

Veril saw their glances, saw their fear and shame, and knew **they were flying from something that seemed to them too terrible for any human courage to face.**

But for once in her life she had no compassion. These had abandoned Ilohan.
“Cowards!” she screamed, in so loud and terrible a voice that they cringed in their saddles. “Cowards! Where is King Ilohan? You have abandoned him!

“Turn for the king! For courage, for love, for duty, for the homes you should defend, turn! Go back! The shadow will fall before you, I know it! Alas – if you will not turn, I shall! Alas for all the world! Yet not utterly alone shall he fall.

About the Author:

Homeschooled from first through twelfth grade, Ari Heinze holds astronomy degrees from Caltech (B.S. 2001) and the University of Arizona (Ph.D. 2007). He's passionately interested in astronomy, but equally so in storytelling. Even in early childhood he entertained his two younger brothers with stories, and now, besides writing with obsessive delight, he invents stories for his own children: Petra, Eleazar, and Brogal. He and his beloved wife Jane live in Houston at present, but plan to move to a more starry and adventurous locale when they have opportunity.

The Author's Favorite Books:

Fiction: *Cry, the Beloved Country*, by Alan Paton

Green Dolphin Street, by Elizabeth Goudge

The Jacobite Trilogy, by Dorothy K. Broster

Jane Eyre, by Charlotte Bronte

The Lord of the Rings, by J. R. R. Tolkien

The Napoleon of Notting Hill, by G. K. Chesterton

Northanger Abbey, by Jane Austen

The Space Trilogy, by C. S. Lewis

Till We Have Faces, by C. S. Lewis

Nonfiction: *Confessions*, by St. Augustine

Desiring God, by John Piper

The Reason for God, by Tim Keller

Jeremiah, by the Prophet Jeremiah

Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians, by St. Paul

*Darkness
Gathers Round*

*THE EPIC OF KAROLAN
THE FOURTH BOOK AMONG FOUR*

Ari Heinze

SOLI DEO GLORIA

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CONTEXT WITHIN THE EPIC OF KAROLAN

This is the fourth and final book in *The Epic of Karolan*. It tells how King Ilohan led forth an army against the overwhelming host of Vadshron, the Zarnith Warlord, and a great battle occurred. It tells how Jonathan lost hope of finding goodness or meaning in the world, yet still sought for it in desperation – and it describes the end of his search. It concludes the story of Ilohan and Jonathan, and of others, no less significant, who were caught up in their adventures. In the end, though darkness gathered round, their stories did not end in darkness.

The first book, **Bright Against the Storm**, told of the adventures of Jonathan the blacksmith and Sir Ilohan during the time preceding the great war between Karolan and Norkath, and of the love that was between Jonathan and Naomi the shepherdess, whom he left behind in Glen Carrah.

The second book, **Ashes of Our Joy**, told how Ilohan and Jonathan acquitted themselves in the Norkath War and its aftermath.

The third book, **Rain, Wind, and Fire**, recounted Naomi's experiences during the Norkath War, and what was the end of Jonathan's search for her. It also described how a new Zarnith warlord arose to threaten Karolan with utter destruction, and told of the desperate plans Ilohan and Jonathan made to oppose him.

To explore Karolan further, visit <http://www.hopewriter.com>.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to my dear wife, Jane, for supporting me in writing and publishing this work, for believing it was possible even if I didn't, and for essential advice and encouragement every step of the way. The hours of reading aloud and arguing with her about proper English were great fun. Besides guiding me in countless other corrections large and small, she ensured that the difference in meaning between 'discreet' and 'discrete' was properly observed, that the phrase 'bright wind' was not used, and that no one reined on his throne or used reigns on his horse.

Thanks to my parents, Dan and Judith, and my brothers, Ky and Dar, for being my first readers, and for making me believe I could write something publishable.

Thanks to Daniel Song for detailed editing suggestions for the whole series.

If I start naming those who shared with me the adventures I have drawn on to write my epic, this page will never be enough – but thanks to those who stood with me on icy mountains, hiked to hidden valleys, ventured into baked but splendid deserts, and dared enough heat and cold, hunger, thirst, and danger that my portrayals of these things have some taste of the reality.

Thanks to those whose love helped me dream of Ceramir, and whose courage and faithfulness helped me dream of heroes.

CEMBAR

KAROLAN

NORKATH

The far North is forested and unpeopled

Forest

Farmland

Britheldore

Aaronkal

Guldorak

Niida

Idranak

Metherka

Dilgare

Tremilin

Valley of Petrag

Felim

Kiuhern

Byrinkal

Glen Carrah

Vykadrak

Dilfandokir

Cliffs of Doom

The Great Mountains

Ceramir

Harevan

Desert Gap

Kyrta

Desert Church

Drantar

Church of Joyful Prayer

Luciyr

Drantar's Gap

The great Desert extends beyond the edge of knowledge to the extreme South, from whence, it is said, the Jarnith once came.

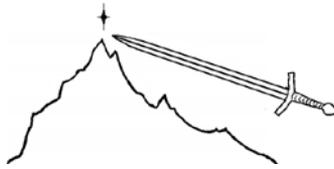
The Desert

Many other castles, churches, rivers, and other features exist which are not shown.

The borders cannot be traced with certainty where they meet the Desert and the Mountains.

*To my readers,
and to all for whom the quest of holy love
is more than merely fantasy.*

Chapter 1



Always Another Road

HOPE BEYOND ALL REASON HAD SEEMED TO HOLD THEM IN peace as they stood at the Gate of Hope, the entrance to the Cloth of Joy. But peace fled with the moment's passing, and Barnabas and Hannah urged their exhausted horses up from the shallow stream toward the stone house of Ceramir. Even at that moment the son and daughter they carried might be dying.

The house was brilliantly lit, and many were going in and out. There was a large bonfire not far from the front door. "We bring wounded and sick!" cried Barnabas. "Wounded and sick from the Desert Gap and Karolan. Will no one bring us aid?"

Instantly a tall man was beside him, looking up into his face in the firelight. "Barnabas!" cried the man. "Have you, then, found Jonathan?"

"Yes, Rangol! He is direly wounded. But beyond that, my wife Hannah has come a weary journey from Karolan, bringing our daughter Naomi at the edge of death. Like Jonathan she must have care immediately, or perish."

"Your wife – and Naomi!" exclaimed Rangol. "But no one could travel by – never mind, this is no time for questions. I will help you, though I do not know how we will find beds."

Barnabas dismounted and took Jonathan gently down into his arms. Rangol helped Hannah down from her horse. He would have carried Naomi, but Hannah reached up to her first. With only a little help from Rangol, she took Naomi's wasted form down from the saddle and onto her own back, and began carrying her toward the stone house. Rangol, and Barnabas bearing Jonathan, followed after her.

The big room they entered was lit with many lamps, and filled with the bustle of healing work. Beds lined the walls, all occupied with wounded men. Yet Hannah noticed one exception: in one bed lay a golden-haired young woman, her shoulder wrapped in a bloody bandage. An older woman leaning on crutches stood beside this bed, looking down at the wounded girl.

Hannah went to her, bent almost double under Naomi's weight. "Lady," said Hannah, "my daughter is dying, and I am at the end of my strength. Is there any hope for her here?"

The woman with the crutches looked up in astonishment. "There must always be hope for the sick in Ceramir," she said. "I see, indeed, that --"

But here Rangol interrupted, pushing up past Hannah. "It is Hannah, Lady Eleanor – Jonathan's mother. The girl is Naomi, his beloved, whom Hannah has brought here from Karolan through some miracle of swift travel. And Barnabas has brought Jonathan in from the Desert Gap. He lives – barely."

A young man was running past carrying a bowl of some medicine. Eleanor turned swiftly and stopped him. "We need two beds, Karlak," she said. "We need them at once."

Karlak looked up in amazement. "By morning some will be free," he said.

"We do not need them in the morning," said Eleanor. "We do not need them in one hour, or one moment. We need them now. One is for Jonathan, who beyond hope has survived the Battle of

the Desert Gap, but now is at the point of death. The other is for Naomi, his beloved, who was reported dying of sickness ten days ago, but has now been brought here alive by his mother through a journey that has taken all her strength."

"Veril is sick only with exhaustion, and Auria here is resting well," said Karlak. "Veril can be moved, and they can share a bed."

"Good," said Eleanor. "That makes one."

"I'd give up my bed for Jonathan even if it meant my death," said a voice. "Give me a blanket by the fire."

The soldier who had spoken lay on a bed near the door. As Eleanor turned to him, Hannah sank down onto her hands and knees, overpowered at last by her weariness and Naomi's weight. Dimly she heard Eleanor and Karlak speaking with the soldier. "Your wounds are serious," said Karlak.

"I fought with Jonathan at Petrag, and I followed him across the mountains," said the soldier. "I would have come with him to the Desert Gap, but he had too many volunteers, and he turned me away to fight here under Barnabas instead. He is the greatest hero Karolan has ever known. I would give up my bed for him even if it meant my death."

"We cannot let you do so, if indeed it will mean your death," said Eleanor. "Karlak, what do you think? Can we accept the gift of this man's noble heart?"

"He can be moved with little danger," said Karlak, "but he must have a mattress. A blanket on the hard floor will not suffice for one so wounded."

"They are drying spare mattresses by the fire outside," said Rangol.

"Go, then, Rangol," said Eleanor. "Tell them we need a mattress now, even if it is not wholly dry."

Hannah was aware of some motions around her, and then Naomi was gently lifted from her back. She stood and followed

Rangol as he carried Naomi to the bed she supposed had been Veril's. The very next bed over was the one the soldier had given up, and there Barnabas laid Jonathan. Hannah stood bewildered between them for a moment. She had lost sight of Rangol, Karlak, and Eleanor, though Barnabas was standing still and silent beside Jonathan's bed. There seemed to be no healer to help them, even though they had come to Ceramir at last. In the clear lamplight Naomi's thinness was terrifying, while Jonathan looked deadly pale, and the white sheet of his mattress was already darkening with blood from a wound on his back.

"May God bless your coming to Ceramir, Lady Hannah. I am Mudien of the Cloth of Joy, and this is Imranie my wife. We will heal your children, if by the power God has given us they can be healed."

The voice startled Hannah, and she looked up to see a strong, gray-haired man, with his wife at his side. He moved to Jonathan's bed. He looked long into his face, and felt his wrist. He did the same then to Naomi. "They are both on the threshold of death," he said. "The case of the son is most urgent. Dear Imranie, watch them while I gather what we will need."

He went out, but soon returned with a basket of white strips of cloth, clean wooden laths, and vials of medicine. Before doing anything else, however, he knelt silently by Jonathan's bed for what seemed a long time. When at last he rose, he and Imranie immediately began attending to Jonathan's injuries. Hannah watched, rigid as a statue, torn between gratitude and horror.

They removed Jonathan's clothes and gently turned him over, making sure nothing obstructed his labored breathing. The broken blade of a dagger protruded from a dreadful-looking wound in his back. Hannah heard Imranie gasp a little at the sight, but Mudien made no sign. From the basket he took pliers and a slightly curved metal plate with a slot at one edge. He placed the metal plate against Jonathan's back, fitting one edge

of the dagger carefully into the slot. He placed one hand over the metal, with the blade between two of his fingers. With the other hand he took up the pliers, grasped the dagger firmly, and, after a moment's hesitation, drew it out. We she saw the length of the black, jagged blade, Hannah could hardly believe it had not run Jonathan through and pricked out from his chest. Bright red blood welled up from the wound, now that the dagger was withdrawn. Mudien and Imranie began working with great haste, almost frantically and yet with a control and discipline that made their labor beautiful. Though Hannah was aware of this, and could even admire it, the sight of that dagger and of her son's flowing blood had done something to her. There was a buzzing in her ears, and her vision seemed to be fading behind a haze of gold...

When Hannah was aware of things again she was sitting on the floor, lying back against Barnabas with her head resting on his chest. From the warmth and light around them, she guessed that he was sitting with his back to the hearth. "Is Jonathan alive?" she whispered.

"Yes," said Barnabas. "You have lain here only a few moments, and Mudien and Imranie are still tending him. Imranie said it would be best for you if you no longer watched. They will call us if we are needed. She said that you should rest and eat something, and tell me of your journey, if you can."

For a long time Hannah was silent. She tried to put words together to describe her journey. But always her fear for Jonathan came crowding in on her thoughts. The memories of the journey, too, were full of darkness that oppressed her. "I cannot speak of it," she said, "and I do not want to eat. I wish there was something we could do that might help Jonathan."

"There is much praying done here," said Barnabas. "Perhaps we can do that."

Hannah sat up and rose wearily to a kneeling position at the hearth, surprised how stiff and weak she felt. "Lord God," she began, "I beg you to save Jonathan. I beg you not to let Naomi die..." she choked on tears. "I cannot go on," she said. "I am weary and broken... I have no words."

"Perhaps we can pray without words," said Barnabas.

They knelt together near the hearth and tried to pour out their love and sorrow, deep and strong and raw, before God as prayer for Jonathan and for Naomi. Hannah was sure that God heard and cared for them, yet she had no assurance that he would grant their hearts' desire. Weariness weighed on her so heavily that every waking moment seemed a torment, though she had no desire to sleep. At last she stirred and said, "I want to go back to him. Even if I faint again, I want to see him."

Barnabas stood, and helped her up. He saw her waver on her feet, and he looked at her intently. She was very pale. The days of her journey with Naomi had changed her. He realized he knew nothing of those days as yet, but in her face he read her courage and their terror. He embraced her, and felt how thin she was grown since he had left her with bitter pain on the side of the Third Mountain. "You have come a hard road, of which you have not spoken, Beloved," he said. "It grieves me to see how much it has cost you."

"Neither of us knows how the other comes to be here and to be alive," said Hannah. "But now is not the time for telling stories."

Barnabas led Hannah to where Imranie and Mudien still labored over Jonathan. Mudien was just lifting his shoulders, while Imranie wound a strip of cloth around his torso, crossing the dagger-wound again and again, with a tightness that seemed almost cruel. Yet it stopped the bleeding completely. The outer layers of the bandage did not even turn red, and no blood seeped out the sides. Mudien continued to support Jonathan,

while Imranie painstakingly conveyed the contents of a cup into his mouth, using a hollow reed. Then they laid him down again, propping him with pillows so that he would rest on his left side.

Mudien felt his wrist again, and listened to his breathing. "He has survived that, at least," he said. "That is a point gained. It seems indeed a miracle that he could lie on the battlefield for half the day with such a wound, and yet still live. Now we must attend to the rest."

He did not move to do so, however. Instead he knelt suddenly on the floor, and bowed his head down on the white sheet of Jonathan's bed. He stayed like that, in a posture of weariness and hopelessness, for a long moment. Fear came upon Hannah with such intensity that when she tried to open her mouth to speak, she could say nothing. Then she saw Jonathan's chest rise and fall just a little, and she knew he was not dead... not yet.

She realized that Mudien was weary himself, and wounded. A bloody bandage encircled his right arm near the shoulder. Another was around his right hand – one that was very insufficient, Hannah guessed, to the extent of the wound. A larger bandage would have inhibited his service of others. It was his own weakness and exhaustion, not despair of healing Jonathan, that had brought Mudien to his knees. But even as she thought these things he rose and went on with his work with strong and steady hands, as if there had been no interruption. He and Imranie were working now to bind up the terrible spear-wound in Jonathan's thigh.

At last, when that was done, they began laboring to straighten and bind his horribly misshapen left arm and hand. Mudien rejected all the pieces of wood that were in the basket. Leaving Imranie again to watch at Jonathan's bedside, he went out and returned after a considerable time bringing larger square bars of white ash wood, and a short, sturdy knife. He felt Jonathan's

arm, and then selected a piece of wood. "Three separate fractures, in the arm alone," he muttered.

Beginning from a deep, sawed notch that ran the length of the square wooden bar, Mudien began to carve away the wood with his knife. After watching for a while, Hannah realized that he was trying to carve out a hollow the shape of Jonathan's arm. Eventually, she guessed, he would use the stiffness of the wood to encircle half the arm and hold it straight, while he bound the rest with cloth. It would be like the splints used for broken bones in Karolan, but it would hold the bones far more steady and more straight. Yet as Hannah watched, she realized that for all Mudien's skill and understanding of the healing arts, he had little practice in carving wood. Forgetting her own weariness, she stepped forward.

"Let me try a little," she said. "I think I have seen what you want to do."

He let her take the smooth white ash from his hands. He offered her the knife also, but she brought out her own from within her cloak – the knife she had used when she hid the great Sapphire. She sat cross-legged on the floor and began to carve the wood with long, sure strokes. Wood that had been scraped off in ragged chunks under Mudien's efforts now peeled smoothly away. Soon she had enlarged the groove in the wood into a wide hollow nearly large enough to fit over Jonathan's arm. She handed it up to Mudien. He held it against the bruised and swollen limb and showed her where a little more wood must be shaved away. He also asked her to carve from the outside of the curve, shaving away much of the bulk of the original square bar, until what was left was only a shell, thick enough to be sturdy, yet thin enough to be light.

It took her only moments to finish all that he had asked. "Well done," he said. "You have aided in the rescue of your son. I know no other who can match your skill with wood."

“It is enough to know that I have aided you,” she said.

Gently Mudien placed the wood around Jonathan’s arm, padding it inside with soft cloth. Many times he felt the bones and made adjustments, before he finally bound the arm to the carefully carved splint using sturdy bandages. He then turned to Jonathan’s broken hand. “Here I would ask your help again, Lady Hannah,” he said.

It was strange to her that they all gave her that title of honor, to which she had no right. Yet now in their need and weariness was no time to dispute it. She simply followed Mudien’s instructions as well as she could, while he used the pieces of wood she carved to bind up her son’s hand.

When at last that was finished, Mudien again held up Jonathan’s head, while Imranie again gave him medicine using a reed. Despite her best efforts, he sometimes coughed and choked. On one of these occasions he gave a heartrending groan, but he did not wake. “The coughing hurts him because of his broken ribs, and because the dagger pierced his lung,” said Mudien. “Nevertheless it is good for him to cough – it will help clear his lungs and stave off infection.”

Imranie finished giving Jonathan the medicine. Together she and Mudien carefully positioned him with his left side down again, and then covered him with a blanket. “There,” said Mudien, taking a deep breath, “we have done all we can, for the present. He must have another healing draught every hour, to help him resist infection and to aid in replacing the blood he has lost. I will tell Karlak to see to it.”

“Will he live?” asked Hannah in a whisper.

Mudien turned and looked at her and Barnabas with compassion in his face. “I do not know,” he said. “He has lost a vast amount of blood. I have scarcely ever seen a man so desperately wounded live. Yet he has enormous strength, and all that we have just done has gone well. If he lasts until the dawn,

he will survive – unless infection kills him. There is hope, dear friends. For now, let us turn to your daughter.”

Though Imranie and Mudien moved to Naomi’s bed, Hannah turned suddenly to Barnabas and flung herself into his arms. “It is always another road,” she cried. “Always hope is far away, and the journey is full of perils, and there is no arriving.”

He held her tightly, and she relaxed in his embrace. “I love you,” he said. “I love you, my dear Hannah, who for love has journeyed beyond her strength.”

Together they went to where Naomi lay. Mudien was praying by the side of her bed, while Imranie stood at its head and looked down at her with an expression of indescribable love. Hannah knelt beside Mudien, and took one of Naomi’s hands in her own. She raised the cold fingers to her lips. She felt again, stronger than ever before, what she had felt while tending Naomi through the long nights in Glen Carrah: she felt that love and sorrow were woven together in a pattern whose beauty and holiness broke her heart. Naomi was a forgiven child of the God she loved. Hannah could not bear the thought of losing her, but when she thought of the pain Naomi had borne on earth and of the joy that awaited her with her beloved Lord, she felt that in love for her she could hardly hope she would be spared.

Hannah’s grief for Naomi hurt her just as her grief for Jonathan did, but it held yet an element of immense comfort at its core – where in her sorrow for Jonathan there was nothing but aching fear. For a moment as she knelt beside Naomi’s bed, she felt that the peace of exhausted sorrow must grip the whole world – that mockery and violence everywhere must be stilled in a breathless vigil for her daughter’s life. Then the peace faded, and she was again aware of herself as Hannah, only Hannah, whose sorrow the world did not share: a weary woman kneeling by her daughter’s deathbed.

A gentle hand touched her shoulder. "Rise, dear one," said Imranie's voice. "She will not die this night, I think. Rise now, that we may tend her." Hannah looked up, and to her surprise she saw in Imranie's face the same love for herself that she had previously seen there for Naomi.

Hannah rose, and Imranie took her place on the bed. She tilted up Naomi's head, and gave her medicine from a small silver flask, using a hollow reed just as she had with Jonathan. When the flask was empty she remained where she was, with Naomi's head resting against her. "We must wait a little now," said Imranie. "You will soon see the strength this medicine will give her."

"Why do you love us so much?" asked Hannah.

"I love all who come here, though my strength is not like Mudien's or Eleanor's to serve them," said Imranie. "Yet for you... I look at Naomi, and think how my own daughters, too, lie sick and injured this night, yet their danger and my suffering are light compared to yours. Also, you remind me of another – who had courage and hope and humility enough to send her daughter here when none in Karolan could heal her. But she did not come herself on a perilous road such as yours."

"Who was she?" asked Hannah in a whisper. "And what became of her daughter?"

"Her daughter was healed here," said Imranie. "And the mother's name was Sarah: Sarah, Queen of Karolan, who sustained her land and her king with long love and wisdom, and whose blessing lingers even now. Yet her heart was not more true than yours, Hannah of Glen Carrah."

Hannah bowed her head, as she stood beside Naomi's bed. "I have longed that the lives of those I love might be rescued," she said. "Credit me with no more nobility than this – and even in this I have faltered. Once I held my husband back from rescuing this our daughter, in fear for his life, in longing to keep him

beside me. Had it not been for my sin, maybe she would have been spared this dreadful sickness."

Imranie began to say something, but before Hannah could understand what it was, she found herself crushed in Barnabas' embrace. "Hannah, Beloved, do not speak such folly!" he said. "Listen now, and remember my words. You delayed me a day. If you had not, both I and Naomi would have been lost. The day before I set out, Naomi was wandering small trails in the depths of Cembar. If I had left then, and kept to the main roads as I certainly would have done at first, I would have passed her by and never known it. She would have died in that ditch by the Karolan road, and I would have sought in vain till evil befell me. On you there is not one shred of guilt for all her hardships."

She tightened her arms around him, and the words of condemnation that the darkness had spoken to her back in the caves now seemed utterly foolish. "I thank you," she whispered. "I thank you, Barnabas. I did indeed sin when I held you back, but I see now that God worked even that for our good, and that I am forgiven."

"Imranie, the time has come," said Mudien suddenly.

"Then Hannah should have this place," said Imranie.

Barnabas released Hannah, and she, though she did not understand what was happening, obediently took Imranie's place sitting on Naomi's bed. As Imranie had done, she pillowed Naomi's head gently upon her lap. Mudien, still kneeling upright beside the bed, took Naomi's hand in his.

"Daughter," said Mudien, "awake now and speak to us."

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Naomi felt as though she were being lifted up from the depths of a black lake in which she had known nothing and remembered nothing. First she was conscious only of being

lifted, and then of thoughts and memories returning to her. Then she was aware of a warm light above her, still far away, but rapidly getting nearer. At last her head broke water and she opened her eyes.

Peace was all around her, and she was warm. She could not move, but that troubled her little. Above her was a ceiling of wooden beams, and candlelight shone warmly all around. She felt pressure on her hand, and a voice she did not know said, "Welcome, Daughter, to the Cloth of Joy."

She was glad of the welcome, but felt no need to speak or move. A hand and arm came into the edge of her field of vision, and a voice she knew well – Hannah's – said, "Drink this, dear Naomi. You have come at last to Ceramir, at the end of a long journey, and it may be that here... that here you may be healed."

A cup was held against her lips, and she drank. It seemed to her that this had happened many times before while she was sinking into darkness, but the memories were vague, as though she had only been told of its happening to someone else.

Though her lungs ached with every breath, the drink seemed to ease her pain and clear her thoughts. She wondered if she ought to do anything, but she was very weary. The light and the things that she saw seemed somehow distant – distant from the dark lake bottom where she belonged. She felt she had been reprieved for a short time to a kindly world, but one that was only half-real.

A face came into view – a gray-haired man whom she did not know. He seemed sad and weary, but his eyes were strong and kind. "You are very sick," he said. "I have worked and prayed long that we might have this chance to speak with you, but our time is short."

"Say what you will," she whispered. "I am listening."

"Your body is balanced between life and death. I cannot tell whether Nature has decreed that you must die, or whether she

might still allow you life. But she is God's creature. Whichever way her decree is cast, he may overrule it. But this I would know from you, Naomi, daughter of courage. What is your heart's desire? To live, and face this world's trouble yet a while longer, or to die, and go to the joy that awaits you with your Lord?"

She was silent for a long moment then, and closed her eyes. She felt herself drifting back toward the black lake. There was no fear there: it beckoned her as sleep beckons the weary. Yet she would open her eyes again and speak, because she still had that duty in the world. It was easy, and it was a blessed surprise to her that her duty now should be easy.

"Is Jonathan still alive?" she asked.

"Yes, Naomi," whispered Hannah. "Jonathan is alive."

"If he is alive," said Naomi, "I also want to live... if I can." She sank swiftly into black depths, holding no memory of what had passed. The eyes that had looked serenely up at Hannah's with the question closed as though they would never again have strength to open, save when they relaxed in death.

Mudien was still, still holding her hand, for a long moment. Then he raised his head, and weary though he was there was a stern fire in his eyes. "So," he said. "We will fight for her. This is war, as surely as our resistance to the Zarnith was war, and the right way to wage it is the same: pray, hope, and fight."

"Can I now take up the fight for Naomi, leaving you free to serve others?" asked Imranie.

Mudien stood slowly. "That is well thought of," he said. "Eleanor and Karlak have been long without aid from either of us, and there are many wounded. I leave Naomi in your good hands."

Hannah looked up at Imranie and spoke with words slurred by exhaustion. "Can I... is there help I can give to care for her?"

"You should rather sleep, I think, dear Hannah from Glen Carrah," said Imranie.

“Not yet,” pleaded Hannah. “Not while they still... I beg you, dear Imranie, please let me help you tend Naomi, if I can.”

“Very well,” said Imranie. “First we must wash her by the fire.” Imranie pulled aside the blanket that covered Naomi, and gently lifted her up from Hannah’s lap.

Moving almost in a dream, Hannah followed Imranie into a smaller room where a hearth was built very near the warm stream running merrily in the floor. “It is very important now to keep Naomi warm,” said Imranie in explanation. They gently removed her clothes, washed her thoroughly in the stream, and dried her before the fire. Though her ailment was not of the skin, Imranie rubbed her all over with healing ointments, explaining to Hannah that some of their virtue would sink inward to combat her sickness. At last they dressed her in warm, soft clothes, and Imranie carried her back to her bed. Hannah tucked a wool blanket carefully around her. “In a little time I will return to give her another healing draught,” said Imranie. “For now, all is done that can be done.”

Imranie went swiftly away, leaving Hannah standing alone beside the bed. Hannah looked around bewilderedly, wondering what she should do now. Absently she knelt and placed a hand on Naomi’s chest. She lingered there almost in a stupor, feeling her hand rise and fall with Naomi’s breathing, comforted by this almost imperceptible proof that her daughter lived.

Gradually Hannah became aware of a figure behind her. She turned and saw Barnabas gazing down at Jonathan. “He is neither better nor worse,” he said, turning toward her. “But that is, perhaps, hopeful news. Mudien said that if he lasted until dawn, his recovery would be certain but for infection.”

“What should we do?” asked Hannah.

“Everyone is saying we should sleep,” said Barnabas, “but sleep is still far from me, and indeed I do not think it is right for me to sleep – not yet. This is a night of toil for all in Ceramir, and

many lives besides those of our children hang in the balance. I have been helping carry supplies down from the dry storehouses that are built against the cliff walls of the valley."

"Can I join you in this?" asked Hannah.

"You can, Beloved," he said. "There is much left to do."

She worked beside him for a long time, and the night became more and more dreamlike to her. There came a time when she and he were standing again beside Jonathan's bed, and she could not remember how they had come there. Jonathan was just the same, but that meant, at least, still alive.

Hannah felt a tugging at her skirts, and she turned in surprise. A little girl was there, carrying a small tray with two bowls of soup on it, two cups of water, and some bread. "Ella bid me bring you this," she said. "It is good for people who are sad and worried, and tired and hungry."

Hannah doubted she or Barnabas could eat, but she could not reject the girl's gift. "I thank you," she said. "But who is Ella?"

The girl's eyes widened. "Don't you know?" she asked. "Big people call her Lady Eleanor. She is the one who walks with crutches, but stands straight, and isn't like the other people." Then she lowered her voice to a whisper, and went on, "She is a queen."

"And who are you?" asked Hannah.

"I am called little fern," said the girl. "I woke in the night and went to Ella, and she let me serve people. You are Lady Hannah, I know: your son fought for us with his big sword. I am sorry he is hurt, and you must be afraid he will die, but do not worry. Ella will pray for him, and Mudien will heal his hurt, and he will be well. My father says everything Ella prays for always happens, because God listens to her."

"He listens to all who pray as they should, little fern," said Hannah, "you and I as well as Lady Eleanor. Yet he does... he does not always make happen that... that for which we pray."

“Don’t cry, Lady Hannah. Eat some of the soup; it is good. I had some myself out by our fire. My father is not hurt, and my mother’s little baby – my brother – did not get washed away or chilled. I am very happy. Please do not be so sad. Mudien is healing your son. Mudien is very strong; I am afraid of him a little. I have seen them bring in dead people – at least, I thought they were dead, but my father said no, only almost dead – and Mudien made them well, so that they were walking around, and laughing and smiling, only two days later. Do not be so sad; eat the soup and bread. Farewell; I must leave and carry soup to others.”

Hannah and Barnabas sat by the hearth and ate. With the brigands, Hannah had never been able to eat more than a few mouthfuls of every meal, but now she ate gratefully until not a scrap of her food was left. “I am sorry,” she said, looking up at Barnabas in surprise. “I ought to have spared some for you: the two bowls were the same size, and you are a man, and have fought today.”

He smiled at her. “My share was enough, Beloved,” he said. “I am not fresh from a journey such as yours. Can you, now, tell me of it?”

For a long time she was silent. At last she began to speak slowly, framing words with difficulty in her weariness. “At the foot of the Third Mountain, bandits under the command of one they called the Bowlord slew the men Jonathan had sent back with us,” she said. “They thought I was dead. They would have killed Naomi, but I stole a great sapphire from them. I threatened to throw it into the abyss if they did not spare her. They had mentioned a Dark Way through the mountains into the southern desert. I hid the Sapphire, and I said that if they brought me and Naomi unharmed to Ceramir by this Dark Way, I would tell them the hiding place.” She looked up, and saw in

her husband's face nothing but wonder and shock. He opened his mouth, but said nothing.

"They wanted to kill me," she continued, "but the Bowlord believed I had indeed hidden the Sapphire where they could never find it without aid. It was precious to them – I think it was the symbol and the pride of their band."

"Beloved Hannah," he said, embracing her as they sat together, "at any moment they could have abandoned their promise and simply tortured you!"

"I had a bottle of poison, which I said I would drink if ever they threatened me."

His arms tightened around her. "I have always known you had great courage and strength," he said. "But this is beyond all."

"Day after day passed without light, while I watched Naomi's life fade away," she whispered. "We were all alone, surrounded by evil men, protected only by a power I lived in fear of losing. All seemed to rest on me, and all my sins came back to haunt me in the darkness of the caves through which they carried us. At times I was sure she would die, and that by my faults I would have killed her. A thousand times the brigands might have stolen my poison. I could not stay awake to protect it. I would not indeed have drunk it if it came to such a pass, and I feared they would guess this and prove me false. And all the time... all the time she was dying."

She rose with painful slowness and went to Naomi's bedside. "And still she is at the edge of death," said Hannah. "She survived the journey, beyond hope. But God, my Lord, will this darkness ever end?"

"Can you tell me how you parted from the brigands in the end?" asked Barnabas gently, now standing beside her.

"It was hard to think how to do it," she said. "I drew a map on a piece of wood. They put Naomi on a horse they had there,

and I and the Bowlord went into the desert apart from the others, leading the horse. I had demanded that we each have a loaded crossbow. He was reluctant to grant this, until I shamed him with being afraid of a woman.

"We confronted each other about twenty paces apart, and I explained to him the map and the secret of the Sapphire's hiding place. I hoped then that my crossbow would ensure that he let me go alive. Neither of us trusted the other at all. He walked backwards a long way, keeping his crossbow pointed at me. Then suddenly he knelt, to aim carefully and kill me. I shot him before the motion was complete, and he loosed his own bolt almost at the same moment. His arrow nearly struck Naomi, but it glanced off the saddle. Mine felled him.

"I rode a wide circle around him and headed west along the mountains. At length I looked back to see if I had indeed killed him, and I saw that he had risen and was walking back toward his men. So they will find the sapphire, I guess, and I have kept my word.

"But, dear Hannah, how did you know that you must ride west?"

"I did not," she said softly. "It was a terrible choice, like so many others. I think the Bowlord had said, at the very beginning, which direction one would travel to go from the end of the Dark Way to Brightshadow, which is what they call the Cloth of Joy. I could not remember. All I knew for sure was that the Bowlord was trying to make me ride east. So I came around him, and went west, and long after I was sure I had chosen wrong and was without hope, I met you."

"But, Beloved, how did you escape the Zarnith? For you must have had to ride past them."

"They were far out in the desert, riding like thunder," she said. "I stayed near the mountains, trembling, and praying that

none of them might notice us. I suppose my prayers were answered, and none did."

Barnabas only said, "Beloved!" and embraced her there beside Naomi's bed.

"We should get back to work," she said at length.

They went out into the darkness, beneath the thin waning moon. As they passed the misty lake, Hannah suddenly gave a cry and then stood still.

"What is it, Beloved?" asked Barnabas, running to her side. "What is it?"

"I saw two shooting stars fall," she said slowly. "They were beautiful and golden, and they flew together and went out together in darkness, and it seemed to me... oh..." She crumpled and lay on the dry grass. He knelt beside her. She was breathing evenly, and he was sure she had suffered no sudden harm, but her collapse bewildered him. Slowly, he lifted her and carried her back to the lighted house. Once inside, he stood blinking in the candlelight, too weary to think or understand what must be done.

Imranie saw them there. "I guessed it would come to this," she told him. "You and she have pushed yourselves too hard, but all shall be well with you." She spread a thick warm blanket for them over the hard stone before the fire, and before Barnabas understood how it had happened, he and Hannah lay side by side wrapped in that blanket, their heads resting on a soft pillow. He was asleep almost before he knew that sleep was coming, and his sleep was deep, kind darkness without dream or labor.