

Chapter 1

A Very Strange Beginning

Early one afternoon in the month of November a door opened in a small corner of a place called Dartmoor. While this by itself might not be considered curious, the nature of the door and the place to which it opened were more than simply curious—they were magical. Now, the word “magic” suffers from a great deal of ridicule in our world these days, which is both sad to those who still believe in it, and strange to those who have experienced it firsthand. But in a world where the last few dragons have been slain, the faeries have gone into hiding, and the great tools of magic have been lost, perhaps this skepticism should not be considered surprising. And perhaps it was for this very reason that LIAMB the Light (you shall hear more about him later) chose someone from our world to pass through that door and restore hope to a troubled world.

His name was Geoff, a boy of some sixteen years of age who had come from America to visit his aunt and uncle who now lived in England. Geoff had never before been to England, but he quickly fell in love with Dartmoor, which is where his aunt and uncle lived. Its rugged, fierce, beauty entranced him and it gave him a strange sense of joy to know that the ancient wildness of the world still lingered in places such as this. Geoff spent most of his time in England walking the moors with his aunt and uncle, for that was their favorite pastime. Geoff enjoyed it very much himself and took great delight in hiking through the heather, scrambling up rocky tors, and splashing across the streams that criss-crossed the moors. Besides the occasional hiker, they met only rambling herds of sheep and the wild Dartmoor ponies. Various prehistoric relics—stone circles, standing stones, and the like—stood as a silent testament to the moor’s ancient residents, long since vanished.

On this crisp November day, Geoff sat like one of those standing stones on the top of a small hill. His aunt and uncle had left for another day’s walk, but Geoff had decided this time to

stay behind. When he had awoken that morning, he had known that it would be a special day that needed to be watched very carefully. He could not have been more right, for it was on that very day, on that very hill, that LIAMB opened the door. Throughout all the adventures that followed, Geoff often wondered why, of all the people in our world, LIAMB chose him to undertake the important and perilous quest assigned to him. At first glance, you might very well wonder the same.

There was nothing particularly special about Geoff, so far as outward appearances go, dressed as he was in a gray sweatshirt, muddy boots and an old pair of jeans. He was average in height and build with short, sandy-brown hair and brown eyes that always seemed to be watching something far off in the distance. He had few friends, not being the sort who was very popular in school, and spent most of his time alone. Simply put, Geoff was one of those quiet, unassuming people who most of us easily overlook. Perhaps that was why LIAMB chose him. I think it can be safely said that LIAMB is always choosing those who hold within themselves far more than the rest of us realize.

As Geoff sat upon the hilltop, watching the world, the clouds soon drew his attention up into the sky. They behaved in a very peculiar manner that day, more so than Geoff had ever seen. They stretched all the way to the horizon and filled the sky with a fantastically intricate and always-changing pattern built from an infinite array of layered grays. Geoff watched the clouds for hours, entranced by the shapes that emerged and evolved before his eyes. He imagined the clouds alive, elusive spirits of the air who danced to a song that (alas!) escaped his ears. Geoff listened anyway, but the only sounds he heard were those of the wind and the occasional bird.

But after many hours of watching and listening, a very strange thing began to happen in the clouds. Amidst the shapes of castles and dragons, mountains and valleys, forests and rivers, one cloud assumed the shape of a bridge and moved slowly towards Geoff. At first, he took little notice of it, for all the clouds that day behaved as if they had a mind of their own. Yet as this cloud came closer, the idea that the cloud might purposely be approaching him broke into Geoff's conscious thoughts. He watched it with growing anticipation, afraid to take his eyes off the cloud lest it simply fade away. Slowly and silently the cloud curved downwards until it touched the hillside just before Geoff's feet. For a little while he just stared at the cloud, half expecting it to melt away as soon as he moved or made a sound. Fortunately, however, Geoff possessed a great deal of imagination or else he might have dismissed the errant cloud as an illusion or a strange dream. Had that been the case, the cloud would certainly have vanished at his disbelieving touch.

And this raises a very important point about magic of which you may not be aware: the more you believe in magic the more likely it will work for you. Indeed, this is why you will see

so little magic in our world these days—so few believe in it. However, Geoff was one of the few people in our world who still did, so when he reached out his hand to touch the cloud he found it cool yet solid beneath his fingers.

Pleasantly surprised and knowing now for certain that some magic was afoot, Geoff rose to his feet and took a few cautious steps onto the cloud-bridge. It held firm beneath his feet, as he expected it would, and stretched high into the sky, vanishing into the swirling patterns of white and gray. Geoff paused for a moment, suddenly aware that to continue on somehow meant that he could never go back to the way his life had been. Whatever else the road ahead offered, it promised great change. As he weighed his decision, Geoff gazed upwards and felt as if an unseen voice beckoned to him from beyond the clouds and asked him to chance all the unknown adventures that lay ahead. Geoff looked back to the hilltop for a moment and then decided to continue his ascent. Deep down, he knew that, if he did not go on, he would regret it until the end of his days.

Before long, the hilltop, the wide expanse of Dartmoor, and all the things of this world disappeared behind Geoff as the clouds enveloped him. He did not feel trapped in any way, but rather as if the clouds offered him protection as he journeyed from his world to places unknown. Yet as Geoff hiked across the bridge, he wondered with some trepidation where exactly it was taking him. He had read many stories in which strange and wondrous things like this had happened, but he had never stopped to think about what it must feel like to be one of those characters whom fate whisks away from home and sends on some dangerous adventure that could easily end in death. This was one story in which he couldn't simply flip a few pages ahead to find out what would happen.

The surrounding clouds prevented Geoff from seeing more than about five feet in front of him, and he had to take each step in the faith that his feet would meet solid ground (after a fashion) and not plunge instead into empty air. They never did, much to Geoff's relief, and before long walking on the clouds felt as natural to Geoff as strolling down a country lane. The clouds made for a delightfully springy surface to walk upon and despite their rough shape he never once tripped.

At long last, the bridge began to curve downwards and the clouds ahead thinned to reveal the vague shapes of distant mountains. At the sight of those mountains, Geoff knew for certain that he had arrived someplace else, for Dartmoor could boast no such mountains. His heart pounding, Geoff began to run towards the mountains, completely forgetting that even magic clouds are made of water and can be very slippery. A moment later, Geoff lost his footing and started to slide down the bridge at an uncomfortably rapid rate. Seeing no way to slow his descent, Geoff closed his eyes and braced for the worst. He soon landed with a splash in a shallow pool and sat, somewhat dazed, shivering in the cold mountain air.

“Well,” a voice said, “you *do* know how to make an entrance, don’t you? Although I must say I would have done so in a much drier fashion.”

Geoff stood up, still shivering, and looked around. There, sitting on the shore, his unblinking yellow eyes studying Geoff with an intense air of curiosity, sat the largest and most intelligent panther Geoff had ever seen.

“Greetings, young human,” the panther continued. “My name is Sylran of the clan Sirrin.” Here the panther gave a slight bow. “Welcome to the land of Edelsha!”

“Come on, Wehrya!” Sylran cried as he bounded up the mountainside. “Today’s going to be the day, I just know it!”

“That’s what you say *every* day, Sylran,” the gryphon replied from above as she battled against the winds that flowed down from the mountain’s peak. “Or at least every day that you manage to drag me along with you,” she added under her breath.

“But today’s different, I can feel it,” Sylran insisted.

“I’ve heard *that* before too,” Wehrya said with a touch of exasperation.

Sylran merely shrugged and continued on his way. Wehrya’s skepticism had yet to dampen either his spirits or his belief in the old stories. He and Wehrya had known each other almost since birth, having both been born in the same year, and had lived all their lives in the Cloud Mountains west of Edelsha’s eastern plains.

The great cats and gryphons have shared their home in the Cloud Mountains since time before memory and the deep friendship that runs between the two races is just as old. A strange alliance, perhaps, for though the gryphons are half lion, they are also half eagle as well—and I know of few worlds in which birds and cats remain on good terms.

Few other talking creatures dwelt in the Cloud Mountains, save for an assortment of goblins and the occasional dragon, but the Cloud Mountains contained a vast number of caves in which the great cats preferred to make their homes. The gryphons, on the other hand, built their aeries high on the mountain peaks, safe from the reach of all but the dragons.

Sylran and Wehrya were still accounted young by the standards of their races, both being about forty years of age (the cats and gryphons of Edelsha live, on average, twice as long as humans). Being young, they spent most of their time exploring the mountains and seeking out adventures. Sylran had a sense of adventure that rivaled that of most of his kindred, as well as a knack for falling into danger. His bright yellow eyes and keen nose always seemed to find unexplored caves and crevices, the most elusive prey, or some entirely new way to get into

trouble. He never thought much of the possible hazards lurking just around the corner, but he rarely lacked the courage to stare such dangers in the face when he encountered them.

To be fair, neither did Wehrya, although she approached most situations with a little more caution than Sylran. Still, she accompanied Sylran on nearly every one of his adventures and had rescued him from more than one tight spot, a fact she often reminded him of when he stood on the verge of doing something particularly foolhardy.

“Remember the last time you explored a dragon’s cave that you *thought* was abandoned,” she would warn. Sometimes the panther listened, but when he didn’t, Wehrya always followed a few steps behind.

“Someone has to keep an eye on you, Sylran Sirrin,” she insisted. “If not me, then who?” Some might argue that Wehrya didn’t want Sylran to show her up, but I think it simply proves the depth of their friendship. Wherever the stories drew Sylran, their friendship drew Wehrya.

Wehrya belonged to the clan of Ravencloud and, like all members of her clan, her eagle half was covered in black feathers like those of a raven. Where her feathers turned to fur, the color lightened to a rich brown.

Clan Ravencloud and clan Sirrin both lived near the Great Cloud Mountain, a mountain possessed of many strange and magical properties. In particular, the clouds that hovered endlessly around the peak often behaved in a very curious fashion. Some said that they shaped themselves after the image of other worlds, while others claimed to have seen the clouds move in directions quite different from that of the wind. Folk told strange stories of that mountain and the shallow pool that sat at the top, and Sylran knew all of them by heart. He often visited the old Storyteller who lived near the peak, the only human Sylran knew to live in the Cloud Mountains.

According to the stories, if you looked deep enough into the pool it would show you the image of another world and, if LIAMB willed it, a bridge would open up in the clouds and lead you to that world. While this had not happened in a great many years, Sylran believed the stories. He had spent many long hours gazing into the pool, but so far had seen nothing. Today, however, Sylran felt that things would be different. So he scaled the mountainside in leaps and bounds with even more abundant energy and optimism than usual, while Wehrya followed in the air.

“How you always manage to talk me into coming along on these silly errands of yours I’ll never guess,” she said. “And I don’t know what you expect to see that you haven’t seen before.”

Sylran shrugged. “I don’t know either,” he said, “but there’s only one way to find out, isn’t there?”

Wehrya sighed and flew on without replying. The two of them had had this conversation countless times before, and Wehrya knew by now that once Sylran set his heart on doing something, very little she could say would change his mind.

When the pair reached the peak Sylran assumed his usual position at the water's edge and fixed his eyes upon the pool's surface. For an hour he remained silent and motionless, hardly blinking, while Wehrya steadily grew more and more restless.

"How you can sit there for so long doing nothing but watching I simply *cannot* understand," she burst out at last.

"I'm waiting."

"Yes, I know, for magic bridges to come out of the sky. Well, you haven't seen one yet!" With that Wehrya flew off in search of other excitement, leaving Sylran to continue his vigil in solitude. And that day, at long last, LIAMB rewarded his faithfulness.

As Sylran watched the pool, small ripples began to spread across the water that drove away the image of the sky and the surrounding mountains. The surface of the water then shimmered and the ripples cleared to reveal a wild land possessed of a desolate beauty, covered in heather and filled with rocky tors. The image drew close to a single hill, upon which Sylran saw a figure that watched and waited just as he did. As you may very well guess, this was none other than Geoff sitting among the hills of Dartmoor. As Sylran continued to gaze into the pool, he saw the bridge arrive and lead Geoff up into the clouds. Sylran watched, awestruck, for while he believed very much in stories of things magical, he did not often witness such miracles. Sylran flicked his tail with barely suppressed excitement as Geoff vanished into the clouds and the image of his world faded from the water. Sylran smiled. He knew that many wondrous things were now afoot and that a great story was about to begin.

"Will Wehrya ever be sorry she missed this!" he thought.

Sylran waited patiently as Geoff crossed the chasm between worlds, a touch overwhelmed at the thought of meeting a human from another world. When Geoff made his rather ungraceful entrance into Edelsha and lay soaking wet in the pool's shallow water, Sylran had to admit that this was not exactly what he had been expecting. He shivered at the thought of getting so wet and dirty, for like most felines he much preferred to remain both dry and clean at all times.

Indeed, Geoff was quite a sight. As a result of his landing he was now drenched from head to toe in muddy water and his clothes had turned a uniform shade of pale brown. His face, streaked with mud where he had attempted to wipe it clean, was no better. Geoff's bedraggled appearance, however, could not compare to his shock and amazement at hearing Sylran introduce himself. He had read stories in which such things had happened, yes, but none of them had quite prepared him for the surprise of meeting a real live talking animal face-to-face. Geoff

tried to find the words to reply to Sylran's introduction, but he only managed to stare open-mouthed as he stood shivering in the crisp air.

"Well? Aren't you going to introduce yourself?" Sylran asked, cocking his head. He began to wonder at the manners of this other world.

Geoff opened and closed his mouth a few times and at last managed to force out a few words.

"My... my name's Geoff."

"Well, that *is* better. I have to say, I was starting to wonder if humans could talk in your world."

"Of course they can!" Geoff exclaimed.

"I thought so," Sylran said with an air of nonchalance that merely added to Geoff's bewilderment, "and it looks like I was right. But you just stood there for so long that I *was* starting to wonder." Sylran then paused to watch something behind Geoff. Geoff turned around just in time to see the cloud-bridge disappear back into the pool.

"Well, that takes care of that," Sylran said. "And now that you're here, we'd better figure out what exactly you're here for."

"But what about the bridge?" Geoff asked. "How on earth am I supposed to get back?" The realization that he did not know how to return to his own world began to disturb Geoff very much. It was not quite as simple as shutting a book to get out of a story. Geoff suddenly felt very small and very alone, not to mention wet and miserable.

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about that," Sylran replied cheerfully. "When the time comes we'll find a way."

"That's easy for you to say. *You're* not the one who's gone into a different world," Geoff retorted. The cavalier way in which his strange companion dismissed the issue of going home rather annoyed him.

"Yes, that's true," Sylran said thoughtfully, "some humans have all the luck." Geoff was about to tell Sylran that he had missed the point entirely when the panther suddenly bounded off towards a nearby trail. "No more time to talk! We really should be going. The Storyteller will be expecting us, I'd imagine."

"Who's the Storyteller?" Geoff asked as he ran after Sylran, struggling to match the panther's quick pace. Sylran stopped abruptly, which gave the waterlogged Geoff a chance to catch up.

"Oh!" Sylran exclaimed in genuine surprise. "Of course, you wouldn't know." Sylran paused to think of how best to explain. "He's the one who tells stories, important stories, and... well, you'll understand. Now come on!"

Sylran shot off again, picking his way quickly yet carefully down the uneven mountain trail. Geoff kept up as best he could, and fortunately the mountainside was not so steep as to be particularly dangerous. Geoff would have preferred, however, to descend at a much slower rate had he been given the choice. To be honest, Geoff simply wanted to know why Sylran was in such a dreadful hurry. His mind was still a little numb from the shock of being suddenly plunged into a strange world, as his fingers and toes were still numb from the cold mountain water.

Geoff knew only that he had been thrust into the middle of something he did not yet understand. He also didn't understand that Sylran had waited most of his life for something like this to happen, and in his rush of feline excitement the panther had forgotten that few humans are as sure-footed as the great cats. If Wehrya had been there she could have told Geoff that while Sylran was a wonderfully brave and loyal companion, his excitement did sometimes get the better of him. This was one of those moments.

Sylran led Geoff down the mountainside to a shallow ledge that lay before the mouth of a small cave. A fire blazed brightly in front of the cave and Geoff inwardly rejoiced at the warmth it provided. Between the fire and the cave sat a wizened old man with a long white beard that fell down to his knees. He wore long brown robes with a hood pulled up over his snowy hair to keep out the evening chill. His eyes, set in a kind but wrinkled face, at first appeared closed by sleep, but when Sylran and Geoff approached they opened just slightly and the Storyteller nodded approvingly upon seeing Geoff.

Without a word he scuttled into his cave and soon emerged with a thick blanket made from some coarse cloth. He wrapped Geoff tightly in the blanket, sat him beside the fire, and pressed a warm mug into his hands. Geoff tasted the thick broth it contained and it warmed him to the core. His guest thus defended against the dangers of catching cold, the Storyteller sat down next to Geoff while Sylran curled up on the Storyteller's other side.

"So, you have come," the Storyteller said in a low, rumbling voice. "You did well to bring him to me so quickly, Sylran Sirrin. He should begin as soon as he can. Stay close to the flames, both of you, for a cold wind blows upon the land tonight."

Geoff nodded, not daring to say a word. Something in the Storyteller's manner instilled in him a tremendous sense of awe. A voice deep inside Geoff told him that the stories this Storyteller told were no mere fairy tales but *real* stories.

"You wonder, young human, why you have been brought to this land," the Storyteller said, and Geoff knew he did not need to tell him that he was right.

"I shall answer that question," the Storyteller continued, "but first I must tell you a story. Sylran has heard this story many times before, but this shall be the most important telling. Where is your winged friend, Sylran?"

"She got tired of waiting. She *always* gets tired of waiting."

“She lacks patience, and should remember that all stories come true at their proper time. It would have been good for her to be here, but that cannot now be changed. I cannot fault her for the nature LIAMB has bestowed upon her.”

The Storyteller raised his squinting eyes to the peak of the Great Cloud Mountain from which Sylran and Geoff had just come. Geoff followed his gaze, doing his best not to think about how steep the mountain looked or how quickly they had dashed down it.

“You have far to travel, young human,” the Storyteller went on, “before you return there. The story before you is long.”

Here Geoff remembered that in all the stories he had read where someone had traveled from one world to another it was always to do something very important. Geoff found it a little unsettling to think that it was now his turn to do that very important something, whatever it might be.

“The story I must tell you begins long ago, as most stories do,” the Storyteller said, “and concerns three rings.”

Sylran’s eyes grew wide and his fur bristled with excitement. “Is it really *that* time, Storyteller?”

“Yes, Sylran, it is. Now hush. You have heard the story before, but the young human has not.” The Storyteller turned to Geoff, his eyes filled with a deep seriousness Geoff had never before seen in anyone. “Listen very carefully to what I tell you. A great errand lies before you and these words shall help you on your way.” Geoff could only nod; it didn’t feel like the time to speak. The Storyteller stared deep into the flames and, as they flickered silently across his face, he began his tale.

‘Twas in the days before the high kings of Edelsha, during a great age when magic flowed through this world as freely as the rivers flow to the sea, that there lived the White Wizard of Lahalla. She dwelt in a time far more wild than our own, as worlds oft are in their younger days. In her time the darker forces of the world plagued the lands with great war and violence, spreading their malevolence from the mountains to the sea. The name of LIAMB the Light had been forgotten by most and those who fought in his name were few. The Wizard of Lahalla stood all but alone against the tide of darkness and feared what might become of the world when her days passed away.

She thus decided to craft three magic rings in which to deposit the vast stores of her power. She knew that her power would be needed long after her mortal days had ended, and she did not wish for it to perish with her. Guided by the will of LIAMB, Lahalla crafted the rings in

the great forge of the oreads of Shalamanar and poured into them the light of the sun, the moon, and the stars.

The oreads, if you do not know, are people of earth and stone. They are a race stout and strong with jewel-like eyes and skin as tough as granite. And while all oreads are skilled in the arts of stone and metal, each has an affinity with the type of stone they most resemble, both in temperament and appearance. It is said that the greatest of their craftsmen can shape their birthstone with their bare hands and with secret whispers mold it as one does clay.

And so it is to the oreads Lahalla went to forge her rings and together they toiled in the depths of the earth until at last Lahalla had sealed her power within them. With the final blow of the hammer she cried, "Long may these three rings serve the light, for so long as light dwells within the heart that wields them, peace shall know the victory."

For, like all magic, Lahalla knew the rings to be a two-edged sword which could be twisted to serve evil purposes. She also knew that no such vessels of magic would ever be crafted again, and that their power was great enough to bring the land under either great good or great evil. She therefore guarded the rings well and used them to unite the good warriors and heroes of the land together against their evil foes.

And there arose in those days a Dark Enchanter who mustered the forces of evil and strove with great might against the Wizard of Lahalla and her allies that he might lead the world into an everlasting night. For many years they fought great and terrible battles of which few tales remain. The day came at last when the White Wizard and the Dark Enchanter stood face-to-face and waged what was to be their final battle. High atop the mountains they stood, on what now is known as the Great Cloud Mountain, this very peak. For days they wrested with each other, each summoning every ounce of power that dwelled within their being. But so great was their combined power that in the end the fabric of the world itself cracked and both magicians perished.

"Oh!" Geoff exclaimed. "Is that where the cloud-bridge came from?"

"Hush," Sylran said sternly, "you should know it isn't polite to interrupt a tale." The Storyteller continued as if he hadn't heard.

The three rings made in Shalamanar, though lost, were not destroyed. But with the passing of the White Wizard of Lahalla and the loss of the rings, a dark age fell upon the world. For even though the Dark Enchanter had also died, his servants soon overwhelmed those of Lahalla.

Centuries passed, until the day there arose a great warrior named Tohan. Tohan learned of the rings and their making and knew that the power they contained could bring peace to his troubled land. He thus resolved to embark upon a quest to find at least one of the three rings or else perish in the trying. But where to begin? After giving the matter great thought, Tohan

decided he should first seek out the Questing Stone, said in legend to answer only those who quest for the good of others. No one from the race of men had sought the Stone in countless years, but Tohan saw no other way to begin his difficult quest.

The Questing Stone resides deep within the Eldest Wood, an ancient habitation of the dryads, and so there Tohan traveled first. In those days dryads and humans had little to do with one another, but Tohan still marched boldly to the gates of the Eldest Wood and requested an audience with the dryad king. The dryads regarded this stranger warily, but they could see that Tohan was a worthy warrior and so they admitted him into the Wood on the condition that he enter unarmed. Tohan agreed and the dryads brought him before their king and queen.

When he saw them, and all those gathered with them, it was for Tohan like looking upon a living forest. These were the dryads, the tree people, so seldom seen in those days by men, and they looked to Tohan as if the trees themselves had been given a human shape. Each dryad stood tall and graceful, though each one differed from the next as the birch does from the elm. Some had hair as fine as willow branches, while others had rough hair like pine needles, and Tohan was struck by both their nobility and beauty.

“In the name of the dryads of the Eldest Wood we greet you, noble stranger,” declared the dryad king in a voice as strong and deep as the oak. “State your name and purpose in my fair dominion.”

“Greetings, your majesties. I am called Tohan and I have come for no other purpose than to consult the Questing Stone.” The dryads expressed great amazement at this for, as I have said, no one from outside the Wood had sought the Stone in many years.

“And for what quest do you consult the Stone?” asked the queen in a voice as golden as the maple in the fall.

“I seek to find at least one of the three rings of Shalamanar, crafted long ago by the Wizard of Lahalla. It is my hope to use the rings to restore peace to the troubled lands of Edelsha.”

This news indeed interested the dryads, for they knew well the power of the rings (one or two of the elder dryads could even remember the time in which the rings were made), and every dryad desired a rest from the evils that beset them. The Eldest Wood bordered the Wild Mountains of the north where a variety of darker creatures, such as the goblins and centaurs, lived in abundance. They had grown stronger as of late and caused the dryads no end of trouble.

“I grant you the right to consult the Stone, Tohan, warrior of men,” decreed the king, “and should you succeed in your quest, do not forget the friendship we have shown to you.”

“I seek peace for all, good king, and shall do everything in my power to restore it to your people as well as my own.”

Tohan's answer pleased the dryads greatly, and so they swore to him their friendship and whatever aid they could give. All could see that LIAMB the Light was with him. However, most feared that the Stone would keep its silence before him. Why should it speak now to this warrior of men? Yet all knew that a great power would be needed to turn back the dark forces encroaching upon them. It could do no harm for Tohan to at least try.

Since time began the Questing Stone has sat within a cavern deep beneath the Wood. Shaped into a perfect hemisphere, the cavern is clearly no natural phenomenon, but what hand formed it none can say. The Questing Stone itself sits at the center of the cavern, flanked by the carved statues of a lion and a lamb. Shaped into a perfect cube, the Stone possesses a hue of such deep black that it appears as little more than a shadow, swallowing all light that falls upon it. On the top face of the Stone an unknown hand has carved a series of runes which, when translated into our tongue, read as follows:

*He who in great adventure partakes,
Ask and I shall an answer make,
To guide you to the path of right,
If quest be done for none but light.*

Tohan was led into this cavern by the dryads who then waited in a hushed silence to hear what reply, if any, the Stone might make. Tohan paused before the Stone, pondering what question would best be asked. When at last he spoke, his question astounded the dryads. All had expected that Tohan would ask how to find the rings, if he didn't ask where they were outright. Instead he knelt before the Stone and asked,

“Am I the one to seek a ring of Shalamanar?” For the true beginning of any quest is not where to begin, but whether or not one should begin at all.

Suddenly, a light pierced the cavern's gloom and blinded Tohan with its intensity. The Stone woke! The runes upon the Stone shone like fire, and the sound of one word split the silence.

“Yes.” The Stone had answered!

“Where?” Tohan asked. This time the Stone said nothing, but upon its surface a new set of runes appeared:

*The rings of power lost in the fight,
Go seek the first where all is night,
By sword you shall not claim this prize,
In battle soon the dark shall rise.*

*To lowest rank though you will fall,
In such shall surely conquer all.
The second in hand of fire rests,
The third another world's own quest.*

As soon as Tohan and the dryads read these words, they faded away, their fire dwindling with that of the original runes. Soon all light from the Stone ceased as it slept again. Tohan had received the answers he had sought, even if their meaning eluded him.

Tohan remained with the dryads for a fortnight, pondering deeply the meaning of the runes, during which time the dryads made preparations for his departure. When the time came for Tohan to continue his quest he stood once more before the king and queen, joined now by Jeyal, a young dryad warrior who had offered to accompany Tohan (and who reminded Tohan of the fir tree, with coarse hair and dark eyes).

A great host of dryads gathered to bid farewell to the two adventurers.

“Farewell to you, Tohan,” said the dryad king. “May LIAMB the Light be with you and may you and Jeyal return to us in safety.” Tohan and Jeyal bowed to the king and queen. Tohan offered his thanks, and both offered their farewells.

“I thank you, O king, and all your people for your friendship and aid. Without it my quest would truly have been doomed to fail.”

Tohan and Jeyal took their leave of the dryads and marched south through the Arine Forest towards the mountains. While most of the Stone's words remained a mystery to Tohan, something deep in his heart told him his destination. It bore the name Harakmel, although few dared use that name openly. Most simply called it the Dark Road, a place from which no one returned. Once a great oroad stronghold carved into the mountains, it had long since fallen into the hands of the goblins and whatever dark master they served. That master dwelt there still, and the name of Harakmel had become synonymous with great evil.

Tohan had once before gazed upon the gates of Harakmel and had sworn never again to tread that path. His quest now forced him to break that oath and each step he took towards Harakmel fed the shadow which weighed upon his heart. That shadow only deepened when Tohan and Jeyal reached the gates of Harakmel and found them open. Tohan's worst fears were confirmed when, as he and Jeyal watched from the cover of the forest, a host of goblins issued forth from the gates armed for war.

The goblins marched past man and dryad with the deafening sound of rumbling feet and clanking armor. They are a hideous, misshapen race with flat faces, squinting red eyes and dull gray skin stretched tight over bone. The crude armor they wore to cover their thick limbs only doubled their ugliness. Tohan and Jeyal could not count the vast number of goblin soldiers that

passed before them, each leering with crooked teeth at the anticipation of victory, and Tohan feared for whoever waiting unknowingly at the army's destination. When the last of the goblin footsteps faded into the distance, the gates slowly began to close.

Knowing it might prove their only opportunity, Tohan and Jeyal crept stealthily towards the gates and darted through the immense doors moments before they closed. The gates crashed shut behind them with a noise like thunder as darkness engulfed the two travelers. Neither Tohan nor Jeyal uttered a sound as they walked forward into that unending night. After walking many weary leagues, Tohan and Jeyal became aware of the faint light of torches behind them. Soon a row of lights ahead joined those behind and Tohan and Jeyal knew their presence had at last been discovered. Goblins barred the way, both forward and back, and their ugly, twisted swords glinted dully in the pale firelight.

"What!" cried Geoff. "Do you mean to tell me that this Questing Stone sent them into the mountains only to be taken prisoner and killed?" Geoff began to wonder about the kinds of stories they told in this world. They certainly weren't the kind he had ever heard before.

"Shhh," whispered Sylran, "you shouldn't interrupt! Everything will happen as it should, you'll see." The Storyteller simply gazed deeply at Geoff and continued.

At the fore of the goblin ranks stood a great goblin chief, nearly twice the size of any other goblin they could see. It carried no torch and at its side hung a tremendous ax, larger than any of human or dryad-kind could hope to wield. It was a gulrahk, a goblin giant. Few are they among goblin-kind, but they possess greater strength and cunning than any ordinary goblin. The gulrahk signaled its soldiers to disarm the trespassers and to strip them of any items of value. Neither Tohan nor Jeyal resisted, knowing that to do so would mean instant death. The gulrahk then led them deeper into the mountains, turning from the main road into one of the many side passages, and brought the prisoners into a great cavern.

At the far end of the cavern dwelt the goblin's dark master, a creature of pure shadow named Schreikal. The very air reeked of evil and even the goblins trembled in the presence of that vile being. Tohan's mind screamed in horror and revulsion at its presence, and his muscles tensed with the impulse to run, run forever from that abominable thing. Jeyal stood silent, a look of sheer terror frozen upon his face.

The gulrahk forced Tohan and Jeyal to kneel before Schreikal who probed their thoughts. No words were spoken, but as the dark force pressed down upon them Tohan became aware of another presence. So alien was it to Tohan's current surroundings that it took him some time to realize that it was a presence of the light! Tohan understood at once. Here, wielded by a horrible evil, was the first of the three rings. When Schreikal finished his silent interrogation, the gulrahk seized hold of the two prisoners and dragged them into another of the side tunnels, going deeper still into the labyrinth of passageways.

Neither Tohan nor Jeyal had the will to oppose their captor; Schreikal's oppressing stare had sapped them of all strength. The gulrahk tossed the two prisoners into two separate, adjoining cells. The cell doors clanged shut, the steps of the gulrahk faded away, and the prisoners were left alone in darkness. Tohan told Jeyal of the second presence he had felt within the cavern, the object of their quest, and with that knowledge both rested for awhile in peace.

From time to time the goblins brought the prisoners food and drink, such as it was. Filthy water, a hunk of dry bread, and a shriveled piece of meat (which they dared not eat) formed their new diet. They were given just enough to survive while day and night stretched into one endless misery. Uncountable days after their capture, Tohan awoke to a loud clamor in the passage outside his cell.

"Let go! Didn't mean any harm!" squealed a whining voice. "Don't throw poor drahk into nasty, damp hole!"

Tohan then heard the sound of a body being thrown into the cell on the other side of his. The whining voice of the new prisoner continued to drone on.

"Never did any harm to nasty goblins, only came to look," the voice whimpered. "Was once home of drahk, this was. Cursed goblins! Hate them all! Didn't know they were here now... O! Poor, poor drahk!"

Tohan wondered what sort of creature this was, for he had never heard anything quite like it. Nor had he ever heard the name "drahk."

"Shouldn't have come here. Now, poor, poor drahk shall be alone forever. Don't care about goblin's war, didn't come here to spy. Don't care if they attack the dryads. The drahk hate dryads too. Let dryads and their nasty Eldest Wood burn!"

These last words roused Tohan's sagging spirits. The goblin army! They were even now marching on the Eldest Wood, but how long until they reached their destination? With their great numbers the goblins could not pass through the woods as quickly as Tohan and Jeyal had done. They could reach the Eldest Wood in two weeks if they traveled hard, more likely it would take at least three. Tohan and Jeyal had no means of marking the passage of time in their underground prison. Had they spent only a week in captivity? Had it already been two? Tohan could not be certain but he knew they could waste no more time. He quickly told Jeyal of the new prisoner and all that he had overheard.

"A plague upon those cursed goblins!" Jeyal cried out. "If we but had some means of escape!"

An idea suddenly sprang into Tohan's mind and he gave a triumphant shout. "Escape is well within our reach, my friend, for the goblins themselves have provided the means!" Tohan explained his plan to the astonished Jeyal while the drahk, hearing Tohan's cry, realized the adjoining cell was not vacant.

“Who is there?” moaned the drahk. “Not a goblin, drahk thinks. O brave stranger, help poor and pitiful drahk!” The pathetic drahk would do anything to be released and upon this Tohan rested his hopes.

“No, drahk, it is not a goblin you hear, but a man,” Tohan told him, “and if you do exactly as I say I promise to set you free.” Tohan informed the drahk of their plan, praying the creature would be capable of performing its part.

The prisoners did not need to wait long to execute Tohan’s plan, only until the goblin jailer next came to deliver their scant meals. In the meantime, Tohan asked Jeyal what he knew of the name “drahk.”

“Drahk?” Jeyal asked, surprised. “Why, I thought they were but legend!”

“Then you know of them?”

“Only the name, a name passed down from the beginning of time. Alas, that tale, like all tales from the time before the great darkness, is lost.”

When the goblin jailer next returned, the drahk began to scream and wail at the top of its voice, shouting that Tohan had escaped.

“I, good and kind drahk, tell you of this,” the pathetic creature said. “Perhaps you now show mercy upon poor drahk and let him go, yes?”

The goblin grunted, not for a moment believing the drahk’s tale. Yet the jailer knew its head would surely roll if the prisoner were later found missing. The goblin peered into Tohan’s cell, but saw nothing for Tohan had concealed himself out of sight of the door. After fumbling with its keys for a moment the goblin unlocked the door and, holding a rough-hewn sword in one hand, cautiously entered. Before the jailer had time to puzzle out the riddle of the prisoner’s apparent disappearance, Tohan attacked. Moments later the goblin lay dead at Tohan’s feet, the victim of a broken neck. Tohan worked swiftly. He disguised himself in the goblin’s foul-smelling armor and hoped that in the poorly lit tunnels no one would notice the exchange. After locking the dead goblin in his own cell, Tohan released both Jeyal and the drahk. The drahk groveled at Tohan’s feet, thanking him profusely and begging for pity. In the light of the goblin’s torch Tohan had his first glimpse of this strange being. It was a short, wrinkled, hunchbacked creature, one which certainly deserved any pity it received.

“Like an oread, yet twisted,” Tohan thought, and indeed that is the best description any can give. The drahk he saw looked like a piece of misshapen stone, one where the sculptor’s chisel had too often missed its mark, and had red eyes that blazed with the light of a deep, hateful fire. To the drahk Tohan said, “You have fulfilled your part in our bargain, and in return I grant you your freedom. Go where you wish.”

The drahk thanked him again, whimpering all the while, and shuffled off into the darkness, leaving Tohan and Jeyal to prepare for their next task. Tohan found a piece of rope

among the goblin's gear, and he used it to loosely bind Jeyal's hands, giving him the appearance of a prisoner. Armed with but this thin disguise, Tohan and Jeyal made their way through the twisting passageways, until they encountered the goblin that guarded the exit from the prison block. Tohan attempted to drive his "prisoner" past the guard, but the guard blocked them both with a spear.

"Where are you bringing him?" growled the guard, taking Tohan to be a goblin.

"What business is it of yours where I bring this filthy dryad?" Tohan snarled in return. "My orders do not concern you!"

"I'll show you whose business it is," spat the guard, reaching for its knife. "I'll bring your head before the gulrahk, I will!"

Tohan reacted quickly. Before the goblin could draw its knife Tohan drew his own and brought it swiftly across the goblin's throat.

"Quickly, Jeyal, before we are discovered!" Tohan whispered.

Jeyal now donned his own goblin disguise and the two continued their journey to the great cavern. When they arrived, they found the cavern empty save for the gulrahk and the dark presence. The gulrahk knelt before the fearsome throne and the cavern radiated with raw evil. A low, rumbling voice then filled the air and it was not the gulrahk who spoke.

"The time of victory draws near," the voice hissed. "Our army now lies but a few days march from the Eldest Wood. The Great Tree (accursed is its light!) shall be hewn down and the smoke that shall rise from its burning stump shall signal the commencement of the eternal reign of Schreikal!"

Then came the cruelest sound beyond mortal imagining. Schreikal, the dark lord under the mountains, laughed. Like the sound of a thousand knives, it pierced Tohan's heart and soul and awoke within him a tremendous fury. Suddenly, he saw with clarity the path before him. Boldly Tohan crossed the cavern, his sword drawn. The gulrahk leapt to its feet, but soon fell again as Tohan plunged his sword into its heart. Tohan then raised his sword high and declared,

"I, Tohan, warrior of men and servant to LIAMB the Light, challenge you, Schreikal, and claim the ring made deep in Shalamanar!"

A dark wind blew through the cavern, which chilled Tohan to the bone and smothered all lights. Schreikal stirred. He rose up and filled the cavern with overwhelming malevolence. And though all was now dark, Tohan for the first time saw Schreikal clearly. He saw what few mortals have: the face of the fifth race of darkness, the unnamed evils. They are dark, shadowed beings from the depths of the earth and only LIAMB himself can say in what manner they were born. Tohan's mind froze as he stared into those infinite eyes. Crushed by the weight of that evil gaze, Tohan's consciousness seeped away, the world flickered out, and he knew no more.

When Jeyal saw Tohan fall to the ground, overpowered by that monstrous thing, he charged forth and placed himself between Tohan and Schreikal. Schreikal's dark will locked with Jeyal's and with a wordless cry Jeyal challenged Schreikal to take his life instead of Tohan's.

Even the great cats and gryphons high above heard the scream that followed as it shook the very roots of the mountains. For when Schreikal bored down upon Jeyal, the power of the ring awoke and turned against the dark master who wielded it. The ring had been crafted by light and for light, and while it can be forced to perform evil, it can never be transformed into a willing agent of darkness. When Jeyal offered himself as a sacrifice in Tohan's stead, he unleashed the full power of the ring which now worked against Schreikal. Schreikal battled fiercely but, being in the end only shadow, he could not hope to withstand the full light of the ring and soon perished. In those moments Jeyal felt as the light of LIAMB himself flowed through him, a greater power than any mortal form can bear and live. Filled with this awesome light, Jeyal also breathed his last and joined LIAMB in peace.

"He's dead?" Geoff interjected, and Sylran tried to hush him once again. "But they won, they got the ring, that's not fair!"

The Storyteller met his eyes and Geoff knew he was right: it wasn't fair, but he realized then that this story was about bigger things than simply what was fair. The Storyteller nodded and returned to the story, and Geoff did not interrupt again.

Without Schreikal to bind them together, the goblins fell back into their petty squabbles and scattered, abandoning Harakmel. Their army quailed at the thought of assaulting the Eldest Wood without the dark force to press them onward and they too fled in fear. The dryads pursued them and destroyed whatever goblins fell within their reach.

When Tohan awoke he found himself utterly alone. The ring lay shimmering at his feet and through its wisdom he understood all that had occurred. Tohan wept deeply for his friend and bore Jeyal's body from the lingering shadow of Harakmel. Tohan buried Jeyal in a quiet forest glade, not far from the gates, and erected a burial cairn to mark his friend's resting place. This duty finished, Tohan returned to the Eldest Wood with a heavy heart, and the spirits of all the dryads sank as he entered the Wood alone. They too grieved deeply for Jeyal's passing.

Yet in the midst of this sorrow there arose great joy. Through the recovery of the first of Lahalla's rings, Tohan and the dryads of the Eldest Wood brought a new era of peace to Edelsha. Guided by LIAMB the Light, Tohan became the first of the high kings of Edelsha and of that time there are many tales to tell.

"The Tale of the Burning Sword?" Sylran asked hopefully, himself forgetting that he shouldn't interrupt, but the Storyteller shook his head.

But of these we have no time to speak today. I shall only tell you that with the ring Tohan united the races of light, ruling not only over the humans, but also over the oreads, dryads, great cats and gryphons. Upon the vast Eastern Plains of Edelsha he constructed an immense fortress, the palace of the high kings, from which he reigned with a fair and just hand.

Edelsha flourished in these times of peace, which lasted for many years as king after king succeeded Tohan. But as is the way of the mortal world, such joyous times could not last forever. In time the dragons of the north began to rise in power, led by the great dragon Krynoka. The secret behind her ever-growing power was none other than the second ring of Shalamanar. Somewhere in the mountains, during her never-ending search for treasure, Krynoka had uncovered the ring. Long had she hoarded it with no knowledge of its true nature, but now she had unleashed its power and so brought chaos and destruction upon the land. With the power of the ring to aid her, Krynoka extended her reach far from her realm in the Wild Mountains into the very heart of Edelsha.

Countless knights and warriors had set forth to challenge Krynoka, but none had returned. Thus with a heavy heart did the high king of Edelsha watch as Sir Sherlacar, greatest of the knights of old, prepared himself for battle with the great worm. The king had prevented Sherlacar from undertaking this quest before now, not wishing to lose the most worthy knight in his kingdom, but now Sherlacar had sworn an oath to reclaim the ring and nothing the king could do could hold him back. His day had come.

Dread fell upon the heart of the high king, for if Sir Sherlacar could not attain victory, then what knight could? All of Edelsha would be at the mercy of this fearsome beast were he to be defeated. Sherlacar knew this well, but he would watch no more as his fellow knights marched forth to meet their death at Krynoka's claws. Before Sherlacar's departure the high king placed a small object into his hand. Looking down, Sherlacar found to his surprise that the first of the rings of Shalamanar shone silver in his palm!

"Take this," said the high king, "for you shall need it to match the power of that accursed creature."

For a moment Sherlacar regarded the object that glittered within his grasp. But then, to the amazement of the high king, Sherlacar returned the ring saying,

"The strength that shall wrest the second ring from the claws of Krynoka shall come from a higher power than she who crafted this ring!" With those final words Sherlacar set forth and took his leave of the king.

It was but a simple task for Sir Sherlacar to find the beast he sought. The charred remains of once green fields proclaimed Krynoka's handiwork and guided both the brave and the foolhardy to her door. Thus it was not long ere Sherlacar found himself before the mouth of Krynoka's great cave from which issued black smoke and fire. The dreaded beast was at home.

Most knights in Sherlacar's place would have challenged the beast at once to single and mortal combat and so perished for their bravery. But not Sherlacar, for he knew that even if he had accepted the first ring he could not hope to defeat Krynoka in a battle of sheer strength. So instead of drawing his sword and charging forth unto a death of glory, Sherlacar surveyed the surrounding mountains until he found what he sought. For years the forces of nature had worked at the mountainside above the cave until it stood at the point of collapse. With effort, some of the boulders could be dislodged to fall before the mouth of the cave. They would not be enough to crush the great worm to death, but they would give Sherlacar the precious moments he needed. The work was grueling, and Sherlacar feared his strength would leave him before his task could be finished. But when it was, Sherlacar called out to the dragon.

"Hear me, O accursed worm of the Wild Mountains, defiler of Edelsha! Hear me, Krynoka, and come forth to meet he who challenges you!"

For a moment there was silence, and Sherlacar wondered if he had been heard. But as he was about to call out again, a sinister voice answered his summons.

"Warriors beyond number have come to challenge me," the dragon hissed, "and now their bones litter every corner of my cave. Join them and feel the fires of my fury!"

A stream of flame burst forth, and Sherlacar was thankful he did not stand before the mouth of the cave, as many before him had done. The great bulk of the creature could be heard below as she charged forth to meet her attacker. He saw first the reptilian head, red as blood, as it emerged below him and Krynoka's cold, dark eyes searched for the remains of another fallen warrior. When she saw nothing, Krynoka grew wary. She slowly ventured further from the mouth of her lair, her gaze darting rapidly across the landscape in search of her unseen opponent.

"Where is the cowardly knight who foolishly challenges Krynoka?" she demanded. "Show yourself!"

But Sherlacar stayed silent, waiting for the beast to crawl further from the safety of her lair. Krynoka sensed treachery, but still she inched slowly forward. Sherlacar remained patient until at last he saw the object of his quest. As the right foreleg of the creature emerged, Sherlacar saw the silver sparkle of the ring upon one claw. Mustering every ounce of his strength, Sherlacar sprung his trap and the rocks crashed down upon his prey. But Sherlacar knew that the great dragon would only be stunned, not dead, and so with a mighty cry he leapt onto the dragon's exposed neck. (For if you know your dragon lore well you know that this is the best place to attack a dragon—where neither its claws nor its fiery breath can easily do you harm.) With one swift stroke of his great sword Sherlacar pierced the beast's armor and sunk his sword to the hilt in the scaly flesh. Yet the blow spurred Krynoka into a greater fury than ever before. With a terrible cry heard in every corner of Edelsha, she broke free of her stony prison

and sprang into the air. For though Krynoka knew that her deathblow had been struck, she was determined to destroy the knight who had vanquished her.

Sir Sherlacar held tight to his sword and dug his heels into the rough scales so as not to be hurled to his death on the rocky crags below. In all the history of the world there has been no ride such as Sherlacar had upon the back of Krynoka. She dove and spun and writhed and twisted and thrashed, and with all her efforts attempted to shake her unwelcome rider. But Sherlacar held fast. In truth, his strength neared its end and Sherlacar feared the beast would claim victory with her dying breath. Yet whenever his grip began to loosen, a new strength filled his being and his hold once again became firm.

After many hours of this ordeal Krynoka's wound finally began to overcome her. With a final effort she dove towards the ground, hoping to dislodge and then crush her rider, but she succeeded only in crashing before the gates of the fortress of the high king. The dust settled and Krynoka lay still. Weary, Sherlacar withdrew his sword from the flesh of the creature and dismounted. Krynoka still wore the second ring upon her claw, so Sherlacar raised his sword and cut the claw from the hand that wore it. He then held the claw high, the ring shining in the sun, and cried,

"The great worm Krynoka lies dead, and the deaths of my fellow knights are now avenged. Here is the second ring of Shalamanar!"

However, it seemed that Krynoka still had a drop of life left in her, for she lifted her wounded foreleg and drew it across Sherlacar's back, piercing his armor and soaking him with her dark blood. With that, she breathed her last.

The high king of Edelsha stood before the gates of the fortress and a solemn silence surrounded him, and all those who looked on, as Sherlacar slowly approached the gates. The poisonous dragon blood coursed through his veins as he placed the claw and ring into the hands of the high king.

"Here, O king," Sherlacar said, "is the second ring which I swore an oath to regain. Through the strength and power of LIAMB the Light it has come to me, and in his name I give it to you." With those words the last vestiges of strength left Sherlacar and his poisoned body fell dead to the ground. The sword that struck the dragon's deathblow clattered at the feet of the king Sherlacar had so long served. Krynoka too had had her revenge.

All Edelsha mourned the passing of Sir Sherlacar, bane of Krynoka, but rejoiced in the mighty deed he had done. For with the passing of the dragon and the recovery of the second ring, a new peace fell upon the kingdom of Edelsha which has lasted almost to this very day.

Silence filled the mountains as the Storyteller finished his tale. By now the fire had died down to a few glowing embers and they smoldered with a dim, rusty light that flickered across the face of the Storyteller as he turned his gaze to Geoff. Sylran, having heard this tale many times before, pondered deeply its meaning in light of current events. Geoff, who had not heard this tale before, nor any quite like it, puzzled over its purpose. Why had it been told to *him*? The Storyteller continued to fix Geoff with a steady look until Geoff felt at last that he should speak.

“But... but what does it mean?”

“The second in hand of fire rests,” the Storyteller intoned. “These words were fulfilled by the knight Sherlacar, but one line of the Stone’s prophecy yet remains: ‘The third another world’s own quest.’”

Geoff stammered in understanding. “M... me?”

The Storyteller nodded. This was starting to become a bit too much for Geoff.

“But it can’t be!” he cried. “I mean, how could this Stone have known that I would come?”

“The Questing Stone speaks with the voice of LIAMB the Light,” the Storyteller answered. “It was he who brought you here and he who sends you upon this adventure.”

Sylran sat in silent understanding. He had waited a long time to see this quest begin and Geoff’s reluctance frankly baffled him.

“I’m afraid you’re wrong,” Geoff said. “I don’t even know who this LIAMB is.”

“He who is both the Lion and the Lamb.” And that was all that the Storyteller said about that.

Geoff felt a sudden dread rise up inside him and he began to wish very much that he had never crossed that bridge. The story he had just heard was not, to his mind, at all encouraging. Geoff found it hard to forget that in each of the first two ring-quests someone had died. He was not so eager to search for the third. Yet this seemed to be exactly what the Storyteller was asking him to do.

Geoff looked at the panther sitting beside him. Sylran’s eyes met his with a steady, unblinking gaze. The strangeness, and indeed the other-worldliness, of it all struck home. Here was a cat who could talk and think just as he could. Geoff did not doubt the truthfulness of all the Storyteller had told him and suddenly he knew that things which only exist in our world as nightmares were as real in Edelsha as the talking beast beside him. If you have never visited another world, you may not fully grasp what a sudden and strange immersion it is. And so, considering the magnitude of the task suddenly laid upon Geoff, perhaps you can forgive him for what he did next. Geoff slowly stood up and, hardly knowing what he was doing, began to run back up the mountainside towards the pool.

Sylran blinked in surprise. This was not at all what he had expected. He cast the Storyteller a questioning look.

“Bring him to the fortress, Sylran Sirrin,” came the Storyteller’s answer, “and tell the princess that this is the one. I shall send Wehrya after you. You shall need her help as well.”

Sylran nodded and then bounded up the path after Geoff. Every piece of him twitched and bristled with excitement. What an adventure they would have!

It did not take Sylran long to catch up with Geoff, as Geoff was not used to such rough terrain. Sylran soon found him trudging along wearily.

“Wait! Wait!” Sylran called out. Geoff looked behind him and saw the panther racing up to meet him. “You’re going the wrong way! The high king’s fortress is *down* the mountain!”

Geoff kicked a loose rock and it bounced along the trail ahead of him. “I’m not going to any fortress,” he said, “and I don’t want anything to do with those silly rings.”

Sylran stopped. It had never occurred to him that someone might not want to take part in this quest. “But you have to help find the ring. The Storyteller said so!”

“I don’t care what the Storyteller said,” Geoff said sullenly. “I don’t know anything about hunting for rings, or fighting goblins, or slaying dragons, or anything like that. This isn’t *my* world, you know. I’m going back to the pool to wait for a bridge home.” Without waiting for a reply Geoff continued his ascent.

Sylran stared after him, his eyes wide with astonishment. Geoff had not taken many more steps before he heard a peculiar, unearthly yowl. The forlorn cry echoed through the surrounding mountains.

“It’s all very well for *you* to just go off and leave us,” Sylran howled between tears. “It’s not *your* home that needs the ring. Go on then, and I hope you have to wait as long as I did for a bridge!”

“Well,” Geoff thought, “another bridge is sure to come and then someone else can come and go on this quest, can’t they?” Geoff paused to look back at Sylran. The great cat looked quite miserable as tears streamed down his face and dripped one by one off of his whiskers. The sight made Geoff feel rather wretched as it did seem to be his fault. Looking up, Sylran saw he was being watched.

“What are you waiting for?” he sniffed. “You don’t want to miss the next bridge, do you?”

“I, uh, well... why did you say you needed that ring?” Geoff asked.

Sylran’s ears perked up a little and he stopped crying. “It’s because of the prince and princess, Artyr and Arlyn. They’ve been fighting each other for months now, ever since their father, the last high king, died.” Sylran’s tail swished in the dirt as he spoke, sending pebbles skipping down the mountainside. “They’re twins, you see, so their father High King Arthain

trained them both to be the next ruler of Edelsha. But he died before deciding who would succeed him. Prince Artyr is the elder by a few minutes and claims that he should be king. But everyone knows that Princess Arlyn had her father's favor, and so she and her followers claim that *she* should be high queen." Sylran sighed.

"So now their armies are fighting each other for the crown. And without a real leader, many of the Edelshan provinces are ruling themselves and ignoring everything that's happening on the Eastern Plains (that's where Tohan the First built his fortress and where most of the fighting is). The prince and princess each have one of the two rings, but so far they haven't made any use of them in their fight. That's what many of us are afraid of, because it's said that if the power of the rings are turned against each other then Edelsha itself could be destroyed."

"Then how will having the third ring help?" Despite his overwhelming desire to just be home, Geoff was gradually becoming more interested in the events of this world.

"No one is really sure," Sylran replied, "but after King Arthain died, the high dryad of the Eldest Wood prophesied that only when the third ring of Shalamanar is found will Edelsha see peace again." Sylran sniffed, the tears once again welling up in his large yellow eyes. "So you see, if you don't help us find the ring it may *never* be found and the war might never end!"

Sylran let out another heart-rending yowl and Geoff was torn between returning to the safety of his own home and helping to bring safety and peace to the home of his new friend. After all, he had made the choice to come to this world, even if he hadn't really understood what that choice meant. Was it right for him to so quickly turn away simply because the things he was supposed to do in this world might not be so easy? Geoff looked up the mountain and saw the clouds gathering around its peak. Somehow he knew that if he returned to the pool he would find a bridge waiting to take him home. He looked down the mountain, past Sylran, and thought of all the untold dangers that waited for him down that road, if he chose it. Geoff sighed.

Afterwards, he confided that this was probably the most difficult choice he had to make in the whole course of his quest. Much to Sylran's joy and astonishment, Geoff started walking back down the mountain. With a joyful cry the cat bounded over to Geoff and gave him a great big feline hug, nearly knocking Geoff over in the process.

"Hooray!" Sylran cried. "Now come on, there isn't a moment to lose! Get on my back, it's off to the fortress!"

Geoff complied and wrapped his arms tightly around Sylran's neck. He remembered very well the breakneck speed at which Sylran had descended last time. Indeed, Sylran nearly doubled his pace this time, leaping from rock to rock at lightning speed. Geoff merely closed his eyes and held on for dear life.

The Storyteller watched the pair descend the mountain and travel out of sight. He nodded in satisfaction, knowing all would come to pass. He returned to his cave as the moon rose high, washing the mountains with its cool light.

A second pair of eyes also watched Sylran and Geoff. She giggled and clapped her hands merrily, what a game was about to begin!

“Such funny creatures, these mortals are,” she said to no one in particular. “So much fuss over a few small rings!” Still, she knew the great power contained in the rings and preferred to see them in the hands of those who would use them for good. She remembered fondly another human who, long ago, had sought another object of great power. He had needed her help then, as these two did, though his bones had turned to dust long ago and the great deeds he had done had been forgotten. “Ah, Reshal, what a merry game that was! Would that you could join this one as well!” She clapped her hands once and vanished, but her eye remained fixed on Geoff and Sylran. It would not leave them for a great while to come.