

# Telcontar Restored

October 27, 2006

## 1 Prologue

"We are slowly fading away. Our children are scarce and our elders are dying in needless battles against our distant kindred. I say we call our mortal kindred to us and restore our dying bloodlines."

"But will they answer our call? Many are completely ignorant of their true natures and are completely attached to mortality."

"We must try. It is better to at least try, and perhaps a few will answer, enough to delay the inevitable until we can find a way to restore our numbers. If not, let it not be said that we took our fate passively."

"So be it. Let us then call our lost kindred, those born among mortals."

"The other Tuatha are also in dire need and they too, suffer as we do. Perhaps this calling will help stop the needless battle between them, particularly the Sidhe and the Alfar, whose hatred of each other grows ever stronger."

"Or destroy the last of them. Cylithera has suffered much in her last attempt to restore Dûnhèasa at the hands of both humans and the giants from Vladivostok. Gildharain, too, suffers much as fewer and fewer people maintain their innocence for long in that world. I can foresee a time where both cease to be in that land."

"Perhaps, then, the age of the Tuatha is completely over in that realm. The last of that realm to choose, then, will be Imladrien of the Alfar, Eöl of the Sidhe, and Oroszlan of the Sarkany."

"So let the Calling begin."

## 2 Of Geeksters and Flames

In another land, Vincent Gahan stood in the music practice room with a microphone and an electric guitar. He was an athletic young man of medium height, about five foot nine, with jet-black hair that was slicked back and a tanned, handsome face with a slightly golden tinge and dark, intense almond-shaped eyes, revealing his Chinese and mixed European origins. He wore a pair of black jeans and a black and silver collared button-up shirt with a black leather jacket with silver highlights that formed the shape of far-Eastern styled dragon. Around his neck was a gold chain that held a small silver pendant shaped like a falcon. Nodding to his friend, Ivan Sîrbu, he said, "Ready?"

Ivan was a lanky young man with spiked, wiry golden-brown hair with dark brown, almost black, roots that stood up by itself, adding about two inches to his slender six foot four frame. He was fair-skinned with expressive green-flecked blue eyes, sharp features, and a distinct cleft in his chin that his goatee only emphasized. Unlike his friend, he wore tight white dress pants and a pastel green and pale yellow tie-dye shirt. On the lobe of his left ear were a pair of small silver earrings that seemed to form abstract, almost rune-like shapes. "Yeah," he replied, positioning himself at the keyboard and pulling out the metronome. "Raz... dva... tri.. iee!" he called out before hitting the button on the recording equipment and setting himself up behind the keyboard.

Vincent began to sing and strum along on his electric guitar, while Ivan began to play on the keyboard. In the small room, Vincent's smooth, powerful baritone reverberated and resonated, filling the room with both his voice and a sense of yearning.

I walk down the thorny trail,  
Perhaps to tell a tale  
Of adventure and derring-do  
Or to sing a song of my longing for you.

Alone I trek, save for my songs  
For you, to whom my heart belongs.  
Tell me, if I ever hurt you,  
Know that my love is forever true.

Ivan' high, almost keening tenor voice then joined Vincent in the chorus as a counterpoint. Although his sweet, boyish tenor lacked the power of his friend's baritone, his voice still floated into the air, rising above the two young men.

Oh the winter may pass and the spring may die  
The summer may fade and the years may fly  
But I'll return to you, my love  
By the sun above  
And the shining stars, I promise you

After the chorus, Vincent's baritone took over once more, his solo voice once again overpowering the room with emotion. Had anyone else been in the room, they would have begun to feel the same longing his voice carried and probably would have begun to weep.

I may be trapped in hell below,  
Or wounded by a mortal blow  
But nothing can silence this tune  
Even if we depart all too soon.

You alone are my guiding light  
Through the dark and stormy night,  
My hope that shines across the sea  
Only your love can set me free

Oh the winter may pass and the spring may die  
The summer may fade and the years may fly  
But I'll return to you, my love  
By the sun above  
And the shining stars, I promise you

After Vincent played his last set of riffs and Ivan played his last chords and sound effects, Ivan hit the switch to stop recording. "I think that was good one," he said as they both drank from the water bottles they brought in.

"Yeah, it felt pretty good," replied Vincent as they listened to the recording. "Best recording we've made too, I liked the way you added that techno beat, and I think it works better as a faster, Eurodance-style track than the really slow ballad I originally decided on. The Ceroc formation team will love this one I think. I should take this to Dr. Nunnelley when he gets back from the American Chemical Association meeting."

"Almost linear combination of 'Enjoy the Silence' by Depeche Mode and 'Despre Tine' by O-Zone," commented Ivan. "Except you sing with much more passion than them. You like someone, don't you?"

Stuttering a bit, Vincent's normally tanned face turned a bright red. "Yeah. Of course, I wonder about you too with some of the songs you've written like 'Night-Time Prayer', especially when your voice really goes up like Andy Bell." Before Vincent could continue, the door flew open and a tiny figure, a few shades below five feet tall, darted in before collapsing. She was engulfed in a bluish flame that quickly extinguished when Vincent and Ivan caught her. "Tarathorn!" gasped Vincent.

The tiny dark-skinned girl with the lively almond-shaped eyes and back-length raven ponytail moaned a bit in pain. Her simple navy blue Caltech sweatshirt and jeans were unaffected by the flames, as was her skin. "I don't know what happened," she whispered in a slightly cracked voice that was normally an airy, cheerful soprano. "I was practicing my piano four-hands piece for the chamber music concert with Dr. Claudio and then something happened."

At that moment, Dr. Claudio, a somewhat stocky, late-middle aged woman in camouflage with grey-streaked short-cropped dark hair and thick silver-rimmed owl-glasses, ran in. "Tarathorn? Are you going to...?" she gasped when she saw that she was sitting up with a bit of assistance from Vincent.

"Dr. Claudio! Did something...?" started Vincent before he saw Dr. Claudio's ring glowing brightly. The ecology professor always wore a silver ring shaped like a wolf's head on a silver chain around her neck. "What the hell...?" he mumbled, noting the ring.

When the ring began to glow with a piercing blue light, Tarathorn began to shriek in pain as blue flames began to grow on her. This time, the flames began to consume her skin, although her clothing was still left intact. Quickly, Dr. Claudio shouted something, almost like a wolf's howl, and the ring stopped glowing. Tarathorn was no longer on fire, but her skin was scorched, especially on her slender, nimble arms. Then it dawned on everyone that Ivan had just dialed 9-1-1 and was reporting the incident. "Yes. Caltech campus, sub-basement of South Houses. The room is under Blacker House. No, she's alert and breathing, but her skin is severely scorched..." continued Ivan, trying to keep his voice from trembling too much.

"Vincent, get some cold water from the bathroom and a towel from the linen room," instructed Dr. Claudio, gesturing over Tarathorn. Once she saw Vincent running to the bathroom, she began to chant softly.

"Gildharain?" gasped Tarathorn. "Estel... wielder of Telcontar... Eöl." Then she passed out with a confused expression on her face.

Right as Vincent came in with the wet towels, several paramedics had already run in and placed Tarathorn onto a stretcher after checking her vital signs. "So... she just burst into flame, you said?" asked one, scratching his head as Dr. Claudio explained to him what had happened in the music room.

"Most odd case," mumbled the paramedic. "We had two other cases of Tehanu Syndrome, one I saw with my own eyes where the boy just lit up like a torch with a blue flame. Both of them died, but I think you got this one in time and she's really hanging on aggressively." With that, the team of paramedics whisked Tarathorn away even as she called out incoherently and Vincent and Ivan ran alongside them, trying to comfort her.

While Dr. Claudio waited anxiously in the emergency room with Tarathorn's parents, Vincent, and Ivan, her cell phone suddenly began to buzz and ring. "Hello?" she answered hoarsely.

"Helen, I don't know if you've run into this... but I've had some dreams about my old bow being rebuilt with the silver inlays that the Eternal Huntress had placed in them all those years ago. And there was talk from strange faerie like creatures, some cat, some fox, some small birds, all child-like about taking back a land that was promised to them but never granted. Dûnhèasa was under attack and it wasn't from this world, it was from these child-like creatures led by what looked like Barrie's Peter Pan," said the voice anxiously. Dr. Claudio recognized it as Dr. Joanne de Salvo, one of her first post-doctoral scholars and now fellow collaborator.

"Joanne, we need to talk, but I've got an emergency situation in the hospital. Tarathorn got hit with what the media and doctors are calling it Tehanu Syndrome. Things aren't looking too good. I'll try to investigate what the others have found, I have been feeling something in the air and my fears are slowly being confirmed. I'll call you back later tonight," replied Dr. Claudio.

A doctor in a blood-spattered coat came out and called out, "Mr. and Mrs. Suttankankul?"

Before Tarathorn's parents could reach the doctor, Vincent and Ivan ran up first with Vincent's face stained with tears. "Tarathorn... is she ok? Will she live?" He grabbed the doctor nervously, while Ivan tried to restrain the devastated youth.

"She is in critical condition with an extremely rare condition known as Tehanu Syndrome," said the doctor. "With your permission, Mr. and Mrs. Suttankankul, we will transfer her to UCLA, where they are researching this very condition."

"Please do it! Where's the papers?" demanded both of Tarathorn's parents.

"Go over to the counter and we'll take care of it for you," said the doctor, leading the distraught parents. Vincent and Ivan tried to follow, but Dr. Claudio grabbed both of them with a surprisingly firm grasp, given her small build.

"Vincent and Ivan, I need to talk to you guys. I just got a call from Joanne de Salvo from the Institute of Environmental Sciences. I know you know Tarathorn best and I don't want to tell her parents just yet, but I must speak to someone. I can't stay silent on it any longer," said Dr. Claudio urgently. With that, she pulled the two students into a fairly quiet corner.

Still unable to restrain his tears, Vincent asked, "What is it, Dr. Claudio? I mean... Tarathorn will live, right?"

Whispering just slightly above the din, Dr. Claudio replied, "I don't know. She's the one who'll have

to decide when the time comes." She was then interrupted by her cell phone ringing again. Checking it and sighing, she picked up. "Joanne?"

"I know it's probably a bad time to call, but I just had another disturbing vision. One of a huge dark-haired woman with a black yew longbow and of the Eternal Huntress, who spoke to me. 'Telcontar must be rebuilt', she said to me," answered Joanne. "She also spoke of one who can unite the Sidhe and Alfar once more and of defending Dùnhèasa from hordes of angry Alfar. Only the one who can wield the rebuilt Telcontar can unite them. Then a dragon that looked like he was made of molten gold showed up and told me that it wasn't only for the Sidhe and the Alfar, but also for the rest of the Tuatha."

"Damn. But who would be able to restore Telcontar and wield it?" asked Dr. Claudio. At this point, she pushed a button on the phone to allow Vincent and Ivan to listen in.

"Telcontar?" whispered Ivan and Vincent to each other.

"All I know is that the Eternal Huntress is searching for the shards, the silver inlays that were on my old bow, that maple Chek-Mate Falcon that I got so attached to, so they can be placed within the new bow. One is a small medallion in the shape of a falcon, the other two are enchanted runes," continued Joanne. Suddenly, Dr. Claudio looked intently at both Vincent and Ivan, her eyes fixed on Vincent's pendant, then on Ivan's earrings.

"And the shards have been found," said Dr. Claudio. "They're on two students who are with me right now, namely the Geeksters. All this time, the knight-errants have been searching and it's been under my nose."

"The Captain's getting a bit rusty, eh? But you know what to do from here. I will alert the rest of the knight-errants, including Kestrel. Why it's been able to evade us, I am at a loss, but now that the shards have been found, you must act fast." With that, Joanne hung up the phone and Dr. Claudio closed her cell phone. She turned to Vincent and Ivan, still looking at them intently.

Ivan blurted out, "What do we do now?" He started to remove the earrings from his ears and was getting to ready to offer them to Dr. Claudio, who tried to take them, but she leaped back as if struck by lightning.

"No. I can't touch those. Cylithera's pissed at me again," grumbled Dr. Claudio. "I can't touch them but I'm going to see if I can come with you guys. And I hope you don't have anything else to do for a while because you guys are coming on a long trip with me... or if I can't quite do it myself, I'll get Kestrel or Joanne to do it."

Vincent and Ivan looked at each other and then at the sky and then at each other once again. Ivan's bright blue eyes widened with the realization of the reality of the situation. "Not good," muttered Ivan.

A small, tapered avian shape appeared in the night sky. Judging from the slender, pointed wings, Vincent thought it looked like a small falcon or hawk. It began to descend towards the ground and a silvery light surrounded it, highlighting the tawny plumage with black stripes and a light underside and a dark mask of black feathers on its face. The bird suddenly began to shudder in the light as its talons contacted the ground. It rapidly grew in height and its shape began to shift towards that of a human form. She was perhaps about as short as Dr. Claudio with a slightly lighter build and paler complexion with messy white hair with a few black and grey streaks. Like Dr. Claudio, she had an expression of intense curiosity. She wore a reddish-brown hooded cloak with dark stripes and a black mask that concealed her eyes and her upper face, but the lines on her face hinted that she was probably significantly older than she looked.

Even Dr. Claudio gasped at the transformation, but she quickly regained her composure. "Kestrel..." she said. "Speak of the little devil..."

Laughing, the older woman smiled and hugged Dr. Claudio before replying. "Will you ever stay out of trouble? I'm starting to wonder if I should retire from academia and just dedicate the rest of my life to answering calls for help on this side of the transect." Her voice was somewhat high-pitched and almost child-like, yet it held more authority than most professors that Vincent and Ivan had ever run into. "In case you haven't figured it out," she said to the two boys, "I am the one known as Kestrel."

"I'd love to catch up with you, Anya, but that'll have to wait," muttered Dr. Claudio to Kestrel. "I know you can transect the planes much better than I can. Take these guys to that bowyer, Tindariel, I think she'll know what to do, Joanne's visions are a bit too accurate sometimes."

Kestrel's masked face suddenly burst into a huge smile at the mention of Tindariel. "My old roommate at the University. I wonder how she's holding out, it has been far too long since I've last spoken with her. I will take them." Before Vincent or Ivan could do anything, Kestrel began to chant spidery words and grabbed one of the boys with either hand. As vortices of brightly colored energy swirled about, Kestrel

called out, "Whatever you do, don't let go! We're going in for a ride!"

Then Vincent and Ivan suddenly saw themselves and Kestrel burst into bright blue flame. "You're not giving us Tehanu Syndrome, are you?" screamed Vincent.

"In a sense..." trailed Kestrel before explosions blocked her voice.

*Tarathorn stirred slightly and looked around in the silver-blue miasma that surrounded her. "Where am I?" she called out, still dizzy and somewhat nauseated.*

*An ethereal voice responded, "At the Crossroads. Here you shall remain until the appointed time." The miasma then cleared, revealing a fairly flat landscape with muted colors. The entire area was surrounded by high mountains that seemed to reach for the sky. Several other ghostly entities walked around and each of them looked around before crowding around a large stone tablet.*

*"To Dúnhèasa I go," said a tall, feral-looking old man with a vaguely lupine face. "I'll not return to mortality. I will forever become Sidhe." With that, he began to walk towards a dark, forbidding part of the mountains where the sun was setting and lightning constantly struck down. As he walked towards the mountains, he was gradually able to stand up more and more straight and the white hairs began to darken into a rich black.*

*"I go back to Mag-na-Oige," whispered a small, pale boy with leg braces. "I'm coming home to where I can forever be at play!" He struggled to walk towards a less forbidding part of the mountains, where the stars seemed to be twinkling playfully. His first steps were pained and hesitating but each step grew stronger, more steady until the leg braces vanished.*

*A young woman with deep brown skin and black, curly hair walked past. She was wearing a business suit and carried a large book entitled, 'Solid State Physics', and she walked with an air of confidence. Looking around, she said to Tarathorn, "I wouldn't stay here for too long." Then turning towards where the sun was trying to penetrate the strange misty darkness, she called out, "To Pelda I shall journey!" As she walked away from Tarathorn, the woman began to glow with a bright golden light and she no longer had eyes for the ground as she burst into sunlight and her human form became long, graceful, and reptilian.*

*Several other of these ghostly figures also began their journeys to various locations, gradually leaving Tarathorn all alone. She then approached the stone tablet, which only had incoherent runes to her. "How the heck is this going to help?" she asked herself before looking for patterns among the runes and the ghosts.*

### 3 Ancient Ones

Baelnorn Clawstaff and Tanilthara N'Shad-Daermon were sitting back on their cushioned hardwood rocking chairs in the library of the University, both reading from large tomes. Baelnorn was a pinched, hunched over old man in a blood red robe that looked a few sizes too large for him with thin, stringy white hair and a thinning beard that extended past his chest. He wheezed almost constantly and only stopped his wheezing and reading to mumble about "arthritis" and "rheumatism". Tanilthara was a short woman with ebony skin with a few wrinkles that only added to her regal expression, rich silver hair, and almond-shaped expressive green eyes. Her iridescent violet robe only emphasized her shapely figure, and she, like the old man, was fully intent on reading. Their peace, however, was disrupted with a flash of light that produced three large objects that looked very human to them.

One of the humans, a short and slightly built woman, brushed herself off and saluted both Clawstaff and Tanilthara. "My apologies, Dr. Clawstaff and Dr. N'Shad-Daermon," she said in her high-pitched voice, smiling.

"Kestrel... you should know better," grumbled Clawstaff. "And did you find the runes?" he added, wheezing heavily.

"Yes..." spoke Tanil before Kestrel could even respond.

The first of the two strangers was an extremely tall young man in tight pastel clothing and spiked blonde hair, thick gold-rimmed glasses, and a distinct goatee that only barely covered the cleft in his chin. He carried an aura of intense curiosity both Tanil and Clawstaff's eyes. The second was also a young man, not so tall, and in the eyes of the two mages, much more tastefully dressed with his mostly black clothing with silver highlights. He was also raven-haired with almond-shaped eyes that spoke of intense passion and intelligence. Both young men looked disoriented, judging from how they looked this

way and that, especially the taller one. The shorter one merely blinked and then started to scrutinize the two mages.

"They're on these two, both collaborators of Captain Greywolf," said Kestrel as formally as possible. The black mask on her face made it hard for her to strike the two mages as formal. Pointing to the taller man, she introduced him. "This is Ivan Sîrbu," she started and then pointed to the shorter man. "And this is Vincent Gahan. Both of them are doctoral scholars at the California Institute of Technology..." Then she gestured to the old man and said, "Ivan and Vincent, this is Clawstaff." Finally, she pointed to the woman. "And this is Tanilthara N'Shad-Daermon."

"A pleasure to meet you," said Vincent, extending his hand out to Tanil, who shook it with more vigor than he ever expected from such a slender woman. Coldness spread up his arm, but it instantly vanished. Then he shook hands with Clawstaff, who merely extended his fingers out and grumbled incoherently about rheumatism. Ivan imitated Vincent's gesture, although not as boldly as his friend.

As Ivan' pale, delicately boned hand gripped Tanil's ebony-skinned hand, a flash of light enveloped both of them. Ivan found himself pressed against a wall, while Tanil was sprawled out against an opposite wall. Grunting and wheezing from exertion, Clawstaff stood up and brandished his staff, which was topped with several claws of various sizes. He spoke some spidery words that floated in the air, then the staff glowed, and Ivan' face contorted with pain as red light surrounded him. "Baelnorn! He means no harm!" called out Tanil, brushing herself off.

"He is touched deeply by the Tuatha," mumbled Clawstaff, putting his staff down and letting Ivan relax a bit.

All the while, Vincent merely stood still, while Kestrel merely stood, ready to leap into action if necessary. Her lips were moving slightly as she whispered softly and her hand began to glow ever so slightly. She tugged at Vincent, who yelped at the shock of being touched. "Vincent is also touched deeply by the Tuatha."

"What the ...?" exclaimed Vincent, eyes almost bugging out from confusion.

"But you are not, Kestrel, at least until you got yourself into that mess all those years ago," laughed Tanil, her green eyes flashing in mirth before returning to a serious expression.

Suddenly, for no apparent reason, Vincent couldn't contain himself and he burst out, "Why the hell are we just yammering? What about Tarathorn? Time's running out for her and we're just wasting time like it's some fuckin' tea party!" At this outburst, tears started to stream out from Vincent's eyes and his face flushed red. "She might be dying!"

Ivan joined Vincent's outburst. "What's the meaning of all this?" spewed Ivan as his pale face also turned beet-red. "What do we have to do to save Tarathorn?"

Kestrel's cheerful expression took a few notes of seriousness. "I don't know and these guys don't know either. But what we do know is that things are changing and Tarathorn and many others, you guys too, got caught in the change. Ultimately it'll be up to her, but what we can do is start getting other stuff to happen."

Clawstaff stood up, struggling and leaning on his name-sake staff, wheezing heavily all the while. Tanil ran over to support the old man, but he motioned her away. Hobbling slowly, he walked over to Ivan and Vincent. "It has been over three thousand years... and Olorin has finally shown me some mercy..." he babbled almost incoherently. "I can finally retire..." He then reached out a bony hand towards Ivan and Vincent. "You... both of you... the two..."

Again, Vincent and Ivan looked at each other, puzzled at the old man's outburst. "What?" asked Vincent when he noticed that Ivan' jaw had dropped.

Shaking her head, Kestrel said, "There's a really long, complicated prophecy... it started back when I was here as a student and when Captain Greywolf, er, Dr. Claudio was still a little pup. To give you what's relevant... basically there's this huge rift between all of the fey, or as they prefer to be called, the Tuatha. Many of the different races of the Tuatha haven't gotten along too well, especially the Sidhe and the Alfar and things have been getting really ugly. So the prophecy says that if someone from the three warring factions of the Tuatha can come together peacefully before the leaders of their kin, then things can defuse... and there was something about Soronthrel's bow being re-built with those runes... at least if my memory isn't failing me, I'm getting old after all. Oh and something where humans are the answer to the problem as it always seems to be in all these epics."

A smile formed on Tanil's lips at Kestrel's rambling description of the situation and at Vincent and Ivan' lost expressions. "What Kestrel is trying to tell you are that there's a good chance that fate may have brought you to us..."

"Just great," whined Ivan. "Just like in those Dungeons and Dragons games at Cal State LA..."

"Except... there's no time-outs," added Vincent, whispering to Ivan. "Or time to look up stuff in the manual."

While the boys were mumbling to each other and Kestrel about Dungeons and Dragons, Clawstaff began to grumble and wheeze out spidery words which sent a cloud of smoke swirling around. "Dr. Clawstaff, I don't think you really need to do this," started Kestrel, searching her pockets.

Vincent began to glow with a faint, cool silver light, while Ivan glowed with a golden, almost fiery light. The smoke then dissipated even as the boys began to glow more brightly. "Baelnorn, I could've easily told you that," said Tanil, shaking her head.

A hot, dry breeze began to blow and pick up in intensity. The ceiling of the vast library cracked and rubble began to descend as the top part was lifted off. "Baelnorn Clawstaff and Tanilthara N'Shad-Daermon, it is a pleasure to see you once more!" hissed a voice that sounded like gigantic cymbals clanging in the wind. "And dear little Anya Cho, I am glad you are well after your courageous act of defiance against Tindarien Dalithariel and Cylithera Eaglestrike. Although, the cloak of mortality appears to be finally taking its toll on you. It's not too late for you until the Calling is over." The rest of the building began to crumble as giant claws tore at the walls and a mighty serpentine tail struck stone. "Do not worry, I will make sure no falling debris strikes any of you," added the reptilian creature, now revealing its crocodile-like face and toothy grin. Unlike a normal crocodile, its scales looked more like molten gold and it had a long beard and horns adorned its face.

"Shit. A dragon," whispered Vincent to Ivan. For some reason, Vincent found himself unable to move except to utter that phrase. Kestrel, Tanil and Clawstaff too, seemed to be immobilized.

"Legoregebb, the Eldest of the Sarkany. Still better than Cylithera and her Sidhe or Gildharain and his damned Alfar. Damn, where are Killer Parakeet and Rusty when we really need them? Or even that idiot Tindariel?" mumbled Clawstaff even as his eyes bugged out slightly and the expression on his pinched, skeletal face spoke of pure terror.

"*Sarkany gyermek!*" roared the creature to Ivan. Dark smoke came up in wisps from its nose.

Unconsciously, Ivan called out, "*Sarkany regebb futestver!*" Vincent looked at Ivan, pondering what on earth he just said, but Ivan's eyes were focused on the creature that Vincent kept thinking of as a dragon. His intense yellow eyes focused on Ivan with a vertically slit, almost feline, pupil. "Please, Legoregebb, do not hurt them!" said Ivan, projecting his voice above the powerful wingbeats of the hovering Sarkany.

"I will not. But I know of what you and the other mortal bear," intoned the Sarkany in that crashing cymbal-like voice. Descending with a grace that seemed impossible for such a large creature, he extended a muscular foot reminiscent of a gigantic parrot's foot but with sharper claws and scales that looked like molten gold. Deftly, he grabbed Ivan with the surprisingly agile foot, taking care to hold him securely, although Ivan paled even further when one of the claws came dangerously close to his crotch. A second foot came down and snatched up Vincent, again holding him so he could do little more than watch in terror. "And send my greetings to your daughters, Ilithara and Iliiryana, and to Ildathra, their namesake goddess of song and dance," he intoned to Tanilthara. "It has been far too long since I have last seen her, I hope her recovery from Cylithera's attack on her has not taken too much of a toll on her." Flapping his wings, he ascended, taking care to dodge the last bits of the ceiling and roof.

"Ivan? What the hell did you say to him?" asked Vincent once he realized that Legoregebb wasn't going to kill him quite yet. "And what the hell did he say to you?"

"He addressed me as a child of the Sarkany and I addressed him as the Eldest one," replied Ivan, trying to wiggle so the Sarkany's claw didn't dig so much into his crotch. "But beats me exactly what a Sarkany is."

"Probably one of these dragon-like creatures," said Vincent, wincing in pain at the claw that threatened to damage his crotch.

Between the heat from Legoregebb's body and the chill wind from flying so fast, Vincent only hoped that he was going to survive the trip and not die from being cooked or frozen. Far below, Vincent and Ivan could see the landscape slowly go from a bright, healthy green to a paler green to parched desert. At first, there were many blue spots and lines, but they quickly faded away as Legoregebb's powerful wingbeats propelled them forward. "We are almost in Pelda, the realm of the Sarkany. Stay strong, little ones."

Suddenly, a wave of nausea began to overtake Vincent as Legoregebb turned and began soaring upwards. "Ivan... I think..." groaned Vincent. Before Ivan could turn and see what was going on, Vincent began vomiting, lurching as far forward as Legoregebb's secure grip would allow him to. Even

with all the effort Vincent put, he still threw up on the molten gold-like claw that held him. Looking up nervously, Vincent said, "Uhh, I'm sorry about my little accident. My stomach hurts."

A thunderous clanging filled the air and Vincent wondered if he was going to get killed for his little accident. "Vincent, I don't know about you, but that probably wasn't the smartest of things to do, although, I might have to follow your footsteps," groaned Ivan.

"We are almost in Pelda. My deepest apologies for your discomfort. I forgot that mortals are so weak in the stomach," clanged Legoregebb, almost making a laugh-like noise. What felt like an eternity passed for both Vincent and Ivan before they spotted what looked like a golden slit in the sky. The Sarkany flew straight on, flapping as fast as he could before approaching it.

As soon as the three of them passed through the slit, the sky suddenly took on a more intense bluish hue and then sun seemed to be a much stronger presence. There was very little vegetation, except for a regularly positioned, lush rectangular patches. There were also several large mountains and hills, also somewhat regularly positioned. There was little life on the ground save for vegetation and what looked like large people tending to the vegetation, but there were many more reptilian (draconian in Vincent and Ivan's minds) creatures flying through the air. Finally, the great Sarkany alighted upon an especially tall mountain that looked as if it were made from bronze and marble. Gently, he set both boys down. Ivan was still able to stand up steadily as he admired the scenery, but Vincent lost his balance and held his stomach.

"Excuse me, but I'm not feeling too good," groaned Vincent again.

The Sarkany made that clanging noise again and looked at Vincent with those vertically slit pupils. "Go in further. You will find food and drink. Regain your strength."

Ivan's stomach began to grumble loudly and after helping Vincent back onto his feet, he went towards the back of the large cavern. On the table was a simple set-up for two people with bread, brightly colored fruits, and what looked like glasses of water. "Ivan... are you sure it's safe?" whispered Vincent as Ivan eagerly downed the food and drink.

"I feel all right. You better eat or at least drink something," said Ivan. Vincent reluctantly ate and like Ivan, he began to eat more heartily. The liquid he thought was water had a slight metallic flavor to it, but as soon as he took it in, his nausea vanished and he felt a bit more alert.

Then Vincent suddenly felt a burning sensation in his stomach. "Shit!" he swore, clutching his stomach again, all the while Ivan showing no signs of distress at all. "What the hell is this? And why the hell did you bring us here?" demanded Vincent, scared.

In that ringing, clanging voice, Legoregebb spoke. "I speak on behalf of the Amonethedain, namely, the Sarkany and the Eldharin, who follow the paths of mystery that all mortals face. We are aware of the tensions between our fallen cousins, the Sidhe and the Alfar, who embrace the night and the ways of lawlessness. I ask of you who hold the secrets to cooperate with us, for both the Sidhe and the Alfar seek to take away our lands." Then gazing at both Vincent and Ivan, he added, "What I ask is that you give the runes and the pendant to me."

"And what will you do with them?" asked Ivan, looking up from eating.

"I will hold onto them such that neither of the Tuatha Gilthanedain people can take them and thus protect the balance, at least until the one worthy of re-creating the bow that Soronthrel Cúthalion once used and then wielding it him or herself," he replied.

Looking at each other again, Vincent and Ivan pondered over the situation. "Wait a minute, but who would that be? Couldn't we go searching for that person and then bring it back?" asked Vincent, eyeing the Sarkany cautiously. "If nothing else, we can use it to save Tarathorn... and then give the bow to you!"

The great reptilian creature shifted, then said, "In theory, but the inherent lawlessness of both the Sidhe and Alfar will only cause a struggle for power that only the strongest can even think of stopping. Aye, I know what Cylithera Eaglestrike and Gildharain seek. Both seek to expand their empires for perceived wrongs, particularly Cylithera. I do not wish to have another war among the Tuatha."

"But Kestrel or one of her friends mentioned that a mortal could also be the unifying force," added Vincent.

Laughing again, Legoregebb gazed intently at Ivan, then at Vincent. "Then what do you propose? Will either of you wield the bow when the time comes?" He focused especially hard on Vincent, who gulped.

Returning Legoregebb's gaze, Vincent declared, "I'll do it if it'll stop this nonsense and save Tarathorn. And by the Caltech Honor Code, I'll see it through!"

Legoregebb smirked. "Silly mortal. But I still demand something to maintain your fidelity and honor. And I choose to keep your companion, Ivan." At that instant, Ivan's jaw dropped and he glared at the creature.

"I go by the Caltech Honor Code! It explicitly states 'No one member of the Caltech community shall take unfair advantage of another' and I adhere to it like my life!" cried Vincent, flushing and tears dripping from his eyes.

"Vincent, calm down," whispered Ivan. "I'll stay with Legoregebb. I don't think he'll harm me too much, I figure you'll be safer getting that bow made and stuff, after seeing how you almost barfed on the food."

"Are you sure?" asked Vincent, whispering.

"Vincent Zhong-hua Gahan of the Humans of the Changing Lands, I cannot promise you that you will succeed or that Ivan will be unharmed. What I will promise to you, however, is that I will treat Ivan as a respected guest as long as you stay true to your promise to only use the power of the bow to save Tarathorn's life and to hand it to its rightful wielder. If you stray, both your life and Ivan's life will be forfeit," said Legoregebb sternly, his voice filling the large cavern.

Shuddering in nervousness, Vincent stepped up to the Sarkany and promised, "I accept your terms." Then he turned to Ivan and hugged him. "Wish me luck and you hang in there..."

Hugging his friend back, Ivan whispered, "Don't worry, I'll be ok. Tarathorn's the one in danger, not me, well, you're in danger too." He took Vincent's hands and held them tightly before giving him a quick peck on both cheeks. "Good luck, I know you'll be ok!" Discreetly, he let his hand brush against Vincent's backside as he reluctantly walked away.

Pondering Ivan's actions, Legoregebb kept a close eye on both men. Then with a giant claw that now looked like dark steel traced in gold in the light, he motioned to Vincent. "Follow the light, and you will return to the library. Hopefully it will no longer be in shambles."

Cautiously, Vincent stepped towards the light and soon he found himself in what looked like a hallway made from golden tiles. The hallway seemed to extend infinitely with a bright white light at the end. At first the only sounds he heard were his footsteps and breathing, but his ears soon registered something else. "Kestrel! No!" shouted a distressed but melodic and sultry female voice. "Don't you die yet!"

Panicked, Vincent ran as fast as he could through the strange hallway and soon he found himself crashing right into what felt like a solid wall. He looked around once his head and nose stopped hurting. Several trees surrounded him, including some slender and willowy ones that seemed to glow in the moonlight and some extremely large trees with canopies that formed monster-like silhouettes. The wall he crashed into was made of grey bricks and was part of what looked like a small cottage. He walked around the cottage until he found a door, which was inscribed with a longbow with an arrow nocked to it and drawn to full extension. Beneath the inscription was a coat of arms with a lion, bearded unicorn, and a rose. He gulped and then knocked on the door, having decided that it was probably safer in the cottage than in these strange woods.

One knock. Two knocks. Three knocks. No response. Then the sound of heavy footsteps caught Vincent's attention. They came from behind him and he whirled around to see a large bear approaching him. Without a second thought, he tried to open the door, pushing and then pulling. With a quick tug, he opened the door and then bolted in.

It was dark in the cottage aside from the embers of a dying fire. The first thing that Vincent could sense was the strong smell of concentrated whiskey and tobacco. "Ugh," he thought as he explored the dim cottage. There was a door in the opposite corner from where he had entered. Loud snoring came from that general direction. On the floor Vincent was able to find a large dark-furred bear pelt, and as far as he could tell, there were several sticks of some sort, but the light was too dim for him to tell what they were. Between the traumatic journeys and the sight of a comfortable pelt, his body gave out on him and he passed out.

## 4 Tindariel

*"Tarathorn, come away with me," said a boy's voice. "Leave that world of suffering and come with me to Mag-na-Oige forever, where you'll always be at play."*

*"No, I've got many things to do... and even if I didn't, what about my friends?" asked Tarathorn's voice.*

Vincent felt like he was floating in a warm, viscous environment. He couldn't see anything in the darkness, but his hearing for some reason was even keener than ever. His ears perked up at the sound of Tarathorn speaking.

"They'll either come along or they won't," replied the boy's voice, carefree and brazen. "If you're talking about that bean-pole with the spikes in his hair, he can't because he's tainted with too much order. But as for the one who sings so beautifully, maybe he can if he sets his priorities straight and doesn't give himself over to the enemy. And as for the others, they're a bit too grown up, but maybe we can persuade them. Come on, join me!"

"Tarathorn!" he called out, hoping his voice would reach her through what felt like thick syrup. "It's me, Vincent!"

The darkness began to lift slightly and Vincent could see Tarathorn standing at a road where there were many paths and signs leading in divergent directions. Next to her was a boy about her height with reddish-black hair and what looked like a kilt made of a mixture of summer and autumn leaves. Unlike the boy, Tarathorn was dressed fairly plainly in blue jeans, a navy blue Caltech T-shirt, and a pair of grey tennis shoes. Tarathorn whirled around, searching for where she had heard Vincent's voice.

"What do I have to do to save you?" he called out when she faced him.

"Leave her alone, mortal, or come join us where you can forever be at play," said the boy before turning back to Tarathorn. "Your voice would be a real treasure and there's pirates for you to duel with and raven-haired lasses who would eagerly fight on your side. Or would you rather have blonde lads serenading and dancing with you?" The boy then drew a short sword and brandished it at Vincent.

Tarathorn looked at Vincent and then the strange boy and then her eyes went back to Vincent. Before she could do anything, Vincent tried to reach out to her. As he touched her, he felt something pulling him away from her...

"Dagnabit! What brought you here? Tell me before I frontier justice you!" roared a very deep female voice.

Vincent's eyes bolted open to see a tall, imposing muscular woman looming over him. The smell of alcohol and tobacco surrounded her, and he forced himself to make sure his stomach didn't empty itself. Based on his fuzzy vision, she seemed to be at least six feet tall, built very heavily, and was perhaps in her mid-thirties by his estimate. Her shoulder-length black hair had a few streaks of silver, and her stern, sea-grey eyes seemed to pierce him. In her large, weather-worn hands was a large sword that was traced in runes reminiscent of the ones that he and Ivan had inadvertently obtained.

Gulping and fighting the waves of nausea, he replied, "I ran in here to escape from that bear last night..."

She lifted the sword slightly to give him a bit of breathing room. "Hah, not many people escape Urrgh. He must've either decided you weren't worth the trouble or might actually be of use to me. So, who are you and what do you want?" she laughed heartily before stepping back and letting Vincent sit up a bit more comfortably.

He clutched his stomach for a brief moment, then said almost incoherently, "I'm Vincent Gahan of Pasadena, California and I'm here to figure out how the heck to remake the bow known as Telcontar so I can save Tarathorn's life and find the rightful wielder of that bow to stop the mess between the Sidhe and the Alfar and keep Legoregebb and the Sarkany from throwing a fit. Oh and there were also these two creepy wizards, Tanilthara and Clawstaff..."

The woman interrupted him brusquely as she dropped her heavy sword onto the ground, narrowly missing Vincent. "Wait a minute, slow down kid! You've told me far too much in one breath. So if I have it straight, you're trying to save someone's life and you're working for a bunch of slime-ball Tuatha leaders to try to deal with Tuatha leaders who are acting like asses."

Nodding, Vincent said, "Effectively yes."

"Well, I've got news for you. I am having nothing to do with it. And if you don't mind, I'm going to put some grub inside of you and then you can either get the hell out and tell them that I ain't working with them or stay here and make yourself useful," she said curtly, digging through her pockets for some more tobacco and looking around the room for food and drink. She pulled out some bread, dried meat, and a few green apples she had in her pantry and laid them out on the table. She also brought out two chipped mugs and filled both with strong-smelling dark beer.

"But what about Tarathorn and Ivan?" cried Vincent. "I can't just let them die or face some horrible fate!"

"No, I've had enough of this nonsense over the years. And by the way, I'm Tindariel. And you, eat something before you become skinnier than Clawstaff! What is it with you human boys from your world and not eating enough?" she roared, tearing into some dark bread and dried meat.

Vincent's stomach rumbled, reminding him where his priorities for the moment were. Joining Tindariel at the table, he said, "Wait... so you're... Tindariel?"

"That I am. Or if you want the damn Eldharin fancy-pants version, Alhanthra Tindariel Il-Kanan Toel Ul Thorondarien. So what is it now, Legoregebb is throwing a fit because Cylithera killed one of the Sarkany because it set fire to another forest? Clawstaff crying over his students failing his class because Gildharain is distracting them? Cylithera generally throwing a temper tantrum over everyone trying to encroach into her realm or stealing her priestesses from their vows? Gildharain whining over some smart, adventurous girl who decided she wanted to live a normal, grown-up life?" said Tindariel almost sarcastically.

"I don't know what's going on. I just want to get Ivan away from Legoregebb and make sure Tarathorn lives. And Kestrel too. She's hurt badly somehow, I don't know how..."

The large ceramic mug in Tindariel's hand suddenly fell and she began to cough and splutter. "Kestrel..." she gasped. "My old roommate at the University... and..."

Clutching his advantage, Vincent begged, "Please Tindariel, if you won't do it for Tarathorn or Ivan or a greater purpose, won't you at least help Kestrel?"

Sighing, Tindariel said, "So she is still alive! I hadn't heard from her and there was no way for me to talk to her after all of the enchantments started going strange... and then she just disappeared from the worlds..." Her weather-worn face had a few tear-streaks coming down at the mention of Kestrel being alive.

"So... what do we have to do? Kestrel mentioned that you'd have a role in this mess," said Vincent, feeling a bit relieved even as his stomach complained about the beer to wash down the dry bread and meat.

A faint smile passed through her face. "Well, let's just say, I'm going to work your ass off. And you better put away those doll clothes and put on some real men's clothes 'cause you're gonna get dirty."

Vincent watched Tindariel intently as she painstakingly continued to work on what looked like a mere stick of wood. Slowly and patiently, she scraped off thin pieces of wood. With a practiced and weather-worn hand, she took her knife from the center to the ends. Most of the time, Vincent had to attend to the garden, making sure they were well-watered with the water from the river and plucking out weeds while Tindariel focused on the bow. At first, Vincent's mind was occupied with learning the proper techniques for killing weeds and giving Tindariel a hand whenever she needed his help. Once he became comfortable tending to the garden and Tindariel needed less of his help, he began to sing to pass the long hours away.

You've been much more than a thought,  
I see your face in my dreams every single night.  
Never I knew that you were the one I've sought  
Until that day you faded far out of my sight.

Please let me come into your brilliant glow.  
My body trembles in anticipation,  
Feelings are seeking emancipation.  
When can I let what's inside of me show?

If only there was a way  
I could feel your tender warmth right next to me  
Your voice singing my loneliness far away  
A tiny fragment of that blissful memory.

That night, Vincent was exhausted and could barely sit up when it was time for dinner, which consisted of a large fish that Urrgh brought for Vincent and Tindariel, and a bowl of ripe fruits and vegetables that Vincent had picked earlier. Tindariel emerged from the corner and held a piece of wood that looked very much like an unstrung bow. Judging from the smell, she had also been smoking heavily to stay relaxed and calm. "By the way," she said as she started eating heartily. "You sing very well. I heard you earlier and I almost had to open another jug of moonshine to stop the tears."

"And looks like you're almost done," said Vincent, smiling and blushing a bit. "Well... I've been singing all my life, so I guess I hope I at least won't break anything."

"You definitely can break a lot of hearts with that voice of yours. But as far as this goes, it's only the beginning. Once I finish tillering this and putting the final laminations on it, you're going to have to do a lot of work. I just hope your lungs are strong because you're going to have to do quite a bit of singing and chanting. I'd do it, but let's just say even my old buddy Killer Parakeet sings better and music-craft is one of the three classes that kept me from ever finishing the University," laughed Tindariel, looking more cheerful than usual.

"Why? Does it require music training?" asked Vincent, curious. In the weeks he had been helping Tindariel and tending to her garden, his complexion had darkened and although he was already somewhat athletic in build, his muscles had become more defined from carrying all those buckets of water from the river.

"Seriously, it's because you have the runes and the pendant that you have to put into the bow and apparently you have Cylithera's blessings to handle them safely and you do have the raw talent needed. I can't believe I'm actually helping some damned prophecy! But they did say that peace will be in the hands of mortals and a singer would play a big role!" said Tindariel, grumbling a bit and lighting up another cigarette.

After a few minutes of silence, Vincent finally asked, "What exactly is this prophecy?"

"That a fatherless and motherless woman with both Sidhe and Eldharin blood cursed with eternal life, yet possess none of the enchantments that all Tuatha have, will be the one to restore the bow wielded by Soronthrel Cúthalion. Together with a mortal whose voice can touch even the hardest of Tuatha hearts and can safely touch the sacred true-silver runes from shards of Telcontar, they shall restore the bow," replied Tindariel, wincing a bit. Before Vincent could open his mouth to ask his next question, Tindariel said, "And yes, I'm that woman. I was an accidental creation."

Vincent gasped and literally dropped a mouthful of fish onto his lap. "You don't mean..."

"My alleged father had been experimenting with wizardry and he had gotten himself lost in the forest in hopes of finding an ancient library that had been engulfed by the forest. As luck would have it, Coranthan Il-Kanan pissed off Cylithera Eaglestrike, at the time the high priestess of the Eternal Huntress. Of course, that was quite a story with how Cylithera became the new Eternal Huntress and it was a mess that Kestrel and I got pulled into, but to keep things short, let's just say Coranthan tried to scare her away. He made a mistake somewhere in his spell and he did scare her off, but not before a small piece of his flesh and a piece of her flesh came off, joined, and became a baby, which is now me. So for over a hundred years, I thought I was just the ogre in a family of noble pansy swans in academia. Then Kestrel came along and I learned everything about my real origins. Oh and as if that weren't enough, Cylithera put a curse on me and she's the only one who can undo it."

The rest of the dinner was silent after Vincent cleaned up the mess on his lap. He eyed Tindariel nervously and her sea-grey eyes also kept scanning him. A deep sigh escaped from him after he finished dinner. Tindariel had long finished her share of the food and was leaning back, smoking a cigarette and producing thick clouds of tobacco smoke. She also was drinking from a jug that smelled like exceptionally strong whiskey whenever she removed the cork. As he tried to clear his own thoughts, Tindariel motioned for him to take a sip out of the jug. "It'll clear your mind, you look like you're needing something to relax."

He looked at the jug and then motioned his lack of interest in it. In the weeks he had stayed with Tindariel, he decided that he had far too much beer, even if the alcohol content was fairly low. Nonetheless, out of politeness, he took a small sip of the whiskey, which made him want to vomit until he convinced himself that it wasn't going to kill him. "Not to be all personal, but I've been watching and listening to you and I heard your song. There's someone you really miss and like, isn't there?"

Vincent nodded as he felt the strong liquor travelling all through him. "Yeah, I miss my two best friends. Tarathorn's hanging onto life, but just barely, and Ivan' being held prisoner by Legoregebb. It's the first time I've really been separated from both of them like this, we've known each other since we were at Cal State LA. Well, I guess I've had a crush on Tarathorn for a while..."

"Damn funny foreign names, I'm assuming Tarathorn is a girl, at least I hope so," grunted Tindariel, taking another swig of whiskey. Blushing a bit, Vincent found himself unable to talk.

"She is. She's full of life and I've never seen anyone with such a will to live or a sense of mischief. And she is so cute, tiny, almost like a very young version of Kestrel, but smaller and even more energetic."

Laughing a bit, Tindariel said, "Sounds like you're looking at a good one then!" Then her face now

flushed from the strong drink, continued. "Hey, kid, why don't'cha sing a bit? No pressure, just wantin' a bit o'music," she said, a bit slurred as the drink took effect. "Gimme one o'them concerts like Kestrel took me to once many years ago when she took me to your world."

"Sure, I guess. But you'll have to promise to stop the drinking," said Vincent, clearing his voice and drinking a bit of water. He stood up, inspired by the strong drink as well. "And I don't know if I'll be able to sing as well being a bit drunk and all," he admitted, but Tindariel merely smiled and motioned for him to do his best. Pretending to be performing, he said, "And now, I'm about to sing 'Night-Time Prayer' written by Ivan Andrej Sirbu."

If I were to lose you tomorrow  
In a tempest of regret and sorrow,  
And the darkness embraces me from below,  
With its coldness about to lay me low,  
Where in the empty night sky will my prayers fly,  
That final gesture of love before I lay down to die?

I wish I knew the path my prayers will take,  
I truly hope that they will reach you in time.  
Please forgive me for each and every mistake,  
I know it's hard but I'll do anything to atone for my crime.

If only there was some kind of way  
To preserve a fragment of our last day  
That enchanted time that felt like yesterday  
When we were innocent children at play.  
Who will come and fly with me to my eternal rest?  
I hope it'll be with you that I'll be forever blessed!

I wish I knew the path my prayers will take,  
I truly hope that they will reach you in time.  
Please forgive me for each and every mistake,  
I know it's hard but I'll do anything to atone for my crime.

If the night sky can show me the truth in the star,  
If only I could keep a fragment of your love from afar...

After finishing his song, Vincent could see Tindariel covering her eyes, as if to refuse to admit that she as indeed crying. "Tindariel? What is it?" he asked, tenderly laying his fine-boned hand on her muscular shoulder.

Grunting, she responded in a cracked voice, "Nothin'... just... thinkin' 'bout me late husband, Wyndon Nic-Taranis... but I think you might've given me hope."

"I'm sorry to hear about his death," responded Vincent, hugging the tall woman, who sat with her head between her hands.

"Aww, don't'cha worry 'bout me, but if'n ya think ya really wanna help me, then make whoever this here bow is for insist to Cylithera that she release me from her hexin'," slurred Tindariel, taking yet another large swig from the jug.

Vincent watched Tindariel stagger around and walk right into the table. Without a second thought, he ran up to her to support her as best as he could. As he supported her weight and tried to lead her to her bed, he suddenly realized that for all her coarse language and rough attitude, she was still soft and female. Ignoring the annoying voice in the back of his mind, he continued to lead her towards her bed and then let her collapse onto it. "Poor Tindariel, no wonder she's an alcoholic," he thought before going back to clean up the other room and sleep on the mat she had provided for him.

A few days later (and without any more moonshine consumption), Tindariel finished weaving the last strands of the string together and then motioned for Vincent to hand her the black yew recurve bow. At first, Vincent went towards Tindariel's own bow, a mighty longbow that was a bit over six feet long, but he remembered that she wanted the shorter bow. Completed and unstrung, the bow was perhaps a bit under five feet in height and was deeply recurved with a strongly deflexed riser. Reverently, Vincent picked up the bow and handed it over to Tindariel, who placed the end of the string with the larger loop

over the top limb, slid it down, and she placed the small loop over the bottom tip. Then in a blink of an eye, she strung the bow and pulled back on the string. "This is one damned good bang-up job," she said, admiring the draw on it. "Vincent, you try. This is absolutely the best damned recurve I've ever made."

Reluctantly, Vincent took the bow and drew it as far as he could, a bit short of the shoulder on his bow-hand. He grunted and tried to pull back further, but he was forced to take down the draw. "Damn it's got a heavy draw," he groaned, thinking back to the times he had done archery with his family or with Tarathorn and Ivan.

"We're going to finish this up tonight. It's a full moon. Just remember, you better damned well keep that promise to get that damned curse off me," said Tindariel, grinning.

For the rest of the day, Tindariel and Vincent copied runes from a worn leather-bound book and meticulously scratched them onto the floor. They only stopped briefly for food and water, and as it grew darker, Vincent began to feel more and more nervous. "Tindariel, I don't know how on earth I'll be able to get those runes in," he admitted. "I'm not like Kestrel or Dr. Claudio or Dr. de Salvo, er, Soronthrel," he said. "I'm just a computational organic chemistry grad student who moonlights as the singer for the Geeksters duo."

"One thing ya gotta learn, Vincent, is that anything can happen. Who the hell would've known that Kestrel, a crazy little girl from your world, would've single-handedly led to the downfall of Tindariel Dalithariel, the goddess I was named after? Or that we, two people from different worlds, would even be working together?" laughed Tindariel. "Who knows, maybe I will someday pass Clawstaff's class and even musicology." With a laugh, Vincent resumed scratching the runes onto the floor and then swept all of the shavings away once he and Tindariel made the final marks.

## 5 Lhîndóme

The moon began to rise and it was a clear but cold night. Its silver light permeated through the windows on the cottage and Tindariel made sure to leave both the door and the windows open. She handed Vincent a grey wool coat and said, "Your skinny arse is going to freeze tonight so you better wear this on top of those three shirts you're already wearing. And you better warm up that pretty voice of yours 'cause you're going to be singing for quite some time."

Finally, as more moonlight continued to enter the cottage, Tindariel reverently held the bow and knelt in the center of the circle of runes she and Vincent had carved out. With a deep breath, he said, "Tarathorn and Ivan... and Kestrel, hang in there. We're almost done here... and I hope I don't mess this up." With that, he began to sing, his powerful baritone voice filling the cottage and flowing out of him. What he sang, he had no idea, only that he was singing with all the passion and energy he had to save his dearest friends. As he sang, a rainbow nimbus of light surrounded him and poured into the bow. Instinctively, he placed the two silver runes onto the bow where Tindariel had carved spaces for them. Silver light burst forth as the runes fused onto the dark wood. Then Vincent placed the pendant in riser and he could feel electricity flowing through his entire body.

Images of cheerful, reckless days in the University with Killer Parakeet, Kestrel, and the rest of the exchange students from Caltech formed in Tindariel's mind. With a few tears, she recalled all the times she and Kestrel had pranked various professors, especially old Clawstaff and the pompous loser of a history professor, Ian P. Freely. She also recalled the day she had found Kestrel crying bitterly when the first love of her life had broken up with her and how the Eternal Huntress began reaching out to her. With a tiny bit of sniffing at the bitter-sweet memories, she recalled how Killer Parakeet and his trusty wolf/hound mutt, Rusty, had given their lives to save everyone in the University from the wrath of Herkos, a mad god of destruction. Then there was the vivid image of little Kestrel openly defying the past Eternal Huntress and defeating her in a battle to the death and how Cylithera Eaglestrike took the mantle of Eternal Huntress immediately afterwards. Her memories then wandered about to Sir Wyndon Nic-Taranis, the knight she had rescued during a trip to the far southern reaches of Tuonela. Life with Sir Wyndon had been some of the happiest years of her life after Kestrel and Killer Parakeet had left, but those almost forty years had been all too short. "Wyndon, I will find a way back to you someday," she thought.

In Vincent's mind, images of studying and hanging out with Ivan and Tarathorn came into formation. Fond memories of days when he and Ivan would be working on music for the Geeksters flowed into his mind, as did memories of playing Dungeons and Dragons with Ivan, Tarathorn, Katie, and Robert. The more he thought about his friends and school, the brighter the light around him grew. Even as he sang

his wordless song with all his strength, his mind still drifted over to Tarathorn and her contagious energy that encouraged to keep going no matter how difficult or frustrating things got. He also thought of how he enjoyed that one time he had hugged her at graduation and how warm and soft her tiny body was. Then he recalled how Ivan had occasionally brushed his hand against him and how he kissed him before he left that cave. That thought almost broke his concentration for a split second, but he continued singing, forcing his mind to concentrate on the task at hand. "That was one heck of a game with the whole gang," he remembered. "I still can't believe Ivan actually performed that awful free-style rap after he typed it out over IRC."

DM: You find yourselves in a dark, filthy room that is strewn with clothing and towels everywhere. There is a metal fixture on the wall that looks like drawers but are vertical and seem to be openable from the side. In front of these metal drawers are long, wooden benches, most with at least one or two pieces of filthy clothing and drawers. Towards the back of this room is an area covered in white and pink ceramic tiles and metal objects about six feet above the ground.

Teyrnathra: I'm going to open those metal drawers, with force if necessary.

Arsenie: What does the clothing look like? Anything suitable for a pretty boy like me? I have a total of 16 on my Search check.

Foxfire: I'm going to play with that hat I acquired from that grumpy guy back at the inn.

Para-Ketone: I'm gonna keep an eye out for anything scary. You never know with these strange places. I draw my axe and stand on guard.

DM: Teyrnathra, roll a Reflex save. Arsenie, you don't find anything that really fits you because it's for someone who's built more like Teyrnathra or Para-Ketone. If you weighed around 180 lbs, you might find something that was a bit baggy for you, but these are obviously designed for huge muscular people. You do see an oversized circular medallion with a P on it on a tacky-looking gold chain and a blue and purple cap that might fit you. Para-Ketone, nothing seems to be happening aside from the sound of water leaking from the place with the pink and white ceramic tiles. Everyone, roll a Spot and Listen check.

Arsenie: I'm going to pick up the medallion and cap and put them on. And Spot 6, Listen 8.

Teyrnathra: I have total of 1 on my Reflex, 3 on my Spot, 9 on my Listen. What happened?

Para-Ketone: I'm still keeping an eye out. Arsenie, what the hell are you doing with those? Remember the last time you got turned into a booger-eating troll when you put on an amulet and hat? I have 17 Spot, 18 Listen.

DM: Para-Ketone notices that Foxfire disappeared. Arsenie, the medallion and hat feel normal. Teyrnathra, you succeed in opening these metal things, but you also get buried in filthy, stinky clothing. Roll a d4 for damage.

Teyrnathra: 3. That ain't anythin' for me. I'm digging myself out.

DM: A black fox starts yapping and running around. It starts sniffing Arsenie and starts pawing at him, staring at the medallion on him.

Para-Ketone: Dagnabit! Foxfire turned into a dog-gommed fox again. And something's up with Arsenie.

Teyrnathra: I'm gonna tackle that idiot, Arsenie that is.

DM: Arsenie, roll a Fortitude and Will save.

Arsenie: Fortitude 10, Will 2.

DM: Arsenie suddenly starts glowing and his foppish clothes suddenly turn green and cling onto him. His face becomes somewhat scruffy and he doesn't look so much like Arsenium anymore.

Para-Ketone: What did Arsie do this time? I told you that something weird was gonna happen! Now we're going to have to get you out of whatever dog-gommed feces you got into!

Teyrnathra: Well, we can't have Arsenie without the word "Arse".

Arsenie: (In a bad linear combination of Mid-Western, Canadian, and stereotyped Southern accent.) Yo! Yo! Dis is da Coach P, pronounced with an 'Oach P! And I gotta know where da terlet be. Yo! Yo! I don't mean no disrespect but I think deez people are tryin' to fade me!

Foxfire: (I just fell out of the chair laughing)

Teyrnathra: (I don't blame you, Tarathorn)

DM: (Ivan, please don't try to record THAT! And Katie and Robert, don't encourage him either!)

Para-Ketone: (Couldn't be as bad as that cover our DM did of those ABBA songs last year!)

Teyrnathra: What did that arse just say? I'm gonna knock some frontier-sense into his head with my meaty fist! What's his AC?

Para-Ketone: I'm going to help Teyrnathra with this. I'm not going to have another durned booger-eating troll with us.

DM: Roll initiative the three of you.

Light continued to pour out from Vincent's body as he sang the wordless song that wove its way back and forth between love, joy, sadness, frustration, friendship, and hope. The thought of that one game over IRC when he and his friends had been separated for that one summer, when everyone else had gone to visit their relatives around the world. The bow glowed more and more intensely and it began to float into the air. Sweat poured from Vincent's face and his normally lightly-tanned complexion became flushed from the exertion. Tiredness had no place in his vocabulary, at least not just yet. More and more light flowed out of him, but his voice showed no sign of faltering or tiring out. His knees, on the other

hand, started to feel weak, and Tindariel noticed that standing was becoming painful for him. Thinking quickly, she pulled up a chair so if his knees did give out, he would land in a chair and not on the floor.

Soon, the glow from the bow became so intense that both Tindariel and Vincent were almost blinded by the radiant silver light. What was once a continuous stream of light flowing from Vincent soon became irregular flashes and flames, but he continued to sing and his voice gradually rose into a mighty crescendo as he fought the weakness that was threatening to make him stop. During the sustained crescendo, the lights around Vincent and the bow exploded into a huge flash of silver-tinged multi-colored lights. With a wordless cry of ecstasy and hope, Vincent suddenly collapsed but the bow continued to glow brightly, although its light gradually faded until only the metallic inlays retained the glow.

Too stunned by Vincent's singing, Tindariel didn't realize he had collapsed forward instead of backward until she looked down. Without thinking about the bow, she examined the boy, searching for any signs of life, but his body was cold and still. His face was sweaty and pale, and he did not respond to anything she did. Wordlessly, she held him close and looked up at the bow and then the sky.

## 6 Oroszlan

Ivan concentrated as hard as he could at the log sitting in the hearth. "Tuz" spoke Ivan firmly, pointing at the log. A tiny red-gold spark formed on it and promptly fizzled.

Legoregebb's clanging voice intoned, "Not bad. You are indeed a fast learner, Ivan Andrej Sirbu. You need to speak with more authority and call upon the power in your blood like a true Sarkany."

"In my blood?" asked Ivan, puzzled.

"Indeed. But I will not speak of it further until the time comes. Now, try again," commanded the reptilian creature.

"Tuz." He focused again, this time wracking his brains as hard as he could. His blood began to heat up and he could see a much larger spark growing from the log. The red-gold spark soon turned into a flame and began to eagerly consume the log.

The Sarkany nodded in approval at Ivan's progress. "Now, speak the word of Undoing."

Almost without hesitation, Ivan spoke out, "Csendes." The flame began to shrink before it withered away into a tiny spark that faded away into the wood. This time, Ivan could feel his hair, no longer spiked, stand up slightly and a strange, almost burning feeling passed through his blood.

For the last several days, he had been isolated with only Legoregebb for company in this cave. He had to admit, for being someone being held prisoner, he was living in luxury. The Sarkany, understanding human needs, had provided Ivan with a comfortable bed, a place to bathe, spare clothing in the form of loose robes, and plenty of food, some of which was quite tasty and some was just inedible even by Ivan's standards. It was still odd for him to wake up in a vast cavern full of glittering minerals embedded in the dark metallic-grey walls with a large dragon-like creature nearby.

"You speak truly," said Legoregebb, watching Ivan gawk at the semi-consumed log. "And you have the fire deep within you."

Finally, Ivan plucked up the courage to speak up again. "Sir, not to be rude or ungrateful, but why are you teaching me?"

The gigantic crocodile-like jaws cracked open slightly, as if to smile. "You will understand soon, little one. For now, do as I teach you and hope that your ... companion, if that is the right word, stays true."

Mumbling softly to himself, Ivan said, "Tarathorn... please make it... and Vincent, I hope you're ok..."

One day, when he was sure he wasn't being watched, Ivan poked his head out from the cavern mouth and looked up into the sky. The stars looked completely different in Pelda, where they had been inspiring back home, the stars looked cruel and remote here. "Vincent, I know you'll make it... next time we see each other, I've got a lot to tell you. And Tarathorn, hang in there, we'll bring you back... and I've also got something to tell you too," he whispered before running back into the cave he had called home for the last several weeks.

Ivan thought his little excursion outside went un-noticed until he heard Legoregebb's metallic voice ring. "Ivan. You have grown much in these weeks and the time draws near for you to be Named."

"Named?" asked Ivan, not realizing that his voice now had some metallic notes. Light soon filled the room from a small ball of light that Legoregebb had willed to form. With a large claw, he pointed towards a mirror for him to look into. He looked at the mirror, the same one that took Vincent away from him.

Suddenly, he let out a shrill shriek when he saw that his pupils were starting to become vertical slits and that fine reptilian scales were forming on his face. "What's going on?" he asked nervously.

"You should know from that day you addressed me in the language of the Sarkany," replied Legoregebb as a grin formed on his crocodile-like face.

As soon as the Sarkany reminded him of that fateful day when Ivan had addressed him as "*Sarkany regebb fiutestver*", he suddenly realized that he may actually share a kinship with the creature. He mumbled to himself, "No, this can't be happening. It's not an Ursula LeGuin story. I'm not going to be like Tehanu in *The Other Wind*. It's all a bad dream."

The ancient Sarkany laughed as Ivan continued to stare at himself in the mirror. "You are indeed one of us, Ivan. As there are mortals born among the Tuatha, there are Tuatha born among the mortals," said Legoregebb, watching Ivan closely as the young man's jaw dropped. "As a Tuatha born among mortals, you will have to decide which roots to follow, whether to take the eternal journey that all mortals will take or to join the rest of the Tuatha on the forgotten paths and remain within the Veil."

A look of confusion passed through Ivan's face before he resumed looking at himself in the mirror. "I can't believe this..." he babbled. "How much time before I completely become like you?" he whispered as he checked his fingers for claws. He still felt the small, blunt human fingernails on his hands, but he could see them slowly becoming the steel-like claws of the Sarkany.

"You're only manifesting the Sarkany blood within you, and now that you're truly manifesting, the time has come for your Naming," said Legoregebb, looming close to Ivan, who suddenly felt extremely tiny in comparison. "I will summon the Elders so they can bear witness to your Naming in three days' time."

The next three days, Ivan found himself surrounded by other Sarkany, both male and female. At first, he couldn't tell the difference, but gradually, he noticed that the males had long beards and were somewhat smaller than the females. All of the Sarkany regarded him with both curiosity and respect. An ancient female with scales of both burnished gold and bronze, easily larger than Legoregebb, approached him. "Ivan Andrej Sirbu. I am Ereny, the Queen of the Sarkany. Legoregebb spoke highly of you," boomed her deep, church bell-like voice in the cavern. Ereny looked him up and down and a smile formed on her crocodile-like face before she saluted him. "I would speak with you more, but I have many preparations to make and I must speak with Legoregebb."

Ivan also noticed that there were a handful of smaller and apparently younger females, judging from their lack of beards and smaller sizes. Several of them eyed him as well and his stomach began to turn nervously. While he was pondering what was going to happen later that night, Legoregebb called to him, "My child, let me explain in brief what will happen tonight. I sense your fear and I do not want you to be afraid."

"I'm definitely nervous and afraid and I'm also worried about Vincent and Tarathorn," he replied honestly.

"I understand your fear for them, but there is nothing you can do yet. As for the Naming ritual, it is a formality of giving you your true name among us now that you have manifested your Sarkany nature," said Legoregebb.

"Manifestation... you don't mean I'm going to actually transform, am I?" asked Ivan.

With a brazen cymbal-like sound, Legoregebb laughed. "Don't worry, you will. And by the way, as part of the Naming, you will stand before the Council of Elders naked. After all, we do not wear clothing, save for maybe some minor adornments we fancy. And as for your worries of mortal obligations, this ceremony does not force you to become Sarkany. You will decide upon the appointed day, when the last of the Tuatha are finally called to either return home or to remain amongst mortals."

The night fell all too soon for Ivan as he looked at the vast cavern filled with Sarkany, both ancient and young. Reluctantly, he removed the robe that Legoregebb had given him to reveal his naked body before the Council of Elders. At least it was fairly warm in the cavern and the robe was more a matter of modesty than anything else, but he still felt uncomfortable parading his slender body. In the many weeks he had spent with Legoregebb, not only had he been understanding his roots, he had also been forced to draw buckets of water for himself to bathe and drink with, and he felt a bit of relief that he had filled in a bit. As he stood in front of the Sarkany, he tried to think of anything to ease his embarrassment of having to be naked in front of these regal creatures.

While the ancient Sarkany spoke amongst each other, the young ones (all female, Ivan noticed) eyed him, as if to evaluate him. Finally, Ereny spoke out, "From this day henceforth, this mortal-born will be known as *Oroszlan*, the Lion." She stepped out from the group of Sarkany and placed her reptilian hand

on his shoulder. "May the fire of the sun flow through you," she intoned.

A small trickle of golden flame began to flow from his shoulders to his hands and he felt the flames envelop him. His eyes then scanned the rest of his body to see that his chest was now covered in scales, and although they were still human flesh-colored, they shone with a golden light. The world began to blur slightly and then he realized that he still had his glasses on. No longer needing them, he reverently pulled them off and to his pleasant surprise, his vision was perfect. Then he felt something rubbing against his tail. Tail?! He looked behind himself and sure enough, he had grown a long, scaly tail and he also saw wings that looked like membranes made of gold and bronze flames. Then his hands went to his face and he felt the crocodile-like snout.

"This will be your form, should you return to live among us," spoke another Elder, an ancient female with scales that looked like liquid bronze with copper and gold highlights and a glow that reminded Ivan of sunrises.

"And were you not mortal-born and thus given a choice, tonight, you would have also been given your soul-mate for life," spoke another Elder, a male with reddish-gold scales and eyes that looked like liquid sapphires. "Should you return to us on that appointed day, then you will be given your soul-mate." Many of young females let out hissing noises, although it was unclear to Ivan whether they were sighs of relief or frustration.

He felt his heart and stomach sink. He looked up nervously to Legoregebb and Ereny. They merely shrugged at him and motioned for him to look at the light that was now coming into the room. The light from the dawn reflected off of his scales and Ivan had to admit that he enjoyed the feeling of the sun's warm rays. "Oroszlan..." he thought. "Lion of all things. But how am I going to tell Vincent and Tarathorn everything? What the heck did I walk into?"

## 7 To Be An Alfar

The boy continued to tug at Tarathorn's hand. "Come, fly away with me. Just think, you'll never have to worry again," he insisted. "If you stand at the Crossroads too long, Cylithera might send her goons here to take you away to become mean and serious. And if that is not enough persuasion, at least follow me to Mag-na-Oige. There is something I must show you."

"How do I know that it's not some trap?" demanded Tarathorn uneasily.

Taking her hand in his, he said, "I promise to return you here if you choose not to remain with me. I'd rather have you stay with me, for some reason I've known you before, yet I can't remember the details." With that, he pulled something out of a pouch and blew it in her direction.

Tarathorn suddenly felt herself growing lighter and her feet soon lifted off the ground. "For some reason, I remember flying once before," she said, experimenting with her movements and tumbling in the air.

With that, the boy led her up into the air. After a few minutes of what felt like aerial swimming, Tarathorn quickly became graceful, almost like a sparrow. She looked down and watched the dreary Crossroads shrink and fade before her eyes. "And so we are not strangers, I am Gildharain, leader of the Alfar," he said to her, bowing in the air.

Together they flew towards the horizon, where the moon was now shining from. Soon, Tarathorn smelled a mixture of pine trees, wildflowers, and the ocean. Over the mountains was what looked like a chain of islands covered with various trees and flowers. Waves pounded away on the shores and far below, she could see flocks of white birds that reminded her of gigantic seagulls. Still holding her hand, Gildharain led her to an especially large island that had a volcano in the center. As they descended through the nippy night air, Tarathorn noticed that they were heading towards what looked like a massive sequoia tree. Surrounding the sequoia tree were small huts with thatched roofs, although in the moonlight, it was hard for Tarathorn to tell what they were made from.

"Mag-na-Oige," said Gildharain, pointing to everything before landing on a large branch. Tarathorn examined the leaves and noted that they were very much like oak leaves, but with a silver tinge to them.

"It's so beautiful here," whispered Tarathorn, absorbing all of the images in her mind. Then her eyes spied children running around below. Some of them were engaged in mock-sword play with each other, while others were playing hide-and-seek. Most of them were almost naked with nut-brown complexions and dark-hair, but many were also paler or darker with different colored hair. Some of the children also had costumes that reminded her of various animals, mostly foxes, bobcats, badgers, weasels, and otters.

Scooting slightly closer to her, Gildharain replied in a more serious, almost mature-sounding voice, "It is, but we are also constantly in danger of being overrun by Sidhe, who seek to turn this land of innocence into one of hatred. Cylithera still wants beautiful, pristine wilderness, but she also wants to take away the playfulness and the eternal childhood that Mag-na-Oige provides."

Tarathorn reflected silently as she watched the children play. Memories flooded her mind of a time when she had dreamed of a place where children were forever at play and of a book she had once read – Peter Pan by James M. Barrie. Was this the Neverland she had read about? Or was Neverland a fanciful, whimsical version of the what really was? Or perhaps, were they two separate entities that were often lumped together in children's stories? Her mind reeled around for a moment before her attention returned to the situation at hand. Then she saw that the play-fighting had taken on a much more grim dimension when she overheard the children talk about slaughter and the evil Sidhe.

"We need to learn how to kill for real, not just the pirates and orcs and savages that keep coming back to life the next day, but those horrible Sidhe who come in the night and murder as they please. Sidhe are evil, they killed my family and left me for dead," said one tiny boy, the same one she recognized as the one with the leg braces at the Crossroad.

A tall, somewhat stocky girl with a coyote pelt cloak nodded and hefted a heavy sword. "We will soon launch our attack on Dúnhëasa and get the lands they took from us. And then we can stop the rest of the attacks on our lands. We need to take initiative, Gildharain's no longer leading with the authority he once had. If need be, we should challenge him for the leadership of the Alfar to protect our long-term interests." Tarathorn let out a small gasp at the graveness of the talk between what she thought were innocent children.

"He will not fight. He only wanders about aimlessly, uncaring of us and the land. It is time he is culled," said a short, badger-like boy. "I say we follow Kiora and challenge him."

Thinking for a moment, she finally asked the children, "Is there any way to not have to fight? These children are sounding like Sidhe themselves with all the anger!"

"No. The Sidhe would betray us if any peaceful means were used," replied the small boy, his eyes flashing an angry reddish-gold. "The only chance might be if Telcontar was rebuilt, but the one to rebuild the bow is nothing more than a drunken ogre, and there's none strong enough of heart to wield the bow."

"Who are you to speak, stranger?" demanded the girl, apparently named Kiora, brandishing a sword at her. "You mortals know nothing but washed-down fairy tales told to you before you go to sleep! Taxadus is correct! Gildharain must be culled and room must be made for a true leader! He no longer even culls properly as he once did."

Frustrated, Tarathorn shouted out to the children, "Is it worth fighting for this land only to become like the Sidhe? Listen to yourselves! You sound more like the Sidhe than they do!"

Taxadus, the badger-like boy looked up at Tarathorn and at Gildharain. "What? But once we take care of the Sidhe, we'll revert to being ourselves! It's only until we beat the Sidhe."

Tarathorn nodded her head sadly. "I don't know that much about the Sidhe beyond what my mentor, Joanne de Salvo, known to some as Soronthrel..." she began before being interrupted.

"Soronthrel... that witch," hissed Kiora. "She was the one who opened up old wounds by bringing Cylithera's attention once again to Mag-na-Oige."

Still groaning a bit, Tarathorn finally shouted, "Look. Maybe Soronthrel did more good that way. The Sidhe were trying to take over my world and let a bunch of loser monsters from Vladivostok in, at least if that biography of Soronthrel was accurate! She could've become a Sidhe leader alongside Cylithera, but she didn't! She listened to her conscience, and well, someone did knock some sense into her head too in the process."

Silence, aside from the rustling of the wind and the roar of the sea, filled the air for a moment. Several children looked at each other, then the noise that ensued from boys and girls, some of which looked more feral than others, rose up to where Gildharain and Tarathorn were standing. Seeing the chaos, he took her hand into his and tried to fly off with her. "Don't worry, they'll be ok. I want to... talk to you for a bit," he said, whispering into her ear.

"Gildharain, what is this about?" asked Tarathorn, following him cautiously.

"There's something else besides leadership of the Alfar. I never thought about it until you somehow brought back memories to me," he confessed as he led her to a relatively isolated island on the edge of the archipelago. They sat down on a large rock that faced the moon-lit ocean and allowed them a nearly endless view towards the horizon.

"I do remember one time where I dreamed about flying to a place everyone called Neverland, but that

as after I read J. M. Barrie's 'Peter Pan'. A boy with reddish-brown hair with a fox-like face took me away and made me promise to not grow up... I think I was maybe seven or eight," started Tarathorn, looking absently at the horizon and trying to conceal the fact that she was shivering in the chill night air.

Noticing Tarathorn's shivering, Gildharain motioned for her to come closer to him. "I'll keep you warm," he said, but when he saw her hesitate, he added, "Don't be afraid... I just want you to be comfortable..."

Despite the cold, Tarathorn scooted away and said, "What is the meaning of this? What are you trying to do?" She crouched into a defensive stance, ready to punch, kick, or dodge the boy as she saw appropriate.

"It's just that... I've been seeking companionship, not in the form of the children who look to me as their leader... but someone I can treat as an equal and will be a leading voice with me... and there's something about the kind of companionship that a lot of grown-up mortals have that's different from anything I've known before..." he started, also trembling a bit, but from nervousness. "And... you don't... have feelings for that man, the singer, the one touched by the frost of the Sidhe?"

She stared at him, wondering what she had gotten herself into. "Explain," she said, crossing her arms. "Not that I really know anything about that kind of stuff either. I've never been there and it would be odd to be with someone so much younger..." she added nervously. "And as far as Vincent goes... I've always seen him as a dear friend, almost a brother... Although I think maybe he might see things otherwise and I'll have to talk to him about it at some point."

He breathed a sigh of relief. "I can change myself to match your age... and if you want, I can also make changes for you," said Gildharain as his child-like features glowed and his features became more handsome than fox-like and he became taller, until she was at his shoulder height. His childish frame also filled out, and although his muscles became more distinct, he still remained slenderly built. "After all, I am also a being of shape-shifting as well as eternal youth..."

A few skipped heartbeats later, which felt like an eternity to her, she whispered, "But won't that... somehow affect you too as the Spirit of Youth? And... I don't know if I'm ready for anything like that yet..."

Before Tarathorn could say much more, Gildharain gently placed his fingers over her lips. "Shhh, you don't have to decide right here and now. Listen to your heart." Her mind whirled at Gildharain's behavior. First he was this immature, careless child who thought of life as one adventurous game and was more like a little brother to her. Then tonight, out of the blue, she felt as if the legendary child had become a young man who was actually a bit more mature than she was. While she sat there stunned, Gildharain held her hands and whispered softly, "You know what I want, I really want to be your companion, but even more than that, I want you to make the choice that will make you happy as well..."

"You do want me for me, don't you?" asked Tarathorn, then she realized that she might've put her foot in her mouth. "It's not for someone that you can't have... because I do know that many of those you've come close to ultimately chose to leave you for mortality, if the stories are accurate."

Gildharain's beautiful green eyes narrowed slightly and a pained, almost stunned, expression entered his face. "I guess... I don't really know either, it's something I don't understand myself, just that I know it's there," he admitted with a few tears in his eyes. "I want to say that I want you for you... but I don't know if I can say that honestly yet..."

"But why me of all people? I'm just an ecology graduate student at Caltech," she finally said, curling up a bit to protect herself from the cold.

Turning to her and taking her in an embrace, he said, "Because... you truly embody what it is to be Alfar more than any of the others, myself included. Not that you're completely careless and carefree, but the way you approach everything. Think of how you pursue your research and the small joys you find every day and how you keep your friends from falling into despair."

## 8 Journeys of a Song

Tindariel tearfully placed Vincent onto the bed and put a very light blanket over him. She could still feel the faint fluttering of his heart and she could still see the ever-so-weak motions of his chest moving up and down as he breathed. His pale face was covered in cold sweat, and the expression on his face was a mixture of relief and longing. "You've got more damned balls than anyone else I've met," she whispered, wiping off the sweat from his face with a soft cloth.

It was still dark, although sunlight was beginning to sneak up from the the horizon. She then went to the other room where the bow was, still glowing radiantly and levitating over where she and Vincent had scratched the runes. "Cylithera... if you can fuckin' hear me, will you not let this boy enjoy all life has to offer him? Surely, even one like you would be moved by his songs!" she cried out into the sky.

Cylithera Eaglestrike's pointed ears perked up as she drew her longbow and took aim at a mighty, gold-furred buck with mighty antlers in the forest. The deer, apparently also entranced, first looked up from the tender vegetation it fed upon, then at Cylithera, and then at the sky. A powerful baritone voice, gentle, yearning, and bold, filled the air and surrounded the area. Reluctantly, she took down her shot, allowing the buck to gracefully trot away or stand as he desired. Tonight there would be no venison on the table for her or her young wards.

Though the moonlight shines upon you  
What use is it when your hatred casts its shadow?  
Why wallow in that ancient war from far below?  
Why not stand up to the night and change your view?

Someone's beloved lass from afar lies dying,  
Another's son trapped in a foreign land,  
Many more suffering, even as leaders are lying.  
Who will finally take that courageous stand?

For some reason, a tear escaped from her piercing almond-shaped, slanted sea-grey eyes. "No. Such feelings are below me," she said to herself, but even so, her mind was flooded with thoughts of her lost family, a brave warrior she had slain as a child, a Tuatha-lord whose mantle she had to take, and two insanely brave women who spurned all the power she had offered for a life of mortality. Her left arm stung as she reflected on the day she had chosen to abandon the way of the Eldharin and received the mark that transformed her into a Sidhe. Now, nothing would allow her to undertake that mysterious journey that Eldharin and other mortal beings had to take after death. Then she saw a handsome young man materialize before her. His jet-black hair blew in the wind and shimmered in the moonlight, while his intelligent brown eyes pierced her frozen soul with a gentle warmth she had forgotten in her thousands of years.

A bright silver light surrounded the image of the man and in his hands was a recurve bow carved from dark yew. Next to the man was a very familiar-looking woman, a tall, almost brutish-looking woman were it not for the sharp, Eldharin features on her face. "Telcontar has been re-made, though it is now named Lhíndóme, the Nightingale," gasped Cylithera. "Tindariel has almost come full circle and Eöl has revealed himself."

"Mother... aren't you going to do a damned thing for the boy who fuckin' gave it all to not only save his dearest friends, but also to protect Dúnhèasa and to try to stop this senseless war between the Sidhe and the Alfar?" pleaded Tindariel's cracked voice that had lost some of its resonance from excessive drinking and smoking.

Sighing, she nodded and looked at the ghostly images that had formed before her. Although she knew that the boy had physically collapsed, the image still showed him standing and singing. "I shall meet him at the Crossroad. If he can prove himself to me, then I will let him return. But if not, I will merely leave him there to whatever fate he may have."

Ivan paced about as he looked at himself in the mirror. The almost leonine mane, combined with the horns and the beard on his crocodile-like face only made him even more nervous. He continued to survey his long, dragon-like body and the metallic scales that covered him. "I still can't believe this. Oroszlan. I want to be Ivan Sirbu the Geekster again," he muttered to himself. "And how do I tell these regal beings that I..."

Before he could finish his thought, a softer clanging voice with several bell-like notes spoke up. "Oroszlan..."

He turned around to see the owner of the voice and saw a golden-scaled female Sarkany with silver markings on her scales. Her intense violet-tinged eyes focused on him and her reptilian jaws shifted into a broad smile. "This shape fits you far better than that mortal form you held, Oroszlan. Come, be a part of the Sarkany, you have been Named and blessed by Legoregebb and Ereny themselves," she said, moving closer to him. "And to even the field, I am Galka."

"I am greatly honored, Galka, but there's one other problem. I..." he started but the female swished her tail at him, interrupting him.

"Oroszlan, I know you have strong bonds in the world of mortals, but consider your future and the future of our kindred. Legoregebb and Ereny will not tell you this, but we are a dying race, for there have been no offspring in a hundred years yet we have been dying in defense of Pelda. In this age of chaos, the mortal-born Tuatha are also being called to decide, either to come home or to journey to the unknown lands. Our hopes lie in mortal-born Sarkany like you to restore our lines," she implored, looking him in the eyes.

He looked at Galka and he had to admit, she was an extremely beautiful creature. Words escaped him as his eyes looked up and down her from the expressive crocodilian face to the ridge of silvery spines on her back to the membrane-lined golden wings and then down to her serpentine tail. Her legs, though sturdy and somewhat short, held graceful lines and were covered in the same shining burnished gold-like scales. She stood with a regal air that reminded Ivan of a swan and somehow, even as a different species, he recognized that feminine stance and pose.

Shocked at the train of thought his mind had taken, Ivan leaped up into an alert stance. He certainly never saw females that way! "Vincent... I... wish you were here to see this..." he mumbled to himself.

Her eyes suddenly narrowed at Ivan. "You had feelings for another, then?" she asked.

Nodding, Ivan's face would have turned scarlet had he still been human. "In a sense... but Vincent never knew... I wanted to tell him..." As soon as he mentioned that Vincent was a male, Galka's eyes flared an angry red. Certain she was going to explode into pure fury, he closed his eyes and cringed.

Instead, she crept even closer to him. "The Elders chose me to be your soulmate, should you choose to be among the Sarkany. Our laws forbid us to engage in any intimacy until the appointed time, but perhaps this might help persuade you to cut yourself free from your mortal bonds." She nuzzled up to him and allowed her tail to brush against his body. Right as he allowed himself to be touched by the beautiful Sarkany, the sound of a smooth, yearning baritone voice filled the hall.

The shadows may follow us all in the night,  
And hate may blot out our guiding light,  
But know that you're never alone,  
Even when you think you're all on your own.  
Why let your sorrow and pain block out the truth?

"Vincent..." murmured Ivan, yet he felt a sinking sensation in his stomach. "He did it."

Loud clanging from both Legoregebb and Ereny's voices filled the cavern. "But will he fulfill his promise? Will he honor the oath?" roared Legoregebb over the din. "He will most likely have to give his life for this."

"I know he'll do it," said Ivan. "I trust him with my life and I would do the same for him."

Mr. and Mrs. Suttankankul sat anxiously in the waiting room at the UCLA medical center yet again. A doctor stepped out and motioned for them to come into Tarathorn's room. Slowly, they followed her into the secluded room. "Is there any news?" asked Mrs. Suttankankul nervously.

The doctor nodded and said, "She's getting worse. Her white blood cell count fell from the last time and she's been mumbling in some odd language."

The three of them walked into the intensive care room where Tarathorn was. Her normally nut-brown skin had become pale and the parts of her that had been burned were still covered in bandages. Instead of a look of fear or pain, however, a smile had formed on her face and in the ghostly paleness, there seemed to be a bit of pink, almost as if she were blushing. "Estel tha Sidhe-Dûnhèasa si tha Alfar-Mag-na-Oige?" she murmured.

"Is it your native language by chance?" asked the doctor.

Nodding, Mrs. Suttankankul replied, "No. It's not Thai. I can't even recognize the language."

A passing nurse listened to Tarathorn's constant muttering and poked her head in. "Shall I bring a priest in here?" she asked, half-jokingly. "Not to be too flippant or anything, but maybe it'll be some psychological reassurance," she added when both parents and doctor glared at her. "There was that one study too where a priest or a minister brought someone out of Tehanu-induced coma."

"Something like an exorcism?" asked Mr. Suttankankul, fingering the cross he kept on a necklace.

"Possibly," said the nurse. "I can't guarantee anything, but it might just be worth a try. I'll bring the minister to see if he can do anything."

The doctor continued to monitor her vital signs. "There have been some cases where religious intervention has helped some of those afflicted with Tehanu Syndrome."

"What else do you know about it?" asked Mrs. Suttankankul finally. Suddenly, the blush on Tarathorn's face deepened and she whispered something incoherent.

"Well, besides the obvious symptom of suddenly bursting into flames and getting all kinds of burns, going into a coma, and having a really high fever with fluctuations in white blood cells, there's also a sudden increase in unidentified proteins in their blood and changes in brain-wave activity. In the four cases where the patient lived, three of them were brought back with the help of a religious official and loving family and friends who continued to call out to them. The fourth case was most unusual in that the person, a young man with a history of mental problems, just bolted up and was no longer plagued. We still have little idea about the cause of Tehanu Syndrome, it may be a new genetic condition from the Post-Rift era. Most who are affected die, typically with an expression of peace and joy," replied the doctor. "And many of those who die spontaneously combust. Thus the name Tehanu Syndrome, after Ursula LeGuin's character who went from a scarred orphan to a fiery dragon."

A man in a black suit with a large black book entered the room. He looked at the Suttankankuls, then at the doctor and then at Tarathorn. Taking a chair next to the young patient, he placed a hand on her forehead, nodded, and then started to read from his book to her. She writhed a bit and murmured again. "Gildharain, take me to Dúnhéasa. If you can't speak with Cylithera, then I will," she whispered. "Or if you won't take me there, then take me to the Crossroad so I can call upon her."

"Possessed," said the minister. "If you are not saved, I highly recommend you step out, lest the demons within her try to possess you."

Unaware of the minister, Tarathorn continued to speak in a faint, almost cracked voice. "Vincent? Is that you?"

"Boyfriend?" asked the minister, puzzled.

"He better not be," replied Mr. Suttankankul, grumbling at the mention of Vincent. Both of Tarathorn's parents held a long dislike for the young man because of his Geekster associations.

## 9 The Crossroad

Vincent opened his eyes reluctantly to find himself in a dull, grey landscape surrounded by high mountains. A faint white miasma added to the murkiness of the view and the only things he could see were a sign and multiple divergent roads leading towards the mountains. In one direction there was faint sunlight peeking up, while in another there was silver moonlight illuminating the way, and in another, there was only darkness, and in yet another direction, lightning danced about. Several people, all somewhat transparent, began to materialize around him.

"Where am I?" he asked nervously.

"At the Crossroads," replied a strong female voice. Looking for the source of the voice, he saw a woman about his height yet he felt diminutive before her. A tall, intimidating woman with sharp, cold features began to materialize before him. The raven-haired woman was of graceful yet fierce build who possessed a frozen, deadly purity of spirit and body that commanded both fear and respect. On her hips were a pair of glowing scimitars that few others could touch safely, so cold were these lightning-sheathed blades. She also carried a silver-runed longbow that glimmered with a bluish-silver light. Vincent shivered from the sudden coldness in the air and his stomach sank when he realized who was standing before him.

Kneeling before her, he said, "Cylithera, I don't know how to go about this, but I have come to petition to save my dear friend Tarathorn... and to stop this senseless violence between Sidhe and Alfar... and to let your daughter, Tindariel find peace at last."

Laughing coldly, she said sarcastically, "Why would you about the Alfar? Do you not know of your true roots to even care about that little Alfar wench or the plights of those honorless beasts of metal?"

"And two of my dearest friends, Ivan and Tarathorn, are being held prisoners. And I have promised many to try to help them in whatever way possible. Is that not enough?" he protested.

"The Sarkany are truly a foul race, laying waste to the pristine lands to corrupt it into fields of metal and ore. If you are so interested, then come with me," she said, extending her hand. Reluctantly, Vincent placed his hand into her ice-cold hand and he wondered if he was going to suffer from frostbite. The ground below them began to fade and she added, "And you better not let go."

Looking down despite the rapid ascent into the air with the ice-cold woman, Vincent noticed that the grey ground quickly took on that golden hue again. "Damn, not Pelda again," he thought, recalling the

last time he was there.

Wordlessly, Cylithera continued leading Vincent around until they reached Legoregebb's cave. Outside of the cave was a vaguely leonine Sarkany with golden scales with bronze highlights and membranous wings of gold and bronze flames. For some reason, the expression on the crocodilian face, down to the golden beard and the spiked scales on top of his head, reminded Vincent of Ivan. He squinted his eyes to see if he could get a better view of the relatively small Sarkany, who was now accompanied by a beardless one with silvery spines on its back and held her posture much like a swan. "Oroszlan? What is it? Why do you keep looking up to the skies?" asked the one with the silvery spines in a clanging, yet more bell-like voice.

"I just thought that I heard Vincent again. Somehow, I know he's near, but I can't see him," replied the one addressed as Oroszlan. "I hope he's all right," he continued in that Sarkany clanging voice. Yet Vincent recognized something else in the voice. There was a hint of that keening boyish tenor that Ivan had when he was singing.

"Ivan!" called out Vincent to the Sarkany. "What did that creature do to you?"

"Galka? Do you see a mortal, a human, a handsome young man with jet-black hair and almond-shaped eyes?" asked Ivan, frantically searching for the source of the voice. Then shouting in his clanging voice, he roared, "Vincent? I'm over here!"

"I'm over here!" cried Vincent, waving with his one free arm. Cylithera merely smirked at him and pulled him away in the direction they came from. "Cylithera, I've got to talk to Ivan!" he protested.

Galka then nipped Ivan on the back of the neck and pulled him back. Two more large Sarkany emerged from the cave, including a very familiar looking one. Vincent's stomach began to turn at the memory of Legoregebb, and the second one, even larger than him, glared straight at him. Like the one addressed as Galka, this one lacked a beard and had some bell-like notes in its voice when it roared. "Oroszlan, I know you care deeply for that companion of yours, and you have yet to choose, but understand that his heart may be elsewhere," clanged the really large creature.

"And you want to rescue him? He is betrothed to that female, Galka, and he's already falling for her. He means to leave the mortal world. Do you want to be the wedge between them?" insinuated Cylithera, dragging him through the air against his will. Looking back, Vincent could see Ivan nuzzling up gently to Galka.

A lump formed in Vincent's throat. "No, I never felt that way towards him... but... I never thought he felt that way about me," he choked. "How long did you feel like that?" he thought as he watched Ivan.

"Come, follow me to see the other one who seems to be so important to you, then maybe that'll help you make a wiser decision than to just throw your life away," said Cylithera as they flew swiftly through the air. All the while, Vincent merely shivered miserably and continued to hope that his hand would not freeze off in her grasp.

This time, as Cylithera sailed through the air with Vincent in tow, they flew past the moon that shone over the mountains that surrounded the Crossroad. The wind grew even colder, to the point where Vincent wondered if he was even going to survive. "It's cold," he said, teeth chattering. "I'm going to die of cold at this rate."

Still flying swiftly, she soon led Vincent over a chain of islands shrouded in night and fog. Far below, small red fires were visible with wisps of smoke sneaking out past the fog. The shouts of children mixed in war chants also rose above the fog and Vincent looked down anxiously. "Just a little more, and I will leave you to where you will no longer freeze." They reached a relatively isolated island that seemed to be shaped like a fox from high above. Without warning, Cylithera dove down, almost losing Vincent as she allowed herself to simply fall until they were right above the vegetation canopy. Vincent looked around and saw a rocky outcropping, where two figures stood. "Go closer and see the truth," encouraged Cylithera coldly. Every time she spoke, Vincent could feel his blood freezing a bit more.

There was Tarathorn with that fox-like boy, now standing much taller and looking slightly older. "I need to go back first. I need to speak with my family and those I work most closely with. I want to stay, but I also have many duties to complete, not because I'm forced to, but because I want to," said Tarathorn, her cheerful voice just barely stronger than the wind.

"But what if they change your mind? Then what am I to do?" demanded Gildharain, frustrated.

"I would stay, but there's a still, small voice that I've learned to follow," said Tarathorn. "I can't promise for sure, as much as I want to just stay and help you, but what I can promise is that any decision I make will be from my conscience."

"Tarathorn!" called out Vincent, flailing his arms to get their attention.

Apparently neither of them saw or heard him because Gildharain merely took Tarathorn's hands into his again. "I wish I could keep you here because you're much more of an Alfar than even me, and yet, there's something in me that tells me to let you fulfill your mortal duties and choose for yourself," he whispered as he put his arm around her shoulder and fidgeted with a stray lock of her raven hair. Cold fingers then grasped Vincent's hand and as he rose into the air again, he saw Gildharain lean in towards Tarathorn, who also was leaning slightly towards him.

Vincent almost screamed but he merely bit his tongue as Cylithera took him high up into the air. "She won't need Lhîndóme to bring her back now that Gildharain, Lord of the Alfar, will take her back to that mortal life. Vincent, your friends are deserting you for their Tuatha roots, while you remain mortal and deny your own roots. I offer you this so you may have a chance to not have to leave them for the unknown journey. Bring me Lhîndóme and I will allow you to be Sidhe so you can forever be a part of Dûnhêasa, and Tindariel will also find peace."

After what felt like hours to Vincent, Cylithera finally set him down at the Crossroad, where several more ghostly figures were milling around and looking for their destinations. "A quién me llevaría a mi destino astral?" asked a dark-skinned matronly woman with long, black hair, not paying attention to who was listening.

"Cylithera," asked Vincent meekly. "How do I get out of here and go back to Tindariel's cottage?"

Tindariel's voice suddenly boomed through the bleak surroundings of the Crossroad. "Vincent! Don't go on me!" her voice roared from all around, but mostly coming from a distant area that was away from the storms.

"To return, sing once more, and I shall find you. The words of the song of return will come to you when the time comes."

"Tindariel! I'm coming back!" he replied before running in that direction as fast as he could before he tripped and collapsed to the cold, hard ground.

## 10 Ancient History

Vincent opened his eyes and instead of seeing the bleak sky and feeling cold, hard ground, he felt a soft, warm bed and saw Tindariel sitting next to him. "The Crossroad..." he mumbled groggily as he let his focus return to his eyes.

Tindariel breathed a huge sigh of relief as soon as Vincent began to talk and squirm about. "Vincent! What happened?" she roared, hugging him tightly.

"I was at the Crossroad..." began Vincent. "And I saw them..." he babbled. "Ivan is engaged to one of those dragon people, the Sarkany or whatever you call them. And Tarathorn... running off with Gildharain... if I only knew what would happen."

"Before you do anything else, you better eat, you've been out for almost three days!" exclaimed Tindariel, lifting Vincent out of bed as she would a small child. Effortlessly, she carried him to the table and helped him sit up. "I know you're weak, but you've got to eat!" she insisted, pulling up a chair and running to the fireplace to heat up some soup.

"I don't know what to do," he said weakly. "My friends... leaving me... especially Tarathorn... I can see Ivan being under that kind of pressure, his parents tried to do that to him until he got into Caltech. But Tarathorn..." he babbled.

"In the meanwhile, drink this," urged Tindariel, passing some water to him. "No, there's no booze in it. Just good, clean spring water and a bit of honey. We'll talk more after you've had something inside you. No sense while you're delirious." He nodded weakly, understanding her logic when his stomach suddenly let out a huge growl that would put Urrgh to shame. Without protest, he quickly drank the water. Before he could ask, she said, "I just put some honey into it to give you enough strength to eat properly. I figured you'd be a real mess after the first day."

Once the soup was warmed up, Tindariel gave a bowl of it to Vincent, who eagerly but cautiously ate the nutritious bean and vegetable soup that had been seasoned with some meat Urrgh had brought in. "Keep eating," she encouraged after two bowls. "You really need your strength back, I don't like it when anyone starts looking like a pansy Eldharin wizard." To prove her point, she pulled out a mirror and let Vincent look into it. A gaunt, pallid face stared back at him and his eyes looked somewhat sunken in from his long fast. Without any further comment, Vincent continued to eat, convinced by what he saw in the mirror.

Several long moments later, Tindariel said, "So, what happened? You said something about the Crossroad."

"Cylithera found me there... and she showed me what was happening to both Ivan and Tarathorn..." started Vincent. "The Alfar and Sarkany are both taking my dearest friends... Cylithera offered me a chance to become one of the Sidhe in exchange for Lhîndóme."

Nodding, she said, "You do realize that maybe you're not seeing the whole picture, right?"

Blinking, he asked, "What do you mean? But those brief passages... I can't get them out of my mind, especially Tarathorn and Gildharain... and Ivan being one of those creepy dragon-folk."

"You're a smart one, at least I think you are. Kestrel used to tell that to me when we studied together. 'Look at the big picture,' she'd tell me whenever I got stuck in my studies or when I got frustrated at someone's seemingly erratic behavior. And as far as Cylithera's promises goes, she's all honorable and shit, but she's also usually trying to rob you of your humanity. She's still got that grudge against humans even if she did finally give up on your world thanks to Soronthrel. Plus you're not exactly human yourself, you've proven that with your singing!"

"So then... Cylithera is basically a crooked statistician," pondered Vincent. "Manipulating the data and the analyses in hopes of biasing the decision."

"Kestrel said that once too, except she said that about Iliirya, not Cylithera. But what you've got to understand is this whole Tuatha business. Once in a great while, there's crossover between Tuatha and mortal, especially between mortal and the ones that are fighting now. Can't remember the damned fancy-pants term, but basically Sidhe and Alfar. I really now wish I paid attention to those history classes. But I guess it's too damned late now."

Pausing to think, Vincent asked, "Wait, couldn't we ask those creepy wizards? Clawstaff and Tanil? Surely they'd know after seeing how they addressed that Sarkany!"

Just the mention of Clawstaff made Tindariel cringe. "Well, I suppose he'd know something after that horrible history class I had to endure with him... and that damn wizardry class everyone has to take. Not as frickin' bad as Dr. Freely though, but that's not saying much. That old geezer does owe me for that time I saved his pathetic ass," she muttered. "And Tanil still owes me one for the time I stopped Kestrel from almost killing her. Still got the scar from Kestrel's sword." She lifted up her shirt to reveal a long, jagged scar across her abdomen.

Vincent suddenly spoke up. "Tindariel. I think we know as much as we need. How do we get to the Crossroad? I think I know what to do and I have promises to keep with you, even if the Tuatha-lords may've screwed me over. I owe you at least, for saving my life and helping me out even when things looked bad."

She covered the scar again, then looked at Vincent. Once, she had regarded him as little more than a dolled-up boy, but weeks of hard labor (and proper eating, in her mind) had filled him in and the grim determination on his face added a maturity she had never expected from him. Without a second thought, she grabbed him into a powerful bear-hug and replied, "We have almost everything. The Crossroad is a bit of a problem, given that I'm a bit lacking in Tuatha skills."

"Wait a minute, I just remembered something Cylithera told me. I can get us there with the song of returning," said Vincent a bit more confidently. "At least if Cylithera is right about that." He took the recurve bow now christened as Lhîndóme and Tindariel grabbed her own bow, Eagle's Honor.

"And if we want to make use of our bows, we might need some arrows," pointed out Tindariel. "I have my own quiver of arrows that I know fit mine well." She went to the corner and brought out a pair of leather quivers. "This one is mine," she said, putting on a quiver filled with red and yellow fletched arrows. Then she handed Vincent the other quiver, which was filled with blue and white-fletched arrows. "These should be fine, I didn't really test them out, but I think Lhîndóme should spit these out nicely if you actually have to pincushion anything. I'm ready to go to the Crossroad when you are."

Clearing his voice and sipping some water, he began to sing, but as he began, he noticed that his finger nails grew longer and more claw-like. Some wiry black hair sprouted from his hands and arms and he could feel his hair growing into a mane. A horrified gasp escaped from Tindariel, but he didn't seem to care. Light flowed out from him again and he grew insubstantial, but before he faded away, Tindariel grabbed him and found herself also fading. "Watch it, kid, Cylithera might've also gotten you to tap into something else to turn you into a Sidhe," warned Tindariel.

## 11 Paths

Oh, sweet little one,  
How do I reveal the truth to you?  
And when all has been said and done,  
Will you still let me touch you, hold you?  
Love, come hear me out,  
Please don't scream and shout  
I've got too much to reveal  
Please hear my urgent appeal!

Forbidden, unforgiven, but so true  
My heart yearns so much for you  
My arms are open for that day  
(If indeed there can be such a day)  
When I can embrace you without fear  
And I can softly whisper into your ear  
Those little words: "I love you"

Oh, angel with the magical voice,  
Will you listen to this song, this plea?  
My blue heart would truly rejoice  
If you'd share your life with me.  
Come dance with me upon the grass  
And we can let careless hours pass  
As we enjoy games of life and love  
And celebrate the joy from high above!

Ivan finished singing as he continued to gaze into the stars. Even in his reptilian form, he could feel his heart beating. "Vincent, I've got to see you again! I wish I could've told you, but who would've known that I'd be out here?" he sighed, putting a clawed hand over where he could sense his heartbeat.

"Oroszlan?" called out Legoregebb. "You're not moping over that human again, are you?"

Turning around, he faced the ancient Sarkany. "Yes, I am," he replied honestly. Then he realized that he was incapable of shedding any tears. "I can't stop thinking about Vincent, both as my best friend, and..."

"A mate? A lover?" finished Legoregebb.

He expected him to grow angry, but he merely nodded at him. Ivan continued, "Exactly. Please. I want to help your... our people, but at the same time, a still, small voice in me tells me that I should at least confess my feelings towards Vincent."

A faint clanging noise escaped from Legoregebb, then he regarded the young Sarkany with a look of curiosity. "I have spoken with the Council and Galka and we have decided that perhaps it is best to allow you to resolve and reconcile what you must. If you follow the star that shines blue and green then you'll find your way home."

Politely saluting the elder Sarkany, Ivan said, "Thank you, Legoregebb. And please send my regards to Galka."

"I am here," clanged Galka's bell-like voice. "Oroszlan, I will accompany you. I will not be able to rest until I know you have made the journey safely." Ivan bowed politely before both Sarkany by dipping his head down, then he nuzzled up to Galka respectfully. "And I also wish to learn of what it is that binds you to your mortal life so I can better understand you. That is, with your leave, Elder."

"You have my permission, but on the condition that you will speak for the Sarkany, should the need come. My body will not handle a journey to the Crossroad, my time draws near," said Legoregebb, suddenly with a bit of sadness in his voice. "Soon, the Council will select the next leader and a space will open." Both of the younger Sarkany bowed down respectfully before the elder and then flew off towards the Crossroad.

Tarathorn slowly leaped from tree to tree on the canopy. All the while, she would glance back and see Gildharain sitting with his head in his hands, almost as if trying to conceal the fact he was crying. She

sighed and looked towards the horizon, where lightning began to strike and grey storm clouds threatened to enter. Cold winds began to blow and the moon's light began to fade, while the leaves grew dry and brittle before falling apart. Nervous, she shivered a bit before continuing onwards towards the clouds. "No, I've got to go on," she thought, then she thought back to a song she had written and performed with Vincent and Ivan once.

When I get lost and all grows dark  
I just start to whistle and sing  
Just like the little meadowlark  
And then my fears fade away to nothing

Maybe there's sorting stuff with a bubble  
Or maybe you're having trouble  
Remembering that for every action  
There an equal and opposite reaction  
Nothing to hide from, nothing to fear  
That much is transparent and clear!

Just lift your weary head up high  
If your antiparallel feet do stumble  
Start thinking happy thoughts to fly  
No sense in wasting time to grumble.

Her clear soprano voice floated above everything around her and she felt herself warming up. As she continued to whistle and sing, her body grew light once more and she began to fly higher. She turned around to see if Gildharain was still sitting, and she saw he was standing up, as if listening to her song from afar. "To be one of the Alfar is to live for the here and now and without fear," she thought.

Kestrel opened her eyes reluctantly and felt herself lying on hard ground without even a blanket. "Crap," she groaned as she looked up at the dull sky. "Not the path to the Crossroad again. That one trip to get Danny out of here was bad enough."

She stood up and brushed herself off, taking care to get the dry dust off of her. Looking around, she searched for any navigation aids, whether it was on the ground or in the sky, but all she could see to the horizon was a pinkish-grey haze that covered the entire landscape. "If I were a dead soul, where would I not go?" she asked herself. Her voice rang eerily in the silence that surrounded her. "Come on, I've got to find a sign!" she yelled before a wind began to blow from one of the otherwise undistinguishable directions.

Even though she was well over sixty, nearly seventy, she still walked with a bounce in her step that made people a quarter of her age blush in shame. "I guess that's a sign," she mumbled to herself, brushing her greying hair back to keep it out of her face. "Not my first choice, but it's a sign!" She continued onwards through the seemingly unchanging environment.

A trio of voices suddenly wafted from multiple directions. "The Geeksters..." she muttered as her ears discerned a hauntingly beautiful and smooth baritone voice, a boyish and slightly shrill high tenor, and a pure flute-like yet cheerful soprano. "And Ivan needs to sing in tune without using that awful Andy Bell-style falsetto that Captain Greywolf likes so much," she thought to herself. "Even if he still sounds better than Killer Parakeet and Tindariel. And they're in different places."

Looking around, she fumbled around in her pockets for a pencil and paper. Scribbling down vectors and equations, she pondered for a moment and hastily wrote down some calculations. "And the sum of these three vectors is suggesting they're going exactly where I don't want to go, if the wind is any indication," she said. "Cylithera, if you have anything to do with this, I've got a long talk with you and maybe a knuckle sandwich to go with that. I kicked your ass once and I can do it again."

## 12 Convergence

"Tindariel, I think we made it," said Vincent weakly after singing. Then he looked at his hands and cried out in a panicked voice, "What happened to me?"

"I freakin' flunked wizardry and enchantments four damn times... but I can damned well tell ya that's one of Cylithera's secrets. It's weird though, that she'd give that kind of secret to a male, especially one who's intact," replied Tindariel.

"You don't mean... she's got some evil plan for me?" gasped Vincent.

"Exactly. Kestrel could easily tell you more," replied Tindariel slightly glumly. "It happened to her too."

Grey mists began to swirl around both of them and as always, there were barely visible ghostly figures milling about. The dry ground was now cracked despite the chill, wet mist and the sun looked more like a cold, distant star than a source of light and warmth. In the distance, the electric storms that marked the passage to Dúnhèasa grew stronger and threatened to take over the part of the static sky where moonlight and starlight tried to fight back. Even the sun-lit region seemed to be threatened by the electric storms. "Cylithera," said Vincent, gripping the bow even more tightly in his hand. "But why would she want me to be Sidhe?" he asked, watching the various ghostly figures walking in their chosen directions.

A short, shadowy figure with a dark mask over its eyes from the one direction that lacked any travellers soon emerged. "Whew, so my calculation was right!" said the shrill female voice that both recognized as Kestrel. "For a moment I made a mistake with that cross-product somewhere..."

Without a second thought, Tindariel charged straight towards her with her arms wide open. "Kestrel!"

"Tindariel!" shouted Kestrel, also running up to the tall Eldharin woman with her arms wide open before they collided. The larger and relatively young woman held the older, tiny woman in a tight bear-hug. "It's been far too long. And I see you've been feeding Vincent properly," joked Kestrel, seeing how the boy had filled out.

"Don't tell me you're... dead..." whispered Tindariel, suddenly realizing that they were indeed at the Crossroad.

"No, just badly injured after saving Clawstaff's skinny rump from a falling bookshelf and in danger as always," laughed Kestrel. "I was trying to get back to life but then I heard these kids singing and thought I'd come help out."

As if on cue, a pair of golden-scaled draconian figures soared down from where the sun was attempting to rise. One was golden-scaled with linear silver markings, while the other had triangular bronze markings on its wings. Both of them roared wordlessly in clanging voices with sweet, bell-like notes. They landed in a cloud of dead, dry dust stirred up by the wind produced from the motion of their wings. "Vincent," clanged the one with the bronze markings.

"Ivan!" cried out Vincent, hugging the large reptilian creature after recognizing his voice.

"And this is Galka, my companion," added Ivan, motioning to the silver-marked Sarkany, who smiled and nodded politely.

While Vincent could do little more than stare, Kestrel grabbed him and turned him towards where the moon and the stars were struggling against the storm. A pair of small fluorescent white dart-like lights began to fly swiftly towards the Crossroad. "We've got more company," said Kestrel, grinning even more.

The darts of light soon became a leaf-clad boy and a young woman in full Caltech attire. Both of them descended to the Crossroad and landed just as gracefully as the two Sarkany. The woman, now revealed as Tarathorn, looked at where Ivan and Galka stood. "It's me, Ivan," said Ivan in his clanging voice.

"A Sarkany!" hissed the boy, holding Tarathorn close and defensively. Then turning to Kestrel, he awkwardly saluted her. "And Kestrel... I found a new companion, not a... big sister or mother..." he stuttered. Kestrel merely nodded in approval at Tarathorn before breathing a huge sigh of relief that Gildharain would no longer plague her dreams.

"Gildharain, he's a friend... at least in a different form," said Tarathorn, breaking free from his grip and going up to hug both Ivan and Vincent. Galka watched the three of them hugging each other with rapt curiosity.

"Oroszlan, you do realize that you are capable of returning to mortal form, right?" said Galka, a smile forming on her crocodilian face. "Just speak the word and you will return to your true form."

"*Embar*," said Ivan in a firm, controlled voice. Once he finished that word, his body began to glow with a faint pink light. The crocodilian face and reptilian body shrank once again and the tail vanished. Gradually the scales and claws receded, revealing very pale human skin once more. In a flash of lavender and white light, a tall, lanky young man with shoulder-length wiry brown hair stood in the place of where the draconian creature once was. He wore a simple beige robe and a pair of sandals.

Galka followed Ivan's example and also said, "*Embar*." She began to glow with a bright reddish light and in a flash of brilliant light, a muscular young woman with copper-tinged skin, intense amber eyes, and long, black hair stood in her place. She was wearing a robe, very similar to what Ivan was wearing, but adorned with silver markings similar to that of a diamond-back rattlesnake. She smiled and said, "It's a very odd form with this covering, but I will use it to learn of your ways."

Vincent and Ivan looked at each other and grinned. "Vincent... I..." started Ivan but a flash of lightning interrupted him. A lightning bolt struck the ground and quickly solidified into a figure that made both Vincent and Tindariel cringe for a moment before regaining their composure.

To most, the entity that formed may have well been a human icicle, so cold was her expression. Her tanned skin had a faint bluish tinge and her piercing sea-grey eyes seemed to emanate rays of ice at anything she gazed at. In her hand was a mighty, silvery wooded longbow with runes of inspiration and fear inscribed on them and on her back was a quiver filed with arrows. On her hips were a pair of curved swords that glowed with cold, menacing light and were surrounded in an aura of lightning. "Kestrel and Tindariel, a pleasure to see you once more, although I would have expected both of you to show me more respect than that," she sneered.

"And I see you're doing pretty darn well," said Kestrel, a grin creasing her wrinkled face. "I had hoped you had learned from the last few nerds that we just make awful soldiers for you, especially after that little Vladivostok incident with Soronthrel."

"How dare you!" hissed Cylithera at Kestrel, but she refrained from drawing her scimitar and striking at the cheeky old woman.

"Cylithera. I have *Lhíndóme* in my hand," piped up Vincent, holding the bow openly before her. The bow began to glow radiantly with a cold silver light.

Cylithera walked up to Vincent, who held the bow tightly in his hands despite the chill that spread through him. "Vincent... or shall I say, *Eöl*, if I were to use your true name, which has never been given to you, hand me the bow," she commanded. "And you will be freed of the mortal curse."

"Vincent! Remember the promise you made when we first got into this!" called out Ivan, trying to run up to him before Galka grabbed onto him.

"Let him do as he wills," whispered Galka, all the while holding onto the youth with inhuman strength. "We only act if he does the truly irrational."

Suddenly, *Gildharain* charged with the fury of a bull at Vincent and knocked him over. Growling like an angry dog, he ripped the bow from Vincent's grip and started howling victoriously. "*Mag-na-Oige* shall triumph over *Dúnhèasa* and *Pelda*!"

The two youths began to grapple at each other with *Gildharain* quickly subduing Vincent to the ground. With a deft twist and jerk, Vincent shook *Gildharain* off of him before charging head-first at him. Once again, the two of them clashed in full force, grabbing each other. Vincent growled incoherently and his features began to grow feral, almost tiger-like. An orange and black-furred tail sprouted from his backside and fur began to cover his face and arms. He roared and in an inhuman burst of strength, he hurled *Gildharain* off of him and pounced on him.

Kestrel, tired of watching the two boys fight, ran out and tried to yank Vincent off but to no avail. Finally, she tugged with all of her strength on his tail and threw him off-balance. "People may call me *Granny*," she grumbled. "But I'm not weak!" she added, giving *Gildharain* some time to recover.

Angrily, Vincent whirled about to strike at the impudent old woman. That distraction was enough to give *Gildharain* time to step away and shake his head. "No... I must not fight. That'll only turn me into a *Sidhe*, that much *Tarathorn* showed me," he said to himself, stepping back from Vincent. "And then the *Alfar* will truly become extinct if we take that path."

Sensing danger, *Tindariel* charged at Vincent. "You gotta fight it off! I hope you're not that much of a doorknob to just give in to the *Sidhe* in you!" she roared, knocking Vincent to the ground again before he could injure Kestrel. "Think about anything besides anger and hate, think about *Tarathorn* or Ivan or anything else!"

Cylithera merely watched and smirked coldly, her hands near the hilts of her scimitars. "And as for you, *Imladrien*, or shall I say, *Tarathorn Suttankankul*, what will you do? Unlike the others, I can offer you true immortality if you vow to defend *Dúnhèasa*. *Gildharain* merely offers eternal childhood and a life with no purpose. The other *Tuatha* lords make no such offers, only conformity with their beliefs. And if you remain mortal, you will only be scorned for your beliefs until you're old and weak like your fellow academics who passed up the opportunities I offered them."

*Tarathorn* looked around at the people who surrounded her. *Gildharain* was standing off to the side

with several cuts and bruises and a torn kilt. Galka held onto Ivan with a very firm grip and despite Ivan's struggles to rescue his friend, the mysterious woman held him tightly with an almost serpentine grip. Kestrel was brushing the dirt off of herself before helping Tindariel hold Vincent down until he calmed down. And then there was Vincent, who suddenly looked a lot more like a tiger and was snarling angrily.

"But what will I have to give up in return? Surely my collaborators didn't like something about your offer," Tarathorn asked boldly, taking a step closer to Cylithera.

"Only that you take a vow of utmost purity and slay those who oppose me," replied Cylithera, scrutinizing the three students, especially Tarathorn and Vincent.

"Is that what you want?" bellowed Tindariel at Vincent and Tarathorn. "Look at Cylithera and then look at your friends!"

Weakly, Vincent glanced around despite the blood in his eyes from the gash he got from his scuffle. "By the Honor Code," he whispered, wiggling against the weight of both Tindariel and Kestrel. "I have a promise to keep," he huffed. "And can you let me stand up?"

Reluctantly, Tindariel and Kestrel helped Vincent up and on weak legs, he picked up the bow and faced Cylithera boldly. "I made a promise when I got here and now that I see what you want, I am all the more determined to keep that promise," he declared in a strong voice. "Even if I'm a bit confused about exactly how to go about it," he admitted.

Finally, Ivan was able to wiggle out of the powerful woman's grasp and ran up to Vincent and hugged him before placing his hand on the bow. The runes on the bow began to glow more brightly in the dim miasma and dust that swirled around. "I'll do what I can," he said proudly. "This fighting's got to stop otherwise all three species' population dynamics are going towards the sink called zero!"

"And so will I," called out Tarathorn, also dashing over to her two friends and placing her hand on the bow. The light on the bow intensified, surrounding the three youths that now held the bow. "We've been through so much together and heck if we ditched each other now even if we are touched by three opposing Tuatha races!"

The light grew so bright that even Cylithera and Galka had to shield their eyes. At first, all three of the youths were engulfed in the rainbow light, but gradually, the light focused on Vincent, bathing him in radiance. The claws and tail receded, as did all of the cuts and bruises. Instinctively, Vincent held the bow a bit more firmly and he closed his eyes in rapt concentration. A rainbow-hued arrow formed in his hand and he nocked it to the string. Taking aim high above, he drew the bow back effortlessly before loosing the arrow in a smooth, fluid motion.

Arcing high above everyone, the arrow exploded into a flurry of light. Vincent turned towards the stormy mountains and drew the bow again and another rainbow hued arrow materialized as he drew the mighty bow. This time, as the arrow arced through the air, it struck the dark clouds that loomed over that side of the mountains. "Dûnhèasa and Mag-na-Oige are one, for none can exist without the other!" screamed Vincent. "Let the barriers fall and let the Sidhe and Alfar live in equilibrium! And to the Gilthanedain and Amonethedain, let this senseless battle amongst each other stop! You are all Tuatha even if you embrace different aspects of nature, for the sum of the parts is greater than the whole!" With that, Vincent suddenly started singing again. What he sang, he had no idea, but as he sang, the bow glowed again and light surrounded him.

"Now I know why you're so drawn to this young man," whispered Galka to Ivan. "His voice, the one that touches all... He is indeed the true wielder of Telcontar restored, the bow he has dubbed Lhîndóme. Among our kindred, the Nightingale is a symbol of peace."

"And he is the truest of friends," added Ivan, not quite noticing Galka holding him and making sure he didn't run up to his friend.

"Vincent... I know you can do whatever you've been called to do," said Tarathorn softly. "And you better do it or I won't help you out with your statistical analyses!"

"Damn, that boy is good," muttered Kestrel to Tindariel as she noticed how Cylithera and Gildharain seemed to instantly calm down. "Surprised he's still in school and not making a fortune as a rock or pop star."

Tindariel watched Cylithera gaze longingly at Vincent. "Shit. She better not go for that kid." Kestrel merely giggled at the thought of Cylithera developing a fondness for Vincent. For a moment, the coldness in Cylithera's expression seemed to thaw out a bit. Her sea-grey eyes fixated on Vincent, who continued to sing wordlessly. "Holy crap, it better not happen!" groaned Tindariel nervously.

"Tarathorn, how do you resist someone with such a voice?" asked Gildharain once he found himself

next to her. "He's got a voice that can even melt the ice in the angriest of Sidhe or the most logical of Sarkany. And I would be happy having him around to sing me to sleep." She merely grinned at him.

The two Tuatha leaders faced each other, and for the first time in many years, they did not glare at each other in obvious hostility. "I still cannot and will not forgive the Alfar for their attacks on Dúnhéasa and for defiling the temple at Tindarn-Niniel," spoke Cylithera, still with a voice tinged with hatred.

"And there's still the corruption of the Alfar with your seed of hatred," reminded Gildharain, trying to retain as much control of his voice as he could. "Not only in Palindor and the Veil, but also in Terrios."

Galka let go of Ivan to approach both of the Tuatha lords. "Do you not understand the larger picture?" she roared, returning to her reptilian form in a flash of golden light. "We are in decline and here you are, still in your petty squabbles! This is a matter of survival of the Tuatha, even if it means withdrawing our kindred from the world that these children are from."

"If nothing else, please release Tindariel from her burden and let us return to our world," called out Vincent after he collapsed to the ground for a moment. "That is, if Tarathorn and Ivan wish to. And I want to seek out the one who will wield Lhîndóme."

"But he has been found. You are the wielder of Lhîndóme and the one to unite the Sidhe and Alfar," pointed out Galka. "Did your voice not touch the coldest of Sidhe hearts and the most careless of the Alfar? And did you not invoke the powers within the bow?"

Stunned, Vincent could only stutter. "I... just did what I knew I had to do," he started. He shook his head and examined the bow in his hand. It still glowed brightly, especially where he had placed the silver inlays. The light pulsed about him, making him glow along with the bow. "I've done my part, right?" he asked nobody in particular. "I can pass this bow on to the one who really wields this permanently and live my own life as an ordinary graduate student, right?" He then knelt and looked skywards before holding Lhîndóme reverently in his outreached hands. "Will any of you take this bow and lead the Tuatha now that I have played my role in getting this thing made and starting the peace-making process?"

Tindariel approached the youth and put her hand on his shoulder. "Well, I think you're stuck with it. You just proved it yourself as that dragon girl said."

Cylithera heaved a heavy sigh as she regarded the crowd around her. "Very well. Tindariel, you are no longer bound to Palindor, though you will live the normal thousand or so total years of the Eldharin," she said. "And after your time is up, whether by violence or age, you will be reunited with Wyndon in the lands that no Tuatha, save the Eldharin, can ever behold."

"And remember the promise of peace between the Gilthanedain," said Galka. "Eöl has spoken. What will you do, Cylithera and Gildharain?" Reluctantly, Cylithera and Gildharain stood before Vincent, who now held the bow with authority. Vincent wanted to bow to them, but the two Tuatha leaders bowed down to him first. Galka had taken up reptilian form again and knelt respectfully before him by bowing her head.

Looking down at the huntress and the feral youth, who now looked up to him, Vincent merely said humbly, "All I ask of you now that the promises to my friends are complete, is to cooperate to the best of your abilities to keep the Tuatha from becoming extinct and forgotten legends."

## 13 Home Again

*Vincent hugged Tarathorn, ignoring Gildharain's shocked expression, then he allowed Ivan to hug him, this time soliciting a disturbed expression from Galka. "It's time for us to go home. At least until the end of two years..." he said before focusing on Lhîndóme.*

*"Remember, Oroszlan, I will find you soon," whispered Galka into Ivan's ear.*

*"Tarathorn, thank you for reminding what it truly means to be Alfar," said Gildharain to Tarathorn, holding her close after prying Vincent away from her. "I hope you'll return and be Imladrien of the Alfar once more."*

*"I don't know about you guys, but I'm going to hang out with Tindariel. Maybe I'll come back, or maybe I'll just permanently relocate to Palindor," laughed Kestrel, hugging all three of the youths at once in her short arms.*

*Tindariel smiled at Kestrel, then at Vincent. "Good luck, Vincent. And for all the times I called you a doorknob, I apologize. I hope things go well, and maybe we'll work together again, although without so much pressure."*

*All through the interactions, Cylithera remained silent, although her sea-grey eyes fixated on Vincent, who seemed to be unaware of her cold gaze. Her grip on her own longbow tightened and had anyone been*

*paying any attention to her, they may have noticed a tiny teardrop forming in her eye and just barely trickling down before vanishing into the parched air. "Ready, everyone?" asked Vincent.*

The doctor and the minister watched the vital signs on Tarathorn and suddenly, the tiny girl bolted up. "Mom? Dad? I'm home!" she piped up eagerly before looking at the strangers in confusion. "What's going on?" she demanded, noting all of the needles and devices around her.

"Glory hallelujah!" shouted the minister, running out of the room to look for Tarathorn's parents. "Thank Jesus Christ for her recovery!" he announced to everyone.

Puzzled, the doctor pulled out a clipboard and took notes on Tarathorn's sudden recovery. "You're the most drastic recovery from Tehanu Syndrome..." he mumbled. "Most fascinating case..."

"Tarathorn!" screamed both of her parents, running in ahead of the minister. Eagerly, she hugged both of her parents, ignoring all of the wires and tubes hooked up to her.

Trying to remain as stoic as possible, the doctor continued to scribble notes. "If you don't mind, I would like to track you for the next few years," he said. "There's so few recoveries from Tehanu Syndrome that we want to study them closely. The biochemistry is still beyond our grasp and we want to analyze for things such as remission and any significant changes."

"Do it, Tarathorn!" said Mrs. Suttankankul. "Grandma died from Tehanu Syndrome while you were gone. And Chantavong had it but he recovered and it was a very mild case, he only went into slight flames and then he woke up. It's all over the family! But we're so glad you're back!"

"And another indication that Tehanu Syndrome may also have genetic origins," mumbled the doctor, taking notes. The minister, in the meanwhile, was praying eagerly and crying out his thanks to the Lord.

"Dr. Claudio?" asked Vincent shyly, waiting for the stocky woman to look up from staring at numerical data.

"Yeah?" she said casually, looking up.

"Can I still do the Ghetto Institute of Technology project even though I was out of commission with Tehanu Syndrome? James and Efren said it was all right if you sign my form since they're both at that organic synthesis conference at MIT," he said, pulling out some papers.

Smiling, she took the paperwork and signed on the lines that were marked with bright blue and pink highlights. "Just be sure that you're not in your usual Geekster attire, at least if you don't want to get SN-2'ed or worse," she laughed. "Anything but those tight black pants and that tight, sparkly dressy shirt. By the way, did Ivan ever find a use for rubber policemen? James and I made a bet that nobody will ever find a real use for those things."

"Not yet. Not even Galka could think of anything and she made some interesting uses for some of those ugly lamps that Ivan keeps around in our apartment," replied Vincent, still laughing.

At that moment, a tall, heavily muscled man stepped into the office. "Hey, Helen, are you going to the shoot over at the track?" he asked. "Joanne and Thomas are getting ready to go, we need one more on our team!"

"Yeah Kevin, I'll join you guys as soon as I'm done talking to Vincent," called out Dr. Claudio. "Vincent, you should come shoot with us. In fact, I think Tarathorn had mentioned that she was trying to find a fourth person after recruiting Galka and Ivan into the competition."

"I'll see you at the track, I need to stop at my apartment to pick up Lhîndôme," replied Vincent before he dashed out of Dr. Claudio's office to pick up his recurve. The ecological research group had all pitched in to get the bow for him once word arrived that he had survived and recovered from Tehanu Syndrome.

*Iliiryana N'Shad-Daermon and Firianna Celethorn crept silently through the underbrush, making sure to keep a close eye on the ice-cold warrior they regarded as their leader. Cylithera was stalking a white stag, ready to loose her arrow into its heart and lungs. The stag continued to graze peacefully, unaware of the archer about to take his life, yet ready to accept his lot in life to eventually fuel one of the many predators of Dûnhèasa at any point. Then while the two Sidhe were watching their leader, a smooth baritone singing voice flowed through the air and Cylithera took her shot down before dropping her mighty longbow onto the ground. "Eöl..." she whispered.*

*"Dûnhèasa is in danger," hissed Iliiryana to her companion. "Eöl must be slain." She blinked her glowing feline eyes.*

*"That's what you said about Thomas," replied Firianna. "Yet you spared him too. Although, Eöl*

appears to be of much greater threat because he not only wields *Lhîndóme* but also holds her favor." Like *Iliiryana*, she was in panther form and her eyes narrowed as she watched *Cylithera* gaze up into the sky.

"*Eöl* must die. As long as he lives, *Dûnhèasa* is in danger."

*Cylithera* merely continued to gaze up into the sky. She murmured softly to herself, "*Eöl*, what have you done to me? What spell have you cast upon me? I'll not succumb to the same fate as *Eventhrel Thorondarien* and yet why do I still hear your voice and see you in my mind?"

"*Eöl* will die," vowed *Firianna* coldly as she scraped her arm slightly with a dagger. "This I swear by my very blood."

*Iliiryana*, like her companion, also made a light slit on her arm. A drop of blood struck the ground and dissolved into the soil, leaving only a hint of redness that quickly faded away.

"Darn arthritis and rheumatism," mumbled *Baelnorn* frustratedly, struggling to sit up. His rheumatism and arthritis had grown worse ever since *Legoregebb* had knocked in the library ceiling. *Kestrel* had leaped to push him aside from a falling bookshelf, severely hurting herself, but sparing him from little more than several bruises and ever-worsening ailments.

*Tanilthara* looked over at the ancient man and brought a small cup full of hot tea. "Drink this, *Baelnorn*. It'll relieve your aches and pains. I can't have two patients who need constant attention!"

"I'll be fine," laughed *Kestrel*. "Take care of your old man. They may call me *Granny Kestrel* now, but this *Granny* isn't giving in so soon." Then she took her cane and tried to stand up from the chair only to hear something creaking. "Aww, shut up!" she said to her aching back before hobbling over to the shelf that had fallen on her.

"*Kestrel*, you've aged more gracefully than most *Eldharin* I've known," said *Tanilthara* mirthfully as she helped *Baelnorn* with the teacup.

Suddenly, *Baelnorn* began to wail as the hot liquid touched his parched mouth. "I can foresee it! That vision!" he cried out, ignoring the aromatic tea. "The day when I can finally atone and find peace, when the last of the *Tuatha* have left *Terrios* or have chosen mortality."

"And when all the damage we contributed to in the days of *Rannarek*, over three thousand years ago, can finally be healed. We certainly left a mess that needed to be cleaned up," replied *Tanilthara*. "The *Godsfall* was only the start. One day, the gods and the *Tuatha* both return to *Palindor* and the *Art* will be alive again."

"And *Terrios* won't get so many *Tuatha* issues!" piped up *Kestrel*. "So we won't have any more of me or *Captain Greywolf* running around! We'll all be separate worlds again, although I did enjoy all those trips back and forth. I'm going to miss those rifts between *Terrios*, the *Veil*, and *Palindor* and anywhere else that might've been connected."