

Chapter one: The Crystal Prophecy

"I have loved to the point of madness, that which is called madness, that which to me is the only sensible way to love."

-Francoise Sagan

It was a tender, sunny day in Alszeria, anticipating the end of summer, yet the leaves of Sirta forest persisted their rare-green colour; the sole sign for season shift was the virgin, fair bloom of the Alagenea flower.

The elf Ziederon – widely referred to as Zied – was sitting crossed-legged on the supple moss and grass, stroking the velvet belly of a fawn. His posture said ease as he fed plump Loilonë mushrooms he had to the sillily sprawled animal. These mushrooms were yet another omen for summerset.

There was a slow mincing noise, and a doe came out of the shrub; the herd has finished grazing.

"Aneka, felt sīdan! (Farewell, young fawn!)" said Zied calmly as the fawn skipped towards his mother. The young doe seemed to greet him back before rushing ahead, at her parent's heels.

Silence hung in the air, following the herd's departure and the fading of the easy moment. It was the kind of silence which disregards the rustle and buzz of life, which swells and seeps into all backdrop sounds.

The kind of silence which evokes memory.

The mountain is blowing with chill in his sharp and sharpened ears. His gripping stones are loosened under the gushes of air, becoming limp in the face of their roar. These, however, are no obstacles for him – he is an elf.

Contracting his muscles, he all but glides up the vertical incline, grasping onto the next protruding stone.

Clouds swirl heavily around the mountain with profound, gloom presence. Remarkably-mute light bursts encircle him repeatedly, followed not by thunder, but by low, vague growls which rise from the swollen, black blisters of vapor—

The clouds and gusts give in with a start when he pulls himself one more time: he discovers it is not a mountain shelf he rests on. Rather, it is a trail powdered with light plume of moisture.

Though he is still catching his breath, he pulls himself to his feet: out of the thin mist and thick evening obscurity, a figure draws near, its—

Zied sprung onto his feet as noise of movement penetrated the swollen silence, bursting the memory.

“Ah¹, it is you Emuez, *sedloyán ellái* (my light),” said Zied then sheathed the dagger that he detected it in his hand – “I am sorry; ill thoughts clouded my mind.”

“It is good I came then,” she smiled with a dent of concern to her brow and pressed her lips to his with light.

Zied smiled despite himself and greeted back his fiancé with a kiss, his lips fluttering as moth wings over hers. They talked and walked slowly, tracing lines over each partner’s hand with their thumbs and catching up on the events of the day.

The couple were both over two hundred years old, with Emuez the older of the two – as elves, such a year count was not unheard of, for elves live on so long as they are not met with fatal harm or disease. Due to the unlimited potential for life expectancy, elves lead their lives with relative ease, with patience even. It likewise makes the choice of life partner or partners ever-more delicate, as they could possibly live jointly for thousands-upon-thousands of years, barely affected by time. This has caused the pairing of elves to be unique and noteworthy. Zied and Emuez’s union was, therefore, not to be taken lightly, though their bond did seem light: their conversation was idle and effortless as they motioned gracefully between the trees, their affection worn on their sleeves, probably over their entangled hands.

Emuez has shared with Zied the events of her shift as an Alsserian Sentry, Tzurnat Alsseria, and Zied listened intently.

“I regret missing your father’s departure on account of the shift,” she added. “Has he mentioned how long it will take for his errand in the Western World to be carried?”

“In practice, the duty should consume no more than a fortnight of his time there. I calculate this means he should return within three moons past his parting.” Emuez reacted with a quizzical expression at Zied’s withdrawn reply.

“You need not regret missing him,” he finally submitted, “for when you saw him last, not a dozen days ago, was when I last convened with my father, too; it appears he has departed this morning, as planned, without a leave-taking word.”

Emuez was saddened by this. She wanted to acknowledge the wrongness of his father’s behaviour and to remind Zied of his nature, childhood, and old-fashioned customs – yet she knew better than to project what is already known and was aware Zied would not appreciate a so-called “child treatment”. She conceded on resting a steady hand on his cheek.

She could not tell him today of her own travel plans. She will postpone them altogether.

¹ From this point and until the end of the chapter, all speech and thoughts will be translated from Elvish. Some phrases will appear in their Elvish pronunciation and be translated in the body of the text. For further reading, examine the full dictionary at the book’s end.

They moved on from the topic, and Zied told her of an idea he has been forming to explore the grand coral reef, Gavnet Shammen, as part of his teaching to rise from the manneater alphysicist status, to become a master alphysicist. They flicked between polite and insightful arguments, teasing and affectionate remarks, and few short stories of Zied. He possessed a notable talent for storytelling and could transform the most leaden experience to an enticing tale ("all of the sudden, the young snail could feel a searing sensation throughout its sluggish body, causing its antennas to rock – he knew not it was a nettle he had nibbled on!").

"I do hope my earlier foul mood did not taint your own," probed Zied gently, following a tranquil silence.

"No, not at all. You are to be blamed for nothing," she gave an easing smile.

"I might be reaching then but could there be something on your mind? Something I am not to be blamed for, perhaps?" he persisted, not as subtly as earlier.

Emuez blinked. "Is my heart transparent to an unaided eye?"

Zied smiled reassuringly. "Certainly not. Had I been anyone else, the working of your heart would be too subtle. To me though, your troubles are crystal clear, as the light you bring to my mind."

"How appropriate," she said with bitter irony, not meeting his eye. "I should have known better than to obscure my emotions from my life partner."

Zied clenched internally at the words; they were only uttered half-jokingly.

"I intend to scale the Crystal Peak. I shall head west by at dawn."

Zied's reply was reserved and calculated. "Dare I inquire what questions could drive you to this short-noticed visit to... her?"

Emuez thought long before opening her mouth to speak, yet Zied interrupted: "weigh your answer harder, love, for I know you, and it would seem you opt to insult my intelligence."

Emuez was stunned at his blunt words.

"You avoided disclosing your decision to journey to her, and you ponder long upon what to let me know. You do not bid a question answered by her, do you?" his voice became subdued razors at the final words. "It is **us** you wish to question."

"Yes," she conceded meekly. "Our upcoming union, you see..."

"Yet you chose to withhold consult with me."

"I meant to not weigh your heart with knowledge of my own dishearten," Emuez rationalised.

Every breath sawed through the profound hush which followed.

"I should go. You should depart by nightfall, lest you start the climb at dusk. May your travels be fruitful," said Zied with a detached voice. "Luhe w' duna neka," *may we meet again*, he declaimed.

Emuez gut was made hollow by his choice to conduct the parting formality. Still, bound by her education and manners, she followed suit: “W’luhe w’daimogin larkduin anatha b’belavórden (and may the stars guard over you on your way).”

And he was gone, gone quietly as her were when she had found him in the wood, leaving Emuez with diamonds hanging on her eyelashes.

The day was bleeding to a close and Emuez was prepared to leave for the Sakrell Mountain, whose peak is the most sacred Elven site in the Northern World. The most curious item she packed was particularly important: a small vial, cool to the touch, containing liquid crystal used for the questioning ritual.

She drew the preparations long, all the while looking at her parents’ residence from her window in hope to see her parents before the days-long trip. She had doubted it was important for them to see her beforehand – she was surprised that it was for her at all – but it was – and so she delayed.

She got to her feet the moment the horizon turned grey, and the shadows melted into no light at all – then was startled by a soft knock on her door.

Looking curiously out the window, her sharp, Elven eyes saw no one.

Opening her door, she could hear the word “**laythena!**” uttered softly; immediately her eyelids grew heavier-and-heavier, and all reason and conscious thought deemed into the muck of a forced sleep.

Emuez’s mind was a mire, yet she was a Sentry of Alsseria – the elite of the Watch; her training has prepared her for all kinds of assaults and ensnares. Thus, she was able to recover her consciousness out of the muddle into which it was cast.

Her body was cumbersome, and every thought took peculiar routes through her mind. Rubbing her eyes, she had thought she was yet sleeping, that is until her thoughts cleared enough to realise that she is yet in her poorly lit residence. Beside her rested a bag (*‘my bag,’* her numb mind processed) turned inside out, and its contents scattered about her.

‘How bizarre...’ she thought with a dazed head, *‘what happened here? And who...?’*

Her head felt as if it is tilting and she fell to the floor, forcing down her throat a gag.

Tasting acid, Emuez neared her strewn belongings, and while gathering them, her eye caught shimmering light on the floor.

Her stomach churned upon recognizing its nature – a puddle of liquid crystal tainted the floor; the vial which used to contain the solution has been shattered methodically, the floor carpeted with no more than crumbs of glass.

Seeking refuge from her home, Emuez sprung to her feet and bolted out her door. The comforting evening air she breathed was shaking behind her ribcage as she strode, gracefully nevertheless, away from her breached home.

She froze in front of a door – Zied’s door.

She was surprised to have found herself at his doorstep. *‘I shouldn’t be, though. Who else could make sense of this state of play apart from my own sensible elf?’*

Yet instead of steadying the trembling within her, she found this door further unsettling; a note hung carefully upon it, delicately adorned with her name.

Emuez, my dear,

I have visited her, the Crystal Priestess, a long time ago. She revealed to me that for now, our union cannot come to be, for destiny has entrusted me with a task, one I am incapable of avoiding. One I have attempted avoiding.

You might, perhaps, find comfort in distance from me, as I am sent many ways away from you.

Do please forgive me for abusing alphysicy against you, for it was indeed I who put you to sleep and discarded your crystal. I have attempted to persist on my avoidance from my fate, by stopping you from revealing your own. By doing so, I betrayed you and your love for me. By trying to preserve our relationship, I fear I may have destroyed it with a cruel, cruel urge. I am sorry.

Remember, Emuez, that no matter what now comes to pass, I shall always love you.

Yours,

Zied Kürdeth h’Zardnin.

Emuez had had to read the letter several times in order to process its contents.

‘Kürdeth h’Zardnin?’ pondered Emuez *‘Why does Zied identify as the Worlds Redeemer? Has the Crystal Prophet intitled him so?’*

The frustration at Zied’s ambiguous words grew inside her into tenacious, steady rage like solid flame. She had no hesitation when she reached to open the door to Zied’s residence.

With no warning, revolt has risen within Emuez for the third time that night. Her hand quickly clasped her mouth and nose to shield them from the gut-turning odour of rot.

She knew not what the cause for it could be; merely two days ago the house smelled of nothing but wood and resin and flowers – even at that very moment the room seemed tidy – though quite empty.

Emuez stepped inside to investigate. The air was still in the dark room; the only light was the shimmer of her silvery hair, the only sound – her footsteps and shaky breath through her hand.

...and a metallic scratch. Startled, she sprung backwards before realised that her foot had merely tackled an object on the floor.

Looking down, Emuez comprehended it was the short dagger Zied held this morning.

It was daubed with blood.

And there, farther on and around the dining table, to which she has sat countless times before, laid an elf.

"Zied...?" she mumbled, her voice hardly pushing air, though her heart pumped blood hard and fast.

Emuez felt ice teeming down her spine: this was not Zied. It was his father's mutilated corpse. His limbs unnaturally warped; one of his arms was missing with the marrow of the stump's bone sucked out of it, as if by a famished scavenger. His head twisted, turning backwards, and his eyes – oh his eyes! – the eyelids dangled over hollow sockets which exhibited crusted trails of blood tears.

Something within her cracked. She fled that house. Her mouth gaped in mute shrill of terror, though her haunted mind was booming: *'Had I caused this? Was this a message to me? Why has Zied spared **me** after assaulting me with alphysicy? Oh, stars, has this side of him existed all the while? His mindset was foul and dark earlier, and he drew that same dagger at me when I startled him... in his letter he mentioned "a cruel, cruel urge..." oh, stars! Why was I spared?!'*

Emuez gave in to the recurring sense of abhorrence as she ran, and she vomited. She then fell to her knees, rolling onto her back as tears began to roll off her wide eyes.

She was found unconscious in the forest by bypassing elves. She was brought to healers who sought to tend to her, yet there was none to mend, superficially speaking.

Her silent grew long, stretching over five days. Only then did the healers dare to attempt communicating directly with her mind using their own. There, in the private forest of her Consciousness, they uncovered the ghastly truth possessing it...

And through this sick murder, the realization of the doom of the Northern World has been commenced, and the divination of fate begun.

Chapter two: Bear Away

Thirteen years prior to Chapter one.

A hush of relief poured into the room with the release of a last strained breath. The secretions-coated mortal woman extended weary yet sound hands to receive her new child from the midwives, a radiating beam pierces through the aches, tears, and perspiration which cascaded off her.

She was rapt in the near-unnatural softness of the babe's whimpers. Her husband braced her tightly, resting his black hair against her chestnut strands, and looked at the babe, no less enthralled.

"A boy," he observed with a smile. "Did you decide of a name for him, dear?"

"He is Adem," said his wife with conviction, caressing their son's clay-coloured hair which stuck to the fair skin.

"You're right, Beranette," replied he, and replaced her hand on the head of their child.

"Adem' is true."

Under the babe's swollen eyelids could be traced a glint of sea-deep green, and the mortal couple sighed.

"Look, Leopord!" whispered Beranette. "His eyes open at the sound of his name."

Adem's lips began blinking and he was bombilating demandingly. Leopord grinned and allotted space for Beranette while she raised their firstborn to her breast.

Six days past and the trio headed to the Grand Priestess of their people, to have their son blessed by her, as customary for newborns.

Adem was fast-asleep and tucked in his mother's arms, unbothered by the typical northern chill whilst they were waiting to enter the priestess' hut; he was sturdy for his age and with pleasant mood.

From inside the cabin emerged a young, chattering girl and her father, noticeably pleased with the results of their visit. The two parties bowed heads politely at each other ere the priestess summoned inside Beranette, Leopord, and Adem.

They were invited to sit, and the Grand Priestess approached them, smiling at the sight of the baby. She fluttered her fingers over his untroubled brow.

"What is the child's name?" asked the Grand Priestess then took him in her arms; he did not even stir.

"Adem," replied Leopord with a smile in his voice. The priestess knit her brow with wonder.

"Adem..."

His eyes opened with sudden attentiveness, looking into the priestess' eyes, and she opened her mouth to speak – though not a blessing. Rather, in a misty, faraway voice, she began unfolding a prophecy:

"Be taken the boy onto hapless betide;

Out of love and of haste this fate he'll abide:

He shall fight to confound the evil which looms,

For redeeming all life from an imminent doom.

The love of the hero shall cause sorrow to flower,

Yet his soul will it brace, pervading with power.

His anguished heart to return would demand –

Both to and fro should beget reprimand.

Each wrong and loss shall fan up ire

To enfold his heart and arm with fire."

Adem blinked and yawned, and heavy eyelids caved; he was again in the mansions of dreams.

Beranette and Leopord, though, were stunned amute at her ominous words, yet the priestess was oblivious to their distress, carrying on with blessing Adem with fair fate, wisdom, and love.

Thus it was, in the land of Elda: the northern home of the mortals.

Leopord and Beranette sat to the table together, yet conversation was wanting. Though by now, this was nothing they were unaccustomed to; their house has become colder than most places in the north.

Looking up from his plate, Leopord opened his mouth to speak: "And where's—"

"As if you do not know," snapped Beranette.

"And did you—"

"Of course I told Adem to stay! He knows what it does to me when he goes away, not that it bothers him any longer; he snuck out, and we won't see him tonight."

Leopord's eyebrows puckered over his eyes at his wife's assertiveness, and he picked up his dinnerware. "You needn't speak to me in this way. You know I'm on your side."

"Do I!"

Leopord's frown deepened, and he filled his mouth with food, rather than with poor-taste conversation – but Beranette did not finish.

Commented [ZG1]: When I translated, I forgot to add that he's kidnapped. Original translation:
The boy who was chosen shall rise to the challenge

"I would've known that had only you've been cooperating in any way with me to protect our son."

"I've been cooperating with you, and I still do! I have defended our son from those who could bring him to risk, and I stood by you, when all started to alienate you." He suddenly paused and raised a hand. "Please, let us not discuss this again."

"No, please, let arguments be heard! Let it not be your monologue. Do tell how you stood by me when I installed windows bars to protect Adem from an impending kidnap, how you taught our son from home, how you supervised him with his friends and their parents, how you kept him from knowing his fate lest he accepted it, and how weary you were of the day he'll find love to **fight** for!"

Leopord studied with compassion the fierce glitter of the brown eyes, though his voice remained serious and uncompromising.

"You know of my opinion about these actions," he said unapologetically. "I wish not to speak of it again. A monologue is not favourable, but this conversation is no dialogue, either."

Beranette leaned backwards heavily. "I don't know what to expect any longer – at least having an idea of when he would be taken could have made it easier to endure and handle!

"Yes, yes, I know your opinion on the matter," she pushed on before he cut her off, "yet I can't find ease in my heart until I've faced those who'd take him. Thirteen years we've been preparing – I hope it is enough."

"And may it be that we'll be among the few who manage to prevent fate from realising," her husband said.

Beranette surprised him with a smile. "Perhaps there are a few things left that we both agree on."

They were both surprised later that night how this simple common ground eased matters between them enough for passion to grow. They were similarly surprised, upon the physical reunion, by the degree each of their bodies has been longing to feel the other's.

So caught up in the sensations were they that Beranette missed the faint sound of groaning iron, though she did catch the noise of breaking wood from inside the house minutes later. Even then, she was tempted to not trace its cause. Yet expecting calamity in every moment (and in every kind of moment) for thirteen years had played its part.

Ignoring her husband's wordless protest, she sprinted across the hallway to Adem's room. She could not guess what she'd find there though, with Adem being away from home.

The thick metal bars and the frame of the window were either bent or broken, so that the window was left gaping, allowing the vacant night to suck the curtains outwards, rolling with the wind. In the room, one of the bed's legs appeared broken, having caved under pressure that was put on it, yet something underneath the mattress was keeping the bed aligned. Only the bookshelves and desk were not meddled with, more or less.

"**Leopord!**" cried Beranette.

"I'm here," he said wrapping her with a night gown.

Her mind was racing, veering out of control.

"What... what could it mean? Has Adem avoided his fate?" her chest was heaving with rising emotions.

"I do not know, m..."

"Check... Check outside! Locate the burglar if you can!" she ordered.

He nodded without objection and rushed out the house. Beranette was motionless for a mere moment before acting: she looked for clues – what was the burglar interested in? For whatever reason has he troubled to enter after breaking the window to a vacant room? Oh, and **how** has he overcome two-centimetres-thick bars of metal and a reinforced window frame?!

She began searching for whatever might be missing. The bookshelves were indeed untroubled, though under the bed she found a thing she knew not what to make of – a small chest. Once she released it from the bed's pressure, she opened it to discover letters. Old letters, it seemed by the writing skill...

"May you get lost on a starless night," hissed Beranette, noticing from whom they all were, even before reading the correspondence.

Her eyes suddenly fell on a piece of paper next to the broken bed's foot, with a quill by its side.

Picking it up, she read its contents, and her heart grew heavy and frosty with every word:

Alexandra,

I'm sorry for doing it over a letter, and especially such a hurried one, but I am leaving. I wish I could offer you more than this letter and the time we have shared, but it is my destiny to go.

You know that I've been suspecting my parents are hiding something. Well, I found out what it is: a prophecy that I will head out to save the Worlds from evil. I snuck away for advice from the Grand Priestess when my parents and I were in the capital, and she told me. Believe me, I never thought the time would arrive so soon... an elf took me while you and I were together in our secret place, then I realised what was happening.

I now pack and write these final words to you before we head to Alk-Gammed. I don't know where I'll go from there or when I should return.

Forgive me. I am doing this in your name and to keep you safe. I love you, and I will come back for you.

Adem.

"I found nothing—"

"He is gone."

Leopord watched his wife tearing over the letter. Reading it over her shoulders, his own slouched with broken acceptance. "He knew his fate. He's known it for days."

Beranette's gaze would have set the paper aflame had it not been wet with her tears.

"This Alexandra should never see the last words he wrote to her."

Leopord's expression became cautious and worried. "Dear, these words... they are the last words he's left before departing—"

"In **her** name!"

"Trust me, I know – but she deserves answers! This is something we at least have. If she loves him as much as this letter suggests, she'd be devastated and confused by his leave-taking."

Beranette opened her mouth – then closed it and nodded with a thoughtful expression.

"This letter supplies us with one unexpected thing," she said, her voice rising: "we know his destination! We could follow him, save him from his takers and from himself!"

"Pardon? You wish to follow him? To... Alk-Gammed?! But... this is his destiny! Now that it is initiated, we cannot interfere—"

"I know you have always been reluctant about trying to interfere with fate, even though neither of us wanted Adem to be borne away, but now that he's gone, I beg you to come with me." she insisted. "You can accompany me to keep him safe. You can be their personal cook, for all I care! Your motives would be your own, but I know what mine are: I mean to save him, if it's in my power."

Leopord inspected his wife's tenacious expression.

"I will join," he said, conceding at last.

"Very well," her expression was pleased for a moment, then her tone turned venomous.

"But, first, let us deliver Adem's vaguely-constructed letter to its recipient – the poor girl will be heart broken."

Chapter three: Interlude of Introductions

Adem has been feeling his heart torn, to say the least.

He was exhilarated by everything he had seen and heard; never has he been out on sea – not to mention on a full-sized ship! Now that he has, Adem was entranced with the sea, with its foam as the ship's bow gashed through the water surface, with the utter tranquillity of all the living and otherwise, but most of all, Adem was at awe from the previously unfamiliar vastness of the ocean.

On the other hand, he's forsaken his loved one for a vague journey. He found himself standing at the bow along the day, shying away from the eyes of the cool and mature elves.

"Good morning, Adem," said Zied from his rear. "Apologies for not approaching you earlier; I was needed elsewhere on the ship."

Adem's brow wrinkled slightly.

"That's not my name," he complained.

Zied was startled and ashamed. "I am sorry! I have never forgotten a name before. Please, tell me once more what it is."

"I meant that is not how it's pronounced! It is a-**dem**, not **a**-dem!"

Zied eased with a smile, then promised to not forget it. Satisfied, Adem changed the topic. "I love your white ship, if I may say so – she is the fastest, most elegant thing I've ever seen!"

"I thank you kindly," said the elf and bowed his head, slightly amused. "Her name is Kenarkath h'Meinin – you may call her the Ripper of Seas, or the Seas Ripper. And it is true, she is likely capable of surpassing any other watercraft made by the other races thanks to my people's artistry: over a period of many mortals' lifespans, elves have fostered into vessels a class of tree species we call in our tongue Tzaherin Faerlédin, which grow upon the surface of salt water. Do you see how the ship's body is uniform, without beams or cracks? This is not owing to craft or skill, but to the ship being a living being.

"This particular tree has been cultivated for speed and endurance: its structure is relatively narrow while the bow is high and deep, it is remarkably strong and light, and the sail-leaves are tight and light like wings. We similarly occupy alphysicist rowers, who bend the water around the ship to not only spur the vessel, but also to keep it higher afloat, and the water ahead less dense. This is how we are now travelling in a maximum speed of thirty-two marine knots."

"Wow..." said Adem, mildly bemused by the unasked-for elaboration. "Only, wouldn't it be easier to just hack trees for ships' construction than waiting for these ones to grow?"

"On a purely practical level, it would be."

Zied's kind smile seemed to be chilly and his Elvish accent slightly more distinct, and Adem decided not to push the question further.

"How did elves grow these trees into ships? Any why are they better than common ships?" he asked instead.

“What is known of the procedures is beyond my apprehension, I dare admit, though their larger share is a secret, I regret to say,” said Zied. “Their advantage is in their uniformity on the one hand, which reduces the traction with water and makes their sails highly effective, but also, since such ships are alive, they may heal independently damage to their structure or sail, particularly under the care of specialists – of whom we have aboard.”

“This is beyond anything I could’ve imagined.” Adem’s eyes were shimmering as they spotted the matrix of green veins interlacing through the sails.

“It gladdens me that I have engaged your imagination.”

“There is a different thing bothering me, Zied,” said the boy slowly.

“What is it?”

“I’ve known my own destiny for mere days: I told you that it was kept a secret from me.” Zied nodded empathetically at his sulky tone. “You, though, have known to set out days ago to find me – perhaps even weeks! But how’ve you known to find me? How did you recognise me and knew where to locate me?”

“A fair question,” Zied nodded. “Upon visiting the one who bears the words of fate for my people, I was told that my destiny is to set out on this journey, along with three more champions. I was then instructed to not only trust in destiny, but to follow it – and I have made up my mind to trace this instruction to the letter, rather than take it for mere prudence.

“It was thus that, upon making harbour at Elda, I set to observe those who attended your priestess. Then it was that I realised you are the one I have been searching for,” Zied’s smile turned apologetic. “Apropos, I am sorry to have eavesdropped on your conversation, but it was all I could think to do at the time.”

Adem was surprised. “Why have you taken so long to contact me then? And... why did you elect to take me in such a crafty manner? Sorry for the wording, by the way.”

“It was fairly put. But understand, your parents have been highly protective of you, and I predicted they would have reacted strongly had I appeared at their doorstep to take you along. Wishing to avoid being hunted whilst departing from Elda, I turned to the measures I saw fit. Moreover, I knew not what your opinion of the role you were destined to play was. I know I, for one—” Zied at once silenced, closed his eyes, as if to settle his mind, then continued with a renewed smile. “At any rate, I wished to avoid delay and opposition; our cause must be above parental concern.”

Adem did not know if he found the elf’s rationalization compelling, but he nodded. “So, do you know how we are to find our third companion?”

“Not at the moment, though I have contacted two friends of the Alsserian watch in advance. They now serve as private protection for an Elven ambassador of Alk-Gammed, yet he was able to spare them for some days to aid us, though he is unfamiliar with our goal.”

“And... will they be able to help us in our search?”

“Perhaps not directly,” admitted the elf, “yet it is an asset to have escorts who are acquainted with the manners of dwarves. Regardless, our journey is predicted to be hazards-afflicted, and I would be grateful for further protection, lest troubles befall.”

It took less than a week to arrive to Alk-Gammed, and the voyage would have been shorter, had they not needed to sail around the treacherous area known as the Shuddering Blue. Eventually, the Ripper docked at Daikunar harbour, located at the shore of Terrunk city.

Zied and Adem were walking down the gangplank when the former raised his hand and called, “Ah, there are my friends. Kenra! Dirna!”

Two elves, a woman and a man, walked over.

“Luhe w’shturen sedliyen ayel h’duna har-aden (may it be and the truth will shine over this meeting),” greeted Zied with a hand over his heart. As the elves greeted each other in their language, Adem marked the grace and the splendid, natural beauty of the three.

Zied’s friends had swords strapped against their thighs, and Zied himself fastened bow and arrow onto his back. In addition, the boy could not help but note to himself the open disdain and suspicion the nearby dwarves displayed towards the elves. Adem deemed it bold to exercise such blunt hostility when its objects’ waist surpasses each of the dwarves’ shoulders. The elves, however, did not seem to mind.

‘Maybe additional protection is not excessive,’ Adem thought worriedly. ‘Why does our presence attract such reactions, I wonder?’

The woman suddenly surprised him with a question in Elvish, and he could do nothing more than to blink in silent awkwardness.

“Speak Tichnor, Kenra, if you please,” requested Zied, subtly amused.

Kenra smiled. “Of course, a foolish error and entirely my fault. What is your name, dear boy?” she rephrased with a kind expression.

“Adem (Kenra was surprised at how strongly he emphasised the second syllable in his name), pleased to make your acquaintance, Kenra and... Dirna, was it?”

“Correct. It is not every day that us elves become acquainted with a mortal youth, and it is a pleasure to be at one’s presence.” Each nodded their head in a polite gesture, but Adem wondered if he understood Dirna’s meaning rightly.

“Have you awaited long our arrival?” asked Zied.

“Not at all, not at all,” answered Dirna. “We have preceded your arrival to Terrunk by an hour – haven’t gone as far as locating a suitable inn for us to stay in.”

“Not to be rude, but would that be a thing we’re interested in doing? I feel it would be a... um... misuse of our time and resources. The day is young – we should perhaps get to the task at hand.”

Kenra and Dirna were slightly taken aback at the boy’s definitively phrased remark, but Zied did not linger over it.

“Adem speaks truth. Fate has entrusted us with a quest of utmost importance; folly it would be, being tempted to comfort or idleness.”

“We shall evade the both therefore,” affirmed Dirna. “What is it precisely you were tasked to accomplish here? And how should we begin?”

“We are bent on finding the third member of this mission, of whom we know naught. Our primary guidance was to ‘follow fate’, which is how I have identified Adem as the second member of this journey – I went to the site where fate is communicated in the land of Elda.”

“If it is such a scene you seek in Alk-Gammed, we should make way for the capital, Dilom,” announced Kenra. “The city was built as an ascending site to Mount Oisk, where destiny is interpreted by the prophet.”

Zied’s brow tensed. “It is a long road.”

“No shorter than three days per direction with the required stop in Kelon taken into account, to which it is less than a day’s walk,” agreed Kenra.

Zied’s face was remorseful at the bother he would put his friends through.

“Why would we need to stop at Kelon?” Adem asked.

“The second part of the road is wide, barren plains where the road is not always kind. We will be bound to hire travel provisions as well as aid to carry it.”

Zied had gone silent at that and thought hard. Adem could not understand his hesitation, yet was afraid to insult Kenra or Dirna, who had arrived to Terrunk but an hour ago – only to escort the pair to the city whence they came.

Zied crossed eyes with Adem, and, as if reading the boy’s thoughts straightened his back.

“It is best not to linger, in that case. Let us depart as soon as possible.”

Zied led the group to the Seas Ripper’s storage space and stocked them with immediate supplies and equipment, though Kenra and Dirna needed nothing other than sustenance. Adem, however, found it near-impossible to concentrate on the process, as he was left entranced by the diverse collection of books viewed through a series of sturdy display cabinets. Tracing the rows of books, he was saddened to recognise no logical arrangement of them (“*A Survey of the Giant Worms of Zum*”... “*Pointy Ears: Characterizing the Elven Race*”... *I see no pattern here, unless giant worms colonise elves’ ears,*’ thought Adem, unable to hold back a grin).

“Adem, search and find the map of Alk-Gammed and a Dwarven dictionary, if you please!”

“It would indeed be of wisdom to learn a few Dwarvish words on the road, though I see no need for the former, as we possess our own and are not expected to be separated over great distance, considering the nature of your task,” advised Dirna.

Zied was internally worried to follow his suggestion yet nodded in agreement and Adem resumed browsing the diverse library, glad to be given with an excuse to do so.

“‘Are Mortals our Enemy’... we’re not. ‘The Mating Habits of Dragons’... **definitely** no. ‘Analysis of Evil: Origins, Goals, Key Battles, and Unsolved Mysteries’... no... ‘The Dwarven Marble Quarries’... close, but no.”

Nearly all supplies and equipment were packed by the time Adem happily located “The Languages of the Northern Folks: Dwarvish” and was happy to ease Zied’s mind by announcing it contains three map types of Alk-Gammed.

Delighted and purposeful, Zied led the band out of the Ripper of Seas to locate the third ally.

A dwarf with a bald head and a distinguished, braded black beard pointed the group half-heartedly towards a water well, gazing after them in suspicion, and after filling their waterskins (the elves’ were made of some sort of leaves), Kenra and Dirna led the group to the road.

The path was well-trodden, so they could easily locate it without help of a map or signposts, which is not to say there were none. The road was barely occupied by the time they set out; most traders and deliverers had completed their travels ere daybreak. There was one group of five dwarves who had made an undisguised effort to hurry along in order to avoid the elves – though one dwarf did not follow suit.

The dwarf slouched with blatant annoyance and reduced his pace before turning and approaching the surprised group.

“Would you it be awful if I accompanied you four?” he asked in a hoarse, warm voice. “These sorry sods I escorted decided to hurry along, and while I am in no rush, it’s never wise to roam by oneself.”

“Certainly, please join us,” said Zied and smiled heartedly, surprised to hear Tichnor from a dwarf. “I am Zied of Alsseria, and these are my friends.”

“Kenra is my name, and this is my brother, Dirna, we are private protectors of the Alsserian delegate in Alk-Gammed,” she said politely.

“How do you do,” greeted Dirna.

“Oh, ye are siblings! Pardon my surprise, for while I do acknowledge the resemblance, I have not met as many elves as to tell between likeliness of race or blood.”

Adem was similarly surprised and felt as if the dwarf took the words out of his mouth – leading him to be awkwardly late to realise he has yet to introduce himself.

“I am Adem of Elda,” he blushed at the four pair of eyes looking at him, “how nice to meet you, sir.”

“Gemlan is the name. Happy to meet you all,” he smiled warmly at the group, making a loose fist with the thumb sticking out, then bowed his head with the tip of the thumb touching his forehead. The elves laid a palm over their heart and bowed, while Adem just bent his head in a greeting.

The now-five-membered group resumed the walk and displayed interest in its newest fellow, which he reciprocated.

“A fine thing it is, to personally meet elves and a mortal for the first time,” said Gemlan, surprising them again with his tolerant manner. “Will ye be staying long in Alk-Gammed?”

“Not for our part, regrettably – mine and Adem that is,” replied Zied. “We merely have a business to conduct in the capital ahead of sailing on. We are not expected to linger for as long as a full week.”

“Ah, the capital? You could seek out my brother, Gemlin, he began the journey merely half a week ago or so. He might be able to assist you with your ambiguous affair,” he winked, causing Zied to blush. “No, no! you need explain nothing; your business is exactly so.”

“Are you headed to join your brother in the capital, or do you return to your partner?” asked Dirna, deflecting the conversation.

“No, my business in Terrunk is conducted; I am now headed back to my home in Kelon, where my brother and I share a house,” replied Gemlan, refraining from directly addressing the last word in the question.

“What is your occupation then, Gemlan?” probed Adem gently.

“I am multi-untalented,” turned to him the dwarf with a laugh, “I have tested my skill and wit in a variety of trades and crafts over the years. I still take on an occasional smelting or carpentry of home essentials, but I have never been talented in using my hands for crafts. I have retired some fifty years ago, and I prefer to leave such bothers to professionals.”

“Fifty! Why, that is such a long time ago!” cried Adem in amazement. The elves were shocked at his unsubtlety, yet the dwarf minded not.

“I have likely retired ere your father was born, haven’t I?” he gave a real, full laugh, to which Adem joined. “You are right though, at the age of one hundred and seventy, I am nearly officially old.”

Adem was amazed. “I knew not dwarves live so long! Are your lives eternal, as the elves’ are?”

Gemlan shook his head. “The average dwarf would live for about two hundred and twenty years, though there have been those who were nearing full three centuries at their time of death.”

“Remarkable!” said Adem; Gemlan laughed at his reaction. “I wonder how it is, that some races live longer than other?”

“This’s a query for the gods themselves,” shrugged the dwarf; the elves pursed their lips. “The dwarves were the first intelligent race which they had placed on this earth. You could’ve asked my brother to broach this question with the prophet, though I doubt one would receive a definite answer, as dealings with fates tend to be.”

Adem this time did not laugh at the joke, rather he had felt his mind drifting onto another course...

“Your brother,” he said, “you mentioned he is in Dilom... has he gone to climb mount Oisk?”

“Ah, so you have heard of it!”

“I don’t suppose you know what question drew him to seek fate’s guidance?”

Gemlan's expression became graver, and he stopped walking. "I do not, and had I known, I would not have presumed to disclose such a thing, be it to a stranger or a friend. I will indulge you with this: it is a northern-Dwarven custom to enquire fate for counsel every thirteen years."

Adem felt shame to have assumed as far as to ask such a question; he had nevertheless forced himself to maintain coolness.

"I apologise Gemlan. I promise that I meant no offense, and I didn't intend to delve into your or your family's personal affairs out of meddlesome urge," said Adem and bowed his head humbly. The elves were watching the exchange with blank expression.

The cold atmosphere somewhat thawed and Gemlan resumed his stride. "Because I sense your intentions are of pure heart, I will add only this: Gemlin is no tradition-stickler, but he has never skipped a visit to our prophet and would even visit more often than custom dictates; my brother and the prophet are close."

Adem was puzzled at the obscurity kept around the topic, yet he responded with nothing short of polite gratitude. He retreated from conversation with the dwarf, allowing another travel partner to engage, while he sought Zied's company for a conversation of their own.

The elf appeared to have been intent in conversing with the boy as well, as the two soon found themselves falling a few steps behind the rest, speaking in hushed voices.

Chapter four: Ailed Love

"[...] Away from light steals home my heavy son, and private in his chamber pens himself, shuts up his windows, locks fair daylight out and makes himself an artificial night."

-William Shakespeare, from "Romeo and Juliet"

Alexandra Sofia has confined herself to her room whenever she could help taking a part in the Worlds. No-one besides her was allowed inside her space, especially her parents, not even in the brief instances she had no choice but exiting it. She attended her responsibilities – those being school and boating classes – but she wasn't a part in them. While she was in her room, she had no food and drank naught but her briny tears. She would have grown shrill had she not occasionally had to put in a shoulder on the boats and eat under her concerned parents' watchful eyes. Yet none could make her sleep through the night.

Her friends used to come and try helping in that too. They would offer sleepovers, socialising, and other comforts. But these efforts have long since died out; there was not much sunshine to try to lure Alexandra with anymore, and the neighbouring lakes and streams grew far too cold for casual bathing – but neither of those things drew Alexandra regardless. They had stopped trying.

Her parents, Jorë and Pimpernella, would not. They were providing their daughter with fresh garments as a substitute for her gradually wearing-wetting clothes by tears, they wished to wash and replace her tattered and tearing sheets – or at least set up a warm bath for their daughter. She would have none of it: depending on her mood and degree of vigour, she would either decidedly sit with heavy eyelids and would resolutely repel their attempts, or she would snap into red-eyed, violent fit and cast them out of her space.

Weeks had passed. Despite her parents' efforts, Alexandra was trying to experience as little as possible. Never moving on. To what end, they did not know, but it was like sharing a home with an apparition: a hollow doppelgänger filling for their daughter's place.

There was one hurtful item that Alexandra herself expelled from her room's boundaries: Adem's letter.

The rocky tusks jutted tall all about, saliva foaming over the food residues still stuck between them: cracked wood boards and planks, metal barrel hoops, ragged sails and flags. The sea's breath was hissing through its gnashing fangs, which smelled of salt, rotting wood, and rust. She was then wobbling forward, deep between these jagged teeth. She realised then that there is another whistle trickling into the misty air, an alien-native tune. Then that whistle turned into a piercing screech, and she was in a clearing of sea, where the water pulsated and bubbled as blare

blasted through. Suddenly, she heard Adem! He roared in a voice so alien she was almost doubting her recognition – then, a blast of hot crimson fire filled her sight. She screamed and tried to turn away, but there was fire everywhere she looked.

She thought she heard a bell ring then, though no chime was sounded. There was no wild-hued fire, she was just seated cross-legged on a cold wooden floor close to the fireplace, so it was filling her field of vision. It was full of dancing tongues of flames, as if caught in wind which were not there, haphazardly shifting, but with purpose all the same. Feeling chilly, she neared her hands to the fire, but though closer she went, she didn't feel heat radiating, but...

Alexandra inhaled sharply and opened her eyes. She blinked to shoo the enduring prickly shards of dream, then she sobered a bit to appreciate they were just hurt tears, summoned by the recall of Adem's voice echoing from her mind. Alexandra did not flinch away from the memory's jagged fangs, biting at her. Her mind reached and clung onto it, and the gashes it had left on it made her bleed from her eyes and moan in ache.

The pain of their daughter could reach Pimpernella and Jorë even thru her room's shut door.

"I can't believe I let it go so far," muttered Jorë for the who-knows-what time these last several months. "We should have listened to Beranette and prevented their relationship growing so serious."

"We couldn't have known then that the boy would—" sniffed Pimpernella from her chair at the edge of the room, fidgeting with the red gem jutting from her mother's necklace, her eyes watery yet resentful.

"I saw in him a husband for her, one day," he continued, his wife's words falling about his ears. "He seemed so committed... mature... I thought he'd—"

"Stop it, Jorë. It was the wrong choice, and we both know it. And even if we tried separating them, we may have failed at that."

Jorë snivelled and nodded heavily; his shoulders so slumped they almost touched his knees.

"We need to think what we need to do—" a sob escaped her lips and she shivered—"right now. We need to try and **help** Alexandra!"

"How can we?" he groaned helplessly. "The lad and his family are gone and will not come back probably. That's the end of it."

"I don't know how," said Pimpernella, her words shot like arrows, "but we both know who will."

"What can she—?"

"Enough! We tried everything – reconnecting her with her friends, gifts, aid, professional advice, and even time alone. Not a **thing** helped, and Alexandra's state's worse." Pimpernella regarded her husband, her fists clenched. "Listen – no, **listen** to me, Jorë! Please...

Commented [ZG2]: Decide on a name
Jorë and Wona

Commented [ZG3]: Decide how the gem came to her or
her mother.

"I don't know what to do either," Pimpernella stood up, walked to her husband, and sat beside him – without touching. "I don't even know if there **is** something to be done at all, but we know how to find out. We must not become hopeless before we know for sure."

Jorë looked for a long time at his wife. Then, he leaned towards her and kissed her (non-responding) lips and nodded.

"You're right." He took a deep breath and his shoulders somewhat steadied. "Of course, of course you're right. I'll start preparing for the trip and will leave at dawn to the Priestess."

"Ah, my dear, I've been missing you—"

"You **must** be joking, aren't you?" spat Pimpernella and detached her husband hands from her shoulders. "You were gone for three days for a reason. Now, enough fondling and tell me what the priestess had told you!"

"Nella..."

"Yes? Stop idling!"

"We..." he swallowed. "There is nothing we can do."

Silence; and then: "What?"

"There is hope," he qualified sans none, "but there's nothing that **we** can do to help Alexandra."

Resentment and impatience were uprooted from Pimpernella's features and left them hollow.

"Tell me what she said," she burbled.

"The Priestess said... well, it sounds like we can do nothing, but if at least one of three things happen by the next winter solstice, then our daughter will be saved: she feels love again for another, a mind-affecting force intervenes, or Adem returns."

"But... what if none of these things happen by then?"

"Then... then she's lost. Or worse, she'll lose her sanity for grief."

Pimpernella's breath accelerated. "But maybe we can try bringing people over again, maybe Alexandra will meet someone she'll fall in love with!"

Jorë was shaking his head before she finished. "This isn't up to us, the Priestess said. She needs to happen upon some person who she'll love on her own. Well, I don't know what Alexandra needs to do, but she should be doing the... doing."

"What about the other things? There must be something that—"

"That what?" probed Jorë in desperation. "Will you look for some evil potion to quell our daughter's pain with to bide our time before she is **really** lost?"

At last, Pimpernella broke and began to weep, falling to the floor. Jorë sat down right by her and embraced his wife for the first time in weeks.

"There must be... must be..." she moaned. Jorë tightened his embrace. Pimpernella gulped the lump in her throat, barely breathing through her sobs. "I never thought... that the... the stories were... t-true..."

"What stories?"

"That love could... that it **would**..."

Her weeping overcame her words, and she was just resting her head in Jorë's lap while she cried.

That night, once the two managed to somewhat compose themselves, Pimpernella came into her daughter's room. She didn't knock, but Alexandra was seated on the floor against her bed in one of her hollow states and did not react; she merely continued to stare at her hands through tears and baggy, inflamed eyelids.

"Alexandra," whispered Pimpernella and slid to sit beside her daughter, "Alexandra, my heart, do you hear me?"

"Mngh..." Her nearly dead voice spilled chills down Pimpernella's spine.

"My darling, I know that you can't let go of your love for... that boy... and I know that I can't make you let go of it... and though it breaks my heart, now I... I... must accept it..." she couldn't help a choking. Alexandra raised her eyes with effort at her mother's voice. "But I can't, I can't let you go without expressing how dear you are to me. You are my one and only daughter, my heart..." Pimpernella tightened her mother's necklace to her chest, then unclasped its chain and with trembling fingers, put it around her daughter's neck, "... and I want you to have something of mine close to yours..."

"I love you, Alexandra," Pimpernella said, and pressed the faded red stone against her daughter's frail skin. "Please remember: there are others who love you in these Worlds."

She nearly broke in sobs when Alexandra's fingers touched hers over the necklace – and then again, when they meekly tugged her hand away before dropping limp.

'The gem has sharp edges,' Pimpernella explained to herself, barely maintaining her composure as she saw the empty eyes wherewith Alexandra watched the necklace round her neck. She kissed her daughter's head, her lips quivering, and after she left, she caught her own shoulders in tight hug.

Alexandra whispered: "Thank'... mom..."

The door closed.

Chapter five: Alsseria Alarmed

"Deserves it! I daresay he does. Many that live deserve death. And some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them? Then do not be too eager to deal out death in judgement. For even the very wise cannot see all ends."

-J. R. R. Tolkien, "The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring"

Even the dead-keeper needed to be swayed into tending the body. Consequent of a day of arguments for and against – he did it. Harnessing alphysicy to clear the scent of death out of the air, he had supplied Zied's father with a body-passing ceremony: the transition of his remaining compositions into that of a hallowed Arniye tree. The dead-keeper was later assigned to mind-rehabilitation by designated alphysicists.

The incident was felt beyond the village wherein it occurred – the entire land was bewildered by this heinous crime. The elves hold the sanctity of all life in the highest regard; no meat would they consume, no tree shall they harm beyond mending. Amongst a people of such belief, no offense is more momentous than homicide.

It is no wonder then the repercussion of the murder caused the queen to announce a nation-wide mourning week and to assemble a council. To the conference were summoned the leaders of each city and village, the highest-ranking officers of the guard and watch, the queen's councillors and secretaries, Elven law-workers, and other influential or key individuals of the people. Furthermore, while uninvited, a large crowd of elves gathered outside the hall in which the council was held, awaiting news with seeming patience.

A hush was cast over the hall the moment stood the queen in all her awe-full grace, radiating a halo of reverence.

"Ladies² and gentlemen, my people," her voice was soft yet clear as falling snowflake, "ye all are conscious of that which gathers us under my roof. Over a dozen days ago, a murderer struck amongst us; Ziederon, of Damëko village, hath taken his father's life," brisk, biting wind shuddered the snowflake. "Thru the mourning hebdomad, alphysicists and investigators of the guard have been analysing evidence and interrogating witnesses, and I was assured the elf – for he is an elf, by the broadest definition – stands rightfully accused.

"We are hence gathered to establish a course of action thereof. The people expect us to decide. I shall now listen, ere I issue a decree."

The queen's chief counsel-woman took over the assembly the same time the head of the guard stood to speak.

² The verbal interactions of this chapter will be translated from Elven tongue.

“By your leave, my liege, I humbly wish to amend a word you said: the people do not merely expect a decision of us, but **action** as well,” a murmur of agreement rustled through the hall. “I believe the people expect us to seize this... offender and to imprison him for the remainder of his undying life. I bid you, my ruler, to heed this counsel: realising their desire would not only be a righteous act of justice, but likewise our obligation for our civilization – and for all life! Duty-bound are we to apprehend Ziederon and thrust justice upon his head.”

The murmur grew into more distinct words of like-mindedness.

The counsel-woman raised her hand for order and the crowd obediently hushed.

“Compelling words by the high captain of the guard,” acknowledged she. “What say the representatives of our countryfolk? Do these claims echo the aspiration of the people?”

“They do, my liege,” said one of the key elves from among the people, and others sounded similar replies.

“For the sake of order and balance, the queen’s wish is to heed all views, every possible doubt, or any suggestion for alternative courses of action in the pursuit of justice,” announced the counsellor.

A mere short silence fell ere the captain of the guard raised his voice yet again: “her majesty would likely hear no opposition of—”

“Sire, I would implore you to avoid speaking unless assigned permission to do so,” interrupted the counsellor with a stern voice. “Being a great, and a shrewd member of the council of Queen Frëa-Thyr, you know interjections such as these dishearten other members from speaking their minds. You will forgive me, I trust, for the impoliteness I have demonstrated by interrupting your remark, as it is the queen’s behest that this assembly will be handled strictly according to proper conventions.”

“I will, of course,” said the captain with a stiff bow of head.

“With your permission, madam counsellor,” rose a law-worker. “I would like to raise a question to the investigators, as they are present to my understanding: as the queen’s law dictates just trial and fair process, I would like to question the motives which drove Ziederon to such acts – were they established?”

The investigators said no.

“While I doubt not the professionalism of the investigators, I fear I see potentially troublesome arguments here,” he said, capturing the attention of all. “Not only do we have no motive for this gut-churning crime, but I likewise have reason to question the identity of the offender: I have heard from all his acquaintances that this elf is remarkably intelligent and level-minded; this horrendous murder, on the other hand, is careless and disordered. I mean, he virtually signed his name in the crime scene – which is his own home! I beg your pardon for this cold, controversial phrasing, for while I am mortified at the crime, I long to see justice through properly.”

“He might have exercised brusqueness to present his father the way he desired,” said an officer of the guard. “Or he was a madman who took pride in his actions.”

“Then what gratification would there be in it for him? He has left Alsseria, as far as evidence suggests.”

“Another opposing stance on the matter could be that the level of sophistication speaks nothing of the killer’s identity. Even the most disciplined elf could lose his self-restraint.”

“We all lose our temper, kind sir. Nevertheless, none here has dismembered another.”

The crowd shuddered. All were growing confused and polarised.

“If I may, madam?”

“Proceed, miss,” said the counsel-woman.

The Elven woman was looking steadily and blankly into the law-worker’s eyes.

“Here is your testimony of his guilt: the day before the body was found in his home, the elf affirmed of a dark mindset and spoke ill of his father; the eve the body was found he wrote of a cruel urge within him; he committed assault against his would-be life partner. Finally, he has once confided that he had committed some sort of offence on a past time of life in his homeland, at the western world, which has driven him to migrate north, thus, attesting to his capacity for a dramatic loss of temper.”

A silence fell following this sharp-worded testimony.

“Who mayst thou be, miss?” asked the counsel-woman.

The elf’s moonlight hair fluttered as she turned to meet her gaze.

The queen leaned forward. “She is Emuez, Ziederon’s past would-be partner in union. She is present per mine invitation.”

Another silence followed. Emuez drew all eyes to her.

“Does that settle your doubt? Good,” spoke Emuez then turned her eyes straight to the queen, stepped to face of her and kneeled, without disengaging her gaze from her ruler’s eyes. “If you deem it well, your excellence, I should desire nothing more than to aid in leading a hunt for my old **love** – and I humbly implore you to charge such a quest.”

The crowd went silent as a tomb at her presumptuous appeal, yet the fair queen’s expression was flat.

The queen rose a second time, and the hall seemed to be holding its breath.

She was quiet for another moment before speaking. “You would require guidance... and perseverance...”

“Hark, for the queen hath issued an instruction!” the queen’s chief counsellor formally announced to the crowd mustered outside the hall. “The captain of the guard and the captain of the Sentries shall enlist a hunting party. The sentry, Emuez of Damëko, and the guard’s high captain, Rovuntho of Filthen h’Elfin, shall spear the hunt to apprehend Ziederon, the accused.

“Ere its embarkment, the party is to seek counsel from destiny, whereupon the journey is conditioned.

“The libertine shall be brought to trial in chains. Unspoiled and living ought he be, in the name of the Queen’s justice and the laws of her people, should fate wills it so.

“Such is the bidding of Queen Frëa-Thyr. Long and well may she reign!”

The crowd which hoarded to listen clapped, slow and hard, with solemnly satisfied expressions. The noise of the determined, patient peer approval echoed afar. A thunder clapping.

Fate wills it.

Not four days passed when the agent returned, galloping back from the journey to Mount Sakrell.

She fell onto her knees, drained and hardly breathing – “he is... in Alk-Gammed... but—”

Her report was cut short by an authoritative call of Rovuntho, the captain, who pointed with his blade: “To the ships!”

The hunters banged their feast over their chest-plated armour twice in unison ahead of striding to staff the three ships’ posts. Bows and arrows, swords, and marine lances were secured in their stands, ready to be harnessed, while the ships sailed out of Shanra harbour – and to the hunt.