



WORLD
WARCRAFT
MIDNIGHT



THE QUIET AT THE
END OF US

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STORY

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SEED

Elder Hagar used to say that forgiveness was a seed: planted by one, to be harvested by another. It is not a single act, but a process. And like all natural processes, forgiveness takes time. It takes tending. It can neither be forced nor rushed. You must give it what it requires. Light, water, sustenance. Space. Humility. Amends. Yet, even so, just because you pushed a seed into the mud doesn't obligate anybody to do one damn thing with your scraggly weed if they don't want to.

Hagar's students thought she was talking about one of them stealing another's toy, or tattling on someone who snuck out during quiet meditation, or took two helpings of hot mushrooms. And she was. But when Elder Hagar spoke, she always spoke of many things at once.

Orweyna understood that now. The lesson beneath the lesson. And she understood that no matter how many seeds she planted, the person dearest to her in all the world would rather burn black every penitent leaf than harvest one single fruit.

Even though, no matter how many times she laid out the pieces of what happened, no matter how she arranged them, in what shape, in what design, she could not, *could not* see how she'd done anything wrong.

On good days when the light was rich and bright and so was Orweyna, she told herself it was a fair bargain. Amarakk lived, after all. Alive and hating her was better than dead and loving nothing anymore.

On good days.



When Orweyna was a little reedy, unkempt sprout, she loved five things in all the protected, splendid glowing expanse of Harandar.

The sound of Hagar's voice, who treated her as both pupil and granddaughter.

The taste of fresh water after a long trek.

The sight of the fungus-glittered roots of Teldrassil, the tree-of-us, soaring roots wrapping around the land as kin as a mother's own arms.

The smell of berries on the vine just before they're ready to pluck.

And the feeling of being with Amarakk, her brother, her friend, her ally in every scheme—and they had so many schemes.

Everything else mattered not one bit to Orweyna. Everything else was *in her way*. Big disapproving boulders rolling between Orweyna and adventure, between Orweyna and satisfaction. She'd already met everyone who existed in the whole world, or so she thought, and all of them loved forbidding her to do or have or see or try things far more than they ever loved her for herself alone. This situation aggravated the girl such that she swore to Teldrassil's stony toes never to love anybody who didn't love her back *more*. She was so young then, she truly believed that oath to be the most perfect assurance against pain ever devised by haranir, rutaani, fungarian, or tree.

And so she longed to do and have and see and try it all, in case there was a sixth thing to love out there, hiding.

Except the life of a shul'ka. That, Orweyna could live happily without sampling. Shul'ka carried a heavy weight of honor. Powerful warriors. Secretive, isolated. But it

was neither a power nor an honor to be craved. They lived near the Rift of Aln, away from all other haranir, and did their work in separation and silence, all for their people's sake. They severed themselves from the song of the goddess so that they could enter the Rift without losing themselves to the splintered, mutated song within as it shrieked in those cursed crags and vales. So they could remember their own names as they fought to hold back the monstrous things there. So they could protect the world of Harandar from the misshapen abominations of the Alnscorned, the broken nightmares that dwelt in the Rift, before the beasts could cross the borders of haranir villages. So that they could take the constant battle into the creatures' homeland without being driven mad by the shattered, unsane music within.

It is not a thing to be said aloud, but Orweyna always thought the shul'ka very nearly a breed of Alnscorned all their own. Twisted, songless versions of haranir in endless pain—but the twisting was of their own making. They invited it, the scorning not only of the Rift of Aln but of Aln'hara herself, their goddess, and all her gifts. A sacrifice, but a scorning all the same.

Yes, there were some few things Orweyna knew she did not want to taste, after all.

The song of the goddess didn't count among her five loves. It wasn't a thing to love or not love, any more than you could love or not love your own heart beating in your own body. It was the song of being alive. The song of you. Without it, you were nothing but sad meat. Without it, you disappeared.

Amarakk didn't count either—like the goddess's song, he was always with her. In the ever-blooming, half-lit world of Harandar, the boy Amarakk and the girl Orweyna could not be separated, not by force or pleading or bribery—and many tried. Two handles on one braided basket, and that basket oh so very often on fire. Wild, disobedient, foolish, feral. It never mattered how many haranir lived and laughed and feasted and worked around their mischief; the little world of Teldrassil's curling labyrinth of great mosaic roots and vines was their personal kingdom. The two of them hid from chores among mushrooms as tall and grand as ancient trees, crashed through fields of puffballs and glittering blue-violet spores as small and numerous as the minutes of childhood, which always seem infinite, until, suddenly, they are not. And deep within the song of the goddess, whenever they were together, the melody that meant Orweyna

and the harmony that meant Amarakk syncopated into something new and pretty and sweet, a song all their own in the vast sea of sound that was the silent unified symphony of Harandar.

And it is simply never possible to separate a song from itself.

All those pinch-faced, grumbling grownfolk saw only that this wild orphan and this good family's good son were *different*. Among the haranir, *different* did not come along often. There was little room in the imagination of this busybody elder or that stern rootwarden to comprehend that the difference of two tiny creatures went much further than shirking chores. That the song of divine love, running through the minds of the villagers as a gentle humming counterpoint to the rhythms of their lives, soared and sang in Amarakk and Orweyna like a thousand-strong choir. And so their objections came out strange and feeble, for not a one could put proper words to the thing.

Why can't you just play and work and be content like the other children?

Why can't you two do as you're told?

Why can't you do any single thing, one without the other?

"It will all come to grief," sighed Elder Ruia, in those old kaleidoscope-colored days. They watched the young haranir assembling in the gardens for instruction. Neither *assembling* nor *waiting* were amongst Amarakk and Orweyna's talents. "Our ways are our ways for a reason. To stray from the path is to invite pain."

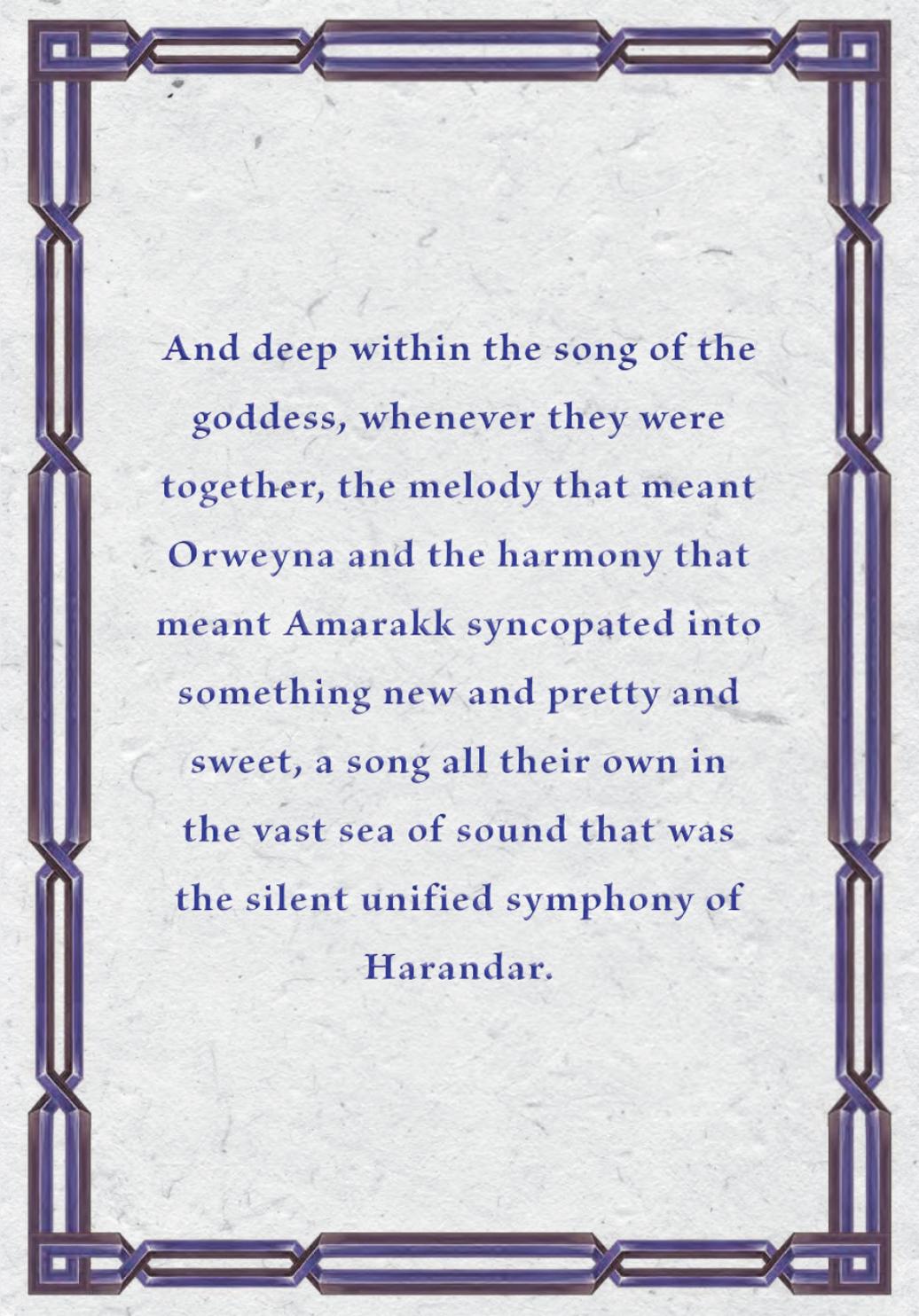
"Wait and see," Elder Hagar said with a nod. She scratched at a half-healed wart behind one long ear. "Invitations do not always arrive, on time or at all."

Elder Ruia grunted roughly. "Time will prove me right. Weeds rarely grow into flowers. Merely larger weeds."

Elder Hagar reported this conversation to the little urchins within the hour. Hagar did not believe in speaking of others in secret. *All conversation relating to ourselves belongs to us, sooner or later. Sooner if we are present to hear it, later, and much in need of mending, if we have it only once it has passed through many hands. Why not save time and speak only once, as plain and honest as the dirt on your noses?*

Amarakk snapped that he would *so* become a flower almost in the same moment Orweyna smirked and declared that she would be the most powerful weed Harandar had ever seen, just you wait.





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“Besides,” Amarakk sniffed. “What do grown-ups do that’s so great?”

“Work. Die,” Orweyna mumbled darkly and stormed out of Hagar’s chambers.

That was all she knew grownfolk were capable of for certain, because that was the only thing she remembered her parents doing. Not in noble battle or protecting kin either. Just gone in half a gasp. A sudden rooffall they hadn’t time to see or hear before it buried them deep.

Amarakk made a face and chased after his friend, hollering that not everything was about her. Hagar shook her head. He always ran after her. Probably always would. Once Amarakk caught her, Orweyna spun round giggling, all darkness forgotten. She punched him in the arm until he admitted everything *was* about her, and also that he was a burlbrain with stupid-shaped ears.

Such are children. Such is childhood.

But Amarakk and Orweyna never argued, or at least, Amarakk never won. They tried their best not to work at much at all. And neither of them had one single intention of dying, then or ever.

Other haranir children were only occasionally acknowledged; grown haranir interested them little. Their rules, not at all. The pair raced together through the long dream of childhood. Though he had some few years over hers, it made no difference. Orweyna, very generously, did not hold her dear friend’s advanced and decrepit age against him.

Perhaps it was inevitable. After all, if either of them on their own had shown any capacity to behave, to do as they were so gently and so often told, to go along, get along, or play along, Orweyna and Amarakk never would’ve met. Elder Hagar never did have very much use for sweet, compliant children who make no trouble. She never was one herself. She made it her quiet purpose to take the seedlings nobody else could coax to set down roots.

Thus, to be the troublemakers among Hagar’s pupils, one must make outstanding trouble indeed.

Hagar tried, she did. But there wasn’t very much hope of making these two behave. Not once they were breathing the same air, answering the same questions before anyone else had a chance, eating the same tubers and nectar every day, suffering

through *the same infinite wasteland between grown-up enough to argue and grown-up enough to win.*

And what's worse—they were *clever*. Cleverer than the others. What they did not know already, the crescendo of the goddess booming in their hearts told them at full volume. That was the first problem. The second was that they *knew* it. And even though they were closer than two leaves on one vine, Amarakk couldn't stop trying to show off for Orweyna. Nor could Orweyna stop herself trying to one-up the older boy. That was the third problem. And the fourth.

But the fifth problem? Not even the strongest warrior with the strongest sword and a shield shining like the Cradle itself could go to battle with it and hope to emerge victorious.

Because when two children have a secret between them, there's no room for adults to squeeze their serious, safe, sensible ideas in. And Amarakk and Orweyna's secret was a big one. An utterly delicious one. *Far* too big, and *far* too delicious, for two hands. You needed at *least* four.

"Amarakk," she whispered to him while Hagar told tiny little fat-checked Hannan that if he kept arguing with her she'd make his tongue fly out of his face and onto her fishhook as bait, "if you really think about it, it's actually *a waste* to listen to Hagar lecture us about the ancestors when there's a *whole* other *world* up there."

"Shh," Amarakk hissed back. "You want to end up tongueless?"

Orweyna could see it in his eyes; he was calculating the likelihood that Elder Hagar could actually pull off the thing with the tongue and the fishhook. She was *very* tall and strong and mysterious, after all. Amarakk always thought things through just a little longer than Orweyna. Just a little more anxious. Just a little less certain.

But she knew better than to believe Elder Hagar's bluster. Even though many in the village called her Elder Hagar, Orweyna was perhaps the only one who knew another side to her. She was akin to a grandmother—adopted, anyway. Not that it mattered, day over night over day. She never treated Orweyna differently than her other charges. *Our ways are our ways. We are all one. No one more important than the other.* And, she thought to herself, if Elder Hagar had the power to magically separate a child's wagging tongue from their head, she'd have done it to Orweyna long before then, twice on holidays, and a third time if the tongue looked particularly funny to her.



The one unfailing way to make Orweyna do something was for Amarakk to insist she couldn't possibly. And the sure path to Amarakk springing into action was for his younger friend to tease that the action in question was far too unsafe for someone so little. They made a game of it in those days, especially when one felt the burn of the other's desire but knew they could not quite put away the fear at the bottom of their hearts to try on their own.

He knew that. He'd always known. After everything, some part of Orweyna's heart still thought they'd been playing.

"Stop being such a mushroom," she hissed. "We escape after the meal. Hide behind the root that looks like a serpent's skull. Bring as many berries as you can. And a flask of fresh water. And pruning shears. Swipe some chanterelles if Ney'leia doesn't *snuuuurf* them all up in half a hiccup."

"And what will you bring?"

"Courage, Sir Scaredy-Skipper," the haranir girl whispered, and winked, and wheedled. "Since you left yours at home."

Shadows moved in Amarakk's young eyes. "Is that so," he said quietly.

Orweyna flushed with shame.

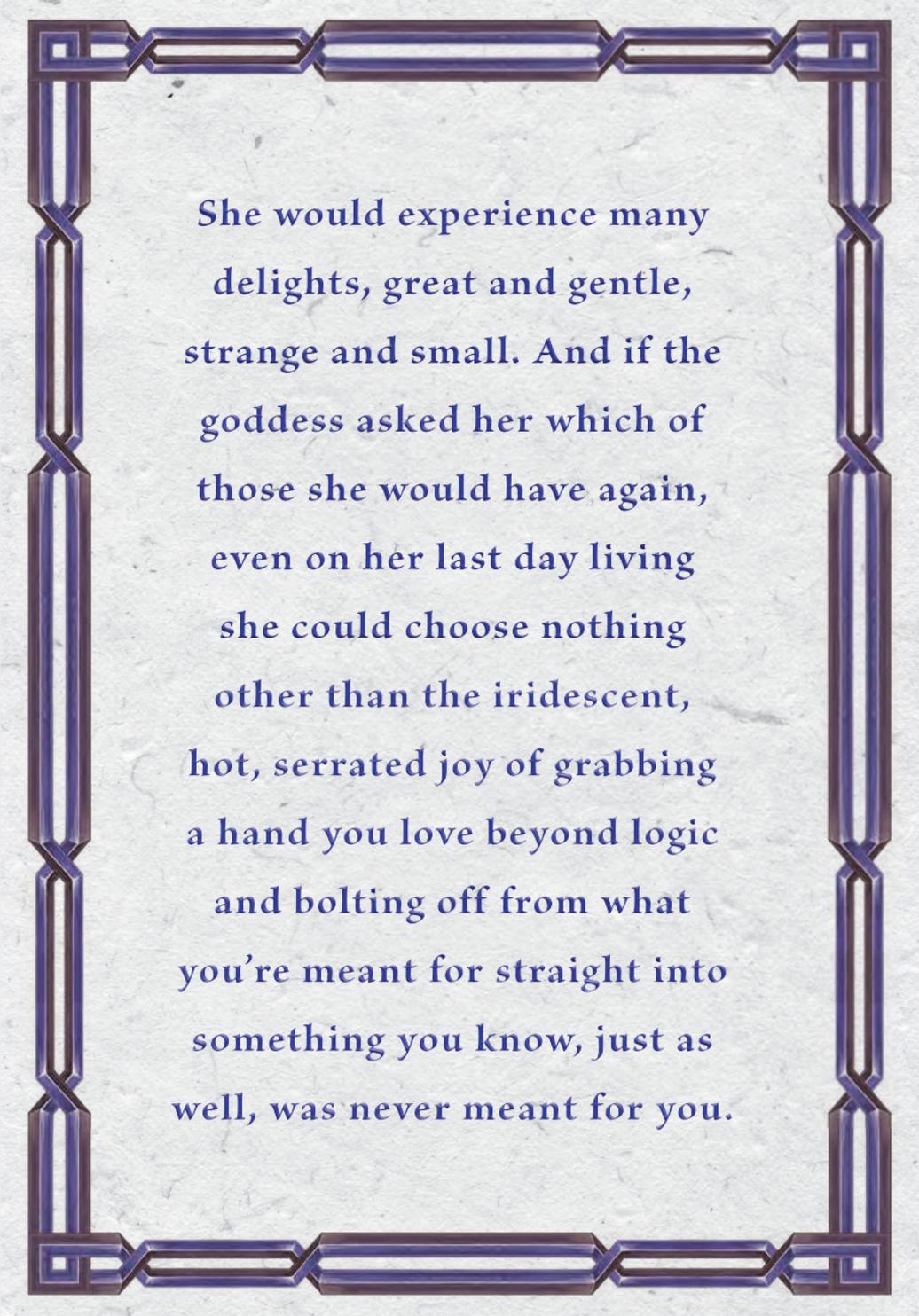
"That was one time," she mumbled. "Okay, two. And anyway, I vowed never to abandon you again. *Never*. So there."

Orweyna would not stay little. No one does. She would grow less reedy, less unkempt, whether weed or flower. She would experience many delights, great and gentle, strange and small. And if the goddess asked her which of those she would have again, even on her last day living she could choose nothing other than the iridescent, hot, serrated joy of grabbing a hand you love beyond logic and bolting off from what you're meant for straight into something you know, just as well, was never meant for you.

There wasn't really a whole other world.

It was the surface she meant—the place their people had come from long ago, until they'd followed the song of the goddess here. And Orweyna had learned there was magic to reach it.

But the surface was forbidden, a place no haranir was permitted to go, let alone two scrape-kneed children. As Orweyna conjured the magic between the great roots of



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Teldrassil, vines and roots sprouted from the ground, so close and tight together they almost became walls, great braids of emerald and sapphire and gold. A portal appeared in the tangle, and as they stepped through, the ground rose up and up and away from their world, into someplace *else*.

“Orweyna! Can you hear it?”

“Hear what?”

“Try!”

“I *am* trying, Amarakk, you empty nutshell. What am I meant to hear?”

“Her. *Her!* The goddess, singing!”

“I always hear that. Don’t be boring.”

“But it’s so loud! I’ve never heard it so loud, not ever in my life! And so strange, so melancholy and complicated. Aln’hara feels something about what lies beyond the portal. Or about us. Or about herself doing this thing with us.”

Orweyna wriggled her shoulders and stretched her neck through. Amarakk grinned and arched his back, spread his toes in the dark. Then, they had only begun to learn the edges of their power. They couldn’t do anything big or scary, anything wild or mad, but *tiny*?

Oh, *tiny* is the kingdom over which every child is born master.

Amarakk grabbed Orweyna’s hand and squeezed it. She squeezed back. Between the two squeezes, two children vanished.

And tumbled into the air of that other world. With a look, they changed forms: bats taking flight. Giggling, tossing their leathery wings and plump bellies, knocking into one another to prove their prowess, darting and dancing up into the light.

Light. Real light. Not the Cradle. Not the lovely dim stained-glass gloaming that had softly held them every moment of their lives. Light. Light everywhere. So hard and bright it blew out the pupils of their little eyes and sent them blindly careening into the dizzying clouds.

Clouds. Neither Amarakk nor Orweyna knew the word to mean anything but steam off hot stew or curls spilling out of an elder’s pipe. But as their vision slowly returned, it seemed the right thing to call the great slow white puffs moving through the impossibly blue, impossibly brilliant, impossibly pretty air.

Sky. They only knew that word from Elder Hagar's stories, or the paintings in the sacred cave.

The song of the goddess still moved in them. Humming, beating, thumping, sighing in their heads, singing still of the Cradle's light and the animals' cries and the quiet growing below. But now the goddess sang of something new, of the hot, fast, yellow-and-blue songs in this new territory. Of a new rhythm. *Up, up,* it seemed to say. *Up is the only way to put all in place as it ought to be. Up, my children. UP.*

Yes, on the other side of the rootway was another place. A place nothing like Harandar. A place where light didn't come from the glow of tangling roots but a ball of fire burning down the sky, as it did in the old legends. Where the alien colors out of song and poem burned your eyes so fierce you'd see glowing, ragged afterimages for hours and the sounds made your ears throb. Sounds that were sometimes called thunder. Sometimes hoofbeats. Sometimes birdsong.

Sometimes the gnash of metal against metal.

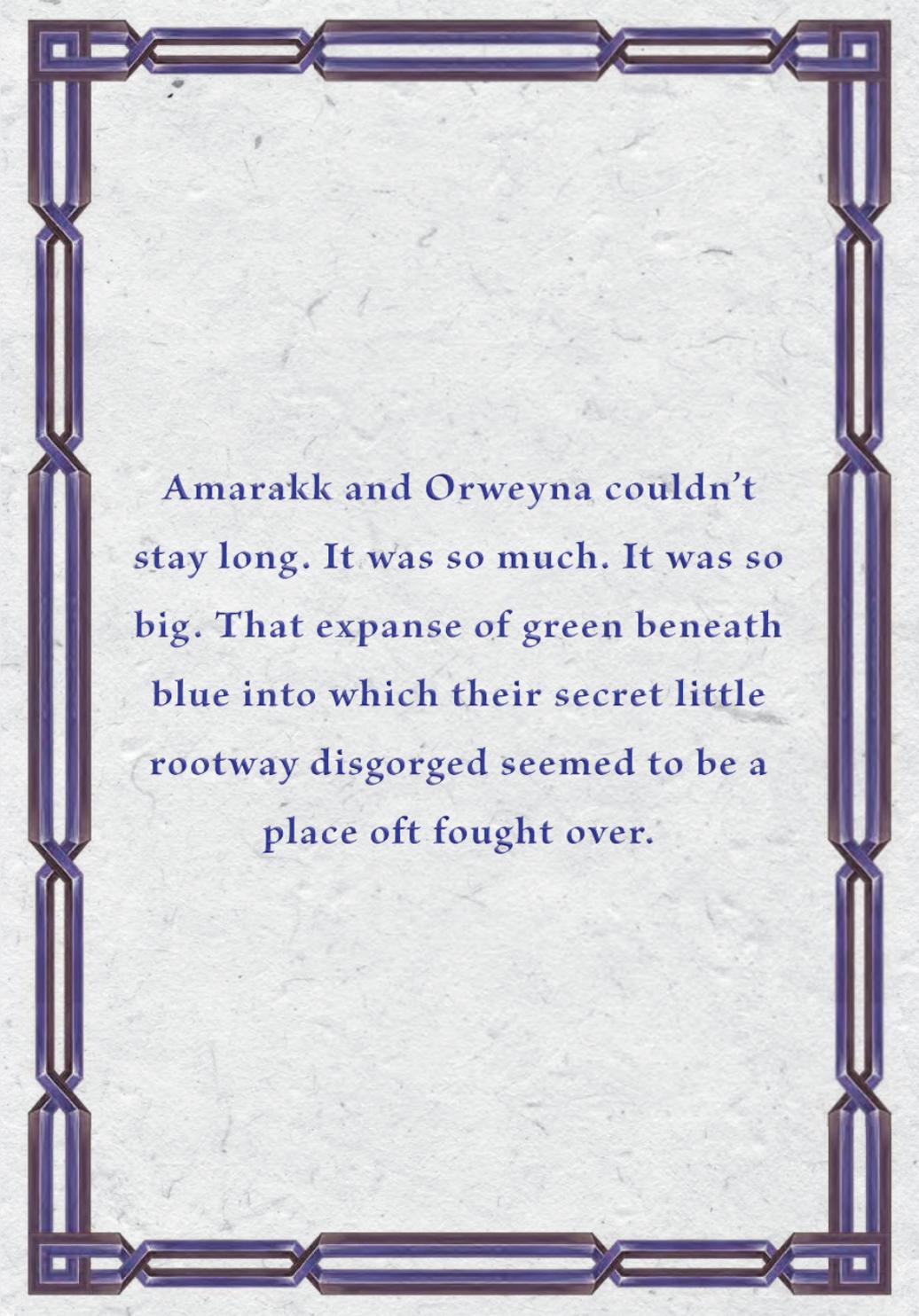
And sometimes screams.

Amarakk and Orweyna couldn't stay long. It was so much. It was so big. That expanse of green beneath blue into which their secret little rootway disgorged seemed to be a place oft fought over. Huge beasts barreling across the plain, with other huge beasts atop them, swinging silver-and-white branches that flashed in the boiling light and clanged horribly against one another when the beasts collided, bellowing words the children barely understood—and one repeated most often:

Azeroth! For Azeroth!

They stayed bats as long as they could, terrified to shift back. Exulting in flight. Terrified they'd never *get* back. Exulting at having escaped. When they could hold their form no longer, they swooped and bolted back through the portal down, down, and down again into the familiar and the safe.

But not so safe as they imagined.



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EARTH

After Azeroth, who could return to meditations and quiet mealtimes? Amarakk and Orweyna never could. Over time they dared each other on to more adventures above, more places not meant for them, until there was little new or exciting below, save perhaps one place.

The Vale of Mists was well known to Orweyna and Amarakk, a vast stretch of land where haranir patrolled and hunted, ensuring that any Alnscorned who escaped the adjacent Rift penetrated no farther. Such people, fierce and hard as they must be, might camp the Vale to rest, to dress wounds, to feast at the end of their exertion, to drink to lost friends, to remember what they defended and preserved with their own blood and blood they held dearer than that.

But to the tumbling, wild haranir children, it seemed as vast and frightening and thrilling and serious and fascinating and endlessly beckoning as a teeming metropolis. A maze of flowerlights and fog snarled enough to lose one's way quickly and find it again only with wits and speed. A place for a child to try herself against.

Meet me. Meet me in the mists.

But nothing on the Rift's edge is good for growing things. They ran first through the Den when they turned their attention there, hiding and haggling and sneaking and listening through the green cliffs and violet shadows, the black snaking roots and the cave mouth that opened below onto silver-gold mists. But when you hide and haggle and sneak, sometimes, *sometimes* adulthood finds you before you are ready.

There are things in the Rift. It is impossible to describe the Alnscorned by comparing them to other animals, other people, other monsters. They are more than broken, more than misshapen—they were never meant to *be* at all. They come from the Rift of Aln, crawling nightmares.

Impossible bodies. Unbodies. Conglomerations of anatomies that could never work together except to produce unending agony: lungs that connect to stomachs, flowers and fruits bursting with claws, teeth, a thousand malevolent eyes. Butterfly

bones carrying the weight of minotaur muscles, hearts that pump wind and flame and green sap into gasping dry veins meant only for blood. Flesh that hates itself. Gulping for air, breathing only pain. And all of them born starving, bottomlessly ravenous, no matter how much they eat.

Most die days or weeks after birth.

The ones that last are worse.

And some of these escape.

Playing in the fog, daring Amarakk to find her, Orweyna ran far beyond the sight of the Den before she quite knew where she was. Mist hides distance, depth, danger.

A voice came slicing out of the gray. A metallic bellow-screech of fury. Unwholesome, un-haranir, un-anything. Orweyna stopped hard, scrabbling in the spore-puffing dust. Did she hear it first in her own ears? Or in the panicked dissonance in the song of the goddess, the unnatural shriek of notes grinding against notes that should never touch, the cry of a tiny broken part of her creation, calling out in terror and pain.

“Amarakk!” Orweyna cried in fear. She had never been truly alone, not really. Hagar, her village, her people were always close by. Even an orphan cannot truly be alone among the haranir. Now she could not even see the little spots of flowerlight atop the Den. Only gray. And the gray was full of shrieking.

Orweyna felt breath on the backs of her feet as she ran, calling out Amarakk’s name, desperate to hear an answer. She was already exhausted: climbing, shifting, clawing back down into the blessed dark, and all with barely a morsel in her mouth since she wakened. In the clinging mist she collided with the curl of a root arcing up out of the stone, strong and straight and hard—but no, not a root at all but Amarakk, who grabbed her tight and held on like a thing drowning. For a moment they thought they could simply outrun the mist and whatever stalked within it. Find their way out alone, as they always had, out of anything. But the Alnscorened are not true flesh. They are not bound by the laws of foot, earth, momentum, blood, and air moving through meat. It was so close. Almost inside them, like their own breath.

Amarakk dragged her onward, blind as a bat in the light. But Orweyna was younger. Her legs a little shorter. Her lungs a little smaller. Her fear bigger than the ache of running.

The thing that found them in the Vale was not so big. Later, they would both admit that. Even they had heard tales of un-beasts much more gargantuan and starving. But they were children then. They saw as children see.

Not so big, but faster than dreaming.

It caught Amarakk's heel in its mouth with pure ease. Then his calf. And in that moment, with the other half of the song of the goddess in the razor-mouth of pure insanity, Orweyna did not see a poor feral animal little bigger than a wildcat. She did not see a starving beast who'd scented meat for the first time in its whole cursed existence.

She saw a giant. A mass of writhing needle-teeth lengthening inside a rose of flesh, a long body of luminous skin and shimmering, slick, oily light coating freakish angles, claws carving their way out of a shattered spine while the horrid thing scabbled for purchase on Amarakk's shin bone, clawing clumsily forward like a child trying to walk on its eyelids. She saw the death that came for her people given form, given life, given hunger, and come at last for the only person left she couldn't lose.

The Alnscored cried out. Amarakk cried out. The song in the children's heads wept and splintered.

And Orweyna *froze*. Oh, the shame of it would remain forever beyond forgetting. The brave girl froze. And so much worse, Amarakk saw her freeze. The thing had his foot in its ruined, churning mouth-face. His eyes locked with hers, and in their depths, disappointment tolled its awful bell.

Amarakk stopped screaming. The lovely mischievous amber glint in his eyes flickered out. He slumped down to the earthen floor of the thicket and began to weep like the child he truly was then, big hitching sobs of fear and despair. He didn't even call for his friend. What was the point? Orweyna's courage had been laid bare. Nothing but a lie and a boast to get out of her lessons. She stood still as stone and watched the best person in the world give up. She could almost hear him say it, the truth, the real truth:

If you have only Orweyna between you and ruin, you have nothing between you and ruin.

The beast began to feed.

It closed its eyes and moaned in a kind of pleasure as it swallowed Amarakk's blood. Screams only sent her back into her own nightmares. But the sudden quiet broke Orweyna's stillness.



She leapt onto the claw-spined back of the Alnscorned wretch and squeezed her eyes shut. She kept those eyes crunched, smarting, colors shooting in the dark—and stabbed her dagger down as she clung on desperately. It kicked, it gnashed, it spat, it slashed—but between the shoulder blades is a good place to attack most things. Orweyna carved its body apart. She felt it dying between her knees, felt it slow and whimper. She felt it give up, and when it did, she heard the song of its dying seep through the song of the goddess like cold blue ink.

Amarakk and Orweyna huddled together in the mists for what seemed like hours, trembling without words. She wanted to tell him how sorry she was. She wanted to tell him how glad she was that he lived. He wanted to tell her he was afraid, being so little and the danger so great. He wanted to tell her he was proud of her, being so bold and the danger little enough now.

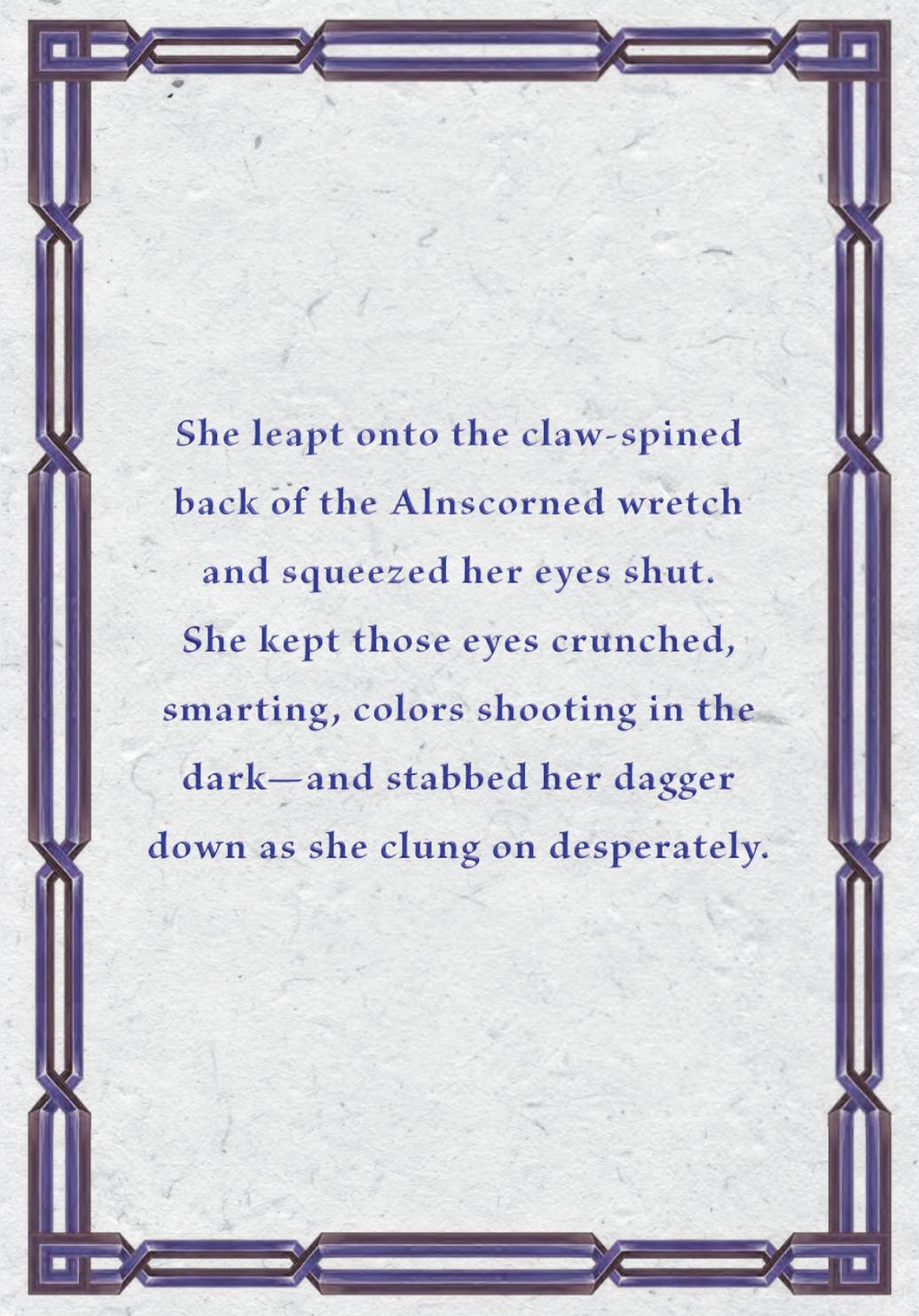
But they said none of it. They just held each other in silence. Bound his wounds with nettle and mud and whispered words to whose learning they both should've given much more effort. If they'd been more serious. If they'd been better. If they'd been more like the rest of their people, as they'd been told to be so many times.

At home, they told a kind of truth. That an Alnscorned stumbled upon them in the wilds, that Amarakk had been bitten, that Orweyna had killed it. Hagar praised them, but neither could feel the warmth of it.

And talk turns quickly among the young. To anything but pain. To the beast, how it got so far into the Vale of Mists, out of the Rift, without others seeing. The shul'ka, whose life's work lay in protecting the haranir from such creatures, were always few in number, but enough. The guards around the Rift's rim should have caught it.

Amarakk and Orweyna crept away while the others debated. They could bear being discussed no longer. They needed sleep. And they hardly understood the Elders' words through their weariness and shame.

But though her blood wept for it, Orweyna could not rest. She went to Amarakk's chambers. His heart did not even know how to be closed to her. She sat at the foot of his bed. She stroked his bandaged ankle gently, like a little pet waiting for attention. He gave none.



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and squeezed her eyes shut.

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“Fine,” Orweyna said. “Be a stone, if you like. I will be water. I will be patient.”

She put her little gift next to his scholar’s hand, wrapped in a long blue-golden leaf. “You will crack when you will crack. I will always come for you. This I swear on the song of the goddess and my own green soul.”



At the morning meditation, Orweyna could see her apology glinting in the folds of Amarakk’s tunic: a rough amulet hewn of the hard black stone that covered the land they’d first glimpsed on the surface. So they’d remember always where they came from. Where their bond arose. She’d carved a design on it with the same blade she’d used to kill the beast, then stained the furrow with pigments she stole from the zur’ashar and her own blood. A simple shape—the shape of the portal away from their home through which the place called Azeroth shone.

Still, for days after, they hardly spoke to each other. Even the other children began to show distress at their distance. Little Hannan burst into tears and tried to drag their hands together, to clasp them under the table like they’d always, always done. He was so tiny, the youngest of all. He didn’t say anything. He just stuck Amarakk and Orweyna’s hands together like two parts of a broken tool and stared up at them, his huge eyes shimmering with tears.

Amarakk and Orweyna *must* be closer than two braided vines, or else what could be relied on?

They could bear their own pain, but not Hannan’s. They laced their fingers together with practiced ease and forced smiles for him.

His face glowed. Theirs did not. But some glow would come again, with time.

Orweyna did not know then that through those days when they could not look each other in the eye, Amarakk’s thoughts grew heavier and heavier with guilt.

For if she froze, so did he.

If she owned shame, he owned no less.

Orweyna could not even imagine such thoughts. Her silence had another root. She did not speak for days on end because she could not forget the dying whimper of

the Alnscored. It played in her head over and over, like a melody strummed on a harp that would not leave the mind.

It sounded like the whimpers of a newborn haranir babe, desperate for comforting in the dark.

The thought unsettled Orweyna. For that creature was the first thing Orweyna ever truly killed with her own hand.



LIGHT

Days passed.

Weeks. Then months. Then still more days and nights and months, all spent in the clutch of wild children like spotted mushrooms round Hagar's feet. Studying, feasting, escaping, spying, returning under cover of flowerlight and whispers. Growing like vine flowers, each night opening wider, vining longer, sending tendrils and shoots into the long future ahead. Chasing their little golden secret trips to the world of Azeroth through the rootways. Telling each other a hundred thousand tales of the people who must live there, the lives they must lead, the battles they must fight against glorious foes, the songs they must sing and the loves that must make their hearts beat as fast as any haranir's.

Uneasiness faded quickly. At least Orweyna thought it did. At least her own. The song of the window into Everywhere Else pulled her so that it eclipsed all other thought. Even little Hannan began to forget that she and Amarakk had ever pried their hands apart.

The day of the Ceremony approached on little feet. The haranir coming-of-age. When they would enter the Den of Remembrance and see the living paintings of their people's deep memory with their own eyes. Not only hear the goddess's song but see before them in brilliant colors the fate she'd folded away for each one in particular in the baskets of time before the world began. When they would meet, for the first time, the people they would soon become.

Oh, the excitement in Hagar's hut then! The goddess never lied. Not to the haranir, her most special children. If one dreamt of a life as a mother, the cries of healthy babies would be the songs of all her days. If one saw on the walls of the great den long days painted in greenleaf and red liquors, the stain of tinctures and medicines on their fingertips as they nursed the dying, the careful tending of the herbalist's garden lay waiting and ready for them. Amarakk's father said he'd seen himself swimming in a sea of branches and vines—and no hands, no matter how deft, could braid or shape circlets and pauldrons and signets so fine as his. Hagar snorted and harrumphed that she'd dreamt of swimming in a sea of ungrateful brats with snot bubbles for brains—and her clever hands made all these haranir.

The Ceremony is the singular moment the goddess looks into a young haranir's deepest being and recognizes it with gladness.

Hannan was too young yet, but Ney'leia and Kai'shae and Orweyna could hardly breathe for waiting. They ate nothing for three days to honor Aln'hara's pain and loss. They washed their feet in the streams, to come before her unshod as the day of their births.

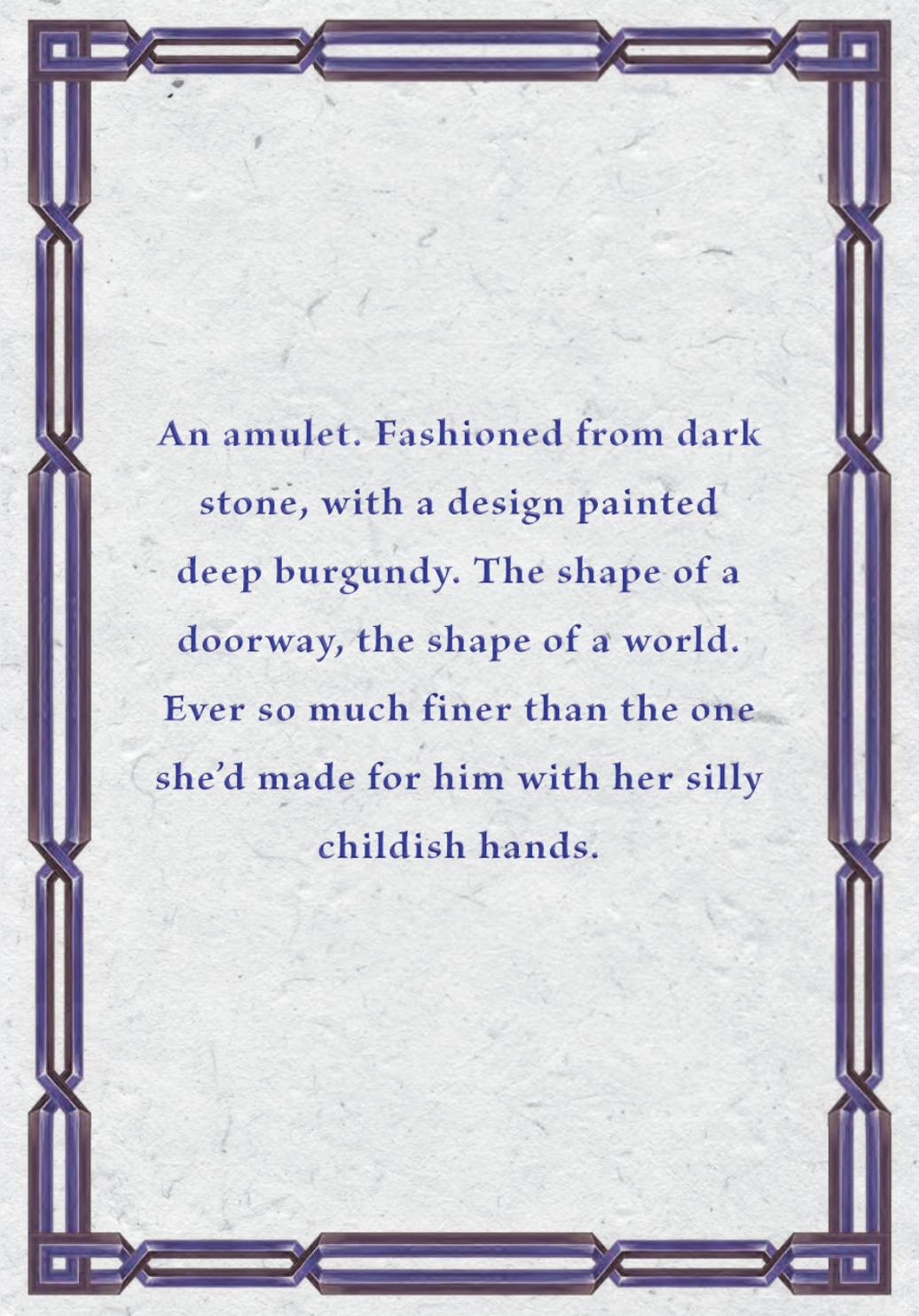
Amarakk came running toward his friend over the dew-tipped grass the morning of the Ceremony. He caught Orweyna up, away from the others as they drifted into the hut Hagar had prepared for weeks, shy and suddenly almost handsome in his long green cloak. Suddenly, after all this time.

"You'll make us late!" Orweyna laughed. Morning Cradlelight splattered the land like fresh paint.

"Are you going to claim to care? Because I have a present for *Orweyna*. And *Orweyna* is *never* on time. Have you seen her around? Better get going, you wouldn't want to be *late*—"

"Oh, stop it. I thought I might *try* punctuality just this once, for the occasion. See if it fits. Where's my present?"

Amarakk took something from the folds of his stiff new cloak, still smelling of his mother's care. All in half a moment, he tied it round her neck, kissed her cheek, whispered in her ear, and bolted off, so that he would not be there to blush when she saw what it was.



An amulet. Fashioned from dark
stone, with a design painted
deep burgundy. The shape of a
doorway, the shape of a world.
Ever so much finer than the one
she'd made for him with her silly
childish hands.

An amulet. Fashioned from dark stone, with a design painted deep burgundy. The shape of a doorway, the shape of a world. Ever so much finer than the one she'd made for him with her silly childish hands. He'd traced the ripples and eddies in the stone's hard surface in dyes from his father's workshop. Orweyna ran her fingers over it. Tomorrow they would not be children ever again. Tomorrow life began. Amarakk's shy whisper echoed in her ear.

Where we go, we go together.

Orweyna walked through the great stone slabs leading into the Den of Remembrance beside her friends. They entered an earthen cavern, the walls hung with dried flowers and garlands of citrus. Hannan sat proudly in the corner and hummed a melody every few minutes to center the older haranirs' minds and keep them tethered to this world. A very sacred duty.

Each haranir walked through the great quiet cave, not quite daring to run their fingers over the images glowing there. They listened to the regular hum of Hannan's singing, the deep and even breathing of everyone who mattered to them. Orweyna listened for the goddess singing in her heart, looking for the tune that could be her own, finding little but a quiet humming. Eventually, Hagar's light snoring as she leaned against the wall joined the hum like a countermelody.

What if it's wrong for us? Orweyna thought. *What if all this turns sour?*

The truth settled into her chest. Amarakk watched keenly, his brow unwrinkled, his eyes searching. Orweyna gazed at him, knowing nothing could be the same now. *You could never be sour, old friend. But I am. I am. Like everything else, what comes natural as walking to every haranir is beyond my grasp. I should've known.*

Orweyna did not find her image on the wall. It simply came to her. Not on the wall, but in her mind. And before she knew it, her hands had plunged deep into Zur'ashar Kassameh's dyes and she was painting her future with her own fingers.

The long roots of Teldrassil—and other, perhaps greater trees besides, if such a thing could ever be—curling around her, thick and glossy and alive, tendrils of pale yellow and green and blue spiraling out of them. Serpents of wood and sap and deep time. Like great, strong arms, like a father's arms, lifting her up, up, farther up still. Like

a mother's long hair trailing across her child's forehead. The air crackled and sparked with giggling green, with innocent power never yet used.

She painted herself rising in the cradling roots. Up. So far. So impossibly far—unless the Orweyna on the cave wall meant to break through, as the Orweyna painting the wall had. To another place. Other colors. Other light. The song in her mind was simple and perfect and true and right. She painted her heart on the wall, soft and yielding as moss. The heart lay flayed open. No blood welled, no bones cracked. Orweyna was moss. Orweyna was earth. Orweyna was light and water. And out of her came everything, oh, everything that ever took breath in Harandar. Great and small, pouring out of her, midwived only by delight. The lowing potatoads, the groaning great roots growing, the Cradle's light, leaves sprouting and falling, fungus and fireflies, the wail of the dying, the cries of life itself and the idea of that cycle, fruits and mushrooms and rainclouds. Hagar. Her parents, alive and whole. Amarakk.

In the painting, in her song and her waking dream, Orweyna gave them all life but lost nothing in the giving. The more they took, the more she had. All the while roots and rootways lifted her up and away.

There are nights now, in the places Orweyna has wandered, when she holds her frozen hands out, not to the flames of a traveler's fire, but to the memory of that moment. Its perfect rest and safety. Its colors and its sound. That for a moment, she was simple and good and nothing could touch her but light.

Then it was gone. It was gone.

Only the painting remained.

But when Orweyna woke from her trance, became aware of the world beyond her painting, she found no one by her side. Only dark air. Amarakk's slab of cave bore a dark, violent image. A world of death and pain Orweyna could not bear to look at.

Amarakk was gone.



HEAT

“Where is he?” Orweyna bellowed at Hagar like a feral creature. “What have you done?”

“I’ve done nothing and you know it, child.” Hagar sighed heavily. “If he does not wish to be found, he will not be found, just as you would not, if you did not. And stop your caterwauling—your voice makes my back hurt.” She hung a heavy gourd over the flowerlight and rubbed her hairy eyebrows with her fingertips.

“You *do* know, though,” she hissed, more quietly. “It’s been weeks. Longer. You won’t tell me. You’re keeping him from me!”

“By Aln’hara’s groans, you are *exhausting*. Of course I know. So do you, if only you could stop being angry long enough to reason anything through. But you never do, you just swing and flail at everything around you and hope something falls over and makes itself obvious. Amarakk has his own path, just as you do.”

“Of course he does!”

“And he has gone to begin his life, as the others have. Leaving me to my other charges, every one of which annoys me less than you.”

“But he hasn’t! I have gone to every hut, every one. I even went—” Orweyna stopped herself in time. The empty thicket where Orweyna would open a rootway for them in secret. When she was alone with Hagar, it was so easy to slip up. But their secret escapades were all she had of him now. “No one has taken a new apprentice,” she finished quickly.

Hagar lifted her eyes to the ceiling. “I spent my store of patience on this world long before you were born, girl. Not a drop left for your nonsense. Where did he go, then, little sprout? If Amarakk is nowhere, where is Amarakk?”

Orweyna’s heart crumbled in on itself. “No. *No*. That’s impossible. He’d never do it. It’s obscene. It’s repulsive.”

Elder Hagar poured for herself—and none for Orweyna. She never got tea when she was slow at her lessons. “What it *is* is a great honor, child. Shul’ka Amarakk has gone into the Rift to protect us. He will return when he returns.”

Orweyna felt sick. Amarakk had mutilated himself forever. And gone into the one place she could never follow.

“Orweyna,” Hagar said sharply. The mist from her tea circled her eyes like strange new hair. “I find it so curious that in all this panic and rage, you have never once asked me what the paintings meant for *you*. You’ve just punched holes in my walls and lain about all day like a child who’s been punished. What about *your* life? What about *your* place? Childhood friendship will not feed or clothe you.”

“I don’t have to ask,” she snapped. “I know what she wants of me.” *And I cannot tell you where the uplifting roots wish me to go, she thought silently. Go far enough up, and there is only one place that could be meant.*

Hagar turned her head to one side, regarding her adopted granddaughter coolly, as if she’d never seen her before that moment. “How fascinating.” She took a long sip and grimaced at the taste. Tossed the dregs out. “I thought so too, when I was young.”

Orweyna knew she should have asked her. Should have had a thought for her, a thought for herself. But she shoved her chair back and stormed toward the door. She was always rude.

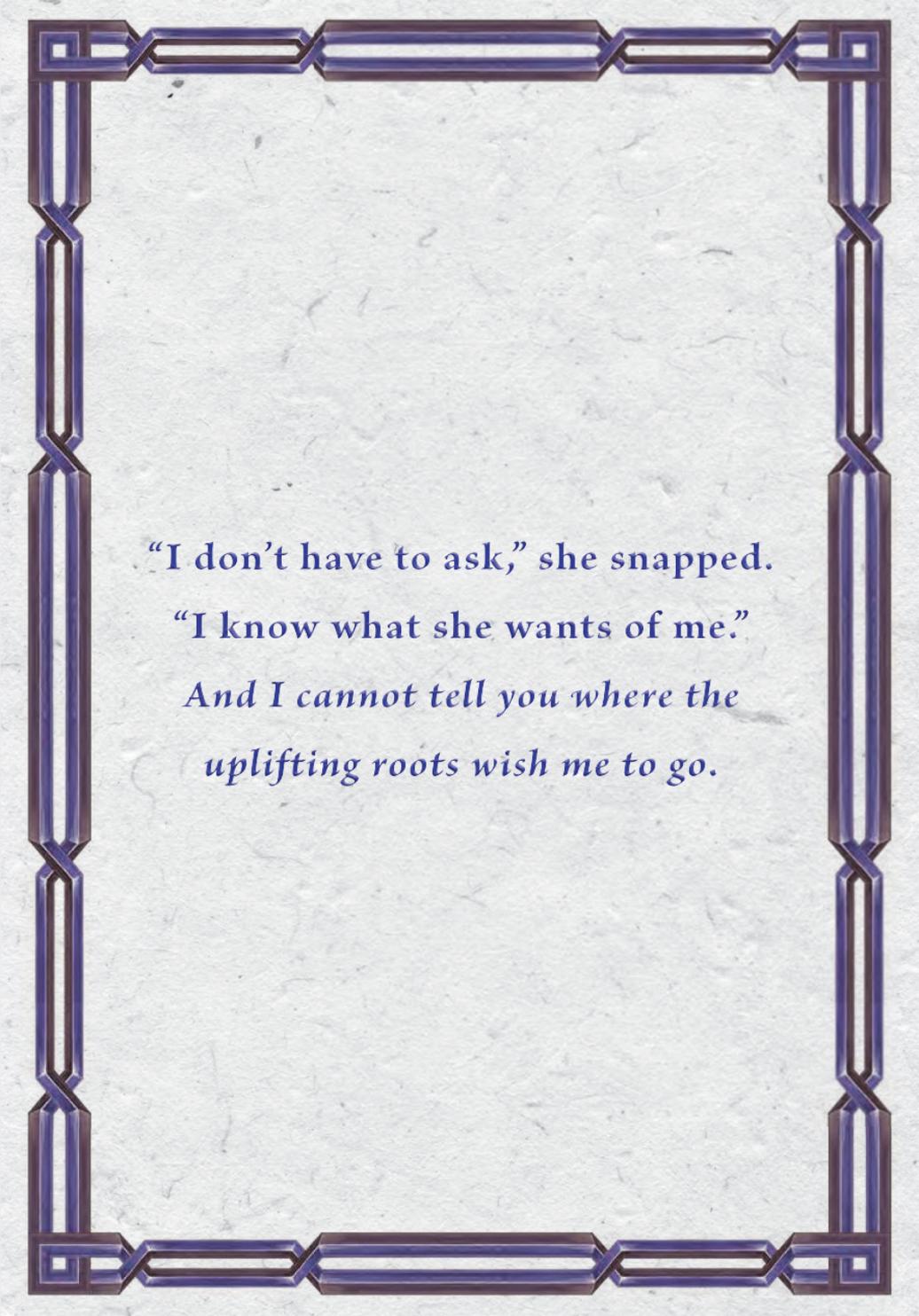
“Go and see a rutaani named Chaaga.” Hagar sighed wearily. “Before you get your face ripped in half by an evil fish-toad for no good reason. You will find him in the Blossoming Terrace, and you will know him by the smell. Tell the old weed I will give him three bowls of *truly* obese worms if he doesn’t kill you.” She looked Orweyna over again. “Four. You are *exhausting*.”



DARKNESS

The Blossoming Terrace lay on the edge of the Vale of Mists, a great forest of luminous fuchsia and cobalt and emerald vinery, fungal towers hairy with lichen. She could almost see the Riftlight simmering blue and violet in the south.

The smell of Chaaga’s bower almost knocked Orweyna to the ground. The haranir are not entirely strangers to perfume, living among flowers and spores, but this



“I don’t have to ask,” she snapped.

“I know what she wants of me.”

*And I cannot tell you where the
uplifting roots wish me to go.*

was different. So complex and layered, so delicious and bright, somehow both spicy and delicate at once, and sweeter than memories.

“Chaaga?” Orweyna called out into the yawning caverns of color.

A resentful rumble sounded from all around.

“Is that you?”

The rumble deepened from resentful to a warning.

“Hagar has worms for you!”

The rear wall of the cavern, sunk into shadows, writhing with fireflies, moved. Moved *toward* her. The mass of flowers and leaves opened its eyes. Curling runners and thorned whips unfurled like antennae from the top of his head. The rutaani pawed one petaled hand at the soil of the earth and crooned.

Oh, she thought. Oh. Worms refine the dirt. They make it better, more nourishing. Hagar offered him a feast.

Orweyna explained everything, how she had loved Amarakk, how he’d mutilated himself and gone alone into the Rift, how she needed to find him, how little good she’d be to anyone if she lost her mind to the song of the Rift. How living so close by, he might know a way for her to follow her friend.

Chaaga pawed the ground and crooned. “Worms for a life. If this haranir seeks the Rift, this haranir seeks death. This one will not give it.”

Orweyna’s request turned to tears. “There must be a way. Hagar said four bowls of worms—*fat ones*. Please, I . . . I promised him. I promised to go where he would.”

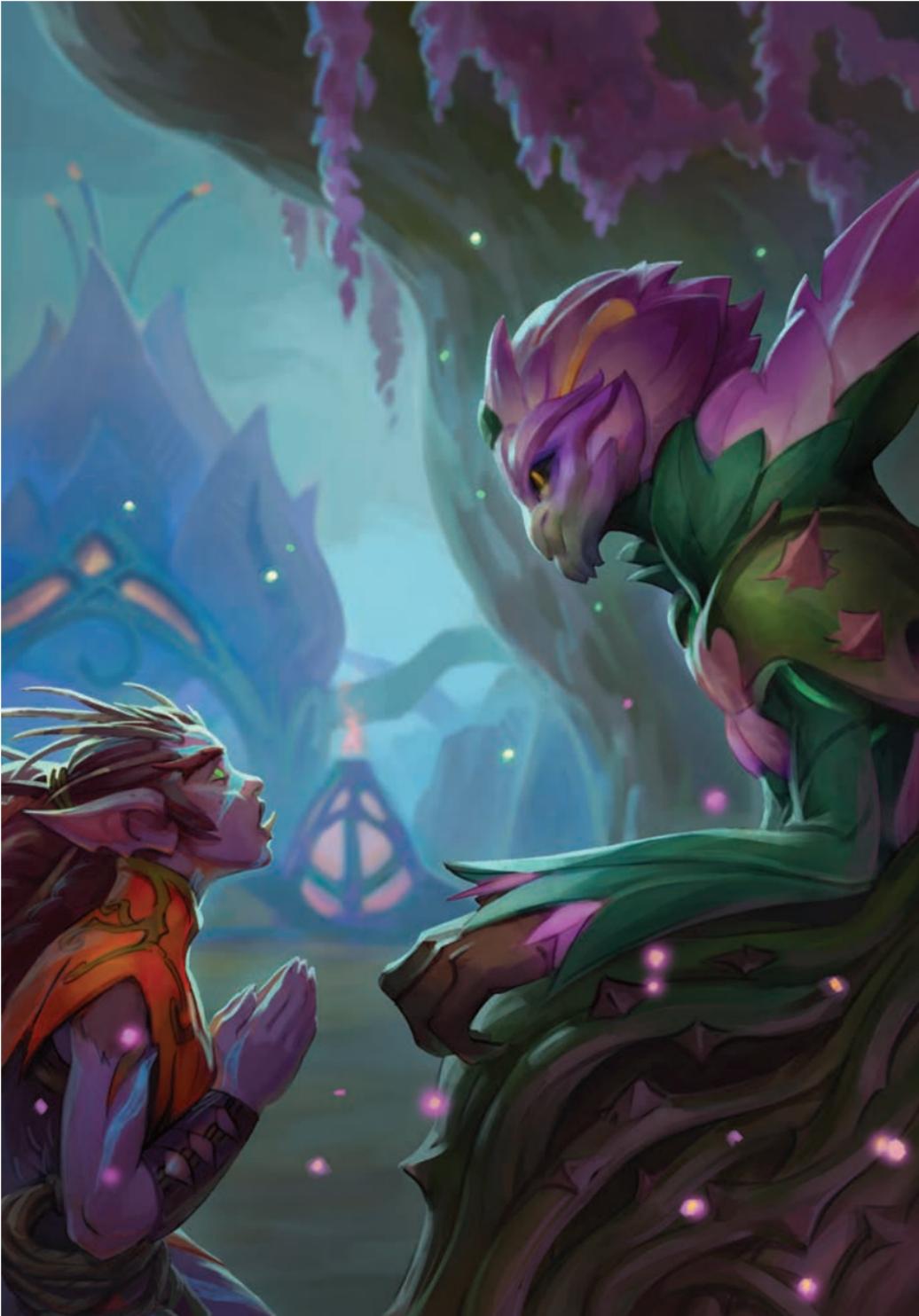
Chaaga closed his eyes again. “Plant your roots where they belong.”

If only you could ever stop being angry long enough to reason anything through.

Orweyna was not a child anymore. No one would come to dust her off and show her how to do things right, not ever again. She could *so* reason things through. The haranir held her hand over her heart. She let the sorrow inside her run wild on her face. A little slack in the rope, and it all came free.

The rutaani’s eyes blinked slowly.

Hagar was wrong. Orweyna *had* asked what the cave paintings meant for her. A hundred times, a thousand, a million. She just hadn’t asked *Hagar*. In the weeks and weeks without Amarakk, she’d asked herself over and over. She’d asked Teldrassil. And



she'd asked the goddess. But her only answer was the one she already knew, syncopated by the same steady song she'd heard every moment of her life.

Orweyna closed her eyes and began to sing it then. The goddess's song, as badly as she could sing it with her simple, singular mouth. For Chaaga. For Amarakk. For all of them. For her parents and Hagar and the poor dead beast she'd killed so long ago, too broken to even understand what was happening to it. Her song had no words, for the goddess's did not.

But when she opened her eyes, the towering rutaani was holding his brown hand out to her, low enough to reach. In his blooming palm lay two pearly seeds.

“Such pain.”

Chaaga lifted his other hand to his ear. Dropped it to his rustling side. Lifted it again.

“Plant where they block sound. Does not stop. Slows, delays.”

There *was* a way.



WATER

Orweyna did not understand.

Not even after feeling the dying gasps of one of those poor monstrosities sizzling out over her hands. Not even after Elder Hagar told them, very plainly, hundreds of times. Not after the stories told around the flowerlight, not after the paintings in the Den of Remembrance. She'd listened, as much as she listened to anything. But Orweyna still thought of the Rift of Aln as a wide and lonely place, desolate reaches of gloaming and shadow. Every now and then, perhaps once a year, perhaps less, a tragic, unspeakable beast might trudge miserably across the cursed land before being swiftly hunted and brought down by brave shul'ka.

She did not understand.

The Rift is *full*.

Orweyna heard the screams before she came near the border of the great forbidden

chasm. Inhuman, unanimal. Nothing alive could make those sounds. They were just wounds you could hear.

She hurriedly slipped Chaaga's seeds into her ears. Those screams, those screams, even in the distance, they sawed at the edges of her selfhood, hungry for the *idea* of Orweyna, for the feeling a thinking being has of who they are and who they have been. The seeds gave a little liquid shiver, like water sliding out of her ear when she finally emerged from the river after swimming and fishing all day long. Then a shrill, piercing pinch, then the blessing of silence.

Orweyna didn't know what she expected. She supposed she thought herself clever. She supposed she was proud at having reasoned it all through so well and managing to convince an overgrown hedge to help her. She supposed she thought it remotely possible to become a shul'ka without paying their price, and then merrily return to her good, real, solid life without a worry. *If this haranir seeks the Rift, this haranir seeks death.*

Orweyna felt long, alien petals with frilled points unfurl from her ears. Felt their stamens and pistils prod the air and grow in a hundred nameless colors. They shielded her from the sounds, stopped up her ears. Still she heard the goddess's old sweet song within. She just couldn't hear anything *else*.

And for a moment, Orweyna truly thought that would work just as well as the shul'kas' way. As if they would not have made a pact with the rutaani and grown ear seeds in fields by the thousands if it were such a simple thing.

The first slash of a paw bristling with thornfangs, true as a knife through the skin, revealed her foolishness in blinding color. Orweyna never even heard its footsteps. Never heard its screaming, the clang of its malevolently glimmering face as its dozen translucent jawbones churned together, cutting into the delicate skin of its own throat. Never heard its breathing as it stalked her along the shallows of the Rift, or the stones breaking under its impossible feet. Never even knew the Alnscorned was there before it was upon her, biting, clawing, vomiting ichor and worse onto her face, trying to drown her in its wreckage.

Orweyna felt its teeth crunch through the meat of her shoulder. She screamed and could not hear that either. Only the slow, sad, broken weeping of the goddess's song as pain barreled through her—it would drive her to madness in moments if the Alnscorned

didn't kill her first. The thing was bigger, much bigger, than the one she'd fought in the mists. So much bigger than the one that stalked her nightmares for years on end. Its sheer weight pinned her to the ground; its breath on her neck blistered the skin. It was just as well she could not hear her own screams over the twisted song of the goddess.

And then the weight, the stench was gone. Orweyna scrambled back, grabbed for her weapons, panting, frayed. All she saw was luminous flesh moving in the dark. All she heard was the goddess in her twisted singing, singing, singing.

Where we go, we go together.

Amarakk was on the beast's improbable back. Orweyna hardly recognized him, gaunt and strong all at once, grim, older. His mouth hung open; he was screaming too. But she could not hear him. She couldn't even hear whether he was screaming her name or in wordless rage at the beast. She couldn't hear his sword finally cut through the Alnscored's throat and paint the thicket with its remains.

All she could hear was the twisted song. An excruciating moment passed, then another.

The last thing she saw was Amarakk's eyes before the pain consumed her.

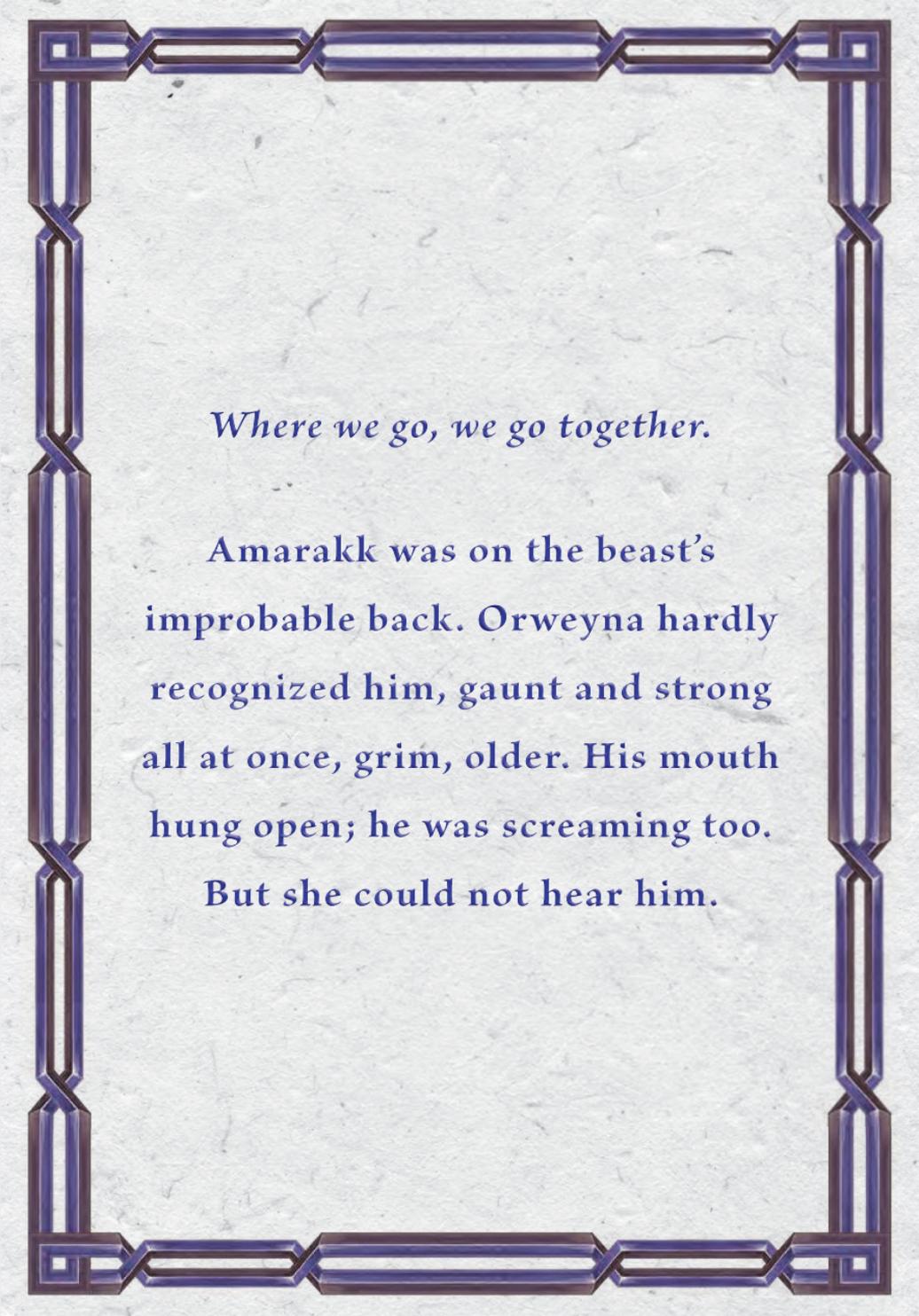


GREEN

When Orweyna blinked awake, the song of the goddess was louder than ever. She could feel it vibrating in her chest, as if trying to push out the pain that had bored through her.

Then she realized she was not alone.

The two children stood, no longer children. Never children again. Breathing heavy. Staring at each other. Orweyna's flowers wilted and dropped. She could hear again, hear the murmur of the creatures stalking, deep in the Vale of Mists. He'd brought her to an encampment of his own, a simple refuge he could journey from when he needed to. She thought bitterly how the old Amarakk would have smiled and laughed at her silly head sprouting flowers. How he'd have shared any tent he ever had with her before even himself.



Where we go, we go together.

Amarakk was on the beast's improbable back. Orweyna hardly recognized him, gaunt and strong all at once, grim, older. His mouth hung open; he was screaming too. But she could not hear him.

This Amarakk would never laugh again.

They looked into each other's eyes for a long time.

"What does it sound like?" Amarakk asked quietly. "I cannot remember. You must tell me. You owe me comfort."

Orweyna blinked back tears. "It cannot be so final. You can still catch a whisper of it. I know you can. You were always so strong. Try."

"Do you think I have not tried?"

"Just try!"

"There is nothing there *to* try. When I touch the place in my memory where it should be, I find only emptiness. Wind. Dead branches in the dark."

Orweyna would not allow herself to cry. She would do better than a child would. She would try, if he could not.

"The song of the goddess sounds like the colors of starlight. Like spring happening all at once. Like your own mother humming while she weaves a basket and fills it with fruit and the fruit growing too. It sounds like weeping and laughing and growing up, and it sounds like the feeling of your hand in mine. There. Are you comforted?"

"No, Orweyna. No, and nevermore."

"Come with me, then. Let us be together as we always were. What you've done to yourself doesn't matter. We can go, through the thicket, into the world. Make our own way there, find our fortunes."

Amarakk shook his head. She could barely see his face. "It is too late for that now. I know too much."

"You know nothing. You only suspect. You didn't even stay to ask after my fate. Mannerless behavior, if I'm honest."

"I know what I am, Orweyna. What I must be. I think I've always known, since that day in the mists. My steps could take me nowhere else. I think I spent so many hours with you because I always knew those hours would end."

"And now you will not even ask. Always staring at yourself. I am going *up*, Amarakk. Up. The roots want to carry me up. The goddess would have me rise. You know what that means. You know where a rising will end. Azeroth, Amarakk. *Azeroth!* Come with me! There is more than enough room there for us!"

“What if it’s wrong, Orweyna?”

“Don’t be stupid, Sir Scaredy-Skipper. The Ceremony is never wrong. The song plays; we dance. That is the way of us, all of us.” Orweyna’s face twisted into a grimace as she realized what she was truly saying. But she would not accept it, even out of her own lips.

“You betrayed me,” she hissed. “I could hate you, Amarakk, if I tried hard enough.”

“Try,” he answered ruefully. Almost a smile, almost familiar.

“You lied to me! You lied!” Orweyna snarled at him hopelessly. “We were one vessel, and you smashed us against a wall before we could even start to live! You always knew? I was there, Amarakk, and *no, you did not always know!*”

“I never lied to you, Orweyna. I do not lie. I cannot. Except perhaps to myself.”

“Where we go, we go together?”

Amarakk, for a moment, for the last time, had the decency to look chagrined.

“Forget the Alnscorened, you fool.” Orweyna wiped her nose on the back of her hand, sobbing openly for the last time. “*I scorn you. Me. You mutilated yourself. Don’t you miss it? Don’t you miss her?*”

Amarakk’s tusks shone furiously in the mist. “If you ask me that ever again, I will walk away from you and never return. Not once have I asked you whether you miss your parents, Orweyna. You do not get to ask me that.”

“Don’t you miss *me?*” she whispered.

But Amarakk was quiet a long while.

“Some things are more important than promises.”

“More lies! What could be more important than us? Than our lives here, growing up, growing wise, growing old in unity with our people as everyone we’ve ever known has done?”

“*Now* you want to do as everyone we’ve ever known has done? *You, Orweyna?*”

Orweyna twisted her fingers together like a little girl, broken all over again. “You were all I had. All our lives we heard the same song soaring inside us, and we never will again. Our part of the melody will never play in the great song again. And you didn’t tell me. You were just gone. You didn’t even sing me goodbye.”

“Some things are more important than goodbyes.”

“Then tell me. Tell me, Amarakk. What is more important than your oath and your honor?”

Amarakk howled into the endless mist. A howl of agony from his bones to his throat. “*You*. You, Orweyna! And my mother and my father and Hagar and Hannan and everyone, every single haranir. To keep *you* safe, there is no oath I would not break, and honor feeds no one, least of all the dead. I saw it happen. I dreamed it alive. I saw you all dead and torn apart; I saw Harandar bleed. And I could stop it. All I had to do was give up everything!”

In the echoing quiet, Orweyna’s response was swift:

“I cannot forgive you, Amarakk.”

“I cannot forgive *you*, Orweyna. I am glad you have adventure waiting for you in the sun. A grand mission from the goddess. I see it light your veins. But my place is in the shadows.”

“What do I need forgiving for? I did not mutilate myself without a word. I did not make myself an oathbreaker.” But there was little fight left in her words. She had already lost, and she knew it.

Amarakk tried to take her hand. Orweyna yanked it back.

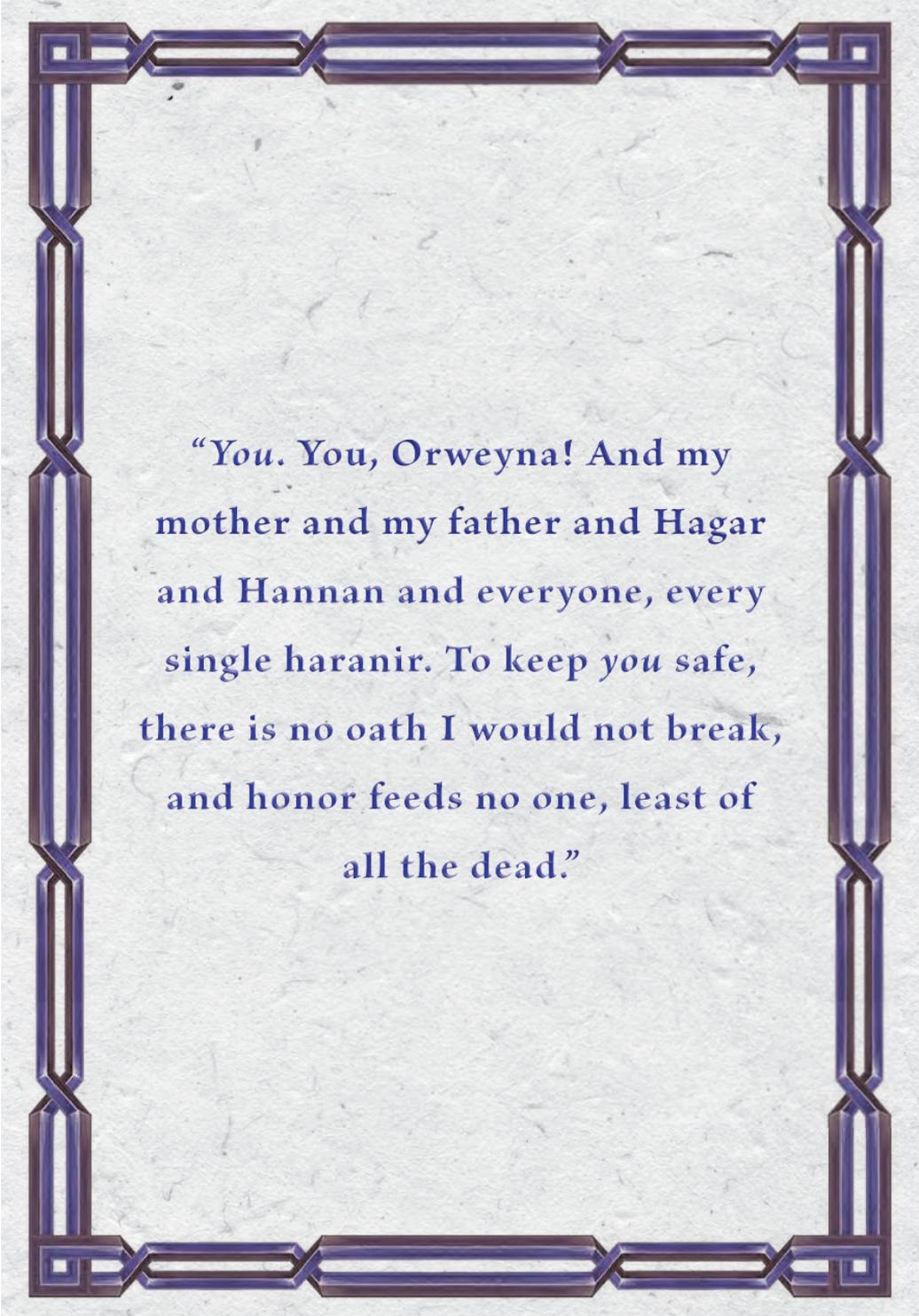
Amarakk’s expression turned bitter. “You could not let me go, old friend. In your arrogance, you placed your judgment before the goddess’s. You did not believe I could survive without you. Because you saved me once and thought I could not be my own man without your help. That day, in this place, in the mists, that was *your* victory, but it took something from me. And you never guessed my shame. Only thinking of your triumph. Staring at yourself.”

“I said I would never abandon you again. *Nothing* is more important than promises. I did not break mine. I too had visions; I too painted my wall. I wanted to tell you. But you were gone.”

“What did you see?”

“I moved inside her. I moved *as* her. I *was* her. Aln’hara, stolen from innocence. Stolen from herself. And if I woke from that vision, Amarakk, if the nightmare ended for me, perhaps it can end for her too. Perhaps I can reason it through. Perhaps I can





“You. You, Orweyna! And my mother and my father and Hagar and Hannan and everyone, every single haranir. To keep you safe, there is no oath I would not break, and honor feeds no one, least of all the dead.”

save her. Perhaps the way is up there. In Azeroth. Where the sun shines. Or else why would the goddess send me a dream of her own pain?"

"I hope you find a way, Orweyna. I truly do. May the song follow you all your days."

"But you will not."

"But I will not."

Orweyna could hear in the song of the goddess his agony and grief, his conflict, the way his vision possessed him and would not release its hands from the throat of his future unless he followed it true. She pitied him; she mourned for him. In time, she would have forgiven him, no matter her words.

But he could not hear her pain in the song of the goddess. Not anymore. He could not hear Orweyna's heart, her dream, her reasons, her anger, her guilt, her loneliness, her despair. Her loss of him.

They simply stood there, in the wreckage of their youth, alone and separate in their own heads, soundlessly raging at one another, accusing and defending. A basket with one handle now, and that handle frayed and near breaking.

They understood each other all the same. They always had.

"Sir Scaredy-Skipper," Orweyna whispered. "Don't leave me."

But he did. And she was all alone.



FLOWER

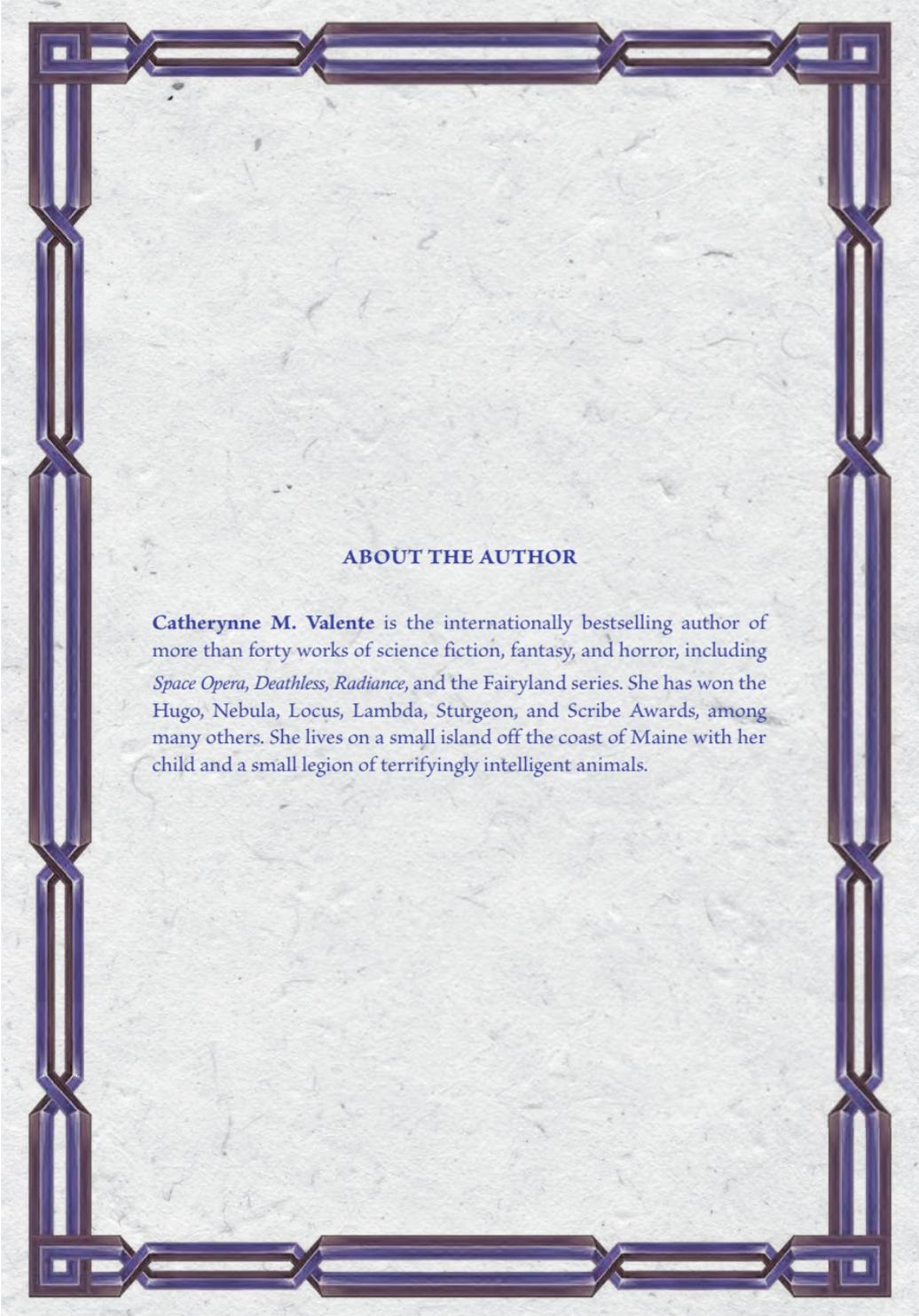
Orweyna grew strong and hard. She had so much time to think, in the growing. Enough time passed that even Hannan came of age. They all had, Orweyna and Amarakk's old friends. Perhaps five would be enough. Perhaps not. Six would be better. But sometimes a vessel shatters in a way that cannot be mended. Orweyna had not yet decided whether she would tell them that her journey was to save Amarakk or to save the goddess herself. She was not sure which they would believe. She was not sure herself which she longed for more.

But as she prepared to enter the rest of her life (*up, up, the roots lift up*), closed away her belongings, her memories, all she had that was young and new, she held on to one thing above all else, one precious thing from Harandar to keep her warm in the cold surface night, even above the goddess's vision that she sent to Orweyna waking and sleeping now.

When Amarakk turned from her, she saw her old amulet winking beneath his cloak. That rattly old stone with a child's drawing on it.

Amarakk's finer amulet hung beneath Orweyna's cloak too, on the day she left her world. Next to her heart. Next to his.

Between them and whatever comes.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Catherynne M. Valente is the internationally bestselling author of more than forty works of science fiction, fantasy, and horror, including *Space Opera*, *Deathless*, *Radiance*, and the *Fairyland* series. She has won the Hugo, Nebula, Locus, Lambda, Sturgeon, and Scribe Awards, among many others. She lives on a small island off the coast of Maine with her child and a small legion of terrifyingly intelligent animals.