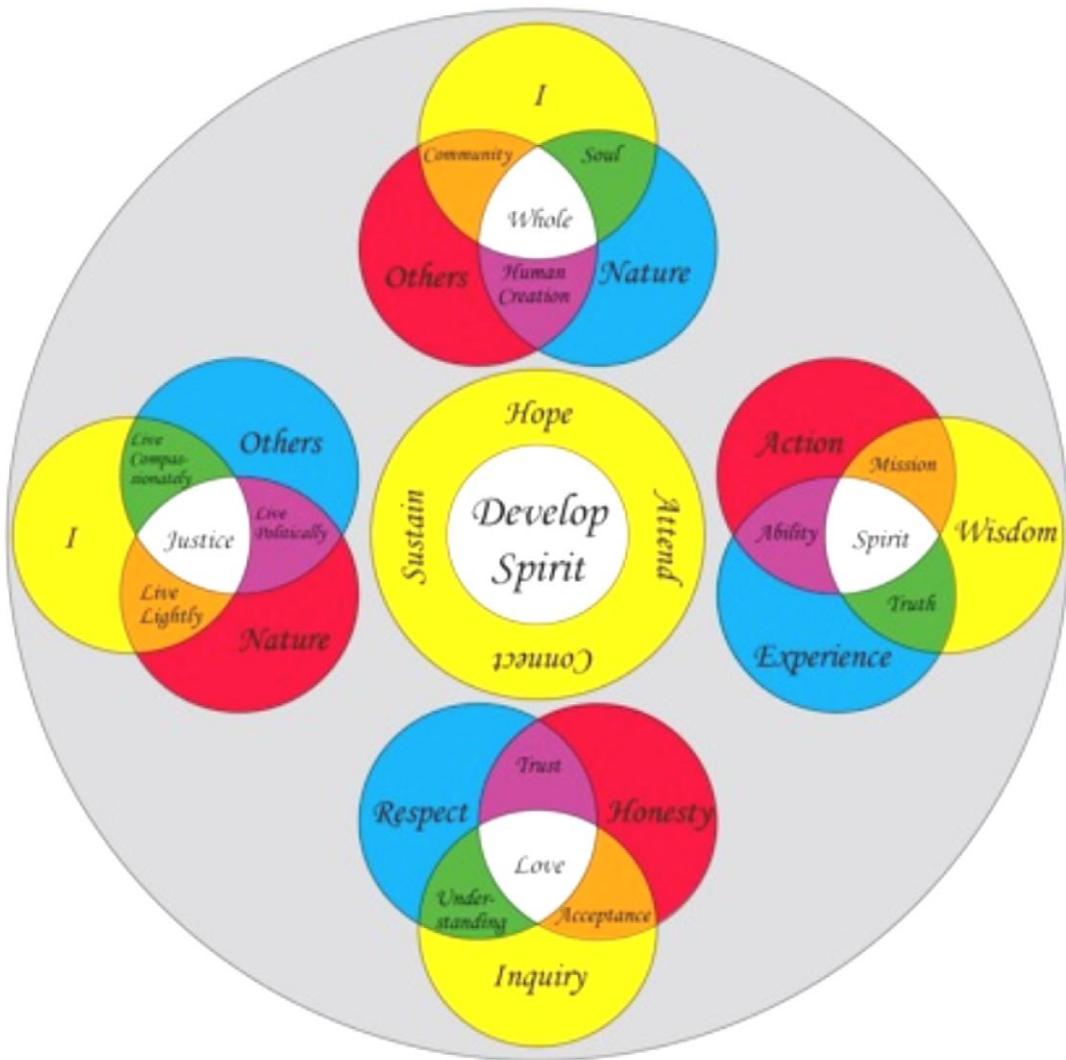


Rings of Heran



Tim Muirhead

TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

Finding the Rings

The original manuscript of what you are about to read turned up on a wild winter's beach in Australia's South West. It was in a casket, like a little treasure chest, half buried in the sand. I found it.

You don't believe me. You think I made it up. Ah now; perhaps you haven't been to the wild winter's beaches of the South West. Magic happens there. You can step, unknowingly, right into your soul so that the waves and wind and endless skies become a part of you and wash you clean. Giant whales leap lightly from the ocean, dolphins dance in symmetry on towering waves. Birds hover, exactly stationary, on buffeting winds. Receding waves leave glistening lines of silver on white sand. Great sculptures of water explode from the rocks and hang in the air, just for your joy. You can hold a handful of sand that, since the very beginning of the universe, no human hand has touched. And you won't even know.

Go there sometime. Step into your soul. You'll find magic. You may even, like me, find your own treasure. But if you don't, enjoy the waves. They are enough. The waves are enough.

My treasure, though, came in a language that has taken me over a decade to decipher. The language is not known to any linguists, though seems to have its roots primarily in the Aryan languages, yet with elements relating to Indigenous languages of all continents. Where "the Kingdom" is cannot be determined. I can't even verify that it really existed and that this entire manuscript isn't all an enormous hoax. But the words, as they emerged from the mists of an unknown language, gave me hope and strength in a troubled world. So, hoax or no hoax, I give you, here, my translation of the words written who-knows-when, in a Kingdom who-knows-where, by people who are little more than names on paper, but who must have been flesh and blood at one time, in some place.

It has become, for me, my own little bible. For you, may it take you deeper in your own journey through the experience of being human.

Tim Muirhead

BOOK 1
THE STABLE BOY'S JOURNEY

CHAPTER 1
The Ailing Kingdom

Once upon a time there was a land where magic was still known, but only to the few who chose to see. I knew this land. But if you are reading these words, you cannot have known it.

It was a glorious land. Its shores glistened white and grey and strong against the deepest oceans. The horizons flickered and glistened with the wings of dragons that flew between places unknown. Only the bravest seafarers had ever seen into the eyes of the dragons, and it was said to be the most wonderful and the most terrible experience of their lives. But this, as it turns out, is not a tale of seafarers.

The land that rose from the glistening shores was bright with colour and bustling with life. It held jungles dripping with growth and shadows, and patchwork fields swaying with the love of custodians' hands. It held forests and woods full of wonders to be found, and fairies and elves just out of eyeshot. It held red and glaring deserts, all silence and emptiness and hidden scamperings. It held high mountains, whose crowns were barren and whose feet were life itself.

The colours of the flowers, the flight of the birds, the chaos of the butterflies, the endless cycle of life and death; these were part of the magic, but they were not the magic.

The glowing of the moon and the power of the oceans, the searing sun and the soothing rain, the breezes and winds, the rivers and streams, the endless, endless, flow of life through the veins of tree and creature alike; these were part of the magic, but they were not the magic.

The magic could not reside alone in any corner, or jungle, sea or field. The magic sprang from every creature and every plant; every rock and pool of water. But only in the spaces and connections between them could the magic take hold. And alas, the magic was in danger. For division had begun to deplete the land, yet only few could see.

In the centre of this land was a high valley ringed by towering mountains, capped as white as the clouds, with hillsides of green and faraway blues. The ring of mountains was the great watershed of the land. Small rivers ran away in all directions. Within the ring, there had been, long ago a thousand brooks and a dozen streams that danced their way toward one, great swirling waterfall where the valley dropped away towards the lands below.

But, generations ago, the people of the valley had created a dam above the fall, and created a great lake, and on the shores of this lake now stood a busy, rushing smoking City, all straight lines and ingenuity and noise.

This City was a wondrous place - the culmination of all that the people had strived for

over the generations. The miracle of invention was alive and flourishing. The forces of nature were transcended by technologies that outshone the most powerful magic. The people were comfortable beyond the imaginings of their forbears. Humanity, it seemed, was in charge. Yet all was not well. I could see that. Some others could see it too.

The City itself and the land beyond were one Kingdom, governed by a King called Gabriel. He was of a long line of wise and loving monarchs, and the land was rich with their compassion.

There was mystery and love around the kings and queens. Some said that they were, in fact, the many faces of one, immortal lord. Others, that the one blood of truth and greatness simply flowed through their separate and newly born veins, one to the next. I paid this mystery no mind for, which ever, their reign was immortal, and the knowledge of past and future was in their bones.

But Gabriel, wise king that he was, was greatly troubled. For he could see that the people of his land were somehow faded, and the magic of his land was frayed. There was, in the City, much noise and clamour and activity, yet his people seemed lost.

Most did not know they were lost, so their confusion was turned inward and tangled as they tried to make sense of a world that they could not recognise. Or their confusion was turned outward and bitter as they sought to blame others for their entanglement. Their confusion, alas, was rarely allowed to sit and flower and grow truth as confusion should. It is such a gift, true confusion, yet few will take the time to see.

So the king was troubled. His reflections and his meditations, his readings and his calculations, his logic and his deepest thought could not ease his trouble, nor cast light on the decay that puzzled him.

In this state, he called in the wisest advisers of his court. I was there. Barely seen. But I was there.

He spoke: "Friends, I fear my kingdom is in disarray. I feel its pain, and yet cannot name it. What shall I do to make it whole once more?"

His advisers responded, one at a time, without question or interruption, as was their way.

The first adviser, a man of economics, said these words: "Lord, your people have fear in their hearts, that they may not know comfort in the future, and their children may live in poverty.

"But do not trouble yourself lord. We will manage the kingdom's wealth so that all will prosper. We may know painful years, but soon wealth will create itself and recreate itself, and your people will be happy once more."

"I am pleased", said the king, but it was clear that his heart remained silent and troubled.

The second adviser, a man of technology, said these words: "Lord your people are bored, and dissatisfied, for as the wealth of your kingdom flourishes their demands for entertainment and comforts grow ever greater.

"But do not trouble yourself, lord. Our ingenuity and technologies know no bounds. We are inventing machines for their entertainment, and mechanisms for their comfort. Nature recedes before us - the weather need not burden our bodies, nor silence nor stillness burden our soul.

"I am pleased", said the king, but his heart was still silent and troubled.

Other advisers followed: a man of social sciences, another of education, and then of politics, and then, of environmental studies. Each spoke of answers, and to each Gabriel replied, truthfully "I am pleased". But his heart remained silent and troubled.

And then the king turned to the seventh of his advisers whose name was Sophia. She was a young maiden, and shone with wisdom, and her hair poured like water. She had been chosen personally by the king - against the advice of other men - to speak of the future.

I have never forgotten young Sophia's words. Written here, they seem like a sermon. Yet coming from someone so young, and true, and pleasing to the eye, they seemed to draw out the knowledge of us who listened, rather than assuming us mute:

"Lord, your advisers are knowledgeable men. Their plans for renewal have truth within them, and will bring benefits. You must heed their words and take from them what is true. Yet, alone these plans cannot succeed. They speak of healing the branches of the tree, as the trunk decays from within.

"When we see the tree dying, shall we try to revive the leaves in one room, and the flowers in another; the branches and the roots and the bark all in separate rooms, and by separate means? What hope should we have of true healing, if we separate the parts of the tree in this way? And even if there were hope, what point the healing, if the tree is thus scattered?

"For the tree is one. The illness of each part is the illness of the whole, and the illness of the whole, becomes the illness of each part.

The King, with despair and hope, saw that this was so and said to Sophia: "You're words resonate, but what shall we call this illness, that eats at the whole and the parts?"

"Lord" she replied, "The Spirit of the people, and the Spirit of the land, is choking. It is like breath, this Spirit – the breath of life. And it is, for so many of your people, stifled, and they fear the emptiness of it. For when their Spirit is choked they become as a person drowning and choked of air.

"The drowning think of nothing but the next moment; thus do your people lose sight of the past, the present and the future. Thus to they lose sight of the deeper vision and wonder of living, and focus only on trivia.

"The drowning grasp at anything to help fill the choked and airless space inside; thus do

your people consume too greedily of natures' gifts, and seek desperately for greater wealth and more distractions.

"The drowning lash out at those who come near, and even as they seek help, they strike at those who would rescue them. Thus do your people strike at each other and put their own interests ahead of others, and see fear and enemies, where love and friends should dwell.

"Finally, lord, the drowning cease to care, surrendering to the loss of breath, this Spirit. Thus do your people finally choose apathy, and both passion and compassion die.

"Lord, your kingdom is awash with people drowning for lack of Spirit; of this deep Breath. Many still struggle. Some are able to call out. Most are agonising in silence - alone and resigned as a person drowning."

"As your people are choked of Spirit, as your animals and plants are choked of Spirit, so then the Spirit of the whole cannot breathe, and your kingdom will fade. God Itself - the Whole Spirit - feels the pain."

The king saw that this was true, and his heart was troubled, and he spoke aloud: "But how has it come to this?"

"Lord, your advisers, in truth have answered this question, and their answers are each a part of the whole, though not the whole itself. But deep in the answer is also a deeper truth - what is now is what we have chosen. And what is now is what must be.

"You have given your people great freedom. But the people must learn, sometimes painfully, how to make such freedom work for them, bringing joy to their lives rather than distraction and pain.

"And so, dear adviser", the king asked with growing anticipation, "tell me, how do we heal from this choked Spirit?" What programs shall I implement?"

Sophia's beautiful face grew sad then:

"What is now is what we have chosen. And what is now is what must be.

"For we have chosen freedom, which brings great gifts, but in so choosing we have also chosen separateness. And in separateness the branches of the trunk wither and die. So now, we must choose again what our future will be."

"So tell me what choices we must make".

"Lord, the answer to that is beyond my knowing. Perhaps the answer is within you, for the blood of immortality runs through you, or perhaps it is still deeper beyond. I have only a small gift to offer, handed down to me in silence by mothers' mothers. We have always known that the time would come when they could safely be handed to a king. That time, I feel, is now."

With this she took 3 rings - one from the hair of her head; one from her heart, and one from her hand. Plain, simple things they were, but the King's eyes widened like they were crusted diamond. "Take these three rings", young Sophia said "and wear them, lord, and

seek truth where you will."

The King thanked all of his advisers with a heavy heart, and bade them leave him. He was tired and confused, and he retired to bed in the hope of rest.

Rest would not come. It seemed the words of Sophia echoed in his heart. Yet he was angry with her. Some of us heard him in the night: "Who is she to name the question, and yet have no answer?" he railed at the stars. "What sort of adviser is it, that burdens her king with questions, but offers no solutions? The six, at least, offered solutions to the problems they saw. And yet this young woman, so soft of hair and gentle of eye, simply shattered the comfort of their words, and left the debris with me, littering my sleep and my peace."

"Tomorrow, she will be my adviser no longer. I was foolish to think that she had anything to offer". Finally, with that dark thought, the King went quiet; slept perhaps.

And he dreamed of answers; answers that he had always known, yet never spoken.

In his dream, the three rings of Sophia were brought to him on a velvet cushion, but they were laid in such a way that the three became seven, and all the colours of the rainbow were in them.

On seeing them the king's anger exploded, and he took the rings and threw them to the winds of the cyclone, but they dropped again to his feet. He scorched them with the fire of the volcano, but they flew out again, and fell to his feet. He hurled them to the depths of the oceans, yet the waves lightly carried them and, once again, they fell at his feet. He buried them deep in the earth and turned away, yet when he returned to his throne, the rings were there, and lay, still, at his feet.

And the three were seven, and all the colours of the rainbow were in them. The King was now wild and thoughtless with rage, and he grasped the rings, and threw them in anger at the cross that hung above his throne. But to his amazement, rather than falling to the ground, the three became twelve, and the seven became twenty eight. And rather than colours, words appeared; simple, familiar words.

He awoke with a start, just as the first light was appearing on the new day. And his heart, at last, was alive with hope. Gabriel, the king, had his answers.

Of course, I have only understood this dream through the retelling of the retelling of the King's retelling to entrusted ones. But what was said next I was there to witness.

As soon as the sun was over the horizon the king called Sophia to his court. "Sophia you are surely wise, and your rings are gold. They have brought to me a message of truth and hope; a message of such simplicity that the humblest servant can grasp its meaning, and the most arrogant politician can not deny it. Will you stand with me on the balcony when I deliver the message to my people?"

Sophia was pleased for the King and spoke in that gentle way of hers again: "Lord, I can see through the glow of your heart that you have heard truth - heard, indeed, the word

of God, and all who hear it will be enriched. But remember, lord, you can offer truth, but you cannot impose it. You can lead, but you cannot control.

"The kingdom will be renewed only if the people wish it so. The gift is yours to give. But the power of others to receive is not yours. The Spirit of the people cannot hear truth from above, only from within. The Spirit cannot truly be led from the throne or the pulpit. Words from above will speak to peoples' fear. For they will take them as rules that they are bound to follow, or bound to reject. Better by far that they hear the message from the little known edges of the kingdom. Then they will know that they have heard no more than words, no less than truth, and the words will speak to their hopes instead of their fears.

"Better that they can hear with their hearts, and know they are free to accept the words or ignore the words, as they choose. Then, truly, the words become powerful, for they are gifts of the Spirit, rather than weapons of the State; whisperings of the heart, rather than mere instructions of the intellect.

"But Sophia, for me to know, and not to speak, would be dishonest. Shall I manipulate my people in this way?"

"Lord, your dream is your truth, and therefore a part of the word of God. But it is not you alone who dream such dreams. The power of the Court that is vested in you makes you powerless in the hearts of men and women. They listen to you with their fear, or with their need. But it is only their own hearts that they can listen to with truth.

"Your kingdom needs more truth, not more laws. If you wish to lead, give space for people to hear truth, rather than cluttering them with certainties. Give space for truth, and let the message go where it will.

"Let go of authority my king. Do not to use that authority to make others listen. Truth will come from the edges. From the edges of experience. From the edges of consciousness. From the edges of conformity. From the Edges of your kingdom. Let the message spread, great Lord, and let it spread from the Edges, so that it may be truly heard.

And the king saw, once again, that Sophia was right. "But how shall I get the message to the Edges? What great person should I engage to be the courier of this sacred truth on the behalf of myself, King Gabriel?"

Sophia reflected: "You will need a messenger who can travel well, and can be trusted to go to the farthest and strangest corners of the Edges. You will need a messenger who people will listen to without fear or awe. You will need a messenger who will not seek to interpret the message through his search for power. You will need a messenger who has humility enough to know that his is not the only way, and so will listen to, rather than fear, the power of others.

"May I suggest the humble stable boy."

CHAPTER 2

Beyond the Ring of Mountains

The boy who was soon brought into the Court was simple and honest. He looked the king in the eye with a quiet nervousness that he made no effort to hide. The odour of sweat and straw and earth was upon him. His clothes were of the autumn, his hair a tangled shrub, his eyes a pond, undisturbed.

The king looked upon him with a powerful, gentle gaze, and smiled. "What is your name, boy?"

"Ajiras', sir"

"You are well named, for you have much to do, and far to go. I have a message of truth for my people. Yet I do not have the power to have it heard. So, Ajiras, you must carry it to the Edges for me. You must find the places where people are alive and open and do not insist on the main path. You must take it to people who will hear, and speak, and you must give them my message, and let the words spread as they will."

"But lord, I have hardly left the City walls, have never ridden for more than the daylight hours. How shall I ride far and fast enough to reach the Edges?"

And the king said, "you need only reach for the fire within you, and it will drive you forward"

"But lord, I am but a humble boy, with no title, and no bearing. Why will people listen to me?"

The king replied, "Speak the truth, and it will be heard by those in whom it dwells."

Ajiras remained uncertain, but held his silence, and so the King showed him the message. He showed him the three rings, and how three became seven, and how they shone with each colour of the rainbow. He showed him how to spread them around the cross, with the Call at the vortex, so that the three became twelve, and the seven became twenty eight. He told him the words that made beauty truth, and watched as the boy's eyes shone with recognition.

And the boy said "Lord, it is as if you have woken the sleeping dreams of my hope. You have given shape and voice to that which I could feel but never speak. You have awakened my own truth".

"Then take it to the Edges, Ajiras, so that all may hear. To help you in your travels and your speaking, let me pass on to you these three Rings, from which the message was born. Hold them safe and hold them lightly". The boy's eyes widened, just as the King's had, as he looked at the Rings and then back to the Kings smiling face.

"I will try to guard your Rings well"

With that, the king embraced the stable boy as a brother and laughed as, eyes still sparkling with recognition, the lad stumbled out of the court, staring at the rings, and

tripping over his own boots.

"My message is in good hands" he thought, and retired to carry on his duties.

I was in the court. I heard it myself. The journey, though, I have surmised, of course. I am a story teller. I listen to people tell the threads of their stories. And I draw those threads together into one long, lustrous yarn. But this story is more important than most, though Ajiras is long passed away. It is written for the few who choose to see. So listen. I will carry on.

The stable boy, Ajiras, was bursting and bubbling to begin his quest. But his experience as a Stable Boy called him first. He did, first, what must be done: did it with the ease and ability of one whose very heart knows each task.

He set about brushing down all the horses, and bidding them farewell. He fed each beast with their favourite grain, and swept their stable clean. He took those horses that needed new shoes to the Smith, who gave them the love of his skills with iron. He repaired the loose shingles in the roof, and the crooked boards that had started to let the winter's breeze blow through. He filled the trough with fresh water, and trimmed the dead leaves from the trees; the trees that shaded the horses in summer, let the sun warm them in the winter, and gave beauty to their eye.

As he did all this he took with him his dearest and most trusted friend, Gregory (a lad I knew myself), and he spoke in a babbling flow of quiet, clear words, explaining every task; how it was done, and what it meant to his beloved horses. As he spoke he could see in Gregory's eyes the light of love that he himself felt for these majestic beasts, and by nightfall knew that they would be well in his absence.

So he slept sound that night, and in the morning, saddled up the strongest, fleetest horse, bade farewell to his childhood home, and rode towards the first glimmers of light on the horizon.

The Mare he had chosen was called Sidreatha and the boy loved her most amongst the horses. He felt her solidness and purity; her freedom and her obedience.

Her obedience was that of one who knows her own power and her own joy. Unfailingly, she would obey the voice that is within and throughout; the voice that speaks, concurrently, of giving and receiving. Unfailingly, she would ignore the voice that is separate. She would obey as the sun obeys the grapes that ask to be ripened. She would obey as the oak obeys the soil that asks to be held through the winters' rains. She would obey as the butterfly obeys the flower that asks to be pollinated in the spring, or as the lung obeys the air, that asks to be breathed, and give life.

The main path to the Edges begins from the southern boundary of the City, dropping quickly out of the Ring of Mountains, then gently following the long winding curves of the River in a quiet, patient loop that kept away from the high and hostile places.

But by this path it takes many weeks to reach the Edges. Ajiras had long heard talk of a faster path to the Edges and the Ocean. Many travellers who came to the stables told stories and drew maps in the sand. "Why take the long slow journey around the kingdom" they would ask with a laugh in their voice, "when the Edges and Oceans are just across the mountains? ". Only later would Ajiras realise that these travellers had all arrived from their journey in early Spring. Only later would he realise that different seasons call for different actions, and offer different gifts. And summer was almost upon him. Such is the focus of youth.

So, propelled by the certainty of a great truth newly discovered, he headed directly for the Eastern Edge of the Valley. There the "Dawn Pass" lay beckoning nesting comfortably between the two great mountains that shaded the City each morning.

Only one person noticed him leaving. She stood at her window where every morning she greeted the dawn. Her skin and her hair and her eyes seemed aglow in the new sunshine and hope of early morning. "Ride well, young Ajiras, ride well. You carry the future with you".

But Ajiras did not hear Sophia's words, nor feel her stare. He was alive with the message, and the strength of the beast beneath him, and the lure of the jagged horizon ahead.

Ajiras and Sidreatha rode together with speed and purpose along the well worn path that had, for time unknown, carried City Dwellers out of the valley and into the rich lands that lay beyond. Their passion was alive, and they saw each bright flower, each green and budding leaf, heard the song of birds and the shuffling of the creatures, smelt the decay and growth of the forests on the hillsides as though for the first time. Every element of life seemed an un-imagined miracle, and they were awash with nature's fullness, as each detail sang of the beauty of the whole.

They reached the pass, patched white with remnants of the winter's snow, by mid - afternoon. Standing together, clouds for breath, they looked silently back into the Valley. The boy's memory and his comfort rested gently in that valley, and he grieved silently. Yet his very grieving gave him pleasure. For although his memory and comfort were there, they hummed to the rhythm of his heart that, already, was bounding on toward the Edges.

As Ajiras reflected, Sidreatha simply stood and waited; her being, her moment, her past and her future, complete.

At last the boy walked over the small final rise of the pass and into the valley beyond. He mounted the mare and rode her effortlessly downward toward the rich fields of the central lowlands.

That night Ajiras and Sidreatha camped by a dancing brook that ran through a small wood. The fruits and grains of the wood fed them well, the ground was soft and the air was soothing. Ajiras made a small fire, and stared into its flames, holding and playing with the Rings that the King had given him, and pondering on the powerful message of the Rings. And there, staring at the flames, he fell to sleeping. The moon was full, and the boy slept fitfully, yet heard nothing of the strange happenings that befell him that night.....

Just as the last ember turned grey and cold a strange, rasping creature crept into the small clearing where Ajiras slept. He did not hear its ugly snorts and grunts, or smell its foul breath, or see its distorted and hateful face, except, perhaps, in his dreams.

People of the Kingdom would know, though you, my unknown reader, may not: he was visited, by a Dubat; a creature little seen yet much loathed at that time.

Dubats, when seen, are gangly, stooped, smooth-skinned creatures who thrive in the tangled undergrowth of these slopes just beyond the mountain passes. They are, in their way, entirely like humans, and often pass un-noticed even when they are seen. But they feed on the energy of those who are choked of Spirit. When these people cry for breath, the Dubats are at the ready, giving all manner of promises and dreams, delusions and distractions to fill the space where the Spirit should be. At the same time they draw on the remaining energy of these people, and feed from their bitterness.

Many in the Kingdom thought their powers of magic strong and startling. But they are not; their powers of trickery are small but vicious. They cannot dispel truth, nor sway courage. Rather, their powers merely niggle at the fears and doubts of people who are lost yet dare not ask the way. Human emptiness is their food, and human Spirit their demise. The great emptiness of the people that troubled the king was the very stuff of life for the Dubats, who found, in that emptiness, ample space to crawl and thrive. They were able to use their dribbling skerricks of mouldering magic to penetrate and expand the cracks of lives lived in fear, and thus keep their food source ever growing.

And so, on this night of the full moon, a Dubat skulked invisibly into the clearing where Ajiras lay sleeping, and listened to his dreams.

He saw it all - the circles, the cross, the colours and the words, the three and the seven, the twelve and the twenty eight. But he saw more than this; he saw truth and simplicity that touched the heart. It shone like a light that all had seen yet never named; shone sharp like a flame that was pure and bright enough to re-ignite the human Spirit of all who heard.

And so, thought the Dubat, it must be stopped.

Grunting and frowning, pacing and worrying, sweating and exhaling his foul breath, the Dubat pondered on a spell that could combat such pure and shining truth. What doubts and fears could penetrate the simplicity of a truth that all could see?

Scratching and biting at his skin and nails he could not see and could not see a way through. So he stood, invisibly as Dubats will, and stared at the boy, looking for the weakness in his dream, but seeing none.

"But it must be stopped and it must be stopped, and the Spirit must never hear" he chanted to himself, staring at the face of the boy; staring and feeling for the trouble that ran up and down his spine and in and around his heart. And suddenly the answer came - came in the sight of an anxious frown and a troubled tightening of the arms and legs. He saw, in the boy, not doubt in his message, but doubt in his self. **There** was the tangle of fear that he could crawl through and work his magic. All he had to do was erase the memory - not of the word itself, but of the source of the word.

He skulked forward and took the golden rings from the boy's hand. And then he cast his spell:

*"You who shovel shit and straw and sleep with bridled beasts
You who chew on hunted fowl and cower before the very least
of men and women, serfs and slaves, sinners, serpents, cheats;
why would you be chosen by a king?"*

*What arrogance and filthy hope could ever put this myth inside
your foolish, empty, worthless head; what devil works so hard to hide
the fact that you were never called, but simply dreamed, to feed your pride,
the words within the rings.*

*No king would call a stable boy; less trust him with a sacred truth!
For who would listen to such a lad: unwashed, untried, unlearned, uncouth?
Who would listen? Who would see? Where would be your certain proof
of the words within the rings?*

*Forget this dream my little child. Hold your thoughts inside and quiet.
No one need know the blasphemy that took you in this darkening night.
For kings and wiser men would speak if there were truth or even light
in the words within the rings, dear child. Leave words within the rings.*

*Leave them be and leave them be;
leave them be to fade, to fade
Leave them be to fade.*

And the Dubat crept out of the clearing silent and invisible; scratching and biting no longer at his skin, but smashing and crashing at the trees in joy. For his power had won, and the Spirit of another, he saw, was choked.

With glee, he threw the rings he had stolen far into the tangled undergrowth of a deep ravine.

CHAPTER 3

Through the Emptiness

The boy woke in the morning and looked out in wonder on the glories of the morning forest. The finest dew drops reflected the fullness and colours of the early sunshine; webs of spiders laced themselves across drooping fronds of opening ferns; a tiny squirrel scampered along her path, stopped, stared a question at the boy, and then darted up to the tree-tops to continue on her way.

The world was rich, and his heart was filled with power. He thought of the rings. The rings and the gentle self-evident truth that they held for him. His heart soared. But then, as suddenly, it plummeted from excitement to anxiety.

"What am I doing here, on this strange mission? Who am I to tell others how to live their lives? What can have possessed me to set out for the Edges, to tell people what, in their hearts, they already know, or choose to ignore?"

"What cruel curse has been put on me, that I should pursue this madness? How people would laugh and scorn me when I open my mouth to speak - me a mere stable boy presuming to speak of life itself!

"I must return to my duties, bow before my masters and my horses, and seek their forgiveness for my flight to foolishness."

As soon as his beloved horses came to mind, of course, he thought of Sidreatha. She had wandered off, perhaps in search of grain. He called her name, but to his surprise, she did not return.

So he stood and walked in search of her. Sometimes, the prints of her powerful hooves were clear in the sand. Yet where they came to water, or rock, or tangled scrub, he lost her, and had to walk in random circles until, once again, he found her marks.

After some searching he found her, grazing on grasses in a small, fenced garden within a thicket of tangled shrubs. The gate was open, and the grass within the yard was green and long. Behind her there was a remarkable, tiny cottage, old and crooked and tumble down, but with warm smoke from the chimney, and soft light from the tiny, sparkling windows.

"Sidreatha" the boy called in a loud whisper, not wanting to disturb the occupants of this strange little house. "Sidreatha". The mare did not respond, but stood quietly grazing. The boy was confused; Sidreatha never ignored the call of another.

He went closer, trying to keep to the shadows of the trees. "Sidreatha; come, we must return to the City quickly. My masters, and your brothers and sisters will see I'm gone, and be angry."

The horse continued to graze. And so the boy moved closer; crept quietly along the muddy path to the gate of the yard, and walked through and up to the horse. "Sidreatha! Come! Now! We must return to the City". But the mare's only response was to glance briefly at him without acknowledgment, and drop her great head to the ground

once more. As her head dropped there was another that took its place, with a gaze of piercing clarity, in Ajiras' line of vision.

It was an old and wizened face lined with stories and the hair matted with unkempt age. Teeth were missing, and there was straggly down on the chin. It was the face of a woman - a Gnomish woman. Her clothes were a rainbow of rags, and around her neck and arms she wore all manner of stones, strung together in a rattling, clattering, clattering noise.

"Headed for the Edges, I see" said the old woman in a voice that sounded like the crunching of fallen leaves in Autumn. The boy's eyes fell to the ground; he was both startled at her in-sight, and embarrassed at his secret exposed.

"I was", he mumbled, knowing he could not hide the truth from a Gnome of such age and knowledge, "but I see I've been foolish and I must return to the City"

"In your foolishness is truth" the woman replied. Gnomes, whose only job is to guard treasures, have no use for formalities and politeness. "The light of the Edges is in your eyes, and it cannot now be extinguished. You are destined to follow it, and follow it you will"

"But I have set out on a fool's quest. I carry high ideas of great truths. Yet such is not the work of a stable boy. I am embarrassed by my arrogance."

"Child, arrogance and foolishness cannot survive with humility, and your humility is strong. To know one's purpose and desire is not arrogant. In humility you offer your truth as a gift. Only in arrogance will you turn it to a command. I know little of truths, and yours is for the Edges. But I can read hearts, child, as I must to guard treasures. And I know noble humility when I see it in the heart. And I know the flame of purpose when I see it in the Spirit. Travel on."

"But old mother, I am no longer sure of my purpose - so how can I be sure of my destination?"

"You cannot. No-one can. But turn toward the Edges child, and feel the Spirit flare. And turn towards the City, and feel it flicker and choke away. The Spirit will guide you forward. Follow it. The Edges may not be your destination, but they are, on this day, your direction. Later, the Spirit may bid you turn away. If it does - again, follow it. "

Ajiras could feel the truth in the old Gnome's words, and the flame was indeed strong. "I will go, but there is doubt in my heart"

"Haa!!" she screeched. "More than doubt, child; deeper and more powerful than doubt. Confusion!. Wonderful magical confusion. So much that is new is pouring into your heart. And you are too courageous to hide behind illusions of certainty. Let confusion bubble and boil and do its toil. Wander in your wisdom and you will, when time allows, find pathways in the tangled labyrinth of your experience. Let your confusion be, and let it embrace the doubt. And while the confusion is doing its work, let the Spirit lead. Go!"

And with that Sidreatha raised her head, and stared expectantly at the boy, and whinnied impatiently, so that the boy thought no more, but leapt to her back, and bent to whisper in her ear: "To the Edges".

She sprang away from the yard like an arrow, so that when the boy turned to wave to the old mother Gnome, she and her cottage were lost in the tangled shadows of the forest. He turned forward again, to the wind and the leaves brushing at his hair, and the sunshine beaming low through the trees, and to the flame flaring in his heart. "To the Edges" he shouted to the earth and the air. "To the Edges". And the shout filled the forest and the sky and echoed back to him in the roar of the waterfall, and the sigh of the wind, and the sound of a thousand birdsongs.

And Sidreatha galloped forward like the wild beast that she was.

Together they travelled on, all that day and the next, and a third beyond. The low rolling hills that they were in held many villages. The people there, unlike those in the City, went about their lives steadily. But there was little joy in their step and a weight seemed to press on the shoulders of many. Their eyes were suspicious of this stranger, and with a glance they willed him on his way and he, for his part, was pleased to oblige.

Each evening he camped in any inviting glade or field that he could find, and the land fed both him and Sidreatha well. Each night the moon would rise a little later, and a little smaller, and the darkness that doused the blazing sunsets grew longer and deeper.

On the fourth day after he had left the mother Gnome's garden the land began to grow drier, the houses and villages further apart. Leaves underfoot crackled and broke, and the sun shone fiercer. That night the boy and the horse kept walking until after nightfall in the hope of finding greater nourishment. But eventually they stopped and camped by a creek-bed that held no water, by fields that held no grain. What animals or fruit may be in the trees and shrubs were hidden to Ajiras' eye, and, for the first time both he and Sidreatha went to sleep with hunger in their belly. The darkness was yet longer and deeper, the trees and distant hills only an emptiness in the rich blazing star-mist of the sky.

When Ajiras woke the next morning the pale shrinking moon was cowering from the dawn. His hunger was a stab. Sidreatha stood as still as ice.

The boy lay still for many minutes, trying not to listen to the niggling trouble that grabbed at his heart. Finally, unable to rid his heart of the worry, he sat up to stretch his tense muscles, and there, not six paces from him, was an old man, crouching, staring, chewing. His skin was black and lined with age. His face was broad, and his eyes were gentle.

"Don't be in too much of a rush, boy".

Ajiras, first scared, was slightly calmed by the soft voice. "I am going to the Edges, old father, and have things to say there, and words that must be heard."

"But to reach the Edges you face great hardship. Do not rush. You'll reach your destinations when destiny allows."

With these words, the old man moved quietly through the trees that shaded the river bed, digging at the earth, scratching at bark, lifting fallen branches, and shaking low lying shrubs. He dug a hole in the dry bed of the river, drew water in a small bark scoop and

poured it into a bag of skin.

He came over to Ajiras and laid a motley but generous mound of nourishment at his side. Grubs, leaves, tiny berries and seed, all manner of grass heads, and the bag of water.

"Foods of the desert", he said, with reverence. And as he said it, he gave a slight bow towards the wretched mound, as though in gratitude.

But Ajiras did not reach for the food. He was a child of the City. Instead he spoke:

"Old father, I am filled with doubts. Yesterday I was certain of my destiny, today I am tired and unsure. Yet I have been told to travel toward the Edges, and a flame leads me there, so I must follow".

"Yes; you are tired and unsure. Your body calls for rest and reflection. Listen. Your body is wise. . There is great hardship ahead of you, and you must rest to prepare. And eat." His eyes fell once more to the food.

"Old father, you are kind, but these are not the foods I crave. I am more suited to lush fare. Thank you for your thoughts, but I will go back to the nearby forests and choose the food that is known to me."

"Then you will not reach the Edges, child". And he stared straight ahead, looking out toward the distant horizon glowing red. The stable boy followed his gaze, and his eyes became wide as he looked into a distance that he had never imagined. The horizon beyond the dry river bed was flat as though drawn with the finest rule. And around that fine line the colours of earth and sky blended as one into a blazing red. And for the first time in the boy's life, he saw the anger in those early rays of sun - saw a power that might scorch his being, even as, in other places it softly dried the dew drops from the finest web.

Fear filled his heart, for this land was unknown to him. But even greater than this he feared his fear - for this, he thought, could turn him away from his quest. The flame still burned, but fear blew at it. If he turned back now the flame, the truth, and the passion would be lost, and his journey would crumble, again, to humiliation

"NO!" he cried. "I will not be turned away. Sidreatha, we must go now!"

"Wait, child. Rest, and let me teach you the ways of the Emptiness, for you cannot survive alone. Listen to your fear, child. Listen to your fear and it will guide you. Ignore it, and it will haunt you like a ghost that has not been heard. Your fear speaks of consequences. Listen, so that you can know how to move forward."

"But if I surrender to my fear it will enslave me"

"So do not surrender child. Listen"

Again "NO!". And he gathered up the food and water that the old man had collected, jumped to Sidreatha's powerful back, and urged the horse eastward.

Momentarily she hesitated. The old man looked on, sad but calm.

"So. It must be so".

These were the last words the boy heard from him as Sidreatha bolted toward the sun.

Within minutes the sweat glistened on Sidreatha's coat, and white froth flew to the wind. The boy felt the heat of the day although his shadow was still long behind him. He realised that they must slow, or Sidreatha would not last. He slowed the mare to a canter, and then to a walk, and they travelled steadily on across that endless void. How far they travelled he could not tell. There were no trees or hills or buildings to mark the distance. The world was sheer emptiness. A great dome of blue met the ground in a simple never-changing circle - an endless floor of red sand and stones, dotted sparsely with dry, sharp leaved grasses, and not a creature to be seen.

He ate sparingly of the food that the old man had given him, and sipped only a mouthful of the water at a time. Yet still, at the end of the second day, it was gone. He had offered both food and water to Sidreatha, but she refused, chewing, instead, on the wretched plants that clung low to the desert floor. On the third morning hope visited him briefly. He saw, ahead, a strange city of thin houses; welcome structures against the endless blue sky. But as they neared the structures, his heart was struck low once again. They were merely twisted towers of earth, as though the desert floor had spat its sand angrily toward the sky, only to have it frozen in punishment.

Frustrated, he kicked at these strange structures and his kicking revealed that they were made by the tiniest of ants who were alive with industry and busy-ness, These creatures were thriving in this place of death, and the stable boy, in his desperate weakness, hated them for it.

He was near defeat. Death and hopelessness seemed upon him. He had been walking alongside Sidreatha, hoping to conserve the energy of the mare, but now he could walk no more. His Spirit was struck low and his body had no nourishment to move it forward. He used his last strength to climb on to the loyal mare's back, and there he slumped helplessly, deserted by hope.

The line between thoughts and dreams was lost. He saw rocks pass beneath him and the horizon rocking gently as he moved along. The rings hovered around in his head, and he grasped at them to find safety. But they only taunted him. One of the rings became the whole horizon - this circle of death that he was in. Then it began to shrink and choke him, tightening around his throat so that he could not speak. Another grasped tight around his chest so that he could not breathe, and another his hands so that he could not save or feed himself. The colours of the rings mixed and faded and baked pale, until there was only the red of the earth and the blue of the sky, and he looked at his own body and clothing and they were melting to the red of the earth and the blue of the sky and he was becoming one with them, and he slowly saw, in the terrible infinite silence that this is how it must be. Finally he resigned himself to the blue and the red and wanted only to be a part of them. He wanted to call to Sidreatha to leave him here and go on alone but he had no voice. He opened his eyes to pull at the horses mane but as he did so he realised

that Sidreatha had stopped. "Thankyou, dear friend" he mouthed, readying to slip his body to its final rest. "Go well, and when you find the world of creatures once again, think of my Spirit" With that he made one last effort and threw himself to the ground, where he was shocked to find himself wrapped in coolness and liquid and soft mud. It got into his gut and he coughed and spluttered and choked and laughed and looked up at Sidreatha with wide, delighted, confused eyes.

"Dear mare, how did you find this place?". He could see, around him, not just a small, muddy water hole, but also some short, grey-green trees that shaded the ground and offered him life once again. He drank from the waterhole, and, in the long shadows of the setting sun, slept where he lay in the damp mud. He slept so deep that he might not have existed for that whole night. When he woke in the morning and searched his memory, the night was but a deep, dark nothingness. And in its nothingness he felt, briefly, whole.

That morning, more good fortune befell him. A small lizard came to drink at the waterhole. The boy lay still watching it. Then slowly, carefully, noiselessly he brought himself up to his haunches and, when the lizard began to drink the liquid, he sprang, grabbed the poor creature, and broke its neck with a single chop of his hand, just as he had seen his grandfather do on outings beyond the city bounds. Such was his hunger that he immediately bit at the belly of the dead lizard, chewing greedily at the flesh that lay beneath the cool skin. He offered no prayer, nor thanks.

For an hour more he rested and hoped for more game to arrive, but none did. Worse, he saw from the stains in the sand that the little waterhole was growing rapidly smaller. He was going to have to move from this place; it offered only temporary reprieve from the emptiness. But he was still exhausted, and fell to a fitful sleep and, again, dreamed of the rings, but they were in disarray.

In the morning he spoke sternly to himself. "I have come by great knowledge. I must use this knowledge to guide me out of this silent place of emptiness." Drawing the rings in the sand, he strived to create solutions. He saw, there, the points of the compass. He saw the three and the twelve. He saw how he could visit all the points of the compass, yet by a triangular course that would reveal more of this strange place.

"I think I see the way" he thought to himself. "I have come from the west, and know that I cannot return, for I do not have the food that I had before. So the rings of the west are done. But the vortexes of the Trinities form, with the vortex of the Call, four great diamonds, and these must be the way to my salvation. Now I must go to the East, following the way of the circles' centres; a day out, a day across, and, if I find no food and water a day back to my waterhole here. Then I must do the same to the South, and then, if need be to the north.

He saw the geometric beauty of the plan, and this told him that it must be right. So he filled his leather bag with water, and set off with Sidreatha once again.

For three days he rode to the East, and across the horizon, and back. And he found nothing but emptiness.

For three days he rode out to the south and across and back, and another three days in the north. And he found nothing but emptiness.

Between his journeys to the east and the north and the south he drank water from the ever shrinking waterhole, and he waited for more creatures to drink, but none came. He dreamed of the rings when he slept, but still they were scattered, randomly and uselessly on the lifeless sand of the desert floor.

And so, on his twelfth evening in the desert, when no moon graced the night, his optimism was lost. Once again, he gave in to the power of the world around him, once again understood that he must melt into the red of the earth and the blue of the skies. As he drifted to sleep, he felt his smallness, and was one with the tiny ants and the blades of grass in the desert. Then he felt himself boundless, no longer constrained by his skin, and his Spirit was afloat across the desert and the endless star-filled sky that had breathed life into his soul in these last evenings. So he knew, at last, he could return home to this infinite web of glory that he had come from and must now go to.

Finally the darkness of a dreamless, endless sleep was upon him, and he felt a freedom that life had never offered.

Yet, come morning, he woke. And gradually he recognised, in his waking, the voice of the old man who had bid him stay, chanting high and rhythmic.

*Little brother, little brother, let the dreaming now return
Let the stars shine on your heart and let the flame inside you burn
Let the breezes of the sky and the earth of sand and stone
become once more a part of you, and be no more alone.*

*Little brother, little brother, let the waking now begin
Let the tree within you sway and let the bird within you sing
Let the sun within you rise and the river in you flow
to the places you belong to, where the Spirit loves to go.*

Over and over the old man chanted his song, so that the boy, as he slowly surfaced towards consciousness, felt like he'd been listening to it forever, yet only now begun to hear.

Finally he sat up. The old man was with him once again crouching, staring, and chanting slow and high.

When he saw the boy rise he stood up from his haunches and walked a few paces this way, a few paces that. He picked some spindly grasses, dug at some barren sand, turned some useless rocks, and presented Ajiras, once again, with a mound of food, and once again he graced it with a small bow of gratitude. Food had never tasted so good to the starving boy.

"Old father, I am grateful. This land is cruel, and chooses death before life. I thought I saw a message on how to cross it, but the message failed me."

The Old Man gazed at the horizon as he replied. "It is hard to listen when you're heart is filled with fear and death. This land chooses life in many forms. The Emptiness is rich when you learn to listen to its silence. It holds nourishment, but the songs that will lead you there are sung in whispers"

"But old father, I have been shown signs of great truth, and yet they could not lead me across the desert". He drew the 12 rings in the sand - the flower of truth that shone in his heart, and explained to the old man how he had used their shape to guide his explorations.

The old man smiled. "How many are there, child?. But look again and you see the 7 - look again and you see the 28. What magical Rings! Look again and you see 7 multiplied once, and again, and again and again, and the 2401 appears, and brings you back to the 7. What magical rings! The The 3, the 12 speak of separateness, the 7 and the 28 speak of connection. The 2401 speaks of the whole. What magical Rings!"

The Old Man's words held a stinging edge. But he softened. "These are just circles and words child. These truths cannot guide us in the Emptiness. Here we must listen to the small, quiet voices, the whispering Spirits, the wisdom within. Our own way, in the Emptiness, is our own. And the right path across the Emptiness, like the right path to the mountain top is rarely straight.

"The pathways of the Emptiness are found in songs and poems that are whispered in breezes and written in sand. You cannot plan your way, and the paths and maps of others will not guide you. But if you listen to the Emptiness, and love its harshness and give thanks for its gifts, it will treat you well. "

With that the old man stood, and began to sing to himself, and set off toward the horizon. And the boy and the mare, having no alternative but death, chose to follow.

Day after day they wandered the Emptiness together. The boy never rode the mare, for the pace of the old man was slow and patient. Their journey took them in all directions, and the boy could not discern any sense in their path, except that his stomach was full and his throat was never dry. Every day, the colours were of ochre and blue, and yet, as he began to see the emptiness, he could see its vividness and endless variety. The world changed shape many times, from unending flatness to sharp cracked mountains.

Occasionally, in the shade of a jagged cliff, the three of them would stop by a dank, cool place of mud and moisture, with mosses and lichen that seemed, to the boy, like the most glorious forest. At these places the boy would strip himself naked and roll in the wet, dark mud, and suck at the mosses. And afterward he would lay on his back, still naked and open to the sky and trusting. He reveled in the dirt and the wetness. It somehow brought him closer to the soul of this vast Emptiness that he was in. He could feel something mysterious move within him that he could not name.

Gradually Ajiras recognised, even in the most barren parts of the Emptiness, not desert but garden. The old man gathered plants and insects and grubs and water as though they were placed for his taking. Some he cooked on fire. Some crushed and baked in the sun,

or pasted with water. Some he offered straight from the bush. But always he offered thanks for their existence, and thanks for their death.

The simple, vivid lines of the desert, and the confident colours, so few in number and so strong in depth, drew Ajiras into the soul of the Emptiness, and washed him clean.

The moon grew slowly full again, and again slowly disappeared. And the old man said little, so that sometimes it was as though he was simply a mirage - an imagining that the boy held in his heart. A few times, when they were sitting for the evening, the boy tried to fill time by putting words to his Rings. But the old man seemed disinterested. On the last time the boy tried to elicit his opinion about the rightness of the words. His reply was short.

"I do not care for words. I see they are pure, and in your heart, and so they are good. They must be spoken, and heard, and spoken again. But I am of the Emptiness, and do not care for words." That was all.

On the twenty eighth day, as light crept over the moonless sky, the old man stared into the boys eyes longer than he ever had before. "Today you return to places of things and structures. Destinations will lead you once more. But remember these forty days, child. Keep the whispered songs of the Emptiness in your heart"

They walked East, and a blue mountain range slowly rose out of the flat red Emptiness. As they approached, the boy could see that the mountains rose in massive cliffs, seemingly impassable. Briefly, the boy felt fear again; was his journey from the Emptiness to be blocked by these towering walls? But as he drew closer he noticed a thin splinter of light in the face of the cliff, and walked towards it. Slowly it revealed itself as a deep, narrow chasm. Its floor was no higher than the Emptiness behind, but its walls rose, shaded and straight, to the tops of the range, and the sky smiled above.

At the far end of the chasm, not a thousand paces distant, the boy could see trees, and shrubs. On a distant hillside, miraculously, a small low fence marked the landscape, separating it, one side from the other.

His heart was filled with the joy and sadness of homecoming. He saw that he must now emerge from the anonymous silence that the Emptiness offered, and be again amongst men and women. The thought filled him with dread and excitement and resolve. He had, once again, a purpose in his heart.

He turned to speak his thoughts to his old companion. But he was not there.

He stared for one last time at the simple beauty of the Emptiness, yearning for its random songs even as he yearned for the destinations of lush lands. He thought back on his forty days there - twelve days of death; twenty eight of whispered songs and random beauty, and he saw that they had opened new parts of his wisdom, how they had left his spirit silent and waiting, ready to be re-enchanted with new awakenings.

His reverie was broken by Sidreatha who whinnied softly, and he turned to walk through this massive gateway from the Emptiness to the Edges.

The floor of the gateway was as stony and sandy as the desert, and flat. But the boy stared in awe at the walls, felt the coolness of their shade as though it was a deep pool, and listened to the echo of his footsteps and breathing, and the rustle of his clothes. And he heard Sidreatha's echo the same.

His time in the emptiness had made his senses sharp and grateful; he experienced this simple, narrow world in its full glory, and surged on and through to find more.

At the end of the chasm the world spread before him in rolling hills, with trees for shade, and berries for food. He followed the dry creek bed that led from the chasm. Before the sun was low he had reached a place where the creek bed crossed over a small rockfall, and at the base was a pool, dark and deep. He threw himself in carelessly, and splashed with glee. Every droplet on his body was a sweet caress.

Sidreatha sniffed at the water, then drank heartily, and watched her stable boy with a patient eye.

CHAPTER 4

The Edges

They camped by the pool that night, and next morning continued to follow the creek bed. By noon it was a dancing brook; by mid-afternoon an eddying stream, and, just before nightfall, it joined with a swirling flowing river. Alongside the river was a rutted, well used track. Again the boy camped, this time soothed by the sound of flowing water.

The next morning he was woken by the sound of voices; the high musical lilt of the Edgelings. Of course Ajiras had seen Edgelings before. They came to the City often in those days sometimes to speak with the king and his advisers about the Edges and their well-being, sometimes to barter and trade. Though they come less today, they are well known as a Spirited people. They bow to no-one and are greeted by most City folk and central lowlanders with a touch of fear. There is much laughter and fire in them, and they are rarely silent. They make their own entertainment, though most in the City, and I am one, feel that it is of a sort that no civilised person would join in.

The Edgelings whose voices woke him that day were typically tall, and dressed in wild and wayward clothes of clashing colours. And he was struck, after the gentleness of the old father who had led him through the emptiness, by the fire and sharpness of their eyes. He sat up as they passed, and stared at their backs as they waltzed along the track.

Suddenly, though, there was a voice of another approaching him and he turned to see her, angular and thin and full of spring in her step.

She was surprised to see him. 'Now what and which and what again would a City boy be doing here, dossed down all doefully and doddle-eyed in the uplands of the Edges? Where have you come from child we wonder and worry and wander about?'

'I have come from the City, madam', Ajiras replied tentatively.

'No madam, child, but Lemma. And I am not blind or batty or blunt, sweet citified sir, so I can see with an eye diddle diddle that the City's in you and never will leave. But how did

you reach this very right now and right about here spot, and why, I'm wondering, why?'

'I came through the Emptiness. I came because I have a message that must be spoken, and I feel that only the Edgelings can hear.'

The woman sparkled and laughed. 'Well it's long ago and far away since a City boy sought to confound and astound, and riddle me riddle me re. So I retire and yield and fall down dead; what mean you by the Emptiness?'

'It is a great dry place, with no water and no food to see, unless you know the hiding places of darkness and shadow and dust.'

For the first time the woman's brow creased. 'The Plain of Fire? You tell me, and lead me and hope that I heed thee that you have crossed the plain of fire without the waters of winter? Child of the baffling and boring, I love a riddle but I hate a lie, so tell me the honest and nothing-but truth. Where do you come from? Where do you go?'

'Good woman, I would not lie. I have come across the Emptiness. I was guided and fed by a wise and kind old father, who led me to a great chasm and I have followed the stream of that chasm to this very place'.

'Goodnessly graciously, mercily me. I have heard tall tales and few of the old man of the fire. Let me see your deepest eyes, lad. Is this the truth?'

'The truth, on the life of the king'

'Well that would not be a long live the lollipop sort of promisey pledge around here, but I know for you City folk that tells of the truth. So, amazed and re-phrased let me ask in refrain - why and why and why again?'

'I have a message in me, and I have come to the Edges to speak it, for only here will people hear.'

'The boy puns at least, but speaks not a word of sensible serious sanity. What message from a City boy would we wild and woolly Edgelings seek, except perhaps some news of your ever changing tyrannical toys.'

The boy, suddenly shamed, looked at the ground. 'Good woman, I have tried to hide that question in the pit of my stomach for my entire journey. All I know is that I have had a fire in my heart that leads me to the Edges, and bids me take my truth. I hope the message will have the power to overcome my fears, and your cynicism.'

'Well truth to tell and tell it square, we Edgelings are not ones for listening. We go about our business with a laugh and giggle, and we let the world drift by. Hard to say, even for a wild and wily Edgeling, but I think you came through the Gates of Fire for wastily, nothingly, emptily nil. Still, join me on my meandering way, and bring your farting and furcoated friend, and I will show you giggles and sighs. You shall have skittles and cheer after your great ordeal. By the time we part, your message will be a lot of old letters, free adrift on the wind.'

With a heavy heart the boy stood, and walked on with the bright babbling woman, and wondered what had made him think that his message should be told.

As they walked along the track they saw other Edgelings along their way. Ajiras noticed that his companion did not greet them. Instead, she kept her gaze from theirs, and afterwards whispered harsh words to him, providing him with a list of their failings.

'She there wears the clashing, clumsy clothes of the vile village of Arrogere. Full they are of their own, uppity muppity self importantly'.

And of another: 'That man there with his eyes to the hoity toity heavens is said and said and said again to be rather too frolicking friggingly friendly with those of four legs and too little brain.'

And of a child 'Look at that child, now, poor little mite of a mouse. What fault his that he's born to a mother who will not keep him, a father who does not know him. Some people are simply too me and me mean to deserve the love of a child.'

The boy was puzzled at her venom, and finally his puzzlement found voice. 'Good woman - Lemma - I have heard that the Edgelings are a Spirited people, and when they come to the city they seem united indeed. But now I see suspicion and separation. Must you all live in fear of each other?'

'Well puzzle me over and call me queen, what sort of question is that? I fear no other, child. Life is a giggle and a gift indeed, but you mustn't deny that most of the world is made up of the foul, the foolish, and the failures. I live with good people, and they're enough for me. I don't need to go bowing down worshiply to any old fool that I find on the road.'

'But I see bitterness in your heart.'

'What bitterness is there, child, is mine to do with what I will. Now you keep your eyes on the track, and out of my heart.' Her face had gone dark, and she did not speak for many a turn in the path, so that the boy knew he had caused offence, crossing into territory

where he was not invited. So he too was silent.

As they walked, the country side became steadily greener. The track followed the valley of the stream, crossing from one side to the other and back again. The stream cut deep into the earth, forming small canyons of crystal and magic. In places the water danced and played down carved rock, forming little pools and fountains and shards of light. Whatever obstacles were placed in its path, it played with gently, skipping and turning, waiting and gathering, letting go for long silver dream like falls. And all the way it sang and smiled so that the strange and difficult path of the valley seemed hand carved for its journey to the sea.

On some of the bridges that crossed the stream the stable boy would stare in wonder at its beauty, and in every nook and cranny of the stone-walled canyon he felt that there were smiling little faces and mumbles, but not for the eyes or the ears to know.

But the spell that the valley was casting on him was soon and suddenly broken. As Lemma was leading him over a ridge that stood at a curve in the river, he came to a terrible sight. The glorious forest that they had been walking through suddenly gave way to a carnage of scarred timber and wasted ground.

‘Good woman, what have your people done?’

Lemma's anger erupted: ‘My people, child? My people? This is not our ground, and not our business, except it may pay our wages. But these trees fall to the hunger of City houses and City fire and City paper for your fancy City words. This land was long ago won by you Civics; the Civic hunger is never satiated. It has eaten your own trees; it has eaten the trees of the central lowlands, and now it reaches the Edges.’

Ajiras was shaken by her anger, yet felt compelled to challenge this carnage. ‘But you could stop this. This land could be used for food or nourishment for your people. It is Edgelings who cut the forest, Edgelings who take their wages - it is Edgelings who destroy the magic just to get the money of the City! You have the power to simply stop. Do so!’

Suddenly, the woman sat down. She looked tired, but she held the boy with her stare, honest and fierce.

‘Child. The world changes. You in the City see the changes every day. You create and embrace the changes. They excite you. But you think that, because we Edgelings still live close to the earth and the oceans and the forests, because we still talk in Spirited tongue, because we still speak of strangeness and magic, our world is not changing.

‘Our visits to the city entertain you. And our forests keep you warm. Yet you do not see our changes or our pain. It is always so with the Civilised Civics. The City draws from the edges, yet ignores our needs.

‘Our world, as you see, is slowly being eaten away by the City's demands and the Edges' compliance. So it is in all things for the Civics. How can we stand against those who ignore the very Soul of their living and their kingdom? You, who can ignore the Soul can too

easily ignore the Edges. Look at your people child: the soul demands nothing but fate. And yet you Civics, who demand everything, neglect the soul which is the only source, and let it choke.

‘The fish from the ocean, the grains from the land, the timber from the forests are all growing thin. And *still* you call for more fish, more grain, more timber, carelessly ignoring the ocean, the land, the forests.

‘These, child, are the soul that you Civics so sorely need. You call for more of the parts, but you ignore the whole; you call for more of the "things" but you ignore the soul. Your quest is futile, but it has drawn us to its madness. Some Edgelings visit the City and try to make you see - a foolish quest if ever there was one. And as the riches of the ocean and the land and the forests are reduced to scraps, so the strong bond of the Edgelings turn to constant, petty quarrel. Our Spirit is choked away. And who can wonder, child. Who can wonder?

‘The world changes, child. The Edges, like the soul, are suffering most, yet you Civics will not see. The soul knows the deepest pain, but the Civics will not feel it.’

She paused, and gathered her things together as though to walk on. But then she saw that there was something more to say.

‘And yes, child, the challenge in your eyes is true. We accept the money of the City and so have changed our ways. Now we yearn for the subsistence that feeds our soul, even as we grasp for the money that feeds our greed. We Edgelings could respond to the changes. We could again begin to build new ways of living. We could stand against the ignorant pillage. But the world changes too fast for us child. We are tired and weary, and we fight and bicker, and our soul thins, just as yours does.

‘I do not know the answer. But I must live on. And so I do what must be done. On that blue, distant hill, that looks so serene and mysterious from here, is my peoples' village. And I am working, child, to steal the trees from the land around, steal them in exchange for the money that the City provides. I must live on. So I do what the City demands. It is wrong, but the world changes, and it is the only way forward I know.’

The boy listened to all this with his eyes on the damp moss-covered rocks that lined their pathway. When she was done he sat in silence, and did not lift his eyes. Finally he spoke; ‘I have much to learn of the world. I carry a message - a message of answers. Yet, as I travel, I just find more questions.’

‘Ah my churlishly cheekily chuffable child, don't hang your hairy head so. You may not know the curly questions, but your ears are open, and your heart is of a hero's - it never turns away. Lets walk and talk and stalk horizons, and let our hearts giggle again.’

And with that she sprang to her feet, and resumed the path toward her blue, beautiful hill with the scars still hidden to the boys eyes, but now known to his heart.

As they passed the many villages and people she resumed her happy, hard-edged tirade against all and sundry, and the boy let her mask of bright bubbling hatred be, and let the words pass him by.

By nightfall they had reached her village, and even in the dusk Ajiras could see the deathliness of the fallen forests around. But that night he spent in the common house of the Edgeling woman's village. He laughed and cried to tall and hilarious tales that the villagers told. Tales of the misdeeds of half-known fools, and of the brave and noble work of his hosts in standing against the ignorance and incompetence of the strangers of their world. He knew the stories belied the kingdom's rich diversity, but knew that his own certainty had done the same, and so he held his silence.

In the morning he rose early with excitement. Today he would see, at last, the legendary ocean of childhood stories. Lemma walked him to the gate to bid him farewell, babbling away in her mad flowing language and forced cheeriness. But at the gate she spoke in low, simple words to him.

'Child, I offer only questions and problems. You have answers, even if I will not hear them. Walk on. The answers will find their home.' With that she slapped him gently on the arm, and turned and danced up the path like a leaf blowing in the wind, and never looked back. Ajiras climbed on to Sidreatha's back and rode on.

CHAPTER 5

By the Ocean

The track continued to wind along the valley, which became steadily wider and more gentle as it approached the ocean. Earlier it had cut a deep and narrow canyon through the land around, barely visible from a distance. Now, though, the valley itself held farmlands and forests in a broad rolling world of its own. And here the forests stood only on the ridges and hill tops.

Around mid morning, a faint sigh could be heard from the direction they were walking, and it grew, gradually, to a roar. Finally, as they rounded a bend in the river the boy saw that the water and the valley dropped away suddenly over an escarpment. His eye, though, was carried to the distance. There he saw a glittering emptiness that the boy had heard of but, until now, never fully imagined. It was blue like the sky, and the line between the two may have been mere fancy. A thousand sparks played on its surface as it reflected the sun, and across its endless lifeless surface there was deep, constant, glorious movement as wind and wave and mystery played across it.

For long minutes, the boy's Spirit was lost in confusion and joy and wonder. He sat on a rock and stared gratefully at the sight, and explored his thoughts, finally speaking them to the patient Sidreatha. 'Friend, I began this journey with an answer to my questions. Yet all I learn is just how much more there is to know. The journey to truth seems to run ever deeper, so that I find not more facts, but more mystery.

'I never imagined that a journey could be that rich.'

He was suddenly filled with the excitement of it. He stood and walked purposefully to the edge of the precipice by the waterfall, and shouted joyously to the plains below and the wondrous emptiness beyond: 'I have riches, unknown, oh God! I have riches unknown!' And with that, he ran at Sidreatha and sprang on to her back. Together they galloped along the track, down the sloping path as it hugged the rough cliff of the escarpment, and

across the coastal plain to the sea.

Their joy was pure as the villages and travellers passed them by in a blur. Within the hour they were on the white sands of the ocean, and into the cold fresh clear water. Ajiras was screaming and laughing with delight, and Sidreatha's soft breath sang with the sound of the waves lapping and small pebbles knocking together, and the solitary cry of a seagull.

The boy and the mare swam and splashed and frolicked in the surf until Ajiras' fingers began to wrinkle, and he was shivering with cold. Only as he emerged from the waters' edge did he notice that a crowd of Seafarers had gathered to stare at them.

These were wild eyed folk, and Ajiras stood nervously, dripping the ocean's water to the sand. The clothes of the Seafarers were faded and few - baggy, tattered shorts and a roughly weaved hessian top that covered their shoulders but left their arms to move freely.

Finally, a young woman, found voice. 'I's sorry good Civic for us stares and mumblings. It's not many Civics is swimming in us ocean here. Me's aunties and uncles and cousins be a wild bunch, and them's not knowing how to behave with strangers and fears'.

'Be hushed young woman' spoke another far older, worn and wizened . 'It is not apologisings he's be needing, but guidance to help he find he's way.'

Both women spoke in a lilting melody that darted unexpectedly this way and that, so that their speech was, to the ear, what the flight of the swallow is to the eye.

The old woman spoke again, this time direct to Ajiras. 'So young himself, talk to me of destinations, and us's will get you closer there.'

'But sea woman - I believe that I have arrived. For I bring a message that must be heard. And I have been driven to the Edges to tell it. I see that I can go no further than this. So please, listen to the truth of 3 rings and seven. 12 and twenty eight.'

Immediately, and with passion, he began to explain the rings that he had come to love so much. And with his passion was certainty, for in the deep memory that had no name, he knew that he was instructed to take his message to the Edges. And so, of course, here he must speak.

He drew the rings in the clay earth that they were standing on, next to the brightly coloured boats that took these people to sea. Yet no sooner had the first three rings been drawn, than people began to wander away, a glazed look of disinterest in their eyes.

'But good people. Stay with me. It is only in their fullness, in the 12 and the 28 that you can see their beauty. Stay and you will know truth'. But another, and then another of the small crowd moved away until just a young man remained. He was not much older than Ajiras. His clothes were faded to pastel, and his eyes were the grey of a dolphin. To look at him was to see the sea spray on the pounding waves, or the endless, light clouds on the winds.

He was, clearly, a seafarer, but he spoke in the dialect of the City. 'Don't think them rude', the young man said to Ajiras. 'Words and geometry are not their language. They cannot feel passion for these things'

'But these are not just words and geometry" replied the stable boy. 'These are of the Spirit! You Seafarers are famous for your Spirit. I offer you words to give that Spirit voice.'

'Thank you City boy, but we respectfully decline. There are more voices in the sea and the sky than were ever in the throats of humans. And they need not speak in words.'

'But I have been driven to the Edges. I know that you must hear. I have felt a flame within me that has driven me to this place, to your village, to the edge of the land and the ocean together. I know that you must hear. And yet you greet me with apathy and call it deafness! Of course words are your language, just as they are mine. Do not feign deafness just to give comfort in your ignorance.'

The stable boy's certainty angered the Seafarer, and his eyes and voice stormed at the boy. 'I feign no ignorance, nor deafness, nor do I speak of apathy. Have you seen the sleeping power and beauty of the ocean on an early spring day? Have you heard the song of the whale, or seen the glistening dance of the dolphin. Have you felt the rage and disdain of a winters storm at sea, or felt the gift of a sparkling fish, pulled from the depths for your food? If not, boy, do not speak to me of ignorance; do not speak to me of deafness.

'The seafarers whose attention you sought have heard other voices than you, and have no need of words or rings. And some among that crowd that you drove away with your preaching have seen and heard even more. They have dived beneath the sparkling waters, to find a world unknown, filled with creatures, boy, that you cannot even imagine. They have found a world of weightlessness, where every plant and creature is engaged in a glorious slow, synchronised dance. And they have dived into the blue darkness, where the human eye can only dimly see, and whose mystery gives the light of dry land a special meaning.

'And a few have faced the fire and terror of dragons that can burn to the human soul; have cowered in their boats as those wild monsters swoop upon them with their wings blocking the sun; have even tamed the terrifying creatures in the only way known - to stare into their eyes and call them brother, call them sister, call them self.

'Do not call us ignorant, boy, until you have known these things, and have let them into your heart. But then you would not call us ignorant. You would call us friend. And you would speak our language.'

His anger, with his last words, subsided, and compassion returned. 'I see the passion your rings create in you. Hold the passion, and share the passion. But if you invite the audience of others, and they have no need to hear, let them go their way. Otherwise your gift becomes a tyranny, your truth becomes merely a chain.

'We Seafarers embrace the mystery. Your rings speak of explanations. These are of little use to us, lad. They are of use to the world, I expect. But they are of little use to us.'

The boy was confused. "It seems that my quest is merely a chase between false horizons. Perhaps the flame has driven me to the Edges in order to make me see my own stupidity; to rid me of any notions that I should quest for more than shit and straw.'

'Ah lad. Cheer up. You will find your way in good time. Meanwhile, walk with me along the beach and I will tell you tales of the Seafarers. I am called Mustes. What do they call you?' Ajiras told him, and together they went to the water and turned to walk along the jagged coast. Sidreatha walked quietly for a while, but it was not long before the grandeur, the endlessness and the purity of the ocean side had sung to the wildness within her. She surged on ahead, now kicking, now rearing and prancing, now galloping until she went beyond the farthest headland and was lost to sight.

Mustes told tales of dragons and sea serpents, of the migration of birds and the places they see, of lands that have no name and the people that visit from them, and of treasures known but never reached in submerged caves. He spoke of waves the size of mountains; of shells as delicate as snow flakes, and, with love in his voice, of the quite dance of the world beneath the water that tempts people to stay below when their lungs are fit to burst.

The boy could not tell which stories were real and which were merely for entertainment, but they eased his pain and he was grateful for the company.

As they walked he saw all manner of beauty. The silver lines that the waves left behind on the sand; the pebbles that had been smoothed and polished for all time; the curve and flurry of the sea-birds' flight; the gnarled, swirling lines of the cliff faces, as though the rock itself had been bent and twisted by some mysterious and glorious force. Where they stopped to watch the play of waves on a rocky headland, he picked up a tiny gleaming spiral shell. He rolled it between his fingers, and stared at it in different lights. 'If all of creation had conspired only to form the perfection of this shell' he said - speaking to himself and the ocean as much as to Mustes - 'it would have been time well spent.'

Mustes smiled silently and nodded. Then, after a pause, he said 'It's time for us to return to the village'

'I think I will stay a while' Ajiras announced, and Mustes made no protest, even though the sun was dropping to the blue horizon. 'As you like. There is a cave at the foot of those cliffs where you can find shelter from the cold, and smooth dry platforms for sleep. I will bid you farewell. May your rings find their place of meaning. Your heart is true.' They shook hands as friends, and the Seafarer turned and moved into a slow trot, down to the water's edge and along through the shallows, returning from where he had come.

With his companion gone the stable boy, who had wanted time to reflect, suddenly felt deeply troubled. He was sad and alone, and his confusion was like a tangled jungle. He swam, once again, in the sea, and felt the gentle power lift and move his body as though he were in flight, and knew that he did not understand it. He climbed on to the wet rocks and looked down into the world of magic and strangeness beneath the surface, and knew that he did not understand it. He walked onto the sand where the damp skin of his legs picked up millions of tiny perfect grains of sand, all carved from the majesty of the rocks,

or the fragility of the shells - carved through millennium unknown - and knew that he did not understand it.

Because he could not know what plants and creatures in this mysterious world were poisonous, he dared not eat. So in the darkness after the sunset, he crawled, cold, confused and hungry, into the cave that Mustes had shown him. Even Sidreatha, his silent companion throughout this strange quest, was not with him to accept his goodnights, or ease his loneliness. He gathered some seaweed to rest his head upon, found a smooth platform of rock raised away from the damp cave floor, and sought the sanctuary of sleep.

As consciousness gently ebbed, he felt, sadly, that his confusion and foolishness was complete, and he must return home to the City.

He tried to console himself with the thought that the quest had, after all, been the journey, rather than the destination. For no doubt he had seen more, now. He was wiser, and more experienced. He knew a greater world, had seen other truths and had many stories to tell.

The journey, it seemed, was all there was; the journey and the rings. The fire which had driven him toward the edges seemed no more than a trick of the heart to justify his travels. So now the trick was revealed, and he must return to the City, to the stable, to his destiny of shit and straw.

Sadly placated by this thought, the boy finally drifted into a fitful sleep.

He woke to the strange, ringing echoes of water lapping at the cave walls. The sandy floor had become waist deep in gently rippling water. The ocean had risen beyond the boy's imaginings - and outside his understanding. He was amazed. He had heard tales of how the oceans breathed in this way, but had put little store in them. Some said that it was the sun and the moon pulling at the earth, yet only the water would obey. But Ajiras had always considered himself above such superstitions. He did not believe in miracles.

Amazed as he was, his attention was quickly distracted from this miracle by an event of unsurpassed beauty. Shining in to the darkness of his cave was a single piercing beam of light from the rising sun. It came through a tiny hole in the cave wall, and shone direct to the rippling water. And where it struck the water it scattered in a thousand directions. It spread itself upon the sandy floor of the cave, and danced around the walls and roof. It sparkled on the rippling surface of the water and even glowed on the boy's skin, so that it seemed to shine from within. And wherever these reflections danced and played there was beauty. Every reflection from this single, narrow beam was unique, and could never be perfectly repeated no matter how long the boy waited to see.

And here in this darkened cave lit bright by a single beam shining on water, the boy felt the form of his ignorance with clarity. If only all of us could do so at such a young age. He had made himself as a rock to light that shone on him. Yet how much richer to make himself as water, to see the light move through him and see it dance and play in a thousand ways at once.

And his message. What of his message? Was it simply a reflection amongst millions? And if so, what hope could he have of finding people who would see it brighter than their own. Why would people *need* to see it, rather than their own?

With this thought the boy wept as he had never wept before. He wept for the great vision that now seemed so small. He wept for the wisdom and beauty of the folk who had steered him to this cave. He wept for the stabled horses he had left behind, and the childhood that had passed in pain and joy and innocence.

He wept for the blood and the tears that had been shed by people in centuries past and countries afar; shed for the sake of a dancing reflection of truth that people sought always to capture and freeze, and use against others. And he wept for the fact that he was alone in a cave at the farthest Edges of the kingdom with no idea which way was home.

And when his weeping was done he felt a soft, safe, open emptiness within him that left directions unimportant. He slid down into the water that played so beautifully in the cave of the one and the many, and washed through it to the glaring light of the sand and ocean and sky outside.

Sidreatha was waiting, motionless, the steam of the early morning rising from her fur and her breath. She stared at the boy as he emerged, and nuzzled at him with satisfaction and pleasure as he walked close to embrace her soft neck. He could feel, as though for the first time, the life blood coursing through her veins, the strength resting in her muscles, and the purity shining in her soul.

He walked towards the waters edge and found rockpools there alive with bizarre and colourful life such as he had never seen. He pondered their mysteries, but sought no answers. He threw himself into the bracing waters beyond, and felt his body swayed and rocked and swept along by the hidden powers of this great ocean.

When he emerged, he ran and leapt as Sidreatha had done the day before, simply for the pleasure of it. The warmth of the sun and the coolness of the water played on his skin. The hardness of the rock and the softness of the sand caressed his feet. The fragility of the rock pools and the majesty of the towering cliffs delighted his eyes. He was free.

He picked up a thin piece of drift wood and drew lines in the sand. He ran in wide sweeping circles, round and round and round. And then round and round and round again. And then again. And then again.

And there were the 3 and the 7. The 12 and the 28. There they were, on the Edges of the kingdom. And they were just for him. "Thankyou, Ajiras" he said to himself, "for bringing me to this wonderful place, and for showing me your beautiful, magical circles. I will treasure them always" And with that he laughed happily and long and loud, and cried some more, and stared at the wide deep ever-moving ocean.

CHAPTER 6 TO HERAN

"They are very beautiful rings, Sir"

He was startled by the voice, and turned to see a girl, about 12 years old. She wore a flowing robe that brushed the sand. Her face was small and shy, and she looked uncertain about this stranger. But she went on: "I have seen another draw these rings"

"Where?" Ajiras asked in astonishment.

"In my village there is a great table in the square. The communal meals are served at the changing of the seasons, and many an evening is spent drinking and talking around. Those rings are painted on that table."

"Where is your village child?" Ajiras' heart was suddenly alive with wonder.

"Two days walk from here, in the Middlelakes. I have come to gather sea shells for the market day, and plan to begin the return journey before the sun is high."

"Child, let me offer you a trade. I will take you with me on that great mare, if you will guide me to your village."

The child laughed: "I will happily guide you, and need not trade. I think that mare is not for me to ride, but perhaps she could help carry the burdens and gifts that I've collected. I have people to visit and duties to do on my journey, so it cannot be hurried. You will have to move at my pace. "

"So be it" said Ajiras. "But child, I have another request, and have nothing to offer in return. I am famished, and do not know what can be eaten here. Could you point me to some food?"

The girl giggled at this. "It is strange what treasures can be hidden to the eye" She reached into the nearest pool and pulled some seaweeds, anemones and small crabs. Swiftly, and with a mumbled prayer, she stabbed the animals and took their life.

"Make a fire, sir, and we shall eat well"

Ajiras was heartened by the thought of nourishment, and delighted that it could be so easily received. "What is your name, my new friend"

"I am called Sophia".

By mid morning Ajiras, Sidreatha and the young girl were walking along winding paths, overgrown and seldom used.

From time to time the girl stopped to deliver sea shells to people who lived in the small huts along the way. Sometimes she accepted money for these shells, and sometimes not. She also stopped, occasionally, to make token offerings at special places; a waterfall here, a grand tree there, a small temple at another place. Ajiras admired her quiet

competence, her clarity in the tasks that she must undertake, and her easy knowledge of the way along the labyrinth pathways of the tangled and sometimes scarred forests through which they passed.

They slept that night in the home of Sophia's aunt and uncle, a quiet and gentle couple who accepted both Ajiras and Sidreatha as guests without question.

The next morning Sophia talked about the forests that they walked through, and the plants and animals they saw, and what role each of them played in the life of the forest, and the life of humans. And she talked of the village that she lived in.

"It is called Heran. I have not always lived there, but it is all I remember. My parents moved there from a distant Edgeling village when I was two. They say they were tired of living amongst people who cared only for themselves. In Heran, my mother says, "people know connection"

"And do you like the village?" Ajiras asked.

"I have friends who I have fun with. And the fields and the shrubbery, and the wetlands and streams around are rich with magic and things to do."

As the day passed, the rich cacophony of colour and devastation of the Edges faded to a plainer, drier, simpler landscape. As the sun set before them, chased by the silver wisp of a new moon the three travellers crossed a small ridge of hills. Below them was a simple village spread along the side of a lake. The land beyond was gentle and low, with no features to arrest the eye. The colours were of browns and ochres, tinged with wisps of green. The lines of the lake, and the land beyond, and the small huts that made up the village were low and steady. Only the sky was glorious, and where the sun reflected itself in a million sparks on the lake's surface, there was magic and beauty.

This village did not speak of grandeur, and the boy was disappointed. Somehow he had imagined the place of the Rings as a remarkable village; in a landscape that would overwhelm the senses. Yet this was as plain a place as he had seen on his entire journey.

As they followed the path down the hillside a noise came to them like a gentle stream as it cascades over rocks. But the boy quickly realised that this was the sound of a hundred voices engaged in conversation.

"It's the night before market day" Sophia said. "Tonight, from sunset, people gather in the village square on the lake and talk and argue about all manner of things."

When they reached the edge of the village of Heran, Sidreatha stopped to graze at the meadows; not wanting to enter the tight busy-ness of the village streets. Ajiras understood and walked on with Sophia. But before he had gone ten paces he stopped and looked back. "Friend, join me in this crowded village, though it may suit your nature. This may be the moment for which we have travelled so far together, and I need your strength beside me".

Sidreatha, though the village streets and noise gave her discomfort, obeyed the boy. And so they walked on together, Sophia leading the way through this last labyrinth.

As they weaved through the narrow streets of the village the stable boy admired the little houses that lined them. They were made of local mud and the windows and doors were edged in painted decoration. The decoration of each house was unique, and yet all were familiar. There were flowers and trees in them, and creatures and birds. There were suns and moons and stars. There was water and fire and earth and wind. There were people, and the things that people made and the things that people treasured.

These simple decorations gave voice to the mud walls, and spoke of the quiet rich lives within.

And as they walked, he glimpsed the silent cacophony of moments that made up the lives of this blessed place. Laughter here, an argument there; children playing and feeding the yard animals and carrying water. Men and women talking, tilling fields and chopping wood. Old folk sitting amongst them, watching the rhythms recur and sometimes change. There was noise and friendship, gossip and ill-will, cruelty and kindness and pervading love. Love that hurt and love that nurtured and love that slowly, gently, painted colour into the line-drawings of living.

Soon the streets opened up into a square that was filled with people sitting at tables talking and laughing and arguing and frowning, just as Sophia had described. And there, in the middle of the square, was a large, low, round table, painted, just as she had described, with the rings; the 3 and the 7; the 12 and the 28.

Sophia led him to a small table where six people were talking with great Spirit and animation. She interrupted one of the men there. "Father, I am back, and I have brought a man who has drawn Phemi's rings in the sand".

The man looked up and saw Ajiras, and stood to shake his hand with a warm smile. "Welcome to Heran. You have arrived on a good night. The Market Eve is always busy with talk."

"I think I have never seen so many conversations in one place" laughed Ajiras nervously.

"Well there is much to talk of. Many of the people in this village share just two things: despair about the ways of the kingdom, and hope that there is a way forward. But as you see", he added with a smile and a sweep of his arm, "we do not share the same vision of what that way is."

And indeed, the air was thick with argument and disagreement. Yet the argument and disagreement had a life and a passion in it that he had never seen, and his Spirit was lifted by it.

"Where did you learn of Phemi's Rings?" the man went on.

"I found them one morning in my heart. I do not know where they came from, but I know they are truth. And the words within them are truth".

At this the man's eyes widened. "You have put words to the rings?. Well this is news indeed."

"Did this man Phemi not have words to explain the rings?" the boy asked.

"Phemi was a simple man" Sophia's father replied. "He was more comfortable with children and animals than with adults, and never engaged in our debates. He painted his rings on the Great Table in the days before he died, and spoke only to the children of them."

Sophia added:" He said that he liked the colours and the shapes, and that that's why he painted them."

"Phemi was never one for analysis" laughed her father. "But sir, you have words for the rings. This is good news indeed, and we must hear the words."

"You must also see the words" Ajiras replied, "so I will need paint." Sophia immediately ran off to one of the houses that bordered the square, and came back with a fine brush, and a small pot of golden paint. "I will paint the words as you speak, Ajiras".

At that her father stood, and called for silence in the square, and asked the people to gather around the Great Table.

"Friends, we have a visitor who has brought us words for Phemi's rings. Let us all hear and see".

At this, Ajiras stood on a stone bench, and looked into the eyes of the people around; eyes that were alive with questions. And then he closed his eyes, and felt his Spirit move deep into his wisdom, and he began to speak.

CHAPTER 7

At the Table

"Good people, I have a message. It is a message from deep within the heart of every human being. Phemi's rings, painted on your great table, call for the words that I have been given, so I shall write them there.

"But Phemi's rings also go to a deeper truth beneath the words. His rings show the three simplest colours of the world blending to make all the colours of the rainbow.

"And the centre of each trinity is pure white, for what is the rainbow but one pure light bending through countless droplets of rain that fall from the heavens?. The beauty of the one pure light is seen through all the colours of the rainbow and all the colours of the world. And yet all the colours of the rainbow and all the colours of the world only exist because of the one pure light.

So it is with the words of the rings. They are, each of them, simply a part of the one pure light. And so, to understand them, we must see them, not as separate messages, but as one - each ring connected with every other, as though they are one; each ring dependent on every other, as though they are one.

Phemi, then, has given the first message of the Rings. But I give words.

"To begin, I give you the Call: *"Develop Spirit."*

"This challenge - the development of Spirit - is the seed of all the Rings around. And this challenge - this development of Spirit - is also the fruit of all the Rings around. It is the beginning and end of what we must achieve in every human endeavor.

"Our Kingdom knows great freedom. Time was when our world kept us safe, by showing us one path, and holding us to that path. This left our Spirit safe to live, and sing its song as we walked the narrow path. But the Spirit could not choose, nor fully develop.

"That time has passed, left for the animals and plants of our kingdom. The paths that held us have become many and varied, and are now a labyrinth, open to all of us. This is the greatest gift that we have ever received, and the greatest challenge.

"The challenge of freedom is simple and deep. Freedom bids us to choose. The many paths are laid before us. And we are free to choose which, if any, we will follow. We must choose, and choose, and choose again as we take our journey through the labyrinth paths of freedom.

Alas, our kingdom is crowded with people who are wandering the paths aimlessly and so are lost. It is crowded with people who are simply following others along the pathways, and so are in the wrong place. It is crowded with people who want all others to follow the same path, and so are bitter. It is crowded with people who are hiding away, and so are choked of pleasure and nourishment.

"Good people, we must accept the challenge of freedom. We must choose. Yet we must choose wisely. We must choose with attention. We must choose the paths that nourish us, and that nourish our kingdom. We must choose the paths of hope.

"The paths of hope lead us toward our dreams of what could be. They may begin in eroded, tangled places of despair, of fear and greed and hatred, but they draw us onward.

Now choosing is not always easy. We must listen deeply in places far deeper than the shallow crust of gratification and frivolous greed.

Our choices are found deep beneath the gorgeous robes of our daily living; deep beneath the brittle armour of our self-doubt and arrogance; deep beneath the wounded flesh of fear and greed. They lie in our Spirit. If we are to choose the path of hope we must first find our Spirit and let it breathe."

"The answer is written, too, in the Ancient Book of Words". It was the low, quiet voice of an old, man, staring over his spectacles at Ajiras with a stern look. His hair and face were grey and stormy, his clothes, formal but unkempt, and in his hand was a great and well-worn book.

"Ah Scol, too much talk of books might make you boring if you're not careful!" called a young man from the crowd. There was an eruption of laughter. But the old man, unmoved, referred back to his book, and read from it: "Spirit" in the tongues of antiquity, is *"The breath of life"*. When it breathes we are fully alive - in sadness or happiness, troubled times or calm - when Spirit breathes we are fully alive. Yet when it is choked we

are "de-Spirited" or despairing as it has come to be known. When it is choked, then, we can only choose the paths of despair.

"The Ancient Book already knows young man" he went on, piercing Ajiras with his gaze. "We can only hope when our Spirit breathes".

Ajiras had not expected support from such Ancient places. And he was taken aback by the intensity of the old man. But he went on:

"Alas, our kingdom has slipped toward silent despair. The despair of choked Spirit - of fear and greed - is lived out in the world and made real, and our kingdom decays. Our kingdom needs hope - hope that is born within us, brought into the moment and movement of our living and made real, so that the kingdom may heal.

"Yet, as this old man has said, we can not choose hope when our Spirit is choked away. We must reveal and offer our Spirit to the world; let it play its part. develop Spirit.

"Ah, a very good word, 'develop'" said the old Scholar of the stormy face, clearly warming to his power, "and much misused. Many use it to mean change, or build, or transform. Not so! The Ancient Book of Words tells us that it means to 'un-wrap', quite the opposite to *en-velop*, which is to wrap up and enclose"

The boy was silent for a moment. He was amazed at the words that this old Scholar offered. They revealed the exactness of the words that he had been offered in that night beyond memory.

"Indeed, the Spirit is not something that we create. It is within us, as the Spirit of the tree is within it, and the Spirit of the earthworm, of the deer or the fox. The third(?) challenge of freedom is to un-wrap - de-velop - the true Spirit within ourselves and others.

With this Sophia leapt lightly to the centre of the table, and wrote the words in the innermost circle of the cross: "Develop Spirit", just as they had come to him in that night lost to memory.

Everyone crowded around to see the first emergence of worldly meaning within Phemi's rings, and a hub-bub of voices grew.

"And friends", Ajiras called, quieting the dialogue for a moment, "if we are to choose hope, and if we are to develop Spirit, we must undertake four great Tasks.

"We must **dream** , for our dreams will show the way of hope for us, and for others around us, and for nature herself.

"We must **attend**, for in attention our actions, experiences and wisdom are given life, and our Spirit will develop.

"We must **connect**, for only in the connected Spirit of the parts - of ourselves, and of others, and of Nature - can the Whole Spirit emerge.

"And we must **sustain** , for we are called to ensure that the Spirit of all of creation is held sacred, and cannot, therefore be destroyed. We are called to ensure that our hope is

realised, and cannot be ignored."

As he spoke these words Sophia skipped round the outer circle at the centre of the cross, writing the words just as he had seen them in that night lost to memory. He felt great joy as he saw his vision slowly unfold with such beauty, and in such a place.

As soon as the first of the words were written there was a great surge of voices as people started discussing, debating and discerning their meaning and their worth.

Ajiras tried to quieten the crowd, for there was much still to be said. Yet they would not be hushed. They were too lost in their own conversations with each other to hear his pleas.

He shouted at them: "there is more to hear", but was rewarded with little more than passing glances.

"Ajiras" said a quiet calm voice. It was the child Sophia. "Tell me the words and I will write them, and they will be there for all to see". "But child" he said, annoyed at her naivety, "they require explanation".

"This village is not short of explanations" she laughed. "What it needs is simple truths. Let your words offer those simple truths, and let the explanations follow. For they will follow in droves!"

The boy saw that she was right, yet he hesitated. He had enjoyed preaching to these people who seemed so willing to hear. He had started to feel like a prophet of old. But he could see that such prophets had no place in the labyrinth of Freedom. His task, he could see now, was to awaken the Spirit, and the truth, of others, so they could choose their own paths well.

So he stepped down from the stone bench, and walked around the table, telling Sophia the words of the message. And Sophia scribed the words in gold in each trinity of rings until the fourth was complete.

As they circled the table, a few of the villagers followed them, and would peel off to argue and puzzle over the words that had been added, and then new villagers would take their place. In this way the arguments and elaborations steadily widened in their scope until the square was filled with discussion of dreaming, attending, connecting and sustaining.

Ajiras' initial disappointment turned, as they circled the table, to joy. Nothing was as he imagined it. He had imagined that his quest had been to preach to the people on the very edge of the Kingdom, yet found himself speaking with unknown villagers in the most unremarkable of Middlelake districts. He had imagined that his quest was to preach to crowds, yet found himself dictating single words to a small girl. He had imagined himself receiving accolades and praise, yet found himself almost invisible in a crowd of dialogue.

But his mission had been true, for it had brought him to this very place where, unexpectedly, his quest had been fulfilled.

With the words in the rings complete, Sophia came and stood beside him and stared at

the great table. "Stable-boy", she said, "you have brought a poem to old Phemi's rings, and you have brought questions and rich confusion to the village. "Phemi would have been pleased. Phemi would have said thankyou."

Ajiras stared for a moment at the girl, then responded with a question: "When this man Phemi was painting the Rings, did he give no hint of their meaning?"

"No", said Sophia. "But he had two favourite sayings, and every time he rested from the Rings he would repeat them over and over, like a prayer: 'Its more important to question the answer than answer the question' and, ' if you're not confused, you haven't heard the question'".

Ajiras was pleased by this, and wandered around the table with a light heart. He listened to the conversations that were flowing everywhere, and saw a depth in the rings that he had not known. For he had seen the rings from only one perspective, yet here they were seen from the many.

Questions danced round the lamplight, and each new answer revealed yet deeper questions until the Rings themselves seemed to be shimmering with life.

How can we know truth?

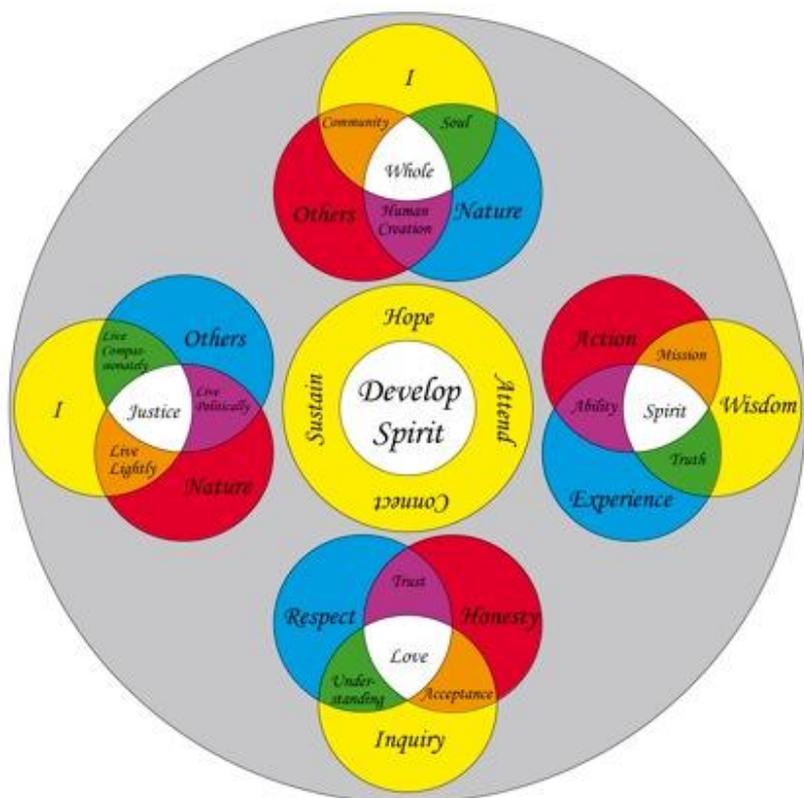
How can we inquire without invading and causing discomfort?

Who can speak of soul without diminishing it to logic?

When we live politically, do we not violate the viewpoint of others?

Ajiras began to think that the Rings were not so much the answers given, as the questions revealed.

Rings of Heran



And as the questions shone ever clearer, Ajiras revelled in the pleasure of the Rings alive with the music and wisdom of a thousand voices interpreting, arguing, laughing crying, encouraging and revealing.

Questioning, questioning, questioning.

As the eastern sky began to lighten, the boy saw that his work was done, and it was time to leave. He was filled with the quiet, pure melancholy that comes with the completion of a great task. But another sadness held him, and one he had to listen for deeply before he could finally name it.....

These words; these truths, these questions were no longer his. In speaking them aloud he had lost control of them. Others would pass them on, with scarcely a look back to who first spoke them. They would be re-interpreted a thousand times and may, by some, be misused in ways that he could not foresee. But his task was done. He could now only let it go.

He took one last look at the great table and at Phemi's rings now adorned with the golden words that he had carried and now spoken, and turned to walk quietly towards his home.

CHAPTER 8

Return to the City

"Ajiras!". The stable boy turned at the call to find Sophia running after him. She caught up to him, breathing clouds into the sharp morning air. "I wanted to give you a gift. I led you through the paths of the Forests, and I would like to give you a memory of me to carry with you as you travel back to the City.

With this she took 3 rings - one from the hair of her head; one from her heart, and one from her hand.

"Take these three rings and wear them lord, and seek truth where you will". Ajiras laughed. "Not 'lord' young Sophia, just your friend Ajiras, the stable boy!"

Sophia looked a little confused and embarrassed. "My words are jumbled sometimes" she said. As she spoke Ajiras felt a slight dizziness and blurring, and for a moment Sophia seemed older, taller, even glowing slightly, and her hair poured like water.

But then he blinked, and looked again, and there was his innocent young friend. I must, he thought, find a place to rest early today. To the girl he said "Sophia, thank you for feeding me when I could not see food. Thank you for guiding me through the labyrinth paths of the forests. Thank you for writing my words in gold on the great table. And now, perhaps most of all, thank you for these three rings. I will treasure them always".

He looked at them gleaming in his hand. "Where did you come by them?" he asked. Sophia shrugged: "I've always had them. Perhaps I was born with them!" She laughed, reached up to kiss the boy on the cheek, and ran back towards the village square.

Ajiras watched her go, the rings still resting in his hand. He looked at them and felt, almost, as though he'd seen them before, but could not remember where. "I must hold them safe" he thought, and placed them in the inside pocket of his shirt, close to his heart where they could not be lost, dropped or taken. Then, with a last glance back at Heran, he mounted Sidreatha and directed her South towards the Great River.

The path that followed the valley of the Great River was wide and well trodden. It would hold, he knew, few surprises, few challenges, few lessons. But Ajiras was in no hurry now. He had found his truth. He had carried his truth through hardships and emptiness to the very Edges of the Kingdom. He had spoken his truth aloud. He could feel his Spirit alive like never before. And now there was no hurry. He wanted to be by the Great River, where so many others walk. And he wanted to follow it to its source, to the home that was his.

Sidreatha carried him South in a slow walk. By mid-afternoon they came to the whispering waters of the river and threw themselves in to it, rejoicing in the pleasure of its velvet caress. After a quiet rest, they turned upstream.

As they walked Ajiras reflected on the passion with which he had left the City, the stable and his horses for the simple cause of speaking truth. He was still bemused by this. But he was deeply content. His truth had been spoken and heard, and it stood by him and held him strong. The long, steady winding path of the Great River suited his contentment well, and he sang in hums and whispers as he and the mare travelled its gentle curves.

Along the path, in the days that followed, he met many a traveller, and passed through many a village. He felt easy with conversation that led where it would. Sometimes it led him to speak of the Rings. Sometimes he spoke, with quiet and powerful humility, of the 3 and the 7, the 12 and the 28. The attention of some were seized powerfully by the Rings. Others stared blankly, and he moved the conversations to other matters without regret. He could feel, at last, that his job was only to speak his truths. What others did with his truths was their business, not his.

Occasionally, though, he was surprised to hear that others had seen the Rings before. When he asked where, they spoke of other travellers who they had met on the way who had spoken of them, drawn them, given them as gifts. The message that he had carried so determinedly and long was now making its own way, free of his efforts. This saddened him and pleased him.

He had ample times for imaginings and daydreams, and sometimes, when a breeze caught in his hair, he would think back to the dizzying moment when he farewelled young Sophia. There, in his imaginings, a woman remained, with hair flowing like water. His life, as a child, had been lived in harsh and busy surrounds. The soft touch of beauty that the ephemeral, imagined woman brought to his heart was a new and welcome sensation. Where at first he had tried to turn away from the image, he began after a time to summons it for his own pleasure, and the world around shone brighter as a result.

His journey toward the source of the Great River was easy and enjoyable. He learnt more of the kingdom; more of the nature that infused it, more of the people, and more, quietly, gently, of him self. He felt larger, wiser, more whole than he had on the journey out. And he felt, every day, that his Spirit was dancing to the songs that the journey revealed.

The closer he came to the City, the more he heard tell of the Rings. It was said that the City itself was alive with dialogue; insights and questions bouncing from person to person and echoing through the streets. It was said that the dialogue grew from 12 simple Rings born in a distant village. 12 Rings, with words, it seems, scribed by a 12 year old girl, on the whisperings of a passing stranger.

Sometimes he tried to tell people that he himself was that passing stranger. Some laughed. Many nodded politely, with eyes passing on. A few believed him.

When they believed him, he felt his heart leap with pleasure, felt himself a little larger than human. And when they laughed, he sometimes felt darkness in his heart, but tried to pay it no mind.

After 28 days, when the moon, for the third time on his journey, was new, Ajiras reached the Ring of Mountains that surrounded the Valley of the Great City. Here the great River fell majestically from the Valley's edge and was guarded on each side by towering peaks, flecked with snow.

It was evening and Ajiras knew, for all travellers know, that the path across the Ring of Mountains, though well trodden, was treacherous, steep, and tiring. So he camped near the base of the falls, ate nuts and berries that he had collected through the day and, for the last time on this strange journey, bid his mare Sidreatha "goodnight".

Meanwhile, the Dubats - who dwelt just outside the Ring of Mountains - were troubled. Suddenly, Spirit - their great enemy - was coming to life in the kingdom. When first they had seen the emergence of the Rings, some weeks before, they had been shaken enough. For these rings spoke aloud of the Spirit and were on the lips of many.

But since then, something worse had emerged - something that threatened the very existence of the dubats. The rings had not just offered a single path for many to tread. They had, instead, opened the very question deep within the wisdom of people - "which path shall I tread?" They had re-awakened the search for truth and mission and ability that so enlivens the Spirit.

As though this were not bad enough, it had become clear as the dialogue of truth grew louder that certainty was missing. Certainty had always been the last line of defence for the dubats; had turned many a Spirited truth to a brittle shell of rhetoric. It was certainty that, in earlier days of the kingdom, had turned magnificent truths to oppression and warfare. It was certainty that had turned rich dialogue to sterile debate and contradiction. It was certainty that had turned the very wisdom of faith, which could so liberate the Spirit, to the tyranny of religious law which could so choke it.

And the dubats had become, perhaps, complacent. They had come to assume that this certainty grew naturally when humans discovered truth; that just as the beautiful cream

that forms on the milk in the chalice turns hard and poisonous, and feeds only the mould, so truth, left alone, would crust over with certainty and, finally, turn to poison.

So when they had first seen the Rings appear the Dubats were comforted by the thought that time itself would choke again the Spirit that was their enemy. Yet, in these last few days, they had seen that something else was loose in the Kingdom. Far from embracing certainty, people were embracing that *confusion* that dwells in wisdom. Far from obediently following the words of the Rings, they were questioning them, awakening the questions of truth in their own heart, their own wisdom. And these questions were feeding and nourishing each other as the plants and creatures of a forest feed and nourish each other.

The Spirit of people, awakened briefly by the Rings, was not being choked by certainty, but developed by the questions and rich confusion. The Rings themselves, now, could disappear from view, yet Spirit would still grow. A power had been unleashed that, without certainty to contain it, could bring the Spirit of the whole Kingdom to life.

The dubats, then, were troubled.

Now on that night, as Ajiras and Sidreatha lay sleeping, a dubat crept into the light of the fire that warmed them. As fate would have it, it was the very same creeping creature that had put such a profound spell upon the boy on his outward journey. This dubat, of course had scratched and scathed himself in frustration when first he had heard that the stable boy's message had been spoken out loud. He had felt so sure, before, that the self doubt he had willed into the boy would have silenced the message. And yet, powers beyond his had clearly intervened.

As before, the dubat listened to the young man's dreams. As before, he saw the rings there. But to what avail, now, would a spell of self doubt be? For, by now, it was not the message of the Rings that was de-veloping Spirit in the Kingdom, but the very telling of truth that they had spawned.

The Dubat was helpless and horrified. It was he that had let this power pass the Ring of Mountains the first time. Surely, now, he must do something to choke that power.

Again, he stared, silent, invisible and troubled, at the sleeping Ajiras. Again, he looked for a place of weakness that could be used to take hold of his Spirit. Again, chanted to himself, scratching and snarling - "But it must be stopped and it must be stopped, and the Spirit must be silenced".

Suddenly, he could see a way. Indeed, he suddenly saw that the vital seed that he had planted those months ago could still bear fruit. For as he looked into Ajiras' dreams he could see that the boy was still not clear on the simplest truth - that, while he had been the messenger, the message did not belong to him. The carrier of the message - King Gabriel - remained beyond his memory. The mysterious source of the message lay deeper than his understanding could reach. And the destinies of the message were beyond his power. While the dubat had been unable to stop his power as a messenger, perhaps he could convince this young man that the message was his to control. Perhaps he could convince him that the message was more important than the people who listened. Perhaps he could bring Ajiras to don the armour of arrogance, to turn the gift of the

message into a weapon that could be used against the truths of others, and thereby wound and choke, once again, the Spirit of the kingdom.

And so, again, he worked a spell upon the sleeping Ajiras:

*You who've journeyed far and long and seen the ocean's shore
You who've braved the desert's void, and touched upon death's door
You who found these magic Rings, who gave the world this lore
It's you must now ensure they're kept in tact!*

*Their message now can save the world, if the world will only stand and see!
Their beauty and their symmetry must stand untainted, proud and free
And those who'd question God's own truth, who'd bend and break the four the three,
It's they must now behold the simple facts!*

*Cast aside what doubts you have oh strong and wise, oh chosen one
You alone can bring your peers, your kingdom back to truth's great sun
And those who will not follow, drag; and those who'll speak against you, shun.
'Til all have seen the light, do not relax!*

*There are no other Rings but these; there are no other sacred words
to light the path that must be seen, to play the tune that must be heard
There is no room for doubt, great man. Be certain as you travel forward
And keep the rings un-tainted and in tact!*

*Keep them firm and keep them firm.
Keep them firm to shine, to shine.
Keep them firm to shine.*

And the night fell quiet.

The dubat disappeared into the tangled woods around, grinning and dribbling with glee. This spell of arrogance he had put on Ajiras could, he was sure, turn the power of the rings against the Spirit - for the shards of brittle certainty can shred the most beautiful truth.

But this time he would not rely on the frailties of the boy alone, for his Spirit was strong, and the Spirit in the Kingdom was awakening. He slipped and slashed through the tangled shadows of the undergrowth to warn his cousins of the task ahead. They must sneak into the cracks and crevices of as many people as they can find. They must hold fast the door to their victims' own wisdom, guard the threshold where steps the quiet discernment of truth.

For, if people listen to the boy's certainty through their wisdom and their truth, if the eyes of their Spirit remain open, the boy's certainty will be powerless to choke the Spirit. But if their wisdom is closed, they will blindly follow his certainty, ignoring the song of their own truth. Or they will blindly reject and lash out at what he has to say, battling

against it with brittle certainties of their own, and their own song of truth will be drowned out in that battle.

His cousins must do their work quickly, or people may do no more, in the face of his arrogance, than listen for notes of truth that may nourish their Spirit, and gently leave aside those that do not. In this way their own song of truth may become even richer, the symphony of the kingdom grow ever louder and more glorious, and the discordance that is the home of the dubats ever fade away.

Thus it was that, in the dawning hours of that next day, the mountain passes were busy with the silent scurrying of a thousand dubats rushing to do their work in the Great City.

But the boy, oblivious to the troubled spells that were being weaved, woke again to a new day. The last of his journey.

When Ajiras awoke he found in his heart a new found determination. These glorious rings that he had brought to the world filled his mind, and they seemed to enthuse him with a sense of clarity and destiny. The world must hear. The kingdom must hear. Suddenly he knew that it was only these Rings that could save his kingdom from the terrible, cancerous decline that had so diminished it through the years of his life.

He had never felt such certainty. And it made him strong.

He quickly ate, gathered up his things, and leapt onto Sidreatha's back for their last ride together. The path to the mountain pass was steep, and worn. Many times Sidreatha lost her footing, and she tired quickly, so that, despite his urgings, her pace was slow. By early afternoon he found he had to dismount and lead her to the pass, and thought perhaps that the end of the journey was causing her a sadness far greater than his own.

But no matter, for when they finally reached the pass, the view was glorious, and the boy's head was alive with excitement at what was to come.

He saw, at that high place, all that could come to him, with the Rings to make him powerful:

For with the certainty and power of the Rings at his command he could bring about miracles, turn the most hardened person to a follower of the Great Spirit.

With the certainty and power of the Rings he felt invincible, as though God Itself would protect him from every fall; that he could leap where he liked, for God would catch him.

With the certainty and power of the Rings, he envisaged the wealth and fame that would fall to him, as long as people knew that the Rings had come from him.

As he was pondering on these three ecstatic visions he noticed that Sidreatha lagged even further behind, and he worried that she might be taking ill.

He had, though, an invisible companion. The dubat that had already cast two spells on him skulked invisibly along beside, sniggering and scratching in delight. He had thought that Ajiras may have been strong enough to resist this third spell, which was known

amongst his cousins as "The Curse of the Called". But the three temptations of arrogance are powerful indeed for those who have recently found their power. There are those, amongst the wisest of women and men, who can resist them. But they are few. With Ajiras, the three pronged curse had found it's mark.

At last, as the sun dropped towards the horizon, Ajiras strode through the streets of the City. He was alone, for Sidreatha had dropped so far behind that Ajiras had lost sight of her. This had not troubled him though. The mare would know the way to the Stables, and he, Ajiras, had important work to do.

The streets and alleys of the City were a symphony of energy and conversation; people everywhere engaged in lively dialogue. There was joy and sadness, there was laughter and anger, there was agreement and disagreement. The human Spirit was alive in these conversations, playing and dancing in the cool evening air.

Ajiras was, at first delighted by this. For he could see that his Rings had taken hold. Everywhere, the familiar and beautiful symmetry of the Rings could be seen.

But as he looked closer his delight was overtaken by anger. For many had changed the words within the Rings. And some had even changed the shape of the Rings themselves.

He wandered into the City Square where many had gathered, seemingly to speak together of the Rings. The entire pavement was a-jumble with bright and faded Rings and words. They were drawn in chalk of many colours - a rainbow of dialogue - but Ajiras saw, to his horror, that they were not true to his own vision. Indeed, the very purpose of many conversations seemed to be in questioning and revising the Rings, rather than learning them.

A small cluster of women were pondering over the Third trinity. But where "Inquiry" should be, he found "Deep listening". "This is not the Rings as they were given!" he complained. And the women looked up, confused, but said nothing.

Another group stood talking around the Rings, yet "Choose Hope" was added to the Call, and "Hope" had replaced "Whole" in the first Trinity. "These words are sacred and are not to be trifled with!" he shouted at them, so that they turned away with fear in their eyes.

Another group stood over Rings that held Attending as the first Trinity, and Wisdom as the first word.

Another had left aside the Trinity of the Dreaming altogether, and still another was, it seemed, redrawing the Rings entirely, using a tangle of lines and arrows, so that the boy barely recognised them.

All around were other words - words that did not belong to the Rings yet had lines connecting them to the Rings. Words like power, culture, listening. Words like equanimity, peace, happiness. Strength. Courage. Joy. People seemed intent on invading the sanctity of the Rings by bringing in the words of other teachers, other histories, other peoples.

Everywhere he looked, the Rings were being questioned, and questioned, and questioned again. The boy was distraught. Had his entire journey been for nothing? Had he risked his very life, only so that people could twist and deform his sacred message?

He was distracted from these thoughts by raucous laughter, and found a group of loud young people hovering over the Rings. The Rings were in tact, but the youth were using them as a game! A stone would be thrown, and where it fell, a challenge was put. "True or False?", and the challenged one would tell a story that pertained to the word the stone had found. Was the story true, or false?. The young people were wild with hilarious stories, trying to out-do each other with their lunacy.

This was too much for Ajiras. He stood in the circle and kicked at the stone so that it was lost in the legs of the crowd. "How dare you make fun of these sacred Rings! These Rings can change lives. These Rings have come from God! You have no right to turn them into a cheap game!" He was flushed and angry to the point of shaking.

"Ahh man. Leave it be. We're just having fun with words and time. What can it matter to you?"

"I am the messenger who brought the Rings to the Kingdom. I found them. I risked life itself to carry them to the corners of the Kingdom so that they could be heard. I am the one who gave the blessed people of Heran their powerful message - a message that will see the Kingdom live again.

"I stand, then, as their guardian, and will not see the Rings desecrated while I have breath."

The youth around raised their chests in defiance, and an old man who was standing nearby intervened, and spoke to Ajiras.

"Take your leave, lad. No one is desecrating. These are just rings and words. Who can desecrate rings and words? Granted they inspire truth and questions. They speak of Spirit. But they are not Spirit! They speak of Hope. But they are not hope! Who can desecrate Rings and words? Take your leave."

Ajiras became furious. "You don't know what evil you speak. I must tell you so that you will understand. I must tell you all!"

With that, he climbed immediately onto a table and bellowed at the people so that all would listen: "My people, hear me! You are being led astray! These Rings were not given to you for games and questions! These Rings were not given to you so that you might re-draw them as you will, re-name them as you wish! You must stop this foolish talk. I am Ajiras. It is from me that these Rings have come, given to me in a forest many months ago. I am Ajiras, and I have journeyed far across the Kingdom so that the Rings would find their proper birthplace. I am Ajiras, and I stand here now to guard the Rings. I stand not against you, but for you. For when you see the beauty of the Rings unchanged, when you commit yourself to a life guided by the Rings, then you will know true freedom; then you will know true joy

Stop your foolish chatter! The Rings hold truth for you. You must accept them if you

want to find the one true way!"

He would have gone further, for he saw that he was succeeding at silencing, or in some cases dispersing, the foolish dissenters, but at that point a small man pulled at his cloak.

"What is it man?" he barked impatiently, glaring down at the humble messenger.

"Sir, the King has asked you to join him"

Ajiras was amazed and delighted. "Now", he thought " the Rings will find their rightful place in the Kingdom. Now the power of them will be understood"

CHAPTER 9

The Castle

The royal castle towered over the City Square, so that there was not far to walk. As he followed the messenger toward the Gate, he began to prepare his presentation to the King. The King, a wise and noble man indeed, would see the beauty, the inviolability of the Rings. More than this, he had the power to make their words Law through the land. "Then" thought Ajiras to himself, "the Rings will be safe from harm."

He was taken to the great balcony of the castle that overlooked the Square. But as soon as he arrived, he forgot his words, for the King was clearly unhappy; dismayed; angry.

"Young man: I have watched as you abuse and degrade your fellow citizens; desecrate their Spirit. I have watched you deny their search for truth. I have seen you put words and rings above human dignity. I have seen you reduce the beautiful noise of Spirited and diverse dialogue to the harsh screech of a single voice, brittle with certainty."

"Just as the Spirit of a million voices is beginning to re-invigorate the Kingdom and the City, I see you strive to choke that Spirit. Explain yourself!"

Ajiras was shaken by the King's anger, but his certainty of the need to protect the Rings held him firm.

"Lord: all you saw me do was defend the Rings that have become the subject of such debate in the City Square. There is something you do not know. It was me who found the Rings. They came to me one morning, many months ago now, in a small clearing beyond the Ring of Mountains. It was me who carried them to a village called Heran, walking through the very shadow of death to take them there. It was me who first revealed the Rings to the good people of that village, and so gave them voice throughout the kingdom. It is me, Lord, who is called to guard the truth of the Rings"

King Gabriel's eyes softened, though his anger still trembled. "What spell has been cast on you, young Ajiras?"

The stable boy stood, startled. "You know my name?"

"Ajiras", the King replied, "do you not remember standing in this very place, as I revealed the message of my dream to you? Do you not remember that I asked you to take the

message to the Edges, so that it would awaken the truth in people's hearts, rather than being feared as a word of law?"

Ajiras was, suddenly, deeply confused and disoriented. He stared blankly at the King, his eyes glazed, as if his whole view of the world had been pulled away from him and he could not yet focus on the view that had replaced it.

"Lord, I do not remember"

"Then somewhere in your journey, a spell has been draped on you. Yet, despite this, you have carried the message, and you have set it free. Your courage is clearly great, and you have done the Kingdom the greatest service; you have spoken truth, so that others may hear, and question, and speak theirs.

"So do not, young man, destroy your work by choking the truth of others!"

"But Lord" Ajiras replied, struggling to find focus again. "If these Rings are the message of the King, then, surely, they are sacred beyond all other truths. Then, surely they are the greatest of truths in our kingdom. Then, surely, they must be guarded against the mere ponderings of your subjects"

"Ajiras", the king replied, smiling gently. "I have dreamed many times, since I dreamed of the Rings you so love. I have heard truth in many forms. And I have sent out many messengers. You, it appears, are the first to have spoken your message to those who would hear. But there will be others.

"Your gift to the kingdom is not the Rings. Your gift to the kingdom is that you spoke truth aloud. Some will heed that truth, and many will question it, and so listen deeper, so that truth may be ever more revealed.

"My kingdom has begun to find its voice again. But the voice of a kingdom cannot be the voice of one. It must be the voice of many, or the Spirit will be choked.

"You say you are a guardian of the Rings. I say, instead, be a guardian of truth and justice. Guardianship of truth comes through the freedom of all to speak freely of their own truth. If you seek to guard mere words and rings, mere theory and rhetoric, then you stand against truth, for in doing so you choke the questions and answers of others.

"And guardianship of justice - of the equilibrium of needs that keep the kingdom whole - comes through the development of Spirit, for it is only Spirited people who will serve each other, and it is only Spirited people who will refuse to be crushed.

Hold the Rings dear, Ajiras, as I do. But hold them lightly, and rejoice in the questions that grow from them."

Ajiras felt wisdom in the Kings words, but there remained, within him, a grinding certainty - the Rings were too important, too self-evident, too complete in their symmetry to be compromised by others. This grinding certainty rose to the surface and, once again, he became agitated and angry;

"Sir, you must see, again, the power of these Rings. I fear you have been distracted and waylaid. There can be no other truths but these - they hold all other truth within them. They hold the Trinity of the God's three colours. They hold the seven days of the week. They hold the twelve months of the year, the twenty eight days of the moon's re-birth. Lord, the Rings are complete. I will not leave here until you have seen the error of your uncertainty"

The king, though, remained calm. "I know your passion. I felt it too when first I saw the Rings in my dreams. Yet I, in turn, was drawn back from certainty to truth, by the person who had given me the Rings, but in different form. She is now my senior Adviser. Her name is Sophia, and it was her gift of the three gold rings that sparked the fire of my dreams."

Ajiras was astounded. He reached deep into the inner pocket of his vest; reached for the rings that he had forgotten were there. "Rings such as these sir?"

"Ah, so you still have them. I thought you must have lost them if our last meeting had been lost to you"

Ajiras was puzzled by the King's words yet again. "Sir, these were given to me by a young girl who led me from the ocean to the village of Heran, through the labyrinth paths of a great forest. The girl was called Sophia."

At this, the King laughed in surprise and called for his senior Adviser. A minute later a beautiful woman walked onto the balcony, hair pouring behind like water. Again, Ajiras stared blankly. Again, the world seemed to change shape in front of his eyes. For here, before him, stood the woman who had shimmered and glistened behind young Sophia of Heran when she had farewelled him.

The king spoke first. "It seems Ajiras has lost your rings, and found them again." Without speaking Ajiras handed the Rings to Sophia, who turned them in her hands, and then stared at his eyes.

"I see you have travelled far. These are rings such as mine; handed down by the mothers' mothers. Yet they are different, for these have been glazed with innocence, while mine were glazed with attention. Your journey was a rich one indeed. Welcome back, Ajiras.

She slipped one ring over her hand, placed one over her heart, and wrapped the third around the hair of her head. Then she leant and kissed him lightly on the cheek saying, again, "Welcome back, Ajiras. Welcome back from your journey on the great circle of knowledge and innocence. Dine with me, and we will speak of your journey"

And with the feel of her kiss on his cheek, clarity and memory returned to Ajiras. As though seeing a great tapestry for the first time, Ajiras saw his journey in its completeness. He recalled, clearly, the first meeting with the King, recalled the power of the message as he first heard it and his excitement as he passed beyond the Ring of mountains. Yet he recalled, also, those for whom the Rings held little nourishment. The Gnomish Woman in the forest; The Old Man of the Emptiness; the Edgelings and the Seafarers. He recalled the humility he had felt when he had spoken his message to the people of Heran. He even saw, with a shock, the shadowy shape of the dubat that had

tried so hard to choke truth however it could.

And he stared back at Sophia, and felt, for the first time in his life, truly complete.

EPILOGUE

Sophia and Ajiras dined together that night, and spoke long. She loved to hear of his actions and experiences. He loved to hear of her wisdom. This is not the place to speak of their courting, but it nourished their Spirits and made them whole. In time they married, and lived together in a cottage by the stables. Joined, they led their lives in the service of the Trinity of Attending, a painting of which they hung on their wall. Ajiras cared for the horses and sometimes carried messages to all corners of the Kingdom. Sophia remained as adviser to the King, and to the many Queens and Kings who followed him.

It is often said, when the story of Ajiras journey is told, that the Dubats, at first, skulked away into the most tangled undergrowth they could find. But, as Spirit grew, people came looking for them and slowly, carefully brought them into the light of day where they could be seen, and where they could make their own offerings to the Kingdom.

For what is truth, if doubt is left cowering in the darkness? It is nothing but certainty. So the dubats, that had so long been agents of certainty, became, when brought gently out of the undergrowth, agents of truth.

The Spirit of our Kingdom has flourished from that day on, alive with the passion of dreams, of attention, of connection and of sustenance which the Rings call for.

THE END

Wistoria's account of Ajiras' journey was written some generations back. The Spirit unleashed at that time has lived on. But the Rings themselves, having done their work, have faded from view for all but students of philosophical history and, of course, we in Heran, who celebrate them to this day. As the waters are rising around our land, we have decided to cast a copy of our collection – including Wistoria's account – to the oceans. Even if the worst should happen, as some are predicting, we can take comfort that the Rings, and the story of their birth, may awaken Spirit in other land and times, as they have in ours.

You who may read this story, live your life well. And think of us; rejoice with us here in the Kingdom. Our Spirit breathes long and deep. Ajiras, Sophia, the King, the Edgelings, the Old Man, and the ever-arguing villagers of Heran have, in a way, never died. The dubats, the Gnomic woman, the Old Man, the dragons and, most of all, Sidreatha live on. As should always happen in Kingdoms of soul they lived, happily, ever after, and are still there, if you will only choose to see.

ENDNOTES ARE ONLY FOR AUTHOR'S REFERENCE – NOT FOR PUBLICATION