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The End of a *Great* Civilization ... The Last of the Arda ... The Beginning of an Even *Greater* Legacy

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The boy was feeling strange that night. Enemy forces had not been seen for hours and his side's forces were completely depleted. The dead outnumbered the injured; the injured outnumbered the survivors. As he walked among the dead and dying, their cries of pain and agony rang in his ears; the boy only wondered why he, a simple slave, had lived through the onslaught.

He walked aimlessly. After waiting at his dying master's hut, the doctors had told him to leave. He could not stand much more of the waiting really, and enjoyed a good stroll when he could get it. This, however, was not a good stroll. This stroll was littered with the doomed and their death throes. He tried to block it out as he ventured to a hill at which he'd spent most of his free time. It was at this hill that he could watch the sunrise.

The sun rose slowly into the air as it gave off the warmth of morning. The dark blue of night was washed away by the light blue dawn as he gazed outward onto the battlefield, miles away. The boy was a slave to a warrior of a secret encampment. The warrior was one of many who roamed the camp. It was one of righteousness and a good cause. The camp was a sort of tribe, which was rival to a neighboring tribe, who went against all they stood for, or at least that's what he knew. They called themselves "The Civilization of Arda," and the rival tribe was called "The Dark Arda."

The boy was kept in the dark, for the most part. His master would
leave when the battle came close to home and he would be left to tend the house. He rarely ventured from the house, and when he did, he learned nothing from the people that he stayed with. From what he'd collected, they were an ancient civilization, the two tribes. A war had been going on between the two for thousands of years.

There was a smell in the air, one the boy could not explain. The more he thought about it, the more he found it was not a smell. It was a feeling deep inside him, telling of something amiss. He felt as though he was being found out, and that he was out in the open. He was told that the camp was hidden and that only their tribe knew of its location.

"Boy?" said a voice from behind him. The boy trembled as he spun around. He looked at the face of a ragged messenger. The messenger was wearing the traditional garb of the Messengers of Arda, which consisted of tight-fitting clothing and lightweight letter holders. He wore boots fashioned for running, and by the looks of him, he was suffering from exhaustion. Sweat ran down his face, accompanied by sparse streaks of blood. Every breath of his was a struggle. He leaned heavily on a crutch.

"Yes... sir?" asked the boy.

"I have this message....," responded the messenger as he coughed. "This is for the Keeper. I must take this to him, but as you can see...," he coughed again as he indicated his crutch and bruised limbs, "I am spent. The Keeper lives on the Mountain of Arda.... Would you take this to him?" asked the messenger. A look of thoughtfulness was in his eyes. The boy stood there as confusion washed over him. He went to tell the messenger that he was the wrong kid for the job but the man interrupted him.

"Please!" said the man with insistence and fear in his eyes. The boy looked onto him with pity and understanding. The people of Arda never took on a task without meaning to accomplish it. To fail at a task given to you was to fail at life itself. The boy nodded solemnly and asked to hear the message. The messenger shook his head and reached into one of his letter carriers to remove a tattered scroll. He faltered as if the scroll had a massive weight, and his eyes flickered. As soon as it touched the hand of the boy, the messenger fell to his knees.

He raised his arm with great effort and pointed a finger toward the
boy. The boy looked at his chest in disbelief as the messenger motioned for him to move aside. As the boy moved, the man indicated a mountain resting in the distance. The boy looked onward at the mountain that was rumored to be impossible to climb. The sweat of nervousness ran down his face as he gazed. The mountain reached up into the clouds and held dense forest about its feet. His stare was abruptly interrupted by the sound of the messenger falling to the ground.

The boy rushed to him in aid, but it was in vain; the man was dead. He said a few holy words that were spoken at burials he’d been to, and then focused on the matter at hand: getting this scroll to the Keeper of Arda. The boy felt sick at the sight of death, but something drove him to shake it off and get his task accomplished. He strode off in the direction of the mountain.

After twenty minutes of walking, the boy made it to the perimeter of the mountain that was covered in dense forest. The boy lived an isolated life. For his fourteen years of life, the boy had not even ventured into the woods. Trees and related environments were foreign to him. The travel through the dense forest was a mission in itself. One mile of forest, he was told.

His arms had grown bloodied and scarred. His clothes had been dirtied and torn as well. While traveling through the forest, he had thought about abandoning his quest, but just then a black squirrel perched atop a tree branch chattered at him. He’d heard squirrels before, but this one sounded as though it was mocking him. As he went to approach the critter, his foot was caught by a root and he fell on his face. The muddied earth welcomed him, as the forest went wild with the sounds of birds and owls and small mammals, all making mocking noises and gestures.

This forest was attempting to defeat him, thought the boy. He felt a fire go ablaze within himself. This forest and he would both be in competition, but it would not emerge the victor. The boy would make it through this wood if it were his last action. He pulled himself up from the mud and trudged onward.

Three hours later he made it through the forest. He looked back with an air of pride in his lungs. He puffed up his chest and looked back toward the mountain. He shuddered. The mountain had a set of stairs that ran up it. They were covered with grime and mold for the years of decay and
disuse, yet underneath he knew was fine craftsmanship and precision. The staircase was about four feet in width, and the steps themselves were a foot wide and tall. He walked to the edge of the steps and looked upward.

The sun climbed into the air and reflected off the mountain and onto the steps that flickered gold in the light. It was two hours till noon, thought the boy. If this message was as urgent as he was told, he wasn’t making good time. He needed to go faster. He placed his right foot onto the first step with uncertainty to make sure of its support. It held, and the boy dusted himself off and stormed up the steps. The boy traveled at a moderate pace. After half an hour he came to the ring of mist surrounding the mountain and engulfing the stairs. He shrugged his shoulders and entered the mist.

As he traveled through the mist, horrible weights lay upon his shoulders that were so heavy he could have shrugged them no more. Every step became a struggle as exhaustion swept over him. He counted time. Fifteen minutes had gone by and he’d climbed about three steps.

"This is impossible!" he shouted aloud in defiance. Something deep within him held him down and kept him from going further. He could not identify what it was, but it pulled at him from the inside. He felt victory over the forest and defeat by this mountain at the same time. He was gripped by a feeling of winning something only to have it torn away from you because of your own weakness. He fell on the steps and lay there exhausted. He was a failure. He opened his eyes and looked across to meet eyes with the hollowed out sockets of a skull. He was too tired to pull back in fear.

"He let his weaknesses overcome him," said a voice in his mind. The boy looked around dizzily. "He was a failure to himself, just as you are."

"Who are you? Why are you disturbing me? Can’t you see I’m lost?" the boy stated.

"You’ve a long way to go, boy. Pathetic, you are."

"If you believe this is so easy, show yourself and climb up these stupid stairs yourself! I am not one made for such conditions."

"Self-appointed, the best critic is. You are your own weakness, boy."

"What good are you doing me by telling me such things?"

"Stop it! Only when you are broken may you rebuild yourself!"

"Stop speaking in riddles, man!"
"Too far you have gone to quit now. Don't be pathetic! The weak are those who quit before they have lost! If you wish to give up now, look across the step you are on, and look at where it gets you!" said the voice as it echoed through his mind. "Look at myself," he thought. "I'm so delirious with exhaustion I'm carrying on conversations with myself!" The boy lay there deep in thought.

Why did he make it through the forest if he was to die here? He was a fool, he thought. Striving to conquer the forest was only prolonging the inevitable. He was doomed, and he knew it. He looked at the skull with pity and friendship.

"Well, looks like I'm ending this chapter just as you did yours... Farewell, brother!" the boy said as he closed his eyes and awaited the cold finger of death. As he lay there, he felt a coldness sweep over him. The cold seeped into his ears and flooded his mind. Thoughts of pity and hatred flew through him. The cold crept through him, engulfing his body as it slowly moved toward his heart to seize it. Death was to claim another victim. It was then that a fire burst into existence and pushed away the cold.

His eyes opened and burned with a reddened fury. He was destroying himself. The only reason he'd gotten this far was because of him, and now he was going to die here amongst the bones of failure? No, he shouted in defiance. He forced his eyes open and tore away from death. He took all feelings of hopelessness and failure and pushed them back into his subconsciousness. When he was finished, he found himself lying on the steps with rats and other rodents nibbling on his hand. He recoiled in disgust and threw the creatures from him.

He cast his gaze down the steps and looked at all he'd accomplished by will alone. He remembered the mocking chatter of the squirrel, and then he turned his eyes back up the mountain with the red glare of fury in his eyes. Up there was what he would accomplish before the day was done. The weight was lifted and the steps came more easily to him.

"What we supposed ta be lookin' for, again?" Beeder asked. He was a small, winged creature with yellow, beady eyes. He stood about three feet in height and had an eight-foot wingspan. His skin was a dark, mottled green
that was unwashed. He was in flight through the mountain’s mist and was surrounded by others of his kind. They were a squadron working for the Dark Arda in search of a messenger that was delivering a message to the Keeper about an oncoming army of the Dark Arda that had discovered the location of their camp. If this was given to the Keeper, he might be able to make an evacuation.

The Great One, leader of the Dark Arda, had ordered his army to destroy everyone. The Great One had managed to get his army’s presence past the Keeper of Arda, and if a messenger were to get warning to him, their mission would be foiled. So the Great One sent his most elite spies: the Urds. The Urds were small creatures capable of flight and with good eyesight. Their mission was to kill the messenger before his message was sent.

"We’re supposed ta be lookin’ for a messenger!" said Gorim. Gorim was their leader. He was stronger, faster, and more intelligent, even though Urds were not intelligent to begin with. They were smart enough to respect power, which is why they had Gorim as their leader; he was the most powerful. Another Urd came up to meet them.

"Spech! You find anyone on the steps?" asked Gorim. Spech panted and gave a nod.

"Das one messenger on his way up!" said an exasperated Spech. The Urds, after a signal from Gorim, moved into a special formation.

"Well, boys, looks like we got him! Let’s set up for ambush positions!" he said, as he motioned for them to land, and the squadron swooped through the mist and landed at the top of the mountain.

An hour had gone by and the boy finally reached the top. He was told as a child that a magnificent temple rested at the top of this mountain and that a powerful warrior-sage lived in it, along with his most trusted bodyguards. This warrior-sage was said to be the Keeper of Arda, or the leader of the Civilization of Arda. It was told he held massive power, and might that was unbelievable in most respects.

He looked around. Pillars were everywhere. Most of them were destroyed and lay in shambles on the ground. His feet stood on a tiled path.
The tiles were covered in grime and moss. He scraped his toe along the tile to reveal a silvery shine beneath. He eyed the tile and followed it in the direction of the path to see that all the tiles were made of the same stuff. He admired the path’s beauty as he strolled along it.

He came to the middle of the path and noticed a bunch of fallen rubble from the pillars. They lay everywhere like sitting stones. He heard a rustle in the distance and jerked into a defensive position. A high-pitched voice rang out of the mist:

"Attack! Charge! Everyone... Attack?" the high-pitched voice faltered. "Hold! Everyone stop!" the voice commanded. The boy stood there, ready for the attack. From out of the mist he could grasp two red pinpoints. They bobbed up and down as they came forward, and then a short form emerged from the mist. It was about three feet in height and had a set of dark leathery wings tucked behind it. Its eyes were a beady yellow and its teeth, which were sharp fangs, matched the color. It was slightly reptilian looking and had a dog-like muzzle. Its skin was scaled and was dark mottled green in color.

The boy took two steps back in fear as more of the grimy looking creatures landed around it. He was now surrounded by twelve of them. All of them were snickering softly. The first one came forward with confusion in his eyes.

"We were gonna waste ambush tactics on dis? Look at him! He don’t even got no Power!" said the creature. Another of them spoke up.

"Say, Gorim! What we gonna do wit’ him?"

"I dunno! Kill ’im?" replied Gorim. The boy stood there in shock as the thing approached him. "Whatsa matter? Ain’t you ever seen an Urd before?"

"What are you going to do to me?" asked the boy.

"Kill ya. We can’t have you deliver dat message."

"But I have no message."

"What’s dat?" asked Gorim, as he indicated the scroll in the boy’s quivering hand.

"This? This isn’t a message." He held it up, with the wax seal in his direction. "This is my mother’s. She wants me to give it to someone down
there." He pointed down the mountain.
"You mean 'a tell me dat you live up here?" The boy nodded. "Den I call you a liar, liar. Besides, dat's the Seal of Arda. We got you, boy."
"But I don't even know what's on this! You cannot murder me for carrying a scroll."
"Don't think of it as 'murder.' Think of it as," Gorim paused to pat his belly, "fillin' our bellies..."
The sun reached its peak and the light shone down on the mountaintop. The majority of the mist cleared. Storm clouds rolled in from the east. The boy was in panic. He had believed it was going to be difficult to send this message back at the forest, but this was not what he had expected. Gorim stopped rubbing his belly and walked to the edge of the mountaintop. He waved toward the boy and beckoned him. The boy reluctantly walked over with him.
"You's a sad boy. I figure I tell you why we gonna kill you. It would be unfair to kill such a sad boy without him knowing why," said Gorim, as he motioned toward the plains and meadows lying below, miles away from the camp. The boy looked onward, not sure of what he was looking for, and then he saw it. The storm clouds from the east cast a shadow on it. It was an army! It slowly poured across the countryside like molasses, man after man. The boy's mouth gaped open in disbelief.
"They're headed straight toward...," he stammered.
"Your camp," said Gorim.
"But that's impossible! Our camp's location is known only to us!"
"Yes, dat's true. Was hard to find. We would've never found it on our own."
"On your own?" the boy repeated. A person's face flashed in his mind.
"Yeah, we find him starving for food and he told us all we wanted to know when we took him in," said Gorim. "Looked remarkably like you, boy. What was his name? Mialdokolo, I believe?"
"Mialdokolo," the boy repeated. The name was far too familiar. The face in his mind's eye took shape and he knew immediately who it was. Like him, Mialdokolo was a slave. He was a friend with the boy for as long as he
could remember. All while growing up, the boy knew he was a sick mind waiting for an opportunity to strike. He cared nothing for others’ feelings and did not care about today, but about tomorrow, and who would rule tomorrow. He was nicknamed the boy’s twin because of their remarkable resemblance to each other.

He was exiled from the Civilization after he allowed a girl to be attacked by a beast and did not call for help, or try to save her. It was said that he watched with eager eyes as the beast killed the girl. The Keeper of Arda ordered him to be turned away, and he was exiled from the camp. No one was known to be exiled and survive it, and life went on in the camp believing he had died.

The storm clouds swirled overhead and the boy felt the first drops of rain. There was something strange about this storm, though. With it came darkness. Almost immediately, daylight on the mountain was blocked out completely. All the boy could see were the dark mottled spots on the Urds that glowed in the dark.

"The Great One say he must destroy every last one of the Civilization of Arda. Not a single survivor can there be. True victory can only be achieved when yer opponent is completely destroyed, or so says the Great One."

"Of course, you know our army is depleted?"

"Oh, sure! Dat’s the fun part! The Great One isn’t sending dis army to have a war; he’s sending dem as an extermination squad," Gorim said, with a twinkle in his eye and a chuckle.

"You are sick!" the boy stated with disgust. He slipped the scroll into a pouch at his belt as he backed away. There were people down there he knew and loved. Though he was a slave, he was never mistreated or hurt. The people, though not linked by blood, were his people. These creatures were working for a person that was going to mindlessly murder women and children and the wounded. He stepped back in frustration.

There was nothing he could do. There he stood, knowing he was miles from the people and only inches from creatures that would kill him before he could warn the Keeper surrounding him. He stepped back and then he stopped. Tears rolled down his face. He kept asking himself why he’d
been so foolish. If he had only refused to let himself get defeated on the stairs he would have been able to tell the Keeper, and the camp would be saved! The people of the camp would be senselessly slaughtered, all because of him!

"Awww..., look at dat! He's cryin'! Don't worry, your death will be quick and painless," said Gorim, as he stalked closer to the boy. "Sorry 'bout dis, boy!"

The boy brought his fists up in front of his face. His face grew scarlet with anger and frustration. He stomped his foot and yelled at the top of his lungs.

"STOP CALLING ME BOY!" he said, just before it all went black.

The Army of the Dark Arda marched across the plains on their dreadful mission. Theirs was one of death and destruction. This was not an army: it was a legion of death bringers to the opponent. There was no army to defend against it. The General looked forward into the distance.

"Looks like the storm will drown out the sound of the cavalry," he said. The General called for a halt. The army and cavalry were halted. The General dismounted to give his victory speech.

"Well, boys, this is a very important mission. We are to exterminate every single Ardaian down to the very last one. There can be no survivors. Take no prisoners! Cha--," he was cut off by the sound of his army in awe. They all motioned toward the Mountain of Arda where a huge beam of light crashed from the clouds above and down onto the mountaintop. It resembled lightning, but it was more focused and less random in its movement. Though miles away, it cast enough light for the whole army to make out the detail of the landscape.

The beam persisted for a minute and then disappeared. Following it was a massive booming noise. It was equal to five times the crash of thunder. The boom lasted for thirty seconds and then ceased. The ears of all the men heard long drawn out ringing. The men everywhere in The Dark Army were quieted and hushed. The General ordered silence and they were silenced almost immediately.

The Lieutenant scrambled up to the general with fear in his eyes.
"Maybe the messenger wasn’t found by the Urds, Sir! Maybe they were destroyed!"

"Shut your hole, Lieutenant!" shouted the General. "We shall await their return!"

"But, Sir!"

"I said we should await their return, Lieutenant. The thought of someone in that capable of an attack is absurd! What part of that don’t you understand?" he said through his teeth. The General was a husky man of around five foot two inches in height. Many people had to look down on him to speak with him and he wasn’t looked at with much respect, but when he talked through his teeth, those who didn’t follow through were never heard from again.

"I was just suggesting, Sir," said the lieutenant. The General beckoned the lieutenant. The lieutenant hushed and walked cautiously toward him. He waited at the General’s side nervously. The General motioned him closer. Without warning the boot of the General collided with the lieutenant’s face, sending him to the rain soaked floor.

The army waited in uneasy silence for ten minutes until a group of eleven Urds flew in. They landed in front of the General, and he ordered the lieutenant to make a headcount. The lieutenant finished counting heads and reported the results to the General.

"Eleven, shir!" he said in a broken voice; the lieutenant’s now missing teeth became evident.

"Eleven?" asked the General in disbelief as the lieutenant nodded in confirmation. "Spech, where’s Gorim?"

The boy awoke with a start. He was lying on the ground, and his head felt full of buzzing and his sight was blurred. The smell of burning flesh filled his nostrils. He looked in the direction of the smell to reveal a smoldering pile his foot was lying in. He jumped up with a start, and shook his foot about to put out the flame. After he extinguished the flame, he approached the pile.

It seemed to be flesh that had been charred and blackened to a pile. The smell made him want to gag. Each moment he examined it, he grew
sicker. Just as he was about to discover the nature of the pile, the stench became too much and he was overwhelmed by sickness. He ran from the pile and purged himself. He stood there a moment, then looked back to the pile. He purged himself again.

The boy chose to leave the pile be, and walked along the path in the direction of the Temple of Arda. It was strange, thought the boy, that all around him was silence. There was the rumble of the storm but nothing more. He picked up his pace and raced for the temple. The clouds gathered all around him, and darkness washed over the mountaintop. He looked up at the noon sun and saw with surprise that it was nowhere to be seen.

It was almost completely dark when he reached the doors to the temple. The temperature had dropped significantly, as he could almost see his breath. The doors were massive in size and reached well over his height by at least three times. They were very weather worn and aged. The huge hinges the doors were held up by were long since rusted. He approached the doors and grabbed a rusted doorknocker and attempted to move it, but to no avail; it was held motionless by the years of rust.

If this was such a magnificent temple, thought the boy, then why are these doors so ill used? He began to wonder if the Keeper of Arda was even alive or if he even existed. This was madness! He had wasted his time by...

The doors to the temple creaked open loudly. They swung inward and a voice beckoned for him. The boy eyed the interior suspiciously, and then slowly entered the aged abode. After he took ten paces, the doors swung shut behind him, and the last of the stormy air rushed in quickly. He looked around in amazement; the interior of the temple looked as new as it must have been the day of its creation.

Huge pillars, like the ones outside, were in a row going down the room. A row was to his left, and a row was to his right. They stretched down the temple’s length. The boy noticed quickly the torch holders with torches lit already. There were five of these torches on each pillar. The inside of the temple was very well lit, which gave the boy a good view of the altar lying beyond.

He paced toward the altar with a moderate pace. The ceilings, walls, arches, supporters, and pillars awed him. This interior was an architectural
masterpiece. All had been done just so, and with amazing precision. It was like a gigantic cathedral, minus the pews. He walked toward the altar with his head in the clouds. When he reached the altar he locked his gaze onto it.

It was a large statue of a figure forcing himself up. The statue was constructed of gray marble and was mounted on a slate pedestal with small brass bowls holding flame. He could not discern the gender of the figure, but it had a large, muscular build. It looked beaten and destroyed with a grimace of pain in its face, yet it was standing in defiance against unseen foes.

"Ah, it seems you've made it, boy," said an old voice from the shadows. A robed form came from the shadows with a hood cast over its face and its arms crossed. The boy looked toward it with curiosity. The form removed the hood from his head to reveal an old, wise face. A long white beard flowed from his chin, and his eyebrows were bushy and bristled. His eyes were a deep blue. The man looked many years of age, yet in his eyes it showed much more. As the boy looked into his eyes, he looked into more than an old man's wisdom; he looked into centuries.

"Who are you?" asked the boy. The old man walked closer to him in a sort of sidestep toward the altar. He stared at the statue and looked to the skylight above it.

"Why, child...," he removed his gaze from the altar. "Who do you believe me to be?"

"Well, the Keeper of Arda is a very powerful warrior-sage, I'm told." The man's eyes widened with pride. "You are his servant?" presumed the boy. The old man's brow furrowed, and he looked around dryly. The old man shook it off and held a hand out, and with the boy's eyes following, followed it to his chest as he indicated himself. The old man stood there, proud and slightly pompous.

"You?" the boy repeated in disbelief, as the old man nodded and leaned on the altar heavily. "The Keeper is a very powerful warrior!"

The old man nodded with enthusiasm.

"But you're old!"

"Now, quiet you be! Old may I be, but that gives you no right to disrespect me. I am the Keeper of Arda and I am a very powerful warrior-sage."
"But how can you be a warrior at such an age?"

"Naught does age have to do with being a warrior, boy. In my prime I was literally a very powerful warrior, but today that song has a different tune. I am still a warrior, boy. What do you want with me? Times are grim, child, hurry," he urged, as the boy fumbled through his pouch to retrieve the message. The boy grabbed the message and transferred it to the old man's hand. The man looked over the message with cold and stern eyes.

The boy stood there adamant. The hopes and dreams of the Civilization of Arda relied on this? A haggard old man calling himself a warrior? He was not at all amused. This was pointless. He knew little of the Civilization, but this made him lose a large portion of faith he had in them.

"What does it say?" asked the boy. The Keeper's eyes were clouded with anger and frustration. His face reddened.

"The Great One clouded my mind, preventing me from knowing of his army. He used his powers on me during the battle when I was under great strain to cloud my mind. The Dark Army has fixed its location on us, and is headed our way to destroy us completely." His face grew calm. He silently folded up the document and placed it in his pocket.

"What do you mean, 'his powers'? How could he 'cloud' your mind?"

"You know naught of the Power of Arda, do you boy?" he asked. The boy shook his head in response. The old man motioned for him to sit, so he did. The Keeper stood in front of the altar and drew in a deep breath. The boy had a feeling this was going to be a while, so he adjusted his sitting position into a more comfortable manner.

"Long ago, an ancient civilization formed, and they called themselves 'The Civilization of Arda.' For years they had based their lives upon maintaining the balance between Good and Evil. They swore to never allow one to become more powerful than the other. They used their gift of a strange and unusual power they called 'The Power of Arda.' The power allowed them to surpass their weaknesses, and gain power in their strengths, to unbelievable proportions.

"You may not know it, but your weaknesses hold power in themselves.
By drawing from this weakness and using it to supplement their strengths, they could achieve anything. Their agility would be multiplied, the strength would double, and their health would reach impossible levels. Their defense against attacks would be unbreakable. But with all this power, there were side effects.

"The power, if not harnessed, could reach levels of such power that the user would be destroyed in using it. The users had a wall they called the Spirit, deep within themselves. If the power, which came from within, passed beyond this wall, they would be destroyed. So the Civilization developed a plan to keep this from happening: the Keeper of Arda.

"The Keeper is a person who harnesses the power of all those in the Civilization to keep the Spirit strong enough to keep the power from passing through it. The Keeper would keep his position for one thousand years."

"One thousand years? How could one live so long?" asked the boy incredulously.

"With using this power to put their bodies in maximum efficiency and keep everything balanced, the people of Arda were capable of living for years. I myself am about to reach my thousandth year.

"Anyways, after one thousand years, the Keeper must perform a Passing. Someone must come forward and receive The Keeping. This person, in turn would live for a thousand years. Most of the people of Arda live an average of two hundred years. Only the Keeper lived for a thousand years.

"However, harnessing so many people's power and Spirit puts a horrible strain on the Keeper. That is how the Great One clouded my mind. While the battle raged on, I had most of my power in my defense against things that could cloud me. My army was growing desperate, so I tapped into my defensive power and added it onto my power, and then onto my army. We barely got away with a quarter of our original force, and I wonder what could have happened if I'd used the power I added from my defense.

"I would have probably not been clouded, but my army would all have died without even placing a dent in the Great One's Army. I feared this would happen. Now we are to be completely destroyed."

"Why does the Great One seek to destroy everyone from the
Civilization? I know some can simply be vicious and seek death and destruction, but he seems to take it very seriously…"

"Seems! His very life depends on it!"

The boy stared with confusion.

"Long ago, after the First Keeper was established and he had harnessed the power for nine hundred years, half of the Civilization started a rebellion and turned from the Cause by lust for power and disrespect of the Keeper of Arda. They refused to follow him, and wished to use their gift of the Power not to balance but to ruin and create havoc and destruction.

"This half was then called The Dark Arda. They were not content with a world of balance, and split from the Civilization on a mad quest to rule all. The leader of the rebellion was since known as the Great One. This horrid turn of events forced the Civilization of Arda to change their priorities and values. They could not continue their mission of balance with the Dark Arda commanding such power and bent on causing chaos. So they began a crusade that was to simply stop the Dark Arda and destroy them right down to the very last one.

"The Great One was faced with something horrible also. He could not achieve his true power because of the split in the Civilization. When it split, the power split with it. Only by completely destroying every last one of the Civilization of Arda could their power build on its own and they could grow in strength.

"You see, our existence is like an anchor for their power. We keep them as they are and in this small lake of power. When we are destroyed, the anchor is broken and they can travel all the seas and oceans of power and energy they wish. Their power will be absolute."

"So, what now?" the boy insisted. The Keeper gazed into his eyes coldly.

"We are finished. Nothing I can do will prevent his army from crushing ours and butchering our people."

"Finished!" the boy said, with tears in his eyes. How could this be, he thought. A civilization built on raw power and might was finished? The boy had faced death and braved the wilds only to have an old man tell him there was no hope? He was infuriated.
"I can’t believe this! You mean to tell me there’s no hope?"
"I never said that. There is always hope. There is always a last resort. A last ditch effort to come out on top."
"You have one?"
"Yes, and it involves you," said the old man, as he beckoned two figures from the darkness. The figures came forth to reveal a man and a woman. The woman guided a small girl alongside her. The two must have been the parents of the child, as they regarded the girl with care and had a striking resemblance.
"And her. She is our last hope. Our last resort," he said, as the boy stared at him dubiously.
"Her? Keeper, she is a child... How can this help? We have an army in the thousands approaching our camp and we are doomed, and you say a girl will save us?"
"Yes. I am going to perform a Passing. I will pass on the Keeping to her. Her name is Aurora."
"But, Keeper, she is too young... Won’t her Spirit Wall be too small to contain your power?"
"Yes, but this one is special. Her heart is pure and innocent. And she is the last one of our people. She has never used her power before. An Ardaian who uses his power first cannot become the Keeper. The power used by an Ardaian for the first time is always of titanic proportions and uncontrolled. Once used, they lose the ability to become the Keeper, as they have spent a great deal of their Spirit in using the power and forcing their body to adapt to it. After becoming a Keeper, they still contain the raw pool of energy deep inside them, though."
"But, Keeper, even if you pass on your power to her, what good will it do? We are still about to be exterminated..."
"Yes, but this is where I need you," said the Keeper.
The boy was dumbfounded. "Me? I don’t..."
"Yes, you. You shall be her guardian in the years to come... There isn’t much time now!" shouted the Keeper. He began to strain, as he focused his power into his center. Time seemed to stand still as he gathered his might. A blue light blurred his outline. The interior of the Temple of Arda...
was filled with the blue light. Sweat ran down his face and steam rose from below him. The boy was awestruck. From outside, the cracks in the temple shone through with the blue light.

In the dark recesses of the Great One’s Palace, the Great One sat atop his golden throne. He sat there, pondering his victory with pride, when all of a sudden something strange washed over him. It was a great focusing of power and might. He knew not what the focusing meant, but it reminded him of something similar one thousand years ago. He could not put his finger on it, and he sent out his Spirit Wall to discover its location.

The location came to him, and then it left him. He shouted in frustration and anger. His fist came crashing down on his armrest. Fury overtook him. Then out of nowhere its exact location was discerned: the Temple of Arda! His fury overwhelmed him.

"That fool! I’ve already won; doesn’t he know that? Why is he wasting his time? My army is going to cru--," he screamed violently, and then abruptly stopped. At that point the only thing running through his mind was the death of his foe, and the fact that he was not going to be given a tie like this. He sensed more than the Passing. Some extra energy was being gathered for another purpose altogether.

"Mialdokolo!" he commanded. Within moments the young boy had made it to his chambers.

"Yes, Great One?" replied the boy. The Great One’s voice was full of hate and anger.

"The Keeper of Arda is performing a Passing!" he said as the boy nodded with a grim smile. "But there is something else… A time warp! He is going to send the new Keeper into the future! Come close, Mialdokolo…" requested the Great One. The boy approached him with fear and suspicion. The great One jerked his hand from within the folds of his black robes and onto the boy’s head. A strange power surged through the boy’s body as the Great One spoke in a loud, shrill voice.

"You shall be my Guardian, my assassin in the days to come. You will live on to destroy the girl if I fail! Do you understand?" shouted the Great One, as the young one nodded fearfully. "Pray to the Dark Ones, and grow
in power! Now, be gone!" he shouted, as a gate of blackness opened behind the boy and he threw him into it. The Great One turned in the direction of the Temple of Arda and focused all his energy into himself. He even took energy from around him, and from his slaves in their chambers below him. He forced the energy into himself and with a painful grimace gave out one last cackling statement.

"Well, my army shall be destroyed by such a blast, as well as myself and this temple. So be it! I shall strike down the Keeper, his temple, his mountain, his people... all shall perish in the name of the Great One! Ah, ha, ha, ha!" he laughed, as the energy overwhelmed him and passed far beyond his Spirit Wall, and he focused it into a sharp beam. The ceiling and walls around him busted and collapsed. He felt the energy boiling within him as he forced every last thing he had to the surface. The walls began to fall apart for the last time before the palace would be destroyed.

He released his energy in a stretching beam that consumed his body and his surroundings as it burst through the wall, and left the Palace of the Great One as a pile of rubble and debris. His energy of death and destruction left a long black trail as it streaked to its target. The Great One was no more, but his energy lived on, his last ditch effort to destroy the last of the Arda. As the remnants of his body lay under the thousands of pounds, all he could do was relish his victory and laugh with all the vile darkness that he was. Time had run out, with him as the victor.

The Temple of Arda shook with terrible force. The brilliance that was its architecture was being destroyed by the second. The boy stood there attempting to steady himself. Stone and debris came from the ceiling as the Keeper stood calmly, collecting energy.

"Place her on the altar!" he shouted. The parents did so, as the blue light engulfed her. Aurora cried as she lay at the foot of the statue. The Keeper drew forth his hand and placed it onto the boy's chest. The blue light from him climbed off and onto the boy. The Keeper had to yell to keep his voice above the noise. "You shall be her Guardian, her Defender in the days to come. You hold unknown powers, boy. Go to the Mage Tower and receive the Test of the Magi. You will have the lifetime of four men, child. Live on!
Find the Heroes of Legend, and defend her! Go! I will be watching you!

The blue light surrounded him, and the last thing he saw was the parents of the girl being thrown aside by the rubble and the Keeper being overwhelmed by his energy as he passed it into Aurora. His eyes locked with the girl's, and at that point he saw what the Keeper was talking about: raw and unbridled power were in those eyes. The boy felt weakened and shrunken by her presence. She had no idea of the massive power she held. For a moment he saw what they called "The Spirit Wall." It was a huge, shimmering white light that was engulfing her. It was around ten times her size, and even then he was standing within its boundaries. The blue light surrounded him, and he blacked out into a deep, forceful sleep.

Miles away from the Mountain of Arda, the boy appeared with a flash of blue light and a clap of thunder. He fell violently onto the ground. He stood up with strain and effort and gazed forward. All was blackness. He could see the outline of the Mountain of Arda and the blue light now emanating from the Temple of Arda. A huge, billowing black cloud rolled in from the east. It was not a natural cloud, for he could sense it was born of evil.

The cloud ceased its rolling and went into a hover above the mountain's peak. Crimson lightning flickered about its insides and streaked out in random directions. The boy pondered the Keeper's reasoning behind teleporting him here. In one moment, a flash of burning victims and explosions filled his mind's eye. They cried out in pain and agony as they suffered from the final death throes. The image wiped itself from his mind. He jerked his head to the east where his eyes met with the unearthly terror.

A huge beam of black energy was streaking straight toward the mountain. It was magnificent in power, as the boy could actually feel the beam's power from where he stood. The beam raced onward toward its target. The boy made a cold realization: the Civilization of Arda was doomed. The Keeper knew this. He wasn't creating a defense! He was sending the girl away to a different time, and he was being teleported away because of it, because he was her guardian.

All the animals and creatures of the forest were going crazy. Every
creature capable of making a noise was making it. His eyes returned to the mountain as the beam crashed into it soundlessly. All went silent. The mountain began to glow with a gray light. There was a sudden flash of blue from within the temple that broke holes into the walls enough to let onlookers see inward. His eyes followed up the mountain and focused on the black storm cloud. A huge bolt of crimson shot from its center and touched the mountain. All went silent. Almost immediately the mountain exploded with a violent force. A colossal sphere of flame consumed the mountain and increased in size until it ate up the nearby land whole. The sphere broke at the poles and turned into a large circle of fire stretching outward.

The boy stood there in disbelief. The wall of fire stretched outward and outward until finally the light became so bright he had to shield his eyes. The wall stopped expanding and stayed there frozen. With a fantastic flash of light and energy, the wall flew outward as tremendous energy. The boy was thrown forty to fifty feet by the blast. He landed in a tree with bruises and scratches covering him. The blast came at speeds of thirty to forty miles per hour in every direction. It went on for five minutes, as the boy clung to the branch for all his worth.

Finally, it ceased. The force quit coming, and the boy fell out of the tree clumsily. He looked up at the crater that was once the magnificence of the Mountain of Arda as tears welled up in his eyes. He cursed himself for his slowness in getting the letter to the Keeper. So many lives were lost, all because of his weakness. He was a failure, and others were punished for him. He sank into a crying heap under the ravaged tree.

"Why are you cursing yourself, boy?" said the voice of the Keeper.
"Because I’ve failed you, I’ve failed everyone," he said, in between sobs.

"No, child, you don’t have to act in such a manner. It has all turned out as it should. The time for Good and Evil to lock horns on the battlefield is for another day. It is a long battle, but it will not be won today. Another day, another day, my child. You will have the lifespan of four men... Live on. Take the Test of the Magi and grow in power as a wizard. You have powers you have yet to awaken. Live on to find the Heroes of Legend..."

"Who are these heroes? How will I tell?" said the boy, wiping away
tears.

"Know you shall. You must be her Guardian in the years to come. Live on, live on..., live on!" were the last words of the Keeper of Arda as his spirit left the world. The boy stood up with a focused pain and anger flowing through him.

"I will seek redemption for my weaknesses and you will be mine, Mialdokolo! This is not over!" he said sternly. The boy gazed onward into the sky that was now covered in a sickly gray. This was not over, he thought. This was not over.