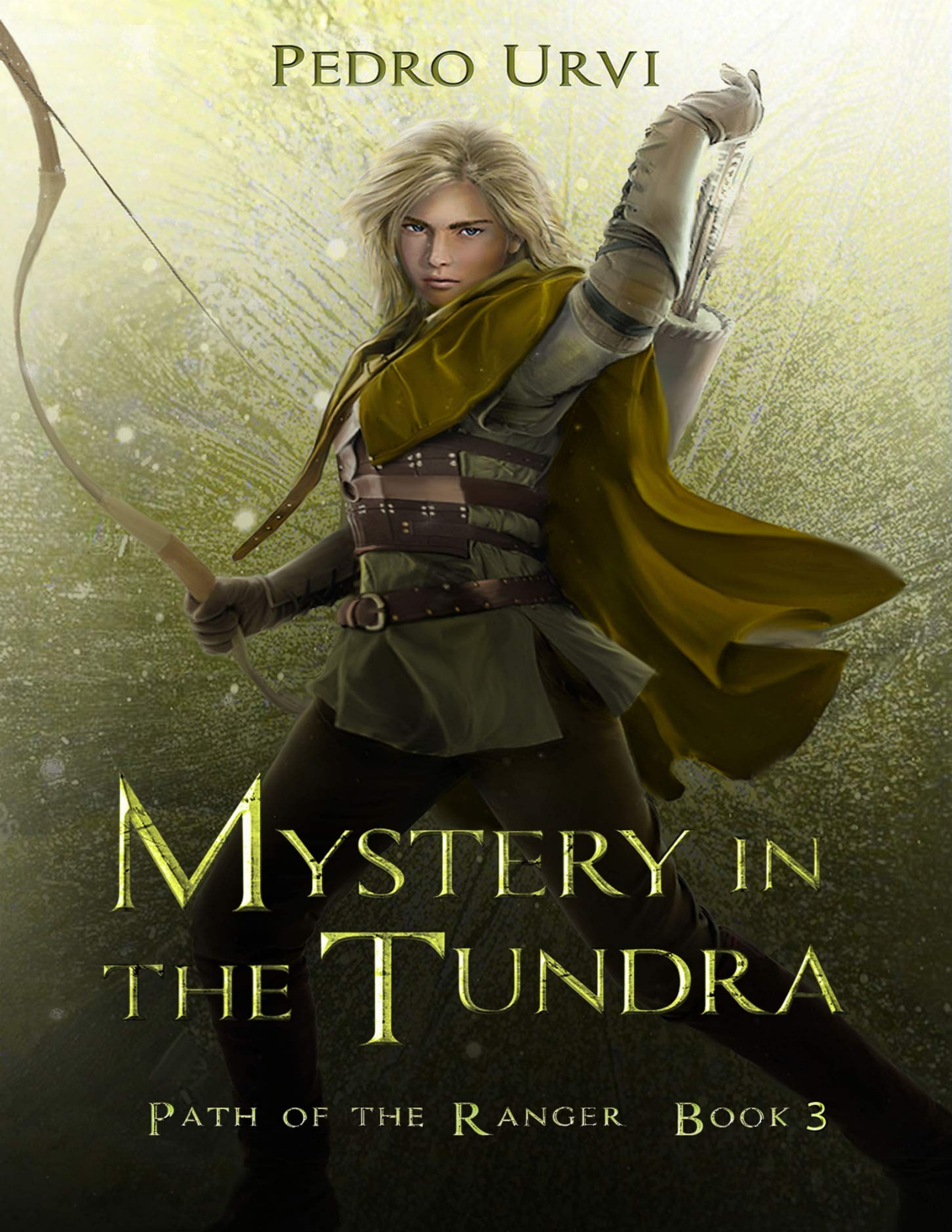




PEDRO URVI

MYSTERY IN THE TUNDRA

PATH OF THE RANGER BOOK 3

Mystery in the Tundra

(Path of the Ranger Book 3)

Pedro Urvi

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Dedication

*To my good friend Guiller.
Thank you for all your support since day one.*





Chapter 1

“Camu! Come here!” Lasgol called to the creature as he mounted Trotter.

Camu turned his head and looked at him from the top of a boulder by the road with his large eyes and everlasting smile. He began his characteristic dance, flexing his four legs and wagging his long tail. He had grown quite a lot during the year and now was the size of a cat, although for some strange reason he always gave the impression of being much smaller, as if he shrank in size when looked at.

“I said *come here!*” Lasgol repeated, more forcefully. Trotter, alarmed by the order, snorted. The pony too had grown quite a lot during the last seasons, and in his case it showed in his muscles, which were even sturdier. He was only a hand taller, and would not grow much more. Norghanian ponies were very strong and sturdy but small. Perfect companions for the harsh, snowy mountains.

Camu shrieked in delight at the sight of some squirrels and bounded into the oak wood, intent on chasing them.

Lasgol snorted in frustration. “You’re a good pony,” he told Trotter, patting his neck. “But Camu is a rascal and a pain in the neck. And he’s only getting worse.”

He turned to examine the oak-wood. He had chosen the northern path because he knew that if he approached the village along the river, Camu would start chasing the rainbow trout and they would run the risk of someone seeing him. But in his plan he had not taken the squirrels into account. He calculated how long he had left, without taking his eyes off the little creature, which was climbing an oak after a poor squirrel that was looking at him in puzzlement. They were very close now, about six hundred

paces from Skad, his village. He was coming back to spend the vacation weeks before he started his third year of training as a Ranger.

He looked for the sun among the clouds. He could barely glimpse it in a cloudy, threatening sky. It was so cold that it hurt to breathe. They were at the end of winter and there were still a couple of heavy snowfalls to come before spring arrived. He thought about his situation. He had managed to survive two years of instruction – and *survive* was the right word, because they had tried to kill him on several occasions. He felt a certain pride in the fact. He had already completed two years of instruction as a Ranger; he had gone from being an Initiate Ranger the first year to Apprentice Ranger the second, and once the break was over and he went back to the Camp he would be a Contender. It was said that this was the most important year, where it was decided who had true Ranger mettle and who did not. *I have it. I'll manage to pass to the fourth and last year and graduate as a Ranger.*

Suddenly he heard voices in the oak-wood, to the west. He did not need to use his Gift; the voices were clear. Several men, talking animatedly.

He leapt off his horse and ran into the wood. He spotted Camu leaping among the branches as if he were another squirrel. He could not risk the naughty creature not obeying him; he would have to use his Gift. He closed his eyes and concentrated. He searched for his inner energy, which he always visualized as a quiet blue pool, and found it in his chest. From what he had read about the Gift and how magic worked, the pool was really a representation of his inner power which was made by his mind. According to *Basic and Non-Linear Concepts of Magic*, by Samuras the Charmer, the mind used this visualization to make it easier to accept the existence of the magic energy of those born with the Gift. There was no pool or pond in his chest, as Lasgol knew, but what there actually was within him was that strange energy: magic. Now he studied every book that fell into his hands. He was interested in learning, above all else. The more the better. To understand who he was and what he could do with his Gift. Especially

because it gave him an advantage over his enemies – and unfortunately he had very powerful ones.

He fixed his mind on Camu. He saw the creature as a magenta aura which was moving through the air in the trees. At first it had been very hard to fix his mind on the creature when he moved. But as he was always moving, Lasgol had had no choice but to practice hard until he got it right. And now he had mastered it.

Camu, stay, hide, he ordered.

A season ago this order would have been obeyed at once. But things were changing now. Lasgol received a feeling Camu had transmitted:

Fun.

This was not good, not at all. They could not exchange mental messages – the skill he had managed to develop did not work that way – but now Camu was capable of transmitting sensations and feelings in response to Lasgol's requests. And if he did not feel like it, he simply ignored them.

Hide, danger! Lasgol insisted more urgently.

But Camu did not want to stop playing. *Happy. Bounce!* the creature transmitted.

Lasgol could already see the men approaching along a snow-covered path. There were half a dozen of them. Judging by their clothes and the axes, saws and other tools they carried they must be woodcutters. They were returning from working in the western woods. He made one last attempt.

Danger, strangers!

Camu looked down at him from a low oak branch. Then he looked toward the woodmen.

Danger, he transmitted, and camouflaged himself so that he disappeared.

Lasgol snorted in frustration. The older the creature grew, the more difficult it was to control him. Soon he would no longer be able to. Camu would do whatever he pleased, which would be very dangerous for both.

“Top of the freezing evening to you!” said an enormous woodcutter, who was carrying two axes over his right shoulder.

“Freezing evening to you,” Lasgol replied in the Norghanian style.

The six woodmen stopped beside him and stared at him. Lasgol was wearing the hooded cloak of the Apprentice Rangers, an intense yellow which would have drawn those men’s attention, but he was wearing it inside out so that it was an unobtrusive greenish-brown. When he went back and started the third year he would be given the green cloak, which though better-looking – at least for Lasgol, whose favorite color was green – was still too showy. But from what Egil had told him, the colors of the cloaks were like that on purpose, to make it easier to be seen from afar and to avoid accidents, particularly during Archery training. According to Viggo, they were those strident colors to make things difficult in the School of Expertise.

Lasgol took a good look at them in turn. They were big, sullen-looking men. He did not know them; they were not from Skad.

“Passing through?” one of them asked him. He was the oldest, with a flat nose, and was staring at him warily.

“I’m on my way to Skad. I’m from there.”

“From Skad?” said another of the woodmen, a thin, red-haired man. He spat to one side. “We’re from Torse.”

The village of Torse was a little further south, a couple of days’ walk away. Lasgol wondered what these men were doing in the forest of Skad; usually the inhabitants of each village kept to their own domains. The Skad woodcutters would not be at all pleased to know that people from Torse were felling trees on their land.

“You’re a bit far from Torse...”

“So?” the other one asked. He was huge, with a thick fair beard. “What’s it to you?” It was like a warning bark.

Lasgol understood that it would be better to keep quiet and avoid trouble.

“Nothing. I just want to get to my village and rest after my journey.”

“Then go on your way,” said the first man.

His tone was threatening, which surprised Lasgol. The group seemed to be rather tense. He noticed that one of them, the youngest, was bleeding from one arm. The one beside him was limping, also from some wound. This surprised him. Woodmen knew how to be careful. They did not often have accidents, and they never, ever, left wounds untreated.

He pointed to the sky as he got ready to leave. “I hope the storm doesn’t reach you.”

“Nor you.”

The comment, once again, sounded like a veiled threat. Lasgol did not want to push things any further. He took Trotter’s reins and went on along the path. *Follow me and don’t show yourself*, he transmitted to Camu with his Gift as he went. He took a last, surreptitious, look over his shoulder. The woodmen were heading south.

He arrived in Skad as the evening was fading. The village was just as he remembered it. As he went towards his house, several of his neighbors recognized him and greeted him kindly, even gladly. *How things change*. Not long ago they would have refused to greet him, or insulted him, or something worse. But that was far behind now. He was no longer ‘the traitor’s son’. He was respected now, and he could not have been prouder of having cleared his father’s name and regained the respect he deserved.

He went past the square and saw the traders and workshops beginning to put away their wares and shut up shop: everyone except the inn, which would still be doing business that day. Night was beginning to fall, and soon there would be a snowstorm. He looked up at the clouds, sniffed the cold damp air and noticed the direction of the wind on his face. *Yes, there’s going to be plenty of snow*. He was not the only one to have had the thought; the villagers were hurrying to their homes. The village appeared to be

unchanged, but one thing caught his attention: there were not many people, fewer than usual.

He led Trotter home and crossed the center of the village. A group of miners greeted him. They were on their way back from the mine and were so filthy that they were barely recognizable under their working clothes and grimy faces. *I bet my dinner they'll stop at the inn to have a beer before heading home.* He turned around on Trotter and followed them with his gaze. They went straight to the inn.

He found the door to his house shut. For a moment he gazed at his home. He was filled with a sweet, warm feeling of longing and wellbeing. He was glad to feel that way. It would not have been the case a year before. He realized he was dying to go in and rest. *It's my home.* He dismounted and knocked, then waited.

"Who is it?" came the voice of a woman from the house.

"An Apprentice Ranger."

"Lasgol! Master! By the winter heavens!"

"Hi there, Martha," he greeted her with a wave and a radiant smile.

The housekeeper ran to let him in.

"Nobody warned me. I didn't know you'd be arriving today. I'd have had a welcome ready."

"Don't worry, Martha, there's no need."

Martha gave him a huge hug, which Lasgol welcomed with pleasure.

"Sorry. My manners... sometimes I get carried away... it's just that I didn't expect to see you."

"No formalities between us. I'm glad to see you too."

"You've grown. But you're very thin. Don't they feed you at the Camp?"

"I think I look the same," he said with a shrug.

"No way. That sharp face..." She looked him up and down. "Besides, you look tired."

“It’s been a long journey.”

“Come with me. I’ll prepare a feast so that you get your strength back.”

“Something hot will be enough.”

“Nonsense. How could that be enough? The master of the house is back, he must be treated like a king.”

Lasgol burst out laughing.

“I’ll take Trotter to the stable and come inside in a moment.”

“I can do it for you, master,” Martha said.

“He’s my steed. I always have to look after him.”

“A Ranger thing?”

Lasgol nodded. “A Ranger thing.”

“All right, then. I’ll get dinner ready. What a blessing!”

She ran off, and Lasgol could only smile.

After tending to Trotter and making sure that Camu would stay hidden until they were alone, he took a brief stroll round the estate. Everything was clean, tidy and in place. The garden was very well kept, even the vegetable patch, which in winter tended to be rather neglected.

He busied himself over Trotter. The good pony appreciated the grooming and the food. When Lasgol went into the house he noticed that the inside was even cleaner and better kept. Everything shone, and the tidiness was impressive.

“Everything’s really clean.”

“The least I could do! Order and cleanliness must always reign in my master Lasgol’s house.”

“What’s that wonderful smell?” Lasgol asked, a moment before his stomach began to rumble like a bear.

“Roast venison with herbs. One of my specialties.”

“Wonderful,” he said, and smacked his lips in anticipation. “I’ll just leave my satchel in my room and be straight back down.”

He persuaded Camu to stay playing in his room, and gave him some vegetables he was carrying in his satchel. The creature ate and fell asleep straight away, at ease and happy. Lasgol smiled at the picture; usually this was not the case at all. He went down to the kitchen, where Martha was busying herself preparing a delicious dinner.

“Sit down. I’ll serve you.”

“Mmm... it looks good.”

They dined and chatted for a long while. Martha wanted to know everything he had been doing this past year at the Camp. He told her almost everything, but did not reveal what they had found out about King Uthar. It was not that he did not trust her, but he did not want to put her in danger. The less she knew about that ugly business the better for her. She asked a thousand questions about the Rangers and about his comrades. He answered as best he could, without revealing too much about the Rangers, as this was forbidden.

During dessert – delicious curd with honey – he asked her about the war and how the village had survived.

“It was very hard. War always is,” Martha said. “Many good men died defending the kingdom of Norghana.”

“Many from the village?”

“Quite a few, yes. Do you remember those three bullies that were after you? Two of them haven’t come back yet, and the third lost a hand.”

“Oh... I’m sorry to hear that.”

“It’s very sad when the young perish.”

“Did Darthor’s forces get as far as the village?”

“They came close. There was a great battle in front of Count Malason’s castle. The Count had recruited all the grown men and boys of the county

villages for his own militia. He made it compulsory. And in that battle many lives were lost, too many of them. They say the Wild of the Ice are colossally big and strong, and as if that wasn't enough, they had terrifying beasts with them. Our men are miners, woodcutters, hunters, they're no rivals for those bloodthirsty beasts from the frozen continent."

Lasgol nodded. "I know..."

"We lost a lot of men. War is a curse. Always."

"I'm sorry for the village, for the families..."

"It could've been much worse. All of us might have died. We came close. If the battle had been lost, the county would have been laid waste and this village with it. Luckily the battle was won at the last moment with the help of the other Dukes and Counts of the West. The enemy withdrew northwards. They didn't come back."

"Did Duke Vigons-Olafstone take part?" Lasgol asked. He was curious to know what Egil's father had done.

Martha nodded repeatedly. "It was thanks to him that the battle was won, him and his two sons. A desperate charge by those brave young men saved the day. At least that's what people are saying."

"I see..."

"The King owes Duke Olafstone a lot. He really does."

Lasgol said nothing. He knew that the King and the Duke were rivals and that the King would not be in the least grateful for that victory. He also knew that the only reason for it was that the King had threatened to kill the sons of the Dukes and Counts who were reluctant to help him. Among them Egil. But he said nothing to Martha.

"War is terrible..." he lamented.

He would have given anything to stop the war, to prevent it from reaching the extremes it had reached, bringing death and destruction to Norghanians and Wild Ones alike. A war which could still break out afresh. Darthor's

troops had withdrawn to the Frozen Continent, but they were not destroyed: far from it. That was what Dolbarar had told them. The Rangers needed to be alert to any suspicious movements of the enemy. Lasgol was very much aware that he was only a Ranger's Apprentice who could do very little to stop a war, but he wished with all his heart that he could. And if the opportunity arose, no matter how unthinkable it might be, he would try to stop it.

"Very true. Do you want some apple pie? It's almost ready."

"Oh no, thanks. I can't manage anymore," he said, poking out his belly. "I'll burst if I swallow another bite."

"You needed it, you're just skin and bone. A few days with Martha and you'll have some flesh on your bones."

Lasgol laughed. "And I won't be able to move. You'll have to help me get up on Trotter."

She smiled. "I won't say it mightn't happen."

Both laughed.

They talked for a while longer, and finally Lasgol went up to bed. He was exhausted and his stomach was full. A deep healing sleep carried him away.

When he woke the following dawn he did not remember what he had dreamt, but it had been something pleasant. Martha was already waiting for him with a breakfast that would have fed four people. He tried to protest, but it was useless.

"I'll go and look in on Ulf. I'm looking forward to seeing him. I'd have gone yesterday, but I arrived too late for visits."

There was an odd silence. Martha went on cleaning and did not say anything.

"Is anything the matter?"

"You'd better go and speak with Limus..."

"Chief Gondar's assistant?"

"Yes..."