

Chapter Three: Down the woodland path

Night's cover had been pulled away from the bedding of the world, leaving Halin adrift in the misty purple of predawn. Pools of deep shadow appeared beneath her boughs and collected in every nook and alcove of the Treeburgh.

In the grey fields of Withershin a group of black figures made their quiet way amongst the wild fields that lay between Furrow warren and the northern Ring Hills. Only the light tread of their feet upon the road gave noise to the early hour as the rest of the world slumbered.

Walking at the far rear of this group, eyes still heavy from sleep, were Linnet and Hoffer. They staggered along as the earliness of the hour took its toll on their vigor. It left little room for chatting as each was locked away in his own sleep deprived stupor.

A sudden yawn opened Hoffer's mouth wide. He stopped for a moment, stretched and then rubbed his eyes. All this only increased his desire to lie down and go to sleep.

Looking at the surrounding fields, Hoffer thought how soft it all looked. To his bleary eyes, the blades of grass wove together into a downy blanket; as comfy and cozy as anything he had ever seen. A breeze gently drew back the cover to reveal a bed of warm flowers made just for him and inviting a visit.

Hoffer willingly accepted the invitation and allowed the promising allure of sleep to lead him from the road.

Now, thought Hoffer, if only I could find a pillow...who is that shaking me?

"Wake up, Hoffer!" said Linnet, jostling the younger Ifin.

Hoffer jumped, startled out of his fantasy. The effect was like having cold water splashed in his face. He quickly looked about and found himself back on the road. To his horror the downy blanket and the warm bed were gone, replaced by whispering fields and a horrible person.

"Stop shaking me," snapped Hoffer, jerking his arm away from Linnet.

"Well quit daydreaming, or we're going to leave you behind," said Linnet.

"Oh, leave me alone," said Hoffer, his good humor still asleep. "Besides, they're as far ahead of you as they are me."

Linnet turned and saw the group steadily pulling away. He motioned for Hoffer to follow and set off after them. Hoffer drew his cloak tight and reluctantly joined the chase.

A bothersome chill lingered in the air. The wind it mustered pinched Hoffer's cheeks as he ran. With every step its hidden fingers searched for a way into the layered warmth of his clothing.

Cold weather was not uncommon for this time of year. By day, Halin lounged in spring's warmth, but it was far enough north that the memory of winter still cooled the late sunless hours.

I hope the sun pops his head up soon, thought Hoffer, suppressing a shiver.

In the near distance loomed the northern wall of the Ring Hills. Dark treeholms dotted the hillsides, their quiet silhouettes appearing as black bristles against the purple sky. Few lights played there beyond those illuminating the little paths that snaked their way through the hills.

The sky above was a painter's palette, with colors running together to form a rainbow of evening and pre-dawn hues. Fat clouds rolled lazily in the east. Their underbellies turned pink at the mere touch of invading dawn.

In time the road left Withershin's care and began its ascent into the Ring Hills. It curved and double backed on itself, further lengthening the upward trek. At last they reached a plateau of sorts and entered the twisting streets of Lonburry Warren.

As they walked its avenues the boys quietly dined on muffins, which had been speedily prepared by the kitchens and made ready for the group as they left the great home. Several bags of the delicious pastry found their way into the load that would be carried far into the woods this day. However, many of the treats from the bag Hoffer and Linnet shared were gone.

"I don't believe this!" cried Linnet, searching the bag. Finding nothing, he looked up at Hoffer. "Did you eat them all?"

Hoffer's cheeks bulged with half eaten muffin. Instead of answering Linnet's query he just kept chewing away at his treat.

Linnet snorted with annoyance and dug deeper into the bag. Finally, he produced a soft, golden muffin, stuffed with bits of sticky fruit. Its scent of newly baked dough sweetened the air as he brought it up to his nose and inhaled. The wispy essence of the golden treat rose eagerly to stir his hunger.

"I'm surprised you left any for me," said Linnet, right before biting into the treat.

"What?" muttered Hoffer, bits of muffin flying out of his mouth. "I'm hungry."

"You're always hungry," said Linnet, patting Hoffer's belly.

Hoffer smacked his hand away. "Only when I'm tossed out of bed before dawn and sent off onto a forced march, without the chance of a decent breakfast."

Linnet made no comment, but directed his full attention to the muffin. He gently pulled pieces from the whole, careful not to lose a single crumb. After finishing the last bite, he delicately licked the sugar from his fingers.

Rubbing his eyes, Hoffer said, "I wonder if Timpkin is still asleep."

"Oh, I doubt it," said Linnet in a matter of fact confession. "He's not sleeping well these days. Told me so himself."

Hoffer's surprise was palpable. "He *told* you?"

Linnet nodded.

Hoffer swallowed the last of his muffin. A visible weight seemed to settle on his narrow shoulders.

"Ok, Linnet," Hoffer began. "You have to promise not tell anyone what I'm about to tell you."

Linnet gave Hoffer a look of disbelief. "Are you serious?"

"Very," insisted Hoffer. "Now promise."

"Will that be good enough?" asked Linnet, his words resounding with a comedic tone. "I could swear a blood oath not to tell anyone, or better still I could swear on the graves of my ancestors."

Hoffer glared at him.

"Fine," said Linnet, rolling his eyes. "I swear."

"Not like that. You didn't mean it," said Hoffer, clearly annoyed that Linnet was not taking this seriously. "Raise your right hand and swear."

"Oh for the love of..." Linnet words trailed off into an undecipherable mumbling.

He reluctantly lifted his right hand into the air. Feeling very much a fool but wanting to end this little game quickly, Linnet said, "I swear that I will not reveal what Hoffer is about to tell me."

Linnet lowered his hand and stared at Hoffer. A look of expectation was clearly visible in Linnet's eyes but Hoffer did not seem to pick up on the wordless queue. When Linnet's irritation could stand no more he said, "Well, was that good enough?"

"I guess," said Hoffer, unimpressed by Linnet's sincerity.

"Hoff, I swear, if you put me through all that for some stupid bit o' gossip, I'll flatten you," said Linnet.

"Just listen," responded Hoffer, trying to keep Linnet focused. "Timpkin has been acting funny these last few weeks."

Linnet, taking the offered bait of an interesting story, asked, "What do you mean by funny?"

"Well, one night I caught him sitting up in bed," said Hoffer. "His eyes were wide open but when I called out to him, he didn't answer me. It was like he couldn't see or hear me."

"Go on," said Linnet.

"I thought he might be *sleep-awake* so I..."

“Wait, wait, wait,” interrupted Linnet. “What do you mean sleep awake?”

Clearly surprised by Linnet’s ignorance, Hoffer said, “You know, when you look like you’re awake but you’re really asleep...sleep-awake.”

Linnet, regretting he had started this whole thing, said, “Continue.”

“I started to leave Timpkin’s room,” said Hoffer, “When suddenly he began talking to...someone. At first I thought it was me, but he never turned to look at me. He just stared off into the darkness, talking to someone that wasn’t there.”

“That’s strange,” said Linnet.

“I know,” agreed Hoffer. “Well, whatever they were chatting about seemed to upset Timpkin because he started crying.”

“Crying? That’s terrible,” said Linnet, now pulled into the story. “What did you do?”

“Nothing.”

Linnet stared at Hoffer in disbelief.

“Don’t look at me like that!” said Hoffer, shame settling on him. “I didn’t know what else to do...so I just watched and listened, hoping he might say something to clue me in to what was happening. Unfortunately, he mumbled a lot, so I couldn’t figure out what was bothering him. I did, however, catch the words “Halin’s seed.” Does that mean anything to you, Linnet?”

Linnet chewed on the question then shook his head. “I don’t have the faintest idea, but I wouldn’t be too concerned. It sounds like Timpkin just had a strange dream. I get them too, especially after raiding the pantry late at night.”

“But it wasn’t a onetime thing, Linnet,” said Hoffer. “This went on for several nights; the same mumbled conversation each time.”

“Didn’t you tell anyone in your family about this?” asked Linnet.

“No,” said Hoffer, “How could I? Tessel’s death already had everyone so rattled and I didn’t want them to think Timpkin had cracked. So...” Hoffer’s chest inflated a little. “I decided that it had to be me. I had to watch over Timpkin and keep him safe.”

“And thus a hero was born.” Linnet laughed.

Hoffer, withering a little under the comment but pretending it didn’t bother him, continued, “Ever since that first night that’s exactly what I’ve done. Staying very close to Timpkin, always keeping up on where he’s going. Of course, this was done in secret and without his knowing.”

“Of course,” agreed Linnet. However, he was certain that Timpkin knew. “So, whatever happened to these dreams he was having.”

“Here is the strangest part,” said Hoffer, the storyteller in him coming out. “He’s up, night after night and babbling for hours, right? Then one night it just...stopped. Not so much as a twitch out of him the entire evening. I peered in on him several times that night and Timpkin seemed peaceful, as if he’d made some decision and was no longer troubled.”

“When I woke up the next day it was almost noon. Guess I over slept a little.” Hoffer gave a grin of embarrassment. “Anyway, when I eventually got out of bed, I stopped by Timpkin’s room but he wasn’t there. Panicking, I ran downstairs and found him arguing with our parents.”

“Listening to them go back and forth, I gathered that Timpkin had asked them if he might be allowed to come to Halin and help you celebrate the Anniversary. They had said no. They had said it was too soon after Tessel’s death for one of us to go sprouting wings and flying off by our self...even if it was only for a few days. Timpkin continued to beg and plead with them, but they remained fixed.”

“Timpkin got angry, very angry. I’d never seen him like that before. My mom tried to calm him down, but that only made things worse. He yelled and said such hurtful things to her that she cried. I wanted to run into the room and stop him, but before I could blink dad struck Timpkin so hard that it knocked him flat on his back.

“Timpkin didn’t move for a little bit and I thought he might be seriously hurt. My dad seemed to be afraid of that too. I could see from his face that he regretted striking Timpkin. When he moved to help Timpkin up, my brother jumped to his feet and disappeared outside. I ran after him but he was already gone.”

“He hit, Timpkin?” asked Linnet, shocked by the news. “I never thought your dad was a hitting sort of person.”

“He isn’t,” said Hoffer, rushing to his father’s defense. “But, to be fair, Timpkin kind of deserved it.”

Hoffer pulled another muffin out of his pocket and bit into it. Crumbs ran down the side of his face and drop to the ground.

“Hey!” cried Linnet. “How many more of those have you pocketed?”

“Dis iz ma last wahn,” responded Hoffer, raining crumbs from his mouth.

Linnet looked away in disgust. Even with his eyes off the subject, his mind replayed the image of muffin bits falling out of Hoffer’s mouth. It made Linnet queasy.

“Tell me when you’re done,” said Linnet, feeling his stomach churn.

When Hoffer swallowed the last of his muffin he continued.

“When Timpkin came home, late that night, he wouldn’t talk to anyone. He was still very angry. Over the next few days, I watched him withdraw from the family as his mood continued to sour. He began wandering by himself, first along the ways of our land, then hiking in the northern hills. Wherever he went his eyes always turned to Halin.”

“Our parents worried about what to do with Timpkin. I worried he might slip away to Halin one night and we might never see him again. I couldn’t let that happen. So, I asked our parents to let me to go to Halin with Timpkin, promising that I would send word home if anything went wrong. It took some convincing but they finally agreed.

“Timpkin fumed when they told him the news. He argued with my parents, saying that he didn’t want me tagging along, but they stayed firm. They said it was the only way they would let him make the journey. I was surprised when he finally gave up and accepted my company.”

“That next morning Timpkin was so anxious to get on the road to Halin that he left without me. By the time I caught him, Timpkin was already at the edge of our clan’s hunting grounds. He said nothing to me as I came up huffing and puffing to walk at his side.”

“Timpkin was so driven to reach Halin that the normal niceties exchanged between people were completely forgotten. In fact, we only spoke once. I asked if we might stop for a breather and, I’ll remember this for the rest of my life, he looked at me with these sunken, haunted eyes.

“‘No,’ he said, in words so thick it was like his tongue had gone heavy. ‘I can’t rest...never rest.’”

“And he didn’t. We didn’t stop once the entire way to Halin’s gate,” said Hoffer.

“Hoffer, I had no idea all of this was going on,” said Linnet, his brow furrowed with concern. “Has his behavior changed since coming to Halin?”

“He hasn’t done anything really weird since getting here, if that is what you mean,” said Hoffer.

Linnet sighed “What can we do about him...or for him? He might need our help.”

“I don’t know,” said Hoffer, his face a mixture of confusion and hopelessness. He felt small, weighted down by the cares of the past few days. It had stolen a part of him but Hoffer wasn’t sure what part that might be. All he felt certain of was that something terrible waited on the horizon, something that he could neither see nor stop and it was aimed directly at Timpkin.

“Linnet, I’m worried,” Hoffer confessed. “Whatever is causing Timpkin’s anger and the same nightly dream, I think the answer is here in Halin. I just don’t know what it is or where to look.”

“There’s not much we can do,” said Linnet, seemingly mirroring Hoffer’s helplessness. “We can only try to keep a close eye on him from here on and pray that is enough.”

A sudden realization dawned on Linnet. “Oh, I can’t believe I’m so stupid!” Linnet grabbed the sides of his head as if suffering a sudden headache.

“What is it?” asked Hoffer.

“Timpkin practically begged me to take you on this venture. I didn’t think anything of it so I agreed,” said Linnet. “How could I be so stupid?”

“Don’t worry, Linnet,” said Hoffer, trying to calm his companion. “It’s alright. If you wouldn’t have agreed to let me come, Timpkin would’ve simply found something else to get me out of the way. He’s done it twice since we’ve come to Oak Brow.”

Linnet appeared confused and that confusion hung in the air even as he spoke. “So you’re not the least bit worried that he will be out of our sight for an entire day?”

“Nope,” said Hoffer, a sliver of confidence shining through. “I have others watching him while we’re away.”

Linnet just stared at Hoffer for a moment. “Following people in secrecy, employing others to do your spying. You’re a very devious person, Hoffer. You do know that.”

Hoffer’s only reply came as a shrug.

Linnet turned his attention to the muffin bag. He shook it out but only crumbs tumbled out. Disappointment settled on his face when no actual muffins appeared.

Hoffer whistled to draw his attention and then tossed Linnet another muffin he had been hiding in his pocket.

Moving onward, the Ilfins stuck to the road as it twisted and turned its way through the small community. Homes lined either side of the street. Their distance from one another was so precise that it was like walking through a living hallway.

At long last they reached the hallway’s end and exited the warren that surrounded it. Morning eagerly awaited them. The newly risen sun had just obliterated the remaining traces of night and was busily warming the waiting world. Treeholms once darkened in their nighttime slumber were now awake and clothed in dawn’s splendor.

Onward, over the Ring Hills rounded shoulders, the road wound its way down the opposite side of the hills. Before them Hoffer beheld a sight that although familiar still managed to amaze him. Trees, enormously tall wooden towers grown so close together that they merged into a single structure—a living wall. Here stood the Treewall or boundary wall that enclosed all of Halin; a stern line separating the Treeburgh from the rest of Anwar Forest.

Tall and of wide girth, these trees were unlike any other in Halin. They were darker and sturdier than their treeholm brethren. This hale resiliency culminated in their bark, toughened to a near stone consistency. Winds did not stir them. Fire’s caress did not sear them. For those reasons these trees bore the name of Stone Wood.

Growing out of the Treewall, near the crowns of her towers, was a wooden walkway. This disappeared into the distance in either direction as it travelled the entire length of the wall. Hoffer’s sharp ears picked up the curse laden language of the Pickets as they patrolled this wooden way.

At intervals this path high above the ground disappeared into the heart of one of the trees of the wall, through an entry way naturally formed in the tree's surface. The walkway emerged on the other side of the tree and continued on its way before disappearing again.

At the feet of the living wall sat structures that resembled black legless beetles, grouped together in a semi circle of five units. They were single story longhouses fashioned completely from the bark of some dark tree. These Bark Houses housed those Ilfins, called Pickets, whose sole purpose was guarding the Treewall.

The road reached the foot of the Ring Hills and passed the Bark Houses only to dead end at a tree that looked more hardened than all the others in the wall. It stood as a grim sentry barring further passage.

No knob. No handle. No visible sign of any gate could be seen. The tree was solid and completely impassable.

Elsberry calmly strolled to its dark face and gave a rapid succession of knocks. Then she stood back and stared at the tree as if expecting something to happen. Several moments ticked by and when whatever event Elsberry awaited did not occur, she knocked again.

Still nothing happened.

Placing an ear to the tree, she listened for the faintest of sounds.

"What are they doing in there?" she whispered.

A loud thud caused Elsberry to quickly jump back from the tree. Nothing else happened. Finally, Elsberry could wait no more. Banging hard on Northbole's surface, she shouted, "Wake up in there and let us in!" Irritation poured out in her words.

Immediately a hard crack rent the air. The ground trembled as the face of the great tree split. Under Elsberry's waiting stare the crack widened until the interior of Northbole revealed itself.

"That's more like it," said Elsberry, her dissatisfaction subsiding.

She motioned for the group to follow as she entered Northbole. They came to a small anteroom where two Pickets, dressed in the brown attire of their post, stood to greet her. The shorter of the two pushed his taller fellow forward, hoping that he would be brave enough to greet the unhappy guests.

"W-w-welcome to Northbole," he said, trying not to verbally trip over himself.

Elsberry's agitation came back to life. With a simple gesture of her hand she brought the group to a halt and turned to face the young Picket.

"Why did you leave us standing out there like that?" she asked slowly, her words filled with such authority it might well have come from the Picket's captain and not a woman nearly a foot shorter than him.

The Picket's eyes widened. His ears lowered so far down that they seemed to disappear into his head. He removed his hat and crushed it to his chest to keep his hands from shaking.

"I'm very sorry ma'am, but you see, we didn't know how to open the gate, at first." The Picket tried to give a friendly smile but it simply came out as a nervous grimace.

"It wasn't until Charl here." The Picket pointed at his mute and equally nervous partner "Remembered the unlock command that we figured out how to let you in."

Elsberry chuckled at the Picket's absurdity.

This made the poor fellow even more nervous. He swallowed hard and then spoke again. "This is all still so new to me...and Charl, he's been here an even shorter time than me."

The shorter Picket started to wave at Elsberry, thought better of it and kept his hands at his sides.

Elsberry looked them over, studying each face intently. They were both so young, not much older than Linnet. This fact only enhanced their ridiculousness. It also endeared her, somewhat, to their fresh and helpless qualities.

Motherly warmth kindled within Elsberry, softening her displeasure. "What is your name, son?"

The taller Picket glanced back at his fellow. Ready for insults and tirades he did not know how to handle such an innocent question. Charl, the shorter Picket, motioned for him to answer.

"Eh...Eh...Edder, ma'am. He managed to stammer.

"Well, Edder." She smiled. "If there is one thing you learn in all the years to come, let it be this." She paused, staring at Edder and Charl for effect. "Never leave a lady waiting."

"Yes ma'am," Edder sheepishly replied.

"My mother says the same thing," Charl chimed in, suddenly finding the courage to speak.

Elsberry drew up to Charl, patted him gently on the arm and said, "See, a wise woman your mother." She shook a finger knowingly at him. "You best listen to her."

"I will." He nodded.

"Here," Elsberry said, digging into one of her bags. She produced two muffins brimming with golden deliciousness. "Take these." She handed one to each of the young Pickets. "I know how trying a new post can be and you two look like you could use some fattening up."

The Pickets accepted them eagerly, smiles decorating their faces.

"Thank you ma'am."

Elsberry, pleased with her good works, signaled for the group to continue onward.

"You, you won't tell our captain about this little incident, will you?" asked Edder, calling after Elsberry.

“Promise to be more alert at your post,” her words echoed back to them, “and I may forget the whole thing.”

“We will.” The Pickets sounded off together. “Thank you, ma’am.”

Leaving the anteroom behind, Elsberry led the group into a long hallway. Northbole’s great wooden doors closed behind them with the snap of breaking wood. Hoffer jumped at the sound. He turned around and saw that where a moment ago the anteroom exited into open air there was nothing now but solid wood.

At that hallway’s end a cavernous room with a high domed ceiling greeted them. Its walls were honeycombed with exits that lead deeper into the tree. Stairways, fashioned from the tree’s heartwood, connected these passages together while walkways bisected the chamber like fine brown threads.

The traffic here was akin to that in the Great Room of Oak Brow; Ilfins going this way and that in seemingly chaotic patterns. Elsberry kept the group close together, making it easier for them to navigate through the swirling tide.

Hoffer found it difficult to keep up. More than once a passing Picket, hurrying on his way to some unknown destination, bumped into him.

Reaching the other end of the chamber, Elsberry brought the group to a halt before another impassable wooden wall. Several feet above them, on a platform growing out of the Northbole’s heartwood, stood an important looking Picket. He surveyed them with interest while those gathered about him stood silently ready for any order that he might give.

Judging by his attire this was an Ilfin of prominence amongst the Pickets. Posture, erect and sure, portrayed the confidence of a strong leader. Short hair, graying slightly at the temples, was cropped with military precision. His ears stood tall, a direct contrast to his droopy eared underlings.

Cennick Burrows greeted the group and welcomed them to Northbole with the practiced words of a statesman...and then his eyes fell on Linnet’s mother.

“Everything alright back there, Elsberry.” He motioned back to where the group had first entered Northbole.

“Yes, just fine. A couple of good boys you have there, Cennick,” said Elsberry. “They’ll do alright once they’re polished up a bit.”

Cennick did not respond. He only stood there, looking down at her. His eyes betrayed their shared history and the warmth that it still kindled within.

“It’s good to see you,” said Cennick, his voice taking on a pleasing and more personal tone. “You come this way far too infrequently.”

“Well, things never seem to slow down for me,” responded Elsberry and fixing Cennick with a firm stare she added, “and Oak Brow is my home and my heart.”

The message was not lost on Cennick. He nodded, answering some unspoken question. A resigned look spread across his face for a moment and then quickly passed away.

“Going out into the woods today, are you?” Cennick asked, clumsily sliding into another subject.

“Well, I’m not here for the company,” replied Elsberry, her words playfully sarcastic. “As you can see,” she thumbed back to the group, “I have a fair amount of that already.”

“Of that I have no doubt.” Cennick chuckled. “I’m only surprised your followers are not of a more considerable number. Usually your influence commands the devotion of a far greater multitude.”

Elsberry raised her hand to stop him. “Just open the gate and we’ll be on our way.” Her tone making it clear she was not in the mood for any more nonsense.

He stood for a moment, his eyes appreciatively taking her in. A large smile came over his face and turning to one of the other pickets he said, “Crack it open and let them out!”

As before, a loud snap was heard and within moments the road opened up into a field hemmed by a wall of trees.

Elsberry smiled back. “Thank you, Cennick.” She bowed her head slightly and then walked on. Bill returned the bow and added a little wave.

Some of the older ladies gathered around Elsberry as she led the group out of Northbole. They drew close together, twittering and whispering, as they stepped out into the open air.

Hoffer was glad to be leaving. He had found the whole exchange uncomfortable; as if he was spying on some secret and very personal sparring match.

“That Cennick!” said Danella. “He’s always been very sweet on you.” She laughed teasingly.

Elsberry silenced her with a slight nudge.

“I don’t care if he is,” said Elsberry. “Cennick had his chance all those years ago, but decided being a Picket was more important.”

“Oh, c’mon now,” said Herry, a somewhat tactless old Ilfin. “Don’t you miss him even a little?”

“Not one bit,” responded Elsberry, a note of annoyance in her tone.

Herry continued, “But he was your first love, your first kiss. The one who took your flower...”

“Stop it!” Elsberry hissed, her annoyance erupting into embarrassment. “I am a happily married woman and I don’t want you talking like that while Linnet is within earshot.

A pained groan escaped Linnet. Hoffer, who had been listening to their conversation, giggled quietly; apparently Linnet also heard what they were saying.

Having left the gate of Northbole behind, the Ilfins entered into a field that buffered the Treewall from the surrounding forest. Here the orderliness of Halin gave way to the wilds of Anwar. Purple headed alum, bristling thistles and sweet honeysuckle grew in abundance amongst the company of lush grass. Their numbers thrived in the nurturing sunlight and faltered only when they reached the tree line.

A freshly shorn path cut through the rich growth. It issued proudly from Northbole and disappeared into the forest. A meticulously kept corridor of cut grass, the path was wide enough for three Ilfins to walk abreast. Its rigid unwavering lines further accentuated by the plant life that bordered her.

The path led them across this field and into the waiting company of the woods. Instantly, the sunlight faded away to a diffused green beneath the lush canopy.

To Hoffer's sharp ears the forest was alive with activity. In the branches above and all around he heard various types of wildlife going along their daily affairs. Birds fluttered from tree to tree serenading the folk below. Off in the distance he discerned the passing of a small herd of deer dining on the bounty of the forest.

The path led on into the woodland company, slithering around trees too old or too stubborn to move. It marched over hillocks and through little dells, always keeping to a northern course.

Now and then, the path birthed smaller roads that twisted away from its parent and disappeared into the woods. Hoffer wondered where they might lead. What mysteries might wait at the end of one of those roads, perhaps some hidden corner of the forest that no Ilfin had ever seen? A concealed den hording an untold wealth or mystery just waiting for his discovery.

Curiosity burned within him. Hoffer's mind seethed with the possibilities that surely waited for him. If only he would slip away from the group and disappear into the green. He could spend the rest of his life exploring the deep woods.

Hoffer warred with his overly inquisitive nature and then he thought of Timpkin, of the brother whom awaited his return to Halin. His fiery impulsivity cooled and he left the idea of adventure behind...for now.

Hoffer rejoined the retreating group, but his interest in the forest soon meant that he was trailing behind them again. Linnet did not notice this as his mother had called him to her. She busily filled his head with all sorts of facts about the things they were harvesting today.

Trees lined this road on either side, reminding Hoffer of the close avenues of Lunburry Warren. The severity of their numbers fluctuated and at times their ranks would open, affording Hoffer a deeper look into the surrounding forest. Invariably, however, they would close their ranks again and the sight would be lost.

To Hoffer's right, the wall of trees suddenly opened into a small field. Sunlight gently showered the opening, creating a pool of radiance to contrast the darkened wood. Every petal, stalk and blade drank

deep from the offered font of light. This only sharpened the clearing's beauty as every color sparkled from the sunlight's kiss.

Life hummed within this pocket in the tangled wood. Bees busily passed from wildflower to wildflower, collecting their burdens as birds flittered about in the trees. Their song tickled the air as little rabbits foraged on the ground below. Some could be seen but most were hidden in the thick growth. Only the rustling grass marked their passage.

Hoffer stopped to take in this tranquil scene. He longed to run off into the green expanse and feel the tall grass all around him. To pick some of the flowers whose bouquet teased his nose. But, other things demanded his attention today, so with a regretful sigh he started to leave the field behind. It was then that something strange caught his attention.

Four green stalks rose up from the ground at the clearing's far edge. They were tall, easily standing over six feet, curved at the end and dipping slightly forward. From the tip of each one hung a bright green bulb, suspended a few feet above the field's floor by a waxy thread connected to the stalk.

No wind played in the field yet the bulbs swayed freely in a pendulous rhythm. Then one of them began to unravel. From its core issued four wide, flat appendages, each covered by fine hairy bristles and ending in a single black claw.

As the rest of it unfurled, Hoffer saw that what had at first been a simple bulb now appeared to be a form comprised of several enormous leaves fused together to create a whole. It was unlike anything Hoffer had ever seen. This leafy thing twisted and turned as a chime caught upon the wind.

Then it slowly descended towards the ground with all the practiced patience of an arachnid. It suddenly became clear to Hoffer that what he was seeing was some sort of strange, leaf-like spider. It possessed an almost two dimensional body with an anatomy that existed at such an angle as to give the illusion of bulk when viewed straight on.

Hoffer, following the logical destination of its descent, recoiled in horror. A few feet below the spider a fat, brown rabbit happily nibbled some grass, unaware of its approaching death. The spider's black thorny fangs wiggled in anticipation of the kill.

It inched closer to the ground, almost within striking distance. Still the rabbit remained oblivious to its approaching death.

Hoffer desperately cast about for something, anything that might frighten the forager away and save its life. He found a stone of sufficient size and let fly his missile. It hurtled through the air and struck the spider.

Hoffer winced. He had not meant to actually strike the spider but merely to drive off the rabbit.

With a screech the arachnid flailed wildly about in the air, causing the green thread that attached it to the stock to dance about violently. The raucous startled the rabbit and, abandoning its meal, it quickly disappeared back into the woods.

The green thread proved unequal to the strain and snapped. Crashing to the ground, the spider continued twisting about in an effort to stand. Finally, it righted itself and Hoffer saw several black eyes looking about for its attacker. One of them, he noticed, appeared to have ruptured, spilling a generous amount of ooze that dripped onto the ground. No need in guessing where his rock had struck.

Its remaining eyes locked on Hoffer. Blackened orbs seethed with hatred as it chattered with rage. With a bound the leaf spider crossed nearly half the little field, racing towards Hoffer.

In a panic, Hoffer cast about for another stone, hoping to frighten the large spider away. He found one that perfectly fit his hand, wound up his arm and threw the missile. It missed the mark, easily sailing over the leaf spider and striking a tree.

The spider's pace doubled.

"Linnet!" cried Hoffer. "Linnet! Help!"

Hoffer stumbled backwards just as the spider lunged the remaining distance between them. All forty pounds of it hit the startled Ilfin, sending him to the ground beneath the enraged arachnid.

Fighting madly, Hoffer flailed under the spider. Its black claws pinned his arms to the ground, but thankfully did not pierce the skin. Up close the creature was a horror. A remorseless monster devoted solely to murder.

Dark, piteous orbs held Hoffer's eyes, freezing him in place. Thorny fangs bubbled as the leaf spider lifted its head and struck. They drove their venom into Hoffer's shoulder. He cried out and fought hard to break free but the spider held him fast. It watched his thrashing efforts with soulless disinterest as it continued to inject its poison.

Hoffer felt dizzy as if he had drunk too much bereroot on a sunny day. His head swam as the venom ran rapidly through his veins and began shutting his body down. The world slowly melted away into a hazy, sickly green fog.

In the last moments before he lost consciousness, Hoffer felt the leaf spider bind his limbs together and begin to drag him away. From there he fell into darkness where all sensation turned mute and disappeared.



Timpkin's stomach knotted as the lift came to a halt and brought the Hall of Ancestry into view. It was mid morning before he had found himself here.

The hall bustled with activity as visitors made their way past frozen moments of history artfully displayed on the walls. Groups clustered here and there, each guided by an Ilfin clothed in the colors of Oak Brow.

Timpkin glanced nervously about; his eyes darted from face to face. He half expected Renwit to materialize out of the air and unleash a verbal assault of acidic strength but there was no sign of him. Good.

Reminiscing on Linnet's words he whispered to himself, "Puffy faced badger." A soft chuckle escaped Timpkin and calmed his nerves enough to allow him to enter the hall.

Unable to sleep, his mind had spent most of the previous evening fixating on the picture of Bunding Eavwarro. Mentally reviewing the painting, he tried to recall anything that might jog his memory and explain why the oiled rendering was so important. Nothing. Not a single detail revealed why his last dream pointed so firmly to Bunding's painting.

Timpkin had planned on being the first visitor to the hall this morning, so lost in his desperation to unravel the mystery. However, even anxiety and anticipation gave way to fatigue as Timpkin found when his head came off his pillow around nine in the morning.

"Release me."

The words echoed softly in his ear. So quietly, in fact, that had they been spoken by mortal lips Timpkin would not have heard them over the rolling noise of the crowd.

He moved along the hallway. Following the linear progression of the paintings he started at the latest days of Oak Brow and worked backwards. He passed paintings of various subjects but paid them no mind.

When he finally reached the spot where Bunding's portrait was supposed to be hanging, he met with a terrible surprise.

The painting was gone.

In its place hung a mural titled: *The Arcorsan Rose*. It depicted one Herald Eavwarro standing at the bow of a ship named the Arcorsan Rose. Not a mere wooden drift boat, the Arcorsan Rose appeared in this painting as a proud nautical beauty, crafted by the hands of a master artisan. Its gunwales glistening with spray.

Timpkin glanced around, desperately searching for Bunding's portrait.

"Are you lost?" asked a voice. It was warm and inviting.

"Actually it's a painting that's lost or at the very least it's been misplaced," said Timpkin. Fueled by his hunt, Timpkin failed to notice the young Ilfin woman standing right in front of him.

Netha Eavwarro studied Timpkin quizzically. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

“Just the other day, hanging in this spot...” Timpkin pointed at the Arcorsan Rose, “was a portrait of Bunding Eavwarro. Do you know what’s happened to it?”

He faced the silent rendering of Herald waiting for him to come to life and expose the ruse.

Netha laughed as if privy to some secret joke and the music of it drew Timpkin’s attention. He turned away from the painting and looked at her for the first time.

She was a beautiful.

A pure and innocent face, bejeweled with mysterious blue eyes, regarded Timpkin with amusement. Her bright smile warmed her ivory skin and bathed the hall in radiance. Midnight hair framed her face and flowed down in rolling waves to gather at her delicate shoulders.

Normally her allure would have held Timpkin’s attention, but today another voice spoke in his ear. Its whispered words, for him alone, bent his thoughts on his goal so thoroughly that nothing else mattered...only the painting.

“It’s been moved down the hall, to a room where we keep the lesser historical figures,” said Netha. “Would you like me to show you its new home?”

Relief washed over Timpkin and his rising anxiety abated.

“Yes, please,” said Timpkin, his voice seeming to come from far away.

Netha opened her mouth to speak but thought better of it. She turned and led Timpkin away from the *Arcorsan Rose*.

As they moved down the hall, a fog settled on Timpkin’s mind and muted everything around him. The world slipped into the ethereal, its shapes fading into silhouettes of gray and white.

Netha walked ahead of Timpkin and turned her head now and then to look at him. His unfocused eyes stared straight ahead. They did not move, almost as if he did not see those around him yet still he expertly side stepped any patron that stopped right in front of him.

Not a word exchanged between them as they passed both paintings and patrons. Only when they reached the room that contained Bunding’s representation did Netha speak.

“Here he is,” she said, pointing to the painting, “and none the worse for the trip.”

The fog lifted from Timpkin the moment Bunding’s portrait came into view. Without looking away from the painting, Timpkin muttered a “thank you” to Netha. He walked passed her as if she was not there.

Timpkin studied every inch of the rendering but nothing leapt out at him. He did notice the title of the portrait for the first time:

Bunding Eavwarro at Wood Hedge

Suddenly, the treeholm that figured prominently in the background began to shimmer. Its edges glowed with a translucent light. The rest of the painting darkened. Bunding's doppelganger faded completely into darkness against the treeholm's growing luminance.

"Do you see that?" Timpkin asked, not taking his eyes from the painting.

"See what?"

Timpkin turned to her. Instead of looking at the painting her eyes were focused solely on him.

It is there...

The whispered words were cold in Timpkin's ears. He turned back to the painting.

"What is that place?" Timpkin pointed to treeholm in the portrait.

"That's Wood Hedge," she answered

"Do you know where I can find it?" asked Timpkin. His query edged with desperation.

"You can't," said Netha. "It was destroyed years ago."

Timpkin swore silently to himself.

"If you want to find whatever remains of Wood Hedge you should ask Uncle Renwit. Of course, I wouldn't expect him to be of much help," said Netha.

"You mean there are no books or maps that might show me?" asked Timpkin, hope rising within.

"No, I'm sorry," said Netha. "Relations between Oak Brow and Wood Hedge were never warm, even in the best of times, so you won't find anything of use in our libraries. Renwit saw to that."

Renwit, thought Timpkin. The knot quickly returned to his stomach.