

THE GREAT DARKENING

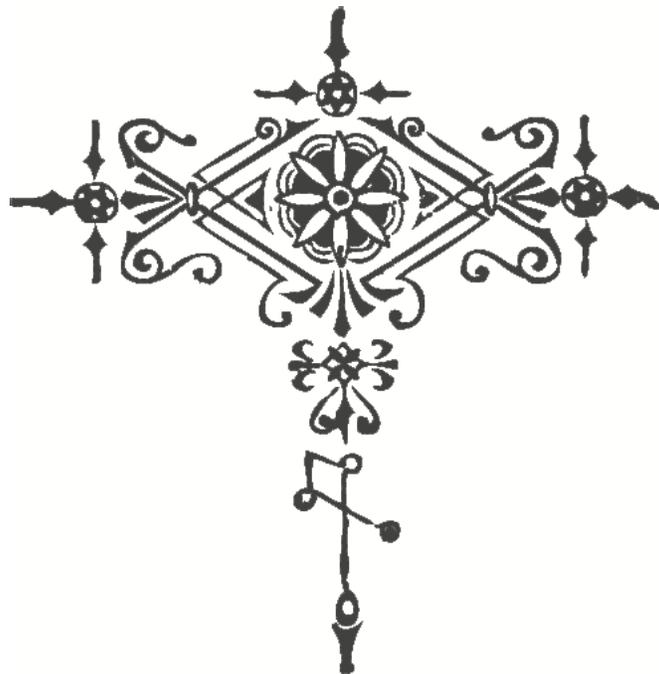
EPIC OF HAVEN BOOK ONE

SAMPLE CHAPTERS

Preface

Breathed into the hearts of men at our first birth are the silent whispers of myths that echo with the resounding feel of would-be legend. Somehow these grand incantations are bound and chained from within, hidden in a chasm of doubt and duty and distraction. They wait for one who would liberate their power and bring purpose to the captive heart in which they reside, making man fully alive for the second time.

In every generation, hopeful stories are told of a chosen few who find their chains fallen limp, and in turn their hearts free. Their voices sing with heroic melodies, and their eyes burn with a fierce understanding. Theirs is the task that strikes fear in the hearts of the unawakened; their mission is perilous and their quest daunting, by which the enslaved hearts of men hold to the faintest hope of freedom.



Prologue

King Illium awoke with a start, jolting upright as he heard the desperate knocking on his bedchamber door. He blinked hard, willing the sleepy fog to dissipate from his eyes as he forced

himself to come alert and take account of his surroundings. His Queen, Evande, sat up in bed beside him. She clutched the bed linens to her small, milky-skinned frame and gasped a distressed breath.

“What is it, Illium?”

The frantic beckoning from his royal guard had not ceased its demanding clamor. King Illium swung his legs over the side of the bed and propelled himself towards the chamber door in a swift yet haphazard manner.

“Do not be afraid, my love,” he said reassuringly as the relentless pounding continued. “I am sure all is well.”

Evande could plainly see that all was *not* well, for a disruption of the King’s bedchambers as the silver light was just beginning to fade to morning’s first amber was an action that could only mean a desperate situation had arisen in the city.

She searched the strong face of her husband and her King, looking for some tell in the lines of his expression.

“Just wait there,” he whispered as his hand closed over the door latch. “I will see what the trouble is.”

Illium swung the door wide and beheld the forlorn faces of his captain of the guard and his scribe. Behind them stood two wispy figures with leathery, aging skin and long, green hair, dressed in the humble, dark brown robes of their office. The looks on their faces led Illium to an almost immediate realization of what had brought them to his chamber door on this early morning.

“The tree?” he asked with more confidence than he felt.

“You must come with us, Your Majesty,” spoke one of the green-haired figures. “It seems

that our world is about to change.” Before he could say any more, the bells of the great Citadel rang out in an alarming orchestration of noise and notes. Illium saw the color drain from his scribe’s face, and the two aged figures hung their heads in defeat. “It is done,” whispered the other brown-robed figure as he clasped a leathery, gnarled hand over his heart. “Today ... this day ... shall mark the beginning of the end.”

“Captain!” said the King, rising to action before a haze of grief and confusion could overtake him. “Summon them, wake them now and bring them here right away! Assemble the council, for we must discuss what is to be done in the wake of so great a horror.” The King looked out the enormous glass window and surveyed the aftermath of the atrocity that had just befallen the shining city.

“Yes, your Brightness,” Captain Barkas replied.

King Illium turned his gaze back to his wife, who stood there in his bedchamber, naked and in shock. Fear had taken its merciless hold on her once bright and beautiful face, and tears began to trace an unfamiliar path down her panic-stricken features.

He went to her, gathering the bed linens that had fallen away. He gently wrapped her body with them and smoothed her hair away from her face, looking into her eyes.

“Take heart, my love,” he offered. “All is not lost yet.” He pressed a calming kiss to her forehead before walking out the open door to the anxious group of advisors.

The chamber warden approached Illium and, helping him into his dark, evergreen robe, he asked, “My Lord, what would you ask of me? How may I be of assistance on this dark morning?”

Illium smiled warmly at his servant, then addressed him, along with those frightened few that still remained in the corridor, awaiting words and wisdom from their King. “This is courage, my friends,” he said as he clasped the shoulders of the chamber warden. “Even in the face of this grave uncertainty, we must choose to remain true of heart, to not be given over to the point of despair. For while hope endures, so will our bright city ... so will our people.”

King Illium looked each of them in the eyes, one at a time, compelling them to draw courage from his words and resolve from his heart.

“Come, for the citizens of Haven need us now more than ever before, and we, by the THREE who is SEVEN, shall not fail them.”

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In many tales told before this telling, the Kingdom of Haven made its roots in the fertile and lush green of the most sought after and fought over ground in all of the lands of Aiénor. Its city flourished like a well-watered tree, rising high above all other kingdoms both in beauty and in might. Some said that Haven became the center of the world. A bright star in the midst of darkness, which many believed would shine for all eternity.

This famed light emanated from the most holy and yet the most humble of all possibilities. At the center of the royal city, in the garden of the great Citadel, a burning tree lived. This tree was neither made nor planted by human hands. Its brilliant amber flames perpetually licked the sky by day while the nights were illuminated by the subtler glow of silver fire, yet the flames did not consume a single leaf with their fury. No Arborist, regardless of skill and stature, completely understood the power of the great tree or knew the depths from which it drew its strength and shone its life-giving light.

In this great Kingdom of Haven there were those who lived under the radiant light of the burning tree, and there were those who lived in the outer dimness, beyond the reach of the undying flames. Although not everyone who lived outside the walls of Haven was corrupted by the brooding shadows, strange and evil things were afoot in the darkened places of the world where light had lost its reach. In the same way, not everyone who lived in the land of the light, inside the Kingdom of Haven, was noble and good—for there are hidden places in the hearts of men and of beasts alike where darkness is not so easily exposed.

For generations, the people of Haven lived and thrived amidst the illumination of this burning tree. Its light was revered and worshiped as a gift from the THREE who is SEVEN, not merely for its beauty or its practicality, but because every citizen of Haven had eyes to see that beyond the influence of the tree there existed no other form of unmade light.

To some, this brought great peace and wonder, filling their minds with gratitude for such a gift to be given to such a people. These were the Poets, a people who reveled in

beauty and worshiped in authentic honesty before an unknowable power. They wrote and sang of wonders beyond their comprehension that were born amidst the unending flames. They laughed often and felt deeply the true joy born in their most humble of communities.

To others, it brought only fear. Fear that one day the tree would no longer sustain the flames and would consume itself in catastrophic fury. Fear that the whole of the world would be plunged into a deafening darkness. These were the Priests, set to stockpiling timber and to teaching the way of the flint, preparing every soul for the great darkening of the world.

As their ideals and convictions led them down divergent paths, both the Poets and the Priests found themselves forgotten and at odds with each other. The Priests made their religion out of order and fear, baffled by the trusting wonder that their Poet brothers had at the great tree's light.

The Poets were enraged by the sheer irreverence these Priests showed, confounded at how these *holy men* could not stand in wonder and amazement at such a gift. The Poets believed that mere calculations and preparations amidst this beauty made the brilliant world a much darker place.

The citizens of Haven, for the most part, tuned out the chatter of the rival brothers as nothing more than background noise and tired tradition. They were seen as mere competitors for the attention and the coin of those few citizens who still gathered, in chapels and cathedrals alike, to hear the postulating of irrelevant men.

The two sides were forced to live together in a world that no longer cared to notice them, and from within this societal apathy was born a great and grave danger. For the most toxic of all poisons is extracted from within the bowels of safety, and so the people of Haven lived under the drugged influence of indifference amidst the luminous vitality of a forgotten tree.

Until that dreaded morning.

The chief of the Arborists sounded the alarm, waking to frenzied life the whole of the city of Haven from its complacent slumber. While its citizens slept, the fires that for generations had burned without consumption had suddenly and unexpectedly feasted on

the lower branches of the sacred tree. Its glowing embers lay corpse-like on the floor of the great garden, signaling with their lifeless black the beginning of a complete and utter change to the world of Aiénor.

Not many noticed the reduction of brilliance at first, but soon panic ensued, and the voices of the dismayed citizens could not be ignored. “How many more branches are left? How long until they burn up? What can be done to save us?”

Questions, like ceaseless volleys of sure-fired arrows, rained upon the Citadel, demanding answers from its King. After what seemed like an eternity of relegation to the periphery of society, the small chapels and great cathedrals hummed and creaked under the weight of frightened souls. The span of the tree’s light had retreated, coloring the outer walls of the city in an ominous shadow they had never known before. For the first time in the great city of Haven, the center of the world, torches were lit.

Illum, King of Haven, Lord of the Citadel and Protector of the Flame, assembled his council, and for eight days they sought wisdom. Both the Poets and the Priests debated with fierce conviction as to what must be done. For every suggestion, there was a counter; for every idea, there came a rebuttal. The tired and weary Illum wavered underneath the relentless debate.

Finally the Arborists, Ispen and Aspen, broke the council’s stalemate with a most unlooked for revelation. These aged caretakers bore an eerie resemblance to the very tree they tended, with leathery, gnarled skin and green, flowing hair. They produced for the council an archaic wooden book, bound with still-green vines, on whose pages were written the ancient magic. The words were not merely inscribed; rather, they seemed burnt into the parchments with such artistry that their beauty alone brought all, King and council, to a reverent still.

Aspen read aloud in a palsied voice. “I am the THREE who is SEVEN, the light in Haven before there was a tree, and the light of Aiénor long after I will be. Behold, the wounds of this world I am mending; the evil and its darkness will soon be put to sleep. My light will break forth to conquer the dark. No tree could hold such brilliance, and no stone could keep it, for it will consume with ferocious intent the weariness of this world and light a way to My kingdom come. Though the tree may fail you, and though fear may assail you, I will place My light in the hearts of those who hope. For in this world you will face

darkness, but My light is alive and its coming is near. *Seek the light*, all you who hope, and find My kingdom, and call it home.”

“How did we not know this?” yelled the old and outspoken Poet named Bell. “There is light and beauty beyond the tree!” The excitement at the very possibility of such unexplored mysteries set the Poets’ hearts ablaze with wonder.

“You fools! Idiots, all of us!” shouted a Priest brother. We should have been gathering timber for generations now, stockpiling our sustenance in preparation for a life without the unending flames. We could have heeded the warning sooner!” he cursed. “Now look at us. We don’t know how long the great tree will last, and our forests may run empty before newly planted ones will yield us any timber!”

While a tumult of curses and accusations swirled in the great court of the Citadel, Ispen stared at the King and mouthed the ancient words, “Go, *seek the light*.”

Knowing what he must do, Illium nodded in stunned agreement. Barkas, dressed in the green and silver of the city guard, bent down at the beckoning of King Illium. Words, dangerous and deep, were whispered into Barkas’ ear. “Find me ten men, strong and brave and still of hope. Make ready the ship *Wilderness* with horses, provisions and arms. We sail at the first flames of amber.

We sail west. We seek the light.” “May it be,” responded Barkas in the obedient and determined

resolve of one who has spent his life in service to king and kingdom. In one fluid motion Barkas spun round, his green cloak emblazoned with a silver flame billowing out behind him. The movement held the eyes of the King, fanning to flame a burning resolve within his heart. *Seek the light*, he told himself. *In the name of the THREE who is SEVEN, I will find it, or die trying.*

Chapter One

Pride beamed on the faces of the parents standing in front of their small congregation as they waited with eager anticipation to begin the festivities of this momentous day. Today was the day its newborn citizens would be dressed in white and held in the arms of their loving mothers. Today was the day when words of ancient magic and meaning were spoken over their new little lives. Today was a bright day of hope.

The gathered flock formed its way into the small chapel on the edge of town, which just so happened to occupy the parcel of land next to this small community's shared stable yard. The chapel was modest, not at all like the grand cathedrals being constructed brick by backbreaking brick on the other side of the river. This chapel was small, not too small, but certainly not big. On most days, even this very special day, the modesty of the church reflected the humble personality of this village.

Children were a scarce commodity in Westriver. When dedication time came, no matter the number of children present, the day was significant. This observance spoke of brighter moments, and this time carried with it a greenness that weatherworn trees dreamed of in their sweetest of sleeps. This was both a holy ritual and, for some with hope still beating in their chests, this was also an awakening of sorts.

Gaereld and Nancwen stood both nervous and proud before the small congregation of Westriver. Their young son was totally unaware of the seriousness and the weight of the moment; staying still, let alone reverent, was the furthest thing from his mind. While the heads of this small community were bowed and the words of ancient magic were spoken, the young boy freed himself from the desperate clutches of his mother. He made his way, swift and silent as a mouse, to the platform of the Priest and the Poet. Prayers of consecration and words of deep and dangerous meaning filled the humble chapel, beckoning all who might hear them to dare to believe in their spoken worth.

The Priest spoke. "In the name of the THREE who is SEVEN, we ask by your Spirit to wake our grey and shadowed world with a new light. May these, our few children, carry within them a reverence for your ways, and a passion to follow them even in the darkest times."

The congregation answered in a half-whispered, "may it be." They raised their heads to

see all of the newly charged families holding their newly blessed children. All, except one.

Gaereid and Nancwen turned their heads in an effort to hide the bright red of embarrassment that had colored their faces. For while all of the other children remained at their parents' sides, their son had ventured atop the platform of the Priest and the Poet, irreverently holding the torch of illumination in his small, chubby hands.

Some spoke in disgust, whispering shame upon the boy.

"Does he have no respect for what it is we speak of and act out?" said the angry voice of the Priest.

"How dare he play with the sacred fire!" whispered a member of the congregation.

"These traditions are meant to be upheld by proper and holy hands," agreed another. A few laughed at the playful innocence that brightened what could otherwise, in their opinion, be a dullish and overly serious ritual. Gaereid and Nancwen were not sure what to think or what it was that they were supposed to do now. Embarrassment, defensiveness and a touch of amusement swirled through their thoughts as they calculated how to get their son down without causing a further scene.

Amidst the pious, the entertained, the embarrassed, and the offended, there were a few who felt the current of something *holy* humming in their midst. Perhaps this time the magic words found their mark; perhaps this wasn't just the rambunctiousness of the boy or the poor parenting of the young couple. Maybe this was something more. This awareness brightened in their eyes, deeper and with greater conviction, as they saw the toddler holding the sacred torch. A knowing hung over these enlightened few, for they had just witnessed a movement of light that they could not possibly understand, and yet could never wholly forget.

As the small congregation of Westriver filed out into the humble yet well-kept green, they greeted the families of the newly dedicated few. Some grasped little hands longingly while others tickled tiny feet playfully. They spoke blessings and offered parental wisdom, all while doing their best to drink in the clean, fresh scent of new life.

One man, whose name was Tolk, insisted that he meet this young boy who played with

torches on the platform of the Priest and the Poet. With laughter in his eyes, he asked the half-blushing parents what his name was.

The young mother spoke. "His name is Calarmindon. We call him Cal though, because Calarmindon is a bit of a mouthful to say ... and, well, it seems a bit too formal for Westriver."

"Pay no mind to its formality," the man said. "Perhaps he was not meant to dwell in a place where such a name cannot be worn proudly. Do you know its meaning?"

"To be honest, I do not," said Gaereld. "It was the name of an old friend who once did a great favor for me. This name for my firstborn is my humble attempt to honor his generosity."

"It is a good name, and a very fitting one at that," said Tolk. "It seems to me that the spirit of the THREE who is SEVEN has been at work, weaving a tapestry we might never fully see, or at least might never fully understand, here in the life of your son. But make no mistake, Calarmindon is a good name ... a name ripe with meaning." Tolk spoke with reverent scrutiny as he considered the child.

After embracing Gaereld and Nancwen and doing his best to laugh away the gravity of the moment, Tolk bent down and kissed the head of Calarmindon, whispering, "Farewell, young man. Grow strong, Bright Fame."

The townsfolk slowly dispersed from the grounds of the chapel, and the young families followed close behind, eager to get back to the routines of their greying lives. After all had left the darkened building, one man, who had remained hidden in the shadows until the Priest took his leave, came forth with eyes still wide in wonder.

As Tolk approached the wooden platform of the Priest and the Poet, he reached a shaky hand out to touch the famed torch of illumination. Though its flames had been extinguished when the Priest left the chapel, the relic still emanated warmth from the dwindling embers of the sacred fire.

He let his fingers play with the ashes for a moment, reveling in the recent memory of what he had witnessed while the hot cinders disintegrated in his hand. A smile crept across his features and brightened his whole face with a hopeful joy that could not be

held back.

Inhaling a deep breath, he took hold of the torch and placed it gently in his cloak. With that, he took his leave of the empty chapel, moving unseen and unnoticed past the town of Westriver, through the Western Gate, and out of the walled Kingdom of Haven.

Chapter Two

Life inside the crumbling Kingdom of Haven continued to diminish at both the dying of the tree and the absence of her beloved King. A cold chill had attached itself to the wind and the words of its people as an ill distrust began to color the dimming vision of the disillusioned citizens. Illium's quest to seek the light had once inspired and fueled the fires in the hearts of his people with hopeful encouragement. But as the years continued to be counted with no word from the great King, the people had begun to resign themselves to the reality that perhaps a new light was not coming for them after all.

The shadows brought with them a fear that seemed to give the once ignored and forgotten Priests a renewed sense of vigor and a growing, albeit woeful, following. The once lush green of the sprawling forest of Haven was methodically reduced to a lifeless brown as the oaks, redwoods, and armies of soldier pines were decimated by the need for light. Woodcutters found themselves to be the new holy soldiers of the emboldened Priests, and they fought with an almost maddened fervor, laying waste to coveted green with the bite of steel, animated by fear.

There was little room for the beauty of the Poets after Illium disappeared from Haven, for light was power, and timber became the real currency. What use for words and song could the woodcutters have when the rhythm of the axe was all the melody they could stomach? Those few who did heed the words of the Poets became shunned and bullied by the rising power of the determined Priests and the followers of their flintish ways.

For over twenty years, the rival brotherhoods had existed and competed, albeit lopsidedly, for the hearts of the people of Haven. It wasn't until the protests turned violent and bloody that their coexistence ceased to be a possibility. Not many know the true story of the great atrocity that happened that day in the square of Westriver, but its result was certainly known and felt throughout all of Haven. One of the young Priests, whose duty it was to oversee the rations of timber, was brutally bloodied at the hands of a young Poet.

The ruling of the Citadel was swift and severe, and was clearly influenced by the rising power of the Priesthood. The young Poet was executed there in the very square of his alleged offense, and all who called themselves Poets were summarily exiled for his transgressions.

It is said that few have ever seen such a sad exodus as the citizens of Haven witnessed at these champions of beauty being removed from their once-shining city with a dreadful curse of merciless finality. Many of the Poets who were unjustly exiled by the Citadel were already far along in years, and their unwavering convictions were so deeply ingrained into their hearts that they felt the exile a worthy sacrifice. With heads held high and proud, they departed the city with little remorse or sorrow, save for the loss of the loved ones who would not depart with them.

There were still a rare few who held to the teaching and the ways of the Poets, though they could not bear to depart altogether from the safety and comfort of their once great city. Their Poetic life in Haven was lived in secret as they outwardly participated in the daily rhythm of the greying, pious citizens. Laughter was rarely heard in Haven, not because its people had forgotten how, or even because its citizens were too sad; rather it was because there were too few children to rescue them from their seriousness. It was as if the virility of Haven waned in harmony to the fading light of the burning tree, and the drive of its men mirrored the ever-diminishing forests. The people preferred practicality in the midst of fear, clinging to order like the floating timber of a storm-wrecked ship. The few brave ones that did bring children into this world continued to live under the biting yet envious criticism of those who chose not to.

"How can one think of love when light is almost gone?" would often be heard whispered behind the backs of those who gave in to the indulgence of romance.

“Why would we waste what few resources we have left on children who should never have to be subjected to such a poor way of living?”

“Such procreation is a frivolous way to spend one’s energy.”

Gaereld and Nancwen, Cal’s parents, had spent many years as children raised in the company of the Poets. Even after the exile, though in secret, they found ways to dream along with the remnant of a few who still clung to the forgotten Poets’ ways.

The two of them fell dangerously in love, and their romance gave them a welcome diversion from the injustices of evil and the fear of failing trees. They were surrounded by thoughts and hopes of brighter days, and spent many a silver night pondering the way of the Poet. As they honed and perfected their giftings, they became fatefully linked to the fortunes and survival of the exiled Poets. Gaereld was a bright and talented smithy and Nancwen, having been raised amidst the sprawling farms of Abondale, was aide to the master groomsmen.

Though contact with the exiles was strictly forbidden, and the outlying lands surrounding the walled city had grown dangerously inhospitable, Gaereld and Nancwen still would venture beyond the boundaries of safety to deliver goods and supplies to their Poet mentors.

Each time the young couple would ride into the encampment of the exiles, their hearts would wrestle with the beckoning of their Poet fathers. These sages urged them to leave the comforts of Haven and embark on the truest of all callings: to seek and find the new light of the THREE who is SEVEN.

But as fortune and fate would have it, Nancwen became heavy with child. The compelling gravity of a greater calling, as it often does in the wake of unanticipated responsibility, lost its pull on the hearts of the soon-to-be parents.

As their young child grew, the couple took great care to instill the Poetic sense of hope in his blonde-haired head and his tender heart. They taught him to trust not in the strength of his own hands, or in flames birthed from timber alone, but rather to put the whole of his hope in the coming light of the THREE who is SEVEN.

The pressure from the citizens of Haven to follow the Priestly way of the flint had taken

its toll on their ability to abide well in the walled city, but regardless of the persecution from peers or strong-arming from the Citadel, Nancwen and Gaereld did not sacrifice their hope, nor their commitment to the Poets.

Cal spent many amber days in the company of his mother as she tended to the royal horses of the Citadel. His ease and effortlessness around the four-legged beasts was uncanny for such a young boy. Even more amazing in the royal stables of Haven was not the familiarity of Cal to the horses, but rather *their* attraction to him.

Nancwen would often scold her fearless little son. “Keep your mind sharp around these beautiful creatures, my boy, for you must remember that they are, in fact, still beasts at heart; remember that often and perhaps without warning they might just choose to act ... rather *beastly*.”

Cal would just smile at his mother and agree to take extra precautions, though both of them knew full well that he never would.

Not only did it seem that Cal had little, if any, fear for the stables full of horses, but it also became obvious to all who saw him that he had a gift for calming whatever fears assailed their equine thoughts. Nancwen was not the only one who took great pride in the young boy. Many a groomsmen of the Citadel would watch Cal and his ways with the horses, hoping that they too might learn more about the animals that they spent their greying lives in service to.

Once, when Cal was just seven years of age, he and his mother walked into the stable yard by the silver light of early morning to find one of the mares in the violent throws of labor. Her eyes were wild with fear, for the obvious distress of the pain and complications had taken over her motherly senses. She was thrashing and kicking, snorting and whinnying so loudly that all of her other stable mates had been worked into a nervous lather alongside the maddened mare.

“Help!” Nancwen shouted. “I need help restraining her, or she is going to kill herself and lose the foal!” But no one was near enough to hear and quickly respond to her cries for help.

Nancwen tried to calm the fear-stricken beast, but nothing that she could say seemed to pierce through to the frightened mind of the mare. Blood leaked down her hindquarters

and her mouth began to froth as she worked herself into a dangerous and desperate four-legged storm. As she fought to control the raging horse, Nancwen heard a lilting tune from outside the stall. She looked up and watched as her son sang to the beast, not words at first, but calm and whispered melodies. Nancwen had never heard these songs before, and yet with each haunting lift of his voice, the frightened mare began to calm in time to his music.

The boy walked up to the stall that confined the once-raging horse, and as he climbed the wooden gate, Nancwen could not help but stare in awe at the brave command that her little boy held over a beast ten times his size.

Cal began to stroke the mare's neck, and soon she was held in a calm, albeit lathered trance. The help that Nancwen had called for finally arrived, and the groomsmen helped to deliver a healthy, young foal from the teeth of death.

Nancwen knew her boy was special; that old Poet had told her as much long ago. But here, seeing him like this, she felt a pride that she never knew was possible.

"Oh my boy, my brave, brave boy," she cooed to him as she tucked young Cal into his bed later that silver evening. "The THREE who is SEVEN has given you a gift, that is plain enough to see. What now you must learn, son, is how to use it well."

"Well, Momma?" the boy asked her. "Did I not do a good thing today?"

"Oh child, of course you did a good thing." She smiled with proud and loving eyes at her son. "But it's not just today ... He will be expecting, you know ... for you to always use that gift of yours to point the way to beauty."

She tussled his blonde hair as she leaned over to kiss his forehead. "Who knows, my little Cal, you might one day use your gift to sing to the horse of a King!"

Cal continued to grow in the confidence of his gift, and subsequently he caught the eyes of the master groomsmen. Soon he was given responsibility of his own there in the royal stable yard, and his parents could not have been more proud.

One day a message reached Gaereld and Nancwen in secret. Their dear exiled Poet friends begged and pleaded for them to come swiftly to their aid. Sensing the urgency of

the matter, and knowing that Cal would be safe in Westriver completing his duties with the horses of the Citadel, Gaereld and Nancwen decided to ride beyond the safety of the wall to bring whatever help they might.

They kissed their boy goodbye, leaving him in the care of his uncle and aunt and in the company of his closest friend and cousin, Michael. They promised to return in three days' time.

"Look for the light while we are gone, huh?" Gaereld told his son. "Maybe you and Michael will find it for us and end this whole grey sadness that has come over everyone."

"Papa, don't be silly," Cal chuckled in response.

"I am not silly, boy!" he replied with a large, mischievous grin on his face. "We were never told when and where it would come to us! And there was never any words written that said it couldn't be found by some boys from Westriver, neither."

"Ok, Papa," Cal said. "We'll find it."

"That's my boy," Nancwen cooed as she beamed with pride at the hopeful belief there in her young son's heart. "And don't you go letting anyone tell you otherwise ... huh?"

"I won't, Momma," he said with a sweet kiss on her cheek.

Gaereld and Nancwen mounted their mule cart, setting off for the Western Gate with supplies in tow, in search of their friends beyond the wall.

"Sing to the horses for me, Cal!" his mother called as she looked back and waved to her yellow-haired boy. "I will, Momma! I will!" Cal shouted as they faded off into the distance. "We are surely blessed, my love," Gaereld said to his tear-stained wife as she rested her head on his shoulder. "I think the THREE who is SEVEN has already shown us His new light."

"Oh, has He now?" Nancwen asked playfully as she wiped her eyes.

"Indeed He has!" Gaereld replied, a proud smile lighting up his face. "My world has never been so bright as it is when I look at that boy. I swear to you, he shines brighter than any fire I've ever seen."

Nancwen just nodded and smiled, her heart overflowing with a love that can only come from a source of deep gratitude.

The simple goodbyes made that day were the last words ever spoken between Cal and his parents. He never again saw their faces or heard their hopeful voices, for not a half-day's ride beyond the Western Gate, Gaereld and Nancwen met their deaths at the hands of some unknown assailants.

It was nearly eight days before word reached Cal's family of his parents' deaths. They tried to break the news gently to the boy, offering somber words of mourning and pious liturgies of parting. Though Cal was young, he could sense that his aunt and uncle held Gaereld and Nancwen partially responsible for their own demise; though they cared deeply for them, they had never approved of their work with the Poets.

Cal had never known a loss like this before. Grief-stricken and overwhelmed by little-boy emotions, he ran to the only other place he had ever felt at home.

That night he wept with unbridled anguish while he slept in the stall of the once-frightened mare. The unwarranted kindness that he had once shown her in the moment of her greatest distress she returned with unparalleled affection to the orphaned boy who lay asleep on her bed of straw.

Though Cal's aunt and uncle raised him with sincere love, they did not carry hope in their hearts as his parents once had. It was easier for them to believe the Priests, to think that fates and fortunes could be controlled by disciplined minds and righteous determination.

Cal and Michael became brothers in the fourteen years that they grew up together, though brothers of two completely different faiths. They prayed to the same God, but it was Cal and Cal only that clung to hope and lived with the belief that a new light would truly come for the world of Aiéonor.

Perhaps his parents' convictions and teachings molded Cal to believe so strongly in this light, or perhaps he felt a stirring in his own heart that gave him cause to hope for it. Whatever the case, he knew the only true way for the pain he carried in his heart to be mended would be to know that his parents' death was for a cause that was worth the sacrifice.

Calarmindon, “Bright Fame”, sought answers to the questions so deeply written on his heart, perhaps with more conviction and intensity than anyone else in the kingdom, save the Arborists. These keepers of the tree spent day and night scouring the libraries of ancient magic in their hallowed hall under the tree, pouring over the forgotten tomes in search of an answer, or at least a clue, as to where this new light could be found. Their prayers were the desperate kind, begging the THREE who is SEVEN for time enough to find the light, and timber enough to see it by.

Time and timber were all that was really on the minds of the citizens of Haven. The people breathed their sighs, exhaling the winds of relief each silver evening that the woodcutters entered the city square in their ox-drawn carts filled with fresh-cut pine and oak. Then, almost with their very next breath, they inhaled panic as the sounds of the hooves of the scouting horses clamored on the streets, signaling the empty-handed and unlit return from the western shore.

Many wondered just how long the forest would hold out, but they dared not ponder that thought for too long, or they might find the truth that they didn’t want to see.

And so it was, day in and day out, from the light of amber morning to the glow of silver sleep—time and timber, timber and time, the rhythm of a nation whose light was dying.