

Ariel's Tear
A Tale of Rehavan

By
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*Sing to me, nymphs of the river!
Sing to me, sprites of the wood!
Sing me the song of the Father,
Who purged your lands in his blood.*

Stanza I of "The Lay of Reheuel"

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On Creation

Deep in the murk of irreality, Faeja stirred restlessly. Before the light was known, neither was the darkness. Only Faeja. Intellect breathing in the nether preceding time.

Loneliness, a feeling then unnamed, pricked His soul, and He dreamed. Unwinding a thread of His essence, He cast it forth into the void and named it *time*. Eternally it grew and crept away from Him, drawing in the wake of its seconds subtle traces of Himself. Every second lessened His being which had once seemed infinite, unwinding His thread of self.

But still he created. For He loved the newness, the brevity of current, past, and future. A frail and filtered reality beneath His former plane. Existence devoid of the eternal—a novel and ingenious beauty.

Despite this new wonder though, loneliness persisted, a hunger unsatisfied with simple time. So Faeja drew them forth. Out of His soul He formed the Passions and the Traits to dwell in His new creation. They were beings of Faeja's own ether, each Passion and each Trait representing an element of His fuller being. Curiosity came first, followed by Love and Malice. And then came the rest, hundreds and thousands of names now forgotten: Lust and Generosity, Cruelty and Kindness, Guile and Honesty—they slid like glass beads upon the thread of time and made their way along its course. They met with one another and mingled, each interaction altering those involved, each perception of another passion diluting the purity of he who perceived. By these dilutions, the Passions and the Traits developed into conscious beings, ruled by their first natures but broadened to encompass all emotion.

Faeja smiled, but He desired more. He desired a stage, a reality to frame the intellects that dwelt in time. So He created matter in the form of spiraling spheres and molded bodies to house the souls of His first children.

Ever forward, Curiosity was the first to alight upon a world in the new universe, the first to find that he could touch. And finding touch, he wanted more. He wanted to mold and to alter just as Faeja Himself had done. So Curiosity approached the throne of Faeja and begged Him for the gift of creation.

Faeja smiled on Curiosity's request and unbound from His own essence a small portion of His creative force, His *cyntras*, to give to His favored son. Curiosity, still awed with the sensation of touch, used this borrowed *cyntras* to create new senses that would complement touch: sight, hearing, taste, and smell. All of his fellow Passions and Traits reveled in these sensations for a time. But the matter of first creation was too uniform to long hold their fascination. They approached the throne of Faeja as a body and begged Him for more creative power.

Pleased with Curiosity's creations, Faeja removed all the cyntas of His being, all His creative force, and bound it into the strings of a mighty Lyre. This Lyre He handed down to His children, content to watch them play the tunes of creation.

For a time, the universe continued in harmony. Curiosity used the Lyre to play the music of reality. With the vibrations of the strings, new melodies sprang forth from matter. Atoms and molecules multiplied and formed into elements. Stars and planets discovered their orbits and the universe began its eternal expansion outward from the Lyre. Creation was a symphony, written for the delight of its own musicians.

Imagination alone grew discontent with Curiosity's music. Seeing the eternal repetition of old scales and familiar chords, Imagination begged to take the Lyre that he might discover new melodies. With the Lyre, he crafted life. Plants came first, practice for the coming wonders. Then came the naiads and the dryads, spirits for the rivers and the trees. Fire Sprites rose from the notes of the lyre and fell to fester in the crust of the earth, churning the rock to liquid lava. To balance the heat of the fire sprites, water sprites dripped from heaven to people the seas and the rivers.

And in all of this, Faeja was pleased. He descended to the thread of time and walked beside His children on their earth, critiquing the beings they had created, the crudeness of their minds and the simplicity of their motivations.

Imagination again lifted the Lyre and struck up his former tune, gracing earth with all its beasts. But each new creation still fell short of Faeja's desires. Tired for a time, Imagination yielded up the Lyre to his sister Love. Love played a new song, imparting feeling for the first time into the ordered music of her brothers. From her notes came the merpeople, the first race of the new earth. The merpeople were a deeply passionate race, driven by emotion before thought. Their lives were as wild as the waves of the oceans they swam in, consumed by every feeling both light and dark.

After Love had finished, Endurance stepped to the Lyre. A perpetually silent deity, Endurance was the last Trait that any might have imagined creating. But Endurance had grown sick with watching the merpeople, disgusted by their inconstancy and subjugation to feeling. So he played his own tune, a slow, haunting melody that clung to every note till the final echoes had faded. And from his song came the minotaurs. A hardy race, they stepped forth from the rock of the mountains and peopled the land left open by the merpeople.

Then, when the final notes of Endurance's long dirge had faded, Curiosity once again lifted the Lyre. And he made man, a race to balance the passion of the merpeople and the strength of the minotaurs. Gifted with both high reason and deep passion, man was driven by an insatiable need for knowledge.

After the creation of man, all of the Passions and the Traits began to understand the nature of creation and its new inhabitants. Many cried out for the Lyre. Philia created the elves, a tribal race bound by familial affection. Introversion created the dwarves, a race given to solitude and art.

In time, each of these races began to flourish, to grow and to multiply, taught and reared by the Passions and Traits they most admired. The Passions and the Traits became gods—rulers of races and dispensers of law. The world blossomed under the ever flowing music of creation.

However, the Passions and the Traits were not perfect beings. Though modeled after the perfections of Faeja, their natures were subject to corruption; and experience altered their forms, letting their purity fall into distortion and entropy.

Malice, twisted by his association with Desire, grew tired of the simple, pastoral world which his brothers and sisters had created and crafted two new races: the eelings and the goblins. Beings of hatred and violence, these new races ravaged the rest of creation with the invention of war.

Grieved at the violence of His children, Faeja repented His gift of the Lyre and drew it back to himself. He sealed up the music of creation and bound His children within it, cutting them off from all reality outside of matter.

After the banishment, the peoples of the earth all but forgot Faeja and the time when He walked among them. The Passions and the Traits became lawless, struggling for dominance to fill the void left by Faeja. Their created races became armies in battles for lordship, and the Passions and the Traits became contenders in a battle for godhood.

Despite the removal of the Lyre, cyntas flowed freely through all of creation in the centuries following the banishment, leftover melodies from the first songs. Directionless, this power sparked creation wherever emotion reached climax. In battlefields and weddings, new creations sprang forth. Whenever a being felt an emotion in perfect sync with that emotion's Passion, whenever a being developed a trait in perfect sync with that Trait itself, cyntas became a usable power.

In all this time, the Passions and the Traits struggled for dominance, maneuvering the peoples of creation like pawns on a chessboard, toppling nations for personal grievances. It was not until the day of the first extinction that these minor deities finally repented of their struggles. The stories vary on what race died, but the scholars tell us that on that day Grief became the most powerful Passion the world had ever seen. So many tears fell, both of the Passions and of the peoples, that Grief harnessed the full cyntas of creation. Full of anguish and righteous indignation, Grief used his newfound power to bind all of the most powerful Passions and Traits in prisons beneath the earth, protecting creation from their lust.

Grief established a covenant with his remaining brothers and sisters to never again reign in the affairs of their creation. He guided the many peoples to a rich and fertile land he called Rehavan and left them there to carve their history.

Prologue

A strange hush hung over the festive nighttime streets of Candeline. The circus had come, and gaiety reigned in the tiny village. Above the peeling paint of the carts and the glorious moth-eaten stripes of the great circus tents, flickering candles dripped their tallow and wax in the dust of Candeline's streets. A single clown wandered these streets carrying a candle-snuffer on the tip of a long pole. He was a gnome, dressed in a grotesque approximation of a human Guard member, his wide, leathery features framed by a cerulean hood. He whistled as he walked the otherwise silent streets, shuffling in a peculiar, exuberant little dance. He spun a quick circle around his planted snuffer and then shot it out from his arm, neatly snuffing a candle that hung from a nearby pole.

Pastry crumbs and bones from fresh-fried fowl littered the dusty road, remnants of the evening's festivities. The gnome picked his way over them carefully, still dancing to his own music. It was his favorite time of the circus. His act was over, all of the other performers were sleeping in their beds, and he had the streets to himself, free from his identity as a mere entertainer, free from the laughter and gawking of the audience, many of whom had never before seen a gnome. The people of the village were all gathered together in the big tent, hundreds of silent farmers and miners listening in rapt attention to the circus's most-valued performer: the story-man.

No one knew how old the story-man really was. His withered, dried-apple face had seemed ancient when the gnome first joined the circus as a child. The story-man had no name or history, just his self-ascribed title—but he knew things, things old and beautiful and strange that no one could know, stories lost in the folds of time's cloak or buried in the vaults of death. Some said that he had sold his soul to Ingway for longevity and knowledge. Others that he was immortal. The gnome believed none of these things, but he still spread the rumors. They were good for business. He shot out his snuffer again and neatly extinguished a flame. He would stop thinking about the story-man now, about the circus. It was his time, the time when he was more than just a living novelty. He whistled and danced on down the streets as they darkened beneath his snuffer.

Under the canopy of the big tent, the story-man sat on a small stool in the center of a dimly lit stage. Spreading before him, a sea of faces stared upward, waiting for the coming tale. His hands spoke as much as his mouth as he began, flowing in rhythms that swelled and subdued the expanse of his tale, that dulled his sharper inflections to render them palatable and heightened his monotones with emotion.

“Tonight we begin a tale nearly as old as the Iris of the human empire, a tale that was ancient when the hills around you had never felt the cut of a plow.

“All of you have heard the name of Reheuel, a name so steeped in legend that the stories obscure the man who lived them. The youngest child beneath this canvas tent could tell me the deeds of Reheuel’s descendants, that favored family of immortals. But I wonder how many could tell me aught of the man behind the family.

“We honor Reheuel because he was the first immortal, because his descendants so faithfully served the Iris of the empire, forming the Guards, the Keepers, and the Healers. But I wonder if any of us pause to ask whether the man would crave this reverence, a man who denounced the empire for imperialism.

“Tonight I wish to reach back to a time before the Hunter Wars had ended the reign of the immortals, to a time when the Iris of the human empire was still fresh and young. For that is the time when the immortal bloodline was first born, when Reheuel first entered the pages of history, pages he would then frequent for so very long.

“In this distant year, Reheuel dwelt as Captain of the Guards in the small town of Gath Odrenoch, a settlement carved from the foothills of the Gath mountains . . .”

Chapter 1

A tiny, glowing figure cut a swirling arc across the surface of a still pond, her bare feet leaving a trail of tiny ringlets in her wake. In front of her, a dragonfly flitted, its translucent wings casting back a light wind that stirred the fairy's hair. She laughed and reached out, stroking the dragonfly's scaly body. It veered sharply and raced away, leaving the fairy to seek other mischief.

On a nearby hill, a young girl stifled a giggle as she watched. Her older brother laid a warning hand on her shoulder. "Shh! You'll frighten her."

The little girl nodded vigorously and sealed her lips, drawing comically hard lines over her round features.

Her brother glanced away over the hill and then whispered, "Look! You can see the city now. The sun is just high enough. Do you see it, Veil, that silver shape on the horizon?"

Veil's eyes sparkled. "I see it, Hefthor! I see it—the Fairy City!"

Her brother smiled. "Tell me what it looks like."

Veil thought for a moment and then said slowly, "It looks like—more."

* * *

"Dust is a sign of idleness," Tressa said, sweeping a feather-tipped wand over her husband's book case.

Reheuel coughed as his wife continued flicking dust about his study. "And dusting is a sign of avoiding more worthwhile occupations."

Geuel, Reheuel's oldest son, glanced up from the pages of a worn book. "Oh, Father, please don't."

Tressa shook her duster at her husband menacingly. "Cleanliness means gentility! And I shall not have my husband, the *newly appointed* Captain of the Guards, living like a withered scribe in a dusty cubbyhole."

"But he's nearly fifty," Geuel called from his seat near the window. "Pretty soon he will be a withered scribe."

Reheuel glanced at his son and raised an eyebrow. "Since when do you get off with such comments, rogue? I raised you better."

Geuel set aside the fencing manual he had been reading and shrugged. "Oh, I don't know. Maybe you've just been letting things slip in your old age."

Tressa nodded with a gently mocking smile. "It has been terrible, darling, seeing you fade these past few years."

Reheuel laughed and wrapped his arms around his wife, lifting her from the floor. He swung her around him in a tight circle, clutching her waist in his strong hands.

"Fade? Do you call this fading?" He lowered her down softly till she hung over the floor in his arms and planted his lips on hers, laughing through his kisses.

She laughed also and hung in his arms, staring at his face. "Sure you can hold me here, old man?" she whispered.

Geuel rolled his eyes. "And that's my queue. I'll be in the stables with Hefthon." He planted his hands on the window ledge and began to launch himself outside.

"Use the door!" his mother shouted after him. "We need to be dignified."

Geuel landed lightly in the grass outside and strode toward the stables, shivering slightly in the evening chill. He was tall, twenty-one with a narrow but athletic build and dark, curly hair that helped widen his otherwise narrow features. As he entered the stable, he heard his younger siblings, Hefthon and Veil, chattering to the horses. Geuel stroked the nose of his charger, Iridius, and watched his siblings as they brushed their horses' coats. "Where did you ride?" he asked Veil.

The little girl grinned with ill-concealed excitement as she recited dutifully, "Nowhere special, just around the farms north of town."

Geuel laughed. "Don't bother, Veil. Leave the lying to your brother. He's better suited to it."

Hefthon threw his brush at Geuel in mock anger. He was a blonde, burly youth, large at nineteen and still growing, with thick, heavy features and a wide, simple face. "Better suited! I only learned it from you. Mother says that you and deception are like mermaids and water. The first would die without the second, and the second would lose its charm without the first."

Geuel shook his head. "How far did you ride, *really*? You've been gone all day."

"To the edge of the blue hills—but no farther. I was careful."

"You know better, Hefthon. There have been sightings," Geuel said, unsurprised but angry.

"I just wanted her to see the City of Youth, just once while she's still of age. Father showed us both when we were younger. And besides, Daris saw one goblin. That's hardly sightings."

"There's never only one," Geuel replied. "Risk your life for a sight-seeing trip if you want, but don't risk your sister's. Are we clear?"

Hefthon nodded. "Yes."

"Good, then I guess Father needn't hear of this."

* * *

Reheuel sat beside his wife in his study, softly stroking her back and whispering in low tones, "The Emperor has recalled another unit of guards from each of the inner cities. I'll have to send Hadrid and his men out soon."

"But you're already stretched so thin," Tressa replied.

"I know that, and you know that. But what does that mean to a ruler a thousand miles away? He only cares for his borders. The Empire is expanding—rapidly. Through

conquest and truce alike. Before long, all the civilized lands in Rehavan will lie in the shadow of the Golden Iris. With such gains at the borders, what do towns like Gath Odrenoch matter? He hardly thinks of the dangers still within his realm."

"And the goblins?"

"We don't even know if the rumors are true. As far as the scouts can tell, only six or seven have left the mountain."

"I wish we would have killed them when we had the chance," Tressa said, "when our forces were still full."

Reheuel sighed. "Yes, that's what we say now, but we were sick of fighting."

"I just pray that they don't come here," Tressa whispered.

"So do I, Love. So do I."

Tressa lifted her head from his chest and smiled. "Love—after twenty-two years of marriage, the word still thrills me."

He smiled at her. "Has it been that long? You still look like the bashful maiden of eighteen who swore to be mine."

"And you still look like the confident guardsman who wooed me with songs in the evenings."

"Where does time go?" Reheuel asked, staring at his calloused, beaten hand as it flit across his wife's shoulders.

"It goes to our hearts, Love. Our hearts eat time, and they turn it to memories. Time never returns because it's already used up."

They sat still for a while longer, lost in silent remembrance, thumbing idly through the great volumes of their memories, prying the covers of dusty books and pulling apart pages that had become stuck and stiff through disuse and time.

It seemed to Reheuel, as he sat there, that his wife fed his mind, that her presence cleared his thoughts. The silence and her presence together drove his mind back through memories which had remained untouched for many years. Little glimmers flashed in his focus, special moments which used to be precious but, long since, had faded into obscurity. Little smiles that had flitted over his wife's lips, occasional glints of light in her hair, words spoken in the stillness of a summer evening—all these things rushed over him. He remembered moments which he had sworn never to forget—and had forgotten. He remembered moments that he had striven to burn out of his mind—but never had. It was all there for the reading—his life. Fifty years. All he had to do was turn the pages.

Darkness crept over the old farm that night, sweeping away the sounds and sights of daylight and giving way to its own nocturnal symphonies: crickets sang in the marshes, an owl questioned the night, and a band of coyotes yapped in the forest, scrapping over some minor prize. Geuel and Hefthon sat in the living room, their voices rising and falling to the flicker of dim candles melting on the table.

"It was stupid. You should never have left alone. Think of Veil. She's a child," Geuel said.

"I know she's a child. That's why I took her," Hefthron replied. "Do you remember what it felt like—to see the Fairy City as a child? There was a moment, a moment when your heart stopped beating and a shudder rippled through your blood, screaming that you were alive and that the world was still beautiful."

"Yes, I loved that trip," Geuel replied, "and I remember the thrill—but you can't endanger your sister's life for a thrill."

"Thrill! You call it a simple thrill? I saw the city today, brother. I saw it as a man, and all I saw were buildings. I saw tear-shaped buildings that glinted in the sun. Oh, it was still beautiful . . . But it was *only* beautiful. The magic was gone. Veil saw more than beauty. Where I saw buildings shining in sunlight, she saw the glint of innocence and the spark of youth."

"It's just a place," Geuel replied, "just a part of the world."

"Does that make it any less fantastic?" Hefthron replied. "Even dreams are part of this world. But the Fairy City is more than just a place. It's immortal childhood, a place where innocence and wonder never die. To be a child and to see eternal youth, the opportunity only lasts so long. I wanted her to have that while she still could. She's growing; soon the Fairy City won't matter."

Geuel sighed. "I know it's important to you. Just don't ride beyond the farmland anymore. I've heard things—in town. It's not safe out there."

"Fine, it won't happen again."

They blew out the candles and returned to their rooms in silence.

* * *

Dawn broke over Gath Odrenoch the following morning, and across the countryside men dragged themselves free from the loving arms of sleep, leaving her for the cold of life. Over the foothills, in the mountains of Gath, goblin laborers laid down their tools and crept back to their dark caverns, replacing man in sleep's fickle embrace.

Reheuel rose from his bed lightly, gently smoothing the blankets back over the form of his sleeping wife. He walked to the window and inhaled, swelling his muscled chest and basking in the morning chill. When he reached the kitchen a few minutes later, he found his children preparing a meal. They paused as he walked to his chair and then resumed.

Sitting down, he turned to Geuel. "We need to repair the fence in the southern pasture this morning, before I head into the city."

Geuel nodded. "Yes, Sir. I'll prepare some planks."

A few hours later, Geuel and his father stood along the wooden fence line in the southern field of their farm, Geuel digging at the base of a snapped post, trying to pry it from the clinging earth. Reheuel sat across from him, widening the slots in a new post with his hunting knife. He was already dressed in his uniform, the folds of his cerulean

robe spread out over the field grass around him. "So, Geuel," he asked, "how have your fencing instructions progressed?"

"Quite well," Geuel responded with a grunt, his arms straining as he edged the post up its first inch. "Master Kezeik says I should be able to test next month."

His father nodded with a light smile on his lips, glancing up only briefly from his work. "Excellent, you shall be an officer one day if you continue as you have. And your archery?"

Geuel released the shovel and responded as he dug his hands down into the earth around the post, seeking a hold. "Not so well, I'm afraid. Master Deni tells me that if I were a hunter I would do best to dig a grave with my bow."

His father laughed. "That's just Deni's way. I expect you to focus more on archery though. We must be versatile. Specialization is a luxury that the guards can no longer afford."

"Yes, Sir," Geuel replied. He waited a few seconds to see if his father would continue, then asked, "Will there be fighting soon?"

"Someone has been listening to barracks-room gossip," Reheuel replied, standing and lifting the new post. "We don't know. We know that the goblins have been venturing farther afield, getting bold. Several farmers have reported vandalized fences and missing cattle. But, as far as actual war goes, no one knows. We haven't had a conflict with the creatures in decades. I was younger than you the last time they attacked. Who knows how many are even left up there."

"Would we win—if there were a war I mean?" Geuel asked.

"I'm confident we could defeat them," his father replied, "but win? I'd hardly call it victory. We would leave blood and bodies on the field, neither of which we can afford right now. The Emperor is still calling for conscripts, and we're running out of soldiers. No one would win."

Geuel tossed aside the stump of the old post and waited for his father to slide the new one into place. "I guess we should hope for peace then," he said.

"Always," his father replied.

Chapter 2

Four months passed, and rumors settled. Nervous hearts beat slower. As summer reached its peak, Gath Odrenoch returned to its sleepy routine.

Reheuel lay on the crest of a hill, his head resting on his saddle. It was his second day of travel, and it felt good to just lie still for a bit. Around him, the wild bluebarrels, namesakes of the Blue Hills, blossomed and trembled in the breeze, their beautiful barrel traps trembling enticingly for passing butterflies and other prey.

Staring off at the horizon, Reheuel could just spy the hazy outline of the Fairy City. "The City of Youth," he whispered as he let his eyes trace the tear-shaped buildings that hung, dribbling along the horizon across the lazy river Faeja. "Amazing, isn't it, that a sign of grief should represent the innocent race?"

Standing nearby, Geuel nodded. "We all know about the symbol, Father."

"Tell me about the Tear, Daddy. I want to hear," Veil cried.

Reheuel leaned back and gazed at the sky, letting his voice sink into a rhythmic tone of narrative, delighted to tell a favorite tale. "Once upon a time, in the earliest days of creation, when the magic cyntas of the Passions and the Traits still flowed through all of creation, man lived in little villages along the banks of the Faeja. And in just such a village there was born a girl named Ariel. She was a perfect child, more beautiful and pure than any other creature. They say that the birds went silent when she sang and covered their faces in the plumage of their wings when she passed.

"Ariel grew and developed in perfect tune with Innocence, absorbing the cyntas of that great Trait. And for many years it seemed that she would never be corrupted. One day, though, when Ariel was no older than you, Veil, she discovered grief. Her father was murdered by bandits in the forest.

"Terrified and alone, Ariel ran away and hid in the rushes of the Faeja. And there she wept. And in her tears, all of her innocence flowed out, expelled by hate and grief. The tears, though, still held the cyntas of Ariel's innocence. And they pooled and collected in the water, hardening into the gem we call Ariel's Tear.

"The gem was so full of Innocence's power that when Ariel lifted it, it transformed her into a new being, a beautiful fairy. And since that time, the Tear has ever remained Ariel's symbol, the symbol of the Fairy Queen."

Hefthon grinned. "I can't believe we're actually going to visit. It's been so long."

Veil, who had paused to pick a bunch of bluebarrels, glanced up at her father. "Do you know Ariel?" she asked.

"I suppose, as much as any man knows a fairy. I've visited her city many times, and we speak. I give her news of the Empire."

Veil's eyes sparkled. "Can children still become fairies?" she asked.

"Yes, my dear. Every so often in this world, a child is born who doesn't quite belong, a child too simple to survive its grief. Ariel takes those children and changes them, giving them eternal youth. That's where fairies come from."

"I want to be a fairy!" Veil cried.

Reheuel chuckled. "I'm sure you do. But I'm afraid you have too much of your mother's mind and your father's spirit for that. Some day you will be blessed to raise a family or to labor in some other way, to give back to your world."

Veil wrinkled her nose in disgust. "That's old! I want to be young. I don't want to get wrinkly and tired and droopy."

Reheuel laughed. "Are you calling me wrinkly and droopy?"

Veil giggled, sensing her father's playful mood. "Yep, daddy's old, like Kezeik's hound."

Reheuel rolled over and faced his daughter, staring up at her with wide eyes and drooping lids, imitating Kezeik's endearingly hideous pet. His daughter responded with gales of laughter before grabbing his hand and saying with sudden urgency, "Hurry, Daddy! We're all rested. Let's keep going."

As he rode beside his father a few minutes later, Geuel asked, "Why *are* we going to the Fairy City, Father?"

"This world was given wonders for a reason," Reheuel replied. "They remind us that life is more than dull, drab pain. I want to give Veil something beautiful before reality dashes her illusions."

"And the human empire has no wonders?" Geuel asked. "How can the world be dull when we stand beneath the fluttering Golden Iris?"

Reheuel smiled. "You're proud of Gath Odrenoch? Of its people?"

"I would die for my city. It is a mark of human virility and endurance. We carved Gath Odrenoch from the face of a mountain, raised it in the heart of the wilderness. It is a symbol of man's power—like the Iris itself."

"And what if one day the Iris is not so noble? Our human Empire is complex, subject to the whims of its rulers. The Fairy City is simple. Immortal childhood, immortal innocence. It is a wonder that will never corrupt."

"The Iris stands for ideals, not men," Geuel replied. "I would take pride in it even if all humanity were evil."

"Then cling to your pride, son. Never let it go. But—not all will share it. I lost my faith in the Iris when the ego of its ruler drove him to conquer rather than protect. I no longer look to the Iris's ideals. I look to the beauty I find in the world."

Hefthon, who rode just behind Geuel, said then, "I would say that the ideals of the Iris are not always reflected by the actions of its leaders. Perhaps loyalty to the Iris allows for distaste toward its government."

Geuel laughed. "My thoughts exactly, little brother."

Late that night, the family stopped to rest in a stand of pine, spreading their canvas tents beneath a thick canopy of boughs. Reheuel lay in his tent beside Tressa, whispering quietly as they listened to the children in the other tent. "They sound happy."

Tressa smiled, her glinting teeth the only thing visible in the tent. "I only hope that Veil can still see the city as a child."

"She can," he replied. "She's never known grief or pain. The Fairy City was made for those like her."

"How far is it?" Tressa asked, shifting herself closer and hunching her shoulders against the cold night air.

"Less than two days. It's a little under a four day ride."

"Good. As much as I love riding, I'm starting to miss my bed."

Reheuel laughed. "You're getting old, my love. There was a time when a simple journey like this would hardly have affected you."

Tressa smacked him. He laughed.

"Old? I married a man ten years my senior, and yet he calls me old. What I would not give, my Love, just to stop the world right here, to halt the clock and slip into eternity as we are now."

"A tempting thought," Reheuel said.

"Can you imagine it? To live as timeless and changeless as the Fairy City, the two of us like this with our children forever? Why must things change?"

"Because change brought us to where we are," Reheuel replied as he twirled her hair in his fingers, "because change gave us what we have now."

A twig snapped outside the tent, and Reheuel froze. He clamped his hand gently over his wife's mouth and watched through the crack of the tent flap. A harsh, guttural huff sounded beside the fire. He reached for his sword. "Stay here," he whispered as he rose.

Reheuel flung back the flap of his tent and leapt into the open. The light from his family's smoldering fire cast dim shadows across the camp site. A creature stood in the glow, green eyes glittering in the light. It was a small goblin, about four and a half feet tall, lithe and gangly like all its kind. Its freakishly long limbs bulged with sinewy, narrow muscles that seemed ready to burst through its tightly stretched skin. Its massive, flat nose steamed as it breathed in the darkness, and its long, spindly fingers clutched a sickle-shaped sword.

Reheuel yelled and swung his broadsword, arcing the blade at a downward angle toward the creature's neck. It dropped to all fours and sprinted for the trees, nickering in a series of eerie clicks. It leapt for a branch and swung into the pine trees, using the weight of its body like the head of a flail on the end of its slender limbs. Reheuel ran to the tents to check on his children. When he reached them, Hefthon was stumbling from the door, his spear clutched in his hands. Geuel stood at the other end of the tent, his

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