



# Earthbound

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# EARTHBOUND

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KIRRIATH PRESS

EarthBound

Book five of the Portals of Tessalindria Collection

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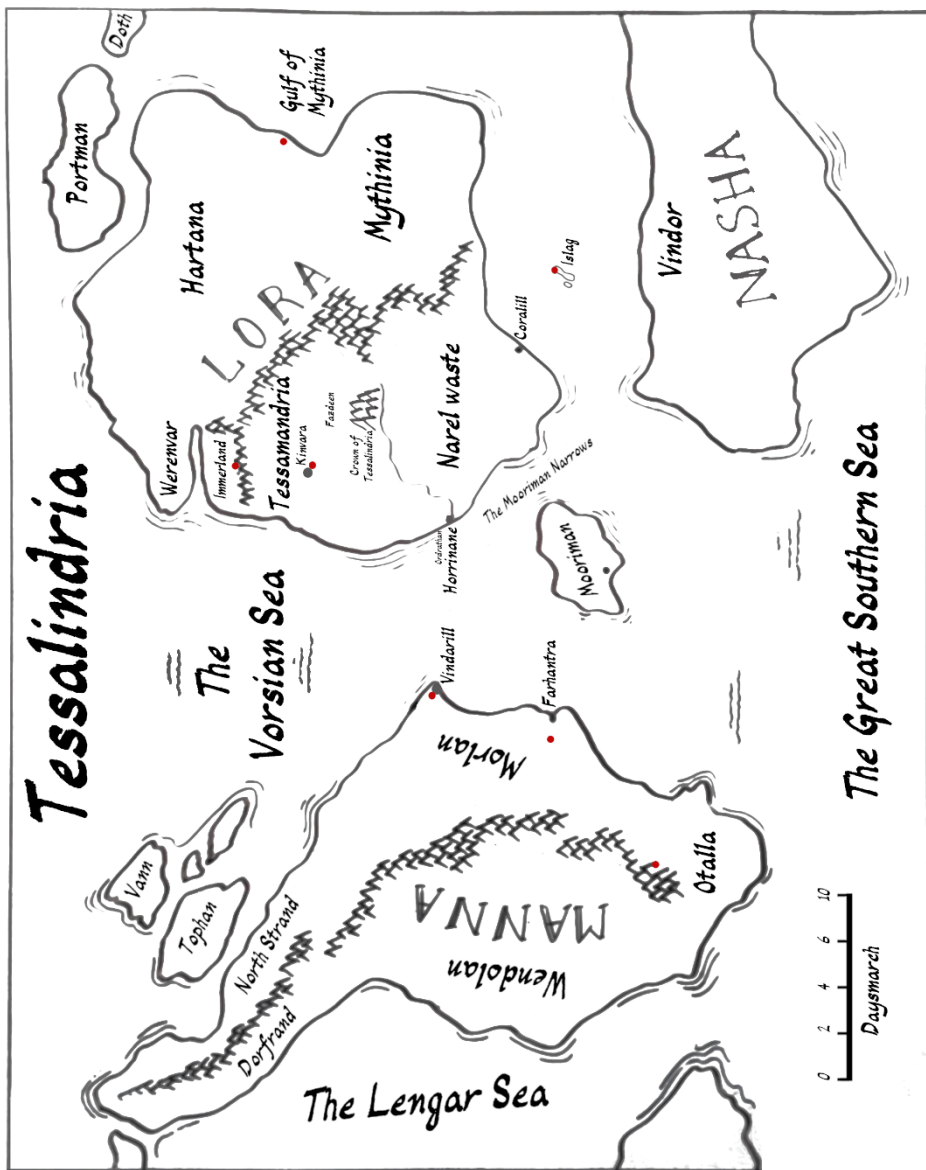
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To all those who  
struggle to see themselves  
for who they really are

*“Born of the lioness of Mooriman, a link in the chain of Rizerand,  
Hidden by distance from all the splendid aspirations of the mankind  
In abuse, he does not stumble in psadeq, nor fail in hakapa.  
In rebuke, he does not falter, but brings rebuke upon us all,  
And by his trials, are we shown the path through trial.*

*In life, he lifts the hand of the oppressed, and gives us hope.  
In death, he holds the hand of those who have died while living.  
Purified through the crucible of youth,  
And forged under the hammer of Asolara on the anvil of the NarEl Waste,  
So shall he emerge with the light of all life.*

*Through the portal he is called, and from that darkness, he comes in strength  
To stand against those who rule the mankind with fear.  
Like bitterleaf in the parched lands, a deep root that finds water in the wastes,  
He brings forth a drop for our tongues and healing for our vorns.*

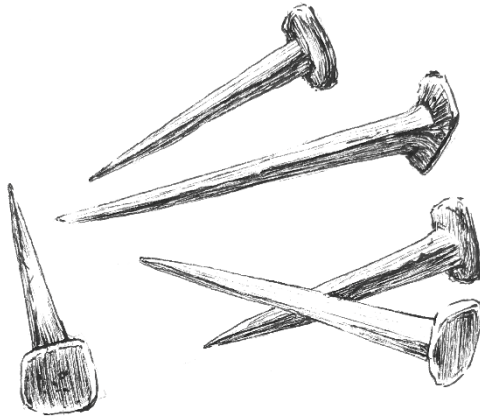
*With bread from the stones of the desert, in his hunger he feeds us all;  
On the path through dry lands, he shows us the hidden way  
with the gentle hand of the healer, that sets the bone without reproach,  
We are healed of the scourge of narmatan, and made whole without wholeness”.*

Volenkarta Sin  
Uliya Alnar

*“After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing  
proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke  
about the kingdom of God.”*

Acts of the Apostles 1:3  
Luke, the Evangelist

# EARTHBOUND



## 1. Nowhere

*“Faithful is the friend that leads you from death to life.”*

Journey to the infinite  
Karendo Marha

MAEL: The flax blade for Jaris glowed orange as it lay just below the surface of the coal in the firepot—the final heat of the night. The blade for the town’s weaver would cool in the bin of wood ash beside the forge, and Mael would do the final shaping in the morning.

A gust of wind pounded the north wall of the smithy, clattering the shingles. With a vicious slap, the shutter on the window by the door, freed itself from its restraint and slammed cross the window.

Mael glanced quickly down at the glowing blade, hesitated, then jumped toward the door.

The rain soaked his pant legs and back before Mael got the shutter properly refastened. He bolted back to the forge.

His face fell at the sparkle of burning steel. Two hours of forging lost in an instant of inattention.

He crossed his arms and watched the sparks with vacant eyes that reflected the inner emptiness that gnawed his vorn. "Burn well," he muttered as picked up the tongs to remove the blade from the fire. He examined the ruined edge briefly, before dropping it into the slack tub. It groaned as it hit the cold water and sent up one last gasp of steam as it sank in the blackness.

Mael pulled the door to the smithy closed behind him. His right hand fingers ached from the cold rain, as he fumbled to secure the lock.

With his hat tipped down against the wind that drove in off the harbor, he stepped off the stone stoop into the dark, empty street.

Menzor's shape appeared in the rain in front of him, startling him out of his frustration.

"Hey," she said.

Mael shook his head as he started toward home. "What are you doing here?"

"I felt you needed encouragement."

"And how did you *feel* that?"

"Be careful, Mael," she said.

"I burned another blade."

Menzor nodded. "It's not the end of the world," she said, "Or the end of your life." She strode beside him as he slogged through the muddy puddles on the road.

"Fada will be angry."

"Your father was young once."

"I am twenty-three, Menzor! I shouldn't be burning blades."

She didn't respond.

"The chimney doesn't draw properly in the wind," he said into the silence, "and the coal cokes differently when the air is wet."

"Your time is coming, Mael."

"You've said that before, but you know I can't leave. Matar's death left no one except me to take over for fada."

"Your father knows the prophecies, Mael. He trusts Mah'Eladra."

Mael shook his head. Cold beads of water dripped off his hat brim onto his shoulders. The rivulets snaked down his sleeves into his pockets. "I know the prophecies too."

Menzor nodded. "They are why I'm here, Mael. As a guardian of the ancient ways, this is my duty." She had explained her role as a Pistisine before.

"The prophecies are vague and distant—timeless," he said. "When I read them, they can mean anything about anyone—at any time."

"I followed your mother here for this purpose."

Mael looked straight ahead. "It all too ordinary. I'm the son of a free slave, destined to live as a free-slave myself. My friends are married and have homes and children, but I still serve like a child in my father's smithy."

"Do you think your friend's lives are simpler and more pleasant because of those things?"

They had had this discussion before. The honest answer was no, but something burned inside; a passion he couldn't identify. There was more—somewhere—somehow. He sometimes wondered if there was something wrong with him. No one he knew felt the guiding forces behind his life that drove him without mercy.

"The answer doesn't lie in the temple either," Menzor said, "but you know that already."

Mael nodded. "They treat me like I can't understand. I want to understand and I think I do, but they can't answer my questions."

Menzor frowned. "Their vorns have become hard and they have stopped listening. You must live what they teach, but not how they live."

"If they would read the book honestly..."

Menzor nodded.

"How is it that no one else sees all this?"

"There *are* others, Mael."

"And where are they?" He despised the desperation that flooded his voice and he knew he had to be careful.

"You will find them...*in time*...in a place you don't expect."

Mael wasn't so sure, but he knew it was pointless to pursue Menzor's vague allusion. Statements like this felt unfocused, like the prophecies. He wondered if *she* even knew what they meant.

"Would you like to come in for something to eat?" he said as they paused by the front door of his house. "You're always welcome."

She smiled. "I know, but not tonight, Mael."

He looked down into her eyes, clear as crystal, gray as the haze over Farhantra harbor before dawn. Her copper hair, cut just above her neckline was soaked and dripped onto the forest green scarf bound closely around her neck. The twenty-year age separation couldn't diminish the severity of her youth, somehow held in stasis by the force of her life.

"Are you sure?"

"Another time, Mael."

He hugged her. "Another time," he mumbled as he turned toward the door. "Another time."

He slipped through the door and looked back. Menzor had vanished. It was often like that. She came and went with the fluidity of a ghost. To this day, he wasn't even sure, where she lived.

Menzor wore a startling, severe beauty that rivaled any woman he knew, except perhaps his mother. At nearly the same age, his mother's endless burden of supporting a family that registered as nothing on the social ladder of the community, had faded her natural beauty.

Menzor appeared to be only slightly older than himself. Perhaps it was the Pistisine life and their knowledge of the way the world worked that kept her young. He liked her—was attracted to her—but the lifelong relationship kept him from thinking of her as anything but his guardian and mentor.

A fair breeze from the northwest had cleared the air during the night. Asolara breached the horizon as Mael and Fada walked together toward the smithy, skirting the puddles that remained on the road.

"I'll forge a new blade for Jaris first thing," Mael said.

Fada nodded. "What happened?"

"I was tired." He refused to excuse himself with an explanation about the shutter.

"Thinking about something else?" His father's deep voice accepted his answer with no hint of accusation.

"Things aren't going well at the temple."

His father stopped. Mael turned to face him. Fada's eyes shone in the early light of dawn—black as the coal that fired the forge, but luminous and large in the deep sockets above his chiseled cheeks. "You have to stay true to the Tessarandin, Mael, even if no one else does, even the priests."

"You've said that before." Mael turned to continue walking.

"It's important."

Mael shook his head. "I feel like I should go somewhere else. I come to the smithy and forge the same things again and again: Hooks, pokers, kitchen knives, scythe blades—pins and feathers for the quarry... I go to the

temple every day, and every day it's the same: I have questions. They think I'm too young to understand so they don't answer. I think they don't *know* how to answer and that's offensive to them. I go home and sleep. I come back to the smithy..."

"You're destined for great things, Mael."

"You keep saying that, Fada. Menzor says that. Mada says that, of course. All mother's think that their sons and daughters will be great someday."

"In your case, it's true."

Mael shook his head. "All the great men come from great places: Tessamandria, Vindor...Mythinia...Morriman. They're born into great families. They're trained in the great schools. Farhantra is a flea on a horse's shoulder—off the edge of nowhere—a Mooriman outpost—an afterthought. The streets are mud. The only stone is in the temple and the presidatory's palace."

"Be wise, Mael. The pride of the mankind wants us to believe that all that is important. It's not."

"How do you know?"

"The Tessarandin tells us."

"The priests read the Tessarandin and they're as greedy and selfish as the Mooriman Highborns."

"We have to be different, Mael. We have to try to live it."

"Yes, and what do we have? We're abused, then discarded like kitchen compost on the manure pile. We can't go to the schools..."

"Good morning, Aanaris," his father said to the older woman who waited at the door of the smithy. "Your sheers are ready. I'll get them as soon as we're inside." He unlocked the door, ushered Aanaris in and then waved to Mael.

Mael slipped past his father's broad shoulders. It felt more like entering a prison than a place to work and serve. He would serve this morning. After lunch, he'd go to the temple again.

The temple!—the dim possibility of escape. While shunned by the priests, they allowed him there, the singular bastion of power and authority that tolerated members of the underclass in Mooriman society. Though jaded by the escalating conflicts with the priests, the temple still offered Mael a ray of hope, illuminating a larger life that he felt burning inside.

Mael never actually made it into the temple. He stood before Elleth and the five other priests on the Kirrinal temple steps. "I don't understand why you make this so complicated, High Priest."

"You are too young to understand, Mael. We've been through this before."

"I'm capable of understanding anything that you can explain," Mael said, "but this doesn't make sense. It seems that you—all of you—would rather hold onto your way of life than hold to the noble truths. But you yourself have said that the noble truths don't bow to tradition and the culture of the mankind."

Elleth's eyes narrowed. "Someday you'll appreciate the teachings."

Mael shook his head. "If Mah'Eladra want all of the mankind to live out the Kirrinath, it can't require years of schooling to understand. Most of us will never have the luxury of such an education. We work for our bread, and honor Mah'Eladra by the sweat of our hands."

"How little you know—and you would teach us, Mael? It's taken us years to understand it so we can teach others what Mah'Eladra want."

"But what you are teaching me—and others—are simply rules that can't encompass the intent of the Kirrinath. The Kirrinath can't be reduced like this; it has to be lived out with wisdom—in the vorn—not from a rulebook. The evil intent of the mankind will find ways around any rule. They give the appearance of restraint, but are powerless to confine the unruly." Mael paused. The High priest glared silently.

"The mankind has proven over and over," Mael said. "that they don't want to, and cannot live by, rules. No collection of them can guide us properly. They breed guilt and failed obedience, and you and the others, use that guilt to enslave us to your will and the will of Vishtoenvar."

Elleth's eyes stormed. "Are you saying that we don't teach the will of Mah'Eladra? Such impudence is born in ignorance—and arrogance. We only listen to Mah'Eladra."

"You hear Vishtoenvar, who desires only to enslave and master the mankind for his rebellion."

"You know nothing of Vishtoenvar!" Elleth said. "It's blasphemy to attribute the work of Mah'Eladra to him."

"I've met Vishtoenvar." Mael replied. "I've felt his chill. I've tasted his hatred as he conspires to master the mankind. He promises comfort and to help us, but works only to enslave those who do not serve Mah'Eladra fully."

Mael continued: "I feel his chill here. You hate me because I stand before you with truth. You haven't found fault in what I say, but you conspire against me. We've known each other long, yet still you won't listen."

"Vishtoenvar would not show himself to you!" Elleth replied.

"But he does to you! You listen to his voice, yet speak to me of obedience to Mah'Eladra. Which is a greater blasphemy?"

Elleth stared at him.

Mael knew what he said was true, a truth so brutal that it could not be said with the compassion he desired. Years of compassion and patience had failed to change the conversation, yet his compassion remained, but Elleth, and the priests that followed him, stood at the threshold of his patience.

Mael wasn't sure it was his place to deliver the message, but the words came from deep within, from a reserve that he knew was from Mah'Eladra.

Mael turned and walked down the steps of the temple. He knew, somehow, that his last words would catalyze a conspiracy against his life.

Three days passed—long weary days sharpening knives and truing scythe blades for the harvest. He forged a set of identical hooks for a Mooriman noble who would point out inconsistencies and demand reduced payment. Mael couldn't refuse by law. A large chandelier that his father had designed and forged for the entrance to the presidatory's palace had to be riveted together—tiring, tedious, but exacting labor.

A neighbor had split the edge of his felling ax when the handle broke and the head hit a stone. Removing and refitting a new steel edge into the head took most of one afternoon.

The rhythm of the huge double-chambered bellows, once the breath of life to Mael, felt more like a death rattle now—long wheezing breaths that kept the fire alive for another round of nails for the addition on the back of the baker's shop.

He could do three nails in a heat: forge the point, cut the nail and drop it into the jig, four blows to square the head and repeat—five hundred times—three hours of tedium while his mind worked overtime on his frustration with the priests.

He hadn't been back to the temple. He hoped the extended hours in the smithy would alleviate his growing anger, but the rote work left his mind free to enlarge his vexation with this tiny, claustrophobic town while the huge, unexplored world surrounded it.

On the third night, he and fada worked late. "You've been working hard," Fada said as he locked the door to the smithy. "And no break for the temple?"

"I won't go there. I'm no longer welcome."

His father sighed. "It's your *life*, Mael. I see it in your eyes. I feel it in your vorn. You resonate to a vernal beat I have seen in few others. The smithy is work—but the temple is life to you."

Tears pushed up into his eyelids. "There has to be more," he said through clenched teeth. "Something bigger. Something more—real."

"Where would you go?" his father asked.

"I don't know," Mael said. Opening his mouth to speak clarified his thinking. "Tessamandria—Kinvara," he said. "I've heard the temple there is the greatest in all Tessa. Perhaps Vindor. Study at the school of Asha Vindor under the scholars there—Maybe to the stones of Ordathan..."

"Then you should go." His father barely whispered.

"What?" Mael had heard clearly, but wanted to hear it again.

"You should go."

"But how?"

"You know there are regular trade ships out of Farhantra to Mooriman. From there, there are routes to Horrinaire and south to Vindor."

"I meant, how can I leave you here—the family?"

"Koltar's an able smith. I can make him my apprentice until you return. We can make it work."

"What if I don't come back?"

His father smiled. "If we can make it work while you're gone, we can make it work if you stay gone."

Mael stared straight ahead, unable to speak further.

"I have watched you the last three days, Mael. You need to go. I've spoken with Mada. She knows better than I that it's time. She's known a long time—since you were born. I didn't want to know, but I see it now."

They paused on the front step before opening the door to the house. Fada stepped forward and wrapped his arms around Mael, leaning into the hug with his chin above Mael's shoulder. "We would miss you," he said as he compressed the breath out of Mael's lungs.

Tears sprouted from Mael's eyes. He couldn't speak. He wrapped his arms around his father's chest and returned the squeeze. His breath rolled forth in the chilled night air. The stars danced before him. He had never felt this way in his life that he could remember. Fear sought to eclipse his elation but a deep resolve welled up to overwhelm both.

He fell into a fitful sleep that night, staring out his garret window into the infinity of the deep sky.

Someone shook Mael's arm. He struggled to open his eyes. Meekar's pale half-light, filtered by the trees outside, offered him barely enough to see.

Menzor hovered over him. "Mael...Mael!" She spoke close to his ear. The urgency of her voice brought him to full awareness.

"What time is it?" he said. "What are you doing here?"

She held her index finger over her lips. "Come with me!"

"Where?"

"No time! Get dressed—traveling clothes."

Mael swung his legs out of his blanket to the floor.

Menzor was dressed for the woods—a dark tunic with a hood—leather leggings and soft leather footwear bound up around her calves. Her belt carried a leather water pouch opposite her long knife in its leather sheath.

"Quickly! We're traveling light."

"Do I need anything else?"

"No time—come!" She leapt to the open window, and slipped through it onto the low roof over the chicken coop. Mael followed. She turned back to him with her finger over her lips. He nodded.

She dropped over the edge of the roof, landed silently on the ground. She grabbed her staff she'd left against the roof post, and took his hand to lead him away from the house.

At the back gate to the goat pen, she stopped and crouched down, pulling him down and cupping her hands to his ear. "No time for goodbyes," she said as she pointed toward the front of the house. Shadow figures on horseback dismounted quietly. Mael counted six.

Menzor pulled him through the gate and closed it silently before moving into the shade of the lemon tree. She pointed up. Two shadows swept over them toward the house. Gulls! Mael felt the chill as they moved overhead. It vanished as they passed out of site.

Menzor started out toward the tree line into the woods. They moved quickly, like shadows in the scant light, their dark hooded tunics shielding them from eyes that hoped to catch him in his house.

When they reached the trees, Menzor pulled him into a copse of dense undergrowth and then turned, with her finger again to her lips. They crouched behind a rotted log and watched.

Torches flared. Voices drifted across the field—loud, angry voices. The torches were in the house now. His father yelled; his mother screamed. Chaos ensued. The torches entered his room in the garret.

"Who are they?" Mael whispered.

"Temple guards—and a couple priests." Menzor yanked him to his feet.

It had all happened so fast. Mael hadn't been aware of his senses, but now, plunging along in the darkness on Menzor's heels, he became suddenly aware of a vernal darkness that surrounded them.

Menzor stopped. Mael ran into her. "Do you feel it?" she asked.

Mael nodded. "What is it?"

"Messenger gulls!" Menzor waited as she caught her breath. "They're tracking us."

He shivered. "Ever felt it before?"

She nodded. "Many times."

"Where are we going?"

"I'm taking you to the portal."

"What?"

"To the portal. Elleth has ordered your arrest. It's time to leave."

Mael's mind reeled. "How far is it?" was all he could say.

"Two daysmarch."

"You know the way?"

"Several ways!"

"They have horses."

"Then we'll go where the horses can't!"

"What about the gulls?"

"We'll do the best we can."

They stuck to rocky backwoods trails, where horses couldn't follow. They waded up streams, to cover their passage. They climbed trees and leapt onto cliffs from the branches, tracing along the tops of rocky outcrops to find other trees, which they used to climb down.

Menzor paused frequently to listen, though Mael didn't know what she was trying to hear. She often tensed into high alert. Mael had never seen her like this: focused, aware and so quick to make decisions. That night, they slept in a shallow cave that she had found, with no fire.

"Mael," she said in the darkness, close beside him.

"I'm here."

"I'm afraid," she said. Her voice quivered.

"You? Afraid?"

"Yes."

Mael didn't know what to say.

"Mah'Eladra told me to bring you to the portal. There's a secret entrance that's unknown to the priests and they're guiding us there."

"Mah'Eladra?"

"Yes. I'm to see you safely into the portal—"

Mael waited in disbelief.

"I'll not be coming with you."

"No!"

"It has to be this way, Mael."

"You have to come!"

"I can't."

"Why?"

"The portals move to the will of Mah'Eladra. They've made it clear that I can't go with you. I've implored them. Since coming to Farhantra, you've been my life, Mael, and I want to go with you. But they won't allow it." Her voice wavered with emotion that Mael had never felt from her. In the utter darkness of the cave, he could see nothing. She sniffed.

"Why are you afraid?"

"I am going to die defending you into the portal."

"What?"

"We're in great danger, Mael. I won't escape."

Mael's mind reeled. "Are you afraid of death?"

"Yes." She said in a hushed whisper.

Mael sat stunned.

"...and no."

Mael shook his head.

"Mah'Eladra has been good to me, Mael, and I don't fear the infinite, or to climb the golden stair into the deep sky—but the violence of dying at the hands of the priests..."

"We don't have to do this."

"We do. You have to go into that portal and you must do it alone."

"We don't have to do this now. We can hide until it's safe."

"No Mael, there's an appointed time."

Mael's mind raced. Emotions flooded through him.

"I love you, Mael." It was barely a whisper. "I have since you were born."

"Why are you telling me this now?"

"So that you know. I cannot bear the thought that you might not know."

Tears sprouted in his eyes and rolled down his cheeks. He reached out and groped for her hand. When he touched it, she pulled it back.

He had always loved Menzor in a way that was genuine, not selfish, but never thought to tell her. "I—I—" Why couldn't he say it?

She sat quietly in the darkness. He could see nothing, but her felt her nearness.

"I—have always loved you too." He stammered a whisper.

"I know."

They sat for a long time without words.

"We have to sleep," she said. "Tomorrow's another long day."

She said nothing more.

Mael couldn't will himself to sleep. He lay for a long time on the leaves they'd brought into the cave. He wanted to touch her—He was afraid to touch her. The slow, rhythmic breath of her sound sleep filled the darkness. He didn't remember falling asleep.

Water dripping from the vines that hung from the brow of the cave woke Mael from his fitful sleep. Menzor sat in front of him. "Eat," she said as she handed him a dry biscuit. "And drink." The water skin was in her left hand. "We have to hurry."

Any emotion from the conversation in the dark was gone, or perhaps hidden behind the mask of her role in his life.

"How far today?"

"A full day," she said between bites on her biscuit, "but tonight we can rest if we make our goal."

"Our goal?"

"Come, we have to go." She stood up and shouldered her pack.

Mael glanced out as he stood up. A drizzling fog obscured the view beyond ten paces.

"A good day for traveling," Menzor said. "The woods are wet and protected by the fog. The gulls won't be able to track us. Come."

Mael slogged along behind her as she pressed through the woods. It wasn't long before he was soaked. The dampness chilled him. He shivered and his teeth chattered. He wasn't convinced that this portal idea was good, especially in light of the revelation the night before. His mind burned with a strange understanding that he had never felt.

He wasn't ready to leave. He'd made no farewell to his family, fada especially. He knew somehow that both fada and mada would understand his leaving, but his sudden disappearance wasn't the way it should have happened.

New feelings for Menzor twisted through his thoughts; feelings he had never had before, but restrained by her opaque stride as she walked in front of him, pausing now and then to make decisions on their path.

With odd turns—ups and downs, they twisted through wet thickets that tore at his clothes and made him wetter and colder.

They paused for a quick lunch. Menzor offered no crack in her veneer. Late in the afternoon, the clouds pulled away and the slanted rays of Asolara warmed the air as they filtered through the canopy.

They pushed through a thick growth of bushes covered with plump red berries he had never seen before. "Don't touch the fruit," Menzor said.

They emerged from the berried bushes into a stand of slender trees, each the thickness of three hands, and perfectly straight as they towered up to a dense green canopy ten paces above them.

The ground in front of them sloped down for about fifteen paces and ended at the edge of a pond. The surface of the water was as flat as glass and reflected the trees on the other side like a mirror.

Just before the water, the land leveled and cleared. A small ring of stones graced the center of a clearing with a fire burning in it. To the side was a neat stack of firewood.

Menzor led him to the fire and sat down, pointing beside her for him to join her.

"What is this place?" he asked as he sat down on the moss in front of the fire. "And how is the fire burning? Were we expected?"

Menzor nodded. "We were."

Mael shook his head.

"This is the Shihou Margah, Mael."

"Margah?"

Menzor nodded.

"Like the Grand Elia Margah in the Crown?"

"Well—in concept yes," Menzor smiled, "but hardly the same scale."

"So what is it then?"

"There are many margahs, Mael. This is a small one. They're hidden around Tessalindria—refuges for the Eladra in their work. Most of the Mankind don't know they exist. Most of the Mankind are forbidden to enter them."

Mael stared into the fire. "The Eladra are real? They're still here today?"

"Very real and very present."

Mael's mind raced to Menzor's assertion. He wondered why, if what she said was true, that he had never seen one. He feared asking more. He knew the legends of the Eladra: the servants of Mah'Eladra who had filled Tessa with wonders for the mankind to enjoy. He knew the stories of Vishtoenvar's rebellion, and the scorching of the NarEl waste, but he never assumed the Eladra were still present.

"We're safe here," Menzor intruded into his thoughts. "The priests that chase us are forbidden. We can sleep in peace. We have food, and the fire to warm us."

Mael looked around. The mirror lake was only five paces from them. "It's beautiful," he said.

Menzor nodded. "We're forbidden to touch the water—or to drink it or to eat any of the fruit in the margah. Those are the only restrictions we have."

"Why?"

"It just is, Mael. It's this way in all the Margah's."

They fell silent again.

"Is the portal nearby?" he said after a time.

"Very near."

She leaned forward and opened her pack, drawing out her last bits of food. Two small raisin cakes, an apple and two small dried fish wrapped in a piece of linen. As she spread out the linen, another apple appeared with two small glasses, already filled with an amber liquid.

Mael startled. "How did you do that?"

Menzor ignored his question and handed him one of the glasses. She took the other into her own hand, and raised it in a toast. She smiled as the glasses clinked together. "To life and all that it means."

"To life," Mael echoed as he sipped the liquid. It rolled like gold over his tongue, a strong, smooth aromatic that burned as it coursed down his throat. He felt it all the way down into his stomach and suddenly felt the effect on his vorn. His mind cleared. The aromas of the moss and trees intensified into a hyper-sense. "What is it?" he said.

"Amberviol," she said.

Mael took another sip.

"It's an ancient gift to the mankind from the Eladra, to sharpen the mind and senses in the times of great stress...like today."

They stared into the fire, sipping the strange elixir until it was gone from both glasses. Mael tingled. The subtle sounds of the fire heightened and the wind in the trees made it feel as if they were talking. He looked at Menzor. Every strand of hair and each small detail of her face stood out against waning light of the day. The grayness of her eyes sparkled. She looked up.

"What?" she asked.

"About last night..."

An odd hiss on the other side of the fire arrested his intended words. A giant materialized from the hiss. Menzor stood up. Mael jumped to his feet.

"Welcome to Shihou, Mael, son of Dilarna."

The huge warrior's hair fell like gold over his shoulders. Burnished greaves adorned his shins and his forearms bore gleaming bronze bracers. Leather armor shrouded his torso and loins, and his belt bore a scabbard housing a short sword with an ornate silver hilt across his right hip.

Mael stepped in front of Menzor.

The giant sat down. Menzor grabbed Mael's arm and pulled him back. "This is Vishtalar, Mael. Your guardian."

"Guardian?"

"Sit down, Mael." Menzor reseated herself on the moss.

Mael sat down.

"Vishtalar has been your guardian from the beginning, though you have never seen him."

"Eladrim?"

Menzor nodded.

"Since the beginning? Like when I was born?"

Vishtalar smiled. "Since before you were born."

"When I was imprisoned for not making that dagger for the Mooriman Highborn?"

Vishtalar nodded. "It could have been a lot worse."

Mael's hand involuntarily moved to the scar across his right cheek. He held up his right hand. "When they took me to work in the quarry or when they crushed my hand?"

"They would have done more. I restrained their abuse."

Mael stared at the giant.

"Menzor has told you about your journey?"

"Some."

"Do not fear, Mael."

Mael stared into the fire. "I am trying. There's a lot to fear."

Menzor stirred. "I told him what I know."

"I know," Vishtalar said.

"Does it have to be this way?" Mael said.

The giant nodded.

"I'm not ready."

"Readiness is not a requirement."

"Will you let Menzor die?"

"That is not my province."

Menzor looked up at Mael and shook her head as if to say 'don't ask that question.'

"Are we truly safe here?"

"In the Shihou Margah, you are beyond the reach of any evil. You should rest now. Tomorrow is not far ahead. I will be with you."

Vishtalar vanished with a hiss.

Mael still felt the heightened effects of the Amberviol. "How long does this feeling last?" he asked

Menzor smiled. "A while. You'll still feel it tomorrow."

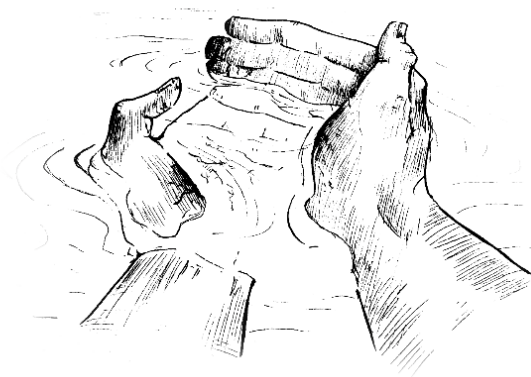
"About last night..." Mael said.

"I should not have said those things," Menzor said as she stared into the fire.

"But you did."

“Yes and it’s true—but I cannot talk of it further at this time. We need rest for tomorrow. We’re safe here. Sleep now. In the morning you’ll go through the portal.”

“Menzor—” The rest of the sentence stalled in Mael’s mouth. He looked down and shook his head as he reached for one of the raisin cakes. “Thanks for the food—and the Amberviol,” he said.



## 2. Portal

*"The purposes of Mah'Eladra are clarified in waiting."*

The Essences of Corritanean Wisdom  
Hispattea

**MAEL:** Dawn came quickly in the margah. No bird song graced its appearance. No breeze moved the branches of the trees. It seemed as if the world had stopped.

Menzor said little. She divided what was left of the food and they ate in silence.

The circumstances trapped Mael's mind in an endless loop of futile thoughts: His own journey, Vishtalar's role in his life, Menzor's death, images of the portal...all coursing randomly through the pathways of his mind.

Menzor stood up. "It's time." She offered Mael her hand. She pulled him to his feet as if he weighed nothing. "The portal is over here," she said.

Mael followed as she moved up the slope to the right. She left everything behind except her staff and her sheathed knife.

She led him about twenty paces to a small dip in ground, nestled into the woods. "Here," she said.

At the bottom of the dip, a small square opening lay between two boulders, shrouded with moss that had been undisturbed for years. "I'll go first, she said. "You follow. No talking."

She entered feet first, squirming into the small opening and dragging her staff behind her. When she'd disappeared, Mael sat down and imitated her entrance.

By the time he had worked his way in, Menzor was holding some sort of greenish light that barely illuminated the cave. The ceiling was low, but they could almost stand up. She held her finger to her lips. Mael nodded.

They crept along in the near darkness. At one point, Menzor stopped and cupped her hands over his ear. "Around the next corner—the portal. Quiet."

Mael followed closely as she crept into the vaulted chamber. She stood up. As she did so, torches flared and they both shielded their eyes from the sudden light.

"We were expecting you." The unmistakable voice of the High Priest.

Menzor stepped in front of Mael. "And we you," she said.

"The protection of the Margah doesn't extend here," said the High Priest.

"The protection of Mah'Eladra is everywhere," Menzor countered.

Mael's eyes were adjusting to the light and he dropped his arm. A pace behind him, a vale of smoky, black ink, restrained by some unknown force into a vertical wall, twitched in the torchlight.

The High Priest stood in front of them in his full priestly regalia. The drawn sword in his hand crossed down in front of his knees—tense—like a drawn bowstring waiting to lose an arrow. Mael studied the scowl on his face.

Behind the High Priest stood four more Kirrinal priests, their hands gripping swords that pointed down at the stone floor. Readiness glinted in their eyes below their blue and white turbans. Four temple guards stood behind them. Burnished helmets gleamed in the light from the torches they held. Their dark, vacant eyes betrayed willing obedience to the slightest utterance from the High Priest.

Menzor stood beside Mael, her staff ready in both hands, with the stout end protectively angled in front of his chest.

"If you enter the portal you'll die," the High Priest said.

A subtle indignation flooded into Mael as the priest spoke; a sudden strengthening of resolve to stand against his hypocrisy. "Should I prefer to face death by your sword, High Priest?"

The priest's eyes narrowed. "You know the legends, Mael. You've blasphemed the gods. Your death in the portal will be eternal and painful in the hands of Mah'Eladra. If you die by my sword, your narmatan will be released and you will only face oblivion. If you live, you know that no one will listen to a disfigured son of an Otallan dog!"

The black nothingness of the portal shifted behind Mael. Legends of the inky surface spoke of cold terror for those who entered; passage to an unknown place and time. To Mael, the blackness warmed his back.

"He lies," Menzor said through her teeth. "I've been through the portal. It's not death, even for those who are imperfect."

The priest's eyes stormed. "She's the liar, Mael. She's been lying to you since birth. You know that. We all know that. She pretends to be a Pistisine Guardian, but has no education. No knowledge. She'll die with you for her impudence and then, what will either of you gain?"

The priest tossed his head to one side. The other priests spun their swords up into attack position as the High Priest slowly lifted his sword up in front of his eyes. "You have such potential, Mael." He examined the blade. His dark eyes glittered with anger as they coursed along its edges. "You'd be a valuable addition to the temple, if you'd renounce the foolishness she's used to ensnare you. We wouldn't have pursued you, if we didn't think it worthwhile to rescue you. Your stubbornness is pitiful!"

"Now you have choice:" the priest peered past his blade into Mael's eyes. "Reject her and join us, throw yourself into the infinite torture of the portal—or die by my sword."

Mael stared back. His vorn, deep in his core, ached for those of the priests. More so for the guard's excusable ignorance. He hurt for Menzor, for he knew her fate, and none of the three options would avoid that.

Death from the priests' swords would end his life, but there was more to learn—something else he had to do. Joining in the hypocrisy of the Kirrinal temple worship, even in the hope to help them change, was futile. The priest had given himself into the service of Vishtoenvar to a depth from which there was no escape. The unknown of the portal was the only path out.

The priest's voice chilled. "Choose the manner of your death, blasphemer!"

"I choose life!"

The priest moved fast, but Menzor was an instant ahead of him. His descending blade severed her staff at the thick end, glancing far enough to the right that its tip only slit Mael's palm on the way down. The other priests

moved in behind him, four swords arching down on Menzor who shouted, "Go, Mael!" She stepped in front of him.

Mael reached out, grabbed the back of Menzor's tunic and sprang back into the warm darkness. His last memory of his beloved mentor was her fall under the descending blades of the priests. He was not fast enough to avoid one last thrust from a sword that pierced her body and then ran through his left hand. He let go and yanked his hand off the sword as he stepped farther back. All sound and light disappeared. Pain flooded over him as he stumbled backward in the utter nothingness of the portal.

Three—four—five steps back—he tripped on something and lost his balance. He expected to fall hard onto the rough, stone floor, but it vanished beneath him. He cried out as he fell into the darkness that swallowed his voice, somersaulting out of control into a soundless abyss.

ELLETH: Elleth's eyes fell to the task of wiping the blood off his sword with the hem of his robe. The blood on the thick, blue wool angered him. *By the throne of Vishtoenvar . . .* In front of him, crumpled and bloodied on the floor, lay the charlatan Pistisine, slaughtered by the other priests. He turned to them as they wiped down their own swords.

"We're rid of her, Highness," said Tanar without looking up from his task.

"You were supposed to slay *him*, not her!"

"We tried, highness. *You* tried—she was in the way."

"We should never have let him get here."

"I think your first stroke injured him, highness."

"Injury wasn't the objective," said Elleth. "The master wanted him dead."

"I don't understand why Vishtoenvar didn't just kill him when he had the chance," said Arth.

"Vishtoenvar has some arrangement with Mah'Eladra, even as he denies they exist. He speaks in riddles when I'm with him; vagaries and fragments that I don't understand—he never gives me details."

The priests sheathed their swords and straightened their bloodstained robes.

"Why was Mael so important that all five of us had to come after him?" Dargan said.

Elleth let out a deep breath as his scowl deepened. "Vishtoenvar wanted to be sure we ended it."

"What happens now?" Arth said.

Elleth shook his head. "Let's go." He turned to the captain of the guards. "How do we get out of here?"

The captain saluted. "Follow me, Highness."

"What about the woman?" Arth paused over the bloodied corpse in front of him.

Elleth's eyes narrowed. "Throw her into the portal!" he said as he turned to look at the captain.

The captain lowered his eyes. "She should be burned in Eshen, Highness."

Elleth's eyes flooded red. "She's a blasphemer. She deserves no such honor."

"If you wish to treat her like this, do it yourself."

"You defy me?"

"With all respect, Highness, it's *your* teaching that requires Eshen for any of the mankind. If you want her thrown into the portal, do it yourself."

"It's forbidden that a priest of Kirrinal should touch a person so dishonored in death. Her blood would defile me." Elleth stared into the captain's eyes.

The captain remained unmoved. "Her blood covers your robes."

"The blood of the sword doesn't defile us. The blood of her flesh would. Into the portal!"

Their eyes locked for a long moment.

"I'll report this to the commander, captain. You know your disobedience to the will of a Kirrinal high priest won't bode well for you."

The captain didn't move.

"Do I have to cross swords with you?" Elleth said as he reached for his blade.

The captain's eyes fell in disgust. He nodded his head to the other guards. "Into the portal!"

The three other guards stepped forward. They stooped over Menzor's remains and took hold of her clothing, trying to avoid touching her flesh. Their hesitance showed their distaste.

With two swings, they tossed her into the dark wall. The darkness roiled as wispy fingers of black shot out and wrapped themselves around the ankles and wrists of the guards. They called out in panic, scrambling back from the portal. The wisps retracted into the wall, which writhed momentarily before calming into the sooty edifice it had been when they arrived.

The guards trembled as they moved back from the darkness, wiping defiled hands on the backs of their leggings.

The woman's severed right hand lay near the edge of the blackness. "That too," Elleth said.

The captain scowled, took two steps forward and sent the hand into the black wall with his foot. The wall swallowed it without a sound.

Elleth looked up. "Well done, Captain. Well done. You'll find that it's much simpler this way."

The captain scowled as he turned to the passage leading away from the portal. "Follow me, Highness."

Elleth stood alone in the sanctuary of the Kirrinal Temple. He liked the elliptical shape, and the high vaulted ceiling with a circle of windows around the base of the arched roof. His eyes moved down from the intricately painted ceiling to the narrow balcony that circled the room. Thirty stone columns rose from the polished floor to support the balcony with room behind each for three men to walk abreast. A large eight-pointed star in a blood-red stone adorned the center of the polished, gray marble floor.

He shivered in the cold breeze. It was always so, even in the hottest part of the summer. The air moved as if it were sweeping in from the ends and exiting the ceiling above, but he had never found any openings beside the ornate double door at one end of the ellipse.

Vishtoenvar had summoned him here as he entered the city. He had been riding all night and still wore his blood-stained robe. He stood on the center of the red star and waited. That was the protocol.

He tumbled the anticipated conversation through his mind, rationalizing answers and his defense of any possible attack from the Lord of the temple. It was delicate business and fraught with pitfalls as these conversations always were.

The light shifted as Vishtoenvar entered the room. Elleth had no understanding of how this happened, but his presence was undeniable. He didn't speak—protocol.

The wraith appeared like a vague shadow as he descended to the floor and snaked through the columns—cold smoke that left a chill with no odor. "Tell me how you fared with the young Mael." The hiss came from behind Elleth and raised the hair on the back of his neck. He dared not look.

"Oh lord, you know these things."

"Speak, priest. Use your words." The voice was closer and colder.

Elleth shuddered. "He escaped Farhantra with the help of the charlatan."

"I warned you about her."

"Yes. We underestimated her treachery."

"Your pride clouded your judgment. Do you think I warned you to no purpose?" The gray mist twisted twice around Elleth and paused just in front of him, almost materializing as it posed the question. Elleth looked up and it vanished backward away from him "Answer me!" The command lingered in the air before him.

"You warned me Lord. You did."

"And you didn't move to intercept them?" The voice descended from dome above Elleth, moving backward as it whispered.

"We did—I did—with four other priests and four temple guards."

"And?"

"They escaped into the woods. The charlatan knew paths where the horses couldn't follow. We tracked them with messenger gulls and the soldiers and horses followed us."

"But you didn't catch them!" What should have been a question was whispered as a statement from somewhere in the colonnade to his left.

"We didn't catch them."

The wraith moved more slowly, circling and coming in closer with each turn. The traces of mist touched Elleth's hands and ruffled his robe. He tried not to flinch.

"We guarded the two entrances to the caves that we knew about. They got in somewhere else."

"Did you find out where?"

"We are searching for it. The woman must have known."

Vishtoenvar wrapped around him closely, then suddenly pulled away. "You don't know that they entered the portal?"

"No. We *are* sure. I saw Mael enter, but we cut down the charlatan as she defended him. My sword cut his hand. Arth may have injured him also."

The wraith spiraled upward toward the high vault. "And the Pistisine, what happened to her body?"

Elleth trembled. "We threw it into the portal."

All motion stopped. It was as if the lord had left the temple, but Elleth wasn't sure. He held his breath.

A sudden downward blast of the wraith's presence forced him to his knees. "Fool!" The voice thundered from all sides at once as if the entire temple had shouted it. Elleth dropped his head and covered his ears with his palms, waiting for a physical blow that never came. Vishtoenvar disappeared without explanation; no direction; only the empty fear of

disappointing the one who kept him in power, and the vague sense that the matter wasn't finished.

**MAEL:** As suddenly as he fell, Mael stood again on solid stone. The queasy feeling of free-fall vanished, but it was still dark and quiet beyond his experience. He stomped his foot. The shock rippled up his leg without sound. He waved his hand in front of his face. Nothing. He touched his cheek, with fingers sticky from the gash across his right palm.

His left hand throbbed as the blood dripped from his fingers. He still felt the coarse texture of Menzor's tunic. Tears streamed down his face into the darkness.

He knelt down to avoid the risk of falling again and inched forward, patting his hands along the unseen floor in front of him. They ached from the injuries but he knew no other way to navigate the unknown.

After about five paces, the air changed on his hands and then his face as he emerged into a more ordinary darkness. He could hear again, but there was still no sound. He breathed deeply to stabilize his feelings. "Hello?" His voice reverberated off close walls—a small chamber—or perhaps a corridor.

He sat down on the stone floor, and tucked his hands into the folds of his tunic under his armpits. They needed attention. He had to do something—perhaps he had to do nothing. The clear voice of armatan spoke in his vorn, that deep inner composite that formed the core of every Tessalindrian. *"Wait, Mael. What happened was not an accident. The purposes of Mah'Eladra are found in waiting."*

Menzor's image filled his mind. She was ready. Her death had been swift at the hands of the High Priest and the temple guards, perhaps not even long enough to recognize the pain of it. Her sacrifice meant something to history, but Mael sensed it only vaguely, a ghostly image through smoky glass.

She had served him and his family since before he was born, but she never spoke of her purpose nor the reason for her presence. Her selflessness had taught him truths and showed him paths that he would never have seen without her and it saved his life in this one, final heroic action.

Her death was now far in his past, or perhaps deep in his future, possibly removed from him by millennia in either direction, and by some distance—some place on the other side of the world. More tears wet his cheeks from the imagery of her last moments.

Mael waited. He pinched the skin of his hands together to stop the flow of blood, but his shallow breath and the dizziness told him he was weak from its loss.

The sensory deprivation of his tomb heightened his awareness. The first slight sound brought him to full attention—a small scrape, somewhere to his left—several light taps, as if someone were on the far side of a solid stone wall. Another scrape and more taps, then a sudden grinding that lasted but a moment—another grind and then a faint light opened into the darkness.

Mael rose carefully. He shuffled toward the light. The light was darkness beyond the crack, but even Tessalindria's night was bright compared to the darkness of the portal and this tomb.

With a sudden burst of motion and grinding stone, a doorway opened before him.

"Mael! Come!" Vishtalar!

Fresh air from outside washed over him as he moved forward.

"Come! Quickly!"

He paused at the narrow opening. Vishtalar took his wrist and yanked him through. The opening ground closed behind him. He whirled to look. A round stone, the thickness of the length of his forearm and taller than he was, rolled back over the opening and sealed it shut against the solid rock behind it.

Vishtalar took his shoulders in his hands and looked down into his eyes. "You are safe now, Mael. And you are here." He smiled before dropping his hands. "I must go, but I am nearby."

"Wait! Where am I? And when?"

"You are *here*, Mael! Now!"

"What happened to—" The giant smiled and vanished with a hiss, leaving him alone in the night with many unanswered questions and an unbearable grief. He wept for Menzor. He wept for his loneliness. He had never been so alone in all his life.

The tears subsided after a time and he looked up. Thin tree limbs snaked over him occluding most of the sky, but Tal hung low over the horizon. A white gravel path glimmered in the darkness, and led to where he could see the sky. The stars would tell him where he was.

In twenty paces, the path rose and he came into an opening. He was in a garden, but stood where the shadows of low buildings that surrounded it and the short trees occluded the horizon. In spite of the thin crescent of Tal's light overhead—wait! It wasn't Tal. Its light was more yellow and the markings on its surface weren't the same. It was larger, and not as bright.

His eyes roved to the stars—thousands of stars, all different in brightness, points of light that spangled the sky with their glory, but it was all different—no familiar patterns. He looked for Elgatora. They were nowhere to be seen. Without Elgatora, Vitorinda should be visible with his spear—or Allizar. If he couldn't see Nolaran in the turtle's leg he should be able to see the Hellscor ring...

Nothing! *Where* was now the greater mystery. *When* remained opaque.

To his left was a small grassy area where he could sit and wait. His mind roiled with questions. It took discipline and courage to wait when every thought called for action.

He sat cross-legged in the cool grass, and leaned forward with his elbows on his knees to think. As he dropped his chin into his palms, he gasped as his short thick beard stabbed at his wounds. He looked more carefully in the faint light. The wounds weren't bleeding but his heart pulsed under the painful, half-dried furrows in his skin.

The skin of his right palm had been sliced by the priest's sword from the base of his thumb to his little finger. Dark sticky blood smeared over the rest of his skin, and it was tender.

Blood still oozed from the puncture through his left hand, and it ached terribly. He licked the back of his hand, gently cleaning the backside of the wound from the outside edges with the softness of his tongue. Clean water would be best, but ...

Clean Water! His mind leapt to the intense thirst as the sound of running water invaded his awareness. He stood and moved toward it.

A trough of wood carried a flow of water from the base of a low hill until it fell into a shallow pool carved into a wide flat stone. It ran over the far edge of the stone and disappeared into a bed of white gravel.

Mael fell to his knees in the gravel to get a drink where the water dropped off the stone. His thirst raged and he gulped the water. *Slowly!* He reminded himself as he swallowed several times. He could drink more shortly. He pushed his hands gently into the cool water and then jerked them out as the water flowed over the wounds. He pushed them back into the flow again—past the pain, rubbing them gently to loosen the dried blood.

"What are you doing?"

Mael startled, standing quickly and turning to face the voice three paces behind him.

The man stiffened. "Master?" The man's surprise was shaded from any light by the hood of his robe that fell from his shoulders nearly to the ground, loosely bound about the waist with a cord. He carried a short rake and a hand shovel.

"I was just getting a drink—and washing my wounds. I am master of nothing—no one," Mael said.

The man's shoulders relaxed. "You're defiling the pool with your blood!" he said as he looked down at Mael's hands.

"I was catching only the water that flowed over the edge."

"Where're you from?"

"From Farhantra—on the east coast of Morlan, on the Vorsian Sea."

The man moved the shovel into the hand that held the rake and reached up, pulling back his hood. The shock of gray hair like a lion's mane descended into a full beard. His eyes remained shaded by his thick eyebrows. "What's your name?"

"Mael."

"Mael..." The old man processed the name. "I'm Klopas. That's an unusual name. I mistook you for someone else."

"It's my childname, given me by my mentor when I was young." Memories of Menzor flashed in front of him again. He gritted his teeth to force them back.

Klopas nodded and pursed his lips. The details of his face became clearer as he stepped toward Mael, weathered with years, with deep creases from his nose down around his chin. He was tall, more like an Eladrim warrior than a man. "May I see your wounds?"

Mael startled. Klopas's lips didn't move with the sound of his words. "What is this place?" Mael asked.

"The garden of the dead—where we bury those who die." The sound was clearly coming from his lips, but the lips formed something else. "I'm the gardener." He waved the shovel and rake to indicate the surroundings.

"It's a beautiful garden," Mael said.

"I keep it so."

They stared at one another. The eerie feeling that something was wrong flooded over Mael's vorn. Klopas was the first contact out of the portal. It couldn't be accidental. Nothing was accidental, but something was off.

Mael offered his hands to Klopas. "I was injured by a priest," he said. "This hand is just a gash—but the sword went all the way through this one."

Klopas laid down his tools and stood to full height. "May I?" he asked as he gestured to see the wounds up close.

Mael nodded. Klopas leaned in for a closer look and straightened the fingers of Mael's left hand. He stood up straight and looked into Mael's eyes. He was closer now and still holding Mael's fingers. "A priest did this?"

Mael was now sure that his lips had said something other than what he heard. Mael nodded. "The wound, yes. The crooked fingers are from several years ago."

Klopa muttered an epithet that Mael didn't understand. "Sometimes they're worse than the soldiers," he said.

Klopa looked down again and probed the palms of Mael's hands gently before he looked up into his eyes. "What work do you do?"

"I'm a blacksmith and a farrier—like my father."

"We need to find the healer," Klopa said as he shook his head, "or you may never smith again."

"The healer?"

Klopa dropped Mael's hand and stooped to pick up his tools. "There are many doctors in the city, but none are like the healer," he said as he turned away. "Come. He's often in the garden east of the city when Asolara rises."

Mael hesitated. His thirst rose up before him again. "May I get another drink first?"

Klopa stopped and faced him before nodding to the stone.

Mael knelt and took several more swallows from the flow. He would need more, but it could wait.

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### *About the Author*

Frederick W. Faller lives with his wife in Portland, Maine. Having served his time in industry as an engineer, he is now retired and spends his time serving others, teaching in a local church and writing his books.

The books are a 'collection'. Written for independent reading, if desired, they build on each other as 'historical fiction from another planet'

EarthBound is the fifth novel in the Portals of Tesselindria collection:

- "A Sword for the Immerland King", 2001, DPI Books
- "Lonama's Map", 2003, DPI Books
- "Tveeling" Self-published 2014
- "BitterLeaf", not yet released

The first two books are technically out of print, but can be purchased from the author website. Tveeling can be purchased at [www.Lulu.com](http://www.Lulu.com)

The first three are being prepped for re-release by Kirrinath Press LLC. See the website for updates on this process.

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