The Magic of Writing

On Writing The Legend of Quaronaax: A Mage’s Tale

B.A. Essay

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This paper, written as an English Creative Writing thesis, is the result of a lifelong fascination for the English language, for dragons and magic, and a course in creative writing by Dr. Anna Heiða Pálsdóttir that I attended during my exchange year at the University of Iceland in the spring of 2015. The first part is a novella called *The Legend of Quaronaax: A Mage’s Tale* of around 19,000 words and the second part is an exposition, *The Magic of Writing* of around 3,700 words.

*The Legend of Quaronaax* tells the tale of a prodigious young mage called Quaronaax who is indentured at the master magician’s tower in the Ashlands. Forty years have passed since the mountain Tol Hrokkronaax erupted and wiped out the young mage’s people. It has been a time of peace. With the discovery of the returned abundant growth of the Ashland fungi and Quaronaax sensing a strange and dark magic in the atmosphere of the mountain and the Ashlands, the world is in peril once more.

Quaronaax seems to be the only one who can feel the dark magic. He and his friend decide to secretly investigate by themselves. With the help of the legendary Lady of the Dreki, descendant of ancient dragons, he begins to understand the implications of the shifting magic and embarks on a journey to seek out the evil under the mountain and defeat it once and for all.

*The Magic of Writing* describes in great detail what inspired the main themes and magical elements of the story, how I became more confident with point of view, how I conceived the plot and made it round and coherent, how my characters have been created, and how the fact that English is not my first language has affected the writing process.
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Chapter 1: The Magician's Tower

‘Quaronaax,’ a much too familiar voice cried, followed by the noise of lunges of someone taking two stairs at once.

‘Quaronaax, Galambhór is waiting for you! Don’t tell me you’re still dreaming away between straw and dust!’ The door was torn open as if by a sudden gust of wind. Quaronaax jolted upright on his straw mattress breathing heavily. His mind went reeling for an instant as the daylight flooded into his room. For a flicker of a second the sight of Llyrwyan leaning against the doorframe melted into images of blackened caverns and smouldering creatures rising out of the molten rock, wielding ebon maces, glowing vividly. The same dream as usual, he thought.

Quaronaax squinted his eyes. When he opened them again, he found a pair of big yellow eyes staring at him. Aurgkwynd, his fire drake, had been sleeping next to him and had crawled on top of him. Softly clawing at his chest, she licked the sweat off his face.

‘Bloody mushroom! I have never seen Aurgkwynd lick you like that,’ Llyrwyan said.

Quaronaax ignored him, trying to reassure the fire drake that he was alright. At last, he managed to push her away and get her to lie beside him and curl up again. He looked up and immediately caught sight of his desk, which was overstrewn with a myriad of magical utensils; alchemical alembics, a mortar and pestle with a now unidentifiable substance still sticking to it, various tools like knives, compasses, a wooden mallet, a small sharp hammer, and forceps. A dozen charcoal pieces littered the surface, one drawer was overflowing with sheets of Llaril bark, and the nearby shelves were crowded with boxes of phials, jars filled with iridescent liquids, more stacks of Llaril bark, and two dozen of Welkwynd gems, magically glowing. Llyrwyan walked past the mess, eyeing it conspicuously, but Quaronaax let out a deep sigh, and nodded at the chaotic room, smiling. Aurgkwynd raised her head, her nostrils flaring softly, then buried her head again between her tiny dragon-paws.

Even the chair was covered with too many clothes so that another pile of clothes began to form next to it where already a scattering of fire drake scales, dust, and soil littered the floor. It was reassuring to let his eyes wander over that array of dust and disorder, as Quaranir—an adept mage assistant to master Galambhór—would put it, and not too kindly.

‘By the ash, Naax! You know that the next time you’re snoozing in the morn’ I can’t—’
'Do I always have to tell you not to open the door like this, and who told you to open it in the first place?' Quaronaax yelled at Llyrwyan.

Quaronaax regretted his outburst of rage immediately, remembering the first night at Caer Lluumrinmore. He had barely seen fourteen winters when the mountain had erupted and destroyed his home. After the flight from Tol Hrokkronaax, Llyrwyan was the first apprentice he met at the magician’s tower that very night. Llyrwyan had treated him as if they had always been best friends. Quaronaax accepted that friendship only grudgingly for he could not understand why Llyrwyan was so kind to him, to a foreigner: a Valgaldheru whom the Ashlanders disliked the most of all the peoples of the mountains and east of that.

Now, Quaronaax glowered at Llyrwyan who had still not learned a degree of tactfulness even after they had been indentured to master magician Galambhór for almost forty years—a long time for mortals, but for Valgaldheru and Ashlanders, who outlived a mortal life at least twice, it was a short time; they were still considered young men.

‘Get out,’ he groaned for there was no point in shouting again.

‘You look ghastly, Naax. Are you sick or somethin’?’ Llyrwyan said, ignoring him, but looking a little contrite.

Quaronaax still sat in his bed, realising that his hair was sticking to his forehead and his shirt felt clammy against his skin. His face must have been pallid by the worried looks of Llyrwyan.

‘What did you see in your dream this morning, Naax?’ Llyrwyan said, and ambled across the room.

‘It’s nothin’, just ash spawns lurching through a dark tunnel, black walls, bubbling fire, smoke,’ Quaronaax said offhandedly, then he got up. ‘I’m alright,’ he added quickly when he saw Llyrwyan's raised eyebrows. Aurgkwynds’s ears twitched as well, but she did not stir.

‘You’re sure, Naax?’ Llyrwyan said.

‘I said it’s nothin’. What does Galambhór want? Bending fire, or is it pinching mushrooms this time, eh?’ Quaronaax took something that looked like a string from the mess on his table, and bound his hair into a ponytail, then pulled off his sweat-stained nightshirt, exchanged it for two half-coats, wrapped a warm vest around his slender waist and fastened it with a broad girdle that he extricated from the pile on the floor.

Llyrwyan still stood at his bedside, now gawking at Quaronaax who felt rather sick but still had the nerve to joke about the master magician’s whims.
‘You’re sure, Naax?’ Llyrwyan repeated, still dumbfounded. ‘I mean, yeah… Galambhór said he wants you to bend fire today. He said you should come as soon as possible, as there’s something with our mushrooms that you’re supposed to help him with fire bending,’ he said with a smirk and hurried after Quaronaax who merely grunted and was already heading onto the staircase.

‘You know that you suck at fire magic,’ Llyrwyan said.

‘I know,’ Quaronaax said with a downcast voice. ‘The fungi are all yours now, hah?’ He walked briskly down the winding stairs hugging his chest. The tower of Llumrinmore felt chill and unfriendly this morning, as the sea lay still and shrouded in the mist that wrapped itself around the two towers, and made the steam from the hot river indistinguishable from the mist.

They entered the dining hall where several apprentices sat around the fireplace with a mountain of Llaril bark and a myriad of little pots, jars and cups filled with coloured liquids, and brushes beside them. Each apprentice was looking intently at a different kind of mushroom sitting in front of each of them, while trying to paint its likeness onto the Llaril bark. Among them, Llyësin and another girl giggled away with their mushrooms dancing on their knees, but quickly stopped when they saw the two young men approaching.

‘Morn’ Llyrwyan. Good Morning long-slumber-Naax!’ Llyësin beamed at Quaronaax and offered him a mushroom. She was Llyrwyan’s younger sister and studied alchemy in the magician’s tower. Master Galambhór undertook many projects which required a lot of work, such as documenting the fungi growing in the Ashlands.

‘You’re hungry? This variety is called Faerie Frills, because of its huge tufts at the stem and the very delicate and narrow folded gills.’ She turned the mushroom upside down to show them the underside of the cap.

‘On our last trip into the Ashland we found unusually many samples of each variety,’ she said and paused to indicate with a wide sweep of her hand a large crate brimming with mushrooms. She continued, ‘There were hardly any in the last forty years since the eruption, but that couldn’t have been the reason since the fungi is native to the Ashlands. Now we could easily find enough samples for our research. The land is covered in spores, too, and mushrooms that we thought gone forever reappeared, such as these—’ She paused again showing them paintings of long, slender mushrooms with pale blue caps twice as tall as a human. ‘It seems as if the Ashlands have awoken from a state of paralysis. We discovered many more types that were native to the land before the eruption of Tol Hrokkrionaax, but have been destroyed. Currently—’
‘Currently, we are trying to gather as many samples of the previously thought lost fungi to find out why they are growing rampant again,’ the adept mage Quaranir finished her sentence. He was overseeing the group and seemed very important with his notes of Llaril bark and piece of charcoal pinned under his left arm. Quaranir cocked his head a little, squinting squarely at Quaronaax. Llyrwyan was squirming beside Quaronaax, who was clenching his hands into fists, steeling himself for whatever insult Quaranir would throw at him this time.

‘Shouldn’t you be with master Galambhór by now? How do you oversleep every day, Quaronaax?’ mage Quaranir added, frowning. ‘It seems just because you are the last Valdgaldheru you can do whatever you want. I am fascinated that master Galambhór has let you go through with being late to Fire Magic for several weeks now.’

Quaronaax wanted to hit Quaranir, smash his face so he couldn’t say another word about the Valgaldheru again—oh, how he hated Quaranir for always making comments on his heritage, as if he didn’t already know he was Valgaldheru, a mere shadow of the once mighty magicians who died under the Tol when the mountain erupted and apparently caused the magical mushrooms of the Ashlands to stop growing.

Quaronaax glowered at Quaranir, his red eyes glinting, his mouth twitching to retort something, but Llyrwyan tugged at his shoulder, pulling him away, mumbling softly ‘Let’s go, Naax. It’s no use.’ Quaronaax, grunting at Quaranir, extricated himself from Llyrwyan’s grip and walked out of the hall.

Quaronaax didn’t halt for Llyrwyan to catch up but spiralled up the staircase leading to the magician’s research chamber.

‘Well, if Quaranir was waking up from dreams with monsters pointing glowing maces at him he wouldn’t have said that,’ Llyrwyan shouted after him. ‘His head is all wrapped up in mushrooms these days. It’s been long since they’ve been growing so—’

‘Llyrwyan, that’s it!’ Quaronaax cried. Llyrwyan frowned at him, then his expression changed and Quaronaax knew it had dawned on him.

‘You think the change in the atmosphere that you’ve felt for weeks now has something to do with the return of the fungi,’ Llyrwyan said. It was not a question, but a statement. They both grinned, for they were excited by the revelation.

‘The mushrooms are native to the Ashlands; the eruption cannot have weakened or destroyed them. It must be the shift in the air. Can you really not feel anything?’ he asked Llyrwyan, who shook his head immediately.
‘No, but haven’t you told Galambhór about it? Surely, he must know something,’ Llyrwyan said.

Quaronaax laughed wryly. ‘When I told him I felt a rupture in the atmosphere, energy shifting around Tol Hrokkronaax, and asked him if he did as well, he denied it, and said there is nothing under the Tol.’ He could feel it even now, and it was becoming more palpable by the day.

Llyrwyan nodded again. ‘Come now, master Galambhór wants you to bend fire today.’ Without another word of argument, they entered the magician’s research chamber panting a little while they were approaching a tall man hunched over a stone table gawking at a mushroom, and looming with a pair of forceps over it, obviously trying to find some tiny detail in the gills.

‘Master Gal—’ Llyrwyan ventured but was immediately silenced as the magician hushed them to be quiet. The man just kept staring at the mushroom in his left hand, sucking in air ever so delicately with a hissing sound, making Llyrwyan’s hairs stick up on his arms.

‘It disgusts me when he does that,’ Llyrwyan told Quaronaax who neither looked nor reacted to him.

‘I prefer him making us do what he wants than making us stare at him while he stares at a mushroom all day. After all I had to wake you and bring you here as fast as dragons fly and now he’s just shushed us,’ Llyrwyan rambled on.

‘Ahhhhh. You stupid teeny frilly mushroom. To the Boiling Swamps with you.’ The magician who had just been sitting tight and tense on his stool jumped up without warning, and threw the mushroom right into the fireplace in the middle of the room. The tiny flames nibbled on it right away so that tiny curls of smoke rose up, accompanied by a terrible odour, making Llyrwyan wrinkle his nose and cover his face with his hands immediately.

‘No, no, no,’ Galambhór shouted and made a movement with his arms as if he was fishing for something that had been blown out of his grasp by the wind. The mushroom rose out of the embers, halting in mid-air with a sizzle and a thin vapour rising from its cap, and wandered ever so obediently into the magician’s open palms. He looked at it with such a worry in his eyes, as if the mushroom was a sentient being. Llyrwyan shook Quaronaax, looking him in the eyes, ‘Don’t you think master Galambhór has gone mad now, or have I gone mad?’

‘Ahh. You are safe now. Perfect.’ Galambhór put the mushroom back on the table into a tray and straightened his shoulders.

‘Oh, you are here finally,’ he said as if he had just noticed them.
‘Llyrwyan, could you please find out what’s wrong with that mushroom? There are tiny little beasties between the gills. I’m sure they know something.’ Llyrwyan and Quaronaax were still gawking at each other, even though they knew that the man was serious.

‘Do you want me to ask them?’ Llyrwyan said more to himself than to the magician who had already turned towards Quaronaax, and sat down on the stool, sighing over the tray heaped with mushrooms of various shapes, sizes and colours.

‘Today you will produce a flame by yourself, and maybe burn that mushroom later,’ the master magician said to Quaronaax and gestured towards Llyrwyan who glanced at them briefly.

‘But first I will show you how to bend the fire in the pit.’ Galambhór knelt down in front of the fireplace and beckoned his young apprentice to follow him. When the magician moved his palms over the small fire it suddenly flared up, but then became small and languid again, sizzling down at the embers. His hands seemed to float around the flames with a slight buoyancy, barely touching an invisible globe protecting the fire from being quenched. He moved his fingers like forceps closing in on the flames as they shrank back, making the embers crackle. Then he lifted his hands out of the invisible globe and let the fire come to life once more.

‘Now you tame it, Quaronaax. Don’t listen to it too much, but make it listen to you. You must present your thoughts clearly to the fire. Eventually you will become the flame and the flame will become you. Try it,’ the magician said in his most cryptic manner, making Quaronaax more insecure about his abilities to control the flame.

Quaronaax knelt down and held his hands above the live flames. They almost licked his palms as he moved closer to the globe and made them shrink back subserviently.

‘Yes, very good. Now, move slowly,’ Galambhór said. Quaronaax didn’t look up from his hands but kept focusing on the flames. He gazed into the fire below his hands feeling the heat and power emanating from it. The flames flickered, clicking like the tongues of snakes, planting unintelligible words into his mind. His gaze was drawn into the green centre of the flame trying to bind him as he rallied against its hisses. He felt sweat drops sitting on his brow slowly trickling down along his temples as the hisses became louder and more furious. He thought his head would burst soon; he couldn’t stand the pain much longer. Then he squeezed his eyes shut, but the hisses turned into shouts and the heat became almost unbearable.

He tore his eyes open and saw right into the fire; a smouldering chamber with streams of red molten rock that bubbled vivaciously opened up in front of him, and ash spawns that
rose out of the viscous, black rock wielding glowing maces and axes came into view. It was as if he was right there, standing on the lava rock in the chamber of his dream. Then the ash spawns gazed at him with their flaming ember-eyes. Behind the steam wafting up from the streams he could discern silhouettes of a human figure sitting in a chair at the end of the elongated chamber. When the figure leaned forward through the mist he saw a man, but still could not see his face clearly. The man in the chair bore a stone crown upon his brow; the familiar pale-blue gems glimmered yellow in the firelight.

‘Father, is…’ Quaronaax started but his voice merely came out as a muffled echo within the sphere of the flame.

‘I need you. Come to me,’ an ancient voice whispered so clearly he was startled. Then, as if on cue, the ash spawns started towards Quaronaax.

At last, the man tilted his face into the fire’s sheen and glared with eyes of embers at Quaronaax. Everything blurred and fell apart into bits and pieces which were engulfing him like an embrace of fire and smoke. Then he was pushed out of the sphere of the flame.

Quaronaax screamed as the flames in the pit singed his palms. He crumpled onto the floor staring at his hands that had already produced blisters.

‘I can’t shut out the voices. They’re shouting too loudly. I’m no good. I can’t bend fire …’ Quaronaax rambled on, but Galambhór was holding him tightly. Quaronaax felt tears wetting his cheeks as the blisters on his palms sizzled and the smell of burned flesh began to rise. He had been a young man but now he lay defeated at the magician’s feet, turned into a boy once again, like the prince on the day they left Tol Hrokkronaax together. Master Galambhór had promised to teach him how to bend the natural elements. There was only one element left: fire. It was the opposite of the innate power of the Valgaldheru.

‘Get up Llyrwyan,’ Galambhór shouted, ‘and help me.’

Llyrwyan, still baffled by the sudden commotion, lunged across the room and slid his arm under Quaronaax’s arm, and together with Galambhór they heaved him down the spiral steps. Quaronaax tripped into the dewy grass as they pushed him out the back door. He gulped in the crisp air, becoming quiescent.

‘Get Llyësin, bandages, and her stinky bubble-blisters ointment. Now.’

Llyrwyan nodded and disappeared inside the tower. Galambhór walked towards Quaronaax. He sat in the grass and stared out at the sea as the waves pounded into the rocks of the coast and the brine splashed high up into the air.

Quaronaax tried to make sense of what had just happened. The flame had become some sort of portal directly transporting him into the lava rock chamber of his dream. The ash
spawns were there again, but this time they looked at him directly as if he had truly been there. How had it been possible for the flame to transport him into the cavern of his dreams? Quaronaax could still see the imprint of the glowing ember eyes of the crowned man against his closed eyes. Why was it possible for that man—or was he truly a creature of the flame—to wear the crystal drop crown of the Valgaldheru?

He shook his head, trying to blot out the images, and fixed his gaze on the waves rolling in at regular intervals. Quaronaax noticed that Galambhór had stepped beside him looking out at the sea as well.

‘What did you see?’ The magician asked softly.

Without taking his gaze off the sea, Quaronaax told the master magician what he saw in the flame and in his dreams. When he had ended his tale, Galambhór crouched down, cocking his head a little, as if to say something, but instead stared at him ponderously.

‘Why don’t you say anything?’ Quaronaax blurted out, pulling Galambhór out of his reveries.

‘Because I don’t know what this means. Perhaps you are not strong enough—’

‘Even if I was strong enough to bend fire I would still see ash spawns, fire and smoke. Why do I see these creatures in my dreams, and this strange man with ember eyes wearing the crown of my people in the flame? Where does he want me to come—to the mountains?’

‘A mere illusion of the fire. It wants you to listen to the voices, to believe in the images just so you fail. What you saw means nothing,’ the magician said calmly.

Quaronaax could not believe the magician was so blatantly denying the obvious connection between his dreams, today, and the changes in the atmosphere in the Ashlands. He pressed his lips together as he fought the urge to clench his burned hands into fists.

‘Why are you lying to me? Don’t you feel that there is something out there? I know you feel the shift too. Why—’

‘Don’t you dare to accuse me again of lying. When I told you that there is nothing under the Tol, I was not lying to you, for the Valgaldheru are gone; they could not escape the eruption, nor could any of the mortals from the hill lands in the east, or the Dreki, or Aelbjonger. None of them are no more. You cannot bring back any of them as you cannot bring back the Valgaldheru just because of a mere feeling of something you know nothing about that may, or may not perhaps be roaming under the Tol. And even if there was something, it is not the Valgaldheru.’

‘Stop saying that they are no more. I am still Valgaldheru. You say it as if I was not Valgaldheru, as if I was an Aelbjonger, or an Ashlander. Am I an outcast, then?’ Quaronaax
shouted. He groaned as he glimpsed his hands, now covered in blisters. ‘I am the outcast prince, so who cares whether I can bend fire or not?’

‘I care. Your father cared. Your mother cared. I will not break my promise to them, just because you think the only honour that matters is the one you lost forty years ago. Redeem it now and here in Caer Lluumrinmore, and it will matter whether you can bend fire,’ master Galambhór said.

‘Ah, Miss Llyēsin,’ Galambhór said without any motion in his face whatsoever as Llyēsin came blustering out the door with a bundle in hands. He turned towards Quaronaax once again. ‘I congratulate you, young man. You made it impossible for yourself to bend fire. You will help the others to prepare for the autumn equinox.’

Llyēsin’s head jolted from Quaronaax to the magician who vanished inside the tower without another word.
Chapter 2: Lady of the Swamp

A tenday had passed after the vision in the flame. Quaronaax was pacing up and down in his room, looking alternately out of the small window of the tower, Caer Lllumrinmore. It was the day of the autumn equinox, which marked the day and the night that lasted as long as the other. He saw several people bringing in baskets bursting with Welkwynd stones, and placing them down near the middle of the open space between the two towers—a wide depression that had a curious surface as the lava had cooled in its flow—while others were bustling to and fro as they carried items from the east tower to the west tower.

The people of Lllumrinmore had been preparing the festivities of the autumn equinox over several weeks. Llyrwyan, Llyësin, master magician Galambhór, Quaranir, and Quaronaax had been almost entirely separated throughout these days, confined to their work spaces, either continuing the magician’s endless project to document every type of fungi in the Ashlands, or collecting Welkwynd gems and enchanting each one for the fest. All of the apprentices had been so busy, that there had been no time to ask Quaronaax how he had managed to burn his hands when trying to work fire, even under the close supervision of the master magician.

He was glad that the preparations for the autumn equinox had begun soon after his failed attempt at fire magic, for he was not so sure if he could have born the worried look of Llyësin much longer than a couple more days. Aside from Galambhór, Llyrwyan was the only one he told about the crowned man in the flame. As soon as there had been any time after their chores the two apprentices had scarpered off into the Llarilary where hundreds of blocks of Llaril bark were kept. They buried themselves under notes about the past, trying to find hints in the few historical accounts on the Ashlands, but could not find anything substantial about ash spawns, except that they were undead creatures, which they had known before. It seemed pointless. Why was he even trying to prove Galambhór was wrong?

Somebody knocked on the door as he was peeking out the window again. Llyrwyan poked his head between door and frame, huffing and puffing.

‘Hey Naax, what are you still staring out the window? Get yourself down there. You’re needed; they’re assembling the gem stones now.’

‘Oh, okay,’ he stammered, but Llyrwyan had already turned on his heels, ‘See you there,’ he called, running downstairs again, probably taking two steps at a time.
Before Quaronaax could pull himself from the window he saw how Llyrwyan stepped outside, heading towards Llyësin who was already there hunkering over a makeshift table. She was drawing something on a sheet of Llaril. Several people were streaming outside both from the west and east tower; even in the distance beyond the two towers Quaronaax could descry several groups of more than a dozen people each making their way toward the magician’s tower. Shifting from one foot to the other, Quaronaax tried to shake off the tension that was hanging in the air. He had never seen so many tribes of the Ashlands come to the autumn equinox festivities. He knew, though, that just like himself they could not wait to see the Lady of the Swamp ignite the flame of the equinox for the first time.

Alongside the east tower a shallow stream, the Lluurinmore, had been digging its bed in from the Ashlands, snaking its way between the two towers, running down into the sea. People were trudging through the shallow stream without so much as a flinch for its water was warm, in fact hot enough to bathe in at certain spots. Quaronaax eventually drew away from the window, rolled up the cuffs of his shirt, and headed out with a smile on his face.

‘Look, master Galamhór is coming back,’ a young voice cried. Almost at the bottom of the tower he could already hear a big deal of rustling, as the Ashlanders and all the other apprentices, and helpers headed for their spot around the depression.

‘Look, look,’ the voice cried again. Quaronaax discovered that the voice belonged to a little boy, who skipped forward to tug his parent on the leg. Quaronaax followed his tiny hand pointing on the horizon where silhouettes of small figures came into view. He craned his neck to see Galamhór, as he approached the stream from beyond the east tower, the Aelbjonger, and the Lady of the Swamp trailing behind him. Master Galamhór was straddled on a fire drake, one of the lizard-like descendants of the Dreki. Once, before the battle on the Tol, the Dreki, the mighty dragons of yore, roamed the lands. Each township, settlement, and realm was guarded by one Dreki and seven drakes. Now, only their mediocre descendants, the fire drakes, still lived.

Nimuanvar, Galamhór’s fire drake, lifted her wings once, and as she flapped them down she swooped over the shallow stream. The master magician brushed his hand over her grey-blue scales, and patted her neck, before he swung down to the ground.

‘My dear friends,’ he said to those assembled around the depression, while extending his arms to beckon the new arrivals. Quaronaax wedged forward between the people to get a better view.
‘Aelbh’iain, Lord of Aelbjonheim, has come to light the flame of the equinox with us.’ Galambhór waved his hand, as Aelbh’iain, and three dozen of his people came riding up from the lower plains, but halted before the stream. Aelbh’iain was a tall man, clad in thick fur-trimmed robes for the north coast where the plains of Aelbjonheim lay was always windswept by the northern sea. He swung down as deftly as Galambhór. The two men bowed before each other, then bowed towards the people of the Ashlands.

‘Welcome again, Aelbh’iain!’ they cried and bowed in turn.

The Aelbjonger also bowed towards the Ashlanders, and then some of them casually walked through the stream, and assembled around the depression between the two towers.

Master Galambhór and Aelbh’iain turned around to look into the distance where the line of the Ashlands melted into that of the Tol, the barren lands, that nobody ever entered safe for the Fire Nomads, who dwelt deep within the wastelands in the glade, that could not be found by anyone except for themselves.

The silhouettes of a procession were rimmed by the light of the dipping sun, throwing its long rays between the two towers. Quaronaax’s gaze was fixed on the horizon as well, awaiting the arrival of the Lady of the Swamp, the daughter of Lord Aelbh’iain. He could feel the tension in the air, so excited was everyone to see the woman who was said to be of the Dreki, the first creatures to tread on this world. He was wondering what this glade in the lowlands of the Tol looked like. Many tales had been wrought around it, some saying that it was a lush forest with water cascading down the slopes, others saying that it was a swamp warded off by magical mists.

The last rays of sunlight were stretching over the depression beyond the stream that reflected its light in a wild array of sparkles. It was then that a woman came up behind the hill with a magnificent fire drake walking beside her, as its red scales and mane shone bright in the cast of the setting sunlight.

Four women and more than a dozen fire drakes had come with Mhëlian. The women were clad in bright red robes which bore a symbol upon their chests; it was a single orange swirl, symbolising the inherent power of the Fire Nomads. The woman in their midst, though, wore a purple robe with intricate patterns in bright colours. Her shoulders were embroidered with two symbols, each within a circle; on the left sleeve were three small swirls in pale blue, followed by four square shapes in green; on the right sleeve sat the single orange swirl, followed by three undulating lines in bright blue. These symbolised the four elements that the Dreki could bend at their will, and so could the Lady of the Swamp. And so could Quaronaax
—if he practiced more—for the Dreki had taught their knowledge to the Valgaldheru upon Tol Hrokkronaax long ago, when the mountain was still teeming with life.

The sun was now hitting the Lady of the Dreki squarely in the face, her eyes as bright green as the sap of the sea weed, but her hair was stark white, tumbling down her shoulders. She bowed so low, as did the women beside her, that her long hair casually swept the ground.

‘Yo’rshku, ch’kin ni’asgkr to Caer Lluumrinmore,’ she said in the ancient tongue of the Dreki. It was the same language that Quaronaax used to speak in Valgaldrunheim on Tol Hrokkronaax. It sounded so different than how he had remembered it, so long has it been that he spoke the words. In her voice the runes sounded harsh, but clear and rich.

‘Well met, people of the Ash of Caer Lluumrinmore,’ she said again but in the tongue of the Ashlanders, and smiled into the warm sun.

‘Welcome, Lady Mhêlian,’ Galambhór said to the white-haired woman, both moving into a stance as if to clap their hands together, but instead punched their fist into their left outstretched palm, then bowed to each other.

Galambhór turned towards the crowd around the depression, and raised his voice again, ‘Let us bid welcome to Lady Mhêlian!’ Only a few Ashlanders joined in this time.

The Ashlanders were not so easily softened, for they were naturally wary of strangers, especially of a young woman with piercing green eyes and hair as white as the ever-lasting snow caps of the Pass of Hrokkr. Quaronaax was curiously eyeing this strange woman, not only because wondrous tales had been wrought about her but also because she had known the Valgaldheru. Craning his neck, he saw how Lord Aelbh’iain clasped her on both shoulders as he bent down, kissing her on the brow.

Nimuanvar casually plopped down at the magician’s feet, obviously undaunted by the bustle, but Mhêlian’s red fire drake suspiciously circled around the prone drake, grumbling deeply. They were both laying their ears flat against their head, growling at each other. The red firedrake stopped abruptly when Mhêlian laid her hand gently on it, her green orbs locking with the drake’s yellow lizard-eyes. She smiled softly.

* * *

Mhêlian herself was uncertain whether the Ashlanders’ reaction was at all good. Even though they greeted her, and welcomed her, would they still accept her for who she was? Certainly, the people of the Ash would be suspicious of her, for the Dreki had long been friends of the Valgaldheru. Their reasons for hating the people of the Tol were somewhat
understandable, for they were partially responsible for the eruption of Tol Hrokkronaax. Still, she could not see why the Ashlanders should keep distrusting anyone associated with the Valgaldheru; the fire drakes, her people, herself and Quaronaax.

She brushed through the auburn mane of her fire drake, twisting the tufts around her fingers, then patted her softly, mumbling under her breath ‘Come, Nehkgwenvar. Let’s go.’

Before she made her way up to the depression she let her gaze sway from Aelbh’iain who stood engrossed in a conversation with Galambhör, to the drakes she had brought with her that were teased by several children, and soon became interested, bundling along with them—she chuckled to herself—and to the three acolytes who had accompanied her to this foreign land; they had already mingled with the apprentices bustling about the depression, instructing them about the items needed for the conjuring of the flame. She noticed Quaronaax who stared at her, his uncommon red orbs unnerving her. She stared back, his cheeks dimpling a little. Then he walked towards her in four long strides, halted at the stream, and stretched out his hand in front of her.

‘Well met, Lady Mhëlian.’ He paused, then said ‘Val ek nchgwn to?’

Gaspng, she looked at him squarely, still offering his hand to her. To hear the ancient tongue of the Dreki spoken by someone else surprised her, even though she knew he could still speak it.

‘Yorosh’ku,’ she replied in the ancient tongue, which meant nice to meet you. Quickly composing herself, she smiled at him, for she had been waiting all her life to meet the legendary Valgaldheru—not that he was legendary yet, but to Mhëlian he was a link to the Dreki, no matter how small it may seem.

She waved his hand aside, for she didn’t need his help, and stepped onto the stream offhandedly. She had conjured a buoyant force within the water to keep her feet floating on top of the surface.

‘How, though … how did you do it?’ he stammered waving his hands at her.

She was grinning for she loved the surprise in his face, but looked at her feet, as she easily walked above the stream. ‘I can teach you if you like,’ she said, as she stepped onto the ground before him.

‘You are Quaronaax the Forgotten Prince.’ She could barely contain her excitement.

‘I prefer Quaronaax the Apprentice,’ he retorted, not taking the comment well at all.

‘Who are you, Mhëlian of the Dreki?’ he added.

‘It is true I am of the Dreki, but I am also just a Fire Nomad,’ she said.

‘Then I am just an apprentice. You should go—’
‘I apologize for my friend’s rude behaviour. He has burned his hands,’ Llyrwyan said quickly—he had watched the scene from afar—stepping beside Quaronaax, and held up his hands, still wrapped in linen cloth, to prove he had truly burned his hands as if that would excuse everything. Llyrwyan pulled him away from Mhëlian, and out of her ear-shot.

* * *

‘What the dragon’s spit was that all about? Can you never be just acting like you were not the hurt prince of the lost Valgaldheru, because you are just an apprentice as you said yourself? Cope with the fact that you are no longer a prince. You have been rescued by Galambhór, welcomed by our people, and become one of us, just as ordinary as everyone else. Can’t you be grateful for that? I can’t believe how it fazes you each time somebody mentions your heritage. It’s gone, but that doesn’t make you any less. Indeed, you are elevated among us. Haven’t you noticed that? You are never going to be completely ordinary.’ Llyrwyan said, glaring at Quaronaax, still stunned at his friend’s behaviour.

‘Indeed, because I am not one of you. I know who my people are. I know my legacy and I will be the prince that they would have had if—’

‘Are you infuriated because there is nobody who expects you to be that prince, Quaronaax? You need to let go,’ Llyrwyan said and pulled him by the arm again, gently this time. ‘Come on. Let’s go and light the fire of the equinox.’

As Quaronaax didn’t resist he let Llyrwyan nudge him on, quickly catching up with Mhëlian as she walked into the depression where all the preparations have been made, and everyone was waiting for her to come.

Llyësin and Quaranir were awaiting her, both bowing in turn as Mhëlian approached them. ‘Well met, Lady,’ they said almost simultaneously.

They handed her the sketches for the rune circle, but Mhëlian pressed them into Quaronaax’s hands, without so much as looking at him. Holding a white ribbon between her teeth, she passed it under her arm to tuck up the wide sleeve of her robe with it, then passed the ribbon behind the back of her neck, passed it under her arm again to tuck up the left sleeve, and tied both ends of the ribbon across her back. With a stern expression on her face, she walked into the middle of the depression, crouched down, and began to trace the lines of a circle into the air just a few inches above the ground with her index and middle fingers.

Llyrwyan joined them around the depression, and together they gasped, for a soft shimmer appeared where her fingers had passed. The Lady of the Swamp drew the second
circle at least two feet around the former, and the last circle several feet around the first two lines. She instructed the apprentices to quickly cover the lines with the pale greenish dye they had prepared just a few days ago.

At a distance Galambhór watched them as they brushed the fresh dye over the already fading outlines. Each drew a rune within the perimeter of the third ring, then of the second. When they had finished their work, Mhèliáin instructed them to place crystalline gems, Welkwynd stones that they had imbued with magic fire, for they glowed fiercely in the waning light, opposite each rune outside of the perimeter of each circle, and crushed each gem with a huge mallet.

When that was completed, Mhèliáin walked into the now rune-emblazoned circle, to its very centre, drew a symbol quite different from the ancient runes—it was the single swirl, that both the Lady of the Dreki as well as her companions bore on their attire. Then Aelbh’iain entered the circle, carrying a magnificent Welkwynd stone, placed it on top of the single swirl, and crying out a word of completion, drew an ebon blade from under the folds of his robes to bring it down at the same moment that Mhèliáin raised her mallet, smashing the Welkwynd gem under their conjoined force.

For a moment, there was only silence, then the shards of the broken gems began to tremble slightly. Aelbh’iain and Mhèliáin rushed out of the circle to join the apprentices huddled around the depression, their gaze fixed upon the now glowing rune circle.

The glowing increased; multiplied. A fountain of pale blue light erupted out of the runes drawn upon the ground, shooting into the darkening sky with such a force that it was palpable even beyond the crystal circle. Its blazing blue light calmed somewhat, reflected on each of their faces alternately.

Cheers resounded among the people around the magical flame, and more than one sceptical Ashlander’s mouth split into a smile, for they were awestruck by the magic that has been unfolding before them. Quaronaax had never seen such a strong conjuring of light, and nor had the people of the Ash. He looked at the young woman again, curiously, admiringly. Her long white tresses were waving lazily around her body as if by the charge of the magic that was still lingering in the air. He was surprised why all these years the Lady of the Dreki had never journeyed to Caer Lluumrinmore, but had left the Lord Aelbh’iain to conjure the light by himself.

Quaronaax turned his gaze away from the magical flame, searching for the master magician in the midst of the assembled crowd. Galambhór stood next to the Lord of the Aelbjonger, gladness in his face, yet with a fierce look; something—the wrinkles around his
eyes, or the scarcely visible crease on his brow gave him a somewhat stern expression. Why had the magician summoned Lady Mhëlian to aid them in the equinox conjuring this year? Perhaps the stubborn mage suspected something about the mountains all along, perhaps that is the reason he brought the Fire Nomads and their lady into their midst.

Would the master magician admit what he felt if he confronted him again? If the shifts he had sensed under the mountains were real, the Fire Nomads must have been sensing the change in the atmosphere as well, which meant that lady Mhëlian might know about it too.

Turning around, he realised that the Ashlanders, Aelbjonger, and Fire Nomads were still rejoicing in the summoning of the blue flame. They patted each other on the shoulder, congratulating themselves for the success of the conjuration. They were laughing, chatting, even dancing around the rune circle as it was custom to do on this crisp night of the equinox.

The Lady of the Dreki and Lord Aelbh’iaiin joined them, and the Ashlanders seemed to have forgotten all thoughts of suspicion, but what did that mean for the new arrivals? Had they truly come for the sake of the equinox, or had they been summoned by Galambhör because of some shift in the atmosphere of Tol Hrokkronaax?

Quaronaax was shaking his head as if he wanted to throw it all away. Furtively glancing over his shoulder, he disentangled himself from the throng, making for a possible exit to the side. It was quite a feat to find a path out of the perimeter of the crystal circle, so that he had to push his way forward, to weave through the people, as gently as possible.

Sighing, he took a few steps toward the quiet stream. No ripple disturbed its surface, but it was slightly shrouded in steam. He plopped down on the edge of the shallow water, craning his head upward into the night sky, trying to find the four major star constellations. His meagre attempt lasted not long and he turned his gaze back towards the darkling figures dancing around the blue flame.

A dozen children, many young Aelbjonger as well as Ashlanders had joined in on the wild dance where the participants were holding each other’s hands while they executed a simple pattern of a few steps to the side and back, forward, spinning, and again a few steps to the right and back, forward and spinning, all the while turning around the magic flame, slowly and steadily. Llyrwyan, Llyësin, and even Quaranir—usually scampering off as soon as he saw too many people in one spot—were among the dancing circle, yet the latter’s sullen expression betrayed his actions. Everyone (except for Quaranir) seemed glad as they were laughing, and giggling as they softly chanted the words of an old tune.
When they turned around the magic flame, the light illuminated their figures alternately, so that some of them were no longer looming dark in front of the blue light. Quaronaax was caught by the fluid movements of Mhélian as her feet were tracing the pattern of the dance, boldly, confidently.

She had a stern expression on her face, so focused had she been on the correct steps, but after a while—they had turned around the blue light once more—she was giggling as well, as they were all swaying to the right more swiftly now, yet in perfect unison. Her long hair was swooshing around her, blazing in the cast of the magic flame.

Then her green orbs discovered Quaronaax, as he sat by the stream. Having lost himself in her graceful movements he was almost caught off guard when she looked at him squarely. She extricated herself from the dancing circle, disappeared in the crowd around the rune circle, then emerged again, puffing breathlessly as she stumbled down toward him. He noticed that her sleeves were still rolled up and tied back around her shoulders since the drawing of the rune circle. Her cheeks dimpled slightly as she came closer.

‘It is so quiet out here,’ she said, not taking her gaze from the clear eastern sky, stretching over the Ashlands and to Tol Hrokkronaax.

‘If you listen closely you can hear the chill wind sweeping over the rock,’ he whispered.

She crouched beside him on a soft hillock overgrown with the pale green moss of the Ashlands, bent her legs and pulled her knees in tightly to her chest. The thin wafts of the steam were warming the crisp air, but a gust of wind was scattering the wisps across the stream. She nodded.

Quaronaax sought a reply, wanted to ask her about the shifted magic of the mountains, about the “Swamp”, about the Dreki—he wanted to ask her everything. He felt awkward here, rightly so, for he had no reason to insult her before. He had never since he had become a disciple of Galambhór been able to talk to someone who knew the Dreki before their disappearance, who was even speaking the ancient tongue; Galambhór spoke it too, but he was not of the Dreki, nor was he Valgaldheru—and who was so attuned to the fire drakes, to the way of the flame, and wielded magic so effortlessly.

He looked at her, admiringly, for he wished he could have grown up on the Tol, where the Valgaldheru and the Dreki would have taught him the way of the magic, had they not been forced to fight their own people, a bunch of dissenters. Indeed, why had the dissenters split away from them at all? But he waved the thought away. All he wanted to
know was whether there was something under the Tol or not. If someone felt the same as he it must be her, the Lady of the Swamp.

She regarded him curiously as if she could see the struggle that he was fighting within him. As she bent forward she raised her arm before his face, pointing to the north-east where the slopes of Tol Hrokkronaax began, stretching far down into the lower Ashlands, making the region almost impossible to penetrate for huge mounds and high ridges of lava had formed many passages and trails through the barren land that was dotted with hot springs, boiling mud pots, and steaming water fountains.

‘There,’ she pointed at several mounds towering so high that they covered a vast expanse of barren land—no one would expect to find anything behind them—‘behind these mounds lie the Hidden Swamps, the home of the fire nomads,’ she said.

He nodded. He was baffled, for he didn’t understand why she was telling him this.

‘Mhëlian—’ he began, but broke off.

She was hugging her knees so tightly; she looked fragile rather than bold and nimble, the way she had been at the rune circle. Her hair was streaming out behind her like a blanket of snow covering her body. She was shivering.

‘I usually don’t get cold, but whenever I look at the mountains I am shuddering as if a cold is descending upon me, and I cannot get warm. I feel a tension under the mountain. Something has changed within the very fabric of the magic lying over Tol Hrokkronaax.’

He was not surprised, for he had already suspected as much, but her last words the very fabric of the magic lying over Tol Hrokkronaax still echoed in his head.

He leaned forward, gasping. ‘What magic are you talking about?’

‘The magic ward, of course.’ She looked at him, puzzled. ‘My father and master Galambhór devised a spell that they cast over Tol Hrokkronaax when the lava had cooled. Its magic laid an eternal slumber on the mountains so that the evil could not return.’ She paused, looking over his shoulder into the darkling plains beyond, to the Tol that lay in its own shadow now. Only a few stars on the night sky traced the silhouette of the mountains. Quaronaax sat very still, very quiet, hearing her every word.

‘The very fabric of the spell is crumbling,’ she said at last.

Her words made Quaronaax, anger budding in him, jump to his feet. How dare he, Galambahór, not tell him about that spell all these years? Whenever Quaronaax tried to make him tell more about the fated day the mountain erupted, the magician had evaded him. He knew Galambahór felt the rift in the magic fabric too, yet, the master magician did not tell him. He could not understand why he kept it a secret all these years. If the mountain has been
lying in a slumber could it be that someone had somehow survived the onslaught of the lava flow all these years? He had to find out, now. Galambhór could no longer keep the truth from him, not anymore.

Now, Mhêlian got to her feet as well, looking him squarely in the face.

‘Surely, you must have known about the spell,’ she said, but it sounded more like a question.

‘No.’ The simple reply seemed to catch Mhêlian off guard. Her long white hair cascaded over one shoulder as she cocked her head to the side, her eyebrows shooting up in a question.

‘Galambhór lied to me all this time. He told me nothing,’ he said bluntly.

When Mhêlian’s eyes widened, it dawned on him that she was not meant to tell him about the spell. He stomped off heading back up to the gathered throng without another word.

‘Quaronaax!’ she cried, scrambling after him, but he had already disappeared in the crowd. Without thinking, he started towards the west tower and swiftly walked past Ashlanders and Aelbjonger who were still revelling the night, some of them dancing around the seemingly tireless blue flame.

Right in front of the entrance to the west tower, he bumped into Llyrwygan. Both men exchanged looks of surprise, halting in their stride.

‘Have you seen Galambhór?’ Quaronaax said with a half-hearted smile.

Llyrwygan told him that he had seen the master magician and Lord Aelbh’aiain disappear inside the tower a while ago. Quaronaax mumbled his thanks as he brushed past Llyrwygan, patting him on the back.
Chapter 3: Secrets of the Past

The tower felt oddly quiet compared to the throng gathered around the magic flame outside. Without thinking twice, Quaronaax headed straight to the spiralling stairway leading up the tower, but then he paused in mid-step, falling back against the wall, puffing, for he realised he had no idea where Galambhór and Lord Aelbh’iain actually were. He considered the question of their whereabouts for a moment, trying to think like the master magician, and decided to head all the way down into the lowest level where the alchemical laboratory was—the room of the magician’s favourite occupation. With his new-found courage, he started again, taking two stairs with each step. Halfway down the stairway a loud creaking noise reverberated throughout the tower when the front door opened again. From out of the corner of his eyes he glimpsed Mhèlian as she glanced around furiously, immediately catching sight of him on the stairway.

‘Wait,’ she yelled at him, yanking him around by the shoulder.

‘Why are you following me?’ He brushed off her hand with a gruffness that seemed to surprise her, and pulled away from her, continuing down the stairway.

At the bottom, he quickly walked down the corridor, Mhèlian close behind him, but stopped abruptly before he reached the door at the end. It stood ajar, candle-light streaming into the corridor. His muscles tensed when a familiar name was mentioned behind the door, and held him back from entering.

‘I warned you the spell would not last. The magic of Nerevyn is too strong.’ It was Galambhór who spoke.

‘We could not have fought Nerevyn and his followers either. Without the Dreki and the Valgaldheru, they would have defeated us before we even reached the Crystal Hall. To put the mountain under the magical slumber was the only way,’ Aelbh’iain argued.

Galambhór sighed deeply.

‘If the magic ward breaks, Quaronaax will be vulnerable. Nerevyn has already established a link with him. When Nerevyn finds a way to communicate with him again, he will draw him to the mountain as soon as the magic is weak enough,’ Galambhór reasoned, his voice strained and worried.

Quaronaax and Mhèlian stood just outside, not daring to move, barely breathing, as they listened to the two magicians’ every word. Quaronaax knew Nerevyn, a powerful mage among the Valgaldheru, and always at his father’s side—indeed, for he was his father’s best
friend. Quaronaax was confused for he thought he had seen his father in the sphere of the flame. Could it be that Nerevyn had spoken to him through the flame?

‘We must close the rupture in the fabric of the magic, Aelbh’iain.’ Galambhór paused. The candle-light was obscured for a moment as he walked past toward the other mage.

‘Quaronaax will not understand how dangerous Nerevyn is. He will want to find Nerevyn for he is the only link to his past. Nerevyn is Valgaldheru, nevertheless, which is enough for Quaronaax to trust him regardless of the danger. When he finds out we enchanted Tol Hrokkronaax he won’t listen to us, will not hear our reasons, will only care about Nerevyn. He will think that Valgaldheru are still trapped inside the mountain, but they are no longer…’ Galambhór’s voice faltered for a moment. ‘The ash spawns won’t recognise Quaronaax. And Nerevyn won’t hesitate to order them to attack the boy as soon as he realises what Nerevyn’s true—’

‘You cannot keep the truth from Quaronaax forever, Galambhór!’ Aelbh’iain cut in.

‘But when we lose Quaronaax the Ashlands will be lost too.’

‘Galambhór, you cannot keep the boy locked up in Caer Lluumrinmore. He is smarter than you think. When he discovers the truth, and he will, he will go to Valgaldrunheim all by himself,’ Aelbh’iain said.

‘But Quaronaax is not ready yet. Nerevyn will k—’

The master magician’s last words were drowned in an ear-shattering sound as a dozen jars and phials started quivering on their shelves, their contents freezing and exploding. Glass shards flew everywhere, crackling and glistening. Quaronaax knew this exactly, even though he stood outside, his hands clenched into fists with an icy vapour surrounding them.

Before the two mages in the alchemical laboratory could react, Quaronaax stormed off into the corridor back up the stairway and to the right, heading up the spiraling staircase leading up the tower. Galambhór was right, right about everything he said about himself. After all, Galambhór had raised him and knew him better than his parents would ever have; perhaps knew him better than Quaronaax did himself. He stopped in his tracks, kicked the circular stone wall, silently venting his fury, and pressed his hot face against the cool, smooth stone, lingering for a moment. Was he really that weak? A mere shadow of the mighty Valgaldheru, having only mastered three elements out of four, barely able to conjure a tiny flame. Was he even allowed to call himself Valgaldheru? The thought, sending a shiver down his spine, made him shake his head, as if he wanted to throw it all away.

Swearing under his breath, he hauled another fist against the wall, then slumped against it. Now, more than any other time, he wanted to prove Galambhór was wrong about
him, that he was not weak, that he could defend himself, even though he could not work fire. Perhaps the master magician was scared of Nerevyn, but he was not, for he knew Nerevyn. The sudden realisation reminded him of his own knowledge of another branch of magic, a much darker one which not only Nerevyn but all Valgaldheru knew. Galambhör did not allow dark magic at the tower, did not even speak about it. When Quaronax was fourteen years old—still a little boy in the near eternal lifetime of a Valgaldheru—he began his magical training under the tutelage of Nerevyn, who also taught him the dark arts.

He remembered when they had climbed the top of the Tol, a snowy, windswept platform on that clear crisp night long before the eruption of Tol Hrokkronaax. The sun had barely neared the horizon, when long shadows rolled out from the mountains, and the first shoals of stars had already become visible against the night sky, illuminating their path. Nerevyn had led Quaronax to a patch where the snow was still undisturbed and knelt down, beckoning Quaronax to him. Looking up at him, Nerevyn smiled and soft wrinkles rimmed his red eyes, giving him a kind expression.

When the sun had finally dipped into the horizon, the first moon, Aurcundor, a large round sphere ascended into the night sky, looming great and imposing against the two standing on the snowy platform. Without taking his gaze off the wondrous spectacle unfolding before them, Nerevyn traced a perfect circle into the snow. When the second moon, Kyndariel, dwarfed by the magnificent shape of the first, arose, Nerevyn traced a triangle inside the circle. Quaronax watched how Nerevyn conjured a tiny flame on his fingertip and enkindled the outer circle, then, from under his heavy, fur-trimmed cloak, he drew a dagger and held it out to his disciple. Quaronax knew what he had to do, and took the blade, at first tentatively, but then, remembering he had practiced this very step many weeks before, he gripped the crosspiece firmly, and cut across his left palm. With the blood from his wound he traced a sigil rune in the centre of the triangle in the snow.

By now the two moons had risen fully and loomed above them like guardians, paying witness to their dark ritual. With jittery hands Quaronax took the Welkwynd stone, that he had mined from the bowels of the mountain—it was a large clear blue crystal surrounded by a soft pulsating glow—and placed it on top of the sigil rune.

Instantaneously, a dark red flash of light exploded within the rune circle, enravelling the gem stone completely. When the red glow lifted, the crystal was no longer clear blue, but instead had turned almost black, sparkling dark purple against the night sky.

‘Well done, Naax,’ Nerevyn said, his mouth splitting into a leer as he picked up the black Welkwynd gem and handed it to Quaronax. He flinched as his mentor clapped him on
the back. All of a sudden he was nauseated at the thought that his own blood had transmuted the clear blue crystal into a black Welkwynd gem, turning it into a tool for dark magic and imbuing it with the property to hold a soul of any living being.

The clatter of steps, reverberating throughout the stairway of the tower, tore Quaronaax out of his reveries. The next moment Mhëlian appeared just a few steps below him, panting. He shook off his memories and turned towards her.

‘Why for the drake’s sake are you still following me?’ He pushed her away, making her bang into the stone wall. She threw him an unblinking stare, not the least deterred.

‘Stop it! I didn’t hurt you!’ she yelled at him. ‘Nor did Galambhó. He just meant to protect you.’

‘Did Galambhó send you after me? To protect me as well?’ Without waiting for her to reply, for whatever it was it would not have made a difference, he ignored her, and started climbing the stairs again, but she caught his arm turning him towards her.

‘Quaronaax! What do you mean to do? You don’t really think about finding Nerevyn, do you?’ Her last remark almost caught him off guard, for he had not yet formulated a plan in his mind. To hear Mhëlian say it out loud made him realise that he wanted to go to Valgaldrunheim, now more than ever before, and find Nerevyn whatever the cost would be.

When he did not reply, she threw her arms up helplessly, hurrying after him.

‘You cannot defeat Nerevyn.’ This time her remark hit him squarely. In the many magic lessons with Nerevyn, once his teacher, it had never once occurred to him that the arguments between his father and Nerevyn had something to do with Nerevyn having perhaps dabbled too deep in dark magic.

‘Then help me,’ he countered, turning his back on her as they arrived at the landing of the fifth flight of stairs, and headed toward the second door on the left.

‘How?’ she muttered under her breath as he walked into his circular room. Nothing had changed, of course, the clothes still lay in a pile on the floor, the gemstones still covered the desk, and the sketches and the single, rolled-up piece of Llaril bark still lay where he knew he had left them. Glancing across his shoulder he found Mhëlian, still standing in the doorway, seemingly indecisive whether she should enter his realm of dust and disorder or not. He managed to grin in the face of his reckless plan, but quickly focused on the matter at hand. With one deft motion he pulled out a wooden crate full of candles from under his bed, then handed it over to her.

‘We need these,’ he said, turning to his desk, to fetch the sketches and Llaril scroll, and handed them over to her as well. The memory of his first transmutation of a Welkwynd
gem reminded him of the last component still missing. Sighing, he went to his desk again and retrieved a coffer from the highest shelf hidden behind a row of dust-covered jars of various sizes. He placed the coffer on top of the wooden crate, that Mhëlian was already holding, and opened the lid.

‘And these,’ he added. She gasped, her eyebrows shooting up at the sight of a dozen black Welkwynd gems glimmering inside the box.

‘Nerevyn was not the only one to use dark magic, for the Valgaldheru did too. But he was the only one to use it against others,’ he quickly added when he saw her sceptical look.

In his mind, his course was set toward Valgaldrunheim, but he did not yet know how to find the entrance—it has been too long since he had last wandered the snowy plateaus of Tol Hrokkronaax, or the wide and convoluted tunnels under the mountains. Realising that entertaining such thoughts would only disappoint him, he quickly let them pass, for he knew as well that Valgaldrunheim was no longer how he remembered it.

‘I don’t know where the entrance to Tol Hrokkronaax is,’ he conceded at last. He paused, picking up a black Welkwynd gem, turning it around in his left hand. ‘I have to summon the spectre of a Valgaldheru who knows the way. Will you help me, n’chkwenn Mhëlian?’ he said, addressing her as Lady Mhëlian in the tongue of the Dreki.

Mhëlian nodded and put down the crate with a thump.

Her continued silence caught him off guard. The summoning of a dead person was no small feat, disregarding the fact that he had never before done such a spell. Would his blood alone be enough for the spell to work properly? Nerevyn had taught him enough to perform the calling of a spectre, but Quaraonaax could not be certain, could not rest easily until he had completeted the spell and the spectre of one of his kindred appeared before him. The rest he did not yet dare to think about.

He had expected Mhëlian to protest, to hold him back, or to betray his plans to Galambhór, but she did no such thing. It puzzled him that she had agreed to help him. Admittedly, though, he was glad that she had followed him, for he was not sure if he could do this summoning alone.

She picked up the sketch he had put on top of the crate holding the candles, unfolded it, and regarded it intently, it seemed, then put it away. The wide sleeves of her robe were still tucked up with the ribbon across her back, only her long hair was a little dishevelled. She picked up a piece of chalk from his desk and set to work, drawing a large circle on the stone floor. He grabbed some chalk himself and drew the lines of a smaller circle about ten inches inside the first, and then drew a triangle into its centre. Together they quickly placed candles
and black Welkwynd gems—she eyed them suspiciously before grabbing one—on the circumference of the two circles. Mhēlian conjured a flame on her fingertip, much like Nerevyn could, to light each candle, then drew the runes of the spell itself within the perimeter of the outer circle.

Lastly, Quaronaax stepped into the very centre, placed three black gem stones on the sides of the triangle, and drew the summoning sigil rune in the middle. Sighing deeply, he unravelled the bandages on his left hand, and with a small dagger he cut across his barely healed palm. Through clenched teeth he gasped as a searing pain erupted in his hand. He almost lost his balance. Steeling himself this time, he was prepared when he made a fist to trickle the blood on the floor. As soon as it touched the sigil rune the floor began to vibrate.

Quaronaax grabbed the Llaril bark scroll, and skidded to a halt just in front of the rune circle. The wild flicker of the candles threw undulating shadows on Mhēlian’s face, who stood on the other side of the rune circle, making her green eyes glow like embers. Without taking his eyes off her gaze he breathed deeply before he unrolled the scroll.

‘Nchund argkanz Valar to’Nchumz Mzel Kagrangkth akr val i’Mchuleft nekr’to.’ He pronounced each rune slowly and with care as if they were fragile and might slip past his tongue if he was not wary enough. When he had completed the incantation, the candles began to flare up like seabirds shooting into the sky, only to shoot back into the water just as fast to catch fish. Even through closed eyes, he could feel the orange glimmer against his eyelids.

When he opened his eyes, the summoning runes dissolved into a smoke. Then the candle lights shot up once again, and began whirling around so fast they formed a barrier of flames. Peals of thunder rent the air in the circular room, and all the flames instantaneously collapsed like a fountain, burning only faintly in their candle holders, bent and scorched. Now a mist rose out of the sigil rune in the middle, whirléd around, and formed a thick, impenetrable veil much like the fog drawing in from the sea in early autumn mornings. Then a blazing light pierced through the whirling wafts, blinding him for an instant.

When he looked again wisps of mist coalesced into a human figure. The sheen of its red eyes glowed softly in the candle-lit room. Instinctively Quaronaax stretched out his arm to touch the figure only to draw it back right away, remembering the summoner must never enter the rune circle.

‘Mother,’ he mouthed voicelessly. He had not expected to see her again. They looked at each other for a long while, for the candle light was twitching only faintly now. Her face was still the same that he had looked into on that fated day that Galambhór came and brought
him to Lluumrinmore. Her features were soft and her red eyes unperturbed as if nothing—
neither the battle; nor the eruption; or that she died—had ever happened.

Then, the spectre of his mother looked at him curiously, as she cocked her head
slightly, her red orbs turning dull and dark. He cleared his throat and started again.

‘I need your help. Can you show me the way to Valgaldrunheim?’ As soon as he had
spoken the words a strange tiredness began to permeate his entire body. At first, he tried to
fight against the numbness; but his knees buckled before he knew it; and he verily fell to the
ground. Before his eyelids fell shut under the leaden weight, he glimpsed the spectre, who
nodded at him; her cheeks dimpling into a smile. All of a sudden it dawned on him that he
was under her spell and with that he fell into darkness.

The next moment he saw himself kneeling in front of the rune circle in his room. His
closed eyes were glowing with a bright yellow light, directed straight at the spectre whose
eyes were glowing with the same fierce light. Then she turned her steely-eyed gaze on him,
not the body of himself kneeling before the circle. Looking down at his hands, he realised he
has become insubstantial, a mere astral projection.

‘Follow the eastward road into the Ashland,’ she said.

It seemed he was overlooking the world, for the land was passing beneath him as she
led his eyes along this path.

‘Turn northwards, and do not stray from your direction until you find the dragon claw
rock.’

Drifting over the narrow, crisscrossing trails of the Ashland, he descried a peculiar,
black rock formation looming like a sentient guardian at the apparent beginning of a new
trail.

‘Climb the Serpent Road up high Tol Hrokkronaax, and follow the wisp lights into the
cavern.’

Now ascending the slopes of the Tol up to a snow-covered plateau, he could make out
the entrance to a cavern, barely recognisable between the high snowdrifts.

‘Then go where the crystals grow and the fire stream meet, but beware of the false
bearer of the crown, and those awakening from the ash. One dark soul for the price of the
light of your own.’

Descending into the cavern, he traversed the many tunnels and corridors in an instant,
it seemed, and glimpsed the soft glow of the crystals and the lava at the end of a tunnel before
darkness engulfed him. Quaronaax found himself again in his dim-lit circular room, kneeling
on the cold stone floor. Mhëlian jumped, her mouth splitting into a smile, when he opened his eyes again and the fierce glowing light disappeared from them.

‘Fear not for I am watchful,’ the spectre of his mother said at last, clearly, solemnly as the smoke began rising from the sigil rune again. Quaronaax, though, without thinking what he was doing, rushed into the rune circle wanting to stop the spectre from disappearing. He called the spectre, his mother, but the very instant he had stepped over the first barrier of the circle, peals of thunder roared—it seemed a thunderhead hovered right above his room—and drowned his voice completely.

A gust of wind broke open the shutters of the window and whirled through the candle-lit rune circle, sending sparks to fly in all directions. The candles flickered feebly, twitched once more and distinguished. Quaronaax spun about, his eyes darting to Mhëlian, and realised his error, realised how futile, and how very irresponsible his action has been. He could not escape the circle until it was somehow ended, or completed correctly. But there was no time to think about that anymore, for another roar of thunder shook the room, and the floor trembled so he lost his footing momentarily. A whirlwind ensnared within the rune circle, making it near impossible to move.

Quaronaax howled and half-fell, half-dived right for the black Welkwynd gem closest to his grasp and, lifting it up, smashed it down with all his might. The moment the gem stone broke, the invisible barrier of the rune circle was broken as well, but, to his dismay, the whirling winds did not cease to rage, and neither did the thunder. Then his gaze fell on the broken shards of the black gem. His eyes widened, and he gasped aloud as he realised what the spectre meant by the one dark soul for the price of the light of his own. The only way to fight Nerevyn was to haul his own soul against the mage, he knew, and he had to bind his soul to do that. It dawned on him then that this was, at the same time, the only way to stop the storm from raging—he had to perform another spell and thus complete the first one.

Scrambling to his feet, Quaronaax conjured a magical ward, and quickly made headway against the unrelenting whirlwind and breached the last ring of the rune circle. Unable to stop his momentum from the sheer force of the wind he tumbled right into Mhëlian, the magical ward expiring as they both plummeted to the floor. Without so much as looking at her he disentangled himself, and sped to his desk. He uncovered a crystal dagger from the depths of the drawer, stuffed with crumpled up sketches and dozens of Welkwynd gems. He held the dagger up before him; the blade was similar to the Welkwynd gems, but had a much more refined shape, and was wrought in the likeness of a leaf.
Before he entered the rune circle again, he drew a long deep breath, hollered at the top of his lungs, for the storm was reaching an ear-deafening crescendo, and told Mhëlian what she had to do in this one last spell. She nodded briskly and set to work.

As soon as he had entered the circle, Mhëlian placed a new black Welkwynd gem where Quaronaax had smashed the one before and, her fingertips erupting with streams of fire, walked around the circumference of the rune circle to inflame the entire outer ring. Fighting to keep his balance in the midst of the whirlwind, Quaronaax managed to draw a thin line, this time along the length of his arm with the crystal dagger. At last, with closed eyes and his head craned upward, he uttered the word of a single rune. ‘Rei.’

A searing pain arose in his chest and rocked him forward so suddenly that he almost retched. The bloodied crystal dagger fell from his grip and landed on the stone floor with a jarring clang. Through bleary eyes he saw Mhëlian staring at him with a look contorted in horror. He smiled half-heartedly, wanted to reassure her, wanted to tell her it was okay for he saw her hands trembling and clenching so that the white of her knuckles showed through.

Then he screamed, and screamed again as pangs of agony tore through his chest. Groaning, he tried to heave himself up, but as another sting jolted through his body, his limbs went limp and he slumped onto the stone floor in exhaustion. He steelèd himself for another jolt. A keening sound numbed his ears—he realised it was him who screamed—when his back arched up to the point he thought it would crack. Then a strange, glowing light disengaged from within his chest, and as it hovered, its pale blue sheen was reflected by the fire-lit circle. As if the magic had loosened its grip he collapsed to the floor. From the corners of his eyes he glimpsed the light, a piece of his soul, as it passed into the leaf-shaped blade, pulsating briefly before it went still again. He heaved a deep sigh, then let all the muscles in his body relax for he knew it was all over now. His entire body was smarting; it was as if he was screaming inside for the lost piece of his soul now encased in the crystal dagger. He nearly smiled for he realised that the storm had ceased at last, and the flaming circle crackled softly, then flickered and expired.

The sun would rise within a few hours, but he was too worn to even move. He was so weary from the spell, he let his eyes fall shut, laying amidst the crystal circle, quiescent and in darkness.
Chapter 4: Unsuspected Friends

Barely four days had passed since the night of the equinox. Quaronaax had been evading Galambhór without much effort for the blisters on his palms have barely scabbed over which still excused him from fire bending classes with the master magician. Doubtless, master Galambhór was not unaware of what caused the frost explosion in the alchemical laboratory, but he would not confront Quaronaax about it either. The master magician seemed to have been evading him as well these past few days. Quaronaax did not mind, on the contrary, he was glad that he had been indented to help the other apprentices categorize the Ashland fungi. It had been easier to hide the pain from the void inside him that the extracted piece of his soul had left behind. It had been easier to walk away at the end of the day when he had been so worn out that he simply fell into his bed beside curled-up Aurgkwynd. Four days had lagged by so slowly he could not think of waiting another day, even though he needed more time to recover. He had to go now, had to see Nerevyn, had to find the remaining Valgaldheru.

He wrapped the crystal dagger into a soft cloth to muffle any jarring sound it could cause, he walked barefoot with his boots in hand, he wore a fur-trimmed vest over his dragonscale shirt and fixed it tightly with a girdle—made from the slender stalks of the lanky pale blue mushrooms that used to grow rampant in the Ashlands—so that any rustle would be muffled as well when he was skulking down the stairway. Glancing over his shoulder more than a dozen times, he snuck out of the tower in the cover of night.

Creeping up the Steaming Mound as stealthily as possible, he tried to avoid the sulphurous vents coming out of the many fissures riving the ground. When he reached the top he had to stifle a chuckle at the sight of several dozen fire drakes slumbering either curled up or sprawled, whichever way, there was hardly any surface uncovered by a paw, tail, or wing. Their bellies heaved a grumbling roar as their nostrils flared and their ears twitched in their sleep, but none of them as much as opened their eyes.

Before entering the circle of fire drakes, he neatly took off his boots and tip-toed over tails and wings, and steaming vents until he found Aurgkwynd. As he gently laid his hand on the drake, so as not to startle her out of her slumber, her yellow eyes opened instantaneously, knowingly. Aurgkwynd jumped to her feet without protest and followed Quaronaax who turned to navigate a path out of the ring of dozing fire drakes, stepping over them as nimbly as he could.
Just before he could make it to the edge he was grabbed by the scruff of his neck, pulled back, a hand covering his mouth making the decision for him that it was wise not to scream in that precise moment or else all his caution was for naught. Yet, his muscles relaxed as a single white tress fell over his shoulder.

‘Where do you think you’re going?’ Mhélian breathed into his ear.

Spinning around furiously, he extracted himself from their awkward embrace and scowled at her.

‘You won’t stop following me, will you?’ he hissed, and stepped into his boots, without turning his back on her. He noticed she was similarly attired, wearing a thick white fur-trimmed throw over her red-purple robe, and what struck him the most was a long staff that was strung across her shoulder, protruding over her head. Its stick seemed to be fashioned out of the slender stalks of the giant blue-capped mushrooms, that once forested the Ashlands, and at its head perched a single amber crystal that had a peculiar greenish hue. It must have been one of the rare resins found in the ancient giant mushroom trees.

‘I won’t let you go alone and get yourself killed.’ She paused, looking to her red fire drake plodding up behind her, then continued, ‘Somebody has to guard your back when you face Nerevyn.’

‘What makes you so sure Nerevyn will kill me?’ he said, and looked at her askance.

‘What makes you so sure he won’t?’ she said.

He nodded, conceding the point. Sweeping his arm out in front of him he indicated to her to go first. She nodded, her mouth splitting into an unmistakable smile, and swung onto Nehkgwenvar, her fire drake. He mounted Aurgkwynd and together they rode into the waning night. They followed the path that the spectre of his mother had laid out for them to the entrance to Valgaldrunheim.

Now, Quaronaax stood on the lip of the snow-covered ledge high up on the Tol. His gaze was swaying over the Ashlands to the sea in the west. As he watched Caer Lluumrinmore emerging out of the darkness in the gloaming light, the disturbing question was still bouncing around in his thoughts.

The truth was he was clinging to the only memories he had of Nerevyn, his friend, his teacher, his mentor in the arcane magic, who used to look at him with kind eyes whenever he failed to work ice magic and showed him again, but with a patience that he had not known in his father. These memories, however, were now overshadowed by Galambhór’s and Aelbh’iain’s words, by his dreams of ash spawns and Nerevyn wearing the crystal drop
crown, coupled with the rupture in the two magicians’ spell, calling into question the very
innocence of the remaining Valgaldheru.

The stars were still sparkling in the limpid beauty of the night sky, as the sun had not
yet reached the ice-locked peaks of Tol Hrokkronaax. It was utterly silent, but for the
howling wind, sweeping down from the snowy plateaus, down over the tip of the cavern
which loomed out of the snowdrifts like a gaping maw behind him.

Turning around, he found Mhëlian crouching on a snowy hillock just below the cave
surrounded by their fire drakes, stroking through their woolly mane framing their lizard-like
heads. They were waiting for him, waiting for his cue to make ready. Mhëlian was staring at
him with such intensity that caught him off guard. Since they had left Caer Lluumrinmore
together his thoughts whirled in a tumble, mulling over her last words and trying to make
sense of what they meant for himself.

His hand slid down to the crystal dagger, now dangling from his girdle, bare and
freezing cold to the touch, that emanated an odd, pulsating sensation against his thigh,
reminding him of his mother’s own ominous words. He jerked his hand away from the
enchanted dagger, realising how futile his hopes were to join the Valgaldheru under the Tol.
Mhëlian was right after all; there was nothing that gave him certainty Nerevyn would not
attack him.

The wind had ceased to a low wheezing susurrus, as it steadily blew the powdery
snow over the lip of the ledge into the rocky vale below them. He looked back over his
shoulder, afraid that Mhëlian had noticed his awkward movement, but somehow managed a
faint smile when she walked down the hillock towards him. Mhëlian, lowering her gaze,
unlimbered her staff, and raised it high, ready to cast a spell.

‘Wait, what are you doing?’ he piped up. Realising her intent, he tried to wrestle the
staff off her in vain.

A jet of blazing, flaring light erupted out of the magic staff in a semicircle before it
soared into the twilit sky, glowing like a beacon to anyone who was watching in the west. His
eyes went wide; too stunned to go against her again. He watched the light as it hovered for a
little while longer until it extinguished.

‘What the blasted ash worm’s tail was that for?’ He scowled at her now, waving his
hands in disbelief.

‘I know you think you can fight Nerevyn yourself, but you have only one crystal
dagger. I doubt you can skewer him and all the ash spawns all at once,’ she said evenly with a
seriousness in her voice that seemed to be of genuine concern.
Throwing up his hands in defeat, for he knew there was no way to argue against that, he started up the hillock toward the gaping aperture of the cavern. He ran a hand through his hair and looked back to the west. The sun finally broke free of the high peaks of the Tol, tinting Caer Lluumrninmore with a soft yellow glow. Letting his still bandaged hand slide over the crystal dagger on his belt, and with the Lady of the Dreki behind him, and the fire drakes in tow, he stepped into the dark cavern.

As a Valgaldheru, he could naturally see in the dark but even he struggled to see clearly for it had been too long since he had last wandered the tunnels and ice caverns of his home. For a few moments it was completely dark, but when his eyes had finally adjusted to the foreign, yet familiar environment he could make out a high vaulted chamber that soon narrowed into a dim-lit tunnel of ragged black rock.

As they edged forward in the narrow tunnel, slender rays of faint light found their path through tiny cracks in the vault and illuminated the fine dust hanging in the air. The atmosphere had utterly changed because jagged rock formations protruded from the ceiling and the floor was no more solid and safe, but icy and slippery. After a while they came to a fork leading into three different corridors beyond which only Quaronaax could see. The air had become frigid, and it was eerily quiet; no wind draught was sizzling through fissures, even the dust seemed immovable. Only their silent breath blew puffs in the chill air. Mhëlian stirred, held her staff up before her, gripping it with both hands, for it began to quiver with the energy that bubbled up inside it, and released a ball of pure light. It bounced off the cragged vault and hovered above her head as she and the fire drakes hurried to catch up with Quaronaax.

He led them into the corridor straight ahead that the spectre of his mother had showed him through her vision. With each step the mage light lit up the inside of the cavernous corridor; clear crystals jutted from its ceiling, and the walls were wrought into snow and ice, sparkling wildly in the passing light. More than once Quaronaax had to catch Mhëlian who almost skidded on the ice for her eyes seemed to be riveted on the dazzling beauty of the cavern.

For a while they could hear nothing but their own hoarse breath and the ice grating against their boots, and the rustle of the drake’s tails as they glided over the frozen floor. With only the slightest hesitation, Quaronaax turned toward the looming entrance on one of the side caverns. With tentative steps Mhëlian and the fire drakes followed him across the chamber, avoiding the crystals protruding from every corner, and into another corridor. They arrived at a stairway hewn into ice and up it they climbed. Taking two stairs at once
Quaronaax came abruptly to a halt. He stood momentarily petrified on top of a bridge, spanning over a maze of chambers below. Out of the corner of his eyes he glimpsed the spectral tail of a floating creature. Gasping, he tripped backward, inadvertently kicking a few ice shards over the bridge that reverberated throughout the entire cavern with a jarring noise.

He never turned his back, keeping his eyes fixed on the spot in the chamber below where the creature had been but an instant ago. At the very moment he spun about to warn Mhëlian, she plunged right into him, and he instinctively covered her mouth to stifle a surprised shriek, as her eyebrows shot up in a question.

‘There is an ice wraith nearby. Perhaps more than one,’ he merely breathed, barely audible, but he bent so close to her she could hear every word. The ice wraith had to be what the spectre of his mother called wisp lights.

She nodded, then lowered her staff, and covered the amber crystal with her left hand, letting the mage light expire at once.

Now he did hesitate, realising fully that they stood no chance against an ice wraith, not to mention several. With his companions unable to see much in the dark, he would not even attempt to fight the ice wraith. They had to sneak over the bridge somehow, and hope to outrun the creature if it noticed them. He looked at his companions who were crouching side by side. The fire drakes were bristling their furry manes, they were so tense. Then his eyes met Mhëlian’s steely-eyed gaze. Nothing betrayed her thoughts. Before he headed back up the stairs, he patted Aurgkwynd and Nehkwenvvar on the neck and nodded at Mhëlian. Then he motioned for them to move with all caution.

Quaronaax tip-toed ahead of them, dropped a hand into his pouch, feeling for the Welkwynd stone that he had picked up earlier, and placed it down at the head of the bridge. It gave off a faint glow, just enough to illuminate the edges of the bridge for the others to see. When he went ahead again, he looked back at them often, for though they were creeping after him as noiselessly as they could, he was afraid that they would slip and fall down into the clutches of the ice wraith. With slightly jittery hands he placed a second Welkwynd stone on the ground. His eyes scanned the chamber below for the ice wraith. It was languidly floating about. When he saw the distance that they had yet to cover to the corridor on the other end of the bridge, his muscles tensed.

After a few more feet, he placed yet another Welkwynd stone on the bridge. He let his gaze sway from the creature below to his companions who were moving ungainly over the smooth, frozen surface. While he was crouching low to wait for them he wondered whether it had been a good idea to bring the fire drakes along.
A sudden ear-shattering noise brought him from his contemplations, for the tail of Aurgkwynd had swept the second Welkwynd stone casually over the edge as the drake slithered over the bridge, sending the stone tumbling in an arc before it plummeted to the floor and burst into shards flying into all directions. The ice wraith whipped about, hissing furiously.

Quaronaax hurled a deadly glare at Aurgkwynd. The drake flattened her ears and huddled beside Nehkgwenvar. Quaronaax shook his head, letting his anger go. He held his breath, they all did—they had barely come halfway across the bridge—and even Aurgkwynd was wise enough to stifle an instinctive squeal. Quaronaax knew the others could feel the tingling, freezing sensation as well. He dared to slowly shift his head, to look to Mhëlian, signaling to her to conjure the mage light again, for the enemy was practically upon them.

‘Run!’ Quaronaax cried. ‘Flee this place!’

The fire drakes, no need to be told twice, growled and sprang past Mhëlian who still stood rooted to the spot, loping towards the tunnel on the other end. The ice wraith emerged from the stairway and issued forth a magical blast of ice and snow that sent the Lady of the Dreki to her knees, her staff rolling away, teetering precariously on the edge of the bridge. Purely on instinct, Quaronaax ripped across the space between them, grasped the magical staff just in time, then grabbed her arm, and skittered over the bridge. They sped up another stairway into a natural tunnel with several narrow corridors leading off on either side.

As the images of his mother’s vision flit through his mind like a map, Quaronaax remembered to take the last tunnel to the right. When they scrambled up the sloping path, the mage light was bouncing off the ceiling in a wild frenzy. Then they slipped into a narrow, snow-clogged tunnel and bent over for a moment, wheezing and panting for their lungs hurt from the icy air. The fire drakes, coyly at first, blasted right through the snowy bumps, and jumped ahead, leading the way. From the corner of his wary eye Quaronaax caught some movement behind them down the tunnel. Quickly, he gripped Mhëlian’s hand and broke into a run again, pulling her along.

At the end of the passage they descended into a chamber that opened wide to the left and right, though the smooth wall directly opposite the aperture was not far away. The ceiling here was higher than in the tunnel, but hefty columns and splinters of ice hung down to the floor in many places. The fire drakes had crawled ahead into the web of ice, but then stopped in their tracks and turned a disconcerted look at Quaronaax.

Scanning the chamber, he realised to his horror that there was no tunnel, no stairway, no cubby to go on to. How could that be? There was no time to waste now, so he
involuntarily let the thought pass, and instead went right into the frozen web, diving deftly under a crystal spear, rising only to squeeze under another splinter. Bending his knees again, he balanced under a tremendous crystal column while evading gem stones sharply sprouting from below. By hair’s breadth he managed to evade another ice spear protruding aslant overhead as he straightened up at the wall that seemed to bare no mark of entrance.

He blew a deep, silent breath, composing himself, reminding himself he had to find a way through this wall, for if they could not escape they would likely die before they even reached Nereyn. Pacing up and down the wall, he ran his hands over the smooth frozen surface, peering over his shoulder now and again, to Mhëlian who ducked ungainly under a crystal splinter, foreign and unfamiliar. Then it struck him, that only a Valgaldheru, an ice mage, could open an entrance, the entrance to Crystal Hall.

He drew his crystal dagger, scratched the runes for the enchantment into the wall, then began the chanting, a rhythmic reiteration of the ancient words to open a door in the ice.

‘Roku. Tamahk. N’to.’

A great rumble, causing the crystals and columns to quiver, hurled him against the wall. The ice wraith had entered, having cast another freezing whirlwind at Mhëlian that launched her a couple feet across the floor. Her body crashed through ice splinters and slumped down in agony. As the ice wraith closed in on her, it sent a psionic wave at her, but Mhëlian managed to dodge it with her staff that immediately snapped under the sheer force as though it was but a mere stick. Quaronaax howled and cast his own icy blast against the ice wraith which did not even budge, but merely distracted it. This gave Nehkgwenvar just enough time to shake free from the smashed ice splinters and charge, hurling herself against the budding psionic blast, diverting it away from Mhëlian.

Quaronaax took up his chanting again, repeating the runes faster and faster each time he spoke them until he hit a crescendo. He rushed up to the wall, his hands straight out in front of him, palms pressed tightly together. With an inhale of resolution, he thrust his fingers straight into the ice. Then he groaned, his arms and shoulder muscles flexing as he pulled the wall apart and opened it as though it were no more solid than a curtain of heavy fabric.

A magic force whirled across the chamber, sending ice splinters flying everywhere. Mhëlian and the fire drakes were swept against the wall, smacking into Quaronaax squarely, and tumbled right into the newly opened gap.
Chapter 5: The Darkness at Valgaldrunheim

Entangled with Mhëlian and the fire drakes, Quaronaax fell into darkness, but landed almost subtly amidst the crystal shards on a snow chute that took the companions forth through an underground tunnel system. Nehkgwenvar and Aurgkwynd growled and hissed, as the ice shards cut into their flesh. Desperately, they scratched and clawed to stop, but it was no use for the snow was too solid to get a fast grip on it. Quaronaax whipped out his crystal dagger, and hauled it into the ice to grab a hold but it bounced off, barely scratching the surface. Try as they may, they were relentlessly washed away like a snail in a river.

The air soared around them like in a stream, as they were half-falling, half-sliding down the chute at breakneck speed. All of a sudden they were hurled into a bend that loomed right in front of them. The sheer force blasted the air from their lungs for an instant. Quaronaax winced at the more than audible crack. He had to wrestle to keep his senses when a stinging pain tore through his ribcage. He found reassurance in the fact that they seemed to be at least not sliding, or falling, just hanging on a precipice, even though he was squeezed under Aurgkwynd, and Mhëlian was stuck uncomfortably between the other fire drake’s rear end and the wall. For a while it was utterly silent but for their rapid breathing. Neither one of them dared to move, not even open their mouth to speak. Just when Quaronaax thought they were safe at last, Aurgkwynd started to stir. Then another crack resounded—his spirits were almost thwarted—and the precipice broke off. Aurgkwynd barely grabbed his shoulders, frantically flapping her wings in the narrow chute and crashing to the sides in a last resort to stop their plummet. Mhëlian, calling upon her innate ability to levitate, bounced off the walls more deftly.

He hit the ground face-forward and skidded a few feet more. Bruised and battered they lay on the cold floor, not daring to move. The world was spinning around him and seemed to shape-shift forward and back between light and dark silhouettes. He swayed his head languidly to and fro, looked to Aurgkwynd, to Nehkgwenvar and the myriad of crystals that covered the floor around him, and to Mhëlian, staggering to the ground. His whole body smarted with outrageous pain, his broken bones throbbed, blood was plastered to his skin, and his head pounded so loudly he barely recognised the shapes moving towards them.
Mhëlian stopped dead in her tracks, as a man peeled himself out from the far end of the shadowed, fire-lit chamber. Another man trailed behind, his head down as he scuffed his feet over the jagged black ground. Mhëlian gasped when she caught the glint of artfully chiselled gems.

‘So, you have made it to Crystal Hall,’ Nerevyn said, seemingly unsurprised, stretching his arms out wide in an arc to indicate the high, vaulted ceiling that was studded with Welkwynd crystals, glimmering like amber gems in the red glow of the lava pools below that stretched sidelong on either side of the elongated cavern. Mhëlian looked at the man with what she thought must have been contempt. He smiled at her, then put on a lugubrious pout as if he was truly grieving the event that had caused the lava flow to bury the hall’s former splendour beneath it.

‘Where is everyone?’ cried Quaronaax.

Nerevyn chuckled at that. ‘Did you truly think that they had survived? Nobody is here. Well, some of them are, but I couldn’t save their souls in time.’

‘What has happened here, Nerevyn? Where is my father?’ Quaronaax said.

Mhëlian noticed that Quaronaax’s right hand glided down over the ebon hilt of his dagger.

‘These are much better questions,’ Nerevyn said, his mouth drawn into a leer, and stepped aside to reveal a man, no, an ash spawn whose limbs were formed of smouldering lava rock, and whose eyes were glowing embers.

‘Your father,’ he said, reaching for the crystal drop crown sitting upon the creature’s brow, and placed it upon his own head, ‘was, for the most part, ignorant of our race’s potential for dark magic. But we, through many experiments that he called vile and abominable,’ he practically spat the words, ‘found how a soul can be controlled, yet even be used to become stronger. Your father banned all dark magic, banishing his best friend with it.’

He looked downcast for a moment, then his lips split into an uncanny smile. ‘Your father was foolish to think a simple ban could deter us. And his ignorance had cost him his soul, as well as his life.’

‘You’re lying,’ Quaronaax screamed. His cheeks were glistening with tears in the red glowing light. Out snapped his crystal dagger, and struck hard at Nerevyn who dodged the
thrust with a magical ward, energy instantly coursing up the weapon’s head and handle, and sent Quaronaax to his knees.

‘You’re a fool, Quaronaax. Nothing but a fool.’ Nerevyn retreated behind the ash spawn, that instantly turned a dangerous glare at Quaronaax.

Mhëlian found herself similarly pressed, as a dozen ash spawns emerged from the smacking lava and lurched toward her and the fire drakes. Her whole body was poised; her toes poking into her sturdy boots firmly planted on the rugged floor. As one fiend came close enough to swing a flaming maze at her it was suddenly launched a dozen feet away. Mhëlian took heart when she realised that she had just unleashed the raw power of her dragon breath.

Nehkgwenvar came out hard and fast, barreling right into another ash spawn, clawing and whipping her thorned tail about, sweeping the glowing blade from the creature’s grip, and jumping right away to bear down on a third monster.

A second whirlwind came and sent several ash spawns flying back.

But the fiends came on too many, and Mhëlian could not keep up the defensive. She tried to think of a dragon breath more effective as Aurgkwynd roared and sprang to the closing lines of the ash spawns, unleashing a freezing whirlwind, a frost breath that cooled down their embers, halting their charge.

* * *

Through the tears of outrage Quaronaax hardly noticed that the ash spawn, once his father and king of Valgaldrunheim, raised its flaming greatsword overhead and brought it down hard. Quaronaax shook his head in denial as he swerved under the heavy thrust, and jumped back. It had the features of the king, but its ember eyes were that of a monster.

With a snarl the ash spawn lashed at his feet but this time Quaronaax parried with a magical ward that exploded into a stinging, icy blast, and quick-stepped to the side. He cried out and leapt back, magical ice spikes forming in his hands and hurled them one after another at the smouldering creature. With each throw he felt a hot explosion in his ribcage, but he had no choice but to ignore the pain. The ash spawn raised its flaming blade again, then stopped, too confused to strike, as another ice spike hit home and extinguished its ember heart.

Quaronaax looked to Mhëlian, to Aurgkwynd and to Nehkgwenvar who were sorely pressed by a score of roiling ash spawns. He felt the heat of the lava pools, releasing yet another dozen fiends, heard a clamour in the distance, somewhere above him which he did not understand.

He took another step, then broke into a run, determined to go after Nerevyn next.
Llyësin was drifting down the chute alongside Llyrwyan, Quaranir, and the master magician and Aelbh’iain who incanted a spell of buoyancy. Out of the chute they came, and rushed to their friends’ aid as soon as they staggered to the ground quite lightly for the magicians’ spell had halted their plummet. Llyësin wisely stayed back and, drawing a magically imbued arrow, took a bead on an ash spawn that was about to swing down its glowing axe on Mhëlian. It went down, frost exploding within its embered chest, before it even registered the source of the magical blow. Llyësin quickly shot a smile at Mhëlian, then went in, twanging her bow again, taking down another ash spawn that nearly scored a hit on Llyrwyan who deftly quick-stepped to the side.

The five worked in unison: Galambhór with Aelbh’iain at the lead, releasing freezing whirlwinds, blowing any fiend aside that stood in their way, and Quaranir who countered by conjuring an ice ward, sending a numbing cold down any ash spawn that hit the ward, followed by Llyrwyan’s undeterred rush without getting hit once, not even nearly, preparing for their first enchantment, and Llyësin’s icy arrows at the rear.

Without looking back, Llyrwyan ran on and, skittering across the chamber, smashed potions to the floor. Quaranir skidded to his side. A burst of magical energy erupted from each of their fingertips. Together they drew runes of frost where the contents of the potions were sprayed. With a cry they leaped back just in time the floor exploded into a wall of frost, felling a dozen ash spawns that were brave enough to charge right through.

The frost runes gave Galambhór and Aelbh’iain—the two magicians had cast a frost cloak on themselves that scathed any approaching ash spawns with a freezing sting—enough time to begin their spell. Llyësin broke into a run, and signaled to Mhëlian to follow quickly, as the air began to tingle with the budding energy of a greater enchantment.

They all came to an abrupt halt around Galambhór and Aelbh’iain who began moving in an intricate dance, waving their arms overhead. At first, only an icy cold erupted in their hands, that turned into a coruscating flurry of frost, then into a freezing whirlwind whipping around them at breakneck speed. At last, the two magicians thrust their hands forward unleashing a blizzard that froze their opponents solid, even for just an instant, though long enough to cool down their embers.

* * *
Quaronaax’s heart skipped a beat. From the corner of his eye he glimpsed Llyēsin, and Llyrwyan, even Quaranir, blasted Galambhór, and Aelbh’iain as they drifted down the chute entering the fray.

Quaronaax spun around in a flurry, hurled himself at Nerevyn, feinting a straightforward thrust, then quickly swerved his crystal dagger low, but missed a near hit. Nerevyn had anticipated the move.

Without respite, Quaronaax cast a whirlwind, but Nerevyn just shrugged off the blow. Quaronaax, unwavering, went in again, this time willing his mind to disintegrate the ground beneath them, hurling the rocks against Nerevyn, who merely diverted the missiles with a magical ward.

‘What are you waiting for? Why don’t you bend the lava?’ Smiling, Nerevyn stretched out his hands, indicating the lava pools on either side of the chamber.

Clenching his jaw firmly, Quaronaax charged hard. He thrust his left hand forward, hurling a freezing blast at Nerevyn, who ducked fast, but the force of the gust sent the crystal drop crown flying away, skidding dangerously close to the lava.

‘Huh, you cannot bend fire,’ Nerevyn said, genuinely baffled, but seemingly unperturbed by the circlet’s precarious position.

Quaronaax, rage budding inside him, raised his crystal dagger, then stopped, overwhelmed by an enormous blast that launched them both a dozen feet. Nerevyn’s lips split into a wide grin, as he caught the strange dark purple glow within the dagger that emanated from it now.

‘It seems I am not the only one who is guilty of dabbling in dark magic. Perhaps… perhaps, you are a Valgaldheru after all.’

Quaronaax staggered backward, both enraged and horrified at the realisation of what he had done. Ashamed at his own inability to bend fire, being branded as a weakling Valgaldheru, yet, he has always been apt to learn dark magic.

He was the first to come up to his knees, and spun away, ignoring the searing pain rippling through his ribcage. Screaming with all his strength he somehow managed to lash out, and this time, he did not miss, but plunged the now dark crystal dagger right into Nerevyn’s torso. Nerevyn’s eyes went wide when Quaronaax’s soul surged out of the crystal dagger into his body. Quaronaax, tears burning his eyes, watched Nerevyn jerk weirdly, then fall away, and saw the leaf-shaped blade turn a pale blue after.

* * *
Chapter 6: Homecoming

Quaronaax turned around, sheathing the crystal dagger. The raging blizzard had ceased and revealed a battlefield littered with scores of ash spawns. At last, Quaronaax let his guard down at the sight of his companions and the mages. Mhëlian was almost toppled over when Aurgkwynd jumped past her, rushed toward Quaronaax, and buried him under her weight. He was glad for the fire drake to lick the tears of his scuffed face before the others could see them.

‘I’m alright. It’s over,’ he said, trying to soothe the fire drake. Smiling slightly, he winced from the pain jolting through his ribcage and gently pushed Aurgkwynd away. She jumped to the side as she discovered the dead body of Nerevyn on the ground behind them.

‘It’s alright. He’s gone,’ Quaronaax said, stroking Aurgkwynd over the back to calm her. Coming up to one knee, Quaronaax almost lost balance again when Mhëlian ran toward him and wrapped him in her own embrace.

‘Nerevyn is right,’ she said. ‘You are a fool, but the bravest one I have ever met.’

He barely nodded, but managed a half-hearted smile, then shrugged himself free of her hold when the master magician approached them. Quaronaax turned a scathing glare at Galambhór.

‘Why did you lie to me all these years?’ Quaronaax started to shout, but his voice came out as a croak.

‘I only did as your father bade me. When I said that there were no Valgaldheru under the Tol, I meant it because an army of ash spawns led by an undead Valgaldheru mage was not the kind of answer you wanted me to give you anyway. Your father wanted me to keep you oblivious of Nerevyn’s true role in the battle of Tol Hrokkronaax. He wanted me to protect you, so you could be free of the burden of your heritage.’

Galambhór paused, walked to the edge of the lava pool and picked up the crystal drop crown, the king’s circlet. Its blue gems were glowing like amber in the red sheen.

Anger bubbled up within Quaronaax. He did not need that sort of protection. Why did everyone think they had to protect him? He could handle the truth, the truth about Nerevyn and his vile followers. He could have handled it if his father had given him a chance.

‘The reason I kept the truth from you is because I promised your father. He wanted me to keep you safe, to raise you and teach you, to teach you all the magic I know…’
Galambhór’s voice broke off. Then he stretched out his hand with the circlet. Quaronaax looked at it curiously.

Perhaps Nerevyn was right and his father was a fool, a fool to think he could protect his son and his people as well. A mistake he paid with his own life. But Nerevyn was a fool too; a fool to think that his black magic had tainted Quaronaax enough to win him over. He had not expected Quaronaax to use his own black magic against himself. He had not expected Quaronaax to come prepared and aided.

Perhaps, Galambhór and the king were right to protect Quaronaax after all. It was time to let go of the past, and be free of the burden of his heritage.

Quaronaax took the crystal drop crown and tossed it into the lava offhandedly. He watched as the crystals sizzled and cracked until they melted away into the hot viscous stream.

‘You have done right to destroy the crown,’ Galambhór said and smiled at him so much that tiny wrinkles rimmed his eyes and made him appear more vulnerable than he ever admitted to be. Then the master magician took him into his arms just like when he had burned his hands almost one moon ago.

‘I just wish he would have told me the truth himself, and that he would have let me stay and fight,’ Quaronaax whispered just loud enough for Galambhór to hear.

‘Would you have wanted to share the same fate as your parents did?’ the master magician asked. Quaronaax pulled away and regarded his mentor more closely for a moment.

‘No, but at least we would have been together.’

Quaronaax let out a deep sigh, then looked at them all. ‘Let’s go home!’

* * *

After traversing the narrow and winding passages of Valgaldrunheim they had finally stepped outside the cavern, sucking in the crisp air, and walked down the hillock onto the ledge that Quaronaax and Mhélian had looked out over the Ashlands the night before. She let her eyes drift from her father and master Galambhór at the lead, followed by Llyësin and Llyrwyan, to Quaronaax. Each of them silently mounted their fire drakes under the watchful glare of the two moons.

Her gaze lingered on the leaf-shaped dagger that was strapped on Quaronaax’s belt. Mhélian almost choked, trying to muffle her scream, as she caught a dark purple flicker flaring up in the crystal dagger for only an instant. Wasn’t the piece of Quaronaax’s soul
released when he defeated Nerevyn? Wasn’t the crystal dagger empty, reverted back to an ordinary Welkwynd gem, glowing pale blue as always? Perhaps the light of Aurcundor and Kyndariel, the two moons, played a trick on her. For a moment she was too confused to move.

‘Nerevyn?’ she whispered under her breath. Shaking her head she quickly mounted Nehkgwenvar and followed the others, already heading down the mountain into the west to Caer Lluumrinmore.
The Magic of Writing
On the process of writing *The Legend of Quaronaax: A Mage’s Tale*
1. Introduction

In my childhood, I always had ideas for characters and would be seeing scenes and dialogues in my mind. I used to act out these characters and plots with my friends but never wrote down anything. Around the age of twelve, when I read a German fantasy novel called *Nijura – Das Erbe der Elfenkrone* (2006) by Jenny-Mai Nuyen, which is still my favourite novel today, I started to plot in my mind more seriously. The reason I wanted to create my own story is because I was so upset that my favourite novel ended with the death of one of the main characters. Thus, I decided to write a novel as perfect as Nuyen’s novel, and with all my favourite elements, but without the death of a main character.

My first attempt to do so was to rewrite *Nijura – Das Erbe der Elfenkrone* (2006) with an alternate set of characters and an adjusted plot. After my best friend told me off for using other writers’ plots as bases I developed an obsession to create completely unique characters with names made from scratch, and plots that are inspired by other fantasy novels but are changed so much that it is impossible to trace them back to the originals. Eventually, I wrote two chapters in German about an elven girl and a boy who can talk with dragons through a mental connection. I was very strongly influenced by the RPG *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* (2006) and its expansion pack *The Shivering Isles* (2007), as well as the second novel by Jenny-Mai Nuyen called *Drachentor* (2007).

At that time, the appearance of my characters was very important to me. I started painting my characters with artist’s watercolours instead of describing their psychological traits. One night, I sketched my female main character for the story that was supposed to become the improved version of my favourite novel. This girl magician became the beacon of the painstaking process of creating a whole new set of round characters, an intriguing plot, and a unique world.

I wrote the original prologue for the main story in the autumn of 2013. Even though I had not written much in the past years I constantly invented more details about the story. When I decided to write this BA thesis in Creative Writing, I already had crafted the world of Quaronaax and Mhëlian. Utilising it for my thesis proved to be very helpful.

2. Concept and Plot

Choosing the right part and adapting it to the size of a novella turned out to be an incredibly difficult task. It is true that because I have been developing the main story for several years it
was very difficult for me to focus on a specific part of the plot. At first, I had lost myself in the vastness of the plot I had conceived for my main story.

Even though I had managed to narrow the plot for the novella down to the beginning of the main story I still struggled with adjusting the plot and making it work. The reason I struggled was because the prologue and the first chapter I had already written for the main story made it more difficult to let go and find a new beginning that was more fitting for the novella. Another obstacle was the first section of the main story which has a rather open ending whereas the novella had to have a rather closed ending. Furthermore, I had to accelerate time to implement the events needed to lead to the climax and ending. At the beginning, I had difficulties to decide when is the right time for Mhēlian to appear, as she is necessary for Quaronaax and plot development. Moreover, it was hard to show how Quaronaax gets from Caer Lhuumrinmore to the entrance to Valgaldrunheim in Chapter 4.

I wrote the first two chapters—I called them Prologue and Chapter 1—for the novella in two full nights early on because I thought I had to write 30,000 plus words. These first chapters turned out to be a test run to see how much 10,000 words are and how the actual act of writing feels like. To be honest, I did not enjoy writing at first but I was glad I had already learned many lessons.

I discarded the first two chapters and adapted and extended the first chapter I had originally written for the main story, including some parts of the discarded first chapter. I wrote the second chapter completely from scratch. I wanted to write the autumn equinox for my main story for a long time but never did and enjoyed it a lot, but I also made copious mistakes with point of view. I adapted many parts of the discarded first chapter into the third chapter where I realised they would make much more sense regarding plot development. It was much easier to write the last three chapters because they are basically one long night that is not interrupted by anything.

However, exactly because there is a huge break—for a writer even four days can seem long—between the third and fourth chapter it was difficult to write a transition. Getting Quaronaax and Mhēlian from location A to location B was really hard so that I ended up writing no transition and jumping right to location B, the entrance to Valgaldrunheim. Fortunately, my tutor Dr. Anna Heiða Pálsdóttir suggested to shift around the scenes and thus connect the two chapters. I re-arranged the scenes and partly re-wrote them as well. I learned that shifting around scenes can make a profound difference in the coherence and cohesion of the plot.
I want to point out that I originally dedicated an entire chapter to Quaronaax’s dreams but then realised that it is better to reveal the details through dialogue and the character’s thoughts. Furthermore, I wanted to give the reader only a peek of what Quaronaax’s dreams look like through the vision in the flame in the first chapter, so that when he visits the real setting of his dreams it would come as a revelation to both him and the reader.

At the very beginning I had the impression that I had to write at least 30,000 words. Thus, I did not take the time to think about the plot first and wrote straight away. When I learned that 20,000 words are the recommended limit I started to relax. Taking notes and deciding what I want to say and convey in each chapter made it so much easier and faster to adapt my ideas into coherent narrative. I asked myself what the point of a certain action was and whether it contributed to the development of the plot. This method was particularly useful for the dialogue between Galambhór and Aelbh’iain in Chapter three. I wanted to create a dialogue that conveys just enough meaning to Quaronaax and the reader, but not too much since Quaronaax is supposed to find out the rest of the truth in the following chapters.

3. Inspiration

Even though I had made up most of the plot, the world, and the characters of my main story over the past eight years, I had to extract a working plot, setting and set of characters for the novella. Quite a few elements had to be invented from scratch and were influenced by several novels I have recently read. However, because the main story has been influenced by many fantasy novels, fantasy video games, classes I took while studying Scandinavian Studies at the University of Vienna, soundtracks, anime/manga art, and a children’s TV cartoon series, the novella’s story is influenced by the same sources.

It goes without saying that I am obsessed with dragons and magicians. Thus, I am primarily influenced by fantasy novels of the subgenres high fantasy and sword and sorcery. My obsession with dragons has been sparked by the fact that most fantasy novels as well as popular myths and legends generally depict dragons as the antagonist that is either evil or used by evil characters and seems rather dumb regarding its greedy collection of treasures and gold. I was so upset about the dragons in The Lord of the Rings (1968), The Silmarillion (1977), and The Hobbit (1937) that I felt the need to create good dragons. The book Das Drachentor (2007) by Jenny-Mai Nuyen really rekindled my fascination for dragons, because her novel depicts friendly dragons with a rather unusual appearance such as woolly manes along with horns and scales. I knew of other fantasy fiction about good dragons, however, I
have only read one other series called the *Riftwar Saga* (1982-1986) by R. E. Feist that features docile fire drakes as well as dragons that have been living by themselves more or less peacefully, but have become evil afterwards. There is one instance when the hero forges a friendship with one such ancient dragon. This scene and the dragons by Jenny-Mai Nuyen and R. E. Feist became iconic to me and strongly shaped my fire drakes and dragons. I wanted to enhance the status of dragons so much that I created a backstory that makes Mhëlian essentially dragonborn.

The magic is heavily based on the magic systems in the RPG games *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* (2002) and *V: Skyrim* (2011) as well as Nickelodeon’s *Avatar: The Legend of Aang* (2005-2008), and *Morrowind’s* House Telvanni, essentially a guild of mages, which is based in a city made up of giant mushroom towers specially built to dwell inside and constructed so that levitation is necessary to move up. I made levitation an innate ability of Mhëlian and an acquirable skill for magicians in the novella. All the spells and tools such as magic staves are inspired by the magic system in *Skyrim*. As the Valgaldheru are essentially ice mages governed by the water and ice element I used many of *Skyrim’s* ice spells, and the dragon breaths that both Mhëlian and the fire drakes are capable of are obviously based on the dragon shouts in *Skyrim*.

On the one hand, the dark magic the Valgaldheru use is based on the necromancy in *The Elder Scrolls* games series (1994-2016). Usually, these necromancers reanimate corpses turning them into undead creatures. In the novella, Nerevyn reanimates the fallen Valgaldheru and turns them into ash spawns. He mentions that he was unable to safe their souls in the process, which hints at him having taken their souls in the first place. I took the idea of black soul gems used to catch souls to recharge magical items from the games as well. However, in my story the Welkwynd gems, whose name is derived from the Welkynd stones in *Oblivion* (2006), are not used to recharge magical items but to hold souls and use them against opponents. For the excruciating effects of the dark soul ritual I have been heavily inspired by the side effects of the weather working magic in the *Kingmaker, Kingbreaker* series (2007) by Karen Miller. I wanted Quaronaax to suffer for an important cause.

On the other hand, the good magic, which is the main magic in the novella, is largely inspired by the bending of the elements and their sub-elements from *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2005-2008). In the novella, Quaronaax knows water and ice, earth, and air already, but has difficulties to acquire fire magic. As I do not want to entirely copy the bending system from *Avatar* I call it elemental magic and use phrases such as “to bend fire”, “to work fire”, “fire bending”, “fire magic”, or “fire working”. There are instances of ice, air,
and earth magic in the fifth chapter of the novella. In *Avatar*, lava bending is a sub-element of earth, but in my novella lava belongs to fire, which is why Quaronaax is unable to bend the lava against Nerevyn.

Regarding the setting, I have been greatly inspired by the originally so-called Ashlands in *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* (2002) and the geothermal activity in Iceland. I wanted to set the novella in a landscape that reflects the sadness and forlornness inside Quaronaax. The Ashlands in *Morrowind* are largely ragged and barren; only here and there the land is interspersed with lava fields and boiling mud pots. The above mentioned giant mushroom towers that are built in such a way they are habitable grow only in one area in the Ashlands. Usually, the coastal regions are studded with mushroom trees and other fungi. The Ashlands are blighted not only in my novella, but also in *Morrowind*. In the novella, the Ashlands are blighted because of the protective spell that Galambhór and Aelbh’iain have laid upon the mountain. The spell causes the land to hibernate. The mages’ discovery of the revived growth of the Ashland fungi is the first sign that the spell is failing. In contrast, in *Morrowind* the Ashlands are made inhospitable by an actual disease called the Blight.

The combination of ice and lava is obviously inspired by the extreme landscape of Iceland. Tol Hrokkronaax is based on Eyjafjallajökull which is both a glacier and a volcano. The landscape is supposed to reflect the traits of each individual people. Mhélian’s people, the Fire Nomads, live in the Hidden Swamps in the middle of the Ashlands and therefore are primarily fire mages. In contrast, the Valgaldheru have always lived in the ice caverns of Tol Hrokkronaax and therefore are primarily ice mages. The Ashlanders at Caer Lluumrinmore live on the outskirts of the Ashlands near the coast and therefore are primarily earth mages. I contrast each people through their respective elemental magic. For instance, Quaronaax finds it nearly impossible to work fire because his spirit is governed by ice magic which is a sub-element of water, the complete opposite element of fire. Furthermore, Quaronaax has not yet mastered the spell to walk on water because the rivers and pools in the Ashlands are generally geothermally heated and therefore belong to the fire element which makes it more difficult for him to bend.

I always knew that Caer Lluumrinmore has several geothermally heated natural pools, but only after I had hiked to the volcanic hot springs at Hveragerði in Iceland, I decided to have a similar hot river between the two towers. The river flows down from Tol Hrokkronaax, through the Ashlands, and thus brings the fire element into the settlement of Lluumrinmore otherwise governed by the earth element.
Finally, the subterranean tunnel system of Valgaldrunheim is influenced by my long-standing dedication for the *The Elder Scrolls* video games (1994-2012). These games feature various types of subterranean caves as well as ice caves, ruins, and forts. Through navigating these dungeons I initially went a little bit overboard with my imagination. *The Legend of Drizzt* (1988-2016) by R. A. Salvatore features a whole subterranean world called the Underdark which helped me tremendously to put my imagination into coherent descriptions.

4. Writing in English as a Second Language

My home country is Austria where I grew up speaking Austrian German and learned Standard German to use for writing and oral presentations at school and later at university. Since English is not my native language I did not only have difficulties to describe complicated settings in a non-confusing way but I also had difficulties to simply write. Due to personal reasons, I took a year off between my third and last year of studying. During this time, I have to admit, did not practice creative writing. Whenever I was reading fantasy fiction, I was always taking notes of vocabulary, phrases, and collocations in order to study and memorise them later. When I started writing the novella I had to re-activate my English language repertoire. At times, my syntax was more German than English; I was unable to put my characters’ reactions and behaviour into respectable prose, and sometimes I had no idea how to describe anything in a comprehensible way.

Due to this slight disadvantage, I started to highlight especially useful words, phrases, and sentences while reading *Siege of Darkness* (1994) by R. A. Salvatore. Fortunately, I was able to use my previous vocabulary note books which contained words and phrases from many other fantasy fiction books I’ve read in the past. I relied on the vocabulary of two fantasy series especially because they are the last ones I have taken notes of in my current vocabulary book. *The Legend of Drizzt* series (1988-2016) by R. A. Salvatore and the *Kingmaker, Kingbreaker* (2007) as well as the *Fisherman’s Children* series (2010-2011) by Karen Miller. I was also influenced by the writing style and vocabulary in the short story *Green Man* from the collection of short stories *An Apple from a Tree* (1991) by Margaret Elphinstone.

I have internalised a substantial amount of vocabulary and phrases of many other fantasy fiction novels through note-taking and self-study over the last eight years, but I still have issues with syntax, tense, and keeping the same subject in one sentence. Practicing close reading on novels and implementing words, collocations, and syntax as they appear there in
my novella was incredibly helpful. It not only kept me writing but also helped improve my writing skills.

5. Point of View

Ever since I have started writing stories I have never given much thought to point of view. I just assumed I was writing from a limited third-person narrator, but what I had not noticed at all until now is that I was switching between characters’ heads fairly frequently.

Hence, my tutor Anna Heiða Pálsdóttir provided me with a book called *Characters and Viewpoint* (1999) by Orson Scott Card. I studied the chapter about viewpoint which helped me somewhat to differentiate between the types of third-person narrator (156-172). Initially, I was set on writing as an omniscient narrator, but even after reading the chapters I could not understand how to use the omniscient narrator properly without making it look like I switched heads with a limited third-person narrator. I wrote my second attempt of the first two chapters with an omniscient narrator in mind, but soon gave up and edited everything so it fitted the limited third-person narrator.

However, what the book really helped me with is that I can now notice when I write a paragraph as a limited third-person narrator with light penetration, deep penetration, or with a cinematic view (Card 164-169). I realised that most of my previous writing was cinematic which I sorely mistook for the omniscient narrator.

Now that I am more confident with recognising these mistakes I decided to consciously change the point of view with a line break (Card 157). I used this method especially in the fifth chapter, because I wanted to emphasise the rapidity of action as well as show that action in more detail. It was impossible to write that chapter only through Quaronaax’s point of view as he does not see it himself.

6. Characters

I have been inventing my characters over the last eight years. Even before any of the characters had a name, I already had a concept of them in mind. Some just came into my mind complete with a name and character traits. Others were created fairly organically during the process of writing the novella.
6.1. Quaronaax
The main character of the novella is Quaronaax. The name is a contraction of two names appearing in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011); I used the first syllable of Quaranir who is a magician from the legendary Psijic Order, and the last syllable of Parthurnaax who is a dragon that the player can become friends with in the game. For me personally, the way a certain name sounds and looks on paper is very important. However, the meaning of a name should also emphasise the character’s traits, personality, or history.

Quaronaax is not a dragon, but before the eruption of Tol Hrokkronaax the ancient dragons and the Valgaldheru used to live peacefully side by side and thus spoke the same language: the ancient tongue of the Dreki. The Psijic Order is an ancient order of mages that brought forth some of the greatest mages in *The Elder Scrolls* game-lore. The Psijic Order inspired the Valgaldheru.

The name Valgaldheru is a contraction of three parts. In Tolkien’s *The Lost Road and Other Writings* (1987) he explains the etymology of names. In his invented language Quenya the word vala means “(angelic) power” (350). It is quite ironic and fitting, that Old Norse valr refers to the corpses on the battlefield (Jóhannesson 164), as the Valgaldheru have essentially perished from the world in my main story and novella. Old Norse galdr refers to a magical action such as spells and incantations (Jóhannesson 301). The suffix -heru comes from the Valheru, the legendary dragon lords, who are one of the most powerful beings in the universe of the *Riftwar Saga* (1982-1986) by R. E. Feist.

6.2. Mhēlian
Mhēlian’s name is derived from Melian who was one of the Maiar who helped the Valar to shape the world in Tolkien’s *Silmarillion* (1977). As a Maia, Melian is technically an Ainu, one of the divine spirits created by Ilúvatar (Tolkien’s god figure). My Mhēlian is the daughter of Aelbh’iain and a female Dreki. Mhēlian’s father is one of the oldest magical beings in the universe of my story, and her mother is one of the Dreki who are known as the ancient dragons. As Mhēlian’s mother fell in love with Aelbh’iain she took on the shape of a human. Thus, Mhēlian is the Lady of the Dreki.

Compared to Quaronaax, Mhēlian is more powerful and much more confident with her powers than Quaronaax who attempts magic that he has not mastered yet. However, Quaronaax knows dark magic which she does not know. Mhēlian is also much more tempered than Quaronaax who often overreacts and acts before thinking thoroughly about the next step. Due to his erratic behaviour, I decided that Mhēlian needs to be his companion on
his journey to help him with his decisions and guard his back when he gets himself into trouble. Hence, Mhëlian represents the hero’s helper who is one of Vladimir Propp’s seven “spheres of action” (qtd. in Barry 221).

6.3. Llyrwyan and Llyësin

Llyrwyan and Llyësin, the two Ashland siblings, are very positive and cheerful characters and are meant to loosen the tension between Quaronaax and whoever he interacts with. Due to their merry demeanour, the siblings contrast with the other more serious characters. Llyrwyan is derived from Lyrian from Rabenmond (2008) by Jenny-Mai Nuyen, whereas Llyësin is derived from Talyssin from the Welsh Mabinogion (1976).

Both names are influenced by Welsh language conventions. Thus, their full names are Llaaw Llun Llyrwyan—Llyrwyan, Child of Llun (father)—and Llaaw Llëw Llyësin—Llyësin, Child of Llëw (mother)—which are based on the British sea-god Llyr and the mythological Welsh figure Lleu Law Gyffes (Rutherford 66, 68). Their light-heartedness is reflected by Lleu, meaning light, however, Llyr is reflected in the coastal location of Caer Lhuumrinmore where they live (66, 68). My intention behind the similarity of their names is to make them strongly recognisable as siblings belonging to a distinct people, the Ashlanders, and to further contrast them with Quaronaax who is the last heir of his people.

6.4. Galambhór

Galambhór is one of the few characters whose name just popped into my mind one day. Master magician Galambhór is primarily based on Gandalf and Merlin. The origin of both characters is slightly obscure. However, Tolkien’s Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-earth (1980) explains that Gandalf is one of the Maiar closely related to the Valar, and also comes from the West, from Valinor, Tolkien’s heaven (378, 381). Unfortunately, even though several scholars have done research on Merlin no consistent origin has been found (see Bromwich et al. ch. 5). Hence, both characters have an aspect of other-worldliness which I attributed to Galambhór as well. He is not an Ashlander, or from the North as is Lord Aelbh’iain, but from the West beyond the sea, similar to Gandalf. Thus, Galambhór is not related to anyone in the novella’s world.

However, when Galambhór comes to the Ashlands—which happens in the beginnings of the history of the novella—he forges close relationships with Lord Aelbh’iain, the Dreki, and the Valgaldheru at Tol Hrokkronaax. Aelbh’iain asks Galambhór to move not too far away from him, so Galambhór goes south to the coast and establishes Caer Lhuumrinmore—
the suffix caer- means stronghold (Rutherford 34) and Llhuumrinmore is the name of the hot river flowing between the two towers. Galambhór acts as an ambassador between the realms, thus he knows the tongue of the Ashlanders, as well as that of the Dreki which is spoken by the ancient dragons and the Valgaldheru.

I originally intended Galambhór to be Quaronaax’s mentor and close friend, sharing everything with him. However, as Stein says “conflict is the essence of dramatic action” I decided to distance Galambhór from Quaronaax and make him distrust the magician (21). According to Stein, “the engine of fiction is somebody wanting something and going out to get it” (21). Thus, Quaronaax’s father asks Galambhór to keep the protecting spell on the mountain and the true role of Nerevyn in the battle at Valgaldrunheim a secret to Quaronaax. This way I can create Stein’s “adversarial spirit” which is primarily demonstrated in Quaronaax suspecting Galambhór of hiding information from him (21). I planned to focus on the inner conflict of the main character but soon understood that letting Quaronaax react to the other characters would create empathy in the reader and make the conflict more understandable (see 27). As Stein states that the adversarial spirit is not the clash between hero and villain but often simple verbal confrontations, I decided to make Quaronaax very vulnerable towards other characters’ remarks about him (21). As Stein suggests to let characters envy others, quarrel and lie, I added the adept mage Quaranir who bullies Quaronaax because Galambhór tolerates his slackness (25). The adversarial sense is heightened when Quaronaax finds out that Galambhór lied to him and Mhëlian knew the truth all along.

6.5. The fire drakes
There are only three named fire drakes in the novella, whose names I invented as I wrote. The names are not only influenced by Welsh language conventions, but are also inspired by Norse and Welsh mythology. Nehkgwenvar is a contraction of Nýkur, a water horse from Icelandic myths and folktales (Simpson 110-114), and Gwnhwyvar from the Welsh Mabinogion (1976). Aurgkwynd, Quaronaax’s drake, and Nimuanvar, Galambhór’s drake, are various syllables randomly mixed together.

Originally, only Mhëlian has a fire drake as companion as she is the dragon lady. Later on, I decided that Quaronaax, Galambhór, and other members of Caer Lluumrinmore have their own fire drakes as well. I was always intrigued by the idea of a pet-companion. Especially, Nickelodeon’s Avatar: The Legend of Aang (2005-2008) and The Legend of Korra (2012-2014), in which Aang has a flying bison, and Korra has a giant polar bear-dog,
respectively, have inspired me to give my main protagonists pet-companions as well. Even though the fire drakes are not the most intelligent or wise, they are always truthful and loyal and are often the only ones that the main characters can trust and find comfort in. Furthermore, they are a means of transport, which is especially important in my novella.

6.6. Nerevyn and the ash spawns

Nerevyn is the primary villain in the novella. His name is a contraction of ne- from necromancy and Revyn, a dragon rider in Jenny-Mai Nuyen’s Das Drachentor (2006). I admit that I took the idea of ash spawns from the RPG The Elder Scrolls V: Dragonborn (2012) and III: Morrowind (2002). Originally, I called them wraiths but realised that wraiths are ghost-like creatures. I keep referring to necromancy as dark magic in the novella because I don’t want to use a Latin word in a story set in a completely fictional world.

I created Nerevyn as a character while writing the first chapters in autumn 2016. He was supposed to appear at the end of the main story but I decided to put him into the novella because it would be a more convincing and meaningful move. The close relationship between Nerevyn and Quaronaax is also a fairly new invention which I employed to give the reader more reason to empathise with Quaronaax when he risks his life during the soul ritual and confronts Nerevyn.

7. The Ending

I always intended for the novella to have a rather open ending. Even though the part of Quaronaax’s soul perishes in the process of defeating Nerevyn, Nerevyn’s soul finds a way to live inside the crystal dagger. I wanted to have an unforeseen turn at the end to stun and intrigue the reader. The novella is closed in the way that the first quest in The Legend of Quaronaax is overcome, but already foreshadows the events of the second quest.

8. Conclusion

I chose to write a thesis in creative writing not because I am particularly good at writing, but because I genuinely enjoy inventing stories and characters. Admittedly, the writing process was very trying, but as I kept writing on I realised that a BA thesis is not meant to show that I am perfect already, but to show that I can overcome obstacles, learn from them, and improve each and every time.
While writing, I have learned so much about POV, about my characters, and how to plot more effectively in order to write coherent chapters. My characters’ actions were often not cohesive and meaningful enough, but now I know that every action has to contribute to the tension and the plot.

I feel very lucky that I was able to write my thesis under the supervision of Dr. Anna Heiða Pálsdóttir, as her advice and support were invaluable to encourage me to keep writing.
Works Cited


