

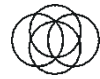
A journey through haunted forests, through dreams and time. A story of magic and the power of forgiveness. A Tzanatzi outcast and an Einache shaman are on the trail of an ancient curse. Will they save their people from destruction?

Curse of the Tahiéra

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CURSE
of the
Tahiera



Aguéri

Curse of the Tahiéra

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One

A Journey North

Rom met Yldich on a trip to the North when he was almost twenty years old. He was a slender young man, with hair the colour of crow feathers, and eyes that were almost as dark. He had a temper on him that was like an underground forest fire. It could smoulder undetected for a long time, and consume him from the inside, but a well-aimed spark and sufficient fuel could ignite it and make it blaze like a bonfire.

At an age when most young men had already put down roots and were tending their fields and holding, their young wives raising their first babies, Rom travelled the country alone, buying and selling goods. To the northeast he went in spring, selling precious dyes, spices, silk thread for embroidery, silver needles, buttons of mother of pearl and any other things that were rare to the people of the northeast. Back to the South he travelled in autumn, to stay in the old cottage and buy goods from local farms and holds to sell next spring.

When people from the village started to say Rom should stay on the farm and get married like any honourable young man his age, he ignored them. When people said he was a strange one, always had been, and no good would ever come of him, he ignored that, too. When a migrant farm worker who had sampled a lot of strong local ale one night in the inn referred to him as ‘that shady *Tzanatzi*-looking bastard in the corner there’, he did not ignore it, and the man ended up with a broken nose and a lost tooth. Rom ended up in the village lockup. It had taken two town guards and a wrathful innkeeper to subdue him.

When the after-effects of the alcohol and a thorough beating had worn off and he regained consciousness, he found himself in an uncomfortable situation. Not only did the numerous hurts and aches vie with each other to get his attention, he also had to find a means to pay both the substantial fine for fighting in a public place as well as the furniture and goods the innkeeper

claimed had been damaged in the process. The list included three chairs, a table, ten bottles of wine, two bottles of brandy, a keg of beer, the farmhand's tunic and some other assorted items Rom couldn't remember breaking. But then, he had been reasonably drunk.

Apart from that, to contest the fine would mean demanding justice at Court. He had no taste for that. It was common knowledge that Southern judges did not favour *Tzanatzi* in their rulings. But it meant a substantial portion of his earnings from the trip to the northeast were lost. He would have to set out again as soon as possible, to earn back some of the damage. It would mean travelling in autumn, when the winter snows threatened from the North, instead of waiting for spring in the comfort of the old cottage.

He set out a few days later, on horseback, leading a pony laden with merchandise and supplies for his journey. His ribs were still sore, but the cuts on his face were healing nicely.

The first days of his journey were uneventful. The nights were still warm, so he slept beside his horse, wrapped in his blanket. When the evening air became edged with a chill that hinted at the end of summer, he decided to seek a place indoors to stay the night.

The first wayside inn he stayed in was *The Squealing Pig*. It had a bad reputation as far as food and hygiene were concerned, but it was a good place to start a journey, for lodgings were cheap and as the inn was frequented by both locals and travellers from all over the kingdom, it was a good place to sample the local news. Though Rom was not one to chat with locals, his face was familiar to most frequent lodgers as he had travelled the same route before. So they treated him fairly enough, though they knew better than to try to get him to socialize.

It was down in the common room that evening, while Rom washed down a somewhat dry meat pie with a mug of home brew, that he was warned off the journey north. Not as many people stayed at the inn as was usual that time of year, and a big, ginger-haired traveller in his early forties was obviously looking around for some company. Rom ignored him, but the man took a seat at the same table, across from him.

Unfortunately, as there were no other diners present, he could not pretend the man was not there without insulting him. The incident of the previous week still fresh in his memory, he nodded stiffly. He silently hoped the man would be put off by his grim appearance, the yellow-purple discoloration around his left eye, and the healing cuts, visible remnants of being in a fight. The man seemed to take no notice, however, and introduced himself as Yldich. He spoke with a subtle accent Rom had never heard before.

Yldich did not seem to mind Rom's monosyllabic answers to his questions where he was from ('south,') and where he was going ('north,') either, as he had enough tales of his own to fuel the conversation. He told Rom about his travels, his home, and his experiences on the road, evidently enjoying talking and hearing the sound of his own voice. Despite his tendency to keep to himself, Rom found he actually enjoyed the man's tales. He gave a silent, encouraging nod every once in a while to keep a story going.

Yldich had signalled the serving boy to refill their beer mugs for the third time, when he said: 'Well. This business of yours up north, will it take you through Gardeth Forest?' Rom's head snapped up. He glanced sharply at Yldich. 'I thought as much,' Yldich said. 'You haven't heard about the trouble people have had up there then?'

'I usually go around, because my business is with the villages near the east coast.' Rom turned his mug around in his hands and frowned at his beer. 'I've never gone through the Forest all the way.'

'Better go around again,' Yldich said in a low voice. His eyes narrowed under his heavy brows. 'I've barely been able to get through in one piece myself, this time. And I know the region well. Something's haunting the Forest, something that doesn't like people passing through.'

He set his mug down on the table with an audible thump, and sat back in his chair. 'It started about ten years ago. Well, the Forests have always been dangerous for the unwary to cross, especially in winter. Frozen branches crashing across the paths, horses getting spooked and running off, ropes breaking on you for no apparent reason. Treacherous frozen lakes appear where there hadn't been any before. But last winter it got really bad.'

He leaned over his mug, and fixed Rom with a stare, his grey eyes like ice under an overcast sky. 'Travellers have been disappearing. Their bodies were found at the Forest's edge, frozen solid. They looked as if they died in terror.' He took another draught of beer. 'Now, some say the Forests have been getting worse because they've been stirring up trouble in the mines in the South. Disturbing some sort of balance, something to do with dark spirits or whatnot.' He shook his head and sat back. 'I'm just a simple farmer, I don't have anything to do with that sort of thing. But you mark my words, young man, be careful, or better still, don't be passing through the Forest at all.'

Privately Rom thought Yldich might be a farmer, but whatever he was, he wasn't simple. He wondered also if there could be a specific reason the man wanted to discourage him from travelling through Gardeth, other than warning mere strangers from the goodness of his heart. But he couldn't think of any.

'I've got no choice but to pass through the Forest,' he said. 'It's already late in the year, and I can't afford to waste any more time.' Yldich shook his

head in disapproval. He looked concerned, but he did not press the matter further.

‘Well, you do as you see fit, lad.’ He got up and left a small pile of coins on the table to pay for the beer. ‘Sleep well, now.’

‘Good night.’ Rom watched Yldich leave. He moved surprisingly gracefully for a man of his heavy build.

While Yldich had a short talk with the landlord before he went up the stairs, Rom stared at the worn tabletop, lost in thought. Maybe Yldich was trying to warn him off the journey through Gardeth not because of supernatural danger, but a natural one. Rebels? Robbers? But what would be his motive to dissuade him from passing through? Rebels would not take offence at a lone traveller passing through. Robbers would welcome the chance of an easy prey. But if the Forests were home to any kind of illegal activity, why would Yldich not just say so? Why the ghost-stories? It made no sense. Unless the man was the gullible, superstitious kind, and he didn’t seem to be, not at all.

When he was finally in his bed, he mentally went over his supplies again. He thought of the small but sharp knife he always had with him on his journeys. It could cut through tough ropes, leather, roots and the like, but it would not be of much use against robbers.

Despite Yldich’s warnings, he decided to go directly north and pass through the Forest as quickly as possible. That way he might avoid the worst of the winter weather.

The next morning, after a quick and simple breakfast of stale bread and hot soup, Rom went outside to pack. He was checking on the ropes and leather harness when he heard a short, deliberate cough behind him. He turned around sharply. Yldich carefully stood just a few paces behind him. He grinned through his trimmed rusty beard.

‘Good morning to you,’ he called. ‘Still set on going north?’

‘Yes,’ Rom said. He wondered what would be next.

‘That’s just as well. I’ve decided to go visit my relatives in Hernicke. It’s just on the other side of the Forest. I will accompany you.’

Rom felt singularly ill at ease riding through the southern fringes of Gardeth Forest with his new travelling companion. He was not used to having company on the road. In fact, he wasn’t used to any kind of company at any time. From a young age he had always taken care to go about his business alone.

Yldich did not seem to share his discomfort. He was humming under his breath, looking around with his bright grey eyes. There was no beginning or end to the cheery tunes, just endless meandering notes.

The older man apparently knew the Forest well. On his journeys to the northeast, Rom had always taken care to follow the well-trodden paths used by farmers and goat herders. But Yldich had chosen a route that took the men straight through the Forest, and ignored the existing paths and trails altogether. What means he had of knowing the way through the trees, which looked all the same to him, Rom could not discern. He seemed to find his way through the foothills and trees effortlessly.

The cheerfulness of the humming contrasted with the sharp vigilance with which Yldich took in his surroundings. Was he on the lookout for signs of trouble? Rom's eyes flitted across the path, but he could discover none. The forest floor looked undisturbed; there were no signs that anyone had camped along the trail recently. He was also concerned about Yldich's motives for travelling with him. First, the man wanted to dissuade him from going north. Then he had insisted on going too. Somehow Rom had been unable to shake him off. He was like a big, stray dog that followed him around and wouldn't go away. Suddenly his mouth pulled in a wry smile. It was the other way around: he was following the dog's lead.

Every once in a while, Yldich pointed out something to him: a lizard basking in the sun, almost invisible against the background because of its bizarre camouflage patterning, a small group of deer in the distance, that threw back their heads and sniffed the morning air, a beautiful large hunting cat that moved noiselessly through the underbrush. Rom wondered at the abundance of life around him. It had never been so apparent to him before. Had it always been there but had he never seen it? In contrast to his stream of talk the evening before in *The Squealing Pig*, Yldich was silent except for his humming and occasional remarks.

When the sun was sinking behind the tall trees, they stopped to make camp in a small clearing. Rom gathered some dry grass and twigs to start a small fire. He had some trouble getting it going. Yldich had seen to the horses and had gone, probably to relieve himself. Rom was busy with the fire for a long time, frowning and concentrating. It was already getting dark.

Just as it caught and he had a small blaze going, he heard the snap of a twig behind him. Without thinking, he threw himself forward and whirled around on the forest floor, putting the fire between him and whatever was behind him. He fumbled for the knife in his belt. He had it out, ready to strike, when he recognized Yldich, who stood there with a dead rabbit hanging from

his belt. Yldich lifted an eyebrow at the sight of the sharp knife pointed at him.

‘Caught us some supper,’ he said. He sat down and proceeded to skin the rabbit with his belt knife. Rom released a breath and got up slowly. He put the knife away and started to feed the fire little twigs. Every once in a while he threw a glance at Yldich. The man deftly pulled the furry skin off the rabbit, taking care not to tear it and spoil it. His face was expressionless.

When the rabbit was roasting on a makeshift spit, Rom said: ‘How did you catch the rabbit?’

Yldich grinned. ‘I called him.’

‘What?’ Rom blinked at the man, as if he doubted he’d heard him right.

‘I called him. He was ready. He came. I caught him.’

Rom raised his brows in incredulity. ‘Just like that?’

‘Just like that,’ Yldich said softly. ‘I would have preferred not to take his life. But we have to be careful of our supplies, we have a long road ahead of us. Bad weather’s coming.’

Rom stared at him. The sky had been clear all day. He wondered once more just what kind of man he was travelling with. Was he merely an eccentric, was he mad, was he dangerous? Would he be killed in his sleep tonight?

When they had eaten, Yldich stretched his heavy limbs and sighed. He arranged his blanket around his large frame moving slowly and carefully, as if he was aware of the younger man’s misgivings. ‘Have you ever heard the tale of Rabbit and the king of the Pixies?’ he said. Rom gazed at him through the fire. He shook his head.

‘One day, Rabbit was running from his enemies. He was making his way through the Forest, chased by teeth, nails and fangs, and because he had no means to defend himself, all he could do was run. It was dusk, that magical time between night and day, and he was still running, and getting really tired when he crossed the border of the land of the Pixies.

As it happens, the King of the Pixies was having a Feast. All the woodland folk were there: beautiful deer with antlers, adorned with field flowers, field mice with little gems tucked behind their ears, and lots of Pixies having a good time.

“Welcome,” said the King of the Pixies. He was the most magnificent of all creatures present. His coat was studded with precious stones and he had a wreath of delicate night-blooming flowers in his hair. His eyes were as bright as peacock feathers. He looked at Rabbit, who was still panting from being chased through the Forest all day and all night. “Well met, young man,” he said, and belched discreetly behind his hand, for he was slightly tipsy from the

elderberry wine. "Please join us in our merry-making, and know that if your heart desires anything tonight, you shall have it." Being slightly drunk made him generous.

Rabbit thought for a while. He was really tired of being chased. He said: "Your Magnificence, if it's not too much trouble...."

"Not at all," the King of the Pixies said without hearing him out. "Tell us what you would have, and I will see to it that it shall be so."

"I would like to be safe from my enemies," Rabbit said. "I would like to have a coat of armour, and sharp teeth to defend myself with, and sharp nails to hurt my enemies with."

"Eh?" The King said, being temporarily distracted by an attractive pixy lady passing by. "Very well," he said. "Let it be so!" He waved his hand, and spoke a secret spell. And in no time at all, Rabbit was transformed.

Rabbit felt it instantly. For one thing, he was much taller than he used to be. He was heavier too. His hide was thick with scales, from the tip of his nose to the tip of his little tail. His claws had grown to the length of small daggers, and they were very sharp. His teeth had grown into fangs. Rabbit was very pleased.

"Now no-one will bother me ever again," he thought. "Now I will be safe from my enemies." He thanked the King of the Pixies extensively, and went on his way again.

He strode through the Forest, feeling big and strong. A large forest cat had followed his rabbit-smell to the border of the land of the woodland Pixies. When Rabbit came out, she picked up his trail again.

"Ah," she thought, "here's that little bunny-smell again. I'll have a feast tonight." Then she bumped into Rabbit's transformed self. Her yellow eyes went wide. She screeched, and all the hair on her back stood on end. She turned her tail on Rabbit as quick as she could. It was three times the size it had been. And that was the last he saw of her.

Rabbit was very satisfied with the effect of his transformation. He walked home, much at ease and taking his time. Who would bother him now? He hummed as he approached the rabbit hole where he lived with his wife and children.

"I'm home, dear," he sang, but there was something odd about his voice. "Must be my improved girth," Rabbit thought. Mrs. Rabbit came out, with the little rabbit-children behind her. Their eyes went wide when they saw Rabbit standing there, with his scales, his fangs, and his nails. "I'm back, my love," Rabbit began. "And you wouldn't believe what happened," but before he could finish his sentence, Mrs. Rabbit whacked him on the head with a large stick. The little rabbits shrieked and fled down the hole.

“Get away from us, you monster!” Mrs. Rabbit used the stick in an honest attempt to bash his head in.

“No, no, wait, it’s me, let me explain!” Rabbit tried to shield his head from the resounding blows. Mrs. Rabbit had a good aim. But the words came out all slurred around the heavy fangs that now occupied his mouth and he didn’t recognize his own voice.

“Get you gone,” Mrs. Rabbit cried, and after one more painful blow, Rabbit fled.

He walked through the Forest, feeling wretched and alone. After a time, he became hungry. He thought: “I’ll feel better when I’ve had a bite to eat. Then I’ll go back to my wife, and explain it all,” and he went searching for something to eat. He tried to nibble the grass, but his fangs got in the way. He tried to dig out some roots, but he hurt himself with his long, sharp nails. He tried for a long time to find something he could eat, but it was no use. After a while, he became thirsty.

“I’ll have some water, first,” he said to himself, and he went to the edge of a small forest lake. He was so tired and hungry, he dropped to the ground at the water’s edge, as he moved his head to the water. But he was not used to the heavy bulk of his armoured body, and he toppled over. Rabbit fell into the water, and he couldn’t swim, not with the long nails and the heavy scales on his body... so he sank, and the water closed above his head, and that was the end of Rabbit and the gift of the King of the Woodland Pixies.’

After Yldich had finished the story, he fell silent.

‘So... what does it mean?’ Rom said.

‘Mean? Well, with my people, to find meaning in a story is left to the discretion of the listener.’ Yldich chuckled softly. Rom stared into the glow of the dying fire, his brows knit. He didn’t like riddles. He was about to ask Yldich another question, when he became aware of a soft snoring sound. The man was sound asleep.

The next morning, Rom woke up with a start. The sun had been up for a couple of hours at least. Despite all his intentions to be wary and keep an eye on his companion, he had slept through the night, deeply and without waking once. He cursed himself softly and looked about. Yldich and the horses were gone.

Rom felt a sense of panic build up in his chest. He started to think quickly to push it down. What could have happened? Could there be a reasonable explanation for the absence of both Yldich and the horses? The pony’s load was still where he’d left it, at the edge of the clearing. Maybe Yldich had only taken them to the pond they had seen yesterday, to drink.

He looked at the tracks the horses' hooves had left, but they went the other way, deeper into the Forest. What if Yldich had stolen the horses and left him intentionally? He would be alone, on foot, in the middle of Gardeth Forest. He had only the small pack of provisions he had laid aside yesterday. They wouldn't last long, and he had no means to hunt for himself.

He considered quickly stuffing his belongings in his pack and following Yldich's trail, to overtake him and get the horse and pony back. The other man was taller and heavier, but anger and despair might give him the edge he needed. Maybe he could subdue him in a surprise attack.

He was just picturing how to surprise Yldich and throw him off his horse, when the man appeared from the other end of the clearing. He whistled softly and walked as if he were taking a relaxed morning stroll. The horses and the pony followed him obediently at a few paces distance.

'Where did you go?' Rom called, his voice hoarse with anger and relief.

'Oh, there's a patch of herbs the horses like, just a bit to the east.' Yldich smiled cheerfully as he crossed the clearing and walked up to him. 'Will do them good, I thought, so I took them there.' Then he saw the look on Rom's face. 'Why, what did you think?' Rom hesitated. 'I see,' Yldich said. 'You thought I'd gone off with the horses.' He frowned. He started to put the baggage back on the pony and checked the straps. He seemed deep in thought.

Rom waited for him to say something more, but Yldich went about clearing camp and getting ready to travel in silence. He quickly ate some of the leftover bread and cheese, and handed Rom a share without comment. He then hid all traces of their fire. He buried it in the sand and laid some branches over it.

Then he did a strange thing: he went and stood in the middle of the clearing, his eyes closed, and started to sing in a language Rom had never heard before, his hands palm upward. When the chanting had ended, Yldich opened his eyes slowly and kept still. He looked as if he were waiting. An expectant silence seemed to fill the clearing. A blackbird started to sing. Its song rang clear in the morning air. A dragonfly flew across the field in a straight line, its wings an iridescent green. Yldich wasted no time. He strode to his horse and mounted.

'Well, stop standing about then, let's go!' He spurred on his horse. Rom still stood beside his horse, watching him in wonderment. He quickly mounted when Yldich was about to disappear between the trees. He followed him in the direction the dragonfly had gone.

They rode through the Forest in silence. Rom noticed the landscape changing subtly; green, leafy trees were being replaced by tough birches, tall pines, and oaks with gnarly trunks and roots. Yldich was doing his good-

humoured humming again. It blended in perfectly with the sounds of forest floor. It removed all need for talk, and Rom was grateful for it.

After a while Yldich stopped humming and turned to Rom. 'Tell me, Rom, what's your horse's name?'

Rom started and looked up. 'Well, I call it *horse*.'

Yldich laughed out loud. A few birds, startled by the sudden booming sound, rose from the bushes and scattered through the air, chattering like affronted old ladies. 'Don't tell me you don't know your horse's name?'

'I bought it off a farmer a couple of years ago. It didn't occur to me to think of a name.'

'And the pony?'

'I call it *pony*.'

Yldich laughed again, shaking his head. Rom didn't know whether to be offended or to laugh with him. His mouth twitched. 'Where I come from, it would be considered very strange behaviour to live with a fellow creature for years, even ride on his back, and not know his name,' Yldich said. 'Now, if you listen closely enough, you can discover your horse's name.'

Rom's eyes widened in incredulity. 'How?'

Yldich laughed again at the expression on his face. 'Just ask him.'

'That's madness. Are you saying horses can speak?'

'Not exactly,' Yldich said. 'What I'm saying is that if you listen closely enough, you can hear what they say. Now,' he said quickly, before Rom could voice his disbelief, 'I don't mean your horse will tell you his name like a human person would. What I'm saying is, that if you take the time, and watch, and *listen*, you might learn more about your horse you might ever have assumed possible. Or any other being, for that matter.'

He motioned at the area behind them. 'For instance, how do you think I knew where to look for the herbs this morning? I don't keep a map of this area in my head. I listened for what the horses wanted, and they directed me to it. It's very simple. Just listen.' Rom sat shaking his head at him in silence. Yldich chuckled. 'By the way,' he said. 'His name is *Skála*.'

At noon, they rested the horses and ate some more of the leftover bread. They sat at the edge of a small dry gully surrounded with bushes.

'I don't understand,' Rom said, while they were eating. 'How can you know the horse's name is *Skála*, when you tell me they don't use words as humans do?'

'Good question. They don't. What I 'heard', so to speak, was not the exact word, *Skála*, but its meaning. In my language, it means something like *likes to run with the wind*. Did you ever notice *Skála* being restless in windy weather?'

‘Well, yes... but I thought the wind made him nervous.’ Yldich shook his head.

‘Try and pay attention next time he gets restless. My bet is, when the wind is in the west, he’ll want to run with it. You should let him. It’s his *éristwae*.’

‘It’s his what?’

Yldich searched for words. ‘It’s difficult to translate. Every living being has *éristwae*, men, women, children, horses, even dogs. It can be an element, an animal, a mineral... your *éristwae* depends on the hour on which you are born, and on the signs that accompany your birth. With my people, our names are based on it. But *éristwae* can change over time, as you learn, and grow, and change by new experiences.’

‘So what’s your *éristwae*?’

Yldich chuckled. ‘You could know if you had paid attention. If you’re not perceptive enough to see it, I’m not going to tell you. But you might want to find out what *your* *éristwae* is.’

‘How?’ Rom said, his interest raised in spite of his scepticism.

‘Pay attention. If you want your *éristwae* to come to you, all you have to do is invite it. Then you pay attention. You watch, and wait, and listen.’

When they were moving again, Rom made an attempt to locate his *éristwae* without Yldich noticing. He tried looking around, taking in as much detail of the world around as possible. He tried listening, but all he heard were the familiar sounds of the forest: rustling leaves, the chirruping of birds, the sounds of small creatures in the undergrowth. Yldich saw him work at it, frowning with effort, and laughed.

‘It doesn’t work that way, lad. You have to feel it in *here*.’ He pointed at his chest, at the height of his heart. ‘Feel the connection. Feel how you’re a part of everything else. Know it. Then your *éristwae* will come to you. Maybe,’ he added, a teasing glint in his eyes. Rom stared at him. Yldich sighed. ‘You’ll work it out.’

That night, when the fire had gone out, Rom fell asleep and found himself standing before the burnt-out fire pit. It was dark, yet he was able to see the forms of the trees before him in a greyish light. He moved his hand in front of his face and saw it clearly. It emanated a subtle silver light. He was strangely unsurprised. He started to walk carefully through the dark forest, his senses tuned into the world around him more sharply than they had been during the day. He heard a small mouse-like creature scurry through the leaves and twigs on the ground in a hurry. An owl flew overhead at its leisure, surveying the ground for prey.

While he made his way through the nightly forest, he became subtly aware of another conscious creature's presence. How he knew this, he could not be sure of. He felt as if someone was watching him. He knew the creature was there before he saw the eyes. They were fluorescent green. The eyes moved towards him. Then he saw the animal that was the owner of the eyes. A large, black hunting cat was stalking him. He froze.

The cat circled him, and Rom sucked in his breath. He hardly dared breathe out again. The cat was big, bigger than the wild cat he had seen the other day, almost as big as a large hound. It circled him three times, without making a sound, and every circle narrower than the last, until it stood face to face with Rom. Rom's breathing was shallow, he felt his heart beat wildly, high up in his chest. He wanted to turn around and flee; he knew that if he did, the cat would be on him in a heartbeat. There was nothing left to do but stand there and stare back into the eyes.

They were beautiful eyes, of a deep, luminescent green. They were different from the cat's eyes he knew from experience. Some house cats did have an uncanny intelligent look in their eyes. But looking into the big hunting cat's eyes, he saw that it truly saw him and *knew* him. He would have been only mildly surprised if it had started to speak. But somehow, he felt human speech would be beneath the magnificent, deadly creature. It would be crude and awkward compared to this knowing silence. All he would want to know was in the creature's eyes.

The cat moved as if to pounce, but instead it set its front paws, the large, razor-sharp claws clearly visible, heavily on Rom's chest. Its big feline head was now nearly level with Rom's. The cat opened its mouth slightly and breathed, as if it wanted to taste the air between them. Rom was frozen by the sight of the animal's large head, the sharp incisor teeth, so close to his face. The cat sniffed and looked straight in the eyes with a piercing stare. It opened its mouth wide and screamed at him. Shocked, Rom stumbled backward. The animal raked his tunic and the skin beneath painfully with its claws as it slid down.

The spell broken, Rom turned and ran as hard as he could. He heard the cry of the cat close behind him. Fear spurred him on faster. Branches scratched his face as he scrambled through the forest in a panic.

He was caught by his shoulders, a sound booming in his ears. He cried out, struggling, and suddenly looked into Yldich's face. The man was shouting at him. Bewildered, he tried to fight him off, but the other man held him in an iron grip against the trunk of the tree he had been sleeping under.

'Let me go,' he yelled, struggling frantically.

‘Stop it, Rom,’ Yldich shouted, and shook him. Rom blinked, bewildered, and stopped struggling. ‘You were screaming in your sleep.’ Yldich slowly relaxed the grip on his shoulders. Rom lowered his hands, and Yldich let go. Rom moved his hand across his face. It was damp with cold sweat.

‘I... I was having a nightmare.’ He wiped the hair out of his eyes.

‘So you were.’ Yldich moved to the fire pit and got a small fire going again. Then he went to fetch the water skin. He filled the cooking pot and put it on the fire. ‘Let’s hear it then,’ he said in a good-humoured tone.

Rom took his blanket with him to the fire. He sat down and wrapped himself in it. ‘You—you want to hear my nightmare?’

‘I’m not sleeping anyway after this, and it will be morning soon.’ Yldich filled their mugs with some dried herbs from his bag. ‘Besides, nightmares are important.’

‘I thought they were just... scary dreams.’

‘There’s dreams, and then there’s dreams.’ Yldich filled their mugs with hot water and handed one to Rom. He sat back at the other side of the fire. ‘My people take dreams very seriously. Nightmares are unfinished dreams. Important ones. Tell me about yours.’

Rom drew a hand across his eyes. ‘Well, I was walking through the forest. It was strange, because I could see in the dark. There was this black forest cat. It came to me. No, it stalked me, going around me in circles. Then it came up to me. It screamed at me, and I ran...’

Yldich stared at him with wide eyes. ‘A black forest cat? It came up to you?’

Rom nodded. ‘It stood with its paws on my chest, and looked me in the face. It screamed at me.’ He put his hand on his chest where the claws had scored him. It still burned. ‘It raked me with its claws, and I ran as fast as I could—’ Yldich put down his mug.

‘Let me see.’ He reached out to pull aside Rom’s tunic. Rom flinched, jerking backwards, away from Yldich and upset his mug. Yldich froze and looked at him sharply. He drew back his hand and sat back. His movements were slow and careful. He gazed at Rom without the usual twinkle of amusement in his eyes. ‘What happened to you?’

Rom settled in his place before the fire again. He pulled the blanket closer around him. He was frowning. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Well,’ Yldich reverted to his usual lilting speech, ‘ever since I met you, you have reminded me of the pup my daughter took home with her one day.’ He smiled grimly. ‘It had been beaten and misused, so it was distrustful and anxious. We had to take it away eventually, because it attacked the children when they startled it. When trust is broken early, it’s hard to trust people

again.’ Rom stared at his hands. His face was tense. He didn’t speak. ‘Some stories can poison a man from the inside, if they’re not told,’ Yldich said slowly. ‘Tell me. What happened to you? Why are you so distrustful?’

Rom’s head snapped up. He shook the hair out of his eyes. They had turned black. ‘Why did Rabbit ask for a favour of the King of the Pixies?’ He clenched his fists. ‘I’ve been running from the past all my life. What good is there in telling about it? It can’t be changed.’ He looked down and muttered to the ground: ‘Why should you care, anyway?’

He stood up brusquely and moved to walk away from the fire. The blanket dropped from his shoulders. The strap of his tunic was loose.

Yldich looked up at him. His eyes widened. ‘Rom. Look at your chest.’ Rom looked down. There were bloody claw-marks, big ones, crimson against his pale skin.

‘This isn’t possible. This isn’t happening.’ Rom tugged at the straps of Skála’s harness. The horse whinnied in protest. Rom hurriedly fastened his saddle. The marks on his chest burned, but the rest of his body felt icily cold.

Yldich was urgently talking to his back. ‘Rom, wait. Don’t run off in a panic. The forest is too dangerous to blunder through like a fool. Wait, now. There’s something I should tell you....’

‘What now? More about rabbits and pixies?’

‘No, indeed. About black hunting cats.’

Rom shuddered and said nothing. He rolled up his blanket and threw it behind the saddle.

Yldich shook his head and sighed. ‘Have you any idea what significance the black cat has where I come from? It’s the... the *daemo*, the chief Spirit Animal of the *Tzanatzi* people.’

Rom stiffened at the name. He fastened a rope. ‘There are no *Tzanatzi*, this far to the north.’

‘Not anymore. But once there were. Many of them. They came to the North, when they settled in these lands many years ago. These woods were their battlegrounds.’

Rom shook his head. He felt another story coming on. ‘What’s that got to do with me?’

Yldich gazed at him, long and deliberately, the dark hair, the dark eyes. ‘Well, look at you, lad.’

Rom felt the blood rise in his face. His fingers tightened on the rope. ‘What are you implying?’

‘Easy, now. There’s something I haven’t told you. It wasn’t a coincidence that I met you in the *Squealing Pig*. I was there on purpose, to meet you, or someone like you.’

Rom spun around. ‘I knew it! I thought there was something suspicious about the way you sought me out. And when you were going north too, it was too much of a coincidence.’

‘Maybe,’ Yldich said with a wry grin. ‘But even as your intuition was right, there’s a difference between malicious and good intent. I didn’t deceive you to bring you harm.’

Rom drew up a brow. ‘So why did you deceive me?’

‘Rom, I am *Yaever* for my people,’ Yldich said, the melodious accent more marked than before. ‘It means true-dreamer in our language. It means I have, how does one say in your language, *warning* dreams, dreams that come true. I knew how to find you because I dreamt you.’

Rom’s eyes widened. ‘You dreamt me?’

‘I knew I had to go south, and search the inns along the way for a dark-haired young man with dark eyes,’ Yldich said in a chanting tone. Rom guessed he had told this story before, many times. ‘He would be travelling on his own, he would be a loner, and he would have great significance for my people, my House, and for the dark powers that are threatening us. I knew so in my dreams. I’ve dreamt you for over seven years.’

‘What—what are you talking about?’ Rom said. ‘What dark powers?’

‘For years, I’ve had dreams about something dark, something evil, being awakened in the earth. At first, they seemed to be only nightmares.’ Yldich shook his head. ‘But it’s true what I told you at the inn. A balance has been disturbed. A horror is stalking the Forest. One by one my nightmares are coming true. Who knows where it will end?’ Rom felt a shiver travel along his skin.

‘All I knew,’ he heard Yldich continue, ‘was that I had to find you, because somehow you may avert the evil that’s threatening my people.’

Rom shook his head in uneasy disbelief. ‘What about the black cat? What does that mean?’

‘That’s what I wonder, too. But bearing in mind your appearance, Rom,’ Yldich said, choosing his words with care, ‘my guess would be you have *Tzanatzi* blood in you. The cat sought you out for a reason. I’ve never heard of the children of *my* people dreaming a powerful *Tzanatzi daemo* in their first true-dream. It must mean something. It must be important. Maybe it’s telling you to tap into your heritage. So you can make a difference somehow.’

Rom scowled. ‘I want nothing to do with that—that *filth*. All I want to do is go north, tend to my business, and go home.’ He turned brusquely and tied his tunic with fingers that were stiff and cold.

‘If you don’t stop running from the past and face it,’ Yldich said softly, ‘it might hunt you down one day.’ Rom ignored him. He strode off to the pony to pile on his luggage as quickly as he could. He donned his cloak and

mounted the horse. Skála's ears were turned backwards. He sidled, and then moved hesitatingly. Rom spurred him on. He turned to look at Yldich.

'Safe journey,' he muttered. He felt a strange, sinking sensation beneath his anger. He hurried the horse along to escape it. The pony followed. They shot away into the trees.

'*Neachspragae*,' Yldich said softly. 'Until we meet again.'

Two The Riders

Hours later, when the sun had risen almost to its zenith, Rom looked around for a place to rest the horses. It appeared to be one of those autumn days when nature has one last go at denying the slow death of summer. It was hot. The temperature did nothing to cool Rom's temper. He bit his lip, while he searched the forest floor with his eyes for pitfalls. It wouldn't be long now before the horse, no, Skála, would need to drink and rest. He scowled.

'Wonderful. Now he's in my head.'

He travelled through an area where the trees thinned out and yellow fading grass covered the ground. The welcome increase in light and range of vision was spoiled by the increase in insect life. Rom, Skála and the pony were beset with buzzing insects.

Finally, they came upon a small stream which was running through the Forest. Rom decided to fill the water skin and let Skála and the pony drink, then follow the course of the river for a bit upstream.

There was a small grove of willow-trees and bushes near the stream. He tied Skála and Pony to some trees near the water. They drank thirstily. Rom submerged his head in the icy water. It stung his face with cold. He shook his head like a dog, to shed the water from his hair. It fell back into his eyes. He decided to use his knife on it one of these days to cut it. Shaving would be a good idea as well, he thought, as he felt the two days' growth on his chin. He sat by the side of the stream and scraped his face carefully with the razor-sharp knife. After he filled the water skin, he decided to go for a short walk upstream, to get a view of the terrain to the north and to stretch his legs. They were stiff from the hours of riding.

He followed the stream until he came to a spot where the Forest had moved almost to the water. The stream must have changed course long ago. Bushes lined the river on either side.

He had started to search for berries, when he heard the sound of horses coming from behind. He froze. He had not met any other travellers on the road when travelling with Yldich. He did not know what to think of it. He thought of hiding between the trees, but the riders must have already seen his horse and pony, tied to the willows a little way back.

He heard a shout. Obviously the riders had already seen him. They came straight for him. It was no use to hide. He stood still and tried to remember where he had left his knife after shaving. Then the riders were on him.

The moment he set eyes on them up close, he knew he was in serious trouble. The riders reminded him of the deserters and mercenaries he had seen in the filthiest inns and taverns of the South. Dressed in worn tunics, greasy leather, and bits and pieces of old armour, they looked like the type of men who had nothing to lose. Though some of them had lost some personal items on the way. He saw one missing part of an ear, some missing one or more teeth, a finger or two. They looked even more unkempt than he would after travelling for weeks, no months, sleeping in ditches. Probably they hadn't seen the inside of a house in years.

The riders circled him like wolves. There were at least ten of them. He attempted to ignore the rise of an icy, visceral fear deep in his belly. One of them reigned in his horse and spoke to him.

'You're the one who travels with the *Einache* rebel leader?' It sounded more like a statement than a question.

Rom frowned at him. 'What are you talking about?' The man slid off his horse in a fluid motion. He looked less dilapidated than the others. He was a little older and taller than Rom, with hair the colour of dark honey. He would have looked handsome after a wash and a shave. Three long strides took him right up to Rom. He looked him calmly in the eyes and struck him on the left side of his face.

Rom reeled from the impact and fell back heavily. He was dazed. The young man, his strength greater than one would expect from his build, gripped him by his tunic before he could fall to the ground and held him up. A trickle of blood dripped from Rom's mouth. He coughed, tasting blood, and swallowed with difficulty.

'I'll ask you again, and this time I advise you not to waste my time,' the man said. 'Are you the one travelling with the *Einache* leader?'

'I've no idea what you're talking about,' Rom said truthfully. He started to feel obstinately defiant. It was better than feeling terrified, he decided. The man calmly hit him again, harder, and allowed him to fall this time. Rom passed out before he hit the ground.

When he woke up, he felt slightly sick. It was the only thing he was conscious of for a time. Then he carefully opened his eyes. It was dark; the only light came from a large fire a few feet away. When he looked at it directly, the light seared through his eyes and exploded in the back of his skull. He groaned and closed his eyes again. He tried to get a sense of his situation by touch alone. He was lying with his back against the big roots of a great old tree. His hands were tied in front of him with strips of leather. He heard the riders being busy with the tasks of a small camp.

He heard a high voice. 'Hello? Sir?' It came from somewhere in front of him. He dared to open his eyes once more. It was less bad than the first time. The voice spoke again. 'I—I've brought you some water.' He focused his eyes and a face came into view. It was a young boy's. He didn't look more than ten years old. His face was dirty and his clothes looked worn. They were at least two sizes too small for him.

'Who are you?' Rom said.

'I'm Eald.' The boy pronounced it as 'hay-eld'. His accent reminded Rom of Yldich. 'Here's some water.' He held out an earthenware bowl. It seemed to have been made by a drunken potter. The water wasn't entirely clean, either. But Rom accepted the bowl thankfully, if with difficulty. He drank with care, his tied hands under the bowl, and tried not to drop it in his lap.

'Thank you,' he said. 'I'm Rom.' The boy smiled a nervous half smile and vanished. Rom lay back against the roots of the tree and closed his eyes.

He became aware of someone staring at him. He opened his eyes. The man with the honey-coloured hair sat cross-legged in front of him.

'You're awake,' he said softly. He had a cultured voice, clear and melodious. Rom swallowed. The man's composure scared him more than any display of aggression ever had. He opened his mouth to speak, then thought better of it. 'Very good,' the young man said, 'don't bore me with useless questions and protests. I have no patience for it.'

He drew a small knife from his belt. He started to cut the nails of his left hand. His movements were curt and precise. Rom stared at the sharp, controlled movements of the knife with horrified fascination.

'I'm called Feyir,' the man said. 'I intend to get some information from you. I advise you again not to lie. If you do, I'll turn you over to my men. They have crude, but effective methods to persuade people to be informative.'

Rom shuddered. He tried to shut down his mind against the images it was conjuring up for him. A feeling of despair rose from deep within his belly.

‘Here we go,’ the young man said, his voice light and pleasant, as if they were having a picnic on a summer’s day. ‘One: what is a *Tzanatzi* doing in the Forests of Gardeth?’

‘I’m not *Tzanatzi*,’ Rom said habitually. In a heartbeat, Feyir was at his side, grabbed his hair and pulled back his head with force.

Rom felt the cold steel of the knife at his throat.

I knew I should have cut that hair.

A new explosion of pain racked the left side of his head. He laboured to control his breathing.

‘What did I tell you?’ Feyir said, his face so close to Rom’s he could feel his breath on his cheek. His voice was low.

‘I’m half-*Tzanatzi*,’ Rom said, surprising himself. ‘I didn’t lie to you.’ Feyir laughed and let go of his hair. He took the knife off Rom’s throat and sat back again, completely composed.

‘Two: why is a half-*Tzanatzi* travelling through Gardeth Forest with the leader of the *Einache*?’

‘I really don’t know who you—’ The knife flashed through the air. It flew straight at his face. He gasped and yanked his head sideways. He screamed as the knife seared straight through his right ear and struck the tree behind him with a thump. Something warm began to flow down his neck. There was a short pause in the clamouring of the pots and pans near the fire. Then the normal sounds of the camp resumed. Rom’s ear throbbed with a dull, hot pain.

‘I warned you,’ Feyir said.

‘I—I really don’t know who you mean.’ Rom was shaking. Blood trickled down his right arm.

‘You were seen with the man they call Yldich,’ Feyir said slowly. ‘The beast-caller. The mage. The rebel leader.’

‘Yldich, a mage and a rebel leader?’ It was ludicrous. ‘He’s a farmer or something, a story-teller. He tells dreams, and stories about *rabbits*.’

Feyir leaned over to him, his amber eyes narrowed. ‘Where did he go?’

Rom shook his head. ‘I don’t now. We parted company. His stories got on my nerves.’

Feyir smiled. ‘Very convincing. I don’t believe you.’ He moved as if to leave. He turned and grabbed Rom by the front of his tunic. Rom held his breath. ‘I’ll have my riders break you in the morning,’ Feyir said softly. ‘They’ll tear you apart if they have to.’ Rom stared at him and swallowed. Feyir looked at him with a pensive expression. ‘Pity,’ he said, ‘you’re not unpleasant to look at. After tomorrow, I doubt if any girl will look at you a second time. If you’ll live.’ He threw Rom back against the tree.

A movement caught Rom's eye. He turned his head and saw the boy standing not three paces away. He was staring at Feyir. The boy's face was ashen. He had his arms around his small, frail body as if to steady himself. Feyir turned around and noticed him. He smiled. Rom suddenly felt sick.

'What's a child that age doing here? Where did he come from?' He hardly recognized the sound of his own voice. It was hoarse. Something dark began to well up inside him.

Feyir looked at him, his eyes narrowed like a satisfied cat's. 'If you want these *Einache* mongrels to be useful servants, you break them while they're young—'

Rom lunged forward and thrust Feyir to the ground with his bound fists. 'You bastard!' A surge of black rage gave him strength. Feyir was taken by surprise and fell back under his weight. Rom grabbed Feyir's neck with his bound hands and hit his head against the ground. He'd ceased to think altogether. 'I'll kill you, you bastard....' His blood was ringing in his ears. Riders came running from all directions, but he didn't notice.

He was pulled back with force and hauled off Feyir's body by many hands. He fought like a cornered animal, instinct taking over, kicking and yelling. He heard a bone snap and a cry as he kicked someone's hand away. A heavy blow to his chest had him reeling. Another threw him back against the tree, where he lay sprawling. He was barely conscious. A rider kicked him in his ribs, another in his stomach. He doubled over and coughed up blood. Then he lay still, his eyes closed, panting. Someone leaned over him. He heard Feyir's cool, level voice as if from a distance.

'That was a foolish thing to do.'

He fell into darkness.

The sound of painful, laborious breathing woke him. He found it was his own. He slowly opened his eyes. His head throbbed. It was completely dark, save for the dull red glow of the embers of the fire in the middle of the camp. He heard no sounds, saw no silhouettes against the light of the fire. Apparently, the riders were so sure of themselves they didn't even keep watch at night. It struck him as strange. The silence seemed unnatural.

He tried to move, and groaned as he felt a sharp pain shoot through his chest. The leather strip that bound his wrists had been tied to something, a thick tree root perhaps. He couldn't move more than a few inches. He lay still and closed his eyes. What use was there in trying to do anything? Tomorrow he was a dead man. He tried not to think of what they might do to get him to tell them what he didn't know. He wished he knew *something*. To be killed over nothing seemed even more horrid. A wave of panic went through him and he nearly choked on it.

‘Roëm,’ a voice said near his ear. He would have jumped if he had been able to. It was the boy with the Northern accent. Eald. He stressed the vowel just as Yldich had done, but more markedly so.

‘Are you awake?’

‘Yes,’ he whispered.

‘Please, keep still.’ He heard a sound above him. The boy pulled the knife out of the tree with some difficulty. Feyir had apparently forgotten it after the unexpected brawl. The boy kneeled in front of Rom and carefully cut through the leather binds.

Rom peered at him through the darkness. ‘What if someone sees you?’

The boy smiled his lopsided smile. ‘I put some herbs in the beer. Watcher drank most of it. The others had enough to keep them asleep. I hope.’ He gave a final tug at the leather binds. They gave way and Rom sat up gingerly. He rubbed his wrists and winced at the pain in his chest. ‘You must go now, while they are still asleep,’ the boy said. ‘Don’t try and get your horses. Too dangerous. Just go.’ He handed Rom the knife.

‘They’ll know you did this,’ Rom said. ‘You’d better come with me.’ He saw the boy hesitate.

‘They’d kill me if they caught me running away.’ Eald’s voice was a whisper. ‘Or my family. That’s what *he* said.’

Rom swallowed down a curse. ‘You’re not safe here either. What are you going to say when they see this?’ He motioned at the cut binds, hanging from the tree root. ‘The pixies did it?’

The boy grinned wryly. His eyes were filled with fear. A sound came from a few feet away, where most of the men lay sleeping. It sounded like a groan. Maybe one of them was tossing in his sleep.

Then a low voice rasped. ‘Who’s taking watch? Hey, Marteld, that you?’

Rom’s heart leaped up, his throat constricted. ‘Someone’s waking up! Come on!’ he hissed to Eald. ‘Quickly now!’ He gestured towards the trees. Behind them lay a low mound. Rom took the boy’s hand and started to half help, half drag him up. His ear started to throb with pain again and his chest felt as if it was on fire. He set his teeth and hurried Eald along. ‘Go, now!’

They went over the mound and half slid into a ditch. Rom nearly passed out from the pain. He blinked to clear away the specks of black in his vision. Eald dragged him up with difficulty. They scrambled through the trees, trying to make as little noise as possible.

Rom had no idea where they were, what direction to take. First a straight line away from the camp, he decided. There were no sounds of pursuit as yet. Maybe the rider had not noticed anything amiss, and had fallen asleep again.

They had run for quite a while, Rom clutching at his side and coughing, when they heard the sound of horses’ hooves behind them. Eald moaned.

Rom looked around. Panic surged through his chest. There was a steep, narrow gully to the left. It was the only place where they could possibly hide.

Rom grabbed Eald's arm and pulled him into the gully. They half fell, half slid into it. It was fairly deep. There was still water at the bottom. It was cold and muddy. Rom noticed there was an area where the roots of a large tree had eaten away into the bank, creating an overhang covered with moss and old leaves, with a dark niche behind it. He crawled towards it. Eald followed. They crawled into the narrow dark place and kept still. The sound of their breathing sounded alarmingly loud in the stillness. Hopefully, Rom thought, the tree roots would hide them from anyone looking down from the side of the gully.

Hardly had they settled into the muddy hole when the riders arrived. They were bearing torches. There were four of them, including Feyir. They heard his smooth, confident voice from the lead.

'No use blundering about in the dark,' it said. 'Cal. Can you see any tracks?'

'Too hard in the dark with this bloody thick carpet of leaves,' another voice said.

'All right then,' Feyir's voice sounded. 'You two, go northwest a bit further; see if you can catch up with them. Cal, we'll move around, back to camp. If we don't find them now, we'll do so in the morning. They won't get far.' He turned his horse. Feyir and the rider called Cal went back. The two other riders went off ahead.

Rom was strangely reluctant to get moving again. His head was swimming. He closed his eyes for a moment.

'Rom? Rom!' Eald was shaking him hesitantly. He had drifted off into a state of semi-consciousness. 'I don't think we should stay here,' Eald whispered. They clambered out of the gully with difficulty and made their way through the Forest. Eald was nervously listening for hoof beats or voices in the distance. Rom was plodding along doggedly. He felt strangely disconnected from his body. A buzzing noise filled his head, making it impossible to think clearly. His chest burned. He coughed painfully.

They came upon a wide, dry riverbed with rocky banks overgrown with moss and followed it. They had to clamber over rocks and boulders. Apparently, the river had once run a wild course from the mountains in the North, through the forests, foaming over rocks, only to ease down when it reached shallower waters in the South. The river bed was now overgrown with small bushes, plants, and moss. Rom stumbled over a rock and fell down hard. His breath was coming in painful gasps. Lights were going off in his head, like exotic flowers of exploding pain. He closed his eyes.

‘I’m sorry.’ His breath was wheezing. ‘I don’t think I can go any further.’

Eald anxiously tugged at his arm. ‘We can’t stay here. They’ll see us when it gets light.’ He bit his lip. Rom laboured to sit up. The grey light of dawn was filling the sky. ‘Maybe we can hide somewhere for the day,’ Eald muttered.

He left Rom sitting against a boulder and went a few paces ahead. He studied the rocky sides of the river bed in the increasing light. There were places where gnarly trees had grown into the river bank, dislodging rocks and creating small crevices. Years of determined growing in rock and hard soil had widened them. Some were near the ground, others higher up. A few seemed big enough to hide in. Eald went back to where he’d left Rom. He found him lying against the boulder, breathing hard and coughing. There was blood in the corner of his mouth. Eald shook him softly.

‘There’s a hiding place a few paces away. Please, just a little further.’ He helped Rom up with difficulty. They stumbled to the rocky side where a narrow crawl led to a dark opening. ‘Here,’ Eald said. Rom crawled forward, and moved slowly through the crack in the hardened soil, holding on to tree roots and branches. He slid down a short slope. He fell down with a gasp, landed in a small cave-like hole and lay still. It was dark and smelled of earth and dead leaves. Eald clambered in after him. ‘They won’t find us here,’ he said hopefully to the darkness.

Eald found himself walking through the trees in the light of early morning. The sun had gone up, and the warm, golden light fell in beams on the forest floor. The forest already smelled of autumn. A blackbird was singing in a tree a little further up the trail. Its song was piercingly sweet. It filled him with gladness. Eald felt strangely light-hearted. He walked softly, delighting in the sounds and smells of the early morning.

After a while, he became aware of a deep, soft humming sound. He realized it had been with him all along, like an undercurrent in his mind. He felt curiously unafraid. The sound attracted him in a strange way. It seemed to softly draw him towards the source, as if friendly, ghostly fingers were tickling him, tugging at his will in an almost teasing way.

He came upon a small clearing. A large, heavily built man sat a few paces away from him in front of a small fire pit. He had ginger hair and a short beard. The man looked at him and ceased his humming. The piercing grey eyes seemed to laugh at Eald. Eald smiled, completely at ease, and moved closer. The man gestured at the ground before the fire. Eald sat down and looked at him. He became aware of a low, vibrating voice in his head.

Who are you?

His name flowed out of his eyes, across the fire to the man. *Eald.*

Eald, he sensed, I'm Yldich. Can you help me? I'm looking for someone.

The strange thing was that Eald heard no words, but meanings. The wonderfully complex, soundless speech that flowed through his brain was composed of bits of knowledge, faint images, impressions, and feelings. He saw a dark young man that reminded him strongly of Rom. The picture differed subtly from his own image of him. Concern and a question of location went with it.

He nodded to the man across the fire and let the images and feelings pour out of his eyes to him. *He's with me. We're in trouble. Can you help us?*

Yldich was alarmed by the violent images the boy emitted. Urgency and fear accompanied them. He allowed them to pass through his awareness without holding on to them. If he did, they would possess him. He steadied his breathing to stay calm. If he broke his concentration, he might lose the boy and not be able to connect with him again.

Where? He conveyed.

Eald showed him.

Eald woke up with a sense of urgency. A slender beam of sunlight penetrated the entrance to the hole above. Motes of dust danced in the light. It had been a dream. Yet Eald felt compelled to act on it. He turned to Rom and gently shook him. 'Rom. Wake up. We've got to go.'

It was hard to get Rom to crawl up the slope to the entrance. It was even harder to get him out and down to the river bed. He was barely conscious. Somehow Eald managed, pulling and tugging. When they had gotten out, he looked around anxiously. Maybe he was being foolish trusting in a dream. The big man had said to get out and wait for him near the entrance of the hole. What if the riders got there first? What if the man existed only in his dream? The sun was already high and he felt awfully conspicuous. Anyone coming down the river bed or from the forest above would see them immediately.

Rom's horribly ragged breathing rasped in his ears. It scared him. He tried to shut it out of his awareness. Then he was afraid he would stop hearing it altogether. He hardly dared to look at him. The thought of running occurred to him for an instant. To run into the woods and leave the man to die alone was somehow even less appealing than to stay and wait. He sat down beside him and waited.

When Yldich found them, they were sitting on the ground, leaning against each other in the shadow of a large rock. The boy looked as if he were asleep. Rom looked as if he were dead. Thoroughly alarmed, Yldich dismounted as quickly as he could. He shook the boy gently, while he peered

into Rom's face. It was deathly white. His breathing was shallow. Tiny bubbles of blood formed between his lips.

'Eald,' Yldich said. The boy woke up and stared at him anxiously. 'It's all right. I want you to do something.' Eald nodded. 'There's a large crystal in my saddle bag. Take it and go up the river bed for a mile or so. Put down the crystal in the middle. Turn it until it catches the sun and point it away from us. Say this word: *'Ílumaē'*. Say it three times. Don't look directly into the light. Repeat it to me now.'

'Ill... *Ílumaē*,' Eald said. *'Ílumaē.'*

'Can you do that?'

Eald nodded.

'Go!' Yldich said.

Eald found the crystal quickly and ran off. He was relieved to be away and doing something, anything. He ran until a bend in the river bed obscured the others from view. Then he carefully set down the crystal. He took a few small rocks and set them against it on all sides to steady it. He started to turn it. It wasn't long before a ray of light found it and shone through it. He spoke as Yldich had instructed him.

'Ílumaē. Ílumaē. Ílumaē.' He carefully pointed the crystal away from him.

The strangest thing happened: the ray of light flowed with the movement of the crystal as he was turning it. It seemed to become tangible somehow, like honey or fluid amber, caught by the crystal, changed into something malleable. It grew stronger and stronger, until it shone like a second sun. The air around it was affected too. It shimmered and changed, until it seemed as if he were looking through a glass curtain. Everything behind the curtain was distorted. From one side of the river bed to the other, a shimmering curtain of glassy air rippled and obscured everything behind it from view.

While he was giving directions to the boy, Yldich was already turning his attention to Rom. He sensed the young man was slipping away fast. He pulled open Rom's tunic and saw bruises covering a large portion of his body. The skin had broken in places; dried blood had caked his tunic to the skin. Yldich breathed in sharply when he saw the extent of the damage. He deftly searched the area with his fingers, closing his eyes, almost touching the skin but not quite. He frowned with concentration.

Rom was sinking into an immensely deep, black sea. The feeling of sinking was not unpleasant. What was cruelly painful was to try to keep his head above water and breathe. Breathing hurt, and with every painful

exhalation, life seemed to flow out of him. The water pulled at him. He could almost hear it whisper.

Come away, let go, come with us....

The voice of the water was seductively sweet. He had been struggling to get away from it for a long time now. He was so tired. The voice of the water was getting clearer every time he expelled a breath.

Let go, with us there is no pain, no hurt, no grief.... He struggled for another painful breath.

Let go....

There was a small pinpoint of light somewhere above him in the dark above the sea. It was like a tiny sunbeam seen through deep water. He only saw it when he took in breath. He tried to focus on it, but it was hard. The sea was stronger. It wouldn't hurt to let go. The pain would cease. He would have peace.

But somehow the light kept him from letting himself sink into the soothing blackness completely. It was like a nagging voice that wouldn't leave him alone. He heard it murmur. It turned into a strange wordless song. It sang its way down to him and connected itself to him. He struggled for another breath. The energy of the song somehow gave him strength. It filled him with golden light.

Initially, it hurt even more. Then it got a little easier to breathe. His lungs were filling with light. It was warm and soothing. The song reminded him of sunlight, of the sounds and smells of spring. He breathed in a little deeper. It hurt less than before. He felt life return to him. The black sea receded. It murmured mournfully to itself behind him as it retreated, like a ghostly lover turned away. He was lying on a shore that was basking in light. The pain drained away into the sand.

He opened his eyelids a little. Sunlight was seeping through them. Someone peered into his eyes. He couldn't see clearly who it was. The sun was behind him. Rom opened his mouth as if to speak.

'Don't move yet, Rom,' he heard. 'Easy, now,' and he recognized Yldich's voice. He tried to move and found it hard. His arms were heavy as lead. His legs were somewhere down below, far away. He was hardly aware of them. His hands twitched.

Yldich took them into his own. 'You will never do as I say, will you?' Rom tried to grin. He imagined it probably looked hideous. The taste of his own blood was still heavy in his mouth, his teeth stained red. He coughed.

He heard quick footsteps coming closer. Eald was back, his eyes still full of the miraculous feat he had performed with the crystal.

‘Eald, please get the water skin for me,’ Yldich said. Eald blinked and looked at Rom, then back to Yldich with a question in his eyes. ‘He’ll live,’ Yldich said. ‘For now.’

After he had had a few sips of water, Rom closed his eyes again and drifted off into a sleep of exhaustion. Yldich checked his breathing. It sounded normal and healthy. While Eald looked at everything he did with wide eyes, he started to peel off the mud- and bloodstained tunic.

‘Keep an eye on him, will you?’ he said. Eald nodded. Yldich took one of his own spare tunics out of the saddle bag. When he carefully lifted Rom into a sitting position to get the clean tunic over his head, he heard Eald gasp. ‘What is it?’ The boy was staring at Rom’s back. Yldich moved over so he could see. He swallowed. The young man’s back was a map of scar tissue. Lines of old welts formed ridges of white flesh that crisscrossed like old mountain trails. Yldich felt a surge of nausea. Then a black thundercloud of anger welled up inside him. He released it with difficulty, closing his eyes for a moment, and let it soak into the dry earth of the river bed with an inaudible sigh.

‘Sir, look here,’ he heard the boy say. His face was tense and white.

‘It’s Yldich, son,’ he said, his thoughts elsewhere for a moment, ‘not sir. What is it?’

‘Here,’ Eald said, ‘I’ve seen this before.’ He pointed to Rom’s left upper arm near the shoulder. A mark had been burned into the skin at one time, leaving the inverted sign of a stylized animal. It looked like a misshapen dog or boar. The mark was old, like the other scars. Yldich cursed under his breath. ‘Feyir has a ring with the same picture on it,’ the boy said.

‘Feyir?’ Yldich looked at him sharply. ‘*Lord Feyir?*’

Eald looked confused. ‘He’s a lord?’

‘Is that who he’s run into?’ Yldich’s face was tense. Eald nodded. Yldich shook his head. ‘A wonder I found him alive at all.’

A while later, the sun began its journey down into the west. It would be a few hours yet before it went behind the trees. Yldich made a quick meal of powdered grains and herbs which he soaked in water. He tried to get some spoonfuls of the stuff into Rom’s mouth, but he wouldn’t wake up thoroughly enough to swallow properly. After a few attempts, Yldich gave him some more water, mixed with honey, and let him sleep.

Eald fetched the crystal. He kept all his senses alert in case the riders were nearby. Yldich had told him the crystal would be of no use for protection once the sunlight had faded away.

Yldich carefully lifted Rom onto the horse and let Eald sit behind him to steady him. They followed the dry river for a few more miles. Rom was deeply asleep, leaning back heavily against the boy.

They came upon a place where there had once been a shallow ford. The sunlight was fading away when they climbed the river bank, abandoning the relative shelter of the riverbed, and went back into the woods. Yldich started his habitual soft humming. This time, the humming was so low-key it was barely audible, yet it stretched over the ground over a large area. It washed against trees and bushes as it flowed through the forest, and created a tapestry of sound that stretched for miles. If any living being bigger than a mouse entered the area, he would know of it.

They made camp in an area where small trees had grouped together in a rough half-moon shape, creating a secluded area. Yldich dug a deeper fire pit than usual, to hide the light of the fire, and made some more broth. Eald had gone to sleep, sprawling by the fire like an exhausted dog, arms and legs in all directions. He twitched in his sleep. Yldich pulled a blanket over him. He took a bowl and went over to Rom, who lay on the other side of the fire, under the trees.

‘Rom.’ Rom was faintly aware of someone calling his name. He was reluctant to wake up. The voice kept calling him. ‘Rom. Wake up. You should really eat something now.’ He opened his eyes a little and peered in the darkness ahead. A large shape sat before him, painted in reds and yellows by the light of the fire.

‘Yldich?’

‘Come on, let’s get you up.’ He was grabbed under his arms and gently dragged up against the larger of the tree trunks. He had never felt so exhausted before. He sighed and noticed breathing didn’t hurt any more.

‘What happened?’

‘Eat first,’ Yldich said. ‘Questions later.’ Rom accepted the bowl, bringing it to his lips with difficulty. He took a few careful mouthfuls. His hands were shaking.

‘I feel as if I’ve been run over by a herd of cattle,’ he said finally.

‘No wonder,’ Yldich said. ‘You nearly died.’

Rom looked at him over the rim of the bowl with wide eyes. ‘What?’

‘You were drowning in your own blood when I found you. A few heartbeats later and I wouldn’t have been able to bring you back.’

Rom stared at him, white-faced. ‘I remember.’ A spasm of pain crossed his face. ‘I remember dying.’ He closed his eyes.

Yldich shook him softly. ‘One more.’ He helped him lift the bowl again. Rom obeyed, his eyes closed. He took another sip. ‘Good.’ Yldich put aside the empty bowl.

Rom leaned his head against the tree. He opened his eyes again. ‘How—how did you bring me back?’

‘Well, I am a *Yaever*.’ Yldich sat back into a more comfortable position. ‘I told you it means *true-dreamer*, or dream-walker, in my language. But it’s a lot more than that. I’ve been taught to, how would you say it, touch the living web that is life, and work with it. Manipulate it. Sometimes it means healing people. Or animals, or fields, or trees. Sometimes it means other things, like helping them to die. It’s hard to explain exactly,’ he said with a grin. ‘Your language is not equipped with the words to describe it well.’

‘But I was nearly dead. I felt it. How did you bring me back? Can you heal anyone? Anything?’

‘No. No I can’t,’ Yldich said, looking sober. ‘Some hurts are beyond my help. Some beings don’t want to be healed. Or can’t be healed,’ he said, searching for words. ‘It’s a matter of feeling your way, balancing, understanding, and focusing energy.’

‘I thought I... heard you sing,’ Rom said.

‘You probably did. Sound is an important part of it. Touch, as well.’ Yldich looked serious. ‘Listen, Rom. I wouldn’t have been able to heal you if it hadn’t been the way things should be.’ He frowned, trying to explain it properly. ‘If it had disturbed the purpose of your being, of the lives you touch, of the reason why you’re here, I would have had to let you go.’ Rom was silent for a while. Yldich thought he had fallen asleep again. Then he spoke.

‘How did you know where to find us?’

Yldich smiled. ‘Eald told me.’

‘Eald? But he was with me. How could he have...?’

‘He found his way to me while he was asleep. I had a feeling you might get into trouble, so I was looking for you, casting a net of awareness, so to speak. Eald responded to it and came to me in his dream. He has a great talent for dream-walking. As do you.’ Rom stared at him in bewilderment. ‘Rest now,’ Yldich said. He helped Rom back into his blanket between the roots of the tree. ‘We’ll talk more tomorrow.’

Rom was awakened by the sound of voices. He sat up slowly and carefully. It appeared to be early morning. A low mist drifted past over the grass. Watery sunlight illuminated the glade. Droplets of water had formed on the blanket. The voices were a little distance away. They were speaking in a language he didn’t understand.

Laughter rang in his ears. It was the boy, Eald. He heard Yldich's deep, booming laughter follow it.

Rom drew the blanket around him and walked unsteadily towards the sound of their voices. He found them sitting opposite each other in the middle of the glade. They didn't notice his presence. It suddenly occurred to him how similar they looked: Yldich with his ginger-coloured hair and beard, his big nose, his merry grey eyes, his ironic grin, and Eald, with his slightly darker shade of lanky hair, almost copper, his skewed smile, his boyish features that might just grow into a countenance like Yldich's. His high voice had the same lilting accent Yldich's had. Rom stood still, and watched them, fascinated by the strange speech and exuberant laughter. He had never laughed like that, not even as a boy.

Yldich was aware of him. He smiled at Rom. 'Well, good morning to you,' he sang. Rom was reminded of the morning he had imposed his company on him at the inn. 'How are you now?' Rom felt subtly excluded by the intimate laughter and the language he couldn't share. He drew the blanket around his shoulders more tightly.

'I'm fine,' he said stiffly. Yldich sprang up lightly and came up to him. He put his hands on his shoulders and looked him closely in the eyes. Rom had to force himself not to look away from the clear, piercing glance. Eald happily hobbled along a few paces behind Yldich. He looked up at them expectantly. If the boy had a tail, Rom thought, it would be wagging.

'Let's have breakfast,' Yldich said.

'Rom!' Eald said while they were eating. 'Yldich's going to teach me *flestrérer*.' Rom blinked at him in bewilderment. Yldich saw the flustered look on his face and grinned.

'It's the humming,' he said to Rom. 'The kind that makes you aware of your surroundings.'

Eald nodded eagerly. 'I can help Yldich keep watch, so no riders will find us.'

Wonderful, Rom muttered to himself. *Now there's two of them*. He nodded at Eald, doing his best to look at the boy approvingly. Eald beamed at him. Yldich cleared up the bowls and mugs.

'Eald, why don't you go and practice *flestrérer*. And keep on the lookout for anything we might be able to eat. Like berries. I want to talk to Rom for a while.' Eald nodded and sprang away. Yldich helped Rom up and motioned toward the trees. 'Let's have a seat.' Rom tried to sit down on his own, using the tree for support, but his muscles trembled so much that Yldich had to help him down so he wouldn't topple over. 'Now then,' Yldich said when he had settled in the grass. 'Tell me what happened. The day before yesterday.'

Rom looked uncomfortable. He would rather keep the episode shut out of his mind. But Yldich was looking at him intently. And there was a question that was beginning to nag him, now he thought about the day he ran into Feyir and his riders. ‘Well, I met someone called Feyir. A refined gentleman.’

Yldich nodded gravely. ‘Eald mentioned his name. Do you have any idea who he is?’ Rom shook his head. ‘He and his riders were first seen in the Forest five or six years ago. Soon after, small villages and houses on the Southern fringe of the Forest were found burnt down or empty. The inhabitants were found slain, or were never seen again. We—I guessed that they had been taken as slaves. Or worse.’

Rom shuddered. ‘He was going to have his men torture me. He was having a go at it himself.’ He pulled away the hair on the right side of his face. Yldich stared at the mass of clotted blood that was his ear. ‘He seemed to be under the impression I was travelling with the leader of the *Einache*.’ Rom studied Yldich’s face sharply. ‘He wanted to know where he had gone. I tried to convince him I had never heard of such a person. He wouldn’t believe me. So he did this.’ He motioned at the bloodied ear.

Yldich closed his eyes. His tanned face was a shade paler than it had been. ‘I am sorry.’

Rom stared at him. ‘Who are you?’ he said finally, his voice hoarse.

‘Feyir has got a somewhat distorted notion of what it entails, but in a sense, I guess it’s true. I am the *Hárrad* of the *Einache*.’

‘What does that mean?’ Rom’s face was tense. He felt strangely betrayed.

‘It means I am at the head of a—a group of people who want to change things for the better. But it’s not what Feyir thinks.’

Rom shook his head and scowled. His eyes had turned black. ‘Why didn’t you tell me this? Before you let me go off into the forest by myself...’

Yldich fixed his gaze on him with a stern expression. ‘It’s not the kind of thing one goes and tells a man he has only known for three days. Besides, you hardly left me time to explain. You were too busy running away from yourself.’ Rom swallowed. He leaned his head against the tree and closed his eyes. To his horror, tears pushed to the surface. He brushed them away with a gesture of annoyance. Yldich looked at him with an unfathomable expression.

‘You haven’t been too forthcoming with details of your personal history either,’ he said softly.

‘But that’s hardly the knowledge that would get another man killed.’ Rom sounded bitter.

Yldich laughed. ‘You’ve got me there.’ Rom didn’t speak. He sat against the tree with his eyes closed. He felt drained, tired and empty. Yldich looked at him and shook his head. ‘Rom,’ he said in a gentle tone. Rom remained

motionless, his eyes closed. Yldich took his hand. Rom's eyes flew open. He flinched and tried to pull back his hand. Yldich held on to it. 'If I had meant to harm you, would I have gone through all that trouble to find you and keep you alive?' Rom looked at him and swallowed with difficulty. 'Maybe it's time you learned to trust a little.'

Rom shuddered. Something strange happened. Something that had been coiled and knotted inside his chest ever since he could remember was loosening. It scared him. He felt he would drown if he let it uncoil. He would dissolve. Yldich saw the panic rise in his face. He carefully laid his hand back down in the grass. He took a deep breath.

'I'm sorry your trip to the North is turning out to be such a nuisance,' he said in a cheerful tone.

Rom pushed the hair out of his face. He smiled wryly. 'I guess I'd have been better off listening to your warning.'

Yldich grinned. 'Welcome to the North.'

'Why, thank you,' Rom said. 'I think I'll turn around and go home as soon as possible.'

'Unfortunately, it's far too late for that.' Before Rom could retort, Eald came back from his expedition, running through the glade with his shirt filled with orange-red berries. They had stained it thoroughly.

'Look what I've got,' he called. 'The bushes near the stream are full of them.' He dumped his load at Rom's feet.

'What are those?' Rom said, as he eyed the squished things. He'd never seen them before.

'Weyberries,' Yldich said. 'They only grow in the north of Gardeth Forest. Have some, Rom. And let me have a look at that ear.'

Yldich studied Rom's cut ear and carefully cleaned it with a damp cloth, while Eald looked on with the same fascination he would have for a dead animal or a curiously mottled bird's egg.

'You've been lucky,' he said. 'It looks like the heavy bleeding has cleaned the wound thoroughly enough. I don't think it will get badly infected. Just don't touch it, and it will heal by itself.' He put away the cloth. 'Now, there's one thing I'm still wondering about. How did you manage to get yourself in such a state that you almost bled to death?' Rom was silent. Eald answered for him. He sat up proudly, tossing back lanky wisps of hair.

'He fought all of the riders at once,' he said. 'Of course, there were too many of them for him.' Yldich raised his eyebrows and looked at Rom. Rom looked away, feeling uncomfortable.

'It really was the other way around,' he said to the grass. 'I attacked Feyir, and they pulled me off him and—'

‘You attacked Feyir?’

‘It was something he said.’ Rom frowned darkly at the ground and was silent.

Yldich was about to ask another question. Then he thought better of it. Instead, he got up and went over to the saddlebags. He pulled out a sword. With it went a scabbard of deep indigo that was beautifully adorned with silver needlework. Hundreds of thin lines of silver formed curly patterns that intricately connected forms of birds, leaves, stars and symbols Rom had never seen before. Yldich pulled out the sword. It had the same forms and symbols on it, subtly engraved in the shiny steel. The sun glinted on its sharp edge. Yldich tapped it lightly with a fingernail. Immediately, the sword resounded with an eerily high, clear note.

Rom stared at the sword. He had never seen such a strange and beautiful weapon before. It looked more like a work of art than an effective weapon.

Yldich saw his glance and grinned. ‘Don’t underestimate it. It’s well-balanced and extremely sharp.’ He threw the sword into a tree with little effort. It ripped through the air like an arrow, and burrowed itself deeply into the trunk with a thump. Rom and Eald stared at it as it quivered, Eald with his mouth half open and his eyes shining.

‘I had it made in Newbury for my daughter Maetis.’ Yldich touched the hilt with a fond smile. ‘She has an un-girlish fascination with weaponry.’ He pulled the sword out of the tree and sheathed it. He held it out to Rom. ‘I think you should have it for now.’

Rom made no move to touch it. ‘I don’t much care for weapons. Besides, I haven’t any skill with a sword.’

Yldich lifted a brow. ‘Would you rather fight Feyir with your bare hands again next time you run into him?’

‘I intend not to run into him at all.’ Rom frowned. ‘I’m going home as soon as possible.’

Eald sprang up and tugged at his sleeve. ‘But, Rom, you can’t leave us now. You’ve got to stay with us.’ He turned to Yldich. ‘Please tell him to stay!’

Yldich gently pressed his arm and turned to Rom. ‘Rom, you’re in no state to travel by yourself. Even if you hadn’t lost your horse and pony, you wouldn’t be able to get through to the South on your own safely now. You had better stay with us for a while. The most important thing is that we stay out of the way of Feyir and his riders.’ Rom sat down in the grass. He felt too weak to argue. He held his face in his hands and nodded. ‘That’s settled, then,’ Yldich said cheerfully. ‘Eald, let’s go pack. Rom, you rest now. We’ll be leaving shortly.’

They cleared the camp quickly and efficiently. Yldich showed Eald how to hide all signs anyone had been there. They raked the floor with branches and buried the fire pit.

The day before, Yldich had left Rom's tunic in a shallow pool for hours to soak the worst of the bloodstains. It was the only one he had now, and he needed it since Yldich's spare one was much too big for him. Yldich helped Rom mount the horse.

'His name is *Elda*. Just give him free reign. He'll follow my lead.' He walked alongside the horse.

'Where are we going?' Rom said, when they were moving for a while.

'We'll try and find Eald's parents, first,' Yldich said. Eald was a few paces ahead, humming softly. He was practicing *flestréerer*. 'This morning, he told me he was taken in a raid by Feyir's men a year ago.' Yldich spoke softly. 'His family lived in a small village on the outskirts of the Forest. They were surprised at night, and Eald doesn't know what happened to them. They might have been looking for him all this time. Or mourning him.' Rom looked at the boy.

'Yldich,' he said softly. 'What do you think happened to them?'

Yldich shook his head. 'There's always hope.'

When they had reached a wide, hilly glade in the forest, Yldich signalled them to stop.

'I need to get my bearings.' He went and sat down cross-legged in the middle of the glade. Rom and Eald looked at his movements in silence, wondering what the man was up to.

Yldich closed his eyes. The mellow autumn sun warmed his face. He let the sunlight fill his heart and breathed in slowly. As he breathed out, he let his awareness pour out over the forest floor. He let it spread around in all directions. The golden threads of Life were everywhere. To touch them, and know himself to be part of it, filled him with gladness.

He was aware of the small creatures working in the earth, turning leaves to soil, their busy, productive lives unnoticed by human beings. He let his awareness rise up beyond the forest floor. He felt the slender presence of young saplings, their fresh leaves rejoicing in the light of the sun, and he rejoiced with them. He sensed the slow heartbeats of the old, wizened trunks of their elders. Their leaves, high above, whispered to him and he listened respectfully. Further and further away he reached.

He passed Rom and Eald, who looked on in wonder. He felt Eald's presence, a blend of exuberance and amazement, vibrating at a high pitch, like any young life. There was only a little scarring there, at the surface. He felt Rom's, darker and more introverted, old hidden pain, and power beneath it.

He felt a strange connection with the young man that went further than the few days he had known him. It felt like a subtle thread he couldn't define, running along from somewhere far back in the past, right through his heart, to somewhere far ahead in the future. He had felt it before, in his true-dreams. His skin prickled.

He let them go and let his vision expand beyond their immediate surroundings. He rose up into the sky, sensing more animal life further ahead. There were geese in the air, flying in V-formation towards the south, all business and purpose. He became aware of a dark area in his field of awareness to the northeast. Feyir and his riders. He swooped over them, then turned and went through them. He felt the riders' energy. Theirs was a common mixture of brutal ignorance, callousness with fear underneath. They were mainly concerned with survival and competition. Then he came across a different form of energy altogether. Feyir. His vibrated at a much higher frequency, yet there was something about it that made it more unnerving. Something repulsive, like the hidden rotten core in a piece of fruit that looked otherwise attractive and healthy. There was brilliance to his energy that somehow sickened Yldich.

He pulled back quickly and breathed out, then returned to the glade where he'd left his body. He strengthened his connection with it. For a moment, he rested lightly above the earth, and let the interconnectedness of life sustain him. He touched the roots of the grass and trees and shared the nourishing energy of the earth.

He felt something dark pull at him. It came from deep down below, from far beneath the tree roots. Yldich frowned. A strange metallic taste was in his mouth. He tried to pull back, and to his rising horror, the darkness wouldn't let go. An acrid smell filled his nostrils. He struggled like an animal caught in tar. He started to choke.

Rom gingerly dismounted and stood beside the horse. He studied Yldich silently as he sat down and closed his eyes. He wondered what the man was doing. Yldich was breathing slowly. Rom slowed down his own breathing instinctively. He half closed his eyelids and let his awareness drift. Then he saw the other man frown. An expression of pain crossed his face. He cringed. It was alarming.

'What's happening? What's he doing?' Eald said. His voice was high with uncertainty.

Driven by an impulse he didn't understand, Rom ran towards Yldich and dropped on his knees before him. He gripped the big man's arms and shook him forcefully. 'Yldich. Come back.' Yldich groaned, but his eyes did not open. All colour had drained from his face.

‘Do something,’ Eald cried out.

Rom hesitated. Then he closed his eyes. He concentrated fiercely. First, he saw nothing but the dark of the insides of his eyelids. He tried to locate Yldich by sight alone, but it was to no avail. Desperately, he tried to feel for him with his senses. He groped around wildly, finding nothing. He panted, his chest filling up with fear and despair. Suddenly, he was aware of a thin thread that wound through his heart. He followed it out. It stretched before him, into the dark. Without knowing what he was doing, he sent a call through the thread and felt a response. He hurried towards it. He became aware of another being, far below, partially trapped in a horrible living darkness. It struggled faintly. It felt like Yldich.

He plunged down towards the darkness, and felt its substance reach for him. It felt like something sentient, something conscious. Touching it made his skin crawl. It was cold. It leeches onto him greedily. He grabbed at the energy form that was Yldich, and cried out to him. He felt a faint response. It was as if someone grabbed hold of his hand. He pulled out of the darkness with all the force he could muster. It was almost unbearably heavy.

‘*Ayàdi eymiraz,*’ he cried, and he did not know the language. The darkness gave way a little. He gave one last desperate pull, moaning with pain and effort. All at once, there was no more resistance. He fell back heavily and found himself back in his body. He was lying on his back in the sunlit grass, shaking uncontrollably. He heard Eald cry out with relief and run towards them. He heard Yldich’s voice. It was hoarse.

‘I’m fine,’ Yldich said. He sounded badly shaken. Rom clambered up and sat up in the grass. He looked across at Yldich. Yldich wiped his brow, his eyes closed. He composed himself, taking deep, ragged breaths. He suddenly opened his eyes and looked at Rom. ‘How, by all the gods, did you....’ he burst out abruptly. Rom shrank back from his glare. He drew a hand across his face. He was shocked at what he had done. He didn’t even know how he’d done it. He didn’t want to think about what it meant. It frightened him more than the sickening blackness he’d felt reaching for him.

‘I—I don’t know,’ he said. ‘I just—I don’t know.’ He bit his lip and stared at the ground. Eald looked at him with anxious wonder. Yldich stared at him fixedly with his deep grey eyes.

‘It can be a dangerous thing,’ he said slowly, his voice still hoarse, ‘for a man not to know who he is.’ Rom buried his face in his hands. Yldich sighed and got up slowly. He walked up to Rom and kneeled beside him. ‘Whatever it is you’re running from,’ he said kindly to his bowed head, ‘whatever you may be, you may have just saved my life with it.’

Eald dropped down beside them in the grass. His clear voice rang in their ears. 'I know what you did. You were dreamwalking. I felt you go. Only you were awake.' Rom lifted his head and stared at the boy.

'Eald may be right.' Yldich looked at Rom. 'What was down there is not of this plane. The only way to reach it may be *ayúrdimae*, the waking dream.' He didn't mention the strange words he had heard Rom cry out. Somehow the darkness had shrunk before them. He couldn't remember where he had heard them before, but it was a long time ago. It disturbed him greatly.

'Our safest course is north-west, I think,' Yldich said as they were preparing to move on. 'I sensed the riders on the other side of the river to the east.' He helped Rom mount the horse. 'We may be able to find Eald's village that way as well.'

Rom looked down at him, frowning. 'How do you know?'

'Well, right before I was... trapped in the darkness, I surveyed the area around us. By *ayúrdimae*, dreamwalking. But apparently it has become hazardous to do so.' Yldich's face was grim. 'It appears whatever is down there in the earth can entrap anyone who's dreamwalking.'

Eald looked at him with wide eyes. 'It can grab me while I'm asleep?'

'Well, I would advise you to be careful where you dream yourself to, lad,' Yldich said. 'Just as long as you don't stray too far, you should be fine.'

Rom shook his head in bafflement. 'You talk about this—this dreamwalking as if you're talking about cleaning the dishes.'

Yldich chuckled. 'With the *Einache*, we teach our children from a young age how to dream well. But they're not all as talented as Eald. Or you. These days, most of them don't get to the stage where they have true dreams at all.'

Eald smiled at Yldich. He seemed to grow a little with pride. Rom fidgeted uneasily with the reigns.

They moved through a green woodland area that was fed by several little streams. Blue-green dragonflies glided through the air above their heads. Eald and Rom filled the water skins while Yldich went hunting. He returned with two rabbits.

'How did you do that?' Eald said, his eyes big.

'I called them,' Yldich said. 'I'll teach you.'

In the afternoon they came upon an area where the trees stood back in thickets and a strip of grassland bordered a small river.

'Let's make camp here,' Yldich said. 'We could all do with a wash. Eald, you look like a pair of muddy boots left out to dry.'

Eald laughed. 'And Rom looks like a bag of dirty laundry.'

‘If we went to the *Squealing Pig* now,’ Rom said, studying his grimy fingernails, ‘I doubt they’d let us in even there.’

Eald and Rom descended to the river bank. It was lined with small pebbles that stung their feet. They waded carefully into the river and stood there shivering. After they had washed their clothes in the stream, they wrung them and threw them on the grass. Then they plunged into the water, gasping with the cold. Rom habitually made sure his back was turned away from Eald while he washed. Eald noticed.

‘You don’t have to hide it,’ he said. His tone was matter-of-fact. ‘I’ve seen your scars.’ Rom winced. ‘How did you get them?’

Rom’s eyes turned dark. ‘It was a long time ago,’ he said in a low tone. ‘It doesn’t matter now.’ Eald opened his mouth to ask about the mark that was shaped like Feyir’s ring. Before he could speak, Yldich’s voice boomed through the air.

‘Hurry up you two. Dinner’s almost ready.’

They hurriedly dried themselves off with bundles of coarse grass and spread out their damp clothes over the bushes to dry. Then they went up the river bank, Eald in the lead. Rom followed more slowly, holding on to roots and tufts of grass.

They wrapped themselves in their blankets and sat down before the fire. They looked at it in amazement. Yldich did not only have two rabbits roasting above it, but he had also filled the small kettle with an assortment of wild potatoes, herbs and roots. It smelled delicious.

‘Don’t tell me,’ Rom said. He looked at the potatoes. ‘You called these as well?’

Yldich laughed. ‘No, I had to dig these out myself.’ He grinned. ‘Eat, now.’

They went to sleep early, wrapped in their blankets around the fire. Rom heard Yldich and Eald softly murmur in their own language for a while. He was too tired to talk. He stared at the stars until he drifted away into sleep.

The next morning Rom retrieved their clothes from the bushes. Yldich had gone off on his own. Rom and Eald ate some leftover stew as they waited for him to return. Eald babbled about calling rabbits, ducks, deer, and wolves. A whole menagerie filled the campsite in his imagination. They heard Yldich’s voice from the other side of the field.

‘Good morning to you,’ he called in a merry tone. ‘Sword practice today.’ He tossed two staves at their feet.

‘Where did you get these?’ Eald said.

‘Went into the woods and cut them while you were still snoring,’ Yldich said with a grin. He gestured at the staves and looked at Rom. ‘Choose one.’

Rom stood up slowly and picked up a staff. He frowned and looked at it with distaste. ‘I told you, I don’t want anything to do with weapons.’

‘Really?’ Yldich moved forward so suddenly Rom had no time to blink. He took a swing at the staff with a precise, curt move. It flew out of Rom’s hand and hurtled to the ground. In one fluid motion, Yldich turned his staff around and pushed at Rom’s chest with just enough force to make him topple backwards. He hooked his foot behind Rom’s right leg. Rom gasped and fell over like a felled tree. He lay on his back in the grass and before he could move, Yldich was on the ground beside him and lightly held his staff across his throat.

‘Too bad,’ Yldich said in a sober tone. ‘You’re dead.’ It had taken less than five heartbeats. Rom swallowed and breathed out slowly. Yldich took the staff from his throat. He grabbed Rom’s right hand and pulled him up.

‘That was perfect!’ Eald jumped up and down with excitement. His eyes were shining. ‘Do it again!’ Yldich grinned. Rom looked shaken. His face was pale, but his eyes were dark with some emotion Yldich could not fathom. He clenched his hands into fists.

‘I won’t do it. I’ve been able to survive for years without picking up a sword. I won’t start now.’ His voice was strained.

‘Eald, you get some practice with this,’ Yldich said, and lightly threw his stick at Eald’s feet. ‘I need to speak with Rom.’ His grey eyes were stern. He took Rom by the arm and pulled him across the field until they were out of earshot of the boy. Rom tried to loosen his arm, but Yldich held it in a tight grip. At the other end of the field, he turned Rom around briskly and faced him, gripping his upper arms.

‘Now you listen to me,’ Yldich said forcefully. Rom stared back, his face tense. ‘I don’t know what happened to you, but you can’t afford to run from it any more. I won’t let you. What will you do if Feyir’s riders catch up with us? What if they capture Eald? Torture him? Kill him? Or me? Will you just stand there and say that you don’t want to fight? Will you let yourself be killed?’ Rom swallowed and closed his eyes. Yldich felt him fade away. He shook him sternly. ‘Rom. You must stop this, now. You can’t do this any more.’

‘Please. Leave me alone,’ Rom whispered. He was shaking. Tears were running down his face. Yldich stared at him in perplexity. He shook his head.

‘If you go on like this, you’ll get yourself killed. You’re running towards your death.’

Rom looked at him with non-seeing eyes. ‘Better mine than another’s.’

Yldich's eyes widened. 'What do you mean? What did you do?' He let go of Rom's arms. Rom sat down heavily against a tree. Yldich squatted in front of him. 'Tell me.' Rom closed his eyes. 'I've seen your scars,' Yldich said, his brows knit. 'I know something horrible must have happened to you. The kind of thing that changes a man.'

'Not a man,' Rom whispered.

'What?'

'I was not a man. A child. Eald's age.' Yldich gazed at him with wide eyes. Rom stared blankly at his hands. 'I was apprenticed to a man called Aldr,' he said finally. 'Lord Aldr. I was sent to his Keep to serve as a page. I must have been eight or nine years old....'

They heard Eald shouting challenges to imaginary foes in the distance. Apparently he was bravely attacking and killing stones, bushes and small trees with his staff. The merry sound contrasted sharply with Rom's wan face, Yldich thought. He felt his heart sink. He sat down before him and looked at him intently. Rom was speaking with his eyes closed. He held his face in his hands.

'Where I come from,' he said huskily, 'the family of a young boy that showed an aptitude for battle, or other skills, would be paid a small amount of silver for his apprenticeship at the Keep of one of the local Lords.' He took a deep breath and steadied himself.

'Maybe it was once a good system. Boys were taught their letters and their manners. They were introduced by their elders into their way of life and into their professions, of men-at-arms, guardsmen, falconers, and so on. First, you would learn the ways of the Keep by being a servant to the lords and ladies, by working in the kitchens and stables. Then, from the age of eight or nine, we were taught fighting skills.' He paused.

'Go on,' Yldich said.

'As I said, maybe it was once a good system. By the time my mother sent me away, it had become a life of servitude.' He swallowed. 'We—we were broken down and taken apart bit by bit. We were each assigned to a master, to teach us obedience, discipline, and unquestionable loyalty.' He emphasized the words with force. The list sounded as if it had been beaten into him many times over, Yldich thought grimly.

'That meant that you could only speak when questioned, to never ever look your master in the eye, to never ever question anything he did or said, to never have a thought of your own.' Rom's eyes were dark as pitch. 'We were to follow any order without question and without delay. I was assigned to Lord Aldr himself. I suppose he thought it an honour.' He grimaced. 'But

Lord Aldr was the worst of them all. He resented anything *Tzanatzi*. And they made me his personal servant and page. A half-breed.’ He swallowed bitterly.

‘From the age of eight until I was about twelve, he was the centre of my life. He ruled it from the early morning till late in the evening. At night he had me sleep at the foot of his bed, on a sheepskin rug on the floor. The slightest mistake, the smallest mishap, and his fist would be in my face, or his belt on my back. Maybe it wouldn’t have been so bad if I had been better at pretending to be submissive.’ He grimaced. ‘But when he ordered me about, when he chastised me, my eyes betrayed me every time. He would look at me and *see*. I couldn’t hide my thoughts. I wasn’t really obedient. I didn’t show him due reverence. So I was beaten even more often than the others.’ He held himself as if he were cold.

‘As I became older, it became worse. He seemed to be haunting me, tricking me into making mistakes, so he could punish me for it. He wouldn’t leave me alone.’ He hid his face in his hands like a child. ‘I’ve often wondered why he hated me so much,’ he whispered. Yldich swallowed down a curse.

‘I know,’ he said. ‘He knew he could never get from you what he wanted.’

Rom looked up, his face wan. ‘What was that?’

‘Respect,’ Yldich said, his voice stern. ‘True respect. Furthermore, he probably sensed you were stronger than him.’

‘Stronger?’ Rom said. He sounded incredulous.

‘Indeed,’ Yldich said with a grimace. ‘Why else would he need to beat you down so much? You were the more powerful, and he knew it.’

Rom stared at him, unbelieving. ‘Do you really think so?’ Yldich nodded. Rom frowned, trying to make sense of it.

‘Go on,’ Yldich said softly.

‘One afternoon, my lord had me bring him a cup of heated wine during a gathering of nobles. I must have been twelve or thirteen. As I came up to him, carrying the heavy cup on a tray, he turned their attention to me. He said,

“Here’s that half-breed mongrel. Can’t do anything right.” He moved as if to cuff me again. And I flung the tray at his feet. Warm red wine splattered on the stone floor and on his trousers. I did it on purpose. I couldn’t help myself. I heard someone laugh. It was one of the nobles. Lord Aldr flushed red and beat me to the floor with one heavy blow of his fist.’ Rom swallowed. He closed his eyes.

‘The next day, one of the other boys was accused of stealing something that belonged to lord Aldr. A piece of jewellery or something.’ He looked at his hands as if they belonged to someone else. ‘We were all summoned to the

practice court, a hall where the swordsmen used to practice. All the pages and many of their masters were there. Lord Aldr took it upon himself to punish the boy.’ He blinked.

‘The worst thing was, I knew the thing hadn’t been stolen. It couldn’t have been. I knew the whereabouts of every garment, every piece of jewellery my lord owned. The boy had no reason to take it and no chance to mislay it. He must have lost it himself.’ He paused, and absently tugged at a tuft of grass. He pulled the blades to bits before he let them fall to the ground.

‘Lord Aldr took the whip he used for this kind of routine. He had the boy forced down over a stool. Then he proceeded to beat him.’ He swallowed. ‘I knew the boy. A lanky boy with red hair and freckles. I liked him, insofar as it was possible to know him. We weren’t encouraged to socialize. Any talk amongst pages was habitually discouraged. We were kept at our chores and exercises all day, so we didn’t have much chance to talk. Still, I liked the red-haired boy. He had laughing eyes, and a wry grin, a little like Eald. And my lord was flogging him until the blood was dripping out of his mouth. His shirt was drenched with it.’ Rom paused a moment, then continued, his face white and drawn.

‘I thought he was going to kill him. And then something strange happened. Lord Aldr spoke to him, in between the lashings of the whip. I heard him say:

“This’ll teach you, you despicable little bastard,” and he looked at me across the hall. He looked straight at me. It was a look of hatred. So then I realized. He wasn’t flogging the red-haired boy for stealing. He was punishing me. For defying him. He knew I liked the boy. He’d seen us talk. So thrashing this boy to death was just another way to subdue me.’ He closed his eyes and clenched his hands into fists.

‘What happened?’ Yldich said, his voice strained.

‘I went over to him,’ Rom said. ‘It was as if my legs were on strings, pulled by someone else. I walked up to him. And then I hit him in the face. In front of everyone.’ He closed his eyes. Yldich stared at him. Rom breathed deeply, as if he had been under water. He opened his eyes, and gazed in the distance without seeing.

‘Time stood still. I could hear the other boys gasp. I looked at Lord Aldr’s face. It was wrenched with cold fury. I felt like sinking into the earth. I wish I could have.’

‘What did he do?’

‘He became deadly calm. He had the boy dragged away. I didn’t dare look at him, to see if he was still alive. And then Aldr ordered his men to bring two swords. He said,

“If you really want to fight me, you filthy little bastard, you’d better do it right.” He ordered me to choose a sword.’ Rom shuddered. ‘I’d had a little practice. Some years of basic training. And I was tall for my age. But to have to fight him, with a real sword....’

Yldich cursed. ‘A boy is no match for a grown man.’ His voice was low with disgust. ‘It was never a fair fight.’

‘For an instant, I thought that he only wanted to humiliate me, put me in my place,’ Rom said. ‘To be an example to the other boys. But when he came at me, his sword drawn, I could see in his eyes that he truly meant to kill me.’ He stared at the ground. ‘I couldn’t move. I saw him advance, but it was as if I was frozen to the floor. Then he lifted up his sword and aimed it at my head. I blocked it by pure habit. We had practiced the same move over and over, outside on the field in weapons practice.’ The ghost of a smile pulled his mouth awry. ‘Lord Aldr wasn’t an accomplished swordsman. He had strength, but not skill. Still, he could have had me down in two, three strokes.’

‘What happened?’

‘I blocked the first blow, and a second with effort. The sword was heavy. I could just manage to parry his moves. The third time he aimed a long thrust at my heart. I backed away to avoid it. I stumbled and fell to the floor. The sword fell out of my hands. He gripped me by the front of my shirt and lifted me up. He meant to cut my throat right then.’ He swallowed. ‘I closed my eyes. And then he spoke to me.

“By the way,’ he said, ‘your little friend is dead. I just had him put out of his misery.” Rom’s face was drawn, the skin taut. Yldich scowled. ‘Something came over me,’ Rom whispered. ‘Something dark. From deep within. I felt pure rage, pure darkness. And it was as if the light of the sun was cut off. The hall was darkened. I heard people gasp in surprise.’ Yldich stared at him.

‘I looked up at Lord Aldr. I looked him straight in the eyes. Something went out of me. And he shrank back from me. I saw a look of horror in his face. He let go of my shirt. He backed away. Sunlight returned to the hall. The tension was broken. I saw him wipe the sweat from his brow.’ He released a breath. ‘When he was at a safe distance he stopped and looked at me. He took care not to look into my eyes.

“I’ll not waste my time with you again,” he said over my head, loudly so all those present could hear. He nodded at his men. “Twenty lashings,” he said, and then he left.’ Rom shuddered.

‘They held me down over the same stool. And they flogged me like he had the red-haired boy.’ His breath quickened. ‘I wanted not to cry out. But by the fifth stroke, I couldn’t stop myself.’ He shook and put his arms tightly around his body. ‘By the tenth stroke, I had fainted. So they waited until I

came round. And then they went on again.’ Yldich clenched his teeth and breathed out slowly.

‘When they were finished, they dragged me from the room. I hardly noticed. I only felt pain. Like fire, and ice. Red and white. My back was screaming.’ He stared in the distance.

‘When I woke up, I was in a little cell. It was one of the old dungeons that were no longer in use. I welcomed the silence. I was resigned to die. I almost looked forward to it. But at night, one of the kitchen servants came to me. I was barely conscious. She gave me water. She told me one of the pages had told her what happened. Lord Aldr had given orders for them to stay away from me. He wanted me to die slowly, alone in the cell. But she had heard what had happened to the red-haired boy. She was related to him. So she took a great risk and took care of me in secret.

At night, she came to me and dressed my wounds. She stole soup from the kitchens and ripped up old sheets for bandages. After a day or two, when I was delirious with fever, she had one of her cousins take me out of the castle in secret. In a cart loaded with empty beer barrels.’ He sighed and drew a hand over his face.

‘He brought me to a small inn. After a few days, when I was able to sit up again, the innkeeper came to me. He told me Lord Aldr’s men were searching the country, looking for a dark-haired half-breed boy. Apparently, when they had gone down to the dungeons to take away my dead body to be buried, they discovered my disappearance. Lord Aldr was furious.

The innkeeper hid me in the wine cellar. After a few days, strange rumours came to the inn. It appeared Lord Aldr had caught a mysterious disease. He had a fever of sorts, they said, that made him hallucinate. He kept to his rooms and trusted no servant to get him his food. He had his men prepare it for him. He had them stand guard by his door day and night. He saw things that weren’t there, and ranted about *Tzanatzi* curses and black magic. He suffered from a strange fever that wouldn’t go away. And then one night, after a series of painful convulsions, Lord Aldr died.’ Yldich stared at him. Rom continued, oblivious of his gaze.

‘I went away one night, not long after. I didn’t want to get the innkeeper and his family into trouble. I took some food and a knife. I walked by night, and slept by day in ditches. I managed to get to another town a little further from the Keep where they didn’t know me. I would do dishes, laundry, any work they’d let me do for food. And sometimes I had to sleep under bushes and steal it. Then I moved on further away from the Keep to another village. And so I managed to survive. Once or twice I had a narrow escape. Aldr’s men just missed me on the road, or in a village. But they never caught me.’

He leaned his head back against the tree and closed his eyes. He exhaled slowly. He looked completely spent. After a while, he spoke again. 'The innkeeper also told me what happened to the red-haired boy.' His voice was husky. It had nearly gone. 'He told me Lord Aldr's men had dragged him away from the practice hall still alive. And then they'd cut his throat.' He winced. 'If only I hadn't smiled at him, passing him on the stairwell. If only I hadn't talked to him... if I hadn't provoked lord Aldr and defied him every chance I had, maybe he'd be still alive.' He leaned forward and hid his face in his hands. Yldich shook his head.

'It's not your fault, lad,' he said softly. 'He wasn't killed because of what you did or didn't do. He was killed because your lord Aldr was filled with fear and self-hatred.' He sighed. 'You were just a child. There was nothing you could have done.' Rom's breathing was shallow, his eyes closed behind his hands.

'I'm so tired,' he whispered. His voice sounded faint in his own ears, as if it came from far away. Yldich went over to him without a word. He sat down next to him and put an arm around his shoulders. Rom shuddered, but he didn't pull away. He turned towards Yldich as if involuntary, grasped his tunic with one hand, and hid his face against his shoulder. He wept without making a sound, shaking, and soaked Yldich's tunic with tears. Yldich sat with him against the tree for a long time, and held him silently, until he was still.

Rom disengaged and drew a sleeve across his face. Yldich handed him a piece of cloth without comment. Rom blew his nose, and stared in the distance, avoiding the other man's gaze. Yldich seemed not to notice his embarrassment. He sat back and looked at him for a moment with his clear grey eyes. He nodded and released a sigh.

'We should go and see what Eald is up to,' he said. 'I hope he hasn't taken his own foot off with his pretend sword.' Rom managed a bleak smile. 'Come on.' Yldich helped him up. 'After a tale like this, we need a second breakfast. I wish I'd taken a bottle of mead with me.'

They slowly walked back to camp. Eald came running towards them over the grass, the staff in his hand.

'Rom!' he called. 'You must come and look at my moves. I can take a man's head off like it's nothing.'

Rom smiled at him with an effort. 'Show me.'

It was far past noon. Yldich had left Rom under a tree with Eald after they had eaten. Rom already looked half asleep. Yldich had decided to give travelling a rest for the day. Rom needed some peace after his tale. And he

himself could do with some time to think. He needed to clear his head of disturbing images.

Softly humming low-key he went into the woods. He let his song brush against the low trees and bushes, to increase his awareness of his surroundings. He didn't want to do any dreamwalking. Instead he used his senses to connect to the world around him. He felt his way around with his singing, like the small creatures of the woods use the tiny hairs across their bodies.

He increased the pitch of his song so it rose higher, until it became like a bird of prey's piercing cry, rising up into the air. He let his heart rise with it. He sighed and let the high north winds blow through his awareness, and clear his heart and mind. They brought to him the ghost of perfectly formed snowflakes from the far mountains. Focusing on their clear, crystalline perfection cleared his mind. He breathed out and let all uneasiness drain away into the ground.

Then he started to think. There were aspects of Rom's story that snagged in his mind like catch weeds. They bothered him. He turned them over and over in his mind.

When he returned to the camp site, Rom was fast asleep. Yldich heated some more stew and had Eald wake Rom to eat a few mouthfuls. He drifted away as soon as they left him alone. Yldich talked to Eald for a while until they fell asleep.

He was standing on a cliff at the edge of a great plane. Clouds of a grey that was almost black rose in the north, nearly blotting out the sky that was stained a deep indigo by the last light of the sun. Dark shapes moved on both sides of the vast plane beneath him. He heard the sounds of clashing swords. He felt a nameless horror approach. It coiled over the earth like smoke and smothered everything it met in its path.

Habit made him feel for the hilt of his sword. He found it at his left hip. Its familiar weight reassured him.

He woke to the sound of wood clacking on wood. The sun was already up. The sunlit field seemed strangely peaceful after the dark plane of his dream. Birds twittered in the trees at the edge. The distant rushing of the river was brought to his ears on a slight breeze.

Before he made a move, Yldich cast his awareness about him. He found nothing disturbing. The whole area was quiet and peaceful. He sensed Eald and Rom a few paces away, the only humans near. Yldich was surprised and a little unnerved. He'd never slept through the others waking before. They were

practicing basic fighting moves near the fire. Eald worked hard to keep up with Rom's movements. Yldich heard Rom's clear voice ring across the field.

'Don't stand there holding that staff like a dead fish, Eald! Hold it up properly.'

Eald giggled. Yldich sat up. Rom noticed he was awake. He lowered his staff and met his gaze. There was something in his face Yldich hadn't seen there before. It was reflected in his eyes. It reminded Yldich of fireflies dancing in the dark.

'Good morning to you,' Rom called. He was smiling.

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