

# 1 Prologue

## 1.1 The Legend of Sorondil-Telcontar

In ages past, there was once a master bowyer who had created many bows of legend, some of which still exist today. But there is one bow, Sorondil-Telcontar, that stands out among his great creations, not only because it was his last, but also for the heroes who wielded it over the ages. The bowyer knew that he would eventually grow old and die, so he retreated from the world into the wilderness, planning to make his final bow, one that would endure much longer than his memory or even any of his other creations. Thus he went, far away to create his final masterpiece: the bow Sorondil-Telcontar, into which he poured all of his creative energies and skill.

The end product of his labor was a mighty recurve bow with silver runes of inspiration and courage inscribed into it. The woods he used are now long forgotten from enchanted yew-like trees that the Sidhe once used in their own bows and spears before they faded from all apparent existence. As he completed this bow, he willed a portion of his life into it, blessing what he knew would be his final creation. "I dub thee Sorondil-Telcontar, the Wayfaring Eagle-Friend. May you forever aim true and may you serve valiant heroes in the present and future!" he whispered with his last breath as he finished inscribing the last of the runes onto the complete bow.

No sign remained of the old bowyer was ever found. All that remained of him was the bow Sorondil-Telcontar, a leather quiver inscribed with silver runes, and masterfully carved wooden arrows, also inscribed with silver runes and tipped with what was then known as true-silver, a metal only the Sidhe could use to its full potential, although the Eldarin were also capable of creating mighty blades and armor with it. For thousands of years, Sorondil-Telcontar passed from wielder to wielder, some more noble than others, and the bow gradually developed a dim memory of all its wielders. However, one wielder will shine above all others in its memory...

## 1.2 Saturday Afternoon With the EEP-Sters

Vincent Gahan couldn't stop laughing when his roommate, Radu Hladek, handed him a small slip of paper. Tara Luo also was grinning from ear to ear, while Katie Castro and Robert Qian were both groaning. Tara whispered to Katie and Robert, "I think Arsenie is going to try that trick on Father Larry... the one he did on Father Pius at that other church while we were disguised as monks and nuns."

Tara was a tiny girl with shoulder-length black hair, thick glasses, and a perpetual grin, as if life were an eternal adventure. Katie was a dark-skinned muscular young woman with short-cropped dark hair and an attitude that spoke of fearlessness and defiance. Radu, on the other hand, was tall and thin with pale skin, wire-like blonde hair with black tips that always seemed to stand straight up, a goatee, and a pair of gold-rimmed rectangular glasses that would have been fashionable, had it not been for his thick lenses. Sitting next to Radu was Robert, who was of medium height and compactly built with a shaved head, a pair of thick glasses, and a tattoo of a green parakeet on his right arm and a set of equations on his left arm.

"Well, I guess you can't spell Arsenie without the word arse in it," muttered Katie to Tara and Robert. Then turning to Vincent, she said, "Teyndara is going to brace herself by putting her hand on her greatsword. If Father Larry goes bugfuck crazy, I hit him over the head with the flat of my blade until he's out cold."

Still laughing, Vincent said, "So, Foxfire and Cujo, what are you guys doing?"

Groaning, Robert replied, "I'm going to start praying to the Soulforger that the pansy knuckle-head of a fop isn't going to mess up our chance to investigate the church of Immanuel. And that doorknob of a drunken warrior better not invoke frontier justice!"

Also giggling a bit, Tara scribbled something onto a sheet of paper and passed it onto Vincent. "I'm going to just watch the show and straighten out that over-sized red-orange pointy hat I got from that wizard at the strip joint that Arsenie caused so much trouble in."

Rolling a few dice and trying his best to maintain a straight face, Vincent said, "Father Larry's thinning grey hair suddenly stands up on end and his eyes kinda bug out and his robes begin to fly open. Arsenie, roll a will save."

Radu took his 20-sided die and rolled it. "Uhh... crap. I rolled a one, so that gives me a will save of two. Arsenie is going to look as cute and innocent as possible."

"Well, Arsenie is suddenly looking even goofier than usual and he's standing paralyzed while Father Larry is looking really furious now," said Vincent, grinning.

"Frontier justice!" roared Katie. "I charge into Father Larry and try to knock him down!"

"And I interrupt my praying long enough to get that pansy fop out of the way," said Robert. "Arsenie, you doorknob!" he added in his gruffest, grumpiest voice.

"Everyone, roll a spot check!" said Vincent, still unable to maintain a straight face. "Except Foxfire and Arsenie."

"Total of 15," said Robert. "I have a very bad feeling about this."

"Shit. Three. We're fucked," groaned Katie.

"Teyndara, you don't see anything since you were so intent on giving Father Larry a good drubbing to make sure he doesn't harm Arsenie anymore than necessary. Cujo, you notice that Foxfire disappeared and that there's a little red fox running around."

"Where's that little ratling?" said Robert in his best grumbling voice. "You better not have done wandered off again!"

Tara passed yet another note to Vincent, still smiling insanely. Katie let out another groan, as did Robert. "The little fox starts sniffing around, particularly at the now unconscious Father Larry." Some paper exchanges and dice-rolling occurred between Vincent and Tara. "And the fox starts pawing at Father Larry's robe pockets, particularly the one on the right side near his belt. The fox also barks and then starts jumping up and down at Cujo and Teyndara before returning to Father Larry's pockets."

"That little fox is onto something," grunted Robert. "I swear, it's acting a lot like Foxfire."

"Ya durned idiot, it is Foxfire," roared Katie in a mock-Texas accent. "She's one of them damned midgets with those funny powers to turn into small animals. I'm gonna dig in that pervert's pockets."

"Roll your search check. Cujo, are you also searching?"

"I'm going to dig through the rest of the pockets and make sure that fox doesn't rifle through my pockets or anything. I don't quite trust that little rat in any form."

Several dice rolls later as well as an ear-to-ear grin from Vincent, he said, "Cujo, you find a cross on a chain, some prayer beads, and a flask of whiskey. Teyndara, you find some scrolls that are all sealed with the symbol of Immanuel. In the meanwhile, Arsenie, you can move again. Foxfire, are you changing back yet? Everyone, roll a spot and listen check."

More dice rolled. "I have a bad feeling about this..." mumbled Robert again even though his 20-sided die clearly showed a 20.

"I'm staying in this shape until I have to change back," replied Tara.

"Cujo and Teyndara, you see hear light footsteps coming from the back of the church," said Vincent, noting that Robert and Katie rolled well, while Radu rolled very poorly. "And Foxfire, you smell and hear something very familiar." He also wrote a small note to Tara and passed it to her. She quickly responded by scribbling something down.

"Damn, someone's fuckin' following us!" roared Katie, still maintaining the mock Texas accent.

"And you just durned gave us away!" bellowed Robert.

"Heard what?" asked Radu. "I didn't see or hear anything!"

"Ya doorknobs! Shut up!" said Robert in his most dwarven, grumpy voice possible. "I'm gonna get me hands on me axe and get ready to chop up whatever that durned thing was!"

"Time for some frontier justice!" said Katie, smiling.

"I'm just gonna look as pretty as possible. Might be someone in distress," said Radu as effeminately as possible. "I fix my hair and straighten out my hat and start gyrating my seductive hips. If it's someone really hot, I'll start singing passages from *Dragostea Din Tei*." As soon as Radu mentioned the popular song by the Moldovan pop band, O-Zone, everyone at the table let out a huge groan.

"Cujo and Teyndara, roll attack..." said Vincent, then he waited for the numbers. After looking at their dice, he said, "Well... a tall, lightly built young woman with piercing green eyes wearing a non-descript grey outfit and a hooded cloak leaps down from the shadows. Her facial features are hidden aside from those slightly cold, glowing green-grey eyes. She carries a runed recurve bow in her hand and even before she hits the ground, she nocks an arrow, draws it back, and points it at Arsenie. On her hips are a longsword that glows menacingly with a cold light that brings the room's temperature down a few degrees and a shortsword that crackles with electricity. Roll initiative." Everyone rolled groaned. It was a particularly bad die roll for everyone except for Vincent and Tara.

"Shit!" exclaimed both Robert and Katie at once. "The Nighteagle. We're hosed."

"Hello, gorgeous," said Radu seductively. "Nice to see you again. Want to join me at the tavern tonight?" Everyone else couldn't help but giggle. He began to yodel eagerly, causing even more laughter at the table.

"Arsenie, you just got hit with a runed arrow. I hope you have more than five hitpoints..." said Vincent. "Coldness spreads through your body and you also feel a shock. You take fifteen points of damage."

"Seven hitpoints, now minus eight. I just keeled over and now I'm dreaming of romancing either the Nigteagle or that really hot Blade-dancer girl at the strip joint we went to..." said Radu.

"The Nigteagle speaks to you. You are all under arrest for violating the sanctity of a church, even if it is of the cult of Immanuel, attempted assault of a high priest, breaking in, and poaching," said Vincent as menacingly as possible. Returning to his usual smooth voice, he said, "That's all I have for today..."

"I guess next game, it's bandage up Arsenie and then hope his pasty ass doesn't attract every fop in town," laughed Katie as she took some notes down on her character sheet.

"Don't worry, I will," joked Radu. "I think we have to worry more about Teyndara attracting sheep and cattle or Cujo attracting the guards."

Katie choked for a second while she was drinking some soda. Spluttering about, she laughed wildly. "That was just that one time! How did Teyndara know that it was a potion of bovine magnetism instead of a potion of invisibility?"

Tara joined in on the laughter. She chimed, "Or that time you guys charged into the barn thinking Father Pius was hiding in there... only to find lots of fertilizer and then having Cujo cause a nice little explosion because he insisted on lighting citronella candles!"

"Talk for yourself. Foxfire did crawl through that one doggie door in the Emperor's palace and then got her butt stuck!" Robert was grinning, recalling what happened at the beginning of the game.

## 2 Dr. Hong

The next day, Vincent sat at the table in the cafeteria and started to thumb through the course offerings. "Man, this sucks!" grumbled Vincent to himself.

While he was looking around for classes to take, a short, extremely thin, hunch-backed balding man in his early sixties with thick glasses and what looked like an unusually severe case of acne on his face and a huge pile of books stumbled across the table. "Excuse me, but mind if I sit here?" he asked, pointing to the crowded cafeteria. He spoke with a very heavy Chinese accent.

"No problem," he replied, clearing a bit of space for the older man.

The man set his books down and sat with him. Then he said, "I heard that there's some discontent with the course offerings."

"No kidding," said Vincent. "They've been cutting the sciences pretty hard, especially the math department and I'm getting desperate for classes."

"Well, you may be in luck. Have you taken calculus, both single and multivariate and linear algebra?"

He nodded. "I'm a soon-to-be senior," he replied.

"You look so young! By the way, I'm Dr. Cheuk-Yin Hong of the Control Dynamics Systems department at California Institute of Technology. I am currently looking for students here at Cal State LA for an experimental class that I will be teaching next quarter," said the older man.

"What's the nature of the class?" asked Vincent.

Dr. Hong smiled and said, "It is an introduction to control dynamics and will be exploring the various uses of nonlinear analyses to explain everyday things."

"Sign me up!" cried out Vincent. "What do I have to do?"

"Go to Caltech and we will take care of it for you," replied Dr. Hong before disappearing into the crowd.

As soon as Dr. Hong left, Tara, Robert, Katie and Radu joined Vincent at the cafeteria table.

"Did you talk to Dr. Hong too?" asked Tara, smiling still.

"Yeah. I think I'm going to do it," replied Vincent as he closed the course catalog. "It's got to be better than this crap here."

Robert giggled as he poked and prodded his chicken salad with the plastic fork from the cafeteria. "I'm only taking it because Dr. Arboles wants me to and I was at the meetings to help set up this class," said Robert, still fascinated with the lone olive in the bed of iceberg lettuce with a few shreds of chicken. "He wants to me to start modelling mussel reproductive behavior, as if there weren't enough of those! Damned tasty, but I don't really care too much as long as there's plenty to eat!"

"Fuck Dr. Arboles... and not literally though," said Katie, who had a habit of cursing almost non-stop. "Plus you're a mechanical engineering major, not a fuckin' marine biologist like that bastard!"

"Dr. Ulrich didn't like the idea of me taking that class instead of that plant ecology class that Dr. Hirashi's teaching, but I convinced him that I could use nonlinear dynamics for modelling," grumbled Tara.

"Dr. Hirashi's as fuckin' exciting as a fuckin' sleeping pill!" said Katie with a bit of a groan. "Combined with dramamine and a bit of heroin. I've been more fuckin' alert on that shit than in his class."

Radu, who had been silent the whole time, laughed at Katie's comments, even though his eyebrow also raised instinctively. "Damn, I'm surprised Dr. Liang hasn't threatened to wash your mouth out with soap yet!"

Katie stabbed the styrofoam cup on the table. "She's fuckin' given up on my language, not that she really fuckin' knows what I'm saying. But that Dr. Washington fuckin' bitched at me when I was takin' genetics with her and I got tired of her bullshit." She continued to stab the empty cup. "Damn bitch with that overdose of fuckin' testosterone and that fuckin' mushroom hairdo!" The last comment triggered roaring laughter from the rest of the friends, especially Robert, who always had a way of earning the wrath of Dr. Washington for being at the wrong place at the wrong time.

While the crowds gradually thinned out as evening classes drew near, the friends were still sitting together, discussing their strategies for the next several quarters. Each one had a piece of graph paper with their schedules pencilled in and in the center of the table was a course catalog with all of the projected classes for the next year. Only Radu seemed to be smiling while the rest of his friends groaned and cursed at the courses they had remaining. "Damn pure math major," grumbled Katie jokingly at Radu.

"Or should I say, silly double-majors?" grinned Radu. "Hey, not to change the subject, but are we still up on that competition?"

"But of course," said Vincent. "Good point, actually. We should finalize our set soon, since we are in the finals and we know we can beat out N-Loo, right? And I think we face-off third week of next quarter, which gives us a decent amount of time to really polish up..."

### 3 Nonlinear Dynamics Class

It was only the second lecture and Dr. Hong's lectures had already turned into equation salad in Vincent's mind. He, along with the rest of the EEP-ster gang, had been sent to Caltech as part of an arrangement between the two campuses to form an interdisciplinary team of modelers and field researchers. While Vincent's brain tangled up over proofs on stability analysis, his eyes wandered over to his friends. Radu had fallen asleep in his chair and was twitching periodically, indicating his struggle to wake up. Robert and Katie were trying to focus but they seemed more intent on drawing pictures of Dr. Hong on their notebooks. Tara was the only one who was still able to concentrate on the class and she even seemed to remain engaged and ask questions.

Tara's elbow brought Vincent back to reality and his mind went back to the material at hand. "You're going to have to help me," whispered Vincent.

"Uhh... and as you can see... there is negative derivative there and so this will go left and there is positive derivative there so it will go right. This will be sink or stable fix point," lectured Dr. Hong, spitting all over the place, including on Radu, who was completely oblivious. For the next half hour, Dr. Hong continued on and on about stability in one dimension and then he finally concluded with, "Next lecture, we will do two-dimensional studies so please review Jacobian matrices and your linear algebra, especially eigenvectors."

Judging from the Caltech students and the relatively low attendance despite the high enrollment in the class, Vincent decided that he was in deep trouble, even though he was a math and chemistry double-major. "Tara, I don't know about you, but I think this is going to be a tough class," he said.

"Not as bad as organic chemistry," laughed Tara. "You helped me with organic, I'll try to help you through this class."

"Hey, Tara, look at what Katie drew!" giggled Robert, waving Katie's notebook, while Katie was trying to grab the notebook and cursing profusely as always.

On the notebook was a stick-figure of Dr. Hong with the hooked stick he used to pull down the chalkboards that he couldn't reach during lecture. Instead of pulling down chalkboards, though, the cartoon version of him was brandishing the stick at Vincent's butt and there was a little speech bubble that read: "Here, let me see if that fixed point at your butt is nodal source, sink, or saddle point."

Vincent began to laugh, while Tara looked around nervously to make sure that Dr. Hong wasn't looking. "You did pay attention in lecture, right?" whispered Tara.

"We fuckin' tried," said Katie while the four of them were walking out of the lecture hall. "He's so fuckin' boring and we don't fuckin' understand any shit he says. Oh wait, where's Radu? He didn't fuckin' die from that shit, did he?" She ran back in to check on Radu, who was now snoring blissfully and drooling. Brusquely, she shook him until

he bolted up.

"Yeah, we tried... but we get sleepy," said Robert sheepishly as he tried to hide his drawings, which Katie snatched up and showed it to Vincent and Tara. It was a cartoon drawing of Dr. Hong with one hand in his pocket and his pants looked slightly crooked, while the other hand was holding that hooked stick for pulling down the blackboard. The stick was pointed at the students, who were bent over on their hands and knees. The caption read: "Dr. Hong gets his daily organic moment from lecture."

Tara muttered, "You sick puppies."

Vincent merely nodded in agreement with Tara before following her towards the western end of the Caltech campus. Robert and Katie continued to giggle as they returned their notebooks to each other and scribbled more drawings of Dr. Hong and the nonlinear dynamics class.

## 4 Vincent in Trouble

"Trace is negative, determinant is negative..." said Vincent as he thumbed through the well-worn textbook.

"Saddle point," replied Tara without even pausing from writing. "Negative determinant is automatically a saddle point." Vincent continued to scratch his head as he looked at the curve in the book to classify fixed points based on linearizing it about the point.

Three hours and half a problem later, Vincent moaned "I give up!" and looked around the room. Tara had already fallen asleep on the floor at Vincent's feet and her tiny body was curled up. Radu, too, was asleep on his stomach and using his nonlinear dynamics textbook as a pillow and his jacket as a blanket. Katie and Robert had also passed out in the next room, but they had been working on some kind of mechanical engineering project instead of nonlinear dynamics and were drinking fairly heavily to boot. Glancing quickly over Tara's homework, he saw that she had already finished her homework and had been reading ahead about index theory. The temptation to copy her homework entered his mind, but he mumbled, "No, there's the Honor Code to abide by. Plus it's too confusing to even think of copying."

While Vincent struggled to at least finish working on the Jacobian matrix, Tara began to shiver and curl up into an even tighter ball. Carefully, Vincent stood up, went to his bunk bed, grabbed his blanket, and gently put it on Tara. She didn't completely stop shivering, but she didn't look like she was going to freeze. Without a second thought, he also grabbed Radu's blanket and put it over her, hoping it would keep her warm. "Silly little girl, wearing only a T-shirt and shorts in the dead of winter," he thought. He tried to work on the problem that had been taunting him for so long, but his eyes kept going over to the little girl curled up next to him. Unconsciously, he ran his fingers through her dark hair and she began to whisper incoherently. While he stroked her hair, something deep inside of him began to stir and he pushed the homework assignment aside to give him some space to lie down next to her.

Just as he got under the blanket with her, a voice in his head began to whisper ideas of kissing her. "I can't," thought the seventeen year old boy at the suggestions that

deep part of his mind offered. "She's just a really good friend... but... I guess... I... we... like... each other..." his mind began to ramble.

While he contemplated the situation, Radu began to mumble incoherently in what Vincent assumed to be Romanian. "Unde ești, iubirea mea?" he murmured as he snuggled up to his advanced non-Euclidean geometry textbook. "Mea dragostea, te voi iubi până-n ultima zi."

Vincent ignored his roommate's quiet mutterings. He made yet one more pass at the homework assignment, trying to make heads or tails of the symbols that swam in the paper and the book. "I don't know if I can pass this class," he thought. "And I'd much rather be snuggling up to Tara, she's so nice and warm and cute," added that part of his mind that was bothering him so much tonight. "No, but I can't. It's not right," he countered himself.

While he stared at the Jacobian matrix of a simple Lotka-Volterra equation and tried to plug in non-trivial fixed point into it, a cold wind began to blow although he and Radu had already closed all of the windows. Shivering a bit at the cold, Vincent tried to burrow deeper into the blankets. Tara was still asleep, although she began to curl up into an even smaller ball in the cold. She too, shivered in the cold and Vincent found himself putting his arm around her and pulling her close to him to keep her warm. "Vincent?" whispered Tara, still asleep. Then her whispers trailed off into some language that Vincent had never heard before. "Na laetha estel... tar edain Sorondil-Telcontar."

## 5 Wandering in the Dark

Then his hand drifted to her tiny hands, and as soon as he touched them, there was a sudden explosion of force that blasted him into the wall and all of the lights went out, leaving him in darkness. Staggering about, he tried to figure out what happened when his hand had brushed hers. As he tried to lean onto the bunk bed, he only felt thin air. "What the hell?" he yelled nervously as he tried to feel his way in the dark. Stone walls? No sign of any books or his roommate or Tara either. After walking around and bumping into walls in the dark for what felt like hours, he finally heard something besides his own movements.

There were heavy footsteps that were coming closer, and judging from the thumping sound, the source of the footsteps were wearing boots. A harsh, gravelly voice began to speak. "Gar, we need to find that man-flesh before he escapes and tells those ghostly straw-heads who'll come in with their filthy swords and bows and unholy light from the pale-face."

"Aye, but it's not the straw-heads I fear. It's the red-skins with their large swords and shining metal skins and foul beasts they ride upon and their priests that bring in the golden face," commented a second voice. "But I do smell the man-flesh nearby! Let us feast on his flesh tonight!"

Realizing that he was most likely the "man-flesh" they were looking for, Vincent's heart began to pound wildly as he crawled away. "What the hell am I doing? This is all bad dream... just go away," he pleaded silently. While he made that plea, a tiny silver light suddenly began to shine in a distant corner away from the source of the footsteps

and noise. Curiosity piqued, he continued to crawl as quietly as he could to the light. As he drew closer, the light grew more intense, indicating its proximity.

Expecting it to be an exit, Vincent forgot about silence and began to run as fast as he could, only to trip on a large rock and find the source of the light to be on the ground. It was a recurve bow with a quiver full of arrows and a curved sword lying next to it. The bow was made of what looked like a yew or maple inlaid with silver and it was inscribed with several runes. It was strung with what looked like filaments of silver and gold braided together. The arrows, too, were made of the silver-inlaid wood and had runes inscribed into them. The curved sword, about as long as Vincent's arm, glowed with a faint red light and provided Vincent with a small measure of warmth. Without thinking twice, Vincent picked up quiver, sword, and bow. As soon as he touched the bow, warmth spread through his body and it began to glow with a much brighter light.

"I don't need light," he thought. "It's going to attract those cave creatures! How do I put out this blasted light?" As if on cue to his thoughts, the light suddenly disappeared, leaving Vincent in the complete dark.

While Vincent pondered what to do next now that he had some means of protecting himself, his reverie was interrupted by the growing footsteps and gravelly voices yelling. "I smell the man-flesh nearby. We're gaining on him!"

"Ok, I'll need enough light so I don't trip and kill myself," thought Vincent. The bow began to glow dimly with a faint silver light. "Oh great, I have a mentally controlled lantern," he thought. Laughter echoed in his mind and disappeared before he was able to think about it.

"We're going to get the man-flesh! And then we feast!" howled one of the gravelly voices. "No more red-skins and straw-heads to attack us!"

Moving as quickly as possible, Vincent ran through the dark tunnels and eventually ran into a dead end, footsteps and yelling becoming louder. "Shit!" he groaned. "Trapped. I guess I'll have to see how well I can shoot!" While he was on the verge of despair, a small ray of light poked in from above. "Help!" he cried. "I'm trapped here and something's after me!"

"We'll get you out once we dig a hole large enough!" shouted a strong female voice from above. Some bits and pieces of soil and rock came down onto Vincent. He could register the sounds of picks and shovels working on the soil as the bit of sunlight grew.

Vincent looked down the passage and saw growing silhouettes of what looked like gorillas with spears, swords, and other fierce-looking weapons chasing after him. One howled, "The man-flesh is ours!"

"Stop, or I'll shoot!" yelled Vincent as boldly as he dared, nocking one of the arrows and then drawing the bow, ready to let go. He could feel himself straining to maintain his draw and his hands began to tremble, as did the rest of his body.

"Ooh, the man-flesh has a weapon!" laughed one of the gravelly voices. Vincent could smell what made him think of a combination of wet dog, cigarettes and mold. As the silhouettes grew nearer, he continued to strain against the bow, although he knew too much longer would result in him letting go. Finally, one of the smelly gorilla-like creatures emerged from the corner. It was wearing little more than a loincloth and had dark green and orange mottled fur. "Get him boys!" roared the leading gorilla-like creature.

"Stop..." commanded Vincent as the gorilla-like creatures charged at him. At the same time, he loosed an arrow, which sparked silver and blue through the air. Although it flew erratically, it struck the leading creature square in the chest, exploding into a blast of light. Quickly, Vincent nocked another arrow and watched both the passage ahead and the hole above him. The hole was larger as more pieces of dirt and rock fell around him and a shaft of golden light highlighted him.

The leading gorilla-creature roared angrily before falling over with a gaping hole in its chest, blood spurting out. The creatures behind it howled, and a second creature had also been pierced and fell over. "Kill the man-flesh! But watch out for the lightning!" bellowed one of the creatures.

Adrenaline rushing through him, Vincent continued to fire arrows, lighting up the dim corridor with blue and silver sparks. Screams echoed as he struck creature after creature, but he knew the people above him had to hurry up when his arms, chest and back began to hurt. "Please hurry!" yelled Vincent nervously.

One of the creatures began to chant in a deep, gravelly voice. As it chanted, the rest of the creatures began to glow with a sickly orange light. Without thinking twice, Vincent loosed an arrow at the chanting creature. The arrow struck against the orange light and exploded into a shower of rainbow colored sparks. Some of the sparks struck the creature, creating small splashes of blood, but it still stood and let out a laugh. "Charge the man-flesh!"

Right as the creatures began to charge at Vincent, a rope came down. Without thinking twice, Vincent loosed one more arrow and grabbed onto the rope. He prayed the rope would hold up his weight as it creaked. Something grabbed onto his leg and he shrieked three octaves higher than he thought he was capable of. Kicking vigorously at whatever that grabbed him, he called out, "Something got me!" Then he mumbled, "Oh shit, this must be a bad dream..." Again, the bow exploded into a brilliant flash, causing several of the creatures to shriek madly. A few vigorous kicks and jerks of the rope later, Vincent found himself above the ground in the sunlight and surrounded.

## 6 Journey to Taipalos

The source of the strong female voice belonged to a tall, middle-aged woman with sharp, hawk-like features, heavily corded muscles, and well-worn blue overalls. With her were a short, delicate woman with somewhat lighter skin, long red hair, and a fox-like expression, and a large, almost ogre-like man with a wide-brimmed hat and travel-worn clothing that made Vincent think of a stereotyped cowboy. "What done brought ya here, kiddo?" asked the ogre-like man with a heavy, stereotyped Texas accent.

"I wish I knew..." began Vincent nervously, fidgeting with the bow he found. Meanwhile, the two women were busy throwing dirt back onto the hole, covering up the sounds of the creatures cursing and yelling.

The short woman spoke. "Wait a minute, that's not Tara! Although, he looks to be from her cohort. He's certainly a fetching one too." She put the shovel down and looked up and down Vincent. For some reason, Vincent felt naked before this fox-like woman and he felt a twisting in his stomach.

"It don't matter now. He's sure a durned pretty boy, like the little wizarding ones I done beat up as a girlie. Say, boy, where'd ya get that durned pretty bow?" asked the taller woman, also eyeing Vincent.

"I found it down there. Oh, by the way, I'm Vincent Gahan, a junior in math and chemistry at Cal State LA," he replied, regaining his composure.

"Bessie-Mae, I think we oughta take him to Lady Andraste," said the man. "By the way, I'm Billy-Joe Strongarm," he added, extending a large, weather-worn hand out, which Vincent shook. After getting what must've been the most powerful handshake ever, Vincent checked his hand to make sure nothing was broken. "Har-har! Ya durned little pansy, but we'll sure 'nuff will fatten ya up on some proper grub!"

Still eyeing him intently, the fox-like woman said, "And I am Kit, Warden of the Shadowlands."

"And I'm Bessie-Mae Strongarm, Billy-Joe's big sister," said the large woman, also gripping Vincent's hand in a crushing handshake. For the second time, Vincent flexed his fine-featured hand to make sure nothing was broken.

Before Vincent could let his hand recover, Kit approached him and tried to get a closer look at the bow. A small flash of electricity struck out at her, knocking her onto the ground. Startled, Vincent dropped the bow and leaped back. "Kit? You ok?" he asked after he found the ability to speak again.

Kit muttered something that made Vincent think of the occasional rambling he heard from Tara. All he caught was the words, "Sorondil-Telcontar".

"What? You're not talkin' that spirit-talk are you, Kit?" roared Bessie-Mae.

"The legendary bow. The one that Andraste had spoken to us about. And to think it was right on the borders of Tuonela," whispered Kit. "Sorondil-Telcontar."

Billy-Joe lifted Kit off the ground, then went to the bow. He tried to pick it up, but he couldn't lift it off the ground. Several swear-words later, he looked at Bessie-Mae and then at Vincent. Bessie-Mae also attempted to pick up the bow, only to find it too heavy for her to lift. "Dagnabit!" roared Bessie-Mae after cursing profusely. "Can't believe a durned stick like you can lift the durned thing!"

All the while, Kit was giggling at the Strongarm siblings before bursting into laughter so intense that she fell onto the ground. "You nitwits!" she coughed. "I thought everyone in Tuonela, Sidhe and mortal, knew the lore of Sorondil-Telcontar! It can only be lifted and wielded by those who have no other weapon about them. I never thought I would ever behold Sorondil-Telcontar in my lifetime!"

After Vincent picked up the bow, he looked at the silver runes closely. "I've seen runes like these before," he whispered.

"How in tarnation? You're one of them durned foreigners!" said Bessie-Mae.

"But this durned foreigner knows Tara, that girl who saved me from being Billie-Joanna last year. I think she done told him something," replied Billy-Joe as he walked alongside Vincent. Together, the four of them slowly made their way to Taipalos, the capital of Tuonela. It was about a two hour march through rolling hills, although Vincent could see mountains on one side and what looked like endless plains on the other. He assumed the sun rose in the east and set to the west, placing the mountains in the north and the plains in the south. The hills were covered with grasses with the occasional grove of trees, and as the group grew closer to Taipalos, there were also more patches of

cultivated land. Vincent quickly noted that the dominant crops were fruit trees, grapes, and some kind of grain.

Once they arrived at Taipalos, Vincent quickly noticed the stone walls that surrounded the part of the city that wasn't nestled against a hill. The stone walls were a dark grey with both green and reddish streaking, hinting at what he believed to be a large copper and iron content in the local rocks. Although it was a fairly compact city, it was a strange combination of bustling businesses and open space. At the top of the hill was a large building made of the same stone that made the walls and a tower of white stone with green veins in it.

While he admired the view, Kit spoke. "Welcome to the city of Taipalos, and we'll be going up to Dunheasa, where Lady Andraste awaits us."

The streets were fairly straight, although there were some winding streets that went through the sleepier sections of town. A number of girls looked up from their daily toils at Vincent. "There's a handsome stranger in town!" announced one of the girls who looked to be about Vincent's age. Most of the residents were dark-skinned with a slightly reddish cast and raven-haired with either greenish grey or hazel eyes. Billy-Joe smiled at the young girls, who merely made faces at him before returning their eyes to Vincent.

"Ya durn well know they ain't lookin' at ya," laughed Bessie-Mae at Billy-Joe. "Ya'd scare their young'uns with dat ugly mug of yours!"

"Speak for yaself, sis!" roared Billy-Joe. "I've seen cows and orcs that done look better than ya!"

Vincent smiled at the girls, who then scattered giddily, giggling all the way. Even the young men looked up to see why the girls were suddenly blushing, and then they too, smiled at Vincent. Taking him aside, Kit whispered, "The Tuonela really like that slightly golden-brown tinge to your skin and your really dark eyes and black hair. You look like some of the local Eldarin to them, although I know you've got nothing in common with them besides your dashing good looks." As soon as Kit explained the Tuonela idea of beauty, he suddenly blushed. "And admittedly, the Strongarms kinda fit in with their idea of ugly. They don't really like pale skin or ogrish features, but thankfully the Tuonela aren't too concerned about appearances."

While they continued to walk up the streets, the giggling girls soon gave way to older adults who gasped at the sight of Vincent's bow. Many murmurs of "Sorondil-Telcontar!" filled the air. "The old legends... he has returned!"

Further and further up the hill they walked until they reached the dark iron gates of Dunheasa. Two guards in ceremonial armor stepped up, noted that Billy-Joe and Kit were there, then muttered spidery words, opening the gates. "Lady Andraste has been waiting for you." Vincent noted that these guards were fairly young and had yet to grow into their ceremonial armor, which was emblazoned with a lion, unicorn, and a single rose, exactly as Tara had described to him.

"It's the situation, isn't it?" said Kit, slightly grimly.

"Aye, Warden Kit," replied one of the guards. Then his eyes went to Vincent. "It can't be! It was lost five hundred years ago!" he gasped. "Lady Andraste must know!"

## 7 Dunheasa

While following the rest of the group, Vincent's eyes wandered about the walls of Dunheasa. Large tapestries covered the wall, and they all depicted men and women either in battle with huge swords or sitting at the throne. They all had the dark, slightly copper-tinged skin and raven hair of the Tuonela, and they had some form of the coat-of-arms on them, whether on their armor and shields or on their robes. "The Tapestry of Ancestors," whispered Kit, pointing to some old ladies who were busily weaving threads. "And they're working on Andraste's image. The weavers will work until the day of her death, then after that, they'll work on her successor." The image of Lady Andraste was one of a woman in full armor, and it looked as if they were beginning a second person standing next to her.

"Before we go see Andraste, we better durned get ourselves squeaky clean, she ain't gonna like us lookin' like this," reminded Bessie-Mae, breaking Vincent's reverie at the sights. He had been focused on several abstract stone carvings into the pillars.

"Naw, Andraste ain't going to be too worried," laughed Billy-Joe. "We can do some washin' after. Besides, Andraste ain't some pansy fairy queen. She's a fighter like us."

A large door at the end of the long hallway suddenly opened and a lone, regal figure stepped out. It was hard to tell much about the figure, but Vincent gathered that whoever came out was in full armor and carried a huge sword. As they walked closer to each other, he started to see more details, although he still could not identify gender or age. Like the guards at the gate, this person was wearing ceremonial armor and was a bit taller than he was. A few steps later, the person opened up the visor of the helmet to reveal a slightly weather-worn female face. Instinctively, Vincent knelt respectfully, but she merely smiled and said, "You need not bow down to me, sir." Her voice was slightly deeper than most females.

"But... you're..." started Vincent.

"Andraste doesn't like it when people do that. Isn't that right?" laughed Billy-Joe. Bessie-Mae's face paled at Billy-Joe's way of addressing her.

Andraste's face beamed and the intimidating aura she held disappeared as she took Billy-Joe and Kit into a warm embrace. "My friends! Come and rest, and we will talk!" she said. She also hugged Bessie-Mae, who almost fainted at being treated like an equal by the queen. Motioning to everyone, she led them into her throne room, where there were several well-cushioned chairs waiting. "Please sit, my friends," she added warmly.

After settling comfortably into the chairs, Andraste approached Vincent. Unable to contain himself, Vincent exploded, "What is it with the bow I found in those weird mines?"

"There is a prophecy among the Tuonela that a stranger will find the last bow that the half-mortal, half-Sidhe bowyer Cuthalion made ages ago. That was the bow, Sorondil-Telcontar, the greatest of Cuthalion's creations. It is said that the stranger who wields this bow will be the one who will either protect Tuonela from destruction or lead to its downfall. All that is clear is that whoever can wield Sorondil-Telcontar walks on a fine blade between salvation and destruction," replied Andraste, looking cautiously at Vincent.

Vincent shifted, then thought, "This is worse than nonlinear dynamics!"