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The InvEnture

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Appendix E - UNIVERSITY HONORS PROGRAM
SENIOR PROJECT - APPROVAL

Name: Lara Miller

College: Arts + Science Department: English

Faculty Mentor: Sandra Capps

PROJECT TITLE: The InvEnture

I have reviewed this completed senior honors thesis with this student and certify that it is a project commensurate with honors level undergraduate research in this field.

Signed: Sandra E. Capps, Ph.D. Faculty Mentor

Date: 4/25/02

General Assessment - please provide a short paragraph that highlights the most significant features of the project.

Comments (Optional):

Lara's writing reveals an impressive skill with character and plot development, and her style and imagery seem to mature, even over the few weeks I've been involved in editing the text. Indeed, there are many moments of lyrical beauty, even haunting images of intensely felt and ^{strongly} rendered emotions and actions. I also feel she is extremely cognizant of her audience, and always ~~writes~~ includes them in her imaginative explorations, a difficult feat in a newly-created "virtual" world.

The InvEnture

**a novel
by
Lara Miller**

(Senior Honors Project 2002)

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Foreword

This novel has been an experiment for me, my first attempt at actually writing one of the books that I've spent so much of my life reading. I've had the idea for the story more or less complete in my head for five or six years, maybe longer, but I never really had the motivation to sit down and write it out. Luckily, the Honors Project gave me a good reason to get to work, and having a deadline helped me to work steadily. I probably could have picked an easier project, one that would have been much less work, but this was something I needed to do for myself, so it was much more worthwhile in the end, even if it was more difficult. I'm glad I had the opportunity to see what I could do.

I am indebted to my mentor, Ms. Sandra Capps, for reading the manuscript as I wrote it and giving me feedback. She put in a lot of hard work and a lot of long reading, and I am extremely grateful to her. Her comments helped me a great deal in revising my work, and gave me another perspective to look at it from. I'd like to thank her very much for putting up with the length of the book, as I know she has a very busy schedule. I'd also like to thank my friend Gary King for reading some of the early parts of the manuscript and offering feedback, and of course, my husband Adam, for keeping me from going crazy.

Chapter One: In Which Good News Is Received

Mark crouched in the bracken, sword at the ready. His men huddled around him, the dappled late afternoon sunlight blending their brown clothes with the forest. One of them shifted position, making the undergrowth rustle; Mark motioned him to silence, and strained his ears for sounds of the group he knew was approaching on the road. He had been waiting for only a few minutes, but it felt like days. His legs had already grown stiff from crouching. His anticipation had grown as well, until now he could barely keep from fidgeting with impatience. Callah and her followers should arrive at any moment. He held his breath, listening for sounds of footsteps. He had been listening so intently that at first he thought that the faint, rhythmic thudding was only his heartbeat, but it continued and grew louder, until it could be distinguished as the sound of many feet marching in unison. Soon, the steps could be clearly heard in the still air. His men were as nervous as he was, which was reasonable since they were, essentially, himself. Each one was a mirror image of him, wearing his face and features, possessing most of his skills. The only difference was that his clothes were green and theirs brown. They gripped their weapons more tightly - Mark could feel them tensing, like wild creatures preparing to pounce on unsuspecting prey. He hoped that was how it would go. He had skirmished with Callah's band many times, but never gained a lasting advantage. This ambush would bring him a decisive victory, if it succeeded. His eagerness grew with the thought. He could feel his breath coming faster as he strained to see the advancing party.

The autumn sun slanted onto the dusty road as it wound through the thick forest, and Callah's troops came marching along it, their shadows reaching far ahead. Each one was a copy of Callah herself, just as his men were copies of him. They were slim female fighters in light leather armor, with a thin curved blade hanging at each one's side, and a longbow hung over each shoulder. Their yellow hair was cropped short, though, to

distinguish them from Callah, and it shone in the sun. Each one walked just the same way, and the same puffs of dust rose from each pair of boots. They were making no effort to conceal the noise of their passage. They obviously didn't expect a thing -- Mark exulted.

The few seconds it took for the group to pass seemed like an eternity to Mark. His palms were slippery on the hilt of his sword. He forced himself to wait until he was sure that the enemy group was in the perfect position for attack, just past his position, with their backs to his men. Then the silence shattered as Mark shouted the signal to attack. He leapt up from his hiding place, all the stiffness falling from his limbs. As the startled women turned towards them, scrambling for their swords in sudden fear, he and his warriors were among them. Mark laughed aloud in triumph.

Mark reached the first soldier in front of him, who had barely gotten her sword clear of its sheath. Knocking her light scimitar aside, drove his broadsword deeply into her stomach. He winced a bit as she crumpled to the ground; he'd never quite gotten used to doing that to someone who looked so much like Callah. Not that he would hesitate to do the same to Callah herself when he got the chance. Where was she, anyway? Mark ripped his sword free of the corpse with a rough jerk and scanned the chaos. Dust was everywhere, copies of himself and Callah were killing each other all around him, but... there were more copies of him than there were of her, and not just because his forces were winning. There weren't enough of Callah's soldiers here, this was less than half of her band. He hadn't noticed before -- it was too hard to get a count when they all looked the same. Still, he should have been more careful; he'd been too confident in his plan, too eager to fight. He swore. How could he have been so stupid?

Mark shouted desperately for his men to retreat, but it was too late. A quivering arrow suddenly sprouted from the side of the man nearest to him. A hail of arrows followed, their deadly *whizz-thump* filling the air. They struck his and Callah's fighters indiscriminately, but her followers had been forwarned and some had thrown themselves to the sides of the road, where they killed any of Mark's men who tried to escape into the

Mark laughed. "I should've realized it a lot sooner. And I was so proud of my little ambush. I even thought that I might actually get ahead by more than one game. We're too evenly matched. I'm better with hand-to-hand fighting, but you're sneakier."

"I prefer to call it good tactics," Callah retorted, beginning to struggle out of the harness that had sensed her movements and translated them into the game world. The harness looked like some kind of body armor. The padded plastic fittings that enclosed the entire body were attached to a soft molded couch that conformed to the user's shape and held him or her in place while the game was in progress. It was called a couch but was really more like a reclining chair, holding the user in a semi-recumbent position. "If you can hit someone hard enough before they know you're there, you'll only have to hit once. Which is what you were planning, after all."

"Just wait until next game." Mark was out of his harness. "I think we went overtime again. They'll be coming to kick us out any minute."

Both young people rose from their couches, the impressions of their bodies fading slowly from the soft cushions. They bundled the pieces of their harnesses with their trailing wires and softly blinking lights back onto the couches, where they would be cleaned up and rearranged before the next players came in. Someone knocked softly on the door, and it opened to reveal an employee of the VR arcade. Seeing that they were out of their harnesses and ready to go, he smiled and quietly stood back to let them pass. Their footsteps made no noise on the thick carpet as they walked down the hallway to the exit, passing the other small rooms that contained more VR hookups. Callah had heard that in the last century, arcades had been noisy places with bright blinking lights and shouting people pounding on buttons, but it was very different now. The arcade was a place of neutral tones, soft lights, and above all, silence. Noise from the outside world would interfere with the gaming experience, destroying the reality of whatever world the player was living in. So the arcade was divided into many small rooms, all with soundproofed walls. It was really a very peaceful place, Callah thought. Walking out

through the silent halls was always a calming time, a chance to be at peace for a little while, after all the conflict, noise, and mayhem to be found in the VR world. And the outside real-life world they were on their way back to, for that matter. This was a limbo in between the two.

Mark and Callah followed the hallway to a large entry room with waiting benches and an attendant behind the desk. Occupying several of the benches were their friends. They usually all gamed together, but today the others had wanted to try out a new sci-fi shoot-'em-up that hadn't interested Callah much. Mark was more into fantasy himself, so he hadn't minded skipping out on the new game for another round in their ongoing contest.

They made a large group, nine in all. They were friends from school, brought together through a common love of VR gaming. Nicholas was tall and dark-haired, always keeping himself a little apart. Right now his long form was draped across one of the benches, one foot dangling and kicking at the bench leg. Alissa, a tiny redhead with a small snub nose, was perched on another bench between Jacob and chubby, freckled Timothy. Callah envied her for her flaming hair, and for the graceful way she moved, but Alissa did have the fault of being extremely talkative. Right now she was holding up two conversations, turning from Timothy to Jacob and back again, gesturing at them to illustrate her point. Short, round Timothy looked harried -- it took energy to keep up with Alissa. Jacob just smiled quietly and didn't try to answer. Everything about Jacob was quiet. Average height, average build, short brown hair -- nothing drew attention to him. If you looked closely, though, you might notice that he had eyes of an amazing deep, dark blue. Emila and Steve sat on the third bench, holding hands. They were the only ones in the group with a "relationship," and they usually spent most of their time sickening the rest with the way they hung all over each other.

Alissa noticed them and jumped up. Timothy looked relieved.

“Well, *finally!* It took you people forever! We’ve been done for like an hour!” She grabbed Timothy with one hand, and Jacob, who had been sitting on her other side, with the other, and dragged them both to their feet. “Let’s go, I’m *starving!*” Nicholas, on another bench, got up quickly, before Alissa could decide to help him up too. He hated it when people touched him, but Alissa never quite seemed to get the message. Emila and Steve took a moment to notice that Callah and Mark had arrived, being involved in other interests. Alissa marched over and kicked their bench until it rattled. They looked up, startled, from their rapt gazing into each other’s eyes. Alissa rolled hers and turned her back on them.

“Where’s Greg?” Callah asked.

“He had to go,” Emila said. “His mom called his cell and said their dad was showing up for dinner after all, so he had to leave early.”

“Yeah, so he’s not here,” Alissa said. “So can we go get some food now?” Everyone turned to leave. It was easier to do what Alissa wanted than to listen to her complain. Not that Callah minded. She was hungry too.

Leaving the arcade through its thick soundproofed doors, the group plunged into the bustle of the busy commercial center. The wide halls were full of people shopping or simply looking for amusement. Callah was always glad to be here with friends. Their group was large enough to cut a path through the sea of jostling humanity. As long as she stuck close to them, she could walk freely before the people swirled back in again to fill up the gap. When she walked alone, she used a different strategy, twisting and sliding between people, fitting herself into the gaps they left, but she still didn’t move very quickly, and it was tiring to fight the current alone. Her parents hated to come here. They always said that when they were young the human traffic never got this bad, even on peak shopping days when everyone was out looking for bargains. There were more people now than there used to be.

They reached a McDonald's, its doorway formed from two large golden arches. The restaurant had been around so long, Callah was surprised that people weren't tired of it by now. She knew she was, but it was one place that most of the group could tolerate. Whenever they went anywhere else, at least one person was sure to complain they couldn't find anything they liked. She shrugged to herself and got into line behind the others.

When they were all seated at a couple of adjoining booths with their food, Mark asked the others, "So, how'd you like the new game?"

Nicholas answered. "It was all right. A little unconvincing movement wise. Jerky. Nothing like the fantasy setting we do our one-on-ones in, that one's the best around. How'd your battle go?"

"Callah won," Mark said ruefully. "I let her decoy troops spring my ambush. After that I didn't have a chance."

Callah grinned. "It worked perfectly. And you're right about the graphics in that setting. You can barely tell it isn't real. 'Course, if we get into the InvEnture, we might really see some good graphics. If it's as good as they say." The others looked up from their food. Callah knew she'd doomed the conversation. For the rest of the meal there'd be no mention of anything but the InvEnture.

The InvEnture was the latest production of a company named InvEnt, or Innovative Entertainments. It was one of the leading creators of science-fiction and fantasy VR games, and was very popular among young people. It had spent millions of dollars on an ad campaign for the InvEnture, which was something of a grand opening and a sweepstakes contest rolled into one. InvEnt was preparing to unveil its newest technology, a helmet of some kind that purportedly went far beyond any VR technology currently available. The company refused to release any information about how the helmet worked, saying they wanted to keep it a secret until its release. They would only say that it offered a better experience than a neural shunt, with no surgery required.

This was hard to believe. For a long time, a neural shunt had been the only way to have a fully immersive VR experience. Experienced gamers using regular equipment learned to forget that they were lying on a couch encased in sensory equipment, so that they no longer even felt it, but it was still there if you concentrated. A neural shunt could completely disconnect the mind from the body, allowing it to roam free in VR, unconstrained. However, only the most hardcore cyber-geeks had neural shunts put in. The surgery was invasive and still dangerous, despite the abilities of modern medicine. Afterwards, the shunt was ugly, and instantly marked a person as someone who'd rejected the real world. Not many would brave the social stigma. No one in Callah's group had one. InvEnt's claim to be able to outdo a shunt without surgery of any kind was intriguing.

So far the company hadn't offered any hard evidence that they could really do what they said. That was the purpose of the InvEnture. It was going to be a massive VR session lasting several weeks, and involving several hundred high school-age people from across the country. Not many details were forthcoming about what would go on in the adventure, either, though countless websites had sprung up to speculate. All InvEnt would say was that it would be a high fantasy setting. The participants would be chosen from among all submitted applications, which could be filled out online. They would all meet on June 12th at InvEnt's main offices, and spend the next few weeks immersed in the VR setting. It was like a summer camp, but online. It was unhealthy to be in VR for that long at a time, but InvEnt had assured the public that their device would pose no health risk. Again, they refused to say why. The InvEnture was less than a month away now. Millions had already applied. Callah and the others knew they had only a slim chance of being chosen to participate, but their hopes were high nonetheless.

The rest of the meal consisted of a discussion of each person's chances of getting in to the InvEnture. There were many variations on the theme of "Oh, I hope we'll get in!" and "It will be so great!" Eventually, though, Nicholas got up.

“That’s enough goobing about the InvEnture for me. I’ve got stuff I have to do at home. We’ll get in or we won’t, that’s all there is to it.”

Everyone else started to get ready to go as well. It was getting late. They were all turning towards the exit when Timothy pounded on the plastic table for attention.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, your attention please!” Heads turned to stare. Timothy was doing it again, trying to be funny. He always did this. Callah grinned. She enjoyed it. The others shook their heads and sighed. They had less patience with him. “Members of the board, I would like to propose a pact.” This was different. “We all know that we don’t have a very good chance of getting into the InvEnture.” Callah made a sad face at him. He waved his hand at her in dismissal. “You know perfectly well it’s true. And even if some of us do get in, it’s even more unlikely that all of us will. Therefore, I would like to make a proposition, to avoid any unpleasantness or jealousy that might result from some of us getting in and others not.” He looked around pompously, puffing out his chest so that it was almost as round as his belly. “I propose firstly: that, since we know it is a large corporation making these selections, and since everyone knows that the IQ of a corporation is the IQ of the stupidest member divided by the number of people, there shall be no assumptions made about the relative worth of those who did and did not get in. Do I have everyone’s agreement on that?” Callah nodded. Most of the others were too embarrassed by the other people in the restaurant, who now thought they were some kind of very young board meeting. “Secondly, I propose this: that those who are accepted shall not be envied, and those who do not shall not be pitied. I realize that this is difficult. However, in the spirit of brotherhood -- and sisterhood,” (this after a snort from Alissa) “And friendship, those who are not picked shall take contentment from the success of their friends, and in the spirit of enjoying their good fortune, those who are picked shall not diminish their happiness by guilt about those who were not.” Callah grinned at him. His posturing always made her laugh. “Agreed? I can’t hear you.” He pretended to hear

cheers. No one was cheering. Callah golf-clapped at him. "Wonderful to have such enthusiasm. Good then, it's a pact, and I expect everyone to abide by their promises."

"You are such a freak," Alissa said, shaking her head at him.

Nicholas rolled his eyes. He was always annoyed by Timothy's mannerisms. He waved his hand at the others. "I've got to go, you guys. See you later."

The group began to split up. Callah and Mark headed for the subway terminal, since they lived nearby each other. The others went their own ways. Most of them lived closer to the commercial center.

They reached the revolving doors that led to the subway. The name was really just a remnant. The subway happened to start underground at this particular place, but it didn't always stay that way. The tracks rose to the surface sometimes, and sometimes they climbed high into the air on suspended tracks that wound among the tops of the tall buildings. Mark and Callah waited on the crowded platform for the next train to arrive. In a few minutes, it came to a stop in front of them, its electric hum fading into the soft whoosh of hydraulics as its doors slid open. Callah watched Mark as he tried not to jostle the other passengers on the way to a seat. The subway was really designed for smaller people, she thought as she watched him try to fold his long legs under the seat. He had trouble fitting, since he was not only a head taller than most people, but somewhat wider in the shoulders as well. His parents had known from the prognostics when he was born that he was going to be a little too tall to fit comfortably in the modern world, which was designed for the "average person." Callah wasn't convinced that any average people actually existed. Mark's doctor had suggested the possibility of artificially limiting Mark's growth with hormonal treatments, as a few parents were starting to do nowadays, now that human tailoring had been legalized. Many people still regarded such things as tampering with nature, however; and besides, it was terribly expensive. Mark's parents had decided to let Mark be unique. He was -- uncomfortably so at times. Callah herself

was slightly taller than normal, but not close to Mark's height. She slipped easily into the seat beside him.

Once Callah and Mark were settled on the subway and had entered their desired destination into the touchpad, they could talk again. Callah asked the question they'd all been asking. "So... what do you think about our chances of getting into the InvEnture? You never said at supper. It's just about time for the results of the selection to come back."

Mark sighed. The waiting was beginning to wear thin. He was also probably a little tired of the topic, Callah supposed, seeing that it was all they'd been talking about for the last few weeks. She supposed she shouldn't have brought it back up, but she couldn't think of anything else to talk about right now, and riding in silence was awkward.

"I hope we'll find out soon," Mark said.

Callah nodded emphatically. "I think I'll explode if I have to wait another week to know. I'm sure you'll get in. You're a good heroic type, you look like you were made to wield a broadsword, with your height and all. They want people who look convincing in their roles, I bet. Of course, that's assuming you'd be cast as a hero..." She smirked at him.

"No, I'll be the stableboy who holds the heroes' horses. Or maybe the blacksmith who shoes them."

"Well, I was thinking you could be the evil villain's lackey." Callah grinned at him. He raised an eyebrow.

"I'd never settle for being a lackey. A minion, at the very least. But if they judge by physical stuff, you'll be sure to get in too. Look at you, you're the perfect damsel in distress. Green eyes and blond hair, all the really good heroines have them. And I'm sure you'll be very convincing, locked in your tower, waiting to be rescued... Useless, but very ornamental." He covered his head with his arms in mock fear as she cocked a fist in his

direction. She wasn't really mad at him, pleased and embarrassed by the compliment he'd hidden in his teasing. There was no way she'd let him know that, though.

The subway train came to a stop, saving Mark from certain death by pummeling. Their destination was a high platform halfway up a tall housing 'scraper, enclosed by tinted plastiglass. They got out and took the elevator to Callah's floor. It had become their ritual over the past week: the Checking of the Mail. Callah let them into her housepartment, and they headed for the main computer.

"Computer, open Callah's mail, please," she said, ignoring Mark's usual grin at the "please." The screen brought up her mailbox. Holding her breath, with Mark leaning avidly over her shoulder, she scanned down the list of messages - junk mail, some spam, and there, from the InvEnt mailer, a message simply titled "Notification."

"Oh... This could be good or bad..." Callah bounced in her chair, unable to contain her nerves. Mark was fidgeting beside her.

"Open it already!"

Very slowly Callah moved the pointer up to the message and clicked it. Voice commands would have been faster, but half of her wanted to put off finding out what it said. She would have closed her eyes if she didn't need to steer the mouse. The message flashed onto the screen: "We at InvEnt are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted to participate..."

Mark gave a whoop and tried to hug her. "Wait, wait, we're not done yet, cross your fingers!" she said, squirming away. "Computer, open Mark McPherguson's mail, please. Mark, give it the password." He rattled off the code, and his mail opened. There was another "Notification" waiting for him. "You do it," Callah said, scooting aside so he could reach the mouse. He clicked his message. Callah covered her eyes, with her fingers crossed, not caring how silly she looked. Then Mark pulled her hands away from her face and dragged her out of the chair by them. He started to dance her around the room, grinning like a madman.

"We both made it! We're both going to The InvEnture!"

Chapter Two: In Which the Adventure Begins

On the day the InvEnture was slated to begin, Callah and Mark stepped off the subway together at InvEnt's stop, with only a little luggage and their barely-checked excitement. It had been a long impatient wait, but the day was finally here. Callah kept close to Mark, nervously clutching her bags. He was trying to seem calm, but not doing a very good job. They stepped up to join the murmuring crowd of excited teenagers that had already gathered in the wide reception area.

"Looks expensive," Mark said. "The floors might even be real marble."

"And listen how quiet it is in here. No sounds from outside. They must have really great dampening systems. I guess they'd have to, being a VR company."

More young people flowed into the room every time the subway tram stopped. There were already at least a hundred teens waiting, and the number was growing. Callah alternated between watching the small stage up front, checking for the appearance of anyone official, and checking out the newer arrivals.

Mark said, amused, "You're making me dizzy, the way you keep turning back and forth like that. Quit fidgeting. They can't start talking until everyone gets here. Anyhow, it's still half an hour before things are supposed to get started."

"I'm nervous!" Callah said, fidgeting, and ignored him, turning back toward the subway entrance. A new group was coming in. She caught sight of Nicholas' dark head above the rest. She could see Jacob among the strangers, too. "Hey look, everybody's here!" She said, waving at them.

Callah and Mark had messaged the others as soon as they'd found out they were accepted. She'd been surprised, and happy, to find out that so many of their group had been accepted. Not all had been, though.

Timothy bounced energetically in their direction, his chubby face flushed with excitement at being there. Trying to make his somewhat squeaky voice deep and

impressive, he said, "Greetings, comrades in arms. Let us take a moment to remember those who could not be here with us today: Emila, Steve, and Greg." He bowed his head in a position of deep sadness, wiping imaginary tears from his eyes.

Alissa made a sad face. "Yeah, it was *so* unfair that Emila and Steve didn't get in! They were just as well qualified as the rest of us. Of course, I can see why Greg didn't make it. He just doesn't seem to *get* it sometimes. If he'd just --"

Jonathon broke in, his quiet, slow voice a contrast to Alissa's chatter. "Hey, that's mean. He was really disappointed about not getting in."

"Well, I *know*. I didn't say that to *him*, of course. I told him it was probably random, they just drew names out of a big hat or something. Yeah right. Like we'd have to fill out all those forms and things if they weren't looking for *something*."

Timothy tried to recapture the conversation. "In any case, we deeply mourn our comrades, but we cannot let their misfortune dim our triumph. In accordance with our pact, everyone, be happy to be here." He waved his arms over them as if he was granting his blessing. No one needed it, they were all too excited to be here, even if they did feel bad for their friends. Callah smiled as they all started talking again, wondering how long they'd have to wait.

Nicholas wasn't joining in the speculation. He had his back to the others. He was as tall as Mark, tall enough to look over the heads of most of the crowd, and he was doing so, looking towards the platform on the far side of the room. With his black hair and dark brown eyes, he looked like a dark prince out of a story, and he always seemed to strike a pose when he stood still. Callah could never tell if he was doing it on purpose or not, but she figured he didn't know how haughty he looked. He said, "Look, someone's showed up."

They all turned to look at the stage, everyone but Mark and Nicholas straining to their tiptoes to see. An official-looking man was mounting the platform.

“Good morning, everyone!” He had a strange way of speaking, as though he’d just finished rehearsing his speech in front of a mirror and was pretending he was still there. “Congratulations on being accepted to The InvEnture! This is a very prestigious event. It’s the very first public release of our new and revolutionary system of virtual reality, and you should all feel very proud of yourselves for being accepted. We chose only the most interesting and talented individuals to participate in this grand unveiling of our new technology, so you can all give yourselves a pat on the back, ha ha.” He gave a funny stiff laugh that sounded like he was reading it off a card. “The equipment you will be using to take part in the InvEnture is a breakthrough which we think will transform the entertainment industry. We are all very excited here at InvEnt, and we’re sure that you are as well.” Everyone stirred impatiently. Callah had been hoping for some real details on what would happen and what exactly made this new technology so special, not some stiff little congratulations speech. It reminded her of the speeches the principal at school made whenever the school received some award. Maybe the company’s regular speechmaker was out sick.

“Now, if you’d all like to file through the large doors at either side of the stage, you can be processed. We’ll just be checking your registration and making sure everyone is here who should be, and that everyone is who they should be, ha ha, and then we can get started. We’ll all meet back up later on, and don’t worry, refreshments will be provided, ha ha.”

The crowd filed through the doors all too slowly for the excited group of friends. They took their places in the disorderly line, trying like everyone else to get a spot near the front. They made it to the middle, sticking together, except for Nicholas, who hadn’t waited for the rest of them to get moving, stalking off ahead. He never did have much patience for waiting.

Eventually they all made it through the doors, where they faced a battery of small cubicles, each one stocked with a technician and a computer. One by one they took their

places in the next open seat. Callah settled gingerly in the wobbly plastic chair, looking at her technician, who was young and sleepy-looking. He barely glanced at her, but reeled off a long set of questions about her interests, family life, and whether they knew anyone else who'd been chosen for the InvEnture. He zipped through the questions in the rapid-fire monotone of someone getting through a boring memorized script as quickly as he can, typing in her answers almost before she could supply them. He paused, looking interested for the first time, when Callah told him that she knew five other people who'd been accepted to the game.

"That's unusual." He tapped a few buttons on his keyboard. It seemed odd to Callah that he was using such an outdated piece of hardware as a keyboard -- everyone used voice-recognition software nowadays, for most things. But maybe he didn't want her to know what he was writing down -- the screen was tilted so she wouldn't be able to see it without getting up from her seat and looking over his shoulder.

"Oh, you're from *that* group." She looked at him inquiringly, and he avoided her eyes. "Oops. Sorry, I'm not supposed to say anything about the selection process. You and your friends just had an interesting group dynamic, that's all. Forget I said anything, okay? Boss'll get mad at me." She nodded, a bit perplexed. What did "an interesting group dynamic" mean? They did work well together in VR, maybe that was it. But the company shouldn't have been able to tell that just from their applications, she thought. The technician started asking her more questions, going even faster now as if to cover his mistake, and she didn't think any more about it.

After all the questions were finished and several waivers signed, the technician sent her past the rest of the cubicles, through another door to a large room full of tables full of refreshments and beige couches to sit on. From the large brand labels on all the food and drink, it looked like InvEnt was cashing in on some marketing. Callah grabbed a candy bar and found her friends where they'd claimed a set of couches as their own. They settled down to wait and laugh at Timothy, who had tried to carry such a tall stack of

cookies back to the couches that he dropped the top one and stepped on it, squashing it into the carpet.

After an eternity of increasingly impatient waiting, all the InvEnturers had been processed. A woman who looked just like a stern kindergarten teacher to Callah came through the door on the far end of the room, and stood there until the talking died down a bit. Then she said loudly, “The briefing is about to begin. Please form a line and step this way.” She went back out of the door, leaving it open for them.

The new room looked like a scaled-up version of the familiar VR arcade rooms, with row upon row of VR couches and constellations of quietly blinking lights. These couches were different, though. They were the same soft, semi-reclined chairs, but all the restraints were missing. There was nothing but a helmet sitting on each couch. Callah didn’t understand. You always needed restraints, even in simulations without significant action. Without them, your body might fall off the couch, or get tangled in the wires, and even if you didn’t hurt yourself you’d probably break something. But there were no restraints, and for that matter, very few wires, just a few coming from the helmet. The helmets, too, were different. They had no face covering. No goggles, no microphones to pick up speech, nothing. She couldn’t figure out how that would work without a direct neural shunt, and InvEnt’s advertising had promised that there would be nothing of the sort. She wished the company hadn’t been so secretive, but it had to protect its secrets from other companies, she supposed. This was its big unveiling stunt, after all. She just hoped they would reveal some of their secrets before they got started.

The woman who’d directed them in motioned everyone to take a seat on a couch, and they somewhat hesitantly did so, fingering the helmets and looking around for the familiar restraints. Callah exchanged baffled looks with her friends as they took their places. They’d managed to find a few empty couches all together. When everyone was seated, the woman left, and the official who’d welcomed them came into the room and

climbed onto a small platform at the front. He stepped behind a lectern with a glass of water on it and cleared his throat.

He began to speak. He still seemed stiff, as though he was trying very hard to follow a script. Maybe speechmaking wasn't his usual job.

"All right, who's ready to begin their InvEnture?" There were some nervous but enthusiastic cheers. "Good. We are almost ready to start, but first, I'm sure you've all noticed that the couches you're sitting in are different from normal VR couches. You haven't put on your helmets yet, but I'm sure you've noticed that they lack a faceplate." Timothy had been trying his helmet on and hurriedly removed it.

"Up until now, you've received very little information about the new technology we'll be using for the InvEnture.

"That's for sure," Alissa whispered from her couch behind Callah's.

"We want this to be a surprise for the public, so we had to keep things secret," he went on. "You are the lucky group that will be getting a sneak preview, as it were, ha ha. Right now I'll explain a few of the things you may be wondering about. In our advertisements we have announced that we can now offer the realism and detail of a neural shunt, without any surgery or risk. You are probably wondering how we do this."

Alissa was muttering again, "Oh, *please*... could he *be* any worse of a speaker?" Callah smiled in agreement; the man was just so wooden. But she kept listening, hoping he'd give them some concrete details.

"Innovative Entertainments has just made a breakthrough in mental technology. I'm sure you're all familiar with electroencephalographs, called more simply EEGs. They allow doctors, scientists, or people like us to read a person's brain waves. They've been around for well over a century and a half, but it seems that no one besides InvEnt has ever decided to reverse the process. We have been working on this technology for years now, and we've finally succeeded in creating a device that can not only read and interpret brain waves, but actually alter them in a controllable way."

He paused as though waiting for a shocked reaction from his audience. There was a little murmuring, but it seemed that everyone was waiting to hear more. Looking miffed that they didn't react more, he continued in a slightly ironic tone, "Don't be alarmed, this is not mind control. The device allows to control a person's perceptions, not their actions. We were a bit worried that people would react suspiciously to this new technology - the public has a history of overreacting to forward-looking improvements like this one. But I can see that you are a progressive group." He took a sip from his water, still looking a little annoyed.

"The device can also block nerve impulses from the brain to the rest of the body. That is why there are no restraints on your couches. Our device gets rid of the risk of injury inherent to today's VR technology. But this is only half of what makes our device so amazing. The true breakthrough is that our technology now allows us not only to affect sensations, but to change memory and belief as well." Once again he paused for a reaction from the audience. They were mostly silent, thinking it over. Callah frowned. She had to admit to herself that even she couldn't help having some misgivings about that. Altering a person's memories -- that could be misused pretty easily.

The announcer seemed to give up on getting his audience to respond. "Well, this seems to be a very... *composed*... group. But you are right, there is no reason to be alarmed. No mind-control schemes for us, at least not the bad kind. Think of the device simply as an extremely *convincing* VR scenario. When you are inside it, you will forget that it is not real. The device will suppress your memories of your real life and replace them with memories that fit the world we've created for you. We've put a great deal of work and detail into it. Now, it would be impossible, of course, for us to create a full life-history of memories for each one of you, and the memories would not fit your personality. Instead of trying to make up memories for you, the device simply superimposes our reality on your memory of yours. It stimulates your own brain to create memories to fit the world we've created. So, if you have a memory of, say, riding a roller

coaster when you were little and being frightened, the device and your mind will work together to create a memory that will make sense in the game context, such as you trying to ride a wild horse, and being frightened.

Now, it may seem extreme, this alteration of memories, but don't worry; the effect lasts only as long as the helmet is worn. The moment it is removed, all the subject's true memories return, completely unaffected. The subject can remember the false memories that were produced by the helmet, but they know which ones are real. The effect on memory is what allows our new technology to be so useful. Since you will have been provided with a whole lifetime of experiences, all set in the created world, and since you will remember nothing that *doesn't* fit in with the world, you'll have no reason to question anything that happens. No one disbelieves in the reality of their own lives. You'll react exactly as if everything that happens is real." He folded his hands on the lectern and looked out over his audience. They were starting to seem more excited now. Callah knew she was. This was the kind of thing she'd been waiting to hear, but better than she'd hoped. She'd been afraid that the whole thing would turn out to be just a lot of hype, but just maybe it would be all that the announcer was promising.

He continued. "I know that nearly all of you are experienced VR players. Haven't you ever wondered what it would be like, in your games, if you didn't know they weren't real? How much more exciting the experience would be? Well, now you have the opportunity to find that out. In a few minutes you will put on those helmets and enter an entirely fictional world, one full of adventure, danger, and excitement. It will also contain magical creatures, all the staples of a fantasy world. We decided that this would be the best demonstration of our new technology when we release it to the public. Anyone could make a game set in the real world convincing. What will make this demonstration truly impressive is that we are going to convince all of you to believe in a world that is completely unlike our own."

“I’ll give you a short description of the InvEnture now, but don’t worry, I won’t spoil the surprise. Of course, you won’t remember what I say once you’ve started.” He smiled. “The InvEnture will be set in a pseudo-medieval world. There are no guns or any advanced technology, but we have changed a few things to make it more interesting. Magic exists in our game world, though few of you players will be able to use it directly. Only a few of the computer-animated characters will use it. We haven’t quite worked out all the details of how using magic would feel, and besides, we have to save something for later releases.” That was disappointing. Callah would have loved to get to play with magic. “There will also be fantastic creatures inhabiting the world with you, some good, some bad, some in between.” That sounded good. “We’ve made another small change that will make the world a little less authentic to its historical period, but that will improve game play. The sexes are considered to be equal in the game world, and you won’t have to worry about class restrictions either. Since we have the same number of female participants as males, it would be ridiculous of us to expect half of our playing team to sit at home and knit. And it wouldn’t be very realistic if we had to start you all out as nobles or wealthy merchant’s children to allow you the mobility to do what you’ll need to do. Therefore, the society you will encounter once you begin to play will be a more progressive medievalism than a strictly historical one.” Callah was happy with that. It wouldn’t be much of a game if she had to sit locked away in a tower the whole time.

He paused and took another sip of water. “Now, I realize that when something like this happens in science fiction movies, the people who are in such scenarios are usually killed in real life if they die in the game. It’s always assumed that their minds somehow cause the injuries in the game to become real outside the game. However, I can assure you that this doesn’t happen, and you certainly will be at no risk while using our new technology. First off, sometimes in real life you can believe that you’ve injured yourself more severely than you really have. That doesn’t make it true. Secondly, even if it did, your bodies do not receive input from your mind while you are in the game world,

as I said before. You will be perfectly safe. Even if you die in the game, you will simply wake up at the end of the simulation, none the worse for wear."

The man seemed to relax then, as though he'd finally gotten past the hard part. He stepped back from the lectern and rubbed his hands together briskly. "Now, is everyone ready to begin? We'll be running a short calibration program -- it will be an unusual, but not at all painful, experience. Don't be disturbed. It isn't supposed to make any sense for a while. Now the technicians will help you put on your helmets."

The questioners from before filed into the room and began to place helmets over people's heads. Callah reclined in her seat, watching the workers hovering over the filled couches, attaching wires quietly and efficiently, like roller-coaster attendants checking safety straps. She saw her technician from before over on the other side of the room, awkwardly trying to help a girl with frizzy hair put on her helmet. A different man approached her and slipped the contoured plastic helmet over her head. Several thick wires protruded from the back of it. Inside it was lined with a smooth white surface that started to warm up slightly after it was fastened on. She could feel it shifting to conform itself to the shape of her skull. It was smart plastic, not a new invention. This was a new use of it, though; Callah thought it was pretty neat. It flattened her hair down tight, so that it stuck to her face after coming out from under the helmet. She pulled it back behind her ears, and felt the helmet shift again to adjust. It was a little uncomfortable. Some of her hair was being pulled just a little, and the top of her head itched. She guessed a little discomfort would be worth it if this adventure was as good as it was built up to be.

The speaker's voice continued. "Now, everyone close your eyes and relax your muscles. The less input to your senses while your neural patterns are analyzed, the easier it will be for the computer to mesh with your nervous system."

Callah did as she was told, sinking back into the soft couch, trying to keep her excitement from tightening her muscles. It was hard, because she was almost shivering with anticipation. The room was very quiet, the thick carpet and padded walls muffling

the sounds of nervous breathing. She waited, trying to feel what the computer might be doing.

Suddenly, the darkness behind her eyes was filled with bright swirls of color and light -- her eyes flew open automatically, but that seemed to make no difference. Shapes formed, burst, and split before her vision, coalescing and shattering without pattern or reason. Sounds of every type assaulted her ears, a cacophony of musical notes, voices, and sounds of every description. Half of a humming purple bicycle spun slowly past and collided with an orange-spotted top hat which emitted the opening notes of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. They then exploded in a burst of green sparkles with the sound of running water. Her other senses joined in - smells of baking bread, new grass, burnt tires, and paper assaulted her nose simultaneously. Conflicting tastes made her tongue curl. She had never thought to combine grape juice and chocolate, and now she knew why. Her skin tingled as the computer experimented with sending nerve impulses to her muscles. Her nose was burning hot, her ears icy cold, and her wrists itchy. It was too much; overloaded with sensations, she began to get dizzy. Callah tried again to open her eyes, but could not tell whether or not she had succeeded. She could no longer feel the couch under her. She felt as though she was falling, spinning, out of control. She tried to grab hold of the couch's sides but couldn't feel them.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the surreal experience was over. She was lying, shaking, on her couch in the long room, looking again at the podium, where the smiling announcer stood. She turned her head and saw Mark on the couch beside her, breathing hard, and looking as pale as she felt. Timothy, sweating on the other side of her, muttered, "Was that supposed to happen?" The coordinator's expression, however, was untroubled.

"Good, now did everyone experience that? Raise your hand if nothing happened." No hands went up. "Perfect. Now that the computer can encode and decipher your nervous impulses, it can provide any stimulus and simulate any action. As was explained

in the briefing, your actual bodies will not move, since no impulses reach your muscles. So you can be as active as you like without fear of real injury. You will feel any injury you incur in the game world with complete accuracy, however, which you may regret before the InvEnture is over.

“Now, there is one last test to make sure that everyone is hooked up correctly. Is anyone experiencing any dizziness or having trouble with your vision or hearing? Anything seem strange or wrong?” No one responded. “Good. Then you will be surprised when I tell you that this is a simulation, set up to test for errors. Even I myself am just an encoded piece of software, since my real-life counterpart did not put on a helmet and enter the simulation as you did. However, I find myself very lifelike.”

A murmur of shock ran through the room and the coordinator grinned triumphantly. Callah felt her mouth drop open. She looked around the room in wonder, then down at her hand -- the skin was textured just as in life -- she could see every pore. No dream or VR scenario was ever that detailed. She put her hand up to her headset and felt the smoothness of the plastic under her fingers. It just wasn't possible, this had to be real! She looked at the announcer in doubt, expecting to see him admit that he was making a joke. But he only smiled again at the skeptical expressions around the room.

“Can't believe it's not real, can you? That is what makes our technology so truly striking. I can tell you it's all computerized, and you won't truly believe it. Well, I will just have to prove it, then, won't I? Like so.”

He made a sweeping gesture overhead with both hands, and the ceiling faded away like mist. Sunlight filtered down, and the thunderstruck group found itself under a leafy forest canopy, huge ridged tree trunks stretching up and away to form a columned cathedral, green and silent. Huge, bright butterflies fluttered everywhere. Callah found herself sitting on rich, damp earth. She took a handful of it. It stuck moistly to her fingers and got beneath her nails. She looked up and saw the announcer, still behind his mundane

wooden lectern, which now stood on a great gnarled root. He looked incongruous in his neat business suit, surrounded by a rain forest. Her mind reeled.

Instantly the VR room was back around her, a couch under her, and the coordinator standing in front. She wondered whether they were back in the real world, or just in the simulation of it, and realized that she couldn't tell. This was great!

The coordinator said, "That's enough theatrics for now. You see that the programming is powerful indeed. And we haven't even started the real thing yet. No memories have been produced for you. When that happens, you stop questioning the reality of the programming entirely, even if you were not entirely convinced by this one. Now, all of you, lie back in your couches again, close your eyes, and prepare to embark on the most exciting adventure of your lives."

She was more than ready. Callah leaned back, and her mind wandered away.

Chapter Three: In Which Bad News Is Received

Callah opened her eyes and looked up at the ceiling. She had been having the strangest dream, but she couldn't quite remember it. She had been about to do something... No, it was gone. Dismissing it from her mind, she jumped out of bed, then stopped, feeling disoriented. She was in her own bedroom, so why did she feel like she was in a strange place? It must be the dream, lingering. The sun was streaming in through the window, falling across the bed with its carved headboard. Her grandfather had carved it himself for her twelfth birthday, when she'd outgrown her old trundle-bed. She stood and stared at it for a few moments, then shook herself out of her confusion. She couldn't stand around in her room all morning, she had things to get done.

Unfortunately, if the sun was already high enough to shine in her window, it meant she'd overslept. She dressed quickly and ducked under the blanket that was hung up as a door leading into the kitchen. Her mother was already up, hanging the large pot to simmer over the fireplace. From the smell it was chicken soup for lunch again. As Callah came in her mother turned and smiled at her.

She said, "I decided to let you sleep a little more. You worked hard yesterday helping your father mend the fence."

Callah blinked at her, then remembered. Of course, she'd spent the whole day repairing the damage to the fence around the cow's pasture, after a storm had brought down some large tree branches on it. She must still be tired. For a moment she hadn't been able to remember yesterday at all.

She replied, "Oh... Thank you. I guess I'd better get started on my chores then. I'm going into town as soon as I'm finished. We wanted to get an extra practice session in today. I'll be back by supper." She cut herself a chunk of crumbly yellow cheese from the wheel on the table, and went outside munching it.

Callah walked out to the barn, waving to her father. He'd already milked their two cows, and was out in the wheat field inspecting the crop. She was surprised at how easily she fell into the routine of her chores, and then wondered why she was surprised. She did this every day. Today she wanted to get her work over with, though, so she could make it to the early practice session they'd scheduled. She quickly dumped grain into the cow's feed trough, where they were waiting impatiently. She left them chewing and took some more grain in a small pail to the chicken coop. After feeding them, she checked their nests, and found that none of them had laid. They hadn't been producing many eggs lately, and Callah and her parents had not been able to figure out why. Shaking her head, she let the cows out to pasture and then went back to the house.

"No eggs today," she told her mother.

"I don't know what is the matter with those chickens! And your father said the cows gave even less milk today. I swear we'll go hungry in the middle of summer if this keeps up."

There was plenty of food for now, though. Callah wrapped some bread and cheese in a cloth, kissed her mother quickly, and started up the road to town.

Her family's little cottage and farm was about half a mile from the village. Most mornings, she went into town to practice swordplay with the rest of the young people in the village. Some of the older villagers grumbled, saying the practice was a foolish waste of time, corrupting young minds and keeping them from their chores. Her parents didn't mind, though, and the mayor thought that it was a good idea for everyone to know how to defend themselves. Just to be on the safe side. You never knew, after all.

Callah enjoyed the sessions. Her best friend Mark's father had been a guardsman in the army, and had fought in many battles before he retired. He'd taken a sword wound to his right leg that had never healed quite right, making him walk with a painful limp. Now he instructed the village youngsters in weaponry, and although he could not fight as well anymore and was often gruff to his pupils, they all admired him and did their best to

impress him. A quick nod of approval from him was worth more than profuse praise from anyone else, and his frown was devastating. Mark worked especially hard to please him. He was showing great progress in swordplay, and generally managed to beat all the others in the practice matches. Callah was a fair hand with a sword, but nothing spectacular. Her area of expertise was the bow. She never missed the target anymore, and it was seldom that she hit outside of the inner circle.

Callah realized that she was going over the facts of her life in her own mind, as though she were reciting her life history to herself. She was also staring at the familiar woods lining the road as if she had never seen them before. It was a beautiful day, and the clear morning sun made everything look fresh, but she had seen it hundreds of times, every time she went into town. Shaking her head, she decided that the unaccustomed extra sleep had made her groggy. Served her right for being lazy, she supposed.

After a few minutes of walking she came to the town and found her friends already gathered in the square. There was an area of hard-packed dirt just in front of the town gathering hall that they used for their practice space. Timothy waved at her, and Mark smiled. The other three barely glanced at her; they looked to be involved in a serious discussion.

"Good morning, Callah," Mark said. "I don't know if we'll be practicing today."

"Why not, what's going on?"

"Well, a group of soldiers came into town this morning. They've been in the meeting house for an hour. The mayor's with them, and my father, too. I think he knew them from when he was in the army. But you'll never guess who's with them! I never knew my father knew the-- Look, they're all coming out now!"

Callah and the rest of the group turned to stare at the strangers emerging from the front door of the meeting house. Visitors of any kind were rare in the small town and were a welcome diversion from the sometimes dull routine of everyday life. There were four soldiers, lieutenants by their shoulder loops, two men and two women. The leader

was a tall, imposing man with steel-grey hair who was still deep in discussion with the nervous-looking mayor, whose fat, red face was shiny with sweat. His large chins shook as he nodded his head at the taller man's every word. The stranger had a single gold cord looped over his shoulder, marking him as a general. Since there was only one general in the country, the last Callah had heard, it had to be the leader of all Terania's armies, General Vallorn himself! He was revered as much as the king himself, and even more famous for his exploits in the last war with Gorotal. What could he be doing in their tiny, backwoods village?

Mark's father limped next to the mayor and the general. His face was even more grim than usual, yet he seemed not at all uncomfortable in the presence of such an august personage. The other soldiers followed a few steps behind their commander. They all wore swords, another rare sight in this part of the country, where there had been no fighting for years, aside from the occasional tavern brawl. They seemed more similar than their uniforms could account for. Watching them, Callah realized that it was the way they moved - wasting no energy, yet seeming completely alert and ready to act in an instant. They moved with the air of someone who relies on his grace and skill to preserve his life, and looking at Mark's father, she saw that he had the same look, despite his limp. She had never noticed it before.

The mayor waddled over to the large bell hung just outside the meeting house and began to ring it energetically to summon the townsfolk, his shiny face growing even redder from the exertion. Doors opened up and down the square as the villagers hurried out to answer the summons. Even the families in the outlying farms could hear the town bell, and would come to see what was going on. Callah knew her parents would be putting down their work in the fields and making their way to the square as well. The bell was never rung except in emergencies. The last time had been last winter, when a small pack of starving wolves had come right into the town. All they had done was dig through some rubbish heaps, but the mayor had been terrified.

The visitors waited, arms crossed impassively, as the townspeople gathered around, murmuring speculatively among themselves. Callah exchanged glances with her friends. Mark looked about to burst from pride at seeing his father actually standing with the general; Alissa was whispering intensely to Nicholas.

"Why do you think he's here?" she was saying. "Do you think he's touring the country? Maybe he's rallying support for the king."

"Maybe," Nicholas replied. "The king has plenty of support already, though. Unless he has some new plan, something big, there'd be no reason for it. And if General Vallorn himself is here, you can be sure it's for something important."

Finally the last of the farmers from the more distant homes arrived, panting and looking around for the emergency. Callah waved to her parents as they slipped into the back of the crowd. The General looked over the assembled villagers, then stepped forward and raised his hands for silence. The murmur of conversation died away, and the whole town waited to hear what had brought him so far from his duties at court.

"Fellow countrymen," General Vallorn began, "for those of you who don't recognize me, I am General Vallorn. I have come bearing disastrous news. The Gorotal, whom we defeated in battle twenty years ago, have built up their forces again, in secret, and are massing for an attack on Terania!" A dead silence fell. Callah's mind spun. Had she heard right? He didn't give her time to gather her thoughts.

"Already there have been raids on our borders. Within the year, there will be full-scale war. The Gorotal scourge has come again." There were cries of dismay from the townsfolk. This was the worst news they could have imagined, coming with no warning.

"Even worse, they have begun again to use the power of the Black Disk." Callah swallowed hard. The news kept getting worse. She squinted up at the blue sunny sky. It was lying, somehow. A day that brought such news as this should be grey.

"As you know, our conflict two decades ago was not a total victory, though we did drive back the enemy; our forces were too exhausted to follow them into their own territory. We did manage to hurt them badly enough that they could not attack us again for all these years, but the cost was horrific. Our army was nearly as badly decimated as that of our enemies. That is why we did not do what we set out to do: we failed to destroy the Black Disk, the evil power that fueled the Gorotal and sapped our strength. Most of you remember the wave of sickness and famine that swept over our land when the Gorotal invaded last time." He looked around at the crowd. Most of the adults were nodding their heads grimly; they remembered the hardship, and the deaths. The general surveyed Callah and her friends, at the front of the crowd, addressing his next words to them.

"You're too young to remember the war or its aftermath, but some of you are missing relatives who died in that awful time."

Callah saw Mark nod his head slightly. His mother had died shortly after his birth, weakened by poor food and sickness. She was lucky to have both parents; most families in the village had had at least one member either killed in the war itself, or dead in the hungry times that accompanied it.

The General continued, still speaking to the group of young people. "Now we face another onslaught. Already wells are drying up, cows no longer give milk, crops are withering in the fields. The influence of the Black Disk reaches out and blights all that we try to do here, all that is good. It is stronger than last time, I am afraid. It is happening more quickly. And our spies report that the Gorotal have again summoned unnatural monsters, Dark Ones, to do their fighting for them. Some of your parents fought them, and know that they are formidable. Great trolls, with their stony strength, and goblins, with their cunning ways and poisoned blades, form the greatest part of the Gorotal army that is forming just north of the Border Mountains, with humans commanding them, and

even darker creatures to serve as spies and assassins." The General's hands were clenched at his sides, his voice a relentless tide of dread.

"Our standing army has not recovered from the last war. Nor has our country. We have less than half the fighting strength that we had when the fighting last began, and even our full undamaged strength was barely enough to save us then. We cannot hope to defeat them by numbers. Yet we must resist the Gorotal and their foul allies, or they will sweep into our land, bringing pestilence, starvation, and violent death. They will raze our homes, burn our fields, and enslave those of us that they don't slaughter, to serve them and to be tormented for their amusement."

Vallorn's commanding voice had held the crowd frozen. But the things he was saying were too horrible to be heard in silence. Behind Callah someone was sobbing. Beside her, Alissa shouted out, "What will we do?"

General Vallorn stood silent for a minute, his shoulders bowed, letting the breathless silence stretch out around him. Then he raised his head. He seemed suddenly tired and old. Callah knew he was the general of the country's army twenty years ago, so he must be old, but he had not seemed so until now. He said, "I'm not telling you that it is hopeless. We still have a chance. A small one."

There was complete silence. Callah and the rest of the crowd waited, holding their breaths, to hear what he would say.

"We can't hope to defeat the Zertran's army. We don't have time to build up a bigger army of our own to match theirs, that would take years. And our best magic-users cannot stop the effects of the Black Disk. The best they can do is dampen its power for a short time. What we truly need is something that can combat the Black Disk. Only one power is strong enough to do that. The Black Disk's counterpart, the White Disk. It would allow us to counteract the corruption that attacks our land, and summon warriors of light to fill our ranks."

An uneasy murmur went through the crowd. The Disks were an ancient legend, Callah remembered: they had once been a single disk of shimmering grey, or so the story went. No one knew what it was made of. It was said to be as hard and heavy as stone, but unbreakable, and smooth as crystal. The Balancers had made it at the beginning of the age of man. They were older than men and dwelled apart from them, and no one had seen any one of them for centuries. They had always existed; they were as old as the world. Creatures made of light, they built no cities, but lived in great shadowy caverns in the earth where no man could find them. They grew no crops, and no one could say whether they died or lived forever, for they all looked the same to humans. But they made things, creations of magic and beauty, and long ago men had dealings with them. They gained many powers from the Balancers, which sometimes brought great good to the world of man, and sometimes ruin. All that they would say of themselves, back in the times when they would speak with humans, was that they were creatures of Balance, and that they worked to maintain the balance between good and evil in the world. Thus humans named them the Balancers, for they would give no name that they called themselves.

The Disk was the last thing they had given to mankind. They sent it to a man named Agraven, who was then the Emperor of most of the world, sending no explanation with it. After that they were simply never seen again. They did not come to the places where humans had met with them, and no one could find their caves, or even the places where the cave-openings had been.

Agraven found that the Disk would do many great and many terrible things. The stories said that he used it to make the crops of his land grow thick and bountiful, so that none of his people went hungry. He banished all sickness, so that his subjects became tall, strong, and they sung his praises in the streets and fields. He went to war against the few small countries that did not yet pay him homage, bringing a tide of sickness with him, and striking down their warriors with fire and poison, and they cursed his name. He used the power for good or for evil, as he saw fit, but one day it was stolen from him.

The legend said that a great sorceress from a nation that Agraven had conquered concealed herself by her arts and the darkness of night and took the Disk from where it lay on a silken pillow on Agraven's throne. She bore it far away to her tower, where she remained for nine days and nights. Agraven's men pursued her and besieged her in her tower, but they could not get in. Each night fell voices could be heard murmuring and shouting at the top of the tower, and each day the one small window shone like a second sun. On the dawn of the tenth day, the sorceress appeared at the window, bearing something white in her right hand and something black in her left. She said, "I have sundered the Disk. No man should hold both Good and Evil in his hands. From now on the Balance will not rest in only one man's hands." She cast down both halves from her window, and fell back into her tower-room, dead.

Agraven's men went and lifted the two disks from the ground, and saw that no dirt had touched them. One was a pearly white, shining softly with hints of many colors; it was the White Disk. The other, an oily black that seemed to crawl and wriggle at the corners of vision, was the Black Disk. Agraven's men did not bring either disk back to their Emperor. They quarreled over the Disks, and fought, and some of them fled one way, others another, and no one knew who had the halves of the Disk. Agraven searched for them, but his power was broken and his Empire soon fragmented. There was war and confusion for many years, and the story was unclear what went on for a long time. Both Disks were fought for and many lives were lost. For more than a generation the land was washed in war and chaos. But after a time the Disks seemed to disappear. It seemed likely that they were hidden away to end the fighting. The wars came slowly to an end. Nations reformed, and life eventually became peaceful.

It would have been better if both had remained hidden forever, but this was not to be. The White Disk had not been found. No one knew where it was, or even if it still existed. But just a century or so ago, the Black Disk had reemerged. No one knew where or how it was found, because its bearer had kept it secret for who knew how long, until he

had mastered its power. Using its influence, he subtly wormed his way into the rulership of one of the nations that had emerged from the ancient conflicts, Gorotal. For a while, he was content to rule over that land, but eventually he grew greedy for more power. He began to summon Dark Ones to fill the ranks of his army, creatures from some black pit that was never meant to open to the world of sky and sunlight. At one time the Gorotal had been an ordinary race of people, no more warlike or cruel than any other, but the influence of the Black Disk changed them. After years under its sway, the Gorotal had become as monstrous as the creatures their master summoned to serve beside them. Now they lived only to inflict pain and gain power. They began a campaign of conquest. In time some of the neighboring countries were cowed into paying tribute and accepting the Zertran's over-lordship. These countries were not exactly invaded, but their citizens were conscripted into the Gorotal army, and their property was seized at a whim. The nations that resisted were overwhelmed, one by one, and their people were slain without mercy, until the ground was soaked with blood. The few surviving refugees told horrific stories of their fertile lands being twisted into a blackened wasteland where nothing could grow. Terania was the last resisting country, and the only one that had ever defeated the Gorotal in battle. They had been a great and powerful nation when the Gorotal first attacked, but their strength was broken when they drove back the Gorotal. The General was right, they could not hope to win another such war.

Callah saw that Nicholas was scowling. He muttered, "The White Disk has been lost for centuries. How can we possibly hope to find it before the Gorotal kill us all?" Callah was inclined to agree with him. General Vallorn was a military man, not one she would expect to go off chasing legends. The country's plight must be even more desperate than the General had made it sound for him to grasp at such a frail straw.

Vallorn continued. "It sounds like a slim hope indeed, I know. We have been searching for the White Disk since the start of the last war, but we have never had even a hint of its whereabouts. Things have changed now. Miliana the Seer, the most powerful

magic-user in our land, had a great vision at midnight on this last Year's End, when we heard the first rumors that the Gorotal were stirring again. The vision was too powerful, and its coming destroyed her, but before she died she was able to give us clues that we think may lead us to the White Disk. We believe now that we will be able to find it, and soon enough to save Terania."

The General squared his shoulders, seeming to shake off decades. "Therefore, I am asking for volunteers to join me in a quest. A quest for the White Disk, lost all these centuries. A quest into danger, for we believe the Disk lies in enemy lands. A quest which may not succeed, but which is our only hope. If we fail we will all die, and everything good that we have ever known will perish with us. And yet, if we do not try, the result will be the same. So I ask you, citizens of Terania, who will join me in this quest?"

The crowd flew into an uproar. Shouts of, "I will!" and "For Terania!" echoed off the wall of the small town meeting house. Callah shouted along with the rest. Alissa was jumping up and down. The General had confronted them with their worst fears, and had seemed to be telling them there was no way out, and then he had offered them hope again. Right then, everyone in the crowd was ready to follow him into the heart of Gorotal itself.

Vallorn let the cheering go on for several minutes, then raised his hands to quiet them once more. The townsfolk quickly fell silent, anxious to hear what the General would say next.

"I thank you." He smiled. His severe face did not look like it wore that expression often; it was as though a beam of light had broken through stormy clouds. "You are a credit to this country of ours. We are the last refuge of light in these dark days, and with people like you, I can see why we are still strong in spite of everything. You give me hope that we can indeed beat back this darkness."

He paused. "The force I am leading in search of the White Disk will be a small one. We cannot hope to best the Gorotal in a pitched battle in any case, so we will have

to rely on swift travel and try to avoid their notice. We have a plan for doing this, but we cannot hide a full army. We will be posting the borders with the rest of our forces, to try to hold back the Gorotal as long as we can, in hopes that the Disk will be found. Some of you will be better placed there. Either post holds its full share of honor. And danger. I do not doubt the bravery of any one of you, but take a moment now to think things over. Go home, eat, talk with your families. We will be going on a desperate mission, and few, if any of us, may return. We need each person to be fully committed, or they will be nothing but a liability. I know you will all decide rightly. Remember that you hold our fates in your hands."

He began to turn away. "Meet me back here with your decisions at sunset." He turned and went back into the meeting house, walking slowly, as if he carried a great burden. His guards and the mayor followed him.

Mark's father limped towards them, his mouth tight and his head held high. He did not look at any of them as he spoke, but stared over their heads. "The General wishes me to ask all of you to consider joining his group, to go in search of the White Disk. He believes your training will make you a valuable addition." He turned away abruptly and went into the meeting house. Callah turned to Mark. He had a funny look on his face. He rubbed at his nose, turning his face away.

"Guess he's worried about sending us into danger," she said. She was guessing that Mark was hurt by his father's abrupt manner.

Mark took a deep breath and nodded. "Yes, but he thinks enough of us to recommend us to the General!" A big smile broke across his face. In spite of everything, Callah couldn't help but smile too. All Mark could ever think about was making his father proud of him. She remembered one time a few years ago when he had finished out the training period after taking a bad fall and hurting his arm, just so his father wouldn't frown at him. They found out afterwards that his wrist was broken.

Callah's smile didn't last long. She looked around at the others. Timothy looked pale, and Alissa just looked excited. She would be happy about a thunderstorm because the wind was exhilarating, and never notice that it had blown her roof off. Nicholas was frowning. Jacob's expression was impossible to read, but then Jacob was always like that. They all stared at each other, everyone waiting to hear what the others thought.

"He wants *us* to go with him," said Callah slowly. It was hard to think that they were so suddenly being called to do something so important. General Vallorn, the most venerated man in the entire country, had come to *their* tiny village, and as if that weren't enough, he had asked *them*, Callah herself and her own friends, to help him. It would have been the most exciting thing that had ever happened to her if it weren't for the news of the Gorotal. If General Vallorn was everyone's hero, the Gorotal and their dark allies were everyone's bogeyman, and now the heroes and the monsters were both real, it seemed. She remembered that Timothy's mother had told him when he was a child that the goblins would come for him if he didn't do all his chores. He'd had nightmares after that for a long time. Even now he'd usually find some excuse to leave when the adults started talking about the creatures they'd faced in the war.

"This is a lot to take in at once, isn't it?" Mark spoke slowly. His grin had faded too. Callah guessed that he was having the same conflict that she was. The honor and excitement of being asked to defend their home by a national hero was warring with the horror at the re-emergence of the worst enemy they had ever known, and fear at being the only ones who would stand between that evil and their land. Mark probably wasn't afraid the way she was, though. She'd never seen him afraid of anything but his father's frown.

Timothy licked his lips. "The Gorotal -- strong again? I... never thought that would happen. This is terrible."

He looked very pale still. His mother hadn't thought that he might someday have to face goblins when she had told her son those stories. Callah felt sorry for him. "Well,

we beat them last time, right? We can beat them again." Timothy looked grateful, but Nicholas laughed harshly.

"Last time nearly destroyed us. We're still not recovered, you know. And last time Vallorn was young and in his prime. Today he looked...old."

Mark turned to Nicholas. "You aren't saying you think we'll lose, are you? We have to win! We'll die otherwise."

"So maybe we'll die--" Nicholas was interrupted by Alissa.

"Don't be silly, of course we'll win! We've been training forever. Anyway, it has to be worth something. And just think, we'll finally be able to get out of this tiny, sleepy, *boring* town! I'm in, definitely, I wouldn't miss it for the world."

Nicholas replied, "Actually, I agree with you. I don't think we'll automatically win, but this will be an opportunity, as you say. Someone who's willing to try hard will be able to make a name for themselves in this war. If we do manage to win, we'll come back heroes."

Timothy looked nervous again. "If we do come back. I guess it's good to have a chance to help our country and all, but what about my parents? They depend on me, you know. They're not young anymore, and they need me to help run the farm."

Nicholas scoffed. "You can send them your military pay, if you're that worried. Besides, I don't think you're all that vital. You've got plenty of time to come and practice with us every day, after all." He grinned, a little mockingly.

"Very funny! I'm serious here, I--"

"Serious, huh? That never happened before."

Alissa jumped in before Timothy could explode. "Hey, you think we'll get paid? How much do you think they'll pay us? I bet they promise to pay us but never do; armies never have any money for their soldiers. My mother says that she never saw a penny from when she fought in the last war."

Timothy said, "It's not that I don't want to help, it's just that I'm not a very good fighter. You all know I can never beat any of you. I might just be in the way."

Jacob cleared his throat. Everyone looked at him. "None of this really matters, you know. When you think about it, it's very simple. It's our duty to join Vallorn and fight. Whether we win or not, whether we're skilled enough or not, whether we get paid or come back heroes. We have to do our best to protect our land. If we don't, one morning we may see the Gorotal march into this square and destroy everything. If we lose, at least we know that we tried our best."

Callah smiled at him. He always did that, ignoring everything but the essentials of a question. "It sounds a lot easier when you say it like that. I guess there's nothing else we can do, when you think of it."

Mark nodded. "I'll go. There's definitely nothing else *I* could do. My father would disown me for a coward." He smiled. Callah thought he was actually happy to do this, to be a hero for his father.

Nicholas smiled too. "I would be a fool to miss this opportunity."

Jacob didn't say anything. He'd already made his point.

Timothy looked around at all of them, his expression uncertain. "Well, I guess I'll go too. If my parents say they can spare me." After saying that he seemed to cheer up. "I can't let all of you go out and steal all the glory, after all. I have to get my share, or else I wouldn't be allowed to be seen in your company."

Allissa clapped him on the back. "It's settled then, we'll all go together. We'll show the Gorotal a thing or two!"

There was more to it than that, of course. They had to tell their parents of their decisions, first of all. They split up to do that. Callah's parents nodded somberly when she told them she'd decided to join the General. They said they were proud of her, and that they'd expected no less. She could tell they hated to let her go, though. Her mother

cried a little, but she fought off her tears by bustling around the small house, packing up nearly everything she came across, and giving Callah all kinds of advice. Most of it was to keep her feet dry and wear warm clothes, but she surprised her by following an admonition to make sure she took time to eat regularly by the pronouncement, "Now remember, dear, goblins are very timid. If you can make them think you're very strong they're likely to run off, even if they've got you outnumbered. Killing one of them might work. It's even better if you just maim one, though, because then it starts screaming and frightens the others." Callah could only stare at her. She had never seen that side of her mother before.

When she met back with the others, they looked as wrung-out by the good-byes as she felt. All of them were carrying packs, most of them overstuffed like Callah's own. Allissa looked near tears, but she was trying valiantly to disguise it by wondering excitedly whether they'd get to talk with the General, and whether the king would be there, and what the mountains looked like. Timothy, on the contrary, looked more cheerful than he had before. Callah asked him what his parents had said. "Will they let you go?"

"They said it would be a relief to have me out of the house. Said I eat too much anyway, that it would be much easier without me underfoot all the time." He smiled broadly. Callah didn't think she would have wanted her parents to say that. He had a strange family. But as long as he was happy, she supposed it was okay.

Callah and her friends stood and looked at each other then, no one knowing what to say. None of them had been very far out of the village before, and now they were going not only into the wider world, but to war. They stood quietly. Callah was glad that all her friends would be with her, whatever they were going to have to face.

The sun was slipping below the horizon. The sunset was lovely, all gentle pastel shades of purple and pink. It seemed so peaceful, it was hard to believe that they were under attack by their old enemy again.

Vallorn came out of the meeting house. The mayor followed behind him, looking disgruntled. Vallorn walked over to them. Callah's heart beat faster. He was going to talk to them.

"Your good mayor wanted to have a speech and a sending-off for you, but I told him that I was in a hurry. I hope you don't mind." They shook their heads mutely. Callah hoped she wasn't as goggle-eyed as Timothy, but suspected that she was. Up close, she could see the deep wrinkles which scarred the General's face. His eyes were grey. His mouth was held tightly in a hard, straight line, but it was not cruel. A long white scar ran across his forehead over his right eye. He wasn't as tall as Callah had thought, only a few inches taller than her.

Vallorn said, "Thank you for volunteering. Are you offering your services to me directly, or do you wish to join the border guard?"

There was a silence, then Mark said, "I want to be part of your force, sir!"

Nicholas spoke at the same time. "I won't stay behind and wait with a border guard."

Jacob said, "I believe we all wish to go with you, my lord." Callah nodded. Guarding the border, waiting for hordes of monsters to pour across it, not knowing if the other group had failed or not, didn't appeal to her. She wanted to be where she could actually do some good. She glanced sideways at Timothy. He was pale, his freckles standing out, but he was nodding with determination.

Alissa said, her voice unusually quiet, "We'll all go together."

The General regarded them gravely, but the corners of his mouth had turned up just a bit. "Good. I'm glad to hear it. I was assured that you would answer as you have. You will all be fine additions to my army. I know I can rely on you to fight for your homes with all your strength. Are you all ready to come with me now? We can be back at the army's encampment before midnight."

Callah's heart was beating hard. She swallowed. Her voice came out sounding hoarse. "I'm ready."

General Vallorn nodded briefly. He looked them over. Callah forced herself not to flinch away from his gaze. His eyes were fierce and determined, and she knew he was sizing her up, as though she was a sword blade to be checked for balance and heft. She tried to stand up straighter. When he looked over at Timothy, she realized she was holding her breath and tried to resume breathing without making any noise.

Vallorn finished looking them over. His face didn't give any clues as to whether he thought them worthy weapons or not. He crossed his arms.

"Very well then. If you are ready, follow me now." He turned his back and began to stride down the hard-packed dirt road leading out of town. His guards turned and followed. One of them looked over at Callah and the others. He had a vicious scar right across his mouth.

"Say goodbye to this little town. It won't look the same when you come back. If you ever do." He grinned lopsidedly. Callah heard Timothy swallow beside her. She couldn't quite manage a smile, but she squeezed his shoulder.

"We'll come back," she said softly as they started to walk. She tried to make it true by saying it. "We'll come back, and we'll be heroes, just wait." Then she could smile. Timothy managed a weak little grin in response. They all set out together, trying to keep up with Vallorn's long stride, as the setting sun drew its light down below the horizon behind them, and shadows crept in to fill up the spaces it left.

Chapter Four: In Which the Quest Begins

The next morning when Callah woke up, she was surprised that she knew where she was. The night before she had expected to be confused when she woke up, since she'd never stayed in a place like this before. She was sharing a two-person tent of rough brown canvas with Alissa. The quartermaster, who was in charge of supplies, had tossed each of them a bedroll and every second person a tent when they arrived late in the evening, and pointed them to an empty spot to set up camp. The encampment was a jumble of tents staked out in no perceptible order. Young people were darting in every direction, most of them looking completely lost. Older soldiers stalked among them, swearing at the new recruit's various idiocies. The quartermaster shooed Callah and her friends away when they stood looking at him, hoping for a little more guidance. He told them they'd start training at sunrise, and that they should be up, dressed, and ready to begin by then. They had set up their tents all facing each other, and sat outside for a while, wondering together at the great change in their lives.

Now Callah was glad she was used to being up before dawn. She rolled out of her bedroll and poked her head out of the tent flap. The sky was a pale, washed-out blue, the sun nothing but a glow on the horizon. Grey figures hurried through the still air. Most of the camp seemed to be already stirring. She ducked her head back into the tent and dressed quickly, then shook Alissa, who moaned and tried to pull the blanket over her head. Alissa, as the daughter of the village blacksmith, didn't have any cows that needed to be milked at dawn every day.

"Come on, time to get up! I'm going out to get a drink; I'll bring a cup back for you. If you're still asleep, it's going in your face!" Callah slid out of the tent, excited. She knew they were going into danger, but she was looking forward to the training beforehand. She'd finally get to see how well Mark's father had taught them. Mark and Timothy were in the tent next to hers. Mark was crawling out of the tent flap slowly, his

hair sticking up in all directions. She grinned at him, and he responded by yawning hugely.

Just then a horn blew a sharp staccato series of notes. Callah jumped, but Mark only smiled. "Guess that's the wake-up call. Glad we were already awake."

By this time the traffic around their tents had arranged itself into a steady stream of recruits all heading in one direction. Callah's other friends staggered out of their tents in response to the trumpet, in various states of panic and undress. Nicholas somehow managed to emerge from his tent with perfect aplomb, completely dressed and unruffled. Jacob came after him, looking a little less calm, but ready, at least. Timothy tumbled out of his tent looking panicked, still buttoning up his shirt. They all looked at Callah's tent, waiting for Alissa to come out. A muffled voice called from inside. "What's going on? Are we being attacked?"

Everyone had to laugh. Alissa enjoyed life, but she didn't always keep up with it. Callah called, "I told you to get up! Come on, you're going to be late! The rest of us are all ready!"

They were answered by a wail, and the tent shook as Alissa tried to throw on her clothes. She burst out of the tent with her red hair flying, a blanket following her. Somehow she'd gotten it tucked down the back of her shirt. She stood there as the others laughed at her, and stomped her foot at them. She opened her mouth, but whatever tirade would have been forthcoming was interrupted as a passing soldier waved an arm at them.

"Hurry up, fresh meat! If you're not lined up and ready in half a moment, you'll get no breakfast!" He hurried on.

"No breakfast!" Timothy sprang into motion; this was a serious threat. The others followed him, joining the thinning stream of soldiers and recruits.

The stream of people led to a wide field where the grass was trampled and brown. The army was assembling there. There were large squares of soldiers all in rows, standing

at attention. The squares themselves were arranged in a larger rectangle. She and her friends stood huddled at the edge of the field, wondering what to do.

“Think we should just join a group?” Timothy asked in a low voice.

“I think you’re only supposed to join the one you’re assigned to,” Callah whispered back.

“But we haven’t been assigned, have we? Did I miss that part?”

Just then, a stocky man with a sergeant’s white loop on his shoulder marched up to them. “You new recruits? Get in line up front.” He pointed past the rest of the army, to a ragged line of very nervous-looking young people who were shifting around, staring at all the soldiers lining up in front of them, looking very much like country peasants who’d never been more than twenty miles away from home. Callah didn’t want to look so nervous and lost, even if it was how she was feeling.

Quietly, she said to the others as they started walking through the assembled ranks toward the front, “Hey, let’s try not to look as scared as the rest of them, okay?”

“Hey, that’s right,” Timothy said. “Remember who we are, we’ve had training.” He puffed out his chest and took the lead, motioning the others to fall in behind him. He muttered back at them, under his breath. “All right, you lot, look alive! Shoulders back, chins up, hut, two, hut, two.”

As Callah straightened her shoulders, she realized how tense her whole body was, and tried to loosen up. It was silly to be scared. These were her allies, after all. Being scared would come later, when they faced the enemy. She tossed her head back and strode behind Timothy, trying to look confident. She could see the soldiers they passed lifting their eyebrows and smiling. She did feel a little silly, but she figured it was better than looking as terrified as the other new recruits. Their group fell in beside the rest and turned to face the army. A sea of unfamiliar faces looked back at them. All those eyes... There were more people looking at her now than had ever lived in her village. It was unnerving. Callah realized she was starting to cringe again, and made herself straighten

back up. She summoned up her most haughty expression. Looking proud made it a little easier to keep her spine straight. Timothy was stretched to his full height beside her, and Mark, on her other side, was looking out over the heads of the crowd, looking as though he hadn't even noticed that there was anyone there. Out of the corner of her eye, Callah could see the new recruits looking at her and her friends. One by one they started to straighten up as well, and stop their fidgeting.

Then General Vallorn came walking out of the ranks toward the line. He was smiling slightly. He stopped in front of them, his hands clasped behind him.

"Well, that was an interesting display." Callah winced inwardly. They must have offended him, acting like they were trained when they didn't know anything. But he nodded slowly, and said, "All it takes is someone self-assured, someone who looks like they know what they are doing."

Maybe he wasn't angry after all. She hoped. The General abruptly snapped his head toward her. She froze.

"You, recruit, do I look like I know what I am doing?"

She blinked. "Yes, sir."

"Glad you think so. Would you follow me into battle? You- would you?" He turned on Timothy.

"Y-yes! Sir!" Poor Timothy nodded rapidly.

"Good."

Vallorn began to pace up and down the line, glaring at the recruits. Callah noticed again the way he moved. It wasn't as though he was dancing -- she couldn't imagine him doing anything so light-hearted. It was as though he knew exactly where he was, and where everything around him was. If one of them drew a weapon, she thought, he would know it almost before it happened. She watched him as he walked up and down.

He said thoughtfully, stopping in front of one uncertain-looking young man, "Everyone wants guidance. It removes our responsibility. It is much harder to make your

own decisions and mistakes.” Then, in a sharper tone that made the man jump visibly, he said, “Well, guidance you shall have! You’ve joined up. We thank you. Now you’ll be trained, exercised, and hammered into shape until you are fighters instead of farmers! Isn’t that right, men?” He turned towards the army. A long resounding roar of affirmation, like a storm wind in a pine forest, resounded from a hundred throats.

He turned back towards the recruits again. “Now, we have developed a little custom, an initiation into our ranks, as it were. You’ll be issued weapons and given training later on, as well as being assigned to squads and divisions. We’re not going to bother with all that now. First, we’re going to have a little getting-to-know-you-routine.” He turned back to the army. “Would you like to get to know your new fighting-mates?” he shouted. There was another resounding roar of agreement, this one filled with laughter. Callah didn’t like the sound of this. “All right, then! A line has been drawn at either end of this field. Recruits, all you have to do is cross *that* line!” He pointed over the heads of the army. “Make sure you don’t get dragged across the one behind you. Now, try not to hurt your new friends!” He yelled the last part at the army. “Go ahead, get to know each other!” He stepped back, and with cries of glee and a earth-shaking rumble, the entire army broke ranks and charged at the small wavering line of recruits.

Someone at the other end of the line gave a terrified squeak and ran for the line behind them. Everyone else stood frozen, watching the great flood of soldiers bearing down on them. Callah had no idea what to do.

She heard Mark gasp beside her, “Quick, form a wedge!” He jumped in front of her, and Nicholas stepped up next to him. That pulled her attention away from the rumbling charge ahead, and she realized that they were going to try to fight back. Against the whole army. She began to giggle; this just wasn’t going to work, but what difference did it make? She stepped up to Mark’s left shoulder and braced herself. She saw Jacob backing up Nicholas, and felt Timothy come into place behind her. Alissa was behind Jacob.

Mark shouted, "Ready? Okay, charge!" And they started to run towards the solid line of human muscle that was bearing down on them. One of the other recruits stepped in behind Jacob. Alissa had been there, but now she shifted to the middle. She was so tiny, she would be swept off to the line in a heartbeat. Some of the other recruits ran forward in a half-hearted way. Others just stood and waited for the inevitable collision.

Callah was still laughing when they met their fellow soldiers. She yelled, "Pleased to meet you!" and then they collided. Mark lowered his shoulder, plowing through the first rank. Then a very large man with huge arms and a bristling black beard crashed against Mark with his arms open, and caught him up in a great bear hug, sweeping him off the ground. Callah tried to tackle the man, but someone else grabbed her arm. She pulled free and threw herself against Mark's opponent. She couldn't budge him, but then from the back of the group Alissa darted in. Ducking low, she wrapped her arms and legs around the huge soldier's legs. He wobbled, and when Callah gave him a good hard shove, he toppled over backward, bringing several people down with him. Alissa jumped up, planting her small foot right in the middle of the big man's chest as she ran over him. She scrambled under the grasping hands of another soldier and disappeared into the melee, twisting and turning. Alissa could be handy after all, Callah thought, yanking Mark to his feet as more soldiers jumped them from every direction.

Callah struggled hard, her back to Mark's, but she was soon dragged away from him and surrounded. She found herself being lifted high into the air by a dozen hands. Frustrated, she tried to fling her weight to one side, hoping they'd lose their grip, but more hands just came up to steady her. She hadn't expected to last long, anyway. She craned her head to see the others. She thought she could vaguely see Mark in a writhing tangle of limbs on the ground. She caught sight of Timothy being lifted off his feet by two female soldiers who had grabbed him by the arms, and heard them giggling as they dragged him toward the line. Then she was over the line herself, a bit disappointed that

she hadn't lasted longer. She found herself deposited unceremoniously on the ground, and sat there panting, looking at the chaos.

After a moment Jacob was flung down beside her, still struggling. She grinned at him. "Were we supposed to have any chance at all?" He shrugged, touching his lip where it was split and bleeding. Nicholas looked really angry as he was dragged up soon after, still struggling with several soldiers latched onto every limb. They forced him back, step by step, and when he finally crossed the line, he stood with his fists clenched, glaring defiantly. Mark came next. As the others watched, they could see a twisting knot of men inching towards them. It looked like he was putting up a good fight. But eventually the knot dragged itself across the line, and broke apart to show Mark lying on his back on the grass. Callah crawled over to him. His nose was bleeding and he was holding one eye closed. It looked red and puffy.

"Are you okay?"

He grinned at her, putting his hand gingerly over his eye. "Never better. Some brawl. Just think if everyone got to know each other this way."

The older soldiers gathered around them, grinning. The huge bearded man, who also seemed to have acquired a black eye, sauntered over to Mark and dragged him back to his feet one-handed.

"Pleased ta meet ya!" he bellowed, and grasped Mark's hand. Callah thought she heard crunching noises. Mark winced. "You put up a good fight! I could tell ya had some training. Too bad ya were outnumbered, eh?" He slapped Mark on the back, nearly knocking him back over again.

A great bellow stopped all the talking instantly. General Vallorn shouted. "Very good! Now, attention!" Everyone turned towards him. He was standing on the other side of their line. Callah never knew that a person could shout that loudly. Maybe that was a requirement for generals.

“You new recruits are probably wondering why I asked you to do this. The old ones already know. I put you up against insurmountable odds, not to humiliate you, but to demonstrate to you what we are up against, and to see how you would react to it. Most of you didn’t know what to do. You panicked, or tried to fight alone, and you lost. Don’t be ashamed. Your training, which will start soon, will teach you how to fight together, effectively. This time it seems that we have a group of trained fighters among us, however. There are usually a few of you in each set of recruits, but this group appears to have trained together.”

Callah looked around at her friends. Everyone was looking at them. “They are an example of what we’re going to teach all of you to do. They reacted quickly to danger, banded together, and fought as one. They came closer to success than any other group has since we began forming this army.” Callah caught the startled looks from her friends. She hadn’t thought they had done very well at all. The most they had done was hold their ground for a few seconds. They hadn’t even made any progress forward at all. “While it is true that the majority of their group didn’t get very far, they sent one small fighter ahead of them. She was able to slip past many of our older soldiers.” Some of the older soldiers looked embarrassed. “And she nearly made it to the other line before someone caught her. Good job. All of you, welcome. Now, it’s time for breakfast!”

Everyone laughed and cheered. The older soldiers swept Callah and her friends off with them towards the mess tent, where a disorderly line was starting to form. Callah had a warm sense of being accepted by the group, not a stranger any more. Callah looked over at Alissa, who was being jostled along not far from her. She grinned.

“I didn’t know you got so far ahead,” Callah said. “So, did we plan that or did it just happen?”

“I saw an opening and figured I’d give it a shot,” she shrugged. “I guess I kind of deserted the rest of you, but I didn’t feel like I could help much.”

“We didn’t even noticed, we were too busy getting dragged off.” Callah smiled. “Good thinking though. At least one of us got a little further. I just hope the General doesn’t expect us all to be tactical geniuses or something now.”

Timothy squirmed through the crowd and found a place next to them. “Makes you feel good about us, huh? I guess all that daily training was good for something.”

“We’ll find out how good later on. I heard we start training after breakfast, and it goes all day long. The guy I was talking to said that this day will be the longest one of our lives, since they’re going to try to determine what we already know and what we’re good at. Better fuel up at breakfast.”

When Callah finally got back to her tent that night, it was dark, and she was worn out. Maybe not more tired than she’d ever been; there had been that time when they’d cleared the north field, and had to dig up so many rocks and stumps. But this was still a significant level of exhaustion, she decided. Her shoulders ached from swinging weapons, and her arms felt like lead. Her legs were shaking. All she wanted to do was sleep.

They’d started with sword practice. The practice ground was formed by a rectangular hole among the tents where the grass was trampled down. In a temporary camp like this they couldn’t have a good flat practice area of beaten dirt, but at least it wasn’t dusty.

They’d been given wooden practice swords, and they all went through some basic attacks and parries in front of the swordmaster, a slim, graceful man who seemed to dance, his sword darting around him as if it moved on its own. Some of the recruits had never even seen a sword before, and the swordmaster quickly sent them off to learn the basics from a sergeant. Callah’s group had had years of training, and they were surprised to see how far ahead of the others they were, as the swordmaster took them through more difficult and complicated maneuvers. When they kept up with him all the way through the routine, he observed, “You’ve all been trained by the same person, haven’t you?”

When they told him Mark's father's name, his eyes lit up. "Ah, I knew he'd gone off to live in some small village, but he never was one to give up the sword. He taught me, back in the last war. This should be interesting."

He had a practice match with every recruit who'd shown any knowledge of swordplay, to get a better feel for their capabilities. The sword had never been Timothy and Jacob's favorite weapon, and the swordmaster disarmed them after a few moments, as he had done with most of the other recruits. Callah and Nicholas put up a little more of a fight, but this man truly was a master of the sword. He moved too quickly and fluidly, and his sword soon darted past hers, stopping within inches of her throat. She felt clumsy and slow compared to him, and stepped back to stand with the others.

Alissa fought next. She'd chosen a very light thin-bladed sword and moved like lightning with it, twisting and feinting. The swordmaster took a bit longer to defeat her, and afterward he complimented her on her technique, but said she needed to let herself flow with the motion of the sword and follow through more with her attacks. She cocked her head to the side, then nodded and stepped back. That had always been what Mark's father told her in their training sessions.

Then it was Mark's turn. He and the swordmaster started out slowly, testing each other, and then suddenly erupted with a flurry of blows that Callah could barely follow. One would be driven back over the trampled grass, then the other. Once Timothy had to jump out of Mark's way as he threw himself backward to avoid a whistling swing of his opponent's sword. Another time the swordmaster barely managed to block one of Mark's blows. He grinned, and shouted, "You are his son! I've missed the sparring matches, all these years!"

The fight went on for at least five minutes, until finally the older man caught Mark's wrist with a stinging blow from the flat of his wooden blade. Mark dropped his sword, and the two stood panting, watching each other. The swordmaster grinned and clasped Mark's hand. "Ah, I want to keep you around! You've got to go finish the rest

of the weapons practices, but I want you to meet me again tomorrow. I may have you help me with training. I haven't found anyone with your talent since I met your father."

Callah watched Mark as they left the field. He was glowing with pride, walking tall. "So, did you know your dad was famous?"

"Not really. I knew he'd been an officer in the war, but I didn't expect this many people to remember him. I never realized he was such a great swordsman. But then, I never saw any one else but us use a sword."

The rest of the day followed similar lines. They used battle-axes, maces, knives, and even had a hand-to-hand session. Callah was relieved when they came to archery. Finally she'd have a chance to do something she was really good at. She was a little disappointed that they only shot at short-range targets, but she hit them dead center every time, even though she was already exhausted. After all the fighting evaluations, they had lessons on how to march, run, and fight in formation, which took up the entire afternoon until past sunset. Overall, the day hadn't been too bad. She hadn't been completely inept in most things, except the pole-arms practice. They'd never practiced with those. Now Callah was on her way back to her tent. She was hungry, but she needed sleep more than food.

As she limped along, she realized that she wasn't sure where her tent was. She stopped in the darkness, looking around among the tents at the scattered campfires. Then she heard Mark calling her.

"Callah! We're over here! Where are you going?" Gratefully she trudged that way. He was the only one there -- the others were probably already in their tents.

"Great day, huh? I never knew training would be this much fun; I can't believe how well we're doing." He talked in a steady stream, waving his hands excitedly. It was a little unusual for him, and Callah knew he was in his element. This was what his father had groomed him for, she supposed. She was too tired to keep her mind on what he was

saying, though. She plopped down on the ground next to her tent and started pulling off her boots.

“...moving out tomorrow, heading for the mountains.” Callah lifted her head, realizing she’d almost fallen asleep sitting up. She was holding one boot in her hand, the other was still on her foot.

“Hmm?” She stifled a yawn. “Sorry, what were you saying?”

He smiled down at her. “You seem tired.”

“Oh, I wonder why.”

“I’m fine, just a little sore.” He didn’t even look tired; his eyes were shining with enjoyment. She made a face at him, tiredly, and pulled off her other boot. “I was just saying that we were the last set of villages that the General is visiting to recruit. Tomorrow we’ll be heading north, towards the mountains.”

That was chilling news. Going north would bring them closer to the Gorotal, closer to fighting. She’d thought they’d have more training before they had to worry about that. But right now, even the prospect of battle wasn’t enough to keep her awake. She crawled into her tent, ignoring Mark’s teasing comments on how easily she tired, and immediately fell asleep on top of her blankets. No dreams reached her in the depths of her exhausted sleep.

Chapter Five: In Which Callah Gets into Trouble

The next two weeks were not easy, but they were exciting, as Callah and her friends improved their skills under their trainers' instruction. They drilled, and trained, and practiced, and marched, and dropped into their bedrolls every night exhausted. Their army was on the move, heading towards the mountains in the north and the border. This part of the country was rolling grassland, lightly dotted by small trees and criss-crossed by numerous small streams. It had once been prime grazing land, but it had been hard hit by the Gorotal when they invaded two decades. Most of the people living here had fled; the rest had been wiped out. Now it was deserted: only a few ragged groups of cattle, gone wild, roamed it now. Callah's home was one of the northernmost villages of any size. Occasionally, as they marched in a long, winding train with their supply wagons, they would pass the ruins of other small towns. There wasn't much to distinguish these places from the rest of the landscape, just a few scorched timbers, or the remnants of stone walls. The Gorotal, when they invaded, had destroyed everything. Even towns that had already been deserted had been burned by the invading hordes, pulled apart just for fun. Callah could tell when they were passing one of these places, because a ripple of quiet would travel back down the column, each person falling silent as they saw the ruins. They knew that their own homes might look like this someday, if they didn't prevent it.

The new recruits were being rapidly whipped into shape. The instructors were especially hard on the newest members of the army, since there was so little time left to train them. They would reach the border soon, and they couldn't afford to stop and train everyone properly. So they drilled every morning before breakfast and every afternoon after they stopped marching, and were instructed during meals on the habits, strengths, and weaknesses of the Dark Ones. Timothy said they did that during meals to make the trainees lose their appetites, so that the supplies would last longer. He was right about the

effect of the stories; the descriptions weren't pretty. Trolls and goblins were the most common and best-known of the Dark Ones, but all of their kind were unwholesome, enjoying destruction and pain for its own sake. The things they did to any human they could catch alone were stomach-turning to hear. They only obeyed their Gorotal masters out of fear, and the power the Black Disk held over them.

While they traveled they learned strategy from the master of tactics, Sir Torvald. He marched along in the middle of a crowd of young soldiers, lecturing in a loud voice. It was a kind of mobile, dusty classroom. Callah was always amazed his voice didn't give out, but it never did. He talked about battles of the past, ones he'd been in himself and ones times long ago. He analyzed the details of what happened in each battle, and what caused the winning side to win. He shouted out sudden questions, singling out one soldier from the crowd without turning to look at them. "Mark, why was Fenrick the Brave unwise to divide his forces in the Battle of the Divided Pass?" or "Sarah, why was it significant that only half of Siema's troops were on horseback?" The unlucky victim was expected to shout the answer back right away, or endure a sarcastic comment from the instructor. Torvald had a sharp tongue. Still, people fought for a place near him. He was not only a tactical genius, making them see how battles unfolded and how they could be won, but he was a captivating storyteller. They could see the battles he described taking place in their minds, and under his telling they took on a certain deadly and precise beauty. Timothy began to show an aptitude for military strategy that none of them, especially he himself, had expected. He stuck by Torvald's side for the whole march each day, drinking in his words, reliving ancient campaigns. Timothy told Callah one night that he had never felt as good about himself as when he could correctly answer one of Torvald's questions.

She knew what he meant. They were all finding strengths within themselves. Mark helped the swordmaster train the less accomplished students, and he swore he'd almost defeated the older man one day in a sparring match. The others had discovered that they were already trained as well as any of the old soldiers. They'd never realized

how much of a head start Mark's father's instruction had given them, and now they were proud of themselves. If they ever started to get too proud, though, Torvald would catch them off guard and put them in their places with a simple tactical question. Callah was surprised one day to realize, as she crawled exhausted into her tent, that she'd never been happier. They were heading for danger and darkness, but now, while they were still in the sunlight, they had never been happier.

Callah wasn't thinking too much about the future, content to let it arrive in its own time. She was preparing for it as best she could; she knew there was no need to let it eat away at her. The rest of the army seemed to feel the same. They were lighthearted and energetic, singing around their small fires at night or bellowing loud marching tunes during the day. Their officers and trainers were more serious, but still relaxed. The only one who never seemed to smile or relax was the General. Callah didn't see him often, but sometimes she would catch sight of him pacing in front of his tent or conferring with one of the many messengers who carried word of the army's progress back to the king, or who brought news back from the border. His face was always grim, but there was no bad news as yet, from what Callah had heard. There had been a few small forays reported from the border, but no large offensives yet.

As they drew closer to the border, the rolling grassland turned into large rounded hills, and trees were more frequent. The army could see the mountains on the horizon now, dark even in the sunlight. The border guard was posted on this side of them, patrolling the thick pine and oak forest that covered the hills at the mountains' feet. Most of the army would stop at the border to help guard it; only Vallorn's special force would go onward. They'd leave the slow supply wagons behind, and travel light and fast in search of the White Disk. Then things would really get interesting, not to mention dangerous.

They reached the main encampment of guards at the border after fourteen days of marching across the grassland, the trees growing thicker as they pressed forward until it

was a true forest. The rolling hills were higher here, building slowly up to mountain-size. The guards posted there in the hills were glad to see them, for they brought supplies, news, and, most importantly, new soldiers. They would still be spread far too thin, but they were glad for the extra help. They were building watchtowers all along the hilltops. If they saw an invasion force coming in time, they might be able to pull all their far-flung scouts together to meet it as a cohesive force, but they really needed a thousand more men just to watch the border effectively. Callah was glad she wasn't staying.

They didn't rest long at the border. Vallorn called everyone together the night they arrived, and gave a short address. He told them that either position, staying behind to guard the border or marching with his select force in search of the White Disk, had its own honor, and that whichever choice they made, they'd still be outnumbered by the enemy. It was a disheartening speech, not at all the thing to keep up an army's spirits, but Callah figured he knew what he was doing. He wanted to get rid of anyone who'd be discouraged too easily or frightened away. No one who'd volunteered was a coward, but most of the soldiers stayed at the border. Searching for the long-lost Disk just seemed too far-fetched to most of them, Callah guessed. Vallorn thanked everyone who'd decided to stay, and sent them off with the other border guards to learn what their duties would be. Then he assembled his personal force.

There were only about one hundred men and women who had decided to join him. Nearly all of the people who'd trained Callah and her friends were going with Vallorn, but most of the newer recruits had decided that they weren't well-trained enough yet for such a desperate venture. The force was mainly older soldiers who remembered the last war, with a few young people, eager to prove themselves, mixed in.

There was also a small group of Healers from the palace. They were magic-users, and had kept apart during the march to the border. They stayed close together, speaking among themselves or staring up at the trees and sky with dreamy eyes. Callah had heard stories about how strange magic-users could be. The magic made them half-crazy, and

they were very rare. She'd never met one before -- no one in her village had ever shown signs of being able to do anything with magic. Nearly everyone who started to show magical talent was sent to the royal palace as a child, to be trained to serve the king. Callah didn't know how they were discovered; she supposed that they must start acting strangely, doing magical... things... whatever those looked like.

It was just as well that her village had never had one. They didn't look capable of doing a day's work in a farming village. Most of them were pale and languid, seeming to pay only a small part of their attention to the world around them. The rest of the time they stared off into space. But Callah guessed it was good to have some along with them. She'd heard they could heal nearly any injury. There were stories of magic healers reattaching severed limbs and even chopped-off heads, but Callah suspected that those were just the embellishments of enthusiastic storytellers. She hoped she wouldn't have to find out the hard way how good their healing skills really were.

They left the next morning at dawn, and traveled for three days, winding up through the growing hills towards the mountains. The land began to be more broken as they traveled: some hillsides ended in steep rocky cliffs that they had to circle around. The General marched in the lead each day, leading them through the thickening forest, heading for the place that Milania the Seer had described just before her death. Callah didn't know any more than that about where they were going. The details were kept secret in case of spies, though Callah couldn't imagine any of her countrymen becoming spies for the Gorotal, betraying their own homes and people to serve their bloodthirsty enemies.

Messengers still traveled between Vallorn's force and the border, one each day. They'd continue to bring news and take back word of Vallorn's progress until they reached the place that Milania had named, wherever it was. Callah didn't know what they were looking for, of course. She couldn't tell if the General knew exactly where he was going, or if he was just hoping that if he walked long enough he'd find something.

On the evening of the third day, after the tents were set up, a scout returned out of the dusk, out of breath, bearing word that she had spotted Gorotal in the area. Word spread through the camp, person to person, that Vallorn had ordered all campfires extinguished. Everyone was to be silent, and make no light. Meanwhile, more scouts were being sent out. Jacob went with them. He had shown talent for moving silently. Hours passed with no more word. Callah and her friends crouched in the middle of their tents, watching each other's eyes in the darkness, hardly daring to whisper.

The moon was high when a whispering soldier brought word that the first sighting had been only three Gorotal scouts, humans, camped a few miles away. More waiting. The second wave of scouts came back, each one bringing word of a new group of Gorotal sighted. The Gorotal were finally moving in towards Terania.

Finally Jacob returned. He'd been sent south, back the way they'd come, and had found a band of stone trolls camped in a stand of oak, right along the path their messengers had been following. He described the trolls to the others, after he made his report to the General, as dark hulking shapes in the dusk, their campfire throwing more shadows than light on their rocky faces. It was a long time before Callah could get to sleep. The night seemed very dark.

They walked very quietly the next day until noon, sending scouts out constantly to keep track of the Gorotal, so that they didn't blunder into them. Then the word came back that Vallorn had ordered a halt. They had reached their destination. Callah looked around. The place looked no different than the woods they'd been walking through all day. The trees were tall and still, the leaves underfoot undisturbed. There was a heavy tangle of green brambles on the left that they'd been skirting for the last half-mile. That was all. She wondered what made this place special.

Everyone gathered around Vallorn and his advisors. Callah and her friends wove their way to the front, where Vallorn stood before the bramble bushes. The brambles

were intertwined and thick with thorns and green leaves. He turned around and faced his intent army, who were all waiting for an explanation.

He said, "Beyond this hedge of thorns lies a deep and narrow crevasse. It is secret, protected by these thorns and by a greater force. We are not sure what power it is that has concealed the valley; we only know that the power holds the White Disk, and that our quest calls us to pass the barriers it has set up. And so we shall. Milania could not tell us much about how to do so. She said, 'Simply ask.' So I shall."

The General turned back towards the brambles. Lifting his hands towards the green plants, he said, in a curiously humble voice. "We are men and women of Terania, seeking the White Disk in a time of dire need. May we enter your domain?"

The leaves rustled without wind; then the brambles curled and writhed and pulled apart, leaving a clear dirt passage a few feet wide. Callah felt her mouth drop open as a cool wind gusted out of the gap, stirring the leaves around her feet and rustling in the branches overhead. A scent she could not name came with it, but it was gone in an instant. The breeze died too. Callah stared down the narrow path, but it twisted and was quickly lost among the brambles; she couldn't see where it led.

Vallorn bowed his head to the brambles in thanks. Then he turned, triumph in his face. Callah saw that he hadn't been sure that it would work. The bravery of the man, to let an army watch him talk to a bunch of plants, not knowing if he'd be made a fool of or not. He said, "Good. You and you, scout ahead." He pointed at Jacob and the woman who'd found the first Gorotal the night before. They nodded swiftly and slipped out of sight between the brambles. Callah hoped they'd be safe -- who knew what was waiting in there? At the same time she envied them; they would be the first ones to see whatever the mysterious hidden valley held. They might even find the White Disk!

"Now, we still have one messenger from the border with us. Viscount Rotiart, I believe," Vallorn continued, turning towards the current messenger. This one was a short, slim, dapper man, dressed in expensive riding leathers. He was a petty noble, and was

constantly sniffing disdainfully as he looked around. He had stayed close by the General and the other officers that night, not mixing with the soldiers. Nicholas had been called to serve in his tent, bringing the Viscount food and running errands, and had come back in a foul mood, refusing to talk to anyone. Right now the Viscount was staring avidly at the divided brambles. Vallorn continued, "You will need to report back to the border and the King now. Tell them of our success, and warn them that the Gorotal have begun to move in their direction."

He began to turn away, but the messenger asked haughtily, "And my escort, my lord?"

Vallorn looked back at him evenly. "Ah, yes. The woods have grown more dangerous since you made your way to us. You two, take him back past the Gorotal forces, then hurry back here." He pointed to Callah and Mark. Callah's heart jumped; it was the first time she'd been given a real duty. She hadn't been sent out scouting, since she tended to step on twigs and get hung up on trailing branches. She saw Mark salute beside her, and hurriedly followed suit.

Vallorn looked at them sternly. "Be careful. If you are captured by the Gorotal, they will torture you. They will almost certainly break you in the end, no matter how brave you may be. And we do not know what dark magics they may have to aid them in extracting information from prisoners. If they find this passage, all is lost. Remember this, and do not allow yourselves to be captured."

Ice in her heart, Callah nodded solemnly. The General returned her nod curtly and turned to put the rest of the army in order, ignoring the sputtering Viscount. Callah and Mark accompanied him to his tent, where he kept them waiting as he got his things together and fussed over his horse's bridle. Finally, he was ready. They left the rest of the army, who were already beginning to file through the small bramble-opening, and set off back the way they'd come, south along the messenger-route to the border.

The excitement of being singled out by the General faded quickly, as the messenger-noble began a seemingly endless stream of complaints. Callah and Mark were on foot, and the messenger kept kicking his horse into a trot, forcing them to run to keep up. They only got him to slow down by reminding him of the Gorotal activity in the area, and took turns going on ahead, as much to get away from him as to scout. He complained about how his honor was demeaned by being sent out with two common soldiers as escort, how he was being put in danger with Gorotal around every tree trunk, how vital he was to the King and how he couldn't understand how he could have been so foolish as to send him away from court at this vital time. And he constantly whined about how slow they were going. That seemed to bother him the most. He said the woods were barbaric, the living conditions in the army's camp intolerable, and the conversation entirely lacking. Indeed it was, for neither Mark nor Callah had the breath or inclination to respond to his complaints. Luckily, it was only a mile or two, or they might have killed him and saved the Gorotal the trouble.

Callah was almost glad when Mark came back to warn them they'd reached the place where Jacob had found the trolls last night. They were still there. Either the Gorotal were moving slowly or the trolls were being lazy. There seemed to be no humans with them, no one to keep them in line, so they had very likely decided not to exert themselves overmuch. Trolls didn't like to move any more than they had to, unless there was something for them to kill. Easy prey, however, would motivate them very quickly, as the recruits had learned over breakfast one day a few weeks ago, during one of their lessons.

They had stopped in a narrow, steep-sided valley. The trolls were camped about half a mile ahead of them. Mark said, "We'll climb up this hill to the right and pass by them on the far side of the ridge, so they'll have no chance of spotting us."

Callah nodded, but the Viscount said loudly, "Go all the way up that? Look how steep it is! My horse couldn't possibly go up that, and besides, it's a waste of time. Why don't you just kill them so I can pass safely? They are our enemies, after all."

Mark and Callah stared at him. Mark said, trying to be polite, "Sir... There are six full-grown, armed stone trolls up ahead, and there are only two of us." He didn't bother to count the useless messenger. "We have no chance of defeating them all. It's much safer to go around."

"Much longer, you mean. I can't be expected to waste my life wandering around in these blasted woods, can I? Are you afraid to face them?" He snorted disdainfully. "Some soldier you are." Mark's jaw clenched, but he said nothing.

Callah stepped up. "Sir, it isn't about fear, but it's foolhardy to charge into a battle you can't win and don't need to fight. Going around saves trouble in the long run."

He sneered at her. "Why join the army if you run from every little scuffle? I truly cannot believe the General sent me out with such a pair of lily-livered, ill-bred children. But all this worrying of yours is beside the point. I outrank you. You will follow my orders, or I'll have you hanged. Now go up there and remove those filthy creatures from my path."

They stared at him incredulously for a moment, then went on up the path until they were out of sight. Then they held a quick whispered conference. Obviously, they couldn't throw themselves senselessly into combat. But perhaps if they both went up and scouted things out, they could find a way to keep the horrible messenger happy without getting killed in the process.

They sneaked with utmost care towards the troll camp, dropping to the ground and crawling when they got close. Callah found that she could move more quietly than she had thought, when it meant her life not to. They lay close together under a bush and peered at the enemy. The trolls had built a huge campfire, and were roasting something over it that Callah didn't want to look at too closely. The trolls themselves were slumped

in lumpy heaps around the clearing they'd camped in, occasionally tossing sticks at one another or snarling a few words in their gravelly language. They were bigger than Callah had expected, even though she knew they could be twice as tall as a man. They were the size of boulders.

Mark whispered, "Well, I don't know. Of course we can't fight them. Who does that guy think he is? He's obviously never seen combat."

"He doesn't have much grasp of reality, that's for sure." Callah breathed back. "I have an idea, though. I'll draw them off, and you get His Self-Importance, the Honorable Viscount, through."

"How about I draw them off, and you get him through?"

She glared at him. "No. My idea. My job. Don't get any stupid ideas that you're being gallant, either. You know I can do this just as well as you."

"Be careful then," he warned, giving in. "You know how strong they are."

Callah was surprised, pleased. She'd expected more of a fight, but it looked like he had confidence in her. "I know they're strong," she said. "But I also know how slow they are. It won't be hard to outrun them." She rose cautiously from the ground and crept silently away from Mark and the courtier, circling the small clearing until she was about a fourth of the way around. Luckily, she managed to avoid any sticks or clumps of noisy leaves. Then she started to walk nonchalantly towards the troll's camp. She made no effort to be quiet now, and even the stupid trolls could not fail to hear the leaves crunching with every step. They rose from their seats around the campfire and stood hungrily looking in her direction.

Overplaying her role as a careless soldier, Callah was whistling a bit as she walked directly into the troll-filled clearing. The whistle died on her lips as she stared at the trolls, gasping in mock terror as she pretended to notice them for the first time. They stared back at her stupidly. With a scream of fright, she whirled and ran back into the trees...slowly. The trolls stool open-mouthed, then recognition of an enemy soldier finally

penetrated their stone skulls, and roaring with glee, they gave chase. The sight of them in motion was enough to make Callah want to flee in earnest: the enormous, stony-skinned creatures shook the ground as they ran, looking as unstoppable as falling boulders. Anything in their path, even mid-sized trees, was instantly smashed out of the way, not even slowing the monsters. They were terrifying, but fortunately they were not really very fast. Their thick legs were clumsy, and they had a lot of weight to carry around. Callah made herself keep jogging easily, letting the trolls keep her in sight so they wouldn't stop chasing her. It was no problem. She'd draw them off for a mile or two and then lose them.

Mark watched her disappear into the trees, then slipped back to where the Viscount waited, fuming inside at the man's stubbornness that had put Callah at risk.

"Come, sir," he said curtly. "We can pass now."

"Ha, so you found a backbone after all?" the man jeered. "I didn't hear any sounds of fighting. What did you do, feed your friend to them as a bribe?"

The man was intolerable. Mark wanted to knock him off his high horse, literally and figuratively. Through clenched teeth, he said, "No, sir. Callah is leading them off by letting them chase her. She'll draw them out of range so that I can get you past them safely."

The Viscount snorted. "Well, I do think you might have consulted me before going off with your friend and deciding what to do on your own. I am your superior, after all. You would do well to remember that." He glared at Mark as though the young soldier had summoned up the trolls just to annoy him. Mark didn't bother to reply, knowing nothing he could say would appease the man; he simply turned and started walking, forcing the noble to follow or be left behind. Just a little longer, and he would have the idiot out of danger and no longer have to listen to him. He tried not to worry

about Callah; she knew what she was doing -- really, there was no reason for her to have any trouble evading the slow trolls.

Meanwhile, Callah ran through the trees, keeping the trolls in sight and occasionally throwing mock-terrified glances over her shoulder. She scrambled up the steep hill on the east side of the valley; that would slow the trolls down a little, so she wouldn't have to worry about getting out of breath. At the top the ground flattened out for a while, instead of dropping off into another valley. She zigzagged a little and let the trolls crash after her until she was sure that she had given Mark enough time to get past, then put on a burst of speed and easily left the disgruntled trolls behind. She heard them yell in frustrated bloodlust as she disappeared. She continued to run, laughing to herself. That had been fun; there had been no chance of them catching her. Trolls were formidable fighters with the strength of the stone they sprang from. Very few humans could hope to defeat one in a direct fight, but they sacrificed speed for size. They were far behind now -- she would circle around and go back to camp, and tell her friends about all this.

Suddenly, her left foot came down on empty air. She pitched forward, unable to catch herself, and hit the ground so hard that her breath came out in a loud "whoof!" An unbearable pain shot up her leg; her foot was twisted at a right angle to her leg by the hole she had stepped in. It was probably an animal burrow of some kind, hidden by leaves, and it had caught her foot, holding it in place while the rest of her body fell. For a moment she could not move. Then she caught her breath a little and tried to raise herself, digging her fingers into the soft forest dirt. Another jab of pain, like a long needle in her leg. She fell back, unable to suppress a cry of pain. She gritted her teeth and tried again, making it to her knees this time. The pain was incredible, radiating up her leg in sharp bursts with every movement, but she had to keep going. The trolls would not give up their quarry easily.

She staggered to her good foot and pulled the other out of the hole, sitting down heavily again. She touched it gingerly and yanked her hand away -- definitely broken. She had no way to splint it, not before the trolls caught up with her. There was a large branch nearby that looked sturdy. She dragged herself over. It looked about the right length and only had a few smaller branches sticking out from it. It would have to do. She picked it up and braced herself on it as she dragged herself back up. She told herself the pain wasn't so bad now, as she clung to it, gasping. She could keep going. Using the branch as a crutch, she hobbled forward. The trolls would have slowed when they could no longer see her ahead in the trees, but they would keep coming until they were absolutely sure she was gone. She tried to speed up, half hopping and breathing in hoarse gasps; even the slow trolls were much faster than she now was. "That's what I get for counting my chickens, I guess," she muttered.

Callah could hear the creatures now, crashing through the forest behind her. She stumbled forward in a haze of pain. Every forward lurch brought another stab of agony from her ankle. She did not even notice that the branch was rubbing the skin off her palms as she tried to use it in place of her useless leg. Soon they would be able to see her. Sweat and tears ran down her face. She wasn't afraid, though, not really. Just angry at herself, and embarrassed. After telling Mark how easy it would be, she was stupid enough to step in a stupid hole and break her ankle. What a ridiculous way to die.

Callah did not notice that the trees were thinning out until she came out of the forest onto a flat expanse of bare rock ended abruptly about forty feet away, dropping off sharply into a valley. Callah stopped, panting and leaning on her crutch as she glanced desperately about. She was on a narrow outcropping of rock which dropped precipitously away on all sides, forming a peninsula of high ground. The sounds of the troll's blundering progress were very loud now; they would be upon her in moments. There was no way she could double back around them - she was trapped.

Mind numbed, Callah limped to the edge of the cliff, then turned at bay and watched the trees for her pursuers. In a moment, the band of trolls emerged, vines and bits of wood clinging to them from where they had forced their way through thick patches of undergrowth. When they saw her waiting for them, they stopped abruptly. The confusion on their ugly, brutish features was replaced by delight when they realized she was trapped. One of them raised his huge, spike-studded club and took a step forward.

The largest troll stopped him. Callah didn't know their language, but he seemed to be ordering the other not to kill her, since all the Dark Ones looked disappointed and lowered their deadly weapons. They weren't going to let her go, though. They probably had orders to take prisoners. The first troll slung his club across his back grudgingly, and the band spread out and began to advance. Callah put her hand on her sword hilt, but did not bother drawing it. She had not even the smallest chance of taking on an entire band of stone trolls, even uncrippled. The General's words echoed in her head: "If they find this passage, all will be lost. Remember this, and do not allow yourselves to be captured."

Callah thought about her friends lying dead, the Gorotal triumphant. Her village burned and her family slaughtered by hordes of Dark Ones, their human commanders picking through her home for choice belongings before setting it afire. She looked at the trolls, who were advancing slowly, prolonging the fun, knowing she could not escape. Her mind was suddenly sharp and clear, and she felt distanced from the pain in her ankle, and no longer afraid. There was no time for fear now. She turned and considered the cliff just behind her. It was very steep, and about twenty feet down it became a bumpy slope of shale and large boulders. The top part was a sheer slab of granite, with very few footholds. She doubted if she could ever have climbed down it, and it was impossible now. She raised her head and looked at the trolls, who were quite near now, with gaping mouths of brown, sharp tusks. She could see the gleam of their small black eyes. Nowhere else to go. Quickly, she hopped the last step to the cliff, dropped to the ground and swung her legs over. The trolls lunged forward, roaring in surprise. She slid down

until she was hanging from the rough rock by her fingertips, searching for a hold with her good foot. There was none, just a small crack she couldn't wedge her boot into. Then the trolls reached the cliff side, the leader lunging down to try to grab her wrist and haul her back up. She let go.

She hit the shale slope first, and began to roll down it, curled into a tight ball. The first impact had hurt terribly, but as she continued to tumble, out of control, it didn't seem to matter as much anymore. She crashed against something large, probably a boulder, she thought dispassionately. It started crashing along with her. Through the bright flashes in her head and the roaring in her ears, it seemed to Callah as if the whole slope was suddenly in motion around her. Then she hit something else, and all her thoughts were swept away in a rushing tide of red shot through with tiny bursts of light.

Mark had finally gotten rid of the whining fop. They had met the messenger for that day, on his way to meet with General Vallorn, and Mark had sent them both back together with the news of their success. The Viscount had ridden off, already griping to the other messenger about being forced to skulk through the forest like a common peasant. The other man rolled his eyes and rode faster. The rest of the way had been uneventful, except for a distant rumbling noise like thunder, that had begun a little while after Callah had left. He had stopped and listened to it, then decided it was no threat to them, whatever it was, and continued, ignoring the nobleman's complaints and promises that the King himself would hear of the way he was disregarded by commoners. Now he was sneaking back through the enemy-held forest, this time going the long, safe way around. He went around the troll camp on the other side of the hill Callah had headed towards. She was probably already back with the others by now. He'd keep an eye out for the trolls, but they'd probably gone back to their camp.

The other side of the hill was a bit steep where Mark was, but Callah had been further north. He headed to the bottom of the hill and hiked it, alert for sounds of the

enemy. The hill grew more rocky and steep as he went along, until it was a steep slope of loose rubble. He didn't want to climb back up, but he didn't want to have to go all the way back around, either. Occasionally he'd pass huge chunks of rock that had detached themselves from the cliff and fallen down among the trees. He was afraid he'd have to backtrack after all. This rubble-slope was pushing him further east than he wanted to go. But he'd go on just a little further to see if there was an easier place to climb.

The cliff turned back west not far after that. Mark had been walking through the trees that grew up close to the scattered rocks at the bottom; now he came around the corner the curving cliff made and stopped. On the other side, the trees were all smashed, rocks and boulders lying all around, only a few broken-branched trees sticking out of the rubble at strange angles. Several ravens wheeled lazily overhead; otherwise, nothing moved. This collapse must have been the cause of the rumble he had heard; something had started the rocks on the slope above sliding, and it had become a landslide. He knew the slope had looked unstable. Feeling faintly uneasy, he wondered what had started it. It was probably nothing; a rock had come loose and fallen. It must happen all the time.

Still, why now? That was the way Callah had gone, running from the trolls. He told himself he was being paranoid; Callah would have no trouble outrunning stone trolls, and she would stay well away from cliffs. The ravens didn't mean anything. Some animal had probably been caught by the rocks.

But he still felt nervous. Surely it wouldn't hurt to check it out. Maybe the Gorotal had been skulking around and had set it off. It would be good to know what they were up to. He'd have a quick look, just to make sure.

Mark set off at a quick walk, skirting the worst of the destruction, keeping under the cover of the unhurt trees at the edges as much as possible. As he neared he saw that the worst damage was on the far side of the slide. There had been fewer large boulders on his side. Several trees were knocked down, but most of the slide there had apparently

been made up of small pieces of shale. Here, trees were down in a wider area, and even some trees far away from the main slide had had their tops knocked off by flying stones.

He began to poke through the rubble, looking for any clue to what had started this. He knew it was unlikely that he would find anything in the rubble, but he would check it out just in case. And there was still that niggling worry in the back of his mind, and the ravens overhead. He tilted his head back, watching one of them swoop lower. All veteran soldiers hated the carrion birds, which would defile the bodies of companions killed in battle, but Mark was no veteran. He admired the bird's easy glide, watching the way it changed direction just by tilting its wings a little, hardly having to flap them. The creature landed with a flutter on a large slab of rock that was propped against the thick pine trunk it had felled.

Drawn by a morbid curiosity, Mark moved neared to see what hapless animal was attracting the scavenger. Whatever it was lay out of sight behind the slab of rock. Mark walked to the side and peered around, and froze in horror. A human figure was lying beneath the grey slab, one arm flung over her face. Mark did not need to see her face to know who it was; the sweep of golden hair, matted with dark blood and dirt now, told him that it was Callah.

Mark stood staring; this couldn't be right. The raven broke him out of his stupor. Cawing hoarsely, it hopped off the rock and landed beside Callah's head, eyeing her as if to decide the best place to begin its meal. Mark snatched up a stone and flung it at the bird, shouting wordlessly. He missed by several feet, hitting the boulder instead, but the raven took off hurriedly, croaking its displeasure. Mark stumbled across the uneven ground to Callah's side and dropped to his knees in the dirt. She wasn't moving. He took her hand tenderly and moved her dirt-caked arm off her face with infinite care, not feeling the tears streaming down his cheeks. Her face was distorted, bloody and muddy and swollen. He could feel bones grating as he moved her arm, and she stirred and moaned. His heart leaped -- she was alive! She rolled her head from side to side, whimpering, then

opened her eyes. He leaned over her and said her name, but her eyes didn't focus on him. She whispered, "Mark?" in a voice filled with so much pain that fresh tears blurred his vision.

"It will be all right, I'm here, don't worry. I'll get you out, just hold on." He chanted it like a spell, wishing he believed it and could make it true. She looked so broken. He glanced around frantically, trying to assess the situation and figure out what to do. Everything but her head and right arm were pinned under the great rock. She would have been crushed, but the pine tree that had stopped the rock's slide was also supporting some of the weight. It was an enormous slab, about a foot thick in the middle and as wide as his table back at home. Mark bent down and took hold of Callah's shoulders, pulling cautiously. She didn't move, and he felt something shift in her shoulder. She screamed. He stopped pulling and let go, horrified.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry! I've got to get you out. This won't work, though. I'll have to get the rock off somehow." Callah was breathing shallowly and still didn't seem fully conscious. She must have hit her head. Mark ran his hands through his hair. Of course she'd hit her head, she'd been in a landslide. How could this have happened? Why had she come so close to a cliff?

Mark realized he was crouched beside Callah with his head in his hands, not doing anything. He got up and looked for a branch to use as a lever. He found a good sturdy pine limb that had been snapped off, and forced it between the tree trunk and the rock slab, and pushed down as hard as he could. The rock was heavy, but it lifted a few inches. Then the branch snapped and the rock sagged back to its former position, bringing a small cry from Callah.

Mark couldn't take it anymore. Flames filled his head, and he cast the branch away in fury and attacked the rock with his bare hands. He pulled upward, but the rock didn't move. Mark's fury grew -- he refused to be beaten by a stone! He heaved until his muscles screamed and he thought his heart would burst -- and the boulder moved. Sweat

dripping into his eyes, the rough, jagged edges of the slab biting into his palms, he lifted the rock free of the tree trunk, then dragged it to the side, pivoting it on its end, and, with a final, supreme effort, he shoved it clear and fell to his knees.

He stayed where he was for a moment, gasping for breath, his heartbeat pounding through his whole body. Then he stumbled to his feet and stepped around the log to Callah's side. She lay pressed up against the trunk that had saved her life, battered and limp as a rag doll flung down by a petulant child. Mark hadn't wanted to think about her injuries. Now he was appalled at the damage. Callah's back was twisted at an odd angle, and one leg was bent almost underneath her. Now that the pressure of the heavy rock had been lifted, fresh blood was seeping through her torn clothes in a dozen places, and Mark could hear a slight bubbling sound with her every labored breath -- a rib must have punctured a lung. Looking at the ruin of his friend, Mark had to shut his eyes. But that wasn't helping. She needed him to be strong. He went and knelt beside her. He touched her raw cheek gently, and she opened her eyes and turned her unfocused gaze towards him.

"The rock is off now. I'm taking you back to camp, but I'll have to pick you up. I-I'm afraid it will hurt a lot. Just hang on a little longer, and the healers will take care of you." Callah did not respond, and he couldn't tell if she had understood him. She looked at him for a moment more with a wide, blank gaze, then shut her eyes again.

Mark started to slide his hand under Callah's shoulder, wincing at the agony he would cause. She moaned as he bumped her dislocated shoulder, and cried out as he got his other arm under her legs. It took all of Mark's determination to keep from pulling back. He could not stand hurting her, but if he left her here, she would die before he could bring help. He was not even sure if he could get her back to camp in time. The wet rasp of her breath was worse -- being moved was probably making her bleed faster, too. He took a firm grip and lifted her limp body, which felt as though all the bones in it had been broken. She didn't scream this time, just hung still and silent from his arms. Mark's

throat closed up, then he realized that she was still breathing. For now. He had to hurry. He settled her inert body against him -- she felt too light, as though she were hollow -- and hastened back toward the healers.

When Callah awoke, the first thing she noticed was the absence of pain. Her last memories were of smashing blows coming from all sides, then a crushing weight on her and pain-soaked darkness. Now she was wrapped in something warm and soft, and so gloriously comfortable that she nearly went back to sleep. A nagging thought came to disturb her rest: where was she? She had thought she was falling to her death. When she opened her eyes and looked around, she was lying, wrapped in blankets, on a cot in a tent. Mark was sitting beside the bed, holding her hand and smiling.

"Feeling better?" he asked. "I was wondering when you'd decide to wake up."

"How did I get here? I thought I was going to die."

The smile left his face. "You nearly did. It took five healers all night to get you patched back together." Suddenly he was angry, his face twisted. "What were you doing? How did you manage to get caught in a landslide? Why were you even anywhere near there?"

"Sorry," she whispered. He never shouted at anyone.

This made him even more agitated. "Don't apologize! It wasn't your fault!" He was waving his arms in the air. She couldn't help it; she started to giggle. He stopped waving his hands around, realizing how silly he looked. He sighed, and tried to laugh, but it came out sounding more like a sob. Suddenly there was something in his face that Callah had never seen there before, a strange intensity. "You scared me, Callah," he said softly. He lowered his forehead to her hand. She watched him, not knowing how to react. He stayed that way for only an instant, then looked up again, started to speak, then stopped and tried again. "Ah, I'm just glad you're all right now. What happened? I thought you were just going to lose those trolls and come back here."

As Callah was about to answer, the tent flap opened and a group filed in hesitantly. It was Nicholas, Jacob, Alissa, and Timothy, all wearing various expressions of concern and uncertainty. When they saw she was awake they all grinned and started to talk, but naturally, Alissa beat them to it.

"Are you all right?" she exclaimed, before she was even all the way in the tent. "We were so worried!"

"I saw you when Mark brought you in," Timothy said, giving a shudder. "I thought you were dead." Jacob nodded an affirmative, his face somber.

"Mark carried you all the way back. They said if he hadn't been so fast... well. You're all right now."

"Was it that bad?" Callah asked.

They all tried to speak at once, telling her how awful it had been. Mark said, "The healers said that most of your bones were broken. They were surprised that you lasted long enough to be healed. It was too close. Never do that to me again. When I was carrying you back, I was frantic to get you here as fast as I could, but I was afraid to shake you up too much. You weren't breathing very well."

"So you found me? I don't remember that part."

Nicholas broke in, "He came dashing into camp and charged right into the General's tent in the middle of a meeting with the Healers to get them to fix you. He said you'd been leading some trolls away. Surely they didn't catch you."

Callah ignored Nicholas's faintly scornful tone. He didn't mean to sound that way, she was sure. She addressed her answer to Mark, who seemed to have forgotten that he still had her hand. "After I led the trolls far enough away, I sped up to lose them, but I stepped in a stupid hole that I didn't see, and hurt my ankle." She winced, remembering. "I think it was broken -- I couldn't put any weight on it. I felt like an idiot. It was just bad luck, I guess, or maybe I should watch where I'm going better. I tried to keep going, but the trolls were catching up, and they maneuvered me onto a cliff. I couldn't get around

them, they had me trapped. I couldn't let them take me prisoner, so I tried to climb down, but I fell. That's all I remember. It hurt a lot." She was shaking a little, even though she knew she was safe now. Mark squeezed her hand.

"You're better now," he said. "You gave the healers a lot of exercise putting you back together, but they needed the practice, I'd say. It was incredible, the things they did with their magic. They said that they'll probably be drained of power for a day or two, since you were so badly hurt, but they won't be needed, as long as no one else decides to go cliff-jumping. They said for you to stay in bed for several days, to give your body time to build its own strength back up. Even magical healing takes a lot out of you, they said. You probably couldn't get up now if you tried."

Callah tried it. She barely got her shoulders off the bed before falling back. She didn't feel weak, just heavy. It was easier not to move. "You're right. How strange." A thought struck her, and she would have sat bolt upright if she could. "Wait, where are we now? Did we go through the passage? Was it safe? Has the White Disk been found?"

Timothy laughed. "You sound like Alissa. Uhhh, no offense, Alissa." She punched him in the arm. "Ow! Um, we did go through the passage. It was really steep and twisty, and really strange, nothing but green brambles all around. We went way down into a valley, and it was so narrow it felt like being in a tunnel. But it kind of flattened out at the very bottom, and we made camp there. Mark got you to the guards at the opening, and dragged the healers up there, pretty much literally. They move fast when someone's in trouble, though. I couldn't keep up. They healed you right there at the top of the path, barely past the entrance to the brambles. We kind of put up a tent around the healers as they worked. The brambles made room. Very polite of them, when you think about it. They're never still; they always keep rustling their leaves, like they're talking about us or something. It's kind of creepy. Now we're all down at the bottom of the valley. No Disk yet, we're going on with the search in the morning."

There was another stir at the tent flap, and the General himself ducked in, his presence making the tent feel suddenly crowded. The others pressed back against the walls to give him room, and Mark jumped to his feet and saluted. Timothy tried to snap to attention, salute, and scramble out of the way all at one, and nearly fell over doing so. Callah tried again to sit up but couldn't even get her head off the pillow this time.

"Don't try to get up," General Vallorn said. "I just stepped in for a moment, to thank you."

"To thank me, sir?" Callah was astonished.

The General smiled. Callah felt as though she'd received a rare gift. "Yes. You were willing to die to keep our location a secret. You are the kind of soldier we need - brave and loyal, and you will serve as an example for the rest of the army. I commend you." He reached out his hand and shook Callah's firmly. "I regret that I must go so soon, but I must finish the conference that your impetuous friend interrupted last night." Smiling, he clapped the stammering Mark on the shoulder and was gone, leaving everyone in the tent a bit breathless. He had a strong presence, and knew how to use it.

Nicholas said, "A true leader of men." He sounded sour for some reason, and Callah felt the need to defend the General.

"He's a great man," she said.

"Well, he certainly knows how to influence people. A pat on the head and you're all ready to die for him." Now he sounded almost envious.

Alissa jumped into the fray - she loved to argue. "She's already shown that she's willing to do that, Nick." He hated being called that. "Not just for the General, though I think that almost any soldier in the army would do that at a moment's notice. What do you think would have happened to all of us if the Gorotal had found our hideout?" She wrinkled her nose at him. "What's made you so grouchy, anyway?"

"I just thought it was funny, the way he has you all wrapped around his finger."

Callah watched the argument with tired amusement. She was used to the wrangling between her friends. Nicholas always had cynical remarks to make, and Alissa always jumped on them, just to start a fight. Callah didn't think that Nicholas really believed all the things he said. He just enjoyed making people mad. Her eyelids were getting heavy now, like the rest of her. She let them close, glad to have her friends around her. The sounds of the quarrel faded as she drifted back into unconsciousness.

Mark, who had been enjoying the argument, trying to get a word in, noticed that Callah had fallen asleep, looking a bit pale, but peaceful. He looked down at her, remembering how frightened he had been the night before, when he had burst in on the General's private meeting with the Healers. He had been desperate by the time he had reached the camp. The bubbling in Callah's lungs had gotten worse and worse, and he was afraid he was jostling her to death, in his haste to save her. He'd dragged the Healers out of the tent, but once they understood that someone needed help, all their dreaminess had disappeared. They'd nearly beat him back up the path, and then they had pushed him out of their way as they gathered around Callah's broken frame, all of them looking grim. He'd been afraid that she would die while he was gone. He had stood in the shadows, watching, a heaviness in his chest. He had really thought that it was too late, that she would die, and had been taken by surprise to realize how much that would hurt him. He had a lot of thinking to do, now.

Mark gestured to the others to hush, then gently tucked Callah's hand under the coverlet, smoothing the blankets around her newly repaired shoulders with a gentle pat. As he stood and turned around, he saw that the others were all staring at him. He blushed, and said gruffly, "What? Come on, let her get some rest." They filed out, Alissa grinning widely. Outside, Nicholas stood looking at him with a funny expression. Mark thought he was going to say something, but he didn't want to talk right now. He needed to get things worked out in his head, so he quickly said good night to Nicholas and the others and headed for his own tent, to be alone with his thoughts.

Chapter Six: In Which the Quest Is Ended, and Nicholas Gets into Trouble

They moved out the next morning. General Vallorn made sure that everyone was inside the outer wall of brambles, then politely asked them to close up again, so that no enemy would find the pathway. The brambles obliged, but they didn't stop closing just at the opening. As the General and the soldiers guarding the entrance came back down the hill towards camp, the brambles crept in behind them, slowly, their rustling leaves whispering like wind. They stopped only after they had closed up the whole path. As the army got ready to move again, they were continually conscious of the brambles on all sides of them, vines swaying softly, despite the cool, still air. Callah caught Alissa poking at the brambles furtively, to see if they would react. The leaves Alissa had touched pulled back sharply, almost as if they were startled, and the vines around them retreated, weaving themselves away into the mass of vegetation, leaving an open space. Alissa stepped up and tried it again. Callah pulled her away. It was better not to tamper with such things. The brambles had left open only one narrow trail that led deeper into the valley. They followed this path when they moved out, the brambles gently covering up their campsite behind them.

That morning the Healer who had wakened Callah told her she could get up, but that she shouldn't do anything strenuous. She found that she was strong enough to rise and walk around slowly, but she wasn't much good for anything else as they packed up their tents and supplies. She found her friends, who told her how glad they were that she was well, and gently pushed her to the side whenever she tried to help them with their tasks. It was frustrating. Even more frustrating was discovering that she really was unable to do the work. She tried to lift a backpack to Jacob, but it felt so heavy that she lost her balance and sat down hard on the ground. After that she sat off to the side, watching everyone else busily getting ready. She polished her sword, but it was already

bright. The others split up her things among themselves. When they started out, she found that she could keep up with everyone else, but only barely. Within minutes she began to pant and sweat as though they were climbing a mountain, instead of walking along a straight, flat path. She forced herself to keep going, ignoring the concerned looks from her friends, and found that the walking got a little easier.

They walked through a sea of shivering green that slanted steeply upward on both sides of the path. As they went on, the walls of the narrow valley deepened and grew even steeper, until even the brambles couldn't grow there. Bare rock walls rose high around them. Callah had to look straight up to see the sky, a narrow, dim blue strip far above. The way was very narrow, barely wide enough for two people to walk abreast, forcing the army to stretch out in a long narrow line. If they were attacked now they'd be lost, but Callah supposed any attackers would be just as cramped, even if their enemies knew how to find this secret valley. She guessed that someone could drop rocks on them from above, but if she craned her head back, she could still see the green brambles hanging over the lips of the valley. They were well protected here.

They pressed on, winding with the valley's sinuous turns. The ground slowly changed from dark black dirt, scattered with small dried-up bramble leaves, to dusty rock. Their footsteps echoed from the walls. After a while Callah could no longer see the brambles leaning over the cliff tops above her. She didn't know what that meant, but perhaps they were far enough within this strange place to leave its border guards behind. The rock walls grew more uneven. There were deep cracks and fissures in them, and occasionally a shallow cave. Then they began to encounter other branching canyons. The first time they came to one of those, the whole army came to a stop. Callah and her friends didn't know what was going on, since they were too far in the back of the line to see the branching paths, until the whisper came back that the way split in three, and no one knew which one to take. But soon they were moving again, taking the middle path. Callah hoped the General knew where he was going.

The branches came more frequently after that, but they always came in threes. One path to the left, one to the right, and one straight ahead. Each time they took the middle path. Their journey continued in this fashion, until the light began to grow dim in their narrow valley. There had been only had a brief time of direct sunlight, when the sun was right overhead, and then it had gone down behind the canyon wall. Now it was setting in the world outside. A light breeze, the first one Callah had felt since they'd entered this place, began to blow down the canyon against their faces. It grew stronger as the canyon filled up with darkness. Just as Callah was beginning to wonder if they'd have to set up their tents all in a row along the path, they entered a wide open bowl of sloping cliffs. It was very large, maybe half a mile across, and full of small round boulders and rocky outcroppings. The wind was strong here, swirling dust into patterns around the rocks and whipping Callah's hair into her eyes. The walls around them were full of cave entrances and other small canyons leading out. Callah and her friends didn't talk much as they made camp. Callah was still tired from her ordeal, and the others were too awed by the sterile grandeur of the place, except Alissa who had gotten dust in her eyes. They made camp in the middle of the bowl, hearing the wind whistling through the rocks and caves in the darkness until they fell asleep.

The morning dawned red and cold in the rocky hollow. The wind had stopped sometime during the night. Callah lay quietly when she woke up, not wanting to break the deep silence that stretched out around her. It felt like nothing was moving for miles around. Callah wondered if anything else was moving anywhere. Maybe the silence and stillness had stretched out from this hidden canyon to smother all the rest of the world, and there was no noise anywhere. Maybe the green brambles had followed them through the canyon as they slept, and now they'd grown all around them and over all the tents, to keep them from disturbing this empty place any longer. She was making herself nervous, so she got dressed and crawled out of the tent. All was as she had left it, no encroaching

brambles in sight. A few of the others were up already, almost tiptoeing as they got ready. No one wanted to talk. Even the slightest noise seemed to echo off the rocks.

Then Alissa stumbled out of the tent, yawning loudly. Everyone winced, staring at her. Then she said, in a normal tone that sounded like a shout, "It sure is quiet here, isn't it? I don't think I've seen any birds since we've been down here, have you? Or bugs either, or anything. I don't like it."

Callah should have known that nothing could keep Alissa quiet. While they took the tent down she kept chattering, not lowering her voice even a notch from its normal volume, as though she didn't notice the absolute silence around them, telling Callah all about what she'd dreamed that night. Something about blue horses. Callah didn't pay much attention, but it was impossible to keep whispering when someone else was talking out loud, so soon they were all speaking normally. The rest of the camp was stirring now as well, and all the sounds of breaking camp created a bubble of noise inside of the silence, so that it didn't weigh quite so heavily. Callah still felt as though she could feel the deep stillness just outside of their camp, though, waiting.

She was much stronger today. She had been exhausted at the end of yesterday's long hike, but today she felt only a little tired. Her friends were still showing a tendency to take heavy things away from her, but she felt fine. She made them let her carry her own pack this time.

Before long they were ready to move out, but Callah wasn't sure where they would go. The countless canyon-ways and caves that led out of the big stone bowl all looked the same to her. But she didn't have to wonder long. The General shouted the order to move out, and they set out across the bowl. Before they even had a chance to get into marching rhythm, though, he called a halt, in the center of the bowl. There were rocky outcroppings all over the bowl, in no pattern that Callah could detect, but here there was a spire, bigger than the others, thrusting up out of the earth. It was rough and ended in a jagged break about thirty feet up, and it was nearly twenty feet across at the base.

The General stopped in front of it and shouted, "We are near the end of our search! The Seeress told me that we would face many false paths before we would find our goal. The branching paths in the canyon were false -- the middle path was a true one, the others led only to death. Now we have come to the end of the false paths. All these caves and passages, so like a maze, are only there to distract us from our goal. Here, at the center of this hidden world, lies the thing we seek."

He turned to the rough rock face behind him and placed his hand against it. In a loud voice he called, "You have helped us this far, allowed us to enter your domain. You have let us enter the center of your stronghold unmolested. Now, give us passage, so that we may finish our quest, and then leave here and trouble you no more."

A wind sprang up from the still air. It swirled dust up from the ground, and moaned among the rocks. A deeper grumbling came from the stone beneath Callah's feet, vibrating up through her legs. Dust blew into her eyes. As she rubbed them, the wind stopped. She looked up to see that a door had opened in the rock spire, five feet wide.

Everyone had shielded their eyes from the sudden swirl of dust; now they stood and stared. General Vallorn said softly, "Thank you." Then he stepped forward into the dark hallway in the stone, the rest of the army filing in behind him. Callah paused on the threshold, looking into the dimness. The passageway was smooth and irregularly shaped, and Callah felt as though she were walking into a giant stone throat. But Mark stepped up beside her, and Timothy was on the other side, and she could feel the others close behind. Alissa was whispering excitedly to Jacob. She felt better and went on.

The passage sloped steeply downward. The footing was uneven, and the ceiling sometimes swooped high above them, and sometimes hunched down, making the taller soldiers duck. The walls were rippled, as though the stone had once melted and flowed like water. They quickly left the light of the sun behind, but the walls glowed weirdly. Callah had seen foxfire once, exploring after dark with her friends in the forest. It had been an eerie green light that quivered in the rotten stump they'd found as though it were

alive. But this light was different. It was bright and steady, without color, and it came from every direction at once, casting no shadows.

They walked for a few minutes, winding down through the tunnel. Then the walls opened out in all directions, and they emerged into a vast empty space.

It was an immense cavern -- it must have taken up the whole underside of the stone bowl where they'd camped. The high ceiling arched into darkness far overhead, but the rest of the cavern was well lit by the sourceless light that now seemed to fill the air all around them. At the far end of the chamber, an immense trunk of stone grew upward from the floor. The top of it was flattened, forming a huge pedestal that loomed over the rest of the chamber. On it were three tall pillars of intense blue fire that neither flickered nor wavered, more like cold blue crystals than flames. Then one of them moved, stepping forward, and Callah could see another shape inside the flame, a human form. And yet it was not a human, for no human was so tall. The other two pillars also contained humanoid figures. It was hard to make out their shapes through the radiance that shone from them, but Callah could see that they wore long robes that fell in smooth folds to the floor, like water. Like flowing stone. The three were almost identical, except that the middle one was slightly taller, and the hue of each one's glow was slightly different. The one on the right shone with a bright clear blue the color of a spring sky, while the middle one was the deep blue of a still pool that rises cold from rocks, and the one on the left was darker, like the shade of the sky just before a thunderstorm. The one in the middle had moved, and now it, for Callah could not judge whether it was male or female, stepped forward to the edge of the column.

Now Callah could see that the creature's eyes sparkled like sapphires, crystal and blue and unemotional. These must be Balancers, the beings older than men who had created the Disks. The White Disk must have found its way back to them, at some time in the long confused years. Callah wished that they had taken the Black Disk back as well.

The middle figure now turned its face towards the General, who stood straight and tall in front of his huddled army. Though his bearing was proud, he seemed tiny in the great chamber. The cold light of the gemstone eyes fell on the General, and he was suddenly surrounded by a column of sparkling blue light which sprang up from nowhere to set him apart from the rest of the company. It stretched up to disappear in the darkness of the ceiling. Even though Callah was in the midst of the army, far from Vallorn, she suddenly found that she could see and hear the General as if she were standing close beside him.

<Why have you come?> The question came from nowhere and everywhere, like the light. The voice did not come from a human throat and lips. It sounded like a waterfall, like a falling stone, like a breeze. It was musical, but without feeling. The middle figure stood still and waited for their reply.

"We seek the White Disk," General Vallorn responded, ignoring the shifting light that surrounded him. "The people of Gorotal have been corrupted by the power of the Black Disk, and are laying waste to the world. Even now they may be invading our lands. There is no force that can oppose them, for the White Disk has been lost from the world of men. We humbly ask that you give the White Disk into our keeping, so that we may stand on equal terms with our enemy and help the world find balance once more." He weighted the word *balance*, peering up at the beings above him.

The Balancer bowed its head. <You have studied us, I think.> Callah had expected anger at the presumption, amusement, anything, but the voice was held only words, bereft of any intonation. <Your kind have named us the Balancers. It is fitting enough, for we seek an equal balance in all things. That is why we created the Equara, the artifact whose halves you name the White and Black Disks. We gave it to humans, hoping that it would give some order to your ceaseless conflicts. All of our gifts have two sides. One side you would call "bad," the other, "good." We do not give without taking away; thus is the balance maintained. However, one of you foolishly broke our creation. This

allowed the two sides of the gift to act separately, and the balance was thrown askew. Yet it is not our concern that you have corrupted your gift. Why should we step forward to save you from the consequences you have brought down upon yourselves?>

Callah bit her lip. What would Vallorn do now?

He did not seem worried. His face stayed calm, looking up through the nimbus of light toward the Balancer. “You must have once had some interest in the fate of humankind, or you would not have created the Disk and given it to us.”

<Perhaps, but those days are past now. Now we dwell apart and leave humans to their own follies.>

“This is true. But still, I do not think you have abandoned all interest in your creation. You are said to have been craftsmen of unbelievable skill when you once had dealings with humans. True craftsmen do not abandon their creations, claiming to have no responsibility for what is done with them. A sword-maker is responsible for the people his sword slays.”

The Balancer’s light seemed to glow fractionally brighter. <Ah, an interesting view for a human. Perhaps we do have some interest in our Equara still. But why should we give it to you? Remember, there is always a price. All swords have two edges. What will you give us in exchange for the Equara Alma, the White Disk?>

Vallorn stood still and proud, never wavering. “I do not presume to know what unearthly being such as yourselves would want from mortals. Perhaps there is something you have in mind, that we could offer?”

The Balancer nodded, once, regally. <Indeed. Our peace has been incomplete since we withdrew from the world of mortals. We could not fully withdraw while a part of our power was loose among you. As long as the Black Disk, the Equara Sart, is active in the world, we cannot fully depart. But in giving you the Equara Alma, we fear that we will merely tie ourselves more strongly to your world.>

Vallorn frowned slightly. “With the power of the White Disk, we may be able to capture the Black Disk. I would see that it was brought back to you, and when my country is safe once more, we would also return the White Disk.”

<Ah. So you promise, but you know it would not happen that way. The Equara Alma cannot defeat the Equara Sart. They are evenly matched. Even if you did capture the Sart, and bring it back to us, you would never be completely sure of your country’s safety. You would mean to return the Alma, but there would always be something for which it was needed. A sickness, or a drought. It would never come back to us, and we would still be troubled by your use of it.>

“Then, what would you have us do? I do not believe you would have let us in to your retreat and stronghold if you did not mean to deal with us.”

<You are right. We will give you your White Disk. We will choose one of your numbers to carry it, someone who will return it to us when it has completed its purpose. This person will take it to the Equara Sart and reunite them.>

The Balancer who stood on the left side, whose blue radiance was deep and stormy, turned sharply away. It was the first time either of the flanking figures had stirred at all. Callah had begun to think they were statues. The Balancer who had been speaking turned to the third figure, on his right. This being’s light, clear glow intensified, and it lifted something from the folds of its robe. It held this thing out in both hands, a disk of unearthly beauty. It shimmered softly, and the blue fire of the Guardian mixed with its pearly gleam to fill the chamber with a softer, milky glow. Its light played over the faces of Callah’s friends, making even Timothy’s plain round face beautiful beyond compare. Everything in the great chamber was made new -- everything but the leftmost figure. The light failed to touch that being; it was as though a shroud of darkness covered and surrounded the figure.

The middle figure spoke again. <Look now upon the Equara Alma, the White Disk of Good. It was meant to be but one half of a greater creation, and it still bears the

mark of its separation.> The right figure turned the Disk around, and its light was dimmed. There was a murmur of disappointment from the army. Callah felt like crying at the loss of its beauty. The side of the disk that they now saw was a dull lifeless grey.

<This side of the Equara was once joined to its other half, but that break can never be repaired. But, if the unscarred sides of the two halves were ever to touch, they would strive each against the other, since their unity has been broken. Their conflict would not destroy them. Nothing can do that. It would make them less powerful, though, turning their might inward. Their influence over mortals would lessen, enough so that they could be brought back here. However, we will have to choose one of you who will complete this quest, one who will be willing at the end to dim the great power they hold in their hands, just to keep a promise.

<Only one hand can hold the Equara Alma. Who will dare to take up the burden, and be its Bearer? Would you seize the power for yourself, General?>

"I am not worthy to bear the Equara Alma, nor do I presume to know who is," Vallorn answered quietly. His face remained expressionless, but Callah saw his hand, hanging at his side, curl slowly into a fist. "You who can see what is hidden know who is destined to take it up. Will you share your wisdom with us?"

The column of light around the General sparkled brightly. <Well spoken, General. You have a wisdom of your own. You are a worthy man and a great leader, but you have the weight of your country on your shoulders. You would not be able to throw away the power of the Equara, when you could so easily use it to help heal the wounds of Terania. The bearer of the Alma must be more simple, less weighted down with care. I will search the hearts of your army, and see if there is one fit to receive this trust.>

Suddenly, the cold blue light that illuminated the chamber grew brighter, filling the room. Callah felt as though she were breathing crystal. The light surrounded her, and she felt strangely as though it were shining *inside* her as well. She could no longer see the others, for there was a mist of light before her eyes. She reached out a blind hand, and

found another, which clasped hers. Slowly, the light faded. She was clutching Mark's hand. Embarrassed, she let go, and tried to pretend that she hadn't been afraid. Nicholas, standing off to the side, was scowling. He'd probably been scared too, she thought. Being afraid always made him mad, like the time she'd jumped out at him from behind a tree. This was no time for reminiscing, though. The Balancers were going to name the person who would carry the White Disk.

The Guardian stood looking over the throng, then nodded his light-crowned head.
<Yes. There is one worthy.>

Callah felt a wave of relief wash over her. This meant they would be given the White Disk! They'd succeed in their quest. They could save Terania. She wondered who it would be. Probably one of the Healers -- they were strong and devoted to good. Or maybe the swordmaster. He was very honorable; he'd keep his promise to return the Disks once they were joined.

Then a column of blue sparkling light, like the one that had appeared around Vallorn, suddenly leapt up around her, giving her the shock of her life. Dumbfounded, she looked around her. Mark and Nicholas were also included in the circle of light - it must be Mark who was being chosen! She had not expected anyone so young to be the choice, but she had always known Mark was special.

<You, young soldier. Do you feel that you would be worthy of this great honor?>

Callah waited for Mark to answer, but he was staring at her, his eyes intense. Her own eyes widening, she glanced around. Everyone was looking straight at her. This wasn't what she had expected at all... She realized that she was standing there while the Balancer was waiting for an answer.

"M-me? Uh...sir?" she finally stammered, completely off guard. Why, out of all this company, should she be chosen? "As the Bearer of the- the White Disk?"

<You. Do you consider yourself worthy?>

"I - Surely there are others who would do it better! I'm just a regular soldier. I've never even seen a real battle." She was shaking. This was much more frightening than facing trolls. She had never even daydreamed about using the White Disk. She wouldn't know where to start. The most ambitious daydream she'd had was of getting a medal for saving General Vallorn in a battle. Mostly she just wanted to avoid making a fool of herself.

<You would not choose yourself as the best candidate?>

"No, sir! If the General himself was rejected, how could I possibly be found worthy?" She was afraid she was sounding falsely modest, but that wasn't how she meant it. She was just terrified. Surely you had to be a magic user to use the Disk.

<I wonder if everyone thinks as you do?> The focus of the light suddenly shifted a little, to Callah's intense relief. Maybe they were just using her as an example, or maybe she'd answered wrong. She glanced at Mark, but couldn't read his expression. She looked the other way -- the new center of the light was on Nicholas. She hadn't really expected him to be chosen; he was so touchy half the time. But maybe all he needed was something really important to do.

<Do you consider yourself worthy to bear the Equara?> The Guardian was asking Nicholas the same question. Maybe it was going to ask everyone the same thing. That would take a while, but it was worthwhile if it got them the White Disk.

Nicholas answered, "I think I could do it. Sir." He didn't seem afraid as she had been. He was standing tall, in that proud pose he always struck.

<You are confident of your abilities?>

"I am. I have trained hard." He looked eager, reaching out his hands. "I will accept the burden of the White Disk."

<You make too many assumptions. I have not yet offered it to you, nor will I. You are too hungry for power, too confident in your abilities. You would use the Alma for your own glory, not to right the Balance. And we would never regain it, or the Equara

Sart.> Nicholas' face darkened with fury, but the light was already leaving him. To Callah's dismay, it centered on her again!

<You have said that you do not feel worthy to be Bearer of the Equara. If my judgment told me that it is your destiny, would you refuse it?>

Callah took a deep breath. This wasn't going well, but she still hoped they were just using her as an example. She glanced over at Mark again. He was no longer in the circle, which had tightened to focus on her alone. But she could just see his shape standing outside the light, and the outlines of her other friends behind him. She took a deep breath, and answered, "You are far wiser than I. If it is your judgment that the White Disk is to be placed in my care, I must bow to your decision."

<That is my judgment. The bearer of the Alma must be strong of will, and brave of heart, but not too proud to accept guidance. Willing to serve, and humble enough not to take the Disk for herself. This is your destiny, Callah of Terania. Will you accept it?> Callah swallowed hard. <Remember, our gifts are two-edged.> The Balancer's voice rang through the cavern.

For a heartbeat, the chamber was absolutely silent. Then Callah bowed her head and said, "I will."

The nimbus of light around her danced and sparkled. The Balancer nodded its head, and Callah thought it almost looked pleased. The sky-blue figure on its right stepped forward and threw out its hand, and the White Disk floated gently down a column of coruscating blue light, toward Callah's uplifted face. She saw now that it hung from a chain, a chain whose links seemed to be carved out of stone and wood. It settled gently over her head, and she watched as the White Disk settled against her chest. It was about the size of a circle formed by her thumbs and forefingers together, but it didn't weigh as much as a stone of that size should. The Disk flashed with a pure white light as it settled against her, then its beautiful shimmering light began to pulse gently, in time with her heartbeat.

The Balancer on the right broke the silence as the entire army stared in awe, speaking for the first time. Its voice, as mighty as that of the middle figure, had a lighter timbre, like the bubbling of a spring. <Thus I grant to you the Equara Alma. It is a gift, for it shall give you the power to protect your homeland.>

The darker figure on the left kept its head turned away, but also spoke, reminding Callah of the groaning of a great oak trunk in a gale. <I grant you the Equara Alma. It is a curse, for all the forces of evil shall try to take it from you.>

The lighter figure spoke. Their words, slow and measured, were like an incantation, a chant that rose and fell, triumphant and ominous in turn. <I grant you another power, to know who must bear the Equara Alma after you, if you die without completing your task. If this should come to pass, we will grant you our wisdom, that you might know who is worthy to bear it after you. It is a gift, for it will allow you to continue your quest, though you die.>

The dark spoke again. <I grant you the power to recognize your successor. It is a curse, for you will die knowing that you have passed your burden on, and that the one to whom you give your curse shall suffer for it as you have.> Callah stood trembling, her hands at her sides. She would accept the curses with the blessings. She was too stunned to do anything else.

<I grant you a protector, to stand between you and the evil that stalks you, even now. This is a gift, for you will not bear your burden alone.> The light Balancer turned away from Callah slightly. <Who will swear to guard the bearer of the Equara Alma with his life's blood?>

Almost before the Balancer finished the question, a figure stepped into the pool of light that still surrounded Callah. He had been standing just outside the circle the whole time, and his presence had been an unconscious comfort, keeping her from panicking. It was Mark, and he smiled at her, his eyes brighter than the blue light dancing around her. He stood beside her, and called, "I will guard her, with my last breath!"

<It is fitting,> came the reply from the unearthly creature. <I grant you great strength and skill in warfare. It is a gift, for it will allow you to defend your companion and keep her safe, for she must attend to her burden, and cannot do so while embattled.>

The Balancer on the left spoke again. Callah held her breath; this was the curse to go with Mark's gift. <I grant you prowess in battle. It is a curse, for your mind will be clouded when you fight, and you will not be able to tell friend from foe. You may strike down your own comrades, as well as your enemies.>

Then dark figure on the left spoke again. Callah had forgotten: he hadn't answered the other Balancer's gift to her of Mark as guardian yet; he had just put his curse on Mark's fighting skill. <I grant you a protector who will stand by you. Yet this is a curse, for I also give to you a betrayer, who will bring your doom.>

Callah swallowed. A betrayer. She knew it wouldn't be Mark. She would have to be careful.

Now the center Balancer spoke again, his voice filling the room. <You have been granted that which you asked for. Now, go, and remember what you have promised.> The light faded from around Callah and Mark. The three Balancers all took a single step backwards, and stood still, like statues or great crystals once more.

Callah was dazed. She didn't know what to think -- everything had gone crazy. She was the bearer of the White Disk. Then everything broke loose at once, all the soldiers cheering and shouting. They had what they had come for, the legendary thing they had never been sure they could even find. Mark and Callah found themselves surrounded by their friends pounding them on the back, but Nicholas turned away, and shoved his way through the throng, ignoring the protests of the people he jostled. Callah saw him go and frowned, worried. He was probably angry about the way they'd asked him if he wanted the Disk when they knew they wouldn't give it to him. His pride would

be hurt. She'd have to go talk to him. But right now she was surrounded; it seemed that the entire army wanted to shake her hand or give her a hug.

Somehow the yelling throng of the army made their way out of the darkened cavern without trampling anyone. For Mark and Callah, who were already stunned by what had happened, the triumphant exit was a whirlwind of faces and congratulations. They were jostled, their backs pounded, and their hands were seized and shaken. The General and other ranking officers congratulated them at one point, and told them to meet for a briefing as soon as they got outside. Once Callah was nearly brained when an uncharacteristically enthusiastic Jacob tried to lift her onto his shoulders where the ceiling was too low. Mark pulled her down again and wrapped one arm around her shoulders, clearing the way with the other. Finally they made their way into the sunlight.

Callah and Mark stood blinking in the bright sunlight of the open stone bowl. She had expected the White Disk to look different in the sunlight, to lose some of its glow after she left the darkness of the caves, the way a candle does at noon. But if anything it shone even brighter, seeming to absorb the sun's rays and cast them back out again, whiter and cleaner. It was like looking into the heart of a cloud with the sun on the other side, Callah thought.

The rest of the army eddied out around her as everyone emerged from the passage. Everyone wanted to be near her, to stare at their prize that she wore around her neck. Callah and Mark were feeling very crowded, but everyone backed off as General Vallorn came striding through the crowd, followed by his advisors. He stood in front of Callah and looked down at the White Disk. Then he looked up at her. She met his unwavering blue eyes and was suddenly unsure of herself again. She couldn't understand why this man, who had spent his life defending Terania, hadn't been chosen now to wield the very power that could defend it.

His stern eyes bored into hers, but he didn't look angry. She forced herself not to look down, not wanting him to think she was weak. He said slowly, "Bearer of the White Disk. You have found what we all sought. Now--"

A desperate shout broke through his words. A woman, one of the lookouts the General had posted before going into the caves, was running towards them from the side of the bowl. When she saw the General had heard her, she stopped and gestured back the way she'd come, shouting breathlessly, "A band of goblins! They were spying on us! They're escaping -- this way!" She turned and pounded back the way she'd pointed.

Callah was aghast. She hadn't thought that any of their enemies could get into this valley. The General wasted no time wondering, however. He shouted, "They can't be allowed to tell their army about us! After them! Don't let any escape, but keep a few alive for questioning."

The excitement of the army had found an outlet. They were elated at their success -- no Dark Ones could frighten them at this moment. Their scanty training collapsed, and a yelling, undisciplined mob rushed across the floor of the bowl. The soldier who'd seen the goblins raced ahead of them, towards a gorge that was about four men wide, leading out of the bowl. Anyone who had held back might have been trampled, but no one was holding back. Mark and Callah were carried along with the rest and found themselves in the forefront of the army when it tried to squeeze itself into a thin column that would fit through the gorge. The path twisted and turned, but the goblins had been caught by surprise when they were seen and weren't far ahead. Callah began to catch glimpses of them around the next bend as she ran. They were dark crouching creatures in ragged, filthy clothes that used their long clawed hands to pull themselves along as they ran. Their wide feet flapped on the stone, and they screeched and gibbered as they ran. Callah saw one of dart up a broken place in the wall ahead. She thought it darted into a hole at the top, but she was swept along by the soldiers running behind her before she could give chase. She pointed after it, started to shout, and saw Nicholas struggle to the wall and

begin to climb. Then she rounded a corner and nearly ran straight into the massed goblins. They'd hit a dead end and turned at bay. There were only about twelve of them. They had drawn their swords, which were wicked things with curved and spiky blades, and were baring their long yellow teeth and snarling. They were so fierce and ugly that Callah might have hesitated, but the soldiers behind her couldn't all stop in time. The two groups collided.

Callah had drawn her sword as she ran, but she almost lost it as she ran right into a goblin. It was small, thin and sinewy, only a little taller than her waist. Its long arms ended in grasping, clawed fingers, and its skin was dark grey and hairless. It was knocked off balance when they collided, and shoved at her with its off hand, trying to make room for its sword. She shuddered in disgust at the stench of the thing, like meat that had been rotting in a midden heap for days. She kicked it and it stumbled back, its black eyes opening wide amid the leathery wrinkles of its face. It was staring at the White Disk, which still hung openly around her neck. It gave a screech in its uncouth tongue, and suddenly all the other goblins' heads snapped towards her. They ignored all the human soldiers who were charging in among them, and tried to jump on her, even though several of them were cut down. She held her sword out in front of her, the point low. The first goblin ran right into it, skewering itself. Its clawed hands scrabbled at her, trying to reach the Disk even as it died. Its weight dragged her sword down, and three more goblins leapt for her.

Mark had been just behind her all this time. She'd known he was there without looking for him. Now she suddenly felt herself dragged backwards and shoved into the soldiers piling up behind her. They went down in a heap of flailing limbs. Mark surged past her. She caught sight of his face as she fell-- it was strangely blank, empty of expression, but his eyes-- his eyes burned blue. He leapt among the monsters.

Mark's sword moved like lightning, and two of the goblins fell dead, one beheaded, one clutching the stump of an arm. The third tried to stop, but he grabbed it by

its scrawny neck and lifted it wriggling above his head, then smashed it down in the midst of its fellows. His sword whistled as it ripped through the air. The rest of the army wisely fell back and gave him room. They watched in awe as the goblin force was decimated by a single man. Most of them were dead in a matter of seconds. When only one of them was left, someone shouted belatedly from behind, "We're supposed to take one alive!"

Mark didn't even pause. The last goblin was terrified, whimpering and dodging around as Mark stalked it. He had left his sword in the ribcage of the second-to-last demon and was stalking this one barehanded. Callah was back on her feet now, after disentangling herself from the arms and legs and weapons. She was lucky she hadn't landed on a sword. She didn't know what Mark was thinking -- then she caught sight of his face again as he pursued the goblin. So empty, as though he weren't there at all. And that burning light in his eyes... Callah remembered what the Balancers had said, that Mark's mind would be clouded to balance the gift of fighting skill. He was fighting better than he ever had. His sword moved like a snake. That last goblin didn't stand a chance.

Timothy shoved his way through the crowd, panting. Alissa was close behind. He ran up to Mark, yelling, "Don't kill this one! We need to know how they found us!"

He got no reaction. The lone goblin was backed up against the rocky wall, cringing. Timothy grabbed Mark's arm, trying to pull him away, but was sent sprawling with one shove. Another man jumped at Mark, but he grabbed him and flung him bodily into the midst of the army. The soldiers cried out in surprise and anger. Callah ran forward and flung herself between Mark and the goblin, feeling strange to be protecting the disgusting creature. Alissa moved in behind her to take it prisoner. Callah tried to shove Mark backward, but he was immovable as stone. She shouted into his face, "Stop! The danger's over!"

Mark's eyes burned down at her madly. He raised his fist. She didn't move. Finally, he paused, and blinked, faint confusion coming into the blank face. She said

softly, "The battle is over now, Mark. I'm safe. You can come back." He stood still for a moment and then shook his head.

"What's going on?" He looked at Callah, and his eyes faded back to their normal warm brown. "What are we doing here?"

"We chased a bunch of goblins here, and we barely stopped you from killing the last one. You were berserk, and you nearly killed the whole band by yourself."

"I did? It's... all vague, like a dream."

"It's what the Balancer said would happen. You did protect me."

He grimaced, trying to remember. "You're not hurt, are you?"

She smiled. "No. I said you protected me. And I protected the goblin, of all things, so we did pretty well." She paused. "So, um... Are you still going to hit me?"

He stared at his still-raised fist in such horror that she had to laugh. "Don't worry, I don't think you're allowed to hurt me. You're supposed to guard me."

He looked upset. "But are you sure? What if I can? If I don't know what I'm doing, I might..."

She shook her head grinning. "Well, you could try it and find out. Take a swing at me and see."

He stared at her. "I'd never do that!"

"Well, there you are then."

Timothy was just getting up, rubbing his chest where Mark's arm had caught him. "You know," he grumbled, "he may not be able to hurt you, but it looks like *I'm* another story. I don't look *that* much like a goblin, surely." He scowled at Mark, but as Mark began to stumble over his apologies, grinned and waved a hand at him. "It's okay. I'm honored, really. The first person on our side to be swatted by the guardian of the White Disk. I'll be more careful, next time. Since she's immune, let Callah be the one to try to stop you when you're berserk. Seriously, though, I've never seen you fight like that. It was ... re-Mark-able."

Timothy paused, his chubby face hopeful, waiting to see if his pun would be noticed. Callah groaned, and hid her face in her hands. "That was awful." Mark began to chuckle at her reaction, and she whacked him in the arm, making him laugh even harder. Suddenly he sagged to one knee, his laughter ending abruptly.

Callah crouched beside him, her hand going out to keep him from falling over. "Mark! Are you all right -- were you hurt?" She started looking him over, searching for blood, but he stopped her.

"I'm not hurt. I just felt tired all of a sudden." His face was pale.

"It's probably just a reaction, after that performance he just put on," Timothy said reassuringly. He took Mark's arm and pulled him back upright. He breathed hard but stayed standing. Callah eyed him with concern, but he did seem all right. She supposed it was natural for him to be tired after a fight like that.

Other soldiers had helped Alissa escort the surviving goblin back up the gorge, surrounding it with a ring of blades. Now everyone started to file back out to the bowl. Callah suddenly remembered the single goblin that had scurried up the wall, the one that Nicholas had been chasing. She asked the others, but no one else had noticed. Timothy had been in the middle of the army, since he didn't run as fast as some, and he hadn't seen Nicholas on his way up to the front. He hadn't seen Jacob, either, even though he thought they'd both been ahead of him. Callah frowned. "I remember the spot. Let's go find out if that goblin got away."

They went back down the gorge, to find the swordmaster scaling the wall where the goblin had gone. He looked down at them, and said, "Come with me. Some soldiers saw a goblin climb up the wall here and went after it, but no one has come back yet. We'll check things out."

He reached a small ledge about twenty feet up and slid out of sight. Callah, Mark, and Timothy followed him, along with some of the other soldiers who had not yet left the gorge. Timothy barely made it up the wall, but Callah and Mark each reached down a

hand from the top and hauled him up. The ledge was wider than it had looked from down below. The hole Callah had seen, that she thought the goblin had slipped into, turned out to be a narrow crack running through the wall of the gorge. It looked like it led straight through the wall. That was the only place the swordmaster could have gone, so they squeezed through single file. Timothy got stuck once when his sword belt hung up on a protruding rock, but Callah unhooked him and they went on. They soon found themselves in another gorge, this one more narrow and twisting than the last. This whole place was a maze, Callah thought.

The swordmaster waited until they were all out of the crevice. He was looking around at the stony ground, probably looking for tracks, but Callah couldn't see any. There wasn't enough dust to show footprints. The gorge curved away in either direction. There was no telling which way the others had chased the goblin, Callah thought. Just then, footsteps echoed from the right. Jacob came into sight, supporting another soldier, who was limping and clutching his side. Jacob had a bleeding cut across his forehead.

The swordmaster called to them. "What happened? Did you catch the goblin? Report!"

Jacob tried to straighten up without dropping the hurt man. "Sir, several of us climbed the wall after the goblin we saw climbing through the crevice. When we got to the other side, there were more goblins waiting for it, about six of them. They split up and we gave chase. Me and Robert here killed the three we were chasing, but he's hurt."

"And the other group?"

"I haven't heard from them, sir. They could be on their way back right now. I believe three soldiers went the other way."

"All right. Thank you, soldier. Good work. Take him back to the Healers." The swordmaster scanned the others, and suddenly seemed to notice Callah. "You shouldn't be here! You'll put the Disk in danger, what are you thinking? Go, help carry the wounded man back to the Healers; then report to the General. The behavior of the army

today was ridiculous. It's the most disorganized charge I've ever seen." He shook his head. "The rest of us will go see what's happened to the others. Tell the General what we're doing."

Callah, chagrined, went and took the hurt man's other arm. She hadn't even thought about the Disk's vulnerability when she'd charged into battle with everyone else. The goblins might have taken the White Disk, and it would have been all her fault. She tucked it into her shirt.

She didn't have much time to berate herself for her carelessness. It had been hard getting the wounded man through the narrow crevice and even harder to get him down the wall at the other side, but they'd made it eventually. She'd made sure that Jacob saw the Healers too, to get the cut on his head treated. When she went to find the General, she found him and the swordmaster already deep in discussion. Both were frowning intently, murmuring intently in low voices, so she didn't interrupt them. She stood off to the side, waiting for them to finish.

But after she had been waiting for at least half an hour, they still didn't seem to be done with their discussion. The General's other advisors and officers had all gathered around as well. She backed away, not wanting to look like she was eavesdropping. They were probably planning the army's next move, now that they had the White Disk. She watched them and wondered what she would do now. The White Disk didn't ever seem to do anything; it just hung there around her neck. She could feel it, cool against her skin. She wondered if she'd use it to summon up help for their army, maybe soldiers made of light or something, like the General had said in his speech back at her village. She hoped someone would be able to tell her what to do. She didn't have the least idea how to start.

Before she could get too worried that she would mess the whole thing up, though, Mark approached her, blood smeared on his clothes. She stared at him, worried and

confused. He looked grim. She said, quietly so that she wouldn't interrupt the General and his officers, "Did you find more goblins? Was there another fight?"

He shook his head. "No. The goblins got away." His voice was emotionless.

She gasped, "Oh no! That means they'll tell their army where we are! We'll have to get out of here fast."

He nodded. "It's worse than that, though. The goblins couldn't have outrun the soldiers chasing them. It was Nicholas and two of the other recruits. They chased the goblins down the gorge, but the goblins led them right into a big band of trolls. They ran right into them." He paused. She bit her lip, afraid of what he was going to say. "We found the bodies of two of the soldiers. One of them was still alive, and she told us what had happened. They didn't have a chance. There were probably at least twenty trolls. She said... they took Nicholas prisoner. He broke his sword on one of their clubs, and then they just grabbed him and took off. She was too badly hurt to follow. She... we didn't get her back to the Healers in time." His voice trembled just a little. He was trying to act calm, but she noticed that his fists were clenched tightly at his sides.

Callah stared at him. She had known there were risks in a war like this, but so far they had not lost anyone. Now two people were dead, and Nicholas was captured. She'd heard rumors of what the Gorotal did to their captives. Nicholas would be tortured until he told everything he knew. He wouldn't know enough to satisfy the enemies. She started to shiver. "We've got to rescue him."

Mark nodded. "That's what the swordmaster is telling the General right now. We're going to try to save him, he said. They're questioning the goblin we caught now. One of the Healers can also use magic to read thoughts. So we should know a little more about the enemy's position and have something to work with." His jaw clenched. "I hate this waiting. But we *will* get him back."

They stood there together silently, watching the officers plan. Callah fought back despair. They'd keep Nicholas alive until they were sure he'd told them everything, so

there was still time to save him. Nicholas had sometimes annoyed her, the way he was so impatient and proud all the time, but he was still her friend. They had to save him. She had wanted to talk to him about the White Disk, she remembered now, to make sure he was not too hurt that they'd picked her instead of him. She hadn't gotten the chance.

The General suddenly said something sharply to his advisors, and stepped back from them, looking around. He caught sight of her and beckoned. Nervously, she went forward, and Mark followed. Vallorn didn't send him away.

General Vallorn gave Callah another penetrating stare. "I never got to speak to you earlier. I was going to tell you that you have been given a great gift, and also a heavy responsibility. I think you know that, but you must remember that you must be more careful than a common soldier. No more running into battle. Your friend here protected you this time, but it might not always turn out that way. From now on, you will stay back with the Healers and officers." She bit her lip and nodded. She wasn't going to argue with the General. She told herself she wasn't that good at fighting anyway, and this way maybe Mark would be out of danger, too. One less person to worry about.

General Vallorn continued. "Don't worry about not being able to help out in the battle. Like a commander, you will have to learn that sometimes you're more useful working in the background than fighting. You will wield the White Disk, and you will be the most important soldier we have."

Callah felt strange about her new importance. That wasn't the issue, though. "Sir, may I ask something?"

"Certainly."

"I'm worried about my friend Nicholas. He was the one captured just now by the Gorotal. Sir, we've got to rescue him!"

He looked thoughtful. "So he was one of your friends, eh? I'm sorry to hear that. This is what I've been discussing with the officers. We cannot go charging in against the

entire Gorotal army. That would be foolish, and it wouldn't help your friend. However, we think that *you* might be able to help him."

"Me, sir? With the White Disk?"

"Yes, though we don't know what it is capable of. For all we know, you could snatch him right out of the Gorotal's hands and set him down safe among us. There is no way to find out but to try. Try now. No one can teach you how to use the Disk. It has been lost for too long. You'll have to teach yourself, I'm afraid."

She nodded, uncertain. She had been hoping for more guidance than that. But, if she could help Nicholas, she had to give it a try. She pulled the White Disk out of her shirt. It was warm and smooth as she took the disk in her hands, and she realized this was the first time she'd really touched it. It felt alive, somehow. It didn't move in her hands, not exactly, but a beat ran through it, like a living heart. She held it flat in both hands and gazed at it. It was truly beautiful. The surface was pure and unstained by any design, but it moved and swirled subtly. There were almost colors in it, like shades of whiteness. She looked deeper -- she thought she could see something, pulsing white, at the heart of the disk. She realized that she could feel the same pulse running through her own veins.

She forgot everything else. She no longer saw the General standing nearby, or Mark at her side, or the floor underneath her. She was surrounded by whiteness, mists made of light. She was a part of the Disk; it had accepted her. Then she remembered what she needed to do. As she thought of Nicholas, the mists opened before her, and she saw, dimly at first, a troop of trolls and goblins, winding through a narrow rocky passage. In the midst of them was a tiny figure, hanging limply between two trolls. It was Nicholas. She'd never seen him look so small before, but the trolls were huge. The goblins were even tinier, running along behind. Callah watched the monsters leave the gorge and reach the valley of the green brambles, but it took Callah a moment to recognize it. A path had been hacked and burned through the thorns, and lay like an open wound in the green valley. The surviving brambles had pulled back to the edges of the valley, many of them

singed and missing leaves. They cowered away as the Gorotal went by. Callah wondered why the Gorotal had decided to force a path through a seemingly innocent patch of brambles. They must have already known what the brambles hid, but that was something to think about later.

She focused her gaze back on Nicholas. They were carrying him up the last hill now, almost beyond the haven of the Balancers. Waiting, at the top of the hill... More and more of the mists pulled away, revealing to her unwilling eyes the vast army encamped on top of the hill. Tents covered the hill, stretching down the sides into the valleys, filling them, too. The tall oaks that had stood so proudly were gone. Bonfires burned around the edges of the camp. The hill crawled with creeping goblins, lumbering trolls... and humans. This was the first time she'd seen one of the Gorotal who controlled the monsters. They were the ones in the tents. They stalked among their fiendish servants, kicking and shouting at them. So many enemies. Callah knew their small army couldn't hope to take on this one. If she couldn't save Nicholas, no one could.

He was now being carried up the steep path by the triumphant trolls. He still hadn't moved. Callah could only hope that they would only be taking him prisoner if he was all right. She had to get him out of there now.

She *leaned*, somehow, forward, willing the White Disk to carry her closer to him. Swiftly, she swooped down towards him, but she felt no motion. It was as though Nicholas and all the rest of the world around him was being moved closer to her, while she stood still. She knew she wasn't really there, but she hoped she could still reach him. None of the trolls or goblins looked at her, even when she seemed to be standing in the midst of them. She was only a few feet from Nicholas now. One of the trolls had tossed him limply over its shoulder and was carrying him that way. His eyes were closed and his face pale. She reached a hand out towards him, and nearly lost her concentration when she saw that it was not flesh-colored any longer, but as white as the mists that still

surrounded her. She touched his shoulder and felt nothing, but he stirred. He moaned and lifted his head, looking through her.

She tried to speak, and heard her voice come as the faintest of whispers.

“Nicholas! Try to take my hand, I’m here to rescue you.”

He heard her, she could see it. She reached out her hand to him. His hand moved, weakly. He lifted it, groping in the air. She grasped his hand with her ghostly one, getting ready to pull.

Suddenly there was a wrench, a terrible jerk that tore her hand out of his. She heard him cry out faintly as she hurtled away from him. The last she saw was her friend being thrown down at the feet of some Gorotal at the top of the hill, who closed in around him.

She was surrounded by the mists again. She’d lost sight of Nicholas, she’d failed. She didn’t know why, but something had pulled her away from him. She cried out to the mists around her, “Why? I must save him, what went wrong?”

The mists swirled. She felt that they were sorry, somehow. They whispered to her, in her mind, *wait. wait. he will return.*

Then she was back in the hard, sharp light of day. She watched the hope on the other’s faces fade when they saw the despair on her own. Nicholas remained in the Gorotal’s clutches.

Chapter Seven: In Which Terania Is Protected

The explanations were difficult, especially since Callah herself didn't know what had gone wrong. Her friends and General Vallorn gathered around, waiting to hear what had happened. Nearly in tears, she tried to describe what had happened, the way the mists had jerked her back just as she touched Nicholas' hand. She couldn't offer her friends any explanation for her failure. Maybe she had done something wrong; maybe the Disk couldn't do what she had asked it to. She knew nothing about magic. She only knew she'd left her friend to be tortured.

She didn't dare look up at the General as she told her story. Why had the Balancers given her the Disk, when she couldn't even use it? He must be disappointed in her, but he remained silent. She told of the voice that had spoken to her out of the mists, telling her to wait, that Nicholas would return. Then she finally gathered the courage to glance up at him. A small frown creased his forehead. He had had faith in her, as had her friends, and she had failed them all. She burst out, "Sir, I'm sorry! I must have done something wrong, I --" He raised his hand, cutting her off.

"No one knows how the White Disk is meant to be used," he said. He didn't sound angry, just tired. "I imagine it will take some trial and error before you master it. I am sorry that you could not save your friend. However, if the disk told you that he will return, I suggest you take hope in that.

"In any case, even if you had succeeded, the Gorotal would know where to find us. They will be massing for an attack even now. We have to find another way out of this maze, or they will crush us here. Try using the Disk again. See if you can find us another way out."

Callah nodded, glad to have an excuse to avoid her friends' faces. She couldn't see the worried looks they exchanged over her head. Now when she looked into the Disk,

asking it silently to show them another way out, one that would keep the Gorotal from finding them, the patterns within it began to swirl faster. She almost dropped it when the patterns rose like thick mist from its surface, swirling upward over her head. A few soldiers caught sight of it and stared -- the rest of the army turned to look and stood openmouthed as the mist wafted through the air, coiling like a white ribbon out over their heads. It drifted out across the bowl, and into one of the many narrow valleys that lined it, one they had not been down before. The glowing strand coiled out of sight, one end of it still connected to the disk in Callah's hands. She was afraid to let go of it or take her eyes off it, for fear the guide would disappear. She only hoped she had done it right this time, and that the strand would indeed lead them out. And she tried not to think about Nicholas.

The General wasted no time. He knew the Gorotal were probably already on their way, eager to trap their helpless enemy in the maze and slaughter them. He shouted for everyone to fall in, and the echoes carried his voice around and around the stone bowl. The soldiers scurried to form ranks, trying to make up for their breach of discipline during the charge on the goblins. Still concentrating intensely on the Disk, Callah vaguely heard the General telling Mark to keep her with the Healers, and felt Mark's arm around her shoulders guiding her over to their group. She went where he led her, her head bowed over the Disk.

The ranks were formed in a matter of minutes. The General shouted, "Follow the line of mist; it is the White Disk's guidance! It will show us the way out of this place, before the Gorotal can find us. This time, remember your training! Stay together, and listen for your orders! Now, move out!"

He led the way, his officers around him. He set the pace at a quick march which took them speedily into the fissure the white smoke had coiled into. This one was very narrow, only one person across. Callah waited with the Healers as a sergeant rapidly shouted orders, getting the troops organized to fit through the small gap. The Healers

were sent in one by one, with two soldiers between each one to protect them if the army ran into trouble. Callah and Mark were kept together, with five soldiers in front and behind. Callah didn't pay much attention to the arrangements. It was hard enough keeping her eyes and attention focused on the Disk. Its patterns were always changing, but always the same. She feared she might fall asleep, watching them. Mark went in front of her into the passage, walking sideways so that he could lead her with one hand on her shoulder. He led her well, but the ground was uneven, and after only a few minutes, she tripped, dropping the Disk. Panicking and clutching at the Disk, she scrambled back to her feet, looking for the ribbon of mist that guided them. To her great relief, it was still there. She watched it anxiously for a few minutes, but as it showed no signs of fading, she relaxed a little. At least now she could pay more attention to her footing. She shrugged apologetically at Mark for making him lead her. They moved more quickly after that, though Callah kept one anxious eye on the ribbon overhead to make sure it wasn't fading.

Their path twisted and turned, first leading one direction, then another, and the army made their way as quickly as they could. Sometimes the path widened into an avenue down which they could march easily; sometimes it narrowed so much that it was a tight fit for one soldier at a time. At first Callah listened fearfully behind them for the rumble of their enemy's pursuit. But after several hours of winding their way through the rocky maze, she relaxed, thinking they must have lost the Gorotal. They left no tracks on the stony ground, so the Gorotal couldn't know which of the many paths they'd taken. They must be safe.

The General had set a blistering pace at the beginning, almost running through the passages. After an hour or so, they slowed down to a more sustainable pace, believing themselves out of immediate danger. The walk quickly became monotonous as the excitement of flight wore off, and they plodded one after the other as the day wore on. Callah could hear a soldier behind her muttering, wondering if they were really heading for an exit, or if they were just wandering in circles. In the afternoon the paths they followed

began to climb upward. She hoped that meant they were nearing the end of this strange place.

Finally, as the sun was starting to set, Callah heard a murmur from up ahead. She could hear the soldiers just ahead of her asking for news. She rounded the next bend, and sighed with relief when she saw the end of the passage ahead. Craning over Mark's shoulder, she could see the V-shaped cliffs giving way to a view of the open sky, where purple clouds were heaped in layers on the horizon, the sun glowing through them. Callah could see rows of forested hills stretching away, dark in the last of the sun.

Everyone hurried forward, eager to leave the enclosing walls behind. But when Callah got there, she saw that the ground fell away a few feet beyond the passageway. A long, steep slope of smooth rock stretched downward. The misty trail they'd followed drifted out a few feet over the drop-off, then trailed off to nothing. Callah pulled back, her heart pounding. All she could think of, looking down, was the cliff that had nearly killed her when she tried to escape the trolls. She was shaking. She didn't think she could go down that.

A sergeant had been posted at the passage opening to help everyone down. He said, "Don't worry, it's not as steep as it looks. You can just slide down it without getting hurt. We haven't had so much as a sprained ankle so far."

Mark turned to look at her, surprised at her hesitation. She flushed, he probably thought she was a coward. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"Sorry, it's just... the cliff..." The soldiers behind her were snickering. She gritted her teeth. "I'll be all right. Let's go."

Mark looked concerned, but nodded. "I'll go down with you."

Callah was thoroughly embarrassed now, so much so that she almost forgot her fear. "No, that's all right. I just wasn't expecting it, that's all." She sat down on the edge and swung her legs over, telling herself that this cliff was nothing like the other one, then took a deep breath and pushed off. The rock was very smooth indeed. She slid quickly

down without hitting any snags or bumps, and landed with a jolt at the bottom. General Vallorn was standing there. He reached out a hand to help her up. She blinked at him, surprised by the honor.

“We’ve sent out scouts to secure the area. It’s hard to say, but we seem to be in the hills near the border, just further west than we started. You stay here with the Healers; we don’t know whether any Gorotal forces nearby.”

Mark came sliding down with a thump as the General helped her up. The General nodded to both of them and marched off to see to the perimeter. It would take a while for the whole army to get down the hill, since most were still strung out in single file along the narrow corridors.

Callah and Mark stood and watched silently as people slid down the hill. The sergeant at the top had been right; no one did get hurt. Callah wasn’t sure if that was because of some magical property of the stone, or just luck. From below, the slope didn’t look like anything special. It seemed like just another of the cliffs that were common in these hills, maybe a little smoother than normal, but not noticeably so. She couldn’t see the corridor they’d come out of from here, just more cliff. She admired the way the Balancers guarded their home. Unless they already knew there was something on the other side, no one would have any reason to climb this slippery cliff, any more than they would try to get through the thick brambles at the other entrance. The barriers were more effective because they didn’t look like barriers.

After most of the army had emerged from the Balancer’s realm, Callah noticed that they ones who had just slid down the hill were looking worried. She heard one say to another, “Did you hear anything from behind us, just before we came out?”

Alarmed, she looked up at the hidden opening. The next soldier came sliding down and hit the ground at a run, shouting, “We can hear noises from back down the path! The Gorotal must have found us!”

The General's voice roared over the sudden mutter of alarm. "Form up, troops! Draw your weapons! They'll be coming through only a few at a time, we can pick them off!" But Callah thought she heard doubt in his voice. She knew that if a troll came sliding down that slope, he'd smash into their army like the boulder that was his brother. Picking them off wouldn't be so easy.

The General appeared at her elbow. "This is why we searched for the White Disk," he whispered urgently. "See what you can do."

Soldiers were pouring down the slope now, almost throwing themselves over the edge. The last of them landed in a heap at the bottom, and hurriedly scurried into the safety of the army's ranks. One of them shouted, "They're right behind us! I saw them, they've got goblins with their noses to the ground, sniffing us out!"

Now Callah could hear the rumble of many feet, growing louder. Her heart pounding, she stared down at the White Disk, silently begging it to help her, but her gaze was yanked away when the first of the trolls came over the hill. It skidded down the slope on huge flat feet, somehow staying upright. Callah watched in horror as the troll smashed into the line of braced fighters. It landed right on their uplifted swords, but many of them were brushed away, or their tough steel blades snapped like sticks on its hide. A few stuck into its stony flesh, and it bellowed with a sound of grating rocks. One swipe of its arm knocked three soldiers on their backs.

The next troll appeared at the top of the cliff, poised to leap down. The first troll was surrounded and beginning to falter, but it wasn't dead yet. The army couldn't fight troll after troll, they were just too powerful. Callah didn't know how such huge creatures had made it through some of the tight spots in the passages. Maybe they'd found another way around, or maybe they'd just smashed their way through. She had to stop them.

Callah forced her gaze back down to the Disk, forced herself to ignore the shouts and cries of pain that were already filling the air around her. She concentrated, and again a wisp of white mist obeyed her will and rose up from the Disk, high into the air. She

willed the mist to strike like a whip, wanting it to destroy the second troll before it could join the battle, but the mist only floated gently down, and when it touched the creature it recoiled, with the same jolt she'd felt when she tried to rescue Nicholas. She gritted her teeth in frustration. What was she doing wrong? Then it struck her that the Dark Ones were said to have been created by the power of the Black Disk -- maybe that protected them from the White Disk. So if she couldn't hurt them, what could she do? Maybe a wall...

She closed her eyes, clutching the cool smooth surface of the disk tightly. A wall, a barrier that evil couldn't pass through. That was what she needed. In her mind, she drew a shining line between her friends and allies and the monsters, darkness on one side, light on the other. She opened her eyes to see a wall of white light leap up, gleaming in the gathering dusk. It formed an arc that swept through the middle of her army, all the Dark Ones on the other side, and touched the cliff wall on both sides.

Unfortunately, a large number of her own side's troops had been in close combat with the Dark Ones, and they were now on the other side as well. She had thought that might happen. She had tried to make the barrier selective, so that it would only block creatures of evil. She held her breath, hoping it would work.

The barrier was translucent, the color of cloudy glass. Things on the other side were a little blurry, and their edges shimmered with rainbows, but the battle could still be clearly seen. Callah saw one big soldier lifted high by a troll's club and flung several feet through the air. He came through the barrier without slowing, and crashed into the ground. That answered one question, at any rate. The Healers ran to him.

General Vallorn had seen the same thing. He shouted above the noise, "Soldiers, fall back! They can't follow you through the barrier!" Callah only hoped the monsters wouldn't pass through her wall just as easily as the hapless fighter had.

Soldiers started to fall back through the barrier as quickly as they could scramble, dragging their wounded back with them. The Healers hovered at the barrier, seizing the

wounded as they emerged. A few even darted through the barrier to the dangerous side, to help get everyone out. Luckily, few trolls had yet come down the slope, and they had all flinched away from the wall when it went up, giving the Teranians a chance to escape.

In a surprisingly short time, the battle was over, though the trolls danced on the other side of the barrier in frustration. They stayed several feet back from it, though, seeming unwilling even to brush against it. Inside things were crowded, since the trolls hadn't immediately realized that there was nowhere to go, and had kept coming down. There was a constant scramble going on as they tried to climb back up the slope, but they couldn't make it and slid back down on top of each other. A scuffle soon broke out.

On the top of the cliff, a human suddenly appeared. Apparently the Gorotal preferred to send in their minions to do their dirty work before they themselves even stepped onto the battlefield. This one didn't look happy to be here. He shouted down at the jumble of scrambling creatures below him, uncoiling a long whip from his belt and cracking it over their heads. They snarled, but backed away. He turned and shouted an order to someone or something in the passage behind him. His voice was muted from behind the wall, and Callah couldn't quite make out what he was saying. A scrawny goblin skulked forward. He kicked at it, and it skidded down the slope on all four spidery limbs. He gestured at it, and it crept unwillingly toward the barrier, but stopped before touching it. He raised his whip, and it cowered, but it wouldn't go any closer to the wall. He scowled, and snapped an order to one of the trolls. An unpleasant grin split its ugly face, and it scooped the goblin up in one enormous hand, then flung it hard against the wall Callah had raised. There was a flash of light and the goblin shrieked. It bounced off the wall and fell to the ground, whimpering. It didn't seem injured, but the wall had stopped it.

The Gorotal officer tucked his whip in his belt and slid down the slope, trying to stay dignified. He stalked between the ranks of his underlings, right up to the wall. He put out his hand and touched it, and shuddered in revulsion, but did not pull away. Then

he pushed his hand right through the barrier, and setting his teeth, followed it. It let him through. Callah was crestfallen. He was evil, but still a human, so it had let him through. He stood staring disdainfully at the soldiers ranged against him. Several of the Teranian soldiers raised their swords. The General stepped forward, though, and shouted, "Sheathe your weapons!" He strode forward, stopping a few feet from the Gorotal officer. The air between them seemed to crackle as they stared at each other.

The Gorotal was short and swarthy, with a black beard that hung in two greasy braids. He sneered at the General, "So, after all these years, you weaklings have actually managed to find the White Disk. You don't seem to know how to use it very well, though. It must have taken you five minutes to put up a simple wall to block a tiny fraction of our army. And that pitiful attempt to rescue that little boy we captured? Pathetic. Surely you realized that we would detect it? You can't touch us directly with your power; the might of our Black Disk prevents you. Your White Disk is nothing compared to its strength! We strike down your lands with pestilence and famine, and you cannot so much as slay a single one of our men. We summon endless hordes of dark fighters to serve our will. Let me watch when you try to raise up even one of your own! And I can stand here alone in front of your whole army, and you don't even have the courage to strike me down!"

General Vallorn stood with his arms folded, waiting for the man to finish his boasting. Then he said softly, "We do not attack you because it would serve no purpose. Your loss would not even be noticed by your superiors. But your insolence has irritated me, so I think you should go back to your filthy, crawling servants now. Tell your overlords to go home, or watch their army be destroyed. Run now, or feel my blade!" He whipped his sword out of its sheath. The boastful Gorotal obviously hadn't been expecting that. He flinched.

"Fools! All who oppose the Gorotal's might will perish!" He tried to keep up his former bravado, but his voice quavered. General Vallorn let his blade fall, and the other

man gasped and flung himself backward through the wall. The General sheathed his sword in disgust and turned his back on the man, shaking his head.

“All right! Get ready to move out! Let’s distance ourselves from the stink of this scum.” The army formed up and prepared to march, as the Gorotal officer shouted up at his goblins above to bring ropes and pull him up. From what Callah could tell, the goblins were laughing at him, now that he was unable to reach them. They left the Gorotal behind, trying to put some distance between themselves and the Balancers’ haven, and the enemy.

After they made camp, Callah sat with her silent friends by the fire and thought about the barrier she’d raised. It had seemed to work well enough, even if it wouldn’t stop humans, and now she wondered if it could be applied on a larger scale. She stared into the White Disk once more.

Again, as they had the first time, its mists surrounded her, drawing her out of the confusion of the outer world and into its still peace. Then the mists parted before her, revealing an expanse of green. Looking down, she realized it was her own land, seen from high above, higher than any mountain could tower. She could see the hills, the grasslands, the wide stretch of forest and farmland, and far off, the glimmer of the sea.

She felt a chill at her back and turned around. The mountains rose up in blunt peaks of rock and pine. On the other side, wasted land stretched away into darkness. All she saw was withered trees, dry barren fields, hardly a speck of green to be found, even from her high vantage.

But worse than the ravaged land was the darkness that lurked to the north. It was a crouching, brooding clot of black on the landscape. Forcing herself to look at it closely, she could make out the faint outlines of a crumbling fortress set on a high rocky spire, enveloped by palpable darkness. That was the source of the cold she felt. It was as if a frozen wind blew outward from it. She could see tendrils of its darkness reaching out like

pulsing rivers, twisting through the land it dominated like a spreading cancer. Its arms reached out, clutching its land, and even crept across the mountains. She could see the tendrils moving, creeping slowly as she watched, deeper into her own unspoiled land. Where the black fingers touched, she thought she saw the green of the land fading.

She had to stop the life from being drained from her land. She lifted her hand and pointed to one side of the border, where the land met the sea. She *willed*, and a line sprang up, glowing as white as the evil tendrils were black. She motioned, drawing the line across the hills, where she imagined the border to be, willing it to be a eternal barrier between her people and the forces summoned by the Black Disk.

There was a jolt when the white line came into contact with one of the black tendrils. Callah willed her line sharp, *burning* it through the creeping evil, but there was resistance. Dimly and far away, she felt surprise and outrage from a will that had never felt opposition. It was suddenly *close*, and she could feel its ancient, rotten strength, the force of its hate. It was hungry. It wanted to devour everything green, soak up every light, until there was nothing but its own swollen, lonely bulk. Right now, what it wanted most was to devour *her*.

She could feel the powers of the White and Black Disks, perfectly balanced, like two swung swords meeting, matching edge to edge. A breath to either side and the equilibrium would shatter. One of the swords would fall.

She and the ancient wielder of the Black Disk struggled, mind against mind. At first she thought she would be swept away before its wrath, but somehow she held her ground. It seemed to be too startled at the challenge to bring its full power against her.

Back around the fire, Callah's friends gathered around her, alarmed. She hadn't wanted to get their hopes up, in case this didn't work, so she hadn't told them what she was going to do. They were afraid to touch her now as she trembled and panted, face twisted, eyes closed. Mark reached out to touch her shoulder, but she felt nothing, locked in a battle far away.

The power of the old king, the one who had held sway over Gorotal for so long, struck at her -- *she was nothing but a girl, she knew nothing of the powers she tried to wield, she was never intended for such a responsibility* -- and she felt the cowardice in herself agreeing with it. The Balancers should have known that she couldn't do something like this. She was no hero; she should never have joined the army. Somehow, though, even as part of her cried and wailed that it wanted to go home, another part realized that regardless of her worth, she was the one who had been chosen. Whether or not she could do it, she was the one here, standing between evil and her home. No one else could do it, just her. It wasn't fair, it wasn't right, it should have happened to someone stronger, but that didn't change her duty. She gathered her strength and shoved back against the solid wall of darkness that was pressing in on her. To her surprise, she felt it give.

She was connected to the loathsome thing that was her opposite, and she felt its fear. Nothing had opposed this old king for hundreds of years. She could feel his great age, the endless empty days and years that the Black Disk had stretched out for him at his request. She could feel the great weight, the nothingness of those years, how everything the Disk gained for him had turned to dust in his mouth. She sent a quiet question at him: *Why keep fighting the natural order? Can death be so terrible, if this is all life holds for you?*

With that he recoiled, the oldest terror of all driving him. Was that all he was afraid of, Callah wondered -- had he done all this, destroyed so much, just to keep from growing old and dying? She drove her white sword of flame forward, and felt him cry out and drop away from her, their connection broken. Then she was alone, floating in the clear air over her land. When she waved her hand, the light sprang up all along the barrier, slicing cleanly through the filthy black tendrils that had been draining the life out of her home. The bits of blackness, cut off from their source, withered and shriveled away. The border of her home was now protected by a shining white line, from one side to the other.

She gave a sigh of triumph and relaxed. She opened her eyes to find herself lying cradled in Mark's arms, her friends peering down at her with worried expressions. "Are you all right?" he said, helping her sit up.

She nodded. It felt strange to be sitting on solid ground. Alissa exclaimed, "You looked horrible! Your face was all twisted up, and then you just fell over. What happened?"

Callah took a deep breath, and started to explain what she'd done.

Chapter Eight: In Which Nicholas Is Rescued

Most of the army was in high spirits as they marched out the next day. The Gorotal had proved unable to break the wall that Callah had raised, and the news that she had a way to stop the effects of the Black Disk on their homeland had sent a wave of pure joy through the soldiers. Many of them had worried about the families they'd left behind, with the Black Disk sending famine and sickness to weaken them. Now they didn't have to worry about that. Everyone Callah looked at grinned at her, or came over and shook her hand. It was embarrassing, and she was in no mood for it. She had not forgotten her earlier failure to save Nicholas.

She and her friends were not in such high spirits. Nicholas' fate weighed on their minds. Callah couldn't bear to think of what he must be going through right now, if he was still alive. She marched along with her eyes on the ground. She tried to take hope in what the White Disk had told her, that he would return, but it was hard to be comforted by such a vague promise. She was full of guilt. Her friends stayed close to her, trying to cheer her up, but Callah could tell that they were dispirited, too. Alissa seemed especially upset. She was always picking on Nicholas when he was around, playing off his pride and touchiness, but now she seemed to be at a loss, and was unusually silent. No one else was talking much either.

General Vallorn had sent out scouts to try to determine their position. It was impossible to keep track of the twists and turns they'd taken in the Balancer's realm, so they weren't sure exactly where they were. As far as the scouts could tell, they weren't very far away from the spot where they'd entered the bramble valley. They worried that the Gorotal force could reach them quite quickly, if it only knew where they were. Luckily, they had sighted no enemies since they'd left the frustrated little band behind at the opening in the rock wall. They set out marching west, hoping that that would take

them further away from the Gorotal forces and out of immediate danger. After that, they would turn north, towards the Gorotal homeland, back into danger. The General had made a brief address to the army before they'd set out in the morning. He had spoken quietly, but intensely, his hands clasped behind his back.

“We have finished the mission that you all volunteered to set out upon,” he had said. The army remained silent. “We have found the White Disk, which has been lost for hundreds of years. Now we face a choice. The easy path would be to return now to our homes, bearing the White Disk with us in triumph, to guard us forever against the Gorotal’s power. This path seems safest. However, when the Disk was given to us, a promise was taken in return: that we would rejoin the White Disk to its dark brother, and forever remove these powers from the world of men. Thus, honor dictates that we avoid the easy course.

“Honor may be all the reason we need to keep our promise, but it is not the only one. Think: what would happen if we brought the White Disk back to our own land, breaking our word? Not only would we become thieves, but we would also doom ourselves to strive forever against Gorotal, neither of us ever able to end the conflict, until one or the other of us were finally and utterly destroyed. Two such great and opposite powers could never rest with only a border between them. And they are evenly balanced; if one side were ever to defeat the other, it would only be after ages of warfare. Our children would know nothing but endless war.

“And, though it may seem strange to say such a thing of our sworn enemy, we would also doom the Gorotal. My grandfather once told me of a time when the Gorotal were no more evil than anyone else, when trade between our two nations was open and both our lands prospered. But over the years the Black Disk shaped them to its will; now they are nothing but its slaves and puppets, twisted to the service of evil. Gorotal is now a wound upon the land, and it is one which will never be healed until the poison thorn which

caused it is removed. If our word did not bind us to take up this second quest, our good sense would. We march to Gorotal. Are you with me?"

The army roared its assent. They had expected deadly danger and a near-impossible task when they had agreed to join Vallorn's army, and so far they had not faced anything too difficult. If anyone was abashed by what the General was now proposing, they were hiding it well.

He smiled. "I expected nothing less. However, I will need a few of you to forgo this adventure. Word of our success, and of our mission, must be taken back to the King. The way home may be blocked by Gorotal forces, so the task will not be without danger. Whoever wishes to volunteer for this messenger group may speak to me when we make camp this evening."

Once again, Callah had to admire the General. If there were any soldiers who had lost their nerve at the idea of invading Gorotal, now they had a way out that would still allow them to do something worthwhile. He was an excellent leader.

Callah hadn't really thought about what would happen after they retrieved the Disk. At first she'd been too shocked at being chosen to bear it, and later she'd been too upset about Nicholas. Now she considered the future, trying to take her mind off him. She had made a promise to the Balancers, without thinking very deeply about what it entailed. She had told them she would bring the White Disk and the Black together, to neutralize their powers and bring them back to the Balancers, so that they would no longer be troubled by how men used their creations. Now she knew where the Black Disk was: at the heart of the wasted kingdom of Gorotal, deep in a fortress that was wrapped in darkness, in the clutch of an ancient, wicked man who would cling to it as he had clung to his life for so long. The General seemed to think an attack on the fortress was possible. She had seen their destination, though, and it filled her heart with fear. She fought it back. If the General thought they could do it, and all these brave souls were ready to follow him,

she wouldn't let them all down. She was the bearer of the White Disk, and she had to be strong. Even if she wasn't.

When the scouts returned the evening after the army turned north, they brought word of a small group of Gorotal that was also heading north. There were no goblins or trolls with them, only humans, about six of them. They had nine horses, picketed close to the tents. The scouts had waited and watched well into the night -- the Gorotal only had one guard on watch, seeming unconcerned about possible attacks. But the most interesting thing that the scouts reported was the possible presence of a prisoner. One of them had caught sight of a man in one of the tents, with his arms tied. She had had only a bare glimpse, however, and could give no description of the man.

When Callah and her friends heard this, the same question filled each of their minds. Could it be Nicholas? Hope, and fear that the hope was in vain, battled inside Callah until she didn't know how to feel. Hope won out, for the most part, when the General announced that they would be attacking the Gorotal. The small group posed no threat, and if there was a Teranian prisoner there, he should be rescued. The General also hoped to capture the horses. He said they'd be useful if there were wounded who needed quick transport, and he also hoped to have a pair of mounts available for Callah and Mark, so they could escape with the Disk, if their army lost a battle. Callah hated the idea of riding off and abandoning everyone else, but maybe it would never come to that.

The General gathered a squad of forty fighters to attack the Gorotal camp at dawn. He hoped that they would be able to impress the Gorotal with their numbers and perhaps force a surrender without fighting. Callah and her friends went along, since Nicholas might be the captive. Callah and Mark had permission to go if they stayed at the back of the fighting and did not endanger themselves. Too tense to rest, Callah slept little through what was left of the night. When the sky began to turn grey, she gathered with the others and crept through the forest toward the small enemy camp.

The camp was only three tents, set up in a small clearing, with a tiny campfire in the middle. The flames had died to embers, and threw a sullen red light onto the grey tents and the single figure who stood at the edge of the clearing. It was a muscular man of middling height who stood peering out into the shadowy trees, sword drawn. He'd probably heard one of them moving a little, but wasn't sure yet if the noise signaled a threat, or just an animal passing by. He wouldn't get the chance to call the alarm now.

There were several Teranians in the small group who were good archers. The General had instructed all of them, if they got a clear shot, to take it as soon as they thought they could kill the guard quickly. Callah found herself with an unobstructed view of him between two trees. She thought she could easily put an arrow in his throat from here. She rose slowly from her crouch, pulling an arrow slowly from her quiver and setting it to her bowstring, smoothly and quietly.

She sighted down the long straight shaft of the arrow, past its wicked iron point. The man had lifted his head to listen, conveniently baring his throat. She wouldn't let herself think that this was the first human she'd ever tried to kill. Nicholas might be in there. She drew the arrow back so that its feathers almost tickled her ear. It would be a powerful shot, so that he would be killed right away, but she had to be careful not to overshoot her mark. She waited, breathed once, and loosed the arrow. It sprang from the bow, only buzzing slightly. She'd made sure her arrows were straight and the fletchings not loose, so that they would not whir too loudly as they flew through the air.

She didn't breathe as the arrow streaked towards the sentry. She had aimed well, it buried itself in his throat, knocking him backward. He fell heavily to the ground, but made no other noise. Callah's allies hurried forward, taking less care to be quiet now.

There was stirring from the tents. A head popped out of one of them. The man blinked groggily at the dark shapes that were slipping into the clearing, then shouted a loud warning. Before he could say any more, a warrior reached him and smashed him to the ground with a mace.

Three more Gorotal darted out of their tents. These had had time to snatch up weapons, but to no avail. Two of them tried to fight and were cut down. One, seeing the numbers of his enemies, threw down his sword and sank to his knees with his hands outstretched for mercy. He was quickly surrounded by a ring of weapons. That left one Gorotal unaccounted for. And the prisoner.

They came bursting out of the tent together, a swarthy Gorotal dragging Nicholas by his bound arms out of the tent, a dagger pressed hard against his throat. The attackers fell back from him. Callah was in the back rank of fighters, but she could still see clearly enough. It was him. He was thin, and dirty, his clothes torn almost to shreds. The ropes that held his arms behind his back were cutting into his flesh; and his face was black and swollen with bruises, but it was undoubtedly Nicholas. He was alive. All they had to do was keep him that way.

The Gorotal cried, his voice thick with a guttural accent, "Let me go, or I'll kill him!"

The General stepped forward. "Let him go, and we will show you mercy."

"Pah!" he spat. "I have no use for your mercy! If you don't want to see him slain before your eyes, open a path for me!"

The Gorotal who had surrendered spoke up from where he was still kneeling in the dirt. "Let me go, too! Take me with you, Tryon!"

The one who held Nicholas turned his head and glared in the other man's direction. "Coward! I'll not help a deserter. Rot with your new friends!" He curled his lip disdainfully and turned back to face the General. "I'll take my prisoner, and myself, and go. You can keep this worm, much joy may he bring you."

The General stood still as stone. "We do not bargain with the likes of you. We cannot let you go to warn your friends of our position, and we will not let you take one of our men to taste your lords' dubious hospitality. You will be treated well if you let this man go; we are not cruel. However, if you harm him, you will die."

Tryon pressed harder with his knife, and a small trickle of blood welled up and ran down to join the blood already dried on Nicholas' chest. Callah bit her lip -- this wasn't going well. Very slowly, she put another arrow to bowstring. She might be able to shoot him before he could harm Nicholas...

Before she could steel herself to take the risk, one of the Teranians behind Tryon shifted position. The Gorotal heard it and his head jerked around sharply. His grip on Nicholas loosened just a fraction, and Nicholas didn't waste the opportunity. He drove his head backward hard, connecting with his captor's temple. The man's knife arm sagged, and Nicholas threw himself sideways before the other could recover, tearing free of his grasp. His muscles bunched; he burst his ropes -- they had been frayed almost through. It looked like he'd prepared for a chance like this.

Tryon had stumbled to the side, but now he recovered and leaped for Nicholas with his knife raised. Nicholas grabbed his arms, and they went down in a tangle of limbs. The Teranians gathered around, but no one wanted to risk hitting Nicholas. It turned out that it wasn't necessary. Callah couldn't see -- there were too many people in the way; but there was a gurgling shriek, and then Nicholas got back to his feet, holding the Gorotal's knife, blood dripping from the blade.

Silence fell. Nicholas stood very still, holding the bloody knife, more blood still trickling from the cut on his neck, staring around at his rescuers with an unreadable expression. No one moved for several moments, until Nicholas threw the knife to the ground and took an unsteady step backward. The soldiers standing near him put out their hands to catch him, thinking he might fall, but he waved them off. Callah's friends rushed through the crowd to gather around Nicholas, all talking at once. He looked at them blankly. Callah couldn't imagine what he had been through. She was afraid to approach him and stood frozen at the back of the crowd with her bow limp in her hands, staring at him. He was safe. She hadn't left him to die when she failed to rescue him. But he obviously hadn't had an easy time of it. Would he blame her?

Then Nicholas looked up, over the heads of his excited friends, and stared straight at her. She started. He asked quietly, "Why so shy, Callah? Aren't you glad I'm back?"

She came forward slowly then, not taking her eyes from his face. "I -- I'm very glad you're back. Would you... Can you forgive me?"

He frowned. "Forgive you for what, exactly?"

"For not saving you! I tried, with the Disk, when you were captured, and I almost got to you, but then something went wrong, and I lost you. I don't know what happened." There were tears in her eyes. She reached out one hand towards him, but then remembered how he hated to be touched and let it fall again. "It's my fault that you've been a prisoner all this time."

He looked at her for a moment, then smiled a twisted smile. "It isn't your fault. I was the one who ran like a fool into a bunch of trolls and let myself get captured in the first place. It sounds like your Disk isn't all it was supposed to be, but it wasn't your job to save me. I shouldn't have let it happen to begin with."

Callah was glad he didn't blame her, at least. She forced a trembling smile. "Well, at least we have you back now. I --"

Alissa broke in, apparently unable to keep quiet any longer. "Wow, it's great that we happened to find these Gorotal! If our scouts had missed them, we might never have gotten you back! So, did they torture you? Did you tell them all our plans?" She didn't seem to notice the glares from her friends. Sometimes Alissa had no sensitivity at all.

Nicholas would usually have gotten angry at Alissa for a question like that, but this time he just snorted. "They didn't treat me like a king, as you can see, but it could have been worse. I didn't have much to tell them, since they already knew where the army was, and I didn't know anything about what we were planning to do next. I think they were saving the real fun for later, when they got me back to their leaders at home in Gorotal. It would have gotten worse then." He looked grim.

General Vallorn approached them -- Timothy and Jacob backed away to make room for him. He stood with folded arms and looked Nicholas over in silence; Nicholas lifted his chin and stared back, expressionless.

Vallorn finally spoke. "Congratulation on rejoining the army, young man. Not many would be able to weather an experience like you must have had, but you seem to have come through it on your feet. That takes strength. I would like you to come with me, if you don't mind. I realize you must be tired, but I'd like to ask you a few questions about the Gorotal before you rest." They walked off together, Nicholas not allowing himself to limp, back towards the camp.

Callah followed the others as they all walked back. She listened quietly to their happy whispers back and forth, and smiled. Things might work out after all.

Chapter Nine: In Which Everyone Gets into Trouble

When they crossed the border into Gorotal land, no one noticed but Callah. The difference between one country and another was not as great as she had expected -- she had known there would be no line drawn on the ground, but had somehow expected one all the same. Still, to her there was a line between the two, a line that she herself had drawn. She could see it shimmering faintly at the edges of her vision, and as they drew closer to it, she could feel its strength, holding back the tide of hatred that beat against it ceaselessly, but could never again break through. She stopped at the wall, looking down it in both directions. Its subtle glimmer stretched out of sight between the trees. To her eyes, the trees on the other side were slightly wilted, a little less green; the song of birds and insects was muted, with an undertone of fear to it. It wasn't enough for anyone who couldn't see the barrier to notice, though.

Callah put a hand through the wall, not feeling the resistance she had half expected. She felt something else as she started to step through, though. As the White Disk touched the barrier, it flashed a bright warning -- she had forgotten again to hide it in her shirt. Simultaneously Callah felt a quiver from beyond the wall, the faintest hint of a stirring from the power that waited there. She suddenly knew that if she passed through the barrier, the Black Disk would sense her Disk's presence. Its bearer would know where she was, and send hordes of his creatures to stop her. She stepped back, away from the barrier. She must first find a way to keep him from sensing her before she could pass through it.

The General had been walking the length of the army, making sure everything was going smoothly. When the White Disk flashed, he saw it and strode over. "Is anything wrong?"

She frowned, holding the Disk. "Sir, this is the border between Terania and Gorotal, where I raised the barrier to keep out the Black Disk's influence. Until now, the

one who holds the Black Disk has not been able to sense me, but if I pass through, he will know where I am. He'll be able to send troops against our army. I have to find a way to hide the White Disk from him."

The General stood back as Callah concentrated on the Disk. Once again she was enveloped in its whiteness. What she needed was a blanket to cover them up, or a fog that would hide them... White mists began to smoke up from the Disk -- everyone was staring at Callah, but she didn't notice. Mist, that was good, but it had to hide her from the Black Disk, not from ordinary sight. The mists disappeared from the sight of the people watching her, but Callah had her eyes closed anyway. She could see what was happening in her mind. She wreathed the mist around the Disk in her hand, and around herself, until she was sure she was completely covered. Then she had a thought and tried extending the mists, which spread outwards effortlessly. Good, maybe she could hide the whole army this way. The mists billowed up and out. She made them form a long cloud around her, covering the whole army, allowing extra room for stragglers. She made it nice and thick. There, that should conceal them.

She looked up from the Disk. There was a ring of soldiers around her, watching her expectantly. The General asked, "Success?"

Callah nodded. "I believe so. I tried to cover the whole army, so that we'll all be hidden from the Black Disk. I don't think it will guard against normal spies and scouts, though, so we'll have to be just as careful to avoid being seen by the Gorotal."

The General said, "Good enough. Better give it a test then." He motioned her forward.

Callah took a deep breath and stepped through the barrier. It was like stepping into a cave out of bright sunlight. She could feel the darkness of this place; the sunlight seemed dim all around her. She could feel the crouching power ahead of her, sitting in its stronghold, cloaked in its own darkness, but she did not feel the sudden recognition she

had feared. He had not noticed her. They had passed through one more trap safely, but now they were in the land of their enemy.

Traveling was hard after that. Near the border, there were many Gorotal camps of various sizes, but most of them were already in the hills on the Teranian side, waiting to move further into the country. General Vallorn tried to avoid the Gorotal whenever possible, not wanting to give away their presence until absolutely necessary. They hid, detoured, and backtracked, weaving their way between the bands of Gorotal. Sometimes, if there was a small isolated group, they would move in and slaughter the enemy, making sure none of them escaped to give warning.

As they traveled further, the decay of the land began to be more obvious. Trees were dead or diseased, with black-spotted leaves. Even the undergrowth was wilted and sickly. There was not much water to be found. Most riverbeds were dry, or held only a trickle of mud. Food was scarce too -- what few animals they saw looked thin and mangy. Their stores were enough for now, but they probably would begin to run low before long. The soldiers might end up as thin as the animals if they weren't careful.

The hills started to grow less steep now, with more flat land in between. There were fewer groups of Gorotal here. Callah imagined they preferred the richer land of Terania to this dying waste. She knew she did.

That afternoon the scouts brought back word of a detachment of goblins up ahead, bringing supplies to the rest of the army. There were not very many of them, maybe twenty goblins and a handful of human overseers. Quickly the General made plans. It would be worthwhile to capture the supplies -- there would be food for the human commanders even if the goblin's food was unpalatable, and water, both of which they could use. Such a small band should be easy prey. The goblins were only a few miles up ahead, coming along a rudimentary dirt road, probably the remains of a more prosperous time, when trade caravans traveled to Terania.

The General led the army to a place the scouts had found, where the road ran close by the hill before turning outward to cross an open field cut by a dry riverbed, a wooden bridge crossing it. The goblins would be heading towards the field. The army took up their places on the far side of a tall ridge of rock that ran up the hill, so that the goblins wouldn't see them until it was too late.

Mark stood by the horse he'd been given, Callah fidgeting on a lanky bay mare beside him. The horses had been captured in the same raid that had rescued Nicholas, and now General Vallorn had required Mark and Callah to stay on their horses once the fighting started, so they could escape quickly if necessary. Mark could see the rest of the army, spread through the undergrowth on the wooded hillside, every eye fixed on the dusty road below them. For a moment, he had a disorienting sense of repetition, as though he had been in a situation like this before. He could not think where, though; maybe it had been in a dream. A moment later the feeling dissipated, leaving him uneasy. Suddenly, irrationally, he was sure that something would go wrong. He forced himself to sit still. Nothing would go wrong; it was a good plan. The goblin troop they were waiting to ambush would be outnumbered at least two to one. It would be an easy victory. He was just jittery because he and Callah had to sit back here with the General and his advisors, instead of fighting the goblins with their friends. While Mark was glad to keep Callah out of danger, he chafed at letting others risk their lives while he sat in idle safety. He did not even have the expertise to assist the General with strategy. That was what Timothy had been doing. Something he had said had so impressed Torvald, the one who had instructed them on strategy, that he had started bringing him into the tactical discussions.

The discussion was over now, though, and Timothy came to stand next to Mark and Callah. Mark said, "You ready?"

Timothy shrugged. "I'm hanging back with the reserves, so I'm not too nervous. I don't know, I just always feel self-conscious when I'm charging into battle. I feel silly, like I'm just pretending to be a warrior, or maybe like I'm acting out a story." He smiled ruefully. "I'm just not cut out for this kind of thing. I like planning a battle a lot more than being in one."

Mark said, "I don't know if I've ever felt like I was pretending to be a warrior when I was charging into battle, but of course nowadays I usually don't remember much of it. But it might be easier if this were just a story to act out. Then we'd know what we were supposed to do, and how things would end. I guess they'll be making stories about this some day, if we win. That would be something to hear. Maybe we'd even get titles. I could be Mark the Magnificent!" He grinned.

Timothy smiled, too. "I could tell that story. And this is how it would go: Mark looked out across the sea of enemies and saw how many there were. He shivered and shook, terrified, but then his warrior friend, the legendary Timothy, walked up beside him. 'Do not fear,' the brave Timothy said, thumping his quivering friend on the shoulder. 'The enemy are many, but we are strong and brave, and we will prevail.' The hero's comrade straightened his shoulders and stopped shivering, given new courage by the great Timothy's reassurance."

Mark laughed. "And then the astounding Timothy said, 'Wait here! I will show them the true strength of a hero.' And he went alone to face the enemy hordes, and lay about him with his dreadful sword, and they fled before him and were vanquished. And there was peace again in the land."

Grinning, Timothy replied, "Exactly! You stay here, I'll go end this war alone!" And he raised his fist as though he would charge down the hill.

Suddenly the piping whistle of a bird cut through the forest from further down the road. A ripple went through the hidden army as every eye strained for a glimpse of the road. That was the signal that the goblins were in sight. The caw of a crow followed,

from the same direction, and Mark frowned. Something was wrong! The crow-call meant that there was something unforeseen about the approaching band. He strained his ears, listening for the goblins' steps. Soon the tramp of a large group was audible, and by the sound, it was a much a larger group than they were expecting.

After that, things fell apart, and everything seemed to happen at once. There was a buzzing noise from behind him, and then a squeal from Callah's horse. The creature plunged past him, a small red-feathered dark sticking from its flank. Callah had not been prepared for the horse's sudden lunge -- she was barely in the saddle, clinging to the reins with one desperate hand as the horse leapt down the hill towards the road. There went their surprise, Mark thought with a strange detachment, leaping onto his horse and kicking it into a gallop, lying low against its neck to avoid the tearing branches. As if in slow motion, he saw Callah fall from her horse, landing in a cloud of dust in the middle of the road, in full view of the approaching enemy. She rolled once and lay still for a fraction of a second, then got to her feet, swaying unsteadily. She looked very small down there, all alone, facing a column of goblins that stretched down the road, with a few bands of trolls at intervals among them. There were a few human commanders as well. They'd been expecting a group one-fifth this size, without trolls. Something had gone terribly wrong.

The goblins and trolls stared at Callah for a moment, surprised. Then they gave a cry of glee at the sight of a single defenseless victim and pounded towards her. The human commanders saw the trap and tried to stop their allies' mad rush, but they were ignored. Mark jumped his horse across the small ditch between hill and road, and pulled up between Callah and the attackers, keeping a tight grip on the reins. His horse tossed its head about and pranced, wanting battle. He could feel his own battle-madness coming on, but fought it back, retaining enough sense to see that attacking the entire army by himself would not be the best way to protect Callah. She lifted her arms to him, and he yanked her up, dragging her across his saddle in front of him. She managed to get into an almost-sitting position, clinging to the horse's mane. There was no time for her to find a

more stable seat -- he drove his heels into his horse's sides, sending it racing up the road.

The monsters sent up a bellow of disappointment as their prey sped ahead. Mark glanced back; the ambush still had a chance to work. The Gorotal army was disorganized in its mad rush to catch them, and the human commanders who had realized the danger were being ignored. The General had seen the same thing, apparently, for in the next second, a hail of arrows flew from the woods. The trees blocked some arrows, but some found their marks, and screams rose from the Gorotal's ranks. Half of the monsters were still trying to pursue Mark and Callah, but most of the remaining ones were panicked and trying to retreat back up the road. The human commanders cursed and lashed out at their followers, but had little success in bringing order. The Teranian army burst with a roar from the trees, crashing into the chaos.

Mark and Callah galloped down the road, still pursued by a large number of the enemy. The horse's hooves thudded on the packed dirt of the road, which turned away from the treeline to head for the bridge and dead river a few hundred feet past the ambush point. Mark steered the horse along the road, since the ground was better there. There was nowhere to go, really; nowhere safe here in the Gorotals' own land. He just needed to keep Callah away from the enemy long enough for the rest of the army to catch up.

Suddenly, the horse stumbled, whinnying. Callah clung to its neck, nearly unseated again. Mark looked back -- an arrow was sticking out of the horse's flank. One of the Gorotal must have had enough sense to stop and use his bow. Another arrow came whistling overhead, and Mark ducked. It missed, but Mark knew they were an easy target. The injured horse was limping, slowing down. The part of the Gorotal army that was still pursuing them would catch up at this rate, if he didn't do something.

Mark made his decision. He had to give Callah a chance to get away and keep the Disk safe. He was her protector. He swung off of the crippled horse, drawing his sword and slapping the flat of the blade against the horse's rump, before Callah could react. She

stared back at him in shock as the horse bolted away with her. Mark turned to face the charge of his enemy, and let the waiting madness take him.

When Mark slid off the horse, Callah first was afraid that an arrow had hit him. But then she saw him turn away from her and raise his sword, and knew what he was going to do. Angry, and frightened for him, she tried to scramble all the way into the saddle and find the reins. Before she could do more than get one hand tangled in the reins, the horse reared up onto its hind legs, apparently deciding that it didn't have any responsibility for the human that had gotten it shot. Callah tried to hold on, grabbing on to Mark's shield that was fastened to the back of his saddle, but it came loose. She slid off, managing to land mostly on her feet. The horse went limping off. Callah shook her head. Maybe the horses they'd captured from the Gorotal hadn't been such an advantage after all.

Callah found herself alone in the middle of the field, not far from the dry riverbed. Mark was surrounded by goblins not far away, his broadsword flinging their twisted bodies aside with each blow. He was fighting with amazing skill, but the goblins were still pouring around him, racing towards her. She didn't know what to do. She couldn't desert Mark to fight alone against so many. Across the field, she could see part of her army, fighting in their direction, but she couldn't be sure if they would be able to break free and reach her. She had to keep the White Disk from falling into the Gorotals' hands, no matter what the cost. But there was no sense in running; some of the goblins had to be faster than her, and some of them carried short bows. There was nothing to do but try to hold out until help arrived. Callah drew her sword, backing up to the edge of the ditch so that the goblins couldn't surround her completely, and strapped the shield to her arm. It was heavy, but she needed the extra protection.

The next few minutes were a nightmarish interval of feverish attempts to avoid the barbed swords stabbing at her from all directions. Callah had never been more than

moderately skilled at swordplay, and she knew she could not hold off her opponents much longer alone. She knew she wouldn't have lasted even this long if the goblins weren't so cowardly. They weren't afraid of her, one fighter all alone, but since there were so many of them, they were all waiting for someone else to take the first risk. It wouldn't take long before one or two of them worked up their courage, though.

Suddenly they fell back, unexpectedly leaving her a breathing space. Pushing her sweaty hair back from her face, she looked up, panting, and kept on looking up. She was facing the biggest troll she had ever seen. Easily ten feet tall, it towered above her, its long, sharp fangs bared in a fierce grin, and swung a great iron mace toward her skull. She barely had time to bring up her left arm as the blow whistled toward her. The weapon hardly seemed to pause as it crashed against her shield, the vicious metal spikes biting deeply into the wood. It pinned her shield to her side, lifting her completely off her feet. The world spun as she flew through the air in a short arc, and then smashed back to earth, hitting her head against the packed soil hard enough to make her ears ring. She sprawled on her back at the edge of the trench, trying to re-inflate her lungs, her crushed shield arm numb and limp at her side. Dizzily, Callah tried to focus on the enormous troll which now stood over her. It was raising its mace for another blow, one that would almost certainly crush her, but it all seemed distant and unreal. She had dropped her sword, and her shield arm wouldn't move -- she couldn't even feel it. She couldn't get up -- uselessly she raised her right hand, palm out as though she could ward off the blow.

It swept down, unstoppable -- but then jerked aside in mid-swing, thudding deeply into the dry turf not an inch to Callah's left. Suddenly Mark was there, between Callah and her assailant, his eyes blank with the Balancer's battle-madness. He had come through the wall of enemy fighters as though they were not even there, crashing into the troll leader so that its swing missed her. The troll roared in fury and ripped its long-handled mace out of the arid ground, tearing free a large chunk of dead grass which clung to the spikes of the mace. Mark swung his broadsword at the troll, forcing it to

back away a few steps. He stood over Callah, who was trying to sit up. She was still having trouble focusing her eyes, but she did make it to a crouch, her shield hanging limp at her side.

The troll lunged at Mark, and he counter-attacked with a ferocity that surprised it. It was not accustomed to such skillful resistance from puny humans. Its prodigious size and strength discouraged most potential attackers, and those foolhardy enough to stand their ground were quickly slaughtered. It could not understand why this small fighter, who did not even come up to its shoulders, was standing up to it without a sign of fear. Its sunken eyes revealed a dim puzzlement as it regarded its small opponent, then it attacked in earnest, the mace ripping through the air. Mark ducked and responded in kind, and the apparently mismatched fighters raged back and forth across the crushed grass of the battlefield. The goblins gathered around, watching but staying out of the way, so that the duel took place in an open space at the edge of the riverbed. Callah was left unnoticed, a small figure alone on one side of the rough circle. She had finally managed to rise unsteadily to her feet and pick up her sword, but she could not use her shield arm, and did not think she could walk without falling. She was afraid she would get in Mark's way if she tried to help, so she watched the contest tensely, wincing every time the troll's mace came down, certain that Mark would be crushed under it.

The troll was much bigger and more powerful than Mark, and every swing of its mace had enough force to split a boulder, but Mark too fast to let those blows hit him. He avoided or parried every attack, and his sword blurred in his hands as he handled it with the ease of a true master. There was a flurry of blows, and then the troll stepped back, oozing black slime from a shallow gash in its side. It and Mark circled each other warily, both breathing hard. For the first time, doubt showed dully in the creature's eyes.

Mark had been driven close to one of the gathered ranks of watching goblins. His back was to them, but Callah, watching, saw one of them shift its grip on its long knife, preparing to leap at Mark's unprotected back. Drawing on reserves she did not know she

possessed, Callah flung herself forward, sword raised. She lurched dizzily and almost fell, but her sword slashed down across the small goblin's wrist. It dropped its knife and screeched with pain, backing into the safety of its fellows. Callah fell to her knees. The other creatures saw her guard go down and attacked en masse. A wave of dark, wiry forms suddenly rushed at her. Scrambling backwards, Callah swung her sword wildly to keep the goblins from her defenseless left side, but there were too many of them. One raked its claws down her wounded shoulder. She bashed it away from her with her sword hilt, buying herself a little space. She managed to get back to her feet before the goblins closed in again. She soon found herself back-to-back with Mark at the edge of the dry riverbed. He had also been forced back, and now had to fight the oversize troll, as well as hold off the horde of goblins.

Callah was hard-pressed to hold back her half of the monsters. Her shield arm had lost its numbness and sent a wave of pain through her that made her vision dim. She swallowed hard and kept waving her sword in front of her. If the goblins had not been so timid, they could have swarmed her under in a matter of moments.

Without warning, Mark slammed into her from behind. He had parried a direct blow from the great troll, and it had knocked him backwards. Callah, already unbalanced, teetered on the edge of the trench for an instant, then pitched toward the stream bed. She slammed against the ground for the third time that day, landing heavily on her bad arm. This time, when she tried to rise her muscles would not cooperate, and then she forgot why she was trying and let the darkness take her.

Callah awoke flat on her back on the ground. As she swam back towards full consciousness, the rhythmic pounding pain in her skull and arm tempted her to take refuge again in oblivion, but she struggled to wake up. Groaning, she opened her eyes and looked up at wooden planks above her head. Bewildered, she tried to connect that with her last conscious memories. What was she doing inside? She turned her head, bringing a

wave of sickness that made her close her eyes and clench her teeth. When the spinning subsided and she opened her eyes again, she saw that she was not inside after all -- she was lying in the river bed, under the small wooden bridge that spanned it where the road crossed the battlefield. Fighting back nausea, she forced her protesting body into a sitting position, trying not to think about her left arm. Blood was seeping through her sleeve, and she still couldn't bear to move the arm. The shield was gone. She wondered how she had lost it; she thought she'd strapped it on tightly. Listening, she decided that the battle was over; there were no more shouts or sounds of clashing metal, only the groans and screams of the wounded. She wondered who had won.

Looking around, careful not to jar her splitting skull, she noticed a human figure slumped against the wall of the ditch. There were several goblin bodies scattered about as well, but she ignored them and crawled one-handed towards the crumpled person. The activity proved to be too much, and she was miserably sick at the side of the ditch. After a wretched interval, she continued her crawl, stomach still heaving but now empty. As she got closer, she saw that it was a man, and what was more, it was Timothy! His knees were drawn up against his chest, and his head was leaning back against the wall, his eyes closed and his face white. A pang of terror shot through Callah -- he was too still.

In a cracked voice that sounded nothing like her, she said, "Timothy? Are -- are you all right?" She touched his shoulder, and felt weak with relief when he opened his eyes and looked at her.

"Callah..." he breathed in a faint voice. Callah's relief evaporated. He took a gasping breath. She stared into his brown eyes that were usually so cheerful. Now they held pain, and something worse that she didn't understand.

"Where are you hurt?" Callah demanded. Maybe she could use the White Disk to help him.

"Stomach... Listen, Callah..." He could hardly speak. Callah tried to get him to uncurl from his tight ball and he cried out in agony. Her face twisted in sympathy, and tears leapt to her eyes.

"I need you to lie down, Tim, so I can see your wound. Have to stop the bleeding." Her good hand trembling, she eased him to the ground, then pulled his shirt aside to look at the wound. Her heart froze. There was an enormous, jagged tear in her friend's stomach, and it was bleeding profusely. It was far too long to bandage, even if she had had any means of doing so, and there was already blood everywhere. But what was this Disk good for, if she couldn't even help her friends?

Holding her breath, Callah placed the disk over the wound, willing it to help him. It glowed brighter, and he seemed to relax a little, as though the pain had faded. He opened his eyes again, and looked at her calmly.

"Too late ... for that." She shook her head furiously, tears streaming down her cheeks. Mentally, she ordered the Disk to heal him. It just pulsed there, and the bleeding didn't stop. Timothy put his hand over hers, where it held the Disk. "Just listen. A traitor ... in army. I was ... with Nicholas ... found you ... dragged here. Nick ... the Disk..." His face twisted. He was having trouble saying whatever it was he wanted to tell her because of his wound, she thought. His eyes burned with urgency, but he was running out of time. He tried to repeat himself, but the next breath wouldn't come. He looked at her, his eyes begging her to understand, then his hand in Callah's grasp went limp and his eyes went empty. His laughing, cheerful eyes. Callah slumped over him, looking down at the traitorous White Disk. Why could she save Terania, but not her friends?

She was still sitting there, her heart desolate, tears running down her cheeks, holding Timothy's hand in a ditch in the middle of a battlefield, when she heard a step behind her. She turned. Nicholas was there, a drawn sword bloody in his hand. "Oh, Nicholas -- Timothy's dead!" Saying it seemed to make it real. She began to sob, holding her friend's hand.

Nicholas' face twisted strangely, but Callah barely noticed. He slowly knelt beside Callah and wrapped his arms around her, and she buried her head on his chest, crying even harder. He let her cry for a few minutes, then began to urge her toward the side of the ditch.

"Come on, we can't stay here. We have to get back to the others."

"But Timothy -- we can't just leave him here." Her voice broke. She couldn't think -- she didn't know what to do. She wiped her eyes, but new tears replaced the old ones. Timothy had enjoyed life so much, always telling his silly jokes; he should be alive.

"We'll send someone back for him," Nick said reassuringly. He scrambled out of the river bed, then hoisted her up and began to lead her across the battlefield, steadying her with an arm around her shoulders. She followed him, glad she didn't have to think. She'd failed her friends again.

After they had walked a little, Callah remembered something. She asked shakily, "Nicholas? Timothy was trying to tell me something, before he..." She trailed off.

Nicholas looked down at her sharply. "What did he say?"

"He said something about a traitor, but he didn't get to tell me more than that." Her shoulders shook again.

Nicholas nodded. "Yes, we saw one of our soldiers firing a dart at your horse. That's why it ran off with you and messed up everything. We found him near the end of the battle and confronted him, but he stabbed Timothy and tried to run. I chased him down, but he got away into the woods. I didn't know Timothy was so badly hurt, or I wouldn't have left him." Just then there was a shout from behind them.

"Callah, Nicholas! You're all right! But where are you going, you're nearly to the forest? Everyone's gathered back on the road!" Nicholas' arm tightened around Callah's shoulders, but when she looked at him, he looked confused as he turned to face Jacob and Alissa, who had shouted.

"I guess I got turned around," he said, looking foolish.

As the friends approached, they noticed Callah's tearstained face and Nicholas' grim look, and their expressions of relief faded, to be replaced with worry.

"What's wrong?" Jacob asked, his forehead creased with misgiving.

Callah answered, "It's Timothy - he's dead." Fresh tears began to course down her already wet cheeks. The other two looked shocked, then crushed as the terrible news sank in, and the three friends came together in a hug of mutual grief and loss. Nicholas stood forgotten outside the group, silent, his dark eyes brooding, but dry.

Some time later, tears spent, Jonathan asked, "Where's Mark?"

Callah's eyes widened. "Haven't you seen him? I thought when you said that everyone was gathered on the road that you meant he was there, too!" When the others shook their heads, she stood stock-still for a moment, her gaze going from face to face. She couldn't stand to lose him too. She turned without a word and began to dash across the field in the direction of the trench, ignoring the pain screaming from her arm and head. The others followed her at a run.

Jacob called, panting, "Where are you going?"

"Back where I last saw him. I've got to find him -- he could be hurt!" It felt like there was a large, cold stone in her chest. The last thing she remembered seeing, as she pitched into the riverbed, was Mark, surrounded by enemies. He was an amazing fighter, especially with the berserker rage, but there had been so many of them, not to mention the troll. She ran faster.

Callah reached the ditch and jumped in. The impact drove her to her knees, but she stumbled back to her feet and kept going, biting back a cry. She scanned the stream bed for signs of Mark. One hundred yards or so from the small bridge, there was a pile of goblin bodies, about where she thought that last fight had taken place. She peered towards it, and what she saw made her stop in her tracks as the world narrowed to a single point, where a limp human hand stuck out from the bottom of the pile.

Not knowing how she had covered the distance, Callah found herself on her knees beside Mark's hand. She took it in hers, muttering unconsciously under her breath, over and over, "Please, please..." Not daring to breathe, she closed her eyes and felt for a pulse. Nothing -- but wait! There was a weak flutter in his wrist. Then another. With a sigh of relief that was half a sob, Callah began to breathe again. She leapt to her feet and began to tear at the pile of bodies, dragging the filthy goblin corpses off the pile. But she couldn't do it fast enough with one hand. Her friends, who had stopped a few feet away, watching in dismay, stepped forward and began to help her. Callah barely noticed them.

At the bottom of the pile lay the body of the huge troll, a sword blade sticking out of its broad back. It took all four of them to move the enormous body, uncovering Mark's unmoving form, still clutching the hilt of his sword. Callah threw herself down beside him. His shirt was ripped and covered in the troll's black blood. Callah took hold of the edge of one of the rents and pulled, ripping it and baring his chest. She swabbed at it with the shirt, trying to get enough of the blood off that she could see where it was coming from.

He was bleeding from a dozen cuts, but none of them seemed serious. Callah decided that most of the blood was not his. She almost dared to hope. Suddenly he stirred and she leaned over him, peering down into his face. Callah smiled at him when he opened his eyes, and asked, trying to imitate his father's scolding tone, "Don't you know better than to let a big opponent like that pin you?" She didn't notice the tears which still dripped down her face, and the way her voice wavered.

Mark lifted his hand and gently touched one wet cheek. "Are you all right?"

She shook her head. "Can you get up?"

He answered by rising to his feet, only stumbling a little on part of a goblin. She rose with him and steadied him, though she was none too steady herself. "Come on. Let's get back to the rest of the army. I have bad news."

Chapter Ten: In Which the Situation Fails to Improve

The day of the battle with the goblins marked the turning point in the army's luck. Until then, they had had no major setbacks. Spirits had been high; everyone had been drunk with the surprise and joy of gaining the White Disk. They had thought that if they could achieve that, they could do anything. But now things had gone bad, and it looked as though they would only get worse. They had defeated the goblins, but they had lost a full quarter of their forces in doing so. The Healers had done their best, exhausting themselves in an effort to save all the wounded, but they could only blunt the damage the army had sustained. The limping Teranian forces had dragged themselves a few miles from the battlefield and rested, but though they recovered some of their strength, they had lost their initial confidence. General Vallorn walked among his troops, speaking briefly with those who seemed most discouraged. Wherever he went soldiers straightened their spines and took heart. But there was something else much more damaging to their spirits than a hard battle, that was sapping the strength of the army.

This insidious disease making its way through the ranks was the rumor of a traitor in their midst. The mistake about the size of the goblin force could have been coincidence. The small goblin band that the scouts had reported could have been joined by a larger group shortly before the ambush, though it was awfully lucky for the Gorotal. But someone had shot a dart into Callah's horse, almost delivering the White Disk into the enemy's hands. The dart had come from somewhere within their own ranks. Unfortunately, everyone had been watching the approaching Gorotal at the time, so only Nicholas and Timothy had seen the traitor.

The General summoned Nicholas to his tent the night after the battle, and he stayed there late into the night. When he returned, though, he said that he hadn't been much help. Timothy had been the one who saw the dart fired, and in the heat of battle and

pursuit, Nicholas had never gotten a very good look at the man. He couldn't describe him well enough to help, though he thought it had been a man of medium height.

An atmosphere of gloom and suspicion settled over the camp. The officers tried to dispel it, saying that the traitor had probably fled into the woods or been killed in battle. It was unlikely that he was still within the ranks of the army. It was true that there were a few people unaccounted for after the battle, but most of the army was mourning at least one lost friend, and no one was in the mood to assume the best. Rumors ran wild through the camp, and undercut the General's efforts to improve morale.

Everyone had lost someone, and Callah and her friends felt their own loss as much as anyone in the army. Master Torvald had been devastated when he heard the news. He had been grooming Timothy for command, he told them. He hadn't found a mind that took to strategy the way Timothy's did in all his years of instruction, and he'd enjoyed the young soldier's attitude. He went away looking broken. Callah was sunk deep in a morass of grief and guilt that none of her friends could pull her out of. Once again the White Disk had failed her when she most needed to help a friend. She hated the Disk and wished she had never seen it, never been entrusted with its care. She kept thinking she heard Timothy's voice, his laugh. Mark stayed close to her, but they didn't talk much.

The situation did not improve with time. The army managed to avoid the Gorotal for some days after the devastating battle, but the land itself seemed to drain their strength. The sun did not brighten the land, but it baked the soldiers with a sullen heat. The further they traveled into the land, the less life they saw. Everything was wilted and dying. The earth was cracked and beaten flat. For a time they traveled in a ghostly forest of dead trees, trunks bleached white. It was very quiet, and they saw no more animals.

Then they reached the end of the hills and came to a flat, dead plain. Standing at the edge of the last scrawny tree-skeletons, they looked out over the desolate waste, and saw nothing but empty grey dirt and dead grass, the occasional rock sticking up like a

broken bone. The horizon was close, blurred by heat and dust. The army stared, disheartened.

General Vallorn strode to the front of the company, nodded his head briskly, and turned to face his troops. To Callah's surprise, he looked almost cheerful. He shouted, "Very well, then! It looks as though we have a straight march ahead of us now. What could be easier?" A few people cheered, but most of the army was still staring out over the barren plain, wondering how they would ever get across it without every Gorotal in the country descending upon them.

The General laughed. "Some of you look a little discouraged! Come now, did you really expect us to walk right up to the Gorotal fortress and knock on the door without being challenged? Remember what we are doing here. These are deeds that will live in song forever. Our children's children will hear how a small band of heroes went questing one day, how they found the hidden stronghold of the ancient Balancers and entered it, bringing forth into the light of day the long-lost White Disk, which no one else could find despite centuries of searching. The bards will tell then of our fearless march, right into the heart of the enemy's twisted land. They will tell how the very trees clutched at the heroes and the stones of the earth moved to trip them, for the bards like to embellish things, you see. They will tell of the wide flat plain, how it was black with the armies assembled to oppose the heroes, how those heroes were undaunted and waded into the battle, hewing their way for miles, leaving the plain stained red behind them, until they reached the black fortress itself and struck its walls such a blow that they fell in smoking rubble. Then our grandchildren will hear how we plucked the evil Black Disk from the rubble, and ended its power forever, so that it might never threaten again."

He smiled at his army. They were hanging on his every word. "Now, we may not do it quite that way, for even heroes can't do all that the bards ascribe to them. However, it does not lessen what we have done, and what we will yet do. For if this plain before us were full of enemies instead of empty and deserted, we would still do what we must, for it

is our duty and our only hope. Now, do not be discouraged, and do not despair, for we will triumph. It is our destiny.”

This time the army roared. If the plain had indeed been full of enemies, they would have followed their General into their midst. Vallorn smiled broadly at them. “Now, it is true that we would be terribly exposed on this plain, and it is true that we’d attract more attention than we need. However, we have a small asset that I think some of you might have forgotten. Callah, bearer of the White Disk, can you find a way to conceal us?”

She swallowed hard. Everyone was looking at her. She hadn’t been able to bear to look at the Disk since Timothy’s death, much less contemplate using it. She looked around at the eyes of all the army, all fixed on her in hope. Even her friends were looking at her as though she could save them. She closed her eyes. She must not fail all these people. She might hate the Disk, she might blame it for failing her, but she couldn’t let them see that. She wondered if the General felt this sense of obligation to the army, if he ever thought he couldn’t meet the challenge. If she said she couldn’t do it, she would undermine everything he’d just done, and take away the new courage he’d given the army. She had to try.

Slowly, Callah pulled out the Disk. She had forgotten just how beautiful it was. A low gasp of delight traveled through the ranks, as the gentle glimmer spread over them. In this dead place, it seemed to be the only thing that was alive, the only thing incorruptible. It was a cool breeze in this place where the hot air hung still and stale over the seared land.

Callah gritted her teeth and looked at the swirling surface of the Disk. Regardless of her feelings, she had to do this. She opened her mind to the Disk, and showed it what she wanted: a barrier of illusion around the army. The Disk was good at making mists; now she wanted it to surround them with a heat shimmer, a suggestion of windblown dust, so that any enemies who were not too close would not notice them, or only see them as a small dust storm, perhaps, out on the horizon.

The familiar mist started to smoke up from the Disk, but as it left it changed, faded into a wavering of the air, a distortion. It swirled out from Callah's hands, circling the army, pulling up grey dust from the ground, until the land around them went vague and blurry. That was what they needed, but they had to be able to see out themselves. The whirling, wavering sand disappeared, except for a faint shimmer in the air. The General sent a runner out onto the plain to look at them; when he returned he said that he could still tell they were there when he looked for them, but otherwise they blended well with the background. It would have to do. The army moved out onto the plain.

They saw surprisingly few Gorotal at first, for the plain was almost entirely deserted. They would pass an occasional patrol or supply train crawling by on the horizon, but no one noticed them, or if they did notice anything strange, they didn't bestir themselves to investigate.

Thus, they avoided combat for some time. Then they started to run low on water. There was none to be found on the plain. The supply trains they passed on the horizon always traveled with large wagons full of water barrels, and eventually it was necessary to begin raiding them for supplies. They preyed on small, poorly guarded bands when they could, but there were still some hard fights, and they lost soldiers every time. It hurt their prides, too, to be forced to behave like common highwaymen.

When they caught their first glimpse of their goal, they thought it was a cloud, and rejoiced, for rain would have been a sweet blessing on this parched plain. But it sat still there on the horizon, and grew only as they approached. They realized then that it was a black fortress like a mountain on the midst of the plain, and their hearts misgave them. The closer they got, the taller it grew, until it towered over them, and its shadow was like a finger of death reaching across the plain.

For days the black fortress sat like a brooding cloud on the horizon. As they drew closer they could see that its height was not all man-made; it had been constructed at the top of a wide up-cropping of rock, a large, round mesa that jutted upward from the flat

plain. In the dusk it looked like the blackened top of a grey and rotting tooth, jutting into the dark hot mouth of the sky. Nearer still, and the army began to see the hopelessness of the task before them. The walls of the mesa were steep and rocky. The only way to reach the fortress was a narrow, winding road cut into the cliff wall. An army attempting to storm up that would be decimated by missiles hurled from above before they were halfway to the summit.

They camped there, at the base of the fortress-mountain, wondering why they had not yet been challenged. Despite the illusion that Callah had raised around them, surely someone had noticed a disturbance approaching?

They did not have long to wait. A small group of humans on horseback came down the winding trail at dusk, and rode toward the camp. They bore themselves proudly, and their black horses pranced. They wore armor that did not shine. They stopped at the bottom of the trail and waited.

The General took his advisors and went to meet them. Callah had thought that he might take Mark and herself with him, to show the White Disk as a threat, but the General did not invite them along. She supposed that showing their hand at this point would be unwise. In any case, they didn't have a large enough army to back up a threat in any case.

The Gorotal and the General talked together for a short time, then the Gorotal turned and rode back up the winding trail to their fortress. The General came back to the camp. His face was calm and without expression, but Callah saw his hand clench on his sword hilt. He stalked into his tent, but the word eventually filtered through the ranks: the Gorotal had pretended to think their army was an envoy bearing tribute, or at least word of Terania's surrender. They had laughed at the tiny army camped below their stronghold, and boasted that a single rock dropped from the walls would wipe out the entire camp. The soldiers murmured with anger and shame. Some began to wonder audibly what they were going to do here, after all. It was obvious now that they couldn't storm the castle. What would they do?

Callah sat with her friends. They had no campfire, in case the Gorotal decided to try something; why give them easier targets than they already had? They didn't have much water left, and they had been on half rations for days, trying to preserve the last of their food. Alissa was trying to draw the group into speculation about how they would breach the Gorotals' defenses, because of course they would somehow, she said; why else had they come so far? She couldn't provide a reasonable plan, however. She chattered on about scaling the walls, digging their way up through the rock, chipping away at the base of the mountain until it collapsed. Nicholas started to make fun of her.

Before the two had time to drive Callah completely insane, a soldier came by to tell them that Callah was wanted in the General's tent. Mark went with her, taking it for granted that the summons included him. The tent was a cave of light in the starless night. Lanterns were hung to illumine the maps and charts that had now been shoved aside.

The General stood still in the center of the tent. A few of his officers were still there, slumped and looking defeated. The General still seemed angry. Callah and Mark slipped in through the tent flap, and he turned to them frowning. He said bluntly, "The Gorotal laughed at us. They were right. All our planning and tactics couldn't get us into that fortress, not if we besieged them for the rest of all our lives. Even if we had enough men to do so, they have deep wells there under that hill, and we have no water, no food, nothing. If we charge we die; if we stay here or try to retreat they'll kill us. They're most likely assembling a force right now to wipe us out. We have to move tonight; we have to get in now. You are the only one who can make this possible, Callah. You must use the White Disk again, and find a way into that fortress for us, or we have come here only to fail and die, and be derided as the most foolish group of would-be heroes ever to set out on a quest."

Callah surprised herself by saying, "So you're saying that this is kind of important?" It was what Timothy would have said. Only not even he would have said it to the General. She realized what she'd done as Mark turned white and the General's eyes

widened. She'd actually shocked him. She began to stammer, "Oh! I- er, I'm sorry, sir, I didn't mean-"

He shook his head slowly, almost seeming at a loss for words. "I don't think any soldier has spoken to me that way in twenty years." Slowly, he smiled. "Well. I suppose I should not take myself so seriously. I hope your flippancy will herald success, bearer of the White Disk."

"Y-yes sir." She had to be losing her mind. The General stared at her expectantly, and it took her a moment to realize he wanted her to start doing something to get them inside right now. Hurriedly, she dragged the Disk out. She cupped it in her hands and gazed at its surface, but something wasn't right. The tent walls seemed to press in on her, smothering. She mumbled, "I think I should do this outside, sir," and ducked out of the tent.

Outside the air was hot and stale, but somehow she felt better. She looked up at the sky, hoping for just a glimpse of one star through the clouds, but the sky was thickly overcast. The clouds would have been welcome in the day, but each morning the sun rose clear and merciless, undimmed by clouds.

She took a deep breath and headed for the edge of the camp nearest the cliff wall and the beginning of the upward ramp. She could feel Mark close behind her, and beyond him she knew the General and his officers were following as well. She passed the last tent and walked out to stand in the open. Then she held the White Disk in her hands as before, and concentrated on its shifting surface. This time, she didn't make any requests of it right away. She thought, for the first time, about what its goals might be. It had always seemed aware to her, and if it could speak to her, it must have some kind of plan of its own. She felt a chime of agreement deep within her mind.

Callah wondered what that plan might be. The Disk was a thing of pure good, and a part of the nature of good was to do no evil, to guard against evil. She had used the Disk so far only to guard against evil, and anything she had tried to do with it that would

have caused damage, like attacking the Dark Ones with its power, had failed. But good couldn't really be complete, couldn't be good, unless it also actively opposed and fought against evil. If the White Disk were really good, it must work to stop the Black Disk. She focused her thoughts towards the Disk in her hands, and it began to glow. She would take it to face its antithesis so it could fulfill its nature, if it would only help her find the way. Otherwise, she would fail in her duty, and it would fail in its very being.

The White Disk glowed like a star in the night. Callah felt its agreement; it would do as she asked. She turned to tell the crowd of soldiers that had gathered behind her the news, and immediately felt... wrong. Facing that way made her uncomfortable somehow. She turned back around, aware that she was confusing the others who were waiting to hear if she'd succeeded or not. The feeling of being uncomfortable diminished, but now she didn't want to stand still any longer. Standing where she was suddenly seemed irritating; she needed to move. She set out slowly, walking toward the ramp. Mark followed.

That made her feel better for a few moments. Moving felt good, it was what she needed to do. She started up the ramp. The others followed her, rather hesitantly. They weren't sure where she was going, but the White Disk was glowing steadily and that must mean something. Behind her she could hear the murmured orders going out, for everyone to assemble quickly, not to bother taking down tents, only take some water and food and their weapons.

After she got a few hundred feet up the ramp, however, she began to tire. Climbing uphill was terribly hard all of a sudden. Her legs felt like lead, and she had to drag herself upward with every step. She stopped. She couldn't really be that tired on this gentle slope. She took a step backward. Yes, that felt much better.

The army became completely confused as she headed back down the ramp through their midst. Mark, hurrying behind her, whispered, "Callah? Where are we going? Do you know?" She just shook her head and kept going. Walking downhill was as

unnaturally easy as walking up had been hard. She supposed this was how the White Disk had decided to guide her. She wished it had found some way that didn't make her look completely lost in front of the whole army.

The next half-hour got more and more humiliating, as she paced back and forth along the rocky wall, running her hands over its surface. It took a while for her to pick up on the wrong feeling, and as far as she could tell, it only started to grow after she'd already passed the right place. So she had to narrow things down as well as she could by walking back and forth, turning back again at the first twinge of reluctance or tiredness.

Finally, she stopped in front of what she thought was the right spot. It looked like a perfectly normal bit of rock wall to her. Smooth and grey, it didn't have any particularly distinguishing characteristics. She had no idea what she was supposed to do with it. She ran her hands over its surface aimlessly for a while, finding nothing. She stretched her hands out across it, trying to find something, anything, that felt like a latch, a lever, a handle, anything. The White Disk swung gently against the rock with a tap. It glowed more brightly for an instant, and when Callah stepped back she saw, five feet to her right, a large rounded stone lying against the wall, reflecting the Disk's light. That was helpful, finally. She went over to it and yanked it away from the wall. The stone didn't move, so she shoved it inward. It budged a tiny fraction, and the section of wall that she had been probing swung outward, grinding loudly.

She shook her head. At least she had found it in the end. She had a feeling that the army had thought she was just bluffing for a while. Mark gave her a relieved smile. He'd been looking a bit worried at her behavior, too. Callah just shrugged at him and stepped through the dark portal.

The Disk's glow lit her way for her. The others would need torches. They had had plenty of time to get ready, though. And she couldn't wait for them now. The Disk was tugging at her constantly. She thought she could feel another force now, too, the

force that her Disk yearned towards and yet was repulsed by, its other half. It was still far away, but it was there, somewhere inside this mountain.

She led the way, the army following. They were in a square-cut passageway of stone. It looked as though there had once been carvings on the walls, but they were chipped away and scarred by crude drawings that had been hacked into the rock. The floor was of wide, square, stone tiles. They looked as though they might be different colors, but it was hard to tell in the pale light of the Disk. Callah had only gone a few hundred feet along the hallway when the feeling of wrongness hit her again, terribly strong this time. She flung herself backwards, slamming into Mark, who grabbed her shoulders to steady her.

“What is it?” he asked, alarmed, but she again didn’t know. People were bunching up behind them.

“Someone pass me a torch and a stick or something.” A torch and someone’s quarterstaff were passed to her. In the heartier yellow light of the torch, she could see all the colors of the tiles: red, blue, yellow, green, white, black. On the wall there was a stick-figure carving of a humanoid figure with a spear sticking out of its belly. There must be some kind of trap; Callah would prefer not to share the stick-figure’s fate. She crouched down and reached forward with the staff. She tapped a red tile, a yellow one, nothing, a blue one -- a thick spear sprang out from the wall, thrusting through the empty air with enough force to spit a human like a roasting pig.

Callah raised her eyebrows, and lifted the staff from the tile. The spear slowly retracted into the wall; she could hear clockwork machinery shifting and groaning in the walls. When it was fully withdrawn, she tapped the rest of the tiles, as far as she could reach. None of them seemed to do anything. She tapped the blue one again and the spear shot out once more. When it had retracted, she gingerly stepped over the blue tile. Nothing unpleasant happened to her. Mark passed the word back. She hoped everyone would be very careful about where they put their feet.

Callah went forward more cautiously now, tapping the ground in front of her with the staff. Before she reached the next trap, though, the Disk warned her again with the same urgent feeling that she needed to stop moving forward. Again, it was a blue tile that triggered the trap, which this time was a swinging blade that swept down from an opening in the ceiling.

The next blue tile they came to had a large rusty chunk of iron sitting on it. The stump of a metal blade was sticking from a hole in the wall -- it had been snapped off. This trap was disarmed. All the ones they came upon after that had been similarly neutralized. This meant safer traveling for the army, but it also meant that the Gorotal used these passages. With their love of destruction, it was no surprise that they had vandalized the wall-carvings. They had probably left the first few traps armed to deter intruders.

Callah kept leading the army through the passages. It was slow going, for all the hallways branched and split, recombining, slanting up or downward, ending abruptly at a blank wall. Staircases wound up or down into darkness in this ancient maze. The Gorotal Callah knew hadn't built this. Maybe it had been the stronghold of their ancestors, before evil had taken hold of them. Callah had to start down a path in earnest before the Disk would let her know if it was the right one or not. She was constantly heading down a passage, only to have to turn and make her way back through the ranks of the troops that had followed her.

It seemed that they wandered in those dark halls forever, but eventually Callah emerged into a huge room with a vaulted ceiling. A single wide doorway yawned at the other end. She started to cross the room, but before she got far, she realized she didn't want to walk any further that way. It was the same feeling of wrongness again. She tried to head toward the sides, thinking there could be hidden doors, but that direction wasn't right either. Neither was back the way they had come. Whichever way she thought of walking, the Disk let her know that it was the wrong choice. Unable to fathom what the

Disk wanted her to do now, she stood still, watching the room fill with her fellow soldiers. It took a surprisingly short time for them all to file in; there were far fewer of them than there used to be.

Nicholas, Alissa, and Jacob came to stand beside Callah and Mark next to the door they'd entered by. Alissa immediately started to badger Callah about whether she knew where they were going, why she kept taking so many wrong turns, how long they'd have to stay in this maze. Callah just shook her head, and trying to figure out why the Disk was keeping her here.

General Vallorn approached. He nodded to Callah. "Very well done. You got us into the fortress after all. It appears that the Disk has a strange way of making its wishes known, but we appear to be making progress. I believe we've moved upward a great deal through all these twists and turns. It shouldn't be long until we reach the fortress itself. Is there a reason that you've stopped?"

"Yes, sir, the Disk doesn't want me to move yet, so far as I can tell. I don't know why. Maybe it wants us to camp here for the rest of the night, I don't really know, sir."

The Disk pulsed sharply. Callah hissed, "Listen!" There was a rumble in the floor, more felt than heard, but it was growing stronger. The army fell silent as they all strained to hear. It was a rumble of feet, Callah was sure of it. Now there could be heard growls and war cries and chants, coming from the far hallway. The Gorotal must know of their presence down here in the bowels of their citadel. They were coming.

The General sprang into action, shouting commands for the army to form ranks, prepare to meet an assault from the far tunnel. He yelled back over his shoulder as the walls started to shake from the thunder of many, many feet, "Take the White Disk and go, Callah, you and your friends! We'll hold them here; you'll have to find your own way to fulfill our quest. This is why the White Disk brought us here to this room. We can hold them at that doorway for hours; they won't be able to come through all at once. Go now! You're our last hope, the Disk will guide you!"

Callah hesitated, but the Disk was driving her back toward the door now. She couldn't stay. She cast a last glance over her shoulder at the army -- they braced to meet the wave of Dark Ones that was rushing down the hallway before them in a black river of death. Her friends fled with her as the battle was joined.

They fled down hallway after hallway, frantically retracing their steps when the White Disk belatedly let them know that they'd taken a wrong turn. Their general trend seemed to be upward; after a while Callah began to be able to guess the correct path some of the time, and that let them move faster. At first they ran full tilt, the knowledge that their allies were fighting and dying to give them time giving their feet wings. But the many stairs took their toll, and soon the friends were struggling up them at a staggering jog, panting hard but still trying to move quickly.

After they had climbed so much that they thought they must have climbed right out past the roof of the fortress by now, their path finally leveled out. After some turning and twisting, the Disk led them into a small room with a low ceiling that forced them to crouch. Even Alissa had to bend her head. Here Callah stopped. The Disk would not let her move from the room.

Nicholas cursed the Disk for stopping them in this tiny room. He was bent nearly double, and no one could blame him for being disgruntled. It wasn't much to the other's liking, either; they were packed into the small space tightly. They waited, expecting the Disk to lead them out any minute, but Callah felt no sign of a change. It seemed that they were stuck here for the time being.

Callah's head was drooping. It had been a long, hard march over the baked desert to reach the fortress that day, a march made harder by the presence of the huge edifice looming larger and larger over them. They hadn't had a chance to sleep before starting into the tunnels, either. It must be past dawn by now; to Callah it felt like three days had

passed. She was hungry and thirsty, and her legs trembled from the multitude of stairs they'd climbed. She sank wearily to the floor.

"Oh well," she said. "If we can't move, I'm going to grab just a little rest. I'll know when the Disk wants us to move out again. You should probably all try to rest a little, too. Who knows, maybe that's what the Disk is stopping us for."

Nicholas had been poking at the wall. "Hey, look what I found."

They crowded around. There were three tiny holes in the wall. He was staring through one; the others took turns looking through the others. They looked out into a spacious room with large heavy doors on three of its walls. They could not see the other wall, since it was directly below them. It was empty -- no people, no wall hangings or furniture, nothing. It seemed a boring room to spy on, but perhaps it had been more important when the fortress was first built. A stateroom or royal chamber, perhaps. Now, the peepholes were just a curiosity, it seemed.

Callah went back to the far corner of the room and lay down on the floor. She could feel that the White Disk still wanted her to stay in the room. The others played with the peepholes a little longer. Callah was almost asleep when Nicholas said, "You know, these things give me an idea."

They waited. He continued, tentatively, "Well, I was thinking that we have no idea where we're headed. Who knows where this crazy Disk is leading us. It would be good to find out something about where we are, just in case something happens. I was thinking I might poke around a little, since I can still leave, even if the Disk won't let Callah go anywhere. And if I'm really lucky, I might be able to hear something useful. Like how our army is holding up, someone might mention something."

It seemed a reasonable enough idea, but Callah said, "It's very dangerous. You won't have the Disk's guidance. How will you avoid the Gorotal?"

He said, smiling, "I'll just have to do it the old-fashioned way. I'll use my eyes and ears. Don't worry, they won't be looking for a lone Teranian wandering around in their hallways. I'll be fine."

Callah nodded slowly. "Still, it's not safe to go alone."

Alissa said, "I'll go with you, it sounds like a great idea. We could even find out where they keep the Black Disk!"

Nicholas scowled. "You'll just slow me down. I have to move quietly. Besides, you should rest."

Alissa retorted, "Don't be silly, you know I can move just as quickly and quietly as you can. And I'm not tired a bit. I'm going to come along. You don't get all the fun."

Nicholas looked irritated, but said, "Fine. Just don't get in my way."

Jacob said slowly, "Well, in that case, I think I'll go along, too. To keep these two from fighting the whole time and missing something important."

Nicholas threw up his arms. "We'll make a party of it, great."

Mark said, "I'll stay here and guard Callah. Just make sure you don't get lost out there, and come back before too much time passes. We don't know when the Disk will decide we can move again."

Callah was already asleep by the time they left, heading back down the passage to poke around. Some time later, she was awakened by Mark shaking her shoulder. "Come look at this; the others have found their way down to the room we can spy on."

Groggily, she sat up, rubbing her eyes. Mark pulled her over to the peep-holes. There were the other three standing down in the empty room, looking around. Callah smiled. "Let's try to get their attention." But before she could try, one of the doors burst open, and six Gorotal guards, all carrying halberds, walked in.

The Gorotal seemed as surprised to see the three friends as they were to see the guards. But the Gorotal recovered before the others could run, fanning out to block their escape. Mark and Callah held their breaths. Nicholas, Jacob, and Alissa stood at bay,

casting desperate glances around them. They couldn't bluff their way out of this one; they were trapped. They would be at a disadvantage facing the long pole-arms, and Callah and Mark had no chance of getting down the long corridors in time to help their friends. Jacob and Alissa drew their swords, backing toward the wall. Nicholas, however, did not draw his weapon. Instead, he stepped toward the Gorotal calmly, his left hand fiddling with the cuff of his right sleeve. He must have some plan, Callah thought.

The Gorotal eyed him warily, not attacking until they saw what he was going to do. He drew back his sleeve, to reveal a black circle on his forearm. It looked like it had been burned into the skin. Callah shook her head, looking away from the spy-hole long enough to cast Mark a confused glance. "What does that mean?" He hushed her, frowning. They went back to staring through the holes.

When the Gorotal saw the mark, they inclined their heads to Nicholas, their faces showing a mixture of respect and contempt. One of them rasped, "Very well, you're one of the Master's recruits. What about those two?"

Jacob and Alissa were staring at Nicholas in confusion. Alissa asked hesitantly, "Nick? What's going on?"

Jacob said, "Nicholas. You've betrayed us."

He turned casually towards them. His face was cold and aloof. "Yes. As a matter of fact, I have. Quite some time ago, actually, but all of you were too trusting to suspect. Pity." He turned to the guards. "Kill them. I can't have them giving me away if I need to rejoin Vallorn's forces."

Callah gasped with horror. She couldn't believe this. Nicholas was the betrayer that the Balancers had promised her. But he was her friend, how could he do it? Surely he wouldn't have his friends killed! But the Gorotal advanced, and Jacob and Alissa backed up to the wall, side by side, preparing to go down fighting.

They had to do something! Callah and Mark exchanged glances, but they couldn't get down there in time. Callah pressed against the wall futilely, desperate. That wasn't helping. The Disk!

She ripped it out of her shirt and began to concentrate on it, but too late. The sounds of weapons clashing was already coming from below. A wisp of mist started to rise from the Disk. She heard a bellow of pain from Jacob. Alissa screamed his name. The wisp moved toward the eyehole. Mark had been watching still, from the other one, his fists clenching and unclenching. Now he turned away from it, his hand over his eyes, his shoulders bowed in grief.

Callah cried out and looked back through the spy hole. Jacob and Alissa had fallen out of her limited line of vision, but the Gorotal were turning away, their weapons bloody. Nicholas was standing apart, his face cold and emotionless. He tilted his head back and looked straight at Callah where she was watching in horror. His eyes were black and frozen. She saw no regret in them. Transfixed, she stared until he turned to the guards and said, "We have to hurry. There are two more of them. They're the ones with the Disk. This way; they're watching through the spy holes now. We're probably too late to catch them before they can run, but maybe we can overtake them."

Callah jumped up, not to flee. She turned toward the path the others had taken, but she realized she didn't know the turnings they'd taken to get to the room below. She spun back to face Mark, frantic. He still had his hands over his face.

"Mark, we've got to do something!"

"It's too late." His voice was hopeless. "They're gone. I- I saw..."

"No! It can't be, we have to get to them, we have to-"

The room was too small. The walls were squeezing in on her. It was the Disk again, telling her to move. She ignored it, crying in a cracking voice, "We have to find those Gorotal- Nicholas! How can this be? We have to stop him." She didn't know what she would do, but she sprang toward the path that the others had taken. The Disk

protested -- she felt as though the passage walls were crushing her. She kept going, though her vision narrowed to a single small point, and she had to gasp for breath.

Arms wrapped around her from behind, holding her back. Mark pleaded in her ear, his voice rough, "Callah, stop, there's nothing we can do now. Running to death won't help them."

Fury rose in her. She whirled to face him. "How can you say that?" she shouted. "They're your friends, are you just going to leave them? Don't you care? They wouldn't have deserted us!"

He grabbed her shoulders. "Do you think I'm happy about this? I just watched our friends cut down, and Nicholas was the one who betrayed them! All I want to do is find him and those guards, and kill them. But it won't help! I have to think of you. I'm your guardian. I can't let you throw your life away, and you'd be handing them the Disk as well. Do you think Alissa and Jacob-" his voice broke in a sob- "would want their deaths avenged at the cost of our whole land? They died fighting for Terania. Would you make them the reason it was destroyed?"

She stared at him through blurred eyes. She knew he was making sense, but she didn't want to hear it. She wanted to be told that Alissa and Jacob were okay, that it was all a mistake, all part of some plan that Nicholas had to get them away from the Gorotal safely. But she knew it wasn't true, and she knew that everything Mark said was right. But how could she just go on, keep going on when her friends were dead? She put her head against his chest and began to sob. He wrapped his arms around her briefly, then led her down the other passage.

The Disk led them in the end to another secret door. As before, it showed her the catch to open it. Inside was a spiral staircase that seemed to have no end, nothing but blank walls and even stone steps leading down forever. Around and around Callah went, her eyes fixed on Mark's stooped back, downward until her head whirled and her knees

ached. Hypnotized, she watched her feet, moving without her direction, step by step down again into the bowels of the dark fortress. When they reached the bottom, Mark stopped and she ran into him. He turned and caught her elbow to steady her, and she looked up, her mind clearing as she looked at the sight before her.

The corridor stretched for perhaps a hundred feet before branching off into two identical hallways. In the upper levels of this maze, there was barely a trace of the carvings that had once covered the walls. Those halls were too often traveled; for years destructive or merely bored Gorotal had chipped away at the stonework, until nothing of beauty remained. But none of them knew of these hallways, it appeared. As Mark raised the flickering torch high, the carvings everywhere on the walls, depicting forests, hunts, feasts, grand dances, myriad scenes of life and death, seemed to move, suddenly brought to life by the presence of invaders after so much time in utter silence and darkness.

Among the carvings were jewels of all descriptions, set into the stone, forming eyes or claws, fruit or drops of blood. There were rubies glowing with a smoky inner fire, emeralds the clean color of new leaves, sapphires with an evening beauty and a shining star embedded in their depths. Precious metals traced patterns, gleaming. Here and there could be seen mother-of-pearl swirling with many colors, and even mirrors set at angles to the passageway, fooling the eye into seeing another passage leading into the stone wall. Callah wondered that all this could still be here, hidden in the heart of this evil place. She looked up at Mark and saw the glittering corridor reflected in his red, swollen eyes. She closed her eyes against the pain, still too new and raw to be borne. The hardest part was having to go on as if nothing had happened; they couldn't yet even grieve for their friends.

Callah imagined how they would have reacted to this place. Jacob would have been fascinated by its age, and Alissa would have been in her element among the sparkling jewels. She probably would have tried to pry some of them out. She thought back to the first friend they had lost. Timothy would have been panting from the many stairs, but he

would have found some irreverent remark to make to break the mood of wonder and set them all giggling like children. Never had Callah felt less like laughing. Her heart felt heavier than a stone, and she couldn't find any hope in her heart. So many friends lost, and for what? She could not summon up a belief in their success. Empty, tired, and desolate, what she really wanted to do was sit down on the bottom step and never move again. Mark looked at her, and she saw her discouragement mirrored in his drawn face. He shrugged -- there was nothing to say -- and they went on.

They eventually developed a system for deciding which way to go. Whenever the paths branched, Callah would go down one of the forks until the Disk either let her know that it was the wrong one or affirmed that her choice was right by doing nothing. Mark would wait in the intersection and rest a little. He didn't like it that Callah got no rest that way, but she was the only one who could tell which way to go. He wanted to go with her, just so he wouldn't be resting when she couldn't, but she told him bluntly that that was ridiculous. He might need his strength for fighting soon. Besides, with him waiting back at the last intersection, he could remember for Callah which passages she'd already tried, and which she hadn't, so she didn't waste time heading down the same wrong path over and over. Things went on that way for an unknowable time. It couldn't have been more than a few hours, but it seemed like days. Callah came back from one exploratory trip to find Mark asleep, leaning against a wall. Silently, she shook him awake and they went on.

Things continued this way until they came to a place where the main corridor continued in a straight line, with another hallway heading off to the left. There was a large depiction of a banquet on the wall just past the hallway, with jewel-fruits piled high on platters, and a cooked pig with a ruby in its mouth. On the wall opposite the hallway was a slanted mirror that would allow a person standing in either hallway to see down the other one. At a happier time Callah might have been fascinated by the mirror and its altered perspective, but now she barely glanced at it before heading off.

The hallway turned a few corners before ending in a dead end. She turned back again. As she rounded the last corner, she could see Mark at the other end of the hall. He was standing up straight, staring intently down the other hall, with his head up as though he heard something. She paused, listening. Footsteps. She hurried towards Mark. Mark was standing just behind the mirror set on the wall; reflected in its silvery surface she could see the hall they had not yet walked. It turned a corner only a few hundred feet away. Someone came into sight in the mirror, not a Dark One, but a human, a bow with an arrow at the string in his hands. The image in the mirror was small, but this was someone Callah could never forget. His black hair sweeping across his forehead, his proud stance that was now wary as he stalked around the corner... it was Nicholas.

He had not expected to encounter anyone, it seemed, for he jerked back, startled, when he caught sight of Mark. Then he froze, recognizing him. Callah stood still, heart pounding, as the two stood staring at each other. Nicholas hadn't appeared to notice her reflection which must appear in his side of the mirror as well. All his attention was fixed on Mark.

Nicholas appeared to recover himself after a moment. When Mark took a step toward him, he snapped the bow up, the razor arrow pointing at him. He drawled, eyeing his former friend, "Mark. Didn't expect to meet you here. You've hidden Callah somewhere, I see? Gone wandering on your own, or did you have a fight?"

Mark's face was white, with anger or grief; he rasped out, "Nicholas."

Nicholas sneered. "Lost for words, Mark? I'll give you a hint. This is where you say, 'How could you do such a thing? What made you do it?'" He whined mockingly. "When the messenger Rotiart first approached me, before we entered the realm of the Balancers, I thought the way you do. I deplored him as a coward, someone who'd desert the weaker side out of fear that it would lose, like a rat abandoning a sinking ship. He was a fool. He revealed to me that he was a spy for the Gorotal, and tried to enlist my help. He offered me a heavy purse to keep silent. Well, I smiled, and agreed, took his money

and ran to the General with my news, like the eager little soldier I was then. I turned the money over to the General.

“I thought I was a hero. I expected a medal, but he just smiled at me; it might as well have been a pat on the head to a good dog. *He already knew the messenger was a spy.* He knew, and was feeding him false information to take back to his masters.

“I could understand that. It’s a tactically sound decision. But then this General, this hero who you all follow so blindly, not only sent him off with the location to the Balancer’s realm, but he sent you and Callah with him, *knowing* he was in league with the enemy. Knowing he’d do anything he could to endanger your lives. I asked him how he could do that. Well, he thought I meant how could I let the messenger tell the Gorotal where the Balancers were, and he said he thought the realm would defend itself against evil. He was wrong about that, of course. He forgot that the Balancers like things to be even. If they let us in, they’d let the Gorotal in. As it turned out, the Gorotal didn’t ask to be let in; they made their own way. That just proved he wasn’t as smart as he thought he was. I didn’t know he was wrong then, of course. Right then, I was more interested in knowing why he put you and Callah in danger.

“When I asked him that, he got very serious, like we were going to have a real father-to-son talk.” Nicholas sneered. “He was very paternal, offering guidance to the troubled young soldier. First off, he tried to reassure me, saying that the messenger wasn’t a very smart man, and he was sure that you and Callah would have no trouble keeping yourselves safe. We saw how that turned out, didn’t we? Then he gave me this long lecture about how sometimes sacrifices must be made, and it is the duty of the leader sometimes to send his own soldiers into danger and death, if he thinks it is for the good of the army.

“He went on for a while. But I saw through what he was saying. He disguised it well. He made it sound like leadership was this lonely and painful duty. He said he’d sent friends to die, because it was sometimes the only way to win the battle. But what he really

was saying was that you had to forget about everything else, if you wanted to end up a hero. You have to put everything behind you and be willing to see it destroyed, even friendships.

“At first I didn’t believe it. I wanted to keep my friends, sentimental fool that I was. What did any of you ever do for me, anyway?”

“They should have given the Disk to me. I would have done great things with it. What has Callah done with it? Put up a few walls. Open some doors. The Balancers were mocking me, toying with me, pretending to test me with questions when they’d already decided not to give it to me. And Callah stood there, pretending to be all meek, giving the opposite answers, since she’d seen they didn’t like the way I answered. She was laughing at me. She never liked me the way she liked you. You were all laughing at me, the one who was too eager, too proud to be trusted with the White Disk. But the dark Balancer looked at me when he said that he would Callah give a traitor as well as a protector, and he smiled. I knew he meant me.”

Nicholas was becoming increasingly incoherent. His hands shook as he pulled the arrow back and held it there, ready to shoot. “I didn’t want to do it. Why would I ever betray Callah? I’d never hurt her, even if she does laugh at me and steal the Disk that should have been mine. I didn’t want to hurt her. But then I was taken prisoner, and she didn’t save me, none of you did. I felt Callah’s hand in mine, so close, and then she left me there. What good are friends when they abandon you? You call me a traitor, but you turned your backs on me first.

“I had to do something to save myself. How would it have helped if I had let the Gorotal torture me to death? And really, what I did was no different than what your General does. He betrays a single friend, and says it’s for the good of the country, but really it’s for his own glory. What difference is there in sacrificing your friend or your country? You have to do what’s necessary, if you want to win.” Nicholas didn’t even seem to be paying attention to Mark anymore. He was rambling, his eyes feverish. “That

was why I had to kill Timothy. He saw me ruin the ambush -- I knew Callah wouldn't be hurt; they had orders to take her prisoner... but he saw me shoot the dart at her horse, and confronted me with it later. Why did he have to see me? After I'd killed him, that was the end. There was no going back after that. It doesn't matter who I kill now."

Mark's hand had crept down to his sword hilt. He'd said nothing throughout Nicholas' tirade. He had hoped that just letting Nicholas talk might calm him, but it had only let him work himself up. Now, after what Mark had heard, he forgot about calming Nicholas and decided to kill him. But he was too far away. He didn't have the slightest chance of reaching Nicholas before he fired.

Callah had been listening to all this from her hallway, her hand clutching the White Disk so its light wouldn't glint in the mirror and give her away. She had crept as close to the entrance as she could. Now she could see that Nicholas was going to loose his arrow. He was working himself up to it, getting angrier as he rehearsed the wrongs that had been done him. She saw Nicholas' mouth tighten. She flung herself forward. Nicholas let the arrow go.

Everything moved very slowly then. The arrow leapt from the string, its wicked barb blurring as it ripped down the shadowy hallway. Mark's sword flashed as he drew it, futilely. Death flew towards him, unstoppable.

The rising battle-madness must have obscured Mark's vision, for he didn't see Callah throw herself into the hallway, between him and Nicholas. He only heard, clearly and louder than anything in the world, the *thunk* of the arrow burying itself in flesh, and he felt Callah's body stumble back against his. He didn't understand what had happened, but his arms automatically caught her. He looked down at her in shock. She was staring at the arrow shaft, sticking out of her chest.

Nicholas' mouth hung open as he looked at them in horror. He shook his head, backing away. "No, that wasn't what was supposed to happen." He stepped on a blue

tile. As the floor opened beneath him and he pitched down into a pit, he wailed, “Callah! Why did you get in the way?”

Mark hardly noticed him. Callah tilted her head back against his chest and looked up at him as she started to slide to the floor. He lowered her gently, cradling her on the cold stone as he tried to force his mind to work again. Her eyes closed tightly in pain, her back arching as she clutched at the arrow. It was buried deep, just to the left of where the Disk hung gleaming. He didn’t know what would have happened if it had hit the Disk, but it had missed. A dark stain was seeping slowly across her shirt.

Mark didn’t know what to do. He knew the kind of arrow the Gorotal used, barbed to rip flesh when removed. He couldn’t take it out or she would die. He rocked her, unconsciously echoing Nicholas’ words: “Callah, oh Callah, why did you get in the way?”

She opened her eyes. They were wide and glazed with pain, but she smiled a little. “Sorry, Mark. I--” She started to cough a little, and clenched her teeth as it sent pain through her body.

He wanted to laugh, or sob, or shout his fury and helplessness. He could feel the great wave of grief building, waiting to crash down and drown him. “I’m supposed to protect you. I’m your guardian, I’m supposed to die for you. Callah, you should have stayed hidden! Oh, now what will we do?”

Her breath was rasping in her chest. She lifted a trembling hand towards him, and he grasped it tight, holding it to his cheek. “Callah...”

“Mark. Mark, listen.” Her voice was urgent, she was pulling her hand away. “Mark, you have to take the Disk.” She fumbled at her neck, pulling on the chain of the Disk where it lay inside her jacket. It pulsed, as it always had, in time with her heartbeat. Now its light was irregular, dimming.

“Callah, no! You’re the bearer, you have to keep it, I’m just supposed to guard you--” Mark hardly knew what he was saying.

She shut her eyes. “You have to take it.” She was struggling to breathe now. “Remember... the Balancers said that I would know... who I had to pass it on to. When the time came. Now I know. You have to take it, Mark... Please.”

“But... I can’t! How can I go on alone, without you? Don’t do this, Callah, please!”

Her face twisted with pain. “Mark... you have to promise me... promise me you’ll go on. You have to finish this. All of us... we’ve all died for this. You have to go on. You can’t fail us now. Think of Timothy... Alissa... Jacob... remember your father. Promise me... You won’t stop until it’s done. Then... then you can rest. Mark, promise me?”

Her voice had faded to a whisper. Her eyes were fixed on his face, pleading with him. Tears in his eyes, he nodded, whispering, “I promise.”

She smiled and started to fumble at her neck, trying to pull the chain off with weak hands. She could hardly lift her head. He lifted her, slipped the chain off, let the White Disk dangle from his hand. Its pulsing stopped. As it departed from her, she relaxed, sighing like someone who has worked a long, long day, and can finally lie down in a soft bed and sleep. She looked at him, sorrow and peace mingling in her eyes. “I know you can do it, Mark. I would have given that burden to anyone rather than force you to bear it. Forgive me, but put it on.”

He slipped it over his head, and felt it settle around his shoulders with finality. It flared bright, and settled into a new pattern of pulses, already abandoning its former bearer. “I won’t fail you, Callah.”

“I know.” She shut her eyes, nestling her head against his supporting arm. She reached up her hand again, rested it against his cheek. “I love you, Mark.”

His heart would burst; he couldn’t bear this. Her hand slipped away, her body was limp in his arms. “Callah! I love you!” He held her tight, kissing her mouth and closed eyes, but it was too late.

Mark would never know how long he mourned there beside her body. In the end he remembered his promise. He laid her down in the hallway, trying to arrange her comfortably. He couldn't bear to see the arrow protruding from her chest any longer. Sobbing, he pulled it from her unprotesting flesh. Furious, he snapped the thick shaft in his bloody hands and threw it from him. It rattled down the hall. He clutched the White Disk tightly, wishing he could crush it in his bare hands, but it could not be destroyed, and it showed no stain when he took his hand away.

He had to go on. He had to be stone. He had to leave Callah lying here and finish this task she'd passed on to him. He felt his heart dying within him, becoming heavy and still. He could have no feelings now. The Disk began to glow, icily, with a harshness that drove all the shadows from the hall. The gems sparkled mercilessly. Onward, then, with no flesh, only stone. No grief, only duty was left to him, and he would not stop until he had fulfilled his promise.

Mark stalked through the hallways, a cold figure of ice, shining like a diamond in the depths of the night-shrouded maze. His steps were implacable, unstoppable, steady; he paced through the corridors. He stopped beside the pit that had swallowed Nicholas and stared down for some moments on the corpse that lay on spikes at the bottom. He couldn't even make himself hate Nicholas anymore. He couldn't feel anything at all; his heart was dust and ashes. He went on.

He strode with his bare sword gleaming in his hand, with no light in his eyes, with a face that was a mask. His step was sure; he did not watch his feet, but they bore him safely, avoiding all the triggers for the traps that filled this place.

He reached the end of the maze. A great stone slab stood as a wall before him, blank, a dead end. As he approached it, he realized that it was not completely blank. The finest seam, hair-thin, ran down the center.

The White Disk felt strange. He hadn't had it long, but it felt... almost aware, alert. It seemed to be awakening. He could feel its awareness flowing into him. It felt... not eager exactly. But not reluctant either. It seemed to know what was to come, and to accept it, although neutralizing the Black Disk would mean doing the same to the White. Through it, he felt the presence of its opposite power, very close now. It was just beyond the door, in fact. He knew that it was time. The evil power had existed unchecked for too long; it was time for its reign to end. He would be the one to end it. He did not hesitate as he walked toward the door, the White Disk pulsing brighter and brighter. From its center a beam of searing light shot out, hitting the seam of the sealed door. Light crept along the tiny crack, filling it up, and the door slowly swung open. Blackness seeped in from beyond. The White Disk burst into colorless light.

Mark strode into the room beyond the door, a high-ceilinged, shadowy throne room with a few goblin servants lurking in the corners. The wizened creature that crouched on the throne screeched at his appearance, a thin wail that was full of the horror of all his nightmares' fulfillment. It was a very old man, older than anyone should ever be, and all his years had been weary and wasted, his only pleasures twisted, his hours filled with the fear that this day would come. Now it had, and the old king was mindless with terror. He gibbered and scrambled backward in his chair, weakly waving his hands toward Mark, as though to banish him back to the nightmare he'd sprung from.

Mark was a shining figure, upright and merciless in his clear light. He shone with a light that stabbed the eyes of the old king's guards, forcing them to cringe away from his brightness. To them he was the dawn that would end their night. To the king, he was Death. He was Justice, and in his hand he held a sword.

A few of the Dark Ones, brave or stupid, charged at Mark. He cut them down without even looking at them. The rest fled shrieking away into the dark tunnels, abandoning their master, who whined and moaned in his high throne.

Mark approached him, standing at the foot of the steps that led up to the throne. Around the old man's neck hung a hole. It seemed a window into the man's chest, where was found only black emptiness. The light shining from Mark reached the throne and stopped. It could not light the shadow that lay around the king. The pool of shadows that hung around his neck writhed, oily and deep, sending out its unlight. The king, seeing that the White Disk's light could not touch him, clutched at the Black Disk and held it out before him, mumbling madly. The Black Disk flashed, if blackness can flash, and the White Disk's glow flared in response, blinding.

The two were balanced, Mark realized. The old king could not use the Black Disk against him; nor could Mark use the White. But the king was weak and afraid to die, and Mark was strong, and had already seen his worst fears come true before his eyes. Death was nothing to him now. Mark could hear the Black Disk calling to him, seductive, promising anything he wanted. It wanted to abandon this old man who had kept it locked away in this fortress so long; it wanted new strength, his strength. It offered him long life but Mark scorned it, looking at what that had brought this half-mad creature before him. Glory, honor, wealth -- what were they to him? His greatest ambition and treasure was gone. All that remained to him was duty. The Black Disk's call faltered. Here before it was a man with no desires, no fears. It could not tempt him; it could not frighten him.

He raised his sword. The old king shrieked, a keening whistle. The Black Disk flared, trying to protect itself, but Mark's Disk countered it. Balance. Mark's sword shattered that balance, plunging down into the heart of the withered, obscene creature before him. He ripped the sword free, unable to feel even pity for the wicked old man as his body crumbled away to dust. He had lived too long, and destroyed too much.

The Black Disk lay on the throne, begging him to take it up and wield it. Revenge! It could give him that! The ones who had taken his love from him, they could all be punished. It would help him hunt down all the Dark Ones that still remained in the land, make things safe for his country again. It would do anything he wished.

Mark was unmoved. He wished nothing but to fulfill his promise to Callah. Revenge would not bring Callah back, or his other friends. He pulled the White Disk off over his head. Its light grew still and steady, waiting for what would come. Slowly, holding the White Disk in his hand, he lowered it toward the Black Disk. It was hard to bring the two together; he had to press against a force he could not see. But he was relentless, and he drove the White Disk's shining surface closer and closer to that well of endless night. The two met -- there was an indescribable flash, the union of two antithetical forces.

Mark was thrown down the steps to the floor. When he could see again, he climbed back up the steps. On the throne lay what seemed nothing more than a circle of dull grey stone. Seamless and inert, it was hard to believe it had ever been anything more than a simple pendant. Mark could feel no power from it. He picked it up; it was neither warm nor cold, lifeless in his hand.

He'd succeeded. At least he had not failed Callah in that. He could feel no joy in his victory. He shrugged, and walked out of the empty throne room, the grey disk in his hand.

Chapter Eleven: Re-Awakening

The fortress was in an uproar by the time Mark had made his way back through the secret tunnels to the inhabited sections. The Dark Ones were no longer dominated by the power of the Black Disk; now that the creatures were free they turned on their most hated enemies, their former Gorotal overlords. They were no longer interested in fighting Teranians, and the Gorotal were too busy trying to defend themselves to make any trouble. Most of the goblins Mark saw ran from him.

He reached the room where the army had made its stand. A guard with a wounded shoulder leaned wearily the doorjamb. When Mark approached he raised his sword with his good arm and called back into the room for reinforcements. But then he recognized Mark and grinned widely. He shouted, "Mark's returned!"

As Mark passed through the doorway, he was surrounded by soldiers, hope shining from their faces. He had not realized that so many of them knew his name. They were waiting for news, hoping for word of a victory. It didn't seem like a victory to Mark, but it would be too cruel to disappoint these people. They had fought hard and lost friends as well.

Mark looked around. Everyone he saw was wounded, more or less seriously. The more mobile ones were guarding the doors, and the others who could still move were tending those who were most seriously hurt, where they lay in rows on the right side of the room. The dead, a heartbreaking number of them, outnumbering the living, were piled on the left side. The army had held off the Gorotal for hours in this room. Only a few enemies could come through the doors at a time, but still they had outnumbered the Teranians ten to one. The Teranians must have fought in a long line, a fresh soldier stepping up to take a wounded person's place. From the looks of it, some people had taken more than one turn. Mark could only see two Healers moving among the wounded.

The others had probably overspent their strength. He saw a robed body lying with the dead. Even the Healers had given up their lives to allow the quest to succeed.

He realized that these people needed to know that they had finished what they came to do. He held the grey disk over his head. A shout of joy resounded from the walls of the room. Even many of the wounded, lying in rows at the right side of the chamber, raised their heads and tried to cheer. Mark bowed his head, trying to hide his anguish. He fought the feelings back; he couldn't think about Callah yet. He had a little more to do first, to fulfill his promise. Then he could let his heart break.

The General wasn't one of the rejoicing Teranians gathered around him. He turned to someone and asked, "Where is the General?" The man's face fell, and he turned and led Mark to the right side of the room, where the General lay. Mark knelt beside his leader. He was covered in wounds, lying pale and still on a cloak.

"Sir?" Mark said softly. He had to be alive. He'd given too much of his life to Terania to die before he could see it saved.

General Vallorn opened his eyes, which had lost none of their sharp alertness. He spoke, and his voice was soft but steady. "Ah, Mark. You have returned." Mark held the combined disks up so the General could see them. "And you have succeeded. What of the others?"

Mark closed his eyes, trying desperately to keep from seeing their faces, and shook his head. The General nodded slowly and sadly. "I see. I am sorry. This was an expensive victory. Our land will be safe now. The next generation will not face a Gorotal threat. But this generation has lost many of its finest, bravest members. The price was high."

Mark nodded bitterly, not trusting himself to speak. The General looked at him searchingly.

“Mark, I must ask more of you, though I know you given done much already. You are heartsick, I can see. But I am wounded, and most of my officers are either dead or as badly hurt as I. Will you lead the army back home? They will follow you.”

All Mark wanted was to go back to Callah’s body and mourn there. All his friends were dead. But he was still not free. He could feel his friends’ eyes on him, imagine their disappointment if he refused. They had not held anything back, and neither would he. He wouldn’t fail them.

He nodded, and the General smiled and closed his eyes. “Well done.” Then Mark arose, put the grey disk around his neck, and told his army they were going home.

Back across the barren plain they trudged, bearing their wounded with them. The sun still shone hot from the empty sky, but it seemed less oppressive now, more alive. Back through the dead forests. They were still dead, but one day as the army was passing through it rained, and the next day one of the soldiers created a delay by delightedly showing all the others the tiny green weed he’d found sprouting up from the mud. Further on, the still-living trees on the edge of the Black Disk’s influence looked a little less wilted.

They ran into a few small bands of Dark Ones roaming the forests. The creatures fled when they saw the army, though. Without human commanders to drive them, they sought easier prey. This place wouldn’t be safe for small groups of travelers for a long time.

They marched to the border before returning the grey disk. There they found the border guards, diminished in number, but triumphant. They had been hard-pressed for some weeks, and some Gorotal had gotten past them, but then one day, in the middle of a battle that had been going badly for the Teranian forces, all the Dark Ones suddenly turned on their masters. It had been complete chaos for quite some time, but in the end most of the Dark Ones had fled northward. Since then the border guard had been tracking down

the ones that had gotten past them. They believed that few of them could have reached the inhabited parts of the country -- most were still wandering, directionless, on the empty north plains. They were confident that too few Gorotal troops had gotten through to pose a serious threat to anyone.

Mark left the wounded at the border, including the slowly-recovering General. He took along about twenty soldiers, ones who had escaped serious harm, with him to seek the Balancers and fulfill the last stage of their quest. His men chattered and joked behind him at times during the trek, in high spirits now that their victory was secure and they were back in their own land. Mark didn't join in their merriment. He strode silently ahead of them, and sat alone in his dark tent each night until troubled sleep found him.

The bramble patch that blocked the way to the Balancer's realm had grown back to cover up the burned place the Gorotal had left, but the brambles parted when Mark approached, before he could say a word. He went in, his troops behind him.

When they reached the stone spire in the middle of the wide bowl, Mark went in alone. He paced down the dark tunnel, oblivious this time to the beauty of the flowstone around him. Inside the great chamber, the three Balancers appeared in their columns of crystal flame. Silently, Mark cast the grey disk, fulfillment of Callah's promise and instrument of her death, onto the ground at his feet. It struck the stone with a clatter that echoed from the smooth walls.

He turned on his heel abruptly and walked out, not pausing when he heard the inhuman voice of the middle figure say, <We thank you.>

It was finished. Outside in the sunlight, Mark dropped to his knees and sobbed.

Mark woke up slowly, his body stiff and heavy. He opened his eyes to find an unfamiliar face leaning over him. He was off the couch in an instant, ready for battle -- but there was something fixed to his head. He put up his hand and touched the virtual

reality helmet, and then remembered where he was, and what was happening. He was back in the real world.

It was too much to take in. Everything he'd fought for, all that they'd done -- none of it was real? He ripped off his helmet and stared at the startled technician, who'd jumped backward when Mark leapt to his feet. Around the room, other people were awakening. Many of them reacted as Mark had. They had been at war too long to trust strangers. Mark's hand hovered uncertainly at his hip. He wanted a sword.

The world stopped moving as a thought occurred to Mark. If their mission, their world, hadn't been real, then their losses must not be real either... Not daring to breathe, Mark turned around slowly.

There on the couch next to his lay Callah, eyes closed, hands folded on her chest. She looked pale and still, the way she had looked when he had last seen her. Trembling, not daring to think, he turned to the technician, who was still hovering nervously on the other side of his couch, and said, in an unsteady voice, "Wake her up."

The technician stammered, sidling sideways, "Uh, I'm supposed to do this row first--"

Mark reached across the couch and grabbed the technician by the shirt. The little man squeaked in surprise. Mark dragged him across the couch and set him down next to Callah. He was briefly surprised by how weak his arms felt, but that didn't matter now. "I said, wake her up. Now."

The man gave him a terrified glance and bent to the bank of controls at the head of the couch. He pressed a few buttons and some lights went off; others came on. He turned to face Mark, cringing a little. "She'll wake up in just a few moments now... Uh, can I go?"

Mark ignored him, bending over Callah. He couldn't believe she would wake up. Then she stirred and he felt his heart would burst. He pulled the helmet off her head. Her eyes opened and she looked up at him.

The last thing Callah remembered was Mark's face, growing harder and harder to see. Now she was seeing it again, still wet with tears as it had been before. There was bright light all around them. She said dreamily, "Mark. Did you find a Healer?" There was no sign of the Disk around his neck. She felt around her own and found only unfamiliar smooth fabric. "Did we win?"

Suddenly, he grabbed her hands and pulled her to her feet. She felt unsteady, but his tight grip on her shoulders kept her from swaying. His eyes burned into hers. She wasn't sure what was happening, but now he was crushing her in a tight embrace, sobbing, "Callah, you're alive!" over and over into her ear.

She *was* alive; she could feel her heart pounding. But she shouldn't be. Something was wrong. She remembered dying from Nicholas' arrow. She had felt her heart slowing down, felt herself dying, felt the urgent warning from the Disk that she had to pass it on, *now*. Then she remembered -- her other life. The game they'd all wanted to play. She started to shake, unable to reconcile two sets of memories.

Mark let go of her. She stared up at him in disbelief. "Just a game? Mark, how can it be?"

He shook his head. "It doesn't matter. Callah, I love you."

Her eyes filled with tears as he cupped her face in his hands and bent his face towards hers. His lips were soft and warm, and Callah suddenly knew that it didn't matter which world they were in, which one was real, as long as Mark was with her.

They stood looking at each other quietly, at peace. Callah said softly, "I love you, too. We've never said that before, have we? Not in this world. But it's true. I love you."

He gazed down at her, joy filling his eyes. They might have stood that way forever, but someone snickered behind Callah. They looked up to find that everyone in

the room was gathered around grinning at them, and at the front of the crowd were Alissa, Jacob, and Timothy!

Callah gave a cry of joy and opened her arms. The reunited friends fell into each other's arms, laughing and crying, all talking at once. Callah had never been this happy.

They all separated again after a few minutes, a little embarrassed and wiping their eyes. Mark put his arm around Callah's shoulders and she leaned against him. The others grinned again. Alissa was just opening her mouth to make some teasing comment when Callah happened to glance to the side. Standing nearby, staring at them with a stricken look, was Nicholas. She stiffened, and the others followed her gaze. A cold silence fell.

"Nicholas." Mark's voice was an ominous rumble. Callah could feel the anger running through him, but he acted more quickly than she expected. He let go of her and flung himself across the intervening couches, screaming, "You killed her! Die, you traitor!"

Mark wasn't holding back. This was no school-yard fight, it was a war. The only thing that saved Nicholas was that Mark tried to draw a sword that wasn't there. That tiny delay gave him time to dodge out of the way. Mark spun to face him, every muscle taut, ready to spring again.

Nicholas held out his hands. He was broken inside, something in his eyes showed it. "It was... just a game."

Mark's eyes narrowed. "It was much more than that, Nicholas. It was a test. And you failed." Mark leapt for his enemy again, but by now Callah had caught up to him. She grabbed Mark's arm and set herself. She was dragged only a few feet forward before he stopped and looked down at her.

"Let go of me."

"No. Mark, stop it."

"You can't want me to just let him go! He *killed* you! He betrayed us! How can you defend him?"

"I'm not. But you'll get arrested. Besides, I'm not dead, am I? Let me handle this." He was sputtering, trying to argue. "Hush," she ordered. "After all, I'm the one who got killed."

She turned to face Nicholas, her head cocked to one side and a small frown on her face. "Nicholas. Even if it was only a game, it seemed real to us. You caused us too much pain for us to forget what you did. I'm sorry that I couldn't save you when you were captured, and that we never got to talk about the Disk. If things had been different, maybe you wouldn't have betrayed us. I'm really not angry with you for killing me, you know. Isn't that strange? It doesn't bother me." Then her tone changed, growing hard and angry. "But, you killed my friends. You killed Alissa and Jacob. And you killed Timothy. I won't forget that, or forgive it."

With that, Callah cocked her fist back and punched Nicholas squarely on the chin, putting all her weight behind it. Taken completely off guard, he went down like a rock, falling backward over a couch and sprawling to the floor. He lay there, one hand holding his jaw, speechless.

Callah turned her back on him, dismissing him entirely. To the others, she said, "Now that that's taken care of -- I think we've just won a war. Shouldn't there be a celebration going on?"