

The World Revealed



Volume 2 of 4 of DOOR,
the first of The Five
Books of Time

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Miller

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DOOR

Being the First of the Five Books of Time

DOOR – KEY – NIGHTMARE

CLEANSING - BIRTH

The World Revealed

Volume two of the three of DOOR

The Binding Returned

The World Revealed

The End of the Nightlord

Jeffrey Morrow Miller

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*Sailor
cursed from the shores
without an anchor
from shelter to shelter
mercy of the winds
victim of the storms
doomed to the doldrums
no course to steer
adrift.*

A lost soul.

C'Holm and Riversea, 1019

*The cold wind
on my face
reminds me strongly -
of places I'd rather be.*

1 Leave Taking, Summer 1019

“What am I doing here?”

Hamish spoke out-loud, but to no one in particular. He was sitting well forward, so that every wave the Ship of the Fleet sliced through tossed spray over his head. Two years earlier, when he'd sailed from Riversea to C'holm, he'd been told to expect a hard trip to windward and that his job would be to bail. Now he was going the other direction, and yet the conditions were the same. Maybe it was just what you noticed on the first day out. After that everything was uniformly wet. And once you were wet, the cold was all that colder.

“Why do you bother asking such a question, when you already know the answer?” Greyling asked as he flopped down next to Hamish. He was still in good cheer from the night before. “You know as well as I that whatever you are actually doing, and whatever it is that you think you are doing, does not really matter, for time will soon enough transform whatever you do into the stuff of legends.”

“Are you being optimistic or cynical?” Hamish asked as something wet and cold ran down his back. He hoped it was just water, and not something slimy and fishy.

“You are applying a value judgment,” Greyling said as he shook the water out of his hair with a laugh, “while I was merely speaking of an inevitable process.”

Hamish took hold of Greyling's hand and looked at the blackened forefinger and thumb. In the middle of the thumbnail the embedded Crystal sparkled with its own light.

“The Sacred Mountain has made you way too clever at this hour,” Hamish said as he kissed the Crystal. It's cold fire burned his lips. “Did anyone get any sleep last night?”

“No. Leave Taking lasts until we actually cast off. Even if you are not crew, I still think you should have been allowed to join in. It seems to me that everyone on-

board should be Blessed. I still don't understand why the Head wouldn't allow the Brotherhood to Bless you, or even attend the Leave Taking."

"It's strictly personal," Hamish said. "There is no significance to it. He's just letting me know he didn't like the fact the Mistress of the Brotherhood decided to reside in Nor'Isle for the last two years, rather than with him at Kings'Haven."

"She does have a bit of a thing about you, doesn't she?"

"It goes both ways. I've learned more from her than she has from me."

"She wasn't pleased when you told her to travel with the Fleet Captain rather than with us."

"There are some things still required of her position," Hamish said. "And it's not as if we'll even be out of sight of each other."

"The God's willing," Greyling amended.

"The God's willing," Hamish agreed.

They sat for a moment in silence.

"I hope Talan and Peche are waiting for us in Riversea," Greyling said. "It would be nice to have someone show us the way to Changeling."

Hamish turned to Greyling, and then reached out and put a hand on his shoulder. "Talan and Peche are dead. It wasn't a dream that I had two years ago. It was their last words. They had the Mind Voice, remember?"

"I am not going to give up hoping they will be waiting for us. Neither you nor the Mistress have the Mind Voice anymore. You said we were too far away from the cities of the Immortals."

"That is what the Mistress told me. I'm not sure I ever had the Mind Voice."

"I remember it."

"But I wasn't exactly me in those days, was I?"

Greyling actually blushed.

"I sort of remember being a lot being a lot better looking," Hamish said.

"I don't know," Greyling quickly said, "you've got the hair to be a girl now."

Hamish hadn't been able to find a blade sharp enough to cut his hair since leaving Riversea. At least it was now long enough to braid and was no longer in his eyes.

One of the crewman approached and fell to the deck, slightly gracelessly, as the boat pitched in the confused seas.

“I was hoping to be getting some sleep,” the crewman said, as he lay flat on his back. Hamish remembered the man’s name was Lefik. “The Captain is still waiting for the two of you’s’e.”

Hamish glance at Greyling, who explained, “the Captain says the wind is going to swing onto the bow and we’re going to have to row. As you’re the fittest right now, he wants you to set pace.”

Hamish knew they wouldn’t be able to row against the short, steep waves. He guessed the Captain just wanted to get the men rowing in order to help them work off the fatigue of the Leave Taking celebrations. “I’ve never done that before - set the pace.”

“It don’t take much brain-work,” Lefik said. “And talking don’t help much neither.”

“Meaning you think I’m going to find it hard?” Hamish asked with a smile.

Lefik laughed, and then moaned and held his head. “We’re all hoping you’ll find it hard.”

Greyling jumped to his feet with the help of the rolling deck and gave Hamish a hand. “Just keep it slow for the sake of the others, and keep it going for the sake of the Captain. Maybe by the end of the voyage he’ll even start talking to you.”

Both Hamish and Greyling pulled Lefik back onto his feet. Hamish told Greyling, “don’t worry about the Captain. He’s hated me, and my side of the family, since before either you or I were born. He’s doing more than enough allowing me on his ship again.”

“Hamish,” Greyling said, “when he said he was only doing it to make sure you really left C’Holm, he meant it. He doesn’t trust the other Captains to actually deliver you to Riversea alive.”

Hamish didn’t say it, but they both knew that most everyone in C’Holm had heard the story that he was the one who had prevented the murder of Falkr Fhar’son. Captain Grey had confined Hamish to the ship while they were in Kings’Haven. The crewmen who hadn’t come back that year were all from Kings’Bey, which lay just a days walk around the other side of Kings’Lac. Too close. And Captain Grey had made it very clear - his position, Greyling’s future position, and even the security of Nor’Isle depended on Hamish staying out of trouble.

It didn’t pay to mention the gang from Kings’Bey that had come for him last night when all the crews were at the Leave Taking. Luckily, he still didn’t need to get all

that much sleep. He'd let them track him out into the forest, where they probably still were.

"Are we going to lead the fleet all the way to Riversea?" Hamish asked hopefully.

"No," Greyling said, "but we can't make it look like we're waiting for them either. We'll have to let the Fleet Captain with the Wayfinder overtake us. The return trip this year is going to be a struggle. That ship from Nor'Lac can't point worth a damn. The Fleet Captain can't really expect everyone to follow him when it's obvious he's not able to make the heading. Just between you and me, the Fleet Captain and Wayfinder should be on the best sailed ship, and not rotate every year. Those poor bastards are going to have a miserable row just to get into the lee of By'Lac, while we've made it under sail."

"The two of you had best concentrate on your own rowing and not that of the other ships," Captain Grey growled as they approached. Ships of the Fleet could accommodate three men rowing each side aft, tangled up with the helmsman, and three men wedged into each side of the bow. None of the benches - uncomfortable chests in which the crew kept their personal belongings, were permanent or allowed efficient motion. But the Ships could keep moving in the flat fogs that came up between the storms, and maneuver into the bays that gave them a chance to survive the storms. Since there were only ten crew, and then the Captain, the Sailing Master, the Shipwright, the Brother, and the lad aboard, it was rare to have more than six men rowing at a time. Hamish and Greyling were aboard as passengers, allowing the Shipwright and the lad to avoid rowing.

"You see the feathers on the mountains of Grahams Land?" Captain Grey asked his son. Hamish pulled the Ship's chest into position and waved Greyling off as he slid his oar into place. He'd never found either as heavy as some of the others seemed too.

"Yes, sir," Greyling said. Hamish also looked at the crest clouds on the ice covered peaks that looked closer than they actually were. "The winds on the mountains are coming against us, and will reach us in the small hours. I would guess we'll be off Nar'Bey by then."

"It's supposed to be a bad omen not to make it out of the Larsen Channel past Far'Bey Head and into the Inner Sea on the first day, isn't it?" Hamish asked.

Captain Grey shot Hamish a look to remind him the lesson was for Greyling.

Greyling grinned at Hamish and then tried to look serious again. “We Islanders are not a bunch of superstitious ignorants, Hamish ...”

“It’s simply being lazy,” Captain Grey decreed. “A hard first day makes for easier days later.”

“Should we stop our talking, and start our rowing now, Captain?” Lefik called out from his place forward. Every bench was filled. The Shipwright, the Brother and the boy were fussing over the cargo. The Sailing Master was at the helm, so the Captain could move around.

Hamish flexed his whole body, and bit his oar deep into the uneven surface of the ocean, and pulled as hard as he could. He imagined he could feel the Ship actually move with his effort, but realized it was probably just a push from the passing wave. He had always rowed in the bow before. Aft, directly under the gaze of Captain Grey, there wasn’t any chance of talking, and everyone was watching him. He concentrated on the regularity of his strokes, rather than his pace. In the bow he’d remembered it was having to monitor the other guys irregularities that had been most annoying.

The third time Hamish caught only air with his oar, and the third time he therefore fell backwards off his bench, caused no laughter. He was doing better than everyone else. The wind had completely died away, leaving only the ugly seas which knocked the Ship around mercilessly.

“Back on your bench, Hamish.” Captain Grey called out. “It’s some time still until the seas sort themselves.”

Hamish didn’t think the seas were ever going to improve. But since there was no wind he couldn’t suggest they were completely wasting their efforts by attempting to row.

Instead of glaring at the Captain, Hamish turned his head just enough to follow the tip of his oar, and he made sure each stroke now found water. With each bite he felt a surge of satisfaction. The water would yield and let them pass.

Yield, he thought to himself each time as he pulled.

Pass, he thought to himself each time as he set up the next stroke.

Yield, pass. Yield, pass.

When they reached the middle of the Larsen Channel there was just a long swell running. They shipped their oars and drifted as the rest of the fleet slowly reassembled and everyone assumed their rightful position in line. The sequence varied

every year, which seemed to cause more confusion than equality. This year they were last.

The Nor'Lac dwellers in the lead were quick to prove that what they lacked as sailors they made up for as oarsmen. The line got well stretched out, and Hamish was repeatedly told to slow down as they were getting too close to the ship directly in front, who were clearly not from Nor'Lac.

Time ceased to have much meaning. Hamish knew time was still around because every so often Captain Grey would order the Sailing Master to turn the hourglass and ring the ship's bell. A heavy fog settled in making the twilight of the sun hidden behind the mountains ashore feel almost as dark as a proper winter night.

The Captain of the ship just before them hailed Captain Grey and suggested that they should run a line between their two ships so they didn't get separated. They had lost the rest of the fleet in the fog. Captain Grey volunteered to take the lead and provide tension on the line, to keep the second ship from over-riding the line. No one said anything about towing, but Hamish no longer had to be told to take it slow. It was like sitting on the beach stroking through sand. There was no perceptible motion. There were not even any sounds other than their own. There was nothing beyond the tips of their oars.

Hamish declined the chance to stand down. He'd rather be warm and working than attempting to sleep. The others were now really feeling the effects of the all-night Leave Taking celebrations. Hamish remembered that he once would have lead the suffers, but now he seemed unaffected by alcohol. No suffering the morning after, but also no joy during the night before. It clearly made him different.

And then there was his hair. He would gladly cut it if he could find a blade sharp enough. The stuff just wouldn't cut. He now had a bright red braid down to the middle of his back. At least he still didn't need to shave. He was probably the only 19 year-old who didn't. Maybe boys who had yet to become adults never grew any older. It was time to return to the Highlands to see if that was where he belonged. He hoped whatever he was supposed to do in Changeling wouldn't take too long. It was time to sort out his own life.

He knew it wasn't that C'Holm had rejected him. In fact everyone in Nor'Isle, and the other places he had visited, had always been most curious about him. Maybe if he had given it several more years, the novelty of his appearance, and then having to

explain his being a Highlander who had never been to the Highlands, would have worn off.

People were too polite to ask about all of the other stories about him that he knew were circulating. Either that or they were too afraid to ask. He might have even managed to find someone to Announce him before the Gods, but it would have still felt like an adoption. C’Holm wasn’t really his home.

In the past, he remembered, there were times when he felt as if he’d lost track of time. But now it felt as if time had lost track of him. Every night while serving drinks in Afreya’s public room it seemed someone had a story to tell, except him. Last summer, after the Fleet had returned from Riversea, had been the worst. The stories of the happenings in Riversea lasted most of the winter, but no one asked his opinion, since he was a Highlander.

It seemed that High Mayor Barnabas had suffered an apoplectic attack soon after Greyling and he had departed two years ago, and was now paralyzed and unable to speak. Lady Megan was the only one who managed to understand he wishes when it came to ruling. Belthor, the younger of the sons of the High Mayor now seemed to command the Guards, while his older brother, Basson, who had returned from the Kingdoms, waited in the wings for his father to die.

Every time he heard these stories his stomach twisted into knots, and he knew Greyling was watching him, waiting. But he just listened. He was in C’holm. He was no longer in Riversea. He wasn’t a citizen of Riversea. He was banned from even entering Riversea. It wasn’t his place to solve the problems other people brought upon themselves. Megan was the wife of the High Mayor now, as well as serving as The Lady of The Silver Lake. They had been young, caught up in the excitement of the moment, nothing more.

“Hamish, time to take a break,” Captain Grey interrupted his thoughts.

“Is there a problem?”

“You’re pulling too hard. We’re drifting too far offshore.”

Hamish looked at the tiller in the Captain’s hands, but didn’t mention it. “How about I row on the other side for awhile then? I thought we were in a hurry to get past Far’Bey Head, and that was before we started towing the ship from Nor’Haven.”

Captain Grey scowled at Hamish.

“The lad is stronger than three men combined,” the Sailing Master noted. “Those Nor’Haven boys are going to be in real trouble if the winds catch us in front of the Far’Bey Head.”

It took Hamish a little while to get used to the new side. But the oily flat water and the thick fog soon gave him nothing to think about but the rhythm of his motions.

He hoped he’d given something back to all the people in C’Holm who had helped him find his feet after he’d arrived with nothing more than one set of clothes, some yeast, and a bail of hops borrowed from Master Groggin’s inn in lieu of back-pay. Hamish didn’t dwell on the fact that the Master of the Beggin Inn hadn’t survived his time in the High Mayor’s cells.

The five gold coins Hamish had taken from the Master Banker had proved to be worthless in C’Holm, as no one had more than a few coppers in coins, and everyone just bartered for what they wanted. What a man needed - food, a place to sleep, warmth in the winter, no one would accept money for. The trinkets a man might want, in order to catch the eye of a girl, were so rare that only married women wore them.

He had three of the coins turned into medallions in which he mounted the three Crystals he still had. The other two coins he turned into earrings for King Rane Rane’son d’Nor of Nor’Isle to give to his daughter Diamari when she came of age next year. Hamish had never managed to actually meet the future Queen of Nor’Isle, but since her father would not accept anything from Hamish in payment for hosting him, his gift was all he could do.

His three Crystals were now tied to the glass-like torc around his neck. Everything of value that he owned was around his neck, safe under a scarf, which wasn’t keeping the water from running down his back. He and Greyling were planing on traveling light when they got ashore. Greyling had walked to the Highlands and back, and knew what wasn’t needed. Hamish figured that since they didn’t know where they were going, or why they were going, planning ahead was pointless.

He was going to miss Afreya. When he had first arrived she had given him a room, and then a job brewing in her public room. She was the one who’d had the foresight to suggest he sort through the whole bail of hops and find the seeds and plant them. He’d never tried to grow hops. Groggin had always told him it couldn’t be grown in Riversea, and had to be imported from warmer climates like the Empires.

Hamish wondered if the Empires were as warm as the Islands. The hops, like everything else in C’Holm, grew faster than he could plant them. As long as they were

sheltered from the wind, and fenced from the goats and feral pigs, there was no stopping the vines.

The original bail of hops hadn't gone very far. In fact, Hamish found the results undrinkable as he struggled to properly malt the available barley, only to then discover the casks were way too old. If the results didn't impress anyone, at least his willingness to keep experimenting did. He had to use everything Groggin had taught him about why the recipes worked, since none of the recipes themselves actually worked.

During his first winter he had volunteered in the saw-pits, and for the cooper and the blacksmith, and by summer had a whole cellar-full of new barrels. While he had joined the unmarried youths out collecting the sea-plants and sea-animals, and the other things the Brotherhood required in order to create the Essences, Afreya had tended the hops crop. And after Captain Grey had returned with some new yeast, and a he gave out a few IOU's for his choice of the barley harvest, he'd even managed to impress himself this last winter. Even better was the fact he seemed to be able to taste his own product without fear. The headaches he used to get after the smallest of a taste no longer appeared. The scar on his forehead from when his head had been split in half was gone inside, as well as outside.

This year they hadn't needed to plant again, as the vines from last year had resprouted. Everything was growing well. The brewing was regularly successful. They hadn't produced anything for export, because all that they could produce was consumed locally. But King Rane already had plans, and was having more barrels made.

And yet he had decided to leave. C'Holm was now disappearing beneath the waves. Maybe he was just being impatient.

"Rocks ahead," Hamish mumbled.

The passage of the Fleet,
from the safety of Kings' Haven in C' Holm,
to the safety of Riverseaton in Riversea,
should be made in five weeks of six days each,
with but eight days to shelter from the storms that come
so regularly every three to five days.

The survival of the passage,
depends less upon the skills of the sailors,
than upon the Wayfinder,
who must gauge the winds and waves,
and find those which can be survived,
and those that can not be.

-Lessons for the Fleet

2 Hunting sheep

“What’s that?” Captain Grey asked, as he pushed the helm over hard. The forward oarsman cried out as his blade hit, but the hull passed clear as the receding swell sucked them sightly offshore. In the fog they barely saw the rock as it was again submerged.

“Pull offshore, I’ve come in to close,” Captain Grey shouted to the ship that should be behind them, but that they couldn’t see.

“... hear you,” someone replied.

“Take a break lads,” Captain Grey ordered once they had given themselves some distance. “I want it quiet so I can hear the waves on the shore.”

Hamish didn’t move. His oar had been making the most noise, and was showing some wear at the oarlock. He could hear the sound of water sluicing over the rocks of the cliff-backed shore, but it was far away now. Their rock had been an isolated threat.

“I can’t hear anything in this damned fog,” the Sailing Master whispered to the Captain. Captain Grey gave a small nod in agreement, and then turned to Hamish, “I want you and Greyling to pull in the tow line. I want to be able to see their bow.”

The other Captain agreed to the short rope tow, but only if they took turns leading. No one could remember a fog so thick.

“Damned close,” Captain Grey muttered. Then he asked very quietly, “Hamish, are you able to see something the rest of us can’t?”

“No, Sir. I just thought I heard something, Sir.”

“Can you hear more than the rest of us can?” Captain Grey asked.

“I ...”

“Yes or no, Hamish,” Captain Grey demanded.

“Maybe ...”

“Do you know where we are?” the Sailing Master asked Hamish. “I mean exactly where we are?”

“We are in the Inner Sea off of Far’Bey,” Hamish said. He remembered being told two years ago, “Far’Bey is almost on an island, right? We’re just off that channel which almost separates it from the rest of Grahams Land.”

“We couldn’t have come that far,” the Sailing Master muttered to the Captain.

“You had me switch sides just as we went past Far’Bey Head,” Hamish appealed to Captain Grey. “That’s why we were too far offshore. It was time to turn.”

“Are you sure, Hamish?” Captain Grey whispered. “Towing that Nor’Haven boat must have slowed us down.”

“I think the current has been moving us faster than we’ve been able to row,” Hamish said. The Sailing Master and Captain Grey glanced at each other. “At least that’s what it feels like to me. We’re moving faster than it seems.”

Captain Grey held up his hand to stop the Sailing Master from arguing. After thinking for a few moments Captain Grey asked the Sailing Master, “Where do you think we are?”

“I would have guessed we was at Far’Bey. But with the Homefinder sitting where it is we must only be in Nar’Bey.”

“If we were in either bay would we be getting this kind of long swell coming off of the land?” Greyling asked. Hamish wondered who else was listening, and if the confusion worried them. “If we’re off of False Hope Opening then the rock we almost hit was The Killer, right?”

Captain Grey looked to the Sailing Master for any further advice.

“Maybe we should put the Highlander up in the bow,” the Sailing Master suggested. “Everyone else has had a rest. It would seem our new Brother is not the Wayfinder he could be. Some time at the oar might inspire him.”

“Get up in the bows then, Hamish, and keep listening. Greyling, you sit pace.” Captain Grey then raised his voice, “In fact everyone shift sides. Look lively lads, we’ve all been in fog before. There’s a beach in Rest Bay calling.”

Sitting with his head hanging over the side Hamish could almost hear the waves on the beach ahead. Occasionally he had to shift sides so the sounds were louder, and then the Captain would adjust course. Two years ago they had tucked into Rest Bay to get some relief from the waves, but had not attempted to land. He remembered how unhappy everyone had been to be stuck just one day from C’Holm by the weather.

The Eleven Kingdoms of C’Holm were clustered on King Gustavs Island - named in honor of the first High King, the nearby islands, and on the coast of Grahams Land.

Nor'Isle was the farthest Kingdom from Riversea, and was said to have the fairest climate. Kings'Haven was about in the middle, and Far'Bey was the closest Kingdom to Riversea. Although there were roads of a sort connecting the four Kingdoms on King Gustavs Island, and between Lo'Val and Hi'Val, everyone else relied on boats for transportation. And just because the distances within C'Holm were less than the passage to Riversea, they were far from safer.

Hamish had been surprised to learn that each of the Kingdoms had only the same number of families as a county in Riversea. Most of the Kings seemed to have as much use for formality as the Mayors in Riversea did. There certainly wasn't the surplus to support much of an idle elite, and taxes were always paid in kind since there were almost no coins in circulation. In Nor'Isle, King Rane Rane'son only opened his hall on the day of the Binding. On the other days of the week he simply joined the people in one of the many public rooms, most usually that of Afreya, especially once Hamish's beer had improved. It had caused Hamish to wonder what it would have been like to have become Prince Altan of Sarzana, and maybe even the High Councilor of the Highlands.

They were almost in Rest Bay. Hamish suspected that the Captain did not realize the rest of the Fleet had stopped in Far'Bey, in some confusion.

After Rest Bay, which was discreetly uninhabited so that the Fleet could recover from the Leave Taking, there were only a scattering of people living in the bays they might seek shelter in. The Fleet only stopped when it had to, so these people could go for years without contact. And even when the Fleet hid from the weather in their bay, it was often too rough to launch the small boats before the Wayfinder decided it was time to depart into the dissipating storm. Hamish wondered if he should look for an empty bay for himself. The Highlands and Riversea had both banished him, and declared him mentally unfit and too dangerous to become an adult. That only left the Kingdoms and the Empires. Or the Tribal Peoples. Or the wilderness living alone.

They had departed at the hour of the Binding, the first of the long hours of work, and Hamish guessed it was about the same hour again. The fog was too thick to find the sun as it moved its circle around the lower edge of the summer sky. But they were now surrounded by the smells of low tide. Waves were on sand ahead of them, and upon rocks beside them. Hamish stood up and walked down the starboard bulwark to avoid the rowers and the cargo. He had to jump over the various shrouds holding up the masts, and the multitude of halyards.

“How did you do that?” Greyling asked, when Hamish appeared before the Captain. Hamish looked back at the edge of the ship's hull. It was not that much different than a narrow log across a stream. He gave Greyling a wink and then asked the Captain, “will we be anchoring off, or running up upon the beach, Sir?”

“Anchoring off,” Captain Grey said, suddenly very alert.

“We'd better stop about here then,” Hamish suggested. There was not much to hint they were anywhere special in the wet, gray, formless half-darkness. The ship rolled gently as the crew obeyed the Captain's order to stop way, and both he and Hamish stepped through the oars, benches, and elbows to the bow.

“We stopped here last time, didn't we?” Hamish asked. “I remember the beach comes up quickly. It's just ahead now.”

“I hear it,” Captain Grey agreed. Turning to the crew he ordered, “Get the anchor down and launch the small boat. We'll have a look about. Can't even see the stern in this stuff, let alone the rest of the Fleet.”

“They are anchored in Far'Bey, Sir,” Hamish said.

“What?” Captain Grey asked. Hamish then remembered that they were supposed to be following the Wayfinder.

“I'm sorry,” Hamish said. “I thought you could hear them. They seemed to spend more time hitting each other than rowing. I thought it was very wise of you to keep our distance.”

“You could hear them?” Captain Grey whispered.

“It was way before we rounded Far'Bey Head, when my oar was making a lot of noise.”

“Were they looking for us?”

“Not that I could hear. They seemed only to be concerned about themselves. With that swell running, they were hitting each other a lot.”

“You better not tell anyone you heard them. We missed them in the fog and will wait here for them.” Captain Grey turned away, and then paused, “could you actually hear them talking? Were we that close?”

“About two hours away, maybe more. If we had turned around it would have been very slow going against the current and pulling the Nor' Haven ship.”

“My son told me once that you had the gift of the Mind Voice. Did you hear them with the Mind Voice, or did you hear them with your ears? Can you use the Mind Voice to find your way through fog?”

“No Sir. I haven’t ...” Hamish felt the nausea starting. “I mean, the ... it went away when I got better. When I was in Riversea ... I wasn’t well. But I’ve been better ever since. I could hear them. With my ears I mean. I don’t want to try the other - after what happened. The Mistress of the Brotherhood doesn’t have the Mind Voice when she’s in C’Holm. She says it’s too far away from the rest of the World for it to work.”

“I’m not interesting in what you got up to in Riversea,” Captain Greyling said. “I’m asking you because I need to know if your finding this beach was luck, or a gift. There is only so much that a Captain can do with a Homefinder. But some people have a gift, and just know where they are. Can you find places you’ve never been to? Or are you just able to find your way back to places you’ve been to before?”

“I guess that’s it,” Hamish said. “I mean ... we were here before. There’s sort of a feel about the place. It has a smell too. It got stronger as we got closer. But I really thought you knew where we were going, Sir. I was just glad you were going the right way.”

Captain Grey didn’t say anything for a while, and then put a hand on Hamish’s arm and pulled his ear down close to his. “I think you have the gift, boy. But some of the crew might not understand, so if you need to tell me something ... talk quietly.”

“Yes, Sir. I understand. But these fogs never lasted more than a week on Nor’Isle.”

“If we stopped for a week every time it got foggy, we’d never reach Riversea. We’ll get some sleep, assuming it’s still the short hours. Can’t really tell.”

“It’s actually just past the change of hours, Sir,” Hamish said. “We’re about halfway through the hour of the Binding.”

The Sailing Master, who kept the ships hourglass, nodded in agreement with Hamish.

“In that case,” Captain Grey said loud enough for all the crew to hear, “we’d better look lively. I wouldn’t want the Fleet Captain to catch us napping in the middle of what should be the day.”

After Captain Grey and the Sailing Master both checked the anchor, the ship they’d been towing rafted up to them. Two nights with little sleep had reduced both crews to a very cold, wet, and unhappy lot.

Since Hamish didn’t have a set of chores he simply tried to stay out of the way by perching on the bow. Once the little boat was launched Captain Grey turned to

Hamish and said, "There are sheep on this island. Why don't you take a bow and get us one for dinner. A warm meal on his arrival might make the Fleet Captain forget we passed him."

"Hunt?" Hamish asked. "A sheep?"

"They were put here as food for the crews. It may not sound sporting, but they're wary beasts. Normally you can easily spot the little white devils on the hills. But when you can see them, they can also see you, and they run like the wind. In this fog you might be able to get close enough for a shot."

"I've never hunted anything," Hamish said. "When I went out with the sons of the High Mayor, all I did was carry the baggage."

"You have trained with the bow haven't you?" Captain Grey asked.

"Yes. But it has been a while now."

"They say you can't forget the training of a Blademaster," Captain Grey said. "Just don't get lost. And don't hurt yourself. I can't risk sending a man out after you."

The small boat put Hamish ashore. Although Greyling had offered to go with him, Hamish had declined. He didn't think the odds of the hunt were very good, and didn't want anyone to notice his lack of enthusiasm.

After about ten steps into the fog he couldn't see the beach. Even the sounds of the boat and the crew seemed to disappear. He started thrashing his way through the spiny gorse. For some reason a sheep didn't just appear out of the fog offering itself for dinner. Hamish wondered how long he had to stay at it before he could report back that he'd failed, and not look like a shirker.

What he really wanted was to go to sleep. Dry and warm were beyond the possible. But since he didn't actually do much sleeping, what he really wanted was for everyone else to go to sleep. The nice thing about Time, Hamish had long ago learned, was that even with the sun above the horizon all summer, and gone all winter, people still lived by the daily long hours of work and the short hours of rest. When everyone else was asleep, Hamish could read – when he still had books, or get on with his work without being continually interrupted by people asking his advice.

Staring into the fog was pointless. At least he was warm inside his many layers of wet clothes. Between the beach and the higher land, which Hamish remembered to be a little off to his left, was a boggy, bushy, thicket that was impossible to penetrate quietly. Hamish gave up trying to be the stealthy hunter and concentrated on

protecting his oiled-cloth rainwear from the clutching thorns, until he found a path going his way.

He debated if he'd been gone long enough and could choose the direction that probably went back toward the beach. He doubted it.

If he was a sheep where would he be? Hamish realized his knowledge of sheep consisted of looking over a fence at furry white things. Even when he'd gone out to Farsea to get away from Riverseaton during the summer, all he'd ever done was cut hay. No one he was offering his summers too wanted to risk him with anything important. They had concentrated on putting his size to work.

The only thing that was obvious was that no smart sheep was going to be down here in this thicket. That meant turning away from the beach and climbing into the high country.

Hamish stopped walking when he realized he was crossing a stony tundra. He'd been watching his feet rather than where he was going. There was some wind that blowing the fog around, and it was filled with odors he had once taken for granted.

Like sheep shit.

Hamish stopped breathing, but then his heart was even louder in his ears. He knocked an arrow and then began to slowly walk upwind. But the visibility was so bad he realized he'd step on a sheep before he saw it.

Hamish reached for one of the Crystals tied to the glass torc around his neck. He felt the familiar hard edges, but not the burning icy-coldness. The Crystals hadn't helped him read the books in his fathers library the way he used to be able to, so he didn't really expect them to find him a sheep. The worst thing about being in C'Holm was the blurring of the books. He could remember the library, and the books, but not quite the words themselves. The Mistress said it was because they were too far away from Riversea. She said they were even beyond the edge of The World itself. She sometimes said all sorts of strange things.

He then stood a little straighter. He shouldn't ask for help to do something he could do himself. Finding something was not that hard. You simply had to become the desired object, and then look around to see where you were hiding.

Hamish closed his eyes. He let himself relax. He was a sheep. He was standing in the wet, cold wind. Four feet on the ground, head down, fog making his nose itch.

He breathed slowly, feeling the air inside his chest as it flowed in, and then back out.

Somewhere nearby there was a small flock. He could feel them pulling him, but he fought against it. He turned his back to the wind in order to rest a little, and settle himself. The pain now in his stomach was more hunger than fear. He couldn't remember when he'd ever been without the hunger. The hunger, and the fear. The sounds in the fog. The flock was the only sure thing. Standing rump to the wind, head down.

He preferred to be alone. No young ones challenging him. But now the flock was better. The wet grass before his nose. Legs of others on both sides. The push of another body trying to get closer. The tired tension, sounds unseen, stick to the flock.

It was good. It was safe.

The arrow bit into his side.

He coughed blood, staggered, and fell to his knees. There was a distant sound of scattering hooves.

It was so cold.

Only his tongue was was warm. His warm life was draining over his tongue.

The blue eyes looked into his and wept as hands held his face. He did not understand.

The sheep died.

Hamish gasped in pain and felt the blood pouring from his body.

Me!

Not me!

The sheep died!

He sat up and looked at his hands. It was sheep blood, not his blood. There was no arrow in his side. The blood in his mouth was not there. He had just bitten his tongue.

It took a long time, but he finally got tired of the drizzle running down his face. He was laying in the fog turned into rain. In his arms he held the body of the sheep. To take his mind off the pain he stood up and put the sheep across his shoulders and began the walk back to the beach.

"By the Gods, Hamish," Greyling said, running to help him, "what happened to you."

"Sheep," Hamish said. He dropped the body off of his shoulders.

"I can't lift this thing," Greyling said as he attempted to carry it as Hamish had. "You're covered in blood. Are you hurt?"

“The sheep died.”

Hamish didn't eat dinner, and instead just slept soundly.

One should not honor an insult,
by acknowledging that it has been heard.
One should instead express delight,
that one's presence has been so keenly felt,
and one should strive to understand,
why you have caused the speaker
to feel so much afeared.

Santos a'Mann

3 The Isle of the Dead

“The Fleet is not stopping,” someone shouted. The stench of his burning flesh bit into Hamish's nose. He rolled over, and gasped, and barely managed to vomit. He held his stomach, but felt no other pain.

“Hamish, are you alright?” Greyling asked.

“Wrap the meat in seaweed,” the Sailing Master shouted. “We'll have to finish cooking it as a gift to the Brotherhood.”

The meat. His body.

Hamish tasted smoky mutton on his tongue. He opened his eyes and saw large chunks of meat roasting over a fire.

“Hamish, are you alright? Greyling asked again.

Hamish sat up as Greyling helped him. “I'm fine. I just better not kill anything again.”

Greyling looked at Hamish, and then at the cooking sheep. “When you killed the sheep ... it's Soul became part of you? Like what happens to the Immortals when they kill someone?”

Hamish waved his hand to stop Greyling's words. “It was only a sheep.”

“Nice to see you're awake, Hamish,” Captain Grey said. “If you slept more often you wouldn't drop like one of the dead when you do.”

“Best not to be joking of the dead right now, sir,” Lefik said. “We'll be visiting them soon enough.”

Captain Grey stopped smiling. “You're right. I apologize, Lefik.”

Hamish looked at Greyling, but he didn't explain the Captain's words.

“Hamish, why don't you and Greyling help pack your sheep?” the Captain suggested. “We've two lines ashore and two anchors out, and then a Fleet to catch.”

“Actually,” Greyling cut in before Hamish could speak, “it would be better if Hamish stayed away from the cooking. He's got the heaving-guts.”

“Are you sick?” the Sailing Master stepped in.

“No, he's just land-sick,” Greyling explained quickly.

“Sick is sick,” the Sailing Master decreed. “And sick won't be coming onto my ship.”

“I'm fine now,” Hamish said. “I ate some bad berries when I was out hunting. Now that they're out of my stomach I feel fine.”

“Little brown berries than come out the back of a sheep, maybe?” Lefik asked as he slapped Hamish's back. “You need a wash before you visit the dead. They see all that dried blood on you and they are going to keep you with them.”

“That one will not be going ashore when we visit the Isle of the Dead,” the Brother that had been assigned to their ship said. Everyone stopped moving. Hamish realized the whole crew was ashore, and looked out to the two ships still rafted together, and wondered who was watching them.

“You denied him the Leave Taking,” Greyling said as he stepped in front of Hamish. “You can't deny ...”

“Why are we visiting the Island of the Dead?” Hamish interrupted.

“It doesn't concern you,” the Brother said.

Hamish got along much better with the five Brothers on Nor'Isle, but at the Leave Taking this one had replaced their own. He told Greyling, “Since I'm not planning on dying anytime soon, I don't mind staying on the ship.”

“But ...”

“Think of it as a 'sheep-thing',” Hamish suggested.

The winds on the tops of the mountains that they had seen the day before had failed to materialize. The fog was gone, and once they were out of Rest Bay they had ideal sailing conditions – a stiff breeze on the beam and enough sun to make the flying spray enjoyable. Lefik sat down in the bow next to Hamish and asked, “What is it with you and the Brotherhood? The Mistress says that you are the Lord Binding, but the rest of them don't want anything to do with you. Aren't you supposed to be their God?”

“The Brotherhood follow the Old Ways, from before the stories of The Binding,” Hamish said.

“Nice to know you think they're just 'stories',” Lefik said. “Personally, I'm not much given to worrying about such 'God-things'. And I'm not superstitious either, like

most of the crew are. But I'm also not stupid. Do you know why we're stopping at the Isle of the Dead?"

"No," Hamish said. He wasn't sure if he wanted to know.

"Each of us is given a pouch of earth from the Island by the Master of the Dead. Just in case we don't make it back. Good idea don't you think? At sea it doesn't take much earth to properly bury a man."

Hamish was relieved. Since he wasn't an Islander he doubted if anyone would allow him to be buried on the Island of the Dead anyway.

As it turned out, they didn't even stop at the Island of the Dead. No one living visited the Island of the Dead. They instead stopped at the Keepers Island. The constructed harbor on the Keepers Island was so good that Hamish wondered why the Fleet bothered going to Rest Bay when it was only half a day away from real security.

As he looked around he did agree that the bare rocks of the Keepers Island weren't very welcoming, and the Island of the Dead loomed just across the narrow channel, but there were warm buildings with rooms out of the rain ashore. Not that Hamish minded sitting in the rain alone on the ship.

Being alone was completely impossible on the ship. It was the hardest part of the voyage. The cold, and the inability to get out of the rain, and the flying spray, were things Hamish could ignore. But when you didn't sleep, and someone was always awake and working around you, you couldn't just sit and think. Not that he really had anything to think about.

He told himself yet again that he couldn't change the past, so there was no point in agonizing about it. He had no idea what the future would require of him, and he knew he should not to attempt to force the future to fit into a preconceived plan. He therefore tried to not think about the future.

There was only the present to think about. It didn't require much thought, so he'd have to stretch it out in order to pass the time.

The present consisted of the deck, about twenty paces long and five wide. He stood up and began walking around his existence. Between the two masts most of the deck was missing, forming the open hold. Since the barrels containing the Essences where the only things that were water-tight on the ship, everything else was designed for easy access and bailing.

Hamish jumped up onto the bulwarks. With the deck cluttered with oars, chests, and coiled lines he found it the easiest way the walk around the ship. The bulwarks

were strong enough to take his weight, but no one else seemed to trust their sense of balance as he did.

The Ships of the Fleet were schooner-rigged with fore and aft sails, which made them much nimbler than the square-sailed fishing boats of Riversea. Their efficiency when beating upwind, and their ability to quickly tack in the confined channels they sometimes navigated were essential. They were also as small as possible so that they could be rowed by the limited number of crew aboard. Each of the Kingdoms were too small to have many more than fifteen men who could dedicate most of the summer to the passage to Riversea. Both the Essences being delivered to Riversea, and the Globes returning, were too valuable for the crews to be able to charge for their delivery. The crews therefore depended upon the generosity of their King for their summer wages.

Hamish tested one of the shrouds, and thought about pulling himself up to the top of the mast. But the masts were too short to see over the seawall surrounding the harbor.

Each King only had one Ship of the Fleet. They only made one voyage a year, as they were too precious to risk in coastal trading. Although the wooden pieces could be renewed, the great lump of lead attached to the keel, and the iron anchor chain were irreplaceable. Whatever ores The World once held had long-since been mined. C'Holm received just about enough iron every year from the Empires to keep it's farmers in plows and scythes and other tools. There wasn't enough metal in C'Holm to build a new Ship of the Fleet. There was barely enough for repairs.

The coastal trading ships were larger than the Ships of the Fleet because most of their hold was filled with stones to balance the sails. And since none of their passages were much longer than a day, it was rare that they would ever have to anchor. If they were forced to seek shelter they would have to rely on rope anchor rode.

Hamish looked up as Greyling jumped off the stone quay and crossed the deck of the ship they'd rafted next to, since they'd been the last to arrive. No one else was coming, so Hamish figured he could carry on exploring the ship. For some reason the Islanders were very secretive about their ships and their sailing skills, which had only increased his determination to learn all that he could.

"Hamish," Greyling said as he approached, "have you just been pacing the deck in the rain this whole time?"

"It's not been that long," Hamish replied. "Did you receive your bit of earth?"

“No.” Greyling paused. “There has been a bit of a problem.”

“At least it's not my fault,” Hamish said with a smile. “I've never left the ship.”

“Actually, that is exactly what they are arguing about.”

“Who's arguing?”

“The Mistress of the Brotherhood and the Master of the Dead.”

“Go tell her that I'm not getting off the ship,” Hamish said. “Of all people, she should know that I don't need some earth from the Island of the Dead in C'holm.”

“She doesn't want you to leave the ship,” Greyling corrected. “It's the Master of the Dead who requests your presence.”

“Really?” Hamish asked. “What made the Brotherhood change it's mind?”

Greyling just looked at Hamish.

“Are you sure he really wants me ashore?” Hamish asked again. “Is this some split within the Brotherhood? I don't want to get used by one faction against another in some squabble I know nothing about.”

“They are all agreed about this.” Greyling paused again. “They want you to visit the Island of the Dead.”

Hamish burst out laughing. “I knew they didn't like me. But isn't leaving enough? They don't really need me dead do they?”

“They want you to go and Bless the Island of the Dead.”

Hamish took a deep breath. “Oh ...”

“The Mistress of the Brotherhood does not think it would be a good idea.”

“No,” Hamish said slowly. “It is not a good idea.”

The more Hamish thought about it, the worse it sounded. For the last two years while in C'holm he had not felt like he had anything to do with the Return of the Binding, and no one had asked him to do anything to demonstrate he was The Chosen One. He wasn't even convinced he was the legendary being, since nothing about him had changed. Even Greyling, with the Crystals embedded in his thumbnails, was wiser than he was.

He'd thought about it every day for the last two years. He was still just what he had always been. He had said the words that he'd read in the coded daybooks of Algar the Alchemist, his great-great-grandfather. The Necromancer.

He had performed The Binding.

But he had not Reunited The World and the Underworld.

He had bound himself to serve The World and The Underworld. How The World, or The Underworld, went about accepted his service he didn't understand.

But he knew The World and the Underworld were now bound to him.

All he had wanted to do was open a door out of the dungeon The Lady of The Silver Lake had locked him in. He wasn't trying to open a door into the city of the Immortals. And he most definitely wasn't trying to open a Door into the Underworld.

You couldn't enter the city of the Immortals unless you became an Immortal. In order to become an Immortal you had to be killed and have your Soul caught. It was a skill the few Immortals that still existed had long since forgotten.

And you couldn't open a Door to the Underworld unless you were The Binding. He was still just Hamish. Not even Prince Altan, heir to Sarzana in the Highlands anymore.

He looked around the deck of the ship. This was his world for the next month. He had to concentrate on the present. The past was gone, and the future would never be. There was nothing more than the present. And it's problems.

"You had better tell the ..." Hamish paused. "I suppose I should go speak to the Master myself. It would only be polite."

"Just a moment," Greyling said as he took hold of Hamish's arm. "There's a little more."

"I'm not supposed to dress up funny for this, am I?"

Greyling didn't laugh. Instead he said, "The Master of the Dead has decided that since the Lord Binding has Returned, there is no need for the shelter of the Earth of the Island. Only through the Lord Binding will the dead now find their way to Stand before the Gods and Give Account for their Lives."

Hamish looked closely at Greyling. "He decided all this in the last hour, while I've been sitting in the rain, without even consulting me, or the Mistress of the Brotherhood, or the Master of the Brotherhood?"

"He said he's been aware of these changes since he heard of your arrival in C'Holm two years ago."

"But he didn't think it necessary to reveal this insight until today?"

"I ..."

"So now the whole Fleet is stuck here until I ..." Hamish stopped. There was not point in getting angry. "Is it warm and dry inside?"

“You're not actually going to do this are you?” Greyling asked. “You know the Master really just wants to prove that you are not who you say you are. He doesn't believe you will return from the Island of the Dead.”

Hamish kissed Greyling's forehead. “Nothing slips past you, does it, my wise friend?”

The first of the Keepers that Hamish encountered were two young men standing guard at the doors of the building Greyling was leading him towards. When the Keepers of the Dead saw him, they dropped to their knees and bowed forward so that their foreheads touched the ground, with their arms outstretched before them.

Hamish followed Greyling through the doors and then stopped to pull his dripping oil-cloth anorak over his head. As with most buildings there was a drying room off to the side of the entry with a rick of Globes warming the wet-weather gear of everyone inside.

“Hold this, will you?” Hamish asked Greyling, as he handed over his jacket. “Don't hang it yet.”

He then walked outside and grabbed one of the prostrate figures by the armpits, lifted him into the air, and stood him in front of Greyling.

“Could you try and dry my jacket?” Hamish asked the wide-eyed trembling man. Before Hamish could elaborate the Keeper snatched the jacket from Greyling and disappeared into the drying room.

Hamish looked at Greyling, who said without a trace of irony, “Welcome to your life, my Lord Binding.”

Hamish took off his oil-cloth outer pants and his sodden double-knit wool jersey, and stood the second guard on his feet and sent him after the first.

“No one on Nor'Isle behaved like that,” Hamish said.

“They didn't know they were supposed to.”

Hamish paused, and then sorted out his rumpled clothes. He still had more layers on that he needed, but the doormen were hiding. “Right. Let's do this.”

Although Hamish had been told that the Islanders didn't believe in sending gifts to the Gods when burying their dead, it was clear that they still did it. You couldn't call it wealth when it was just laying around in piles. Even more sobering was the fact no one would dare steal any of it. Objects of beauty now stripped of their value and usefulness.

Hamish now knew where all the coins in the Islands had gone to. And there were so many Globes lighting the treasure, and heating the room, that Hamish was surprised it all hadn't melted.

The inner doors opened before either Greyling or he could touch them, and a voice rang out, "Master of the Dead, Mistress of our Brotherhood, fellow Keepers, honored Brothers, Captains and crew of the Fleet, and guests, the Lord Binding, the promised re-uniter of the World and the Underworld has Returned."

Hamish stepped into the great hall and saw that the crews were stunned, and didn't know what to do, while all of the Brotherhood immediately dropped to their knees. The Mistress was still standing on the raised dais at the head of the hall, next to a large chair that was obviously empty.

"Just stay calm, and do not respond to anything," Hamish whispered to Greyling. "As my Counselor you should stay just behind me, on the left. That way my sword-hand remains free."

"But you don't have ..."

"Just as well."

Hamish kept his eyes fixed on the Mistress as he walked down the central isle. He heard someone moving, as if they were joining the Brothers on their knees, and he snapped his fingers and wagged a warning finger. No one else even tried to breath.

He climbed the first two steps of the dais before the Mistress could move and dropped to a knee and kissed her hand.

"Thank you for inviting me inside and out of the rain," Hamish said loud enough for the whole hall to hear. He then stood in front of the empty chair, ignored the Master of the Dead who was still on his knees with his forehead on the floor, and addressed the Fleet.

"A friend of mine who is not much given to theological debates, and who is not superstitious, told me of the reason for our stop here. As he explained it, there is no point in being stupid, when you can easily cover your bet."

"As all of you know, there is no single course to any harbor, there is no single answer to any question, and there is no single path to the Accounting we all will have to do before the Gods. Most of the people of C'Holm seem to make the journey through the Path of Earth, and return the Earth of their bodies to the Island of the Dead that is before us. Some who travel the seas follow the Path of Water and return the Water of their bodies to the oceans. In times long ago there were warriors who took

the Path of Fire open in the heat of battle, and some of our more enlighten minds manage to achieve the Path of Air.”

Hamish paused. The Master of the Dead attempted to rise, but Hamish stepped on his hand and hissed, “Don’t move. You asked me ashore, now live with the consequences.”

All the eyes that were not on the floor where on him. He really didn’t want to do this, but couldn’t stop now.

“I do not know the intentions of the Gods. I do not know why they choose to call a certain man, at a certain time, to come before them and give Account of his Life. I do know that because this could happen to any of us, at any time it, is best to live our lives at all times without regrets, and without actions that we will not be able to justify.”

The hall was silent when he paused.

“I also give the Gods the credit that when they do call each of us, there will be a Path to reach them. The tests they lay before us while we are living are The Tests we define ourselves by. Once they call us to Account for ourselves, the talisman, the charms, and the goodwill of our fellow men will count for naught. Where the material pieces of our bodies - the Earth, the Water, the Air, the Fire, and even the Life that we are made of – where this pieces rest when we receive the Call of the Gods will not hinder, or prevent, any of us from responding to the Call of the Gods. And when we respond to the Gods, the fate of the pieces that we once were is no longer of importance. The flesh that we are returns to the Earth, the Water that we are returns to the seas, the Air that we are returns to the skies, the Fire inside us that keeps us warm does a little to warm the whole World, and the Life that we have given form to as our Soul returns to the interconnected Life all around us.”

Hamish knew he wasn’t saying anything new. But maybe it was good for the crews and the Brotherhood to hear it from him.

“I, and I am sure everyone here, would like the ability to intercede on behalf of our friends and loved-ones, when they are called before the Gods. I would like to think that the kind words of the Mistress of the Brotherhood, or the Master of the Dead, would somehow cause the Gods to go easy on me. But the hard truth of the existence the Gods have given us is that no one is Accountable for my actions but myself, and no one’s good wishes or Blessings are going to blind the Gods to the truth of my failings.”

Hamish reached down and stood the Master of the Dead back onto his feet.

“Personally, I would suggest that each of us should plan on returning safely to our homes, and that we carry a keepsake from the loved-ones waiting there for us, rather than plan for our deaths. However, as my friend advised, if you want to cover your bet and also carry a gift from the Master of the Dead to let the Gods know that you are living your life in such a way that you are ready for them whenever they decide to Call, it probably cannot hurt. If any of you believe that The Binding has indeed Returned, and that the process of Reuniting the World and the Underworld has begun, and that the goodwill of The Binding will curry favor with the Gods, then you should know that The Binding is here to serve you, and help you, in all that you do. I can not help you when you stand before the Gods. I will help you, to the best of my ability, while you are still part of The World and the Underworld. This I promise.”