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## Disciples of Vu

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DISCIPLES OF *VU*

A Thesis  
by

LEIF CARL BEHMER

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Texas-Pan American  
In Partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2011

Major Subject: Creative Writing



DISCIPLES OF *VU*

A Thesis  
by  
LEIF CARL BEHMER

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May 2011



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## ABSTRACT

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This project is in the design of high-fantasy sword and sorcery, wherein the concepts of mana and magic are employed as expressions of virtue to highlight contemporary issues of cultural identity and belonging. This project is also an experiment to attract a readership of non-traditional fantasy readers into the genre by creating, rather than assuming, a fantastic world context using immersive rhetorical techniques.

This project in of itself is not so much a re-invention of the traditional adventure quest as it is an exploration of its post-Tolkien form (the attraction of mythology and folklore, the narrative use of prophecy), and also includes elements of satire, which respond to the stereotypical battle between good versus evil and the haphazard treasure hording conventions encouraged by fantasy gaming culture.





## DEDICATION

To the gap between fairy and faerie, but especially to the people who don't know the difference. To my family...



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	iii
DEDICATION.....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	vi
CHAPTER I. SONG OF SWORD.....	1
CHAPTER II. THE VILLAGE DISTRICT.....	34
CHAPTER III. LORD VALUIL'S PROCESSION.....	67
FANTASY LITERATURE AND ITS DISCIPLES.....	105
Rhetorical Incantations.....	112
The Magic, the Real, the Nothing.....	121
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	131
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH.....	133



CHAPTER I  
THE SONG OF SWORD



*The Lord of Murder used to be a tyrant.*

*Now the Creature is a slave.*

Ivan held the gash at his chest as he breathed in the darkness that surrounded him, listening to a sound he could only describe as evil – which made him feel stupid. Of course he would make a villain out of anyone trying to kill him, and swear every suffering curse to anyone who might succeed.

Muses from across the globe, give Ivan his tale about how he was duped into coming to this adventure for gold and glory only to be cut down by a vicious predator from some undiscovered hell, sealed away by pantheons of gods who somehow failed to make sure something like this would never happen to Ivan. Yes! the great hero unjustly ripped from his prime by irresponsible deities, deceit, and bad etiquette – not because he made a mistake.

He stopped complaining to himself when the *evil* sound returned, scratching the outer lining of his ear canal. He imagined the cave to be shaped like the inside of his ear, the walls scarred by a maniacal scratch that flaunted its own personal tune, more appropriate inside some forgotten prison, or asylum. He wanted to groan and block out this mental invasion.



Then he did, a lengthy groan that grew into a shout that was as much a launch for his frustration as it was a challenge to his pursuer to quit being a pansy and fight. Ivan was ready for round two.

A silent moment slipped past him. Then the steps of an unseen villain boomed across the cave floor as if by drum, a procession for the advancing slaughter. Ivan felt for the boulder next to him then took out his sword and began slicing across the rock, saying “I can do that too, asshole! You come any closer, I’ll cut your damn head open and cram your brain out your ears.”

And not a moment’s hesitation interrupted the signal that Ivan’s taunt was recognized. The procession advanced upon him, and Ivan’s ears throbbed against a long scratch from the villain’s weapon, resonating with splintering tones. The bass was rock and the soprano, steel.

Ivan’s own frantic scrapes against his boulder were much less impressive and only sharpened the air’s intensity by clashing against the harmony made by his opponent. Ivan stopped. This was the most ridiculous kind of combat he had ever been in. Give him a target he could see and he would trash it with the precision of a Grecian sculptor. Put him in front of a shop owner and he could chew him out for his horrendous prices without any shame, but how do you fight a sound? A guitar might have helped if he knew how to play, a guitar with a spear head coming out of its neck.

No more complaining.

His challenger was coming. He held on to the boulder while shuffling his feet around the floor. Not quite a flat surface. His opponent wouldn’t know that, though...or about the boulder! Ivan moved into position, his legs bent low and his arms out.

The procession arrived.

Ivan rammed into the metal mass of his attacker and shoved him into the rock, not waiting for the clamor to end before he brought his arms up and struck down. Miss.

Suddenly an intense pain surged through Ivan's arm, and he dropped his sword down to one hand. New blood leaked down his bicep. Was the villain wearing spiked armor? Completely impractical inside of a cave. Pushing him into a boulder should have bent or broken most of the spikes. He may even be unconscious.

Nope!

The air itself swooned as a blade cut across at Ivan, who forced his bad arm to his sword in time to help block it. He guided the weight to his back leg then kicked his opponent's shin, propped his foot to his chest and shoved him off.

Pain again. Now his foot was sore, having pushed into surviving spikes on the armor, but Ivan ignored it and immediately thrust his weapon where he heard the feet clamor back to. His blade touched the armor, but only with a graze that was easily deflected to the side by the armor's curvature. Ivan swung again and again.

Where's that neck? the jugular? Damn the Fates! He hadn't been so blind since before he was born, but his sword helped show him the way through space as he sliced down and left, up and right, advancing as best he could. Wherever this prickly bastard stepped back to wasn't good enough for Ivan until he fell down.

*"Fall, damn it, so I can kill you."*

But their weapons crossed again, only this time Ivan felt his blade locked in place, as if there were spines coming from the blade of his opponents own sword, keeping Ivan from sliding down to his hilt or brushing away to the side. They both struggled in place, unseen by each other yet perfectly realized within their shared space. And Ivan could not help but wonder what the

hell he was fighting. Some overprotective minotaur like the one in myth? Some bandit trying to loot the place for himself? No. There was something vindictive about this man. The armor, no one would be wearing that unless they wanted people to bleed. This was not just some mindless guardian. He wanted Ivan, along with the rest of his companions who came down here inside the labyrinth with him...

Or was that only what Ivan wished were true? How arrogant was he to assume that this bastard came all the way down here in a cave that doesn't believe in sight, below the ruins of a thousand year-old civilization, just to whack *one* guy and a few of his buddies? Then do what? Climb out and go back to bed?

"What the hell is your problem?!" Ivan yelled suddenly.

No answer. Worth a try, though. Talking was only thing Ivan hadn't tried, probably because it was a stupid idea. Who has time for a conversation in the middle of a fight to the death?

"*Yinol!*" said the attacker from his side of the blades.

Curious. That was a language Ivan seldom heard, not because it was uncommon but because he was almost never around the people who spoke it. They were people, if people could also be creatures. They had the attributes of birds and lions, tall people with broad colorful manes but thin bodies that deceived you into thinking they are not strong. This attacker could be one of them, but the Rivlao weren't the only ones who could speak their language.

Unfortunately, Ivan could not.

"The hell you just say?" He finally asked.

The attacker leaned in, buckling Ivan's knees. "Ha! *Mofnal yu Vu!*"

"Gah! why bother talking when you know I can't understand you?"

Ivan asked himself just as much, but the need, the drive to understand overcame his logic. But damn it, he wanted to know, even if it didn't matter. Then he reminded himself that this battle had more than one combat.

Idiot. He could not let himself get confused by any more noise. He shoved back at the Bastard then finally jerked himself out of the deadlock. But not without another tear at his arm. Ivan turned around and rushed back to the boulder, at least where he thought it was. For his next gamble, he had to find that boulder. He put his hand out. Not here. The steel feet began to advance behind him. Was it here?

Yes! Now for careful precision. Wearing no armor gave Ivan the nimble advantage he needed to lift himself quietly above and over the boulder. Now he could wait with his weapon at the ready for the oncoming steps to stumble over the rock. Then Ivan would strike with the fury of a hundred executioners.

Then suddenly his composure wavered as he stood. He could feel his blood still dripping down his arm. He gave himself a quick shake and swore to himself that this time he would not fucking miss.

The steps were close.

*"That's right,"* Ivan thought. *"Come and get me!"*

They shuffled in place.

*"Come'n get me! Come'n get me!"*

A *twang* resonated as metal struck the boulder...but no stumble. Instead, the metal scrapped against the side of the boulder with that same screeching chord which tore into Ivan's ears. The scrapes were traveling around to his side of the rock. The Bastard figured him out.

With just enough time to be nimble again, Ivan lifted himself back over the builder, his arms agonizing as he lifted his legs up far enough to keep his leather pants from rubbing against the rock surface. He was down. His sword up.

And the screeching chord stopped where Ivan had just moved from. Ivan, tempted to stab or slash over the boulder, kept his patience, which eased his breath well enough to think straight and convince himself that his opponent was fooled.

Nope!

Ivan leaped out of the way as his attacker leaped over and crashed onto his position. Ivan fell to his side against the uneven floor. He bit his lip to keep quiet, then when he heard nothing, he gradually eased himself on his back. But of course, then he heard the metal armor rubbing against itself, as if perhaps his attacker had turned to face him lying on his back. He hoped to all things sacred that this steel demon had no idea where he fell to. That's all he needed, just a little divine luck to tip the scales...

Then he accused himself of self-righteousness. As if he was on some mission to single-handedly save the world and all he needed was a *little* inspiration from the powers that be. Powers...was there just one god? One was all Ivan needed, but what a convenient time for a divine favor, right before he gets killed. He found it so hard to stay true to his virtues as he imagined his soul being dissected by darkness' hidden scalpels. Truly, he would not be worth saving.

But perhaps he was wrong. The clanking steps of his attacker were going the wrong way.

*"That's right, jackass,"* Ivan thought. *"You didn't get me. Now get the hell outta here."*

Then he paused.

Crap!

Now he was dedicated to the priesthood for the rest of his life, his soul preserved for all eternity in God's over-the-counter shelf next to rows and rows – maybe not too many rows – of good Samaritans, bleeding hearts, and butt paddling preacher know-it-alls.

Those preachers. It was almost worth it to Ivan, getting on God's shelf and turning inside one of His divine jars to all his old school teachers and church folk and saying "See, assholes? I didn't do anything you all told me to, and I made it here anyway. Fuck you!"

That *was* an acceptable heaven, now that Ivan thought it through... Ah, but what about his comrades? They were lost somewhere else in the labyrinth, and the Bastard was still on the loose. Things were still sour between Ivan and Percy, and Darius sounded like he took a bad slash before they all got lost. Ivan's tirade against those preachers wouldn't last for very long once he saw Percy and Darius' jars next to his.

*"The new guy must be scared out of his wits, too."*

He was thinking of Marcus, who always smiled with his front teeth touching. But there was one more in left in their party, a Rivlao. *He* would have understood what the Bastard was saying, that creature-person whose name Ivan could never pronounce. *Let him* still be alive.

But gods or no, Ivan rocked himself off his back and sat up. He put his hand down, lifted on one foot then stood on the other. His ankle bent inward and Ivan fell to his side. His teeth clenched in silence as he bent forward and jerked off his boot and sock, then grasping his now sprained ankle with both hands. He tried to cradle the pain away by rocking back and forth while putting the sock in his mouth to keep from eating his own lips. But within the damp cotton surface was a profound taste, strangely similar to the taste of coins he used to suck on when he was a boy, as if coins were naturally stained with blood.

Then Ivan realized he couldn't feel his foot. It was slick against his palm, as if it were still bleeding. He tied his sock around his ankle then crammed a handful of dirt on the wound, but he only managed to scoop up pebbles and dust. No soil to patch it with.

His arm began tingling and Ivan shivered, thinking "*I was just kidding! Don't take me away!*"

And a new set of steps answered his call, coming in through some passageway, the sound of leather boots stumbling against the gravel.

"*Uh, thanks?*"

The *oofs* and *gahs* of another blind man encouraged Ivan to whisper, "Hey, over here, buddy."

No answer, but the leather boots were now scuffling towards him.

"It's Ivan. I'm hurt bad. Can't stand up. Any chance you got the med bag?"

No answer as his friend came upon him. Ivan grabbed his arm and shook it. "Be still, Ivan, I'm just out of breath."

"Marcus? God damn, when you didn't answer, I almost thought you were some henchman of the Bastard."

"Stay quiet, Ivan. Let me have a look at you."

Ivan knew Marcus couldn't see him wincing as he pressed around his body, so he told him, "It's my right foot and arm. The dick had spiked armor. Don't know how deep it went, but I don't feel any splinters. You got the gauze?"

"I dropped the bag somewhere. I'll go find it."

Marcus moved away but Ivan grabbed his arm again and said, “Hey, that’s where the Bastard went. Be careful. He likes to scrape the walls with his sword. The noise drives you nuts, but don’t make any sound. Understand?”

“Just stay put,” Marcus said assuringly, “and I’ll come back for you.” But Ivan grabbed Marcus’ shoulder again before he could leave him.

“Hey.”

“What?”

“Marcus, I don’t have any kids.” His feeling barely lingered now at his fingers. “Do you think that will hurt my chances?”

Why had he said such a stupid thing? Ivan imagined Marcus’ wide goatee above him as he said, “Don’t say such things. It doesn’t suit you.” Marcus stood up. “But I will say this, Ivan. You are going to live. That, I am certain of.”

How certain? Minutes passed. Ivan crawled against the boulder and sat up. Marcus would find him easily enough, but his last words carried Ivan to his imagination. And he thought, *“Maybe Marcus is a god. Yeah, and this is all a test to see if I’ll be invited into the Hero’s Only Club.”*

Mammothshit.

Ivan knew Marcus only said that to keep his hopes up. That’s what friends are supposed to do. That’s what Marcus did, even though this was his first time traveling in the group. He seemed to be handling his wits better than Ivan had guessed. Could that be because *he* had kids? Did he have kids? No one ever asked, because they might be lying if any of them had said “No”, even their Rivlao companion, whom Ivan considered less of a creature than himself.



Still, what the hell was a Rivlao? Was that what the Bastard was? Ivan convinced himself otherwise. That steel demon wasn't anything like Willow. Fighting communicates certain things, and the Bastard fought like another man.

"Huh, was he a *man*?" Ivan thought out loud.

How forgetful of Ivan. Only a few weeks ago, he had learned some strange lessons from the Rivlao at the trade city of Vir'Vonia, where he and his party made their plans to go to this "domestic labyrinth" – a place frequented by archeologists and treasure hunters. Ivan was the later, of course, but the Rivlao they called Willow seemed to be the former, more curious to see the wonders of dead civilizations than to make riches out of their remains.

Willow.

Was he dead? He was trying to tell Ivan something before they left, while Ivan was drunk and hitting on bar maids. Ivan remembered it now because he never forgot *her*. Ivan made a wish. He wished he had made love to a Rivlao when he had the chance. He had only just begun to tell the difference between the males and females, which was hard for him because he couldn't see any bulges in their pants or cleavage in their chests. They had sexless flesh, which Ivan never understood. But the females, he realized now, were more colorful about the ear bristles, not lobes, bristles. They almost shimmered their colors at him, likely out of anger. The females were always perhaps a few inches taller than himself. Their manes intimidated him as well, because each strand of hair seemed to move on their own, the thinnest of fingers that could choke him if he walked up too close to them in the streets.

Stranger still was the time he busted into Percy's room at the Mountain Stew tavern-inn. Ivan had heard Percy groan out to the tip of his throat, like he was being run through by a sword.

But oh, no...he was just having sex with another man – a Rivlao man, that is – with a bubbled up prod coming out of what looked like a slit in his crotch and into Percy’s...what Ivan had looked away from just in time. Darius came in too after he heard Ivan crash Percy’s door out. He tried calming Ivan down by pulling him outside then splashing his face with the pint of ale he was holding.

“They just do things differently down here,” Darius said. He was holding Ivan’s shoulders steady. “No one’s going to do anything like that to you, y’undestand? This kind of thing happens very causally. No one cares about it.”

But Ivan cared.

Darius had been to Vir’Vonia before, but whenever Ivan walked down the trade streets alone and saw a Rivlao, with hair strands poking out of his head like needles, he changed lanes through the throng of travelers and traders to avoid him.

Or *her*. Ivan was constantly getting into trouble by assuming first that they were male.

“I’m not *man* or *wo-man*, you ignorant pest,” a Rivlao might say before strong-arming Ivan to a wall inside The Mountain Stew tavern-inn, where Ivan frequented with his friends. Then the assailant might shove him to the floor and say something Ivan couldn’t understand. It would always sound like the words *new* and *begin* spoken together too fast. Perhaps he was being mocked into trying again? But one time a malachite-maned Rivlao gave a hand to Ivan and helped him up from the floor. This Rivlao introduced him or herself to Ivan, but the name sounded too whimsy for him to pronounce, so Ivan just smiled through his black beard and shook his head as though he heard well enough.

The malachite Rivlao was bare-chested, a hairless chest, and with a smile that seemed happy to see Ivan’s well developed muscles. Ivan didn’t see any nipples on the stranger but he

could imagine where human nipples could have been, near the pronounced curves of her/his breasts. Ivan's leather vest was only loosely tied, but no one could see if he had any nipples, not that he noticed anyone looking at the black curls on his chest. Still, it relieved Ivan to know that this malachite haired stranger could not see his nipples. He had a hunch that he was shaking hands with a male, but he put aside the puzzle, figuring that it didn't matter.

But their handshake lingered. In fact, it intensified as the stranger widened his smile.

"A *cage of teeth*," Ivan thought.

Before he knew it, he was locked within a test of might. Ivan surged his hand with the power of his right side. At least he thought he did.

All he noticed was the feeling in his hand retreating against his most ardent command. He clenched his own teeth and brought their strength into the struggle. But the tingling wave that began at his wrist quickly swept up through his arm, passed his elbow, and through his shoulder to the scar on his right neck-side. It was as though the entire right side of his body was disappearing, and he could feel nothing of himself. Only the sight of his purpling arm convinced him that it was still there. The sensation was about to sweep away the feeling in his eye and his head when he finally let go with a gapping gasp.

The stranger with the malachite mane dropped Ivan's limp hand and patted him on his back, saying "Percy lasted longer." Ivan's jaw expanded with his widening eyes. "Ha, ha!" the stranger shouted. "He made *the face*!" He guided Ivan to the table Darius and Percy watched them from then sat him down.

"I saved you a pint," Percy said to Ivan as he and Darius both slapped at his back.

"Can you pick it up with your rosey palm?" Darius said with a smirk. Ivan set his right arm on the table as though it wasn't hurting, then swept up his mug with his left hand and took a

gulp of his ale. He slammed it on the wood surface, and froth spilled over and down the shaft of the mug before he said to the Rivlao, “So you were the lucky guy I saw pounding Percy?”

Percy scoffed out a chuckle then said, “Yeah, well, the noise *you* screeched sounded like you had just been enjoyed by the dick of a mammothorse.” Everyone laughed out loud except Ivan.

Percy continued. “But, no. This guy, Darius and I just met.” He turned to the Rivlao. “Would you like a pint – ?”

Ivan couldn't tell how Percy pronounced the stranger's name.

“Angela!” Percy called to the bright waitress behind the bar, pointed down at their table then raised one finger. Most of the other tables were full but not rowdy. Angela did not have to strain herself too hard to notice Percy's request.

“Coming, love!” she said.

The Rivlao asked him, “Why do you folk insist on drinking something that only kills your thoughts?” Angela placed his pint in front of him with only the froth showing. “Is it some kind of training?” he asked while taking a gulp. He smacked his thin lips.

“What, you don't think it tastes good?” Darius said. The three men snickered.

“You'll see why after you have a few pints,” added Percy. Before long, he whistled to Angela with one finger raised. Then another pint came. Then another...

And another...

And, and there was much disappointed. Darius, Percy, and Ivan had been watching the Rivlao drink while they talked about weapons and monsters. Their recent trek at goblin hunting across the stony fields left them with well loaded tales and proud battle scars. Ivan scratched the scar at his neck as he recounted Percy's kill at the nick of time. Of course, Darius would

inevitably slide in how he scared the whole group of little green demons all by himself with the roaring charge of his broad sword, which neither Percy nor Ivan would concede to having ever happened. But eventually, time only bled out their hopes for getting the Rivlao drunk, and the hype became less and less interesting.

“Well,” the Rivlao said “enough water makes me want to go to the restroom too. I’ll be right back.” As the Rivlao left his stool, Ivan glanced at his exotic hair carpeting down his back into a fine jade column down into his back pants. The hairs seemed to stretching apart along with Willow’s arms.

After the Rivlao cleared the end of the room, Ivan asked Percy, “Does he have to sit down when he ...”

“Don’t ask,” Darius interrupted.

“How’s your arm?” Percy asked Ivan.

“Like I don’t *have* to amputate anymore but I wish I would anyway. I need another pint.” Ivan started to lift his right hand into the air then quickly switched to his left. Angela soon came over.

“That guy sure can hold his ale,” she remarked as she passed Ivan his pint. “He already drank as much as all you guys put together, minus one of course, love.” She winked at Ivan before she saw his still aggravated palm.

“Oh yes,” she said, nearly enthusiastic. “I saw you locking hands with that green haired beastie, earlier. Now don’t you get too put off losin’ ‘gainst him. They got a supernatural strength, they do. Never want to see one actually get drunk. I’m just impressed you lasted that long.”

“Percy lasted longer,” Darius reminded them.

“That’s right, you bastard,” Percy said punching Darius in the arm.

“Damn it, not on my bruise,” Darius ached back at Percy. “It hadn’t had a chance to heal yet.”

Angela didn’t seem to hear them. She collected Ivan’s empty mug then began shaking it at him.

“Mind you, it ain’t so much an offense to confuse their sexes, love. It’s when you refer to them as be’un human – makes them feel alien I suppose – that they get that dab o’spite in their eye. I wish I knew why they’re so sensitive to that.” Her eyes began to drift inside the hefty slip of Ivan’s shirt and down the cleavage of his rounded man-breasts. Then she looked to the fading flame of the table lamp. “Oh! your lamp’s gettin’ low. Here, deary, let me refill it for yah.”

Every table had a tall candle lamp at the center with a simple, round copper base and a glass frame, so Angela had to bend herself across the table beside Ivan to empty her oil canteen into the lamp. Her chest nestled briefly at his finger tips.

Percy was watching and noticed Angela balancing herself back up with Ivan’s bad hand under her palm. It did not seem to hurt him.

“There we go, all bright,” she said to Ivan. “Let me know if there’s anything else you need, love.” She walked away with a little bounce to her chestnut dress skirt while passing the malachite Rivlao, who gave a disgusted snort as he passed her. He shook his head then retook his stool next to Ivan.

“Well, so much for the ale,” he said. “So, I hear you folk are from far north,” then in a lowered tone, “deep within the *Claw Mountains*, mwahahaha.”

“Well these two are,” Darius said pointing to Percy and Ivan, “but I was raised in the Ryzoan province. We have a settlement near its capital.”

“Ah,” the Rivlao responded. “Ar’Ryzo. Ar’Inule is the capital in this province. Minoa must be your matriarch.”

“Hell, no!” Percy interjected.

“We’re just men without a kingdom,” Darius explained. “You folks have your provinces with your matriarchs, but we’ll have a kingdom of our own, eventually.” He took another gulp then raised his finger on an important point. “Of course, men don’t actually live *in* the mountains, just inside the crescent of the mountain range. There’s a pocket of land there mankind settled a long time ago, before the dustbowl came inside and tore up everything. A few of us can still make a living, but of course you know, the dustbowl is what made us come down here and meet you fellas.”

Ivan took his eye away from Angela when he discovered an idea to get the Rivlao to mention his name again. He put his mug down then spoke.

“Is your name short for anything?”

“Like what?” the Rivlao asked, somewhat dubious.

“Well, my name is short for Ivanhoe and Percy is short for Percival. Or is yours an alias, like,” he lowered his tone, “*Storm Shadow?*”

But when the Rivlao answered, his name came out whispery and too fluid for Ivan to distinguish between his syllables.

“ – is a name I will always go by. I’ve always had it, but our names don’t *mean* anything in particular unless we do something...” he looked ahead of himself, “glorious.”

His narrow nose and bold iris gave him a hawk-like quality, a quality Ivan realized that all Rivlao shared with hidden variations. Maybe their noses would begin just a bit closer to their

eye brows, or maybe those eye brows would slant just a little bit at the ends. Of course, there were plenty more clues Ivan would probably never know about.

Darius summoned Angela for another round of pints, though the Rivlao declined his. Ivan, however, gladly relieved him of it and dual-wielded his ale mugs. The Rivlao rubbed his finger under his nose as Angela went back to the bar.

“By the way,” the Rivlao continued, “I’m curious. I noticed that you tend to exclude your females when you mention your own people – with words like *man*, *mankind*, *men*. Is there a reason for it?”

Darius replied first with a belch, which announced that he would answer for everyone. “Huh, never thought about it.” He paused to take another gulp. “But women understand that we include them too, except for Percy, that is.”

“Asshole,” Percy said to Darius as he punched him again. This time, he meant to hit his bruise. But when Darius hit him back, their laughter degenerated into snickering grunts. Percy slouched with his elbows on the table then said, “You do something like that one time in your life and everyone thinks you’ve gone queer.”

Ivan slammed both his mugs back down then said, with a wiggling finger raised, “Well one time’s all it takes, doesn’t it?” Percy didn’t answer, but Ivan continued as if to change the subject. “Hey Percy, I have a question for you. Do you ever look at a map’s compass and think to yourself – ‘That looks like a puckered anus?’ ”

Percy reddened as he put his ale back down. The last drop was about to fall from his blonde beard. Ivan leaned forward then said through his sloppy black whiskers, “Does that turn you on?”



Percy gripped his mug like an iron knuckle then whipped it at Ivan's face so fast the flame went out in the lamp. Ivan shouted in mixed pain and surprise then slammed his mugs so hard they shattered, leaving splintered edges directed at Percy. He was about to gut his face.

Immediately, every other patron in the room stood up and faced their table and the group was surrounded by angry glares. Ivan and Percy slowly surveyed the room then dropped what was left of their mugs. The wax candles along the walls gently melted away as they forgot about their clash. Angela held her face in her palm and shook her head as five Mountain Stew strongarms clunked towards their table. Three of them were men and two were Rivlao. Ivan noticed more strongarms watching from the staircase and from the entrance's swinging doors.

One of them said, "We don't tolerate fighting in here." He was a man with a grey wool vest, holding his copper belt buckle to give his arm something to grip as he flexed his bicep. It turned into an arc of peach stone before he said, "Now, if you two wanna take it outside, that's fine with us," he paused to scan their faces then opened his free arm to the bar "or you can sit back down and enjoy another round. I don't think I have to mention your third option, do I?"

The malachite Rivlao stood up slowly. "That won't be necessary." He slipped his hand over Ivan's shoulder then gestured to Percy. "Why don't we step outside a second for some fresh air?" His voice sounded like a suggestion, but to Percy and Ivan, his hands gave a command, clawing at their necks and pulling them outside the swinging doors.

The dust from the street swept against their boots as they crossed the threshold. The sign of The Mountain Stew, featuring a steaming bowl of meaty chunks and spices, was painted orange by the setting sunlight.

The Rivlao knocked the two of them upside their heads. "Alright, now shake hands."

But Ivan didn't shake on anything unless he meant it. Liars were even worse to him than queers. But he looked hard at Percy then slowly looked hard at himself, thinking, "*How do you shake with someone who'd just as soon finger you?*"

Ivan rubbed his jaw. They had snapped out of their fight so quickly once the whole bar came upon them, just like the goblins had, and once again they had each other's backs.

Though Percy was the one who struck first, it still seemed fitting to Ivan that he apologize first, though neither of them ever would, not even in private. Ivan shifted away from Percy and the orange sunlight, then took a breath. He sighed, but before he could lift his hand someone called to Percy from within the shadowy current travelers coming down the road. Marcus' black goatee stood out from the crowd. His hair blew just behind his shoulders as he waved, calling next to Ivan.

He came over to Percy and shook his hand while placing the other on his shoulder. "Well, what are we all doing out here when the ale's inside?" Marcus smiled with his front teeth touching.

"Well, Ivan and I had a tiff," Percy explained. "By the way, this place gets *very* offended by any kind of hostility. Just a heads-up."

"I know," said Marcus. "That's because Vir'Vonia is so far from the rest of civilization it's expensive to repair things like chairs and tables. In think this place had some crazy incident once that..."

"All you *men* have bushes on your faces," the Rivlao remarked.

"Yea," Marcus turned, "well your hair goes down to your butt crack." He extended his hand out to the bird-lion man-creature thing.

The Rivlao laughed to his gut then clasped Marcus' hand, saying, "My name is –"

“*Willow...something?*” Ivan thought.

“And I’m Marcus, from Ar’Ryzo.” His grey cloak fluttered at the back of his knees as the dust collected at its ends. The Rivlao thought to be called Willow resumed.

“Well, it’s nice to have a thick coat down your back when you’re caught without a blanket.”

“Yeah,” Percy interjected, “and having bush on your face ain’t so bad either, right Ivan?” nudging his side with an elbow.

Ivan nodded and laughed with his eyes closed.

“Speaking of which,” Ivan said, “there’s someone I’d like to visit back inside.”

“You guys go on ahead,” Willow said. “I’d like to watch the sun set.”

The three men went inside grasping each other’s shoulders and laughing. The strongarms at the swinging doors approved and watched Darius greet them with fresh pints of ale.

“I had to pay to replace the mugs you two smashed,” Darius said. “They would have kicked us out if I hadn’t. Damn, they do cost a bit, though. You can pay me back later.”

But Ivan wasn’t exactly paying attention. He was still standing with his new mug as he looked around the room. He didn’t notice Angela immediately. She was bent over another table, lighting a lamp that didn’t seem too dim to him. His eyes traveled to her breasts, which were nestling next to someone else’s fidgeting fingertips.

He took a gulp but didn’t swallow most of it. His drink spilled down his beard like rain fall down a shrub. He saw the man smiling at Angela. He had a black beard too. He saw Angela mouth *love* to him. Then the man grabbed her and put her on his lap. The strongarms noticed but stopped moving when Angela put her arms around him. He bounced her on his knee as she touched his thigh, before his hand slipped under the covers of her skirt. She whispered to his ear

and before Ivan knew it, they were going upstairs. The owner added another wrinkle to his smile while he added up his fresh coins.

After a minute of staring, Ivan looked for another waitress. He liked black hair just fine, and this set of hair laid on top a bigger set of gentle bobbers. She had a sky blue dress skirt, which curved nicely when she bent over to set down her pints on the tables. When he came up to her, her face stiffened with a smile that already happened to be there when her face froze. There was a gap between them, so Ivan decided to fill it.

“Hey there, Honey,” he said, expecting the waitress to answer back. The gap widened.

“Is there something I can get for you, sir?” she said while holding her hands together in front of her, one foot already stepping back. Her white apron was frilled, and appeared to Ivan like a fluffy cloud that only needed a brisk wind to part.

“I was thinking that I might do something for you, actually,” Ivan said. He pulled up a stool at a vacant table and sat while leaning his back against the table. “Your legs must be tired.” He patted his thigh. “Why don’t you have a seat right here, love?”

The waitress scoffed then turned away.

“Hey wait,” Ivan said gingerly before catching her wrist. It was smooth and dainty against his thick, rough fingers. But the waitress instantly spun to him with fierce eyes. Ivan froze. He held her with the ends of his fingers thinking only, “*Don’t be mad.*”

The waitress looked at him, then at her wrist, then back at him. His face begged her not to be mad, but her stormy eyes only told him to let go. When he did, she stepped away too fast for him to say he was sorry.

Marcus said at the table, “So, the Magistrate said that we could get a ride to Darimoth as long as there were five of us and we agreed to help protect the caravan before it drops us off. All we have to do is pick up our ‘Plunder Permits’ from her and be off. I assume that green haired guy outside will be our fifth member. What’s his name again?”

Darius and Percy both admitted that they had no idea and that they had been faking their pronunciations, but the stranger never did correct them. Then they saw Ivan sulking towards the doors. The strongarms asked him to leave his mug inside. He dropped it at their feet. When the strongarm bent down to pick it up, Ivan could not help but glance at his boulder buttocks then shuddered and looked away.

When Ivan came outside, the Rivlao stranger seemed tranquil with his hands loose inside his pants pockets, still facing the reddening sky of the west.

Ivan walked beside him. “I swear. Women drive men to be queer.”

The Rivlao didn’t turn as he replied. “That must be hard for kids.”

Ivan wasn’t sure if he should laugh, so he just spoke his mind. “Listen, I have to come clean. I can’t pronounce your name. Can I just call you Willow?”

At that, the Rivlao did turn. “Heh, well, names aren’t so important between friends. I had a lover, once. We spoke by touching each other’s skin. I never asked her name. I recommend you do the same thing.”

“Are you asking me to touch your skin?”

Willow squinted his eyes at Ivan, like an irritated eagle. “You really should stop with those jokes.”

“Awe, come on. You have to admit the way you said it was...”

“Listen, before you first came in, Darius and Percy were talking with me about joining your team into the labyrinth. If that is going to happen then I need to know whether or not you are capable of taking important things seriously.”

“We’re just talking about sex.”

“No, I was talking about love, that’s why I called her my *lover*.”

“What the hell is the difference?” Ivan noticed the roads thinning as more people were heading inside the inns and saloons.

Willow shook his head, “You can have sex anytime.” He sighed. “But it’s much harder to have love.” Ivan remembered holding the blue waitress’ wrist. It was a nice wrist for him just to hold if nothing else.

“I just tried to get with a couple of women,” Ivan blurted out, shaking his head.

Willow sympathized. “Love is like one of those paradoxes when only those who don’t seek it get it.”

“Funny how that works,” Ivan said, now thinking about the stairs. “It just never works out.”

“That can be a blessing in disguise,” Willow announced. “That Angela girl, she didn’t smell right. I don’t know why and I don’t want to know why, but every time I notice a girl who smells the way she does, she always comes away with a guy who’s very upset with her.”

“What smell?” Ivan said. “I didn’t smell anything?”

“I don’t think men can. It’s out of their range, so they can’t sense it. They have no idea which women are good for them, so they grab anyone willing to have them.” Ivan tilted his head back.

Willow grabbed his own chin then tapped with his finger. “You need a Rivlao lady. You get to know one once and you’ll never forget her. I promise you.”

“But they got no boobs,” Ivan complained.

“Believe me, when you’re with one, you’re going to forget all about those.”

Willow turned back to face the purpling rays of the sun. The wind picked up beneath them, and Ivan saw it lift Willow’s malachite mane, and he almost expected him to spread hidden wings and soar...like a gay goose.

Instead, Willow simply looked up to one of the moons gradually unveiled by the night.

“Sorsiress is out tonight,” he said, “and she’s half empty.” He turned to Ivan. “There’s someone I’d like you to see. She should be performing soon. She always does at sunset. There’s a thematic reason for it.”

Ivan shrugged then casually followed.

Willow explained that the Choral Café’s stage was its prominent feature since few places had one, even one so small. Ivan noticed that the stage had enough room to tumble across only once, not enough for a weapons exhibition. He and Willow watched the stage from the second floor balcony. Their table lamp was dimly lit, just like each of the other round tables. Ivan was disappointed that there was no bar on either of the serving floors, but the waitresses would quietly pass by the patrons who held up a golden flag by their lamp and take their order for them. The food was good too, better than chili from the Mountain Stew, Ivan thought, even if he couldn’t see most of the plate in front of him. After he finished eating, he played with his fork with his heels propped on the table.

Willow held his chin and looked out keenly as a figure passed onto the stage's polished planks, draped in a grand black cloth that seemed to spill down her neck and transform the stage into a dark pond, which she sat in at the center. Then magically, the cloth rose about her and spread behind her into a backdrop, and all that the audience could make of the scene was her head and her golden mane spreading out against the black tarp like a melancholy sun. Her face began to glow. Her eyes were bright, though her purple lips betrayed a somber smile. Willow knew her by her reputation and by her song, and he never referred to her by name. There was only her title – Mourning Star.

Her sadness pleased them. The strum of an unseen lyre quieted the last murmurs from the audience. The Mourning Star drifted upward from the floor to the center of the darkness then whispered. She whispered under plucked chords, which teased the audience to anticipate the beginning of the melody. The whispers from the Mourning Star transformed into the sounds she made while crossing through night, through the outer space. But the Mourning Star still faced away from the darkness, facing the listeners who would hear her.

All the Mourning Star could see was the darkness, no matter which way she turned, there was only the emptiness of eternity. The Mourning Star went on a journey to find herself. She rode on a ship of shadows across the midnight sky, looking for a harbor. She drifted until she saw a planet, a wonderful blue planet. The Mourning Star warmed the planet, made him green and happy, then began revolving around him, and he was moved. But as she tried to embrace him, as the ship sailed her around him closer and closer, the planet cried as his skin dried up and cracked apart. But she could not stop herself in time before his tears simmered inside his eyes, before he burst apart in gushes of red ash.



The Ship of Shadows took the Mourning Star away, deeper into her outer limits. She stared longingly into a distance that revealed a barren moon, an object that reflected the Mourning Star's beams. The ship took her to it, and she began to see herself with accumulating dread. She could see where other stars had struck the moon with their fury when they saw themselves against it, when they saw the terrible inferno erupting from within themselves. And they must have realized as she did that they would always be alone.

But the Ship of Shadows guided the Mourning Star beyond the moon, where she saw a faint twinkle of blue. It was another planet, frozen and still. He would die soon. But the Mourning Star was afraid. How close was too close? And when he came to, would he even like her? She had seen planets who grew fat with too much gas and hot air, who grumbled and threw asteroids needlessly into the endless void, all the while ignoring the stars who did nothing but warm them.

The Mourning Star drifted close enough for the ice to thaw and for the planet's streams to flow. She watched as he awoke, already growing green on his own. She coasted a little closer, but then a flaring streak of her flames blew against his side and made a desert. Immediately, she veered away, but as she did the ice returned on his head and his underside. She settled where she was, staring at the planet's streaks of white, blue, green, and yellow. She agonized in silence when she couldn't see how to get closer to him.

But then, her thoughts paused. The planet began to move. And she realized that she was no longer on board the Ship of Shadows. He started with a single revolution then began spinning around her in a cosmic dance. Injured as he was, he still accepted her warmth. But without the Ship of Shadows, the Mourning Star could only spin in place. Surprising the planet, she spun the other way so that every time their eyes met, they would not be able to anticipate it, and every

time they looked at each other it was like a new beginning for them. But the Mourning Star was still too far to touch him. She would always be just a little too far.

Though her eyes were bright, her dark lips betrayed a somber smile. But when the planet decided to bring the moon aboard the Ship of Shadows, the Mourning Star's light spread fervently so that when she shined upon the moon, he could dance with it and pretend it was her.

Ivan saw everything. He saw the strings holding the tarp. He saw the actress playing the lyre under her covers and he saw the planets, the actors' painted helmets, which slipped into view from under the tarp through premade holes. Even the spotlight shining on the *floating* face of Mourning Star. It was beautiful, it was deep, it even had special effects, but none of it was as special to him as the golden flag he kept waving around above the table lamp for an excuse to see the busty waitresses.

Willow clapped for a while before he noticed Ivan and grumbled. When the stage was cleared and the applause died out he said, "I bet that if you actually met Mourning Star in person you'd see what I was talking about."

"Ha! Well, I'll do it if you promise me another pint."

Willow brought his finger up to object, just then realizing how much Ivan drank during the show, but Ivan took Willow's gesture as an acceptance of the deal, and he jumped onto the table, tipping over his mug, then grabbed the railing of the balcony before throwing himself around and dangling off the side. He looked down, aimed himself, then clumsily landed on another table, ruining what was left of the patrons' meals. But Ivan ignored their surprised shouts, clunked off the table, darted over and tumbled across the stage and beyond the black curtain. Willow thought to himself, "*What did I just do?!*"

The props were lying against the wall, helmets that protruded into different topographies, except for the moon, which was all grey, cratered, and had no face hole cut out. Ivan looked at the door the star must have been in, the dressing room. He'd go inside, have his peek, maybe mention that he saw the show, then go get his pint from Willow. He didn't knock. He opened the door to a surprised looking Rivlao. S/he had a platinum mane and just finished tying her shirt laces across his/her back. A line of coat hangers hung along a wall bar.

"Uh, excuse me?" s/he said.

"Yeah, need t'see Moaning Sar real quick where ishe?"

"What for?" s/he answered while blocking Ivan at the door, with his/her nose at his eye level.

He licked his lips. "I just need to see her."

"I think you're drunk."

"Look," Ivan said, "I don't know whether you're a guy, girl, or a walking stork... *hick*...with shredded spinach coming out of your heads, but you'd better let me through." The Rivlao considered clutching his crotch, lifting him up then tossing him out until...

"I'll see him," said a calm voice from the other end of the room. "He sounds funny."

Ivan didn't wait for the platinum mane to move aside and shouldered through towards the light of the candle mounted on the back wall. At the corner behind a hanging costume, Mourning Star was folding the rest of her tarp into its smallest compact square. Her robe, a purple midnight robe with thin, wavy yellow trim, hung with modesty as she stared at Ivan with bemused interest, knowing that the drunk ones always provided an interesting story for her to tell, if they could talk.

Ivan stared into her irises and watched as they widened. The girth of gold in her eyes seemed so heavy to him that his head sank forward, not realizing that her dark, bleak pupils were their core.

“Look,” he spun around to the Rivlao at the door. “I know that there’s butt sex. Alright? I know that it’s here, and...alright? And I just don’t wanna see it. Okay? You do what you want, ‘cause that’s just, whatever you are. But don’t let me see it. ‘Cause...alright? Get out!”

The actor with the platinum mane looked at Mourning Star, slightly more irritated than confused. On the side of her head, where Ivan would have expected earlobes to be, his/her hair came together and straightened like knives to the ceiling. But Mourning Star lifted her arm and waved them down, and s/he saw under her sleeve that she was armed, just in case.

“Enjoy the café, Piper,” said Mourning Star. “I’ll be there soon.”

After Piper closed the door, Ivan snorted. He held out his hand to Mourning Star with his fingers spread as if to say, “There it is.” Then he forgot what there was to say. Ivan looked into her hypnotic eyes while her deep blond mane settled at her shoulders.

He said, “There’s somethn’ weird about your eyes. What the hell is up with you people, huh? You got no boobs, you got no balls, y’hair’s all creepy and crawly, y’speak like ghosts and y’got noses that’d poke an eye out...*hick*...how’s anyone s’posed to love you?”

“*A well educated man,*” she thought. Mourning Star laid the tarp down on her tall stool then pulled it over in front of Ivan and patted on the seat. As much as Mourning Star had been folding the tarp, it still ran down the stool’s legs almost all the way to the floor. Ivan stared at the seat as Mourning Star patted it again. He understood, but then he didn’t. He looked into her suggestive eyes again before he finally sat down.

The tarp cushioned his seat nicely.

“Now turn around,” she said, and he did, facing the door with the candle’s flame light dancing behind him. She held her arms up and her sleeves fell down to her elbows. She put her potent hands over his head and slid them through the strings of his hair. He took a deep breath as he felt his hair expand like a black sail. Then he forgot his vision. He knew he wasn’t blind but for a moment he didn’t notice what he was seeing. He felt as though he were moving across empty space, that his body was just an empty space and that a strength inside of him was now being released from his emptiness. He saw the door ahead of him and imagined it veering closer. It wasn’t as if the door was moving but more like the room itself was bringing it to Ivan, that Ivan could somehow command the room to bring him to the door without him having to walk. And then he imagined himself in front of the door, with the words “BREAK A LEG” written across it. But Ivan didn’t notice his legs. The wind was taking him away through the air as if he were a weightless head dragging a spine.

The door opened itself for him, and he crossed it into the hall of the Mountain Stew, smelling the meaty chili. Willow was there, so the first thing Ivan did was shake his hand then bring his malachite ass to his knees and make him scream out loud, “Nobody lasts as long as Ivan!” while Darius and Marcus, and even Percy too, were cheering him on, and Angela sassied over with open arms and three froth drizzling mugs in each hand while her chest bloated out then shrunk because Ivan couldn’t decide how much was too much before her breasts finally deflated altogether from wear and settled into a smooth, flat bed of skin that reminded Ivan of a wrist he once held and loved. He moaned. Then everything was gone.

“Now stand,” a voice commanded him, and he did. When the voice told him to turn around he saw the candle light eclipsed by Mourning Star. She was already sitting on the stool with her mane presented to him.

“Play,” she said.

Her head was up to his face while she sat. He brought his arms up. Hairs were instruments, Ivan realized as he began to stroke down the long lines of her head down through the open slip at the back of her thin robe. He undid all of her strings, down to her tailbone. Brushing his fingers through her back made him forget how rough his skin really was. He drifted his fingers up then down as if he were rinsing them in a stream lathered by the morning’s rays. He curled his knuckles deep into her roots as he explored the bed of her stream, which felt supple and giving as he rubbed her fibers firmly between his fingers.

The core of Mourning Star’s eyes expanded with a sudden urge to be filled.

Ivan’s hands stopped then came over her upper body and asked in a low, sincere voice between the firm thumps within his chest, “How come you don’t have any breasts?”

Her eyes turned to face him. She leaned against him with her body so that his arms would slide over her shoulders when she said, “Because we drink out of our lips.”

“*Fuck, she’s serious!*” He felt her love slide into his mouth, down his throat, then spread. It was hot and flavorful. When their lips parted, a sliver of their honeyed kiss drizzled down his chin, but his tongue quickly swung under and recovered it.

“Do you understand now?” she asked.

Ivan nodded. She stood up as Ivan brushed his hand through the soft fur at the sides of her neck. Her robe fell off and Ivan could not help but follow it down. He tilted his head to her chest. There were no nipples, and her vagina reminded him of Percy’s male lover, how he had grown a massive balloon of purple flesh from out of his crotch and put it through Percy’s anus, and Ivan wondered if he could ever look at a map the same ever again. The room closed in on

him as his jaw began to shudder. His head stayed down as he stiffly turned away and left the room for a pint.

“*Willow was right,*” Ivan now thought as he rested against an unsympathetic boulder in the middle of a cold black cave far beneath and away from the dressing room at the Coral Café. Mourning Star had been in his mind every day for the last few weeks, in the next morning in bed while his head hurt, after his team left Vir’Vonia while he bumped up and down inside the traveler’s carriage – driven by mammothorses – towards the labyrinth called Darimoth with Percy, Darius, Willow and Marcus. They had journeyed for their fortunes, but Ivan wondered if he had left his fortune behind.

And even now as he bled against the stone, clutching his arm, his thoughts turned to her. She was a *her*, wasn’t she? Ivan thought about Percy and wondered if it mattered. Maybe it could even feel good. Maybe what was good enough for Percy might have been good enough for him. Then he thought about the Ship of Shadows, how the sword’s song seemed to be carried by the shadows as he heard it clash and twang across the caves, once again. He wanted to see the Mourning Star once more, before his blood ran too far, to have her voice there to smite the song of the sword. But if she could not be with him, he did not want to be found. Perhaps he never would. Then the wicked sword of the Bastard chimed by Ivan’s neck, and he wondered if the Ship of Shadows would take him back to the morning stream.

“Didn’t you know, Ivan? That the sound of swords only resonates suffering? When you first grabbed your sword, you thought it would bring you gold, glory, and of course, girls. Instead, it barred you against each of them. Now, disciple, the Lord of Murder needs you, and

you will suffer, because we are all addicted to suffering. And you will not die. That, I am certain of.”



CHAPTER II  
THE VILLAGE DISTRICT



*The Rivlao raise their manes against the breeze, suffering gently with wonder...*

The underground labyrinth of Darimoth was like a whole other world apart from Vir’Vonia, with a grand frontier of tall grass, sunshine, and stony fields to separate them. The Great Plains, however, were deceptively pleasant and its horrors discretely swayed within the blades of grass. This would be the distance Ivan’s rescuer would have to cross. She wouldn’t be looking for him, though. She wouldn’t even know he was there, or that he needed to be found. She wouldn’t even know who he was, or how important it would become for her to save him. But for now, she was too burdened by her own suffering to look beyond the gates of Vir’Vonia, or even the sealed gate of the Village District.

“*Save us,*” Sonia thought in her sleep, her hair sticking to her cheek like gauze while her mane smothered into her pillow with its long fibers stabbing through the feathers. It was a thought, a cry that had lived in her mind for years, years that saw no dreams. She wouldn’t let herself have any. No journeying through fairy forests or titan mountains. Don’t taunt her with

preordained visions of heroic destiny, please, and absolutely no quests. The adventure was over. No. It was all vain. She knew because she didn't stop herself in time before *fate* settled in, a fate that immortalized her dreams as corpses, still lingering, moaning to her, in her sleep.

The red morning light had already begun seeping through the shutter of Sonia's round window and onto the stone wall of her bedroom. She stirred at the sounds of the piper. The fine bristles of her tapered ear strands scrunched into her moist pillow as her shoulder rubbed into the furred underside of her neck, a weak attempt to stunt the sound of the music calling to all the villagers from the center of the promenade, calling them over to rejoice. The red light of the sun matched the hue of Sonia's red hair briefly then grew into a peeling orange against the back wall, next to the doorway where her son now spoke from. "It's morning."

Jonia's mane was also red, a copy of Sonia's from seventeen years ago, rising jets of fine pins brushed out and back through the sides of his head as though he grew up constantly facing the wind, but the hairline down his back was still thin and incomplete. He was not quite an adult yet. He waited a moment to take in the piper's tune, which was an official invitation from a spirit everyone else shared, the spirit of celebration. After it finished, he took a deep breath and forced out a three pronged cough. But his mother only shifted under her sheets.

"I don't want to miss the festival this year," he said. "I want to compete."

"I told you never to come into my room," Sonia said, still facing the wall beside her.

"I'm not in your room. You left the door open."

She lifted her upper body then curled up and held her stretch. As she dropped herself flat onto the bed she heard Jonia sigh.

"If we don't hurry, I'll miss it...again."

She waited for her blood flow to circulate from her back to her eyes before saying, “Wait for me down stairs. I’ll be there in a minute and make you some porridge.”

“But there’ll be food at the festival.”

“Then we’ll put it in the fridge box for later. Go.”

Jonia’s breath was on the rise. He clenched his teeth behind his lips as he stared at his mother, still lying across her bed with no sign of getting up. How could she do this to him again? Year after year he’s had to suffer this disappointment. No! not this year. He turned around then asked himself the same question he had asked year after year. Why was she keeping him away from such a simple, friendly competition? She wasn’t afraid he’d be hurt. He was sure of that after his second year at the hack yards, when he accidentally struck his own leg plowing the field. She did take care of him. She even sucked the manure out of his wound. Jonia never forgot that. But he also didn’t forget how slow she reacted to his cries as he writhed over the mud. Everyone else stopped to see what had happened, but his mother walked over to him without saying a word, leaned over him then pinned him down, keeping him still as she ripped a piece of his pants off and tied it around his wound.

But the bleeding never really stopped.

When Jonia got up, she didn’t ask if he was okay. He lifted himself up with his mother’s back turned to him, already getting back to work.

This festival only happened once a year. It was the only time he had to be somebody, a champion. Sure it might only be for a day, but why couldn’t he have his day? Just one day to believe that he had a speck of greatness. It didn’t even have to be real greatness. Was it too much to ask of his mother? One day where the whole village could say his name at the top of their

lungs as he held his trophy, The Statue of the Invisible Dragon. This year, it would be his. For all the years he had missed it, Jonia swore to himself that this time the Invisible Dragon would not disappear, not without him.

Then the piper finished her anthem.

Without looking, Sonia knew her son was gone. She heard his foot steps down the spiral stairs as she slowly wiped down her lean nose then turned to her side and looked out across the hallway. Jonia's door was closed. She put her feet to the floor then searched for her sandals with her toes, hoping she wouldn't find them.

But she did, and then she got up from her sheets and walked to her chest-dresser, putting on her brown leather shirt and pants. She tied her shirt across the thick line of hair streaming down to her spine while looking at the sunlight shining on back wall, which gradually turned from a random orange into bitter lemon. Sonia looked outside her window down at the promenade in front of Town Hall, where the other farmers had already put together their booths in broken arcs. She brushed the side of her mane as she looked down at the early birds clustering to try out some of their sample cooking, but they would all have to wait for Sonia, because she was the one who kept the special ingredients for the Village District's fifty year anniversary, when Vir'Vonia was first built to support the Eastern Front. But for Sonia, this day marked a different, morose anniversary.

By the time she came downstairs, Jonia had already begun the porridge. She snorted but couldn't say anything. Instead, she came over next to her son and said she would finish stirring the crock.

"It needs more oats, though," Jonia said.

“I’ll manage this. Go into the pantry and pull out those big sacks in there for me. Make sure you don’t forget those before we leave.”

Jonia didn’t reply, but his mother heard him walk away and squeak open the pantry door. She took both of her hands to the great spoon and looked out the kitchen window as she stirred. The promenade shone with the chromatic colors of the cobbled stones that decorated the pavement. The designs would be the same, but Sonia had stopped paying attention to them years ago, after Jonia was born. The wrestling ring was already being chalked along the mat for the Young Adult Wrestling Tournament. Before the end of the morning, she knew she would be asked to compete in the Adult’s Wrestling Tournament in the afternoon. She would have to find a better excuse than a sprained ankle to avoid it this year.

Then she saw the soft ribbons fanned out across each of the street lamps surrounding the promenade, and the other villagers were already handing out the enormous stringed bubbles to the children, who either swung them overhead or pierced them with their noses; Sonia saw the splash of the bubbles water their wide faces in a runny rainbow stream. Sonia grimaced. She tapped the spoon against the crock three times then opened the bottom-right counter door with her foot and shoved the crock inside the fridge box.

Jonia stared out the window by the door with the three bags, each half his size. He turned around once he heard the fridge box close. But Sonia just looked at him.

“Are you going to help me clean up?” She asked.

“It wasn’t my idea to make porridge.”

“We aren’t leaving until this kitchen is clean.”

“But it’s almost time. I’m going to miss the tournament.”

“You will if you don’t hurry up and finish your chores.”

Jonia kicked at the wall. “You’re always making excuses for me to do more work.”

Sonia raised her finger at him just as someone knocked at the door. Jonia hopped over the bags and opened it.

“Rah! I’m going to eat you!” the stranger said bearing over Jonia with great foam teeth stained with old, yellowy paint. It was an enormous puppet with a frizzy, threaded brown overcoat that tried to conceal the one child riding piggy-back on the shoulders of the other child inside the costume. The head, broad and blocky with a peach skin tone, featured a stack of black hair at the center of an otherwise bald top. The eyes, menacingly red, rolled down at Jonia with a widening jaw that revealed a child’s gleeful expression behind the teeth.

Jonia smiled. “Oh, no! I’ve got to go fight ogres, Mom.”

“Jon...Jonia! Get back here right now!” but the door snapped back closed. Sonia gripped the kitchen table while her ear strands stiffened together, as if to pierce through the stone roof.

Jonia tore through the village’s curved lanes and stone apartments to chase the ogre down, savoring the wind as it seeped deeper through the brush of his mane with each stride. But the ogre was crafty, and Jonia hesitated at the first intersection to decide which way it went. He brought his nose to the air then darted towards the smell of morning animal hide, past the continuous lines of open ended light posts, a left at the blacksmith’s shack, a twist around the tanner’s workshop, a turn at the corner...

“Rah!” and the squeaking teeth clamped around Jonia’s neck, with the voices inside the ogre saying, “I’m eating you! I’m eating you!”

“Ah, mammothshit. You got me. I can’t believe I fell for it.” Jonia was looking inside the puppet’s mouth at the face of the child inside the headpiece.

“Be proud,” said the headmaster. “You’re the first my sister and I have caught this year, and we worked really hard to make this costume lifelike.”

“Did you notice the red eyes move with the mouth?” the child under the coat asked Jonia.

“Well, no. You were running away from me like a couple of cowards. Ogres don’t do that.”

“Yeah they do,” said the head master. “My mother said so, and she would know. She has a medal that she’s bringing to the festival.”

Jonia paused for a moment. “That reminds me. Could you let me go now?”

“Not until you apologize,” said the child under the coat, “and say that my sister is right and you are wrong.”

“Okay, you’re right. I’m sorry. You’re not cowards and your mother is never wrong.”

The sisters giggled.

“Now say that we’re smarter than you,” said the head master.

A whistle blew from the promenade. Jonia’s ears scratched at the inner cavities of the ogre head.

“Okay, what you did was very smart and what I did was dumb. Now would you two let me go now? The competition’s starting.”

They giggled again.

“Why bother?” said the legs.

“Yeah,” the head master continued, “boys can’t win at wrestling. They can’t win at anything because they’re missing that noodle in your brain that blocks pride.”

Jonia squeezed into the soft but firm teeth and pushed, but the girls didn’t even seem to notice.

“Yeah, if it weren’t for girls you boys would be banging your heads against every rock, just to see if you can break them all. You should just do what we say and...”

Jonia shouted as the puppets jaw hinges suddenly broke loose. The head master screamed as he ripped the ogre’s head off of her and slammed it on to the street, cracking the nose and denting the head, and releasing the gray stuffing inside. The whistle from the promenade blew again like an alarm, and Jonia tore through the streets before he could hear the sisters crying that they would tell on him.

Nymua, the referee, cleared her throat before she gathered the combatant youth around the outer edge of the chalk along the mat.

“Sit around the boundary and wait until your name is called.”

Sonia watched the youth continue to murmur as they obeyed Nymua. She stood behind a serving booth with the three bags empty on the table, searching about the crop of manes with her arms folded, but she still could not see her son anywhere. Nymua whistled a pitch that split everyone’s murmurs. All ears were up as everyone observed the silence, and the white rays of sun that inspired the chromatic dragon emblem to appear at the center of the arena. Sonia saw the other parents beam when Nymua’s assistants brought in the stakes and ribbons that would physically keep the contenders inside. Sonia continued scanning the youth while she scratched at her cheek.

As her assistants set up the posts, Nymua rubbed against the receding hair line of her auburn mane and reminded the contenders that “you are out of the contest if you are pinned for ten seconds or if you touch the outer rim, which will change from red to blue upon contact. If there is anyone outside the ring caught touching the outer ribbon, you will be removed from the



contest. And I should not have to remind any of you that this is a *grappling* contest. You may not strike your opponent. You may push to evade, break away, or make your opponent contact the ribbon. But you will not strike under any circumstances or else you will be banned from this or any future competition. Is that unders...?”

Her question was interrupted by a stampede of one; one more youth sprinting down the lane so fast no one thought he could stop. The ring of contenders tried to part a path but they only managed to thin the way enough for Jonia to leap over them and the outer ribbons, landing hard onto the heels of his feet on the arena’s one inch floor pad. His hair column sprouted as he clenched his pain in front of Nymua, who grinned after a moment when Jonia finally fell over onto his side.”

“You are late, Jon.” Her voice resonated within him before she turned around and asked the public, “Is he *too* late?”

“No!” they all said.

“I guess we could make room on our list for one more.” She drew a leaflet from inside her string belt and opened it. “And since you are already here...Runawei!”

The cheering commenced before Jonia could catch his breath and see his opponent, Runawei, come from under the ribbon. Her hair reminded him of the sky just before it thundered, that kind of gray.

“You’d better get on your feet, *nilo*,” Nymua said. “Don’t let the first match be a letdown.”

Jonia tumbled backward onto his feet then saw Runawei walk to within inches in front of him. Nymua put her arm between the young combatants and said to shake hands. They shook

once before Jonia jerked his hand away, waving it painfully into the air, and the crowd laughed before Nymua could stop herself from chuckling.

Sonia took her hand to her forehead and shook as she heard the crowd's comments.

"Isn't that Sonia's boy?"

"I was expecting more grit after that entrance."

"I wonder if he's learned something from her hunting skills." Jonia retreated to the far end of the ring.

"Doesn't look like it."

Of course Runawei towered over Jonia, just like most of the other girls his age, but Jonia had not expected to dance around out of breath at the start of the match. How could he improvise without his wits? He tumbled to the left. To the left again. And again. Luckily, Runawei kept expecting him to go right, but soon she would get tired of trying the same thing. Nymua had had her arms up, ready to intervene at a moment of foul play, but now she simply paced at the center of their revolution in her leather skins with her elbows out and her fists at her waist.

The other youths cried "Coward!" as Jonia tumbled again. But Runawei suddenly paused, then she stumbled about, swaying off balance – dizzy! Jonia paused to catch his breath. He was at the dragon's tail of the floor mat, listening to the disappointed *boos*. He thought about The Statue of the Invisible Dragon then brought his arms out, ready to pounce.

But then he stopped. And looked across the way at his mother staring back at him from inside the shade of her booth, still, with a bundle of stringed bubbles tied to her roof ready to explode in a cascade of rainbow fury. She looked at her son with severe intent...then pointed at his opponent.

Runawei's back turned to Jonia as she stumbled closer to him. He readied his stance and prepared to pounce at her, but then he remembered what the head master said to him earlier, and he waited. He turned with her back as she stumbled closer. This time he turned to the right, and sure enough, she adjusted with her gray haired back to him. As Jonia took a step back, she twisted at hurricane speed and clutched his shoulders. He countered, grabbing under her arms and pulling her down, bringing his feet to her waist and propelling her behind him. The ribbon marked blue where Runawei's toe had touched.

"He pulled it off!" a cook said stirring a boiling crock of tomato stew next to Sonia. "See Nymua raising his arm so high? I think his feet are off the ground. Did you teach him how to do that move Sonia?"

Sonia's ears flowed in place for a moment before she shook her head.

"How's the stew coming?" she said, still looking out into the arena.

"Don't worry about that. We've got plenty of time before the end of the tournament. I bet Jon hopes the mayor will give him the trophy and lead the morning ceremonies. Oh, things will get crazy then, but you can go hug your boy now for a few minutes."

Once Jonia stepped back into the crowd, a flurry of cheers and hands brushed through him with pats and laughter. Sonia put on her apron.

"He's fine."

Between bouts, Jonia had the chance to spot Welino, the Mediciner from the apothecary shop, holding his leather belt with a bounce to his walk. His quilted cloth shirt and pants made

him the most huggable being alive to everyone under Jonia's age, but Jonia still smiled as he watched Welino squat to address the group of children.

“Anyone here interested in becoming a healer, or Mediciner?”

A gleeful bundle of yes's scrambled upon him.

“Well, we do much more than brew those salves that make your tummies better. We also make the ingredients for those bubbles you're all holding.”

They *oh*-ed in a soft wave.

“And all the costumes you see around here are all held together with ad-he-sives we heat up in a huge pot then carefully pour in metal bottles, like this one.”

He lifted one of the canisters attached to his belt and opened it. He slowly hovered the empty jar above their eyes until one of the children pointed and shouted at a Rajonin costume.

“Dragon person!”

Unfortunately for Welino, that announcement lost him most of his potential apprentices, but he found a way to use this to his advantage.

“Ah, an excellent example,” he said to the remaining children. “Now you see how the wings seem to sway so naturally at the back? Adhesives allow those parts some give to move while still holding them together. But notice how the sun bounces off that costume's green wings, very unnatural. You can tell right away that she used too much oil on top of the plaster. Every time she turns, you have to squint. But with wax coating, you can stunt the sun's beams and give those legs and arms that scaly texture – Uh oh! but be sure to coat the wax right or it will melt.”

The Rajonin actor groaned as she brought her black claws past her long, rough snout to her disintegrating earlobes.

“So, my little *nilos*, if you’ve ever wondered why these balloons don’t burst on their own with all that colored water inside, or you’re curious about adhesives, then you should think about a career at an apothecary.”

“It sure beats farming,” Jonia said.

Welino ran his fingers through the little manes and sent them on their way, before lifting himself up.

“I appreciate the support, Jon,” he said grabbing Jonia’s shoulder and shaking his hand, “but should you be saying that so close to your mother’s booth?”

“Oopse, I guess not. She might get *mad* at me again.”

“All the farmers would get mad at you, Jon. You’re supposed to get the young’uns excited about your profession.”

“But I’m not. I’d rather be at your desk fiddling with flower petals and dust.”

“You say that now, lad, but you’re not living it. No one here’s excited about what they do, but we get the job done anyway. Think about how hard it is for the sewer drainers.”

“No.”

“Ha! You see? No one wants to think about that, but someone had better do it.” Without meaning to Jonia looked at Welino’s balding forehead. He wondered how many more years of life Welino had left before he would take his Long Walk away from the Village District.

“But anyway, Jon, congratulations on your first bout. You know, a long time ago – dang it, I need to stop opening my stories with that – I would compete for the Invisible Dragon too. Never got past the first bout, though. I tried hard just so I could get a match in with Nymua there. She didn’t laugh when I told her that recently. Ended up being a good sign though, am I right?”

“I guess so. I heard you two were living together now.”

“Yeah. Too late to have children with her though. Just wasn’t what the gods wanted.”

“Huh?”

“Just kidding, Jon. I don’t believe in any of that destiny business, but I guess there are forces that be who just have to get their way no matter what that does to everyone else – I’m sorry, Jon. You don’t want to hear this. Say, you’re almost old enough now. Maybe I should start calling you by your full name. What do you think, Jonia?”

Jonia could only smile at the thought. Maybe he could earn the rights of adulthood by winning the tournament. That would get him out of his mother’s house sooner than he originally hoped. Suddenly a fire stirred at his joints. Any added incentive to win made Jonia’s hair rise from his back, and he looked up into the air commandingly for some blessing from the wind, which was usually expressed through a casual breeze. Good enough for Jonia.

But Welino did not share in his moment. His ears fell inside his mane, obscured, and his eyes were resting on the sight of the pavement. His mane seemed flattened down like grass that had been stepped on for generations by mammothorses, and Jonia grasped an impulse to pay attention to his silence.

A whistle blew for the second bout. Welino’s ears instantly arose.

“Better not let life move on without you,” he said. “But he still held Jonia back. He put both his hands on Jonia’s shoulders and rubbed with all that was left of his strength. “Don’t let me down.”

The chef’s cowl held firmly to Sonia’s head, suppressing her mane, and her apron remained spotless as she tore open another meat package to add to the morning stew.

Traditionally, the Young Adult Competition had to be concluded before the opening ceremonies

or the feasting began. The mayor stood on the high-porch of Town Hall observing the tournament with her attendants, just as Sonia remembered every year before. Their robes, layered coats of green and white, dignified them as city officials outside of the Village District – but inside, they were only citizens. What could they do about anything? Even the mayor’s name eluded Sonia as she stirred her cooked meat into the crock.

She had no use for her name anyway. “Mayor” was what she was called, and it was not her badge but simply a tag to her person, a job that transforms the worker. Mayor was no different than farmer...or slopper.

“There he goes again, Sonia,” her cooking partner said. “You want to go watch? I’ll take care of the crock.”

“I can see fine from here, thank you. You keep preparing the meat.”

“I don’t know how you can. I can barely see the brush of their scalps. Heh, but I guess you’re not that worried about your son losing. I’ll bet you spent the years training him for this. So that’s why we’ve never seen him compete before, eh?”

Sonia didn’t answer but continued watching through the gap between spectators. He was fighting Erina’s daughter – Meliza. Strange that she would be competing when all the skills she had came from the library. Did her mother find a strategy guide? Yes, she would be educated – the suplex, Sonia saw – but not experienced. Sonia slid away in time.

*“Damn.”*

The stew was simmering too thick, and the spices were collecting in isolated globs.

“Ah, it’s getting hot down there. Hand me a pitcher.”

The cooking grate the crock sat on produced a flush of steam that jetted up Sonia’s nose and eyes. She held the pitcher and covered her face.

“Don’t worry Sonia, I can see his head still up. He’s actually doing well...” Sonia didn’t answer. “...as long as she doesn’t get her hands on him. I don’t think she’ll fall for the rolling back throw – Oh! You alright, Sonia?”

“Just thickening it up a bit,” she said wiping her face off. “How’s the meat?”

“Well, I’m going to let this broil for a bit under the counter.” The cook walked around to the front of the booth, took off her white chef’s cowl, and shook her mane free. “That’s better. Oh, Sonia, this is getting intense. You see Erina’s kid dash like that? Why there’s the mother herself, clapping and hollering. I hope you won’t be offended if I cheer for her.”

Sonia witnessed her son falling to his butt. “I’ll try not to be.”

But to everyone’s amazement, Jonia tumbled forward into his opponent’s arms, clutched, lifted and –

“I don’t believe it! Did you see that Sonia? He stole her move!”

And Nymua began the count from ten. To nine. To eight. Jonia felt Meliza’s heels pounding into his thighs three times at every count on to five. To four. To three. Two. Then her legs swung back and over. Too late.

“*Sheeah!* Jon wins!” announced Nymua. More cheers, claps, and even hooping, and Jonia’s ear bristles perked at the marked volume coming from the high-porch of Town Hall. Mayor herself clapped with an enthusiasm that shook her mane like a pom-pom. Then Jonia felt Nymua grab his arm, raise it on high and repeat, “Winner!”

But this time she held his arm with her glove hand, and Jonia paused with a curiosity that crept into a shiver when he felt only two fingers pressing into his skin. Then he saw Welino outside of the crowd with a quilted smile, nodding with his hands at his belt. The shiver vanished.



Now Erina was coming over to Sonia's booth, massaging her daughter's scalp underneath her sweaty, gangly hair. She seemed in spirits; they both did, strangely enough.

"I'm surprised, Sonia," Erina said with a sigh that gave away their dismay. She put her elbow on the counter and pointed at her. "You've got a ringer you've been holding back all these years, huh?"

But Sonia hesitated. What to say that could preserve both propriety and honesty. Sonia cut through the rapid bubbling at the stew's silky brown surface. "I only taught him how to teach himself. Meliza was fighting very smart, but he learned from her."

"I don't get it though," Meliza said to her mother. "Aren't girls supposed to be better than guys?"

"Now Meliza, that's not fair" Erina said. "Boys can't help it. It's just the way they develop. It's very hard for them to compete because they don't develop our perceptions very quickly. That's why they learn slower. They have to overcome that to do the things we can do as well as we can. Besides" – She looked over to Sonia – "it's the boys who move past themselves that you should pay the most attention too." Sonia didn't answer. "I think you should go over to Jon and tell him how much you enjoyed the match."

"I didn't exactly enjoy getting slammed on my head," Meliza complained. All of a sudden a marauding bubble popped over Meliza, drenching her mane in orange, red and green. She spun around and saw them – the Fury Bandits – tucking away their slingshots and dashing back into the crowd. "I'm gonna get you little butt sprouts!" And off she went.

Erina chuckled as she leaned into counter and watched her daughter charge to fight the good fight. "She gets riled up so easily sometimes."

“What books does she read?” Sonia asked.

“I don’t know. We both just pick up whatever’s around. I’ve been cleaning up the books in the archives lately and I can’t help but take in the most random passages about things that make no sense to me.”

“Really? Like what?”

“Well, yesterday, I saw a passage about these super beings called the Grenrai. Their bodies would just burst with light, and all you could see of them was their silhouette inside their colored glow – if you didn’t go blind watching them.”

Sonia continued to stare at the stew’s bubbles bursting against the beef, watching the hues they captured the moment before each rupture. “Is that so? I suppose they embody the power of individuals. Were they saviors?”

“Depends on how you look at it. They weren’t all Rivlao. One of them at least was Rajonin.”

“I see. And what did these great Light Warriors do for a living?”

“Hah! I skipped through the rest. Probably not slopping sewers like Rymusha over there.” They looked at Rymusha The Black Mane, kneeling to a group of *nilos* holding their rainbow bubbles on a string, most likely telling them his adventure story through the sewers to fight the infamous Rat King, who sent his minions into the night to prey on little children in their sleep. But he and other heroes like him braved the muck to do battle against the rat king’s forces every night. Although he and his companions always triumphed, they still needed help to do away with the Rat King forever. Would they train to one day to become a Guardian of the Drains?

“I think Welino would be impressed,” Erina said.

“That’s evil,” Sonia said with a glare.

“What? Oh come on, Sonia. He’s just selling his job.”

“Those children don’t know that. He’s manipulating them. They actually believe they will be defending the village if they become sewage drainers. Once they grow up, they might accept that it was just a fun story, but by then their futures will be sealed, and they’ll be stuck as sewage drainers for the rest of their lives – It’s sick!”

“But it’s no different from what everyone else here is doing. Someone has to do that sort of thing, and it doesn’t hurt to make a game out of something otherwise unpleasant. How else do you think he brings himself to work every night? Maybe it’s okay to believe in things that aren’t real.”

A whistle pierced through the air and Nymua began shouting at Meliza and her quarry while they barged into the middle of the current match. The combatants of the bout disengaged and instead watched together while Meliza initiated her duel with a Fury Bandit. But Nymua was also in the ring, reaching for the both of them while they tactfully stepped away from her before lunging at each other. Nymua’s glove hand slipped against Meliza’s arm, unable to grasp at the greasy skin in motion. The bandit brought his arms around and locked Meliza’s arms to her side, but her hands slipped to his belly and started tickling him. He laughed with uncontrollable spasms. He let go. Meliza pushed him down on his stomach, sat on his back, and – a leg lock! The cheers from the crowd surrounded the bandit.

“Ah! Alright, I give. I give!” he pleaded.

“But I haven’t counted to ten yet,” Meliza said.

“Please? I’m sorry.”

“What was that? I couldn’t hear over the audience’s approval.”

“I’m sorry! Ah!” The cheers turned into laughter digging at his pride.

“And what are you sorry about?” Meliza insisted.

“That’s enough,” Nymua said over them. “You made your point, Meliza, now let him up.”

But before she did, she took his slingshot, stood up, raised it in the air and snapped it like a wish bone. The applause carried across the entire promenade her message to the Fury.

Sonia, however, was unimpressed, and kept on stirring through the bubbles and beef, even as Erina whistled and waved to her daughter.

But then, Erina’s stomach grumbled. It wrenched to one side and then the next. Still she stopped herself from turning to Sonia’s stew, knowing that it would not be served until after the opening ceremonies, and the ceremony could not commence until Nymua declared a champion for the Young Adults Tournament and awarded The Statue of the Invisible Dragon.

Was invisibility like hunger? a void causing the outer rim of your appetite to implode? Standing next to the stew’s wondrous aroma inspired a different kind of wrestling match, which grappled Erina’s attention away from the beginning of the third round.

Sonia, however, watched as her son returned to the ring, and she thought to herself that this moment was right for him to lose. He had won a few times. That should have fed his sense of accomplishment. Better that he not get full of himself. He had experienced his share of glory and he had had his fun.

*“Fail,” she thought, “before you start thinking you are invincible.”*

Jonia nodded to Nymua while rubbing at the excitement crawling up his neck. She smiled and brought her arms out to gesture the combatants to the center. But this opponent was very different from the others, whom Jonia had not been well acquainted with.

Ulia – also a farmer’s child. He would see her working in the row next to him in the hack yards, raking the soil in with the compost. Not the best place to get to know someone. Nor would he have had the chance to talk to her at the end of the day while they washed off their filth at the shower dome in the farm-fort. After that, his mother would be around, and that killed any chance he had of getting close to her.

But there was a song, a habit if not a daily tradition, that the farmers created and then forgot. And each worker would carry a verse then send it to someone else to add from, someone like Ulia, who seemed to anticipate Jonia’s lyrics before him. She could anticipate him. This was not good. “*Sheeah!*”

But Jonia didn’t run. He took the initiative and grabbed Ulia’s wrists with scorpion precision and held them down to her waist. Step one accomplished – keep from losing. But getting to step two – winning – that was the problem. How could he pin her with his hands so preoccupied?

Ulia had her own answer. She jerked their wrists inward between their bodies. She jerked to the outside, then down, but Jonia still held firmly, firmly enough for Ulia to bend his joints and spread his body sideways through the link of his own grasp. Now it was her who would not let go. Slowly his back bent as she brought him down, bending his knees closer to the pavement, coincidentally at the multi-colored edge of the dragon’s mouth.

Nymua was ready to begin counting, but as long as his knees weren’t touching the ground, she could not make the call. If Jonia were struggling with his legs to the floor, even if he wasn’t pinned, she could begin the count then declare the winner by Lame Duck ruling. With the Fury Bandits nearby, Jonia did not want to be called a lame duck. But between the fibers of his ears he heard the undertone of the quack invading his poise.

*“That’s right. You’ve had your fun. Now let it go.”*

His knee fell.

“One!”

He looked down clenching his teeth at the annoyed face of the rainbow dragon, his knee scrapping against its powder lined tooth, the chalk smell rising through the struggle into his nostrils as if it were the dragon’s own breath. As if it would eat him while hundreds of people watched and laughed and made that noise reserved for fights just like this one, a duck’s squawk.

“Seven!”

Got to try something, then something was ready. His knee was down but his toes still fastened onto the pavement. With a sudden burst of power he shoved into Ulia. Success! The quacks stopped, and as Ulia stepped back Jonia leaped up but still holding tight to her wrists. Before she could secure her balance he barreled through her legs, stood up, and flipped her over his back.

*“She still won’t let go!”* Jonia thought.

His feet shook as she landed behind him. That must have hurt, but Jonia stopped paying attention to that while he dragged Ulia across the arena, dashing through the surprised *oh*’s and *ou*’s, hoping she would have the sense to let go. Instead, her grip pinched into his skin. The crowd groaned with Ulia, but Jonia – too scared to see what she would do to him if he stopped – trudged inside the ring, trudged on and on in front of the bright morning, running until he at last succumbed to his exhaustion and stopped. He turned to see Ulia’s legs flat against the ground, her head limp.

But still she held to him, even though his sweat allowed him to rotate his wrists inside her grasp. He kneeled behind her and brought her arms around herself. Her hair shuddered against his body as he cradled her head against his shoulder. Nymua didn't have the heart to begin the count.

Sonia believed that it was everyone's hunger that eventually caused the murmuring to return. Otherwise, they would have left the two of them sitting in each other's arms, content with capturing that rare tenderness of young love. Except for Welino, who trotted over to examine Ulia. He put his hand to her neck, then to the side of her head. Then he playfully poked her eye.

“Ouch...”

“She's just exhausted, folks. This fella gave her one hell of a match – Jon, I need you to let go now.”

Welino's assistants, after taking their arms off each other, helped Ulia onto her legs and out of the ring with an escort of applause. She was very good, yet Jonia still managed to prevail. Only one match left. Could he actually win? Sonia was tempted to believe in her son, but then she stifled her enthusiasm with a deep sigh. Winning would be the worst thing that could happen to him. No. She could not wish him down *that* road. But then, maybe it was a necessary evil, like getting sick in order to tolerate a disease. How else could he learn the dangers of success? He could never appreciate her years of discipline until he experienced the very thing she wanted him to avoid. Such a paradox. And a cruel thing for any mother to decide. But the choice was still hers, for now. Jonia was almost grown up.

Even Sonia's stew seemed anxious as Nymua finally called out to the last of the contenders. She put the lid over the crock then poured some more water into the grate. Some

steam rose, just enough to obscure her view of three people coming up to the booth. Sonia prepared herself to deny serving them any stew until she realized it was an upset mother with her two daughters, both holding on to the bits of an ogre's head. The mother's ear strands slowly unfurled and stiffened into streaks cutting against the rising steam.

Quite an affronting gesture, but Sonia had her own way of dealing with intimidation. An inquisitor of unforeseeable anger, she lifted her nose up to the side and widened her eye, waiting for this person to explain herself for this unprovoked sign of hostility.

"Let me show you what your son did to my daughters." What Sonia saw next made her eye struggle to keep from imploding into itself. It crawled away from the girls' bloody scrapes then jolted upon a view of the arena, fixating at the boy combatant who carried the color of her mane. Sonia wiped off her chief's cowl and threw away her apron. "I'll get him," she said under her breath.

Where was the breeze? Had the wind left him for dead? The arena was too still for Jonia's comfort. Maybe the Invisible Dragon was there sucking it all in as she observed the last match in her name. But Jonia knew he had Welino rooting for him, and even some of the girls he beat, Meliza and Runawei, he noticed them clapping and whistling to him before realizing that nearly everyone was doing it together with them. He was *The Crowd Favorite!*

"Jon! Jon! Jon! Jon!" they chanted in front of a rising rhythm and a crescendo of *ah's*.

Yes! The fame was his at last. And it was just like he imagined, a satisfaction soaked by the very pores beneath his skin and a brisk wave of rejuvenation spread all the way through his body, across his mane, and into his split ends. Who cares about the wind when you've got all *this?*



Jonia raised his arms out and roared back, spinning around to make sure everyone heard, then stopped when he spun at last to his mother, her eyebrows so narrow he could feel them pinching his neck. And next to her, he saw the girls who trapped him inside the ogre costume. One of them was bleeding through the bandage cloth at her head and the other with a purple bruise on her cheek and a bandage around her head. Did he do that? Impossible! They must have faked it. How could she still be bleeding after more than an hour?

Nymua whistled at him to come to the center.

How dare they do that to themselves just to get him in trouble? It was their fault for not letting him go. They knew he was in a hurry. Why can't anyone understand that? But his mother did not seem to care. Her arms were folded, meaning that her judgment had already passed without his defense.

Jonia looked at his opponent but didn't see *her*. He didn't want to. What he imagined was a girl with fire coming out of her head, someone he had to put out. No names, no reality, just brawl.

*"Sheeah!"*

Jonia pounced. Pounced on her head, slid his legs under her arms and squeezed with his hands locked around the back of his knees. Her nose dug into his stomach before she lodged her hands between her face and his body and jumped and slammed Jonia on his back.

*"Don't let go,"* Jonia thought. *"Hold on long enough and you'll win!"*

And he still held, even when his opponent lifted him up and slammed him again on her knees.

"Is he trying to suffocate her?" someone asked aloud.

“Look at what he’s doing to her neck,” someone else suggested. “That’s a lot of strain he’s putting on it. She won’t be able to keep her head straight after this.”

Before she could lift him for another fall, Jonia twisted and rolled her onto her back, sitting on her chest and pressing his stomach deeper into her face. She slapped her hands against the mat over and over, but Jonia was sure she wasn’t conceding the fight.

He gasped. What was he doing?

“One!”

He felt his shirt being sucked into her mouth.

“Two!”

*“Oh, come on, surely she could keep her breath for just a bit longer.”*

But maybe she didn’t take in a very good breath. What if he surprised her, and she only supped a snippet of air?

*“No. She’s just conserving her strength. Stay easy and you’ll win.”*

But her hands grabbed at Jonia’s sides, shaking without any focused effort.

“Seven!”

*“Ah! Why did it have to be like this? I don’t want to have to win like this!”*

“Nine!”

*“Fail...”*

Then as if the Invisible Dragon herself was giving her divine strength she pushed Jonia away. She gasped quickly before breaking the hand lock behind her head and crossing her ankles over Jonia’s neck then pinning his head against the mat.

“One!”

Jonia tried to do the same, then they would be pinning each other at the same time but his opponent had already locked Jonia’s ankles under her arms. He looked over to her red face as her ankles pinched at his throat.

*“I messed up. I didn’t mean to make it personal.”*

He tried to roll over but only managed to get at his side, where he saw his mother. Her glare was gone, but her arms were still folded, and the girls next to her with their mother seemed to be whispering something to him. Probably a curse.

“Five!”

And maybe he deserved one, like that story about The Mourning Star, whose curse was to always destroy the ones she cared about the most. Power does that, he guessed. He didn’t have to win. Maybe it was okay to lose. Vision blurred away the image of the family. He shook his head and there was Welino, frantic, with his ears in the shape of bent forks...

“Seven!”

...shouting, “Get up, m’boy! Don’t let me down!”

Jonia wasn’t sure what for. So what if a boy beats a girl? He’d still have to shovel manure tomorrow in the hack yards. But where would the Invisible Dragon be?

“Nine!”

*“My room!”*

He took his mouth over his opponent’s big toe and began slurping it, mixing the gravel firmly against her skin with his tongue. She jerked her foot away, scrambling off and on to her feet.

“Oh, my Gods! I-can’t-believe-you-just-sucked-on-my TOE!!!” Roaring laughter crashed into the arena, dashing away everyone’s anxiety.

Jonia got up then spat. “Y’ taste like a loser.”

“Is that what you said when I had my foot up your mouth?”

“Alright,” Nymua said stepping between them. “This isn’t a social combat. A lot of people are hungry, like myself, so let’s end this. Are you two ready?” They both nodded. “Okay, now no neck grappling anymore. You both came *very* close to disqualification. Assume your stances.”

Nymua stepped back but left her hand palm out between the combatants.

“*Eeeck*,” Jonia’s opponent said, shaking her foot as though a parasite were still dangling from it. Then Jonia looked at her for who she really was. Pretty short for a girl. Maybe she had something to prove too. And her mane, a glossy mud brown. Far from the fiery frizz he imagined on her. This time, he would pay attention before he did something wrong.

Then he remembered something Nymua just said, which gave him an idea.

“*Sheeah!*”

Jonia hopped in place and landed with his side to his opponent, his palms open and his arms out, “*Wa-tishhh!*”

She paused at Jonia’s sound effect, then swiped for his wrist.

“*Swish!*”

But Jonia was quicker. He shook his hips side to side and bobbed his wrist as if his hand were flowing in the wind. She tried again.

“*Whip wa-tish!*” He grabbed her wrist instead.

“Quit making that stupid noise.”

“*Hu-ah!* Make me.”

She yanked her arm away, but Jonia did not hold on this time. She stumbled back a pace. Jonia started whistling a whirly rhythm and sent it out at her through his fluctuating fingers.

“Cut it out!” Her ears flattened to keep from picking up the sound.

“*The Invisible Dragon works through unseen attacks, yes!*”

And with her ears down, she could not hear well enough to anticipate his movement. He slipped through her defenses then clenched her exhausted shoulders and forced her down on one knee.

“One! Two! Three!”

It was working! Jonia jutted his face to hers and flailed his tongue.

“Gross!”

“Six! Seven!”

She spat in his mouth then tried to stand, but Jonia finessed her weight against her other knee in time.

“*Ahack, ack-thoo!*” He pictured the fire brimming back on her head, but he quickly shook the idea away, tossing it from his imagination. But then he saw his mother again inside the crowd of spectators, arms still folded. He leaned in some more against his opponent, though his eyes refused to drift away from his mother.

“Ten! Jonia wins by *Lame Duck!*”

Applause, cheers, whistling cheers. “Joo-nia! Joo-nia! Joo-nia! Joo-nia!” Everyone who cared chanted, except for one, who stared at her son and clutched her arms together even tighter.



Willow – it was a good name. He would have to thank Ivan for giving it to him, as soon as he knew where he was. He lifted himself up, unsure whether he had opened his eyes. When he moved his hand it rubbed against solid rock. He wasn't lying flat on his back, like he had hoped, but to his side between unseen crags. At first, he didn't try to move his waist, didn't want to know if he was paralyzed. But one of his arms was ready. He pulled his body forward but something caught on his pants and ripped. It was a strange comfort in knowing that he could still feel pain. He slid down whatever rock formation he landed in after the Bastard tossed him aside. How many hours ago was that? He brought his ear bristles together and held them up. No sound. No fighting? Where were the others? Or that prickly wonder?

Suddenly he dropped as he was pulling himself out. The fall helped him find where he was hurt. His thigh, the ribs, his shoulder...and now the leg. He rolled onto his back, clenching his teeth. His shoulder came alive as if it were growing thorns from under his skin. He crawled against a stone, bit into his lip and rammed his shoulder back into socket.

A roar he could never hope to contain announced to all the darkness his new aching madness. He fell on his back, sucking in the blood from his lip and scrambling for some thought to take his mind away from the agony. He thought of his friend.

Ivan was a good man. They all were. He was just confused. Willow had hoped that seeing Mourning Star might have given him something that Willow himself longed for. But of course, he couldn't raise a family, doing what he did for a living. He did notice some change in Ivan though. When he came out of the dressing room, he went straight outside The Choral Café. He didn't even ask for his free pint. He just went back to The Mountain Stew, climbed upstairs and locked himself in his room. He didn't mention girls again while they rode the caravan to Darimoth, and when they got inside the entrance cave among all the other mercenaries and

spelunkers, he didn't seem excited to search for secret passages or hidden caches with magic weapons, ancient tablets, or gem encrusted dragon idols.

Something had changed in him, then all the torch lights blew out, torches put up by previous adventurers that lined the labyrinthine walls just before they stumbled into this cavern. Then there was that screeching, scraping sound that made Willow feel like a talon was scaling down the his spine.

Willow stopped. Didn't want to think of that. It was time to get on his feet. He used his good arm to pull against the rock. He slowly rotated his shoulder. Not too bad. All things considered, aside from the bruising, he was still fresh. He touched around his thighs.

Dagger – cracked.

Canteen – bent, empty.

Sword – unaccounted for. Could still be on the floor. He'd need it soon. If the Bastard hadn't known all along where he was, he certainly would have heard his scream...unless he was dead. A pleasant thought, but a stupid assumption. Hopefully he did hear him. Then Willow could distract him from hunting the others. This might just be that nick-of-time moment Ivan needed to get away.

A good enough plan, but it wouldn't work for long without a sword. He sifted through the crags but turned out nothing. If only he could see, just a little. Willow remembered a story he once heard about these demi-gods called the Grenrai, how they could project light from out of their skin. That would be handy right about now, but then he remembered that at one time there were Rivlao who found within themselves the ability to do that sort of thing out of their own eyes, and he read that you would see only in black and white, where white was solid and black was empty space.

But how could he try? Was it like opening a new set of eyes behind yours, or was it like releasing a floodgate? Willow concentrated, believing fully that it could be done, that his kind had roots with hidden treasure seldom explored anymore. How could they when most of them lived in cities, where the stone pavement blocks their spirit from the soil?

Nothing yet. Then Willow felt a cooling sensation in his pupils, and he believed that perhaps it was possible to suck the darkness into his eyes, sucking the darkness for nourishment. Eat the darkness with your eyes and light will be all that is left.

Silly.

Willow felt a headache come over him and anchored onto a stalagmite. He shook his head and drifted into a dream. No. It was a regret. He could have made a life in Vir'Vonnia, in the Village District. He was tempted to once. He had met someone, a passionate spirit who took his head in so close that her mane would blend into his. Their ears would mix and flutter together as they kissed. She was his sorceress and he was her sorcerer.

The two moons had eclipsed over them that evening, a rare occasion. Their union was powerful enough to put a hole in the center of the sun, yet still magically secrete hidden warmth from within their mutually accompanied darkness. But as the night went on, the moons slowly drifted apart until the morning sunlight finally divided them. That was the only way Willow could explain it. They left each other and never asked for names.

If Ivan had walked in on them, he probably would have asked, "So which one of you's the girl?" Willow bowed his head and smiled.

Ah, ha! So this was what caught on his pants. It was the hilt of his sword, splintered on one end, but otherwise, it was intact. Then he thought heard something. Moaning. Faint. He



rubbed his shoulder then started walking. He didn't have to see to find his way. His mane could tell tales his eyes couldn't, like spiders from Ulsira forest, his hair was aligned to detect the space around him. Spiders, birds, lions, Willow had all their virtues in his blood. His sword could be a claw, a fang, or a talon, whichever suited his temper. He heard the moaning beside him now. He came over the body and felt its face.

“Percy!?” Something came off as Willow brushed against Percy's cheek. He rubbed his fingers against it. Raw flesh. Percy spoke without moving his lips or tongue.

“Huiyo, I ae hunhing. Canc hee or ookh.”

“*Damn,*” Willow thought, “*he ate a parasite!* – Stay calm, Percy. I'm going to get it out of you. I want you to imagine that there is a weed in her gut, and the only thing to fight it is with all that ale you've been drinking. Imagine all that booze bubbling and swishing underneath the weed, drying out the roots. Can you do that?”

“Yehhhhck.”

Willow put his weapon down and carefully spread Percy's jaw. Willow knew the parasite would be in his stomach, but did it have time to grow? He might be able to reach down Percy's throat and yank the parasite out from inside his stomach, but the size of Willow's arm might break his jaw. If he cut his stomach open, he could probably get it all out. If only he could see.

Then the cavern walls began echoing that infamous scratch as if a nail were passing through a giant's throat. Willow shook his head again and again. He grabbed his sword and Percy's with each hand then spun around. He remembered that this place used to be the home of the Rajonin, the people who descended from ancient dragons. If any of their spirits were left would they have enough pity to lend him and Percy their strength?

Silly...

CHAPTER III  
LORD VALUIL'S PROCESSION



*hunting for dirt*  
*with mop and broom*  
*attacking the hurt, attacking the room*

“You missed a spot, your *majesty*.”

Jonia only pretended that he was upset by the taunting of the ogre girls. He sighed with his ear bristles beside his cheeks as he slopped another coat of blue soap over the stone floor in the their kitchen, but it took the greater portion of his strength not to let out the celebration bombarding at all corners of his soul.

*“I did it! I won, you little butt sprouts. Kill me now if you want to, I don’t care, ‘cause I kicked everyone’s ass. I’ll run through your house five times over, and it still won’t change the fact that a ‘boy’ beat a whole team of girls. Ha!”* – was what Jonia wanted to say out loud.

Fortunately, his better judgment guided his outward appearance as he shuffled inside his shroud of misery, and the two *nilo* girls could only seethe in their seats with their hair raised like

porcupines and their eyes squinting like hawks as they watched him clean their house. They were hoping for a more satisfying punishment, like a whipping or a butt paddling, maybe even make him fix their costume, but so far, this was the only arrangement their mother and his had come up with.

Because he won, Nymua escorted Jonia immediately after the final fight up onto the stage to initiate the opening ceremony, and Mayor herself “bequeathed” him with the trophy he now had sitting like a center piece on their kitchen table. If justice had had it their way, Jonia would have been spanked in front of the whole village, a public spanking, until he cried. Then the girl that should have won would kick him off the stage and take his place under the big green banner with the shield made of feathers. As it was, Jonia could not have been stopped before he came on stage, shook Mayor’s hand and hoisted up his trophy in front of everyone as they sang along with the piper The Anthem of *Ofna* – the anthem of giving. Welino, however, had ordered the girls home to rest off their injuries before all the bubbles gathering overhead popped and drenched the whole village with color and cheer.

They also missed the buffet of stew, chili and *huila*, the cherished jam made from plump and tender sweet leaf.

But so did Jonia, who now felt the strength of the Invisible Dragon slithering inside his stomach, a sensation which assured that she was still with him. Sweep then slop. Jonia moved his bucket along with his foot. He had an odd way of cleaning that the girls said was stupid. He knew he should be sweeping the entire kitchen floor before bringing out his mop, but he secretly imagined that holding the mop and the broom in each hand made him ready for combat, but it would be hard to appear like he was doing work if he didn’t try using them one after the other. But better that they think that he was sad and stupid than excited and gaudy.

The Statue of the Invisible Dragon, however, was not a sight to see. In fact, all that the girls saw was a simple wood base with a thin plaque bolted in front. Aside from the polished wood finish, they saw absolutely nothing.

One of the girls giggled. “Is that all they gave you? All that fuss over a piece of wood?”

“Yeah,” Jonia said. “I guess so.”

“Shows how stupid you are, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, I guess you two were right.”

“So I suppose you wouldn’t mind,” one girl slid off her stool and leaned over, “if I take it!”

His stomach trembled with a force that traveled into his arms, but Jonia remained calm and continued working without paying her any attention, except for when he said, “Fine with me.”

She took the statue and banged it against the table. She banged, and banged, and banged again, but just before Jonia’s pride cratered into his explosive nerves, her sister hopped off her stool and grabbed her hands. “Don’t do that! They’re going to want that back for next year’s competition.”

Jonia froze. He would have to return the Invisible Dragon? How soon? Next year? Next week? But he had earned it. No one could take away his achievement. That’s impossible. How dare they!

“That’s okay,” her sister replied, tossing the base back on the table. “We’ll just blame him.”

Jonia gripped his mop and broom as if they were spears. But then, he shook his head. He shouldn’t let kids get to him, but it was hard, especially since they had that mysterious mind

control power over adults that made them see things the way kids wanted every time he fought with them. His mother refused to understand. He moved his pole arms along the side of the kitchen table, the same table he and his mother had at their home. Plain wood, same splintered edges glazed over with a solid layer of hardened sap.

The girls resumed their banter and Jonia's ear bristles flashed apart and blended inside his mane, the deep red furs obscuring the lighter shades of his ear strands.

"I don't understand why *you* two are being punished," he finally said.

"Huh?" the girls said together.

"When my mother dragged me here to clean your house, I figured you both would be enjoying the festival. Oh, wait. That's right. I *injured* you both. Aren't you two supposed to be in bed right now?"

"We can do whatever we want," said the girl who damaged the statue, the one who used to be the head master of the ogre costume.

"Oh – well I'm glad I didn't hurt you two *that* badly," he said lifting an eyebrow.

"You did too, jerk."

"Is that why you took off your bandages already?"

"Shut up," the girls said together.

"Yeah, well, you'd probably get caught if you left anyway. Wouldn't want to get into trouble."

The former head master pointed her finger. "You just want us to leave so *you* can go back to the festival."

But then her sister stood up grabbing her mane. "I don't care anymore. We're missing the costume contest. I heard someone dressed up as an immigrant. I want to see the immigrant!"

“But Lil...” the head master began protesting, but her sister interrupted.

“Mom’s going on stage soon for the memorial service and dad’s stuck at the stonecutter’s booth.”

Jonia paused at the word *dad*.

“They’ll never know we left.”

“They will once they see Jon.”

“I don’t want to leave,” Jonia said.

The girls paused with curiosity in their eye brows.

“Liar,” they said together.

“My mother will be keeping an eye out for me too.” Then he glanced at his chipped trophy. “Besides, I don’t have anywhere else to be.”

A vibrant energy crept its way through the chambers of Jonia’s body, filling his chest, widening his throat, then nestling behind his eyes to massage his thoughts. The Invisible Dragon gave her sympathies as Jonia squinted at the knowledge that at this same time the next day he would be back out in the fields hoeing dirt and manure with his mother. That would be his story for years to come until she took her Long Walk. Then *he* would be the one abusing his child with scowls and scolding, telling his son what to do but never why, pointing out the wrongs but never the rights. But his case just might be different. He might not have to raise a child alone. He thought of Ulia.

But the light dimmed from the round kitchen window. Before he knew it, the stools were empty. The girls had left without him realizing. Now it truly felt like he was back at home. There was the same wooden countertop with the steam stove and fridge box built into it, with the

cabinet on the right end. The spiral staircase inside the alcove on the left would go upstairs to their bedrooms and downstairs into the storage basement.

But as the Invisible Dragon blew into his spirit, Jonia gained an idea. He remembered Rymusha – The Black Mane – how he and his compatriots stormed through the sewers in search of the infamous Rat King, and all of a sudden, Jonia didn't see a dull house, but a secret labyrinth all ready for him to explore. He held the statue, a totem of his deity, pushed it against his chest then stuffed it into his pocket.

He might need lock picks too. He ripped a few splinters off the edge of the table, put them away, then held his *spears* up. The first rule upon entering a dungeon – Check for traps! Why not the fridge box, because who wouldn't want free food? He put down his pole arms then ran his fingers along the smooth grooves of the wooden fridge box. No wires. Okay. So he hooked one end of a spear at the handle and carefully pulled the door open. Success! Inside was a big bowl of *huila*, the sweet leaf jam. He ran his finger inside the bowl of purple goop and put it in his mouth. Yum, yum!

*“Beats the heck out of porridge.”*

He searched the rest of the kitchen but found no traps. Now for Rule Number Two: While advancing into formerly inhabited areas, such as the habitat of a now extinct civilization, be sure to stop every so often and – Check for secret passages!

And compartments. Jonia opened the cabinet. Rows filled with cooking ingredients made from the plants he himself harvested. Nothing secret about them, but what could be hidden in the back? He sifted through the rows until he reached the bottom, where he touched an unusually small lump of metal fastened on the roof of the row. With two fingers and a thumb, he pulled the

tiny knob towards him. A board from the right end sprang out and flapped open on a long hinge, revealing a cache of rock pellets and a blow rod, the weapon of choice for the Fury Bandits.

Jonia laughed to himself. “*So this is their headquarters.*” Yes, bandits did frequently make labyrinths and secret dungeons their base of operations. If Jonia were to bring this news to Mayor, there just might after all be that public spanking the ogre girls wanted. She may even give him a reward! He took his evidence into his pockets then moved on down the spiral staircase, into the lowest level of the lair.

And what would he find beyond the basement door? – Locked. And of course, there was – Rule Number Three: Don’t *ever* assume that someone will leave a light on for you; bring a torch! In Jonia’s case, there were none available, though a traditional dungeon dweller might inspect the wall by the door for one. Jonia crossed over the walls with his spears when something fell over in the dark. The only helpful light was that which traveled all the way down with Jonia from the kitchen window, a mere spectral light that ended at the bottom of the spiral steps.

But Jonia had a good idea what he had hit with his spear. And sure enough, he felt along the floor the broad shaft of a *vulva*, with its smooth bell at the end dangling by the hinge. Even better than a torch. He positioned the mouth of the bell at the roof of the passageway then twisted the handles inward. Before long, the bell began to glow and a green hue seeped through the ends in globs of dripping light. One glob landed on his hand. Jonia loved to pretend that the slush was searing hot, and he would hop around in screams just to frighten his mother, which was never a good idea...

This time, he moved the gooey light with his thumb inside his palm, clenched then watched as the green light shined through his skin, and he thought for a moment that he had a



light that was all his own. Revealing a power like that would earn him some respect, maybe even a hint of admiration. Then he wouldn't have to risk getting his butt kicked in the arena.

Apparently there were people who could shine like that. They were called the fallen plumes of the phoenix, the Grenrai. But Jonia guessed that such people didn't need respect anymore; they weren't around civilization because they didn't need other people to make them feel special. Is that a prerequisite for being a god?

Whatever. Jonia had his globe of green daylight stuck onto the ceiling, which not only revealed the lock Jonia needed to pick but also a sign on the door that brought Jonia to Rule Number Four: Deciphering ancient runes. In this case, Rivlao runes, because "rune" is a much more interesting phrase than "letter". Yes, it was all too important to know how to read *ancient* texts in order to heed such warnings left behind by the *ancients*, who apparently expected their labyrinths to be plundered even in their golden age. How nice of them to think of the future.

#### *Amu Nu'uma*

Jonia understood that most words in Rivlao had its own self-contained meaning altered by an attached segment. Immigrants called them *prefix* or *suffix*, depending on which end the segment came. Having neither, Jonia couldn't figure out the first word, which embarrassed him a little since he was technically an *ancient*. But the second word had a very recognizable prefix. *Nu* means no, every time. Then Jonia noticed a peculiar coincidence. If you took away the *Nu* then the second word would be spelled exactly opposite of the first. Erina was his schoolmaster, and she used the term "reciprocal" when he used to go to class at the library. That meant that the first

word means the opposite of the second word...but the second word was in the negative – so both words actually say the same thing?

But the lock told him enough to understand that he was not supposed enter. He pulled out his picks and went to work digging into the keyhole. There was another rule coming up that he thought about while working. Rule Number Five – Expect the unexpected. This was the first time Jonia actually counted all the rules he learned from The Black Mane. Jonia would be surprised if the room was empty. Rymusha “The Black Mane” used to tell him about how he swung at the darkness as he turned a corner of the sewer tunnels, just in case of an ambush by the Rat King and his minions. Jonia flattened together his right ear bristles and pressed onto the door. He didn’t hear any rats. Maybe they heard him first. Then Jonia finally found the groove inside the lock to turn the gear. As he twisted the picks, they snapped, with split wood jammed inside. That was all right. He unlocked it just in time.

He lifted the latch just enough to leave the door ajar then picked up his spears. Then he brought his foot up and with a roar kicked open the door. He froze at an inconceivable sight, and Jonia realized that Rule Number Five was impossible to follow.

“Thank you for understanding, Sonia,” Mayor said in front of the stage. Everyone else was busily walking from one end of the promenade to the other trying to participate in the many different activities of the afternoon.

“I *don’t* understand,” Sonia said, “but I suppose I don’t need to as long as you have your way.” She spoke with her arms folded and was sorely tempted to turn her back hair to Mayor if other people wouldn’t look over and think she was being rude.

“It’s not my way,” Mayor said, “it’s just that I didn’t think it was wise to make a scene out of what happened with Jonia and the girls, not during the ceremony. But I’m surprised that you disagree with me. I thought you would have been terribly embarrassed to have your son publicly reprimanded, especially on a day like this.”

“I’m already embarrassed, but that isn’t as important as making sure he learns his lesson. He needs to learn consequences and he won’t get that if you keep taking him under your furs.”

“You already have him cleaning the offenders’ house.” Mayor pointed through the first row of homes circling the commons. “And he did miss the morning feast. Surely that’s enough to make peace.”

“Perhaps, if he didn’t show the signs of stubbornness. He insists it’s not fair. I had to pull him all the way to the house. He still needs discipline. He has to understand that before he can live on his own.”

Mayor’s blond ears lifted. “I see. So he’s almost fully developed?”

“His spine is almost completely covered, and I hope you understand that while this festival happens only once a year it is incidents like these that form the basis of character, which once molded cannot be remade. Don’t ever put The Greater Good ahead of what I have to teach my son.”

Mayor sighed, and in her exhale, a wisp of wind blew out her nose in a pitch that released her irritation at Sonia, who snorted back. But Mayor flew her arms up and shook her head.

“But that isn’t even what I wanted to talk to you about, Sonia.”

“Really?” She noticed Mayor glancing at the arena, where Nymua was already preparing the mat for the Adult Wrestling Competition. Sonia raised her finger. “Oh, no you don’t. Leave me out of that.” She began walking away, but Mayor followed.

“Oh, come on. Why not? We really need you to compete this year.”

“I don’t care. You won’t convince me this time. I’m through.”

“But wouldn’t it be neat if both mother and son won both trophies? I don’t think that has ever happened before. Don’t you want the honor of...”

“No! I don’t need any more *honor*. I’m just fine with the honor I have.”

“Would you slow down just for a second, Sonia? You have no idea how important it is for us to have a competitive tournament this year.”

Sonia leaned into the wind as they passed by the scene of the costume contest. “You’ve said that before – last year, as a matter of fact. I don’t want to fight. I don’t remember ever wanting to fight.” She dodged around a judge inspecting a troll costume covered in glaze with patches of mud and grass for hair.

“But this year’s important,” Mayor continued. “There’s a reason why I postponed the veterans memorial ceremony to later this evening, but it’s a surprise. Won’t you return to the ring?”

Sonia stopped in front of a face painting booth and turned to Mayor. “Why me? Why is it so important that you get me to compete? No one will remember after tomorrow anyway.”

“That’s what will be different, Sonia, and I need your help to make sure this year will be memorable to everyone. Tradition demands that you come back, and everyone wants to see you fight.”

“Well, they can’t have me. I am my own.”

But Mayor seized her arm before Sonia could turn away, and Sonia, broiling inside, glared as if she could send daggers through her eyes. Mayor stood fast, revealing only the slightest tremble from her modest chin.

“*Asuni!*” they both heard, and Mayor let go of Sonia to address Nymua and her quilted spouse Welino coming their way from the arena.

“*Asuni,*” Mayor replied. Sonia, however, remained silent with her chin up. Nymua looked widely, as if she were gazing through the two of them, as if she saw between them more than what met her eyes.

“I didn’t hear you say it, Sonia,” Welino said.

*Asuni* came out of Sonia’s mouth with noticeable exertion. Nymua put her glove hand on her chin then asked, “*Y’eiye’h’m*, Sonia, when are you going to sign the list? *Nu’wisamn* without you.”

Sonia’s temper shifted back into an exhausted embarrassment as she questioned how well she could still speak Rivlao. Maybe she wouldn’t have to try. “Please, leave me out of it this year. For once, I’d just like to watch.”

Nymua looked at Mayor, who shook her head, saying “I haven’t told her yet.”

“Told her what?” Welino asked.

Mayor rubbed her forehead, “Well, it’s supposed to be a secret, but I guess if Sonia insists on being so stubborn, like a certain young boy we all know of, then it seems we have no choice, if Welino can decide not to include this in his gossip.”

“By my honor,” he said, which made Sonia squint. If everyone did everything by their honor, the entire Village District would be in debt to itself a trillion times over.

“Well, listen,” Mayor began, “the reason why we’re all excited is because Lord Valuil is coming.” Sonia waited, as if Mayor needed to explain more. “I realize it is a bit hard for you to understand, Sonia, because you aren’t from here. I remember when you first came to the Village

District, your red hair all strew and lank, your arms holding your sides with absolutely nothing with you. We couldn't believe how scared you were coming in to Town Hall."

"Yes, such a sweet *nilo*," Welino added, "and when I took you in, you were so confused you pulled at your hair and cried for weeks, like you had some parasite in your belly. You didn't understand that you were just pregnant. You acted so solemn, like you were going to die."

"But instead, you were renewed," Nymua said. "Renewed with a beautiful baby boy. I've never seen you smile that way again, like your spirit just beamed out of your very teeth."

"I don't see the point in talking about any of this," Sonia said.

"You see," Mayor continued, "before you came here, before Valuil became *Lord Valuil*, she lived here."

"That's right," Welino said. "She's a native Vir'Vonian, who grew up right here in the Village District, and she has never been back since the Ogre Battles."

"So you see, Sonia," Mayor said, "this is all part of a welcome home celebration. Everyone here but you personally knew Lord Valuil before she was chosen by the Matriarch to sire over the entire Eastern Territory."

"Wait a minute," Sonia said raising a finger. "You're telling me that the Matriarch can just – dance up to any one of us, point her divine pinky and say 'I dub thee Lord over everyone's crap, in that land, right over there?'"

"It was a formal invitation into the Inulian Council," Nymua explained, "to help her take care of the province. She was asked to lead."

Sonia didn't say anything, but it was suspicious to her that the Matriarch would have picked some random nobody from the common rug of things into such a big government

position. She looked over at the face paintings. A *nilo* girl proudly displayed the outline of a dragon coming out of a mist along the rim of her nose, the Invisible Dragon.

But before she could dig up another excuse to leave, Nymua put her hand on Sonia's shoulder, with that look as if she could see through her. "No one is going to make you do anything you don't want to, Sonia. If you say no, then that will be the end of it – but I would consider it a personal favor if you helped us make Valuil's stay something special.

"You see. She was our commander. She led us through the Eastern Front into the mountains against the ogres. Have you seen my hand, Sonia? Have you ever seen me take off my glove? No, because none of us who survived want anyone to see what we went through. But Valuil, she already knows. When she reveals herself today, when she comes through the gate of Iron Side along with the Viceroy and the Magistrate of Vir'Vonia – Gods! – Will you help us welcome our hero?"

The hero was terrified. Heros were supposed to be courageous, or at least brave. But what Jonia saw diminished even the presence of the Invisible Dragon. The green light from the vulva's residue highlighted a giant skull mounted on the back wall by poles as thick as Jonia's own body, one pole extending out each eye socket and a third poking through a fractured tooth. The costume the girls made of this ogre was clearly not to scale. Where they could only fit Jonia's head in their mouth, he could feel this skull munching at all his bones, with room perhaps for two more people to grind his hair and toes into, making one flesh out of three in one heaping pile sliding through an engorged throat.

Across the walls, lines of mounted weapons, swords, axes, spears, weapons that Jonia did not recognize, could not guess how they were used in combat, all crossing one another in pairs surrounding the ogre skull. Then Jonia looked at the frame of the door then back at the bone monster. How did something so massive get inside the room? Was it the same way the immigrants made those bottles with the ships inside? Jonia crept up to the skull, up to its menacing maw and rubbed the surface of the bone with his spear.

No. It was just a broom. He also had a mop, and he was not inside a labyrinth, just a basement of terrors long since dead.

He struck the floor, struck in front of a skull that told him he was trapped, a skull that ordered him to choose between two lives. Staying in the Village District would reduce him to a drone among many hundred others who would never realize their own uniqueness. Even The Black Mane was only a makeshift ghost of a genuine hero. Jonia knew that Rymusha spent his day under people's houses, slopping clean their latrines and guiding the muck through the pipe tunnels, the same as everyone else he worked with. It was the same for him in the hack yards, constantly scraping the ground as the sun burned the hairs on his back. He would do that for a long time, waiting for the day when he'd be so old he might decide to take his Long Walk out of Vir'Vonia, into the Great Plains, and never come back.

*"Welino could take his Long Walk any day now,"* Jonia thought. He struck the floor again, and again, and again, and didn't stop until he finally broke his broom. He panted with his waist bent forward, the ogre's teeth bearing at him like the opening for a cave of demons. But he managed to settle down, leaning with his hands on his knees and his red mane limp with exhaustion. Was this his alternative? to sacrifice himself to this altar of danger? He wondered if that was what happened to his father, but his mother would not explain what happened to him.



She would just say that he would never be with them. Was he in the Ogre Battles? She'd shake her head. Did he love someone else? She'd start talking about porridge and telling him to clean his room. Always with the chores.

But now the broom was broken. Would he fix it, or leave it behind? He turned to a table on the right side wall and looked at a glass case featuring an impression of a medal that meant that you had killed ogres for your children. There were people who had defended Jonia's future before he was even born into it. His ear whiskers jittered in the fading green light from the hallway, unsure whether he should be grateful. Then he thought about the glove over Nymua's hand and immediately felt ashamed for thinking that way. He came over to the ogre skull and touched it. It felt as tough as the stone he stood on, stone from one of those vast quarries that brought the Village District its building supplies. He imagined that being digested in the stomach of an ogre would be just like the sun melting him across the quarry – or the hack yards, the steam of the compost rising up his legs, beneath the roots of his mane, boiling him alive with the hot moisture of his own sweat.

Yes, his spirit was already being eaten alive. The Invisible Dragon swam down Jonia's back then up through his neck. She seemed to agree.

Wait.

Was it a *she*? For all Jonia knew, the Invisible Dragon could be a *he*. Why not? Not everyone he was supposed to look up to had to be a *she*. But Jonia stopped, realizing that the Invisible Dragon might not be either male or female. So he wondered how much the detail actually mattered. Yet, when Jonia thought *he*, the Invisible Dragon converged over his chest then expanded out into his arms and legs, and Jonia felt it was all right to call him a *he*.

The light went out completely, and Jonia's ears stiffened upright as he heard the front door creak open. Did the girls come back? Was it their mother!?

He shoved as much of the broken remains of the broom as he could find with his feet towards the table, picked up the mop and darted out the door, closing it behind himself with stealth. He snailed his way up to the stairs and listened, hoping that whoever came in would be too preoccupied by the kitchen to notice whether Jonia was coming from the basement or the bedrooms. He treaded up the spiral staircase as if there were a dungeon guard waiting for him, and there just might have been if the mother ever found out that he had been in her private war room.

"Jonia?" said a familiar voice. She had used his full name.

"Ulia?" he said coming out of stealth mode into the kitchen. He fancied that her green hair spun with its tapered ends to hide her eyes just long enough to twist Jonia with anticipation, which he liked.

"I'm glad you're okay," he continued. "I was afraid I had scraped your back real bad."

Ulia grinned as she walked over to Jonia, sifted her fingers into the underbrush of his mane then said, "You were worried about me?" She pinched and held a nerve in his neck, and Jonia shouted as she guided him down to his knees with her two fingers. When she let go, Jonia sprung up, rubbing his wound.

"What was that for?"

"I just had to see if you were still mortal," Ulia said. "A bit more so than I was hoping, though."

"Oh really?" Jonia moved in close, his hand by her waist, their smooth chests almost touching. She seemed to invite his hand with a slight twist to her hip. Then his crotch began to

burn. He gripped with his fist and turned away from Ulia, panting before she brought her hand to his shoulder.

“I found a book about this,” she said softly. “What you are feeling happens to all boys before their first time. Breathe through it and you will master the warmth.” He closed his eyes as she ran her fingers into his mane, stroking the back of his head. Before long, the pain subsided, and he was himself again. Ulia turned him around and rubbed her thumbs across his eyebrows.

“You are so sensitive, Jonia,” she said.

“Uli,” he began.

“Uli – ah,” she corrected him, “when we’re alone, of course.”

“Ulia, how do you feel about living here, in the Village District?”

She raised a finger.

“Before I forget, I have a letter for you.” She lifted a paper sheet out from between her belt and presented it to Jonia. He had never gotten a letter before, but once he saw it, he grimaced, accepting it as if it were rag from the floor. The packaging made it look like something picked from off the grass. Brown vines laced around the outside as if sealed by a tree’s roots. It was moist too, as if the water was preserving its text.

“Where did you get this, Ulia?”

“From Welino. Mayor wanted to give it to you herself, but since you and your mother left the stage, she gave it to Welino, because she saw you two together this morning. So before he sent me away with my bill of health, he asked me to bring it to you. Aren’t you going to open it?”

He thumbed over the laces and around the corners of the letter. He poked into his thumb slightly, as if to test it somehow. He pricked his skin.

“Maybe later,” he answered.

“Jonia, I don’t know about you, but no one else gets letters very often. Do you know why?” Jonia looked up. “Because few of us have family outside of Vir’Vonia.”

Jonia nodded then took a deep breath. “I guess I’m just scared. It’s been a while since I wrote to my grandparents. I have grandparents I’ve never even met. I have no idea what they think of me.”

“Oh, so you’ve used a letter before?”

“No, I just told one of Mayor’s assistants what I wanted it to say and they took care of it. I guess that’s not how it’s done in Nul’Sira.”

Ulia rubbed along his arm, “Well, it does take time for mail to be sent. Things are a bit dangerous in the outside. I’m sure they were excited to hear from you.” She took her fingers to Jonia’s hand and guided it under the laces of the letter. “But you’ll never know unless you open it.”

He lifted his fingers and the laces snapped apart. He walked around the kitchen table as he unfolded the paper inside the envelope, running his hand through his hair. He pumped his anxiety out through his lungs with an excited fervor that lifted Ulia onto her toes. She leaned back against a chair as Jonia came to the kitchen sink. The room settled like a pond after hours of ripples. Then he crushed the envelope.

“Ah, mammoth shit!” he said pounding against the counter with the crumpled letter still in his fist. Ulia came to him as he threw himself over the table. Then he looked at her. “I can’t read it.”

“What?”

“It’s in Rivlao. I can’t understand Rivlao.” He threw himself again at this strange indignity. Why should that agitate him so much? It wasn’t because he had to go through his mother to translate, and expose his new family bond before her scrutinizing gaze. There were several people he could go to who would help him translate Rivlao into Common, like Erina at the library. It wasn’t even that he had been waiting for so long to hear from them just to be thrown for a loop. He was a Rivlao. He should know Rivlao. Why doesn’t he understand Rivlao? Just how distant was he from the people who could help him understand his mother? His roots were much farther from him than miles could measure.

Ulia sat him down and brushed his hair through her fingers.

“Well, you can toss the letter away and just let it wither, or you can put it in a jug and read it later. Fill it a quarter-way with some fresh soil from the field and water it a few times a week. Just be sure to take it out every once in a while, or else it’ll get moldy with scum. Letters live a long time if you take care of them. I wouldn’t be surprised if your grandparents put your letter in a jar after a week of reading it over and over, put it in a jar right next to their bed, with the laces mending themselves back together, so that in the morning, they could take it out and open it as if it were their first time reading it all over again.”

Jonia closed his eyes and produced a groan. He wished Ulia would lift his skull open like a treasure chest and dip her fingers through his gold coined thoughts. He let go of the letter and smiled. “Ulia, you can unlock me every time I close up – I hate that.”

“Oh, really?”

“I just wish I understood who I was better.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean, where do I come from? I mean us. We call ourselves Rivlao. What does that mean? I know we have books for just about everything about us, like the history of Ar’Inule or the morality of disturbing a rock, even a taxonomy of Undying creatures. There’s even a book about the impact of immigrants in the Great Plains, but knowing just isn’t the same as understanding. You know, what you said about the burning inside me? A book told you that. We have to learn about sex from a book.”

Ulia took her hands away. “So what are you saying? that I’m wasting my dignity researching your anatomy, looking ahead at what you’re eventually going to do to me?”

Jonia spun around in his stool. “No, wait! I didn’t mean it like that.”

But then Ulia grinned. “I know, Jonia. I was just plucking your hairs.” She sat down beside him and held his hand. “Well, that’s not what books are for, anyway. We have to create an understanding for ourselves,” she leaned her lips in close, “and share it.”

Jonia closed his eyes, and his mane lifted as if to expand as wings do before flight. Their kiss drew on, and the bristles of his ears stretched beside his head and reached over to the sides of Ulia’s mane, where her ears also extended to him, weaving gently into his strands in red and green waves.

They parted before Ulia said, “Now, let’s go join the festival.”

As the two of them walked together among the other villagers circulating the majestic pallor of promenade, they chose not to refer to each other by their full names, not so much because they weren’t quite adults yet, but because the suspense of their secret romance developed their passions for when they would be alone. For now, they showed no sign of affection as they stepped into the audience for the costume player’s contest. There would be

some danger for Jonia to stroll out and about before he had been relieved of his punishment, the least of consequences was if the ogre girls spotted him, which they did immediately as he stepped in for a closer look at the immigrant costume.

“*How dare he!*” they must have thought before dashing away in fits of pouting fury, but the Invisible Dragon awoke inside Jonia to conjure up some preemptive wit. Should the girls tell on him, how innocent would they look when he mentioned how they never went to bed like they were told, especially after revealing their blow pipe and bullets to their mother? But if their mother finds him before they tell on him, he’d simply explain that he had received a letter from his grandparents, who lived far, far to the south in the small forest village of Nul’Sira, but darn the fates if his Rivlao reading skills were so rusty he needed his mother’s help to translate.

A half-lie was better than a full lie – maybe three-quarters of a lie.

If his mother saw him, he’d want to come up with a different excuse, because sharing his letter with her was out of the question. He had the common sense to look over to the farmer’s booths to see if his mother was among them, preparing for the evening feast. He missed the aroma of stew and *huila* from earlier that morning. There were too many heads blocking his vision now for him to be certain that she wasn’t nearby, but at least he knew how hard it would be for her to see him too. When he turned back around he noticed Ulia’s mane curve back and over her shoulders, giving her the appearance of a green cobra as she looked at him. He would have welcomed a bite from her, or even a pinch in the neck.

The immigrant costume was clearly “the belle of the ball”, as immigrants say, next to the green, mud skinned troll, or even next to the dragon-kin, who stood upright to display her detailed scales and sent the Invisible Dragon into a frenzy inside Jonia’s ribs. Even against that, the immigrant stole the show, and both he and Ulia gazed at the spectacle. The immigrant

costume had the swollen features of a chest expanding out of the leather shirt, whose strings strained to contain the breasts, creating a chasm of cleavage. The second place their eyes widened at was a great arch coming out of the immigrant's crotch. It hung out so far it was being supported by the waist belt, stretching the pant's leather with unnatural elasticity.

Ulia threw her head over with laughter, sharing in the satire that was as yet oblivious to Jonia, who understood almost nothing about the physiology of immigrants, only that he thought immigrants had only one of those exaggerated features, which determined their sex. Seeing one with both breasts and a penis made him doubt his intelligence, then Ulia pinched his neck and told him to laugh anyway. He did, because it still looked silly, but then he began paying attention to some of the finer features, like the ears – lobes carved into a flesh that bent any which way it wanted to then came instantly back into its original shape. Jonia tried to simulate the design with his bristles.

Much harder than he thought. The curvature created pockets about the rims as the skin narrowed inside the head like a toilet bowl, but Jonia only succeeded in morphing his ear bristles into a disc that tilted into his inner canal. It did make for an interesting sound effect, however, as Ulia's laughter shifted into a high warped pitch.

Then the face of the immigrant costume, though waxy due to the novice skill of the costume maker, made Jonia touch his own nose, which was much more pronounced and thin than the one on the immigrant, which was almost round like a button. Perhaps the costume maker used a real button with clay molding to shape the wide opening of the nostrils.

“That might have been smart when it came to sewing the nose onto the mask,” one of the other viewers suggested.



Jonia's attention next came upon the immigrant's hair, which was clearly a wig made from straw, but it still managed to shine with that golden brown that comes from baking that immigrant dish called pie. Welino knew how to make one, but he didn't revive the recipe this morning. Maybe he was waiting for the evening feast. Jonia imagined a strawberry pie topped with sweet leaf pudding then suddenly began to drool – at least he started to before he saw a patch of curly hair unfolding out of the immigrant's cleavage.

But apart from the impressive immigrant costume, it was the goblin that received the most attention, mostly because they were so noisy. Lots of the little sprouts dressed like goblins, their teeth layered with a yellow color that reminded Jonia of corn. They hopped and hooted with miniature spears spanking their green thighs as their butt-flaps swayed in the wind. Their ears were waxed over and shaped into a flexible cartilage that curved upward into a point. Little green devils, he heard them called. To their credit, the younger *nilos* didn't try to cover up their developing spinal hair columns, but decorated their manes to look like they were wearing animal hide as hats. Surely this was the epitome of a Fury Bandit.

To no one's surprise, the immigrant won first place, with a white ribbon pinned into the stiff breast with a dragon shaped tassel. Second place went to the Rajonin costume pinned into the scale, a green ribbon with a unicorn shaped tassel. But third place didn't go to the mud caked troll as everyone had anticipated, since the artisan did an intimidating portrayal of the gangly face and slimy texture of its touch. No, an unexpected contender claimed that position, one almost completely unnoticed by the viewers but not by the judges, who came towards an odd sort of creature, made entirely of steel with a growth of metal shards poking out the exterior. The judge impaled the purple ribbon through a needle off the chest piece, trapping the tassel of a sphinx among the thorns.

The Spike Knight, the artisan called herself.

She took off her helmet, gasping for cool, fresh air. It was inspired, she said, by a piece of spiked armor she once saw when she snuck out of from the Village District, That was when she was little, after her mother told her she would never leave Vir'Vonia – saw it in a shop among gold plate mail suits and towering shields.

She explained to an admiring crowd that she carved each wax needle by hand. That's why the tips looked so sharp, they were sturdy enough to pierce through the delicate thread of the third place ribbon, but that was about all. In Jonia's opinion, she went crazy with the needles. Who in their right mind would go into battle dressed like that? On the other hand –

“That's a little freaky.”

Jonia turned around at the voice behind, slightly above him, and what to his surprise if it wasn't The Black Mane himself – Rymusha – with a fist to his waist and a finger pointing out at the Spike Knight. His mane flapped, Jonia imagined, as if it were the shadow of a storm.

“What ho there, Jonia?”

“What what?”

“Never mind.” Rymusha said. “It's an immigrant saying.”

His idolatry thus slaughtered, Jonia reverted to looking at The Black Mane as simply Rymusha, who then put his hand on Jonia's shoulder.

“I've been meaning to congratulate you all day, and now I've finally found you.”

“Oh, thanks, Rymusha.” There was a pause. Perhaps Rymusha had expected him to say more.

“Well?” he began. “Let's see the trophy.” As Jonia pulled the wood disc out of his front pocket a thread tore apart.

“Holy sweet! That’s nice and lofty, isn’t it?”

“I hope you’re not patronizing me. This isn’t that impressive.”

Rymusha nodded. “Yeah, I’ve been around *nilos* too long today. Sorry, Jon. Anyway, I have another reason for coming over to see you.”

Jonia’s ears perked up.

“I wanted to tell you that I think what you did this morning was very brave. I figured the wresting tournaments were just for the matrons, you know. But you proved me wrong. When I saw you taking that pounding in the ring, I didn’t think you were going to make it. Each match, I was wrong again. I’ve been so used to the idea that we can’t be as good as them in most things. I’ve never felt so entirely wrong before, so this time, I’m going to give it a try. I want you to know that I’ll be in the Adult Wresting Competition. Wouldn’t that be something if we both win? Both tournaments won by males, in the same year?!”

Jonia was speechless. Within minutes, Rymusha had changed from an idol to an idiot to something Jonia had never experienced before. He was stuck on the idea that someone older than himself actually admired him, actually praised him for a virtue that he admitted to lacking. Adults never admitted such things. Mistakes, maybe, but never something as deep and personal as a flaw. A simple “Thank you” seemed a horrible understatement, but that was all Jonia could prepare himself to say.

“*Inusa*, Jonia.” He used his complete name. As The Black Mane turned to leave he stopped then glanced over to Ulia, who all the while had still been admiring the Spike Knight. “By the way, you’re lucky she picked you,” he said with a wink.

Not saying anything left Jonia with the grace of knowing that he would have time to find better words for Rymusha whenever they saw each other next. And Jonia prayed to the Invisible Dragon that when they did, they'd have twin trophies to share.

Though the city of Vir'Vonia had four gate entrances, one for each cardinal direction, the Village District only had the one gate, Iron Side, which opened into the northern trade street to Norgate. No one except the villagers could enter Iron Side without approval from Magistrate, a policy the villagers deeply appreciated, not so much because they *shunned* outsiders, but for matters concerning crime, this measure proved profoundly effective, at least when one overlooked the activity of the Fury Bandits.

Suddenly Iron Side began opening, and everyone in the village quieted. The people gathered towards the gate, realizing that it had not opened just for one person but for an entire procession, lead by Inulian banner bearers proudly displaying the green crest of the Feather Shield high into the air. Excitement flourished among the gatherers, but many feelings were still in reserve before the nature of this visit was clear. But yes, there was Viceroy and Magistrate. Duties of State kept them far from home at all times, but they weren't from the Village District. The gatherers saw fit to clap for their governors' appearance, a genuine pleasure, though perhaps too dramatic an entrance, a little too self-important for the tastes of most, the ones who hadn't yet realize that another figure was emerging from the ranks. Mayor struggled to contain a sprint while she went in strides towards this person. But once they both came out in front it was clear the stranger needed no introduction.

Except for Sonia, but she preferred to learn about people first hand, rather than from hear-say. Third parties had a way of injecting opinion in between facts so that you couldn't tell

which was which. So this was Lord Valuil? Sonia scratched the back of her head. Valuil didn't act anything like she thought a lord would...or dress. A simple white cloth shirt and brown pants, boots instead of sandals, but the belt seemed fancy enough, a black one with a gold buckle engraved with another Feather Shield crest. And of course, she wore her medallion, an amethyst encrusted one, which meant that she had led soldiers in battle. It tapped against everybody Valuil embraced. Her mane, a deep forest green, did not indicate any solid sign of aging either by fading patches of color or a receding hairline, like Nymua, but there she was with her spouse coming from the rear with two girls – who could have been Jonia's age – and a young *nilo* boy.

No bows, no kneeling, no grand speech; just cheers and the new fashioned hug, an immigrant custom the Rivlao came to enjoy. The banner bearers fastened their flags onto the stage, eager to make friends with a colony that came as close to home as they could be. Mayor escorted Valuil and her family to the stage, followed by the line of her former compatriots, including Nymua, who wore her own honorably earned medallion, which whispered to the others her part in the age of untold valor, a subject never to be spoken of. But never-the-less, the Ogre Battles were a memory they shared silently among themselves.

Then everyone quieted. The crowd observed a moment of silence in memorial for those who did not come back, those who were doomed to be forgotten in all ways save for in spirit. The names might be written down in some history book, but within a few generations, the heroes of old would settle back into a past which curdles into myth, lore, or maybe a tall tale. Sonia did not want to believe it, but how could she expect the memories of the beloved to linger forever when the heart could only beat for so long, especially a heart that leaked.

Then Valuil spoke, "They will be remembered for all time, as long as there exists in time that virtue which they possessed, that burning ardor which compels a grin at the sight of their

own blood – that time when you realize that you cannot die. They never died! They never died!  
They never died!”

The villagers chanted again and again with Valuil, “They never died!” – all but Sonia and her son, who managed to share in their confusion together without having to be near.

*“Did she even make sense?”*

*“Right, nobody really dies.”*

*“They just...stop moving.”*

*“Forever.”*

*“Yeah.”*

But another surprise had just alluded to its own entrance, via the rocky roll of a cart so enormous it had to have been built to be hauled by a mammothorse. But the city banned all livestock within its limits for purposes of sanitation and road maintenance, so what the gatherers saw next were twelve Rivlao hauling in the very last of Lord Vauil’s procession, the Band Wagon, which spared no introduction as Viceroy gave them the signal to begin.

With a boom that people swore shook loose the cobbled stones of the entire promenade, they launched with an exalting rhythm, electric and dynamic. The strings they used, how could they make such thunder so pleasing? Such a firm yet organic cadence from the percussion, and yet between these forces a voice projected as clear as the day upon them all:

And we’re following the will of the One

With our families through The Age of Storms

Though we cannot find the road to the sun  
In the darkness we reshape our forms  
As we're following the will of the One

The One, that sense of unity that applied to either a group or an individual. Sonia thought about those lyrics as everyone else cheered. Would Sonia have received such a procession if she ever returned home to Nul'Sira, back to her home where she had belonged to so long ago? Perhaps not. She wasn't a lord, but at least her parents would be happy.

If the Matriarch was Valuil's *One*, who was Sonia's? If she was her own self, then *she* was her One, and with that idea came an everlasting self-reliance Sonia coveted, yet all at once abhorred when she saw Valuil give herself up to her son's antics. So playful. But nothing was fun for Sonia anymore. Mayor lifted her feet up the side steps of the stage then announced the beginning of the Adult Wrestling Competition. Sonia looked at the ring with a sigh as the band played on.

"*Storms?*" Jonia thought. His life felt more like a drought, but the music impressed him enough to forget about it. Before he knew it, Ulia was with him.

"Wouldn't it be funny if the first match was between Rynusha and your mother?" The thought sent a chill up his red furs, but he remembered his mother's distaste for these events. She was the one who kept him from competing until this year.

"Summon The Black Mane!" Nymua shouted. Was there any coincidence? or was Nymua anxious to see the next male contender prove himself. Lord Valuil had missed the opportunity to see Jonia's ascension. Rymusha dove over the ribbon and tumbled into his

fighting position. But his opponent was not Jonia's mother. This lady with the modest sized mane was inclined to reserve her enthusiasm. She stepped into the ring one foot at a time then presented herself to those seated on the stage, the full line of governmental power which lacked only the Matriarch's presence.

But Rymusha snuck behind his opponent and waved his arms as if to secretly ward off the *evil* before him. When she finally turned to see what the government was laughing at, Rymusha jolted back in mock fear. She gasped at how long it had been since she had been made fun of. Having grown up with the tyranny of the Furry Bandits, she praised the forces that be for giving her the occasion to exact her revenge on all bully-dom.

Rymusha snapped his fingers, pointing to Lord Valuil with a confident smile as Nymua brought the combatants together to formally announce the rules, which Jonia already overheard earlier that morning when he sprinted and lunged into the ring before he was too late to enter the Young Adult Competition.

“Are we clear?” Nymua asked. When the opponents nodded, she shot her arm up.

“*Sheeah!*”

Rymusha snapped his arm out like a crane lifting a stone by his fingers. As he advanced, the crane tilted palm out like a brush then slowly dropped, as if he were painting the wind. He switched sides and repeated the exercise with his other hand with the fluidity of a snake. Jonia wondered what made him think of that as he turned to Ulia and her cobra green mane. As The Black Mane stepped, his opponent counter stepped – to the left, to the right, then the right. He shuffled with her twice to the left, then twice to the right, then twice forward. By the time he stepped back, she followed. Then he brought his arms out beyond his shoulders – as if she were



close enough to embrace his opponent while he led her in their waltz. And the government laughed again.

“Oh, that does it!” she finally shouted before she charged, before she dashed into Rymusha and rolled him over the mat. But his recovery bounced him up on one foot, just before she grabbed on to the other to bring him down. She pulled with all her weight as she climbed up his leg, so The Black Mane decided to let her force take his step into her chest, stamping all her air out before he sat on her and pinning her face on the mat. He quickly brought his other arm around under her leg and stretched it over his back, locking it in the air with most of his weight bearing on her chest and chin. Nymua began the count, but before she reached to three, the pinned combatant reached for Rymusha’s neck. He had to let go of her face to stop it, and managed enough force to slap her own hand back on her face, resuming the pin.

She tried to bring her free leg over his head, but he rocked and shook against her chest. Then, just as she slipped her last arm, grasped Rymusha’s neck and forced him to arch back – but not before Nymua called out ten.

Jonia observed quickly that the adult matches usually ended much faster than in the Young Adult tournament. Once an opponent got a lock, they knew how to keep it. In Rymusha’s next fight, his opponent surprised him with a neck lock from behind. But what did he do? He took a step, bowed before Lord Valuul, then threw his opponent over his shoulder, securing her in a headlock of his own after she landed square on her butt.

But, there were some matches when it was clear that the combatants were just there to have a good time, and were quick to end all struggle once they knew they had been caught. The unexpected attendance of Lord Valuul inspired an untraditional number of participants who otherwise didn’t care for wrestling. She seemed pleased all the same.

A rumor had spread that Valuil herself would challenge the winner, though to Jonia, she seemed tired enough in her seat from that long journey from the Inulian capital of Ar'Inule. Jonia imagined living inside a fortress city, with a real castle behind his back yard, equipped with guard towers, dungeons, secret passageways, and a vault of magical secrets.

“Don’t be stupid, Jon,” Ulia said. “Castles are cold, wet, and built to be as *accessible* as possible. And they’re not going to horde all their ancient rarities in one place, as if the Matriarch needed to pass the time with a treasure bath or something.”

“Let a guy dream.”

It took several more matches before his mind settled back into the present, when he realized that his mother had not fought yet. If Rymusha had fought twice already, she had to have missed the first round. That would definitely disqualify her.

“*Good?*” he wondered.

“Hey, there’s Piper,” Ulia said, pointing her finger towards the face painting stand. “I bet she’s playing a battle hymn. Let’s go.”

Jonia had no objections, since Rymusha wasn’t fighting. They passed through bystanders observing the tournament with cups that only adults were allowed to have; something to do with what they were drinking. Jonia could find out after just a few more weeks, he estimated. Then he noticed Ulia’s spinal hair column going into her pants, and he felt that burning feeling again inside between his legs. He looked at the sky then breathed in, but his peripheral vision didn’t warn him in time before he bumped up against her with his hands at her waist. She twisted back with her cobra head, with a face half waiting for him to proceed and half ready to bite his face off.

Jonia coughed then walked on ahead to where Piper sat, with a stool she apparently carried with her. She had a mane best described as platinum, not as sleek as silver or as dull as gray. It helped contribute to that statuesque quality she maintained in the idlest of positions. Her head was down. She smiled.

“Well, *asuni*, to you two.”

“*Asuni*,” they replied.

“Do I have any requests from my audience?” Piper said.

“Got any new melodies?” Ulia asked. Piper played a ten second thriller which shook Ulia to her shoulders.

“How was that?”

“Nice,” Ulia said.

“And how about you, Jon? What are you in the mood for?”

“I haven’t a clue.” But that was enough for Piper to whiz up a tune that made Jonia imagine someone soaring up a hill just to trip over its summit and tumble down the other side. He laughed.

“That’s good,” Piper explained. “Whatever mood you’re in, it’s letting you enjoy yourself.”

“I wanted to ask you if you knew where my mother was.”

“Oh?”

“Jon got a letter from his grandparents in Nul’Sira,” Ulia said. He had forgotten about that, but now that Ulia brought it up...

“I can’t read Rivlao very well, so I need her to translate for me.”

“I see,” Piper said. “It’s a shame Rivlao isn’t being used as often as it used to be. Since business is influenced so heavily by the immigrants, Common has become the staple language. Only the government seems to be keeping Rivlao alive, they and reclusive villages like Nul’Sira. And of course, myself.”

“How did you learn Rivlao?” Jonia asked. “Did you study it at the library?”

“No. I often play in cafés or along the trade streets while you are working the fields. I’ve done that since before I came of age. I’d see Rivlao from the different guilds who still speak it. The Wizard’s Guild in particular is fascinated with the suggestive powers of music. I learned Rivlao from them as payment for participating in their experiments.”

“Wow,” Ulia said. “Did they experiment on you?”

“Ha! No, I usually just played at a plant or something. But one time I did manage to put a mammothorse to sleep.”

“*That’s incredible,*” Jonia thought. And it was all made possible because she left the Village District. He thought about that as Piper continued her stories, each one full of anticipation and riveting uncertainty. There were trolls. Not the kind with wax for skin and grass for hair, she was talking about real live trolls walking beyond Iron Side at that moment. She even mentioned a creature she had come to know of called a golem. It was actually like a pasty flesh, a symbiote that grafted itself onto whatever it could find and grew a body from it. Her friend – Grub Chub, she said – was a symbiote that found a recently deceased cadaver and brought it back to life. She met him through the Wizard’s Guild and tried to use her music to hypnotize Grub Chub, to see if he could recall the memories of the person his body used to be.

“Yes,” said Piper, “many interesting characters pass right by Iron Side every day.”

For certain. Lords, trolls, golems, immigrants, band wagons, and magicians – and maybe even Jonia’s dad.

“Oh, Jon, I think Rymusha’s back in the ring. It’s the last match!” Piper took Ulia’s urgency as a signal to wave them goodbye.

“I’m sure your mother well be there soon. *Inusa*, to the both of you.”

Leave the Village District – That made so much sense to Jonia that now he deeply considered it. It was on his mind while he was cleaning the house, before he saw the ogre skull hidden in the basement. If Piper was used to passing Iron Side, perhaps the danger he imagined was exaggerated. But she didn’t say she left Vir’Vonia, and Jonia wondered how long the city could contain him before he decided to leave there too and search the rest of the world. Better that he not start if he wasn’t prepared to reach the ends of the earth.

“You’re sick, Jon,” Ulia said. “You think this place is keeping you down, but it’s also what’s keeping you safe.”

“I’m tired of being safe. I’m tired of working my butt off all year just to be humored by this festival. It’s all make believe to help us forget how far our people have sunk.”

“What do you mean sunk?”

He clung to his mane. “I can feel this, and the burning that boys feel when it’s almost their time. But I don’t feel like a Rivlao, because I don’t understand what it means to be one. That’s what I tried to tell you earlier at the house.”

“And you think you can learn that by going out there?” Jonia retrieved his letter, then Ulia understood. “I see what this is about,” she said. “Listen, it’s one thing to get to know your

roots. But why leave? Why can't you take the Village District and help bring our culture back into it? I'm sure there are plenty of folks who would support you."

He glanced over to Mayor, sitting next with the rest of the government at the stage.

"Trying would take away the rest of my life. Besides, how can you teach a culture you've never experienced?"

Others had tried, like Erina when she taught school at the library, but even she had spent most of her life in the Village District, and probably never left Vir'Vonia. She only had facts, which were helpful but can't alone tell a meaningful story. What was the story of the Invisible Dragon? Jonia looked at the mat while Rymusha stretched on top of the drawing of the chromatic dragon. Then he turned towards the face painting stand and noticed the costume players still in character, like the Spike Knight, who threatened people with her impaling hug. He saw a bubble pop and drench Meliza, who flung its dew at Erina, her mother, and Welino in a stand with strawberry pies and sweet leaf syrup, ready for the evening feast as soon as the next winner emerged from the tournament, and the Band Wagon starting up a prelude for the title fight.

All distractions.

Jonia gazed as if trying to absorb all these images at once. Like Rymusha's snake hand, a deceit. And once it's all over, he'd be subdued, back in the hack yards...with his mother. Jonia finally began to see into the nature of her abrasive aura. For as long as he could remember, his mother had contempt for the festival. And Jonia began to theorize that since she had arrived in Vir'Vonia much later in her life, she did not have the chance to grow with the contentment that the native villagers did; and being raised by her, it was no longer a mystery why he and Ulia did not agree. Maybe his mother wanted to leave too. Maybe there was something holding her back...

Maybe, it was him.

Ulia took his hand. “Jon, I can tell you’re still thinking about leaving. And I just thought you should look inside your pocket.”

His trophy was still inside. The Invisible Dragon came to him through his accomplishment. But even the dragon fell into suspicion when Jonia reconsidered what purpose the dragon served. The immigrants picked one whole day out of their week when they didn’t do any kind of work. Mayor found it to be a useful custom, as did the rest of the Village District, but would Jonia spend the rest of his weekends bragging about this one triumph in his life?

His heart sank.

Ulia returned with a snort. “I can’t believe you, Jon. Did I lose to someone who didn’t even want that trophy? Look at Rymusha. Do you think less of him for competing?”

Jonia shook his head. She was right. The Invisible Dragon wasn’t just an object. It was a companion, and he felt him breathing his fire inside his chest, as Rymusha’s dragon must have been breathing through him now.

The Black Mane put on his show again, arms in motion, hips bobbing. That’s the sort of thing Jonia did to distract his opponents that morning. It was working for Rymusha too. The Invisible Dragon taught him that. Rymusha had learned *mind* combat.

“Go, Rymusha!” Jonia shouted.

Surprised, Ulia, said, “Well, you don’t have to root for him if you don’t want to.”

“Huhn? Why not?”

Then he saw who had entered the ring to defend her title.

“Son-ia! Son-ia! Son-ia! SONIA!!!”

## FANTASY LITERATURE AND ITS DISCIPLES

*Soon all the sparkling things will be gone from the world and only clay will remain – and those damned stupid barbarians with their damned stupid swords will win after all...*

– Back cover, *The Magic Goes Away*

The sword is at war with the sorcery in Larry Niven's novel, *The Magic Goes Away*. The sword is the way of the brute, and the sorcery, the way of the intellectual; and yet, both together are in peril as the world loses its last remnants of magical power, mana. It has been uncommon for me to read about mana in fantasy novels. Magic is more commonly, in my experience, accessed through a philosophical expression, such as in Ursula Le Guin's *Earthsea* trilogy, rather than a natural resource as Niven has it – and a limited resource at that. To a fiction writer, the implication of Niven's use of magic as a limited resource is that the fantastic itself also has its limits. The fantasy author has to manage a sense of magic environmentalism or else s/he risks throwing a reader into a torrent of misplaced meaning, and as an emerging fantasist, this made me wary.

When I first began this project, I wasn't sure how I should treat the concept of magic. I share Farah Mendlesohn's view on J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series when she says, "Because there is no system of magic, no sense of what each kind of magic can achieve, the choice of potions versus wand spells versus magical objects is frequently arbitrary" (64). It is very easy for



a fantasist to fall into the whistles and bells of the genre, or into Gandalf's fireworks as Merry and Pippin do so enthusiastically at the beginning of *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Creating a system of magic is one way to put supernatural, or non-rational, phenomena into an understandable perspective and allow for a more engaging text, and it was after reading *The Magic Goes Away* that I decided to use mana as my anchor.

Originally a concept derived from the Pacific Isles, anthropologists have associated mana with "magic virtue", describing magic also as a personal agent as well as a conscious agent that operates through supernatural beings (Philsooph 183).<sup>1</sup> Though the term "mana" is not always used, both approaches to magic have been explored extensively in commercial gaming novel series such as *Wizardry*, *Forgotten Realms*, and *Dragon Lance*, with precedent from renowned authors such as Tanith Lee and fantasy classics such as *Earthsea* and Peter S. Beagle's *The Last Unicorn*.

In the case of *A Wizard of Earthsea*, magic is expressed as a conscious agent through the recognition of names, and the incantations can only succeed when the caster has discovered the "true" name of things.<sup>2</sup> Magic here comes from realizing identity from the outside-in, from which greater Truth can be mastered and expressed through the fantastic. Therefore, the mastery of wizardry for Ged becomes a quest of mastering his own self-identity, which becomes threatened by the magical manifestation of his own shadow, a personification of his character vice, his pride.

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<sup>1</sup> The year this article was written (1971) is particularly pertinent for representing influential research in Niven's generation of fantasists.

<sup>2</sup> This system of magic is also indicated in *The Magic Goes Away*, though is not incorporated in *Disciples of Vu*.

In contrast, *The Last Unicorn* de-emphasizes the significance of the utterance in vocal incantations to express magic on a more internal level. When the unicorn, disguised as a human, fails to flee from the Red Bull, the wizard Schmendrick tries once again to save her life by saying “a few words. They were short words, undistinguished either by melody or harshness, and Schmendrick himself could not hear them for the Red Bull’s dreadful bawling. But he knew what they meant, and he knew exactly how to say them” (*Unicorn* 259). In this case, language succeeds as a magical medium in so far as it expresses powerful, personal feelings rather than “true” names. Only a moment before Schmendrick casts his spell, the reader is clued in to what happens inside a Beaglean wizard just prior to spell-casting. “Wonder and love and great sorrow shook Schmendrick the Magician then, and came together inside him, and filled him, filled him until he felt himself brimming and flowing with something that was none of these” (*Unicorn* 258).

While Beagle and Le Guin do not take magic as an environmental resource (granting that magic has a significant impact on their environments: i.e. enchanted forests, surprise storms, and cursed villages), their depictions of spell-casting brought me closer to personalizing the concept of mana in a narrative, which I felt was an important function to making magic a tool of empowerment for my protagonists to grow with. While *The Magic Goes Away* puts might and magic at odds with one another, a traditional point of contention within the sword & sorcery genre, *Disciples of Vu* finds magic virtue in the sword as well, though the sword too has limitations.

Combining the sword with the sorcery has been explored to an exciting effect in the video gaming industry. Westwood Studio’s *Lands of Lore* series strikes a balance between the notorious hack and slash drive sword and sorcery is known for with a sense of depth to the

fantastic elements. *Lands of Lore: The Throne of Chaos* employs mana in a system that suggests that mana is an inherent resource within all individuals, whether trained or untrained in sorcery. Even the butch, broadsword-wielding valiant enters the game with “magic points” to spend on casting spells and using magical items. The difference between the valiant ( a low grade magic user) and the arch-mage character type is a matter of frequency and potency of the spell-casting.

But in the sequel, *Lands of Lore: Guardians of Destiny*, the protagonist plays both the role of the valiant and the arch-mage. Having become cursed by ancient magic, Luther randomly transforms into hideous, deranged beasts, and must fight his way across distant lands in search for his cure with only the weapons he can find and the magic that develops within him. As is the convention of traditional RPGs, Luther’s proficiency in either weapon fighting or magic is determined by the frequency with which he uses these skills. Thus, the player has the choice to attack an enemy with the “Spark” spell or to swing his weapon.

What I find particularly interesting in *Guardians of Destiny* is the distinction made between ancient magic and “new” magic. Ancient magic is characterized as the power of cosmic creation and destruction, the magic of the gods, while “new” magic is more pragmatic or entertaining, like a the fancy disappearing act. However, Luther is compelled to participate in ancient magic, the more fantastic of the two, in order to gain the power to expel his curse. Ancient magic is a magic of the greatest consequence to the equilibrium of cosmic forces arguing over moral virtue and responsibility, which is what prompts Luther’s moral development as a player progresses into the story.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> This development is dependent upon the player’s choices, as Luther may become either a hero or a villain, creating two alternate story-lines for the plot to unfold.

Working the sword alongside the sorcery has been employed so well within the gaming industry that some titles like Konami's *Castlevania* series, traditionally a side-scrolling horror adventure, has incorporated elements of the fantasy RPG genre, beginning with *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*. Like Luther in *Guardians of Destiny*, Alucard is cursed, but with the blood of a vampire, and is forced to use his dark gifts to prevent the evil rise of his father Vlad Tepes Dracula, using his family sword and armor to cut through the evil magic within Dracula's castle. As a creature of the night, Alucard is naturally predisposed to using magic, and thus, he begins the game with magic points to spend. And as he slays vampires, demons, and other unholy monsters, he gains experience, which eventually increases his magic potency and the number of magic points he may recover.

In games like *Lands of Lore* and *Symphony of the Night*, mana is regenerated naturally over time, though the player can use a "mana potion" or the equivalent to speed up the recovery rate. This idea that mana recovers on its own carries an implication that the magic-user is naturally drawing from the sources of mana that pervades all life, that he or she is spiritually connected with a force beyond him/herself that can be used to overcome supernatural obstacles and achieve magic, or moral, virtue.<sup>4</sup>

In Chapter 1 of *Disciples*, it was crucial for me to establish a suitable *feel* for the magical effect at work and begin developing a sense of magic virtue. When I think back to Schmendrick the magician, I am reminded of a poignant line before he finally casts a successful spell while

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<sup>4</sup> Other examples of creative magic systems and the fantastic in video gaming include Square Enix's *Xenogears* (Playstation 1998), Working Design's *Dragon Force* (Sega Saturn 1996), Data East's *Shadowrun* (Super Nintendo 1993), and Bioware's *Baldur's Gate* Series (PC 1998-2001).

entertaining Captain Cully and the rest of the bandit camp, a line in which a magic virtue is revealed. “ ‘Do as you will,’ he whispered to the magic. ‘Do as you will’ ” (*Unicorn* 87). Up until this point, Schmendrick’s entertainments had been comical at best. “They applauded his rings and scarves, his ears full of goldfish and aces, with a proper politeness but without wonder. Offering no true magic, he drew no magic back from them; and when a spell failed...he was clapped just as kindly and vacantly as though he had succeeded” (*Unicorn* 86). It wasn’t until he “let go all his hated skills” (*Unicorn* 87) that the images of Robin Hood and his merry men begin to enter and pass through the camp fire and evoke the desired response, the wonder that was previously absent from his audience.

In Schmendrick’s case, he had to give himself up to the powers that be in order for his desire to be fulfilled; he had to become selfless and reduce himself to an instrument of virtue, rather than acting as source of it; and this is something I have attempted to emulate in several of my protagonists by setting myself up for this challenge: to evoke a magical feel without a clear supernatural source. This is an effort to blur the interpretive lines and allow for a literal or romantic interpretation of the fantastic, and thus personalize the experience for the reader and draw them into the characters. My attempt to exemplify this technique was also a response to Beagle’s “Do as you will.”<sup>5</sup> Play is an important form of expression for magic in *Disciples of Vu*, because magic, the fantastic, is of all things a performance art, and participating in play is crucial for the magic<sup>6</sup> to create meaning.

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<sup>5</sup> Beagle’s expression is not far from Michael Ende’s “Do as you wish” in *The Neverending Story* (1979), which requires a quest for self-knowledge to uncover what you truly desire, rather than to simply do what you want.

<sup>6</sup> “Magic” in either the romantic or supernatural sense.

And yet without any confidence, the magic also cannot be summoned. As Schmendrick falters during the group's first encounter with the Red Bull, Molly Grue pleads with him to save the unicorn. "You have magic...Maybe you can't find it, but it's there. You called up Robin Hood, and there is no Robin Hood, but he came, and he was real. And that is magic. You have all the power you need if you dare to look for it" (*Unicorn* 139). The fantastic at its most compelling moments should express some deep wish or desire, perhaps one that readers never knew they had in common with characters they've come to care about, or perhaps that is why we care about them.

The sword alone has clear limitations alongside the fantastic, but hopefully, I have done some justice to reconcile the sword with the sorcery, which was also important to Niven. In *The Magic Goes Away*, the Greek soldier Orolandes is a member of the barbarian army that annihilates Atlantis, and the result of their siege is to annihilate themselves by killing the magic priests who were keeping the island afloat. Orolandes is the only survivor to witness the aftermath. The necromancer Wavyhill (who has been resurrected as a talking skull) observes this about Orolandes. "You wiped out a whole continent, people and centaurs and merpeople and all. You broke your sword, you were so disgusted with yourself" (Niven 34).

The implication I hope to have made in the previous passages is that the romantic usage of the term "magic" (i.e., the magical world of Disney; the magic of love) is fundamental for understanding my interpretation of "mana" a source of magic virtue for self-empowerment and for understanding the supernatural concepts in *Disciples of Vu*. Readers may judge for themselves to the extent I have succeeded in making the supernatural "magical" and relatable through the numerous themes that I may or may not be aware of. I have come to discover that mana is useful as a magical resource felt personally, yet it and can be expressed through ordinary

means by everyday activity. Its potential gives meaning not only to the fantastic but also to the mundane. Having fun, or exploring the wonders of the world, means harvesting mana. The decay of the world, the loss of mana, means no more wonder. If as fantasists we forget to invest our appreciation in the mundane, then the fantastic becomes trivialized, even resented. My strategy has been to make the fantastic meaningful through its relation to the mundane.

But if anything else, I hope to have lead in furthering the concept of mana in a fantasy setting as an investment for supernatural potential that expresses hidden virtue through non-sense that, never the less, persists to be meaningful.

### *Rhetorical Incantations*

I believe I started this project writing what Farah Mendlesohn calls in *Rhetorics of Fantasy* a “portal-quest” (PQ) fantasy. This is perhaps the most well known form of fantasy, championed in role-play gaming (RPG), PC gaming and has even become a business through Live Action Role-Playing (LARPing).<sup>7</sup> Questing narratives like *The Hobbit*, *The Last Unicorn*, and *Earthsea*<sup>8</sup> naturally evoke a sense of motion through the plot with a clear sense of rhetorical direction; the

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<sup>7</sup> Films such as *Gamers* (2006) and Cullen Hoback’s *Monster Camp* (2008) explore these cultural lifestyles centered around fantasy gaming, which relate to the satiric subversion of traditional PQ fantasy conventions in *Disciples*. I also recommend Rona Jaff’s novel *Mazes and Monsters* (1981), which takes a psychosocial approach to the initial rise of table-top fantasy gaming.

<sup>8</sup> Other examples include David Lindsay’s *A Voyage to Arcturus* (1920), Lloyd Alexander’s *Chronicles of Prydain* (1964-1968), and Phillip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* (1995-2001).

reader can safely expect to embark on a travel “tour”<sup>9</sup> across a new fantasy land knowing that the “quest object” will not be attained until the end of the tour, and that the experience of the journey will, as part of its major themes, question moral values concerning the world at large.

This narrative tradition acquires some of its roots from John Bunyan’s colonial narrative *Pilgrim’s Progress*, which Mendlesohn refers to when she explains, “a quest is a process, in which the object sought may or may not be a mere token of reward. The real reward is moral growth and/or admission into the kingdom, or redemption” (4). Along with *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Mendlesohn cites *The Canterbury Tales*, *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*, and George MacDonald’s *Lilith* as club stories, in which “a tale is recounted as if it has happened in the past” (6).<sup>10</sup> *A Wizard of Earthsea* would also be included in this list as Ged’s future success as Archmage is consistently referenced ahead of the current timeline, as if to deliver inside information the narrator wishes to share personally with the reader.

I initially had in mind a travel tale that continued the PQ fantasy tradition, in which the reader would follow a group of questing protagonists into the context of my particular vision of fantasy land, a practice popularized by the works of Tolkien and Lewis. “These novels [*Lord of the Rings* & *Narnia*] set the pattern for what [John Clute] describes as the full fantasy: the novels presume a thinned world, one in which wrongness already exists...and a consolatory healing or restoration...in which the participants are fulfilling agon” (Mendlesohn 30). This process is often prescribed through the function of prophecy, a common trope in fantasies like *Lord of the Rings*

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<sup>9</sup> See Diana Wynne Jones’s *The Tough Guide to Fantasyland*.

<sup>10</sup> In fact, [Swordandsorcery.org](http://Swordandsorcery.org) cites not only the Homeric epics but also *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (700-600 B.C.E) as the earliest known sword and sorcery tales, followed up with *The Aenied* (28-19 B.C.E.), *Beowulf* (700-800 C.E.), and the Icelanding *Volsunga Saga* (1275 C.E.), a particular source of inspiration of Tolkien (Harvey).



and *Narnia*. Aragorn's broken sword Narsil will be reforged one day so he can eventually assume the throne of Gondor to redeem the line of Isildur, just as the Pevensie brothers and sister are destined to lead the Narnian's against the forces of the White Witch, win, then rule. The reader knows in advance that there is a "plan" and becomes willing to trust the authority and guidance of the narrative voice.

Prophecies provide a structured and efficient approach to foreshadowing and tension that allow for both character development and plot movement. They also "allow knowledge to be imparted, so that in fact the goal is 'known' even though its meaning is not understood" (Mendlesohn 41-2). A prophecy is also useful in developing the fantasy world quickly by relating to the reader cultural/mythological beliefs that s/he will use to interpret the following series of events. I had the choice to begin *Disciples* with a prophetic tone (my initial opening segment did); but I eventually found it so much more interesting to be subversive, to question the convention, and I found that as soon as I did, it seemed to me that my characters became something I had never read before.

With *Disciples*, I question knowledge, I question prophecy. I question even the highest source, the fantastic itself, because magic is challenging to understand. Magic is one of the most fickle of all words in the English language to define, yet it is the center piece to every work of high-fantasy. In the high-fantasy, magic is often presented to a reader through a supernatural context, a law of the universe/Nature or a divine being. Yet, this is a different treatment of irrational phenomena than saying "miracle", which provides a theological rather than a mythological context. And in science-fiction, the fantastic is presented through either a sociological lens or off of concepts based, however loosely, on our modern understanding of physics and technology.

I did not wish to submit so wholly to the conventions of the PQ fantasy. It was too assumptive for my tastes. For example, “the sacredness of book knowledge is a given...Books are searched for because knowledge can only be recreated from what is already written...the convention is that what has been destroyed cannot be re-created, it can only be rediscovered (Mendlesohn 57). Here, Mendlesohn examines China Miéville’s *The Scar*, a subversive novel of the PQ fantasy that I have found to be helpful in realizing my satirical approach to the conventions of the post-Tolkien fantasy, or the medieval-quest high fantasy that is so deeply rooted in the fantasy gaming culture.<sup>11</sup>

I understood the tendency of PQs to develop through figures like “the sage” and historical documents where information was always reliable – very unrealistic. But a more important weakness I saw was that with all of this extra-narrative help, where does the protagonist gain the ability to learn for him/herself? It was important for me to have my reader engage in the world and piece together the clues about what’s going on and not just ride side-saddle with the protagonists in a typical safari with a pamphlet from Diana Wynne Jones’ *Tough Guide to Fantasyland* (the revised and updated edition, no less!); and yet, the PQ strategy was essential to create a sense of the journey and enable my protagonists to attain self-knowledge, one of the major quest objects of *Disciples*.

What the project inevitably became was a compromise, or perhaps even a synthesis, between two specific rhetorical strategies, between the PQ fantasy and what Mendlesohn categorizes as the immersive fantasy.

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<sup>11</sup> This is a subgenre of commercial fantasy book series almost entirely monopolized by Wizards of the Coast, and seems to be the source for many stereotypes about fantasy in general. Since the seventies, “quest fantasies in particular came to dominate the bookshelves of many book stores, to the degree that in many minds, it was thought of as the default form of fantasy” (Mendlesohn 43).

Often a PQ fantasy is characterized by “the elaboration of the anthropologist or the Pre-Raphaelite painter, intensely descriptive and exploratory rather than assumptive” (Mendlesohn xix), which often gives character to the setting itself. However, in my earliest drafts I had made the mistake of being overly descriptive, to the point where there was almost no indication of a plot, only a sort of character portrait where the images were strictly metaphoric and prevented me from entering into a scene. This was due in part of a mistaken assumption that a reader needed to be “prepared” for a fantasy narrative before I could begin a story already immersed within a fantasy setting. This failed approach was a pull away from resorting to a prologue that explains the world context from the outside in and risks reading like a historical essay rather than fiction. My alternative, I felt, was to tell the story from the inside out. What I had not understood at the time was that I was struggling with two competing narrative strategies and using neither of them effectively.

The truth is it has been common for many high-fantasy novels to begin with an introductory segment prior to the beginning of the novel – a forward, prologue, or preface. Some examples include Barbara Hambly’s *Circle of the Moon* (2005), Tanith Lee’s *Anackire* (1983), and Michael Ende’s *The Neverending Story* (1979). In other cases, a prologue may be employed to series titles to remind readers what has happened so far in the previous books; but in my case, the need for a prologue became less and less appealing the more I tried. Having consulted experienced fantasy/sci-fi writers at conventions, the following question came up: If my prologue was starting at the point where the action begins (as any engaging story should) then why not just make *that* the beginning of the first chapter?

Ah, but then how will the reader know what’s going on?!

Because answers can't be given before there are questions, and it is the immersive technique that encourages a reader to piece together the context clues as events unfold.

Mendlesohn makes the point that the theme of alienation was “key” for the subversive strategy of the PQ fantasy in *The Scar* (55), and I believe that point is also true in *Disciples*. I have found that introducing the reader to a foreign culture like the Rivlao is very difficult unless the reader begins with an outsider's perspective, and in the case of *Disciples*, alienation became the means of expressing cultural views (or bias) as a result of awkward juxtaposing of character perspectives who both regard the other as an outsider. In this way, a reader is able to cross-reference between these perspectives and develop their own opinions about the world context. As Mendlesohn puts it, in the immersive fantasy, “the world should be described, not explained, and the vision should come first, elaboration later, forcing the readers to construct the world from hints and glimpses. The harder they work, the more they will be a part of the world” (112).

Some examples of fantasy novels that employ the immersive technique include Terry Pratchett's *City Watch* novels (1989–2003), Tanith Lee's *Faces Under Water* (1998), K. J. Parker's *Fencer* trilogy (1998-2000), Martine Leavitt's *The Dollmage* (2002), and China Miéville's *The Iron Council* (2004). But this technique does not restrict itself to the form of the novel. I found Esther Friesner's “All Vows” to be an excellent example of the immersive technique. The opening line signals an informed first-person narrative voice that creates more questions than answers. “I'm cold. I wish it'd stop raining. Granny Teeth never comes when it rains, and I like her, even if Sammy don't” (Friesner 14). Quite apart from a club story narrative, this speaker speaks his mind without considering who might be listening, and thus, the reader gains the experience of an eavesdropper rather than a travel companion. A traditional PQ

narrator would likely first reveal the context of why these characters are in the rain and follow with an elaboration of these characters' dispositions.

But Friesner had something else in mind for her narrator, because “the reader is positioned to a great degree in terms of what is not said, and this sense of the not said, can also be formulated as the not explained. It is this that builds the sense of depth” (Mendlesohn 113). The reader comes to know the speaker only in bits at a time and always within the focus of his interests, and it is for this reason that the first-person narrative is optimal for an immersive strategy. “It demands that the readers subsume their points of view to what the narrator as authorial voice is willing to reveal” (Mendlesohn 93). And what is revealed always implies something not being spoken of. Just from the first line, a reader can safely assume that the speaker is outside in the rain because he says first that he is cold. His thoughts are simple and his desire to be attended to by a grandmother figure all suggest that the speaker is a child. The context develops gradually as the speaker reveals more and more about himself through his interaction with the other characters, Sammy and Granny Teeth.

It is through the speaker's (Corey's) inquisitive perspective that the immersive reader engages in figuring out the puzzle before it is solved, when the last piece arrives; and this is exactly what is required from a useful protagonist in the immersive fantasy. “A protagonist must be engaged with the world, and must critique it in terms of his needs – must be, in fact, an antagonist” (Mendlesohn 113). Although Corey is loyal to Sammy, his internal questioning and defensiveness serves to antagonize the situation and provoke an “infodump.” For example, when Sammy tries to explain to Corey about ghost names, he asks about his age, but Corey refuses to tell. “You tell *one* thing, you start telling all of ‘em. Anything you say maybe gets back to someone else. Maybe the police, and then I know what *that* means: They'd take me back”

(Friesner 15). Now a reader can create an understanding of Corey's situation and begin using that to interpret the rest of the story.

Like Sammy, Granny Teeth is also both a source of comfort and fear. "Ghosts, they're monster kin. It don't do to get'em mad. I remember how Granny Teeth looked the time I told her just a bit about Uncle John and how it was. I thought her eyes'd take fire, burn me right up then and there" (Friesner 18). In this case, we have a peak into Corey's family as well as a foreshadowing of what will be revealed, but each of these cases of the infodump necessitated an antagonistic encounter for Corey to express what he is reluctant to divulge, because he is in defensive control of the narrative.

"All Vows" proved to me that the immersive technique was an acceptable solution for how I wanted to begin *Disciples*. It allows for an immediate sense of inquiry without the lengthy hand of a chronicler and its affinity for antagonism compels a reader to quickly connect with the protagonist. However, upon another rereading of "All Vows," it occurred to me that there were also some qualities of the PQ in the narrative. Mendlesohn says, "Where the portal-quest fantasy emphasized recognition and healing, the restoration of the grandeur of previous days, the immersive fantasies are overwhelmingly concerned with entropy of the world" (60-1). In a sense, "All Vows" is about personal healing and reconciliation/atonement of past events, though certainly not glorified ones (i.e. the Vietnam War); but "All Vows" is also intensely focused on a world constantly at odds with itself, and although this indicates an immersive piece, one of the overall themes of the story is actually a quest to discover The Quest.

For much of the story, Sammy is very vague about where he's taking Corey and why, explaining only that he has to fulfill a vow. After first entering the narrative as an eavesdropper, the reader too accompanies these characters in a journey across the Eastern United States, inside

of a McDonalds, sleeping under green blankets, and hiding from people behind the bushes of state parks. Corey puts up with this mystery because all he wants is “to get [Sammy] to let me stay with him forever” (16). The consequence of this desire, the logical conclusion, given circumstances the reader must piece together along the way, is what guides Corey’s journey. In the quest to discover The Quest, the protagonist is compelled to go on a journey in which the quest object is unknown, and all that is known is that the quest object is needed and that its need will become apparent upon attaining it.<sup>12</sup> At large, this is a piece about the need for reconciliation for past sins so that each member of the party will at last gain admission to the kingdom of redemption, à la *Pilgrim’s Progress*.

“All Vows” is a compelling blend of the PQ and immersive strategy that encouraged me to believe that these techniques could work together in the same text, and Friesner did not even have to change narrative control<sup>13</sup> to achieve this synthesis, which resulted in what I interpret as a quest to discover The Quest, wherein the quest object becomes answering the question, “What should I be doing with my life?” The nature of this quest object requires that antagonistic questioning of the world, as necessitated by the immersive fantasy, and it is in this way that the two narrative techniques may synthesize and offer the advantages of both strategies, which I have attempted to employ in the genre of sword and sorcery.

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<sup>12</sup> Note how this accomplishes the function of prophecy without resorting to the prophetic tone the traditional PQ fantasy relies on.

<sup>13</sup> I did, however, find switching narrative perspectives useful for emphasizing certain dynamics between different protagonists.

*The Magic, the Real, the Nothing*

*There are people who can never go to Fantastica...and others who can, but who stay forever. And there are just a few who go to Fantastica and come back. Like you. And they make both worlds well again.*

– *The Neverending Story*

My career in writing began while as a student peer tutor at the University of Houston-Downtown Writing/Reading Center. It was my first experience being a part of what you could call a community of writers. We were all experienced essayists and maintained a 3.0 GPA in our cumulated English courses. A few of us were poets and were willing to trust each other's criticism, but it is always hard not to take it personally.

Because that was a piece of *me* you just tore up, how dare you!

It doesn't matter how good of friends you might be with a fellow writer. The emotion climbs up to the apex as if death itself were underneath, the dark abyss of dread creeping above the horizon of a defiant hope that you will be accepted, or well-liked. And my friend's hands clenched over her knees as I read on wondering how I should tell her that I didn't understand her poem. Or maybe I did get it, but I didn't feel anything from it. My response was woefully ambivalent, and it would not do to have told her the truth.

At least, not *that* truth. My initial impulse was to say "Pretty neat!" and start asking questions about what inspired her, anything that didn't require me to explain my reaction with



any depth. That is the safe way to go. It's gentle and encouraging...but also useless. I understood that I had a responsibility to take a risk too. She was trusting me to be honest, and I decided that I'd respect her bravery in kind. Respect – that was what I wanted whenever I had asked for someone to read my work. So instead, when I finally began to speak, I emphasized *my* personal, honest difficulty in unraveling the depth of her piece, which I assumed was there or else she wouldn't have been so emotionally invested with it. Because of this choice, I turned our interaction from a sort of doctor to patient set-up to a more collaborative discussion, and we explored the piece's strengths and weaknesses together. By the end of our talk, she was her ordinary self, plus something extra.

There were several faculty/staff members I became firmly acquainted with too at the writing center, all English professors who taught literature and/or first-year composition courses. One professor I worked with explained this to me once; “There are two kinds of literature professors, those who love *The Lord of the Rings* and those who spend their entire career avoiding it.” We both laughed. It was nearing my last semesters as an undergraduate at UHD and I had been curious to find out what sort of things were being talked about in fantasy literature, since I had missed the only course offered in the subject.<sup>14</sup> In a way, I think I understood her sentiment. All fantasy gamers I knew looked at *The Lord of the Rings* as their bible, that Tolkien was the father of all fantasy literature and everything fantasy today comes from something he did. He was effectively the Creator.

To an important extent, that is true. He did formalize the modern high-fantasy, heroic quest genre, and it is true that his work has had a very strong following of acclaimed writers.

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<sup>14</sup> This course was a survey analyzing the original published works of the brothers Grimm.

Peter Beagle in the introductory segment of the 1983 Balantine printing of *The Hobbit* admits that “Tolkien was the magus of my secret knowledge,” and Ursula Le Guin recounts her experience as a Tolkien reader in *The Wand and the Word: Conversations with Writers of Fantasy*, along with Lloyd Alexander, Terry Pratchett, and Phillip Pullman, to name a few. Tolkien’s work has even received praise from acclaimed figures such as W. H. Auden, who is quoted in his 1954 *New York Times* review saying “No fiction I have read in the last five years has given me more joy than *The Fellowship of the Ring*.”

Yet apart from the works of these fantasists, there exists another development, what I can best describe as post-Tolkien literature, works that borrow liberally from the fantastic context of Middle Earth (i.e. orcs, goblins, elves, magic rings, the epic adventure-quest).<sup>15</sup> This is a category apart from other fantasy genres because it restricts itself to emulating the esthetics (and arguably the *aesthetics*) of the high-fantasy that is achieved in *The Lord of the Rings*, and for a large population of fantasy gamers, this is the material they draw their inspiration from. In 1990, Orson Scott Card made a poignant observation:

...good mythic fantasy can still be written in that kind of setting; but since such a world has been the staple of romance since before Chaucer, one can hardly credit most authors who work in it with having allowed their imagination to play a large role in their writing. Most such ‘fantasists’ tuck their imagination away

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<sup>15</sup> As previously referenced, this genre is possessed now almost exclusively by Wizards of the Coast, and is stereotypically described as Dungeons & Dragons fiction. However, this post-Tolkien esthetic is also found in early console fantasy RPGs, such as the prestigious *Final Fantasy* series. However, a study observing the twenty year evolution from *FFI*’s post-Tolkien esthetic to the more modern sci-fi/fantasy esthetics of *FF XIV* may provide an interesting perspective to compare with the ongoing development of high-fantasy literature.

somewhere before they enter the mythic marketplace; they have come to buy, not to sell. (276)

William Gray doesn't go as far back as Chaucer in his book *Fantasy, Myth and the Measure of Truth*; but he does emphasize modern fantasy's roots in late eighteenth century German Romanticism, citing figures such as Ludwick Tieck and Novalis,<sup>16</sup> who said, "All fairy-tales are only dreams of that familiar world of home which is everywhere and nowhere" (12), with Gray adding, "and to which we are always going home" (12). A major recurring theme in Tolkien's work is home, the longing for a pipe, bacon and eggs; the opening paragraph of *The Hobbit* describes a hobbit's home: "...it was a hobbit-hole, and that means comfort" (1). And throughout the novel, this romantic sentiment is Bilbo's emotional anchor as he treks on through numerous life-threatening encounters until he finally completes his quest and arrives back safely to the Shire and writes his memoir – *There and Back Again, a Hobbit's Holiday*. In fact, the very last image the reader is left with in *The Hobbit* is the tobacco jar. We begin and end in the comfort of home. As Beagle reminds us, "in the end it is Middle-earth and its dwellers that we love, not Tolkien's considerable gifts in showing it to us...the world he charts was there long before him...He is a great enough magician to tap our most common nightmares, daydreams, and twilight fancies, but he never invented them either: he found them a place to live" ("Untitled Letter").

The truth is, Tolkien is a part of a long line of fantasy that stems from the German Romantics' "tendency to create a self-contained, fairy-tale-like world of the *marvelous*" (Gray 24), a time-line which includes E. T. A. Hoffman (*The Golden Pot* – 1814), George MacDonald

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<sup>16</sup> A pseudonym for Georg Philipp Friedrich Freiherr von Hardenberg

(*Phantastes* – 1858), Lord Dunsany<sup>17</sup> (*The Gods of Pegana* – 1905), and E. R. Eddison (*The Worm Ouroboros* – 1922).<sup>18</sup> What concerns me is that the failure to recognize this timeline narrows our understanding of the fantasy genre and limits its expression to where the post-Tolkien stereotype becomes the dominant image of fantasy across all mediums fantasy appears in.

This concerns me on two fronts, that: a) new work will be held up to a standard or series of expectations that will discourage experimental (or un-Tolkien) approaches to high-fantasy; b) and as a result, the genre will continue to reuse/refresh its conventions over and over until there is virtually no audience left to appreciate high-fantasy sword and sorcery. This is only my humble observation of things as I have come to learn, having participated in various aspects of the gaming culture and listening to the opinions on non-traditional fantasy readers, who have complained to me about not being able to “get it.” It was important to me that I create fantasy that didn’t require a background in fantasy literature to enjoy, and taking responsibility for my writing development has been a launch towards that purpose.

In essence, this also meant writing work that could be used to bridge the schism among literary academics that I came to discover during my conversations at the writing center. I realized at the time that I was only engaging in idle conversation, not much more than gossip, so I optimistically ensured myself that as long as the writing itself was compelling, the genre didn’t matter. It wasn’t until much later when I read Debra Spark’s article “Stranger Things” that my two concerns gained substance. Spark writes:

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<sup>17</sup> Edward John Moreton Drax Plunkett

<sup>18</sup> This list was compiled after consulting *Fantasy Literature: A Core Collection and Reference Guide* (1979).

Like most fiction writing teachers I know, I make a point of outlawing genre fiction in my classroom...I say, at the start of my undergraduate fiction writing classes, the same thing my compatriots, a predictable lot, say all across this great land of ours: ‘This class is a class in literary fiction, not in how to meet the demands of the marketplace. (Spark 22)<sup>19</sup>

It was clear that my concerns were valid. Fantasy along with sci-fi, horror, and others were being completely dismissed in creative writing classrooms as pulpy, superficial fiction devoid of any potential literary merit. “No little green men from the planet Urk, please. If there’s a barbarian in your gathering of characters, please don’t invite me to the party. When it comes to literature, I don’t mind being a snob. Indeed, snob is what I do best” (Spark 22). These are the stereotypical images that gloss over the entire spectrum of the sci-fi and fantasy genres, which is not only unjust but detrimental to the efforts of the more bold writers who challenge the status quo, which has produced a myth about fantasy that I will take a moment to bust.

Spark along with many other creative writing instructors has come to believe that “genre fiction is driven by plot, and literary fiction is driven by character” (22). But this “characteristic” does not restrict itself to any particular bookshelf at Barnes & Noble; however, I imagine that there are quite a lot of fantasy novels that have not featured extensive character development (having read many that, regardless, were still enjoyable). But character development is actually critically fundamental to the post-Tolkien fantasy reader, who is closely tied to the fantasy role-playing culture. One of the most sophisticated character creation systems I’ve experienced in role-playing gaming is Kevin Siembieda’s Palladium Fantasy RPG™, which incorporates an alignment system that considers a new character’s moral disposition and a series of tables to help

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<sup>19</sup> On an ironic note, “Spark” is a lower-level spell in many fantasy RPGs, like *Lands of Lore*.

suggest details about the new character (such as birth order, biases, or muscular build) that is not far removed from what a creative writing exercise might prompt. And most importantly, there is plenty of room for a variety of character personalities and traits that may develop as a character is “rolled” into being, the most notable of which (in my opinion) come from the insanity tables, a comprehensive list of neuroses, psychoses, obsessions, addictions, and phobias. The behavioral descriptions that accompany these tables are both informative and suggestive, giving tips and examples on how to realistically dramatize psychotic behavior within a narrative.

In role-playing, flawed characters are desirable. “This is realistic and fun. It’s realistic, because nobody is perfect...a hero with strengths and weaknesses makes for a much more interesting and fun character” (Siembieda 15), and this is an expectation of post-Tolkien fantasy readers as well; so when a fantasy author fails to achieve character interest, this does not speak to the deficiency of the genre or its commercial demands, only the deficiency of the writer in question. And this is a standing observation throughout all writing genres.

Card informs us that “the most successful fantasy is not often that which *looks* most mythic; often the most powerful fantasies are those that seem to be very realistic and particular” (275). And note here again the use of the term *realistic*. Realist fiction is thought to be the antithesis of genre writing, what separates “literature” from pulp-fiction, and of course, this excludes the fantastic entirely. But for a fantasy reader, the material can become *real* if not *true* – and this fact prevails across all genres of *fiction* writing.

James Wood in *How Fiction Works* makes the case that “realism, seen broadly as truthfulness to the way things are, cannot be mere verisimilitude, cannot be mere lifelikeness, or life-sameness, but what I must call *lifeness*: life on the page, life brought to different life by the highest artistry. And it cannot be a genre; instead, it makes other forms of fiction seem like

genres” (Wood 247). When I first read this statement I immediately imagined it being addressed to the skeptics of genre fiction, and I cheered at the discovery that there were also academics who were willing to give fantasy, sci-fi, and the like a chance; but there is another side to the Wood coin.

As abrasive as I was initially to “Stranger Things,” I found Spark’s inquiry of genre to be honest and thoughtful. It was clear that she had engaged herself with intellectual discussions on the matter (citing genre considerations from Flannery O’Connor and personal interviews with Michael Chabon)<sup>20</sup> and had read a fair sample of fantasy works to familiarize herself with, some of which she admits having enjoyed. I felt her complaints with genre were warranted. Her principal “objection is aimed toward genre work that disregards psychological or emotional truth, that works people as props, or that creates a uniformly fantastic world, as if the fantasy is an end in and of itself, rather than a means to revelation...Magic not to enhance an observation about reality but to replace reality altogether...and with reality gone altogether, I’m uninterested” (Spark 25).<sup>21</sup> All of a sudden, I felt like she was preaching to the choir. I myself was largely dissatisfied with the regulars on the fantasy/sci-fi shelves and could only look to classically acclaimed works to remind myself how fantasy is done well. Spark is right to complain, and to protect her students from the trappings of formulaic writing that overuses fifty to a thousand year old story conventions. Card writes:

The real fantasists are not content to echo other writers’ myths. They must discover their own. They venture into the most dangerous, uncharted places in the

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<sup>20</sup> Magical realism is also a discussion point in both “Stranger Things” and *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, which relates it to the immersive technique.

<sup>21</sup> It seems this relation to magic and reality is what makes or breaks the reader experience. My approach has simply been to treat my fantastic elements with meaningful consequences.

human soul, where existing stories don't yet explain what people think and feel and do. In that frightening place they find a mirror that lets them glimpse a true image. Then they return and hold up the mirror, and unlike mirrors in the real world, this one holds the storyteller's image just a fleeting moment, just long enough for us to glimpse the long-shadowed soul that brightly lingers there. In that moment we make the mythic connection; for that moment we *are* another person; and we carry that rare and precious understanding with us until we die.

(Card 276)

Fantasy excels in expressing issues of identity and self-reflection, all of which are important for that depth in character that Spark and other skeptics' desire; but even an emphasis on character development only valorizes a different set of conventions. When a story weighs in at 10% plot development and 90% character development, you had better have some pretty compelling characters, because the reader will not have the benefit of "motion" through the story line to drive a reader to the end. Likewise, having 10% characters and a 90% plotline relies heavily on the presentation of compelling situations, because the reader will not have much to tie him/her to what the characters are going through.<sup>22</sup> As Wood puts it, "The true writer, that free servant of life, is one who must always be acting as if life were a category beyond anything the novel had yet grasped; as if life itself were always on the verge of becoming conventional" (248).

Spark is an important example of a responsible skeptic who pokes at the clichés and challenges her students to produce meaningful, rather than derivative, stories. Her negative

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<sup>22</sup> Another thing to consider is that while a work of fiction may sway in one direction or the other, the percentage of material devoted to either character development or plot development does not in of itself reflect the potency of that commitment.



image of the fantasy genre from what I can tell comes from the exposure to a very narrow but deep stream in fantasy that I call post-Tolkien fiction, which exalts the heroic/high-fantasy sword and sorcery conventions established in *The Lord of the Rings* to the effect that all the genres that I have just entailed are bonding together into one life-sized cliché. My hope is that as a fantasist I may participate in dispelling the stereotypes by subverting the cliché while moving on to new areas to explore;<sup>23</sup> because what was modern and new for Tolkien readers fifty years ago needs to adapt – not die, adapt, because that’s what *liveness* does.

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<sup>23</sup> One novel I am familiar with that functions this way is Neil Gaiman’s *Stardust* (1998).

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Leif Carl Behmer received his Bachelors in English (with minors in Psychology and Philosophy) at the University of Houston – Downtown and his MFA in Creative Writing at the University of Texas – Pan American. His passion for fantasy fiction stems from his exposure to fantasy in both classic Fairy Tale literature and the fantasy role-playing genre of the video gaming industry.

His pursuit in the discipline of writing led him to taking courses in technical writing and dramatic writing, as well as studying tutor theory. He has worked as a University Writing Center tutor from 2005 – 2011 and has acquired Level 2 Teaching Certification in Hidalgo County. He has also served as Judge in the Edinburg ISD UIL Essay Contest in 2010 and writes dramatic scripts for pop-culture conventions.