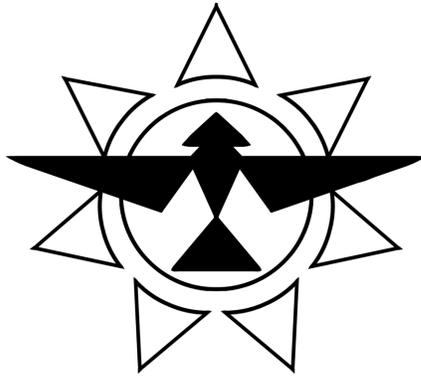


# The Mirror Of Dùmsarò

Book Four of *The Seven Wars*

E. H. Kindred



A Novel Of The Somaðarsath

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All the hapless silent lovers,  
All the prisoners in the prisons, all the righteous and the wicked,  
All the joyous, all the sorrowing, all the living, all the dying,  
Pioneers! O pioneers!

I too with my soul and body,  
We, a curious trio, picking, wandering on our way,  
Through these shores amid the shadows,  
    with the apparitions pressing,  
Pioneers! O pioneers!

Lo, the darting bowling orb!  
Lo, the brother orbs around, all the clustering suns and planets,  
All the dazzling days, all the mystic nights with dreams,  
Pioneers! O pioneers!

...  
Has the night descended?  
Was the road of late so toilsome? did we stop discouraged,  
    nodding on our way?  
Yet a passing hour I yield you in your tracks to pause oblivious,  
Pioneers! O pioneers!

Til with sound of trumpet,  
Far, far off the daybreak call—hark! how loud and clear  
    I hear it wind,  
Swift! to the head of the army! —swift! spring to your places,  
Pioneers! O pioneers!

—Walt Whitman  
Excerpted from "Pioneers! O pioneers!"

## Chapter One

The kingdom was in a state of joyous celebration. For the past week, the land had been ringing with the sound of singing and music. It was the first time in hundreds of years they were truly safe. The rebel Vortearigan, who had waged war for centuries, who had once brought the kingdom of Etheria to its knees, had been defeated. His defeat was brought about by the single greatest union to ever stand together in the history of the kingdom; an alliance of seven races, their victory solidifying their friendship and issuing in what everyone expected to be a new age of prosperity and peace.

Celebrating both the victory and the new year, the High King Lavancer hosted a week of lavish festivals and feasts, inviting all of the United races to attend and share in the joy. The castle, its courtyard, and the fields beyond teemed with laughter and dancing. While all of the races were invited inside, there were mostly humans, as the larger races, such as the dragons, simply couldn't get into the castle with so many people. Likewise, the centaurs, unicorns and moranters opted to stay out in the courtyard, preferring the open space. Most of the griffins stayed outside as well, perching on the ramparts, except for their leader, Ossifer, who muscled his way inside in search of the best wine. Some of the fairies ventured into the hall, keeping their wings tucked low so to not take up too much space.

The castle was bustling that night with feasting and laughing. The early spring air was cool, and all of the windows were open to allow the crisp breeze inside. It was the final night of the celebrations, and the Great Hall was full of people in elegant costumes of all colors.

There was one man in the hall who drew many glances over the course of the evening. It was not because of the rich red coat he wore, embroidered with fine gold stitching. Nor was it because of his skin, which was as pale as the moon rising in the east, seeming a stark contrast to the velveteen black of his hair that fell across his shoulders. Nor, for once, was it because of his eyes, eyes as red as the blood he had spilled on the battlefield. It was because this man was Lask, and it was he who had slain Vortearigan and brought the kingdom together.

Lask sat at the nobles' table, at the right hand of the king where he always sat, but he was aware of all the eyes in the hall that fell upon him with a new interest, and he sat proud and calm under their inspection, not showing that so many glances made him uneasy. It had been that way for the past week, and he supposed he was starting to get used to being watched, and thought it was only fair, as he had always watched everyone else with keen, inspecting, eyes. As the Protector, he kept a constant vigil over the safety of the king and the kingdom.

“Smile,” said his wife, Myranda, from beside him, “You look a lot less scary that way.”

Lask gave her a fond smile and replied,

“I don’t like people watching me eat.”

“It’s the last night,” she answered. “We’ll be back home in the peace and quiet all by ourselves tomorrow.”

Lask was looking forward to the day. While he enjoyed the merriment at the castle, he missed the quiet evenings by the fire when it was just him and Myranda, and it had been a long time since he’d been able to sit in a moment of absolute peace, not having the worries of war upon his shoulders.

“Dance with me,” Myranda said when the meal had ended and the music began. She tugged at his hand with an enticing smile.

Lask obliged, leading her down from the nobles’ table onto the main floor among the other couples. They stepped around the hall, admiring the general splendor amid the merry tune and the rhythmic stepping of so many feet. Myranda twirled away from him as the dance changed partners and Lask found himself across from the Head Ambassador.

“Fiora,” he said with a smile, drawing her to him into the step, “You’re looking particularly lovely.”

“And you are as eerily dashing as always,” she replied with a teasing smile. “Your victory has brought you many admirers. You should count yourself lucky that you’re already married, else you’d surely have your hands full.”

Lask gave her a crooked, roguish smile, at which Fiora couldn’t help but laugh.

“Now if only we can keep it this way,” said the ambassador, “With the peace. I certainly hope no one decides to take their chance and disrupt our happiness; the Hydras or the Wraiths, for example.”

“I hope they give us at least a month,” Lask replied, “Though I do think we should take up negotiations with the Hydras soon, particularly given the way they responded when we invited them to join the United.”

“That will be an interesting discussion, to be sure,” muttered the ambassador.

She spun away from him as the partner change came again, and Lask turned to find himself standing across from his best friend, the general.

“How did that happen?” asked Forge.

“You never were very good at dancing,” Lask remarked.

The two decided to walk alongside each other in the general flow of the room, so to not get in the other couples’ way.

“What was that you were speaking to Fiora about?” asked Forge. “You both looked so serious all of a sudden.”

“The Hydras,” Lask replied.

“Honestly, you can’t even enjoy the peace for a week before you start worrying about another war,” Forge said, giving him an accusing nudge with his elbow.

“Can’t help myself.”

Forge shook his head and wandered off the dance floor for a drink. Myranda soon returned to her husband.

“Leave it to Forge to throw off one of the simplest steps,” she said with a fond smile.

Lask chuckled, pulling her back to him, leading her in a turn about the room. As he led her, he looked over her shoulder, seeing a faint, green curl of smoke winding up from between the stone in the floor, almost lost between the flurry of dancing feet. Myranda noticed his expression darken and looked back, catching sight of it as well.

“What is that?” she asked.

The smoke was thickening, drawing more attention, and people were stopping in the midst of the dance to draw back from it. Lask let go of Myranda, working his way through the crowd toward it. Myranda followed in his wake, but before they could reach it, there was a blinding flash of green light and a bellowing crack of thunder. Several people screamed in the chaos. When the light cleared, they could see that something had appeared in the middle of the floor.

It was a mirror, at least twelve feet high, with its grey-black frame stretching even taller. The frame was carved with pointed knotwork, ordinarily beautiful designs, but twisted and sharpened into something far more sinister. At the base of the mirror was carved a series of Aetherian symbols, a language few could still read. And though it was a mirror, it reflected nothing.

A face appeared in the glass; a hideous, gaunt face, with a hooked nose and skin sunken under sharp cheekbones, as if it were a skull that had been hurriedly covered in stretched greyish skin. Dark brows furrowed over black eyes that glinted with unnatural reflections as it glanced around the room. Lank, wavy dark hair fell about its head.

“Such a lovely evening,” said the face, in a cold voice that carried a subtle hiss.

The hall had gone deathly silent and Lask had already positioned himself between the mirror and the king, so when the mirror’s black eyes fell on him, it gave a slight, sneering smile.

“Ah yes, our dear Protector. I suppose I ought to thank you. If you and your king had not opened the door several weeks ago, I might still be imprisoned.” Its dark eyes surveyed the room, taking in the wide-eyed faces. “Such shock and horror,” it remarked with a certain satisfied note, “I suppose there must be many dark legends about the Mirror of Dùmsharo.”

A hushed murmur of gasps and whispering went up from the crowd. Lask was still, waiting for the Mirror to make a move, as he was sure it would. He was poised, ready to spring, though he knew not what he could do.

Everyone in the room started when there was crash, but it did not come from the Mirror. The doors of the hall had been blown inward, crashing back against the walls with the wind of another figure’s arrival. The crowd parted in an instant as the newcomer came galloping down the

center of the room, hooves clanging against the floor, leathery wings flared, dragon-like head reared back in a roar. Before he could reach the Mirror, the green light flared again and the Mirror was gone, disappeared as quickly as it had come.

“Damn it all!” swore the creature, coming to a prancing halt. His long scorpion tail swayed back and forth behind him, agitated. Everyone in the room knew this drokamerdor; he was Chai Karan, the Ancient Time. He turned his head, leathery frill flaring as he snapped, “Get everyone out. Now!”

The room hesitated, but Lask agreed with the Ancient and called,  
“Everyone outside.”

As the guests roused themselves out of their stunned stupor they made a quick exit out of the hall. In the midst of the bustle, Chai Karan said,

“Réasdar, Somadar, please stay.”

Lask and Lavancer hung back, bidding a temporary goodbye to their wives. When the hall was empty, the Ancient turned to them. He inspected the king first, with shrewd, penetrating eyes. Lavancer shifted under his scrutiny, uneasy, until the drokamerdor’s gaze swung over to Lask. He studied him for a moment, then said,

“Good God.”

Lask glanced to the side, not knowing how to respond.

“How could you?” asked Chai Karan, shaking his head in disgusted disbelief.

“We were following an old map under the castle,” Lask replied, defensive under the Ancient’s scorn, “We had no idea—”

“Not *you*,” Chai Karan growled, but still looked straight at him to spit, “How *dare* you?”

Lask exchanged a confused glance with Lavancer.

“Lask,” said Chai Karan, “You must come with me into the Void for a moment. There is something we must do.”

“Into the Void?” Lask echoed, uncertain.

“Yes, come. We won’t waste any time that way. Time shall stop the moment I leave. Come, put your hand on my shoulder.”

Lask was reluctant, but nonetheless stepped forward to lay a chalk white hand upon the Ancient’s chestnut coat. Everything seemed to lurch and Lask felt his stomach drop, then all of a sudden, everything was gone. There was complete silence, and only flat, endless grey stretching in all directions. Lask had been here before, in the brief moments when he stepped through the Gate to pass between Etheria and Earth, but now, the nothingness endured, unbroken.

“You may remove your hand,” said Chai Karan, voice deafening in the utter silence. “The denizens of the Void will not dare approach me.”

Lask obeyed, stepping back a bit, feeling lost and not knowing just what kind of *denizens* might be lurking about. Chai Karan’s head swung around, fixing him with that sharp emerald-eyed

stare to snap,

“Get out here *right now*.”

“What are you talking about?” Lask asked, startled and confused.

“Not you,” snarled Chai Karan. “He knows who I’m talking to. Get out here *now!*”

Lask shook his head, wondering if the Ancient Time was in complete possession of his senses, when all of a sudden, he was swept with a strange feeling. Lask felt suddenly hot and feverish, and a wave of nausea swept over him. His breath came quicker and he heard himself gasping, feeling as though he couldn’t get enough air (he had the terrible thought that perhaps there *was* no air in Void and he just hadn’t noticed before). His hands started to shake, the tremor continuing up his arms and down his back, and he was forced to his knees with the sudden dizziness and nausea. He doubled over, coughing, sputtering, feeling like he was drowning, until all of a sudden, he gasped in an enormous breath.

As he exhaled, a strange, white glowing mist passed out of his mouth, following the curls of his breath, drifting up to form into a glowing ball of light beside him.

“How *dare* you?” snarled Chai Karan at the orb.

Lask looked up at the Ancient, then to the light, not knowing what was going on. His surprise was complete when the ball of light replied,

“Oh, don’t sound so indignant.”

“How could you take the Uniter?” demanded Chai Karan, “Do you have any idea what you might have done?”

“Yes, I have a perfectly good idea of that,” answered the light, in a distinctly masculine voice that Lask found somehow familiar. “I have saved his life—several times, I might add; poor fellow is just a beacon for trouble—and continued the Prophecy as it was meant to be. Why, without me, none of it might have happened.”

“Don’t you dare try to take credit for the workings of the Plan—”

“Wouldn’t *dream* of trying to steal *your* glory, old boy. We all know Time’s supposed to be the one who brings it all around. But what you might not know, is that I have an equally important part—”

“Hardly. You are the seventh of us, last Created—”

“Always save the best for last, I say—”

Lask had picked himself up and demanded,

“Would someone kindly tell me what is going on?”

Chai Karan’s head snapped back over to look at him, snarling,

“This fool has—”

“Oh, do shut it, would you?” said the light.

“Then *you* tell him,” growled Chai Karan.

“Don’t mind if I do,” the light answered, sounding pleased. “Now then, my dear Lask, what

do you know about Ancients?”

“They are the seven basic functions of the world,” Lask replied, “Time, Life, Death, Good—”  
“Evil, Mystery, and the Gateway,” finished the light. “Yes. And what else?”

“They each have physical forms within Etheria to carry out their functions, the functions that drive the course of history and allow the One’s Plan to be carried out.”

“Precisely. You always were so very smart, one of the many reasons I like you.”

“We were each allowed to choose a body,” said Chai Karan, with an irritated glance at the light, “At the Beginning when we were put into the world. I took the form of a drokamerdor, Death a dragon, Mystery a human woman, and so on. However, there was one of us who couldn’t make up his mind. He couldn’t decide on a form to have forever, so he chose to take hosts instead.”

“Hosts?” Lask echoed.

“Yes. He would bind himself to the mind of another, often unbeknownst to them, and thus anchor his function to the world through their body. It accomplishes the same end, but he can only use his power vicariously through them, and that’s only after the host has become aware of his presence. He usually makes himself known, but sometimes he finds it best to keep quiet and hidden. Though how he manages that with his incessant jabbering, I’ll never know.”

“I have many talents,” said the light, sounding smug, “You should know that.”

“Wait,” Lask said, catching on. He motioned at the light. “Are you telling me that you are—?”

“The Ancient Gateway,” finished the light, “Keeper of the keys, responsible for the passageways between the four worlds... among other things.” Lask could hear the proud grin in the voice.

“I’ve been host to an Ancient?” Lask asked, stunned. “For how long?”

“About four hundred years now,” answered the light.

Lask let out a disbelieving breath, which sounded like a half-scoff, half-sob. For almost half his life, he’d had another being living inside him and not even known it.

“Why?” he asked after a moment.

“An excellent question,” growled Chai Karan, turning impatient eyes back to the light.

“I thought you’d need the help,” the light replied. “After all, you have such a big part in the Prophecy!” A glare from Chai Karan silenced any more the Gateway might have said on the subject. “And,” the light continued, “I’ve been helping you. You always had a good intuition, but I’ve been making it even keener. Not to mention I’ve helped you survive things, given you stamina in battle, such as with Galator. I even kept you alive after Vortearigan stabbed you. You heard my voice that day, do you remember? And then afterward you were telling Myranda how you’d like to find out who had spoken to you and thank him. You always were such a dear—”

“And you always did meddle in things,” Chai Karan snarled.

“Chai Karan, old friend,” said the Gateway, “Surely you know the Seven Wars Prophecy, and surely you know the Mirror of Dùmсаро was supposed to be next?”

“Yes, of course, I did.”

“Then how, pray tell, would that ever happen, if only an Ancient can open the door? Contrary to popular belief, you don’t always know *everything*.”

Chai Karan was silent, sour at the knowledge of not having made the connection.

“You see?” said the Gateway. “I’ve got it all under control. When Lask and Lavancer went exploring under the castle, they found the Mirror’s cell, and when Lask touched the door, I just released a bit of magic and undid a few of the bindings. The Mirror did the rest. Sorry about shocking your arm that day, Lask.”

Lask’s brow furrowed.

“You released it?” he said. “*Why?*”

“It has to happen,” answered the Gateway. “The future depends on it. Besides, it was only imprisoned because the First didn’t have the means to destroy it during their time.”

“And we have those means now?” Lask said.

“Yes, of course. Now then, what say we go get started taking care of this mess? Hold still, Lask, I’ll take a moment to resituate myself—”

“No,” Lask said, forceful and taking a step back. “I do not want to be host to an Ancient.”

“What?” The light sounded hurt and forlorn. “Why? I need a place to stay in the world. I can be an even greater help to you now that you know I’m there. We could—”

“No,” Lask said. “If you have indeed shared my mind all these years, then you should know I am a man who needs his space and freedom. If I cannot even have that space in my own body and mind—”

“But you still have so much left to go through! You need someone to look out for you, to help you through it all—”

“Why can’t you help me in your *own* body?” asked Lask.

“A question we’ve been asking him since the Beginning,” said Chai Karan, looking smug.

“But I like having someone else’s mind to keep me company. And how could I ever just pick *one* body? There’s so much I like about so many of them—”

“If you can ask for any body you want,” said Lask, “Why not just combine all the elements of your hosts that you liked into one?”

“I must say, I never thought of that,” the light remarked, intrigued. “Such an ingenious fellow you are.”

“No,” Chai Karan said, “We were to pick one of the races—”

“The Creator never said that. He just said to ask for a body of our choosing.”

“Really, Gateway—”

“Might want to step back for a moment.”

Chai Karan huffed and stood still, stubborn, but Lask obeyed, backing up into the nothingness, as the light began to chant,

“Bruste Aucre, é rogantiel sérm fànre cùl mém més estruriòn...”<sup>1</sup>

Chai Karan was shaking his head, but the orb of light repeated the phrase over and over, and the light began to pulse with the rhythm of his speech. The orb began to break its spherical shape, tendrils of light twisting and coiling out of it, whipping in all directions. Chai Karan, though still disapproving, backed up out of reach. The light grew brighter as it moved faster and faster, until it flared so brightly, Lask had to shut his eyes. When he looked again, the light was gone. In its place was a strange creature.

He stood as tall as Lask did, perhaps even taller, on two legs like a man, with a humanoid torso, arms and hands, though his body was covered in thick white fur with black stripes. A long fluffy tail hung down behind him, with two gold barbs on the end. A pair of golden, leathery wings sprouted from his shoulders, matching the tall ears that pricked up on the top of his head. His head was that of a white tiger, with deep blue eyes and pointy-toothed jaws revealed in a broad grin. He was naked, except for a leather bandolier that stretched across his chest, bearing four keys, two of them gold, the other two black iron. He seemed to realize he was naked, bringing his tail up to cover himself, saying,

“Oh dear.” He waved a hand over himself, and he was instantly covered in a flowing white robe with a tall blue collar. Waves of various shades of blue adorned the hem and the edges of the wide sleeves. He shifted around in it, bringing the bandolier out to drape over himself so that it sat outside the robe. When he was done arranging himself, he gave a satisfied nod and announced, “Much better.”

“What have you done to yourself?” Chai Karan demanded.

“I took Lask’s suggestion and combined my favorite features of all my hosts. Rather dashing, don’t you think?” He struck a pose that flexed his muscles and showed off his form.

“You look like a total loon,” growled the drokamerdor, “But I suppose now it will have to do. You’ll need a name.”

“Gonamadé, I think,” replied the Gateway. “Been pondering over it for centuries.”

“What a terrible name.”

“It’s better than *Chai Karan*. For heaven’s sake, you couldn’t settle for just one name, had to give yourself *two*—”

“If I might remind the pair of you,” Lask said, growing irritated with them, “The Mirror of Dùmсаро is free.”

“There is no rush,” Chai Karan replied, “So long as I am in the Void, time has stopped in Etheria.”

“You’re quite right, Lask,” Gonamadé said, “Silly of us to be bantering about when there’s real work to be done. Let’s be off, shall we?” He reached down and plucked the second gold key from

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<sup>1</sup> “Powerful Creator, I beseech you to make me a body of my own.”

the bandolier, holding it aloft.

Everything lurched again, and suddenly all the colors, sounds and smells of the Great Hall came rushing back to assault their senses. Lask found himself standing exactly where he had been beside Chai Karan, only this time, Gonamadé stood on his opposite side. King Lavancer started, as the other Ancient seemed to appear out of nowhere.

“Ah, High King,” said Gonamadé, bending into a sweeping bow, “Ancient Gateway, at your service, sire!”

“Hello,” Lavancer said, eyeing the newcomer.

“I’ll explain later,” Lask told him.

“Come,” said Chai Karan, “The Mirror will surely go after the Dragons, as that was its intended purpose. We must warn Scoarin and her Kyn.”

As Scoarin and many of the Dragons had been attending the festivities, they went out into the courtyard in search of her, but the yard and the fields beyond the walls were devoid of dragons. At the first word the Mirror of Dùmсаро was free, they had all taken to the skies, fleeing back to their lairs.

“Her lair is not far,” Lask said. “We can be there within the hour.”