

# As Mountains Rise

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photo

Lady Oriana turned her face to the biting wind and ran. Perhaps it was telling that the winter wind had chosen this day to blow off the frigid peaks of the Douthmards and down into the palace, behind the walls of tall grey stone. They were unprotected now. That was all she could think. The wind blew hardest on the birdtower, from where her ladyship ran down the slippery stone steps, although it turned into biting stillness down below.

Still, Lady Oriana ran, her embroidered silk skirts swishing wildly and her beaded necklaces jangling and chattering like teeth, paying no mind to the gawking people she passed, or the chilling air that clawed at her throat and burned her lungs.

They should have had more time. They should have been more prepared. They shouldn't have put all of their eggs in one basket. Finally, after running the distance of the outer and inner courtyards, she reached the servants entrance. She gave no thought to the unfamiliar passages as she sped ahead, her mind still deep in despair and grief. As it happened, she only got lost once, and managed to reach the great hall faster than if she had gone in by the gilded front doors. It would have taken the guard ages to open them, even given her current position as Head of the Minds.

She ran full tilt through the flock of noblemen and women gathered in the hall. Dressed in their bright silks and velvet, they looked like strange birds, the ones that came from far over the seas to the south, banding together for protection, bravely squawking and pretending that they were here by choice and had not been forcibly removed from their own homes. Grimly, she set to dodging as many as she could. Although there were a few ripped hems, grumbling mutters, and bruises by the time that she had reached the other side, breathless, she was still mercifully on her feet.

She paused by the door at the far end of the hall, a conspicuous little black thing in comparison to the gold inlaid columns and the colorful banners that decorated the great hall. By habit, she raised her hands to smooth her hair and settle her jewelry before she gave herself a sharp shake. There was no time, no time at all. She put her hand to the iron handle, carved in a simple eagle's head, and opened the door without knocking.

"My King," she said, dropping a small curtsy as soon as she was inside. The murmuring of voices in the room stopped as soon as she entered, and she found herself under the inspection of a dozen sets of eyes. Despite the confidential atmosphere of the gathering that was in progress, none of the eyes seemed to object too strongly to her presence. They knew that something must have happened, something bad, for her to be here in the dark, dingy room where those of high rank and influence conferred.

King Neader recovered first, straightening to his tall height from where he had been leaning over a map on the circular table. "Lady Oriana, you have news. What comes from the Minds?"

"Yes, my king. There is news from the Western line." Oriana held her head high and tried to keep her chin from trembling, "The last of the bright ones has fallen. The great Dre-Dagain is now in stone, may he sleep peacefully."

The company around the table, once silent and watching, erupted around her. Colors and textures shifted in the room until it looked like the wind blowing at the High Turc Festival. Silk and velvet brushed against cotton and wool. Embroidery attacked buttons and perfume and sweat mingled.

"I told you," someone burst out from the dark side of the room, "I told you we had little time."

“My dear Regnus,” a woman’s voice replied, “it does us no good for you to become supercilious now. We all knew that this would happen, and you were not the first nor the only person to say that it would happen sooner than we had hoped.”

Oriana did not hear the reply as it was lost under an explosion from a round gentleman, whom she had never seen before, in a deep red coat. His hair hung over his eyes and the voice that emanated from his pudgy face was unexpectedly deep and strong. “The times have changed, your majesty, you must consider my offer.” The king did not look up at him, did not acknowledge that he had spoken. The man persisted. “You must see the folly in your plan, you cannot allow this! Side with me, and something, at least, can be done.”

Lady Edme threw the man a dark look from her narrow seat next door, but said nothing. The beads in her hair jingled as she turned away, her nose held in the air.

Lady Oriana saw Lord Kane, tears in his eyes, put his hand to his mouth, and barely heard the mutter of, “Oh, for the land, poor Aither.”

Finally, the king spoke. “We have run out of time,” he said clearly, and the room fell silent. “There is nothing else to be done. Whatever other plans or hopes we had, we have chosen our path and we must ride it until the end.” He turned and bowed his golden head to the man in the red coat. “We no longer need your service, Amicer. We are sorry that you had to travel so far for no benefit to yourself.”

The man, Amicer, did not take well to the dismissal. Hauling himself to his feet and almost upsetting the oak table, he left, muttering all the while. He made no acknowledgement to those in the room as he left, even though he had to turn himself sideways and inch past Lady Oriana to reach the door.

Once Amicer had left, the king gestured to his empty seat. “Please, my Lady Oriana. It appears we have much to discuss with you.”

“Are we sure,” said Regus, still cast in shadow, “that she is ready for this. Oriana has served this kingdom well, but she is young, and there is much that cannot be known.”

Oriana’s tongue glued itself to the roof of her mouth and she could say nothing in her defense. She looked to her king, but he was preoccupied with the papers in front of him.

“That would be Lady Oriana to you now, Regus,” Lady Esme snapped at him, “and you will respect what that means. The Great Burzine Kingdom is not yet so far gone that no amount of civility remains.”

“I am not questioning her title, Lady Esme,” Regus said in the most soothing voice Oriana had ever heard him use, “I am simply questioning her credentials and her abilities. This is a hard task and she is young, after all.”

Oriana wished that she wasn’t hearing so plainly what was so often said behind her back. Finally, the king spoke, raising his weary face to address the company. “I chose Lady Oriana as Head of the Minds. Her father taught her well, may he rest in peace, for the role which she plays. As for her abilities, if the Head of Minds has forgotten how to keep a secret, this kingdom died its death long ago.”

Lady Oriana took a deep breath for courage, “You know I will serve you and this country however I can, my king.”

King Neader turned his head towards her, “I’m counting on it,” he said. Oriana looked into his eyes and felt her soul turn cold. His eyes were already dead.

Once the conversation in the dark room was over, her’s were as well.

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The smoke hung heavy in the dark, dank King's Prison pub. Few people frequented it, due to its dank smell and lack of good liquor, but today there were four more patrons than usual. A man sat at the back corner table, his feet resting on a chair beside him, the snarling skin of a wolf hanging on the wall behind him. Two other men watched him from across the room and, although they were sure that he had seen them, neither made any move to approach the man who sat below the wolf. A fourth man sat unnoticed a few tables away, mug in hand and greying hair tousled. He had an old grubby book propped open before him and squinted at it in the dim light. Every now and then he reached up to turn a page.

Muttering under his breath, the shorter of the group of two rung his hands, the mug in front of him untouched and his colorful, embroidered clothes crumpled. His thin face was drawn and he looked pale in the dim light. The other man, taller, broader, and carrying a heavy sword swung across his back, sat beside him, unconcernedly sipping his drink. "What if this was a bad idea?" the pale man asked. "What if all of this was for nothing? What if as soon as I walk up to him, he sticks a knife in my ribs?"

"Then get it ov'r with and get yourself killed already," the taller man mumbled into his mug. His accent was thick, his syllables slurring together. His voice was surprisingly high and nasally for a man of his size.

"I don't see how that helps you, good sir, given that you get paid on the return of me and my body, intact, to the court of the Great Emperor, may he prosper for all his days. It is within your best interest to keep all of my appendages attached to my body and functioning throughout this time and, if it is for you to provide assistance to me in order to fulfill that goal, I suggest that

you begin to make your suggestions.” The pale man said all this without taking his eyes off the man who sat at the corner table. If at all possible, his face had gotten even paler. The hanging wolf was not helping. He tried to settle his hands in his lap, but always returned to unconsciously ringing them.

The taller man had become frozen, his mug half-way to his mouth, staring at the shorter man. “I don’t know what you’re saying half the time, Mr. Alden, but if you want my advice, I’d say to go ov’r there and talk to the man. If he wanted you dead, you’d have one of those boot knives he carries sunk into you before you’d even made it half the length of this table here.”

Mr. Alden glanced at the taller man and began to ring his hands even more furiously. “Thank you, Callan,” he said faintly. Then he picked up his own mug and downed it all, coughing as he came up for air. Finally, he took a deep breath, settled his shoulder, and stepped towards the lone man in the cloak.

The man sitting in the corner saw the other man stand, trying to suppress his coughs, and make his way over to the corner table. The broad man behind him followed after a mournful look at his ale, which he left behind. The man in front, the one that he was here to meet, looked to have no fighting experience at all. It appeared as though the serving girl who brushed past the man, throwing him off balance, could take him in a physical fight. The other man behind him, however, had training. Although, judging from his clothes and his demeanor towards his companion, he was hired. In a desperate situation, he might be convinced that his life was not worth the money he might receive from his employer should it come to swords and fists. Though, perhaps not, given the amount someone from the Emperor’s Court, may all those who live there burn in its flames, would be able to pay to ensure their safety.

The man pulled his feet off the chair but did not stand as the other two men approached. “The contact and his bodyguard, I presume,” he said, icily.

All the color drained out of the contact’s face. “We agreed on the code word ‘recondite’,” he breathed in a very quiet voice, “It is to protect us both so I would have been most appreciative if you’d have used it and not shouted to this whole rotten building that we are discussing something important and possibly highly secretive, especially given that rebellion has been highly active in this area as of late. I took a great risk in coming here, and I would prefer not to have the odds that I leave with no head increased.”

The man’s eyes never left the contact as he said, “My name is Guy Magnar, I am here on account of the information that you claim to have about the legends of the Light Ones. Should I have any indication that you are being untruthful throughout this meeting, you will not walk out of here alive; should I suspect that you are being followed, you will not walk out of here alive. Do I make myself clear?”

“You certainly have a way of making a man feel safe,” the contact muttered under his breath. The big man beside him tried to hide a smile in his hand. Maybe Guy had underestimated the relationship between the two. Maybe there was some outside loyalty.

“You are perfectly safe here,” Guy replied calmly, “I asked for this table particularly because, despite the open visual area, sound does not travel far from this corner,” he indicated the skin of the mountain wolf behind him.

“Ahh, yes, that makes sense, it gets trapped in the fur,” the contact muttered. He continued muttering to himself long enough that Guy stopped paying attention. Anything that came out of this man’s mouth seemed to be abstract at best and absurd at worst. Nothing was true fact. This trip wasn't worth it.



After the first glance at the bodyguard, Guy had not looked at him again, although he could see a distorted image of him in the pewter mug sitting in front of him. He heaved a sigh and cut across the man's ramblings. "I have never heard of the word *recondite* before, and I didn't care to find out what it meant just for this. As I just told you, your safety in this pub is currently guaranteed, although I cannot say that it will be should something be amiss with you or your information, which you currently seem to have no desire to share. Perhaps we could start with your name?"

The man, the contact, lost whatever color he had begun to regain in his cheeks. He started muttering again. Guy began tapping his foot on the floor, bloody courtiers and their useless frivolities. There were so many things that he could be doing that were much more worth his time.

"Yes, yes, of course, the information. It is of the utmost importance. Where to start, where to start. Let's see. At the beginning? But which beginning? The Bright Ones' beginning?" The contact glanced up at Guy for a second, "your information or legends, as it were, are wrong, Mr. Magnar. They are called the Bright Ones, not the Light Ones." After this last statement, he seemed to lose his thoughts as he dropped his eyes and simply stared at the table for several seconds.

After looking over the table to ensure that there really was nothing to see except a dreamer's fantasy, Guy prompted him. "Your name, friend, or I will have to assume that you have come meaning harm."

"Oh, no, of course not," the man assured, beginning to wring his hands again. "I meant no offense, Mr. Magnar, none at all. Please do accept my apologies from the deepest parts of my heart--"

“Your name,” Guy interrupted him on a growl, “and Guy will work just fine for me. I don’t need your court friperies.”

“Yes, yes, of course, sir--Guy, I mean, pardon the slip of the tongue. My name is Favish Alden and I contacted you, well not you, really I contacted the rebellion, because I found some documents from the old country, kingdom, I mean. Yes, that’s right, from the Burzine kingdom concerning the existence of the Bright Ones.”

“And,” Guy prompted again, finally feeling as though he was getting, if not to the heart of this mess, then at least somewhere close.

“And, well. I suppose I’ll start with what I know of what the Bright Ones were,” Mr. Alden continued to ring his hands. At least he seemed to become more and more comfortable the longer he talked on topics about which he understood. “No one really looks what they looked like,” he continued, “or, I have at least been unable to find a text that describes their physical attributes. Mating rituals, battle tactics, yes, but no physical attributes. Funny how these things work.” He looked up and caught Guy’s eye, quickly dropped his head again, and re-established his original line of thought.

“They are generally talked about more in hyperbole, things such as ‘their might was the tallest mountain and their wisdom the oceans depths’. That sort of thing. Wonderful, I’m sure, in the times when the Bright Ones were known but not so useful to us now.”

Once again, he trailed off at the end of his sentence. Guy gave the contact the time it took to restuff his pipe before he prodded Mr. Alden again--by poking his pipestem none too gently into one of his ringing hands. The bodyguard tensed beside him, but did not move.

Mr. Alden started, and his face went snow white again, however, it did succeed in getting him talking. “Anyway,” he cleared his throat, “there are several possibilities for why this could

be. First, no one ever actually saw one. Secondly, all of the records recording their physical attributes truly were destroyed when the Burzine Kingdom fell. Thirdly, and the one I personally believe, the Bright Ones themselves asked that they not be described in written text.”

Guy actually managed to inhale some of his ale on a swallow. “They what?” he coughed. “They asked not to be described? From all the legends I know, they are beasts of great power. I’ve never heard a bear speaking; I’ve never even heard of those strange animals from across the seas, the elons speaking.”

“It’s lions, actually,” Mr. Alden corrected, almost absentmindedly. “I had a chance to study the drawings of one once. Such amazing creatures. That’s besides the point, however,” he sighed regretfully. “To address what you said, though, Mr.--I mean Guy. The Bright Ones could obviously communicate to us humans in one way or another, whether it was through speaking or through some other course of action, as is recorded in the second script of Lady Dealla Kane of the year 504, ‘their might was the tallest mountain and their wisdom the ocean depths.’ In order for wisdom to be passed down, some form of communication must have occurred.” Here he paused again. Guy was just about to thumb him over the head when he started talking again. “Anyway, to argue about their physical attributes is imprudent at this time. The true purpose of my bringing this topic up is for me to say that there are many things that we either never knew about the Bright Ones or that we have lost to time.”

“Or perhaps they never existed in the first place,” Guy put in, his hands playing restlessly with the handle of his mug.

Mr. Alden nodded. “Of course, that is an option , but from my research, the Bright Ones exist too widely across texts from different cultures to be a mere fairytale that enjoys great popularity. Of course, it is difficult to know as no culture, as I noted earlier, physically describes

these creatures, and no bones can be found. Which, while you might say that this disproves the whole theory,..."

"I do."

"...a Meloploician text has been found that describes the 'Great Creations of the Mountains' returning to air and ash once they die. There are also references to this process in old records from the south coasts and from the Northern Gurdite region." Mr. Alden stopped again, this time clearly waiting for Guy to say some inadequate fact which he would then to refute.

"Ok," Guy growled, "if these things did exist, why aren't they around now? From the tales, these things were near impossible to kill with powers beyond imagination. What happened to them? Did they all die when a rock fell from the heavens?"

"Ah," Mr. Alden said, looking intent, "that! That is the most complicated part of the whole idea--theory. Now, please don't interrupt me. It would be useful if I could get this out at one time.

"The Bright Ones are stone, that is one of the reasons why they are so difficult to kill." Guy snorted and Mr. Alden gave him a severe glance. "They are stone," Mr. Alden repeated firmly, "and they will remain stone throughout the centuries until their mind receives the call to awaken. This call must come from the mind of a human. Until that human dies, the Bright One is free to roam the earth. Sometimes, these Bright Ones will seek out those whose mind's call to them--"

"Like prey," Guy said, his hand clenched tight around his mug. "I've heard the stories."

Mr. Alden sighed deeply and moved his hands up to massage his temples, "It is a possibility, I suppose, although it makes no sense to me. Why kill the thing that is keeping you

alive? But there has to be at least some truth behind those legends, or else why would they exist? Were they manufactured for a purpose? But what would the purpose of that be?"

Camly, Guy leaned across the table towards him, "Perhaps, Mr. Alden, you should stick to your story lest you want to end up as air and ash as well."

Once again, the man lost all of the color in his face. He glanced at his bodyguard in a way Guy was sure he thought was inconspicuous, but the heavy-set man had turned away and was surveying the pub and its other residences, which consisted of a mere three men, including the barman, and a serving girl or two.

"Of course, of course," Mr. Alden finally muttered. He began to ring his hands again. Guy heaved a sigh.

"Well, there is a possibility that some of the Bright Ones sought out their links or connection or other minds, whatever you want to call it, with the purpose of killing them, but as I said, I think that this is the least likely option as that means that the Bright One would once again turn to stone. I think that it is more likely that they seek out these humans for companionship. The minds of those who call are different from the minds of regular humans. They will change, whether they are aware of it or not, to become more like the Bright Ones. Something has been mentioned in several texts about changing eyes that allow for better vision and ears that gain the ability to move in order to pick up sounds better. Not everyone can call to a Bright One."

"And you have proof of this theory," Guy said in a mocking tone, "that the great Bright Ones go to humans for companionship?"

"At this point, a lot of it is at least a low degree of theorizing," Mr. Alden admitted. "The only pieces of sure evidence I have at this point is that, in the historical texts I have found, every Bright Ones' name is always linked with the name of a human, and those humans are always

specifically referred to as ‘those who link’; also, there is a line in the writings of Lewas from 313 that says: ‘When those that call to the Brights take their last breath, those great ones, those Bright Ones, will fall into their own sleep beneath the rock.’ From this text, as far as I can gather, humans do link with the Bright Ones, but only specific humans. This is further supported, in my opinion, by the fact that, oftentimes, the names of the Bright Ones and their linked humans appear together, doing the same deeds. On top of that, when a linked human dies, so will the Bright One, making it even more unlikely that a Bright One would seek out their linked human and kill them.”

“I think,” Guy interrupted with a sneer, “ that I’ve heard all of this drivel that I need to.” He stood suddenly, causing the bodyguard, who had been desperately trying to catch the attention of a serving girl throughout a large majority of the conversation, to start. “It was amusing while it lasted, but time is precious in my line of work.” He leaned towards Mr. Alden, and the bodyguard beside him stiffened, his hand hovering above the table, ready to reach for his sword. “I’d suggest you run home, courtier.”

“But,” Mr. Alden sputtered, “I have yet to tell you what I know about finding a human with the linking capability or what I know of how a link works. Also, there are the powers and possible ideas of difference between types of Bright Ones!” He looked genuinely puzzled.

Guy leaned further across the table, and for the first time since the start of this strange conversation, he addressed the bodyguard, who now had his hand on his sword hilt, as well. “I said, go home.”

They left, although not as quickly as Guy would have liked, Mr. Alden kept on pausing and glancing at Guy as though he expected him to change his mind and ask about the information. The bodyguard kept on looking around for an attack now that they had been so

severely dismissed. It was all arranged, though. That would come later, when the suspicious death of a court member and his bodyguard would likely not be linked to a grimy pub in the middle of Old Palensite.

Eventually, once they had left, the patch of bright winter sunlight slowly being engulfed by the darkness as the door to the pub swung closed, Guy motioned to the small, hunched man that sat a few tables away. He came at once, the limp on his right foot greatly pronounced.

“Anything to tell the boss,” he asked, showing a surprising set of white teeth.

“No,” Guy replied, “just a man who believes in fairytales. There is nothing to it. Nothing useful, anyway.” He drained the last of his ale and left. The other man hobbling along beside him.

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The early spring sun beat down weakly on a village that stood tucked into the shadow of the huge Scar Mountains. The towering size of the mountains rose up far behind the village, making the village almost invisible as it seemed to disappear into the shifting shadows of the dense woods around it. Blue-grey smoke still curled up from many of the chimneys as the turning of time had yet to take the bite of winter out of the air. However, despite the chill, the town was buzzing with spring spirit. All along the small streets of the village, people rushed about like ants. The drifts on the road had finally broken and those families who lived outside the village had been able to make their way in to hear the news and perhaps buy a few items that they had run out of, at great cost, from those who had items to sell.

In the hustle and bustle of the day, a gangly boy slipped out of the back of a shop, still swinging his cloak over his shoulders. He waved to the people who waved to him as he passed, most of whom were friends of his parents' or brothers', and tried to avoid the conversations that they attempted to start.

He weaved through the town, going into a few stops, but always leaving empty-handed. He moved through the streets until he came to an empty space on the outskirts of town, left that way so the peddlers could sell their wares without cramming their carts into the small streets of the village. Currently, it was packed with wagons, sleds, and horses of every size as they waited for the return trek home. The children were also there. Having left their homes at first light and it now being noon, their excitement of town had now faded, most of them having begun to remember that after seeing your friends, the town only consisted of a lot of adults that yelled at you and told you not to touch stuff, they had returned to their wagons where they had begun to play a variety of games.

One large flock of children stood off to the left, crowded around someone who sat on the ground. Although he was much older than the children, and at least twice as tall as most of them, the boy still couldn't help being drawn in. He walked closer, trying to stay in the shadows of the wagons so as not to be spotted.

"...these great beasts of the ages, these Bright Ones', had power that you can barely imagine!" The old man swept his arms wide, his grey and white beard flying, his voice rising and falling with the words. He looked the children in the eyes as they huddled closer. "They were monstrous! They could be the size of several large houses all put together and to strike their skin is like striking stone. Even spears would shatter on impact. It is said that they could breathe air hot enough to set trees aflame or cold enough to turn the ground to ice. Their claws and their



teeth were immense white gashes against their bodies; sharp as iron and eight times as strong. Besides their great strength, they had another secret. Despite their size, they could be strangely quiet. So quiet that they could move without you knowing. Maybe next time you feel a breath on your neck it could be one of them. Maybe they have sought you out. It is said that they sleep, but that they will rise again when a mind calls to them. Just one special mind for each ancient Bright One. Maybe that could be you.”

Silence held for a second once the old man had finished talking. The children stared at him in awe, their eyes shining brightly as they took in the man who sat before them—a hero, despite his maimed leg, lost so long ago to swords and battle.

Suddenly, the silence was broken with a crack as sharp as ice breaking in winter. “Ashling Roya, you aren’t putting stories in these childrens’ heads are you?” A stout, short woman appeared from between the houses, apron still tied around her waist, and wooden spoon, which she now rapidly shed dough as she shook it, in her grasp. “Do you want them to turn out like you, going off and chasing dreams and nearly getting yourself killed in that rebel army, toss their souls too the f—...well. These children will be hard working, good people of this village. We don’t need you filling their heads with feathers and fancies.”

“Goodnoon to you, too, Mrs. Ishild. How is the baking? Well, I hope. I heard that little Ellen is becoming quite the little prodige now,” Ashling replied, pulling himself painfully to his feet with a twisted stick that he propped under his arms.

“Ah, Ellen is doing wonderfully. Her bread is superb and she can make the most charming little cakes. It is good to start preparations for a husband early on. The respectable ones can be hard to find,” for a moment Mrs. Ishild’s face darkened, and the boy, still standing in the shadows, winced. Everyone knew that Mrs. Ishild disliked her daughter’s choice of husband, and

planned to change her mind in the years she had until her youngest daughter could marry. Of course, it was just another piece of gossip that floated in the rumor mill unless, of course, you were the one on the receiving end of it.

Slowly, old man Ashling began to hop away, half-heartedly trying to make a convincing escape while Mrs. Ishild was happy talking of her daughter. Of course, like always, it did not work.

“And just where do you think that you are going?” She demanded, putting both hands on her hips. “I am not yet finished talking to you. We,” apparently she had decided to talk for the town now, “do not appreciate those deceitful stories that you put in our children’s minds. They need to concentrate on the thing that they will need to survive, not fables that will get them killed.”

“They aren’t fables, Mrs. Ishild,” old man Ashling argued. “They are perfectly true. The Bright Ones lived in the old kingdom centuries ago. I have seen the proof with my own eyes.”

“So I have heard,” the woman replied sharply, “in an old book some man at court dug out of a rusty cellar. Probably complete gibbering made up to please the idiotic nobles of the day. It is bad enough that you are not sensible enough to see that. It is truly unforgivable that you infect those who cannot tell tale from truth with it. Look at young Leal over there, still sneaking off to listen to your stories. Rumor has it that he is headed to the city this summer to study books. Book! What life is there in that?”

Feebly, Leal raised a hand and said, “Goodnoon, Mrs. Ishild, Mr. Roy.” He really had thought that he had been quite safe, tucked back into the shadows of the wagons. Apparently he needed to improve his ability to remain unseen.

“Is he really?” old man Ashling asked excitedly. “Truly? Oh, that is wonderful, my boy.” He turned to Mrs. Ushild, “I really must go and speak to him. Give my regards to Hardel.” He moved his body carefully to face Leal, and made as if to move. However, before he could, Mrs. Ishild put her stout form in front of his. She began talking, and just didn’t stop.

Guilty, Leal slipped away, refusing to see the pleading look that old man Ashling threw at him, probably both for rescue and to talk about the books. Well, Mrs. Ishild was right that he was leaving this village in the summer. But he wasn’t going to the city to learn from the books.

He stopped by an old stump where he had hidden some old snowshoes, protected in oiled leather, before he crossed the river, being very careful on the ice, and began to climb one of the great Scar mountains that rose behind the village. No, as great as the city sounded, he had a much better teacher.

Leal climbed for what felt like hours, although he knew that it was, in truth, much less. He climbed until his legs and chest burned. He couldn’t stop to recover for long, though, as the cold bit into his cloak and made his hands turn blue and numb. The thinning air caused him to be perpetually out of breath so that when he finally reached his destination, a deep ravine somewhere on the east side of the mountain, he stood for several minutes, hunched over, his breath coming in weases until he finally gathered the strength to force his thoughts outward.

*I won’t miss this*, he thought bitterly. His throat and tongue were beginning to feel swollen.

As he thought, the birds in the valley took flight, started by the sound of soft slithering and the hiss of great amounts of air that hummed as it circles. The movement of the air increased, until it became not a hum but a rhythm, thumping in time with Leal’s heartbeat. He straightened himself as the air around him began to slither into the valley, taking some of the loose snow on

top with it. A few seconds later, he had to fling up his hands to shield his face as all of that snow and more was flung back at him. When it finally cleared, Leal looked up to see a huge shape blocking out the sun. It was alternatively grey and brown, with red highlights running under its great wings and down its legs and tail. Its talons were sharp and white, as were its teeth in its cavernous mouth and the horns that mounted its head. Its eyes, also a deep, flickering red were the size of a small cart wheel.

*I never said that we had to wait to leave. If you remember, I suggested that we leave three moons ago. The thought was deep, and it reverberated through Leal's head, leaving a trail of fire behind. Leal could sense the heat, although it would never hurt him.*

*That, he told the creature, would look strange. I believe that doing that would be the only sure way for me to be considered more strange than I already am.*

The great beast sighed, his breath knocking even more snow into Leal's unprepared face. *I am sorry, child, the beast said quickly, after such a long sleep, I do forget how the world moves. He stopped as if considering for a moment. Would you like to attempt to climb down like last time, or this time, will you accept the ride on my back. I do not fancy having to carry you in my mouth again. Humans are fragile creatures, and I never did do well with fragile.*

Leal looked suitably chaste. The beast was protective of him. After all, their lives and minds were linked.

*I think I will accept the flight, Azar-Taal, dragon.*