

THE CHART OF
TOMORROWS

ALSO BY CHRIS WILLRICH

The Scroll of Years

The Silk Map

A Gaunt and Bone Novel

THE CHART OF TOMORROWS

CHRIS WILLRICH



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In memory of Jane Eades, Georgia Grytness, and Anne Robweder

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IMAGO BONE'S NOTES ON
PEOPLE, PLACES, AND THINGS
BECAUSE HE IS GETTING OLDER
AND HIS MEMORY IS TAXED

A-Girl-Is-A-Joy: Also, Joy Snøsdatter, Joy. Daughter of Snow Pine. Chosen to be the Runethane, champion of the Bladed Isles. It might have gone easier for her if she hadn't.

A *Tumult of Trees on Peculiar Peaks*: Also known as the Scroll of Years. A landscape painting that either contains or accesses a pocket dimension of accelerated time. You see, Gaunt? I can use magical jargon too.

Aile: A headwoman of the Vuos people. I heard of her much later, yet somehow I feel she belongs here.

Alder: A former wizardly apprentice, my comrade at the Gull-Jarl's steading.

Alhild: A human raised as one of the fey uldra-folk. A princess of the uldra, no less. It seems to have affected her mind.

All-Now, the: Mirabad term for the compassionate creator of the universe.

Anansi: An exploratory ship from Kpalamaa.

Arngrimur Townflayer: One of the Nine Wolves. You may notice a theme in their names.

Arnulf Pyre-Maker: One of the Nine Wolves.

Ash-lad, or Askelad: A peasant hero from folktales.

Aughatai: Jewelwolf's horse. There was something very wrong with that horse.

Beinahruga: Cairn.

Bone: A fool. No, that's not all. An old fool.

Brambletop: A young woman of Larderland. It hurts to think of her now.

Breakwing Island: A troll-inhabited island beside Spydbanen.

Cairn: A Chooser of the Slain.

changing: A troll or uldra child, left in place of a kidnapped human child.

***Chart of Tomorrows, The*:** The Winterjarl's protean book, full of cryptic passages and alarming maps.

Chooser of the Slain: An agent of the old gods of the Bladed Isles.

Claymore: A troll.

Cliffion: Grand Khan of the Karvaks.

Corinna: Princess, later queen, of Soderland. I was never sure where we stood with her, but I was always sure she was in charge.

Crypttongue: A magic sword Gaunt wielded for a time. I hate magic swords.

Deadfall: A sapient magic carpet. Before I met it, those words would not have seemed frightening.

Dolma: An exiled warrior of Xembala. For a time she helped my son. I am grateful.

Draug: A spirit creature found upon the sea and within the Straits of Tid. Draugar can take the forms of dead folk you've known.

Draugmaw: An unnatural, gigantic maelstrom. It has Draugar in it.

Einar Bringer of Wailing: One of the Nine Wolves.

Eldshore, the: A slowly crumbling but still mighty continental empire.

Erik Glint: A foamreaver and Larderman.

Eshe: Priestess, wanderer, warrior, spy. Possibly our employer.

eventyr: Fairy tales.

Everart: Rabble-rouser of Soderland. Quite good at it.

Fiskegard: Independent-minded islands founded by fishermen, nominally part of Oxiland, periodically filled with itinerant workers. I came from a family of fishermen, and the scent was like home.

Five Fjords: A shaky alliance of the towns of Lillefosna, Vestvjell, Vesthall, Grimgard, and Regnheim.

Floki: A slaver.

Foamreaver: Can be a seafarer, trader, raider, or all of them together.

Freidar: An old tavernkeeper and Runewalker. Husband of Nan. Kind to Innocence, he was a good companion when we sailed aboard *Leaping Bison*.

Gamellaw: A region governed by old laws under which steadings are the unit of civilization, not nations. Takes in Svardmark from the Morkskag to the Chained Straits, and all of Spydbanen.

Garmsmaw Pass: A mountain pass connecting Garmstad territory to northern Svardmark.

Garmstad: A town and territory allied to Soderland.

Gaunt: What I call Persimmon when we're about our errands. The other half of my mind.

Gissur Mimurson: An Oxiland chieftain.

Gold-Jarl, or Gull-Jarl: Ruler of the small country of Gullvik.

Grawik: The steading of Ottmar Bloodslake.

Great Chain of Unbeing: A huge artifact absorbing the power of the dragons whose immense bodies gave form to the Bladed Isles.

Grunndokk: A town paying tribute to the Gull-Jarl.

Gullvik: Name of a town and a small domain in Svardmark.

Gunlaug: An overseer at the Gull-Jarl's steading.

Haboob: An efrít, a spirit of the desert.

Hakon: The retired king of Soderland.

Harald the Far-Traveled: Chieftain of the Laksfjord region.

Havtor: A slave in the Gull-Jarl's steading. May his name be honored.

Haytham ibn Zakwan ibn Rihab: Inventor and gentleman of Mirabad, daring to combine natural philosophy and magic. He gave the world ballooning. I might regret that, had I never flown.

Heavenwalls: Vast fortifications of Qiangguo—and beyond!—which somehow channel the land's vital breath.

Hekla: Huginn Shardspear's companion. I think she was more formidable than he.

Huginn Shardspear: A chieftain, lawyer, and tale-teller of Oxiland.

Imago: What Persimmon calls me, amid the least or greatest dangers.

Inga: She was half of the duo responsible for Peersdatter and Jorgensdatter's *Eventyr*. A mighty fighter, and brave.

Innocence Gaunt: Our son.

Ironhorn: A Karvak general.

Ivar Garm: Lord Mayor of Garmstad Town.

Jaska: A girl who turned Innocence's head in Oxiland.

Jegerhall: The steading of Arnulf Pyre-Maker.

Jewelwolf: Wife of the Grand Khan and a powerful leader in her own right. As if that wasn't enough to make me nervous, also knowledgeable in magic. Sister of Steelfox.

Jokull Loftsson: Strongest of the Oxiland chieftains.

Jotuncrown: A settlement of humans in thrall to the troll-jarl in the Trollberg.

Joy: What we all called A-Girl-Is-A-Joy.

Katta, called the Mad: One of many names for the wandering monk of the Undetermined whom we knew. A big-hearted person, though I think he regarded me as a miscreant. Truly I have no idea why.

Kantenings: The humans of the Bladed Isles, excepting the Vuos, who stand apart.

Kantenjord: It means something like “Edge-lands.” Outsiders know it better as the Bladed Isles.

Karvak Realm: The empire of the Grand Khan.

Karvaks: The mightiest nomads of the steppes.

Klarvik: A town in Soderland.

Kolli the Cackling: One of the Nine Wolves.

Kollr: A young follower of the old gods in Oxiland, whom Innocence befriended.

Kpalamaa: A mighty realm of the South. If Qiangguo is not the world’s most advanced nation, it is this.

Laksfjord: A surprisingly pleasant community near the Morkskag.

Langfjord: The steading of Kolli the Cackling.

Lardermen: Elite group of foamreavers, who made their name bringing supplies past a blockade.

Leaftooth: Head monk of the Peculiar Peaks.

Liron Flint: Explorer, treasure hunter, friend.

Loftsson’s Hall: Steading of Oxiland’s most powerful chieftain, with many allied folk nearby.

Lysefoss: A settlement beside a spectacular waterfall. I’d have appreciated it more if we hadn’t been running for our lives.

Malin: She was half of the duo responsible for Peersdatter and Jorgensdatter’s *Eventyr*. A brave soul. An unusual mind.

Meteor-Plum: The guardian of the Scroll of Years sometimes goes by this name.

Mirabad: Name for both a great city and the caliphate it commands. Once its power made the world tremble; its wealth and learning still make the world envious.

Morkskag, the: The haunted forest that divides “civilized” Svardmark from the Gamellow.

Mossbeard: A troll.

Muggur Barrow-Friend: One of the Nine Wolves.

Muninn Crowbeard: Once a foamreaver styled “Surehand.” He changed, more than once.

Nan: An old tavernkeeper and Runewalker. Wife of Freidar. Those two were kind to Innocence and did as much as anyone could to protect their homeland. I, a selfish man, am in awe.

Nine Smilodons: The Karvak soldier we traveled with for a time.

Nonyemeko: Captain of *Anansi*.

Northwing: A taiga shaman in service to Steelfox. Powerful as friend or enemy. I would know.

Numi: A Swan-church novitiate whom Innocence befriended.

Ostoland: A heavily wooded island, of somewhat insular folk.

Ottmar Bloodslake: One of the Nine Wolves.

Oxiland: A volcanic realm, and some associated islands, in Kantenjord's northwest. A bleak country, settled by stubborn people with notions of democracy. Clearly they are mad. It's tempting to join them.

Painter of Clouds: Swanlings use this term for what Mirabad's people call the All-Now; they got the name from the People of the Brush.

Peersdatter and Jorgensdatter's *Eventyr*: A surprisingly useful book of folktales.

Peik: A boy from Klarvik, by his own account absolutely the most truthful person that this or any other world has known.

Persimmon: See Gaunt. She is the one who should be writing this down; she has the gift for words. But she forgets little and doesn't see the need. She remembers the time I did this, and the time I did that, and the other thing. And yet she is still with me.

Qiangguo: A vast realm of the East. If Kpalamaa is not the world's most advanced nation, it is this.

Qurca: Steelfox's peregrine falcon, bonded to her spirit.

Rafnar Dragon-Axe: One of the Nine Wolves.

Ragnar: Half-brother of Corinna of Soderland.

Red Mirror: A Karvak soldier.

Roisin: A Swanling priestess. A fine person, surely, but a little too cozy with slavers.

Rolf: A young Swanling of Oxiland, whom Innocence befriended.

Rubblewrack: A troll, or so she appeared.

Runethane, or Runemarked Queen or King: The one who commands the energies of the Great Chain of Unbeing.

Runewalkers: Traditional mages of Kantenjord. Their power derives from tracings of mystic runes. Some of their tracings are enormous.

Ruvsu: Pirate queen of Larderland.

Schismglass: A magic sword, akin to Crypttongue but antagonistic.

Skalagrim the Bloody: One of the Nine Wolves. I'll say no more about him.

Skrymir Hollowheart: Lord of trolls in Spydbanen and, effectively, everywhere else.

Skyggeskag, the: An elder forest in Soderland, cousin to the Morkskag.

Snow Pine: Once known as Next-One-a-Boy or simply Next One. A bandit of Qiangguo and a companion to Persimmon and me. Our best friend.

Smokecoast: The largest settlement of Oxiland.

Soderland: Strongest and richest of the local kingdoms, principalities, chiefdoms, and what-have-yous. Therefore, the biggest target.

Splintrevej: Maze-like scattering of islands in the heart of Kantenjord.

Spydbanen: The northeastern of Kantenjord's main islands, and home to its most violent jarls, including the troll-jarl. The Vuos people live in its extreme north.

Steelfox: A princess of the Karvak Realm, determined to conquer the Earthe in the memory of her father, the first Grand Khan. Even with all that in mind, I liked her.

Storfosna: A town in Soderland.

Stormhamn: A town in Soderland.

Sturla's Steading: The home of Huginn and Hekla.

Styr Surturson: An Oxiland chieftain.

Surtfell: The great volcano of Oxiland.

Svanstad: The capital of Soderland and largest city in the Bladed Isles.

Svardmark: Kantenjord's largest island, home to what passes for its civilized lands.

Swan Goddess: The deity said to have sacrificed herself to save the world. Accounted the daughter of the Painter of Clouds.

Swanisle: An island nation, closer to the continent than are the Bladed Isles. Gaunt's homeland. Legend has it it's the petrified body of the Swan Goddess. I am not weighing in on this.

Swanling: The Kantenings call the Swan Goddess's followers this.

Tlepolemus: A fellow far-traveled adventurer who became a Larderman.

Torfa: Jokull Loftsson's wife. By report, an exemplar of Kantening ferocity.

Trollberg, the: The troll mountain-fortress beside Jotuncrown.

uldra: A varied nonhuman folk who sometimes dwell underground and sometimes in other worlds entirely.

Undetermined, the: An enlightened being venerated in the East.

Varmvik: A town in Soderland.

Vatnar: An important churchman of Oxiland.

Vinderhus: A whaling community in Oxiland.

Vuos: A human community distinct from the Kantenings. They herd reindeer and have shamanistic beliefs.

Vuk: A man of the Wagonlords on the continent, my comrade at the Gull-Jarl's steading.

Walking Stick: An itinerant official of Qiangguo. Also a wulin warrior, capable of esoteric combat moves. A good ally, and a bad enemy, to have. He's been both.

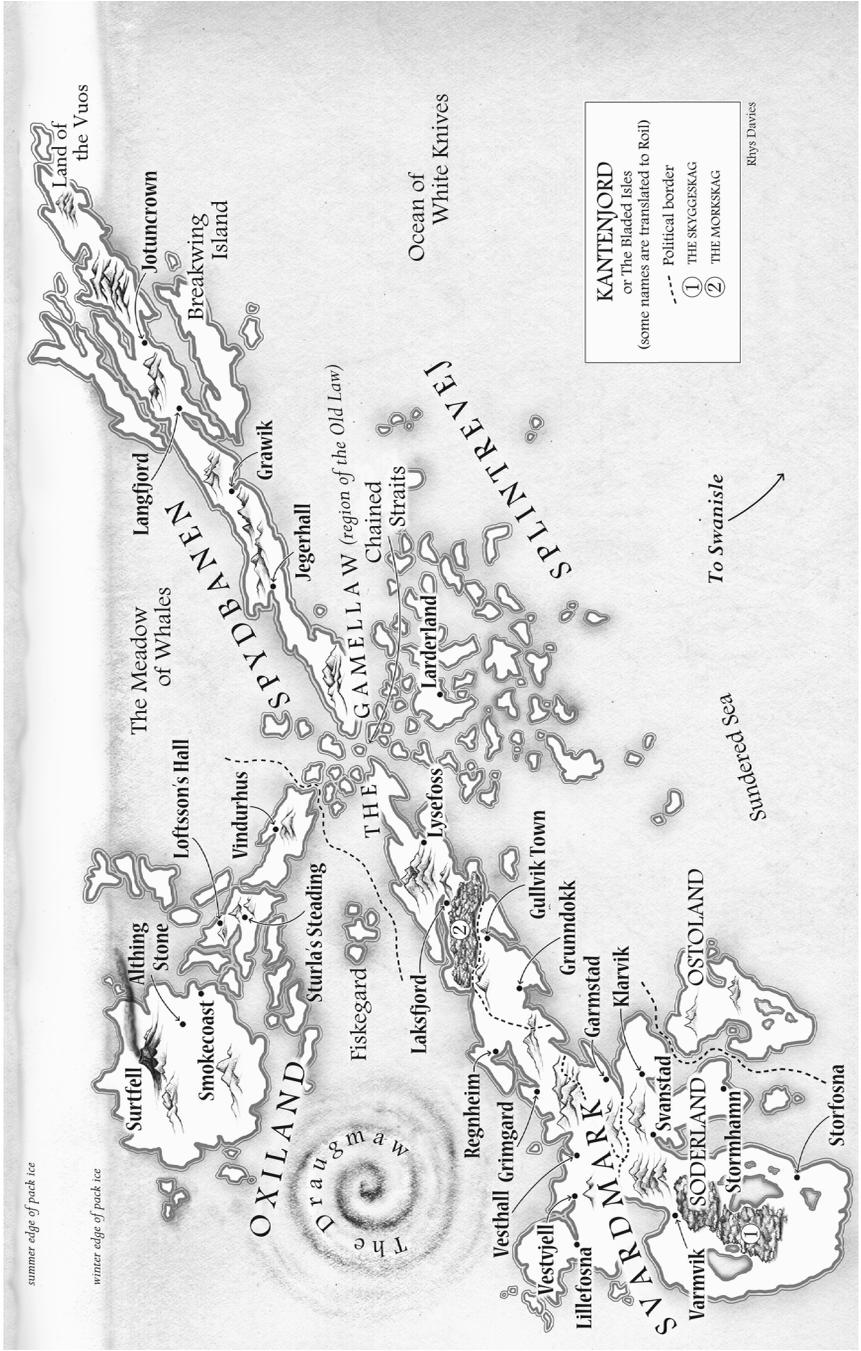
Wiglaf: A legendary warrior, whose fate was tied up with the swords Crypt-tongue and Schismglass. I don't envy him.

Winterjarl, the: Harbinger of Fimbulwinter and Ragnarok, or so we thought.

Wormeye: A troll.

Xembala: A paradisiacal eastern land, a source of ironsilk. There are times I'd like to be there.

Yngvarr Thrall-Taker: One of the Nine Wolves. He surprised us at the end.



summer edge of pack ice

winter edge of pack ice

KANTENJORD
 or The Bladed Isles
 (some names are translated to Roil)

----- Political border

① THE SKYGGESKAG
 ② THE MORRSKAG

Rhys Davies

To Swanisle

Sea surrounded

Ocean of White Knives

Land of the Vuos

The Meadow of Whales

Jotuncrown
 Breaking Island

Loftsson's Hall

Surtfell
 Althing Stone
 Smokecoast

OXILAND
 The Draugmaw

Sturla's Steading

Fiskegard

Laksiford

Regnheim

Vesthall Grimgard

Lillefosna

SVALDMARK

Svanstad

Varmvik

SODERLAND

Stormhamn

Storfosna

Jegerhall

GAMELLAW (region of the Old Law)
 Chained Straits

Landerland

Lysefoss

Gullvik Town

Grunndokk

Garmstad

Klarvik

OSTOLAND

SPLINTREVEJ

SPYBRANEN

Langsfjord

Grawik

Land of the Vuos

PROLOGUE

ASH-LAD

The Lardermen fished the castaway from the sea's gray clutches in a place where no island rose and no wreckage lay. The maelstrom that men named the Draugmaw was not so far from that place, yet it was strange to find no broken remnant of the boy's vessel.

"There now," said the captain, not unkindly. "You're warm and safe, drinking my aquavit and eating the finest Larderman gruel. Who might you be?"

"Deadfall," the ashen-faced lad muttered between shivers and sips and bites, looking around the deck in fear. "Deadfall." The boy, who looked no older than thirteen, seemed to spy little to cheer him. The sky of fading summer was a billowing tapestry of white and gray, shading to black. The pirates below were a rough-looking bunch to be sure, scowling below the black flag of the skull and crossed meat cleavers.

"Anyone make anything of that?"

"That's southern talk," said the mate. "The part I can make out anyway. Something about death and falling. I don't think he's from Kantenjord at all."

"Death. Falling. A boy from nowhere. This is ill-omened. I had a dream, you see. A girl riding a narwhal whispered to me to come here. . . . It wasn't far off our course. But I do not like this."

The captain was a man of the Swan, and his once-yearly confessions in Svanstad were long and specific and left the unlucky priests in their boxes as pale as the snows of the Trollberg. Yet he bore around his neck both the silver token of the Swan and its opposite number, the iron axe of the heathen god Torden. For the Swan's mercy was a great prize, but in the Bladed Isles with its troll-haunted ways it paid to remember the lore of the grandfathers.

"We sail to Fiskegard," the captain said. "The fishermen there can take him in. I trust you'll remember, lad, the kindness of Captain Erik Glint." For something cold as a troll's seeing-well told Erik Glint he'd be hearing from this boy again. That indeed they all would.

Now, Fiskegard was a forbidding place even in Haymonth, craggy gray peaks rising sheer from the sea like monstrous arrowheads. The island was grim, but the waters were a sea-giant's purse of silver fish, and many men sailed to Fiskegard for the winter spawning, earning themselves coin for the year and the local lords a surplus they could sell across the Bladed Isles. Already a few knarrrs nosed into the harbors bearing hardscrabble men, who peered at the notices in taverns like the Raven's Perch, known to the likes of the prince of Soderland, and the Pickled Rat, known to the likes of the Lardermen.

Thus Erik Glint tugged the boy his crew now called Askelad, the Ashen Lad, up the creaking, barnacled stairs of the Rat and into the squinting regard of Freidar the Wayfarer and Nan Henricksdatter, the proprietors.

"This lad speaks the Roil speech of the South," the captain told them, "and a bit of Kantentongue we've taught him on the way. He's a hard worker."

Old Freidar favored Askelad with a whisker-fringed frown like a cleft framed by new-fallen snow. "You're not selling him, are you, Erik?"

"Do you think I'm Yngvarr the Thrall-Taker or some such swine? You know me, Freidar."

"He is from far away, I think."

Askelad bowed with cold courtesy.

"Aye, from the South," Erik agreed.

"No," said Nan, as wizened as her husband. "Farther." Upon her red vest lay a bronze brooch, half-hidden by a coiling lock of gray hair. It had the shape of three sinuous dragons, their necks intertwined in fierce conflict. She smiled at Askelad and asked him in Roil, "Who are your people? Where is your home?"

Askelad had been taciturn aboard ship, and he startled Erik with an eloquent answer the captain couldn't quite follow. "My mother was a poet, and my father a thief. I was raised by monks, and by a warrior-scholar whom I hated in the flesh and revere in memory. My home is lost among the mountains of the known world's heart. I left it months and years ago, and bitterly now do I recall my exile. My only friend in the wider world was a rug. The thing I hate most is innocence, and the thing I miss most is joy. When can I start?"

"Son of a poet, you say," said Freidar, scratching his chin.

Nan turned to the captain. In Kantentongue she said, "A suspicious woman might mistrust him."

“He worked his passage, Nan,” said Erik, “never complained. Help him out, for me. Remember when Soderland tried to annex Fiskegard and blockaded your harbor. Who was it brought you victuals?”

“You,” said Nan.

“And when the cod-catch was sparse and hungry fishermen troubled your sleep, who kept you supplied?”

“You,” said Freidar. “But when the lad turns out to be the lost son of the North Wind, and that one comes screeching to blow down our tavern, who gets the bill?”

“Me,” said Erik with a nod. “Of course, I’ll be halfway to Kpalamaa then.”

So it was settled. Before the Lardermen cleared the harbor, Askelad was clearing tables. He cooked and carried and tended the fire. And late by firelight, he learned Kantentongue. As Harvestmonth approached, Freidar and Nan took turns sacrificing sleep to ensure their hire could speak to the fishermen.

Freidar’s lessons soon had Askelad reading Huginn Sharpspear’s *Younger Sagas*. “Oxiland’s is the oldest dialect of these islands,” the old man explained, “preserving root-words that appear all over.”

“These islands are small,” Askelad said. His red hair seemed a cousin of the firelight. His nimble hands passed over a map of the archipelago. “Perhaps no more than three thousand *li* along the longest path. How can you have so many dialects?”

“Three thousand what?”

“Sorry, I should say *rast*? Or *mil*? One thousand *mil*. So many little kingdoms and lordships!”

“Little?”

“I don’t mean to offend, Freidar.”

The tavernkeeper rubbed his eyes. “What lands are you familiar with, boy, that you think all the Bladed Isles so tiny?”

“I don’t think I have the language to explain. Yet. So what did Eilifur Ice-Gaze do after the witch-woman tricked Wiglaf Sword-Slave into wooing his beloved, and Eilifur raised his blade Crypttongue against him?”

“You read and tell me, Askelad.”

“*Eldur og sorg*. Fire and woe.”

“You skipped ahead.”

And thus on Freidar's nights for teaching, Eilifur Ice-Gaze and his ilk loved and fought their way toward doom, and in the nights between Nan used myths for the same purpose.

"And so, Askelad, the warring tribes of gods spat berry-juice into the vat to seal their pact of peace."

"They what?"

Nan smiled. "That's not the half of it. After the berry-juice and god-spit had swirled around a while, it gave birth to a new god."

"It what?"

"The god of knowledge. Kantenjord had a god of knowledge." Nan giggled. "He could answer any question, on any subject. A wonderful thing. So much wisdom he had. Naturally someone drowned him in the vat so they could take the magic juice."

"Aiya—crazy! I mean, Uff da? These legends are insane. I say this as one who knows the story of the philosopher who thought he might really be a dreaming butterfly, and of the tale of the peasant who married a snake."

"I might like to hear those sometime, Askelad. Well, I think sometimes Huginn's *Elder Sagas* make more sense when you're drunk."

"May I find out, Nan? No? All right, then. . . . So, the mead of drowned Knowledge was the making of skalds . . . Skalds?"

"Poets. Bards, you might say."

"My mother . . . she was a bard, once."

"Tell me about her. What has become of her?"

"I haven't seen her since the day an angry power slapped her from the sky. Nan, I'm sorry . . . *Beklager*. I do not think I can continue tonight."

Nan worried after Askelad, but in the gray of the next morning he was nowhere to be found.

She confided in Freidar, who answered, "Sometimes I think he carries a doom great as any in the sagas. That is why I taught him of Eilifur, of Wiglaf, the rest. To tease out his story. Or prepare him for his fate. He knows more than he'll say, that much is sure."

"I think he dwelled far to the east, Freidar. Farther than the Eldshore or the wild forests or the steppe. I think something bad happened to his parents there. As to how he ended up here . . ."

"He will tell us, or not. But I think Erik brought us trouble."

“I’m sure of it. But I like the lad.”

“As do I.” Freidar clutched the edge of the first of four shields hanging from the tavern wall. “Four sons, Nan.”

“Don’t speak of it.”

“War. Sickness. Falling. Drowning. It still hurts.”

“Then don’t speak of it, Freidar. Nor of how Erik knew exactly how we’d feel.”

Freidar sat and pounded a table. “He knew also we’re Runewalkers. That we might be able to fight Askelad’s doom, if it comes to that.”

She sat beside him, wrapped an arm around him. “We gave all that up.”

“Ah, Nan.” He squeezed her hand. “As long as you’re here, I won’t worry.”

“Be glad of what we have, Freidar. And that for a while we’ve another boy to care for.”

“Glad is a fit feeling for day’s end, when we know at last what the light’s wrought.”



As the sun struck a golden road upon the eastern waves, the one they called Askelad scaled a sea-cliff, shrieking gulls his only company. He’d avoided the other children of the island. They knew him, of course, for he was a trifle young to stand among the men of the fishing shacks, hauling and drying stockfish. And he knew the children, though he was a little old to run amongst them. They gave each other stares and a wide berth. He needed no company that lacked wings.

He was more at home with things that flew.

He reached the cliff top and collapsed in a blast of cold wind. He clutched his Kantenjord cloak. At last he stood, the dark cloth flapping like a torn sail.

“I am Innocence!” he bellowed to the steel-gray sea, with dawn still a newborn thing to his left, rays thin and tentative as the legs of a colt. To his right the infinite blade of the sea clove blue-black armor of storms. “I’m chosen of the chi of the Heavenwalls! Commander of the vital breath of Qiangguo! Master of Deadfall! I need no mother, no father! I am power, and this is my world!”

The gulls winged warily, and he raised his hand to call upon the wind.

It became no more fierce, no more cold, than before.

He lowered his hand. It became a fist as it fell.

“Why have you abandoned me? I did not want you, but you chose me. You cannot just discard me on this barbarian rock!” The wind had nothing to say beyond its continual groan. Innocence backed away and folded his arms. “Where are you, Deadfall? You saved me. You may be an evil thing, but I don’t want you dead.”

He stayed there, amid the raw sounds of wind and surf and birdscreech, until he risked vexing his employers. The master of the world had to get to work.

As he descended he noticed a dark winged shape, angling closer. He hurried. In Freidar and Nan’s tales the three great islands of Kantenjord were in fact the greatest of arken-drakes, mineralized long ago. Oddly enough, the tales had it that younger, mobile dragons avoided these lands, for if a young dragon fell under the influence of a dreaming elder, madness might result. He didn’t know what the shape was. But it was darker than a seagull—

He dropped the last ten feet, stumbled, rolled, and ran.

He remembered his mother’s voice, like something in a dream. *Your father was a great climber and runner, a master acrobat and a survivor. Oh, and he stole things sometimes.*

Something screeched past him, something much faster than he.

He froze upon the rambling path, between tiny wildflowers and little granite islands in the grass. The thing rushed ahead, converged with its shadow upon the path, and revealed itself as a peregrine falcon.

It did not alight but spun midair and rushed toward him, golden belly flashing with the brightening dawn, wings gray like the western sea. Somehow its wide, dark eyes were full of recognition. The feeling was mutual.

He had seen it before, on a day that haunted his thoughts.

“Get away! I want nothing from that time! I don’t need you, or them! Go!” He clapped his hands together, and thunder cracked.

The boy fell to his knees, deafened by sound and shock. When his senses returned, the falcon had gone. He searched the sky for wings and the ground for feathers. Nothing.

“I have power yet,” he said to his stinging hands. He ran to the village, head down, feeling as though dark eyes followed him the whole way.



Two weeks later the knarr *Swan-road* arrived ahead of an early snowstorm, and the Pickled Rat bustled with old hands and new arrivals. Among the fresh fishermen was an unexpected visitor, a Swan priestess in a cloak of silver-gray whom Freidar and Nan offered a booth. “Are you visiting Mentor Ulf up at the church, then?” Freidar asked.

“My plans are uncertain,” the priestess answered. “Except for the aquavit.”
“Coming right up!”

The one called Askelad, now navigating Kantentongue with dispatch if not grace, cocked his head at the cloaked woman. He was starting to detect accents, and hers struck an odd note. It was not, he thought, of Oxiland, Svardmark, or Spydbanen, or any other nook of the Bladed Isles. It sounded closest to that of Swanisle, the nearest foreign land and home to some of Fiskegard’s winter workers.

And my mother’s land, he thought. But there was a lilt to it that spoke of somewhere farther off. As he studied her, neglecting the flow of cups, she turned and studied him back. She was not young, perhaps in her forties, yet with youthful mischief in her expression. She was dark brown in the way of folk from Kpalamaa and other great lands of the distant South. Her hair, what he could see of it under the hood, was a lively tangle, and dark freckles made her weathered face look impish. Yet there was a hardness in the set of her jaw. Something about her made him think of daggers and monsters, but also laughter and marvels.

As he’d grown comfortable with the language of his benefactors, he’d acquired a certain swagger that amused the fishermen. But it was all gone now. *I’ve been found* was his first thought, though by whom and for what he didn’t know.

He busied himself with this or that and skirted that corner; and perhaps he’d inherited some of his father’s stealth, for he appeared to avoid the priestess’s attention until nightfall. He whirled here and there on currents of ale, mead, brandy, aquavit, hovering at times in a vortex of talk:

*They say there’s been more fires on the troll-mounts, up Spydbanen way—
They’ve talked down that rebellion in Soderland for now—
Hear tell of the Nine Wolves? Been killing folk beside the roads—*

Princess Corinna and Prince Ragnar, they've got their work cut out for them—

The talk circled round and round like a raven waiting for something to die, and all the good gossip was in time rent and digested, with only the offal of old rumors and tired grudges to chew between sips. Yet snow and chill discouraged the clientele from tromping to their whistling shacks. Innocence was tired, but Freidar and Nan weren't about to close shop. When he dared glance toward the priestess she beckoned him closer . . . but he was rescued by a fisherman who called for stories.

"Let's hear marvel-tales, Askelad! Let's hear eventyr!"

He pretended not to have noticed the priestess and leapt onto a table. Men laughed and cheered, and now a hush came upon the Pickled Rat as he began, "Hear now the tale of Impossible Paal." He'd learned it from a pamphlet come lately out of Ostoland, called simply *Eventyr*, or fairy tales, compiled by two women combing the villages for stories. He'd loved them at once.

He told how lazy Paal tricked a king into thinking Paal's kettle could boil by itself, leading the king to embarrassment; and how Paal tempted him into thinking Paal's flute could restore the dead to life, leading the king to murder; and how Paal fooled him into thinking Paal had leapt off a cliff into an undersea paradise, leading the king to death—and Paal's claiming all his lands. As the poor fishermen laughed at the pranking and slaughtering of the mighty, the priestess stood and walked closer to the table, and so he launched into another story, of how the North Wind scattered the flour a poor boy was carrying, and how the boy marched right up to the North Wind's home to demand restitution. And so it went, as tale after tale, plucky ordinary folk got the better of the wise, the mighty, and the supernatural.

At last he ran out of such fare and, racking his brains, spun a chilling account of a man who raced an evil sea-spirit, a Draug, across the stormy ocean in a confrontation that could only end with shipwreck and death. He'd heard this story only once, and he embellished it by letting the man escape with the help of a merciful water-dragon.

"I've never heard it like that," said a man doubtfully.

"I think I did hear it told that way," the boy replied. "Once. In eastern parts."

"Dragons don't live in the sea," another man objected.

"They can if they want to," said the Swan priestess, drawing stares. "You've lived in places where that's true, haven't you, lad?"

“Tell us!” a fisherman said.

“Yeah, Askelad,” said another. “We never hear tell about yourself.”

There was general agreement, amid some knocking of mugs upon tables. Someone passed him an ale, which made self-confession more reasonable. Wiping foam from his lips, he began.



THE TALE OF THE BOY, THE SCROLL, AND THE MAGIC CARPET

East of the sunrise, far beyond the Eldshore and the Wheelgreen and the Ruby Waste, there was a land of wisdom and grace, where sages fashioned works of wonder. One such was a scroll-painting of strange peaks, ones even more jagged and spindly than those of Fiskegard, wreathed in forest and wrapped in cloud.

Had the painting only been beautiful, it would have been enough. But it was also a thing of magic. Gaze upon the mountains, or clutch the scroll, and you might find yourself drawn into another world, where the timeless mountains speared an infinite sky. A great wizard-king made the scroll to be a haven, and it had yet another peculiar property. Time flowed differently within the scroll than within our world. The relationship was a fluid thing, but time inside the scroll always flowed faster, so that hours outside might be days inside.

Once a boy and a girl were abandoned within the scroll. Their parents did something foolish—bringing a male Western dragon to an island that was really a sleeping, female Eastern dragon. The dragons’ mutual desire destroyed that island with fire and earthquake, and the kids could only survive inside the scroll. The parents were supposed to come back. They never did.

I’ll translate the kids’ names as Innocence and A-Girl-Is-A-Joy. In some ways they were very different. The boy’s parents came from the West of the world, the girl’s from the East. He liked battling; she liked exploring. He was quick with the spoken word, she with the calligrapher’s brush. But after their parents disappeared, they were inseparable. Their only other companions

were monkish sorts full of lofty thoughts. So they chased each other around the monastery and up and down the rainy mountain. They discovered and built up and destroyed enough kingdoms to fill Peersdatter and Jorgensdatter's *Eventyr*. Such was childhood. Yet their orphanage in the mountains did not come free. There was among the monks a warrior who went by the name Walking Stick. He drilled the children endlessly.

Now, when I say warrior, you might imagine a fierce-eyed fellow with a spear and roundshield, helmet and byrnie. Or maybe in a more southern style, with plate armor and longsword and a shield like a kite, and if his gaze is fierce, his helmet conceals it. But you would have it wrong. This warrior has no armor, just a robe, and he bears no weapon, and his eyes are serene as tidepools. You laugh. You wouldn't if you fought him. They say the heathen All-Father bade men always keep a weapon within reach, but this man is his own weapon. His body is as tough as wood and as flexible as grass. He knows hundreds of ways to strike, throw, jump, grapple, trip. He knows the vital breath that flows within each person, and the thirty-six key paralytic points. And he can use his own vital breath to leap walls and walk across treetops.

Again you laugh! You wouldn't if you trained with him. He was convinced that Innocence had a great power within him, and a destiny, and that only endless toil would make his fate a good one. As for A-Girl-Is-A-Joy, well, there are those who think women incapable of being warriors. Walking Stick wasn't one of them. She might have been happier if he had been. Miles on miles of running upon the mountain, hours on hours of hard labor in the temple, and thousands on thousands of mock battles in the gardens. I'm not even going to repeat the lectures! For "the superior person speaks softly and acts boldly," and "what is done needs no declaration, what is finished needs no protest, what is past needs no blame," and "life spawns, the seasons pass and return, yet does Heaven say a word?" Perhaps you now have a sense of his speech; I will speak of it no more.

Save for this, Innocence longed to escape his teacher. And the day came when he met the agent of his escape.

In a desert city between East and West, a work was fashioned, perhaps as wondrous as the scroll. It was a magic carpet flowing with the colors of the sands and the mountains, with the image of a volcano at its heart. Like others of its kind, it was made to fly, though sometimes it did so badly. Unlike others,

it was also made to snatch power away from those who possessed it. The wizard's apprentice judged its purpose evil, and he stealthily changed its weaving, hoping to alter its fate. Thus the carpet became a divided thing, torn between good and evil. Perhaps that more than anything is why it sought the boy.

The carpet was attuned to power and sought out Innocence within the scroll. It told him of many things, of the outside world, of monsters and wizards, of armies and kings—of power. And Innocence made a rash decision and left the scroll, flying away upon the carpet.

How they explored! No boy roaming the countryside beside his dog could have been more eager than this lad wandering the Earthe with his magic carpet. The things they saw! The Moon Pit with its eerie shining minerals, remnants of the lost satellites of past ages. Splendid Amberhorn upon the Midnight Sea, a whole decadent civilization retired to a single city and countryside. Loomsberg with its waterwheels and alchemical engines. It was in the eccentric air of Loomsberg that the pair hit on the plan of exploring the moon—the silver moon, the last moon, place of mountains and gray plains and ice. Why go to the moon? Because forbidding as it was, it looked safer than the sun.

And so they rose to that strange orb. They had no guarantee that the world's air extended all the way to the moon, and for a time it seemed they could never reach it. For Innocence, shivering in the great cold of that pale-blue altitude, began to fall unconscious. The carpet made one last effort and found itself in a dark expanse. Fearing it had killed its companion, it tried to dive for the Earthe—but it found itself snared by an attractive force exerted by the silver sphere overhead.

Together they crashed upon a frosty plain of gray dust. The moon, it turned out, had its own air, thin as that of a high mountain peak but enough to restore Innocence to himself. Yet they could not celebrate. The strange land beckoned, but there was little chance of the boy staying healthy in the cold and thin air. As peculiar pale creatures crept over the horizon, reminiscent of lobsters fashioned of white mushrooms, they tried to fly.

It did not work.

They were trapped upon the moon.

Innocence had little time to act. He had to draw upon the strange power that lived within him, an innate ability to manipulate the vital breath of the

land. But that power was tied to a single part of the Earthe. Did he dare try to tap the power of the moon? He had little choice.

And the carpet helped him, for siphoning power was part of its purpose. Together they absorbed the strange magic of the moon.

I . . . how to describe it? The moon is beloved of poets and thieves. And of lovers. And in that moment it seemed no accident that those on the edge of life revered the moon; for love, and a zest for life, flowed into Innocence.

Also, power.

They rose from the moon in a cloud of dust, strange fungus-things clawing and chittering in their wake. Their triumph was to be short-lived. Escaping the pull of the moon, they entered the region of darkness, and as the cold ravaged Innocence's skin and the absence of atmosphere seared his lungs, light swirled within his vision and awareness ebbed.

Once, he awoke with the knowledge that they fell at great speed toward the Earthe, and that the carpet was shielding Innocence from a great heat birthed by their plunge through the atmosphere. He caught a glimpse of jagged islands, their mountains goring the clouds, then a stormy sea. They hit; their flame was quenched. So was thought.

How Innocence survived is a blurry matter. It seems he must have used the power to stay afloat and keep his body warm, but the events are as a dream. When the Lardermen found him, the carpet was nowhere to be seen.

In pride Innocence had flown too close to the moon and was nearly destroyed. He was now a simple serving boy. So, if it's fated, he will remain.



In the silence that followed, the priestess took his hand and said, "This one's practically given a confession, I'd better shrive him." There was uneasy laughter at that, which even Nan and Freidar joined, and there was no help for it but to be led into the booth.

"You are forgiven of course," the priestess said as they sat, "but you have brought great danger on yourself, Innocence Gaunt."

Almost he ran. But there was truly nowhere to run upon Fiskegard. "How do you know me?" he asked. "And who are you?"

"Weeks ago there was a boy of Fiskegard who overheard a young man

on a sea-cliff yell to the wind, 'I am innocent!' He told his mother, who told another, and the chain of tellings eventually reached the ear of one who is paid to report unusual doings to us."

"Us?"

Her gaze did not waver. "That needn't concern you. Let's say there are those who keep an eye out, for threats to peace."

"What sort of threats?"

She smiled. There was something cold in it. "You start with two questions and stretch them like sailcloth into more. I'll say what I'll say. I am Eshe of the Fallen Swan, an itinerant priestess. I serve as other priestesses do, but I have a larger duty too. And I seek out interesting people who might serve the cause of peace."

"Like me?"

"And your parents. I can reunite you, Innocence."

"If I wanted that, I wouldn't be here."

"It does not sound as if you want to be here. And you have just informed a whole crowd of migrant fishermen what you are."

He looked over his shoulder. A couple of drinkers looked back at him through the haze.

He returned his gaze to the priestess, uncertain what to make of her. "What am I, then . . . Eshe, is it? My mother spoke of a priestess named Eshe, though I don't remember much."

"I remember your parents. Looking at you, I knew you at once for their son. You have your mother's intellect, your father's contrariness. But any gifts from them are dwarfed by the gift of Qiangguo's Heavenwalls. You are power, Innocence. The kind of power that wizards and warlords will want to claim."

"And you want to claim me instead?"

She raised a hand. "Hardly. I might want to employ you someday. But most of all I want you and your parents somewhere safe. Where you won't become the trigger for a war."

Innocence laughed. "You think very highly of me."

"I know the eye of a storm when I see it."

"I am my own man, priestess. Let me be."

"All right. For now. I will stay with the village priest and argue about the liturgical calendar to keep myself warm. But I will be back."

“Do what you want. You have no hold on me.” He hesitated. “My parents . . . they are both alive?”

Eshe studied him as she rose. She nodded. “So my sources tell me.”

“Are they looking for me?”

“I suspect so. They are heading west, haphazardly, aboard a frequently crashing flying craft. It may be many months before they reach you.”

“That is as it will be.” He spoke as a Kantening might, but as he rose, he bowed in the manner of Qiangguo, remembering how Walking Stick had taught him to respect his elders. Eshe surprised him by bowing likewise, with no self-consciousness, here in a room of the Outer World.

As she exited the Rat, Eshe glanced at the sky and back into the room. “I think this may be a break in the weather,” she told them all.

A number of men took her advice and returned to their homes or shacks. Before long the Rat was sufficiently emptied that Nan and Freidar made noises about closing up, and their ward was too occupied with plates and bowls, mugs and knives, to worry about Eshe of the Fallen Swan. Below the surface of his thoughts, however, memories shifted like horses that had fallen asleep beneath the snow.

At some point Nan steered him to his straw-covered shelf by the stove. She covered him in a blanket. He tumbled into the deep sleep of cold nights.

He dreamed he hovered over the jagged contours of Fiskegard, the island and the snowfall patchily illuminated by a cloud-veiled moon. He floated far above the sea, yet the sound of surf beat in his ears like slow thunder. Looking around he saw translucent waves glowing silver all around him, as though a second ghost-ocean had manifested far above the first. He could still see the ordinary world, but this spectral sea stretched wide all around. Its waves slammed into some unseen headland, scattering into starry droplets.

“Aiya,” he swore. “What is this place?”

He did not expect anyone to answer, but someone did.

“You drift within the Straits of Tid.”

He saw a ghostly beast like a dolphin with a horn such as unicorns were said to possess. The horn resembled an icicle and the body a patch of star-speckled darkness. Upon it rode a young woman in battle gear. She bore a spear and roundshield and wore a byrnie of gleaming steel. Her helmet was a round cap with a spectacle guard masking much of her face, though he saw

her braided red hair and the icy blue of her eyes. She looked older than him, sixteen perhaps, though her voice had a hint of childish laughter in it that made him wonder.

Dreaming—if such he was—made him bold. “That’s not very informative,” he said. “And if I ask you your name, will you say you are the Rider of Zot or the Guardian of Zed or the Slayer of Zeep?”

“Tid means ‘time,’” she said. “You drift upon the edge of the Straits of Time, where its waters wash the rocks of the present. And I have taken the name Beinahruga, though you can call me Cairn.”

“Charmed.”

“And you?”

“You may call me Askelad. Nan has told me of the Choosers of the Slain, who swoop down from divine Vindheim and carry off the spirits of the valiant dead. Though I thought that was just a story. Are you one of them?” He looked this way and that, as an uneasy thought came to him. “Am I dead?”

Cairn laughed. The sound seemed to reverberate off the unseen headlands of present time. “Do you think yourself valiant, Askelad?”

He laughed too. “The Sage Emperor has said that a superior man should avoid violence and heedlessness, that he be sincere, and that he be polite. Would a Chooser of the Slain pick such a one?”

“You never know.”

“So you are a Chooser?”

“The All-Father has said that a rash tongue sings mischief, O Askelad, if that’s what you want to call yourself. I would like to keep my nature to myself for now. What you should know is that I have been waiting for you. You have the power to explore the Straits of Tid. There are certain sites in Kantenjord where the energies of the sleeping dragons distort space and time. Fractures in the fabric of reality, rent in the days when the arkendrakes fought one another. In those places it’s possible to send one’s dream-form into other realms. Or, with sufficient power, to go there bodily. The Pickled Rat is built upon one such site.”

“Do Freidar and Nan know of this?”

“They suspect. They know many things they haven’t told you of.”

“What do you want from me?”

“Learn—and beware!”

She gestured with her spear, and it was as though a gale rose up. He was washed upon the waves through clouds and snow, then rain and sun, speeding across the seas.

They seemed now to float above rugged day-lit straits, where two jutting headlands loomed above a small, barren island. A titanic metal chain wrapped around each promontory, linking them to the island in the straits' midst, itself enmeshed in the links. Runes the size of horses glowed upon the links.

"What is it?" Innocence asked.

"Behold the Great Chain of Unbeing. Forged by the Vindir, great lords now thought of as gods, it drains the energies of the arkendrades, keeping them docile, unable to resume their ancient conflict. A third length of the Chain plunges into unseen depths, sending excess power deep into the Earth. The Chain has an intelligence of its own, and from time to time it claims a champion. This time it has chosen your friend, A-Girl-Is-A-Joy. She bears the mark of the Chain upon her hand."

Innocence looked across the seas, past an archipelago of thousands of craggy islands and skerries, out to the East.

"You are thinking of another mighty construct," said Cairn. "The Heavenswalls of Qiangguo. They too draw power from dragons. They too chose a champion—you."

"I have never understood why. I'm no son of Qiangguo. By accident I was raised as one, but the blood of that land doesn't flow in my veins. I'm much closer to the folk of Kantenjord! And why did this Chain choose Joy? She is a daughter of Qiangguo! It makes no sense."

"You are right to wonder, Innocence. Humans have wrought these mighty works to empower themselves. But they did not anticipate that those tools would conspire with each other."

"Conspire? How? Why?"

Cairn laughed and raised her spear.

The sun vanished again, and reappeared, many times, throwing the ocean into light and casting it into darkness. And now land—green coast, misty forest, looming mountains, and forest again, and pale-green grass stretching forever.

Below him lay an astonishing sight. At the southern edge of a great influx of the sea, upon the snow-covered grasses of the steppe, there stood thousands

of tents and tens of thousands of men, nearly that number in horses, a hundred ships on wheels, and scores of balloons ready for flight.

He drifted down toward the horde, and suddenly a falcon crossed his vision, the same that had stalked him weeks earlier. Somehow it picked out a single individual on the ground and dove toward her. He fell too, drawn along in the bird's wake.

He seemed to hover above the ground in the midst of armored nomads, as the bird alighted upon the wrist of a woman. She was a noble of the remote East, dark hair proudly worn high and shiny with a coating of animal fat; yet she was no ornamental figurehead. He took note of her muscular figure, even hidden as it was by a thickly draped, sky-blue robe. More than that, he took note of an imperiously eager look to her gaze.

"Meat!" she called, and the language was none he knew, yet somehow within this dreamscape he understood her. "Meat for my falcon! And summon the khatun. Tell her I have interesting news."

Soon the bird was snapping down chunks of flesh, and out of the crowd came a similarly dressed woman, a little younger than the first, though her hair was piled and coiled more elaborately, and yellow makeup emphasized her brow. Her smile worried the unseen boy. "I am here, elder sister. I hope you are ready to define 'interesting.'"

"Qurca has returned. He's found the one I sought."

The younger sister's eyes narrowed. "You are sure?"

"I've seen the image in my bird's mind."

"Where is he?"

I'm right here, he thought, but tried not to think it too loudly.

"In the Bladed Isles," the elder sister said.

The younger sister nodded. "What the locals call Kantenjord. 'The Edgelands.' I know it. I have allies and spies there. This is auspicious. The Great Khan's council is even now debating how to apply a pincer campaign against the Eldshore. The northern route is clear. The southern prospects are murky. But thanks to you, sister, there is another way." The younger sister gestured at the fleet of balloons. "Your inventions can carry a force across the waters. We can subdue the primitive island-dwellers and have a base for harrying the Eldshore from the west."

"Not my inventions. They are the work of Haytham ibn Zakwan—"

“It is charming how you wish to credit outlanders. Yes, ibn Zakwan’s craft can carry a force to a new stronghold, and over the months of winter we can build up an army. The Westerners fear a winter campaign, as we do not. Yes. We can conquer the Bladed Isles by spring and assault the Eldshore in summer.”

The elder smiled a trace. “You may be overconfident. And how does finding Innocence Gaunt suddenly make the Bladed Isles a good target?”

“As I said, I have allies there.” The younger gestured toward two soldiers, who led forward her horse. “Not all of them human. One of them will know how to use the boy’s power to our advantage. And I have you. You have yet to regain the khan’s full confidence.”

The elder sister’s smile vanished, and her face darkened with anger as her falcon rose and shrieked. Meanwhile the younger sister’s horse sniffed, whinnied, and bucked. The invisible wanderer did not understand the animals’ behavior, but it worried him. The elder sister said, “Our mother sided with me in our dispute over Xembala.”

“And her word carried great weight,” said the younger sister, grabbing the reins. “Nevertheless, my husband is the Grand Khan. He agreed you were justified in your actions, arranging trade with the Xembalans rather than conquest. But nonetheless you undercut me.”

“It was you who subverted my mission.”

“Calm, calm, Aughtatai,” said the younger sister to the horse, but Innocence thought the words were equally meant for the elder. “Hunt down this Innocence Gaunt for me, Steelfox. I know you mean to inform his parents, whom you lent your inventor ibn Zakwan and your shaman Northwing. I do not wish you to break your word. Tell them. But surely a Karvak princess will be a more formidable huntress than a pair of lunatics from the world’s edge. Join my invasion of Kantenjord. And bring Innocence to me, that I might honor the chosen of the Heavenwalls.”

“Control him, you mean.”

“And if that is the price of peace between us? One boy’s future in exchange for your rightful, unblemished place in our father’s empire?”

The elder sister, Steelfox, did not reply.

Jewelwolf’s horse was snorting and shaking now. It lurched toward the spot where the unseen wanderer felt himself to be. He began to shiver.

“Aughatai, what has gotten into you!” cried Jewelwolf. “What do you see?”

The horse got loose and charged the invisible boy. Soldiers shouted.

Cairn! he tried to shout. *Help—*

So you see, “Askelad,” came the voice of the Chooser, you can’t escape the burden of your name, nor your power. I leave you with a riddle. It may have practical value one day. If you should meet your future self, what is the most important question you can ask?

And in his straw bed in the Bladed Isles, Innocence Gaunt woke with a start.