

A GAME OF GODS

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Saint Petersburg, Florida

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ISBN: 978-1-64718-593-0

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

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BookLocker.com, Inc.
2020

First Edition

Dedication

A wise woman once told me that no man is an island. Therefore, I would like to dedicate this book to some people who were with me during the journey of its creation

Dianne Paquet – You are the strongest woman I have ever known. Thank you for creating within me a love for reading. You showed me that the only limit to our imagination is the limitation of our mind.

Bryan O'Neal – Thank you, my brother, for your friendship and your powerful spiritual healing. You reached down into the water and saved me from drowning.

Jes Carlo Balan – Thank you for igniting a fire within me to pursue the truth behind the mask. For it is in judgment that truth is revealed, and with truth, justice prevails. Enjoy the world of smoke and mirrors you have created around yourself. For in due time, this too shall pass.

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Prelude

Xclatru Ral looked out over the auditorium at his assembled class. As Chief Interspecies Sociology Professor, it was part of his duties to teach the curriculum for Social Experimentation 1A. A historic, long-term, and on-going project involving Alpha and Control Group samples from the world known to its combined human population as Earth.

Ral leaned forward, his giant black opaque eyes surveying his students. Species from each world of the Common Alliance were present, and he recognized several students from previous courses. Ral stood in preparation to address the class. His lanky gray-skinned frame was adorned in a red tunic that flowed around him, decorated throughout with gold letters in the Language of the Founders. A clasp at the right shoulder with a bas relief of the Common Alliance worlds and a glyph that stood for Knowledge held the tunic together.

"Good Morning, class," Ral projected the thought out from within himself. Ral's people had long ago dispensed with the need for vocal speech or any of the other requirements of a mouth or vocal cords. Hence, his tight-lipped and stony expression.

"Our purpose here today is to examine the on-going socio-historic research involving the Control Groups transplanted from Earth to the experimentation platform designated as Threa."

Ral turned to the giant screen behind him, and with a wave of his hand, an image of Earth appeared. *"While the Earth is home to highly complex life forms, it is also in a state of constant fluctuation due to the proximity of its moon and its place around its parent star."*

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Another wave of his hand showed a different picture with fault lines and continental drift progressions. Turning to his audience, he leaned against his podium.

"Earth is in an almost constant state of turmoil," stated Ral. "Seismic activity, changes in climate, and weather extremes all contribute to cataclysmic events used throughout its history to cover our efforts to preserve some Earth species. Especially the highly evolved life forms."

Ral consulted a tablet on the podium. *"We say highly evolved instead of just Human since there have been numerous intelligent and sentient life forms that have evolved on the planet. Most are not recorded in its current history or are part of ancient mythology."*

Ral raised his hand with his palm facing up and traced a symbol in the air. An image of a female clad in shimmering white appeared.

"This being was one of the first indigenous life forms encountered on Earth, and it simply told us it was First, and Always. Scientific research determined the being was a manifestation of the elemental energy of the planet itself. As such, it was capable of controlling and influencing the Earth at a level of its choosing. While research is on-going, we still have yet to determine what this being is or how it came into existence."

With a flick of his wrist, the image in his palm transformed into a full-scale model. A shimmering translucent figure clad in shifting colors stood before the assembly.

"The closest we have come to determine using our science is that this is the essence of the planet Earth itself. In short, this is the planet's spirit."

Ral clenched his hand into a fist, and the image disappeared. Crossing his bony arms, Ral turned to his audience. *"We have encountered the same or a similar manifestation on every world with complex life forms, and*

when we started transplanting populations to Threa, the being or one very similar was also present."

One of the students, a hideous conglomeration of eyes and tentacles and wings, raised an appendage for a question. Ral recognized the student as an Arcturian named Spllaggleph. His race being from a planet where gravity was so strong that its inhabitants never developed a bone structure and had remained in a nearly amoebic state for all of their conscious existence.

"Yes," queried Ral, turning his unblinking gaze towards the students. Ral's mind automatically translated the wet bubbly pipings of the student's native language.

"Honored Teacher!" the student waved its tentacles in exasperation. *"Is this the deity manifestation we have read so much about in the mythology from other worlds?"*

"We don't know." The answer exuded an exclamation from the audience.

"The closest we can determine is that the being has the same biological signature of every species we have ever encountered at the base level, and at the same time, it exhibits characteristics of star formation and non-biological matter. We know that if the same manifestation was ever part of our existence, it is buried too deep in our history to find. We know that the more mechanized, industrialized, and technologically advanced a species became, this manifestation occurred less. Therefore, we conclude that the being is of the natural order, and technology causes its manifestation to weaken."

Ral watched his students writing notes from the board at a hurried pace and waited in stony silence until he felt his student's attentions turn back towards the front of the auditorium.

"This digresses from the lecture, but it shows a crucial interaction between a proliferation entity and its offspring."

❧

Chapter One

Early Years

For as long as I can remember, I have always been different. I also know that for as long as I could remember that I hated being different. Never mind that I figured out how to escape from my crib at nine months old or that I had memorized all of my letters and knew my numbers up to one hundred by my third year. All who knew me knew I was different

By age four, I was perusing the books in my father's vast library and asking my mother questions that she would helplessly not be able to answer. My father, being the Jarl, was an educated man, and he collected books from all the lands with which we traded. For all the ferocity of our culture, we were tradesmen, craftsmen, and surprisingly, we were foremost scholars and poets.

So by age five, I was reading stories of faraway lands and those who lived in them. The oddest thing was that no one ever taught me how to spell or count or read. Such things seemed to come naturally to me.

Now for all of my bookishness and odd behaviors for being so young, I was by no means an isolated boy. I had the opportunity to play with anyone I chose to, but often, the games seemed childish and annoying. Again, I wasn't trying to be isolated; I just knew I was different.

Playtime for me was running through the forest so close to our Trelleborg. That's where the voices would come to me. Voices that spoke to me from realms faraway. With these voices, I would commune and find comfort. In the forest also I found friendship.

A huge Raven named Schrock would visit me on my forest walks, and I found that he could speak after a

fashion with images that came to my mind. He taught me how to talk to animals and how to observe them.

I discovered that all things in the forest had a voice if one only listened. I made friends with a wolf cub I named Growl because he sounded fierce, even in a good mood. He taught me how to track and how to move silently through the forest while hunting.

I would also play with a Cave Bear cub named Bumble because he was fat and rolled around in the grass. He taught me to live off the land.

It never occurred to me to tell my parents about my animal friends or my forest adventures. I knew I was different, and I did not want to add to their concerns. To tell them I talked to animals and heard voices would cause more attention than I wanted.

That was me. From the age of five until I was ready to begin my training at age seven, I was a child of the forest—more of a wild thing than a boy. Being a curious child, I would scour the library on everything I could find regarding animals and living in the wilds.

We were a hardy people, and for many generations, all Ostmen knew from birth that we were part of nature. We only took from it what we needed, and as often as we could, we gave back to nature. While the game was plentiful, the people of Numitgart were careful never to take a life unless we needed to.

I didn't know that my parents were very aware of my roaming and the playmates I had found. But, being wiser than I gave them credit for, they did not stand in my way. Instead, they ensured I was able to spend as much time in the forest as possible.

Father even went so far as to fashion a bow and a good knife for me, which he presented to me on my sixth birthday. My father, was also an accomplished craftsman and worker of wood. The knife he gave me had the hilt designed like a running wolf. The handle of the bow was

a carving of a standing bear. When he gave me the presents, I knew at once that my parents were aware of Growl and Bumble.

I lowered my eyes, not sure what to say, and I felt tears run down my face. "Father, I..."

"Hush boy," said my father coming down on one knee till he was of my same height. "What you have is special." My father winked at me. "For us, being special is something that just is."

Father waved at my mother.

"Did you know your mother is special too?" My mother nodded and came over to me, also kneeling.

I had spent so much time absorbed by my pursuits that being so close to both of them brought up feelings that made the tears run even more.

My father grabbed me in a big bear hug and held me close. My mother wrapped her arms around both of us.

"Don't cry, my son," my father whispered. "Being different is a gift from the Lady."

Father broke from our embrace, and my mother lifted my chin with her fingers. "Jon, we know you can talk to them, all the voices you hear, the animals. I can do it as well, but for me, it's more like a feeling." Mother looked at me. "That's how I knew you were communicating because I could feel it."

My father stood and looked down at me. To me, he seemed like a giant, but his eyes were kind. He ruffled my hair. "Jon, be thankful for your gifts. Don't try to hide them. We didn't tell you earlier because most of our people don't even know about being different until their twelfth or thirteenth year."

Rayneck the Red stood and announced to the many people who had assembled for my birthday.

"This is my son Jon!" He announced. "Many of you know him and of his travels in the wildlands already. You have seen him in the Trelleborg's library. He has asked

questions of the well-learned among us. Knowing his curious nature, he will ask many more."

Father laid his hand on my shoulder. Instead of feeling heavy, it felt like warmth and kindness and strength all at once.

"My son Jon has the gift of speech with animals and the spirits of the forest! It is a rare gift and rare even more so that he has discovered his gift so young." Then my father gathered me up in his powerful arms so all could see me. "I am proud to be blessed with such a son!"

My father was a man of few words, and to hear such praise from him was exceedingly rare.

"Enough of all of this!" My father exclaimed at the applause and shouts. "My belly is empty, and I could drink a barrel of beer! Let us feast!"

As the night went on, I quietly retired to a spot high above the celebration. Schrock joined me there after a while, and we sat in silence, observing the ways of men. Any occasion to celebrate was appreciated, and my father was generous to all.

Food and drink aplenty were provided. Both men and women engaged in games of chance, and there was always at least one good fight. Ostmen by nature and upbringing were rough people, and all who were my age practiced Glima and with weapons.

I was always fascinated to watch them fighting. It was all so fast and fluid. As I sat up above, Schrock fluttered his wings beside me. He sent me an image of a Raven in the air circling an Eagle.

In addition to Glima and other weapons training, I found that I had an uncanny grasp of archery. As hunting was part of our daily lives, my father ensured that I excelled with the bow and arrow.

The intense practice involved drawing and holding on a target for as long as I could before launching my arrows. Training occurred with both longbows and short bows.

My father also provided me with bows and arrows captured from different raids in case I needed to pick up an enemy's weapons on the field.

In time, my practice with the bow became part of me, like walking or running. In my hands, the bow became a living thing, an extension of myself.

In regards to other weapons, it was evident early on that I was competent with an axe. My father was pleased to no end as it was a very versatile weapon.

"However," he cautioned, "one must be proficient with as many weapons as possible. You never know what kind of situation you will find yourself in."

The daily training and hunting and time on the oars when fishing added hard-earned muscles to my frame, and I was quickly gaining strength. It always felt good to be out in the open air, at sea, or in the wilderness, using gifts I was blessed to have.

However, I never considered my muscles as more than tools for fighting, running, and hunting. Father ensured that I was just as proficient in my studies.

I learned from books and scrolls, songs, and sagas. I was required to quote at random anything I had read or studied for my parents, and by my tenth year, I had read everything our library had available.

It was during my fourteenth year when my studies started having more practical applications. With my ability to remember well all that I read, my father decided to have me learn the Great Knowledge.

My private tutoring consisted of Runecraft and Sigil applications. Skalds, Galdre, and Seidre from all over Numitgart would come to teach me. I found I had an unusual skill in this area as well. Tracing a rune on an object or in the air would nearly always render a result.

One would think that with so many blessings, I would be happy. However, I never felt happy within the walls of

our home. The hours I spent immersed in my books and my daily training served only to distract me from the voices, images, and sounds.

The creatures of the forest were continuously speaking to me and me with them. Even with my heavy load of studies, I would still spend many hours in the forest. Sometimes the Skalds caught me sneaking out in the night to run with the wolves or forage with the bears.

Such activities were considered odd, even for one with the gift to speak to the forest creatures. At times it scared my mother to no end when she would see me walking with a full-grown Cave Bear or when wolves would make their presence known near our home.

My father saw it as a blessing since there was always an escort of enormous and intimidating animals on our frequent expeditions. That is how my story begins.

It was ten days before my Assumption of Title ceremony, which was to coincide with my birthday. Given what I understood of time, I had lived now in this world for seventeen years. My father, my brother Adnar, and I were on a hunting expedition near our northern borders.

On that clear, cold day, with a chill wind in the air, we were out hunting and stumbled across the most unusual creature. It was a total surprise as we crested a hill, and a massive and hungry-looking creature, with great long fangs, reared up and let out a roar. My brother and father instinctively brought up their bows to fire.

"Wait!" I shouted and jumped between them and the cat. My father was angry.

"Get out of the way, fool!" He bellowed.

"Father, please wait!" I shouted back and turned toward the snarling beast.

Stepping forward, I presented my hand palm down.

"Well met traveler," I thought in my head.

I immediately received back a jumble of images and feelings—surprise, confusion, and pain.

"Slowly, friend," I assured the great cat, *"I am Jon, and we hunt here."*

To an animal, a hunting area is the closest thing to a territorial boundary. An image came to me of confusion combined with fear.

"He's lost," I called back to our hunting party.

"I've never seen his like before," stated my father.

"Is he friendly?" asked my brother.

Cats don't usually make friends," I recalled from experience. "He's not used to talking like this, so it's garbled. Closest I can figure is he was chasing something he had caught the scent of, and next, he ran into us."

I turned to my father. "He's hungry and hasn't eaten for several days."

The Jarl dismounted from his horse, sat down, and pondered. "Makes no sense. Look at the size of him and those teeth!"

"We would have had a sign of him if he was local." Adnar agreed.

"He's not local," I confirmed. "I've never seen anything like him in the wildlands."

Rayneck still looked perplexed." We would have known about him and his kin long ago. So unless he wandered in from the unknown northern wildlands, I do not understand why he is here."

"What if he's an Arrival?" I interjected suddenly.

"Aha!" my father exclaimed. "Another acquisition of the Benefactors, no doubt!"

"That would make sense," I replied, carefully observing the now quiet beast who seemed to be listening to our every word.

"Just one animal, though?" my brother countered. "The Benefactors haven't staged a transplant within our borders for years."

"Aye," responded father. "And there are always signs in the sky of an Arrival."

"I doubt he's random," mused Adnar.

"Aye, and what do we do about him?" exclaimed father. "An animal his size will ruin the hunting!"

"You speak the truth, father," I replied. "We must have him located elsewhere."

Turning to the enormous cat, I attempted to relay that he must go to another place to hunt. The image I received was of an open plain with long grasses and herds of what looked to be some kind of deer and or wild cow. In the distance, massive shapes moved.

"His home looks like a vast grassland. Perhaps somewhere past the Northern Range, such a place exists."

"By Odin's beard," exclaimed my father again. "That's five days ride north on horseback."

My father turned to me. "We can't have him here, and the way north is known to few. We are under a mandate never to go past the Northern Range. What shall we do?"

I pondered for a bit and then looked at the quite hungry beast. I simply said, "let's get a belly full and think on it,"

Adnar laughed. "Just like your woodland friends, always thinking about food."

I shrugged, "Got to eat sometime," I answered back.

I sent my new friend the thought image of a deer, and he growled, bobbing his head in agreement.

"We hunt," I stated while unfastening my bow.

Now my bow was a remarkable piece of work that I had made as part of my training, and it was hard to string even for me. With a flip behind my leg and a downward pull, I strung the bow with great effort.

Upon inspection of the weapon, it always impressed me how the darkened steel and weathered ivory weaving seemed to blend into whatever background there was.

I faced the giant cat, "Well, what do I call you?"

He made a sound that was somewhere between a spit and a snarl.

"*How wonderful,*" I thought back at him. "The cat has the attitude of an angry serving wench, but for lack of a better word, we will call him Splar."

Both my father and my brother laughed at this. Even the cat gave a guttural sound that had to be a chuckle.

"Come on, you oversized house cat," I said and thought of a small and very fat version of my new companion laying by a hearth. The cat returned an image of him gnawing on a human-looking leg bone.

"Father, if you would be so kind as to make a camp, I will be back in just an hour."

I started into the wilderness in what would have appeared to anyone else as a random location. However, I had been watching for animal signs since we had crested the bluff where we had found Splar.

As Rayneck and Adnar watched Jon disappear in the wilderness with his new friend Rayneck shook his head.

"Been like that all his life, and it still bewilders me."

"Aye," replied Adnar. "My brother is a strange one, but imagine how that encounter might have gone had he not been with us?"

"Hard truth, lad." Rayneck retorted. "That cat is twice the size of a horse and scared the shit out of me!" Rayneck pointed to a clearing nearby.

"Good a place as any for a camp."

We were now within the deep wilderness. For all of my young life, I had always been most at home here. I was moving at a quick saunter, and my new friend was right next to me. Training to the point of instinct had honed my step as I went through the forest.

As the twilight rolled in, my eyes adjusted to the forest shadows, and I became one within them. I crouched low behind a tree and closed my eyes. With a thought and a

focus, the sounds of the wildlands became far sharper and more pronounced.

One by one, I sorted through the sounds: Splar's deep breathing nearby, Owl's were hooting in a tree fifty faðmr away. Two squirrels were arguing in a hollow log one hundred faðmrs away. Two hundred faðmrs to the east was a swiftly running brook. *Listen, breathe with no sound. Become the Forest.*

Then I heard the snorting of a buck who had caught a doe's scent. In one fluid motion, I pulled an arrow, drew back, and loosed. My target was unseen, but I sent the arrow up at a slight angle, perhaps a handspan back from the sound of the snort.

I counted four of my heartbeats, and then there was the hard smack of an arrow striking a body. As soon as the first arrow struck, I had another ready and heard the sound I was waiting for, the surprised grunt of the doe and her rapid exit from the area. Moving my bow to the left slightly, I let loose my second arrow and crouched again. Four more heartbeats, smack!

I turned to Splar, *"Next time you do the hunting."* I thought at him, to which he responded with an image of himself holding an antler in his mouth and me looking hungry.

"Aye, c'mon," I said as I low trotted to the area where I had placed my shots. There was the buck with an arrow piercing the skull. The doe was nearby with an arrow through its heart.

As always, a sadness came upon me, and I crouched down, praying, *"Thanks be to The Lady for this blessing. I pray for the souls of these gentle creatures. May they find peace in the next life."*

I stood up and looked at Splar. *"The doe is yours."*

Splar pounced on the dead animal, nearly biting it in two, and I turned my back. Cats are messy eaters, and I wasn't in the mood for a gorefest.

With a bit of rope, I tied the buck's front and rear legs together and, with a long-practiced move, heaved the beast upon my shoulders.

"Come find me when you are finished with dinner and bury what's left further away. The smell of blood will spook the rest." I heard a sloppy wet sounding grunt in return.

As I trudged back through the dense forest with my load, I pondered recent events. *"A giant cat with knife-like teeth just appears? Highly unlikely."*

All the peoples of Threa knew of the Benefactors and how they had saved millions of lives from inevitable catastrophe. My ancestors had survived a natural disaster, having arrived here after being snatched from the settlement of Eystrbyggð now twenty generations ago. Six hundred people had survived.

My forebearers had upset the course of natural events. In short, our ancestors were not supposed to be there. Overgrazing and inadequate understanding of the land would eventually destroy the balance. Therefore, our ancestors had been whisked away to this new land.

I went back through my mind and all of the reading I had done about what we still knew of Earth and what we now knew of Threa. There were some ancient tales sang by the Skalds of giant cats and hairy long-nosed beasts who roamed vast stretches of grassy plains.

Although I remained watchful and alert while moving through the woods, my mind perused maps. Such had been given to my ancestors when they had first come to what they ended up calling Numitgart.

While scanning the maps in my mind, I found that which I sought. According to the charts, there was an open valley five-days journey by horse to the North, just on the other side of the Northern Range.

I broke out of the woods and spotted our camp up ahead. As I broke into a trot, I formulated my plan. Now, to explain it to my father. I dumped my load by the fire,

and two of our escorts busied themselves skinning and butchering our buck for dinner. Our hunting expedition numbered twenty men, and we would make quick work of the fresh meat.

Rayneck was sitting in front of his tent, smoking his long pipe.

"Well?" he asked as I walked up.

"Buck and a doe," I replied.

Rayneck knew that already. He had seen the carcass of the buck. The angle of entry and what he knew of his son's skill led him to estimate a shot at nearly three hundred faðmrs. The old Jarl shook his head, shrugging.

I settled down to my haunches with my father and breathed deeply.

"So," my father peered at me over his pipe, "what of your new friend?"

"He's having dinner," I replied as I unslung my bow and nocked three arrows into their respective slots. It was never a good idea to be unarmed out here in the wildlands.

"Father, I think I know where I can take that beast, and he will be more at home."

"Oh?" Rayneck remarked. "And just where would a cat the size of two horses fit in around here?"

"It's not around here," I replied, pulling a stick from the kindling.

From memory, I drew a map on the ground. "This is the area around the Northern Plateau. There is a stretch of grasslands, nearly fourteen Vei long. There might even be more beasts like him there."

Rayneck pondered this and looked intently at the map his son had drawn.

"A long journey," he stated.

"One I am well capable of taking, father," I replied.

Rayneck's eyes looked sad. Although he was very proud of his son and his accomplishments, he never liked

it when Jon went on long expeditions. Not because he feared for his safety. No, Jon was more than capable of making the journey. It only made his heart heavy when one of his children went afar.

"If you go, then I will give you a secondary mission," said Rayneck. He gestured at the map. "The maps you memorized show the boundary lines of our lands, but we know little of the land to the North. We only know there was another colony there, and we were not to interfere.

He looked at me with a piercing gaze. "You are to add to the map as you go. Show me landmarks, water, mountains, easy passage if there is any."

I nodded. "It will be as you say, father."

"Make your preparations," replied Rayneck. "You have an hour."

My heart was racing! What an opportunity! Running to my tent, I hurriedly gathered my gear. I picked my bow, arrows, and the two long knives my brother had made last year for my birthday, the two hand axes which were part of a Wardens trappings, and my woodland cloak. After a stop at the eating tent where I collected trail bread and dried meat, I came back before my father.

As I laid down my equipment piece by piece in front of him, my father inspected each item with care.

"Good choices, son," he remarked as he tested the edge of each blade. "How many arrows carry you?"

"Twenty-five," I replied without thinking. I always knew how many arrows I carried.

Rayneck grunted. "You have food?"

"Enough for a fortnight, father. More than that would be a waste."

I looked at my father, who seemed to be rooted in his thoughts. I watched as he slowly stood up and walked over to the chest that always accompanied him when he left the Trelleborg. He returned with a leather coin purse and a heavy, oddly elongated bundle.

My father placed the coin purse in front of me.

"Gold,"? I queried.

Rayneck shrugged. "A group of miners went up north about fifty years ago. There might still be settlements out that way." The Jarl placed the bundle in front of me.

"These were to be yours at the end of your training," Rayneck stated. "The final test of a Warden is a lone journey. I feel as if they are yours now."

I pulled back the leather cover, and there, in shimmering glory, were two of the most beautiful weapons I had ever seen. The first was a long-handled, single-bladed axe of remarkable artistry. The blade's shape was of the type many used in battle and for routine use, but the similarity ended there.

The edge was of dark metal with shimmering red lines running through it. Both the pommel and the head were forged into the likeness of an open-mouthed Dragon. On one side of the blade was a rune that signified fire. On the other was a combined rune that spelled out the word "Vulcanfang."

My head was swimming with the thought of carrying such an axe when my father reminded me, "take up the sword Son."

Reluctantly, I put the axe down and picked up the sword.

Now, this was something different. It was unlike the broadswords with which I had trained so much. This sword had a single edge, was heavy at the front, and had a vicious-looking serration along the thick backside of the blade. The odd-looking metal gleamed in the light, seeming to change colors.

Ancient runes decorated both sides of the blade, and the script was so old I had difficulty reading it.

"I am the Warden's Promise," I read on one side. Turning the sword over, I read the other inscription.

"Draw me for blood only." On the hilt was inscribed the Rune Tiwaz, which ensured victory in battle.

I shuddered at the inscribed warning. By the oath written on this weapon, I could never pull this blade without drawing blood.

Looking up almost tearfully, I uttered, "Thank you, father, such gifts I do not deserve," and then I bowed my head gravely.

"Look up, boy!" exclaimed father. "Wardens bow their heads to no man! Not even a Jarl." Rayneck swept his arm out to the nighted forest. "You pay respect to the land now and no one or nothing else."

"Yes, father," I replied.

I felt consumed by many emotions; the chief of them was a strange misguided fear. Why was my father acting this way? I had been on longer journeys than this and with far less protection. My father held up a hand at my questioning look.

"You wonder why I'm giving you these now?" Rayneck packed his pipe and lit it from an ember in the fire.

"I dreamed of this," stated Rayneck. "Ahhh, I see," I responded. My father's talent was dreaming. While unable to see all things in the future, he would dream of things that were often of importance. Rarely were his dreams wrong, even if they were cryptic.

"I take it your dream was not a good omen?" I asked.

"No!" responded my father severely. "It showed me that you and your big friend disappeared through a pass somewhere along the Northern Range and disappeared." I sat there quietly, contemplating his words.

"That was the end of the dream," he replied to my questioning look.

"A most concerning portent of my fate," I replied with a smirk.

"Aye 'tis the truth," chuckled my father.

My father stood up. "Come with me," he said as he scooped up the weapons and gold. "We have to make it official," and together, we stepped outside the tent.

Our whole hunting party had assembled. My brother, Adnar, the Bear, was in front. He towered a head span or better above the rest, dressed in his typical garb. Adnar was bare-chested, wearing a wolf fur kilt and bearskin cloak. His booted feet were wide apart, and his hands rested idly on his Warhammer.

I was never much on ceremony, so I felt more than a bit embarrassed by all of the attention. Father guided me by the arm to the middle of the party near the fire.

"Stand before me and face me, Jon Raynecksson." My father said in his booming voice.

Heeding my father's words, I held my head high and moved in front of him.

"Raise your arms high!" commanded the Jarl of Numitgart. As I did so, two of my father's men at arms came forward carrying between them a finely worked battle harness.

At a glance, I could see the embossing on the cuirass was of numerous runes and symbols. An excellent example of leather and ring mail combined.

The men fastened the cuirass around me, and one of them showed me the mechanism at each side, which would detach the harness so I could remove it.

The armor fit very well and had been custom made for me, leaving my arms bare but covering my torso. Looking down, I noticed a series of loops and hooks. Upon these, my father started attaching my gear, knives to the rear with handles pointing outward. He then slung the hand axes low to my sides and strapped them to my legs.

My father produced another kind of cloak. It had a deep hood and an unusual slot at the back with a drawstring around it. Once the cloak was draped over me,

my father took up my bow and slid it into the hole. I heard a thunk as the bow slid into place.

Next, my father slid the sheathed Warden's Promise in at the same angle and reached up under my cloak; I felt him fasten it tightly to my back. Vulcanfang nestled in at an opposite angle into a sheath designed to keep the head of the axe exposed.

Finally, my father placed my helmet on my head. It was a close-fitting leather and metal cover I had made with curved ram horns emerging from it. Father stepped back and looked at me, admiringly.

I flushed from all of the eyes on me. "How do I look?" I asked sheepishly.

"Like a Warden," laughed my brother, "just like the ones in all those books you keep reading." The rest of the party laughed as well.

"Aye!" my father roared, "full of weapons, piss, and ale!" He thrust a mug of beer into my hand. Now I have never been much of a drinking man. Strong drink dulled my senses, making me feel as if I were underwater.

I held my drink as my father then brandished his greatsword, made especially for him, by my brother. Named Reaper during forging, its blade was as long as a man was tall, and it had a double-handed hilt.

My father held his sword above his head and uttered a series of words that must have been from a formal text.

"A Warden bows to no man, not even his Jarl. A Warden protects the borders of his lands. A Warden defends the weak, the oppressed, and those who cannot defend themselves. Raise your mug Warden."

I raised my mug high with my left hand, and my father lowered his greatsword and rested it on my right shoulder. The whole scene seemed suddenly very surreal, and everything seemed to slow down like I was looking at everything moving through a jar of honey. In my head, I heard a voice that seemed to move through me like water.

"I am you, and you are me," a voice like distant thunder whispered. At the edge of our circle, a figure appeared. It was a many-colored shimmering visage that seemed to change shapes and faces. A young girl, an ancient man, a bald, pointed eared being I did not recognize. The figure was solid, then swirling mist as it moved closer until it stood before me.

The assembly had disappeared in a strange purple fog that seemed to be everywhere. The figure finally coalesced into a stunning and rather small woman with blonde hair and silver flowing gown.

The woman spoke, *"Do you know who I am, Jon?"* My mind was struck dumb by the beauty of this woman, and I could feel her power. I had never felt such power, even during my most in-depth training of the Great Knowledge.

"You can only be The Lady of the Lands," I whispered, bowing my head and starting to sink to my knees.

"A Warden bows to no man," remarked the woman with a wave of her hand.

"No, but a Warden will always bow to The Lady," I replied as I came to one knee with my eyes low.

The woman laughed, and her laughter was like waves crashing in my ears. *"Arise, noble Warden."*

Slowly I came back up to my feet, but I kept my eyes low, not wanting to look upon the surreal beauty of the specter before me.

The Lady spoke. *"I have come to you, Warden, just as I come to all who wear that title. Among many peoples, your kind exists by many names. Whatever the name, the vocation is similar. I come to you because You are about to embark upon your Warden's Journey to that place which you call the Northlands."*

The woman crossed her arms. *"You call them this because you have no idea what's out there beyond a series*

of basic maps given to you by the beings who brought your ancestors to this world."

The Lady waved a hand, and a map of Numitgart, the midlands, and the Southlands appeared out of thin air. Next to it, another less detailed map showing Numitgart and the Northern Range manifested into being.

"Notice the space here?" asked the Lady as she gestured towards an empty gray space that seemed to cover the top of the map.

"Y-yes, My Lady," I replied, stammering.

"By all that is sacred enough with the subservience Jon!" The woman snapped. "My name is Myrnran Gaia, and long ago, I was very much like you."

The woman looked directly at me. "If you want to call me something respectful, you can call me Mother."

"Mother," I whispered.

"Yes, that will do even though I am no longer either man or woman. I am all around you, Warden. I am all that you see. I am everything you hear and feel, and I have come here at this time to give you my blessing and a gift. Two gifts, actually."

"Mother, I deserve nothing from one such as you," I replied quietly.

"Nonsense," replied Gaia. "All are deserving of my gifts and my attention. You only need to believe that I am real and that you, Jon, are one of my special creations."

My mind was reeling from this exchange and the presence of this shimmering ghost.

"I don't..."

"You don't think very much of yourself, do you, Jon?"

The woman made it a statement as much as a question.

"Think back upon your life. That brilliant mind of yours, the ability to speak to animals, to speak to spirits!"

The woman raised a hand in an almost prayerful attitude. "Many of my children are now gifted, but some,

like you, are very special indeed. You have a complete gift. It manifests in all that you are and all that you do. I am very proud of you, Jon."

"Thank you...Mother..."

"Yes, that's it! Mother!" The woman looked pleased.

Suddenly I felt a wave of dizziness come over me, and emotions filled my being. I felt overwhelmed and felt myself falling. Suddenly the woman reached out and caught me, and I realized that this ghost was indeed quite real and substantial.

"You! You're real!"

"Yes." the woman laughed. *"I'm just as real as you are, only a few millennia ahead of you."*

"Mother," I whispered. *"So many questions..."*

"Time enough for that later," replied Gaia. *"Now, I have gifts to give."*

Gaia made a gesture, and an ancient-looking book appeared floating before me.

"I have been observing your rune craft studies. You handle the words and gestures well, but what you are learning is a pretty decadent system. A good friend of mine by the name of Bestla wrote this ages ago. It's written in a much older version of your language, but I think you will be able to understand it. She wrote it for her son Odin, of whom I'm sure you have heard. It contains many things, including ways to create changes in reality."

The woman looked at me with laughter in her eyes.

"Such as what we are doing now," as she waved her arms wide around her. *"Not bad work if I do say so myself."* She commented with a satisfactory air.

I looked around me. *"What are we doing? What is this place we are in?"* I could see out, but it was as if I were looking through water. I could see the shapes of my father and our men, but they seemed frozen.

"We are in a displacement pocket." Mother replied.

"It looks like we are inside of a dream, and that is the real world out there," I observed.

"That's quite a good analogy, Warden," quipped the woman. *"Such things are merely a process of thought and mathematics."*

"Am I dead?" I whispered, a fear rising in me for the first time.

"No, Jon, you are very much alive. I needed to speak with you alone, and this was the best way to do it."

Gaia gestured to the book floating between us.

"Learn that while you travel. I would hate to see that brilliant mind of yours go to waste."

"Yes, Mother, I will do my best." I reached for the book. Surprised yet again, that it indeed felt authentic.

"Now, for your next gift."

The woman opened her hand, and a peculiar looking red stone appeared.

"This is called a speaking stone. It functions like your ability to speak with animals. With this, however, you will be able to understand anyone who speaks to you. You will also be able to speak to them, and your speech will sound like theirs. It will meld with your natural gift and enhance it quite well, I think."

I looked at the spinning stone.

"How do I use it?" I asked, suddenly feeling very much like a young child again among the highest scholars in the land.

Gaia swiftly moved her hand up to my left ear, and I felt a sharp pinch on the inside.

"It works without you having to do anything."

Gaia stepped back. *"You look good, Jon, very capable of the task at hand."* She stepped back, looking me over. I felt very much like an ant must feel when observed by a curious child.

She cast an ominous gaze upon me. *"Know this, Warden; you are being tested by your father and by me. Even greater powers will also observe your journey."*

As I considered these words, Gaia stepped back and continued to do so, seeming to shrink, shimmer, and lose focus with each step.

"Learn from the book Warden. For all of your training and all of the weapons you wield, your greatest weapon is your mind." The shimmering ghost winked out of existence, and with her disappearance, the world as I knew it shifted back into being.

"Jon...Jon! Snap out of it, boy!" Father was shaking my shoulder roughly and had a worried look on his face.

"Jon, what happened?"

"I...I'm not sure," I replied, still stammering. "I was somewhere else, and the Lady of the Lands was with me."

My remark elicited oaths all around. All Ostmen knew of Gaia in our world. For most, she was a goddess of immense power who lived far away above Asgard, among the stars. I was beginning to think that it was not precisely the case. She had touched me. She was real. For all of the shimmering lights and swirling fog, she looked much as any beautiful woman would.

"She gave me this," I said, holding the book out.

My father took the book and turned it over in his hands. Now that I had a better look at it, I could see it was a very well-made book like I had been reading with the Skalds at home in our Trelleborg.

Perhaps twice the span of my hand and half again as wide, the book was handsomely bound in dark leather, with the pages being a parchment that felt very thin but very tough at the same time. On the spine of the book were the words Knowledge is Power. On the face were two symbols intertwined as if there were no end or beginning to each.

"Knowledge and Power," my father said as he traced the symbols with his finger.

"She said I was to read it while on my journey," I remarked as my father thumbed through its pages.

"Looks to be a peculiar combination of mathematics and runecraft," he commented.

Father handed the book back to me. "She has been with us since our ancestors arrived some twenty generations past. She makes her presence known in many ways, but only one other time that I know of did she come to one man personally."

Jarl Rayneck crossed his arms and stroked his shaggy beard. "The book makes my head swim just looking at its pages. It was not meant for men, such as me, to read."

Rayneck the Red, my father looked at me with admiration and something else I couldn't read. Fear? Wonder? I could not tell his thoughts.

"The Skalds, the Seidre, and the Galdre taught you because I felt you were special. I had no idea how special, though." Father shook his head and frowned, handing the book back to me.

"It is too much for me to understand," he said. "I'm just an old soldier. You are or will be, much more."

Now it was my turn to frown. "I never wanted to be more than a Warden father."

Father snorted and chuckled. "To be a Warden is to be much. It is clear that our lady favors you and has for some time. How do you feel about the attention of a goddess?"

"I feel as though I am a tiny fish in a very great lake," I responded. "She felt like she was real, father! Yet, at the same time, it all felt so unreal as to make my head spin."

"Aye, that is the way of Gaia. Her ways are always a mystery," my father responded simply.

A thought came to me suddenly, "you said this happened before? Was it someone you knew that she visited?"

"Ha! That was long ago!" Father exclaimed, "she came to Thorvald just before our ancestors arrived here."

"So Gaia is a Benefactor?" I asked.

The circle had broken up, and it was only myself, my father, and Adnar standing near the campfire.

"No, she is not a Benefactor," Father responded thoughtfully.

"From what the sagas tell us, the Benefactors are nothing like us except that they walk upright and have two arms and two legs."

Father regarded me with his piercing gaze. "You saw her. You said she looked like us?"

"Aye, father," I replied. "Put her in women's clothing, and she would look much like any other beautiful woman of high breeding."

"Aye, and that is how she appeared before to Thorvald," father said simply.

He looked upon me with concern. "The hour grows late. Will you retire before going on this extraordinary journey?"

"Nay, father," I replied, looking at the sun setting over the Northern peaks where I would travel. "I need to find our new friend before he eats a whole herd of deer or something just as damaging to the local wildlife."

"Ho! I nearly forgot about him with all of this going on!" Exclaimed father. He grabbed me in a great bear hug, and we embraced as only a father and son understood. Rayneck then held me at arm's length with his hands on my shoulders and held my gaze with a long silence and the hint of a smile.

"What, father?" I was puzzled.

The Jarl was rarely affectionate towards any of his children and certainly never in the presence of his soldiers.

"Tis nothing, my son. It's just you seem different suddenly. No more a boy who is swinging his wooden sword, but still not a man. I worry about your journey."

Touched by his sudden show of affection, I placed my hand on my father's shoulder. "Worry not, Father, for Gaia is sure to be with me. I feel her even now."

My father nodded and clasped my arm. "Best be on your way, the path North will not make itself. That's your job."

I walked from the camp and was headed toward the woods when Adnar appeared beside me.

"On your way?" He queried, smiling as I jumped.

It had never ceased to amaze me how my brother, a man the size of a bear with an attitude to match, could move so silently as to shock people.

Quickly recovering from his startling appearance, I responded simply, "Aye."

Adnar chuckled. He had always enjoyed shocking people, especially me. Adnar's eyes were sad.

"You are ready?" He asked, looking me over and checking the fit of my gear, and the position of my weapons.

"Aye, it seems to fit well," I replied, looking up at him.

Again I was puzzled. Adnar was a man after my father. Not prone to affection or even much talk. Although we were brothers, he was ten years my senior and was never much for doing other than working in his forge or going on raids with my father.

Adnar adjusted a belt on my harness and gave me a final inspection.

"A parting gift for you, brother."

Reaching behind him and under his bearskin cloak, he produced a leather case and two sheathed knives.

He handed me the knives.

"Stick 'em in your boots and fasten 'em into the laces," he said, regarding me seriously. "Never know when you'll need 'em."

I knew that Adnar carried four such on his person. On his advice, I secured a knife in each boot as he watched.

"What's that?" I asked, nodding to the leather case.

"Ah, yes! I have been working on this for a while with your sister to give you for your birthday."

Adnar opened the case and pulled out a most unusual-looking bow. Fully a foot shorter on each side than our standard bows with an odd curve outward at each end. The entire bow seemed to be bound in some sort of metal wire. The notches for the bowstring were at each end, and the bowstring looked as well to be of metal. As I thumbed the bowstring testing it, there was a soft, musical thang.

"Tis quite something!" I remarked.

"Aye," replied Adnar. "The wirework covers a metal fold that I saw one O' them eastern swordsmiths use. Here try it," he said, handing me the bow.

"*Light*," I thought immediately.

Most of the bows I had used until now were heavier and made of wood. The bow had little adornment and appeared to be built as compact and as flexible as possible while remaining sturdy.

"More a weapon than a tool for hunting," I stated as I pulled the string back. The draw seemed very light.

At my questioning look, Adnar commented. "Near as I can figure, the draw weight is somewhere around 30 stone, could be more."

"Impossible," I exclaimed.

"Aye, to look at it, it would seem so. Adnar looked at the bow with a sense of admiration. "Tis a beauty, eh?"

"To be sure!" I replied.

I looked down, suddenly feeling embarrassed. "Adnar, this is too much. I'm just a Warden going on a trek. Others have done so with far less than this."

"Take the bow," my brother insisted. "Consider your Trek as a test of its function."

Now it was Adnar's turn to look down. "I expect great things from you. So does Father even if he does not say."

I felt quite emotional suddenly, and it was almost shameful.

"Thank you, Bear," I replied, using his childhood nickname and clasping his outstretched arm as he offered it. "I will do my best, although I do not know what you and Father expect of me."

Adnar suddenly grabbed me in a fierce hug that pushed the wind from my lungs and lifted me off the ground.

"We expect you to come home safe, Jon." He whispered in my ear. With that said, he put me down and quickly turned his back, and walked away.

I turned back toward the woods, and I disappeared into the growing darkness, carrying the new bow.

From across the camp, Rayneck watched his son vanish into the forest like a shadow. Adnar walked up with two mugs of ale and handed one to Rayneck.

"Worried?" asked Adnar.

"I worry for any of you when you are out from our lands," replied Rayneck, raising his mug in response to Adnar's.

"'Tis the way of fathers I feel."

"Bah!" Rayneck suddenly exclaimed. "Enough of this womanly goings-on! Let's get drunk!"

"Good idea!" replied Adnar enthusiastically, and father and son strode to the campfire to drink with the men and to sing old songs, boast of battle and bedding buxom golden-haired women.

A Game of Gods

Within the depths of the woods, a silent watcher stood stock still, observing the ways of men. Then with a silent flap of its wings, the shadow propelled into the night. There had been a whispering voice in the wind that compelled action.

"Follow him."

❖❖❖ Chapter Two The Steward of Threa

Myrnran Gaia looked out the viewing window from her station at the Northstar Observatory. The giant spherical ship had been in orbit around Threa for as long as she could remember.

"half a million years and not a day over thirty," she thought as she idly looked at one of her slim, ivory-colored hands.

Although her people had achieved the highest levels of science, they couldn't stop the ravages of time. Finally, at the ripe old age of two hundred, she had consented to transfer her consciousness into a construct she affectionately called her Forever Suit.

In every aspect, she still appeared human. *"Just a little on the pale side,"* she mentally smirked for the hundred millionth time.

She could still touch and feel; she could even eat and perform bodily functions, although neither were primary requirements. Synthetic blood flowed through veins and arteries cleverly designed to be identical to the human circulatory system. She felt emotion. That was what she was feeling now. Deep emotions swam through her mind as she looked out, wistfully at the window at the planet below. It had been ages since she had stepped onto the surface in physical form, but her recent visit had been necessary.

Ever since the Benefactors had started the transplant of human control groups from Earth in the wake of cataclysms, she had been here watching. Myrnran's previous post as Steward had been Earth. However,

disasters and life-destroying events had kept happening to the life-giving but unstable planet.

After the last Extinction Level Event, she had been transferred to Threa to monitor the social and evolutionary experiments. Her people and the Benefactors had always been interested in the events of Earth, and the North Star Observatory database had documented transplant events back as far as just before the Meteor Impact.

Earth's Steward before her time had been forcibly removed from his position for not having the foresight to warn his superiors of the coming danger.

A very hurried transplant of as many species as could be moved began at that time. The result had been that the different species had cascaded through different periods in Threa's history.

Being a planet in a nearly perpetual primal state, when was never a consideration for transplants. For the Benefactors and Myrnran Gaia, what mattered was where on Threa to place the arrivals.

She remembered her time as Steward of Earth with mixed feelings. During her tenure, the Benefactors, in their infinite wisdom, decided to seed Earth with humans of a sort. The concept and method of delivery remained in the hands of the Stewards.

An accomplished Geneticist, Gaia had decided, along with fifteen of her colleagues, to use their essence to impregnate females from the most highly evolved indigenous population with the gene strain that would grow into modern humanity.

The experiment was considered an overwhelming success, and the Benefactors started transplanting humans from different times and eras from Earth to Threa to allow the species to thrive. Myrnran, at the forefront of the experiment, was transferred to Threa to monitor the continued social evolution of the species.

There, of course, had been others before humans. The records showed whole eras and civilizations that had been wiped out on Earth before her Stewardship had begun. Before each cataclysm, the Benefactors had come to Earth. A control group of each species from across time was plucked from Earth and given a new home on Threa.

That was not a point of concern for Myrnran. With the other races who called Threa home, Myrnran's orders were clear. She was to monitor the interaction between humans and other Earth-based lifeforms that had evolved during her previous posting. She was not to interfere unless deemed necessary.

Fortunately for Myrnran, "necessary" was a rather broad area. The Steward of Threa was often left to her own devices when it came to interfering, and she tended to interact more with humans than what her mandate required. As such, her recent interaction with the Ostman called Jon had caught the attention of the Benefactors. There was no doubt her superior would be visiting soon.

Almost as if on cue, a portal opened up in the center of the bridge. Its swirling vortex shimmering black and violet. Through the portal stepped none other than Xclatru Ral. The gangly creature looked around the bridge and, approving of what he saw stepped out from the vortex, which immediately closed after him with a swirl and a flash of light.

"Speak of the Devil," Myrnran smirked.

"*The Devil, you know,*" thought back Ral.

The two regarded each other as adversaries. "*It has been some time, Steward of Threa,*" stated Ral. "

A hundred years and then some, but then who's counting?" noted Myrnran sarcastically.

"*Your human concept of time after so long is disturbing,*" Ral replied. "*Your body was designed in such a way as the ravages of time are no longer a concern.*"

"Yeah yeah, I got it, Bug Eyes" Myrnran looked up at the Benefactor with the closest approximation of tired exasperation that her synthetic features could muster.

"I watched your lecture the other day," Myrnran stated, changing the subject.

"Ah yes," the barest hint of a smile curved the edges of Ral's vestigial mouth. *"What did you think?"*

"A fair approximation of events, but I still oppose portraying the Stewards as some form of spiritual deification to the more enlightened races."

Ral shrugged his bony grey shoulders. *"People need something to believe in that is higher than themselves. Such is the way of more primitive races."*

"The Common Alliance is not a group of primitive races, Ral," Myrnran replied hotly. "They are the galactic total of all of the highly evolved life forms we now know." *"Yet they all share some form of belief in a higher level of spiritual existence,"* Ral replied.

"It has been clear to us since the beginning of the partnership between our two races that maintaining a cover of spiritual deification was necessary to satisfy the need for sentient beings to understand why they exist. In nearly three hundred million years, we have found that only humans can achieve the same level of existence we have."

Myrnran rolled her optics at the comment. "As a scientist, I still find it hard to believe that humans are the only race you have encountered that has the potential for reaching a higher level of being than your people have!"

"Oh?" Queried Ral. *"You have seen the research. Although much knowledge of our first encounters is lost to history, it has become clear that humans and humans alone can effectively meld with the kind of technology that now sustains your life."*

Ral held up his arms with his fingers spread wide.

"My people for all of its longevity and endeavors are still finite...still nothing more than flesh and blood tied to mortal shells."

Ral turned back to the Steward. *"In time, even we will cease to exist, and it will be the task of humans to continue in our absence as Benefactors."*

Myrnran pondered the words. Humans. A term coined on Earth in the latter part of its current civilization. From the data and research, it was known only among the Benefactors that humans were the first race discovered when Ral's people had taken to the stars.

"So, you seriously believe that the rest of the intelligent races of the galaxy that we know of do not know the true origins of Humanity"? Myrnran scoffed. "I find that hard to even conceive of Ral!"

Ral gave a mental sigh. The argument was an old one and never really resolved, even after the two of them had worked on the Threa experiment for thousands of years.

"As I told you before, they know that humans originated on Earth because that's where humans were discovered."

Ral raised a hand to his head. Myrnran was among the most intelligent of her kind, but her stubbornness, a trait well known among humans, was infuriating at times, even for his patience.

"You cannot hide an entire origin species, you Bug-Eyed Scarecrow!" scolded Myrnran. "At least ten races have visited Earth in its history for one reason or another!"

"Yes, Earth, but Earth was seeded with humans after a sort by you, Steward. As were all of Earth's higher life forms, starting five hundred thousand Earth years ago."

Ral crossed his arms and recited a passage from his vast memory *"In the beginning God created..."*

"I'm not a god!" Myrnran interrupted vehemently. I'm a scientist who happens to have a lot of time on her hands thanks to this construct you stuck me into!"

Ral looked down at the woman with his giant black eyes.

"Nevertheless, you are responsible for the appearance of humans on Earth. You manipulated the indigenous population to produce said humans, and for a very long time, had a direct influence over the evolution of humanity, often above your directive of non-interference."

Ral put his hands on his narrow hips and regarded the petulant woman.

"How godlike of you," He stated condescendingly.

Myrnran lowered her eyes. Of course, Ral was right. She had meddled far too many times, and in some cases, that resulted in terrible consequences.

"It's because..."

"You have a conscience," Ral finished her words and continued.

"Yes, I know, so you have told us time and again. It is the reason why you meddle so in affairs better left to evolution and social experimentation. It's the reason why we had you transferred to Threa. Once we determined that the Earth was too unstable to ensure the continued evolution of the numerous species that you and your contemporaries seeded the planet with."

Ral pointed one long bony finger at her, *"and it is the reason why you are still meddling in human affairs above and beyond your mandate even here on Threa!"*

The gangly Benefactor crossed his arms again. *"Which is the chief reason why I am here, not to engage in a debate with you over whether you consider yourself a god or not."* Ral raised his hand, and a hovering globe with an image of Myrnran and Jon appeared.

"I had a feeling that's what this was about," replied Myrnran, suddenly feeling very small.

"Indeed!" Ral replied with a hint of sarcasm. *"You have been meddling with this particular colony and specifically this family unit ever since they were transplanted here, and we want to know why!"* Ral put his hands back on his hips and leaned forward, not unlike a parent scolding a child.

Myrnran collected her thoughts for a moment and took a deep breath.

"As good a time as any," she thought.

"The Numitgart colony, while interesting, is not the focus." Myrnran reached over to touch a key on her virtual board, and a picture of two DNA helices appeared.

"As you know, the combination of solar radiation and magnetic activity on Threa has caused human DNA strains to adapt to survive. The adaptations are random and fluctuate. In nearly every case, the adaptation also modified the gene marker of the original seeding, which occurred on Earth. Myrnran keyed again, and a graph of gene marker modification over time appeared.

We placed special identifying markers to track the proliferation of humans over history. To see how different types of humans would interact with each other."

Myrnran picked up a tablet from her table and handed it to Ral. "I'm sure this is all known to you, but here is the research for your reference."

Ral took the device and glanced over the material. Thorough and detailed as usual, it did indeed show where there was one original gene strand which branched into three strands, then ten, then one hundred. After several thousand variants, the marker became nearly impossible to follow.

"This is common with any species that procreate as often as humans do. It still doesn't explain why you are so interested in this one subject."

Myrnran smiled. "That's where it gets interesting. Look here."

Myrnran motioned to the gigantic view screen on the bridge, and a series of DNA strands appeared.

"These are the original fifteen gene sets placed into the indigenous population on Earth. We assumed the strains would adapt and become indistinguishable from the DNA of the test subjects. However, we can't explain why traces of five of the original markers have shown up in this colony, and the strongest trace was the first marker."

Myrnran brought up the image of her and Jon's interaction. She gestured at the screen.

"It's in him," she stated. The wonder and admiration in her voice were unmistakable.

"Indeed?" replied Ral. *"Now that is interesting."*

"Agreed," responded Myrnran. "The odds of finding five genetic markers in the same colony are a million to one. The statistics are astronomical that I found the original marker trace in this one human."

Myrnran checked her notes. "As the research will tell you, gene splicing with human DNA was still in a primitive stage at the time of the experiment. The easiest way to introduce the human genome into the indigenous population was to inseminate selected females with fertilized human eggs, accelerating natural evolution by nearly half a million years."

Myrnran brought up the picture of Jon with his specifications running in a column alongside it.

"The Stewards at the time, including me, were the volunteers who gave their eggs for the experiment."

She turned back to Ral. "Fifteen Stewards, fifteen eggs, each marked for evolutionary tracking. I am sure that you are familiar with this information."

The Steward put a hand to her head. Even in her synthetic state, trying to bring science to a reasonable level was difficult. The experiment had indeed taken on a life of its own. The melding of the indigenous species of

Earth and Human DNA had worked well, too well, in fact. Trying to track so many genetic variants became too difficult. Therefore, Star Observatories were built to track human evolution.

Myrnran rubbed her temple and cast her steady gaze on Ral's expressionless face. "Since I started the social integration experiment, I was also the first egg donor. I left a special marker on the DNA chain so that if my progeny were to thrive, I would know of it."

Ral stood reading through the column of information next to Jon's picture.

"This looks very familiar," he stated. *"Have I seen this before?"*

"Yes, about half a million years ago," replied Myrna, and with a wave of her hand, the giant view screen split, and next to Jon was the image of a small blond woman in glasses and a lab coat.

"What!?" Ral exclaimed, *"that's...that's..."*

"Yeah, it's me," responded Myrnran. "Jon is a direct descendant of the first egg I provided for the experiment. Not only that, but his genetic make-up is nearly identical to mine when I was his age. We could be siblings."

Myrnran punched in a sequence of keys, and several strands of numbers came to the forefront of the screen.

"Although we, of course, could not administer a traditional IQ test, I was able to manipulate events in such a way as to test his intelligence. He has read all of the current lore of his people and all of the surrounding colonies. Even material brought from Earth during colonization."

Ral now looked interested. *"What are your findings?"*

"Well, aside from being an amazing physical specimen of his race, he has what appears to be a nearly photographic memory with a recall level that rivals mine at his age. He is also acutely attuned to sensory input from other brain waves."

"Telepathic," Ral queried?

"In a matter of speaking," replied the Steward. "He sees images. And due to a highly developed natural empathy he inherited from his mother, he can interpret intent and emotion. At least that was until I gave him a wave translator."

Ral stood to his full height abruptly. *"You gave him tech? Seriously!?!"*

"Relax, Ral," Myrnran raised her hands in defense. "It's nearly ancient by our standards, and the model I used is more of a focus for his ability to communicate with other lifeforms."

"Does it enhance anything else?" questioned Ral.

"No, it won't," Myrnran said very positively.

"What about the other thing you gave him? The book?"

Myrnran smiled. "It's just something to help him better understand what he calls the Great Knowledge is. It's something Bestla wrote ages ago. For you, it would be rather boring, I think."

Ral's eyes bored into her as if attempting to read her thoughts; thankfully, her synthetic form made it difficult to understand what she was thinking.

"Hmmm, I'm sure it's more than that, Steward. Bestla was never a proponent of our alliance. She preferred human independence."

Myrnran raised her hands helplessly. "Look, Ral, give me a break, ok? Jon's the closest thing I have ever had to a natural son."

"Unusual time to develop a maternal instinct. It's been quite some time since you were able to bear children."

"Hence the reason why he's so special," replied Myrnran. "In many ways, he is my child. As such, I feel compelled to not only interact with him but to assist him in the endeavor he is undertaking."

Ral clasped his hands behind him and paced for a time, considering the information Myrnran had given

him. Although he did not approve of the Stewards meddling in human affairs, it seemed there was little harm in Myrnran focusing on one lone human. It might be an interesting experiment to see how this human interacted with different species during his journey.

Finally, coming to a decision, he stopped his pacing in front of Myrnran and faced her.

"If nothing else, it will keep you occupied and, out of Threan affairs as a whole, at least for a time."

Ral handed the tablet back.

"Document your findings of the journey. You are not to directly assist Jon Raynecksson unless his life is in danger" Ral pointed at her again, *"That is your directive, Steward! Do not meander from it due to some misguided motherly instinct."*

Myrnran stood up and gave a rather insolent salute.

"Yes, Benefactor," Myrnran replied snidely.

Ral threw up his hands in exasperation yet again. With a wave of his hand, the portal appeared again, and Ral stepped into it.

"I will be watching Steward," Ral fired as a parting shot before he disappeared.

Myrnran, once again alone on the bridge, considered Ral's parting words.

"Alpha to my command."

There was an audible hum, and the artificial intelligence systems computer answered, "I am Alpha. What do you require?"

Myrnran pursed her lips, and her brow furrowed in thought. "Scramble a set of observer drones to track the bio-organism displayed on the bridge screen. Secondly, I want a grid satellite area five hundred miles around his location. I want optical feeds of the drones and the satellite on the main viewer until further notified."

"As you wish, Steward," replied the metallic voice. "Will there be anything else?"

Myrnran thought for a moment. "Yes, I want you to forego automatic reports to Prime during this experiment. Instead, I will review and edit before transmission."

"Clandestine Operations Protocol Steward?" The voice intoned.

"No," replied Myrnran, "let's just say the information is Need to Know, and there are some things our Benefactors don't need to know."

Alpha hummed again. "As you wish, Steward."

With her task finished, Myrnran turned back to the viewscreen. *"Ok, Jon. Let's get you going, the Benefactors never wanted your people to go where you are going and never allowed observation in this region, and I want to know why."*

PNRMM

Chapter Three

Into the Wildlands

I watched my father and my brother walking back towards the campfire from the shadows. I breathed in the chill night air and took great comfort in the closeness of the trees and the feel of the Earth beneath my feet. Around me, the forest felt not just alive, but as a real and spiritual presence. I had always felt most at home out here in the embrace of the wild.

"Ok, you giant house cat, where are you?" I gave the thought out to the forest.

Off to the North, there came a faint and startled response. I chuckled softly. *"Thought I forgot about you, eh? I will come to you."*

By the distance and the faintness of his response, I judged Splar to be about thirty minutes away on foot. I headed off to the North in the low hunched saunter I had learned from my woodcraft teachers.

As I made my way through the woods, my training took over. Unconsciously, I slipped into a trance-like state, and my senses took in my surroundings on an entirely different level.

I could sense life all around me. Small insects appeared like tiny dots of light. A pair of sleeping squirrels seemed like shimmering ghost images as I passed under their tree perch unnoticed.

In the distance, I could hear rabbits moving through the underbrush, and I could sense several foxes hunting them. Farther away, I could just feel a group of larger animals huddled in one area.

"Deer herd," I thought to myself as I moved past their territory. I heard the buck snort as I ran by, but he didn't

appear concerned by my passage. Continuing, I focused on Splar.

Within another one hundred faðms, I was where his image felt strongest. Looking around, he was nowhere I could see. I scanned my surroundings. I was in a clearing with the woods at my back, and a slight ridge formed the other side. The hunter in me was fully aware.

"Hmmm. I know you are here, you great ugly beast. I can smell your disgusting breath."

The insult had the desired effect, and Splar launched himself off the ridge above. I had a feeling he had been up there and watched as his dark form descended rapidly onto the very spot where I stood.

A split second before he landed, I suddenly rolled to one side behind a clump of high grass.

As the beast landed and moved his head towards my position, I rolled again and scuttled behind the trees. Relying on memory, I knew that by keeping a cat engaged with sight and sound, his sense of smell would not come into play.

Moving again, I snatched up a good-sized pebble and threw it at a tree a ways off. Splar's head turned towards the sound of the impact, and I took the opportunity to leap up and come down within reach of his forepaws.

Splar let out a startled snarl and swiped at me with his right paw, which looked to be twice the size of my head. I ducked, and his paw swished over my head.

Seeing an opening and not wanting to miss the opportunity, I came back up and, in the same motion, clouted him on a furry ear with a hammered fist. Splar hissed and opened his great jaws, trying to bite my exposed head.

As I saw his move, I snapped my head backward and waited for his jaws to snap shut on empty air. Splar snarled in bewilderment, and taking advantage of his confusion; I slapped him smartly on his nose.

The stunning blow brought Splar's head low. Now in control of the situation, I pulled my right boot knife and brought it up just before the cat's right eye. Splar knew I had him, and he froze.

"Now, my big friend, as much as I enjoy a good fight, I have orders to follow and little time to waste. Are you going to come with me, or are you going to be the next rug on the floor of my father's house?" Splar stayed frozen, ogling the knife within a hair's breadth of his eye.

I was receiving images and what sounded like muffled words coming from the cat.

"Hmmmm," I thought, concentrating a bit more. Finally, the images became more precise, and the words were understandable.

"*Well played Two-Legs,*" I got clearly from Splar.

"Aha, you great beast, so you can talk!"

"*So can you, Two-legs,*" responded Splar in what sounded like sarcasm.

I stepped back and allowed Splar to recover his dignity. Being this close to him again in the light of the moons permitted me to inspect him more closely. As the cat sat on his haunches looking at me with his beady green eyes, he towered over me by more than a head's height.

The feline was heavily muscled throughout his body, with much of it around his shoulders and forelegs. His rear legs appeared long and probably useful for jumping. All four of his enormous paws were tipped with claws as long as a man's fingers. They seemed to extract and retract with a mind of their own.

His maw was slightly open, and I could see that while he indeed had two long dagger-like incisors, the rest of his teeth reminded me of the saws we used to cut through the bones of the water spouters.

Splar's coat was very shaggy and looked to be adapted better for a frigid climate. From his varied striped and

mottled coloring, I judged he would be tough to detect. I knew the only reason I had just won his test was that I had caught him by surprise. I seriously doubt my success in combat with Splar if we were ever to go head to head. Splar finally lowered his head down to mine.

"I will go Two-Legs. Too warm here and too many of you running around with your metal claws." He said, indicating my gear with a toss of his head.

"You know what metal is?" I asked, surprised.

"I know it because you know it," responded Splar and sent me an image of the knife in my hand.

"Metal claw," he said.

"Hmmm," I thought, *"If you can read that from me, then how did I win that fight just now?"*

Splar caught the thought and got up on all fours. He brought his great shaggy head down to where he could look me in the eyes.

"Two-legs not thinking during fight," responded Splar.

I was quite taken aback by the comment. He was right, in a matter of speaking. Fighting, regardless of what kind or against whatever opponent, was more a matter of instinct now. Rarely did I need to think of my actions in combat actively. Yet, somehow I always knew what to do, and my efforts had served me well.

"Good training, I guess," responding half to myself and a half to Splar.

"Not always the smartest way," Splar replied.

I shrugged my shoulders. The thinking was what I did when I studied in the library or navigated a trail. I had observed all too often the results of hesitating when the situation called for immediate action.

Looking to the North and nodding my head, I explained the situation. "The Northern Range is five days from here, and then it's possibly another day to a place that looks like what you showed me."

I pulled out my new bow and set four arrows ready.

At Splar's quizzical grunt, I replied, "shoots metal claws like you saw me do before."

Splar glanced at the bow, "*looks different from the others I saw*," he growled.

"Feels different as well," I replied. "However, it's a gift, and I promised my brother I would test it."

Splar twitched his shoulders in his best imitation of a shrug. "*Two Legs depend too much on tools. Maybe that is why you don't think enough.*"

I had to laugh at the remark. "Maybe you are right. Come on, house cat!" Splar spat and stood up fiercely. He turned his head to the North.

"Go?"

"Aye, we will go now," and we bounded off towards the foreboding line of snow-capped mountains that was the Northern Range.

While I kept a good run, Splar was content moving at a moderate trot to keep pace with me. My training had conditioned me to keep a good running pace for several hours before needing to rest.

While we moved on, my mind was split. Part of me was keeping a record of our journey, picking out landmarks, observing places that would be easy for caravans to travel, assessing the game, and other life-sustaining resources as we moved. The other part of my mind was trying to process recent events.

Just a few hours ago, I was a young man out hunting with my father. Now I was on my Warden's Journey several weeks earlier than expected, and I had been visited by none other than the Lady of the Lands. In twenty generations of our history, this had happened only one time before. The probability that this would be an ordinary journey was fast becoming the thought of folly.

As we passed through the night with only the moons for our light, I had the oddest feeling we were being watched and said as much to Splar.

"*Bird up there,*" Splar tossed his head up to indicate the sky above us. "*Can't see it, only hear, but not dangerous.*"

"How do you know it isn't dangerous?" I asked aloud.

Splar snorted. "*Been there all night and hasn't tried to eat us yet.*"

"How do you know it's a bird?" I mused.

Splar gave his version of a laugh. It sounded like a deep rumble in his chest as we ran on. "*What else fly besides bird?*"

I decided not to elaborate on that question. Where Splar came from, probably the only things flying were birds. From my reading, I knew that Threa had a lot more airborne species than just birds. Some of which I sincerely hoped we would never encounter.

"*Just let me know if you notice anything else I don't.*"

We ran for the night and the rest of the next day, stopping when we found water or to sate hunger. It was twilight again when I had to rest.

I was quite winded and in need of something more than a brief respite. Splar appeared none the worse for wear even after such prolonged exertion. For all of the ground we had covered, the mountains of the Northern Range looked no closer than before.

"Make you a deal, Kitty Kitty," I chided the big cat. "You go get dinner, and next time we spar, I will keep my eyes closed." Splar considered this.

"*Agreed,*" he said, and with that, he loped off towards the east as if he sensed something in that direction that had yet to register on my senses.

I set about making a fire, gathering kindling and large branches into a cone. Looking to the left and right, I traced Kenaz, the rune for fire on a flat piece of bark and set it beneath the whole assembly.

I cleared my mind and concentrated on the rune. Under my breath, I began a slow monotonous chant.

"Elder, logo, elder, logi."

Much to my surprise, the fire manifested to life after only two edifications.

"Hmmm," I thought, *"that normally takes time."* Then, eying the fire, I shrugged my shoulders, "thanks be to the Lady..." I said in prayer before I could stop myself.

I sat down slowly. There hadn't been time to ponder recent events, and like a slap to my face, it suddenly occurred to me that the woman who had appeared to me was indeed Gaia. She who had saved my ancestors twenty generations past now.

The sagas and stories that spoke of Gaia portrayed her much as I had seen her. Yet, I had never read of her giving gifts to anyone. She had touched me! She was real.

"Well, at least she felt real," I thought.

The books I read named all manner of creatures both real and what could only be the writings of madmen, but the Lady was always the Lady, and she had come to me personally.

"Just like Thorvald," I said to myself as I laid out my pack. First on my list while waiting for dinner was to sketch out our first day's journey.

"what's keeping Splar?"

I pulled out a blank parchment and, with my charcoal, began to sketch all I could remember of our journey so far. The land was nearly all forest with scattered clearings and rock formations. We had crossed three rivers and passed two small lakes and one large one. Water sources were vital landmarks as they remained for long periods.

I also sketched in such landmarks I remembered; rocky ridges, animal trails, a deep gorge that we saw but never needed to navigate, and one relatively flat plateau with a cone-shaped peak in the middle.

I was well into the sketch and quite enjoying the look of it when I heard Splar's faint broadcast.

"Trouble coming." Splar sounded odd, even in his thoughts, and he was running full out towards me. Someone or something was chasing him.

"By Odin, what did you get into?" I shot back.

"Two legs, not human, metal claws, and taste terrible...I'm hurt!"

"By Thor," I exclaimed, *"can you make it back?"*

"Hurt, but still running. These Two Legs very angry."

Quickly I covered my small camp with some boughs I had cut for such a purpose and grabbed my bow. *"Well,"* I said to myself as I slung my quiver and tied it to my waist, *"looks like we will be field testing Adnar's gift earlier than expected."*

I took off at a dead run towards Splar. Best as I could tell, he was about two miles out and closing fast on me. I could feel him already, and then I could feel the others behind him. They were not human.

Hate. I felt the emotion firmly even at this distance.

"What did you do to provoke them, Splar?"

"Tell you later," came back Splar's reply.

As I ran, I came upon a small gully. With a quiet smile, I told Splar, *"bring them to me. How many?"*

"More than all of my claws!" Splar shot back.

Removing my quiver, I stuck all but four arrows into the ground at the lip of the gully. Ahead of me, there was an open clearing maybe five hundred faðmrs wide till the forest sprang up again.

"Get them in the open!" I instructed.

I could sense Splar changing direction towards me, and his pursuers changed course as well. Suddenly he exploded out of the forest to my left, running for his life towards me. Right behind him came a horde of running shapes.

I could see they were large, bipedal, armed, and intent on catching up to my big friend and killing him. I counted

at least twenty. Splar had said they weren't human, but they indeed moved like humans.

"No matter," I thought as I grabbed up my four arrows. I nocked the first one and held the other three in my bow hand.

"Splar veer right hard as you can!" Splar veered so hard to the right that he skidded and rolled before regaining his feet.

The whole troop stopped short in surprise at the cat's sudden move. In the second it took for the horde to realize something might be amiss, I had lost all four of my arrows and was nocking another. I watched, surprised as not only had all four arrows found their mark but had succeeded in taking my targets entirely off their feet.

I put my next arrow into the big one in front, and was impressed to see my arrow split his head like a melon.

"Must still be over four hundred faðmrs and still has that kind of power," I thought, readying yet another arrow.

The horde, down by a third of its number, had finally figured out where I was and were advancing rapidly.

"Perceptive lot, aren't you?" I saw their heads perk up, and they started directly running towards me. Swearing, I grabbed my remaining arrows and ran along the gully until I had no more cover.

My move had flanked them and put me within a hundred faðmrs of their quick advance. At this distance, I could see that these unknown aggressors wore armor and were brandishing hand weapons. So far, I had seen nothing like an archer or spear caster among them. Almost as one, the band faced me.

I dropped to one knee while at the same time stabbing my arrows into the ground. Pull, draw, release, pull, draw release. I cut down four more before they were too close.

With a bellow, I yanked Vulcanfang off my back and prepared for close quarters.

"Hold!" I shouted, and the band abruptly stopped a short distance away. A fur-covered human armed to the teeth wasn't what they expected.

Their appearance was appalling. Other than walking upright, the aggressors looked nothing like humans. They had thick muscled arms with broad shoulders, almost no neck, and short legs. The apparent leader had a face I could only equate to being half simian and half frog due to its bulging eyes.

"Take heed," I stated. "I'm not partial to killing, but you have wounded my friend and chased him across half the forest for a reason I do not know. I'm inclined to hear why. However, I am just as inclined to chop you into much smaller pieces if that's what you want."

The brute in the lead had a surprised look.

"How do you know our words?" The creature asked. The thing's voice sounded like rocks crashing together in a pit, but at least I could understand him.

"I received a gift from a pretty Lady not long ago. She said it would help me speak." I held Vulcanfang low and steady and glared at him. "Even when talking to brainless ape lizards." I sent an image of the ugliest monkey/frog combination I could imagine, along with the insult. I put quite a push behind the picture just for emphasis.

The creature grabbed its head and fell to its knees, screaming. Seeing a window to dominate the situation, I surged forward. Closing the distance, I brought the axe up suddenly, and the blade was under the leader's chin before it could move.

Up close, the thing was even more repellent. Its skin was mottled greenish-gray and looked wrinkled and leathery. There were bulges under the skin like cysts or boils, and it smelled like a week-old corpse.

For all of its appalling appearance, it was intelligent just from the look in its eyes as its gaze shifted down

towards my axe blade at its throat. The thing regarded me with its bulbous hate-filled eyes.

"Human!" It stated flatly as if the word tasted foul on its long gray tongue.

"Aye," I replied, "and it would be good for you to relax since my large and angry-looking friend is now behind you." Splar had crept up on their backside while they focused on me.

Splar reared up in two legs, something I had not seen him do before. Like this, he looked to be as tall as three men. He roared and, in one motion, came down, slamming his paws into the ground, causing a tremor.

"So, what shall we do?" I asked.

"We are dead anyway," the thing replied and stood up, swinging his drawn sword at my head.

Now I was the one surprised as I ducked and spun away, the creature's sword barely missing me. Without thinking, I snapped up my axe handle and struck the beast squarely under its chin. Allowing momentum to do the work, I swung the axe blade along the same arc, splitting the creature in two from the crotch upwards.

Things were moving rather quickly, and I did not have time to register the ease with which Vulcanfang had just sliced through my nearest opponent.

The heavy-bladed weapon continued its swing, and I moved with the momentum. Turning, I followed up with a back kick directly into the chest of the one behind the falling pieces of its leader. I heard the metal of the creature's armor crunching as it bent forward, expelling all of its wind with a "whoof!" Putting my foot down, I struck behind me with the axe handle, smiling as I felt an impact. Bones crunched as I looked behind me, noticing that the blow had shattered its nose, caving in the skull.

I was in the middle of them now, and they were scrambling to get at me. Staying mobile, I rolled outside of the group, and they were turning towards me. Coming

out of my roll, I let fly with a tremendous low sweep of Vulcanfang, severing two sets of legs.

Turning into the sweep, I pulled Vulcanfang in tighter. Then, spinning around, I cleaved through the skull of another. Following the arc, I spun and whipped my right foot out in a hook catching the last of them directly on the side of its head with the heel of my boot and sending it to the ground. I stopped my spin and stood to look around.

As always seemed to happen when I was in a bad situation, the time had slowed down around me, and it had seemed like all I had done had taken several minutes at the least. I looked over to Splar. His reaction to the leader's sudden move had been to squash two of the creatures flat.

I could see blood on his coat and the haft of a spear sticking out of one shoulder.

"You only got two?" I teased.

"You were doing fine," replied the cat sending me an image of a tornado full of metal. *"Didn't need help."*

Suddenly, though, I felt quite sick and sat down slowly. My hands were shaking, and my head spinning.

"Hurt, Jon?" I heard the big cat rumble.

"No, I don't think so. Just a dizzy spell."

I stood up as my head cleared. I suddenly realized that Splar had used my name for the first time. Remembering the blood and now concerned, I went over to my new friend, examining his wounds. The slashes would heal with no trouble. The spear was another issue.

"I need to look at it," I motioned at the spear shaft.

Splar grunted, licking one paw. Taking that for understanding, I started probing around the shaft, moving it from side to side. It appeared to move a bit.

"No barbs, that's a good thing," I remarked as I walked around till I was in front of Splar. His great shaggy head was hanging low.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

The cat grumbled. *"I didn't get dinner."*

I threw back my head, laughing. "Ok, look, we have to get the spear out, and then we can talk about dinner."

The cat seemed relieved. *"Yes, Jon,"*

I walked back over by his massive shoulder.

"Probably going to hurt like hell," I warned, placing my hands on the shaft.

"Understood," responded the cat.

"I will pull on three, alright?" The cat shook his head.

"One. Two," Splar relaxed, and I heaved as hard as I could.

"Yeeooww!" screamed Splar as the spearhead came free with a great gout of blood, and I landed hard on my backside, almost knocking me silly.

"I thought you said three!" Splar shouted at me.

"An old soldier's trick for removing arrowheads," I replied. I got up with the spear shaft in my hands.

The wound was still bleeding freely enough to concern me. Splar looked at me reproachfully.

"Thanks," he grunted.

"How bad does it feel?" I asked.

"Hmmp! Let me bite your shoulder, and you tell me how it feels!" The cat snapped, shaking his head rapidly.

"At least you are still in good spirits." I chided him. I inspected the wound more closely. *"No evidence of poison. Nothing left inside."* I looked over the spear, and the tip was intact. *"Good! No chance of infection."*

"I need to stop the bleeding," I said as much to myself as to Splar. I went back over to my covered campsite and dug out my medicine pack.

Now any woodsman worth his salt will pick up such items along the way as will be helpful later.

Even during my very pressed run yesterday, I was gathering herbs and other things as I saw them.

Part of my training had been an intensive six months of how to treat sickness and ailments, and most significantly, how to heal wounds. One never knew what could happen out here in the wildlands.

From my pack, I pulled out a flat white cake of clay that had been boiled clean, some Yarrow leaves, and some Cattail cotton. With practiced ease, I pulled out my mortar and pestle, mashed up the Yarrow leaf, and mixed in the cotton. With a good poultice made, I went back to Splar. Placing the Yarrow and Cotton directly on the wound, I covered the dressing with the clay.

"What's it do?" Asked Splar.

"Aids in healing and will help the blood clot quickly," I replied as I added a bit of water along the outer part of the clay pack to make it stick. I stepped back and observed my handiwork.

"Not bad," I thought.

The problem was I was still on a multi-mission journey, part of which included relocating my new friend as far North as the grasslands, which I only knew of from vague maps.

Being held up by a grumpy wounded long-tooth was not going to help matters. Suddenly a thought occurred to me. During my rune craft studies, I had, of course, dealt with the rune Berkano, but the reading dealt more with healing the self.

Almost without thought, I pulled out my charcoal and drew the symbol for Berkano on the clay. After a moment, I added Protection. I didn't think Splar needed protection, but I didn't need that wound infected.

I laid my hand on the patch and intoned the words of healing and protection along with a call out to any spirits nearby to help the big cat. At the end of the intonation, I could have sworn the whole plaster felt quite warm, but that could have just been from my hand being on it for so

long. I stood back and walked back around to Splar's big, whiskered face.

"Ok, so let's have it," I implored.

Splar wasn't quite up to whole sentences, so what I got was a lot of disjointed words and a lot of images, along with some very unpleasant cursing. After translating, I gathered that Splar had indeed found dinner in the form of a deer of good size. He was about to pounce on it when he had gotten impaled by the spear. Then he was surrounded by more than two scores of the ugly brutes out in the clearing. The party and Splar had most certainly been hunting the same deer.

A fight had ensued where Splar had killed at least ten of his attackers, which included taking a bite out of at least one. I chuckled, recalling his comment

After he had gotten clear of them, he had run here as fast as he could.

"Hmmm," I said, "good thing you weren't the replacement for dinner."

"I don't taste good either, maybe?" replied Splar with his growling laugh.

"Let's never find out, shall we?" I responded.

I walked back out to where the bodies still lay, Counting the five I had dropped as they came into the clearing, the four that went down after advancing on my position, and the five who lay close together here, the attacking party numbered two score.

"They have a camp, and it's within ten miles of where you ran into them."

Splar lifted his head, *"more of them?"*

"By the Lady, I hope not! They are a nasty-looking bunch with a death wish."

With Splar settled down and fed a bit of dried meat laced with willow bark for the pain, I decided to do some drawing to help me with my report. Pulling the most intact of the nasties out of the pile, I cut him loose of his

armor to better see what he was. Stepping back, I took up the parchment and sketched the creature with sure and quick strokes.

Our attackers were about a foot taller than an average man but stoop-shouldered and had minimal neck. Course hair covered a mottled, leathery, almost lizard-like skin. A face with massive brow ridge, heavy jaw, and tusks jutting from upper and lower jaws. Eyes somewhat small and forward-facing. Arms heavily muscled with massive pectorals. Abdominal region solid, legs short, and slightly bowed. Five fingers and respective toes on the limbs, and a short tail was extending from the spine.

I took note of the gear. The armor was well-made but unfamiliar in design. The helmet was a standard bowl and nose guard type but again with an unusual design. The weapons were a sword, a long knife, and a shield. Looking at the rest of the bodies, I noticed that their armor and weapons were similar.

"Soldiers!" I exclaimed suddenly.

Splar's head came up, "*What? Soldiers?*"

"No, no...Them," I said, gesturing at the bodies. "Only soldiers in an army will be wearing the same or similar kinds of gear."

Whatever these things were, they were some kind of patrol. Not only were they two days' journey from my father's Trelleborg, but it was also still three day's journey to the Northern Range before we reached the edge of Numitgart's borders. This patrol was in the middle of nowhere. There must be a camp nearby.

I stood arms crossed, considering the bodies as I contemplated our next move.

"We will find their base camp tomorrow morning," I finally decided.

"*Why?*" asked Splar.

As far as he was concerned, the fight was over, no need to pursue the matter further.

"Tis likely they left the deer." That got the cat's attention.

He stood, shaking himself. *"Food?!"* He growled, *"go now! Hungry!"*

"Wait!" I cautioned.

Moving forward, I got close to his shoulder. The patch on his wound was well over a head above me.

"What about your shoulder?"

Splar stretched in the way typical of cats.

"Feels better," he purred.

"That's odd. I put that dressing on ten minutes ago."

Splar settled back down to where I could see the patch better.

"Look!" The cat purred adamantly. Carefully I pulled the dressing back, taking care not to remove any hair or cause Spar any more irritation.

The wound had completely healed over, and there was a pink scar where the spearhead had entered. I staggered back.

"By The Lady!" I exclaimed.

Now I knew I was pretty good at dressing a wound, but this was impossible! Even the healers of my people could not accomplish this. I remembered what I had done.

I had set a dressing to create a clot so the wound would heal well, but then I had added some rune craft. The patch had felt very warm afterward. I shook my head and whispered a prayer to the Lady.

I was beginning to get the feeling that somehow her recent interaction had been a great deal more than giving me a book and putting a gemstone in my head. Myrnran Gaia had said that the speaking stone would meld well with my natural talent.

"Speaking Stone, my arsel!" I muttered, wondering what else the Lady's gifts had in store.

I shrugged, "Well, it appears that fortune smiles upon us this day, Splar."

The cat stood up and huffed in reply.

I looked back in the direction that Splar had come out of the forest.

"We will venture to this camp tonight," I decided, "but first..." I grabbed Vulvanfang and headed towards the clearing.

"*What you do?*" Splar asked.

"We are going to send a message," I responded, swinging up my axe over the pile of bodies.

An hour later, we were on our way at a fast trot with Splar leading the way. The fourteen bodies were stripped of armor and weapons, which I took a rather smug joy in breaking into unusable scrap.

With the bodies laid in a circle feet in, I had piled the heap of broken war-gear in the middle. Then I beheaded each corpse. An unforgettable message.

After maybe an hour, we came upon the deer just where Splar had said, and I had it skinned in no time. Cutting off a hind quarter, I left Splar to fill his belly with the rest while I made a roasting fire. While waiting for my dinner to cook, I finished my sketches and then wrote in my journal regarding the fight.

I still had a lot of questions, though. Who were they? What were they? How had they been within our borders which had a series of natural protections around them? What else was up here, and what would I find at this base camp if there even was one?

"Pretty sure there's a camp," I said under my breath as I stabbed my dinner and cut off a hunk of meat.

"*Me too,*" thought Splar as he chewed through a good hundred pounds of deer meat.

"*Clumsy in woods,*" he growled as he licked his chops. He began to dig a hole to bury what was left.

"Wait," I said. "Claw up those bones and make a real mess of it."

Splar pricked his ears, looking puzzled. "Think of it as part of the message we are leaving,"

Splar shrugged his massive shoulders, and with a double stamp of his paws and one mighty swipe, the remains of the deer scattered wide. With that, I stood and collected the remains of my dinner in a pouch I kept for such purposes. I started searching out away from the area where the deer had been discovered.

I had a gut feeling that the brutes had come from somewhere up north, and it was no surprise when I picked up their sign.

"Aye, clumsy," I muttered, agreeing with Splar. "They left a trail that blind men could follow."

Within another hour, we were on a bluff high above the camp and looking down at a camp of maybe twenty tents. They were arranged in a circle around a larger, more permanent-looking structure. I could see the brutes moving around a series of fires. All were wearing the same kind of armor and weapons as the last ones.

At a glance, I counted about 40 of them. I turned to Splar and explained the situation. "We have to do something to get them headed in another direction. This group, for whatever reason, is heading right for our colony. Not to mention, we are still inside Ostmen borders for another three days. That means they are trespassing, and they aren't here to trade."

I looked back over the circle of tents. Ten guards at strategic points. Two guards in front of the main tent. The rest were lounging around several of the fires.

"So Splar, do we scare them or kill them?"

"Scare them," replied Splar, "*No kill. They taste like they have been dead for a day out in the sun.*"

"Interesting," I thought. "*Alive but taste like rotting flesh.*" I filed the information for further thought.

“Aye, we scare them, but it’s going to have to be a big scare.” I motioned to another side of the camp.

“Can you make it over there quietly, and when I tell you, I want you to make as much noise as possible?”

Splar stretched and yawned. *“I will make them pass water in fear,”* he thought absently.

I nodded, and Splar vanished into the undergrowth like some great forest spirit. I shook my head that a creature of Splar’s size could move so silently. I stayed down and kept my thoughts on Splar until I knew he was exactly opposite of me, about two hundred fadms away.

I unslung my quiver and put it right in front of me. Picking up the bloody sack I had been carrying, I split it down the side. With a great heave, I flung it out over the top of the camp. Suddenly twenty severed heads rained down upon the unsuspecting raiders.

“Now Splar!”

The night was shattered by a terrifying screeching otherworldly roar such as I had never heard before. If I hadn’t known it was Splar, I would have pissed myself.

The heads I had thrown seemed to drop out of an empty sky, and the mighty roar had the desired effect of having the whole camp on its feet. Next, I fired four arrows directly at the main tent, then one into each fire, making a lot of sparks and adding further confusion. Then I took off on a low sprint down the ridge, firing at random targets until I was down to only three arrows left.

I was near Splar’s position by this time, and once I saw him, I cupped my hands and shouted at the top of my lungs,

“You ugly rotten bastards are inside of Numitgart borders, and we have you surrounded! You have two minutes to clear out, or we are coming in!”

Thankfully my speaking stone had allowed me to figure out their guttural, primal language, and my words had their desired effect. The nasty creatures were looking

around wildly, trying to pinpoint my echoing voice. I then sprinted another fifty faðms through the forest and pulled out an arrow.

It was time for a trick I had figured out while studying practical applications of rune craft. I took out my writing stick and mapped out the runes for sudden, fire, and intense action.

As I nocked and aimed, I went down within myself. My thoughts concentrated on the most intense searing blaze I had ever known, which was my brother's forge, and then imagined fire igniting.

I loosed my arrow at the main tent while speaking the rune "Kenaz." The fiery missile sped through the night like someone had thrown a lump of burning coal, striking the shelter with an explosion.

The blast knocked everyone in the camp to the ground. I stood there, shocked and dismayed. That wasn't what I had intended. I had just wanted to start a fire on the tent to flush out the leader.

"Damnit," I said under my breath.

I had no problem with killing in self-defense, but whoever was in the tent never had a chance. I would need to be more careful. However, the explosion had the raiders scattering in a Northerly direction as fast as their squat legs could take them. They never even bothered to pack up.

Erring on the side of caution, I crawled over to Splar.

"Nice fire," he commented, licking a paw. "Where did you learn that?"

"Same place I learned to heal a deep muscle wound in ten minutes, in short, damned if I know!"

The cat chuckled, which sounded like a deep Bing Bing sound in his throat.

"We wait for dawn, and then we go in, agreed?"

Splar yawned.

"Don't need to wait. I don't smell any of them down there."

"Well, what do you smell?" I asked impatiently.

"White coat, blood, and fear." Splar had an image in his head of the biggest bear I had ever seen with fur that ranged in color from cream on its legs to almost dead white along its back.

I shook my head in wonder. I knew about the great white bears from books I read, but to my knowledge, they were not that size, and I had never seen one in our lands.

"We have to get down there! Splar, we will spiral in till we meet in the middle."

I slung my quiver and pulled the Warden's Promise sword free.

"Be ready for a fight!"

Splar chuckled again and yawned, trotting off away from our position. I circled in progressively tighter spirals to him until we were inside the camp.

Whatever these things were, they had an unpleasant smell that permeated the camp. As we moved in closer, I saw that the main tent was little more than bits of cloth and support beams.

The inhabitant was most certainly dead, and as I bent over its body, I noticed at once that while this one was similar in build, its features were more refined. The eyes were wider apart, the nose straighter, tusks not as prominent. Perhaps different types of the same creatures? I shook my head. First, I encounter a giant cat, then our patron deity. Then, as I am on my Wardens Journey, I run into a small army of very unpleasant-looking and skillful soldiers of a race I had never encountered before.

"What next?" I murmured.

As if on cue, Splar called out, *"Jon! See! More trouble!"*

I came at a sprint, sword up, towards Splar, who had continued to move through the camp. As I came upon him, I stopped dead in my tracks.

My eyes were filled with one of the most disgusting and horrid sights I had ever witnessed. In a large metal cage, there was the white-haired bear that Splar had shown me the image of, but there was barely a patch of white fur left on it.

These inhumane bastards had somehow captured it and then had slowly tortured it by skinning it alive! It was also wounded mortally in numerous places, and at least one leg was severely broken.

“By The Lady!” I exclaimed in disbelief.

Suddenly the creature turned its head! I jumped back involuntarily, and instantly my mind was bombarded with images! Horrible images!

The bear was alive, but I could see the images becoming cloudy and black at the edges. I had seen similar in animals who had befriended me, and their time of life was ending. In my mind, I saw a battle between this bear and these uglies until they had subdued her. A female! Then other images of a smaller version of the bear. There was a cub!

Even in all of her pain, this mother was so worried about her cub! More images appeared behind my eyes of a trail, an iced-over lake, a cave. The images were fading. I felt tears running down my face. What monsters were these things?

I had never been so angry in all of my years! For anyone to wreak this kind of torture on one of nature’s children! One of the Lady’s children! One last image. It was the bear standing up and pointing the way to her cub. She wanted me to find her cub!

“Yes, dear mother, what you ask, I will do.”

The bear breathed a deep sigh, shuddered, and was gone. I knelt next to the cage, whispering a prayer.

Never in all of my young life had I ever seen anyone torture an animal. Ostmen learned from when they were very young that we were part of nature. We lived with the animals, and they were with us. If we killed animals, it was only for survival, and in nature, that was the circle of life, of balance.

If we chopped down trees, we planted new ones. If we planted crops, we always gave some back to the children of the forest. Such was our way. For me, it was more. I was more than a part of nature. I was its sworn protector.

"Whatever these things are, they are not part of nature, at least no nature that makes any sense," I said to the air, the trees, and the very mountains.

I looked over at Splar, "you saw what she said?"

"*Hard not to,*" he replied. "*Every animal around us probably saw too.*"

"We have to find the cub!" I stated. "Do you agree?" Splar nodded. "*If it were my cub Warden, I would want to find it.*"

I turned to the cat. "First time you called me Warden."

Splar looked directly at me, lowering his head down to where our eyes were level. "*You and your family could have filled me full of flying metal claws back near your home. You saved me from these bad-tasting things and made my shoulder good again.*"

I raised my hands slightly. "That is Wardens work."

Splar raised his head back up to its full height.

"*To be a Warden is to be much,*" he stated.

"*You are not first to say that, Splar,*" I responded.

"*I don't think I will be the last,*" Splar said as he turned in the direction the bear had indicated. "*Find cub?*"

"Yes!" I nodded, "It was her dying wish, and I am honor-bound to fulfill it."

With that, Splar let out a roar and bounded into the forest. I broke into a run that nearly had to be a sprint

just to keep up with him. After about an hour at a dead run, I had to stop to catch my breath.

“Splar, wait!”

The big cat skidded to a halt, leaves and twigs and snow flying up in the air. *“What?! Trouble?”*

“No,” I gasped, “I’m about done! We have been at this for nearly two days with no real rest!”

The big cat came back to me, regarding me with his giant feline eyes. Slowly he dropped down to the ground and looked like he was about to take a rest.

“Climb up on my back.”

Stunned, I looked at him incredulously.

“What?! You want me to ride on you like a horse?”

Splar chuckled deep in his throat. *“I am far better than any horse! We have far to go, and the cub will be hungry!”*

The cat put his head to the ground. *“Climb Warden.”*

I bowed my head. “you honor me,” I said humbly. Splar yawned so wide that I thought his jaws would split.

“You should be,” he stated simply. The great cat extended his right paw. As carefully as I could, trying not to pull his hair, I climbed up on his back.

For the first time, I noticed that his mane, though short, made for a good handhold. I straddled his high shoulders and grabbed two handfuls of his fur.

Suddenly Splar stood up! I was at a height in the air twice that of how I would be with a horse!

“Ready, Jon?”

I bent close into Splar’s back. I had seen him run, and Splar was faster than any horse I had ever seen. “Ready!” Splar took off with a great leap, and I felt my heart in my throat! The cat must have cleared fifteen strides in a bound, and then we were running!

Splar ran mostly in great leaps that seemed to go on one right after the other, but I never once felt jarred or like I was going to fall. It was the most fluid motion I had

ever experienced, and after a while, I learned to move with him so it would be easier to run or change direction.

I held myself close and switched my grip from his mane to where I had my hands on his neck, using my legs to stay in place. Splar relaxed visibly, and we became like some great machine in my brother's forge. Rhythm took over, and instinct seemed to kick in. Riding, we seemed to become one entity.

Within an hour, we had reached the ice-covered lake. Splar came to a skidding halt at its edge and crouched low. I slide off his back, my legs feeling wobbly and my head dizzy. Standing before him, I held out my right hand.

"Where I come from, we do this to thank a friend."

I showed him an image of my brother and me clasping arms. Splar looked at my hand and back to me.

"Friend?"

I showed him a vision of Tunel, one of my classmates and my favorite sparring partner. In the image, Tunel was hugging me and shook my hand. It had been a good match, and we were going to have an ale to celebrate.

Splar raised his right paw, but instead of trying to meet my hand, he wrapped his paw around the back of my head and pulled me in close to him. I suddenly felt his sandpaper-like tongue run across my helmet.

"You are more than a friend." As he released me, he must have noticed my cheeks were wet.

"You did that same thing with the White Coat," he stated, *"are you in pain?"*

"No!" I said, looking away, "humans show their emotions on the outside a lot." Splar grunted.

"I noticed," he yawned, scratching behind his left ear.

Suddenly his ears pricked up. *"The cub!"* He swiveled his head towards the north. *"I can hear it, and it's terrified!"*

"Quickly then," I exclaimed and headed in the direction Splar's head was pointing. After about another

five minutes of running at a slow loping trot, I started picking up images from the cub.

It was terrified. The mother must have been absent for some time. My heart melted, and I started sending all of the happy thoughts I could muster.

"Don't be afraid," I projected. *"We are here to help."* Soon we had found the cave, and I slowly approached the entrance.

"Well met, Little One. Please do not fear us. We are friends, and we are here to help you. Come outside."

I kept sending this thought over and over in my head. At the same time, coming to my knees and trying to appear as non-threatening as possible.

Slowly the bear emerged. First, it was just the tip of its black nose sticking out of the blackness of the cave entrance, then a pair of eyes. Slowly, ever so slowly, the creature fully showed itself and sat timidly, looking at me. I had not received an image from it for several minutes, and I was concerned the bear might try to run.

A picture of a mighty white bear flooded my mind. It was large and powerful and had great paws and warm breath.

"Your mother," I thought at the bear. I sent an image of my mother. Tall and robust, but with gentle hands and a song on her lips.

My mind was full of images of the fight between the mother and the Ugliers. Her mother had told her to run.

"Another female," I sent to my friend.

"Can smell her," he replied.

Slowly, I approached her.

"Well, you are certainly much larger than I expected," I whispered. This cub probably weighed about eighteen Stone! Sitting down, she was just slightly below my height. I stopped when I was within maybe two feet of her. This close, I noticed she had shocking green eyes and a patch of black fur shaped like a star on her forehead.

I was intrigued despite the fact we were here to rescue this cub. With my palm down, I extended my hand until I finally touched her right on the patch of black fur. Instantly I felt the stone in my head vibrate, and I heard a low hum.

"Can you hear?" Startled, I stepped back.

"Yes, I can hear you, Little One."

The bear started swaying her head, something I had seen bears do when agitated. *"Mother! Mother!"*

My eyes went low. *"Your mother has passed on,"* I whispered. *"I'm sorry. There was nothing I could do."*

For the third time that day, I felt hot tears running down my cheeks. My fists balled up in anger, and I slowly collapsed to my knees.

"What kind of monsters? What kind of world allows this to happen?"

I just knelt there in the snow, openly weeping. Not knowing what else to do, I found myself overcome with grief for the cub's mother—a creature I could never save.

After what seemed like forever, I felt a cold nose on the back of my neck. I looked up sharply and was staring right into those shocking green eyes, the cub's long nose next to my face.

"You come for me?"

I wiped my eyes and slowly got up. *"I promised your mother, and I must protect all children of nature. Children of the Lady."*

The bear moved up close to me and nuzzled my neck. *"Smell good, like..."* The words jumbled, and I got an image of her mother again.

"I will do my very best to take care of you, or at the very least, take you to others like you who can."

The cub looked up slightly at me, *"yes, take me..."*

Splar ambled over. The cub had seen him, and, since I had not considered him a threat, she shouldn't either.

"*Splar*," he introduced himself by putting one paw on the ground.

The cub considered the gesture for a moment.

"I don't have..."

"You have no name?" I acted surprised. Of course, she didn't. Until ten minutes ago, she had never spoken.

I crossed my arms for a minute, looking the cub up and down. Unlike her mother, the cub was almost pure white, and sitting there, she reminded me of...

"Isbjorna." I said finally. "We will call you, Isbjorna."

The cub looked back at Splar, *"I am Isbjorna."*

The bear put her paw on top of Splar's.

"And I am called Jon." Putting my hand on top of their paws. Suddenly, something seemed to slide into place with almost an audible click. It seemed as if we all heard it because we all stopped as one.

The air started having a funny feeling as before a rainstorm. My head felt dizzy, and then I heard the voice.

"Jon, it's me; we need to talk." The Lady was calling. She was calling to all of us.

