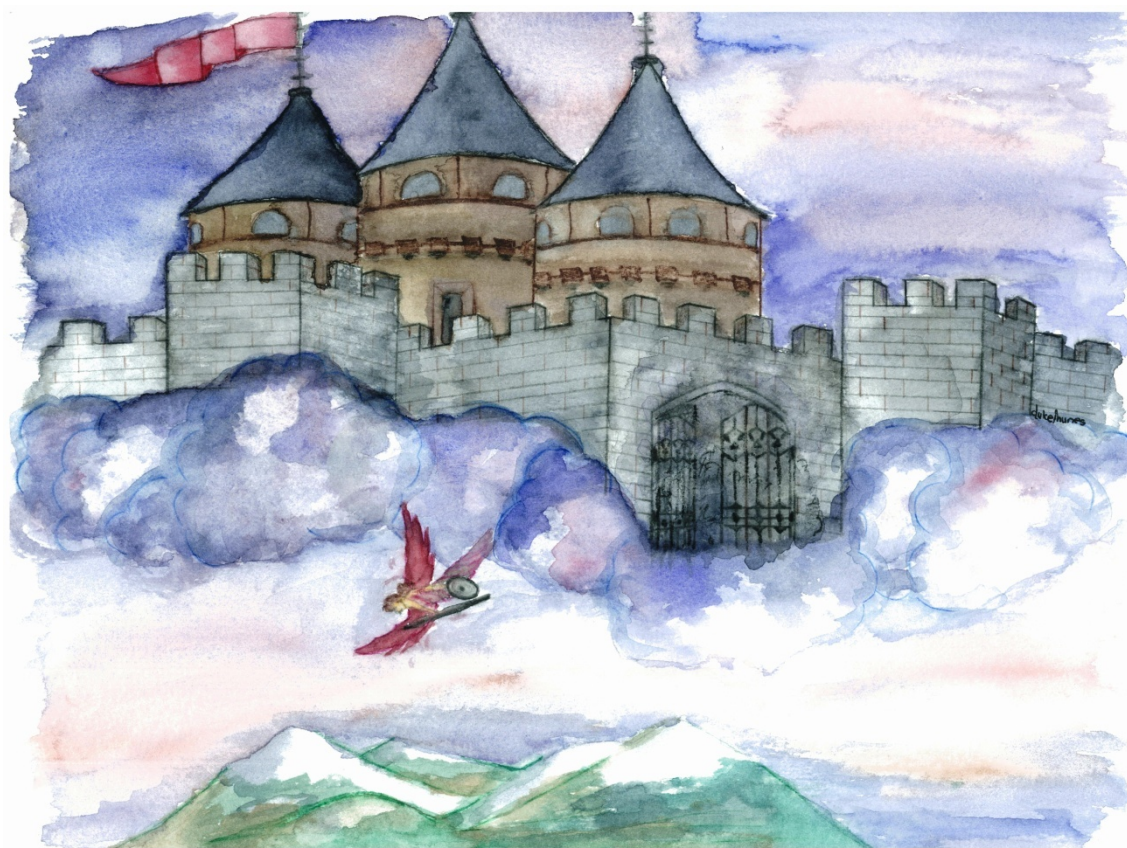


The Heavenly Hall

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Far away, in the distant horizon, lies a fortress in the sky, with white flags unfolded to the morning breeze, and towers which rose above any rainbow. The cloud line as its walls, gleaming with the solar beams, the fortress stood proud and tall. In that Heavenly Hall, there was a great queen named Elaina,

with hair white as the Winter snow in the highest peak, and her beauty so heavenly that it was almost too much for earthly eyes. She was the greatest of all Valkyries, holy beings who could wield the Light at will and could give a man wings, turning him into a Soldier of the Light. The greatest of these winged soldiers were the Paladins. Warriors amongst warriors, they were armed with great swords, axes and broad shields, as well as bright suits of plated armor. But the Heavenly Hall had a terrifying enemy: The Purple Thunder clan. They were mainly composed of traitors to mankind and magical creatures possessed by evil spirits. However powerful, the great Queen Elaina, aided by her mighty soldiers, always kept these enemy hordes at bay. A storm of purple lighting always followed the enemy, but over the clouds they were far from the clan's grasp. The Heavenly Fortress was thought to be unreachable by either friend or foe, for only the winged beings that lived in it could reach it. They could not be matched in strength by anyone. And so, the good Queen decided to protect the inhabitants of the lower Realms from the attacks of the Evil Clan. And soon all beings, human or magical, physical or spiritual alike, relied on her protection.

One day, in order to prevent the peace that ruled throughout the land from being corrupted, Queen Elaina decided to send a messenger in disguise. His mission was to roam to every village, town and citadel and tell tales about the power and glory of the Heavenly Hall, so people wouldn't forget. For as long as they trusted and remembered it, the power of Light would remain strong and could never fail before any Evil. Such a dangerous quest would require someone bold and brave, willing to make the ultimate sacrifice. To be sent to Earth and lose his wings so that he could never be recognized as an Angel by the Purple Thunder clan. The Queen looked down her throne and chose the bravest of her warriors, a Paladin named Hulgur. She asked him to step forward and spoke:

– Hulgur, you are our finest warrior, and I wouldn't trust more this task to anyone else. However, I cannot make you accept the quest and pay such a high price. But know that we would be forever in your debt if you would agree on doing this. What say you?

Hulgur bowed and replied:

– My Queen, I could not live with myself on refusing your request, so it is under my free will that I accept.

Feeling both joy and sorrow, because he agreed but for her it meant losing her favorite Paladin, the Queen dubbed him the Bard:

– You will be known as the Bard. You will roam the land as a storyteller and everywhere you go, our Light will go with you. – and rising her staff she exulted – Hail Hulgur, the Bard. – And her gesture was imitated in unison by everyone present in the hall.

Hulgur had the looks of a mighty warrior. He was tall, with long curly hair a light shade of brown. His armor was magnificent. All made of Silver, and quickened by the power of Light which gave it a strange glow. In his eyes glowed the fire Courage itself. But this time that fire, although never diminished, was accompanied with sadness because he had to lose his wings; the thought of serving his greater purpose brought joy to his heart. It always falls into a few to sacrifice for the good of many, and Hulgur was glad to be one of those few.

The day of his departure came, and every Soldier, every Paladin and every Valkyrie was summoned to attend the ceremony of Hulgur's farewell. They stood before the gate, shouting his name, Hulgur the great Paladin. Even the Queen bowed before him because someone who has this kind of courage deserves great honor and recognition. He couldn't carry any token or weapon from the Heavenly Hall, because their superior craftsmanship would be easily recognized by the peoples of the Earth. His clothing also had to be changed; he left behind his mighty armor and replaced it with wolf skin boots, simple garments made of cloth and leather, and a black cloak with a hood; a chainmail tunic underneath represented the only armor he had. So, Elaina cast an enchantment upon him. It would charge any earthly sword of his choosing with the power of Light, so he could still defend himself without raising suspicions. There were many powers in the world but none could match the Light, the source of all magic. Not even the power of the Shadows, because without Light there can be no Shadow. Hulgur bided everyone farewell and spread his magnificent wings. He flapped them and rose in the skies, turning back one last time to look upon the Heavenly Hall and dove towards the lower Realms.

As he landed, a gentle wind blew past him and with a soft caress took his wings away. He was already expecting it; however, he couldn't help but feel some sadness. He took a deep breath of the cold air that surrounded him and looked around. Hills, covered with rocks and snow as far as the eye could see.

Then he started walking through a path in the snow towards a village that he had seen as he came down, just a few miles away from the place where he had landed. An anxious feeling dwelled in his heart, and he couldn't wait to arrive in that village and gather everyone around him to tell tales of glory.

On his way, he saw two riders, rushing in the same direction as his. As they approached him, they stopped and asked where was he heading and what was his business. He told them he was a bard and that he roamed the land telling tales of glory. Seeing that he meant no harm, one of the riders introduced himself and his companion:

– I am Animus, chieftain of the village to where we are headed, and my companion is Argrinn, the greatest master blacksmith in all the land. – Animus had the looks of a warlord. He was a huge man with long dark hair and a braided beard. He wore darkened plate gauntlets on his shoulders and legs. On his torso, tunic of chainmail covered with a tabard made in leather, featuring a design that seemed to be the head of a wolf. On his back a cloak that seemed to be made of grizzly bear skin and two huge swords that probably, only such a mighty of a man like he was, could wield at once. As for master Argrinn, he was short but his looks were nonetheless fierce. Judging by his face he seemed like a man in his early thirties, slightly younger than Animus. He had a horned helmet, plated shoulders engraved with the same design as Animus's tabard, leather gauntlets and bearskin boots, plated knees, and a tunic of kingsmail³ reinforced with leather backing. A shield and a fair-sized axe lay on his back along with some sort of cloak made out of wolf skin. Hulgar thought that, even though they seemed to be heavily armed for times of peace, the peoples of the Lower Realms had experienced too many probations and times of terror, and one could never be too careful.

This said they decided to take him with them. On their way, Animus told him that the village was called Wolfstooth, named after a large stone in the shape of a wolf's tooth, which lay on a hill that overlooked the village. He told him also that he would be welcome. Everyone loves a good story.

³ Kingsmail is a sort of chainmail, but more dense and heavy than the regular. Despite its weight, the protection it provides is far greater, and it is also more expensive to make, therefore worn mostly by kings.

They arrived at Wolfstooth, passed through the gate and a herald came and took the horses. The town was poor and small. Perhaps 70 people lived there. The whole town was surrounded by a palisade wall made out of stacks of wood with a path around it for a few guards armed with spears to patrol it. There was a small market with vegetables, animal skins, mead, and a few other goods. There was a well in the central square, and on the far left lay Argrinn's workshop. In the center of the town was the Longhouse, where the townspeople gathered to celebrate. It was also the house of Animus.

Nonetheless, the people seemed happy and contented with their lives. As they saw their chieftain return, they ran to open the gates of the longhouse and lighted the fires. Soon, everyone was gathered for the celebration. There was plenty of food to go around, ale and mead. Hugar was very impressed with the way in which the peoples of the lower lands shared a great bond and allegiance towards their master and each other. Animus, as chieftain of the village, took the central spot, right by the fire and said out loud:

– Gather around and pour the ale, for here is the Bard with mighty tale.

The town celebrated until dawn and everyone enjoyed the tales of the Bard so much that it seemed that the bond between the Higher and the Lower realms had been strengthened. But a new day rose from behind the mountains, and it was time for Hugar to leave and carry on with his quest. The chieftain thanked him, saying that he would always be welcome there, and presented him with a magnificent war horn.

– Blow on this horn every time you approach a town, and everyone will know that the Bard has arrived. I shall spread word of your coming to the nearest towns.

Master Argrinn also gave him a present. The roads were dangerous, especially for a lonely traveler, so he gave him a great sword.

– I hope you know how to use this, my friend. It is perhaps my finest crafting. Use it wisely.

Before he left, Animus gave him one final present, a mighty black steed with a white spot on his forehead. Hugar called him Eclipse, like the covered sun when the moon is fleeing back to her place. Hugar thanked them both and mounted and left towards the next town. He rode on.

A few years went by and the Bard's name went far and wide. Everyone knew the tales of the Bard and they always waited impatiently for his return. The bond between both realms was stronger than ever. One day, as the Bard was returning to Wolfstooth, he saw some darkened clouds and purple lighting over the village. This time he didn't blow the horn. It was under attack, so he approached carefully. When he got there, he saw Animus, armed with his two mighty swords, fighting the Purple Thunder clan. Agrinn was there too with a few others, but though they were good warriors, the Purple Thunder were too many. A small army of men and Goblins wearing horned headdresses were ravaging everyone who crossed their path. There was also a warlock with them, a man of great power, setting the village on fire with bolts of lightning. Hugar could only draw his sword, already charged with the power of Light, and make way through the enemies, to provide Animus, Argrinn, and a few others with an escape. Although he wanted to destroy the warlock, reaching him was folly. Leading the few survivors, he managed to flee, taking shelter in the woods, but Wolfstooth had been overrun.

As they walked among the forest, Hugar asked Animus to lead them to the closest town to raise the alarm, for Animus knew those woods better than he. But when they got there, they were too late. The town had been razed to the ground. The destruction caused by the Evil of the Purple Thunder was spreading fast. So fast that, before Queen Elaina could realize it, the fear of the inhabitants of the Earth was making them lose faith, and the Heavenly power had begun to weaken. The Purple Thunder clan had been building up their forces, quietly, during those years of peace. And this time, she knew that the Heavenly Hall could not resist a direct attack, especially without their greatest warrior. Hugar also knew this, but he could not help them for he had no wings.

They returned to the ruins of Wolfstooth, trying to find any survivors. Among the debris of the longhouse they found a child trapped in an underground pit. Argrinn went down to help the child, but as he descended he was amazed by what he saw: it was a passageway, leading towards the hill of the Wolf's Tooth. Argrinn took the child, and carried him. Despite living in that town, neither he nor anyone had any memory of that boy, but it had been fate that put him there. They lit some torches and followed the path. Strange

markings covered the walls, until they arrived at a wide chamber with a big crystal in the center. Animus mumbled as he touched the walls:

– I wonder what these symbols mean... this must be a ritual chamber of some kind.

Hulgar knew those markings.

– They are the ancient language of Valkyries, the language of the Heavenly Hall. And this room seems to be a Gate.

Because telling stories was what he did best, Hulgar told them his story. When he finished, everyone was amazed by his courage, but now they needed to save the Heavenly Hall, because if they didn't, the Earth, along with all its inhabitants, would be enslaved by the Evil of the Purple Thunder clan.

Argrinn put his cloak on the ground and put the boy there to sleep. He was very small, maybe four or five years old, and he had a strange thing about him. He tried asking his name, but the boy didn't answer, so he thought maybe he couldn't speak.

After the story, they lay down to rest. They had walked for a very long time and everyone was excessively tired. Everyone slept except for Hulgar. He grabbed a torch and started reading the symbols on the walls, trying to understand where that gate led. He was amazed; centuries of history were engraved on those walls, and that gate chamber seemed to be of extreme importance, but still there were no mentions to where it could lead.

Meanwhile, the shadows were covering the Earth very quickly. It seemed that the night was falling but this time it came from below. And as it fell, so did the hope of a new day. The guards of the Heavenly Hall sounded the alarm:

– Purple Thunder at the Gates!

With great haste, the armies of Light assembled their positions in the walls and in the yard. The door to the Throne Chamber was blocked to protect the Queen. A few soldiers were outside, guarding it. Before them there was an immense legion of goblins, men, and trolls, with purple banners and armed with scythes, spears, and bows. Far in the distance, upon patch of darkened clouds, stood the Purple Thunder Order: a secret order of five warlocks, great in power and wickedness. The Order was bound to secrecy and their names were as secret as the source of their powers. The greatest of them, who wielded the power of thunder, sent a bolt of lightning against the gate, damaging it. The

assault began. The Evil armies stormed the gates with overwhelming numbers. The good soldiers were fighting fiercely but it seemed that for every enemy they killed, two more appeared. A pile of broken shields was growing outside the gates. The assault continued, wearing out the gates of the fortress and the spirits of the brave soldiers, who desperately fought the unending waves of Purple Thunder wretches.

In the Gate Chamber, Hulgar kept trying to find where the Gate led, and how it worked. Worn out by the anguish, Hulgar fell to his knees. He was torn, but he wasn't giving up yet. His companions woke up and tried to help as well. They didn't know how to read that language but thought that maybe if they found some sort of secret switch, something would happen. It was then when Animus, intrigued by the odd crystal in the center of the room, approached it and touched it. A light inside the crystal began to shine and opened the portal. On the other side they could see a round room with a throne at the center of it, where a very beautiful lady with wings was sitting. Hulgar approached and as he saw her, he shouted:

– My Queen! We've found the Heavenly gate! – and turning to his companions he said – I thank you all from the bottom of my heart, but now I must go and join the fight.

Seeing this, Argrinn gave Animus his swords, which were laid down in the place where had slept, and took up the axe and the shield.

– It's our world too. – He said – You won't stand alone, my friend. Arm yourselves!

Everyone took up their weapons, and inspired by that man's courage, they followed Hulgar, as he crossed the gate, willing to fight until the end for their world. Only the boy was left behind, and he was fast asleep. Argrinn believed that the Portal Chamber was, perhaps, the safest place to be, and if anything went wrong at least the boy could have a chance. Another portal opened on the other side and Queen Elaina broke down in tears as she saw Hulgar pass through it. She ran up to him and embraced him. For her safety, he asked her to cross the Heavenly Gate, to take shelter in the cavern and watch over the boy who was there asleep. He also told her to close the portal as soon as she saw any enemy drawing near. As the Queen crossed over, they began to unblock the door.

Outside the battle raged in the yard, the gate had been breached, and by the last blow the horn, few warriors were still alive. Hulgur and his companions finally managed to unblock the door and joined the rest of the defenders. The sight of the brave Hulgur, back beside them, inspired them to fight until their final breaths. Hulgur drew his sword and pointed it to the sky.

– My brothers and sisters, for all the people who believed in us, for those who still believe, for our Queen and the power of Light, now rise, come a red dawn! – was his battle cry... He blew his war horn and charged. They fought as they had never fought before, and the Gods themselves couldn't stop them. They drove the Purple Thunder soldiers to the walls. In awe, the attackers scattered in fear. It would pass years before they heard of the Purple Thunder clan again. But they would be ready to defend the Heavenly Hall once again. Without fearing any Evil, they fought for a new day.

The terror was over. The darkened clouds vanished and gave place to the clear morning sky. The newborn sunlight covered the Heavenly Hall that lay in ruins. All but the northern tower and the central hall where the throne chamber was were standing. Bodies covered the floor, so they gathered each Heavenly Soldier and Valkyrie and burned them in funeral pyres. As for their foes, they piled the bodies and burned them. The warlocks were nowhere to be seen, but it didn't matter—each battle at a time. Hulgur and his companions passed through the Heavenly gate returning to the portal chamber. Queen Elaina was beside the boy. She was most pleased knowing that they emerged victorious once again. Turning to Argrinn she said:

– Our little friend here has been talking to me about you.

Argrinn was beside himself with joy. The boy's name was Maglor. He didn't speak the language of humans. And he seemed to know everything about the portal Chamber, perhaps a bit too smart to be a human boy. The Queen had found out that he was alone in the world, for he had told her that his mother was a Valkyrie and his father was a man, a mighty warrior who had lived in the past ages. His tale was written on the walls of the room. A long time ago, a great war raged both realms, destroying almost the entire world. An alliance between the upper and lower realms to stand against the tides of darkness made his parents meet and fall in love. As the hope seemed to fade, to save the child, his parents sent him through the portal, not only through space but through time as well.

Although he had only spent a short time with the boy, Argrinn had grown fond of him. He had no wife or children, so he decided to take that child and raise him as his own. The walls depicted that child was of the most importance, so he would prepare him, and when the time would come he'd go to that chamber to learn his destiny.

Animus and Argrinn gathered the remnants of the inhabitants of Wolfstooth and rebuilt it. As for Queen Elaina, she decided to conceal her identity and live among them, as a healer, bound to repay their kindness. Although in ruins, the Heavenly Hall still stands. Its Guardians continue their tireless watch over all beings, and wait for the day when the throne of Light will be restored. And the Bard... well, he had another story to tell.

– *“Gather around and pour the ale for here is the Bard with a mighty tale.”*