

The Chronicles of Wetherid

The Legacy of the Elves

Author

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Publisher

Christian Dölder

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(TM) Logo „The Chronicles of Wetherid Fantasy Series“

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This book is dedicated to my children Patrik Neo, Kristina Karolina and Maria Margareta. Never give up and don't let your imagination be taken away from you!

Development of the Story

Chapter 1

Story pacing 35%

Engagement 39%

Action development 41%

Character development 43%

Chapter 2

Story pacing 54%

Engagement 59%

Action development 63%

Character development 61%

Chapter 3

Story pacing 72%

Engagement 79%

Action development 74%

Character development 69%

Chapter 4

Story pacing 86%

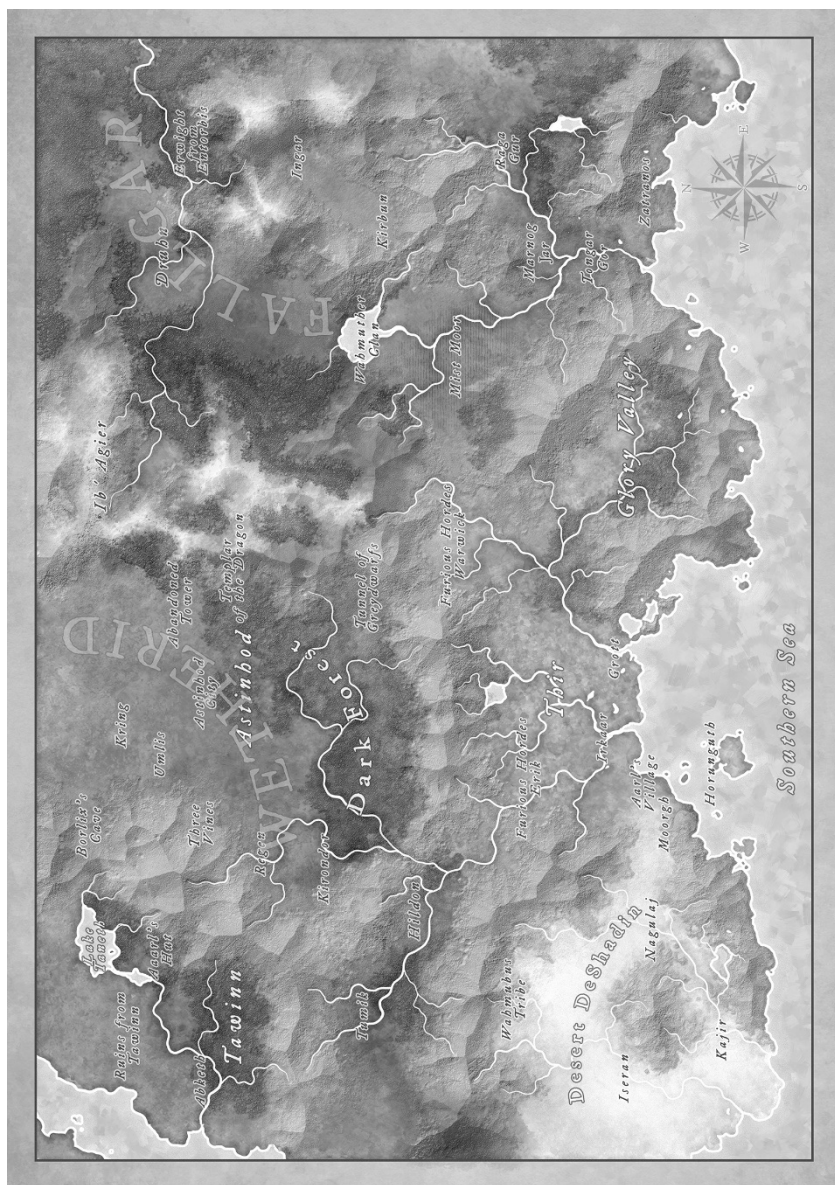
Engagement 91%

Action development 92%

Character development 76%



The peoples, the peoples shall forever stand,
let a new era arise across the land.





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Prologue

In the thirteenth cycle, after the emergence of the landmasses, long before the Ancient Era began, at the time when the flames in the Northlands had turned to ice and the High Lands had formed on the continent of Mendaris, fearsome, mighty dragons ruled Wetherid. They fought fierce battles with the giant, murderous wolves of Fallgar for the right to rule the land tormented by fire and frost. The cycle of life, of rebirth, was broken and neither the dragons of Wetherid nor the wolves of Fallgar could achieve victory after five thousand years of war. A shadow spread over Wetherid and Fallgar, and a thousand years of darkness followed.

One day, however, the elves, the purest and noblest of creatures, brought a light accompanied by glorious sounding horns across the Southern Sea to the darkened continent, to Wetherid. The darkness was illuminated and the scarred wounds of the land healed so new life could emerge.

20th cycle

It was in the twentieth cycle that the heart of Wetherid began to beat again, and its soul was filled with the "Word of the Father". Ehrondim, the king of the Glorious Elves, wrote down the "Word" in a book and when his time had come, he left the book to Wetherid so that a shadow would never again settle over the land and darkness reign. One cycle later, Wetherid had become a cherished garden in which life sprouted and flourished. The creative gifts of the elves had borne fruit. Humans, dwarves and other races began to feast on its abundant, tasty fruits over the following thousand years. However, as in every garden, Wetherid had also become infested with vermin. Lizard creatures, goblins and underwater creatures began to gnaw on some of the roots

unnoticed, laying claim to parts of the paradise garden beds and becoming part of Wetherid.

Towards the end of the twentieth cycle, small settlements of humans began to appear in the north, west, south and southwest of Wetherid. Dwarves began to mine for ore in the mighty mountains to the east, and a strange race of smallfolk who were neither humans, dwarves nor elves settled in the northwest. Soon after, the present-day regions of Wetherid began to emerge and were given their names: "Tawinn" in the northwest, "Astinhod" in the north, "Ib'Agier" in the east, "Thir" in the south, the "Desert of DeShadin" in the southwest and the "Glorious Valley", the home of the elves, in the southeast.

21st cycle

In the twenty-first cycle, the Glorious Elves turned their attention to neighboring Fallgar, sending light into the shadowy darkness. But Fallgar was already populated by creatures of darkness. Orcs, ogres, undead, gray dwarves, mist elves and hundreds of humans, who preferred the shadows to the light, were the new masters of the barren and scarred land. The light of the Glorious Elves was unwelcome, seen as a threat and pushed back with all the power of darkness. Attempts to bring the "Word" to Fallgar were prevented by force of arms. The Glorious Elves had to leave Fallgar to its own devices and thus to the shadows, and turned back to Wetherid, where the Age of the Ancients had begun. Great cities were built and kingdoms arose.

It was the beginning of the age of abundance, prosperity and peace for more than a thousand years.

23rd cycle

In the twenty-third cycle, the inhabitants of Fallgar began to look upon Wetherid with envy and greed. Their dark, poisoned hearts harbored a desire to claim the flourishing land for themselves. Initial attempts to invade Wetherid failed, however. The glaring, burning light and the echoing, aching "Word" put a stop to Fallgar's greed.

Centuries passed.

In an hour of demonic darkness, a child scarred beyond recognition was born in the north of Fallgar, in Druhn, and given the name Rorannis. It was shadow mages who prophesied great deeds for the child and saw in his dark soul a leader who, with their help, would succeed in leading Wetherid back into the shadows.

They were not mistaken. The child grew up to become a fearsome and terrifying ruler. At the age of twenty-six, Rorannis was married to Jehndira, the daughter of Manlatur, the chief servant of the Shadow and the most powerful mage in Fallgar. The blood bond between the people of Fallgar and the Shadow was thus sealed and from the marriage alliance between Rorannis and Jehndira sprang the Entorbis lineage.

It was the beginning of all evil for Wetherid.

Rorannis of Entorbis realized at an early age that the power of Wetherid was based on the Book of the Glorious Elves and that it therefore had to be destroyed - or better still - harnessed. Together with the Shadow Mages of Druhn, under the cover of night, in a magical sphere of darkness, Rorannis of Entorbis traveled to Wetherid, to the Glorious Valley, and stole the book from the son of Ehrondim.

But this act did not go unseen. A circle of mages from Horunguth Island, Guardians of the light and the "Word" who had been granted powerful gifts, stood in the way of the shadow mages.

As in the ancient battle between shadow and light, the opponents clashed.

Rorannis of Entorbis nevertheless managed to escape to the interior of Wetherid, where he hid with the book in an abandoned dragon's lair. Ehrondim's son and a group of elven warriors set off in pursuit. They followed the thief's trail to the Middle Mountains, where the young elf separated from his group and confronted the first of the Entorbis in his hiding place.

The battle between the son of Ehrondim and the ruler of Druhn lasted for many days. In the end, both gave their lives. Neither good nor evil prevailed. The book was lost, the "Word" fell silent and the soul of Wetherid was no longer nourished.

Greed, envy and strife then broke out among the peoples of Wetherid, leading to centuries of war among allies and brothers. It would have been easy for the descendants of Roranni to take over Wetherid, which was almost mutilating itself, had the Glorious Elves and the mages of Horunguth Island not created seven powerful artifacts of light to counteract them.

The "Seed of Life" went to Astinhod. The "Crystal of Seeing" was taken to Tawinn. "The Golden Hammer" was given to the dwarves in Ib'Agier. The "Lute of Peace" went to Kirindor. The "Tablet of Law" was set up in Thir. The "Key of Secrets" went to the Desert of DeShadin and the "Living Glass" remained in the Glorious Valley.

For five hundred years, the seven powerful artifacts of light protected the inhabitants of Wetherid from the Fallgar's attacks, but not from themselves. The seven artifacts were stolen and taken far beyond the borders of the country. Wetherid was almost defenseless as a result. It was only through the efforts of the mages of the Horunguth Island that humans, dwarves, elves and Tawinnians joined forces and drove the gray dwarves, orcs and mist elves that had already invaded Wetherid in the Middle Mountains, back to Fallgar.

Whether it was a coincidence or not, if a group of people had not stumbled across the book by chance in one of the old caves in the Middle Mountains, Wetherid would have faced dark times

again. However, the future of Wetherid was in the hands of the humans. As only a few were able to read the old characters, the "Word" began to whisper softly through Wetherid. Loud enough, however, to be heard by the mages of the Horunguth Island.

There was hope again.

25th cycle

With the silent consent of the Glorious Elves, the book remained with the humans, and the mages of Horunguth Island kept a watchful eye on Ehrondim's legacy. By the beginning of the twenty-fifth cycle, the Word was once again widespread in Wetherid, a little of the former peace had returned.

However, the Entorbis family continued to try to take possession of the book from generation to generation. Therefore, the mages of the Horunguth Island chose a few from the peoples of Wetherid and appointed them "Guardians" to spread the Word and protect the book. The Queen of the Elves from the Glorious Valley bestowed special gifts on the "Guardians" to aid them in their task and made them part of the soul of Wetherid. As per Ehrondim's legacy, they were taught to write history and record all the events to ensure posterity and to accompany the Word that had come to life. Bliss and peace reigned in Wetherid.

Until the day when Tyrindor of Entorbis managed to do what only the forefather of his race had managed to do more than one thousand five hundred years ago. Tyrindor of Entorbis was able to steal the Book of Wetherid and even take it beyond the borders of Wetherid to Fallgar

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The year is 530 in the twenty-sixth cycle. The Book of Wetherid has been in the Entorbis' possession for sixty years now. How long it will be before they see through our ruse is uncertain. But I can already feel Fallgar's shadow. Closer and closer, faster and faster, it is moving in on the border of our land. Peace still reigns, but the peoples are divided, too weak to oppose the threat. We have been robbed of the artifacts of light. Many of the Guardians have left us, the Word threatens to fall silent once more. Should there be another darkness in Wetherid? A sword of destruction wielded by the young, powerful hand of Erwight of Entorbis hovers over our heads, ready to strike. Never before has the enemy been so close to the target. I am on my guard, listening intently to the wind, looking around with a far-sighted eye and keeping my head down. Only a handful! Will that be enough? Is there any hope?

Chapter 1

An unknown petitioner

It was beginning to get dark. He closed the shutters and dimmed the flame of the oil lamp hanging from the ceiling of the small room. He went to the small cupboard next to the bed, took the book that lay on it and sat down with it in a simple little chair, directly under the dusty lamp, where he looked at the cover for some time before he began to read. With each page he carefully read, the images in his memory became clearer. He saw Tawinn, lying in the northwest of Wetherid, enclosed by two adjacent mountain ranges: the high, mighty and barely passable Ice Mountains that stretched from the border with Astinhod in the north to Kirindor in the south, where the high mountain landscape of the Karwarts reached across to the outer border of Wetherid in the west.

In the north-western corner of Tawinn, in a clearing surrounded by old, thick-trunked oaks, tall beeches, thin-branched birches and mighty maples, was the unfortified village of Abketh. Its inhabitants - the Abkether, as they were called by the humans, dwarves and elves - were a hard-working, ambitious and, above all, cheerful and carefree people who felt safe and protected in their valley. In the settlement of no more than one hundred and thirty houses, there was a store, three inns and a house of prayer with a wooden tower topped by a gleaming golden bell. In the village square, there was a deep well made of stone, which served the women of Abketh not only as a source of water but also, as they called it, a center of conversation.

It was a sunny spring day. The sun's rays were reflected from the stained-glass windows, which shimmered red, green and blue, onto the white alderflowers, the yellow striegilia and the splendidly thriving wonneziras that bloomed in the flower troughs in front of

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the windows of the small houses. Everything in the quaint and peaceful village went on as usual.

Many of the Abkether were already hard at work in the small-scale wheat, barley and sunflower fields to the north and south of the clearing. The inhabitants of the village were also going about their daily chores. Klersten, the pot-bellied miller, his gray hair caked with flour dust, was busy pushing a few sacks of flour from the mill to the village bakery in his old handcart. As his white work apron protruded a little too far past his knees, he had to take many small steps to avoid stumbling. It was only thanks to his strong, broad arms that he managed to keep the stubborn handcart in check and prevent it from rolling down the small slope and straight towards Ermis, the white-haired rope maker. He was sitting, bent far forward, on a small bench on his ivy-covered terrace, conscientiously and calmly weaving the rope that the rich farmer Olmis had ordered from him two days ago. Ermis would have been scared to death if Klersten's handcart had smashed against his wooden terrace fence.

Further ahead, not too far from Ermis' house, in front of the door of Bells Inn, the pretty, blonde-haired Mina was sweeping the courtyard with a bristly broom, attentively watching the young Abkether strutting across the village square and showing off their brightly polished short swords. A few tens of steps behind, Werlis, who enjoyed the reputation of a good-for-nothing, was lying in the hammock in front of his house as usual.

Werlis was an Abkether just growing into a young man who didn't think much of work, but still wore strikingly fine shirts made of DeShadin silk and silver jewelry. If you took a closer look at Werlis, you could see that strong shoulders were hidden beneath his long curly blond hair. He certainly didn't lack the strength to work, but rather the will, which he often admitted publicly.

Only three or four stone throws away from Werlis' house, the gray-haired Gwerlit, who was many winters old, had her hut surrounded by a wildly growing herb garden. Gwerlit, said to be the wisest woman in all Abketh, was talking to an unknown man in her herb garden.

"You are lucky you came this week, because I would have made a tincture of all the flowers soon," she said to the stranger, adjusting her old silver-gray gown.

"I thank you for letting me have some of them and you can also be sure of King Grandhold's thanks. Since the queen passed away ten years ago, his daughter has meant everything to him," he said.

The stranger bowed his thanks.

"It's terrible what happened to the girl, and very strange too. It's been more than thirty years since I last heard of a similar illness. I think you know what I'm talking about," said Gwerlit seriously.

He nodded.

"My thoughts and suspicions are not far removed from yours. But I am not yet sure whether it is connected to them. I really don't want to rush to judgment. If it is, then we all know what that could mean. Let's hope for the best, Gwerlit," he replied thoughtfully.

"Some of the signs you've told me about indicate that they might have a hand in this," Gwerlit remarked.

She sighed.

"Tyrindor of Entorbis may be an old man whose strength has waned, but his son, Erwight, is now in the prime of life. If he has come full circle, then it is quite conceivable that he will soon turn his attention to Wetherid, if he has not already done so. But as mentioned before, it's still too early to make that assumption public. I hope Master Drobai's plan will be successful, so that clarity can be brought to this whole strange and ominous affair," said the stranger, asking Gwerlit to keep their conversation to herself.

"Don't worry about it. You can be sure of my silence," she assured him and led him to the spot in the herb garden where four moonflowers grew.

She explained to him, in detail, the conditions under which it was possible to grow the rare and extremely demanding plant and what had to be taken into account when harvesting its flowers.

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The forty-year-old Vrenli, grandson of the scholar Erendir Hogmaunt, who was on his way to the village square and was just maturing into a man, took a few steps towards the wooden fence that surrounded Gwerlit's herb garden. He looked curiously at the sturdy, middle-aged man, three heads taller than him, who was wrapped in a thick, dark green cloak with a hood.

The stranger was wearing worn dark leather trousers and brown knee-high lace-up boots that looked as if he had already taken tens of thousands of steps in. A few thick strands of his long, wavy dark hair, which reached over his shoulders, almost covered his large, dark green eyes. On his back he carried a fire axe, probably from Ib'Agier, which hung on a leather strap next to his dark wood longbow and bark-woven quiver.

"Probably someone from Astinhod," thought Vrenli, noticing the attentive gaze of the tall man that fell on him.

The stranger then gave him a hand signal to come closer, but Vrenli wasn't sure at first whether the wave was meant for him, so he turned around looking for someone else. When the stranger waved to him again, he opened the garden gate and followed the narrow path that had been trodden into the loose, damp earth and past several green bushes, low-growing shrubs and a variety of different herbs to Gwerlit's house.

Vrenli was no more than three steps away from the two when the stranger's dark green eyes lit up for a moment as he stepped toward him.

"A Guardian here in Abketh? As far as I know, Erendir was the only one. But he left us many years ago," thought the stranger, who was very surprised at the encounter.

He could clearly feel the connection between the Abkether and the Book of Wetherid. The two looked at each other wordlessly for a few moments.

"Very strange, why doesn't he reveal himself? Has he not been given the gifts of a Guardian?" the stranger pondered, trying to explore the innermost thoughts of his counterpart.

He concentrated on his senses, attuned them to his feelings and found what he was looking for deep in a hidden corner.

"I greet you," Vrenli, who froze in shock, heard a voice within him.

Petrified, he stood in front of Gwerlit and the stranger, who placed his hand on his shoulder. Vrenli flinched. His thoughts took on a life of their own, spiraled inexorably for a few moments and were shattered by the fear of impending disaster. Frightened, he looked at the tall man leaning down towards him.

"Don't be afraid, friend. My name is Gorathdin, Gorathdin of the Forest. I am on my way on behalf of King Grandhold to ask Gwerlit for the blossoms of a moonflower," sounded the voice in his head.

"Scared? Yes, I'm scared. I thought I heard a voice," Vrenli confessed in a trembling voice.

"What kind of voice? I didn't hear anything," Gwerlit replied, raising her eyebrows in surprise.

She put her hand to her left ear and listened attentively to the wind.

"The voice sounded inside me," explained Vrenli, pointing to himself.

Gwerlit shook her head.

"You must have been mistaken, my boy. You were probably just frightened by Gorathdin's strange appearance. It's been a long time since someone from outside came to us. Your imagination must have played tricks on you," she reassured him with her gentle voice and stroked his cheek.

Gwerlit felt that there was a connection between him and Gorathdin, and since she knew about Vrenli's grandfather, Erendir, she concluded that the meeting with Gorathdin awakened something dormant in Vrenli. She had known for a long time that it would happen one day. She didn't have a clear idea, but she wished that Vrenli had a little more time before he found out what his destiny was.

Vrenli looked puzzled at Gorathdin.

"She's right. He does look strange. But I'm sure I heard the voice," he mused, lost in thought.

Doubts arose in his mind.

"I'm not going to get sick, am I?" he murmured quietly, touching his forehead.

"Are you not feeling well?" asked Gwerlit worriedly.

"I'm not sure. Maybe I should go home and lie down for a while," Vrenli replied hesitantly.

Gwerlit broke a small twig from a bush and handed it to Vrenli.

"What should I do with it?" asked Vrenli, looking skeptically at the yellowish leaves of the branch.

"I wouldn't be surprised if you got sick. It's a sunny day, but it's still spring and you're out without a cloak. Put three or four leaves in hot water and drink it in small sips, then try to get some sleep and when you feel better, come over again. Who knows when you'll next have the chance to talk to someone from outside," Gwerlit said with a smile and then turned to Gorathdin.

Vrenli said goodbye to them and, thinking about the voice, went back home.

"It may seem strange what I am about to ask you to do," Gorathdin began and paused for a moment.

"I want Vrenli to travel with me to Astinhod and I need your help, Gwerlit. Unfortunately, I can't tell you why," he added.

Gwerlit closed her eyes for a moment and went into herself.

"No explanation is necessary, Gorathdin of the Forest. I think I know what's going on. I will help you, even if I wish Vrenli had had more time," she finally replied.

Gorathdin could not hide his surprise.

"I didn't know you knew about this. So, it's important that we don't tell him about his task. I want him to find out as much as possible for himself. In Astinhod, Master Drobald will tell Vrenli about everything because it seems that he doesn't know about his purpose, has suppressed it or forgotten it," he told Gwerlit, who

noded and followed by Gorathdin, walked back to the house, where he sat down on the steps in front of the entrance and gazed thoughtfully at the cloudless sky.

Gorathdin watched a buzzard circling over the fields outside the village, looking for prey.

"When the circle closes, a shadow will spread across the land and then Wetherid will face dark times," he mused, imitating the bird's call to greet it.

Gwerlit was startled and the jug of water she was about to hand to Gorathdin almost fell out of her hand.

"Forgive me! I didn't mean to frighten you. I was thinking and just greeting a friend," Gorathdin apologized to Gwerlit and pointed to the circling buzzard with his hand.

Gwerlit smiled and handed Gorathdin the jug. He drank and then placed it next to him on the stairs. Gwerlit went into the house and returned a little later with a small, hemp-colored sack.

She sat down on the small bench next to the front steps. She opened the sack and took out a few wonderfully fragrant leaves.

"You have to carefully break off the small green stems and then remove the thin, yellow threads that run through the middle of the leaf," she explained to Gorathdin and handed him a handful of the leaves.

Smiling gently, Gorathdin took them and began to clean the leaves as Gwerlit had explained.

It was after midday when Vrenli got up from the small wooden bench on his terrace. He was already feeling better, although he was still not sure about the voice he had heard. He decided to go back to Gwerlit.

Once there, he knocked on the door, which opened just a moment later.

"Come in, Vrenli. We're having dinner. Are you hungry?" asked Gwerlit, leading the way into the living room.

"If there's enough. I'm a little hungry," Vrenli replied and greeted Gorathdin, who, being too tall and heavy for the small chairs, chose to sit on a chest. Vrenli then sat down at the table.

Gwerlit brought an empty plate and small wooden spoon and sat down opposite them.

"Grab it!" she urged Vrenli.

Vrenli nodded, took a piece of bread and scooped some of the vegetable stew onto his plate with the wooden ladle.

While they ate, Gorathdin began to talk about the city of Astinhod and as he was the only visitor from outside for more than twenty-five years, Gwerlit and Vrenli listened to him attentively. Vrenli was particularly eager to learn and wanted to know everything down to the smallest detail. When Gorathdin had finished his story about the most important events of recent years, he looked at Gwerlit. She nodded slightly and put her hands together.

"You have to listen to me carefully now, Vrenli," Gwerlit began.

She paused for a moment.

"I ask you to accompany Gorathdin to Astinhod," she told him.

Surprise reflected in Vrenli's wide-open eyes.

"I need you to deliver an important message from me to Master Drobai, and I think Gorathdin could use some help on his way back," she said to him.

Vrenli's mouth fell open, and he raised his eyebrows.

"Gwerlit is right. It is important that the blossoms of the moonflower are brought to Astinhod as soon as possible, and I ask you to accompany me there in two days' time, on the full moon, when its buds begin to bloom," Gorathdin added.

"I don't understand...?" Vrenli stuttered and frowned.

"Why me of all people? I'm not the right person for such a responsible task. I haven't even passed the final test yet and then you're demanding that I travel to Astinhod?" Vrenli pressed.

He sighed.

"You misunderstand something, my boy. I'm not demanding that you travel to Astinhod, I'm asking you to. Just like Gorathdin," Gwerlit said gently.

Vrenli thought about it.

"What's with the flowers?" he asked, turning his gaze to Gorathdin.

"I'll tell you about it on our way to Astinhod," he promised.

Vrenli looked disappointedly at Gorathdin because of the short, unexplained answer. He really didn't feel like the right person to fulfill their request. He had doubts and there was also fear. It was not fear of Gorathdin or of the journey to Astinhod. No. It was fear of something he could not describe. Fear that reached far back into his childhood.

"Does the book have anything to do with it?" asked Vrenli, surprised and amazed that he was asking himself this question.

In all the years following the death of his father, and the death of his grandfather shortly afterwards, he had never thought about the book until today and had forgotten everything that had been read to him from it. A shiver ran down his spine. Images from his childhood struck him like flashes of lightning in quick succession. He tried to stop the flood of images that made little sense and only showed fractions of moments from his past. He took a deep breath and composed himself.

Gwerlit stood up and took something from the small chest of drawers next to the table. She took a step towards Vrenli and handed him a small leather pouch. Vrenli opened it and pulled out a finely crafted silver chain with a walnut-sized crystal attached to it.

"The Oracle of Tawinn," Vrenli realized in amazement.

"I want you to take it. It has been in my family for generations, and it has not only served me, but all Abketh, well. It is time for it to be passed on, just as it was handed down to me by my ancestors," said Gwerlit.

"I can't accept that, Gwerlit", Vrenli refused.

"It's a gift from the ancients, take it," said Gwerlit and closed Vrenli's hand around the small leather pouch.

Vrenli lifted the necklace in front of him and looked at the crystal.

"How does it work?" he asked curiously.

"An oracle does not work. An oracle sees! It sees after you ask it what you want to see. Most of the time," Gwerlit's face became serious.

Vrenli's gaze was still fixed on the small crystal that lay cold in his hand.

"I think it will be best if Werlis accompanies you," Gwerlit surprisingly suggested.

Vrenli looked up, startled.

"You've been good friends since you were children. He will certainly accompany you if you ask him to," said Gwerlit.

She glanced at Gorathdin, who nodded in agreement.

"What's Werlis got to do with it?" Vrenli wanted to know.

"Werlis, well, he's your friend, and friends are there to help each other, right?" Gwerlit continued.

Vrenli put the bag away and nodded.

"But I'm not sure if he would actually come with me. I'm not even sure whether I can comply with your request," he admitted hesitantly.

"Can't you two ask someone else to do it?" asked Vrenli.

Gwerlit and Gorathdin were silent for a moment and looked at each other questioningly.

"I want to be honest with you, Vrenli. It's not just about you accompanying me on my journey back and delivering a message from Gwerlit to Master Drobai, it's also about you. But that's all I can tell you about that. Master Drobai will have answers for you," Gorathdin finally revealed.

"About me?" Vrenli asked himself, puzzled, and looked thoughtfully into Gorathdin's eyes, to which he was strangely drawn.

The dark green glow did not cause him any discomfort, on the contrary, he felt warmed inside. Vrenli couldn't explain to himself why that look seemed so familiar. But leaving Abketh and traveling to Astinhod with Gorathdin was not an encouraging thought.

"I really don't know if I'm ready to leave Abketh. I ask for your patience. Before I make a final decision, I'd like to sleep on it," Vrenli announced and stood up from the table.

"Of course, my boy, do that. We really don't want to rush you. I can understand that you have a lot of questions now, but you can only answer most of them yourself," said Gwerlit gently.

"I'll be on my way back in two days, and I'd be delighted if you decided to come with me," Gorathdin said and held out his hand.

Unanswered questions buzzed in Vrenli's head, but he first had to think about what he had experienced and heard before he would demand further answers from them. He said goodbye to them and went to Klersten, the miller, to buy the bag of flour he had left his house for that morning.

"This Gorathdin is very strange. He looks so unusual and yet I feel as if I know him. Maybe grandfather told me something about him? But can it really be that I've forgotten? I should remember his eyes," he thought as he marched towards the village well.

Vrenli stopped for a moment and looked over the low edge down into the darkness. He picked up a small stone from the ground and threw it down into the depths. It took two or three moments before he heard a thud.

"I feel more or less the same as the stone. As if Gwerlit and Gorathdin were throwing me into cold water. I really don't want to refuse their request, but such a long journey certainly harbors many dangers. If I remember grandfather's directions correctly, the road to Astinhod leads through dense forests, wide valleys, over high mountains and deep lakes, and wind, rain, snow and ice will

accompany us on our way. I don't think I'm the right person for this," he mused.

Vrenli continued in the direction of Bell's Inn, where Mina was leaning against the windowsill and stroking her long, wavy blonde hair. When she saw Vrenli, she waved to him with a friendly smile.

"Hello Vrenli. It's a beautiful day today. Isn't it?" she called from afar.

"Greetings Mina. After the winter we've had, it really was time for some warm rays of sunshine. I can hardly wait for summer to finally arrive," replied Vrenli.

Vrenli gave her a smile and was just about to move on when Mina asked where Werlis was.

"Where will he be at this time of night? He's probably still asleep," replied Vrenli with a grin.

"If you see him, give him my regards!" she called after him and smiled sheepishly.

"Does Werlis know that she likes him? He thinks that the girls in the village don't like him. But that's not true. He's brave, strong, a bit rash with his decisions, but he has a good heart. The general opinion of him in the village isn't the best, but that's only because he's wealthy and therefore prefers to sleep rather than work hard," Vrenli thought to himself as he walked towards the mill.

"Come to think of it, Gwerlit is right. If Werlis would accompany me, then I would dare. Although, what Gorathdin said to me sounded very strange. I mean, what does it mean, it doesn't just have to do with his journey and Gwerlit's message for Master Drobol?" he asked himself, knocking on the heavy door of the mill.

Nobody opened the door.

It was late afternoon and Klersten was already in the Guesthouse zur Glocke, washing down the dust of his work with a mug of mead.

"Such bad luck. He's not here," Vrenli said loudly and walked back in the direction of Werlis' house.

"Werlis, wake up! I have something important to tell you," shouted Vrenli from afar.

Werlis shot up from his hammock.

"Are the wolves in the village? Where's my sword?" Werlis exclaimed excitedly.

He looked around in panic.

"There are no wolves in the village, you can calm down. But I must tell you something," Vrenli said to him.

Vrenli put his hand on Werlis' shoulder to reassure him.

"If it's not the wolves, then I wonder what's so important that you're waking me up from my well-earned sleep?" Werlis asked grumpily and lay back in the hammock.

"Oh Werlis, you haven't really earned any sleep for a long time. You haven't done any regular work since your father died and left you all those possessions," Vrenli teased him.

"You are only plagued by envy. Besides, I let every inhabitant of Abketh share in my inheritance. Even crazy old Ingwis," Werlis defended himself.

"I know, I know. That shouldn't be a reproach. Let's not bicker. There are more important things for us to do," Vrenli placated.

"What do you mean by that? Is it already time for the final test? I thought it was tomorrow," asked Werlis.

Werlis, just like Vrenli and all other young Abkether who reached the age of forty, had to learn how to use the short sword, sling and bow and arrow over several months with the Abketh masters of arms and then pass three tests. When the opponents were drawn by lot, it was decided that Vrenli and Werlis would have to fight with the short sword. Only one of them would emerge victorious. The final test, as the Abkether called it, was a village event and was always associated with a festival that lasted several days.

"No, that's tomorrow. So, you have one more day to improve your technique," said Vrenli with a grin.

"My technique doesn't need to be improved. You know I'm the stronger one between us. So, admit defeat straight away and you'll save yourself the embarrassment of fighting me," Werlis countered.

"You're an incorrigible braggart, Werlis. Mere strength is not always enough. In battle, it's not just strength that counts, but also experience, mental superiority, speed and, above all, the element of surprise," replied Vrenli, drawing his short sword and cutting the line of the hammock with a single blow.

Werlis fell to the ground with a loud cry.

"Ow! Are you crazy, that was unfair, I wasn't prepared for that," protested Werlis grimacing.

He rubbed his aching backside.

Vrenli grinned.

"Was that proof enough?" he asked with a laugh and put his sword back in its sheath.

"Yes, yes. I understand what you mean," replied Werlis grumpily.

"Come on, let's go to my place. I must tell you what happened at Gwerlit's earlier," Vrenli urged him.

Werlis nodded and followed Vrenli to his house.

"Now let's talk, what's new?" urged Werlis, who still had his hand on his backside.

"Wait until we get to my house. Patience, my friend," replied Vrenli.

He grinned, although he didn't really feel like it.

Their path led them past the village fountain, where a few women who had lined up to fetch water were chatting like quacking ducks. Among them was Vrenli's corpulent Aunt Lurie, who lived just two houses away. As soon as she saw Vrenli, she took a step towards him.

"You should be helping your mother in the fields rather than wandering around the village with that good-for-nothing. You've

certainly got nothing but nonsense on your mind again. Like last week, when you stole your cousin Gerieth's washing from the line and then hid it in farmer Zerwig's hayloft. By the way, I changed my mind and didn't tell your mother about it," she said to the two of them and began one of her long, drawn-out lectures.

Vrenli and Werlis, to whom her words were nothing but chatter, let her go without a word, wished her a pleasant day and then walked on, amidst the laughter of the young girls standing by the fountain.

A little later, they came across old Ingwis, who stepped out of his old, half-ruined hut. Stooped by age, he walked very slowly, using a small, thin stick. He held a bucket in his left hand as he walked towards them.

"In the twentieth cycle, a child was born. It will find the stolen goods," the old man called to the two and went to the women at the village well, where he stood in line to fill his bucket with water.

"What does that mean?" asked Werlis after they had moved on.

"It's one of his fantasies. Ever since he was with the mages on Horunguth Island more than sixty years ago, for reasons no one knows, he has only spoken of a youngling and a father of the world. At least that's what my grandfather told me. He's a poor old man and you shouldn't pay any attention to his babble," replied Vrenli, who opened the door to his house and entered, followed by Werlis.

Before they sat down, Vrenli closed the shutters and lit a candle, which he placed in the middle of the heavy, round oak table.

"Can you finally explain to me what all this strange behavior is about?" asked Werlis and sat down.

He let his eyes glide through the untidy room filled with hundreds of strange things. The combination of disorder, dust, the strange smell and the dim light of the candle, which cast a faint shadow over all the pots, jars, glass tubes, the many books and the strange objects piled up on the floor, made him feel uneasy. Werlis looked at the menacing-looking wooden figure of a Gooter standing on the mantelpiece, its two glittering emerald green eyes

shining in the candlelight surrounded the wooden figure with a mysterious aura.

"Every time I look at this hideous thing it sends shivers down my spine," complained Werlis.

"And I tell you every time that there haven't been any Gooters for a long time," said Vrenli, grinning.

"I know, but today I feel as if his gaze is piercing me," Werlis moaned.

He turned his gaze away from the wooden figure.

"Listen, Werlis. My grandfather told me that long before the peoples we know settled in Wetherid, the wolves and dragons battled for millennia over the claim to rule the land. The dragons, who used destructive fire and ice magic as weapons against the huge, murderous wolves, who outnumbered them, inexorably destroyed all life. Powerful beings sent down to Wetherid from another world put an end to the cruel battles and banished the combatants to live out their existence in one body from then on. This creature, which was a mixture of dragon and wolf, was called Gooter," Vrenli told his attentive friend.

Werlis let his eyes continue to glide around the room.

"I don't know how many times I've asked you, but how can you live in this house, I couldn't get a wink of sleep in here," said Werlis, pointing to the various objects in the room.

"My grandfather left me this house. It's messy, that's true, and some things may seem strange, but that's nothing to be afraid of. I've tried to explain that to you so many times, Werlis. Grandfather always had guests from all parts of Wetherid. Each of his guests brought him gifts and over the years the house filled up with them. That cloak hanging on the wall next to the door, for example, was given to him by a guest from the Dark Forest. Or that chalice on the shelf next to the stove," said Vrenli, pointing to the small, silver, richly decorated chalice. "Grandfather was given it by a sheikh from the Desert of DeShadin," he added.

Vrenli looked at the multitude of objects in the room.

"There are so many more here, but unfortunately I don't know what purpose they all serve," said Vrenli and sighed.

"As a child, my grandfather forbade me to play with the presents he received. He said that they weren't toys, but dangerous weapons or magical objects and they didn't belong in children's hands," he said, turning his gaze to the small candle on the table in front of him.

He watched the faintly burning orange-blue flame in silence.

Vrenli remembered.

He was still a small child when the son of Tyrindor, Erwright of Entorbis, the dreaded, fear-spreading Lord Druhns from Fallgar, tried to put an end to what his forefathers had started hundreds of years ago. For reasons that were initially inexplicable, more than a hundred knights from allied Astinhod arrived in Tawinn. They had suffered heavy losses on their arduous and dangerous journey over the Pass of the Ice Mountains and were very weak. They stayed at Lake Taneth for two days until they were joined by a group of ogres, several dozen orcs and some black-clad knights of Entorbis.

A group of merchants from Abketh on their way to Astinhod, who happened to witness this strange gathering, were more than perplexed when they saw the knights from allied Astinhod crossing the lake together with their enemies from Fallgar.

The merchants immediately returned to Abketh with the news and informed the village council of their strange observation. The three old men conferred and concluded that it was very likely that Astinhod had joined forces with the ruler from the east. This conclusion hit the inhabitants of Abketh with full force.

Panic broke out.

A long-forgotten fear was reawakened. Some left the village, packing up their possessions, which were rather modest, and sought shelter in the northern forests. Others buried their gold coins, jewelry and other possessions and hid with their families in the cellars of their houses. Many, however, prepared themselves for an imminent battle against the tall humans and orcs and the giant ogres, although they knew that they would not be able to

stand up to the superior forces for long without help. Thanks to a lucky coincidence - some claimed that things had not gone according to plan - a violent, destructive storm that stirred up the waters of Lake Taneth drowned most of the enemy as they were crossing on their rafts.

However, the less than two hundred survivors did not let this stop them and invaded Abketh just a few days later. Vrenli knew from stories, as he had not witnessed the attack himself but was hiding with his mother and grandfather, that his father, Hallweg, had played a considerable part in driving the enemy away before he had fallen in battle.

It turned out some time later that the Knights of Astinhod had acted against their will. They were under the magical influence of the shadow mages allied with Tyrindor of Entorbis and were told to search for something believed to be in Abketh.

"I'd love to know what grandfather's journey of several months, which he set off on just a few days after the raid from Abketh, was all about," thought Vrenli.

He thought he remembered that no one had read the book to him since. When his grandfather returned from his journey, which had taken him all over Wetherid, seriously ill, he no longer had the strength to do so. Vrenli remembered the balmy summer evening when he sat with him on the little bench on the front terrace and asked him to recount some of the adventures he had experienced on his journey.

"I haven't experienced any adventures. Adventures are situations that you are not prepared for. I was just part of a story that had already been written. One day, you too will be immersed in this story. You will find out that there are actually no new situations or tasks to fulfill in life. Everything is part of the story, and you will know this story. Deep down, you will know what you have to do, whatever comes your way," Vrenli heard his grandfather's voice ringing in his memory.

That evening was now more than twenty-five years ago. The words were long forgotten, but today's meeting with Gorathdin

reminded him of the book of his grandfather and of some of the things he had said and told him.

Werlis was puzzled by Vrenli's prolonged silence and began to get bored. He began to rock his chair back and forth.

"I absolutely have to find it!" Vrenli suddenly exclaimed, causing Werlis to almost fall over in shock.

"What do you need to find?" asked Werlis, who was only just able to hold on to the tabletop.

His question brought Vrenli back to the here and now.

"My grandfather's book," explained Vrenli.

"Is that why you're keeping quiet? Because of a book?" asked Werlis, shaking his head.

"Yes. It must be here, somewhere in the house," Vrenli replied half-absentmindedly and was about to get up from the table when Werlis held him back.

"Don't you think it's time for you to explain to me why we're sitting here in broad daylight with the shutters closed by the light of a candle?" asked Werlis.

Vrenli sat down again.

"Forgive me. I was just thinking about something. I'd completely forgotten why we were here," Vrenli smiled sheepishly, but his smile was short-lived. He became nervous, got up from the table briefly, went to the window and made sure that the shutters were well closed.

"You have to keep what I'm about to tell you to yourself. Promise me that, Werlis, even if it sounds strange," Vrenli's expression became serious.

"All right, I promise, but now tell me," demanded Werlis. His impatience grew to its limit.

"I don't want people in the village to think I'm crazy, but I heard a voice within me," said Vrenli quietly.

Werlis looked at him questioningly.

"You hear voices? That can't mean anything good," Werlis remarked mockingly.

Vrenli shook his head.

"Not voices. I heard a voice. Before I woke you up, I was on my way to Klersten to buy a bag of flour. When I passed Gwerlit in the herb garden, I saw a stranger standing next to her," he told Werlis and sat down at the table again.

"He waved to me and when I walked over to him and looked into his dark green eyes, which lit up briefly, I heard a voice within me," he continued.

Werlis gasped once.

"At first I thought I was having a daydream or that I was ill, but when he grabbed my shoulder and looked deep into my eyes again, I had a feeling of familiarity. As if I knew that look. I remembered long-forgotten moments from my childhood. I find it difficult to describe. I saw the book in front of me that my grandfather used to read to me in the evenings. I don't even know why I thought about it at that moment, but it has stayed with me ever since.

"I have to find it, Werlis! I think there's a connection between the voice I heard and grandfather's book," Vrenli concluded, looking around the room for a moment.

"Then I should wish you good luck with your search. With all the clutter and the hundreds of things, it won't be easy to find," Werlis replied and grinned.

For him, it was just a book and he didn't understand Vrenli's excitement about it.

"Gorathdin, as the stranger calls himself, asked me for help," Vrenli continued.

"Help with what?" asked Werlis.

"To bring the blossoms of the moonflower to Astinhod. He told me that this was important and that he was traveling on the orders of King Grandhold," Vrenli replied, looking thoughtfully at Werlis.

"You're not actually going on such a long and dangerous journey with this Gorathdin. You don't even know him, Vrenli. I

beg you to reconsider," appealed Werlis, looking deep into Vrenli's eyes.

"That's not all. Gwerlit also asked me to accompany Gorathdin. She wants me to deliver an urgent message for her to a mage called Master Drobol," Vrenli added.

He groaned.

"A mage?" Werlis asked in astonishment.

"Yes, one of the mages on Horunguth Island," confirmed Vrenli.

Both were silent for a moment.

"If I decided to comply with her request, would you accompany me to Astinhod, Werlis?" Vrenli asked hesitantly.

"You don't really think I'd risk my life for someone from outside who I've never seen before. Besides, how much help can we both be to him and why doesn't Gwerlit just give him the message for the mage?" Werlis replied, shaking his head.

"Two half-men from the small people of the Abketh, following a stranger to Astinhod. You can't be serious, Vrenli," Werlis added, puzzled.

"I don't feel comfortable with the whole thing myself. If I decide to accompany Gorathdin, I'll have to leave in two days' time. I don't know if I can muster the courage. Gorathdin told me that this journey also has to do with me. I don't know what that means myself. He kept a mysterious silence about it. But something unknown inside me is urging me to go away with him," Vrenli said sadly.

Werlis couldn't help feeling annoyed. He didn't understand why Gwerlit and someone from outside wanted to impose such a burden on his best friend.

"Oh, don't listen to me, Werlis. I can understand why you wouldn't come with me. Don't worry about it. Let's talk about it again tomorrow. After the final test. I'm going to look for the book now, and I still have to tell mother about all this. Oh, that will be something. Just to think what all the relatives and especially my

Aunt Lurie will say when I leave for Astinhod. The Loffers have always been a dramatic family. I hope it won't affect mother that much," Vrenli mused, resting his head in the hand of his left, bent arm.

"You're right. You should sleep on it again. I'll go to Gwerlit and ask her what she's thinking sending you to Astinhod with this Gorathdin. Maybe I'll meet this troublemaker then," Werlis said firmly.

Vrenli tried to dissuade Werlis from this plan, but he was unsuccessful. Werlis said goodbye and let the door slam behind him.

"Oh, Werlis!" moaned Vrenli, who was exhausted from the eventful day.

"Sometimes he really is stubborn," he thought, looking around the room.

"It must be here somewhere. Maybe it's in one of my grandfather's chests. There was a smaller, elaborate one with silver fittings where he kept all the parchment scrolls that he made such a secret of. It could well be that the book is in there," Vrenli said aloud to himself.

Vrenli then began to rummage in a corner among a pile of books, boxes and items of clothing. He quickly realized that it would not be so easy to find this small chest among all the household goods. He lay down for a moment on the narrow wooden bench next to the stove to think about what Gwerlit and Gorathdin had told him. Only a few thoughts later, he was overcome by tiredness and fell fast asleep.

Vrenli's dream

In his dream, Vrenli found himself as a small child in a summer meadow covered with colorful flowers and tall grasses. He was lying in his father's arms under a huge maple tree that was several hundred years old and provided shade. Deer and rabbits jumped past them happily, without any shyness. Birds flew over their heads

and sang beautiful songs over the valleys and mountains of Tawinn. It was midday, the sun was at its highest point and its warm, golden rays fell on the old, mighty tree, which began to speak.

"You must take good care of your son, Hallweg. Teach him mental superiority and speed in battle, for only then will he be able to hold his own against opponents two or more heads taller. Teach him, as your father taught you, how to use magical objects and initiate him into the secret of the book," said the tree in a deep, creaky, wooden voice.

"I will teach him everything as it is written," Hallweg replied.

"The course of events can change, but what is written does not. Remember, you don't always have to read a book from beginning to end. That's just a bad habit of the peoples of Wetherid. You can read a book from the middle to the end, or to the beginning, or on a random page of your choice, as you please. Don't always rely on a certain order in life. Everything can change at any time, that's the confusing thing for you because you're not used to it. You live your life according to a preconceived plan. At least that's what you think, but you'll see. You will see. Make the most of the time," said the creaking voice.

The leaves of the maple tree rustled in the rising wind. The next moment Vrenli was in his parents' house, sitting at the table with his father and mother and enjoying supper. Then the village bells suddenly began to ring, urgently and alarmingly. Shouts rang in from the village square outside.

"Fire, fire!" voices shouted in confusion.

The clanging of blades hitting each other and a whole orchestra of arrows whistling through the air could be heard.

"They've entered the village!" Hallweg shouted, jumping up from his chair and running to his weapons. He took them, put his hands firmly around the hilt of his short sword and opened the door.

"Go into the cellar and follow the tunnel to grandfather's house!" he shouted to them and then stormed out into the flaming village, shouting battle cries and readying his short sword.

He was just about to run towards the burning hut opposite to help his friends put out the fire that had broken out on the shingle-covered roof, when a shadow two heads taller than him, screaming loudly, pounced and threw him to the ground. The sharp blade of a sword gleamed in the light of the flames as it hurtled towards his head. At the last moment, he rolled to the side to avoid the fierce blow. Just as the large shadow was about to strike another blow, Hallweg plunged his short sword into its loins. Blood flowed slowly over his blade. The attacker groaned and slumped to the ground.

Hallweg jumped to his feet, his gaze darting hastily through the chaos. About two hundred heavily armed knights and a handful of ogres had invaded the village and set it on fire. They killed anyone who stood in their way. Men, women, children and old people. They searched every house and every hut. Hallweg stopped for a moment, wondering whether he should help his friends put out the fire or throw himself at the attackers, when he heard a loud voice behind him.

"Hallweg, get over here quickly!" the voice called from the mill.

When he turned around, he saw Molekk, the miller's burly son, gesticulating angrily with both hands.

"Five of them have just gone in here. Quick, let's barricade the door," Molekk suggested.

Hallweg nodded and followed him with quick steps to the adjacent barn, from where they pushed an old, heavy cart towards the door of the mill.

"That's it. They can't get out of there. There's only one window and it's at the top," said Molekk, wiping his forehead, taking a deep breath and pointing to the roof of the mill with a sweaty hand.

Cries of despair wafted over from one of the burning houses and made the men shudder. Three of the attackers, who were trying to get an old man to talk, had placed his trembling right hand

on a wooden stake and one of them was holding the sharp blade of his sword over it threateningly. But before the old man could answer their question, Hallweg shot two arrows at them in succession. They pierced the lightly armored breastplates engraved with the Astinhod crest and dug deep into their guts through the flesh of their backs. The two victims cried out in pain, screamed and writhed, spat blood and finally fell to the ground dead.

The still-living man flinched, drew his sword and was about to bring it down on the old man's head when the projectile from Molekk's slingshot struck him fatally in the head with full force. The old man looked at his rescuers, shouted his thanks to them and hastily took cover behind the bushy thorn hedge next to his house.

"Back to the mill, Molekk. I have an idea!" Hallweg shouted to drown out the loud sounds of fighting and screaming.

Molekk followed him and when they arrived at the mill, Hallweg explained his plan.

"Get your bow and bring as many arrows as you can find. Come back to me afterwards. We'll let the mill's spinning blades pull us up to the roof. From there we will have a good view of the whole village," Hallweg explained to Molekk.

He nodded and immediately set off for the adjoining house, from which he returned a short time later with his short bow and two full quivers. Both were now standing in front of the old mill. Hallweg grabbed a passing wing with both hands, let himself be pulled all the way up and jumped onto the shingle-covered roof.

He was just about to shout to Molekk to hurry up when a hideous thing several heads taller and spreading an acrid stench moved out of the darkness towards the miller's son.

A club, almost the size of an Abkether, was swung towards Molekk's head by the powerful hand of an ogre that Hallweg could recognize in the light of the flames.

"Duck!" shouted Hallweg from the roof of the mill.

Molekk reacted with presence of mind and was able to dodge the ugly figure's clubbing blow at the last moment. The ogre

immediately lunged for another blow, but two of Hallweg's arrows, which he had fired at the thick-skinned, grunting ogre from the roof of the mill, pierced the many-veined, thin skin on its neck. Squealing and grunting loudly, the heavy mountain of flesh took two steps to the right, began to stagger and finally toppled over. The ground shook.

"You see, you have a good view from up here. Now hurry up!" Hallweg called down.

Molekk stood shocked in front of the passing wings of the mill wheel and looked up at the roof.

"Thank you!" Molekk called back. He reached for a wing and was slowly pulled upwards by it.

Once on the roof, they could now, back-to-back, in their position overlooking everything and under the cover of night, shoot their arrows at the attackers, who were easily recognizable by the light of the flames and the burning houses and huts. When they had killed more than a dozen and the rest of the attackers had been driven off by the three hundred armed Abkether defending the village, Hallweg felt a cold, stabbing pain in his back. His senses began to fade, his eyes bugged out, his lungs inflated, blood began to gush from his mouth and finally he slumped down. One of the people trapped in the mill had managed to climb out of the window and onto the roof. He crept up behind them and plunged his sword into Hallweg's back.

Drenched in sweat, Vrenli woke up briefly, tossed and turned a few times and then fell asleep again.

He now saw himself standing with his mother and grandfather at his father's grave. The eldest member of the village council was giving a speech to the assembled villagers.

"He sacrificed his life for the good of us all. Through his courage and his arrows, many of the attackers were killed. May the Father receive him with joy," the old man chanted, stretching his open hands to the sky.

The Chronicles of Wetherid

Vrenli's mother burst into tears and was taken into Hallweg's father's arms for comfort.

"He lives on in Vrenli," he said to her and then moved away from the mourners.

A little later, he returned with a scroll of parchment in his right hand and a leather traveling bag hanging around his shoulder.

After a few indefinable images and sounds, Vrenli slipped further into another dream. He was sitting in the middle of a circle of women dressed in silk, shiny white tunics. They were singing a song that was unfamiliar to him.

Once the Father created the peoples of the world,
ended the reign of wolves and dragons unfurled. He then
wrote the book of books,
entrusted it to his youth, by his looks.

The peoples, the peoples shall forever stand,
let a new era arise across the land.

The young man began to read the tome,
unaware of how time had flown. He walked by night the path
ahead,
recalling the father's words he'd been fed.

The peoples, the peoples shall forever stand,
let a new era arise across the land.

He met a shadow man on the way,
who cast a mighty spell that day.
The book was then taken away from him,
whereupon the young man's search began, grim.

The Legacy of the Elves

The peoples, the peoples shall forever stand,
let a new era arise across the land.

The youth sought the book in the valley deep,
as a thunderous battle cry did sweep.
Bodies of the dead scattered around, evil had come to the
Glorious Ground.

The peoples, the peoples shall forever stand,
let a new era arise across the land.

Warm rays of sunlight shone through the small gaps in the closed shutters, tickling Vrenli's nose. He woke up and when he heard a rooster's morning wake-up call, he was surprised that he had slept from yesterday afternoon until this morning. He got up from the wooden bench. The melody of the song he had heard in his dream was still in his ears. He opened the window to let the morning in. He took a deep breath and watched as a dog chased after a cat, which eventually fled up a tree. Klersten, the miller, was already on his way to Bendris, the baker, with his handcart full of flour, who used it to bake the Abkether's delicious flatbread. Vrenli went to the wash basin next to his closet and washed the exhausting dreams from his eyes. When he heard the creaking sound of the front door opening, he turned around and saw Werlis standing in the middle of the room with a basket filled with fresh bread and eggs.

"Well rested, Vrenli?" asked Werlis.

"Occasionally you could knock before you enter my house," Vrenli replied somewhat grumpily.

"You must have had a rough night?" asked Werlis, putting the basket on the table.

"After a night like that, you're glad when you wake up again. I'm telling you, I had dreams, terrible. But how come you're already

awake? You're usually always the last to wake up," said Vrenli and managed to wring a grin out of his face.

"I thought you'd be happy if we had breakfast together before we face the final test. Besides, I have something to tell you," replied Werlis.

He sat down at the table.

"Then get started without me. I'll just put a kettle of water on quickly," said Vrenli and went to the stove.

He lit a fire while Werlis was already starting to peck at both ends of the eggs he had brought with him.

He then placed them on a plate and broke the bread into bite-sized pieces.

"What I wanted to tell you, Vrenli. Are you listening to me?" asked Werlis.

"Yes, I'm listening to you," Vrenli replied and placed a kettle on the stove.

"Well, I went to Gwerlit that evening. Just as I was about to knock on her door, I heard the stranger from Astinhod, what was his name?" asked Werlis.

"Gorathdin of the Forest," Vrenli helped him out.

"Well, I heard this Gorathdin telling Gwerlit about a beautiful princess," Werlis continued.

"That probably made you curious and you kept eavesdropping. Am I right?" asked Vrenli smiling.

"Believe me, the way that Gorathdin was raving about the princess, even you would have been listening at the door," Werlis defended himself.

"That may well be, but go on," Vrenli urged him as he sucked the contents of an egg with relish.

"I heard this Gorathdin tell Gwerlit that the princess was seriously ill and that the court healers at Astinhod Castle were at a loss. He mentioned a mage who was trying to brew a healing potion," said Werlis, raising both eyebrows.

"And the magician needs the blossoms of the moonflower for this," Vrenli stated and sat down at the table with the kettle full of hot water into which he had put some herbs.

"I'm not finished yet," Werlis continued. "Gorathdin fears that this mysterious illness may be linked to Erwright of Entorbis. Erwright of Entorbis, did you hear that, Vrenli!" Werlis shared aloud.

He was teeming with excitement.

Vrenli nodded and filled his mug with the hot brew.

"He also mentioned a book. I couldn't hear anything more about it because they went into another room. But when they came back, I heard Gorathdin talking about the magic of the elves of the Glorious Valley. Erwright of Entorbis is in search of something that, as I understood it, belongs to the elves. Imagine that Vrenli. Maybe there will be war, who knows," Werlis continued, his eyes wide.

"Who knows," repeated Vrenli, sipping carefully from his hot mug.

"Before I finally decided to knock, I heard Gorathdin say that you will probably go down in history. Did you hear that, Vrenli, you will go down in history," said Werlis excitedly.

Vrenli took notice.

For him, the word history had a different meaning and he immediately thought of last night's dreams.

"Did he say that?" Vrenli asked.

"Yes, he said that you would go down in history. And you know what, if you decide to go with Gorathdin, I will accompany you to Astinhod. I, too, want people to know who Werlis Johnmar was. Do you understand that Vrenli?" asked Werlis.

"Of course I understand that, Werlis," Vrenli replied happily.

"But what did they say to you when you knocked on the door? I'd still like to know," asked Vrenli, taking another egg and slowly sucking it out.

"Well, first Gwerlit told me off for listening at the door, because I didn't even knock, but she opened the door and let her cat out. And then she said to me that if I had a shred of friendship for you, I should go with you," said Werlis, a little ashamed.

"Did Gorathdin of the Forest say something to you?" Vrenli asked curiously.

"Nothing. He just looked at me with his big, dark green eyes. Even though it was so long ago that I almost don't remember what humans look like, I don't think Gorathdin is one of them. Humans don't have green eyes," Werlis replied, widening his eyes to mimic Gorathdin's gaze.

"You're probably right. I've never heard of people with green eyes and his skin shines so strangely. But let's not talk about him any longer. I'm glad that you would accompany me to Astinhod and now that I know that, I think I'll go," Vrenli announced, a broad smile on his face.

"We'll see Astinhod!" Werlis beamed.

The final test

"It's time to get ready for the final test. I'll leave you now and treat myself to a nap in my hammock before I put on my weapons. Meet me at the fountain for lunch," Werlis announced and hurriedly left the house.

Vrenli's thoughts revolved around what Werlis had told him. Erwright of Entorbis was searching for something that belonged to the Elves of the Glorious Valley and he couldn't shake the feeling that it might be his grandfather's book. He finished his cup and glanced at the window, where golden sunrays fell on a dusty pile of books.

"Where would he have kept it?" he asked himself, trying to remember his childhood, but the images of his memory mingled with those of the dreams he had experienced last night.

He couldn't tell the difference between what he had experienced in the past and the images in his dreams. He didn't know whether he had actually experienced what he had seen in the dream or whether it was just a figment of his imagination. But he could remember the book well. He could see it right in front of him. It was a very old book and must have had more than a thousand pages. It was much bigger and heavier than all the other books in Abketh and the purple-colored, leather cover was decorated with ornamental silver fittings. Vrenli could clearly see the strange characters written on the cover.

He knew that his grandfather had read him many stories from it. But no matter how hard he tried to remember at least one of them, he simply couldn't. There was a fog of forgetfulness around the stories that he couldn't see through. But he could still remember his grandfather coming into his room many evenings with the book under his arm, placing it on the small chest of drawers next to the bed, dimming the light, picking up the book and sitting down in the simple little wooden chair by the bed. Before he began to read from it, he had the habit of gazing into the flame of the oil lamp hanging above him for a while, as if he were thinking about something.

Vrenli brushed off his thoughts about the book and returned to his upcoming test. He opened the door to the small chamber next to the stove and took out his father's old combat suit, who was only twenty years older than Vrenli when he died. Vrenli wondered whether he might still be alive if he had taken the time to prepare himself before running out into the burning village. With this thought in mind, he first put on the cotton shirt, as it would soak up the sweat in the exertion of a fight. It took him some effort to squeeze into the tight chain mail shirt made of fine silver threads, which was lighter than it looked and would prevent injury from a sword thrust or a projectile. He slipped into the thick leather trousers and tied the cords that ran along the sides of the barrel. He picked up the brown leather helmet lying on the top shelf and put it on. After closing the door to the chamber again, he adjusted the two thin iron plates that were incorporated into the helmet.

They served to protect the wearer against blows to the forehead and back of the head.

As he walked to the trapdoor that led down to the cellar where his grandfather's weapons collection was kept, he thought that he would certainly have had more fun with all the combat training if he had been allowed to arm himself like this.

"Werlis could hit hard," he muttered to himself, touching a blue, sore spot on his chest.

He opened the trapdoor and was greeted by a cold, musty smell. No one had opened this trapdoor since Vrenli's grandfather returned from his several-month journey through Wetherid seriously ill and died just a few weeks later.

"Far too dark," he muttered and went back to the table in the middle of the room. He took the half-burnt candle, which he lit by the fire in the stove, and climbed down the ladder.

The cellar was dimly lit. Vrenli realized with regret that the many years in the damp darkness had left traces on the numerous objects. He opened the lid of a large, rather rotten box, which only contained the remains of clothes.

Vrenli glanced around the semi-dark, roughly walled room. On a shelf next to the small chamber where the weapons were kept were old, dusty jars with dubious contents. He glanced at the shelf next to it, which was full of dusty, elaborately crafted, thick books, and walked towards it, holding the candle in front of him above his head.

"Maybe I'll get lucky," he thought to himself and carefully took one book after another from the shelf.

But he couldn't find anything special, and above all no book with writing that could still be read. Vrenli knocked the dust off his clothes and walked towards the armory, lifted the heavy bolt and opened the door. This is where Vrenli's grandfather kept the swords, daggers, knives, lances, slingshots, shields, bows and quivers that he had received from his guests over the years. Just to the right of the wall was a holder with a torch, which Vrenli lit with the small flame of the candle.

The small, dusty chamber full of cobwebs brightened. He had only been in here once before. He was still a child when his grandfather was presented with a diamond adorned longsword by a nobly dressed man. When his grandfather was out for a walk with a guest and forgot to lock the door, Vrenli snuck into the chamber. Not much had changed since then, only one or two items had been added to the collection. Vrenli picked up the golden lance leaning against the wall in front of him and looked at the inscription engraved on it.

"May the light of Lorijan always shine for you," he read aloud, wondering what it meant, before putting it back in its place.

He took a step towards the cupboard where the short, curved and long swords, sabres, and daggers were kept, and searched for his father's short sword, which was one of the simplest. What set it apart from the others, however, was its blade was forged in Ib'Agier. No one in all of Wetherid knew better than the dwarves how to smelt the ore from deep within the mountains in fiery furnaces to forge the hardest blades with the resulting metal.

When Vrenli found the short sword, he took it and put it on his belt. He reached for the glass bow and the elaborately woven quiver hanging on the wall in front of him. Vrenli did not know that this was a gift from the Elves of the Glorious Valley. They had made the bow especially for his grandfather, as theirs were at least twice as big as his. Vrenli pulled one of the arrows out of the quiver and examined it. It was made with such care from the finest and hardest wood that it flew further, faster and more accurately than conventional arrows. Vrenli put it back and hung the bow and quiver around his shoulder. Then he extinguished the torch, closed the door and locked it. Now all he had to do was pick up his slingshot from the bench on the terrace, where he and Werlis sat almost every day and practiced their aim by shooting at all sorts of things, and he would be ready for the final test.

He climbed back up the ladder. Just as he was about to close the trapdoor, it occurred to him that the blade of the thirty-year-old short sword would certainly need sharpening.

"There were some grindstones on top of the cabinet with the swords," he recalled.

He climbed back down the ladder, opened the door to the chamber, lit the torch on the wall again and was just about to reach for the grindstones when the cupboard collapsed with a loud crash, followed by the clang of swords falling to the floor.

"All this rotten wood down here is life-threatening. When I get back from my trip, I really must replace them before someone else gets hurt," he said aloud to himself and picked up one of the fine, angular grindstones from the floor.

Just as he was about to stand up again, he noticed a loose stone in the rough masonry wall behind the collapsed cupboard. Amazement and curiosity gripped him, and he began to scrape away the earth around the stone with his short sword. After some effort, he removed it from the wall and laid it on the floor next to the swords. He had uncovered a small cavity and tried to shine the torch he had taken from the wall bracket into the small, dark hole. When he realized that there was something at the very back, he slowly reached out his right hand and hesitantly grabbed it.

"A leather pouch!" he exclaimed in surprise as he pulled the soft object from its hiding place in the wall.

He opened the small, dusty brown bag, which contained a small piece of parchment on top.

"I received these three acorns many years ago from the last living tree creature in the Border Forest. Whoever comes into contact with them without first speaking the following verse will immediately be transformed into a tree," he read aloud and looked at the verse that followed.

"The tree of trees stand by me, it is I who once saved your life, your seed will not hurt me!"

"I was lucky then. It would have been unthinkable if I had touched one of the acorns first," he thought, reading the verse

aloud again for good measure before burning the parchment in the flames of the torch.

"These acorns will accompany me on my journey," he said aloud.

He fastened the leather pouch to his belt, closed the chamber and climbed back upstairs. He locked the trapdoor and then went to his washing bowl, dipped a cloth in the water and used it to wipe the blade of his short sword again and again while he carefully sharpened it on the grindstone.

"I've done it! It's as sharp as if it were new," he said with satisfaction and then slid his short sword into the shaft, went outside the door onto the terrace and picked up his slingshot from the small wooden bench, locked the door and made his way to the fountain where Werlis was already waiting impatiently for him.

"What took you so long? We must hurry, the village council and the weapons masters will surely be waiting for us," said Werlis excitedly, not even waiting for an explanation, but walking quickly to the meadows to the north of the village.

When the two of them reported to the three old men for the examination, they were asked why they were late.

"We're sorry we're a little late, but we completely lost track of time helping Gwerlit in the herb garden," Werlis lied.

This was not the first time that Gwerlit, who had a very high reputation in the village, had been used as an excuse for being late and fortunately no one had ever asked her before and so it was this time too. Vrenli and Werlis were sent to the first test, where they had to prove their skill with bow and arrow.

When the two arrived at the northern clearing, Vrenli took a close look at the meadow, because everything was different from the previous months' exercises. To the right of the path that ran right through the middle of the clearing, round targets made of white cotton had been set up on the grass and flower-covered hill. Vrenli estimated the distance at about two hundred and fifty paces, and he knew that not everyone could hit at that distance. About a hundred paces from the left side of the path, a few tree stumps

about two paces high rose up on a plain, with pumpkin-sized red helmets on top of them. He assumed that these were the targets he had to hit with his slingshot.

Further down, almost at the end of the path, where the grass was already worn down, there was a circular area marked off with thick ropes where, he assumed, the duel with the short sword would take place. This year there were sixteen Abketh taking the final test. Only eight would pass. Vrenli let his eyes glide past the three stations again when Werlis finally asked him to follow him to the hill.

When they arrived, they were greeted by Armsmaster Narlis, a lean, sinewy man of around seventy. Like all Abketh's weapons masters, Narlis wore laced brown leather trousers and a brown cotton shirt, with a sleeveless leather jacket over it. The golden chain that held his gray cloak together was adorned with an ornate pendant engraved with the mark of the Abketh weapons masters. Next to him, on the meadow floor, lay a short bow made of dark wood, strung with the thin but tear-resistant sinew of a boar. His longbow, which was wrapped in fine silver threads, was leaning upright with its pointed underside against the small wooden platform next to the ground marker. He had hung the quiver, woven from light brown vines and containing a dozen hardwood arrows, next to the small pedestal, on which lay a parchment with the names of the candidates.

Grundlin, Erwog and Jorl, who were not only the same age but also good friends, welcomed Vrenli and Werlis after they had already successfully passed their own test with Narlis.

"Good luck, friends," Erwog wished them and followed Grundlin and Jorl across the meadow and down the path. Armsmaster Narlis made three ticks in red ink on his list and turned to Vrenli and Werlis.

"It's two hundred and fifty paces from the marker here to the targets on the hill," he said, and then explained that they had three attempts to hit the target. He pointed out that they were not allowed to step over the marker and reminded them to take into account the wind and the slope.

"We shot at closer targets on the same level during our exercises. It's impossible to hit the center of a target that's two hundred and fifty paces away on a hill," Werlis objected, discouraged.

"All you have to do is hit the target anywhere," replied the weapons master.

"Then that's good. I thought I wouldn't pass this exam," Werlis remarked.

Narlis gave him a sign that it was his turn next.

"Good luck, Werlis," Vrenli wished him.

"Since I only have to hit the target and not the center, I won't need any luck," Werlis said confidently and smiled.

He stood behind the marker, watched the wind, took his bow, put one of his self-made arrows with hawk feathers attached to the string and shot it at the target, which he missed, albeit narrowly.

"That was close," remarked Vrenli.

"You have two more attempts," Narlis pointed out.

"I'm sure to score this time," Werlis thought to himself.

He plucked the string of his bow, which sounded like the strumming of a lyre.

"You shoot from the bottom up. Don't forget that," Vrenli reminded him.

"I know. I know. I should shoot my arrow steeper," Werlis replied.

He then placed another arrow in the string of his bow and set the firing angle a little steeper. Aiming at the target in front of him on the hill, he tightened the string so much that Vrenli thought it would snap at any moment.

With a whirring whistle, the arrow flew up the hill towards the target, where it got stuck at the far-left edge.

"Done!" exclaimed Werlis.

Vrenli patted him appreciatively on the shoulder.

"You have passed this test, Werlis. You can now move on to the next one," Narlis confirmed and made a tick next to Werlis' name on his list.

Werlis asked to be allowed to wait for Vrenli, who was next. Vrenli followed Narlis' hand gesture, stepped behind the marker, took an ebony-colored arrow, its shimmering silver tip gleaming in the sunlight, from the quiver and placed it in the thin, almost invisible string of his glass bow, which strangely warmed up where he held it.

"Strange, it feels like it's adapting to my grip," thought Vrenli, before tightening it without much effort.

He paid attention to the wind, corrected the launch angle and then released the arrow. Almost silently and faster than the eyes of Werlis and Narlis could follow, the arrow made its way to the center of the target.

"I don't believe that. Was that luck, or were you practising in secret?" Werlis was surprised and stood open-mouthed in front of Vrenli for a few moments.

"A master shot, Vrenli. You hit the center of the target. That hasn't happened for a long time," praised Narlis.

His gaze remained fixed on the glass arch.

"What a strange bow. I've never seen one like it before. May I have a look at it?" he asked.

Vrenli handed Narlis the bow.

"I don't know who made this bow myself. I found it in my grandfather's armory," explained Vrenli.

"How light it is, and it feels so good in the hand, as if it was made for me. Truly, a beautiful bow. You too have passed and can move on to the next test, Vrenli," said Narlis, handing the bow back to him.

Vrenli and Werlis said goodbye, delighted that they had passed the test.

On their way to Armsmaster Jaris, they speculated about who might have made this bow. Vrenli remembered something.

"Grandfather told me that the weapons of the Elves from the Glorious Valley have magical powers. Maybe he got it from them," Vrenli mused.

"As far as I know, the elves live in a dense, impenetrable forest. I don't think they use bows made of glass and even if they did, elves are at least two heads taller than us and a lot stronger. Your bow is as small as one of ours," said Werlis.

"You're probably right. We'll probably never know where the bow came from," agreed Vrenli thoughtfully.

They arrived at the meadow south of the path.

The short, stocky, more than one hundred winter old weapons master Jaris was congratulating Kulis, Werlis' neighbor, on passing his test. With a slightly shaky hand, he made a tick next to his name with a frayed quill and then turned to the two of them.

"Greetings, Vrenli and Werlis. Do you have your slingshot with you?" asked Jaris, raising his.

The two nodded in agreement and began to giggle.

Proving how to use the slingshot should not be a problem for them. Even as children, they had played all kinds of pranks with it. Once they had the idea of shooting at the village bell in the middle of the night, whereupon one hundred and fifty angry, armed Abkether ran out of their houses to the village square and didn't find it funny at all when they realized that the village was not in danger, but that two children had played a trick on them. Vrenli and Werlis were grounded for a few days and their slingshot was confiscated by the village council for several days. Another time, they were just about to shoot apples down from a neighbor's tree behind a wooden fence. After they had successfully brought down about ten, they noticed too late that the neighbor was also in the tree picking apples and had been hit by one of the projectiles. As a result, they were grounded for six days and didn't get their slingshot back like last time.

"So, you two. You have to bring down one of those helmets standing on the tree stumps in front of you. You have three attempts. If you succeed, you've passed the test," explained Jaris, who, like Vrenli and Werlis, remembered their youthful pranks.

They stood together behind the marker and, thinking of their earlier pranks, pulled the smooth, brown leather straps from under their capes, placed the round, peach seed-sized stones in the small leather pockets and began rhythmically swinging the leather straps above their heads. With ease and laughter, they shot one helmet after another off the tree stumps before Jaris even noticed.

"Actually, one of you should just shoot down one of the helmets. It's always the same with you two. You've got nothing but mischief on your minds. Now I have to collect all the helmets because of you and put them back on the tree stumps!" Jaris complained angrily.

"We've passed this test!" shouted Vrenli and Werlis, starting to dance and laughing from the heart.

"Yes, yes. You've passed the test and now make sure you get to your final test," replied Jaris.

He made a shooing gesture and set about collecting the helmets scattered in all directions.

When they had followed the path almost to the edge of the forest, Werlis looked Vrenli firmly in the eyes.

"Now we'll see which of us is the better one," said Werlis.

Vrenli did not answer, for he knew that Werlis could not win against him and his blade from Ib'Agier.

Vrenli approached Armsmaster Turlis, who was overseeing the duel, and greeted him.

"How have you been so far?" Turlis, who was by far the tallest in the village and one of the strongest, wanted to know.

"We passed the test with the bow and the slingshot," Werlis reported proudly, which made Vrenli laugh when the word slingshot was mentioned.

"I'm glad to hear that," Turlis replied, a little surprised at Vrenli's laughter.

The weapons master Turlis was a serious and deliberate man of around seventy. He always had a watchful gaze and his hands, when not otherwise occupied, were always on the hilts of his two short swords, which were ready in the sheaths hanging on the right and left of his belt. Turlis was one of the few who knew how to wield two swords at the same time. He began by explaining the rules of dueling with the short sword to the two of them.

"Don't forget, only one of you will emerge victorious and the loser will have to repeat the final test next year," Turlis reminded them, looking at the two of them seriously.

Vrenli was in a quandary. On one hand, he wanted to pass his test, but on the other, he had to consider that if Werlis lost, he would not accompany him to Astinhod. After some back and forth, he decided that he would let his friend win.

"Let's get started," said Werlis, who had already climbed into the ring and was swinging his short sword through the air as if he were artfully trimming a hedge.

The fight between them did not last long. Werlis knocked the sword out of Vrenli's hand after just a few attacks and Turlis then declared him the winner.

"I won! I won! I told you I was the better of the two of us," Werlis beamed from ear to ear.

Vrenli tried to look disappointed.

"We'll see you again next year," Turlis said to Vrenli, who looked down at the floor in disgust.

"Such bad luck. I was only inattentive for a moment. That's what I get for it now. See you next year, Turlis," Vrenli looked into the ring once more and then set off back with Werlis.

"Don't hang your head. With a little more practice, you're sure to win next time," said Werlis encouragingly, who was delighted with his victory.

At the edge of the clearing, the three old men had already divided the winners and losers into two groups. Once there, Vrenli joined the group of losers and Werlis approached the group of winners with a broad smile. Vrenli realized how important this victory was for his friend and was glad to have made it possible for him to win. It was some time before the three weapons masters came up the path and joined the three old men.

They now called the losers up one by one and informed them that it would be advisable to hold further exercises before they returned for the final test next year. When Vrenli was called up, he only listened with one ear, as his thoughts were on his forthcoming journey to Astinhod and his grandfather's book, which he was determined to find beforehand.

"Vrenli, you should listen to us more carefully," rebuked Armsmaster Jaris, who noticed his inattention, in a stern tone.

"Forgive me. I was thinking," Vrenli said looking at him sheepishly.

"In your thoughts? Well, maybe you'd better concentrate on what we say to you, otherwise you could easily be one of the losers again next year," one of the old men warned him.

Vrenli said goodbye to them and walked towards the group of winners.

"Honoring the winners will take some time. In the meantime, I will go to Gwerlit and Gorathdin and tell them my decision. You'll come with me, won't you?" Vrenli asked Werlis, who was just telling the others in his group about his fight and looked at him expectantly.

"Yes, I haven't changed my mind. I'll come to you as soon as this is over. And don't be angry with me for winning," Werlis agreed.

"I'm not angry with you, Werlis. Not in the slightest. I'm happy for you! I'll see you later," replied Vrenli.

He then made his way to Gwerlit's house. He took the small side path that led from the mill to the Bells Inn. Mina was sitting

under the window on the small wooden bench next to the front door.

"Hello Vrenli! Which of you two won the duel?" she asked curiously.

"Werlis knocked the sword out of my hand after just a few attacks," confessed Vrenli, trying once again to look disappointed.

"I'm so sorry for you. You'll have to compete again next year! Please pass on my congratulations to Werlis," replied Mina, smiling sheepishly.

"I'll do that, Mina. I must get going now. See you around," said Vrenli approvingly.

He walked to the village square, where some girls were giggling and chatting. When he saw his Aunt Lurie and Nemlis, the glassblower's wife, standing behind the girls by the fountain, he stopped.

"I really don't want Aunt Lurie to tell me off for having to repeat the final test," he thought, and immediately made a dash for it, walking across Polmis' garden and around the village square.

He followed the wide hedge to its end and walked across the manicured lawn of his Uncle Rados, his mother's brother and Aunt Lurie's husband. He climbed over the small wooden fence and crossed the springtime meadow between his uncle's house and the northern part of Gwerlit's herb garden, which he walked around.

"Vrenli, my boy! How did you fare in the final test?" Gwerlit asked him as she watered the flowers growing along the wall of the house.

She approached and sat down next to Gorathdin on the front steps.

"Hello Gwerlit! Good afternoon, Gorathdin. Werlis has won our duel," he replied.

Gorathdin greeted him.

"Did he? That surprises me. I was firmly convinced that you would win, my boy. One can be so wrong. But you're not going to worry about it, are you? If I remember correctly, your father had

to repeat the final test three times and, as we all know, he was later appointed Master of Arms himself," Gwerlit said and put the bucket down.

"To tell you the truth, I let Werlis win. Victory meant much more to him than it did to me. Besides, I talked to him after the conversation with you and Gorathdin about the trip to Astinhod and he will come with me. That's why I didn't want him to lose. I was afraid he would change his mind," Vrenli revealed to them.

Gorathdin listened.

"So you will accompany me, Vrenli?" asked Gorathdin.

He got up from the front steps.

Vrenli looked up into Gorathdin's dark green eyes.

"If I can help you with that and the message is that important to the mage, then I think I'll come with you. Although, there's something I haven't understood so far. You said that this journey also has to do with me and you can't tell me more about it. Well, if the journey is also about me, then I find it very strange why you won't tell me more about it. I am a simple Abkether from the remote valley of Tawinn and have never seen you before in my life and yet I feel like I know you and I am sure I heard a voice when we first met. Even if that sounds a bit crazy," Vrenli shared his thoughts.

Gorathdin looked at Gwerlit, but she only raised her eyebrows and remained silent.

"I can understand your curiosity and that this all seems very strange to you, and I wish I could tell you more about it, but that's not my job. It is Master Drobal's. I don't want you to be worried about it though. Let me put it this way; Erendir had an important task in Wetherid and you are his grandson. You will learn more about it in Astinhod, friend. Be patient," Gorathdin said and sat back down on the front steps.

"Grandfather had an important job in Wetherid? He hadn't told me about that. But that would explain his long journey," thought Vrenli.

"You young people need to be more patient. You can't always know everything right away. Some things you find out at a young age, others only when you get older and some never," Gwerlit philosophized and went inside, returning a little later with a sealed scroll of parchment.

"Here is the message for Master Drobald, my boy. Just give it to him personally. You'll recognize him by the diamond-shaped mark on his forehead. Take care of yourself and Werlis. Good luck, my boy! I'll leave you and Gorathdin alone now. I have to take care of the moonflowers. It's a full moon today," Gwerlit said goodbye with a warm hug, stroked Vrenli's dark, half-length hair and went into the herb garden.

"We have to be in Astinhod within fifteen days, Gwerlit told me, otherwise the flowers will lose their healing powers. So, we don't have much time. We will set off early in the morning. Prepare yourself well for the journey," Gorathdin warned sternly.

Vrenli looked at Gorathdin wordlessly. His thoughts revolved around what Werlis had told him after he had overheard Gwerlit and Gorathdin.

"Should I approach him about the sick princess and what he said about me going down in history? He didn't mention anything to me about Erwright of Entorbis. Maybe Werlis just misheard them," Vrenli thought to himself and decided to wait with his questions. He wanted to look for the book first, which he hoped would answer some of his questions.

"Gwerlit was right about what she said. I'll have plenty of time to talk to Gorathdin about all this," he continued, sitting down next to Gorathdin on the front steps.

The two talked for some time. Gorathdin told him a lot about the city of Astinhod until Vrenli finally said goodbye to him. Gorathdin's story about the city of men made him think. Much of what he heard he thought he had heard before.

He walked home with quick steps. The desire to find the book grew in him and as soon as he entered his house, he began to search for it. He didn't waste a single thought on the fact that he had to

repeat the final test and would be leaving for Astinhod in the morning. The only thing that interested him now was finding the book. He felt that there was something special, something important connected to it. But he couldn't place this connection.

As he rummaged through the wooden boxes to the right of the bookshelf, he thought about why he wanted to find the book. Did he want to find it because it belonged to his grandfather? Because it connected him to his childhood, or did it have to do with his father and the dream he had last night?

"What secret did the talking maple tree mean? Was it even grandfather's book? If it wasn't his book, who did it belong to?" he asked himself as the urge that drove him on incessantly grew within him.

He took every single book from the bookshelf next to the fireplace, read their titles and leafed through some of them. But the book he was looking for was not among them. He began to open all the cupboards and chests of drawers and searched through them meticulously. In the hope of finding a secret hiding place, he then decided to remove some slats from the wooden paneling on the walls. But apart from a lot of dust, some spiders and beetles, he couldn't find anything. He continued his search in the kitchen that led into the living room. Here, too, he opened all the cupboards and chests of drawers and looked in all the larger pots. He pushed aside the large glass containers on the sturdy wooden shelf, which contained a wide variety of liquids, rocks and plants. He wanted to make sure that the book was not behind them. He searched under the chests of drawers and behind the shelves, but the book was nowhere to be found, so he opened the door to the small chamber next to the stove and searched through it to no avail.

"I've already looked in the cellar and it's not in the living room, the kitchen or the chamber either. That only leaves the bedroom and the attic," he said aloud to himself, pausing for a moment and wiping the beads of sweat from his forehead.

He went to the table and sat down. Exhausted, he looked around him.

"Is the book possibly not in the house? Did grandfather take the secret of the book with him to his grave? Maybe it's a book about magic. Maybe it holds great power. But why can't I remember anything? Did my grandfather and father teach me magic? Were they powerful magicians? Was Abketh attacked because of the book? Or maybe because of grandfather and that's why he and father had stopped reading it to me, so as not to put the village and me in danger! But where is the book now? I was sure it was here in the house, within my grasp. As if I could feel it," he thought to himself.

Vrenli was shivering from the cold, even though it was already late spring.

He trotted back into the living room and lit a fire in the stove, where he warmed himself up before going into the bedroom, where he continued to search in the wardrobe and in the small chest of drawers next to the bed. As he couldn't find anything, he searched under the bed and behind the wooden paneling on the walls. But without success.

"That leaves the attic," he said aloud and went back into the living room where he used a small pole leaning against the wall next to the bookshelf to open the hatch to the attic and pull down the folding ladder.

Just as he was about to climb up the first rung, there was a knock at the door and Werlis entered, beaming.

"Come on, let's go outside, the village festival has already started," Werlis urged him.

"Maybe later," said Vrenli, half interested.

"Can you help me look for my grandfather's book in the attic first?" he asked him.

Werlis nodded in agreement and followed him up the ladder.

"What's so important about this book?" wondered Werlis.

"It's the book my grandfather used to read to me as a child," replied Vrenli, sweat dripping from his brow.

Werlis stopped in the middle of the ladder.

"It's just a book, Vrenli! You're shaking. Let's look for it tomorrow, or when we return from Astinhod. Don't bother any more, it's already late. Let's celebrate now," said Werlis, worried about Vrenli's distress.

"Are you going to help me or not?" Vrenli's face hardened. He climbed up the last rung.

"If it's so important to you, then of course I'll help you. Although I would have preferred to drink a mug or two of mead with you and the others. Everyone is gathered outside celebrating, Vrenli," Werlis replied and climbed higher up the ladder.

When they realized that the attic was pitch black, Werlis climbed down again, went into the living room and returned with a lit candle. The air under the roof was very dry, almost stuffy. There were cobwebs hanging from the roof posts and walls and when Vrenli took a step down from the ladder onto the wooden floor, he kicked up so much dust that it filled their lungs, and they began to cough. Vrenli wiped away the large, thick nets hanging in front of him with his hand and peered into the half-dark, empty attic.

"That's strange. It's empty. Strange, that doesn't fit in with grandfather at all. There's something wrong here. Come on Werlis, there must be a secret room or something similar in here somewhere," said Vrenli, visibly puzzled and tense.

He urged Werlis on, whereupon the two of them spent half the night searching for loose floorboards, wall paneling and false floors. During their efforts, they talked about the final test and about Gorathdin and Gwerlit.

"I agreed to travel to Astinhod with Gorathdin and told them you are coming with me. You're coming, aren't you?" asked Vrenli, pausing for a moment.

"Of course I'm coming with you. You can stop asking me that," replied Werlis somewhat grumpily.

Time was running out and he began to worry whether they would be able to see any of the village festival at all. Shortly after

midnight, dusty and exhausted, they descended the ladder after their fruitless search.

"The book isn't here," Vrenli realized disappointedly and sat down on the bench next to the stove, where a fire was still burning, and looked at Werlis with tired eyes.

"Let's go outside and join the others. It would be a shame if we didn't get a taste of the feast. Think of all the goodies and the mead," Werlis suggested and waited in the already half-open doorway.

Singing and loud laughter drifted in from outside and Werlis was startled for a moment when fireworks were set off, lighting up the sky in red, green and blue.

"I'm really too tired for this, the search for the book has exhausted me too much," Vrenli confessed and put his legs up.

"Too bad. I'll see you tomorrow after breakfast," Werlis said goodbye and closed the door behind him. He still couldn't understand Vrenli's excitement about the book.

Vrenli sat next to the warm fire for some time, gazing into the semi-dark living room. His thoughts were still on the book. He was angry, upset and deeply saddened.

"It's very strange that I couldn't find the book," he thought to himself and wondered where else the book could be since it wasn't in the house.

"I'll ask mother and Gwerlit about it tomorrow, maybe one of them knows where it is," Vrenli decided in his thoughts.

It was only when he went into the bedroom, lay down in his bed and pulled the covers over him that he pushed his thoughts about the book aside and thought about his forthcoming journey to Astinhod.

The departure to Astinhod

The next morning, shortly after Vrenli woke up, he began to pack everything he needed for the long journey into his leather traveling bag; his washing kit, two flints, a drinking bowl, his small knife, a

piece of thread, needle and twine, warm socks, thick woolen clothing, a rolled-up sheepskin and an ointment that he had found on one of the shelves during his search for the book yesterday. He tied up the travel bag, made sure that the small pouch with the acorns was still hanging on his belt and went to the small chamber next to the stove where his father's leather armor and chain mail were kept and opened the door. He hesitantly reached for the leather helmet, lifted it up and put it back a moment later.

"I'm going on a journey, not going to war," he said aloud to himself and locked the door.

He walked up to the clothes rack next to the front door and looked at the bow from the Glorious Valley hanging there.

"Actually, this beautiful piece is far too good to take with me on my journey. My slingshot and father's short sword should suffice as weapons," he thought.

He looked at his travel bag and went through its contents again. Before he left his house, he closed all the shutters, checked that the fire in the stove had gone out and, most important of all, went into the bedroom and made his bed.

"When I get back, I'll just fall into my bed and sleep for at least two days," he said to himself as he stretched the fresh sheet over the straw-filled mattress.

He conscientiously folded up the warm, fluffy blanket and placed it on the bottom end of the bed. He shook out the down-filled pillow and placed it at the top end.

"Now just a quick visit to mother and I'll be ready," he muttered to himself as he stepped out of the bedroom and looked around the living room once more.

The wooden slats that he had torn from the wall next to the bookshelf caught his eye.

"Not a pretty sight, really. I'll fix that when I get back," he decided.

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Vrenli made his way to his mother's house. Fortunately, the conversation with her did not last as long as he had feared it would. He asked her about his grandfather's book, but to his disappointment she didn't know any more about it than he did. When Vrenli told her that he would be traveling with Gorathdin of the Forest to Astinhod, she burst into tears. He was prepared for this; he knew that she would not approve of this journey. He understood that after losing her parents, her husband and his parents, she now only had him and she did not want to lose her only child.

"It breaks my heart, boy," were her words.

But to his surprise, her attempts to dissuade him from his plan were limited.

"You're old enough to decide for yourself now, Vrenli," she said to him.

They drank tea together and Vrenli tried to find out more about his childhood from her. His mother told him one or two stories, but she didn't say anything really significant.

After they had said their tearful goodbyes, Vrenli went to Werlis to run a few errands with him. On the way to the merchant, where they wanted to buy durable supplies such as beans and dried meat, they met Molekk, the son of Klersten, who immediately approached when he saw them.

"Good morning, you two. I've heard that you're leaving for Astinhod today to bring the king a message from Abketh, just like your grandfather once did, Vrenli," Molekk said to the two of them in a good mood.

Vrenli and Werlis looked at him questioningly.

"How do you know we're traveling to Astinhod? And what message are you talking about? I don't understand," Vrenli wondered.

"People hear a lot of things. Why else would you take the long and dangerous journey if it wasn't about something very important. And until now, everything that was important in Wetherid was always connected to Astinhod. But what am I talking about? You

should go to Gwerlit, she's been waiting for you all morning. And before I forget, I have something else for you here."

He rummaged in a small bag he had under his cloak.

"Here, take these loaves of bread. I baked them from the fruit flour of the Everfull Tree. They are no bigger than a walnut, but if you put them in water, they will grow into a real loaf that you can eat for several days. Here, take these three pieces and all the best on your journey," he said to them.

Molekk pressed the three tiny pieces of bread into Werlis' hand, who looked puzzled. Werlis thanked him and looked skeptically at the three little things in his palm before stowing them away safely. They said goodbye to him and went to Mr. Rosenstrauch's store, which was only a few houses away.

Vrenli opened the door and a soft chime sounded.

"Good morning, Vrenli. Good morning, Werlis," the small, white-haired man greeted them, adjusting his glasses.

"I have already prepared a package for your journey. Dried meat, beans, a delicious dry cheese, some nuts and dried mushrooms," said the grocer to Vrenli and Werlis with a friendly expression on his face.

The two were astonished.

He pushed the parcel over the counter and when Vrenli went to pay, he turned away from them in a huff.

"I'm not going to ask anything of you. On the contrary, I'll give you another thirty gold coins to take with you. I hope they will be useful to you. You can always use some small change on a long journey," he said with a smile and pressed a small leather pouch into Vrenli's hand.

The amazement of the two grew.

"But I can't accept that, Mr. Rosenstrauch," Vrenli fended him off.

Werlis also shook his head in disapproval.

"Of course you can, Vrenli," Mr. Rosenstrauch encouraged him and smiled again.

Vrenli put the bag away.

"And now make sure you get to Gwerlit. I'm sure she's already waiting for you," he urged them.

Werlis took the parcel with the provisions.

"Thank you very much, Mr. Rosenstrauch," the two thanked him.

They left the store.

"Strange, apparently everyone here knows about our plans," Vrenli wondered.

Werlis shrugged his shoulders.

"That was the first time one of the Rosenstrauchs had ever given anyone anything," Werlis remarked in amazement.

Vrenli raised his eyebrows.

"I find that strange too".

They were just crossing the village square when Armsmaster Jaris asked them to wait.

"Wait a moment. I have a map for you with the way to Astinhod marked on it!" he called out to them. After crossing the village square, he handed Vrenli a fragile scroll of parchment.

"How come everyone knows about our trip?" Vrenli asked him after he had passed the map to Werlis.

"Gwerlit and Gorathdin were at the village feast until midnight, and they mentioned that you are both going to Astinhod with the visitor," old Jaris told them.

"Ah, that explains a lot, of course," replied Vrenli and looked at Werlis, who nodded in agreement. They thanked the weapons master and said goodbye.

"Let's go to Gwerlit and Gorathdin," suggested Vrenli and led the way.

Werlis followed him.

On the way there, they met some villagers who shouted congratulations to them, as if they were setting out to rescue the village from an impending disaster. When they arrived at Gwerlit's

house, Gorathdin was already waiting impatiently for them, walking up and down the wooden fence of the herb garden.

"You probably understand 'early in the morning' a little differently than I do! We should have been on the road at sunrise! Wait here, I'll just get my travel bag, then we can set off," urged Gorathdin, about to take a step towards the front steps.

"Wait, we're not ready yet. We still want to talk to Gwerlit and then we have to stow our provisions and put on our weapons," explained Vrenli.

Gorathdin turned around again.

"Gwerlit is not in the house. She was waiting for you, but after a while she went into the forest to collect herbs," Gorathdin said.

"But I wanted to ask her something important," Vrenli interjected disappointedly.

"I'm sorry, but we really don't have time to wait for her. The moonflower blossoms have to be processed in the next fourteen days! Time is of the essence. I'll wait for you here. Hurry up!" Gorathdin said sternly.

The two walked quickly back to their houses, from which they returned after some time with their traveling bags around their shoulders and armed with their short swords and slingshots.

"Let's set off," urged Gorathdin. "I want to reach Aarl's hut before nightfall. If we find him there, we can spend the night with him," he added.

"Do you mean Aarl, the Thirian from the south who lives near the Border Forest?" asked Vrenli.

"Yes, that's the one I mean. Do you know him?" replied Gorathdin.

"I've only heard of him," Vrenli admitted.

"We've avoided the path to the Border Forest until now," Werlis added, somewhat ashamed.

"Have you ever traveled beyond Tawinn and seen the wide green valleys, high angular mountains, broad rushing rivers, crystal-

clear lakes and magnificent cities of Wetherid?" Gorathdin asked, pointing with his right hand to the horizon to their left.

"Never until now," the two replied, following Gorathdin along the path that led east from their village of Abketh into the neighboring mixed forest.

They turned around one last time and looked back with mixed feelings.

Leaving their family, friends and the small, quiet, peaceful Abketh behind was not easy for them. On the other hand, they were looking forward to seeing Astinhod soon and with this anticipation in them, they followed Gorathdin to the small path that lay to the right of the road and led across a meadow to the edge of the forest to the east.

Vrenli noticed that he had never been on this path more than two or three times before and that he had never followed it more than a few hundred steps deep into the forest. On second thought, he had to wonder about that. When he and Werlis went hunting or picking mushrooms and berries, they did so in the forest that bordered Abketh to the northwest.

They avoided the eastern forest, which was also called the Border Forest. It had once been traveled through by Abkether on their way to Astinhod, but that was many, many years ago. Vrenli only realized now, as he thought about it, that no one from the village had actually traveled to Astinhod in decades. The path, overgrown with tall grasses and low scrub, remained unused by the inhabitants of Abketh.

"Have you ever thought about why none of us have used this path in recent years, Werlis?" asked Vrenli, who almost tripped over a root sticking out of the ground.

"Watch where you're going and no, I haven't really thought about that yet. Why should I?" replied Werlis, following at a greater distance behind Gorathdin, who stopped to wait for them.

"I mean, isn't it strange? None of us have traveled to Astinhod in the last twenty or twenty-five years," Vrenli remarked.

Werlis asked Gorathdin to walk a little slower.

"Why is that strange? I don't understand what you mean. I don't see the need for any of us to travel to Astinhod," Werlis replied skeptically.

Both began to pant as they tried to keep up with Gorathdin.

"Haven't you noticed that we no longer trade with the other peoples of Wetherid? But what really makes me wonder is that we don't even know what's going on in the rest of Wetherid. We have an alliance with the King of Astinhod, but none of us have been there for so long. Doesn't that surprise you?" asked Vrenli, now starting to walk even faster.

"No, I'm not surprised. Why should I be!" replied Werlis as he climbed over a large stone.

"I'm just saying that it might not hurt to know what's going on in Wetherid, and I imagine the King of Astinhod might be interested to know what's going on in Abketh and Tawinn," Vrenli said in response, dodging the stone.

"You think too much. I don't think people are interested in our village. What's more, it's the only settlement in Tawinn," explained Werlis.

He stopped for a moment and pulled up his ochre-yellow linen trousers. Vrenli was waiting for him.

"And besides, if something were to happen in Wetherid that affected all peoples, the king would certainly send messengers to Abketh," he added and continued walking.

Gorathdin had to wait for them again.

"What do you mean, Gorathdin? You live in Astinhod. Do they talk about Abketh there? And can you please walk a little slower?" Vrenli asked him, puffing along beside him.

"Forgive me, friends. I paid too little attention to your greatness. As far as I can tell, Abketh has almost been forgotten. The path over the Ice Mountains to Tawinn is difficult and, as Werlis has already correctly pointed out, your village is the only settlement there," Gorathdin replied and followed the winding and now somewhat sloping path light-footedly.

"I've had the feeling for a long time that it's very convenient for the village council that Abketh is being forgotten. It seems to me that they want to hide from the rest of the world," Vrenli speculated, looking up at the sky through the treetops.

The sun was high above them, it was midday and the few warm rays that fell through the sea of leaves onto the damp forest floor were soaked up by the tufts of grass and low-growing plants that were now only sporadically growing on the path. The deeper they hiked into the forest, the more the narrow path turned into a dark hollow.

"Watch where you're going!" said Gorathdin, who stepped over some stones and roots.

The loamy, almost reddish-brown earth was swollen with moisture and as the path became slightly sloped, Vrenli and Werlis had their eyes on the ground. They struggled to climb over the roots and stones and had to be extremely careful not to slip and fall. For Gorathdin, the muddy, stony, deeply furrowed hollow path with its many tangled roots sticking out of the ground was not a problem. Werlis watched him as he climbed over all the obstacles without looking at the ground, as if by instinct.

"It seems to me that you spend a lot of time in the woods," Werlis said to Gorathdin, whose eyes glanced through the surrounding trees to the right and left of the path.

"I spent my whole youth in the forest," Gorathdin replied with a smile.

He stopped briefly to help them over a fallen tree trunk that lay across the path. They marched on without stopping.

It was late afternoon and they had already made more than half their way through the Border Forest when the hollow path became flat, covered with moss and leaves again. They followed it for some time until they reached a point where a path leading from the north crossed theirs.

"Wait!" Gorathdin said suddenly.

He gave them a hand signal to stop. His dark green eyes began to light up as he looked up the northern path.

"Is something wrong?" asked Werlis.

"Be quiet. I hear footsteps," Gorathdin remarked and jumped behind the thick trunk of an oak tree that stood next to the crossroads.

"Over here! Quickly! Hide and keep quiet," he warned them, grabbing a branch of the leafy oak at head height and pulling himself up into the tree nimbly and effortlessly.

"Gorathdin? Where are you?" whispered Vrenli, who had crouched down on the ground behind the trunk of the oak tree with Werlis.

"He climbed into the tree," replied Werlis, pointing upwards into the oak.

"I can't see him," said Vrenli quietly, who had spread his brown, furry cloak from the Dark Forest over himself and Werlis and from where the two looked onto the path at a point where he lifted it slightly.

"The leaves on the ground are all damp," whispered Werlis.

"Shh!" warned Vrenli, who was still amazed that he couldn't see Gorathdin up in the tree.

"There are five figures coming down the path," Werlis drew Vrenli's attention.

"Shh, they're people," Vrenli replied quietly.

He put his index finger to his mouth and lifted his cloak a little more.

The five men, dressed in brown leather pants and thick linen shirts, came closer to the crossroads. Vrenli was worried because he didn't know whether Gorathdin was in the oak tree or whether he had escaped.

"What could humans possibly want here? No strangers have been seen near Abketh for years. Is their stay in the Border Forest possibly connected to the appearance of Gorathdin of the Forest?" wondered Vrenli, crouching under the cloak.

"His dark green eyes, his physique and the way he moves. Maybe he really isn't human? If so, then he's not from Astinhod either," thought Vrenli, and the more he thought about it, the more he became convinced that Gorathdin was not human.

"A person with dark green eyes? No, I've never heard of that," he pondered.

The five men stopped abruptly at the crossroads, and it sounded as if they were arguing about which way to go. One of them, a fat, bearded, dark-haired man, divided the others into two groups and pointed with his hand along the eastern path and then to the one leading west.

"Look around for tracks!" he called after the others and, to the horror of Vrenli and Werlis, sat down right next to the trunk of the oak tree they were hiding behind.

Vrenli noticed that Werlis wanted to say something to him and held his hand over his mouth at the last moment.

"Shh!", Vrenli whispered to Werlis and let the end of the cloak slide back onto the forest floor.

Without moving, breathing quietly, they waited for the fat man to move away from the oak. The air under the cloak quickly became stuffy, however, and so Vrenli lifted the end of his cloak again slightly. He looked at the path and tried hard to remember the appearance of the five men, comparing their appearance with that of Gorathdin.

"He could be human in terms of his size and build, but his shimmering skin, dark green eyes and pointed ears speak against it. No. Humans don't have eyes like that and especially not pointed ears. Pointed ears only belong to..." he thought and paused for a moment.

"Elves. Yes, elves. Elves have pointy ears. Now I remember one of the stories my grandfather used to read to me," he remarked to himself.

Vrenli was so pleased that he almost stood up, but luckily Werlis held him back.

"What's got into you? Stay down," whispered Werlis, hoping that the fat man hadn't heard him.

Vrenli let the end of the cloak slide back onto the forest floor.

"Elves have pointy ears and that's why they were often teased by humans. The alliance of the elves. I can almost remember the whole story now," Vrenli thought happily, but his joy disappeared as quickly as it had come.

"But elves don't live in Astinhod. Astinhod is a city of humans," Vrenli corrected his own thoughts about Gorathdin.

He could now remember exactly what his grandfather had read to him from the book about the elves and humans. He knew that there was an alliance between the two peoples and that they lived peacefully side by side in Wetherid. Nevertheless, there were some things that an elf should not do, including joining forces with humans. It was also advisable to keep a certain distance.

"An elf who lives among humans? And what about the voice I heard?" Vrenli asked himself.

Werlis became impatient and unintentionally bumped his left knee into Vrenli's stomach.

"Shh!" he hissed at him.

The air under the cloak became stuffy again and Vrenli slowly and quietly lifted the end again.

"What's that voice I heard all about?" Vrenli continued to ponder. He tried to remember the voice and its sound.

"I'm sure it was Gorathdin's voice," he thought and was startled when a longhorn beetle slowly climbed over his hand.

"Magic! It must be magic. The magic of the elves, yes, it must be!" he thought, pleased that he had come to this conclusion.

A soft cry interrupted his thoughts. Werlis was startled, jumped up from under his cloak and looked around, searching. Apart from the trees, he could see nothing and no one, but when he stepped out from behind the thick oak trunk onto the path, he looked in horror at the fat, bearded man lying dead on the ground in front of him. Strangled! He was just about to call for Vrenli when a hand

grabbed him by the back of the neck and pulled him up into the tree.

"Shh!" Gorathdin whispered to Werlis, covering his mouth with one hand and pointing with the other at the two men returning to the oak from the western path.

"Hold on to this branch and stay calm," Gorathdin whispered.

Werlis nodded.

Vrenli, who was worried about Werlis, had just stepped out from behind the trunk of the oak tree when one of the two men caught sight of him.

"There's someone up ahead!" one of them shouted and ran towards Vrenli, who was standing motionless and looking at them in fear.

"Kurdek is dead. The little one killed him!" shouted the man dressed in dark suede, drawing a dagger the size of Vrenli's short sword.

Vrenli was about to take a step back when the man running towards him fell to the ground with an arrow piercing his chest.

"An ambush!" shouted the still-living man, hoping that his two friends, who had followed the path to the east, could hear him.

He reached with both hands for two palm-sized throwing knives, which were in small leather sheaths on his chest strap and investigated the oak. Before he could spot anyone in the tree, an arrow hit him and he slumped dead on the forest floor next to the two other men. Vrenli froze. He thought several times about reaching for his short sword, but a great fear paralyzed his muscles and constricted his throat. A hand unexpectedly grabbed him by the back of the neck and pulled him up through the leaves and branches into the oak tree.

"Hide behind the trunk," Gorathdin whispered, pointing to the thick branch behind him.

But Vrenli didn't react, he just looked at him with wide eyes.

"Quick, take care of Vrenli," he whispered to Werlis, who climbed out from a branch behind the trunk of the oak tree.

"Vrenli, reach for my hand," Werlis whispered softly and held out his hand.

"Vrenli! Come on, grab my hand," he whispered emphatically.

Vrenli hesitantly grabbed Werlis' hand and pulled himself onto the thick branch that led behind the trunk of the oak tree.

"Gorathdin is an elf. He lied to us, Werlis. Did you see how he killed the three humans in cold blood and insidiously by ambush? He didn't have the slightest inhibition. He might be a murderer and wanted," Vrenli revealed.

Werlis looked at him in astonishment.

"An elf? A murderer?" Werlis repeated with wide eyes.

Vrenli nodded.

"We have to do something before he kills the other two as well," said Vrenli emphatically.

Werlis thought about it for a few moments before nodding in agreement.

The two men — who had just returned from the path leading to Abketh and saw the others lying motionless on the forest floor — then began to run as fast as they could towards the oak tree. They drew their throwing knives and searched around. Gorathdin was just about to put an arrow in the string of his bow when he was pushed out of the tree by Vrenli and Werlis.

"What are you doing?" Gorathdin shouted as he fell.

He did a somersault and landed upright on the forest floor. The two men immediately pounced on him, threw him to the ground and held him there with all their strength.

"Now we've finally found you, elf," said one of them, laughing maliciously.

Gorathdin was taken aback.

He had never expected that his two companions would throw him at the feet of his pursuers. He had managed to kill three of the thieves from Astinhod from his safe position and it would have been easy for him to get rid of the remaining two who were now pinning him to the ground through the folly of Vrenli and Werlis.

"You will pay for killing our three friends, elf!" the thinner of the two shouted at him and put the blade of his dagger to his throat.

Vrenli and Werlis looked down at Gorathdin, who was in a hopeless situation.

"Vrenli, your folly will have serious consequences for the whole of Wetherid. It's no secret that the thieves of Astinhod have formed an alliance with Erwight of Entorbis," Vrenli heard a voice within him.

"Erwight of Entorbis?" exclaimed Vrenli, attracting the attention of the two thieves.

"Whoever else is up there, if you don't want us to cut your friend Gorathdin's throat here and now, you'd better get down from that tree!" one of the thieves shouted into the oak.

Vrenli looked in horror at the blade on Gorathdin's neck. He realized that he had done something very stupid.

"What do we do now? We can't let them cut his throat, even if he is a murderer," whispered Werlis.

"I'm afraid he's not a murderer, Werlis," Vrenli whispered back quietly, ashamed.

Werlis was confused and looked at Vrenli in astonishment. The thief under the oak once again threatened to kill Gorathdin.

"Have you got your slingshot with you?" Vrenli asked quietly.

Werlis pulled it out from under his cloak and lifted it up.

"I don't think they know there are two of us. I'll go down. Wait for a favorable moment," Vrenli instructed Werlis.

He nodded in agreement, but he wasn't entirely comfortable with the idea. The tree was too densely overgrown for him to hit a target at ground level without difficulty. They looked each other firmly in the eyes once more before Vrenli slowly climbed to the lowest branch of the oak, from which he hesitantly jumped down to the ground. He fell, as expected, right at the feet of the two thieves from Astinhod.

"Who have we got here? A child?" one of them wondered, grabbing Vrenli by the cloak and pulling him up.

Vrenli looked into Gorathdin's glowing, dark green eyes, in which he could not recognize any hatred towards himself.

"I am not a child, but an Abkether and I am traveling to Astinhod with Gorathdin to buy goods. I am a merchant and have gold with me. Let us go and I'll give it to you," he lied to the full-bearded, tanned thief.

Gorathdin did not understand what Vrenli was trying to achieve with his lie.

"Does he really think he can buy our lives," he thought to himself.

The thief began to laugh.

"Gold, you say? And pay us for letting the stinking elf live?" he asked maliciously.

He was still holding Vrenli by the cape at eye level.

"I don't think you quite understand, Abkether. We're thieves, we take what we want!" he shouted at Vrenli, dropped him to the ground and kicked him.

The force of the blow almost knocked Vrenli unconscious, but his will to make amends for the stupidity he had committed saved him. He gasped and writhed on the ground.

"Take the gold, but let us live," he begged the thief tearfully, nimbly taking the small leather pouch from his belt and lifting it up.

The strong, tanned hand of the man, who was two heads taller, hastily reached for the bag.

"What are you up to? There are no gold coins in this bag!" he shouted at him after shaking and feeling the bag.

"No, not this bag. Sorry, I gave you the wrong one in my excitement. Please, give it back to me!" begged Vrenli.

He tried to look desperate.

"You wish!" the thief replied and opened the small leather pouch.

He reached in with two of his fingers. When he touched one of the three acorns in the bag, his gaze became fixed. A paralysis that started in his fingers spread throughout his body.

"What is wrong with you, Frantal?" the other thief, who was holding Gorathdin, called out in surprise, but he got no answer.

Frantal slowly turned into a tree in front of everyone. His hands became branches and his abdomen turned into a tree trunk. It only took a few moments and a multitude of thin branches sprouted from his upper body and head, from which more and more green shoots grew. The other thief let go of the dagger he was holding to Gorathdin's throat in horror.

Werlis, who had watched the transformation in amazement, grabbed hold of himself and hurled a stone at the thief. There was a short shriek as Werlis' projectile hit him on the shoulder. With his face contorted in pain, the thief tried to draw a throwing knife from its sheath. But Gorathdin reacted immediately and pulled his feet out from under him. He threw himself at the thief with his hunting knife, which he pulled from the brim of his boot, and held it to his throat.

"Don't move, or I could easily plunge my knife into your neck," Gorathdin threatened.

His eyes began to light up.

The thief then opened his mouth wide and began to tremble.

"I'm not moving. Relax, we can talk about everything," he whimpered.

Vrenli stood up.

"I'm sorry Gorathdin, I didn't mean to..." Vrenli began.

Gorathdin interrupted him.

"We'll talk about that later. First, I want to find out what thieves from Astinhod are doing in Tawinn, especially near the village of Abketh," he said calmly, still pressing his hunting knife to the thief's throat.

Werlis threw Gorathdin's fire axe down to the forest floor before climbing down from the tree.

"What was in the leather bag?" asked Gorathdin.

"I found the bag in my grandfather's cellar. A gift from a tree creature from the Border Forest," replied Vrenli.

"I thought there hadn't been any tree creatures in the Border Forest for a long time," Werlis objected in astonishment.

"You thought wrong," replied Vrenli.

The two approached the lifeless bodies of the humans and examined them more closely while Gorathdin tried to get information.

"Why are you hanging around in Tawinn? Speak!" Gorathdin demanded sharply of the thief.

He pressed the blade of his hunting knife more firmly against his throat and looked at him determinedly with his glowing eyes.

"We were ordered to prevent the moonflower blossoms from arriving in Astinhod," the thief stammered and swallowed.

"Then Gorathdin was telling the truth after all," whispered Werlis in Vrenli's ear.

Vrenli nodded in shame.

Gorathdin could hear Werlis' words and turned in his direction. These few moments were enough for the thief to twist the ring he wore on his right hand and stab himself with the poisoned thorn that emerged. The poison induced a brief vomiting attack, followed by trembling of all limbs, which quickly led to the thief's death.

Surprised and horrified, Vrenli and Werlis looked at the thief's lifeless body, who had killed himself out of fear of his employer. Even Gorathdin, who had faced death from time to time in his life, was surprised by this act.

"Let's move their bodies away from the path. Or better yet, bury them nearby," Gorathdin suggested.

He then dragged two of the thieves a few steps from the crossroads into the forest, where he dug a pit big enough for five people with his fire axe. In the meantime, Vrenli and Werlis examined the bodies of the thieves for further clues. The only thing

they noticed, however, was that they all wore a simple, wide silver ring with the Entorbis coat of arms. Vrenli took one of them and handed it to Gorathdin, who silently put it away. Together they threw the five lifeless bodies into the pit and covered it up again. When they returned to the oak tree, it was already dawn.

"This incident has cost us a lot of time and as it is not possible for you to cross the forest in the dark, we have to set up camp here for the night," Gorathdin said to the two and set about collecting dry branches and twigs.

"What does he mean we can't walk through the forest in the dark? Is he saying that he could?" asked Werlis, opening his travel bag and taking out a piece of dried meat, one of the small loaves of bread they had received from Molekk, a handful of nuts and a bottle of water.

"I think his dark green eyes give him the ability to see in the dark, but I'm not sure. I've made plenty of guesses for one day. Why don't you ask him when he comes back?" replied Vrenli and he sat down on the forest floor next to Werlis.

He was just sprinkling the small loaf of bread with some water when Gorathdin emerged from between the surrounding trees with a good amount of firewood. While he lit a fire, Vrenli and Werlis spread their cloaks on the damp forest floor and laid their sheepskins on top.

"I hope you won't hold it against me that I'm going to rest after I've eaten some of the dried meat. I need to think about what has happened. I ask you to wait until tomorrow with any questions you are sure to have," Gorathdin asked them. The two nodded in agreement while they ate the nuts that Werlis had taken from the travel bag.

When Gorathdin had eaten a little of the dried meat and the Everfull Bread, which tasted unexpectedly good and was very filling, he crouched down with his back against the trunk of the oak tree and closed his eyes.

"This way of thinking is very familiar to me," said Werlis with a grin.

Vrenli yawned.

As it had been an eventful and exhausting day for them too, they lay down on their cloaks a little later and fell asleep next to the blazing fire, listening to the sounds of the night.

Aarl's hut

Their first night spent in the open air passed quietly. Vrenli only woke up briefly once, when Gorathdin put dried branches in the fire at a late hour so that it would continue to burn until dawn. A ray of sunlight, which had found its way through the sea of leaves of the oak, woke Vrenli from his deep sleep. He opened his eyes and saw that Gorathdin and Werlis were already awake.

"Good morning, you two," Vrenli wished them in a sleepy voice.

He stood up and sat down next to them.

"Tea?" asked Werlis, who was heating some water in a small metal container on the almost extinguished fire.

Vrenli nodded in agreement.

"If we keep at it, we'll arrive at Aarl's hut around noon. When he's home, we can get some strength and rest," said Gorathdin as he took one of his arrows from the quiver and began to carve small notches in the wood with his hunting knife.

"It's strange that a human lives in Tawinn. Not far from our village, at that. I've heard he's been living here for over twenty years," said Werlis, taking the metal container from the fire.

"And in all those years he never came to Abketh? Strange," remarked Vrenli.

"He just prefers to live alone," Gorathdin explained and looked up at the sky to check the position of the sun.

"We should set off soon," he let them know.

They sat by the now extinguished fire for some time and drank the hot brew of wild herbs that Werlis had gathered near the oak early in the morning while Vrenli was still asleep and Gorathdin

was exploring their surroundings. Vrenli got up, picked up his cloak and removed the damp leaves clinging to it.

"I am astonished to see that you are wearing a cloak from the Dark Forest. May I ask you where you got it?" asked Gorathdin, smiling gently.

"It belonged to my grandfather. By the way, I'm very sorry about yesterday, Gorathdin. I don't know what got into me," Vrenli apologized.

"Fear is one of our greatest enemies and I alone am to blame for this incident. I should have told you more about my mission and myself. It was my mistake not to inform you that the five men were thieves from Astinhod," Gorathdin apologized.

He stood up and kicked out the embers in the fireplace.

"So, the thieves of Astinhod have entered an alliance with Erwright of Entorbis. They wore rings with the Entorbis coat of arms," Vrenli muttered to himself and looked sheepishly at Gorathdin, who knew about his embarrassment and kept silent.

He hoped that Vrenli had not connected yesterday's exchange of ideas with Wetherid's book. So far, he wasn't sure whether Vrenli could be trusted in every respect.

"Something else I wanted to ask you Gorathdin. That voice I heard when we first met and again yesterday, what can you tell me about it?" Vrenli asked him as Werlis went behind the thick trunk of the oak tree to relieve himself.

"As you've probably already noticed, I don't belong to the human race. I am a ranger from the Dark Forest. I am an elf and the voice you heard, well, we elves have certain abilities," Gorathdin lied.

His gut told him that it was still too early to tell Vrenli the truth. He had thought a lot about him last night, but he couldn't find an answer to the question of why they hadn't known about him much earlier.

"So, elves have the ability to exchange thoughts?" Vrenli asked.

"Not all elves," Gorathdin replied, taking his fire axe, which was leaning against the trunk of the oak, and hanging the wide leather strap around his neck.

He reached for his bow, which was hanging at head height from a branch next to his quiver and slung it over his left shoulder. He then freed the leather strap of his quiver, which had become entangled in the thin branches of a bough and slung it over his right shoulder.

"We really should set off now," Gorathdin warned, looking back once more to the place where they had buried the dead thieves before following the path further west, followed by Vrenli and Werlis.

"How is it that you set off for Abketh alone? I mean, the princess of Astinhod is seriously ill and the King is sending a single man on such a long journey, don't get me wrong, you're an elf to boot," asked Vrenli.

"You're very curious," Gorathdin said with a grin.

"I think it's time to tell us the whole story, Gorathdin," demanded Werlis.

The path was now getting narrower, and they finally had to march one after the other. Gorathdin pondered for some time whether he should answer. He observed the surroundings with his sharp elven eyes and became aware of a hare, which was startled by their appearance and sought shelter under the berry bushes and wild thorns a few steps away from them.

Gorathdin's eyes continued to wander through the trees, over the bushes and shrubs until they stopped briefly at two wild boars searching for roots and tubers under the forest floor with their young and then continued past birch, maple, spruce and fir trees. On a small hill deep inside the forest, he discovered a cave on the side facing him, in front of the entrance to which he could make out two forest goblins sitting in front of a pile of animal bones.

"We should hurry, friends! We're not moving fast enough," he urged them. But he didn't tell them what he had seen to their right,

more than a thousand paces away, among the trees, bushes and shrubs.

"Gorathdin?" asked Werlis, still waiting for an answer as he began to walk faster to match Gorathdin's haste.

"Forgive me, Werlis. I was thinking," Gorathdin apologized.

Vrenli also took a few quick steps to catch up.

They were on the last stretch of their journey through the Border Forest. Gorathdin looked down at his two companions and decided to tell the story of Princess Lythinda's sudden, strange illness.

"Princess Lythinda and I are, how shall I put it, very close friends and not long ago we decided to go on a two-day ride to Regen, which lies south of Astinhod. Her father, King Grandhold, was not happy about this, but Lythinda convinced him that it would only be to the Crown's advantage if she spent some time among the people in Regen and that she would not be recognized by anyone in the simple outfit she wanted to travel in. King Grandhold finally agreed, but the look he gave me made me realize that I would bear the responsibility.

"The next day we set off from Astinhod's stables. After we had covered half the distance, we stopped at the Three Vines inn to spend the night and taste the excellent wine produced in the Regen area.

"Of course, we were not the only guests on this day, as the harvest festival was being celebrated in Regen. It has always been the custom for guests from all parts of Astinhod to be invited to this event. And so, it was this year too. The inn was full to bursting. Peasants, citizens, nobles, merchants, craftsmen, women and some children from Relvis, Kring, Umlis, Merniton, Wanderbuk and the city of Astinhod sat, stood, danced and sang in the large dining room. To my surprise, there were also inhabitants of the independent county of Kirondor among them. Even songwriters from Hildon, Tumik and wanderers from Wuxtir had come.

"To my astonishment, if the innkeeper had not immediately recognized Lythinda, who entered the inn in simple clothing and

only in my presence, and wanted to give us a table, we would probably have ridden on. Lythinda made it clear to the innkeeper that she did not want to be recognized and so we were given a table a little away from the small stage, where guests who had drunk one or two too many cups of wine sang songs which, if they were well known, were sung along by half of those present. Sometimes poems were also recited, but these were usually ended after the first two verses by boos or scraps of food being thrown at the performer. In addition to the performances by his guests, the landlord also hired fire-eaters, jugglers and minstrels, who performed three times a day.

"Princess Lythinda enjoyed being among the simple guests and the wine suited her taste. She drank two cups and was laughing at the minstrels, who were making fun of the noblemen and her father, when a man dressed in dark clothes appeared at the table behind us and bowed to her.

'My lady,' said the stranger, who had pulled his hood low over his face.

"Everything went very quickly.

"I noticed too late how he reached for her hand and said something in a language I didn't understand, bowed again and disappeared into the crowd. Lythinda looked at me in astonishment, but when almost all the guests in the inn began to laugh at a parody of Count Laars, the chief judge of Astinhod, the stranger was quickly forgotten.

"After the show was over and a songwriter from Hildon started a song that we all sang along to, I noticed how Lythinda suddenly stopped singing and her gaze became fixed. When I grabbed her hand and asked her if she wasn't feeling well, I noticed a shadow spreading from her left arm to her shoulder. She didn't answer any of my questions and when I put my hand to her forehead, I realized that she had a fever.

"At first, I thought there might be something wrong with the grilled lamb we had eaten and called for the innkeeper, but he assured me that this was impossible, as more than twenty people had eaten the lamb and no one had complained. I asked him to

help me take Lythinda upstairs to one of the guest rooms," Gorathdin explained in detail.

The three travelers were not far from the clearing that lay at the end of the Border Forest to the west.

"We will soon arrive at Aarl's hut. I hope we'll find him. It's already getting dark," Gorathdin remarked as they followed the path through the forest that led to a meadow covered with tall grasses and flowers.

"Go on," Vrenli urged him.

Gorathdin nodded.

"After we had taken her to one of the rooms, I gently placed her in one of the two beds. To cut a long story short, it was obvious that Lythinda was ill. Together with two knights from Astinhod, who were also guests at the Three Vines, I brought her back to the city. As you can imagine, King Grandhold was not happy about his daughter's condition.

After several healers had examined the princess and given her various potions to reduce her fever, with none of them having any effect, the King sent for Master Drobai, the magician from Horunguth Island. He fervently hoped that he would find out what mysterious illness his daughter was suffering from. I have a very friendly relationship with King Grandhold and I could understand the anger he harbored against me. I told him about the stranger in the Three Vines and tried to convince him that it was most likely a planned attack on his daughter. And if that were the case, then even if he had not allowed Lythinda to ride to Regen, they would certainly have found another opportunity to poison her, as I assumed.

He didn't want to believe my suspicions at first, but when Master Drobai entered the bedchamber and I told him what had happened, he supported my suspicions. He told the King that there were rumors that Erwright of Entorbis was looking for allies in Wetherid. But as these were only rumors, King Grandhold was divided. The anger he harbored against me because he held me responsible for what had happened to his daughter subsided after

a few days when Master Drobald found a book containing a recipe for making a healing potion that he believed would help Lythinda.

One of the main ingredients was the blossom of the moonflower, which he knew grew in an unknown place in the deep forests of Tawinn, but where exactly he did not know. However, he remembered the village of Abketh and that they would know where to find a moonflower. As I felt it was my duty, I agreed to travel to Tawinn to get Master Drobald a flower. King Grandhold offered to let me be accompanied by some of his warriors, but I told him that I would make much faster progress on my own. I didn't tell him that I wanted to make as little fuss as possible on my journey and therefore decided to set off alone," Gorathdin finished his story.

Suddenly Gorathdin stopped unexpectedly in the evening twilight on the narrow, well-trodden path that led across a meadow to Aarl's hut.

"Watch out! Aarl seems to have dug a pit here to keep out uninvited guests," Gorathdin warned, pointing to a spot on the ground in front of him where Vrenli and Werlis couldn't see anything unusual, even when they looked hard.

"Can't you see the leaves and dried grass lying on the ground here?" Gorathdin wondered, leaning forward.

"Yes, and?" asked Werlis.

Gorathdin smiled.

"Do you see any trees around here?" he asked the two of them.

Vrenli and Werlis shook their heads.

They avoided the pit and followed the path to a small hut surrounded by a high wooden wall. A loud and dangerous barking sound startled Vrenli and Werlis.

"Aarl! I have returned from Abketh with friends!" shouted Gorathdin over the wooden rampart.

"Quiet, wolf! It's only Gorathdin," a loud, powerful voice rang out.

A small gate in the wooden rampart creaked open and a tall, strong, tanned southerner from Thir, with half-long, stringy black hair and eyes radiating a strong self-confidence, stood before them with a large, dangerous-looking wolfhound, which he held by the scruff of his neck.

"Were you successful?" he asked Gorathdin after greeting him.

"I got a handful of flowers from Gwerlit," he replied and introduced his two companions.

"Come in, friends. My name is Aarl and this is Wolf, my friend and companion," said Aarl to Vrenli and Werlis.

The two looked fearfully at the dangerous-looking animal that reached up to their shoulders.

"He looks more like a wolf than a dog," thought Werlis and, like Vrenli, didn't dare to move.

"You don't need to be afraid; he won't hurt you," Aarl let his two little guests know and ordered Wolf to go to his place next to the hut.

The two of them slowly entered the garden with unease. Vrenli immediately noticed the flowers, bushes and shrubs growing along the wooden wall to his right, which was unusual for Tawinn. He glanced around the entire garden. In addition to the colorful blooming keel roses, the magnificent amen lilies, overgrown pommel plants and the intertwined salt roses and hedge ivy, there was a small, well-tended vegetable garden in which larger-than-average pumpkins, carrots, beans, red shining potato and many-bearing galmates sprouted. Between the vegetable garden and the weathered hut grew a wide variety of berry bushes, which Vrenli approached and tasted the blue and red fruits. Wolf, who was lying near the bushes in front of the small terrace, then began to growl. Vrenli didn't know what to do, so he simply stood still and didn't move. Wolf stood up and slowly approached him.

"Aarl! I need your help," called Vrenli, whereupon the sturdy Thirian from the south whistled back to his gray-shaded wolfhound.

"He'll get used to you quickly. Won't you, my boy," he said to Vrenli with a smile and gave Wolf a friendly pat on the back.

"Come on, let's go inside," Aarl urged his guests, leading them up the three low steps that led to the terrace and opening the front door.

In the simply furnished hut, they sat down on a rickety table in front of a small cooking area. Aarl searched for four mugs, which he placed on the center of the tabletop along with a bottle of wine.

"We have discovered one of your pitfalls," said Gorathdin.

"The one on the eastern path, I suppose. The forest goblins still see me as a specialty after all the years I've lived here, so I must protect Wolf and I from their attempts to take us as feast roasts. Those damn creatures still haven't stopped giving me a hard time after all the failed attacks," Aarl told them as he poured them wine.

"Forest goblins?" asked Vrenli and Werlis in amazement.

"Yes, forest goblins. Those hairy little devils with their razor-sharp claws and teeth. How I hate them. A small horde, I think there are about fifty of them, lives north of here near the ruins," Aarl explained angrily.

"But I thought all the goblins had been driven out of Wetherid long ago. In any case, their last attack on our village was more than two hundred years ago. My grandfather told me that before his time, an army of humans, elves, Abkether and dwarves had driven the snow, forest and cave goblins out of Wetherid," Vrenli objected.

"By all appearances, they must have overlooked some of them," Aarl remarked.

"They try to get in here two or three times a year, but my traps and wolf stopped them every time," he added proudly, pouring them another glass of wine.

"You must certainly be hungry," Aarl remarked, got up, went to the cooking area and brought a piece of meat weighing several kilograms from a small chamber, wrapped in large, spicy-smelling green leaves.

"I told you, when you came back, I would prepare us a wild boar roast that you won't forget for the rest of your life," Aarl said to Gorathdin.

He removed some of the leaves and showed him the deep red, juicy piece of wild boar meat.

"I didn't know that Gorathdin and you were friends. Have you known each other for a while?" asked Vrenli.

Aarl looked at him wordlessly for a moment.

"I don't know if you can call seven days long," he replied with a smile and looked at Gorathdin, who was talking to Werlis about wild herbs.

"Only seven days?" Vrenli asked.

"Yes. Gorathdin was on his journey from Astinhod to Abketh when we met in the forest southeast of the ruins. He appeared just at the right moment. It was a favorable twist of fate. I was hunting and had my attention on a boar and was about to shoot an arrow at it when I was ambushed by three forest goblins. Wolf couldn't help me against the attackers as he was having a hard fight with the boar he had tracked down. Gorathdin saved my life, so to speak, as one of those little devils had knocked me unconscious with his club," Aarl recounted, now completely freeing the piece of boar meat from the leaves and beginning to rub it with salt.

"If they hadn't surprised you from behind, you would certainly have dealt with the three of them on your own," Gorathdin objected.

"That may be. But not only did you save me, you also killed the boar," Aarl replied happily.

Aarl lifted the piece of boar meat in front of him with both hands.

"You should get some rest. You still have a long journey ahead of you. I'll prepare the roast in the meantime," Aarl urged his guests.

He poured them some more wine and went out into the garden, where he picked some herbs and put them in the piece of boar

meat he had cut in half. He took it to a spot just a few steps away from Wolf's favorite place and laid it on a large flat stone, next to which was a hole in the ground covered with fir and spruce branches. He pulled the large, heavy branches aside, then fetched some thin logs from the pile of wood next to the hut and used them to light a fire in the hole he had dug a day earlier. Little by little, he added larger pieces to the flames and when he thought it was enough, he went into the garden and fetched potatoes, carrots and a pumpkin, which he cleaned by the fire and wrapped in the large, thick leaves of a tan tree.

"The vegetable packet is ready, my boy," he said to Wolf, who had joined him.

While he waited for the wood in the pit to burn down to embers, he wrapped the boar meat in new, fresh leaves.

Gorathdin, Vrenli and Werlis, who had been watching his preparations from the terrace, had dozed off on the long wooden bench where they were sitting. Meanwhile, Aarl placed the wild boar meat wrapped in leaves together with the vegetables in the hot embers. Carefully, he gradually poured the fine pebbly sand that he had laboriously collected for this purpose from the southern stone hills into the hole in the ground.

"We're ready, my boy. Now we just have to wait," he said to Wolf and went out into the dark meadow in front of the wooden rampart to check his traps.

Gorathdin had given him some suggestions on his first visit as to how he could better protect his home from the unwanted visits of the forest goblins, and Aarl had had enough time over the past six days to put some of these suggestions into practice.

It took him a whole day to bring the thorny plants from the nearby forest, which he then hid to the north in front of the wooden rampart, among the tall grasses.

He spent another two days hammering pointed wooden stakes into the ground on the inside of the wall, at a distance of about half a step. Gorathdin had explained to him that if the forest goblins

succeeded in overcoming the high wall, at least some of them would die or at least be seriously injured by the tips of the stakes.

Because the forest goblins had once tried to burn down the rampart, Aarl had taken precautions and placed more than ten water buckets, which he filled up once a week at the river Taneth, in various places within the rampart. Aarl checked the water level in all the buckets and, as he still had enough time before the boar roast was ready, he set off for the nearby river with four empty buckets, accompanied by Wolf. It was already night when he arrived at the swampy riverbank, which was covered in mist. He climbed onto the footbridge he had built especially for fetching water and filled the buckets. But as he was about to make his way back, a multitude of small torchlights appeared at the nearby edge of the forest. Wolf began to growl.

"That's all I need. Forest goblins. The whole horde," Aarl said angrily to Wolf.

"Looks like they've decided on a big final blow after all these years. That's at least fifty, my boy," he said aloud.

Wolf bared his sharp teeth and began to pace back and forth restlessly.

Aarl dropped the buckets and since there was at most a distance of seven hundred or eight hundred paces between him and the sinewy, emaciated creatures, he began to run as fast as he could in the direction of his hut.

Wolf followed him.

"Forest goblins, forest goblins. The whole hordel!" he shouted from afar.

Gorathdin, Vrenli and Werlis woke up at his warning shouts, hurried into the hut, took their weapons and ran to the rampart, where they climbed onto half-height wooden ladders to the right and left of the gate, which Aarl had leaned against so that he could shoot his arrows at approaching enemies.

"Their last attempt to get in here was no more than three months ago. Strange that they are trying again so soon," said Aarl,

out of breath, as he entered the garden through the gate, which he immediately barricaded.

"That's at least fifty," Gorathdin stated, as he could already see the rapidly approaching forest goblins armed with clubs and blowpipes with his sharp elven eyes.

Aarl ran into the hut, where he put on his leather belt with the throwing knives and took his bow and quiver from the wall bracket. He hurried towards the free wooden ladder next to Vrenli and Werlis' and climbed up. He looked out over the wide grassy landscape in the darkness, where a few torchlights were shining brighter as they approached the rampart. There was no wind, and he could already hear the slightly stooped, emaciated creatures, their wizened, earth-colored bodies wrapped in skins, creeping through the tall grass. Wolf sensed the forest goblins coming closer and closer to them and began to bark loudly. The intense, musty smell they gave off caught Wolf's fine nose. He stood behind the gate, snarling, jumping up and down and scratching at it from time to time. Gorathdin's dark green eyes began to light up as the creatures came within range of his bow.

"I didn't think I was so important to them that the whole tribe would come. Strange, they will be expecting greater losses and all this just for a little human flesh," said Aarl to Vrenli, who was standing just a few steps away from him and felt fear at the sight of the strange, menacing-looking creatures.

Gorathdin quickly placed two arrows in the string of his bow and fired them at the approaching attackers. When two forest goblins hit in the middle of the head fell to the ground, Aarl also shot an arrow. Vrenli and Werlis plucked up courage and hurled projectiles from their slingshots down from the rampart at the torchlit pack. Three of the forest goblins were hit on various parts of their bodies, badly wounded and incapacitated.

The leader of the horde, who was clad in wolf skin and wore small deer antlers on his head, stopped abruptly. His shrill, snarling cry, which made Werlis' blood run cold, was the signal to his horde to stop.

"Seems they didn't expect me to have company," Aarl exclaimed delightedly, hoping they would back off.

But to his disappointment, the forest goblins formed into three groups and approached the rampart from different directions.

"Get ready for them. They're throwing their torches!" shouted Gorathdin warningly, pointing with his hand to the few half-full buckets of water.

"Vrenli, Werlis, take care of the water!" shouted Aarl, who fired three arrows at the little devils, as he called them, one after the other. Two of the arrows hit their target.

The three groups of forest goblins had now come close enough to use their blowpipes and some of them were already putting them to their bluish, cracked, dripping lips. Aarl immediately ducked behind the wooden wall.

"Watch out, the arrows are poisoned," he warned the others.

Gorathdin, who did not seek shelter behind the rampart like Aarl, but shot his arrows at the approaching torchbearers, was hit by several small, thin poison arrows. Three of the torchbearers who were not stopped by Gorathdin's arrows threw their burning straw torches at the wooden rampart, which slowly began to burn.

"Gorathdin!" shouted Vrenli, who had seen several of the poisoned arrows hit Gorathdin's body and wanted to run towards him.

"Take care of the fire. Don't worry about me!" Gorathdin called out to his friends.

He then placed two arrows in the string of his bow, several times in succession, and decimated the group of forest goblins heading north-east towards the rampart by almost half. Many of the enraged, snarling creatures coming from the north fell into Aarl's traps and died in pain. Vrenli and Werlis, who struggled to extinguish the fires along the rampart, were shocked to the core as the desperate screams of those who fell into the pits equipped with pointed stakes echoed through the air. The following rows climbed with their bare feet onto the thorny plants hidden in the grass and hissed in pain.

Neither Aarl, Vrenli, Werlis nor Gorathdin noticed how Wolf, who was running up and down the rampart, kept baring his teeth, growling and barking. Suddenly, he leapt with several bounds onto one of the ladders and from there over the rampart onto the meadow, where he lunged at the forest goblins approaching from the north-west with his mouth wide open.

"Wolf! No! Come back!" Aarl shouted as loud as he could down the rampart.

He was able to stop two of the creatures from attacking his friend and companion by hurling his throwing knives at them. Wolf lunged at four of the creatures carrying a moss-covered ladder tied together with branches and vines and tore off several of their limbs with his powerful teeth.

"Good boy. Come back now!" Aarl called out to him.

Just as Wolf was about to answer his master's call, he was struck by several poisoned arrows.

Wolf howled, tucked his tail, turned to and fro and tried to stagger back to the gate, but two forest goblins, not much bigger than Vrenli and Werlis, knocked him to the ground with their clubs.

Aarl's eyes widened in pain.

"Help me!" he shouted, firing several arrows at the forest goblins and then trying to climb over the rampart.

Gorathdin noticed this in time, however, and with several light and airy leaps, he jumped from his ladder onto the one next to it and finally onto Aarl's, preventing him from jumping in front of the rampart at the last moment.

"It's too late," said Gorathdin, holding him by the shoulder.

"Wolf!" cried Aarl, devastated by the loss of his friend.

The forest goblin horde, reduced by more than half, decided to retreat.

"It's over!" cried Gorathdin with relief and climbed down the ladder, followed by Aarl.

He sat down on the ground next to the berry bushes and began to pull out the small, thin, needle-like arrows that had hit him. Aarl opened the gate and hurried to Wolf, who lay dead, just a few paces from the rampart, next to the forest goblins he had mauled. He knelt down and gently stroked his gray fur.

"I'll miss you, my boy," he whispered on the verge of tears, picking Wolf up and carrying him into the garden, where he buried him in his favorite spot.

Vrenli and Werlis stood on the ladders for some time, looking after the departing forest goblins with relief, and joined Gorathdin a little later.

"How come the poison didn't harm you?" asked Vrenli, curious and amazed.

"We elves are immune to plant poisons. An extremely useful gift that has been bestowed upon my people," Gorathdin replied with a smile, whereupon the two helped him remove the poisoned arrows with the utmost care.

It took them some time, and, in the end, they had pulled more than fifteen arrows out of him. Gorathdin took them, looked around the garden and the rampart with his sharp elven eyes and collected the projectiles he had found there so that no one could be injured by them later. He looked out through the open gate into the darkness of the meadow.

"Let's burn the bodies of the forest goblins. Their stench could attract wild animals," he suggested, and Vrenli and Werlis agreed after a moment's hesitation.

They went out in front of the rampart and, a few hundred paces from Aarl's hut, began to lay the bodies of the forest goblins on top of each other.

After clearing the meadow of the hideous creatures, Gorathdin set fire to the disgusting pile. A dark, thick cloud of smoke rose into the sky until dawn, spreading a foul-smelling stench over the entire lowland.

When the three of them returned to the garden after their work was done, it was already morning and Aarl was still sitting on the spot where he had buried Wolf.

"It's always very painful to lose a close friend," Aarl said to them and went ahead into the hut.

"He gave his life to save ours," Vrenli said trying to cheer up Aarl, who was washing off the traces of the fight in the washbasin standing on a dresser next to the hob and nodding silently.

"This is the second time I've lost a close friend," Aarl let them know and placed a bottle of wine and four cups on the table.

"I'm still amazed that the whole tribe came. I already told Vrenli that I didn't know I was so important to them. Surely they were expecting great losses," Aarl continued and sat down at the table with his comrades-in-arms.

Gorathdin thought about what Aarl had said for a moment and came to the conclusion that the forest goblins' attack might not have had anything to do with Aarl, but with him. However, he kept his fears to himself, brushed off the ominous thoughts and tried to enjoy the wine with his friends.

They talked a lot and when Vrenli and Werlis talked about Abketh and kept mentioning the words home, peace, friends and family, Aarl's face became thoughtful. He felt a pang of homesickness.

"I would like to travel with you to Astinhod," he revealed in surprise and looked at them, waiting for an answer.

"I want to leave Tawinn and since I don't really know where to go on my own, you would be doing me a great favor," Aarl let the others know.

Gorathdin looked at Vrenli and Werlis for a few moments. When he felt that they agreed, he agreed to Aarl's request.

"Of course you can travel with us to Astinhod, Aarl. We would be delighted," replied Gorathdin. Vrenli and Werlis were pleased that there were now four of them. They smiled and nodded in agreement.

The Legacy of the Elves

"You'll no doubt be hungry after all this excitement and work. I'll get the roast boar out of the pit. It will already be cold, but its taste will still delight you, friends, and afterwards we should get some rest, the night was long and tiring. I can feel my muscles aching," Aarl finally said, getting up from the table and walking out into the garden to the fire pit.

He picked up the shovel lying next to it and scooped the fine, pebbly sand out of the hole in the ground until he came across the two parcels. The leaf packet with the vegetables was completely charred, but the roast seemed to have survived well, apart from the slightly burnt underside. He went back inside, removed the charred bits of leaves and scraped away the burnt crust with a sharp knife. He put it on a wooden board and placed it in the middle of the table.

"Here you are, friends. Enjoy your meal," said Aarl and sat down with Gorathdin, Vrenli and Werlis.

The three of them had to admit that they had never eaten such a tasty roasted wild boar before and after they had almost finished it and emptied a second bottle of wine, they spread out their skins on the floor next to the stove, lay down on them and fell asleep.

The Ruins of Tawinn

When Vrenli and Werlis woke up refreshed early the next morning, Gorathdin was already helping Aarl make arrangements to leave his hut in the small clearing near the Border Forest in Tawinn.

"Good morning, friends. There's still some of the roast left and the tea should still be warm," called Aarl to Vrenli and Werlis, who had just stepped out onto the small terrace in front of the hut.

"We'll leave as soon as you've regained your strength," Gorathdin called out to them, to which they nodded and went back into the hut. They sat down at the table and while they talked about yesterday's battle with the forest goblins, they ate the last of the roast boar and drank tea.

"I'm ready, friends!" Aarl announced as he entered the hut, taking his leather belt with the throwing knives from the wall and put it on.

Vrenli and Werlis tied up their travel bags, drank again from their cups and followed Aarl and Gorathdin into the garden.

"I'll be right back," Aarl promised and went to Wolf's grave to say goodbye to him.

As they stepped out through the door onto the meadow in front of the rampart, Aarl stopped for a moment and looked back. He suddenly felt strange. He now had to say goodbye to his home, where he had spent more than twenty-five years of his life.

"I had a good time here," he said, following Gorathdin, Vrenli and Werlis as they walked north across the spring-like meadow.

Their destination was the river Taneth, the largest flowing body of water in Tawinn, with a riverbed more than twenty paces wide and a considerable depth of water. To cross it, they had to walk for half the day across the wide meadow plains and hilly grasslands until they finally reached the bridge to the northwest.

"Our next destination is the Ruins of Tawinn, where we will camp for the night and cross Lake Taneth the next day. We'll have to keep at it. The attack by the forest goblins has cost us a day," said Gorathdin, who was keeping a close eye on the surroundings, for if the attack by the dangerous creatures had anything to do with him, they might come across some of them again.

But when they had left the Border Forest, which lay to the south-east far behind them, and he saw the valley in which the Ruins of Tawinn lay, Gorathdin was reassured.

The narrow bridge made of rope and wood was only a few hundred paces away from them when images of women and children screaming in pain flashed through Vrenli's mind. Behind huge, lambent walls of fire, he recognized the outline of a city. Vrenli stopped in horror and rubbed his eyes.

"Was that a dream?" he asked himself as he stared at the ruins that lay before him on the horizon.

"Vrenli, hurry up!" Werlis, who had gone on with Gorathdin and Aarl, called to him.

Vrenli walked slowly towards his companions. His face was white as a sheet and his eyes reflected horror.

"What's wrong with you?" asked Werlis anxiously.

"I saw terrible pictures in front of me. It was like a nightmare," Vrenli replied, panting with excitement.

"What are you talking about? What pictures?" Werlis asked him, putting his travel bag down for a moment.

"Horrible pictures of dying women and children. And I saw a city on fire," said Vrenli, upset.

"It's probably just the effort of the march, you're tired. Do you want us to take a break?" Werlis offered.

Vrenli shook his head.

"Must have been a daydream," remarked Aarl and walked on slowly.

Gorathdin suspected that Vrenli was having a vision, but he did not speak to him about it, and instead urged him to move on. Vrenli was still thinking about the images he had seen as he followed his companions the few hundred steps to the bridge.

"We should cross one by one. I'm not sure it would hold all our weight," Gorathdin suggested as he stopped just before the narrow, collapsible bridge, whose tree trunks were rotten and whose ropes were brittle.

He was then the first to cross, followed by Aarl, Vrenli and Werlis. Once on the other side of the river, they followed the path that led through the flat valley to the northeast. They could already see the peaks of the Ice Mountains towering into the clouds, two to three days' journey away, on the horizon to the north-east.

"Is it very cold up there?" asked Werlis.

"The Ice Mountains are covered in snow all year round. On the pass, which is the only one in Tawinn that leads to Astinhod, many have frozen to death. Mainly because they wanted to recover briefly from the strenuous climb and therefore stayed out in the

cold," Gorathdin replied, pointing admonishingly in the direction of the peaks.

"Frozen to death?" asked Werlis.

Gorathdin nodded.

Werlis looked uneasily at the snow- and ice-covered peaks and pulled his brown cloak tighter.

They hiked north for a while shortly after midday and then all afternoon across the wide plain to the east. In the late afternoon, they reached the first evidence of the once splendid and lively city of Tawinn. The remains of the walls, overgrown with ivy, thorny plants and tall grasses, were once home to noblemen, merchants and farmers who tilled the fields around the city. The path they followed became wide and overgrown with green, bushy grasses, but in some places they could still see the cobblestones with which it was once laid.

There was little evidence of the life that had once prevailed here more than five hundred years ago. Nature had spread over the ruins of the town, reclaiming its property piece by piece. Large, thick oak trees grew on the former village square and a small, dry spruce forest lay where the stables used to be. Vrenli looked at the crumbling town wall, which was only more than ten steps high in some places. Berry bushes, thorny plants and lianas grew on the remains of the former castle, which had crumbled to its foundations and was now home to wild boars, foxes, hares and pheasants.

The travelers crossed the crumbling city until they arrived at the western end, at a round, two-story building that had survived the centuries more-or-less intact. There was no longer a roof, windows or doors, but the foundation walls, apart from a few places, had not yet crumbled.

"This seems to me to be a suitable and safe place to camp for the night," Gorathdin decided and entered through the low but wide archway.

"Let's go upstairs. Except for a few steps, the staircase still seems to be intact," Gorathdin suggested and climbed the steps, light-footed.

His comrades followed him.

The stone floor on the upper floor had collapsed by more than half and there was a hole at least eight paces wide in the western outer wall, next to the staircase, which gave them a view of the ruins of the former city of Tawinn. The atmosphere was gloomy; it was cold and the remaining light of dusk was getting fainter.

"We will spend the night here," Gorathdin said to his friends and laid his fire axe, bow and quiver on the ground.

"Soon it will be so dark that you won't be able to see your hand in front of your eyes and it will get noticeably colder. I'm going to go back outside and collect firewood," Gorathdin announced and made his way back down with Werlis, who offered to help him.

Vrenli and Aarl followed them into the basement a little later, unaware that their night's lodging was a former temple. They looked around curiously. Apart from the stone walls and a weathered floor painting in one of the rooms, they couldn't see anything of interest, so they went back upstairs.

"What will you do in Astinhod?" Vrenli asked Aarl, who was standing next to him in front of the hole in the outer wall and looking out over the crumbling city.

"I don't know yet exactly. I think I will stay in Astinhod for a while and then probably return to my village in the south. I have the feeling that I can only be truly happy there," Aarl replied slowly and thoughtfully.

Just as Vrenli was about to ask him why he had left his village so many years ago, Gorathdin and Werlis returned. Gorathdin had collected a considerable amount of firewood, but Werlis was carrying two pheasants in his hands instead of branches and twigs.

"I came across them and thought it wouldn't hurt to stock up a little more," said Werlis with a grin.

Aarl helped Gorathdin light a fire, while Vrenli and Werlis plucked the pheasants and then put them on two branches, slowly

turning them over the fire. They talked about the ruins and conjectured what the former city might have looked like.

By the time the pheasants had finished roasting, it was already pitch black. Vrenli could not deny that there was something eerie about this place. After they had eaten the pheasants, Gorathdin and Werlis began to talk about the Ice Mountains, while Aarl lay down on the bearskin spread out on the ground in front of him and listened to Gorathdin's stories.

But it wasn't long before he fell asleep, snoring in the memory of his Ice Mountains crossing more than twenty-five years ago.

Vrenli stood up from the fireplace, walked to the hole in the outer wall and looked at the ruins, dimly lit by the moonlight. He became thoughtful and his ruminations brought back a memory. He now understood the pictures he had seen earlier near the bridge. The place they were in was the home of his ancestors.

"The Tawinnian people. Now I remember," he rejoiced silently.

He also remembered a page from the book on which there was a picture of a crystal.

"The star of Tawinn. The Star People, that's what they were called before by the humans, elves and dwarves," he recalled, but with his memory came questions.

"Was it so long ago that everyone in Abketh had forgotten the city of Tawinn? How many generations had passed on the history of our people to their children? Am I perhaps part of the first generation to forget the Tawinnian culture or was the forgetting a long time ago?" he asked himself, although he knew that he would not find an answer to these questions on his own.

"Maybe Gwerlit could have told me something about the Old Ones," he thought, and the more he thought about it, the more tired he became.

He was about to avert his eyes from the ruins when he unconsciously reached for the second leather pouch on his belt and noticed that it was getting warmer. He opened it and pulled out the crystal, which shone with a warm, bright blue light.

"The Oracle of Tawinn," he thought.

"Maybe that's the answer to my questions," he murmured quietly.

"Are you alright?" whispered Werlis, who was lying next to Gorathdin and Aarl, who had already fallen asleep.

"I'm just thinking about something, Werlis. Go to sleep," Vrenli whispered to him, whereupon Werlis rolled over and fell asleep a few moments later.

Vrenli stared at the crystal, which he was still holding in front of him. The bright blue light now shone directly into his eyes, and he was startled when he saw an image inside the crystal. His curiosity, far greater than his fear, did not allow him to take his eyes off the image. He saw a wide valley bordered by dense forests to the west and north. To the south he saw large fields of wheat and corn and to the northeast was a lake.

"That's Tawinn," he remarked, whereupon the image began to blur.

But it didn't take a moment for a new picture to emerge. A picture that was full of life. A huge city, surrounded by white walls about twenty steps high, stood in the center of a wide valley. A cobblestone road led from a bridge to the city gate in the southwest. Several guards, dressed in leather armor and armed with short swords and lances, stood at the ivy-and rose-covered round city gate, chatting with some farmers who were pulling handcarts into the city with part of their harvest. The road leading into the town was decorated with magnificent, colorful flowerbeds to the left and right. Every few steps there were oil lanterns which, when it got dark, illuminated the town. The inhabitants were dressed in gray or white tunics. Only the craftsmen or farmers, as it seemed, wore brown cotton work clothes. The language they spoke was foreign to Vrenli.

His gaze fell on a building that caught his attention. It was made of white marble blocks and had three pointed towers that rose to the left, right and center of the front. Several round columns decorated with stucco supported an elongated, dome-shaped roof that covered the steep staircase, which had more than a hundred steps and led to the entrance of the building. Four blonde-haired

women in white tunics walked slowly up the stairs and entered the building.

Several guards stood in the long corridor, where fine tapestries and paintings hung on the walls to the left and right in massive, large frames. The four women followed the corridor, which led them into a high, sumptuously furnished hall decorated with wall, ceiling and floor paintings. In the middle of the hall stood a throne carved from white marble, on which sat a rotund, long-bearded old man clad in a robe made of fine fabrics and wearing a shimmering crystal crown.

"We had a king?" Vrenli wondered as he watched the four women approach the throne and bow deeply to what he assumed was the King of Tawinn.

The image began to blur, but, as before, it didn't take a moment for a new image to emerge. A fire was burning on top of the Ice Mountains and Vrenli could hear warning chimes ringing from the temple. Women in white tunics knelt around a huge, precious-looking crystal that shimmered in a bright blue light and stood on a marble pedestal in the middle of the lower hall of the temple. They stared in horror at the image inside the crystal, which showed knights in black armor, several dozen hideous orcs in war paint, and a handful of giant ogres marching across the Ice Mountains. Four of the women kneeling in front of the crystal stood up and left the temple. The image in Vrenli's crystal blurred and the bright blue light went out.

Excited, he went to Werlis and woke him up.

"What is it?" Werlis mumbled with his eyes closed.

"I told you about the crystal that Gwerlit gave me," whispered Vrenli.

Werlis opened his eyes.

"What crystal?" he grumbled, slightly annoyed at his nocturnal awakening.

"The Oracle of Tawinn," Vrenli whispered emphatically.

"Yes, I remember. What about it, have you lost it?" Werlis sat up.

"No. On the contrary, it's here with me and you won't believe what just happened," Vrenli replied.

Vrenli told Werlis, who carefully threw some branches into the fire, what he had seen inside the crystal.

"I'm starting to worry about you. Have you been dreaming again?" Werlis questioned because he couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"No. I wasn't dreaming. I really could see Tawinn more than five hundred years ago and imagine we had a king," Vrenli said excitedly, forgetting to whisper.

Gorathdin and Aarl woke up.

"Forgive me, friends. I didn't mean to wake you up," said Vrenli apologetically.

The two of them looked at him sleepily.

"Why aren't you sleeping?" asked Gorathdin, sitting upright.

"Something incredible has happened," Vrenli replies enthusiastically.

"Forest goblins?" Aarl guessed, still lying drowsily on his bearskin.

"No. I have seen something. Here in this crystal," said Vrenli and took the Oracle of Tawinn out of the leather pouch.

"You saw something in a crystal? I think you're in desperate need of sleep, my little friend," Aarl advised, turning over to continue sleeping.

"Can I have a look at it?" asked Gorathdin.

Vrenli hesitated for a moment before handing him the crystal.

Gorathdin felt the cold crystal, placed it against his forehead for a few moments and closed his eyes. When he opened them again, they lit up briefly.

"Magic," whispered Gorathdin.

"I saw pictures inside the crystal. They showed me the city of Tawinn five hundred years ago. Our ancestors were the Tawinnians. I am quite sure of it. They looked just like us. They

were the same height, the same build, only their language was different and they had a king. We had a king! Can you imagine that?" Vrenli shared excitedly.

"Are you sure you weren't dreaming?" Werlis remained skeptical.

"Werlis, I wasn't dreaming. Absolutely not!" Vrenli became restless.

"So, you think we're descended from the Tawinnians? Don't you think we would have been taught that if we were?" Werlis yawned and his eyes almost fell shut.

Gorathdin placed a thick branch in the waning fire.

"We are descended from the Tawinnians, from who else? What do you know of the ancients? Did you think our village has always existed? Werlis, think about it. I beg you. We are Tawinnians!" shouted Vrenli energetically.

"Hm. I don't know anything about the Old Ones, I have to agree with you. But then again, I've never asked myself who they were. But I think it's a bold claim that we're descended from the Tawinnians," said Werlis, shaking his head.

"But it would be conceivable. I don't think it's that far-fetched," said Gorathdin.

Vrenli was determined to convince Werlis that their ancestors were the Tawinnians and took the oracle out of Gorathdin's hands again.

"You don't believe me?" Vrenli played with the fine silver chain.

"Be honest, the story with the pictures about the city of Tawinn sounds a bit crazy. You're probably just tired. Let's talk about it again tomorrow," replied Werlis, who didn't want to hurt Vrenli's feelings.

"Then see for yourself," said Vrenli, holding the crystal in front of Werlis' eyes. Nothing happened.

"Ask the oracle who our ancestors were," demanded Vrenli, still holding the crystal in front of Werlis.

"All right, but only if you promise me that you'll sleep afterwards," Werlis replied.

Vrenli nodded.

"Who were our ancestors, Oracle of Tawinn?" asked Werlis.

Vrenli's eyes began to shine.

"He'll see in a moment," he thought.

But nothing happened.

"I can't see a picture," confessed Werlis, who hoped he could lie down now.

"Wait a moment," Vrenli told him, watching the crystal closely.

"It doesn't even shine in the bright blue light," thought Vrenli disappointedly.

"Let's go to sleep now, Vrenli," Werlis yawned again.

"It doesn't really matter who our ancestors were," he added and lay down.

"You have to believe me. I really did see pictures in the crystal," Vrenli hesitantly put it back into the small leather pouch.

"I believe you, Vrenli, and I can understand your excitement about what you have seen, but you should get some sleep now. We have a long way to Lake Taneth tomorrow," Gorathdin reassured him in a gentle voice.

"You're right. Forgive me for waking you up. It's just that we young Abkether don't really know anything about our ancestors," Vrenli explained and lay down next to Werlis on his cloak from the Dark Forest.

Gorathdin looked gently into Vrenli's eyes.

"I can understand what's going on inside you, Vrenli. I also thought a lot about the history of the rangers in my youth because we had also forgotten our ancestors and it took me a lot of time and effort to establish a connection with the elves from the Glorious Valley. But we really should go to sleep now," Gorathdin said emphatically and lay down again.

Vrenli turned away from the fire and clutched the small leather pouch.

The desire to look into the crystal again did not allow him to fall asleep, so he waited a little longer to make sure his friends were fast asleep before he took the crystal out again and waited for the light blue light. But after a while, when nothing had happened, he wanted to put it back in the leather pouch.

"How I wish I had known what happened to the Tawinnians after the city of Tawinn was destroyed," Vrenli whispered softly.

The crystal lit up bright blue.

Full of anticipation, he placed it next to him on the cloak. It only took a few moments for a picture to appear inside, showing a small group of no more than fifty Tawinnians. The majority of them were women and children, but only a few men who were capable of fighting. They appeared to be fleeing from the enemy, who had completely destroyed the city of Tawinn. They headed east, passing straight through a dense forest to remain unseen by possible pursuers, and then reached a clearing where there was a river to the south, from which they continued west. The group settled down in the shelter of the surrounding woods. Before the image blurred, Vrenli saw a woman pulling a small piece of the crystal from the Temple of Tawinn out from under her tunic, and this small fragment looked very similar to his own.

"Now I have certainty. We Abkether are descendants of the Tawinnians," he thought and immediately wondered who the enemy was that had destroyed the city of Tawinn and killed most of its inhabitants.

Vrenli looked at the crystal.

"Who were the enemies and why didn't anyone come to the aid of the Tawinnians?" he asked the Oracle of Tawinn, whereupon another image appeared inside the crystal that caught his eye.

Vrenli saw many hundreds of heavily armed humans in black armor moving from Fallgar in the east to Wetherid, marching into what appeared to be a city inside a mountain. He watched as many as hundreds of dwarves fled into deep, dark tunnels leading steeply

down into the mountain. Ogres and orcs from Raga Gur followed the humans through the city in the mountain, killing many of the dwarves who opposed them. When the attackers had fought their way through, they continued across the mountains towards Astinhod. Vrenli could hear the booming bugles of Astinhod announcing the approaching enemy. A battle lasting several days outside the walls of the city of Astinhod, which the enemy was unable to take, was followed by a siege lasting several weeks.

Vrenli watched as several hundred black knights, dozens of orcs and several ogres formed to the west of the tent camp outside Astinhod and then marched across the Ice Mountains to Tawinn. The remaining army of about five hundred men outside the walls of Astinhod was pushed back to the city in the mountain by the defenders, who were aided by strange-looking creatures, and from there, with the help of the dwarves, pursued back across the eastern border of Wetherid to Druhn.

However, there was no help for Tawinn. The humans, orcs and ogres, who lost more than a hundred men in the snow and ice on their way through the Ice Mountains, set up camp near the city of Tawinn after crossing Lake Taneth on rafts. In the forest between the city and Lake Taneth, they began to cut down vast quantities of trees and used them to build simple, but destructive war machines. After just a few days, they had three catapults and a ballista ready to march on the city, which was less than a day's journey from Lake Taneth.

Vrenli heard a soft, feminine voice accompanying the images he saw. The Tawinnians were not prepared for such an attack. They felt safe in their valley, whose only access was the pass over the Ice Mountains. There was no need for them to learn the art of bearing arms. They were peaceful people and the few lightly armed guards, whose only task was to defend the town from wild animals and the forest goblins that lived in the adjacent forests, were overrun by the humans from Druhn, who were two to three heads taller, the stocky orcs from Raga Gur and the giant ogres from Wahmuther. The voice Vrenli heard fell silent.

The attackers caused a bloodbath in the city of Tawinn, killing women, old people and even children. They searched every house, hall and room. Vrenli could not see who or what they were looking for. The picture showed a mighty, hell-hot wall of flames, several tens of paces wide, burning in front of Tawinn's castle and bathing the city in a dark orange, bluish light. Lamentations, whimpers and cries of fear and despair emanated from the castle, where the king was tied to his throne and executed by two dark-cloaked figures with lifeless eyes before the eyes of some Tawinnians who had sought shelter in the throne room. The images Vrenli saw began to blur and the bright blue light of the crystal went out.

Vrenli cried. He could feel all the pain and anguish of the Tawinnians he had seen in the crystal.

"They didn't hurt anyone. They lived peacefully in their valley. Who was responsible for this terrible atrocity?" sobbed Vrenli, to which a voice behind him replied.

"The Entorbis dynasty, which has dedicated itself to the shadow, to evil, since its inception. They use the power they derive from this for their own selfish ends, and one of these ends is to subjugate, exploit and enslave Wetherid. They exchange love, peace, compassion, helpfulness, tolerance, honesty, honor and respect for hatred, belligerence, self-aggrandizement, greed, intolerance, falsehood, dishonor, malice and contempt for life. To strengthen their power, they commit crimes like this one. Their realm of Druhn lies in the north of Fallgar, which is a land of evil. Cunning mist elves from Marnog Jar, deceitful gray dwarves from Ingar, demonic undeads from Zantranos, angry, ugly ogres from Wahmuther and insidious orcs from Raga Gur dwell there and they all follow the same power, the power of Entorbis and its shadow mages. It casts a spell over the inhabitants of Fallgar. It blinds them, makes them strong and unscrupulous. They are all only looking out for their own advantage," the voice revealed.

Vrenli jumped up, startled, and reached for his short sword.

Gorathdin and Aarl, who woke up as a result, immediately took up their weapons and stood beside him protectively. Werlis first thought that Vrenli had seen something in his crystal again and

turned around with half-opened eyes. He almost froze to stone when he saw the glowing outline of a female figure hovering about two steps above the ground.

"Do not be afraid. You don't need weapons," said the female being in a gentle voice.

But none of the four were prepared to lay down their weapons, instead holding them up protectively.

"My name is Lorothe. I was a Tawinnian priestess, and I have come to deliver a message from the ancients to Vrenli," she said.

She floated towards Vrenli.

"To me? What message?" Vrenli stammered and took a step back.

"When you return to your village from your journey, it will be your task from then on to teach the Abkether, as you call yourselves today, the history of the Tawinnians. You must never forget what happened and, above all, who was responsible for it. From now on, you shall be called Vrenli DaFanorlan, which means the preserver in Abketh's language. Bear this name with respect and pride. Preserve the history of the ancients," said the priestess.

A warm, pleasant light shone from her hand onto Vrenli's forehead, on which the image of a star appeared.

"Farewell Vrenli DaFanorlan," she said as her disembodied form slowly dissolved.

Vrenli, Werlis, Gorathdin and Aarl could not quite believe what they had seen and heard and stared wordlessly for some time at the place where the priestess's spirit had disappeared.

Sleep was out of the question that night, so they sat around the fire and gazed into the flickering flames, amazed but also pensive at the appearance of the Tawinnian priestess who had come to them from a long-forgotten time.

Vrenli wasn't sure how he felt. Should he be afraid or feel honored to have been given this task by the ancients?

"Why me? Why not Werlis or someone else? Gwerlit, perhaps. Yes, Gwerlit would be the right person," he thought.

He very much doubted that he was the right person for the job. He was still young, had no children and no wife. He enjoyed a good reputation in Abketh through his grandfather, that was true; he probably had enough influence to fulfill this task. But there was also the village council, which he assumed wanted to hide Abketh from the rest of Wetherid.

"Am I really the right person for this? Am I strong enough to stand up to the village council?" he pondered as Werlis interrupted his thoughts.

"I'm sorry that I didn't believe you. I have thought about it and I now think it is right and important that the history of our ancestors is taught in our village and I am proud that you should take on this task, Vrenli DaFanorlan," said Werlis, standing up and hugging him.

"Thank you, Werlis. I'm glad to have you as a friend," replied Vrenli, wiping a tear from his eye.

"I also consider it a very honorable task, Vrenli DaFanorlan," said Gorathdin, who was glad that Werlis had broken the silence.

"Very honorable," murmured Aarl, who was the only one of them lying on the ground and almost falling asleep again.

"I don't think the title the ancients gave me is a title to be used. Please just call me Vrenli, like before," he asked his friends, smiling sheepishly and telling them into the early hours of the morning what he had seen when he consulted the Oracle of Tawinn for the second time.

Lake Taneth

At the first light of dawn, Vrenli and Gorathdin, who had not slept, woke Werlis and Aarl.

"Wake up, friends. I know you have had little sleep, but we must set out. Lake Taneth is still a day's journey away and I want us to cross it before nightfall," Gorathdin said to the two of them, shaking them gently.

"We have to leave already? But I've only just fallen asleep," yawned Werlis in a sleepy, hoarse voice and looked at Gorathdin with his half-open, swollen eyes.

"It has to be," Gorathdin replied and took his fire axe, bow and quiver.

"Can I at least brew us some tea?" asked Werlis. Gorathdin shook his head in refusal and pointed to the extinguished fire with his hand.

Werlis sighed and stood up.

Aarl rolled up his bearskin, walked to the hole in the wall and took another look at the Ruins of Tawinn.

"I almost feel as if I had only dreamed the encounter with the ghost," he said to his friends, who could see that he had also had little sleep.

"The spirit of the Tawinnian priestess. I thought I was dreaming too," Werlis agreed, rubbing his eyes.

"I wish I had been dreaming," Vrenli stood thoughtfully next to Aarl and looked out of the hole into the cloudy morning sky.

"Your ancestors have chosen you, Vrenli. You should feel honored. I can't understand why you're worrying about it," said Gorathdin, who had a vague idea of what must be going on in Vrenli's mind.

"If only it were that easy," thought Vrenli, wordlessly slung his travel bag over his shoulder and walked down the stairs.

He stayed in the room with the almost unrecognizable, heavily weathered floor painting until Gorathdin, Werlis and Aarl came down the stairs.

The four traveling companions followed the wide path that led from the ruined city of Tawinn to the nearby forest to the northeast. They entered a path branching off to the right across a dewy meadow and followed it to the mixed forest ahead, which they traversed for half the day. They headed north, then east for a while and when the path began to ascend, slightly to the southeast.

Aarl told Werlis at length about the port city of Irkaar in Thir, on the coast of the Southern Sea. As their distance from Vrenli and Gorathdin increased, Vrenli took the opportunity to ask Gorathdin a few questions.

"It's strange! Although I don't actually know you, I'm following you to Astinhod. I have a feeling of familiarity with you, but I would still like to know why you said that the journey also had to do with me, and what task did you say my grandfather had in Wetherid?" Vrenli wanted to know.

Vrenli turned around briefly and made sure that Werlis and Aarl were far enough away.

"I thank you for the trust you have placed in me, Vrenli, but I can't tell you much more at the moment than that it's about a meaningful matter."

Vrenli was disappointed by Gorathdin's answer.

"It's about a book. A very old book," Gorathdin whispered and immediately put a finger to his lips to let Vrenli know that he shouldn't answer.

"Then my feelings and suspicions were right. I knew it," thought Vrenli.

It wasn't easy for him to not ask all the questions that were now running through his head.

"Master Drobale will certainly be pleased to meet you in Astinhod!" said Gorathdin, indicating to Vrenli that he would find the answers to his questions in Astinhod.

"I can hardly wait to meet him," said Vrenli, who understood what Gorathdin was trying to tell him.

Werlis and Aarl, who were still in conversation, noticed that their distance to Vrenli and Gorathdin had increased and began to walk faster until they were finally walking alongside them again. The path zigzagged out of the mixed forest onto a meadow, which they crossed and entered the adjacent dry, initially sparse coniferous forest, which they walked through until late after midday. Werlis expressed his wish to rest.

"I'm hungry, friends. How about you, surely you won't say no to some dried meat," said Werlis with a grin, although he was exhausted.

"Dried meat and bread. Why do I have the feeling that I will soon wish I could remove these two delicacies from my diet," said Vrenli.

Werlis grinned again.

The coniferous forest became denser and Gorathdin asked Werlis to wait until they came to a clearing not far away. As the path they had followed so far was no longer recognizable and certainly not passable due to the dense, overlapping fir and spruce branches, they left it and walked north for some time and then east again until they came to a small clearing overgrown with tall, thin forest grasses, in the middle of which a rock protruded from the ground that could serve as a resting place.

The four travelers put down their luggage and leaned their weapons against the sun-warmed rock on which they then sat down. Werlis took out a piece of well-smoked dried meat, the already slightly smelly cheese and one of the small loaves of Everfull Bread from his travel bag. He pulled his knife from its sheath, used it to cut small, bite-sized slices of the dried meat and placed them on a flat stone lying on the rock. He undid the knot on the thin rope that tied his metal container to the outside of the bag, filled it with his water bag, placed the loaf of Everfull Bread inside and waited a few moments for it to soak up the water. He placed the now handsome loaf of bread next to the dried meat on the stone to dry briefly.

"I'll have a look around in the meantime," Gorathdin announced and disappeared behind the neighboring trees.

Aarl, looking at the few pieces of dried meat lying on the stone in front of him, realized that Werlis' estimate of the quantity was that of an Abkether. He therefore opened his travel bag, took out a smoked wild boar ham and cut several thin slices from it, which he placed next to Werlis' pieces of dried meat.

"I think that will be enough," said Aarl.

Werlis looked astonished.

"You humans certainly can eat a good amount of meat," commented Werlis, pressing his index finger on the loaf of bread to test it.

Vrenli sat in the meadow near them and thought about his grandfather's book.

"Where could he have hidden it?" he asked himself and a few thoughts later came to the question of why Gorathdin knew about the book.

"I hope Master Drobai can tell me more about the whole affair," he thought, unexpectedly remembering a conversation he had overheard his grandfather having with an old man in a gray cloak who had come from outside.

The book in which the Word that has come to life is written.

He had already wondered about this saying as a child and this time, too, it seemed strange and incomprehensible to him. It sounded just as strange as the voice of the stranger who had been talking to his grandfather for two days.

Vrenli's thoughts were interrupted by Werlis, who informed him that Aarl's smoked wild boar ham tasted delicious. "You really must try it," said Werlis, holding up a slice of the pink meat and handing it to Vrenli.

"Fantastic!" praised Vrenli with his mouth full, breaking off a piece of the loaf and topping it with two slices of Aarl's smoked wild boar ham.

"I use a very specific smoking technique," remarked Aarl proudly.

"And what would that be?" asked Werlis with interest.

"That's a secret," replied Aarl with a grin.

Gorathdin, who had returned to his three traveling companions, looked at the dried meat on the stone in front of him.

"You didn't have to wait for me, friends," he said, not understanding why he was being grinned at.

"What is it?" he asked them.

"Nothing. We were suddenly no longer hungry," replied Aarl, who was infected by Vrenli and Werlis' burst of laughter.

Gorathdin finally had to laugh himself, although he didn't know why.

"Put the dried meat back in your travel bag, Werlis," Aarl said, pulling his ham out of the bag and cutting off a few slices for Gorathdin.

"Is there something wrong with Werlis' dried meat?" asked Gorathdin, reaching for the last piece of bread and tasting Aarl's ham.

"Everything is fine with it. We just thought that Aarl's ham tasted a lot better," explained Vrenli.

Gorathdin didn't even try to find out what was so amusing about it.

"Delicious," he remarked.

"A secret recipe," said Aarl and almost started laughing again.

"So, so," replied Gorathdin.

After fortifying themselves, they set off again towards Lake Taneth in the north. By late afternoon, they had left the coniferous forest behind them and entered a wide, initially flat, then rising grassy landscape.

"Beyond this plain, at the foot of the Ice Mountains, lies Lake Taneth," Gorathdin informed them, gazing at the snow-covered peaks shining dazzlingly white in the distance.

"Let's hope the nice weather lasts another two or three days," said Gorathdin, looking up at the bright blue sky.

He knew from his first journey over the Ice Mountains that it would certainly take him a lot longer if a storm came up, especially as he was now accompanied by two Abkether and a human. But he had no more than eight days to bring the moonflower blossoms to Astinhod. If he were traveling alone, he could make twice as much progress, but getting Vrenli to Master Drobai was just as important as the blossoms. There were only a few of them left and he was convinced that Vrenli was an asset to them. He had not yet

recognized the power that rested within him, but Gorathdin was confident that Master Drobald would awaken it in him.

The sun's rays shining on the surface of Lake Taneth made the mirrored peaks of the Ice Mountains sparkle like crystals. The wide lake, which stretched from the northernmost corner to the center of the snow- and ice-covered mountain range that bounded Tawinn from Astinhod, could only be crossed by raft. The water was too cold to swim to the other side of the lake, which was more than three hundred paces away. Vrenli looked at the still water and remembered the images the Oracle of Tawinn had shown him. He again saw the knights, orcs and ogres crossing the lake on rafts to destroy the city of Tawinn.

"We'll need a raft," said Aarl, who had come to Tawinn across this lake more than twenty-five years ago.

During this time, he only traveled back to his village in southern Thir once. Back then, when he felt the death of both his parents, he took the long journey and faced the anger, fear and failure that had once caused him to leave his village.

"I thought we were going to cross the lake on Gorathdin's raft," Werlis said, looking around for it.

"I swam across the lake, little friend," Gorathdin revealed.

Vrenli, Werlis and Aarl looked at him in amazement.

"Swam?" Aarl asked.

"Well, the water is cold, but not too cold to unnecessarily stop a ranger on his journey," Gorathdin replied with a smile.

"But Werlis is right. We need a raft. We need to build one and we should hurry. I want us to reach the other side of the lake before dusk," said Gorathdin, looking at the few trees growing along the lakeshore.

"Aarl and I will take care of the tree trunks and you two can start weaving ropes from willow bark," Gorathdin said to Vrenli and Werlis, who nodded, drew their short swords and walked towards the large willow to their right.

They cut off several thick branches and carefully peeled off the brown-green bark. Gorathdin took his fire axe from his back, walked up to a birch and began to strike the trunk of the tree hard. He knew that what he was doing was not what he had been taught as a child, but he had no other choice. He needed the wood to get across the lake with his companions.

"Sorry," he whispered as the first of the four trees he had to cut down fell.

Together with Aarl and with the help of Vrenli's short sword, he split the tree trunks in two. They laid the eight halves next to each other, just a few steps from the lakeshore, with the flat, level side facing upwards. Vrenli and Werlis began to tie the tree trunks together with the braided bark ropes. In the meantime, Gorathdin searched the lakeshore for two branches suitable to use as oars. However, it took longer than he intended and when he finally found what he was looking for and returned to his friends with two strong, straight branches, Vrenli, Werlis and Aarl had already tied the eight trunks together.

"Looks floatable," said Aarl, who was standing next to the raft close to the water.

"Now we just have to build two oars and we can cross," said Gorathdin, who threw the two branches on the ground next to the raft and checked the position of the sun.

They didn't have much time left and he suspected that they wouldn't make it to the other side of the lake before dusk.

Together with Aarl, he split off several small, flat pieces from the remaining logs and tied them to the two branches.

"Let's get it into the water," said Gorathdin after the work was done.

Together they pulled the raft the few steps from the lakeshore into the water. Vrenli and Werlis now realized for the first time how cold the water in Lake Taneth really was. Werlis climbed onto the raft, followed by Vrenli and Aarl. Gorathdin pushed it away from the shallow lake shore before he jumped on, took one of the

oars and, together with Aarl, began to row towards the middle of the lake.

Vrenli and Werlis, who were soaked up to their knees, froze in the cold wind blowing across the lake. But it was also this wind that dried their clothes when they reached the middle of the lake after a while. Gorathdin and Aarl decided it was time to take a short rest.

"How deep do you think it is here?" asked Werlis, gazing into the clear, deep water.

"It's hard to say, but since you can't see the bottom of the lake, I estimate at least fifteen or twenty paces," replied Aarl, who had experience in estimating water depths.

He grew up in a small fishing village on the Southern Sea and even as a child he would go out fishing with his father. As Aarl gazed into the depths of the lake, he remembered what had happened more than twenty-five years ago.

He began to sweat, his hands cramped and he started to tremble. If Gorathdin had not urged him to continue rowing, he would have lost himself in his memories and would once again have to face the horrors of his past, as he had done so many times before. Aarl was about to reach for his oar when he almost fell into the cold water in shock when he saw an old man standing next to him on the raft, who had a long, white, matted beard that reached the bottom of the raft and was a head shorter than Vrenli.

"Such a crossing can be dangerous. Especially if you harbor dark thoughts. But I hope that doesn't apply to you," said the old man with a chuckle and, to the surprise of Aarl, Werlis and Gorathdin, pushed Vrenli off the raft into the cold water.

Vrenli stiffened with fright. He slowly sank into the depths of the lake. Aarl was about to reach for the small bearded man when he jumped from the raft onto the surface of the water and, to Gorathdin and Werlis' astonishment, stopped a few steps away from them without sinking. Gorathdin wanted to jump after Vrenli, but a gust of wind threw him back to the bottom of the raft.

"No. No. The Abkether has to make this journey alone," said the old man, chuckling.

"Vrenli, why don't you swim," Werlis called after him full of concern.

But Vrenli did not move and sank deeper and deeper to the bottom of the lake. Gorathdin's dark green eyes began to light up. The old man, who was still standing on the surface of the water next to the raft, felt the anger and hatred that the elf harbored against him.

"You don't have to worry about him, elf," the little old man said to Gorathdin and chuckled again.

With a swinging, circling hand movement above his head, he disappeared before their eyes. Before any of them could jump after Vrenli, a storm arose and the swell increased alarmingly. Gorathdin turned on instinct and saw a huge wave racing towards the raft at high speed.

"Quick, lie down on the ground and hold on!" Gorathdin shouted and threw himself down.

The wave caught the raft and carried it to the opposite shore of the lake. Startled and angry at their unwanted arrival, Werlis, Gorathdin and Aarl stepped off the raft into the cold water, whose swell had subsided with the decreasing wind, and pulled the raft ashore. Werlis stood freezing a few steps from the shore, staring at the middle of the lake, and was startled when a huge carp head emerged from the water behind Gorathdin.

"You don't have to worry about your friend," said the carp and dived down again.

"I am worried, and not a little. Who or what was that anyway?" Werlis asked Gorathdin and Aarl.

"A water gnome," replied Gorathdin, who sat down beside Aarl on the meadow by the lakeside, soaked through.

"I'll light a fire, otherwise we'll freeze to death," Aarl decided and got up to collect some dry branches and twigs from the nearby trees.

"But what about Vrenli?" Werlis called after him.

"We can only hope for the best for him, because we can't help him now," replied Aarl.

As Vrenli slowly sank into the depths of the lake, he was amazed that he could still breathe. All his efforts to swim failed due to the rigidity in which he found himself, which he assumed was caused by the cold water. The deeper he sank, the darker it became around him and eventually he lost his bearings. He no longer knew which way was up or down. However, despite the fact that he was probably sinking towards death, he felt no fear. When he saw a light in front of him, towards which he was sinking, he asked himself whether he was ready to die and answered the question with an unequivocal "no".

"I mustn't lose consciousness now," he admonished himself and was amazed that he still didn't feel any compulsion to gasp for air, which he wouldn't have had anyway.

He sank into the increasingly bright, dazzling, golden light. Vrenli closed his eyes for a few moments. He lost all sense of space and time. But when he opened them again, he found himself floating high above Lake Taneth.

"Have I died and been reborn as a bird?" he asked himself, startled when he saw several hundred heavily armed knights in black armor striding down a path that led from the Ice Mountains to the lake.

He quickly looked around for his friends, who were supposed to be floating on a raft below him. Vrenli wanted to warn them of the approaching enemies. But no matter how hard he tried, he could not see Werlis, Gorathdin and Aarl. He therefore tried to warn them by shouting loudly, but his shouts were stifled before they even left his lips. Vrenli floated slowly towards the western shore of the lake, where three old weeping willows stood. When he caught sight of the Tawinnian priestess who had appeared to him last night, he was surprised. She was sitting on the grass under the drooping, many-leaved branches of the weeping willows with a young man who was a head shorter than her.

The Legacy of the Elves

Slowly, he hovered above their heads. He heard the young man singing a song to the priestess, accompanied by a pair of birds that swooped over their heads.

Bird meadow, flower valley - wonderfully fragrant everywhere
Water rushing in the sun valley - fish and otters everywhere
Love happiness and cheerfulness - have enveloped me
Oh, how delighted I am - as your heart comes close to mine
If you want me, then I want you - Lorothe, I love you
Bird meadow, flower valley - wonderfully fragrant everywhere
Water rushing in the sun valley - fish and otters everywhere

In the bright rays of the sun, the priestess's long, curly blonde hair shimmered golden and the snow-white, silky fabric of her tunic fluttered gently in the wind. Her delicate features were accentuated by her graceful pallor. She gazed, enamored, with her crystal blue eyes at the little man kneeling before her. Vrenli wanted to glide closer to them and warn them of the approaching enemies, but it was too late. An arrow pierced the priestess's heart. She collapsed into the arms of the young man who was still kneeling before her and her white, silken tunic turned red. The weeping young man shouted something Vrenli could not understand and, before the arrow fired at him could hit him, jumped into the lake, from which he did not emerge. Vrenli began to fall. He fell deeper and deeper until he finally plunged into the water below and slowly sank to the bottom of the lake. He noticed glittering points of light moving quickly towards him and suddenly looked into the sad eyes of a huge carp, which opened its mouth wide and snapped at him.

Out of fear, Vrenli closed his eyes and when he opened them again, he had not been eaten by the giant carp, as he had assumed, but was next to the young man, who was now standing on a boat made of snow-white nacre floating in the middle of the lake. He was wrapped in a robe of seaweed and gazed at the enemy returning to Lake Taneth from the direction of the city of Tawinn.

His eyes were filled with pain as he saw the murderers of his beloved rowing towards him on rafts. He began to cry and with each of his tears that fell into the water, the water level of the lake rose considerably.

Slowly, the young man raised both his hands far above his head, whereupon huge walls of water opened to the left and right of the enemy's numerous rafts. Screaming, they fell into the water and sank to the muddy lakebed. He lowered his arms again and with them the walls of water crashed down with a thunderous noise on the murderers of his beloved and buried them beneath them.

"Lorothe, you flower of Tawinn. Your death and the death of your people shall not go unrecognized!" the young man called out into the expanse of the lake and then turned to Vrenli.

"The Entorbis family must be punished for the deaths of your people and those of Lorothe. Do not forget the words of the raftsmen of Lake Taneth," the young man emphasized.

Vrenli wanted to answer him, but instead of words he spat out water that he had swallowed when he emerged from the lake near the eastern shore, where Gorathdin, Werlis and Aarl pulled him out.

"You're alive!" cried Werlis delightedly as Vrenli, still dazed from his involuntary journey into the past, opened his eyes.

Gorathdin picked him up and laid him next to the warming fire on Aarl's bearskin.

"That cowardly water gnome just pushed you into the cold water from behind. If I get my hands on him!" grumbled Werlis angrily, pointing towards the lake with a clenched fist and then covering the freezing Vrenli with his cloak.

After they had recovered from the excitement and warmed themselves by the fire, Vrenli described his experiences to them.

"An incredible story," marveled Werlis with raised eyebrows.

Aarl and Gorathdin were silent and thoughtful.

"Unbelievable, but true," said Vrenli.

He lay down on his back and gazed at the starry night sky over Lake Taneth for some time until he finally fell asleep.

The Ice Mountains

When Vrenli woke up, he couldn't remember the dream he had that night. His head was pounding and his limbs ached due to the involuntary bath the day before. He slowly rose from Aarl's bearskin and looked at Werlis, who was no better off. Vrenli's voice was hoarse and his nose was dripping.

"We don't feel particularly well," they let their friends know.

Gorathdin and Aarl scrutinized the pair. They did indeed make a sickly impression. Gorathdin then decided to postpone the ascent into the Ice Mountains for a while.

"Time is running out, friends, but there's little point in us setting off straight away," he said, looking at Vrenli and Werlis, who felt a little guilty as they were responsible for the delay.

"I'm sorry, friends. I really don't feel strong enough to climb the mountains," Vrenli admitted, looking up at the Ice Mountains and sneezing.

"I think we need a strong, hot herbal tea," Werlis suggested, looking sympathetically at Vrenli.

"There's still some firewood left. I'll light a fire," said Aarl and put his travel bag, which he had hanging on his right shoulder, back on the dewy grass.

"If I remember correctly, not far from here, here and there, single-root flowers were growing in the crevices. A decoction with their flowers will restore Vrenli and Werlis' strength in no time," Gorathdin thought, running quickly and light-footed a few hundred steps up the steep path.

"You'd have to be an elf," sighed Werlis.

Gorathdin's speed, strength and stamina impressed him.

"Dark green eyes and pointy ears. No thanks. I'd rather be a bit slower and weaker and take the occasional break," said Aarl with a grin.

Vrenli and Werlis had to laugh and immediately coughed hard.

Aarl lit a small fire on which Werlis heated water. After a short stay on the lakeshore, Vrenli sat down on his cloak from the Dark Forest, which he had laid on the dewy meadow floor as a base and thought about the raftsman from Lake Taneth. Shortly afterwards, Gorathdin returned with a handful of Singleton Blossoms and handed them to Werlis, who prepared a brew from them.

"Just let it boil for a moment," Gorathdin told Werlis and asked Vrenli how he was feeling.

"All my limbs hurt," moaned Vrenli.

He really wasn't in good shape.

"The tea will help you. You'll see, you'll have your strength back by midday," Gorathdin promised and sat down next to him.

After Vrenli and Werlis had drunk the brew from the Singleton Blossoms, they fell into a cozy, warm, deep sleep, from which they only awoke when the sun was high above their heads.

"I haven't slept so wonderfully for a long time," thought Werlis, who woke up before Vrenli and felt much better.

He went to the lakeshore and splashed cold water on his face to wash the sleep from his eyes. Vrenli woke up shortly afterwards and stretched like a cat. He had his eyes fixed on the northern shore of the lake, from where Aarl and Gorathdin were on their way back to the camp site carrying a branch they had strung four fish on.

"We're having fish today. I hope you like fish?" asked Aarl.

Vrenli and Werlis nodded in agreement and smiled.

"We should set off after the meal, friends," urged Gorathdin, as he was worried that they had already lost another half day. He didn't have much time left to bring the moonflower blossoms to Astinhod. Unconsciously, he clutched his chest, where the small leather pouch he kept the flowers in hung.

Gorathdin's thoughts were with the most enchanting creature he had ever met in his long life as an elf. The longing to hold Lythinda in his arms again with a smile had been with him since his departure from Astinhod. But this longing was also accompanied by reproaches about what had happened in the Three Vines and weighed on him as a burden.

"I was foolish. I should have taken better care of her. I let myself get carried away by the happy drinking mood in the pub," he thought and was then plagued by worries.

He gazed into the flames of the small fire on which Aarl was roasting the fish he had caught and remained introverted. Gorathdin was worried about Lythinda first and foremost and hoped that the healing potion Master Drobald would prepare for her would free her from the strange illness that hung over her like a shadow.

However, he was also worried about the kingdom of Astinhod, as Lythinda was the only heir to the throne. He didn't want to imagine what would happen if someone else took over the regency in Astinhod after King Grandhold. No one noticed Gorathdin's worries, which weighed on him like a heavy burden. He fought a battle between hope and hopelessness. He had heard a lot about the loving and hopeful God of mankind. Even though he had often wondered about human double standards and had met many so-called believers who had stolen, cheated and murdered despite their good intentions and values, he decided to pray to their God in hours of inner despair.

"I'm going to take a little walk along the lakeshore until the fish finish roasting," Gorathdin said to Vrenli, Werlis and Aarl, who were sitting around the fire and turning the branches with the fish on them back and forth over the flames.

Gorathdin stood up and walked slowly along the lakeshore to the north. He decided to pray quietly:

"Father,
Creator of all life - my life.

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Thank you for all my talents
and abilities that were bestowed upon me.
Give me strength in my struggle
for the good and give me hope
and confidence, in all the difficult
hours of my existence.

Give them light,
who are on their way into the darkness.
Enlighten them with knowledge,
who do not recognize what you have created.

Let the nations endure forever.
Lead them to unity in their struggle
against evil and stand by them.
Amen"

In a miraculous way, Gorathdin's fears and anxieties were replaced by renewed hope and confidence. It was a new and unusual experience for him; a ranger who feared neither the shadow nor the malevolent creatures of Fallgar, a ranger who lived among humans. He had already fought hundreds of orcs, ogres, goblins, underwater creatures from Moorgh, lizard creatures, undead, forest wraiths and shapeshifters, but he had never felt fear or dread before, and he was not used to having to hope for anything. He was a ranger from the Dark Forest, in harmony with nature, he thought, until he felt the desire to live among humans. From that moment on, something changed in him and when he met Lythinda, he experienced the longings of a human. He loved her, but he didn't love her like a ranger, he loved her like a human.

As this human love was now in danger, he sought refuge in the faith of men. Not that he forgot his origins or even wanted to deny them. No. It was more as if he had found something that had always been missing and this miraculously complemented him. Gorathdin went back to his traveling companions and sat down by the fire.

"You've come at just the right moment. The fish are ready," announced Aarl with a smile, pulling the fried fish from the branches.

The smell of the fried fish spreading along the lake shore attracted two otters that emerged from the water just a few steps away from them and pointed their noses into the wind.

"Look, two otters," Werlis drew his friends' attention and pointed to the two small, furry animals.

During the time that the four traveling companions ate their fried fish, the two otters did not move from the spot. It was only when Werlis threw them the leftovers that they greedily snapped at them and dived off with the fish heads hanging out of their mouths.

"We should set off," said Gorathdin and extinguished the fire with the remaining brew from the Singleton Blossoms.

They moved swiftly away from the shore of Lake Taneth and took the path that led steeply into the Ice Mountains. Vrenli and Werlis soon noticed that their travel bags were getting heavier, and they occasionally had to lean on the rock face to their right, so Aarl and Gorathdin offered to take the bags off their shoulders, as they only represented a small additional burden for them.

They followed the path up to the middle of the mountain and looked down one last time at Lake Taneth and the Ruins of Tawinn. The increasingly narrow path, strewn with rubble, made their progress slow. Vrenli and Werlis slipped several times on the loose gravel and therefore continued between Gorathdin and Aarl. The path led them higher and higher up the mountain. Only a few low trees and bushes grew on the slope to their left. As they would soon reach the tree line, Gorathdin took the precaution of

collecting dry leaves and branches so they would not be left without firewood on the way ahead.

Far above them, they could already see the snow-covered plateau stretching out in front of the highest peaks of the Ice Mountains.

"The pass to Astinhod leads over these peaks," Gorathdin drew his traveling companions' attention and pointed with his hand to the peaks covered in snow and ice.

It was getting noticeably colder. Vrenli, Werlis and Aarl therefore pulled their cloaks, which had kept them warm during their ascent, tighter. The path they had been following for more than half a day over the summit of the westernmost mountain in the mighty range finally led them to the snow-covered plateau. Gorathdin watched the overcast sky anxiously. The ominous, black clouds forming over the snow- and ice-covered summit of the mountain far ahead of them did not bode well.

"A storm is coming. We should look for suitable shelter," Gorathdin warned his fellow travelers and looked around searching.

Aarl drew their attention to a crevice that had formed between two strange, adjoining rocks and would provide a natural roof over their heads.

"Here on these rocks in front of us is a crevice where we can take shelter," he said to them, pointing to the two broad and high rocks that rose out of the snow to their right, just a hundred paces away. They walked towards them.

"Not exactly comfortable, but still better than being out in the open in a storm," Werlis remarked as they made their way into the crevice.

The sudden icy wind was a harbinger of the approaching storm. Vrenli, Werlis, Gorathdin and Aarl therefore dug their furs out of their travel bags and wrapped themselves in them.

"We should light a fire. When the storm breaks, it will be much colder," Gorathdin suggested and placed a few stones in a circle.

"The idea of it getting even colder further up scares me," confessed Vrenli, who was freezing even though he was wrapped in a lynx skin on top of his cloak from the Dark Forest.

Gorathdin placed a handful of dry leaves in the stone-lined hearth and Aarl tried to light them with the sparks of two flints he struck together.

"The leaves are too damp. It smokes more than it burns," remarked Aarl as he struck sparks on the leaves a few more times.

The sky above them lit up. Lightning struck not far from the crevice and with it began an icy downpour, which only a little later turned into a heavy snowstorm, blowing snow into the crevice again and again and making it impossible for Aarl to light the already damp leaves. Aarl moved closer to Gorathdin and Werlis, who were already sitting very close to Vrenli, who was leaning with his back against the rock face.

"Get ready for a damp and, above all, cold night," Gorathdin predicted and wrapped himself in his fur.

"Impossible!" exclaimed Aarl angrily, throwing the flints on the ground next to him.

He reached for his travel bag and began to rummage in it. After a few moments, he pulled out a small bottle, from which he poured a good amount of the contents onto the dry branches he placed in the fireplace.

"What's that?" Werlis asked with interest and was startled when Aarl struck a few sparks and the branches ignited in a flash of flame.

"This is the finest herbal spirit. Very strong and highly flammable," replied Aarl, warming his hands over the bluish flames.

"Can you also drink the herbal spirit?" Gorathdin asked him and smiled.

"That's what it's actually for," replied Aarl and handed him the bottle.

"Home-brewed," Aarl added as Gorathdin took a big swig from the bottle.

Gorathdin handed the bottle to Vrenli, who fortunately only took a small sip, but it flowed down his throat like fire.

"Strong," he rattled and handed the bottle to Werlis, who sipped from it.

"Very strong, but it warms you up immensely," Werlis remarked with a grimace and handed the bottle to Aarl, who then took a big swig.

Inwardly warmed by Aarl's herbal spirit, they sat around the flames of the small fire, which waxed and waned in the wind. Gorathdin told his companions how he had spent the first and coldest night of his journey alone on the peaks of the Ice Mountains. His words were repeatedly drowned out by thunder. When he had reached the end of his story, Vrenli, Werlis and Aarl fell asleep. Gorathdin placed another branch in the small fire and looked out of the crevice onto the plateau.

The snowstorm had subsided. The distant rumble of lightning let him know that the storm had moved on. He thought about Lythinda for some time, holding the small leather pouch containing the blossoms of the moonflower. His thoughts revolved around the stranger in the Three Vines.

"Was it possibly just a harbinger of another strike the Entorbis were planning against Wetherid?" he wondered. Gorathdin knew that all attempts by the Entorbis to take Wetherid in recent centuries had failed. But the losses of the peoples of Wetherid were becoming greater.

"We have irretrievably lost much of what once helped us in our defense against the Shadow Lords. Do we still have the strength to successfully fend off another blow?" he mused, thinking of the book that was no longer in Wetherid.

The nearby howl of a snow wolf demanded his attention. Gorathdin interrupted his thoughts to sneak out of the crevice onto the dark, cold and snow-covered plain. When the snow wolf howled once more, Gorathdin camouflaged himself. He didn't

know if the hunter was just a scout or if there might be a whole pack nearby. Camouflaged from the wolf's eyes and scent, he followed the its scent, which led him to a small hill not more than three hundred paces east of their lair.

His sharp, dark green elven eyes watched the surroundings carefully. When the snow wolf howled three times in quick succession, Gorathdin knew that the animal was not alone. The hunter told his pack about the prey waiting for them in a crevice. Gorathdin wanted to reach for his bow, but he realized that he had left it next to his fire axe in their shelter. He had to make do with his hunting knife, which he carefully pulled from the brim of his boot. He put the knife between his teeth and slowly crawled back to his friends on the snow-covered ground, waking them up and telling them of the approaching danger. Vrenli and Werlis immediately reached for their short swords, which they had leaned against the rock face next to them. Aarl threw off the bearskin he was wrapped in, took a burning branch from the fire and followed Gorathdin, who retrieved his weapons, outside. They stared out into the darkness and waited for the pack of wolves. With his sensitive elven ears, Gorathdin could already hear the panting of eight snow wolves running down the hill towards them. His dark green eyes began to glow as he finally caught sight of them, and he sensed the hunger that was driving them. Gorathdin knew that they would not listen to him if he tried to speak to them. Snow wolves were not like the wolves of the Dark Forest. They followed no laws. They were murderers. They not only killed to feed, they killed for pleasure.

Gorathdin prepared himself for the upcoming battle. Even though he would kill the snow wolves who were hostile to him, he asked for forgiveness in advance, just as his father had taught him as a child. The distance between him and the pack was no more than a hundred paces as he took an arrow from his quiver and placed it in the string of his bow.

"Stay where you are!" he shouted to Vrenli and Werlis, who were just about to scurry out of the crevice with their short swords at the ready.

The two followed his invitation and peered out from behind the rock face. Aarl checked that his throwing knives were loose in their sheaths and waited for the snow wolves to come within throwing range. Gorathdin drew his bow and shot the arrow, which whistled through the air and struck the right shoulder blade of one of the snow wolves, who fell to the ground howling. The pack's leader bared its teeth and urged its hunters on. Aarl dropped the burning branch and threw two of his throwing knives at the two snow wolves running to the right, close behind the pack leader. One of them fell to the ground from the impact of the throwing knife, which hit it in the head, and the other, who was less fortunate, was killed by the second knife hit on the front of its chest. Less than twenty paces separated the five snow wolves from their prey.

Gorathdin knew that he only had a few moments before he would have to fight to the death with the pack's leader. He therefore placed two of his arrows in the string of his bow, which he drew with all his might and shot at two of the snow wolves, who were only a few steps away from him and Aarl. The force of the striking arrows sent the two snow wolves howling backwards, where the white, snow-covered ground turned red. Gorathdin threw the bow into the snow and grabbed his fire axe with small blue-orange flames dancing on its blade. He tightly gripped the handle of his axe with both hands. The eyes of the pack leader and his own collided. Gorathdin watched as the muscles of his opponent's hind legs tensed and with one step the snow wolf leapt at him, snarling. Gorathdin was prepared for this and took a step to the side then turned and cut off its head with a powerful blow.

The three remaining snow wolves howled, snarled and bared their large, dangerously pointed teeth when they saw their leader's head in the snow, but before they could leap towards Gorathdin, two snow wolves fell to the ground, hit by Aarl's throwing knives. The third, however, leapt at Gorathdin and threw him to the ground. Gorathdin held his fire axe above him protectively, fending off the powerful bites. Before Aarl could turn around to help Gorathdin, Vrenli and Werlis, overcoming their people's

primal fear of wolves, rushed at the snow wolf, screaming with their short swords at the ready and killing it with several stabs.

"Thank you, my little friends," Gorathdin gasped, pushing the dead snow wolf away from him and standing up.

"We have to get their bodies away from here. The stench could attract other wild animals," Gorathdin said to Vrenli, Werlis and Aarl, grabbing the two hind legs of the wolf lying next to him and pulling it into the darkness to a chasm several hundred paces deep, less than two hundred paces from the crevice.

Aarl fetched a burning branch from the fire in their shelter. Together with Vrenli and Werlis, he pulled one of the snow wolves to the spot where Gorathdin had just thrown his down the precipice and threw the other after it.

Little did they know that the rockfall caused by the falling bodies of the snow wolves had startled a group of snow goblins sitting fifty paces below on a ledge in front of their cave. Vrenli, Werlis, Gorathdin and Aarl spent some time dragging the remaining carcasses from the crevice to the precipice.

By the time they had finished their work and returned to their shelter, where Aarl had thrown some branches on the fire, two of the snow goblins had climbed up a small ascent that led in switchbacks around the eastern side of the mountain onto the snow-covered plain to find out who or what was responsible for the night's rockfall.

The four travelers, who had wrapped themselves in their furs again and were sitting close to each other, were talking about the fight with the snow wolves. They did not notice that the two snow goblins were very close to them, as the hideous creatures had noticed the smoke from the fire, which they could smell from afar, and had followed. With their small, hairy feet, which allowed the snow goblins to creep almost silently over the snow, they climbed up the rock and looked around in search of the fire that was causing the smoke. Gorathdin was startled by a few small stones that bounced down onto the snow-covered ground as the two creatures climbed up.

"Be quiet," he whispered to Vrenli, Werlis and Aarl, who looked at him questioningly.

Gorathdin put his index finger to his lips to emphasize his statement.

His dark green eyes sparkled, and it seemed as if his pointed ears were moving like those of a deer listening intently to the wind. He reached for his fire axe carefully and slowly so as not to make any noise. Vrenli, Werlis and Aarl realized that Gorathdin must have heard something and kept quiet. The two snow goblins who had been lingering on the top of the rock had just noticed that the smoke they had been following was rising from below, on the south side of the rock. Slowly they climbed down the thirty or so steps and spied the light of the flames shining dimly from the crevice. One of them leaned over the crevice from above, holding onto a ledge with one hand, and saw two Abkether, a human and an elf, sitting around the fire causing the smoke.

Before the sinewy, emaciated snow goblin could pull himself back up to tell those waiting on the rock what he had seen in the crevice, Gorathdin's fire axe severed his neck. In a fraction of an instant, Gorathdin leapt out of the crevice and caught sight of the second snow goblin crouching above him on the rock. Gorathdin was about to jump onto the rock when the snow goblin leapt down to the other side of the cliff and disappeared into the darkness. Gorathdin wondered for a moment whether he should try to pursue the fleeing snow goblin, but was prevented from doing so by Vrenli, Werlis and Aarl, who emerged from the crevice and caught sight of the snow goblin's severed head.

"What kind of hideous creature is that?" Vrenli exclaimed in horror, his eyes fixed on the creature's hairy head lying in the snow in front of him.

"A snow goblin," explained Gorathdin, for whom it was now too late to pursue the fugitive.

"Was he alone?" Aarl wanted to know and looked at the headless body lying on the rock above them.

"I'm afraid not. We have to get out of here," Gorathdin replied and crawled back into the crevice, where he took his bow, quiver and the bundle of dry branches that were still left.

"But it's the middle of the night," protested Werlis, looking at Gorathdin in astonishment.

"I don't feel like waiting here until the whole horde arrives. I will lead the way and you must follow me closely," said Gorathdin.

Aarl crawled into the crevice, rolled up his bearskin and extinguished the fire as soon as Vrenli and Werlis were ready to leave.

"Stay close together," Gorathdin warned, looking around the area with his elven eyes.

He listened for sounds and sniffed the wind. When Gorathdin was sure that none of the ugly creatures were near them, he strode east, followed by Vrenli, Werlis and Aarl, across the snow-covered plateau in the darkness. Gorathdin looked around several times to make sure they were not being followed and noticed that it was not easy for Vrenli, Werlis and Aarl to keep up with him. The light of the crescent moon over the tops of the Ice Mountains was just strong enough for them to not lose sight of Gorathdin in the darkness. Werlis and Vrenli fell a few times on the frozen, snow-covered ground.

It was bitterly cold and the several hours they walked wordlessly took almost all the strength they could muster. They had left the plateau behind them and were facing a steep rock face several hundred steps high, and it would not be long before the morning began to turn gray. Gorathdin had doubts as to whether they would be able to conquer the snow and ice-covered walls, weary and exhausted as they were. The ascent would take them half a day and he knew how difficult it would be to find a foothold on this steep wall.

"We need to rest, the climb is exhausting and dangerous," said Gorathdin in a serious voice.

Vrenli, Werlis and Aarl were delighted at the prospect of getting some more sleep. Gorathdin laid his weapons and the smaller

bundle of dry branches in a hollow in the snow, which seemed a suitable place to sleep.

"We'll have to do without a fire. It could give us away," Gorathdin warned and looked around.

Convinced that they were not being followed, he crouched down in the hollow.

"It's very cold. I'm freezing," Werlis stuttered, shivering.

Vrenli was no different and \not happy that they were supposed to spend the night here in the hollow without a warm fire.

"I know one way we could keep warm," said Aarl.

Everyone was excited to see what proposal he would make.

Aarl explained to them that he could spread his large bearskin over the cold floor of the hollow. They would stretch Gorathdin's fur over the hollow as a cover and secure it with stones.

"We should at least try," he encouraged Gorathdin and picked up some large stones, which he placed around the hollow.

Aarl asked Vrenli and Werlis to leave the hollow for a moment so he could spread his bearskin on the snow-covered ground.

"You can lie down on it now," Aarl said to the two of them and stretched Gorathdin's fur over them.

Gorathdin weighted down the fur from the outside with the stones he had collected earlier, then lifted the last corner of the fur that had not been weighted down and crawled into the hollow. He reached out to the edge with his hand and placed the stone lying there on the hide.

"Well, what do you say?" asked Aarl, who lay down next to Vrenli and Werlis.

"Very cramped, but I think it will serve its purpose," Gorathdin replied and lay down next to the three of them.

Warmed up inside, they fell asleep shortly afterwards, exhausted but not freezing.

The cave of the outcast dwarf

Aarl was the first to wake up, and as he carefully lifted Gorathdin's fur and stepped out of the snowy hollow, he realized that it was already daylight.

"We did sleep for a while. It was cramped, but it was much warmer than if we had slept outside," he thought as he looked around sleepily.

The snow-covered plateau appeared to him like a white sea, from which the sun's rays were reflected so strongly that he had to close his tired eyes several times. Only after a few moments was he able to see his surroundings clearly. Snow dunes, ice and stone were all he could see. Aarl turned towards the mountain, at the foot of which they had spent the night, looked at the steep rock face covered in snow and ice and wished at that moment that he was back in the south of Thir in his sunny, warm village. Gorathdin awoke and woke Vrenli and Werlis.

"After we've fortified ourselves, we have to set off," he said to the two of them, climbing out of the snowy hollow and realizing that they had slept until well after sunrise.

"I didn't think it would be so restful to sleep in a snowy hollow," said Werlis.

He stretched and reached for his travel bag, pulling out the red and white striped, well-salted dried meat, a bit of cheese, which smelled strong, and the last loaf of Everfull Bread.

"Today we have the most dangerous part of our journey ahead of us," Gorathdin announced, looking at the rock face in front of him.

"How are we supposed to get up there? There's no paved ascent," Werlis remarked as he divided up the dried meat, cheese and loaves.

"There is a fortified ascent about half a day's journey from here, but it would take a whole day. We don't have that time," Gorathdin replied and took the piece of cheese that Werlis handed him.

"We have to climb this wall," Gorathdin added.

Vrenli, Werlis and Aarl looked anxiously at the high rock face covered in snow and ice.

"Once we've conquered this wall, it's only half a day's journey to the pass," Gorathdin explained.

He pulled a rope twisted from hemp out of his dark brown travel bag and checked its tensile strength.

"I'm not sure if it's long enough," said Gorathdin, and he began to measure it with the span of his arms.

"We also have ropes. You said we should take some with us," Werlis reminded him and took the rope out of his travel bag. Vrenli opened his and also pulled out a rope about thirty paces long.

"That's about sixty steps together," Vrenli calculated and handed Gorathdin the two ropes, which were much thinner than Gorathdin's.

"I doubt they can withstand all of our weight," Gorathdin remarked after examining the two ropes.

"They are strong enough to carry the weight of fifty sacks of flour," affirmed Werlis, who had bought the ropes from Ermis, the rope maker, who mainly made them for the craftsmen and farmers in the village.

"But they really are very thin," Aarl also remarked.

"That's deceptive. Thin and light ropes are very popular in our village. But that doesn't mean they are not resilient. Ermis is a master rope maker, none of his ropes have ever broken," said Werlis, trying to appear convincing.

"We have no choice but to rely on Ermis' ropes," said Vrenli and stood in front of Gorathdin so that he could tie the rope around his waist.

"Vrenli is right. We have to trust that they are strong enough," Gorathdin confirmed, knotting the three ropes together and tying them around Vrenli first.

When they were all connected with the rope, Gorathdin climbed up the wall, slowly, with his hands looking for support,

followed by Vrenli, Werlis and Aarl. Every ten to twenty steps he had to pull Vrenli and Werlis upwards as they were too small to reach the ledges and notches in the wall.

"It will take us all day to get up there," Gorathdin said anxiously.

"I'm sorry that we're holding you up, but we could never climb up here alone," said Vrenli sadly.

"Of course, it's not your fault that you are so small. Forgive me, friends, I didn't mean to hurt you," apologized Gorathdin, who was just pulling the two of them up onto the small ledge on which he was standing, smiling gently at them.

"We'll make it in time," said Aarl, who had to make some effort to pull himself up.

The four travelers lingered for a few moments on a small ledge about a third of the way up the wall that Gorathdin looked up with concern. The part that was to come was certainly the most difficult. Ice and snow covered the wall completely and there were only a few ledges, but they were too far apart. After they had rested, Gorathdin climbed the few steps where he still had a foothold.

As the gaps between the rocky outcrops and notches grew wider and were finally no longer within reach, he reached for his fire axe, slammed the pointed side of the double blade hard into the ice and pulled himself steadily higher up the wall.

Every time he found a suitable spot, he had to pull Vrenli, Werlis and now Aarl up to him. Not only did they have to struggle with the ice and snow that made the ascent difficult, but there was also an icy wind blowing, which froze their facial hair and caused small, icy lumps to form under their dripping noses. Pulling the hoods of their cloaks low over their faces, they roped themselves up as best they could so as not to overtax Gorathdin's strength.

It was already early afternoon when they had finally climbed half of the rock face. Gorathdin sensed that it would be tight to reach the summit before dusk. He therefore tried to shorten the many breaks they had taken so far. It was getting bitterly cold that even Gorathdin was freezing, but he was not half as cold as his

three fellow travelers. The fiery elven blood flowing in Gorathdin warmed him from the inside out. Vrenli and Werlis, who were no longer able to stick their already blue and terribly painful fingers into the icy snow, now used their short swords, stabbing their blades into the icy snow to find the grip they needed.

Occasionally, Gorathdin kept an eye out for black clouds that could cause the weather to change suddenly. But they were lucky because the sun was shining that day. When Werlis asked for a break, Aarl pulled the bottle of herbal spirit from his traveling bag.

"Take a small sip and pass it on, my friend," Aarl said to Werlis and took another big sip himself before handing it to Werlis.

After everyone had taken a sip from the bottle, they were warmed by Aarl's brew for a short while. Their strength was restored, and they made slightly faster progress.

They still had the last third of their ascent ahead of them. It was late afternoon. They didn't have much time left and with the last reserves of strength they had, they climbed and roped their way further up. None of them wanted to spend the night on the rock face. They knew that it could very well mean their death. At the point where they were, the slope of the rock face was not quite as steep and Vrenli followed Gorathdin closely. A moment of inattention caused by tiredness and the cold made Vrenli lose his balance. Staggering, he managed to hold on to the bundle of branches Gorathdin was carrying on his back at the last moment. But the hold was short-lived. Vrenli fell backwards, dragging the bundle with him. The rope around Gorathdin tightened and, out of reflex, he dug the tip of his fire axe deep into the ice and clutched it with both hands.

"Hold on to the rope!" shouted Gorathdin, whereupon Vrenli, without thinking, grabbed the rope and pulled himself up.

The bundle of dry branches fell down the rock face, hitting several ledges.

"Our firewood!" shouted Werlis, looking after the falling branches and twigs.

"I'm sorry," apologized Vrenli, who had a few tears running down his cheeks, which immediately froze.

"Let's keep going," said Gorathdin. He didn't want to lose any more time in addition to the lost firewood.

"It couldn't have been much worse, barring injury or an oncoming storm," he thought as he pulled himself up the last forty steps on his fire axe.

Once they reached the summit, the joy of their arrival was short-lived, as the loss of the firewood dampened their spirits. Everyone had the same thought: a warming fire would have been a just reward. Vrenli felt guilty. He couldn't look his friends in the eye, so he looked up at the sky, where he saw the rising moon.

"We should go on while it's still light," Gorathdin suggested, whereupon Werlis put back the dried meat he had taken out of his travel bag, and was about to slice, with a sigh.

The four travelers looked down at the high, hilly landscape that lay five or six hundred paces below them, at the foot of the wall they now had to descend.

"The pass to Astinhod begins behind these hills and leads over the mountain in front of us," Gorathdin explained as he checked the rope.

The descent from the snow-covered summit, where an icy wind was blowing, proved to be much easier than the ascent. Gorathdin roped his three friends down the length of the rope and jumped light-footedly and unerringly after them.

"You have the skills of a mountain goat — agile and sure-footed. You missed your true calling!" joked Aarl, causing Werlis, who was abseiling down an icy ledge on the rope Gorathdin and Aarl were holding, to laugh out loud.

"Watch out!" Gorathdin called out to him, laughing at Aarl's joke himself.

Vrenli remained silent.

Werlis managed to gain a foothold on the icy ledge. He turned briefly to the side, facing away from the mountain, and looked out

over the white, hilly landscape, at the eastern end of which a broad mountain peak rose high into the sky.

"Ready?" Gorathdin asked.

Werlis pulled the rope taut.

"Ready," he replied, whereupon Vrenli, followed by Aarl, abseiled down.

"I don't think you can jump down here," Aarl called up to Gorathdin when he had reached the bottom.

"It's too icy," he added.

Gorathdin looked down the fifty or so steps and realized that Aarl was right. Jumping onto the ice would be too risky, so he tied the rope to a stone and rappelled down.

"And how do we get it down now?" Werlis wanted to know.

Gorathdin did not reply but placed an arrow in the string of his bow and shot it at the upper end of the rope, which was cut by the sharp arrowhead. Vrenli was amazed at Gorathdin's accuracy and thought to himself that even with his glass bow he would have had difficulty hitting it. Gorathdin pulled hard on the rope a few times until it finally snapped and fell down to them. To prevent it from breaking any further, he tied a strong knot at the end.

They completed the last part of their descent just as dusk was falling. Looking for a suitable place to camp, they walked several hundred more steps to the west, past some small snow-covered hills. The looming gray clouds obscured the moon, and it became darker. Vrenli, who had been silent the whole way down, noticed that Werlis and Aarl were freezing and was plagued further by feelings of guilt. He looked around for trees or bushes, but they had long since crossed the tree line. The hilly landscape was buried deep under a thick layer of snow with not a single plant to be found. The icy wind blowing in their faces made progress increasingly difficult.

"We'll have no choice but to dig a hole in the snow. Let's hope we don't freeze to death," said Gorathdin, and he suddenly stopped.

The wind had blown the smell of burnt wood into his nose.

"Wait!" his dark green eyes began to glow.

He looked a few hundred paces ahead of them and could see a small sea of lights on one of the hills.

"I think I can see the light of torches," said Gorathdin to the surprise of his friends, who were unable to see through the darkness.

"We're not alone up here," Gorathdin remarked.

He grabbed his bow and crept towards the lights, followed by Vrenli, Werlis and Aarl.

"Snow goblins," Gorathdin whispered and pointed to the nearby hill that they walked a few more steps toward.

Now Vrenli, Werlis and Aarl could also see the small, bent creatures wrapped in the skins of mountain goats, ibexes and lynxes, their furry faces clearly visible in the light of the torches. They immediately stopped and lay down on the frozen, snow-covered ground.

"That's at least twenty," Aarl estimated, reaching for his throwing knives.

"I wonder what they're doing up here at such a late hour?" whispered Vrenli, watching the creatures closely.

"I don't know. They may be looking for us," Gorathdin speculated.

His eyes fell on a larger snow goblin, clad in a white snow leopard skin and holding a staff of ice in his left hand, pointing at the mound that the other creatures had gathered around. Gorathdin noticed smoke rising from the top of the mound, and he was sure it was not from the snow goblins' torches.

"There must be something in the hill. Let's crawl closer carefully," whispered Gorathdin.

Vrenli, Werlis and Aarl got ready for battle and followed Gorathdin. There were no more than a hundred paces between them and the hill, where they could see four snow goblins pouring masses of snow into a metal pipe smoke was rising out of.

"How did a metal pipe get into this inhospitable area and why are they pouring snow into it?" asked Werlis in a whisper.

"I have no idea," Gorathdin confessed quietly.

Aarl and Vrenli shrugged their shoulders.

"What are we going to do now? I'm cold and tired," whispered Werlis, wiping away the small lump of ice that had formed under his nose with the sleeve of his cloak.

"It's already pitch black, and I have to admit that I'm a little cold too. We could try to go back, or we could wait some more and hope that the snow goblins disappear from here," Gorathdin replied quietly, pulling his fur out of his pouch and wrapping himself in it.

"They'll discover us if we dig a snow hole near here. And go back? I don't know, my toes are freezing and it's already dark. I think it's better if we wait here," said Aarl in a whisper, pulling his bearskin out of the travel bag and wrapping it around him.

"What if they come our way?" Vrenli asked quietly.

"We'll call our bluff," replied Werlis, putting on his coat as well and sticking his short sword into the snow next to him, when suddenly, with a loud crash, a large amount of snow was whirled through the air from the side of the hill. The four friends were startled.

"What was that?" exclaimed Werlis, and before Vrenli, Gorathdin or Aarl could answer, three of the snow goblins were hurled through the air by something unknown.

A dwarf clad in chain armor with red hair and beard leapt out of the hill, circling his axe around him with one hand and protectively holding a shield in front of him with the other, and struck at the snow goblins.

"A dwarf? Here in the Ice Mountains?" wondered Gorathdin, who had traveled a lot in his long life as an elf and had met the most incredible creatures in the most incredible places, but even he had not expected to see a dwarf in this desolate region.

"It's a dwarf, and what a dwarf. Look, he's already beaten five of these ugly creatures to death," said Werlis, who was amazed by the axe-wielding dwarf.

"We should help him," Aarl decided and took two of his throwing knives from their sheaths.

"Yes. Let's help him," Gorathdin agreed, putting an arrow in the string of his bow and shotting it at one of the snow goblins, who fell to the ground screaming.

The snow goblin clad in the white snow leopard skin pointed his staff in the direction of Gorathdin after noticing that one of his party had been hit by an arrow. Four snow goblins immediately ran towards Vrenli, Gorathdin, Werlis and Aarl, but they were killed halfway by two more arrows and two throwing knives.

The dwarf had noticed that he was receiving support from strangers and then cut his way to the leader of the snow goblins. With a powerful blow from his axe, the dwarf cut off the snow goblin's arm that held the ice staff. Vrenli and Werlis plucked up courage and ran at the other snow goblins with their short swords at the ready, bringing two of them down by plunging their short swords into their emaciated bodies. Gorathdin reached for his fire axe and was about to run towards the creatures gathered around Vrenli and Werlis when the red-haired dwarf leapt from a rock towards the snow goblins with his axe held high above his head, ready to strike, and cut off their limbs with quick but fierce blows.

"Thank you!" shouted Werlis, ducking at the last moment before a bludgeon came hurtling towards his head.

Vrenli rammed his short sword into the attacker's back from behind. The snow goblin fell to the ground and with it Vrenli, who had not let go of his short sword, but used his entire weight to ram the blade deeper through the goatskin the creature was wrapped in. The dwarf, looking around for other opponents, saw Gorathdin

leaping towards Vrenli, who was still lying on the dead snow goblin's back, performing several somersaults in the air.

At the last moment, Gorathdin prevented the worst by leaping over Vrenli onto the hill and severing the lower body of an ambush attacker with two powerful, cutting blows from his axe.

The dwarf, who had been watching Gorathdin's agility and speed with admiration, was thrown to the ground by the leader, who now held his staff in his right hand. The snow goblin threw off his white snow leopard fur and his mouth formed into a malicious grin, revealing his many pointed and rotten teeth.

He raised his staff, the tip of which glowed red, threateningly above the dwarf, but a moment later he slumped to the ground, gasping and spitting blood. He had received two of Aarl's throwing knives in the back. His staff fell onto a stone and shattered into a thousand pieces. The dwarf looked wordlessly at Aarl for several moments as he stepped out from behind the dead snow goblin.

"Thank you," he finally said to Aarl, who smiled kindly at him.

"We've come at just the right time," said Werlis, wiping the blood of a snow goblin from the blade of his short sword and holding his nose because of the foul stench.

"By all the halls of Ib'Agier! You have indeed come at the right moment. Tell me, what brings a ranger, two Abkether and a Thirian from the south to the cold Ice Mountains?" the dwarf asked out of breath and looked at Vrenli, Werlis, Gorathdin and Aarl in amazement.

"Our journey takes us from Tawinn to Astinhod. And what are you doing here, in this lonely, icy place, so far away from Ib'Agier?" Gorathdin inquired, bowing politely to the dwarf, who had placed his shield on the ground in front of him and was leaning on it.

"That, Mr. Elf, is a long story. And as a thanks for your help against the snow goblins, who are a real nuisance for a dwarf living here in the Ice Mountains, isolated and far away from his home, I will gladly tell it to you over a mug of warm beer and a freshly roasted goat," the dwarf replied and led them into his cave located inside the hill.

Gorathdin and Aarl had to bend down to pass through the entrance, but inside the cave, where the walls and floor were lined with furs, they were able to stand upright.

"Forgive me for not being able to offer you a seat at my table, but I only have one chair. I have never received guests in the thirty years I have lived here. Why don't you sit on the skins on the floor," the dwarf sheepishly admitted.

Vrenli, Werlis, Gorathdin and Aarl were surprised at how cozy and warm a cave could be and looked around curiously. To their astonishment, it was neither damp nor musty, the usual stench prevailing in such places. A small table with a low chair was in the middle of the cave, which was about fourteen paces wide, ten paces long and twelve paces high. A small oil lamp hanging from the center of the ceiling above the table provided a dim light.

To the right of the entrance, where a stone-built stove stood, a metal pipe led through the ceiling to the outside. Off to the side, at the back of the cave, stood a low bed made of wood, on which lay a warm-looking, thick fur. A small cupboard on the left wall next to the entrance was where the dwarf kept his chain armor, which he removed after entering the cave.

Conscientiously, almost reverently, he placed the gloves, chain mail, chain pants and helmet in the cupboard and locked it. He leaned his axe, the handle of which was engraved with dwarven characters, against the cupboard and hung his shield, which reflected the bland lamplight on the other side of the cave, on a large metal peg protruding from the stone wall. The dwarf wore a thick brown cotton shirt under his chain armor and leather pants, which he pulled off and then down over his navel, from where they slid back down at regular intervals.

"It probably came from a time when the dwarf was a bit more corpulent," thought Vrenli, who was observing this ritual.

"My name is Borlix. Borlix from Ib'Agier, or should I say Borlix from the Ice Mountains?" the dwarf introduced himself to his

guests, who noticed the sad expression on his face, which he tried to hide behind a grin.

After Vrenli, Werlis, Gorathdin and Aarl had introduced themselves to Borlix, he poured them warm beer from a wooden barrel that stood on the floor to the right of the stone oven.

"Very tasty," praised Werlis, who wondered how Borlix managed to get a barrel of beer in this remote area.

"Every two years, I travel over the Ice Mountains Pass to Astinhod, where I stock up on supplies," Borlix explained when he noticed that Werlis' gaze remained fixed on the small barrel of beer.

While Borlix opened the sturdy wooden door and stepped outside the cave, where he began to dig in the snow at a spot just a few steps away from the entrance, the four friends talked about the battle with the snow goblins and the progress of their journey. They were pleased that they had come across the dwarf, whose cozy cave they could warm themselves, fortify themselves, and spend the night in. In the meantime, Borlix had dug out a small mountain goat that he had buried in the snow for safekeeping. He took it back into the cave and laid it on the flat stone slab by the stove. "I'll let it thaw a little before I cut it up and prepare you an Ib'Agier-style roast goat," Borlix announced, beaming.

It was just before midnight when he took the roasted goat out of the stone oven and placed it on the floor in front of Vrenli, Werlis, Gorathdin and Aarl. He sat down with them and cut it into several smaller pieces with a long, sharp knife.

"You wanted to tell us why you live here alone and so far away from Ib'Agier," Vrenli reminded Borlix as he gnawed the tasty, tender goat meat from a bone.

Borlix nodded, poured his guests and himself some more of the warm beer and began his story, which began thirty years ago in Ib'Agier.

"It was shortly after my hundred and twentieth birthday, which I celebrated in The Golden Cup alehouse. A group of five dwarves

patrolling the border to the east told King Agnulix about an approaching army from Fallgar, which caused panic in the city. The army commanders immediately began manning the defensive wall in the east. All combat-capable dwarves were ordered to arm themselves as quickly as possible and gather in the inner courtyard behind the eastern rampart. The attack came as a surprise.

With the help of their destructive war machines and magic, they broke through one of the side gates and invaded the halls of Ib'Agier. King Agnulix feared for his people and his city, but as befits a true dwarf king, he gave the order to defend the halls to the last man.

I was an ordinary officer at the time and led a hundred-strong group of axemen. I was stationed with my men at the lake, which was in the center of the hall of living units. But when I saw the hundreds of knights clad in black armor, screaming orcs and grunting ogres coming towards us, I thought it more prudent to order my men to lead the old men, women and children who had gathered around the lake to defend the halls of Ib'Agier deep down into the mines, as I believed they would be safe from the attackers there.

You have to imagine the stupidity of the dwarves. They would sacrifice their elders, wives and children just to protect, how shall I put it, the stone in which they live," Borlix said and the four could see that, for a moment, he was ashamed to be a dwarf.

The pride of the dwarves was known throughout Wetherid, but Gorathdin was not surprised by Borlix. He understood what he meant and respected him for it and from then on looked at him with different eyes.

Borlix continued.

"I disobeyed King Agnulix's order, but saved the lives of many hundreds of dwarves, because, as it turned out later, the enemy was not interested in destroying the halls of Ib'Agier. They marched to the western gates, from where they moved on to Astinhod. They were merely defending themselves against the dwarves who attacked them in the halls.

"We suffered great losses, but the halls of Ib'Agier remained undamaged by the enemy. King Agnulix was a just and wise man, except for what seems to me to be the innate ignorance of the dwarves to protect their buildings with their lives. Despite disobeying his orders, I was decorated for my services. The news of the death of my father, who was a respected paladin, took me by surprise at the award ceremony, which took place before all traces of the battle had been removed. The chief priest of the Holy Hall and King Agnulix offered me the chance to follow in my father's footsteps. I knew about the power of the paladins. I knew about the light of Lorijan, but I also knew the price a paladin had to pay to receive that light.

Faith and religion have never been among my aspirations in my dwarf life. Renouncing alcohol, women and feasts, hours of prayer and meditation and submission to the priests and the goddess Lorijan were not my destiny, so I turned down their offer. King Agnulix decided, as our laws stipulate, that I had to leave Ib'Agier for a period of fifteen years and was only allowed to take the bare necessities with me.

So, I decided to go into exile and the first few years I was away from Ib'Agier were not particularly, how shall I put it, successful. It is difficult for a dwarf trying to live among humans or elves to be accepted because of our size and, shall I say, our pride and the quick temper that comes with it, which often makes us misunderstood.

I had my axe in my hands more often than food, so I decided to head for the Ice Mountains. They may only be half as high as the insurmountable mountains of Ib'Agier, but they are still mountains," Borlix told his four guests, who listened to him attentively as they drank the and feasted.

"But the fifteen years are already over. Why didn't you go back to Ib'Agier?" Vrenli asked in a tired voice.

He could barely keep his eyes open because of the three mugs of warm beer he had drunk.

Borlix was silent for a while and looked around his cave.

"Perhaps I should interpret your unexpected appearance as a sign. A sign that it is time to return to Ib'Agier," Borlix mused thoughtfully.

His eyes took on a certain gleam.

"You can travel with us to Astinhod and from there on to Ib'Agier," Gorathdin offered.

He was delighted that Borlix wanted to end his exile.

"Perhaps I should accept your offer. I'll sleep on it and decide tomorrow," Borlix yawned.

"It's certainly past midnight. We should get some sleep too," remarked Aarl, who had already lay down and covered himself with his bearskin.

"Aarl is right. I can barely keep my eyes open," Vrenli admitted, yawning.

Werlis nodded in agreement.

Borlix removed the remains of the roasted goat and lay down in his bed under the snow leopard skin. Vrenli, Werlis, Gorathdin and Aarl, who were about to fall asleep, were kept awake for some time by the sawing, whistling and humming noises made by Borlix, who was fast asleep, and although their tiredness was painful, they had to laugh about it. When silence finally fell in the cave, they slipped into the realm of dreams with relief.

Chapter 2

The City of Astinhod

When Gorathdin woke up the next morning, followed by Aarl, Werlis and Vrenli, Borlix was already standing in front of the entrance to the cave with his travel bag packed and dressed in his chain armor. He had his axe slung over his shoulder, his shield lying in the snow in front of him and was looking towards the pass that led to Astinhod.

"You're coming with us?" Vrenli asked him in a sleepy voice.

"Since I couldn't really sleep all night, I had enough time to think about my return to Ib'Agier, and yes, I will go with you," Borlix replied, surprised at his guests' sudden laughter.

"Why are you laughing?" Borlix questioningly looked at them.

"It didn't sound like you weren't really asleep," Werlis replied, imitating some of the sounds Borlix had made in his sleep.

Everyone, even Borlix, laughed boisterously.

Vrenli, Werlis, Gorathdin and Aarl returned inside with Borlix, ate the remains of the mountain goat and emptied the barrel of beer. Then they tied up their travel bags and prepared to leave. Borlix looked around the cave, his home for thirty years, one last time. He sadly left behind the belongings he had collected during this time. He hurried ahead of his four traveling companions onto the snow-covered plateau to hide the tears that ran down his round, red-cheeked face and into his long, bristly red whiskers. Borlix himself didn't know exactly why he was crying. Actually, he should be happy that he would soon see the halls of Ib'Agier again.

The ascent to the pass was exhausting and, above all, freezing. Fortunately, there were no clouds in the sky and no storms in sight that could have jeopardized their journey. They followed the path

over the pass for two days when they finally reached the side of the Ice Mountains facing Astinhod. Although they were still more than a thousand and two hundred paces above the valley, they could already see the vast fields of wheat, barley and sunflowers surrounding the village of Kring. Gorathdin jumped onto a rock and straightened up.

Far ahead on the horizon, he could make out the city of Astinhod with his sharp elven eyes, surrounded by a mighty city wall of white stone. Three towers rose high into the sky from its center. Gorathdin reached for the small leather pouch hanging on his chest.

"A little more than two days' journey and we will have reached our destination," Gorathdin announced as he looked down at the village of Kring, which they would reach before dusk.

Aarl and Borlix turned their gazes southward, towards the city of Astinhod, which for them was a symbol of homecoming. Aarl still had a long journey to Thir ahead of him, but Borlix would need no more than three days from the city of Astinhod to Ib'Agier.

"Let's go on," Gorathdin urged his travel companions, who were now friends.

He jumped down from the rock onto the mountain path, which was no longer covered in snow but overgrown with grasses and mosses, followed by Aarl, Werlis, Vrenli and Borlix. They had now left the snow and ice behind and low stone pines and larches were already rising to their left and right.

After the five travelers followed the path to the foot of the mountain, they crossed a small, wooded area from which they walked southeast across a grassy landscape. It was late afternoon when they entered a wide path that led through the vast fields of grain towards Kring.

Vrenli and Werlis looked out over the fields, one of which was the size of Abketh. The humans, who appeared large to Vrenli and Werlis, tilled the clay-colored earth with sickles, rakes and shovels, carrying large, woven baskets on their backs that the two could fit inside. Some of the field workers waved welcomingly to the five

travelers, although they were surprised at the strangers, for they were an unusual group of wanderers. Five people, four different races, and one didn't have to be very perceptive to realize that they had crossed the Ice Mountains. Vrenli, Werlis, Gorathdin, Aarl and Borlix were aware of the field workers' curious glances, but they paid them no mind, only waved back in a friendly manner.

They were no more than five hundred paces from Kring when they caught sight of the roofs of some simple houses.

"We will share a room at the Golden Chaff. It's the only inn in Kring that offers accommodation to wanderers. Tomorrow our route will take us to Umlis, a small town just a day's walk from here," Gorathdin explained to his friends as they reached the muddy road, on which the wheels of the farmers' heavily laden carts had left deep ruts. It led the five travelers past stables and farmsteads to a small, seemingly insignificant, deserted village square.

On a building that Vrenli first thought was a barn, a lantern hung above a closed wooden door, under which the name of the inn was carved on a weathered wooden panel.

"Don't expect too much. Mostly farmers, field workers, hunters and a few saddlers live in Kring," Gorathdin informed his friends before knocking on the door.

It took a moment for a small hatch to open at the level of Gorathdin's head.

"Who is this, and what do you want?" inquired the gruff voice of a bearded, slightly drunk old man.

"We are travelers on our way to Astinhod and need a warm meal and quarters," Gorathdin replied.

"What in God's name..." croaked the old man and threw the hatch shut again. Vrenli and Werlis looked questioningly at Gorathdin.

"We must have scared him," remarked Aarl.

"Open up," Borlix grumbled and knocked hard on the door three times.

The hatch opened again and, as Borlix was too small to be seen, the frightened eyes of a woman looked at Aarl standing behind him.

"Forgive me, sir. My uncle is a drunkard. He said he had seen the Incarnate One at the door," a timid voice rang out.

A moment later, the door creaked open and a corpulent, slightly stooped, middle-aged woman stood in the doorway. Puzzled, she looked first at Borlix, who was standing in front of her, and then at Aarl, who smiled at her in a friendly manner.

"Have no fear, good woman. We are just weary wanderers looking for a place to stay. My name is Aarl from Thir and these are my friends Borlix, the dwarf, and Vrenli and Werlis, from Abketh. The strange-looking one is Gorathdin, a ranger from the Dark Forest," Aarl introduced himself and his companions and took a step to the side.

"Adlena is my name. Come in," she said hesitantly.

"You'll have to forgive me, but we don't often have guests from outside," Adlena apologized when she noticed that the five travellers posed no danger.

With friendly smiles, Vrenli, Werlis, Gorathdin, Aarl and Borlix entered the small inn, where there was no one except for the bearded old man sitting at one of the eight gray tables in front of a jug of wine. They sat down at the table near the open fireplace and warmed up. Aarl ordered a jug of wine for himself and his friends.

"If you're hungry, I can offer you hot barley stew and freshly baked bread," Adlena suggested, placing a white clay jug and five wooden mugs in the middle of the table.

While they waited for their hot meal, they talked about their battle with the snow goblins and their journey. Adlena brought them another jug of wine before placing a large bowl of steaming barley stew, cutlery and five plates on the table.

After Vrenli, Werlis, Gorathdin, Aarl and Borlix had fortified themselves, Vrenli, who insisted on this privilege, paid five gold pieces for the meal and overnight stay. They then followed a

creaking staircase to the upper floor. Adlena opened the door to the guest room on the right and wished them a good night's sleep.

In the small room, lit by a candle, two extra-wide mattresses filled with straw lay on the floor, on which the friends spread out their cloaks, lay down and covered themselves with their furs. Vrenli, Werlis and Gorathdin slept next to the small window on the east side of the room. Aarl and Borlix shared a mattress on the west side.

Early in the morning, when the rooster's wake-up call sounded, everyone woke up except Werlis, who had to be woken up by Vrenli. They stowed their furs, put on their cloaks and went down to the inn, where Adlena had already prepared breakfast. After they had fortified themselves for their journey ahead, they said their thankful goodbyes. As an apology for the misunderstanding the night before, they did not have to pay for breakfast.

They followed the loamy road southwards. Their day's march took them across a wide meadow lowland and through a dense mixed forest followed by a hilly, dry coniferous forest, which they walked through in the late afternoon.

As dusk began to fall, they finally arrived in Umlis, where they spent the night in The Plough inn. As time was pressing, the next morning Gorathdin borrowed a pony and two horses from Mayor Edmarg Humkis of Umlis, to whom he showed a letter of escort from King Grandhold.

"Long live King Grandhold!" the mayor called after them and closed his hand around the ten gold coins that Gorathdin had given him as thanks for his loyalty.

Vrenli, Werlis, Gorathdin, Aarl and Borlix rode on southwards until midday, then eastwards and, after they had left the wide cornfields around Astinhod behind them, Gorathdin stopped his horse and pointed with his hand to the city of Astinhod.

"We made it in time," he said happily and smiled.

The city of Astinhod, home to thousands, stretched majestically before them.

"Never in my life would I have imagined such a huge city," Vrenli marveled, looking at the high, thick city wall, with well-fortified defense towers rising into the sky every fifty paces or so.

They kept up a moderate trot with their mounts towards the city gate, which was not far. Once there, Vrenli and Werlis were amazed at the hustle and bustle in front of the mighty, wide-open gates. Many farmers, merchants and travelers were waiting to enter the city, but the five gate guards only allowed them in after inquiring about their origin and purpose of their intended stay. Gorathdin, who led his fellow travelers, marched past the queue of people, heading straight for a guard.

"Stop! You have to get in line," the guard armed with a lance and sword reprimanded him.

However, he apologized to him only a moment later and bowed.

"Forgive me, my lord. I did not recognize you."

The guard ordered some of the farmers and travelers to clear the way.

"My lord?" Vrenli looked at Gorathdin in surprise.

"A long story and not that important," he evaded and walked through the large archway.

Two guards standing to the left and right behind the gate stopped Vrenli, Werlis, Aarl and Borlix.

"Stop right there!" one of the two guards told them and stood in their way.

"These are my fellow travelers," Gorathdin stated emphatically, whereupon the guard let them pass and looked after the motley group in astonishment.

The five followed a stone-paved street leading to the market square for some time. Vrenli and Werlis looked at the gray facades of the simple houses to their left and right, but the closer they got to the market square, the more magnificent the buildings became. The now white facades were decorated with stucco and there were

even small statues on some of the window ledges. Some of the entrances were adorned with marble or dark stone columns.

Arriving at the marketplace, Gorathdin stopped to give his friends time to take in the commotion.

In the center of the crowded square, a white marble basin shot thick jets of water high into the air. All around it were countless stalls lined up by traders who had come from all parts of Wetherid to sell their goods in Astinhod.

Astinhod was a prosperous city and its inhabitants were hardworking and industrious, which brought with it a certain prosperity. People from the DeShadin and Thir deserts, elves, dwarves, a few barbarians and two monks in purple robes touted their goods to eager market visitors: pottery and fine fabrics, carpets, furs, meat, vegetables, fruit, flowers, artfully crafted jewelry, herbs, spices, tea, healing potions, leather goods, weapons and armor. As in any marketplace, the merchants haggled over their prices, which were usually too high. It was not uncommon for the haggling to turn into heated discussions, which occasionally led to an argument. However, the city guards, who ensured peace and quiet in the city with their military clothing made of fine fabrics and their gleaming lances, were usually quick to arrive and settle the loud discussions.

Vrenli and Werlis stopped in front of a market stall where three Scheddifer were selling spices and tea and were amazed at their dark skin color. This astonishment was mutual, however, as the three traders had never seen Abkethers before. Werlis noticed a young man sitting next to the spice and tea merchants' stall on the steps of the water basin, pursuing a pretty girl who was accompanied by a very wealthy-looking man.

"Let's keep going," Gorathdin urged Vrenli and Werlis.

"Just a moment," Werlis asked and approached the painter.

"Forgive me, Sir. Could you paint a picture of my friends and me?" he asked the artist as he followed the artist's quick and precise brushstrokes.

"One gold piece per picture. But since there are five of you, I'll need more parchment, so let's say two gold pieces," he replied, looking up briefly from the picture he was painting.

"Agreed," Werlis agreed.

However, the young man put him off until the next day. Just as Werlis was about to offer him double the amount if he would agree to paint them immediately, Gorathdin urged him to move on.

"There really is time until tomorrow. Come on now!" he said firmly.

Walking side by side, the five crossed the market square to the north. Vrenli and Werlis had just noticed three jugglers showing off their skills on a small wooden stage not far from them when Gorathdin stopped.

"Wait a moment. I have something to do here," Gorathdin pointed with his hand to a tall, strong man with blond hair in two plaits that hung over his shoulders.

The man played a lyre while a large brown bear, standing upright and tied to a thick chain, danced to it. Gorathdin disliked this kind of animal exploitation, so he approached the burly man and asked him to release the bear.

The man, who had something barbarian about him, stared at Gorathdin, who was a head shorter, wordlessly for a few moments and finally laughed out loud.

"Who do you think you are? That's my bear. I caught it myself and I do what I want with it. Mind your own business!" he snapped at Gorathdin in disregard and tugged at his bear's chain, which then opened its mouth wide.

"See to it that you get on, or my bear might suddenly get hungry," the bear keeper irritably hissed and glared at Gorathdin. But when he recognized his elven ancestry, he immediately took a step back. He placed his strong, rough hand on the handle of his axe leaning against a tree trunk next to him where he had placed his lyre.

"I wouldn't dare do that if I were you," Borlix grumbled, whereupon the burly man, who now realized that Gorathdin was not alone, abandoned his plan.

"What do you care how I earn my living, Elf?" he asked in a disparaging tone.

Gorathdin remained calm.

"I'll make you a proposition. I will give you fifty gold pieces if you leave the city and set the bear free," Gorathdin pulled a pouch of gold coins from under his cloak.

"Fifty gold pieces? I can live on that for a year. But what do I do after that? No, Elf, that's not enough. I demand one hundred gold pieces".

The bear keeper's eyes began to sparkle at the thought of the sum.

"Here have a hundred. Take it and make sure you leave the city today," Gorathdin replied and tossed him a pouch of gold coins.

The bear keeper smiled at Gorathdin and looked at Vrenli, Werlis, Aarl and Borlix. He grinned, took his lyre from the tree stump, pulled on his bear's chain and walked a few steps further to an inn, where he tied up the animal before entering the building.

"He's not going to start spending the gold coins with his hands full now, is he?" Vrenli wondered.

"I don't care what he does with the gold coins. But if I still find him here tomorrow with his bear, I'll have him thrown out of the city," Gorathdin replied calmly and walked on.

Not far from the market square, they passed a district that showed Astinhod in a completely different light. It smelled of feces and the inhabitants of this quarter were wrapped in rags or dressed in simple cotton. Dirty children played with a small leather ball on the muddy ground.

The few houses had dirty facades and some of the windows had broken panes of glass or missing shutters. There were even four simple wooden huts far back. Aarl noticed that the majority of the

inhabitants were Thirians, and he wondered about the many patrolling city guards.

"Where are we?" he asked Gorathdin curiously.

"There is also poverty in Astinhod. This district is the so-called Shunned Quarter. Women and men who do not or cannot pursue a regular job are housed here for the benefit of others. Between us, with thousands of people living in Astinhod and more than two thousand in the surrounding areas, there are of course criminals and many of them have found shelter here. The idea that the king had when he made this district available to the poor was not to separate them from the other inhabitants, but rather to combat the poverty that was also spreading in Astinhod. Every day, basic foodstuffs are distributed to the needy for a small fee. But I have to admit that many people shamelessly exploit this. Many could work but prefer to rely on the royal family.

What's more, more than ten years ago, thieves and other outlaws joined forces and founded a guild. The 'Thieves' Guild, as they call themselves, has an estimated one hundred and fifty members who are known to hold underground meetings in Astinhod. This guild is the real problem in the Shunned Quarter and the city of Astinhod," Gorathdin informed his friends, adding that the nobles of the city had been trying for years to convince the King that the inhabitants of this quarter should be relocated from the city to one of the surrounding villages. "However, the powerful landed gentry opposed this proposal and so they had been arguing for years. During this time, the 'Thieves' Guild had become increasingly influential and now bribed or threatened officers of the city guard to be able to carry out their work undisturbed." Gorathdin continued.

"Why doesn't the King have all the thieves arrested and build a new village for the poor outside the city? He could give them land that they could then cultivate?" Vrenli wondered aloud.

He didn't see the problem as being too big.

"The theory sounds simple, I agree. But the thieves have influence in high places and nobody knows the people who protect them from the law. They are a plague and have to be dealt with.

And as for the poor being moved out, I think it's the 'Thieves' Guild that has found a perfect hideout in a district that is shunned by the rest of the population," Gorathdin explained.

"Politics and crime have always gone hand in hand," Borlix grumbled, to which Aarl nodded in agreement.

They followed the street from the market square, past the Shunned Quarter, to the craftsmen's quarter. Master carpenters, blacksmiths, weavers, shoemakers, goldsmiths, glassblowers and other craftsmen plied their trades here. Borlix stopped in front of a blacksmith's shop and observed the strong, sweaty man wearing a black leather apron, covered in coal dust. He was taking a red-hot piece of metal from the fire of a stone furnace. The blacksmith placed it on an anvil in front of him and struck it with a large hammer several times in succession with short, powerful blows. After only a few moments, Borlix began to criticize him for his imprecise blows.

"Come on, Borlix!" Gorathdin called to him, who had already moved on with Vrenli, Werlis and Aarl.

"Forging is an art," Borlix said after he rejoined them.

"And not every artist is equally good," added Aarl with a grin.

"Indeed," Borlix agreed and turned back towards the blacksmith.

The road that meandered through the craftsmen's quarter turned west and led them into the merchants' quarter, where they noticed that almost every fourth house was an inn. When they saw a sign hanging in front of the entrance to one, they couldn't help but wonder at the name on it.

"Goblin Cave. Who gives an inn such a name?" Borlix wondered aloud and had to laugh.

"I'd like to have a look at this cave," said Werlis. He walked towards the door but was held back by Vrenli's cloak.

"We really don't have time for this now, and besides, it could be dangerous. You don't know what kind of creatures are in an inn called Goblin Cave," warned Vrenli, still holding Werlis by the cloak.

Undaunted, they continued and soon reached a building where halves of lamb, pork and game on large metal hooks hung from its roof beams that reached almost four steps into the street. A short, fat, bearded man with big, strong shoulders was cutting off a large piece of meat with a very sharp-looking knife, wrapping it in parchment and handing it to a woman with two children.

"Can you imagine how much meat the thousands of people who live here eat?" Werlis asked Vrenli, who just shrugged his shoulders as he followed Gorathdin, Borlix and Aarl.

They strolled past a row of stores selling all kinds of things. Once they had left the merchants' quarter behind them, they headed east. They entered a district where tall buildings were lined side-by-side to the left and right of the street.

"Two-story houses. As if they didn't have enough space in the large stone buildings where the humans live. They have to build another - how shall I put it - house on top of their house," Borlix grumbled.

"Seven or eight dwarf families could live in such a building. People always have to exaggerate," he added.

"Sorry, but speaking of exaggeration, I've visited Ib'Agier many times," Gorathdin joked and gave Borlix a mischievous smile.

Werlis, Vrenli and Aarl didn't understand what he meant, but Borlix grinned sheepishly. Wordlessly, they walked past the ornately decorated facades of the two-story houses.

Gorathdin, who was driven by the longing to see Lythinda again and wanting to tell the King about his success in finding the flowers, did not notice the carriage speeding towards them from behind. He was so absorbed in his thoughts that his fine elven ears did not warn him of the approaching danger. The magnificent carriage, drawn by four white horses and adorned with gold, sped towards him and his friends. At the last moment, Aarl pulled Gorathdin aside by his cloak.

"Get out of the way! Count Laars has an important audience with the King!" shouted the coachman, who spurred the horses on with his whip cracking above their heads.

Aarl, who had dodged to the left side of the road with Gorathdin, looked at the shocked faces of Vrenli and Werlis, who had jumped to the right side of the road together with Borlix.

"What on earth! Didn't the coachman see us? We're not that small," Werlis stammered, while Borlix shouted a few dwarven curses after the coachman.

"Humans," he grumbled after venting his anger.

"Very unusual. An inattentive elf," Aarl noted, still holding Gorathdin by the cloak and pressing him against the wall of the house.

"You're right. I was in my thoughts. I let my feelings guide me too much. Feelings which, it seems, are stronger than my instincts," Gorathdin admitted.

"If Lythinda really is as enchanting as you told me, then I'm not surprised," grinned Aarl.

"Which Lythinda?" asked Borlix, who was not yet aware of the reason for Gorathdin's journey.

Gorathdin looked at him wordlessly for a few moments. Borlix noticed his brief silence and walked across the street towards him.

"You don't have to tell me the reason for your journey. It's none of my business. You don't have to feel bad about it. I didn't mean to pry," Borlix placated.

"Can I trust a dwarf?" Gorathdin pondered, as he received looks of approval from Vrenli, Werlis and Aarl that dispelled his doubts.

On their way through the residential district of Astinhod, he told Borlix what had happened to Princess Lythinda in the Three Vines inn. He also told him that he had traveled to Tawinn in the village of Abketh to find the blossoms of the moonflower. Borlix listened attentively and when the name Erwright of Entorbis was mentioned, he grimaced angrily.

"Entorbis. Murderers they were and murderers they are. Feeding on the power of evil in Fallgar. Allies of the shadow. Murderers," Borlix growled and spat on the ground.

None of them noticed the thief who had been following them for some time and had overheard their conversation.

"We should talk further in the castle. Something inside me warns me not to speak so openly here on the streets of Astinhod," Gorathdin suddenly said. He turned around quickly, but he couldn't see anyone.

Having heard enough, the thief disappeared into one of the houses on the road.

They had reached the end of the residential district. The stone-paved street turned off to the right behind the last house. They approached a gate guarded by four soldiers from the lifeguard. Behind the gate was an avenue of birch and beech trees, through which led a path paved with white marble stones.

Master Drobal's Tower

The guards wore heavy, shiny silver armor with the Astinhod coat of arms engraved on their breastplates. When the five travelers arrived at the gate, the guards crossed their long, pointed lances and gripped the gem-studded hilts of their broad-bladed swords menacingly.

"Open the gate!" Gorathdin ordered.

"Tell me your rank, name and desire," demanded the oldest guard.

"I am the Count of Regen and my name is Gorathdin of the Forest. King Grandhold is expecting me," said Gorathdin, who reached into his travel pouch, pulled out the King's letter of escort and handed it to the guard. The guard looked at the royal seal at the end of the letter and stepped aside.

"You may pass, Count of Regen."

The soldiers of the royal guard cleared the way.

The gate was opened and Gorathdin, followed by his friends, walked through. They followed an avenue for some time, which led to a large garden. Aarl was fascinated by the artfully trimmed

green hedges, some of which were in bloom, and the rare archbell flowers, clover violet beds and the occasional habermilk cactus, which normally only grew in Desert of DeShadin. Vrenli and Werlis also looked around enthusiastically, overwhelmed by the mighty maple trees and the old, thick-trunked oaks that stood sporadically on the low, well-tended lawn. Just a few steps away, to the left of an oak tree, was a small pavilion. Vrenli and Werlis stopped for a moment and stood for fun under one of the mighty trees that was about forty paces high with a trunk at least seven paces in diameter.

"Your whole nation could gather on this oak tree," joked Gorathdin.

"How easy their lives are," he thought to himself as he watched his two friends begin to chase each other around the thick trunk of the oak tree from the path.

Werlis, who was being followed by Vrenli, turned off behind the tree trunk and ran as fast as his little legs could carry him to the nearby pavilion, where he hid under one of the benches made of fine wood. As Vrenli stopped behind the thick oak trunk to wait for Werlis to come around, he didn't notice that Werlis had long since disappeared.

"Where is he? Surely, he won't have the same idea and be waiting for me on the other side?" thought Vrenli, slowly creeping around the oak trunk.

"He ran over there!" Borlix shouted with a laugh and pointed to the pavilion.

"Not only are they almost as small as children, they also have a childlike disposition. I envy them for that," thought Gorathdin, who almost got carried away by the game had it not been for Lythinda, who was waiting for his help.

"I hope Vrenli will maintain his cheerfulness even after he has learned that life has given him a far more difficult task than simply being an Abkether, or, as the Tawinnian priestess has instructed him, preserving the history of the ancients."

Gorathdin called out to the two to finish their game and, followed by Aarl and Borlix, who didn't have much interest in the plant splendor, continued to a tower rising high in the sky, where they stopped to wait for Vrenli and Werlis.

"This is Master Drobald's Tower," Gorathdin remarked.

"Should I go up and give him Gwerlit's message?" Vrenli asked, looking up to the top.

"There is still time. We must first go to King Grandhold and tell him about the success of our journey. He will certainly be very worried by now," Gorathdin replied and followed the path that led to a wide staircase with many steps. Astinhod's banners waved in the wind to the left and right of the adjacent, half-height staircase walls.

The two men from the bodyguard standing guard outside the staircase were talking to a man sitting on a magnificent carriage that looked all too familiar to the five friends.

"Hey, you there! Be more careful next time. You nearly ran us over earlier," grumbled Borlix.

The coachman gave him an irritated look.

"Look out, dwarf. This carriage belongs to Count Laars," one of the two guards admonished him.

"And if it belongs to the King himself, this man almost killed us before," Borlix angrily replied, which is why Gorathdin gently put his hand on his shoulder to calm him down.

"A little more consideration would be appropriate, coachman," Gorathdin said firmly and ordered the guards to report him and his four companions to the King.

The coachman looked disparagingly at Gorathdin, who, like his friends, was not exactly in a condition befitting court. The dust and dirt of the long journey were visible on their clothes and in some places their cloaks showed small tears. What's more, there was only one human among them, and he was a Thirian to boot.

"Did I hear that right, were those guys talking to me?" the coachman said condescendingly.

"This is Gorathdin, Count of Regen," the guard whispered to him.

"Pah, landed gentry," the coachman replied quietly and made a dismissive gesture with his hand.

Gorathdin, who had heard the conversation between the two, did not react. Far too often in his life he had been insulted by people, treated with contempt, ridiculed and initially driven away. He only understood the reason for this many years later. People were afraid of him. It was the fear of the unknown that drove them to these actions and insults. He used to react to this with anger, but now he only felt pity for those who disregarded him.

The guard who had announced Gorathdin and his friends came down the stairs with quick steps, accompanied by King Grandhold himself. The other guard and the coachman halted their conversation and bowed. Borlix knelt and kept his eyes on the ground. Aarl, who was still a little hesitant, finally followed him.

Werlis stared for a moment at the King of Astinhod, who was a slender but strong-looking man of around sixty. His full brown beard was neatly trimmed and his brown, thick, straight hair, which he wore loose, reached almost to his shoulders. It was barely noticeable that his hair had turned gray in some places, which was covered by the simple golden crown.

"What do we do now? Should we kneel down too?" whispered Werlis questioningly to Vrenli, who was equally perplexed and looked to Gorathdin for help. But he just smiled.

"Gorathdin, my friend!" King Grandhold greeted him warmly and looked him expectantly.

"My King," replied Gorathdin, barely nodding, to which King Grandhold smiled, reassured.

"You brought friends with you?" the King turned to the companions.

"This is Vrenli and Werlis from the village of Abketh. Vrenli was instructed to seek out Master Drobal," Gorathdin explained briefly and then introduced Aarl and Borlix, whom the King asked to stand up.

"We should continue our conversation in my chambers," he invited Gorathdin and walked up the stairs that led to a large gate with two wings they passed through. They followed a long corridor lined with fine carpets and where hunting trophies and pictures of the King's ancestors hung on the walls. Every few steps there were magnificent, heavy suits of knight's armor, silent showpieces that amazed Vrenli and Werlis. They didn't understand how people could fight in such metal containers, as Werlis called them.

Several castle guards, dressed in splendid uniforms made of fine fabrics, walked up and down the corridor. The two guards standing in front of the door to the throne room opened it hastily when they saw the King with his five followers. King Grandhold entered the magnificent, gleaming golden throne room with quick steps. He strode past the throne of Astinhod, opened the small door that led to his private chambers and entered. From his study, where he wrote most of his royal decrees, received private guests or held secret meetings, he strode purposefully into the adjoining bedchamber.

Inside was what Vrenli, Werlis and Borlix thought was a huge four-poster bed, with a smaller one next to it. Surrounded by a lady-in-waiting, a healer and a priest, the King's daughter lay there, motionless and in the grip of an unknown fever. Gorathdin approached the bed and gently wiped away the small beads of sweat that had formed on Lythinda's forehead with the palm of his hand. Lythinda fixedly gazed at the mural on the ceiling above her.

"Fortunately, her condition has not worsened," the healer said to Gorathdin, who looked at Lythinda with concern and sadness.

Vrenli, Werlis, Aarl and Borlix were enchanted by the princess's grace and beauty. The young girl, who was no more than twenty-five years old, had long, curly blonde hair, which was carefully combed by the lady-in-waiting who sat at her bedside. Her deep blue eyes reflected a sea of emotions and her pale face with its small, delicate nose and thin red lips looked as if it had been painted.

"You should send for Master Drobai," Gorathdin suggested to King Grandhold.

"Master Drobale left Astinhod three days ago. Without much ado, and you can imagine that I was not happy about it. He had a very serious, almost angry look on his face. He didn't want to tell me anything more than that my daughter's illness was probably just the beginning of a greater suffering that could befall us. He told the court healer Palanmar to make the healing potion in his place. The recipe is in the book on his desk in the tower," King Grandhold said.

Gorathdin was irritated by the unexpected, mysterious departure of Master Drobale.

"Master Drobale explained to me how to prepare the potion. I just need to get the book from his tower. Before I forget, the blossoms of the moonflower must not be older than fifteen days," said Palanmar.

"Today is the twelfth day," replied Gorathdin.

"Has Master Drobale given any indication as to when he will return?" asked Vrenli, who was already getting impatient.

"Magicians! Who knows why and where they are going and when they will return? He didn't give the slightest hint. He didn't answer any of my questions. Not even the question of a worried father as to whether the healing potion would help my daughter. He just shrugged his shoulders wordlessly and went back to his tower," King Grandhold complained angrily.

"Something must have happened. Something that has eclipsed Lythinda's illness and requires his full attention," Gorathdin stated anxiously.

"Where did you say the book with the recipe was?" he then asked Palanmar.

"On the worktable in his tower," the healer replied.

"I'll get it," Gorathdin decided, hoping that he might find some clues in the tower as to the reason for Master Drobale's sudden departure.

"I will accompany you," Vrenli said to Gorathdin, who looked at him for a moment without replying.

"I was supposed to meet Master Drobal in Astinhod and no one has explained why. I would at least like to see his tower if I can't meet him myself," Vrenli announced resolutely.

Gorathdin understood and nodded in agreement.

"The blossoms must be processed at midnight," warned Palanmar.

"You will certainly want to rest from your journey. I'll have you taken to your room," King Grandhold offered Werlis, Aarl and Borlix, who, however, expressed the wish to accompany Gorathdin and Vrenli to Master Drobal's tower.

King Grandhold looked at Gorathdin with a smile.

"After the long journey we've been on and the incidents that were not always without danger, it's hard to separate us," Gorathdin replied with a smile.

"Then follow me," he urged his friends, whereupon they left the King's private chambers.

By the time they reached the castle garden, it was already dark, so Gorathdin walked ahead of his friends to the tower.

"Why do you think Master Drobal left Astinhod?" asked Vrenli.

"I only have a vague suspicion and I'd rather keep it to myself," he evaded.

They could already make out the shadow of the tower in the moonlight on the marble-paved path.

Gorathdin walked to the heavy wooden door that blocked the entrance of the tower, which rose more than seventy paces into the sky and had only a single window, just below the battlements of the spire.

"The door is open," Gorathdin noted and looked up, where he noticed a faint light in Master Drobal's study.

"Either Master Drobal is back, or someone else is up there," Gorathdin said, pointing with his right hand to the window at the top of the tower.

"Maybe he just forgot to turn off the light," Werlis pondered.

"I doubt that," Gorathdin replied and reached for his fire axe.

"Wait here for me."

Gorathdin was about to enter the tower when he noticed Vrenli following him with his short sword drawn.

"Wait here, Vrenli," said Gorathdin, waving him back with his hand.

"You shouldn't go up alone. If your suspicion that someone other than Master Drobai is in the tower turns out to be true, it could be dangerous and you know that I know how to use my short sword," Vrenli said firmly, looking at Gorathdin with determination.

"All right, then. Aarl, Borlix and Werlis, you guard the entrance. Don't let anyone in or out," Gorathdin instructed his friends, who picked up their weapons and nodded.

Gorathdin and Vrenli followed the winding staircase to the top third of the tower when they heard the sound of breaking glass.

"Shh! I don't think that's Master Drobai," Gorathdin whispered.

They crept quietly up the remaining steps and stopped in front of the heavy wooden door that closed off the mage's study. When Gorathdin tried to carefully and quietly open the door a crack to peek inside, he was surprised to see that it was locked from the inside.

"Maybe it's Master Drobai after all?" Vrenli whispered.

Gorathdin put his pointed elven ear to the door and raised his hand, holding up three fingers.

"I can't hear exactly what they're saying, but I think they're talking to each other in a Thirian dialect," Gorathdin whispered.

"Thirians?" whispered Vrenli in astonishment.

"Thieves," Gorathdin said quietly.

"We should seize the moment of surprise. I'll break down the door and then we'll try to overpower them," he whispered in Vrenli's ear.

"Wait! Shouldn't we let Werlis, Aarl and Borlix know?" asked Vrenli as quietly as he could.

"There are only three of them," Gorathdin replied, swinging out his fire axe and slamming it so hard against the door that it burst into the room with a loud crash that alerted Werlis, Aarl and Borlix.

"Watch out!" shouted one of the thieves, startled by the breaking open of the door.

Gorathdin leapt towards the three and struck one of them down quickly and skillfully with the handle of his fire axe, which he held in the middle of the shaft. The second of the three thieves attacked Gorathdin from the side with a dagger, but Gorathdin grabbed his arm in a flash and twisted it, causing the thief to fall to his knees, whimpering. Instead of helping his two guild brothers, the third jumped over Vrenli, who was trying, unsuccessfully, to stop him by raising his short sword, and ran as fast as he could down the winding staircase of the tower.

"Wait! Werlis, Aarl and Borlix will take care of him," Gorathdin called to Vrenli, who was about to pursue the fleeing thief.

"Let go of me!" shouted the thief, who was still being held by Gorathdin's arm.

Gorathdin's grip tightened.

"You'll break my arm!" shouted the tanned Thirian, who was dressed in brown leather trousers and a similarly colored shirt.

Vrenli noticed that the thief, like Aarl, was wearing a leather belt across his chest with several shafts containing throwing knives.

"What are you doing here?" Gorathdin asked in a sharp tone.

The thief spat contemptuously on the plain, gray stone floor. Gorathdin then twisted his arm so hard that a crack sounded.

"Damned elf! You broke my arm!" the thief screamed, whimpering in pain. Gorathdin grabbed the thief's other arm and pulled him up.

"If you don't want a second broken arm, then answer me!" Gorathdin thundered.

His eyes lit up dark green. The thief, bent over in pain and with tears in his eyes, was being held by Gorathdin and startled when he looked into the elf's eyes.

"We need to steal a book," gasped the pinned man, wracked in pain.

"What book?" Gorathdin asked.

"A book containing the recipe for a healing potion that could help the princess," replied the tormented thief, suddenly turning white as a sheet.

"Vrenli!" Gorathdin exclaimed, pointing with his hand at the other thief, who had just regained consciousness and tried to get up, whereupon Vrenli knocked him to the ground with the hilt of his short sword.

"Who told you to do this?" Gorathdin asked the thief and tightened his grip.

"I don't know," whimpered the thief.

Gorathdin twisted his arm again. The thief contorted his face and begged him to stop.

"Answer me!" Gorathdin shouted at him.

"We belong to Massek's guild. He told us to do it," the thief confessed and tore himself free from Gorathdin's grip.

He looked around briefly, jumped up and ran down the stairs over Vrenli, but didn't get far. The blunt handle of Borlix's double-bladed axe hit him before he could jump over him.

"Vrenli, Gorathdin?" Borlix called up the stairs.

"We're fine!" Vrenli replied.

"What happened up here?" he asked the two of them when he arrived in Master Drobald's study and saw the unconscious thief lying on the floor next to his friends.

"The thieves wanted to steal the book with the recipe for the healing potion," explained Vrenli.

"One of them fell over Werlis down at the entrance, who was worried about the sounds of fighting coming down from above and was about to enter the tower," Borlix reported.

"Is Werlis all right?" Vrenli asked anxiously.

"Yes. Everything's fine. He just has an abrasion on his knee," Borlix reassured him, leaning on the handle of his axe.

"What about the two thieves?" Gorathdin wanted to know.

"Aarl will take care of one of them and the one I met on the stairs won't be waking up any time soon," Borlix said with a laugh, tapping the handle of his axe.

Gorathdin's eyes wandered through Master Drobald's study, which strangely reminded Vrenli of his grandfather's house.

"This must be it," Gorathdin muttered and walked towards the large, round table next to the window, where a pile of old, written parchments, quill and ink, small and larger glass tubes, metal stands, various stones and some test tubes with dubious contents sat on. He leaned over the table and picked up the book lying on the floor. Gorathdin opened it and began to leaf through it. The hundreds of pages were filled with all kinds of recipes for making healing potions.

Borlix grabbed the still unconscious thief lying next to Vrenli and pulled him down the stairs to where the other incapacitated Thirian was.

"Werlis, come up and help me!" Borlix called down the winding tower stairs.

"I'm coming!" he replied and hurried up the stairs. Together they dragged the two thieves down the stairs and laid them on the ground in front of Aarl, who in the meantime tied up the thief that stumbled over Werlis with his belt. While Borlix told Aarl and Werlis what happened upstairs, Vrenli looked with fascination and curiosity at the low, golden, oval bowl, about two and a half steps wide, which stood in the middle of Master Drobald's study. He approached the bowl, paused for a moment and looked at the small, shimmering light blue crystal inside.

Gorathdin, who was looking around for clues about Master Drobald's unexpected departure, did not notice Vrenli climb into the bowl and reach for the small, shimmering light blue crystal. A mist that had slowly formed at the bottom of the bowl began to envelop Vrenli. All at once, it became pitch black around him.

Vrenli tried to move and get out of the bowl, but a sea of lights appeared out of nowhere and blinded him so much that he had to close his eyes. He lost all sense of space and time followed by a state similar to unconsciousness. Gorathdin happened to turn in the direction of the bowl and could not believe his eyes as he saw Vrenli slowly dissolving into the mist.

"Vrenli! What the...?" cried Gorathdin, jumping towards the bowl before he had finished his sentence and reaching into the mist. He grabbed Vrenli by the belt and tried to pull him out of the bowl, but in the same moment, he completely dissolved into the mist. Gorathdin withdrew his hand from the mist and, instead of his friend, he held the small leather pouch containing the Oracle of Tawinn in his hand.

"Vrenli?" Gorathdin shouted so loud that Werlis, Aarl and Borlix could hear the bellow from outside the tower.

Gorathdin gazed into the clearing fog in horror.

"Magic," he thought as he walked towards the window to inform Werlis, Aarl and Borlix about Vrenli's disappearance.

Werlis ran as fast as he could up the winding staircase to Master Drobal's study.

"He just disappeared before my eyes," Gorathdin explained, pointing to the golden, oval bowl.

"Vrenli! Vrenli," cried Werlis and ran towards the bowl, crying.

"That can't be right. How can he just disappear like that?" Werlis sobbed, staring at the bowl in horror.

"Magic," Gorathdin replied.

"But where is Vrenli now?" Werlis' senses began to fade.

Gorathdin was silent for a few moments.

"I don't know," he finally replied, sitting down on the chair at Master Drobal's desk and looking at the bowl in silence for a while.

"He's not dead, is he?" asked Werlis hesitantly.

Gorathdin, still holding the small leather pouch in his hand, did not answer.

"Tell me he's not dead!" Werlis screamed hysterically, slumping down on the floor next to the bowl, crying.

"I don't know," replied Gorathdin, his words almost stuck in his throat.

Werlis straightened up, wiped the tears from his face and stepped into the golden bowl.

Nothing happened.

"What are you doing?" Gorathdin shouted and yanked him back by the cloak.

Werlis fell to the ground.

"I want to follow Vrenli," he replied with a pale face.

"Have you lost your senses? It could mean your death. We don't know what this bowl is all about," Gorathdin warned him.

He held out his hand to Werlis, pulled him up and hugged him.

"But Vrenli is my best friend!" Werlis burst out, his voice drowned in tears.

Gorathdin thought and looked around the room.

"I don't think Master Drobald keeps objects here that mean death if you touch them," he spoke reassuringly to Werlis.

"But where is Vrenli now?" Werlis sobbed.

"I wish I could tell you that. Let's look for clues here in the room," Gorathdin suggested, walking towards the bookshelf, taking out one book after another and reading their titles. Many of them were written in a language he didn't speak and the ones he did understand gave no clues about Vrenli's disappearance.

"What strange objects there are here," Werlis remarked after climbing onto the chair and looking at Master Drobald's desk.

"Please don't touch anything. Who knows what might happen to you," Gorathdin warned him and grabbed his hand before Werlis could touch a test tube containing a brown, viscous-looking substance.

"I can't find anything that could help us. It will be better if we go back to the castle, maybe they can tell us something about the

bowl there," Gorathdin decided and went down the tower stairs, followed by Werlis.

"At last! We were getting worried. Now tell us, what happened to Vrenli?" asked Aarl, who was guarding the three bound thieves with Borlix.

Gorathdin told them what had happened up in the tower. Both were left open-mouthed and when one of the three thieves laughed derisively, Borlix acknowledged him with a strong elbow strike. Werlis began to cry again, and Aarl put his hand on his shoulder to comfort him.

"They can certainly help us in the castle. Someone will know what this bowl is all about," said Aarl, whereupon Werlis gathered himself and regained hope.

"Mages. They're all dangerous, just like their objects," Borlix grumbled and motioned one of the thieves to stand up.

"You three will end up in prison!" he shouted and kicked the thief, who did not comply with his request, in the shins.

"You little red-haired devil!" he screamed and began to hop on one leg in pain.

"Let's go," said Gorathdin, and he strode ahead of his friends, who were holding the bound thieves, through the dark castle garden. When they arrived at the staircase in front of the castle, Gorathdin ordered the men of the royal guard standing guard there to take the three thieves into custody and, followed by Werlis, Aarl and Borlix, made his way to King Grandhold's private chambers.

"A golden, oval bowl that stands in the middle of Master Drobald's study?" King Grandhold repeated after Gorathdin had told him about the events in the tower.

"Yes, a golden bowl. It's about two and a half steps in diameter, you can't miss it," replied Werlis.

"I'm sorry about that. I don't know what this bowl is," the King apologized.

"Do you know anything about the bowl in Master Drobald's Tower, Palanmar?" King Grandhold said and turned to him.

The court healer, who was leafing through the book Gorathdin had handed him, looked up.

"I don't know anything about that," he replied briefly.

Werlis gasped for air and began to tremble all over. As tears ran down his cheeks, he began to laugh at the absurdity of his best friend disappearing into a bowl. Gorathdin knelt on the ground in front of him and looked deep into his eyes.

"We will find Vrenli again. Don't give up hope," he said gently and took Werlis in his arms.

"We'll find him," assured Aarl, running his hand through Werlis' short, blond hair.

"Master Drobal will know what has happened to your friend," said King Grandhold, looking first at Werlis and then at his daughter.

"But no one knows when he will return to Astinhod. Who knows what might have already happened to Vrenli," Werlis objected, wiping his nose on his cloak sleeve.

"I have to go to my laboratory to prepare the potion," Palanmar interrupted those present.

He bowed to the King and left the bedchamber with hurried steps.

"I hope the potion will help my daughter. Look at her! How beautiful she is. She is still so young, too young to be punished so severely by life," King Grandhold worried as he paced impatiently up and down the room.

"There's not much we can do for Vrenli today, but tomorrow is another day, Werlis," Borlix comforted him, who, like all dwarves, found it difficult to show his feelings.

"Vrenli will not be forgotten. I will do everything in my power to find out what happened to him. I ask you to understand that I must now turn my attention to Princess Lythinda," Gorathdin said to Werlis.

"We will find Vrenli again. You can count on me," affirmed Aarl, and he put his hand on Werlis' shoulder.

"And on me," Borlix grumbled.

Werlis thanked them. He knew that he could rely on them and that gave him new hope.

Some time passed. Everyone waited anxiously for Palanmar's return. Werlis, Aarl and Borlix had sat down on a narrow bench covered in red velvet on the west side of the room. King Grandhold was still pacing impatiently up and down the room.

"I can't shake the feeling that all the recent incidents, and by that I mean what happened to Lythinda, the group of thieves who followed me to Tawinn, Master Drobald's surprise departure from Astinhod, the three thieves and perhaps Vrenli's disappearance are all part of a plan to harm Astinhod, if not the whole of Wetherid," Gorathdin speculated, interrupting the silence that had fallen in the room.

"Do you think the Thieves' Guild has anything to do with my daughter's condition?" King Grandhold asked.

"The stranger in Three Vines was not a thief and I think it's unlikely that the guild is behind all this. They are thieves, simple men, but someone could take advantage of them and use them as henchmen," Gorathdin replied.

"Do you think someone from the nobility is behind this?" asked the King, who was aware of his enemies in Astinhod.

"Blackmail?" Aarl interjected.

"It's possible," replied Gorathdin.

"But no one has confessed to the crime or made any demands at all," King Grandhold pointed out.

"Also, the Thieves' Guild has split into two groups, at least that's what Count Laars told me today. The town guards apprehended four thieves who tried to flee Astinhod over the city wall last night. They were arrested and interrogated. We have information from them that there have been disagreements within the guild and that some are now following Hattul and the others Massek," King Grandhold announced.

"Did they say why the split happened?" Gorathdin asked.

"As far as I know, the guards couldn't get them to talk," replied King Grandhold.

"Maybe I could help with that," offered Aarl.

"Yes. He could try to get information from them. Aarl is a Thirian and no one in Astinhod knows him. He could be locked up with the thieves under the pretext that he stole something," Gorathdin suggested.

"That would be worth a try," the King said happily. They discussed the necessary steps to have Aarl locked up with the thieves the next day. Gorathdin and King Grandhold knew that the 'Thieves' Guild had allies in high places, so they had to make sure that what they were about to do seemed genuine. They needed some time to come up with a credible story. As it was already past midnight, Werlis and Borlix felt a growing tiredness and the longer they waited for Palanmar, the sleepier they became.

The lady-in-waiting, who had been sitting silently in a rocking chair next to Princess Lythinda's bed the whole time and, as befitted a woman in her position, was not following the conversation of those present, offered Werlis and Borlix the opportunity to ring for a castle servant to take them to a guest room. The two assured her, however, that they appeared more tired than they were. They didn't want to miss the moment when the princess would be given the healing potion.

More time passed. Werlis and Borlix struggled to keep their eyes from closing and fell asleep in the King of Astinhod's bedchamber. Suddenly, the door opened and Palanmar entered the room with a crystal jar containing a bluish liquid.

"I have followed the instructions in the recipe exactly," he said to King Grandhold, who looked at the crystal vessel with relief and hope.

Palanmar took a delicate silver cup that stood on a small chest of drawers next to the princess's bed and poured a little bit of the bluish liquid into it. He handed the crystal vessel to the lady-in-waiting and was about to put the cup to Lythinda's lips when Gorathdin stopped him.

"Wait a minute. I want to taste it first," Gorathdin announced firmly and held out his hand for the cup.

Palanmar was surprised and questioningly looked at King Grandhold.

"Give Gorathdin the cup," King Grandhold instructed him.

Palanmar handed the cup to Gorathdin, who first smelled it and then sipped it. Werlis, Aarl and Borlix watched intently to see what would happen to their friend. Some time passed and dead silence reigned in the King's bedchamber.

"You can give it to her," Gorathdin finally said, after he could detect nothing unusual about the potion.

Palanmar carefully put the rim of the cup to Lythinda's lips and poured a few drops of the potion into her mouth.

"The recipe didn't say anything about how long it takes for the potion to take effect," he remarked and sat down on the chair that the lady-in-waiting had placed next to the princess's bed.

"Now we have to wait and hope," said King Grandhold, who, despite the late hour, did not feel tired.

Werlis, Aarl and Borlix sat down on the soft, precious carpet on the floor and gazed sleepily at the princess. The time they waited passed very slowly and Werlis, followed by Borlix, was overcome by sleep. Aarl and Gorathdin went over the details of Aarl's planned arrest together once more. King Grandhold sat down on the edge of the bed and held the princess's hand until the early hours of the morning, hoping that his daughter would regain consciousness as the sun rose.

The sage of the desert

When Vrenli stepped out of the golden, oval bowl, which stood in a strange-looking, strange-smelling tent shortly before midnight, he lost consciousness for a moment and when he woke up again, he was lying in front of a tent made of goat and camel skins. A fire was burning next to him, its flames rising into the cold night sky

of a desert. Opposite him sat a dark-skinned, sinewy old man whose long, white beard reached down to the chilled, sandy desert floor. The sage of the desert, as he was called by the Scheddifer people, was clad in the fur of a desert wolf and around his neck hung a chain on which the teeth and claws of various desert animals were strung. Vrenli jumped in fright.

"Fear not, Vrenli from Abketh! My name is Nagulaj," revealed the old man, who was sitting opposite him with his legs crossed.

"How do you know my name and where am I?" Vrenli looked around in confusion, but apart from the tent and the fire burning in front of it, all he could see was a sea of sand in the darkness.

Nagulaj did not answer Vrenli's question, but began to talk about an old book, which he said contained all knowledge and in which the magic of the elves from the Glorious Valley rested. The longer Vrenli listened to the stories, the more he concluded that the Book of Wetherid, as Nagulaj called it in his story, could be his grandfather's book. Vrenli asked him questions several times, but Nagulaj did not answer. Nagulaj was so engrossed in his story that he spoke with his eyes closed, and only when he had reached the end, did he open them and look into the flickering flames of the fire in front of him, pausing for a few moments.

"When the sparrowhawks circle in the sky above us, you will set off for Horunguth Island to meet Master Drobal. That's what it says in the Book of Books," he finally announced, looking at Vrenli with his large, dark brown eyes.

"A lot of what you told me about the book seems so familiar to me, as if I already know about it," Vrenli revealed.

"But I would really like to know how I got here, why you know my name and why you told me so much about the book," Vrenli continued.

Nagulaj did not answer.

He slipped his chain over his head and opened it. Slowly, the small, weathered animal bones and teeth slid onto the sandy desert floor, where Nagulaj gazed in silence.

"I have to go back to Astinhod. I'm sure my friends are worried about me," said Vrenli.

Nagulaj got up without saying anything and went into his tent, from where he returned to the fire a little later with a long-stemmed pipe made of dark wood. Vrenli looked at the pipe shaped like a bull's head with red eyes made of two fiery rubies.

"The concern for a friend should never be as great as the concern for your own destiny, which life has given you and which each of us follows, even the simplest man," Nagulaj explained to him, taking a brown ball of dried mataii tree resin from a small pouch and putting a piece of it into the round opening of the pipe.

"Can't I travel back to Astinhod with the bowl?" Vrenli wanted to know.

"That's not possible! As far as I know, the portal bowls can only be used by the mages of Horunguth Island," Nagulaj replied as he pressed the mataii resin more firmly into the bowl of the pipe with his thumb.

"I don't understand. The bowl brought me here, why shouldn't it take me back to Master Drobai's Tower in Astinhod?" Vrenli wondered, got up and went into the tent, where he stood in the bowl and waited anxiously to be taken back to Astinhod.

Nothing happened.

Vrenli sadly went back outside the tent and sat down by the fire.

"I don't understand all this. You say that only the mages of Horunguth Island can travel with the bowl, but then why is it in your tent?" Vrenli groaned and questioningly looked at Nagulaj.

"You'll have to ask Master Drobai that, not me. I don't use the bowl; it was in this place long before I pitched my tent here. A very long time ago," Nagulaj replied.

He pulled a thin, burning branch out of the fire and lit the bull-headed pipe with it.

"That's strange. The most unusual things have been happening since I met Gorathdin in Abketh," mused Vrenli.

"How am I ever supposed to get to Horunguth Island alone or find my way back to Astinhod? Can't you come with me, Nagulaj? Please!" begged Vrenli with a pleading look.

"My destiny is different, Vrenli. The journey you have embarked on together with your friends must not be interfered with. Things must take their course, just as it is written in the Book of Books. I am not allowed to change history. My purpose is to bring you a little closer to yours," Nagulaj replied, taking a puff on his pipe.

Vrenli did not understand what the dark-skinned old man was trying to tell him. His thoughts revolved around Werlis, Gorathdin, Aarl and Borlix, whom he thought he had gotten into trouble for the second time through his carelessness.

"I hope that the blossoms of the moonflower will help the princess so that the long journey was not in vain," he thought, looking questioningly into Nagulaj's large, dark eyes.

Nagulaj offered him the smoking pipe.

"What should I do with it?" Vrenli shyly asked.

"I don't smoke," he added dismissively.

But Nagulaj only made a hand gesture, indicating that Vrenli should pull on the mouthpiece of the pipe.

"Your journey to me was not without reason, Vrenli from Abketh," Nagulaj explained and pressed the pipe into his hand.

Hesitantly, Vrenli put the mouthpiece to his lips and looked at the bull-headed bowl of the pipe as he drew on it. With every puff he took, the two red rubies began to glow brighter and finally in a fiery red light.

After a few strokes, Vrenli felt a pleasant warmth relaxing his muscles. All his worries and fears seemed to have left him. As he listened to the song that Nagulaj began to sing, he noticed a feeling of lightness spreading through him.

"I feel so light. As light as if I could fly," said Vrenli, slowly stretching out his arms and beginning to make wing-flapping movements.

To his surprise, he suddenly found himself floating above the ground in a sitting position.

"Fly home. Fly to the Glorious Valley!" Nagulaj called to him, whereupon Vrenli flew higher and higher, towards the sky, and finally flew over the vast Desert of DeShadin, gazing at the stars before him, to Thir, where he could see the lights of the port city of Irkaar below him.

Vrenli flew over the city towards the east, where, after a while, he saw a vast meadow landscape below him.

Before him lay the mighty mountain ranges that surrounded the Glorious Valley. He headed higher towards the mountain peaks and when he had almost reached them, he was caught by a gust of wind that whirled him through the air. He was afraid of crashing and panic and despair broke out in him. He tried with all his might to fight the wind.

Vrenli felt that he had strayed from his predetermined path. He was no longer flying towards the Glorious Valley, but over the northern mountains to the east, beyond the border of Wetherid.

"Help, Nagulaj!" shouted Vrenli. He had lost control of his flying body.

"Don't fight it. Let yourself drift. Don't be afraid," Nagulaj's gentle voice rang out.

Vrenli tried to overcome his fear. He let the gust of wind carry him further and further south-east. When he realized that his fear was unfounded, he relaxed and looked down at the barren landscape. Leafless, thin-branched trees, thorny bushes and faded grass grew sporadically on the deserted plain. The gust of wind carried Vrenli to the ruins of the city of Zatrano, which lay on the southern border of the valley of Tongar Gor, and suddenly it became frighteningly dark around him, so dark that even the moonlight was unable to penetrate the darkness. Vrenli was shrouded in an impenetrable shadow, from which he emerged a few moments later. He was now hovering above the ruined city and looking up at a hill where he recognized the outline of a castle. He was carried closer. A figure clad in dark clothes and a cloak,

sitting on the skeleton of a horse whose eyes glowed fiery, rode out of the castle onto the crumbling bridge above a blood-red river.

A cold shiver ran down Vrenli's spine. As he turned his gaze to the river, he recognized the dead bodies of countless humans, elves, dwarves, Tawinnians, ogres, goblins and other creatures and animals floating in the river. It was their blood that colored the river.

Vrenli turned his attention back to the dark rider who had led his horse to the precipice in front of the crumbling bridge. The figure raised his right hand and pointed north, whereupon the horse's skeleton reared up and neighed. When the figure became aware of OrnuX, it paused and a mocking smile played around its lips.

Vrenli was frightened when he saw OrnuX, but he listened attentively from a lofty height.

"OrnuX, a shadow who dares to enter the realm of the dead. What brings you to me?"

"Azrael, I come on behalf of Erwight of Entorbis to make an offer. An offer that should interest even a soulbinder like you," OrnuX replied, standing imperturbably before the rider.

Azrael laughed coldly.

"And what offer could that be, shadow mage? What could Erwight offer me that I don't already have?"

With a movement that darkened the air around him, OrnuX invoked the power of the shadows.

"The dead of the coming battle for Wetherid, Azrael. All souls that fall will be yours, added to your ranks of the undead, as your thralls."

Azrael's interest was piqued.

"All souls, you say? A tempting offer, but why should I trust Erwight of Entorbis? His ambitions are well known to me," he replied coldly.

"Because I stand here to reinforce that promise. Because I am ready to knock you off your high horse should it be necessary,"

Ornux replied, letting the raw, powerful shadow magic pulsate around him.

In a sudden burst of power, Ornux hurled a wave of dark energy at Azrakel. The soulbinder, surprised by the mage's determination, was unable to dodge it. The energy hit him and his horse with such force that both were thrown to the ground.

Azrakel pulled himself to his feet, his gaze now serious as he looked at Ornux.

"You dare to attack me? You have courage, shadow mage. Perhaps ... maybe this alliance is beneficial," he said confidently.

"Courage is necessary to shape the new order, Azrakel. The dead that Wetherid will leave behind will be at your service. Together we can ensure that this battle will be the last," Ornux replied, calming the darkness around him once more.

"Very well, Ornux. I will accept your offer. But remember, the price of betrayal would be your downfall," he said threateningly, his gaze now firmly fixed on Ornux.

"I don't expect anything else," Ornux replied.

Thus, in the darkness of Zatrano, a new alliance was forged, an alliance between shadow and death. Under the leadership of Erwright of Entorbis, this union would lead Fallgar into a new era; an era built on the souls of the fallen.

At the same moment, an army of undead crawled out of the ground in the city below. Azrakel mounted his horse again, spurred it on and jumped with it down the chasm hundreds of steps deep, where he landed in front of the skeletons and half-rotten bodies of the Knights of Zatrano. Under his leadership, the army of the undead marched out of the city towards the north.

The gust of wind suddenly whirled Vrenli through the air so powerfully that he almost threw up. He began to thrash in panic. But shortly afterwards the gust of wind calmed again and carried him further north, where he flew over a fog-covered moor, the musty stench penetrating deep into his nose. At first the thick mist enveloped him so he could not see anything, but as the gust of wind let him glide closer to the ground, he saw the shadows of tall

figures whose eyes glowed red in the darkness. The fog lifted and he saw many mud and wooden huts covered in leaves and twigs, standing on the few patches of solid ground. He was carried to Marnog Jar, the city of the mist elves, at the eastern end of Mist Moor. Dozens of spider and lizard riders armed with bows and arrows had gathered in the center of the city in front of the large, mighty wooden sculpture of a spider. Among them stood OrnuX, the emissary of Erwright of Entorbis, and Prince Sylvain. It was a moment that, beyond the fate of a hidden city, threatened to affect the fragile balance of the entire world, where alliances were fleeting and enmities deep-rooted.

Vrenli listened, hidden in the mist, as OrnuX spoke to Prince Sylvain:

"Prince Sylvain, the world is at the beginning of a change. Erwright of Entorbis has sent me to show you a possibility. A possibility that could change the fate of the mist elves forever," OrnuX began, as the silence in the mist carried his words like an echo.

"He offers an alliance, the fruits of which would encompass the Glorious Valley should victory over Wetherid be ours."

"But what will become of Marnog Jar? Of Mist Moor, which offers us not only home, but also protection and identity? How can we give up everything and place ourselves under someone else's banner, just for a piece of land that stands between us and old enemies?" replied Prince Sylvain Fog Crow, his expression marked by pensiveness.

"It's not about being subservient. Erwright sees you, the mist elves, as allies on a path to something greater. The Glorious Valley is just the beginning," OrnuX replied with a smile that radiated more patience than joy.

Prince Sylvain paused for a moment.

"If we join this alliance, it will only be on the condition that our people, our freedoms and our heritage remain protected. Marnog Jar and Mist Moor are our foundation; the Glorious Valley must

be a place where the mist elves can not only exist, but thrive," he spoke.

"These conditions are respected and Erwright of Entorbis is ready to fulfill them. Together we enter a future in which Marnog Jar will be at the center of a new order," Ornux agreed earnestly.

And so, under the watchful eye of the mist, a new chapter was opened, not without uncertainty, but with a spark of hope for a future in which the mist elves would play a central role in shaping their destiny, strengthened by new alliances and the promise of a better world.

The shrill, distorted sound of horns rang out over Mist Moor, whereupon the spider and lizard riders, followed by a troop of mist elves several hundred strong, rode north.

The gust of wind shot Vrenli accelerating like an arrow into the sky and carried him further inland towards the east. A sea of tents stood on the dark rock-strewn plain of Raga Gur. From the highest peak of a small mountain range in the north, a mighty flame flickered high into the sky.

Vrenli could clearly see the crater filled with glowing lava. He could feel the searing heat of the fire, which never went out and whose light colored the plain fiery red. Hot, molten rock poured out from inside the mountain and flowed slowly down the steep mountain faces. Hundreds of heavily armed orcs had gathered at a burnt forest quarter, no more than a thousand paces from the fire-breathing volcano. Ornux, shadow mage and emissary of Erwright of Entorbis, had set out to renew the alliance with the orcs under the leadership of shaman Gorzod Greywing. But the atmosphere was tense and the air vibrated with mistrust.

"Gorzod Greywing, I bring word from Erwright of Entorbis. He wishes to renew the alliance with your people," Ornux began as he looked at the mighty shaman, whose war paint shimmered in the pale light of the volcanic fire.

"Ornux, the shadow roams our ranks. Why should we place our fate in your lord's hands again?" Gorzod replied, his voice low and penetrating as he gripped the staff tighter in his hand.

"Because the power of Entorbis gives you strength, because our alliance with Raga Gur and beyond can lead to unprecedented power," Ornux replied, but he sensed that words alone would not convince the proud shaman.

The orcs murmured among themselves, their eyes glinting suspiciously. Ornux realized that he would have to find another way to win their approval. In this moment of uncertainty, an idea came to him.

"Gorzod, show us a test of your strength and wisdom. A duel of magic between us. If you win, I will return without having achieved anything. But if I win, you will renew the alliance."

"A duel of magic, then. Very well, Ornux. May the dark power decide," Gorzod laughed in agreement.

The duel began under the eager gaze of the orcs. Ornux and Gorzod faced each other, each of them summoning the dark forces they controlled. But Ornux had no intention of fighting a real duel. With a clever deception, he drew Gorzod's attention to a point behind the shaman while murmuring soft words. An illusion was created, a vision of Erwright of Entorbis himself, granting Gorzod his power and blessing.

"Gorzod Greywing, look! Erwright of Entorbis himself shows you the way. Your strength is undisputed, but together we are invincible!" shouted Ornux as the figure in the illusion knelt down and asked Gorzod to renew the alliance.

Surprised and impressed by the vision, Gorzod lowered his staff.

"If Erwright of Entorbis himself gives us his blessing, who am I to deny this alliance? The alliance be renewed, Ornux. But be warned, the orcs of Raga Gur will not enter the fray lightly."

With these words, the alliance was renewed under new terms. Ornux, relieved at his success, knew that this ruse was a dangerous wager, but one that was necessary to avert a greater catastrophe. The orcs of Raga Gur would once again stand alongside Erwright of Entorbis, but the future remained uncertain, scarred by the shadows that lay over them all.

Three of the pig-faced, sabre-toothed orcs then spurred on their large, furry, horned mounts and swung their lances, red banners waving at their tips, above their heads. Squealing, snarling cries echoed far and wide, whereupon the horde, several hundred strong, moved northwards.

The gust of wind now carried Vrenli northwards along the wide, fiery river over a small mountain range and then further west towards a large, wooded area.

Above a tent camp, in a wide clearing where flames flickered from a fireplace, he paused. Strong, fat, half-naked creatures, at least five steps tall, armed with clubs from which long metal spikes protruded, performed clumsy dance movements to the dull, thunderous drumbeats that sounded across the plain. When the drumbeats stopped, a loud grunt followed, making Vrenli's blood run cold. A five-step-tall ogre stepped out of one of the tents and greeted OrnuX, who had come to have a crucial conversation with Gromak Ironskin, the mighty leader of the ogres. The air vibrated with the raw energy that the ogres released in their rituals and dances, a harbinger of the power OrnuX sought to tame.

Vrenli had to listen very carefully through the noise of the drum to understand what was being said:

"Gromak Ironskin, in the name of Shadow Lord Erwright of Entorbis, I demand to speak!" OrnuX's voice firmly and piercingly rang out, even against the wild grunts of the ogres and the crackling of the hearth.

Gromak, his mighty stature silhouetted against the blazing flames, slowly turned around.

"OrnuX the shadow rarely walks without purpose. What does Erwright of Entorbis want from the ogre warriors?" he inquired in a loud and deep voice. His eyes sparkled with suspicion.

"Renewal, Gromak. Renewal of the alliance that will lead Fallgar into a new era. Erwright of Entorbis offers more than promises, he offers the power to take control of your destinies in your own

hands," Ornux replied as he raised his hands and softly whispered the words of an ancient, forgotten language.

The shadows around him began to dance, forming images of the future, visions of ogre armies marching invincibly through the lands, led by the dark power that Erwright promised.

"See, Gromak Ironskin, what you and your people can achieve. Unimagined power, strength that will shake the foundations of Wetherid."

Gromak observed the shadow images closely.

"And what does Erwright want in return? Our freedom? Our will?" he challenged, visibly thoughtful.

Ornux made the shadows disappear again and took a step closer.

"No, Gromak. Erwright of Entorbis demands unity, a common endeavor. The freedom of the ogres will be preserved, strengthened by the alliances we forge," Ornux announced.

"Words, Ornux, are like the wind; fleeting and often cold. How can we, the ogres of Wahmuter, be sure that this future will come true?" Gromak spoke, his tone now less challenging and more inquisitive.

"Faith, Gromak Ironskin. Faith and the will to take fate into your own hands. Erwright of Entorbis has powerful enemies, but also powerful allies. Under his leadership, not only will Wetherid fall, but a new world order will emerge. A world in which the ogres take their rightful place," Ornux assured him, underpinning his words with the magic of the shadow that vibrated softly in the air.

A moment of silence enveloped the plains.

"I will take your words to the council, Ornux. If Erwright keeps his word, the ogres will stand by his side. But he should be warned: The loyalty of the ogres is like our wrath; powerful and unrelenting," Gromak finally agreed.

With those words, the conversation ended, and Ornux knew he had taken a significant step towards realizing Erwright of Entorbis' dark visions. The ogres of Wahmuter, once wild and untamed

forces, could tip the scales in the coming storm. That night, under the starry skies of Fallgar, the foundations were laid for an alliance that would shake the world.

It was not very long before Gromak, who had been conferring with the council in a tent, came forward again, swung his great club in the air and led the Wahmuther clan northwards.

Once again, the gust of wind caught Vrenli and carried him northeast. He flew over the hilly landscape of Kirbun towards a high mountain range. Hundreds of small caves had been carved into the dark gray, steep, smooth rock faces, from which small shadows roped themselves down to the ground on ropes a hundred paces long. Huge trenches, fifty paces across, lay at the foot of the mountain.

The gust of wind brought Vrenli closer to one of the trenches, which led many hundreds of steps down to Ingar. Slowly the wind died down, allowing Vrenli to glide down into the deep branching tunnels of the gray dwarves.

In the gloomy shadows, deep beneath the mighty peaks of Kirbun, where the passing wind whispered old stories through the barren tunnels, OrnuX and Brumir Ironfist, the indomitable leader of the gray dwarves, stood face to face. This was an encounter that would decide the fate of the races.

"Brumir Ironfist, it is with the deepest respect that I come to you, on behalf of Erwright of Entorbis," OrnuX began, his words interweaving with the cool tunnel air.

"A shadow that wanders to the gates of Ingar rarely brings glad tidings. What does the emissary of Erwright of Entorbis seek from the gray dwarves if not that which he cannot possess?" replied Brumir, his eyes reflecting the depths of subterranean lakes, in a firm voice.

"Erwright seeks an alliance, Brumir. An alliance that will not only turn the tide of battle but shape the future. Even if the mines of Ib'Agier never belonged to the gray dwarves, we offer something more valuable: a promise to create a new order together once

Wetherid is united under our influence," OrnuX replied, emphasizing the gravity of his proposal.

Brumir laughed so loud that an echo reverberated in the cold stone walls.

"Promises are like snow in spring, OrnuX. Why should we join an alliance whose fruits we have never tasted?" replied the gray dwarf.

"Because we, Brumir, are at the dawn of an era in which old boundaries will be redrawn. Your skill and knowledge could form the core of this new world. Not as servants, but as shapers and guardians. Ib'Agier may never have been yours, but the future could belong to all of Fallgar. And therein lies your power," OrnuX explained, with a quiet fire in his words.

"And what if we decide to follow this path and the battle is lost? What then, shadow mage?" Brumir questioned, his brow furrowed.

"Then, Brumir Ironfist, we will have fought and risen together again. This is not a pact of submission, but of cooperation. Erwright of Entorbis sees you as allies of equal strength," OrnuX replied with conviction.

A moment of silence enveloped them, in which the wind seemed to be the only answer. Then Brumir nodded slowly.

"OrnuX, your words carry the ring of truth, even if they are surrounded by shadows. I will accept your proposal. But be aware, the trust of the gray dwarves is hard-won. We will be vigilant," Brumir finally agreed.

"So be it, Brumir. Together we will carve a new path through the darkness, a path that leads to a tomorrow where iron and shadow shine in the light of a new world," OrnuX spoke, a sense of hope in his voice as he said goodbye to Brumir.

Thus ended their conversation, a dialog between powers that laid the foundations for a possible future. A future in which the gray dwarves might never call the mines of Ib'Agier their own, but in which they could play a role in shaping a new world order. An alliance forged on the thin line between mistrust and hope now

carried the possibility of breaking through the shadows and leading into a new age.

Vrenli was carried up again by a gust of wind.

A multitude of diminutive creatures, their silver-gray chain armor reflecting the bland moonlight, climbed out of the gray dwarven city on wooden ladders that reached over the edge of the moat. They followed a path north, which led them to a cleared wooded area where several powerful, destructive war machines were being built. Vrenli flew at great speed over the catapults, ballistae and assault towers, heading north, where after some time he reached the land of Druhn.

He floated further and further over the large, wooded areas, grasslands, meadow lowlands, streams and rivers to the northeast. It was getting much colder and the landscape was covered in snow.

Vrenli could see from afar a frozen lake covered in mist, in the middle of which lay a rocky island where a fortress built of blackstone and dark iron stood, with a flock of black crows circling in the night sky above its five mighty towers. The icy cold enclosed him and he began to shiver. An uneasy feeling grew inside him, a sign of impending danger.

The gust of wind made Vrenli glide slowly towards the dark fortress to within a hundred paces, when suddenly a black shadow appeared above him. Vrenli looked up and saw a large, black crow flying towards him. It grabbed Vrenli with its sharp claws that dug into the flesh on his back through his clothes. Vrenli screamed out. In a dive, the large bird raced with him towards the icy surface of the lake. Vrenli felt the bird's grip loosen. Crying out for help, he plunged onto the icy lake, which broke at the force of the impact. He plunged into the icy water and froze. Slowly, he sank down into the deep, icy darkness. Close to fainting, he closed his eyes. He tried to call Nagulaj's name, but his mouth immediately filled with the foul-tasting lake water.

A warm hand grabbed his shoulder. Coughing and gasping for air, Vrenli opened his eyes and, drenched in sweat, looked at Nagulaj, who was sitting next to him by the fireplace in front of his tent.

"You had a vision. Don't be afraid," Nagulaj said in a gentle voice. Vrenli, pale as a sheet, couldn't get a word past his lips.

Nagulaj handed Vrenli a cup of tea made from desert herbs, which he drank hastily.

"Here, eat," Nagulaj offered and handed him a piece of pulp from the cactus.

Vrenli greedily sucked in the fruity sweetness and recoiled when Nagulaj handed him the pipe again, its contents still glowing.

"There's more for you to see. Don't be afraid," Nagulaj said gently and pressed the pipe into Vrenli's hand.

"I flew over places, towns and settlements far to the east. I saw terrible, terrifying beings and creatures. They were all preparing to move north, where there was a massive, dark fortress that lay in the middle of a lake covered in mist. These places were dark and evil, and I could feel the hatred that their inhabitants carried within them. What does all this mean?" Vrenli asked Nagulaj, who only pointed to the pipe with his bony index finger.

Hesitant and afraid of the unknown, he took a single drag on the mouthpiece. He inhaled the sweet smoke deep into his lungs. He had to cough and gasped for air. He had pulled too hard on the pipe. The smoke from the burning mataii resin billowed out of his mouth and enveloped him. He could no longer recognize Nagulaj because of the thick, acrid clouds of smoke floating in front of him. He closed his eyes for a moment.

When he opened them again and dispelled the last clouds of smoke with a wiping motion of his hand, he saw himself sitting on a branch among the sweet-smelling fruit of a strange tree.

He looked down on a calm and peaceful pond overgrown with ivy and roses, where several silent, white stone sculptures stood. The water in the marble basin shimmered in the violet light of a sparkling crystal lying at the bottom of the pool. A strange-looking youth with long, blond hair and shimmering golden skin sat on one of the steps leading to the edge of the pool. Birds were circling above him, singing a cheerful song. Vrenli's gaze fell on the glass bow and the quiver of silver arrows lying on the step next to the

young man. He watched as the young man picked up a book from one of the steps, opened it and began to read it.

"That's my grandfather's book," thought Vrenli excitedly. He recognized it by the purple leather cover with silver ornaments. Vrenli was just about to climb down the tree when the young man closed the book, picked up his bow and quiver from the step and walked away from the pond. Vrenli jumped hastily from the tree, but landed unhappily face first on the forest floor, which was covered in damp leaves. When he straightened up again and looked around, the young man was already more than a hundred paces away.

"Stop, wait for me!" Vrenli called after him, but the young man didn't seem to hear his call.

Vrenli ran after him, but as it was already dusk, he soon lost sight of him. Vrenli followed the narrow path that led him deeper and deeper into the forest. Suddenly he heard screaming in the darkness ahead of him, whereupon he ran towards it as fast as he could. He almost fell in shock when he saw the young man shrouded in a dark shadow. When a tall figure emerged from behind the shadow cocoon, Vrenli froze. He looked into the pupilless eyes of a face distorted beyond recognition and covered in scars.

"Get away from me, servant of darkness!" the young man shouted and was about to put an arrow in the string of his bow when the figure bent down to take the book that had fallen from the young man's hand.

"No! Not the book. Give it back to me!" the young man pleaded and wanted to jump towards the figure, but the shadow surrounding the young man prevented him from doing so.

With a ghastly grin and the book in his hand, the figure dissolved into nothingness within a moment, while the shadow ball slowly lost density and finally disappeared.

Vrenli looked at the young man, who was kneeling beside the spot where the book had been lying on the floor, weeping.

"Forgive me, father. I've lost the book," he whispered in a low voice. Then he got up and followed the path north. Vrenli brushed off the fright that had gripped him and followed the young man through the night.

"I will find the book again, father. I swear it," the young man repeated aloud as he made his way through the forest.

Vrenli was startled when he heard bugles and a thunderous noise. Cries of despair, weeping and the sounds of fighting reached his ears. Vrenli stopped for a moment, but the young man took his glass bow from his shoulder, put an arrow in the string and began to run in the direction of the screams.

"Wait for me!" Vrenli called and tried to follow him.

But his short legs did not carry him fast enough to catch up with the young man, who could neither see nor hear him.

The deeper Vrenli followed him into the forest, the darker it became and when he could almost no longer see anything, he stumbled over something lying on the ground in front of him. He recoiled in horror: in front of him lay the lifeless body of an elf, its once shimmering golden skin covered in a gray shadow. His mouth was wide open and his dead eyes reflected the horror of the last moment of his life.

It wasn't the young man, as he had first feared, but someone else. Vrenli became afraid. So scared that his lungs constricted and he had to gasp for air. He began to run. Faster and faster, he ran along the path where several dead elves lay. When he could no longer bear the sight of the faces of the dead, distorted by pain and horror, he ran on with his eyes closed and when he again fell over one of the dead, he remained lying on the ground and began to cry. He cried out of the pity he felt for these noble and pure beings.

An initially unintelligible sound coming from a distance grew louder and it sounded more and more like someone was repeatedly calling his name. Vrenli suddenly felt the touch of a warm hand gently stroking his head. He opened his teary eyes and looked at Nagulaj standing in front of him by the fire.

"You should get some rest now, Vrenli. I've prepared a place for you to sleep in the tent," Nagulaj said gently and held out his hand to Vrenli to help him up.

"I saw dead elves and my grandfather's book," said Vrenli.

He spoke slowly, as he was still dazed from the effects of the mataii resin.

"You had another vision, Vrenli. And I would be delighted if you would tell me about it tomorrow, before you set off on your journey to Horunguth Island. But you should sleep now," Nagulaj comforted him gently.

"It was all so real and there was a shadow and a terrifying figure that had stolen my grandfather's book," Vrenli described before lying down on the soft carpet, where Nagulaj covered him with a fur.

"Good night, Vrenli from Abketh," said Nagulaj and he went back to the fireplace where he picked up his pipe from the sandy desert floor and stuffed it again with some mataii resin.

He gazed silently into the starry night sky above Desert of DeShadin.

The Thieves' Guild of Astinhod

It was already midday and Princess Lythinda's condition had not changed. She was still gazing fixedly at the ceiling painting above her bed. Contrary to everyone's expectations, the fever had not gone down and the shadow on her arm was slowly spreading to her shoulder. Palanmar had given her another cup of the healing potion that morning, but it had had no effect.

"All our hopes have been dashed. My daughter has been exposed to this seemingly incurable disease and all my efforts to help her have failed. I will declare this day the black day of Astinhod," spoke King Grandhold, clouded with grief.

"I think it's time we asked the Order of the Dragon for help. Their knowledge of healing is very extensive," Gorathdin suggested.

The king looked at him silently for a few moments.

"You know that the royal house of Astinhod keeps a certain distance from them. I am not sure this is a good decision. My father did allow the Templars to resume their activities in an hour of great need after the Order was crushed a hundred and fifty years ago, but some of the nobles were against that decision. If I ask the Order for help now, it could lead to unrest. The whole debate could possibly start all over again," King Grandhold objected.

He looked thoughtfully at Gorathdin, Werlis, Aarl and Borlix.

"Bah, politics," Borlix grumbled, whereupon the king raised his right eyebrow and gave him a stern look.

"Borlix is right. We mustn't think about politics now. The welfare of Princess Lythinda is at stake and we should leave no stone unturned. I've already thought about asking my father for help. I'm pretty sure his healing skills aren't the most suitable in this case, but as I mentioned before, I don't want to leave any stone unturned," Gorathdin said.

"You're probably right, Gorathdin. We must try everything we can to help her somehow. But the decision to ask the monks of the Order of the Dragon for help is not an easy one for me. I need to think about it alone, friends," said King Grandhold, walking towards the door that led to his study.

"You should fortify yourselves. I'll let you know my decision after you've feasted," he added before the door closed quietly.

He made his way to the palace gardens, where he sat down silently in the pavilion to weigh the pros and cons.

"What's there to think about? After all, his daughter's life is at stake," Borlix grumbled as he stood up from the small stool that the lady-in-waiting had kindly brought him from the library that morning.

"The monks' healing skills are known throughout Wetherid. Many people from the villages and towns of Thir have often made

use of them and in most cases the healing potions and ointments have worked," explained Aarl, who clearly agreed with Borlix.

"I've never heard of the Templars of the Dragon. But the name alone makes me uncomfortable," Werlis said and tried to smile.

"Well, King Grandhold is first and foremost King of Astinhod. His kingdom comes first. He put everyone's welfare before his own when he ascended his father's throne. Of course, he is also a loving father, but his hope that someone can help his daughter is fading. He now has a difficult decision to make. Personally, I think his worries are unfounded. But it is not my kingdom and not my decision," Gorathdin explained to his friends and, at Werlis' request, told them who the Templars of the Dragon were.

Just as he was finishing his story, he unconsciously reached for Vrenli's small leather pouch, which was still hanging from his belt.

"That's it!" he suddenly shouted, whereupon Werlis, Aarl and Borlix looked at him questioningly.

"The Oracle of Tawinn! When I reached into the fog that surrounded Vrenli, I grabbed his belt and when it disappeared, I had his leather pouch in my hand," Gorathdin said, waving Vrenli's leather pouch in front of her eyes.

"The Oracle of Tawinn! All is not lost after all. We must ask it about Vrenli!" cried Werlis enthusiastically.

His eyes shone. Before Borlix could say anything, Werlis explained to him what the crystal was.

"I don't know how it works, but let's hope for the best," said Werlis.

"Let's go next door to King Grandhold's study," Gorathdin suggested and, followed by his three friends, left the bedchamber.

In the study, they sat down on a massive table made of dark wood and waited anxiously for Werlis to take the crystal from the leather pouch that Gorathdin had given him earlier.

"Looks like a normal fragment of rock crystal," Borlix expertly stated as Werlis placed the oracle on the table in front of him.

"Oracle of Tawinn. Show me Vrenli. What happened to him?" Werlis spoke in a trembling voice and gazed eagerly at the small crystal, which, to the astonishment of Gorathdin, Aarl and Borlix, began to shine with a bright blue light.

Only a short time later, a small picture emerged inside, showing Vrenli struggling over a dune in the moonlight at night. He was struggling to find his footing in the fine-grained sand and appeared to be suffering from severe thirst. As he tried to descend the other side of the dune, he fell and rolled across the fine sand to the bottom, where he stood up in front of a dried, thick bush. He knocked the dust and sand off his clothes, broke off some branches from the bush and lit a fire with them.

"He's alive!" exclaimed Werlis with Gorathdin, Aarl and Borlix.

"There's a pack of wolves coming towards him from behind the dunes. Look," Werlis remarked. The image inside the crystal began to blur and the bright blue glow went out.

"What about the giant wolves? Oracle of Tawinn, show me what else has happened," Werlis begged the crystal, but nothing happened. He tried again and again, but the glow remained absent.

"Let it go, Werlis. We now know that he is alive," Gorathdin reassured him in a gentle voice.

"But what about the wolves? They'll tear him to pieces," Werlis sobbed and burst into tears.

"Vrenli is tough. He'll cope with the beasts," Borlix announced.

"He wore his short sword on his belt. I could see it clearly. He's not unarmed," Aarl remarked.

"Vrenli is alive! If he wasn't, the Oracle of Tawinn would have shown us. We saw him, albeit not in a completely harmless situation. But he's alive," said Gorathdin.

"He must live," Werlis implored and let the silver chain with the crystal slide back into the leather pouch, which he then tied to his belt.

"All I could see was a sea of sand. What strange place is Vrenli in?" asked Werlis.

"From the looks of it, he's in Desert of DeShadin," Gorathdin replied.

Aarl nodded in agreement.

"But it must be thousands of steps from Astinhod. All the way to the southwest of Wetherid! He'll never make it back alone," Werlis sighed in despair.

Gorathdin, Aarl and Borlix remained silent for some time.

"Listen to me, Werlis. I hope that King Grandhold will decide to ask the Order of the Dragon for help. I promise you that as soon as I have brought Lythinda to them, I will set off with you to Desert of DeShadin in search of Vrenli. But you'll have to be patient a bit longer," said Gorathdin, getting up from the table, walking towards Werlis and placing his hand on his shoulder.

"I'm heading south, I'm happy to take the detour into the desert to help Vrenli," promised Aarl.

Werlis looked eagerly at Borlix, hoping that he too would accompany them. Borlix looked left, right and at the ceiling and finally cleared his throat.

"Well. Hm. Um. Ib'Agier. Yes. Hm. A few weeks more or less doesn't matter now! I'm coming with you, friends," he relented.

"Thank you, friends. I knew I could rely on you. I will never forget that," said Werlis with tears in his eyes.

"Let's go to the dining hall and drink to that," Gorathdin suggested and explained the way there, as he wanted to check on Lythinda first.

"I'll be right behind you," he let them know and went back to the King's bedchamber.

Werlis, Borlix and Aarl had already gathered in the dining room and were just being invited to the table by two servants when Gorathdin arrived.

"How is she?" Aarl inquired.

"There is no improvement in sight. I hope King Grandhold will make the right decision. A decision from his heart," replied Gorathdin and took a seat at the sumptuous table.

Werlis looked at the silver trays. But even the roast suckling pig, partridges, larded saddle of venison, dumplings stuffed with ham, boiled vegetables, soup, eggs, bread and juicy fruit could not restore his lost appetite due to his worries about Vrenli. One of the castle servants approached the table and poured red or white wine, as they wished, into four golden cups that stood next to elaborately decorated golden plates.

The double doors of the dining room opened and a guard informed those present that King Grandhold would be arriving at any moment. One of the castle servants was arranging the cutlery, plates and cups at the end of the table when King Grandhold entered the dining hall with a serious expression on his face. Gorathdin, Werlis, Aarl and Borlix started to rise, but King Grandhold gestured for them to remain seated. Before he sat down, he asked the servants to leave the hall. He took his seat and poured himself a little glass of red wine.

"I've made a decision," he revealed in a saddened voice.

Werlis, Gorathdin, Aarl and Borlix put down their cups and waited anxiously for King Grandhold to announce his decision.

"I, King Grandhold, Lord of Astinhod, will not allow the monks of the Order of the Dragon to be summoned to the castle to help the Princess of Astinhod," he spoke majestically and seriously.

Werlis, Borlix and Aarl's mouths fell open in astonishment.

"That can't be true," whispered Werlis to Gorathdin, who put his index finger to his mouth and stood up from his chair.

"Politics," Borlix grumbled.

Aarl poured himself another cup of wine, which he drank in one go and then put down on the table with a forceful gesture.

"My King! I will take Lythinda to the monks, and I speak here not only for myself, but also on behalf of my friends," Gorathdin said to King Grandhold and bowed slightly.

"Gorathdin of the Forest, Count of Regen, you are contradicting your King," King Grandhold replied with a calmness that Werlis, Arl, and Borlix were not prepared for.

"But you are not contradicting your friend and a loving father," he added with a smile after a short pause. He got up from his chair, approached Gorathdin and gave him a friendly hug.

"We must keep the journey to the Templars of the Dragon as secret as possible. I have already sent for Army Commander Arkondir. I want him to accompany you with some trustworthy men," King Grandhold explained to Gorathdin.

"Army Commander Arkondir is my and Lythinda's friend. I agree with you completely. We can rely on him," Gorathdin confirmed.

King Grandhold sat back down in his chair. Werlis, Borlix and Arl were delighted and toasted to their forthcoming mission.

"What about the captured thieves? We talked about me getting information," Arl inquired.

At the same moment, the wings of the door opened and Army Commander Arkondir stepped into the dining hall.

"You sent for me?" asked the fully armored man of strong build, bowing low before the King.

"Sit down with us. Let's talk openly about what Gorathdin, his friends and I have planned," King Grandhold invited him and assigned him a place at the table.

Gorathdin greeted his friend with a firm and hearty handshake and told him of their secret plan to bring Lythinda to the Templars of the Dragon. He also let him in on his fear that Erwright of Entorbis might have something to do with all the incidents, which he briefly explained to him.

"I thought something similar. The problems with the thieves in Astinhod are increasing day by day. Master Drobald is untraceable, Lythinda lies in an unknown fever. You have left for Tawinn and two Abkether, a southerner and a dwarf are sitting at the King's table," stated Army Commander Arkondir and poured himself a cup of wine.

"I hope I can count on you, my friend," Gorathdin affirmed and raised his cup, ready to clink glasses.

"You know that you can always count on me, Gorathdin! And you too, of course, my King," replied the army commander, whereupon everyone clinked their glasses together.

"The plan has to be made and I need the right, trustworthy men for it. I'm afraid we won't be able to set off before tomorrow evening," Arkondir added.

"You're right. For one thing, we need to get more information about the Thieves' Guild, as I fear they have entered an alliance with Erwight of Entorbis that could be dangerous to us all, and for another, it's better to travel at night anyway to attract as little attention as possible," Gorathdin considered and looked at King Grandhold, waiting for his approval.

"So be it then. I am relying on you, friends," said King Grandhold.

Gorathdin introduced Werlis, Aarl and Borlix to Arkondir and told him about their plan to lock Aarl up with the two thieves who had been arrested last night.

"The best thing to do is arrest him with some of your men we can trust and present him to Count Laars. Think up a credible story for his offense," Gorathdin asked the army commander, who nodded.

"As time is pressing, we should start immediately. I will look after my daughter in the meantime. Good luck, friends," King Grandhold said goodbye.

Army Commander Arkondir had the guards outside the dining hall send for two of his men.

A short time later, a common soldier and an officer arrived in the dining room and were briefed by their commander on Aarl's planned arrest. Aarl took one last sip of wine from his cup and said goodbye to his friends.

"Take care of yourself, Aarl!" Werlis called after him as he was led away by Arkondir's men.

"I will see Count Laars at once and ask him to sentence Aarl immediately due to the seriousness of his offense," Arkondir said and hurriedly left the dining hall.

"Let's hope it all goes well," Borlix grumbled and yawned.

"I think we all need a little sleep after this night, friends," Gorathdin stated and, followed by Werlis and Borlix, went to the room prepared for them close to the King's bedchamber.

"I'll go and check on Lythinda. You don't have to wait for me," said Gorathdin and he closed the door.

Werlis and Borlix lay down on two of the beds and soon fell fast asleep.

Aarl's trial took place before the afternoon and, due to the seriousness of his offense, he was sentenced to five years in prison. The two court guards who took him out of the hall and led him into the underground vaults that lay between the marketplace and the merchants' quarter were not exactly gentle with Aarl. They kicked him several times and the shackles they had put on him were tightly tied around his wrists.

The dungeons of Astinhod were truly not a pleasant place. It was dark, damp and home to countless rats. The thick, black-gray stone walls were covered in fungus, and behind the heavy iron doors, Aarl could hear the prisoners' lamentations.

The officer in charge of the dungeon, who was a friend of Army Commander Arkondir, took Aarl from the two court guards and locked him up with the two thieves captured last night.

"So far, everything has gone as intended," Aarl thought as the heavy iron door closed behind him and locked from the outside. Aarl looked into the dark eyes of his fellow prisoners, who, like him, were from the south of Thir. Throughout the night, he tried to gain their trust by telling them one lie after another. His stories ranged from thieves from Irkaar who allied with Erwight of Entorbis to treasure-hunting tales he had concocted to inflame their greed.

"I'll be out of here by morning. I have friends who will bribe the guards," he told his fellow prisoners confidently and, with a promise to take them with him, he was able to elicit some important information from them, which was of course top secret. As dawn broke, the heavy iron door opened and Arkondir's friend entered, accompanied by four armed men.

"Someone tried to bribe the guards last night because of you. You'll end up in the darkest hole down here for this!" the officer shouted at Aarl and took him away.

The two thieves looked wistfully after their newfound friend, annoyed that their attempt to free themselves had failed.

"Hang on!" one of the Thirians called after him as the iron door was locked again.

Werlis, Gorathdin and Borlix, together with Army Commander Arkondir, had taken all the necessary precautions to get Lythinda out of the city unseen. When Aarl entered King Grandhold's bedchamber, happy that he had been able to coax some secrets out of the two thieves, he looked in amazement at Gorathdin, who was sitting on the edge of the bed next to the princess, wrapped in rags and holding her hand. Aarl's astonished expression changed to a grin when he saw Werlis and Borlix standing next to Army Commander Arkondir in minstrel clothes.

"Here, these are for you," Borlix said to Aarl and handed him a colorful costume that included a jester's cap.

Before Aarl could express his astonishment, Gorathdin explained his plan to him.

"We will hide Lythinda in the cart we will be traveling in. I am a beggar who has joined you, a group of traveling minstrels. You are on your way to Relvis, where you will perform your next play," Gorathdin explained, to which Aarl gave a short laugh.

"Is that the best you could come up with?" said Aarl with a grin as he pulled on the colorful costume.

"You'll have to get out of the city on your own. We'll meet at the abandoned tower. Take good care of yourselves and Lythinda,"

The Legacy of the Elves

Afterword

Dear readers,

With the conclusion of “The Chronicles of Wetherid - Legacy of the Elves”, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to you. It has been an extraordinary journey through the mysterious world of Wetherid, filled with adventure, magic and unforgettable encounters.

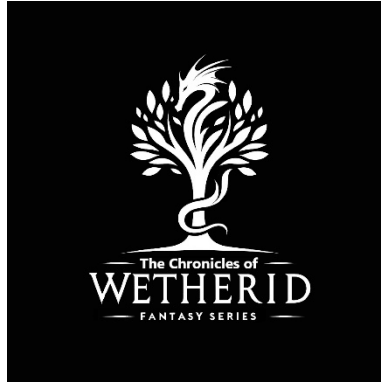
I hope you found in this book not only an exciting story, but also a world you could immerse yourself in to escape from everyday life and discover new horizons.

For more information, exclusive content and news about upcoming projects in the Wetherid series such as “The Keepers of the Seven Artifacts” or “The Secret of the Ice Flames”, please visit our website wetherid.com or facebook.com/wetherid/. There you can interact with other fans, discover bonus material and dive deeper into the world of Wetherid.

Thank you again for your support and enthusiasm for this story. May your journey through Wetherid hold many more adventures.

Best wishes,

Christian Dölder



About the author

Since his childhood, Christian Dölder has been fascinated by the worlds of magic and adventure and has set himself the goal of sharing this fascination in his works. The “Chronicles of Wetherid” are the result of a long journey through fantasy, inspired by the epic works of great authors such as J.R.R. Tolkien.

Through years of dedication and tireless striving for perfection, Christian Dölder has created a story that not only entertains, but also makes you think. With the “Chronicles of Wetherid”, he aims to take readers on a journey that takes them through the highs and lows of the human spirit as they discover a world of adventure, magic and unforgettable characters.

From its early beginnings to its publication in 2024, “The Chronicles of Wetherid” is not only a story, but also a journey of self-discovery and creative fulfillment. Christian Dölder invites you to immerse yourself in the world of “Wetherid” and become part of an epic saga you won't soon forget.

