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Kes, the last aure of Terralan



Abucci & Barone

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I. KES, THE LAST AURE OF TERRALAN

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INTRODUCTION

The story goes that at the end of the First Age, Grom managed to stop the rotation of the world by seeking to leave Terralan under a perpetual shadow.

During those dark days of darkness, the creatures and demons sent by the evil one were strengthened to such an extent that they dared to challenge the unicorns' power.

At that time, the Terralanians did not have a king and lived divided into small villages along the Moaslan River valley and on the great lake's banks: the Acuantalis.

There was no order. Men and women lived exposed to the constant and unpredictable changes of the forces of nature. Disunity prevailed.

Their lands, their animals, and finally their own lives were threatened, as the hosts of evil attacked again and again from the now permanent shadows, trying not only to tear their bodies apart but to take over their souls as well.

But after seven days of anxiously waiting for the dawn light, a brave man appeared, Valmar, who, taking reckless risks, managed to cross the vast fields that separated him from Anes, the Lord of the unicorns, with whom he made a pact that would forever mark the future of all.

As a result of this alliance, the inhabitants of Terralan marched to war with those magical creatures, who could not use their power to attack but to be faster than their enemies.

Thus, they resolutely faced each other in their deadly and unequal fight against the evil one, commanded by Valmar and Anes, at the head of this fantastic and orderly troop of magnificent mounts, which carried inexperienced but fierce fighters.

In a bloody battle, which lasted many hours, the forces of darkness were decimated, and Gorn was thrown back into the dark depths of the abyss, from which he had emerged to subdue humanity.

Immediately, the unicorns began to gallop together towards the west, using all their powerful energy in each step. In this way, after an almost infinite effort, they managed to reestablish the Earth's movement.

Before the end of that first new day, Anes carried on his back the couple who would become the first king and queen among the Terralanians: Valmar and Vedia.

Together they laid the foundation stone for Ukaris, the Golden City, perched on a lonely hill in the Moaslan Valley. Vedia carried a very bright ruby, a gift from the Lord of the Unicorns, a symbol of the alliance that defeated the evil one. The Second Age had begun.

—Never forget us —Anes said goodbye before heading back to the East.

A long time passed, and the Ukarisians lived aware and grateful to the unicorns. The Sun rose every morning, and the water flowed through the rivers and streams due to their gallop. Without them, you could not get crops or raise animals. Those beautiful creatures' magic made the world continue to rotate, and the days and nights happened.

But even though the power of the unicorns had brought the movement back to Earth, the damage done by the evil one had left its mark. The forces of nature have behaved in bizarre ways ever since, making life more difficult than in the First Age.

In those dark times, a new caste of Terralanians appeared, possessing a unique gift that helped them determine the right time to sow, the right place to cast fishing nets, or the exact measure and what medicine they should administer to the sick.

When circumstance demanded, they could use even more extraordinary powers. It seemed they could somehow quell the force of the elements. They numbered only twelve, no less, no more, and were known as the aures. Every time one of them died, always at an old age, another was born somewhere in the kingdom to take his place.

I. THE TREASON OF MOUNTAIN NAUIR

The earth began to shake slightly. It was almost dawn, and a gentle breeze was blowing when the first of them appeared. Beautiful, strong, with his mane in the wind, he seemed to fly over that green carpet that stretched over much of the rich valley.

Shortly after a second, a third, until soon they could be counted by tens, and finally hundreds. Their horns, of different colors, began to glow as the Sun rose from the East. They were so fast that their hooves seemed not to touch the ground. At the head of the pack was Unir, the only one with a silver horn, an unmistakable sign of his rank.

Many observed the luminous and glittering spectacle repeated every dawn in the upper parts of the Golden City after the first night of full moon: the gallop of the unicorns from the great lake's north shore towards the mountains of the Moaskif Mountain Range.

Although the pack always kept a certain distance from Ukaris, their hooves' thumps against the ground could be felt throughout the city.

Unir, son of Anes, had led his people through the Path of the Unicorns and the Moaslan Valley for many years. However, he did not appear to show signs of aging. They had that gift when they reached adulthood, and with it the development of their magnificent horn, they maintained their beauty and vigor until the day appointed for their departure.

The last of the unicorns crossed the river that came down from the mountains. The men turned their attention to their daily chores, confident that once again, this magical gallop would allow them to continue their lives quietly.

Many winters had passed since the aure Diruk first arrived in the uninhabited but fertile lands beyond the Acuantalis.

Commissioned by the then young Balkian King, father of the current monarch, the aure had guided some thirty of his subjects to that remote part of the kingdom, seven days on horseback from Ukaris.

In that place, the Town of Herol arose, just half a league east of the Efin Forest, fed by small streams born to the northwest.

From the beginning, Diruk helped, with his powers, the new inhabitants to develop a unique quality that would distinguish this region from others. Their careful and subtle cultivation of the vine, which later became what would be their distinguishing mark: their magnificent wines.

Years later, King Balkian gave the throne to his son Balkurian, a righteous man who soon achieved great wisdom and later would be known as the friendly monarch of the aures.

Everything seemed to indicate that under the tutelage of their protectors, the different towns and villages of Terralan, together with the Golden City, would enjoy long years of peace and prosperity.

However, forty years after the colonization of those lands, the Second Age's most tragic event would occur.

A group of men, inhabitants of Ukaris, whose souls were won by ambition, deceived five young unicorns on a cold and dark night, at the foot of the most inaccessible and distant mountain, Naur, far away from the road that crossed the Moaskif Mountain Range.

Once in the place, the men offered to drink a special potion that they said had been prepared by the aures, one that would increase their magic. That way, they would no longer have to perform the strenuous gallop from the north shore of the lake to the western mountains every morning after the full moon.

—You will be able to walk where you please. You will no longer have to submit to Unir's will.

One of the unicorns, still suspicious, asked:

—How can we be sure it is the aures who have prepared it?

—You must not be suspicious, friends. As proof of our goodwill, we will first drink of it.

One by one, the men took a sip, dispelling the unsuspecting youths' suspicions, who drank it too.

The unicorns did not know that the magic recipe was harmless for humans but would affect them terribly. Little by little, they fell into profound lethargy.

Those evildoers' real purpose was revealed. Without the slightest hesitation, they proceeded to cut off their horns.

—Now we can prepare a potion so powerful that it will allow us to subdue the king and conquer Terralan —said the leader of those heartless.

The next day the herd found the five dead bodies. Although the potion did not kill the unicorns, the absence of their horns did.

Since then, Unir would no longer trust the Terralanians. Shortly afterward, the power of the Ruby of the Alliance began to weaken inexorably. The culprits of the terrible infamy were never found.

The magic of the aures would also suffer from the betrayal perpetrated on Nauir Mountain. First, his predictions would not promptly alert the kingdom's inhabitants against the mysterious forces of nature. The crops would suffer the appearance of plagues, the fishing would not bear enough fruit, and even many cattle heads would be lost due to diseases that they could no longer cure.

This forced them to depend much more on what others produced. The commercial exchange would soon increase between the dispersed inhabitants along the Moaslan with

those who lived even further away. Thus, Herol winegrowers provided the best wine, while others produced the grains or offered the different animals they could raise.

The new king was determined to give the aures again their rightful place, as sent by superior beings. Still, both the Golden City inhabitants and those of the neighboring valley and the distant eastern lands saw that it would no longer be as before the betrayal when unicorns had full confidence in men. The ruby, Anes's gift, shone brightly.

II. THE GARGOYLES

—Kes. Where are you? That boy is going to turn my gray hair before my time! —a young woman shouted after poking her head out of the window of her house. A well-arranged but straightforward cabin, next to the main road.

—He must be playing around there. Chasing an animal or racing with friends —a stout man replied, tapping his pipe against the table—. This tobacco is the best I've ever had; I must bring more on my next trip.

—I don't like our son hanging out there when it's getting dark. Remember what old Diruk said.

—Woman, that myopic old man couldn't tell a sheep from a cow. We cannot believe what he claims to have seen.

—You shouldn't talk like that, Palur. Remember that he is an aure. He doesn't need to see like you or me to know what happens.

—I don't think the aures have more power left. Have you forgotten what happened to the last harvest?

—How to forget it. If we hardly had anything to eat. But still, I worry that there is something evil haunting the trees.

—Ila, I don't want our son to be putting weird ideas in his head. There is nothing more dangerous in that forest than a pack of wolves, and they rarely come close to man.

—I hope you are right, my husband. Although more and more people say that wolves have behaved in strange ways.

A quarter of a league from there, two boys of no more than ten years ran following the stream that came from the west.

—Hurry, Alit! We still must get to the first trees —said the one in front.

—Wait a bit! Remember I can't run as fast as you, Kes —the second exclaimed.

Shortly afterward, the former paused, partly to catch his breath, somewhat to wait for his friend.

—Do you think we'll find it? —Alit asked when he reached for him.

—I do not know. But we must be cautious.

Soon the boys left the last farmland and entered the forest. They were determined to get as far into the wilderness as possible. Kes, son of Ila and Palur, and his inseparable friend Alit, son of Kasif and Nira, had been walking the winding and narrow path surrounded by trees for a long time when the evening began to fall.

Rumors that a beast with a human form and large wings, hiding in the forest of Efin, had killed a dozen sheep and an occasional cow, did not seem to scare the young adventurers.

—What will you do if you find the beast? —Alit asked.

—Run as fast as my legs allow, straight into our deer trap.

—Don't be a fool, Kes. The beast has wings. It would be useless to take it to a hole covered with branches and leaves.

—You're right. I hadn't remembered the wings. It's something we'll have to think about —the boy said, after looking in all directions.

—Remember what the aure said. The beast has been seen close to where the creek bends sharply, and the trees grow exceptionally tall.

—We're still far from there, and the sun is about to set —Kes exclaimed, somewhat disheartened.

—Then let's come back tomorrow. We must start very early.

—And with everything we need to spend a night in the woods.

The friends hurriedly left the thicket, just before it was completely dark. However, that would not save them from a reprimand from their parents.

—You must not walk through the woods at this hour —Ila warned her restless son.

—But Mom, there's nothing to worry about. I always hang out with Alit. Together we can overcome any danger.

Ila couldn't help but smile at the boy's innocence.

—Anyway, I prefer you to play close to town. That forest is home to dangerous animals.

—And the beast too. We know what the aure has told, Mom.

—He’s already an old man, and maybe he’s wrong —Ila explained, as Palur watched silently, sitting in his rocking chair, taking long puffs on his old pipe.

Kes and Alit’s great-grandparents had settled in the far eastern lands more than sixty years ago after Diruk predicted that such soils would produce the best grapes in the entire kingdom.

The next day, Palur had everything ready to leave for Ukaris. This round trip was made every three months and allowed Herol’s wine to be exchanged for food and vital merchandise for the inhabitants of the kingdom’s easternmost town.

The convoy of winegrowers, made up of a dozen carts in which more than thirty men were traveling, would take the road that crossed Efin and then travel along the southern shore of the Acuantalis. After leaving the towns of Zun, Belia, and Litar, it would continue to the plains of Kinar, the name by which the large land areas dedicated to agriculture and livestock, located between the great lake and the capital of the kingdom, was known. Finally, after a week of travel, he would reach the Golden City.

The carts, mostly old but very well preserved, carried dozens of large carafes filled with the vine’s sweet fruit. The entire town was present to bid farewell to travelers who had carefully enlisted their animals and tightly tied their precious cargo. The kingdom

roads were not always in the best conditions, and there was a risk of losing part of the wine on the way.

Yet Palur's mind was occupied with another thought. Although he still had good wine to bring to Ukaris, the last grape harvest had been poor. This had been going on for two or three years.

—What's wrong, dad? —Kes asked.

—Nothing, son. Why do you ask?

—I see the concern on your face.

—Everything is going to be fine, and I'll be back soon. Promise to listen to your mother.

—I promise.

—And don't be going into the forest. I don't think there are any strange creatures, as the aure mentions, but you could meet some wild animal or fall victim to the arrow of some careless hunter.

The little boy nodded, looked at his friend Alit, who also said goodbye to his father a couple of carts later, and asked:

—When will you be back?

—Before the new moon.

The caravan of travelers turned away along the main road, which then ran through part of the forest. Their wives and children returned to their homes. The former returned to their housework, the teenagers to the fields and crops, and the children to their games.

Among them, there were two who, making leather bags in which they put large pieces of bread and some cheese, along with light blankets and a couple of canteens that they hid in a hiding place near their houses, said goodbye to their mothers like every day they went out to play and headed towards Efin.

When Kes reached the edge of the forest, he turned to say:

—Come on, don't be late again.

—Do you think we find the creature? —Alit asked, yelling loudly.

—I do not know. But if you make so much noise, it will likely find us first.

They followed the previous day's route, until finally, after an exhausting march, they reached the place where the stream abruptly changed direction. Even though it was a long time before dark, they heard the distant hooting of an owl. Their hearts pounded with excitement. The idea of meeting that being that surely came from the dark depths of the earth irresistibly seduced them.

—We must be very close. You must keep quiet. From now on, we will communicate by signing —Kes said, as Alit took a piece of bread from her bag.

—No! —Kes managed to say in a low voice, then continued explaining with gestures that they shouldn't take out food until they were sure they were alone. The creature could smell the food.

They both leaned under a robust and leafy tree. They were tired, but they agreed that the terrain had to be reconnoitered without further delay. There was only the song of the daytime birds and the sound of a gentle breeze that swayed the highest branches.

Kes motioned for his friend to walk in one direction. He would do it in the other, and when each had gone a thousand steps away, they would return to eat part of their provisions. That way, they would make sure the beast wasn't around to smell their food. It was a plan he had devised that morning.

Alit was hesitant about wanting to do it alone, but Kes encouraged him, reminding him that they could have some fresh bread and delicious cheese when they came back.

Soon, they could no longer see each other. The dense forest made it difficult for them even to remember the path they were following clearly. That was solved, as they advanced, they tied small pieces of cloth of different colors to the branches that they considered the most appropriate to indicate the way back.

Kes soon reached the agreed distance to return. Somewhat disappointed that he had not seen any creatures, he thought for a moment that perhaps his friend would have had better luck. He looked in all directions, hoping to notice something that would give away the being he was looking for, but he saw nothing out of the ordinary.

He was about to retrace his steps when he thought he heard something.

Very carefully, he crawled to a tree surrounded by bushes that would give him the advantage of being hidden and being able to observe what was happening.

At no more than fifty paces, he recognized a dead deer, most of its belly missing. Above him lay a truly ferocious-looking creature.

With head and limbs like those of a man, it kept slowly flapping his enormous wings that could have wrapped several in a terrifying embrace. Its fangs were huge. With them, it cut large pieces of meat that it swallowed almost without chewing.

Although it was a being that looked as full of life as anyone who inhabited Terralan, Kes could not help noticing that its skin had the stone's appearance. At times, when it stopped eating and did not move, that stony aspect changed, mimicking the environment, as if suddenly the leaves, branches, and the shadows of the forest were present on its body. Kes watched the scene with a mixture of fear and fascination.

Then, inadvertently, he stepped on a dry branch just as the creature seemed to be sniffing the forest. Kes's pulse quickened immediately. The strange mixture of man and giant bat looked in all directions and fully spread its wings. It didn't take long for it to flap its wings, and after rising quickly, it moved away from the place, leaving the deer carcass half-eaten.

At that moment, the little boy thought he felt the footsteps of someone approaching. Still, with the image of the hideous creature in his head, he prepared to run.

It was Alit, who, after returning to the place where they left the provisions, decided to take the path that his friend followed.

—You don't know... you don't know what I just saw —Kes exclaimed in a tremulous voice.

—Have you seen the creature? Have you seen it?... Shouldn't we be silent?

—It's gone. It took flight and was lost in the sky.

—And how is it? —Alit asked.

—It's worse than I imagined. It's huge and robust and has enormous wings. Look, that's the deer it was devouring.

Alit silently watched the dead animal.

—We must go back quickly —Kes said.

They made their way home as fast as they could. Alit, infected with excitement, had no problem keeping up the demanding pace set by her friend.

When they arrived at the town, they said goodbye, not before promising not to say anything about what had happened in the forest.

It was hard for Kes not to tell his mother, who sensed that something was bothering her son.

The hours passed, and it got dark. As he had done so many times before, on his way from the forest to the lonely hill where his hut stood, Diruk used the main path that led through the gate of Kes's home.

The boy, who frequently liked to peek out the window, recognized him immediately and without hesitation asked his mother:

—Can we invite the aure to eat?

Ila went to the window and saw the old man go by, strolling leaning on his cane.

—Why do you want to invite him, son?

—He's a very lonely man, but I know he's a good man. Besides, we could use his company tonight when we are alone —Kes replied eloquently.

Ila, who had experienced haunting dreams, in which she first saw Palur seriously injured and her son lost in the forest, felt that it would be time to speak with Diruk. He opened the door and asked with some shyness:

—Why don't you come in? I'm about to sit at the table with my son.

—Thank you, Ila. I see that goodness nests in your heart.

Despite being over ninety years old, Diruk was remarkably lucid. He gladly accepted the invitation. It had been a long time since no inhabitant of Herol had shared a quiet dinner with him by the fire.

—Take a seat in that chair, next to my husband's.

Kes took the old man's cane, who thanked the gesture by putting his hand on his head.

—You are kind. I see that your mother has raised you well.

—How old are you? —asked the little boy after sitting down in his father's rocking chair.

—Kes, don't pester our guest with those kinds of questions —Ila said, her voice stern.

—It doesn't bother me at all —Diruk exclaimed. Looking closely into Kes's eyes, he replied:

—Older than the age of your parents combined.

—My friend Alit says you're older than anyone else in this town.

Your friend is smart because I founded Herol, commissioned by the king, more than half a century ago.

Ila kept stirring the soup, which was already boiling in the old pot that hung under the fireplace.

—I hope you're hungry because if there is something that has never been lacking in this house, it is the good seasoning that my mother taught me.

—From here, I can attest to that. It smells delicious.

At that moment, Kes confessed:

—Did you know that I have seen the winged beast?

—Kes, I asked you not to disturb the visitor.

—No problem, Ila. It is wise to listen to children.

—I saw it in the forest. It was not yet dark.

—And how was it? —Diruk asked.

—It looked like a man, but it had wings like a bat. They were huge. Its skin was like stone, and it had large fangs with which it tore chunks of meat from a deer it had just killed.

The aure exclaimed worriedly:

—If they have reached Efin, it means that they no longer fear wandering all over Terralan.

—What are you talking about? —Ila asked.

—Later... Now, let's enjoy this magnificent table.

During dinner, no more was said about the creature or anything else that might disturb the calm.

After tucking Kes into his father's rocking chair, since the little boy refused to sleep in his room, Ila fanned the fire a little and sat down next to the old man.

—I'm all ears —she said.

—Very well. I think it is time to explain some things. I'm about to tell you it is a dark secret that we aures have been forced to keep for many years.

The woman looked at him with concern.

—Before Naur, when the Ruby of the Alliance still glowed brightly, gargoyles did not exist.

—The gargoyles? —asked Kes, who was wide awake.

Diruk paused briefly and continued:

—In those days, unicorns were not suspicious of man, and in their gallop, they sometimes approached, close to their houses and stables. Even the horses, distant cousins of the unicorns but without any magic, seemed to want to start in a fast race after that herd roamed free throughout the Moaslan Valley.

—You spoke of a dark secret —Ila interrupted—, and gargoyles. What do you mean?

—That was what I was about. Naur's betrayal caused the rift between unicorns and men. Five members of Unir's pack lost their horns and then their lives. At that time, King Balkian, father of the current sovereign, ordered to search for the culprits throughout the kingdom, but they never found them. The inhabitants of Terralan had to resign themselves to living with guilt, and the Lord of the unicorns decided not to trust men again.

Kes had paid full attention to the aure's words.

—The forest creature is one of the culprits. Is not true?

—Your soul as a child can see it clearly —Diruk said.

—What are you talking about? —Ila asked, confused.

—The power those men gained in Naur was too great to be controlled by any mortal. Their souls tainted by ambition transformed the pure magic of the unicorn horns into a dark force.

At that moment, the aure noticed how the fire in the fireplace seemed to grow stronger.

—Just talking about it makes the elements manifest —he said thoughtfully and quietly.

—So... that created the winged creatures? —Ila asked.

—So is. It transformed the men who betrayed the unicorns into hideous beings, into soldiers of darkness.

—And why have they just appeared now? What you are telling me happened more than twenty years ago.

—The remaining power of the Ruby of the Alliance, which fuels our magic, kept them at bay. Until recently, they were only found in the most intricate part of the Moaskif Range, out of the presence of the aures.

—That is why the last crops were spoiled. You too have grown weaker —Ila exclaimed.

—That’s what the gargoyles want. That men no longer believe in us or unicorns. Thus, their power will be even greater, and they will come to dominate Terralan —Diruk said.

—How can we avoid it?

—Through the pure soul of someone who believes in our magic.

—But somehow, we do believe. We all look forward to the gallop of the unicorns every dawn after the full moon —Ila said, her eyes shining especially.

—Men have gotten used to it, which is different. They don’t value that wonderful delivery anymore. That is why King Balkurian plans to reunite the aures, seek a way to achieve the unicorns' trust, and restore power to the ruby once again.

—If they don’t, the kingdom could start to split. We’d go back to the times of the First Age.

—It’s even worse. In his last audience with the king, Elkos, the wise, has foreseen that no more aures will be born again. If that happens, we will never again have help against the unpredictability of the elements, nor the havoc that nature can cause.

—But is there nothing we can do?

—We must not lose hope. We can still fight. I know that a new chosen one has been born far from Ukaris. One who will guide men to defeat the darkness.

—Who can it be?

The old man stood up and walked to the window, turning his back on mother and son.

—Can't you guess? Do you think it is a coincidence that I am at your house tonight?

Ila turned to see her little Kes, who had fallen asleep in Palur's rocking chair.

—You can't be serious.

—I wasn't sure before, but now I have no doubts. When it comes time to fight the evil once again, Kes will have a more significant role than you can imagine.

—But he's hardly a boy.

—A boy with a pure soul is enough if he has the inner strength of an aure.

—Kes?... are you telling me that my son...?

—I can't say more for now. I must go to rest and seek the advice of someone wiser.

After putting her son to bed in his room, Ila sat in the rocking chair, stoking the fire and trying to understand Diruk's words. She couldn't sleep soundly that night. The dream in which she saw her husband seriously injured came once more and with greater intensity.

It had been almost two days since he left Herol, and the group of wagons was approaching the last clearing in the forest of Efin. Palur, who was in charge of the caravan heading to Ukaris, decided that they would camp there.

—It's getting dark now. We better get the tents up at once.

—Palur, the horses are restless. Maybe it's better to keep going, and camp outside the forest —Kasif said worriedly.

—There is still a considerable stretch to leave the shadows of Efin. It is safer to spend the night in this place.

—I suppose you're right, but I don't like it when animals are so nervous. Don't forget what is said about the winged creatures.

—Kasif, my friend. Do you know what I think? That those are stories told by the wine growers of Litar, or Mut, who only want to scare us to stop trading our wine. They seek to terrorize the people of the most remote villages so that they are the only ones supplying Ukaris.

—Do you believe that?

—Trust me. There is nothing to fear.

Soon the camp was ready. In the center, a good fire warmed the food and had displaced the darkness of the night. The hearts of the men were glad about songs and a little of the wine they brought to sell.

Only Palur's neighbor and good friend were always on the alert. At times, he came to think that his nerves were betraying him since he thought he heard something move among the trees on more than one occasion.

—Why don't you go over to the fire? You have always liked the songs of our people.

—I can't be calm. I feel like we're being watched.

—You shouldn't worry so much, Kasif. Our dogs would have already alerted us to any intruders.

At that moment, there was a distant howl. Then another, and then another.

—You see, —said Palur—. Just a pack of wolves howling to the night.

Suddenly the wind stopped, and the men stopped talking. An unearthly silence took over the place.

—However, friend, I must confess that something strange is happening.

—What thing? —asked Kasif.

—I don't even hear the insects —Palur replied.

—Look! The dogs have hidden under the wagons. They are terrified. I'm telling you something's going on here —exclaimed Kasif, taking by the hilt a machete that he always carried with him.

At that moment, a kind of very low growl was heard. It seemed to come from the throat of a giant animal. Two horses managed to break free of their tethers and ran deep into the forest, in the opposite direction from the horrible sound.

—Everyone gathers in a circle! We must watch our backs —Palur ordered.

The men could see in terror how three demonic figures rose above the trees, flapping their enormous wings, so strongly that soon the wind they produced began to extinguish the fire, a weak source of light on that moonlit night almost entirely covered by dense clouds.

—Don't let the fire go out! —Palur yelled as the winged demons began to flap louder. Moments later, darkness took over the place.

The creatures descended to the ground and began to attack them, trying to bite them in the throat, grabbing them by the legs, and rising with them to drop them from a deadly height. These men armed with machetes, knives, and the occasional short sword could do little or nothing.

—Palur. Where are you? Shouted Kasif, who, severely injured, had managed to free himself from one of the creatures, after producing it a large cut with his machete.

He couldn't see his friend anywhere. Filled with anguish, he proceeded to light a torch. He just realized that not even the dogs had been saved from the savage attack.

Suddenly, there was a cry of pain that forced Kasif to look up. At the top of a tree, he could make out his friend, who was desperately fighting for his life. He and one of the creatures were on a branch that seemed to support their weight barely.

Palur showed a deep wound on the shoulder, caused by the creature's bite, which after having received a stab in the chest, had released its victim by dropping it on that tree.

—Getaway, you filthy beast! —Palur yelled bravely, taking the knife in his left hand and trying to cover the wound with his right.

As hard as he looked, Kasif couldn't see the other two demons. It seemed they had already left, having quenched their thirst for blood.

—Resist, friend! —the man on the ground shouted after putting the torch on the ground. Then he prepared to shoot an arrow at the beast.

At that moment, the creature, which seemed to be the largest of the three, lunged at Palur, whose body collided with the trunk of the tree, dropping the knife.

Kasif watched in horror as that winged being, out of the worst of nightmares, took the head of his friend with one of its huge hands, provided with very sharp claws, and with the other tore deeply a part of his chest.

Then it looked over at the inexperienced archer, and after snarling fiercely at the sole survivor of the brutal carnage, it began to flap its wings.

—Damn you, beast from the abyss! —Kasif yelled, shooting an arrow that missed its target.

Still inflamed with rage and courage, he started to fire another bolt but saw the creature rise above the treetops with the lifeless body of his friend.

No one else was left alive. Just a dying dog, to whom Kasif decided to give a quick and merciful death.

He had not yet recovered from the most terrible shock of his life when he thought he heard the beating of the wings of death in the distance.

—I must return to Herol. I must warn of the danger that inhabits the forest.

III. A HARD DECISION

The aure Diruk would use the dawn hours to attempt to establish a bond with the purest magic in the realm. He felt that the time to face those guilty of Naurir's betrayal was near.

—I invoke the power of the Ruby of the Alliance. Lord of the unicorns allow the inhabitants of Terralan to correct their error—the old man repeated, after throwing some powder into the fire from a small leather saddlebag.

Almost immediately, a very intense green light swept through the room, escaping through the windows of the lonely cabin on the top of the hill.

Unir's consciousness, the most powerful in the kingdom, heard the call. However, the response was not very encouraging.

—Diruk, friend of the unicorns. I know that your heart is sincere and fair, but that of the Terralan is no longer so. After the betrayal on Naurir Mountain, we have seen how they wait for our gallop after each full moon, as something they think they have earned, something we owe them.

—There's still hope... little Kes.

—You mean the prophecy written on the stone.

—He is the one chosen by the higher beings to unite us again.

—This child's heart may be pure, Diruk, but I see a lot of pride and selfishness in Terralan.

—Don't lose faith in men, Unir.

—We'll see what happens, old aure. I will be watching and waiting. You do what you have to do.

Then the light slowly diminished until it disappeared. Diruk fell exhausted.

At dawn, a bloody horseman arrived at Herol and went directly to Ila's home, whom he found sweeping the entrance like every morning.

She looked up and soon recognized Kasif, who almost breathlessly said:

—They attacked us in the forest. I am the only one who could escape.

—What are you saying? —the woman asked fearfully.

—I couldn't help it, Ila. They were creatures sent by the evil one.

—My husband. Where is Palur?

—I'm so sorry. He's no longer with us.

Hearing that, Ila almost lost consciousness.

—I'm very sorry to be the one to bring you this news. I wish I could have done something, but last night evil took over the forest —said Kasif.

Ila, overcome with grief, fell to her knees:

—It cannot be. Palur cannot be dead.

—It's later than I thought —thought Diruk, who had just appeared.

The aure put his hand on her shoulder and said:

—You must be strong. For your son, you must be strong.

Little Kes had just got up and, hearing his mother's sobs, went to the door. When she saw him, she hugged him tightly.

—What's wrong, mom?

—Your father. We will never see him again. He has been killed in the forest.

Kes said nothing. Big tears bathed his face, which nevertheless showed an expression of hard firmness. He took the old man's hand that was still on Ila's shoulder.

—Let's go into the house —Diruk said.

With deep sorrow and a feeling of helplessness, Kasif said goodbye and left for his home. He must see his family, heal his wounds, and warn the people of the tragedy.

The aure immediately began to make a special tea and gave Ila a taste. The drink took effect quickly, bringing some relief to the suffering that engulfed her.

Kes drank some tea too, but from another recipe, one that put him to sleep soundly. It was vital that his mother first understand what Diruk had to say.

—I know the timing doesn't seem right. Now they are both dejected with pain, but we need to get into action as soon as possible.

—I hear you —Ila said, gathering strength from deep within.

—I perceive that an understandable feeling of hatred, a desire for revenge, is being born in you, for the tragic death of Palur. However, I want you to know that this is not what will give you peace, nor will it provide tranquility to your soul. The greatest confrontation between good and evil will begin since the Second Age began. We have only one chance to achieve victory against the evil one.

—What do you expect from me —the devastated woman asked, gathering her courage.

—I hope you understand that it was precisely the darkest feelings that made these creatures appear. While selfishness and a thirst for power led weak-spirited men to betray unicorns, later turning them into gargoyles, it is the desire for revenge that keeps them from the light.

—Are you suggesting that I forgive them? Are you asking me to forget that my beloved Palur has been taken from me?

—I ask you to make the decision now that will surely be the most difficult of your life. First, you mustn't hold a grudge against those who were once men like us, men whose souls are being vilely and cruelly tormented by an evil force that you cannot even imagine.

—You mean Grom, don't you? Does Grom exist, Diruk?

—I'm sorry to confess that he does. He still exists because he is the evil that dwells in each one of us.

—In me? Also, in my son?

—Ila, most people win that daily battle. The primordial instinct to do good almost always overrides the desire to do wrong. But in some cases, when the soul is weak, selfishness and excessive ambition emerge and take control.

—Was it what happened to the five from Naurir?

—It was the evil one who seduced those men. Once they obtained the unicorn horns, they doomed their souls. The magic of the horns, which is not good or bad, depends on who uses it and what was transformed into a dark power.

—How can we fight such demons?

—As I told you last night, with the help of pure souls like Kes.

—What are you asking me? —Ila asked.

—You must let him go with me. He doesn't know yet, but it's an aure.

—Even if what you say is true, what could he do? He's just a boy.

—A boy destined to save Terralan.

—You ask me to let him go with you. Today I found out that I lost my husband, and now, should I watch my son leave for what will be certain death?

—Do you know why the gargoyles have come so far from the mountains? Do you know why they have appeared in Efin?

—You tell me.

—Because like me, they have begun to sense the latent power in Kes. That is why they have approached Herol. Until now, they don't know who he is, but they will soon find out. His life is in even more danger if he stays here.

The woman remained silent. After a moment, which seemed like an eternity, he stammered:

—Maybe I always knew. Sometimes, when he was sound asleep, I would hear him speak in a language I couldn't understand. When that happened, some objects in his room seemed to come to life. Some warm energy was felt that enveloped the whole house. I could never explain it to myself.

—You heard the language of unicorns, which only aures know.

—How can you be sure of all this, Diruk?

—When King Balkian visited Naur Mountain after the Lord of the unicorns ended his alliance with men, he found a prophecy written in the stone. It said that one day an aure

would be born that would have great power, capable of reuniting those who were once friends.

—And my son, is that predestined?

—I'm sure of it. We will be twelve again with him, and I know that the secret of his power will not lie in enchantments, magic powders, or potions that he can learn to use like common aures, like me. It will come from his heart, from the purity of his feelings, and before that, Grorn will not be able to do anything.

Ila closed her eyes for a moment and approached her son's bed, who was sleeping soundly from the effects of the tea:

—How do you plan to protect him? You are already old and weak.

—My spirit is still young, and I plan to use a potion that will energize me for the long and dangerous journey. It is a forbidden recipe, since after consuming it, when its effects have worn off, I will have to pay the highest price for using it.

—Does it mean you won't be back?

—It is a necessary sacrifice —said the old man.

—Will you travel alone? You and him to Ukaris?

—On the way, we will meet the four who live outside the Golden City. Once we reach our destination, the other six will join us.

—I have always known that the aures gifts have served to win the fruit of the earth, to cure diseases. How do you plan to fight these creatures? Just three of them easily killed thirty men.

—We also have other powers, Ila. Some have weakened, but we can still do much more than people think or remember. Besides the twelve gathered, we will request the king that his soldiers accompany us to the Moaskif Mountains.

—Will an army of men suffice? Ila asked.

—We must have confidence. Nor can I anticipate what power Kes will reach. The prophecy does not reveal it, but my heart tells me that it will be one never seen on this earth.

—You ask me a lot. How can I be calm to see my only son leave?

—It's time to be brave. Take advantage of today to be with him. Give each other strength and courage for Palur's departure. Tomorrow I will come at dawn.

—This will be the shortest day of my life.

After saying goodbye, the old man went to his abode, on the highest hill of Herol.

The day passed quickly for the heartbroken Ila. After Kes woke up, she prepared him his favorite dish, dedicating all her time to hugging him tenderly, repeating how much she loved him.

—Mother. This stew is delicious. I haven't eaten it in a long time.

She watched in silence as the little boy greedily devoured whatever was served him.

They both cleaned the table, and Ila invited him to sit on her lap. Kes seemed to know that his mother was about to tell him something important.

—Son. Listen carefully.

—Don't worry, Mom. You can trust me.

—I always have, and you have never disappointed me, but what I have to say to you today is the most important thing I have spoken to you in your whole life.

—It's about the creature of the forest, and the aure, isn't it?

At that moment, Ila let a tear run. She couldn't help be moved by her son's precocious intelligence and wisdom.

—You must go with him to a very distant place. You will cross the entire kingdom.

He looked her straight in the eyes and said in a calm and confident voice:

—I know, Mom. I understand why I must go.

She burst into tears:

—I just can't understand why my little son has been given such a great responsibility.

—Don't cry. You can be sure that I will return.

Then the whole house filled with a dim glow, which grew more intense around Kes.

—This is your doing, my son? Because I feel comforted and calm.

—Look, Mom. We're flying.

Ila looked down and saw in amazement how their bodies levitated a few inches above the chair.

—I know I'm going to come back, Mom. Also, I'll be the one to take care of you when you get old.

She held him tightly to her chest.

IV. MAGIC YOUTH

The next day, the aure appeared at Ila's house, just as she had promised. Kes stepped open the door before Diruk knocked.

—I was waiting for you —said the little boy by way of greeting.

—My appearance doesn't faze you.

—You look younger, but I know it's you. I can feel it. Come in. My mom is about to serve breakfast.

The aure did not wait and went directly to the kitchen, which gave off a smell capable of whetting even the most satiated.

—We have bacon, eggs, milk, and muffins. You must eat well for the long road ahead —Ila said, with unexpected encouragement as she put out the fire.

She turned her head to greet Diruk and couldn't help but be surprised before her eyes were not the old man from the night before. A man perhaps fifty- or sixty-years younger was looking at her silently, with a warm smile.

—Is it really you?

—That’s how I looked when I first came to Herol. At that time, I was a strong aure who probably would have dared to challenge the gargoyles on his own. An unwise initiative, I can assure you now.

—It’s a bit difficult for me to recognize you. But your voice is the same and your wisdom too.

—It took me a while to get used to my new face this morning.

—It is powerful magic. Did it act immediately? At what point did you change?

—I drank the potion shortly before midnight. It did its job while I slept.

—I have Kes’s things ready. They are in a saddlebag that belonged to Palur —Ila said, unable to prevent her eyes from getting wet, her beautiful face contracted with deep sorrow.

—Remember that you must be strong for the sake of your son and to honor the memory of your husband.

—I know. I will be strong for both.

—I hope you haven’t forgotten to pack warm clothes for him. Nights in the forest can be freezing —exclaimed the aure, taking a muffin from the table.

After a couple of bites, he commented:

—Really delicious. I will have to take some for the road.

When he turned to grab a few more, he was surprised that the heavy table was not in its previous position. At the far end of the room, Kes levitated, giving off a blue glow that surrounded his entire body.

—Look what I can do, Mom. I have moved the table just thinking about it.

—What confidence and energy! —Diruk exclaimed. I wonder what else you will be able to do.

This demonstration partly alleviated Ila's great concern. The kind mother began to understand that superior beings chose her son to reestablish peace in Terralan.

—Diruk, perhaps you are right about Kes. He may have incredible and unimaginable power to me, but I ask you with my heart in my hand not to stop taking care of him. He's still a child.

—I assure you that before you know it, he will be the one who will take care of us all.

After a succulent breakfast, the travelers prepared to leave. As Ila and Diruk went through the luggage for the last time, Kes took the opportunity to say goodbye to Alit.

After a while, the friends would return along with the road, hugging and singing:

*The creature's days are counted,
fortune will be on our side.*

*If a man can't beat its head-on,
then two will have to attack its side.*

Behind came Kasif, Alit's father, who was already beginning to heal from his wounds with his wife's good care.

—This is not a game —Ila said to the children in a scolding tone.

—Let them sing. The spirit your son is now demonstrating is precisely the one that will save us from the shadows —Diruk said.

—Mom, I don't think the creature likes our song. And when it's distracted and upset about it, it'll be easier to beat.

—Good aure. We apologize for not believing your words —Kasif said.

—You must not apologize. It is the work of the evil one to confuse and divide man. This is how it gets stronger.

—If we had listened to you before, they would not have taken us by surprise, and perhaps others would have been saved.

—What do you think you could have done, Kasif? —Diruk asked.

—We would have traveled better armed.

—The weapons of man are no longer sufficient against the envoys of Gorn. Only a new alliance with the unicorns can save us now.

—I understand, and although I don't have any magic power, I want to offer myself to be part of this confrontation with evil. I must honor Palur's memory —and showing great determination, he opened the saddlebags in which he had already brought everything necessary for the trip.

—Can I go too, father? —Alit asked enthusiastically.

—Not this time, son. You must stay to take care of your mother and Kes'.

—And that's a great responsibility too —said the aure, putting both hands on the boy's shoulders. Then he took one of the leather bags he was carrying and handing it to Alit, he said:

—These are magical powders that will protect you from any evil creature. You should spray them around all the houses in town. Can I trust that you will fulfill what I entrust you?

—Don't worry. You can trust me. I will stay to protect the inhabitants of Herol, said the brave little one. He would have a critical mission to fulfill.

—Diruk, Kasif, take my horses. They are docile and strong and will serve you well —Ila said.

—Thanks once again. For being courageous and for giving this kingdom the possibility of ending the terrible evil that threatens from the shadows.

At that moment, Kes hugged his mother tightly.

—See you later, son, and take good care of yourself. I will be waiting.

—Don't worry, Mom. I'll be back soon.

—We must go now. Gargoyles are weak in daylight —the aure said.

Ila helped her son mount and accompanied the riders a short distance. A hundred paces later, she stopped and stood silently watching them as they walked away. The little boy turned to see her repeatedly. She didn't stop waving her arm until they were out of sight. Alit and his mother also said a long goodbye to Kasif.

—I've never advanced beyond the forest —Kes said, somewhat embarrassed, as when a closely guarded secret is confessed.

—Even if you haven't gone any further, your raids through Efin speak of your courage.

—Too bad Alit can't come with us.

—He'll be safe at home. He also has his mission —Kasif said.

—Is the road to the Golden City long? —asked the boy.

—We could say yes, but more importantly, it will be full of surprises —Diruk replied.

—My father always talked to me about the lake where the rivers that feed our lands are born.

—The Aquantalis! —exclaimed the aure—. There is only one larger water body in the world.

—You must mean the sea —Kasif said—. I was there once, and its waters seem to go beyond the horizon. However, the great lake has inspired more myths and legends among the inhabitants of Terralan.

—Your words are right, my friend.

They continued, stopping briefly to eat. By then, the Sun was shining bright, right above their heads.

—Diruk. It's strange, but I feel like the forest is talking to me.

—I feel the same. And it tells us to continue that we leave behind these roads where they could easily ambush us.

At that moment, Kasif felt a strange daze that forced him to dismount and place his hands on the ground.

—What's happening to you? —asked the aure.

—Just remembering what happened that night fills me with anguish I can barely control.

—Don't worry. There are no gargoyles nearby —Kes said with great assurance.

—Your powers continue to manifest —Diruk exclaimed.

In the Golden City, King Balkurian met with the aures in the Alliance Chamber, an imposing hall located at the castle's top.

—I have summoned you this day for a reason of vital importance to Terralan.

—We are happy to heed His Majesty's call —Elkos said. Next to him were Dulak, Nuryl, Zanys, Hove, and Nutas.

—Why have you brought us together? —asked Nutas, one of the three female aures of Ukaris.

—Those chosen by the gods to bring prosperity to this kingdom should know by now —the king exclaimed.

—We respectfully prefer that His Majesty tell us —Elkos replied.

—I called you because the moment my father was waiting for has come —said Balkurian.

—You must refer to the Naur Mountain prophecy.

—He was able to read it on the stone shortly after the betrayal was perpetrated: *An aure, who will be born outside the Golden City, will be responsible for uniting men and unicorns again.*

—King Balkian may have misinterpreted those words, Your Majesty.

—No, Elkos. He knew that a new alliance would come.

—A new alliance with the unicorns. For what purpose? —asked Dulak, one of the youngest.

—Evil is taking over this kingdom again. The traitors have turned into winged monsters, emissaries of Gorn, and are about to destroy the ruby. Only if we go to meet him and fight alongside Unir will we be able to banish that threat forever.

—We cannot assure you that they are part of the host of the evil one. What evidence is there for it? —Elkos asked.

—Diruk has more than enough evidence.

—King Balkurian, Diruk has not visited Ukaris in years. He has long taken a path that has alienated him from this Council —Nutas exclaimed.

—It is precisely that distance that has allowed him to be aware of what really happens in the most remote corners of the kingdom. He has kept in touch with the Lord of the unicorns, which you have not done in a long time. This is how he has discovered the origin and purpose of the creatures that have finally dared to leave the Moaskif Range, terrorizing the inhabitants of the entire central valley.

—Noble King Balkurian. Your heart is big, and your eagerness to take care of your subjects is sincere, but how do you think we can defeat the gargoyles if our magic diminishes every day? —Elkos asked—. Today it is difficult for us even to anticipate a storm.

—My heart is big, you say. Well, one bigger than mine, bigger than all of us, is on its way here.

—Your Majesty relies too much on prophecy. The coming to this world of the supreme auro could only be one more ruse of the evil one. Most likely, such power will never exist.

—Elkos, you were once the great advisor to Ukaris. In your youth, you came to demonstrate what can be achieved with a noble and sincere heart. My father always trusted you and held you in the highest esteem. Why do you hesitate now?

The old man looked for the support of the others before saying:

—Diruk anticipates assuming that the boy of Herol is the chosen one.

—Why do you say that?

—The prophecy may be wrong, if the wielder of a power never seen before in Terralan is destined to save us from the hosts of Gorn and reestablish the alliance with the unicorns, it is to be expected that he will appear in the Golden City and not in the last corner of the kingdom.

—What do the other aures say? —asked the king, in a voice that was heard throughout the hall.

—Your Majesty knows that Elkos is the wisest of us. Like him, we believe that the abilities that this boy has shown may rather be the work of the evil one.

—Don't you see that this is what he wants? Sow doubts and discords. Only by joining this pure and innocent soul will we be able to defeat the shadows.

The aures were silent until Dulak intervened again:

—Your Majesty. Unicorns no longer want to have contact with men. Unir will not support any initiative on the part of the inhabitants of Terralan.

—You're wrong! Unir will help us if we believe in his magic again if we unite again and realize that a child's heart can be stronger than a thousand armies.

—What then does Your Majesty decide? —Nutas asked, trying to be more conciliatory.

—Diruk is on his way to Ukaris. He will come to form once again the council of twelve. Hopefully, until then, the camera can protect the ruby from Gorn's demons.

—As Your Majesty commands —Elkos replied.

When the aures left the chamber, they ran into Queen Isia, who approached the oldest of them:

—You remember the promise you made to King Balkian.

—I could never forget it —Elkos replied.

—It is time to fulfill it.

The old man looked at the queen silently, lowered his gaze, and said:

—I'm not sure if that time has come.

—I just hope the gods guide you. We may not have many options anymore.

Elkos said a courteous goodbye and hurried to catch up with the others, who had already descended the spiral staircase that led from the main tower to the castle.

Inside the Alliance Chamber, the king was silent for long hours, pondering how to deal with the threat looming over his kingdom. At the end of the afternoon, he met with his top general.

—Loer, old friend, I need your men ready in four days.

—How many soldiers do we require?

—Gather them all.

—May I ask you something, Your Majesty?

—When have you been shy about telling me what you think?

—Is what is said true? That a boy will lead us to victory against the armies of darkness.

—It is not a question of a little anyone, but the one who will unite us again with the unicorns.

General Loer asked no more. However, his eyes were doubtful and confused.

Dozens of horsemen set out that same afternoon for the towns and villages throughout the Moaslan Valley and the southern shore of the Acuantalis.

After the messengers' departure, Ukaris began to talk about the king's useless crusade to reestablish the name and prestige of the aures. No one thought that this purpose would make them believe more in the divine messengers since their errors had increased in recent years and had caused them to suffer from hunger and disease.

Many even doubted Balkurian's ability as ruler of Terralan.

—«The king has gone mad! »—was heard even in a tavern, after the wine ran generously and lightened the tongues.

General Loer, first in command of the army, had also expressed his doubts at the surprising and inexplicable request to summon all men to the Golden City.

—It is not advisable to leave the villages completely unprotected—he had told his first lieutenant.

—Sir, what do you order then?

Loer had no intention of betraying his king. However, he felt it appropriate to take the management of this delicate matter on his own. The messengers had left with a secret order.

It was getting dark when Diruk said to Kes:

—There are still a few hours to leave the forest. Maybe we shouldn't have stopped to eat.

Despite the powers that were beginning to awaken in the boy and the renewed vitality of the aure, fruit of the forbidden potion, the rhythm they followed during that part of the journey had not yet allowed them to leave the dark, intricate paths of Efin.

—I notice you are nervous. What's up, Kasif? —Diruk asked.

—I feel intense pressure in my chest. Something tells me I must go back.

—Kes. Can you feel if evil stalks Herol?

—Gargoyles won't attack it. But the animals of the forest are no longer the same, and perhaps our friends in the village should beware of new enemies.

—Go, Kasif! Get back as fast as you can. You will be very necessary there. We will be fine.

—I'm very sorry to leave you.

—No way. Your place now is with your wife and child, and all our people. You must organize them and give them confidence.

—May the light guide your steps —he said goodbye before taking the road to Herol.

An hour later, when Diruk and Kes were alone, the boy said calmly:

—You don't have to worry about gargoyles. They are not close.

—I envy your clairvoyance, or in any case, your optimism.

—But I sense there is another danger watching us from the shadows.

—Are you sure? —asked the aure.

Diruk did not yet know that the gargoyles had influenced the creatures of the forest with their magic.

—We must make a fire. The animals fear it —Kes said.

—It's true. But you mean a special kind of fire.

—Only the blue flame will protect us from this threat.

—Can you summon it, Kes? Has your power grown so much that you can now invoke it?

The little boy smiled, took his hand, and said:

—Let's go for dry sticks, Diruk.

—Wait. I almost forgot. I have brought an ax. Now I have the strength to handle it without any problem. Let's make a big fire. Let's get the necessary logs.

After lighting the fire, they both felt comforted and more secure under the shelter of the light.

Next, Diruk took out some powders that he carried in the small saddlebag that always hung from his belt, and while he was throwing them on the fire, he asked Kes to say the incantation aloud.

Without ever having heard it before, the boy raised his arms, looked at the sky, and shouted:

*Blue flame of the aure,
the evil one attacks us with waste.
Blue flame of the aure,
shines bright until late.*

Then something fantastic happened. The flames grew huge and turned blue. That light swept across a large area of the forest, creating a dome that surpassed even the tallest trees.

—Now we can sleep soundly —said Diruk, witness to Kes’s increasingly extraordinary powers.

—Can you hear them, Diruk? They dig and bite everywhere. They are suffering a lot.

Outside the dome, a large pack of wolves tried in vain to penetrate the magical defense. Those animals, who usually feared man and fire, would not have hesitated to attack them if they had been able to get closer.

Like raging beasts, out of control, they tried to burrow under the edge of the wall of light or leap over it. The greater their desperation, the stronger that barrier gained, blocking their way.

—The creatures of the forest don't want to hurt us. It is the evil one who governs his will.

—I know, Kes. Tomorrow with the light of day, that dark influence will vanish, and the animals will be able to rest.

The night was longer than the boy had wished. The desperate howls of dozens of wolves barely let him sleep. His essence of aure was more and more awake, but his soul and innocence as a child remained as valid as ever. A child who cared and suffered for others, whether they were people or animals.

The next morning Diruk was the first to get up. The blue fire, which had lasted all night, was extinguished with the first lights of the day.

—The wolves have already left —said the aure, by way of good morning.

—Some haven't gotten very far. We don't see them, but they can smell and hear us. Now they fear us, or in any case, don't want to hurt us.

—Your wisdom grows day by day, Kes. Soon you will be the one to guide my steps —Diruk exclaimed with a smile.

—Do you think that happens? I am not that sure.

—You'll see.

After a quick breakfast, which consisted of a couple of muffins and a piece of bread, the two travelers resumed their journey. They soon left the western limits of Efin, and the march became lighter.

As the morning he said goodbye to his mother, Kes repeatedly turned to see the forest, which gradually got smaller. Gone is the threat of the wolves. Behind is the memory of that night in which the future aurore witnessed evil once again.

Before them now lay a great plain of tall, golden grasses, stretching to the southern shore of the Acuantalis.

—How long until we see the lake? —asked Kes, who at times showed the impatience of any child.

—Almost a day's ride. If we hurry, we'll get there shortly after dark.

That part of the journey, perhaps the most tedious because of the monotonous landscape, allowed Diruk to tell Kes a little more about the unicorns.

—After we leave Ukaris, with King Balkurian's army, we must march towards the Moaskif Range. In that place, if the conscience of the twelve gathered again manages to convince Unir, he and his brothers will be waiting for us to face the gargoyles.

—Do you know the Lord of the unicorns well? —Kes asked.

—Before the betrayal, when his kindred ran confidently among men, Unir and I were great friends.

—Friends like Alit and me?

—Yes, we trusted each other. But you should know that with unicorns' friendship is something that transcends much more than itself.

—What do you mean? —Kes asked, intrigued.

—They're free spirits, galloping proud and confident of their magical nature and their passage of several centuries in this world. During the alliance they formed with ancient men, they allowed our race to ride them, like magnificent steeds, to fight Grom together.

—The man never did it again?

—I'm going to tell you a secret. Many years ago, shortly before I was commissioned by King Balkurian's father to found the town that is your home today when unicorns still trusted men, Unir allowed me to ride him only once.

—How does it feel to be on them, Diruk?

—It is a magical experience. Time seems almost to stop, and a feeling of peace immediately floods your heart. You could easily sleep on their back as they go.

—And did you go far?

—He took me from the west bank of the great lake, near the village of Mut, to beyond the forest of Efin.

—My home.

—Precisely. It was Unir who showed me the land that would yield the sweetest wine in the whole kingdom. One more gift from the Lord of the unicorns to men.

The little boy thought about those words and then asked:

—Do you think we can get him to trust us again?

—I have my hopes pinned on that.

—But some aures don't believe the prophecy.

—Together, we will make the other ten strengthen their spirits again and find their way.

—Look! I can see it already —Kes said.

—The great Aquantalis! I hope that its waters receive us as friends.

V. THE ACUANTALIS

It was just after dark when Diruk and Kes reached the lake. From there, they would continue west, toward Zun. A gentle breeze blew from the north; it seemed to bring smells from the lands that crossed the Path of the Unicorns.

The imposing body of water, which stretched for dozens of leagues, was the primary livelihood source for dozens of small fishing villages located on its shores.

—My father told me that nobody lives on the North Shore. Are they not good lands?—Kes asked curiously.

—It has been reserved since ancient times, only for unicorns.

—Is it their abode?

—No, but they use it as a runner for their magical gallop. That is why it is known as the Path of the Unicorns.

—Where do they come from?

—First, they were thought to come from the sea. But no one has ever seen them emerge among the waves. They seem to come from beyond the horizon, as no matter where you expect them, they will always appear far from where you are.

—Will we continue to travel at night, Diruk?

—It's best if we reach Zun as soon as possible. There we can spend the night more safely.

—I'll meet a great friend of yours soon.

—You're right. Did you read it from my mind, or his? —Diruk asked, intrigued.

—From both.

The aure couldn't help but smile with marked satisfaction.

—Do you know what power Vaz possesses?

—I think the one to heal. I'm not really sure yet. You mentioned something about the waters of this lake.

—Yes, I said I didn't know if they would welcome us as friends.

—What did you mean? —asked the boy.

—The Acuantalis generously offers its fruits to the fishermen who live near its shores, but it is advisable always to navigate it under the sunlight.

—What happens at night?

—Unexplained events have long fed the imaginations of men, who prefer not to sail its waters during the hours of darkness —Diruk replied.

—Tell me more.

—The story goes that Valmar and Vedia reached the place where the first stone of Ukaris would be placed on the back of Anes, and that the Lord of the unicorns took them

first to the north shore of the lake. We assume that there he gave them the Ruby of the Alliance, and perhaps that is why the spirit of Grorn runs through him at night, looking for how to take revenge.

—Do you believe so, Diruk?

—I have witnessed some strange occurrences, things that even with the arts of the aures I could not explain. On one occasion, I was close to the eastern shore, north of Herol. In that place, I was able to witness something that caused me great disturbance. First, the waters became darker and darker until they became almost entirely black. They immediately began to give off a nauseating smell. Then I heard something that sounded like a scream and a roar at the same time. It seemed to come from everywhere. At that moment, I felt great anguish, a feeling that forced me to leave the place immediately.

—It sounds very strange. You never knew what happened?

—So far, I regret not staying to find out.

—I don't think it was the evil one, not him directly —said the boy.

—I agree with you. Grorn is most likely to materialize himself in the heart of Moaskif, where the betrayal took place.

Soon, the travelers found themselves on a well-established road. From there, it would be a few hours' journey to Zun. It was a clear night, without clouds. The stars and the moon, which was waning, were reflected with intensity on the waters of the Acuantalis.

Then Kes noticed something that caught his attention powerfully. He seemed to see brief and fleeting reflections on the surface of the lake, silhouettes whose shape he could not pinpoint.

—Do you know what those lights are? —asked the aure.

—I have no idea.

—They are the reflection of the unicorns. After the battle in which they fought alongside the men to banish Gorn from Terralan, Anes led his kind to the east's great plains, and together they galloped back into the mountains. On their way, they used the north shore of the lake, and the magic they used at that time was so great since they had to return the Earth to its rotation that their silhouettes were forever etched in its permanent ripples.

Kes was ecstatic. A big smile lit up his face, and for a moment, the fleeting reflections seemed to gain greater intensity, filling the calm waters with beautiful shapes and colors.

—However, let me tell you, they are rare, much less in this part of the lake —Diruk said.

—Perhaps they are a sign.

—It's possible. We hope to find out soon what they want to tell us.

—I can see smoke from chimneys in the distance —Kes pointed out.

—We're almost there. How good a cup of tea will do me!

Moments later, they were both walking the road through the town. They went straight to a large and very well-built cabin.

—Ahem... I see my friend has been busy —Diruk exclaimed.

—His house is much bigger than yours.

—You're right. I can't wait to see it inside.

After knocking on the door twice, they both fell silent. They didn't hear any sound coming from within.

—Maybe he's asleep —said the boy.

—I do not think so. He knows we are here.

The aure knocked on the door again. This time with more energy:

—Open it now, Vaz! It's cold out here.

—Who are you? —a voice asked from inside after someone glanced out the window.

—You don't remember an old friend? —Diruk replied.

Kes gently tugged on the aure cloak. With an eloquent gesture, he made him notice that his face was different now.

—I see. My friend doesn't seem to recognize me.

—You are not welcome! And less at this time of night —they heard behind the door.

—It's me. Diruk. Open the door once.

—You're not going to fool me, demon. Indeed you are an envoy from the gargoyles, or worse still, from Gorn himself.

—What does the fire tell you? Ask him who is at your door.

After a few minutes, it was heard from inside:

—It says you are friends. But these days, I don't know if I can even trust the green flame.

—You can open confidently. Remember that evil cannot enter the home of an aure, not even on dark days like these.

—Who is with you?

—Someone you'll be happy to meet. Nothing less than the ultimate aure —Diruk replied, looking at Kes with a smile.

—The the supreme aure, you say?

—Haven't you felt how your vital energy had been renewed in the last hours?

After a short silence, there was the unmistakable sound of a bolt. The door slowly opened, and an elderly man said in a low voice:

—Old friend. You have drunk the forbidden potion.

—Yes, but that doesn't matter now. I want you to meet Kes, son of Palur and Ila, a native of the Town of Herol.

—Nice to meet you, Kes. But come in, come in, it's a cold night. Excuse me, but I was afraid it was a trap from the evil one.

The travelers immediately settled into a comfortable armchair near the fire.

—I see you've been busy remodeling your house —Diruk said.

—Have you noticed the changes? It was with the help of the people of Zun that I was able to expand it.

—We certainly haven't seen each other in a long time. I had no idea.

—It was a few years ago. Our powers had not yet weakened. On that occasion, I saved the granddaughter of the founder of this town from a terrible disease. In return, he and the other neighbors decided to expand my cabin and turn it into this comfortable house that you see now.

—Who could have said it! In Herol, no one ever became so seriously ill. Although if that had been the case, indeed, I would not have hesitated to call on your healing abilities immediately.

Kes was about to say something when Diruk filled his mouth with a muffin.

—You must eat, little one. You will be destined to become the supreme aurore, but you still must regain your strength.

—The chosen one. And he appeared in the far corner of the kingdom —Vaz exclaimed.

—Did you receive my message?

—I have everything ready. I've even made up a story so as not to sow more fear among the inhabitants of this part of the kingdom.

—You have always been careful with details. What have you told them? —Diruk asked.

—That I must travel to Ukaris because King Balkurian has summoned the aures to help him appoint new captains for the army —Vaz replied.

—The king is gathering all the available soldiers. People will believe that story.

—The Golden City hasn't sent for all of them, old friend. I thought you knew.

—That is something unexpected. I don't think it was the king's decision.

—What are you suggesting? —Vaz asked.

—That once we get to Ukaris, we must watch our backs.

By then, Kes, who had listened carefully to them while he was eating, dared to say:

—Once before the king, I can help you find out who to trust.

Vaz looked at Diruk with a puzzled expression and asked:

—Is he serious?

—Don't have the slightest doubt. Soon he will be the one to guide our steps.

—I think it's time to rest —Kes said, after letting out a long yawn.

—You're right. Tomorrow we must leave early —Diruk said.

—There will be four of us soon. I look forward to meeting Mias —the little boy exclaimed as he tucked himself into the comfortable chair by the fire.

After he fell asleep, the aures continued talking about times past. They remembered when their youth and the alliance between men and unicorns allowed them to display much greater power.

VI. THE AURES OF BELIA, LITAR, AND MUT

—I've secured the doors and windows. I have also used an enchantment that will prevent anyone from entering in my absence —Vaz said, as Diruk waited for him by the road.

—Very well thought.

—Will you ride without help?

—Since I drank the potion, I have fully regained my vitality —Diruk explained.

—It's true, how could I forget. I have always envied your courage. I think that I would never dare to drink the forbidden formula.

—You will ride with Kes.

—We must leave as soon as possible —exclaimed the boy, who, impatient to continue, was returning from a short walk.

—Your energy will soon overtake us completely. I hope I can keep up with you —Vaz said with concern.

—You will, and with increasing strength —Kes said, and as usual, he reaffirmed his words with a big smile.

They soon left the town and headed northwest. The road would bring them closer to the Acuantalís again. If there were no inconvenience, they would reach Belia, home of the aure Mias in two days.

It was already dark when a group of gargoyles began to congregate atop Naur Mountain. First, there were a few, but several hundred occupied the natural ledges and cornices of the rock massif of the Moaskif Range.

Suddenly, a voice from the depths of the earth addressed each of them:

—Shadow soldiers, the moment of our revenge is getting closer.

At that moment, the powerful creatures began to flap their wings, saluting the master of their souls and bodies.

—Be ready. Soon we will attack every village and town in this miserable kingdom. In the end, Ukaris will also succumb to my power, and man will be an eternal slave to our will.

The night grew even darker, and the wolves of every Terralan forest howled plaintively.

—Come on, let's speed up. There is little left for us to arrive —Kes encouraged his friends.

The travelers had made their way to Belia without a hitch, and a few hours later, they had entered the valley that housed the most beautiful town south of the great lake.

The boy soon noticed something very peculiar. In the fields, there were draft animals that worked alone. No man directed or guided them to make the furrows.

They had already come across a bear, which seemed to greet them from a distance instead of showing aggressiveness.

Diruk noticed his surprise and said:

—It's Mias's magic. It wonderfully acts on animals.

They soon found themselves entering the town. Its white and small houses, built with a more symmetrical and uniform design to the rest of the kingdom's villages, shone splendidly in the sunlight.

On the roofs, many wild birds sang incessantly melodies that cheered the hearts of men and women.

—It's just as I saw it in my dreams —Kes said.

—Now you'll meet Mias —Diruk put in—. Let's look for her at her house.

—You won't find her there —exclaimed the little boy, dismounting and anticipating his fellow travelers—. Let's go to the market.

The aures were left with no choice but to follow him.

The townspeople met at the market that was held every day in the main square. There, a great variety of food, clothing, and utensils were exchanged. It was common to haggle over the price, and each transaction was used to talk animatedly, both the most important and the most trivial events.

Kes immediately identified the stall where herbs and essences were sold, and he approached without hesitation. In that place, a woman who partially covered her face with a cape had just bought a bundle of the famous plant known as unicorn's mane, widely used by the aures to prepare medicinal potions.

—Hello, Mias! —the little boy greeted.

—Good day! Do you know me?

—I know who you are, and I'm sure we'll get to know each other well on the way to Ukaris.

At that moment, the woman uncovered her face, revealing her great beauty and youth.

—You're prettier than Diruk and Vaz told me —Kes said with amused naivety.

The two aures, who had just arrived at the herb stall, managed to hear him.

—I don't think I remember telling you that —Diruk exclaimed, his face sharply flushed.

—You didn't tell me in words, but I assure you it is a thought that is very clear in your mind.

—Who'd say? —Mias exclaimed—. That I would see the great Diruk rejuvenated and embarrassed as a teenager because of a child's words.

They all laughed and then accepted the invitation of the beautiful aure to eat and rest at her home. They would leave for Litar the next day.

The morning found the inhabitants of Belia sleeping peacefully. Almost everyone got up a little later than usual to start their house and field chores, feeling refreshed.

Only three people knew what had happened. Kes' growing power had momentarily allayed fears in that part of the kingdom, allowing men, women, the elderly, and children to experience a great sense of peace and security.

—It's time to leave Belia, Kes —Diruk said—. Its inhabitants will long remember this sunrise, brighter and more beautiful than in many years, after a quiet night in which none of them experienced any nightmares.

Soon they were on the road again.

—What is Mia doing? —asked the boy, always curious.

—She is leaving a spell that will protect Belia from the attack of animals that the evil one could control.

—Like the wolves that attacked us in Efin.

—Yes, exactly. This morning I told Mias about our hectic night in the forest, and now she is using her magic to tell the animals not to forget that men are their friends.

The riders once again spotted the mighty Aquantalis in the distance. As before, it would be their companion until they reached Litar.

—I still can't believe you drank the forbidden potion —exclaimed Mias, traveling with Diruk.

—It was necessary. Bringing the boy to Ukaris is the most important thing right now.

Further back, Kes and Vaz followed, who now managed with unusual vitality despite his years. Around noon they stopped on the way. They distributed some of the provisions and settled down to rest.

— There is something in the wind that makes me uneasy —Mias said after the clouds hid the sun's rays.

—You're right. Something's wrong —Diruk agreed.

Suddenly the wind ceased, and a threatening silence enveloped them.

—Kes, do you know what happens? —Vaz asked.

—I don't feel anything special.

The aures already suspected that Kes' powers, while great, were not yet entirely under his control. For much of the time, they had before them only the playful boy of Herol.

They were attentive, trying to discover what was bothering them when suddenly the little one exclaimed:

—We are about to be attacked by the gargoyles.

—We feel nothing —Diruk exclaimed—. How do you know?

—Because I can see them. There in the sky.

Sure enough, five large and menacing winged creatures were approaching them at high speed.

—We will have to fight! —exclaimed Mias.

—Diruk, old friend, I think it's time for you to use your magic too —Vaz said, as Kes, frightened by the memory of the gargoyle he saw in Efin, hid behind a tree.

Mias and Diruk took a few steps forward and raised their arms to the sky.

—What are they going to do? —Kes asked, intrigued.

—Now you'll see —Vaz replied.

Mias repeated the spell she knew best three times:

Winged friends, friends of always.

Hear my call with no delays.

Almost immediately, Kes watched as dozens of birds flew up from a nearby forest and headed straight for the demonic creatures, which were almost upon them. Diruk, for his part, still stood with his arms outstretched and silent.

Some eagles, dozens of ravens, and many others of smaller size attacked the gargoyles with great courage from various fronts.

However, Mias soon realized that her winged friends, being barely enveloped by the monsters' wings, instantly lost their lives. From the ground, the auras that could control the animals saw despair that they fell lifeless one after another from the heights.

—Diruk! It's your turn. I'm going to ask them to leave. They can do nothing against these black demons.

By then, the gargoyles had descended and were approaching with a sure and threatening step.

—Stand aside, Mias. I'm going to use the magic rumble.

—Now you'll witness Diruk's real power, Kes. Come, let's run for shelter. Cover your ears tightly —Vaz warned.

Immediately the three took refuge behind a huge rock and, lying on the ground, energetically covered themselves with both hands.

*Ancient magic of the aures,
give the necessary power to my hands.
Beneficial magic of the aures,
let me fight the villains once again.*

The gargoyles were only a few steps away. From that short distance, you could perceive their stench and feel all the power of their roars.

When all seemed lost, Diruk clapped his palms together with a thunderous thud. This produced a ripple of such magnitude that it knocked the hideous creatures to the ground, leaving them stunned.

The magical rumble was practically invincible. However, to re-conjure it, the aure had to rest for a full day.

—Let's go! We have maybe an hour before they can recover. We must be far from here by then —Diruk warned. Litar was still more than a day away.

In the Golden City, King Balkurian had summoned his general, urgently:

—Loer, dear friend of so many years. Why have you disobeyed my orders?

—Your Majesty?

—You know well what I'm talking about. Soldiers from the nearest towns and villages have started arriving in Ukaris, and it hasn't taken me much effort to realize that not all of them have been summoned.

After hesitating for a moment, the general dared to say:

—My loyalty is and always will be to the kingdom. I will never question its king's courage and nobility, but it is his judgment that may have been affected by the growing power of the evil one.

—You have dared to doubt my ability as the ruler of this land. Right now, the enemy wants us divided and full of doubt.

—My king, I don't believe I have betrayed our people.

—Guards! Take the general to the dungeons.

—You must not neglect your subjects, Your Majesty! Terralan will be left vulnerable to attack —Loer exclaimed vehemently.

—I won't listen anymore. Take him out of my sight! —the monarch ordered again.

Kes and his friends were already close to Litar when Vaz asked them to stop, confessing in a nervous voice:

—I have felt as if a strange force was pulling my cloak.

—Are you sure? —Diruk asked.

—Completely.

They looked in all directions but saw no one.

—Some have forgotten my abilities —came a voice that startled the two older aures. Those words that came from the air seemed not to surprise Kes and Mias.

—Gaslan! You could have announced yourself before —she said, while the boy, covering his face a little with both hands, barely contained his laughter.

—What a fool I was! —Vaz exclaimed—. We are so close to Litar that playful Gaslan most likely wanted to make a joke like this.

At that moment, the figure of a very tall man, the same age as Mias, appeared before his eyes, who immediately greeted his friends affectionately.

—I see the little boy is not surprised either —said the newcomer.

—I knew of your presence because the animals announced it to mee —Mias explained—. As for Kes, perhaps he already has our powers, or he has simply read your mind.

The boy shook the hand of the fourth aure and said:

—It's nice to meet you. Much more now that I can see you.

—Tell us, Gaslan. Apart from having fun at our expense. Is there any reason you searched for us outside of Litar? —Vaz asked, hiding some annoyance.

—I'm afraid so. But don't be mad at me, dear friend. I must tell you that things are not going well in town. Many of its inhabitants are given over to anger. They lose patience quickly, and some even want to take justice on their own to settle their differences.

—Shadows are taking over the entire southern shore of the Aquantalís —Diruk said—. Have you seen gargoyles near here?

—No, not yet. But the forests are now quite dangerous. The animals seem dominated by an exacerbated rage.

—Something similar happened in Efin when I was traveling alone with Kes. What do you suggest we do, Gaslan?

—Let's go immediately. We must not enter Litar.

—Sounds like the most sensible thing to do. Let's continue to Mut —Diruk said.

—It's not necessary. I recently managed to communicate with Nerus, who is at the other end of the lake, on the Unicorns' Path. He will use his speed to catch up with us on the way to the Golden City.

—What is he doing there? —Vaz asked.

—You know what he's like. Although he can never beat them, he's always looking for unicorns to make them races.

—Diruk, I think I will soon run like unicorns —Kes said with excited enthusiasm.

—That means you would be faster than Nerus —Diruk said—. I would not be surprised.

Following Gaslan's advice, the aures continued their way around the Town of Litar. They soon reached the western bank of the Acuantalis and entered the fields that precede the Golden City: The Plains of Kinar.

On Ukaris, King Balkurian had received a message through a dove sent by Mias.

—They are close now —exclaimed the sovereign, comforted.

Queen Isia took his hand and said:

—You carry the great weight of watching over your people, and you have done it wisely and fairly for many years, beloved husband. However, now it's time to share that responsibility with someone else. The time has come for the aures to prove their worth.

—You are right, my queen.

—Is Loer still in the dungeons?

—He must pay for his mistake.

—Do you think he acted in bad faith?

—I don't know. But with his doubt, we have weakened even more before the evil one.

—Something tells me he's innocent.

—It's possible. In due course, I will ask the aures for advice.

The travelers had entered the Kinar expanses several hours ago when they spotted a dust cloud rushing toward them.

—What could that be? —Mias asked.

—You seem to have never seen our friend Nerus —Gaslan exclaimed.

The cloud of dust continued to approach very rapidly, until finally it was so close that it looked like it was going to ram them. At that moment, it stopped abruptly, revealing moments later a man who showed great physical strength.

—Greetings, my friends. I hope I arrived on time. I had to hurry a bit.

—Punctuality is precisely one of your strengths —Diruk returned the salute.

—How fast can you run? —Mias asked, still not out of her astonishment.

—In short distances, almost as fast as unicorns, yes.

—The only problem is that our speedy friend has a hard time holding his breath for long distances —Gaslan put in.

—I'm happy to see you this time —Nerus said before bowing to the beautiful Mias.

—You look a bit agitated —she said.

—I don't usually run that fast or for that long. I confess that now I will need to rest more than usual, but first I must introduce myself to our little friend.

—Hello, Nerus —Kes said—. I could perceive you from many leagues away.

—And I could feel your presence and energy, even in the middle of the race.

Everyone smiled upon hearing this short but revealing dialogue.

VII. THE GOLDEN CITY

The enormous rectangular wall of Ukaris and the intense luminosity surrounding it were seen from several leagues away. Kes could barely contain the overflowing emotion that had completely taken over his heart and that he couldn't explain.

In part, he knew it was because he would soon meet the other aures and because he would finally meet King Balkurian, but there was something else. Somehow it was as if he were coming home. He had a feeling of confidence, a calm feeling that he could face the uncertain and threatening future that would bring him despite his short years.

To the north, near the Moaslan River, the travelers could see the fires arranged between the tents of the soldiers who made up the Terralan army. Many men had come from all corners to join the forces that would march towards the distant mountains.

—They are not all. Is it not like that? —Diruk asked his brothers.

—I'm not sure —Gaslan replied—. They haven't been summoned to the Golden City for years.

—Only half came —Kes said, confirming what Vaz already suspected—. I see blue flames around the city. But they are weak. Who has lit them?

—They are flames that Hove lights every night to protect Ukaris from the shadows —Diruk replied—. The problem is that each time they shine with less intensity.

—Years ago, you could see the blue reflection in the sky, from many Moaslan villages —Gaslan put in.

—Sometimes, these didn't go out immediately after the first rays of the sun. They were so strong that they stayed on, even after sunrise —Nerus added.

—They'll shine that bright again soon —Kes stated with great assurance.

The travelers continued to advance until they found themselves passing through the Golden City's great gate. As its name indicated, imposing walls that resembled the color of gold surrounded it.

Then something magical and special started to happen. The blue flames began to glow brighter. The entire city seemed to greet them.

The first thing that caught Kes's attention was a large silver statue, which represented Anes, former Lord of the unicorns, who sealed the ancient alliance with the Terralanians at the beginning of the Second Age.

—It's bigger than I had imagined it and brighter —the little boy exclaimed.

Nearby the other six aures awaited them, led by Elkos, the sage, whose main power was clairvoyance.

—Welcome to Ukaris.

—Thank you, Elkos —Diruk said—. We haven't seen each other for many years.

—Diruk, is that you?... You have defied our law at the cost of losing your own life.

—My friend, it is precisely the duty of an aure that has led me to make such a drastic decision.

Vaz, Gaslan, Mias, and Nerus also politely greeted their friends.

—We can assume that this little boy must be the one —Elkos said, in a tone of voice that sounded a little unfriendly.

—I'm pleased to meet you. We must join forces. We don't have much time —Kes said, nonetheless.

—How much energy! And what impatience. Are you sure you are who you say you are?

Diruk smiled broadly and pointed to the statue of Anes. A beautiful blue light enveloped it completely.

—Look around you —said old Vaz.

The city's protective flames had also been rekindled, glowing as they had not seen in many years.

—I assure you, Elkos, I have nothing to do with this rebirth of blue fire —Hove exclaimed, surprised.

At that moment, the royal page interrupted:

—Illustrious visitors, the king awaits you in the castle.

—Let's not keep the good King Balkurian waiting —Diruk said.

Elkos seemed to make a gesture of displeasure. Soon after, he found himself advancing through the city, talking with his old friends Vaz and Diruk.

People watched them from their doors and windows, wondering what important reason had brought them all together in the Golden City once again.

—Surely, it's not a good thing —some said.

The soldiers gathered north of Ukaris could not bode well. Others, more optimistic, hoped that perhaps this meeting, which they had been waiting for a long time, would finally stop the advance of the shadows.

The wide and beautiful central avenue led them to the very entrance to the castle. Once there, they could hear the trumpets, which were always announced to distinguished visitors. When the doors had finished opening, the page indicated:

—Please follow me. The king wishes to see you immediately.

Kes was silent, in awe of the majesty of the building. His usual eloquence seemed to have deserted him.

Unlike its cold exterior, the interior of the castle was warm. A long red carpet, finely woven, served as a path from the front door to another pair of smaller doors, which led to the throne room. All the environments were splendidly lit, highlighting the sober wealth that was immediately appreciated in them.

Dozens of furniture made of the best wood and lined with exquisite tapestries filled that enormous room, leading to two side rooms. Towards the right, one accessed the dining

room and royal kitchen. One found a long corridor leading to an armory and a courtyard for military practice to the left.

Large windows, located at the height of five men, would surely let in the daylight in a resplendent way. With the blue flames rekindled both outside and inside the castle, an unearthly clarity had taken over the building.

At that moment, Kes took Diruk's hand and said in a low voice:

—When we stand before the king, let Elkos speak first.

The doors of the royal hall finally opened, and they all walked purposefully toward the throne, where a man with a profuse but well-groomed beard was waiting for them. On his head rested a golden crown that made him look majestic, gallant, but at the same time fair. His eyes gave off kindness and intelligence.

—Great King of Terralan! Those who have come from beyond the Moaslan, and from the distant town east of Acuantalis —the page announced.

—Dear friends, welcome. Especially you, little Kes of Herol.

The boy, who had positioned himself somewhat behind Elkos, just bowed and remained silent. It seemed as if an unexpected shyness had taken hold of him.

—I see also that some have come with the face of youth —exclaimed the king.

Balkurian was well acquainted with the arts of the aures, and it was not long before he recognized the one whom his father had sent sixty years before, to the limits of the kingdom, to found the farthest town in Terralan.

—I always keep Herol in mind, the land of the best wine —added the monarch.

Then he waited for Diruk to speak. After all, he was the main person in charge of that necessary and, at the same time, long-delayed meeting.

The silence lengthened. Just when it was beginning to get uncomfortable, Elkos dared to say:

—Your Majesty. I'm sure you will agree with me that we should test the boy before placing all our trust in him.

—Our confidence, you say? Honorable Elkos, I believe rather that it is mistrust that dominates your mind.

—Understand my words, Your Majesty. But we must be sure of his identity if we want to be prepared to face the evil one. We cannot forget that the spirit of Gorn usually acts in strange and unforeseen ways. Our brothers may have been misled.

Vaz, Gaslan, Nerus, Mias, and Diruk showed on their faces an energetic rejection of Elkos's words.

—You may be the wisest of Terralan —Mias exclaimed—, but you cannot forget that the boy has reached the consciences of five aures. We all agree that his heart is pure.

At that moment, Kes approached the king.

—Everyone be silent —the ruler ordered—. Do you have something to tell us, little one?

—I'm ready for whatever test Elkos wants to impose on me. But first I would like to ask one thing.

—And what could it be?

—I'm starving. Could I have something to eat?

Everyone laughed at the unexpected request, and the tension that reigned in the environment disappeared utterly.

—Of course, you can eat. A banquet in honor of my illustrious visitors has been prepared with great care today.

Soon, they all found themselves enjoying a splendid table. Except for wine, Kes was able to taste everything that was offered to the aures. The most delicious cakes, the most incredible variety of meats and fruits that he could have imagined, were served to the king's guests.

After a sumptuous dinner, they were taken to the bedrooms specially fitted out for them. The boy would sleep with Diruk.

—Try to rest. Tomorrow a long day, awaits us.

—Will I meet the Alliance Chamber tomorrow? —Kes asked.

—So is. In that place, together with the king, we will look for a way to reestablish the ruby's power and prepare the people of Terralan for the battle against evil.

That night the blue flames continued to glow brightly, as in many years they had not.

VIII. NIGHT OF TERROR

—Ila, we hope you stay with us tonight. Alit has offered you his room more than gladly, and Nira has prepared it so that you can sleep comfortably.

—Thank you, Kasif. I prefer to wait in my own house.

—I don't think it's for the best. Although we've sprinkled around the town the powders that the aure left us before leaving, the animals seem to act strangely. I have a feeling that something terrible can happen at any moment.

—I'm nervous too, but it is at home where I must wait for my son to return.

—As you like. But don't forget that our door will always be open for you.

The woman said goodbye and continued the path that led to her home. A dim moon shone in a cloudless sky.

Kes had fallen asleep with no small effort. Something had kept him worried since he left the castle dining room.

—What is going through your young mind? —Diruk wondered, who seemed to veil his sleep in silence.

In the middle of the night, the little boy got up with a start: —My mother!

—Here I am, Kes. It was just a nightmare.

—No, Diruk. She is in danger. The evil has taken over Efin.

—Try to calm yourself down. It was only an image originated by the evil one to confuse you.

—I rather believe that it is the future that I have seen. The beasts of the forest can no longer resist such a dark influence. They are determined to attack Herol.

—Are you sure?

—We must do something, Diruk.

—Come. Take my hands and focus on your mother. Now repeat after me:

Magic of the aure, blue flame

protect mine, protect them from evil.

Magic of the aure, spread your vail

may the end doesn't come along this riddle.

When Kes had finished repeating those words, the flames surrounding Ukaris grew tremendously, spreading for several leagues around.

It had been several hours since Ila said goodbye to Kasif, and she still hadn't been able to sink into sleep. The howls of the wolves, getting closer and closer, were heard like never. They weren't ordinary howls. They didn't seem to indicate dominance or celebration. The voices of the beasts tried to tell that they were fighting furiously against a supernatural force.

At that moment, there was a knock on his door. The woman approached the window nervously.

—Who is it?

A fierce howl was heard too close.

—Who is outside? —Ila asked again.

—It's me, Kasif! Ila, you must come with me! The wolves have penetrated the perimeter of the town. The magic of the aure could not stop them. They are about to attack. You must come with us.

Without thinking twice, the frightened woman opened the door and hugged Kasif.

—Two other families have also taken refuge in our home. We will not die without a fight.

—Do you think we'll get there? —the frightened woman asked.

—Take my hand —was the only reply.

They immediately broke into a run, moving as fast as possible along the path that led to Kasif's house. Suddenly, they thought they made out a score of wolves that were approaching rapidly in the distance.

—We're not going to make it —Ila cried, terrified.

—Keep running!

There was still a considerable distance to go to reach the cabin's safety when they both turned to check how far away the beasts were. With horror, they could see that the eyes of the wolves were fiery red. It seemed as if terrible demons of darkness inhabited the maddened animals.

Nira was waiting for them at the door, accompanied by two men carrying sharp machetes.

—Hurry up! They are almost upon you! —the desperate woman screamed.

At that moment, Ila tripped over a stone and stumbled on the road. Kasif reacted instantly, helping her up in a second. From the house, Nira could see how the wolves were preparing to jump on their prey.

At that precise moment, a very intense blue light blinded everyone. The frightened animals backed away with their tails between their legs and the hair on their backs standing on end. They immediately started running, losing themselves in the shadows of the night.

Ila and Kasif had not yet recovered from their shock when the others approached.

—What has happened? —Nira asked tears in her eyes.

—It was Kes. I can feel his presence in every fiber of my being —Ila replied.

—It's true —Kasif said—. I can feel it too.

—Look! —one of the men exclaimed.

Everyone was surprised when they discovered a kind of energy dome around each village cabin, a very bright blue color.

—We are safe! We are safe from the wolves! —shouted Kasif excitedly.

IX. TWELVE AGAIN

The Sun rose on the horizon, illuminating the Golden City. Although the darkness of night had given way to the light of day, the blue flames continued to glow for a few more minutes.

The morning had surprised Kes, sound asleep. When he finally opened his eyes, he could see Diruk sitting cross-legged on the floor in deep meditation.

—What are you doing?

There was no answer to his question. The boy finished stretching and got dressed. Finally, the aure got up and said:

—Good day to you! I have been meditating. I want to be as lucid as possible during the council.

—Council? —Kes asked.

—It's the name we used to call the meetings we had every five years here in Ukaris. It has been almost two decades since we have done it, and what better occasion to resume the tradition, now that the twelve of us are present once more.

—Even though you don't tell me, I know it still surprises you.

—What, Kes?

—That at times I show a power much greater than yours, clairvoyance greater than Elkos', and at other times I behave like any other boy, who only seems to care about playing and eating.

—Yes, sometimes it surprises me. But I know the reason for it.

—I'm still a boy.

—Exactly! Even if you become the strongest aure of all, part of your nature is to be a boy, and you cannot stop being one no matter how much power higher beings have decided to grant you.

Kes looked out the window and marveled at the splendid sight. From that height, he could see a large part of the city. The houses, many of them two and three stories high, stood in an orderly fashion over the avenues and streets that surrounded the castle.

For a moment, the little boy seemed saddened.

—What is it, Kes?

—I remember my father telling me about the multi-story houses he used to stay in when he came to Ukaris, with his cargo of wine.

—Do you want to go for a walk? I think we have time before the council.

—I'd like that very much, Diruk!

Shortly later, the two found themselves walking the streets of the city. The dwellings looked higher and more imposing. Some people, who did not even know Kes, did not hesitate to greet him happily from its doors.

—Who are they? —asked the puzzled boy.

—You don't know them. But your heart will soon understand that these are the people who still believe in the alliance we once had with unicorns. The problem is that there are fewer and fewer —explained Diruk.

After touring one of the main avenues, they arrived at the great market, which stood inside an imposing square. It was much larger than Belia's. People from all over gathered there to exchange products from all over Terralan.

The stalls crowded with food, clothes, and ornaments, filled the place with colors, smells, and sensations that the little one didn't know and that at times seemed to cloud his senses.

—What is that sound? —Kes asked, leading Diruk by the hand to where it seemed to come from—. It sounds like a melody.

Soon the boy found what he was looking for. A group of musicians, accompanied by their flutes, lutes, and drums, played joyful music. One of them was singing with a strong and beautiful voice. Having stopped their work, many people surrounded them and listened attentively.

Despite the festive atmosphere the orchestra fostered, Kes seemed to be gripped by a deep sadness. Hesitantly, he approached the lively singer and asked:

—Who do you dedicate this song to?

The surprised man stopped his interpretation and replied:

—We sing to the Sun and the Moon. This is how we celebrate the blessings that each day brings us.

—Why have you forgotten about the unicorns?

—We haven't forgotten them, sometimes we even see them from a distance —he replied indifferently.

—But you are no longer grateful to them —Kes seemed to reproach him.

—Well, that's their job, isn't it? What a funny child! —the man replied. Many of those around them laughed along with him. Diruk stared at the scene in silence, his expression grim.

Shortly after, they were both back in their castle room. It was close to noon when there was a knock on the door.

—It's Mias. The time has come —Kes said, almost undeterred.

—Diruk opened and verified that indeed it was the beautiful friend of the animals.

—Are you ready? —she asked.

—We are. Now it's time —Diruk exclaimed, unable to hide a certain nervousness.

—Don't worry —Mias tried to encourage him—. Kes will measure up. Much more than you imagine.

Soon the three of them found themselves climbing a spiral staircase, which would lead them to the highest level of the castle. At the top end of the main tower was the Alliance Chamber, a large hall with twelve stone chairs arranged in a semicircular manner. In front of them was a thirteenth, intended only for the king. On a gold pedestal in the center of the room, the magical ruby still glowed, but with faint opaque glints.

—In this place, the king and aures are treated as equals. That is why the thirteen chairs are the same size —Mias explained, anticipating the question that indeed haunted Kes's mind.

—Welcome! We were waiting for you —the king received them.

After greeting each other with affection, those present were taking their respective seats.

—I think some don't want me to sit down yet —the little boy exclaimed.

—It is not by the wish of some; the law of the aure is what prevents you from still occupying that place —said the monarch.

—Kes, the time for your test has come —Diruk announced, with a warm look and a friendly smile.

—Come closer, native of the Town of Herol —said the king—. You too, Elkos of Ukaris.

The latter was surprised.

—Is Your Majesty sure of his decision?

—More than ever. It is necessary that the one who masters clairvoyance be the one to carry out the tests.

—If the boy is not who Diruk thinks he is, I fear that his mind and body may suffer irreparable damage —Elkos sentenced.

—We all know the risks of testing —said the king.

—Your Majesty. I want to ask you one thing —Kes put in.

—I hear you.

—I don't want you to hold Diruk responsible for what happens to me.

Elkos made a strange gesture. He thought he perceived fear and doubt in the boy's words. Perhaps that indicated that he was not who he claimed to be.

—Very well —said the king—. You will be subjected to the tests at your own risk.

Kes turned to look at Diruk, and with a smiling gesture, let him know that everything would be fine.

By then, Elkos was waiting for him in the center of the semicircle formed by the twelve chairs. The boy stood in front of him and waited.

The others kept their minds focused on trying to rekindle the ruby's glow. At times it seemed to want to come back to life, but the power of those gathered there was not enough to return it to its original state.

—Clear your mind. Put aside any ideas or thoughts that might disturb your concentration —Elkos pointed out.

—I'm ready! —Kes exclaimed, his voice firm.

The test consisted of two parts. In the first, the aure would invade the child's mind to force his spirit to reveal his true identity and purpose on earth. Then, his body would be subjected to enchantments that would seek to find weaknesses that could turn him into a soldier of the evil one.

Elkos was staring at him. The silence in the chamber was total.

—Please, everyone, close your eyes. You too, little one.

Kes obeyed without hesitation and waited.

—Give me your power aures present here and now. Give me your power aures that have already departed to the higher plane. In the name of Valmar and Vedia, first kings of Terralan, I request the necessary wisdom to know the essence of the one who appears before me.

For a moment, it seemed that nothing would happen. Kes, curious like every child, opened one eye to try to know what was happening. His surprise was capital. He was no longer in the Alliance Chamber.

—Where we are? —he asked, intrigued.

—Our consciences have left our bodies and have moved to a place that only aures and demons can reach. Of something I can already be sure. You are not an ordinary mortal.

Kes looked down, concentrated, and was suddenly able to see the Moaslan Valley dwarfed below his feet. He tried a little harder, and then he could see Ukaris and the king's castle.

—Does it bother you to be in this place? —Elkos asked.

—Why you ask?

—It seems like your mind wants to run away. Get away from me now that I am about to enter the depths of your thoughts.

—I don't want to run away. I just wanted to make sure the inhabitants of the valley and the city were all right.

—Let's see if what you say is true.

In that instant, Kes felt the depths of his consciousness being auscultated by Elkos's. For a moment, he was scared. It was the first time he felt something like this.

Warm and pure energy invaded the old aure. He was enveloped in an indescribable feeling.

—It's wonderful! Your vital energy is wonderful —he repeated.

Kes was looking at him with exaltation and with a big smile.

When everyone opened their eyes, they found the boy hugging Elkos, who knelt wept with excitement and happiness. His body and face had rejuvenated, even more so than Diruk's after using the forbidden potion. The chosen one had transformed him, giving him the gift of youth and the fullness of his powers.

Elkos couldn't stop touching his face.

—I don't think any more tests are necessary. No, they are not required—he exclaimed with irrepressible emotion.

They all vigorously shook their heads in shock, in approval.

—Now you can guide us to find Unir—said Diruk—. Only with his help will we restore the ruby's power and completely release the essence of the supreme aure, still hidden in Kes.

—We must wait for the Terralan army to be completed—the king exclaimed.

—Not all will arrive—Kes said with concern.

—Explain yourself, little aure.

—Your general, who initially disobeyed your orders, is no longer responsible for the soldiers' failure to reach Ukaris. The evil one has spread his cloak of darkness throughout most of the kingdom. Those who didn't come with the first call from the Golden City have been imprisoned in their homes.

—Excuse the general, King Balkurian—Elkos said—. It was I who influenced his mind and heart with my doubts regarding the prophecy.

He widened his eyes, and with an excited voice, exclaimed:

—Something in me told me that Loer, my old friend, was not a traitor at all. He will be released immediately and placed at the head of our army —he declared.

At that moment, Kes fell to the ground in an apparent trance state. Diruk approached the boy and, trying to remember, revealed the following:

—If I'm not mistaken, the prophecy said that once the chosen one's identity is confirmed, he will sleep until the Lord of the unicorns awakens him, according to the higher beings' design. It is known as the «dream of the aure.»

—How are we going to go to war with only half the army? —Balkurian asked uneasily.

—Kes has strengthened our powers in ways we could never have imagined —Elkos replied—. It is time for Nutas to use hers after so many years.

The aure was hesitant. It had been a long time since she used her special gift.

—Do you really think I can? —she asked unsurely.

—Don't you feel it in the depths of your being?

—Tomorrow, after we leave for the mountains.

—Who better than you to know the right time —Elkos supported her.

X. THE PROMISE OF UNIR

The next day the entire town gathered to bid farewell to their king. The ruler marched at the head of the hundreds of soldiers who had reached the Golden City.

Along with him were the eleven adult aures. Kes was traveling in a comfortable bunk a little further back. He would only come out of his deep sleep when the time appointed by the gods arrived.

After advancing for almost two hours, Nutas requested King Balkurian to stop his army:

—The moment has come.

—Are you sure? —Elkos asked.

—We must not waste any more time.

The king indicated General Loer, and he ordered the soldiers to stop.

Nutas took a few steps away and, raising her arms, began to say:

*The power of being many more is what I invoke today,
we need to increase our forces to fight.*

*Powers of the aure, help me here I am,
we expect to win because we are right.*

Almost immediately, before the astonished eyes of all, a large group of the best and most experienced soldiers who had not been able to reach Ukaris appeared, swelling the number of men that made up the army, significantly increasing its power. Nutas's translation spell had worked perfectly. She had never used it on a living being. On this occasion, feeling an extraordinary and overwhelming inner strength, she achieved what she had never imagined in dreams.

—Soldiers. Who do you swear to obey until the end? —the general asked in a stentorian voice.

—We will fight to defend Terralan and its king! —the throats of men inflamed with anger proclaimed in unison.

The highest mountains in the range still rose defiantly and far to the west. The army marched confidently through the ravine that would bring them closer to Naur.

— Our horsemen have not yet found a trace of the evil one or his hosts — exclaimed a spirited King Balkurian.

—We must not lower our guard. They are not far away —Elkos warned, who, along with Diruk, led the other aures.

—Do you think they attack during the day while Gorn's power is weaker? —asked the monarch.

—I'm afraid the Lord of darkness had grown very strong, perhaps as much as when he stopped the world, before the alliance with Anes —Elkos replied.

Soon after, Diruk lingered to speak to Mias, who seemed to be showing great concern.

—What's wrong?

—There is something very dark and sinister that has bothered me since this morning —she replied.

—Is it the gargoyles?

—No, they are not. They are the animals and beasts of the forest. I've never seen them gathered in numbers, they come to meet us, and I feel like I can't control them. I can't even get them to listen to me.

—Perhaps they are still too far away for them to hear you.

—I don't think so. Even before Kes' arrival, my animal friends could hear me throughout the kingdom —Mias explained.

—It's Gorn —Elkos interjected, also quietly lingering so as not to worry the king—. His power has surpassed anything I expected, and he now controls our former allies as well.

The tense morning was followed by the threatening afternoon. When daylight began to fade, a captain returning from reconnaissance a few leagues later reported confused:

—General. I bring disturbing news. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of animals, come from the west in an orderly formation towards our position.

—It cannot be. They don't act like that —Loer exclaimed.

—These beasts are controlled by the evil one. It's not their instinct, but we'll have to defend ourselves anyway —Elkos explained.

—This time, it will be useless if we invoke the blue flame. We can't take shelter behind its dome and stop moving —Hove added.

—Hove is right, Your Majesty. If we delay in reaching the heart of Moaskif, the gargoyles will have grown stronger.

—We have no alternative. Prepare your weapons —the king ordered.

—My men have not been trained to fight animals. But they will do whatever it takes to control this threat, Your Majesty —the general said.

The army continued to advance. The sun was about to set, and they had not yet sighted any enemy.

—They will indeed attack at night. By then, Grom's influence will be much greater —Diruk revealed.

—Set up camp! —the general ordered—. Double the guard and establish a security perimeter.

The tents were not yet finished being erected when a sound resembling a stampede was heard.

—Loer, prepare your men! We will have to fight sooner than provided —the king ordered.

The sky of deep orange with pronounced reddish stripes seemed to announce the imminent confrontation on the horizon.

Soon, everyone could see what Mias predicted and what the advance captain had reported after his scouting. It was about hundreds of animals, wolves, and bears, coming towards them in large herds. In the sky, thousands of crows began to form a great circle above their heads.

—The Lord of darkness is a coward, attacking us first through innocent creatures —said the king—. We cannot avoid facing them. Try to make them suffer as little as possible.

The soldiers could not quite believe what their eyes saw. At times they still hesitated to draw their swords.

—Everyone ready! —yelled the general—. The time to fight has come.

Moments later, the front ranks attacked the Terralan army. As some attested before, they seemed controlled by a superior force that had stolen their will.

—They look like rabies-sick animals —the general exclaimed.

The men had bows, axes, and swords, but the evil one strengthened the forest's beasts. Their skin seemed at times invulnerable to steel weapons. Their claws and fangs cut with enormous force. Soon the casualties were very numerous.

—Zanys, your time to act has come —Elkos yelled.

The aure spread her arms and said aloud:

I request the higher magic,

I invoke the power of fire.

Drive away evil and resentment,

attend my request and desire.

Almost immediately, with the Sun about to set, a series of fantastic flares appeared, as if trying to burn the enraged animals.

The beasts froze. They growled, howled, trying to control the fear it produced in them, and although their anger didn't seem to wane, they didn't continue their attack.

The men also stopped fighting. They did not want to hurt those who were only innocent victims of the Master of shadows.

First the birds, then the wolves, and finally the bears began to retreat from the battlefield, dispersing smaller and smaller groups.

—Why are they running away like this? —Loer asked.

—The fire summoned by Zanys seems to have overcome the control Gorn imposed on them —the king exclaimed in relief.

—I don't think it was that simple —Diruk warned.

—My brother is right —Elkos said—. It's more likely that it was part of the Dark Lord's original plan. Now Zanys will need to rest for a whole day. By employing animals, our enemy has reduced our chances of victory. We can be sure that the turn of the gargoyles is coming.

When the magical flames finally died down, it was already night, and darkness surrounded them. It didn't take long for them to hear terrible roars, capable of shaking the heart of the bravest warrior and the most gifted aurore.

Many men were overcome by fear. Some even seemed to want to flee and take the path back to the valley. General Loer would not allow courage to leave his ranks.

With a determined step, he climbed a small unevenness in the ground, took a deep breath, and proclaimed a harangue that his men believed came from heaven:

—Soldiers of Terralan. I know many of you are wondering if such a great and dark power is worth fighting for. Well, now I tell you that we also have an immense force on

our side, that of our hearts. And if we are to die in battle, our spirits will continue to face the terror of the evil one. We won't stop until we can beat him.

They all raised their weapons high and screamed, puffed up with courage and determination. Strangely, what they feared did not happen. The gargoyles did not appear that night.

The next morning the men were lifted from their bunks by an earthquake that comes from the east.

—Will they attack us from both fronts? —asked a soldier, who was finally awakened by fear.

Suddenly, every one of them began to feel an intense emotion, a strong sense of security, when their eyes started to see in wonder the sparkling and powerful step of the unicorns. Their horns glowed brightly, and their hooves seemed to fly over the ground. Led by Unir, they had come to the aid of King Balkurian and his army.

The Lord of the unicorns immediately went to where Kes was resting.

—Can you wake him up, Unir? —Diruk asked.

—He's already awake, at a level that not even other aures can perceive. It was he who contacted me to meet them in this creek.

—So, it's the strength of the unicorns that has kept the gargoyles away until now?

—That’s right, friends. But we won’t be able to stop them forever. They are preparing their final offensive. They are just waiting for us to go further into the mountain range. And we must.

—But that’s going straight into his trap —said Diruk.

—Perhaps. But only then will the power of the supreme aure awaken, a power far surpassing mine —Unir confessed.

—Unir, I want to apologize on behalf of all the inhabitants of Terralan. We should never have forgotten our gratitude to unicorns —said the king.

—It’s not your fault, Balkurian. You are wise and just, just like your father. But you could do little to a people who had to learn for themselves the value of a promise.

—I’m confident that together we can fight a great battle.

—Before my brothers here, I swear that the unicorns will march with you to the end —Unir exclaimed—. One way or another, this kingdom will go back to the place it once was, before the betrayal.

XI. AT THE FOOT OF THE MOUNTAIN

The unicorns and the men went deep into the mountain range at the formidable gallop of the former. Gone was the battlefield with the lifeless bodies of many soldiers, bears, and wolves. The birds had mostly managed to flee, perhaps because they were the least influenced by the evil one.

As they entered the ridge, the rock walls grew taller, steeper, and menacing. At times it seemed as if they were going to come over and crush them.

Despite this, they advanced all day relentlessly until they stopped to camp on a plateau. The enemy had not yet shown his face, and the tension between the men was mounting. Finally, just before dark, they spotted the silhouettes of five colossal-sized winged beasts atop a mountain.

—They look threatening! —General Loer exclaimed.

—They are the captains of Gorn, the original gargoyles. Before they were men, those who devised and perpetrated infamy against our brothers, —Unir explained.

—How many gargoyles are there now?

—Each captain of the evil one has perhaps fifty or a hundred soldiers under his command. Their number has always been increasing, because you have allowed it.

—We? —asked the general.

—After the betrayal, the first gargoyles appeared, but it was because the inhabitants of Terralan forgot about us that the Ruby of the Alliance was losing its strength. The evil one took advantage of this to turn many into new soldiers of his army of shadows.

For an instant, the brave Loer seemed to collapse.

—We must not allow ourselves to be dominated by the terror they want to instill in us —said the king—. Soon the full power of the supreme aure will awaken.

Unir gave his brothers an order in the unicorns' language, and the magical creatures immediately quickened their pace. Before accompanying them, he said to the king:

—We must do a recon gallop, measure the enemy's forces. Have your weapons ready, but more important than that, fill your hearts with faith.

When the unicorns disappeared on the horizon, a horrifying roar filled the ravine, causing the horses to run wild, getting many, running in the opposite direction, towards the Moaslan Valley.

—Now we hardly have any horses —the general exclaimed with great concern.

—Maybe it's better this way. This will finally be a battle of Terralanians and unicorns alone against evil —Diruk chimed in.

The wind began to blow with unusual force.

—I don't like how the elements greet us —the king warned.

The skies were covered up, and soon a fierce storm broke out. With the first lightning bolts, they were able to verify with terror that at the top of the mountains that surrounded them, hundreds of winged creatures flapped their wings, producing a supernatural wind that hit their faces, trying to knock them down.

At that moment, Zanys summoned fire once more but could do nothing.

—I don't understand —she exclaimed in surprise.

Elkos and Diruk were the first to realize what was happening. Gorn's dark power had completely taken over the mountains. In that place, the magic of the aures almost didn't exist. They were the realms of shadows.

—Don't let fear win you over! Gorn's creatures are not immortal. We can win —the king extolled his men.

—Where are the unicorns? —Loer asked.

The king looked at his general without being able to answer him.

—They have left us to our fate —said the soldier.

—Never! —Diruk yelled—. Unlike the man, Unir would never break his promise.

By then, the gargoyles had taken flight and were rushing toward them.

—Get your bows ready! —the king ordered.

Immediately, hundreds of bows were drawn, ready to launch their first volley.

—Wait until they are closer.

Hove tried, without much success, to spread the blue flame.

—I can't create it! I just feel great pain in my chest. I can't do it—he exclaimed in frustration. A very faint halo, barely perceptible to the eye, surrounded the Terralan forces.

Hove had to accept resignedly that the protective dome would only delay the winged demons' attack for a short time.

—They're flying through the blue light!—yelled the general.

The gargoyles continued to flap their wings with all their might, moving slowly but inexorably through the weakened defense of the aures. The situation became desperate.

—They're almost upon us!—yelled the king.

—Ready your bows!—the general ordered.

The instant the first gargoyles broke through the dome, hundreds of arrows whistled through the air, hitting several dozen, who flew with their arms outstretched.

To the soldiers' surprise, almost all the bolts bounced off the evil creatures' bodies, which could harden their skin like a stone for brief moments.

The battle turned into carnage. Many men died, being bitten on the neck or dropped from a great height.

—Is everything lost?—asked a soldier.

Suddenly, there was the sound of hundreds of hooves approaching at full gallop. That startled the gargoyles, who took flight and flew momentarily away from the decimated army.

—Fast! Ride on us —Unir said.

Immediately the archers climbed on the unicorns, and as had happened only once before, they attacked the demons together with renewed spirit. Part of the magic of the unicorns passed to their arrows, which found the hearts and other vulnerable parts of their enemies this time.

One by one, the gargoyles fell, unable to reach their attackers, who galloped swiftly over the magical creatures. The battle's fate was quickly reversed, and everything seemed to indicate that victory would favor the Terralan army when a gigantic shadow took over the plateau. An enormous and horrible being was taking the life of everything it touched.

Unicorns and men fell dead as they were overtaken by the power of evil, which had materialized on earth to exact its final revenge.

—The time has come to fulfill the promise to King Balkian —Diruk shouted, making sure Elkos and all the aures listened.

—You're right. The hour of our sacrifice is here.

The eleven formed a circle to protect Kes and impetrated the higher beings just before losing their lives:

*Supreme Aure,
aure of prophecy.
Wake up right now
make a new day our destiny.*

Gorn's figure stopped a few feet from the boy's body, who opened his eyes and smiled.

—Aren't you afraid of me? —asked the Lord of darkness, in a voice that seemed to gather all imaginable hatred and evil.

—I'm not afraid of death —Kes replied, his body levitated in a very intense blue glow.

—Death is nothing compared to the terrors you will suffer if you do not join my army.

—What army?

At that moment, Gorn realized that all the gargoyles had disappeared.

—What have you done with my soldiers?

—They are no longer here. This battle will be just between you and me.

—Go dead! —yelled the Master of the depths, reaching out, trying to smite Kes with his massive claws.

The evil one initially thought that he had reached him, but great was his surprise when he discovered that the great little aure was now behind him.

—You are so slow! The power of Nerus has made me much faster than you.

—I will not allow you to mock me —the evil one shouted furiously, and with the other arm, he tried to reach him once more.

However, Kes was no longer there, or at least he couldn't be seen. Using Gaslan's magic, he had become invisible.

—Do you think that by using those tricks, you can escape from me? I can feel your presence, no matter where you hide or how fast you move.

Kes was faster than his fearsome foe, but Grorn also had enormous power, and he soon managed to locate him and anticipate his movements. Invisibility and speed would no longer serve him.

The Lord of darkness was about to ram him, but a blue flame like never seen before appeared in front of him, impeding his advance.

—You're only delaying the inevitable. You'll soon get tired. You are very worried about your friends, and that distracts and weakens you. Your defenses will eventually fall, and then I will destroy you and exact my revenge.

—My friends! That's!

Without a moment's hesitation, Kes used all his energy to move along with Grown and the bodies of the unicorns to the north shore of Lake Aquantalis. There he revived the magical creatures.

At that moment, Unir witnessed how the boy fell to the ground, barely alive.

—Brothers! Let's ride as we've never done before. Just as this little boy has given up all his power, all his love, let us now give everything we have to end this evil shadow that threatens life.

The unicorns began to ride, almost furiously, using their magic once more, spinning the earth faster and faster. This made it dawn again in a few moments.

With the brightness of the new day, Unir was ready and charged the Lord of darkness with the force of a thousand titans.

XII. A DIFFERENT FUTURE

Unir's massive onslaught had almost totally wiped out Grom, and what was left of him had been banished to the depths, this time forever. Not yet fully recovered by the energetic revitalizing action of the unicorns, Kes approached his aure brothers' lifeless bodies. One by one, these were reliving, as he touched them and called them back to this world.

They opened their eyes, and the first thing they saw was the pure and sincere smile of the boy who had saved everyone in the kingdom.

Then followed King Balkurian, his general, and the soldiers who had fought bravely in that rugged Moaskif region.

Once everyone was on their feet, they started back to Ukaris.

—I can't see the unicorns! —Diruk exclaimed.

—They won't come back. At least not in the way we have known them.

—What do you mean, Kes? —Elkos asked, intrigued.

—We no longer need the Ruby of the Alliance. The evil one will never return, and the earth now turns on its own. The gallop of the unicorns is no longer necessary.

—You mean we’ll never see Unir and his brothers again? —Diruk asked.

—Yes, we can. Do you remember the silhouettes we saw on the south bank of the Acuantalís? Their spirits have been forever etched in its waters. During the nights of the full moon, we will be able to marvel at the reflection of the most beautiful and magical creatures that ever populated these lands. Men will face life with faith, hoping that their behavior will dictate their survival and future.

As the aures descended into the valley, Kes revived all those who had died in battle.

Even the bears, wolves, and birds that died under the evil control were brought back to life.

Despite using the forbidden potion, Diruk did not have to leave this world, at least not yet. Kes used the last of his power to prevent his friend from suffering the end they all feared.

The Golden City celebrated for several days. In each town and village of the kingdom, the celebrations also extended much more than was remembered.

Those who were sent by higher beings received great honors. The aures would be forever remembered as the true guardians of the kingdom.

When Kes returned to Herol, he had the greatest of surprises. His mother and father were waiting for him at the door of his house. Palur had also come back to life, along with all those who had been victims of gargoyles.

Both held tightly to their son, crying, filled with emotion.

Then Kes went to look for his friend Alit, with whom he was joined in an emotional hug. They had so much to wonder, so much to tell. With a knowing wink, they perfectly understood each other. They would soon have new adventures. Their impatience as children was already beginning to dominate them.

Some weeks later, Kes's father asked at the table:

—Would you like to accompany me to Zun? I must bring a special request.

—Who requested it? —Ila asked.

—A man named Vaz. I don't know him, and I don't know if he knows our wine, but he wants us to bring him two carafes and half a dozen more for his neighbors. In his letter, he sends greetings to Kes.

—How curious! —the woman exclaimed.

—Where do you know him from, son? —asked Palur.

—It's a long story, Dad. I could tell you on the way to the forest.

Unicorns, expressions of the victorious and incorruptible force of good, had left an imperishable mark. An era of peace and prosperity had begun, thanks to a child who became the last aure of Terralan.