

time for you to pay the debt is due."

*Darkness that holds a treasure beyond treasures . . .*

Ambling over to the other door and opening it, the small, wizened form of Gathrunggin passed from Orthnarr's sight, only to return some few minutes later.

"Here," said she, presenting a wooden bowl up to the Bear-slayer. "Take it."

"This is all?" he asked, his face contorted in confusion as he took the item to look at it more closely. It was a plain wooden bowl, smooth and well wrought, ornamented only by a silver rim upon which four runes were carved, one at each quarter.

"Fill the bowl with fresh water, and bid yer warriors to each take one sip from it afore the battle begins, and ne'er shall any wound be final to them."

*When two destinies intertwine within a time of strife . . .*

Ilress glanced out of the doorway and saw that Orthnarr was coming towards the cottage. Scrambling back over to her pallet, she made to feign sleep but the chieftain entered the room before she was able, it thus appearing that his arrival roused her.

"You're awake, good." He closed the door behind him. "I am Orthnarr, called the Bear-slayer, and I am the chieftain of the Ishtun Clans."

"I am Ilress, Daughter of Sir Ulfion of the House of Thamswood," she replied in a proud, fearless timbre.

"And he?"

"Ventharn, of the House of Faldweck."

Orthnarr pulled over a stool to sit, Ilress tensing as if readying to fight from the suddenness of his movement, at notice of which the hint of a smile touched the chieftain's face.

"Be at ease, I merely wish to talk with you." Seating himself, he regarded the strong young woman before him with a thoughtful stare.