

All the elm-trees sought to wound me,
All the aspens tried to cut me,
All the willows tried to seize me,
All the forest tried to slay me.

—*The Kalevala*

. . . the leaves rustled in the woods ever so mournful; and I heard an owl, away off, who-whooping about somebody that was dead, and a whippoorwill and a dog crying about somebody that was going to die; and the wind was trying to whisper something to me, and I couldn't make out what it was . . . —*Huckleberry Finn*

CHAPTER ONE

THE BORDER

They rode, nine humans and an elf, down a winding path, leaving the last rows of indigo trees behind, the soft shimmering music of the vibrating leaves growing ever fainter as horses and riders descended from the Debatable Hills into a barren, shadow-steeped valley. The strange, brilliant constellations of Faerie pulsed red, blue, and gold overhead, casting a faint glow below; the moon had not yet risen. All lay silent save for the horses' hooves on the harsh stones and the distant cries of wyverns hunting through the night.

They were finally leaving Faerie, preparing to cross the border into the Back of the Beyond. The Faerie folk claimed that none might go thither without losing their lives. The travelers hoped they were wrong.

Gray Darien, Prince of the Stallion Lords, rode at the front of the company alongside Koothlin of the Light Elves, who had been their guide throughout their journey. They traveled slowly, exhausted from their combat an hour past, giving encouraging pats to the necks of their weary horses. Dried blood darkened Koothlin's left shoulder, and Gray reached a hand across his saddle to steady the elf. "We should stop to tend your wounds."

"Not yet, lad," Koothlin replied. "Duskell Watch lies ahead, and we dare not rest till we bolt its oaken gates behind us. The manticore gave bitter battle; more than once I thought my life ended. I have no wish to meet its brothers in this broken vale." He took a labored breath. "Ah, Prince, I have been happier!"

"Is the pain worse?"

"The wounds are nothing. But the wounds of the heart pierce deep. I know I promised to bring you to this dread place. I do not regret the struggles fought to win it—the marsh-wolves, the handrigites, the goblins, not even the manticore—enough to glut any warrior's appetite for battle. But I rue leaving you to travel to the Back of the Beyond without me. Ill done are companions parted. Are you still determined? You and I could have much glory in the courts of the Elf King. You would be welcomed there."

"I won't quit until I find Tanabel-Tunia," Gray said. "I know she's alive; I've seen her in my dreams."

Koothlin sighed. "Who can deny the dreams of a dreamer in Faerie? But will they bring you joy in the end? I hope, Prince of Stallions, you have not dreamt yourself a night mare." The elf gave a barking laugh, then groaned in pain. "'Twas a droll turn of phrase, think you?"

"It was," Gray replied gently, knowing his companion feverish; and also knowing that—despite his protests of grief—Koothlin would not mourn their parting overmuch. The emotions of elves are mercurial; sorrow cannot abide in their hearts for long.

Gray looked around at his companions, dim shapes in the starlight. They traveled in a defensive formation, Master Tatters scouting before them, Fox Lodan and Ninette Argilla flanking either side, Soonderkainen, Joiwend, and Jaunter directly behind Gray; Russ Rogers and Corporal Spence bringing up the rear. Together they had tracked Tanabel-Tunia's abductors across the realms of Faerie. They were told she and three men were sighted in a nearby village eight days before, and later seen crossing the Westwall into the Back of the Beyond.

When Gray and Tanabel-Tunia were sixteen years old, they had sat together in the palace gardens of Gray's father. Seen from a distance, the lights of Faerie were especially beautiful that twilit eve. As beautiful as Tana herself.

They thumb-wrestled for a buttercup, their eyes locked. Hers were brown. Her brunette hair was long and straight, her nose, besprinkled with freckles. She nearly had him pinned when he slipped beneath her grasp and caught her thumb in an irresistible grip.

He grinned. "The buttercup is mine."

She feigned a pout. "I wanted it!"

He plucked it and handed it to her. "Then my lady shall have it."

"Thank you, my prince."

She drew a petal from the flower and held it against the horizon. "It's the same yellow as the Faerie torches."

He took his eyes off her. The border of Faerie lay several leagues to the west. Over that magic kingdom the fading glow of the sun always cast bands of yellow, green, and purple, shot-through with sparkling, golden lights.

"I'd like to go there someday," Gray said.

"I wouldn't. It's too dangerous. Those who go in don't come back."

"Some have. Our merchants even conduct trade there."

"They throw their goods over the border and come running home." She crossed her arms over her chest. "What if I met the Elf King? The ruler of Faerie since the beginning of time! He'd turn me into a cat or toad."

"I would protect you." He glanced over his shoulder. For the first time since Tana arrived, Gray's ever-present Greek tutor, Aristides, was nowhere in sight. Moving casually, he put his arm around her shoulders.

She leaned closer, her gaze still on the horizon. "I'm sorry tomorrow is my last day."

A pang ran through his chest. "Do you have to go back? It's only been a month. Surely uncle would let you stay longer if you asked."

"There's a jest! My wishes mean nothing to him. I'd stay all summer if I could. Anything to get out of Mare Castle. No one cares what happens to me there, certainly not my foster father. It's better here, where everyone is kind. I remember the first time I came. How old were we? Ten?"

"Twelve," Gray said. "We were riding and you fell off your horse."

She put her hand to her lips. "Oh, I did! I wish you hadn't remembered that."

"It wasn't your fault. A fox startled the mare." He furrowed his brow. "Why didn't we ever meet before then?"

She frowned, her downturned mouth winsome. "I think there

was some sort of disagreement between the brothers, some feud that lasted for years."

"My father and uncle have always been bullheaded." With his other hand he reached over and took hers. "I'm determined not to inherit the trait."

She turned to him. "In you it is a restlessness. You're seldom still, or even if you are, your mind is always working."

"My brothers call me Stargazer. They mock me for a dreamer."

"They're wrong, Gray. You must never lose that restlessness. It's one of your strengths." She smiled. "Perhaps I *would* go to Faerie, if you promised to be my champion."

"I would try, my lady." Their faces drew closer together.

She parted her lips. "Would you protect me, Gray? If I needed you to?"

"I would, I swear."

They kissed, her lips warm and sweet, her hair fragrant as roses. It was a dream come true, one he had imagined every night since her arrival.

A voice sounded somewhere behind them. Instantly, they parted, their eyes snapping to the horizon, their arms by their sides. Aristides was back. A prince and a duchess were seldom far from a chaperon. But that was the night Gray fell in love with Tanabel-Tunia.

Gray's horse momentarily stumbled, shaking him from his recollections. Prince Fox Lodan, Tanabel-Tunia's betrothed, rode in closer, his red hair the color of blood beneath the starlight. "We're nearly to the border. If Koothlin leads us aright and more manticores don't find us, we should reach the fortress soon."

Gray's voice thickened in rancor. "How would *you* know? You haven't been here before."

"Because I'm not an inexperienced whelp who can't read the signs," Prince Lodan said. "I swear, boy, your ignorance astounds me. You speak like an untutored commoner."

"Unlike you, I speak when I have something of substance to say."

Prince Lodan spat on the ground. "So says our baby-leader." He had been calling Gray that throughout their four-week journey.

"Fox is right; we are close," Jaunter said. With his face shadowed beneath the flaps of his tall, felt cap, the Scythian looked monstrous

in the starlight, his hair tumbling wildly down his Eurasian features, his jaw out-thrust like a battering ram, his shoulders wide as those of a bull; but he appeared the most terrifying when the starlight caught his deep-set eyes, sleepy yet perilously cunning above the blue horizontal bars tattooed across his left cheek.

The bard-enchanter, Soonderkainen, trotted to Jaunter's side, his jagged cloak belling behind him, his smooth, handsome face a stark contrast to the Scythian's craggy mien. He brushed aside a golden lock. "But how *do* you know? There's been no sign. Even Koothlin recognizes the way only by description."

Without replying, Fox Lodan rode haughtily back to his position, but Jaunter grinned at the enchanter, revealing the gap left by a missing front tooth. "You should conjure up a better nose. Can't you smell it? There are trees and tall grass ahead."

"I'm a bard, not a hunting hound," Soonderkainen said. "And why are you so happy? Are you actually looking forward to this?"

"It will be a new and glorious adventure. They'll sing songs about it."

"Perhaps they will; perhaps they won't," the bard-enchanter murmured. "Perhaps we'll never be heard from again."

"*Tagimasad!*" Jaunter exclaimed in his native tongue. "I'll not have it. There are no better warriors in any land. If we can't find the girl, no one can."

Soonderkainen said nothing; and despite his irritation at Fox, Gray thought with pride that Jaunter was right. Because Gray's small country—the kingdom of En, the land of the Stallion Lords—bordered Faerie, its people were familiar with the peculiar precepts of that enchanted realm. When the trail of Tanabel-Tunia's kidnappers led into the domains of the Elf King, Gray's father had not dared dispatch ordinary soldiers to follow her. Under the direction of Koothlin, the Elf Who Guides, seven ravens were sent into Faerie, seven birds to find seven heroes. Fox Lodan made the eighth member of the company; Gray, the ninth.

Gray's father had not wanted to send him, but in Faerie only the third son of a king can successfully lead in a quest, all others being doomed to failure. It had irked Gray's older brothers, both better warriors than he; and Fox—oldest son of the ruler of the Faerie kingdom of Jenar—despised him for it, but that was the way of it.

So, having seen but seventeen summers, Gray became leader of this company of his elders. Often he felt a child among them, and had to remind himself he was a prince, especially beneath Fox Lodan's taunts.

Born several years after his siblings, Gray had learned early that he could never compete with those bigger and stronger than he. When faced with confrontation as a child, his natural response had been to run away. Only under Aristides' tutelage had he learned to fight both physically and verbally for himself. As a result, he was an excellent archer and a passable swordsman. But most of all he loved heroic songs and tales of adventuring knights and fair maidens. Apart from his concern for Tana, he had always longed to set out on a real quest. And because her trail had led into Faerie, where mortals often find themselves lost in Story, he had truly become the Questing Hero, his thoughts bent on courage, poetry, and his unceasing love for Tanabel-Tunia.

Seven days after the sending of the ravens, Gray had ridden to the misty borders of Faerie to meet his comrades, allowed to enter that country only because its laws decreed that a quest cannot be hindered. For a month he had journeyed with them, pretending to command, but mostly accepting their counsel. Following Tana's trail had proven easy enough; in Faerie there was always a witch or wise woman, a messenger bird or beast to guide them. They had fought terrible battles, often succeeding against tremendous odds. Gray had learned much from his journey and would never be the same when he returned to his father's mortal kingdom.

Joiwend rode up beside him. Even exhausted as she was, starlight became her dark hair and dark eyes. Born and raised on Earth, of French and Spanish heritage, she still retained a hint of an accent. She spoke so softly only he could hear. "You should quit quarreling with Fox. He's a dangerous man."

"I can be dangerous too, and I'm sick of his bullying."

"*You* do not possess an enchanted sword that makes you invulnerable in combat."

His anger rose, but wilted beneath her earnest presence. He gave a crooked smile. "You're right. As always."

"Only because I've seen his kind before. Don't push him too far."

They passed through a series of scattered standing stones tall as

men, and Duskell Watch, the border fortress, suddenly lay before them, squat and black in the shadowed vale. A stone wall thirty spans high snaked away to either side of it, the Westwall separating Faerie from the Back of the Beyond. A single sentry called down from the low parapet, a shade silhouetted against the stars, eyes glowing like cats' orbs. "Stand fast! Who comes?"

"A servant of the day and of the High King of Faerie!" Koothlin called. "Who would you expect in this ghastly murk?"

"Monsters to match the murkiness," the sentry replied. "Or murk-men, at least." He drew a sword of blinding radiance, and though Gray blinked beneath its gleam, Koothlin looked with unshielded eyes.

"Oh, I do love this!" the sentry exclaimed. "To see a brave elf lad guiding such a company, riding where no sojourners ever come."

"But I am no lad," Koothlin replied.

"Because you have not lived so many summers as I, I say you are."

"But in Faerie it is always summer; there is but one," Koothlin said. "And so by summers I count us the same age—each one summer old."

The sentry laughed. "Then we are both babes! So one nursing hails another. But let us say I have seen more of summer than you and be done. Tonight we will dine together and speak of that endless summer—the flowers we picked, the maidens we wooed, the beasts we slew on fiery heaths."

Koothlin shuddered and slipped sideways on the saddle.

"What fool am I!" the sentry cried. "I prattle, not seeing you wounded. A moment, and I'll be at the gate."

As the elf vanished from the parapet, Koothlin, leaning on his horse's neck, said softly, "No hurry, plenty of time, no haste. We'll dine on summer pies and dreams, sip hours brewed to elven taste."

So saying, before Gray could catch him, he gave a toneless chuckle and tumbled to the ground.

* * *

Though Gray Darien agonized over every hour not spent seeking Tanabel-Tunia, the companions were forced to remain two days at

Duskell Watch to recover their strength and rest their horses. On the final evening the elves prepared a dinner of roast chimera served to the travelers at a table built around a fire-pit on the rampart overlooking the Back of the Beyond. Unlike the barren valley they had ridden through to reach the fortress, a wood stretched across the vale below them, crowding against the high wall, a forest bedecked more brightly than any troop of soldiers, with flowers for medals and broad leaves for braids, brigade upon brigade of briars and blossoms and brown-barked boles storming the walls with the creeping charge of slow tendrils and roots, patient with the sure knowledge of coming victory, as all wild things are against civilized construction.

Still weak from his wounds, Koothlin the elf sat wrapped in a white robe on a wicker chair. Malimenê, the sentry of the first night, one of six occupants of the citadel, reclined on a stone bench beside him, basking in the rays of the setting sun. As they finished their meal the orb dipped below the treeline; the first stars came out. A cheery flame blazed in the fire-pit, warming the travelers' feet.

"You should convince your friends," Malimenê said, stroking his chin and continuing his conversation with Koothlin, "or call yourself no friend at all."

"I brought them this far as promised," Koothlin replied. "Who am I to dissuade any adventurer from the path of the True Quest? Yet, I have tried. Perhaps Gray might listen to you. You have a way of foreboding about you that could frighten him well enough."

"And you a way of annoying," Malimenê said with a grin. "Had I not a way of forbearing, I'd send you on your forlorn way."

"I consider myself forewarned," Koothlin said, "and thus forestall my fate, for—"

"We didn't come this far to turn back," Gray interrupted, knowing elves could play with words until all thread of meaning was lost. "We've been through too much."

Without warning, Jaunter slammed his fist against the wooden table, causing everyone except the elves to flinch. The Scythian grinned broadly and raised his arms expansively to include the entire company. "Enough of such talk! A feast, that's what this should be!" He lifted a pewter cup, revealing the ram tattoo on his forearm. "A feast to the dangers we've come through to reach this

stronghold.”

“For you, everything is a reason to celebrate,” Fox Lodan said grimly, looking down his aquiline nose. His red hair, cut to his shoulders, flamed in the firelight, heightening the prince’s glistening blue eyes and feral features. He was tall, not as broad-shouldered as some, but well-muscled. “You should take a lesson from our glum baby-leader. The boy sulks better than a caged kitten.”

Seated beside Gray, Joiwend gave his elbow a warning touch. He bit back an acrid reply.

Jaunter laughed. “You’ll be the same as I am when you’ve seen enough years on the road. An old campaigner takes what he can when he can. Not like you young bulls.”

Gray Darien couldn’t help but smile. Jaunter’s enthusiasm was contagious. “You’re not that old.”

“Thirty-six next month, near as I know,” Jaunter said. “On the steppes, that’s ancient. Surviving another day is a cause for rejoicing.”

Joiwend laughed, her voice pleasantly low for a woman’s. “Only you would find a reason to celebrate reaching the Back of the Beyond.”

“I have never understood mortals’ longing for peril when their lives are so short,” Malimenê said.

“None of that,” Jaunter commanded. “I’ll not have it.”

Russ Rogers pushed his black-framed spectacles against the bridge of his nose. “I’ve had enough of fighting, myself. I’d welcome a little peace.”

“I’ll second that one and shake your hand, Sarge.” Corporal Spence stuffed a piece of cabbage into his mouth, leaving a scrap on his cheek. Beneath the brim of his American army helmet, his shrewd eyes flickered in the firelight. Only Soonderkainen, Ninette Argilla, and Fox Lodan were natives of Faerie. The rest had been born on Earth, though not all in the same century, and had stumbled into Faerie by various means.

“If you want peace, better you should remain here when your companions depart,” Koothlin said.

“I’ve lived with the screwball Faerie laws for six months, and that’s long enough,” Russ said. “I aim to see what’s out there.”

"Me too, Sarge," Corporal Spence said.

"Less talk, more wine!" Jaunter called.

"None of us will turn back," Master Tatters said.

"Why not?" Malimenê asked.

"Because what drove us here must drive us on."

"And what might that be?" Malimenê replied.

"For me the moon, I reckon," Tatters said. "Her dark eyes, her dark brow. She leads me."

"Don't pay any attention to him," Spence said. "He's nuts sometimes."

"Enough of that, Corporal," Russ ordered.

"Sorry, Sarge, but you know it's true."

Malimenê rose and looked deep into Master Tatters' ever-wandering eyes. Tanned to a nut-brown, barrel-chested and still powerful despite being easily past fifty, his disheveled hair and constantly moving hands gave him the appearance of a lunatic. He shrugged his shoulders, sending his frayed cloak flapping.

"You are moonstruck, 'tis true," Malimenê said. "I see it within you, yet you have wandered far and learned much." The elf gave a low bow. "The peace of my people upon you, my lord."

Master Tatters gazed at him blankly.

"Tatters, blessed by an elf?" Jaunter bellowed. "Wonders above and below the earth! This is a high day! I'll drink to that!"

Corporal Spence raised his goblet. "I'll drink to anything."

"You'd drink poison if it were poured in a stein," Soonderkainen said.

"That's hard, sir," Spence said, glowering. He tugged at his army helmet with both hands, as if to climb inside it.

Gray Darien looked at the bard-enchanter in surprise. Though Spence clearly disliked the gibe, such barbs from one given little to mirth meant Soonderkainen was actually enjoying himself. Gray looked around the table, studying the others. Save perhaps for Ninette Argilla, they were all elated to be here. Despite his anxiety about their search being delayed these two days, even he felt cheerful, for in the morning they would be on their way to find Tana. Turning to Joiwend, he gestured toward the waiting forest, murmuring, "It's strange, isn't it, being happy when we don't know what we'll face out there?"

"Today is the day we live in," Joiwend said, brushing a dark curl from her brown eyes. "It's enough that we're leaving Faerie." She was a voluptuous woman, fifty years old, though the powers given her by her magic ring kept her body closer to thirty. She had confided the source of her vitality and her true age to Gray alone, the world being filled with those willing to steal or kill to preserve their youth. "For all of us to have lived through so many hardships to reach Duskell Watch—we know the dangers we leave behind. That's reason enough to rejoice. You especially are one step closer to what you most desire."

He blushed, afraid she would say more and the others hear, but she winked and gave his shoulder a reassuring squeeze. He turned his attention to the company and found Fox Lodan addressing Malimenê. "Since we won't be turning back, tell us what to expect. You've watched the Back of the Beyond, but said little concerning it."

"I would rather not, but will for friendship's sake," Malimenê said. "Let me begin by saying that because Faerie lies on the border of mortal lands, a human may sometimes catch a glimpse of its glory: the luster of magic on the hills, a passing flowered scent, a memory from the days of childhood. When mortals see this, they stand awestruck, for we dwell in a reality deeper than their own. Their world is but a shadow compared to ours."

"A passing shade," Koothlin added. "A raindrop falling on Faerie's unceasing stream. We are more real than those enslaved to Time, who die like grass fresh-cut in the field, withering in a moment, soon to the flames."

"Poor tinder, indeed," Malimenê said. "The winking of fireflies, scarce stoking the eternal fires. But Duskell Watch lies deeper within Faerie than any mortal can discern, though poets sometimes journey here in their slumbers, half-mad, never dreaming where they walk, but only walking where they dream. When Faerie first was, the Elf King himself passed through this valley into the Back of the Beyond and returned with a face pale as frightened spooks. He raised fortresses along the western border and forbade our people entrance into that country.

"So we know little, but I have watched and listened, and oft-whiles cunning creatures creep from that forest, rapping upon the

door, inviting themselves to dine. I host them in the small gatehouse on their side of the wall. I suspect I have entertained monsters and saints, and which take one lump in their tea, and which two, I could not say. But this I believe, that even as mortals are less than shades to us, so are we to those beyond the boundary. It is closer to reality; its inhabitants are filled with forces of life greater than our own, and we are hand-puppets, dangling limp by our necks in comparison."

"I little knew when I called you foreboding," Koothlin said. "This talk is too fierce. I will not dwell upon it."

"I am ruined by that country." Malimenê looked grim and drawn in the growing twilight, his eyes dead orbs. His voice quavered as he spoke, so Gray knew his jesting had been bravado. "Sometimes from the ramparts I catch a glimpse—oh but a flash!—and I know how mortals feel dreaming of Paradise. And I, an elf of Faerie, who know not time, nor age, nor insufficiency, am filled with such longings as can scarce be borne. And someday I fear I will descend the stone steps leading into the forest and open the little wooden gate at the back of Duskell Watch and run capering against the edict of my king into that land. It fills me with dread, for once I have tasted the fruit of that country, the wine of Faerie may parch my throat. I tell you, did the Elf King's law not prevent me from interfering in a quest, I would deny you passage."

He fell silent while Gray gazed over the forest. A sweet scent, repellent and inviting, wafted from the uncanny wood, permeating the fortress. A shiver ran through him.

Jaunter growled in annoyance and Joiwend said, "A song, Soonderkainen, in honor of the occasion."

The bard-enchanter rose to his feet, unslung his harp, and began "The Song of Dirold," his beautiful baritone echoing around the parapets. Joiwend joined in, her voice pure and sweet as spring water. Jaunter added his graveled tones, never in tune, and Corporal Spence, already too full of wine, followed along, missing most of the words. Even Russ Rogers sang. Master Tatters stood and danced, waving his hands in time to the music, moving his arms up and down like a drifting cloud. Fox Lodan sat silent, beating one palm in rhythm against his chair.

Only Ninette Argilla remained unmoved, her face and body

hidden behind the mask and bronze armor she never removed, slipping what little food she ate between its mouth-slit. Gray had noticed that Malimenê treated her almost as if she weren't there, sometimes acting startled to see her, as if she had suddenly appeared before him. Soonderkainen hinted he knew something of her origins, but would answer no questions. She never spoke of herself; she scarcely spoke at all.

Gray dismissed her from his mind and sang along. Joiwend was right. He was happy; they were all happy, regardless what tomorrow might bring. They were leaving Faerie. Anything was possible. They would soon find Tanabel-Tunia. He sighed, picturing her face.

In the year following their kiss, the king had decided Gray should focus on diplomacy, and Aristides had kept him busy studying, practicing logic and rhetoric, and meeting with minor officials from various villages. He and Tana wrote often, but when she did not come to the palace for Summerfest as usual, and ceased writing back, Gray began to despair. Then the news came of her upcoming betrothal to a Prince of Faerie, stunning the entire court.

By the decree of the Elf King, the denizens of Faerie could not enter mortal lands, so the official engagement was to be celebrated at the border between the two kingdoms. Since the palace of En lay close to the boundary, Tana and her foster father, the First Duke of Mare Castle, would stay there a time.

When she arrived, Gray finally got the chance to talk to her alone on the ballroom terrace at a feast held in her honor. The lights of Faerie shone in the distance, steady and unwavering; the torches of the palace cast their glow over the Royal Gardens. Somewhere in the night, two cats argued.

Far enough from watching eyes, Gray placed his hand over hers on the balcony rail. "I've missed you. Why didn't you tell me?"

She glanced over her shoulder, assuring herself of their privacy. "I wanted to write, but I couldn't find the words."

A lump rose in his throat. "Do you love this prince?"

Tears sprang to her eyes. "I've never even met Fox Lodan. The duke arranged it all."

Momentary relief swept over him, replaced by a vast emptiness. "How could he do that to you? It's insane. You'll be—"

"I know." Her hand trembled beneath his. "I'll have to live there

after I'm married, following the course of whatever tale I find myself in, trapped in a role, stripped of choice. The duke says it doesn't matter if I live my life in a Story, so long as it's a good one. He calls knowing exactly how my life will go a gift. He says marrying a prince is a blessing for a girl of unknown parentage." She squeezed his hand, her voice growing bitter. "Your uncle never said why he adopted me, but I've always known he didn't love me. He sold me like a prize cow."

They stood silent, Gray's mind churning. "I had planned to ask him for your hand when you came this summer." He hurried on, his voice hoarse. "Only if you love me, of course. I've loved you since we were children."

She studied his face. "I do love you, Gray. Of course I do."

Impassioned, he drew her into the shadows and kissed her. For an instant, she responded, then pulled away. "We mustn't. We can't disobey the duke's wishes."

"We can. We'll run away together, leave En, find a place of our own."

"You would do that for me?"

"For both of us. We'll travel east to Charovia, seek sanctuary there." Gray's heart pounded in his chest. "It won't be easy, but we'll have each other. We'll go as soon as we can slip away. I'll arrange everything."

Her voice came breathless. "All right." She glanced into the ball-room. "Someone's coming." She hurriedly kissed his cheek. "You've always been my protector."

Gray's reverie was broken by the ending of the song. Other tunes followed from the companions' respective homelands. Russ sang a favorite of his called "The Red River Valley," his voice rough but mostly on pitch. Gray always liked that one, though he preferred ballads of brave warriors. Malimenê crooned an elven tune, sad and sweet, wistful as only their melodies can be. Joiwend sang a song in French; Tatters contributed a lay about a woman named Clementine. The moon rose full and golden; the fire crackled; the susurrations of unknown insects drifted from the Back of the Beyond. It was a peace Gray would often recall with longing.

"Gentlemen and gentle ladies," Russ Rogers said, pushing his glasses back against the bridge of his nose and catching each of their

eyes. "I propose a toast. We've fought together, brothers and sisters in arms. We've been through the fire and now stand at the edge of a great mystery. As Master Tatters said, we've each come for our own reasons, some of us because we were compelled, others voluntarily, but we've made the journey together. May we continue to be a chain against our enemies, each link upholding the others." He lifted his goblet higher, his tanned face unaccustomedly flushed. "May we never separate in strife, but only in friendship. I give you the Company of the Far Riders."

"The Company of the Far Riders," the others intoned, some rising to their feet as they raised their goblets. Jaunter downed his; Ninette Argilla scarcely tasted her own. The rest drank heartily while the elves looked on.

"Hear, hear, Sarge!" Corporal Spence said, his speech slurred. "Good words, sir. Good words."

* * *

They retired early in anticipation of the next day's journey. The others were soon asleep, but Gray remained restless. After throwing himself back and forth among the covers, he finally rose, drew on his clothes, and went to stand again on the rampart overlooking the Back of the Beyond. The night was cool; the forest lay black in the darkness, the starlight of Faerie dying at the border.

"A lovely evening," a voice behind him said.

Gray turned, startled, automatically reaching for the sword he had left in his room.

Koothlin's eyes shone golden in the moonlight. He smoked a briar pipe. "What brings you out so late, lad?"

"I couldn't sleep."

"Come sit beside me, then. We'll watch the stars make their great pivot overhead."

Gray took a nearby chair, and the two sat in momentary silence.

"Are you troubled about tomorrow?" Koothlin asked.

"I just want to get there and be done with it, and I . . . I'm sorry you're not riding with us."

"You've been fine company."

"It's not just that," Gray said. "You're the only one who treats me

as the leader.”

“By the rules of Faerie, you are.”

“That doesn’t mean much. Fox Lodan is the real commander. Or Soonderkainen; everyone is a little afraid of his magic, even Jaunter, I think.”

“You misunderstand Fox. In Faerie, the eldest son often likes lord-ing it over others. It’s a cruel streak in an otherwise valiant man. Jealousy.”

Gray snorted. “Fox, jealous of me? There’s a jest.”

“You are the third son, who must always prevail.”

Gray looked into his friend’s eyes. “So I’ve been told, but is it true? More than once I thought I was about to die, just as I might in En.”

Koothlin blew a smoke ring toward the moon. “No one said your trials would be effortless, only that you will win through at the last. By his magic, the Elf King, the High King of Faerie, made it so. Everyone in Faerie is subject to his laws, even the elves themselves and the strangers who enter its borders. Because of those laws, lad, whatever you turn your hand to must ultimately prevail, not only because of your order of birth. Your eyes, one blue and one gray—such a difference marks you as the Victorious Prince. So long as you lead this quest, you can be wounded but never slain, defied but never defeated.”

“It didn’t feel that way beneath the manticore’s jaws.”

Koothlin chuckled. “Nonetheless, you are alive today as proof of it. You are invincible and must succeed. That includes winning Tanabel-Tunia.”

“Tana and I are cousins. I’m—”

Koothlin raised his hand to silence Gray’s protest. “Only by her adoption into your uncle’s family. Even an elf can see where love lies. Fox sees it too. He may be betrothed to her, but you’ll win her in the end. He knows the truth of it, and it gnaws him.” The elf frowned and lowered his voice to a mutter. “But I speak amiss, giving poor counsel. What a wretch I am to babble so vainly! All certainty will vanish once you cross the border. The magic of Faerie does not hold there, and even the third son of a king might perish in the Back of the Beyond.”

“Then I’m no worse off than I was in En.” Gray spoke carelessly,

but the elf's words shook him. His reputed invincibility had given him more confidence than he realized. Everything was now uncertain. His thoughts grew dark, his voice, bitter. "Fox doesn't even know her. She doesn't love him."

"That is what makes him so envious."

"He doesn't love her, either. It's all politics. He thinks being connected to a mortal house will give him some advantage."

Koothlin drew a deep draft from his pipe. "Have you considered what the people of the village of Nysa said about her, when she and the three men passed through? Though they lingered half a day there, the villagers sensed no fear in her. Can she have accompanied them willingly, perhaps even arranged it to avoid the marriage?"

Gray's temper rose. "That's impossible." He met the elf's skeptical gaze. "Don't look at me like that. If you knew her, you'd understand. She is perfect, the best of women, beautiful and wise, filled with kindness, good beyond belief. When she walks into a room, it's as if everything stops. When I look into her eyes, it's like . . . it's like—"

"Seeing a reflection of yourself?"

Gray frowned, uncertain of his friend's meaning. "No, it's . . ." He hesitated. "Or perhaps in a way it is, because she seems so much a part of me. We were meant to be together. We have to be! I know it in my heart. I've written poetry about it." He hesitated. "I've told no one, but when she learned her father intended to betroth her to Fox, we vowed to run away together."

"A delightful contrivance. What kept you from doing so?"

"We planned to escape during our journey to the engagement feast, but weren't able to, so I decided it would have to be afterward. But everything went wrong."

That had been the strangest night of Gray's life. The royal company, led by the king and queen, had sat facing Prince Lodan's party at a table set so the border between Faerie and En ran precisely down its middle. No one's hands crossed that line, the Faerie folk because it was forbidden, the mortals, due to fear.

"You're a lovely prize, Tanabel-Tunia." Prince Lodan's voice was deep. "I am not displeased."

A wave of jealousy had run through Gray.

"You surely do me mere courtesy," Tana replied. "It is said mortal

women cannot compare to the ladies of Faerie."

"True, if you mean those born to be a Beautiful Princess or Comely Maiden. There are none more fair in all our land."

"So you truly know the course of your destiny?" Tana's voice quavered slightly. "May I ask what your fate will be?"

"I am the Unjust Prince. My second oldest brother is the Prince Who Always Fails. Like every third son, our youngest brother is the Good Prince. Though I am the successor to the throne, I will reign, if at all, for but a short season. In any solitary quest, I will fail and my brother will later succeed. I will strive against him and win for a time, but ultimately he will be victorious over me. I'll die either imprisoned, executed, or in combat against him."

Tanabel-Tunia paled, but her foster father remained impassive. Gray wondered how he could be so detached.

"Is there no way to avoid such a doom?" the queen asked.

A puzzled look crossed Fox Lodan's brow. "I am the Unjust Prince." He raised a utensil above the table. "Would you ask if the knife can keep itself aloft?" He let it drop clattering.

Tana was nearly in tears. "When we are wed, what will happen to me?"

Fox grinned the grin of his namesake. "That is the question on which I pin my hopes! Your normal fate is to become the Long-Suffering Wife, subject to my disregard, never to know happiness; yet, a mortal woman brought into Faerie could perhaps change my course. Who knows?" He eyed her as if she were a found diamond. "Perhaps you will sweep us both into a Story that will make me king."

Tana turned absolutely ashen. Without glancing at her foster father, she said, icily, "So this is my dowry. Gold flows not from the duke's castle, but to it."

"You should be grateful for the chance to wed a prince," the duke murmured.

Gray could not remain silent. "Father, you cannot allow this. It is a prison."

The king did not reply.

"You presume too much, nephew," the duke spat.

"I presume what is honorable."

"What business is it of yours, boy?" Fox demanded.

Gray bristled. Lodan was surely less than five years older than he. "Cicero said 'Not for ourselves alone are we born.'"

Fox Lodan looked Gray over, smirking. "Mortal nonsense. You remind me of a visiting prince who mocked me when I was your age. I invited him to spar in the courtyard with wooden swords. Instead of halting when I scored the first point, I beat him raw. He was lame in one leg thereafter."

Lodan's men laughed; Gray's people sat in stony silence.

"Too bad you and I can't test our mettle against one another, eh boy?" Fox continued. "Perhaps I could win against a third son from mortal realms."

"Peace!" the king commanded, cutting off Gray's reply with a look that could not be denied. "This is not the hour for dissension."

Gray clenched his fists beneath the table.

Ceremonial words were spoken, affirming the engagement. At the speaking of the pledge, made not by Tana, but by the duke, cold sweat broke across Gray's brow. Music played, but he scarcely heard it.

When the evening ended and the royal party withdrew into the palisade prepared for them, Gray determined not to wait another night before spiriting Tana away. As the royals veered off to their individual pavilions, he ushered her away from the torchlight. Her handmaids and a guard started to follow, but he ordered them back.

Hurrying her to the paddock, he retrieved the supplies he had previously secreted there. He wished he could have secured her some rough riding clothes, but there was no time. He helped her to her horse; she turned to slip her foot into the stirrup.

Something struck him a blow to the head. He fell to his knees and was hit again, driven to the ground. His vision went black; he fought to clear it, tried to rise to his knees, fell back down. Through a haze he saw two men grasping Tana, one with his hand over her mouth.

Fighting to rise, struggling to cry out, his voice little more than a moan, Gray saw the abductors throw aside a railing and bolt out of the paddock, Tana bound in front of the leader's saddle. They vanished into the darkness, leaving Gray crawling toward the distant guards . . .

The soft flutter of wings woke him from that terrible memory. A great horned owl landed on the parapet, much larger than any other of its kind, its eyes golden as Koothlin's own. Gray looked at it in surprise, but the elf smiled.

"Fine birds make fine feathers," Koothlin said. "How lovely you look, my lady."

The owl grew before their eyes, its shape changing. Joiwend stood before them, precarious on the parapet, one finger touching the magic ring that allowed her to shift her form. She glanced unconcerned over her shoulder at the long drop, then hopped gracefully down beside her companions.

"A lovely night for an evening's flight," Koothlin said.

She rotated her head toward the elf, her eyes a vacant, unblinking stare, her whole body motionless, still owlish for a time after taking its form. "Whoo . . ." She cleared her throat. "How odd you looked sitting there; but I knew you for friends." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "I flew for leagues along the border. I dared not cross, not without the others. I fear that land. The magic within it is not the enchantment of Faerie. Everything is different. Its dwellers are shrewd and terrible hunters; we will be their prey, mice beneath their claws. We must turn back. Tanabel-Tunia is lost."

Gray recoiled as if struck. "How do you know?"

She stared at him again before abruptly dropping her head, her hand to her brow. "I'm sorry, my friend. I know nothing for certain. That was the owl speaking."

Gray blew out a relieved breath, but Koothlin murmured, "Best to heed an owl's wisdom."

Gradually, Joiwend's eyes became smaller, more human. She took Gray's hand in both of her own. "Owls are cruel, Gray. They know only the hunter and the hunt. We will find Tanabel-Tunia. Whatever I sensed out there, we will face it as we have done all else."

He squeezed her hand, grateful for her comfort, wondering if she really believed it.

"I'm famished," she said.

"I'll have a mouse sent to your chamber," Koothlin said. "Or would you fancy it here?"

She stuck out her tongue. "I only eat when I'm human, as you

well know. I'm off to my room; my wings are tired."

She departed, her back bent forward, striding stiff-legged as a bird.

"Not much of a night-owl," Koothlin said.

But Gray did not laugh, and the morning found him still sleepless, having spent the night mentally composing and discarding, one by one, poems of longing for his magnificent Tanabel-Tunia.

CHAPTER TWO

THE BACK OF THE BEYOND

When the sun peeked above the elven hills the next morning, the travelers said their farewells to Koothlin and Malimenê, and departed by the little back gate, passing along a narrow deer path into the Back of the Beyond.

They had scarcely gone fifty paces before throwing their hands over their eyes, dazzled by a light emanating not from any single source, but from the entire land, a brilliance so intense the whole forest seemed aflame. Blind, squinting in pain, Gray struggled to control his horse. To his left, Corporal Spence shouted, "My eyes! It's burned my eyes!"

Gray nearly panicked, thinking Spence right, but his sight gradually adjusted, leaving him blinking stupidly against the radiance. The sky shone diamond blue; the clouds rose overhead, cliffs in the heavens. The land had appeared vivid from Duskell Watch; now its loveliness overwhelmed him. Words such as *green* and *blue* were inadequate, as if he had never seen color before. He glanced back at the fortress, drear and gray in comparison, wavering and thin as a mirage.

Beyond the path the branches of the forest formed a thick canopy of breathtaking beauty. Tendrils covered the trunks, displaying velvet flowers shimmering in rainbow hues. Thorns, serrated as knives, glistened with dew, each drop a thing of wonder.

Gray glanced at his companions and drew an astonished breath. In the light of the Back of the Beyond they seemed as gods, their

every trait accentuated: Jaunter the Scythian, Lord of the Plains, massive as iron, his eyes—distinctly Asian—aflame with wrath and joy; Soonderkainen, Bard and Enchanter, his handsome, beardless face star-glistening as the sun; Russ Rogers, tanned as tempered clay, lean of frame but steady as his name, his cropped, thick hair standing upright like black smoke; Corporal Spence, short and squat as an ape, eyes ever searching beneath his army helmet; Prince Fox Lodan, red hair streaming like lava, his expression cunning as that of his namesake; Joiwend, dark-haired, dark-eyed, constant as the sky, filled with glowing serenity; Master Tatters, cloak flapping, hair entangled, his face swimming in chaotic colors; Ninette Argilla, so faint she was nearly invisible in her bronze armor. Even the horses were transformed—the sleekness of their coats, the massive power of their flanks, their noble brows, the chocolate depths of their eyes.

Gray looked down at his own form. Silver swirls swept over his body, elusive and ever-changing. Around his heart his chest shone golden. He felt powerful, confident, filled with unspeakable joy. Throwing back his head he whooped in pleasure. He was alive!

Caught in that ecstasy, the horses reared, nearly tumbling their riders, hooves flailing to shatter the sky, their wild, joyful whinnies filling the forest. Gray's mare bucked three times like a colt and broke into a dead run through the woods, heedless of caution, the other steeds with her. In his exaltation, Gray did not care. Bellowing like children, the companions sped away.

For long minutes they ran, heedless of the danger, traveling farther than any horse could go without dropping from exhaustion; but when at last their joy was spent and they slowed to a trot, no foam flecked the animals' lips; the beasts were scarcely winded.

Gradually, the intoxication ebbed, the splendor fading from Gray and his companions. They drew to a halt. The forest surrounded them; Duskell Watch was lost behind the trees.

"What just happened?" Corporal Spence asked.

"I don't know, but it was magnificent!" Joiwend exhaled the words, breathless.

"Plumb lovely," Master Tatters rasped. "Loveliest."

"That was a powerful enchantment." Soonderkainen said, dismayed. "I didn't think anything could compel me to act so blindly."

"I felt like a kid again," Russ said. "It's like Malimenê told us; everything here is more alive."

"I could have slain giants," Jaunter growled. "Would there had been some to fight!"

"Well spoken!" Fox Lodan grinned, tapping one hand against his sword.

"Why did you let the horses run so hard?" Ninette Argilla asked, though her mount had galloped as fast as any. "They could have been lamed."

The others looked at her in surprise.

"Did you feel nothing, woman?" Fox Lodan asked.

"I'm sorry. I don't understand . . ." Her voice trailed away, her eyes, seen only through the slits of her armored mask, puzzled as those of a pup.

From the inside of his cloak Soonderkainen drew his small harp, the focus of much of the bard-enchanter's might. A darkness passed over his visage, the shadow that covered the left half of his face when he summoned his magic. His left eye, usually golden-brown, went cold and hard as black amber. The others stiffened, fearing him a little when he donned the mantle of his power. He dismounted and walked a slow circle, but his features soon returned to normal, leaving him shaking his head. "I do not sense any sorcery. I don't know what we experienced."

His words sobered the company, their euphoria fading into embarrassment and apprehension. The wizard's skills had saved their lives more than once; it disquieted them to hear him baffled. Gray drew a deep breath, inhaling rare, earthy scents savoring of the unknown. A humming filled the forest, so near the brink of hearing he half thought it his imagination. Birdsong pervaded the woods, the cries like echoes of voices. A crow sailed past, looped back, and landed on a nearby boulder. It studied them, turning its head from side to side. Gray instinctively reached for his bow, then wondered why he did so. The crow flapped away, leaving its mocking *caw* drifting behind.

"Let's get about our business," Fox Lodan said. "I'll take the point."

The company stirred, the mood broken by the call to the familiar.

"But in what direction should we go?" Soonderkainen asked.

"Outside of Faerie, we can't expect our usual guides. There won't be any sages or dwarves to show us the way, no scrying pools or auguries."

"Why not?" Fox Lodan asked.

"Because that's not the way the normal world works," Russ said.

Fox Lodan shook his head, clearly bewildered. "How does anyone find their way anywhere?"

"We know we have to travel away from the border," Joiwend said. "If we can reach a village, perhaps we can learn where the girl was taken."

They fell into place, red-haired Fox scouting a few paces ahead as he often did, a habit allowing the prince to remain aloof. Gray came next, leading the others, and Jaunter took up the rear, his short, curved bow in hand, his half-moon battle-axe, a *sagaris*, hanging by his side. As was his wont, Master Tatters drifted in and out of the company, constantly searching the ground for tracks. They kept alert, their hands at their swords. And still that soft humming rose all around.

"It's spring in these here parts," Master Tatters drawled. "The endless summer of Faerie lies behind us now."

An hour passed, then two. Corporal Spence said, "Does anybody else feel different, like the fog is lifting?"

Gray looked around. "There isn't any mist."

"He means the enchantment," Russ said. "You're right. My thoughts are clearer; I'm not thinking of myself as some fairy-tale knight."

"As are mine." Joiwend laughed in delight. "We're no longer in the Tale of the Quest. We've been set free!"

"It's what we've hoped for," Russ said. "The Laws of Faerie *don't* operate in the Back of the Beyond. We're finally clear of their influence."

"It's like waking from a dream," Joiwend said. "Not that we weren't aware of it. We've often spoken of it. We've been ourselves but not ourselves, consumed by our mission. And before that, before we met, by the other Stories we chanced upon."

Gray searched his mind. It was true. From the moment he left En and entered Faerie, he had fallen under the realm's enchantment. In that land ruled by the magic of the Elf King, he had become . . .

what had he become? He shook his head, trying to comprehend. He had gone there intent on rescuing Tanabel-Tunia, but once within its borders, had turned into a shadow of himself, at times more shell than man. He now saw that the others had been the same, their purposes and personalities channeled into set roles, like characters in a balladeer's song.

His Greek tutor had warned him this would occur, but thought Gray might be safe enough as long as he was seeking Tana. "Because you are already on a quest, the Story should take you where you wish to go," Aristides had said. "May it also bring both of you back safely."

A shiver ran along Gray's spine. It was like escaping from a dungeon. Terrible were the sorceries of the Elf King that could control the very thoughts of his subjects. Gray wondered how it would be, now that they were their true selves.

"You've all gone mad," Fox Lodan said. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Nor I, at least not entirely," Soonderkainen said. "But being born in Faerie, we two know we are destined to live our lives following a single path, foreordained to be only what we are and nothing more. In other lands it's different."

"Grotesque and unnatural is what it is," Fox said.

"Not to me, it ain't," Corporal Spence said. "Nuts to the laws of Faerie! It feels good not to be the squire of Russell the Valiant. No offense, Sarge."

"None taken," Russ said.

"It matters naught to me," Jaunter said. "I am what I am in any country."

They soon intersected a stream and followed its banks thereafter, its waters babbling by, an unfathomable choir.

Soonderkainen turned to Joiwend. "I thought we would surely have met someone by now. Why were there no border guards? Try flying above the trees and see if you can spot a village or farm."

"I wish I could," Joiwend replied, softly. "In the last few minutes my powers have failed."

Gray glanced back in consternation. Joiwend's usually tranquil face was drawn. If what she said was true, it would leave her vulnerable in more ways than in battle. Despite her beauty, Gray saw

her only as a friend given to motherly advice, but early in their journey Jaunter had made overtures toward her. She had responded by taking the form of a bear, and no one had troubled her again. Through their common dangers, Gray hoped even the Scythian had learned to respect her; but if he had to defend her, Gray would do so with his life.

Soonderkainen slowed his horse and peered at her. "When did you first know? What did you feel?"

"The change was sudden. I can't describe it. It just *is*. Have you noticed anything?"

"Nothing. My magic lies within me; I doubt I will be affected. It is possible yours might return, but that depends on its source." The bard glanced at her magic ring, perhaps guessing her secret.

* * *

The morning passed, cool beneath the forest canopy, chilled further by the babbling stream. Life teemed in the forest—hares and foxes in abundance, wild deer, multitudes of birds. Corporal Spence and Master Tatters went hunting and were gone only moments before the travelers heard the twang of bows and the pitiful squeals of dying rabbits. The two returned with three hares.

"There's hundreds of 'em, Sarge," Spence told Russ, grinning and wiping blood from his hands onto his pants. "Tatters got these before I could even take a shot. We won't starve, that's for sure."

"Perhaps the Back of the Beyond isn't as bad as the elves thought," Gray said, but catching Joiwend's troubled demeanor, wished he hadn't spoken.

"Make no assumptions," Soonderkainen said. "The place is uncanny. There's a feeling in the air. I don't like it."

"This *is* a lively country," Master Tatters said, rolling his eyes around the forest, "filled with beasts and wings and bumfuzzled things. We mustn't let nary a one of 'em gobble us up."

Soonderkainen chuckled. "We'll watch for that, Thomas."

They were used to Master Tatters' quirks. His true surname was Ragsdale, but he had earned his title long before the travelers knew him, doubtless due to his worn clothes and scattered mind. An extraordinary tracker, a skill learned from a people called the

Comanches, he carried some tragedy concerning the loss of his wife and daughters. Despite his homespun ways, he knew smatterings of other languages and had read extensively. His demeanor fluctuated from cheerful humor to a pensive despondency sometimes lasting for days.

Just before noon they descended over rough shale into a valley filled with a mist shot through with rainbow hues of green, orange, and yellow. They rode in a close V formation, weapons ready. No sooner did they enter the vapors than Gray felt a tingling up and down his arms. The colors drifted serpentine through the mist, always just out of reach. The horses blew uneasily.

Joiwend clutched her saddle horn. "I feel faint."

Gray dropped back and reached out a hand to steady her. "Do you want to dismount?"

"Not in this fog. I think I'll be all right." Eyes closed, she leaned on the neck of her mare, Maravilla.

They rode out of the mist, back into the sunlight, and the tingling in Gray's arms subsided. Joiwend sat upright and gave him a determined smile.

"That was witchy," Master Tatters said. "The Greeks called such a place the Underworld."

"*Ato!*" Jaunter barked. "Speak not of the land of the dead. You and I have both seen worse, my friend."

"It was another boundary," Soonderkainen said, "perhaps a more important one. I sensed arcane energies within it. We have ridden deeper into the Back of the Beyond. Keep alert, my friends. I do not know what to expect, but we must remain wary."

Before they had gone another fifty paces, Ninette Argilla tumbled from her horse, her armor clattering as she struck the ground. Russ leapt from his mount and hurried to her side, Joiwend following after. Master Tatters and Corporal Spence drew their bows and scanned the forest for assassins. While Fox Lodan hurried back from his position at the point, Gray and Jaunter dismounted and stood guard over their fallen companion, their weapons in their hands.

Soonderkainen left his saddle slowly, his expression thoughtful.

"I can't see her eyes," Joiwend said. "We need to remove her faceplate."

Russ struggled to do so, peering through his black-framed spectacles, his tanned brow furrowed in concentration. Using the blade of his knife, he pried away a pair of rivets and pulled off the mask.

"Tagimasad!" Jaunter swore.

An exhalation ran round the circle.

A head of clay lay beneath the faceplate, the eyes mere gouges, the mouth a slit.

"What devilry is this?" Fox Lodan demanded.

Soonderkainen knelt beside the armor and shook his head. "From the moment I met her, I perceived she was a creation of earth and stone. Only a great Lord of Faerie could have given her life. Though such black magic is abhorrent to me, her body and her armor made her nearly indestructible, and I knew she could be useful. For that reason, I was glad she accompanied us."

"But she had eyes," Joiwend said. "We all saw them. She ate with us."

"Or feigned doing so," the bard-enchanter said. "Whether she required sustenance, I do not know. Hers was no more than a semblance of life."

"So that's why she was so quiet," Corporal Spence said.

"Why didn't you tell us?" Fox Lodan asked.

"Constructs have certain weaknesses," Soonderkainen said. "The fewer who knew, the better."

Master Tatters returned the faceplate, covering the clay features. "Here today and gone today. Maybe fetched back tomorrow?"

"I don't believe so," Soonderkainen said. "The spells that gave her life failed as we moved away from Faerie."

"We should bury her," Russ said.

"Would we bury a broken carriage?" Soonderkainen asked.

"That's right," Fox Lodan replied. "Leave her and move on, I say."

"She wasn't much of a person," Corporal Spence said. "She hardly ever talked and never laughed. You couldn't joke with her or find out anything about her. There's nothing to say over her grave."

Joiwend's eyes welled with tears. "She was a strong warrior. Some of us might have died without her. We could at least admit that."

"Let it be her epitaph, then," the enchanter said, not unkindly. Joiwend looked at Gray. "The decision is yours."

Gray spoke reluctantly, feeling everyone's eyes upon him. "We don't know what dangers are out here. It's best to keep moving."

"Our baby-leader has spoken," Fox said.

Gray flushed but ignored the jibe. Apparently, leaving Faerie hadn't changed Fox's attitude.

"What about her sword?" Corporal Spence asked. "It's pretty valuable."

"We've lost a comrade and you speak of ducats," Joiwend retorted. "Leave her the dignity of her weapon."

Spence tugged his army helmet tight around his brow. "I was just asking, but if you want to chuck it for the next bum to pick up, it's okay with me."

Gray remounted in silence. Russ tied the bridle of Ninette's horse to his saddle horn and led the animal away. Gray looked back only once at the bronze armor lying among the ivy, dully reflecting the sunlight. Spence was right; Ninette Argilla had always been a puzzle. They hadn't known her because there was no one in the armor to know, yet he felt both loss and shame at leaving her unburied. He should have insisted instead of choosing the easy way.

They stopped shortly thereafter to rest beside the stream in a small clearing surrounded by hoary willows. They refrained from building a fire, eating cold rations while their horses champed tall grass. Low clouds covered and uncovered the sun, sailing in winds unfelt below.

"The clouds have faces," Master Tatters said.

Corporal Spence snorted. "All clouds do, you dunce."

Gray glanced up and was startled by the sight. Each of the clouds wore a long face with watery, watchful eyes expressive as those of a portrait. They seemed to stare down at the company, unsmiling judges in fleeced robes.

Soonderkainen rose to his feet, brow furrowed. The formations drifted toward the southwest, changing and reforming, yet the faces remained, some dissipating only to return, some combining to create other, larger visages.

"It's a trick of the wind," Fox Lodan said. "Isn't it?"

"I wish I knew, Prince," Soonderkainen replied. "This country

baffles me. If it's a result of sorcery, it's a kind I can't fathom."

"Then we'll face it with our blades when the time comes," Jaunter said. "I'm no crone to stare at vapors. Let's eat and go on. I'd like to find a village and sleep in a soft bed tonight."

"I'm for that," Russ said, studying his army compass. He showed its needle to Gray. "Look! It's finally working. In Faerie it just spun in circles. We've been traveling mostly northwest."

"Anyone with a sense of direction can tell as much," Fox said.

"I can too," Russ replied, "but this is more accurate."

They fell silent, tight-lipped beneath the watching clouds. Finishing their meal, they plunged once more beneath the shadows of the trees, leaving the glade behind.

The afternoon passed, and the land grew more uneven, rising until they rode among low hills. Gray found himself increasingly anxious. Though the sky remained hidden by the foliage, he had the impression they were still being watched. He kept glancing behind him, fancying faces in the rocks, in the patterns of the leaves on the forest floor, in the earth itself. Nor was he the only one. Fox Lodan kept leaving his place, trotting his horse far ahead, returning with a perplexed gaze. Master Tatters rode incessantly back and forth, scratching his head as he searched for signs of tracks. Jaunter had his sagaris in hand, and Soonderkainen, his harp.

By the time the sunlight angled through the western trees, the companions' vigilance had left them exhausted, and still they found no sign of a settlement. Gray grew despondent, wondering if anyone lived in the Back of the Beyond at all. The country might be vast. Without someone to tell them which way Tana had gone, how could they ever find her?

Russ echoed the prince's thoughts. "Is it completely deserted?"

"Oh, no," Master Tatters replied. "They're here, sure as rain. We've been passing through them all along."

"Who?" Gray asked.

"Whoever they are," Tatters said. "Haunts or spooks, fairies or trolls. Legions we can't see. Legions of legions. They smell like leaves and green grass and seeds."

Corporal Spence sneered. "It's a forest. Everything smells like that."

"Yet Master Tatters is right," Soonderkainen said. "The deeper we

travel, the more I sense some uncanny, unknown force. Whatever it is, it grows stronger with every step we take."

"Leaves and Greensleeves," Tatters sang. "Leaves and Greensleeves, leave some Greensleeves for me and mine."

"A bit softer, if you please," Joiwend said.

"Sorry, mademoiselle." Tatters bowed at the waist from his horse's back, his cloak flapping with the motion.

Fox Lodan returned from scouting ahead. "We might as well call a halt. There's nothing before us but more woods, and there's room to camp just ahead."

Following the stream, they soon came from under the trees. A fire had passed through this part of the forest some time before, sweeping along the sides of the tall hills, leaving charred logs half-hidden by new growth. Gray took a deep breath, relieved to be free of the confining foliage, a feeling extinguished when he saw the watching faces of the clouds again, gnarled and heavy-browed as hoary ancients.

They made their camp as the shadows grew long, at the bottom of a sloping hill a hundred paces from the treeline, sheltered on one side by a stand of brambles.

"I say we dare a fire," Jaunter said. "Tatters says there's people about, but I wager there's none around for leagues. It will keep wolves away."

"Prometheus' gift, a lovely rose that cost him dear," Master Tatters said.

"Let's gather some wood, Corporal," Russ said.

"Sure thing, Sarge." Spence tugged his army helmet down and adjusted its strap.

They unsaddled and cared for the horses, tethering them in tall grass beside the stream. Crickets began their night-song as Russ and Spence laid the wood for the fire. With a word and a strum of his harp, Soonderkainen lit the flames.

A soft keening arose, as of distant voices. The travelers froze in place, eyes darting, hands to their weapons. Jaunter grabbed his sagaris and stepped into the growing shadows surrounding the camp, but turned quickly back. "The hubbub is here. It fades beyond the firelight."

Gray walked a tight circle, his blade in his hand, but could not

find the source. It seemed to come from the fire itself, and as the moments passed it dwindled into silence.

"More mysteries," Soonderkainen said. "I'll sing some wards tonight to keep us safe, but we must post a watch."

"I'll take the first turn," Gray said, "Spence, the second, Russ, the third." For the first time he missed Ninette Argilla, who had often served as sentry for the entire night. He now understood why she had never needed sleep.

As darkness fell, they clustered close to the fire and dined on the rabbits, their mood subdued. Gray sat beside Joiwend.

"How are you?" he asked softly.

"Like someone who has lost an arm." Her voice trembled as she spoke.

"It will come back."

She gave him a brave smile. "Perhaps you're right. I've had a strange feeling ever since we passed through the mist, as if something *were* coming." She lowered her eyes, her lashes spider-shadows in the dusk. "It may be nothing at all, or perhaps it means something else." Her voice grew even quieter, almost a whisper. "Gray, do I look any different?"

The question surprised him. "Not that I've noticed. Why?"

"Not any older?"

"Ah." He chuckled and looked more closely. "There aren't any crows-feet around your eyes."

She blushed and gave him a ruffled smile. "It's silly of me. Forgive my vanity."

"I wasn't laughing at you." But this was a new thought, that Joiwend, so confident, could be worried that the failing of her magic ring could mean the loss of her beauty. It was a fact about women he should remember.

"This forest is akin to the one in Faerie, angry as Talos against the Argonauts," Master Tatters said. "I druther be out on the plains, where we could espy what was about us."

"Which forest?" Soonderkainen asked. "We traveled through two."

"He means the Velitar Timber," Joiwend said. "That *was* an angry wood."

"But this one wasn't so when we crossed the border," Tatters said.

"It's grown plumb furious since."

Jaunter slapped Fox Lodan on the shoulder. "We were glorious in the Velitar. That battle in the twilight, you and me and Gray; we showed the wicker-cats our mettle! I slew five, and you killed what? Four?"

"Six," Fox said. "I would have taken more if our baby-leader hadn't gotten in my way."

"Ato! You wrong him. He did his share. I wouldn't have a left arm today if he hadn't been there. We won honor that night."

Gray looked away. That had been early in their journey. He had stumbled in the fight, causing Fox to trip over him and drop Forlamard, his enchanted sword. Gray had nearly gotten them both killed. But he had deflected a scything claw away from the Scythian, and Jaunter had treated him with respect ever since.

"You may have had a wonderful time, Jaunter, but you weren't under a wicker-cat's withy paws." Joiwend gave a sudden, violent shiver. "I can still feel them at my throat. It's a wonder we survived."

"It was a grim battle, true," Jaunter said, "but I have fought in worse places. When I first left the steppes, scarcely more than a boy, I enlisted as a mercenary for Mithridates against Rome. Those were terrible campaigns."

"Why'd you leave home?" Corporal Spence asked. "Your old man kick you out?"

"You will laugh at me," Jaunter said. "It was because of the horses. I was so much bigger than the other men of my tribe that our mounts, sturdy but little larger than ponies, could not long bear my weight. I left to find a horse to match my size and never went back. I decided I liked traveling."

Gray smiled, doubting that was the whole story.

"I never thought to ask you before," Russ said. "Is Jaunter your real name? It sounds English."

The Scythian ran a rough hand over the blue tattoos on his cheek. "My real name is Idanthiros. A comrade-in-arms who could not pronounce it called me Jaunter and the others took it up."

"If I had a moniker like that, I'd change it too," Corporal Spence said.

Jaunter frowned. "I kept it in honor of him. He died in battle long

ago."

The travelers fell silent, listening to the crickets and the low hum of the forest.

"Was that lightning?" Russ asked.

The travelers glanced around. Brief flashes played behind the southern treeline.

"May be a wet night," Russ said.

Corporal Spence tugged his helmet down with both hands. "Terrific."

With harp and chant Soonderkainen set his wards, his face half-shadow, half-light, terrible to behold. The travelers took to their bedrolls, leaving Gray to contemplate the twilight. He grew increasingly uneasy with the onset of full dark, pacing the periphery of the camp, peering blindly into the night.

The sounds disturbed him the most. The humming remained incessant, and the chirruping insects seemed to speak with voices of their own, a drone of words incomprehensible in their multitude. "*Who, who, whom,*" an owl hooted, drifting by; "*Hunting. Hunting,*" a distant wolf cried; "*Watch!*" a night bird called. Gray ran his hands over his ears, astonished at his own imagination. The day had been wearing, his nerves were frayed. He fed the fire, making it blaze, but it lent him no comfort.

He shook his head. This wouldn't do. In his travels he had grown accustomed to the silence of a resting camp; he knew it could awaken deep fears. At the beginning of their journey, he might have roused one of the others, Soonderkainen perhaps, because of his power, Russ Rogers for his cool sense of command; but he had learned to master those apprehensions and would not be unmanned. He sat down, his back to the flames, watching the night.

A long hour passed. A cool, whispering wind arose, bringing the scent of rain. The clouds had increased and covered half the sky, great thunderheads lit by inner lightning, heavy with moisture. The wind struck, the edge of the storm, a wave of dirt and leaves that made the fire dance. Gray bowed his head against the blast, drawing his cloak around him. Jaunter sat up and rose to his feet, his mass of hair billowing down his back.

The first rumbles reached them. Looking up into the shifting masses, a horror stole upon Gray, for this was no ordinary tempest.

The clouds roiled, creating rolling titans startling in their clarity, vast, angry shapes forming and dissolving into great-jawed beasts, winged monsters, hags' faces, all with sharp, distinct, staring eyes. Gray scrambled up beside Jaunter.

"Targitai's hammer!" the Scythian cried. "The Thunderer is surely in that!"

The others awoke, sitting sleepy-eyed in their bedrolls or rising to their feet.

The lightning flashes came more quickly, forks running rivulets across the sky. A spattering of rain fell. The clouds drew closer, black shot with blue, swarming overhead.

From out of the many forms crossing the canvas of the heavens, the clouds coalesced, sculpting themselves into a single, bearded face painted in stark lines, washed in rain, gigantic, heavy with malice, its features wavering at the edges but firm at the center. It fastened its eyes upon the travelers.

The storm spoke, its voice the howling wind. "Behold! I am Ondoroon, descended from the Upper Air! Glorious Ondoroon! I shall live forever and none can stand before me!"

Lightning ran jagged through the sky, a bolt with a face and eyes at its tines, flashing and gone in an instant. The thunder roared with a voice of its own. The horses stamped and whinnied in fright.

"Soonderkainen! What is it?" Fox Lodan shouted.

If the enchanter answered, it was lost in the crash of a lightning bolt, searing the ground where the campfire had burned, a deafening explosion, a wave pounding against Gray's chest. He threw himself to the earth, scampering away on all fours, instinct responding quicker than reason. When he halted and looked back, he saw the ground broken where the bolt had struck, the firewood and flames scattered to cinders.

Another bolt landed at the edge of the clearing, sending the travelers scrambling again.

"Soonderkainen!" Russ cried. "Do something!"

But the bard-enchanter already had his harp in his hand. He sang his magic, transforming his body to half-darkness, half-light. He grew, unfolding, expanding, his height doubling, tripling, doubling again, extending until he towered into the sky. His jagged cloak swelled at his back; his right eye burned sun-bright; his left eye

dulled to smoldering blackness. None of the companions had ever seen him revealed in his full might, and it was almost as terrifying as the storm itself.

He strummed his harp, then released it to dangle from his neck by its strap. Raising his arms, he gestured at Ondoroon, and a blast tore from his fingers, pure ebony from one hand, pure light from the other. It struck the face, tearing it asunder, pushing it back into the depths of the clouds. But almost at once, the eyes reformed, and Ondoroon returned, sending lightning flashing toward the enchanter.

Soonderkainen blocked it with a hand, the bolt quivering in his palm. Shouting in pain and rage, he cast it away, sending it crackling over the companions' heads. With his other hand he drove the clouds farther back, fighting the wind with a barrage of solid darkness. In answer, Ondoroon arched higher, streaming upward to escape the pummeling.

Chanting a song of wind and power, Soonderkainen struck another chord on his harp, forming a golden aura. He gestured, weaving the nimbus into lines of force thrusting toward the heart of the storm. Exultant in his strength, the bard-enchanter's laughter came riding on the wind. He strode forward, driving the enemy back, keeping himself between the companions and his foe.

The wind around the travelers died into preternatural silence.

"He's winning!" Spence shouted. "Look at him go!"

Back, ever back, irresistible in his magic, Soonderkainen drove the storm. The trunks of the trees bent against the force of his might.

Is it any wonder we fear him? Gray thought.

Soonderkainen halted. "You will come no farther!"

The clouds rolled over and over, Ondoroon's face rising and disappearing. Suddenly, it grew again, twice as large. The lightning within it blazed, so brilliant Gray could scarcely look upon it.

"Can you do no better?" Ondoroon roared.

Scores of lightning bolts poured from the clouds, each with eyes and a face, shouting as they flew. Furious lances from the heavens, they scalded the air, splintered the trees, scorched the ground. Soonderkainen spread his fingers wide, seeking to form a shield, but the bolts broke through, striking him everywhere—his ankles, his knees, his chest, his head. The air shook and the earth with it,

convulsing the clouds and the enchanter.

Soonderkainen shrieked. He vanished, dissipating, shattered, defeated, wisping into nothingness. His harp tumbled to the ground, melted and burning.

Joiwend screamed. The companions stood frozen in disbelief.

"I . . . am . . . Ondoroon!" the storm cried.

The wind hit Gray full in the face once more.

"Run!" Fox Lodan bellowed.

Gray sprinted to Joiwend and took her arm. "Get to the horses!"

The two of them broke into a run, Masters Tatters and Russ behind them, but when they reached the place where the animals had been, their steeds had broken their tethers and fled.

A bolt of lightning crashed to their left, turning them aside. They scrambled into a grove of cedars, seeking shelter beneath the limbs. The lightning rained down on every side, the glistening, yellow eyes of the tines shearing trunks, incinerating branches. The shock waves knocked the companions again and again from their feet. A nearby tree burst into flames.

They broke from the grove, sprinting up a hillside, instinctively keeping several paces apart lest a single searing shaft take them all. Ondoroon's shrieking laughter boomed down upon them.

Massive boulders, tall as men, lay scattered on the hillside, and Gray sped toward them, Joiwend at his side. Small stones rolled beneath their feet, tumbling down the slope, making the way treacherous. Nearly there, Joiwend stumbled, falling hard on the uneven earth. Gray wheeled and helped her up, practically lifting her off the ground, his strength grown great in his terror.

They reached the boulder and scurried behind it, dropping to their knees, hiding from the gaze of the storm. Bolts struck before and behind them. Gray's hair stood on end; the bitter smell of ozone filled his nostrils.

He looked for the others. Russ and Master Tatters had found sanctuary beneath two standing stones leaning against one another. He heard Tatters shouting, the words indecipherable in the tumult. Where Fox Lodan, Spence, and Jaunter had gone, Gray did not know.

A slow hissing arose, the march of the rain. With a gust of wind, a cold, hard torrent fell. By the light of the lightning blasts, Gray

saw and heard a tiny face and voice in every drop, millions of voices together, speaking a single sizzling word. "Down!"

With the coming of the obscuring rain, the lightning lessened to single bolts, but these were carefully aimed. A boulder exploded not far from where Gray and Joiwend crouched, a chip striking Gray's face. He touched the wound, his fingers coming away wet with water and blood.

Master Tatters shouted again. To Gray's astonishment, the old pioneer left his shelter and ran in a circle, dancing in the rain, a song upon his lips.

"What is he doing?" Joiwend shouted above the cacophony.

A bolt struck close to Tatters, bowling him over. He rolled to his feet, sticking out his tongue and shaking his fist at the storm, even as he darted toward Gray and Joiwend.

Lightning popped at the old pioneer's heels; he dove headlong and landed at Joiwend's feet. "I'll show him what for, that's what I'll do!"

"Stay down!" Gray ordered, pulling the man close against the boulder.

Tatters pointed. "There's a cave up yonder! Russ spotted it. I'll waltz with the storm. You go!"

"Wait!" Gray shouted.

But Tatters plunged away, calling to Ondoroon, singing snatches of nonsense songs.

There was no time for hesitation. More than once a member of the party had served as a distraction to save the others. Such a sacrifice was not to be wasted. Russ was already running up the slope. Joiwend grabbed Gray's arm, pulling him up.

They splashed through flowing water, scarcely able to see in the downpour. Gray hoped it would make it harder for Ondoroon to strike them.

He tripped, stumbled, and nearly fell, but Joiwend gripped his arm, keeping him upright; then they were both slipping, struggling to remain on their feet on the steepening slope. They seemed to move with impossible slowness. Gray dared a backward glance, glimpsing through the sheets of rain the searching eyes of Ondoroon.

The cave mouth beckoned, a gaping maw. Russ vanished inside.

Seeing its prey about to escape, Ondoroon threw cascades of bolts, the tines striking all around, blinding, deafening, the fireworks of death. Gray pulled Joiwend up the hill and under the sheltering arch into the darkness of the cavern.

"Russ!" Gray called.

"I'm here," the sergeant's voice came from beside him.

Together they crouched at the cave's mouth, far enough back to avoid the eyes of the storm. The barrage had ended; only single bolts struck now.

"Do you see him?" Gray asked between the flashes.

"I can't," Joiwend said. "Foolish Tatters!"

They scanned the slope, straining to find their comrade. Nothing moved along the hillside save the rain. Gray thought he saw a body not far from their former shelter. His heart sank. Ninette Argilla, Soonderkainen, now Thomas Tatters. Half-mad, always unpredictable, the man had been nonetheless endearing.

A form swept into the cave, sending the startled travelers stumbling backward.

"Tatters!" Joiwend cried.

"A lark in the rain, a polka through the puddles," Master Tatters laughed. "I've counted lightning coup."

"You maniac!" Russ grinned, clapping him on the back. "You old maniac."

"What about the others?" Gray asked. "Did anyone see where they went?"

"Spence ran the other direction," Russ said. "I don't know about Fox or Jaunter."

From where they sat the camp was invisible, hidden by the rain.

A click sounded, followed by the flickering flame of Russ' lighter, the wonder torch he had brought with him from his homeland. The cave was mostly gray stone mixed with earth. It smelled clean and dry, and showed no sign of beasts.

"Let's move farther back so that thing can't take more potshots at us," Russ ordered.

The grotto ended at a dozen paces. Along one wall, a centipede fled from the light. Gray ground a scorpion into the earth with his heel, its death-cry an odd scratching noise. They rearranged large stones to use for seats. Russ extinguished his lighter to save its fuel,

and they sat in the dark, watching the flashes of lightning beyond the cave mouth, listening to the thunder and the falling rain.

"I didn't think anything could kill him," Joiwend said. "He was so powerful."

"Up into the sky he flew," Master Tatters mourned. "Gone like a hot-air balloon."

Russ dried his glasses on his shirt. "What are we up against out here? Monsters in the storm! Living lightning!"

"And drops of rain with faces," Tatters said. "A whole passel of 'em."

"The elves tried to warn us," Russ said. "If Soonderkainen couldn't survive, what chance do we have?"

Gray reddened, wondering if they blamed him. If he had ordered them to turn back at Duskell Watch, he could have justified it to his father, but he would never have deserted Tanabel-Tunia. Trying not to think of the loss of Soonderkainen, he remembered instead his beloved's bright eyes, her smile, the cascade of her hair, his whole inspiration and the reason for their quest.

Gradually, the rain slowed and ceased; the thunder grew distant. Gray crept to the entrance and peered out.

Ondoroon had moved west, riding its cloud chariot, its gargantuan face turning from side to side, its voice reverberating in the thunder. A glow shone from below the eastern horizon, the first signs of moonrise. Raindrops dripped from the lip of the cave, speaking words too soft to comprehend.

Feeling his way, Gray returned to the others. "Should we look for them?"

"We'd never find them in the dark without shouting," Russ said. "There's no telling what might show up if we do."

"He's right," Joiwend said. "We'll have to wait until morning. We should get some rest."

"Reesst," a deep voice said. "What enters me to rest without permission?"

Gray's stomach tightened; he dared not breathe.

"It's the cave," Master Tatters whispered. "We're in the innards of the earth."

The voice rumbled, the growl of clay and stone. The entire grotto shuddered, its rocks grinding.

"The entrance!" Russ hissed. "It's closing! Get out!"

Gray, closest to the threshold, reached it first and passed through. Already it was half its former size. Grasping its upper lip, he pushed against it, trying to hold it back. Dirt and splintering stones fell on his head and shoulders, ejected by the cave's efforts. The opening continued inexorably down.

Joiwend sprang out, stooping to clear the entrance. Master Tatters followed.

"Russ!" Joiwend called. "Where are you? Hurry!"

All three thrust against the rock, vainly attempting to slow its descent.

When the gap was scarcely large enough for a man to crawl through, Russ' head appeared. Master Tatters grasped his hand and pulled; Gray seized an arm to help. Russ' foot caught, wedged between the narrowing way. For an eternal moment they struggled. Joiwend reached in and turned his boot, and he was out.

Tatters and Gray pulled him to his feet, dragging him away from the cave. They scrambled down the slope, stumbling and sliding in the mud, putting distance between themselves and this new horror. Reaching their former camp, they stood in a circle where the fire had been, facing outward, weapons drawn. Gray trembled, thoroughly drenched, shaken to the core.

"What should we do?" Joiwend asked.

"Keep your places," Russ commanded. "When the moon rises, we'll find somewhere to hide."

Hardened by their battles in Faerie, they obeyed, holding their ground, their breath coming in gasps. Gradually, Gray felt the pounding of his heart subside. They waited, hopeful for the light to guide their way.

Slowly, the moon's edge appeared, enormous on the horizon. Some trick of the ether made it seem many times its natural size. Gray watched, expecting it to shrink as it rose, but it did not. Despite that, it lit the earth and sky no more than usual, its surface less bright than the moon he knew. It slipped upward, moment by moment, before the awed travelers. When half of it was clear, Russ gave a ragged exclamation.

It was full, but this was not the familiar face of the mountains of the moon, seen for centuries by mortals and elves. The travelers

watched its ascent, transfixed. Two half-circles, spaced apart, rested on its top third. Toward its bottom ran a frowning line and out-thrust chin.

The half-circles opened, revealing misty eyes, deep and thoughtful. The curve of the sphere's rugged terrain formed a slender nose and lines upon forehead and cheeks.

Tatters shrieked. Joiwend muffled a scream.

The moon raised its eyebrows. Its voice boomed down from the sky. "Now am I come, glorious beyond hope, arising out of the abyss from which I fell. Rejoice! Rejoice! I shine my light on all the world!"

Looking down, those eyes focused on the companions. "But who are these, these mortal mites, new strangers come to scout the land? What do you here? I like it not!"

Their courage spent, the travelers bolted, fleeing and hiding until dawn from the eyes of the moon.

