

TO FACE THE NIGHT

“We live in strange times, milady,” said Rikard. “Who can know what the future may bring?”

Ilina turned from her red-cloaked host to gaze south across the vastness of the highlands. Past her feet the hill wall plummeted into broad Tarn Vale, a trough which, beyond its namesake river, mounted steadily higher and farther in soft knolls and swells toward a great upsurge of land fluttering russet with windswept heather. Autumn had come and the red hills flared in fiery bloom, filling her vision. Looming above their gentle crests, far beyond the southern borders of Kramarak, white peaks clustered like a crown. The air was so crisp and clear it almost hurt to breathe.

Perhaps that would be her excuse.

A wedge of bright red snapped into her peripheral vision, then fell back. Reluctantly tearing her eyes from the heights, Ilina returned them to the figure of Rikard Harnish, heir of the highlord.

He stood like a knight overlooking the field of battle: arms crossed, head held high, long cloak billowing out to the side like a wayward banner. Immovable he was—feet planted firmly apart, sharp gaze fixed on the far distance. The same distance, Ilina realized with mild surprise, into which she had been so inconsiderately staring. *He's haughty*, she mused, *in love with his own not-inconsiderable majesty*. But then his eyes flicked back to meet hers and their liveliness—their sheer *playfulness*—brought her breath up short. *No, it's not the wind's doing*, was her sudden thought. She shuddered.

“Change is like a mast spider,” she said, more to herself than to him. “Most count themselves fortunate to die without seeing one, but some men there are who risk their lives and fortunes, even their souls, to lure one from the depths.”

“And some men see one whether they ask to or not.” Rikard relaxed, jettisoning his air of solemnity to prop himself against a pillar wrapped with carvings. A surge of wind tousled his shock of flaxen hair into a jaunty tuft.

As fickle as the sea, thought Ilina, *but is he as constant?* “And few of those live to tell the tale,” she said aloud.

“Yes, but those who do have become unlike other men, it is said. They speak little. They ... *see* further. Some who were wild seem tamed, and some who'd grown tired of life take interest in living once more. They are different. They have—”

“Changed.” She whispered the word and felt his keen eyes flick toward her as though they'd been tugged by the wind. Strands of auburn hair snaked across her eyes—tickling her creased brow and high cheekbones, twisting down her dainty nose, thin lips, and strong chin. She raised a hand to brush them back. Though only twenty-two, Ilina had learned by bitter experience

to anticipate that moment in every conversation when her interlocutor, taken aback by gravity, would politely disengage. *Others cannot be like Father; it isn't fair to judge them for it. We Lightkeepers must keep our own company.*

Nevertheless, Rikard had outlasted her expectations. He kept refusing to back down or look away, and he advanced observations at odds with her own, and seemed to find her frostiness refreshing. So it was partly out of curiosity that she'd continued to accept his invitations and attend his courtly functions. How long could he last? How much could he take?

The feeling of his examination didn't pass. After a moment, she looked up to meet his gaze.

"And is that so terrifying?" he asked, shrugging himself away from the pillar. "Should we really flee such change? Barely a year has gone by without ill tidings from the south, and already we lapse into dispassion. Some days I feel as though I wake from a slumber I have no memory of entering, and perceive apathy all around me, rising by increment like an unseen flood. I fear many of my countrymen have already been whelmed. They float along, carried to and fro by a fitful current. I do not wish to join them."

"Beware what you *do* wish," said Ilina, turning again to face the hills. "The gods have ways of turning the tiny droplets for which we thirst into gales that rage and destroy. I fear not a fitful current, but one that sweeps everything I've ever known toward the edge of a cliff."

Rikard closed the small gap between them and leaned close, trying to read his guest's expression, then reached out to lift her chin with his fingertip. She flinched, but allowed him to guide her face up toward his. Her eyes were a plea: *just let me go ... just let me be ...*

"You really *are* afraid!" he marveled, dropping his hand. "Is the future that bleak to you?"

“I fear I know only the half of it, my lord.”

“But the other half need not be bleak. The Imperium has not found us. The Tunnoltans are not here. Speak plainly, Lady. What is it you fear?”

“Do you not feel it? A great change comes.” She fell silent a moment. With how much would she trust him? He had proven courteous, yes, but that was no great feat. To *understand* her—to be taken into her confidence—and yet remain solicitous was perhaps beyond the capacity of any man reared on the mainland. How could he comprehend her chill, he of clear skies and bright hills? How could he grasp her dread? This city, though rude by comparison with those depicted in her histories, seemed distant, detached—perched at a comfortable remove from all that yet lived and moved apart from the leave of well-mannered man. Not at all like her home in the throes of the sea.

The same histories that had transported her throughout the length and breadth of Arlam also told of a time when the name of Lightkeeper had been held in even greater esteem than that of Harnish. Not for haughty splendor or deeds of war, but for a quiet vigil kept unbroken. For who would remain to await the Truant King if not the heirs of the herald he’d left behind? It was said the sky itself had dimmed when his ship, like a setting sun, had threaded the rim of the world. It was said his return would banish woe.

But that had been centuries ago. Long enough for those who kept his light to surge in the popular imagination from stewardship to priesthood, before ebbing to the fringes of respectability. Now men would pass a Lightkeeper in the street without bothering to doff their caps. Now the future of Ilina’s house might well rest on her ability to secure an advantageous union.

But what's my house to me? Naught but a hollow shell, echo chamber of an empty ocean.

Aware that the sails of her reverie hung slack, she cleared her throat and spoke. "Perhaps it is easier to sense such things when one lives in solitude. Perhaps there is less distraction, less pressure to drown out the chill voices of the silence."

"And perhaps," said Rikard, a quick smile masking his evident alarm, "the solitude itself becomes a haunting presence—a thing inescapable, pitiless, and cold. A thing that sucks warmth from the bones and joy from the heart." He leaned in, placing a gentle hand on her shoulder. "A thing that, for all its silent strength, is banished easily by a leaping fire and the laughter of friends."

For an instant Ilina stared at him with hunted eyes. Her lips parted, and it seemed to her as though she might let something slip—indeed, lurid babble nearly leapt from her tongue—but the mood passed. She sighed and grinned shyly. "Perhaps you are right."

"Good," he said. "Let's go in. By now the long hearth should be blazing brightly."

"If you can find more than heather stems to feed it."

"No," he replied slowly. "No, for you we will light winter wood." A strain tinged his voice. The timber blight that afflicted Kramarack was a sore spot on his mind.

But not sore enough. "Then half the cure is accomplished."

A silence. "Ilina, I assure you: we're all friends here."

"Not even you can presume so much," she sniffed.

"Would you insult my house?" bristled Rikard. "Do you know something I don't?"

Ilina's eyes fled to the cold crags on the high horizon. She let that coldness fill her mind.

"I know it is easy for men to feign friendship with those from whom they wish to benefit."

Rikard was silent. Ilina clenched her jaw, stifling her urge to turn and smile and say it was alright, that she hadn't meant it, that she took it back, that it was all a joke in poor taste, and wouldn't he take her again to Bald Tor to watch the starshower tonight? She refused to break beneath the guilt. She had to do this. She had to know. She felt him withdraw from her side like a thorn withdrawn from flesh. Despite herself, she cringed.

"Ever since you arrived here you've been morose," he said, voice low. "I've done everything in my power to ensure you a pleasant stay, but you keep casting my kindness back in my face. One might almost think you suspect me of some plot against you, but it is not *I* who need this match!" He practically spat those last words, then spun and strode to the edge of the stone portico, cloak streaming from the breadth of his hunched shoulders.

At last, she sighed. It had required all her patience to flush Rikard's ego from its den of deference. Now his true colors were flying in the breeze for all to see.

Yet even in this small victory, Ilina felt defeated. Rikard's seeming perfection had unsettled her, yes, but only because she'd recognized it as a mask. Now disappointment swelled in her breast. *I must have been ready to deny my doubt*. Had his spell truly been that strong? Had she truly wanted to believe?

And what now? Was she willing to lose his courtship along with his esteem? No, she had no alternatives. She couldn't drive him off. She had never really wanted *that*. She just needed to know for certain if he loved her. *And what if he does?* her thought demanded. *If he does love you, and you convince him you aren't interested, he'll leave! What then?*

She clenched her wolrum-tooth brooch and turned toward Rikard. Her thought had failed to venture beyond this point. She had assumed his eventual reaction would satisfy her either one

way or the other, but now she felt even less certain than before. What could she say? *Harlith send me a true wind. Blow me to the right.*

Rikard straightened. Shaded his eyes. Ilina sidled over to follow his gaze. A rider was moving down from the hills—a black speck passing through red heather with reckless speed. Ilina shot a sideways glance at Rikard, whose vision had narrowed to exclude all but the distant figure. His mouth formed a thin line.

As she turned again toward the south a sudden gust smote her—colder far than before, slicing right through her fur-lined mantle and leather riding-dress, tearing a gasp from her throat as she clutched her teal cloak tight about her shoulders and lowered her head against the blast. She stood, forcing herself to weather the wind—rooted in place like one of the pillars yet shuddering uncontrollably.

“You’ll excuse me, milady,” said Rikard. “I have business to attend.” He swept his cloak aside and strode from the porch, preceded by a red banner flapping past his upraised arm.

Ilina was shocked. She hadn’t expected such an unequivocal dismissal. Rikard’s mask, once lowered, had been brusquely cast aside. All pretense had vanished like chaff in the wind. And the wind seemed so much colder now ... so cold ... She closed her eyes. The work of her lungs suddenly demanded all her thought. After a struggle she turned aside to suck in a breath. *Stupid, stupid girl—where will you go now? To whom will you crawl? Is there no prospect you cannot throw away? Now he hates you. And all because you are so proud.*

A faraway sparkle caught Ilina’s eye: the rider was crossing Tarn Ford in the vale below, the spray churned up by its mount a spectacle no less foreboding to her mind than the glow of a strange lantern bobbing down a hill-road in the dead of night. Was this because Rikard had left

her when the rider appeared, or was there something about the black speck itself that inspired fear? Perhaps Rikard hadn't seen the rider at all. Perhaps she, unsettled that he'd responded in kind to her provocation, was spooking at shadows. *You will go to him*, she told herself. *You will apologize for your hostility. You will choke back your pride and honor Father's wish.*

Yet even as Ilina reached this decision her thought shifted fully to the mounted figure ascending the skirts of Harn Hill. He—for the rider was male: his white beard licked past his shoulders in two long tongues—broke from the hill's shade just as he rounded a switchback and suddenly his clothes were black no longer but silver like salmon scales, and like a salmon he flashed once before plunging back into shadow. Dust curled in the sunlight where an instant before his cloak had spread like a vast wing. Something about the sight sent a shudder up Ilina's spine.

She turned away as the rider passed out of sight beneath the great hill wall. A strange yet implacable urge to meet the silver man squeezed her heart. Even in that moment it felt ridiculous. *I need to inform myself of Rikard's dealings*, was what she told herself, *especially those from which he excludes me*. With this resolved, Ilina headed for the door through which he had departed. The wind wrapped her cloak about her from behind.

Before she had measured a half-dozen paces, a smaller door to her left creaked ajar against the wind, then flipped open to bang against the stone wall. Out stumbled Rhinya—hair fluttering across her face, cheeks bright from exertion in the cold. “Milady, milady!” cried the servant girl as she slumped against the wall, held upright seemingly by the force of the wind alone. “Come! Come and see! Forkbeard is here! Forkbeard has arrived!”

Ilina turned toward the girl and her cloak slid from her back to whip up into coursing air. Its brooch dug into her neck and she clutched at the pin to unlatch it, pricking her throat as it sprang free. She snatched the garment back down, pinning it in the crook of her bare arm and covering the remaining distance at a trot. The wind's howling seemed nearly intelligible now—a deeply unsettling sound.

“What's happening?” she shouted.

“Forkbeard!” The girl's face was all aglow. “He just rode in through the under-gate. Follow me and you'll see him!” She paused to draw breath, then waited for a response. *Like the cat that exults to offer a rat to its master.*

Ilina started, blinking. *Whence came such a morbid thought?* She nodded, and Rhinya pulled her through the door.

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Silence but for breathing enveloped them with the slamming of the door as though they'd plunged beneath pounding surf. Without another word, Rhinya caught hold of Ilina's sleeve and tugged her down the half-lit hallway. Ilina, curious beyond caring, allowed herself to be led. But the girl's excitement only fueled her strange sense of foreboding.

She'd not seen Rhinya this emotional since the night the girl, in tears, had pounded on her bedroom door and begged her to kill the spider that had crept into the servants' wardrobe. The other servant girls, Ilina later determined, had made concord to resist Rhinya's pleas in an apparent effort to fortify her maturity. But Ilina, seeing only a child in tears, had immediately

snatched up a shoe and gone probing through the closet on hands and knees to the petrification of the gaggle of older girls whom she'd neglected to release from their frozen states of obeisance.

After that night, Rhinya had looked at Ilina with something akin to awe; the girl had known at the time what it meant to ask a dignitary of such repute to crawl around among her sweat-soiled slippers searching for spiders, and yet she'd asked anyway. Ilina respected that. It meant Rhinya was either uncommonly brave or uncommonly fearful, and, either way, that she was interesting.

But now, in Rhinya's tow after being sought out a second time, Ilina knew it was bravery, and not merely fear, that propelled the girl's audacity. This awareness did nothing to ease her own trepidation.

The doorway at the end of the hall opened onto a narrow, pillared porch overlooking a broad courtyard. Ilina's free hand shot up to shade her eyes. The sun hovered just above the peaked rooftops of Harnaral, its golden rays slicing through the dust churned up by a quickly-swelling crowd. A babble of voices—confused yet jubilant—rose with the thickening haze.

People of all kinds were running toward the center of the square. There, a squat stone gatehouse guarded the entrance to the tunnel that led from the hillside road below. Men, women, and children streamed out of the streets that radiated from the square, shouting in passing to those who peered from windows, grinning and jostling and fighting the wind. Handcarts stacked high with wooden crates or sacks of grain slouched forward on their handlebars—forgotten, ignored. Every banner on every gable streamed in the air as though Harn Hill itself were some great misshapen ship and the highlands were high seas. Ilina squinted toward the crowd's

epicenter and thought she caught a faint flash of silver before Rhinya tugged her down the porch steps and into the hubbub.

As Rhinya wove expertly through the press of bodies—dodging stray limbs and squeezing through the smallest of gaps as soon as they appeared—a voice rose above the tumult. It seemed to echo faintly inside Ilina’s head, as though she’d entered an empty room and left the clamoring crowd outside.

“Where is Highlord Hansel?” it boomed. “Where is the lord of this place? Move! Move, please! Make way!”

Rhinya dropped suddenly to the ground, ducking between a man’s legs. Ilina, distracted by the booming voice, thumped into the man’s broad back, instantly losing her connection with Rhinya. “I’m sorry!” she gasped, straightening as the man turned and the crowd pressed them together.

It was Rikard.

His eyebrows leapt so comically that Ilina would’ve laughed aloud had she not been mortified. His mouth dropped open and Ilina, not waiting to hear what came out, placed both hands on his chest and shoved off into the throng. But then she was through the throng and stumbling backward into an open space and sprawling on the ground. A hand fell on her shoulder. She looked up.

Forkbeard.

His smile seemed to well up from somewhere deep within. It emerged slowly, like a deer from the forest—spreading from his mouth to his cheeks to the golden irises of his bright, bright eyes. Eyes that might’ve held a thousand deadly secrets or a thousand priceless jokes. Eyes so

hard they seemed to dissect her soul, yet so lively as to teeter on the brink of laughter. Ilina sat for what seemed an eternity, held captive by those kindly, terrifying eyes.

But then they blinked and the light and noise and dust came crashing back in on her and she felt herself hauled upright by strong hands and set on her own two feet and she was herself again, still gazing up at a face haggard yet regal. Forkbeard loomed over her, the white of his flowing forked beard blending with the silver of his long robes and cloak. He held her shoulders as though she were a mere girl.

“Your Reverence,” said Rikard as he elbowed his way into the people-free pocket, “allow me to introduce the Lady Ilina—”

“Lightkeeper,” finished the old man. “Daughter of Orlim Lightkeeper the son of Glennal Lightkeeper the son through many fathers of Kredak Lightbringer, Herald of the King. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.” He inclined his head.

Rikard, for once, was at a loss for words. Ilina just stared at the old man, stupefied. “How ... how do you know me, sir?”

“I do not *know* you, not yet. But I make it my business to know a great many things.” His eyes seemed to dim slightly. “Your father was a good man, if unduly stubborn.”

At this Ilina stiffened. A memory unbidden impressed her senses. A figure, face averted, black against a sea whose roar failed to overwhelm dire words. *‘This is the hour of doom.’*

Ilina’s mouth worked soundlessly, but Forkbeard just bowed again and turned to Rikard. “Come, lead the way. I must speak with Lord Hansel at once.”

“Wait!” Ilina blurted. “How do you know him? My father?”

As Rikard marched off toward the hall, Forkbeard glanced back and pierced her with his eyes. His half-smile faded into the wrinkles of his bony face. “You cannot now envision him apart from the light he kept, but it was not always thus. He once was as you are now. A fledgling tern before the wind.” He squinted. “Here, let me get that for you,” he murmured, reaching out and jabbing Ilina’s throat with his forefinger.

Her hands jerked up in shocked reaction, but not before his fingertip withdrew, bloodied. He licked it, then slowly frowned and turned, striding away. Ilina pawed at her throat but her hands came away clean.

Only then did she notice the stillness of the air.

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“It’s unconscionable!” The Lady Lightkeeper spun on the ball of her foot and stalked back across the small yet elegantly furnished room. Rhinya’s head swiveled to track with the pacing of her honored charge. The girl sat in a chair at the foot of the bed, her hands in her lap—as demure as curiosity allowed. The Lady had grabbed her and towed her all the way back to the guest chambers as soon as Forkbeard left the square. Rhinya was bursting with excitement inside, and would’ve had more difficulty repressing it had she not known the Lightkeeper wanted answers as badly as she. No pleading or convincing seemed necessary to inspire official action of some kind. She had only to wait.

“How can he just walk away from me after saying something like that? The whole city seems to know of him, yet no one bothers to inform me a visit is expected from a friend of

Father's. And Rikard! Rikard walks away from me to meet with him, saying nothing! Who does he think I am, a servant to be dismissed at will?"

The Lightkeeper paused her pacing, glancing at Rhinya with what could only be sheepishness. "No offense intended, of course," she amended, then spun back to face the far wall. "But I am unused to such treatment. I cannot help assuming your lord desires to keep something from my knowledge."

Rhinya sat silently. The younger Lord Harnish had always seemed to her impressive and intimidating from a distance, but she'd never served him—not even at table—and had never learned aught about him that would've contradicted the Lady's accusation. She thought of the secrets she knew—that Melinda sequestered sweetcakes in her mattress, that Miliarah liked Rel the stableboy—and imagined the Lord Harnish whispering with Forkbeard in some dark corner, perhaps disclosing his interest in Lady Lightkeeper. *No, that can't be it*, she thought, shaking her head slightly. *Everyone already knows he's courting the Lady*. Well, everyone, seemingly, but the Lady herself.

"No," the Lady said. She ceased pacing and faced the wall. "No, if he wants me, he must talk to me. This cannot continue. Rhinya," she said, turning, "you are relieved of duties until dinner. Enjoy the sunshine."

Rhinya sighed and slumped. "Thank you, milady," she mumbled. She had been dismissed. Lady Lightkeeper didn't need her help to uncover the big secret. This day had become boring once again.

###

Ilina strode across the cobbled courtyard, her steps stiff and determined, her jaw set. Now that things had come to a head, she no longer felt confident taking such a risk. What if Rikard *did* call off his unilateral courtship in response to her impertinence? He was her last best hope to fulfill her father's assignment. She knew she should feel honored to be pursued at all, even if the faded favor of her family name was all that attracted such pursuit. If Rikard called off the chase, Ilina would have to settle for an unlearned man were she to meet the deadline.

She shuddered at the thought. And yet ... it was worse by far to withhold knowledge than to lack it. Any man who excluded her would become a husband she would regret having chosen. She swallowed and quickened her pace.

The Great Hall of Harn loomed before her, its raised foundation and massive stone columns seeming to draw themselves up against her intrusion. As she ascended into the portico's shadow, Ilina kept her eyes on the double doors flanked by two guards in full heraldic regalia. She extended an arm to shove open the right-hand door.

A gloved hand closed on her wrist. She glanced up at the guard in shock. Stark white heraldry—Stone and Sword and Hand—blazed from the red field of his breastplate. *Symbols only*, thought Ilina, but the sword-hilt jutting from behind the spaulder of his left shoulder was real enough. His eyes glinted through slits entwined by bronze creatures on the elaborate mask of his steel helm. He released her wrist the instant their eyes connected, yet stepped between her and the door, joined by his counterpart from the left.

“What is the meaning of this?” Ilina demanded. “Do you not know who I am?”

The first guard dropped his gaze. “Yes, milady.” He didn't sound happy.

“Then step aside and let me pass, and I shall forgive your indiscretion.”

The first guard shifted his eyes to some indefinite point over her shoulder. He said nothing. Ilina crossed her arms. After a moment, his counterpart spoke up, voice slightly louder than necessary. “Our apologies, Lady Lightkeeper, but our orders state that none are to enter the Great Hall at this time.”

“At this time?” she said. “And when, pray tell, will *this time* be concluded?”

“When we receive different orders.”

Ilina exhaled in a sharp burst. “And am *I* to be constrained by these orders?”

The first guard cleared his throat. “Apologies, milady, but we cannot make exceptions. I’m sure you won’t have long to wait.”

“What are your names?”

The first guard opened his mouth, but nothing came out. Guard Two took over. “My name’s Takla, and he’s Brigord,” he said, elbowing the other man. “We are soldiers of Kramarack, our blood runs in the hills, and we guard the doors of Highlord Hansel Harnish himself. No foreign authority can supersede our orders. Good evening to you, Lady Lightkeeper.”

Ilina turned from one to the other, then stepped slowly back. “Of course,” she said, voice flat. “Good evening, gentlemen.” With that, she spun on her heel and stormed back down the steps.

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As soon as Rhinya saw the Lightkeeper turn from the doors, she realized how important it was that she'd tailed her all the way to Great Hall. The Lady left the place as forcefully as she'd approached—head down, dress swinging and swishing about her legs. She still hadn't noticed her shadow.

That's because you're still hiding, dummy! With a backward glance, Rhinya leapt from her vantage by the pillar and dashed after the departing figure. "Milady, milady!"

The Lady neither slowed nor turned. "I thought I told you to enjoy your evening, Rhinya."

That brought Rhinya up as though she'd hit a stone wall. *When did she see me? When I turned the corner at the bakery? Did she know I was behind her this whole time?* A second later, however, she was jogging along at the Lady's side like a dog before dinner. "Yes you did, and I *have* been enjoying myself—but you need me now, milady!"

The Lady left space for Rhinya to continue, then sighed and took the bait. "Why do I need you, Rhinya?"

"Oh, you need me for many things, milady: you need me to clean your room and scrub your clothes and serve you at table and braid your hair and fetch you the best books and guide you to the observatory unseen and—"

"Alright, alright," said the Lady, rolling her eyes. "I need you. But why do I need you *right now?*"

Rhinya smiled to herself, though she still couldn't fathom why Lady Lightkeeper always had to be goaded so before she admitted her dependance on assistance. According to

Headmistress Lara, Rhinya's noble charge was practically helpless on her own. "You need to get into Great Hall," she beamed. "I can show you a back way!"

And now it was the Lady's turn to stop abruptly in her tracks.

###

"How can you see anything in here?" asked Ilina. Her head throbbed from its sudden acquaintance with a stone lintel—a meeting which had left her preoccupied by the relative nature of height. She was not accustomed to being tall. But Rhinya tugged her forward and so she stooped, almost on hands and knees, and crouched through yet another bottleneck of rock. At least the floor was level. "Do you come here often?"

"Lots," answered Rhinya. "Sometimes, when I'm following—" She caught herself and fell silent.

Interesting, thought Ilina. *So others visit these tunnels, too.* The entrance they had used had been hidden at the bottom of a storage stairwell. Rhinya had stuck her hand into a niche in the rock, then pushed open a gap barely wide enough to squeeze through. Since then they had crouched and crawled up a circuitous route of lefthand turnings.

The tunnels were all low and constricted—seemingly designed for use by children, or maybe dogs. Ilina almost laughed at the mental image of a vast subterranean kennel, but her humor evaporated at the next blind turn as she realized it might still be in use as such, perhaps for animals too dangerous to keep above ground. History books notwithstanding, she still knew precious little of the Harns or of their Hill.

Or of my own blood, it would seem.

She scowled reflexively at the thought of Forkbeard's condescension, thankful the darkness hid her face. His words had roused a rage she couldn't help but recognize as incommensurate. *Am I reacting this way because I lack insight, or because he possesses it? Or perhaps there was another reason. Perhaps she hated the insight itself. Am I truly unable to envision my father apart from his sacred role?*

But that doubt was a mere knot in the cord of her thought. The real provocation had been left implied. And from it she shrank, for it affronted her faith. *'He once was as you are now.'*

Does that mean Father didn't have to become what he is? Could he have chosen differently?

Can I?

The rogue memory returned, sucking her down like a riptide, dragging her back to a time when she'd been no older than Rhinya.

She remembered shivering in the Pavilion of Winds—that pillar-ringed, dome-roofed platform atop vertiginous Kredak Tower. Behind her the great crystal beacon, though dormant in evening golds, splashed the rotunda's interior with refracted light. Before her stretched the sea, glittering like a sheet of steel beneath heaven's pitch-black pall. The gulls whose incessant din formed the aural backdrop of her life had withdrawn before the storm, hunkering in hidden roosts, and in the comparative quiet the wind exulted like an old dread newly roused.

And at the edge of that expanse, on the very brink, there sat a man. She had feared it would be so.

"Father," she said in a voice submerged by the roar.

She edged toward his hunched shape. It had been one of his bad days. Particularly bad. She'd been looking for him these past three hours, and though she'd known where she'd eventually find him as surely as she knew down to the minute when the storm would strike the shore, she'd delayed this discovery until she had no option left. *Just once. Just once I'd like to be wrong.*

"Father, it's time to come down," she cooed. "We can watch Harlith frolic from inside."

He stirred, tilted his head. An eye glinted at her before fastening again on the deep.

"Hello 'Lina. Can you feel it? He's close. Out there. Coming. Oh, he's coming. Perhaps tonight, under cover of storm."

"Yes Father," she said despairingly.

Orlim sighed. "You shouldn't lie to me just because you think I'll like what I hear, Puffin. I know you don't feel it. If you did, you'd have shown up before now."

"I'm sorry, Father." And she was.

Still he didn't move. So Ilina sank to the sun-warmed stone and scooted forward, toward oblivion's lip. As the howling void inched closer, a kind of vertigo took her. Not the gut-twisting panic described by those few mainlanders she'd invited to this place over the years, but something more vicarious—a creeping cognizance that the bonds which held her to this kind and steady man were as insubstantial as seaweed. A fit of enthusiasm, a robust gust, and worlds would lie between them. Ilina slipped her legs over the edge to dangle beside her father's. An ocean of air set her blue dress all aflutter. *Harlith spare us. Pass us by.*

“If I’m here I’ll see him sooner,” muttered Orlim. “A trifle after all these centuries, perhaps, but of some worth nonetheless, at least to me. I am the Lightkeeper. I should espy him from afar, not be roused in the night by a fist upon my door.”

Ilina licked dry lips. “You can’t live up here, Father.”

Orlim was silent. His daughter fidgeted. She could smell the immanent rain. And as she watched, powerless, the sea’s glimmer dimmed point by point, wave by sparkling wave. The storm front reared like a breaker intent upon the world.

“Time is short,” he finally said. “You think me touched, but I tell you I have never felt so certain in all my days as watchman. The king is *near*. You understand me? I can *feel* it. It’s like ... like the rain, like when ... when you can sense ... with ... in your ... oh, it’s no use.” He slumped further, then whispered: “He *must* come soon.”

A sharp sorrow washed over Ilina then, and she leaned into her father, wrapping an arm about his waist. *Why can’t he be happy with what we have? Why must he always look for more?* “But think, Father! If he’ll be here soon, there’s no cause for me to wed.” She said it lightly, like a jest that was more than jest.

A blast of wind collided with the tower, shrieking through its pillars, forcing its keepers to lean forward toward the brink. Orlim’s hat-brim snapped up against his brow. He turned to his daughter, surprising her with the joy playing over his weathered face.

“Oh you pensive puffin! In the kingdom to come there will be more cause to wed than ever before! Do not be afraid. We of all people should welcome change. And he *will* come soon.” Again he scanned the sea. His eyes burned with its reflected gleams. “He can afford no further delay. For night is falling—a night in which Kredak Light will avail us nothing. Can’t you see it?”

Can't you feel it in your veins? He will not miss his final chance. This is the hour of doom, an end to our suspense."

Ilina blanched. Swiveling, she threw her other arm around him, gripping him with all her strength as though he might cast himself into space. "Don't say that!" she screamed into his chest.

"Ilina, I ..." his voice broke as he returned the embrace. "Peace, Puffin. Do not weep. We were never meant to keep this light forever. Without fulfillment, anticipation is a fruitless thing. We are envied by our fathers. Do you see? *We* are envied. We who stand *here*, on the threshold of a world made new."

Ilina raised her head and followed her father's gaze out to sea. Through her tears the horizon warped as though deluged, but then she blinked and the air cleared and she saw that they still had time left to outrun the storm. Despite herself she squinted, peering toward the world's rim where ocean and sky exchanged blows. The vault above, though endless, remained constant. Likewise the deep knew its limits. But within that hairline rift which divided the two was concentrated all potentiality, all hope, all doom.

And then a wall of rain engulfed them. The storm had arrived too soon. Father and daughter scrambled back from Harlith's maw only to be swept unceremoniously across the Pavilion of Winds and down its recessed stairwell into darkness.

Darkness.

Ilina's memory ejected her into the present. She became aware that she had been crawling for some time with no sense of her surroundings. Not that it mattered in this warren of voids.

Well, assuming Rhinya's been paying attention. She shuddered and felt a sudden urge to break the silence. "Who else comes down—"

"*Shh!*" whispered Rhinya. "We're here."

Ilina froze. A cold breeze wafted down over her head and shoulders. Cringing lower and glancing up, she felt more than saw an empty space above the spot where she squatted.

What do you think you're doing, you fool? After this, you'll be sent home for certain.

Closing her eyes in the dark, Ilina drew in a deep breath of cool air. *Then so be it. Rikard must decide what he can tolerate, but I cannot marry an untrustworthy man simply to carry on a custom. I am not so tightly moored to Father's fate.* She stood, whacking her head on stone.

Rhinya gasped. Ilina bit her lip and bent forward, letting the pain flood her, then dissipate. When she could think straight again she felt for the stairs ahead, where the ceiling gradually slanted upward.

And why should he earn your trust when you scuttle around in the shadows like some enemy spy?

Ilina paused on the step. Her conscience—if it *was* her conscience—took advantage of this momentary hesitation to loose a barrage of accusations. *How would you feel if you invited him to Kredak Light and he spent his time there prying open the sarcophagus to read your mother's death-song? Would that differ from what you're doing now? With no knowledge of you apart from reputation, he has showered you with favors. Does it matter the reason? You will marry him. You know you will. And after that? Will you snuff out what glimmer of affection he has for you just to prove yourself correct? Will you condemn yourself to the life you fear just so you can say you knew it would be so? Will you?*

Ilina reeled, and nearly fell backward upon Rhinya who stood immediately behind, but then she clenched her jaw, cleared her mind of doubt, and advanced up the narrow stair. She would not so easily abandon any project once begun. She had to know what Rikard hid from her.

The steps were steep and uneven and required Ilina's full concentration. But she, accustomed as she was to cliffside maneuvering in pursuit of cormorant eggs, had to climb for only a couple of minutes before she smacked her head against the iron ring that dangled from a rusted grate above. She stifled a whimper, unwilling to break the silence. *Absolute silence.*

Wait ... that isn't right. She turned. No Rhinya.

"Rhinya!" she hissed into the blackness below. No answer.

Ilina's head throbbed no longer, but her skin had begun to prickle. She stared unblinking down the stairs. It seemed darker there, somehow. As she watched, that blackness deepened, as though its luminance continued to ebb beyond the threshold of visibility. Had she not lost her fear of the dark while still a little girl? Why then had mere breathing become suddenly an impossible task?

Where was Rhinya?

*Stop cringing like a child and go find out! She probably slipped and hit her head—
Harlith knows you've done so more than is good for you.*

Ilina descended a step—thin muscles twitching from tautness, hand trailing along the wall to maintain her balance. The absolute silence was almost tangible. Absence had become a kind of presence, a thing that was *there*—impossible to ignore yet dreadful to assess. A kind of nausea washed over her and she almost lost her footing. She had the distinct sensation of being both blind and naked in a brightly lit room with only a heath tiger for company.

Exposed, yet oblivious.

Stop it! You're frightening yourself! Now get down there and find that girl!

She took another step. Heightened senses detected minutiae unnoticed on the way in.

Like that sickening stench. That was new. Perhaps this whole tunnel complex was nothing more than a sewer, and that grate at the top of the stairs the drain from a latrine. She jerked her hand off the wall.

“Rhinya?” she hissed. “Where are you?”

The scrape of her boot on the stone screeched in her ears like the cry of some small and helpless animal. Darkness enveloped her, a crushing oblivion like that which wrapped islands' roots far beneath the heaving northern sea. Blood pounded in her ears. She couldn't breathe.

But she heard breathing.

For a long moment Ilina stood absolutely still, her body immobilized, her mind riveted by sheer, raw horror. The sound that gripped her was unlike any breathing she'd ever heard before, yet was unmistakable as such: the soft, hollow suck of inhalation alternated with a thin rasp that seemed to go on for far too long. But Ilina *felt* the sounds more than she heard them. They pulsed up from the stone to rattle within her chest as though the strange breath was *hers*. But that couldn't be; she wasn't breathing at all. And the sounds came at a cadence far too slow for any human to maintain, because no human had lungs that vast.

And, with that realization, blind panic crashed in upon Ilina's mind and she screamed, flinging herself back up the stairs and catching her heel on an uneven step and scraping her forearms to break the fall, scrambling forward on all fours and assaulting the ceiling's iron grate. It held, rusted in place. She wailed incoherently, shaking it, slamming herself into it again and

again and again until it gave with a crunch and then she was up and through and in an undefined black space. She threw out her arms and stumbled into several hard objects and knocked some of them over before she found a door. It was locked. Iilina lowered her shoulder and charged and bounced back like a sealskin ball. She kicked it. No effect.

Dead, dead, dead! I'm dead. It has me now.

Iilina whirled and screamed to drown out the breathing that doubtless had entered the room by now—whether in defiance or despair or out of a childish instinct that what cannot be sensed cannot exist, she neither knew nor cared. She lunged away from the door, tripping over one of the objects she'd dislodged from its shelf. It was large and heavy and she heaved it into her arms and hurled it toward the door. *Crack!* Light burst in. Iilina dove through the splintered aperture and landed in Highlord Hansel's personal study.

She rolled, cracking her head on the edge of a writing desk and dousing her hair with black from an ornate inkwell. Lurching to her feet, she squinted in the sudden natural brightness that streamed from a small window. The door. The door was there. She bowled it open in her haste, striking the face of Rikard Harnish and knocking him to the floor. Two more men were hurrying up behind him: Forkbeard and the Highord Hansel himself.

Iilina paused in the open doorway to look back. Months later, after waking tangled in sweat-soaked sheets, she would regret this decision.

For just then the chamber's closet door burst outward, and the thing which emerged seemed altogether too horrifying to exist in the waking world.

First there was the mouth. It was round like that of a hagfish and situated at the front of an arrow-shaped head, black as pitch, that sported no discernible eyes. Sinuous limbs, strangely-

jointed, radiated out from behind the head to grip the doorframe with slender pads that sprouted three hooked claws each. Two limbs were twice as long as the others, and these groped like antennae until they seized on the edge of a table, whereupon the whole creature lunged violently forward, using its shorter limbs to launch itself out of the closet before snapping them tightly against its sides as it slid out in coil after writhing coil, splintering table legs and sending a cascade of papers sliding across the floorboards.

All this transpired in an instant. When Ilina turned away, a nightmare image seared in her mind's eye, Rikard was just scrambling to his feet. The woman before him bore scant resemblance to the haughty aristocrat whose scorn he'd borne earlier that day. With her clothes torn and soiled, her arms and legs slick with blood, her hair matted with both red and black, her face whiter than Cloudfall Pass in the month of Whrenen, and her eyes as wild as those of an old Jaar seer, she resembled more a specter than a real person.

"Ilina, what's happened? How did you get—"

Ilina slammed the door on the still-emerging creature, then shoved Rikard backward.

"Run!"

Rikard's face was a picture of bewilderment. He threw up his forearms to block a second shove. Just then, something crashed in the room behind and an aggressive squeal like that of a stuck pig punctured the words forming on his lips. His mouth snapped shut and his eyes went wide. Catching Ilina by the shoulders, he threw her behind him and snatched a hand-and-a-half sword off the wall.

For they were in the Great Hall of Harn, realized Ilina with that shrinking fraction of her mind still capable of detached thought. Swords lined the walls as high as the stone vaults arching

overhead in great sweeping curves and, here and there, letting in the last crimson rays of a nearly burnt-out sun that fled before the advent of western darkness.

“*Hold the door!*” boomed Forkbeard’s voice. “If it gains the hall we shall have trouble bringing it to bay. Give no ground!”

The bellowed commands focused Ilina’s attention once more. She turned to see the old man and the lords of Kramarack—father and son, side by side—clustered before the door. Highlord Hansel gripped a thick-hafted pike, bracing its butt end against the floor with his back foot. Rikard clutched his sword with both hands, feet planted apart, knees bent. But Forkbeard held no weapon. He stood tall in his silver robes, empty hands extended to either side—palms up, thumbs and fourth fingers forming twin circles. As Ilina watched, it seemed to her that what little light remained in the hall concentrated itself around his figure until all else grew dark as a night without stars.

With a jarring crash a half-insectile, half-serpentine form burst through the wall to their left. Swords and wood splinters spun through the air and clattered against the floor as the beast launched itself directly at Forkbeard—maw gaping, limbs splayed as though for an embrace. Ilina would’ve screamed if she hadn’t choked while drawing breath.

The old man barely had time to react, but react he did. He turned, bringing up his right hand and snapping his wrists around so his palms faced forward. There was a flash of light and a deafening boom and then everything went dark. Even the candle flames vanished. From the far wall came a heavy thud and clatter, then a gurgling growl that rose to an atonal keening.

Suddenly, a human voice pierced the sounds of alien fury with the unlikelyst of expressions: a song. It began in a soft quaver yet quickly grew deep and sure. It was the voice of Highlord Hansel Harnish, and this is what it sang:

“The sun went down behind Harn’s Hill

When there he made his stand.

How bright his eyes, how clean his blade

How small his mighty band!

The sky was black, his blade was red

The Hill had drunk its fill,

When Harn at last sank to his knees

And everything fell still.

The hills are dry, the heather thirsts,

The stars glint in the sky.

The world waits with bated breath

To hear Harn’s battle cry.

For men like Harn shall yet arise

In time of dire need.

To face the night yet see no dawn

Doth sow a mighty seed.”

Lord Harnish ended his song with a loud shout, joined by his son. And Ilina woke from her stupor of fear.

The guards! she thought. *Why have they not come?*

In an instant she was running, guided by memories from earlier visits. A stool cracked against her shins and she cried out, eliciting a deep belching bark from the blackness that was the hall's far end. Shouts and thuds and squeals and other sounds of violence rang out. Flashes of light illumined her route in a kind of inverse blinking: uniform blindness punctuated by sight. Ilina whimpered, hobbling forward more carefully now, yet more urgently. How could those men fight something they couldn't even see?

Sounds of dull pounding—fists and sword-hilts upon thick wood and iron—brought her up before she hit the doors, which apparently were locked from the inside. Finding a great ring, she heaved with all her might, but to no avail. She groped along the riveted surface and felt a bulky protrusion: the crossbar. Was there only the one? Ilina jumped, flinging her hand overhead. It brushed the upper crossbar bracket. Empty.

But how was she to move even one crossbar, a task that normally required at least two guardsmen? Ilina crouched beneath the massive plank, straining to raise it on her shoulder. It didn't even budge. She bent her knees and back and heaved, screaming in frustration and pain. No movement. Nothing. She was only a woman, after all, and shared no blood with Harn Bright-Eyes. She was helpless, useless, pointless. She sank down before the doors—arms crossed over her face, sobbing. Those men would die—*Rikard* would die as surely as poor Rhinya—and she could do nothing but wait for death to take her too.

Is this what you meant, Father, when you told me doom would come? The king has not returned. How can you still hope? Are you mad, after all? Perhaps we're all mad. Perhaps madness is all that resists the inevitable end of the world.

Ilina curled in a spasm of fear, but then a new thought stilled her. And since the end is inescapable, perhaps all that matters is how I face it. Perhaps Rikard is right. Perhaps redemption comes not from afar, but from within.

And with that Ilina rose, forsaking the impassible doors. Finding a broadsword, she wrenched it from the wall. Something within her had changed, and she didn't know whether or not she approved. But she wouldn't live to know, now would she? She was about to die. And, by Harlith's breath, she would not die cowering in a corner!

"My name is Ilina Lightkeeper," she began in a whisper, "daughter of Orlim Lightkeeper the son of Glennal Lightkeeper the son through many fathers of Kredak Lightbringer, *Herald of the King!*" Her voice rose to a shout as she slashed aside an invisible stool. She reeled a little, overbalanced by the blade's weight. "I stand against you, cruel fate! I need no lost god's aid! You may steal my life, but not my soul! I defy you! Come take me!" She lashed out with the sword, spinning in a blind circle, laughing, intoxicated by sudden fatalism. "Come, spiderworm, I await you!"

At that moment, a bright bluish light burst at the far end of the hall. A grotesque tableau burned itself into Ilina's retinas, then vanished as a thunderclap rattled the swords lining the walls like scale mail. Lord Hansel, too, had procured a blade; his pike now sprouted from the monster's mouth like a toothpick. On the far side crouched Rikard, sword-arm swept back as though he'd been thrown. But Forkbeard stood before the yawning maw with arms upraised—a

black silhouette against that burgeoning brightness which pulsed between his palms. A piercing squeal rent the air, and a great crash, and then all was still.

Is it dead?

Oblivion had closed in again—a blackout of the senses. Ilina’s sword instantly became the lifeline of her nerve: she gripped it with both hands as though she might at any moment slip away to fall forever. Her mouth opened, then shut, silent. If Rikard yet lived, he would find her. But if she were the only one left, there would be no point in inviting any more attention. She was shaking. It was all she could do to keep the sword aloft. She felt crushed by the darkness as though it had substance and weight.

Something thumped and clattered away down the hall. Ilina started. The thudding from beyond the doors, though still faint, had grown more rhythmic: the guards must have found a ram. From the place she’d last glimpsed Rikard, however, not a sound came. Ilina was shaking so badly she could barely stand upright. And then she surprised herself.

She stepped forward.

And why should I not? If I can discard prudence in the face of despair, then why not now, when a glimmer of hope has returned?

But that logic, sound as it was, rang hollow in her mind. She challenged the darkness not to validate an abstraction but to find a man. One man in particular.

“Rikard,” she breathed.

She cracked her shin on a wooden protrusion and dropped her sword with a metallic clatter. The darkness gaped silently around her. With a gasp she fell to her hands and knees, groping for the weapon. The blade’s edge sliced into the little finger of her right hand as she

swept it over the floor. Biting her sleeve to mute a cry of pain, Ilina hefted the weapon in her left hand and rose unsteadily.

She spat out her sleeve. “Rikard!” she hissed.

As if in reply, something moved against the far wall. Ilina heard it clearly.

“*Who’s there?*” she squeaked. “Rikard, is it you? Where are you?”

A low groan. A human sound.

Ilina edged forward, sword raised and quivering. *What if I impale him?* She stopped and, after a mental struggle, lowered the blade. “Where are you?” she whimpered.

“Here.” The voice came from the ground at her feet. She jumped, but managed to hang on to her weapon this time.

“*Rikard?*”

“Ilina. What of my father? Where is he?”

She dropped to her knees, laying aside the sword. Her fingers brushed his face, then found a cold bulk on his chest, abrasive to the touch, like sharkskin. She recoiled instinctively. The lifeless monster had him pinned.

“My father,” he said. “Find him!”

Without reply, Ilina lifted her sword and rammed it into the hulking corpse beside Rikard’s head. The skin gave, but refused to break. She leaned on the hilt.

“Ilina, I’m fine! Find my father! *Go!*”

With a yell, Ilina threw her weight against the sword and it punctured the leathery hide and drove through the soft tissue beneath like a needle through cloth. She fell forward upon the

creature's turgid bulk. Pus and slime bubbled up from the cut and Ilina planted her hands in the mess to thrust herself upright. A debilitating stench flooded her nose and mouth and mind.

"By the Stone, don't bother with me!" cursed Rikard. Then the monster's discharge reached his face and the only sounds were his spluttering gags and a thick, rubbery rending as Ilina sawed the carcass open. She worked up and around, stepping over Rikard's head where it protruded from beneath the mass. When her blade reached the other side, a wedge of skin flopped out—spilling nameless organs across the floor and smothering Rikard's cry of revulsion. Then he was gone—buried.

Ilina plunged her arms into the slime. The incision *must* have relieved some of the pressure pinning him to the floor. *There!* Her fingers struck his face and she worked them down along his neck to close on his shirt. She pulled, but the floor was slick now and her feet flew out from under her and she sprawled on her back, gasping and gagging.

Rage filled her. She might be incapable of lifting a wooden beam, but she'd sooner die than let Rikard drown in viscera. She planted her feet against the creature's body, filled her fists with his shirt, coiled herself, then slowly straightened—dragging him headfirst into the air. A scream exploded from her throat as Rikard breached the slime and sucked in breath. They lay side-by-side, gasping.

Then Rikard rolled over, wrapped his arms about her, and kissed her on the mouth.

Ilina froze, shocked and disoriented. But an instant later her mind, unable to process this sudden reversal, abdicated to emotion. She melted.

A flash of light and there stood Forkbeard, his robes freshly red like flowering heather, his boney features spectral by the glow of an eerie orb glimmering through cupped fingers. His

eyes—before so sparkling, so bright—sank into his skull, twin voids cast from beneath. Below him, the next Highlord of Kramarack and the Lady Ilina, Heir of the Herald, had yet to pause for breath. Rikard was the first to disengage, remembering his father. Ilina clung to him as he rose.

Forkbeard lifted his orb. And all across the floor, shadows and gleams vied over the scattered remains of Highlord Hansel Harnish, son of Hans Harnish the son of Horah Harnish the son through many fathers of Harn Bright-Eyes, Father of the Hills.

“The hills will bloom tomorrow,” said the wizard, and Ilina quailed to hear the deadness in his voice. “He will need you then, Lightkeeper. Do not fly.”

Ilina raised her head and straightened, intertwining her fingers with those of Rikard’s slack right hand.

Rikard’s knees buckled. With a crash, they struck the floor.

And far, far away—as though Harn’s Great Hall had become an endless tunnel fleeing the outside world, an immeasurable shaft in the mine of sorrows, a bottomless pit whose nadir stank of death—the massive doors at last flew open.

* * *