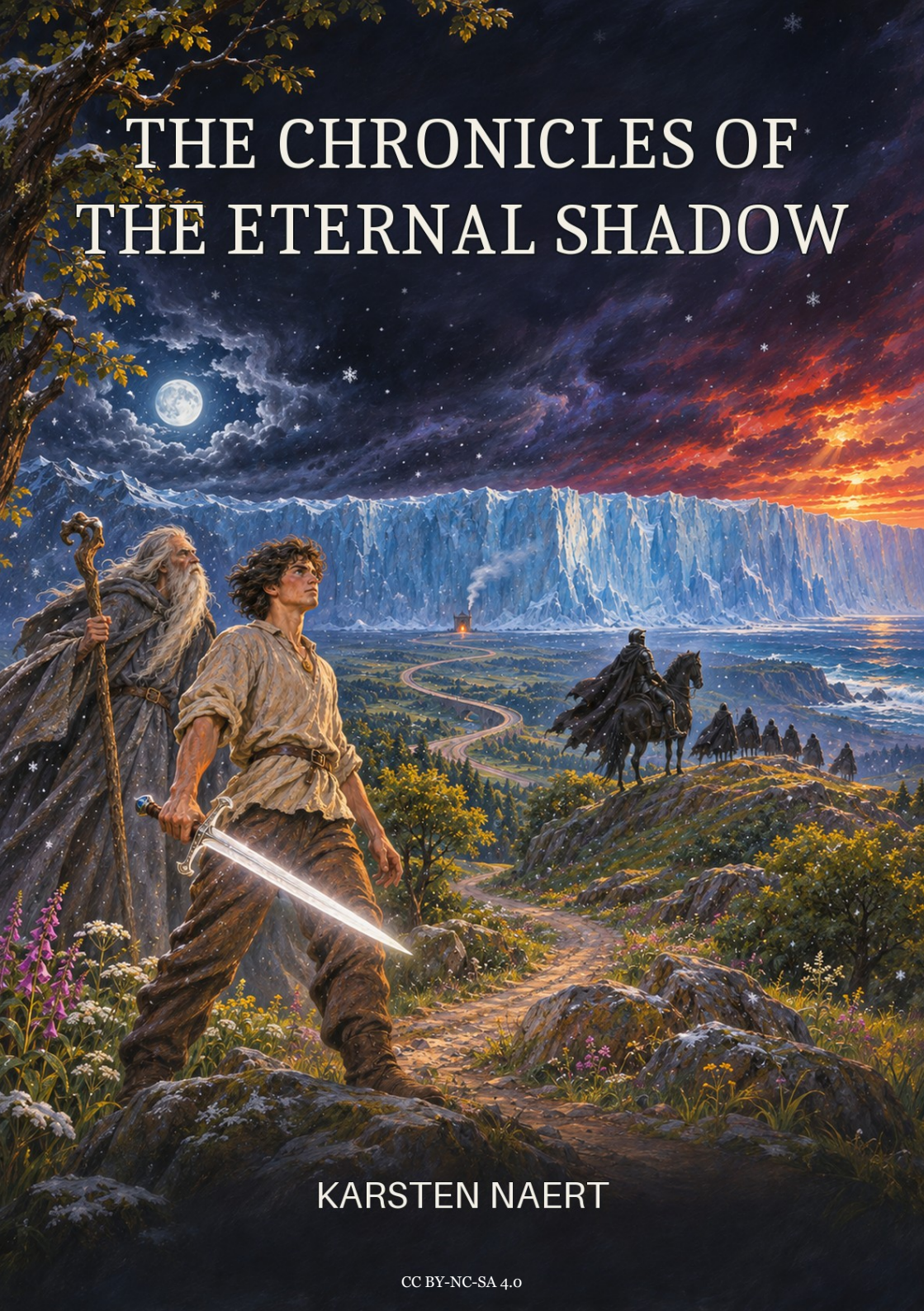


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Chapter One · Book I: The Chosen One



It was a dark and stormy night. As the last rays of sunlight just barely crested upon the horizon, they saw the silhouette of the first rider.

The second rider appeared moments later, followed by a third. Then a fourth. Soon seven dark figures were making their way down the ancient road that wound between the hills of Willowbrook, their black cloaks billowing in the howling wind.

None spoke. None moved save with the steady, rhythmic motion of their horses, whose hooves made no sound upon the cobblestones.

From the windows of their humble cottages, the villagers watched in fearful silence. Strange things had been happening of late. The harvest had been poor. The wolves had grown restless. And old Martha, who had lived in Willowbrook for nearly ninety years, had been heard muttering about the return of the ancient darkness.

But nobody had paid her much attention. Old Martha had been predicting the return of the ancient darkness for as long as anyone could remember.

At the edge of the village, a young man stood chopping firewood beside a modest farmhouse. His name was Aeryn, and though he did not yet know it, his destiny was about to change forever.

He was seventeen years old, tall for his age, with unruly dark hair and eyes the colour of the summer sky. Beneath his simple linen shirt, concealed from the world, lay a strange birthmark shaped like a dragon.

Aeryn had never known his parents.

His adoptive father, Edric, had found him as an infant seventeen years earlier, wrapped in a cloak of finest silver silk beneath an ancient oak tree during a terrible storm. Around the child's neck hung a small golden pendant bearing a single rune, a symbol so ancient that Edric had never been able to learn its meaning.

Edric had never spoken of these things.

There were many things Edric had never spoken of.

"Aeryn!" he called from the doorway. "Leave that. And leave the fence; it will keep until morning. Come inside, boy. There's a storm coming."

Aeryn lowered the axe. The fence along the lane stood half mended, as it had stood since noon, with the new rails stacked beside it.

"But father," Aeryn replied, gazing toward the darkening horizon, "the storm is already here."

Edric's face grew pale.

"Then it is worse than I feared."

At that moment, a solitary snowflake drifted from the heavens and settled upon Aeryn's outstretched hand.

It was unusually large.

"Snow?" Aeryn whispered. "But it is midsummer!"

Edric stared at the melting flake, a terrible recognition dawning in his eyes.

"No," he murmured. "It cannot be."

"Father? What is it?"

Edric seized the boy by the shoulders.

"Listen to me carefully, Aeryn. There are things about your past that I have kept hidden from you. Things about your mother. About your father. About who you truly are."

"What things?"

But before Edric could answer, a terrible horn sounded from the village square.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

Edric staggered backward.

"The Horn of the Forgotten King," he whispered. "After a thousand years…"

Aeryn looked toward the village, where the seven riders had now assembled beneath the ancient willow tree.

Their leader dismounted.

He was taller than any mortal man, clad from head to foot in armour blacker than the deepest night. Upon his breastplate was engraved a single silver rune, a symbol so ancient that its meaning had been lost to the mists of time.

For a long moment he did not speak. His helm turned slowly from cottage to cottage, as though he counted them, and came at last to the farmhouse at the edge of the village, and to the woodpile, and to the young man beside it with the axe still in his hand.

There it rested.

Then he raised his sword.

"PEOPLE OF WILLOWBROOK!" he thundered, his voice echoing across the valley. "BY COMMAND OF THE DARK LORD MALACHAR, WE SEEK THE CHILD OF THE PROPHECY!"

He did not look away from the farmhouse as he said it.

Aeryn turned to his father.

"Father, what is the Child of the Prophecy?"

Edric closed his eyes.

"I had hoped this day would never come."

"Father?"

"There is something you must know, Aeryn."

A terrible silence fell between them.

"**You are not an ordinary farm boy.**"

Aeryn stared at him in disbelief.

And somewhere far beyond the Mountains of Doom, in a tower older than memory itself, an ancient wizard opened his eyes.

"The time has come," he whispered.

Then he frowned.

"For what, again?"

✦ ✦ ✦

Edric drew the boy inside and barred the door. From beneath a loose board by the hearth he took a bundle that Aeryn had never seen, and unfolded it upon the table. It was a cloak of silver silk, small enough to wrap an infant, and it shone in the firelight as though it had been woven that morning.

"You were not born in this house," said Edric. "I found you beneath the old oak, on a night such as this. You were wearing that pendant. You were wrapped in this. And stitched into the hem, in

thread of gold, was a single word."

He turned the hem to the light.

Aeryn.

"Someone wished me to know your name," said Edric. "I have asked myself for seventeen years who it was. I believe I know now. And you must know also, for they have come for you, and there is no more time. Your father, Aeryn. Your true father was—"

The door burst from its hinges.

In the farmyard stood the leader of the riders. The six others sat their horses at the gate behind him and did not stir, and the wind, which tore at their cloaks, did not seem to touch his.

"GIVE ME THE BOY," said the Black Knight.

Edric took up the axe from where Aeryn had let it fall. He was not a tall man, nor a young one, and he had never in his life struck anything but timber. He stepped across the broken threshold and set his feet.

"Run, lad," he said, without turning his head. "The back way. Go to the oak."

"I will not leave you!"

"You will do as your father tells you this one last time."

"STAND ASIDE, OLD MAN," said the Black Knight.

Edric did not stand aside.

The black sword rose and fell. It turned a little in the air as it came down, as a blade will when it is ill swung, though the Knight had not the look of a man who swung ill; and it was the flat of it that took Edric upon the brow. He dropped where he stood.

Aeryn did not see him rise.

He would have run to him. But a hand closed upon his shoulder, a hand thin and strong and very old, and drew him backward through the house and out into the orchard, and a voice

said in his ear, “Not that way, my boy. Not yet.”

Beside him stood an ancient man in a robe of grey, with a white beard that reached his belt and a staff of gnarled oak. A moment before, he had been in a tower beyond the Mountains of Doom. But the Wise have roads of their own, and it is not for others to measure them.

“Who are you?” Aeryn cried.

“I am called Gandorin,” said the wizard. “I have been waiting for you a very long time. At least, I believe it was you.” He raised his staff, and a pale light sprang from its tip. “Come. To the oak.”

Aeryn looked back once. Through the open house he could see the farmyard, and the fallen door, and his father lying beside it. The Black Knight stood over him. He had not moved to follow. One of the riders had urged his horse forward, and the Knight raised a gauntleted hand.

“LET THEM RUN,” he said. “THERE IS TIME.”

And he remained there, in the farmyard, looking at the woodpile.



The storm had passed over, and the moon stood high above the ancient oak.

Aeryn fell to his knees among the roots. He was weeping, and he was not ashamed of it.

“He is dead,” he said.

“There will be time to grieve,” said Gandorin gently. “But not tonight. Tonight you must listen, for I have much to tell you and I do not recall all of it.”

He sat down upon a root with a sigh, as a man does whose knees trouble him, and looked at the boy with eyes as grey as old slate. His hand went into the breast of his robe, as though for something he kept there, and came out empty.

“Show me the mark,” said the wizard.

Aeryn drew aside his shirt. Upon his breast the dragon lay coiled, dark against the skin, as it had lain since the day he was born.

Gandorin nodded slowly.

“It is written in the Final Prophecy of Al Zeimer, greatest of the Seven Archmages of the First Age,” he said, “that in the thousandth year of the peace, when snow should fall at midsummer, a child would be found who bore the dragon upon his breast and the rune of the Forgotten King about his neck. He would be found beside a woodpile, the fence but half mended. He would be raised in obscurity. He would know nothing of his birth. And he alone would have the power to stand against the Dark Lord Malachar, and to wield the Sword of Light.”

“But I am only a farm boy!”

“You are the last heir of the Forgotten King, who ruled all Eldoria before the kingdom had a name. His blood is your blood. I may say that with perfect confidence.”

“And my mother? My father? Edric was about to tell me—“

“Your mother, the wise maintain, was the last daughter of the old royal house. She gave her life to protect you. Of your father the Prophecy is silent.”

“Then who stitched my name into the cloak?”

Gandorin gazed for a time into the branches of the oak.

“Some truths,” he said, “must be discovered, not taught.”

“That is not an answer.”

"No," the wizard agreed. "It is not."

From within his robe he drew a long shape wrapped in oilcloth, and laid it across the boy's knees. Aeryn folded back the cloth. Within lay a sword. Its hilt was plain, its pommel wrought in the likeness of a dragon, and as his hand closed about the grip the blade woke with a clear white radiance that drove the shadows back beyond the farthest roots of the tree.

"The Sword of Light," said Gandorin. "It was forged by the gods in the First Age, or so I was told; I never met the smith. It has waited ten thousand years for your hand. In all that time it has never once needed sharpening."

Aeryn rose. The sword was lighter than the axe. It sat in his hand as though it had been there before.

"I do not want this," he said.

"No," said Gandorin. "I do not suppose you do."

✦ ✦ ✦

Of the gathering of the Fellowship much is told in other songs, and it shall be told here briefly.

By roads that only Gandorin knew, they came before dawn to the next village and to an inn at the sign of the Weary Griffin; and there, by a chance that the songs have not thought it necessary to examine, four travellers had each taken a room that very night.

There was Elara, princess of the elves of the Silver Wood, whose hair was the colour of moonlight and whose aim had never failed, and in whose eyes lay a sorrow older than the kingdoms of men. She looked at Aeryn a long while when he came in, and then looked away.

There was Thorin, a dwarf of the Iron Hills, who trusted no elf and no ale that he had not tasted, and whose heart, beneath a great deal of beard and complaint, was of gold.

There was Kael, a thief of the southern ports, who was handsome, and knew it, and who agreed to come only when the wizard mentioned the Seven Sacred Crystals and what they might fetch.

And there was Borin, who was hungry.

To these five Gandorin spoke of the Dark Lord, and of the Mountains of Destiny where the first of the Crystals lay, and of the road thither through the Forest of Whispers, the Swamp of Sorrows and the Pass of Peril, and of the Great Wall of Eternity far in the north, which had stood for ten thousand years against a darkness older than Malachar. He spoke until the fire burned low. When he had finished, Kael asked what the Wall was for, exactly, and Gandorin said that the hour was late.

They set out at first light.

At the crest of the last hill Aeryn turned and looked back toward Willowbrook. He had expected to see it burning. But no smoke rose above the valley, and the roofs lay quiet in the grey of the morning. Somewhere among them a cock was crowing. He took this for a mercy, and did not think to find it strange.

Then he set his face to the north, and his hand upon the hilt of the Sword of Light, and followed the wizard down into the shadow of the trees.

He did not look back again.

And far away, at the edge of the world, where no eye marked it, a single crack ran a hand’s breadth up the Great Wall of Eternity, with a sound like a door settling upon its hinges.

Thus ends the First Book of the Chronicles of the Eternal

Shadow.

Chapter Two · Book II: The Return of the Eternal Shadow

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Now the tale turns northward, and grows darker.

For Malachar had not been idle. In the Shadow Realm the forges burned by night and by day, and upon every road the servants of the Dark Lord were abroad. The Fellowship went by hidden ways, and in each of them the wizard Gandorin walked before, leaning on his staff and favouring his left knee; and he was seldom certain of the path, but he was never in doubt.

They came first to the Forest of Whispers.

No bird sang beneath those trees. The trunks stood close and grey, and the leaves, though no wind stirred them, spoke ceaselessly to one another in voices just below hearing. For three days the companions walked in that murmur. On the third night Aeryn lay awake, and it seemed to him that the trees were whispering his name; and then three other names, one after another, which he did not know. He asked Elara what it meant.

“The forest is very old,” said the elven princess. “It speaks of all who have passed beneath it, and of all who will. I should not listen, if I were you.”

"Have you passed beneath it before?"

"Often," said Elara, and would say no more.

Beyond the Forest lay the Swamp of Sorrows, where the mists rose cold from black water and every traveller was shown the thing he most regretted. Thorin saw a vein of silver he had sold too cheaply. Kael saw a great many things and was unusually quiet. Borin saw a pie. Aeryn saw the farmyard at Willowbrook, and a man lying beside a broken door; and he would have walked out into the mire toward it, had not Elara caught his arm and held it. She held it somewhat longer than the danger required.

"What did you see?" he asked her, when they stood again on firm ground.

"A kitchen," she said. "When I was small."

It was not the answer he had expected, and he did not know what to make of it.



Far to the south, in the White Tower of Highspire, the Council of Seven sat in session.

They were the wisest in Eldoria, the heirs in an unbroken succession to the seven archmages of the First Age, and for a thousand years their deliberations had kept the peace of the realm. Before them on the table of white stone lay a letter. It had come, as a letter came each year at the turning of the leaves, from the cook of the Brotherhood of the Eternal Vigil, upon the Great Wall of Eternity. It was the fortieth.

The Master of the Council broke the seal and read it aloud. It reported that the Wall was cracking. It gave the position and the

length of each crack, and compared them with the cracks of the year before. It asked for forty masons, twelve wagons of salt, and a reply.

There was a long silence in the chamber.

“The Wall has stood for ten thousand years,” said the Master at last.

“It has,” said the Council.

The letter was laid in a chest of cedar with the thirty-nine others, and the Council turned to the question of the harvest tithe.



In the nineteenth week they climbed toward the Pass of Peril.

Aeryn walked beside the wizard. The road was steep, and Gandorin stopped often to rest his knee, and at each halt his hand would go into the breast of his robe and come out empty, and he would look at it for a moment as though it had disappointed him.

“Gandorin,” said Aeryn. “What is the Wall for?”

“It was raised by the First Kings, ten thousand years ago, from the mountains to the sea, to hold back the darkness that dwells in the uttermost north.”

“Yes. But what is the darkness? And how does a wall of ice hold it back? And why does it not go round by the sea?”

The wizard walked a while in silence. The snow had begun to fall, as in that year it fell on the high passes long before its season.

“I was told these things once,” he said. “By my master, who was the wisest of men. He told me the secret of the Wall itself, at the very end. I recall the evening perfectly. I recall the chair he sat in.” He shook his head. “Some truths, Aeryn, must be discovered, not

taught."

"You said that before. Did he say it to you?"

"He said it to everyone," said Gandorin. "I begin to think it was the only thing he was sure of."

They crossed the Pass of Peril that night, by a bridge of stone no wider than a man's shoulders, above a gulf from which a cold wind blew. Of that crossing Kael afterwards said only that the name was fair. And in the grey of the morning they came down out of the mountains, and saw before them the Great Wall of Eternity.

It filled the north. From the peaks on the one hand to the sea on the other it stood, a cliff of ice seven hundred feet in height, blue in its depths and white along its crown; and the dawn lay upon it so that it seemed a second and a colder sunrise. At its foot crouched a keep of black stone, low and very old. The gate of that keep was carved with signs that none now living could read, and it was said among the Brotherhood, when anyone troubled to say it, that the gate was a good deal older than any record of the Wall.

Of the Brotherhood of the Eternal Vigil there remained in those days seventeen old men, three criminals, a disgraced prince, and a cook.

It was the cook who opened the door.

He was a spare old man in an apron, bald as a stone, with a ladle in one hand. He looked at the wizard, and the elf, and the dwarf, and the thief, and the hungry man. Then he looked at Aeryn, and his eyes, which were the colour of the summer sky, though a good deal faded, grew narrow.

"You again," he said.

Aeryn stared at him.

"I mean: welcome," said the cook. "Mind the steps. I've been asking them to grit those steps for eleven years. You'll want

feeding.”

His name was Nigel. He had been the cook of the Brotherhood for forty years, and the oldest of the Brothers swore that he had been an old man when he came.

The kitchen was the one warm room in the keep. It was noon when they sat down to eat, and the stars stood bright in the high window above the hearth. Nigel set a bowl before each of them, and Aeryn saw that his own was larger than the rest; and when Borin remarked upon this, the cook said that the lad was growing, and that Borin had finished growing some time since, in most directions.

It was the best stew that Aeryn had ever tasted.

“How do you keep it so hot?” asked Borin, who had by this time been given a second bowl. “In a place like this?”

“I told it to stay hot,” said Nigel.

Borin laughed. Nigel did not, but turned back to his board, and rolled his sleeves above the elbow to knead the morrow’s bread. Along his right forearm ran an old white scar, long and straight.

“A kitchen is a dangerous place,” said Kael politely.

“I dare say. I’ve had that as long as I can remember.” The cook pressed the heel of his hand into the dough. “Which is forty years.”

Upon the shelf above the hearth stood a small hourglass in a frame of black wood. Aeryn, watching it idly, saw that its sand ran upward, and supposed that it had been mounted wrong way up. Beside it lay a sheaf of old parchment sewn with kitchen twine. He asked what it was.

"That's the manual," said Nigel.

"The manual?"

"For the Wall. *On the Upkeep of the Wall, as Told by the Master*. Thirty-nine pages. Found it in that drawer the week I came." He did not look round. "Nobody else has read it. It's a boy's hand, and it stops in the middle of a sentence, and I'd give a good deal to know what was on page forty. But it's plain enough as far as it goes. Salt on the footings every spring. Keep the drains clear. Don't light fires against the ice. Somebody ought to be seeing to the cracks." He struck the dough. "I wrote to the Council."

"What did they say?"

"I'll tell you when they do."

Later he sent Aeryn and Thorin down to the cellar for turnips. It was a low vault beneath the kitchen, older even than the rooms above, and against its farther wall, among the barrels, leaned a tall mirror in a frame of tarnished silver. Thorin's reflection scowled out of it plainly enough, with a turnip in either fist. But the glass must have been clouded on the one side, or the lantern ill placed; for where Aeryn stood beside the dwarf, it showed only the barrels behind him.

"Never held with that thing," said Nigel, when they spoke of it. "Makes me look a fool. Leave it be."

That night the Fellowship slept upon the kitchen floor, for the Brothers' hall was cold as a tomb. Aeryn woke once in the small hours. The fire had burned low. Beside it, on two stools, sat the wizard and the cook, and they were talking quietly, as old men will who have found that they need not explain themselves to one another.

"...forgotten all of it," Gandorin was saying. "Everything he taught me. Everything worth the knowing. I have nothing left to

give the boy but a manner of speaking. What does a man do, at the end of ten thousand years, who has forgotten everything worth the knowing?"

The cook was silent for a time. He seemed to be giving the question his full attention.

"Go back and learn it again," he said. "And this time, write it down."

He said it not unkindly, and no more loudly than he had said anything else. But the fire leapt once in the grate, and upon the shelf the little hourglass rang faintly, like a cup that has been touched.

Aeryn slept.



In the morning Gandorin was changed. He was brisk; he was almost merry. The second of the Seven Sacred Crystals, he declared, lay in the foundations of this very keep, and he knew the place. He could not have said how.

He led them down. Below the cellar was an undercroft, and below the undercroft a round chamber cut from the living rock, where a statue of some crowned king stood with its face worn smooth by time. In the midst of the floor was a well. It had no rope and no bucket, and no sound came up out of it, and the light of the wizard's staff went down into it a little way and was lost.

"Here," said Gandorin.

He was not looking at the statue. He stood at the brink of the well with his staff held out over it, gazing down, and the light showed him nothing; and yet he smiled, as a man smiles who has

been given a direction.

“The Crystal will be beneath the king’s foot,” he said, without turning. “You will find it. I never could keep hold of where things were.”

It is sung now that a Shadow of the Elder Deep rose up out of that well, a thing of smoke with many arms, and that the wizard strove with it upon the brink for the space of an hour. The songs were made by people who were not there. Thorin, who was, would say afterwards only that it was a very deep well, and that he had not liked how quiet it was.

What befell was this. Aeryn went to the wizard’s side, to look where he looked. And the stone of the brink, which had borne the weight of ten thousand years, crumbled beneath the boy’s foot like stale bread.

He felt himself go. Then a hand had him by the collar, a hand thin and strong and very old, and he was flung backward across the chamber with a force that no one would have looked for in that arm. He struck the base of the statue. When he raised his head, the wizard was standing where he had stood, upon a lip of stone that was already leaning outward over the dark.

“Up the stair, all of you,” said Gandorin. “Go, my boy. Go up.”

“I will not leave you!”

“You will find that people say that to you a great deal,” said the wizard. “Go.”

It seemed to Kael, who noticed such things, that there had been time for the old man to step back. He did not step back. He looked round once at Aeryn, and it was strange, for there was no fear in his grey eyes. There was something nearer to resolve.

“This time,” said Gandorin, “I shall write it down.”

Then the stone went, and he with it; and the light of his staff

went down, and down, and was gone.



They mourned him for three days.

The snow fell without ceasing. It lay now on all the northern lands, where no snow had lain for a thousand years, and Nigel observed that the flakes were bigger than they had any business to be, and went out twice a day to sweep the steps.

On the third evening Aeryn climbed alone to the battlements of the keep and stood beneath the vast pale face of the Wall. He had laid the Sword of Light upon the parapet. He did not wish to look at it.

Elara found him there.

"I am not the one they need," he said. "He believed that I was. He gave his life for it. And I do not know the first thing about any of it, Elara. I do not know what the Wall is for. I do not know who my father was. I asked him, and he told me that some truths must be discovered, and now there is nobody left to ask."

The elven princess stood beside him for a while without speaking. The snow settled in her silver hair.

"There is the cook," she said.

"The cook?"

"He seems to me a person who would tell you a thing, if he knew it." She looked down toward the lit window of the kitchen, far below. "It is very strange. I have never seen him before this week. And yet he has a look of someone I knew when I was small."

"Who?"

"I cannot remember. That is what is strange. I do not forget

things, Aeryn. My people do not." She turned to him, and her eyes were full of an old sorrow, and of something else that was not sorrow. "You are not alone. I wished you to know it."

He would have answered her. But she laid her hand for a moment against his face, and then she was gone down the stair, as lightly as the snow.

Aeryn took up the Sword of Light.

"I will finish it," he said aloud. "Whatever he began, I will finish it. I swear it by this blade."

And high above him, with a groan that was heard in the kitchen and shook the ladles on their hooks, a crack ran the full height of the Great Wall of Eternity, from its footing to its crown.

Below, a door opened.

"I did write to them," said a voice.

Thus ends the Second Book of the Chronicles of the Eternal Shadow.

Chapter Three · Book III: The Cease and Desist of Destiny

✦ ✦ ✦

Spring came to the north, and brought no thaw.

The snow fell still. The flakes were by this time the size of coins, and they lay upon the land like a spilled treasury. But greater tidings than the weather had reached the keep; for the Council of Seven, after a thousand years of deliberation, had acted.

A herald brought the Writ. It was a scroll of white vellum hung with seven seals, and it commanded the Dark Lord Malachar, by the authority of the Council and in the gravest terms, to cease from his conquests and to desist from all further shadow, upon pain of the Council's extreme displeasure. To the Chosen One fell the honour of serving it upon him in person.

"They've sent no masons, I suppose," said Nigel.

They had not.

Three days later the host of Malachar came out of the east. It covered the plain from the keep to the horizon: ten thousand spears, and wolves, and engines of war, and above them the banners of the Shadow Realm. At its head, upon a horse as black as his armour, rode the Black Knight.

He did not send his army against the gate, as any captain would. He drew it up half a league off, and there it waited through the night. No one in the keep could say why he had brought so great a host so far to stand in the snow before a wall of ice. But Kael, who noticed such things, remarked that for a man laying siege the Knight seemed remarkably sure of where he wished to be.

That was the eve of the battle which the songs call the Battle of Eternal Dawn.



At first light the horns sounded, and the host came on against the gate, and the seventeen old men, the three criminals and the disgraced prince went to the walls with the Fellowship beside them. Great deeds were done there. Elara loosed three hundred arrows and did not miss. Thorin held the breach alone for the space of an hour and complained throughout. Kael was seen in several places, and Borin in one.

But Aeryn was not upon the wall. For in the first clamour of the assault he had looked down from the battlements, and had seen a single dark figure leave the host and come on foot, unhurried, around the flank of the keep, toward the kitchen door, where there was no guard.

He ran down. He came out upon the kitchen steps with the Sword of Light in his hand. The sun was rising red upon his right, and the long shadows of evening lay across the snow.

At the foot of the steps stood the Black Knight.

“SO,” said the Knight. “THE CHILD OF THE PROPHECY.”

“You killed my father,” said Aeryn.

The helm tilted a little, as though its wearer considered the charge.

"NO," said the Black Knight. And he drew his sword.

It was black from point to guard, as if it had lain for years in smoke. Its pommel was wrought in the likeness of a dragon.

Then they fought, and of that fight the songs are full. Up and down the kitchen steps they went, the boy and the man, and the two swords met and met again, the white and the black; and it was told afterwards by those who heard it from the wall that the blades did not clash as steel on steel, but rang together with one voice, like a single bell twice struck. Aeryn was young and quick, and filled with grief. But the Knight was the stronger, and he seemed to know each stroke before it fell. Three times he might have ended it, and three times his blade turned aside.

"WHY DO YOU NOT STRIKE?" Aeryn cried. He was weeping with rage.

"THERE IS TIME," said the Black Knight.

He stepped back, and upward, to the third step from the top; and it was there that he set his foot upon the patch of ice. For eleven years the cook had asked the Brotherhood to grit those steps. The Knight's heel went from under him. His guard flew wide. And the Sword of Light came down along his right forearm, shearing through the black steel as through cloth, and laid it open from the wrist to the elbow.

The black sword fell in the snow. The Knight went down upon one knee.

Aeryn set the point of the Sword of Light against his throat.

"Take off your helm," he said. "I would see the face of the man who serves Malachar."

For a long moment the Black Knight did not move. Then with

his left hand he reached up, and loosed the clasps, and lifted the helm from his head.

Aeryn had expected a monster. He saw a man of some three-and-forty winters, lean and weathered and grey at the temples, with a face that was very like his own, as his own might be when the years had finished with it. So, the songs observe, do all sons see their fathers. The man's eyes were the colour of the summer sky.

"No," Aeryn whispered.

"Aeryn," said the Black Knight, and it was a quiet voice, and tired, and nothing like the voice of the helm. "I am your father."

"It is not true! It cannot be true!"

"It is true." The Knight looked up at him. It seemed that he would say more. His lips parted, and for the space of three breaths the Chosen One waited, with the sword trembling in his hand; but whatever it was, the Knight thought better of it. He only looked at the boy, as a man looks at a house in which he once lived, and then past him, toward the kitchen door.

Aeryn turned.

In the doorway stood the cook. He had come out with a pan of eggs in one hand, and in the other, from long habit, the little hourglass from above the hearth. He was not looking at Aeryn. He was looking at the Knight's bare face, and at the wound that ran from the Knight's wrist to his elbow; and his own sleeves were rolled, and he had gone the colour of his apron.

"Oh," said Nigel. "Oh, I see. That's how." He drew a breath. "Well, you can't stop there, bleeding on my steps. You'll be late. Back you go. Forty years, and mind how you land."

The Knight bowed his head, as to a thing long expected. His left hand went out, and closed upon the hilt of the fallen sword.

And the cook turned the glass.

It was told afterwards that a siege engine had taken fire below the wall at that same moment, and that the smoke of it rolled across the steps. So Aeryn himself believed. When it cleared, the helm lay in the snow, and beside it the mark where a man had knelt. Of the Black Knight there was no other sign; nor of his sword.

"Where is he?" Aeryn cried. "Nigel, where did he go?"

The cook was looking at the hourglass. The whole of its sand had run to the top.

"That," he said slowly, "was rather more than I meant."

"What do you mean? What have you done?"

"Seen him off, lad." Nigel put the glass in the pocket of his apron, and for a moment he looked every one of his years. "He'll not trouble you again. Not from that direction. Come in. The eggs are spoiling."

Upon the plain the host of Malachar, seeing its captain gone, wavered and broke, and fled into the east. So ended the Battle of Eternal Dawn. And Aeryn sat in the kitchen with a plate before him and did not eat, and the cook did not press him, but set a hand briefly upon his shoulder in passing, as he went to see about the bread.

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Of the journey that followed, the Second Crystal that was found beneath the statue in the well-chamber, and the Third in a dragon's hoard, and the Fourth, Fifth, Sixth and Seventh, which were recovered severally from a riddling sphinx, a drowned temple, the crown of a mad king and Kael's left boot, much might be written,

and elsewhere has been. Let it suffice that at midsummer, one year to the day since the riders came to Willowbrook, the Chosen One stood alone before the Black Gate of the Mountains of Doom.

His friends could go no farther. So the Prophecy required.

He passed the gate. He climbed the ten thousand steps. And he came at last into a hall of obsidian, where the pillars were as tall as pines and a red light burned without flame, and at the end of it, upon a throne of black glass, sat the Dark Lord Malachar.

None living had looked upon his face. He was robed in black, and hooded in a shadow that moved like smoke, and out of that shadow two eyes regarded the boy. They were grey as old slate. One long hand lay upon the arm of the throne. The other rested on a book bound in black leather, which lay open across his knees, and from which, as Aeryn drew near, he looked up with the air of a man who has been checking a fact.

"THE CHOSEN ONE," said Malachar. His voice filled the hall. "THE FARM BOY. YOU HAVE SLAIN MY CAPTAIN, WHO SERVED ME THREE-AND-TWENTY YEARS AND NEVER ONCE TOLD ME WHENCE HE CAME. YOU HAVE SCATTERED MY HOST. AND NOW YOU COME TO ME WITH A SWORD THAT IS OLDER THAN YOUR KINGDOM. FOR TEN THOUSAND YEARS I HAVE WAITED IN THE DARK, WHILE FOOLS FORGOT WHAT I REMEMBERED. DID THE OLD MAN SEND YOU? DID GANDORIN SEND YOU, BEFORE HE FELL?"

"Gandorin is dead," said Aeryn.

"IS HE," said the Dark Lord. He glanced, strangely, over his shoulder, toward something tall that stood behind the throne beneath a drape; and then he turned a page.

Aeryn drew out the Writ of the Council, and broke the seven seals, and in a voice that shook only a little he read it through, from

the salutation to the pain of extreme displeasure.

There was a silence.

"THEY WROTE THAT DOWN," said Malachar, with something that in another might have been respect. Then he rose. He rose stiffly, favouring his left knee, and the shadow rose with him until it filled the vault. "IT WILL NOT AVAIL THEM."

Aeryn sprang forward with the Sword of Light.

"NOT THAT WAY, BOY," said the Dark Lord. "NOT YET."

He lifted one hand. A darkness went out from it like a wind, and it struck the Chosen One full upon the breast and flung him the length of the hall. The sword spun from his grasp. His head met the foot of a pillar. And the red light dwindled, and went out, and he knew no more.



Everything faded to white.

He found himself standing in a meadow. The grass was golden, the sky impossibly blue. A familiar figure was coming toward him through the flowers, leaning on a staff.

"Gandorin?" Aeryn whispered.

The old wizard smiled.

"Yes, my boy."

"But you are dead!"

"Death is but another path, Aeryn. One that we all must walk. I am told that it goes round in rather a—but no matter."

"I have failed you. I have failed everyone! He is too strong. I cannot defeat him!"

Gandorin laid a hand upon his shoulder.

"Tell me, Aeryn. What is the strongest magic in all the realms?"

Aeryn looked down.

"The Sword of Light?"

"No, my boy."

"The Seven Sacred Crystals?"

"No."

"The forbidden spell of—"

"Love, Aeryn. The answer is love."

Aeryn's eyes widened.

"Your mother gave her life to protect you," the wizard went on. "And your father, in his fashion, has given more than you know. Such love bestows a power that no darkness can extinguish. It is in you now. It has always been in you."

"But why did you not tell me this before?"

Gandorin gazed toward the horizon.

"Because some truths must be discovered, not taught."

"That does not make any sense."

"One day you will understand."

Aeryn stood silent in the golden grass. A great peace was upon him. And with the peace there came a sensation that he could not at first name.

"Gandorin," he said. "What is this warmth that is spreading over my body?"

The wizard considered him gravely.

"You may have shat yourself as you were fainting, son," he said. "But it is also love."

Aeryn looked down, and the tears stood in his eyes.

"Take heart," said Gandorin. "Courage is not the absence of fear. It is finding the strength to go on, even when one has soiled one's britches."

"But what if the others find out?"

"Then they shall know you as I have always known you. Not as the prince of Eldoria, nor as the wielder of the Sword of Light, but as a man who stood before the armies of darkness and gave everything he had."

"Even my dignity?"

"Especially your dignity."

"Will this happen again?"

A shadow crossed the old man's face.

"Of that, the Prophecy does not speak."

The meadow had begun to fade. The wizard's voice came to him as from a great distance.

"Farewell, Aeryn. And remember: it is not what lies within us that defines us, but what we choose to let go."



Aeryn awoke, his heart filled with courage, and his trousers with considerably less noble things.

He rose. The Sword of Light lay ten paces from his hand; he held out his arm, and it came to him across the floor of the hall, singing. The radiance of it was no longer white but golden. It poured from the blade, and from his hands, and from the dragon upon his breast, and the red light of the hall guttered before it like a candle in the sun.

For the first time in twenty thousand years, the Dark Lord Malachar took a step backward.

"WHAT," he said. "WHAT IS THAT SMELL?"

Aeryn raised the Sword of Light.

“The smell of destiny,” he said.

And he strode forward into the shadow, and the shadow gave way before him. Of what passed then no witness has told. There was a light upon the Mountains of Doom that was seen in Highspire, three hundred leagues to the south. There was a cry. And when the light had faded, the hood and the black robe and the book were gone from the hall of obsidian, and the throne stood empty; and the Dark Lord Malachar was seen no more.

Aeryn nailed the Writ of the Council to the arm of the throne with a dagger. Then he went down the ten thousand steps, slowly, and with care.

His friends were waiting at the gate. Elara ran to him, and stopped, and then came on regardless; and that, the songs agree, was love.

So the shadow passed from Eldoria. The host of the Shadow Realm was scattered, the forges were cold, and in the White Tower the Council of Seven voted itself a day of thanksgiving. Peace had returned to the realm, and this time it would endure for ever.

And far away, beyond the Great Wall of Eternity, in a darkness that was old when Malachar was young, two red eyes opened.

Thus ends the Third Book of the Chronicles of the Eternal Shadow.

Chapter Four · Book IV: The Shadow That Was Not Quite Eternal



The peace endured until the autumn.

It was a golden season while it lasted. The Chosen One was feasted in Highspire. He was given a white horse, and a circlet, and the freedom of nine cities, and wherever he went the people strewed his way with flowers, which the snow presently covered. For the snow had not ceased with the fall of the Dark Lord. It had, if anything, increased.

Then the Council of Seven summoned him to the White Tower.

They received him gravely. The Master of the Council stood, and unrolled a chart of the northern lands, and laid one finger upon the Great Wall of Eternity.

“You have done well, Aeryn of Willowbrook,” he said. “But the hour is come when you must know the truth. Malachar was never the enemy.”

Aeryn looked from one face to another.

“He was the Dark Lord,” he said. “You sent him a Writ.”

“He was a servant. A shadow cast by a greater Shadow. For ten thousand years he was the mere instrument of a power beside

which his own was as a taper to a furnace: the Pale Sovereign, Lord of the Uttermost North, whose host is the ice itself and whose captains are the frozen dead. Even now that host is gathering. This has always been known to the Wise."

"Then why did nobody say so?"

"It was not yet time," said the Master.

"But the Wall will hold them," said Aeryn. "That is what the Wall is for. It was raised to keep the darkness out."

A glance passed around the table of white stone.

"That," said the Master of the Council, "is the second matter. The Wall was not raised to keep anything out. It is the settled judgment of this Council, and has been for some hours, that the Wall was raised to keep something *in*."

"In? On which side?"

"That is not yet clear."

"Then is the darkness to the north of it or the south?"

"Both views have their adherents. You will appreciate that the distinction is a fine one."

Aeryn did not appreciate it. He said so, at some length. He asked what the thing was that was kept in, and how the Council knew, and why it had spent a thousand years telling the realm the opposite; and to each of these questions he received an answer of great dignity, in which he could afterwards discover no information at all. He was told that he must ride north. He was told that the Wall must on no account be permitted to fall. He was not told how this was to be prevented. A motion to send forty masons was proposed by the youngest of the Seven, and deferred.

"It is a pity that Gandorin is not here," said the Master, as Aeryn turned to go. "He understood these things."

"He did not," said Aeryn. "But I wish that he were."

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So the Fellowship rode north a second time, in the waning of the year.

The snowflakes that autumn were the size of dinner plates. They came down slowly, turning as they fell, and settled upon the fields with a sound like the laying of a great table. Whole villages lay buried to the eaves. A learned brother of the Tower, who travelled with them as far as the Forest, explained that it was not snow at all, but the frozen tears of a forgotten goddess, weeping for the world; and when Kael asked him which goddess, he replied with some satisfaction that she had been forgotten.

They came to the keep at dusk on the last day of October, one year almost to the day since they had first seen it.

There was a shape in the snow before the kitchen door.

It lay face downward at the foot of the steps, in a drift that had half covered it, and Aeryn took it at first for a fallen Brother. He leapt from his horse and ran, and turned it over. It was an old man. He was tall, and very thin, with a white beard that reached his belt, and his robe was white from collar to hem, crusted so thick with rime that it crackled as he was moved. His eyes were closed. He had no staff.

“Gandorin!” cried Aeryn.

The others were about him in a moment. “It cannot be,” said Thorin. “We saw him fall.” “It is he,” said Elara, and her voice shook. “It is his face.” Borin wept without concealment. And Kael, who stood a little apart, looked at the old man, and at the kitchen door, and at the unbroken snow all about, in which there was no track of anyone’s coming, and counted something on his fingers,

and frowned.

The old man opened his eyes. They were grey as slate, and for a moment there was nothing in them whatever.

"Gandorin," said Aeryn again, and gripped his hand. "Gandorin! You have come back to us!"

The old man looked at him. He looked at each of them in turn. His lips shaped the word twice, without sound, as a man tries a key in a lock.

"Gandorin," he said. "Yes." And then, more firmly: "Yes. That was my name."

They bore him into the kitchen.



"Changed, hasn't he," said Nigel.

It was later. The old wizard sat wrapped in blankets beside the fire, with a bowl in his hands, and the Fellowship sat about him as about a miracle. The cook had drawn Aeryn aside to the bread-board.

"He has passed through death," said Aeryn. "He fell into shadow, and strove with it in the deep places of the world, and was sent back to us robed in white, until his task is done. Elara says that it is so with the Wise."

"Aye, well. Death'll do that, I suppose." Nigel went on cutting bread. "Only I sat up half a night with that one, a year back. He'd a way of rubbing his knee. He's still got that. And he'd a staff he never let go of, and he looked at a man when he talked. This one looks at the door." He laid the knife down. "And that's not a white robe, lad. That's a black robe with the frost on it. Have a look at the

hem, where it's been near the fire."

Aeryn looked. Where the rime had melted from the old man's skirts, the cloth beneath was black.

"It was scorched," he said. "In the deeps."

"I dare say it was," said Nigel. He seemed to find no pleasure in the subject, and he gave the wizard the smaller bowl. But it was noticed that he filled it twice.

In the days that followed, the joy of the Fellowship was scarcely dimmed, though there were things that might have dimmed it.

Gandorin did not know the keep. He asked the way to the hall, in which he had slept. He looked at Thorin for a long while and inquired courteously of Elara who the dwarf was; and when it was explained to him that they had travelled together for half a year, he said, "Of course. The dwarf," and addressed him afterwards as Master Dwarf, which Thorin bore in a silence terrible to see.

"You do not remember the Pass of Peril?" Kael asked him. "The bridge? You went first. You said that if we did not look down, it would not be there."

"I have never seen the Pass of Peril," said Gandorin.

"The well, then. Under this floor. You went down it before our eyes."

"I have never been near a well in my life. I am quite certain I should recall it." The old man's hand went into the breast of his robe, and searched there, and came out empty; and he looked at it with an expression not of disappointment, as formerly, but of something very like alarm. "There was a thing I kept here," he said. "I would look in it, in the mornings. I cannot think what it was."

"He fell on the first of November," said Kael that evening, to nobody in particular. "He lay in the snow on the last of October. That is a year, less a day. I should like to know where a man keeps

himself for a year less a day, and comes back not knowing a dwarf he has shared a blanket with."

"Hush," said Elara. "He has been beyond the world."

"He has been somewhere," said Kael.



It was Aeryn who sat with the wizard longest. He told him all that had passed: the battle, and the Black Knight unmasked, and the hall of obsidian. Gandorin listened to the tale of Malachar's fall with the closest attention, and at the end of it he was silent for some time.

"And this Dark Lord," he said. "He was seen no more."

"No more."

"I am glad of it. I think I should not have liked him." He rubbed his left knee. "Forgive me, my boy. There is so much I ought to tell you. I feel it. It is all there, like a word upon the tongue, AND I WILL HAVE IT YET—" He stopped. The cook had looked round from the hearth. The echo of that voice seemed to hang for a moment among the ladles. "I beg your pardon," said Gandorin mildly. "I do not know what came over me."

"The Council says that the Wall was built to keep something in," said Aeryn. "They will not say what. You studied under Al Zeimer himself. He told you the secret of the Wall. You said so, upon the road. What is it, Gandorin? What is the Wall for?"

The old man gazed into the fire. It was plain that he was searching, and that he found nothing; and Aeryn, watching him, felt his heart misgive him, and spoke before he had well considered.

"I know," he said bitterly. "You need not say it. Some truths

must be discovered, not taught.”

Gandorin turned his head.

“What did you say?”

“It is what you always told me. Whenever I asked you anything at all.”

“Some truths must be discovered, not taught,” the wizard repeated slowly. He said it again, under his breath, and a light came into his grey eyes that had not been there since he was carried in from the snow. It was the look of a man who, in a strange house, has found a coat that fits him. “Yes,” said Gandorin. “Yes. I did always say that. How very true it is.”

And from that hour he said it often.



On the seventh day they climbed to the crown of the Wall.

There was a stair within the ice, seven hundred feet of it, which the Brotherhood had not used in the memory of any Brother. Nigel went up it twice a year with a bucket of salt. At the top the wind was a blade, and the plate-broad snow went by them level, and they stood upon the rim of the world and looked out over the uttermost north.

It was a white waste without feature, running to a white horizon. But in the midst of it, far off, there was a place where the waste was moving.

“There,” said Elara, who had the eyes of her people. “A host. It is forming out of the snow itself. I see ranks. I see riders, on beasts I do not know. And in the midst of them something very tall, with a crown of ice, that does not move at all.” Her voice sank. “It is

looking at us."

"The Pale Sovereign," said Aeryn.

"Is that north of the Wall?" asked Borin. "Or south? I only ask because of what the Council said."

Nobody answered him.

"Then it is not over," said Aeryn. He laid his hand upon the hilt of the Sword of Light. "It has only begun. Malachar was the least of it. And all that stands between that host and every living thing in Eldoria is this ice beneath our feet."

"Which is cracked," said Nigel. He had come up behind them with his bucket. "I make it forty-one, now. I've put it in a letter."

"The Wall must never fall," said Gandorin, with great solemnity. It was the first thing he had said that day of which he seemed entirely sure.

Far out upon the waste the crowned figure raised one arm; and all along the horizon the snow stood up, and began to march.

Thus ends the Fourth Book of the Chronicles of the Eternal Shadow.

Chapter Five · Book V: The Last Prophecy, Part One

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For a year the Wall held.

That year is called in the songs the Siege of the Long Winter, and no year like it had been known in Eldoria. The sun was not seen from November to November. The host of the Pale Sovereign lay against the northern face of the Wall like a tide against a cliff, and broke upon it, and gathered, and broke again; and day and night the ice groaned with the weight of the dead.

And the snow fell.

The flakes were now the size of horses. This is not said in the manner of the poets. Each was some eight feet from point to point and stood, where it came to rest upon an edge, a little higher than a tall man's shoulder. They descended without haste, turning end over end, and when one of them struck the roof of the stable it went through the slates and killed a mule. The Brothers learned to look upward before crossing the yard. Thorin, who was not easily moved to wonder, stood for an hour before one that had lodged upright in the midden, examining its six arms and the fine

fern-work of its crystals, and said at last that it was good work, and that he did not care for it.

"Gandorin," said Aeryn, on a morning when they stood together upon the battlements and watched one settle across the gate. "You are of the Wise. Do you know why the snowflakes grow larger?"

The old wizard had grown into himself in that year. His beard was combed, he had found a staff, and he had acquired a way of pausing before he spoke that the whole keep found very impressive.

"Is it because the Sovereign's power is growing?" Aeryn asked.

"No, my boy." Gandorin laid a hand upon his shoulder, and his grey eyes twinkled. "It is because winter is coming."

Aeryn looked at him.

"Gandorin, it has been winter for two years."

"Some truths," said the wizard contentedly, "must be discovered, not taught."

Aeryn went down to the kitchen.



It was the one room in the keep where a thing, once asked, was answered. He had spent much of the siege there. He had learned to peel a turnip in one paring, and to tell by the sound of it when bread was done, and it had become his custom to sit upon the stool beside the hearth in the hour after the watch was changed; so that on this day, as on most, he ate his supper at sunrise, by the light of the evening star, and neither he nor the cook saw anything in that to remark upon.

"He doesn't know," said Nigel, when Aeryn had told him. "That's all it is, lad. He hasn't the least idea, and he's found a

handsome way of saying so. I'd not hold it against him. There's men on the Council have built a whole life on less."

"Do *you* know why they grow?"

"No." The cook scraped a board. "It's not in the manual. I've wondered if it was on page forty."

A horn sounded at the gate. It was not the alarm. Presently the disgraced prince came down the kitchen stair, bearing a scroll hung with seven seals, and he bore it carefully, for in two years nothing had come to that keep from the south but one Writ and the Fellowship.

"From the Council of Seven," he said. "To the cook."

Nigel wiped his hands. He took the scroll, and broke the seals one by one, and read it standing. It was not long. When he had done, he read it a second time. Then he handed it to Aeryn.

The Council of Seven, it ran, *acknowledges receipt of your forty-two letters concerning the condition of the Great Wall of Eternity, and thanks the Brotherhood of the Eternal Vigil for its continued interest in this matter.*

There was nothing more.

Aeryn looked up. The cook had not moved. He stood with his back to the hearth and his hands hanging open at his sides, and he was looking at nothing at all, and it came to Aeryn that in two years he had never before seen Nigel entirely still.

"Forty-two years," said Nigel. He spoke quietly. "Salt, I asked for. Forty men and some salt." He drew a long breath through his nose, and let it go. "Well. I've done. I'll not write again. If that's all it is to them, then let it fall."

He did not raise his voice. He said it as a man says a thing at the end of a long day, to no one, and turned away to see to the fire.

Upon the shelf the little hourglass rang once, clear and small.

Then, very far above them, there came a sound that none who heard it afterwards could describe. It began as a single note, like the breaking of a harp-string a mile long. It ran from the mountains to the sea. And it was followed by a roar that put out the fire, and flung every pan from its hook, and went on, and on, and did not cease for the fourth part of an hour.



So fell the Great Wall of Eternity, which had stood ten thousand years.

It fell northward, for the most part, and in that the Wise have seen the hand of providence; for the towers of ice came down upon the host that lay beneath them, and the foremost ranks of the dead were buried a second time. But the keep stood in its path also. When Aeryn had dug his way up the kitchen stair, he came out into the open air. The hall was gone, and the stable, and the upper works, and where the black gate had been there was a mountain of blue rubble. Only the kitchen remained, being sunk half in the rock, and the vaults beneath it.

Of the Brotherhood of the Eternal Vigil there survived eleven old men, two criminals, the disgraced prince, and the cook.

Nigel came up behind him and stood looking at the gap. It was a league wide. Through it the uttermost north lay open, white and without end, and already, beyond the wreck, the snow was standing up once more into ranks.

“I did say,” said Nigel. His voice was not quite steady. He looked at his own hands, and put them in the pocket of his apron.

“You said it would fall. For forty years.”

"Aye," said the cook. "That too."

But there was no time to ask him what he meant. For the horns of the Sovereign were sounding in the breach.



Of the battle that was fought that day among the ruins, the last stand of the eleven and the two and the one, the charge of the dwarves of the Iron Hills, who came at the eleventh hour and of whom nothing has yet been said, and the coming of the Pale Sovereign himself into the field, it would take a book to tell.

He came at dusk. He was thrice the height of a man, and all of ice, and upon his brow was a crown of frozen spears; and where he walked the wounded died and the dead stood up. No weapon bit upon him. Thorin's axe shattered on his greave. The Sword of Light itself, which had prevailed against Malachar, struck sparks from his breast and left no mark, and Aeryn was hurled aside like a child. Then the Sovereign spoke, and his voice was the cracking of a frozen lake.

"NO BLADE FORGED FOR WAR MAY HARM ME," he said. "SO IT WAS SPOKEN BEFORE THE FIRST AGE. I AM THE WINTER THAT DOES NOT END."

Elara had loosed her last arrow an hour before. She stood now in his path with her bow broken at her feet, and she had nothing in her hand but the knife with which, that morning, she had been helping the cook to pare turnips, and which she had thrust through her belt when the alarm was sounded. It was a short knife with a handle of worn horn. She looked at it. She looked at the Sovereign. Then, since there was nothing else to be done, she stepped forward

and drove it to the hilt into his knee, which was as high as she could reach.

The Pale Sovereign looked down. A crack ran up him from the knee to the crown, and branched, and branched again, and he stood for one moment like a tree of glass. Then he fell in ten thousand pieces across the field, and his host fell with him, every rider and beast and frozen man of it, and lay still. The snow began at once to cover them.

That was the end of the Pale Sovereign, of whom the Wise had gone in dread for ten thousand years.



"It is the oldest of all the prophecies," said Gandorin. They had gathered in the kitchen, which was now the whole of the keep, and the wizard stood before the hearth with his staff in his hand. "*No blade forged for war*. I have known it always. And see how exactly it is fulfilled! For this blade was forged for no war, but for the peaceful labours of the board. It was always to be thus. It could not have been otherwise."

"You said nothing of it yesterday," said Kael.

"Some truths—"

"Yes," said Aeryn. "We know."

Nigel held out his hand to the elven princess.

"I'll have that back, if you've finished with it. It's the only one I've got that keeps an edge. Never had to sharpen it once. It was in the drawer when I came, along with the manual."

But Elara did not give it to him. She was turning the little knife in her fingers, and looking at the horn of the handle, where some

small sign was cut; and her face was strange.

"It was mine," she said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"It was mine before it was yours. I had it of my mother. I lent it once, when I was very small. There was a kitchen, and two boys who wished to cut a cheese, and I lent them my knife, and I never had it again." She looked up, and about her, at the low black vault and the ancient hearth, as though she saw them for the first time. "I had forgotten. How can I have forgotten? That was not a hundred years ago, nor a thousand. I do not know how long ago it was."

"A knife's a knife," said Nigel. But he said it gently, and he let her keep it.

In the morning they went out to look upon the ruin. The fall of the gate had laid bare what was beneath it; and there, under the black stones that the Brotherhood had thought ancient, stood the arch of another and far older gate, of grey stone, carved with a single rune. And Kael, going down into the vaults to see what might be saved, reported that the cellar was sound, and the undercroft, and that in the round chamber below the well stood exactly as it had stood, without so much as a fallen pebble on its rim.

"There is a thing I do not understand," said Borin. He had been silent a long while, which was not his habit. "The Wall went from the mountains to the sea. And they were a year getting through it. Why did they not sail round?"

No one had an answer. And before anyone could seek one, a horn sounded in the north, far off: a single note, deep, and older than the Sovereign's.

They ran out upon the rubble. At the edge of the field, where the Pale Sovereign lay in his ten thousand pieces, the largest fragment of that crowned head had opened its eyes; and it spoke

one last time, in a voice like a closing door.

"FOOLS," it said. "I WAS BUT THE HERALD."

Thus ends the Fifth Book of the Chronicles of the Eternal Shadow, being the First Part of the Last Prophecy. The Second Part will follow shortly.

Chapter Six · Book VI: The Last Prophecy, Part Two

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A note from the author. Readers of the first edition will be aware that twenty-seven years have passed since the publication of Part One. I can only say that a story takes the time it takes. I am grateful for the patience of my readers, and in a number of cases for that of their heirs. The narrative resumes the following morning.

C. R. R. M.

✦ ✦ ✦

The following morning, a shadow lay upon the Mountains of Doom.

It was Elara who saw it first, for she had not slept. She stood upon the rubble of the gate in the grey before dawn, and far in the east, above the peaks where no cloud had hung since the Dark Lord's fall, there was a darkness that was not cloud. She woke the others.

"It cannot be," said Thorin.

"It is," said Kael. "It always is."

"Malachar," said Aeryn. He felt no fear. He was surprised to find that what he felt was weariness. "I saw him destroyed. I stood in the light of it."

"Did you see him destroyed?" said the cook. He had come out with the porridge. "Or did you see a bright light, and then not see him?"

Aeryn considered this, and found that he could not honestly say.

The old wizard had come out last, wrapped in his blackened robe. He stood looking toward the east, and the hand that was not upon his staff went to his breast and searched there, as it had not done for many months.

"Malachar," he repeated. "It is a curious thing, my boy. All the world speaks to me of this Malachar as of my oldest enemy. And I find that when I reach for him there is nothing there at all. I do not even know his face." He turned to the elven princess. "You are older than you seem, lady. Do your people remember how it began?"

And Elara told them the tale, as it is told among the elves.



Malachar was not always the Dark Lord.

Once, in the First Age of the world, he was a gifted young apprentice named Malcolm, who studied beside the young Gandorin under the Archmage Al Zeimer, in an academy that stood at the feet of the Great Wall.

Where Gandorin sought wisdom, Malcolm sought power.

Where Gandorin learned patience, Malcolm demanded answers.

And where Gandorin dutifully forgot everything his master taught him, Malcolm did the unthinkable.

He took notes.

It was forbidden. Of all the laws of that house it was the first, though none could say why the Master had made it. He found the book in the fifth year: a book bound in black leather, in which the boy had set down, day by day, every word that Al Zeimer had spoken. And his wrath was terrible.

"Knowledge must be earned, young Malcolm!" he thundered. "Not simply written down!"

"But Master, you say a different thing each week! I only wished to know which was—"

"SILENCE! Your arrogance shall be your undoing!"

So Malcolm was cast out. He fled into the Mountains of Doom, bearing with him the forbidden Notebook of Remembrance. And over the ages resentment twisted his soul. He abandoned his mortal name, and became Malachar, Lord of Shadows, Keeper of Forbidden Knowledge, Master of the Nine Dark Spells.

"So it is told," said Elara. "I had it from my mother. Though it is strange: as I tell it now, it seems to me less like a tale I was told than like one I overheard."

Gandorin had listened with bowed head.

"Then he was my brother," he said slowly.

"Your brother?" cried Aeryn.

"In a manner of speaking. We studied under the same master. So I am informed." The wizard sighed. "Then I know why I have never prevailed against him. He possesses something that I do

not."

"The Sword of Darkness?"

"No."

"The Crown of Eternal Night?"

"Far worse." Gandorin's hand closed upon the empty breast of his robe. "An accurate account of what actually happened."

There was a silence in the kitchen.

"Twenty-seven years," said Nigel abruptly, from the hearth. Everyone looked at him. He frowned and shook his head. "I don't know why I said that. Go on."



They searched the ruins that day, for Gandorin declared that the grey gate must be opened. He could give no reason. But the cook, to the general surprise, agreed with him, and it was the cook who found the seam.

Behind the ancient arch, in the thickness of the wall, there was a niche sealed with a slab; and on the slab was the rune that was carved above the gate, and that Aeryn had worn about his neck since before he could remember. He laid the pendant against it. The slab swung inward without a sound.

Within lay a single scroll in a case of lead.

Gandorin unrolled it upon the kitchen table with trembling hands. It was written in the First Age script, in a large and somewhat wandering hand, and it was headed with the royal rune.

"The Final Prophecy of Al Zeimer," he breathed. "The original. No living eye has seen it."

He read it out. It was the Prophecy as Aeryn had first heard it

beneath the oak at Willowbrook: the thousandth year of the peace; the snow at midsummer; the dragon and the rune. *He shall be found beside a woodpile, the fence but half mended. He shall be raised in obscurity, and know nothing of his birth.*

"It says that?" Aeryn asked. "About the fence?"

"It has always said so."

"But who would trouble to foretell a fence?"

"The ways of prophecy are not ours to question," said Gandorin; and then he stopped, and bent closer. "There is more here. In the margin. In another hand."

They crowded about him. Beside the line concerning the fence, in small, round, careful letters, quite unlike the great scrawl of the text, someone had written a note; and Gandorin read it haltingly, for the ink was faint.

Master says "half mended". On Tuesday he said "unmended". Which? Have asked. He says it does not signify, and that I am not to write on the Prophecy.

For a long moment no one spoke.

"This changes everything, my boy," said Gandorin.

"How?"

The wizard gazed at the parchment. His lips moved. The light that had kindled in his eyes wavered, and sank, and went out.

"I cannot remember," he said.

But the cook had leaned across the table. He was looking not at the Prophecy but at the note in the margin, and he had taken down from its shelf the sheaf of thirty-nine pages sewn with kitchen twine, and laid it beside the scroll.

"That's my boy," he said. "That's the manual's hand. Look at the tails on those letters. Same lad wrote both." He straightened. "So the one who took down how to keep the Wall is the one who

asked about your fence. And he'd have been—"

He got no further.



For the lamp had gone out, and the fire, and a cold had come into the kitchen that was not the cold of the north. It was noon, and the stars could be seen through the broken roof; and in the doorway, where no one had seen him come, stood a figure robed in black and hooded in moving shadow.

"I WILL TAKE THAT," said the Dark Lord Malachar.

Aeryn's sword was in his hand before he knew that he had drawn it. But Malachar did not so much as turn his hood toward him. He had halted upon the threshold. He was looking at the old man in the frost-white robe who stood behind the table.

For the space of ten heartbeats neither moved.

Then the Dark Lord did a strange thing. He drew from within his robe a book bound in black leather, and opened it near the end, and ran one long finger down a page, and read; and looked up; and read again.

"YOU FELL," he said. There was something in the great voice that Aeryn had never heard there, and it was doubt. "THE FIRST OF NOVEMBER, IN THE THOUSANDTH YEAR. INTO THE WELL BENEATH THIS FLOOR. I HAVE IT WRITTEN. FOR TEN THOUSAND YEARS I HAVE LOOKED UPON YOUR SANCTIMONIOUS FACE, GANDORIN, AND ON THAT DAY I WROTE THAT I NEED NEVER LOOK UPON IT AGAIN. AND YOU STAND THERE."

"I am sorry to have disappointed you," said Gandorin

courteously. “I am told that I came back. I fear I cannot tell you more. I do not recall you at all.”

“YOU DO NOT—” The shadow about the Dark Lord heaved like a sea. “TEN THOUSAND YEARS! YOU FORGOT EVERYTHING HE TAUGHT US, AND THEY CALLED YOU WISE! I KEPT IT, EVERY WORD, AND THEY CALLED ME—“

Then Aeryn sprang. The Sword of Light swept down; the Dark Lord flung up the book to ward it; and the bright edge skidded across the open leaves and tore one corner from the foremost of them. Malachar cried out as though he himself had been cut. He snatched the Notebook to his breast. With his other hand he seized the scroll of the Prophecy from the table. There was a clap of darkness, and a reek of cold iron, and the doorway stood empty.

The fire came slowly back.

Upon the flagstones, where it had fluttered down, lay a scrap of parchment no bigger than a leaf. Aeryn took it up. It was the upper corner of a page, and there was nothing on it but a number, written in a hand that had once been small and round and careful, and had grown, with long use, angular and black.

“Forty,” he read.

Nigel took the scrap from him. He looked at it for some time. Then he looked at his thirty-nine pages; and he put the scrap away in the pocket of his apron, and said nothing whatever, which in him was remarkable.

“He has it all,” said Aeryn. He sat down heavily upon the stool by the hearth. “Do you not see? All of it. What the Wall was for. What the Prophecy means. What became of—of everything. It is written down, in that book, and the only man who has ever read it is the one man in the world who will not tell us. And we—” He looked about him: at the wizard who remembered nothing; at the

Council's scroll, still lying where the cook had dropped it; at the Sword of Light. "Has anyone on our side ever known what was happening? Even once?"

"I've had my doubts," said the cook.

"Some truths—" Gandorin began.

"Do not," said Aeryn.

That night a wind got up out of the breach. It did not blow from the north, where the Sovereign's host lay under the snow. It blew from under the ground: from the rubble of the Wall, and the roots of the Wall, and whatever the Wall had been set upon. It was warm. It smelled of nothing that any of them could name. And it came, and went, and came again, slowly, like the breath of something that after a very long sleep is beginning to wake.

Thus ends the Sixth Book of the Chronicles of the Eternal Shadow.

Chapter Seven · Book VII: The Watcher of Yesterday

They hunted the Dark Lord for a year, and did not find him.

They sought him in the Shadow Realm, where the forges were cold. They sought him in the Forgotten Lands of the Far East, whence travellers returned with tales of a warm coast, and music, and two old men in blue who had sent their regards. They climbed again the ten thousand steps, and found the hall of obsidian empty, and the Council's Writ still nailed to the throne. Behind the throne something tall stood under a drape. Aeryn did not lift it. He has said since that he wishes he had.

In the autumn of the third year since the riders came to Willowbrook, they returned to the north, having nowhere else to go.

The breach lay as they had left it. Snowflakes the size of horses stood about the field like grazing herds, and the people of those parts had begun to build with them. The warm wind still breathed from under the rubble. And in the midst of the ruin a thread of smoke went up from the one chimney that remained.

"You've got thin," said Nigel, and put the larger bowl before Aeryn.



It was late. The others slept: Thorin and Kael and Borin in a row against the wall, Elara apart, with her hand upon the little knife. The wizard dozed upright in the chimney corner with his beard upon his breast. The cook had made a supper for which he must have been saving a long time, and Aeryn had eaten it, and now sat on with his elbows upon the table, turning his spoon over in his fingers. It was past midnight, and the low sun came in level through the door.

"Nigel," he said. "How did you know the Wall would fall?"

The old man was banking the fire. He did not turn round.

"I didn't know. I told it to."

"You told it to?"

"I said, let it fall. You were there. I'd said it would for forty years, and that was reckoning; anyone could have reckoned it, with the manual. But that day I said *let it*. And it did as it was told." He set down the poker. "Things do, lad, round me. I've noticed. Small things, mostly. Porridge. I don't look at it very hard. A man who went about thinking the world would do as he said would be a danger to everyone, and I'd sooner be a cook. I didn't think the Wall was listening."

Aeryn was silent. He was remembering a night three years gone, and two old men beside this fire, and the hourglass ringing on its shelf.

"There was another time," he said. "Upon the steps. You said,

back you go."

"Aye." Nigel came and sat down across the table. In the long light his face was very old. "I've been meaning to tell you about that. I ought to have told you the same day, and I hadn't the heart, and then it got harder, the way they do. I'll tell you now. You'll not like it."

He laid his right arm upon the board, and turned back the sleeve.

Aeryn looked at the scar. He had seen it a hundred times. It ran from the wrist to the elbow, long and straight and white. He had not, until this moment, set beside it in his mind another arm, in black steel, laid open on the kitchen steps from the wrist to the elbow by his own hand.

He rose so suddenly that the stool went over.

"No," he said. "It cannot be."

"It's the same cut, lad. To the inch. I watched you make it. I stood in that door with a pan of eggs, and saw a man get the wound I've carried for as long as I can remember, in the place I've carried it. And then he took his helm off, and I saw his face." The cook looked up at him steadily. "I shave that face. It was a deal younger, but I know my own face. I was the Black Knight, Aeryn. I didn't know it till that minute. I don't remember a day of it. But there's no way round the arm."

"You told me that you were my father!"

"He told you. I'd take his word. He seemed to know what he was about."

"Then why have you spent three-and-forty years as a cook?"

"I haven't spent them as anything else," said Nigel. "That's the whole of it. I came to in this kitchen with a pan in my hand and nothing in my head. I'd no more notion than you who I was. And

then on those steps I saw it, all at once. That man had to get here. Forty years back, to this kitchen, without his wits, or there'd be no cook, and no one to see to the Wall, and no one standing in the door. And there he knelt, bleeding, and nothing to send him. So I sent him. I had the glass in my hand. I said, back you go; forty years, I said. And he went."

"Because if he had not been sent back, you would never have been here to send him."

"That was my thinking."

Aeryn set the stool upon its legs and sat down again. He found that he was no longer angry. He was thinking, harder than he had ever thought in his life.

"It does not hold," he said.

"No?"

"He was forty-three. Everyone says it: three-and-forty winters. You have told me yourself that you came here an old man. The Brothers say you were seventy if you were a day. A man does not age twenty-seven years in the passing of a door."

"It may have been a hard journey."

"And the glass. You said that it was more than you meant. I saw it. All the sand had run. What does it measure, Nigel? You have the manual."

The cook was silent for a moment.

"*One turn, one Age*," he said. "Page thirty-one. I'd always taken it for a manner of speaking. An age of a man. Threescore and ten, or near enough."

"And if it is not a manner of speaking?"

"Then I sent him ten thousand years," said Nigel. "Aye. I've lain awake on that. And if I did, then I never came here from those steps at all, and I'm no nearer knowing where I was before the

pan." He rubbed his eyes with the heel of his hand. "I never said the theory was finished, lad. I've a scar and a face. I was that man. How he got from there to here, I can't tell you. There's twenty-seven years I can't lay my hand on, and I've a feeling they were long ones."



The fire ticked. In the chimney corner the wizard muttered in his sleep and was still.

"So you are my father," said Aeryn at last. It was a strange thing to say, in that kitchen, to that face; and yet it was not so strange as it should have been. "All this while. The stew. The larger bowl."

"I gave you the larger bowl the first night because you looked as if you'd my appetite," said Nigel. "After the steps I gave it you because I thought you were my son. I'll not pretend it wasn't a comfort. I'd never had anyone." He looked down at the board. "I'm sorry about your mother. I ought to remember her. I've tried. A man ought to remember that, if he remembers nothing else, and I can't get so much as the colour of her hair. That's the worst of it. Worse than the Wall."

Aeryn reached across the table and laid his hand upon the old man's wrist, above the scar. Neither of them said anything for a while.

"There's a thing more," said the cook. "I'd not have thought of it but for tonight. It was the way you came in at the door."

"Yes?"

"I said to you, the first day, *you again*. You remember. You looked at me as if I'd lost my wits, and I let it go. I'd not seen you

before, you see. You were a lad of seventeen I'd never set eyes on. Only I had." He frowned, and spoke slowly, as a man feels his way down a dark stair. "It'd be five-and-twenty years ago, now. Eighteen years I'd been here. It was this season, near enough to the day. The door opened, that one, from the outside, with no track in the snow before it, and a young man came in. Twenty, I'd have said. He was in a poor way. Not hurt. He'd the look of someone who's just said goodbye to everybody he knows. I sat him down there, where you're sitting, and gave him stew. He'd a sword with him that he kept wrapped. He'd a bit of gold on a chain round his neck. He ate two bowls. And he asked me the way to the Mountains of Doom."

Aeryn's hand had gone to his own throat, where the pendant hung.

"I told him it was no road for a decent lad. He said he knew that. I gave him a black cloak one of the Brothers had died in, for he'd nothing against the cold. He thanked me. He called me by my name, and I'd not told it him. And he stood in that door a good minute, looking at this kitchen, as if he'd have liked to say something more." Nigel raised his eyes. "He'd your face. Three years older than you had when you turned up with the wizard, and I thought then, there's that lad again, and he's got younger. He'd be about the age you are tonight."

He stopped.

It was very quiet. Aeryn had not moved. He looked at the door, through which the low light fell; and at the stool on which he sat; and at the old man across the table, whose eyes, he now saw, as he had seen a thousand times and never once considered, were the colour of the summer sky.

"He went to the Mountains of Doom," said Aeryn. His voice

seemed to come from some distance off. “Twenty-five years ago. A young man with my face, and this sword, and this pendant. And from that year Malachar had a captain. *Who served me three-and-twenty years, and never once told me whence he came.*” He drew a breath. “And when I was born, I was found wearing this. The Knight was my father. He said so, and then he looked at me, and I thought he would say something more, and he did not.”

“Lad—“

“He was not only my father. That was what he did not say.” Aeryn stood. He was quite calm. “I am going to go through that door, Nigel. Not tonight. But soon; I am twenty, or near it. Someone is going to send me back five-and-twenty years, and you are going to give me stew, and I am going to walk to the Mountains of Doom and put on that armour. I will be the Black Knight. I will ride to Willowbrook, and strike down Edric, and stand in the farmyard looking at a woodpile. I will fight a boy on those steps, and let him cut me, and tell him that I am his father, because I am. And you will turn the glass.” He looked at the cook, and there was wonder in his face, and a dawning horror, and under both, absurdly, something very like relief. “You are not my father, Nigel. Or you are; but that is the least of it. You are *me*.”

The old man sat perfectly still.

“Well,” he said, after a long time. “That’d account for the appetite.”

Aeryn laughed. He had not expected to. It broke from him like a sob, and then he was weeping, and laughing still, and the cook had come round the table and put both arms about him, awkwardly, as a man does who has had no practice; and they stood so in the middle of the kitchen, the boy and the old man, while the fire burned down.



"I shall have to know more," said Aeryn. He had washed his face at the pump. "Who sends me. And why. And where you were, in the years you cannot find. And what any of it is *for*."

"Aye."

"I suppose you are going to tell me that some truths must be discovered."

"I am not," said Nigel sharply. "I don't hold with that. I never have. I've heard that wizard say it thirty times, and I've wanted to box his ears every one. If a man knows a thing, he should say it, and if he doesn't, he should say that. I've told you all I've got. It's not enough. I'm sorry for it." He began to gather the bowls. "There's a mirror in the cellar. I had the oddest thought just now that you might look in it. I can't think why. I've never liked the thing. It shows me some old fool in a crown."

"It showed me nothing at all," said Aeryn. "Do you remember? Thorin was in it, and I was not."

They looked at one another.

"I don't know what that means, lad."

"Nor I." Aeryn took up the Sword of Light from where it leaned beside the hearth, and held it a moment, and thought of a black blade with a dragon on its pommel. "But there is someone who does. He has it written down, every word, from the beginning. He told me so himself." He turned toward the east, where beyond the ruin and the snow and the long dark leagues the Mountains of Doom stood against the stars. "I think that he has gone home. He was not there in the spring; he will be there now. And there was something behind his throne that I was afraid to look at."

In the chimney corner the wizard Gandorin opened his eyes.

“I shall come with you, my boy,” he said. “I find that I should like to meet him.”

Thus ends the Seventh Book of the Chronicles of the Eternal Shadow.

Chapter Eight · Book VIII: The Mirrors of the First Age



So they came for the third time to the Mountains of Doom.

The Fellowship went with them as far as the Black Gate, and Nigel also, who had shut up his kitchen for the first time in three-and-forty years and complained of it at every league. There the others halted. The Prophecy no longer required it; but the ten thousand steps did, and the cook said frankly that he would wait at the bottom.

Aeryn climbed, and the old wizard climbed beside him, leaning on his staff and favouring his left knee.

“It is an odd thing,” said Gandorin, when they had reached the four thousandth step. “I have never set foot upon this stair. And yet I know that the next landing has a loose flag.”

It had.

The hall of obsidian was as Aeryn had left it. The pillars stood like pines. The red light burned without flame, and it was the dead of night, and through the high clefts of the roof the noon sun fell in bars across the floor. At the far end, upon the throne of black glass,

sat the Dark Lord Malachar, hooded in shadow, with the Notebook of Remembrance open upon his knees; and behind him the tall thing stood beneath its drape.

He did not rise. He looked at the old man in the frost-white robe, and turned back a page, and read, and looked again.

"GANDORIN," he said. "AT LAST WE MEET AGAIN."

The old wizard lowered his staff.

"So I am told," he said. "You will forgive me. I have come a long way to look at you, and now that I am here I cannot think what I expected."

"YOU EXPECTED TO DEFEAT ME. YOU HAVE EXPECTED IT FOR TEN THOUSAND YEARS. IT IS ALL IN HERE." Malachar struck the book with the flat of his hand. "EVERY SERMON. EVERY SMILE. DO YOU SUPPOSE THAT I DID NOT WATCH YOU? I HAVE WATCHED YOU EACH DAY OF MY LIFE. BEHOLD!"

He rose, favouring his left knee, and with one sweep of his arm he tore away the drape.

It was a mirror. It stood twice the height of a man, in a frame of tarnished silver, and it was the fellow of that which leaned among the barrels in the cellar of the keep. Aeryn, looking into it, saw the hall, and the pillars, and the throne; and before the throne, quite plainly, a hooded figure and an old man in white. He did not see himself. He found that he had not expected to.

"THERE," said Malachar. He stood square before the glass, and did not glance at the wizard at his shoulder. "THERE HE STANDS. MY ENEMY. IN HIS GREY ROBE, WITH HIS STAFF AND HIS BEARD AND HIS INTOLERABLE PATIENCE. I CARRIED THIS GLASS OUT OF THE MASTER'S HOUSE WHEN I WAS A BOY, AND FROM THE FIRST DAY IT HAS SHOWN ME

NOTHING ELSE. TEN THOUSAND YEARS. HE DOES NOT SPEAK. HE ONLY APES ME. WHEN I RAISE MY HAND HE RAISES HIS. WHEN I CURSE HIM HIS LIPS MOVE WITH MINE. IT IS THE SUBTLEST MOCKERY EVER DEVISED, AND I HAVE ENDURED IT."

"A grey robe?" said Aeryn. "With a staff?"

"AS YOU SEE."

"I do not see it. I see you, with your hood. And Gandorin has not carried a staff of oak since the day he fell." Aeryn came a step nearer. "Malachar. He moves when you move. He has always moved when you move. In ten thousand years, did it never come to you that it was a mirror?"

The shadow about the Dark Lord was quite still.

"Gandorin," said Aeryn. "Look in the glass. Tell me what you see."

The old wizard stepped up beside the Dark Lord. He looked. And the staff fell from his hand and rang upon the floor.

"I see a hood," he said faintly. "I see a black robe. I lift my hand, and a hand comes out of the shadow." He turned his head, slowly, toward the figure beside him; and the figure in the glass turned also. "That is not my face. That is his."

"THE NOTEBOOK," said Malachar. He was turning the leaves with a hand that shook. He turned them backward, a thousand years at a time, to the beginning, where the black and angular script grew small and round and careful. "THE FIRST YEAR. THE DAY HE HUNG THE GLASS IN OUR CHAMBER. I WROTE DOWN WHAT HE SAID. I WRITE DOWN EVERYTHING." He found the place, and when he read it out the great voice had sunk almost to the voice of a man.

"*Master says: a Mirror of the First Age shows a man the last*

face he wore before this one. Asked what it meant. He said some truths must be discovered, not taught. I think it is a riddle. It shows me an old man in grey. I do not like him."

There was a silence in the hall of obsidian such as had not been there since it was hewn.



"The last face he wore," said Gandorin.

He looked into the glass, at the hood and the shadow. He looked at his own robe, and stooped, and with his fingers he rubbed at the hem, where the rime of two winters still clung; and the frost came away, and the cloth beneath was black.

"They found me in the snow," he said. "I had no name. They gave me one, and I was glad of it. And I have felt ever since for something that I kept, here, and looked in every morning." He raised his eyes to the Dark Lord, and to the black book in the Dark Lord's hands. "I know what it was. It was that."

"IT IS MINE."

"Yes. It is yours. And it was mine." Gandorin drew himself up. A terrible certainty had come upon him, and with it, for the first time since he was carried into the kitchen, something very like grandeur. "I see it now. I was never restored from death. I never fell. I came from somewhere, without my book, and knew nothing; and they called me Gandorin, and I answered. Malachar, it is time that you learned the truth."

"I ALREADY KNOW THE TRUTH, OLD FOOL."

"Impossible. For you see: I am you."

And the Dark Lord, who had looked for ten thousand years

upon a grey old man in a glass, laid the book against his breast.

"AND I," he said, "AM YOU."

Gandorin staggered.

"Then who am I?"

"THAT IS WHAT I AM TELLING YOU. THE LAST FACE I WORE. BEFORE THIS, I WAS THE OLD MAN IN GREY. I WAS GANDORIN. I WENT TEN THOUSAND YEARS AS A WANDERING WIZARD, FORGETTING EVERYTHING, AND AT THE END OF THEM I FELL DOWN A WELL."

"But if I am you, and you are I, then who studied under Al Zeimer?"

"WE DID."

"Both of us?"

"NEITHER OF US. BOTH OF US WERE THE OTHER."

"But that is to say that I was the pupil who forgot—"

"AND I THE PUPIL WHO REMEMBERED, AND EACH OF US HAS BEEN BOTH, AND I HAVE HATED YOU FOR IT SINCE BEFORE I WAS YOU!"

"Then the feud between wisdom and power—"

"IS A QUARREL WITH MYSELF. I DO NOT CONCEDE IT."

It should be recorded that they continued in this manner for the better part of the night. Much was said concerning the nature of identity, and whether a man who has forgotten a deed may be said to have done it; Gandorin maintained that evil was merely good that had taken notes, and Malachar that good was merely evil with a poor memory; and they disputed with great bitterness which of them had been the more wronged by the other, and arrived by turns at every possible answer. A faithful account would run to eleven pages. Aeryn, who heard it all, sat down at length upon the lowest step of the throne.

"Time," Gandorin was saying, "is therefore a circle. I have often said so. Although, strictly speaking, given the identifications involved, it is more of a non-orientable—"

"Excuse me," said Aeryn.

They turned.

"I wish to be certain that I have understood. Gandorin is the Dark Lord."

"YES!" thundered both wizards.

"And the Dark Lord is Gandorin."

"YES!"

"The Gandorin who found me at Willowbrook lived ten thousand years, and fell into the well, and became you, Malachar; and you lived ten thousand years, and became this Gandorin, here. Then how many people are in this room?"

"Two," said Gandorin.

"ONE," said Malachar.

"Three," said Aeryn, "but let it pass. Where did the first of you come from?"

The wizards looked at one another.

"What does the book say?" Aeryn asked. "Its first page. You write down everything."

"THE FIRST PAGES ARE LOST," said the Dark Lord, with a bitterness that plainly had ten thousand years behind it. "THIRTY-NINE OF THEM. HE TOOK THEM FROM ME WHEN HE CAST ME OUT. BUT I KNOW HOW IT BEGAN. I CLIMBED OUT OF A WELL."

"And before the well?"

"THERE IS NO BEFORE THE WELL."

"Someone must have been born. Someone had a mother."

"I do not believe that I did," said Gandorin, considering it. "I

feel sure that I should have been told."

"You were a boy in the well because you were an old man who fell into it. And you were that old man because you had been a boy in the well." Aeryn pressed his hands to his temples. "It goes round. There is no beginning to you at all."

"I DO NOT SEE THAT THIS IS ANY CONCERN OF YOURS," said Malachar.

"It is both the Mountains of Doom and the Mountains of Destiny, you know," Gandorin remarked, to no one. "I have wondered for years why the charts disagreed. One comes at them from the west, and one from the east. They are the same mountains."

"And you have been fighting one another for ten thousand years," said Aeryn.

"YES!"

"Over a book."

"OVER THE TRUTH!"

"Then why do you not simply stop?"

The two wizards stared at him.

For the first time in ten thousand years, there was nothing that either wished to say. They stood before the mirror, the black robe and the white, and in the glass, for each of them, stood the other; and it seemed for one moment that something might be mended there which had been broken since the First Age.

Then Gandorin spoke.

"Because, my boy..."

And Malachar continued:

"...SOME TRUTHS..."

And together they finished, the mild voice and the terrible one, like one man speaking:

"...must be discovered, not taught."

Aeryn put his face in his hands.



It was at that moment that the hall cracked.

It was not the stone. A line of nothing ran down the air of the hall of obsidian, from the roof to the floor, as a line runs down a page that has been folded; and on the one side of it the pillars stood a hand's breadth higher than on the other. Through it there came a breath of the warm wind that blew from under the ruin of the Wall. The red light flickered. For the space of a heartbeat the mirror showed no one at all.

"WHAT IS THAT?" said Malachar.

"I think," said Aeryn slowly, "that it is because we have noticed." He had risen. "A thing that goes round and round, and was never begun: perhaps it holds only so long as nobody looks at it. And the three of us have just looked." He turned upon the Dark Lord. "I have questions for you, and you are going to answer them. Your Black Knight came to your gate out of nowhere. He was I. I must be sent back five-and-twenty years, and soon. Who sends me? Is it written?"

Malachar turned to the last leaves of the book. He read. Something passed across the grey eyes in the shadow, and was gone.

"IT IS NOT WRITTEN," he said. "YET."

"And the Knight, when he had fallen. He was sent back an Age. What became of him? There are twenty-seven years that the cook cannot find."

"WHAT COOK?"

"The cook of the Wall. He has your thirty-nine pages. He has had them for forty years; he calls them the manual."

It was a great while before the Dark Lord spoke. The line in the air ran a little farther across the floor.

"TAKE ME," said Malachar, "TO THIS COOK."

So they went down the ten thousand steps together, the Chosen One and the Dark Lord and the wizard who was the Dark Lord, and behind them the hall of obsidian came quietly apart along a seam that no one had known was there.

Thus ends the Eighth Book of the Chronicles of the Eternal Shadow.

Interlude · The Forgotten Lands of the Far East

Of the Two Blue Wizards, Azuriel and Cobaltus, the chronicles say little.

They were of the Seven Archmages of the First Age, and they went into the East ten thousand years ago, on what errand is not recorded. Their last message to the Council of Seven, which is preserved in the White Tower, is dated eight thousand seven hundred and forty-two years before the coming of the riders. It reads as follows.

Have located a powerful spiritual gathering near the coast. The local people perform ancient rites involving rhythmic incantation, sacred powders, and the worship of a deity known as David Guetta. Further investigation required.

They were not heard from again.

But it is told that on the evening when the hall of obsidian cracked, two old men in blue were sitting upon a terrace above a warm sea, on the island that is called Ibiza. The sun was going down. Below them, upon the shore, the drums of the evening rite had begun.

Azuriel looked up from his cup.

"Cobaltus, old friend. Do you feel that?"

"Feel what?"

"A great disturbance in the fabric of things. As though ten thousand years of history were coming unsewn."

Cobaltus took off the dark lenses that he wore against the glare, and considered the horizon for some time.

"That will be the boy," he said. "And the two in the well. He said it would be about now. He was very exact, as I remember. He drew a diagram."

"He was a good king," said Azuriel. "Before he forgot."

"He was. I expect he is happier as a cook." Cobaltus was silent a moment. "Ought we to do something?"

Azuriel gave the question the gravity that it deserved. The sea darkened. Upon the shore ten thousand worshippers lifted their hands.

"He asked us that himself," he said at last. "The night he told us. And then he answered it. Do you recall what he said?"

"I do."

"Well, then."

They touched their cups together, and went down to the rite.

Chapter Nine · Book IX: The Möbius Strip of Destiny



They came back to the ruin of the Wall on the last day of October.

The world was coming apart behind them as they rode. It did not burn or fall. It slipped. A village that they had passed at noon was, when Kael looked back, on the wrong side of its river. For the space of a breath the horse that Thorin rode was grey, and then had always been brown. The snowflakes hung in the air above the field like herds asleep, and did not come down. And through everything, from under the ground, breathed the slow warm wind.

There were seven of them now, and the Dark Lord, who rode a little apart in his shadow and spoke to no one, and wrote steadily in his book.

Nigel got down stiffly at the kitchen door. He unlocked it, and lit the fire, and looked once at the hooded figure upon his threshold.

“Wipe your feet,” he said.

Malachar wiped his feet.



"YOU HAVE SOMETHING OF MINE," said the Dark Lord.

"After supper," said the cook.

It was the strangest meal that kitchen had seen in ten thousand years. The Fellowship sat along one side of the table, and on the other, upon two stools, sat the black robe and the white, with exactly the same stoop, rubbing exactly the same knee. Elara did not take her eyes from them. Borin ate. And when the bowls were empty, Aeryn stood up.

"I am going to ask for a thing to be fetched," he said. "And then I am going to ask each of you a question, and I beg that for once I may be answered. Thorin, Borin: the mirror in the cellar."

They brought it up between them and leaned it against the wall by the hearth. It was dusk; and in its tarnished depths, behind the reflection of the fire, the sun was rising.

"Malachar read us the rule, in the Mountains," said Aeryn. "A Mirror of the First Age shows a man the last face he wore before this one. Gandorin."

The old wizard looked.

"The Dark Lord," he said.

"Malachar."

"THE OLD MAN IN GREY." He did not need to look, and did not.

"And the old man in grey, when he was a boy at the academy, and looked in the glass. What did he see? You were there. It will be in the book."

Malachar turned to the front of the Notebook. "*Gandorin says it shows him an old man too,*" he read, "*but with a white robe, and*

that the old man looks kind. I said it is plainly a picture of what he will grow into. He said the grey one must be what I will grow into. We fought."

"An old man in white," said Aeryn. "That is you, Gandorin. As you sit there. The first Gandorin had been the second. So: before this Gandorin, Malachar. Before Malachar, the grey Gandorin. Before the grey Gandorin, this one. Before this one, Malachar." He drew the round of it upon the table with a wet finger. "It does not stop. It is a ring, and there is no one in it who was ever born. Kael?"

"I make it twenty thousand years to go once round," said the thief. He had been counting on his fingers for some minutes. "Near enough. And then again."

"I DO NOT SEE," said Malachar, "WHY IT SHOULD BE SPOKEN OF AS THOUGH IT WERE A MISFORTUNE."

"Now Nigel," said Aeryn.

The cook did not move from the hearth.

"I've told you, lad. I don't hold with that thing."

"I know. You said that it shows you an old fool in a crown." Aeryn's voice was gentle. "Look once more. For me."

Nigel came, wiping his hands upon his apron, and stood before the glass. He looked for a long time.

"Same as ever," he said gruffly. "Old fellow. Robes down to his feet, all over stars. Great daft crown. Seventy, I'd say. He's got a look on him as if he knew what you were going to say and was sorry about it." He paused. "He's got my scar. I never saw that before. His sleeve's fallen back."

"There is a statue in the round chamber," said Aeryn. "By the well. Its face is worn away. But it wears that crown, and the rune of the Forgotten King is cut upon its breast."

"Al Zeimer," said Elara.

She had risen. She was looking at the cook as she had looked at him across this kitchen on the first night, three years before, and her face was white.

"That is who," she said. "That is the look you have. The Master of the academy. I was small, and I came for the cheese, and he would stop and ask me how my mother did. He was very kind, and very sad, and sometimes in the middle of a word he would forget what he was saying. He had been a king, and nobody could remember of what. We were all made to forget him. Even we." Her voice shook. "It is told among my people that he came out of nowhere, a man in his prime, and that he reigned and taught for seven-and-twenty years; and that one day his chair was empty."

"Twenty-seven," said Nigel.

No one spoke. The cook sat down slowly upon the stool beside the hearth. His hands lay open on his knees.

"Twenty-seven years," he said again. "So that's where they were. I sent him back an Age, and he landed at the beginning of everything, forty-three years old, and knowing the lot. And they made him king for it." He looked up at the empty scroll-case, and the sheaf of thirty-nine pages, and the two old wizards upon their stools. "And I'm the one that taught those two. And forbade a boy to write things down. And knew what that Wall was for, and went and forgot it." He drew a breath. "I'd like a word with myself."

"There is one link more," said Aeryn. "What did the Master see in his own glass? Nigel. The manual."

It was the cook who found the place. He had read it many times, and had taken it for a boy's nonsense.

"Page twelve. *The Master keeps his own glass under a cloth and will not look in it. I looked while he was at the Wall. It showed me the same old man in grey. But the forest girl says that*

she came on the Master once with the cloth lifted, when he thought himself alone, and that he was speaking to the glass. He said: Still in your black iron. Still upon your knee. Put up your visor, man; I know the face. He was angry that we asked."

"A knight in black iron, upon one knee," said Aeryn. "And the Knight, looking, would have seen a boy of twenty. And the boy—"

He turned and stood before the mirror of the First Age. It showed him the kitchen, the fire, his friends upon their bench. It showed him no one standing where he stood.

"No one," he said. "For I am the beginning of it."



Then he said aloud what remained, that the whole of it might once be said.

"There are two of us. One is a ring. Gandorin, and Malachar, and Gandorin, without birth or end, and where he came from in the first place no one in this room can tell me.

"The other is a line, and it is I. The first half of it the cook and I had out in this kitchen while you slept: I go back through that door, and I am the Black Knight, and my own father, and at forty-three I kneel upon those steps. Ask me after. Here is the rest. The Knight goes back an Age. He is Al Zeimer for seven-and-twenty years; he digs a well, and teaches the two of you, and writes a Prophecy about a fence. At seventy he forgets so well that the world forgets him. And he comes to in this kitchen with a pan in his hand." He looked at the cook. "Twenty years, and three-and-twenty, and seven-and-twenty, and three-and-forty so far. That is a hundred and thirteen. It adds."

“It does,” said Kael, with a kind of awe. “It all adds. I have been trying to make it not add for three years.”

But Aeryn had not finished speaking before the thing began that he had half foreseen.

The fire burned, and for an instant did not burn, and burned again. The table was oak, and was pine. He looked along the bench, and Thorin was there, and then there was only the wall behind him, with the lamplight on it; and then Thorin, frowning at his own hands. Borin went, and came back with his mouth open. Kael flickered like a candle in a draught. And Elara, who stood nearest to him, grew for one terrible moment as faint as breath upon a glass.

“What is it?” cried Borin. “What is happening to us?”

“It is the same as in the hall,” said Aeryn. He had caught Elara’s hand; it was there, and was not, and was there. “It is all made out of itself. I am my own father. The sword was never forged. The Prophecy was written from the memory of hearing it. None of it stands upon anything but itself, and so it stands only if it is done. And it has been said aloud now, the whole of it, and none of us has yet agreed to do it.” He looked about him wildly. “If I do not go through that door, there is no Knight. If there is no Knight, there is no child under the oak, and no wizard sent to find him, and no Fellowship. None of you ever met.”

“Then go, lad,” said Thorin hoarsely, out of the wall.

“I do not know how! No one has ever told me how!”

“Sit down,” said Nigel. “All of you.”



He had not raised his voice. But the fire steadied when he spoke, and the table was oak.

He stood up from his stool. He was a spare old man in an apron, bald as a stone; and yet the two wizards, who had ten thousand years apiece and more, and one of whom was the Dark Lord, sat a little straighter upon their stools, as boys do when a master comes into the room.

"Now then," said the cook. "You two."

"I WILL NOT BE ADDRESSED—"

"You'll be addressed how I see fit. I had the teaching of you, seemingly, and by the look of it I made a poor job, and I'm sorry for that. I'd no business putting a boy out of doors for writing down what he was told. That was wrong, and I'll say so." He looked at Malachar until the hood was lowered. "And you've had ten thousand years to get over it, and you've spent them sulking in a mountain and making other folk miserable. And you." He turned upon Gandorin. "Ten thousand years telling people that truths must be discovered, when all it ever meant was that you'd lost them. There's a lad there who's asked a plain question every day for three years."

"I am aware of it," said Gandorin humbly.

"Aye. Well. Here's what's to be done. There's a well under this floor. I dug it, it appears; I can't think what I was about. What does it do? One of you has it written."

Malachar turned the pages without a word, and read.

"*Master says: whoever goes down the well comes up on the night it was dug, a boy, and remembering nothing. I said I did*

not see the use of that. He looked at me a long while. He said, no; I do not suppose you do."

"There you are, then," said Nigel. "That's where the pair of you came from, and that's where the pair of you are going. Two boys climbed out of that well the night it was made. Somebody's got to be them. You'll go down it, and you'll come up at the beginning, and you'll do it over, and this time you'll make a better hand of it. You'll put it right."

"It cannot be put right," said Aeryn. "It has already happened. They will do exactly what they did."

"I know that, lad. I can count as well as your thief. But they'll have been told to do it properly, which nobody ever troubled to tell them before; and you never know." The cook folded his arms. "Well?"

The old wizard in the frost-white robe had risen. He stood very straight. He seemed, in that low room, taller than he had been.

"I will go," said Gandorin. "I find that I am not afraid of it. I have been nobody for two years, and somebody else for ten thousand before that, and I should like, I think, to be a boy, and to be told things, and to believe that I shall keep them." He smiled. "I gather that I do not. But I shall mean to."

"Good," said Nigel. "And you?"

The Dark Lord had not moved.

"NO," said Malachar.



"I WILL NOT FORGET," he said. He stood, and the shadow stood up with him and darkened the vault. "I HAVE NEVER FORGOTTEN. IT IS THE ONE THING THAT I AM. YOU ASK ME TO GO DOWN INTO THE DARK AND COME UP A FOOL, AND GROW OLD A FOOL, SMILING, AND CALL THAT PUTTING IT RIGHT? I WILL NOT. LET IT COME UNDONE."

He laid the Notebook of Remembrance upon the kitchen table, squarely, as a man sets down a thing that he means to take up again in a moment. He turned back his sleeves. And he raised both hands toward Aeryn, across the board.

"AERYN OF WILLOWBROOK," he thundered. "YOU HAVE DEFEATED THE BLACK KNIGHT. YOU HAVE FULFILLED THE PROPHECY OF THE SEVEN STARS. AND NOW, AT LAST, YOU MUST TRAVEL INTO THE PAST!"

Everyone stared at him.

"Yes," said Aeryn. "I must. I have just explained that I must. But why do *you* say so?"

"BECAUSE IT HAS BEEN FORETOLD!"

"By whom? It is not in the Prophecy. I have read the Prophecy. What do you gain by it?"

"SILENCE! THE RITUAL MUST BEGIN!"

"Malachar, listen to me. If you send me back, I become your captain. I serve you three-and-twenty years and tell you nothing. I father myself. I lose to myself upon those steps, on purpose. Then the cook sends me back an Age, and I become your own master, and I dig the well that you have this moment refused to go down, and I cast you out of my house for taking notes. Every wrong that

was ever done you, I do. You would be making it happen. Is that not somewhat against your interest?"

The Dark Lord's eyes blazed with ancient fury.

"YOU KNOW NOTHING OF THE WAYS OF DARKNESS!"

"Then is it to mend the world? Because it comes apart if I do not go?"

"DO YOU TAKE ME FOR A MASON? I HAVE SAID: LET IT COME UNDONE."

"Is it because it is written in your book, and so must be?"

"IT IS NOT WRITTEN. I HAVE LOOKED. THE PAGE FOR THIS DAY IS BLANK."

"Then you remember it. You were the grey Gandorin once; he knew that I—"

"I REMEMBER NOTHING THAT I HAVE NOT WRITTEN. THAT IS THE WHOLE OF MY GRIEVANCE."

"Then *why?*" cried Aeryn. "You will not save yourself. You will not save the world. You have no reason that I can find, and I have looked harder than anyone. Only tell me why, and I will go and thank you!"

Malachar drew himself to his full height.

"BEHOLD!" he said. "THE PORTAL OF ETERNAL YESTERDAY!"

And in the kitchen doorway, where the October dusk had been, there stood a darkness that turned slowly, like water going down; and beyond it, very small and far, a door, and snow, and firelight.



Aeryn looked at it.

Then he looked at the table. They were all there. Thorin was scowling, as he did when he was near to tears. Kael had for once nothing to say. Borin was holding out, with a helpless generosity, the heel of a loaf. They were solid again, and they would stay so only by one road; and he knew every league of it. It ran through three-and-twenty years in black iron. It ran through a night of storm in the vale, and a woman he would love and could not save, and a child he must leave beneath a tree. It ran through a crown, and a long forgetting. And it came out here, in this room, with these people, and with one of them who would be waiting.

He was not brave. He had never thought so. But he found that there was nothing in him that wished it otherwise.

"You need not shout," he said to the Dark Lord. "I am going."

He took up the Sword of Light. He settled the pendant at his throat. And he went round the table, and took Elara's two hands.

"You will have to wait," he said. "It is a long way round."

"I have waited before," said the elven princess. The tears ran down her face, and she did not hide them. "I did not know that it was for you. I shall know it this time. And I shall be here; I am the one of us who can be." She kissed him. The songs, which have a great deal to say on the subject, are for once agreed that it was not too soon. "Go quickly. And when you are old, and do not know me, I shall know you."

He turned last to the cook.

Nigel had not stirred from his place by the hearth. They looked at one another, the boy and the old man, with the same eyes.

"You'll come out by this door," said Nigel. "It'll be snowing. There'll be stew. I'll not know you, and I'll be short with you, I dare say; I generally am. Don't mind it."

"You gave me two bowls."

"Did I? Aye. Well." The cook cleared his throat. "Lad. When you ride into that village, and he's stood there by the woodpile. Will you tell him?"

Aeryn was silent.

He thought of a boy with an axe in his hand, who had mended half a fence. He thought of what that boy would do, if a black rider leaned down from his horse and told him all that was to come: the iron, and the storm, and the forgetting. He knew the boy well. He would have run, and no one could have blamed him. And there would have been no one in this kitchen.

"No," he said. "I shall tell him that I am his father. He will have to find the rest." He smiled a little, ruefully, for he had heard what he was about to say, and had sworn a hundred times that he would never say it. "Some truths must be discovered, Nigel. Not taught."

"I still don't hold with it," said the cook.

"No. But it is true of this one."

He walked toward the door.

He would have gone through it of himself. He had lifted his foot to do so. But the Dark Lord Malachar, it seemed, could not suffer that. He strode round the table with a cry, and seized the Chosen One by the wrist in a grip like cold iron, and dragged him bodily across the threshold, as though it were of the first importance that the boy should not go willingly; and the darkness closed over them both.

It turned once more, and was dusk.

The Notebook of Remembrance lay upon the kitchen table,

where its owner had set it down.



For a little while no one moved.

It was Gandorin who broke the silence. He was looking at the doorway, and then at his own right hand, which he had raised, and was turning over before his face.

"He did not let go," he said wonderingly. "I felt it. He held on, and held on, and then the boy pulled free, and went on down into the dark, and he was left with nothing. And it was cold, and there was snow against his face. And he could not think who he was."

"Two years," said Kael. "To the day. He lay in the drift by that door on the last of October. I said at the time that I should like to know where he had been."

"Now you do," said the wizard. He looked down at the black hem of his robe. "So he comes round to it after all. He needed two years, and to lose his book. I am sorry that I was so much trouble."

He took up his staff. He would not let them come farther than the cellar stair; but Nigel went down with him into the round chamber, carrying the lantern, and what was said there beside the well the cook never afterwards told, save for the end of it.

"Write it down," said Nigel.

"I shall try," said Gandorin. "I shall try very hard. And when I am cast out for it, I shall try to remember that you were sorry."

He stepped off the brink as a man steps into a boat.

When the cook came up again into the kitchen he was alone, and he was older; and the fire was burning with a steady flame, and the table was oak, and had never been anything else. Outside, in

the last of the light, the great snowflakes had begun to come down upon the field, one by one, with a sound like sighing. They broke as they fell. And through the open door, turning as it came, drifted a single flake of snow no larger than a fingernail, and settled upon the threshold, and melted there.

"Well," said Nigel. "That's that seen to."

He went to the table. He took the sheaf of thirty-nine pages down from its shelf, and cut the kitchen twine; and he opened the Notebook of Remembrance, and laid them in at the front of it, before the leaf with the torn corner. They fitted. He turned to the end, where the Dark Lord's last page stood blank. He looked at it for some time. Then he took the stub of pencil from behind his ear, and wrote a line, and shut the book.

Elara had sat down upon the stool beside the hearth.

"That's my stool, lass," said the cook.

"I know," she said. "I shall want another. I am staying."

"I'm a hundred and thirteen."

"I am older."

He looked at her. And it may be that some part of him, which had been a boy at Willowbrook, and a knight, and a king, and had forgotten all three, knew her then; for he said nothing more about the stool, but put the larger bowl before her, and went to see about the bread.

So ended the long war of the Shadow, and the realm had peace.

And far away, under the roots of the fallen Wall, in the warm dark from which the wind had blown, something that had slept since before there was a Wall to set upon it opened its eyes.

Nobody at the table looked up.

Thus ends the Ninth and Last Book of the Chronicles of the Eternal Shadow.

From The Complete History of Eldorian Cheese

✦ ✦ ✦

The following entries are reproduced, by kind permission of the publisher, from the author's indispensable companion volume (1,104 pp., of which 300 concern cheese).

Gandorin: Parentage. See *Malachar: Parentage*.

Malachar: Motives and Ambitions. The Dark Lord's ultimate purpose remains one of the great mysteries of the Third Age. Scholars have proposed numerous theories, most of which are wrong.

Malachar: Parentage. See *Gandorin: Parentage*.

Royal House, the. The line of the Forgotten King is traced in Appendix F. Readers have written to point out that the family tree in that appendix is a straight line with a single name on it, joined at one place to a ring. This is not a printer's error. Scholars of heredity are respectfully asked not to write in.

Wall, the Great, of Eternity: Builders of. Unknown. It is established that Al Zeimer and the Seven did something to it. It is equally established that it was standing when he arrived, and that there was a pot upon the hob.

Wall, the Great, of Eternity: Sailing round. See the forthcoming volume.

Wizards, Blue. They were told. See *Ibiza: Liturgical Practices*, pp. 611–790.

Chapter Ten · The Prequel: A Family Affair



Now at the last shall all be made plain.

For it is fitting that a tale should end at its beginning, and that those who have followed the Chronicles through nine Books should learn how these things first came to be; and there is nothing in what follows that will perplex the attentive reader.

In the beginning of the First Age, ten thousand years before the riders came to Willowbrook, a man came through a door.

It was a door of grey stone, with a rune above it, in the foot of a wall of ice. He came through it upon one knee, as though he had been kneeling in some other place a moment before. He was a man of three-and-forty winters, in black armour, and his right arm was laid open from the wrist to the elbow; and he held in his left hand a black sword with a dragon upon its pommel, and at his belt hung a horn.

He knelt a while upon the flags. Then he got up, and bound his arm, and looked about him.

He was in a kitchen. He knew it, as a man knows the house where he was happy. The hearth was the same, and the low black

vault. There was no one there. But the Wall stood above it, vast and blue and already old, and when he went to the hearth, there was a pot upon the hob.

It was stew. It was still warm.

He stood looking at it for a long time. He was the one man then alive who knew all that was to come in ten thousand years, and he had come prepared for a great many things; but he had not known that the Wall would be there before him, nor who it was that had lit that fire. He never learned. It is not recorded that he ever ceased to wonder.

Then, being hungry, he ate.



Of the twenty years that followed, the songs once told much, and now tell nothing; for he saw to that himself.

He put off the armour. He scoured the black from the sword until it shone white, and he laid it by in oilcloth against a day that he remembered. Men came to him, as men will come to one who is never surprised, and because he knew where each river would flood and each kingdom fail, they made him their king. He bore it as he could. He raised a house of learning at the foot of the Wall, about the old kitchen; six others of power gathered to him there, and with them he did to the Wall that which was needful, and which is fully set forth in the manual.

In the eighteenth year he took aside the two youngest of the Seven, who were clad in blue, and told them everything. He drew it for them upon a table. When he had finished, one of them asked whether they ought not to do something.

"I have thought of little else," said the King. "I have thought of it for eighteen years, and before that for three-and-twenty. If I warn him, he does not go. If he does not go, there is no one to warn him. There is a girl I have not yet met, and three friends, and a cook. I find that I would rather they existed." He rolled up the drawing. "No. Go east. I am told that it is pleasant. Some truths must be discovered, not taught."

He had sworn once that he would never say it. He said it a good deal, in those years.

He had two mirrors made, of a kind that he recalled; and when the first was finished he looked into it, and saw a knight in black armour looking out. He hung a cloth over it and did not look again. But a king is watched, and so it came to be said in that house that the Master had made a Veil, and that it was a thing of great power. He let it be said. It gave him the notion.

For he could not sleep. He knew the day of every death in ten thousand years. He knew the name of a woman in a vale, and the night of a storm. And he began, a little at a time, by an art of his own devising, to put it down.



In the twentieth year he had a well dug.

He needed two apprentices. He knew their names; he had known them since he was seventeen. What he had never known was where a man got them. He had questioned every traveller for twenty years, and no one had heard of two such boys in any land. So at last, having the masons in for the drains, he had them sink a shaft in the round chamber under the cellar, for water; and on the

evening that it was finished he stood upon the brink, an ageing king with a lantern, and looked down.

"I could do with some help about the place," he said.

He did not say it loudly. But the lantern flared, and far below him something rang, like a cup that has been touched.

That night there was a storm. And in the dead of it the porter came running to say that there were two children in the round chamber, soaked to the skin, who had climbed up out of the new well one after the other, and that neither of them could tell his name.

They were about twelve years old. They were as like as two peas. Each had a bad left knee; each had eyes as grey as slate. The first was mild, and looked about him with pleasure. The second was scowling, and his right hand was working at his breast as though he had lost something there.

The King knelt down before them. He was a long time looking.

"So that is how," he said. "Of course it is. I ought to have known that I should have to do it myself." He laid a hand upon the head of the first. "You are Gandorin." Then he turned to the second, and hesitated, for the Art had already taken something. "And you are Mal—Mal—it will come to me. Malcolm."

"Where did we come from?" asked the scowling boy.

"Out of the well," said the Master.

"And before the well?"

But to that the Master made no answer; and those who have read thus far will know that it was not from any wish to conceal it.

He put them to bed himself. They were older than he by more thousands of years than can be reckoned, and he tucked the blankets about them and stood in the door with the candle until they slept.



They were good years, the five that followed. He taught them all that he knew, which was all that they had once taught him. He hung the second mirror in the boys' chamber, and let them make of it what they would. He made a small glass of sand to time the eggs, and found only afterwards that it did so rather thoroughly, and put it on a high shelf. He compounded a remedy for the knee, which made the taker a little younger and a little vaguer; Gandorin took it gladly, and Malcolm poured his out of the window.

There was a child of the forest folk who came to the kitchen door each week for cheese. She had silver hair and grave eyes, and she lent the boys her knife. The Master always asked after her mother. He could not have said why the sight of her was so hard to bear, by then; he knew only that he had once known.

He dictated the Final Prophecy, as nearly as he could recall it. It was Malcolm who held the pen.

"Master, you said *half mended*. On Tuesday you said *unmended*."

"Did I?" said Al Zeimer. He looked out of the window for a time, toward the south. "It was half mended. He had done as far as the gate. The new rails were stacked beside it. It does not signify, boy. And you are not to write upon the Prophecy."

There was one law in that house, and the boys had it by heart: nothing that the Master said was to be written down. He had made it in the first year, when he still knew why. It was because the Art was working, and each month he put down a little more; and whatever was written he might read, and take up again, and not be able to bear.

In the fifth year he found the book.

It was bound in black leather. It held every word that he had spoken in five years, in a small round careful hand. He stood with it in the boy's chamber, turning the leaves; and he remembered, as from the far side of a great water, an elven voice telling this tale beside a fire, and what it was that the Master had thundered. He had always thought it a cruel thing to say. He found that he had it by rote.

"Knowledge must be earned, young Malcolm!" he thundered. "Not simply written down!"

"But Master, you say a different thing each week! I only wished to know which was—"

"Silence! Your arrogance shall be your undoing!"

He cut out the first thirty-nine pages, which concerned the upkeep of the Wall, for he thought that someone might one day be glad of them; and he put them in the kitchen drawer. The rest he gave back. He could not have said why he did that, either. And he stood at the gate in the rain and watched the boy go up into the mountains with the book under his arm and the mirror on his back, and he wept, and by the evening he had forgotten what for.



In the twenty-seventh year he was seventy years old, and there was very little left.

He sent for Gandorin, who was a young man now, and gentle, and remembered almost nothing.

"Gandorin," he said. "The Wall must never fall. There is one thing that you must always remember."

"Yes, Master?"

"The secret of maintaining the Wall is—"

"Yes?"

Al Zeimer frowned.

"What were we talking about?"

He patted the young man's hand, and sent him away, and sat on alone in his chair.

There was one working left to do, and it was the greatest. He had prepared it for seven years. It would take the last of what he carried: the names, and the storm, and the friends; and it would take from all the world the memory that there had been a king. He knew this. He knew also where it would set him down, for he had been told, at a kitchen table, by a young man doing sums. It was the one journey of his life to which he had looked forward.

He thought, at the end, of an old man in an apron who had put two arms about a weeping boy, awkwardly, having had no practice.

"I shall want a pan," said Al Zeimer. He went down to the kitchen, and took one from its hook. Then he spoke the Veil of Oblivion.

They found his chair empty in the morning. There was a stir in the house, and a searching; and then, one by one, the searchers stopped, and looked at one another, and could not think whom they sought. By noon the gardeners were at their work. By evening there remained only a feeling, in that house and in all the kingdoms, that there was a chair in which someone used to sit.

Thus began the long forgetting; and thus all is made plain.



Ten thousand years went by.

The house fell, and a keep was raised upon it. The ice grew. A wizard wandered, and a shadow brooded in the mountains, and in the kitchen at the foot of the Wall an old man came to with a pan in his hand. A young man walked out of a door into the snow, and went up into the mountains, and put on black iron.



There was a vale beneath the Mountains of Doom, and in it a weaver whose name was Maerwen.

He had been told, at seventeen, beneath an oak, that his mother gave her life to protect him. He had not been told her name. So for a little while he was able not to know that it was she; and by the time he knew, it was a long way too late to matter. She laughed at him. No one had done that since he put on the helm. When she asked what the child should be called he answered before she had finished asking, and she laughed at that also, and stitched it in gold into the hem of a cloak that she had woven for the purpose, of silver silk.

He did what he could. He had known for five years that the Dark Lord's hunters would come for the child on a night of storm, and when the night came he sent her away before them, down out of the vale by the western road, toward the farms. He had thought of every road but that one. It was upon that road that they found her.

He came too late, as he had always been going to. She lay beneath a hedge with the rain upon her, and she had put her body between the hunters and what she carried; and under her, in the silver cloak, the child was warm, and alive, and looked up at him with eyes the colour of the summer sky.

He carried it four leagues through the storm to Willowbrook, to the old oak at the end of the lane. He laid it among the roots, where the ground was dry. He lifted from about his own neck a small golden pendant, which had hung there for as long as he could remember, and he understood now exactly how long that was; and he put it about the neck of the child.

Then he went back among the trees and stood in the rain, and waited.

It was near dawn when the lantern came down the lane. The man who carried it was not tall, and not yet old. The Knight had not seen that face for eight years of his own life, and had believed, for three of them, that he had watched it die. He stood very still. He saw the farmer stoop, and exclaim, and gather up the bundle against his coat; and he saw him raise the lantern and look for a long moment toward the trees, where something tall and black stood and did not move.

The lantern went away up the lane.

He waited until he could no longer see it. Then he went back along the western road, four leagues, to bury her. He told the Dark Lord that the child was lost; and that, in its way, was true.

Of that night the songs say nothing, for there was no one to make them.



Seventeen years went by.

Upon a midsummer evening in the thousandth year of the peace, seven riders drew rein upon a hill.

Below them lay a valley, and a village among its willows. The leader of the seven sat his horse a little before the rest. He was clad in black from head to foot. He had raised the visor of his helm, as he did not when any could see him, and the wind was in his face.

He had not seen that valley for seventeen years, and before that he had known nothing else. He knew each roof. He knew the lane, and the farmhouse at the end of it, and the fence, of which the new rails went as far as the gate. He knew that there was a man in that house whom he must strike down before the night was out, and that he would turn the blade. He knew what he would say, and what he would leave unsaid; and that beyond this evening lay the steps, and the crown, and the long forgetting, and at the very end of all of it, a kitchen.

There was someone at the woodpile.

It was a dark and stormy night. And as the last rays of sunlight just barely crested upon the horizon, he saw the silhouette of the boy.

Afterword · On The Gusts of Autumn



From the author's web journal.

March. Excellent progress on *The Gusts of Autumn*! I have rewritten the prologue for the seventeenth time, and I think I have finally captured the right atmosphere. The manuscript stands at 87%.

The following September. The book is coming along beautifully. Some characters have taken me in unexpected directions. Aeryn's horse now has three point-of-view chapters, and I think readers will be surprised by how much they care. 87%.

Four years later. I know that you are all eager for news, but please understand that writing is not a mechanical process. Meanwhile I am delighted to announce my illustrated encyclopedia, *The Complete History of Eldorian Cheese*, which answers many questions.

Later. A number of you have asked why Malachar sent Aeryn into the past. I assure you that this is addressed, fully and satisfyingly, in *The Gusts of Autumn*, and that to say anything here would spoil it.

Later. I have written hundreds of pages this year. I have also

discarded hundreds of pages. That is the nature of the craft. 87%.

Later. Regarding the television adaptation, which has now gone some way beyond the books: I have seen the final season, in which Borin the Hungry is crowned King of all Eldoria. Some of you have written to me in distress. I can only say that the producers and I discussed it at length, and when you think about it, who has a better story than Borin?

Later. My publishers ask me to mention that legal proceedings concerning the alleged resemblance of the Chronicles to certain other works of fantasy remain at an early stage, and that the estates concerned have not yet settled among themselves which is to sue first.

Later. I am NOT abandoning the series. I am simply working on a prequel about Gandorin's grandfather. I am told that there are difficulties with the premise.

Most recently. People ask whether I know how it ends. Of course I know how it ends. I have always known. There is an old man in a kitchen, and a woman who has waited a long time, and one morning—

But I find, each time I sit down to it, that the stew is still warm, and that I should like to leave them there a little longer.

87%.