he spoke it was smooth and easy.

"My friend, I have been more than patient with you. Now, you are obviously hurt. Will you please tell me what is going on? What are we transporting? What hurt you?"

"'Who' would be more appropriate," Rathcar said listlessly. Arat noted the lack of energy. "I believe it was Lim'rosh. Though I cannot be sure. The White Council suspected that he had possession of an *aanylc*... in your tongue, an amulet of considerable power. The device enables him to have the power of clairvoyance. This is why we have been trying to pass unnoticed."

"Well, so much for that! You have still not told me what we are protecting," Arat retorted.

The elf shifted uneasily in his saddle. Arat could see that his friend was struggling with something other than his injury. He gave the elf time to formulate his response.

"You are familiar with the seven Elven Kingdoms," Rathcar replied after a few ticks.

"Aye."

"You are also aware of what each kingdom contains and protects." The elf's eyes looked straight ahead.

"You mean to tell me that..."

"DO NOT SAY IT!" Rathcar interrupted, nearly standing in the saddle facing the human. "Give

the enemy no chance of hearing! Now that you are aware, put it out of your thoughts.” Rathcar relaxed back into the saddle, eyes again facing forward, peering into the darkness. “It is magically shrouded. Yet the enemy could still possibly detect its radiance. I am using what powers I am able to also keep it from prying eyes. That is the reason why I cannot simply take flight. To do both would take more magical energy than I am able to muster.”

Arat knew of the power stones. There were seven in all, each about the size of a man’s fist. Each of the Elven kingdoms had custody of one. Arat had actually held the stone that he now knew Rathcar carried. The stone itself was clear with a bright white glow that illuminated the room. Never before had the human felt so much energy, so much raw strength. He was quickly seduced by the feeling, a very human fault, and didn’t want to return the stone to its resting-place. It was all Rathcar could do to get the stone away from Arat without swordplay. Rathcar could not charm the human while he held stone. Eventually, Arat was subdued, without injury, by four members of the royal guard and the stone returned to its resting-place.

Arat understood the danger of others knowing that the stone was not in its guarded hall. There were many that would do anything to possess it. One who wielded such power could be very dangerous.

"Can you use the it to heal yourself?" Arat asked hopefully.

"To do so, it would need to leave its protection, thus being unmasked. I will not take that chance."

“Why was the... item not delivered to its final destination by a party of elves?” Arat asked thoughtfully.

“That would be too conspicuous,” the elf replied. “Also, that would invite attack. This way, it was hoped that the item would arrive without any undo attention.”

"Well, so much for that," Arat repeated.

"I do not believe Lim'rosh knows. The attack was more retaliatory for my invasion of his..."

Rathcar erupted in a coughing fit. This caused his already aching head to scream elegant agony. The horses liked it not. Fortunately, Arat was able to keep both beasts under control. The fit lasted a tick or two. As it subsided, Rathcar was able to raise his head.

Not liking what he saw, Arat said, "Do not speak. Save your breath."

They rode quietly, both absorbed in their own thoughts. As the first rays of morning light broke the horizon, Arat suggested a brief rest to refresh both rider and mount. Rathcar readily agreed. Arat noted how gingerly Rathcar dismounted. The elf acted much like a human the morning after a night of too much drink. He was unsteady on his feet and his face paled. The light in the east continued to grow. Arat was now able to plainly see Rathcar’s eyes. The sparkle was gone. Where there was normally the white of the eye was now blood red. Arat had the image of two corks floating in a puddle of wine, so lifeless were his friend’s eyes. The elf was trying to undo the saddle of his horse, but his fingers were not doing what his mind wished.

“I’ll do that,” Arat said, deeply concerned. “You should sit and rest. Leave the horses to me.”

“I thank you, my friend.” Rathcar responded wearily. He hefted his saddlebags and took a few steps. The elf then plopped to the ground, as his legs gave out. His head lolled forward. Rathcar became motionless.

Nearly tripping on an exposed root, Arat rushed to his comrade. Rathcar was unconscious. Arat eased his friend into a sitting position. He then gently slapped at the elf’s cheek, knowing better than to say anything. That is a lesson one does not soon forget.

Slowly, the right eyelid opened just before left. Both stopped about halfway open.

"*Sumai*," whispered the elf.

"What say you?" Arat queried.

"Arat?" The elf sounded surprised to hear the man.

"Aye, tis I."

"Oh, yes..."

"Are you all right?"

"For the time being..." The elf rubbed at his head. "Tend the horses. Worry not about me..."

"Brave words, proven intent." Arat said loftily. Switching tones, becoming more sincere, "I will worry about you as I chose. But I will tend to the horses."

He did just that. The steeds had responded well to Rathcar's magic. The man's actions were automatic and complete. This was good as the human was preoccupied thinking about his friend. Never before had he seen Rathcar this lethargic. Arat had seen Rathcar take an amazing amount of physical damage in battle and still remain very focused, eyes sharp. Whatever Lim'rosh had done to the elf was serious. Arat began to doubt whether this mission would be completed by the elf, or completed at all.

He finished laying out the riding equipment and sat down opposite his friend. Rathcar didn't acknowledge the action. Instead, the elf stared blankly in front of him.

"I am concerned about you," Arat said as he offered the water skin.

Rathcar did not respond.

"Would you care for some water?" Arat asked after a short bit. His arm was getting tired.

"Please," came the soft response. The elf did not move other than to extend his right hand. It was nowhere near the water skin.

Arat put the skin in his friend's hand. Rathcar put it to his lips and began to drink. As the first few drops went down his throat, Rathcar started to choke. Water droplets flew from his mouth as coughed and gagged. Arat took the skin from him.

"This is not to be," Rathcar finally managed, referring to the drink of water. "You are right to be concerned, young one." Arat hated it when the elf called him that, especially now that he was approaching the autumn of his life, but said nothing. "I am not well," the elf continued. "I am having difficulty seeing. You must lead us from here on."

"Lead us'?" Arat questioned. "I know not of where we are going."

"We will continue southwest across the grasslands until there is a single great oak on our right... You will not miss it, for it stands more than thirty strides high. You must lead us to that tree."

He paused. "It is my hope that we reach the oak before sun-up on the morrow..." Rathcar trailed off, not having the energy to continue speaking. He still sat motionless.

"You forget, elf, that I do not have the sight of your kind. How am I to find this tree in the dark? Do we dare risk lighting a lamp?"

"You will find the tree." Rathcar's voice was dry and lifeless. "Trust your instincts. We must do what we must..."

The elf winced with pain, dropping his head to his chest. At the same time, his great white wings suddenly unfolded from under his cloak, sending the thick material flying up and over his head. Arat saw the pinion spasm violently at full extension. As quickly as it started, they fell lifeless to rest on the ground. The elf made no attempt to fold and conceal his wings. He didn't even uncover his head.

Arat was frightened by and for his friend. He quickly reached over and flipped the cloak away from his friend's head. Rathcar slowly lifted his head. Through the elf's mussed-up black hair, much to Arat's dismay, the golden irises were now cloudy. What looked to be a tear welled and then rolled down Rathcar's right cheek. As it left the rim of the eye, Arat saw that it was a drop

of blood.

“Can you hear me?” the human asked the elf.

A weak “aye” was the only response.

“What can I do to assist you?”

The elf remained motionless and silent.

Arat felt that he had inherited this mission. Never before had he seen Rathcar in such a helpless state. Something about the way the elf’s wings were just laying bothered Arat immensely. The man’s mood quickly went from worry to irritation to determination. He would get Rathcar to the oak tree he had spoke of. He was not sure what he would do when he got there, or if the elf would even survive the trip.

Arat moved to his friend. While lifting and adjusting the wings so that Rathcar could recline, he was amazed at how light and delicate the wings were. Arat realized that this was the first time he had ever touched his long-time friend’s magical and permanent appendages. The bright white feathers were downy soft and did not molt. Arat could not remember ever seeing any fall-out from the pinions, even after battle. Carefully he tucked the wings behind the elf into their usual resting position.

The elf did not resist. In fact, he did nothing at all. Arat eased Rathcar’s legs from under him, helping the elf lay down.

“Rest, my friend.” Arat said soothingly. “We need to give the horses a short rest and then we will be off.”

Arat thought about offering his companion some more water or even food, but quickly reconsidered. He feared that might somehow worsen Rathcar’s condition. Arat broke his own fast with some dried meat, *elan*, and water. He considered a big swig of wine, but thought better of it. He splashed some water on his face, relishing in the vigor. He reached into his pack and produced a small linen cloth. Arat moistened the cloth with water from the skin.

“Rathcar,” Arat began as he moved to his friend, “I am going to wipe your face with a cool cloth. I hope you find it soothing.”

Arat was glad to see that his friend had closed his eyes. The man dabbed at the blood trail the tear had left. It had already dried to a crusty path. The elf showed no reaction to the wet cloth or Arat’s words.

“Rathcar,” Arat said, wiping the cloth over the elf’s fine features. “Rathcar...” he repeated.

There was no response from the elf.

Arat used an open hand to gently slap at Rathcar’s left cheek.

“Rathcar,” Arat repeated a third time, taking a risk.

Still no response.

Arat had a sudden impulse to take the power stone from Rathcar’s saddlebag. Maybe the human could use it to help his friend. As quickly as the thought came, it passed. Arat remembered all too well how he had been consumed by the power of the stone. He also realized the danger it would pose by alerting all that were sensitive to magic. As far as he knew, the enemy’s forces could be bearing down on them at that very moment. He did not want to give them any assistance if he could avoid it. Rather, he would do everything possible to keep the stone from those who wanted to possess it.

“Can you ride?” Arat asked.

Again, no response.

Arat wasted no more breath. He set about saddling the horses and making ready to depart. He didn’t care about Rathcar’s ability to ride. He would tie the elf to the saddle if need be. Arat

checked the horses thoroughly before putting blanket to back. The animals showed no sign of going lame. Arat knew they were not fresh. He hoped that the animals would be up to a solid ride through this revolution. He saddled and encumbered the gray and then the roan.

Arat made sure that Rathcar had his precious cargo close to him. The man somehow knew in the back of his mind that the elf was expending the last of his energy to conceal the magical aura of the power stone. It was more of a feeling than certain knowledge, but Arat was sure of this. He carefully fastened the bags around the elf's midsection with leather straps, crossing elven arms over them.

"Rathcar," Arat said as he positioned himself to lift the elf, "Tis time to leave. I'm going to heft you to the saddle." He paused as he got his grip. "If you can help me, I would appreciate it."

The elf was limp in his arms and did not respond. Arat was squatting behind the elf, using his legs to lift the weight. The human silently cursed Rathcar's wings. Granted, they had been useful in the past for escapes and such. But now they were just a hindrance to Arat's objective. As he would start to lift, one of the wings would fall out of place and prevent Arat from getting any leverage. Arat would gain control of the renegade pinion and the other would break free. He would have found it amusing under other circumstances. Now, he found it frustrating. On the fourth attempt, Arat used the elf's cloak to wrap the wings. This proved successful. Arat now had the elf bowed over the horse's back, face down. The man stepped back and wiped at his face. As he planned his next move, to get the elf seated in the saddle, Arat noticed the blood dripping from Rathcar's eyes. The man quickly turned the elf over, watching to make sure the wings stayed within the cloak. Fortunately, they did. Holding on the elf's shoulders, he brought the elf's torso on to the flank of the horse. With a hand on the elf's chest, he came around and swung the right leg of Rathcar up and over the horse's neck. As if he were commiserating with the man, the roan remained remarkably still while the elf's position was changed. Arat stepped to the back and pushed Rathcar up and into the saddle, propping the elf up. Arat was amazed that Rathcar remained in an upright riding position. The blood flow had stopped, but deep red trails ran up, across, and down the elf's face.

"That was not so bad," Arat said proudly as he retrieved the damp linen. "I think that was rather ingenious." He wiped the blood from Rathcar's face. "We are soon off, my friend. To find the oak and the promise it brings."

He then fixed the lead of the roan to the saddle of the gray. As Arat was tying the leather, he had another thought. Using the straps from the saddle, he fastened Rathcar to the horse. If they had to make haste, the man wanted to make sure that his friend stayed with him. Arat then mounted and spurred his horse on, to the southwest.

They only stopped thrice during daylight. All three times Arat took the opportunity to stretch while the horses grazed and drank. Arat did not like leaving his friend perched on horseback, but had little choice. He also felt sorry for the horse. The roan seemed to sense what was going on and did not complain.

Arat watched the sunset from the back of the gray. He strained his eyes searching the horizon for the oak. As the light failed, he saw no sign of it. He waited for full dark before he stopped. "'Trust your instincts...'" Arat quoted as he dismounted. He had been talking to the elf all day. There had been and still was no response. Arat checked his friend and his cargo frequently. To see if he was bleeding, or chafing from the restraints, or even if he showed any sign of improvement. He gave him very small amounts of water at each stop. The elf's condition remained unchanged. Arat was sure his friend was still concealing the power stone, as he did not

feel its presence. That was a good sign, but he was still concerned.

"I wonder what he meant." Arat was surprised that he spoke his thought aloud.

The man set the horses with a long lead so that they could graze. He then watered the beasts.

Rathcar was still atop the roan; the horse was showing signs of wear. Arat put his hands on his hips and stretched backward. There were a series of *pops*. He then fetched some *elan*, the last of the dried meat, and a water skin. He ate as he walked about.

Arat was chewing the last of the meat when he smelled a peculiar odor. He stopped chewing and sniffed at the air again. He recognized the odor but could not place it. He was reaching to scratch his head in wonderment when the horses spooked. They had caught wind of the same odor. They immediately recognized it as dangerous.

"Whoa, whoa...." He eased as he walked toward them, arms up-stretched trying to settle the beasts.

That was when he heard it. A low, rumbling vocalization of a bear. It was behind the man. He estimated three to four strides. A distance a bear can cross in a heartbeat. The horses pulled against their tether. Rathcar rocked to and fro on the skittering horse's back.

Arat slowly turned. He wanted to go for the great sword he wore across his back but knew that he could not wield it in time. By the time he cleared the blade from the scabbard, this animal could tear him in half. Without thought his left hand settled on the short sword that hung near.

He saw it first in his peripheral vision. As he focused on the animal he was surprised at its size. The bear realized that Arat was turning around so it stood erect on its hind legs. Arat estimated the beast at fully three strides high; forty to forty-five stones in weight. Dark brown in color, Arat noticed the start of black fur on top of its head. It was the largest silverback Arat had ever seen. It wore a loose leather collar with many pouches tied to it. More than a thousand leagues from its native territory, the beast now looked down at Arat. Its jaws gaped, saliva strung between large, slightly stained white teeth. Its panting breath smelled sickly sweet.

Arat was about to speak to the bear when the bear spoke to him.

"Arrrrrrrrrat," the bear said using vocal cords in a way they were not designed to be used. Its eyes blazed with intelligence. "Noooooo thrrrrrreat," it groaned. The bear dropped to all fours, its reddish-brown coat jostling. Arat began backing up, maintaining eye contact. "Noooooo thrrrrrreat," it repeated. The huge animal sat, forelegs propping up its massive chest. The creature cocked its head and repeated, "Noooooo thrrrrrreat."

"What under the stars?" Arat said quizzically.

"Noooooo thrrrrrreat," it repeated. Then it began to change. The muscles began to ripple. Arat could hear bones contracting, joints popping. The hair started to retract in places, disappearing into the skin. Its nose withdrew into the head and its features changed. The skull re-formed as the nose shrunk. The fur on the face pulled back into the flesh. Forelegs became arms. Claws half a boot long turned to fingernails. The black tip of the nose changed color to a golden tan flesh tone. Before his eyes, Arat watched a large silver back bear change form to that of a man. The man was still rather hairy, most of it a reddish-brown. The man's entire lower half was covered in the long reddish-brown fur so that his genitalia were hidden. The hair of the beard ran down into the hair on his chest, which then trailed down joining the hair of his lower half. The hair on his head was long and black with silver tips running in a stripe from forehead to the back of the neck and down the man's back. The collar now hung very loosely about the man's neck.

Before the transformation was complete, Arat found that he no longer held the handle of Orthinel. He had been mesmerized by the transformation. Now, sitting before him, was a very

large human male and a very hairy one at that; he had lost very little size in the process. "Apparently you already know who I am," Arat snorted as he retrieved his blade, "Who be you?" "I am Mäch," he said in common tongue. "Rathcar *vloija*." "I have not heard Rathcar mention your name." There was suspicion in Arat's voice. "Not many know my name," the big man said coldly. "If I wished you harm, I would have inflicted it." "*And you couldn't stop me*," Arat finished in his head. Then he vocally said, "True enough, Mäch." There was a tense pause. "If you offer aid, I accept." The behemoth nodded agreement. "Good," Arat was somewhat relieved, "mayhap you can help me with him." "Then, it was elf blood that I smelled," he said gaining his feet and starting for the elf. "What is wrong?" Arat had no idea who this huge man-bear was, but he claimed to be elf-friend. Arat sensed genuine concern in Mäch's statement and question. "I believe he was magically attacked while meditating..." Arat responded. Mäch was standing next to the roan, which was no longer afraid, examining the elf. The big man still looked down at Rathcar who was seated on a horse. "Help me loosen him," Mäch directed. Arat did so. Mäch then picked up Rathcar, taking great care not to damage his friend's wings. Arat likened it to he picking up and carrying Tirem. The near giant gently laid the elf on the grass. Skillfully, he arranged the wings and head. He began to mumble something under his breath as he moved his hands ceremoniously above the elf. Arat assumed that this shape-shifter was a magician or cleric. He recognized the workings of a healing spell. It was not clear what type of spell it was, but it was working. Rathcar stirred. He rolled his head first left, then right. The huge shaman continued his magic. Arat moved closer to Rathcar as the elf began to speak. Both Mäch and Arat knew the words were ancient elvish, but neither understood them. The elf's eyes were glazed with dried blood. Under that opaque clouds hid the irises and pupils. Arat wondered if Rathcar would ever see again. The muttering of ancient elvish ceased. Rathcar lifted his head slightly as he uttered two words in common, "the tree". The elf's head dropped to the ground. He was out again. Mäch looked at Arat. The shaman caught the swordsman's gaze and held it. He controlled it. Arat felt another presence enter his body; there was nothing he could do about it. His recent memory played back in his head. The man's emotions swelled and ebbed. Then the presence withdrew. Arat realized he was staring at Mäch, who was attending Rathcar. The massive priest was tearing the hem of Rathcar's cloak. He fashioned a bandage and wrapped the elf's head covering the eyes. "How did you do that?" Arat asked. Mäch ignored the question. "I will carry him to the tree he spoke of. Stay close and don't lose your way." The huge man was moving into position to lift the elf. "How do you know of this tree?" Arat questioned. "Get on your horse if you want to keep up," Mäch lifted Rathcar. "Just one moment," Arat strongly protested. Mäch turned his back on him and started to run to the southwest. Arat quickly mounted the gray and set after the shape-changer, roan in tow. He kept the gray at

full gallop until he caught up with Mäch. The horses struggled at keeping pace between a trot and a gallop. Arat could hear the big creature breathe. The steady rhythm was almost hypnotizing. Several times Arat tried questioning Mäch, even pleading with him to slow... all to no avail. Each time the shaman responded with constant, rhythmic breathing.

Arat was worried that the running would further injure the elf. His protests fell on deaf ears. With what light was about, Arat closely watched the elf in the arms of the shaman. Rathcar seemed to float along, never being disturbed by the stride of his conveyor. Mäch was carrying the elf extremely well, safe and protected. Arat relaxed as best he could and rode close through the darkness.

The first words Mäch said were, "We are here." He abruptly slowed his running to a walk. Arat was surprised at the announcement. He saw no tree. He reigned back the gray, but not in time. He was knocked from the saddle by a branch. Landing hard on his back, Arat heard his own *oomph* as the air rushed from his lungs. Stars exploded in front of his eyes. Arat waited, expecting the roan to step on him, but it never came. He was surprised when his vision cleared to see the smiling face of an unfamiliar elf leaning over directly above him.

"Are you injured?" the elf asked rather jovial in common tongue. "I certainly hope not." The elf chuckled, his amethyst eyes sparkling. "It was great amusement."

"The only thing injured is my pride," Arat responded, offering his hand to the elf for assistance in regaining his feet. "Where is Rathcar?" Arat looked around. "And where are our horses?" "*Lor* Rathcar is being attended to," stated the elf flatly, helping the man to his feet. "*Lor* Trennial and his healers are tending him. Your horses are also being tended." The elf paused. "I am Phalei. Please follow."

"What are you doing here?" Arat asked as the two walked toward the center of the great tree. The dark of night was retreating as dawn approached. Arat was now able to make out the giant oak under which he strode.

"I assume that you mean the party of elves I am with as opposed to me personally," Phalei clarified. "We are an advance party journeying to Nemar to offer assistance and aid."

"That I understand," Arat said. "But what are you doing here, under this tree?"

"This was a planned meet between *Lor* Rathcar and *Lor* Trennial," Phalei said, eyes twinkling. They had reached the trunk of the tree, which Arat estimated to be four and ten manheight around. "He will tell you more."

"Where is *Lor* Trennial and your party of elves? I see them not." Arat looked around. He saw no signs of them or even the horses.

"They are where elves prefer to be," Phalei said smiling, "in the tree." He rapped sharply twice with the back of a knuckle. An elven cord dropped from somewhere above. The end had been tied into a small loop. "Please put your foot in the loop and grasp the cord with your hands." As soon as Arat complied, he was hoisted up. The ride was smooth. Arat expected to be nicked and scratched by branches as he ascended the tree. He was disappointed, as this was an established route. Two manheight up, Arat looked down for Phalei. He was nowhere in sight. Four manheight up and he saw a door in the trunk of the tree. It was here that the ascent stopped. Arat released the cord with his right hand and reached for the door. Just as his fingers brushed the handle, the door was pulled open from the inside. Standing there smiling was none other than Phalei.

"How...?" Arat started.

"I took the elvish way," Phalei laughed. The good-natured elf offered Arat his hand for a second time. "Come, I will take you to your friend," he said assisting Arat through the doorway.

Arat stepped into the tree. The interior of the trunk had been intricately carved and polished. Elven fables had been depicted in the carvings. Arat was astonished at the detail. Across the apparent solid floor, Arat suspected a trapdoor, were wooden rungs protruding from the wall. Phalei started to climb. Arat followed.

He was not sure how far he had climbed when Phalei disappeared through an opening. The carvings had held his attention. Arat climbed to that point and followed. Stepping through the portal, he realized that he was on a platform high up in the tree. How high up he didn't know. Arat could see the first rays of sun trying to break through the branches and leaves. The platform was circular, encompassing the trunk of the oak. It extended out from the trunk at least ten strides. The boughs had been trained and pruned so as to allow for elves and men to walk freely without bumping their heads. There were at least a score of elves in plain sight. The sound of elven voices lilting settled upon his ears. Arat was always moved when he heard elves singing. He would be hard pressed to think of a more pleasant sound. The words were elvish, as all songs sung by the fair ones were. The tired man felt his spirits lift.

Phalei went to his left around the trunk of the tree. Arat followed closely after. He saw more elves engaged in various activities such as blade sharpening, potion preparation, and spell memorization.

Phalei led Arat to a covered area on the platform, one hundred eighty degrees from the portal. Here the branches had been woven into a tight covering similar to a thatched roof. Five elves were gathered around a table on which Rathcar lay. Mäch was kneeling before the table at Rathcar's feet. His head was bowed as if in prayer.

Phalei stopped Arat before he could enter the covered area. He also motioned for the man to remain silent. Arat obliged.

On either side of Rathcar were two elves. The fifth, standing at Rathcar's head, was casting a spell. Arat knew without introductions that this was *Lor Trennial*. He was dressed in traveling clothes as all the elves were. In addition, *Lor Trennial* wore a cloak that blended with the flora behind and around him. It was edged with golden thread. On his head was a thin band of platinum. On this band, in the middle of Trennial's forehead, was set a brilliant yellow stone that radiated a faint glow. No larger than Arat's thumbnail, it was spectacular. This stone accentuated the elf's bright green eyes.

Arat was amazed at the intricacy of the spell. In his day, and there had been many, he had witnessed dozens of spell-casters plying their trade. He could not ever remember watching five cast as one. Under the command of *Lor Trennial*, the five magicians performed the exact same movements and vocalizations at the exact same time. Arat could feel the power in the air. Arat studied his friend's prostrate form. His face had been washed. On each closed eyelid was a white flower petal. Arat was not sure of what type. Rathcar's hair had been combed and pulled back. His wings had been folded and tucked so that his torso rested on a bed of feathers. His clothing had been changed...

Arat scanned the area frantically for Rathcar's saddlebags. Even the most honest elf could be corrupted by the powerful contents. He did not see them. Then it dawned on him. Mäch could have removed the power stone at any point during the night. He could have dropped the saddlebags to retrieve later. The gods knew that at several times he had been asleep in the saddle. No, Arat decided, that did fit the man-bear. The man that even while kneeling, was imposing. That man was now praying for Rathcar at the elf's feet.

Arat was about to question Phalei as to the whereabouts of Rathcar's saddlebags, when *Lor Trennial* spoke.

"Human," *Lor* Trennial said in rough common tongue. Trennial was a purest. He did not like humans and the ills they brought. He preferred not to associate with other races, especially humans; he found their odor overpoweringly oppressive and their manner rude. He was extremely put-off by Arat, who had not slept, let alone washed, in days. "You and I speak." Trennial said as he brushed past Arat.

"Yes, *Lor*," Arat said as he followed. Arat knew that he must use the title or he would lose *vloija* and possibly be killed on the spot. Rathcar was too familiar to use the title. Arat felt that Rathcar, at times, wished he did not have the title. He enforced its use sparsely. Arat had heard about *Lor* Trennial and his dislike of humans. He would give this one no reason to dislike him further.

Arat followed Trennial to the edge of the platform, about halfway back around to the portal. In his last step, Trennial spun to face Arat, who almost walked into the elf.

"Tell me know you of Rathcar hurt." He stated in a commanding tone.

"Ah..." Arat started. He stopped himself. It was in his nature to correct, which would not be a good idea here. "Rathcar... *Lor* Rathcar said that he thought Lim'rosh used something-called *aanylc* to invade his... thoughts. *Lor* Rathcar said that he thought we were found out."

"More," Trennial commanded.

"*Lor* Rathcar said that he was given a warning to stay out of Lim'rosh way."

"Rathcar..." Trennial paused. "Rathcar mm... meditate?" He was having problems with common tongue.

"Yes," Arat replied. Changing the subject, he said, "*Lor* Rathcar was carrying a very important item. Do you know where his saddlebags are?"

Trennial was shocked to be questioned by the human. He glared but said nothing.

"I have pledged my life to protect the contents of those bags." Arat said defiantly. "If you would please..."

"I have stones," Trennial interrupted, looking around the platform.

Arat bit back the urge to laugh. He was reminded of his transition from boyhood to manhood when the term "stones" meant a certain part of the male anatomy. Arat assumed the plural tense was another of Trennial's difficulties with the common tongue.

"Stones protected," Trennial continued. "Think not of stones."

Arat opened his mouth to protest. He felt responsible for the power stone. The pompous elf did not let him speak.

"Rathcar..." *Lor* Trennial paused searching for the right words. "In your language, poisoned. Lim'rosh amulet evil is toxin. Rot to core. Rathcar death near."

These last words struck Arat like a boulder hurled by a giant. They came crashing down on the man in a very final way. His head hung low.

Trennial realized the effect his words had on the man. Even though the elf disliked humans, he was true to his nature in that pain and suffering is the great enemy. Trennial had a sudden pang of sympathy for the man.

"Is there nothing you can do?" Arat asked weakly.

"Rathcar healing," Trennial clarified. "Much magic takes it. He mend three turns before moving." Trennial was matter-of-fact. "Stay or leave you."

Arat was both relieved and offended. "I will not forsake my friend," he said indignantly.

"Stay." Trennial said. The elf called to Phalei, who came immediately. Trennial spoke at length, all in elvish. Arat watched as Phalei absorbed the words, nodding periodically. Phalei then bowed as Trennial turned and walked back to where Rathcar lay. *Lor* Trennial ignored Arat as

he walked past the human. Arat was about to say something, then thought better of it.

Phalei addressed Arat, "*Lor* Trennial has asked that I attend you as long as you are our guest. I will do everything in my power to see to your wants and needs."

"I thank you, good elf. I appreciate *your* hospitality." Arat accentuated the "your", referring to Phalei.

"I will make no excuses for my *Lor*," Phalei said plainly. "He makes no attempt to conceal his disdain of your kind. Nor does he need to justify his opinion. After all, he is *Lor*."

"I meant no disrespect. It is that he is so different than Rathcar."

Phalei laughed. This statement was so absurd to the elf. Rathcar was half drow. Of course they were different. "I like you, human," he said still chuckling. "What do you desire first?"

"I want to stay with Rathcar." Arat said with a yawn.

"Very well. Are you hungry or thirsty?"

"Aye... and sleepy."

"Come," Phalei said, taking Arat by the arm. "We shall make you comfortable while food is prepared."

The two walked back to where Rathcar lay. Trennial had retaken his spot at Rathcar's head. The other four elves were once again working in unison with their *Lor*. Arat noticed that Mäch was no longer at Rathcar's feet. Arat was also too tired to care.

Phalei looked up, clapped twice, and said something that sounded like "in-the-lay". Much to Arat's surprise, a rope chair was lowered. It remained suspended from the branches above by two ropes. A length of wood was fastened across the top to keep the chair open. Arat looked at the chair, then Phalei, with suspicion.

Without a word, Phalei showed Arat how to gain the chair and how to leave it. Phalei held the contraption for the man.

Slowly, Arat eased his tired and sore body into the chair. He was surprised at how comfortable it was. Phalei silently motioned as if he were eating then held his hand up in a stopping motion.

Arat took this as "don't get up, I'll bring you food". The elf left.

Arat's attention was drawn back to Trennial and his healers. Once again, five were casting as one. Arat did not trust Trennial. He supposed it was natural not to like someone that did not like you. But this went deeper. Why did Trennial take possession of Rathcar's power stone? Why not leave it close to the one sworn to defend and protect it? The man was anxious for Rathcar to regain consciousness so that he may reclaim what is his.

When Phalei returned, he had to rouse Arat from sleep. The elf hated to do it, but his *Lor*'s instructions were clear. The human was to eat and drink; both food and ale were laced with a sleeping tonic. Trennial did not want to see or hear the human while Rathcar healed. Just because this man was *vloija* did not give him the right to address *Lor* Trennial as an equal. The *Lor* wanted Arat out of his way.

Phalei laid a gentle hand on the man's right shoulder. Arat woke with a start. He seemed to be amazed that he had been sleeping. He accepted the tray with a simple, quiet "thank you". Phalei immediately sat after handing the tray to Arat. He just folded his legs and dropped to the platform, not a stride away from the human. Arat always admired elves ability to be comfortable just about anywhere.

Arat ate hungrily. On the tray were a steaming bowl of vegetable stew, fresh coarse bread, a mug of ale, and a black slab of something that Arat could not identify. He didn't bother to ask either. Half of the hot stew was in his stomach before he even took a breath. Arat then grabbed the mug and downed the ale. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Looking at Phalei,

he smiled, and was about to say thank you again when the world went black.

He dreamt that he was home. Tirem sat on his knee playing with the turnabout Arat brought him from the dwarves of Cobalt. Arat could hear Krystel in the kitchen fixing something delicious. Arat could smell the aroma. Nyrin bounded from the bedroom, past Arat and Tirem, and into the kitchen. There was a loud crash and Krystel screamed. Nyrin came running back out of the kitchen, tail lowered. Krystel was close behind, broom in hand. She was cursing at the panther as she went.

The dream then shifted as dreams often do. He was suddenly in a tavern, which one he knew not. The place was full of raucous folk of all races. It smelled of stale sweat and ale. Arat looked around for a familiar face. He saw none. What he did see was drow, a large number of them. Arat then realized that everyone in the tavern, save himself, were now dark elves. He reached for Vhengeance. The sword was not on his back. His hand went for Orthinel. That, too, was gone. The drow were closing in on him. He could feel their hands grabbing. He started to scream. Then he saw Rathcar. The winged elf was standing at the top of the stairs. Arat called to his friend for assistance. Rathcar did not move. Arat was pleading at the top of his lungs. Rathcar spread his large, black bat-wings, threw his head back and laughed. Arat felt hands tear him down. Then the room disappeared in a swirl of darkness.

Arat was instantly blinded by brilliant white light. He held up his hand to shade his eyes and he saw the dark shadow of his bones through the skin. With eyelids fluttering and tears running down his cheeks, Arat wondered what could be causing such intense light... Gradually, his eyes started to adjust. Squinting against the glare, the man was able to discern a single source. That light source was held at a height just above the man's head, probably four strides from where he stood. For reasons he did not understand, Arat walked toward the light. After two steps, Arat realized that someone was holding the light source in place. Another step and he stopped.

The realization shook Arat to the bone. Standing there, holding the light source was Rathcar. He was naked save for the feathers that covered his wings. The light source was none other than all seven of the power stones that had merged to form one. Arat thought he would go mad from the exposure if he did not get away soon. He worried not about Rathcar; the elf seemed in his element. The light dimmed slightly, enough so that Arat could clearly see his friend's face. Rathcar's eyes locked with Arat's. The elf smiled and silently mouthed "*vloija*". The brightness began to increase. It got brighter and brighter. The elf disappeared in the light. Arat felt the power wash over and absorb him.

Arat's eyes opened. Then slammed shut again. In the time that they were open, he learned three things: that the sun was shining brightly, he had no idea where he was, and that his head hurt horribly. He brought his right arm up so that his forearm covered his eyes. Using this shade, he slowly lifted his lids. This was still painful, but at least he could tolerate it. Squinting, he slowly rolled his head to the left and then to the right to try to get his bearings.

He could see that he was still in the grasslands, probably still in Nemar. As his head rolled to the right, Arat saw that Mäch was sitting a few strides away.

"You are awake," the man-bear said.

"I wish I were not," Arat mumbled. He lowered his arm as he tried to sit-up. Arat felt waves crashing inside his head and was suddenly nauseated. "Ooh..." he moaned as he lay back down.

"What happened?" he asked.

"*Lor* Trennial banished humans from the tree," Mäch replied, "at least while Rathcar is being healed."

"The last thing I remember is eating and drink...." the man paused. "That bastard!" Arat strongly

declared, sitting up. He then promptly grabbed his head as his volume caused him pain. He quickly lay back down again. "Wait until I see Phalei again..."

"Do not lay blame where it is not due," Mäch said in a passive tone. "The elf was just following the instruction of his *Lor*. Besides, you needed the sleep."

"That is arguable," Arat said as he was letting go of his anger. "How long was I out?"

"Just over two revs."

"Two revs? Well, it is better than waiting. What news of Rathcar?"

"I know not," Mäch said looking at his hands. "I left the tree when you did. I have not seen an elf since." What Mäch didn't tell Arat was that it was he who carried the swordsman from the tree. That Mäch left the tree of his own accord. Trennial only banished Arat.

"Two revs and you haven't seen an elf?" Arat sat up again. "How do we know they are still there? Any one of them could have absconded with the pow..." Arat caught himself. "With Rathcar's saddle bags!"

"They are there. I know about the items Rathcar was carrying... and will carry again."

"Items, you say. That is the second time I have heard there is more than one. Tell me more."

"Rathcar will share what he wishes to share. The items are safe. I will say no more about it."

Mäch was looking at Arat expecting a challenge. It did not happen; Arat held his tongue.

Instead, Arat examined the surrounding area. He saw the great oak; it was about 60 strides away.

Between he and Mäch were ashes in a fire ring. Next to him were his saddle, pack, and weapons. Arat immediately inspected the latter, sure that he'd find signs of neglect. He was surprised to find that someone, either an elf or Mäch, had carefully tended and wrapped his swords and daggers. He unwrapped and meticulously inspected each. Barely discernible on each hilt was a small elven rune that had not been there before. Arat did not recognize it. This disturbed him greatly. Knowing how Trennial scorned mankind, Arat was suspicious that this may be the mark of a curse. He didn't mention this to Mäch. Arat would take this up with Rathcar when he saw him next.

Arat felt the call of nature. He started to stand, got wobbly, then sat down hard. His head was swimming again. He felt Mäch's eyes on him. Arat started up again. Before he realized it, Mäch was at his side steadying him. Arat didn't think the big man could move that fast. Arat's pride got the best of him and he tugged away from the huge man. Once again, Arat started to pitch over; Mäch caught him.

"I will assist you," the priest said calmly.

"Just to the tall grass," Arat replied, "I can take it from there."

"Agreed."

Mäch escorted Arat into the grass. He left him there, Arat unsteady on his feet. Mäch returned to their campsite. Arat completed his business. By the time he made it back to where Mäch and his belongings were, Arat's head was starting to clear. He only stumbled once on the trek.

As Arat approached, he saw that Mäch was busy blending the components from several pouches into a wooden cup. Mäch carefully measured the amount of water he poured into the cup.

"What is that?" Arat asked as he settled onto his blankets.

"I have made a potion to restore your body," he replied.

"I have no need for such a potion."

"Now that you passed water, the dizziness shall return."

As if on cue, a wave hit Arat. He was about to go over backward when Mäch caught him.

Without saying a word, Mäch raised the cup to Arat's lips. He drank hesitantly, then choked.

Mäch pulled the cup away.

“What goat’s ass did that come from?” Arat said gagging.

“It is what you need now. Do not ask what it is made of.”

Mäch raised the cup again. Arat pushed it away with his right hand and sat down.

“Take it and drink,” the huge man said nonchalantly. “That is, if you want to be able to ride on the morrow.”

“What did Trennial have Phalei put in my drink?”

“All I know is that it was an elven tonic.” Mäch said returning to his spot across the fire ring.

“Then how do you know your concoction will help me?”

Mäch said nothing. He studied the human, formulating his response. When he spoke Arat had a sense of this man’s wisdom. “Amongst the elements there are what I will call ‘trees’. As with all ‘trees’, you do not see it in its entirety. There is a system of roots: the taproot for water, ancillary roots for minerals and other nourishment, and other roots for support. By observing the tree over a period of time, one is able to determine what is wrong with the ‘tree’.”

“How does that apply to your potion?”

“Over the last two days I have learned much about you.”

Arat got a nervous look on his face, wondering if Mäch had gone through his belongings.

“Your scent contains much information,” Mäch continued. “From my experience, I am able to speculate what ingredients were used in the tonic by the odors you gave and still are giving off. I know not what magic was used. The potion I made is to counter those ingredients.” Mäch paused. “Besides, I have had dealings with Trennial in the past. You are not the first human he has had put to sleep.”

“You are saying, that from your past experience, this concoction will make me feel better.”

“Aye, it will.”

Arat did what adventurers always do: rely on his instincts. He had no reason to doubt the man-bear. All Arat knew about this person was that he had been pacing the two on their trip, he claimed to be Rathcar’s friend, and that the elves accepted him. All in all, those were pretty good credentials.

“Give me the blasted cup,” Arat finally said.

Mäch rose to hand Arat the wooden cup. Arat was once again amazed at this creature’s size and grace. Arat took the cup and, plugging his nose, drank the contents down.

Mäch laughed at the face Arat made as he brought the cup down.

“That is the worst tasting brew I have ever had!” he said with a scowl.

Mäch laughed even harder. After a moment, he was able to say, “You should try my cure-for-too-much-drink!”

Arat was not amused. “And why would I want to?”

“It works,” Mäch said still chuckling.

“Why are you laughing?”

“Because the cure-for-too-much-drink has twice the amount of horse-water than that which you just drank!”

Arat thought he would be sick. He suddenly felt a warm rush go through his body. His fingers, toes, and hair tingled. Black spots exploded in front of his eyes. This passed when Arat belched. Arat felt wonderful. He had a bad taste in his mouth, but he felt great. His head was clear. His muscles no longer ached. He rapidly felt his body fill with energy. A huge smile grew on his face.

“It seems that you are feeling better?” Mäch half-asked, half-said.

“Aye! I feel that I have the strength of ten men!” Arat could not contain his excitement. “I do

not remember when I last felt this good!”

“The euphoria will wear-off soon.”

Arat didn't hear Mäch's words. He continued to chatter until that side effect wore off. Mäch just sat, smiling, and listened. Arat couldn't contain himself in being seated; he was up and pacing as he rattled on.

Finally, Arat took a deep breath and sat down in his spot. Mäch was still smiling.

“I thank you, Mäch.” he said as his old self, something Mäch had not seen until this point. “I should not have doubted you.”

“That is human nature.”

“I have not said it before this, so let me say this now,” Arat said in his most humble voice,

“Thank you.” He looked at the ashes in the fire ring. “I fear that I may have lost a dear friend if not for your help. For that, I thank you.”

“It is nothing the winged one would not have done. Debts are never repaid, just reversed.”

“How do you know Rathcar?” Arat was genuinely interested.

The Noachian Forest, as it is known, is one of the great stands of timber from the birth of Arth. Its great spans once encompassed one third of the landmass on Arth. With the expansion of humans, the old wood was cut back. Still dominating the eastern half of the continent, the Noachian was split by the Ferrous Mountains. Mäch's homeland was in the northern foothills of those steep and stalwart peaks. His people used the landscape for protection from the elements, dwelling in the deep valleys and hollows. It was a wild and harsh land, sparsely populated by two-legged animals. There were plenty of the four-legged kind. Quite a few of those were predators. It was a natural and dangerous place. The fittest survived and prospered; the others were usually eaten.

It was in this habitat that Mäch was raised. Perhaps “grew-up” would be more appropriate. His mother died in childbirth. His father had little time for him; his duties as shaman always took precedence over family. His six older brothers blamed him for the loss of their mother.

The rest of his people feared and avoided Mäch. First, when his mother was carrying him in her womb, the old women bode an omen about the size of the mother's stomach. Then they had heard the story of his birth and were horrified. As the old women had warned, Mäch was too large when he was born. That alone would have probably killed the woman. What made matters worse ensured the fact. Before the midwife's eyes, the over-sized newborn transformed into a bear cub. As the cub pulled himself free, he immediately crawled-up and started to suckle. The midwife, still in her stunned stupor, then watched the cub turn back into a newborn, nursing at the teat of his dying mother. There had been other spontaneous transformations witnessed by many. If Mäch had not been the son of their shaman, he would have surely been killed by the folk. The shaman didn't fully understand why such a thing would happen... there was the lore about the seventh son of the seventh son, but he only had five brothers. He could not show it, being the shaman of his people, but he was scared of his newborn son.

Spending time with other people was not an option. Mäch spent much of his time in the woods, learning life's lessons from nature. He first wandered away from his father's lodge when he was just thirty moons old. The toddler had spent several spans exploring the forest floor before his father discovered that Mäch was missing. By that time, the boy-cub had befriended the alpha male of the area's wolves. In many ways, Mäch learned the most from those animals over the years. The shaman used his powers to find the child and return him to the safety of the lodge. It was not long after that when Mäch first asked where his mother was. Since he had not had

communication with anyone but his father, his language skills were rough. Mäch's oldest brother had taken his other siblings to another dwelling shortly after Mäch was born. His father, not knowing what to say, told Mäch that his mother was a yew tree. That was not so far from the truth. The ashes from her funeral pyre were spread at the base of such a tree.

By the time Mäch was four epochs old, his wanderings took on new purpose. He had reasoned that he should be able to at least see his mother. The shaman by that time had realized there was little that he could do to contain the boy-cub. No one would look after Mäch, save the wolves. The best he could do was to teach Mäch the ways of the wild; he also gave him a knife with thorough instruction. Mäch was then given the knowledge and gift of fire. He proudly wore both his knife and his flint pouch on his belt.

One particular outing, Mäch had the desire to climb as high as he could to see if he could spot his mother. He had reached the timberline by midday. Stopping briefly, he stripped a sapling. Sweet and tasty, the juicy fibers satisfied his hunger and thirst. He resumed climbing. The terrain was very rocky which made the going easy. Before long, the scrub brush gave way to high-altitude grasses and weeds. Still something drove Mäch to climb higher. The rocks grew larger and fewer in number. The boulders he was crawling around dwarfed the boy-cub. Finally, as the sun faded, Mäch could climb no higher. He had reached the summit of the peak. For the first time since he started climbing, he turned around.

He was awed. Never before had he seen so much territory. He didn't know the world was so large. A sea of green and gray spread out before him, rolling from mountain to hills to forest. The stark contrast between the mountain rock and the timberline gave Mäch his first lesson in the divergence and vastness of the world.

Suddenly, awe turned to the feeling of futility. How could he find his mother now? His heart sank. He plopped down hard onto the ground. Tears welled as he buried his face in his hands. A hand touched his shoulder. How long he had wept he did not know; not that it was important. What was important is that someone was now behind him. He hadn't noticed the approach. He spun while gaining his feet. Before him stood a man-like creature with great white wings on his back; Mäch liked the way the breeze played with the feathers. Bright, gold eyes danced with an inner happiness. This supported the smile worn on this stranger's face. On the left cheek was the strangest-looking mole, like a moon and a star. Mäch relaxed a little but was still weary. He had never seen such a creature before.

"Are you in need?" the winged one asked in Mäch's language.

The boy-cub didn't respond. He didn't know what to think. Then instincts kicked in. Mäch began to move backward. So taken with this winged wonder, he forgot he was atop a peak. His first step backward was fine. The second sent him tumbling. He rolled down the rock face hitting his head hard, not once but thrice. If he had been conscious, he could possibly have stopped himself from going over a cliff.

Rathcar made a grab for Mäch as soon as he lost his footing. The elf then took to the air timing his approach. He saw the child *smack* his head the first time and knew this rescue would be easier with him unconscious.

To an outside observer, it would have looked like a falcon plucking a duck from midair. As Rathcar eased to a landing he examined the wounds to the youngster's head. It was not too serious; the child would be able to proudly display the goose eggs that were forming. The elf had just stowed his wings when the most amazing thing happened. He was setting the child down so as to work magic upon him when the child began to transform. Rathcar took a step back and observed the still unconscious child change into a bear cub. It was obviously immature

but the elf recognized that it was a silverback he was looking at. The belt that held the boy's loincloth, knife, and pouch split, dropping them to the ground. Slowly the animal regained consciousness. The beast was obviously frightened, hurt and confused. It eyed Rathcar carefully, seemingly debating an attack. The bear's lips wavered, partially showing strong, white teeth.

The elf's delicate fingers danced in an intricate fashion. A bright blue ball of light appeared between his outstretched hands. A smile played on Rathcar's face. The bear's attention was now focused to the ball of light. Suddenly, the ball split into three, each beginning to change color and cycling through the prism. The elf began to juggle. The bear, absorbed in the moving magic, sat down. Slowly, the bear began to transform once again. As Rathcar watched the change, he wondered what kind of magic was responsible; the changeling radiated a magical aura the elf didn't recognize. It was the aura that made the elf take notice of the child in the first place. The transformation did not seem painful nor did it seem intentional. This creature was most curious.

As the change concluded, a smile formed on human lips. The silence was broken by laughter. The three balls of light were now rotating around Rathcar's right hand. He motioned to the child with his left. Mäch understood and reached out his right hand. Slowly, Rathcar moved his right hand towards the boy's. The spheres of light shifted so that they rotated around Mäch's hand. When the boy brought his left hand close, the balls split so that a set rotated around that hand. Mäch giggled all the harder. He made large circles with his arms and the spheres followed. He brought his hands together and the six balls merged to three.

While Mäch was thus engaged, Rathcar magically healed the boy-cub. Just the fact that he was able to do that taught the elf something of the aura this one emanated. The elf had a sudden inspiration. He released one of the pouches from his belt. Dexterous fingers quickly undid the knot. He inverted the pouch with his left hand, dropping the content into to right. Mäch was still playing with the ever changing colored balls. Rathcar dropped the empty pouch. Using his free hand, he loosened a second pouch. Forefinger and thumb went into the bag to grasp a pinch of the powdery contents.

"Child," Rathcar said softly, gaining Mäch's attention as the balls of light disappeared, "You won't remember this." The elf charmed the boy; perhaps instantly hypnotized would be a better description. Mäch now stood motionless in front of the elf. "This is not going to cause you any discomfort. You will feel my presence. Relax as best you can. It may feel a little crowded, but it won't last long."

Rathcar began casting. In a whisper, ancient verse poured from his lips. Slowly his right hand raised to rest in front of the boy's eyes. Carefully held between forefinger and thumb was a green gem the size of a chicken egg. At the right moment, he brought his left hand over his right, sprinkling the powder held there. With a flash of white light, the gem began to rotate on the axis of elven fingers. The gem itself began to glow with an inner illumination. A green light the color of moss emanated from the stone. It grew, directionally, towards both boy and elf, who was still reciting verse. Straight rays of green light connected elven eyes to the gem to the eyes of the boy.

Rathcar had performed this spell on hundreds of beings over his many epochs. Never before had the access been so open, not having even the slightest subconscious resistance. It had been the elf's observation that most were not comfortable being joined in this fashion. At the worst, it was like walking knee-deep in mud, at its best was like wading through ankle-deep water, this connection with the boy was like gliding through the sky. Instantly, the elf knew everything the

boy knew. The child didn't understand his transformations but was not scared of them. They were a part of his *pa*, his purpose.

Suddenly, Rathcar didn't control the connection any longer. Energy flow reversed. The elf tried to fight the influence, but could not stop it. The elf felt the invasive energy mix with his own, becoming one. Impetuous exuberance and sense of awe was overwhelming.

That was when everything changed. No longer in the Ferrous Mountains or the Noachian forest, Mäch and Rathcar stood on a plane unknown to the elf. There was no sense of space or depth... no feeling of here and there. A swirling, gray mist encompassed the two and everything else for that matter. The only visible illumination were orbs of multicolored light that flickered and moved through the mist not unlike the orbs the elf had juggled. It was at that point that the elf realized that he was watching himself standing next to the boy-cub. A spotted horse ran by, from what would be the floor on up away over their heads. The sound of drums exploded in the elf's ears. Mäch didn't seem to notice. Rhythmic pounding receding quickly, the elf noticed that the mist was now brilliant blue. One of the orbs left the mist to hover between the two. Rathcar went to one knee, looking the boy-cub in the eye. The ball of ever changing light moved to position itself between the two mouths. Rathcar saw enlightenment in the boy's eyes.

"What is your nature?" It was a male child's voice, but it did not come from this child's mouth. It was said inside his head.

The elf was astonished by the question. There was a depth to this child. One certainly wouldn't expect such a question from such a youngster.

"Living and learning," Rathcar responded. "To serve Light."

"What is 'Light'?" The boy's head tilted slightly to his left.

"It is the positive life force that spans throughout creation," the elf tried to phrase his response in a simplistic, concise form. "It flows through you and I even now."

Mäch seemed to understand. "How do you serve?" he asked without blinking.

Rathcar paused, formulating his response. "I strive to keep the scales as even as possible, thus allowing all creatures to choose their own path and to grow in the direction they choose."

Mäch stared without response.

"Throughout existence," the elf continued, "all living things are shaded white or black, light or dark... good or evil... or both. If there is too much Darkness, free choice is lost. I serve by doing my best to assure that all living things are allowed to follow the path of their own freewill."

"Does that not allow Darkness to grow as well?"

"That is true. I, however, believe that Light will prevail."

"Then why do you serve Light?"

"It is my nature." A smile played on the elf's lips.

The boy-cub closed his eyes. He remained motionless, as did the elf. A deep rumbling filled the environment. Rathcar felt the vibration of the noise permeate his body. He reached his right hand out and laid it on Mäch's left shoulder. The child was also vibrating. His head lolled back, face turned up. Pulling his hand back, Rathcar watched with amazement as Mäch's mouth opened. The rumbling got immensely louder. The small mouth was filled with teeth, including the large fangs of a predator. The child's eyes popped open. The same blue that made-up the mist now glowed from his eye sockets. The rumbling grew to a crescendo and stopped. He "looked" directly at Rathcar.

"*Rathcar Mannon Lordshire,*" a deep, booming voice projected from the boy-cub's body, "*thou was previously unknown to thee.*"

Rathcar realized that this being was speaking to him in ancient elvish. He knew instinctively that this entity that now addressed him was of a much higher plane of existence. Who or what this being was, he had no idea. Before he could speak, the entity continued.

“Thou has charmed and investigated thy chosen one, intervening in his progression. Thus, it is thy command that thee be intertwined. Have thou any objection?”

“I pray, thou, share thy understanding,” the elf replied.

Stars exploded in Rathcar’s eyes. He felt as though he was reeling, being hurled through space. A multitude of images, shapes, colors, sounds, and scents flooded his heightened senses.

Periodically, scenes would flash into view from an outside perspective. The first was from high above as Rathcar flew north, noticing Mäch for the first time. That dissolved, swirling into the menagerie. The second scene was Arat sitting across a fire pit from what appeared to be Mäch as an adult. Both were thoroughly engulfed in their conversation. Arat seemed not to notice as Mäch changed into a large silverback and then returned to human form. The fire roared up, swallowing up the vision. The colors of the rainbow ebbed and flowed within the flame.

Suddenly, the fire imploded, leaving everything black. The light from a torch appeared far in the distance. The elf’s sharp eyes recognized the torchbearer as a dwarf. He did not know the long-bearded, stout fellow, but knew that the one behind him was Mäch. Easily twice the dwarf’s height, Mäch looked as though he had just finished his growth; naivete still shown in his eyes.

Without warning, the dwarf was struck in the chest by a short, black dart. He dropped the torch, causing the light to jump and flicker. Both of the dwarf’s hands went to the dart, pulling it out. Rathcar could smell the dwarven blood. Mäch gently pushed his injured comrade to the side, snatching two more darts out of the air. Without hesitation, the large man-bear quickly fired the darts back at the attacker. Rathcar could not see who the attacker or attackers were or where they stood. Mäch obviously did. As he started to move forward, he also began his transformation. By the time he was out of the illuminated area, he was fully changed. Rathcar listened to claws sound on the hard stone floor. The dwarf had fallen, resting against the wall. A commotion followed. Screams filled the air. It was then that Rathcar smelled the familiar scent of blood... drow blood. The torch flickered out. Blackness gave way to the dawn. As the sun rose over a sand dune, Rathcar saw himself and Mäch sleeping. They were half buried in the endlessly shifting sands. Both were in serious trouble, judging by the crust around each of their mouths and by the color and texture of their skin. Thunder clapped, waking the two. Both faces erupted in smiles as rain began to fall. Rathcar’s eyes were drawn to the sky overhead. When he looked back at Mäch, the boy-cub was not much older than he was when the elf came across him on the mountaintop. The two were in a log lodge, seated at a wooden table. Numerous scrolls and tomes were laid upon the worn tabletop. Not only had Mäch learned his letters, he was mastering numerous languages. Mäch looked at Rathcar saying “thank you” in seven different tongues. The scene once again altered itself. Mäch was old, very old. His hair was white with age, yet his face still showed a youthful quality despite the many wrinkles and a few scars. The shaman knelt over Rathcar seemingly praying or casting a spell. Rathcar felt warmth, but little else. His eyes were heavy. He tried to sit-up but could not. Mäch finished his spell or prayer by laying his hands on the elf. The warmth multiplied. Rathcar felt a smile form on his lips. Mäch looked the old elf in the eye, saying, “Journey well, my teacher... my friend. I shall see you on the other side.” Mäch’s large hand moved into view above the elf’s forehead. Slowly, the shaman lowered his hand, closing Rathcar’s eyes.

Sunlight hurt those same eyes. He and Mäch were standing on the mountain, in the same position they were in when the elf lost control of the spell. The sun, however, was low in the sky

as day crept toward night. The angle of the sun was acute and it shone into the elf's eyes. Mäch was smiling; his eyes still shown a glowing blue.

"Does thou understand?" the entity asked through Mäch.

"I believe so," Rathcar responded. *"I am to assume some responsibility for the boy-cub and his lessons."*

"Thou have already begun. Do not disappoint thee."

The blue glow left the boy-cub's eyes. He shook his head trying to clear it. Rubbing his eyes with balled fists, Mäch began to cry.

"Do not fear, little one," the elf soothed in Mäch's native tongue. *"My name is Rathcar. I will see you home safely."*

"I know your name," Mäch responded with a shaky voice, *"and I know where you're from."*

Rathcar looked curiously at Mäch.

"You're an elf... a winged elf," the boy-cub continued. *"A king of sorts. You live in Timberwood, far to the south of here."* The boy's tears had stopped. He now looked accusingly at the elf. *"You tried to do something to me. But my protector intervened..."* Mäch stopped suddenly. A quizzical look appeared on his face.

Rathcar found it interesting that Mäch used the term 'intervened'.

"Do you understand me?" Rathcar asked in elvish.

"Of course I do!" Mäch responded emphatically, also in elvish.

Rathcar found this most curious. When he first entered the boy-cub's mind, he did not find extensive language skills. He figured that Mäch knew thirty-to-forty words in his native language. Now, he understood and spoke elvish. The elf reasoned that somehow the entity Mäch called 'protector' had somehow shared some of the elf's knowledge with the boy-cub. Or, it was possible that the protector had given the boy-cub some of its own intellect. Rathcar had no idea of the extent or duration of this gift, but he wished he knew more of this entity, Mäch's protector.

"What has happened to me?" Mäch asked in common tongue, rubbing his head with both hands.

"I feel like I'm hundreds of epochs old, yet my body has not changed. My head hurts as though someone stuffed it with nettles." Mäch stopped, again with a quizzical look on his face. *"WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO ME?"* he screamed, tears welled-up in his eyes. *"All these words... I don't comprehend..."*

"You have experienced a life-changing event," Rathcar explained. *"It will be a short period before you are fully comfortable with your newly attained... perhaps, newly developed... abilities. Do not worry, your protector would do nothing to harm you. Neither would I."*

"I know my protector," Mäch shot back, sniffing back the last of his tears. *"I have not seen you before today."*

"Your protector has charged me to assist and teach you... under a grave penalty, I fear. You can trust me as you trust your protector."

Mäch cast a wary eye towards the elf.

"Come," Rathcar said, *"let us get you home before your father worries."*

"My father does not worry about me," Mäch said in a flat voice.

"Why? Does he know your protector?" the elf asked.

"No... as far as I know, you are the only other one that knows."

"Then why does your father not worry?" Rathcar already knew the answer, but wanted to know if Mäch was aware.

"He wishes I was never born."

In that awkward moment, Rathcar understood that Mäch knew.

“Have you ever flown like a bird?” the elf asked cheerfully, trying to change the demeanor of the lad.

“No,” Mäch replied, “though I have often watched the eagle glide across the sky and wished that I were on its back.”

“I will not be carrying you on my back, but what say you to a quick flight to your lodge? Do you trust me enough to do that?”

Mäch eyed Rathcar carefully.

“Remember,” the boy-cub said plainly, “my protector *knows thee*.” The last two words were in ancient elvish.

“You will come to realize that I am no threat to you. I understand your wariness and caution. In fact, I am glad to see those qualities in you. As you grow, you will learn to trust your instincts. Come, now, gather your knife and pouch. I will show you how to hold on.”

Rathcar then explained how he would hold Mäch, what it may feel like, and that they were not going to be in danger. Having thus assured the youngster, Rathcar grasped him, then took flight into the painted sky of sunset.

Mäch was nervous and stiff at first. Before long, however, he was giggling and laughing. He would pause between pointing things out and ask Rathcar questions. How did the elf get his wings? How fast could he fly? Had he ever flown to the sun? Is it tiring? Rathcar was glad that the boy-cub had seemed to forget the trauma of his newfound skills. Mäch was using his new language abilities without thought; the elf wondered what other surprises this one held.

The elf did not need directions. He had learned Mäch’s knowledge of the area during the spell.

The two touched down outside Mäch’s village just as the moon began to rise. The flight had done wonders for Mäch. He anxiously led Rathcar by the hand to his father’s lodge, ignoring the stares and whispers of his people.

No one was home.

“I will never forget when Rathcar bent on one knee...” the big man paused.

Arat felt that there was emotion that wanted to come out, but Mäch bit it back.

“He looked me square in the eye and said, ‘You will be a great warrior of Light and a most powerful shaman. Learn all and grow well.’ Shortly after that, I discovered that I could control my instinctual powers.”

“Your ability to... change?” Arat queried.

Mäch nodded. “I have never forgotten his words.”

“He is a most amazing elf,” Arat contributed.

“That he is. That he is.”

The two continued their conversation throughout the span and into the eve, each telling this story or that, making each other laugh and sharing moments of intense tension. The conversation only paused while they ate; Mäch used his powers and skills to procure the best the area had to offer. Arat was astounded by the ease of which the shaman did so. They enjoyed roasted hare, carra root, and a kind of grass that was sweet and juicy.

After dinner, still conversing Arat enjoyed a pipe. He politely offered to share his blend with Mäch. The man-bear turned down the offer. Arat noticed that the smoke was attracted to his companion and swirled about him. He would blow his smoke this way and that, and yet it was drawn to the big man.

"I beg pardon," Arat interrupted, "but why is it that the smoke is drawn to you?"

Mäch smiled. "It is because of my *qi*... my life force. I am deeply intertwined with the elements. It is part of what I am."

"I see," Arat said. Thoughtfully, he continued, "Please continue with your story."

The two talked past sunset. Arat notice that the tree was full of different colored illuminated orbs.

As Arat lay down to sleep, he looked forward to the morrow. He looked forward to seeing Rathcar.

When Arat woke, the sun was climbing to mid morn. He sat up and looked around. He saw where Mäch slept. There was no sign of the shaman. Arat immediately set about his morning chores. Once relieved, refreshed, and armed, he set out for the tree.

There was no sign of activity. As he approached, Arat studied the elevations searching for movement, smoke, something. His veteran eyes were unable to discern any indications of life other than the tree. He circled the massive trunk, looking for a way up. When he completed his orbit, he stopped and scratched his chin.

"Hello?" Arat shouted up at the tree. "Anybody..."

"No need to yell," interrupted Phalei from behind.

Arat spun his hand on the hilt of Orthinel.

"Please, there is no call for that," soothed Phalei with eyes shining. "There is one who wishes to see you. He bid not to wake you. Please, step into the loop and grasp..."

"I know how it works," Arat grumbled as he turned to the lowered rope. His boot went into the loop and he took hold.

Arat was propelled upward at an alarming rate. He had the thought that this was some perverted way Trennial was going to kill him. He was lifted much further up than the last time. The ascent slowed and stopped at a square platform three quarters of the way up the tree. Posted at each corner armed with a fine spear was an elven warrior. In the center, seated in a triangle were Trennial, Mäch, and Rathcar, saddle bags in hand. Arat's point of view was facing directly at Trennial, Mäch at the left and Rathcar on the right, who was also facing Trennial. The purist-elf finished saying something in elvish. To which Rathcar replied, also in elvish.

"How can you stand them, Rathcar?" Trennial spat in elvish.

"We are all creation's children," Rathcar retorted. *"One is not better than the other."*

Mäch listened intently. He spoke elvish fluently. He also knew that these two Lordshires did not necessarily like each other. Their views were quite often very different. He also knew better than to speak.

Arat stepped onto the platform as he hailed his old friend.

"Rathcar!" his voice was joyous. Trennial glared angrily. "Rathcar, my brother, how fare thee?" He was crossing to the winged one.

"Brother Arat," Rathcar responded with an equal joyous quality as he rose to greet his comrade.

"It is very good to see you!"

The two met clasped hands to arms.

"We have many things to discuss," the swordsman said seriously, glancing toward Trennial. Arat pulled back.

"We shall leave shortly," Rathcar replied. "Please, address our host and share my gratitude." He said, turning and gesturing to Trennial.

Rathcar could see anger in Arat. He suspected what may have happened, figuring that Arat would fill him in on what transpired.

"Lor Trennial," Arat said in the most humble voice he could muster, "I thank thee for mending

my friend." He bowed slightly. It was stiff and obviously not heart-felt.

"I did it not for you, human," Triennial loftily said. "It is what we are in the balance." He turned and addressed Rathcar. "Your horses are waiting for you at the base of the tree. They are better than they have ever been because of our tending. They are outfitted with rations and water that should last you the next leg of your journey. Three of the brethren guard your vessel at the appointed spot. Be off in haste. Live and serve Light. *B'delon qi ghutn sai.*" Trennial turned to Mäch. "Leave and wander, learn and live, warrior of Light. *B'delon qi ghutn sai.*"

Trennial stood, turned, walked to the edge of the platform and stepped off. There was a *poof*, a flash, and Trennial disappeared in a puff of gray smoke.

"It is good to see you well, my friend," Arat said to Rathcar. The human was glad to see the elf's golden eyes clear and sparkling once again.

"And you," the elf replied. "Come, let us be on our way. I have wasted enough of our time already."

The three left the tree. Arat and Rathcar each took a turn on the rope elevator. Mäch climbed down. He did so very quickly. Arat wondered what other surprises this great man-bear hid. Arat was the first lowered. As he waited for Rathcar, he inspected the gray and roan. What Trennial said was true; the horses were in top condition. Mäch dropped to the ground about the same time as Rathcar. The huge shaman stepped toward Arat and extended his hand over the man's head.

"Be protected," he said and lowered his arm. "I must follow my path which is a different one than yours. We shall meet again. I look forward to that day." He turned to Rathcar. "You are a good judge of character. Be protected."

Mäch walked away. He shifted his leather band that held his pouches so that it just hung around his neck. He then started to run. As he ran, he began to change. Before the shaman was fifty strides away, all Arat and Rathcar saw was a great silverback bear lumbering towards the east. "Let us mount up," Arat said, anxious to get on the way. "There is much we need to discuss," he repeated as he gained the gray.

"Aye," Rathcar said in a knowing tone, "You will understand much by the end of this ride. I am sure that you have many questions."

"And a few answers." Arat added as Rathcar took his place atop the roan.

They set off, both secretly wanting to put leagues between them and the tree... each for their own reasons. They rode silently. At last, Arat was the one who broke the silence.

"I do not like Trennial," Arat fumed. "He had me drugged! He banished humans from the tree! He didn't even give Mäch a report as to how you were. He..."

"Is Lordshire," Rathcar interrupted, "and deserves the respect of that title. Trennial and I have very different views, yet we realize that we are all striving to achieve the same goal."

"He banished humans!" Arat repeated.

"Do not judge too harshly," cautioned Rathcar. "Trennial has his reasons for his beliefs. I do not always agree with him, especially on his view toward humans. Do not take it personally. Trennial's dislike is not on you, but your kind."

"It sounds to me that you are defending him."

"I am not condoning his actions, nor am I condemning them. He is *Lor*. He makes decisions for the good of his people and the benefit of his land. To do anything else would be betrayal."

"I liked him not," Arat said plainly. Changing subjects, he asked, "How many 'items' are you carrying?"

Rathcar knew this was coming. He did not look forward to it.

“Currently, I have four... ‘Coins’.” The elf winked at Arat. “Let me tell you a story for striplings.

“There once was a ‘family’ that possessed seven magical ‘coins’. Each of these was very special. To protect these ‘coins’, the ‘family’ gave one to each of the seven ‘houses’.”

“I know this story,” Arat interjected. “Skip ahead a bit.”

“Each one of the ‘houses’” Rathcar continued, “protected their ‘coin’. Soon, it was as if the ‘coin’ became the symbol of each ‘house’. It remained this way for generations.

“A great evil threatened this ‘family’. They pulled together and pooled the ‘coins’. Using this collection, the ‘family’ was able to defeat that evil. The ‘coins’ then were sent back to each ‘house’. The ‘coins’ remained there until they were once again needed.”

The elf paused.

“I hope to tell you that this tale has a happy ending,” the elf concluded.

“That ‘great evil’ was *Rubatha*,” Arat stated.

The elf nodded.

“Are you comparing the problem with Lim'rosh with that uprising?” Arat asked. “Do you suspect that the drow have a part in this?”

“The ‘family’ sees Lim'rosh as a formidable foe.”

“You are collect...”

“DO NOT SAY IT!” Rathcar cut Arat off. “I have already jeopardized this mission. Please do not add any more risk.”

“I understand,” Arat appeased. “Why...”

“We have been over this.”

“But why...”

“Tell me what you think of Mäch,” the elf said changing the subject.

Arat hated when Rathcar did this. The human knew from past experience that Rathcar simply would not discuss what the elf did not want to discuss... or could not discuss. Arat decided to let it be.

“I find Mäch to be most talented and amiable,” Arat praised, “but I feel he needs to work on his manner.”

Arat expounded on the potion the shaman had prepared for him, and the man-bear’s sense of humor was discussed. Rathcar laughed out loud at its telling.

“You should feel honored,” Rathcar explained, “Mäch said he looked forward to your next meeting. There are few humans he wishes ever to see. You must have made a great impression.”

Arat replied, “Just being myself.”

“Then it is unusual that he wishes to see you again.” Rathcar laughed.

“Very funny, elf, very funny.” Arat’s tone was serious. “It is good to hear your bad sense of humor. I thought I had lost a friend.”

Rathcar picked up Arat’s meaning.

“I fear that if Mäch had not shown up,” Arat continued, “you would not be here now.”

“I have expressed my gratitude to both Mäch and Trenial for their assistance in this matter. I also thank you.” Rathcar was quite serious.

“Does that make us even? Or, do you owe me?” Arat chuckled.

“Even,” Rathcar quickly shot back. “That makes us even.”

The two fell silent for a short time. Again, it was Arat who broke the silence.

“Rathcar,” Arat said as he drew Orthinel, “do you recognize this rune?” Arat was offering the

blade to his friend.

"I know it," the elf said, not taking the blade. "Where did it come from?"

"I was hoping that you could tell me." Arat was sheathing the blade. "Is it a curse?"

"Where did you get that idea?" Rathcar asked.

"Well, with the way Trennial was treating me..."

"You assumed that he wanted to hurt you."

"Not directly."

"Relax, friend Arat, tis not a curse. It is *selii*... quickness in protection. I can tell you this about the caster: he or she is very graced in the art and whoever cast this thought highly of you. A most arduous and time-consuming spell to cast."

"*Selii*... I woke to find both swords and daggers scribed with that rune."

"That limits the possible casters significantly."

"What do you mean?"

"There were seven elves at that tree which were skilled enough to cast *selii* on four objects at once, especially when two are kindred magic. I am one of those seven."

"Who else? Do you know their names?"

"Aye. I will only speak two. Four were attending me the entire time."

"Trennial and who else?" Arat guessed.

"Phalei."

"Phalei?" Arat was shocked. "Phalei has that ability?"

"Aye. His specialty is combative; he wages war without weapons. He is highly skilled."

"Trennial assigned him to be my attendant while I waited for you. I also assumed it was Phalei that gave me the sleep tonic. I had him figured for a clerk or an aide. I had no idea that he was so skilled."

"It would be wise to stay on his good side," Rathcar suggested.

"Why would Trennial have such an elf be my escort?"

"Perhaps it was out of respect," offered Rathcar. "Just because he cares not for your kind does not mean that he has no respect for you as an individual. Or, maybe Trennial was punishing Phalei for something." Rathcar failed to tell Arat something... the elf was under order to ensure that Arat complied; Phalei was to use whatever means necessary.

"I'm beginning to think I liked you better when you did not answer me..." Arat bantered.

Rathcar looked wryly at his friend, but said nothing.

The two rode until shortly after midday. The scenery had changed little. They were still surrounded by tall prairie grasses. A few trees broke the otherwise flat horizon. Rathcar suggested a stop when they had come across a fallen tree. The elf thought it would make a good bench. Arat agreed. Each rider cared for his own horse. Then the two sat and enjoyed a quick meal of *elan* and dried meat.

"We will camp under the stars this eve," Rathcar said between bites of *elan*. "I expect that on the morrow, we will be changing modes of transport. It is my hope that we will spend the next eve on...."

Rathcar stopped mid-sentence. Arat noticed that the elf cocked his head as if he were trying to listen to something or someone. Rathcar left his seat to put both hands on the ground. He cocked his head one more time, then promptly rose.

"We must pack and saddle-up now," the elf said with urgency. "A large group of riders approach quickly from the east."

"Who could it be?" Arat said through a mouthful of *elan*.

“I do not think we wish to find out.” Rathcar was already throwing the blanket on the roan.

“Do you think it is Lim’rosh?”

“Quit asking questions,” Rathcar chastised, “We must ride now!”

Arat wasted no more words. He rapidly and skillfully fitted the gray for travel. Within a few ticks, both riders were at full gallop headed to the southwest. Arat was thankful that Trenial’s minions had cared for the beasts. If the two were being pursued, Arat knew that these horses would be run into the ground. Few words were passed between the human and the elf, mainly because it was hard to communicate as they rode single file. After a span or so, Rathcar slowed to a stop. Arat did the same. The elf dismounted. The roan’s blood was pumping; he fought Rathcar’s grip relentlessly. He handed the reins to Arat. He controlled the animal as the elf checked on their pursuers. With both hands on the ground, Rathcar looked at Arat.

“Well?” the human asked.

“Still they come,” the elf stated as he rose, took the reins, and slung into the saddle.

Rathcar heard Arat say, "here we go" as he dug his heels into the roan's side.

The two returned to a full gallop. Again, they were going southwest. As the sun's angle decreased, the scenery started to change. The open grassland began to give way to brush and stands of trees. Rathcar picked his path carefully. He was making for a tributary to the Cuwi River. Where that body of water was large enough to float a small vessel waited three kindred. They would use the water to escape. The elf wove between scrubs and stands. Arat was close behind. This was not the first mad dash the two adventurers had made. Both hoped it wouldn't be their last.

The roan was the first to go down. Both horses had labored hard in carrying their riders as fast as they could. Arat had watched the heads of the animals lower as they tired. Both of the riders were wet from their mounts' lather. The fastest they would go was a trot. Finally, the roan could not go on. He just stopped. The elf could feel the animal quiver under him. Man and elf dismounted in unison. The roan, relieved of his burden, simply lay down. Both animals pumped volumes of air through their flaring nostrils. The gray had some left in him, but not much. He stood two strides from the roan. With some fore knowledge, the gray neighed three times. As if it were a signal, the roan dropped its head and stopped breathing.

Rathcar said something in elvish. Arat didn't recognize the phrase, but he was sure that it was not something said in front of proper folk. The elf dropped to his knees and cupped his hands around the roan's nose. Arat watched in amazement as the elf blew air into the horse's lungs.

Rathcar sat up and began casting. Arat recognized what his companion was attempting.

Ancient words poured forth from the elf’s mouth. His fingers danced in an intricate manner. A faint blue glow started to form around Rathcar and the roan. The elf’s volume steadily increased. The glow shifted from blue to pink. The illumination got more intense. Rathcar had finished the verbal part of the spell. Once again, he lowered his body and blew air into the horse’s nose.

Both elf and horse were still surrounded by the bright pink glow. Arat could not believe how long Rathcar seemed to breathe into the animal. Arat was about to tell his friend to cease his actions when the roan drew in a great breath on its own. The elf pulled back and stood. The roan shortly followed. The animal was unsteady, but able to stay on its feet.

“What of our pursuers?” Arat asked.

Rathcar dropped to the ground, feeling for any sign.

“We have gained some ground,” the elf said flatly. “They are still following.”

“These horses are on their last legs...”

“I will do my best to heal them. They must get us to the appointed spot.”

“How far is that?” Arat asked. His back and legs ached. Staying on a horse at full gallop in hard on the body.

“Two or three leagues, I believe.”

“Then what do we do?”

“We get on board the boat that awaits. We shall use the water to escape.”

“What are we waiting for?”

Rathcar did not respond. Instead, he began another spell. He took both sets of reins, one in each hand. Carefully, he pulled the two horse heads as close together as he could. Ancient elvish verse once again poured forth. There was no illumination this time. Skillfully, the elf’s hands worked their way up the leads until his hands found their places at the anterior of each horse’s neck. Each beast was calm and motionless. Arat was astounded that the horses could even hold their heads up. There was a flash of golden light that originated from Rathcar’s eyes. The light was drawn into the horses through their eyes. At the same time, both steeds rear up. Rathcar easily grabbed the reins of both animals. The mounts were once again full of energy, stomping and snorting.

“I like it not that we must push the animals so,” Rathcar stated. “Magic is not what they need, but it will have to do.”

Arat nodded in agreement. “If it comes to it, we must make sure that their sacrifice would not be in vein.”

“Who said anything about sacrifice?” Rathcar asked as he took the saddle. “Come, let us be off.”

Arat got on the gray. “Lead on, Rathcar. Lead on.”

Much to Arat’s surprise, the horses were able to move quickly. The man’s back screamed in agony as the beasts once again hit full gallop. The trees and brush were getting thicker. The experienced riders were forced to slow so that they could maneuver between obstacles. Quite often, the two adventurers would have to bend so that they were not knocked from the saddle. The human was sure that whoever was chasing them would lose more ground following this path. Both Arat and Rathcar were skilled horsemen and able to go faster than the norm through this treacherous landscape.

The sun was rising low in the sky when Arat smelled the telltale odor of nearby water. Rathcar had slowed to a trot. The path was not wide enough, so Arat stayed behind his friend. The elf stopped the roan and silently signaled Arat to do the same. The human promptly complied.

“*Basok nyl ahem,*” Rathcar spoke in his first language. The elf looked around, searching for signs of his kindred.

“Welcome, *Lor* Rathcar,” came the reply. A bright blue-eyed, red-haired elf stepped out of, apparently, nowhere. He was dressed all in green save this gray elven cloak. In his hand he held a bow. Hung over his shoulder was a quiver of arrows. At his side was a long knife.

“We were not expecting you this soon,” a second elf said from behind Arat.

The human jumped at the sound of this voice. Arat whirled, hand going to Orthinel. The elf Arat saw was a twin of the elf in front of them. This one also carried a bow, quiver of arrows, and long knife.

“We are being pursued,” Rathcar explained. “We must make haste in our departure.”

“All is prepared,” said the elf in front of Rathcar. “I am Bal. That is my brother, Cal. Please follow me. I will lead you to your craft.”

“Well met,” Rathcar said while dismounting. The elf tossed his saddlebags over his shoulder.

“Lead on.”

Arat also dismounted. Cal took the reins to both horses. He led them behind Rathcar and Arat

who were behind Bal.

Arat was glad to be walking. His body ached and was fatigued. He was hungry, thirsty, and filthy. He wanted nothing more than a bath, a hot meal, a draught of ale, and a good night's sleep. The man feared that all of those might be some time away. He had an impetuous thought that he never wanted Tirem to see him like this. He wanted the youth to keep a good impression of his father.

Bal led the party to the boat. It was not very far. The brambles and trees were very thick as the group approached the water. At times, Arat did not think the horses would make it through the tight openings in the brush. Cal had no difficulty guiding the animals. Arat nearly tripped once on an exposed root. He caught himself and realized that he was barely lifting his feet as he walked. Shortly thereafter, Rathcar also stumbled. The ride had taken quite a bit from both of them.

"Here we are," Bal announced as they made their way through a thicket that was interwoven with vine.

There was a small clearing near the creek where the boat was tethered. The craft was about five strides long, two strides wide, made of wood with a covered area that extended from the front of the boat to about halfway back. The rudder lay astray. Two oars were stowed, one on each side. "Guulam," Bal called, "make ready. Our guests are here and must leave immediately."

An elf presently appeared from the cabin of the small vessel. He was dressed in all in gray. On his head he wore a small blue cap over his otherwise baldpate. His eyes were a deep green in color and sparkled with life. Arat noticed the dagger in each boot, but could not see any other weapons.

"Hail and greetings, *Lor* Rathcar, Lord Arat," Guulam welcomed. He spoke in an accent that Arat didn't recognize. "All is in readiness for our departure. Please board at your leisure."

Guulam bowed deeply and swept his arm back as he spoke his last sentence.

"Thank you, Guulam," Rathcar said politely. "It is indeed an honor to sail on your fine vessel."

"No, *Lor*," Guulam protested, "it is the honor of the Dandelion and her skipper to carry such an important cargo." Once again, Guulam bowed deeply, gesturing with his arm.

There was something about this Guulam that Arat didn't like. It began with the accent, but went much deeper. Why would Rathcar speak so eloquently to this minor elf? Something was not right. The human couldn't put his finger on it.

Bal had taken the roan from his brother. Bal and Cal had reversed the horses so that Rathcar and Arat could grab their belongings.

"Make sure to grab all that you need," Rathcar instructed Arat. "We shall not see these steeds again."

Arat was already removing his pack when he replied, "I am sorry to hear that. Though he is not my B'ar, this gray has served me well. I will miss you." Arat was stroking the animal as he said those last words.

Rathcar addressed Bal and Cal. "You know how to proceed from here. Ride as fast as you are able back to *Mathyol*. I am confident that you will be able to stay ahead of the pursuers. Ride well. Live long."

"As you command, *Lor*," the brothers said in unison. They both bowed. Before they sprang onto the horses, each reached underneath and undid the saddle. The brothers took off bareback. The saddles and blankets were left on the ground.

Rathcar boarded the Dandelion first. He stiffly raised one leg after the other as he stepped over the gunwale and into the boat. Guulam offered his hand, but Rathcar declined, waving him off.

Over his right shoulder hung his saddlebags. His unstrung bow was in his left hand, while his pack hung from that shoulder.

"Please make yourselves comfortable in the cabin," Guulam instructed. "There should be plenty of room."

Arat then placed his right foot in the boat. His back and legs protested at this activity. A grimace appeared on his face. Guulam noticed and took the man's right arm to assist.

The moment he touched Arat, the human felt electric charges run through his body. The tingling started at the two points of contact. It then spread up the arm and through the body. Every hair stood on end. Arat instinctually pulled away from the grasp. His balance upset, the man tossed his pack toward Rathcar and continued the motion to a pinwheel. Guulam grasped Arat's arm a second time. This time there was no shock; Arat was chilled to the bone. Worse yet, he was unable to pull away from Guulam. The world stopped.

"Are you going to sit down?" Rathcar asked. The sound of the elf's voice shook Arat back to reality.

"W-what?" Arat asked stupefied.

"Come sit down, my friend," Rathcar stated from inside the cabin.

Arat was completely in the boat. He stood, facing forward, in the middle of the Dandelion. The roof of the cabin was at chest level a couple of nails in front of the human. He looked around, befuddled. Guulam was outside the Dandelion casting off. The elf winked at Arat as he walked from bow to stern unfastening the lines.

"How did I..." Arat started.

"Please take a seat, Lord Arat," Guulam stated as he pushed off and stepped into the boat in one swift movement.

The motion of the craft sent Arat rocking on his feet. He grabbed the top of the cabin to steady himself.

"Arat," Rathcar beckoned, "are you all right?"

"I..." The man thought about his friend's question. "I feel fine. My legs, my back, I was sore from riding, but now I feel all right."

"Then please sit down," Rathcar suggested. "Allow Guulam to ply his skills without worrying about you toppling out."

"Please take a seat, Lord Arat," Guulam said slyly. "You will enjoy the trip much more if you make yourself more comfortable."

Arat was still shaken from Guulam's grasp. He shook his head to clear it and said, "Of course, but to stand and stretch is good for my bones." He put his hands on his hips and bent backward.

"There," he said straightening out.

He ducked his head into the cabin. There were two bunks, one on either side. Rathcar was seated, legs folded under him, on the starboard berth. The elf's weapons were stowed behind him. Arat saw his pack to the left. He picked it up and tossed it to the far end of the bed. In a skilled and practiced motion, he undid his weapons harness. He gently lay the two magical blades on the blanket next to him.

"The movement of the boat is very soothing," Rathcar observed, picking up a water skin.

"Aye, It feels good to be out of the saddle. Never have I ridden so long and so hard. I hope not ever to repeat it."

"It is my sincere wish the we have smooth sailing. It is far to *Owayndyl*. Surprised would I be if we see that fair land within a quarter moon." Rathcar took a healthy drink of water. "I believe that we shall have to find another ship in Posh."

"That is correct, *Lor Rathcar*," Guulam chimed in from the stern where he was holding the rudder. "I shall deliver you to the very fringe of that offal city."

Arat looked quizzically at Rathcar, who was folding his cloak to use as a pillow. The white-feathered wings were proudly folded behind him. There was a smile on Rathcar's face.

"That is more than satisfactory," Rathcar said to Guulam. "We shall walk into Posh along the shoreline," the elf said looking at Arat.

"Will we have much trouble securing another vessel?" Arat asked.

"I would not think so," came the reply. "I have more than enough coin. Besides, the river city is crawling with mercenary sailors and ships, not to mention buccaneers. Me thinks it best if you find us our means of transport."

"I would be honored," the man nodded his head slightly. "It would not be the first time I have hired a captain."

"Now that is settled, I believe I would enjoy a bite to eat." Rathcar looked down at himself. "I think I need to wash first."

"I feel a bit grimy as well." Arat agreed.

The words were no sooner out of the man's mouth when Guulam ducked into the cabin, a bucket of water in each hand. Over his shoulders were two cloths.

"Here you be, gentle sirs," Guulam said as he set the buckets on the floor of the *Dandelion*.

"Will you be needing anything else?"

"I do not believe so," Arat said with amazement.

"Very well. Beckon if there is a need. Please enjoy the voyage."

Guulam quickly turned and went back to the rudder. The two filthy adventurers washed up. The water was cold and clean, pulled in from the stream they floated down. Feeling refreshed, clean, and invigorated, each took his turn stepping out of the cabin and dumping their bucket overboard. Guulam was humming some sailor tune and smiled at each as they appeared. This made Arat even more suspicious of this bald elf in the blue cap. In such close quarters, the man did not feel comfortable saying anything.

Arat reentered the cabin to find Rathcar digging into his rations. The elf ate hungrily of dried meat, *elan*, green onions, and white cheese. He put a small piece of meat in his mouth as he bent over and produced a wineskin from the head of his cot.

"What have we here?" Rathcar smiled largely at Arat.

"Maybe we should..." Arat didn't want to vocalize what he was thinking.

Rathcar pulled the cork from the barrel and hoisted the wineskin to his lips. Four large swallows went down his throat before the elf lowered the skin.

"Long has it been since I last tasted mead." Rathcar offered the wineskin to Arat. "A very good vintage at that."

Arat hesitantly took the wineskin from his friend. He sniffed the barrel, judging Rathcar to be correct. He was a little apprehensive having been drugged twice already on this quest. He slowly raised it to his lips and took a small sip. Swishing it around his mouth before swallowing. He blew through his puckered lips. He lifted the skin and took a deep drink. Handing it back to Rathcar, Arat said, "You are correct, Rathcar. It is a very good wine."

The two passed the skin back and forth between them as they ate. The wine worked quickly on the two. After they were full of food, they continued with the mead. They talked and laughed and carried on. They kept drinking from the same wineskin; the volume it contained didn't go down. Arat noticed the color of the sky outside was changing to that of eve. Still the wineskin flowed. It became dark and the wine still flowed. Both Arat and Rathcar were drunk, laughing

and talking. Arat hadn't seen Rathcar this loose in a very long time. It reminded him of days long past. The two continued to drink well into the night. Eventually, gravity and intoxication won the battle. Rathcar was sleeping on his stomach, wings down on his back. Arat realized that his head was going back as it hit his pack. He was on his back with his body twisted so that his feet were still on the floor of the boat. He attempted to lift them but was unable. He was wondering why he didn't have the spins when he passed out. The wineskin slipped from his grasp and fell to the floor. The cork was not in place, yet no mead leaked out.

Guulam entered the cabin. He picked up the wineskin and replaced the cork. He then put the skin in Rathcar's pack that was on the floor. Guulam then picked up Arat's feet and placed them on the bed. He reached over the human and pulled a blanket over the sleeping form. Guulam knew better than to cover Rathcar. It was good for the feathers to be exposed to open air. He had tried to tell that to Rathcar the same day that the White Council had changed the magical wings from that of a bat to that of the dove.

"Excellent," Guulam said aloud. "Now I can get on with my work." He turned and left the cabin.

Rathcar and Arat were awakened as the Dandelion beached. The rough sound of sand scraping against the bow directly under their heads was a most unpleasant experience. Both sat up, Arat reaching for steel.

"Good day, fair sirs," Guulam called in a far too loud of voice. He was outside the boat, pulling it further onto the shore. "Next to each of you is a small vial. Please take a sip. It will cure this morn's pain."

Each looked for and found the vial next to them. Without hesitation, Rathcar removed the top and took a sip. He closed his eyes, frowning. A breath later, he was smiling. Arat saw this and did the same. At first it burned, then the symptoms disappeared along with the hangover.

"You may gather your belongs as you please. I am in no particular hurry to get under way again." Guulam had tied off the Dandelion and climbed back onboard as he said this.

"What do you mean?" Arat demanded.

"We have arrived outside the city of Posh," stated Guulam, who now faced the human.

"How long have we been asleep?" Arat's blood was rising. "Did you drug us?"

"No, Lord Arat," Guulam said seriously, "I did not drug you. You drank yourself silly with the finest of mead. Did it not occur to you than the skin may be enchanted so as not to run dry? You two have slept approximately half a turn. It is midday."

Arat exited the cabin. Rathcar followed. Standing mid-deck on the Dandelion, they looked off the starboard side. In the distance was Posh, the river city.

"How did you get us here overnight?" Arat asked Guulam.

"Oh," Guulam purred, "I used a wee bit of magic."

Arat looked at Rathcar. The winged one said nothing.

"Who in the nine hells are you?" Arat demanded of Guulam. "You are no mere boat captain.

What is going on here?"

Rathcar went back into the cabin and gathered his belongings. He dressed and armed himself. Shouldered saddlebags on the right and pack on the left.

Guulam was looking deeply into Arat. He saw what Rathcar saw in the man. Guulam assessed what the human could handle before he spoke.

"I have long followed the tales told about thee, Arat Trador Magmus, and am glad that I now have met thee. Rathcar's words of thee are not misjudged. Thou art a warrior of Light. Your work does not go unnoticed. Great things lie ahead for thou and for Tirem. But that does not

diminish the importance of the matter at hand. Thou will be tested to the limits in the coming moon. Accept assistance whenever and wherever possible. Follow thy heart to the very end, fore what is in thy heart is good."

"Who are you?" Arat asked, in a relaxed tone. He had cooled off while listening to Guulam's smooth tones.

"My true name is not necessary," The bald elf said smiling. "What is important is that you must now secure your next means of transport. I suggest you turn your attention there."

Rathcar emerged from the cabin, looking back and forth between the two.

"Very well," Arat agreed, "I shall gather my things." He went into the cabin.

"*He is testy,*" Guulam said to Rathcar in elvish, "*but I assume that is one of many qualities you see in him.*"

"*Yes. He has not failed me.*" Rathcar said, also in elvish. "*Nor I him. I could think of no other for assistance in this task.*"

"*I will aid you any way possible. You know how to contact me.*"

"*Yes, Heawik,*" Rathcar said, slightly bowing his head, "*and it is appreciated.*"

"*I sense that you are completely healed from the poisoning. I am relieved.*"

"*I am glad it is over. It is a new day.*"

"*With new beginnings. Farewell. I shall be watching you.*"

Arat stepped out of the cabin. He was dressed for travel and armed. His pack rested over his right shoulder. He looked first at Rathcar, then at Guulam.

"Thank you for delivering us to our destination so quickly. And thank you for the mead. It truly was excellent. I bid you farewell." He extended his hand.

Guulam looked at Rathcar and smiled. He took Arat's hand and grasp it tight.

"Fare thee well, Lord Arat. Follow the path of Light."

The grasp broke and Arat climbed from the Dandelion. The boat was up far enough so that his feet didn't get wet.

"Fare thee well, *Lor* Rathcar. Thou shall succeed in thy task. Go with Light."

"Fare well, Guulam. My thanks for your assistance." Rathcar bowed to the elf then exited the boat.

Arat was waiting for him a few strides from the Dandelion. The two started for Posh. Arat expected to hear from behind him the sound of the boat being taken back into the water. He did not. He glanced over his shoulder to look at the boat. It was no longer beached. In fact, the Dandelion was a half league upstream in that short time. Arat stopped and watched the boat disappear from view. Rathcar had also stopped, waiting for his friend.

"Who was that?" Arat asked sincerely.

"He goes by many names," Rathcar replied. "I know him as Heawik, leader of the White Council."

Arat looked at his friend in wonder.

"That was him? Truly?" His expression went flat. "I raised my voice to the most powerful magician on Arth."

"Good thing he likes you. Come on, Posh awaits."

The two followed the river into town.