

FAR  
FOREST  
SCROLLS  
Na Cearcaill













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BOOK ONE



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Scrolls from 1000 C.E.  
discovered during an archeological dig  
in the Far Forest region of England,  
the soul of this ancient fantasy tale  
is reborn in your mind's eye.

Author: Alpha Four ~~~~~ Illustrations: Alpha Four and Paganus  
Scroll translation to English: Radek Novotny PhD ~~~~~ Image Restoration: Altier Restoration



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*Symbolizing Book One, the rune Jera represents the insensate passage of time. Whether acknowledged or spurned, it is always a season of change.*

A man's perspective  
is limited by the brevity of his existence.

Even living deliberately, how far up can we reach?

Standing on our miniscule patch of time, how far into  
the future can we see? How much of the past can one  
truly understand?

Yet, only a recreant spends their precious drops of  
sand before dropping back into the abyss lounging  
in indulgence, not striving for understanding,  
knowledge, answers that those of us scourged/  
consecrated with consciousness should seek with  
unconquerable passion.





*Welcome to the world of the Far Forest Scrolls. Enter to increase your Wisdom of how to Live.*



The significance of each change of season  
is easily buried in the smallest of life's  
mundanities and trivialities.

Yet, the true consequence of time's passage is  
there, blaring within the subtle disguise of a  
whisper for all who would listen.

*A change of seasons is upon you . . . and upon  
those whom you are about to meet . . .*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

**Prologue:** Chosen One ♦ I

**Chapter One:** Of Day and Knights, Now Is the Time ♦ 29

**Chapter Two:** Battle Within, Battle Without ♦ 79

**Chapter Three:** Of Dwarves, Dragons,  
and Distant Stars ♦ 133

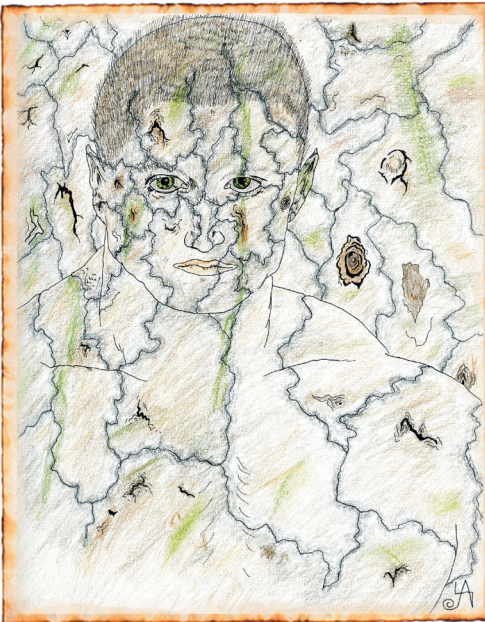
**Chapter Four:** Distant Journey,  
In-Steps, and In-Sides ♦ 175

**Chapter Five:** Plea for Help ♦ 227





*Figure 1: Grand Master Elf Patuljak, originally from the Forest of Creber, his thick bark-like skin sags under the compulsion of time.*



*Figure 2: Massive Elven warrior from the Forest of Creber, Kempe.*





## Prologue

# Chosen One

### **Scroll I: Everything Is Different**

*Three adults bound by friendship  
lead three children fettered by grief.*

“Sometimes the start of a journey is unmistakable and obvious. Other times the start is a grey fog, lulling you away from the significance of the voyage you are walking on,” Patuljak, the Grand Master Elf, mumbled.

“What?” asked the strapping young Elf of Creber, Kempe.

“Sometimes a journey can be the surprise and the destination familiar, and sometimes the journey is featureless and the destination shrouded in mystery.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Your grandfather spoke of an unending cycle, Na Cearcaill, a chain of destruction alternating between light and dark blanketing Verngaurd for eternity.”

“Seriously, I’ve no clue what you’re talking about, Dad!”

“This journey, with these three children, is more profound than you know. We are at *the* crossroads that those in the League of Truth have



## Far Forest Scrolls

dreaded. It is up to us to stand against this storm, this darkness. Whether we win, and free ourselves from this cycle, or lose on this journey, one way or another, innocence will be vanquished from Verngaurd.”

“Are we even still talking about these kids?” Kempe asked.

“Sometimes we pick the journey, sometimes the journey picks us, but either way we will come out the other side either better or worse, never the same,” Patuljak said, smiling at his son’s annoyance.

“Lovely! You know how I *love* your cryptic nonsense!”

Patuljak laughed. “Remember, don’t mention the Chosen One or Na Cearcaill to Friar. As far as Friar Pallium knows, these are simply three children needing a home.”

The Grand Master Elf served as a bridge of peace between the two divergent Elf nations, the sylvan Elves of Creber and the urbanized Western Elves. The Western Elves broke off from the traditional forest life of the Elves of Creber countless generations ago with the intent of becoming more modern, soon becoming obsessed with separating from the symbiotic existence the Elves of Creber enjoyed with the trees of their forest.

“Why would I mention the Chosen One?” Kempe asked. “You haven’t even told me which one of these three is *supposedly* the Chosen One.”

“Soon enough the world will know. Before long, the prophecy that the League of Truth has been protecting for countless centuries will finally be fulfilled,” Patuljak said.

“There have been hundreds of rumors over thousands of years about the coming of the ‘Chosen One,’” Kempe scoffed. “What’s different about this one?”

“Everything.”

“If one of these three kids is the Chosen One, do you think they’ll be safe training to be squires with the Knights?” Kempe asked. Like all Elves of Creber, his dark brown skin was thick, rutted, and streaked with green bands that resembled moss. It was the perfect camouflage for the forest dweller.

Only a few of the thirteen moons of Verngaurd were out in the cloudy night sky, making his bark-like skin blend into the darkness. The small group had crossed the Cosan Bridge several nights ago, and was



## Na Cearcaill

walking towards Castle Liberum, the new capital of the Independent Knights.

“They will be safer behind the walls of Liberum. There have been too many attempts on my life for me to watch over them,” Patuljak explained. “Resorting to assassins is a new low, even for the Evil One. It’s too dangerous with me and no one will think to look for the Chosen One amongst simple squires.”

He adjusted the plain cloak hanging over his aged skin. “Anyway, I shall see the Chosen One again, shortly.”

“Shortly?”

“Yes, shortly.”

“How shortly . . . I mean, how soon?”

“Soon, from an old Elf’s perspective.”

“What does that even mean?” Kempe asked, his voice leaking annoyance.

“It means the child needs to get older before beginning the quest described in the prophecy,” the Grand Master Elf declared. “I just hope the world can wait that long.”

“Patuljak, sometimes I think you are trying to drive me crazy!”

“Call me Dad.”

“Well, *Patuljak*, obviously, the child should be older! Can you give me any details?”

“No.”

“No?”

“No.”

“No! Can you at least tell me how much older they have to be? Do they have to become an adult?”

“No.”

“No, the child mustn’t grow to adulthood, or no, you can’t tell me?” Kempe demanded.

“Yes,” Patuljak answered with a laugh.

“You know, Dad, I am starting to regret joining this League of ‘Hide the Truth from those who are sworn to protect it!’” Kempe complained.

“No one can *join* our League of Truth. You are born into it. For countless generations our ancestors have protected the prophecy, wait-



## Far Forest Scrolls

ing for the Chosen One who can break the Cearcaill.”

Kempe huffed in frustration. “If you aren’t going to tell me, just say so.”

“I’m not going to tell you,” Patuljak said, bursting into a fresh round of laughter.

Kempe shook his head and the two walked in silence that seemed deeper under the squeezing gloom of the night. The rolling plains of Eastern Verngaurd were pleasant enough to walk through, but the Elf preferred his woodland home. Here, only an occasional tree reared off the grassy plain. By day or night, the solitary trees seemed naked as they swayed awkwardly, uncomfortably alone. Kempe missed the thick Forest of Creber, but most of all he longed for his arbor breith, or birth tree. Like all Elves, he had lived most of his life under its protective roots in harmony with nature.

A muffled sob from one of the three children behind them made Patuljak turn. He instantly regretted laughing when they were in so much pain. Their mother had given birth to her third child but then died. “We shouldn’t laugh in the face of their suffering.”

Kempe thought of his own young son, Kainen, and nodded. He shuddered at the thought of not being able to see him grow up. He knew his son’s life, and the constant training he was undertaking, was intricately linked to whichever of these children was the Chosen One. *My son doesn’t have a choice about being in the League of Truth, but I guess they didn’t get a say in their lives either.*

Even in the darkness, he could see the sadness draping over the older siblings. Gaining a new baby sister could hardly make up for losing your parents. Kempe wasn’t sure how or why their father had died. The rumor was he had killed himself in grief over the loss of his wife. The one thing Kempe did know was that his friend, Aquila, had seen everything but would say nothing. Ever since the children’s parents had died the large and beautiful creature had been keeping to himself. He hung back now, with the three newly orphaned children.

“I can’t believe the Knights gave up their former capital Cumhacht without a fight!” Kempe finally stated. “Traveling all the way to Liberrum is a major pain.”



## Na Cearcaill

“The Proliate warriors have become incredibly strong since their victories in the Dark War decades ago. Their alliance with the Magicians has made them almost unbeatable,” Patuljak commented. “I am not sure the Knights had much choice in the matter. Anyway, I like this new Friar, Pallium. He . . .”

“He’s still the son of Isa!” Kempe interrupted scornfully. “Are the Knights returning to hereditary rule, like the days when they were ruled by kings?”

“No. With their ranks thinned, there were few choices.”

“I am not prone to superstition, but that Friar Isa was plain and simply cursed. Whatever he touched turned to dust—including the Knights.”

The Grand Master Elf stared at his warrior Elf son, wondering how to respond as he secretly agreed Isa had seemed cursed. “I concede Friar Isa had a string of horrendous luck and the Knights were reduced to a whisper of their former strength. However, give his son, Pallium, a chance. He is a driven man, expecting perfection from everyone, most of all himself. Even though the Knights are down to just three castles, Friar Pallium has doubled their mental and physical training over the last five years. They are a compact but deadly force. Who knows they may yet regain their former glory.”

The two Elves settled back into a comfortable silence born of their close relationship as father and son. The stillness of the night was cracked only by muffled whimpers and periodic snuffles. The two distraught young children and their newborn sister were following about ten feet behind the two Elves and having a hard time thinking about anything but their dead parents. The uncertainty of moving to a castle to become squires heightened their fear and grief over the loss of their parents.

Shepherding the older two children and cradling the baby was Aquila, his features completely shrouded in a large, black cloak. His normally majestic head was crumpled down on his muscular chest and his shoulders were slouched. His keen eyes were fixed on the baby. The darkness and his tears worked in concert to obscure her tiny features.

Leaning in close, the hulking figure whispered into the newborn’s



## Far Forest Scrolls

ear the plea that had been playing repeatedly in his head, "Forgive me, child."

"What's wrong with Aquila?" Kempe asked. "He hasn't put that baby down since we left his home in the giant redwood forest. He didn't know the children's parents *that* well."

Patuljak sighed. "I cannot go into the details. I can only tell you that he was asked to perform a horrible act . . ."

"Aquila?" Kempe interrupted in total dismay. "Impossible! I don't believe it, not for one second! He is the most intimidating guy I know and happens to be the most principled. No one, I mean no one, in all of Verngaard could make him do anything unethical or against his will!"

"Sometimes decisions don't come down to an uncomplicated right and wrong. We are occasionally challenged with two painful alternatives. Our friend Aquila was faced with a choice that was completely obscured in a hideous fog of wickedness. Whatever he chose, something evil would come from it."

Kempe stared at the elder Elf in confusion. "You make it sound heinous."

"It was . . . it is. However, he did what he believed was the right thing as a member of the League of Truth . . . a horrific act that just may save this troubled world. Still, the deed will haunt his dreams and weigh on his soul for all eternity."

"Bloody blight, Father! Tell me what happened!" Kempe demanded. The elder Elf stared straight ahead in silence.

"Are you going to tell me?"

"Can't, my son," Patuljak answered.

"Can't or won't?"

"In this case, both are true."

"You are my father and the Grand Master Elf, and I know I ought to show you respect at all times, but right now you're really getting on my nerves!"

"I can live with that. Hey, I can make out torches . . . yep, there it is, Castle Liberum!" Patuljak announced, effectively putting an end to Kempe's rant.



## **Scroll 2: Nice Catch**

Castle Liberum, the largest of the three remaining Independent Knight castles, nestled itself between excellent farmland and the River Vita. Its immense outer walls are flanked by large towers and surrounded by a moat.

“Rhyfeler? That man’s as crazy as a woodpecker looking for bugs in a metal spear,” Kempe declared as the eclectic group neared the castle.

Patuljak chuckled. “He takes his job as castle constable very seriously. There is nothing wrong with that. In fact, it makes me feel better leaving the children there.”

“He is a keystone short of a complete arch. That’s all I’m saying,” Kempe added.

“Halt! Declare yourself!” a loud voice cried out of the darkness.

“Patuljak, Grand Master Elf, and friends. Friar Pallium is expecting us.”

“Ah, Elves. We do need some firewood for our gatehouse! Raise the portcullis and open the gates!” a blaring voice announced, followed by fits of sporadic laughter.

“What did that fool say?” Kempe asked, his temperature rising.

“Be nice. We are their guests,” Patuljak advised.

“Be nice? The guy just called us firewood! Proper etiquette has obviously been thrown into the moat!”

“Remember why we’re here. Remember your duty.”

Kempe’s eyes blazed with anger but he needed no reminder of his obligations.

As the portcullis groaned upwards, the gates swung open to reveal a man in a flowing yellow surcoat over his armor.

“Rhyfeler,” Kempe whittled under his breath.

“I hope my little joke didn’t offend,” Rhyfeler remarked.

“Why would being compared to firewood offend us?” Kempe scoffed.

“Of course not, old friend,” Patuljak interjected loudly.

“It’s merely that I have been waiting for the last six hours and had



## Far Forest Scrolls



*Figure 3: Constable Rhyfeler of Castle Liberum is in charge of gatehouse defense.*

nothing to do but come up with Elf jokes. That's too much time to *leaf* me alone! All that time on my hands to *pine* around was really the *root* of the problem!" Rhyfeler could hardly finish his words before bursting out laughing.

"Get it, leaves, roots, and pine trees . . . your skin is rough . . . like bark?" the castle constable spurted. Several Knights gathered around, their torches illuminating Rhyfeler's flowing blond hair and beard. The flickering light bounced off his fair complexion unkindly, giving him a haunted look.

"Oh, that's hysterical!" Kempe seethed. "No one has ever compared us to a tree before. How origi . . ."

"No harm done," Patuljak interjected. "Our dear Rhyfeler here has been waiting up for us and is behind on sleep."

"And common sense," Kempe snarled.

## Na Cearcaill

Ignoring his son's comment, Patuljak quickly changed the conversation. "Is Friar Pallium available?"

"He'll be here shortly, but he did have some chaperones ready for our recruits," Rhyfeler answered, keeping a keen eye on the hulking Elf warrior.

"Scelto! Come out here, boy!" the constable yelled.

After an awkward pause, he hollered the boy's name again.

"He's only six and a half, but a born warrior," Rhyfeler explained.

Finally, a boy shuffled out of the gate. He was obviously very tall for his age and broad shoulders stretched his cloak. Toddling behind him was a much smaller and gangly little boy with hair so glaringly yellow it was obvious even in the darkness.

"So, where are the recruits who need a home?" the constable queried.

"Come forward, children," Patuljak declared. "We have Jumeaux and his twin sister Gimelli. They are seven. Bellae, the newborn, is just behind with my good friend, Aquila."

"Welcome, children," Rhyfeler greeted. "This strapping young man bounding towards us is Scelto. He will show you to your quarters. You will be assigned to the Pantteri squad of Knights. You will join them as stablemates, but if you work hard, you can quickly achieve the rank squire. Oh, and the little guy behind Scelto is the famous Lontas."

A series of chuckles ran through the Knights.

"Famous?" Patuljak wondered.

"He's not yet three, but can *read* as well as any *teacher*! He has got to be the smartest tike to *ever* walk the grounds of Verngaurd!" Rhyfeler remarked.

"Is that so?" Patuljak said, amazed.

"Hey," Scelto said, standing in front of Gimelli. She was too sad to notice his stare.

"Ouch!" Jumeaux yelled as young Lontas plowed into his leg. The others turned to see Jumeaux standing over the trembling Lontas.

"Hey, watch it, new guy!" Scelto berated while gracefully moving in front of Lontas.

Jumeaux scowled, but turned away in silence. *I just lost my parents and now I get stuck here!*



## Far Forest Scrolls

“Easy, Scelto, Lontas just fell into Jumeaux. I forgot to mention the boy genius Lontas can read but not walk!” Rhyfeler blurted as a fresh round of laughter rippled through the Knights. “The boy was born with two left feet and ten big toes. He is simply the clumsiest critter to scurry over the face of the earth.”

“Where’s the third child, the baby?” Rhyfeler asked after the laughter died down.

“Jumeaux, get your sister, please.”

Wordlessly the boy trudged back to where Aquila was concealed by cloak and darkness to take his baby sister, trembling at the sight of the mysterious Aquila and his massive arms. Silently the creature handed the baby to the boy and hopped away.

“What was that thing holding the baby?” Rhyfeler asked, squinting into the gloom.

“A friend and guardian,” Patuljak answered cryptically.

“That’s not what I meant,” Rhyfeler replied.

Patuljak didn’t have time to answer as Jumeaux began screaming. “Bloody wet! Great, just great!”

Disgusted by the urine dripping over him, Jumeaux stumbled. Gimelli screamed as Kempe dove through the air.

With outstretched arms he caught the falling newborn, Bellae. “I got her,” he said, breathlessly.

“Unbelievable,” Rhyfeler muttered. “Well done, Elf! Well done!”

“You threw your baby sister, Jumeaux!” Scelto shouted. “What’s wrong with you?”

Jumeaux’s eyes widened in irritation, “The freak peed on me! What did you expect me to do?”

“It’s what babies do! They eat, sleep, poop, and pee! It’s natural.”

“Natural? If I peed on you, would that be natural?” Jumeaux challenged.

“You’re not a baby! It only works for newborns. Anyway, pee or no pee, you *don’t* throw a baby, especially your sister!”

“That’s enough, Scelto,” a new, aged voice commanded.

“Friar Pallium. This guy . . .”

“I know, Scelto. However, Jumeaux recently lost his parents and

## Na Cearcaill



*Figure 4: Aged leader of the Independent Knights, Friar Pallium.*

then walked a very long distance for many nights to a place he does not know. He is tired and in mourning. Perhaps we should give him the benefit of the doubt,” Friar Pallium, the leader of the Knights, suggested. He brushed aside his mostly grey hair and pushed down on his tired, blue eyes. “Rhyfeler, see the baby to the nursery. Scelto and Lontas, take the twins to your stablemate barracks.”

“Yes, sir,” Scelto obeyed. “Come on, Jumeaux, Gimelli, follow me.”

“Are you going to show us how to be squires?” Gimelli asked as the four of them crossed the moat into the gatehouse.

“You have to pay your dues first. I’ll show you how to be stablemates. We help the squires and prepare the stables. The Knights are divided into squads. Ours is the Pantteri, or Panther squad. If you prove yourself as a stablemate, you become a squire.”

“Do you have dry clothes for me?” Jumeaux asked.

“Yeah, we’ll get there, Whizzer,” Scelto laughed.



## Far Forest Scrolls

“Not funny!” Jumeaux whined.

“What’s up with the big guy in the cloak? The one who held your sister?”

“He kept constant watch over Bellae, but didn’t talk to us,” Gimelli answered. “His arms are human, but I don’t think his face or legs were, and his back was hunched.”

“You never saw him?”

“Not clearly. He kept under his cloak as we traveled by night, and we slept during the day.”

The four walked in silence through the outer courtyard or bailey. As they neared the stablemate barracks, Scelto broke the quiet. For reasons he could not explain, he whispered only to Gimelli, “Hey, sorry about your parents.”

The young girl smiled. “Thank you.”

Jumeaux scowled, angry at being excluded.



“Friar Pallium,” Patuljak said after the two wandered away for privacy. “I apologize for not coming to see you sooner. I was sorry to hear of your father’s passing.”

*I doubt it. My father was a disaster for the Knights and all of Verngaurd.*

“Thank you for saying so,” Friar replied out loud.

After an uncomfortable moment, Friar continued, “I have to ask, my old friend, what in the world is the Grand Master Elf doing bringing me three children in the middle of the night?”

“Well, I was in the neighborhood, and thought I’d stop by,” Patuljak replied, laughing.

“We can sure use the recruits, but that’s a load of rubbish! Things have been pretty bleak around here lately.” After a brief pause he continued, “Those attempts on your life have us all worried.”

“Being Grand Master Elf used to mean trying to reconcile the differences between the Elves of Creber and Western Elves. Now it’s about

## **Na Cearcaill**

trying to prevent them from killing each other while staying alive!”

“Your son looks great, how’s he doing?”

“Kempe’s well. I’m very proud of him,” Patuljak answered. The elder Elf kicked his feet nervously against the grass. “Friar, I need you, as a personal favor, to promise you will take special care of these youngsters without asking questions.”

Friar chuckled. “You wouldn’t have left your forest and escorted these children all the way out here in such secrecy if wasn’t of the utmost importance! Did I see someone else with you?”

“Yes, but he’s dealing with some personal issues. Don’t think him rude,” Patuljak commented.

“Understood. I’ll watch over the children, you have my word.”

“Well, I best be getting my son back to the Forest of Creber before his wife kills me.”

“Safe journey . . . and thank you.”

“Hey, Friar?” Patuljak’s eyes clouded and his cheerful smile faded.

“Yes?”

“I will be lying low for the foreseeable future . . . given the attempts on my life.”

“Seems wise, my old friend. Do you want a Knight escort?”

“I’ve taken enough of your time and we travel only at night. I’ll be back someday to tell you the whole story about these kids. Until then, it is *vital* you keep them safe.”

## **Scroll 3: The Deal**

“You’re joking!” Bellae said, giggling.

Years had passed and the newborn brought to Castle Liberum in the middle of the night with her twin siblings was now a freshly minted six year old.

“I’m serious!” the Knight Finn responded in counterfeit distress. He is one of a handful of Knights from the Forest of Creber. “I can’t believe you would suggest such slander! It was just your birthday, and this is my present to you!” His green and brown eyes widened, and wrinkles



## Far Forest Scrolls

of mock surprise creased through the bark-like furrows running the length of his brown Elvish skin. He was lean and muscular, moving with confident grace.

“A monster really lives in River Vita?”

“Yes, and today I will prove it to you,” Finn declared.

“How?” the precocious six-year-old asked. Her large, brown eyes shone with an inner strength and understanding beyond her age. As her sandy-brown hair bobbed in the wind, the subtle, natural curls bounced merrily in the bright sunlight.

“I am going to catch the monster of Vita just for you!” Finn replied, laughing. “When I do, I want a full apology and let’s see . . . what else should I demand?”

“I already have all the gross jobs as a stablemate, so I think an apology will be enough,” Bellae said, chuckling.

“Okay, deal.”

“What do I get if you don’t catch it?”

“No need to worry about that. I *will* capture it,” Finn said assuredly. “Are your brother and sister joining us, or are they too good for us now that they are squires?”

“Jumeaux and Gimelli will be here.”

The stablemate and Knight had most of the long walk to the River Vita behind them. Despite the fact that the river snaked through the back end of Castle Liberum, the section of water that ran



*Figure 5: Originally from the Forest of Creber, Knight Finn is known for the development and mastery of unique weapons.*

## Na Cearcaill

within the castle walls was set down in a deep gorge. That meant a long hike around the outside of the castle was necessary to reach the river's edge. The castle's water supply came from the plethora of underground aquifers.

Spring had finally come, punctuated by scattered wild flowers and a vernal coat of prairie grass waving energetically around them. Powered by the river breeze and encouraged by the warm suns overhead, the dance of the youthful spring growth added to the thrill rising within Bellae.

*Could there really be a monster?*

Bellae let her hand glide across the smooth but deadly weapon on Finn's belt.

"Tell me about your weapon!"

"Again?"

"Again."

"The kama has a wooden handle with the deadly curved beak of a tuima bird. The tuima are native to my Forest of Creber, and its beak is as hard as steel."

"Oh no! Do you kill them?"

"Again, *no!*" Finn laughed. "As I have said, we only use beaks of birds after they die naturally."

"That's not your usual fishing pole," she said, pointing to a massive rod in his hand.

"It's the largest one ever built, perfect for catching monsters!"

Bellae laughed. "What's in the bucket?"

"A surprise," Finn answered.

"Your surprise seems angry," Bellae commented as something in the bucket thrashed forcefully.

"Probably."

"Is it alive?" Bellae asked, already feeling the answer.

"Yes, obviously!" Finn chuckled.

"Oh, poor thing! What is it?"

"Do we need to review what the word 'surprise' means?"

"No!" Bellae chuckled. "It's just . . . I need to know. So, is it a bird?"

"No, and stop asking. You'll find out soon enough."



## Far Forest Scrolls

Bellae looked up at the tall Knight, her respect for him battling her intense curiosity.

Scrunching up her nose, she gave in to the craving to find out what was squirming in the bucket. "Uhm, a squirrel?"

"No."

"Cat?"

"I'm not answering."

"Dog?"

"Stop guessing."

"A puppy?"

"It's a *surprise*, girl! Let me walk in peace!"

"A raccoon?"

"Quit!" Finn jokingly implored.

Bellae was enjoying the game and her giggles grew louder. "Is it a tekorava?"

"Oh, that's it! I managed to snatch a vicious tekorava with fierce claws and a spiked tail and thrust it into a bucket. No!" Finn laughed.

"A horse?" Bellae snickered. "A dragon? Pegasus?" She was laughing so hard she had to stop, doubling over, her legs weakening under the energy drain of the deep merriment.

"Okay, okay!" Finn conceded. "Go ahead and look. I hope you don't feel too bad about ruining the surprise."

As soon as Finn slid the lid off the wooden bucket, water sloshed violently.

Bellae screamed. Stumbling backwards, she landed stiffly on her backside and started laughing even harder.

"A giant fish is your surprise? Why are we going fishing when you already *have* a large fish?"

"This, my young stablemate, is the bait that is going to catch a monster!"

"The river isn't deep enough for a monster!"

"Once every few years when the thirteen moons of Verngaurd line up just right, the waters flowing down to the Eluvies Delta move in reverse, causing the water to rise enough for the monster to travel across!"

Bellae scrunched her nose, not sure what to believe.

## Na Cearcaill

“You’ll see.”

Bellae couldn’t stop laughing once they finally reached the river’s edge. The fish’s large tail repeatedly slapped the Elf in the face as he struggled to get it baited on a barb hanging below an immense three-pronged hook.

“Got it!” he finally proclaimed. “Time to catch a monster!”

### Scroll 4: A Bit of Bubbly

Bellae’s eyes widened at the thick fishing line and massive fish struggling under the colossal hook as bait. *Could there really be a monster in there?*

Finn’s laugh startled her. “Starting to believe, are we?”

“No!” Bellae answered emphatically. “Well . . .”

Finn cast out the enormous hook into the deep-blue water and they sat on the bank of the substantial river. Several large boulders stood like stone sentries around the edge of the river, and were the only diversion from the abundantly tall grass of the plains.

“You know Crann loves you?” Finn asked.

“He’s an amazing horse and I love him, too.”

“Good! My squire is going to test for Knighthood soon, maybe even next year. Would you think about being my squire?”

“Of course!” Bellae scooted close, resting her head on the Knight’s shoulder. His bark-like skin felt cool compared to the heat of the three suns overhead, and the two cuddled into the relaxed patience required for any type of fishing, even for a monster.

“Is Lontas coming?” Finn wondered after an hour with no bites.

“He might come, or he might stay at the castle and read.”

Suddenly, Finn bolted up from the ground, pulling hard on the thick fishing pole as the line tensed. “Whoa! We got something here!”

Bellae stood and started backing away. She could feel something, a strange surge of emotions. She could hear Finn talking, then yelling, but she couldn’t make out the words. The intense feelings were blocking out his conversation. Closing her eyes and concentrating, she began to



## Far Forest Scrolls

sense a blend of emotions bubbling up from under the water: hunger, panic, rage, and terror.

*It's the monster! Finn's caught it. I can feel him!* she thought.

"Bellae!"

The sound of her sister's scream shocked her back to the present.

Bellae opened her eyes and let out a nervous yelp. Finn's muscles were bulging as he leaned backwards, desperately trying to control whatever was on the other end of the line. Gimelli and Jumeaux rushed to Bellae. The features of Jumeaux's long and thin face were tense with fear. The thick black hair on his head shook in the wind as if it, too, was frightened. Gimelli managed to retain her staggering smile despite the dread in her deep-yellow eyes. Lontas clumsily struggled to catch up.

"Believing me now?" Finn asked with a strained laugh.

Suddenly Finn fell backwards and the massive fishing line went slack. He began chuckling. "The monster broke my line!"

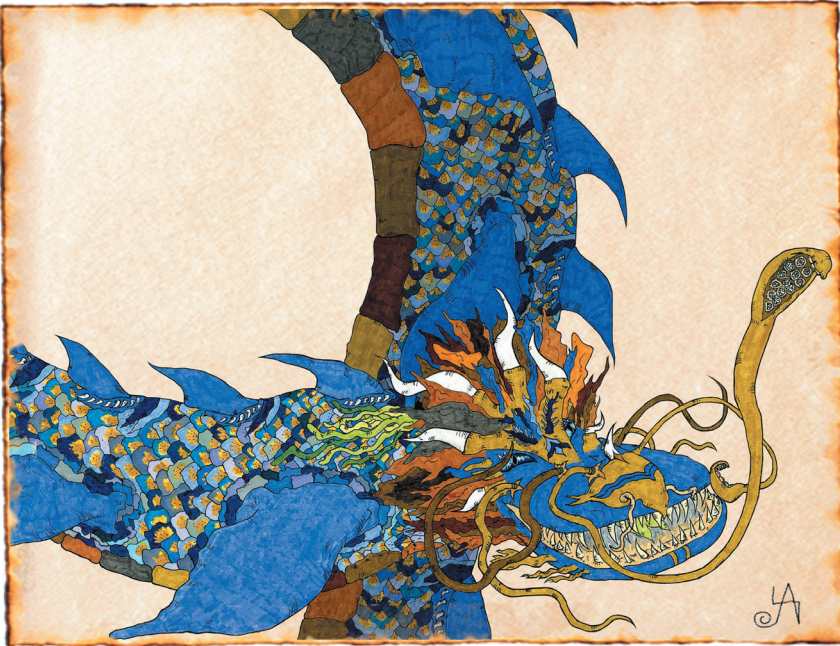


Figure 6: The River Monster of Vita.

## Na Cearcaill

“Good!” Gimelli chimed. “With all due respect, Finn, what were you . . .”

Her words were cut off as a colossal creature rose out of the water, its massive jaws chomping, and rows of sharp teeth just missing Finn. The top of the creature’s head had several horns offset with a crown of wing-like appendages. Its prominent snout was lined with a series of large tentacle-like feelers. Dozens of powerful flippers fluttered the width of its long scaled body.

Gimelli and Bellae screamed while Jumeaux stumbled backwards.

“Everyone back!” Finn ordered as the monster slurped beneath the surface into the tumultuous water.

They waited and stared. Slowly, the undulating water and their pounding hearts began to ebb.

“Is it gone?” wondered Gimelli.

“I don’t know,” Finn said. “To be safe, let’s go.”

Mesmerized by the lure of the extraordinary creature and the rhythmic lapping of the river’s waves, Jumeaux’s gangly body advanced towards the edge of the riverbank for a closer look.

“Hey, back up!” Finn ordered.

“Get away from the edge!” Gimelli yelled.

Jumeaux shook his head and stopped, finally realizing what he was doing.

“J-J-Ju-ma-ma-eaux,” Lontas stuttered, arriving at last. He pointed frantically at something rising out of the water.

Jumeaux followed Lontas’ finger out to the river. He screamed just as a massive tentacle shot out of the water. It swung around, lashing the backs of Jumeaux’s legs. The girls screamed as his lean body awkwardly convulsed backwards. Seconds after his body slammed to the ground, several more tentacles whipped out and grabbed him, flipping him in a high arc towards the water.

The monster’s hungry eyes rose further out of the water and instantly fixed on the squire flailing through the air. With blistering speed, the giant creature arched over and swallowed the boy whole before quickly diving back under the water.





*Figure 7: River Surprise: The surprised Knight and squires caught more than they anticipated.*

## **Na Cearcaill**

While the others stood in opened-mouth horror, Bellae instantly dove in after her brother. Stricken with panic, Finn pulled out his kama weapon and moved to the river's edge.

The bubbling water swirled savagely. Despite the foaming water and fierce thrashing, a shrill sound could be heard under the water. Incredibly, it sounded like Bellae screaming wildly.

The monster's head slowly rose out of the water, Jumeaux could be heard wailing within its mouth. Bellae popped out of the water, screaming in a singsong tone at the beast.

The creature seemed to almost nod before spitting out Jumeaux. The wet and terrified boy slammed into Finn. The force spun the Knight around, forcing him to drop his kama weapon into the water. Bellae snatched the sinking kama and swung wildly as the beast shot out its tentacles towards her. The beast let out a chattering howl as the sharp beak of the weapon easily sliced off an appendage.

"Finn!" Gimelli screamed as other tentacles slipped through Bellae's defenses.

The Knight shook his head, dazed from being plowed over by the flying Jumeaux. Bellae shrieked while being pulled under the water, the monster quickly joined her beneath the surface. The already churning water bubbled with fresh vigor.

A sickening black-red color bled into the white foam of the agitated river. Panic flooded Finn's body and he dove headlong into the water.

Jumeaux coughed and expelled a mix of water and ooze. Still traumatized by being swallowed and released, he began scraping off the viscous slime coating his body, wincing at the pain as his hands hit the innumerable cuts and gashes under his shredded pants.

"Save my sister!" Gimelli yelled even though Finn was already underwater.

Seconds sludged forward like hours. Bellae's screaming stopped, initially replaced by a deafening silence, but quickly succeeded by Finn's shouting. Gushes of blood exploded to the surface. The now crimson waves began thrashing more vigorously as the stormy water churned more violently.



## Far Forest Scrolls

"She's dead!" Jumeaux sputtered. The words surprised everyone, including himself. He was too young to comprehend the roots of his anger. He did understand that no one had screamed for him. He was, after all, the one who had been swallowed and vomited by the monster.

"Jumeaux!" Gimelli shrieked. "That's horrible! She has to be fine!"

Before her twin could reply a gasping Bellae and Finn emerged from the bloody water, his kama weapon coated in blood and gelatinous monster goo.

"Bellae!" Lontas screamed. The young stablemate shot in front of Gimelli and hugged his soggy friend as she hungrily savored the fresh air in deep gasps.

Gimelli's anxious tears turned to those of joy, and her spacious smile spread widely as she moved to embrace her sister.

"Away from the water's edge right now!" Finn demanded. "Move! Move! Move!"

Jumeaux stared resentfully at the affection being heaped upon his sister. Coughing up more of the nasty slime, he spat angrily. *Gimelli didn't come to my side*, he thought, turning his ire towards Bellae and Lontas.

"Nice job, Lontas, are you trying to get me killed, you clumsy, stuttering oaf? If you hadn't distracted me, it wouldn't have grabbed me. Oh, and let's not forget my precious baby sister, the freak! You were singing some sort of enchantment at that monster!"

"How can you say that? Lontas was trying to warn you, and Bellae is the one who jumped in to save you!" Gimelli said.

"She was talking to the monster, trying to get it to let you go," Lontas said.

"Not this nonsense again!" Jumeaux spat. "I'm already sick of you claiming she can 'talk' with animals and now you want me to believe she can communicate with a monster? Ridiculous!"

"I told it to let you go and take me instead," Bellae said. "Then I surprised it with Finn's weapon."

"Bellae saved your life," Gimelli said.

"No way that's what happened!" Jumeaux scowled.

"Stop bickering!" Finn said firmly. "Let's be thankful everyone's fine! Bellae, next time I get an idea like this, please slap me."



## Na Cearcaill

"Definitely!" Bellae said emphatically.

"I'll do more than slap you Finn!" Gimelli added.

"I deserve that," Finn chuckled.

"Has everyone gone mad?" Jumeaux pressed. "Bellae wasn't 'talking' to the monster, she's some sort of witch!"

"Jumeaux!" Gimelli scolded.

"Let it go," Finn warned, leaning down to look at the innumerable rips in Jumeaux's now blood soaked clothing. "You need to see a healer immediately!"

Jumeaux didn't hear the advice, instead glaring at his sister.

A smile slowly replaced Finn's panicked expression, "On the plus side Jumeaux, for the rest of your life you can tell a tale with the most interesting twist on the whole 'the one that got away' fish story. You can say, 'I got away from a monster this big!'" He held his arms out as wide as possible.

While the others laughed, Jumeaux scowled, stood, and hobbled towards Liberum.

"It's just a joke. Sorry!" Finn cried after him.

"Where did that thing come from?" Gimelli asked.

"Legend is that it swims up from the Isle of Hirmulisko when the water levels rise to look for new food sources."

"Hirmulisko? The island of creatures?"

"Yes."

"So, is it dead?"

"No, but it's wounded and long gone," Finn answered.

"What happened down there?"

"Bellae was . . . talking with it and holding my weapon out in front when I got down there. I took my kama and slashed at the monster until it left to find an easier meal."

The others stared, each one silently wondering what in the world had happened between Bellae and the monster. She blushed, feeling uncomfortable under their weighty gaze.

"Are you really okay?" Finn asked.

Bellae paused, a shimmering, ghostly figure flashed up on the hill. She couldn't make out any details before it disappeared completely.

## Far Forest Scrolls

*What is that thing?* she wondered. It had been showing up for several weeks, never staying long, but seemingly always watching her. Initially it only appeared during the night, now it had started appearing during the day. Unbeknownst to her, she wasn't the only one the spirit had visited.

Finn repeated his question.

"No," she said solemnly, trying to push the image of the ghost from her mind. "I'm not okay."

"What's wrong?"

"I'm imagining how many times I am going to have to hear, 'I told you so.'"

"What?"

"You were right, Finn. There's a monster in the river."

## Scroll 5: Those Three?

"I know he's your son, Kempe, but Kainen's still a boy and you may be overestimating his abilities," Ailante, the elder Elf of Creber, proclaimed. "You expect me to believe those three . . . anemic individuals are the League of Truth's best offering to save the world?" The aged Elf's bark-like skin looked particularly droopy enveloped within his baggy robes. The grey streaks within his green eyes shimmered in the scattering light of dusk as he stood with two other Elves in their hallowed Forest of Creber. Immersed in shadows, several feet away, were the three subjects of the conversation.

The powerful Elf Kempe bristled at the notion his son might not be up to the task, but stayed silent. His thick, brown skin with black ruts allowed him to blend in perfectly with the surrounding trees.

"Kainen is a lifetime member of the League of Truth and has been training since he could stand," Patuljak answered. "He has overcome the connection with his birth tree to prepare all over Verngaard."

Ailante scoffed. "Being the boy's father and grandfather does not exactly make you impartial! Also, this secretive 'League of Truth' notion means little to me. That's your family's obsession."

## Na Cearcaill



*Figure 8: Ailante is an elder Elf of Creber and a member of the ruling class called Archerians.*



*Figure 9: The young Elf of Creber Kainen is son to Kempe, grandson to Grand Master Elf Patuljak, and a lifelong member of the League of Truth.*



## Far Forest Scrolls

“Obligation! Not obsession. Our family’s responsibility has been passed down by my ancestors for millennia. Through countless generations we have prepared and waited for the time of the prophecy. Unfortunately, it falls to my son and grandson to contend with the ultimate purpose of the League, to ensure a successful resolution to the prophecy by guiding the Chosen One and avoiding the great chaos of the Cearcaill.”

“The prophecy? The Cearcaill?” Ailante scoffed. “My family has been helping govern the Creber Forest for just as long as yours has been dabbling in the League of Truth. Each generation hears whispers it’s finally time for the prophecy, the great chaos and the end of days. Those rumors have *always* been false.”

“It’s different this time. Dark forces are pouring across Verngaurd. The Dark Warriors are infiltrating our ranks to create divisions amongst the peace-loving nations. Do you think the winged warriors of the west would be mobilizing if it weren’t time?” Patuljak questioned.

“Our ‘friends’ from the Giant Redwoods sat in their trees and let Verngaurd burn decades ago when the Dark Warriors invaded and the Knights failed us. I’ll believe they are helping when I see more than the one youngling you bring before me. Our forest, a sanctuary and a fortress, will protect us, as we protect it.”

“The sacred Forest of Creber is protective and nurturing but, for all the good it does, limits your view of the rest of the world. I have seen what is going on in the other countries. The Dark Warriors are back, the Magicians are expanding their ranks and training griffins for battle, and someone is raiding the Isle of Hirmulisko. They are stealing beasts that should be left alone, and training them for war,” Patuljak said.

“Even if the time of the prophecy has arrived, your answer to this ‘world-ending threat’ is really the three puerile creatures I see over there?” Ailante asked.

“Yes. Kainen, Arend, and Sankari are sworn members of the League of Truth. Despite their age and size, they are knowledgeable and strong. Plus, it is imperative we have individuals who can make a deep connection with the youthful Chosen One, and they are perfect.”

“A juvenile Elf, a youngling from the Redwoods, and a Fairy?” com-

## Na Cearcaill

mented Ailante. “They are too young, too small.”

“Did you just call me small?” a diminutive voice called out.

The young Elf Kainen grabbed the fuming Fairy, “No, Sankari!”

Her brown and tan spotted frame blended in with the dark forest, but her eyes glowed with anger. Her bifid wings beat frantically as she struggled to get free and confront her critic.

“She’s spunky, I’ll give her that,” said Ailante.

“I apologize for her response,” Patuljak said. “All three have been training nonstop. They are tired, yet anxious to begin their exercises in our forest. Soon it will be time for the youngling from the Redwoods to switch to direct guardian mode.”

“Their experience and training should count for more than their age and size,” Kempe added. “They will continue dedicating their lives to preparing for the prophecy.”



*Figure 10: Fairy Sankari is originally from Cappadocia and a member of the League of Truth.*

## **Far Forest Scrolls**

“Assuming you are right, which I do not believe, when will this ‘prophecy’ come about?” Ailante wondered.

“Soon. Within a few years,” Patuljak answered.

“We have many intrepid warriors, why not send them?” asked Ailante.

“Only the Chosen One can fulfill the prophecy. Plus, I don’t think you fully grasp what’s coming. The great chaos, Na Cearcaill, will drag the entire world into war, including our sacred forest. Our warriors will be needed on the battlefield trying to stop the world from burning. Fulfilling the prophecy is a job for the Chosen One and a small group mobile enough to weave their way through the coming turmoil to complete the tasks required,” Patuljak answered.

“Tell me more about this prophecy,” Ailante requested.

“That knowledge is only for the League of Truth. You know we are sworn to secrecy. We only mentioned the presence of these members within our forest out of respect for you.”

“The League is welcome to prepare here. Will they be ready in time?”

“I’m not sure any of us can really be prepared for what’s coming.”



## Chapter One

# Of Day and Knights, Now Is the Time

### Scroll 1: Hold a Star, in a Stable

The seven-year-old squire Bellae opened her eyes to a seemingly endless stream of particles stirred up by life in the stables. She watched them dance in the rays of the morning sunshine. Some moved leisurely, while others hustled with blustery motivation. Yawning contentedly, she enjoyed her soak in the foggy sunlight bath.

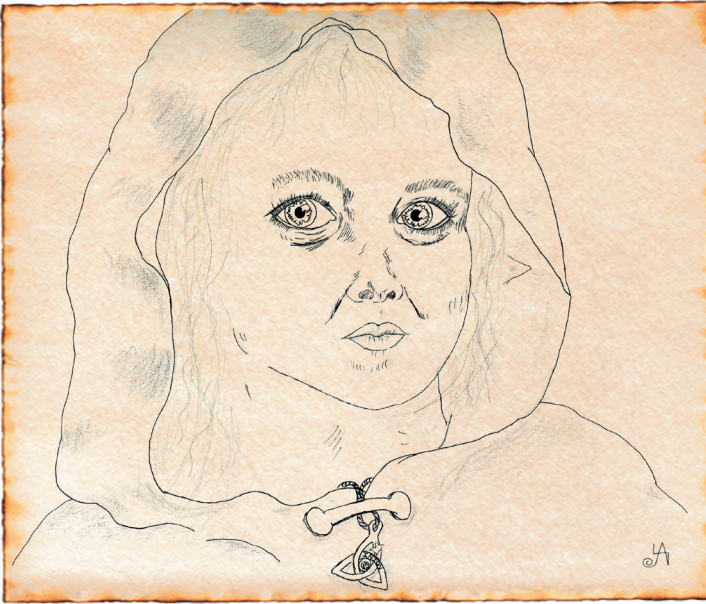
Her sandy-brown hair shimmered as she stretched on the mushy hay before snuggling in closer to Star. As the oldest stable cat of the castle, Star felt entitled to just about anything her heart desired. Most described her as obnoxiously lazy, except the devotee rats she ignored while growing fat on handouts.

The stable was a holding area for the castle's Pantteri Squad of the Independent Knights in Castle Liberum. Each of the five Knights had one section of the stable cordoned off for their horse and supplies. Bellae was squire to Elf Finn and his horse Crann.

*"Bellae, I love nuzzling, but I would so enjoy a nice, plump fish fritter,"* Star purred.

*"You want a fish fritter?"* Bellae asked the cat in what sounded like

## Far Forest Scrolls



**Figure 11:** *Bellae is the youngest squire in the history of the Knights.  
Finn is her Knight.*

melodic chanting. Her first conversations as a toddler had been with animals, not people, and the tuneful singing she used to communicate with them came easier than words.

*"Of course," Star replied innocently. "It's wonderful to have a human who understands me. What was it Friar Pallium said you are?"*

*"I have the gift of the Ainmhi Caint who used to live in Verngaurd. Everyone thought they disappeared."*

*"Interesting," the cat draped in long, white hair purred.*

*"You're trying to distract me."*

*"Never!" the cat protested. "Do you like being . . . whatever it is, so you can talk with us higher beings?"*

*"You know I love it, but you can't trick me!" Bellae concentrated and could feel the cat's gorged stomach struggling to digest its bloated contents. "You definitely don't need fritters, or anything else for that matter."*

*"I hate it when you do that weird, 'feel what I'm feeling' thing. Everyone else must be jealous of your gift!"*

## Na Cearcaill

Bellae laughed. *"Not exactly. Mostly people ignore me . . . other than an occasional mocking whisper."*

*"And they call us animals?"*

Bellae chuckled as her stomach rumbled in protest, reminding her she hadn't eaten. Ignoring the hunger pangs, she laid back. For the moment, all was right with the world.

"Bellae!" a thin voice wailed.

She froze, a chill running through her. *I know that voice.* "Leave me alone!"

"Bellae!" the voice said again. "Follow me."

"Never!"

The normally lazy Star arched her back and hissed ferociously. *"Hide your eyes Bellae!"*

Bellae covered her eyes as the cat shrieked a warning. Eventually a wispy white form shimmered in front of the cat. Reaching out, the form put its ghostly hand through the cat. Overwhelmed with a cavernous chill, the cat fell like a block of ice to the ground.

"Star!" Bellae yelled, opening her eyes and coming face to face with a semi-transparent specter.

Its grey eyes sat back within deep, black circles and drops of what looked like dark blood dripping down the pale face.

Crann, the horse of her Knight, snorted threateningly and lashed out his hooves at the apparition as the other horses in the stable kicked and neighed loudly.

"What are you and why do you keep coming to me?"

"You should follow me when I call! All your worries will evaporate, and the coming agony you must endure can be avoided!"

"I'll never follow you!" Bellae said, drawing the cat to her and rubbing the frosty fur on Star's head.

"Too bad you animal-talking misfit! Eventually . . ."

The stable door opened and the ghostly figure disappeared in a flood of fresh sunlight.

*"That ghost-thingy is sooooo annoying!"* Star chattered, starting to thaw out.

*"Are you okay?"*



## Far Forest Scrolls

*"Feeling warmer, and you're welcome for scaring it away."*

*"What does it want?"*

*"Maybe for you to get me some food after my delicate disposition was upset!"*

*"Star!"*

*"It seems to be popping up more frequently."*

*"I know! I even see it outside now."*

"Good morning, Bellae," Virone greeted. "You realize you're a squire now, right? Let us stablemates get things ready for *you*!"

"Morning, Vir," she replied, trying to settle the fear rattling within her. "I enjoy being up to greet the gentle morning sun, Mardin. The other two suns seem hot and angry."

"Don't let the stablemates and squires from other squads get you down."

"What?"

"They're only jealous because you became the youngest squire in the history of the Knights. That's why you come in early, isn't it? To avoid their bullying?"

"I like being alone with my animals," Bellae replied. *But not ghosts!* "I guess I like it even more now that . . . everyone seems so angry at me. No one asked if I wanted to be the youngest squire!" she said, not understanding jealousy has a way of clouding logic.

Crann neighed loudly, demanding to know if she was okay and what was going on. After Bellae informed him she was fine and translated Virone's question about her being the youngest squire, he brayed loudly, *"Finn had to choose you!"*

*"Thanks. I love you, too!"*

*"You need to tell Finn about that . . . thing."*

*"Not yet. I'm not sure what it is or what it wants from me."*

*"If that thing hurts you, it will be too late!"* Crann brayed.

*"Soon, I promise."*

Crann nudged her for attention. Bellae obliged the patchy red Cavalo horse from the Vahse Plains. Crann, like most Cavalo horses, was taller and faster than other horse breeds. Bellae stroked his dark-brown mane, which rose eight inches off of his head, and wondered if

## Na Cearcaill

it was time to brush his tail which consisted of thick, cord-like strands twice the length of other horses and deadly as a weapon.

*“Is it okay if I wait and brush your tail tomorrow?”* Bellae asked, still shaken up.

*“Sure. I know it takes forever to groom, sorry!”*

Bellae had no family other than her siblings and animals. In fact, she had no memory of her parents. She sometimes caught her twin siblings, Gimelli and Jumeaux, talking about them in hushed voices when they thought she was out of earshot. She hated that neither of them ever spoke of how her parents died.

Now the three siblings were all squires in Liberum, the last great castle of the Independent Knights. For thousands of years, the Knights had dominated and protected Verngaurd until their power was shattered by repeatedly suffering massive losses during the Dark War.



Figure 12: Knight Finn's horse, Crann, is a fierce Cavallo stallion from the Vahse Plains.

## Far Forest Scrolls



“Hello, Bellae,” another Pantteri Squad squire, Scelto, called.

“You’re early.”

Scelto’s laugh made her look up. Gauging the amount of sunlight streaming through the stables, and the absence of stablemates, she realized it must be near six o’clock.

“Losing track of time again?” he asked, his large muscles flexing as he hoisted a substantial bale of hay into Crann’s stall. Scelto’s brown eyes sparkled, beneath his short black hair and surrounded by his rugged features.

“Chef Cookie told me she hadn’t seen you this morning,” he said, handing her a few oatmeal cookies.

“Thanks,” she said, pocketing one for Grym and Borb, her mice friends living in the barracks.

At thirteen and a half, Scelto was as large as many Knights, but kind and humble. Scelto was squire for Ritari, the squad leader and the captain of all Knights.

“Good morning, you two,” beamed Gimelli, Bellae’s older sister. “It’s going to be a great day!” Long, brown hair framed her fine features and yellow eyes.

“Hey,” Scelto answered with an infatuated smile. He moved awkwardly towards her, but then nervously spun back to his duties.

“Hey, Lumi,” Bellae replied.

“Why do you call her that?” Scelto asked.

“It’s short for the second sun, Luminos, because she has such a sunny disposition!”

“She does indeed,” Scelto whispered, blushing. “Yesterday Lontas was droning on about the third sun, Pheobus, and the first, Mardin, making up some sort of binary or twin star system that orbits the massive central sun, Luminos.”

“Lontas loves to read everything, but he’s particularly crazy about astronomy.” Gimelli said. Frowning, she added, “Jumeaux better wake poor Lontas up!”



## Na Cearcaill



*Figure 13: Large for his age, Scelto is squire to Knight Ritari.*



*Figure 14: Gimelli is twin sister of Jumeaux and older sibling of Bellae. She is squire to Sorea.*



*Figure 15: Jumeaux is twin brother of Gimelli and older sibling of Bellae. He is squire to Luchar.*

## Far Forest Scrolls

“What’s the forecast for your evil twin’s mood?” Scelto asked.

“Jumeaux’s not evil, but the outlook for his temper today is a robust grey,” Gimelli replied, laughing.

“Ah! A relatively good day for the grouser, then? How do you stay so cheerful towards your grumpy twin?”

“If I can keep chipping away at whatever is making him so angry, maybe he can be happy. It could happen . . . if I keep smiling!”

“It smells horrid in here,” Jumeaux complained, slamming through the stable doors.

“Good morning!” Gimelli said cheerfully.

“What a stench!” Jumeaux continued. His words leached their weeding-roots into the happy thoughts Gimelli had planted, quickly choking them out. Jumeaux was lean and gaunt, which made him look taller than he really was. His black hair was thick and comically unruly. His nose was long and thin and matched his feeble physique.

“Are these stablemates from the pigsty? We need to remind them to *remove* the shite, not spread it around,” Jumeaux grumbled.

“You do realize this is a stable? You know, full of horses and what they eat, both before and *after* digestion?” Scelto retorted.

“Ha! Very funny! Is this the jester tent?” Jumeaux grouched.

“Do you want to change your forecast to black?” Scelto said, rolling his eyes.

Jumeaux ignored the comment and set to work with a purpose, motivated by fear of his always angry Knight, Luchar.

“J, did you make sure Lontas was up?” Gimelli inquired, beaming a warm smile.

“Hhhmpf!”

“Jumeaux, is Lontas up or not?”

“He was sitting.”

“Were his eyes open or closed?”

“I’m not his keeper.”

“Listen, Jumeaux,” Scelto said. “If his eyes are open and he’s moving around, he’s up. If his eyes are closed and he’s not in motion, likely snoring, he’s asleep. Is that concept too hard for you?”

## Na Cearcaill

"You know, Scelto, I think it might be," Jumeaux said, feigning sadness at not having been able to complete the task.

*"Jumeaux, don't be like this,"* Gimelli said telepathically to her brother. If they concentrated, the twins could converse, even at great distances. Bellae could usually tell when Gimelli was talking to him telepathically by her intense expression of frustration.

"I'll get him," Bellae said. "I'm ready."

"Show off," Jumeaux complained.

Ignoring him she winked at Crann and Star, *"Back in a minute."* Hopping off a stool, she headed out the door as Crann neighed and Star meowed for food.

Lontas was the fifth and last squire of their squad. At nine he had been the youngest squire until Bellae made her appearance. Their Pantheri Squad had five Knights and five squires.

Entering their squire barracks, Bellae found him asleep on his cot with an open codex, or book, lying on his chest. Lontas' blanching fingers were clutching it tenaciously as if it were a long-lost friend about to leave.

"Oh, Lontas, I know books are your refuge, but reading every night in the dark? Wake up," she implored, shaking his shoulder. His blond hairs shuddered back and forth as if they were awake and anxious to help arouse the rest of his body.

"I see you wore your clothes and shoes to bed to be on time . . . it didn't work!"

Lontas let out a groan and Bellae took a few steps back. Slowly, he sat up.

"Good job, Lontas!"

Bellae's optimism faded when he let loose a deep, contented snore.

"Wake up!" Bellae screamed.

"No, of course I didn't stay up reading," Lontas mumbled. His disheveled hair made it seem as if he'd slept well, but the bags under his closed eyes suggested otherwise.

"Lontas, always being late won't help your reputation as the worst squire in the castle. Please wake up!"



## Far Forest Scrolls

He was thin, gangly, and clumsy to a fault. Though steady in his work, he constantly dreamt of a place where he could read all night and sleep the day away.

“Lontas you’re late!” Bellae yelled. Becoming increasingly anxious she nudged his shoulder, squealing as he fell backwards onto his bunk.

“Please, don’t make me do it *again*,” Bellae pleaded as he started to snore louder. Bracing his forearm with one hand, she tugged hard on the book until finally managing to yank it out of his hand. His fingers chomped hungrily after the absent book, sniffing like a mouse hunting for cheese. Eventually, he snorted in frustration and his hand stopped as she reluctantly made her way to the washbasin to collect some water.

Holding a bucket over his head, she sighed, “*Forgive me.*”



Figure 16: Known more for his clumsiness than his skill as a squire, Lontas prefers books to brawls.

## Scroll 2: To Get Back Up

“Ahhhhhhh!” Lontas howled as the icy water washed over his face. His body shivered and jiggled as the frigid stream flowed down his chest.

“Sorry.”

“My book! I can forgive getting wet, but my books? No way!”

“It’s safe!” Bellae quickly reassured, pointing to show it had escaped the dousing.

He sighed with deep relief.

“We have to get going, like now!”

“Tell me I’m not late, again!” Lontas beseeched.

“I *could* tell you that, buuut . . . it wouldn’t be true.”

He stumbled out of bed and the two squires made a dash for the stables.

“Don’t worry, we’ll help you.”

“Thanks, I . . .”

*Thud!*

Lontas tripped and fell face first into the apathetic dirt.

“Lontas!” Bellae shrieked, rushing back to help him up. “The ground here is really uneven.”

“Nice try, but I know it isn’t,” he replied feebly, spitting dirt from his mouth. “I guess that’s one for the LTC.”

“I can’t believe my brother Jumeaux started that silly Lontas Trip Counter game. Don’t let him get you down. Just ignore him, you’re better than that.”

The sound of scornful clapping made them look up. They sighed heavily—Tiron and Stratto were approaching. The much older squires belonged to the rival Tilkeri Squad. Both boys had reached their adult height and their shirts bulged over youthful muscles. Their eyes shone with the zeal of hunters locked on easy prey, and their mouths watered at the inevitable feast awaiting them as they picked apart the spirit of the weak member of the squire herd.

## Far Forest Scrolls

Lontas' vulnerable nerves tingled in anticipation of the inescapable onslaught of insults as he plunged into the familiar role of quarry.

"Wow! Very nice, Lont-a-loser," Tiron said.

"Oh, I totally agree, well done!" Stratto added. "When was the last time you saw someone kiss dirt so successfully, so passionately?"

"Well, there was that blind and demented ex-Knight from the Infirmary who fell last week," Tiron taunted as they laughed haughtily.

Stratto nodded, "Good point. That guy really managed to look graceful as he face-planted his demented head. However, I give the nod to Lont-1-1-loser."

Bellae could see Lontas' already raw and battered self-confidence evaporating under their abrasive fire. "Grow up you two!"

"Nice comeback, Lontas. I love the ventriloquism. It really sounded as if your voice came out of this girl," Tiron said sarcastically. "Oh, wait. That wasn't you. Your pet girl talks for you!"

"Tiron, I have to correct you," Stratto stated with mock seriousness. "It's the girl-freak who 'talks' to animals who has taken Lontas as her pet. Not the other way around."

"Don't we put animals out of their misery when they are lame?" Tiron asked.

"You know, I think you're right. Maybe we should put the hobbling pet Lontas out of his misery?"

Without another word, Bellae quickly pulled Lontas towards their squad's stable.

"Look there, Stratto, he can walk!"

"Miracle of miracles! Thanks for sharing that with us." Stratto scowled scornfully. Tiring of such an easy target, the vulturous Tilkeri walked away laughing.

With his head down, Lontas trudged next to Bellae.

"We still have time to get your work done," Bellae said, trying to sound cheerful while leading him to the well outside their stable. "Forget about them. Let's get you cleaned up."

"Wait," Lontas cautioned, removing a small book from his shirt. "Yes! It's not damaged!"



## Na Cearcaill

“Oh, Lontas,” Bellae giggled at her hopeless friend. “Bestilla from the library will kill you if you hurt one of her books.”

“I know I shouldn’t have. I just thought there might be time for me to look at it today.” Lontas glanced in the direction of the retreating Tilkeri. “Why do I have to be stuck in this clumsy body?”

“It would be hard for anybody to hold up that one-of-a-kind amazing brain of yours!”

Lontas smiled at her tenderness, grateful the water Bellae was using to wash away the dirt concealed his tears born from equal parts shame and appreciation.

“Ready?” Bellae asked, finishing fixing his hair.

“Not really.” His mind yearned for the day to be over before it could begin.

“Well, ready or not, we’re going through those doors together!”

“I can’t handle Jumeaux today.”

“We can do it side by side. Maybe I’ll ask Friar if we can ship him to the Tilkeri!”

Lontas smiled.

“Focus on getting your Knight Lovag ready for his day and I bet he’ll take you to the library tonight.”

Lontas’ eyes brightened, realizing that a glimmer of hope, even a small one lingering tantalizingly far in the future, can help you face the trials in between.

“We’ve got this!”

“Hold it,” Lontas said, clearing his throat awkwardly and glancing everywhere but Bellae’s eyes. “Uhm, I want to thank you for helping me.”

“Don’t worry about it. They’re bullies.”

His cheeks heated with a crimson blush. “Not only for today. I mean thanks for all the times you fought to keep the bad parts of the world away.”

“That’s what friends are for! We’re two misfit peas in our squire pod.”

## Scroll 3: A Day of Knights

The stable doors squeaked open and Scelto's eyes locked on Lontas' dejected expression and grimy, wet dog appearance. His eyebrows arched questioningly and Bellae mouthed, "Tilkeri."

Scelto squinted. *This is the last time they do this to Lontas without payback!*

"Everyone, please welcome our wonderful guest, sleeping beauty Lontasia. Please give her a hand," Jumeaux scowled with mocking grandeur as Lontas stumbled through the door bearing the scarlet scourge of embarrassment.

"Shut it, J! It was your turn to make sure he was up anyway," Scelto scolded.

Jumeaux ignored him. "I love the wet pig look!"

"*Not helpful, J,*" Gimelli told him telepathically. "It's okay, Lontas," Gimelli said. "Scelto and I have already started getting your Knight Lovag ready."

Grabbing a towel, she began drying him off.

"Listen, this squad will get our work done!" Scelto said, smiling at Lontas.

As the morning progressed, Lontas began to feel better as the refreshing pleasure of gratitude and friendship slowly overcame the hot embrace of humiliation.

"Uhm," Lontas began, attempting to distract from Jumeaux's angst. "I was at the library when Friar came through with fifteen Elves from Creber. They looked like Finn, with thick, dark skin and streaks of color."

"Listen, Lontasia, we are all happy to hear this fascinating story about your boyfriends, but what does this have to do with anything? Wait. Don't tell me. NOTHING!" Jumeaux hectored.

"I saw them, too. Ailante, an Elven leader, was with them," Scelto added. "Remember when we saw the Northern Dwarves a couple of months ago? Jumeaux, I'll tell you what Elves and Dwarves being here has to do with us. Something big is about to happen."

## Na Cearcaill

“Oh, really? What exactly is this ‘BIG’ thing?”

“I’m not sure. All I know is something *is* coming.”

“Oh, that totally clears it up,” Jumeaux blurted sarcastically. “I’ll tell you what I know, Scelto. Right now, it’s getting pretty thick in here with a lot of horse cra . . .”

“Jumeaux!” Gimelli interrupted.

Just as Scelto moved menacingly towards Jumeaux, the morning horn blew from the central tower of Liberum.

“Saved by the horn, Jumeaux,” Scelto said, pointing. “Saved by the horn.”

Jumeaux rolled his eyes, but was not bold enough to say anything.

On cue, the five Pantteri Squad squires stood at the ready awaiting their Knights.

“Finn!” the squires greeted as the first Knight entered. His graceful Elfin form moved effortlessly through the central walkway towards Bellae and Crann.

“Happy First Sun,” Finn replied.

Like all the Elves of Creber, Finn had coarse brown skin that was thick and grooved to mimic the tree bark of his native forest. In contrast to his rough skin, Finn’s facial features were fine and thin, and so perfect in shape as to appear important.

“Captain Ritari!” the squires greeted.

“Good Mardin,” he replied.

“Crann and the other horses seem jittery today,” Finn said.

“He’s fine, they’re fine,” Bellae replied, turning a little red, upset at the ghost appearance and contrite at not telling her Knight.

Crann neighed loudly.

*“I will tell Finn about the ghost later, once I know more,”* Bellae promised.

“How did I get so lucky to have a squire who can talk to my horse?”

Bellae smiled while strapping vambraces to his forearms and greaves to his lower legs. He wore no helmet to maximize his vision for his beloved archery.

“What weapons do you want?”

“For independent training time I will practice with my saighead . . .”



## Far Forest Scrolls



*Figure 17: Ritari, head of the Pantteri Squad and captain of the Knights of Liberum.*

“The perfect choice for shooting three enemies at once!” Bellae giggled.

“Hey, a triple shot bow can be very handy. I will also use my telescoping dagger and . . . those two.” He pointed to his hailstorm weapon that shot spring-loaded flying stars, and a long rope with grappling hook on one end and a razor-sharp star on the other.

“Fighting an army today?”

“Once metal hits metal and battle begins, no one wishes they had practiced less,” Finn replied as Bellae laughed.

Scelto helped his Knight, Ritari, into his black armor. His chest plate and shield were decorated with a panther in relief. His shoulder pauldrons and the part of his helmet protecting his mouth and chin were in the shape of panther claws. A central plume of short panther fur and a larger tuft of horsehair dyed red ran down the center of his helmet.

“Hurry up, Jumeaux!” Knight Luchar bellowed.

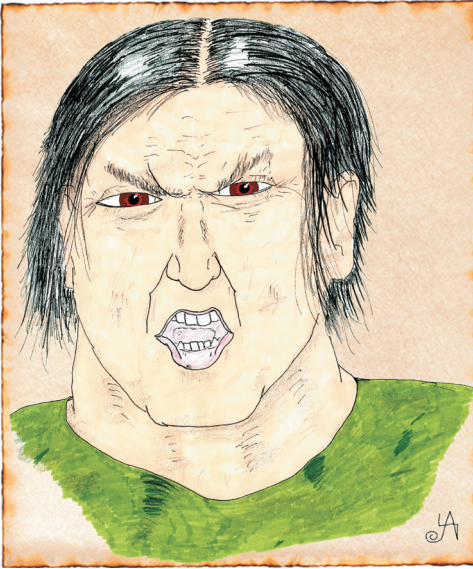
“The morning ritual of Luchar yelling at his squire has begun,” Finn whispered.

“Even Jumeaux doesn’t deserve that.”

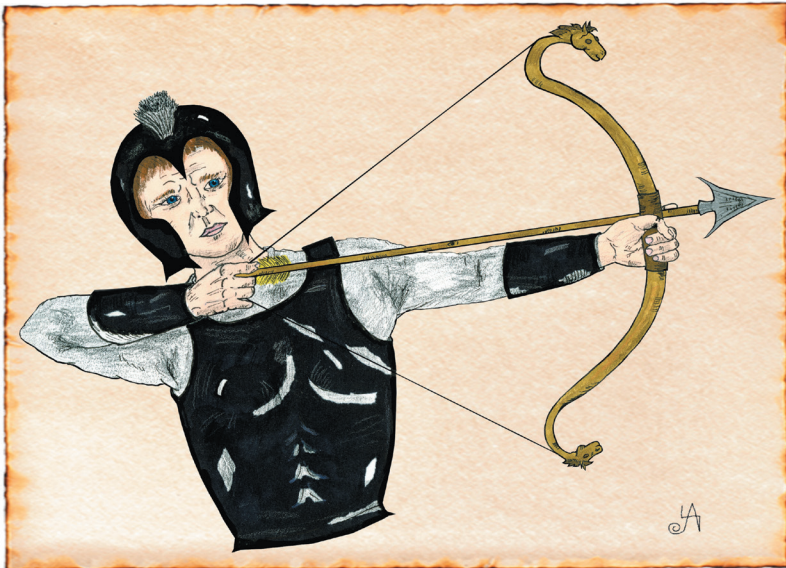
“Luchar holds to the old school belief that misery builds character. Plus, he’s always grumpy before he has a chance to hit something or someone!”

“Will you be using your battle-axe and war hammer today?” Jumeaux asked, struggling to get Luchar’s heavy armor over his padded aketon.

## Na Cearcaill



*Figure 18: Knight Luchar, known for his short temper and monumental wrath.*



*Figure 19: Erudite Knight Lovag, known for his equestrian and archery skills.*

## Far Forest Scrolls

"You know, I'm glad you asked. I was thinking that today..." Luchar said, putting his hand up to his chin in mock contemplation. "...I might train with a handkerchief and a doily." His face suddenly flushed with anger. "What the blazes else would I use Jumeaux, but my *WEAPONS?*" the short, stout, and incredibly strong Knight replied.

"Ready for the day?" Lovag asked, startling his squire, Lontas.

"You always enter so quietly!"

"Silent and overlooked can be great on the battlefield!" Lovag replied. This humble Knight was famous for his horsemanship, archery, and love of reading.

"I'm assuming you will ride Behalen out for practice today, and want both your long and recurve bow?" Lontas asked.

"Yes," Lovag replied, petting his all-black steed.

Lontas smiled at his easygoing Knight. He felt lucky to have one who loved books as much as he did and who had light armor that was easy to put on.

Lovag's glistening blue eyes were clearly visible in his black helmet which was cut back to improve his vision. A tall, black horsehair crest

ran down the center. He wielded a curved scimitar sword for slashing from horseback.

Lontas sighed deeply. *Please, no falling today. Classes are after this*, he thought, looking forward to his comfort zone.

"Morning Sorea!" Gimelli greeted as her Knight arrived. She was one of thirty female Knights at Liberum. "Your cross-bow is cleaned and the strings are waxed."



*Figure 20: Knight Sorea is known for her archery skills and expertise in siege engines.*



## Na Cearcaill

“Nice job!” Sorea said, inspecting her crossbow with an eagle head at the front, and the arms carved to look like wings. She wore light leather armor, relying on speed and mobility to avoid injury.

“Love the ponytail!” Gimelli admired. “However, it would look much, much better *under* a helmet protecting your head!”

Sorea tossed her long, dark hair playfully. “And ruin this?”

Gimelli shook her head, “For independent training, are we working on your new trebuchet?”

“Absolutely!” Sorea declared, salivating. As one of the most skilled mechanics, she was constantly redesigning the castle’s war machines, mostly catapults and trebuchets, to go farther and be more destructive.

“Do you want to start out wearing your talons today?”

Sorea nodded. The talons were two incredibly sharp blades with a slight curve to them as they arced along the length of her forearms, held in place via a series of leather straps. They allowed her to use her superior speed, balance, and trunk strength against larger opponents.

“What’s on your mind?” Finn asked Bellae, seeing her gloomy expression.

Bellae recounted what happened to Lontas.

“Don’t let what happens to you in life become so heavy that it prevents you from living. Learn something from the experience, then let the bad memories fall aside.”

“But that’s really hard to do!”

“Let your mind do what your body does . . . walk away. If you hold on to bad experiences, you give them power to disrupt your mind and weigh down your life.”

Bellae smiled, “That’s pretty good.”

“I’m delighted you approve.”

When the second horn rang, Finn rode out on Crann, and Lovag on Behalen while the rest of the Knights and their squires were on foot. Before moving to their designated practice area, they lined up with the other squads of Knights in the spacious grass-filled bailey that served as the practice grounds within the walls of Castle Liberum.

Centuries of Knights had trained and fought at this castle complex. However, it only became the main castle of the Independent Knights



Figure 21: The Pantheri Squad of Knights and Squires.

## Na Cearcaill

after a series of devastating defeats during the Dark War forced them to retreat from their former capital of Cumhacht.

The troubled leader of the Knights paused within his office despite knowing his Knights were waiting for him to appear. He unfurled a scroll from Supreme Master Magician Veneficus and reread the invitation to meet privately with him.

“A small bit of light in a dark world,” Friar Pallium declared to the impassive and empty room. “If anyone can help guide the Knights and all of Verngaurd through these troubling times, it is my father’s old advisor, Veneficus.”

Friar nodded, excited to meet with the Supreme Master Magician at the upcoming Tournament. Sighing, he moved out onto the topmost balcony of the castle’s keep. Before he could speak he paused again, letting his gaze linger on the storm clouds brooding on the distant horizon. His tired, blue eyes were flanked by deep wrinkles and sat within dark circles of sleep deprivation. He wore a simple black robe that made his greying hair even more noticeable.

“How many nights in a row must I suffer these nightmares, these visions?” he whispered to himself. “Are they some sort of warning? If so, from whom? From what?”

*Do these nightly trials and those faraway dark clouds portent our future? Flashes from his recent string of nightmares raced before him: howls of anger, bloody battles, shrieks of pain, despair, Castle Liberum being overrun by hordes of enemies.*

“Focus on today,” he reminded himself. Shaking away his shadowy fears, he slowly raised his right arm until it covered his heart. The entire compound erupted in the oath extolling the four Knightly virtues taken from the old world.

*“My life I dedicate to the search of wisdom,*

*My heart I steel to courage.*

*I shall live each day with temperance.*

*For all citizens of Verngaurd, I defend justice.*

*Never give up.*

*Never give up.*

*Never give up, Knights!”*



## Far Forest Scrolls

Each Knight thumped their chest twice before raising their right hand in the air, the palm facing backwards and all but the fourth, or heart finger, extended—forming an upright letter *K*. Silently they declared, *I give my whole self*. Next, they brought their hand in a fist to their left shoulder, making a quick slicing motion across their neck to finish the salute—affirming their willingness to give their life in battle.

Controlled chaos erupted, with each squad heading off to train.

Ritari's face grew animated as he barked out assignments. Finn and Lovag dismounted. The Knights and other squires ran to their assigned places as Bellae took Crann and Behalen to the horse holding area.

*"I'll be right back,"* she whispered, kissing Crann on the nose before joining Finn at the footwork machine. Vir was running in a giant flywheel connected to a conveyor. As it turned, a different pattern of wooden rods rotated around, forcing Finn to move laterally and jump to avoid them.

"Bellae! Switch!" Vir panted after running feverishly in the wheel for several minutes.

Bellae moved next to him.

"Now!" he yelled, diving out onto the ground.

Bellae jumped in and kept pace with the wheel as best she could.

"Hey, Bellae!" Jumeaux yelled, his unruly black hair waving on top of his lanky body. "Don't stumble in there like Lontas, and become a human tossed salad!"

Jumeaux's laughter quickly morphed into a grimace as Luchar thwacked the back of his head. Lontas ignored the jab and continued timing Lovag using a device that looked like an abacus as the Knight ran a series of sprints.

Luchar lifted, then let a massive bag of rocks crash to the ground. Jumeaux cheered and Luchar raised both arms in jubilation. Using a complex series of pulleys to lift various amounts of rock, he could strengthen every muscle group.

A man dressed in a black shirt embroidered with a yellow *S*, a castle, and key approached Sorea. Everything about him spoke of efficiency and tidiness. Even his face was well organized to avoid unnecessary effort. His short, dark hair stood unwaveringly at attention above small

## Na Cearcaill

and observant eyes. A straight and proper nose perched above a modest and narrow mouth.

“Hello, Baiulus!” Gimelli greeted. “What’s the castle steward doing at practice?”

Without changing his solemn expression, he nodded over his shoulder to a dozen men hauling a tall wooden structure. As castle steward, or manager, he made sure every aspect of the castle ran smoothly.

“Sorea, as requested, your new inverted sit-up machine.” He pointed to a wooden board that could rotate within a wooden A-frame.

“Excellent!”

Gimelli helped secure Sorea on the rotating board as the other four Pantteri Knights and their squires moved to observe the new training device.

“Rip it up, Sorea!” Ritari called.

“So, since Sorea is inverted, when we apply the phrase, ‘Turn that frown upside down and smile,’ does that mean you ‘Turn that smile upside down and frown?’” Jumeaux joked.

Instead of laughter, he was greeted with stern looks.

*“What? That’s funny! Gimelli . . . come on!”*

Gimelli rolled her eyes.

“I thought it was very clever,” Bellae whispered.

“Like I care what you think, freak!”

She let out a gasp as Jumeaux answered her kindness with an elbow.

Not wanting him to get into more trouble, Bellae gingerly moved over to her sister, Gimelli. Jumeaux exhaled, grateful no one had seen his brotherly retribution.

“Luchar, are you next on this new contraption?” Finn questioned, looking at the Knight’s portly belly as a round of laughter broke out.

“He’s as familiar with sit-ups as he is with personal hygiene!” Ritari chided to a fresh helping of chuckles.

“Enough of this buffoonery! Strength of muscle and deadly weapons knock out your enemy, not sit-ups! Let’s go, Jumeaux!” Luchar seethed before storming off.

“These are the targets you requested, Sorea,” Baiulus said. “Hopefully, they will hold up. Your squire turns this crank to get them moving.”

## **Far Forest Scrolls**

Gimelli began turning the crank and a series of targets began streaking around the top of the machine. Sorea used her intense abdominal muscles to sit upright. Reaching the top, she thrust her talons forward, easily piercing the targets with each blow.

Baiulus winced as the formerly pristine targets were quickly shredded.

Slowly the others went back to work as the targets continued to retch out silent screams of stuffing under the violence of her blows. Squire Scelto was manipulating a machine called the Rotator for his Knight, Ritari. It consisted of several circular towers with various weapons attached. Each tower could spin three hundred and sixty degrees, sending alternating weapons at his Knight.

After two and a half hours of work, they were ready for independent training. Bellae smiled, grateful to spend a little time with Crann before classes.

Suddenly Finn froze, "Something vile approaches."

### **Scroll 4: Red, Silver, and Blue**

"What do you see Finn?" Bellae asked.

"Get Crann."

While leading Crann, she could see a scurry of activity at the gatehouse and outer wall, including Constable Rhyfeler's long blond hair and yellow surcoat. The wind was whipping the blue flags of the Independent Knights and intermittently showing their symbol, a white dove flying over two crossed swords and a castle tower.

Finn mounted his horse in a single leap, "Someone approaches."

"But what do you actually *see*?" Bellae questioned, curious about his unique sight.

"All Elves have the ability to see and feel emotion, health, and intention through nature. Right now, the ground is blood-red and seems to slither towards the gate, telling me something with foul intentions is approaching."

As Finn rode off, Bellae stooped until her nose nearly touched the earth, trying to sense the vibration and color like Finn, but saw merely



## Na Cearcaill

dirt, and sensed only the awkward stares at her peculiar pose.

A series of communication flags were whipping in wide arcs at the top of the watchtowers. Bellae strained to follow them, whispering the words corresponding to their motion.

“What is it?” Lontas asked.

“Someone’s coming.”

“It can’t be a large army or the Bells of Kadotus would be ringing.”

“That’s good, I guess,” Bellae said.

Icy notes from the curled Horns of Infula rang from outside the castle walls, stopping every Knight in their tracks. It was the call of the Proliate and Magicians, first used during the Dark War when the Proliate army burst onto the scene of Verngaard as a force to be reckoned with.

Friar Pallium abruptly appeared in their midst, and Rhyfeler gestured wildly to him from the top of the castle walls.

Friar nodded and Rhyfeler gave thumbs up to the castle porter. The heavy wooden gates wailed with a complaining groan until they crashed open against the castle walls. As the reverberation of the gates died down, riders entered Castle Liberum. Luchar immediately took off his helmet, poised to yell.

“Hold your tongue,” Friar whispered. The expression on the Knight’s broad face was more of a pained scowl than a smile, but he seemed to be trying.

Finn, Lovag, and other Knights on horseback moved in behind the visitors as they rode towards Friar.

The first sun, Mardin, was now well on its way to setting in the northeastern sky, and the second sun, Luminos, was directly overhead, painting everything with a yellow glow. As the gallop of the horses’ hooves increased, the outlines of their riders grew crisper. The red capes of the Proliator warriors billowing out behind their horses were unmistakable.

“Red cloaks and armor . . .” Ritari groaned, “. . . they are the crazy Sanctus Division that guard the Proliate Temples.”

“Temples? They’re bloody fortresses!” Luchar growled.

“They are fierce, not crazy,” Friar declared.

## Far Forest Scrolls

“You know they’re called red death or Rutilus Obitus? Because they are *insane!*”

“Their other branch, the Ultor who wear silver, are not much better.”

“When you get to that level of deranged, a slightly less batty is something to celebrate!” Ritari said with a tight smile.

The rays of the two suns reflected off the hyper-polished Proliator helmets, sending flashes of sunlight into the eyes of the Knights in perfect sync with the jostling of their horses. Two large phoenix wings flanked each of the Proliators’ red helmets. A single burst of red plumage shot down its center. Their armor was red except for a thin, silver outline of a phoenix on their shields and chest plates.

“Oh, great, there’s a Master Magician with them,” Luchar groaned, spotting the telltale blue robes with yellow stars embroidered on it.

Long, greying brown hair flowed from underneath his headband into a long ponytail that bounced in stride with his mount. The center of his headband had a gold star underneath a red phoenix, designating him as a cleric of a Tallcon Temple. Steely grey eyes scanned the Knights and the castle hungrily, as if hoping for a fight.

The unwelcome warriors came to a choreographed stop before banging their spears and shields together and shouting, “All praise Tallcon, everlasting phoenix god!”

Friar Pallium spoke quickly, cutting off the cleric whom he instantly recognized. “Ah, welcome, Cleric Prast! By the light of the first sun, you look well.”

Several Knights laughed at the derisive compliment since the first sun is the weakest of the three.

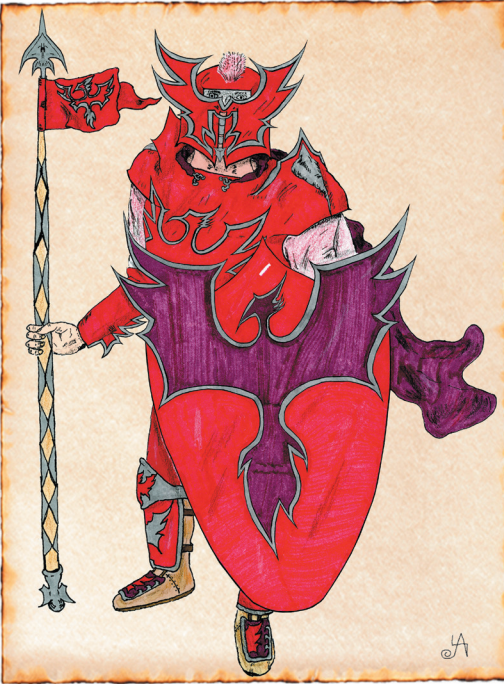
Friar continued innocently, “My Knights do not need a break, but perhaps I could entreat you to tea?”

“Knights?” snorted Prast. “Where are these Knights you speak of? Oh, dear me, I wonder if I am mistaken and these few anemic forms in front of me *are* your Knights? I’m embarrassed to admit I thought these ragtag and undernourished forms were squires.”

Luchar’s face flushed with anger, but he held his tongue, sliding his heavy helmet back on in order to mutter insults with some privacy.

Friar ignored the Magician’s jibe and smiled, “Tea?”

## Na Cearcaill



*Figure 22: A Proliate warrior. Their army has two main branches. The Sanctus Division wear red armor and are responsible for defense of their temples.*



*Figure 23: Magician Prast is also a cleric for the Proliate, officiating their religious services.*



## Far Forest Scrolls

“That would most definitely be a no,” Prast replied with a scornful smirk. “I have come to deliver a message from the Supreme Master Magician Veneficus.”

Prast held out his crosier and began to chant. The crystal at the top of his wooden staff glowed blue, and a scroll from his saddlebag magically rose and unfurled itself. The scroll hovered leisurely in front of the Magician, its gentle vacillation presenting a stark contrast to the tension within the castle.

“Let all who hear this know, Supreme Master Magician Veneficus hereby proclaims the Independent Knights shall no longer address the leader of their three castles as ‘Friar.’ This term is misleading, as they do not serve Tallcon. They will choose another name so long as it is free from religious connotations. Failure to comply, especially at the upcoming Tournament of Flags, formerly called the Festival of Flags, will result in death at our hands and judgment thereafter as Tallcon sees fit.”

Luchar rolled his eyes in disgust and grumbled more invectives within the seclusion of his helmet. Friar Pallium raised his hand to stay the Knights’ quivering hostility.

“Veneficus wants this?”

“It was approved,” Prast drawled, dodging the question.

“Do you Magicians have so little to do that you need to pick on an old man’s title?”

“This is *no* trivial matter. In many native tongues, the words for ‘friar’ and ‘cleric’ are indistinguishable. We want the people of Verngaard to have no trouble identifying their *true* protectors and spiritual guides.”

Ritari began to draw his sword and the metal grated loudly in the strained silence. He stopped as Friar Pallium raised his hand for control.

“Prast,” Friar said quietly, “I want to thank you for this valuable opportunity for us to grow. We shall journey into a new discovery and rethink the importance of having a title for me at all. If we decide one is needed, we shall select it.”

While maintaining his unblinking gaze, Prast raised his head and turned it away slightly, probing to gauge Friar’s sincerity.

“Yes, I should say,” the Magician said tentatively. “I offer this list of titles which you may NOT use on your so-called ‘journey.’”

## Na Cearcaill

The Magician chanted again. The scroll he had read from rolled itself up and plopped back in his saddlebag. On the way down, it passed a new and rather large scroll, which floated to Friar.

"I see, Pallium, that you are still letting your women fight for you?" the cleric said, smirking at Sorea. "You're no better than the primitive people of the North, Jaa. No wonder Verngaurd is so keen to have Proliators and Magicians defend them."

"Out here, in her armor, Sorea is a Knight. We are only men and women in our spare time."

As the Knights chuckled, Friar continued, "The Knights' sole mission for thousands of years has been to protect Verngaurd. We welcome any willing to help us in this endeavor. We appreciate the role the Proliator armies played in freeing Verngaurd from the Dark Warriors, but countless centuries have taught us that this 'help' comes and goes while we Knights stay steady and committed."

Prast chortled. "Referring to the Proliators as mere 'help' is an insult. Perhaps, you are too close to the situation to recognize how far the Knights have fallen. The Proliators need help with nothing! The day of the Knights is *over*!

"Who is patrolling the countryside hunting the Dark Warriors who have returned? It is the Proliate armies, working with the Magicians! We will stop them now as we did during the Dark War when your armies were obliterated!"

Before Friar Pallium could respond, Prast declared, "I tire of this conversation. Mark my words carefully, old man, you have nowhere to go but down. You've been spiraling for so long I expect you'll be able to handle this last bit of your fall into oblivion."

With great precision, the Proliators surrounded the Magician and paraded towards the gates, maintaining perfect lines as the wall of Knights parted to let them pass. The gates were closed as soon as they exited.

"How dare they insult you . . . us, in our own castle! I don't care what they say, they can't pry your title out of my lungs! Do they think they can change centuries of history with that foolish nonsense about Tallcon?" Luchar roared.

## Far Forest Scrolls

"Have you learned nothing about what is important?" Friar Pallium replied. "No amount of insult can change the height or grandeur of the world's tallest mountain, nor the length of time required to climb it. The mountain is unmoved even by the longest and harshest of criticisms. It simply does as it is supposed to. I, too, will function as I always have, no matter my title or the slurs hurled by that misguided traveler."

"Their fanatical religion spreads like pond scum!" Sorea added. "Proliators rely on their strength and the cheap tricks of Magicians to entertain the masses in their temples. We respect your wisdom, Friar, but it is the principle of the insult that boils our blood."

"If you cross the Desert of Calor at midday and call the sand cool, it will still burn your feet. To my thinking, the one who should feel foolish is the one who called the sand cool, not the sizzling sand itself. The sand should keep doing what it ought to be doing. Ah, perhaps there is a clue. All of you get back to training!"

Friar handed the scroll to Lovag. "I trust our book lover can come up with a solution that will calm our Knights and appease those who care so much about what does not concern them, or even matter. Now, back to training!"

Friar watched his Knights scurry back to work, but haunting visions of his recurring nightmares flooded back. He remembered standing on the castle wall as the Proliator's massive diezmar siege engines pounded at their walls.

In his mind's eye, he watched in horror as several large boulders exploded into the castle wall beneath him, blasting his body backwards. It seemed so real that a few beads of sweat formed on his brow.

His palpable fear, pounding heart, and dripping sweat overruled his mind's feeble attempt to convince himself, *There is time to change the future these visions portend.*

"Friar!" a voice shouted, wrestling the catastrophic images from his mind.

"Yes," he replied, wiping the sweat from his brow.

Several recently Knighted warriors surrounded Friar, watching him curiously.

"You were deep in thought."

## Na Cearcaill

"I suppose I was," he replied, smiling broadly enough to calm their fears.

"Please, settle an argument for us. Where is the best place to look when in combat? The hands, the weapon, the stomach, or the head?"

"An excellent question . . . for a squire!" he said. A round of nervous laughter went through the Knights.

"You must practice until you see *everything*. Analyze the fight's location, your opponent's mind, body, and spirit. Your foe's weapons and armor are strong, but these are the least important aspects of the fight. The most vulnerable part of any enemy is the flesh and blood wearing and wielding the cold, hard steel. Of his body, the easiest to attack is the brain. Defeat their mind and you conquer their will to fight and you win.

"Strive to understand the adversary's emotional state. Are they angry? Scared? Do they want to be there, or were they forced? Anyone with their back against the wall defending family or country will fight hardest.

"You must grasp that information in the context of the terrain. What movements would be impossible or unlikely if it is muddy or rocky? Is the ground sloping? Are there obstacles that change angles of attack? Generally speaking, uphill and with the brightest of the three suns to your back is desirable."

He chuckled at their dazed expressions. "Simple answers come from naive people blind to the true meaning of the question. Don't worry, complex answers become sharper with training. Keep these ideas in the back of your mind as you practice, practice, and then practice some more. One day it will make sense."

By this time, a large group of Knights and squires had gathered to hear his words. Tempaus, a Tilkeri Squad member almost of age to test for Knighthood, purposefully swung his elbow out and hit the side of Lontas' head while raising his hand.

"Oww!" Lontas wailed.

"Excuse me, Friar," Tempaus said, ignoring Lontas' cry of pain. "You always teach attack. So, isn't charging in the best strategy?"

Friar sighed in disappointment. "I do *not* always teach *attack*. I



## Far Forest Scrolls

teach to take the *initiative*. The ‘right’ approach depends on the situation. There is a natural rhythm to every fight and fighter. Depending on the circumstances, you should change your tactics so you dictate the battle’s pace. You may need to pull back to lure your opponent into attacking—forcing them to become off-balance or frustrated. Sometimes, you need to be still and observe. Other times, you may indeed need to attack rapidly.

“The sacrifice of victory occurs years before the war begins. Once the battle starts it’s too late. The bells of defeat strike the unprepared. Observe, understand, and then formulate a plan. The more you train, the clearer this will become. Once the clash begins, you must constantly observe and rethink your strategy.”

Despite the multitude of onlookers salivating for more, Friar began walking away. “Enough from this old man, for today.”

## Scroll 5: Squires & HK

Magician Prast’s demeaning visit had lifted the masquerade of permanence and replaced it with a cloak of dejection, sending them spiraling into a nostalgic fog of how far the Knights had fallen after their devastating losses of the Dark War.

Doubt leached its tentacles into every crevice of their day. Suddenly each crack in the wall seemed larger, every weakness more profound, and the notion that the Knights could not only be defeated, but destroyed, hung around their necks like a millstone.

“That’s it. Squires, head back to the stables,” Ritari said as the long day finally withered. He removed his helmet and wiped the sweat from his forehead. “I’ll stay until Luchar is done. The captain should be the last one from the field.”

“Lovag’s already at the library,” Lontas declared.

“That guy loves reading books like Luchar likes hitting people,” Scelto said, laughing.

“Doesn’t Luchar ever want to sleep?” Gimelli asked, giggling.

## Na Cearcaill

“An eternity of sleep after I’m dead will be enough,” Luchar growled after appearing amongst them. “Come on, Ritari. I promise *not* to take it easy on you tonight!”



“All stablemates, out!” Jumeaux demanded, shooing them from the stable.

“But . . .” Vir started.

“Don’t care! Come back earlier tomorrow, stable rats!”

“Where’s Bellae?” Gimelli asked.

“Talking with Finn,” Scelto replied.

Jumeaux scoffed, “The key to stopping her blabbing is to distract her with an animal. She’s insane about any four-legged creature!”

“That only works for you, Jumeaux, because if we compare their intelligence and looks to yours, ANIMALS will ALWAYS win!”

“Be nice, Scelto,” Gimelli requested.

Jumeaux turned red, struggling for a comeback. “Scelto, you should transfer to Jester school. Wait! They don’t take funny *looks* into consideration!”

Jumeaux and Scelto continued exchanging barbs until Gimelli managed to break it up.

Jumeaux looked to the rest of the squires, “I don’t know about you, but I had no idea how far the Knights have fallen. I mean, we’ve all heard how few Knights there are now compared to the days before the Dark War, but I never expected this insult from the Magicians and Proliate. We blatantly got our pride handed to us.”

“Jumeaux, put a bridle on it!” Scelto growled. “That Magician’s a fool!”

“Things aren’t that bad,” Gimelli said. “The Knights we serve are no less than any that came before us, no matter what that birdbrain Magician said.”

## Far Forest Scrolls

“Buuu,” Lontas’ voice cracked. Blushing, he cleared his throat and continued, “But the Knights used to have thirty-five castles, and now o-o-own-only three.”

“See, even speech impediment fool Lontas agrees with me!” Jumeaux proclaimed.

Seeing the displeasure in Gimelli’s eyes, Lontas added, “But I agree with Gimelli, our Knights are quite . . . uhm . . . quite good.”

“Don’t be a suck-up!” Jumeaux chided.

“Whether we like it or not, the fact is we are a fraction of what the Knights used to be,” Scelto added.

“I heard a squad used to be twelve Knights, and now it’s five. Liberum can muster five thousand Knights. This place could hold three times that,” Jumeaux commented. “Isn’t that right, Lontas? Scelto?”

Lontas, not thrilled about being singled out, backed against the stable wall, looking as if he would rather merge into the wood than answer. “Uhm . . . those numbers sound right. Technically we have a few hundred more in outposts. Either way, our numbers are way down. The highest number of Knights was seventy thousand in thirty-five castles right before the horrendous losses during the Dark War. After that, many castles were abandoned or taken over by the Proliate and Magicians.”

“During the Dark War, the individual nations of Verngaurd started rearming their *own* armies with forced conscription instead of honoring their pact to send recruits to the Knights,” Scelto added.

“Prast confirmed the rumor, the Dark Warriors are back,” Jumeaux said. “They handed it to us last time and now we have waaaay fewer Knights. Plus, the Proliate and the Magicians hate us as much as the Dark Warriors do.”

Gimelli smiled through her frustration, “We’ve had peace and tranquility for decades. No matter how you complain, times are good.”

Both Jumeaux and Scelto looked as if they were planning a retort, but Jumeaux raised his voice, “The Knights are weak! If they wanted to, the Proliators *or* the Dark Warriors could come in here and kick our . . .”

He froze as Bellae and Finn walked into the stables.

## Na Cearcaill

“Finn,” the squires uttered anxiously.

“Hello.”

He and Bellae led Crann to their spot in the stable.

“*Did Finn hear me?*” Jumeaux asked Gimelli telepathically.

“*I think so. You don’t have to be so negative to make a point.*”

“By all means, Jumeaux, please finish your bold statement,” Finn said.

Jumeaux’s shoulders fell, and his thin face seemed even more gaunt than usual as his eyes darted frantically. Nervously, he swept his hand through his unruly black hair.

“I . . . *we*, were just talking,” Jumeaux added, looking for affirmation from the other squires. When none came, his eyes dropped to the ground, restlessly watching the dust kicked up by his scuffling boots.

“Talking big in dark corners seldom achieves anything other than getting you into trouble. As it happens, Salus asked me to find someone to help in the Infirmary. Given your ample energy and bold attitude, I think you would make an excellent volunteer.”

Jumeaux groaned loudly.

“So,” Finn continued, “we are supposed to call Friar Pallium ‘HK’ for Head Knight.”

“HK?” Scelto asked incredulously. “This is horse shhhii . . . I mean, this is absurd!”

Everyone laughed but Jumeaux. *Scelto blows off steam and it’s funny? I do it and get sent to work at the loony bin Infirmary?*

“Finn, it was incredible when you saw the Proliate coming before anyone else! That’s an amazing gift,” Gimelli commented.

“There are advantages to seeing as we Elves do. It’s a mixture of colors and emotions.”

“That sounds wonderful!” Lontas said.

Finn paused. “Sometimes it is, but there are times I wish I had *your* gift of seeing things like a blue sky or flowers in their true colors.”

“I hadn’t thought about it that way. I imagined you saw what we do with something added,” Gimelli commented.

“It’s easy to overlook our own gifts while coveting others, often without knowing the full effort required to bear them,” Finn answered.



## Far Forest Scrolls

"It's been an eventful day. Finish your work and get some rest. Jumeaux, head to the Infirmary when you're done."

"Okay," Jumeaux mumbled, gnashing his teeth at the perceived injustice. *No one sticks up for me, but everyone does for that freak Lontas.*

"Try to enjoy meeting the ailing and frail. Remember, soon enough we will be old and in the Infirmary with some young squire running over to wipe the drool off our mouths!"

The Knight leaned towards Bellae and whispered, "Don't forget your meeting tomorrow morning." She smiled and nodded despite feeling stressed about the private appointment as he headed towards the door.

"Everyone, sleep well because tomorrow is your next Squire Battle! Remember, you didn't hear this from me," Finn said in a mock whisper.

"Good night," they muttered over a collective groan.

Only the thud of a bucket being hung up or the jingling of bridle and saddle being put away broke the quiet for the longest time while the squires saw to their work, tacitly dreading the Squire Battle.

It was Bellae's laughter, standing on a stool stroking Crann's forehead that shattered the hefty silence.

"What's so funny?"

"Crann thinks the Proliator horses have their hooves shod too tight!"

Jumeaux rolled his eyes, "Not this again!"

"J, after everything you have seen how can you doubt her?" Gimelli asked.

"She's good with animals, yes, that I believe. But talking to them? No, not believing that! She hums, which they find soothing."

Ever since Bellae had saved him from the River Vita Monster, he had believed she could communicate with animals. However, he was in the mood to annoy. They needed payback for hanging him out to dry with Finn. His anger flared further as he rubbed his largest scar, one of the many cicatrices coursing through his skin after being swallowed. Each lesion served less as a reminder of the trauma endured than as an emotional symbol of the perceived spurn sustained from Finn and the other squires.

## Na Cearcaill

"You're just sore about what happened to you in the last Squire Battle," laughed Scelto. "Real fine piece of work that day." Everyone but Bellae and Jumeaux joined in the laughing. "Remember when . . ."

"It's okay everyone, we can stop talking about last year," Bellae interrupted.

She hummed quietly while grooming Crann. The sense of peace and natural ease that exuded from his younger sister only served to fire up Jumeaux's anger despite her coming to his aid. *Miss goody, goody!*

"I'm done and heading to the blasted Infirmary!" Jumeaux said in a gruff tone. *Thanks for leaving me hanging and not offering to help!* He wanted to share how angry he was to the oblivious squires, but faltered and lashed out instead.

"Anyway, Lontas, I think you should be proud. Your LTC and LCC are at record highs today. Good tripping, good making a fool of yourself, good clumsying!"

"Clumsying' is not a real word, actually," Lontas corrected.

Jumeaux shot him a dirty look. "It's called sarcasm! Don't worry about me not sleeping. It's not like I need sleep to show up the likes of you incompetent ninnies tomorrow!" A thrown brush whizzed through the air and struck the door just as Jumeaux slammed it shut.

"I swear, Gimelli and Bellae," exclaimed Scelto, "how you three can be related I will never know!"

"He does have a good side," Gimelli commented.

"Oh, I agree completely," Scelto remarked. "Unfortunately, it's very small, and can only be seen if you squint really hard in perfect lighting."

They all giggled and Gimelli changed the subject, "What did you and Finn talk about, Bellae?"

"Finn told me about the old days when our capital was Cumhacht and the Knights ran the Festival of Flags. The Magicians and Proliate run it as the Citadel and are bringing the Festival back and calling it the Tournament of the Flags."

"Wow! Changing *Festival* to *Tournament* . . . what a huge change!"

"Long ago when the Knights were at full strength, the Festival of Flags was held every four years to test the different squads of the thirty-five Knight castles and determine the Knight Champion," Bellae

## Far Forest Scrolls

continued. “It gave Knights a chance to see friends and family since they were gone for most of the year.”

“Lovag told me that the donation taxes each country pays for us to protect them are drying up,” Lontas added. “Instead of giving money to us to protect Verngaurd, they are spending it on their own armies or giving it to the Proliators. Think about the last time we had a new recruit for stablemate. A lot of people are sending their kids into their own country’s army or to the Proliators.”

“To get the protection of the Proliators, you have to let them build a temple to Tallcon and take their religion of the eternal phoenix!” Gimelli said grimly.

“The Knights have protected them for thousands of years! How can the nations of Verngaurd turn their backs on us?” Lontas asked.

“Are you kidding?” Scelto said. “We just talked about getting served in the Dark War. We lost credibility. The Proliate and the Magicians are the ones who beat the Dark Warriors and have the power, prestige, and money.” He paused. “Boy, I would *love* to cut off Prast’s ponytail.”

“Some Magicians are good, Prast, not so much. Friar loves Veneficus who always looks out for the Knights,” Gimelli replied. “Anyway, if the Dark Warriors are back in Verngaurd, it’s better if we all work together to defeat them.”

Gimelli playfully slapped Lontas on the back. “Dark Warriors aren’t a cheerful thought to end the day, but you know what? It’s time for bed. Finn is great. He didn’t have to tell us about the Squire Battle tomorrow.”

## Scroll 6: The Lifeless are Calling

Jumeaux stood indignantly outside the door to the Infirmary while the other four squires drifted to their barracks buoyed by the promise of sleep. The white stone building had the word “Vetus” chiseled above the arched entrance and small windows lining the second floor, instantly conjuring the concept that “Infirmary” was a misnomer for prison.

“Jumeaux!” a strange voice muttered. Seeing a ghostly white form

## Na Cearcaill

out of the corner of his eye he bolted through the door as he heard his name called a second time. *What the bloody latrine is that?* Jumeaux thought, having seen that spirit a couple of times before. *I so hate this castle! I soooo hate this castle, and everything in it!*

Once inside he instantly inhaled the loathsome stench that builds up when many dependent people are forced into a fixed area. His ears were assaulted with the erratic comings and goings of workers and patients who seemed to be bouncing around randomly. His eyes caromed back and forth fruitlessly trying to ascertain some pattern or purpose to the chaotic movements.

There were two bustling hallways stretching out to either side. The one to the left had a massive staircase leading up. Yellowing tapestries hung on white stonewalls but failed to dull the racket or add cheer.

"You the squire sent to help?" a large, muscular man asked before Jumeaux could bolt. He was wearing a white cloak and a red belt. His shaggy hair nearly covered his dull eyes. His massive hands were supporting a small, elderly patient who hung limply, like a heedless doll in the grasp of the immense man. "Little scrawny, aren't you?"

"I'll take it from here," a calm voice interrupted. "Please get that patient to his room. Hello, squire."

"I'm Jumeaux, from the Pantteri Squad. Finn sent me."

"I am Salus, I run the Infirmary. As you can see, you have come at our busiest time. We are getting everyone to their rooms for the night. Thank you for coming."

*It's not like I had a choice.*

"As you know, we take care of the sick of body and those with disordered minds. It is a gift to assist those who cannot take care of themselves."

*Oh, yes, a "gift." That's why there are so many people beating down the door to help!* Jumeaux thought.

"Come, let's get you to work," Salus continued. His voice remained as placid as his peaceful expression as if oblivious to the chaos of movement breaking around him like a wave.

Jumeaux was not so lucky, faltering behind him through the busy hallway towards the stairs. The urgency of the healers and orderlies



## Far Forest Scrolls



*Figure 24: Salus is head healer and surgeon at the Vetus Infirmary of Castle Liberum.*

stood in stark contrast to the listless despondency of the patients either motionless, except for dangling drool, or ambling in a hopeless haze, barely outpacing death, which ceaselessly hovered in the shadows brandishing its undefeated weapons, eternal optimism and unwavering patience.

Salus was a tall, spare man who wore a flowing white robe with a red sash over his right shoulder—designating him as a healer. His delicate, scarless, and callous-free appearance stood in stark contrast to the hardened appearance of the Knights. His spectacles reflected the flickering lantern lights, barely masquerading his emerald-green eyes. Petite ears were tucked neatly under his grey hair while standing sentry above a surprisingly broad jaw.

“We had an accident and desperately need help cleaning up.”

*Why can't you clean it up?* Jumeaux thought. *You could use some manual labor.*

## Na Cearcaill

"I'm too busy running this place. We lose people all the time but no one steps up to take their place," Salus said, as if he had heard Jumeaux's thoughts.

Rattled, Jumeaux said nothing, Salus' response and the strange white figure from outside unnerving his mind.

"To make things worse, we have a few orderlies out sick. When it rains it pours," Salus said, pointing up the staircase. "Top of the stairs, first room on your right, a mop, buckets, and water are waiting to clean up days of soup rations, totally wasted!"

The squire glanced around nervously. "Uhm, up there?"

"Yes, Jumeaux. Go up and clean where the mess meets the floor, and the mop leans precariously propped but shamefully inactive. I assure you the mop is anxiously awaiting your arrival." As he spoke he used two of his fingers to mockingly climb imaginary, miniature stairs.

A chuckle from an orderly spurred Jumeaux up the stairs, flushed with self-consciousness. At the top, he was relieved to find less chaos with only a few orderlies helping patients into rooms down a long hallway. On his right, lying motionless on the floor, a puddle of disagreeable greenish fluid stared scornfully up at him.

*That's food?* Jumeaux thought with a shudder of revulsion.

The spill arched out from the doorway like an emerald tongue, mockingly sticking itself out and daring him to take a peek at the volume of slop hiding on the other side.

A solitary mop stood nonchalantly against the wall. Taking a deep breath, Jumeaux grabbed it and pushed one of a dozen large buckets of water closer to the spill. *You have to look*, Jumeaux told himself, leaning around the corner. Several large vats had overturned, hemorrhaging a massive spill of green goop.

*Bloody, wretched . . . ah!*

His thin arms tensed as he thrust the mop forward with all his might, each stroke stoking the fire of his ire. His untamed hair bobbed and weaved angrily in tune with his aggressive swabbing.

*Finn, Friar, and the other squires are cozy in bed while I have to battle this sludge!*

The mop moved furiously. *Dunk, splash.*

## Far Forest Scrolls

“Always me!” he yelled at the slime. “Everyone gang up on Jumeaux!”  
*Squish, splat, shove.*

He ignored the ache in his slender arms and continued scrubbing. Each twinge of soreness in his muscles fueled the seed of fury growing in his heart.

“You missed a spot. Ha-ha. Funny joke, never gets old!” a male voice rang out, startling the squire.

Jumeaux cringed in disgust at a slovenly young man, perhaps a few years older than him, approaching. A fleshy mass of stomach had exiled the young man’s stretched and despairing shirt up around his chest, leaving a breaking wave of fat smooshing out below. His disheveled black hair sprouted like greasy porcupine quills above impassive eyes, a bulbous nose, and inanely large ears.

*He is obviously more than a few fritters short of a dozen.*

A dribble of spittle dangling precariously at the corner of his mouth completed his slovenly ensemble. His pants stretched desperately above generous calves. His large toes, complete with yellowing nails, protruded from tattered work boots.

*This guy works here? They really must be desperate.*

Looking around, Jumeaux noted with relief that he was over half-way done. The ache of his muscles came hammering into his shoulder, back, and arms, causing him to momentarily forget the strange figure in front of him. Jumeaux dropped the mop and gently stretched his quaking muscles threatening to cramp.

“I’m sure glad they stuck you with this job. Who hates you? Ha-ha! Usually I do these jobs because I am such a hard worker,” the bloated-belly-boy said.

*Oh, yeah. Obviously!*

“My name’s Crassus. I work here,” he said, proudly pointing to the perspiring red belt, its stretched fibers languishing under and around his profuse fat rolls. “Do you have food? They never feed me. It’s always work, work, work. I always clean up messes. Do you have any food?” Crassus pleaded, picking at his belly button.

“What’s your name?” he asked as his belly button mining expedition hit pay dirt. He smiled, extracting a large, tangled mass of hair and

## Na Cearcaill

lint. Jumeaux squished up his face in revulsion.

“J-Jumeaux,” he reluctantly answered, staring at the massive, hair laden ball of lint in Crassus’ hand.

“How come you don’t have a red belt like us workers?”

“Uhm, I’m a squire helping out.”

“A squire!” Crassus said excitedly. “I could be a Knight, carry a swordsey . . . and ride a horsey.”

*Swordsey? Horsey? This guy’s insane!* “Didn’t you have to be a squire before becoming an orderly?”

Crassus looked left and right nervously as if expecting someone to come and answer the question for him. A different finger nervously slurped up his nostril.

“Hey, man, what’s wrong with you?” Jumeaux asked, feeling as if he were going to vomit. Crassus looked longingly as he squished his double mined treasure together.

“It tastes better if you get a little from both places!” Crassus announced excitedly.

“Don’t do it, man, I beg you!” Jumeaux pleaded. Despite his request, the revolting morsel of belly button lint mixed with hot snot went plopping into his mouth.

“MMMMMhhh!” Crassus said as he swished the disgusting delicacy around in his mouth. Jumeaux retched but did not vomit.

“Crassus!” someone yelled from down the hall.

Ignoring the voice, Crassus moved towards Jumeaux. “Hey, Jay-OH-moh, I help you mop? Shall I?”

He crudely picked up the mop and ineffectively began to slosh the green slime around the floor.

“Hey, man, you’re messing up my work!”

“I work here. I clean messes,” Crassus mumbled as Jumeaux wrenched the mop out of his hands.

Crassus let loose a deafening bawl. “WAHHHHHHHHHHH-HH-HA-HA.”

“Uh,” Jumeaux stammered, dumbfounded by the bizarre reaction.

“Hey, kid, what did you do to Crassus?”

“Me?”



## Far Forest Scrolls

The large orderly Jumeaux had seen downstairs pushed an elderly man in a rotasessius, or wheeled chair, up to them before gently patting Crassus, "It's okay."

"He not let me mopsy! WAAAAAAHHHHHH!" Crassus pushed the orderly aside and dove into the green slime, kicking and spinning his feet. The goop sloshed all over his tightly stretched white uniform while showering the area Jumeaux had already cleaned.

"Hey, I worked hard on that!"

The large orderly turned an angry eye on Jumeaux. "Haven't you done enough?"

"Me?"

"Me, me, me! Is that all you think about?" the orderly accused, picking up Crassus. "Let's get you to bed. How did you steal another uniform?"

"My uniform!" Crassus bawled. "Mine, mine, mine!"

"Okay, you're right. We'll get it washed so it's ready for you tomorrow," the large orderly soothed in a surprisingly gentle voice. Crassus cooed gently and rested his oversized head on the orderly's shoulder.

*A bloody patient!* Jumeaux thought. *Look at the mess that lunatic made!*

After they walked down the corridor a bit, the immense orderly turned. "Hey, squire, out in the hallway, now!"

Jumeaux obliged.

"While I get Crassus cleaned up and into bed, watch Necare," the orderly said, nodding to the elderly man in the wheeled chair.

"But, I have to . . ."

"You HAVE to watch Necare!"

"This my uniform. Right? Right? I cleaned well, didn't I?" Crassus whimpered. "If that nasty squire hadn't been there, I would have finished."

"It's your uniform and you did great," the orderly reassured. Both turned to glare hatefully at Jumeaux before disappearing into a room halfway down the hallway.

Jumeaux glanced longingly over his shoulder at the floor that was once again smeared with green slime. *If I leave this old guy to clean, something bad will happen and I'll get blamed.*

## Na Cearcaill

He looked more closely at the ancient Necare. The desiccated and gnarled old man appeared to have lost a desperately lopsided battle against the full brunt of time's vindictive abuse. His fissured skin sagged like friable drapery over wasted muscles. His head was thrown forward by a crumbling neck, warped by the years into an eternal bow. Sunken orbits held eyes drained of hope and turned an almost opaque grey by age. Tremors made his knotted hands contort an unconscious, dissonant dance. The ancient eyes suddenly flickered up at Jumeaux.

"A-bch-b-ch?" his dusty voice cracked and wavered through rusty vocal cords.

A few decaying memories shook loose from decrepit mental rafters. Threadbare memories started and stopped like a carriage over large rocks, as he searched for youthful images of himself.

"Whhas Iahh boy?"

Fear, agony, and a cold sadness radiated from the ancient man, causing Jumeaux to shudder. The squire wallowed in the aged man's tangible despair, gripped by a nauseating mix of emotions.

"Was I a young boy?" Necare demanded.

"What?"

Necare sighed and repeated his question. A look of deep sincerity shone from behind the frail, clouded eyes. "Did I kill all those Dark Warriors?"

Jumeaux glanced around anxiously, willing the orderly to return. "I don't know, old man. I have a better question, is everybody in this place crazy?"



**Figure 25: Ancient former Knight Necare. One of the last Knights alive to have fought in the Dark War.**

## **Far Forest Scrolls**

The elderly man shook his head in frustration and closed his eyes, seeming to instantly fall asleep.

A few moments later his eyes abruptly shot open, "It's gone!"

### **Scroll 7: The Dead Are Falling**

"What's gone?" Jumeaux asked, startled by his sudden stir.

"My youth." A flicker of hope in the old man's eyes quickly departed, replaced with jaded fatigue.

"My village was between Pescare and the Koori Mountains. It has fields of wild flowers," he added, his voice quickened with a burst of lucidity.

"Have you seen the Storten Flower Fields? I ran through so many flowers it felt as if I were swimming in them. Oh, the smells, the sights. My muscles were strong and tireless. My whole life was in front of me. Now, look! I can't even stand and I get the pleasure of peeing myself daily!"

Jumeaux looked around in horror. Sweat began to bubble up on his forehead. He wiped it away, wondering if this night would ever end.

"How I wish I would just die."

"Oh, please, don't," the squire begged weakly.

With surprising quickness, he grabbed Jumeaux's wrist. "Just a whisper ago I was young like you. You're a blink of an eye away from sitting trapped like me in this seat of horrors, always tired, but perpetually bored, always in pain, and somehow always hungry but eternally full at the same time. Don't waste a single second of the time you have from now until you're sitting where I am!"

Panicking, Jumeaux began backing away towards the green slop and the stairs. The former Knight's gaze suddenly widened with intensity. Necare's grip tightened, causing Jumeaux to yelp as he dragged the wheeled chair forward. Necare sighed deeply, an endless fog settling behind his eyes. Without warning, his shoulders slumped, and his head collapsed while his entire body crumpled into the chair.

## Na Cearcaill

Jumeaux's mind impassively glanced at the old man's previous advice, but blinded by the youthful cloak of invincibility, he deflected them, sending the words spiraling into the green slime where they sat patiently waiting to be mopped up and discarded.

Seeing no one around, Jumeaux felt the man's neck with his free hand. *Please, be asleep.* "No pulse!" *Dead? You have got to be kidding me!*

Sweat poured off his forehead as he realized the man's hand was still clasped to his wrist. The leathery toughness of the skin surprised him as he frantically tried to remove it. Putting his foot on the front of the rotasessius, he pushed hard.

Nothing.

Leaning backwards in desperation, Jumeaux pulled harder.

*Wham!*

Instead of loosening the dead man's grip, Jumeaux managed to yank the dead man forward out of his chair. The lifeless body toppled onto him, and both were thrust backwards, sliding on the green goop. Necare's foot was caught in the wheeled chair, pulling it forward until it slammed against the wall, eventually toppling over, precariously resting on the top step.

*Oh no! Oh no!* Jumeaux lamented from his back. The old man's rigid body curled on top of him, his boney right shoulder pinching Jumeaux's neck.

Jumeaux managed to wriggle closer to the stairs, desperately reaching for the teetering wheeled chair. His fingers flailed wildly, barely touching the chair's side. Stars began flashing in front of his eyes from the lack of oxygen.

*Have to grab . . . got it!*

The creaking and wobbling of the rotasessius interrupted his thoughts as it hung precariously for a moment.

*Don't got it.*

The rotasessius fell, crashing and slamming down the stairs, quickly gaining speed.

"BOY! What are you doing? Don't you know Knight Necare fought in the Dark War?" the large orderly yelled.



## Far Forest Scrolls

Jumeaux whimpered.

"What the . . . ?" the orderly said, entering the hallway where the skeletal figure of Necare had Jumeaux pinned. Enraged, he flew down the hall.

"He's dead," Jumeaux said, feeling increasingly lightheaded under the dead weight lying across his neck.

"You killed him!"

"No!" Jumeaux gurgled, struggling to stay conscious.

A naked Crassus bolted towards them, excitedly flapping his soiled uniform like a corpulent bird desperate for flight. His lavish, fleshy belly rolls undulated in lumbering tune with each stomping flutter of his makeshift wings. Seeing the two of them lying on the floor, he dropped his clothes and began to jump up and down, clapping with unabashed enthusiasm. "The squire killed Necare! The squire killed Necare!"

Like a fire bell, Crassus' inappropriately joyous call had the residents of the Infirmary rushing into the hallway. Shouts of, "Murderer!" and "He really killed him!" flooded the hall and added to Jumeaux's terror.

Panicking at the orderly's anger and the chorus of patients, Jumeaux rocked back and forth to joggle Necare off him. He succeeded, gratefully sucking in a deep breath. His momentary reprieve was short-lived as brisk tug jerked his wrist, followed by a harsh sliding motion.

Jumeaux shouted, "Oh, NOOOOOO!" as the old man rattled down the stairs, pulling the squire after him down the bumpy course.

*Thud-thud-thud-thud!*

Finally clunking to a stop, Jumeaux looked up to see Salus standing above his throbbing and bruised body.

"This kid tormented Crassus and killed Necare!" the orderly shrieked.

Jumeaux looked pleadingly. Gently, but firmly, Salus broke the death grip of Necare before holding up his hand for silence.

"But . . ." the orderly protested.

"Enough!" Salus said with surprising force. "Carry Necare up to his room and prepare him for the death ritual."

"Sir, I didn't kill him," Jumeaux appealed. "Honest, I didn't. I was cleaning up the green slop when Crassus came pretending to be an

## Na Cearcaill

orderly and eating nasty stuff he pulled out of all sorts of sick bodily places! Then, this mostly-dead guy starts freaking out about being a boy and peeing himself and . . .”

“It is okay, Jumeaux. I know it was not some action from you. The blanket of mortality has been nipping at his heels for years, and finally succeeded in settling its quietus upon him.”

The orderly gently lifted the body of the old Knight, shooting Jumeaux a parting glare before disappearing up the stairs.

“I am sorry he’s dead,” Jumeaux said, averting his eyes from the healer.

“No, I’m the one who should be sorry. There’s too much chaos here for a single squire to help. They should have sent ten of you. Do you want me to look at your injuries?”

“No, I’m okay,” Jumeaux said, slowly standing. His whole body ached from the frantic mopping and painful fall.

“Do you need help getting to your barracks?”

Jumeaux grimaced, looking back up the stairs. “You don’t need me to finish?”

“I’ll have that hulk of an orderly take care of it,” Salus said, winking.

“Thanks.”

“I’ll let you know when the funeral is,” Salus called after him.

*Oh, yeah, wouldn’t miss it,* Jumeaux thought wryly. A chorus of penetrating eyes greeted him as he made his way through the disapproving crowd and pushed through the door. The cool and crisp night air refreshed his lungs, but could not eradicate the brisk and icy memories of Crassus and Necare. Without remembering how he got there, Jumeaux made it to the barracks and changed out of his slimy clothes.

*Everyone’s sleeping! Lucky backstabbing weasels.*

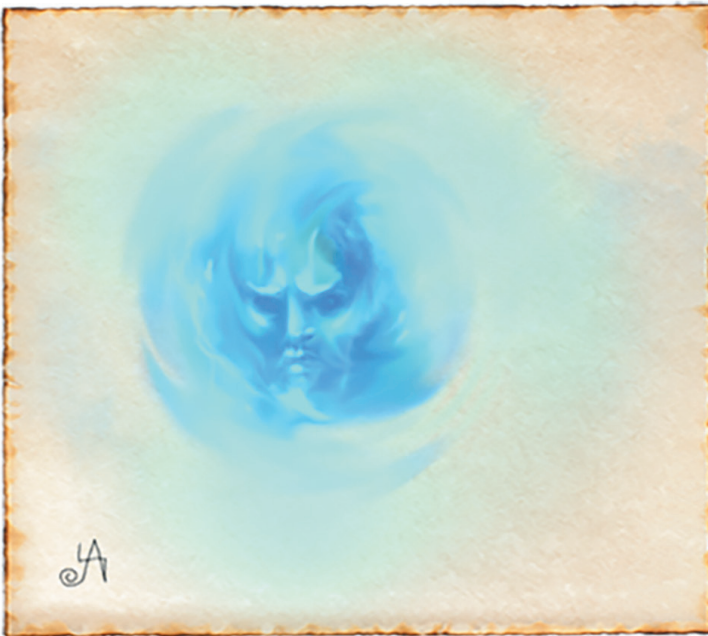
A chill went through him, *What was that white thing outside the Infirmary? If I tell anyone they’ll only criticize me more than usual.*

As he scanned the room he noticed an empty cot.

*Where’s Scelto?* Jumeaux’s tired mind wondered apathetically. Gingerly he slid into his bed. Immediately, his exhausted mind raced into the sanctuary of sleep where he dreamed of wrestling patients in a frothy and turbulent sea of green slop.



*Figure 26: Supreme Master  
Magician Veneficus.*



*Figure 27: Valo are magical floating lights of foul temper, earning the nickname of floating crab apples. These round balls of light have human faces and a gift for sarcasm.*