

Daruk

by Ilia Shalaev

Preface

When I was younger and my sister was just a child, she would ask me to tell her a story to help her fall asleep. I would sit down and make up a story about Arnold Schwarzenegger - the big bad wolf - and, of course, the main character - Margarita. Since then some years have gone by, but here's another story for you, sis. Listen because I am still your big brother.

PART 1 - DARUK AND URTA

Chapter 1 - Daruk and the King

A long time ago there lived a King. The King was rich and powerful. He could marry any woman in the world, but he fell in love with a local girl of questionable reputation. All of his advisors told him that this was foolishness, but he persisted and married the girl.

Two weeks into the marriage he fell out of love with her. Not being a man of high morals, he imprisoned her in the darkest, deepest cell. After nine months the woman gave birth to a child. The woman herself did not survive the childbirth, but her son was saved. The King, fearful of this child, who would certainly hate him having found out how the King had treated his wife, decided to lock the child up in the same cell where his unfortunate mother was once held. The King hoped the child would die of some disease. However, his mother's strong nature - she must have been an extraordinary woman to win the King's love in her position - kept the child alive. He would plead for food hours on end before prison guards shared their meager meals with him.

Twenty years have passed. The King died, and a republic with an elected Senate was created. All the prisoners, apart from hardened thieves and murderers, were to be released. The lock on the last cell to be opened required a special key that was taken off the dead King's neck. An unwashed, wild creature attacked the unfortunate man who opened the cell's door. He was finally put down by a heavy blow from the strongest member of the party.

The man said, "This one belongs in a nuthouse."

The other replied, "We already have enough people there."

The first one continued, "But how can you let a wild monkey like this run the streets?"

"I am surely not going to pay for his keep."

The first man offered, "Let's just take him to the back, kill him and say he was dead when we found him."

So the two men carried the prisoner up the stairs. Suddenly, as they were about to take out their knives, he woke from the blow and hit one of the guards in the jaw and the other - in the stomach. He then ran into the open. People crossed the street when they saw this wild, naked boy running. By some animal instinct, he found his way to the shady part of town. There people were more accustomed to seeing all kinds of unusual behavior, so they were not as shocked at the sight of the creature. Finally, he was noticed by a tall man in a dark cloth sitting and smoking a handmade pipe. The man had an almost noble appearance save for the eyes too mischievous for a man of blue blood.

He called out to the creature boy. "Do you know how to speak?"

The creature boy stopped and gave the man an evil look. The man just laughed. He made a gesture for the boy to come near. The animal boy approached. He was about to bite the man, but the stranger turned out to be more intelligent than the boy. He quickly put a rope around the creature boy's neck at which point the latter gave an ear-piercing cry. The boy tried to free himself, but the man simply pulled on the rope harder. However hard the boy fought, he only grew more exhausted. In the end, he gave up and lay on the ground with his tongue out.

The stranger said to the boy, "I know who you are. I've heard of a son of the King imprisoned since he was a child. Since you lived without light for 20 years, I would call you night boy, but since you made such a ruckus, I'll make it 'Daruk,' dark ruckus. How do you like your new name?"

The newly named Daruk tried to break free of the rope with a final push, but overestimated his strength and, having fallen to the ground, passed out.

Chapter 2 - The circus

The stranger's name was Lazarus. He was the master of a small group of freaks which he showed off like animals to occasional wonderers passing by for two cents. He was not an especially cruel man, but he expected his freaks to put on the necessary show. Daruk was quick to learn the skills needed to scare people, earn his master money, and get a larger portion of food. He would run around his cage like crazy and tried to bite anyone who approached the cage. Eventually he became the main attraction of this small freak show.

Outside of the times of the show, Daruk would try to learn as much as he could about the outside world. He quickly picked up basic knowledge of Bastion, the common language in his native land of Urta. He even managed to learn how to read and write from an ancient book of tales which Lazarus had given to him on an especially good day of business.

The other performers in the troupe began to be jealous of the "creature" as they called him because of his naked appearance, save a loin cloth, to emphasize his wild nature. He did not try to make friends with anyone in the troupe. During his time off from the shows he would sit in his cage and read from the book that Lazarus had given him. If anyone tried to talk to him, he would simply shout an obscenity at them and get back to his learning. To the master, however, he was different. After the first two weeks of his stay, he understood what he needed to do to get Lazarus to be nice to him. He would try extra hard to scare the people if he knew that Lazarus was short of money. He learned to say "please" and "thank you". He would lick Lazarus' hands when he gave him extra food.

Lazarus began to think that the rest of his life was all paid for. But one night after an especially successful show when he was giving Daruk food, the boy took a bite of one of Lazarus' fingers. Lazarus screamed in shrill voice. Daruk then grabbed his hand and said in a very normal, rational tone.

"I want my freedom: open the cage and I will let you go to your own devices."

Lazarus responded, "I did not know you could talk like this, why didn't you tell me? We can make even more money this way. Just imagine: you start off in your cage scaring people, then you change into proper dress and come out talking to the onlookers. We could make a fortune."

Daruk answered coolly,

"I think it would be wise for you to let me out of the cage now." Then he took another bite of the fingers.

Lazarus screamed even louder than the first time. He cried,

"Daruk, you can have half of the profits. Just don't go, you are my main attraction."

Daruk was about to bite off the whole finger when Lazarus reached for the keys to the cage. He opened the cage and let Daruk go. Daruk ran quickly and again scared those walking the streets at night. Eventually he found his way to an even grimmer part of town. There no one even paid much attention to his appearance. They took him for another miscreant roaming the streets in early hours of the morning. He would stay here for the next twenty years of his life.

Chapter 3 - The docks

Little is known about Daruk's life during those years. One story is sometimes told in hushed voices late at night. Daruk was working at the time for a ship merchant by the name Fishus. The merchant was a penny pincher who would not spare a dime for his dying mother. Daruk went to his office on a certain occasion for his pay.

The greedy Fichus did not have the money, but instead told him, "I am sorry, my friend, business is bad, your pay will have to wait until next week."

Daruk said nothing and left the small dirty room. He came back next week and insisted in more firm tone that he be paid.

The boss said again, "I am sorry, Daruk, but my ship with merchandise from our last trip hasn't yet been paid for, I owe money around, and now I don't even have enough to eat."

He then took a big bite of bread and a gulp of palm wine from a clay bottle by his side.

Daruk gave his boss a dark penetrating look and said, "Oh, that's fine, my friend, I am sure that you will be relieved of your money" (there was a pause there) "problems by tomorrow. See you later," and he left with a strange smile on his face.

The boss shouted in chase, "I won't be here. I am going out of town to see my friend in the country."

All that is known of the rest of the story is that the boss did not come into the office the next day, or the day after. Actually, he disappeared altogether until his body was discovered outside of town one week later. Also discovered was a will bequeathing all of the ships and merchandise to Daruk. The boss' wife protested, of course, but the handwriting was found to be that of the dead man. Daruk did very well with the business he inherited from his kind benefactor. He eventually became the wealthiest man in all of Urta. He owned almost two thirds of all merchant ships as well as various other properties and investments. Daruk's voice also carried much weight in public matters. Sometimes an occasional person might mention something about Daruk's mysterious past, but his voice was soon quieted by someone else saying how great the man is.

He was not uptight about sharing his wealth. He gave to public charities, but if one knew him well, which nobody did, he would become aware that Daruk had darker goals which he tried hard to hide. Eventually he ran for a small public office, general secretary to the cabinet. He easily won the race, performed his duties well, and even helped his colleagues with theirs. But soon

some of his colleagues started being caught with government money, and Daruk's small post became more significant. He was now responsible for signing all general assembly decisions into law. Then a series of unusual events unfolded that led to Daruk gaining complete control of Urta.

Chapter 4 - The push for power

One day, Daruk was speaking to a member of the legislature senator Jeslor. He congratulated the senator on his win against another senator in a game of sticks,

"Senator Jeslor, I never knew you were such an excellent player. Is there any way you could spare a minute of your time."

Sen. Jeslor replied, "Sure, Daruk, want to play?"

Daruk said, "Oh, I don't normally play games, thank you for the offer."

Jeslor insisted, "Are you afraid that you are not well trained in these more, what's the word, 'refined' diversions?"

Daruk did not take kindly to Jeslor referring to his past. But he controlled himself, and replied with sweet charm, "Well, if I play games, I usually play for stakes."

Jeslor said, "And what may those be?"

"I am trying to pass this bill that will make it easier for the Senate to pass laws. I simply want your assurance of support."

"You know, I can't gamble away my vote."

Daruk continued as if he didn't hear Jeslor, "And if I lose, I will resign from my post because I am well aware that you are uncomfortable with some of my decisions lately."

Jeslor thought for a long time.

Finally he said, "I don't hide my dislike for you, Daruk, because I know what inside you are a savage, a fiend even, with no understanding of even the basic norms of civilized behavior. I will play you because I want you out of my life and out of the Cabinet."

Daruk ignored the comment and threw the first stick. He landed it just outside the hole.

Jeslor said, "Nice try. Now let's see what I can do."

Jeslor went next. He threw the stick, and it fell with one end covering the hole. Jeslor then threw another stick, and it landed like the first one covering the hole from the other end.

He then said,

"I guess, it's back to the ships for you, Daruk."

Daruk replied,

"Well, I get one more shot, don't I?"

Jeslor said,

"But the only way you can win is if you get stick to land standing. I have seen that twice in my whole life."

Daruk did not even look at the hole and tossed the stick straight into the target.

Jostler stood for about half a minute and then said, "I know what you have in mind, Daruk: you want to be King. Well, let me tell you, 'dear friend': over my dead body"

"You overestimate me, Dear Jeslor. I am just making it easier for the Senate to operate."

"I am a man of my word, and I will vote for this piece-of-crap piece of legislation you are trying to pass but you, you, Daruk, must deal with the shortcomings of your soul."

Having said that, Jeslor left without looking back once at smiling Daruk, who, then, went on to his office where he met another senator, Hondas.

"How did it go with Jostler?" asked Hondas.

"Even more favorably than I had hoped."

"Really? How so?"

Daruk replied, "I believe we are assured of his vote."

"Well, with me, Jeslor, and Fresclor, whose wife is such a big fan of oriental silks," (he looked at

Daruk with a smile) "I think we have the necessary yeses."

Daruk spoke in a louder voice, "Changes are coming to Urta, and I will oversee them."

Hondas replied, "Just don't forget the 'stepping stones' that got you to high places."

Daruk said to Hondas, "Of course, you will get what you deserve."

A strange smile crossed Daruk's face. Hondas then walked out of the office and Daruk got out an apple and ate it with large bites.

Chapter 5 - The attack on the Senate

The bill did pass, which meant that Daruk had now a veto power over all decisions made by the Senate. Strangely enough, he seemed not to abuse that power, but agreed with the Senate on most matters. The people loved him. He donated even more than earlier to charities. He made many public appearances. And everything seemed to go well in Urta until one day a dramatic event brought about a radical change. As every year in the early fall, Urta's Senators met to plan the city's wherewithal for the upcoming year.

Senator Forester spoke, "I believe it is vital for us to minimize our expenses in the next year because, clearly, the money coming in from taxes is insufficient to keep the spending at the current level."

Jeslor responded, "Yes of course and those property taxes are way too high to keep the city's populace happy ... ". At that point he started coughing. "What is that god awful smell? Anyways, as I was saying, the taxes are too high to keep people sat ...", and he started coughing uncontrollably as did other senators. Then, one by one, the Senators fell on the floor.

The next morning, a woman was going to clean the chamber where Senators convened. She opened the door to find a shocking sight: all Senators were lying on the floor dead. No sign of the perpetrator of the crime was to be seen. The woman screamed in horror. She ran out of the Senate building and onto the street screaming, "Help, help, something terrible has happened."

Finally she ran into Daruk who was walking the streets on this fine morning.

The woman kept saying, "Oh, great master, come and see what has taken place. It is the most terrible thing in the whole world."

Daruk said, "Now relax and tell me exactly what happened."

The woman explained what she saw. She then cried out in agony, "They are all dead, all the Senators. What are we going to do now?"

Daruk replied coldly, "We are going to find whoever is responsible for this crime. Then, believe me, the culprit will wish he never did what he did."

News of the crime spread like wildfire across Urta. This was a great blow to the city. The perpetrator had to be found at whatever cost. A list of possible suspects was made. On the list was anyone who had any reason to have a grudge against the government. However, interviews of disillusioned citizens of Urta failed to bring any results. It was still unclear how the Senators were killed since no sign of bodily harm or poison was visible. A week passed since the terrible crime had taken place, and all leads were still unfruitful. It was also unclear who would rule the country after all its Senators, save one, Hondas, who did not attend the meeting, were killed. The people of Urta began to become restless, and it was clear that unless some kind of resolution to this matter was achieved no one in the city will ever know peace again. It was then that Daruk volunteered to head the investigation of the crime. His stature in city politics was such that he was voted to the post with no opposition. Only one person in the general assembly dared to question the nomination. His name was Goldfinder. He was the youngest member of the body and was known to have some rebellious views.

Goldfinder said to the people of the assembly, "With all my respect to the members of this body, I disagree with the decision to allow Daruk to head the investigation into this matter."

Chancellor Larfat spoke, "Please clarify your bold statement, young Goldfinder. As you can see, you are the only member of this general assembly who does not support Daruk's nomination. And be sure to substantiate your point of view with facts, not your unfounded and horribly incorrect personal opinion of secretary Daruk."

Goldfinder replied, "I know, it seems to everyone that Daruk is the perfect fit for the head of investigation, but I have spoken to senator Jeslor, among others, about his unquenchable thirst for power, his lack of respect for human decency, and, if I may say this, about his willingness to do anything, and I mean anything" he gave the room a dark look "to get his way."

Larfat answered, "Well senator Jeslor cannot be here today to substantiate your claims so, I think, your statement is pure speculation. Sit down, young pup, and think before you speak next time."

"Now, again is there anyone opposed to Daruk's nomination for the temporary post of the commissioner of investigative matters?"

This time Goldfinder kept his hand down.

Chapter 6 - The investigation

When Daruk became the commissioner of investigative matters, he "made sure" that the criminal was found. He spoke to Larfat about reopening of the crime scene.

"I think that we need to return to the room where the senators were first discovered to figure this matter out."

Larfat gave Daruk a look of surprise "But, dear Daruk, I know you do not have much faith in our abilities, but let me assure you we searched the scene for all possible clues only to come up empty-handed."

Daruk replied,

"It is not a matter of faith; it's a matter of finding the culprit."

"Well of course, dear Daruk, you are welcome to reopen the crime scene. I just doubt you will find anything of value there."

"Thank you, dear Larfat" said Daruk and departed.

Daruk knew just what to look for. Upon a thorough search of the crime scene he discovered two drops of oil turned into grease in the middle of the room. He then took them back to his office and spoke to the 13 year old girl that worked in his office as a run-around for small tasks. Her parents died when she was very young and now she lived with her aunt in a small house near the gates of the city.

"Jill, go to every magic shop in town," said Daruk, "and find the one that sells this formula and report back to me."

The girl replied, "Yes, sir," and ran off. She went to every dealer of potions and tinctures in town but nobody knew anything about this oil or its use. Jill was ready to give up and started crying. She came back home to her aunt. When she entered the door, the old woman saw the tears streaming down her niece's face and said,

"Why do you look so down, my daughter"?

"The great Daruk sent me to find out where this thing", and she showed her aunt the sticky red slime she had been carrying around in the palm of her hand, "comes from. I went to every magic shop in town, but everyone I asked said that he hadn't ever seen this material."

The aunt replied,

"So now you are down on yourself. You won't get very far in life if you are so easily discouraged. Check out the old shop over in the Gundar district."

The girl stopped crying and ran out the door. In the Gundar district the wrinkled potion maker examined the thing in her hand for a long time and then said,

"This is a very dangerous poison. Its vapors can kill a man in a matter of minutes. Thanks god, it loses its potency when left in the open air in mere hours. It is extracted from the blood of a young ape. Only one of my customers ever purchased it. I think I can even remember his name, what is it Jonda, Jondas, ah yeah Hondas. I think he is a man of some stature in the government, too. At least he acted that way, very full of himself and his so-called knowledge of the world."

The girl ran as soon as she heard the name. She knocked down a passerby as she ran excitedly to Daruk's office

The passerby yelled at her,

"Watch where you are going."

She yelled back,

"Sorry" and kept on running. Daruk was waiting for Jill in his office in the now almost empty Senate building. When Jill entered the room, he was reading an ancient scroll on magical powers.

Daruk asked Jill,

"Any news?"

"Yes, sir, I went all around town and couldn't find a single person who recognized that strange substance, and then I, I ..." it was clear that Jill had problem controlling her excitement "did not know what to do so I went home and my aunt told me about this old potion vendor over in the Gundar district and he said that he only sold the thing to one man. I am afraid to say."

Daruk looked at the girl with apparent kindness in his eyes,

"Go on, my daughter."

Jill finished,

"Senator Hondas."

Daruk said with a mock surprise,

"Couldn't be, are you sure?"

Jill replied,

"Yes, sir. He's the only one."

Daruk said after a pause,

"Well, he was the only senator absent on the night of the meeting. All right now, be off."

He took out several coins, gave them to the girl, and made a gesture for her to leave.

Jill looked with awe at Daruk, then with even more joy at the money and ran out of the room happily.

Daruk got something out of the desk after the girl left. He then called for a ride in a cab drawn by an ostrich. After listening to the complicated directions the driver kicked the ostrich and the cab started its relatively long trip to Hondas' house.

Chapter 7 - One more body

Hondas lived on the other side of town in a lonely house on a dead-end street. Daruk got out of the cab. He told the cab driver to wait for him and said that he'd be back in five minutes. He went into the house without knocking. Hondas was sitting down playing sticks with himself. He didn't see Daruk come in. Daruk stepped behind him and put his hands around his neck. Hondas looked back and saw Daruk. His face revealed real fear. Daruk then took the hands of Hondas' neck and shook his hand.

"How are you doing, friend? Long time no see."

Hondas said,

"You scared me, old friend. Why do you want to play these tricks on my old heart?"

"What? Did you really think that I was going to kill you?"

Hondas,

"You are a tough man, Daruk. I know I won't be the first one."

Daruk replied, "Are you talking about that business with the Senate? That wasn't a murder, that was a mercy killing. The Senate is no longer necessary and that was the easiest and least painful way to eliminate it."

Hondas, trying to smile,

"Yes, I see."

Daruk looked around the room and said,

"Let's have a drink, my friend."

Hondas was happy to change the subject. He said,

"What do you want?"

"Some palm wine would be fine," replied Daruk.

Hondas poured two tall glasses of palm wine. He gave one glass to Daruk and began sipping from the other one. Daruk lifted his glass and said,

"To your long life, friend."

"To yours," replied Hondas.

While Hondas spoke the sentence Daruk put his arm around Hondas' shoulder. With an almost unnoticeable sleight of hand he slipped a small amount of a blood-red powder into his friends' glass. His hand then rested on Hondas' shoulder.

Hondas drank the wine. Daruk gave him a condescending look.

Hondas paid no heed and kept on drinking the wine. He quickly finished his glass. As he took the last gulp from the glass he felt heaviness spreading across his limbs. He realized the reason that Daruk had come here. Hondas tried to vomit the wine.

Daruk said,

"It's too late, my friend. Anyways, you should be scared of the punishment you will have to endure for the terrible crimes you have perpetrated."

Hondas replied angrily,

"The crimes I have perpetrated? Scoundrel! You will burn in hell for this!"

He then threw himself at Daruk. He was a heavily built man and even in this almost disabled, poisoned state Hondas put up quite a fight. He lifted Daruk up and threw him against the wall. Daruk began bleeding from his mouth. Hondas tried to attack Daruk again but in the middle of his approach his strength left him and he collapsed on the ground.

Daruk then went out the door and said to the cab driver in a broken voice,

"Help, help. Somebody is in trouble."

The cab driver ran to get help.

He had to wait for a while before people came because the house was so remote. In the meantime, he got some tobacco out of the pouch and put it in a large leaf from a local tree. He lit the handmade cigarette and sat down with a look of total satisfaction. He said,

"You know, Hondas, there can only be one King."

Hondas, of course, did not respond and Daruk just kept on smoking.

Eventually people did arrive at the house. When Daruk heard the people arrive, he put out the cigarette and changed his expression. He now appeared to be deeply shocked by the events that had transpired.

Chapter 8 - The trial

Daruk was brought before a judge, as a formality, to explain senator Hondas' premature demise.

The judge asked Daruk, "General secretary Daruk Killar, please explain what happened at senator Hondas's house on that fateful night."

Daruk replied,

"Jill - a girl working at my office - can testify to the fact that the grease left over from the poison paid for by senator Hondas was discovered at the scene of the crime. I went to his house to make a citizen's arrest. Senator Hondas upon seeing me arrive tried to flee and I tried to stop him. We fought. I hit him in the chest, he fell. I guess, his heart failed him."

Goldfinder stood up at this last sentence by Daruk.

"Are you going to let this evil man dupe you into believing his silly story? Can't you see that his story does not make any sense? He clearly couldn't punch, however evil his heart, a man like senator Hondas to cause him more than a scratch. And how about the potion grease? Why didn't anybody find it before?"

The judge spoke, "Order, order in the court."

Goldfinder continued,

"Can't you all see that this man, or a semblance of, just wants power, and will do anything to get it, including murder. He murdered the senators on that fateful day and he finished off the job by killing senator Hondas."

At this point guards grabbed him and threw him out of the courtroom. Daruk didn't even move an eyebrow.

The judge quickly gave Daruk a contemplative look, but seeing nothing but blissful ignorance in his eyes spoke,

"The man must clearly be insane. Please place an order to have this man committed to a crazy house immediately."

Daruk said,

"I am sure, he meant no harm. But it is important that a man like that get the help that he needs. I will even pay for his keep."

Everybody was impressed by Daruk's apparent kindness towards a man he hardly knew.

Goldfinder was taken to a place of no hope and no return.

Chapter 9 - Daruk becomes Urta's reigning regent

After the mayhem that had taken place in Urta, it was necessary to make a decision on who would govern the country until a new Senate was elected. There was no doubt that Daruk would be chosen for this important position. Daruk seemed to be dead set against taking this post. First he protested when Larfat suggested him as a candidate. Then he went against a general assembly vote to elect him to the post. Finally, when a crowd gathered outside his house trying to induce him to take the post of the reigning regent, he came out onto his balcony and spoke to the people,

"I apologize, people of Urta, but I cannot accept the post of the regent of Urta. I feel that my qualifications aren't nearly as high as those of chancellor Larfat. I am not worthy of this honor."

The crowd screamed,

"We want you, we want Daruk."

Daruk spoke again,

"I can not and will not do this. And this is my final answer."

The crowd screamed even louder,

"We want you, we want Daruk."

Daruk went inside his house. The crowd kept on. Finally, a minute later as the crowd noise reached its peak, Daruk came out onto the balcony again and said,

"It is with a heavy heart that I accept the position of the reigning regent of Urta."

The crowd cheered and shouted, "Daruk."

"Quiet," spoke Daruk more firmly. "I would like to emphasize that this position is only temporary, until a new Senate is elected."

Someone in the crowd again shouted "Daruk."

Daruk finished by saying quietly, "Or as long as the emergency that we are in continues."

That same night after accepting the post, Daruk issued an edict informing the people of several new security measures. The edict read,

"Citizens of Urta,

It is hereby decreed by the office of the regent that until further notice these precautionary measures will be taken to protect the citizens of Urta.

- 1) It will be from here on a crime to walk the streets after 9 pm on weekdays and after 11 pm on weekends.
- 2) All boys and young men 14 to 22 years of age will serve in the government security forces.
- 3) A tax will be levied to pay for the greater security necessary in these troubling times.

Anyone breaking these laws will be prosecuted."

When the edict came out, not all people were in agreement over whether these precautions were necessary. But the fear of another attack like the one in the Senate was so great that most Urtans didn't fight the new laws. Those that did not follow the 9 pm curfew were quickly dealt with by the new security forces. Those found to be disobedient were usually never seen again. Several of them did reappear several years later, but they were no longer themselves. They became goblin fiends under Daruk's control.

Daruk put great effort into making sure that those who volunteered to join the security forces got the best treatment. Most of the volunteers were drifters with no morals or ties. Even though they were not necessarily evil men, thanks to Daruk the dark parts of their souls were allowed to make themselves known. When they went into shops they would take without paying. When they went into a tavern they would trash the place beyond recognition.

A group of three shop owners and tavern keepers went to Daruk to report on the ruckus caused by his hooligans. The leader of the group was Hamus, the head of the city's tavern- and shopkeepers council. With him was his brother Lamus, who ran a small pub down by the merchant docks, and Jambal - a small man whose achievements included running a lottery and serving as a deputy to Hamus in the vendors council. In fact, Daruk had become increasingly difficult to see. Most of his orders were passed down through the ever growing emergency secretarial office which acted as executer of Daruk's orders. When the group of shopkeepers arrived, they were greeted with a cling of spears by the guards who watched this new compound housing the emergency secretarial office with Daruk at its head. Jambal spoke to the senior guard first,

"We are here to see the great Daruk Killar."

"The Master is very busy. And, anyway, he won't want to talk to a bunch of lowlife vendors like you."

Hamus came up to talk to the guard. "Tell Daruk that I am the head of the city's organization of tavern- and shopkeepers."

The guard replied with a little more caution, "It would be better for you to make an appointment."

"The matter is urgent," and he looked directly at the guard with such conviction that, hesitantly, the guard made a sign for them to come in."

He led the group through the heavily protected fort. In the back room two guards stood at attention at the door. The one leading them made a sign and he was let in. He told the party to wait outside for his return.

The guard spoke to Daruk who was engrossed in a heap of ancient scrolls, "Master, there is a group of vendors here to see you. One of them says that he is their leader."

"I thought I told you not to let anyone in. From now on you are demoted to floor duty."

Daruk took a puff of his rolled fig leaf filled with poppy. The guard became visibly upset, but did not say anything back out of fear of even greater demotion. He did not want to get the nightshift for the next month because he had a thing for one of the girls working at a local brewery.

"Should I send the party away then, Master?"

"Oh no, let them in since they are already here."

"Yes, sir," replied the guard and went away. He made a gesture to the guards standing at the door and they raised their spears to let the party in.

"Daruk," spoke the leader of the group, "we have come to you today with an important matter."

Daruk replied, "I am listening, please go on."

"My name is Hamus, as you probably know. I am the head of the city's tavern- and shopkeepers'

council. To my right is Jambal - a distinguished citizen and tavern owner who, I am sure, helped you get to this position, and to the right is my brother Lamus."

Daruk said, "To what do I owe the honor of your visit?"

"I am afraid to say, your security forces have become undisciplined. They loot and damage the goods in shops."

"Those bandits trash the eateries, and, how should I say this ..., misbehave with the serving girls," spoke up Jambal.

Daruk replied, "But those serving Urta in this most dangerous time have to be given certain privileges."

Hamus, losing his temper, said,

"You need to get those security forces of yours to act like disciplined warriors. Right now they are just a bunch of hooligans."

Daruk looked Hamus straight in the eyes. A flash passed between them. Suddenly, Hamus said,

"Oh, Great One, my apologies for being so rude. You are doing the right thing for us and our country. I was a fool."

Jambal pushed Hamus in the side and asked him,

"What are you doing? This is not what we came here for. Come on, tell Daruk how his troops abuse their privileges; how they looted your store, drank your palm wine, grabbed the girls. Come on, let Daruk have it."

Hamus ignored the comment. He stood as if in a trance for a second and then pulled out a knife that he was carrying with him and stabbed Jambal in the side. His brother Lamus grabbed him from behind. Hamus shouted at his brother,

"Don't stop me. This man is guilty of treason."

Lamus looked at Daruk. He said,

"You made him do this. You put blood on his hands. He will have to suffer for the crime committed at your will."

He then took the knife out of Hamus's hands, who was still in a stupor from Daruk's spell. He moved towards Daruk and tried to stab him. But Daruk was too quick. He grabbed Lamus' hand and the knife fell to the floor. Lamus then himself dropped on the ground and began sobbing.

Daruk was not moved. He called for security, "Guards!"

They ran into the room. They looked around and saw Hamus standing in a trance and mumbling,

"Daruk is right. Daruk is good. Daruk is right. Daruk is good ..."

They then saw Lamus sitting by Daruk's shelf, housing his scrolls, and sobbing. Finally they saw Jambal lying on the ground holding the knife.

Daruk said,

"These men started fighting among themselves. The one paying righteous homage to me," he pointed to Hamus who was still saying "Daruk is good. Daruk is right...", "stabbed that lowlife on the floor."

The guards quickly moved on Hamus. Daruk said to the guards, "Take it easy on that man, I may find future use for him. And take that one lying on the floor. He tried to kill me".

On the city streets late that night two men could be seen, led by five security guards. One was walking quietly and the other was repeating without end, "Daruk is good, Daruk is right, Daruk is right, Daruk is good." When the small party reached the outskirts of the city the man, who had been quiet, suddenly grabbed a knife out of the belt of one of the guards and stabbed him. Then he ran.

PART 2 - SERENLIT

Chapter 10 - The child

In a small village by the sea of Merdal there lived a fisherman and his wife. They never had children and now they were too old.

The fisherman went out to sea every day and sometimes he came home with a couple of fish. Other times his net was empty. But the two usually had enough fish for themselves and, when it got real tough, Pachuka - the fisherman's wife - would weave baskets to buy some rice in the town's market.

And so they lived, just the two of them, for many years. It so happened that one day the fisherman, Harton, came home with empty net. And then again the next day. And the next. This went on for several weeks. After a month Pachuka started weaving baskets. She knew that eventually things would get better. But another week passed and still Harton's net was empty. It was forty days since Harton had last caught a fish when he came back home with his hands full. In one hand he carried a net full of fish in the other was a basket with a baby inside.

Pachuka looked at her husband with surprise and asked him, "Where did you get the baby?"

Harton replied, "I went out further than usual today looking for fish and suddenly it began to rain. The waves began to rock my boat and I thought that I may not come back home, but then suddenly the rain stopped and when I raised my lines I found two fish to every hook. I took off the fish and then put in the lines again, and again there were two fish to every hook. This happened once more but after that there was no more fish. I waited for the rest of the day, but there was no more catch so I put up the lines and, just as I was about to head home, I saw a basket floating on the water in the distance. I rowed to the basket and discovered the boy inside."

Pachuka said, "It's a lovely child."

Harton asked, "What should I do with it?"

Pachuka said with a tiny gleam of hope in her voice, "Why don't we keep it?"

Harton replied, "If I catch as many fish tomorrow and then for a week more, then we will keep him."

Pachuka knew that this was impossible.

She told her husband, "I don't care if you catch another fish your whole life I am keeping the child."

But the fisherman came back with his boat full of fish the next day and for a week after. So they kept the boy and named him Serenlit. They agreed to tell the boy that they were his real parents and they raised and loved him in this way.

Chapter 11 - Dreams and findings

Serenlit grew up quickly and happily on the shores of the sea with his adopted parents. He quickly made friends with the other fishermen's children and one would have never guessed that

he was not just another Merdalian boy. Serenlit helped his mother with basket weaving. With his small fingers he tied hard to do knots. Harton sometimes asked him to go along fishing, and the boy did come but he was not a very good fisherman. He would daydream instead and fish would escape.

Many years passed. Serenlit played with other boys and girls. His best friends were Laska, a tomboy with ponytail, and Doppel, a grumpy, whiny, plump baby, who nonetheless was a trustworthy friend. The three spent carefree days playing on the seashore. It seemed to the thirteen year old Serenlit that life would always go on this way. But one sunny afternoon his whole world was changed. It started out like any other lazy hot summer day. Serenlit and his friends, Laska and Doppel, were sitting on top of a couple of rocks watching the surf crash against the shore.

Doppel said, "There's never anything to do around here."

Laska suggested, "Why don't we go look for crabs in the sand?"

Serenlit said, "I don't know, let's do something else, we did that yesterday."

The friends climbed off the rocks and started heading home. On the way Doppel found a dead seagull. He picked up the half decayed bird and started waving it around in front of Laska. She was not pleased and slapped Doppel hard on his sunburnt chest leaving a red mark.

Doppel screamed. Laska and Serenlit laughed at their friend. The injured adolescent started crying.

He said, "You guys are mean. I am going home."

Laska felt sorry for her adversary, came up to him and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

Doppel was pacified.

He came up to his friends and asked, "So really what are we going to do?"

They all sat down in the middle of the beach.

Serenlit said suddenly, "I know what we can do. Are you interested?"

"Interested in what?" asked Laska.

"I heard that there are mushrooms in the forest that we can eat. We could find some and see if they are any good."

"Ok" said Dopel who had gained the strength of a warrior from Laska's kiss.

"Ok" said Laska.

Serenlit led the way into the forest. He was envious of his friend because he liked Laska so he wanted to prove himself in front of her. They didn't know where to look for the mushrooms so they followed the easiest path a man or an animal made. The terrain climbed up sharply and the kids had to scramble sometimes falling on their hands. It was that feeling of being the discoverers of new and previously unexplored patch of land that kept the kids moving forward. After climbing for several hours the young explorers were exhausted. At this time, the sun began to set over the sea. The kids knew they should probably go back. But something kept pushing them forward. As the shadows grew longer and longer, Dopel began to whine,

"Come on, guys, let's go back. My mom wants me home before dark."

The mountain slope stopped getting darker when the sun set completely and the moon took over the job. Finally the small party arrived before a barren rock mountain slope. It seemed that there was nowhere to go but back. Serenlit, being the most determined of the party, said,

"I think we should try to climb it."

"No way" said Dopel.

"I have to agree with Dop on this one," said Laska.

But Serenlit was not to be stopped. Guided by the dim light of the smaller heavenly body, he began his ascent up the slope. He seemed to be making good progress. Serenlit was half way up the slope when suddenly a rock separated from the granite face. He tried to grab onto a tree branch, but it broke and he fell right past his friends and into the darkness below. Dopel looked down, but the hero was nowhere to be seen. Laska wanted to save her friend, but she saw no way down into the dark gulch. Suddenly she saw a small path, veering off to the right, that the friends had not noticed in the dark, leading down the gulch. She grabbed Dopel's hand and they made their way down the rock.

There was an eerie silence that hung over the mountain like a cloud, broken only by Laska and Dopel's footsteps. It was not long until they discovered Serenlit who was sitting on the ground with a dazed look on his face. He was looking up at something. There was blood running down

his leg, but he seemed not to notice. Right before them stood an ancient green marble statue of a warrior holding a great sword. It seemed as if time had not placed its heavy hand upon the statue. Laska touched the warrior's sword gently as if afraid that it might come alive.

Dopel said,

"Where do you think it came from?"

Laska and the bloody discoverer didn't reply, they just kept on staring at the statue.

Finally Laska broke the silence. She said,

"My grandmother used to tell me these stories about another people that lived here a long time ago. She said they ruled the whole land from the sea of Merdal to the great sea of Go. But she didn't ever tell me what happened to them."

After staring at the statue for a space of half an hour, the friends finally moved down the hill path. They were thirsty and hungry. The little trail led them down straight to the sea. It was only a short walk to their house. At Laska's house the friends parted and went their separate ways. Serenlit could hear Laska's mom saying,

"Where were you? The sun has been set for over three hours now and supper is cold. Go and take a bath, young lady. Where were you anyways ...?"

Serenlit only now realized that there was caked blood on his calf and ankle. He stepped into sea water to wash it off. The salt water burned. Serenlit had to make an effort to keep himself from screaming out in pain. Back home Pachuka was at work making baskets and his father was working on his lines. His mother asked him,

"Where have you been? Harton and I were worried." He felt happy that he received the same treatment at home as Laska. Sometimes he wondered, but never said it out loud, if Pachuka and Harton were really his mother and father. As he fell asleep that day he thought about the lone warrior standing there with his unsheathed sword.

The next day the friends met up again at the beach.

Chapter 12 - The adventure continues

The next day darkness fell over the sea. A hurricane was brewing and the fishermen all stayed home. It looked like Laska was not going to go down to the beach, but she managed to escape

unnoticed out of her house through the back door. Eren, as his friends called him, and Dop were happy to see her. Without her they just listened to the cool wind telling of the storm to come, but when she came they started a conversation with their newly arrived friend.

Serenlit asked Laska,

"Did you get a beating from your parents?"

Laska shook her head.

"And you, Eren?"

"No"

Dopel said,

"My momma always gives me a good beating when I do something she doesn't like. You, guys, are lucky."

Laska entered the water so that it covered her up to her ankles. Dopel started splashing water on her. Soon all three of them were involved in a water fight. Finally Serenlit said,

"Let's go back to the statue."

"I am not going back there," said Dopel.

"Don't be such a wuss. If you go I'll give you a kiss," said Laska.

Dopel really didn't want to go. After the first time he had bad dreams. The marble statue was after him and, as much as he tried, he couldn't get away. But Laska was a girl he'd do anything for so he said, "Ok let's go. But if it starts getting dark I am leaving. That warrior statue creeps me out."

This time they walked straight to the hill path that led to the statue. The sun was still high so the friends were sure to get back before nightfall. When they walked up the path they saw that this was not just a forest trail, but an ancient road that had been taken over by weeds.

"What are we doing this for?" asked Dopel.

"Come on, Dop, you already agreed. Don't whine." She came up and punched Dopel lightly in

his stomach.

Dop asked angrily, "Why did you do that?"

Laska said, "Cause you are a fat cry baby."

Tears started flowing from Dopel's eyes. Serenlit didn't put up very well with Dop crying.

He said, "Come on. If you are going to act like that just go home."

Laska replied for Dopel, "Don't worry, Eren. He'll behave."

She then went up to Dopel and said, "Stop being such a fat cry baby."

She then brushed the tears from his nose with the side of her ragged fisherman's shirt. Serenlit did not look back at his friends. He just kept on going up the hill path. He was mad at Dop and jealous of Laska's attention. The statue did not look quite as menacing in the afternoon sun, but Dopel still gave the statue a look of distrust. Serenlit waited for his friends to come up, but after several minutes passed with no sign of them he realized that he pissed them off.

He was about to head back home himself, but for some strange reason he just kept on sitting by the statue. Finally his eyes focused on the sword. Suddenly he had an idea. He gripped the sword by the handle and tried to take it out of the warrior's hand. The warrior's hand felt strangely warm for a marble statue. The sword fell to the ground and the warrior's hand clamped around Serenlit's. The grip was so tight he fell on the pedestal holding the statue and passed out.

When he regained consciousness, he did not recognize his surroundings. However, another warrior statue was there like the one he and his friends had discovered. The next time he would see his friends would be in ten years by his calculation.

Chapter 13 - The new world

Serenlit looked around and saw below a path leading down the hill on which he was standing. He thought that maybe if he walked down this road he would somehow arrive back at his parents' house. But as he kept walking he found the surroundings unfamiliar. He began to worry. After an hour of walking he saw the first signs that this new land he was magically transported to was inhabited. He had never actually seen, but heard about big creatures with long legs, bushy feathers and loud obnoxious voices. It was one of the many ostrich farms which provided eggs, meat, and transportation means for Urta. Serenlit was a little afraid of these new things so he did not dare come up to one. This was probably for the better since the ostriches were known to be

especially unfriendly to foreigners.

As he kept on walking, he finally saw first human inhabitant of Urta, where one of the gates between the parallel worlds was located. It was an old man worn thin by time. The only thing that still showed signs of life was his eyes, hidden in deep sockets. They were clear and without the haze of senility. Serenlit asked the old man,

"Where am I, old traveler?"

The stranger said,

"You are in Urta, my son. Where were you last?"

"I was at the sea of Merdal."

"I've never heard of it. But I'll tell you this - leave Urta before it's too late."

"I need to find out where I am relative to where I came from. There must be a way for me to return to my parents."

The old man said to himself,

"Maybe he's a traveler from a parallel dimension. No, couldn't be. The gate has not been used since the birth of the King's son."

Serenlit suddenly broke down. He was afraid he would never see his village again. The old man saw despair in the boy's eyes and decided to help Serenlit. He got out a small piece of birch bark and wrote a few words in Urtan on it.

He then gave the note to Serenlit and said, "This is a message for a friend of mine in the city. Her name is Leon. She runs a little flower shop in the city. She will take you in."

Serenlit took the note. He was about to thank the man, but when he looked back at the old traveler, the latter had vanished into thin air. The traveler was not a mere mortal - his story is considered one of the jewels of Urtan mythology.

Chapter 14 - The story of the traveler

Light crawled up the surface of a water drop and split into a rainbow. As one of those rains born on the sun, it carried with itself a mystical being. It was a spirit who had left this world many

centuries ago. Now it appeared before the King's palace in the shape of a young man. A guard at the gate asked the young traveler,

"Who are you and what brings you to this land?"

The young man replied,

"My name is Orion and I am here to join the army of the King."

The guard laughed.

"You must be not from here. But I'll explain myself."

The guard told the strange young man that the King at that time, Selenion, was faced with an enemy from the north that knew no limits to its evil. Whole villages were razed. The enemy was not human. Wild boars of enormous size, driven to madness by a sorceress, destroyed everything in their path and would feed on the bodies of those unfortunate few who tried to stop them. No wonder that after a short while there was no one left brave enough to fight them. The young man seemed to not have heard the guard's words. He re-stated his intent to join the King's army, and the guard had no choice but to lead him to Selenion. The King looked at the young man with surprise, but nonetheless accepted the much needed recruit into the army. Immediately following the allegiance ceremony, the young man asked the King to allow him to lead twenty men of his choosing to fight the boars. The King was shocked at the request, but, as he was about to discipline the recruit, an idea came to him. The young man for all his insanity was a perfect pawn in his greater war against the wild boars. It would appear to the boars that the twenty men sent against them were all Selenion could find, and then the rest of the force would move in from the rear. So the young warrior and twenty men under his command were off to attack the boars while the King gathered the rest of the army in secret. What happened next was put down in a poem still heard in Urta today,

The light of worlds unknown by men
Disguised in man's appearance faced certain death
But to his right - brave ten and to his left - brave ten
The enemy sure doth advantage hath
Thought Selenion

The boars were overfed on spoils of war and fighters
They waited for attack sure to defeat this foolish newcomer
But they were blinded by an otherworldly light and twenty lighters
The cold steel was destroying evil the final night of summer

Shine on, Orion

Many times the traveler was seen in Urta when help was needed. In the reign of a different King, Daruk's father, he had rescued an infant, who was going to be imprisoned by the King after being weaned off the breast. The traveler saved the infant but did not rescue the boy's twin brother. The lucky child was sent through a gateway to a parallel dimension. Since then his trace had been lost.

Chapter 15 - Urta and Daruk

As Serenlit entered the gates of the city, he saw a group of shopkeepers discussing the current political climate. Tired from the day's journey, Serenlit stopped by to listen. The first one said, "Mofat, what do you think? Will they ever catch all those responsible for that terrible thing that happened?" Mofat did not have the right answer. He should have given a decisive "yes". Instead he said, "I think it's time Daruk suffers for the death of my friend Jambal. He can say the sky is gold, but it's still blue. Jambal was a good man. There is no way he would have tried to assassinate anyone."

The first shopkeeper, whose name was Gulfat, was not a good man. He would give his soul for money. So, after Mofat finished speaking, he went directly to the only part of the city that seemed to be teeming with life - Daruk's headquarters. That same night two SEDs - Daruk's security forces - knocked on Mofat's door. The scared shopkeeper was led away to never be seen or heard from again.

Despite the sense of terror that surrounded the city Serenlit managed to make the best of his new life. He helped Leon run her little flower shop. It was not hard work, but he had to get up at dawn to pick flowers from Leon's garden. She always made the bouquets herself. They were lovely: orchids and carnations, roses with bleeding petals and sunflowers swimming in blue lilies. Long after, Serenlit would remember Leon's bouquets lit by the light of the orange morning sun. He would then open up the shop and take out some of the sturdier flowers out into the street. From then on, most of the day Serenlit spent reading in the back of the store. Customers were few. The ones that did come in spent hours browsing, only to end up buying a single white rose or two lilies. Nobody had enough money anymore to purchase Leon's bouquets. The taxes Daruk collected to support his security forces did not leave anything for flowers. It was a hard time for everybody. But the people still believed that this all was only until those who perpetrated the attack on the Senate were caught. Hondas was just the tip of the iceberg it turned out. A much larger group of evildoers is still out there. People started to be more careful.

Although Serenlit's days were full, at night he would still think of his Merdalian mother and father.

Leon asked him one evening, "Do you miss your parents?"

Serenlit looked at her with hallow eyes for an instant, but only said,

"No, ma'am. I like it here with you."

Leon didn't believe him, but decided not to bug him anymore. She had too many worries of her own, trying to keep the flower shop afloat. But she knew that the boy needed somebody beside her.

Chapter 16 - Jill

Serenlit loved going to taverns, buying palm wine and meeting girls, although most of them, seeing that he was young and penniless, would simply ignore him. One evening Serenlit was sitting and enjoying the palm wine in a small tavern next to the flower shop when a girl came in. She had green eyes and black hair down to her waist. She sat down at the other end of the bar stand and ordered palm wine. Serenlit came up to her and said,

"I have never seen you here."

She replied,

"I try not to go out to places where men are so arrogant as to assume that just because I am by myself I need their company." Serenlit swallowed the pill. He continued,

"What are you doing talking to me?"

She said,

"You started the talking."

At that point Serenlit was about to tell the girl what he really thought about her rudeness, but suddenly she said,

"Well, since you are here anyways, sit down. Keep me company."

Serenlit sat down reluctantly. The girl began flirting with him. He did not like girls who flirted so openly. He was about to return to his barstool when she kissed him. He was not impressed. He stood up and left. She called out to him, "I thought that's what you were after."

He said, "I already have that. Now, if you excuse me ..."

She asked, "Well, what do you want then?"

He said, "I want somebody who actually feels something for me."

They started talking about their lives. Serenlit told her about the flower shop.

She said,

"I work for Daruk, you know." Over last couple of years Serenlit had brief and not always unsuccessful encounters with girls but he never had a girlfriend. He thought he knew a little about girls: boys that age often feel that way. He tried to take her home with him that night, but she said she had to get up early for work tomorrow. After talking in the tavern they walked and stared at the moon. She had no idea where they were. She had a permission from Daruk that allowed her two nights a month of extended curfew. So she let the boy guide her. On the way they stopped by the town square. She said,

"I've got to go. It was nice." She looked somewhat aloof. His lips found their way to hers. The second that their lips met a high-pitched scream of an unknown animal broke through the hot night. She said,

"You have to run home. You're not supposed to be out."

He asked, "Will I see you again?"

Out of the darkness and into the light of the street there moved a troop of security forces. Jill ran across the half lit street and waved goodbye. He barely made it to his house before Leon closed the back door. She was anxious to go to bed. Flowers demanded early hours.

Chapter 17 - Jill's betrayal

After that night the two saw each other almost every day. Serenlit met Jill after she returned from Daruk's office where she worked. Once she said to Serenlit,

"You know, Daruk is trying to make me into his toy. He's got very dark past. I think he doesn't know how to be anything but evil. But he's very learned. He spends the whole time free from his work reading ancient scrolls. I think he hardly ever sleeps."

"Why don't you leave?"

"I see how you, people, live." She looked at Serenlit and realized that she said something wrong. "I am sorry, you know what I mean, you are so poor."

Serenlit said,

"But everybody lives like this. There isn't anyone who Daruk hasn't burdened with his taxes or scared with those hooligans that, he says, are needed to protect us from another attack."

Jill replied,

"I am sure Daruk himself was behind those killings in the Senate. Someone will get him and then life will be back to normal. But now it's the time to make a good living if you're smart."

Serenlit said,

"I am not working for Daruk. I don't want to end up being one of his puppets."

They ended the conversation there. Jill went to work and Serenlit lay down. He liked Jill, but she confused him with her allegiance to Daruk in spite of his evil.

Before it rains, birds hover near the ground. And then it pours. This was the case with the emotions the young man had for Jill. Slowly but surely, anger built up within his soul. He decided to give up his little paradise in the flower shop for the sweat and blood of a fight.

Meanwhile, several important developments took place in Urta. The least of these was an ordinance passed down by Daruk making him supreme minister of all official civil matters such as christenings, weddings, and funeral ceremonies. Daruk's signature of approval cost a hefty sum and in certain instances for reasons not discussed was not given even after the payment was made. For the young pair this meant that any their future plans together were tied to Daruk's fancy. Daruk was no longer touched by Jill or any other human for that matter. His sole concern now was power.

Jill came up to Daruk one night after work.

She asked, "Oh, great one, are you ever going to take a day off? You work all day and all night."

Daruk replied, "When you are sleeping you are weak. If you want a day off, go ahead." Jill never thought of herself as weak, but she did want to take some time off - even though she could

handle working every day from morning till night. Daruk's knowledge of power and ways of usurping it from weaker souls was growing every day. He had transcended human boundaries and entered the world of the dead inside. But he had gained for the price of his soul abilities supernatural. There was no one in the whole Urta's history who had more power than he did.

Despite of his friendship with Jill, Serenlit approached other girls. He was angry with Jill for her less than absolutely negative view of Daruk. A woman's heart is deeper than the mines in which man labors. It sees light even in the darkest tunnels. The girls Serenlit met were sweet and at times that's all one seeks - sweet. They also pleased him in ways that Jill did not - Jill backed away anytime Serenlit tried to go beyond their childish (in his view) cuddling and holding hands. He was worried about Jill learning of his indiscretions. He did love Jill, but he did not want to give up his sensual pleasures.

Once Serenlit began seeing other girls, Jill noticed a change in him. He became less interested in getting intimate with her. Jill was actually not very reluctant to be more physical. Serenlit just did not have the experience of having to work to win a woman. They began drifting apart. Finally Jill told Serenlit one day,

"I am in love with someone."

He asked,

"Who is it?"

"Daruk, and he will marry me next spring."

Serenlit thought for a minute and then said,

"He's a powerful man and I am just someone who made a mistake of dancing with you. Enjoy your life." Jill hesitated for couple of seconds. Deep inside she knew that she was not following her heart. She missed this moment. Jill could have kissed him and all would have been forgotten, but, alas, this was not to be.

Jill continued, "I will marry Daruk. He proposed to me and I said that I shared his sentiments and" again she hesitated "will be happy to become his wife."

Serenlit walked the streets. If he had an elixir of death he would have taken it, but he did not. So, guided by a sense of duty, he went back to Leon who saw that the boy was very upset and asked him, "What's wrong?"

Serenlit answered, "I am just tired. Leave me alone."

He then blew out the candle by his bed, got in bed and turned to the wall. Leon in a last gesture of caring tucked in the heartbroken Serenlit and went to work on her bouquets.

Chapter 18 - Serenlit's dark

In the night the streets were eerily quiet. People did not venture out or visit each other after curfew, as it was deemed to be the time when people carried on all kinds of adulterous or unsanctioned activities, strictly forbidden in order to maintain control over people's lives. In keeping rebellion from occurring, it is necessary to not only impose restrictions on what people do but also on how they feel, as love for another human being may outweigh one's commitment to the state. Those who did not follow rules were taught harsh lessons in torture chambers that would break all bonds of flesh and blood. Or at least this was the greatest desire of Daruk's dark heart. One of the saddest and beautiful love songs is about two lovers who were reported to Daruk by the young woman's husband who had caught his freshly paid for wife in the arms of another. They are taken to prison and before they are separated the girl sings to her lover. Of course the song is more beautiful in Urtan, but here is a first translation.

I am thinking, my darling, that you will forsake me.
But though you'll forsake me - my hands will remember
The way that they held you in last desperation
The hour that nothingness closed over us suddenly.

In gold was rewarded my husband for bringing to evil
My heart's only desire, my day's only respite.
And in blood was rewarded my love for you so holy
That no priest was needed to make it whole.

Take my sweet and my surrender to that darkest of places.
And it will guide you so you won't forsake me.

This meant that Serenlit had to meet with the girls he was seeing outside the city walls and sneak back in during the guard change. After parting with Jill, Serenlit became more and more ravenous for sensual pleasures, which served to fill the void left by Jill in his broken heart. He did not care particularly if the girl was right for him, he just needed some way to forget. But the cut was too deep. He plunged deeper and deeper into himself until even working at the flower shop had become a difficult chore.

Leon asked, "What's wrong?"

Serenlit did not answer. He kept on cleaning the shop. He did not feel like talking to Leon or anyone else about Jill. In the meantime, she went ahead and married Daruk. The now most powerful adolescent sometimes came by the flower shop and always bought the most outrageous bouquets - lilies with carnations, huge exotic flowers with red roses. Jill tried to speak to Serenlit, but whenever she arrived he went to the back of the shop and let Leon, who was very surprised at the sudden popularity of her little flower shop, make the arrangements. Thanks to Jill, Leon stayed up most nights making bouquets for the palace. It was impossible for Serenlit to comprehend what moved Jill to marry Daruk. He had no hunger for absurd wealth and he did not understand the attractiveness of Daruk's power grabbing at all costs. It is at the same tavern where Serenlit first met Jill, the first meeting of the Oreous took place.

Chapter 19 - The Oreous

Serenlit spoke first to the crowd barely able to move in the small café. He said,

"All gathered here today want to liberate Urta from Daruk's tyranny. Am I right?"

"Yes," answered the crowd.

"He has taken over our lives and we want them back. Am I right?"

"Yes"

"Are you ready to die to uproot the evil that has planted itself in place of the Senate which was elected by the people for the people."

"Yes" answered the crowd. "Daruk must be destroyed."

The same night a band of three men went out on the first mission by the newly formed Oreous. Their goal was to find weaknesses in Daruk's palace security. In the morning light Serenlit saw a party of four instead of three sent out. The fourth member of the group was none other than Jill.

Chapter 20 - Better late than never

Serenlit was shocked to see Jill at the head of the party. She came up to him and said,

"Didn't you expect to see me?"

Serenlit mumbled something in reply.

Jill continued, "The little party that you sent to scout the palace was captured by Daruk's guards. They were taken to be interrogated by the guards. If it weren't for me, all your plans would have been foiled."

Serenlit said, "Thanks, I guess. But why do you want to help me, anyways? I thought you were on the Daruk's side now."

Jill replied, "Don't tell me which side I am on. You know, I've always loved you. You were just too self-absorbed to see it."

Serenlit blurted out, "And so you married the man I hate."

Jill kept her cool.

She simply said, "But now I can help the Oreous. And Daruk never touches me anyways. He does not care about anything outside of his power over people."

Jill then came up to Serenlit and kissed him. He felt the warmth of her lips. His mind started drifting.

They made love until the sun began to rise over the sea. Then Jill quickly dressed and said, "Alright, I have to get back to the palace before Daruk finds out I slept with the enemy."

Chapter 21 -The Oreous grows stronger

As Daruk's rule became harsher, the Oreous grew stronger. Yet it was only through Jill's efforts that the organization was not discovered and destroyed. She informed Serenlit of Daruk's troop movements, so that meetings could be held in safety. Serenlit's resolve to rid Urta of Daruk also grew. He was ready to give his life in this fight but the lack of strong, able-bodied men prevented the Oreous from inflicting real damage on the tyrant. Most young men Serenlit's age were too caught up in trying to make enough money to eat: they had no time or energy for rebellion.

Many times it seemed that there was no hope for Serenlit but he hung on waiting for the opportune time to make his move. Finally it came. It was the three year anniversary of Daruk's rule. A big parade was to be held in his honor. Serenlit decided it was now or never.

Jill told Serenlit, "I know what you are planning to do. You want to take Daruk out on the day of the parade."

Serenlit, who was sharpening his knife, did not reply.

Jill continued, "Listen to me. It's a bad plan. You have no idea how far Daruk's mastery of power and the ways of protecting it has gone."

Serenlit just kept working on the blade. He knew deep inside his heart that it was his destiny to free Urta from Daruk's grip. The Oreous went ahead with the plan, but it ended up in bitter disappointment. Somehow Daruk got wind of the plot and the two men sent to assassinate him were apprehended by the SEDs. Serenlit was dismayed; the parade seemed to be a perfect opportunity. Daruk was walking at the head of his army, protected only by a few SEDs. But when the men sent to kill him were supposed to run into the street and stab him, suddenly several SEDs came up from behind and held them until Daruk calmly passed by. Serenlit immediately suspected Jill.

He said to her, "I do believe there is somebody in the Oreous who warned Daruk."

Jill said, "Beats me."

"I have a strange feeling that it was you."

Jill turned around and slapped Serenlit across the face.

She said, "You know, you are an arrogant fool. You think you understand everything and everyone. But you know nothing. I would never rat out the Oreous to Daruk."

Serenlit did not know what to say. He saw Jill's agony caused by his suspicion, but still he could not overcome that strange feeling. He was torn in two. Jill was not going to take any of it. She did not know how to be with someone who did not trust her. Serenlit decided there was only one way to find out the truth. That night he followed Jill back to the palace. He sneaked in the gate behind her and made his way to her bedroom.

As Jill fell asleep a secret door opened in the dressing room. Daruk entered clad in black.

He said, "Now tell me about the Oreous."

She replied, "The Oreous' plan failed. They are in disarray."

After Daruk left the room, Jill opened her eyes. Serenlit jumped from under the bed and came up to her. He said,

"Do you remember what happened?"

Jill shook her head.

"Now I know what happened. Daruk used you while you were asleep and he had you reveal the Oreous' plans."

Jill said to Serenlit, "You better get out of here. Daruk may come back any moment."

Serenlit kissed Jill goodbye. He knew he had to be careful and get home safely.

Chapter 22 - The plan

Serenlit knew that he must devise a plan to save the Oreous. Finally it came to him.

He talked to Jill. "I believe there is only one way to keep the Oreous from Daruk's evil hands."

"Go on," said Jill.

"The next time Daruk enters your room, you must be awake, but under full pretense of deep sleep. Then, when he asks you about the Oreous, you must give him anything but the truth."

"I will do that for the Oreous."

"I love you," said Serenlit.

"I love you too," said Jill.

He came up and held her from behind.

The next time Daruk came in, she pretended to be asleep.

Daruk asked her as always, "Is there any danger from the Oreous?"

Jill replied, "No, the Oreous is dissolved. You are the only master of Urta."

Daruk smiled. "I knew those weaklings would disband before too long. Now sleep, you little thing."

Although his plan was working, Serenlit was not happy. He wanted Jill to himself. But in order

to destroy Daruk he needed Jill to continue to pretend that she was Daruk's slave. Serenlit talked to Larfat who had become his best friend about the situation.

He said, "Larfat, I cannot stand the pain of Jill being touched by another man and especially my enemy. Tell me, old friend, what can I do?"

Larfat smiled, "You are still young. You hunger to possess love - just remember this, make the decision as if it was twenty years from now."

Serenlit thought of things to say, but he knew inside that Larfat was right. He knew that Jill cared for him. So Jill continued living with Daruk and the Oreous was saved.

Chapter 23 -The new era of Daruk's power

Meanwhile Daruk's power was growing. An army that he had built was now ready to attack Favista, the kingdom to the east of Urta. The army led by the mindless fiends under Daruk's control left the city on a dark night. Serenlit was sleeping in his cramped room when the army passed below on the street. He looked out of his window to see rank after rank of Daruk's SEDs march in unison.

It was not long after that the news of Favista's surrender reached Urta. The city cheered the victory. Nothing could be gained from fighting the general festive mood, so Serenlit went out to watch the victory parade. As he walked the streets, he looked for signs of resistance, but it seemed that most people were satisfied with having conquered an innocent neighbor. The Urtans did not care for the Favistans who had long washed all their trash down the river to Urta.

Serenlit wanted to see anyone who was still committed to the Oreous, but it seemed that in the wake of the military victory they had all decided on ignoring morality for the sake of immediate pleasure. It was an atmosphere that lasted for a week, until Daruk again imposed a curfew and put out an edict regarding the war.

"A great day has come.

The Urtan army has defeated the Favistans. The soldiers will return with needs that must be met. It is our duty to satisfy those needs. Thus, soldiers must be offered food and drink without pay.

Anyone who does not support the troops will be imprisoned.

Signed,

Daruk Killar"

Once the festive mood had passed, Serenlit resumed his duties as the head of the Oreous. The signs were clear that unless change was forced, Daruk would not leave his post as regent. Some more actions were taken by Daruk to tighten his grip on power. A policy of controlling the movement of people in and out of the city was instituted. It meant that Serenlit had to relocate into a small village. This decision was voted for unanimously by the Oreous because of the fear of discovery. Daruk had arrested several members of the group already and it was only a matter of time before Serenlit's hiding place in the city was searched. That would bring an end to the Oreous. Nothing was to stop Serenlit. He worked day and night devising the ways to subvert Daruk and Daruk worked day and night trying to find those plotting against him.

Daruk talked to Jill while she was supposed to be asleep and under his control.

"Do you know the man by the name of Serenlit. I have heard his name several times from my sources."

Jill replied,

"No, great one, I do not know him."

"Ok, my little girl."

When Jill was going to see Serenlit, she would climb out of the window of her bedroom and pass through the back gate which only had two guards, both of them loyal to her. Serenlit never got a message from her so he was never sure when she would arrive. It made him furious that she would come at random times. He wanted to see her living with him. Yet he understood that if she stayed with him, Daruk would certainly destroy the Oreous. This time she came in the middle of the night and woke him up. While they were making love nothing else mattered. It was because they belonged to each other. Serenlit afterwards thought about the attack he was planning on Daruk. He had to be more cautious this time. He was still not completely sure that Jill was not under Daruk's spell. But, he believed that now he must attack from the side. Daruk's greatest weakness was his lack of trust in anyone. This meant that no one would help Daruk if he really fell.

Chapter 24 - The story contest

Larfat was trapped. He was walking home from the Oreous meeting when several SEDs came out of nowhere and ordered him to follow them. He did not think he would make it back alive.

Serenlit did not know about Larfat's capture, but his sixth sense was telling him something was wrong. The next day Serenlit went to a game of talerich. The point of the game was to see who could tell the richest story about the things they passed on the road.

One of the story tellers was Darmos.

He started, "I was walking in Favista the other day."

"What did you see?" shouted everyone.

"I saw a cart driven by a horse."

"There is no way you saw a cart driven by a horse."

Horses were sacred animals in Urta. They were never harnessed or ridden.

"You know, Darmos, you must have finally drunk yourself stupid on the palm wine. But don't confuse your silly ideas with reality. Ostriches pull carts," said a bystander.

Darmos wanted to argue, but everyone just said,

"That's rich, who's got another story?"

A stranger began his tale.

"I was walking late last night ..."

Darmos interrupted him, "Everyone knows that curfew starts at ten."

"Trust me," replied the stranger, "I was walking late last night."

"And you saw on your way an empty street. Great story, now let me tell you something really rich."

The stranger seemed unaffected by Darmos' words. "I was worried about being caught and so I hid in an empty building. Or so I thought. Inside I saw a man tied to a chair and two SEDs were interrogating him. Now here's the craziest part," the man paused to make sure that no one missed what followed. "The SEDs were hitting with all their force, but the man didn't say a word."

At this point Serenlit started listening more attentively. "Do you remember what the SEDs were

asking the man?"

The teller said, "A lot of different questions, but I heard one word repeatedly, Orefus or Oreus. Do you know what it means?"

Serenlit did his best to hide the fear. He continued as if he was simply determining how true the tale was. "And do you remember the name of this hero?"

"Larfat, I remember it distinctly."

Serenlit remembered that earlier feeling in his gut. But he did not want to raise any suspicions. "Now, that's a rich tale. I know Larfat I just saw him yesterday afternoon."

The stranger hesitated, but said "That was the last night."

Serenlit said, "There is no possible reason for Larfat to get arrested. He is one of the most respected men I know."

Urtans did not like this dark tale and so quickly someone started telling an even richer story. Meanwhile Serenlit slipped out of the group and headed for the city.

Chapter 25 - Larfat

At the gates guards were 'facilitating' the traffic in and out of the city.

Serenlit saw an opening. The guards were occupied trying to get a vendor to give them a bribe. Serenlit straightened his posture, and walked in like a SED off duty.

He quickly made his way to Larfat's house. Larfat's wife met him at the gate. She grabbed him by the hands and cried out,

"I haven't seen Larfat since last night. Do you know what happened to him?"

Serenlit tried to comfort her.

He said, "I'll do everything I can to find your husband."

In five minutes Serenlit was back on the street more lost than before. His mind kept coming back to Jill, she was the only one who could save Larfat now. Jill could be able to get into Larfat's cell. She was close enough to Daruk to find out where Larfat was held. To get in touch with Jill

was difficult. The guards kept her under close watch. But Serenlit thought he could get in through the back gate. He considered the ways to get Larfat out. His best friend was in the darkest chambers of Daruk's prison. The only possible way of bringing his friend to air Serenlit could think of was by assuming Daruk's identity. He had been told before that he looked a lot like Daruk when he wore a beard and mustache. In what way was he like Daruk he could not figure out himself. To him Daruk was an old man while he was in his youth's prime. But what could he do, there was no other way to rescue his friend.

First, he needed to find out where exactly Larfat was held. Jill must be contacted, and, as he planned, he found his way to her bedroom. The time was close to the hour when Daruk usually came to see her. He saw that Jill was getting ready for bed.

She asked him, "Why, in the world, did you come here?".

"Larfat is in trouble. I need your help."

Jill said, "What did you have in mind?"

"Ask Daruk where he is kept."

"Ok. I'll ask."

Daruk was coming soon and Serenlit needed to prepare himself for his greatest role ever. He went back to Leon's place to get ready. She had some make up and he bought some fake facial hair which he could glue on.

Next evening Jill came over. She had a cloth wrapped around her waist and looked tired.

She came up to Serenlit. She said, "You have no idea what I went through."

She told him that Daruk was planning to interrogate Larfat himself tomorrow. If Serenlit did not rescue him now, the Oreous would be destroyed. Serenlit told her about his plan. At first, Jill laughed. Daruk was much older than Serenlit and different in stature. But once she thought about it, she started to see that there was something similar about them. She took another look at Serenlit. They were twins. But why was Daruk so much older? Time passed at different speeds in parallel realities, she realized.

Jill decided not to tell Serenlit about her thoughts. Serenlit meanwhile dressed in a tunic similar to the one Jill told him Daruk would wear. He was ready for action. An hour before sunset he left

the house. Just as the sun went down he reached the prison gates. He was greeted by the guards.

Serenlit spoke, "I am here to interrogate a prisoner."

The guards were confused. Daruk never came to interrogate a prisoner. They were always brought to him. The great chain shook. Larfat's freedom hung in the balance. Serenlit thought for less than a second and decided to take action. He hit the guard on the left with a spear from the guard's hand. The second guard threw a heavy punch, and Serenlit fell to the floor. He kicked the guard in the groin as he was falling. The guard bent over as Serenlit jumped up and kicked him again. Serenlit then grabbed the keys out of the guard's hand and ran into the gate of the prison.

Chapter 26 - The chase

As Serenlit ran down the stairs he could hear heavy footsteps of the guards close behind him. Jill said Larfat was kept in one of the bottom row cells. That was all she could gather. Serenlit called out, "Larfat" but there was no answer. The guards steps seemed closer and closer. Suddenly, Serenlit heard the sound of Larfat's voice. It was coming from a small cell nearby.

Serenlit put in the ancient key and opened the door. Larfat lay in the middle of the cell. It seemed all his strength had been drawn out of him in a long battle. Serenlit picked the old man up and ran back through the cell door. At the door the guards had just run up. Serenlit pushed the door against the guards' heads. The strong impact had the guards bounce back good five yards. Serenlit continued running with Larfat on his shoulder. He made his way up the stairs one flight at a time. Having reached the middle of the stairway he fell in exhaustion. Larfat was a heavier man than him. Serenlit knew he could not make it up the stairs by himself. Larfat meanwhile started showing signs of life. Serenlit remembered that he had some tobacco in his pouch. He put it under Larfat's nose. A loud sneeze emerged from the weak man's nostrils.

He looked around quickly and asked Serenlit, "Where am I?"

Serenlit replied, "Let's go, old friend, no time for talking."

They started running up the stairs again.

Larfat said as he was running, "It was as if I had a bad dream. I feel so weak."

Serenlit asked his friend, "Do you remember what they asked you?"

Larfat said he could not remember much. They ran out of the gates.

After they reached safety Serenlit said to Larfat, "Just try not to worry too much. Someone told me already about your heroics."

Larfat replied, "Thanks, friend."

Serenlit would have been tougher on anyone else, but he knew Larfat well. His friend would not have betrayed the Oreous. In a few minutes they were at Serenlit's place. They sat down to a cup of tea made from roots and plants collected in the forest. Serenlit put some bread and meat on the table. Larfat was clearly famished. He ate with his hands all that was put before him. Only after the third portion did he sit back in his chair and light his pipe. Larfat recounted all he could remember about the past few days.

The last thing that Larfat remembered clearly was that he was walking home from his tavern when he found himself surrounded on all sides by a group of SEDs. He tried to fight, with some success, until he was put down by a heavy blow of the dull end of a spear. He lost consciousness until he was woken up with a bucket of ice cold water in the back of his own tavern. He was then interrogated by two SED sergeants. Larfat was a strong man, and as far as he remembered he said nothing about the Oreous or Serenlit. But Larfat did not know if he had been put under Daruk's spell without him knowing, the same way Jill was. If so, Oreous was in immediate danger.

Again Serenlit went to Jill to see if she had the answer.

Jill said, "I don't know for sure, but Daruk was saying something the other night about a prisoner escaping."

"And?"

"He seemed upset because it appeared he did not get to spend any 'quality time' with the prisoner."

Serenlit said, "That means Daruk never got to Larfat."

He breathed a sigh of relief. The Oreous was safe for now.

Chapter 27 - Daruk's empire grows

After the victory over Favista, Daruk was confident he could further expand his domain. Down the shore of the Horian sea, there stood another great city, Yusta. In Yusta, there lived peaceful people who had no King. They also had no army to speak of since they were not at war with any

of their neighbors. The Yustans had an unwritten pact with the Urtans to come to each other's aid in times of war and leave each other alone in times of peace. But Daruk had little regard for pacts of any kind, and one night an army marched out of the Urta's main gates. Again the army was led by Daruk's force of mindless goblins. They were the Terrible Ten, and the first among them was Goldfinder. Unable to resist Daruk's will, he had been transformed from an enemy to a most excellent goblin.

It took the army three days to reach Yusta. The troops marched non-stop taking just four hours a night to sleep. They were tired but the commanders pushed them forward. Having devastated all the farms on its way, the army arrived at the gates of Yusta. The elders of the city called out to the army standing in front of the city gates, "What do you seek here?"

Goldfinder replied, "We are only looking for your lives."

"We thought we had an agreement with Daruk."

"Daruk makes no agreements. Surrender now or your city will be destroyed."

"That we will not allow to happen," replied the city leaders.

"Let the battle begin then," shouted Goldfinder and the Urtan army roared behind him.

The Urtan army did as Goldfinder had said. The plunder, save a small fraction left in the hands of the troops, was collected and taken back to Urta. The worst part of the whole affair was disregard that the troops had for human life. The city was empty after the brutality. The way back was a prolonged celebration with the troops reveling in victory and enjoying the food and drink they had taken from the Yustans. Again the city of Urta was full of delight.

Serenlit met with Jill on the outskirts of the city.

He said, "What am I to do, sweetheart? It is killing me that you are married to another man."

Jill replied, "But if I leave Daruk, the Oreous will be destroyed."

"I know, sweetheart. That's why I feel the way I do."

Serenlit put his arms around Jill, "I need to kiss you."

And they ended the conversation there. There seemed to be no way out for the two lovers. But Serenlit was hurting. He wanted to forget about his worries, so he went to a party held in

celebration of the Urta's victory. The party was at Leon's house. Leon was still getting flower orders from the palace, so for her this victory meant more money. Serenlit had not seen Leon since she kicked him out of her house ten months ago. Sometimes he missed the quiet flower shop where the stranger had sent him. Some bouquets that Leon had made such an impression on Serenlit that during times of despair his mind turned back to the bright colors in perfect arrangement. At the party, Serenlit drank a lot of palm wine. He felt he needed to refocus his mind to a calm place. But the next morning nothing had changed. Daruk was still the emperor and he - a nobody.

Serenlit decided to talk to Larfat. Only his old friend could help him.

"Larfat, I want to have Jill near me."

Larfat replied, "The time will come, dear friend. Have patience."

Serenlit thought it over. Larfat was right again. There was nothing to be gained from worrying about the obvious. Serenlit concentrated again on the Oreous. As after the victory over Yusta, almost everyone had been too busy enjoying the festivities to think over anything else. It was again an uphill road.

Chapter 28 - The great cloud

In the months following the Urtan victory over Yusta, several new laws were put in place. First, any young man not serving in the security forces would now face the possibility of execution without a trial. This meant Serenlit could no longer walk freely in the city and could hardly leave his small house. He began wearing disguises and gained weight to appear older. Jill was slightly disturbed when she saw Serenlit with an unsightly belly. Serenlit worked day and night. After the new laws took force, more and more SEDs began attending the Oreous meetings. Serenlit believed that if he could get enough SEDs to switch sides, eventually Daruk's hold on power would slip. But this was not an easy enterprise. The SEDs saw the benefits of being on the winning side. They were feared, if not respected, in the city. They had a later curfew and other perks, large and small. Still the brutalities of the regime put off a lot of them.

Sometimes it seemed to Serenlit that Daruk's rule might come to an end before too long. Unfathomable cruelty was all that kept Daruk at the top of the power pyramid. However, it would be another fifteen years before Daruk's rule would finally crumble. Serenlit couldn't know that and he was pushing the Oreous forward. He made an earnest effort to get the Favistas to help him in his struggle. He went to Favista to talk to their King. Daruk was slowly but surely exterminating the Favistas by forcing them to work unfathomable hours with almost no food or

water: there was no love lost there. As for the Yustans , most of them perished in the recent war with Urta, but those that remained would do anything to see Daruk answer for his crimes. Still the Oreous and its supporters lacked the necessary resources. They had heart, but they did not have spears.

Serenlit thought of possible ways to get wild men of the forest to join his cause. They lived in tribes on the outskirts of Urta's Kingdom. They did not keep any contact with people in the city, but sometimes they would walk the fields at night looking for potatoes and crops. They maintained no allegiances and fended only for themselves. But Serenlit knew they could be a valuable ally.

Serenlit talked to Larfat about his plans. Larfat looked at him with concern, "Serenlit, I don't think that's such a good idea. I've heard of people going into the forest never to return."

Serenlit was not to be stopped. He knew that right now he did not have enough men under his command to take on Daruk. Whatever the cost, even if it was risking his life, he was ready to pay it. Serenlit packed a light lunch. As he went to sleep he thought about the ways to convince the wild men to join forces with the Oreous. There wasn't much he could say. The next morning was wet and cloudy. Serenlit walked along a narrow path into the forest. The rain did not penetrate inside the canopy of the ancient trees. But outside the sound of the water droplets bouncing against the protecting cover could still be heard. He wondered whether he would survive through the day. Suddenly he was lost. He thought he had followed a path, but somewhere he must have gotten off. He felt some drops of rain making their way through the leaves onto his nose.

Serenlit decided to climb a tree to see if he could make out his location. The trunks were decaying and wet. The way up was difficult, but Serenlit was known as an expert tree climber in Urta. Back in Leon's shop he would climb trees to collect exotic flowers she planted in small pots up in the tree branches to keep them in the shade throughout the day. At the top branch he stood up to get a better view. Then he saw them.

The wild men had built houses in tree branches all throughout. They must have been aware of his presence since the moment he entered the forest. They let him pass. But for Serenlit that was not enough.

He shouted, "I need to talk to you."

There was no answer.

"I need your help to defeat Daruk."

Again the forest was silent. No matter how hard Serenlit pleaded his case, only his echo could be heard in response. Eventually his voice left him and he had to return.

Larfat hugged his friend when he entered the door late that night. Serenlit went straight to bed without saying a word. The next day he told Larfat what happened.

Larfat said, "I am amazed, actually, that they let you pass unhurt. I have heard bad stories about the wild men."

Serenlit replied, "But that's not what I need."

"Count your blessings - you have your life, you have a beautiful girl loving you, and you have a great friend," said Larfat with a smile.

Serenlit laughed. Larfat could not be a better friend.

"What do we do with the Oreous?"

"Same thing we have done. Our time will come."

"But our forces are insufficient to defeat Daruk."

"Let us do what we can."

"I want to prevent any future destruction. You saw what happened to the Yustans, how Daruk razed their city to the ground."

Serenlit did need some way to justify his hatred for Daruk. It extended beyond the normal desire to destroy one's enemy. He almost felt pain when he thought about Jill in Daruk's arms for however brief a time. At the same time somehow Serenlit could predict Daruk's next move as if some strange connection existed between them. Serenlit thought about Jill's words.

She said to Serenlit once, "You and Daruk are more alike than you think."

Serenlit said, "You are wrong."

And he really felt that way. The one bit of truth he saw in Jill's words was the way he knew what Daruk was thinking about doing next. What he did not know is that Daruk also had an idea of what was going on with Serenlit and the Oreous. The assassination attempt did not just fail because of Jill, but because Daruk had the power to look into Serenlit's heart the same way that

Serenlit looked into his head. Daruk felt the strength of the bond that united the two. It was the unbreakable bond of blood. For Daruk it was a mystery as well why he felt like he had a brother. If his mother had any other children, they surely must have died in the jail cell. No one could have survived what he went through.

Serenlit ignored those feelings. He had some doubts about his Merdal parentage, but he could not have imagined that he had come from Urta.

Chapter 29 - The Jastans

Daruk did not care to think about the Oreous' existence. He felt that, if needed, he could destroy it at any time he wanted. He had annihilated a Kingdom and enslaved another. He felt invincible. He had only one real enemy now - the Jastans. They were ruled by a mighty King, Relgor, who was well acquainted with Daruk. Relgor had met him several times during the days when Daruk was a merchant. Although Daruk was able to fool many people into believing in his goodness and decency, Relgor was not so easily deceived. From the beginning Relgor knew that Daruk was an evil man. He had not been swayed by Daruk's intelligence or charm. To him Daruk's plans were transparent. Daruk desired power over others and would go to any length to get it. However high the cost, Daruk was willing to pay it to increase his dominion over men. Relgor was ready to defend his Kingdom. As Daruk was expanding his domain by sword and fire, Relgor was building an army to fight Daruk's forces. He knew about the Urtans' extermination of the Yustans and he would not let his people be enslaved or exterminated.

This novel was left unfinished because of the untimely death of its author; prepared for informal publication by V. Iakhnine.