

The Hero's Breviary of the Warring Kingdoms

Travel Journals from Nostria and Åndergast



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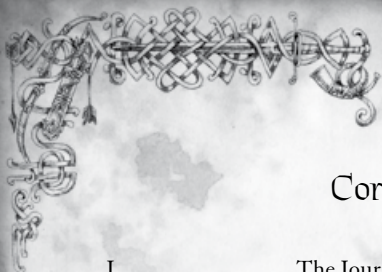
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Travel Journals from
Nostria and Andergast

By
Daniel Simon Richter

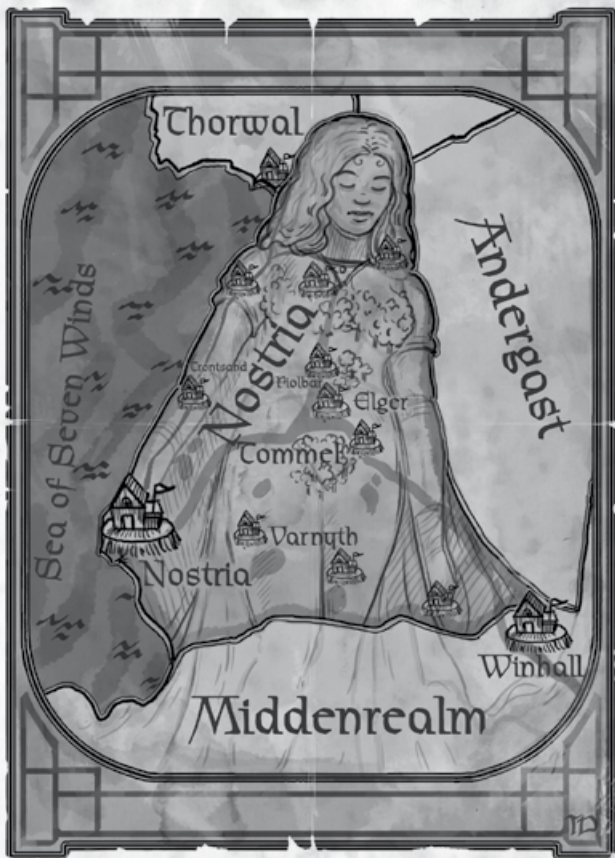




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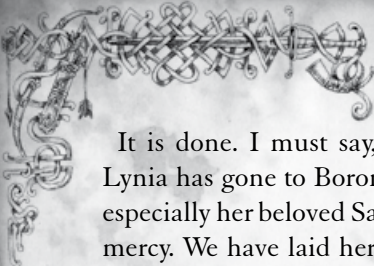


I




The Journey Begins

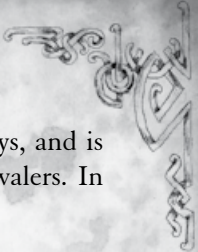




It is done. I must say, it was a sad duty. Young Lynia has gone to Boron. May the celestial beings, especially her beloved Satuaria, receive her full with mercy. We have laid her to rest just as she wished, not far from the small birch grove in Hookmarsh Moor. Her raven Herisso, whom we found huddled up on her chest, rests next to her, as does her old broom, which she used as a walking cane. I had never seen my swordfather so quiet or so saddened. I sat on the dunes and looked long at the beacon fire on the hook of Salta. I entrusted my grief to the gray sea, hoping that the unfathomable Efferd might wash it away.

My decision is final. More than one moon has passed since my time as squire ended and I became a knight. Oh, how I would have loved to escape the drafty motte of my swordfather—and the envious looks of his sons—sooner, but Lynia's suffering prevented me from doing so. Gasparyn spoils his men far too much, and teaches them hardly anything of value. Perhaps he was once a great fighter, but all those years in his castle have not been good for

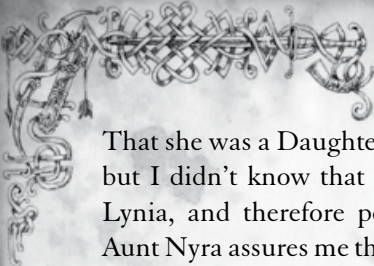




him. He overindulges in brandy these days, and is Netherhellbent on revenge on the Thorwalers. In this he is much like Uncle Hupart.

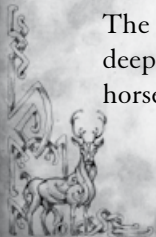
I don't want to say anything bad about the Sea Count of Sevenwind, even if Father doesn't take him seriously. He insisted on gifting me a fine blade and an old suit of armor at my accolade. I fear that the armor will not do me much good, as it is far too heavy, and hinders my use of the bow. Still, I am thankful for his gift. Findulias is the name of the long sword that I now carry at my side. It is a magnificent weapon. Its fuller is decorated with ancient runes (which I cannot read, unfortunately). The byrnie he gave me shows a fishing boat flying the flag of our House. Never before has anyone given me such a precious gift. I made my way to Trontsand to show my respect for him, and to give him my thanks.

Aunt Nyra finally told me why my nursemaid was called Young Lynia even though she had seen more than 80 summers.



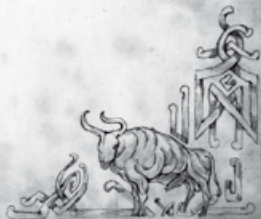
That she was a Daughter of Satuarria was no secret, but I didn't know that her mother's name is also Lynia, and therefore people call her Old Lynia. Aunt Nyra assures me that Old Lynia still lives, and dwells at the Chalk Cliffs of Hallerû. At least now I understand why, before her death, Young Lynia asked me to deliver the chest to her mother. I can't imagine just how old this Old Lynia must be by now, when her daughter had already attained such a great age.

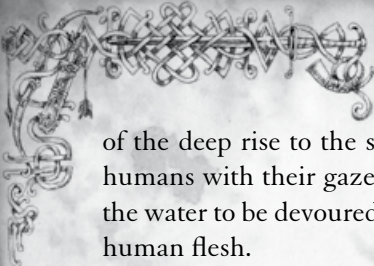
Tomorrow I shall leave the court of Trontsand and travel up the Ingval River. I look forward to it with great anticipation, for it is a journey I have always wanted to make. Before I set out, I will make one last stop at my parents' fortified farm to pick up the horse they promised me. I want to name it Lucharna, after the terrifying creature from the Lakelands region. The mere sight of my Lucharna will drive my enemies mad with fear.



The blood-curdling Lucharna, which dwell in the deepest lakes, are hippocampi, which is to say half horse and half fish. Even though their head, neck,

chest, and forelegs are that of a proud steed, the back half of their body is that of a gigantic fish, and they speed through the water as swiftly as a bird flies through the air. Sometimes, if you stand on the shores of one of their lakes at night, you can see the eyes of the hippocampi sparkling in the depths. I don't know of any Lakelander who will do so during a full moon, for that is when these steeds

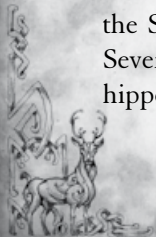


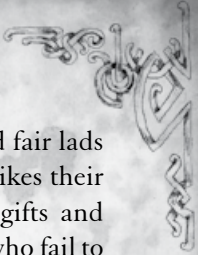


of the deep rise to the surface to beguile innocent humans with their gaze and drag them down into the water to be devoured—for their favorite meal is human flesh.

I still remember vividly how, as a young girl, I approached the waters with a feeling of dread. Young Lynia lived in a hut on the lakeshore, and she did her best to knock that superstition out of me. She must have convinced my father to let her accompany me when I first became page, and later squire, to Gasparyn, knight of the realm. Thanks to her guidance, little remains of that scared child. I wish never to be dominated by fear again, and I strive to be like the Storm King, whose presence instills fear into the hearts of enemies.

The myth of the Storm King has always thrilled me, and I spent long nights on the highest battlements of the motte trying to meet him. When the wind howls and the clouds hang low in the sky, they say, the Storm King travels over the Lakeland and the Sevenwind Coast, leaping over the water on his hippocampus and capsizing boats and ships for fun.





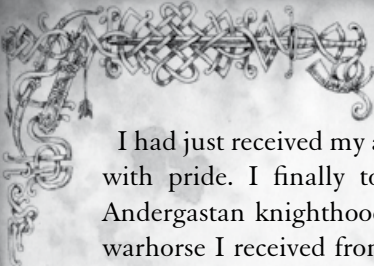
He is said to invite beautiful maidens and fair lads to join his dance above the clouds. If he likes their dancing, he gives them many precious gifts and returns them safely back to shore. Those who fail to entertain him, however, are beyond even the help of the gods, for the Storm King's hippocampi steeds are always hungry....

The peoples on the coast are naturally frightened by such tales. Enemies shall fear my Lucharna as much as the coast dwellers fear the primal forces of wind and waves. The pigheaded Andergastans, especially, shall come to know my name, as they honestly believe that the only blade a woman should wield is a kitchen knife. It is easy to see why those swine will never agree to peace.

But enough daydreaming. Tomorrow I depart for Salta, which I hear is an impressive place. I am excited.

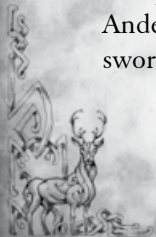
—*from the diary of Brealetha of Hyttenhau, Spring, 1040 FB*

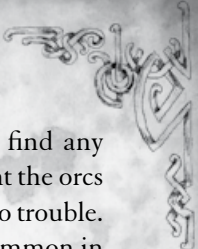




I had just received my accolades and was bursting with pride. I finally took my place among the Andergastan knighthood. I was astonished by the warhorse I received from my grandfather Conrad, the Baron of the Ornib Lands, to mark this occasion. I felt like a little child seeing an animal for the first time. This stallion was nothing less than a Teshkaler, a magnificent and proud breed with excellent training. I brushed his midnight black coat and walked him in the yard to stretch his legs. I saw no trace of the breed's rumored stubbornness, for he responded easily to my every command. I named him Tharvin, after one of the Divine Steeds worshiped in Teshkal, and I could hardly wait to take him out for the first time.

In my exuberance, I spurred him up into the foothills of the Dark Ridge, searching for the orcs that Baron Wenzeslaus' scouts had reported seeing in the area. I wore my byrnie, with its chainmail and plate sections, and chose to carry the mighty Andergaster, the greatsword I received from my swordfather, Wenzeslaus, upon my accolades.




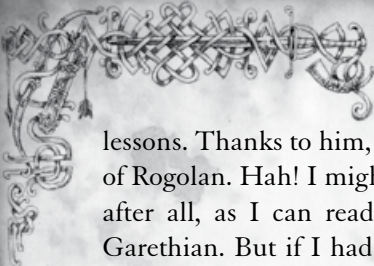


Thinking back, I was lucky that I didn't find any traces of the orcs—at least, none that meant the orcs were still nearby. Recklessness often leads to trouble. Also, the dark dwarves, which are more common in these woods than one might expect, are never easy to deal with. They see themselves as the protectors of the lands of Albumin, but what they call protection, others would call extortion.

I cannot blame my swordfather, the Baron of Albumin, for spending most of his time in the city of Andergast. I would do the same if I judged all dwarves by the glum Angroshim I met at the Court of Albumin. The baron was hosting a large contingent of representatives from Mountain King Bonderik, and they proved quite easy to rile. I am fortunate in having found a protector in the form of a dark dwarf named Cadrang; he has saved me from trouble more than once.

Even more important are the countless times which Cadrang mended my chainmail after the Albumin knights taught me valuable but embarrassing





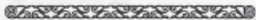
lessons. Thanks to him, I can decipher some runes of Rogolan. Hah! I might have made a good dwarf after all, as I can read their writing better than Garethian. But if I had wanted to spend my days reading, I would have become an official and not a knight.

The message from my grandfather reached me soon after I received my accolades. He wanted me to take charge of the son of a fellow knight in Thuranax and escort him safely to Beartooth, to begin his squirehood. It is unwise to make Grandfather wait for something. I saddled Tharvin, said farewell to my friends in Albumin, and rode west, in the direction of Thurana.

—from the tales of Stanislaus of Tatzenhain, regarding late Spring of the year 1040 FB

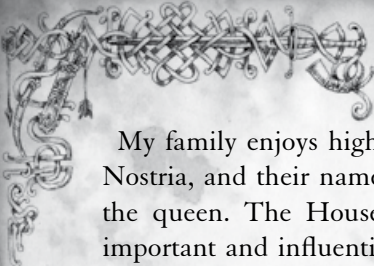


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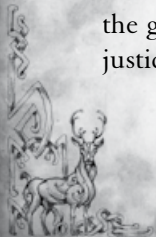
Of Standing and the Work of Weapons

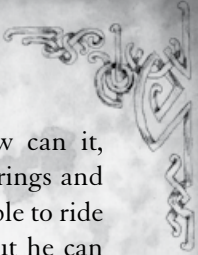




My family enjoys high status in the kingdom of Nostria, and their name is praised at the court of the queen. The House of Hyttenhau has been important and influential for many years and has produced many successful military leaders. And yet, the other bombasts look down on us because we Lakelanders do not fit their conceptions of a knight. We don't wear chainmail, and we don't ride horses, but that doesn't give them the right to treat us with disdain. Our voivodes honor their sea counts, as is customary. We respect our yeomen, who protect our dams and dikes. We battle wherever we are needed: we brave the elements of the capricious Lord Efferd, defy the contempt of our jealous neighbors, and fight for recognition at court. We do not hesitate to stand in the forefront against the pirate lowlifes from Thorwal or those oak heads from Andergast.

My father may be just a simple voivode, but he has been granted power and strength by the queen, and the gods, to understand the world and to dispense justice, like his father and grandfather before him.

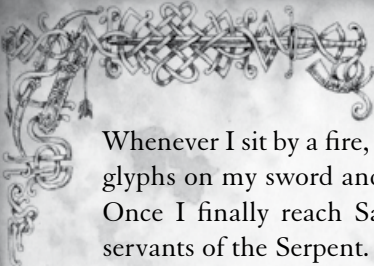




Perhaps his byrnie does not shine; how can it, when it is made from leather and metal rings and not from steel plates. He may hardly be able to ride a horse or wield a two-handed sword, but he can navigate a boat through the narrowest dike sluice, cut an arm-thick mooring rope with one blow of his saber, throw a spear more than 130 feet and hit his target, and keep his footing in roaring surf and stormy weather alike.

He knows how to placate the spirits of our ancestors and the spirits of wind and water, knowledge he must have gained from Young Lynia, the Raven Witch who accompanied me from my parents' home to the court of Lord Gasparyn. Young Lynia also imparted some of her knowledge to me. She could speak with the sylphs who lived at sea, and had me carrying those servants of the wind in my hair long before I could draw a bow. I thank her alone for my ability to read and write. She also taught me to recognize the hand of Satuarria, the Earth Mother, in everything around me.






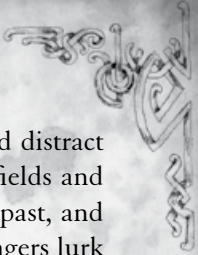
Whenever I sit by a fire, I often gaze at the ancestor glyphs on my sword and wonder what they mean. Once I finally reach Salta, I will ask one of the servants of the Serpent. Maybe a priest of Hesinde can teach me to read the ancestor glyphs. I heard the queen wants to learn their secrets—maybe the knowledge of the ancestor glyphs will help me to gain her attention. Oh, how I would love to serve in her guard.

—*from the diary of Brealetha of Hyttenhau, Spring, 1040 FB*

Like the Forest Wilderness that surrounds the Ornib River, we, the lords of the Ornib Lands, are steadfast, indomitable, and unyielding. Yes, some who envy us call us stubborn, tradition-bound, and dismissive to anything that is new. But history has proven us right.

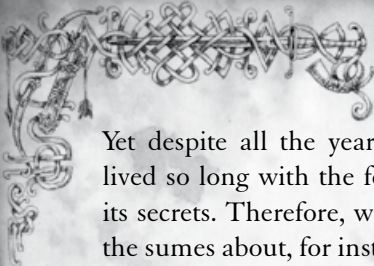
Does anyone still talk about King Efferdan and his unthinkable reforms? Imagine if suddenly every peasant could read and write! That would





only put funny ideas into their heads and distract them from their duties! Farmers till the fields and knights protect farmers. So it was in the past, and so it shall remain in the future. Many dangers lurk in the forest, whether it be marauding goblins or those wretched Nostrians who have wanted to steal our lands since times immemorial, and we knights are trained to meet these threats with sword, shield, and axe. A knight who cannot rely on his farmers cannot protect the land. The world only works because everyone has a role to play. It is best not to question this natural order, whether you are peasant or king. This may be the reason why the gods removed Efferdan from office. History will devour his memory just like the Forest Wilderness devours anything that doesn't respect its old traditions.

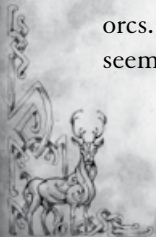
One who sticks to tradition walks on paths followed by countless generations. Secure paths! Everyone in the Forest Wilderness knows how important it is to stay on these paths, and not to stray. Others may call this stubbornness, but this has kept us alive for centuries.

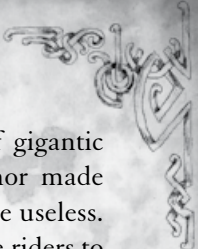


Yet despite all the years, not even we who have lived so long with the forest have unraveled all of its secrets. Therefore, we still rely on the advice of the sumes about, for instance, organizing a hunt or finding places to cut wood. Just as my grandfather always relied on Radewech, the aged sume who spoke the language of the treants (and from whose gaze even the dryads gave way), I decided that I would also enter a covenant with a wise man of the woods once I became lord of my own knightly estate.

—*from the tales of Stanislaus of Tatzenhain, regarding late Spring of the year 1040 FB*

A Weidenan from the Middenrealm would probably laugh if he heard that I am a knight. Not because I am a woman, for the Weidenans don't seem to be troubled by that. They have a fearless mistress, the Duchess Walpurga, who is as brave as a lioness, and doesn't avoid a fight with the hated orcs. Rather, it is my appearance that would likely seem poor and unknighly to a proud Weidenan.

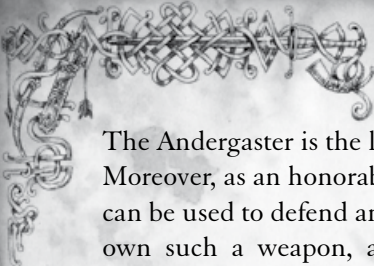




Weidenans wage war from the backs of gigantic horses, with shining blades and in armor made from steel. But in the Lakeland, horses are useless. Thick forests and treacherous moors force riders to dismount. At the coast, one often fights on board ship. Here a warrior needs to be swift and light, and to keep from drowning, our armor is made from cloth and leather. Our preferred weapon is the Nostrian long bow, with which we can hit and kill our enemies even at a distance of 300 feet. This has proven to be the only effective method against Andergast's master wizards. On the battlefield, my arrow always searches for someone with a staff first—be it wizard or commander.

—*from the diary of Brealetha of Hyttenhau, Spring, 1040 FB*

Beyond our borders, nothing is more associated with the name of our proud kingdom than our famous two-handed weapon. Of course, its name, Andergaster, does its part, but the quality of this outstanding product of Andergastan craftsmanship, not its name, is what makes it so popular.



The Andergaster is the longest greatsword there is. Moreover, as an honorable and effective weapon, it can be used to defend any narrow pass. I am glad I own such a weapon, as iron ore is rare in our land, making a weapon like the Andergaster correspondingly expensive.

Because of this, many knights prefer combat with shield and mace or battle axe. After all, it's not the weapon that makes a knight, but armor and horse. Those, too, are expensive, I can tell you. It's not the weapon that saves your life, but your byrnie. Don't let it fall into disrepair. Cherish and maintain it, and when it is time to trade the battlefield for the knight's hall, pass it on to your heir so that he may carry it into battle.

—from the tales of Stanislaus of Tatzenhain, regarding late Spring of the year 1040 FB

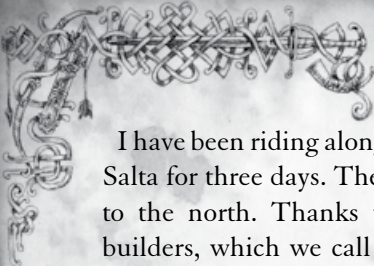


III



The Journey, Part 1




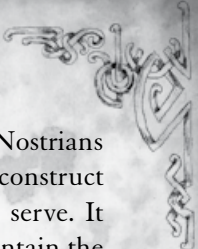


I have been riding along the Coastal Road towards Salta for three days. There, I will follow the Ingval to the north. Thanks to the hard-working dike builders, which we call *koyers*, the road is kept in good condition, and I make good progress. Dike Count Haldur, from the Horasian Empire, is not Nostrian by birth, but he has the true heart of a Nostrian. He and his *koyers* fight for every inch of land.

Yet, I am not sure if I understand his customs. He seems to care little for sylphs and hippocampi, and it is said that when good men and women die accidentally while building a dike, he inters them where they fell, so that their ghosts will watch over the barrier. Steles that memorialize their sacrifice are erected there, and I have seen small altars decorated with an abundance of offerings.

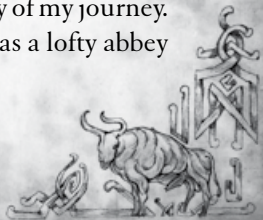
At the Nostrian coast the land is vast and empty, but it has a wind-swept beauty. There is hardly a single hill rising from the marsh grass, heather, or birch groves. In many places, light dunes protect

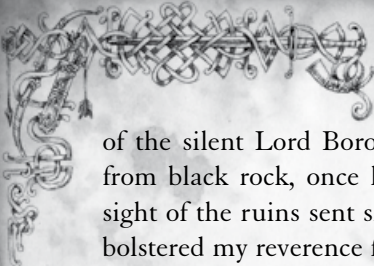




the land from Efferd's elements, but we Nostrians have learned over the course of time to construct dikes and dams where dunes would not serve. It is the divine duty of every yeoman to maintain the dikes that protect his land. If he can no longer do so, he forfeits his right to the land and must leave his dike fork standing on the crest of the dike as a sign. (Many dike builders use their dike fork as a weapon, and a fine weapon it makes. Spike and blade inflict terrible wounds, as I witnessed when Gasparyn and his yeoman repelled an attack by Thorwalian pirates.) Then, if someone comes along and removes the fork, that person becomes responsible for maintaining the dike—but he also gains title to the lands that lie behind it. The dike voivodes, of which my father is one, enforce these rights and duties. And since the fish known as saltarels—the soul of our kingdom and its greatest treasure—are found here, the dike voivodes wield tremendous influence over the fate of Nostria.


I passed Yoledamm on the second day of my journey. I was glad that the sun was shining, as a lofty abbey

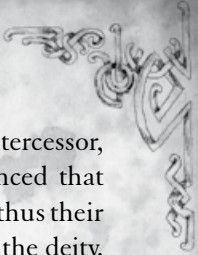




of the silent Lord Boron, a large structure made from black rock, once lay in Yoledamm. Just the sight of the ruins sent shivers down my spine and bolstered my reverence for the inescapable Lord of Death. I had just sat down to a Trontsand breakfast of fresh fish and onions when a young local boy told me that, in their time, those priests were held in high regard. They handled the dead, performed funerals, provided comfort to the bereaved, and were even said to prevent the sick from coming face to face with their Lord before their time.

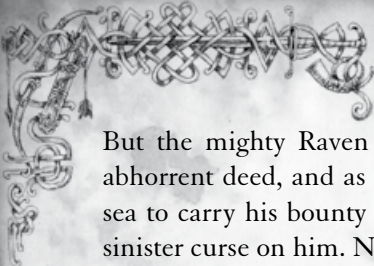
In earlier times, the boy told me, Nostrian heroes were also commemorated here. The Blessed Ones, in special chorales, remembered these heroes to their god, ensuring that their names and deeds were not forgotten. A villager in need did not pray to Boron or one of the other deities—simply out of fear of drawing their attention—but instead prayed to the hero most appropriate for that purpose.






This hero was supposed to serve as an intercessor, for the people of Yoledamm were convinced that heroes were especially close to Boron, and thus their words would receive more attention from the deity. But with the fall of the abbey, the remembrance of the deeds of these valiant heroes fades. Today, a tablet of everlasting basalt bearing the names of some of those champions and heroines is all that remains. The other names were lost in the great disaster that struck this holy place.

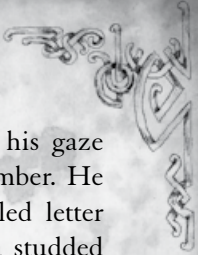
The importance of the abbey eventually reached the ears of the Thorwalers, who assumed that great treasures were hidden within its walls. Terror, in the form of the dread Goldenghoul and his scoundrels, descended upon the abbey. On a storm-swept night, they approached in their dragon ships and set upon the abbey and its priests. They killed everyone and stole anything that wasn't nailed down. Then they put the abbey and the temple to the torch, and burned everything to the ground, as they despise deities other than their own whale-shaped god.



But the mighty Raven in Alveran witnessed the abhorrent deed, and as Goldenghoul sailed out to sea to carry his bounty home, the dark god laid a sinister curse on him. Never again would the ships of those Thorwalian pirates reach their home port. Damned to an undying life, they must sail the sea until they atone for their misdeeds. As they say in the taverns of Salta, anyone who encounters Goldenghoul is lost. The undead captain tries to sell pieces of his cursed treasure to people he encounters. Those who refuse die at the hands of the damned, while those who agree to his terms join his crew and share his fate. Goldenghoul can only redeem himself and enter Boron's Realm by giving away his entire cargo, but he will probably never succeed.

I was happy to arrive at the keep of my swordfather, Gasparyn, that evening, where I received a warm welcome, far warmer than in my years as a squire. Gasparyn stared in astonishment at my steed and asked me to sit at his table, on his right. He still mourns the loss of Young Lynia, and when I said

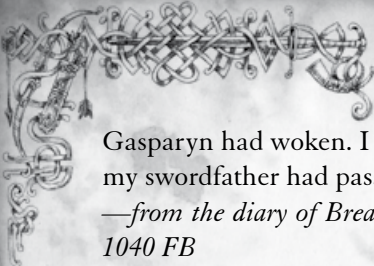




I was on my way to meet her mother, his gaze softened for the first time I could remember. He gave me his blessing, along with a sealed letter for Old Lynia. Later, he also gave me a studded gambeson made with decorated leather. He must have ordered it especially for me, as I am a full head taller than his entire family. That evening, we stood together on the highest battlements of the motte, looking out over the wide tidelands, and we sprayed fine brandy into the wind to curry the favor of the unfathomable Lord Efferd on my journey. Gasparyn's words still echo in my mind, and I reach for the warm, crescent-shaped, moonstone amulet that he gave when I think of them: "Be upright and steadfast, knight Brealetha, like a dike against the waves, and stick to your path. Never forget that you are a Lakelander. Remember it with pride! May the Capricious One give you the power to walk the path of righteousness and always find firm footing."

I was glad to leave with good memories. I harnessed my horse and left for Salta at dawn, before




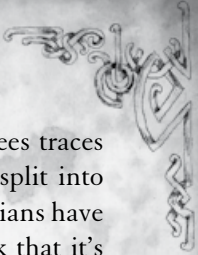


Gasparyn had woken. I wished all of my days with my swordfather had passed as they did that night.

—*from the diary of Brealetha of Hyttenhau, Spring, 1040 FB*

I made the first stop of my journey in Thurana, the largest town on Thuran Lake, which is itself the largest and most productive lake in Andergast. Many anchored fishing boats bob quietly up and down on the water during the day, but they are filled with hectic activity at twilight. Even though the fisher folk subsist on the lake's bounty, they fear the lake at night, when it belongs to *drowned souls*, as they call them—probably the remains of those who died in the many battles fought against the Nostrians here through the ages. Bruun be praised, I never met a drowned soul during my stay. But the fisher folk could be right, and I became firmly convinced that these Nostrian fishheads were not beyond allying themselves with the most sinister powers to seek the blood of upstanding Andergastans, even in death.



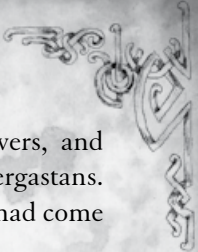


While traveling through Thurania one sees traces of battle everywhere. The area remains split into two: we control the north, while the Nostrians have settled for the poorer south. Locals think that it's only a matter of time until the Nostrians decide they want more, and act to take it. Oh, how I would have loved to travel near Lakemeadows, as south of it lies the field of the Battle of Tarlynsheight, which is considered to be the highpoint of the War of Tears. There is a glorious chapter of Andergastan history—and its misleading name is due to the whiny Nostrians.

Back then, while rummaging through old ruins, a witch woke an entity from ancient times. Afterwards she dedicated herself to dark magic and acts of evil. Emboldened and strengthened, she thought she could finally overcome our proud army. Nostrians flocked to her in droves and together they marched up the river Tommel. But when they reached Tarlynsheight, this louse-ridden band of warriors found the brave prince of Andergast blocking their path.





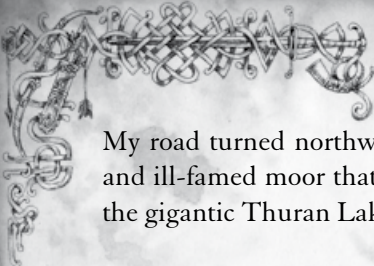


The witch called upon her unholy powers, and cruel creatures descended upon the Andergastans. They killed many before the sumes, who had come in haste, were able to destroy them.

But by then the valiant prince had also fallen in battle. His teenaged son took up the banner shield of the prince and summoned his remaining knights to his side, and together they set upon the witch and her henchmen until not one remained. The knights rejoiced, but they had underestimated the witch. Even in death, the Mistress of the Nostrians cursed them, damning the fallen to relive the terrible battle repeatedly. Every winter since, it is said, one can witness the Nostrian army gathering at Tarlynsheight only to meet the fallen Andergastan heroes, who chase away the ghosts for another year.

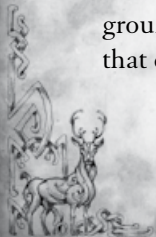
I've never seen anything like that. It's only a story, after all. However, I will not deny that it contains a kernel of truth.

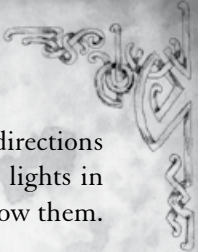




My road turned northwest, into the Fen, the dark and ill-famed moor that lines the western shore of the gigantic Thuran Lake.

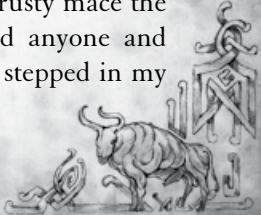
Lucky thing I was here in the spring and not in summer, as I learned later, for the moor is the breeding ground of swarms of gigantic mosquitoes and other insects that extract a substantial toll of blood from all who pass this way. But the insects alone are not responsible for the ill reputation of the moor. Other sorts of dangers await the unsuspecting wanderer there. The county sheriffs (servants of the Nostrian Border Countess Silvia Ornibian of Thuranshag), whom I met on the Thuran Boardwalk, strongly advised me to avoid the moor. If I must enter, they said, then, for the sake of all the good gods, I should not stray from the boardwalk. The moor is said to have devoured countless people. The waterlogged ground is treacherous, and one false step can seal the fate of an unsuspecting wanderer. Even places where the ground appears dry are full of hidden, murky pools that do not give up their dead.

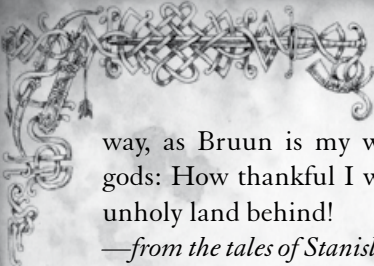




A fisherwoman from whom I sought directions told me that you can hear voices and see lights in the Fen, and she warned me never to follow them. I admit was careless.

I dismissed her warning as superstitious Nostrian gossip, as I did the advice of the county sheriffs. What else was I supposed to think of men that would serve a woman? But the eerie stories they told affected me more than I cared to admit. Their tales turned my journey through the Fen into a ride through the Netherhells. In my imagination, the mist that rose over the lands concealed all manner of unholy things that might dwell there. Fumes rose from the Fen, permeated with the foul stench of rot and decay. I tried hard not to breathe, for who knows what effect such a miasma might have on a healthy body? I watched fields and even expanses of tall reeds move as if stirred by ghostly hands. I am almost certain they tried to tell me something via their rustling. I rode through the moor as fast as I could, my hand clutching my trusty mace the entire time. I would have smashed anyone and anything to pieces that would have stepped in my






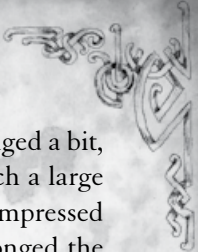
way, as Bruun is my witness! And to you, good gods: How thankful I was when I finally left that unholy land behind!

—*from the tales of Stanislaus of Tatzenhain, regarding late Spring of the year 1040 FB*

When I arrived in Salta, I walked through the streets awestruck, my mouth gaping like a fish and my eyes wide and staring. Everything revolves around the sea trade in Salta, and it has made the inhabitants wealthy. Every house in this city is at least three stories tall and richly ornamented, proclaiming their owners' wealth.

The power of the city is reflected in its nobles. Noble Count Albio is the absolute ruler of the city and surrounding area, and some whisper that he secretly dreams of leading the affluent trading town to independence. He is the queen's most vocal opponent as well as a personal enemy of her husband, Forest Count Eilert, with whom he carried on a bloody feud a few years back.

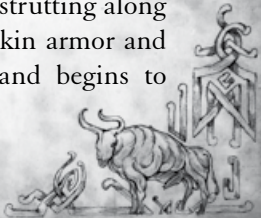


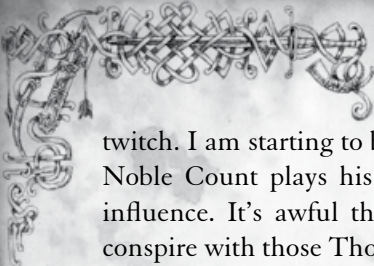


I strolled through the alleys and overindulged a bit, as I rarely had the opportunity to visit such a large city before. The sheer number of people impressed me, as did the many foreigners who thronged the streets.

Father and the other dike voivodes spent their lives fighting that rabble from Thorwal, and I've seen evidence of their mayhem myself. You can imagine my surprise when I discovered that they have their own quarter in the city, one where they can do almost whatever they please. I am beginning to wonder if Noble Count Albio remembers the shame we suffered at Kendrar. We should take back Kendrar, just as we once did. We paid in blood to defend it, and we mourned the loss of many brave souls. Even the queen's husband, Forest Count Eilert, sustained a terrible injury—a scar that he still wears on his face—during the fight. Shouldn't this serve as a constant reminder to persevere?

When I see that Thorwalian rabble strutting along the Dragonmile, clad in their toadskin armor and masked helmets, my bowstring hand begins to




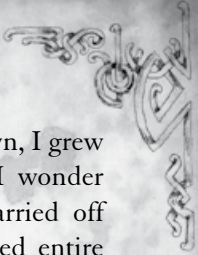


twitch. I am starting to believe the rumors that the Noble Count plays his own game of power and influence. It's awful that he stoops so low as to conspire with those Thorwalian pirates!

As I had vowed, I too made my way to the other side of the river, where I would find the abbey of the serpents, the learned servants of the goddess Hesinde. The Draconites, as they are properly known, are famed for their wisdom, and I hoped that they would decipher the ancestor glyphs on my blade.

I met a priestess there who came from the distant city of Festum in the Bornland. She was able to explain the glyphs on the sword to me. They record the name of the sword (Findulias), and seem to have something to do with precision and speed. These things fill my heart with joy: both that my sword actually has a name, and that the name matches my personality. She even said that the blade has a magical essence...I am carrying a magic sword!



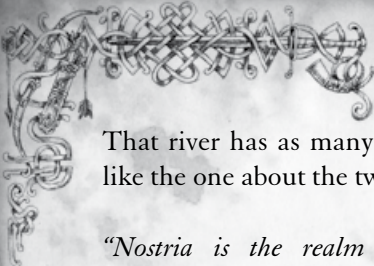


As I walked back toward the center of town, I grew thoughtful despite my joy. Sometimes I wonder if the blue wheeze epidemic, which carried off most of the royal family and depopulated entire neighborhoods in Salta, was not a punishment of the gods above. Efferd is not a forgiving god. He is only interested in those who can endure the elements. As I passed the rows of abandoned counting houses, my thoughts returned to the Thorwalian pirates. It occurred to me that they might also be sent by the Unfathomable to test us. After all, the pirates fear the Lord of Winds and the Sea, too; maybe they view themselves, despite their whale god, as Efferd's fist.

If so, we should teach them that even the fist of a god can break against dikes and walls.


I spent the evening in an inn to get to know the kind of people here better and inquire on my options for the next leg of my journey. My way was supposed to lead up the Ingval, the old lifeline of our kingdom.

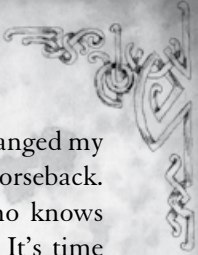




That river has as many legends as it has bends. I like the one about the two brothers best:

“Nostria is the realm of two mighty brothers. One, called Ingval, is a quick-tempered and angry fellow who is the equal of his father Efferd in his capriciousness. The second, called Tommel, is a peaceful and friendly fellow who likes humans. These river lords have been feuding since the beginning of time, as Ingval begrudges Tommel the fertile lands over which he rules. Ingval would dearly like to call such lands his own—and because he cannot have them, he feels neither should his brother Tommel. Ingval sometimes provokes the peace-loving Tommel so much that Tommel’s anger ravages the land with gigantic floods. Soon afterwards, he calms down again and feels remorse for all the harm he caused. Then Tommel retreats once again to his bed, leaving behind the most fertile farmland in the kingdom. This is why people cannot stay angry with him for long, and why they continue to settle on his shores.”

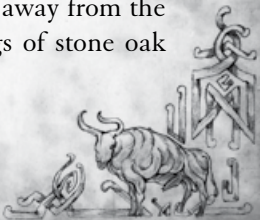


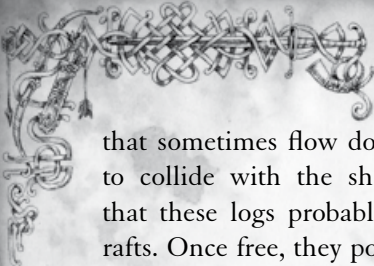


While sitting here writing these lines, I changed my mind about continuing my journey on horseback. Instead, I will travel upon the river. Who knows when I will see navigable waters again? It's time that this Lakelander set sail.

—*from the diary of Brealetha of Hyttenhau, Spring, 1040 FB*

I was lucky. I found a raftsman who is traveling up the Ingval. He seems a somewhat gloomy fellow, and I think he comes from Andergast. He agreed to take me along, though his price, which I had to pay in advance, of course, seems quite steep to me now. The ship itself makes a good impression. It's constructed in a sturdy manner, and looks to have been maintained regularly. Apparently it normally carries wood, but now its hold is filled with sacks of grain and salt, as well as barrels of beer, brandy, and pickled fish. There is room enough for Lucharna and myself to stay out of the way of the raftsmen as they use their peaveys to keep us away from the shore or to repel the occasional logs of stone oak

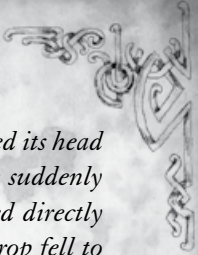




that sometimes flow down the river and threaten to collide with the ship. A raftsman explained that these logs probably break loose from larger rafts. Once free, they pose a considerable threat to shipping. No wonder that at least one crewmember always keeps an eye on the water. This is no simple task as the trunks are not always easy to see in the dark water. At least three times I missed spotting such a trunk.

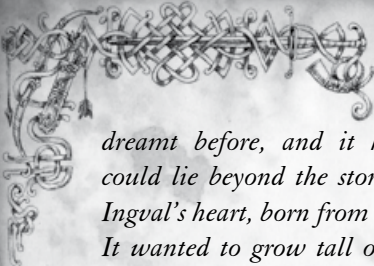
At nights, when we disembark and light a campfire, the crew passes around a bottle of Lyck Schnapps and tells stories of each other's families or other subjects. One such tale is that of the lizard named Ingval. It goes thus:

"A long time ago a lizard named Ingval lived next to a river. The lizard loved to lie in the sun, enjoying the tickling sensation of sunlight on its scales. On cool nights, Ingval crawled underneath a warm stone to sleep. Its life was determined by the river, the sky, the sun, and the stones. Ingval was content and happy. One day, as it was warming itself in the rays of the sun,



something strange happened. It had just raised its head to investigate a strange rushing sound, when suddenly a drop of water fell from the sky and landed directly between its eyes. Ingval blinked. A second drop fell to the earth, and then a third. The water fell ever faster from the sky until all the stones were wet, and river had grown turbulent. It splashed small droplets onto Ingval, producing an irritating feeling on its scales. Repeatedly Ingval had to blink away the droplets of water, but then something appeared between the droplets and the sun. Ingval stared at the spectacle, thrilled. A ray of light, consisting of iridescent colors, arched across the sky like a bridge. Ingval had witnessed the first rainbow.

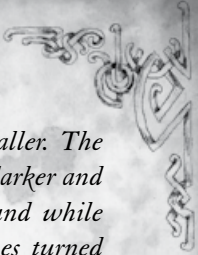
Ingval's heart leaped. Until then it had known only the blue of the sky, the gold of the sun, and the gray of the stones on the shore. It did not know what a bridge was, but somehow it knew that this arch could carry a being from one place to another. It also knew that someone crossing a bridge must have a destination in mind. Then, Ingval realized, if one has a destination, then one also has dreams, and it laughed. It had never



dreamt before, and it had never wondered what could lie beyond the stones. Now a wish rose up in Ingval's heart, born from the colors on the firmament. It wanted to grow tall or somehow rise up into the sky so it could dip into the colors and look onto the world from the rainbow bridge. With this wish, it fell asleep and dreamed of a tower of colors that grew and stretched its arms into the sky, a tower that could carry Ingval.

When it awoke, the rain had stopped and a new day had begun. The colorful bridge was gone, but directly next to it, at the shores of the river, was something new that had not existed before. A small oak sapling, with green leaves and brown, barky skin, stretched its arms towards the sun.

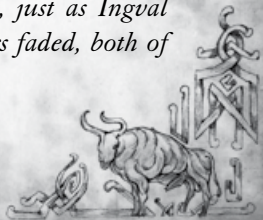
Ingval knew immediately that this small sapling would someday reach far into the sky. This oak would become Ingval's tower, and it would wear different colors throughout the year.

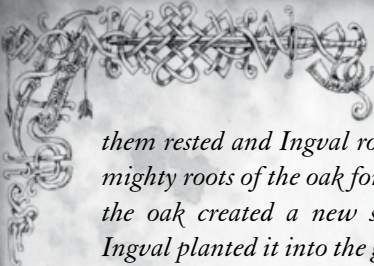


Years passed and Ingval's oak grew ever taller. The sapling became a tree, and its skin became darker and more bark-like. Its leaves became larger, and while they normally looked green, they sometimes turned yellow and red and fell off the tree, only to return the following year. Ingval loved climbing up the trunk and walking out to the furthest branches and smallest twigs. The years passed, and both tree and lizard grew. The rain brought the iridescent bridge of colors with it, and Ingval happily bathed in its light until its gray scales took on all the colors that decorated the bridge of light.

Finally, the day came when the small, now-brightly colored lizard could no longer see the crown of the tree as it lay on its stone by the river. It knew then that the time had come for it to explore the world beyond the stones, and oak and lizard set out together, following the river.

The oak carried the small lizard in its branches, which stretched far into the heavens, just as Ingval had dreamt. At night, when the colors faded, both of

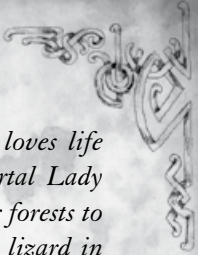




them rested and Ingval rolled itself in underneath the mighty roots of the oak for protection. Every morning, the oak created a new sapling from its twigs, and Ingval planted it into the ground before climbing back onto the shoulders of its friend again to move on. The two wanted to pass on their story of dream and reality, of creation and new beginnings, of longing for a pure life.

Soon, other beings learned of the wonders that Ingval had experienced, and they set out to see the forest of oaks and stones. They liked it so much that they stayed. Insects came, and then birds, fairies, bears, unicorns, goblins, wild boars, squirrels, fish, rabbits, and humans—all lived together underneath the green canopy of leaves in the Stone Oak Forest. The humans named the river that flowed through the Stone Oak Forest after the small lizard that dared to dream: Ingval.

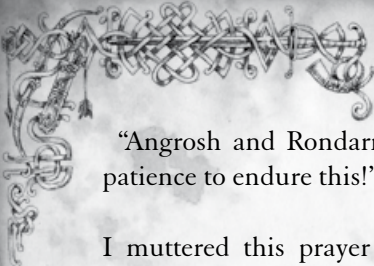
But the true Lord of this Forest is the Oak King—the very first tree that was born from the dreams of Ingval.



The Oak King is a benevolent ruler who loves life as strongly as does the carefree and immortal Lady Tsatuara. The Oak King roams through our forests to this day, driven by the dreams of the small lizard in his arms. If you meet him, they say he might grant you a wish. He lives somewhere deep within the Stone Oak Forest, at the place where Ingval dreamt its first dream. Humans worship and cherish him, and those who consider him a son of mighty Sumu call themselves sumes and try to carry his dreams into the waking world."

I passed a shrine to Ingval in Lyckmoor, and even though this story is just a fairy tale, I caught myself making a small offering and thanking the river for my safe passage. Afterwards I visited a temple of Boron to seek his blessing, for by tomorrow Lucharna's hooves will have carried me through the fabled Lycker Moor. The priest marked my forehead with the broken wheel, and I am convinced that this most silent of all gods above will protect me on my journey.

—from the diary of Brealetha of Hyttenhau, Spring 1040 FB




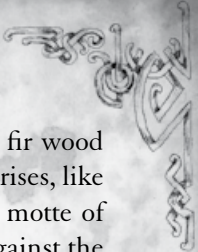
“Angrosh and Rondarra save me! Grant me the patience to endure this!”

I muttered this prayer hurriedly in Thurax as I received the squire whom I am to escort to Beartooth at my grandfather’s bidding. I can only say I was glad that young Krupphold was not supposed to become my squire.

Even though he was maybe 12 years old, he seemed to have learned little of manners and obedience. But I was certain my grandfather Conrad would change that soon. This Krupphold was so clumsy, he was not even able to help me don my byrnie. I doubted whether he would be able to sit upright on a horse. He even showed little sign of having received a page’s training, but at least he’s of noble blood, and the strict hand of a swordfather may make a proper knight of him yet. At least he knew how to be of service. The lad knew where to find wine, and that appeased me quite a bit.

Thurax is little more than a small and sleepy fishing village, in which the people live off agriculture and



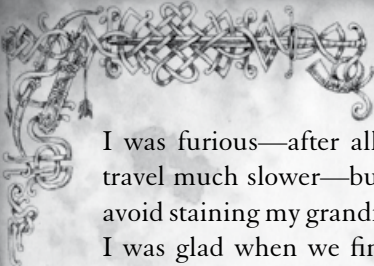


fishing. Shabby cottages made from gray fir wood press tightly against the lake. Above them rises, like the protective hand of a strict father, the motte of the knight Krueck. During the last war against the Nostriacks, the village was ransacked and burned to the ground. Charred ruins still peek from between restored homes. No wonder that Krupphold has not made much progress. How could he have learned anything in this environment?

The fuss people made saying goodbye to the boy the next day reminded me more of a funeral than a new start. They dipped him into the waters of Lake Thuran while the priest of Efferd blessed his journey. I wondered why no sume was present, but I am not familiar with Thuranian customs.

In retrospect, I think Sir Krueck was happy to be rid of his clumsy grandson. In any case, he refused to give Krupphold a horse for the journey, which led me to the conclusion that he does not think very highly of the boy.

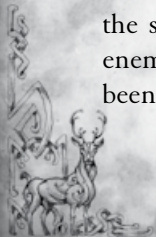




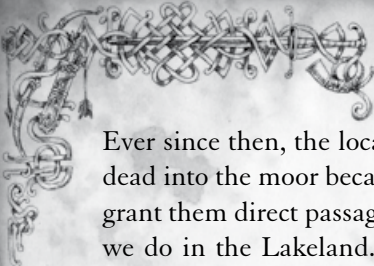
I was furious—after all, it meant that we would travel much slower—but I swallowed my anger to avoid staining my grandfather Conrad’s reputation. I was glad when we finally departed and headed toward Nibwell. The sooner we get going, the sooner I can be rid of this useless boy. The prospect of leaving the mosquito infested Lakeland behind and reaching the forest made me very happy.

—*from the tales of Stanislaus of Tatzenhain, regarding late Spring of the year 1040 FB*

The Lycker Moor is as eerie as everyone claimed. I had already noticed the lower reaches of the Ingval becoming muddy and boggy. The moors seem to go on forever, and corduroy roads run in all directions. People everywhere warn me that it is unwise to leave the road without a local guide, as the ground is highly treacherous. The people of Lyckmoor told me about a battle that raged in the swamps near their city long ago. More humans drowned in the swamp than were killed by the swords of the enemies. Accounts vary. They might not all have been human.




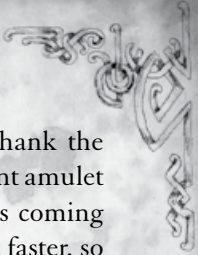




Ever since then, the locals have been sinking their dead into the moor because they believe that it will grant them direct passage to Boron's Realm, just as we do in the Lakeland. Some even journey more than a day to maintain this old custom. While the blue wheeze was devastating our cities, and even the royal family, entire wagonloads of dead were brought here and buried—or rather sunk—into the Lycker Moor.

Gruesome monsters are said to inhabit the misty swamps, their sharp claws waiting to drag the souls of the innocent into the depths. People in taprooms and around campfires speak of treacherous crypt fogs, ghouls, and night devourers—reanimated bodies that bring death and disease to their own families via dark magic. No one knows how much truth may lie behind these tales, but even the best guides adamantly refuse to travel into the moor at night. Bloodcurdling sounds issue from the swamps when the fog rises, and in the days that follow, people learn that someone who dared to venture across the moor is now missing.





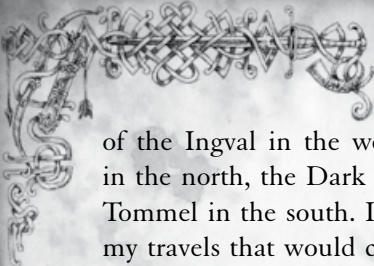
I did not meet any of these creatures, thank the gods. But I must admit, I clutch my crescent amulet tightly whenever I hear mysterious noises coming from the moor. I'll urge Lucharna to walk faster, so that we may soon leave this area behind us.

—*from the diary of Brealetha of Hyttenhau, Spring 1040 FB*

The stretch we had to cover on the Thurán Steps was rather long, but the weather favored us, and whenever heavy showers swept through, we always found a mighty oak beneath which we could shelter from the elements. I learned Krupphold could make a good fire; I would not have expected that of him. He still has much to learn about hunting, but he was able to catch a rabbit for our meal that first day. Villages are rare around these parts, and we must rely on our own abilities. Andergastans call this region simply the Forest—a suitable name, as forest is all there is around here.

It is said that a single, gigantic, impenetrable forest covers all the land stretching from the muddy shores




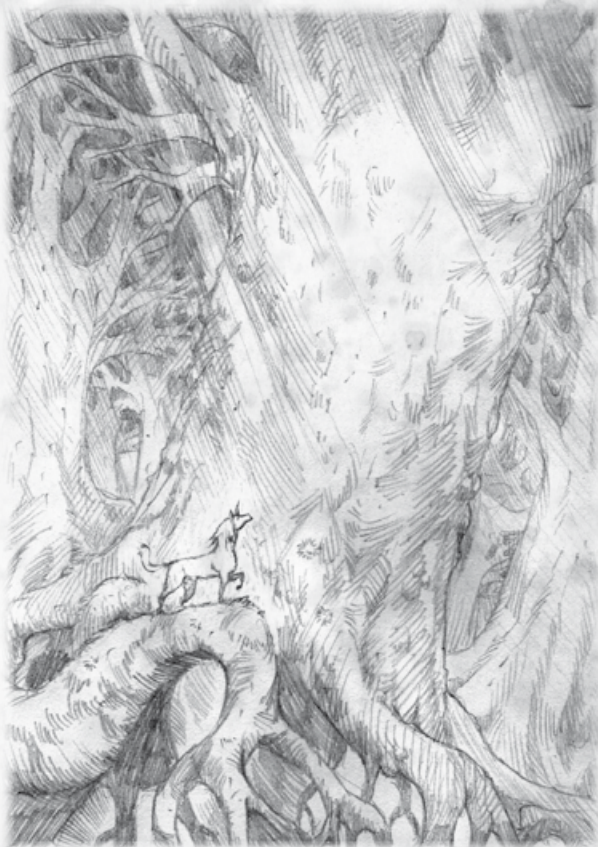


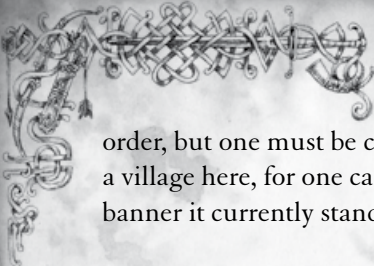
of the Ingval in the west, the Stone Oak Forest in the north, the Dark Ridge in the east, and the Tommel in the south. I haven't seen anything on my travels that would contradict this. Large parts of this forest have never been explored by humans, and in its green depths slumber secrets known only to the sumes. This is the home of stone oaks, like those that adorn Andergast's coat of arms. The few settlements that exist here in the forest, such as Nibwell and Axetown, almost all lie along the Ornib River.

The Ornib splits this wilderness into north and south and serves as the border between our kingdom and the land of the Nostriacks. My grandfather, Baron Conrad, rules the Ornib Lands along this border region, safeguarding it from the greedy fingers of our archenemy. Those Nostrians are not content with what they have, for they repeatedly cross the river and try to take away our ancestral lands.

We do not always manage to stop them, for the region is simply too large to patrol effectively. Naturally, we always reclaim what they steal in short

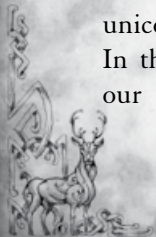




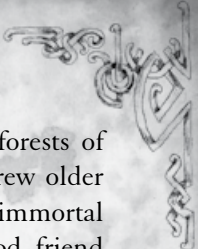


order, but one must be cautious when approaching a village here, for one can never know under which banner it currently stands.

Those fishheads are not the only danger that awaits an upstanding Andergastan in the forest. Many-legged threats crawl in the thick green. Creatures such as the dreadful forest spiders or the goblins, whose witch matrons are said to frequent sinister ritual sites at the headwaters of the Ornib. Many adventurers have set out to plunder the goblins' caves, but none have ever returned. When I was a child, Radewech, my grandfather's sune, cautioned every young squire to avoid those caves. I still remember poor Borkhelm, who did not heed the words of that wise sune and who was never seen or heard from again.



Now that I have had a chance to get to know him, the squire Krupphold proved less simple-minded than I first thought. He knew the legend of the unicorn Keldoran, which is said to live in this forest. In the days of yore, Prince Argos, who founded our kingdom, became friends with the unicorn

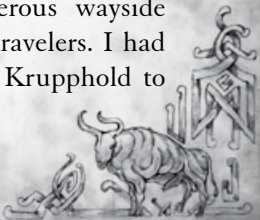


and together they roamed through the forests of Andergast. As with all humans, Argos grew older and eventually died. But Keldoran was immortal and could not understand why his good friend had left him so suddenly. Keldoran has shunned humans ever since, to avoid the pain of parting.

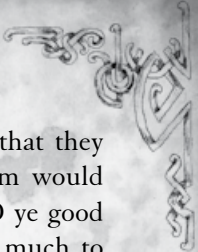
Sometimes Keldoran is seen at a distance, watching the hustle and bustle of humans through eyes filled with pain and sorrow. Rumor says that he can be approached only by an innocent maiden who loves him. Rumor also says that he waits for such a person in vain.

From Radewech I learned that unicorns bear an inexplicable hatred for aurochs, those forest cattle that adorn the coat of arms of the Royal House. Maybe they begrudge the pact that the Aurochs King, the Lord of this Forest, is said to have made with our kings long ago.

Along the way, we passed numerous wayside shrines bearing offerings made by travelers. I had to keep reminding simple-minded Krupphold to







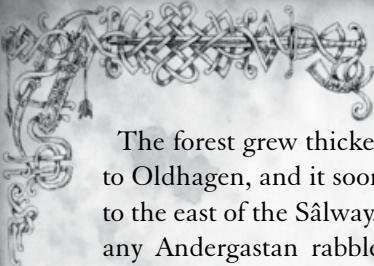
leave these offerings alone. I explained that they appease the gods, and that stealing them would draw punishment down on our heads. O ye good gods! This boy from Thurania still has much to learn!

When we reached Nibwell I decided to take a longer rest. Krupphold had developed a limp, and I had to re-shoe Tharvin's left foreleg. We were lucky that the small settlement's charcoal burner had just ignited the charcoal kiln and was able to reshape the old horseshoe in the embers.

My good name gained us a room at the fortified temple in the center of the village, and Krupphold was very glad to find a shrine of Efferd here (even though it was only one of three, besides the goddess Peraisumu and the sinister Bruun). I asked the local sume to treat Krupphold's blisters, and we moved on as soon as the boy could walk again.


—*from the tales of Stanislaus of Tatzenhain, regarding late Spring of the year 1040 FB*



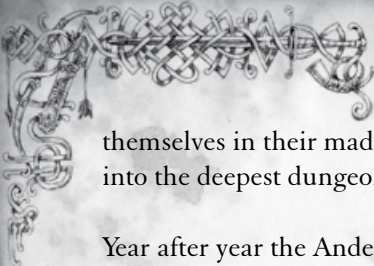


The forest grew thicker as I rode from Lyckmoor to Oldhagen, and it soon dominated the landscape to the east of the Sâlway. It offered perfect cover for any Andergastan rabble who wanted to ambush us as they have repeatedly over the course of history. For this reason, the wise Princess Lysiane II ordered the construction of Fortress Ysraeth in ancient times, to bar the way of the Andergastans who continued to sneak into Nostrian territory. The castle sits on a good location one day's journey east of Mirdin, on the road to Joborn. At the time, the fortress was larger and more beautiful than any built previously in the kingdom. It was named Ysraeth, after Lysiane's oldest son, who was subsequently appointed lord of this castle.

The next Andergastan force that came this way looked upon its mighty walls with fear. They threw down their weapons and shields and fled home without them. Some despaired and ran themselves onto the indomitable walls without rhyme or reason. One did not even have to repel them; one had only to wait until they had exhausted









themselves in their madness, and then throw them into the deepest dungeon.

Year after year the Andergastans assaulted Ysraeth, but Ysraeth remained impregnable.

Andergastans are rotten to the core and think nothing of using sinister powers. The brave Nostrians soon faced Andergastan wood wizards, who conjured hail and wind down on the fortress. Lightning struck from the sky, and the earth itself shook under their treacherous attacks. The mighty walls shattered, the houses collapsed, and the valiant Nostrian knights fell beneath the rubble. Only Thurgeth, the mighty castle keep, remained unscathed, protected as it was by powerful mages.

To this day, the ghosts of the poor souls who were crushed by the collapsing walls are said to haunt the moss-covered ruins, which also contain the magical remains of those mages who protected Thurgeth from destruction. Perhaps I can learn something there about the strange glyphs that are



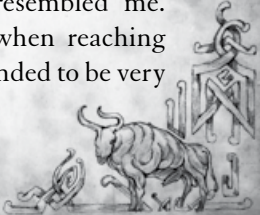


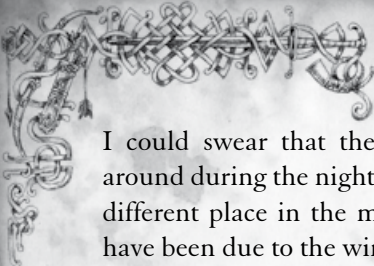
on my blade. Maybe I will be able to take a careful peek into the ruins on my way back from Hallerû.

Well, I finally reached Oldhagen, a cozy village under the protection of the Oldhagener Sisters, a witches' coven. I met one of them when I stopped to eat in the Linden, the local inn. She was a prudent woman who seemed to command great respect. At first she stared at me with her large eyes, because, I think, she mistook me for someone else. But a moment later she sat down with me. I was curious to know what had puzzled her so, but not so curious that I actually spoke up, as I didn't want any trouble from her.

As we talked, I learned she had known Old Lynia as well as my nursemaid, Young Lynia. I was surprised to learn that the reputation of both women was so widespread.

We talked for a long time, and on parting she gave me a small doll that somewhat resembled me. She said that I should present it when reaching Hallerû, as the sisters of the Cliffs tended to be very suspicious of uninvited visitors.




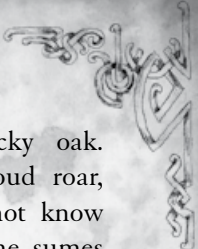


I could swear that the doll got up and walked around during the night, as I found it in an entirely different place in the morning, but that may also have been due to the wine.

—*from the diary of Brealetha of Hyttenhau, Spring, 1040 FB*

No all trees are rooted deeply into Sumu's body. Krupphold learned this the hard way, even though I had warned him. Some among the trees can walk around on root legs. In their gnarled faces they have eyes that you can only see if you stare right at them. And their arms can grab or strike with great strength. They can lift up a horse or snap a sword like a twig. About a half-day's march from Axetown, Krupphold angered a treant who had been standing silent and unmoving in the thick green. I am not sure whether Krupphold trampled a plant or if he spoke disrespectfully about the forest and its creatures. In any event, the treant wanted to teach the boy a lesson.

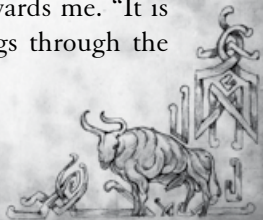


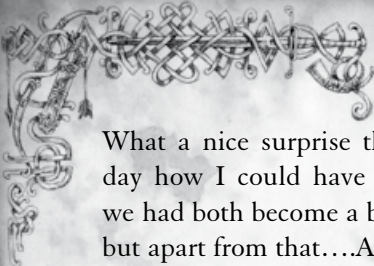


The tree shepherd resembled a stocky oak. It stormed towards the boy with a loud roar, whipping its branches around. I did not know how to placate the treant, as usually the sumes deal with such creatures. I already had my mace and shield in hand and was about to step in front of the boy, when suddenly a young man in simple clothes issued from the forest. He spoke to the tree shepherd in a strange tongue, and the features on the gnarly bark face soon relaxed. The hatred disappeared from its sparkling eyes as the man gave it fruit and mushrooms, and the treant left Krupphold alone and disappeared without a trace into the underbrush.

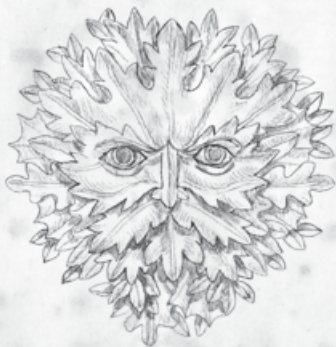
I lowered my mace and hailed the stranger. His flint dagger marked him as one of the sumes. He paid no notice to the whimpering Krupphold and instead looked, with surprise, only at me.

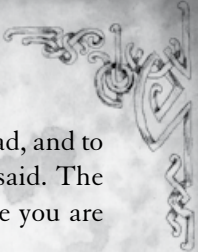
“Stanilaus?” he asked, puzzled. “Don’t you recognize me?” He took a step towards me. “It is I, Holbrand! We used to chase pigs through the castle.”





What a nice surprise that was! I wonder to this day how I could have forgotten that face—well, we had both become a bit hairier around the chin, but apart from that....Anyway, the sune was none other than my childhood friend Holbrand! Strange how people can choose such different paths, isn't it? I had become a knight with byrnie, mace, and steed, while he grew up to be a sune with a wild beard, a stone dagger, and deep insight into Sumu's creation. We greeted each other warmly. I had endured Krupphold's whimpering long enough and told him to get hold of himself and bring us a bottle of brandy from my saddlebags. At least he was good for that.



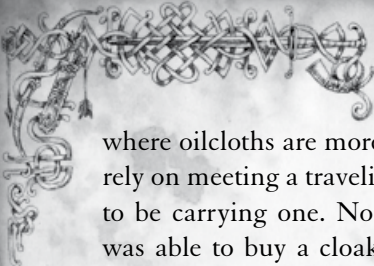


“Radewech sent me to meet you on the road, and to deliver you safely to Baron Conrad,” he said. The he added, with an impish grin, “And I see you are making good use of my protection.”

O you good gods above! I would have slapped him for this insolence if he hadn't been a sume...and if he hadn't been so damned right. He joined us for the rest of the journey, and truth be told, I welcomed the assistance of someone as knowledgeable as Holbrand as I escorted the clumsy brat to my grandfather. I can't imagine what would have happened if I had delivered a dead, inept squire.

—*from the tales of Stanislaus of Tatzenhain, regarding late Spring of the year 1040 FB*


I am now traveling in the direction of Nordvest, and I can expect no more villages or inns along this road. Before setting out yesterday, I went to the market hall in Oldhagen to buy an oilcloth and a warm Trontsand blanket to protect me from the nightly chill. Maybe I should have thought of this back in Salta, though, where they had shops, and

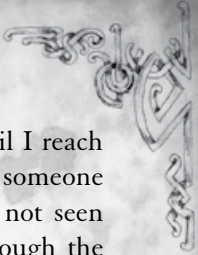


where oilcloths are more common. Here, I have to rely on meeting a traveling merchant who happens to be carrying one. No luck so far, but at least I was able to buy a cloak from a stranger, whom I think was a Norbard. Either way, the cloak will serve my purpose, but for the money, I could have bought an entire new wardrobe in Salta. Curse my stupidity! At least I was able to buy some excellent hunting arrows for a good price. They will help me to sustain myself on my path. Phex, I thank you for sending this Norbard to me!

Since I left Oldhagen it has been raining without stop. I almost believe that the capricious Efferd has made it his personal mission to test my coat's ability to repel water. So far, the coat has kept me dry. The Norbard was not lying. It is worth every coin, and far better than the heavy coat made of Trontsand wool that I would have used otherwise.

The good gods are very generous these days. The grim Firun and the spring maiden Ifirn have granted me luck on the hunt. I was able to bag a doe

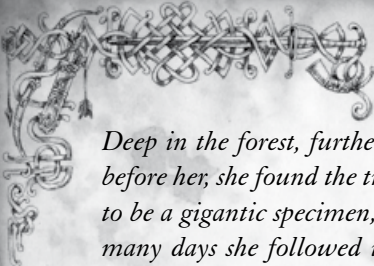




and gather enough provisions to last until I reach the Ingval; even enough to share if I meet someone traveling on the same road. But I have not seen many wanderers out here. As I ride through the forests alone, I pass the time by telling myself old stories, like this sad tale about the hunter Geowine:


Geowine was the king's best archer. It is said that she was as tall as me, and could draw a powerful longbow. Secretly, she loved the son of a bombast, but as she wasn't of noble standing herself, she didn't dare to confess her love.

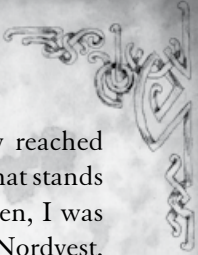
A retainer told the prince of Geowine's love, and he confessed that he burned with love for the proud archer, despite their difference in standing. He asked his father, the lord of the land, to set up a tournament and to promise his hand in marriage to the woman who could hunt the finest game. But since the hand of the prince was much desired, many ladies set out with bow, boar spear, or foxhound. Geowine entered the tournament and did her best to prevail.



Deep in the forest, further than any mortal had gone before her, she found the trail of a crowned stag. It had to be a gigantic specimen, judging from its tracks. For many days she followed its trail, and passed through many valleys that no one had seen before or since. Finally, in a sunny clearing, she saw it: the father of all crowned stags. Its white beard almost touched the ground, and its mighty antlers had thirty-six points, twelve more than the largest ever seen.

She nocked the arrow on the string, but she could not bring herself to shoot this most majestic king of all crowned stags. For many long minutes, she stood there, not daring to move. Then, finally, the stag's gaze met hers and pierced deep into her soul. Geowine fell to her knees, broke her bow, and swore never to kill a stag or any other animal of the forest, ever again. She returned to the court of the bombast empty-handed, and her beloved turned his back on her. Broken-hearted, the king's best archer sought her end in battle, and she found it after having slain countless Andergastans. No one mourned her, and almost nobody remembers her today.

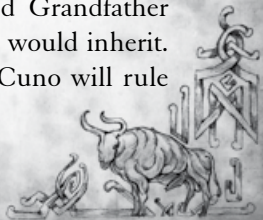


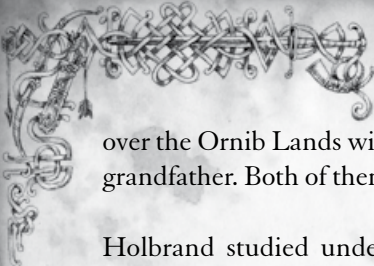


With such stories in my head, I quickly reached Nordvest, the proud and ancient fortress that stands guard above the Ingval. After days of green, I was glad to see the blue of the water again. Nordvest, which stands high on a rocky spur above the foaming waters of the river, winds roaring around it, is the indomitable fortress of the old counts of Ingvalsrohden. The bombasts here are valiant champions for home and country, and I could hardly wait to meet the Old Countess myself.

—*from the diary of Brealetha of Hyttenhau, Spring, 1040 FB*

Holbrand was a great help indeed, for he knows the forest well. He told me which animals I was allowed to hunt, and he knew which plants were edible. He also told me what had changed at Castle Beartooth while I had been gone. I learned with sadness that my grandfather had grown increasingly frail, but this did nothing to weaken the loyalty of his knights. When Bruun called Grandfather Conrad to his side, my Uncle Cuno would inherit. I feel at ease, knowing that Uncle Cuno will rule



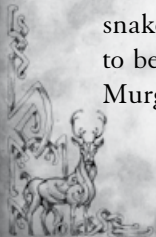


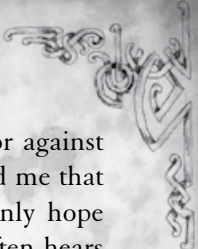
over the Ornob Lands with a firm hand, just like my grandfather. Both of them are similar in that regard.

Holbrand studied under Radewech and had just been anointed a sume, but he had not yet decided which baron or knight he wanted to serve. I remember that he felt a deep connection with the forest when he was a child, so much so that his mother sometimes feared that he would simply run into the forest to court a dryad or something. An amusing image, isn't it?

In any case, I was glad to have him at my side, because the area around Axetown is said to be enchanted and dangerous. No harm in traveling with someone who understands magic.

I remember my nursemaid telling me stories of a wizard who ruled the area from his dark fortress. Murgol was his name, and he did terrible things in his castle in the swamps. I dimly recall tales of snake creatures and unholy rituals. There must be some truth to it, because when I mentioned Murgol, Holbrand told me that the sumes had

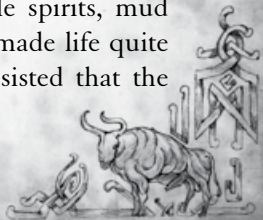


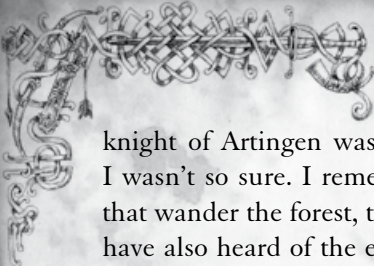


long since punished this infamous traitor against Sumu and the Aurochs King. He assured me that the wizard paid for his crimes. I can only hope that is the end of the story, for, as one often hears in legends, sinister power sometimes lingers, and those we believe were defeated are only waiting for their chance to return to our world.

I was glad that Beartooth wasn't much farther. I felt uneasy in the vicinity of Axetown despite the locals' reassurances. They don't say much that is good about the knight that resides there, either. He is a cruel fellow.

I wasn't too eager to spend the night in the woods underneath the canopy of stars. Even though I love the forest, I thought constantly about the horror stories they tell of Axetown, and the rustling of the leaves made me remember all the ghosts that are said to haunt the area. Holbrand laughed at my fears, but I know what I've heard. Even in Albumin, recent stories said bubble spirits, mud pranksters, and little harness men made life quite difficult for travelers. Holbrand insisted that the






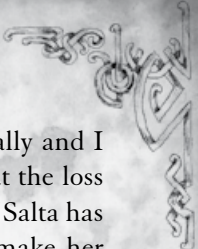
knight of Artingen was handling the matter, but I wasn't so sure. I remember stories of waterlings that wander the forest, tangling with the unwary. I have also heard of the elf sorcerer who guards the spring of the waterlings.

Even in the Stone Oak Forest they tell stories of spirits made of magic and the different elements. Holbrand called them minor spirits, because Sumu's body created them spontaneously and they usually disappear quickly. He said they were harmless and would be a pest at worst. But I didn't want to believe that. Waterlings were a fixture of my childhood. We were not allowed to visit the springs for fear a water spirit would try to drown us. At least that's what my nursemaid told me, and I haven't forgotten her stories.

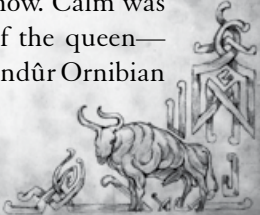
Dangerous or not, to this day I much prefer the dryads that live in the trees and protect us forest knights. Or so they say, because I must admit I've never seen one.

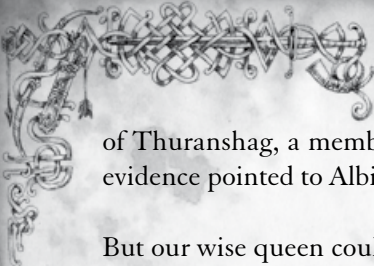
—*from the tales of Stanislaus of Tatzenhain, regarding late Spring of the year 1040 FB*





The Old Countess welcomed me cordially and I must say, she is a remarkable woman. But the loss of her husband after the Bombast Feud of Salta has taken its toll. The bags under her eyes make her look tired beyond her years, and everyone tells me her usual cheerfulness seems a bit muted. The feud must have been terrible. The trouble began when Noble Count Albio Salis called Forest Count Eilert II Rheideryan a beggar voivode in the presence of the queen, during a court council session in Salta. Albio must have laughed as he rejected this obvious challenge to a duel and left the chamber. A knight and friend of the Forest Count followed him, and apparently killed Albio's oldest son during a dispute in Salta. The assassin was arrested by the Noble Count and executed. The Forest Count declared a feud against the Noble Count, and with the support of Noble Count Muragio XII Ansfinion of Kendrar and Countess Melanoth of Ingvalsrohden, he gathered his troops before the gates of the city. Eilert surrounded Salta with a decisive tactical feint that settled the Battle in the Snow. Calm was restored only by the intervention of the queen—until someone murdered Count Firundûr Ornibian



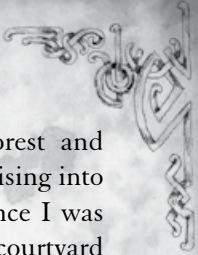


of Thuranshag, a member of the royal retinue. All evidence pointed to Albio of Salta.

But our wise queen could not be deceived, and she saw through the net of lies and soon discovered that Noble Count Muragio, Melanoth's husband, had ordered the murder to prevent peace. I cannot imagine what the countess must have felt: her husband, a conspirator and murderer!

This revelation surprised all parties and they soon agreed to a peace settlement. The crown revoked all of Muragio of Kendrar's titles and imprisoned him in the Blood Fortress of Gordelyn, in southern Thurania, where he will stay until the queen gives him a chance to redeem himself. This feud was no help to Count Albio, and in fact, quite the opposite: Forest Count Eilert has been married to the queen since the Bombast Feud. The feud only strengthened Albio's enemy.

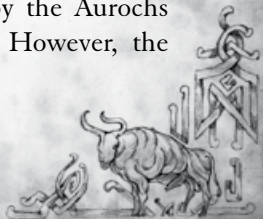
—*from the diary of Brealetha of Hyttenhau, Spring, 1040 FB*

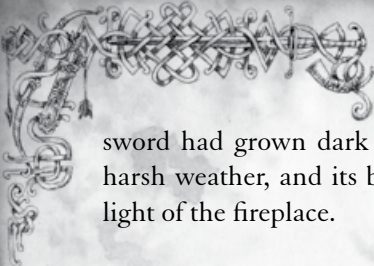


I always enjoy emerging from the forest and seeing the impressive walls of Beartooth rising into the sky. Little seems to have changed since I was here last. The circle of oaks in the castle courtyard hardly seems to have grown at all, and the keep still guards the course of the Ornib, like always.

Uncle Cuno welcomed me with a heavy slap on the shoulder. He took me in and became like a father to me after my own father died in battle. I told Krupphold to clean himself up, so that we could present ourselves to my grandfather, Baron Conrad. Holbrand said goodbye, and went to meet with his teacher Radewech.

As I entered the knight's hall, I noticed that Grandfather seemed to have aged tremendously. Even though it was quite warm, the Baron of the Ornib Lands wore a thick bearskin coat around his shoulders. As a young man, he had ridden into battle even in winter. His mighty Andergaster, said to have been made unbreakable by the Aurochs King, leaned next to the throne. However, the

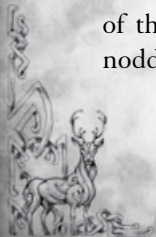


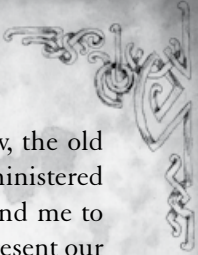


sword had grown dark from years of exposure to harsh weather, and its blade gleamed dully in the light of the fireplace.

Krupphold was quick-witted enough to bend his knee before my grandfather, which, uncharacteristically, made him smile gently. He greeted me first, as was my due. “Knight Stanislaus, you have honored your House, and I see you’ve looked after your gift.” He took a good look at the Andergaster he had granted me at my accolades. “You’ve become a real man, an Andergastan knight. Steadfast and indomitable, like a stone oak. You fulfilled my request promptly, and I praise you for that. Your father’s brother can count on you when my days end. Therefore, I appoint you Knight of the Or nib Lands. Come closer, grandson, and kneel before me!”

I was surprised, because up until now Uncle Cuno had carried this title, which denoted the first knight of the Tatzenhain family. My uncle grinned and nodded when he saw the look of confusion on my

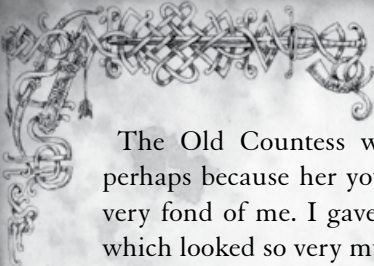




face. I bent my knee and kissed Bearclaw, the old Andergaster of my grandfather, as he administered my oath. I wondered if he would also send me to the royal tournament in Andergast to represent our House.

I remained silent. I wanted to remember every second of the moment I received the tabard bearing the forest spider crest of our House, and the characteristic bearskin coat of our knights. A hoarse cough interrupted my reverie. At first I couldn't tell if it had come from my grandfather or the spindly sune who stepped forward from behind the throne. Radewech had grown even thinner, like a gnarly tree that no longer fears the wind. Leather straps kept his white beard and long hair in check, and I was certain he hadn't cut it since we last met. "I await you tonight, when the moon maiden has risen, young Stanislaus," he said. "Then we shall honor our old traditions."


—from the tales of Stanislaus of Tatzenhain, regarding late Spring of the year 1040 FB



The Old Countess was more than courteous, perhaps because her young daughter Silaleth was very fond of me. I gave her the Oldhagener doll, which looked so very much like me, as a memento from the knight of the Lakelands. This young girl shall one day rule over two counties—the Old County of Ingvalsrohden and the Noble County of Kendrar. I can already imagine bombasts' sons fighting for her hand in marriage. The Ingvalsrohdeners are an ancient Nostrian line that traces its origins back to the Great Amilia, ship's mage under Admiral Sanin, the seafarer who first explored this land two thousand years ago. That alone would make Silaleth a good match, but as ruler over two counties, she will be the most sought after woman in the land, I am sure of it.

I arranged for passage aboard a ship bound from Nordvest to Ingfallspeugen. From there, it is a short distance to the Chalk Cliffs. We depart tomorrow.

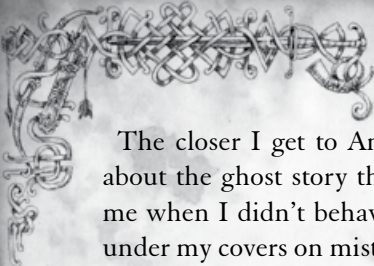
—*from the diary of Brealetha of Hyttenhau, Spring 1040 FB*



IV


Of Magical Creatures and Witches' Work

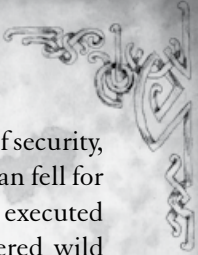




The closer I get to Andergast, the more I think about the ghost story that my parents used to tell me when I didn't behave. I still remember hiding under my covers on mist-clad nights, hardly daring to peek from under the blanket. Young Lynia always assured me that this legend was meant to scare people, but I still get goose bumps when I think of it. I've been feeling the same way as I ride through this area. I refer, of course, to the tales of the Black Andergastan, a rider who hides his face beneath a dark cowl. He rides on a black unicorn with a bloody horn, and wields a black Andergaster single-handed from the saddle.

The Black Andergastan is the spawn of the Netherhells, the child of a demon and an Andergastan woman, with only the worst qualities of both his parents. Abysmally evil, he roamed through Nostria murdering the innocent and the defenseless. After years of atrocities, Princess Yasemin of Nostria finally managed to confront him.



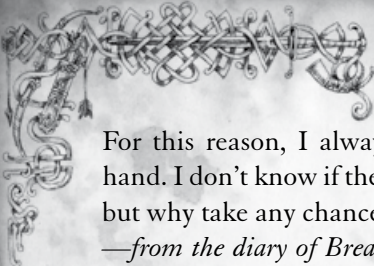


She set a trap to lure him into a false sense of security, using herself as bait. The Black Andergastan fell for her ruse, and the princess' companions executed him on the spot. He is said to have uttered wild curses as he died, swearing bitter vengeance and promising to continue his work.

Whenever I misbehaved as a child, my parents would say the Black Andergastan would kidnap me and take me to a dark and mirthless place.

As I rode, remembering the story, I caught myself listening to the sounds of the woods, wondering whether I heard the hooves of a unicorn. Everyone in the region knows this story, and whenever something terrible happens, for which people have no explanation, they think that the Black Andergastan has returned to make good on his threats. This fear is contagious, and I have hardly been able to sleep at night.



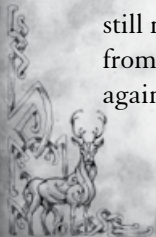


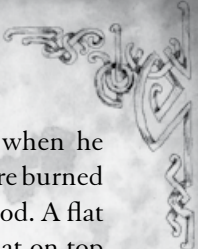
For this reason, I always keep Findulias close at hand. I don't know if there is any truth to this story, but why take any chances?

—*from the diary of Brealetha of Hyttenhau, Spring, 1040 FB*

My appointment as a Knight of the Ornib Lands wasn't be the only surprise Grandfather had in store for me that day, as I found out later, after Mada's Mark had risen. At Radewech's urging, he decided that a sume should be placed at my side, and he chose Holbrand. Thus, we performed the ritual of binding as it had been done for millennia in the forest.

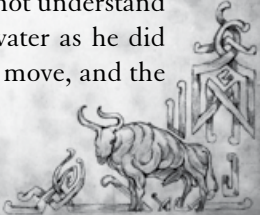
Holbrand and I left Beartooth in the dead of night. Dense fog lay on the banks of the Ornib, and every sound seemed strangely dampened. We walked the few miles to Radewech's home on a nearby hill. The gnarled trees that grew in front of his home still made the same rustling sound we remembered from our childhood. Now, as then, they whipped against my face—deliberately, I had always thought.

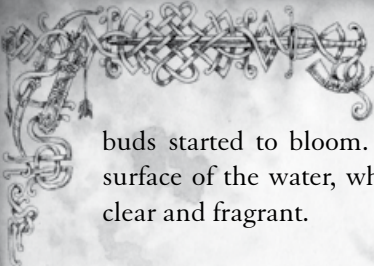




The sume lived in a hillside cave here, when he wasn't staying at the castle. A small campfire burned here next to a stack of various kinds of wood. A flat bowl of fired clay filled with clear water sat on top of the woodpile. On the fire were two crossed, split tree trunks three feet in size. A strange paste had been smeared on the wood. In two wooden bowls of different shapes in front of the pieces of wood were a variety of flowers, herbs, and resins that emitted a spicy fragrance.

Radewech awaited us at the entrance of his cave, standing before large furs that obscured the interior. He greeted us with a coarse voice, and after we had seated ourselves, he handed us different items that he described as gifts of the beings of the forest. With his blade of flint Radewech cut both of his palms and let his blood—dark and heavy—drip into the clay bowl. Then he handed the bowl to Holbrand. Next he chose one of the flowers from each of the bowls and placed them into the reddish water, mumbling some words that I could not understand and spreading his hands over the water as he did so. The water in the bowl started to move, and the




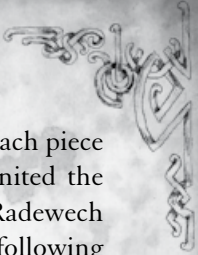


buds started to bloom. Soon they floated on the surface of the water, which had suddenly become clear and fragrant.

The sume motioned us to step closer to the fire. He took the likeness of a black bull from the cave, and, chanting, placed it in front of the woodpile along with the water bowl. Then, with a few words, he ignited the two crossed pieces of wood and threw a handful of herbs and resins into the flames. Two smoke clouds rose from the flames, mixing and emitting a scent that reminded me of the four seasons: the smell of spring flowers, the dry grass of summer, the mists and rustling leaves of autumn, and the earthy mushrooms, snow, and the aroma of long stored acorns in winter.

A mild wind came up, fusing both pillars of smoke into a single cloud that swept around Holbrand and myself. A many-voiced whisper quickly arose out of nothing. I could clearly hear the sounds of the forest—the singing of birds, the rustling of leaves, the murmuring of brooks, and the rutting calls of aurochs.





The old sume cut a burning brand from each piece of wood, stepped into the circle, and ignited the woodpile in front of us. It caught easily. Radewech slowly walked around the burning pile, following the course of the sun, and with every step his voice rang loud and clear:

“I am Radewech, servant of Sumu
and advisor in these lands.

Beings of the forest, listen to me!

You powers of soil and trunk,
of branch and leaf.

You powers of rain and spring,
of brook and stream.

You powers of animal and spirit,
of tree and man.

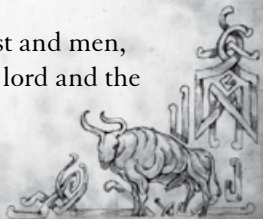
Listen to me!

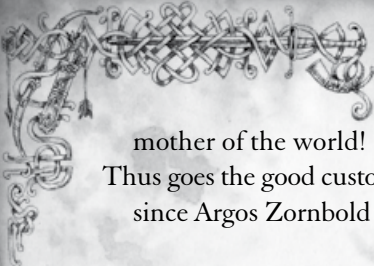
Come hither and renew your promise
from ancient times.

So that we may live, side by side!

Bind these two, Holbrand and Stanislaus of
Tatzenhain, as is due.

Let this strengthen the bond of forest and men,
and grant the favor of the forest's lord and the

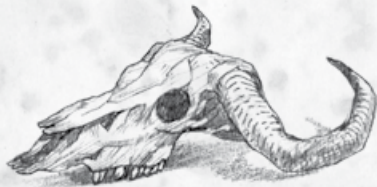


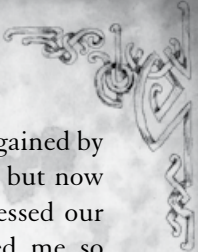


mother of the world!

Thus goes the good custom in the lands of Andergast since Argos Zornbold met the Aurochs King.”

His words echoed from the mighty trunks of the trees around him. Suddenly the flames rose high and, I swear, cast the shadow of a mighty aurochs bull, and wildflowers sprouted in old Radewech’s footprints. Holbrand cut his palms with the stone dagger, and then handed me the ritual tool to do the same. We clasped hands and mingled our blood in the ancient manner, and it became clear to me that we were now connected, two masters over the land that had been entrusted to us and which we would always defend.





I had never understood exactly what was gained by this ritual union of liege lord and sune, but now I knew that the Aurochs King had witnessed our oath. Never again has anything touched me so deeply.

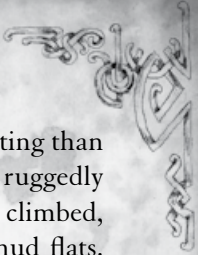
—*from the tales of Stanislaus of Tatzenhain, regarding late Spring of the year 1040 FB*

Scaling the cliffs was by no means easy. From the riverbank, the rock rose many dozens of feet into the sky. Everyone I met along the way warned me about getting too close to the cliffs. And indeed, the mild air was filled with the sound of music and I thought I saw lights coming from the plateau, which I could not see from my position beneath the edge.

I had to leave Lucharna behind quite early, as the area around the cliffs was too steep. I also left behind the larger part of my belongings, and only took along sword, bow, and Lynia's small box.

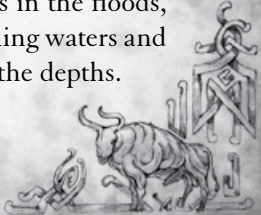


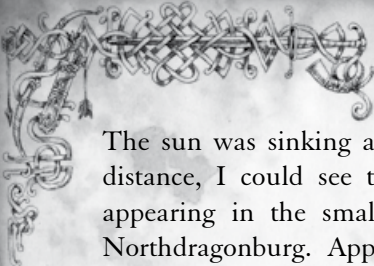




Climbing the cliff face proved more daunting than I suspected at first. The chalk cliffs rise up ruggedly from the river valley floor. The higher I climbed, the farther I could see across the wide mud flats. The blue ribbon of the Ingval meanders through the green of the forest, and the Cliffs of Hallerû tower above everything else. At the foot of the cliffs, the water is especially turbulent, and the nearby rapids inhibit almost all river navigation. Only the boldest raftsmen dare to face the dangers of the Dragon Rapids, as the wild waters to the east of the cliffs are called. Numerous rocks suddenly appear out of the spray and form deadly obstacles in the water. Only the fastest rafters can dodge them.

One raftsmen, I think his name was Ulward, told me that tree dragons often sunbathe there along the shore. These beasts have little fear of humans, he said, and wait only for their opportunity to steal sparkling things. But this is not the real threat of the Dragon Rapids. Ulward claimed to have seen with his own eyes large and scaled bodies in the floods, coiling about themselves in the foaming waters and pulling innocent boaters down into the depths.




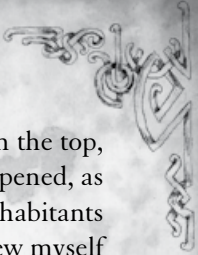


The sun was sinking and I had to hurry. In the distance, I could see the first lights of evening appearing in the small and isolated hamlet of Northdragonburg. Apparently, the settlement is rarely if ever visited by strangers; they don't even have an inn there. But why would anyone want to go there anyway? The path from Ingfallspeugen circumvents the bend of the Ingval and leads directly to Kalking.

I am quite certain that the Northdragonburgers are on good terms with the witches, whose most important ceremonial dancing site is located on the rock plateau above the hamlet. That is the only reason I was scaling these cliffs. I noticed the shrine to Satuarina in the middle of the village. Also, raftsmen in the village's only tavern, next to the river, told me that the local voivode, Binula of Cres, is supposedly a witch herself.

During my ascent I constantly had the feeling of being watched. Sometimes it was a disparaging look from a raven, sometimes a disapproving look from an owl, and I even thought I heard the hissing



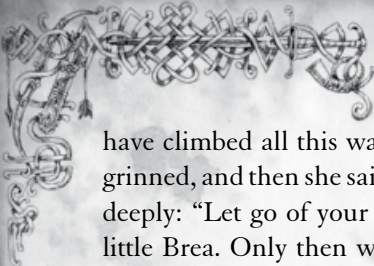


of cats a few times. It took forever to reach the top, and I was glad that nothing eerie had happened, as I had been warned might occur by the inhabitants of the river valley. Breathing heavily, I threw myself onto the grass and rested a bit before glancing around in the evening's twilight. Some distance away I saw a flat area surrounded by mighty trees—blood elms?—from which I could see a faint light.

I was just about to rise when I heard a voice that shot right through me. "Please leave your weapons behind, my child, or else it will be the last thing you will do in this world." Then I saw the woman who had spoken these words. She was crouching in the shadows, not far from me. On her shoulder perched a skull owl whose yellow eyes glared at me with hostility. The slender spear in her hand was pointed at me, but her eyes pose a far greater threat.

"I seek Old Lynia," I said, trying not to show my fear.

"I already know that," the stranger said, clearly amused by my words. "Do you believe you could



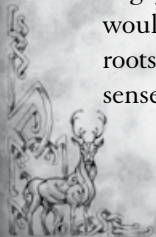
have climbed all this way if I didn't allow it?" She grinned, and then she said something that scared me deeply: "Let go of your weapons and your desires, little Brea. Only then will you find what you seek and what you need." Little Brea! No one had called me by that name since I had become a squire.

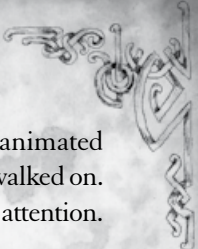
Slowly, I set my bow next to me, and undid the belt to which Findulias was attached. The woman hesitated and pointed the blade of her spear at me again.

"Stop! Can't you hear its voice?" she said. I looked at her questioningly.

"The blade," she answered, "It talks. Keep it with you, but let it remain in its scabbard. Leave everything else here. Now come!"

I walked in front of the woman, under the watchful eyes of her and her owl. When I reached the trees, an angry rustling filled the evening air. I swear, the trees would have hit me with their branches and their roots if the woman had not been present. I could sense that they would defend this place. I had heard





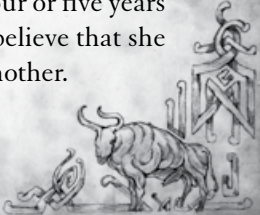
many tales of these creatures: marwolds, animated trees. I couldn't help but stare at them as we walked on. The owl witch did not seem to pay them any attention.

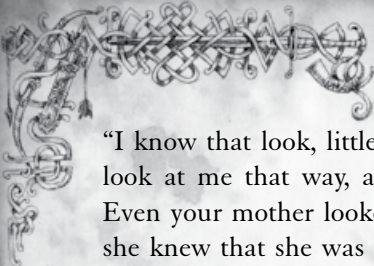
We came to a meadow, at the far edge of which burned a small fire. A pot sat over the fire, and a woman sat behind the pot. She stared open-mouthed at the owl witch. The woman by the fire bore a strong resemblance to my mother and could have passed for her younger sister.

"You wanted to meet Lynia," said the owl witch. "There she is." When I turned to thank her, the owl witch had vanished without a trace, as if she had never been there.

Lynia watched me with familiar eyes. I had seen them before, countless times, in my own reflection. It was as if we were...related.

She gestured for me to sit and join her, and I did so. Old Lynia seemed to be maybe four or five years older than I was. I found it hard to believe that she was supposed to be Young Lynia's mother.






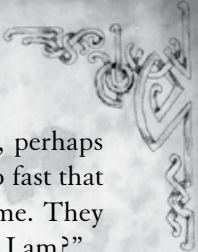
“I know that look, little Brea. Your father used to look at me that way, and his father before him. Even your mother looked at me like that, though she knew that she was my sister’s granddaughter. You’ve grown up well. The sea winds have done you good. You inherited your father’s height, but you have our family’s looks. No wonder my daughter was so fond of you.”

I sat quietly holding the small chest in my lap, trying not to let myself get distracted by the raven that strutted up and down between us.

“They’ve never told you, did they?” sighed the Daughter of Satuaria. I shook my head in disbelief.

“Two great Houses are united in your blood, little Brea: Hyttenhaus of Sevenwinds, and the Ornibs from the forest. Your mother was always a silly person, which is why she had to leave. Do you know that all the women of my line are similar? You may be taller and more slender, but you have our face. Have you never recognized yourself in Lynia? Do




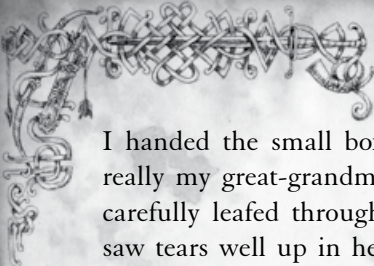


you not now recognize my features? Ah, perhaps I'm confusing you. Maybe humans age so fast that this escapes them. Take a good look at me. They call me Old Lynia. How old do you think I am?"

I was silent for some time, while my thoughts raced around this question. I remember Nyra, Uncle Hupart's sister, saying that Young Lynia might have seen eighty summers. "Maybe a hundred years?" I said, more asking than answering.

Lynia made an idle gesture. "Well reasoned. But no, little Brea. With Satuaris's blessing I've been walking this world for more than two hundred years. I outlived my parents, my lover, and my children, too. I alone remain, because the divine lady wishes it. My youngest daughter, Lynia, was your nursemaid, and I can see that she taught you to respect the natural world. This is well. But before we continue, what do you have for me? A message from Lynia, I hear. I mourned her loss during the last silvery moon, singing in the wind that she loved so well. This small chest is her legacy? Let me see."






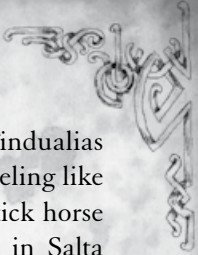
I handed the small box to Old Lynia—was she really my great-grandmother? She opened it and carefully leafed through the documents inside. I saw tears well up in her eyes. Then she laughed quietly. I felt as if I was sitting opposite an older version of myself, watching myself through my own eyes. I was spellbound.

Finally, she reached out her hand: “Give me your blade, little Brea. I wish to see the weapon that was the source of so much irritation for my friend.”

I drew Findulias from its scabbard and handed it to her. She ran a finger over the ricasso, and I heard her sharp intake of air. She placed the blade on her knees, bent low over it, and murmured some words in a strange language. Suddenly her gaze became glassy, as if she were looking through an invisible veil.

After a while she shook her head. “A fine weapon,” she said, “These signs are very old, but I cannot see Mada’s power in it.”





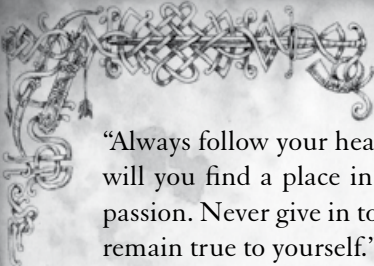
I looked at Old Lynia, disappointed. “So Findualias is not a magic sword after all?” I asked, feeling like a child who has just been told that her stick horse is not real. Hadn’t the serpent priestess in Salta claimed otherwise?

“Satuaria has not revealed Mada’s shimmer to me,” Lynia replied, shaking her head, “But who knows? Most secrets in this world are not magical in nature. The signs on your blade have meaning, but it may take a lifetime to learn them.”

I did not know what to say. I was disappointed about the blade, but I was also relieved. Lakeland people believe that magical weapons are also often cursed. Countless legends speak of mischievous fairies or other supernatural forces compelling weapon bearers to undertake one risky challenge after another.

We talked about Old Lynia’s daughter and the Ornib family line for a time, and then she gave me one last piece of advice to send me on my way.



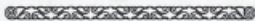


“Always follow your heart, little Brea, for only then will you find a place in this world. Listen to your passion. Never give in to outside forces, and always remain true to yourself.”

—*from the diary of Brealetha of Hyttenhau, Spring, 1040 FB*

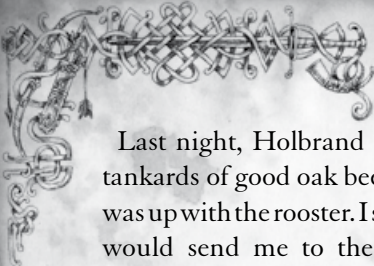


V



The Journey, Part 2






Last night, Holbrand and I downed quite a few tankards of good oak beer to celebrate, but luckily I was up with the rooster. I still hoped that Grandfather would send me to the royal tournament in the capital to uphold the honor of our house, and I did not want to risk doing something that would cause him to change his mind. That was well, because no sooner had I donned my byrnie and tabard when young Krupphold, clad in a gambeson, appeared at the door.

“High Lord,” he called, breathlessly, his cheek red from a recent slap, “His Excellency wishes to see you for breakfast. Please hurry, the Baron is in a foul mood.” He hurried on then, delivering another message, I suspect. I never learned for sure, because that was the last time I ever saw that scallywag.

I hurried across the castle courtyard and found my grandfather and my uncle sitting in the great hall, enjoying a large meal of good bread and cold cuts. “Sit down,” Grandfather commanded. “Eat and listen.”

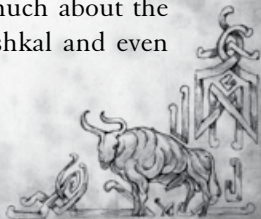


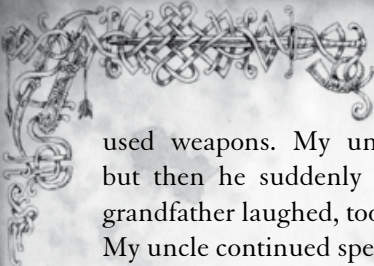
His eyes sparkled dangerously, like those of a field commander anxious to see his plan unfold in battle.

My heart beat faster. Was I about to earn my own command and gain the chance to heap glory on my own name? I forced my hand to keep steady while I poured thinned oak beer into my cup.

“Now you are the Knight of the Ornib Lands,” my grandfather continued without pause, “and you have a trusted advisor in the form of young Holbrand, but two important issues remain to be sorted out. First, you need a squire. No knight can go without a squire. Second, you need a wife to look after the house and give you heirs. This is how you ensure the continuation of the family line and our knightly traditions. Therefore, we are sending you to Teshkal, where you will find all of these things.”

From their reactions, I must have looked completely bewildered. I must have said something, but I was lost in thought. I had heard much about the mannish women who ruled in Teshkal and even

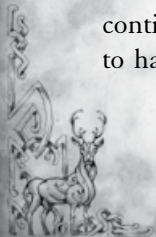


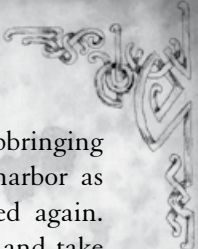


used weapons. My uncle's eyes flashed darkly, but then he suddenly roared with laughter. My grandfather laughed, too, as he took another drink. My uncle continued speaking.

“Stanislaus, Stanislaus. Don't worry, we're not sending you to court a Teshkalian woman. What do you take us for? We are dyed-in-the-wool forest nobles. And by the way, you shouldn't be scared of Teshkalian women. Our good King Wendelmir will soon teach *Baroness*,”—Uncle Cuno almost spat out that word—“Ossyra a lesson, just wait and see. But never mind that. We need some good horses from Teshkal, and a Teshkal knight from a good family and with considerable influence wants to gain a closer connection to the king. We support the king, as our family always has, so Father decided that you, the Knight of the Ornib Lands, will take on this Teshkal knight's first born son as a squire.

“No idea what sort of steppe spirit he has,” Uncle continued, “But be that as it may, we expect you to hammer the pious obedience of Praisos into his

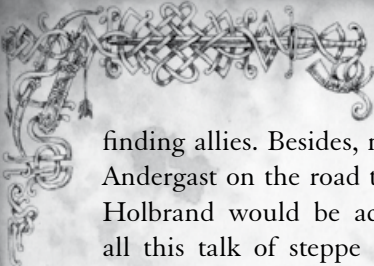




skull. Teach him to leave his steppe upbringing behind, along with any ideas he may harbor as to women's equality." My uncle laughed again. "You'll travel with Holbrand to Teshkal and take on your squire. You will also purchase ten horses, which a servant will deliver to us. While you are there, you will take part in the horse race in Teshkal to gain an impression of the Houses of Teshkalia, so we can consider which are worthy of an alliance. In the meantime, I will ride to Andergast and, as Baron of Beartooth, I will seek a suitable wife for you at the royal tournament. Don't worry. I will try not to disappoint you. A prospective wife should be worthy of you, and hopefully also meet with your approval."

I could not help but feel a little disappointed. The royal tournament in Andergast would have given me the perfect opportunity to present myself to the king. But I had a duty to my House. I must continue the proud line of the Tatzenhains, and I was given a chance to do a great service to the Ornib Lands, the kingdom, and the forest by obtaining horses and



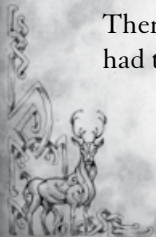



finding allies. Besides, maybe I could at least visit Andergast on the road to Teshkal. I was glad that Holbrand would be accompanying me, because all this talk of steppe spirits made me nervous. Even people in Thurania talk about the strange Teshkalian customs, where life is so different to that in the heartlands.

“It will be done, your Excellency,” I answered proudly. “Tomorrow I will ride out to fulfill your wishes.”

—*from the tales of Stanislaus of Tatzenhain, regarding late Spring of the year 1040 FB*

I often had reason to rue my decision as I made my way up the Ingval. But whenever fear threatened to seize me, I practiced my self-discipline, as I was taught. I had heard of the annual horse race in Teshkal and every day I spent on swift Lucharna’s back reinforced my decision to enter that race. There was only one problem: to reach Teshkal, I had to enter Andergast.

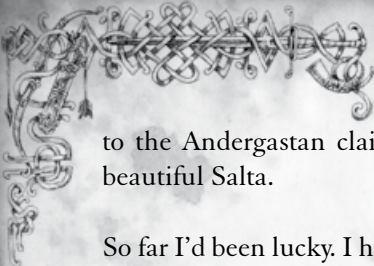




I crossed the border soon after I had passed the Cliffs of Hallerû. I was now in the land of my archenemy. But my first meeting with those oak heads was as mundane as my meeting with the raftsmen in Salta. Still, I felt wary eyes upon me at all times.

I rode through the small settlement of Kalking to follow the new Forest Path and avoid Joborn, the contested border town where, I hear, distrust runs deep and every stranger is thought a spy. The forest counts of Joborn are valiant fighters, and I can only hope that they soon reclaim the city from the Andergastan baron. The Hill of Half, whose slopes have already seen too much Nostrian blood, should not remain in the hands of such an upstart.

I would have liked to see that famous battle site and the wondrous and many-storied Love Light of the merry Rahja. But I'm afraid I would lose my temper over the rough treatment suffered by the town's Nostrian residents. No, it seemed more prudent to travel to Kalleth and to take the Lord's Way from there. Then I will see if there is any truth




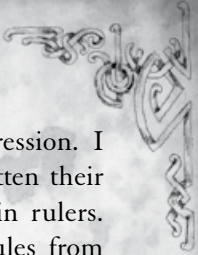
to the Andergastan claim that their capital rivals beautiful Salta.

So far I'd been lucky. I hadn't met any Andergastan county sheriffs, and no one showed me any hostility even though I wore the livery of Hyttenhaus openly. Sometimes country folk in the fields stared as I rode past, as if they had never seen a female knight before. Then I remembered that they hide their women, or least don't arm them. I must try to ask them why they have these reservations, if I ever have the time to talk to them."

—*from the diary of Brealetha of Hyttenhaus, Spring, 1040 FB*

"We left early, because we quickly wanted to reach Joborn and find lodgings with Baron Rufus Longford. His wife, Wenzeslausia, is the king's sister. They live in the castle on the Hill of Half and rule the town with an iron fist. But I suppose it must be this way, or else the Nostrians wouldn't hesitate to move against the town.

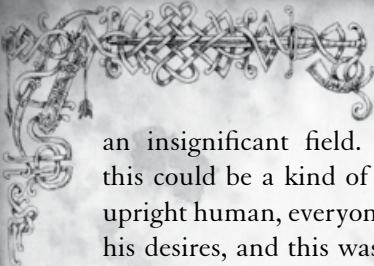




The mood in Joborn was one of oppression. I felt that the people of Joborn had forgotten their patriotism due to the constant change in rulers. It's almost as if they don't care who rules from the castle, just so long as they can go about their daily work in peace. I wondered why I didn't see Andergastans celebrating their liberation from the exploitative Nostriacks. But then I realized that this very indifference could save their lives if the Nostrians possessed the city. I found it both shocking and understandable.

While we traveled, I wondered what could have convinced the baron to allow the construction of a new Rahja temple. This goddess and her priesthood had greatly humiliated us Andergastans in the past. Everyone knows the story of Dorlen, who turned a glorious battle into a bacchanal, an event for which everyone should rightly feel ashamed to this day. But then, I thought perhaps this was just the ruse of a cunning sovereign, who was willing to keep the Nostrians in check by making concessions in such






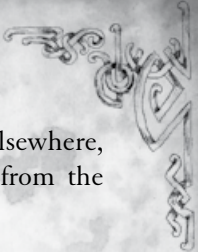
an insignificant field. Holbrand suggested that this could be a kind of test. To become a morally upright human, everyone, so he said, had to master his desires, and this was one way to put people to the test. I could see the truth in that.

We continued following the Ingval upstream, passing through Kalleth and Oakhaven on our way to the glorious capital.

—*from the tales of Stanislaus of Tatzenhain, regarding late Spring of the year 1040 FB*

The somewhat shy woman finally dared to approach me on the ferry to Kalleth. She introduced herself as Rolais Deikvard, an adept of the Academy of Light and Darkness traveling in the service of the queen. I would be surprised if she was more than seven years older than me. She hasn't told me what, exactly, she's doing for the queen, but I am not a fool. She carries a sealed letter bearing the coat of arms of Nostria and some sort of wizard symbols I don't recognize. I've seen others with her black,




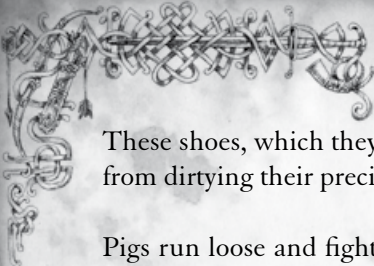


curly mane before, in Infallspeugen and elsewhere, but her name suggests that she comes from the Lakeland or the Sevenwind Coast.

She seems rather open-minded, as one expects of a mage. The name of the serpent goddess Hesinde is often upon her lips, and she has a saying from Emperor Mage Rohal for almost every situation. But she has a rare level of manual dexterity—she even knows how to sew leather seams so tightly that they become waterproof. Why she chose a donkey for a mount is a mystery. They are indeed peaceful animals, but wouldn't a mighty steed make a much better impression? She is not of noble birth, that much I learned, but she is a Nostrian, and that alone is enough to gain my trust in this region. Moreover, she is a gifted orator and that, too, could prove to be useful.

Andergast is a complete disappointment. Low houses made of dark wood, winding alleys, and muck so thick that the fine lords and ladies must wear strange wooden clogs with skids on their feet.

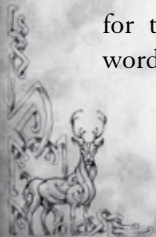




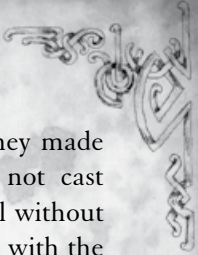
These shoes, which they call *pattens*, keep the mud from dirtying their precious clothes.

Pigs run loose and fight with the city's many feral cats and dogs for scraps. The scent of wood fires is ever-present in the alleys, as is the smell of filth. The people seem as hunched as their half-timbered houses, whose upper levels stretch extend so far out over the streets that hardly any sunlight makes it to the ground. How can people live like this?

The soot-black castle is the only impressive structure, and it dominates the city. Suddenly I begin to understand the Andergastans. Who would dare disobey a ruler as sinister as Zornbold when such an oppressive castle looms right over their heads?



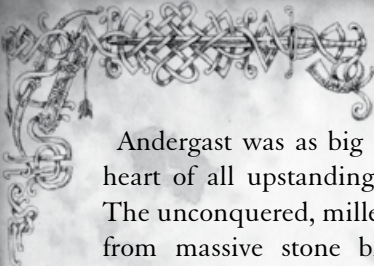
I was stopped by officials for the first time, and I could feel distrust radiating from them like heat from a hearth fire. But apparently one Nostrian woman didn't seem to pose much of a threat, for they contented themselves with admonitory words directed at me and then let me pass. They



even let me keep all my weapons, but they made my companion swear that she would not cast spells within the city walls. I paid the toll without hesitation, for I did not want any trouble with the city guards.


Rolais, my companion, wanted to attend to something. To use her powers here, apparently she needed permission from the *sumes*—the Andergastan term for their local warlocks. She suddenly stopped a man with shaggy hair and a wild beard who was quite obviously a *sume*. Together they spoke in a stream of strange words. The *sume's* companion, a knight, didn't take part in the conversation. He resigned himself to waiting for his companion in silence, and kept his gaze aimed toward the castle. His tabard bore the heraldic device of a spider, which I could not place. Given his harness, though, I concluded that he must be an Andergastan knight. Not wanting any trouble, I kept my distance.

—*from the diary of Brealetha of Hyttenhau, Spring, 1040 FB*

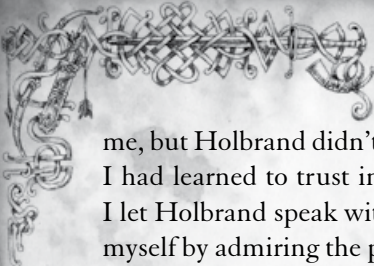


Andergast was as big as I had imagined it. The heart of all upstanding Andergastans beats here. The unconquered, millennia-old royal castle, built from massive stone blocks, stands majestically over the city. Its sight leaves me awestruck. Even the houses of the burghers seem to bow their roofs humbly beneath it. The houses are so tightly packed that their extended upper stories almost touch. It is easy to imagine that the alleys between them never see any light.

Holbrand seemed distracted as we rode through the city. A woman with curly hair and riding a donkey had caught his attention near the city gate. By her attire and the staff in her pack, I could tell immediately that she was a sorceress. I do not trust coincidental meetings, and I trust sorcerers even less, especially ones from Nostria. I concluded she was a Nostrian from the company she kept: a tall woman, wearing a tabard with a ship that I placed as belonging to a noble Nostrian House of the coast. My hand reflexively moved to my mace. The urge to drive this Nostriack out of Andergast rose quickly in






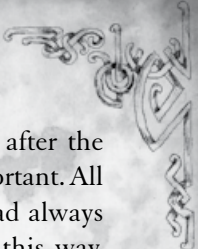


me, but Holbrand didn't seem to share my feelings. I had learned to trust in Holbrand's judgment, so I let Holbrand speak with the sorceress. I occupied myself by admiring the proud royal castle. After all, I could handle a sudden attack from the sorceress' companion.

Generally, it is wise to expect anything from women. Everyone knows that they are impulsive and prone to erratic mood swings. Because of this, I don't understand why other lands are so quick to put weapons in their hands. An armed woman is more likely to hurt herself.

Even though I do not believe this now, at the time, I believed that women did not belong in armor. I was raised to believe that the world works only because everyone had a role to play, as I have already mentioned. This was Praios' will. If someone tried to change things, order would break down. This applied not just to farmers who no longer wished to till their fields, but also to the traditional roles of men and women. Knowing *why* women wear skirts



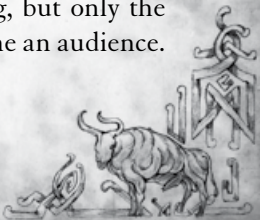


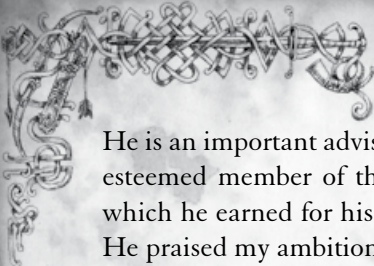
and men wear armor, why women look after the household and men go to war, was unimportant. All that mattered was that this was how it had always been, and things were supposed to stay this way. Our traditions, it was believed, were well proven. What worked in the past could not be wrong today.

As I said, that's what I used to think. But even then, I must admit that this woman held a certain attraction for me, perhaps especially because she wore armor. I suspect that Holbrand felt an attraction for the curly haired sorceress as well.

We didn't meet them again in Andergast, but they remained the focus of the conversations between Holbrand and myself for quite a while. We discussed them over quite a few beers.

The meeting with the two women would later prove to be a lucky and fateful coincidence, but our visit to the court of the king was rather disappointing. I had hoped to speak with the king, but only the Champion of Rondra would grant me an audience.




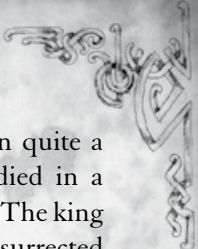


He is an important advisor to the king and a highly esteemed member of the Council of Champions, which he earned for his bravery and military skill. He praised my ambition and loyalty to the king, as consolation for being denied an audience with the king himself. I left the court, moved between regret at not having achieved what I set out to do, and a strange elation that grew out of the certainty that I had made a good impression with an influential person. This could still bring good fortune in the future.

Holbrand didn't seem entirely happy with his visit to court, either. He would have liked to speak with the Champion of Sumu, a sume named Kusmin who was the king's cousin and most trusted advisor. Holbrand considers him a role model, but Kusmin wasn't at court when we visited.

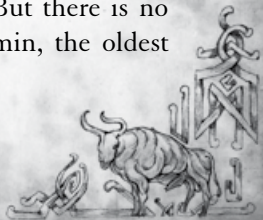
How this sume gained such an important position at court still eludes me. After all, Kusmin is the son and heir of the previous king, Efferdan. Kusmin's miraculous re-appearance at court, just after

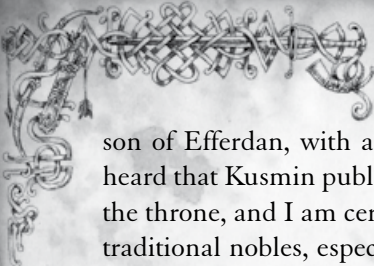




Wendelmir was crowned, must have been quite a shock. Everyone thought Kusmin had died in a tragic boating accident in the Ingval River. The king must have feared that his cousin, newly resurrected from the waters, wanted to challenge his right to the throne. Many nobles were present the night the young man turned up unannounced at the knight's hall of Andergast. Some say they recognized him immediately, as he so closely resembled his father, while others said they could see nothing of a royal heritage in the lad from the forest, dressed as he was in a simple robe and with a flint dagger at his belt.


Some of the nobles openly called the boy a liar when he announced his name. But Kusmin was not alone. He had a mighty advocate at his side: the wise sume Arbogast the Old. I do not know what went through the king's mind when he laid eyes on Kusmin, but he told everyone to leave the hall, and what he discussed with the two sumes in confidence may never be known. But there is no doubt that the king accepted Kusmin, the oldest





son of Efferdan, with all the grace of the court. I heard that Kusmin publicly renounced his claim to the throne, and I am certain that some of the more traditional nobles, especially those from the forest, were quite relieved to hear it. After all, who knew what this lad might have done? He could have been raised with the same newfangled ideas as his father.

With Kusmin's abdication, King Wendelmir could continue to follow the course he had already set and restore the old traditions to their former place of honor. He is the true Champion of Praios. As I understand from Holbrand, Kusmin received a position more befitting his status as a sume when the king appointed him royal spiritual advisor and Champion of Sumu. Both of them together now lead the Council of Champions, although it is said that the sume has the last word in the council, but I haven't heard that he invokes this right. It seems good and proper that two Zornbolds now rule over our kingdom, the king (as Champion of Praios) in

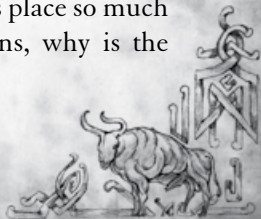


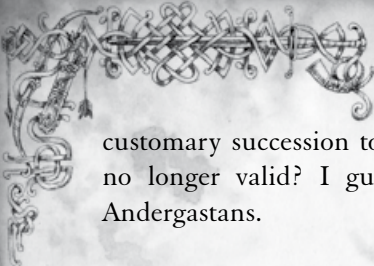
all worldly affairs, and the sune (as Champion of Sumu) in all matters supernatural.

—*from the tales of Stanislaus of Tatzenhain, regarding late Spring of the year 1040 FB*

It's a mystery to me, why Rolais still accompanies me. I had expected that she would remain in the capital to meet this sune, about whom she had spoken with the bearded stranger who accompanied the spider knight. All this talk about the Champion of Sumu is still ringing in my ears. The mage told me that this Kusmin is supposed to be the king's cousin, another scion of the House of Zornbold. By all rights, as first-born son of the previous king, Efferdan, he is the one who should be sitting on the throne.

True, he was missing for years and was presumed dead, but if he is alive, why isn't he king now? Because he is one of the wood wizards? I don't understand this. If the Andergastans place so much emphasis on their ancient traditions, why is the




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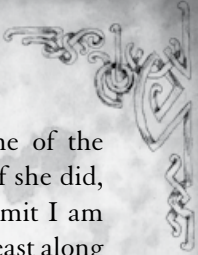
customary succession to the throne, of all things, no longer valid? I guess I'll never understand Andergastans.

Be that as it may, Rolais was not able to meet this Champion of Sumu. With nothing else to keep her in Andergast, we continued our journey together.

We left Andergast behind us, and now the season of storms is nigh. Even the gods seem to have forgotten to bless this time of year. The Middenrealms spend these days hiding in their houses, and superstitiously won't set one foot outside their doors. Luckily, we Nostrians are more enlightened, and even in backwoods Andergast, limiting oneself to twelve gods and one nemesis seems a strange idea. Like us, the Andergastans understand that the realm of the gods above is more complex than the Middenrealms like to think, and that our world is not simply made up of Good and Evil.

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Lucharna seems to be very fond of the mage's donkey. She trots obediently behind the mage,

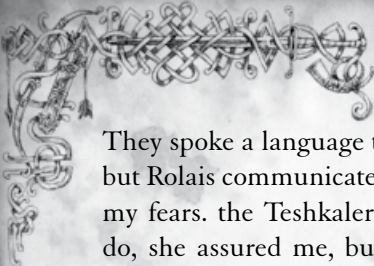


and I fear that she might pick up some of the donkey's proverbial stubbornness. Even if she did, I wouldn't think badly of her. I must admit I am glad for the mage's company as we travel east along the Teshkaler Way. We haven't seen any knights or county sheriffs for quite a while. They are probably too busy securing the roads around the capital, as this is when the oak heads hold their royal tournament.

I worried more about orcs than about Andergastans right now. The Orclands, the ancestral homeland of those menaces, is not far from here. I heard that small bands of marauding orcs dare to cross the Stone Oak Forest to plunder this region on a regular basis now. I wonder if I can trust these tales. In Nostria I was told that the Andergastans have an ancient alliance with the orcs. Could it be that these murderers are welcomed in Teshkal?

I am relieved! Today we met a traveling party of merchants and minstrels. Their dark skin and partly shaved heads led me to think they were Norbards.




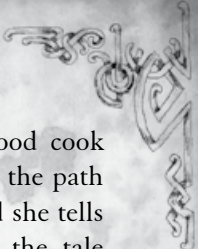


They spoke a language that I couldn't understand, but Rolais communicated with them and alleviated my fears. The Teshkalers hate the orcs, just as we do, she assured me, but—unlike with the rest of the kingdom—Teshkal is ruled by a woman, to my great surprise. A highly sought-after woman, to hear the Norbards tell it. She is being courted by two men: Prince Arlan Lion's Head from the Middenrealm, and Brin of Rhodenstein, a priest of the goddess Rondra.

We followed the course of the Ingval, day after day, and I never forgot to make a small offering of alcohol to the river at dawn, especially not since I heard the legend about Ingval the lizard—it could do no harm to seek the favor of such a powerful deity. This is also why I gladly tolerate the endless litanies that Rolais addresses to the heavens in the evening hours.

She is a good companion who hardly ever complains, but instead does her part with action and skill. I wouldn't have expected that from a



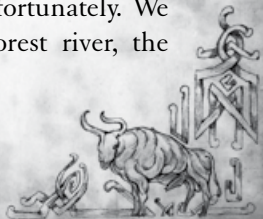


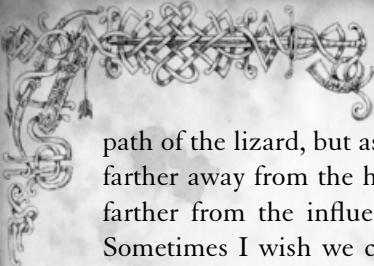
mage. I hunt our food, but she is a good cook who always manages to find herbs along the path that make our meals more delicious. And she tells fascinating stories. I especially enjoyed the tale of the quarrel between Rohal and Borbarad, the brothers who unleashed their powers in a sea of sand and annihilated entire armies.

I don't believe that mortals ever had such power. Not even Old Lynia would call these beings mortals. She would say that they, too, lived beyond the stars, and would no doubt much rather send such faceless creatures back to the Netherhells. Out of all the stories, of sylphs and nymphs and other things, the tale of the two brothers is the one that frightens me the most. I hope that there isn't much truth to it.

—*from the diary of Brealetha of Hyttenhau, Spring, 1040 FB*

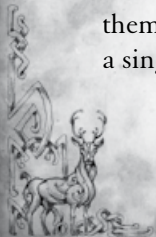
We continued up the Ingval. Unfortunately. We still followed the course of the forest river, the

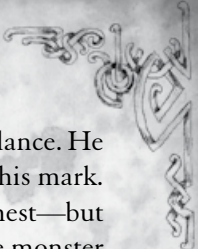




path of the lizard, but as we did so, we also moved farther away from the heart of the forest and thus farther from the influence of the Aurochs King. Sometimes I wish we could have traveled up the Andra towards Andrafall, the oldest settlement in our beautiful kingdom and the place where the first Zornbold, Argos, founded the principality. I often think about the legend of Andra's sacrifice, which is still praised by the rushing waters of the rivers to this day.


According to the myth, in the days when Argos Zornbold reigned, a mighty giant swept down from the heights of the mountains to wreak havoc and satisfy his hunger on brave Andergastans. The prince gathered his best warriors and soon caught up to the giant, as it had left a trail of destruction through the forest, tearing up mighty stone oaks and slaughtering many animals. The prince's knights charged forward, but the giant drove them off by hurling entire trees and gigantic boulders towards them. They retreated before they had inflicted even a single wound on the giant.

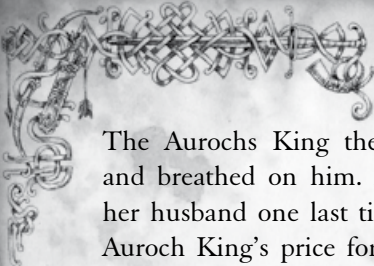




Then the prince himself attacked with his lance. He bravely rode towards the creature and hit his mark. Driving his lance deep into the giant's chest—but not deep enough to kill him. Enraged, the monster struck at the prince, knocking him from his saddle and sending him flying through the air. The prince fell heavily to the ground and did not move.

A scream went up from his wife, Andra, who had disobeyed orders to stay home so she could watch her husband fight, and admire his heroic deeds. While the knights were fleeing, she stepped forward and faced the terrible creature. The hunchbacked giant had only one eye, and his gaze was almost unbearable. He caught sight of Andra and pursued her, but she was not alone. Another creature—the Aurochs King—stepped out of the thick forest. Andra fell down on her knees in front of him and pledged to make the greatest sacrifice, if only he would save her husband. The Aurochs King directed its fury against the giant and destroyed it, for not even something as powerful as a giant can withstand the might of the Lord of the Forest.

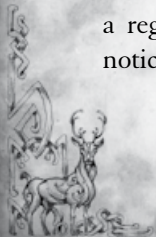




The Aurochs King then approached the prince and breathed on him. Argos lived! Andra kissed her husband one last time and turned to pay the Auroch King's price for saving the prince, as she had promised. With eyes full of tears, the prince said goodbye, and Andra stepped towards the edge of the cliff and jumped into the rushing waters below.

Afterwards, Argos named the river Andra to memorialize his wife's brave sacrifice, which sealed the bond between the forest and the House of Zornbold. He then constructed a tomb for his wife in the forest of the Aurochs King, even though her body was never found. To stay close to the site of Andra's Barrow, as her forest tomb is known, Prince Argos built his capital a day's journey to the south. He named it Andrafall, and each year, many Andergastans come to the city to commemorate the anniversary of Andra's sacrifice with celebrations.

We left the heartlands behind, and journeyed to a region that was not what it seemed. Holbrand noticed it first. The spirits here spoke different



languages. We still heard the whisper of the Ingval, but Holbrand's dryads slowly fell silent as we traveled further. I wondered if this should worry me.

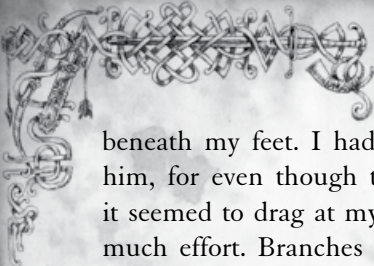
On the evening of our second day of the journey, we set up our camp close to the river. I caught a rabbit and had it sizzling over the campfire when suddenly Holbrand eyes went wide with shock.

"What's wrong?" I asked. I peered in the direction he had been looking, trying to see past the light from the campfire.

He whispered a single word: "Danger!" Then he leapt up as if bitten by a fire beetle and suddenly dashed off into the forest. I grabbed my Andergaster, Clawfang, and ran after him. My stomach growled as I thought about that crispy rabbit going to waste, but I would not abandon Holbrand to his fate.


I was surprised by how nimbly the druid could move through an unfamiliar forest, even at night. I ran, nearly blind, for I could barely see the ground





beneath my feet. I had great difficulty following him, for even though the underbrush was light, it seemed to drag at my legs, and every step took much effort. Branches appeared out of nowhere, lashing me and raising welts on my face. Holbrand didn't seem impeded by the undergrowth at all, and I soon lost sight of him, though I kept running. Finally, I came upon a clearing, and what I saw there horrified me.

The dim light of a small campfire revealed a horde of orcs about to kill a pair of women. Two of the orcs lay dead, pierced with many arrows. The shorter woman huddled behind her companion, apparently in a daze. The taller woman wielded a bow, and even though her situation was desperate, she calmly nocked arrow after arrow with amazing dexterity. Free of the underbrush, I sprinted towards them. One of the orcs dashed up to the archer and raised his jagged saber above his head for a killing blow. She lifted her bow to parry, and the saber shattered it with a loud crack. The woman stumbled back. A part of my mind evaluated her tactics and found



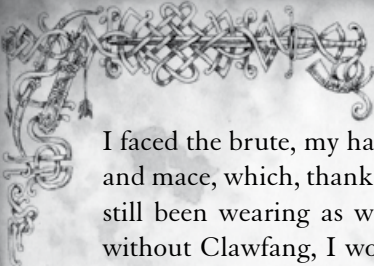
them wanting: instead of retreating to a stronger position at the outset of the fight, they had stood their ground and the archer wound up having to sacrifice her only weapon.

I saw eight or maybe ten orcs in the clearing. Holbrand was still nowhere in sight. Suddenly, I heard an inhuman roar. A moment later, a massive, pale creature charged into the open. It was an ogre!

A chill went down my spine, and my heart pounded with fear, but this was the moment to put my training and honor to the test. I leaped forward, the Andergaster raised above my head, and charged towards the enemy. I must have shouted a battle cry because the ogre turned and glared at me. His small, beady eyes sparkled with murderous intent as he swung his club at my head.

The blow smashed the Andergaster from my hands, and it spun off like an oversized throwing knife. Luckily, I was able to veer off just in time: the club missed me by a hair's breadth.



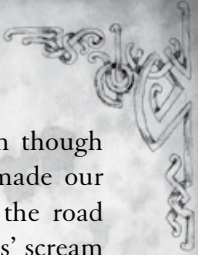


I faced the brute, my hands reaching for my shield and mace, which, thank the good gods above, I had still been wearing as we cooked the rabbit. Even without Clawfang, I would teach this ogre to fear an Andergastan knight.

I stared, spellbound, at the man-eater, but I foolishly lost track of the orcs and left my back unprotected. I remember well how my instincts urged me to turn around and raise my shield—but I was too late. One of the orcs had drawn near and would soon have killed me, if not for the archer. She had cast her broken bow away, drawn her own sword, and cut down the orc at my back.

With no small amount of shock, I recognized her as the Nostrian I had encountered in Andergast. Before I knew it, I found myself fighting back to back with a female Nostrian warrior, surrounded by a horde of orcs and a ravenous ogre.

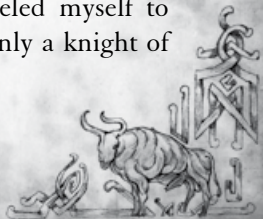
—*from the tales of Stanislaus of Tatzenhain, regarding late Spring of the year 1040 FB*

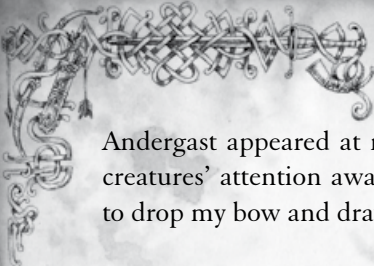


The orcs had caught us unaware, even though Rolais and I hadn't been careless. We made our camp in a clearing only few feet from the road and lit only a few coals for warmth. Rolais' scream alerted me to the orcs that stormed out of the forest and rushed towards us. I had been inspecting my bow before turning in for the evening and luckily still had it strung. I shot arrow after arrow towards the fiends, slowing their wild advance. I felt Rolais grab hold of me. She might have panicked, for she seemed unable to concentrate on her magic. I kept myself between her and the orcs, and I remember turning to say something to her when suddenly one of the orcs charged at me with a jagged saber.

All I could do was raise my bow and hope for the best. I parried the blow, but at the painful cost of seeing my bow shatter. Then, to my horror, a huge ogre burst into the clearing.

I glanced quickly from the monster to the remains of my bow and back again. I steeled myself to fight to the bitter end, when suddenly a knight of



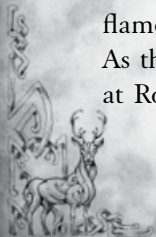


Andergast appeared at my side. He distracted the creatures' attention away from us, giving me time to drop my bow and draw Findulias.

A moment later I stood back to back with the Andergastan. My blade slashed and tore at the enemy, and his mace crushed skulls and limbs alike. Soon all the orcs were dead and only the ogre remained.

The Andergastan narrowly escaped death as the ogre's club smashed down on his stone oak shield, sinking him up to his ankles in the soft ground.

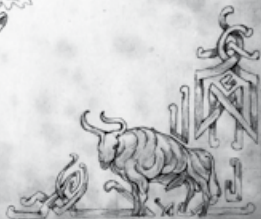
A bright light blinded me and I felt heat surging all around, making me cover my face. I heard the ogre scream in pain as it caught fire. Rolais had regained her composure, it seemed. Her face distorted with rage, she pointed towards the ogre and a stream of bright flames shot from her arm. The heat caused the ogre's flesh to char and peel away, but the flames were so hot that she even burned herself. As the ogre sank to the ground, a sume appeared at Rolais' side, whispering calming words. It was

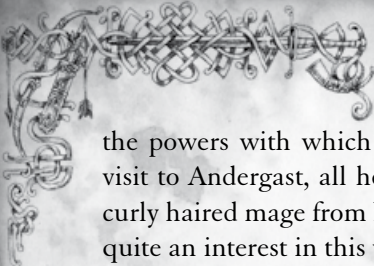


touching to watch. He seemed to ease her pain just by holding her hands.

That evening, I thanked the good gods above that they had sent us those two. But divine Phex! What irony that our lives were saved by two Andergastans. —*from the diary of Brealetha of Hyttenhau, Spring, 1040 FB*

I remember how often Holbrand use to speak of his dislike for mages. These vain, small-minded creatures, he used to say, often do not understand




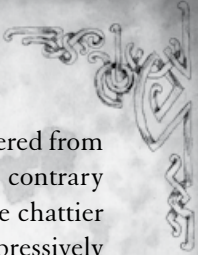


the powers with which they barter. But after our visit to Andergast, all he could talk about was the curly haired mage from Nostria. Ha! He had taken quite an interest in this woman who had killed the ogre. Holdbrand told me that he, too, has words of power—whatever that means—but in this case, the mage had used them to unleash the forces of the elements and reduce the ogre to a charred piece of meat. Holbrand claimed he had never seen such strength, but I think he was simply trying to flatter her.

As for his mysterious actions that night, Holbrand said he had led a great force of orcs away from the clearing, but apparently, a scouting party would not be deterred from killing the women. The fight was almost over by the time he managed to lose the orcs and circle back around.


After the battle, we came to a decision that would previously have been unthinkable: we agreed to continue on our way together.

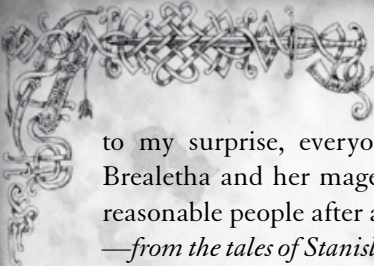




All of my preconceived notions were shattered from the very first day of our journey because, contrary to the general opinion that women are the chattier sex, our first day on the road was oppressively silent. I think we were still too wary to let go of our distrust, but at the same time, we all tried not to anger anyone by saying the wrong word. Of us all, I remained the quietest, because I caught myself secretly admiring the Nostrian warrior. She certainly knew how to fight, but at the time, I didn't want to admit it—not to her or to myself. After all, she was a woman, and if I admitted that women could be skilled fighters, wouldn't I be questioning our cherished traditions?

By that evening, I had resolved this initial confusion and settled back into my usual habits. I decided that the group would stop for the night in a small village near the edge of the woods, for we would be starting the days-long journey across the plains soon enough. I expected loud objections, for everyone knows that Nostrians are rebellious by nature, so I adopted a commanding tone. However,






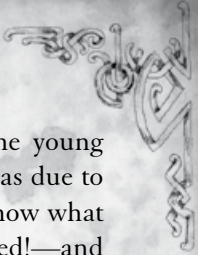
to my surprise, everyone agreed with my plan. Brealetha and her mage Rolais seemed to be very reasonable people after all.

—*from the tales of Stanislaus of Tatzenhain, regarding late Spring of the year 1040 FB*

When it was time to rest, Stanislaus suggested we stop at the last hamlet along the way before we left the woods. He is a knight of the forest, and his affinity for this environment seems similar to my desire to stay near water. I could still hear the murmur of the Ingval through the trees, so I readily agreed, which seemed to surprise Stanislaus.

The first day of our journey together is at an end, and we spent most of it in silence. I had heard many tales of the lively temperament of the oak heads, and I didn't want to endanger our alliance on the first day by saying the wrong thing. One learns more about one's companions by watching than by speaking, anyways.

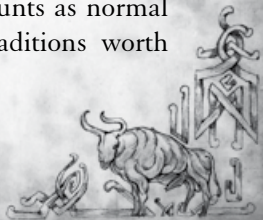


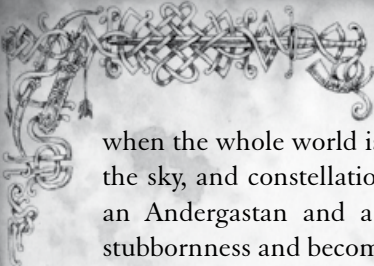


A blind fish would have noticed that the young druid never left Rolais' side. He said it was due to concern over her hands—gods, I don't know what she did, but her hands are terribly burned!—and I have the feeling that his intentions are also of a romantic nature.

Both of them gave up their silence more quickly than Stanislaus or I. During the day, I often overheard them discussing the gods. I think they were debating the relative strength and influence of the All-Mother as compared to Hesinde, whom Rolais calls the All-Knowing. Apparently, the enmity of our kingdoms has taken deeper root in Stanislaus and myself. I can sense his dislike for us Nostrians, even though I see him struggling to overcome it. I realize that I wish to do the same.

I am traveling with an Andergastan knight, our people's sworn enemy, whom I would normally meet only on the battlefield, and then as an opponent, not an ally. But what counts as normal these days, anyway? What are traditions worth





when the whole world is changing? Stars fall from the sky, and constellations move. Why, then, can't an Andergastan and a Nostrian let go of their stubbornness and become true companions?

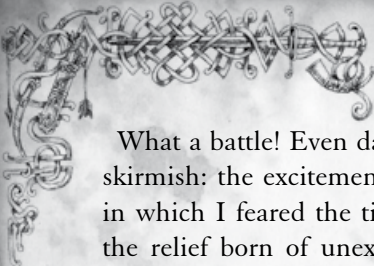
I am still a bit wary about all of this. The Andergastans have deceived us before. We must rely on each other for survival out here in the wild expanse of Teshkalia, but I suppose this should not prevent me from remaining vigilant.

—*from the diary of Brealetha of Hyttenhau, Spring, 1040 FB*

VI

The Second Beginning— Adventure Calls




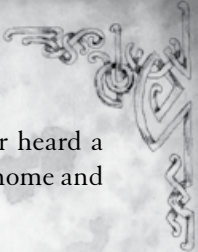


What a battle! Even days later I still think of the skirmish: the excitement, the moments of anxiety in which I feared the tide would turn against us, the relief born of unexpected rescue, the feeling of helplessness, the knowledge that someone depends on you, the sense of certainty, fighting back to back and knowing that we will get through this—together. I felt a previously unknown thirst for adventure. My world suddenly seemed narrow and small, and the reasons for traveling to Teshkal seemed trivial. Of course, I would fulfill my mission. I was a knight, and I had given my word.

But...Brealetha's freedom filled me with jealousy. Yes, I admired her for it, but at the time I felt compelled by years of training to view this freedom as an affront to our traditions, and therefore as bad.

I remember vividly that this was when I began to wonder what I would do with my life after I fulfilled my mission. The world was far too exciting to spend my years in one town. Wouldn't I gain greater glory if I ventured out in the world to slay






orcs and dragons? After all, who has ever heard a heroic song about a knight who stayed at home and tended to his garden?

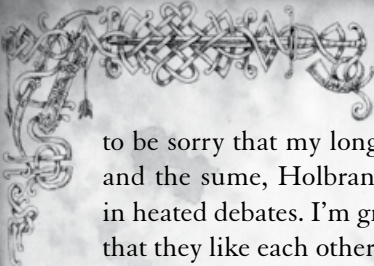
Our strange company of unlikely companions first journeyed on to Teshkal. Brealetha and I led the way on our proud destriers. Behind us rode my friend and advisor Holbrand, the forest sune, and Brealetha's companion Rolais, the wizard from the coast who could tame fire. Bruun help us, it could hardly have been more absurd.

—*from the tales of Stanislaus of Tatzenhain, regarding late Spring of the year 1040 FB*

We still don't talk much, the Andergastan knight and I, but increasingly I have the feeling that behind Stanislaus' solemn countenance hides a pleasant man. I hadn't expected that.

I kept expecting him to say, at some point, that I should be sitting at home wearing a colorful skirt and working a spindle, but I was wrong. He even seems

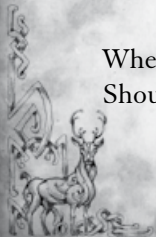


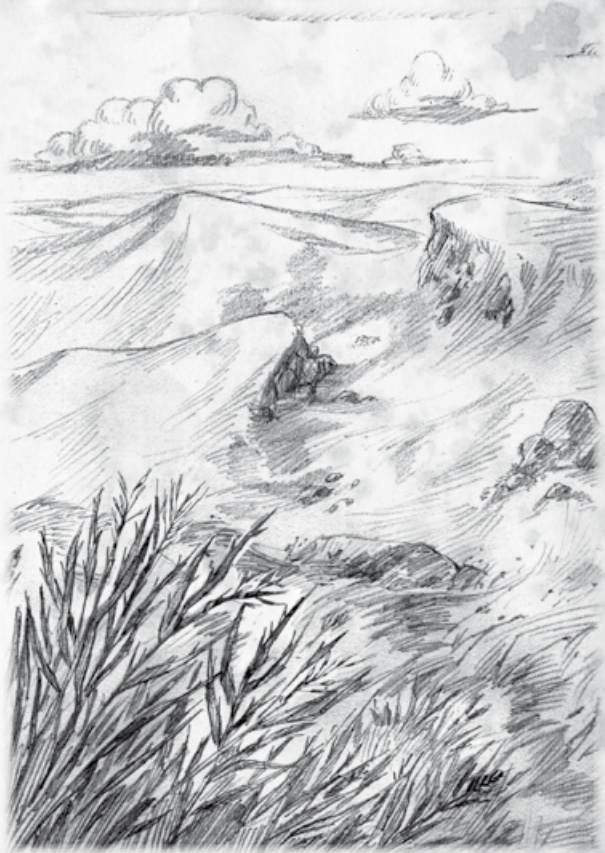


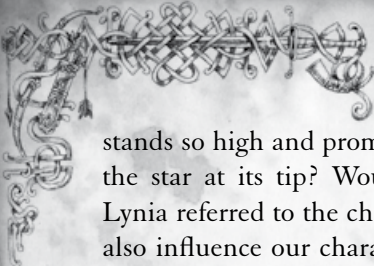
to be sorry that my long bow was smashed. Rolais and the sune, Holbrand, are constantly absorbed in heated debates. I'm growing increasingly certain that they like each other. The signs are there. They argue loudly, and then, moments later, they laugh merrily and seem quite happy together, as if they had never quarreled in their lives.

We left the forest and proceeded across the endless reaches of the Bladegrass Steppes. The road known as the Teshkaler Way is little more than a dusty path that is sometimes hard to distinguish from the packed earth of the steppe. Occasionally we passed piles of stones, which I initially thought were route markers, but Rolais said that they are altars. Each one bore several colorful bands of cloth, frayed by long years of exposure to the wind. The mage and the sune could not agree whether the altars venerated spirits of the wind or the souls of those who had died on the steppe. Both options seemed unnerving, and suddenly I felt lonely.

When evening came, we looked up at the stars. Should it be a sign that the Sword of Rondra, which








stands so high and prominent in the skies, has lost the star at its tip? Would the Starfall, as Young Lynia referred to the changes in the starry canopy, also influence our character, and maybe even end our enmity?

Stanislaus sat silently watching the constellations as they wheeled above us in their turn. I cannot remember seeing them so clearly before, even when no tree or cloud blocked them from sight at the coast. No wonder the inhabitants of the steppe are so superstitious. When they look at the sky, they see the works of the good gods. I heard that they try to learn their future from the movement of the stars and the moon. I've never seen such deep blue-black, such a silver gleaming. Even Rolais and the sune stopped their quarreling and stared up at the firmament in wonder.

But I am sure they saw entirely different things than Stanislaus and me. Both have been kissed by Mada, and their blood flows differently than ours. While we try to find fulfilment in battle, they look beyond

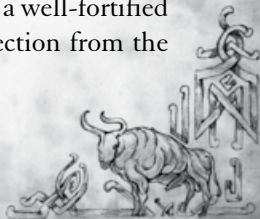
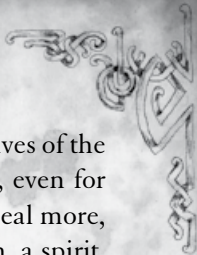


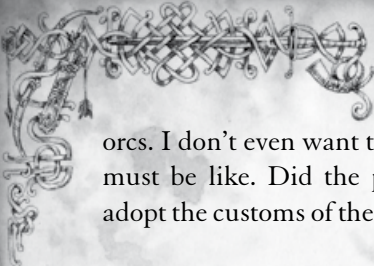
the deeds of men and try to grasp the motives of the gods. The Starfall, it seems, is too much, even for scholars. I probably need to read a great deal more, or be touched by the woman in the moon, a spirit, or a goddess, to have any idea what it means for our future.

We camped for the night in the cover of a shallow hollow within sight of the road. Stanislaus offered to take the first watch, and I welcomed sleep. By the time the knight woke me, the sun was just climbing above the horizon. The sky was a brilliant red, and the steppe seemed quiet and unreal. Surrounded by its vastness, we felt small and unimportant. Nobody spoke a word.

At this instant, we felt closer and more similar than anyone who had ever lived. Even though we had been taught all our lives to mistrust each other, I felt comfortable and safe.

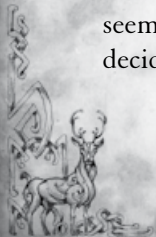
The city of Teshkal is surrounded by a well-fortified palisade, but that is their only protection from the





orcs. I don't even want to imagine what living here must be like. Did the people of Teshkal have to adopt the customs of the orcs to protect themselves?

Stanislaus talks dismissively about the Teshkalers who follow a woman as baroness. At such times the Andergastan in him shines through, the one who wishes to explain why women should not be allowed wear trousers or bear arms, let alone rule a city. He always has the same superficial explanation ready, and if you insist on a reason, he cites only the glorious history of Andergast and the old adage that tradition will take you far. He seems deaf to examples that prove the opposite, such as the empress of the Middenrealm, or the wise Queen Yolande. His response to both is a tally of the voivodes in those realms who have revolted against the weak hand of their ruler for their own profit and the detriment of the people. Under the strict but just hand of King Wendelmir, things like that would be unthinkable. In this matter, Stanislaus seems to be an irredeemable oak head, and I've decided to ignore such remarks for the time being



so I don't do something rash and ruin the peace of our strange traveling party.

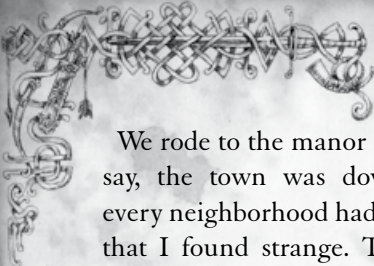
The city is surrounded by meadows and paddocks full of Teshkalers, the famous black horses such as Stanislaus rides. They seem almost the opposite of my Lucharna, a Warunker gray mare. Due to the upcoming horse race, the city is almost overrun with visitors from near and far. The horse market is a blur of activity, and the Temple of Rahja is decorated magnificently.

We saw the precious statues of the city's revered sky horse gods, Tharvun and Sulva, which the people carry through the town during celebrations such as these.

Stanislaus and Holbrand want to ride to the lordly manor and see to their business. Rolais and I plan to visit the market; I still need a new bow, after all. We will meet again at the noon hour in Rahja's Honor, an inn of good repute.


—*from the diary of Brealetha of Hyttenhau, Spring, 1040 FB*

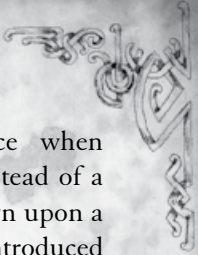




We rode to the manor of the baroness and I must say, the town was downright crowded. Almost every neighborhood had its own palisade, a custom that I found strange. This assemblage reminded me more of an army camp than a city. Somewhat more worrying were the mounds of earth in almost every tribal community. Holbrand mused that they might be graves of influential ancestors. The baroness received us and I must say that she impressed me with her firm voice and her resolute demeanor. Yes, I almost felt intimidated, and I had to use all of my self-control and willpower to remain impassive. After all, I am the proud Knight of the Ornib Lands. What impression would I have made if I had bowed and scraped like a common petitioner?

After we had exchanged meaningless pleasantries, she introduced me to the knight Thangold Greenground, with whom my uncle had made the trade arrangements, and in return whose first-born I was to take on as squire in my service.



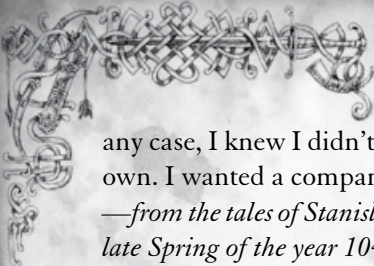


O you good gods! Imagine my face when Greenground presented his heir, and instead of a sprightly boy, I found myself looking down upon a young girl! A girl! Praios save me! She introduced herself as Tharella. What could I do? My family had sealed this deal with their word of honor. What would the tradition-bound nobles of Andergast say when they saw me with this girl? How was I to win fame and glory if one look at my squire was all it took to open me up to ridicule?

I made up my mind. I would keep my promise and train Tharella, but I wouldn't return to Andergast. No, I would follow the example of the great knights of legend and go on a journey of adventure, performing heroic deeds and not returning home until I had won great fame and glory.

But a girl...I had no idea how to proceed. I immediately thought that I would need help—or was I only telling myself that so I would have a reason to ask Brealetha to join me? I don't know. In



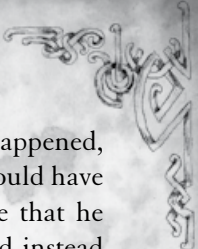


any case, I knew I didn't want to venture out on my own. I wanted a companion.

—*from the tales of Stanislaus of Tatzenhain, regarding late Spring of the year 1040 FB*

From the look on his face, I guessed that Stanislaus was in a bad mood when he entered the inn. I also wondered about the girl who seemed to be accompanying him. O gods, how I wanted to laugh when he told us that this girl was now his squire, but this was no laughing matter for Stanislaus. I knew that he would also be the laughing stock of his narrow-minded compatriots if he returned home with her in tow, so I remained silent.



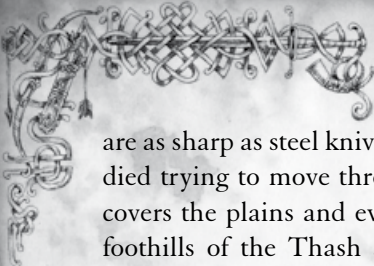


And then something quite unexpected happened, something that excited me more than I would have admitted at the time. Stanislaus told me that he doesn't intend to return to Andergast and instead wishes to go on a long adventure and perform heroic deeds. Then he asked me, a Nostrian knight from the Lakelands, if I wanted to accompany him. I remember the words of my ancestor, Old Lymia, who told me to listen to my passions and follow my heart until I became the person that I always wanted to be. And, you good gods, I did want to accompany him into this unknown future.

Stanislaus' squire is named Tharella. She is cheeky and never at a loss for words, and I am certain that I will enjoy watching her put the stubborn knight in his place. She is also quite educated and knows the surrounding area well. She told us quite a bit about it.

The sea of deadly bladegrass stretches to the north and east as far as the eye can see. These innocent looking plants sway in the wind, but their leaves







are as sharp as steel knives and careless people have died trying to move through them unprotected. It covers the plains and even grows well up into the foothills of the Thash and the Dark Ridge. The only safe path through it all is the Teshkaler Way, now called the Northway, which branches after it passes through Teshkal. One branch leads deeper into the Thash Mountains as far as Thash Ridge, while the other branch heads east towards the Svellt Valley.

Somewhere in the middle of these barren lands, Tharella explained, sits a hill that somehow can only be seen from a distance. Tharella says magical beings live there in a castle named Crowloft. Nobody knows who built the castle, or why, and it is said that few have ever entered it and survived. According to legend, the vengeful ghosts of its previous inhabitants wander its halls, but some people think Crowloft is home to demons.

Rolais immediately expressed an interest in exploring this place, for she sees it as an endeavor



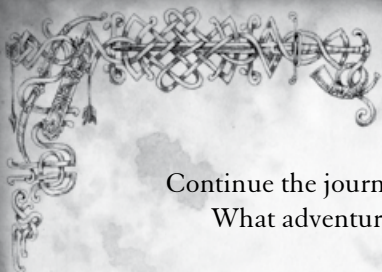


that is very pleasing to Hesinde. Because Rolais showed so much enthusiasm, the same Holbrand wants to come along. It is unanimous. Our first adventure will take us to Crowloft.

We won't set out until after we watch the chariot race and spend the season of storms, the Nameless Days, in Teshkal. Stanislaus wants to write a letter to his grandfather, and I want to write my parents. They should know that I am well. I will not mention Stanislaus—not yet, at any rate. My new bow leans against the wall in my room. When I look upon it and feel the warm wind of the steppes blowing through the window, I grow anxious to saddle Lucharna and ride out again. I know that the future has something good in store for all of us.

—*from the diary of Brealetha of Hyttenhau, Spring, 1040 FB*





Continue the journal in your own hand.
What adventures will you have?





Ulisses
North America