

PROLOGUE

MALEK'S GIFT

ANDUNIN CRADLED THE HEAD of his son, his only son, in his lap. Slowly his fingers brushed back the dark hair from the boy's eyes. The blood on his own fingertips left damp smears on the smooth skin of Tarlin's forehead. A wind like Andunin had never felt before sliced through his soggy cloak as the rain fell cold and hard. Water slipped down his face under the curls of his thick grey beard and fell from his chin upon Tarlin's face and neck. His hands, trembling from the cold, brushed Tarlin's eyelids closed.

In the distance a group of armed men stood around a pile of bodies, slowly but steadily dragging more and more of the slain to the growing mound, but Andunin hardly noticed them. What did he care who else had died? The plight of some foolish merchant or farmer, or even one of the Novaana who had joined in a band of like fools to oppose his army, was no longer of any consequence to him. His son was dead.

The howling of the wind faded, and for just a moment Andunin thought that he could hear music. Just a few notes, faint

and distant, echoed in his mind. What was the song? He could not remember it, but he was filled with the certainty that it was very important that he remember. He had sung the song a hundred, maybe a thousand times before, but still it eluded him. He didn't seem to be able to think of anything. The fine black hair in matted clumps under his fingers and the pale cold skin beneath it obscured all else in his memory. There had been a song, of that he was sure, and somewhere, just beyond the edges of his consciousness, that song was playing. If only he could squeeze everything else out and hear it. If only he could forget the endless marches, the bitter battles, and the sudden, fateful, fatal blow.

Suddenly it was there—a single note at first, then the beginning of a melody. His eyes flickered shut.

Andunin strolled through the field. The grass that had been a brilliant green when he left was now rimmed with brown. Much longer without rain and the summer harvest would be less than the early signs had promised. Even so, while a drier than expected summer would be disappointing, the yield of Andunin's land would be far short of disastrous. Any man who owned as much land as Andunin—in fact, any man who owned or worked the land at all—knew it was foolish to think that some seasons would not be difficult and some harvests not disappointing. For every year that the land produced an abundant yield, there was one, sometimes two, in which the final output was moderate if not lean. To allow such realities to rule one's spirits or emotions was to be broken by the land, and Andunin was not a man to be broken by anything.

Davras appeared over the rise leading the sleek, chestnut gelding Andunin had given to Tarlin for his birthday. Tarlin sat proudly, if cautiously, upon the horse's back. Andunin smiled as recognition suddenly showed itself in Tarlin's face.

"Dad! You're back!"

"That I am, son," Andunin answered as Tarlin hastily dis-

mounted and ran across the field to him. Andunin stooped and picked up his ten-year-old son, then swung him around and around. "Oh," he groaned, "you've grown in the last month, I can tell."

"How were the meetings, Dad?" Tarlin asked when finally he had come to rest against his father's chest. "Were there many dragons?"

"There are always dragons when the Novaana meet, Tarlin, plenty of dragons."

"Was Sulmandir there?" Tarlin asked with a reverent whisper.

"No, son, Sulmandir wasn't there this time."

"Oh," Tarlin said, obviously disappointed. The next moment his face brightened, though, as he added, "I thought about naming my horse Sulmandir, Dad, but it didn't seem right. Guess what I did name him."

"I don't know, Tarlin, what did you name him?"

"Minladir. Davras says that means 'friend of the dragon.'"

"Indeed it does, Tarlin. It is a good name." Andunin set Tarlin down and greeted Davras as he caught up with them at last. "Allfather's blessing upon you, Davras. My thanks for your many pains taken with Tarlin."

"And upon you, Master Andunin, I assure you I took no pain from my service with Tarlin, none whatsoever," Davras replied with a slight bow. "How was the Assembly?"

"As such things go, it was all right. The number of the Novaana seems always to grow, and with growth everything takes longer. Consensus isn't as easy to attain as it once was. Just thinking about it hurts my head." Andunin laughed as they all turned back toward the house. "I wonder," Andunin continued, "if the Twelve ever take so much time to make decisions."

"Why don't you ask Malek the next time he comes, Dad?"

Andunin threw his head back and laughed. He roared until his sides ached and tears began to stream down his face.

“Ask Malek,” he gasped when he had gathered his breath, “that is priceless.”

He stooped and took Tarlin in his arms. “I have missed you, my son, very much. You give mirth to my heart, but I am afraid that I cannot ask Malek.”

“Why not?”

“Because the Twelve are Allfather’s representatives, here to rule Kirthanin on Allfather’s behalf,” Andunin replied. “They do not consult with men about their business. What’s more, if any man even considered posing such a question to one of the Twelve, it would not be to Malek.” He wiped the tears from his face and suddenly grew sober. He grasped Tarlin by his arms. “It is important that you learn from me, as I learned from my father, the appropriate way to approach any of the Titans. The first rule is to treat them with almost as much respect as you would treat Allfather if you could see and talk to him in the flesh. They do not look it when they come among us, but the Twelve are powerful beyond imagination.”

“Are they as powerful as Sulmandir?”

“They are even more powerful than the Father of Dragons, as hard as it may be for you to believe that.”

“Father, are you afraid of Malek?”

The question surprised Andunin. “No, I wouldn’t say that I am afraid, exactl, he said as he lifted Tarlin onto Minladir’s back. The Twelve are servants of Allfather as are we. They guide and direct us. However, prudence demands we treat them with respect. At any rate, I was just thinking out loud. I have no real desire to know anything other than what the Twelve wish to tell me. Besides, we are not likely to see Malek again until after the harvest has come and gone, if then.”

As they approached the house, a massive golden form soared over the trees that lined Andunin’s fields to the south. The beating wings of the dragon sent powerful gusts of wind that bent back the ripening grain and blew Andunin’s hair

about his face. The dragon gripped a moderate sized garrison in his talons, perhaps large enough for a dozen men.

“Sulmandir! It’s Sulmandir, Dad!” Tarlin yelled with excitement.

“No, Tarlin, it isn’t Sulmandir,” Andunin answered.

“But he’s gold,” Tarlin protested.

“Yes, I know it’s hard. All of Sulmandir’s children appear golden. Only Sulmandir is *completely* golden. If you look closely at this dragon’s scales, Tarlin, you will see that they have a bluish gleam as well. Can you see?”

Tarlin squinted at the dragon as it passed to their left. “I think so, but I’m not sure.”

“It takes time to be able to see, son. I was older than you before I could tell from a distance which dragons were blue, which green, and which red. I’ll tell you a secret, though. If you get close enough, there is another clear color marker on any dragon. Look at the nails on his talons. The skin beneath the nails always tells you what color the dragon really is. Still, before you know it, you’ll be able to tell by the color of the scales, even if far away.”

As they watched, the dragon wheeled before them in the sun, and the light reflected blue-gold off of its sleek and powerful body. “I saw the blue, Dad, I saw it!” Tarlin called out.

“Good,” his father replied as the dragon passed almost directly above them and disappeared to the north. A dragon tower and garrison field lay in that direction. “We had better get home quickly so we can warn your mother that we may have guests.”

Andunin’s house was spacious and comfortable, even if it could not rival the remarkable three-and four-storied homes of some of the Novaana further south. Andunin helped Tarlin down from Minladir’s back and mounted the horse himself. “Tarlin, hurry now and tell Mother that I am off to greet our guest—or guests. I’ll be back shortly. Davras, saddle as many

horses as you can quickly and follow me to the tower. If one or more of the Twelve have come, it would be best not to keep them waiting.”

Andunin spurred Minladir on and was soon racing along the narrow road that ran through the trees north of the house.

As Andunin entered the large empty field that surrounded the dragon tower, he saw the open garrion resting on the ground beside the tower. His eyes traced the slender line of the tower up into the dazzling sky. As he squinted, he thought he saw a massive golden wing extend beyond the gyre and then retract. Looking back from the tower to the garrion, he approached it slowly, wondering who waited within.

As he prepared to dismount Minladir, a tall figure stepped from the shadows of the garrion, pausing momentarily so that only his silhouette was visible, before stepping into the bright sunlight. He was a little taller than Andunin, standing almost a full hand over a span high, and powerfully built. Indeed, he projected such an image of strength that it often took some time for those meeting him for the first time to realize he was also quite handsome. He was dressed all in blue with a silver insignia of a great hammer upon his chest. A long white cape swept the floor of the garrion as he stepped into the grass of the field, and thick brown hair fell down upon broad shoulders, curling slightly at its ends. His sharp blue eyes gazed out from a face that reminded Andunin of the solidity of iron despite the slight smile that traced his lips.

“Malek,” Andunin began, dropping from Minladir and taking a knee before the Titan in human form before him, “I did not expect you at this time of year. I was not prepared to greet you appropriately. I am sorry. My servant, Davras, is on his way with a horse. Forgive the delay.”

“Andunin,” Malek began with a voice that was simultane-

ously soft and powerful. “Do not worry yourself. I am well aware of the unusual nature of my visit. I did not expect that you would be prepared to greet me. I am reasonable, after all.”

After saying each syllable of the word “reasonable” slowly, as though savoring them, Malek threw his head back and laughed. Andunin looked in wonder. In the many years he had known Malek, he had never heard such laughter. It was as if Malek had told a joke that only he could understand. When he had finished laughing at his own apparent hilarity, Malek placed his hand upon Andunin’s shoulder and gazed into Andunin’s eyes. Andunin saw a spark in them that he had never before seen in the eyes of any living thing. Though his recent claim to Tarlin still lingered in his mind, he felt wary and frightened. He had never thought before this moment that this kind of fear was possible before one of the Twelve, but he felt it now.

“I am reasonable,” Malek continued, “and I know that you are reasonable as well. Yes, Andunin, you are reasonable and valiant and wise, which is why I have come to you. There is much that must be said. I have, shall we say, an offer to make, unlike any that has ever passed between one of the Twelve and mortal man.”

Andunin, who had started to stroke Minladir as though to soothe him, realized just then that his hand was shaking slightly. “I come to you with the promise of a new world,” Malek continued. “A new dawn for Kirthanin is coming. Indeed, in one sense it has come already, and I have come to you, Andunin, to explain what part you are going to play in it all—to offer you something you would never imagine.”

At that moment, Davras emerged from the woods, riding hard with four horses in tow. Malek looked beyond Andunin at the approaching horses and continued, “Of this I have more to say, but not tonight. Let us enjoy the fine evening that lies before us and the beautiful Nolthanin stars. Take me to

that lovely wife of yours, Andunin, and we will feast tonight as we have so often before. Even now she prepares the feast, does she not?"

"She does," Andunin replied. "It has been hastily prepared, but Cilana is remarkable even on short notice."

"I doubt it not," Malek replied.

Davras arrived and soon Malek was seated on Nothrimar, a pale white stallion of exceptional size and strength that he had ridden many times before. Malek spurred the great horse and led the way at a gallop back south across the field and into the woods.

The following day a steady rain fell throughout the morning. Andunin watched it through the window, knowing he should feel grateful, but the uneasiness and uncertainty that Malek's arrival had created hung heavily upon him.

Malek sat and told stories of the Twelve and of life in Avalione, the blessed city, to a fascinated Tarlin, who knew enough to know that he was bearing witness to a rare thing. The Twelve did not speak often of life upon Agia Muldonai, the Holy Mountain, especially Malek. Though Malek was the contact between the Council of Twelve and Andunin and the other Novaana of the far north, he seldom spoke of anything other than human affairs. Today, though, he spoke of the great temple to Allfather, located in the center of the city, and the Crystal Fountain in the temple courtyard. The water of the Fountain was as clear as glass, the purest water in all Kirthanin. Since the dawn of time, streams and rivers from the Fountain had flowed through the center of Avalione and down the slopes of the Holy Mountain itself. Eventually the waters poured from a waterfall near the base of the mountain into a pool that drained by way of a subterranean cavern beneath the mountain. The Fountain tapped the waters of the great deep and was said to be the fountainhead of all the lesser waters of

Kirthanin, but Malek did not speak of that today. Rather, he spoke with a whispered awe of the glory of the blessed city and the beauty of the Crystal Fountain.

When at last the morning rain had passed and the midday meal was over, Malek turned to Andunin and said, "Time is pressing. Let us ride and speak together."

Little more than an hour later, Andunin found himself astride his own horse, Folnik, riding quietly beside Malek and Nothrimar through the hills beyond the dragon tower. Eventually they came upon a small tributary of the Simmok River. Malek dismounted and led Nothrimar to the water to drink. As Andunin watched Malek, today swathed in a great dark blue cloak, he felt for the second time the ripple of anxiety that had pierced him the previous day. He felt it more deeply with each passing moment.

Malek turned from the water, and Andunin saw an eerie light glowing in his pale blue, almost luminescent eyes. "Andunin," he began, "a great change is coming to Kirthanin, and I have come to reveal to you the role that you will play in it."

"Yes, my Lord," Andunin replied in a trembling voice, dismounting from Folnik and leading him also to water.

"The old order is passing away and a new order will soon begin. The Council of Twelve has served its time, but it no longer satisfies the needs of the land. The Novaana have served their time, but they no longer satisfy the needs of the men of Kirthanin. The time has come for me to assume my rightful place, not as first among the Twelve, but as ruler of all Kirthanin. It is also time for the unwieldy council of the Novaana to yield its authority to the rule of a mortal king, a king who will receive his crown, of course, from me. I have decided that this king shall be you."

Andunin stroked the smooth back of Folnik, who greedily drank the cool water. Andunin tried not to look at Malek, but

the intensity of Malek's gaze drew him back. "You speak of rebellion." The words slipped softly but firmly from his mouth.

Rage leapt quickly into Malek's eyes but subsided just as quickly. "I speak of revolution. I speak of the good giving way to the better. The land cries out for leadership. Do you not feel it? I was first among my brothers, and I assert the right of that position to be their leader and the ruler of all living things. You are a good and capable leader too. Do you not feel frustration with the inability of the Assembly to act quickly and decisively? The land would benefit from a benevolent king with your talent and wisdom." He paused and peered more intently into Andunin's eyes. "Not only would Kirthanin benefit, but so would you and your son. The throne, of course, would pass to Tarlin after you.

"Look at the river, Andunin, and learn from it the nature of all that Allfather has created. Do you see the large rock along the far bank, how it is curved and smooth where the river bends? As strong as the rock is, the superior strength of the water has molded and shaped it. So it is in all things. With time the weak gives way to the strong. The weak plant bends under the force of the strong wind, and the weak branch snaps when the strong hand breaks it off to make it fuel for the fire. This is good and right. As it is in all nature, so it is among the Twelve and among the Novaana. This is not rebellion against Allfather; it is the fulfillment of the only future imaginable for his creation."

Malek clenched his hands and the veins on his forearm bulged as far up as Andunin could see before disappearing into his cloak. He stood beside the water, no longer looking at Andunin but past him, as though gazing at something far beyond him in the south. "Why should I continue to share the power and position that I am better suited to wield and control alone? It should have been mine from the beginning. I have long wanted it to be mine, and soon it will be."

Andunin squatted and lifted a handful of cool water to his lips. The water ran down the inside of his arm and wet the sleeves of his cloak. There was too much to process. He had only ever spoken with Malek about the will of the Twelve for Nolthanin and all the Novaana. Now Malek spoke of things he had never even dreamt. Malek spoke of them as though they were not only good and right, but as though they were inevitable. Andunin splashed water in his face. The future, his own and his son's, hung in the balance.

He looked up at Malek, who had known him since he kicked in his mother's womb. He didn't want to displease Malek, but his plan sounded like rebellion, whatever twist Malek put on it. He had indeed been frustrated by the Assembly, but he had never desired the power to rule it. And yet, the prospect of that power was not entirely undesirable. He knew that he could rule well, and with careful training, so could Tarlin.

Malek fixed his gaze once more on Andunin. "In effect, I am already the true ruler of Kirthanin. I am the greatest of Allfather's creations and chief of the Titans. If I revealed myself to you as I truly am, you would tremble before me like a blade of parched grass before the whirlwind. The sight of my glory and majesty would rend your mind in two. Even the streets of the blessed city, Avalione, built as it is upon the immovable ground of Agia Muldonai, trembles under the weight of my footsteps. Apart from the Twelve, only Sulmandir has ever beheld my splendor and not fallen on his face in fear, and that is only because the golden dragon was created by Allfather to behold us as we are without awe. I will rule all. I am the strongest. Why should you not rule as my lieutenant, as chief of all my human servants?" Malek stooped beside Andunin until his face was just slightly above, and he peered into Andunin's eyes. "I assure you, I will find someone to receive the throne that I offer if you do not. It would be most foolish to decline."

As Andunin looked into Malek's face, he understood that the price of refusal would be total. The spark he had seen in Malek's eyes burned now a full fire, fierce and strong. Those eyes laid the future bare before him. A great storm approached, and there would be no safe place in which to take shelter.

"I am only one man, and even with the whole clan behind me, even all Nolthanin, we could never impose our will on the rest of the Assembly of the Novaana and Kirthanin. And you, Malek, though I do not doubt you are even more powerful than I can imagine, how could you stand against all the Titans at once?"

"Leave the Titans to me, Andunin," Malek smiled. "I am no fool. I would not have come to you if the success of my plan was not assured. As for you, I will approach others to join us, though it will be clear that you are first among all men who follow me. Even so, that is not why all Kirthanin will bow before you. No indeed. Kirthanin will give way before you, because I will give you a gift that will set you apart from all men. I will give you a gift that will make you the lord of men. I will give you instruments of war, tools that have been designed to take life, to kill those who would oppose us. I will forge these with my own hand for this purpose, that you might rule mankind on my behalf."

That evening Andunin stood between Folnik and Nothrimar, holding their reins. The smooth walls of the great dragon tower rose before him into the darkening sky. Great streaks of pink and orange light swirled across the treetops and the side of the tower itself. On the ground, the heavy door of the garrison swung closed and latched with a clang that echoed to the far reaches of the field. As Andunin gazed into the sky, the head of the dragon appeared above the edge of the tower roof. The eyes of the dragon surveyed the ground as two mas-

sive wings opened on either side, measuring at least eight or nine spans from tip to tip. For a moment they simply stretched outward and still more outward, until they finally held taut at their fullest extension. Then the dragon leapt from the side of the tower and swooped into the air, its powerful wings fanning the warm summer air into Andunin's face. The dragon began to rise, circling the upper reaches of the tower in an ever widening arc above the gyre from which it had leapt. It circled upward and upward until it at last seemed just a large bird framed in shadow against the clouds. Then the head of the dragon dipped, and he began to dive. Around and around it swung, moving steadily downward in a great elliptical orbit around the stone tower. As it finally neared the ground, its trajectory carried it several times almost the whole length of the field, but even so it made its circuit with terrific speed. On the final round he slowed his great wings to a gentle rhythmic beat, and the great talons of his claws locked upon the T-bar of the garrison and lifted it into the sky. The dragon shot across the field, elevating to a comfortable distance above the trees, and in a moment, he had disappeared beyond the horizon.

As the last golden gleam of the dragon's scales disappeared in the fading sun, the deepening darkness comforted Andunin. He felt as never before an overwhelming desire to hide. He mounted Folnik and slowly walked the horse through twilight to the path that led home. Soon the even greater shadow of the forest enveloped him, and he pressed Folnik to run with Nothrimar following close behind.

As he drew near to the house, the stars of the northern constellations emerged from behind the passing cloud cover. Even though it was difficult to see this far north, Andunin could see the cluster of stars that made up the topmost section of Alazare's Staff. Further north, but off to the east, the outline of Balimere's Mirror was also clear, indeed exceptionally so. The dimmer outline of the mirror, usually hard to make

out from this distance, could be traced around the twin stars that framed Balimere's Eyes. And, of course, almost directly overhead, the bright stars of Malek's Hammer looked down upon him.

Malek. Andunin wondered what Alazare and Balimere, or any of the Twelve would have thought of Malek's plan. Perhaps they already knew. Would Malek even consider the changes he was proposing without the cooperation of Alazare, second only to Malek in power and wisdom? And what about Balimere, the most beloved of the Titans, blindingly beautiful and full of laughter? Could Malek hope to succeed in ruling man if he did not gain the favor of man's chief patron and provider? All acknowledged the leadership of Malek, but rarely had Andunin ever heard anyone speak of love for him. Come to think of it, Andunin had never heard anyone speak of love for Malek. He just wasn't thought of in those terms.

And beyond the Twelve, what of the dragons and Great Bear? Andunin would have gratefully sought Kiraseth's advice if he were still alive. The Father of the Great Bear had been renowned even among his own kind for his wisdom and insight. It was often said that on the day of creation, after Allfather had created the Twelve and imbued them with all their wisdom and might, he then created the three great creatures of earth: the dragons, the Great Bear, and man. To each he had given a special gift. To the dragons he had given unparalleled physical strength and might. To the Great Bear he had given great wisdom. To mankind he had given beauty and creativity, a dexterity and ability to make objects of industry and art.

Of course, the generalization was limited, as all are. Dragons did not lack for wisdom or, for that matter, their own form of beauty and creativity. Little under the heavens could compare with the beauty and majesty of a dragon in flight, its great wings reflecting gold in the bright Kirthanin sun. And the

Great Bear, among all the creatures who walked the earth, were foremost in strength. Even men, at times, could exhibit both wisdom and might. What's more, the proverb did not take into consideration the claims of many who had sailed the deep waters far and wide, that in some of the lands in and beyond the Southern Ocean, other creations of Allfather walked the earth, the likes of which had never been seen in Kirthanin. Andunin had grown up with the stories, but living within a day's ride of the Great Northern Sea made all such tales of places in or beyond the Southern Ocean seem unreal.

Even so, like many of the old sayings, this one expressed a kernel of truth, and Andunin did not doubt that the counsel of Kiraseth would have been of great help to him. Malek's offer did not feel right. Had Allfather decreed that the time of the Council of Twelve and the Assembly of the Novaana had passed, surely this would have been made clear to the Council and through them to the Assembly. Furthermore, why had Malek come alone and at such an unusual time? Why had the Titan taken him aside with promises of power and threats of punishment for refusal to comply? The Titans had never used their might to intimidate men before, at least not that Andunin knew. His own father had always taught him that the Twelve were to be obeyed and served without question, but such humility was borne out of proper respect, not fear of reprisal.

Most puzzling and troubling was the offer of tools designed to kill. "Instruments of war," Malek had called them. Malek, Master of the Forge, was no doubt capable of such a creation, but it was clearly contradictory to Allfather's will. Shedding the blood of any living animal was strictly forbidden. It wasn't that Allfather disallowed meat; in addition to the fruit of the ground, Allfather had given his blessing to the eating of any of the ignorant animals that walked the earth, but it was not given to man to kill them. In due season, all animals, like

all men, reached their appointed time and died. When an animal was found dead in a wood or field, it was considered a gift from Allfather's hand. Thus man always gave thanks to the hand of Allfather, who had created life and sustained it. To be given instruments designed to shed blood, and human blood at that, was a terrifying thought. What might have prompted such an idea in Malek's mind, Andunin could not imagine. This grim truth plagued Andunin's thoughts—if Malek was capable of conceiving and creating these weapons, he was capable of anything.

Davras appeared from the house and took the reins to Nothrimar, then he waited while Andunin dismounted Folnik. Davras led both horses away through the darkness toward the stable. Andunin followed him with his eyes for a moment, watching the shadows cast by Davras's lantern swing gently from side to side. Turning toward the house, Andunin stepped onto the wide veranda that encircled it, hesitated, then turned toward the back. There, where the land fell away from the house into the apple grove that his great-grandfather had planted over one hundred years before, he sat on the edge of the smooth wooden porch.

What to do? That was really the only question that mattered now. Malek's plan might indeed represent rebellion against Allfather, perhaps even rebellion against some or most of the Twelve, but would that matter in the end? Andunin did not desire to join in a rebellion, but neither did he desire to be the first of Malek's enemies to die. If he joined Malek, he might well find himself on the losing side of an insurrection and paying a terrible price. But if he did not join Malek, would anyone be able to save him and his son from Malek's hand? Surely none of the Twelve alone could stand against Malek. At least if he sided with Malek, there was hope that he would live, and Tarlin too. Did he have the right to place Tarlin's life in immediate danger? Did he have the right not to? Could any

choice he made at this point be the right one, or had all meaningful choice already been taken from him?

Perhaps he could at least try to approach another one of the other Titans about the matter, a prospect that just the day before had seemed laughably absurd. But how, and which one? How could he know which would be safe? Surely Malek was not alone in his plan. At least some of the Twelve must have given Malek their consent. It was even possible, though unlikely, that Malek had convinced them all to join him. Perhaps it was Allfather's will for Kirthanin that they do so. Certainly Malek had implied that this was the outworking of Allfather's own design.

Andunin's head shook almost involuntarily. It was inconceivable. If the thought of all the Titans joining Malek in this plan seemed unlikely, then the idea that it was Allfather's will was even more preposterous. Andunin could not imagine that the gleam of power and rage in Malek's eyes were from Allfather.

Would Allfather protect Andunin from Malek's wrath if he refused to submit? He knew no stories of Allfather intervening directly in the affairs of Kirthanin before. Could he risk defying Malek in the hope that he would do so now? Andunin couldn't guess.

The risk seemed too great. Surely Malek would not undertake such a war if he was not convinced he could win, and how could he win if Allfather intervened directly? If Malek believed Allfather would not concern himself with Malek's actions, Andunin had no choice but to assume he was on his own. He hadn't asked for this, but he was here. He needed to act prudently to protect himself and his son.

The back door swung open, and light from within flooded out. Tarlin stood there blinking in the doorway, allowing his eyes to adjust to the darkness. He stepped out of the light and reached for his father. Andunin met his embrace and caught him up, pulling him to himself.

“Mom let me wait up for you, Dad,” Tarlin began, “but she told me I had to come out and tell you goodnight now.”

“How did she know I was here?”

“I saw Davras taking the horses to the stable and told her, and she said you’d be sitting back here.”

Andunin laughed. “Mother knows me well.”

“Is Malek gone, Dad?”

“Yes, Tarlin, he’s gone.”

“Will he bring Sulmandir when he comes back?”

“I don’t know,” Andunin answered, but as he did, he felt quite certain he did know. Adjusting Tarlin’s place in his lap he looked his son in the eye. “I haven’t had a chance to tell you properly since I returned, Tarlin, but I love you very much. You know that, don’t you?”

“Yes, Dad.”

“Good,” Andunin replied. “With all the excitement last night, we didn’t have time to sing our song. Should we now?”

“Yes, please,” Tarlin answered, barely containing his excitement.

“Let me see, then,” Andunin began. “How does it go? Oh, I think I remember, it goes like this . . .”

*Hey bora, hey nora,
I knew a girl named Dora,
Hey bida, hey nida,
I knew a girl named Lida . . .*

“No, Dad. It doesn’t go like that.” Tarlin laughed, gently pulling his father’s hair.

“Oh, well how does it go? Would you start it for me?”

“No, Dad, you start it! You always start it.”

Andunin closed his eyes. The melody began to ripple through his mind. He opened his lips and found that he was singing.

*Peace, my son, and lay you down,
The sun has gone away.
Wake and find the dawn at hand,
Tomorrow is today—
Tomorrow is today.*

When they had sung the song several times together, An-dunin kissed his son and watched him retreat into the house. As the door closed once more, leaving him fully in the dark, he saw a vision. It was brief, yet vivid. In his mind's eye he beheld a grand hall, unlike any he had ever seen. In the middle of that hall, he could see a throne, ornate and grand. Around the throne stood the Novaana, hundreds if not thousands of them, bowing in honor and allegiance. Upon the throne sat Tarlin, crowned.

The image lingered even when he closed his eyes. Opening them again, he found the picture still pressing upon him. He rose and walked from the house into the open space behind it, peering into the sky. There it was still, though fading, visible in the heavens. Then, as quickly as it had come, it was gone, leaving him to wonder where it had come from and what it had meant. *A crown for Tarlin means a crown for me.*

A cold wind blew in off of the Great Northern Sea. Today the often tempestuous waves barely rippled as they lapped the stony beach. A flock of gulls swept across the horizon and came to rest in the water. As far as the eye could see, gray skies covered the cold, dark waters. What lay beyond these shores? Strange lands and creatures, as rumored in the Southern Ocean? Or nothing but endless water, as the ancient sailors claimed?

“Father?” The sound of Tarlin’s deep voice snapped An-dunin out of his reverie. He turned from the waters and looked at his son astride Minladir. How much the child had

grown in these seven years past. The wiry frame of a little boy had been replaced by the muscular body of a man. Andunin had long since conceded his son's superior speed and agility. He had tried to prepare Tarlin for what would follow this day, but Andunin had been limited by his own need of preparation. What would follow was as much a mystery to Andunin as it was to Tarlin. Yet Andunin knew Tarlin would need to be hard if a throne was one day to be his, hard like no other seventeen-year-old had ever needed to be. As Andunin looked at the grim determination and cold concentration in Tarlin's gray-green eyes, he knew he had succeeded. The laughter of childhood was gone, long since replaced by eyes that reminded him, well, of Malek.

"Father," Tarlin repeated, "Let me come with you to the cave."

"No, we've been over this."

"You shouldn't go alone. You may need me."

Andunin waved his son to silence. "Tarlin, you will not come, because I will not need you. Whether test or trap, if Malek betrays me, there will be absolutely nothing you can do except perish with me, and in my dying moments I would know that my only son was dead or soon to die and my line had failed. If Malek deals truthfully, then I will bring back the weapons he has prepared and the secret of their making."

Tarlin looked out over the sea, avoiding his father's eyes. Andunin understood his frustration and helplessness. How many days had he felt exactly the same way these last seven years? And yet, what was he to do? Sometimes a man's destiny chose him rather than the other way around. All one could do was make peace with the road set before him. "Son, if I have not returned by nightfall, head to the Simmok ford, and I will find you there. If on the second night I have not come, return home and take your mother and sisters away. Where you take them does not matter. If Malek has determined to destroy us,

it will little matter where you go, but you will need to be strong for the others.” He managed a reassuring smile for Tarlin. “Even so, I don’t think you need worry. If Malek wanted to kill me, he could have killed me before now. He means to rule, and I mean us to rule with him. I will return. Farewell.”

“Farewell, Father,” Tarlin replied, riding up beside his father and clasping Andunin’s arm in his. “With you rides the honor of our family and our people. With you rides, rides . . .”

“There is nothing more to be said. What was the custom of our fathers and forefathers has changed. You can no longer send with me the blessing of Allfather. That is all there is to say.”

Andunin wheeled Folnik and rode swiftly down the beach toward the west. Glancing over his shoulder only once, he watched Tarlin retreat from his exposed position at the water’s edge into the scattered trees. They would afford some shelter from the first drops of the rain beginning to fall, and, perhaps, from unseen but watchful eyes.

Andunin hesitated at the cave’s yawning mouth. He glanced back over his shoulder at Folnik, calmly grazing around the tree to which Andunin had tied him. Again Andunin listened. The quiet lapping of the slight waves upon the beach reached his ears, and perhaps the barest whisper of a gentle wind, but nothing more. Andunin could see no garrison, no dragon, no horse, no sign at all that anyone else was here. This was the appointed day and the appointed hour. But what if Malek wasn’t here? Perhaps something had delayed him. Andunin’s mind raced. What if Malek’s plans had been unmasked, his rebellion unveiled? Maybe the remaining Twelve had confronted and detained him. Maybe Allfather himself had rebuked or even punished Malek for his mad conspiracy. Andunin felt a mixture of hope and disappointment. He feared what lay ahead, but the image of Tarlin upon a regal throne was seared inside his memory.

Then Andunin heard it, a deep, metallic ring echoing from the depths of the cave. It was the sound of a blacksmith at his forge. It was the sound of hammer on anvil, folding and re-folding molten metal. It was the sound of Malek, Master of the Forge, shaping for Andunin and Tarlin and all who followed them, weapons of war. It was the sound of Andunin's doom.

Andunin stepped into the cave. The passageway that led from the opening chamber curved slightly down and away from the Great Northern Sea. In a matter of moments, the light from outside was completely lost, and the darkness of the earth would have been complete if not for the presence of odd, iridescent rocks that marked the center of the tunnel floor every five spans or so. Andunin had never seen anything like them, but their glow provided enough light for him to make out the passageway and obstacles.

As Andunin walked, the sound of hammer on metal came ringing again from somewhere deep in the recesses of the cave. Over and over the clashing call echoed along the corridor like a beacon summoning Andunin to his destiny. Then, just like that, the sound disappeared, and the cave was quiet.

Eventually the slight curve of the passageway straightened, and the gentle slope became a steep drop, so steep that at times Andunin had to turn sideways and place his hands on the ground behind him to avoid falling. Even so, Andunin slipped and slid twice. The second time he fell until his precipitous drop was interrupted by the floor of a small room.

Andunin stood and brushed himself off. Several of the glowing rocks surrounded him, embedded in the walls far above his head. The room was perhaps fifteen spans long and ten spans wide. Looking back the direction he had come, Andunin did not relish the thought of returning up that steep slope, especially if he was to carry Malek's promised gift.

A sheep bleated. Turning toward the cry, Andunin saw a doorway at the far end of the chamber. He quickly passed

through and found himself in an enormous cavern. A great orange glow emanated from a massive stone forge on the far side of the room. Beside the forge stood Malek, his massive arm wielding a great, shiny hammer.

Malek seemed completely oblivious to Andunin, his eyes focused on the long slender blade that he was shaping. His left hand controlled long, sturdy black tongs, with which he deftly manipulated the steel. The hammer fell on it again and again in rhythmic strokes, working up and down the length of the blade. Malek's bare, muscular arm flashed up and down. For a moment Andunin closed his eyes. The sound! The sound was almost deafening, filling the great chamber, pulsing and loud. Then, the ringing stopped.

Andunin opened his eyes. They readjusted slowly to the glowing forge. Malek watched him now. He laid both hammer and tongs down and stepped back from his work. "You have come in good time."

Andunin could not tell, but as he approached Malek, he could have sworn that something like a smile passed over Malek's face, like a solitary wisp of cloud quickly passing through an empty sky. Malek continued, "The sword that I have just completed is too hot to touch yet, but I have something else to give you first."

Malek motioned for Andunin to come around the forge. Andunin hesitated but did not stop. He could not stop. He felt drawn, compelled to follow Malek's instructions. If death lay beyond the forge, Andunin could not stop it. The hot surface radiated waves of heat as he rounded it, coming to the place where Malek stood. There, leaning against the wall, was a long, smooth wooden shaft. Bolted to the end of the shaft was a jagged blade, perhaps three hands in length. The blade was dark and bore the single engraved emblem of a silver hammer.

"This is Ruun Harak. It is a spear. The sword you saw me making has a cutting edge along both sides and is handy for

fighting at close quarters. This is a weapon, though, with which you can strike a fatal blow long before your foe is close enough to harm you. Andunin, with enough of these, no number of farmers armed with scythes or hay forks will be able to stop you and your men. You will cut down your enemies like wheat.”

Andunin gazed at the long, cruel blade. He had no doubt that being punctured by that jagged edge would indeed prove fatal. Graphic images of blood pouring from gaping, open wounds flooded his mind. His stomach felt queasy. It was not the first time he had considered what Malek’s killing tools would do. His dreams had been full of blood and death, the cutting and ripping of human flesh. But now that he beheld with his own eyes a blade created specifically for that purpose, he felt the waking reality of all those dark nightmares.

“Here,” Malek said softly as he stepped toward Andunin. “Take it in your hand. Feel it for yourself.”

Andunin’s hands closed around the smooth shaft. The wood was firm and strong. If not for the blade at the end, it might have been any of a dozen winnowing forks or harvesting tools that he kept in his barn at home. But this was no farming instrument. There were no simple wooden pieces fastened at the end, nor a dull sickle blade forever in need of sharpening.

“How does it feel, Andunin?”

“Strange,” he replied, “very strange.”

Malek laughed. The sound of his laughter reverberated through the chamber as his hammering had. “Of course it feels strange; no human hand has ever grasped its like before. It will feel strange until you learn how to use it.”

Malek’s face grew sober. “You must practice using Ruun Harak before you wield it in combat, Andunin. You may spar carefully with others, but that will not be enough. You will all need to practice making use of your weapons to finish your

enemy. All stages of warfare will be strange to you, but you must be as comfortable as you can in making the killing blow. Hesitation at the wrong time could be fatal. I would suggest that you give all of your men a chance to use their weapons on real flesh and bone before they ever see battle.”

Andunin gazed from the spear to its maker. “What are you suggesting?”

“I am suggesting that you practice killing. It may save your life.”

Malek disappeared for a moment around the side of the forge, and when he re-emerged, he was leading a dirty white lamb. The creature trembled as it followed him, alternating between compliance and resistance to Malek’s tugging.

“I cannot say that he volunteered, exactly, but here is your first opportunity to use your gift. Strike, Andunin, and feel in your heart the quickening wonder of what it means to have power over life and death.”

Andunin gazed at the lamb, which had raised its head and was looking from Malek to Andunin and back again. It seemed vaguely aware of the danger of the hot forge and shied away from it. It seemed totally unaware, however, of the danger posed by Ruun Harak.

Andunin looked from the lamb to the spear and then back again. He had honored the prohibition of Allfather all his life, never shedding the blood of any living thing. How could he slaughter the innocent creature that stood before him? Andunin shuddered; if he followed Malek there would be more than sheep ahead. If he wanted to secure the throne of Kirthanin for Tarlin, he would have to kill. If he could not kill the lamb, what would he do when a man stood before him, just as innocent and undeserving of death? No, it had to be done. The lamb had to be sacrificed. He raised the spear, which trembled in his hand, then plunged it deep into the lamb’s side.

The lamb uttered a stunned cry, then proceeded to stumble and fall with the spear still sticking out from its side. Andunin wrenched Ruun Harak free, eyes riveted to the bleeding wound on the dying animal. Steadily, the wool turned a deep crimson.

Andunin raised Ruun Harak and gazed at the jagged blade. Against the almost black metal, the blood was at first hard to see. But it was there, flowing in a zig-zag pattern down the blade toward the wooden handle. Slowly, small rivulets started to stain Ruun Harak's shaft. *So that is what it feels like to kill.*

Malek placed his hand upon Andunin's shoulder. "In addition to Ruun Harak and the sword, I have readied a dozen or so other blades for war. I have hid them in a copse of trees not far from the entrance of the cave. Take them with you today. Also, and far more importantly, I will show you how they were made and train your blacksmiths myself. The appointed time is drawing near. In less than a year it will be time to strike. You must prepare your men. You must teach them what it means to kill."

Malek's words echoed in Andunin's mind as the raindrops continued to fall. He gazed once more at the blood on Tarlin's face, blood that had splattered there from the open wound on his chest. He had taught Tarlin what it meant to kill, and Tarlin had killed many. He had fought as hard and as bravely as any, despite the ruin of Malek's plan and all Malek had promised them. Ruin was all that Malek had succeeded in bringing to himself, to Andunin, and to all Kirthanin. Andunin had known this for weeks, but now he cradled the ruin in his hands and felt its cold totality.

And yet Andunin knew that it was he who had led his son to this bloody death. Tarlin had followed him, not Malek, never questioning, never complaining, and certainly never accusing. Now Andunin bore the blame and the guilt for his

son's death as well as for his own sin. He sighed as he stroked his son's face. So many wrong turns, so many mistakes. The guilt lay heavy upon him, a burden he could neither carry nor lay down.

He looked through the steady rain at Minladir, standing head down a few feet away. The horse waited patiently for the steadying hand of his master. On the ground, between Minladir and him, lay Ruun Harak. He leaned over, careful not to let Tarlin's head touch the soaking ground. He pulled the spear to himself. He wanted to curse the blade and all it represented, but instead he only gazed upon it. The handle felt comfortable in his hand. He had grown used to its feel. He held the blade up above his head and watched the water from the rain stream down its length.

He could not curse it, for he did not hate it. Even now, as he considered the consequences of following Malek, he did not want to let Ruun Harak go. Hard as it was to even acknowledge it, the spear had become part of him. Ruun Harak brought fear, and fear brought power. No, even now, as Andunin kissed Tarlin's forehead, the cold, wet flesh still dear to his touch, he knew that despite the terrible price he had paid for such power, he would never willingly put Ruun Harak down again.

Clutching the spear, Andunin closed his eyes and sang the song that had been a lullaby but was now a dirge.

*Peace, my son, and lay you down,
The sun has gone away.
Wake and find the dawn at hand,
Tomorrow is today—
Tomorrow is today.*