

IN HOC SIGNO

A NaNoWriMo novel by Magnus Itland

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Chapter 1: In The Beginning

In another universe, similar to ours but not quite the same, another earth-like planet circles a whiter sun. It is populated by humans not too different from us, whether by design or coincidence I do not know. For this world is filled with magic, a magic so advanced that it is sometimes indistinguishable from technology. Actually there are two kinds of magic: The white magic of the Holy Light of the White Sun, and the black magic of the Greedy Darkness of the Dark Moon. They're a bit like God and the Devil, I guess, only less occupied with sex, and less personal overall. I really don't know much about God and the Devil actually. But the other two I know all too well. Because I have been there, on that other Earth, many times. I am Vincent Logan Hanson, high schooler and Champion of the Light.

Yeah, I know it sounds crazy. So what? If you don't believe me, fine. It's not like I need your belief. If you enjoy the story more thinking that I'm making this all up, fine by me. At one time it might have mattered to me, when I was just a boy. But after all that has happened, after all that I have seen, after all that I have done and all that has been done to me, I couldn't care less. But we'll get back to that in a while. I think this will make a lot more sense if we begin from the beginning.

I guess I was a pretty ordinary kid until I was 8 and my parents took me with them on a trip to the tropics. They were very interested in old ruins and stuff, so we spent our vacations doing that kind of thing. This time it was in the tropics. Hard to believe there were actually civilizations down there. Anyway, two important things happened.

One, I found a crystal. My dad said it was some kind of quartz. It was kinda foggy and milky in the center, otherwise it might have been worth a little bit. Not exactly a jewel, but very regular in shape and kinda pretty, except as I said it was kinda hazy in the center there. The other big thing is I got some kind of nasty illness.

I didn't get really sick until we had just come home. Then I got crazy fever and was rushed to the hospital. I was totally out of it for more than half a year. I didn't wake up at all in that time, didn't grow, and lost a lot of weight. I was little more than a skeleton when I came out of it. I recovered completely after some time, but from then on I was always the smallest and weakest boy in my class. Or the class below me either, I think. That hurt. I got into so much trouble with the boys who like to bully the small and weak. I was the ideal target. I wasn't even a nerd, I just was too small for my age and that was enough to paint a big bullseye on me. Life isn't fair, is it?

But you can't keep a good gene down. It took years, but gradually I grew back. I came into puberty later than the rest of them, but once there I started to catch up. I just continued to grow for longer, until I had caught up with most of my class. But I couldn't forget. If I had been like them always, I guess I would have been one of them. But I wasn't. I remembered how they really were, and I trust no one.

Hold on, we're coming to the good stuff now. Remember that stone? I had not wanted anything to do with it for all those years. I loved it when we got it down there, but somehow I came to associate it with that fever thing. When I woke up and saw it beside my bed in the hospital – for my parents had put it there because I had loved it so much – I was hysterical and told them to throw it away because it had made me sick. They didn't, but they hid it in the top of the cupboard where I didn't reach. But when I grew as tall as my dad, of course it was only a matter of time before I glimpsed it, way back in the corner of the cupboard. I still shivered as I took it out and held it. It felt strange. I knew now that crystals don't give you a fever, but it still felt weird. I looked into it. There was still fog in the middle. And then the fog started to move.

OK, this is where you'll say I am crazy or lying. Fine. But in there, in the crystal, there were things that moved. Small shapes. I just stared. And then I could hear, faintly, them singing or chanting. And then the fog started to seep out of the crystal and gather around me. I tried to drop it and run, but the fog hid everything and I stumbled and fell.

Chapter 2: Under a strange sun

When I woke up, I was lying on a stone slab in the middle of a circle of stones. Not exactly like Stonehenge, it was smaller and the stones were very regular like columns with big symbols on them and there were no stones lying on top of the others. They were all made from white stone, not sure what kind, if it is marble or what. I'm not a geologist. In their language it is just called "whitestone". Anyway, I didn't know that then, or anything else. As far as I knew, I had just collapsed at home and now I woke up there. Not good.

The people around me were not quite like any of the races here. They were kinda tan but their pigment is pure black rather than brown such as here, so they looked more gray than Latino or anything like that. Besides, Latinos don't have cat ears. Their faces were a little different from ours too, but they were not really cat faces. Perhaps just a little bit that way, but not like they looked like animals. Just the ears. Well, actually the babies have a small stubby tail but it is completely gone by puberty. There is another race that has dog tails, and they keep them all their life. You may think that's really weird but it really isn't any weirder than our women having big round breasts like half or more than half grapefruits on their chests. They didn't believe me when I told them either. But that's for later. These were all men, and they were wearing some kind of toga like clothes and jewelry of silver. The clothes were in bright colors and fine silk-like texture, and the jewelry was really complicated and pretty. These guys were obviously rich and powerful. And they stood in a circle all around me and stared at me.

Back when I stumbled on the floor I had been wearing my normal indoors clothes, jeans and stuff like that, but now I was butt naked. And there were a bunch of guys standing around me, staring at me at first and then babbling in a foreign language. This is not what any sane person would consider a good sign. And right above me, bang in the middle of the sky, was this small white sun and there was like a circle around it right then but I didn't see that again while I was there, the circle. The sun was there alright. Remind me to get back to that later.

Anyway, I sat up and I was like "Who are you guys and what are you doing with me and where are we". And they answered in gibberish but there was this really old guy with long white hair but without the jewelry, he was their prophet or mage or something. So he said something to them and then began to sing. After a while they started to join in. And then I started to understand what they were singing. And then they stopped, and I could understand their language. Just like that, as if by magic. Turned out it actually was by magic.

The old guy said something like "Welcome, champion, the land has need of you again." Pretty much that was the meaning of it. So I explained that I had no idea what he was talking about. I was not a champion and had never heard of them and where was I anyway? And where were my clothes?

Turns out their religion or magic or something has this ritual which is pretty hard to do because you need a number of these holy people who don't lie. That's their idea of holiness, to be absolutely honest. And to do this ritual you have to have only honest people and they need to be a certain level of it, it's not enough that you stopped lying yesterday. This old guy probably carried most of the magic power alone, actually. He'd been absolutely truthful for a couple hundred years at least, from what I heard later. Anyway, this ritual is supposed to summon the immortal champion from beyond. Well, immortal... they were a bit vague on that, but the same guy was supposed to

come back each time. But it was a long time since last they had done this, like a thousand years, so nobody recognized me anyway.

"So, do I look like a champion to you?"

"Hard to say before you put the armor on."

"Armor?"

"Yeah. The time for war is upon us."

That was when I decided that I must have fallen and struck my head. I guess I should have thought of that before. Anyway, they had thoughtfully brought me my armor. I don't know how much you know about armor, but obviously you're not wearing it right on your skin. There is a pretty thick layer of padding first – that's like clothes only less comfortable – and then the metal over that again. Silver, in this case. That's because it was a magic armor. It was kinda fun to try on, but too heavy for me. They also gave me my magic mace, which was like a metal staff with a spiky sphere on the end. You really don't want that thing to hit you at great speed. It is also decent for blocking incoming attacks if you know how. I didn't, and it was too heavy too. I told them as much, and they were rather upset.

Evidently their old holy texts don't mention what to do if you get a champion who has no idea what to do, who has never seriously fought for his life, and who isn't in very good shape. The guys with the jewelry pretty much said that this was something for the old man to find out. His name was Aximarous or Akshimarouz or something very much like it. Their language was not too hard to pronounce, although it sounds a bit different from ours. The sounds are so similar that I could think of them in my own alphabet, but not quite the same. So they left the problem to the prophet, and went on with the program. This consisted of bringing me to their town, in armor (it was that or naked, remember) and showing me to the happy people.

So we rode into town ... actually we didn't ride, we were drawn in chariots by some weird critters who thought they were horses but actually looked more like moose without the branches on their heads that moose have. They were pretty muscular and kinda streamlined like race horses but they were totally not horses. If you took one of them here and let it out in the wild, I'm pretty sure it would mate with a female moose, definitely not with a mare. The whole planet was full of crazy things like this, I wonder if I'll remember to mention them all. After a while you get used to it.

Anyway, we drove through town and I tried to look good or at least realistic in my silver armor. At least they couldn't see that it was just a high school boy inside. Or that I was pink instead of grayish tan and that I had blue eyes and round ears. I guess pretty much anyone can look a hero if you dress them up enough. So people were lined up and they cheered and stuff. Since I thought it was a dream or something at the time, I didn't worry overmuch about letting them down. Hopefully I would be awake again before any actual fighting started.

We came to an awfully big house, not quite a castle but perhaps a manor. I've never been to a manor in my own world, actually, but I think that's pretty close. Something like a castle just less warlike. These people aren't all that warlike normally, you see. But we'll get back to that. Oh yeah, we will. The boss of the jewelry guys lived there, and the prophet, and various members of their household and employees. The border between family and employee was a bit blurry. For instance the prophet's great-granddaughter worked there, or was it great-great-granddaughter? Remember this guy was pretty old. The power of the Light preserves those who serve it, and even so you could see he was old. He must have been at least 200, and I have no idea when he married. I suspect that must have been early in his career, because I am not sure how well that would go along with absolute uncompromising honesty.

You see, it's not that these guys have to be honest because otherwise they'll lose their power or their god will be angry at them in some spiritual way. No, if a Servant of the Light tries to fib, it hurts as if he's on fire. Lightburn, they call it. Most trainees get plenty of it while they adjust to the new lifestyle. I was burned so badly myself sometimes I thought I should die. It happens too. Some people actually manage to get so far in the Light that when they finally lie they burn to death on the spot. I've never seen it but I've been told it happens from time to time. The further you advance in the magic, the less it takes to get Lightburn.

Anyway! I finally got to take off the armor. Said the old guy: "There will soon be someone with clothes you can wear while not in armor." He had shown me the room I was to have for the next days, on the top floor of the manor. It was pretty amazing. These guys didn't live in the dark ages really. They don't have our technology, but they do have a kind of magic-driven technology which is pretty good. They sure can build houses. This was made of stone and yet it was so polished it was as if it was molded rather than built. The windows had glass, so at least they have invented that same as us. The windows were smaller but there were plenty of them so it was pretty bright and you could see through them quite fine, over the town and out to the forested hills beyond. Quite a nice place to live if you're not going to war. I'm sure they liked it there. I have no idea who used to live in that room when there's no champion, though. Surely they can't let it stand empty for 1000 years? Their years are longer than ours too. It's the sun, it is brighter. But that's really beside the point at this part of the story. I didn't know any of that yet.

As I said, I got out of the armor and took off the ugly padding too, when the guy with my clothes came. Except it wasn't a guy, it was the great-great granddaughter. She wasn't any older than me, and rather cute for a cat-eared person. And I was as naked as the day I was born. This is not how I normally meet chicks.

Chapter 3: Light and Darkness

So I'm totally naked and in comes this cute teen girl just as I turn around and she sees me in all my pink glory. And then we had sex. Just kidding! Girls will be girls, cat ears or no. She screamed, dropped the bundle of clothes and ran away. I just stood staring after her till she was gone, then picked up the toga thing and put it on. It was OK, felt a bit strange at first but you get used to them.

Now there's one thing about the women there on that world. The men look pretty much like us except for the cat ears and a bit strange face and gray freckled skin. Oh, and they are shorter and not quite as robust. But the women don't really have breasts. If a girl hasn't had babies, even if she's fully grown, she only has buds like something severely underage around here. Only when she gets a baby will she get udders. Rather small udders, nothing like a cow or even a goat, but what I mean is they don't look like breasts. They look like undersized udders with small teats, but definitely teats. Very functional but not very sexy. The kids will keep drinking from these for two years time, or two of our years at least. Yeah, that means they'll have talking persons drinking from their teats! Must be creepy, don't you think? But that's their problem, not mine. Once they stop having babies, the udders shrink again, but never to the size they had before the first baby. You could see this even with those dresses they usually wear, but also women are almost as likely as men to go topless if it gets that hot. They really don't think about breasts that way, and I can kinda understand that, the way they look.

On the other side, literally, they have the most awesome butt. At first I thought it was over the top, but you get used to it really fast. Now I think most women here are pretty flat on that side. I mean this girl was no older than me and her bottom was like this beach ball, so round. It's not just the size, you see. Anyone can get a huge ass if they eat like crazy for a few years, but it will be flabby and flow out in all directions, especially down. But these... they stand out so literally you could probably put things on them like a shelf. Yeah. I just stared in awe. At the time I thought it was only her, but of course they are all like that and the adults even more so. There's not much doubt about what way the guys there approach their women, to put it that way. Evolution works in mysterious ways! Or perhaps this was the Creator's plan all along if He hadn't come up with breasts at the last minute. Why did He do that anyway, it makes conversations so much more difficult. So much for "Intelligent Design." Anyway... Even with the dress on it was a sight to take my breath away, and I hadn't really thought of myself as a butt boy until that moment. It was one of those **life altering moments**, you know. When suddenly you realize who you are and why you have come to this world. Except I was on some other world, of course, and had come there to vanquish the Darkness. But that wasn't on top of my mind right then, if you know what I mean.

Anyway, a bit later Aximarous showed up – that's the old guy I mentioned – and he didn't comment at all, and I didn't know she was his great great granddaughter anyway until later. He took me to this big hall where there was a party and there were all the top people of the town gathered to eat and drink and be happy because the Champion had arrived. Now that was intimidating. But they were really polite and not gawking too openly at the weirdo from another world. And we were eating most of the time, so I could look at the food instead of all the faces. And the ears.

The food is really different but not too bad. Despite the cat ears they are all vegetarians. They don't even eat milk. But I don't think they have been like that forever, because they grow a lot of mushrooms which look and taste a bit similar to really really tender meat when fried or baked, which is what they do with them.

Because there are so many variants of the most meaty mushrooms, I'd say they have been growing them for thousands of years if not tens of thousands. They also eat roots, you know like carrot and potato, only different, and nuts, but they're not big on grass seeds like we are, wheat and rice and the stuff. And they're not big on sweets. I missed that. There wasn't a dessert ever in the time I stayed there.

The wise old man held a speech at some point but I did not. I guess if they had gotten the guy who used to come, he would have. But I wasn't that guy. I was just me.

After the feast it was pretty much bedtime. Or sleeptime, rather. They don't really have beds the way we think of them, but sleep on thick blankets on the floor. I got as many blankets as I wanted so it wasn't too bad. Oh, and the sanitary facilities are better than in the middle ages, thank the Light. And no, they don't use cat sand. They do however use sand to scrub their hands while washing, instead of soap. It works amazingly well. If you have the exact right quality of sand, it will peel the grime off your hand without peeling the skin off, although it prickles a little right after. I don't even think it is magic, but I don't know. I have to try it here someday, but the trick is finding the right quality of sand. Especially if you want to wash certain other body parts. What do you mean you didn't need to know that? We should have a cultural exchange with them. They could get chocolate and desserts and we could get washing sand and some of those mushrooms, which are much better than the slimy lumps you find on your pizza.

I HAD THOUGHT for sure that when I fell asleep, I would wake up in my own world again. If at all. I was starting to worry because it took so long. But then I woke up in a pile of blankets on the stone floor, and I started to realize that however real this was or not, I had to face the fact that I was stuck here for now.

And who showed up to fetch me if not the girl from yesterday? You would swear they did this on purpose, except I don't think their white magic would allow them to be so devious. She was appropriately flustered; her ears were twitching the whole time and she was looking at the floor. However, by sheer good luck I was already up and fully dressed. I followed her through the corridors (remember this place was pretty big) until she showed me a door. She did not go in herself. The door had a symbol painted on it: A stylized sun surrounded by a circle, both of them in white.

The prophet was waiting inside, kneeling on the stone floor. I did not know what to do in such a situation, so I knelt too. The room was bare except for a kind of shelves with what looked like parchment rolls. I guess I can't actually have been parchment, because that's made from animal skin, but I didn't think that's far right then. There was only one window, and it was in the roof, exactly in the center.

"Do you know this place?" The old man asked softly.

"No. Sorry."

"This is our room of the Holy Sun. It is a sacred place, dedicated to the Light."

"I'm sorry. I'm not the person you try to summon. I am not familiar with your religion. It would be best for us all if you could send me back."

"That is not possible. The Light does not make mistakes. You are the Chosen One. I do not know why the Light chose another champion this time. The matter is out of my hand, however. I will try to teach you what you need to know about the white magic that sustains our society and whose champion you are whether you know it or not."

"Then how did the previous champions return from this world?"

"The champion returns either upon his death or upon completion of the quest for which he was summoned."

"In that case, I would prefer to complete the quest."

"If the other outcome should come to pass, it would be during your attempt to

complete that quest. It is quite dangerous."

"And what happens if I just hang around until I die from old age?"

"Old age is not an option for you. In fact, no one who is young today will live to an old age if the forces of darkness are unleashed upon the land."

"Does this quest just happen to include bringing an evil ring through the enemy lines to the only place where it can be destroyed?"

The quest, as I was to learn in great detail, was less subtle than that. All I had to do was to kill a dark sorcerer who had taken over the land of the dog-tailed people to the south. Actually, the old man did not refer to them as the dog-tailed people. I guess that's not politically correct, even though they do have dog tails. They refer to themselves as Gong-ku, which the cat-eared people pronounce Gouchu. But as far as I'm concerned, the people to the south are dog tails and people to the north are cat ears. Anyway, the evil sorcerer had already taken over most of the south and was now heading north. We, that is to say I, had to stop him before the whole land was utterly destroyed or violated or something.

"Dark magic is a terrible thing" explained Aximarous. "Most people avoid it, not just because of the vile rituals but because of the price it extracts from those who practice it. Dark is the magic of deception, and it destroys life. Those who practice the arts of the Dark look beautiful, but behind the mask they grow ugly. They seem healthy, and as far as we know they feel healthy too. But their life is cut short, that they do not live the full measure of their days. In this way it is with everything they do: It seems to succeed, but it rots from the core. By the time it is revealed, the damage is done.

"When a great Dark sorcerer such as this one arises, his power of deception is so great that people follow him willingly. Wherever he goes, people love and worship him and seek to emulate him. In this way corruption spreads rapidly and the whole land falls sway to evil. By the time his short but seemingly glorious life comes to an end, corruption is festering everywhere. Hunger, war, disease and despair! Those who resist the Darkness are attacked and persecuted by those who give in to it. Our only hope is to stop him before he takes over all the lands. If we can do that, there will be left enough servants of the Light to gradually heal and rebuild the broken lands of the fallen people."

"I take it that the magic of the Light is the opposite? So those who serve it actually succeed but seemed to fail?"

"White magic is the magic of honesty. It does not seem to do anything else than it does. It succeeds, and is seen to succeed, which is why it remains the best loved option for almost all people to have in the lands. But it works slowly and gradually, while Darkness seems to work much faster. This seduces many, especially among the young. Also, it is not in human nature to enjoy complete honesty in oneself, even though everyone hopes for it in others."

"If I am supposed to have anything to do with magic, you better explain it from the start. Where I come from, there is no magic. At all."

He really tried, and it went on for quite a while. But the thing is, these people live with it every day. There are so many things that are just obvious to them, so they forget that it may be different elsewhere. Of course it is the same with us. If one of their people came to us, we would probably forget to mention how to turn on the lights. Things like that. But I should get plenty of opportunity to learn in the time that followed.

Basically there are two levels of relating to the white magic. One is to benefit from it. This requires you to abstain from black magic, obviously, but also to seriously attempt to be honest in all things. You can't go around laying plans to lie and cheat and

deceive people and then receive a blessing from the Light. This is the minimum I would have to follow to benefit from the enchanted armor and weapon, and the various protective spells they were making for me. Supposedly the Light had picked me because I am naturally honest. I suppose there is something in that, it has certainly got me in trouble often enough.

To actively wield the power of the Light, you have to go much further. You must speak no word that is not true, but you also must stop deceiving yourself, which a human does automatically. You must open up your mind to the Light, where it will shine in and reveal the lies you tell yourself. Then you have to give them up, because now lies will physically hurt. Lightburn, as I mentioned before. If you try to protect your lies, it will hurt, to the same degree as the Light-magic flows through you. The more you open yourself to the Light and the more you wield it, the stronger this flow, and the stronger the pain if you don't comply. That sounded pretty scary. It sounds like a one-way road, doesn't it? And way too religious for me. I decided to skip that option for now.

As for the magic itself, it is mostly protection and healing and scrying and that kind of stuff. The white mages can see in the dark, see through walls and things, and see people or things that are hidden by the camouflage of black magic. It's pretty obvious really, when you think of things like "white magic" and "light magic" you're pretty likely to hit the mark. It's just the way they wield it that surprised me. They have songs that work kinda like spells, I guess, except they are continuous for as long as you sing the song. But the more advanced mages just channel the magic, that was how I understood it. No spellbooks or reagents or wands and brooms, or at least these things are optional. You just let the power flow through you and direct it with your mind. Sounds almost too good to be true. But of course, you have to modify the "too good to be true" with the fact that you can't ever hide anything from anyone ever again. I guess that really cuts down on the number of apprentices. Good thing the mages last for a few hundred years then!

Despite the "dire news from the south", the old man decided that I needed to stay for a few days and "cleanse" myself from my "ignorance". For starters, I had to take a ritual bath before he performed a song of blessing which went on for quite some time, during which time I had to stay naked. Luckily we were alone in the room and the geezer didn't strike me as being the perverted type. This was repeated a number of times. And the songs weren't exactly rock'n'roll either, so I guess the cold baths were useful to stay awake at least. After the blessings he put a symbol on a chain around my neck. It was the sun circle symbol, same as on the door. "With this sign you shall be victorious" he declared solemnly. This was when I burst out laughing.

Chapter 4: In Hoc Signo Vincent

It is a good thing the Servants of the Light are a friendly, tolerant bunch. That and they probably cut some slack for people they have summoned from other universes. Otherwise I think my stay there would have taken a turn for the really nasty, when I laughed my ass off during the most solemn part of the ritual to consecrate me as their Champion of the Light. But there was no helping it.

You see, my name is Vincent, right? This not only means I have had my ears checked since grade school to make sure they are both there – Vincent van Gogh, right? The crazy artist who cut his ear off – but also after one history class people started going 'In Hoc Signo Vincent!'

No, I guess I can't expect everyone to remember that one since not everyone is named Vincent, after all. My mom probably came up with it while still hazy from painkillers after I was born. But back in the decline and fall of the Roman empire, you know, with the emperors killing each other and throwing Christians to the lions... this was while the lions had the upper hand, you know. These days it's the other way around, there are Christians everywhere and the lions are next to extinct. I guess they got what they deserved. If they had been nice to the Christians they would probably have been remembered more favorably. But the turning point was when emperor Constantine was fighting another guy who also thought he was emperor. Connie boy looked up and saw a cross in the sky and the message: In Hoc Signo Vinces, which means in this sign you'll conquer. Or win or triumph or something, but mostly conquer I think. And that's what happened too. Of course, this could be because there were already millions of Christians hidden out around in the empire and they all came out to support the guy who didn't want to set them on fire or use them as cat food. That's what our history teacher thought at least. Then again he hadn't seen any flaming symbols in the sky. Constantine did, as did I. That's what makes it so funny, OK? "In Hoc Signo Vincent." Only my symbol was a flaming sun in a circle.

So I tried to explain to the old man what was so funny, how my name means "conqueror" even though I am just an ordinary schoolboy and how he almost quoted the same thing that people used to say to me in school. But he didn't see the funny in it. Instead he went off on a tangent about how this was the Will of the Light (or was that the Holy Sun?) and a sign that I really was the Chosen One.

"And this pendant that I have bestowed upon you, wear it always. It will reveal you to those of the Light and protect you from those of the Darkness. It is imbued with great power by the sacred chants of the ancient Servants of the Light, and it works like a chant of blessing being sung continually as long as you bear it. Make sure to commit no dishonesty or deception while wearing it, for it channels the Power of the Light itself and must not turn upon you lest you are seared by that Power. The longer you wear it, the stronger the blessing grows. This is the nature of the Light, that it works with time rather than against it; for the Light is in concordance with all of unspoiled nature. You may be little more than human now as you put it on; but one the eve of battle you will be able to shatter kingdoms."

Frankly I had no wish to shatter kingdoms, but it wasn't like there was any easy way out. Better go with the flow. Besides, I had probably offended them enough for one day. Yes, after all the baths and the interminable medieval singing most of the day had passed. I didn't have my watch, of course, but the sun was low when I was allowed to put on my clothes again and led out in the courtyard or whatever you'll call it. There I was presented to the guys with the silver brooches and whatnot again.

They stared at me, and then started to cry out: "The sun! The sun!" I thought that was a bit over the top until I looked down and got a glimpse of the sun symbol dangling on my chest. It glowed, enough to be visible even in daylight.

Then I had to put on the armor, which somehow seemed to fit me better this time. It might be the magic, or perhaps they had a smith fit it to me while I meditated on the Gregorian chants all day. Wonder if that would be a job for a silversmith or a blacksmith? Would these people even have blacksmiths? Whitesmith perhaps? Anyway, seeing me in armor again seemed to cheer them up no end, never mind that I could barely walk in armor, much less shatter kingdoms and vanquish evil sorcerers. It was party time again! I'm pretty sure they don't this every day when I'm not around. At least I think so. Perhaps they find another excuse then.

THE NEXT day I was also up and about before the girl showed up. (At the time I still didn't know her name, but I remembered her, it was the same one.) This time she led me to a smaller hall where we ate breakfast. This was much preferred over the previous day's fasting, ritual baths and other purifying stuff. Oh, and by "led me" I don't mean by the hand, but almost as good she walked in front of me. I think I have described the somewhat different bodily proportions of these people already. At that time I was still not used to living there, and opportunities such as that still made a deep impression on me. Luckily it only made impression, not expression, although it was surely a near miss.

This day was to be dedicated to the arts of war. After breakfast I was required to wear the armor again. I started to feel more used to it now, but it was still a drag. We then went through the handling of various weapons, but especially the silver long mace. It was the preferred weapon of the previous champion, from what I understood. I have no idea whether he got it made for him or whether he also was just presented with it when he arrived. It looks like he used to show up whenever there was a crisis for well over 1000 years, the same guy. That's the impression I got. But for all I knew, 1000 years from then people might think he and I were the same guy too.

I tried the various weapons against straw dummies. They just stood there, didn't fight back and didn't evade. But even so, I don't think I impressed anyone who watched me that day. Perhaps they finally started to wonder whether they had really done the right thing relying on some random guy from another world. The thesis of the infallibility of the Light was surely put to a hard test. Then again, so was I. Even though the training was harmless, it was also pretty hard. I was exhausted when we finally finished, despite several pauses through the day. I was also famished. Luckily there was plenty of food, and by now I was starting to get an idea of what I liked the best.

So exhausted was I that I fell asleep not long after nightfall. Usually we stayed up somewhat longer, although not as long as I used to at home. I guess this is how I could wake up so early. The place did not have electric light, of course, but it wasn't too far off. They had magic light. This is one of those things that you grow used to so quickly, you totally forget about them. I really have to tell you about this. It is pretty cool.

The common peasants used lamps burning some kind of plant oil, didn't smell too badly. I think they put some stuff in it for the smell. But here at the manor where the magic people lived, they used crystals. Most of them were simple rock crystals from quartz, kinda like my own. I think they could use pretty much any crystal really, but there weren't any real jewels that I could see. They don't grow so big. But there was blank quartz and at least one pink and one yellow, not sure if that was a quartz

actually. Topaz perhaps.

Anyway, the magic! By day the stones were just stones. But when it started to get dark, the people with magic training would sing to them and they would start to shine. The crystals of course, not the people! The song wasn't really difficult, I learned it in a few days just from listening. The tune wasn't exactly J-pop, you know, but it was a bit like some children's song, in my ears at least. And the text was simple. I'll translate it here, but it doesn't rhyme in English. And I'm not the kind of guy who can take a song in some weird language and make it sound good in English. Tolkien did that, didn't he? I seem to remember him having songs in his books. I wonder if he just made the stuff up or whether he too had actually been in a different world? Anyway, the text. Here. It sounds better in the original language. There it kinda rhymes or at least rhythms.

"Awake and shine!
Awake and shine!
By the Power of the Light
that is everywhere,
that is in all things,
in man and beast,
in plant and stone,
in water and air.
They all serve the Light.
Before all time
the Light decreed
the part to play
for each in turn.
Awake and shine!
Awake and shine!
This is your part
to serve the Light."

Not too mysterious, as you can see. They had plenty of simple songs like that. Depending on how in tune you were with the Light, the stones would start shining almost at once, or you might have to sing it over from the start until they grew bright enough. They didn't really shine like light bulbs but definitely better than candles and lamps, by far. They would stop after a while, or you could sing a kind of lullaby to make them rest.

I had a weird experience with those things one of the days too. Perhaps I should wait with that story until it happened, but then I might forget it. It's not like it is really part of the story, it is just some thing that happened one day. Or rather one evening. I was curious about whether I could do the light song too, but I wouldn't want to try when everyone was looking. After all, I was just a "reserve" Light-servant, by the grace of their summoning and rituals and the amulet. But perhaps I could still do it. Would be useful to know, as a test of exactly what I could do. So at my room, instead of going to sleep in the almost darkness as usual, I went over to the crystal that stood there on a pedestal but wasn't in use. I reached out my hands and stood close to it the way they do, but before I could even start to sing, I saw a faint glow inside it! The glow grew gradually stronger. I was amazed and overwhelmed. Not only was I a real Light-guy, I was the uber one! I was so good! I reached out and almost touched the crystal, expecting it to shine stronger, but it didn't. I maneuvered a bit around and finally realized that it reacted when the amulet came near, not I. Guess I wasn't the uber mage after all!

YET ANOTHER morning. Since I fell asleep with the dark – or not much later, I think – I woke up with the dawn. I was stiff and a little sore from last day's exercise, although I am sure I would have been a lot worse if not for the white magic healing me over time. Also, since I was all alone, I started thinking about girls. Then I started to worry about what was happening to me. Was I in a coma again, like when I was a kid? How much time passed in the real world for each day here? Would I ever wake up? I pinched myself and it hurt. Actually that would not have been necessary since I had already felt the hurt after the training, but you can be a bit dumb when you are stressed like that.

The teen girl showed up again. I noticed again how she had those mature curvy hips and yet almost no breasts to be seen, and I wondered how she looked like without the clothes. Well, I'm a healthy young man, right? Thoughts like that happen. I think I may have lost something she said to me because next thing she asked: "Did you hear me?"

"Yes" I lied, thinking that she had probably been telling me to follow her again as usual. And then fire and pain blossomed on my chest from the pendant, spread in a flash and engulfed me in white searing agony.

Chapter 5: Catgirl fanservice

It was my first Lightburn, and it was a bad one. I had totally violated my deal with the Light, speaking out loud a word which wasn't true. The Light was furious! It felt like my skin had been set on fire, and the fire was now eating its way through my body. I screamed in agony and fell to my knees. "No! I'm sorry! I'll never do it again!" But the fire raged on, and I could hardly breathe. I realized what I had to do if I were to survive. "I lied! I didn't hear what you said but dared not tell you."

"Oh!" She seemed as shocked as I. Probably more, because she probably thought Champions could not lie. Well, we can't, in a manner of speaking.

The fire died down, and I shakily got to my feet again.

"Actually I just told you that the breakfast was ready."

I knew it! I had been right, and I still was punished just for taking a chance! But of course I had spoken a lie, and that was that. I could have just told the truth. But I wasn't in the mood to argue.

"You did seem lost in thought."

"It was nothing... aaaugh! I mean, it was nothing I wanted you to know. Oww. I was just wondering how you would look without clothes."

"WHAT??"

"You look different from the girls on my world, and I wondered how you looked under the clothes."

She stared at me mouth open, ears back and flat against her head. Then she turned and ran. So much for honesty. But at least the pain was gone. Man, I'd never been that honest in my life, it better be gone!

Using my superior male navigation skills, I managed to find the way to the breakfast room even though I had only gone that way once before. I didn't need the girl to show me the way. But of course once I showed up alone, the old prophet knew something was up. "Did Amareth not come to fetch you?"

"The girl who usually comes in the morning? She ran away screaming because I said something weird. I'm sorry."

"Something weird?"

"Yes. She asked me what I was thinking of, and it happened to be how she looked without clothes. I did not mean to say that, but the Light burned me."

"Ah. Yes, that would probably make her run away for a while. My great-(great-) granddaughter probably thought you wanted to mate with her."

"I didn't know she was your family! But even if not, I would not have asked her to do that. I didn't even know her name!"

"And yet you wished you could see her naked."

"Well, it wasn't only because she is pretty. It was also because I have never seen girls of your race before, and they look different from ours. Women on my world have breasts that are round like a ... big round fruit under their skin. These are very attractive to us menfolk. When a girl grows those, she is no longer a child. But this girl, Amareth?, she looks like she could be my age at least but she doesn't have breasts. It confuses me."

"Ah. Yes, Amareth is indeed old enough to mate. Already young men are looking at her with desire, and she at them. It will not be long before she and one of them find each other, I believe. – The Light has not revealed this to me, I say it from the ways of nature. – For this reason she probably thought you also would like to mate with her."

"I am too young to do that legally for a few months more. And anyway I don't believe it is right to ... mate with strangers."

"But your body wants to, does it not?"

"It does, and even without breasts the women here look good. But I don't do

everything I might get an impulse to."

"This is good. And with time, you will start thinking thoughts that you can freely share with others, without hurting them and without shaming yourself. It usually takes some time to get used to, since before we come to the Light we are used to thinking whatever we want and say something else."

"Yeah, I guess."

"Do not worry about it. I will talk to the girl later. Just remember that whatever you choose to do, you are going to admit to it for as long as you live, which will likely be hundreds of years. This knowledge is a powerful help to always choose the right thing."

"I take your word for it."

Even though my muscles were mostly healed, the old man and his friends wisely chose to not run me through combat training this day again. Instead they concentrated on tactics. We had something like a board game that probably hadn't seen much use for the last few centuries, with small shapes that symbolized various fighters. They set up various scenarios and tried to have me guess what to do in each. At first I didn't understand much of it, but I think I improved quite a bit for a beginner. They had to explain the difference between weapons, like how sharp weapons were used against people without armor but blunt heavy weapons against people with armor. I was of course supposed to be in armor. I am their main battle tank, evidently. Yeah, that's me. Vincent Logan Hanson, main battle tank!

It wasn't as exhausting as running around in heavy armor and bashing scarecrows with a huge mace, but my head grew kinda tired and my eyelids kinda heavy at the end. The meal break was quite welcome. One fascinating detail, they never talked about fighting during the meals. I mean, during the meals they never talked about fighting. It was as if they turned off all the unpleasant thoughts while eating. Strange, but probably good for the appetite. People should try that here, no quarrel during meals, and they would probably have much less digestion problems. Consider this the hint of the century, as the saying goes.

Oh and these people normally only eat three meals a day: Breakfast, late lunch and dinner/supper at sunset. I'm not sure if that is important for the story at all, I just wanted to say it and this sounds like a good place. If it were up to me, there would be more and smaller meals. Not to mention snacks. Someone should invent snacks. No snacks, no sweets, is that really a civilization worth fighting for? Well, I guess when the alternative is some insane guy making of the planet a hell forever. But if the alternative had been communism but with snacks, I am not sure I would have trekked across half a continent and fought and died. Anyway, that's how it is over there. They don't even have a **word** for snacks.

Still, I was pretty satisfied when I retreated to my room after the evening meal. The room was dark except for the light from the Holy Sun. I mean, not the white-hot blazing sun of the day, but the symbol on my chest. I already told you it glows. In the dark it is even stranger, for the light from it doesn't fade as easily as the light from a candle. A candle may be brighter to look on, but it doesn't fill the whole room. This light does. I guess it does not diminish with the square of the distance, which is kinda unnerving once you think about it. So I generally didn't think about it. In a world where magic can cause light in the first place, you better take it and be grateful. But anyway the room was always lit as if by moonlight or some such. This becomes important right now, because there was a scratching at the door.

Don't laugh, but these people really do scratch at the door instead of knocking. Also the doors are slightly different from ours, but that's beside the point. It's good enough

that they actually have doors, and not just tapestries or something. I guess the occasional war doesn't exactly favor tapestries, and when you first have invented the door for your castle walls or whatever, they spread quickly to the rest of life. I had already taken off my toga and laid down, but I quickly put it back on and went to the door. This was the first time that my day had not been over after the evening meal, and I was not too happy about it. At least until I opened and Amareth stood there.

We looked at each other silently, she with her ears twitching. Finally I said: "Yes?"

"May I come in?"

"Sure."

She came in and closed the door. Then she bowed her head. "You said you wanted to see me naked. Is that still your wish?"

"Actually" I said, because I knew the Light was just looking for some excuse to burn me in such a situation, "I said that I wondered how you looked without clothes. I still wonder, but it is not a command I give, and it is not something someone has the right to ask of you."

"I mistook your intentions. I have come to make amends."

Her ears twitched more energetically, but with only a deep breath she untied the belt around her waist, then pulled her dress right off. It helps that the unmarried girls don't have so long dresses in the first place, not as short as Japanese school uniforms I guess but well above the knees. The mothers have longer dresses, not quite to the ankles but at least half way down from the knees, but wide enough to move freely.

I didn't get to see her panties. She didn't wear any. I didn't know if that was for the occasion or if that's another invention their culture has skipped, like the snacks. Anyway, she stood there in the soft glow from the pendant, with no more than she was born with. Well, except in quantity obviously, and some places more obvious than others.

Someone with more experience in dimension hopping ought to write a handbook, kinda like the "DON'T PANIC" guide you know, only for magic realms and such. And there ought to be a chapter about "Proper etiquette when they suddenly undress." Actually I don't think there is such a guide even for our own world, but then again I have so far not had it happen in my own world. More's the pity. Anyway, I could need that DON'T PANIC sign right then. I had no idea where to look or what to say. Only after a little while did I realize that it would probably be a good idea to breathe again.

When I dared look, I did of course look at the chest. After all, that was what had piqued my curiosity in the first place. And it looked exactly as I had thought it would when I saw it through the dress. She looked like a 9 year old or so, with buds most boys don't have (or if you had them you would probably be teased by your classmates in the shower or the locker room). But they were definitely not breasts in any normal sense of the word. Nothing that a baby would look at twice. And even a teenage boy wouldn't look three times.

I didn't really stare at the other point of interest on her front, I mean that usually is clothed. My peripheral vision said that they are not as hairy as we are in some patches, but that was no big surprise since even the hair on their head is naturally shorter. The prophet had fairly long hair for their race, but I think that is a blessing of the Light, a kind of mark of favor. And yet I've seen godless heathens in my world with longer hair than him. But anyway, I did not investigate further.

"Are we much different?" she asked quietly, and I understood that Aximarous had spoken with her already.

"You are different" I confirmed. "Not only your skin color and your ears, but you do

not have the round shape of the chest that women have on my world."

"The ones that men of your race find beautiful."

"Yes we do, and we also find them ... physically attractive. They make us think of ... mating. Although there is a long step from thinking to doing for most of us."

"A man of your race would never want to mate with a woman of our race then. We are ugly to you."

"Not ugly. Just different. And the rest of you is as beautiful as any girl of my world, or more so."

"I am not a girl, Champion. I am a woman, although I have never mated with any man. I will always look like this, except when I have babies."

"I know. It is a custom of my world, to call young women girls. To be youthful is thought to be a good thing where I come from."

"I am young, but not a child. Have you not seen my hips and my behind? Are those also like the children of your race?"

She turned around, showing off her backside. It was the stuff of dreams. Sticky dreams. I tried to focus on her head. If that didn't work, I would have to close my eyes. "Please do not show me that so casually. Remember that if anyone ever asks me whether I have seen your backside, I will now be compelled by the Light itself to say yes."

"But you will also say that it did not interest you, because my people are ugly compared to your people."

"Actually, your buttocks are larger and rounder than on young women of my race, and I dare not look at them. Please stop."

She turned to me again, her eyes wide with surprise. "Then men of your race are drawn to both the front and the back of women?"

"We are always drawn to women, no matter from which direction we meet them. Is it a blessing or a curse, you think?"

She picked up her dress and started to put it back on. "Do your people ever get anything else done?" she asked, and I had no idea whether she joked or not.

"Yes" I answered, "except right after a wedding."

She fastened her belt. "I have shown you my body first of all men. If you need to tell it, tell them also that I am... that you saw no other woman of my race before me." She looked down as in surprise. "Now my legs are shaking as if I have run for a long time. I need to return to my quarters lest I lose all strength and fall on your blankets."

"Yes. You need to go. Thank you... Amareth." My voice wasn't supposed to be this thick. I tried to clear my throat. She fled quickly, like a shadow in the night, beyond even the light of the Sun.

Chapter 6: Might and magic

Truth to tell – and that is becoming a habit with me, as you may guess – I was a bit shaky myself. I would never have admitted this to my classmates back home, not even under threats of grievous bodily harm, but I had actually never gotten that far with a girl. At the age of 17, I despaired in the firm belief that I was the last virgin in my class. When I think about how easy it normally is to lie, at least between the lines, I realize that a number of my classmates probably felt the same way. I would do pretty much anything less than naming names to give the impression that I had already "scored" as we used to call it.

And now, suddenly, light years from home, there was a girl showing me everything she's got, and I hadn't even looked all that closely, much less made any moves. I had pretty mixed feelings about it, seeing as it could be years till next time I got such a sight within arm's reach. But the truth is that honesty by fire doesn't encourage you to experiment with these things, since my inevitable failure would follow me to the end of time. Or at least the end of my time in that world. I wondered how long that would be, but it seemed like it had just begun.

It had indeed. Despite somewhat less sleep that night (for obvious reasons), I still had to rise with the dawn. This day was weapon and armor training again. Given how green and unfit I was for the job of Champion, they sure did a great job of making the best out of the situation. My muscles were completely healed by now, and I really did feel stronger and sturdier now. I am not sure how much of this was due to one day of training and how much was due to the magic seeping into me from the enchanted talisman on my chest. The old man had told me that white magic worked over time, after all. Still, even he obviously didn't believe that was all it took. While he wasn't actively in charge of my training, I could see him from time to time in the background.

The cat-eared people probably don't have a standing army normally, but neither was this the first time war happened to their lands. There were people training with weapons, and they certainly didn't look like they were more than 1000 years old. The weapons, I mean. Either there are local conflicts that don't require a Champion, or they just like to be prepared. For all I know there are people who just think it is cool to wear armor and weapons. If you remember when you were little, you probably played soldier at one time or another yourself. Certainly I and my chums did, and we weren't a particularly warlike sort really. War looks kinda glorious when you have never seen one. Trust me, it is nothing like that up close. But that's still ahead of us.

Be that as it may, there were a number of guys already much better than me at fighting, and they were still practicing. At least they didn't lean back and expect the Champion to save the world. That's kinda nice. I really didn't feel up to saving much world, or even my own skin, at the time. But I guess I was able to do more than just lift the weapons this time. I would actually hit the straw dolls for the most part, since they didn't move. Exactly where I hit them was still a matter of blind luck, I'm afraid. But at least it was something to do, and it took my thoughts away from girls and the confusion they always bring.

But of course I saw her during the meal break. She didn't eat with us, but she was part of the manor staff (not a big crowd really, though they seemed to have hired some more recently) and she helped with food and stuff. I met her eyes once, not that I really planned to, and she twitched her ears and I twitched mine. No, of course I didn't, they just grew hot, but it is probably the same reflex. You should probably try

to avoid seeing the local girls naked the first week, as it makes things more awkward at once. I should probably write a book if no one else does, about what to do and not to do when summoned to other worlds. I wish someone else had done it too. Pretty high on my list would be "no mutual nudity with descendants of the local prophets, archmages, kings, or whatever, especially out of pure curiosity".

I soon forgot about her and the rest of the surroundings though, and at the evening meal I was barely conscious. I am pretty sure I got to my room on my own two feet, but I don't really remember it. I slept all night, and woke up feeling great.

My guess would be that this day would see more tactics training with the board game (it wasn't really, but that's how I thought of it). I was however wrong, as can occasionally happen even to a Champion. Especially a 17 year old first time Champion, I guess. This day was magic day. Actually I am not sure if that was decided by the calendar or the prophet, I didn't ask. But after breakfast (and yes, each morning it was Amareth who fetched me, but she did so in complete silence)... after breakfast Aximarous told me that we were going to do magic today.

"You have expressed unfamiliarity with the magic of our realm" said he, which is true enough. "Today I will show you how we practice the work of the Light in everyday life. The Power of the Light is not reserved for battle, nor is that its main purpose. Rather it permeates all our daily life, raising all that is good in life to a higher level. As Servants of the Light, our main task is always to increase the common good. We protect, we heal, we nourish, we comfort. We seek out what is good, to make it better."

I think most of the circle of holy men had left a couple days after the summoning, although I would meet them again later. Well, actually I didn't get to know them all so I can't say for sure that I saw them all again, but probably most of them at least, when we went south. But more about that later. There were still a handful left.

The first thing we saw to was some guy with a bad leg. Some kind of infection, I think he had cut himself during some farm work or something, and it had taken ill. They probably come with these even on other days, but I had been busy training and such. Anyway, someone had already tried to treat the wound by washing it and putting some leaves on. I suppose those leaves are good for wounds or something, but it certainly didn't seem like it was enough, because the leg was a bit ugly by the time I saw it. It didn't have the right color even for their skin, and was a bit swollen. So they took this guy to a room where we were alone with him, just these honest guys and I.

Wait, not just the guys. There had only been guys summoning me, and I think most of the Servants really are male. I guess going to extremes lies more for us, one way or the other. But there are actually female Servants of the Light, they just don't summon nude Champions except in emergency. Like, more emergency than usual. More about emergencies later. Remember this was still my first week here. Anyway, there were two women there too. They were all at least twice as old as I, though, and very decently dressed. It would probably have been bad for the holy atmosphere to think any further about their femaleness anyway. After all, don't do things you need to hide, that's kinda like the 1st commandment, or amendment or whatever.

So I acted like the good boy and sat there in my new clean toga, trying to look all Champion-like and beneficent, benevolent, something like that. I guess that was actually a kind of hypocrisy, but I didn't know any better so I didn't burn. In the long run you will see such thing because the Light kinda seeps into you and shows you things, but not yet. I just tried to look like the other guys so as to not disturb the atmosphere. As far as I knew by then I was doing the right thing.

Then everyone held out their hand toward the swollen foot and began to sing. I hadn't learned the songs yet, but I held out my hand just in case. So far I guess it wasn't any different from what you could see at any revival meeting with really dedicated religious people. But what happened next... OK, perhaps that happens here too, who knows, but I think at least the visual effects are different.

I could actually see the foot start to brighten. As if it came out of a shadow and into a brighter place. It continued to brighten as if clouds were drawing away from the sun, although that wasn't what happened and besides it was only the foot and leg there which it happened to. That's pretty awesome! In religion you need to have faith but here you could see it with your own eyes. Well, at least I could. I am not sure if I could have if I didn't have the amulet pouring Light-magic into me. But I'm pretty sure the other guys in the circle could see it at least as well as I did. It was as bright as a beam of sunshine at the end.

And then they all stopped singing, just as the color of the skin was beginning to change. I was a bit confused, I had expected them to continue until it was completely healed. But that's not how it works. Light magic works with time, so there is a kind of lag, at least with some things. Remind me to explain that in more detail another time. Anyway, the leg continued to glow and heal itself after they finished singing. It was pretty awesome to see. I mean, it was not the first miracle I experienced after I came there, but it was the first of that sort. To see something simply change before your eyes, that's pretty impressive. Especially the first times.

Later we did something completely different, or at least that's how it seemed to me at the time. We went to a farm that had an orchard, and then we walked through it while singing to the trees. Well, the others were singing, I still didn't know the songs. This was the first time I heard them, after all. I didn't see any miracles happen this time. We just walked among the trees singing, and then we left. After we left the farm, I asked the prophet what they had done. He explained that it was a blessing, to strengthen the trees and make them more healthy, able to withstand disease and bear plenty of good fruit in the future.

It turns out they do this a lot when they have the time. Instead of waiting until something goes horribly wrong, they go around blessing things, or at least fix them early if there is something suspicious. And not just things either, they do this with people too. Although not all people are equally eager to hang around with Servants of the Light. I don't think you can get Lightburn just from blessings or healings, I think you have to channel the Light yourself for that. But the Servants can kind of see the quality of your soul. If you are honest and innocents, your aura is bright and clear. But if you fib and lie, you grow more and more mottled. People who dabble in dark magic kind of gather a shadow around them, but even if not it is pretty easy to see that you are not who you pretend to be. So a lot of people are a bit nervous around the Servants of the Light. I guess those who have a good conscience are more eager to come to the Light, while those who know that they are doing something suspicious prefer to stay away.

Anyway, we spent the whole day doing this stuff: Blessing crops and houses and people, and finding a couple lost items. It is a kind of logical that the Light is also the magic of information: It is the nature of light to reveal things, after all. So if you have lost or mislaid something, a Servant and find it. Most of them can see in the dark and the more advanced ones, like the prophet, can see through walls and things like that. Probably through clothes too, in but before that happens you are already too holy to enjoy it, I'm sure.

I guess I had thought inside that all magic would be cool and awesome, like that healing or like the magic shining stones. (Although I was actually getting used to the stones already.) What I learned this day was that often the magic is more like a fridge or vitamins or spraying against pests or other everyday things. In some ways, there is really more magic in our world. We just don't think of it that way. Even ordinary teenagers can talk to someone who isn't in the room, or watch things that happen far away or long ago, and heat food in the microwave in a couple minutes. That's pretty awesome magic if you come from a world that doesn't have all those things!

There wasn't much I could do, except try to learn as much as possible. The Servants of the Light however worked a full day. Even so, I think I ate more than they did at the evening meal, again. You are a teenager only once in your life, after all, even if it seems to last almost forever... and then I went to the bathroom (do I really need to tell you that? The Light doesn't fix **everything!**) and finally to my bedroom. Guess who was waiting for me there?

Chapter 7: Love and war

So I innocently waltzed into my large and somewhat chilly bedroom in the manor, only to find a humanoid form sitting near my blankets. And for the record, she had her dress on, and light sandals too. Yes, Amareth, great (or possibly great-great) granddaughter of the illustrious prophet Aximarous. That's what people called him actually, "illustrious prophet". I guess he was, at that. Of course he wouldn't let them use such language to his face, but that didn't stop them once he was out of earshot.

She rose quickly. "May I have words with you, Champion?"

"Sure. And you don't need to call me Champion. I have a name."

"You have?"

"Yes. I wasn't born Champion you know. My name is Vincent. Can you people pronounce that?"

"Win-sent."

"Pretty close."

"I am Amareth."

"Your ancestor, the illustrious prophet, said as much on the day when he asked me about your absence."

"And yet he did not mention your name to me."

"I didn't mention it to him." Mostly because he didn't begin or end most sentences with 'Champion', but there was really no need to drive the nail that far in. I felt a burning itch on my chest from the half truth. Better choose my words more carefully.

"You honor me." Her ears twitched in the twilight of the amulet.

"Not really. I just don't feel comfortable with you calling me Champion all the time. It sounds so formal. Now, what did you want to talk to me about?"

Amareth turned to face partly away from me, as if talking to someone I couldn't see.

"There is a young man whom I have known for some time. I think his name is not important to you. We have met from time to time together with friends and relatives and on town events. He is a good man, doing his chores faithfully, not too dumb and not too full of himself, and there is nothing ugly on his face. We are near in age, him being a full year older but little more. Now his sister has spoken to my best friend, and my best friend came to me. She told me that he has looked at me from afar and thought well of me, and that he might want for us, for him and me, to get to know each other better."

"Oh." I was on the verge of saying "Congratulations", but I had this sudden fear that the Light would not let me do so unharmed. This was stupid, because my brain knew that I had no future with this girl, and that it was by mere chance that she and not one of a thousand other young girls was the first woman I met when I landed here. If they had chosen to summon me in some other town, it could have been someone else. I did not even know for sure whether Amareth was prettier or uglier than other girls her age, having seen only a few of them and only at a distance, not to mention fully clothed. I certainly had no right to think that we had some kind of special relationship, and most importantly I had no right to mess with her life. I knew all that, and yet I could not make myself congratulate her. Now I had to say something before she guessed as much.

"Your great... prophet told me that this was that time of your life, that young men were looking at you that way. I knew it even before... I knew it from the morning when you ran away."

"I gave her my answer at once" Amareth said, almost whispered, still talking to her invisible friends as if I had not spoken. "This is the message I gave my best friend, that she might take it to the young man's sister, who is close to his heart. I said: I have heard good things about this young man, and nothing I have seen have made me

think otherwise. Surely many a young woman would be happy to have his attention. But as for me, I have already stood naked before the Champion of the Light and showed him my full backside, and he praised it above all the women of his own world. I would rather have his praise than the touch of any other man, and I would rather cradle his memory than the baby of another man. Those were my words."

I opened my mouth, but no words came out. They didn't even come as far as my brain. And then, you may almost say as usual, she suddenly ran away, out of the room and down the polished stone corridor. She was never a good runner, hard to be with the way their bodies are built, but I did not even try to catch up with her. I just stood like a statue until I did not even hear her footsteps anymore.

THE NEXT DAY was mace and armor practice again. My body got its workout alright, I think I was pounding more furiously on the strawmen than ever before, but my mind was elsewhere. Are girls born to confuse us, since they can manage it with just a few words, and even without having breasts? Back home I had always thought at girls would make great friends if not their breasts tended to come between my eyes and theirs. But now that they didn't, I understood even less than before. What had she been saying? Did she tell me that she was in love with me? Even if that made sense, which it didn't since we had only seen each other for a few minutes each day, why would she tell it in such a way?

The only romance I know much about is in Japanese cartoons. A friend of mine has a lot of them. He buys those he can find and downloads the rest from the Internet. The ones he buys have English speech but the rest have just subtitles. Subtitles, whatever. The reason why we watch his romance cartoons is of course that the girls have really short skirts. I've heard that they actually have those in Japan, it is not just in the movies. If the conditions are right you get to see their panties. This is supposedly very popular in Japan. What the girls get out of it, I don't know. The boys in those movies look rather feminine, if I may say so. Anyway, that's beside the point. The point is, when people in those movies "confess" their love, that's what they call it, they turn all red and start to stammer, and then suddenly they scream "I like you!". They don't calmly look at your wall and tell you that they turned down some guy because you have seen them naked.

The guy who was overseeing my training – the prophet didn't do that, but some other guy who probably had studied the art of war for some reason – this guy talked to me at the end of the day. "You seem much more energetic today" he said, "but you need to work on your concentration. If those had been enemies rather than straw men, you would have been dead even with the best of armors and the blessings of a hundred prophets."

If those had been enemies and not straw men, you can bet I would have approached them differently. But I didn't tell him that. I didn't even tell him where I got my energy from. I was angry and upset because I couldn't figure out what was up with this girl, or with myself for that matter, and I took it out on the fight dolls. They got quite a bashing that day, I'm afraid. It was better than bashing myself for not understanding girls. You can't understand girls. They are not made in such a way as to be understandable.

I saw her again during the evening meal, but she did not look my way or in any way show that I existed, as far as she was concerned. I can't imagine how they do it. Perhaps they have a kind of secret handbook with rules that make no sense to us. "Always send mixed signals." "Don't forget to do the unexpected." "If something is simple, make it complicated. If something is complicated, act as if it is simple." "Only chase guys who are not available. Play hard to get when they are interested, then

chase them again when they lose interest." Stuff like that.

And of course she didn't see me after the meal either. I realized that perhaps she wasn't trying to say that she liked me, perhaps she was just trying to make me feel guilty. But who can know how girls think? It seems a fact that they do think, because they can work just fine. It is just the way they think that is weird. It is as if their thoughts grow from the earth like plants, no one can see their roots, while ours sail across the clear sky like clouds, plain for anyone to see.

THE DAYS did alternate between body and head training. So the next day was theory again. This time was history. The magic that made me use their language did not work on books, I got the chance to test that. We didn't really have the time to learn me to read and write either. Instead the prophet and two other elderly people read for me from the scrolls. It turns out that not all scrolls are about magic, although I guess those in the holy room may be. The manor had another library of sorts. It is not like books are mass produced here, though. They still have medieval type scrolls, like parchment. Parchment is made from hides, and their only animals are the moose-like horses. It's not like every farm has one of those either. But perhaps it is enough for their books. My theory is that they somehow made the scrolls from plant matter, though. The way they treated the "horses" as comrades, I suspect they probably bury them with their skin on.

Anyway, history! This explained a lot. The scrolls are magically preserved so they don't rot or go brittle over time. Of course there are still events that can lead to loss of scrolls, like a war for instance, but people try to save the scrolls next after their babies. I think one of them said it approximately that way. And they did have scrolls dating back almost 3500 years, although only the prophet could read those. The language had drifted off, even here, so much that it made no sense to the others. And no, he wasn't 3500 years old either, but he had had time to learn ancient languages in his long life. The other could read about 1500 years back, which is also pretty impressive. I don't think I could have done that! My ancestors wrote in runes by then, those who wrote at all.

With writing so limited, it goes without saying that there wasn't any chit-chat. Only major events were chronicled, like wars or natural disasters. And even in those cases, the focus was practical, what was done to solve the problem. I spent the whole day listening to this. None of it solved MY problems in the least, but I had the presence of mind to realize that I really needed this. I knew next to nothing about this world and absolutely nothing about magic style wars, not least. For instance, do they use armies or just send their champions against each other? As it happens, they do use armies, but these tend to be raised for the occasion. No standing armies, few professional fighters. There is a succession of officers, for lack of a better word, experts on strategy and tactics and weapons and armor. These are charged with training the common people when the need arises. And of course magic plays a big part in it.

Needless to say, the prophet-style writers tended to think war was a bad thing in itself, and focused more on why it had happened in the first place, how to stop it and how to repair the damage. A couple other scrolls were clearly written by those military types and took a more practical, gritty approach to the art of war. These had few or no theories on why the war came to be in the first place, so I know only what the mages thought of the matter. And they thought in each and every case, the problem was too much lies and dark magic and not enough truth and white magic. No big surprise there. If the dark mages ever wrote any books about the topic, it hadn't made it here. They probably didn't, because the victors write the history books. And the good guys won every time. It was just a matter of just how much of the world was destroyed

first.

One thing that worried me was that from what I learned, wars tended to be more local than this. I even asked Aximarous about this at the end of the day. He pretty much confirmed it. Normally it would be a few towns that went bad, not half the known world. (If there were other continents, I did not hear of them at the time.) Meaning that my first job as a Champion would be to win quite possibly the worst war in 3500 years. Perhaps ever.

And yet, when the day was over, only half my mind was on vanquishing the forces of Darkness.

Chapter 8: First move

The following day was dedicated to dodging. They had evidently found that I was pretty good at bashing things that just stood there, so now I had to learn to avoid blows, or parry them. Combining the two things, parrying and bashing, would have to wait. This could simply be because they did not trust me to not bash their brains out by accident. Be that as it may, there went another day.

It was at the end of that day that the prophet let slip something pretty important.

"You are strong enough to travel now. We will leave at dawn the day after tomorrow.

Your strength will grow during the trek, it is a long way."

So soon! I was relieved, but also a bit disturbed. The only life I knew in this new world was about to change. Just as I was starting to find my way around, get to know a few people, get used to sleeping in the big room... all of it was pulled from under me like the rug in a cartoon.

At least this solved the whole girl trouble thing. If I had been stationed there for another month, I would have had to find out what she really meant. As it was, all I had to do was find her to say goodbye. Little did I know how difficult even that should be. And not as in tear-jerking "I cannot say goodbye, my love!" difficult. As in, where in the world is that crazy girl now? Difficult. But first things first.

The next day was spent in the library again, which makes perfect sense because we couldn't possibly take it with us into a war. This wouldn't be our last library session though: We were going to stop in many villages and towns on our way south ... in fact, the first part of the trek was more west than south, because we would gather up people on the road. We wouldn't quite go all over the map, but there would be a bit of zig-zagging. Actually, in a manner of speaking that was my fault. They counted on showing the Champion to raise the morale of the people and get them to actually turn out rather than come up with really good excuses for not being killed by Dark-worshiping dog-tails. My sympathy was with the excuses, but the thing was quite out of my hand.

I tried to remember as much as I could, and not let my mind wander. One reason why it might do so was that, as I said, the girl was hard to say goodbye to. In the morning, she had showed up but moved so fast that I did not catch up to her. During the mid-day meal, she was conspicuously absent. And then again in the evening. Clearly she had heard about us leaving, and for some reason did not want us to say goodbye. Perhaps she was considerate, I thought: Perhaps she believed that I would dissolve in tears. Or perhaps she would. I really had no idea where I had her. Already the time was at hand when she could practice what she preached: To cradle the memory of me.

Except it wasn't much of a memory. We could have made more memories, I thought,

doing something together, talking at the very least. There were so many things that no one asked me, that I could have shared with her if she just wanted to listen. And I knew next to nothing about her either. Did she play with dolls when she was small? She had a best friend, another girl. (Actually their language gave away the gender, as "friend" is not a gender-neutral word there. The translation magic carry over such information in a subtle way. I really should explain that in more detail sometime.) Did she have brothers and sisters? Were her parents still alive, and if so where? There were so many things I'd never know. Then again, I never said that I would keep her memory, she was the one who said she would remember me. So why was she nowhere to be seen?

During the day, the first groups of soldiers (for lack of a better word) started to move out. I already told you that horses weren't all that common, and the footfolk wisely went ahead first. I was either such a Very Important Person or not calloused enough for the march, so would ride in a wagon along with the prophet and two elderly officers.

I went to my room to sleep there for the last time, and I had still not seen her, nor did I see her then. The morning came, and just before dawn there was a scratching on the door. I hurried toward it, but even before it opened I saw a shimmer of light coming through. I don't think I have mentioned this, but as the Light seeps into you, you start to see things. Wait, I said that about mottled people, right? Well, Servants gather light around them just like the other side gathers shadow. I don't think common people can see it, except when magic is actually used, and perhaps not always then. But for me it was becoming more and more visible. By now the prophet in particular was actually shining. Others of them were kind of bright, as if they stood in a sunbeam. But he actually glowed in the dark. I would see more of them glow later when my senses grew sharper. But he was surrounded by a bright aura even then. So bright that I knew it was him before I even opened the door. The time had come. With a strange sense of loss inside, even after little more than a week, I followed him out.

THE LAND doesn't have highways in even the most charitable meaning of the word. There are sand-filled tracks at best, and many places mud-filled instead. Among the farms there are paths at best, the tracks are between villages and towns. It was such a sandy track we followed out of town. Everyone who was still there stood along the road and took farewell. With one glaring exception, of course. I looked for her, even though I had already decided before I went to sleep that night that it didn't matter. It was just curiosity that made me look over the people from time to time, until they all dwindled behind us. And then we were on the road.

You and I have grown up in a modern country, a nation. You have to understand that in a different culture, it is not just the technology that is different. Also the political organization is different. The Land doesn't have a Washington or Paris. Each town or village more or less rules itself. People tend to go to the local Servant of the Light for advice and to solve conflicts peacefully, while the officer types have more power during times of trouble. Towns have some influence over nearby villages who come there to trade. But by and large, people don't travel so much and they certainly don't send goods all across the country unless those are extremely rare goods. Salt from the coast, for instance, or metal from the mountain mines. These things are traded, but food and clothes are usually not. This is why there aren't real highways. There is no central government, no standing armies and little commerce. Who needs roads?

Well, we could need them, but the sandy tracks did help keep the direction. I am not sure it was any more comfortable than just running on the grass, though. Probably worse. They have never seen the need to invent rubber and inflatable tires, so you

can feel ever stone or root in the road. The speed was faster than a man would normally walk, but not as fast as running. The moose horses were muscular beasts but they were not magical: Like any living thing they would grow tired if they had to run all the time. It's the same with normal horses, you know. Actually a well-trained man can run longer than a horse. I might have been able to do that too, thanks to the constant blessing of the Holy Sun. But even with roots and stones, it was still easier to ride in the wagon and listen to the experts on might and magic.

They had planned all along to use the travel time to teach me. Even without scrolls, they were full of memories. The two elderly officers might not be much good on the battlefield, but they knew inside and out how wars and battles had been won and lost since the dawn of time. And Aximarous knew why the wars had been fought, why they ended and what they had cost in human suffering. It was quite sobering.

As we traveled west and slightly to the south, we passed from meadows to rougher terrain with forested hills and narrow valleys. There had been hills near the town too, I had looked at them from my windows every night, but they were like islands rising from the gentle waves of the farmland. Now the land was rocky and broken, the road winding to evade ravines and steep granite hillsides. The forest seemed like something out of Canada or Scandinavia, conifers mixed with leafy trees of a few sorts. I couldn't say from just passing through whether these kinds of trees were the same as on our earth, but they did not seem much different. Not like palms or giant fungi or anything like that. Very normal. The truth is that I don't know the trees all that well even on my homeworld. Never planned for a career as a botanist.

Then the chaos abated a little as several of the streams joined forces to carve out a wider valley, the joint river meandering through lush grassland and planted fields of a string of farms. The road followed this valley only briefly before once again foraying into the shadows of the hills. But it made me think of something.

"Aximarous, do the farmers out here receive blessings like the one you folks did near the city? Or are they left to fend for themselves?"

The prophet looked at me curiously. "That was a very good question." I had thought it somewhat childish, as the answer was surely known to everyone who lived here, but not to me.

The old man continued: "The reason I live in a large town is not a love of city life. It is a matter of need. Where there are many people, there is much need. And if that need is not met by the Servants of the Light, those who live there may turn to other sources that promise great rewards fast. It is not like the Dark is hard to find, least of all when there are many people living together. If a plague of Darkness were to break out in a city or town, the corruption would spread quickly and much would be lost. It may seem heartless, but we have to give our aid first to such places.

Yet the outlying villages are not entirely left to fend for themselves. Often they have Servants who prefer to live outside the towns, so as not to be compared to the older and more skilled among us. Even a Servant may find it uncomfortable to stand in the shadow of another, although such thoughts tend to fade with time as we learn to truly see ourselves as servants rather than masters."

I thought about it a little. "So magic is a question of skill? I wasn't sure exactly how it worked."

"It is a skill indeed, but one unlike all others. You have already felt the two sides of the Light's Power: The blessing and the fire. Know that this is felt intimately by those who wield its force. There is no separation between the Light and its Power. When we sing a song of Power or otherwise channel the Light to perform wonders, it is a small trickle of Light itself that flows through us. This same Power that effects change in the

world, also changes us. For as it passes through us, the Light shines on the darkness in our own life. It shines on lies that we had forgotten long ago, and judges the illusions we like to harbor even now. These black spots of the soul cause pain until burned away, and they also restrict the flow of Light through us. How much Power you can bring into the world does not depend on how well you remember and pronounce the songs, but on how much of your darkness that has been burnt away. The guiding skill of the Servant is the skill to surrender his own blackness within. For this reason, those who remain of little skill for long often feel inferior, as if they are being judged as less worthy. In truth, however, the world need all the Light it can get, even if all you ever bring is the smallest trickle."

"Obviously you must have let the Light burn away a lot then."

"I never found my lies all that lovable in the first place. There are others who feel that some illusions are precious to them. That is their choice. Whatever you choose to preserve, clearly you value it more highly than what you choose to discard. If I can grasp more of the Light, it is merely because I found it more valuable and had fewer other things I valued."

That sounded perfectly logical to me, and surprisingly value-neutral. I guess I had expected someone called "the illustrious prophet" to be a hardcore fundamentalist, quick to judge and quick to act on his judgments.

"So... serving the Light is good for the world, but you don't have an obligation to do it if you don't want to?"

"Obligation to who? The world? The world has no will. To the Light? The Light does not demand; the light gives. If you do not want to receive, it is unfortunate, but above all for yourself. A greatly increased chance of a long, healthy, meaningful life: If you choose something above that, surely it must be precious indeed to you. Nothing was THAT precious to me."

The sun was well past its height when we came to more regular farmland again. This time it was not just patches. Less and less forest, more and more fields, and more and more homes. Well before sunset we arrived at a fairly well developed village, although I wouldn't call it a town. A couple large guest houses were clearly meant for travelers mostly; the farmers and a few crafters living here hardly needed such a business, though they may have met in the tavern from time to time exchanging news. Certainly they were here in force, abuzz with curiosity. Cat ears and curiosity, heh. I guess some of them did join the marching army in the end, too, so it may be all too true.

People had trickled into the town where I first stayed, and were not trickling through this one. It wasn't so much a regular army on the march, yet, as people with a purpose. This would gradually change over the weeks ahead. The officers were already taking charge. On our arrival people flocked to the marketplace in front of the two lodging houses, in order to see the famous prophet. And the Champion of more recent fame. The elderly officers had foreseen this and made me put on the silver armor before we came to the village. I have later thought that this too was a kind of lie. I was not expecting an attack for weeks yet, so the armor was purely to impress the natives with the glory of a genuine Champion. I notice that the prophet did not in any way encourage this charade, but neither did he forbid it. Did he expect me to find out of it on my own? If so, he was disappointed for a while yet.

I had mixed feelings, to say the least, about being shown off like a prize bull. But people did seem to take heart, and I guess I did look like a real Champion in all that silver. The magic had made me stronger already, so much that I did not really mind wearing that metal. It was magically enhanced so not all that thick and heavy. Still, I did feel like a walking tin box. And later in the evening I was allowed to take it off. More curious stares from the locals, who had not had a week to get used to the idea of

pink people with flat round ears. The flat ears may have been the worst actually: When these people flatten their ears, it is a sign of displeasure. Not necessarily anger, but often. Strong negative emotions. I had already seen it in Amareth once, and was to see it more frequently as we moved into the war zone proper. I must have looked perpetually angry to those who did not know me, and it doesn't help that these people don't show their teeth when smiling, only when angry.

Thanks to excellent organizing by the officers, there wasn't too much chaos. By sunset we enjoyed a meal that was every bit as good as I was used to, although the dining quarters were rather cramped. The sanitary facilities were slightly overloaded already, although it was still not the time when I would get used to latrines. At the end of the day, I was also separated from my traveling companions. It was decreed, reasonably, that the elders would sleep in the guest houses. Some others were housed on nearby farms or in private houses. As for myself, however, a polite young man with a somewhat fanboyish behavior was guiding me to a fairly large and clearly expensive tent standing not too far from the taverns. Four armed men stood guard, two at the front of the tent and two at the rear, although at this time it was purely ceremonial.

"That's mine?" I asked, because no one had bothered to mention it until right then. "But of course" said the fanboy. "It is all as ordered. Your betrothed is already awaiting you within."

Chapter 9: Boyology lesson

"Welcome to your new home." Amareth was kneeling easily on the tent floor, a kind of canvas-like textile. For obvious reasons, their women are not as addicted to chairs and such as our own.

"What is this supposed to mean!" I was upset, and I felt I had good reason to. While the few men I knew were installed in the inn, I was brought here and told that this was my tent, my "betrothed" was waiting inside. Even as I entered, my mind could not grasp the change from "she didn't even say goodbye" to "she's pretending to be my fiancée". What the Moon was wrong with this girl?

She looked up at me with quiet dignity. "I took the liberty to arrange for your comfort as soon as I learned that the campaign was starting. I felt that this was a natural extension of my duty to you."

"Your duty as my betrothed?"

She blinked at me, twice. Her ears twitched. "Did you call me, 'betrothed'?"

"What? You're the one who has been passing yourself off as my fiancée, while I thought you had stayed behind without even saying goodbye!"

"In what manner have I passed myself off as anything?"

"The guy who showed me here said that my betrothed was waiting inside!"

Twitch. Twitch. "I said no such thing." She studied the tent ceiling as if reading a cue from it. "I can only surmise that he may have misjudged our relationship because I acted in your interest, and because of my familiarity with your name."

"So you did not tell him that we were, well, going steady or something?"

"No. I simply required certain provisions for your comfort and safety, acting on your behalf as is good and proper for an assigned hostess. And as well as duty I am of course compelled by my gratitude."

"Your gratitude?"

"You have honored me above all women of my generation. Should I not have your best interest at heart at all times?"

"You are honored above all women because I said you have a great ass?"

"Champion! Surely it cannot be seemly to speak like that under our current circumstances!" Her ears twitched furiously, their equivalent of blushing. I wondered how exact the translation magic really was.

"Sometimes you are just darn confusing. So you didn't say we were betrothed, you just acted like it."

"I certainly did not indicate in any way that we had a formal relationship, above the fact that it was my duty to see to your comfort and safety."

"Well, OK. Sorry for yelling at you. Thank you, I guess. I thought I would be staying with the prophet."

"You have not done so in the past."

"True. I guess I'm just new to the whole thing."

I looked around in the fairly big tent. There were my sleeping quilts from the manor. A small light crystal stood on a slender pedestal. Three round, reddish stones lay in a black pan or some such – looked like a wok really – on another, short and sturdy pedestal. I hadn't noticed it in the manor, but that doesn't mean it was never there. Things were just more sparse here so any single thing stood out.

"What's that?"

"I took the liberty of bringing a heater. Admittedly it is still early and we will be traveling south, but a tent offers less protection against the chill of night than do the massive walls of home."

"Heater, huh? How does it work?"

"What do you mean?" She looked genuinely puzzled.

"There is no heat in it now" I pointed out. "How do you start it?"
"I don't. Do I by any chance look like a Light-wielder to you?"
"It's magic?"
"Of course it is. You are the Champion of the Light, after all."
"But I have never seen those being used. I did not even know they existed."
"There is a song to get them started."
"OK. I'll try something and if that doesn't work, you wrack your brain for the song."

I had suddenly remembered the night recently when I had approached a light-stone. I carefully lifted the amulet from around my neck and held it in my hand, reaching out toward the heater. Perhaps a little too close: In a sudden flash of reddish-tinged light, the three stones blazed afire. In fact, they shone as if just emerged from a foundry, and blasted me with their sudden heat. I heard a sharp intake of breath behind me, and I myself jerked my hand away by reflex. Quickly I put the amulet back in place around my neck. Holy sun, indeed. The light crystal had stood an arm's length away, but the sudden discharge of magic made even it glow. It may well have been the first time in a thousand years that anyone had seen one act of magic ignite two different sorts of magic items. Amareth was watching with the expression of a goldfish in a museum of modern art. I somehow found this satisfying.

"OK, that sure takes care of the heating" I said, still surprised by the strength of the magic. "Do we have anything else that must be said or done before you go?"
"About the going part..." she said, kind of hesitantly.
I stared in disbelief. I guess my face said more than words.
"The conditions are cramped during a campaign. Having required such a suitable dwelling for you, I felt it would be overstepping my own importance to also require a separate lodging for myself. After all, I am only on this campaign because of you."
"But..."
"I will lie at the door, as is proper for someone of my standing. Do not mind me."
"That will be difficult. To not mind you. But I guess there is no undoing it now."
"I would rather not be seen as an unreasonable burden to the war effort."
"I guess not."
"Well then, goodnight."
"Goodnight."

My mind was swimming with new knowledge, feelings and worries. Falling asleep wasn't that easy. But I emptied my mind the way the prophet had taught me during the purification rituals. Whenever thoughts and feelings rushed back, I did not despair or fight them but simply ignored them, turning my back on them and walking into the empty room within my heart. And it **had** been a long day on the road, and then prancing about in full armor. With the darkness and the quiet hush, only faraway voices from the village in the night, sleep eventually came.

I woke up and it was still night. The room was quite warm. In my sleep I had freed myself from the thick blankets lying over me, luckily, but in doing so I had also rolled off the blankets under me, and the ground was uncomfortably hard for someone softened by beds from birth. The red stones had finally gone out, but the heat was still oppressive. I started to gather my quilts in a suitable pattern so I could lie on top of them instead. That is when I remembered that I was not alone in the room. Automatically my eyes darted to the closed tent flap, where she was lying. Yes, she had also gotten out of her blankets and everything else. Immediately I closed my eyes, but the effect was much like the shutter of a camera, freezing the picture in perfect sharp stillness. I rubbed my eyelids and turned in the opposite direction before I opened them again. Very carefully I arranged the blankets so that only the very middle of me was covered, and tried to go back to sleep. Again it was a long time in the coming.

I woke from a loud yelp beside me. Perhaps because of the unfamiliar tent, I had not been sleeping all that deeply, or that's how it felt. I certainly woke up fast. Amareth was pressing her hands against her eyes and whimpering. There wasn't much doubt what she had seen; it was morning after all, and I had once again tossed and turned in my sleep, getting out of the blankets. Exactly what I had tried to avoid. I was not happy.

"Why?" I don't think I actually screamed, but I didn't exactly whisper either while I hurried to cover myself up. "Why did you have to do that?"

"I only wanted to check on you..."

"There is one, **one** thing a girl is not supposed to 'check' until she already knows it!" She took away her hands long enough to glare at me: "I am NOT a girl! I am a woman!"

"That makes it worse, not better! How would you have liked if I 'checked' you while you were sleeping?"

"You didn't...?" She peeped again.

"No. I woke up in the heat and saw that we were both out of our quilts, so I turned away and covered myself up before going back to sleep."

"You saw me, and then this happened?"

"Don't delude yourself. This always happens. Don't you have any brothers?"

"No. Why?"

"Because then you would probably have known that they cannot just get up at once in the morning, but have to wait for it to change back."

"Did you ... dream about the women of your own world?"

"I don't remember my dream, you woke me up so fast. But it doesn't matter what you dream, so long as it is not a nightmare. It is a thing of the body, not of the will. I can't believe I have to explain these things to a girl!"

"I am NOT a girl!"

"Then why have no one taught you things that girls don't know?"

"I know many things! I can cook, I can sew, I can trade and do numbers, I know which plants grow well together and which plants go well together in a meal. I know many songs and I can play the flute. I know what clothes are appropriate for men, women and children for each season, and what feasts go with each holiday. You will not find me lacking in any skills that are expected of a wife!"

That wasn't something I was prepared to discuss. I had been worried that she would run away for good this time, never to talk to me again. But by the end of our talk, I was pretty sure that would not happen. And if she did, was it such a big deal? It wasn't like I could stay here and live happily ever after with her, even had I wanted to. I was supposed to vanquish some evil sorcerer and go back to my own world. Her skills as a wife were the least of my concerns. Still, my first thought had been worry about what she would think. Fear that she might leave me for good, even though I had already left her for good barely a day ago and would do so again.

It's bad enough that you don't understand girls, and they don't understand you either; worse is that after a while you don't even understand yourself!

Chapter 10: Spine chill

The second day of our trek, things began to blur a little already. I know the terrain was not as wild as the first day. We rarely were out of sight of fields and homes, and we passed through at least two villages worthy of a name before we stopped in the third for the night. In one of those two villages we were treated to a feast rather than eat a hasty meal by the wayside. I was not surprised that they were waiting for us. There had already been people moving ahead of us almost since I arrived in that world, and besides the Servants probably had some means of communication. Maybe not the equivalent of mobile phones, but after all the Light is the revealer of knowledge, as Aximarus sometimes said.

Apart from the travel, which was quite medieval, the society did seem fairly advanced. I have mentioned the buildings. Even in the villages, stone buildings were the rule, and there was nothing crude or primitive about them. OK, the windows were smaller than ours, but there were plenty of them. The walls were equally thick everywhere, and most impressively they seemed continuous, as if made from one huge rock rather than stones and mortar. You could follow the "grain" of the stone all along the wall and even from one room to the next. I never saw them make one, but it is a safe bet that they used magic somehow. How the power of truth can mold stone is beyond my imagination, but it is my only explanation. Since a house can stand for thousands of years, there wasn't much construction activity obviously. Perhaps they had a different kind of magic before? I didn't think to ask.

Their health care is superior to ours, plain and simple. The natural lifespan of this race is shorter than ours. The adult life is nearly the same, but they grow up slightly faster and they have a much shorter old age. Once they are a little past child-bearing age, they wither and die much faster than we, except for the Servants. Most people only live to a little past 60 of our years, enough for the last possible children to survive without a parent but not enough to take care of grandchildren. I guess the whole grandparent thing is special for our race after all. But the point is, while that natural lifespan last, almost no one dies or get disabled. The blessings and healings are so powerful and so easily available that it is simply not a concern for people. For someone to not live out their days is a shock and an outrage in the same way as a murder is to us. It is simply not natural.

So the Lands are really a good place to live, except for the occasional war. And with this being the first world war in a thousand years, I can understand how unreal it must have felt for the people. During these early days, there was more excitement than fear in the people I met. There was still laughter in the land, and people looked at the silver armor as a work of beauty rather than a grisly implement of war.

It was a good time, and I was just an innocent high school boy who felt stronger and more alive for each passing day.

The next day was much the same, except we arrived later at our final destination, a fairly large village, or perhaps a really small town. The people did not really have the same words for centers of habitation that we do. Their name for it means roughly that, a cluster of dwellings. Anything more than a string of farm would be that, whether it was a village or town or city. I don't think they have many cities anyway, much less a metropolis.

It was kinda weird sitting on the wagon and listening to the old military men talking

about ancient battles. For generations, officers had basically been historians with a side training in physical exercise. War was something that had no part in their ordinary lives. Even now, the attitude was so ingrained in them, they tended to forget that there was a war going on right now where real people were going to die.

It wasn't all that real to me either.

The day after, we were heading more due south. The land began to change, very slowly at first, but I could see dark bulges on the horizon ahead. Mountains began to rise to the south, first barely glimpsed but gradually clearer and rising higher. This was the Landspine, an old and worn mountain chain, the central massive of the northern continent. By then I hadn't seen a map of the continent, but I was to learn this later. Starting as a chain of islands off the coast, it stretches right across the whole continent. The mountains are millions and millions of years old, though, so rather than sharp peaks they are more like enormous hills, broad and tapering off to both sides in long, green foothills.

The going was just a bit slower, although we couldn't really see that we were moving uphill. You could see it when you came to a stream, though. They were all moving in the same direction, and at a decent speed. We hadn't seen any large rivers and wouldn't for the near future: Those were all on the northern and southern plains, where the hills had come to an end and the waters gathered. The summoning circle had been south of the northern plains, at the edges of the hills, though I did not know that by then.

Even as the mountains came closer, most of the land was still arable, and there were still farming villages of the sort I was getting used to now: A tavern, perhaps a smithy, a Servant or two keeping the farmers safe and sound. A slightly larger village was the one where we stopped for the night. It was the last large village before the Spine, so they told us. People used to stop here before crossing the mountains themselves through the Friendly Pass. No, seriously, they called it that. And I can see why. You want to get through a mountain chain, you would want something like this to exist. I'll be back to that in a moment.

Each day Amareth traveled ahead of me, and each evening the tent was ready after the evening meal. She would still sleep by the tent flap each night. We did not overheat the tent anymore, neither one way nor the other, staying in our quilts. But it was this day, in the village north of the Friendly Pass, that I heard a comment I was not meant to hear. Somehow the power of the amulet had gradually changed me, just a little each day. I wasn't just stronger and healthier, I could see more clearly and also hear whispers which common people could not have heard. This was one of those. "He is the Champion, after all." I couldn't avoid noticing that, even whispered at a distance.

"So, do you think he is... married or something?"

"Well, rumor is he's with a princess of some sort. They're not married but they share a tent every night."

"Lucky girl!"

"Well, I don't know... every night? And the Champion is supposed to have the stamina of a hundred men..."

The giggling and tittering that followed made it pretty clear what they were thinking. I was not amused.

I tried to bring it up that night. "Amareth, I am not sure it is wise for us to share the same tent. People are talking."

"People are always talking. That is what people do. Cats meow, dogs bark, people

talk."

"But some of them are thinking that we... that we act like a married couple, even though we are not married. Perhaps we should convince them otherwise."

"Are you asking me to marry you?" She looked at me with wide open eyes, her ears twitching.

I gathered up my fallen jaw. "Amareth, I am too young to marry. I am even too young to legally do what married people do, for two more months. And I'm bound to return to my own world when the war is over. There is no way I could marry you even if you wanted!"

"Then there is no reason for such rumors for at least two more months. I do not think this march will last nearly that long."

"People don't know that!"

"Then you may wish to tell them."

"People don't talk to **me** about these things, they talk to each other."

"But you can tell them anyway. Just stand up and talk. Everyone will listen when the Champion speaks. And everyone knows the Champion cannot lie. Just tell them you are not doing the married people thing for another two moons."

Setting out toward the pass the next day, we soon found the land rising more steeply. The moose horses slowed down. The prophet stepped down from the wagon to make the load easier for the animals, and I followed at once. To be honest, I could probably run faster than the horses and for longer by now. The white energy was burning inside me and I longed to spend it. What surprised me was that the prophet, being by far the oldest looking man I had seen on this world, seemed no less energetic. It was as if he was no longer powered by food and air but by the Light itself, the magic of it coursing through his veins. He stepped as lightly as if gravity was just another illusion that applied to the unenlightened. The two military men, closing in on the end of their lives without any such deal with the Light, had a harder time of it and had to return to the wagon after a while to rest. Luckily the moose horses were strong and well fed and had no doubt been blessed repeatedly since birth. They didn't mind as long as there was no hurry.

There were no more farms, and the plant life was quite different. Small crooked conifers – something like a compromise between a small pine and a juniper – ruled supreme over heather and short, sturdy grasses. The real mountains came closer and closer. The road was quite good here, however. I realized that it was because the pass ahead was one of the few good connections through the mountains, and all roads in the area gathered here.

And then as we came over a crest, I could see it ahead. The terrain was sloping less steeply now, the way we were headed. On both sides of us it continued to rise to form the massive mountains, but ahead of us there was a much lower rise. The Friendly Pass. It was a majestic and beautiful sight, and I wished crazily that I had a camera with me. We were traveling by carts and by foot, and I wished for a camera? Instead I settled for trying to fix the view in my mind so I would not forget it.

Other men, and a few women, had already made cookfires near a cluster of boulders that protected us from the wind. There was always wind up here, and it was cold even in the sun. We ate a quick meal, allowing the horses to rest as well. Then we moved on, wanting to be over to the south side before nightfall.

"We will not reach a village this day" said Aximarous, "but there is a group of stone huts built in the southern slope where we can rest for the night. It was built more than 3000 years ago after the Great War, when many men had to travel between the northland and the southland. For just such an occasion as this was it meant, although

traders and common people have used it from then and until now."

The other two men chimed in with their memories about logistics and the Great War, and I did not think any more about it.

The sun was already low when we passed the highest point and looked down on the south side of the mountains. It seemed we could look to the ends of the world, impossibly far. Somewhere to the south was the "Lands' Throat", the narrow belt of dry land that connected the two continents. South of there lived the dog-tailed people, who were now almost entirely conquered by the dark wizard and converted to his cause. North of it lived the cat-eared people that I was beginning to know, and who were still free. Although perhaps not all of them. The dog-tails had begun to take the war to the northern continent. It was only a matter of time before there was a major onslaught.

But I could see nothing of that from here. A land of green and blue lay ahead of us, filled with serene beauty that seemed to overflow like a cup begging our senses to drink. Was the air ever so clear on Earth, our senses so keen and unhindered? It was as if I could see through the vegetation and the soil to the very bones of the land beneath, brimming with health from 3500 years of generous blessings by the Light.

Mostly in silence did we make the rest of the day's travel, faster now that the horses were going downhill. Still it was pretty much dark when we found the stone huts. There were indeed several of them, and although they were smaller than houses, they must have been more than enough for any caravan making it through the pass. There was even enough room for us, or at least enough room that I got a small room alone with Amareth.

By now I could see pretty clearly even in the dark. Not in colors, but in shades of gray, as if in the quiet borderland between sunset and daylight, when the colors have faded but all else remains clear. Looking at the small room, I saw a slightly shivering Amareth and all our quilts in a heap. What I did not see anywhere was the heat stones.

The End? Not quite yet...

Author notes

Fact, fiction and the creative process.

The form of the story: It is supposedly told by a high school student returning from an incredible adventure in a magical world. Unlike the reader, this guy knows everything that happened and will sometimes spill "spoilers" about things that haven't happened yet chronologically. Mostly he tells a story from beginning to end, though. To a friend, perhaps? Or his blog? In any case, it is informal, personal, even embarrassing in places. There is a distance to the life he lived before this event. The reason for this will be revealed to us over time.

Yes, us. I know a few important facts ahead of time, but for the most part I write it as he dictates it, more or less. Actually we kinda work it out together. When I started writing, I had only the title and a memory from 3 years ago, when I wrote in my journal: Perhaps I should have written about paladins instead.

Worldbuilding: The people in the fantasy world are thoroughly human, but I have tried to set them more apart than just skin color, to remind us that this is a different world. Not ours, and not Tolkien's. Thus the cat ears and the different female attributes.

The exaggerated female backsides are an idealized version of steatopygia, a racial trait among the Khoisan peoples of southern Africa, although there may be scattered cases of it in some other African populations. Sculptures from European ice age indicate that it may have existed there, but many scholars now think this is just artistic liberty. Steatopygia literally means "fat butt", but it is not used so generally except by liposuction clinics. To scientists it is a specific condition in which the buttocks are greatly enlarged by firm adipose tissue, a mix of fat and strong connective tissue which gives the seeming gravity-defying "shelf" effect. As the Khoisan is generally considered an "early" type of our species (it has the greatest genetic variety compared to population) it is far from improbable that even our world could have been filled with overly large buttocks, and we would never have known that it wasn't the only way.

Likewise there are actually groups of humans where the female breast plays a negligible role in sexual selection, strange as this may seem to most Caucasians. I have taken this to its logical extreme in this story, partly to differentiate it from our world and partly as a gesture to my Republican readers, if any. We all know how Republicans feel about breasts, right?

Magic: The white magic is pretty generic and not too far from what you would expect from games like Master of Magic or Magic: The Gathering. It focuses on protection, healing, enhancement and revelation. Particular for this imaginary magic system is the strong focus on truth and Light versus deception and Darkness. Basically the Light in this world has no other moral requirements than unflinching truthfulness. I think this might actually work. Being unable to hide even your thoughts means a constant judgment day. If the society has good ethical norms in the first place, this openness will force people to follow them. Likewise, the power of deception is pretty awesome. Hitler did not have any magic at all (presumably) and yet corrupted a whole people and set a world aflame. The willingness of common people to accept comfortable lies is quite disturbing. How much more when the deception is backed up by magic that masks the uncomfortable reality.