

*But is the path to freedom a road into darkness?*

Orthnarr came to a stop a few yards away at the appearance of a young man from within the hut.

He looked not more than a stripling, this stranger, ruddy-faced and dirty as of a hard life with few comforts, and his garments were patched and worn. The minor hint of a man's beard clung to his slender face, and his night-black hair fell down his back, stopping short of his waist.

"Greetings, Orthnarr Bear-slayer, Chieftain of the Balar Clans of the Ishtrun Hillands," the youth said with a broad grin.

"You know my name?" the Balar chieftain asked, somewhat taken back; his voice was deep and rather hard, matching well his staunch build. He rested his hand casually upon the hilt of the broad sword that hung at his side.

"An odd question," the other mused in reply, "considering that it's our knowledge of things which has brought you to us. Please," he held the door open, "enter."

Of a sudden, the dog at Orthnarr's feet loosed a feral growl from deep in its throat, its jaws clenched together, muzzle wrinkled in a wolfish sneer, and its eyes fixed on the younger man. Taking a few steps forward, it looked as though the animal were about to leap upon the youth, its claws and fangs bared for attack, but the youth merely gazed down at the beast and grinned.

The dog's descent from anger was as swift as its rise, and it strode away languidly, stretching out to sleep. Giving voice to a brief chuckle that echoed of a shower of ice crystals, the youth ushered Orthnarr into the hut with a wave of his hand.

Stepping into the hovel, the younger man following after him and closing the door, the Bear-slayer beheld three individuals dressed much like the youth, all seated around a small fire upon the dirt floor, over which hung a cookpot. There was hardly aught else in the place, and little more than enough room for the four of them to sleep if each were to stretch out upon the floor.

The youth walked over to stand amongst them, including whom the group was comprised of two men, the other an elder, and two women