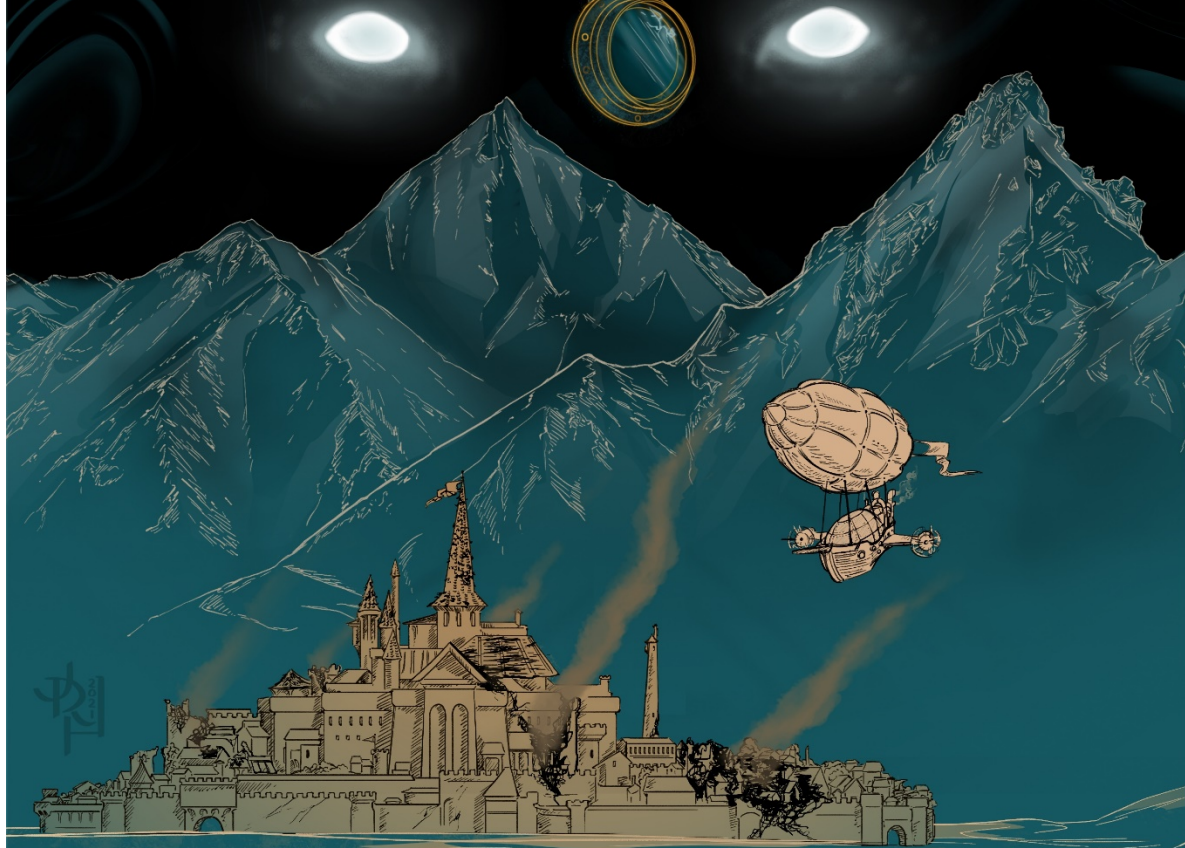


Wærend's Ballad



IAN V. CONREY

Hælend's Ballad

Ian V. Conrey

Copyright © 2021 Ian V. Conrey.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Names, characters, and places are products of the author's imagination.

Cover art and maps by Jeni Hudson.

ISBN: 978-1-7368806-2-3

www.haelendsballad.com

Dark Horses

As the breeze blew the tails of Eilívr's coat behind him, he peered across the Llynhithe port docks to the rising tides of the Swelling Sea. He pulled the letter from his pocket and fiddled with the corner as his gaze wandered to a group of sailors, gesturing and shouting while they raised the sails upon the foremast of a great ship. A boatswain pointed toward the outhaul, and several men gripped the rope, tightening the sail which billowed out in the wind.

"Blasted air's gone chilly again," came a voice from behind.

Eilívr turned as Commander Jótham approached in his black uniform, which only seemed to accentuate his pale skin, even by Daecish standards. "Llynhithe isn't so bad," he replied. "At least you can see the sun."

Jótham grinned, revealing his ghastly brownish-gray teeth—unfit for an officer. "With all due respect, Commander Tyr, you haven't been here but two days. You'll grow to hate it, too." He pointed to the letter in Eilívr's hand. "Are those my orders?"

Eilívr faintly nodded and scratched his cleanshaven face as he peered across a dirt road to a row of crooked wooden buildings. The gray thatched roofs sagged around the seemingly rotting beams beneath them. "Anywhere we can get a drink?"

Jótham let out a hack, which Eilívr assumed was meant to be a chuckle. "A drink? Commander, this isn't Everwind."

Eilívr didn't bother replying.

Jótham rolled his eyes and pointed down the road. "There's a tavern not far from here."

Stepping through the open entryway, the smell of sour milk and lantern oil filled Eilívr's nose. Several Sunderian men, clothed in brown leather tunics and jerkins, sat at the bar. As with just about everyone else in Sunder, they looked like poor farmers. One man, with a leathery face, smiled, revealing his toothless gums. Another man chewed on something, probably tobacco. Eilívr never smoked, but even he knew tobacco was for smoking in pipes, not chewing raw.

Jótham motioned for the barman to bring them a drink as they sat at the table situated beside a hand-blown window wrapped in a rotting frame. Gazing back at the port docks, Eilívr could almost make out the reflection of his graying blonde hair in the glass.

"I've about had it with this country," Jótham whispered as he glanced over his shoulder at the men at the bar.

The barman brought two mugs of ale and set them on the table. “You want to go back to Daecland?” Eilívr asked before taking a sip of ale. He frowned as he forced the liquid down his throat. Jótham was right. This tasted little better than bilge water. A hot cup of tea would have been nicer.

“I don’t know,” he replied with a sigh. “At least out of Llynhithe. But anyway,” he pointed to the letter again, “what have you got for me?”

“Greystrom’s arrest papers.”

Jótham raised an eye. “Lombard Greystrom? Has he been found?”

“A scout found him and his family nearly forty leagues due west of here in the Western Plains, just north of the Arglen Valley.”

“The Western Plains? We should have known.”

“We’ve always been pretty certain. But finding a homestead in the vastness of the plains isn’t easy.”

“Well, it’s about time,” Jótham replied. “This Black Horse will wish—”

Eilívr lifted a finger. “Dark Horse, you mean?”

Jótham waved his finger away. “Whatever you want to call the leaders of the Slithering,” he rolled his hand for the word. “The Slithering—”

“The Silent Hither?”

“Yes, that’s what I said.”

“Anyway,” Eilívr interrupted, “I had planned on arresting Greystrom myself, but as soon as I arrived in Llynhithe, I was asked to take on a series of training courses for the Nautical Armada, effective immediately.”

“You’re a man of many talents, aren’t you?”

Eilívr sighed. “Unfortunately. So, I must find a replacement for arresting Greystrom.”

“And that would be me?”

“I thought you would be a good fit. And you did mention that you’d like to spend some time outside of Llynhithe.”

Jótham laughed. “I’m not so sure the Western Plains were what I had in mind.” He interlocked his fingers, cracking his knuckles. “But I guess it’s better than nothing. When do I depart?”

Eilívr pushed the letter toward Jótham. “Next week.”

Jótham slid his mug out of the way and unfolded the letter, reading through its contents. “Certainly gives me enough time to prepare. Do you already have a team lined up?”

“Three men, fully armored and equipped, as well as yourself. You shouldn’t have any problems.”

“Sounds reasonable for the arrest of one man. And the family?”

Eilívr threw Jótham a stern look. “The family is to be untouched, obviously, unless you’re using self-defense.”

Jótham nodded but said nothing as he continued reading.

“That’s very important, Jótham. We don’t need the blood of women and children on our hands.”

“Of course not,” he replied, waving his hand in the air.

Eilívr sat back. “One other thing,” he said. “One of your men will be Ulnleif.”

Jótham glanced up, a cocked grin on his face.

“It’s his first mission outside of Llynhithe.”

“Look,” Jótham said, “it isn’t a secret that you’re protective of your brother. You want me to give him a special role or something?”

“No, no,” Eilívr replied. “Treat him like the others. I just want to be sure everything is done right. He’s still young.”

Jótham took a last draught of ale, tipping it up as he finished. “Don’t worry, Commander. Your brother will do fine, and we’ll have Lombard in the gallows before you get back to Everwind.”

* * *

Although the sun lay hidden behind the hills, it still managed to cast a thin light against the fleeting darkness. Lombard gazed across the rolling landscape, dotted with sparse withered plants. A sad memory lay in those hills as if they could remember when the land once stood green and lush before it faded into a barren death. But maybe it was his own conscience that made it seem that way—a reflection of his own life. It was a constant internal battle, having to fight off the temptation to wonder whether his hiding in the Western Plains was a punishment from Theos.

It had been five years since the Fellhouse Cellar was sacked by the Daecish, breaking the backbone of the Dark Horses. Landon was murdered, Galvin fled to Denhurst, and Porter and himself were hiding out in this wasteland. The Silent Hither in Everwind was now at its weakest. And as much as he didn’t want to admit it, he regretted leaving Wesley in charge. It was a foolish act of sympathy, and he should’ve put a stronger man in his place—someone who knew how to keep the Dark Horses going in Everwind—to keep the cause of the Silent Hither alive. Hopefully, Drake and Morgan would keep the poor fool straight.

Lombard couldn’t help but let out a low groan. He needed to get back to Everwind as soon as possible.

Approaching a wide depression, he knelt down. Arnon squatted beside him as he notched a cedar arrow on his bowstring. His dark brown hair, as straight as the arrow in his hand, reached down to his lower jaw. Like himself, Arnon was a Sunderian in the fullest sense. It was said that Sarig blood even ran through their clan’s veins, and he was proud of it. He pat Arnon on the back. During these early morning hunts, he had more in mind than just teaching his only son how to kill a deer. He was teaching him how to survive. How to be a Dark Horse when he was gone.

Arnon lifted his bow and drew back the bowstring, his back muscles tightening. Gazing through the tall grass, Lombard caught sight of a doe rising from her bedding, seemingly unaware of the hunters in her midst. With both eyes open, Arnon looked down the shaft of the arrow and let it go with a deep twang as it hissed through the grass and pierced the deer just behind the ribcage. Stumbling, it bolted out of the grass and over the ridgeline above. Lombard pulled the long grass he’d

been chewing on from his mouth and gave Arnon a solid clap with the palm of his hand. “Barely nineteen and already surpassing your old man!”

Arnon laughed, rubbing his shoulder. “You said that last year. You sure I haven’t always been the better shot?”

Although Lombard smiled, he never could get over the softening accents of the younger generation. “Maybe, but you’ll never be stronger than me,” he replied.

Arnon began to disassemble his bow. “I wouldn’t be so sure. You’ve gotta get old at some point.”

Lombard laughed. “Not even then, boy.”

They began the steep climb up the ridge, following the blood trail. The dried grass crunched beneath their boots as dust whipped in the wind behind them.

“You ever wonder what this place might have looked like when Burgess first arrived,” Arnon asked.

“Well, being thirteen-hundred years ago, I reckon it would’ve been greener. Likely more trees, too.”

Reaching the top of the ridge, they paused as the view opened before them. The wind rushed from the west, blowing Lombard’s bearskin behind him. The Serin Sea could barely be made out as it stretched across the horizon like a thin gray thread. To the north towered the vast, impenetrable mountain range—the Great Fringe, his own people called it. Its icy jagged peaks marched from east to west, as far as he could see. There was a rumor that several new Dacish copper mines were operating nearby where the mountains plunged into the sea, and he made a point never to travel too far in that direction.

Dozens of tales about trekking parties looking for a pass through those mountains had been laid down over the ages. But as far as he knew, they never returned with success, nor without several deaths to show for it. Winds were too strong, and the natural paths went too high. The few returning survivors almost always came back with blackened toes and fingers, which would either be amputated or rot off on their own. His grandfather once told him of a man who returned sickened, mumbling and gripping his head as he coughed up blood before falling into an agonizing death.

Despite the casualties, in the early centuries, his people never gave up their search. They craved to know what secrets were hidden on the other side of those mountains. But it soon brought out the worst in them. Of course, all of that ended when the Dacish arrived from over the mountains, and the mystery turned into resentment.

Lombard shook the thoughts from his mind and looked across the ridge, following the blood trail into another holler thirty yards ahead. Next to a rotting tree lay the dying deer, caught up in briar and blackbrush.

“Why didn’t the Earlonians ever speak of why they left the Southern Kingdoms?” Arnon asked, looking south.

Lombard almost laughed. He wondered if Arnon could read his thoughts.

“Do you really think they were running away from something?”

“Aye. When Burgess and our ancestors arrived in this land, they brought with them many tales. But the one thing they swore to never talk about was why they left. I, and other like-minded folk, believe it was something they were ashamed of. Something wrong they did which they hoped to forget. Perhaps it’s why they named this land Sunder?” He tapped the side of his head. “It’s all in the name.”

They continued the trek down into the holler. As they approached the trunk, Arnon pulled the shaft of the arrow from below the ribs of the doe.

“That was a good shot,” Lombard said. “But remember you want to aim behind the shoulder.” He pointed to his chest. “Right in the heart.”

“I know how to shoot a deer,” replied Arnon shortly.

Lombard raised his eyebrows and set his boot on the trunk of the tree, crossing his thick arms.

“Look here, boy.”

Arnon swallowed as if he immediately regretted his comment.

“Don’t get put out. You’re a fine shot, but your pride gets in the way. You need to work that out of yourself.” He peered into Arnon’s eyes. “Pride ain’t strength; it’s weakness. And from it can spring forth all kinds of evil thoughts. All a prideful man shows me is that he cares too much about himself, you understand?”

“Yes, sire.”

“Your grandfather told me the same thing. See, he was a learned man and spoke wise counsel. It’s something we all have to battle.”

“Yes, sire.”

“Good, now grab your knife, and let’s clean that deer.”

By mid-day, they were welcomed by the view of their cottage, situated at the bottom of a low bluff, yet perched on its own little hill. Built of wattle and daub and topped with a thatched roof of grass and willow branches, the cottage didn’t look like much, but he built it himself, and it held strong against the changing seasons. On the west side sat a stable built of a thick layer of sod; it housed two cows, several chickens, and his own bay horse, whom he named Ansel. Out front stood a maple tree with few leaves of a dark and shriveled olive green. Lombard walked up to the front door as Arnon followed.

“Where you heading to?” Lombard asked.

Arnon groaned. “Firewood?”

“Can’t cook without it.” Lombard took the meat from Arnon and walked inside.

* * *

Setting up a hickory log, Arnon swung his ax with a great heave, splitting the log in two. The high sun helped warm the autumn air, but the occasional northern gust from the Fringe pierced through his jerkin. Just as he set up another log to split, he turned, hearing his youngest sister, Hazel, skipping through the tall grass. Her light brown hair whipped in the wind above her woolen gown.

“What’s taking you so long?” She smirked.

“Well, here.” Arnon handed her the ax. “Think you can go quicker?”

“It’s your job.” She stuck out her tongue.

“Then don’t interrupt.”

She placed her hands behind her back and dug her toe into the earth.

Arnon lifted his ax but glanced at her. “I know what you want,” he said, “but I’ve got to finish chopping this wood first.”

“Oh, but please!” she replied with wide blue eyes. Although only six, she had mastered the art of getting her way with him.

“Hazel, I really need—”

“But we ain’t played Burrow Hunt for a whole week. Pretty please?”

Arnon sighed and dropped his ax. “One quick game.”

Hazel jumped as she threw her arms in the air. “Thank you!”

Arnon turned over several logs until he found one with a clean flat top and began drawing out the lines with a piece of charcoal. “Do you have the pieces?”

Hazel searched in her pockets and pulled out a handful of dyed figurines carved from oak. She set them on the log. “I lost a couple more yesterday.”

“It’ll be all right. We’ll just have to improvise.”

As fun as this game was for him when he was younger, it was really pretty dull—just mindlessly moving pieces until one player had the opponent’s fox cornered with no way to escape. It didn’t help that Hazel still couldn’t get the rules right, so it always took longer than normal. And when she did win, which she always did because he let her, she never let him live it down.

Hazel knocked his red fox over. “Ha!” she shouted as she jumped up and jabbed a finger at him. “You lost.”

“Very good, Hazel. Now help me put the pieces away.”

Of course, she didn’t help and just ran back to the house, hollering something Arnon couldn’t understand.

With chopped logs in his hand, Arnon stepped inside the cottage and breathed in the savory smell of roasting venison and smoke. Their family home may have been small, but it had two rooms, one of which was the bedroom on the left side, with a single thick door built from oak planks. Four years ago, his father had felled that oak about a league east of there, and it took him and Arnon a dozen trips to haul it all back to the homestead. In the family room sat a little hearth in the center, with a large trestle table behind it. Arnon tossed several split logs over the hot coals and made his way to his father, who stood salting the venison.

“Give that back, Hazel!” Fleta hollered as she chased Hazel around the hearth. “That one’s mine! You’ve got your own!”

Hazel stopped and faced Fleta. Her face shone almost purple. “You tore her arm off last time!”

“Mama sewed it back on!” Fleta snapped back, snatching her doll from Hazel’s grasp. Hazel broke out in a cry.

“Girls!” called out his mother. “Outside!”

Arnon chuckled and stood beside his father. “Is the pit ready?” he asked.

“Cleaned it out this morning before we set out.” He handed Arnon a thick loin. “But we’ll need to salt and wrap the deer first.”

Arnon stepped around him, grabbing the raw meat. He brushed aside a pile of grass and broken pine needles from the counter, which he assumed was Hazel’s. Reaching between several clay jars of honey and cream, he grabbed the half-empty jar of salt. Above his head hung several bundles of rosemary and basil, which filled the corner of the room with a rich, earthy scent. “This deer will give us enough meat for a while,” Arnon said, massaging the salt into the meat.

“Enough for a few weeks, certainly,” his father replied, laying another strip of meat next to the salt jar. “On the ‘morrow at dawn, we’ll take Ansel to Rock Hill and work on our archery.”

“While riding?” he asked.

“Why else would I take Ansel? One day you’ll be the head of your kin and help lead the Silent Hither among the Dark Horses. You need to be ready.”

Arnon grinned. Nearly every day, for as long as he could remember, his father took him to Rock Hill; whether it was hunting, stalking, building, or survival, he taught him everything he knew, and his knowledge and talents seemed limitless. He happened to also be the strongest man Arnon had ever known.

Flipping over the loin, Arnon began to salt the other side until he felt a bump against his side.

“Excuse me,” came Hazel’s voice from below. She reached up over the meat, grabbing at her pile of grass and needles. “You’re getting blood on the seasoning!”

“The seasoning?” Arnon asked.

Hazel frowned and raised her grass-filled hand toward Arnon’s face. “For our pottage.” She marched toward the hearth.

Arnon glanced at his father, who only shrugged with a smile.

“Hazel!” shouted Fleta from the dining table. “Now look at what you done! You spoiled it!”

“I did not! Mama said I could season it.”

“Not with grass!”

Both Lombard and Arnon burst into laughter.

Myla hurried over to the hearth. “Hazel, dear,” she said, peering into the cooking pot as she held back her long, wavy brown hair. “Thank you very much. I’m sure it’ll taste just fine. Now do me a favor and bring in the milk from the stable. Can you do that for me?”

Hazel stuck her tongue out at Fleta before stepping outside.

“Hurry,” said Myla to Fleta. “I think we can get most of it out.”

With the sun set over the Serin Sea, Lombard lit a lantern as the family gathered around the table.

“Which story will you tell us tonight, papa?” Fleta asked, looking up from her bowl. The lantern light flickered against her green eyes. Even with her black hair tucked behind her ears, he could barely see the faint freckles dotting across her nose. When she was five, Arnon once chased her across their home in Everwind. She slipped and hit her face on the edge of a door frame. A large bump formed on the upper bridge of her nose, and it’d never gone away since. She’d always been self-conscious about it, and one time, when she and Arnon had gotten into an argument, he said she looked like a horse. It upset her so badly she didn’t speak to him for a week. Despite the passing years, he knew it had an effect on her confidence, and he’d never forgiven himself.

“How ‘bout a ballad?” Lombard asked.

Hazel grunted. “I don’t like the singing ones. They’re boring.”

“Hazel,” Myla said, “as you get older, you’ll learn to. Just listen.”

“I like ballads,” Fleta added.

Hazel shot a glare at her.

Lombard crossed his arms and leaned toward Hazel. “It’s the ballads that capture not only the past but the hearts and desires of those who shaped it. But don’t worry,” he laughed, “I’ll only sing part of one.” He then closed his eyes, and in a low, resonant voice, began to hum. His family soon joined in, and together, they sang:

*I shall tell ye now a tragic tale
From Ashfirth village on the dale
In the distant kingdoms, south
By the Cymford river’s mouth
When young Brigham of Colgate
Left poor Orla to her dreadful fate*

*In early spring, at the break of dawn
Before the birds broke out in song
Stood young Orla with curling hair
Eyes of brown and smooth skin fair
Her dress of sage and tasseled ends
Blew against the gentle winds*

*On the Isen road, her people left
For the north, their hearts were set
To forget a dark and troubled past
And settle a country fair and vast
Yet by the southern river flowing
There poor Orla stood sorrowing*

*With cunning words and a handsome grin
Brigham had stolen her love for him
But when her womb stirred with life
He would not take her as his wife
To the north, he'd join his people
And leave her behind weak and feeble*

*She had no means for food or care
So she wept with a pleading prayer
No such journey could she endure
Her coming death was set and sure
Yet still, he left with a heart of ice
And spoke no more of his shame and vice*

*By early winter, starved and cold
She ventured north, in vain yet bold
To find that man before she died
And plead once more to be his bride
But of his fate, she could not tell
For she knew not where he dwelled*

*She soon grew weary with aching pain
And searched for shelter from the rain
By the road, she lay down and wept
With tears, all spent, she finally slept
Under a dying weeping willow
Her beating heart began to slow*

*Early one morn', a man walked by
And saw poor Orla beneath the sky
He laid aside his hunting bow
And knelt beneath that weeping willow
In his arms, he took abold
Her body stiffened with lifeless cold*

*Along the hills and through the dew
He hurried north, for her face he knew*

*By evening he found her family clan
And laid her body beneath that man
Who left poor Orla and child to die
As his new dame stood by his side*

When Lombard finished, Arnon opened his eyes as he let his mind drift back to the room. In Everwind, at their old family home, fast-paced tunes, plucked and whistled with homemade fiddles and fifes, could keep everyone dancing for hours. But old ballads like that song were always sung in the late night after the crowd had quieted down. His father still had an old gourd cut out and fitted with gut strings. He even had a bow made of mule's hair to go with it. But since they left for the plains, he hardly ever played it anymore. No one even danced much either, except for maybe Fleta, when she thought no one else was looking. But even so, ballads and tales were either told or sung every night, and Lombard always insisted the whole family should sing together so that they would never forget their past.

Fleta sighed as her chin rested on her hands.

Hazel rolled her eyes. "It don't even make sense. Why'd she go and get herself pregnant in the first place?"

Arnon burst out in an unexpected laugh.

Lombard lifted Hazel's chin. "She made a terrible mistake and fell too easily for a worthless man who sought only to satisfy himself."

"If you say so," Hazel replied.

"It's all right," said Myla as she stood up, picking up her bowl. "We don't all have to—" she began to say but froze at the sound of Ansel whinnying in the stable. Arnon shot a glance at his father. The whole family held their breath.

"Surely, it's just a wolf or a—" Arnon began to say before Lombard raised his hand.

In the distance grew the thudding sound of galloping hooves.

"Someone's coming," Lombard said in a low voice. He slid back his chair and hurried to the door, blowing out the hanging lantern. "Arnon, go out back and stay outta sight."

"Father, I am not going to leave—"

"Now!" he snapped.

"Listen to your father and go," Myla whispered as she threw Arnon's bowl in a basket.

Arnon knew why he needed to hide, but he hated the idea. He climbed through a back window and ran north against the howling wind. After ascending a steep path to the top of the bluff, he positioned himself out of sight but still had a decent view of the homestead below. Four horses galloped along the road, coming to a trot as they paused just in front of the cottage. Their uniforms looked black. Daecish.

Gunborg Orphanage

Mathios brought the back of his hand across the boy's cheek. Quietness filled the sleeping quarters, and Søren stood still as he looked down at his bare feet, his blanket still in his hands. He couldn't remember the new boy's name, but he obviously hadn't learned that the younger orphans don't talk back to Mathios.

"Learn your place!" Mathios hollered before looking at the others. "If we aren't downstairs in two minutes, there will be no breakfast for none of us!" Walking between the line of boys and iron-framed cots, each step came with a heavy limp as he forced his knocked knees to carry him through the room. He paused and looked at Søren with his freckled face and cheeks as red as his hair. "And don't even think about dodging work today," he mumbled before heading out of the room.

As soon as Mathios disappeared, Søren walked over and grabbed his sweat-stained feather pillow. Slipping two fingers into a rip, he poked around the chicken feathers until he found a brass ring. Pulling it out, he examined the empty socket that once held a small gem. Every time he looked at it, he felt as empty and lonely as the socket, but he treasured it more than anything else. It was his last thread of hope.

Jokith hammered his shoulder into him. "Don't lose your mother's ring!" He laughed.

"That isn't his mother's ring!" another boy said as Søren clambered back to his feet. "He just found it in the street!"

"It is t— too my mother's!" Søren defended. "And she's coming back for me!" He didn't care what the boys thought. They may have had parents who didn't care about them, but he was different.

Jokith sneered. The hairy birthmark over his right eyebrow somehow looked uglier today. "You're just a cocker! Why don't you run off to Eirún like you always do?" He punched Søren in the shoulder and walked off.

Rotating his shoulder, Søren swore that if he was any bigger, he'd smack that stupid birthmark right off Jokith's face. In the least, he could exaggerate the pain, and maybe Jokith would get a few lashings from the headmaster.

As the boys left the room and approached the dark wooden steps, Søren stuffed the ring in his pants pocket and followed behind, trying to force a tear out of his eye as he rubbed his arm. Maybe one of the maids would notice. As he continued down the stairway, the railing opened into the dining hall to his left. He let out an exaggerated sigh and dropped his hand from his shoulder. No grown-up in sight. But that's the way it always seemed to work out.

Three doors opened into the dining hall, but he only cared about two. One led to the kitchen; the other, called the southern door, led to Eirún's and the other maids sleeping quarters. The boys made

their way to the low benches on either side of the table, and Søren sat, facing away from the fireplace. Trying to ignore the heat on his back, he glanced toward the swinging door to the kitchen, hoping Eirún would walk through soon.

Long, leaky pipes clanked and hammered along the ceiling, keeping the orphanage humid with the constant lingering scent of mold. But this morning, the smell of something pungent from the kitchen overpowered the room. With grim faces, they all peered through the open kitchen door at a large steaming copper pot.

Jokith pulled something from his nose and flicked it to the floor. “What do you think is in the stew today?”

Stígr sighed. “Let’s just hope it isn’t leather laces.”

Several of the younger boys went wide-eyed. Jokith’s birthmark looked like a patch of leather, and the thought of it cooking in stew made Søren almost gag.

“I’ve seen it once,” Stígr continued in a low whisper, “chopped up laces, straight off the boots.” He glanced at Mathios. “You remember Olle? The one that got stuck in the chimney and died last winter?”

“Yea,” Mathios replied. “Which is why I’m glad I’m too big to be a chimney sweep.”

“They were his laces. I saw Headmaster Baulfr take them off his boots.”

Mathios shook his head. “Stígr. . .”

“What?”

At that moment, a couple of maids set steaming wooden bowls of stew in front of the boys.

“Eat up, Søren,” Mathios said. “You nearly ten, and you haven’t grown since you were, like what, six?”

Several of the boys laughed with their faces in their bowls, but Søren only stared at the few strips of thin meat swirling around in the brown broth. Maybe it was leather laces. But it did look a bit like Jokith’s birthmark, didn’t it? Perhaps if he drank quickly, he wouldn’t taste it.

He slowly dipped his spoon up and down. Did Eirún make this stew? Certainly not. It must have been Adis. He never could figure out how that maid got so chubby. It definitely wasn’t from eating her own cooking. Eirún, on the other hand, was the best cook in the world, even if the other boys said otherwise. But then again, she was perfect at everything. She was the only reason he didn’t mind living in that terrible place. But he wished she’d spend more time with him. She always seemed busy and—

“Søren?” asked Stígr. The grandfather clock gave a low chime, and Søren looked up with a jerk. The boys burst into laughter. Everyone had finished eating, and they were now stacking their bowls. Søren dipped his finger into the now cool stew.

Mathios walked by and smacked his hand on Søren’s back. “Always somewhere else than here.”

Still chuckling, the boys carried their bowls to the kitchen, and Søren drank down as much stew as he could. He coughed, wiping his mouth on his sleeve. With the other boys getting in line in front of the stairwell, he hurried his bowl to the kitchen and joined them. Reluctantly, he had to stand next

to Stígr, who scratched at an infected rash scabbing around the back of his neck. Søren sighed. Where was Eirún?

Headmaster Baulfr finally walked in through the southern door. His feet thudded with each step, and the nauseating aroma of some spicy fragrance over the sour stench of dried sweat filled Søren's nose. Baulfr's greasy brown hair, a unique look among the mostly fair-haired Daecish, matched the dark buttons along his gray vest, which struggled to hold the threading together as his gut protruded forward. As always, Mathios straightened himself and raised his chin. It was as if he thought Baulfr would actually be proud of him.

The maids began to clean the dining table, obviously trying to appear busy. Baulfr stood before the boys with his thick muscled arms crossed over his chest. Being a quiet man, this was often the only instance Søren heard him speak throughout the day; if he heard him talk at any other time, it was probably because he did something wrong.

"First six on the left," Baulfr rumbled in a deep voice, "you're working on the fence. I want it running up to the smokehouse by dinner . . ." He kept giving orders, but his voice seemed to go distant and muffled. Søren gazed into the embers in the fireplace—reds and oranges waving in and out of each coal. He hated the feeling of hard labor. Most of the time, he managed to get out of breaking rocks or stacking the fence. Maybe he should rub his shoulder. It didn't even hurt, but if Baulfr saw him, he might feel sorry for him. Or maybe he should—

"Søren!"

"Y—Yes, Sir!" he stuttered, turning from his gaze.

"You're scrubbing my floor."

"Floor?"

"In my sleeping quarters."

As Baulfr marched to the kitchen, the boys hurried to their various tasks. Søren headed to the broom closet behind the stairwell and grabbed a bucket, and filled it with cold water. It was supposed to be hot, but that took too much time.

With bucket and brush in hand, Søren stepped inside the sleeping quarters. To his dismay, Baulfr sat at his small black desk situated by a tall shelf, which housed numerous plates and several imported trinkets from Norfrost. Becoming overly aware of what his hands and feet were doing, Søren slowly kneeled and began scrubbing between the cracks of the oak floor. Too much grime came out. This would take all day. He glanced up occasionally at Baulfr, who seemed occupied with writing and scribbling. Excess ink dribbled over the jar as he dipped his pen.

Søren had barely begun working, and he was already certain his arms might fall off. And the dirt only smeared around, making the wood look nastier. At this rate, it would take him a week to finish this job. Wiping his dry eyes, he moaned, just loud enough so that Baulfr might hear. But Baulfr never said a word, and what should have taken a couple of hours took Søren the better part of the day.

He worked straight through lunch, and by close to evening time, he managed to work his way around the bed to the far-end corner, now scrubbing the last few boards which bordered the tall shelf.

Although Baulfr had left for a couple of hours, he soon returned to sit once again at his desk, grumbling as he read over some letter.

Søren heard a soft ting as something fell beneath him. He looked around but couldn't see what it was. Then a dreaded weight sank into his stomach. He slipped his hand into his pocket, but his ring was gone. Frantically, he swept his eyes across the floor, hoping it didn't slip through one of the cracks. He broke into a sweat, and his eyes watered as he sunk low and peered beneath the shelf, hoping it rolled beneath it.

Abruptly, Baulfr stood up, shifting his chair back. Startled, Søren banged his head on the low-lying shelf, bringing several plates crashing down to the floor. His heart pounded, and he slowly looked up. Through his blurred watery eyes, Baulfr grimly stared at him.

"Get up!" he bellowed in a cold, deep voice. He crumpled the letter and threw it on the floor. Søren stood, his eyes fixed on the ground and his chin quivering.

"You muck up every task I give you, you scamp," Baulfr spat out. "You never listen. Always crying, always dodging work!"

"I'm sorry, sir," he cried. "I t— try to listen! I t—t—"

"You need to grow up!" Baulfr kicked the bucket at Søren, splashing soiled water across the floor. With trembling knees, Søren thought he should pick up the bucket, but he couldn't move. Baulfr leaned toward him. His breath smelled as sour as the floor. "If it weren't for the few aracs I get every month for housing you, I would have buried you in that ditch in the back when your father dropped you on my doorstep! Just wait 'til I—"

Adis and Eirún pushed opened the door.

"Supper's ready, Mr. Baulfr!" said Adis in a nervous tone.

Eirún glanced at Søren with worry in her eyes.

Baulfr shot a stern glare at the maids, and Adis shrank back.

"Come, Søren," Eirún told him. "It's time to wash up,"

He lowered his head and ran toward her.

Adis hurried over and picked up the bucket, and began to gather the broken ceramic fragments. "Don't you worry, sir," she said. "I'll get this whole place cleaned up for you. Why don't you go eat before your supper gets cold?"

Standing beside Eirún in the kitchen, Søren washed his face and hands. Grabbing the towel from the shelf, he tried to dry out the tears as they formed in his eyes. But as he looked at Eirún, he couldn't hide his trembling chin.

"Don't worry," she said with a steady voice. She tidied her long blonde hair, held up with sapphire blue pins. In her late twenties, she looked younger than the other maids, with her delicate face and high cheekbones, but her deep green eyes seemed tired. Whenever he was around her, the troubles of the world seemed to melt away. She was his haven, and he often pretended that she was his mother. "The plates will get cleaned up, and the headmaster will forget about it. You'll see. Everything will turn out all right."

Søren faked a smile, but it wasn't the plates that upset him. Would he really never see his ring again? Then, almost instinctively, he felt that familiar bitter tendency come out of him. "Where were you this morning?"

"You know I have work to do, and I can't always be there for breakfast. Sometimes Baulfr needs me in the kitchen or outside cleaning the coop."

"But I thought you would be there." Even before he said it, he felt guilty. He knew she didn't do anything wrong, but it was as if he believed that making her feel bad would somehow make him feel like a better person. But it didn't, and yet it never seemed to stop him.

Eirún's eyes went sorrowful, almost hurt. "I'm sorry," she said. She glanced behind for a second, then she turned back with a bright smile. "But I think this will make you feel better." She pulled a folded note from her apron and slipped it into his olive coat pocket. "I want you to read it, just as I taught you. But not until after you finish your meal. When you're alone. And don't share it with anyone else. Do you understand?"

Søren nodded.

"I mean it," she insisted in a more serious tone. "Remember what we talked about last week."

"T—to be thoughtful of the other boys' feelings?"

"That's right," she replied. "We must always be kind to others."

Søren nodded again, but the boys were never kind to him, so why should he be?

"Why don't you go back to the dining hall?" she continued. "I must get supper ready."

Søren held his hand over his pocket, feeling the note. He was just about to open his mouth to ask her to stay with him a while longer, but she gave him a quick wink, kissed him on the head, and walked him through the door.

Taking his seat at the far end of the table, he peered at the other boys as they tore into their bread, shoving massive chunks into their mouths. The dining hall filled with the hazy sound of munching and moaning, but he only took small bites. What did the note say? As he stirred his spoon in the stew, he kept looking down at his pocket, until by chance, he glanced across the table and saw Stígr peering at him.

Søren didn't say anything, but he liked the idea of Stígr being jealous. That's right. He was loved. He was special. He slid his fingers into his pocket and slightly pulled up the note for a second, pretending to observe it. But when he noticed Mathios glance at it, he slipped it back down and swallowed, keeping his eyes fixed on his bowl.

He subconsciously rubbed the outside of his pant pocket and lost his appetite as he imagined the ring laying in a dark pile of dust beneath the floorboards.

Soon, the boys stood up and carried their dishes to the kitchen, but Mathios stayed in his seat. Eirún walked into the dining hall, and Søren looked up. She laid her hand on his shoulder. "Go, read it now," she whispered. She took his bowl and disappeared through the kitchen door.

Søren raced up the stairs.

Entering the empty sleeping quarters, he slipped off his shoes and hurried past the rows of cots and whitewashed walls. His feet felt raw against the rough grain of the wooden boards. In the back corner, he sat behind the cast-iron furnace and pulled out the note.

He tried to read the words. Thump, thump, thump came the sound of water hammering through the steam pipes. The rising heat of the furnace burned against his face. Was someone walking up the stairs? He glanced at the door. Seeing nothing, he took a calming breath and looked back at the note again. With a finger, he slowly pointed to each word and read aloud:

Søren,

After supper, pack your clothes and meet me in the front entryway. I have a surprise for you.

“Pack my clothes?” he asked out loud.

“What do you have there?” came the voice of Mathios from the far side of the room.

Startled, Søren gripped the note in his hand but didn’t speak.

“Come on now, you can share it.”

Søren said nothing.

“Look here,” Mathios said as he bent down and grabbed Søren by the collar. “You think that since you’ve got some letter from Eirún, that she loves you more, but she doesn’t! Can’t you see that?”

Søren remained quiet but couldn’t keep his shoulders from trembling.

Mathios’s face turned that familiar red, and he lunged forward as Søren turned his back, balling up against the wall. “Give it here!” Mathios shouted as he pulled Søren back toward him by the face. His fingers felt like talons, but he suddenly screamed as Søren sunk his teeth into the flesh of his palm. Mathios slammed him against the hot iron, searing the skin on his right hand and lower forearm. Søren cried out and crumpled onto the floor as the note fell behind the furnace.

The other boys suddenly entered the room with Baulfr behind them.

“What’s going on?” he bellowed, pushing himself past the boys.

Mathios sat on the floor, gripping his bleeding hand, while Søren lay prostrate, weeping onto the dust-laden floor. The room stood silent while Baulfr marched forward. His voice cracked as he shouted louder, “What’s going on?”

Mathios raised his hand, showing the gash of teeth marks. “Søren bit me!”

Baulfr grabbed Mathios by the hand and dragged him across the floor toward Søren.

“S—Sir!” Mathios whimpered.

“Keep your mouth shut!” Baulfr snapped, grabbing Søren’s hand and dragging him alongside Mathios. Attempting to stand, Søren’s feet only tripped behind him along the ground. Baulfr took them both out of the room, down the stairs, and into the dining hall.

“Sit there, and don’t move,” he said, shoving them against the table and tying their hands to the back of the chair. He walked into the kitchen and a moment later returned with that old switch in his right hand. Up and down its shaft poked out several thick barbs and sharp slivers from where he failed to fully smooth it.

Time seemed to slow as Baulfr stood in front of them, bowing the switch in his hands as if to stretch the snap back into it. The grandfather clock began to chime. It was at least past seven, but Søren was too afraid to worry about counting.

With the last chime, the room fell quiet and heavy as the rest of the boys peered down from behind the safety of the stairway banister. With his chin on the back of the chair and his arms tied around it, Søren tried to focus on the crumbs scattered along the oaken tabletop in front of him. All he could hear was his own quickening breath.

The switch swung down onto the table with a loud crack causing Søren to jolt in his seat. Baulfr walked behind the boys, and Søren closed his eyes and held his breath. The sudden sound of the switch whipping through the air was quickly followed by a snap and a cutting pain that ripped into Søren’s lower back like a burning knife. He wailed as he pressed his face against the tabletop.

Rotating every three or four blows, Baulfr whipped the switch across the lower and upper backs of both boys. With snot and tears flooding down his face, Søren clenched his teeth so hard he thought they’d crack. Soon his head went dizzy, and his skin broke as warm blood dripped down into the back of his pants. Upstairs, the boys covered their ears to muffle the cries.

After a while, Baulfr untied Mathios’s hands as he crumpled onto the floor. The maids stood behind the kitchen door, weeping with handkerchiefs over their mouths. Baulfr walked beneath the stairway for a moment, only to come back with a large stone attached to a short rope with a loop on one end.

“You want to be a big man, Mathios,” said Baulfr in a low voice, adjusting the loop in the rope. “Let’s see how big you feel after tonight.”

Mathios didn’t say anything. His body struggled to hold himself straight as his knocked knees quivered beneath him. Baulfr pushed him toward the stairs and hung the rope around his neck. The stone, nearly the size of his head, hung down to his knees.

“Begin!” Baulfr hollered.

Adis opened the kitchen door with Yrsa and Eirún standing behind her. Søren’s eyes met Eirún’s as she covered her mouth and wept. She attempted to push past Adis, but she held her back.

“Mr. Baulfr, please!” Eirún cried, clenching a handkerchief against her chest.

“Get out!” he shouted.

The women trembled but stood their ground.

“I will not leave the boys!” Eirún exclaimed. “I’ll stay until you’re finished!”

With his chin still on the chair, Søren closed his eyes, feeling the burning heat from his swelling back. He couldn’t see Mathios, but he listened to each heavy step as Mathios slowly dragged his warped legs up and down the stairs. He knew Mathios had to be careful not to knock the stone against his

knees—it's how he got the warp in the first place. The best way was to bend your neck down and bow yourself over.

After what felt like an hour, he heard Mathios collapse and his body tumble down the stairs with a sickening thud.

A Lion in the Dark

Myla,” Lombard whispered. “Take the girls to the bedroom. If anything happens to me, go out the window and flee to Porter’s house.”

“What’s going on?” cried Hazel.

“Shush now,” said Myla, taking the girls’ hands and walking them into the bedroom. “Don’t worry. It’ll be all right.”

Now standing alone in the family room, Lombard glanced toward the bedroom. His wife’s face looked pale in the moonlight glowing through the window. He never saw such an expression of fear in her eyes. The sound of several men dismounting their horses came from outside the door.

“Lombard Greystrom!” bellowed a voice.

From the table, he grabbed Arnon’s hunting knife and slipped it into his boot. With a deep breath, he walked out the front door. Outside, the air bit with cold. He narrowed his eyes, peering at the four armored men—two swordsmen with hands on their hilts and two archers who held torches that blew violently as the wind rushed from the mountains. The light flickered against their black leather brigandines, fastened over with many small plates crafted from Daecish steel. At their knees and elbows, he could just make out the underlying hauberks. Etched in white, the Daecish emblem of the three stripes almost glared against the leather of their upper right shoulders.

As Lombard’s breath condensed into a fog before him, one of the swordsmen, who appeared to be a commander, stepped forward, motioning for the other swordsman to stand between Lombard and the house. The two archers each notched an arrow in their bow. Peering through the commander’s barbute, he could not make out what he looked like, except that his face was deathly pale and his stature tall, as with most of the Daecish.

“We’ve been hunting you a long time, Lombard,” said the commander with a hollow and gristly voice. He pulled out a scroll and cleared his throat as he unrolled the paper. “By command of the king, as written in Article Forty-Three, all citizens of Sunder, participating, exchanging, or assisting in the Silent Hither are hereby declared traitors of Sunder and Daecland, and have forfeited their rights as citizens, unto payment of death for high-treason.”

From behind, the swordsman bound Lombard’s hands behind his back and patted his legs and sides. Closing his eyes, Lombard silently prayed for Theos to protect his family.

“He’s clear,” the soldier said to the commander.

“And what of my own?” asked Lombard, keeping calm. “You have me, but let them go.”

The commander walked toward Lombard, lifted his barbute above his mouth, and twisted his colorless face into a nasty grin. His stained teeth, jutting out from his receding gums, glistened in the torchlight. "Don't worry about your family," he said. "I assure you they will be taken care of."

Lombard knew by the commander's tone that his family was in danger. "Don't your own law ensure the safekeeping of women and children?"

The commander laughed and wiped his arm across his mouth. "Daecish law doesn't apply to Sunderian peasants."

Lombard's mind raced to find words to reason with the commander. "But am I not wanted alive in Llynhithe? If I give my full cooperation, will you not let my family be?"

"You have been a thorn in our side for a long time," the commander replied as he took a step forward. "And an especial annoyance to me. It's because of men like you that I've been stuck in this forsaken wilderness for as long as I have. The less of you there are, the better. Do you really think they will care if I bring you back dead?"

"Fine," Lombard's heartbeat quickened. "Kill me. But swear you will not bring harm to my family."

"And let them grow up to follow in your footsteps? I'm afraid that's not how this is going to work." The commander nodded to the swordsman behind Lombard.

As Lombard listened to the blade slide from its sheath, he took in a deep breath. With the thought of the soldiers slaughtering his family, adrenaline surged through his body as he slammed the back of his head into the nose of the swordsman, knocking him to the ground. Clenching his arms, Lombard ripped the leather straps.

The commander stumbled back, pulling his own sword from its sheath. "Shoot him!" the commander spat out. "Now!"

Reaching for the hunting knife, Lombard bolted toward the commander just as the archers released their arrows. One pierced his shoulder as the other bore into his heart. Lombard tripped and collapsed at the commander's feet.

* * *

Peering down with hard eyes, Arnon watched his father collapse, and every muscle in his body trembled. He needed to do something, but like a fool, he left his bow in the house. Trying desperately to figure out what to do, he clenched his fists white as fury swelled within him. He suddenly remembered leaving the ax at the bottom of the hill. Rising to a crouch, he hurried down the bluff in the darkness of the shadow. He picked up his ax and glanced up in the direction of the soldiers. Then he peered to the back of the house and made his way to the open bedroom window. His mother and sisters huddled in the back corner, and he tapped the wooden frame. Myla jumped, grabbing her heart. He put his finger on his lips and motioned for them to climb through the window.

Hurrying forward, Myla shook her head with a quivering chin. "I heard it," she whispered, breaking into a quiet sob. "They shot him!"

Hazel cried out, but Fleta covered her mouth.

"Take the backtrail to Porter's house." His voice trembled. "He'll know what to do."

His mother shook her head.

"For the girls, mother, you must go!"

Fleta grabbed her and Hazel's hand and looked up at Arnon. "I've got 'em," she said with a confidence that surprised Arnon.

He kissed her on the head. "Be careful."

As they hurried up the path and over the ridgeline, Arnon climbed through the window and into the bedroom. Behind the door, he peered through the crack, just beneath the wooden hinge, and waited. He tightened his grip on the ax and prayed the soldiers would take their horses and leave.

A commander and swordsman stepped up to the front door. "Archers," the commander ordered, "go check the stable. Kill anyone you see." He stepped into the house, followed by the swordsman who gazed toward the dying hearth. They took slow steps as the wood creaked beneath their feet.

Walking around the right side of the hearth, the commander peered into the dark corners while the swordsman walked over to the dining table, just in front of the bedroom door. Arnon held his breath as the commander looked in his direction and pointed a finger. He stepped forward. Arnon's heart almost beat straight out of his chest. His palms turned wet, and his head felt light. The commander slowly pushed the door open. With his back now against the wall and his ax held high, Arnon let the door open against him. When it paused, the first thing Arnon saw was the tip of a sword enter the bedroom.

When the side of the commander came into view, Arnon summoned all of his strength and rammed his shoulder into the door, knocking the commander off balance. The commander shouted as Arnon swung his ax and the iron head lodged into the man's chest, reducing his shout to a desperate shriek.

Just as he wrenched his ax from the body, the swordsman rushed in with his blade swinging down. Arnon blocked the swing with his ax, but the force of the blow shattered the neck of the handle. Dropping it, Arnon tackled the swordsman as the back of his head slammed against the ground.

In a burning rage, Arnon wildly beat his fists against the swordsman's nose and eyes. The soldier reached up toward his face, but Arnon gripped him by the wrists. Raising his head high, he brought it back down against the swordsman's face with a heavy thud. Several times he did this until the swordsman's body went limp.

Leaning back, his head went dizzy. He took in long breaths, not bothering to wipe away the warm blood which flowed down his face, dripping off his nose. Slowly opening his eyes, he watched the two archers stumble into the front door. The moonlight spilled in from outside and shed a silver glow on their armor. They both paused as they faced the darkness.

The first archer gripped the hilt of a short sword and darted his gaze to either side of the room; he took a single step forward. The other took a step back and pulled an arrow from his quiver.

“Commander!” shouted the archer in the front.

“Eyes sharp, Lieutenant!” said the archer in the back. “Eyes sharp!”

Keeping his eyes on the archers, Arnon picked up the swordsman’s blade, gripping it in his right hand. With quaking muscles, he narrowed his eyes and lunged forward.

...