

The Vanara

By Chris Garson
Copyright 2012

“No one but the Lady could have managed it, Jerilyn. No one but she could have thought of it and no one but she could have convinced so many. You can see the Balance’s hand in it too, though Ankerrafang knew nothing of that. The Vanara were children of Ealar and Elehu, who had inherited from Craeylu and Elemenes, just like Spirit and Finbardin’s children and you know what they did. It’s the same theory as my Earthmagery. From two, a third.” **Kandol Elf Lord**

“Your kind are rare in my part of the world,” Hali said while stirring the campfire.

A deep rumble passing for laughter issued from the dragon’s throat. “Tyrnavalle is more to our liking. It is less settled, which we prefer. Your kind can be so ... aggressive.”

Hali remembered the recent battle with the savage bronze wyrm. “That’s not unique to humanity.”

Miramani scuttled close to the fire and drew her knees to her chest. “When this one was a child, her gra ... the Bardalla told stories of dragons taking wing over the steppes. This one used to sit on his lap and ask how dragons came to the world, but not even he knew whence they came.”

The dragon shifted its immense bulk and spread its wings wide, catching the embers rising from the fire on a shield of silver scales. “The tale you’ve asked for is no simple one, spear maiden. Wyrmkind is neither Elder Race nor God nor mortal, we are dragons. Ours is the story of Norath’s Doom and the story of the Vanara. It is long and wondrous story, full of hope and love, and treachery and despair. Do you truly wish to hear it?”

“Not particularly,” groaned Kaphiri. “I get enough of that from Maelryn.”

The back of Miramani’s hand smacked his shoulder. “This one does, great dragon.”

The Elves didn’t share her enthusiasm, undoubtedly having heard the tale before, but Shavrakar’s eyes gleamed with interest. When the Ravir had gone to sleep, Dracorys and Davyrma had been alone on mountaintops, awaiting destiny.

“Very well,” said the dragon. “You might as well get comfortable. Telling a tale such as this takes time. It is a tale of the gods and best told in the old style speech.”

Hali drew his cloak tight and settled against a moss-covered log.

“Just after the Reckoning,” Ankerrafang began. His rich voice reminded Hali of Fandichio, the fat master of ceremonies in the Coliseum. “Golden Finbardin, King of Heaven, gazed out upon the Firmament, master of all he could see. Great was his power and magnificent was his glory, with his crown Byndael glittering upon his brow. And lo, the Craeylu hailed him chief and sang praise to his might. All the world was his purview and all wondered at his grace and wisdom.”

“His wandering eye saw into the far corners of Esel and nothing could escape his notice, not the stars dancing across the sky, not Mankind awakening on Sangrar, not even that troubling black hole of evil amidst the Firmament. The Darkhold was no more, but Sorrow had survived its destruction and come to roost there, in the Darkstar.”

“The golden one knew that his murderous brother, slayer of bright Lindivar, would not rest until the Gates of Heaven lay in ruin at his feet. To ease his restlessness, he summoned Celetran, the Lady of Esel. Silver-haired with jet black skin and moons for eyes, she came to him astride a beam of starlight and asked how she might serve the King of Heaven.”

“Now, Celetran had labored long on behalf of the Prophecies. More than any save the Seeress, she had guessed well the Prophecy’s secrets and for this, the King of Heaven had sought her out. He confided his concerns and asked her to help against One-Eye in the dark days to come.”

“The Lady was honored he would choose to pin Heaven’s hopes upon her shoulders and swore her aid to gleaming Byndael on bended knee. She said unto him that she must have time to ponder and then the starlight carried her home to the Winking Star, where the answer smote her like a thunderbolt. Of all the gods, none had done more harm to the Dark Lord’s plans than Numra and his sister, the World Walker, who lived with her inside Belecontar. Neither Craeylu nor Elemenés, yet with the better part of both, the two wielded a higher power, enow to wrap the Dark Lord in chains and Rekindle the Suns, as has been told in other tales. If Finbardin had more like them, the Dark Lord could never claim victory. Her plan was deep and far reaching, and of no small undertaking. ”

Ankerrafang flapped his mighty wings. “Celetran soared away on her beam of starlight until she came again to the Outermost Heavens. Before her work was done, she would ask sacrifices from many, but none so great as what she’d ask of Spollnar. The river goddess shared a grotto under the waterfall with Garruth the Laughing God, whose bulls plowed the fields of

Heaven. Spring and fall, opposites in the Pattern, she and Garruth had been together since the world was young and great was their love. Spollnar was the ripple in the currents, life anew after a winter of Kandalla's frigid breath, and Garruth's laughter murmured in the earth, a playful dirge for the harvester's scythe."

"And lo, the Lady came unto her and her need for secrecy was great, so she waited until the Laughing God was away with his golden bulls before appearing in a shimmer of starlight. The river goddess showered her welcome upon Lady who whispered such things as to turn Spollnar's cheeks red as the fires in Grandar's forge. Now, the Lady was a bold goddess and for her, no thought too scandalous, but Spollnar was of a different mind and refused her entreaties. And yet, the Lady was persistent and spoke unto her again most urgently, turning Spollar's mind, if not her heart. The River Goddess's eyes turned to wonder as she comprehended the audacity of Celetran's contrivance and gave her assent, though her heart was heavy. Of the Lady's intent, she had no doubt, nor even of the need, yet she feared the price she might pay."

"When the bellows of the Laughing God warned Celetran to leave, she rode her beam to a crystal cave in the mountains of Heaven where Norath the Seeress gazed into time-riddled waters. Like Aux of the Elder Days, the Seeress's pool revealed mysteries of the past and futures that might come to pass. To her, naught was hidden; fog shrouded truths and unveiled maybes shone like harbingers of tomorrow in the ripples. Wielding knowledge like reins of power, she whipped the steeds of prophecy mercilessly through twisting turns of light and shadow, moving them ever forward to an end that only she had seen in fevered visions."

"The Seeress waited for the Lady upon a crystal throne sparkling like a diamond, wearing a winsome and knowing smile. She held a flame in the palm of her hand, dowry for a suitor of fire.

"I know why you have come,' she said unto to the Lady of Esel, 'for I have seen it.'"

"And will you aid me?' the Lady asked in return."

"I shall,' said the Seeress unto her, 'or have I already done so? It is all so muddled in the waters.'"

"And Celetran was pleased. Had the Seeress opposed her it might all have crumbled, but her sister goddess was a slave to her misty waters and had little choice. Norath did naught that her visions did not guide, naught that opposed the Prophecies, yet her ways were wily and

slippery like the eel. Her path was always twisted, meandering between trickery and deceit when it suited her designs.”

“Celetran summoned her starlight and made ready to leave but lo, Norath bade her stay. With crooked smile, the Seeress warned the Lady that her schemes would unlock the ancient doom shackling Harnor’s progeny and send them hurtling towards destiny, but the Lady yet stood proud and undeterred.

“‘So be it,’ she said unto the Seeress. ‘You set the doom upon them, not I, and now it must run its course. What is done cannot be undone. Be they bonded forever as two with one heart and mind, or as enemies locked in eternal battle, all shall know soon enow.’”

“And then starlight came unto the Lady and she took flight once more, glad to have acquitted herself of the Seeress. Like an arrow soaring across the vault of Heaven, she came unto the mountaintop where Dracorys the Dragon Lord perched. Alone through the ages, a victim of the old enmity between the Councilor and the Lord of the Spires, he had grown a brilliant coat of gems to dazzle his enemies and cover his mighty girth with armor stouter than any Dwarf-forged mail. Though he took the shape of a mighty beast, great nobility beat in the Dragon Lord’s breast and he was naught if not patient. He endured his solitude with grace and dignity, on Sangrar and later in the Outermost Heavens and yet even so, this unswerving sentinel of virtue hungered for freedom unleashed and eternity with his intended. Even as a child rebelled against a parent’s wagging finger, so too did Dracorys chafe under his sentence and so, he was drawn into the Lady’s scheme, his roar of approval echoing o’er the mountains.”

“Well satisfied, the Lady leapt onto her star beam, which whisked her away to a distant mountain where Dracorys’s love-starved mate, Davyrma, a caged huntress with a quiver for one, waited in eternal frustration. Like him, Davyrma wore the scaled raiment of wyrmkind, with taloned claw and horn-crested head, with fanged jaw and serpent tail, and wings like unto sails of glittering gold. She bore her doom with bitterness, having not the forbearance of her twin, and tugged ever at the chains of her doom, anxious for the day when she and Dracorys would reunite.”

“Her teats yearned for motherhood, for when Harnor had brought them forth, he had intended them as husband and wife, father and mother, king and queen o’er wyrmkind, but in doing so, the Lord of the Spires had stirred the ashes of his old dispute with Deridean. The Councilor brought his grievance before the King of Heaven, who had sided with him when the

conflict had first arisen and even now had little cause to regret his choice. The golden one was wroth that Harnor would defy him and so he decreed that Deridean's daughter, Norath the Seeress, would determine suitable punishment. The Lord of the Spires was livid and loathe to let his rival's daughter decide their fate and protested mightily to Finbardin, but his complaints went unheard. And lo, Norath pronounced her doom, that they should remain apart until an impossible sign came to pass and since then, the Dragon Lord and his intended lived separately, alone and in solitude, and wyrmkind remained unborn."

"So loyal to her nature and doom was the Dragon Lady that Celetran foresaw her being the most difficult to convince. So she charged in riding her star beam like some knight of virtue and smote the mountainside, enveloping Davyrma in her light. The Dragon Queen would have torn her limb from limb, so great was her anger, had the Lady not whispered words to quench her inner fire. They spoke at great length as women do unto one another until at last, the Lady's starlight took her from the mountaintop, secure that the Davyrma would do her part, yet even she could not foresee what would come of it. Perhaps the Seeress had known, her irksome smile suggested as much, but if so, she said naught to forestall the coming storm."

"Next to receive a visit from the Lady of Esel was the god unnamed, whose name might be guessed but has yet to be revealed. She came upon him deep in the wood, where he was wont to be. This one cared little for the affairs of the gods and trespassed alone in the Singing Forest, content to watch over its denizens. The Lady dazzled him with her charms yet he did not so much as notice, so enraptured was he in the wonders of the wood. And then a spotted rabbit scampered from roots of a silver-barked Sildar and came to rest at his feet as a great hawk landed upon his shoulder. He blinked and bowed to the Lady. She explained unto him what he must do and he thought it of little consequence. He would do as she asked and then return to his beloved forest. Even as the Lady rode away, like a witch on a broom of starlight, he vanished, eager be done with it, and then, duty complete, vanished from this tale."

"Now, as has been rightly said, the Lady was known not only for delivering the gods' justice, but also as a goddess with a wanton reputation in the Elder Days. Fairest of the fair, she was most beautiful to behold and no mortal could withstand her charms. She found the Fair Folk most pleasing and lo, Elras found her favor as did Kandol and others of Nammoran's line. So, knowing how much she loved to love, it should come as no surprise to learn that the Lady had given herself a part in the drama to unfold. And then, she came unto her chosen, one she had

long coveted, in a swirl of starlight and let her robe fall away. He needed little convincing and swept her into his arms and his touch was soft as a kitten's yet strong as a tiger's. They lay down in the grass, lost in caresses, while the wheels she'd set in motion ground inexorably onward."

"While the Lady swooned, the Seeress swung her cloak of shimmering over her shoulders and vanished in a swirl, reappearing in the volcano home of the Yarnor the Ravager, who was like unto a man of fire. Now it had never been the Ravager's nature to mingle with the gods and so, when the Seeress came upon him unannounced he was most surprised. She stepped close and drew the Ravager to her bosom, relishing his warmth. And, so fair was she that the Ravager was smitten and took her gladly. She rolled in his arms and his flame caught inside her. From them came Glorianna the Rose, the first new god to step foot in Heaven's hallowed realm for an age. Born of both Ealar and Elehu, Glorianna woke bold and impetuous in a cradle of lava, possessing all the passion of her father's bright flame and her mother's beauty. Tall and fair, the scarlet garbed huntress stood upon a sea of magma with long golden tresses lashing at cinders drifting by, each strand a soldier to stand against the Dark Lord. And lo, she shone with ardor, for she was passion, warm and pounding. She was beauty, a rose among weeds, her thorns jealousy and envy. She was the hunt, hungry and swift, bounding after her prey. She was lust, a ruby of desire, a fire to inflame the hearts of men. She was love, sweet and manic, tempting and seductive, gentle and caressing."

"And then Glorianna turned to thank her mother for the gift of life and her rapture turned to horror. Once fair, Norath had shriveled to a crone from the Ravager's fire. No more would her winsome smile sparkle in the crystal pool. So great were the fires of Yarnor's love, so heavy the burden of bearing his child, that her godly strength was nearly spent. Glorianna rushed to comfort her mother, but as she drew closer, the Seeress diminished even more."

"'Away,' Norath said unto her daughter for she could not bear to have her near. 'Away, child of mine,' she said unto her, 'away, child of flame, before your fire steals what remains of my spirit.' And Glorianna fled in shame."

"While Norath lay with Yarnor, Spollnar came to the Laughing God and lay her head upon his chest. 'Let us make a child,' she said unto him."

"And lo, Garruth was taken aback for never before had she spoken of having a child and yet, he wished only to make her happy. 'Why now,' he asked, 'after so long' and her answer warmed his heart."

“‘I am yours,’ she said unto him, ‘now and forever. Why then, should we not proclaim our love with a child of our making to watch over Mankind and guard against One-Eye? Our child shall be a fist to smash the Dark Ones, a warrior to lead the hosts of Heaven.’”

“And this sounded well and good to the Laughing God and so he planted his seed in her.”

“To Davyrma fell the task of seducing Umbar the Wave. Alone on her mountaintop, she gave great thought to her task and the more she thought upon it, the deeper she drowned in despair. Umbar was a mighty lord, strong of sinew and handsome in his foamy beard and Davyrma was forlorn, sure he would not desire her dragon form. But, she thought, Lillandra of the Hearth was most beautiful, fairer than any but the Lady of Esel, and Umbar might covet her. So she wrapped herself in strands of sorcery pilfered from her father’s Spires and spun Lillandra’s form atop her own.”

“Now Umbar was rightly named the Lord of Sea and Storm and spent his days in Heaven’s seas. The oceans were his plains, the waves the mountains and valleys of his turbulent moods. From the smallest minnow to the giant sea turtles, he held dominion over the world’s oceans and even the very tide rose and fell at his beck and call. He swam with the sharks, he wrestled with whales and he cast down lightning bolts while thunder rumbled at his foamy command. He could whip the wind into a frenzy with the merest thought and no mariners sailing Sangrar’s oceans dared break anchor without offering him his due.”

“And yet, Umbar kept to the surface for the depths reminded him of his brother, mad Rabyn, who had turned to the Dark Lord after losing his beloved Dolforro. Though Rabyn now lived in the Darkstar’s shadowy pools, whenever Umbar dove deep he could feel maddened eyes staring upon him from the murky depths and he shivered. Twisted by the Dark Lord’s lies, Rabyn had come to blame Umbar for his loss and his desire for vengeance knew no bounds.”

“And lo it came to pass that Umbar was resting on the sandy beach of his island home when Lillandra stepped out of the surf wrapped in seaweed and a crown of sea lilies upon her head. She spoke unto him words most kind and praiseworthy and professed that she had long admired him. But still, but Umbar was suspicious, for the Goddess of the Hearth, while showing him the generosity she bequeathed to all, had never before shown him any special interest. He bid her go, but to his surprise, she would not leave. She stayed on his island, tending his needs, feeding him and rubbing his shoulders until his aches fled like night before Aerial’s advance.

She laughed at his wit, she marveled at his wisdom and she named him most fair and handsome. And lo, in time his suspicions waned and then turned to the love Davyrma had long coveted.”

“Now Davyrma, though wearing the guise of Lillandra, was the intended of Dracorys and her fate was tied to his. So it had been ordained since before the Elder Races walked the earth and thus her time with Umbar began as a game, but when the Lord of Sea and Storm returned her loving kindness with love, she found herself drawn to him and lo, her promise to Celetran was no burden, it was a gift promising release for her long simmering passion. For Davyrma had spent eternity alone and companionship was a welcome friend. Though she knew it wrong, ever did her heart rule her mind and her heart turned to the Lord of Sea and Storm. To Umbar, she gave all the love she’d saved for Dracorys and the tide carried them away, to the edge of the horizon, where they conceived a child.”

“In the grotto beneath the waterfall, the Laughing God looked after Spollnar with great tenderness while she swelled with the fruits of their love. And then, when the time was upon her, she held Garruth’s hand and brought forth Pagnar the Lion, Lord of the Arena, into the Outermost Heavens. Thick-shouldered and broad of waist, he inherited his father’s good spirit and hearty laugh and stood before them proudly as a true warrior born. Ten dancing broadswords circled about his head and their touch would spell death to the legions of the night. A captain of captains, Pagnar was ever a god of war, a stalwart knight and champion of order, who relished sharing the gift of combat to any serving the Dark Lord. Legendary was his prodigious might and his mirth sounded o’er the clang of battle, a claxon horn proclaiming victory.”

“And then, now that Pagnar had come, Spollnar’s grip tightened on Garruth’s hand and lo, her form shifted into that of Dracorys the Dragon Lord. ‘What magik is this,’ wailed Garruth, and his wrath was terrible to behold.”

“‘I am sorry,’ Dracorys spoke unto him and truly he was. He took no joy in deception. ‘Norath’s Doom is calling.’ And then, he took wing to air and left the Laughing God alone with their child.”

“Flying faster than a hurricane, Dracorys reached Norath’s cave before the echo of his apology faded from the grotto. The Seeress sat upon her crystal throne, flesh shriveled by age and flame, no longer the fair goddess who had pronounced her doom, and lo, Davyrma was waiting for him too, swelled in the belly as he had been. He had no time to wonder at this, for at

the sight of her, the lust was upon him. After waiting an eternity, nothing would keep him from her a moment more and she too had quickened. They met in mid-air, above the misty waters, and touched for the first time. For Dracorys, it was all he had dreamt of, the end of a lifetime of waiting. And lo, Davyrma too felt likewise and they coupled, but it was swift and savage, an act of compulsion not love, for next to Umbar's touch, Dracorys's paled. Davyrma was ashamed but could not go against her heart.

“‘Choose,’ the Seeress said unto them. Though diminished, her voice still held the timbre of prophecy. ‘My doom said you would remain apart until Dracorys bore a child and now that doom has come to pass. Now you must choose. Will you be bonded forever in love or as enemies?’”

“‘I choose another,’ Davyrma said unto her intended with uncalled for haste. ‘One whose love for me knows no bounds.’”

“Dracorys begged her to reconsider. He pleaded with her, he called upon her sense of duty but she stood firm and resolute in her choice. And then, Dracorys grew angry and his anger was like a cloud of thunderbolts raining down upon her. ‘Behold your infidelity,’ he pointed to her swollen belly and accused her of defying their doom, but lo she would not yield and accused him of the same, naming Pagnar a child of deception. Yet Dracorys defended his action most vigorously, saying unto her, “I acted to end Norath's Doom, to bring us together. What excuse have you?’”

“And Davyrma would not answer. Whatever the Lady had said to convince her remained a secret that not even Dracorys could pry loose. In truth, Davyrma no longer cared. She had given her heart over fully to Umbar.”

“‘So be it,’ intoned the Seeress. ‘If you shall not be together, then enemies you shall be.’ And lo, her doom was complete. The dragons launched into Esel, in different directions and weeping as they flew. Their tears floated through Esel like the Firstborn had floated from the Pool, drifting on the wind until landing gently on Sangrar. As the tears fell, they hardened into eggs, and from those eggs, the first dragonkind hatched.”

Kaphiri stood and stamped his feet. His legs had grown numb from sitting too long.

“Not so fast, young adjutant,” breathed Ankerrafang. “The story is far from complete. After Davyrma's tears ran dry, she returned to Umbar, who knew naught of what had transpired

with the Seeress, and rose out of the surf to greet her love, wearing again Lillandra's face. A single tear rolled down her cheek and Umbar asked her what was amiss. She fell to her knees and wept and Umbar rushed to her side, placing his hand upon her swollen belly.

“Behold my true form,’ she said unto her beloved and then she appeared before him, draconic and majestic, wings stretched like an imperial peacock. And her revelation brought Umbar dismay as surely as the river emptied into the sea. Stern was his countenance when he demanded the truth and so strong was her love that she spilt all. From a seed of seduction, love had blossomed and, as proof, she offered her rejection of Dracorys. She wished only for eternity with Umbar.”

“But her sacrifice in Norath's cave meant nothing to him. Her lies had poisoned Umbar's feelings for her and torn his heart asunder. Not a drop of goodwill remained for her whom he named Deceiver. And lo, he mourned Lillandra, whom he had never known, so well had Davyrma played her role. With tearful eye, she begged him to take her back, for the sake of their child if not for love, and she changed again into that guise Umbar found most pleasing, but his fury washed down upon her in a wave. ‘Go, evil witch. Go, Deceiver and never return.’”

“Davyrma fled Umbar, returning to her mountaintop, and her sorrow was endless, yet the babe in her womb would be free. And then, Beldar the Bear came forth. Like the others, he possessed great strength of arms, for Davyrma could delve like a dozen Forge Folk and a snap of her tail could topple forests. From his father, Beldar was as quixotic as the sea, ever brash and unpredictable and quick to offer the justice of his mace Skullcrusher. More like Glorianna in spirit than Pagnar, Beldar cared little for the stratagems of war. One such as he need only wade into battle and foes would fall by the score as surely as the Dark Lord had but one eye. Hirsute like his namesake, the Bear disdained armor or trappings that might slow his advance, for none loved the rush of battle as much as he, to whom death in righteous combat was the highest honor one could attain.”

“Neath yon waterfall, Garruth the Laughing God laughed no more. Dracorys had departed to meet his doom, leaving him alone with Pagnar. The newly come Lion, swaddled in shining mail, roared a challenge to his father, for he was Lord of the Arena and the gift of combat was the greatest gift he could bestow, but Garruth was disconsolate and refused his gauntlet. He had thoughts only for his beloved Spollnar and sent his questing eye o'er the Realms searching for her. He scried upon the highest mountain and the deepest sea, he even

dared look upon mist-shrouded Tar-Devalle, home of the Primals, but she was nowhere to be found.”

“The Laughing God turned to his son and there was no mirth upon his visage. And though he was wrong and had no right, Garruth held Pagnar to blame for his beloved’s disappearance and cast him out from the waterfall. ‘Begone,’ he said unto the Lion, ‘I cannot abide ye, not while my beloved is taken from me.’ And so Pagnar, like Glorianna before him, suffered his parent’s shame and went into the world with head bowed.”

“The gods are powerful beyond ken, watching over all that live within the Girdle and safeguarding the Prophecies. No doubt, they have our best interests in mind and have saved us from the Dark Lord, but loving parents they were not.”

“As Pagnar strode out from under the waterfall, Davyrma gazed upon Beldar the Bear from her mountaintop roost and lo, despair so utterly consumed her that she threw herself into the sea where the waves might drown her broken heart. For her cub, she offered no farewell, even the sight of him was too painful, and she left him alone on the mountaintop to become the champion of war the Lady of Esel had so desperately sought.”

“Her winged form floated unmoving on the surface of the sea and then sank like a stone. Davyrma closed her eyes, ready to end a life not worth living without her beloved Umbar. But lo, another swam to her in the murky depths and rescued her. Mad Rabyn lurked in the depths and spied the drowning Dragon queen. He took her to a hidden place and nursed her back to health, but when she woke, Davyrma was wroth with him. She had not wished to be saved, but Rabyn would not listen. He cared for her and while he did, her love for Umbar soured into hatred and she stopped rejecting mad Rabyn’s advances. Later, she swore herself fully to the Dark Lord, but that is a tale of seduction best left for another day.”

“Driven by a common hatred of Umbar, their union grew strong, and wherever she reminded Rabyn how Umbar had hurt her, his anger grew, until it was like unto a spear of hatred. And then, he leapt into the fray to battle the Lord of Sea and Storm. Like two tidal waves, they tangled in Heavens’ seas until finally, Rabyn cast Umbar out of Heaven and the Lord of Sea and Storm fell to Sangrithar, with no recollection of his true identity.”

“That is not a well known truth in Sangrithar,” said Hali. “Even in Colcester, I heard a different story.”

“Much has been kept from the people since the curse took hold of the God-Emperors,” said Maelryn. “In olden times, when all Gods were welcome in Sangrithar, the myths of old were well known, but now much is suppressed. Your people are sheltered, Hali, sheltered from their past and that ignorance is a shackle imprisoning the future.”

“If that’s so, then you did much of the sheltering,” shot back Emerre.

“Not now, you two,” Hali warned. “This is not the time or place.”

“The sorcerer speaks truly,” said Ankerrafang. “Even here in the wilds of Tynnavalle, my kind knows of your mad rulers and the tyranny they wield. Like mad Rabyn of whom I spoke, they have lost their reason and much woe has come from it.”

“And that,” Hali said forcefully, “is why we’re here, to end the God-Emperors once and for all. But for now, let us hear the end of the story.”

“As you wish,” said Ankerrafang.

“While the Laughing God wept, his beloved Spollnar also shed tears. After laying with the unnamed god, she had come to Belecontar as the Lady of Esel’s guest and from the Winking Star had she kept an eye on her mate. It brought her no pleasure to see her beloved in such pain, nor had it been easy to watch him caressing Dracorys, but it had been necessary. He would never have agreed to Celetran’s plan, she had always been the stronger of the two.”

“But lo, golden-haired Sudnar, that god of gentle persuasions, had come unto Belecontar too upon the Lady’s beam of star light and laid his hand upon Spollnar’s swollen belly, assuring her that she would soon reunite with her beloved. Light of heart and of cheerful disposition was Sudnar the Protector and his smile brought good fortune. In the Elder Days, he walked the world to and fro, enjoying hospitality from clamoring Elder Races, always glad for his visits. Now when the Lady had come unto him and laid herself bare, he had not been displeased. Celetran had thought to lay with him once and be done with him, but Sudnar brought his charms to bear and behold, the Lady was undone. The hunter was now the hunted and the Lady found herself hopelessly ensnared in a web of love. And yea, of the five, only their love yet survives. Even today, they are together in winking Belecontar.”

“Gladly did Sudnar stay in Belecontar with the Lady while his child grew within her, yet he worried for his good friend Umbar. When Umbar and mad Rabyn had battled, he was caught up in the rapture of his Lady and saw not the fate that befell him. He pried away the Lady’s arms

and searched the seas, in Heaven yea, and in Sangrar too, but the battle had laid Umbar so low that he found no trace. The Lady called him back to the star as her time drew near, yet even as he took her hand, he vowed to find fallen Umbar after seeing his child safely born.”

“And then a river opened up from Spollnar and shining Vitale swam out from his mother’s womb. And lo, Spollnar cried, not from joy of her son, but at the thought of lying again in the arms of her beloved Garruth. And yet, had she spared a moment for Vitale, she may have been proud, for Vitale had the youthful vigor of the spring and from his unnamed father, a reverence for all that lived.

“Stronger of thew than even Pagnar was Vitale. Mighty enough to bear the weight Esel upon his shoulders should the Girdle falter, the Shining One’s strength was a beacon to the hosts of Heaven and his glory lifted oppression from the backs of the weary. For he was a shield and a sword, an avenger, and a redeemer and no tyrant could stay his hand. Like unto a flame eternal, he shone with the brilliance of the Suns and gave hope to all who walked the earth. Spollnar had given Heaven a shining prince to lead the hosts against the legions of the night, but when she gazed upon him, all the deception overwhelmed her. She crumbled from the weight of it and ordered Vitale away.”

“And then the Lady of Esel, Finbardin’s confidant and the author of this plot, brought out Bangal the Rainbow Lord, named for his dazzling cloak, so bright the glow all but hid his features. And lo, unlike the others, no warrior born was he. His glance was soft and gentle and could see into the hearts of men, to sift the good from the bad. Mercy was writ upon his brow, but he suffered little the fool’s glib tongue or false penitence from the unremorseful.”

“When Celetran looked upon her son, bells tolled her love inside the star, for only she, of all the goddesses, had any love for her child, mayhap because only she and Sudnar had any lasting love. And yet she said naught, though her eyes bespoke her feelings, for she knew he must leave. Finbardin was calling. And, as Bangal and shining Vitale strode out from the star, the Lady thought upon all she had wrought before closing her eyes to rest, her work done.”

“Now, all five came to Tar-Livarre’s grassy balcony where golden Finbardin waited and knelt before him. Shining Vitale, Glorianna the Rose, Beldar the Bear, Pagnar the Lion and dazzling Bangal, four warriors and one other, and the King of Heaven was most pleased with the Lady. ‘I name thee the Vanara,’ he decreed, ‘gods to inspire the men awakening below and a

holy vanguard to lead the hosts when the Dark Lord's legions come at last to the Gates of Heaven."

"And then Finbardin spun Formythos, the very chains that had smote Erlik's eye, o'er his head, faster and faster, until Esel swirled above like a tornado. And lo, at the center of the maelstrom, a land formed and the Vanara watched in wonder as a new realm took shape in the Firmament, connected to the Outermost Heavens by a bridge of stars. Finbardin put Formythos down and spoke unto them, 'Behold the Blessed Kingdom, where Men's spirits may come to rest after they die. You shall watch over them from yonder crystal palace.' And lo, a palace of shining crystal rose up at the foot of the bridge."

"And then Bangal asked, 'What realms are those?' The Rainbow Lord pointed to a second new realm, close to the Blessed Kingdom and far from Sangrar, and then a third, hiding behind the second and hard to see. And even as he asked, he knew the crystal palace was not for him."

"'Those are the Halls of the Dead,' Finbardin said unto him of the second, 'where you shall sit upon a throne of judgment. Men's spirits shall take a long walk to stand before you there, and then, should you judge them worthy, a short walk to the Blessed Realm.'"

"'And if I find them lacking?'"

"'Let them contemplate their failure in the Spirit World a while before facing you again.' And then, Finbardin gave the Vanara leave to explore the new realms, yet the fold in the Girdle connecting the Spirit World to the Darkstar went undiscovered until it was too late, and all who sought penitence there were subject to the Dark Lord's evil whispers."

"And later, after the warriors four had taken up in the crystal palace and Bangal sat upon his throne waiting for those taking the long walk, the Lady of Esel, came again to the Outermost Heavens astride her beam of starlight and knelt before her King. 'It is done,' she said unto him. 'Aye,' he replied. 'They are strong, but will they be enough?'"

"And then Celetran, keeper of secrets, whose wisdom was as endless as the reaches of Esel, said unto him, 'We can only hope so, my Lord, but if they fall, do not despair. Remember the warrior, the prince and the priestess.'"

Ankerrafang folded his wings. "And that, my friends, is where dragons come from."