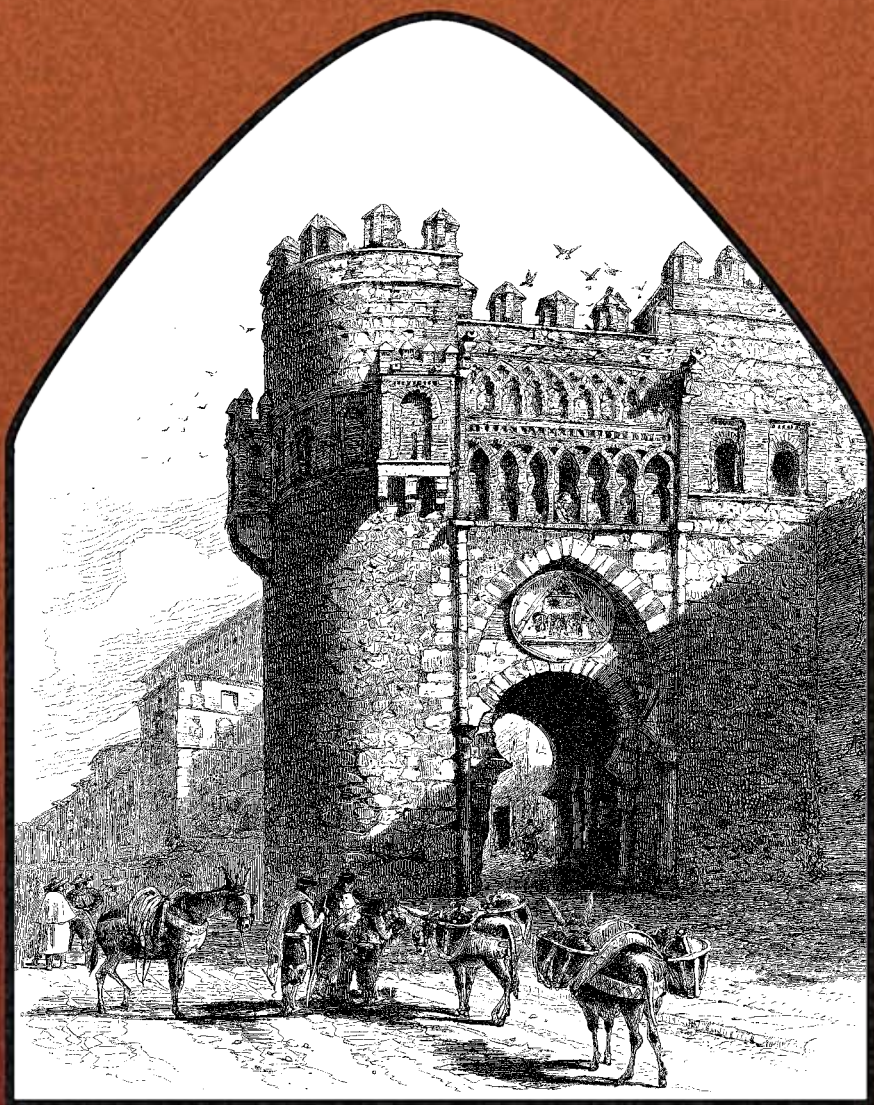


Once Upon a Journey ♦ IV

Journey to Welkindorn



SMSMITH

“The unrealistic nature of [fairy] tales ...
is an important device, because it makes obvious
that the fairy tales’ concern is not useful information
about the external world, but the inner process
taking place in an individual.”

~ Bruno Bettelheim ~

We must travel in the direction of our fear.

~ John Berryman ~

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Dedicated to the memory of Seymour & Winifred; John & Jenny
for firm foundations.

Journey ♦ IV ~ Journey to Welkindorn

A young acolyte's journey to an ancient mystic site is filled with confusion and despair. What is the purpose of his journey? How, with all his flaws, can he hope to fill the measure of his calling?

Once Upon a Journey series:

- I *The Wren & the Raven*
- II *A Prince to Crown*
- III *The Day the Rains Came*
- IV **Journey to Welkindorn****
- V *Belle of the Ballroom*
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Mark of the Flame Guild

Journey to Welkindorn

"That is a lie!" Fafin cried, with all the energy that a scrawny, almost fourteen-year-old could muster.

"'Tis not, short one," Ganndoh scoffed as he bent, thrusting his face close to Fafin's.

"You know nothing—*nothing*," Fafin cried again, clenching his arms stiffly to his body in a valiant effort not to smash the fineness out of Ganndoh's nose.

"Such passion!" Ganndoh mocked, raising his black brows and beginning a slow circle around his infuriated prey. It was his usual expression of mocking incredulity—the same expression so many affected when lording themselves over less blessed families such as Fafin's.

In the face of Ganndoh's mockery, Fafin forgot his mother's words of caution. He forgot too, as his arms came flailing round, how Ganndoh was two heads above him and three sizes beyond, all of muscle and sinew.

In the instant of Fafin's unthinking aggression, Ganndoh's blocking arm and striking fist set in motion for his provocation had been intended to excuse his own defence. Suddenly, the words Fafin had forgotten came ringing from within the harbour's doorway as he staggered backwards from an aborted blow to his shoulder.

"Fists prove nothing, my son," his mother Twandil said from her place beside the arched doorway.

In the shock of this unexpected witness, Fafin and Ganndoh stumbled backward in unbalanced retreat.

Twandil's mind registered the comedy in their reeling retraction, but the rage between them was no laughing matter. In truth, it had been deeply troubling to Twandil for some time. She

felt bereft of capacity to decipher whatever it was that drove Ganndoh to his bullying; so Twandil waited—staring at him, shaking her head. Yet she could not stem the trembling rage within herself at the mocking challenge in his manner. Once, his face would have flushed crimson and he would have scuttled away in hot shame to have been caught in such conduct. But today, he met her stare, a slight smile curving his lips; then his head dropped in an outward performance of courtesy as he sauntered toward the exit where she stood.

She turned her eyes to Fafin, but her mind's focus remained with Ganndoh. She wondered what he would do if she gave vent to her feelings. Would he hold that smirking smile, if she seized him round his vile throat and slammed him into the trellised wall?

Her hands itched to do it as he strolled by, but she kept her eyes on Fafin. She understood the blazing frustration in his eyes for it revealed what she was masking in her own.

When Ganndoh was past hearing, Twandil sighed. "My son," she said, "it does not matter what Ganndoh believes—what he says."

"It matters to me," Fafin cried. "He says the Mozen is a liar. He says the Mozen sleeps in bat dung; that the Mozen—"

Twandil interrupted for she had heard it all. "Does the Mozen care what people say?" Twandil asked.

"He doesn't know what Ganndoh says," Fafin cried again. "He doesn't know the awful things that—"

Again Twandil interrupted. "Oh, Fafin, what Ganndoh says is nothing to what others have said—to what others have published and spread in a thousand ways. The Mozen knows it all, and does he care enough to raise his fists?"

Fafin knew the answer all too well so he did not reply, but the frustration remained etched upon his face.

"Don't you see, my son," Twandil said, "the Mozen's great power lies in not raising his fists?"

It drives them to this madness that their taunts go unheeded. That is why they have turned to ones like us. When we can be provoked, it gives them the illusion of power the Mozen denies them. Then, because of us, they spout how the Mozines are no different than any other."

Fafin swallowed the lump in his throat for he had seen the triumph in Ganndoh's eyes as they had swung at each other. He had seen the smile of satisfaction; had seen his mother's hands clench before she had forced them into straightness. And Fafin knew that as the Mozen-to-come, he had failed miserably. He knew he had wounded himself more deeply than Ganndoh ever could have, and the thought of it was wrenching.

When the great Mozen had come quietly and alone to Fafin's home that summer previous and anointed him as the Mozen-to-come, Fafin had felt unspeakably overwhelmed, as had his stunned parents. But in obedience to the Mozen's instructions, they had told no one. Even

when others speculated as to the aging Mozen's death, they had remained silent. Besides, Fafin was still so young; had so much left to learn and experience. It would doubtless be years before he would be called upon. There would be plenty of time before anyone need know.

Thus, Fafin continued his studies and duties at Mount Mairid, seemingly no different than all the others, but he had become profoundly conscious of his every weakness. He had wondered a thousand, thousand times what had moved the Mozen to anoint him for it had seemed, since then, to compound his every fault.

He longed to weep at the enormity of this latest failing, but he dared not for if Ganndoh were concealed somewhere watching, the news of his compounded failure would spread as feathers in the wind. The agony of it was almost more than Fafin could endure. How could he ever be a true Mozone, let alone the very Mozen himself, if he could not control his fists? Why did this holy calling feel like an unbearable burden?

Fafin closed his eyes to contain the tears, and in the darkness of inside he saw those feathers in the wind. They wafted in a spiralling, slow configuration; yet strangely, they did not disperse. They held a shape he could not fathom until gently they began to rise, and in rising he saw they were not feathers at all. The shape of them revealed a boy—a boy flying in the exact way the Mozen had described!—in the very manner Fafin had sought to defend in that regrettable heated exchange with Ganndoh that had nigh led to a shameful brawl.

As the flying boy wafted in joyful flight, he waved to another, and to Fafin's wonderment, a second boy flew into the realm of his inside vision. The second boy seemed as Fafin's own self.

In the stunning vividness of it, Fafin's eyes flew wide in amazement, and though his vision was shattered in that act, it did not matter, for his knowledge was now fixed. He'd been given the briefest of witness, but it was enough.

He gazed upward and saw his mother watching him intently, though at first he did not have the breath to answer the question in her eyes.

"It is true!" Fafin exclaimed when at last he had the breath to say it. "The Mozen was right. There is a Welkine people."

Twandil smiled; then she asked the question that seemed as stunningly revelatory to Fafin as his inside vision had been.

"Then it does not matter, does it," Twandil said, "whether Ganndoh believes or not?"

In that question, Fafin felt his frustrations fall away as comprehension flashed. It was as sudden light in a dark place. His ragings had little to do with Ganndoh, but everything to do with the unacknowledged doubts that ringed his own belief. His rage had really been against the niggling uncertainties of his own intellect. But now, as in an instant, that rage was gone and with it, the displaced compulsion to crush the doubts of Ganndoh—all swallowed up in the clarity of his inside vision.

Fafin felt almost to laugh at the relief of it. How foolish he had been to rage at Ganndoh. How foolish to let present possibilities deny past incomprehensibles. Just because this present people had learned to fly in favouring winds with cloth and alloyed wings did not mean that the legends of the Welkine were unfounded. If the Mozen said that the ancient Welkine had flown beyond the confines of present wings, who was Ganndoh or anyone to say, it was impossible? Who was Ganndoh to say that the Mozen was a charlatan of inside visions, a sculptor of wind, a deluded conductor of moon-tides? Yet Ganndoh had said them all.

And what did it matter if the Mozen refused to cast himself without wings from Mairid Peak in public display of Welkine history? What did it matter if Fafin himself were too afraid to venture even an experiment in private? For the question of whether the Welkine had ever done it did not rest on the Mozen doing it, or even on Fafin daring it. Nor could the widespread legends of

it be hushed by decree—for they had all heard how that vast city, built so near the crater of its ancient namesake, had forbidden even the mention of wingless flight. The Welkindorn council said the reason could be found in the bleached bones of the many who, in pursuit of the old legends, had leapt wingless from high places. But none of that mattered to Fafin now. For him, the truth rested in the vision of what had been and now was not.

In the pervading calm of his witness, Fafin knew that Ganndoh's denial of the unseen past would never matter again. Fafin even luxuriated in the belief that his future would also be forever free of Ganndoh.

He was allowed the serenity of that thought for seven days—until the great Mozen's second stunning visit to the home of Fafin's family.

The Mozen began with the words, "There comes to each a journey, and the time has come for Fafin."

The Mozen saw the sudden fear etched upon the face of Twandil, yet he did not single her out. He spoke on, "And though you, his parents, may think him young, yet it must be. Thus, in facing your own tests, I would pray you do not deny Fafin his. I do not know the trial of him. I know only that he must begin at the sunrise of his fourteenth year. At the first push of light, he must turn into the west—toward Welkindorn."

The Mozen paused, studying their stunned faces; then he concluded with even more jolting words. He said, "Fafin's journey is to discern the way of every Mozen—the way of the Welkine."

Fafin could scarcely believe the words. He had not voiced it, but since the day of his fleeting inside vision, he had been consumed with a desire to see: to comprehend all that the ancient Welkine had—including wingless flight. Yet how was it possible that he, the fault-ridden Fafin, should be so favoured to quest what was beyond most others? The Mozen had said many times that ancient Welkindorn was accessible only to

those who were called to it—and they all knew he was not speaking of discovering lost ruins.

Fafin still remembered that day in Mount Mairid when a wise student had asked the Mozen if he had ever been to ancient Welkindorn, but the Mozen had given a skirted answer. He had said, “Many discover it on death. I expect I shall too, when I am called.”

But there had been a mist in the Mozen’s eyes that caused Fafin to wonder if one could teach so much of the ancient Welkine way without knowing it directly. Perhaps that was what defined a Mozen in part—to comprehend wingless flight while yet living. Perhaps that was the imperative quest of every Mozen-to-come.

In such thoughts and imaginings, Fafin heard little of the murmured concerns and plans that circled about his young head until his mother’s choked cry.

Fafin looked up to see his mother repeating herself with fists clenched against her cheeks bones. “No, no, no,” she cried; yet even in her

fervency, they all knew the words were meant more in plea than in denial of the Mozen.

Fafin watched in confused wonder as the Mozen, in his always gentle way, asked the simple question, "Why?"

"Because he hates my son," Twandil cried, sobbing on the words. "Because he hates all Mozines. Because he would never prove loyal protector of a Mozen-to-come." She paused to gain composure and they waited. At length, she continued, her voice strained and still near breaking. "Because his traitorous unbelief would compound the trial," she cried. "Because I know too much."

"But Twandil," the Mozen said, "that is never the question. The question always is: Do you know enough?"

Twandil dropped her face upon her clenched fists and struggled for renewed composure. Fafin's father sat beside, his hand upon Twandil's shoulder; his calloused fingers softly stroking a message he could not trust his voice to utter.

Fafin felt his heart beat in unsteady rhythm. He knew that somehow Ganndoh's name had caused his mother's outburst and now this dry, sobbing grief. Had the Mozen said that Ganndoh would be his protector to Welkindorn? How could such possibly be? Ganndoh would protect him from nothing. He could hear Ganndoh's words even now.

"Let the invisible Dahns of the great Mozen protect you," Ganndoh would scoff. "Let them show their high favour in snatching you from harm's way for I care nothing for Mozines—even less for you, whose father is a lowly weaver of cloth and mine the great merchant who sells for him." His tone would drip the poison he had taken into himself.

Fafin knew too, that a day would not pass but that Ganndoh would ridicule the great Mozen for being so imbecilic as to entrust Fafin to his care. Were the Dahns of the Mozines so asleep—so preoccupied they would allow such a thing? Those would be Ganndoh's words as he flexed

his brilliant, superior strength upon the silent, suffering Fafn.

It was clear in Fafn's mind what would surely transpire for he believed, without a shadow of wavering, that Ganndoh, despite his mocking words, would accept any call to serve as Fafn's protector. Above Ganndoh's willingness to serve any cause for the pay of it, he would relish the honour done to his protector's ranking. Beyond even that, he would delight in the unhindered defying of every article of Fafn's faith.

And Ganndoh knew those articles well. Only three years past, he had been the brilliant one at Mount Mairid—until that shocking, dreadful day when he had stood and denounced them all as frauds. That day of Ganndoh's rage had been the most terrible day Fafn could recall because he had always admired Ganndoh from afar. He had admired Ganndoh's mind; his easy, charismatic ways; his flashing, black eyes. Fafn had hung upon Ganndoh's every question—his every word—and had believed in his heart of

hearts that Ganndoh was the Mozen-to-come.

Fafin had never envied him that probability, but had believed it only fitting as he had measured himself against the gifts of Ganndoh. He had not the bones of Ganndoh's strength, nor the height, nor the wit of him; and he knew he never would have. He believed himself lacking in every important way and had sometimes wished, when the loneliness of introspection was upon him, that he had been allowed to share in the gifts of Ganndoh.

Thus, it all seemed impossibly fated that Mount Mairid's most brilliant one, in turning away to become Fafin's greatest tormentor—his very nemesis—would be marked by the Mozen to be Fafin's protector in this journey of his life.

But even above his fears of suffering at the hands of Ganndoh, Fafin felt his heart jerk in sudden fear of himself. He had felt a deep peace in his recent gifted immunity from Ganndoh's taunts about the ancient Welkine ways; but now, with this, things seemed turned about. Believing

the Welkine had flown without wings in ages past was quite a different matter to believing it possible for himself. And if Ganndoh should ever guess of Fafin's possible purpose, what would he not do to destroy the Mozen-to-come?

When Fafin pulled himself from his thoughts, he saw they were waiting upon him for some reply and he did not know the question.

"Did you not hear what the Mozen asked?" his father said, and though his father's voice was momentarily steady, his face was yet wet with tears.

Fafin opened his mouth to apologize, but the Mozen spoke first.

"Fafin, I know some of what you are thinking, but this I will say. Whatever Ganndoh has done, whatever you think he will do, is of no import to any of us. I say it is of no import because this journey is as much his as yours."

As the shock of those words registered in Fafin's eyes, the Mozen continued. "Had I been left to make this choice, I confess, I would not

have considered Ganndoh. He would not have been, even, my last choice. Yet, I tell myself this, that whatever we think about Ganndoh, he is not entirely devoid of honour. If he goes as your protector, he will meet his duty, whatever he may pretend otherwise for it is not within him to pursue failure. So, however much he hates you—however much he thinks he hates you—he will never abandon you. I dare say, he would even give his life in defence of you, if it meant preserving his honour. So you see—there is much we do not see. Nonetheless, it must be your choice.”

Fafin looked toward his mother, but she seemed incapable of speech. His father returned his gaze in silence with fresh tears coursing down his cheeks. So the Mozen spoke what they could not.

“This is not easy for them, Fafin,” the Mozen said. “Perhaps even more difficult than for you, but they have consented for their part. And it is not that they give you into the hands of Ganndoh.

You must always remember this, Fafin. It is that they give you into the hands of the invisible Dahns, which is quite a different matter. And so I repeat myself, Fafin. During those times that will seem past enduring—and they will come—you must remember into whose hands you were given. Do you understand?"

Fafin nodded. He understood more than the words. He understood how his nature would not permit him to deny the great Mozen whatever the circumstance. He felt almost without choice when it came to mouthing the necessary words of consent; almost as if the forces of some vital future compelled him to affirm what his sense and outer vision would have denied. And so, nodding his understanding, Fafin said the words, "I will go."

Those same words sealed Ganndoh's consent, but they were in no other way alike to Fafin's. Ganndoh's were edged with a hostile derision he refused to mask despite the neutrality that protectorate duty imposed on him.

When the Mozen had sent requesting his service, Ganndoh had been both stunned and appalled. Was the Mozen that stupid? Ganndoh could not fathom it; nor could he suppress the wrenching ambivalence of his feelings. It was a high honour, indeed, to be chosen from amongst the many who could have been chosen—the many far more experienced to serve as protector for a traveller—for any traveller, whatever the cause. That was the first rule of the Protectorate. There were never unworthy causes, only worthy pay. But Ganndoh had not felt neutral in contracting this protectorship, so he had resolved to seek more than ample compensation.

He had gone in person to confront the great Mozen, in part, because he could not believe this call to service was genuine; and in greater part, to best the holy Mozen in barter for a good price. Ganndoh had asked a hundred-fold what he expected to settle for, and then, had received the whole of it without so much as a blink from the imperturbable Mozen.

Ganndoh had not known what else to do but sign his name and affix his seal to the consented price. Yet in doing so, he had felt cheated beyond any capacity to measure. He had expected to fight for his pay—had hungered to, in mighty contest with the great Mozen; then whatever the consented amount, it would have seemed a fair price. And in that fair price, Ganndoh would have protected Fafin from all but the awkward boy's own miserable failings. In those myriad failings, Ganndoh had envisioned the young Fafin crushing himself and thus, whatever purpose the Mozen had in this journey to Welkindorn.

Yet now, this hundred-fold, unrivalled pay had stripped the pleasure from a duty esteemed above all others—to be the chosen protector of a traveller—any traveller.

How could he, Ganndoh, possibly feel cheated, and yet he did. Cheated of the measured service he'd intended to give for every thousand senrom. Cheated of the labours he'd meant to heap upon Fafin to augment the bartered price.

But most of all, cheated of his plan to best the holy Mozen in a war of expectations.

Over the eight days allotted for the journey's preparation, Ganndoh could scarcely contain his rage. The sight of the money packets became galling to him. Rather than sensing triumph, his thoughts were occupied with avenues of escape from this now dreaded duty. But there was no honourable escape. Thus, on the eighth day, Ganndoh found himself turning into the west, leading the two packmungs with Fafin beside.

For his part, during those days of preparation, Fafin had blocked all thoughts of Ganndoh, to focus on the legends of the ancient Welkine. There was much to remember of their ways for wingless flight was but one of the many marvels attributed to the once, widely-dispersed art and wisdom of the vanished Welkine.

It had seemed strange though that the Mozen should insist all travel be on foot. He had said,

in his oft-cryptic way, that some journeys were of a kind where one's grounding was integral to the passage. He had said too, that in such grounding, a wise Fafin would perhaps find the footing essential to letting go.

In the mystery of those words, Fafin had straightway asked, "What do you mean—letting go?" for he greatly desired confirmation of his journey's purpose. Was it, indeed, to comprehend the secrets of Welkine flight? Or was it for some other purpose? And how would he come to know?

The Mozen had merely smiled and said that all questions would be answered in their own time. Then the Mozen had refused to say more, except that Mount Mairid had set enduring foundation for his journey; and that a wise Fafin must not, in fixing expectations, constrain the journey's purpose. The Mozen's parting words were to assure Fafin that he would, in the end of it, never regret his consent.

Yet, in the beginning, not even a day's journey passed before Fafin regretted the selection of this protector. From the moment of first light, Ganndoh set a gruelling pace. Fafin soon fell to the rear and into a silence that Ganndoh exuded like a fog. In that silence, they travelled for what seemed forever, plodding step upon plodding step across the unvarying, thirsty grasslands. At length, the Mozen's words began cycling through Fafin's mind.

Fafin had asked why he could not journey trusting in the invisible Dahns without looking to Ganndoh, and the Mozen had said, "I trust you will do that." Then he had explained that the invisible Dahns did not choose to expend their powers when a lesser would do—though that in no way meant Fafin should confuse in whom he was trusting.

So Fafin had made a silent vow to request nothing of Ganndoh but to accept whatever was given, however it came, and to credit it all to the Dahns. He began with contented expectation

that faithless, haughty Ganndoh would prove an unwitting instrument of the great Dahns.

Yet, as the day stretched endlessly on, this protector, engaged as surrogate to provide against every need, provided nothing—not food, not drink, not rest, not even the expected mockery. The confusion of it became consuming.

Where else should he have placed his trust? He had been certain they meant to use Ganndoh for their high purposes. He had thought, even in talk of hardship, that the Dahns would be there for him if Ganndoh were not. Soon other questions took up the cycle of his mind. If this were such a vital journey, why did it have to be so painful? Why was no one providing? not Ganndoh, not the Dahns, not even the bone-dry landscape.

Had he once suspected there could be such total failure, he would have made provision for himself. How could he possibly endure, and this was only the beginning? What could the coming days bring any worse than this?

As the day wore on, Fafin sensed that Ganndoh expected him to collapse in a sobbing heap, but Fafin kept on, hour upon hour, ignoring, as best he could, his obsessing thirst.

All the while, ahead of Fafin, Ganndoh pressed on, knowing that if this traveller were any other, he would have felt duty bound, in the face of even a tenth the Mozen's pay, to bend his back to the utmost comfort of his traveller.

But Ganndoh was still working his angers; still pondering possible paths to escaping his duty. If this weakling collapsed, he could heap him atop a packmung's back and return in disgust, to cast him at the feet of the Mozen. He would fling the bundled money there too, and scorn to be the protector of one who could not even walk a day's journey upon his own feet. But the wretched boy was plodding on, neck bent low, without even the sense to supply his needs from the pouch of first day's food and drink; without even the energy to avoid the packmung filth that spattered upon the path.

And this, Ganndoh knew without doubt—no matter his pay, be it a thousand, thousand fold, the cleansing of this traveller's feet would never fall to him.

Already Ganndoh's strong neck was strained from continual checks at the lagging boy. If the boy was hungry, exhausted, it was no fault but his own. Had he requested food, Ganndoh would have pointed to its place. Had he fallen, Ganndoh would have done his begrudging duty. Had he pleaded for rest, they would have stopped. But Fafin had done none of those, so Ganndoh pressed unrelentingly on.

As night descended, the desire to turn back became almost unbearable within Fafin, but he did not have the strength for even that. When at last the packmungs halted in the near darkness, Fafin staggered away to collapse upon what seemed the only spot of softness he had seen in hours. He had vague recollection of a cover tossed his way, but that was all.

When the rising sun woke him, Fafin's mouth felt burning dry, as dry as the relentless dust. Yet his hair felt wringing wet. Almost in reflex, Fafin turned and sucked into the strange mound of wet moss where his head lay. It gave as if he'd laid his lips to a sodden sponge. He realized then that he had done so several times in the night but had thought it all a dream.

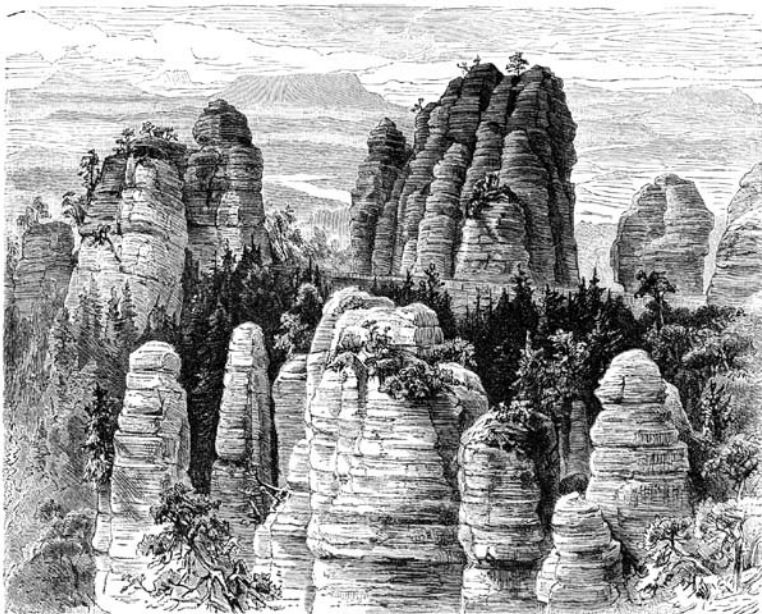
As Fafin stood, he heard Ganndoh cluck the packmungs into the path and without glance or word to Fafin, Ganndoh set out upon the new day's journey.

With fresh hope, drawn from rest and the thirst-assuaging moss, Fafin took up the way, convinced this new day would bring better things—that his hungers would find relief, that his strength would return, that the Dahns would come to his rescue. But as the silent, hot hours dragged on into further numbing weariness, hunger, and thirst, Fafin fought the overwhelming desire to fling himself at Ganndoh's feet and beg for relief.

Yet he did not. By sheer force of will, Fafin survived hour upon hour. But it was more than stubborn will that accounted for his second day's survival. The first time the packmungs balked and stopped in their tracks, Fafin accounted it supreme fortune and collapsed upon the path's edge, not caring if they ever moved, nor giving heed to the withering scorn that Ganndoh shot his way. So while Ganndoh cursed and flogged the unyielding beasts, Fafin sank into slumber.

Ganndoh soon realized the futility of his cause, and begrudgingly resigned himself to preparing grass tea and to keeping mindless of Fafin. It had proven easier than he expected because the thrill of venture had worked past his anger. He had given up for a time all striving to decipher the Mozen's purposes.

Now he lay, scanning the tree-lined ridges and bizarre rock formations he could see just ahead, and listening for the concealed dangers inherent in the transition between mountain and grassland passage. He revelled in the sights that



had been but imagined through the words of other protectors. He revelled too, in the stature of serving protector to a traveller. He put from his mind that this traveller was one he would never have chosen, but then he had always known that his only power was in the pay, and he would not think of that either.

He kept his thoughts occupied, confirming the things about him, till at last the packmungs, of their own accord, took up the course again. He swung to his feet and whistled as he would for

a dog. As intended, Fafin came awake. Ganndoh strode forth to set an even more gruelling pace.

Thus, they continued hour upon hour.

Again Ganndoh's neck felt the stress of continual checks upon Fafin. He could not help but marvel at Fafin's stamina—and at his stubbornness. Fafin had merely to ask, yet he did not. Ganndoh envisioned it all as a contest of wills. It would never have occurred to him in a thousand days that this journey might have become, for his dogged traveller, a test of trust.

As Ganndoh began to feel his own weariness, he longed to shout that if Fafin were so tired, he didn't have to ask anything. He could just plain refuse motion as the wretched packmungs had done.

As if on cue, the packmungs stopped dead pace for the second time, and in their stance, Ganndoh knew better than to think of trying them. But this time, the packmungs took to shaking themselves till it seemed every item within their burdens would be rearranged from top

to bottom. The untouched water flask reserved for Fafin's use broke free of its strap and flew through the air, straight at Fafin's dust-coated head. Before Ganndoh could even respond to protect his traveller as he knew was his first duty, Fafin thrust his hands upward in sheer reflex and caught the sweating sides of the flask. For a mere moment, he and Ganndoh's eyes locked in stunned surprise, but Fafin had no wish to provoke, so he turned away to cautiously drink of what had been so strangely offered, and then to collapse in immediate slumber beneath a high, red-leafed winton.

Ganndoh shook his head free of what he had just seen and did as he had done before. He vowed to keep his thoughts far from both Fafin and the Mozen.

But this time, there was no exotic horizon to capture his focus—only towering red-leafed wintons all around. Soon, without even realizing it, Ganndoh's thoughts turned to the things he would have avoided.

Ever since his self-imposed exile from Mount Mairid, he had trained with the protector's guild. With a competency beyond his years, he had kept the trust of high-ranking merchants and ministers in the portage of rare documents, secret missives, and wealth. But when it came to Fafin—this clumsy boy who seemed the very opposite of himself—he invariably descended to an inane, bullying posture he could not explain; becoming an immature, smirking half-man of seventeen. What was it about Fafin that locked him into such turmoil?

Was Fafin merely an easy whipping boy to flog the irrationalities of the Mazine way? Ganndoh had been given his first traveller—the signalled transition to full service in the Flame Guild—yet, he felt caught in a maze between. How could he reconcile the multitude of contraries that arose in being protector to Fafin? Out of what did his animosity arise? It was not that Fafin followed the Mazine way, for he had known that many

travellers would, and it had not mattered. In truth, despite everything, he would even have served protector to the very Mozen himself had the pay been right. So what was his obsessive objection to Fafin?

When the bitter answer came, his quickened breath expelled as though a fighter's cudgel had caught him midriff unawares. He could scarcely credit the possibility, but if it were so—unbelievably, implausibility so—the magnitude of the honour extended to his protectorship ravelled his mind while at the same time, the power it gave into his hands set them trembling. This cannot be, his mind whispered. And yet—!

He looked across at the sleeping boy. The mind of Fafin was brilliant—as brilliant as his own. Perhaps that had been, in part, his drive to capture it. But who could ever guess, this painfully awkward, oft-silent, almost dwarfish child was the Mozen-to-come.

The more Ganndoh pondered it, the more he allowed that Fafin was indeed the Mozen-

to-come; and the more incomprehensible this journey became. In this, the Mozen had sunk to a new depth of irrationality. Or perhaps, it was a monstrous failing of memory. Had the Mozen forgotten Ganndoh's last day at Mount Mairid? Had he forgotten the cruel words that had driven his shining one into open rebellion? If he had forgotten, Ganndoh had not. Those words would remain forever clear as on the day they were given voice.

When Ganndoh had appeared for private session that hot summer's morn—scarce three summers past—the Mozen had spoken without warning; without mincing his words. He had said, "In seeking this office, my lad, you shall never be worthy of it."

In the unexpectedness of the accusation, Ganndoh had straightway denied what, in truth, had become the pursuit of his life.

In reply to Ganndoh's fervent denial, the Mozen had said, "When hypocrisy comes with such ease, my friend, so will other vile things."

In that doubled blow, Ganndoh had stood silent, too stunned to attempt defense against such unexpected, incomprehensible assault, so the Mozen had continued.

"Ganndoh, I speak these things for your good. You have avarice for the honours you suppose I have. Such would not disqualify you of itself if you were willing to abase yourself, but I do not see that in you. And I do not see in you what is required in a Mozen. Do you wish to spend your days teaching as I? Do you wish to trudge from place to place bearing the soul of life when so many yearn only for the excesses of it, which is not your calling to give, not even condone? Are you prepared to stand silent when enemies shout lies, crafted against your disproof?"

The Mozen had waited for Ganndoh's reply in the stretched-out silence. Ganndoh had always known what he wanted and it was never any of what the Mozen described. What Ganndoh wanted shone in the faces of those who would have walked through fire at the Mozen's nod.

The sense of it filled the streets when the Mozen passed. And if this Mozen did not recognize what it was, Ganndoh did. And he had known for a long time what he would do with it.

The Mozen's final, dismissing words had been spoken softly, but the hardness in them was unmistakable. The Mozen had said, "I have nothing more I can offer, Ganndoh. You will have to find what you seek in other places."

Ganndoh had held his bitter rage till the final forum of that day; then had shouted his mind and turned forever away from Mount Mairid.

He had never expected the Mozen to speak with him again. Thus, how was it conceivable that the allegedly astute Mozen had willingly placed this Mozen-to-come within his hands?

Ganndoh wondered if Fafin even knew of his own election. He wondered if the Mozen had paused to consider the myriad possibilities of what Ganndoh could do? What was the Mozen thinking even now? What did he expect to achieve in this bizarre arrangement?

At last, the confusion of it became too great, so Ganndoh did the only thing he could conceive. He cast it to a corner of his mind and turned to weaving blades of grass without purpose, till in packmung motion he could return to his duty of searching out and protecting the way of the traveller.

When Fafin rose to his feet in answer to Ganndoh's whistle, he discovered at the path's far edge a pouch of partially spilled contents. The sight of the food seemed a gift from the Dahns, which he supposed it was—just as the flying water flask had been—dislodged by the same quaking event.

Without meeting Ganndoh's swift, startled glance, Fafin retrieved his second gift, eating and drinking to cautious satisfaction as he trudged along. It came to him then that this food and drink had always been available but for the asking; perhaps not even for the asking—for the mere seeing. He hadn't once thought to look. He had expected provision to come in another

way. Was this, in part, the Mozen's meaning—that Fafin should not, in fixing expectations, constrain the journey's purpose?

Fafin did not mean to complain, but he wondered why he always seemed to learn everything the hardest way.

It was not until the fourth day of their journey that Ganndoh broke his silence. Fafin had tried on the third day, but Ganndoh had seemed as if he did not hear, except that when Fafin had mustered the courage to say, "I'm stopping for awhile," Ganndoh had stopped without a word. When Fafin was ready, they had proceeded on: the same gruelling pace, the fog of silence.

Sometimes Fafin was unsure he wanted the silence broken if it meant Ganndoh would revert to his usual scorn and mockery. But Ganndoh seemed somehow different—as if he were mulling something he could not settle in his mind. Yet he was fulfilling his duty for each new day, the food pouch and water flask were filled anew.

When at last Ganndoh broke his silence, the bitter tone sent chills coursing down Fafin's spine. They had been sitting apart from each other as usual, eating from their separate pouches, when Fafin had felt Ganndoh's stare. He had looked up and that was when Ganndoh asked, "Are you the Mozen-to-come?"

Fafin felt the truth, the fear, and the shame of his fear, chase across his flushed face. He felt doubly shamed that it had been so visible to Ganndoh, but Ganndoh's expression did not change. He just sat there staring and waiting, so Fafin swallowed the food that threatened to choke him, and said, "I did not seek it, but the Mozen came."

In those innocent, yet convicting words, Fafin saw a darkness pass upon Ganndoh's face and wondered if he had done right in confessing the truth. Perhaps he should have been as Ganndoh, pretending not to hear; but that was not in his nature. He turned and gathered the remains of his simple meal, hoping for the return of peace-

ful silence, but Ganndoh was not finished.

"What is the purpose of this journey?" Ganndoh asked, knowing it was improper to ask and irrelevant to the fulfilment of his duties.

Fafin knew instantly he would skirt reply just as the Mozen had done when speaking of old Welkindorn. Besides, Fafin told himself, he had no confirmation, only his own thoughts.

Without hesitation, he met Ganndoh's stare and said, "The Mozen did not tell me, though I asked. He said my questions would be answered in due time. Thus, the purpose will manifest when that time is come."

Ganndoh stared on for a time before saying, "If you suppose that Welkindorn is any place to send a mere boy such as yourself, then you are as doltish as your precious Mozen."

Fafin refused the angry provocation, yet he would not remain silent either.

"Perhaps, I know what to expect as much as you, seeing as how neither of us has ever been there," Fafin said in low, measured tone.

"I will tell you what I know," Ganndoh said, "which is a great deal more than you. Welkindorn is nothing—nothing—like what you think. You imagine there will be houses of great learning. You imagine there will be wide streets, beautiful gardens, flowering trees. You imagine you will find every fantasy the Mozen takes such pleasure in describing."

Fafin wanted to interrupt and tell Ganndoh that no such things were in his imagination; that he, Fafin, knew as well as anyone that present-day Welkindorn was nothing like its ancient namesake. But Ganndoh was not pausing for any breaths.

Ganndoh continued his tirade. "Well, I will tell you what the protectors say who have been there. They say the streets are narrow and filthy. They say the houses have no windows—only massive doors with bolts and bars. They say, thieves run rampant night and day; the markets, places of fraud and debauchery. Travellers without protectors are beaten, robbed, and thrown into waste

gutters. Those who do not die are sold in the market for any purpose and for any price. That is what I know. And you are the one who knows nothing."

Fafin felt a strange calmness descend in the words of Ganndoh. "Let me tell you what I know," Fafin said in a quiet, steady voice. "I know that you wear the mark of the Flame. I know that if any should touch me or you, or any possession, that every protector of the Flame Guild would descend upon Welkindorn and turn it to rubble if it did not deliver up the offender and his whole clan to the vengeance of your guild. So why should I fear what now is? If the beauty and knowledge of ancient Welkindorn is vanished in the corruption you describe, yet there is some purpose to which I have been called and to which purpose you have covenanted to protect me. That is what I know."

Fafin wished to tell Ganndoh how he was journeying for some greater purpose too, but he kept silent.

Ganndoh stared on without speaking. Fafin felt the blood course up along his neck and wished he had not spoken of purposes. What if Ganndoh should guess what Fafin considered—hoped his to be?

At last Ganndoh arose, breaking the interlude as he clucked to the packmungs. Once again they set off, but not before Ganndoh, in familiar, mocking derision, said "I suppose you think old Welkindorn flew itself up to the invisible Dahns?"

Fafin did not answer for Ganndoh knew well what Fafin thought. When Mount Mairid had been his life, Ganndoh too had believed in the ascension legends of ancient Welkindorn. Fafin sighed and wondered if Ganndoh's mockery would ever end now that it had begun. Indeed, the mocking questions came—often at meal's end—and prefaced with "I suppose you also think ...?"

Yet, over the next six days, there evolved a subtle change. Ganndoh seemed to forget his

barbed assaults and seemed as a blind man groping for a hidden spring that would unlock a mystery.

Despite Fafin's firm resolve, he felt unnerved by Ganndoh's unrelenting study. Fafin tried to assure himself that flying without wings would never occur to Ganndoh as a possible purpose for this journey. Of course, they had argued once or twice about whether the Welkine had ever managed it, but never about whether Fafin thought it possible for himself. Besides, they had argued about many things.

The sun was just casting its final rays upon the sixteenth day of their journey when Ganndoh announced that by dusk of the coming day, they would arrive at the gates of Welkindorn. Ganndoh seemed to sense the twin floods of anticipation and anxiety that nearness to Welkindorn evoked in Fafin for Ganndoh's final mocking statement was perfectly timed. Ganndoh said with terse conviction, "You think you're going to fly."

Fafin felt the flush about his neck and ears that inexperience could not control, and knew his mouth opened in a bursting urge to deny, but somehow he managed to speak as if the words had not hit their mark. "Then we shall know soon enough what the Dahns intend," Fafin said, sounding more calm than he felt.

As they approached the massive city walls, Fafin wondered if Ganndoh felt the same prickling awe. If ever there was vision to confirm the need for a protector, it was that which greeted them inside the Welkindorn gate. Hollowed-eyed men, women, and even tiny children squatted forlornly against mud-crusted walls—vacantly staring.

Fafin could not bring himself to meet any more vacant stares, after the first few, for in the depths of such despair, he could not imagine how the mark of the flame upon Ganndoh's garment, or even its mark upon the packmung halters could effect sufficient deterrence. But Ganndoh did not show concern. Nonetheless,

Fafin closed the distance between himself and the laden packmungs, and felt ashamed at his cowardice. How could he ever prove worthy of his calling—as worthy as Ganndoh would surely have proven in like place?

In tight procession, they proceeded at a steady pace through the narrow, crooked streets. Fafin marvelled at Ganndoh's sense of place for he seemed never to doubt their course. True, Ganndoh had spent much of his meal and rest time studying maps, yet now he proceeded with reference only to his memory. They travelled through twists and turns, like a never-ending maze, with Fafin ever conscious of those staring eyes, and that awful, shaming prickle along the back of his neck.

After a time, the narrow lanes gave way to slightly wider ones, and about the time they turned into a well-paved street, the sense of predatory watching left Fafin. At the street's end stood a towering structure marked high upon its face with the flaming lion. Fafin had not given

thought to where he would stay in Welkindorn, but the sight of this apparent accommodation filled him with flooding relief. Relief too, to see that some buildings had windows, despite what Ganndoh had said, though windows were seen only in tall buildings—their small apertures commencing several heights above the ground.

Fafin stood mute as Ganndoh handed his guild contract to the tall, black-haired woman who silently appeared at the entrance to the flame-marked building. Fafin saw her scan the signatures and then the entries. He saw her black eyes widen in surprise at something, and then glance sharply at himself and then at Ganndoh. Ganndoh ignored her curious surprise, peeling off several thousand-note senrom and handing them to her as he turned to Fafin.

"You are to go with Desna. She is the keeper of this guild house and will look to your needs for now; but I stress, you are not to venture anywhere beyond this entrance without me. Do you understand?" Ganndoh asked.

Fafin understood perfectly, but he felt the need to deny his fears, so he said, "I wouldn't know where to go, anyway."

Ganndoh spoke sharply, "That is not the point." And without waiting for reply, he led the weary packmungs away into a dark portal.

When Fafin recollected himself from staring after the vanished figures, he found the woman named Desna patiently awaiting his attention.

"Oh, I'm sorry," he said. "I forgot you were—" He paused realizing how rude he must sound.

"Not to matter," the smiling woman said, "for we are most assuredly at your service."

Fafin felt uncomfortable at the awe he saw in the woman's face. He could not imagine what prompted it for he had not the slightest idea how much had been paid for his protectorship. Nor did he know of the instructions for his accommodation that Ganndoh had written that very morning in the small space below the contract signatures. But Desna, having seen it all, could not fathom who would ever pay such a price or

why. Her curiosity was peeked beyond what she could ever remember. To pay such price for a mere boy was odd in the extreme; especially as this boy had been contracted to travel on foot, and did not, in manner or clothing, bear the remotest mark of distinction. In his height, she had guessed him years younger than he was, till she'd seen his age noted upon the contract. But whatever the reason for such accommodation and price, it was beyond her in more ways than simple comprehension for her purpose was not to gossip or speculate about travellers. Her first duty and purpose was to serve.

The boy interrupted her thoughts. "Do I call you Desna?" he asked.

She smiled again and said, "That is my one and only name, though a good many travellers don't seem to remember it."

"Well, I will call you Desna," Fafin said with some spirit for in his eyes every person deserved a name that was known and remembered. Her words reminded him of the Mozen's story of old

Wzammi. How soon we seem to forget things we should remember forever, Fafin thought.

Desna interrupted his tangent of memory. "Come," she said, "I will take you to your rooms. There is a gear-lift, but I think, this first time, you should enjoy the artisan view."

As they mounted the grand, circular stairs of the interior court, Fafin felt an overwhelming awe. The higher they mounted, the more superb the craftsmanship. When they came at last to the sixth and highest floor, Desna led Fafin through an ornate door into a room that was so beyond Fafin's imagination, he stood gasping.

"This is one of our king rooms," Desna said. "You are fair fortunate to merit such, for most of our guests never see past the fourth stair."

"Why, then, am I here?" Fafin blurted out pulling his amazed gaze from the many brilliant frescos that surrounded them.

"Your protector paid the price," she said, "which frankly they don't all do, even when they should."

"Ganndoh! paid for this?" Fafin exclaimed.

"Wait till the food comes," Desna said with a smile. "Nothing will ever taste the same—I can assure you."

She had meant it as commendation, but in those words, rang the memory of other words. "When one loses the joy of his necessity," the Mozen had said, "one has lost what he cannot afford to lose."

"Desna, I do not wish to rob you of Ganndoh's pay," Fafin said, "but I cannot stay here. I wish only what is offered without ascending."

"But my child—!" Desna began, her face a mix of confusion, concern, and disbelief. "You cannot mean this. The ground rooms are next to nothing. There is neither light nor heat, save one small candle. The food is bread and cheese and milk and nothing more. You cannot know what you say."

"You are to keep the pay," Fafin said. "I will tell Ganndoh so, but I cannot, I will not stay here. I have no place in this place."

The conviction borne within his words could not be argued, so Desna, sighing deeply, closed the door upon her best suite. She was bereft of both words and comprehension. They descended in silence to the sparsest accommodations. There were only four of the low rooms, as rarely used as her best. Most travellers found place somewhere in between.

The room was indeed sparse, but in Fafin's mind, the straw mattress, elevated from the stone-cold floor, was a marked improvement from recent days. The rough wooden table and chair where a candle, basin, and pitcher vied for space were as serviceable as anything he has seen above. Two knobs protruding from the stone wall would serve nicely for his few clothes, and the small ledge near his bed would accommodate the candle for night-time reading.

"It's perfect," Fafin said with delight. "And to tell the truth," he added, "I can't think of anything I desire more at this moment than bread, milk, and cheese."

Desna gave another deep sigh. Then, after showing him the common washing room two doors down, she went in search of her strange guest's desire.

Fafin was perched upon his low bed eating his nourishing fare when Ganndoh entered. Fafin hadn't known what to expect, but certainly not Ganndoh's silence upon the subject of his room.

"My initiative is completed," Ganndoh said. "What transpires now is up to you, so when you know what you want, you have but to inform Desna, and she will fetch me. But know this: if you think to feel safe in venturing out alone, you are not."

After a brief pause, Ganndoh continued. "You should know as well—the Flame Guild does not pursue vengeance when travellers court their own injury or death. So you see, I await your further instruction." With that Ganndoh wheeled about and left.

Fafin hadn't even managed a single word; not even to say that Desna was to keep the king's pay she'd been given. By the time he collected his thoughts, deposited his meal tray upon the bed, and rushed to the door, Ganndoh had vanished. Fafin tread swiftly into the inner court and gazed up the stairs, but there was no one in sight. He hurried to the entrance and looked out, but Ganndoh was not there either, though there were ones in the street whose hostile stares renewed the prickling along his neck. He drew back into the shadows and watched till his watchers gave up their vigil and wandered off.

Fafin was readjusting his eyes to the dim interior; wondering what he should do about Ganndoh, when Desna appeared in a doorway.

"If you're looking for Ganndoh," she said, "I can fetch him."

"I meant to tell him about you keeping your pay," Fafin said, "but he left so suddenly, I—" Fafin paused, seeing the smile upon Desna's face.

"No need," Desna said. "Your Ganndoh said he expected as much. Even gave me extra for having wasted my steps." Desna laughed. "You are some strange pair," she said. "You down here and him—up there." She pointed up the grand stairway.

Seeing the startled, shocked look on Fafin's face, she explained. "He said there was no point wasting good money, which is admittedly true, and since we accommodate our protectors in whatever manner their means allow, it seemed only fitting that—"

Desna did not complete her explanation for in that precise moment their attention was diverted toward high double-doors at the far end of the inner courtyard. Fafin watched in wide-eyed wonder as no less than five porters emerged, marching toward and up the central stairs, bearing silver trays upon their shoulders. And though the tray contents were hidden by ornate covers, yet intoxicating smells from vented lids wafted within range of Fafin's trembling nostrils. He

wasn't prepared for the rush of emotion that coursed from his belly to his throat.

Ganndoh had played him the perfect fool. Ganndoh had known he would reject the opulence of a king's suite; had known he would resolve on some penurious condition. Now Ganndoh was rubbing his nose quite literally in the poverty of that choice. Fafin hadn't expected Ganndoh to take what he had rejected and he knew it shouldn't matter, but somehow it did.

Desna could see Fafin's conflicting emotions upon his face. "Your Ganndoh said he would be happy to trade with you at any time, should you change your mind," she said gently. "You have only to ask."

There was no mockery in her words, but there was sufficient in this circumstance of his own foolish making that Desna's lack of it was without consequence.

"No, I'm fine," Fafin said between lips that could scarcely move. He turned away and walked resolutely back to his chosen place. He sat upon

his bed and finished his bread of choice, but where it had before tasted nourishing, it now tasted dry and bitter.

He was grateful he had not spied Ganndoh upon the stairs to perhaps hear the news from him. Fate must have hidden Ganndoh in some shadow, or perhaps he had ascended in the gear-lift; thus, it was guileless Desna who had witnessed his colossal failing.

As Fafin sat in his cold, barren room, he hated Ganndoh with inexpressible passion. Ganndoh was like a poultice upon the vileness of Fafin's soul. Every weakness Fafin despised in himself, Ganndoh drew out of him like festering pus.

When Fafin finally choked down the remainder of his meal, he told the attentive Desna that he wished to be alone. He closed his door, latched it, and fell into a sobbing grief that seemed to have no end. How could he ever think to merit any gift of ancient Welkindorn when he failed himself and the Dahns at every turn? How could the Dahns tolerate such a miserable, wretched

soul as he? But the thing that tore at his soul the most was the rage that gradually, inexorably redirected itself.

Almost as if he were spectator, he listened as a part of himself raged at everything he held dear and true. Some part of him, in broiling tirade, accused his beloved Mozen of senseless folly in anointing him the Mozen-to-come. The invisible Dahns received their portion too, of accusation for irreconcilable dealings and failings.

How such thoughts could be entertained and life go on was beyond Fafin. He had been taught his whole life to honour the omnipotent, omniscient Dahns, and yet here he lay, in the midst of his life's quest, with a mind pounding full of unbidden, devastating doubts and accusations directed against the very Dahns he looked to for life and guidance.

When finally the sobs subsided, Fafin lay in the shadows of his room staring at the flickering candle upon his table. His mind felt blank, as if no thought had sufficient force to penetrate the

nothingness left by the flood that had coursed through him. He closed his eyes and waited for the emptiness to complete some final act to his oblivion.

When Fafin awoke, the room was in pitch blackness. He could not even discern his own hand. He had no idea of the time; no memory of the space between his emptiness and his wakening; only that the darkness now held an enveloping calm. There was something else too. A sense of connectedness and reconciliation—as though some rejected, disowned part of himself, having been allowed, was now transcended.

He remembered the pungent smells of the ascending feast; the countless lamps and the trickling water from an overhead cistern that defined, in part, the status he had rejected. He remembered every luxury his astonished eyes had marvelled at in his brief exposure to them; but now, that unbidden surge of envy and grief seemed as washed from him as the soil of his

journey had been but hours before. He knew Ganndoh would be above, revelling in the luxury of kings, and he smiled. He felt pure pleasure in knowing that Ganndoh, loving those cultured things, would savour them as was intended.

Fafin sighed deeply and thought, "Why should I have envied for a moment, a place I never wanted—a place so right for Ganndoh."

In that thought, Fafin comprehended that Ganndoh's place would, one day, be amongst kings; whether for good or ill, only time would tell.

Fafin groped his way to the door, unlatched it and peered out into the inner court. The silence was profound. He walked to the entrance now closed by two massive, wooden doors with the upper portion open to the night. Hoisting himself up, he clung to the iron bars that prevented entrance to all but the night's air and looked out. The stars shone brightly and in that shining he could see skulking, wild dogs of the night loping silently along the street.

He was so engrossed in the desolate scene of the street that he was not aware of his visitor till he felt the thrusting nuzzling against his calf. In the immediate panic of it, he let out a choking shriek as he lost his hand- and toe-grip upon the great door. As he lurched sideways, unbalanced toward the stone floor, the unimaginable creature sprang upon him, knocking him flat, face upward, throat exposed. If the futile frenzy of scooting, rolling and twisting toward escape, Fafin did not realize at first that the expected teeth were nothing more than slathering tongue swipes. When the second swipe caught him full across his blood-drained face, he collapsed full out upon the stones in near-hysterical, smothered laughter as the frolicsome beast trampled his convulsed form unhindered.

His laughter seemed as cleansing as his sobs of just hours before. He hoped no one was being disturbed, but he could not help the laughter, stifled though as best he could. For a creature that must surely have both bark and bite, there

was no sound except for panting enthusiasm.

Fafin was still laughing when a single word called off his playful attacker. "Baston!" a low, commanding voice barked out of the darkness. The creature backed away from Fafin, but in the faint light, Fafin could see his attacker, eyes glowing above a panting tongue and heaving chest.

"He could just as easily have killed you," the voice said, and Fafin recognized it as the voice of Ganndoh.

"With fright, I know," Fafin said, laughter still in his tone as amazement flooded his mind that he no longer cared what Ganndoh knew about his several failings. He scooted to put his arms around the great black dog.

"He is not a pet," Ganndoh said with hardness. "He is the silent watch of the night, and had you not kept yourself so wholly indisposed following your supper, you would have been introduced to prevent his tearing you to shreds."

Fafin could hear the scorn in Ganndoh's voice, but marvelled again how he did not care that

Ganndoh might have listened to his grief. It struck him too, that despite imaginings, Ganndoh had not been revelling in a king's pleasure. He had kept silent watch in the low realms of the guild house against the very possibility of what had just occurred—Fafin's venturing out of his room without introduction to Baston.

Why had Ganndoh not barged in upon his grief hours ago and make this introduction and gone to his kingly room? He could have spent a sweet night too, glorying in Fafin's shame and increasing inadequacies. Fafin could not fathom the oddness of Ganndoh's actions.

For his part, neither could Ganndoh. He had gone and raised his fist several times to rap upon Fafin's door, but each time he had turned and led Baston away. He had sat for hours in shadow upon a low stair, bemusedly scratching upon Baston's inert form, or absentmindedly watching as Baston sniffed at the great door that enclosed the interior court.

Ganndoh had waited, trying not to think about his unfathomable reluctance to break in upon the sounds that both appalled and unnerved him.

If he had been able to make such sounds on that night of his exile from Mount Mairid might he have been the one taking this journey? Had he not held it? Had he not carried it?

Futile, pointless questions, Ganndoh told himself for there could never now be answers. But he'd paced and sat for hours, pondering questions till Baston, lying close, had suddenly raised himself in attentive listening, turning toward Fafin's door. He had grasp Baston's heavy collar and waited. Within moments they had heard the sound of Fafin's door latch. Ganndoh had stroked the alert Baston till he'd sat again, content in Ganndoh's assurance.

From their shadowed place they had watched Fafin pad across the courtyard and clamber up to peer out into the night. Then Baston had nudged Ganndoh's thigh in silent, persistent request for

release. Stroking assurance, Ganndoh had let him go and then stood with quickening pulse as he'd watched Baston creep in stalking silence across the stones. Ganndoh had met Baston only brief hours before and wondered if he'd misjudged. But he kept the silence, trusting. As the frantic scene had played out, Ganndoh had caught himself smiling at the high-pitched, pathetic shriek, and then at the suppressed, convulsive laughter of this boy he despised without reason.

At last, Fafin stood from his huddled place beside Baston and turned to Ganndoh. "I am sorry I kept you up, Ganndoh, and I truly thank you," he said.

Ganndoh's reply was gruff and unaccepting. "It is my duty. I am well paid to do what I do, so your thanks is neither merited nor desired."

Fafin's reply was quiet, "Nonetheless, I still thank you," he said.

Ganndoh turned and mounted the steps. His shoes make no sound so Fafin waited until he heard the soft thud of a closing door.

As Fafin patted Baston and returned to his dark, welcoming room, he thought: At least, Gannдох shall have some hours in that beautiful place, and he felt pleasure in the thought.

He changed into his night shirt and slipped into a peaceful oasis of rest.

In his exhaustion and the darkness of his room, Fafin might have slept well into the day had not Desna tapped upon his door. He padded toward the repeated sound to find Desna standing with her breakfast tray of steaming mush, milk, and warm bread.

Fafin could see the searching in her eyes and knew that she too must have heard his grief, though he had tried to confine it into the mound of his small pillow. Her concern was so poignant, Fafin felt the need to acknowledge it. In searching for words, they seemed to come of their own accord.

"It was necessary," he said, and then smiled. "Not that I fully understand what I just said," he

continued, a little embarrassed, "except that ... I think, it makes the rest possible." He smiled again. "Not that I understand that either."

Desna smiled and held out the food-laden tray. "Perhaps comprehending comes later," she said, and they left it at that. Fafin took the tray with thanks, and Desna went off, jauntily humming, to attend to her duties.

When breakfast was done, Fafin felt an itch toward action. He did not yet know his purpose, but he felt it would not come sitting idle in a small, windowless room. He knew solitude had its proper place, but today, there was something driving him to motion.

He did not wish to dispatch Desna up six flights just to seek audience with Ganndoh, nor did he wish to awaken Ganndoh, so he did the next best thing. After washing and dressing, he strode to the double doors through which the food of last evening had come. After a third knock, a porter answered and Fafin asked his question. "Has Ganndoh had his breakfast?"

"Hours ago," was the brisk reply, so Fafin took his courage in hand to inform Ganndoh of his wishes for the day.

When Fafin approached the ornate door, he heard boisterous voices coming from inside. He hesitated in surprise, but decided that having come so far, he was not about to descend and send another to do what he was quite capable of doing. As soon as he knocked, the voices ceased, and he heard booted footsteps advance across the marble floor.

When the door opened, Fafin was confronted by the tallest man he had ever seen. As Fafin's eyes travelled up, the stranger's travelled down till they met. And though the man saw nothing much till he encountered the top of Fafin's tousled head, Fafin saw a broad, velvet-covered chest marked by the flame-lion, and then a row of flashing white teeth framed in the richest ebony face he could imagine. The man's close-cut, coiled hair was flecked with gray, and heavy brows arched over twinkle-filled eyes.

The stranger squatted, balancing himself with a stick of strange design, but Fafin's attention remained fixed on the man, for even squatting, he yet seemed to fill the doorway. "You must be Fafin," the man said, and then in a tone of descending sadness, "Come to interrupt a fine, rousing game of paelown, I see."

Fafin had never heard of paelown and didn't know what to say. In his awe of the stranger, he did not get beyond squawking, "I ..., I...", before the ebony man stood and propelled him into the room with a hand upon his back. As the man turned into the room's interior, Fafin could see Ganndoh standing beside a waist-high table. He too held a stick of similar design to what the big man held.

"Your Fafin is here," the man said, as though he were delivering immensely pleasurable news.

Ganndoh sighed and raised his own thick brows in a gesture of resignation. "So, I see," Ganndoh said, as he stood waiting for Fafin to speak.

Fafin had not expected company and was not sure how to proceed. He has thought Ganndoh would be either asleep or impatiently awaiting some direction.

"I'm ... sorry to interrupt," Fafin said, his eyes darting between the men.

"Nothing to be sorry about," the big man said. "You are the voice here—we, but await your direction." He winked then, before saying in a deep, conspiratorial whisper, "Besides, we could use a distraction here for I'm losing dreadfully."

Fafin stood smiling, yet confused at the stranger's inclusion of himself in awaiting instructions, so he asked, "Are you my protector, too?"

"Oh, I didn't mean we in that way, though I feel sure, it would be a delight," the big man said, patting Fafin upon the shoulder. "But you see, my traveller rests on the fifth floor without business till evening, so this good Ganndoh of yours has blessedly arrived to sweeten my idleness, and is blessedly ensconced in this grand place on account of you, so I'm told. So you see,

whatever the course, we've had a most enjoyable competition while it lasted."

Fafin stood uncertain how to tell Ganndoh that he wanted to view the site of old Welkindorn. As he stood speechless, the big man laid his hand once again upon Fafin's back and steered him toward the game table where Ganndoh stood.

"Ever played paelown?" the stranger asked. Fafin shook his head. "Well, before you take my tricky partner off on your errand, I'll show you the gist of it," the man said, and then with a sly wink, he added, "seeing as how it must surely be my turn."

"Not by your life," Ganndoh said and laughed, and Fafin looked up startled. He had never heard Ganndoh laugh with such pleasure. Ganndoh continued "We'll leave that argument for later," he said as he laid his game stick upon the table. Then taking paper and quill he plotted out the lay of the table. As he tucked the paper into his breast pocket, he said to the big man, "Now you may practice to your heart's content."

As the big man circled the strange, ornate table, eyeing the black and white balls that lay in scattered chaos, Ganndoh turned to Fafin with raised brows. Fafin knew then that he would have to speak his request, stranger or no stranger.

"I want to visit the crater site," Fafin said.

"I thought as much," Ganndoh said with a resigned sigh. As he turned to collect the satchel and weaponry that protectors always carried for uncertainties, the big man spoke, recapturing their attention.

"Old Welkindorn!" he exclaimed. "Ancient Welkindorn?" His excited glance comprehended them both, so when they replied, it was as though they had practiced the unison of it.

"Yes," Ganndoh and Fafin said together.

"Well, I'll be!," the big man said, "My luck runs full tide! Would you two accept a spot of company, if my traveller consents?" He didn't wait for reply as he hurried on. "Been hankering since eight years to do that very thing, but never the space. I'd be much obliged."

Again his glance flashed between them, but Fafin left the reply to Ganndoh.

"You'll miss your practice time," Ganndoh said, motioning toward the paelown table.

"Worth it. Definitely worth it," the big man exclaimed.

"All right," Ganndoh said. "But just to clarify, the pleasure shall be all mine."

The courtesy and regard between these guild brothers—one so young and one so obviously experienced—was fascinating to Fafin. He saw, for the first time, a side of Ganndoh that amazed him. Ganndoh carried about himself a presence and confidence beyond his years—far beyond the bullying youth who had plagued Fafin's young life. Maybe I am to him what he is to me, Fafin thought. Maybe I draw the pus out of him, too. It was a strange, disturbing thought—how opposition could prove so clarifying.

They made their stop on the fifth floor to query the big man's traveller and were soon descending, a most curious trio, if ever there was.

Ganndoh nipped into a doorway to advise Desna of their pending absence. As if by some pre-arrangement, he returned carrying a bundle of food. The big man, seeing the amazement in Fafin eyes, said, "She's forever ready for any plan. You'd not find the like of her in a thousand journeys."

With that, they strode out into the bright sun with Fafin walking between. The big man looked down and laughed. "Well, my lad," he said, "we're bound to turn more than a few heads, maybe even gain an entourage. What with two flaming lions attending one meagre manling, these tragic vagabonds are going to think you are the great Dahn himself."

Fafin grimaced. He was not keen on having a train of curiosity seekers in his exploratory quest, but more importantly, he felt distressed at the possibility of being mistaken as someone of such import. It felt blasphemous. Though trailing that thought came another, challenging him with his tirade of the previous night. Yet, he did not feel

any hovering anger because of his doubts of the night. Maybe he did not know what blasphemy was at all.

Sure enough, as the trio wend its way, a tattered gathering took up the trail. But with thoughts preoccupied, Fafin heard only snatches of the conversation that coursed above him. To his surprise, he realized these two protectors had met only the evening before, that they came from opposite directions, and that the ebony man's name was Voltushinkin, but that most simply called him Voltus, and that Fafin could too, if he wished—which he did.

When the trio arrived at the north gate that led out toward the plateau and crater, most of their ragged retinue fell away much to the surprise and relief of Fafin.

"We've disappointed them dreadfully," Voltus said. He ruffled Fafin's hair and explained, "You have fallen, my lad, from being a god to being a gawker. Though, of course, those who still hang

to our tail are gawkers themselves—hoping you are one of those loony ones who is going to leap from the crater’s edge.”

Fafin was sure that Voltus had not seen him flinch at those words, but he was not sure of Ganndoh for while Voltus voiced his booming derision of feckless faith, Fafin felt Ganndoh’s eyes fix upon him.

“It’s unlawful,” Voltus was saying, “but what can they do? The crater, they say, is twelve leagues around with a double-dozen handy ledges at most every turn.”

“Fafin believes the legends,” Ganndoh said.

“You do!” Voltus said and stopped in his tracks.

“I do,” Fafin said with conviction. As he spoke on he knew the truth of the words that came unplanned. “But it is not and never will be my intent to leap in some display of that belief. I have come to Welkindorn for a private purpose. It has not yet been revealed to me, but I expect it shall be soon enough.”

Voltus sighed. He looked up along the trail that wound to the crater's rim, already teeming with noisy travellers and their protectors. "You're sure I won't be sorry in giving my escort?" he asked.

Fafin nodded as Ganndoh shrugged, hands uplifted. Voltus sighed again as they resumed their way. "Well, whatever happens with this crowd, it won't be private in any sense, so I'm going to trust you won't spoil my day," Voltus said.

It took some time to ascend the switchbacks to the top of the plateau and thence to the crater's rim. The precipitous walls of the plateau seemed to ooze a sweating, heavy dampness. A strange mugginess enveloped everything.

When they arrived at the top, hot and sweaty, Voltus vowed that hunger was more pressing even than curiosity, so they found an outcropping of stones for their comfort and turned to the food bundle. Voltus had chosen a spot well

back from the precipice, saying that healthy fear was a protector's best asset; that hubris generally proved the first and foremost disqualifier of those who sought service in the protectorship.

"Hubris?" Fafin asked.

"Arrogance," Voltus said. "Gratuitous pursuit of risk. Expected immunity from common laws and consequence."

Fafin keep his eyes downcast, believing the words were cautions for him, but then, with a mouth partially full of cheese pastry, Ganndoh spoke to no one in particular, saying, "Fafin thinks his protector is hubric."

Looking up in surprise, Fafin meet the piercing gaze of Voltus. "Is he right?" Voltus asked. Fafin glanced at Ganndoh, uncertain how to skirt the truth of his redirected thoughts.

Ganndoh locked into Fafin's vacillating gaze, and said, "Perhaps I have been, in the sense of arrogance, but the others? ... I would say not."

It was as though the fledging Ganndoh, in speaking to Fafin, had really made confession to

Voltus such that an unspoken, troubling matter had been exposed and disposed of for good.

The surprise of Ganndoh's confession was still registering with Fafin when Ganndoh turned to Voltus and said with fervency, "The fortuity of our acquaintance, Voltushinkin, has exceeded my every expectation."

Voltus acknowledged the words with a slight smile and a blink of his eyelids. With that, the conversation turned to the sights before them as they finished their meal, though Fafin could focus on little but his thoughts. He felt too many incomprehensibles in what had been said. Was his longing to fly really a form of hubris? Maybe this journey was *more* Ganndoh's than his. What if he, Fafin, were but a conduit to the meeting of Voltus and Ganndoh—a small spark to the fire of Ganndoh's maturity and future? Maybe he, Fafin, had misconceived his purpose entirely?

Fafin came back to awareness as Voltus's hand flashed before his face. "Hel-lo," Voltus boomed as he waved his hand again before Fafin's face.

Fafin grinned at the quizzical look in Voltus's. "I was just thinking," Fafin said.

"A parcel too much, I would say," Voltus exclaimed. Then changing tone, he continued, "Ganndoh has gone to fetch us the official word on this place. So, meantime, tell me what you know about old Welkindorn."

"I don't really know the official word," Fafin said. "But I believe that this was once the site of ancient Welkindorn, though it had another name then, which was outlawed so long ago no one seems to remember."

"Welkinzaan?" Voltus said softly.

Fafin started in surprise. "How did you know?" he whispered. "I thought only three or four knew! It's the sacred name."

"I know," Voltus said, but he did not explain; he merely went on with his questions. "So, why the crater? Did it blow itself to pieces?" Voltus asked.

"No, this is not volcanic," Fafin said. "It sort of got ... dug up like a tree—transplanted."

"Oh, I see," Voltus said. "It flew away."

Fafin expected to see mockery in Voltus's eyes even though there had been no hint of it in his voice, but Voltus seemed serious.

"I think so," Fafin said earnestly. "It's just that some things were then, that aren't now."

"And some things are now, that weren't then—like the need for protectors?" Voltus asked.

Fafin nodded. "But they were needed soon enough. That's why old Welkindorn was taken away," Fafin said, deliberately deciding not to use the sacred name though they both knew it.

"I see," Voltus said, and they fell silent as Ganndoh came striding along the ridge.

"They are diverse opinions," Ganndoh said, "but the long and short seems to be a burning something from the sky. It ploughed into the plateau and behold! instant attraction."

"Interesting," Voltus said, and within that word came the sound of shouting and cries. They looked up to see a short, bearded man running at full speed, his bulging satchel flapping wildly

at his side. Behind him a horde of vagabonds sped in full pursuit.

"Where's his protector?" Ganndoh cried in alarm, turning to Voltus.

"It seems he doesn't have one," Voltus said. "There are still a few who think they can get by without. Sometimes they travel for a time on the fringe of a protector's party, but they are always discovered. And this is the inevitable result."

As the vagabonds gained ground, Fafin could not restrain himself. "Voltus, can't you stand in? Can't someone protect him?" he cried.

"I haven't the papers," Voltus said. "The law allows his pursuers to ask for the papers of his guild contract. Without them, the man is doomed by his own foolishness. We cannot protect a man from such."

Like everyone upon the crater's edge, they stood witness as the man cast off his satchel, knowing that whatever it contained was less than his life. The bulging satchel was pounced upon by many, but most held to their pursuit till the

man, glancing desperately behind, left his circular course and leapt from the crater's rim. With a piercing cry, with his arms spread-eagled, he plummeted out of sight.

The shock was written upon Fafin's ashen face. But his witness was not yet over.

Voltus spoke. "If there is good purpose in your coming here Fafin, then you have fallen heir to two opposing views."

Voltus turned Fafin toward a new sight. Upon a nearby ledge, a young woman stood, dressed in flowing crimson, the wind billowing her cape. Close by, with his back toward her, stood her protector. That riveting scene had shaped itself while the other was being played out, each oblivious to the other.

Without waiting for inevitable questions, Voltus spoke. "This is the first and great fear we carry as protectors—especially when coming to Welkindorn," he said. "We fear the wilful choice of our traveller for we cannot intervene. If she chooses, she chooses. Even the authorities here

have given up controlling this. And as you see, gawkers come as much for these anticipated events as for view into a mysterious crater.”

Voltus had scarcely finished his observations when the woman cast herself off with slender, alabaster arms spread wide. In perfect silence, except for the whistling wind, she too plummeted downward.

Even Ganndoh stood in shock at the sight of it. But Voltus’s focus was upon Fafin. “Do you still believe in the legends?” he asked.

Fafin stood silent for a time and then he knew the answer. He spoke quietly. “It must be given,” he said. “It cannot be taken.”

Silently, they turned to the collection of their meal remnants, and far too swiftly, the chaotic buzz of everyday sounds returned to the crater’s rim as if nothing untoward had happened. The vociferous hucksters and pedlars were already back to hawking their wares—with a clay doll, hastily wrapped in a scrap of red cloth, now added to the daily souvenir offerings.

"Do you wish to venture further round the rim?" Voltus asked.

"I don't think, in the mood of this place, that I wish to stay," Fafin said. "I will have to find my answers somewhere else."

"That's so often the sadness," Voltus said. "Like sludge in a river, there's no drinking the sweetness but upstream."

Those words felt so apt in describing the fouling of this sacred site that Fafin spoke with an earnestness that was deeply moving, "Voltus," he said, "I feel beyond blessed that you came."

Voltus smiled, then laying his fingers ever so briefly against his heart, he said, "The blessing is mine." With that, they turned back to the way they had come.

Voltus stated, at the outset of their descent, that he had every intent of giving distance to the tragedies they had just witnessed; and that he would do it with a stream of true stories. It quickly became apparent that his true stories were being fabricated on the fly, and soon Fafin

could scarce keep his footing for all the laughter. Even Ganndoh laughed without restraint at the inventions and incongruities that spilled off the tongue of Voltus.

Every picture was vividly painted in words. Fafin could perfectly see those two obese infants perched, back-to-back, upon a burdened, long-eared donkey; their infant lips pursed around root straws that looped down into huge cream jugs that hung from the poor donkey's neck: their fat cheeks and bellies jiggling and glistening like burgeoning, sweat-pearled water-skins. These infants, according to Voltus, were the chief merchants of some unpronounceable kingdom that Voltus named only once. Fafin suspected it was because Voltus couldn't have replicated his invention had his life depended on it.

Finally, with thankful relief, they escaped the soggy vapours of the plateau walls to arrive at the north gate. They checked their papers and continued on past the lounging vagabonds.

Voltus had not yet returned to his fantastical stories when Ganndoh asked about the king of Welkindorn.

"He is not," Voltus said.

"He is not what?" Ganndoh asked, surprised.

"He is not a king," Voltus said. "That is why they—we—have this." His arm swept in a great arc to encompass the vast city.

"Why has he not been deposed then, if he is so inept?" Ganndoh asked.

"There is no will to do it. And why?" Voltus asked. "Well, we protectors have our lucrative service because of him. The vagabonds have their plundering rights; the fine citizens their scapegoats; the king, his cronies and merchants their share of spoil; and so on and on. Somehow or other, most every salary and privilege in this land has source in the king's debaucheries and favours. It is not a healthy state of affairs."

This came as a shocking revelation to Fafin, as did Ganndoh's reply. "Then I shall be the one to depose him," Ganndoh said.

"There is no point in deposing unless it makes a difference," Voltus said, "which, most often, it doesn't."

They walked in thoughtful silence till Ganndoh said, "I know the difference I could make."

"Knowing is nigh to nothing," Voltus said, "if there is nothing in the doing."

"I would make the required difference," Ganndoh said with conviction.

"I wish mightily you would," Voltus said, stopping dead centre of the street. He turned toward Ganndoh, took him by the shoulders, and spoke earnestly, close to Ganndoh's face. "If you will, my young friend, you must yet increase a thousand-fold of nobleness and wisdom; and thereafter, you must search out principled allies. I do not speak this to offend, but when you have achieved your increase, come and find me."

Voltus dropped his hands away and turned back to his walk as if he had not just delivered the most urgent appeal of his life. He said, "Now, I must finish my stories."

Another story began, but soon Voltus said, "I perceive that no one is listening," and he lapsed into silence.

When at last they stood in the inner court of the guild house, Voltus shook himself like a dog out of bath and said they had done too much thinking for one day, and that an honourable game between friends was yet to be concluded.

Voltus resisted Fafin's declining to accompany them. Diversion was as vital as focus, he said. So it was, that the peculiar threesome, led by the amicable Voltus, trouped up to the king's floor and into that lush suite that Fafin sensed would be remembered in some future day as the prophetic, first accommodation in Welkindorn of the great king Ganndoh. And Fafin hoped, with all his being, that the appellation, *great king*, would be merited.

Obedient to Voltus's decree that all serious thought was taboo for the evening, Fafin gave attention to the rules of paelown.

The ornate stick, he was told, was to strike a ball with the intent to cascade one's own color into wells that cornered the table; the score was doubled for every opponent's sphere that, at the same strike, was sunk into wells at the centre sides; and scores were halved for mistakes and miscalculations. Simple rules, complex angles.

It was a semi-rousing game in Fafin's view: long stretches of silent stalking and mumbled calculation, then a shot, followed by a resounding AHA!, or mournful wail, depending on the player's perspective.

They gave Fafin a turn, but were soon agreed that his best use would be in solo practice. Fafin, however, was not much interested in the game-playing; his fascination was in the players, and never had he seen such genuine camaraderie. Yet, their enjoyment of each other and their competitive game seemed to deepen his sense of estrangement from physical things. It was not that he felt above them, but rather, like some bird of a different feather.

When the porters finally came, bearing their exotic-laden trays, Fafin knew he would much rather have taken his simple meal alone. He was ready for his solitude, but Voltus entreated him once more, saying that everyone deserved at least one king's meal in a lifetime.

Ganndoh never spoke. He left Fafin to make choice without his interference. The derisions now seemed over, but Ganndoh still had not warmed to him the way Voltus had, and probably never would for Ganndoh too was bird of a unique feather. But then, so was Voltus.

When the exquisite, multi-course meal was over, Voltus expressed regret in having to leave, but his traveller would be awaiting his service. Fafin, knowing he and Ganndoh had so little in common, left with Voltus.

"You're a lad with true vision, I think," Voltus said at their parting on the fifth stair. "You are day as night from our Ganndoh, but as each is required in time's cycling, I will not say more, save that someday, I hope we shall meet again."

He smiled and concluded, "Perhaps we shall be invited some day, as old men, to contemplate paelown in a king's palace."

With that, the smiling Voltus grasp Fafin's shoulder as they shook hands with firmness. "Good-bye, my young friend," Voltus said, and then added with a nod, "And may your purpose be given." With that, Voltus turned and vanished through the adjacent doorway.

Fafin descended to closet himself in his room. Within the flickering light of his solitary candle, he read and re-read the leather-bound book of discipleship that the Mozen had given for the journey. "Without discipleship first, there can be no Mozenship," the Mozen had said. Fafin thought, sometimes this all seems so far beyond me; beyond even my willing spirit.

At last, with eyelids heavy, Fafin closed the ancient book and tucked it beneath his pillow. He snuffed out the candle and snuggled down, too tired even to change into his night-shirt.

When Fafin awoke, it was to the sound of a bell, like the one that rang at Mount Mairid to call students in from their field labours. It had the same distant sound, and for a moment Fafin lay in the blackness confused as to his whereabouts. Then he remembered. He arose and went to his door to listen. Almost immediately he sensed a presence and felt his heart race, but then he heard the sniffing. He smiled at himself. What a coward you are, he thought. He opened his door a crack and whispered, "Baston?" Baston nuzzled into the crack. "Good boy, good boy," Fafin soothed as he squeezed himself out.

Through the upper bars of the great doors, he could see the crescent moon and guessed that the night was yet young. He turned back to lie upon his bed, leaving his door ajar. Baston lay upon its threshold looking outward. Every now and then, in the light sifting from the night sky, Fafin would see the reclining Baston perk his head or ears and then settle back to peaceful inertness. The silence was deep and sweet.

In his own repose, Fafin replayed the events of the day, which seemed so long ago. He'd felt so strongly that he was meant to experience something at the crater's rim that would confirm and inform his calling. But the pollutions were too great. He had expected a peaceful, quiet place but knew now that the solitude he required could not be found there.

I suppose what I desire can be given in any place, Fafin thought. Even here in this dark room. But his mind asked, What then is the pull to sacred places? Why, in the empty solitude of them, has so much of the invisible been made visible?

Suddenly, as if Voltus were present, Fafin heard the words, "Like sludge in a river, there's no drinking the sweetness but upstream."

He sat bolt upright. "What?" he said aloud as Baston perked his head in query toward Fafin.

Fafin smiled. "Sorry, Baston," he whispered. He lay back and thought on the words. Sludge was so apt for what the crater experienced every

living day. The guard at the city gate had said that if anything, their chosen day for sightseeing was a light day. They had looked at one another amazed. Light day! They had felt jostled and bumped at every turn.

Fafin wasn't sure from where the idea came, but into his mind's eye, a vision of the crater's rim arose as it would be in that very moment. The solitude was deep and the spirit of the place seemed to move like a fog, cleansing the awful pollutions of the day.

Fafin sat upright again with a jolt, letting his breath out in a whoosh of sound. Baston came to a standing alert, his eyes fixed upon Fafin. Fafin went to his door and stoked Baston's head as ideas formed within his own.

Ganndoh might wish to balk and complain, but he would not. He had said, had he not? "I, but await your instructions."

Hurriedly Fafin put on his shoes, donned a second dark shirt against the expected cold and mounted the stairs to the sixth level.

Ganndoh opened on the third, quiet tapping. He had obviously been sleeping, but he was mostly dressed. Fafin opened his mouth to speak, but a yawning Ganndoh motioned him in with a touch of impatience.

"This is not unexpected," Ganndoh said as he turned toward his clothing, satchel, and weaponry. As he donned them, he continued. "Nor do I think it wise. But that is of little consequence, I imagine."

"Is there any danger from the vagabonds—at night, I mean?" Fafin asked.

"They are too terrified of the Flame night or day to try anything," Ganndoh said, "especially at night, as you can well imagine. Even I do not know the mystery of its brilliance." Ganndoh paused, and then spoke on. "What you should fear is your own folly, Fafin—to be seduced by fog and spirits for if you don't know the power of them, you cannot be prepared for them."

Fafin spoke. "If I perish from my own folly, is that not what you wished at the outset?"

Ganndoh raised his eyes briefly toward the ceiling as a breath of air snorted outward. "I am not keen on returning empty-handed with some tale of idiocy," Ganndoh said, "though it would serve the Mozen right. But perhaps I owe him something. Maybe he did for me the very thing required of my necessity."

"He did." Fafin said with quiet firmness. "When my mother and I objected to his choice of you, he said this was as much your journey as mine." He saw Ganndoh's surprise. "He knows more than you can ever imagine," Fafin said.

They descended the stairs in silence to let themselves out a small door in the great one. Fafin had not realized it was there.

"Isn't there a key?" Fafin asked.

"Baston is the key," Ganndoh said.

"Then why the great door at all?" Fafin asked in surprise.

"The great door is for the wild dogs," Ganndoh said, "They don't prove as respectful as the sad vagabonds."

At this long past-midnight hour, the city was almost desolate save for the many vagabonds. They hardly raised their heads from their stone pillows as Fafin and Ganndoh passed, and Fafin thought he knew why for the mark of the flame glowed in the dark as a living thing.

As they neared the north gates, they could hear a pack of dogs quarrelling. As they entered the square of the gate, they saw the snarling fray at the far reaches. Several groups of vagabonds were huddled tightly together opposite, staring across at the ferocity. They were shivering and weeping.

"What is it?" Fafin asked, peering intently.

"It is better you do not look," Ganndoh said, in a tone almost of rage.

"Why?" Fafin said, turning to meet Ganndoh's wrath that he knew was not directed at him.

"It is not something one ever wishes to see," Ganndoh replied, spitting out the words, angry at something far greater than Fafin's innocence or the necessity of this dark excursion.

As they passed through a small portal in the gate, the fog drifted about them in scattered clouds. "Don't lag," Ganndoh said, "and attach this to the belt at your back." He handed Fafin an open weave pouch full of bulbous roots over which he poured a dark liquid.

"What is this?" Fafin cried as he pinched his nostrils against the stench that steamed up from the dripping pouch.

"This is so you don't lose your back side to a pack of mongrels," Ganndoh said.

Fafin did as he was told, wondering if his clothes would ever prove wearable again—and he was wearing two shirts to boot.

As they mounted the switchbacks, the awful smell wafted about them, yet Fafin observed how Ganndoh kept grasp upon the blade handle at his waist.

When they reached the plateau's rim, they broke free of the fog to see it lying at their feet—like a silver sea breaking upon plateaued shores. The air felt crisp and clean in the cloudless sky.

In the scant light of the crescent moon, they could see the lonely landscape and the steep, fogless pitch to the crater's broad pit. At first, Fafin thought the moving lights far below were reflected stars upon a wind-rifted lake, but Ganndoh doused the imagery with one word. "Dogs," Ganndoh said with disgust.

"More dogs!" Fafin exclaimed, feeling a prickling along his neck.

"What did you expect?" Ganndoh said harshly. "It's a prime feeding ground."

It was as though Ganndoh were trying to force Fafin to an admission of doubt about the sacredness of the site. But Fafin had no doubts. He didn't have perfect solitude either, but it was enough. He sensed too, that whatever came was to be shared with Ganndoh. He did not know why. It had to do with some futurity.

They stood silent, watching, as thick fog rolled about the plateau's outer ridge. A stiff breeze kept the fog from rolling further in, but with the ridge and trailhead of their descent hidden,

Fafin's sense of deep solitude intensified. The fog seemed to ooze out of the soggy walls.

As Fafin scanned the scene before him, his gaze fixed to a small, strangely incongruous stone block next to Ganndoh. It was partially chiselled—an almost finished piece of workmanship left in a jumble of other waiting stones. He ignored Ganndoh's inscrutable stare as he stepped upon the squared stone that put them on identical height.

Fafin felt an immediate, expansive pull upon his senses and turned toward the crater. Taking a deep breath, he focused upon the emptiness before him and spoke softly as a vision began to form, adding more and more substance. The wind blew cool against his face carrying the stench of their protection away into the fog.

"The buildings are white stone," Fafin said. "Many of them are domed." He spoke slowly, picking and choosing from a flood of pressing images. "The streets are wide and there is light, brilliant light, everywhere. ... There is a great,

high edifice at the centre—steps leading to it. And there is centre to the centre where—” Fafin paused, realizing that some images were not intended for, nor indeed amenable to description. “There is ... unspeakable beauty,” he continued. “Rainbow hues upon a single stalk. And music! Can you hear the music?”

Ganndoh did not answer so Fafin went on for the vision was not waiting. “There is flight, too, Ganndoh. Neither steps nor path to this place, yet the people come and they go—”

Ganndoh’s voice, low and tense, broke into Fafin’s teeming, expanding focus. “And there are dogs,” Ganndoh said.

In Ganndoh’s sharp words, the flood of sights, sounds, and smells vanished. Fafin turned toward Ganndoh and saw a horde of dogs crouched upon the crater’s edge, with more surging up from the steep pitch. “They should not have known we were here,” Ganndoh said, speaking low. “Our scent is away from them, but that also means, our stench is not reaching them either.”

"Which means?" Fafin said, feeling a calmness the circumstance did not warrant.

"It means, by the time our portable stench registers with them, we may no longer care," Ganndoh said.

The dogs milled, as ferociously intent on quarrelling over space as on studying the two humans before them.

Slowly Ganndoh moved—ever so slowly—till he stood in front of Fafin's raised place and till the pouch upon his belt was in his hand. "Put this upon your throat," he said handing it in slow motion to Fafin. "Now you will turn—slowly—till we are spine-to-spine. I will face them."

Fafin thought, I'd as soon see them coming too, but he recognized Ganndoh's intent. "And then what?" Fafin whispered as he set about his slow alignment.

"It all depends on the timing of the beasts," Ganndoh whispered, "and whether I can get us circled with these stinking bulbs." They could both see the fanning edges that would soon

bring the horde into a circle about them.

Finally Fafin was turned, his ears attuned to every sound—his only view the broiling fog. He could see there was no visible means of escape. They couldn't even make a run for it, casting bulbs behind them, for the head of the descending path was obscured in fog, as was the whole sharp ridge of the plateau.

Fafin didn't know what would happen. But he felt peacefully reconciled to whatever it would be. If we live, we live. If we die, we die, he told himself, I can't fix expectations. But suddenly, he smiled for there was nothing to say that he couldn't fix a preference. And he knew what that preference was.

The stench of Ganndoh's actions was nearly choking Fafin to delirium for the wind held its stubborn course, carrying the stench past Fafin and out into the dense, rolling fog. Fafin could hear Ganndoh's low mutterings and suspected that Ganndoh's efforts would, in the end, prove futile. Such efforts were, for now, merely keeping

the dogs at a puzzled bay. From the sounds of it, their numbers were growing as the quarrelling horde attracted others from the crater's depths. There would be too many to mind the scent that was being blown away in the wind. Yet Ganndoh worked on, slicing the remaining bulbs with his knife to maximize his arsenal of stench.

"Ganndoh, what if there were another way?" Fafin asked at last.

"Then I suggest you take it," Ganndoh hissed.

"I can't," Fafin said, "because it can only be given."

Fafin could feel the irritated sigh in Ganndoh's body, but Ganndoh did not give voice to it.

"If it were given, would it be accepted?" Fafin asked.

"It wouldn't be given to me," Ganndoh bit out, "even if it were possible, which it is not."

"If it meant the difference between your death and your necessity, would you accept it?" Fafin spoke with urgency.

"Keep your voice down," Ganndoh warned.

"Would you?" Fafin insisted.

"They're not going to hold off much longer," Ganndoh said, speaking rapidly. "My body may protect you, in part—till they get the stench. If you are able, you must take the guild contract from my satchel. It may ensure your safety back to Desna. She will take care of the rest. But you must—absolutely must—carry the guild contract openly. It has the mark of the flame upon it."

Fafin knew by the tenseness in Ganndoh's back and voice that the situation was beyond desperate, yet he persisted in his pursuit. "Would you accept it, if it were given?" he hissed.

Ganndoh hissed back in disgust. "You're a fool, Fafin, if you think any man, in my stead, would not accept whatever he was given."

Ganndoh let his head drop forward, eyes closed in anger at Fafin's persistence, and in resignation of the inevitable. Perhaps he would let them come without watching. There seemed nothing more he could do.

Ganndoh did not realize his feet had left the ground until, in the sudden howling, his eyes flew open and his hands thrust forward in futile defence. But the howling, leaping horde was far below. His hands spasmed and he clutched backwards for he could still feel Fafin's spine pressed against his own. His frantic clutchings found stability on Fafin's trousers. His breath came in gasps and he seemed incapable of speech.

Fafin smiled at the disbelief evidenced in Ganndoh's grasp. Fafin tried to pull away and felt the stress on his leggings.

"We can do this separately," Fafin quietly said. Gradually Ganndoh released his grip, but his body remained stiff.

"This is how it was done," Fafin said. "There were no wings, no flapping, no spreading of arms. It just was—when necessary; never taken for granted, but given for purpose."

"This is not possible," Ganndoh said through stiff lips as their feet dipped into the fog.

"Perhaps. Perhaps not," Fafin replied, as the fog swallowed them up. He continued, "Nevertheless, Ganndoh, this experience is being given to you for some purpose."

"It is not something I desired to know," Ganndoh said from out of the fog.

Whatever Fafin could have said to that, he left unsaid.

Within moments they found themselves standing firmly upon solid earth, facing the north gate. Ganndoh took the stinking bulbs that Fafin removed from his body and buried them near the foundation wall. Together they washed at the nearby well that served thirsty sightseers. All was done in silence. Ganndoh seemed in no mood for speech.

He cleared their passage with the drowsy guard at the gate, and they proceeded past sleeping vagabonds, saying not a word. It did not seem right to give further voice to what they had experienced. When at length, they reached the guild house, Ganndoh spoke.

"I suppose we leave by morning light?" he said.

"I'm not asking that you return with me," Fafin said. "There is surely another, if you wish to go with Voltus."

"Voltus has already gone," Ganndoh said. "I am not yet ready to seek him."

"Then let us part here," Fafin said. "I think it was meant to be this way."

Ganndoh replied quietly, not arguing, "I will speak to Desna then, at first light," he said.

"Will the Guild mind?" Fafin asked. "Are there rules for this?"

"The guild knows and accepts that contingencies arise," Ganndoh assured. "Desna will find another far more suited to you than I. We are to each other, I think, ... as paelown."

Fafin's brow creased in surprise. He had not expected such reflection from Ganndoh. There was much he had not expected in this journey; yet so much he had, but never how prophetic the Mozen had been in comprehending Ganndoh's

necessity. What was it the Mozen had said? "Do not in fixing expectations constrain the journey's purpose." How close he had come, at times, to doing precisely that.

They let themselves into the inner courtyard of the guild house, assuring Baston by their voices that they merited entry. On the first stair, they said their good-byes.

"Thank you for the protection," Fafin said.

"Thank you for the accommodation," Ganndoh said, and they laughed together at the inflection in his tone.

Then Ganndoh nodded ever so slightly—with the briefest lowering of his eyelids. It was a fleeting, but genuine acknowledgment, not just of respect for Fafin's endurance, but of his merit.

Ganndoh spoke again. "I'll be leaving some packets with Desna for return to the Mozen—if you'd see he gets them. He'll understand." He turned then and ascended to his room with an energy in his step that Fafin had never seen.

It is good, Fafin thought, that in this moment we part ways for neither of us, with our grievous history, is yet capable of sustaining this new sense of humoured camaraderie.

Fafin waited with Baston at his side till he heard the soft thud of Ganndoh's door, then turned to his room. Amazingly, his shirts did not retain the overwhelming stench of the bulbs; yet enough to warrant hanging them in the inner courtyard for a night's airing.

In his night-shirt, he lay upon his bed and felt the peace of his calling wrap round him. He knew there would be other trying and difficult times, but the confirmation and witness of this night would be with him always, to bear him up—to be an anchor to his soul.

The years would never erase what he had tasted—brief in measure of time, yet vast in a marvellous other dimension. In those moments of near solitude at the crater's edge, he had seen the place and the face of the invisible Dahns. Numberless things he had not described—

things there were no words to describe; comprehensions that had flooded in endless waves, yet comprehensions that would exact a lifetime.

As Fafin lay awaiting sleep, he wondered if there would ever be another venturing to this place for him. He wondered if Ganndoh would ever speak of his flight without wings. He especially wondered if Ganndoh would allow the full purpose of what had been given—a purpose that might not reveal itself for many years. And Fafin wondered too, if they would ever meet again.

Just as sleep descended, Fafin thought he heard the voice of Voltus and he smiled at those echoing words. "Perhaps we shall be invited as wise, old men to contemplate paelown in a king's palace."

I believe, I shall look forward to that, Fafin thought, and gave himself up to rest.

THE END

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