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EUSERVIAN LEGENDS:  
BOOK ONE OF THE FIFTH KHAA:  
THE WORDS OF ELAM  
CHAPTER 1 EXCERPT

By  
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## Chapter I: The Boy who Speaks to Storms

Part I: *Gil'deau*

On a dock, by the sea, a young boy wishes for a seafaring storm to make landfall and this storm, hearing him, alters its course. Now, as you must understand, I find this considerably peculiar. Most younglings possessed of such powers are at least aware of their gifts and, if even that is not so, those around them tend to notice the errant levitating stone or song conjured out of nothingness. Yet Elam, wrought of a magic perhaps too grand for proper noticing or beyond anything one might expect to see, has not a shadow's notion regarding the wonder within himself.

But why do the townspeople—*his parents*—not prevent him from sitting atop so precarious a dock amidst so dangerous a storm, you ask. Well, he has a quietness about him, preferring that attention rests on others rather than himself and, fueled by the same magic that has presently charmed a storm, he hides himself from his elders. As for his parents, well... that is another matter entirely. He is an orphan, you see. Though fret not, as he is not alone and is being reared by two wonderful people. Nevertheless, we shall save that for a bit later.

I look over to him, his eyes glazed and mouth slack, though the later lazily forms a smile every time lightning strikes. He has always been this way, even as a baby. Indeed, baby Elam did not cry during storms, for, when it rained, he never cried at all, even when he was hungry. When he grew older and the babyish inability to move about no longer impeded him, he would toddle over to the one window in his house set low enough for him to reach and stare out on storms until they passed. As he grew older and taller, he looked through higher and larger windows until Dara, his adopted mother, finally thought him old and responsible enough to be

permitted to sit outside beneath the overhang, body wrapped in a warm, soft blanket and eyes rapt in the windy, watery storm.

And, growing older still, here he sits beside me, having sneaked past his guardians in order to sit on the dock and watch a storm, even when the mightiest of men have taken shelter; of course, what can outspan heroic courage if not senselessness or ignorance—and children often possess both. He does love storms and often love leads one to do unusual things.

I return my attention to the sea and set myself to pondering. This place, the seaside village of Promincia, has enjoyed an unduly great amount of rain during Elam's life—much to the puzzlement of the townspeople, as the weather had once been most reasonable. Yet, in recent years, storms have compounded in ferocity and frequency like the petty slights of a spited lord in his stewing wrath.

Yet, even in their confusion, the villagers adapted their lives around such weather. The mayor, for one, had purchased an expensive vile of *Vishnari Yareyall*, a liquid extracted from the liver of a shark; this darkens when foretelling an oncoming squall and, in the recent storm season, it became dark quite often. The townsfolk also have begun to store their more valuable and cumbersome possessions in the nearest of what they call the great Promincian lighthouses, colossal cylinders of stone some ten times higher than the tallest building within the village and immortal vestiges of an age long past. Even so, the storms have become so vicious as of late that all new houses and building projects use Ironok stone as their primary element and base, rather than the much cheaper and less durable wood felled in the surrounding forests.

Oh, but I have lost myself. Looking over to Elam, I see these matters have evaded his mind also, the boy just too young to regard such adult affairs. Certainly he knows the liquid in the mayor's necklace has become its darkest yet in the advent of this particular squall, and,

though he knows this means the oncoming tempest will display hitherto unforeseen ferociousness, fear does not beset him... no, it is excitement that makes him shake. The boy also knows the villagers have begun to transfer the contents of their homes to the nearest Promincian lighthouse, though this only means he can go unnoticed on the dock, Balder and Dara being occupied with helping people move their belongings. The fact that houses have begun to be made of stone, well... that does not concern Elam at all.

I survey the sea, observing the storm's approach; I feel and see the very elements shake in excitement, charged in the air. A ponderous wall of gray approaches, like a glacier, save the waters fall and wail, the far off rain a whisper and the thunder speaking in low, sonorous murmurs. The lightning also has its show on occasion, jutting about in indiscriminate schisms and displaying its jagged mazes of light.

Elam observes these things in a less ordered way however, though I suppose that comes from him being human. I see his senses do not order and sort the single facets of the experience as mine do, foregoing a more analytical approach; what peculiar minds these mortals have. He experiences the weather in a headlong rush, not unlike the euphoria felt by other mortals when they choose to ingest certain plants, notably by means of pipesmoking. No, the boy enjoys an interwoven rapture in the storm and, I suppose, that might be why he can love the wind, rain, lightning, and thunder, while I could only understand it.

Nevertheless, this love will change. I see the future, see how this specific storm will alter the way he perceives all others. I see how the wind's songs will change to ravenous howlings, the crystalline branches of lightning to a spider's deadly webs, the laughing thunder to bellowing hate, and the refreshing rain to sharp, cold needles. I see how love will become fear.

Yet... *yet*...I also see what this change will awaken within him, how the darklings will try to use such things against him on the day destiny has set for him to open The Door. I see how his decisions will affect the lives of generations, how his spirit will intertwine with those living before and after him, how he will declare war with his actions, how he will release an evil such that has not been seen for several hundred years. I see how he will lend his soul to the weaving of The Cord.

And, even still, I see a boy on a dock, by the sea, calling forth a storm because nothing on Areth so pleases him as the sound of the rain and thunder.

I sit with him for several rivers of moments, listening as the murmur in the rain becomes more talkative and the whispers of thunder graduates from pure sound to something felt on one's skin. The wind whips his hair about, making it dance as if suspended in water, though with a force that the boy feels down to the roots and one that besets his spine with elated shivering.

Then the rain reaches him.

Elam sees the droplets bombard the choppy, grey sea, refreshing the churning body with new, cold water. He feels the liquid on his face and soon his hair becomes too sodden for the wind's teasing. A fork of lightning strikes the sea and the thunder shake the world; he laughs aloud with joy... though finds his mirth has a strange insincerity.

This puzzles Elam, damaging his euphoria as it does. As his thoughts become more probing and senses less distracting, he sees the world around him began to change... to darken.

Then, all at once, he realizes his fear.

The cold rain on his skin stings a little and the chop that had been lapping at his dangling feet now sends washes of water over the edges of the dock. The wind bears the promises of lonely winter now, rather than its usual haunting poetry. The lighting, once lattices of light, now

shows deep shadows and the thunder loses all joy. Elam wishes in haste for the storm to depart, longs with all that makes him for its flight back to the sea, and the storm, hearing him, seeks to oblige.

Yet such a wish holds the makings of disaster.

Perhaps if Elam had bidden the storm to make haste toward the mainland and not back to the sea, the result might be smooth. Yet his orders trouble the storm, as might be expected when such a tempest is made to fold upon itself, compressing its full wrath to a smaller whole. It bears far too much impetus to simply reverse its course and the mass of clouds that trails the main body thus becomes an adversary, setting the storm against itself as one sword strikes another.

The storm above churns, vexed and confused, as does the sea beneath it. Wild networks of bright and persisting lightning branch over the sky, leaving inter-competing and cacophonous surges of thunder in their wake. The wind spins in upon itself, weaving cyclones from clouds; they seem like gossamer threads initially, though soon grow to mighty coiling maelstroms of wind, woven silk spirals thick and tall as the Nokveird trees of Nwikwood.

Elam, terror besetting his veins with bloodfire, scrambles to leave the dock on hands and knees, but a swell overtakes the place where the dock meets the shore, swallowing the wood and iron in a grey-green bulge of seawater. He staggers, hesitantly rising to his feet and frantically checking his surroundings, skin covered in gooseflesh and legs shaking so hard that a collapse seems imminent.

Standing with him, I long to help—to wisp him away. Nevertheless, such is not my role and, though the boy's heart beats rapidly, though the blacks in his eyes have blotted out the blue, and though his thoughts cycle through an endless rhythm of senselessness, I know I can do nothing. All this has purpose woven within.

Yet, I do not need to act. Just as the magic that called the storm changed, so has the magic hiding him from perception, his anonymity becoming a wailing cry for help, and everyone's attention pulls to him.

“Elam!” comes a scream from the top of the promontory, near the great Promincian lighthouse; despite the squall, Elam catches a faint hint of the call and looks around. “Elam!” she screams again and this time he finds the source, locking his eyes on her.

He sees Dara and, though she remains far away, he sees her terror and an even greater fear stirs within him. He sees Balder sprinting down the promontory, followed shortly by his friend Dom Rurren and more tentatively by two others. He watches their progress, petrified, though a glimmer of hope flitters in his heart.

But then Elam hears a loud crack like the breaking of bones and feels the wood shutter beneath his feet. He looks down and sees the dock break beneath him, the long brown fangs swallowing him. The water envelops him, splintered wood piercing his thigh and back; he screams and cries, though the sea does not heed him. The liquid burns him and freezes him and throws him about and scorched his eyes and forces itself into his nose and mouth; he will die! He knows it!

He hates himself for sneaking past Doms Grimm and Jarrek at the front of the lighthouse, for coming down to the docks when all warned of its danger. What had he done? Why had he forfeited his life?

The water throws him against one of the dock's splintered supports and the air escapes his lungs, bursting from inside him. He swallows a mouthful of water and coughs as the waters pull him seaward. He thrashes to the top and sees the adults by the splintered dock, they far further away than they had been before. He tries to breathe, but does so as a wave rises and he

chokes on a mouthful of water. Sputtering, he feels a great, subtle force pull him beneath the surface.

Twinkles dance before his eyes and a blackness moves in from the peripheries of his vision. The entire underwater world turns murky and he gazes up to the distorted sky from beneath the waves; lightning cast haunting glows through the water, illuminating the hazy, silt-strewn sea as the moons do evening fog. Then the glow turns red and comforts him... makes the world soft and warm again.

He opens his eyes and stares at his hands; they show a brilliant crimson with strands of light that streak upward in watery ribbons. He feels a force above him drawing him upward, oh, and a force to oppose the pulling sea with ferocity! He coughs, spitting up what water he can, a determination burning within him to live and ride the lifting fire. The scarlet streaks pulse upward, setting the entire water world ablaze with murky fire, and Elam, with all his might, embraces the fire. Magic surrounding him responding to the magic within, the fusion of power burns white and with a far more potent force.

He explodes through the surface and ascends into the air.

Dom Rurren trembles on the shore, outstretched hand engulfed in flames and scarlet weaves of light blazing on his skin. The rain between Elam and Dom Rurren glows white, suspended in the air. As Elam floats toward Dom Rurren, the wood that had pieced his thigh turns to ash and catches on the wind. Nearing the shore, the water around Dom Rurren steams and fire boiling from his eye in ferocious torches.

Despite his own gratitude, such a sight frightens Elam; the boy has never seen a wordspeaker making magic, after all, no less one flirting with the limits of his power.



Yet Elam does not know—cannot know—that Rurren’s struggle comes due to the magic in Elam’s own body. Wielding magic, while a difficult endeavor, complicates when waged for or against another and becomes harder still based on that person’s blessing. And Rurren, standing on the beach and exerting all the power within him, can hardly perform the simplest of levitation charms on Elam because the boy possesses more Breath of Ahrah than anyone in living memory.

Nevertheless, woven in the blessing of Elam’s own raw power, the spell does its work. Elam grows nearer to the shore and finds his mind fluttering with waves of overwhelming and contrasting emotions. The world takes a dreamlike quality as he sees the branches of lightning striking on the horizon and the globules of water about him float toward the sky, blazing a vicious white. He sees Dom Rurren, eyes issuing red flames and the weaving bands of his lacarian glowing on his hand and arm. Yet, outshining this dull hue, the light that emanates from Elam himself floods the world, brilliance fiercer than that of the Greatstar on the brightest of days.

In the midst of this euphoria of body and mind, however, Elam begins to feel something, a charge about him that set his skin to creep and hairs to dance. Then he heard it: a crackle in the air. He looks up to see the lightning lance down toward him, though has not the time to scream.

The lightning strikes him through the middle, incinerating prepubescent hair and turning all water upon him to mist. The force of the booming thunder throws Doms Grimm and Jarrek from their feet, though Balder remains steadfast out of fierce determination and Rurren does so also, having engaged a shield of magic.

Elam plummets and Balder, taking no time for caution, rushes into the sea. Bringing his magic to bear, Rurren forces the water around the two to vacate and, in focusing his magic not on

men, but on the elements themselves, finds an easy task. Balder lifts the boy from the sand and makes his way toward the lighthouse; the others follow.

I also fly along behind them and, while doing so, feel a familiar presence. Life appears beside me, Death near my side. “O, dear kindred, my treasured Fate, I have not seen thee as of late. Our time apart I do regret, I trust thy path hath been well met?”

“Indeed, it has been,” I reply. “Save perhaps this bit of sadness,” I add, motioning to Elam.

“O, spur not fear, nor thoughts of strife; I have not come to *take* this life.”

“I know, though he has lost a part of himself today—or will, in time.”

“Hmm....” Death nods; Life affirms. “A shame it is to play one’s part, whilst it rends a blameless heart.”

We enter the lighthouse and Balder sets Elam down on a bed. Rurren puts his hand on the boy’s chest and feels for life, while Anor, the village priest and physician, lifts prayers and assesses the boy’s condition. “The fire of life burns within him, I dare say,” Rurren says. “Though if you be of the same opinion, Anor, I bid you set my mind to ease with your own words.”

“I concur,” replies Anor. “Should he kindle a will to live, the fire of Life will burn hot as it ever did.” At this, a great many sighs held in timid chests about the room release, making the place a measure warmer and lighter. “Even so,” the man continues, “bear him to another bed, Balder, and one not encircled by the stares of the concerned—though you mean well, I am certain. I say, he needs fresh air and rest, not eyes.” A light chuckle runs through the room.

At once Balder draws Elam from the bed and makes for one of the small side rooms, followed closely by Dara. Entering, he sets the boy down and the two sit with him for many tides of moments until neither of them have the strength to remain awake.

Each having gone afar to the land of dreams, I turn to Death, glance to Life, and speak, “I believe it has come time for our part in the matter.”

Death nods, Life affirms, and we place hands on Elam’s forehead, communing with the boy. I observe Death speak to him, Life show the weight of the decision the boy was to make, and, when it comes time, I show him The Cord. I know Elam—I know he will choose Life, despite what it means, despite the pain ahead; he will delay paradise for the sake of those around him... for the world’s salvation. He does.

Death nods; Life smiles. “*Gil’deau,*” it proclaims upon the unconscious Elam, which is to say: Stormson. My kin then looks at me and smiles with a warmth that shows the full light of Life; it then disappears, leaving me alone with the boy. I look at Elam; he has made a noble choice, though, upon waking, he will not remember this deliberation; he will face the darkness in his future unknowing.

## Chapter I:

## Part II: In the Branches of Elnon

When Elam woke after that harrowing storm, residuum transfigured his mind. Having been rent by something he so loved and set to face the trial with such a youthful innocence, he had little option but to harden, lest he slip to oblivion. And so he did, marshaling all his mental vigor. Becoming adult-like in many ways—especially in a newfound reservation and privacy of thought—calm coldness sobered him, he putting off his childish mindset in stride and, perhaps, at an age too young. Indeed, the joy he so he so enthusiastically displayed eroded and he spoke little; some say the storm thieved his words.

Nevertheless, a little girl found great interest in the boy and interrupted his intrepid journey toward hermitage and introversion. Her name is Eily and, at first, her presence quite bothered Elam, the girl following him around almost without end. Oh, indeed, he found her a most unrelenting nuisance, his peaceful bouts of silence interrupted by incessant questions. Though he avoided answering her as often as the scantest bit of politeness permitted, his cordiality proved enough for her to justify continuing with her inquisitive prodding.

Despite his labors toward isolation, he soon accepted her presence, her lingering proximity unavoidable. And, in this, a most curious bond began to form. Elam, having lost his fascination with storms, found his attention pining for a new muse and Eily, most captivating in her feminine differentness, stole his curiosity. I watched them for some two years by the reckonings of Father and Mother Moon and in the youngling named Eily, Elam had once more discovered joy. Yet for this joy, he will pay a price heavier even than that which had come when he brought the tempest upon himself.

Elam loves climbing to high places and, because of this, Eily will die.

Yet the boy knows this not and he hides, as he often found himself doing, because Eily loves to play a game called seeker. He must hide because he runs far faster than her and he believes it rather unsporting to simply outpace her. No, he hides, satisfying Eily's ever-elated curiosity and playing to his own quietness and ability to remain motionless.

He rests on a branch in a Dalnveird tree named Elnon three hundred and more harvests old. Lolling as a crag lion might, comfortable—though poised to move at a moment's beckoning—he rests on a branch some nine long armlengths above the ground. But should he wish to go higher—as he often does—he believes he can nearly reach the sky, the tree more than a hundred armlengths in height. When Elam ascends to his hammock near the top, something he only does when adults, and notably Dara, are quite unaware, he lounges and gazes upon the sky, watching the clouds sail in the aquamarine expanse as boats do on the bluish emerald sea. Yet on this occasion, the clouds do not have his attention; no, whilst resting where he does, Elam has eyes only for Eily and Eily, darting about in quite a flurry, has eyes only for Elam, if, of course, she can find him.

Oh, how he loves her seeking him, though this had not always been the case. When they first played and at a time when he found her quite bothersome, he hid most effectively and rid himself of her for tides of moments. He knew she would not find him, though found no satisfaction in that. For Eily, seeking him out, sought and sought and *sought* until finally he found the idea of being with this Eily and the questions she asked far less maddening than being cramped in a storage bin. An unsearchable mark, after all, is unable to move and go about his life.

In time, he revealed himself, utterly bored and exhausted. What he found, though, surprised even his deliberate mind. Oh, how she applauded his skill at hiding. She went on and

on about his cleverness, unable to believe how he had so successfully evaded her. Pride warmed his chest and set fire to his ears. As he hid thereafter, he began to do so with less stealth, making himself a fair degree more detectable; when she found him, she made him feel so clever with her words. Soon he came to love hiding from her and did so willingly when she bid, something she did with great delight and frequency.

Yet, despite this excitement on her part, Elam believed she liked to look for him because of what happened afterward. After she found him, she would insist that it had become his turn to be seeker, though she herself did not hide. No, she *ran* and because she ran she said he had to actually catch her if she was to seek him again; he found this reasonable as it was quite easy, after all, to simply *find* her if she did not hide.

Nevertheless, and despite his superior speed, she knew how to run in swerves, never keeping the same direction for too long, a most infuriating thing for a boy so fast. In a race, surely he would beat her every time, though she wove amidst grain, and trees, and all manner of things Elam could not merely run through, constantly forcing him to slow and change his course. Oh, she was a master at being chased.

Yet it is not time for him to chase her at present. No, whilst he hides in the tree, still and quiet, it remains for Eily to discover him, and so she seeks to do. He watches her dart about beneath Elnon's branches, she having found his clue indicating he has concealed himself nearby. He watches her duck in and out of the rich grain stalks as the golden, windswept chorus sings its whooshing songs. He watches as she tries to move stealthily through the stalks, though she, seen from above, quite obviously shifts the stalks as she searched, giving away her position most prominently; she reminds him of a kitten in tall grass, convinced of slyness, yet utterly obvious.

Soon she abandons the grain fields around Elnon and explores the grassy grotto beneath the grand Dalnveird's canopy. Quite the magnificent place for a picnic, the bulging grass-covered and leaf-shaded hill hosts a beautiful, shady conclave where glistening lances of the Greatstar's light and ancient beards of moss met shifting shadows and wispy particles that dance in the air.

"Elam!" Eily cries aloud, evidently trying to find him with her words, as her eyes has thus far failed to do so. "Elam, where are you?"

Elam will not answer her, of course, this outcry merely the beginnings of frustration on her part, as he has seen many times before. Nevertheless, he knows once she finds him, the yearning she now experiences will make her all the more proud of herself for finding him and her praise will abound.

"Elam!" she called out again. "Where are you!"

Perhaps if he heeds her call—descends and lets her discover him—Eily will not die. Nevertheless, Elam remains motionless, watching Eily and listening as the dancing branches of Elnon sing their swishing, leafy songs. He smells wood in the air, detecting a live, loamy scent he sometimes describes as "green," though knows quite well one cannot smell colors, or at least not especially well. He feels the gnarled bark in his fingers, nooks and channels much more spacious and smooth than that of oak or celn; so spacious are these that finch squirrels find them comfortable resting places, darting in and about their furrows like maze runners. No, Elam's perch appeals to him just too much and he will abandon it not, especially when he remains unaware of any reason to do so.

A warm spot forms on the back of his neck and he shifts to see a beam of the Greatstar's hot light making its way through the canopy above. Within this column, little particles dance,

the tiny specks seemingly more than happy to float about in their glowing lance, though he himself finds the light irritating and scorching. He shifts a little in order to escape the beam, yet it follows him, blazing once more upon his neck.

Perhaps if Elam knew Elnon does this by design, he might have paid more attention; trees, even ones of the Dalnveird variety, do not do such things without a good reason, save perhaps the Hhalelae, which are, after all, quite tricky. But, Elnon, a noble and kind-hearted tree, senses how gravely important it is that Elam leave its branches, though the tree yet remains somewhat unenlightened as to the details. Elam, however, does not respond, pulling his shirt over his neck.

In time, Elam grows uncomfortable. For one, Elnon has hardened the bark around the boy, making it a fair degree coarser and removing all of the loamy softness so typical of a happy Dalnveird. For another, Elam, skilled amateur in the art of stillness though he is, bears the energy of youth and therefore endures the ever-present urge to move. At first, the impulse feels something like an itch, though soon burns softly. When the muscles take on a fiery insistence, he finally moves, and, with that, so also does a small branch behind him break and loudly so.

Elam looks back, astonished; surely, he did not break this branch as it spans half an arm's length from his foot. But then he realizes and gasps; it had been Elnon! Elam stares at Elnon's trunk, assuming, as mortals often do, that there resides the tree's equivalent to a human's face.

"Elam!" comes a cry from below and all thoughts of Elnon leave the boy's mind. He looks down upon Eily, a peeved souring her otherwise joy-filled face. "Elam, it's against the rules to hide in trees, you know that! And breaking one of old Elnon's branches! How could you?"



He knows this rule well; she did not like him hiding anywhere more than an armlength off the ground, though she only made such rules because she was a dreadful climber and assumes he must be also, detesting the danger most irrationally. And blaming the broken branch on him? Well, he finds this most absurd! Elam glares at her, hotness in his head.

She, having spent some time interpreting his stares, appeared to understand. “Don’t you look at me like that, I heard the branch break!” She crosses her arms. “Now come down and chase me, I found you so it’s your turn to be seeker.”

I take pause. If Elam heeds this, descending and chasing her about, Eily may yet live. But I know Elam, know the path of The Cord; that will not be his choice.

Eily’s remark have inflamed his annoyance and immature boys tend not to heed the commands of others, girls especially. She had not found him, he resolves silently, not in a *fair* way; no, Elnon had betrayed his location to her. And why did she not appreciate the cleverness of like his hiding place? He certainly didn’t consider the spot unsporting.

He does not want to play the game anymore; no, he wants to go to his hammock high in the branches and be alone, staring at the smooth clouds and be alone. Acting on this, Elam navigates down his branch’s length, much to the relief of Elnon, the tree calming and its bark becoming soft once more. But when Elam begins climbing, the Dalnveird tree tenses and Eily calls out. “Elam, what are you doing?”

Yet Elam ignored her.

Elnon, desperate to get Elam from its branches, begins its only recourse. The leaves turn skyward, blocking out the Greatstar’s light and besetting the branchy hollow inside with a cave-like blackness. The limbs begin to sway and creak as if in a storm and Elam might have feared in this alone, save for not knowing to make the comparison, he having never been near a tree

during a storm. The little thatches whip about like scores of probing antennae and the thick limbs rove like ship masts in strong wind, groaning and lurching.

Elam flies through the dancing branches as if such a realm has been his home of many years, navigating the writhing mass undaunted. Undeterred, he claims with what seems to be supreme talent... or perhaps as if aided by magic, though I think by now you know which is the truer of the two.

When Elam reaches the halfway point, Elnon stops its thrashing as doing so only serves to endanger the boy. The tree seems to know his little mind has already been set, retaining no hope of changing it. Elam reaches his hammock shortly thereafter and plops himself therein, finding a comfortable spot near the center of the large net. Yet he finds no contentment in the sky, however, and he returns his gaze to the land beneath, catching a sight that sets him to marvel.

He Eily climbs up after him.

Her progress comes slow, of course—downright slug-like, if he could bring himself to be cruel with his words. He cannot understand why she tries to reach him, as she hates to climb. If she wishes to scold him—or catch him perhaps—he resolves, with amusement, to let her try; it would be nigh on a day before she reaches the hammock at her pace. Even so, he believes that she, faced with time and toil, will resign her task and return to whence she came. Nonetheless, as he looks at her, he cannot deny the fiery determination in her eyes and suspects that she intended to continue upward, even if it takes her an entire phase of Mother Moon to reach him.

Perhaps if he takes mercy—seeing the sight of struggle and counting it a worthy cost for his return—all might be well. Perhaps if the vein of selfishness meets its match in the boy's chivalry, Eily might live. Nevertheless, the boy has spent years becoming a person more liable

to observe than act, saving deeds only for when such things are unavoidable or when his mind is not overwhelmed with curious thought.

He watches her climb for a while longer, seeing her pace slow to the point of near immobility. As he looks upon her, seeing her slowly draw nearer, he spies the shake in her hands; each grasp for a new handhold moves in wary slowness and carries overwhelming uncertainty. Flecks of reason began to fall into place within the boy's mind and he realizes why she climbs so slowly; she has not his skill of his hands, nor his vigor or strength, but the truth of it, the deep Truth shows: she fears climbing as he does storms.

In a rush and unable to think of any other suitable recourse, he flies to the edge of his hammock and commences a most swift descent. A benevolent act though this is, the action comes too late and, all said, proves the very deed that will bring about her demise. Seeing this rash motion on his part, Eily tenses, perhaps overregulating the level of danger. Elam, flying down the branches, sees Eily look down and, terror filling her eyes, wrap herself around the nearest branch.

And thus the last power over Eily's future leaves Elam's hands; all the boy's hope having crumbled. In just under fifteen passes of Father Moon, in just shy of ten and five Arethinian years, Eily will die and Elam cannot do anything to stop this, all because a young boy refused to leave a very old tree.

Yet, even as one's power over a matter wanes, so does opportunity in another strengthen, for, if Eily does not die, The Door, one of Seven and of Khaahn, would not open and Elam, though perhaps happier, would never fulfill his own destiny. When Death and Life visited Elam after the storm, they spoke of this; he saw this path and, though he cannot now remember what will be required of him, as a young boy on the brink of finality he chose this course over

paradise. But Elam, seeing Eily terrified and on the branch below, considers this not, mortal mind unaware of The Cord and its many windings.

No, his thoughts are for Eily.

He flies downward near as fast as one might expect to free and it seem to Elam that Elnon itself bend its branches to give him reprieve, the old Dalnveird's wood somehow feeling sad in the boy's hands. Indeed, the boy has the right of it, the tree flying with him with all vigor, heading not the sadness in the moment, branches leaning toward him as he nears and moving with him as he passes.

Elam reaches Eily, a scared child wrapped around a very large branch. He had never seen her afraid, nor any person so afraid as this, and the sight rends his heart, besetting his body to shake, ears to smolder, and eyes to tear. He hates himself as he perches there, feeling the dense burden of foolishness weigh within his chest and an overwhelming sadness press from within his mind.

He touches her warily and she immediately looks to him, momentarily distracted, it seems, from her fear. They gaze upon at each other, both silent, yet Elam understands the expression that shouts when even her words are too scared to move. *Save me*, she begs.

In a heartbeat, Eily has left the branch and embraces Elam as a cat might when held over moving water.

Securing himself and her, Elam descends the tree with all the care he can muster, which is considerably less than usual, having finally seen something in the height of the tree other than exhilaration. Nevertheless, he navigates to the ground with a squirrel's dexterity, though not its speed.

Soon they come to rest beneath Elnon's shade and the canopy calms, allowing light beams to issue through the leafy limbs once more, though the place still carries a melancholy gloom. The shifting branches groan, all of which sound forlorn, as if at the end of a long and difficult journey. Eily crying shakes his ears and her sobs rattle him as he holds her close, the two of them nestled in a snug grotto wrought of Elnon's exposed roots, which, it seems to Elam, held the two of them just as he himself holds Eily.

As they rest, I felt a presence and look about, seeing Love, which smiles.

"How are you, Fate?" Love asks, the incredibly mortal question sounding so wonderful on its lips. Love, of course, knows exactly how I feel and I it. But we both so cherish words, an undeniably mortal means of communication, though it is.

"Good as ever, Love," I reply.

Love giggle. "Very well then," Love says, smiling again. It looks at the two. "What a special ones we have here."

"The boy will one day open the Fifth Door."

"Really?" Love asks, though it already knows the answer.

"Indeed."

"That Time already? Hmm." Love pauses. "Very well then, I must hurry. There are things to be done."

I laugh. This is a joke, of course; the Greater Spirit Beings operate outside of Time, Time itself being a one of us. *Hurry*, therefore, has no rational meaning to my kin.

Nevertheless, we operate amidst mortals and Love then begins ministering to both Eily and Elam.

I relate to Love the best among my kin. It changed as much as I did. The Dissonance introduced evil into the worlds and Love, so tied to creation, became Hate as well. But this is no mortal hate, but a force, and one righteous; where there is evil, there must be a Hate toward it. But, oh how Hate troubles Love, It having been left the most grieved among us. Even when I showed It The Cord, It lamented the cost.

Love turns to me, Its task completed.

“You are finished?”

“I am.”

“Will you be going?”

“You know I must.”

“Yes.” I pause. “Goodbye then, Love.”

“Goodbye, Fate.” Then, with another smile, this one more sad, it disappears.

I sigh, then, after a few moments, return my attention to Elam and Eily.

After a while, Eily stops crying, though Elam holds her tighter still, letting some rivers of moments pass before he considers doing otherwise. Oh how this has wounded his heart. But should not one whose praise brings him such joy deliver agency in her pain? Even in his brazen fearlessness, does not the trauma of another give him pause?

Elam, who may have held her for a child’s eternity, does not let her go, for Eily leaves him to a degree, just enough to look into his eyes.

“Why was I so afraid?” she asks, an empty soullessness in her voice.

Elam says nothing, mind unsure of which words to use, his mouth unaccustomed to words for some time, especially when his mind contends with emotion.

“I don’t want to be afraid.”

Elam's thoughts take on tempest's chaos her words, spinning doubts and fears about like debris. His head pulses and ideas flow about maddeningly, evading full scrutiny. But then he remembers something—remembers how she loves to be chased. He seeks to translate this into some form of communication. After a long pause, he finds the words. "I..."

Eily looks at him and he counts this gaze both surprised and interested. He wonders why she always looks at him in such a way when he talks; oh, how nervous she makes him!

I chuckle; perhaps if the boy speaks more, his words will not be such a spectacle each time they come.

Elam turns, determinately staring away in order to settle his mind. "If you want... I... I can be the seeker."

Eily speaks again, this time through a smile. "Will you count a stream of moments and chase me?"

Elam nods, relieved that the effort has brought her cheer; he knows not what he would have done if the words had failed.

"And you won't climb?" she asks, soft voice begging reassurance.

"*Ay relest'valay oo,*" he answers without pause, repeating words he had read in *The Ambraveus*. *I give the power of speech to thee*, the words mean and he feels a strange ancientness within himself after speaking them.

He turns back to see an expression upon Vailee's face he cannot decipher. The intensity and pleasure in her stare heat him and he cannot keep himself from looking away. Why does she keep doing this to him?

After a few moments, she stands, walking a couple steps toward the grain field. “I do not think I can do that.” She pauses, turning. “You love being near the sky far too much. At times, I wonder if you are an angel.”

The two looked at each other and I watched their young eyes fill with the kindelings of a bond neither of them yet understand; Love has done its job well, it seems. Then, in an instant, Eily turns and disappears, seeking some hiding place among the uncut stalks of grain.

Elam sighs and begins to count.



Chapter I:  
Part III: Empty Vessels

I watch the two play seeker for many more years by the reckonings of Father and Mother Moon, the most exciting games of which taking place during harvest. Eily, time as naught, runs through the golden grain fields when Elam plays the seeker, he stalking behind like a lion, handsome, noble, and quite the sight of humor when curiosity outshines the later traits and makes his movements playful and overzealous. When Eily seeks, Elam has more places to hide in summer, though never does so in trees, even after Eily, having a strange gleam in her eye, determines to have Elam chase her through old Elnon's branches on one occasion; he catches her with little difficulty. She, nonetheless undaunted, retries this strategy on several occasions, once falling and causing Elam to make a spectacular save, catching her in his arms mid-jump and landing on his back in the dirt; she looks into his eyes for a long time after they land and he feels heat in his face and ears, though, pinned, he finds himself unable to escape her.

Yet for all the games the two play, the track to adulthood has many other whiles and challenges, many finding their source in Eily's blossoming beauty. Oh, a gorgeous young woman she becomes, bluish emerald eyes fit to steal a heart and wavy blonde hair looking to be spun of gold and starlight. Her smile has no escape, a shy, alluring thing that could set a man's heart to flame. Yet, while she looks a princess, she plays rougher than the rowdiest of boys, no less afraid of getting dirty than a vain woman is of her mirror.

For this beauty, Eily has attracted not only every mother with a heart set on marrying off her sons, but also every traveling drunkard, brigand, and rake who seeks a woman's caress. Elam, though still the quiet sort, finds no qualms with parting several of the cruder mouths with teeth and bloodying any of those who do not heed Eily's decline of invitation.

Yet to do this Elam had to be strong—and so he became. He took up angling as a trade and not the sort to use a net. No, he besets fish half his weight and more with a fishing bow and hodging spear, becoming a man of muscles and tan skin. His dirty blonde hair, which fell a ways past his ears, shines the color of roasted grain, framing a well-chiseled face in its wild, unkempt fashion. He steals his own share of hearts, setting young women to swoon when they look upon him and scowl at Eily when they see her so wholly commanding his attention. He did not, however, grow hair on his face and, though Eily continually tries to remedy this, he finds such gruffness uncomfortable and unbecoming.

The two have become something nigh on inseparable, growing together and helping each other through their trials. They often take meals under Elnon, Elam listening to Eily speak regarding the things that concern her, both day to day trivialities and grand qualms. The two also go on long walks through the Promincian Wood, frequently forsaking the trail and exploring new places. But, most of all, the two play seeker, even as both near adulthood and, looking on Elam during his twentieth year and on a beautiful harvest day, I see he does just that.

He hides in a one of the grain fields, masterfully concealed. Yet, standing alongside, I see a predicament overshadowing him, as it is not his time to hide; no, he *hunts*. Eily, his prize, stands on Jutting Rock, the largest among the remnants of Old Promincia and a vestige of the decrepit perimeter wall. Yet this place commands an inescapable view and he will have to cover some sixty armlengths in order to reach to her. More challenging still, Eily has recruited four of the village younglings to aid her as sentries. Elam may evade two eyes, but a full set?

Such is a test, indeed!

Nevertheless, he treasures a challenge and, sure as one's next breath, he has a plan for besting her; with a large dirt clod in his hand and speed ready in his feet, he waits for the right moment.

And so that moment comes.

As the breeze moves the far parts of the grain field, he, with all his strength, hurles the dirt into air, putting it in a wide arc over jutting rock. Just as he had planned, one of the younglings hears the noise as the clod hits the ground. "Dem Eily!" she cries. "I heard something over here!"

The other three children come running and Eily inspects at the grain field. "Elam," she cries aloud. "We know you're in there! Come on out!"

Hearing the wind near him, he smiles, ready to oblige. As stalks of grain around him begin to rustle, he flies from his hiding place with Elnein speed and the stealth of a Scairdeim, moving as a falcon's shadow. He reaches Jutting Rock and, climbing, makes the task more a dance than a trial; I can see he has bent the magic in his blood toward coordination in recent years. Reaching the top and finding himself distanced from Eily only by a remnant door in its frame, he lunges toward her. Just as he would have taken her, the door slams before him, she having turned but a moment before in order to bar his path. As he collides with a loud thud, he hears the lock slip into place; then he stills, sighing aloud.

The iron door hatch opens and Elam looks through it, sight met with smug, sparkling eyes; seeing the way they curve, he knows she smiles, even without seeing her mouth. "I knew you would come this way."

He raises an eyebrow.

"Oh, I didn't hear you; no, you were very quiet."

He narrows his eyes.

“Nor did I see you—*or smell you*—if you wish to know.” She pauses, smile in her eyes growing. “You see, Elam, I know you better than you know yourself and, hearing a noise before me how could I not know you sought sneak up from behind?”

Even still, he has a plan, moving his hand close to the viewing hatch. After a pause, Elam speaks in an amused murmur, “Obvious, was I?”

Her eyes grows surprised. “Oh, he speaks?”

He laughs.

She leans in close and whispers though the hatch, “You can never surprise me, say Vaer.”

Just then, he reaches his hand through the hatch and tries to grasp at her, though catches nothing. A laugh trills from behind the door and Elam feels a rush of semi-amused frustration.

“That won’t work.”

He removes his arm and looks through the hatch, seeing self-satisfaction in those viper eyes.

“No shortcuts. You are going to have to catch me good and proper, Dom Elam,” she says, voice quite playful. They looked into each other’s eyes once more, one pair smug and the other determined. “Goodbye,” she says, disappearing.

Forced to make a swift decision, Elam resolves it will be faster to scale the door and the little bit of rock frame above than attempt to finesse the lock or go around. Leaping toward a jut of wall, he plants a foot on the face and uses the force to throw himself high into the air, easily having enough energy to catch the ledge and almost enough to jump over top. He swings himself over the frame and lands where Eily had stood several moments before.

Looking out, he sees Eily running a ways off, though not at full speed and with the younglings trailing behind. She twirls once as she runs, winking at him; such a taunt will cost her, he resolves. He flies from Jutting Rock with all the speed he has; Eily shrieked in excitement and beginning to run with intent, entering the grain field. He follows her, predatory in his stride.

He enters and barrels through the grain, his speed turning the golds, yellows, and browns to a whirling blur. Soon he catches sight of her and makes chase, gaining ground. Thirty armlengths. Twenty. Ten. Then, just as he reaches out for her, they leave the grain fields and she, catching the trunk of a thin tree, uses it to change her course abruptly in a small swing, setting her path anew toward the village. Having no other option, he slows to change direction.

He chases her through the orchard, weaving in and out of trees; it proves poor place to gain ground, he considers, though pursues her nonetheless, making sure he does not trip on stray roots. Eily then exits the reserve, slamming the gate as she leaves; Elam leaping clean over it, following her around the orchard's storehouse.

He rounds the corner and, not seeing a cart there and having no time to stop, makes a sprawling dive, knocking a couple frinns and apples from the cart as he does. He tumbles a little, but recovers, and begins picking up the fruit. Though not particularly wanting to talk, he nonetheless feels he has to do so and thus does, speaking in a sorrowful tone and not looking into the gatherer's eyes. "My apologies, Dem Huranna, I—."

"Oh, go on, young man," she interrupts him. "Say Vaer, she needs more catchen' than I need helpen'."

He looks at her, needing reassurance.

“That was a cruel trap of Eily’s and I’ll have her caught, if you can manage—now, get off with ye’.”

He offers her a small bow of the head and scrambles to his feet. Looking for Eily, he finds her; she has a smile on her face so grand that his world stops for a moment, she on the brink of hearty laughter. He shakes his head in disbelief and glares at her; Eily’s smile only grows. In an instant Elam is off and Eily, caught unaware, shrieks, losing an instant or two before running again.

They soon reach Promincia, Elam having gained significant ground. He would have caught her, if not for a stunt she pulled with a burgon, startling the normally mild-mannered creature; Elam, though he indeed wanted to catch Eily, did not fancy meeting any of the creature’s four horns, or the immense muscled body behind them.

They enter the town, Elam trailing Eily carefully as she weaves through the crowd. Once more he has found himself in a place where speed offers little advantage. As he runs he watches her dodge and maneuver gracefully, looking as though she runs a well-known path or has done this very course—people and all—many times before. How can he not be amazed by her prowess—her skill at knowing when and where to move? What a master at being chased Eily is.

With a last moment’s turn, Eily juttled down a road, causing Elam, already having committed to go down an adjacent alleyway, to slow greatly before continuing the chase. He make his correction, kicking some dust into the air as he does, and sees her run toward the market, it the only place to go other than the gaps between houses, which would be more of an advantage to him than her. Seizing the opportunity for haste, he rushes forward with all his swiftness and makes chase, eager to gain lost ground, though knowing he will not yet catch her.

But then Eily stops, and Elam does likewise, seeing her stand before the entryway to the market some ten armlengths away; is something the matter, he wonders.

Yet, as she turned and smiles, he knows nothing had gone amiss; she simply wanted to savor the moment, he guessed, and she had known he would stop if she did. She then enters the market, disappearing into dim light and light din. Knowing there can be no time to strategize, the market liable and likely to change by the day, Elam proceeds.

As he moves though the main tent, hunting for Eily, he smells the sweet scent of frinn, then the smooth smell of nir, catching ciraisis and vulnes as he walked. While glimpsing nothing of Eily, he sees bundles of tealeaves and pipe weed, herbs and spices. He spies vegetables and fruits in large piles, some colorful as exotic birds, while others see fit to show a more loamy brown or a dusty maroon. He passes a table of Alorancian potatoes, large brown tubers and the sweet red ones beside; how Elam loves the potatoes, especially with a bit of spice and after they had been set to bake until crispy. He also notices a table with a particularly large stock of heavy woven bags, presumably rice stalk from *Anu Dris Yaredey*; such grain go well with the fish he and his crew catch and they thusly have wonderful trade agreement with the far off settlement. As he walks, searching for Eily, he sees other foods, many of them strange and savory; part of him wishes to resign his search and simply content himself with asking the grocer questions about the wares and the places whence they came. But no, that will not do; he will come back later after finding Eily and let her voice the questions.

Entering the next section, the grumblings and rumblings within him intensify, reminding him that he had not eaten since firsts; after he finds Eily he will insist they take a meal before doing anything else and, if she refuses and wishes him to hide, he would do so, though in a locked room with a meal. Looking about, he sees bags of spices, most of which have fiery colors

to them. He also sees a couple of spices whirling about within jars; these are enchanted, he knows, and quite apt at making their flavors permeate a soup, even if they are a trifle difficult to handle before being submerged. He has not tried all of these—nor near all—though has hopes of doing so in time. Remembering Eily once more, he resolves to leave the place before the wells within his mouth flood the town and grumbling of his angry stomach shakes the world and collapses the market.

The next tent Elam enters contained oddities and he lifts a short prayer of thanks when he sees that none of these are apt to remind him of his hunger. Within this tent of strangeness, he notices bottles filled with odd colored sands; small rocks that twinkle in the dim light; bones, big and small; stones with *El'ambravian* markings; beads, though not the kind used for money; tools he had never seen before; and other peculiarities. He finds the place queer, though worthy of several days exploring, certainly, and, perhaps, parting with a couple beads.

He then notices a strange black orb and his mind latches to it, senses enamored. The black sphere looks—no, *feels*—powerful. It holds an unchallenged blackness, yet other colors also, colors he cannot quite see clearly, strangely enough, but detect nonetheless. This thing is called a tapstone and, though Elam does not yet know it yet, such a magical object will become a very common sight to him. But alas, this will not be so for several more passes of Mother Moon and he has yet another harvest before he discovered the more magical elements within himself.

Before he has more time to inspect the tapstone, Elam senses an odd gaze upon him and turns, seeing an old woman smile from behind a stand in another pavilion. He peers at the woman, noticing her grey-white eyes. A feeling of inscrutable discomfort washes over him, causing gooseflesh to prickle his skin. Though he has seen the woman nigh on a hundred times, the feeling never becomes less uncomfortable; he believes she must be concealing something—



and something *magical*. Yet, and even considering this feeling, he has looked at the woman and she at him; it will be terribly rude to not at least peruse her place.

As he enters the pavilion where she sells her wares—*her* pavilion—it seemed, as no others accompany her, another strange feeling informs him that Eily is near. He looks around and sees stacks upon stacks of wicker containers, woven both tight for the holding of small seeds and loose for carrying of fruit and storing of goods. Some are small, while others had enough space to fit a small horse, or, more likely, enough grain to feed one for a time. Yet all of these baskets look, no *felt*, empty—*oddly empty*—and, even if the closed baskets are full, he gets the sense he would know what they contained. This gives him a most strange feeling.

“Hello young Master Elam,” she says, obviously amused.

“Dem Azoleile,” he replies, plainly not recalling his reading of that name or not associating the text with this smiling ancient.

She chuckles. “I take it you are looking for Eily?”

Elam nods, still bewildered, and finds himself puzzled as to a woman so old can be so beautiful, a haunting presence being about her.

“Hmm...,” she muses. “Perhaps it is time you looked with something other than your eyes, young man.”

This confuses him, of course, though he yet feels Eily nearby presence. He stared at the woman, inquisition in his eyes.

She laughs again and smiles. “Oh, young man, I am afraid that is all you will get from me.”

Elam bows his head a little, wishing he knew where his Eily hid, yet feeling as though having to find her might be acceptable, so long as he does not have to talk to the old woman

again. He searches around, though only sees—only *feels*—empty baskets. Yet, as he goes, he begin to *know*—for he has not another word for describing the feeling—what is to be placed in each of the containers. One speaks to him of dirty clothes needing wash, it a thick woven thing with hardy handles. Another will hold some spherical orange fruit that he has never before seen, this one cylindrical, thin, and will hang as a fruit dispenser of sorts. Then he comes to a shallow oval basin; this one will hold a baby, and a baby he seemed to recognize, strange though such a familiarity is to him.

He turns around, more than willing to break his normal quietness if only he can be made to understand these baskets, though, before he has the chance to speak, an overwhelming rush of knowledge comes when he stares at a particular basket; the old woman smiles. Just as surely as Elam stands, he knows—*know*—that Eily hides in this basket. He takes pause and stares at the thing; he cannot see into it as the weave proves tight and the lid has been securely placed. Nonetheless, he *knows*. He looks up to the old woman, not needing reassurance, though welcoming it; she smiles and nods.

He steps toward the basket and, in an instant, a bit of chaos erupts. First Eily explodes from the container in a mania, evidently not wanting to be caught. This sets Elam to stumble back in surprise, knocking over a stack of baskets as he does. As Eily attempts escape, one of her feet catches on the container's handle and she begins to fall, flailing as she does. Elam lunges to catch her, the toppled stacks of baskets meanwhile colliding with another and set the pile astir as well. Eily, finding catch in Elam's arms, looks into his eyes, becoming calm as she does; something about his touch always stills her and he kneels as he holds her. The two look at one another for a long time, silent and still, attention unbidden by the growing mess of strewn containers about them.

As I watch, I felt a familiar presence beside me; without turning, I speak, "Love."

"Fate," Love answers.

"What brings you here?"

"Oh, just admiring my handiwork." Love looks at me. "And I was thinking of you."

I chuckle.

"What?" Love asks.

I turn and smile. "That is kind of you and this," I say, motioning to the two, "is very good work, indeed."

Love smiles. "You are watching Elam's path now, yes?"

"Correct."

Love's smile grows. "Well this should be exciting, then."

"Pardon?"

"Oh," Love says, voice becoming playful, "just that there is a little something ahead that you might find amusing."

"Oh?"

"Something is brewing in that one's mind," Love says, pointing to Eily.

"Is it now?"

"Yes, indeed."

"But I must leave that to her story, my dear."

"Oh, I know," Love says with a sigh. "You and your rules." But then Its joy renews.  
"But, that is not to say you will not catch hints of it before nightfall."

I laugh again. "Very well then; you have most surely caught my interest."

Love smiles and looks at me, pondering something behind those inscrutable eyes.

“Goodbye Fate.”

“Goodbye, Love.”

With that, Love disappears.

I return my attention to the two, seeing Elam has helped Eily from the ground. Presently, Elam turns and sees all the baskets strewn about. “Dem Azoleile,” he says, troubled heart overriding his quietness. “My apologies regarding the baskets; I—.”

“Pardon?”

Elam looks at her, confused. “I have—,” he says and this is the only thing he says as, when he turns to gesture toward the fallen baskets, he sees not a mess, but containers reordered, precarious stacks standing once more and exuding their *empty* feelings.

He turns back to her, dumbstruck.

“Now go on, you two. Your hearts are young and needing of joy; let not this old woman keep you.”

Eily give Azoleile a smile, seemingly unaware of the baskets, and, taking Elam’s hand, leads him out; he follows, still a bit bewildered. Yet, as he walks, a need to go back overtakes him, an inescapable longing to return within him. He inspects the old woman over his shoulder and she returns his gaze. Unable to walk any further, he turns to Eily. “Give me a moment?” She, like always, savors his words as if they are springs of water found in the hottest wastes of the Purrian desert and he, accordingly, feels a near overwhelming flush of coyness at such a gaze. “I...” He looks away, overcome. “I’ll be back.”

Not giving Eily an opportunity to intensify her look and crush him with nervous discomfort in doing so, he turns and falters back to Azoleile. Approaching her and opening his mouth, he finds he knows not what to say. Yet he she saves from this, as, before his words

come, she places something in his hand, though stares into his eyes. Pulling himself from her, he peers down and, seeing a leather pouch, opens it. Inside sit two bottles.

Immediately he recognizes the thing drawing him back had not come from a need to speak with Azoleile, but rather to acquire these trinkets.

He studies them with careful eyes, perceiving the beauty of their demure simplicity. The bottles were blown of a fine glass and bear resemblance to like inverted teardrops, thick at the top, though curving down to points where each meet a small, spherical ball. A ring fashioned of a fine metal clasps around the neck of each, though the material looks more strong than beautiful, perhaps forged of *hhalrel*—though certainly not *Veusrel*, which is to say, *ow elrel*; there was a similar ring at the bottom where the bottle meets the bulb. From these two rings issue a series of interwoven cords that created a latticework about the surface; also fashioned within the top rings are two loops for setting the treasures on necklaces and presently hold thick leather cords.

Elam fixes upon Azoleile and she grins, closing his hand upon the treasures. “I believe these will assist you in several ways, though remain a burden as well, mayhap.”

“Thank you,” he whispers, voice coming of its own will.

Yet at this, the woman’s eyes gain cautious severity, voice serious in its chill. “It will contain the thing you put within, though no longer that it must; heed this well, child.”

This cryptic statement evades his mind, yet somehow he knows she will not speak more on the matter. Sensing the time for words has passed, he nods in a light bow and makes toward the exit, slipping each of the bottles into a deep pocket of his trousers. He returns to Eily and she takes his hand as they go.

Chapter I:  
Part IV: A Gift to Share

“I am quite hungry,” Eily says, a touch of whimsy in her voice.

Elam, finding such simple words comical when said in such a way, laughs.

Eily peers over at him, a pleased smile alighting her face. “Is that funny, now?”

He gazes at her and smirks, the sight of her joy warming him. They exit the marketplace through the rear access way, walking out on the lonesome promontory overlooking the sea.

“Elam,” she says, quite poignantly; he turns to her again, wondering what grave matter she seeks to voice. “I think you are losing your skill at chasing me.”

He scoffs.

“I’m serious,” she says sincerely, though obviously fakes this tone.

“Are you, now?”

She looks at him, momentarily mesmerized by his words, though soon returns. “I’m worried, Dom Elam, worried that you will soon be unable to catch me.” They continue walking, moving toward the closest of the great Promincian lighthouses. “What will I be left to do if I am simply expected to continue running like this—say Vaer, soon I will have to run forever and shall not do.”

Eily continued walking, though Elam stop. She turns and looks at him, letting his hand go.

“What is it?”

“*El, vel, dey,*” he mutters under his breath.

“These are genuine concerns, say Vaer,” she says, smiling and nearing laughter.

“*Sa, re, la,*” he continues, but then meets her eyes. “I know,” he adds, causing her smile to grow, which it did every time he played along with one of her ridiculous assertions.

“Well then, why have you stopped?” she asked, crossing her arms.

“*Khaa, ghi*—am counting to set.”

“Pardon?”

He grins. “Well if I am to prove I can catch you again, I must first count to set.” She blinks. “Those are the rules.”

As she realizes what he means by this, her eyes grew and she shrieks as she turns to run.

“Ven... Elset,” he says, affording her just a little pause, sprinting as he finishes.

Eily has no other place to run than the lighthouse promontory and so she does, Elam giving chase. The two wind the worn path heading to the tiny outcrop overlooking the sea. Wind catches Eily’s hair and voice as she runs and Elam, seeing these golden locks flying, the sporadic glances back, and also hearing her breathing and laughter, cannot remember a time when he has cherished her more, and in this he revels.

When space to run comes to an end she turns, eyes wild. “Okay, you caught me! You caught me!” she says as he stalks toward her, playful menace making his bloodfire burn with excitement.

In an instant, she tries to run and dodge around him, twirling, but he catches her from behind, wrapping his arms around her. He tickles her mercilessly and she roared with laughter, thrashing to get free.

“Let me go! Let me go!” she blurts, laughing without restraint.

Elam does so and she turns, staring at him with narrow eyes, playful annoyance in the leer; Elam pierces though this, however, having no doubt as to her love of such games.

Elam calms and the mood takes on a serenity, a moment of calm intimacy emerging. Eily's expression softens as well and innocent coyness fills her expression. Yet Elam did not see the obvious love for him she bears, only the loveliness inherent. Leaning forward, he narrows his eyes, an idea churning within his mind. Her stance shifts, betraying its cautious curiosity, and her eyes fill with confusion; Elam does not intend to embrace or kiss her, no, this smile means something else entirely.

“What are you thinking?” she asks, tone anxious.

Elam just looks behind her, smile broadening.

Eily's eyes grow large. “Elam, no!”

Elam takes a step forward, smile growing larger still, crinkling his eyes.

“Elam!”

Though she tries once more to dodge, Elam leaps forward and takes her, wrapping his arms around her as he does.

“No! Don't you dare!”

Elam throws her over his shoulder and jumps, leaping clean off the cliff toward the sea below; she screams all the way down, though Elam hits the water laughing.

They reemerge from the emerald sea and Eily thrash toward a large rock, scaling it in moments. As Elam bobbed up, hair matted over his eyes, a huge grin spans his face. He looks at her and laughs, the expression he regards beyond amusing; irate in that way only a young woman can be, she is furious while not angry in the slightest.

He swim toward her and puts a hand on the rock, which she seemed to ignore, looking away. But when he climbs, attempting to join her, a smirk illuminates her face. Before Elam could react, Eily tackles him back into the sea.



They swim together for several rivers of moments splashing each other and playing children's games. Though they both seemed greatly elated, hunger resurfaces and forces their return to shore. Yet, after they both have changed clothing and taken a meal, they return to the great Promincian lighthouse and content themselves to sit on a bench that faces the sea.

They sit for a long while and Eily speak, as is her custom; though he had been present for most of the things she narrates of in her account, he finds no qualms with hearing of the day again, always finding that he loves the perspective on things she offers. As she talks and Elam listens, they watched the afternoon turn to evening and, in time, Eily falls to sleep, leaning against Elam and tucking away under his arm. Contentment warms Elam in this and he remains there, motionless and as a shield to her, watching the last licks of green leave the sea and the great lighthouse's shadow reach for the horizon.

As he sit, the sky change its color a number of times, as does the sea. Elam does not notice this, however, finding himself in a hearty deliberation, considering the bottles held within in his pocket that Azoleile had given him. They had solved a crux for him, though he yet remained hesitant to committing his faith to the trinkets, fair though they be. He patted the bundle in his pocket, setting the matter for later thought.

Returning his mind to the present, he gazes upon the sea, a surface that, if not for the night, would show its ethereal greenish-blue glow, rather than this murky sapphire. Elam notices a faint strobe on the horizon and then another that follows but moments later. A thunderstorm rages somewhere beyond the Ashenuth Peninsula, he figures, filling the great ocean with fresh water and bolts of light. Elam shivers, regarding the grey whisper of clouds on the skyline as one does the incarnation of a myth-bound legend, fretting the coming rain as he had once feared the fabled Serilgi or Ghlahar.

And, in these thoughts, his mind turns toward wishing—and wishing that would send the storm away. If this hope belonged to anyone other than himself, perhaps the tempest might not listen. Yet Elam, deep magic within having learnt the language of storms, spoke commands regarding this matter as normal men voice hopes, and the storm, hearing him, obeys and begin a new journey eastward.

Yet for all Elam's magic, he has never considered stopping the sound of thunder and the low rumble, coming to him as a great wave, sends his spine shivering; he furls within his coat, finding the fabric only a bit comforting. He understands the fear within his mind, knowing he should not abide such things; yet the heart within him foregoes a man's logic, bound by the emotion of a child.

For Elam's apprehension, he does not hear Eily stir, though, when she stretches, this startles him. He sighs and gazes down at her; she grins and leans against him once more, drowsy. Then she speaks, having seen the gale afar, "I wish that storm would come."

He looks down to her and she back up to him.

"The fields need water," she says plainly. "Father Moon has shown his face more times than the sea has brought storms. Grandfather says Promincia was a damp place when we were young, though now it has grown dry."

Distracting himself from this, Elam clenches his right fist, causing something in his wrist to pop and something else to crack. His hand had found annoyance with him ever since he had wrangled an enormous tezlarian eel some two phases of Mother Moon before. That battle had been grand, though more wonderful still was the meal made of the beast that night; he smiles and rotates his wrist again, cracking it once more.

"You still hate storms, don't you?"

He turns to her for a moment before his eyes fall, downcast by the thoughts and memories. “Yes,” he says, voice haunted.

“Then I’m glad the storm is far off,” she says, an inscrutable smile on her face. She nestles into his side. “No matter the cost,” she adds.

In those words, his heart anguish hews his heart and he feels within him a weight of iron. He peers down upon her and sees the comfort in her closed eyes. How can he be so weak? How could he fear such childish things?

He, feeling a bit of courage, longs for the storm to reverse its course—to approach Promincia... despite his fears. The storm, a trifle confused and understandably so, obliges, folding upon itself as the one had done in Elam’s youth, though not with such force, as Elam’s plea is gentle.

In this, Elam feels a bit better.

“Look at the Moons’ reflections,” Eily says in a coo. “How beautiful,” she adds. Elam heeds her, gazing out at the subtly shifting images on the sea’s face. Then, like she always does, Eily begins describing, “The reflections on the sea look like two swans, I think—and the stars’ reflections like fireflies.”

“And the celestial dust?” Elam asks, despite himself.

She peers up at him, eyes once more bearing that undeserved look of wonder; his ears warm and he looks away. After a moment, he turns back, still flush; she smiles, a mixture of joy-filled dimples and squinted eyes. “Moon cat haze,” she blurts, sounding so much like a child that Elam cannot contain his laughter, remembering Eily as the little girl that she once was. “Oh, look at the moons...,” Eily continues, eyes wide and appreciative. “They look so close to one another. I wonder what... what would happen if they were to touch?”

Elam says nothing and, though having never considered the thought, would have assumed the idea madness if not for her asking. How do such questions enter her mind, he wonders; what dreamy imaginings comprise her thoughts?

“I suppose they long to touch, coming so near to each other so many times each set of seasons, yet never having the courage to slow or stop and speak to one another,” she adds, words running together as her voice fills with a strange haste Elam does not understand. What are these thoughts of hers, he asks himself to renew her comfort, Elam notices the space between them shrink and feels a nervousness overtake him like the first heat of the morning Greatstar and... yet also a trill of exhilaration not unlike a plunge into the nighttime sea.

Despite her words, Elam says nothing and moves not; he can think of no phrase to say that might endear her and his body will not obey his commands.

“...And the old spire out there on the horizon.... It is so eerie under the moonlight.” She nudges closer once more, this time shivering a bit.

He remains silent, though considers the spire, mind more than willing to leave the confounding thoughts of Eily which beset him with such perplexing fire. The spire reaches out of the sea like a great spear or lance, an immense stone thing perhaps as tall as the Promincian lighthouses.

Yet she speaks again, stealing his attention away. “I wonder if the legends are true—say Vaer, does it contain a treasure like everyone says?”

He regards her, seeing a mystic wonderment in her gaze.

“A magic elixir, a mystic fluid that can cure all pains. Imagine: the ability to cure any sickness, heal any ailment.” She pauses and takes a breath. “It just looks like a sharp rock, but I think it does hold that mystic elixir.” She laughs with a soft nervousness and peers up at Elam.

Elam makes no reply, thoughts having become strange noises within his mind. Needing something to do, his hands retreat into his pocket. He feels the bottles there and remembers the thoughts he had set aside.

Yet he notices Eily looking back to the sea, her voice less excited than before. “But they say it only works in a storm. I cannot imagine anyone foolish enough to—.”

A lightning strike, far nearer than those before, though still a long ways off, interrupted her; Elam shudders. She puts a hand on his and he jolts in response, though, when he realizes it had been Eily, he turns at her. Yet, as he does, the rolling thunder makes him wince.

“*When one of the white blades of light tried to kill him on the beach, it failed, though he fell into a dreamless sleep, waking to find his voice had disappeared.*” She pauses. “That is what some of the villagers say of you.”

Elam, once again, does not reply.

“They are fools to not fear the storms as you do,” Eily says and Elam looks to her.

Her eyes have filled with a compassion the young man does not understand. Only dogs and fools fear storms, Elam thinks, yet the strikes of white fire and death howls set him shaking. Why does she accept this weakness in him? What can he be to her if he fears what even most children do not?

“You should speak more,” she says with something that sounds to him like caution, a restraint uncharacteristic of her. “Some might mistake your silence for a lack of heart.”

Elam turns away and, having no mind for words, pulled from his pocket the bottles in their leather pouch, knowing he needs to do something.

“What—what are those?”

Elam does not answer, but instead hands her the purse, forcing his hand not to shake while he does so, an urge to him not unlike resisting the need to breathe.

“Is this... for me?”

Elam nods, nervousness exaggerating the action.

She opens a bag with a slowness that makes Elam tense in both his mind and all across his body. Elam had never given her anything before, except customary gifts on her annuals, and he knows not how she would react to such an unprompted offering. The thoughts in his mind become heavy and doubt, regret, and fear, like rain, fill his wispy clouds of thought.

He remembers the young men that travels from other towns, offering Eily gifts numerous as raindrops; but he has never offered one. One young man had tendered his horse, and another, rolls of shimmering cloth; one, begging but a kiss from her, had even placed around her neck a silver necklace with a green gem so big that Elam’s might only scarcely obscure it. Yet she rejected them and all their gifts, furthermore with a grace Elam thought some of the men did not deserve.

Elam has wanted to be like them in his heart—to buy her things—to offer... but nothing feels right. Furthermore, she rejects everything those men give and how can he give her anything like horses, or soft velvets, or gems that shine like her eyes? Thinking of his gift, he knows in his heart the offering is so childish, so insufficient, so... so worthless.

He decided on giving her a bottle—he had come upon the idea a time ago. They mean something special, something personal, and when Dem Azoleile had given him the gifts, he thought the sagely stranger knew his plan and approved, as she seemed to know of so many other things. Yet, pondering this, his conviction wavers.

The storm in his mind becomes tempestuous and absurd actions demand his consideration. As he watches her unlace the small leather bag, one thought insists he take the gift back and run down the path to a place where she cannot find him. Another suggests he to take the bag and hurl it into the sea. Yet Elam simply wants to undo his gift, return the foolish notion to his mind and forget he had ever entertained it.

Watching him, I sit tense. If Elam does not honor this offering, give this gift, the hammer of Ahrah will remain aloft and Elam will never fulfill his destiny, absurd as it sounds. Yet grand things of the future often rest on the pinheads of the past, for, if he is to open The Door, this gift can be likened to His Key. He must give this gift.

In that moment, I sense a familiar presence, though this time not Love or Life and Death; this is Honor who has come. Honor, a quite kin and one of little speech, offers a short bow of the head, looking to me; It reminds me of Elam. I return the gesture and Honor goes about its business, connecting with Elam. Mere moments later, Honor looks to me once more and we communed for a brief time. After this has ended, Honor leaves.

Elam, even in his fear, detects something deep within himself—something so deep and so vague that he almost cannot verify its presence. Yet he understands this thing and knows he has done *right* in the eyes of Veus, his gift a noble thing, for better or worse. He must do this, must remain strong, and temper what he feels for Eily in the fires of Hope; he, by Love and Honor, resigns to bear this thing to the end, no matter its humiliation.

He feels Eily shiver and he looks as she pulls the contents from the bag. Out clamor the two small bottles, each on a leather necklace. She fixates on him, her wrinkled brows giving away her confusion, and, for the first time in the conversation, it comes her turn to remain silent.

He hangs his head in shame. He never had been good with words—never been good with gifts—why did he—?

“A stone,” the words escape his mouth before he know he has spoken; they horrify him and he feels his face redden. He turns further away.

After a moment, though, a soft hand strokes his far cheek and Eily gently turns his face toward her. Resigned, he lets her guide him; how can he resist?

“Elam...?” she asks, voice fragile.

Oh, how can he tell her? What will words accomplish beyond revealing him for the fool he is? He cannot talk. He cannot tell her. No matter what she says, he—.

“Please...,” she says, asking... begging her small, soft voice.

He clears his throat; such a word in such a voice demands a response. He would either respond or the pain... the emotion—the *everything*—might well kill him. But he will not die and he will not leave Eily’s plea unanswered.

“A stone...,” he begins again, slow, controlled voice the only thing possessing power enough to master his nervousness; but he had practiced these words and now he must speak them. “A stone is already that which the ground finds important and a charm holds that which its fashioners find important, but...” He pauses, wishing to stop, but finding himself unable to do so. “But a bottle you can fill with what is important to you.”

She turns away and another fiery fork of white lightning lights up the sky as she does.

He looks down, shuttering. He hates himself—hates that urge he had to get her something—hates everything that makes him. “I—,” he begins, but the thunder makes him cringe and steals his words. He waits a long while in silence, but the need to speak bubbles



within him, a courage formidable to all hesitation. The words come as a heave. “It was foolish of me to—.”

“I love them,” she says, interrupting him; he hears tears in her voice.

Elam raises his head and meets her gaze. Tears fill her eyes and form rivulets on her cheeks.

She laughs, interrupting herself with a smile, and speaks with a wavering voice. “But why two?”

For this question, he has no answer; why *had* the old woman given him two? Though if he had listened to old Azoleile’s instructions more carefully, he might have known, yet in this moment all he can do is grasp at the answer. “In case one should break?” Elam whispers, not wanting to explain, answers beyond him.

“I have a better idea,” she says, still giggling through tears, a strange sight that makes Elam warm inside, though accompanied by a feeling he does not comprehend; he, caught by emotions powerful and unknown, yearns to wrap his arms around her and hold on to her forever. As she leaves the bench, she speaks, “Stand.”

He does.

She pulls one of the bottles from the bag and leans over toward Elam. She reaches around both sides of his neck, tying the necklace’s cords behind him.

Elam gazes at her, unable to prevent the puzzlement from filling his face. These are for her, he thought; why does she—?

“It is something we can share. We can.... We can each have one... like those promised share rings—.” Her voice grows soft and very nervous as she bites her lip. “...like a husband and wife share signs.”

Elam's mouth opens a little without his asking, the forwardness of her statement dazing him. What woman speaks of such things to a man—furthermore before her own affirmation? Who is this creature who stands before him? Who is this woman who speaks of such things?

“It doesn't mean we are actually married, Elam,” she says, her more playful tone returning. “That's silly.” She then takes a meaningful pause and returns with a devious tone. “You must be patient.... That will not be for another few passes of Father Moon—not until my Day of Affirmation when I can choose you.”

Elam prepares himself for a very necessary response, but Eily does something he thought she would never do: she cuts him off.

“Well, I must be off. The night is late and I have much to do tomorrow morning. See you when the littlestars sleep and the Greatstar rises.” With that, she disappears with effervescent haste, forbidding any further discussion on the matter.

Elam stands, having half a desire to chase after her and make her explain. What is this madness? But she has left him dumbfounded—shocked... *warm*? Finding himself standing on feet now uneasy, he wonders if her words had actually been spoken or if the whole thing had been some strange imagining on his part.

I watch in amusement; the words had been spoken, indeed, this, I assume, being the very thing of which Love had hinted.

Elam takes up the bottle around his neck, evidence, he eventually decides, that something had indeed occurred, no matter how dreamlike the past moments had felt. After a long while and in a cloud of thought so thick as to blind him from his fears of the encroaching storm, Elam begins off.

I watch him round the path, disappearing behind the lighthouse. He has only acquired and given two bottles, but, in doing so, he has taken a most important step toward opening The Door. But soon enough something dark will notice his power and the Time of unbesieged steps will pass; those whispering in the darkness—oh, those horrid demons ever mindful of The Door—will soon detect his presence and the brilliance of the soul within him.

I close my eyes to the worlds of men and gaze upon The Cord's realm, seeing the soul strings weaving in and amongst themselves; The Cord grows thick with destinies long awaiting the nearing age and once individualistic threads have begun to intertwine into a concerted force.

I no longer have any doubt: The Fifth Khaa nears.