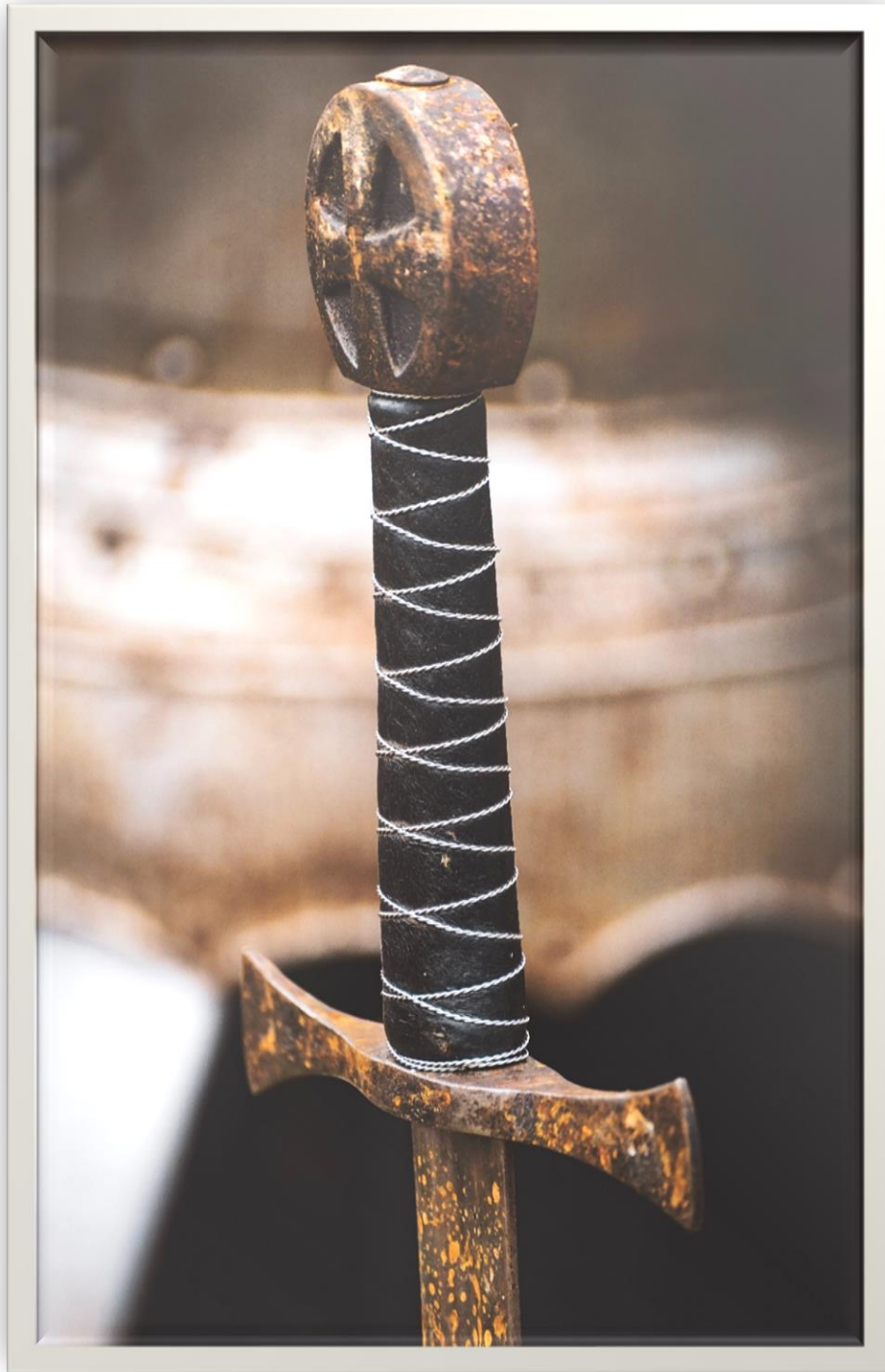


Damon Dar-Par: Sword of Freedom
A Novella



Ethan McGuire

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Prologue: The Old Man

One-thousand years have passed since the creation of Oure-worlde. Many events have transpired. Many events have yet to come.

The Etopian landscape was a sweeping panorama of spring colors as the Old Man came down from his mountain, guiding a flock of sheep through a sea of green foliage. His long, white hair and beard blew softly in the morning air, his slightly wrinkled face was tinted orange by the rising sun. The Old One raised the staff he carried to prod a young lamb, which had stopped to chew on a wildflower, one of the many colorful plants that adorned the surrounding countryside.

Before long, the Old Man and his flock topped the final rise before they entered the valley where their village destination lay. The Old One's eyes took in the whole country, but his gaze finally rested on something singular. It was not the town below. The Old Man looked at something further off, something on the opposite hill. It was the palace of Jeth, Dar of Etopia, a notorious, tyrannical monarch.

Jeth-Dar's dwelling was the finest specimen of architecture in all Etopia, her colonies, and beyond. Outer fortifications surrounded the palace itself, with its shining roofs of many metals, multiple-storied buildings, gold plating, immense towers and pinnacles, domes, spires, gargoyles, and wonderful garden walls. If certain things had fallen into place, if the Old Man had not chosen his present road, he knew he might have lived in the palace himself. He could have existed in luxury, serving as an advisor to the Dar, or maybe more. The Old One's path, however, was not one of Worldly measure. It was a mission of Higher proportions . . .

As the Old Man watched, one-hundred or more black dots appeared around the heavily fortified outer wall of the distant palace. The Old One's face tightened and he flinched involuntarily beneath his clothing, for he could almost feel the pain of the stinging whip. He could almost hear the sound of the slave overseer's hoarse voice, the stumble of a weakling, the corresponding lash, yell, kick. Now that he had chosen this path, he should be a slave while here on His World. It was pure miracle he was not. There was a Higher Power who had called him to his present mission. And when that Power called, none stood in the way.

A lamb bleated, waking the Old Man to the present. As he herded the sheep into the valley, he smiled in remembrance of the townspeople's thoughts about him. They thought he was a wizard. It was the clothes he wore, the way he distanced himself from others, the way he talked. But he was not, and neither wished for nor knew the use of sorcery.

The Man stopped as his thoughts turned back to the slaves. He stood where he was, knee-high in grassy stalks, and looked to the skies. *How long, my Lord, until the slaves may go free? How long until the man you promised comes? I have forged and made his weapons, his protections. How long?*

The Old Man lowered his eyes and a voice entered his head, or rather his heart. *Have faith, my good servant. It will not be long, my friend. Have faith.*

Later on, down in the town, the Old Man spotted a young boy-child. He was a strong looking lad, playful, what the Old One imagined his own son would look like. He put his arm on the boy's shoulder, said, "Son, when it comes time to choose your life's road, choose with the Chosen, and choose the course leading to the True and Faithful Judge."

The boy looked up at the Old Man. He started to say something when the father, a rough man, jerked him away. "Get away from my son, Old One!"

The Old Man nodded and turned his back on them. At least for the time being.

Chapter 1: Damon Dar-Par

Inside Jeth-Dar's palace, Damon Dar-Par, Son of the Dar, stood leaning against the stone-arched window of his royal apartment, perfumed by natural scents outside and in. Down in the courtyard, someone was singing a wonderful song, in a foreign language that arose gently, slowly, in the air:

Da la-da sha wae on no-da-shama,

O baum orr hauts o day palah.

Sa ma o ra-ladae Maalay Saaman haalay,

Oh beautii gifilly ah hughes.

Damon bounced the tune about his brain, but could not remember ever hearing this language. So he turned back to his room, and did it befit a Dar-Par! Oak beams stretched across the ceiling in support; cedar planking lined the stone walls; delicately cut granite flagstones lined the floor. Damon's bed, made of Feln-tree wood - a dark, smooth, wood, sat in the corner by the window; a matching wardrobe was situated across from the bed.

Damon, a lad of eighteen years, had obtained little rest the previous night, a by-product of anticipation. Today, if he passed the necessary tests, his father would award him the title of Sword Master, a title anyone in Etopia would revere. Everyone practically knew the young Dar-Par would get the honor. Damon was quite sure himself. The tests in themselves, though, would be quite the challenge.

Damon Dar-Par was dressed in a red-velvet doublet that fell to the knees, burgundy-colored silken hose, and oiled leather boots that came to his calves. His face bore a clean, honest look. He had high cheekbones, blue eyes, dark eyebrows, and his blonde hair was cut just above his wide shoulders, and to these were attached lean, strong arms. His height was six feet.

As the sun's rays illuminated the palace and sent radiating beams of saffron light into the gardens below Damon's window, Damon turned to his wardrobe and brought out his armor. There would be little need for protective clothing today, as the contestants would blunt their weapons. Yet Damon decked himself in lighter armor: a knee length coat of chain mail, a hood of the same, and a light steel cap with leather inside for comfort and set with a ring of gold. Over all this, the young Dar-Par pulled a sleeveless and short tunic of black wool with DP embroidered in white across the front for decoration.

The most important item of all was the sword. Damon reached over his bed and took his own good blade from its hook on the wall. He strapped the jewel adorned sheath and double-edged sword to his waist. A dagger, hidden in his tunic, completed all arrangements.

Damon Dar-Par finally departed his regal room, battle ready, and hurried down the stairs, taking them two at a time to the palace ground floor. When he reached the gardens, he slowed to a walk.

A fountain flowing into a network of pools was central, and Damon stopped at a small, glassy pond nearby to admire himself.

As Damon did this, he suddenly sensed someone nearby. He slowly raised his head and saw a young woman standing on the opposite side of the pool, her violet-colored dress rustling in the wind, an amused look on her face. She possessed an attractive face, a clear countenance, with attentive, brown eyes, inquiring eyebrows, and curling black hair that rippled freely down to her mid-back. Her skin was a dark tan, like the Etopian colonial peoples'. She was tall for an Etopian girl, though not taller than Damon. Her dress was loose, with many ruffles and folds; the edges were embroidered with silver- and gold-colored weavings; around her waist was a silver rope, with loose ends reaching mid-way to the ground and ended in tassels. She wore small, purple slippers. Except for the embroideries and rope, the maiden wore no decorations.

She was Roxanne, Damon's arranged fiancée. Damon felt a sense of exuberance, for Roxanne was the most beautiful damsel he had ever encountered. Where she had come from, Damon did not know; his father arranged the marriage. Besides, Roxanne was a very pleasant girl, and Damon liked her very much. She lived at the opposite end of the palace in her own apartment.

Damon blushed a little at the fact Roxanne had been watching him. He stepped over to her, taking her hand, kissing it as was the custom. "Good morning, Roxanne."

"Good morning to you," Roxanne greeted, bobbing in a curtsy, her hair tossing delightfully. "Looking good enough for your noble tastes?"

Damon laughed, said, "Yes, I think so. But, my lady, that is a question I should be asking you. So, how do I look?"

Roxanne stepped back in examination. "Hmm," she began, feigning thoughtfulness. "I think you look wonderful!"

"Excellent!" Damon exclaimed, then added, "Was it you I heard singing like a bird but half-an-hour ago?"

Roxanne nodded happily. "Yes, it was. I sang in the language of my ancestors."

Damon furrowed his brow. "Who are your ancestors? Oh, my father instructed me not to inquire about your background. I am sorry."

Roxanne beamed. "That's quite alright. And as you do not wish to know any longer, I will not say."

The two joined arms, and Damon escorted her to the opposite wall where the door to adjacent courtyards lay. They strolled along, talking of the grand festival to take place.

The palace amphitheater was located outside the first set of palace walls, and before the second. As this was the destination of the two, they had to walk through the commoner's section of the palace.

Damon was glad for another opportunity to visit this locale, for here much of life went on, things happened. It was the palace's epicenter of ordinary living, a place of tiring, back-breaking, perspiration inducing, manual labor. Most of royalty despised this part of the palace, avoided it. However, for Damon, it was a comfort, showing he did not live in a dream but a real world.

As the Dar-Par and Roxanne walked, each respective street began its everyday duties. A burly woodsman walked by headed to Dar's Glen to cut wood for the palace fires, sharpened axe upon his shoulder, a big moustache drooping down the side of his face. A stone mason waved at the two as he gathered his tools. A carpenter stopped his sawing, pausing to drink his morning tea, but quickly resuming his work when he saw Damon Dar-Par. A broad-shouldered blacksmith clanged away at a piece of red-hot steel and a potter skillfully assessed a new batch of clay from the Dryridge flats. Chickens squawked at a poulterer. Children danced about the skirts of a busy baker-wife, clucking and fussing everywhere she went. One of the young Etopian commoners stood apart from his siblings, and bowed toward Damon, then Roxanne. Damon raised his hand in salute.

Next the marketplace. Cries of the selling of goods, arguing, bidding, flashing of meats and cloths and goods of all sorts. Merchants from many parts of the world were gathered here, along with their various dress styles. Many of these had just arrived a few days ago, their ships anchoring in Jeth-Dar's Harbor, selling some of their products in Habon town.

"Good luck, Dar-Par," one merchant called in Etopia's universal Landonn tongue. Any of these people who knew Damon liked him, despite the widespread dislike of Jeth-Dar. A dislike hidden best as could be.

The Royal Entrance to the auditorium presented itself. Damon released Roxanne's hand, and left her at the Entrance as he proceeded to the dressing room, where he made certain his armor was clasped correctly and Fanyan cologne applied to his clothing.

"Morning, Damon," someone grunted from a dark corner of the room. Damon rotated and saw Hillbrak, his trainer, flexing his shoulder blades. The man stood at six-foot-two. He had wavy, sandy hair, a hard-cut face, and large biceps and forearms. It was rumored Hillbrak's birthplace was the colonies across the seas. This sprung from the fact he wore his hair in their style, braided in five strands behind the back. His face was sun-burnt and grainy, with a goatee on his chin.

"Morning," Damon said. "Getting prepared?"

"Yes. You ready?"

Damon sighed. "As ready as I shall ever be."

Hillbrak slapped Damon's back. "Good. I'll meet you out there. Luck to you."

Two dragons soared high overhead the palace amphitheater as Damon stepped into the testing ring. His pulse was beating a fury, but his step was sure as he faced his tester, Hillbrak.

A festival superior stepped into the middle of the ring and spoke so all could hear. "The first testee for the day is our very own Dar-Par, young Damon!" At this, the crowd roared with cheering. Damon squinted a bit, slightly perturbed at the superior calling him "young."

The superior continued announcing. "Damon Dar-Par has excelled greatly with the sword, and we should all be proud him." More cheering.

"Damon has now come into the ring. He is going to try for the title of Sword Master. Hillbrak has been his teacher thus far, and will test him now. We all know Hillbrak, and therefore know Hillbrak is not going to go easy on Damon. So, no worries on that matter." The crowd chuckled.

"Now. If Damon lasts ten minutes in this ring while fighting Hillbrak, the title of Sword Master will be his, as Damon has passed all other tests with flying colors." Once more, the crowd applauded as Damon unsheathed his sword. Damon glanced toward the front at a raised dais, where his father sat. On another dais, slightly below, sat Roxanne. Damon flashed a special smile at her, and she returned it as he assumed fighter's position.

The fight began. Hillbrak made the first move and lunged at Damon. With an easy flick of the wrist, Damon swatted the approaching blade aside with his sword. Hillbrak swung his steel twice again in rapid succession then lunged. Damon parried all three moves, responding with his own quick thrust of the broad blade. For nine minutes, the fight went on, amazingly without any seeming advantage on either side. The crowd breathlessly observed that Damon was quite the swordsman.

With one minute left before the gong sounding, the two sword-fighters paused, glaring at each other, good-naturedly, over shining blades.

"Wanna' give up yet?" Hillbrak asked.

"No! Certainly not!" Damon responded, lunging once more.

Then the gong sounded. The fight was over and Damon had lasted his time. Hillbrak and Damon sheathed their swords and shook hands.

"Well done, my Par!" Hillbrak praised, using the nickname for Dar-Par.

The crowd roared in agreement, as Hillbrak announced Damon's new title of Sword Master. Roxanne must have cheered the most, for she truly did like Damon. Jeth-Dar cheered the least, as he gruffly made his way to the ring and unceremoniously placed a ribbon over Damon's head.

"Thank-you!" Damon shouted to the applauding crowd. "Thank-you!"

Damon remembered to unsheathe his sword, and raised it to the people. He had anticipated this day for a very long time. Still, somehow, it seemed . . . vain . . . empty. The young Dar-Par tried to divert the idea as he continued with the celebration. Never-theless, the thought was there, and Damon would not put it aside completely.

A great celebration ensued the contests, and Damon all but forgot his troubles as he visited with friends and led Roxanne all about the palace grounds.

Damon and his escort accepted two cups of punch at a table, along with strips of seasoned bread called *sievan*. They were visiting with a duke and his wife when Damon heard his name called.

Damon Dar-Par looked and saw an older man, with a nose like a Poggen dog, bald head, and dark robe, approaching.

"Greetings, Dar-Par," said the man. "I am Ostwich, head of the religious department in the palace.

"Greetings," Damon replied.

The older man offered his hand, and Damon shook it, saying, "Welcome, Ostwich. This is my fiancée, Roxanne. What brings you to me, Ostwich?"

"You. It has been said you are not one to accept this world as material only."

Damon paused. "Well, yes. You might say that. But why do you talk to me of it?"

Ostwich folded his arms across his chest. "I am a member of an organization called the Metosites. We believe there is more to life than the carnal."

"And what may that be?"

"Inside us all is our own god, and this can be found by what we call self-fulfillment. Come tonight to the Minor Hall. We Metosites will be gathering there. Perhaps you would find something there."

Damon thought for a moment. "I will consider, Ostwich."

"Do." Ostwich left.

Roxanne looked up at Damon. "What do you think of him?" she asked.

"I do not know."

"I know of a better way than what Ostwich offers," Roxanne stated meaningfully. "One offering more than simple self-fulfillment."

Damon led her across the courtyard. "Let us talk of it later."

Twilight came much too soon, and with it the dispelling of festivities. Damon stared thoughtfully into the garden beneath his apartment as he stood on the fifth-story balcony above his bedroom. This place presented a marvelous view of the countryside and a place for thinking.

Damon Dar-Par was wishful his mother had been able to see him receive the Sword Master honor. Nevertheless, she was not, for the woman had died when Damon was only eleven years old. Damon's mother, the Quar (wife of the Dar), had been an Etopian slave until Jeth-Dar had married her. Though the slaves were excruciatingly mistreated, many of the young women were very beautiful. The young Jeth-Dar had noticed this and used his authority to marry Damon's mother. The slaves, strangely enough, were very strong in character and had quite the personality. Most of them, anyway.

When the Quar died five years ago, Jeth-Dar had had the gardens built in her honor. They were very beautiful, with their unusual palm trees, shrubs, enormous (and gorgeous) flowers, stone fountains and pools, and Fernish trees.

Damon began to think of the fact that his mother's death was a mystery to him. Around the time of Damon's eleventh birthday, his mother had of-a-sudden fallen ill, and she had always seemed sad. Jeth-Dar had told Damon it was from a sickness, but the boy had always wondered. His mother had died soon after his birthday celebration.

"My son?" Damon's father interrupted his thoughts.

"Yes, father?" Damon answered.

Damon Dar-Par heard his father's fur robe and beautifully tailored royal garments swishing as he approached him. Jeth-Dar placed his hand on Damon's shoulder, and Damon inwardly cringed. There was something about the way his father acted that struck a wrong chord in Damon's mind, though he in vain tried to figure out the problem. For example, Jeth-Dar seemed trying to act gentle when he laid his hand on Damon, but it seemed not. Damon thought again of his mother; her touch had been a loving one.

"Of what are you thinking, Damon?" Jeth-Dar asked.

Damon replied with, "Oh . . . things." Then a thought struck him. It was just a bit perplexing, so Damon asked it.

"Father, why were the slaves allowed no part in the festivities today?"

Jeth-Dar laughed, deep in his throat. Damon moved to look at his father and discovered he was disappearing down the stairwell.

The Dar stopped and pulled the crown from his head. Facing Damon, Jeth purposefully reflected light from a nearby torch onto his son's face, said, "My son, you know much too little of court

matters. Tomorrow you begin a different training. Tomorrow you begin to learn the trade of a Dar. A true Dar!"

Damon had anticipated this also. But, once again, he felt no thrill at all.

Later, Damon was preparing to leave the balcony when he heard wings. He looked up to see a dragon flying overhead. This was not unusual though, for the Dar often employed small dragons about nine feet long from tail-tip to snout-end, with wings and the ability to shoot fire from their nostrils. These flying reptiles were descendents of the nearly extinct larger dragons, who long before this time retreated to parts unknown.

However, this dragon was not on usual business. This was Enwinda, a member of the Special Dragon Society, a military task force controlled by a high ruler: Jeth-Dar of Etopia.

Jeth-Dar expected a report, and was seated in the Throne Room, the best adorned building in the palace. The ceiling was forty feet high. Balconies wrapped around the edges of the wall. with door in each leading to an outside platform, which had decorations around it. Great beasts of the hunt hung on the Throne Room walls, alongside ancient bronze weapons, jewels, and paintings. The room was lit with fifty oil lamps.

The floor of the Throne Room was made of Gevreen-tree wood; a velvet carpet led up to the purple cushioned throne itself. A door was positioned behind the throne for access to all levels of the building.

Enwinda burst through the door.

"My lord," Enwinda greeted, almost sarcastically, as he bowed then came closer to Jeth-Dar.

Jeth-Dar's face grew red as the small dragon drew closer. "What happened to Tii-Gor?" he asked.

"My Dar, do not be angry!" Enwinda began. "I have a report. But I'm afraid 'tis a grave one."

"What happened this time?" Jeth-Dar forcefully controlled himself. *You never want to argue with a dragon,* he thought.

"I would like to tell the whole story, start to finish."

"Go ahead, Enwinda," Jeth-Dar sighed. *These dragons and their infernal storytelling!*

"Well, me and Tii hunted for 'at feller you told us to hunt for. We hunted all day. Didn't see hide nor hair of 'im! But we did see him."

"Yes . . . did you . . .?"

"No," answered Enwinda. "We didn't get to kill him. If we did, would I be here? No! I'd be out there on the mountain eatin' wizard meat."

Jeth-Dar groaned. "He is no wizard."

"Yes, he is! 'At's how he killed Tii-Gor!"

"What?!" Jeth-Dar sat up in his throne, fingering The Device beneath his robe.

"Well, you see, Tii-Gor and me, we'd been huntin' all day with nothin' more to eat than a couple of cows for breakfast. Now we were getting hungry. We'd looked all over for this Old Guy . . ."

"Old Man, not Old Guy," Jeth-Dar interrupted.

"Whatever!" growled Enwinda, smoke curling from his nostrils. "Anyhoo, me and Tii just looked all over the place, his place, and didn't see no hide nor hair of him, or his sheep."

"Aw?"

"Yeh! Well, we was goin' back, when we two, we spot us a lion. So, we kill it with fire and hunker down to eat it.

"Well, we is eatin' along, when, all of a sudden, I see somethin' outa the corner of my eye and FLASH! Tii's gone!"

"Mmm?!"

"I turn and there behind us is 'at Old Guy we're lookin' for. He shoots flame out of his hand. Dat's how he killed Tii. And he IS a wizard.

"So, Brother, I don't stay around for long. I'm gone in a flash."

Jeth-Dar jumped to his feet, furious. "I sent you to do a job, coward!"

Enwinda's eyes turned into red-hot coals, swung his head about. "You call me a coward, here's what you get!"

Jeth-Dar realized his huge mistake. Yet, he was not going to let this dragon kill him. Up came Jeth-Dar's right hand, something strapped to it. Out jumped a beam, like lightning from a cloud, and completely vaporized Enwinda the Dragon!

"He is not a wizard, my no-more dragon friend. Neither am I, you superstitious imp!"

Chapter 2: Choices to Make

Sweat beaded Damon's forehead as he tossed and turned on his soft mattress of Gandder bird feathers. All he wanted was some sleep. So far, none had come.

The odd feeling of his palace life as vain was troubling Damon tonight, and this was occupying his mind to the point of hindering slumber. Yes, he was well on his way to be a good, honored, and successful man. For one, he had gained the title of Sword Master. Two, tomorrow he would begin his court training. Three, he was to be married in six months. Still, Damon felt this all was somehow futile.

He had gone to the Metosite meeting earlier in the night, but had found only vain procedures. It was nothing but self-conscious fops performing mindless rituals for the self-fulfillment, what the Metosites considered the greater good.

What did Roxanne mean by she knew a better way? A good thing it would be to talk to her about it; maybe she could help him. Even if she was two years younger than he, she was much more mature than a number of young ladies he knew her age.

Damon slung his feet over the side of his high bed. If he could get no sleep, he was not just going to lie there.

As Damon stood straight, a blindingly white light filled his unshuttered window. A ball of flame stabbed through and exploded in the middle of the room. This amazing event, oddly enough, produced zero sound Damon instinctively grabbed and drew his now-sharp sword, throwing the sheath into a corner. All was dark once more.

"What's going on here?" Damon demanded. Tiny pinpoints of light swarmed in his vision.

All was still. Then there was a sudden, slight stirring of the air and a gentle voice, a man's (but *strangely not unlike mother's!* Damon thought) called out, "Damon! Damon!"

"What is it?" Damon asked, sword point facing forward.

Out of nowhere, something appeared, standing in the middle of the room. The thing was six feet tall, eye level with Damon, and looked exactly like a human. Yet this man was different, for he shone with the same white light that had filled the window a minute ago. He also hovered a few inches above the ground, and his ears were slightly longer than a human's and somewhat pointed. His dress was a robe of white.

"Who are you?" Damon demanded, the sword shaking a bit in his hands.

The figure lifted his hand in consolation and spoke with a gentle voice, soothing, yet stern. "I am a Nanjel, of the hosts of the High Lord and God, Emmanweh. My name is Nabriel, and I have come with a message."

Damon, puzzled, asked, "What is the message?"

"Emmanweh, the One True God, has . . ."

"Wait a minute," Damon intermitted. "I have always been taught there is no god."

The Nanjel did not become infuriated, but countered with, "Have you not also been taught Nanjels are simple fairy tales?"

"Why, yes, but . . ."

"And have I not appeared to you exactly as those 'fairy tales' explain?"

"Yes!"

"Then why could not there be a God?"

Damon stuttered, "Well, uhm . . ."

The Nanjel continued. "Oftentimes, mortal men have invented stories of false gods, or even said there is no such thing, so they can soothe their empty hearts. In addition, Damon, I know you too have an empty heart. But, unlike your father, you are searching for something, not concocting stories to fill that gap. Am I correct?"

"You are," Damon replied, amazed. "Yet how do you know these deep secrets of my heart?"

"Emmanweh knows all, and he has told me what it is I need to know about you so I may carry His message to you. Now, are you ready to hear what is True?"

"Yes," Damon responded, "speak on."

Nabriel stopped hovering, and began walking about the chamber, all the time looking Damon in the eye. "Emmanweh knows you have an empty heart, and He knows you are searching for the truth." Damon nodded his head and lowered his sword. "That emptiness can only be filled by worshipping the One and True God, Emmanweh. For you, this means fulfilling his purpose in your life."

Damon was interested now, and said, "I am open."

"You, Damon, have been ordained to help fulfill Emmanweh's special plan. You are to set free the slaves your father keeps."

"Impossible!" Damon exclaimed.

"No, Damon!" Nabriel half-shouted. "Naught is impossible with Emmanweh. If you choose to follow Emmanweh, you must escape this palace and flee to the Akor Mountains near here. There

you must find an old follower of Emmanweh, Omar the Prophet, the only current prophet of the Prepparii order where all are anointed by Emmanweh and given some special gifts of prophecy and ability. He will teach you to follow, love, and worship the One True God. He will also teach you the needed skills to set free the slaves."

"Wait!" Damon insisted. "I am to be a Dar some day. I can not just leave this all!"

Nabriel stopped pacing the floor and his face became austere, as he said, "If you do not choose Emmanweh's path, you will be given over to evil. Do you want that?"

"No!" Damon replied with heart. "But why are the slaves so important to Emmanweh? Why am I so necessary?"

"They are Emmanweh's Chosen People," the Nanjel replied. "In the Ancient Language, they are called the Arydapians. Omar the Prophet will tell you more.

"And as for you: let it be known that everything and everyone is a part of Emmanweh's creation. Every human in Your Worlde is of value to Him. Also, let this be known: if justice were done to all, Emmanweh would destroy everything on this world. In fact, he did so, many years back, and saved only one virtuous man and his family."

Damon was stunned quite a minute before asking, "Is there any sign I can have, a further proof that what you say is true?"

"Yes," Nabriel answered. "You will discover something you thought was true is truly false."

"What is it?"

"You think all those slaves here have been captured on war raids, don't you, Damon?"

"Yes." Damon had hesitated before answering.

"You are wrong, Damon. They were all deceived into slavery by your father, Jeth-Dar! He had given them protection for a little while, as his father did. Then, he enslaved them!"

Damon gasped in disbelief. "This cannot be so. But if it is, I will follow Emmanweh, for I do not want to be an evil man."

As Nabriel the Nanjel disappeared, he left a final message. "You do not have much time for decision or indecision, Damon. You must flee by tomorrow night, or evil will overtake you."

Damon fumbled back into bed. Looked like this was to be yet another sleepless night.

Next morning, Damon's booted feet caused echoes to reverberate between the two giant walls of the resplendent hallway leading to the Throne Room. After a long walk, Damon Dar-Par finally came to the enormous door, behind which Jeth-Dar sat on his throne. Damon knocked.

"Who is it?" the Dar yelled from inside, an unusual pitch to his voice.

Damon turned the latch, walked through the door. "Just me, father."

Jeth-Dar's features softened. "Oh, Damon, come in!"

Damon slowly advanced up the red carpet leading to the throne. Jeth-Dar held out his hand, and Damon bowed.

"You may rise now," Jeth-Dar said.

"I am ready to start my lessons," Damon informed Jeth-Dar, leaving out the fact that this might be the only lesson he would ever take.

"The first of your lessons," Jeth-Dar began, "is to observe the affairs of the slaves."

The slaves! Damon thought. *Perhaps I will find out whether the sign Nabriel gave me last night is true.* Outwardly, the young Dar-Par replied with a nod of the head.

Jeth-Dar continued talking about the slaves. "Yes, the slaves are working on an important project right now." Damon arched an eyebrow in question as his father went on. "It is a monument for me to be buried in when I die. No use letting my legacy go out with me! Of course, it will be many years before I die."

"Of course, father."

Jeth-Dar stared curiously at Damon, and Damon kept his eyes steady.

Jeth-Dar's features were pointed and his skin white. His gray hair was thin; his chin protruded from his face with a fuzzy growth of black beard upon it. His legs and arms appeared to own little muscle, though they did.

Damon's father went on to tell the Dar-Par to go to the brick bakeries on his horse, and ride about, observing. After he had looked around, he was to find a man named Mowzer, a slave overseer, who would tell him more about slave affairs. After this, Damon left the Room and proceeded to the Royal Stables and soon reemerged.

Damon felt repulsion as he rode about the slaves' working areas. He had never actually known how the slaves lived and it came as a surprise to him when he learned they wore ragged clothes, lived in humble mud huts (infested with insects and rodents) and worked from morning to night with one short rest at noon to eat a small and dirty meal.

A few slaves stopped working in order to watch the Dar-Par. There was one little boy, sawing a piece of wood, who looked up at Damon. He was too skinny. His ribs showed, and his arms had no fat upon them. This was a lad of ten years only, and Jeth-Dar had him working like a dog.

Mowzer turned sharply around from where he watched a small group of slaves, primarily older ones, making bricks. He watched closely as Damon stepped from his saddle and jumped to the ground. The slave-overseer looked greedily at the sword by Damon's side.

This man was quick, though fat hung in several layers about his innards, and was usually very grumpy, but decided to put on a good front for the Dar-Par. He could do otherwise later.

"Are you Mowzer?" Damon asked, coming to the place where Mowzer stood, arms akimbo.

"Yeh," Mowzer grunted. "You Damon?"

"Yes, I am," Damon replied. "You are supposed to tell me more about these slaves."

Mowzer grunted again. "Ya' come to the right place, then. I know all there is to know about them animals there." He waved a hand at his assignments.

Damon almost retorted, but kept his mouth shut. Instead, he said, "Let's start with the history of these slaves." *Now we'll see if Nabriel was correct*, Damon thought to himself.

Mowzer hesitated. "Well, I guess it wouldn't hurt none. But I am surprised you don't know about them."

Damon scanned down where the slaves were working. "Don't ask questions. You are supposed to obey the Par. And, if you tell me what is false, I will be sure you are severely punished."

"Alright," Mowzer consented, "I'll tell ya'.

"These slaves used to be a little group of people who called themselves The Chosen Ones. The Dar before Jeth had protected them from some famine, but Jeth took advantage of The Chosens' weakness and attacked 'em all, capturing them without once using the sword. Jeth-Dar then brought them to this palace and many of the things here have been built by them."

Mowzer continued with pride. "Them Chosen Ones, they say they's chosen by some E-Man or somethin'. 'Dat means their insane. Insane people need protection." Mowzer smiled as he said, "I gives 'em protection." Mowzer's parched lips uncovered two rotten rows of teeth.

Damon gave the man a straight look to see if he was telling the truth. By all appearances, he was. The Dar-Par turned to mount his horse as he thought, *The Nanjel was right about so many things, and now I know he's right about this, also. Well, I do want to follow Emmanweh, sincerely. I have one thing to do. I must flee my father's palace . . . as Nabriel suggested.*

It was in Damon that perhaps he was deciding to hastily. But, sometimes in life, this is what you must do. In addition, the young Dar-Par always did have an uneasy feeling about life at the palace. The Nanjel's visit had only affirmed and given him a reason to act.

Damon rode his horse a few steps away from the brick bakery and watered him in the nearby river, the Ryllian. He dismounted once more, and saw Mowzer had followed him.

Mowzer was about to speak, when an old, wizened woman carrying bricks stumbled at his feet. "Dog!" Mowzer yelled, "Don't you stumble, or you'll get this!" Mowzer accentuated his speech with a whip lash to the old woman's back.

As Damon watched, his anger rose within him to a point previously never known. Damon drew his sword and cried out, "Mowzer! That woman is not the dog. You are!"

Mowzer wheeled on his feet and drew his own sword, simple yet sharp and deadly, a double-edged sword the same length as Damon's. Mowzer's face was livid, and a scar above his eye deepened. "No one calls me a dog and lives!"

Damon felt above caution at the moment, and replied, "Mowzer, can you tell me of a better animal that represents you?"

Mowzer laughed an irritating, little laugh. "Oh, Damon! You may be my Dar-Par but that won't keep me from killing you. When you're dead, I'll take that sword from you and escape Etopia. What good is the title of Dar-Par when you are dead?"

Damon and Mowzer circled each other, the river Ryllian flowing to their backs, a crowd of slaves gathered to watch them.

Damon's blade was in position and he stepped in. "Mowzer, Dar-Par might not help me in fighting you, but do you think the title of Sword Master might?"

Mowzer paused and asked, "What?" But he was already too involved to get out. "Whatever," he growled, and lunged.

Damon stepped in, parried, and swiped his blade at the overseer's arm. Mowzer twirled away, leaving red on the Dar-Par's blade. Blood flowed slowly from the wound.

Mowzer paused, looked at his blood. He had never seen it before, his blood. The blood of slaves he had seen. The blood of animals he had seen. He had seen his enemy's blood. Never his own. It surprised him some, in an odd way, that his blood was red, just like others'. He finally found words, let them out in a screech. "Ya' bled me!"

"Yes, Mowzer," Damon replied, sword still and high, "I bled you."

The two stood across from each other, panting from exertion. Damon settled down, and said, "Mowzer, I have no wish to kill you. We can stop this."

Mowzer simply stared at him and breathed, "NO!"

Hillbrak, on one of his many mysterious excursions, topped the rise before the brick bakery. Quickly perceiving the transpired and transpiring events, he rushed down to the scene of the fight demanding, "What is this?"

Damon looked at him, keeping Mowzer in sight. "Hillbrak, I am afraid you better stay out of this. It is a private feud. I've tried to stop it, but Mowzer will not listen."

Mowzer glared. "This kid called me a name! No one, nobody, does this to Mowzer and lives."

Hillbrak strode closer. "Did you know this is the Par?" he asked the overseer.

"Yeh," Mowzer replied, and cut at Damon's legs.

Damon could not parry in time, so he took two quick steps backward . . . and tripped over a brick!

The Dar-Par lay there. Mowzer came up and stood over him, one leg on each side of Damon's body. "Hee! Hee!" Mowzer chortled. "You're mine now!"

Damon was not one to go down without a struggle. He rolled hard against Mowzer's legs and kept rolling as the slave overseer fell to the dirt. However, the overseer recovered and sliced at Damon's head!

Damon regained his blade while he rolled, and now he deflected Mowzer's deadly steel. This maneuver left Mowzer off balance. Damon wished there was another way, but saw none. He thrust hard into the slave overseer's fat body. Mowzer fell to the ground, gasping. Damon rose to his feet and removed the sword from its bloody sheath. He turned to Hillbrak as he cleaned his blade in the grass,

"I saw it, Damon," Hillbrak gave a reply to Damon's wondering look. "I saw it all. It was a fair fight. I'll try to explain."

"No, Hillbrak," Damon said. "I must flee the palace."

"Of what speak you, Damon?!" Hillbrak asked, amazed. "I'm sure the Dar will understand. I know him better than even you do!"

"Yes, Hillbrak. But my life's road lies elsewhere." Damon turned to his horse, who shied away at the smell of blood.

"It's alright," Damon soothed. The young Dar-Par stepped into the saddle. He sheathed his sword and looked down at Hillbrak and some slaves who stood close by. "Hillbrak, you have been a good friend. But I must leave this place. It is accursed, and I have a mission. I will not tell you of it, but you will find out, one day."

Damon turned his horse's head toward a secret place he knew where he could enter the palace. He needed to talk to Roxanne before he left. He hoped she would understand.

As he went a sudden thought came to him. *I could free the Chosen now. I killed Mowzer. Could I not win?*

But Damon knew killing Mowzer had been hard enough. And after the slave overseers like him, there would still be the soldiers and the Elite. No. If he were to follow Emmanweh at all, he must obey Him to all extents, in everything.

Chapter 3: Endings & Beginnings

Roxanne leaned on her windowsill, staring thoughtfully into the woods beyond the palace wall, her hair hanging loose about her.

Her thoughts were of Damon. The Dar had forced her into the marriage deal. But this lot was much better than that of the slavery she had experienced as a child. Besides, she had really grown to like Damon, very much.

As she rested there, the vines beside her window moved. Roxanne looked quickly down and was immensely surprised to see the very person she had just been thinking of: Damon!

"Damon! What are you doing?" Roxanne questioned, eyebrows high.

Damon crawled over the windowsill and came into her room. "Roxanne, I've come to tell you something. I must leave this palace. But I will be back, and I hope you will be here when I come."

"I'll be here," Roxanne said, sitting down on a stool. "I'll be here when you free the slaves."

"How could you know?" Damon asked, perplexed.

"Nabriel came and told me all," Roxanne quietly said. "About you killing Mowzer, about you being ordained to free the slaves, that you would escape this palace. Nabriel told me this last night."

"But that's before I decided to leave! That is before I killed Mowzer!"

Roxanne looked carefully at Damon. "You must be a new believer, or you would already know that Emmanweh can see the future."

"And you are an old believer?" Damon asked.

"Yes, Damon. I am Arydopian."

"Then . . . ?"

"We slaves will accept a better lot, if we can. And as long as it does not go against the will of Emmanweh, our Lord."

Damon sat quite for a minute, soaking in what was sure to be his last moment with Roxanne, at least for a long while. "Roxanne," he finally asked, "do you really want to marry me?"

"Yes, Damon. I do," she answered. "Or at least now I do."

"Alright, Roxanne," Damon paused, said, came to his feet. "I will be back for you when I come for the slaves. I promise." He reached for her hand, kissed it.

"You do that, Damon," Roxanne stood, smiled gently.

Damon pulled a dagger from his belt and handed it to Roxanne.

"What's this for?" Roxanne asked him.

"You might need it someday," Damon told her. Then he was over the window and lowering himself down by the vine.

When Damon's feet reached the wall below, he glanced up where Roxanne still stood at the window, her black hair blowing in the breeze. She watched him until he was out of sight.

Evening descended on Etopia as Damon began to sneak his way across the courtyard. He was in the same armor he had taken the Sword Master test in. The armor was a necessity this time.

Sword Master training. So short a time ago and yet it seemed so long.

Damon reflected on the fact that that morning he had wondered if he could try freeing the slaves by himself, without going to Omar for training. As crazy as it sounded before, he now knew to do it on his own was implausible, and very likely impossible. Furthermore, if he was to follow Emmanweh, he knew he must obey everything, although he might not wish to.

The Secret Tunnel door loomed awing before Damon as he lit a torch and turned the handle. The door creaked open on unoiled hinges. Damon looked up, expecting dark and damp. He did not expect to see his father.

But there Jeth-Dar stood, a torch of his own in hand, a look on his face that Damon had never seen before. Yet this face of cruelty, evil, suspicion, disgust, arrogance seemed to fit his father's face, and fit it well.

"F-Father . . ." Damon stuttered, tried to think of something to say.

"Hello, my son," Jeth-Dar taunted. "Planning to leave us, are we?"

"Uhhmm . . ."

"No need to worry, Damon. Follow me." Jeth-Dar turned and proceeded deeper into the recesses of the tunnel.

Damon obeyed, wondering what was next. Jeth-Dar stopped before a side door and opened it, revealing a glow of eerie, green light inside.

"Go inside, Damon," Jeth-Dar ordered. Damon stepped through the door. In the middle of the room sat a chair, adorned with diamonds, above a stone ring.

"Sit in the chair," Jeth-Dar ordered. As he said this, a spotlight seemed to shine on the seat, and a sound like thunder rolled.

"Wait a minute!" Damon said. "First you tell me what happens."

Jeth-Dar feigned hurt. "Surely, son, you do not think I would harm you! This is, let us say, a transformation. Apparently, you have believed in this Emmanweh childishness. Sit in this chair and you will know Emmanweh does not exist!"

Damon's mind was confused. *Is "this Emmanweh" stuff true?* he doubted in that instant. *Have I believed a lie? Is my newfound faith illusion?*

Then Nabriel came on the scene. He appeared without warning, standing between Damon and the Seat of Transformation. The Nanjel was very serious, as he had been before, as he always was. "Damon, do not believe your father! If you sit in this seat, it will sacrifice you to the side of evil. All you will be able to do is evil. Obey not your father, Dar-Par. Step one step toward me and I will take you to the mountains, where you can find Omar the Prophet."

Jeth-Dar was exasperated. "Damon!" he cried. "Surely you do not believe this man! I would not harm you. I would not tell you lies."

Damon came back to himself. "Father, you are wrong," he shouted. "You would tell me lies. You lied to me when you said the slaves were captured on war raids. You lied to me when you said Nanjels were fairy tales. Father, I believe you are lying about the non-existence of Emmanweh, also.

"And by the way, do you know about me killing that overseer."

"Yes!" Jeth-Dar growled. "A dragon-servant told me."

"And you believed him?"

"Yes. He was a truthful servant."

"Was?"

"Yes." Jeth-Dar smiled. "And I will destroy you as I destroyed him!" Jeth-Dar chuckled and raised his hand, the Device strapped on.

Damon perceived what was about to happen and took the step toward Nabriel.

Jeth-Dar raised his hand to kill Damon . . . but his son was gone. And so was the Nanjel.

The evil Dar turned to the door. What had the Nanjel said?

Omar the Prophet? Omar my ex-brother-in-law?

Darkness tucked its woolen blanket around the Akor Mountains as Damon and Nabriel stood at the top of a peak.

"Nabriel, why could not you have taken me to Omar's dwelling place? Why do I have to find my way?" Damon questioned the Nanjel as they stood on the mountain.

"You must realize, Damon," the Nanjel began, "Emmanweh is testing you with this to see if you really want to follow him or not."

Damon was thoughtful, realizing what lay ahead for his life. "What direction do I go?" he asked.

Nabriel pointed to the night sky and replied, "See that star up there. That is the star called Guidance. Follow it, and you will find what you seek."

"I understand. And, Nabriel, one more question: What does Emmanweh mean?"

Nabriel hovered a little above the ground, about to leave Damon. "In the Ancient Language of The Chosen Arydapians, it means 'High King'."

And Nabriel left Damon alone on the mountain to find the way to his teacher. Damon glanced up at Guidance and proceeded on, down the slope and through the dense forest, a dark entourage where many things wished to take him from the path.

Guidance shone bright in the evening sky as Damon stumbled up a hill. Brushy extremities caught at his clothing as he fought his way upward. The path was not an easy one, for time and time again, Damon tripped on upthrust roots or fallen saplings, and he was sure he awakened the whole forest at his trampling.

Damon paused on a ridge to look back. He recognized the peak he started out on. It was not very far away, not far enough. His progress, he assumed, was much too slow.

For the hundredth time, Damon checked his position in correspondence with the star. *If the Nanjel had given me better directions . . .* but that did not matter. He had to remember this was a test. Why hadn't he asked how far he had to go? *No matter.*

He pushed down the next incline.

Damon traveled all night through the thick of the Akor Mountain Wood. All night, he kept his eyes fixed on that shining star in the northern sky. Now, as the wee hours of morning came, Damon stopped to build a small fire to take the chill from the crisp mountain air.

As Damon tried to warm his hands, he thought of the events that had transpired in the past few fateful days.

What two days! Damon exclaimed to himself.

Damon put out his fire, stretched a bit, then rose to his feet, meaning to note the location of the star. Guidance was obscured by clouds and approaching light. *How will I find my way?*

For half an hour, Damon paced the ridge, trying to plot a course of action. Finally, he decided what to do.

He thought he knew the way north. He decided to go that way, even without the star's assistance.

Damon Dar-Par did this, but it did not take him long to discover he was lost. The whole mountain and forest seemed a thick jungle where everything was the same and it was impossible to find your way. One thought kept pounding through Damon's head: *You should have waited on Guidance.*

Noon came and went. Night was near, and as evening rushed on, Damon tried to spot a clearing where he could observe the star. This was his purpose when he came to the ledge.

As Damon came to the edge of the forest, he found that the growth worked itself all the way to the edge of a giant cliff; however, a protruding of rock jutted out from the trees. Damon stepped toward it.

The ledge seemed strong enough, so Damon walked forward. When full night came, by sitting on the edge of this, he could look for the Star of Guidance. Damon tested his weight on it. It held, and then . . . CRACK! The ledge, deceiving in looks, broke loose from the crag. He grabbed for the remaining soil, and it too broke loose, causing Damon to fall down, down, down, cascading toward the bottom of the precipice.

Nothing could loosen the knot that formed in Damon's stomach as he fell. He glanced down and saw the ragged boulders in the underneath him, knowing that when he hit them, there would be no chance of life. The bottom was two-hundred feet down, and at the rate he was falling, he would soon be obliterated.

Damon's body slammed into another overhang, halfway down the cliff. He expected this to break loose also. But it did not. He just lay there, feeling limp. His eyes went to the sky. Night was approaching. Blackness engulfed him as he slipped into unconsciousness.

Damon Dar-Par rolled over in his bed, not yet opening his eyes. Usually, he liked to soak in the softness of his mattress, but it seemed unusually hard this morning. He opened his eyes. All was black. *What?* Damon wondered. *What's going on? Oh!* He remembered.

Damon bowed his head and petitioned Emmanweh.

Oh Emmanweh, God of All, I know I left the path your Nanjel set me on, but please help me now. I know I do not deserve your mercy, but, Emmanweh, please give me mercy. If it be Your will, please help me from this awful place somehow, someway. I beg You.

Morning finally came, shining its radiant light and warmth in a beam on Damon's face. Soon to follow was trouble.

Damon pulled his aching body to a sitting position and tried to get a mental hold on his position. He looked around and saw that he had landed on a second overhang, much like the first, but sturdier. He looked down and discovered he was about midway between the top of the cliff and the bottom of the valley below. Both extremes were at least one hundred feet away.

Damon felt himself over and (thank *Emmanweh!*) found nothing was broken. But he was awfully bruised, and hurt in every muscle.

Then the trouble came.

As Damon looked out over the immense, green-carpeted valley below and beyond him, his feelings went from contemplation to horror.

Flying about the surrounding hills and peaks, three huge catbirds came in sight. They were much like lions, big bodied with bulging muscles and giant wings as long as their body. The creatures had spotted the Dar-Par.

Damon knew of the catbirds, understood their hunting procedure. He knew that, if they hungered, they would soar high into the sky and then they would glide down and through the air, fast gaining speed. With one bite, they would kill him, regain themselves, crouch, and devour his flesh.

Damon's skin crawled, but he determined to go out with a fight. He jerked his sword out and pointed it toward the catbird. Morning light gleamed on the shining, three-foot blade.

The catbird approached the Dar-Par quickly, gaining speed. Damon did not think he could win, for even if he killed the mercurial catbird, the blow would probably unbalance him, causing a destructive fall off the ledge.

The Dar-Par ducked quickly, and the catbird smashed into the cliff wall, and fell to the ground below, the rock disintegrating it.

The second flying mammal came closer and closer. Damon's fall, his soreness, his past, his future flashed through his mind in death's preparation. He would die. But he would take his killer with him.

Suddenly, a swift-shot arrow intercepted the second catbird's skull! The beast let out a screech, and plummeted to the bottoms. The last winged feline, seeing what happened, flew fast away on exerting wings.

"Thank-you, Emmanweh!" Damon whispered as he sheathed his sword.

Damon did not have time to inquire who had shot the arrow when a rope came snaking down the cliff face, and a voice yelled, "Catch the line." Damon gripped the rope and felt himself hauled up the cliff face and over the top.

When Damon got up from the ground, he saw a rider coiling the rope used to rescue him. The man jumped from his horse and landed easily. He was old looking, but very strong. His clothing consisted of a loose, white frock that came to the man's ankles, and sandals, laced to the knee; he was girded round the waist with a black leather belt. The bow, what Damon presumed this man had fired the life-saving arrow from, was nowhere to be seen. The man's face was wrinkled with keen eyes and a hawk nose; white hair flowed from his chin and bare head in a flood.

Damon offered his hand and said, "Thank you for saving my life."

The old man turned around. He did not smile, but neither was he ireful. "I suppose you are welcome," he said. "But it is an honor I would give to any man, that of saving his life. Not to mention Emmanweh allowing me to save the one who is to free my people from bondage. No. It is all my pleasure. I should be thanking you."

Damon lowered his hand. This man was a little odd, but friendly. "So, are you Omar?"

"Yes," the Old Man replied. "I am Omar the Prophet. And you are Damon the Chosen."

"You're right!" Damon exclaimed. "How did you know?"

Omar stopped fiddling with his saddle girth. "We have no time to lose. The remaining catbird may come back for revenge. Hop on the back of my saddle and we will be off to my humble abode."

Without further ado, and leaving Damon's question unanswered, Omar jumped into the saddle, giving his hand to help Damon mount behind as he rode toward his cottage home. As they rode, Omar sang to himself in joy at finding the Dar-Par. The horse galloped steadily, wind blew about Damon's ears and head, but did not prevent him from catching,

Sa ma o ra-ladae Saman Maalay halay

Oh beautii gifilly ah hughes.

He knew he had heard this before, and meant to ask Omar about it. But the question eventually evaded his mind.

Chapter 4: Omar the Teacher

Omar the Prophet had built and situated his small home well. He had made his cottage with its back snug against a rocky face, not unlike the one Damon had fallen from. A small cave was located near the house and used as a stable and storage place. Far and near the cottage lay the beauty of the Akor mountain range. By sitting on the Old Man's porch, one could see for miles, as the whole place was toward the top of a hill. A valley stretched picturesque below.

It was on this porch that Omar and Damon now sat the morning after the Prophet had rescued the Dar-Par. They were seated in wooden chairs, sturdy like everything else, and watched the sunrise over the Akors. In the valley below, a trickling stream, originating from the melting snowcaps on the mountains, flowed into a crystal lake where Morn trout occasionally jumped from beneath glistening waters. Beyond the lake, the mountain peaks pointed jagged fingers at an azure sky, its sparse clouds brushed red and orange by the waking sun. Everywhere was the sign of spring, and the wind caressed the tall meadows with a gentle rolling. Here and there, these meadows were spotted with a clump of Gevreen and Feln trees.

A large, detailed, and hand-inscribed map lay on a porch table. Damon glanced at it, trying to memorize the geography of the many surrounding miles. He had seen maps of Etopia before, but this was by far one of the best:

Etopia was large, compared to the surrounding countries. It was two-thousand-five-hundred miles from the southernmost tip, down at Cape Afden, to the northernmost boundary at Manden Town. Across, Etopia was one-thousand miles. Most of the western edge of Etopia was coastline of the Cauma Sea. The Akor Mountain Range took up most of the eastern part, therefore making the east a largely uninhabited area. The west coast was good for fishing, and had many excellent places for ships to harbor, the best of these being Dar Harbor, where the Ryllian river (sometimes called the Ryll) flowed into the Cauma. Dar's Palace was a day's journey east of Dar Harbor and was located on a hill, at the bottom of which ran the Ryllian.

The lake in Omar's valley was Rea Lake, a lake of one mile in length and a half-mile diagonally that received its water from creeks and rivers that in turn got their water from the melting mountain snowcaps. The Rea was the beginning of Etopia's two major rivers: one, the Ryllian, which ran northwest and into the Cauma; and two, the Flon, which sped southeast to the Kaasp Sea, forming the Gett Lake on its way.

Several roads crisscrossed the scenery of the map, but the most notable one was the High Road. It started down in a little village called Breckinbridge, went past Dar's Palace, and on to Manden Town.

"Looks like it's going to be a nice day," Damon observed, slowly downing a hot drink. The liquid inside the cup was a tea called *sievan* tea. Omar explained to Damon that it originated at the same source as *sievan* bread, for both came from the Seltan tree, a many-purposed giant herb that grew in the mountains.

"When shall we start our studies?" Damon inquired.

"Soon," Omar responded.

"Of what will the studies be?"

"Of many things," Omar answered. "Your studies will be lessons that you will not only need to free the slaves, but also to live a life for Emmanweh. I shall teach you how to use the sword, the bow, and other weapons; I will teach you the ways of Emmanweh. I will teach you history. And now will I start."

Omar reached over to the side of his chair and took up a rolled piece of sheep-skin, with writing on it. Omar said, "This is the history of the beginning of all things."

Damon leaned forward in his seat. He was all ears, and ready to learn. A change had come over Damon ever since the Nanjel's visit. Not an enormous outer change, as he had always been a "good man." It was an inner change. Damon fully trusted Emmanweh and his people, and he had never trusted anyone like this before, except Roxanne, who was one of the Arydapians anyway.

Omar began to read the scroll, starting with the title:

THE ACCOUNT OF EMMANWEH'S CREATION OF Oure-worlde AND THE TREACHERY
AND DEMOTION OF OKKAN THE NANJEL AND THE SUBSEQUENT TRAGEDY
LEADING UP TO THE CAPTIVITY

Long, long ago all that existed was Telestiane, Emmanweh's land. Here are golden streets, perfect architecture, the most beautiful of places. But Emmanweh saw that, in Telestiane, the only beings other than he and his son, who dwells there also, were Nanjels, with no emotions and little choice but to serve Emmanweh to the fullest.

Emmanweh wished for a land where the beings had a choice. So he made Oure-worlde, setting it full of plants, and waters, and creatures of a million kinds. He hung the sun in the daytime skies for great light, and the moon as night's lesser luminosity. But best of all things he made Humans, who reflected him. These he set as the Keepers of Oure-worlde. Two of each kind did Emmanweh place on Oure-worlde, with instructions to multiply and produce.

Everything on Oure-worlde was plainly radiant. When all this was finished, He pronounced Oure-worlde perfect.

Damon frowned. "But it is not."

"You are correct," Omar answered, and continued reading:

All the Nanjels praised Emmanweh at the making of Oure-worlde. But one of them only did it for convenience sake. It was Okkan, Commander of Nanjels, Singer of Wonders, of whom to say his voice was marvelously clear and greatly pleasing would be an understatement, of whom to say was the most handsome of all the Nanjels would be below the essence. Okkan envied Emmanweh, and wished he could be a god.

And so Okkan deceived and enthralled hundreds of Nanjel legions to the point they swore allegiance to him. Okkan conceived in himself a plan to overthrow Emmanweh and His Nanjels. His chance came at the Nanjel Assemblage, when all the Nanjels gathered to give account of their deeds to Emmanweh. It is here the Okkan proclaimed war on Emmanweh, and set forth his wish for godhood. It is here the fighting began.

In Telestiane, no time is measured; time has no essence there. However, if one could have counted it, the war raged long. From one planet to the next, the Nanjel force on Emmanweh's side beat at Okkan and his ranks. However, Emmanweh's power is so much superior to Okkan's; Okkan was defeated.

Okkan was brought before Emmanweh and his treachery laid out for all the Nanjels to testify. Even then, Okkan was defiant. Emmanweh declared Okkan a traitor and created a place for his judgment, though He did it with utter sadness.

Still, as of yet, the Humans on Earth still had no choice between good and evil, although they did possess the ability. Emmanweh feared his favorite creation would choose evil, but He wanted to try them. So He gave Okkan power to go about Oure-worlde, trying Humans. Men and Women have been taking sides ever since.

"Next, Damon, I have another account to read.":

THE ACCOUNT TOUCHING ON EMMANWEH'S BEGINNING THE ARYDAPIAN
PEOPLE AND THE ENSNAREMENT OF THESE PEOPLE BY JETH-DAR WHO IS AN
ENEMY TO EMMANWEH

Emmanweh is a gracious God. After he cast Okkan to Oure-worlde, he founded a people group and called them the Arydapians, Ancient Language for Emmanweh's People. These were the Humans who chose to follow Emmanweh. He used a faithful man called Zepor to father this people. Eventually, Zepor's family settled in Etopia."

Zepor's children loved it in Etopia. The seasons were good, the country beautiful. Yes, they were immensely pleased . . . until the time of want came. A famine.

The People turned to the ruler of this land: The Dar. This was the Dar before Jeth, and he was a good man. He took the Arydapians in and treated them well. How he provided for them is a story for another time.

That was when Jeth-Dar came to power. He feared the Arydapians would grow in numbers and take control. To keep this from happening, he asked the People to use despicable methods of birth control, devising ways of broadcasting it as for the Arydapians' benefit. Most of the People said no, and Jet-Dar led an army to enslave Emmanweh's Chosen. There was little resistance.

At that time, there were five-hundred Arydapians. Jeth-Dar murdered some of them. Some of them died of mistreatment. Now there are only three-hundred of Emmanweh's People left alive.

"And I am to free them," Damon mused.

"Yes." Then Omar paused a minute before saying, "I see much in store for the Arydapien people. They will face hardship, and will sometimes turn their back on Emmanweh. However, there will always be a remnant, even in the Dark Times."

"What do you see in my future, Omar?" Damon questioned the Old Man, as both left their chairs and descended into the yard.

"I cannot tell you," Omar replied, "for this is your journey, it is for you to live. But the Arydapiens will be freed from Jeth-Dar, and will become a great nation. However, even they will need a hope, one greater than you, Damon. The hope I speak of will take away the worries of this life, and the evil that started with Okkan and the first Humans. As to that matter, I have one other scroll I wish to read to you."

And of course Omar read it without Damon's consent:

THE ACCOUNT OF OKKAN'S FIRST APPEARANCE IN Oure-worlde, THE HUMAN FALL
IN YEAR ONE, AND EMMANWEH'S PROMISED HOPE FOR HUMANKIND

Missing in the account of Emmanweh's creation of Oure-worlde (and Okkan's demotion and the subsequent tragedies) is a detailing of Okkan's first appearance, the Human Fall, and Emmanweh's Hope for Humankind. The following paragraphs are the previous.

As said, Emmanweh threw Okkan to Oure-worlde, giving Men and Women the chance to choose between good and evil. Thus it happened, and Okkan patiently built his army and spawned a sinister plan to destroy Men. He hatched his plan one beautiful morning.

Emmanweh's set the first two Humans, Man Elyr and Woman Ili, on Oure-worlde at Creation and gave them instruction to be Keepers of Oure-worlde. Emmanweh told the two that they could roam wherever they wanted, eat whatever they wanted, and drink from any stream except for one. This one stream was called River Lyfell, and Emmanweh forbade its use to all Humans. Emmanweh went further to say that if the Humans used it, destruction would come to all of Humankind.

Elyr and Ili did not question Emmanweh. They lived in a perfect, exquisite, bountiful, fruitful world. No reason had they for the use of River Lyfell, for Emmanweh provided all of their needs.

Elyr and Ili loved each other as no other Man or Woman has since their time in Year One, and they dwelt daily in that love and Oure-worlde. They talked personally and enjoyed great fellowship with Emmanweh, never went hungry, and enjoyed life.

But Okkan saw this all, and hated it. Okkan had foregone his right to any good, however limited, and he now wanted revenge. He knew he deserved what he got, but he still wanted revenge for the failure of his treacherous plan against Emmanweh. The way to this, he thought, was to destroy this new world Emmanweh had created.

So, as Elyr and Ili arose one morning and joined hands to watch over their lands, Okkan came to them. He came in all his beauty, and asked them why they never used the River Lyfell.

Ili answered, "Because it is Emmanweh's orders."

Okkan laughed. "Well," he said, "Emmanweh did not make specific His words, did he? He said you may not use it. Now what think you he meant by that?"

Elyr answered. "He meant that we should leave it alone."

Again came Okkan's mirth. "Let me tell you," he said, "why Emmanweh forbad the use of River Lyfell. He did it so that you, Humans, will never know power. In fact, to drink of River Lyfell would give you godhood, and make you closer to Emmanweh."

Elyr and Ili now began to doubt Emmanweh, and this was just the beginning. Together, Elyr and Ili discussed, and they finally decided to try the River Lyfell's water. Surely, Ili reasoned, it would not hurt them if they dabbled only slightly with the River.

But these two were absolutely wrong. The minute they drink one drop of the river they suddenly felt awful, sinful. Then, Emmanweh's voice came softly through garden paths, as it always had. But now Elyr and Ili were frightened, and they hid beneath a shrub.

Emmanweh found them. They could hardly believe He would not find them. "Why have you drunk of the River Lyfell?" asked Emmanweh.

Elyr foolishly piped, "It was Ili, the companion you gave me to help and to love. Her reasoning made me do it."

"Piteous Elyr!" Emmanweh said, and Elyr shrank back. "And Ili, what is your excuse."

Ili trembled, but said, "Okkan made me do it. He was so handsome, and well-spoken. I trusted him."

"Piteous Ili!" Emmanweh said. "Both of you, Elyr and Ili, are responsible for disobedience of my orders. Now, I must sadly bring a curse upon Your Worlde. Your Worlde will no longer be perfect. All Humans now must eventually die. You, Elyr, will give your life in toiling work to provide for you and yours. You, Ili, must endure pain bringing life, children, to Your Worlde.

"And Okkan, who I know allow to hear, you shall be accursed and double-accursed as is your lot for treachery and more treachery. There is a seed from Woman who shall conquer you."

Elyr and Ili began to weep, loudly and harshly. As they sat, they felt the Curse, the Fall, coming upon them, saturating everything with its evil. Nothing would be perfect in Oure-worlde any longer.

Emmanweh spoke one more time. "Humans. Elyr and Ili. You mourn well, for much is gone. But I will provide a hope, the Hope. In a future time, he will come and make right the wrong done on this day.

"For now, the way for you to worship me is death, death of the best of your toil. But, one day, the Hope will conquer Death, and give Life through Me."

Then, Emmanweh expelled Elyr and Ili from the perfect Worlde and into the imperfect Worlde, also providing the first sacrifice for them, the best of the animals: a white lamb.

Omar stopped reading, for he had come to the end of the scroll. He said, "In accordance to the scroll, we shall thrice a year make a sacrifice of the life of the best of our toils. This will be so until the coming of the Hope, who will usher in the Restoration of Oure-worlde."

Damon began to consider all Omar had read to him.

On the next day, Omar announced that Damon's weaponry training was to begin. They were in the cottage at that time, and Omar treaded over to a large cupboard, where he reached in and came out with a sword.

At forty-five inches, the blade was longer than Damon's, and consisted of thick steel, with a two-sided blade; the handle was one foot long, and designed for the use of both hands. Omar the Prophet usually employed one hand only.

Damon gaped. Omar noticed.

"Ah! I will get you a sword just like mine. To make things a little better for you!" At this, the Prophet retrieved another, identical sword from the cupboard. The two stepped outside and took up positions on a flat area in the yard. Both assumed ready position.

Omar carefully examined his protégé. "Well, now," he said, "I see they taught you the right stance during Sword Mastery."

"I learned many things about the sword there," Damon said.

"A little lighter on your right foot, Damon. Good. Who was your teacher?"

"Hillbrak, Sword Master."

"Hmm." Omar muttered, tugging on his beard. "I could best him any day without raising a sweat."

"You do not think I had the proper training?" Damon was surprised.

Omar smiled. "Oh, sometimes I forget myself, Damon. You must understand that no other present swordsman could best me in a duel, simply because only one man at a time can receive the training I went through."

"What?"

"Something I cannot tell you of."

"Oh." Damon was already learning not to question Omar when he did not explain a thing to its fullness.

"Alright then, let us begin!" The two touched swords, beginning the fight.

Damon was the first to engage. He began his attack by clashing his own sword against Omar's, feinting, jabbing. Omar parried easily, barely moved as he did.

This went on for a few more minutes until Omar stopped. "Damon, you have good posture," he said. "And you handle your blade well. That is not enough. When you face Jeth-Dar, and yes, one day you will, you must be as good as you can be. You are not at your highest capacity, I can see, and Jeth could easily beat you now."

"I did not even know he was a swordsman!" Damon retorted.

"Oh? He is! Almost as good as me.

"Now, you need a little work on your method, your moves. You execute fast, almost too fast, but then you become slower as the fight continues. You have a small amount of endurance. You need work on that."

Damon swallowed his pride. He had always thought he was one of the best, and here Omar was making him out as small fry.

"Another thing: You leave open spot in your defense. That is a notorious weakness and must stop. Likewise, use your wrist a bit more. You have the tendency to move your arms in excess. That wears you down. We must work out every knot in your rope. Understood?"

Damon nodded, and his training continued.

As the days and weeks wore on, Damon continued a physical, mental, and spiritual training. With Omar the Prophet as his mentor, the young man learned an unusual expertise with all weapons and came to have an even deeper love for Emmanweh, the One who had brought him to this path. In addition, the Dar-Par came to feel affection for Omar as he would a father. Omar felt and did for Damon what a father should for his son. Damon had never received this from Jeth-Dar, now an enemy.

Furthermore, Damon's thoughts were often with Roxanne, and he discovered his real love for her as, day by day, he was absent from her. He had previously spent much time with his betrothed, and now he reflected on her good character traits of kindness, purity, compassion, and love for Emmanweh. These things, for the most part, had Damon seen before. However, it was only now that he was realizing them.

Damon thought of the slaves whom he was to free, and wondered if they knew that he was coming. Did they accept him?

Of all this, Damon thought one afternoon, as Omar and he were traveling through the forest, walking, sometimes running, building muscles and stamina for things to come.

They stopped to rest by the side of a mountain trail, almost exclusively employed for travel by Etopian deer and wild goats. Spring lingered still, but summer was near. The air was cool, with only a hint of heat. Damon sat down and took a swig from his wooden canteen.

There was silence for a bit. Omar was used to living alone, and he seldom spoke. When he did, he usually had something important to say.

"I think I'm getting used to these long hikes," Damon ventured, wiping sweat from his brow.

Omar said, "Damon, it is often good to enjoy the simple, yet not-so-simple, things of life: the complex trees with their scraggly bark, waving limbs, hand-like leaves, solid trunks; an antlered stag leaping into sight, or a mother doe, waiting patient for her fawn; the valleys, the hills, the mountains. All these things are comely to observe, to watch. They help you take your focus from yourself, place it on other people, things. And Emmanweh, above all."

Damon listened attentively. Those simple things of which Omar spoke, Damon had seen these before his coming to the mountains, but then they had been objects. Now they were different. They were pleasures to enjoy, foods for thought.

Omar rose, and Damon likewise. Omar lifted his staff and swung back to the trail, continuing conversation. "Yes, Damon, you are getting better in many things. Your physical strength and spiritual well-being have both benefited by your coming to me. And now I would like to teach you a few more lessons."

"What lessons?" Damon asked, panting.

"There is a phrase in the Ancient Language that Emmanweh's People once used. They have probably forgotten it by now. The phrase holds no charm, or the like. It is a simple, encouraging word, a good-bye of sorts.

"When you leave someone, or meet them momentarily, you say: '*Akkom Emman daddum!*' "

Damon frowned. "What does that mean?"

"Tis one of those odd articles of the Ancient Language where three words represent several others when translated. This phrase means: 'May the path lie straight before you, and Emmanweh lead you on!' Those who know it will receive it as encouragement.

"However, there is another purpose. To the far, far west, a band of little people, four to five feet tall, roam the forests. Most call them Dwarves, and they are dangerous, despite their smallness, as they wield battle-axes, maces, and bows in such a way as few humans can.

"If these rovers catch you in their territory, they will probably kill you. That is where the phrase comes in. These tiny men have a high respect for the Arydapian people. Nevertheless, you cannot simply say: 'I am Arydapian.' Even if you did know their language, they would not care. You must greet the Dwarves with the locution: "*Akkom Emman daddum!*"

At the palace of Jeth, the Dar was pacing his throne room as dusty noon light filtered through a large, smudgy window. Jeth-Dar's gray beard and hair were matted, his whitish skin a lighter than usual shade, his thin frame hunched. *Damon Dar-Par is gone, he thought, run away to conspire with that accursed brother-in-law of mine!*

Jeth-Dar could not see why Damon left. He had been prepared to give Damon all he could want: a throne, Sword Mastery, Dar Training, a lovely wife.

Jeth had figured the Dar-Par would like Roxanne at his troth. She was the cook's servant until he had decided to make her Damon's wife. She was much better looking than the average Etopian maiden, even those of royalty.

Now Damon was gone.

Jeth began talking to himself again.

*Again and again I try to shake free the thorn-in-my-flesh, that Old Man. The dragons have never been successful at it. Mayhap I need to conceive another plan, a scheme that will rid me of that Omar **and** traitor Damon at the same time, once and for all!*

Falon dangle!

Yes, my departed wife. Damon must also die. I know you loved him, as you did the Old Man, but they have chosen sides. They are now my enemies. I must kill them before they cause me more trouble.

He slapped his palm on the wall.

"Servant! Come quickly."

Jeth stretched his hands to the sky in an egotistic practice of self-celebration. He determined to give the glory to his own abilities. He fought aside the deep knowledge that this was false.

Jeth-Dar, you are invincible! You will not die . . . You cannot die!

Spring melted away to summertime, which then burnt off to fall. Etopian men and women went about every day as normal; that is, except for Damon and Omar who, though also working as they must, were always preparing for the deliverance of the slaves from bondage. This emancipation was their ultimate goal.

One of those early autumn nights, after Damon milked the cow and Omar grained his stock, the Prophet led his student into the inner recesses of the cave where two boxes lay side by side, covered by a woolen blanket.

Opening the first chest, Omar motioned to Damon to come and look inside.

"Damon, there is armor in this chest. It is yours to keep, for you must wear it when you free the slaves"

"But," Damon began, "I have my own armor already."

"Damon," Omar was patient. "You left your old life and you must now take this armor as a token of the fact that you no longer live that wretched way."

"Yes," Damon contended, "but it is my Sword Mastery armor. It is good armor."

"Damon," Omar was shouted this time. "You are proud of the fact that you are a Sword Master. If Emmanweh had not called you, that would be fine! However, you were called. You must forget about your Sword Mastery. If I had not taught you, you would not be a suitable warrior for your cause."

Damon was stunned at this outburst, but realized Omar was right. He went over to the chest. He looked inside with awe as he pulled out a white tunic of durable but soft material, a cape of purple fabric, a breastplate of heavy steel, a helmet, likewise of heavy steel with a small spire affixed on top, a coat of fine chain-mail, and leather boots that tied almost to the knees. Across the white tunic's front, DP was sewn in red lettering.

"About the initials," Damon asked, "they are of my old name, Dar-Par, are they not?"

"They are," Omar answered.

"And did I not throw off the old life by starting on my mission, as you said?"

"Yes, granted," Omar answered. "Nevertheless, Dar-Par does not only mean The Prince."

"It does not?"

"No. I think your mother, a good woman," Omar's eyes wetted momentarily before he continued, "I think she knew this when you became the Dar-Par. You see, Damon, Dar-Par is another word in the Ancient Language that means The Chosen One; only Dar-Par is pronounced more softly when spoken in Ancient."

"Really?!" Damon exclaimed.

"Yes," Omar smiled. "And now, are you not forgetting the integral part of an armor collection?"

"What?" Damon questioned.

"The sword." At this, Omar reached into the bottom of the chest and pulled out a magnificent sword, the most glorious blade in the whole of Oure-world. Its hilt was plated with gold, and at the point where hilt met blade, the letter E, for Emmanweh, was engraved. The handle was carefully wrapped in flat leather strips. The blade was an incredibly long fifty inches in length, two-edged, and was extremely well balanced. The blade's metal bore an exquisite shine, engraved with swirls and such, and was very light, for the metal it was made of was not known to the Etopians.

"By the River Ryll!" Damon exclaimed breathlessly, "this is the sword of all swords."

"As Emmanweh is King of All Kings," Omar said.

"Yes, this sword will remind me of him." Damon tried the steel in his hands. "The metal is light! Is it also strong?"

The Prophet took up the sword, sounded it with his pointer finger and thumb. "In fact, it is the strongest of all known metals, but is also lighter than steel." The Old Man could have told Damon much more, but did not.

Omar went over to the other chest, opening it also. He pulled out a bow of Gevreen wood and a quiver of oiled leather that held ten arrows. Handing it to Damon, Omar said, "You also need a bow."

"Yes," Damon replied, taking the bow, feeling it. "You have taught me the use of archery."

Omar grinned. "Something you did not learn in Sword Mastery training."

"Oh."

"And Damon," Omar said, reaching deeper into this box, "the one most remarkable thing of all: a bronze bow."

Omar pulled the Bronze Bow from the trunk. It too had a quiver, and arrows of the strongest wood Omar had been able to find.

"How can any man pull this?" Damon asked. He was stalwart, and could not.

"Well, you see, Damon, no man can . . . without Emmanweh's help. If you are in a time of dire need, Emmanweh will prompt you to draw this bow. When you do, with Emmanweh's help, it is the most powerful bow in all the land. It can shoot five-hundred steps and kill the toughest of beasts."

"Amazing!" Damon's eyes were wide.

"Damon," Omar said, "I have yet another weapon to give you. It is my own invention. Some people have thought me a wizard for using it, but, as I've told you, no one belonging to Emmanweh resorts to sorcery." Damon nodded his head as Omar handed him a small, circular device. On one flat side was a tiny hole and a lever was on another side. A strap was connected to it.

Omar took it back, and said "I call it the Device," as he strapped it on. When in his hand, the circular object lay in the palm, the strap around the hand. The tiny hole pointed out, and the lever was near the thumb.

Omar walked outside, where a large tree stood. "See that oak?" Damon nodded. Omar then pointed the Device at the tree and pressed down on the lever.

When he did this, a beam of flame jumped from Omar's hand and hit the oak tree. In less than a minute, the tree had completely disappeared.

"What in Oure-worlde?!" Damon exclaimed, amazed once more. "I would also think you a wizard if I didn't know you! How does it work, Omar?"

Omar handed the Device to Damon. "It is yours," he said, "use it wisely. To answer your question: Inside the Device is a chemical you project by pressing the lever. The chemical turns to flame in mid-air. When it meets something, that thing saturates the chemical and vaporizes."

Damon said nothing, and followed Omar back into the cave where the armor lay. "Tomorrow," Omar said, "tomorrow we begin your quest! Tomorrow we take the next step to fulfilling your perilous mission!"

Chapter 5: Dark Storm Rising

Far into the night, the palace's outer wall door swung out and four black-cloaked horsemen rode into the dark of night. The door clang shut once more.

Up on a palace balcony, Jeth-Dar leaned against a rail. *I hope that these assassins are the key to death's door. Death for my two most deadly enemies. My enemies shall die.*

Jeth-Dar turned to the stairwell. His jaw was tight in forced ignoring of what he knew deep down inside, but would not admit.

Sometime he would die, as all men must.

But the Dar could not accept this fact. To do this he must admit his non-invulnerability. Dying was the only thing this man feared.

As he went back to his quarters, a thought of no good will entered his brain. One thing he knew would bring Damon Dar-Par scurrying back to the palace. Roxanne!

He explained the Captain of the Elite Palace Guards. They were to capture Roxanne and bring her to him. A messenger would soon find Damon and inform him that Roxanne was being submitted to tortures.

Jeth-Dar's mind was relentless, without mercy, without a single thought of goodwill.

Black was the cottage when Damon woke to see a figure bent over him. The Dar-Par jumped and drew his dagger.

"It is only me, Damon," the figure whispered. It was Omar.

Damon rolled out of his pallet bed and dressed, putting on the tunic and boots he had received the night before and carefully laying the armor on a porch seat. Then he followed Omar out to the cave.

"We will turn the animals loose," Omar whispered, opening the cow's stall. Damon turned to where they kept the sheep as his eyes adjusted to the darkness.

Damon heard a noise far back in the cave, and Omar heard it also. "Come out where we can see you," Omar commanded. Damon and he drew their blades simultaneously. They heard footsteps approaching from the back of the cave.

They have discovered us! Damon told himself. But who were they? Why were they here?

Damon lit a torch and held it high, lighting the entire cavern. From the inner part came a bearded man in light armor, sword sheathed. "I come in peace." The mystery man raised his hands in surrender.

Damon relaxed and exhaled. "Omar, this is Hillbrak! Hillbrak, how are you doing?"

Hillbrak came forward a little more. "I'm doing fine, Damon. I've come to join your side."

"Really?" Damon was surprised.

"Yes," Hillbrak replied. "Wait!" At this, Damon turned to see Omar come forward, the Bronze Bow in hand!

"Omar! What are you doing?" Damon asked the Prophet.

Omar raised the bow and nocked an arrow, saying, "Damon, this may be your friend, but we must not have enemies among us unawares. I will draw the Bow on this Hillbrak. If it shoots, then Hillbrak lies. If I cannot pull the bow, Hillbrak tells the truth."

"Are you sure you want to do this, Hillbrak?" Damon asked his friend.

"Aye, Damon," Hillbrak answered, looking straight into Omar's eyes. "I would rather die proclaiming myself on your side than to put up with that madman, Jeth-Dar, one more minute!"

Omar placed his fingers on the string. His muscles bulged, but the Bronze Bow's string hardly budged. Omar lay the bow down, and came forward to shake Hillbrak's hand. "Welcome to the Army of Arydapians," Omar greeted. "I am sorry I had to doubt you, but I did. And, may I ask, what brought you here, other than that you are tired of the Dar's ways?"

Hillbrak looked at one, then the other. "Well, I don't know if you'll believe me," he began, "but a thing that called itself Nabriel the Nanjel came to me and told me that you, Damon, had joined sides against Jeth-Dar and a fight was about begin. This Nabriel said I should bring Roxanne and find you. So that's what I did, even though I did not know how long it would take. The Nanjel met us a few miles from the palace. And, never shall I understand, he got us here. But he did it in an instant. Amazing!"

Damon was shocked. "Roxanne? You brought Roxanne?!" He could hardly believe it.

Damon stared past Hillbrak, where Roxanne came stepping out of the inner cavern chamber, dressed in a woman's riding habit. She was even more beautiful than he had remembered. He swallowed a bit. "H-hello, Roxanne," he mumbled. They rushed toward each other and embraced in joyful reunion. For a moment, they just stood there.

"Why did you come?" Damon finally asked, remembering her safety. "You said you would stay at the palace until I came back."

"Didn't you hear Hillbrak?" Roxanne looked up at Damon with her bright eyes. "He was told to take me here."

"Oh, yes. But, I suppose, I mean, now that you are here, you will be staying here, will you not?"

"No, Damon," the girl replied. "I'll be going with you. I feel I must."

"But, Roxanne," Damon argued, "this may be a gruesome job. There will be times when we will have to kill to live. I do not want that for you."

"Please, Damon, let me go. I do feel I must."

"Oh, alright," Damon conceded, leading her back to the two others. Hillbrak was grinning and Omar's eyes showed a smile his mouth did not. "What are you two so smug about?" Damon asked, blushing a little.

"Nothing, Damon," Hillbrak said, then changing the subject, "From what I heard, you were going to let these animals loose."

Omar walked back to where he had begun letting out the sheep.

"Come out here to the porch, Roxanne," Damon said, leading her out of the cave. "I have a bow and quiver full of five more than the usual five arrows for you. They are mine, but I want you to borrow them so you will have a weapon. You will need one where we are going. It is hard enough for a man to travel these parts, let alone a woman."

"Yes, Damon," Roxanne replied sweetly, "But I still have that dagger you gave me."

"You do?" Damon was surprised. "I actually forgot about that."

"You did?" Roxanne mocked astonishment. "I hope you hadn't forgotten about me!"

"No, I didn't. Honest!"

Omar came out of the cave, behind his herd of sheep. He walked over to Damon, taking him to aside, said, "Damon, Hillbrak just told me that Jeth-Dar plans to kill us somehow. We must be ever watchful on our journey to the palace."

Chill blew the autumn morning wind, and the bridled horses huffed frosty smoke as the four riders, Arydopian warriors, rode into the rising storm. All four of them were prepared; all were dedicated to the cause.

Damon Dar-Par was dressed in his new armor, the armor Omar had given him, and cape. His sword belt was strapped around his chest leaving the handle behind his right shoulder. He was the epitome of a warrior, as he rode his mighty black steed down the mountain trail, which eventually came to Jeth-Dar's palace after seventy-some miles. The Dar had once been his father.

Now they were each the other's enemy, for Damon had come to hate, not his father, but the deeds his father did.

Hillbrak was dressed in his own coat of mail and shining helmet, a sword by his side and a horse of no inferior rank beneath him. Hillbrak was fresh in the ranks of the Arydapians, but no less dedicated. No one was to ever know all the reasons he had chosen this path over that of the Dar's. It was always enough for the Arydapians that he had passed the Bronze Bow Test, as men would later dub it.

Roxanne, Damon's bow and quiver slung on her back, had been an Arydapien all her seventeen years. Born a slave and soon an orphan, Jeth-Dar's emissaries offered the place of the Dar-Par's bride at fifteen. After extensive considering, and talk with Emmanweh, whom she loved, the girl finally decided to accept the position. Not because it was easier; because it was Emmanweh's will. She often wondered, though, why the Dar had taken her as Damon's wife. She knew she was at least pretty, but . . . Who could understand the Dar, anyway? Jeth was an odd fellow.

And Omar the Prophet, of whom so many knew so little. The story of his life is material for a book itself, and an interesting one at that. Also born a slave, he had, through a series of events, escaped. He was then Emmanweh-called to go to the mountains and wait for the liberator of the Arydapien People to come to him for training. This had happened and now his ultimate role in life was finished.

Saddles creaked as the riders repositioned themselves. They followed a path over a stone bridge crossing the beginning of the Ryllian and continuing to Breckinbridge, where it met the High Road.

"Why didn't you wear armor, Omar?" Hillbrak asked, as they trotted down a hill.

"I am too much used to these clothes," the Prophet replied.

As the four riders rode, clouds rose in the west, and a storm began brewing on the far horizon.

Yet in the forest, peace still reigned, as the wild things began to wake. Squirrels chattered at the men and horses, they did not belong here! A jay squawked noisily; a deer crossed the trail; a hawk circled high above.

Damon drew a deep breath into his nostrils, soaking up the early sunshine and smell of rotting leaves on the forest floor. The horses' hooves chopped the earth and struck at occasional stones.

Each of the four carried, draped across their saddle, a weighty, hooded coat made from the fur of a Mox, an animal much like a huge ram, with dense fur and hooves seven inches in diameter. Some rain began to fall, and each rider pulled his coat and hood over his head.

Later that night, the riders rode into Breckinbridge. The rain was now slanting down in a torrent, the moon hidden behind the murky clouds; lightning stretching in vibrant lines across the blackened sky. The four quickly stabled their horses and found an inn. A wooden sign lay in

front of the building, blown down by the crying wind. It informed the travelers they approached the "Roaring Bear." The four quickly entered the wooden door, and Damon, Roxanne, and Hillbrak found a table by the fireplace while Omar went to the counter for food and rooms. The only other customers at the inn were a couple of town folk, chatting over empty mugs.

The proprietor was a short fellow, and he hustled to the oak-plank counter where Omar waited patiently. "Anything I can do for you?" the little man asked in a high voice.

"Yes," Omar replied. "My friends and I would like some food and drink. We also need two rooms."

"You have it," the little man mumbled, jotting down information on a scroll. "What's your name?"

Omar looked down at him. "Just call us the Riders. We do not want our names abroad." With this last word, Omar furrowed his brow at the innkeeper.

"Oh, sir!" The innkeeper was offended. "I'd never gossip! By the way, don't I know you?"

Omar stared at the little man, then exclaimed, "You ought to! I'm Omar. Remember me, Banty?"

Banty hit his head with his hand. "Of course. Of course! I fought with you in the colonies. How long ago was that? I was a better man then. Remember? They called me 'Bantamius the Marvel.'"

The two old friends began visiting. Hillbrak glanced over at them, and, turning to Damon, asked, "Is Omar always so full of surprises?"

Damon grinned and rubbed his socked feet, boots drying by the fireplace. "Sometimes."

Hillbrak frowned. "I hope this friend of his doesn't like the bad men."

"Don't worry," Damon defended Omar, "if the Prophet likes him, that little fellow must be at least neutral to our side."

Omar came over with a tray of drinks, steaks, and silverware, all special for them. "An old friend?" Damon queried.

"Yes," Omar responded, seating himself. "He is a very old friend. That is Banty, or Bantamius. He is one of the scattered Chosen, though not actually an Arydapien. This town is his calling, and he likes it here. He gave us each a room, as we do not have the funds for four. He is a good man, and trustworthy. He is also a very good cook, so eat." Omar gestured with his fork.

All four dug into their steaks, surrounded by the smells of burning wood and a bit of smoke, cooked meat, and the sound rain.

Omar suddenly stared into the fireplace. "What is wrong, Omar?" Damon asked.

"Nothing," Omar said. "Nothing I can tell you." Then the Old Man became cheery again. "But, I can tell you one thing. We are going to have to stay here until this storm blows over!"

They all nodded solemnly.

"I'm all for it!" Hillbrak muttered, leaning back on two chair legs.

One of the inn customers exited the building chuckling when the other stood up precariously on his chair and, taking a draught, began a song. First the fellow hummed the tune, puzzling Damon, who knew he had heard it before.

Bantamius, making his rounds, stopped by the four's table and said, "That there is Donnell Kay, the local voice. If you don't wanna' hear his song, I'll stop him. But he isn't bad."

Omar looked up, said, "We do not mind."

It was a somewhat long song, a ballad of pleasing tune, and went like this:

A dark king in palace of jewels wrought with greed

Ruled his vast lands with cruelty.

He killed all his rivals, made others his slaves

An' drove the good men to the sea.

Good menfolk they fought him, oppressions to shun.

Like poets of truth they bore steel.

The evil one slashed them, brutally cut down,

Made blood-red the streams an' the fields.

Then whence came a bonnie of courage an' grit,

Whose sword gleamed bright white in the sun.

He fought not for gold, nor prestige, nor lands,

But fought for free-dom to be won.

They say a god, the God, Emmanweh by name

Gave this lad his courage an' skill.

Emmanweh appointed, the lad answered His call,

An' humbly took talents to wield.

The young lad and fellows, some young, and some gray,

Though few in their number took on

The king an' his wiz'dyr of tortures and death

An' more deeds a'waiting Spite's fun.

The lad killed the king, his fellows blew at

The minions of this king's violence.

The vict'ry gained quickly, the Right had the day.

They left the kings rath in silence.

The bonnie boy rescued the captured ones quick

An' fled to the mountains nearby.

They journeyed and 'rived to a land they called home

And happiness came by an' by.

My song in not done, and all is not told.

Evil still dwells in high places.

But one day the Good will o'rcome the Bad,

We'll no longer need swords, shields, an' maces.

The roses will bloom where once they did not,

An' light will fill hearts an' the skies.

The days of the Master of Evil are gone.

Now nature bequeaths held-in sighs.

The singer finished and jumped from his podium. He brought his mug to Bantamius's counter and sat it down while Banty filled it. Omar arose and walked over to him, saying, "I like that song, Donnell Kay. It is a prophetic composition yet to be fulfilled."

Kay took a drink and mumbled, "Aye. A good song, i't's. But only a fairy tale, something men lilt to after they down their ale."

"Then why do you sing it," Omar asked.

"Because, it 'as a good sound. Yet I believe not in such."

Omar placed his hand slowly on the counter, said, "Donnell Kay, be careful of what you speak. Fairy tales are not so fictitious as you think. Moreover, the song is fine, and no fineness comes of alcohol when used as a beverage."

Kay harrumphed and went out the door.

The four each went to their separate beds soon after.

Something jerked Damon from his sleep. This time, however, Omar did not stand over him. Damon leaned up on his elbows and wondered if the bump that awoke him had come from either of the adjoining rooms containing his friends and no one else . . . that he knew of.

The moon came out from behind a cloud and slid into the room. Damon got out of bed and slipped into his tunic. He silently unsheathed his blade and stole out of his room. He crept a few steps and opened Hillbrak's door. The man was sprawled on his mattress, peacefully asleep.

Something must have made that noise, he thought to himself.

Next, Damon opened Omar's door. The room was empty, except for the resting Omar. Damon kneaded his brow in thought. Roxanne's room was the only one left to check.

The Dar-Par tiptoed down the hall of the inn. The moon had once again covered itself in bleakish clouds. The fireplace glowed dimly, letting little light into the hall.

Damon paused before opening Roxanne's door. He wondered if it was polite to look in on her, then went ahead and pulled the latch. His instincts - or was it instinct? - screamed something was wrong, and that that something was the awakening sound.

The door creaked, and Roxanne's voice cried out, "Don't come in!"

Damon stopped. Then he heard a clink. *Roxanne doesn't wear armor,* he thought. Damon burst into the room.

"No! It's a trap!" Roxanne yelled too late. Inside the room, Damon blinked his eyes and saw Roxanne pinned against the wall by a huge, black-cloaked man, and his dress was that of an Etopian assassin!

Damon Dar-Par lifted his sword. But before he could strike the assassin before him, another jumped on his back from behind. Damon fell to the floor.

The assassin pulled a dagger and held it at Damon's throat. "I've come to kill you!" the masked murderer snarled. His breath was a fowl stench.

Damon felt apprehension at the man, but was not afraid to die. "Go ahead," Damon told his oppressor. "But you will never get away with it." The assassin laughed.

The man restraining Roxanne let up on his grip for one second. Only one. Roxanne noticed and tore away from him. She drew her dagger and threw it desperately into the man astride her fiancé. The knife thudded, point first, into the killer's side, causing him to fall away from the Dar-Par.

Damon jumped easily to his feet. The other assassin, completely surprised, began to draw his blade. Damon jumped over to him and, before the man could draw, hit him right between the eyes with a fist. The masked-man slumped to the floor with a thud.

Then, Damon shot past Roxanne, who had retrieved her knife, and stopped. In the main room of the inn came the sound of swords. Damon raced toward it . . .

Among a mess of fallen tables and chairs, Hillbrak and Omar stood back-to-back, fighting four other men. Damon hurried over and attacked one from behind. The assassin twirled and cut sharply at Damon's stomach, but Damon stepped back and chopped down at his opponent's sword. The Dar-Par's large blade struck the assassin's near the hilt, causing the smaller sword to tumble from the man's grasp. The assassin grasped for a knife. Damon struck him in the face with the hilt of his sword, knocking the cloaked-man to the ground.

Omar finished his fight with a slice, and Hillbrak his with a thrust through his enemy's chest. The remaining assassin, less hearty than the others, fled the inn.

Roxanne entered the main room, and Bantamius came in also, finally awoke from his deep sleep. "What happened here?" Banty asked, looking about. "Oh, I see! Blood. Who's gonna' clean it up?"

Hillbrak dragged the dead assassins into the main room of the inn, and bound the two unconscious ones with rope. Bantamius promised to take them to the city council on the morrow. There, the council would try them for their crimes against peace and civilization.

Damon turned to Hillbrak. "Quick! We must not let the other get away." The two hurried through the door of the inn and into the night air as Omar yelled, "Stop, you two!"

Damon and Hillbrak found the assassin outside and pursued him for half-a-mile through a large field. The rain came down no longer. Swirling fog obscured the clearing. Wind stirred the trees, like ghosts in the moon's white glimmer.

"Lost him!" Hillbrak muttered.

"Yes." Damon's eyes darted back and forth, observing. "Let us go back."

Adrenaline from the skirmish was receding from Damon and Hillbrak's veins as they trudged through the inn door. Damon sheathed his sword and warmed his hand near the fire. The main room window, open, was across the room from him, near the door. Roxanne sat wearily on a stool by the fire. Banty mopped up the blood, while Hillbrak checked the prisoners. Omar stood at Damon's side.

Damon glanced over to the window. He gasped.

A silhouette, a man's head, appeared, slowly. "Omar!" Damon whispered.

Then Damon noticed: The man held a bow, an arrow in place!

"Down all!" Damon shouted, and instinctively fell to the floor. An arrow whizzed into the room and thumped against something. The shadow disappeared.

Damon jumped to the window. No one in sight. He flew out the door. The phantom was untying one of the party's horses. Damon's sword came up once more, and the assassin fitted his bow. Damon had no time, cut at the man's head before the bow was drawn. The sword made contact. What was left of the assassin fell into the muddy street.

Banty appeared at the door. "Damon, come!"

The Dar-Par came back, weary. Omar lay on the inn floor, impaled on an arrow. The arrow meant for Damon's chest.

"Omar!" Damon rushed over and fell to his knees beside the Old Man. His eyes brimmed full with tears as he bent over his teacher.

"I used to be a surgeon," Bantamius said, coming over.

"No!" Omar dissented. His voice was hoarse and came in a whisper. "Damon, I have something I must tell you."

"What is it?" Damon asked, tears running down his cheeks.

"Damon, I . . . am your father."

"Is this true?!" Damon Dar-Par could hardly believe his ears.

"Yes, it is true . . . the one you think was your mother . . . was my sister. When Jeth-Dar married . . . her, she convinced him . . . to free me . . . I was a slave. He did it. . . but I would not serve . . . Jeth-Dar, and he . . . re-enslaved me. Emmanweh allowed . . . my escape.

"Soon after . . . my wife died . . . baring you. My sister . . . took you in . . . as her own."

A few months ago, Damon would not have believed. Yet now it seemed right, for Omar and he had treated each other as father and son. Still, his head spun as he processed this new information, his head reluctant to accept what his heart told him he must.

Damon tightened his fists and clenched his jaws. "I will avenge your death, father."

"No!" Omar groaned. "It is not . . . Emmanweh's way!"

Damon hung his head. "Yes, father. You have taught me this."

Omar grabbed Damon's sleeve. "Son," Omar had wanted to say this for a long time, and now he did as he died. "Son, remember . . . all I've taught you."

"Yes, father."

"And . . . I have a last request."

"What is it, father."

"You will need . . . a companion for life . . . a wife. Roxanne . . . is a good woman. I wish to see . . . you married . . . before I die." Omar gasped in agonizing pain as Bantamius pulled the arrow from his side and treated the wound, making Omar's last hours as comfortable as possible

Omar continued. "Banty is . . . able to perform the . . . ceremony. He was once . . . a minister."

Damon looked up at Roxanne, who nodded her head. "We will do it, father."

Bantamius the Marvel united the two in marriage that stormy night, while Damon's real father and friend lie dying on the floor. Any other time, the wedding would have been an ancient ceremony of joy. It was bittersweet in the presence of Omar's death, and performed quickly.

Bantamius brought out two silver wrist-bands he secretly kept. Bantamius placed one silver band on Damon's right arm, the other on Roxanne's left arm. Damon and Roxanne touched their palms to one another's and in one voice said, "I will serve you as Emmanweh commands and is my place. I promise myself to you forever. I will never love another in matrimonial love as long as I shall live. So swear I this on my life before Emmanweh, and all Humankind."

A tear fell from Damon's eyes. Union and new life were beginning while another life was terminating.

Bantamius announced them Man and Wife and ordered them to seal the ceremony with the required kiss.

Damon and Roxanne went back to Omar's side. So did Hillbrak and Banty. A few hours later, Omar the Prophet passed from this life and into the next, the Land of Telestiane, where all is peace, joy, tranquility, and all of Emmanweh's people will meet some day. This is how Omar wanted it. To him, a follower of Emmanweh, death held no sting. He wanted no sorrow at his passing. He wanted joy. Death was joy for Emmanweh's Prophet.

Before Omar died, he looked up at Damon, whose eyes still yet held tears. "Do not weep for me," the Prophet ordered. "You must . . . go on. *Akkum Emman daddum* , Damon!" Omar weakly held up his hand. Damon saluted it.

" *Akkum . . . Emman daddum!*" Damon replied.

Only three of the four riders that had ridden into the little town of Breckinbridge, on a dark and stormy night, came out again. Leading Omar the Prophet's riderless horse, they exited the village slowly, one day after the prophet's death. They were leaving the body of their comrade, fellow Arydopian brother, and Damon's teacher behind them.

Memories behindhand, a mission lay ahead.

Bantamius buried Omar on a hill above Breckinbridge, just past the bridge. The dead assassins were dumped into an unmarked grave; the live ones were thrown into a cell three days journey southwest in a prison secretly kept from the knowledge of Jeth-Dar by those people who still remembered the justice of the time before Jeth came to power.

Chapter 6: Making Plans

The sun arose from the Cauma sea and dove behind the Akors six times. Finally, the riders were close to their destination. Jeth-Dar's palace zone was nearly in sight when the three nooned by the Ryllian river. As they ate a small luncheon, courtesy of Bantamius the Marvel, all three determined that instead of approaching the palace's heavy fortifications from the valley, they would follow the ridge that ended in the Great Hill, not but a half-mile north of the palace.

To the south of the palace lay a valley and village. To the east, the river wound by, with slave huts dotting the banks. To the west, the Akor mountain range began but a mile away.

"Now," Damon began, as Roxanne prepared their food, "we must have a plan for freeing these slaves."

"I agree," Hillbrak sighed. "Something has me flummoxed."

"What's that?" Roxanne asked.

"How are we to free three-hundred slaves, (three hundred!) fight Jeth-Dar's army, and escape alive?"

Roxanne sat down on a log Damon had scrounged for her. "Damon," she quietly said, "we really ought to ask Emmanweh's help, don't you think?"

"Of course we should."

They all bowed their heads. Damon led. "Emmanweh, our God, we are on the mission you have given us. We need Your help more than anything in Oure-worlde, for it will take more than our power alone to free these slaves. We thank You, Emmanweh, for past help. Please forgive our transgressions, and please aid us as You will. Let Your will be done over all, and thank You."

They raised their heads again. Damon thought for a moment, then spoke. "Hillbrak, you should know best the man-power of Jeth-Dar's palace. I lived in it my entire life, but you were more involved with the military."

Roxanne handed each a chicken leg, keeping one for herself.

"Agreed," said Hillbrak. "I do know. Presently, three-hundred-fifty regular soldiers are at the palace. Besides that, there are thirty guards, who camp every night by the Ryllian, and twenty Elite Guards, who are always near the Dar. There are also around twenty dragons, of whom few know. Their loyalty is unpredictable at best."

Roxanne finished her meat and wiped her fingers on a handkerchief. "I know about these dragons, but what about the Elite Guards?"

"After being in the palace for so long, I would think you would know about them," Hillbrak mused.

Damon tossed his bone into the brush. "You, Hillbrak, know about the Guards. That is because you were close to the Dar. In reality, most people know little about the Elite, as they are very furtive-like. You see, Roxanne, they are the special protectors of the Dar and his estates. Many call them the best fighters in the world. They are usually of foreign ancestry, often from the colonies."

Roxanne stood up. "So these Guards would be difficult?"

"Yes!" Damon and Hillbrak agreed. "To say the least."

Suddenly, Nabriel appeared in their midst. They had all seen him before, and were not afraid, but could not help feel the thrill an Arydapien always feels when a Nanjel is seen. "Sons of Your Worlde," he said, "I come to help you plan. I know that two-hundred-fifty of the three-hundred-fifty soldiers you, Hillbrak, spoke of are camped outside the palace in a hidden place by the Ryllian. Tonight, I will take a legion of angels and we will destroy these men."

"Thank Emmanweh for His help!" Damon praised. The others nodded reverently.

The Nanjel continued. "The dragons are even now wondering what happened to their three missing brethren. You know, Damon, that Jeth-Dar killed one of them. One of the others likewise. The first to disappear, however, died on duty. Go to the dragons, located now in the Caves of Ancients. Try to persuade them to help you." "Mightn't they do it for revenge?" Damon asked.

"They will," Nabriel answered.

"And is not revenge wrongful?"

"For the Human, yes," Nabriel said unwearingly. "Yet the dragons are mere creatures, though they can talk, and know not right from wrong, and they cannot discern it either. Emmanweh created them thus. They do, however, have some feelings of mutuality. When they learn that Jeth-Dar killed two of their friends, they may be angry enough to turn against him."

"How do I get in touch with the Arydapien slaves?" Damon asked Nabriel.

"Tonight, the Ten Elders, ten older leaders among the Arydapiens, meet at midnight in the smallest of the slave huts. Go there, after you go to the dragons, and talk with them of what must be done, what your plan will be."

Nabriel the Nanjel disappeared and the three sat quite for a while, thinking.

Evening settled down on Etopia and found Damon balancing his way up a narrow path that led to the Caves of Ancients. The Caves were located on the eastern side of a tributary of the Ryllian

river, opposite Jeth-Dar's palace. To get to them, one had to climb a narrow, winding path that led up a solitary peak, which might have once been part of the Akor Mountains. If one were able to fly, as the dragons did, the Caves of Ancients were much more accessible.

Damon wondered if the dragons would even here him out. No one, human or beast, could coerce a dragon.

After much sweating and worry, Damon came to the first of the Caves. To his great relief, a sign reading "Dragonland," written in scrawling letters, was nailed to the outside. Damon glanced inside; no light showed. Damon's hand lifted to his shoulder and drew his sword; it jumped into his hand like magic. This came from living with ubiquitous danger.

Damon stepped inside Dragonland. He could hardly see a thing. The whole place smelled of smoke and burning; a drip-drop-drip of water came from back in the cavern. Damon's mind heightened to a razor sharpness. "Danger Sense" Omar called it.

Directly in front of the Dar-Par, a stream of flame abruptly leaped from the ceiling to the floor, ending in a vat of some strange, slow burning liquid. An orangish glow shone from the vat, revealing twenty huddling dragon forms about the room, a considerably large section of the cave. One of the dragons, more massive than the others, perched on a small ledge. A sign sat beside him, written in the same crude letters as the one outside, and said "Dragon-Captain." The dragons were of the small kind. The Captain was an exception; he was fifteen feet long.

Smoke curled from the Captain's nostrils. Damon's stomach turned a loop and sweat wetted his brow, as the Dragon-Captain asked, "What does a human coming to our glamorous dwelling place. Our dragon-guard seen you coming many miles 'way, and we put lights out till now in wait."

Damon did not think Dragonland very glamorous, but he sensibly said nothing of it. He noticed that the Captain spoke better than most dragons. "Oh great Captain of the Dragon Clan," Damon began, trying to impress the creature, "I have come to give you information you need. I know that you have been seeking word of your three dead brethren, and I bring you tidings of them." Some of the dragons whispered among themselves at this.

The Dragon-Captain blinked. "This is why we have gathered, Human. First tell us your name, then your information."

"My name is Damon Dar-Par." More whispers ensued. "My information: One of your dragon brothers was killed doing his duty." Damon turned to the rest. "The other two were killed by Jeth-Dar." Several of the dragons gasped, long tongues rolling about their snouts, flame lighting their eyes and nostrils.

"You are the prince?" the Captain questioned, leaning his long neck forward.

"I am the prince no more," Damon answered him.

"This is the one who escaped the palace, the only son of the Dar, he is," another dragon piped up.

"Why keep you the name?" asked the Captain.

Damon stood taller. "In the Ancient Language, Dar-Par does not mean Prince. It means the Chosen."

Without another word, the Dragon-Captain flew from his perch and landed among the rest of the dragons, as he gave a command for them to discuss whether to believe the Human.

Finally, the discussion ended and the Dragon-Captain flew back to his ledge. "We have decided that you speak truth," the Captain asserted. "We have heard tell you are a truth-telling human, and we believe you. And we now ask what you want us to do? You came here not for nothing."

Damon was surprised at the dragon's soundness of mind. "I am leading an emancipation of the slaves," Damon said, deciding to reveal all. "If you felt it helped you, I could integrate you all into my strategy."

"Very well," the Captain said. "Tell us your plan."

All dragons listened close, blinking and stretching their necks.

Midnight neared Etopia. Roxanne and Hillbrak sat at their ridge-top campsite. Some supper was waiting for Damon, heating over a very small, smokeless fire made from absolutely dry driftwood.

Roxanne was thinking to herself, as she often did. She was thinking of her marriage to Damon. It had been so quick, so impromptu; so unromantic. She had hardly received time to consider it. However, she had wanted the marriage for a long time. Emmanweh's Nanjel had told her it was needed, and then she had begun to love the Dar-Par.

Roxanne wondered why Emmanweh wanted this marriage between them. She did not worry too much about that though, at least not anymore. She looked over at Hillbrak. "Where do you think Damon is by now?" she asked.

Hillbrak thought for a minute. "Probably nearing the hut where the Elders meet," he answered. Hillbrak stared into the starry sky. "Hope things turn out."

"It will." Roxanne was confident in this. "The mission is Emmanweh's own."

Roxanne did not express another thought, though. *The question is, who will remain alive when all is said and done?*

Hillbrak leaned close to the fire, pushed a stick into the flame, squatted on his knees. "Damon is a good man," he mused. "If anyone can get us out of this mess, he can. He has chosen the right path."

"Why do you say this?" Roxanne asked.

Hillbrak's eyes took on a faraway look. "Some people think they can go their whole life and never take a stand for one of the two sides. They must quit riding the fence, sometime in their life, and stand. For Emmanweh. Or the Rebel, Okkan."

"You were one of these 'fence riders'?"

"Yes. But I was wrong. I found there comes a time when you must be transformed to one or the other, good or evil."

The fire crackled. Hillbrak went to scout a bit. Roxanne wrapped her Mox coat closer about her and nursed a cup of tea, something else from Banty. She was seated away from the small circle of light the fire created.

The tents of two-hundred-fifty soldiers lay scattered about a hidden green near the Ryllian. All slept, except four men who stood guard. Two of these met as they made their rounds.

"Too bad we didn't get picked to stay at the palace, huh?" one soldier said to the other.

But the other did not speak. Instead, he fell down in his tracks. The first ran and knelt by his side, felt his pulse. The man was dead!

"What goes on here?" the first guard wondered aloud. Then, his heart missed a beat, then two. Searing pain filled his mail-covered chest. He choked, trying to catch his breath. He panicked.

The soldier fell to the Ryllian riverbank. *Am I dying?*

The Ten Elders had secretly convened, as they did every month, in the smallest of the huts. They always held their clandestine meetings at midnight.

As the Elders gathered, a bald one said, "Something is in the air. I sense it."

A bearded one lit a small torch and sat cross-legged. "Brothers, I have a thing to say."

"What is it?" asked another.

"Last night, I was visited by Nabriel, the Nanjel, in a dream. He said the liberator we have been expecting is near, and will meet us here tonight."

Damon stepped into the hut of mud. None of the Elders shrank back. "I am Damon," he said, "and have come to free you."

"We know," the bald one whispered. "We now must formulate a course of action."

"How did you know I was coming?" Damon asked.

"Following Emmanweh is a life full of surprises," the bearded Elder observed. "Trust in Emmanweh takes away the fear these surprises often generate. Now let us talk."

Hillbrak came up with his weapon as leaves crunched out in the dark. Damon stepped into the light and Hillbrak relaxed. The Dar-Par stepped up to the fire and Roxanne handed him a bowl of venison stew, which Damon devoured.

"Thank you!" Damon smiled at Roxanne. She returned his smile.

Damon went over to Hillbrak, and Roxanne followed. "Hillbrak," Damon said quietly, "I have wasted no time. I talked to both the dragons and the Ten Elders."

"And what did they say? What is the plan?"

Damon put the empty bowl down. "I will just outline the whole plan now.

"First of all, we will all meet around forty of the strongest slaves, including the Elders, at the mud huts. To do that we must leave immediately after I give you the plan. From there, we will sneak east to a river dell, where the slave overseers sleep. Most of them will be drunk, and our surprise should be complete."

"There's something I want to know," Hillbrak interrupted.

"What's that?"

"How do those Elders meet anyway? I mean, why has no one found out about it?"

"The Elders told me" Damon replied, "that one of the guards does not like the unfair treatment of the slaves. He is on guard once a month. That is when they meet.

"Now, to go on with the plan. Those two-hundred-fifty detached soldiers should be dead by now, as you two know. All that should be left after we are done with the overseers are the men inside the palace fortifications. The dragons will take care of them at daybreak."

"Kill them." Hillbrak had not asked a question. He had made a statement.

"Yes. By noon tomorrow, the slaves shall be free."

Roxanne added, "If all goes as planned, and is Emmanweh's will."

Damon and Hillbrak agreed.

All three hurried to their horses, and galloped to the mud huts, where the slaves waited to aid in their own deliverance.

Chapter 7: A War for Freedom

Damon, Hillbrak, Roxanne, and twenty slaves crawled up to the edge of a hill overlooking one side of the little valley where the slave overseers camped. The Ten Elders and nine other slaves were doing likewise on the opposite side of the dell.

Damon and Hillbrak had their broadswords. Roxanne had the bow; Damon had given it to her, along with the quiver, as an impromptu wedding gift. The Bronze Bow lay in its pouch on Damon's horse, back with the three other horses tied in the brush by the mud huts. The slaves' weapons ranged from previously hidden swords to tree-limb clubs found in the forest.

Damon, leading his band, rose to his feet and gave a wild cry, a signal for the others. Both groups rushed down their respective slopes and into the overseer campsite. The posted guards were drunk, like the rest of the measly crew.

The sleeping men jumped crazily to their feet and pulled out whips, clubs, and swords. However, in their drunken stooper, most of the overseers just made idiots of themselves. Besides, the cry that all the slaves now yelled drove many of the men who were not completely drunk to a point of utter panic. It was the battle cry of the old Arydapian Army *Toh Emman! Toh nalaal!* Omar had taught this to Damon, who utilized it now, as it was very effective.

The slaves fought for their freedom, and fought well. In the first minute of the battle, several overseers went down by the hands of the slaves.

Damon, sword drawn, ran head on into a muscular overseer with a club. Steel met wood and Damon's sword stuck deep into the club. Both men dropped their weapons and grappled for a minute until Damon threw the larger man with a rolling, self-defense maneuver that Omar had taught him. Almost before he had time to gain composure again, another overseer was near Damon, flailing a whip. Damon ducked the slash and cut the man's hand off. The overseer yelped and fled.

Damon grabbed his sword, withdrew it from the club, and put point to the other, foul-smelling overseer's throat. "Surrender!" the man groaned, still hurting from his fall.

Damon turned in time to see a man go down with one of Roxanne's arrows in his chest. *I do wish she would not have come*, Damon thought. *At least she's a good shot with the bow and arrow!*

Hillbrak came upon a man and raised his sword for a swipe, but the man quickly surrendered his sword. Actually, this is what most of the overseers had done by now. The Arydapians quickly won the battle.

Eventually, all participants on Damon's side gathered at a place where Hillbrak guarded the fourteen living slave overseers. The Ten Elders were in front.

The Elders, Jameson (the bald one) and Aldridge (the bearded one), quickly approached Damon Dar-Par.

"This battle worked out quite easily," Jameson commented. "But what do we do now?"

Damon's eyes went to the starlit sky. "In three hours morning will be here. We must take our advantage once again. Go and gather the people. Tell them to gather as much food as they can from their huts and the slave overseers' storehouses. Take them to the Great Hill behind the palace. There, I believe the slaves, even all three-hundred, will be safe from sight. At least from anyone at the palace. And hurry."

"Aye," Aldridge agreed. "Come," he ordered the other slaves, none of which had been killed in the battle. A few were wearing minor scratches.

"Damon," Hillbrak called. "The prisoners want to speak to you."

Damon walked over to the prisoners. "What do you want?" he asked irritably.

One of them, the guard who had aided the Arydopian slaves, spoke. "I say this for us all. We swear that, if you let us go, we will never come within one-hundred miles of this place. Will you let us go? Sir? We beg you!"

Damon considered for a minute. "I will," he finally decided. "But if I ever see one of you within that hundred mile range you speak of, I will grant no mercy. Understand?"

The overseer never hesitated. "Understood. We will do as you say." Damon took his sword and cut the prisoner's bonds.

After all of these left, Damon turned to Roxanne and Hillbrak. "Let's go to the Great Hill," he said, walking forward.

"Shouldn't we get the horses?" Roxanne asked.

Damon stopped. "Oh, yes! We should."

By the time all three-hundred slaves gathered behind the Great Hill morning crept over the eastern horizon. Damon found Hillbrak, and together they climbed the Hill and sat near the top. Roxanne was among the people, helping mothers with crying children and feeding the hungry. Many of the slaves were malnourished and weak.

"Shouldn't the dragons be attacking the palace now?" Hillbrak asked Damon as they sat down with a sigh.

Damon squinted at the sky. "They should be here any minute." Then, "Oh, there they are now!"

The two squinted at the clouds. High up, twenty dragons flew south in formation.

"Wait a minute!" Damon exclaimed. "What's going on?" The dragons showed no sign of attacking the palace. No sign at all.

"Wonderful!" Damon growled beneath his breath.

One of the dragons drew apart from the others and flew toward the Great Hill. It continued coming until Damon could tell it was Drago the Dragon-Captain. Drago folded his wings and came to a stop in front of Damon and Hillbrak.

"I want to know what's going on. What is?" Damon demanded, trying to hide his frustration.

"I'm very sorry, Dar-Par," Drago apologized. "But my brethren decided they didn't want to fight for you . . . for anyone. I do believe you, but they don't. I must go with them. I am sorry."

Damon wanted to vent his great frustration. He did not. Instead, he quietly said, "Let it be. Thank you anyway, Drago."

The Dragon-Captain said no more and flew away.

"Now what do we do?" Hillbrak asked the inevitable question.

"You don't waste time, do you Hillbrak?" Damon said tersely. "I don't know what we do. I really don't."

Ask Emmanweh. The thought came quickly to him.

"Hillbrak," Damon began, "I need some time alone. Gather the people and I will talk to them when I'm done."

Hillbrak got up and left Damon to himself.

Damon leaned his head against a tree, resting. His eyes were closed in prayer, and thinking. Before him lay the palace of the Dar, ever sticking out in its beautiful, yet evil, prominence.

The problem the Arydapians were in was terrible. It would not be long before Jeth-Dar discovered their disappearance. When this happened, he would be furious and Jeth-Dar's minions would pursue the Arydapians. Although there were more slaves than soldiers, the soldiers were much more experienced in battle than were the slaves. The only men that Damon knew of who really knew how to fight, and fight well, were Hillbrak and himself. Roxanne was extremely good with the bow and arrow; Damon had no idea where she had learned.

If there were five other warriors among the People . . .

A plot to breach the impregnable palace developed in Damon's mind. *Thank you, Emmanweh.*

Hillbrak gathered the Arydapians at the bottom of the Great Hill. A boulder stood near, and Damon mounted it so the crowd would hear him better.

"Arydapien People," Damon started loudly, "not all of you know of our original escape plan, but for those of you who do, I must tell you: The dragons failed us. They will not be destroying the one-hundred soldiers in Jeth-Dar's palace."

Some of the people began whispering, murmuring, groaning. Some simply stood quietly, acceptingly. One of the murmurers stepped forward, saying, "So, you got us out here just so we could die, did ya'?"

"Quite!" Aldridge ordered. All Ten Elders stood listening, their faces emotion's mask.

"Please," Damon continued, "please do not worry. Emmanweh has willed that you escape. We must trust Him. People, I have a plan."

"You'd better!" another griper quipped. His name was Planctus.

Damon ignored Planctus and continued. "You must go to the west and shelter yourself in the Akor Mountains. Meanwhile, Hillbrak and I will go to the palace and create a diversion. I am certain Jeth-Dar knows we have escaped by now, so we need a distraction. That will allow you all to escape. However, I need five men to volunteer to go with Hillbrak and I. Five who know the sword like the back of their hand."

Without hesitation, five men stepped forward. They were all between the ages of twenty and thirty years. "What are your names?" Damon asked them.

The eldest stepped forward. He wore a cropped beard, as did the others, and long hair. He was also stocky, as were also the others, and had bulging arm muscles. "We are the Macklins. I am Jonathan. From oldest to youngest, the rest are Benjamin, Harcourt, Tarry, and Melkik. We know the blade, and the use of it. We offer you our swords." They all wore swords, which they now drew. They had taken them from the slave overseers, who surrendered them in battle.

"Alright," Damon said, stepping down from the rock. "Come with me and we will discuss a strategy."

Roxanne ran up to Damon's side. "Damon," she cried, "I have told you before that I would come with you. Once again, I feel I must, Damon."

"But Roxanne, this will be more dangerous than ever!"

Roxanne looked up at him with those pleading eyes. He just could not say no.

Damon, Roxanne, Hillbrak, and the brothers assembled. Damon commenced the briefing. "My plan is crazy. It's desperate. And it might just work. Are all of you ready?"

Hillbrak bobbed his head. "Lead us, Damon," he said. "For Emmanweh. For victory. For freedom!"

"For freedom!" they all chorused.

A jeweled flagon flew through the air and struck the wall, narrowly missing a complacent servant standing by. Jeth-Dar was in a rage, again. He had just received word, by his servant, that the slaves were gone, disappeared, nowhere to be seen. As were the slave overseers. "What is going on!" he yelled fervently. He was so angry he could not even think. The Elite Guard he sent to scout out the situation had not returned.

The Throne Room door flew abruptly open as another servant guided that same Elite Guard into the room. The Elite Guards were legendary for their fearlessness. This man's face was a white sheet.

"What's the news, slow-moving slug?!" Jeth-Dar demanded with a shout.

One of the servants offered the guard a drink from a large mug, and the man recovered . . . barely. "S-sir, D-Dar, I've n-news f-for you."

"Don't stutter at me, you filth!" Jeth-Dar yelled.

The Elite Guard recovered himself a little more. "Yes, sir. Well, sir, Dar, I was looking for the slaves when I found something that I thought I must report to you immediately!"

"What?!" Jeth-Dar demanded.

"Those two-hundred-and-fifty soldiers that were camped out in the valley, I found them gone!"

"Mutiny? If it was mutiny, you shall track them down and torture every last one!"

"No, Dar. Dead. Every single man and his horse dead! And rust was eating at their armor!"

Jeth-Dar's eyes begot a hazy look. "Omar . . ." he whispered hoarsely, "and Damon. I'd say they have aught to do with this!"

Without warning, one of the Throne Room windows crashed in and the four inside blinked, peering at an armored man with a purple cape, outlined against the morning sky. Across the front of the man's breastplate were the letters DP.

Jeth-Dar smiled deceptively; inside he was seething. "Damon!" His voice was sarcastic. "Welcome home!"

Damon stepped down from the window-frame. "Jeth-Dar, are you really glad to see me?"

"Yes," Jeth-Dar answered, his hand coming from beneath his furry cloak. "Ah! One more move, and I have you to worry about no more!"

Damon stopped, thinking quickly. "What can you do with that thing, Jeth-Dar?" Damon asked carefully. He realized somehow Jeth-Dar had gained hold of Omar's invention: The Device.

Jeth-Dar smiled maliciously. His hand shot out toward the already-shaken Elite Guard. His palm shot flame and consumed the undefended man. Damon inwardly wept for the soldier; he had not had this in mind.

Still, Damon took advantage of the moment and came out with his own Device, pointing it at Jeth-Dar. "Jeth-Dar, I also have one."

"Oh!" the Dar exclaimed, throwing his to the ground.

"What did you do that for?" Damon questioned, surprised.

Jeth-Dar grinned, evil in his features. "You wouldn't kill an unarmed man, would you?"

Damon knelt quickly and retrieved Jeth-Dar's Device, pocketing both Devices in his pocket. "No, I wouldn't. But you would."

"So," Jeth-Dar asked, retrieving a sword from above his throne, "what else did you learn from that Omar, Damon? By the way, the Device I have was stolen from the Old Man."

Damon drew his own magnificent blade, the slow sound of steel scraping on steel issuing forth as he did. "I learned that you are not my father. Omar . . . was."

Jeth-Dar circled Damon. "Was? What happened?"

"An assassin killed him. It was an arrow meant for me." Damon's eyes were sad for a moment at the memory. Both men assumed fighter's position.

The Dar lunged quickly. "Ah-ha! My attempts come to success at last!"

Damon thwarted the move with a sharp parry. "Do you always hire men to do your killing?" he asked.

"Not always," Jeth-Dar said, slashing at Damon's legs. Damon gave a quick upward jump, landed on his feet, and gave a thrust of his own, which the Dar barely thwarted. The fight went slowly for the first few moments.

The two warriors, one a leader of good and one a leader of evil, then gritted their teeth in anticipation of the savage battle that was to follow. So far, the fight had simply been a testing one, a time when both swordsmen sought out the strengths and weaknesses of the other.

Soon, ferocity took control. Each sword was an infuriated blur of screaming steel as the two men engaged in the most intense man-to-man battle of their lives. Both fighters knew the other was his equal, at least in physical strength and sword skill. Jeth-Dar was inwardly amazed at Damon's

complete mastery of the sword and Damon realized that, had he never gone to Omar the Prophet for training - gained this great proficiency - this fight would have already been lost . . . and won in Jeth-Dar's favor.

Jeth-Dar's blade sliced smoothly at Damon's head, but Damon elevated the point of his sword, blocking the maneuver. Then, Damon Dar-Par tried a quick cut at Jeth-Dar's stomach. The blade hit almost home, and then divided empty air as the Dar threw himself backward in a life-saving move. Damon paused.

Jeth-Dar glanced disgustedly at Damon. "What," he snarled, "to weak to kill me when I'm down?"

Damon ignored him, and held his blade at a 45-degree angle to his body. Both hands covered the hilt.

Jeth-Dar sighed and faked tiredness. Damon almost took before he realized it was a trick. The Dar finally gave up and threw himself to his feet.

Jeth-Dar arced his sword at Damon's midsection. Damon stepped, his sword shooting down, blade meeting blade. The Dar-Par then brought the tip near Jeth-Dar's throat as he jumped back. The sharp steel barely skimmed the Dar's stubble strewn chin, drawing blood.

Jeth-Dar could not figure Damon out. Not for the life of him . . . literally. He thought he was the best swordsman ever. But he now found he was not. The Dar's sword strokes became angry, overemphasized. He was falling into a very predictable pattern.

Jeth-Dar knew only one way remained. A door close to his throne led to an outside balcony, four stories up. Jeth ducked one of Damon's blows and jumped to the door, opening it, retreating up the stairs.

Damon realized what the Dar was doing. He charged after Jeth. He swung his sword; Jeth-Dar hopped to a higher step, and Damon's blade struck the narrow stone wall. Jeth reached the balcony, made it to the outdoors platform, a ten foot rectangle. A wooden rail surrounded it. On that outside wall, two bronze ornamental axes hung.

Damon stopped for breath. His sides were aching. His gaze dropped down to below the balcony. The palace street was forty feet down. He looked back up . . . and something slammed him in the abdomen.

"Idiot! Foppish child!" Jeth-Dar cackled. The ornamental bronze axe Jeth-Dar had thrown into the pit of Damon's middle lay at the Dar-Par's feet. It had been thrown hard, and Damon coughed, leaning over. His stomach hurt terribly.

Damon's mind fogged over. The exhaustion of the fight overpowered him, and now this. He felt Jeth-Dar's hands on his side, pushing. He vainly tried to grapple. He slipped.

Jeth-Dar vented a malevolent roar and pushed Damon over the railing.

His hands shot up; he had won. It did not matter that Damon had been a better swordsman. Jeth won.

You were wrong, Omar, he thought foolishly. *Evil will triumph!*

Meanwhile, Hillbrak, Roxanne, and the five Macklins emerged from the Secret Tunnel after waiting their pre-determined time. They immediately hurried to the nearby Throne Room and discovered one of the windows demolished. A rope hung from the top of the roof, but was impractical for use. The little group saw no easy way inside, so they circled several hundred feet and found the entrance to a long, high ceilinged hall. An engraved sign informed them the hall led to the Throne Room.

Just before that, the second servant had fled the room and reached the Elite Guards, breakfasting in the kitchen a few hundred yards away, and told them of the fight between Jeth-Dar and Damon. The Guards immediately left their food and rushed into the hall, only to find seven warriors of the Arydapien who stood between them and the door.

At first sight, the Elite Guards froze in their tracks, determining what to do. This second of delay gave Roxanne the chance to draw her bow, arrow ready, and fire. The wooden shaft sped down the corridor and lodged in a Guard's throat, penetrating ripples of neck muscle. The Guards then drew uniquely curved sabers and charged the seven Arydapiens. The men drew their swords. Roxanne shot one last arrow, also a hit, before the Elite Guards were upon her. She retreated behind Hillbrak and the Macklins, who quickly engaged the enemy closing on.

The battle was hot, and much more serious in mood than the previous skirmish with the slave overseers. It had been some time since the Macklins had bore the sword, yet they quickly adjusted. Hillbrak's first swipe killed two Guards.

Roxanne saw she could help this effort no longer, so she raced back down the hall and flung open the door they had all been preparing to enter earlier. She stepped into the Throne Room just in time to see Damon emerge from a door by the throne, saying, "I thank Emmanweh you have those gargoyles beneath all the palace balconies."

"Nooo!" Jeth-Dar screamed as he tried to cut at Damon. Damon slapped Jeth-Dar's sword aside with his and plunged his blade into Jeth-Dar's torso. The great Dar of Etopia collapsed. Damon wiped his blade free of blood and stepped away from the sputtering Jeth.

"Is he dead, Damon?" Roxanne asked, stepping tentatively into the Room.

Damon had not noticed her there. He shrugged. "He will be. Even though his evil spite was strong in him." Damon's face looked strained. "You know, Roxanne, it seems hard, killing him." He pointed at the Dar. "I thought he was my father, once. But we were never very close."

"No time for sentiment, I'm afraid," Roxanne told Damon. "The others have met the Elite Guards."

Damon hurried for the door, leaving his sword unsheathed.

"Be careful, Damon!" Roxanne called after him.

Damon hesitated for a moment. "If Emmanweh wills, my wife, I will. Stay here."

Damon sprinted down the hall. Ahead of him, he could see the small battle still raged. One of the Macklin brothers was down, and eight Guards still stood. The rest lay on the hallway floor among their gore.

Damon's coming made even the odds, and he quickly engaged a surprised Guard, who was just barely his match in skill. Damon soon ran him through, and saw that the fight was over. Every single guard had fallen in combat, either dead or mortally wounded.

For the Arydapien eight, only the fallen Macklin brother's injury was great. The rest of the brothers were wounded, but only slightly so: a scratch, a scar, a swipe here and there. Hillbrak came out of the battle unscathed.

Damon knelt down by the fallen Macklin and saw it was Benjamin. Jonathan came over to feel his brother's pulse. "Dead," he muttered, and a sob escaped his tightly clenched lips.

"I know how you feel," Damon comforted him. He helped Jonathan Macklin to his feet. They all stood in silence for a minute, not showing the great emotions they felt inside.

Damon turned to face them. "We may mourn our fallen brother," he said, softly, "but we've more to do. If I am not mistaken, we have created the diversion we need. I am hoping by now the rest of the Arydapien have reached the Akors. We must leave through the Tunnel, retrieve the horses outside, and get to the People as fast as we can."

"He was a good man," Malkik commented, as they went for Roxanne.

Roxanne met them at the door and they escaped through the Secret Tunnel just as a few of the soldiers discovered the bodies.

Damon, Hillbrak, Roxanne, and the four remaining Macklin brothers exited the Tunnel at a run and grabbed for their horses. They did not say a word, but each knew what he — and the others — should do. Hillbrak jumped on his black stallion, and quickly gave Roxanne a hand; each of the Macklins rode double, as one bemoaned the fact that they must leave their brother's body behind; Hillbrak, riding single, covered their backs, Roxanne's bow in hand. The mounts galloped as if all evil followed, as was not a gigantic hyperbole.

They had not ridden far before Hillbrak yelled, "They're behind us!"

Roxanne turned and, as she feared, saw that the one-hundred remaining soldiers were just departing the palace fortifications, half-a-mile behind. Every man was mounted. She relayed this information to Damon, who urged faster his spirited mount.

Dust stirred into a cloud as the riders made a mad dash for the mountains, a quarter-mile ahead. They soon reached them, after passing the extended palace yards, through Dar's glen, and over the Dryridge flats on, on to the feet of the Akors. They arrived, and dismounted before the People, who had gathered.

"Press on!" Damon ordered the Elders. "The soldiers are upon us!" The Ten Elders asked no questions, but gathered the people and urged them forward.

Hillbrak rode his horse to where Damon stood. "Damon, we will never make it. Look!"

Damon turned his neck. The army was in sight; it was too late for an Arydapiian retreat.

Damon rushed to Aldridge, said, "Aldridge, we have to make our stand." To the People, he shouted, "People of Arydapia. Perceive! Those horsemen mean to destroy us, if I am not wrong. All who are able to fight and have weapons, prepare for battle. Those who have not: keep pressing further into the mountains." The thundering of the approaching hundred's hooves drove home the need for urgency.

Roxanne grabbed the Bronze Bow as she dismounted the horse. Damon saw, and agreed. She threw it to him, along with an arrow.

Damon caught the Bow and arrow. He felt the need to fire, and readied, aimed steadily at the lead horseman, four-hundred yards distance now. He prayed, drew . . . let fly. The arrow shot out, straight, like magic but better. Those who saw could hardly believe; the Bow's arrow pierced the lead enemy's helmet. The horses soon trampled the soldier beyond recognition as he drooped from the saddle.

Hillbrak yelled "Damon!" Damon whirled, wondering what it was this time. He did not expect what he saw.

The twenty dragons, who left them stranded only a few hours ago, had returned and were descending on the unexpected palace soldiers! The People shouted several loud-voiced cheers and thanks to Emmanweh as the dragons breathed their famous, or infamous, fire upon the Etopians, who had no way to stop their own destruction. Drago breathed his glow, enveloping a horseman. Then he flopped down, caught another soldier in his claws, flew up high, then dropped the man. The other dragons ignited and inflicted multiple claw wounds.

After the soldiers were all dead, the dragons formed formation once more and flew low over the three-hundred Arydapiian People, who shouted again. The dragons all breathed a small fire burst in reply. Then the dragons were gone.

Emmanweh had sent them, for all creatures — excepting Humans — have no choice but to obey Emmanweh's will.

Two months later, the People descended the last of the Akorian Mountains and entered a lush, green valley. Everywhere were signs of rejoicing and glee as the People danced and sang praises to Emmanweh.

Damon stood apart from the others, Roxanne close by his side. "Roxanne," he said, "we sure have been through a lot this past year."

"Yes, we have," Roxanne replied, glancing back at the Akor mountain range.

"I thank Emmanweh so much!" he continued, smiling largely. "He delivered us from Jeth-Dar! He allowed us to cross the mountains without a single death! He allowed you and me to be married. Oh, He is so good, Roxanne!"

Roxanne smiled.

"I know Omar died, and I am sad over that. But we'll meet him again some day, in the sweet Telestiane."

"Yes," Roxanne agreed.

"You know, Roxanne," Damon said, "I am careful not to fear, as I know Emmanweh is with us. Nevertheless, I wonder about a few things. I wonder if Jeth-Dar lived. I mean, that wound I gave him was mortal, but he seemed so intent on evil that he could recover from . . . anything! But that sounds very silly.

"I also worry about the one-thousand warriors that Jeth-Dar had in the colonies. If they come back and discover what has happened, they may be after us.

"And I hope that the People will keep their trust in the One True God, for Omar once said that if ever they forgot Him, those will be the Arydapian Dark Times."

"Well, Damon," Roxanne began sweetly, "as long as we do what Emmanweh wants, I do know all will turn out for the good."

Damon nodded.

This time, with his mission completed, no crowd cheered for him, though the people might have if Damon's words had been a speech to them. However, Damon had found something that gave him real, pure joy. He had gained this joy through hardship, but it was good. Moreover, whatever the future may hold, Damon knew that Emmanweh would always be his God.

The two stood there, now in silence, watching the sun go down and just thinking.

Thank You Emmanweh! Both of them were saying it in their hearts, as were the rest of the Arydapien People. Damon turned to the wind, and whispered, "*Akkom Emman daddum!*" *Akkom Emman daddum* to us all!

The People scattered about the valley and pitched makeshift tents and a small wall in case of attack. They planned to stay awhile.

Chapter 8: Of Good and Bad

Two weeks after the Arydapians fled Etopia and Jeth-Dar's clutch, an immense storm-cloud slowly floated up from the Kaasp sea and drew its dark shadow over the empty palace of Jeth. Along the storm-clouds way, it poured out on all parts of Etopia heavy rains, howling winds, beating hail, and the greatest lightning ever. The people were queasy with fear, for the storm-cloud sight was bizarre and grotesque. It was one-hundred square miles in size, black as the feathers of a Gandder, and it seemed to be higher than a palace. When thunder rolled from the cloud, the sound was like great mountains crashing mixed with vilely mocking laughter. Parts of the cloud would oft create a feigned face of malice making it look like a great imp. This was Mâ len, Okkan the Rebel Nanjel's lair.

When Emmanweh threw Okkan from Telestiane, Okkan immediately created his own little dwelling. Being Okkan and only a Fell-Nanjel, he could not match the splendor of Emmanweh's Worlde. The result was a malice-filled Mâ len the Cloudworld. Here, Okkan built his Rebel Army, lesser Fell-Nanjels who became Mâ len-dwellers. He also made other things of horror, and potions which could serve evil purposes. Okkan was Ruler of Mâ len, and from this high place he watched Oure-worlde and pounced upon it at every chance.

From his stronghold in the sky Okkan watched. Easily he saw the events surrounding the escape of the Arydapians. He had sent a horde of Mâlen-dwellers on the invisible path between his world and Oure-worlde, but Emmanweh exerted His own power so that the Mâlen-dwellers were destroyed midway. At this Okkan was angered, for he fully knew the importance of the Arydapians and the future part they would play in Emmanweh's ultimate plan. He wished to destroy them. But he could do nothing; although Okkan's power was constantly strangling Oure-worlde, Emmanweh was ever greater than Okkan.

When the Arydapians reached the end of the Akor mountain range, Emmanweh released his circle of hindrance from Etopia. The Arydapians were gone, though, and Okkan knew Emmanweh protected them yet. But inside the palace, Okkan's penetrating eye perceived Jeth, now fallen from his Dar throne; Jeth on the edge of death; Jeth, the evil man who even with a mortal wound still held on to a sliver of life so that he would not enter the unknown, for Jeth the Fallen knew any god across Death's river would be angered at him. This was the man Okkan needed. Emmanweh might not allow Okkan to destroy the Arydapians, but surely the Arydapians would have to deal with Jeth, if he could be brought back to the living.

Okkan then steered Mâlen over the palace and quieted his storm. He sent Ull the Mâlen-dweller down the invisible bridge and into the once-regal Throne Room. Jeth lay there. Ull took a vial of potion Okkan had given him and poured half into the deep sword-wound, half into Jeth's mouth. A little life came back to the man, and Ull hefted Jeth over his shoulder, carrying him up to Mâlen. Ull went to the center of Mâlen where Okkan sat and stretched Jeth out on the ground at the Rebel's feet. Jeth came to life at the snap of Okkan's finger. Ull went into the belly of the imitation cloud and drove Mâlen higher up above Oure-worlde so they would go unnoticed for a while.

Jeth awoke from his near-death and his eyes were foggy, but beginning to clear. He slowly lifted his head, and felt something was wrong. Just a few minutes ago, he had been fearing death, a grave and awfully hurting, bleeding wound in him. But the hurt was gone. He felt himself all over. No wounds! Then he looked up and saw a man, no not a man. It looked like a Nanjel! And even more well-made than any Nabriel, the only Nanjel he had ever seen.

Jeth worked his mouth, slowly formed, "Who are you? Where am I?"

Okkan smiled, said, "I am Okkan the Rebel Nanjel, thrown from Telestiane. You are on Mâlen the Cloudworld from whence I observe all the doing in Oure-worlde. My potion which Ulla my servant gave to you saved your life. Therefore, I saved your life, for the potion was mine. Seeing my power, you may realize upon what grounds I offer to you *wallian*, rulership of greatness. It will require service to me; however, you can accept and never turn back, or you can die."

Jeth's eyes grew wild with realization, then cold as his old evil came back to him. Although Okkan did not tell him his power would be wicked, he knew it would be, for Okkan was wickedness. But Jeth did not care. He growled, "Give me the rulership. I will serve you if it means my life remains. All I want more, though, is revenge."

Okkan smiled. "Very well; you shall have revenge!"

In the People of Arydapia's new home, much had passed since their settling. Winter had come as the People built huts and stored wood and food. The winter was braved. Now came spring, and with it the Arydapians built a city at the top of Pelev Hill. They named it Beru, Ancient Language for "Deliverance." They began to fill it with stone dwellings for all families, and a medium-sized stone castle for the government and a place for further protection. Much had passed; indeed, much was passing, and much would soon pass.

Usually Damon helped with building. But, today, Roxanne told him he needed some time for contemplation alone, and Hillbrak also said, "Damon, you've done a lot for the Arydapians. Take some time. Go to the hills and meditate. You deserve it." So Damon went, taking his sword, Roxanne's bow and arrows, and a little *sievan* bread.

He found a small mountain, about two miles walk from Beru and Pelev Hill. He climbed, ever going higher amongst the green spring foliage; the yellow, purple, and red flowers here and there; the great, big trees with their trunks easing, easing toward the skies. High up, twin hawks circled, screeching. A mocklebird perched on a branch and affixed one eye on Damon, then it whistled. Damon looked up when he heard honking and saw a flock of Gandder. The mountain was a good place, thus untouched by Humankind.

Finally, Damon rose above the brushy part and into a section of sparsely spread timber, Here, Damon could see the surrounding land, so he sat down, leaning his back against a tree-trunk. The mountain was higher than Damon first thought. From here, Damon had a birds-eye view of the

countryside, of Arydapia. Damon drew a map in his mind so he would remember to do so on paper:

Down from the Akors the People had come, through Neckle Pass, east into Hoa valley, and up Pelev Hill where they were now building the city of Beru, the capitol of Arydapia. A river flowed down from Peacel Lake to the northwest of Beru, flowing past the very foot of Pelev and going on and dividing a large valley to the south into Mikka Vale and Ihib Dale. All about here was a series of valleys and hills called the Plentii Hia, a series of hills and valleys in a certain area. This was Arydapia. What lay to the north, to the south, to the east, Damon did not know.

Damon bent his bow, unwrapped the string, and strung his weapon, suddenly getting the urge for stag meat. As he came down the hill, he spotted a deer trail with fresh droppings, and off he went, his mind keen to the hunt, relaxation coming with the chase. He licked his finger and stuck it in the air; the wind was coming from the north. Damon circled to the southern side of the trail in order to be downwind from any stags.

As Damon went an antlered buck erupted from an island of brush. Damon popped up his bow, an arrow fitted to the string, drew the string back to his cheek. He led the deer, let fly and the arrow met the stag in his fleeing, lodging behind its shoulder, in its heart. One hundred yards later, the buck fell.

Damon approached and gutted the animal. He left the entrails for coyotes and other such scavengers, then cut two young saplings and found some flexible vines. One of these he tied around one end of both saplings. The saplings he spread out on the ground to form an angle with the closed end tied. The rest of the vines he wound around and around the frame, making a platform to which he secured the stag and drug him back to Pelev Hill.

As Damon pulled his fresh meat down the mountainside, he slipped on a stone. As he plunged down the slope, he fell to a sitting position. He threw himself to the side as the stag's body fell past him. He turned his head to see where the body would stop. But suddenly, he was no longer on this mountain! Instead, images flitted across his vision: A huge city on Pelev Hill; a pointy-eared man bowing to him and saying, "Greetings, Dar-Par Damon. I am Elial the Felnel"; Damon's sword glowing; clouds flashing by as it seemed Damon was flying at high speeds; dragons and catbirds engaged in an airborne fight; and, the most disturbing, Jeth rising from feigned death, a red glow in his eyes and lightning flashing about him, ordering the deaths of hundreds of Arydapians, who were caught without cover in the middle of a great field.

A guttural groan escaped Damon's lips as he leaped to his feet. He was once more on the mountainside, his stag several feet down from him, his dragging platform by it. Then, a voice came from . . . Somewhere, perhaps everywhere. Damon could not tell. But his knees trembled when the voice said, "Damon. I am Emmanweh, the Maker, the Keeper of All Things, Foreverking. You have just experienced a vision, for you, Damon the Chosen, are a Chosenhuman, not a prophet but similar to a prophet. The Felnel you saw will come to you. I have sent him to instruct you in the power that I have given you, the Power of Chosen. Omar did not teach this to you because I gave it to him in a miniscule amount, and he did not know you

had the ability to use it. However, you are going to need this power, for evil is coming to Arydapia, and you are Arydapia's protector, Arydapia's leader, my Chosen."

Damon fell to his face, crying, "Emmanweh, Maker, Keeper of All Things, Foreverking, I give you myself again, as I have in the past. Yet, if Omar was not great enough to possess this much Power of Chosen, you cannot give it to me. Omar was my better. I will never be Omar's equal."

With these words, Damon felt Emmanweh's anger in his breast. Emmanweh's voice came, "Damon! You will not tell me what to do, for your knowledge is smaller than a drop of water in the Cauma! I will give you Power of Chosen, for you do have the ability to use it. Concerning Omar, whom you respect: you are right to admire him, for he was a man of me; but you will be better than him. And you must know he was never perfect. It was only through my grace he was what he was. If you knew him as I do, your respect would fall many ways.

"Moreover, for your lack of faith, your Human voice will fail you until the arrival of Elial." Then Emmanweh's anger disappeared, he said, "Damon, keep your faith in me. I will help you how I will, which will be how you need my help, although it may seem odd to you at the time it comes. Trust me and I will comfort you. Obey me and you will be happy, though you descend into the darkest depths of Oure-worlde."

The presence of Emmanweh disappeared. Damon slowly rose, picked up the stag, and placed it on his sled. He resumed his journey.

Epilogue: Arydapia

“I’m so glad your back, Damon!” Hillbrak exclaimed as he helped the Dar-Par heave the stag off the sled and tied its leg to a rope, which he slung over a tree branch. “I never would have thought such a short time of your absence should give me as much trouble as today has!” Damon did not answer, though he moved his mouth a bit.

“What’s wrong, Damon?” Hillbrak questioned. Damon pointed to his mouth. “What? What’s up with your mouth? You can’t talk, is that it?” Damon nodded. “Why? I don’t understand.” Damon pointed up, made a bowing motion.

Hillbrak growled and went back to work, not understanding. Then he straightened quickly. “Oh! Are you saying this has something to do with . . . Emmanweh?”

Damon nodded. “I see,” Hillbrak said solemnly. “Although I see no reason for dumbness. But Emmanweh does right, I’ve always found that to be true. Yes, even as I ran . . .”

Damon tapped Hillbrak’s shoulder and wrinkled his brow. Hillbrak said, “What’s wrong here? Well, I’ll tell you. There’s some kind of feud going on between the Frankin family and the Macklin boys. The way I heard it, the Frankins were all together, talking about how they don’t really like the way the Dar-Par’s been running things. Well, as I say, one of those Macklins, Johnathan it was, heard one of the Frankins and good-ole John Mack stood up for you and a fight erupted. And I’m telling you! Oh-hoh! Forgive me, Damon, but I just had to see it, just couldn’t stop it, you know how I am.” Damon frowned, but ended up smiling. Hillbrak continued.

“And it was wonderful. Great fight! Anyway, finally that Frankin threw his fist at that Macklin, and Johnathan ducked and brought his fist right up into old Frankin’s wind. Then that Frankin started coughing, so Johnathan Macklin bowed down low like a cat and pounced, slapping the Frankin right in the head. Oure-worlde never saw such a hit, sounded like an axe smacking a bit of wood for sure! Frankin went down cold. And now the Frankins, the whole lot are wanting blood. I had to step in, of course. Right this moment I have a couple of Frankins in irons and Johnathan Macklin shut up in the big house. They’re all awaiting you. And, well, too bad your dumb now.”

Idiot that you did not stop this before now! Damon said within himself. And I wish I had trusted Emmanweh, for what repercussions will come from this? Yet Hillbrak is my best man. I must put him in charge. Damon stared at Hillbrak for a minute, wondering.

“Surely you aren’t going to appoint me ruler until you can speak again. How long will that be, anyway? You are, aren’t you? Damon . . .!”