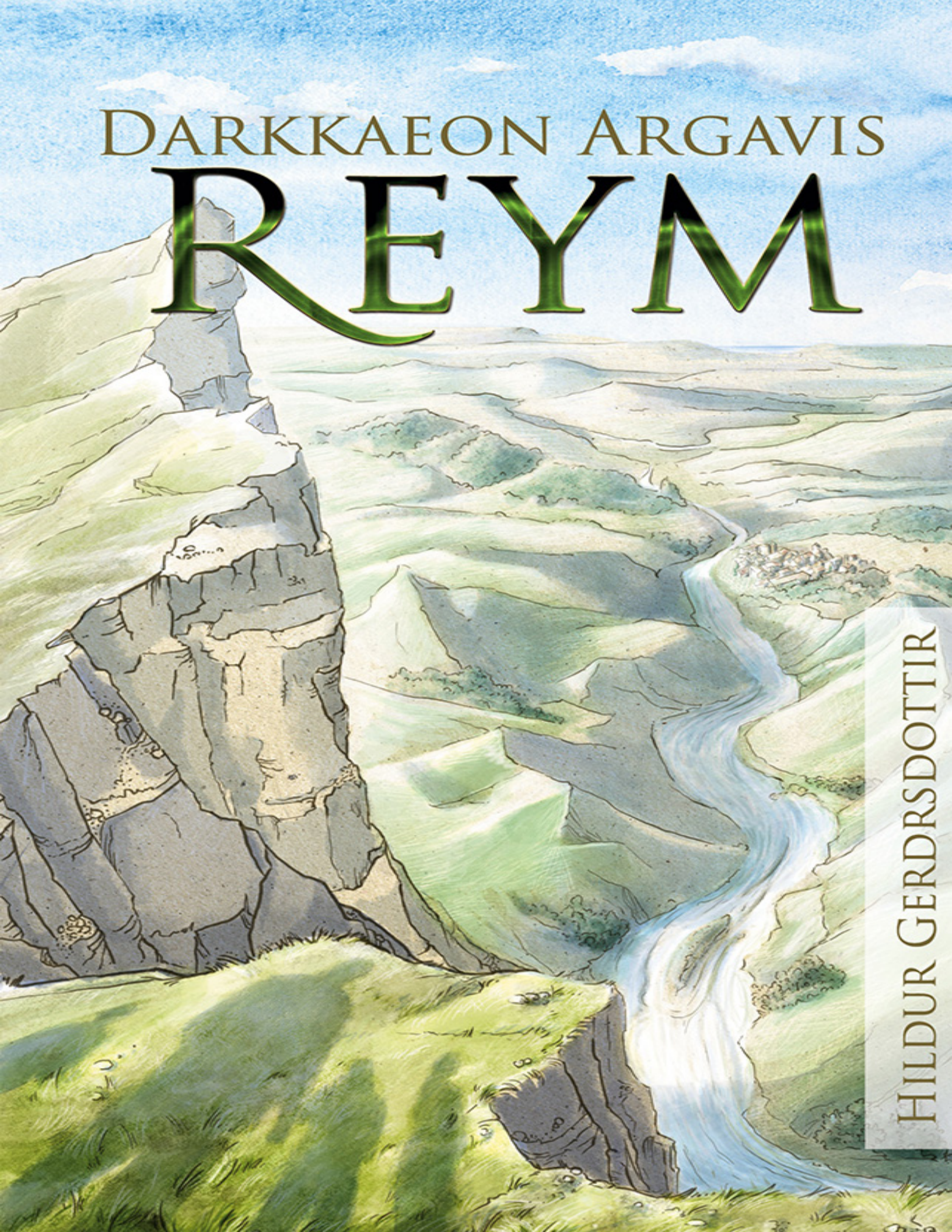
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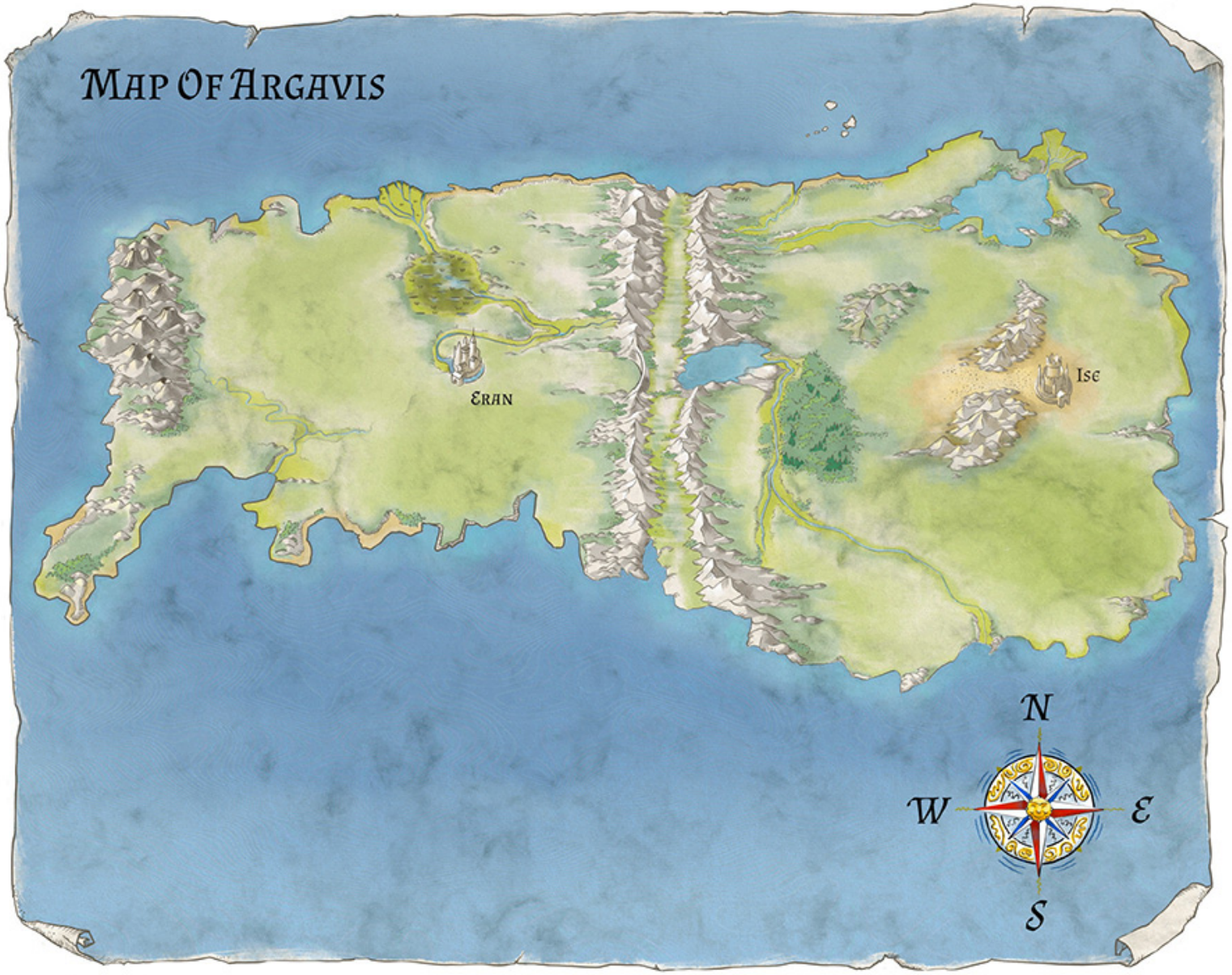
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PROLOGUE

On Argavis, the divided continent, a war between two great powers has been raging for centuries. In the west the royal family of Eran rules, with its alliance of several kingdoms and city-states. In the east Solon IV rules over the gigantic empire of Honodur from his fortress in the Jiin Valley. Between these two powers, every inch of earth has been fought over for generations. Neither side has been able yet to achieve lasting success.

Far away from this war, which has already claimed countless victims, inhabitants of still untroubled lands and provinces live in a fragile idyll. There are the islands in the northeast, each of which forms a small world of its own, and the volcanic mountains in the far west, where the primordial dragons live their traditions undisturbed and decline to interfere in a mortal war.

Scholars describe this as the 16th Age of Man or the Seventh Age of the War. This is the period in which the events described here take place, later to be found in all the history books of the world. They are the origin of this story.

II

Jan! Get up! The wedding is about to begin!”

A young man with wispy brown hair opened his eyes, stretched his slender feet out of the woolen blanket, and knocked over a couple of wooden cups that stood beside his straw bed.

“Come on, or you’ll miss it!”

Jan’s eyes fell on his sister Alm, who was standing in the barn doorway, regarding him with reproach. Now he widened his eyes in fright and jumped out of the straw so hastily that he hit his head on a wooden box on the wall. Quickly he put on the ornate shirt of dyed jute that lay ready. Then he ran out of the barn onto the road and past the wooden and stone houses of the village onto the wedding mound.

The whole village had already gathered around the big beech tree. Under it waited a beautiful young woman in a wedding dress of autumn leaves, moss and green silk. Her sky-blue eyes sparkled like diamonds, and she welcomed her future husband with a tender smile.

Beside her on a stone stood a tall, elderly man who looked at Jan with a stern expression before he began to speak to those present: “Dear people of Beechwall! We are here today to celebrate the marriage of my son Jan and his future bride and wife Ursula. Now that everyone is finally here, the wedding can begin. Jan, Ursula, please carve your names and the day of your wedding into this tree so that from today you will be recognized as a couple!”

With a prettily decorated knife that was old and not too sharp, the two carved their names into the trunk. Then they kissed each other on the mouth. “Now let’s celebrate and

offer our congratulations to the happy couple!” the voice of Jan’s father rang out loudly.

The assembled company walked cheerfully down the hill and crossed the massive wooden bridge that led across the river to the meeting hall. This large room, actually a storehouse for the community’s emergency supplies, was popular as a meeting place in the evenings and on festive occasions. Now the table was ceremoniously set, and for the next few hours everyone ate and drank and sang wedding songs to congratulate the new couple.

As boisterous singing and laughter echoed through the tall building, the evening passed and night fell. A young man rose, jumped up on the table, and, slightly tipsy, said to the bride and groom, “Hurrah for our handsome couple, hurrah!” Then he turned to the young groom. “Now you’re married, Jan, you’ll be boring and respectable. But tonight, that can wait! Now you must prove one last time what you have so often shown you can do as a bachelor.” He jumped down from the table and left the room, swaying slightly, and in a while returned with a trolley carrying two thick wooden barrels.

“Do you accept a challenge from your worst enemy, Beechwall brandy?” the young man spoke to the perplexed faces. “Or do you need assistance in fighting these gorgeous barrels here?”

Jan stood up. “Well, Tibbett with a double B and double T,” he began, “I could drink on my own. But then where’s the fun for my friends?”

Ursula smiled. She knew Jan couldn’t refuse his friends any request.

“True words!” exclaimed Tibbett. “At least I think so. The battle has begun!” he yelled out of the window.

Thereupon a dozen high-spirited lads came running down the street and charged into the room. They stuck taps into the kegs, filled their cups, drank them down and filled them

again. Jan did his valiant best. Thus passed the second half of the night, until everyone staggered home drunk.

III

The next day, in balmy temperatures, the Beechwall villagers went about their usual business. The older men gathered to play cards, the women washed clothes by the river, the children played in the forest and the surrounding area. But then the sound of horses pattering and whips cracking rang out, at first from far away, but the noise came gradually closer. Suddenly, under the archway at the entrance to the village, overgrown with moss and creepers, stood four horsemen. They wore armor and carried weapons. An air of menace emanated from them: they looked like four-legged demons.

The mayor had been summoned to talk to the strange visitors. Now he stepped to face the horsemen. When he came back up to the village after a brief and heated discussion with the riders, his face was showed nervous anxiety. He called the whole village together.

“The time of military service has come!” he sadly announced. “I must hand over the village records to the envoys of the imperial troops so that they can determine who has to go to war.”

Everyone whispered in agitation.

Ursula embraced her newly wed husband. “You can’t go,” she whispered anxiously in his ear. “You have to wait at least a year after marriage to be able to go to war.”

Jan nodded slightly at her, but made a worried face himself.

“How did they even find out about our village?” continued Ursula.

“I don’t know,” Jan whispered back. “We’ll have to wait and see what happens.”

Visibly unhappy, the mayor strode into the village library to retrieve the records. With a thick tome under his arm he returned and, without the slightest glance at the villagers, walked past them down to the archway. With a heavy heart he handed the riders the book, which contained all the more or less important events of the village.

The horsemen examined the last few pages and then rode slowly after the mayor until they came to the assembled people of the village. The leader dismounted from his horse, stepped in front of the crowd, and removed his helmet. A gaunt, hard face was revealed.

“I am Captain Sirin of Rockstream,” he announced. “I will now select the men who will go to war for the Empire. In reading your records, I was sorry to discover that there are too few men of suitable age in this village for me to take to Rockstream.” His face contorted into a grim mask. “Therefore, I will override the customary rules and take with me even those who would not yet have a duty to perform!” he roared hatefully into the crowd. “With me will come Tibbett, Manjor, and Jan, whom I still congratulate with all my heart on his wedding yesterday. I hope someone will take care of your wife when you don’t see her anymore!” The captain’s eyes sparkled like glowing ashes spat out by the fire, and he smiled spitefully at the people.

All present were frozen and silent.

“I won’t go,” a voice was heard shouting in despair. “I can’t!” Manjor ran away in fear.

“Back here at once!” the captain shouted after him.

But Manjor only ran faster. The next moment an arrow pierced the lad’s leg, and he went down roaring with pain.

The captain calmly strode up to him and looked at the wound. “A pretty injury. I can’t use you like this anymore. So you have your will and you can stay here. But your leg will forever remind you of me.” He grasped the arrow firmly, spun it around once in the wound, and then left the tormented boy lying there without giving him another

glance. “Prepare for the journey to Rockstream!” he shouted to the other warriors.

Full of grief, Jan went into his house to get his things. He was not allowed to talk to Ursula or his family. When all the pressed men were ready, they were silently led away by the horsemen.

IV

The men and the soldiers wandered south through the forest for a few days, where they pressed more men into service. After that they turned back and followed the Ganoll stream to get to Rockstream. It was fall, and nature showed itself in its most beautiful colors. But for the first time in their lives Jan, Tibbett and the other conscripts who had joined them from elsewhere did not notice this beauty. They had never been so distressed. To prevent them from fleeing, they were guarded at night. They were also forbidden to talk to each other until they reached Rockstream.

When the guard fell asleep briefly one night, Jan whispered to Tibbett that they should escape at the next opportunity.

Tibbett looked around before answering. “I know someone in the next village. He would hide us until things calm down. Then we can go back to Beechwall.”

The next day they passed Hagen, where Tibbett’s acquaintance lived. That night, as the guard was about to doze off again, Tibbett woke Jan up. “We can walk to the warehouse near Hagen,” he whispered to his friend. “There’s a broken wall there. You just have to pull out a few loose stones and then put them back. I used to get stuff for free from there.”

As quietly as they could, they crept past the sleeping men. But suddenly the guard woke up and alerted the other soldiers. Jan and Tibbett ran into the nearby forest. But then Jan tripped over a root and went down. At that moment he realized that it would be completely useless to get up and keep running.

“Take good care of Ursula,” he called after Tibbett. He heard the horses galloping up and thought to himself that he should get in their way to give Tibbett a head start. But no sooner had he got up than he saw two horses speeding past him, and suddenly everything went black.

When he regained consciousness, he found himself tied to the back of a horse. His head ached. Captain Sirin walked beside the horse. “Your friend managed to escape us, for now,” he said to Jan. “But you, I promise you, you’re headed for the Foron front. Even if I have to beat you all the way. There you will die miserably. In a few days we’ll be in Rockstream, and I’ll personally see to it, when the zones are assigned, that you don’t go to the North Fort or Henna, but to Foron, where the battle has always raged the worst.”

Rockstream was a large fort that had once been a village and was now used for the mustering of the army. It was situated on a lake and could only be approached from the west by water, unless one took a long detour through the nearby Nuhm Mountains. On a large square, the new soldiers were examined and divided up according to their skills.

Jan did not have to prove his combat experience. The soldier in charge of the assignment stepped in front of him. “You tried to run away and shirk your duty,” he said. “Our captain doesn’t like to see that. He said you had a wife. You’ll never see her again, because you are going to Foron. No one comes back from there. Only the best of the Empire and the royal family’s army are sent there – and those like you: the traitors.”

On horseback and in big ships, the new soldiers set off for their various war zones. The horsemen headed south or north to reach their destination via the mountain passes; those traveling by ship would get as close as possible to their goal and then march on. Jan’s ship was the last to leave. Before he boarded, a signal suddenly sounded and

several guards led a young woman into the square. She seemed not much older than twenty, and she was huge. She towered over all the men by several heads, but she had an attractive figure, broad-shouldered, neither thin nor muscular, but with a generous bosom. Her wild brown hair, which gleamed blood red when it caught the sun, framed her pretty face and almost hid her brown eyes. She wore richly decorated full armor with breastplate, arm bracers and greaves, a flexible thigh guard that resembled a skirt, and boots. The armor appeared to be all of a piece. Neither slits nor fasteners were visible. The metal shimmered blue. On her back, the woman carried an axe of the same material.

“Tell Captain Sirin this woman wants to be dispatched to the worst war zone,” ordered one of the guards.

The captain was called and presently stepped into the square. “Why do you want to go to Foron?” he said coolly, facing the woman. “To see someone die?”

The woman remained expressionless.

“Why would you want to go to Foron?” the captain repeated his question.

“That’s none of your business,” she said. “I’ll go to Foron even if you don’t like it. If I have to, I’ll think nothing of reducing this fort to rubble!”

The captain grinned. “There are well-trained soldiers here who would kill you in a second. What makes you think you could take them on?”

The woman’s face still looked calm and matter-of-fact. “Because I’m a Berserker.”

The captain fell into wild laughter. The Berserkers had been exterminated long ago, he said. But no sooner had he uttered these words than the woman’s axe flew just past his face, shattering a man-thick column of granite. She pulled a chain on the axe, and it whizzed back into her right hand.

The captain was startled, but quickly regained his composure. “We cannot have such a madwoman here,” he

said. “Go to Foron, and you’ll have your way. But don’t ever come back here.”

Wordlessly, the woman slung her axe on again and boarded the ship. Jan had to get on board as well. The ship left Rockstream with only him and the strange woman as passengers.

It was a warm sunny day. The young woman stood at the prow, looking expectantly and with some concern toward Foron, where they would arrive the very next day. Jan thought of home, his family and his beloved Ursula. “I must return to Beechwall as soon as possible,” he thought. “However, I won’t be able to take the sea route, and in any case that goes via Rockstream. So whether I like it or not, I will have to cross the Nuhm Mountains …” But as he knew very well, just getting through Foron was extremely dangerous, and to cross the mountains without ever having done anything like it before would be suicidal. Jan looked over at the warrior woman, who was standing there in full gear. He was afraid to approach her; even more afraid than he was of Foron and the Nuhm Mountains. She did seem calm and had a cheerful air about her. Everything she said was polite. No great danger seemed to emanate from her. But Jan had seen in Rockstream what this woman was effortlessly capable of. Just thinking of it put him in mortal terror.

When evening came, he went to his bare room. On the floor, with his head resting on his belongings, Jan lay awake brooding for a long time before he finally fell asleep.

V

When Jan woke up on the day of arrival and realized that he would now have to go to the front, he felt sick. He went on deck and saw that the Berserker woman was still standing in the same place as the day before, as if she had never gone to bed. He still didn't dare approach her and tell her his plan. What would she think of it? Would she kill him because he didn't want to go to war? She seemed to want to go to Foron of her own free will … He decided he would ask her about her intentions at the first moment of leisure after they arrived.

At last the war-torn land of Foron appeared on the horizon. Hours later, the ship ran into an open spot on a wooded gravel beach. A warrior working on the ship instructed Jan and the warrior woman to keep heading west through the forest until they came to a rest area. From there the path led even further west, to the Great Wall between Foron and the Kingdom, where the worst strife between the two sides would be fought out. While Jan climbed down a small rope ladder from the ship, the woman jumped into the ankle-deep water with one leap. She looked pleased as she stepped onto the shore. The ship cast off again and headed back to Rockstream. Now the two were alone.

The young woman gave Jan a quick glance, then ran into the forest. He trotted after her. After about two hours of walking, during which they had not exchanged a word, the warrior woman made camp – still without a word – built a fire and went to sleep. Jan did the same.

As he lay on the ground, she suddenly spoke up. "Someone has been following us since we left Rockstream," she said, "Watch out."

Jan peered over at her and saw that she had opened her eyes slightly, as if she wanted to be prepared for an attack. He also tried to keep his eyes open, but fell asleep soon after. The fire crackled away while they both lay there quietly. No sooner had the fire gone out than something moved on a tree. A shadow flitted across the trunk and then approached the camp. The Berserker woman pretended to move in her sleep and watched the shadow's activities closely. The shadow crept around both of them and then lay down alongside.

When Jan woke up the next morning, he saw that a young man was sleeping nearby. His traveling companion was standing next to him. He ran to her and looked at the strange guy sleeping on a bed of grass and leaves. The latter awoke, stretched and stood up completely relaxed.

"Good morning, Jan, and good morning to you too, of course," he greeted the young woman.

"Good morning," she replied politely. "My name is Syria, and what is your name, dear pursuer?" As she stated her name, she gave Jan a saucy look, as if she knew he had wanted to address her for a long time and just hadn't found the courage.

"Rey is my name. I'd like to join you on the journey to the Great Wall of Foron."

Jan felt like he was having a confusing dream. "Who are you?" he asked aloud. "How do you know my name? And why have you been following us and keeping out of sight?"

"I know your name because I heard it in Rockstream. I stowed away on the ship that unloaded you here. I hid because you never know what kind of people you could run into. But you guys seem to be okay."

"And you just let him get away with that, stalking us in the middle of the night?" Jan asked Syria.

"When he was sneaking around us, I realized he didn't have any bad intentions, so I let him spend the night here

with us," she replied. "And by the way, you don't have to be afraid of me either. I won't hurt you."

Her words reassured Jan, and now he studied this oddball more thoroughly. Rey had short, slightly erect blond hair and a rather athletic build. He wore short blue trousers decorated with metal, which must once have been longer, because threads hung out of the ends. In addition, he was dressed in a black ornate shirt, the sleeves of which were cut off, and his feet wore black, very sporty-looking shoes. In addition, he wore black leather gloves with reinforced knuckles. The most striking thing about him was his tattoo: a pattern like twisting branches adorned the left side of his face.

"Why do you want to come with us to Foron?" asked Jan finally.

The answer came promptly. "I'm looking for my brother, who also had to go to Foron. I want to bring him home."

"And how are you going to get away from Foron once you find him?"

"Hmm, I'm sure I or someone else will think of a way. Do you have any ideas, perhaps? From what I picked up in Rockstream, you want to go back home, don't you?"

Jan was secretly triumphant. Now he could broach his idea. "We can try to cross the Nuhm Mountains to bypass Rockstream."

"Good plan. But isn't there a faster way to go north?"

"Why north? Where do you come from?"

"From Heel – that's one of the North Islands."

"And you walked all the way to Rockstream by yourself?" asked Jan in amazement. "There are many dangerous places in the north …"

"Yes, now and then I had to fight off some bandits or mercenaries … But I had no choice. There is no other way to Foron."

"Rey must be strong," thought Jan, "to travel all that way to Rockstream without weapons …"

“From Foron you must go on without me,” Syria interrupted his thoughts. “I will help you look for your brother, but then we will have to go our separate ways.”

“I thank the pretty lady,” Rey remarked. “But I would be very interested to know why she would want to go to a battlefield. Is the question even allowed?”

“I have someone to kill, that’s all,” she replied with slight unease.

“You and Captain Sirin, you alluded to the Berserkers,” Rey continued. “What did you mean by that? You are undoubtedly human. Tall, to be sure, but no way do you belong to a different race.”

“The Berserkers are a warrior tribe of the eastern half of our continent,” she replied, “and we have certainly not been exterminated!”

“I have never heard of these Berserkers,” Rey said. “And I have been taught about the different races.”

“There are only about six hundred Berserkers. We live secluded at the foot of a mountain, so people don’t necessarily know about us.”

Rey didn’t seem convinced, but he didn’t ask any further. “We can keep talking as we walk,” he only said.

They packed up their things and left the rest stop. Later in the afternoon, they came to a small lake with a waterfall. Rey suggested they go swimming.

Jan made a dismissive gesture. “It’s fall,” he said. “You’ll only catch a chill in that cold water.”

Rey held his hand in the water. “Oh, it’s not that cold. Back home, we jump into colder ones. What do you think, Syria, do you want to go swimming first?”

“We can just as well go into the water together. I can bathe in my armor. As long as you’re not embarrassed, I don’t care either!”

While Rey took off his shirt and shoes, Syria had already disappeared up to her waist in the water. Jan, meanwhile, was preparing the fire for the evening.

“You’re not as sporty as I thought,” he said to Rey.

“I know I have a bit of a belly. I’ve never actually exercised much, and inn food just gives you an appetite.” Rey jumped into the water in one leap.

Jan shuddered just watching him.

“How come you don’t go down in that heavy gear? Strange. You even take your axe into the water!” said Rey to Syria.

“My armor is much lighter than you think. But why don’t you take off your gloves?” she retorted.

“They are the only weapons I have. Apart from my shoes. If something happens, I can still fight back.”

“I guessed you’d fight unarmed. What’s that about your shoes?”

“They are specially made, they reinforce my kicks. So are my gloves, they were made out of ark.”

“Ark … That’s a rare stone, and one of the most valuable materials. You must be quite rich,” Syria commented.

“What is ark?” enquired Jan. “I’ve never heard of it.”

“Ark is a stone that when treated is indestructible and also amplifies or weakens power, depending on which side it is impacted,” Rey replied. “It is so expensive that you could buy a whole village and a lot of land with the money for a small shard!” he explained further. “When I hit something, the force of the blow is multiplied. But if someone hits my hand with a stick, for example, I feel almost nothing from it. The stones have to be specially worked, and then you have to insert them with the right side facing.” Rey looked over at Syria, who was stomping out of the water. “But what about you?” he asked her. “Your armor is light and shimmers blue. What kind of material is it? It can’t be colored steel, it looks different …”

“It’s something quite special.” Syria dismissed the question with a smile.

Rey stepped out of the water and sat close to the fire to let his trousers dry faster. “The armor must be magical,” he thought. He hadn’t seen anything like it before.

Soon it was evening and the party went to sleep. In the night, Rey awoke under the moonlight. He heard a voice nearby. Syria was not in her sleeping place, so Rey followed the voice towards the waterfall. He heard a soft singing. It was Syria standing on the lakeshore.

“Torn apart all, piece by piece,
but still I left my heart behind.
Painted the earth with the reddest blood,
but I long lost the will to live.
Do not resist the urge to die,
my hatred devours many a righteous man.
Yet I have no doubt my purpose is sound,
for innocence is never found.
I give myself over to blood frenzy
in the thick of the fray.
Feel the supreme joy that springs within me,
so rejoicing and gentle, as if it were mine alone.”

When Syria had finished singing and sat down on a rock, Rey revealed himself. He walked slowly towards her. With an oppressive feeling in his chest, he said to her, “Very beautiful, but far too sad!”

“Sadness has been with me since before I met you both.”

“And what depresses you?”

“The loneliness. I am the last of my tribe, the last of the Berserkers.”

“So they have been wiped out except for you. That is why no one has heard of them.”

“I’ve lost everyone I cared about.” Suddenly the usually cheerful young woman looked immensely sad.

Rey felt more and more queasy. He had not been prepared for something like this.

“That’s no reason to choose suicide,” he finally said.

“You don’t know anything about me. What’s it to you?”

“Nothing at all.”

“Then why are you talking to me?”

“Because you haven’t told me to shut up yet.”

“I won’t either,” Syria said. She did not comment further.

Rey remained standing silently beside her for some time. Then he returned to the camp without looking back at Syria, lay down and fell asleep.

VI

The next morning Jan was woken up by Rey. Syria was also up and said that they should soon be arriving at the edge of the battlefield.

“I don’t suppose you can fight, can you?” Rey enquired.

Jan glanced at Rey, who knew immediately that he was right.

“You just make sure you don’t get into a fight,” he instructed Jan. “It’s best if you just stay close to me.”

Syria seemed perfectly cheerful, but that was just her usual mask. “You should keep your distance from me during a fight,” she said. “I can go into a berserker rage, and in that state I don’t distinguish between friend and foe.”

“Leave you space, yes, all right. Jan, you do the same if you don’t want to get hit by the axe.”

“Understood,” Jan nodded. On the way to the battlefield, he wanted to discuss his plan again, “So, Rey, we’ll find your brother, then we’ll split from Syria and head home over the Nuhm Mountains. I have a few questions about that …”

“What’s your brother’s name, by the way?” Syria interrupted him.

“Oh, haven’t I told you yet? Darkkon. His name is Darkkon, and he’s easy to recognize: he has a tattoo similar to mine on the right side of his face.”

“Do you or does your brother have any idea how to get by in the mountains?” inquired Jan. “Do you have mountains on the island of Heel?”

“Yes,” replied Rey. “I’ve never climbed far, but I am an excellent climber. And Darkkon certainly knows what to look out for. He will know how to get us over the mountains.”

“Good. We can certainly get the necessary equipment in the villages that lie around the mountains. And what about

you, Syria? What will you do after we part?”

“I will stay in Foron. I have someone to kill. After that, I’ll just stay there.”

Jan was amazed that anyone would volunteer to stay in this war. But he knew too little of the world and its different peoples to make a judgement. Syria’s statement obviously did not please Rey, but he said nothing.

Around noon, the three of them heard the screaming of warriors, and behind a nearby hill, the battlefield of Foron opened up before them. The air was permeated with smoke and the smell of death. Everywhere they could hear the missiles of heavy wargear hitting. Little by little they realized the extent of the battle. Everywhere the warriors of the Empire were fighting against the well-structured unit formations of the West. The tent camps of the Imperials stood there, a bit battered, arrows and crossbow bolts stuck in the ground everywhere, heavy stones lying around that had been thrown at the tents by catapults. Most of the tents had only been set up provisionally, nothing was meant to last, as a projectile could impact at any time. Chaos reigned on this side. On the enemy side, the picture was the opposite: the units stood in distinct formations on the field and fought according to logical rules. Their camps in front of the Great Wall, which had already suffered many a hit, were perfectly positioned. The whole camp was tidy, the weapons were well arranged. All projectiles, whether fired from bows and crossbows or from heavy war machinery, were immediately collected and recycled if possible. From the hill, Rey, Jan and Syria could tell within the blink of an eye who was fighting on which side.

“Darkkon must be somewhere on this plain,” Rey said. “He too was shipped here from Rockstream, and I’m sure he was given the same instructions as we were. Come on, let’s split up. Jan, you come with me, we’ll go north. Syria, we’ll meet in the evening at the tent camp over there.

“Agreed,” she nodded. “Take care of yourselves. The battle may be structured by the Westerners, but even they know that they’re not getting anything for free here.”

Rey looked Syria in the eye once more, wondering if he would see her again in the evening. Then he walked with Jan towards the north. They asked some resting warriors about Darkkon.

“No, I don’t know anyone here with a tattoo on their face,” grumbled a lounging heavyset man with a cut on his arm. “Go further north, there are many more archers and crossbowmen than here, plus a few catapults.”

The two young men took his advice and continued walking northwards.

“Stop, you cowards! There’s fighting going on,” yelled a young fellow. He looked to be less than twenty years old, standing behind a palisade wall and pointing at a bunch of warriors who were hitting their opponents indiscriminately.

“We’re looking for someone, we don’t have time now!” shouted Rey back just as loudly. His steps quickened and Jan struggled to follow.

“I don’t care!” the young guy roared. “I’m the one giving the orders here. You’re supposed to obey!”

Rey turned back on the spot, charged at the obstinate guy and broke his nose with a well-aimed punch. “If you’re too cowardly to fight, then hide. Otherwise, I advise you to be with your own kind next time we meet. Otherwise I’ll do you even more damage.”

Without waiting for a response, Rey and Jan walked on. Soon they reached a small copse. The ground had been much trodden recently, and some trees bore fresh scars from the erratic blows of metal weapons. Rey thought it was strange that no one was here at this time – after all the forest was right next to a fresh battlefield. No sooner had he said this than ten to twelve warriors, camouflaged with twigs and greenery, rushed out from among the trees.

“Got two again!” one of them shouted. “Make short work!”

Now the moment Jan had been so afraid of was here: an open fight. For him, who had never raised a hand against anyone all his life and who abhorred any bloodshed, this was the worst thing he could imagine.

“You stay close to me at all times,” Rey hissed at him. “But keep out of sight of the others as best you can. Hide behind a tree, perhaps, but run to me immediately if you are attacked.”

Jan and Rey stepped back a little so as to keep a better eye on the attackers. When two men with short swords ran towards them, Jan hid behind a stunted tree and Rey prepared for the fight. The two who came to face him slowly circled with their swords in their hands. Rey kept his eyes on both of them and deftly dodged a blow from the front. Immediately he jumped to the side so as not to give the attacker behind him an opportunity to attack. He turned to the first attacker, grabbed him by the sword arm, threw him over his leg to the ground and knocked the weapon out of his hand. Then, in a flash, he turned to the other and hit him on the head with his elbow. Now that both attackers were on the ground, he had enough time to wring the neck of the first one with a skillful grip. Then he was ready to deal with the rest of the bunch. He strode slowly towards them while the warriors stood a little apart. Rey grabbed one and held him close in front of him so he could fend off the others. He kicked one in the shin and punched another several times on the torso. More kicks and punches followed until he had defeated them all.

Jan, who had been watching dumbfounded, came out from behind the tree and looked at the lifeless bodies on the ground. Although none were visibly wounded, the sight struck him hard. The fight had not lasted long – just a few minutes, and it was all over.

“We’ve come a long way,” Rey said. “But it would not be worth while to go on now. We’ll turn around and go back to

camp. In the evening we'll discuss with Syria how to proceed."

Jan nodded briefly and the two made their way back to their camp. There was no one left at the place where they had met the conceited young man. When they had almost reached their camp, they discovered the boy's body. All his bones had been broken. Some Empire fighter must have beaten him to death with a club or a heavy branch; the Westerners only fought their enemies until they were incapacitated, they fought more decently. Rey lifted the young fellow up and laid him beside a nearby tree. He didn't want to look at his face every time he passed that spot.

And so the day came to an end. While they waited for Syria, they talked to the other warriors. When darkness had fallen and Syria had still not appeared, they announced that they were going to look for the young woman.

"You shouldn't leave the camp now," advised the grumpy old man with the wound on his arm. He was sitting in front of a small fire. "You know, it's like this, they don't really fight at night." He pointed to the camp of the West. "Night peace, that's what they call it. They've never attacked at night. Unlike us. We don't have to abide by their rules. That's why they send patrols all the time, so they don't get killed in their sleep. If they see you two walking around, they'll raise the alarm and you'll have them all on your backs. Besides, you won't get far anyway. It's too dark and you don't know your way around. Sleep until tomorrow. I'll wake you up when they start fighting again. Then you can go." He put his sword over his shoulder and kept guard. He seemed to have been here for ages. His sword was full of nicks, and his knowledge of the rules revealed that he had not set eyes on any other spot on earth than this battlefield for years.

"We'll leave tomorrow," Rey said to the old man. "Thanks for keeping watch, I'll get back to you on that sometime."

He patted Jan on the shoulder and with a wry nod of his head signaled him to sleep too.

VII

As promised, the old man woke them up early. Immediately Jan and Rey set off south, where they suspected Syria was. They passed the hill where they had separated the day before. They looked at the warriors of the West practicing their formations, working their bows or greasing the war machines on the Great Wall. Such order! No wonder the fact that their own single fighters outnumbered these troops did not make any difference to the duration of the war.

For a long time they walked south, encountering no enemies. This did not bother them. At a camp along the way, they enquired about Syria. Rey was unhappy about the information they received. They were told that a single person had been provoking fights since the day before, and it was still going on. That was why most of the troops were still fighting. From where the camp was located, they could not see what was happening. The fighting was taking place in the nearby forest; only occasionally could a warrior be seen scurrying past a tree. Rey considered sending Jan back, but then he remembered the beaten-up corpse. They would do the same with Jan.

Jan seemed to read Rey's mind. "I'll stay close to you," he said.

In the forest, the two were presented with a ghastly picture. Dead bodies of the Western faction lay everywhere. Split shields, shattered weapons, some of the men seemed to have been thrown against the trees with such violence that they had bounced off them.

"Syria!" was all Jan said.

"Syria," Rey nodded.