



Mel Keegan

Ballads and verse
with art by Jade

DreamCraft

MEL KEEGAN

Ballads and Verse

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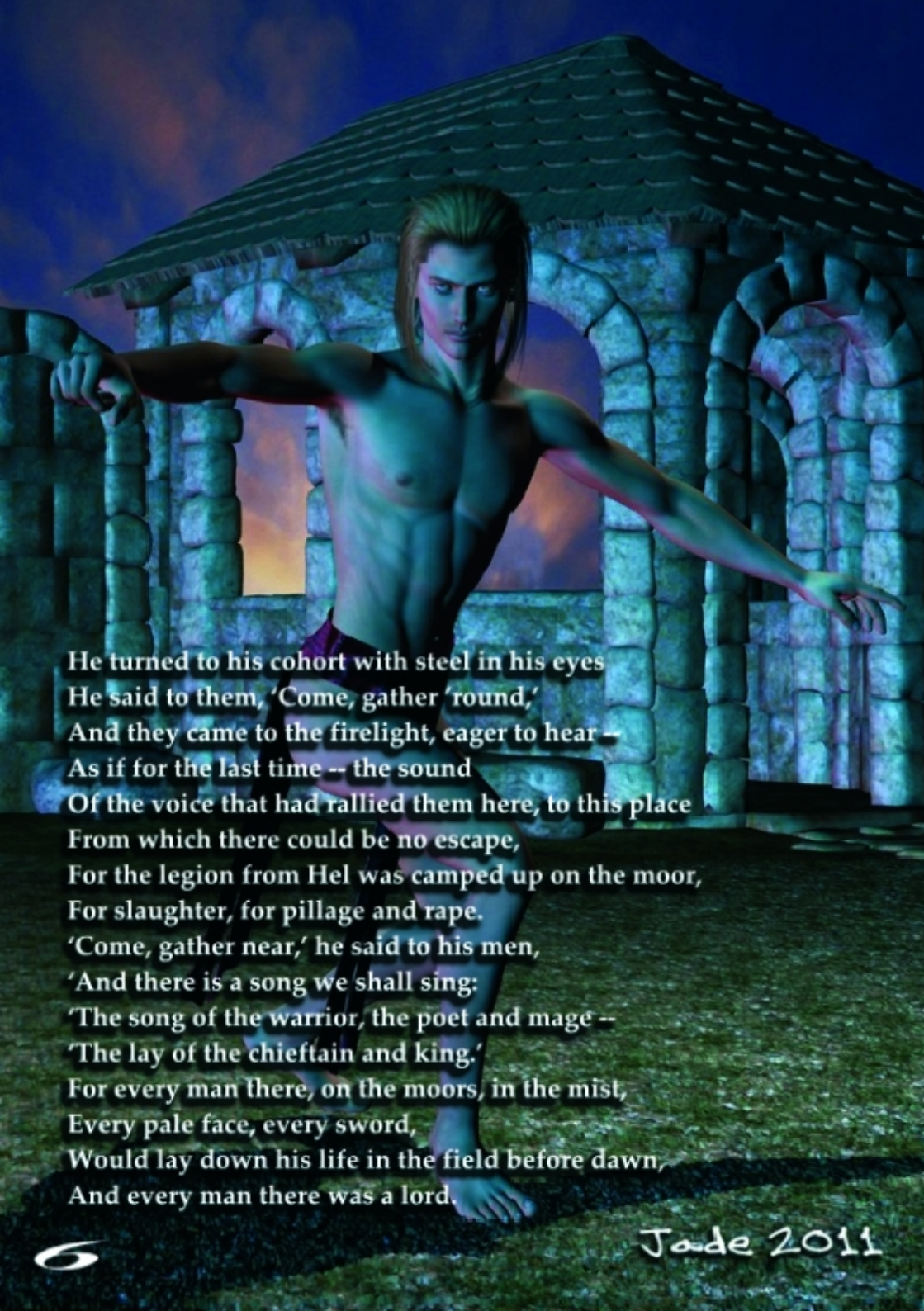


An index of first lines

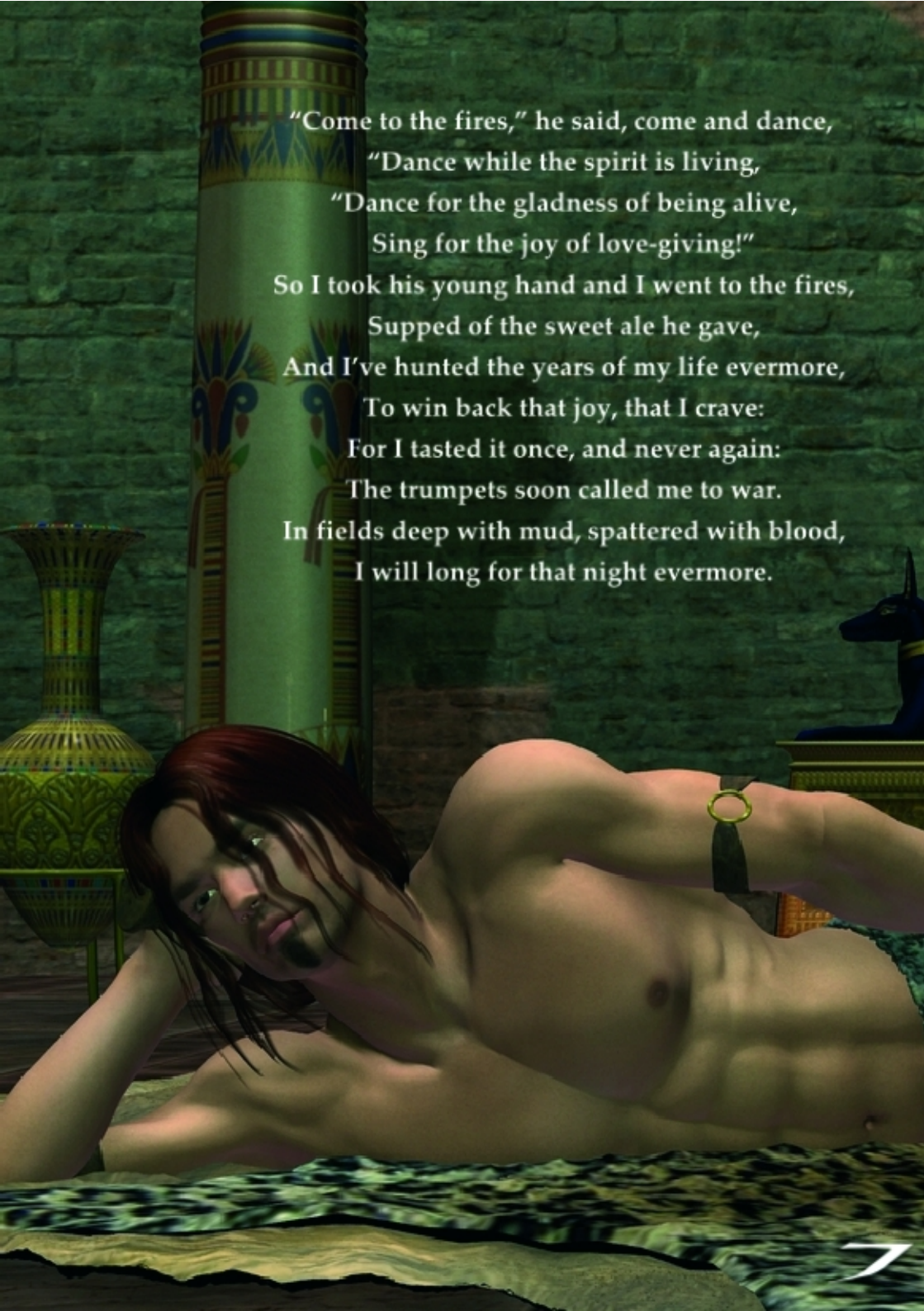
- A half-drawn sword p15
- A legend is told of the man from the north p5
- A whimpering wind and a quiet of stone, p20
- All along the backwaters of my willful mind p10
- At the moment of birth p22
- Can you hear the wind? It whispers p21
- “Come to the fires,” he said, come and dance, p7
- Darkling I listen and oft have I heard p12
- Down came the word, and the word was war p9
- From distant shores p14
- He turned to his cohort with steel in his eyes p6
- “Here,” said the mouse, p17
- Here spins the future, p19
- How shall I say that I have never known p24
- I have passed by the gull’s way p8
- I woke in the night to the sound of a cry p25
- One night I went a-roaming p29
- The wind in the west brings the smells of the sea p23
- When I set out, my mother said p16
- When I was young p13
- When they came in the night p18
- You can hear tomorrow singing p11



A legend is told of the man from the north --
The story is older than time.
He came from a place that no longer exists,
Though if you were willing to climb --
A day and a night over Thunderbird Heights,
Where the wind strips the skin from your face,
Then you'd glimpse a far valley as if in a dream,
And you'd know you had reached the lost place:
The land where your grandsires made magic as old
As the roots of the mountains are deep,
And just as your life ebbed away in the dark
You'd cleave to the secret, to keep
A covenant, ancient and filled with the fire
That passed when the last song was sung --
For this is but legend, just stories we tell
Of the time when the mountains were young.




He turned to his cohort with steel in his eyes
He said to them, 'Come, gather 'round,'
And they came to the firelight, eager to hear --
As if for the last time -- the sound
Of the voice that had rallied them here, to this place
From which there could be no escape,
For the legion from Hel was camped up on the moor,
For slaughter, for pillage and rape.
'Come, gather near,' he said to his men,
'And there is a song we shall sing:
'The song of the warrior, the poet and mage --
'The lay of the chieftain and king.'
For every man there, on the moors, in the mist,
Every pale face, every sword,
Would lay down his life in the field before dawn,
And every man there was a lord.



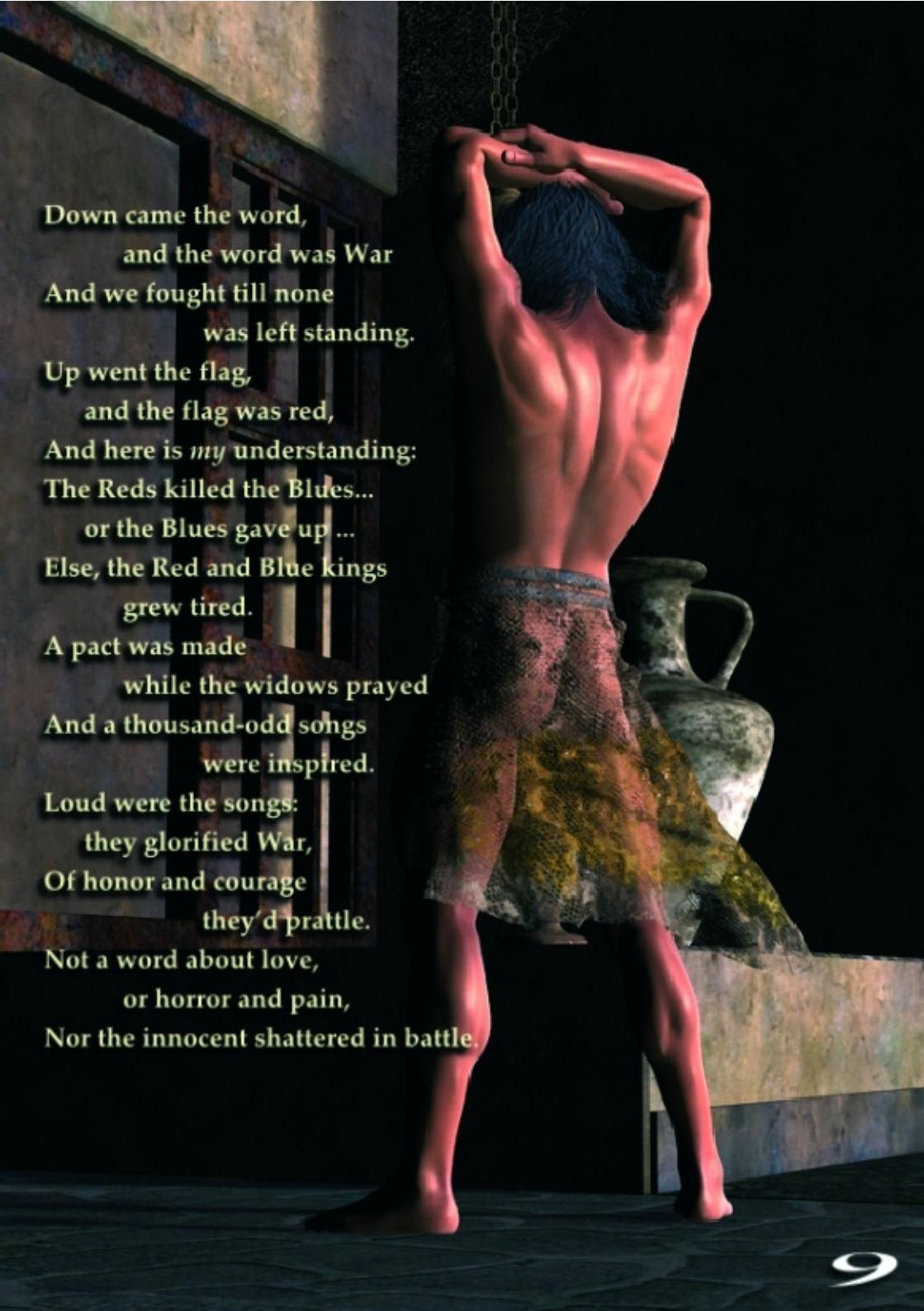
"Come to the fires," he said, come and dance,
"Dance while the spirit is living,
"Dance for the gladness of being alive,
Sing for the joy of love-giving!"

So I took his young hand and I went to the fires,
Supped of the sweet ale he gave,
And I've hunted the years of my life evermore,
To win back that joy, that I crave:
For I tasted it once, and never again:
The trumpets soon called me to war.
In fields deep with mud, spattered with blood,
I will long for that night evermore.



I have passed by the gull's way
and the whale's way — free;
I have cross the Wyld, of ocean
and of sky,
I have heard St. Coreollus speak
and seen St. Aylmer's light...
Seen the whale's wake
and the *draque's* fin
and the gull's flight.

I am here by the dawn star
and the morn wind — home;
I have come by the mist,
the mountain and the sea.
I am come back to settle now
as every rambler must —
Wanting hearth's heat
and love's light
to welcome me.

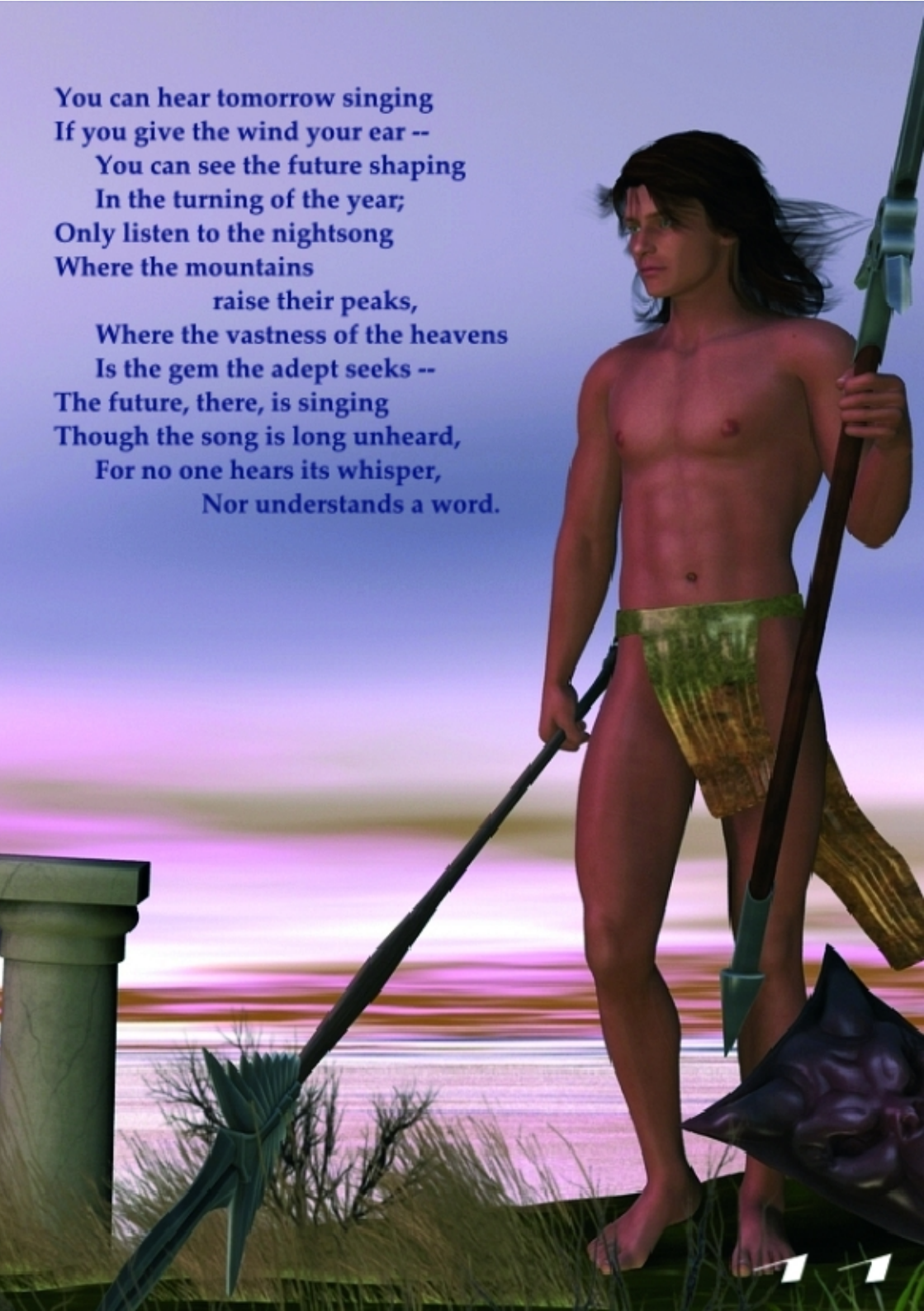


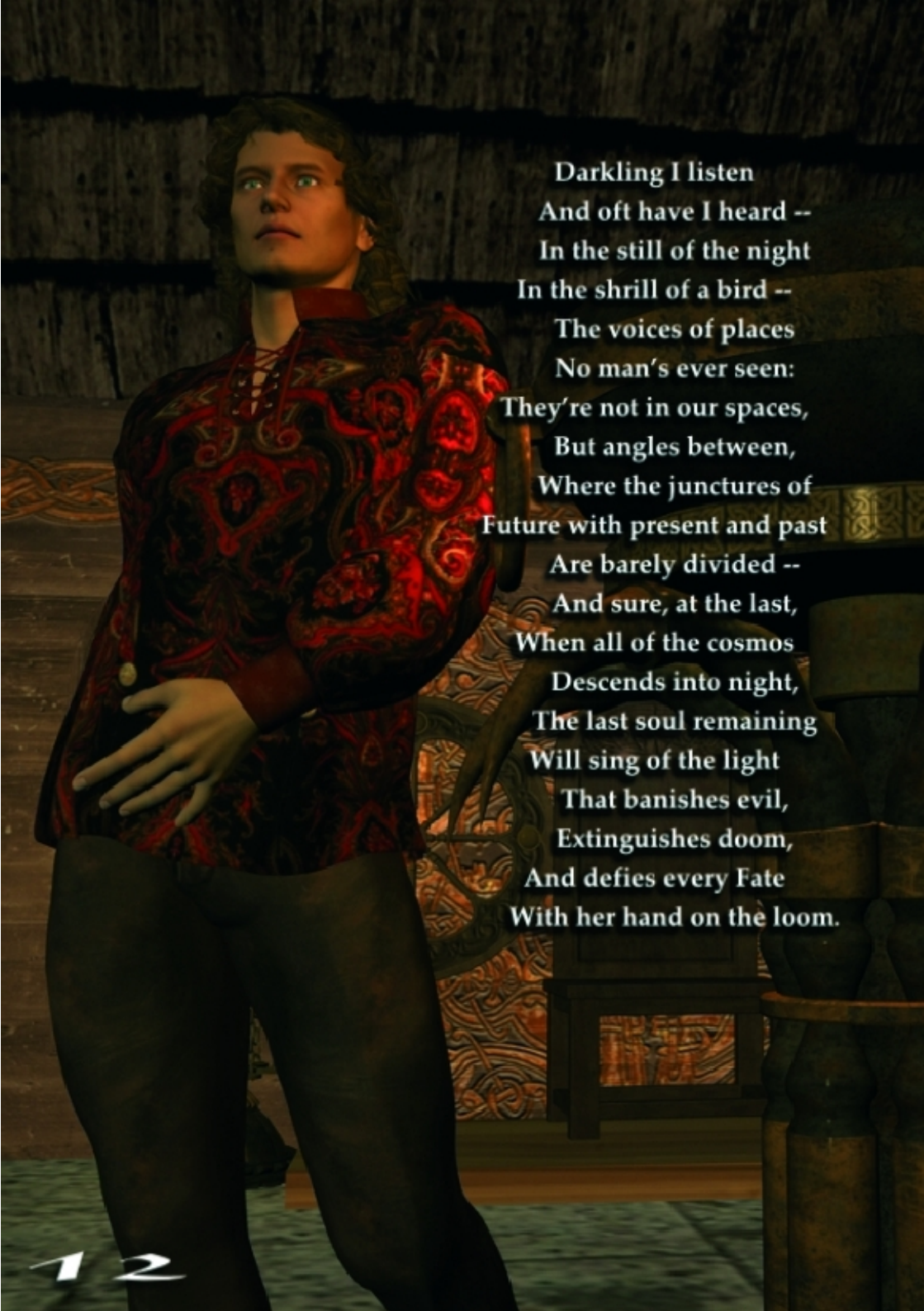
Down came the word,
and the word was War
And we fought till none
was left standing.
Up went the flag,
and the flag was red,
And here is *my* understanding:
The Reds killed the Blues...
or the Blues gave up ...
Else, the Red and Blue kings
grew tired.
A pact was made
while the widows prayed
And a thousand-odd songs
were inspired.
Loud were the songs:
they glorified War,
Of honor and courage
they'd prattle.
Not a word about love,
or horror and pain,
Nor the innocent shattered in battle.

All along the backwaters of my willful mind
Come whispers of the songs that I rambled as a boy;
Some are myths, or legends of the wild and primal kind;
Some are mother's ballads, from her mother, bringing joy.
And then comes the other song from out the well of Dark:
Bloodsong, swordsong, lays of war and strife --
Swift raises up the soul, to such songs, many hark...
And, knowing it, the Dark wells up, and hearty drinks of Life.

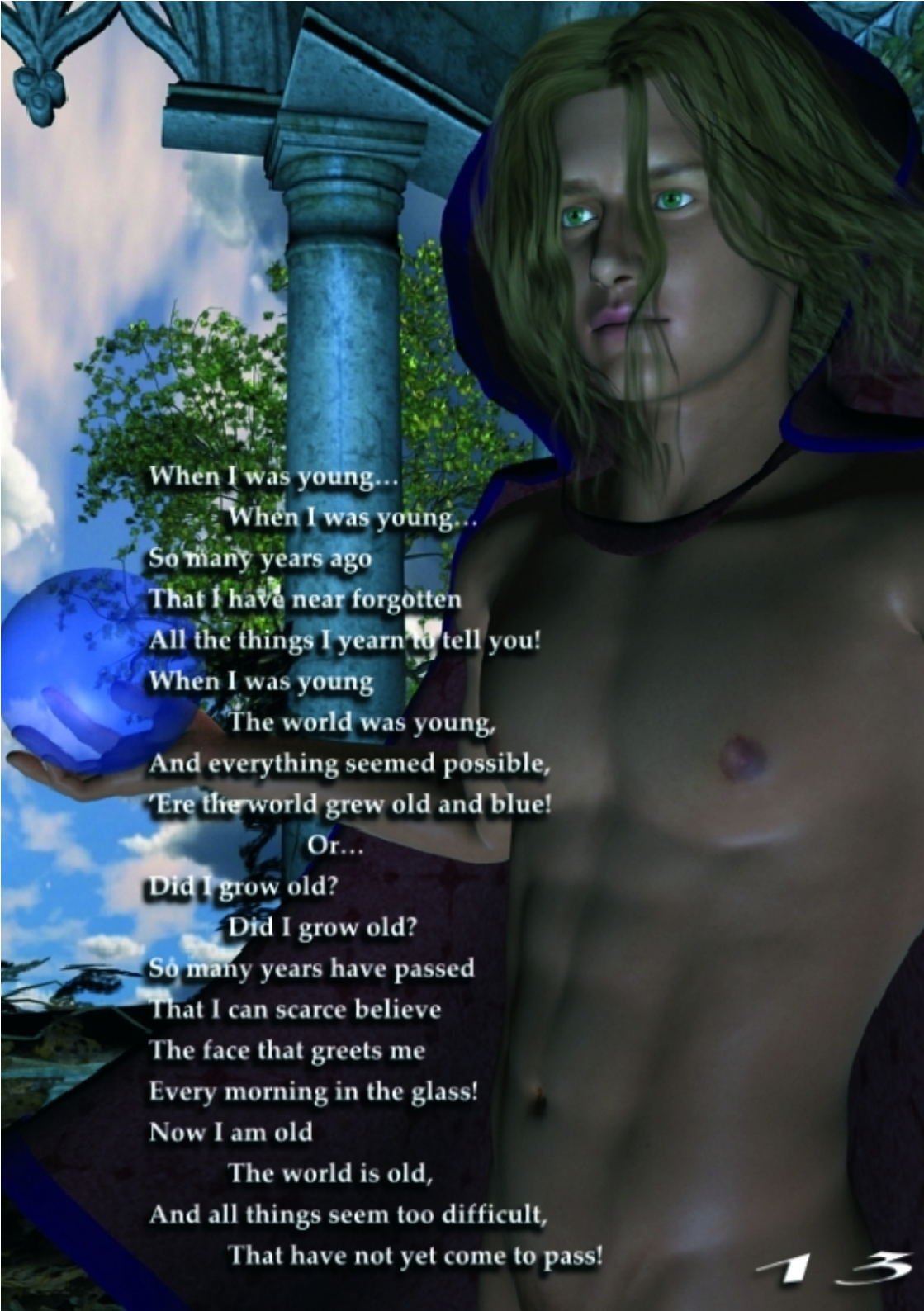


You can hear tomorrow singing
If you give the wind your ear --
 You can see the future shaping
 In the turning of the year;
Only listen to the nightsong
Where the mountains
 raise their peaks,
 Where the vastness of the heavens
 Is the gem the adept seeks --
The future, there, is singing
Though the song is long unheard,
 For no one hears its whisper,
 Nor understands a word.



A woman with long, wavy brown hair and light-colored eyes stands in a rustic, dimly lit room. She is wearing a long-sleeved, high-collared dress with a complex red and black pattern. Her right hand is placed on her hip. The background features wooden walls and a patterned rug. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

Darkling I listen
And oft have I heard --
In the still of the night
In the shrill of a bird --
The voices of places
No man's ever seen:
They're not in our spaces,
But angles between,
Where the junctures of
Future with present and past
Are barely divided --
And sure, at the last,
When all of the cosmos
Descends into night,
The last soul remaining
Will sing of the light
That banishes evil,
Extinguishes doom,
And defies every Fate
With her hand on the loom.



When I was young...

When I was young...

So many years ago

That I have near forgotten

All the things I yearn to tell you!

When I was young

The world was young,

And everything seemed possible,

'Ere the world grew old and blue!

Or...

Did I grow old?

Did I grow old?

So many years have passed

That I can scarce believe

The face that greets me

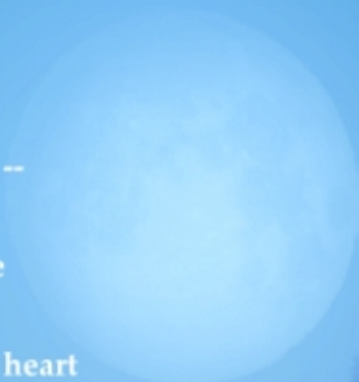
Every morning in the glass!

Now I am old

The world is old,

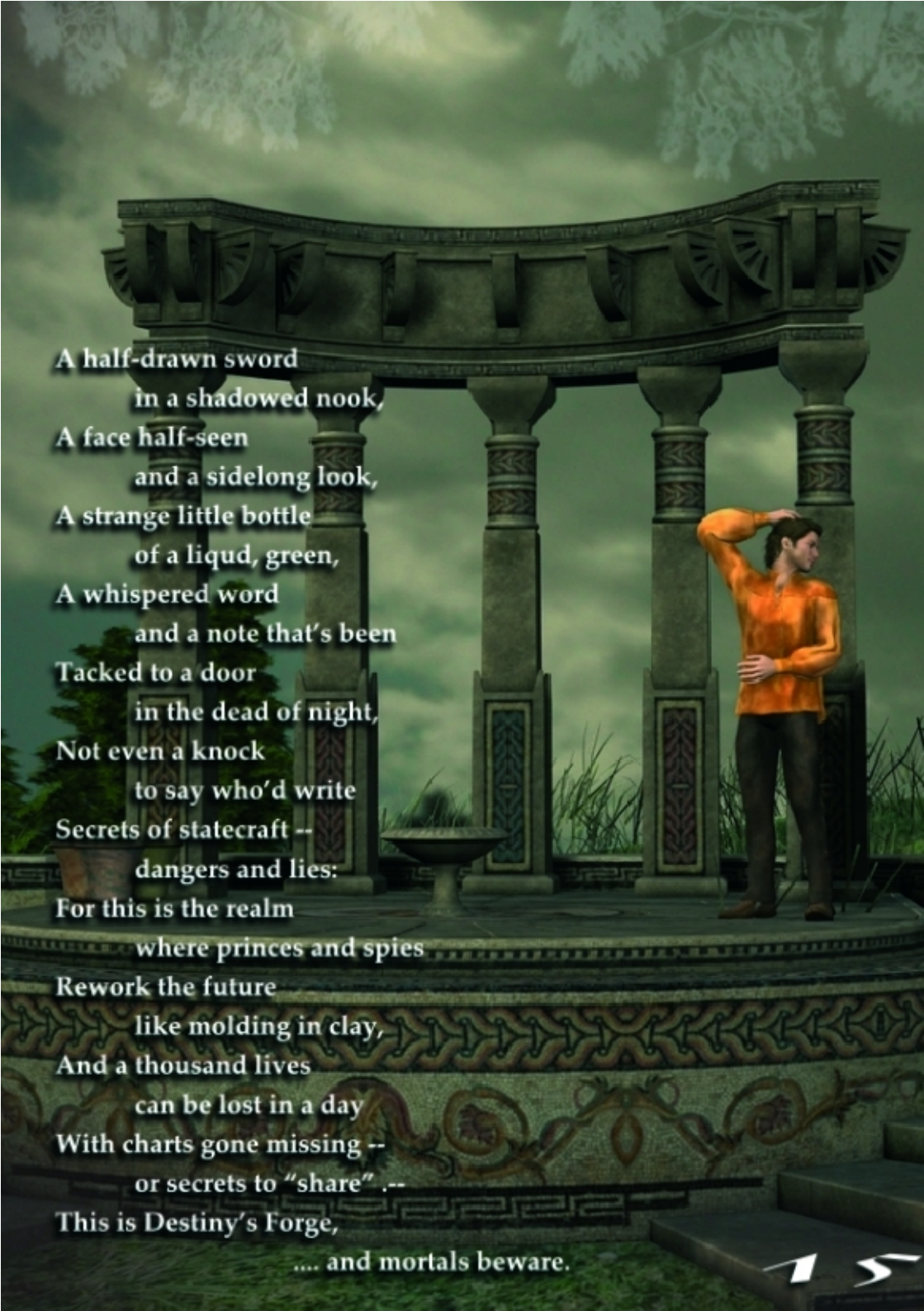
And all things seem too difficult,

That have not yet come to pass!

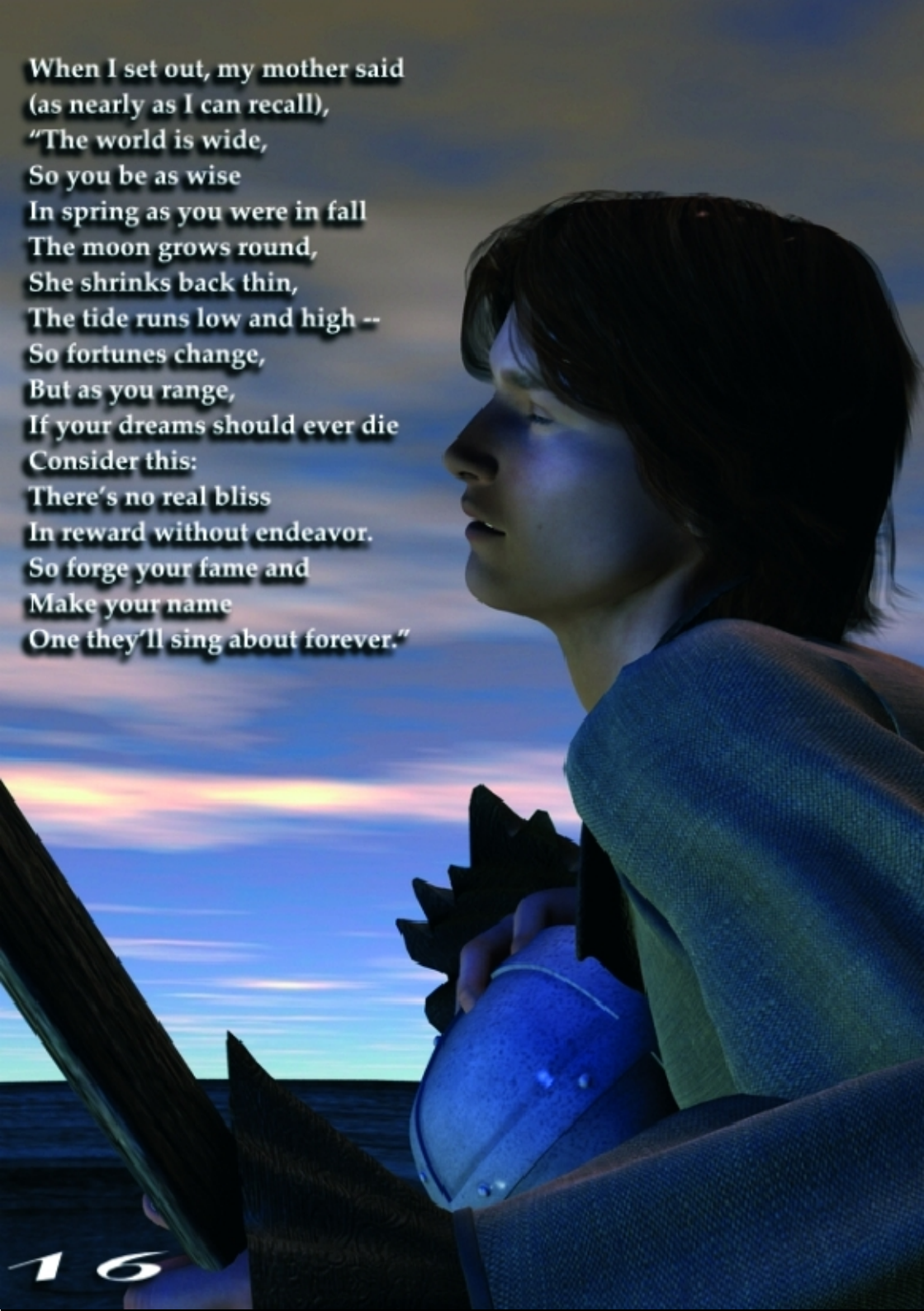


From distant shores
and troubled heights
With joy I am returned
And hoping for fond welcome
From the kinsmen once I spurned --

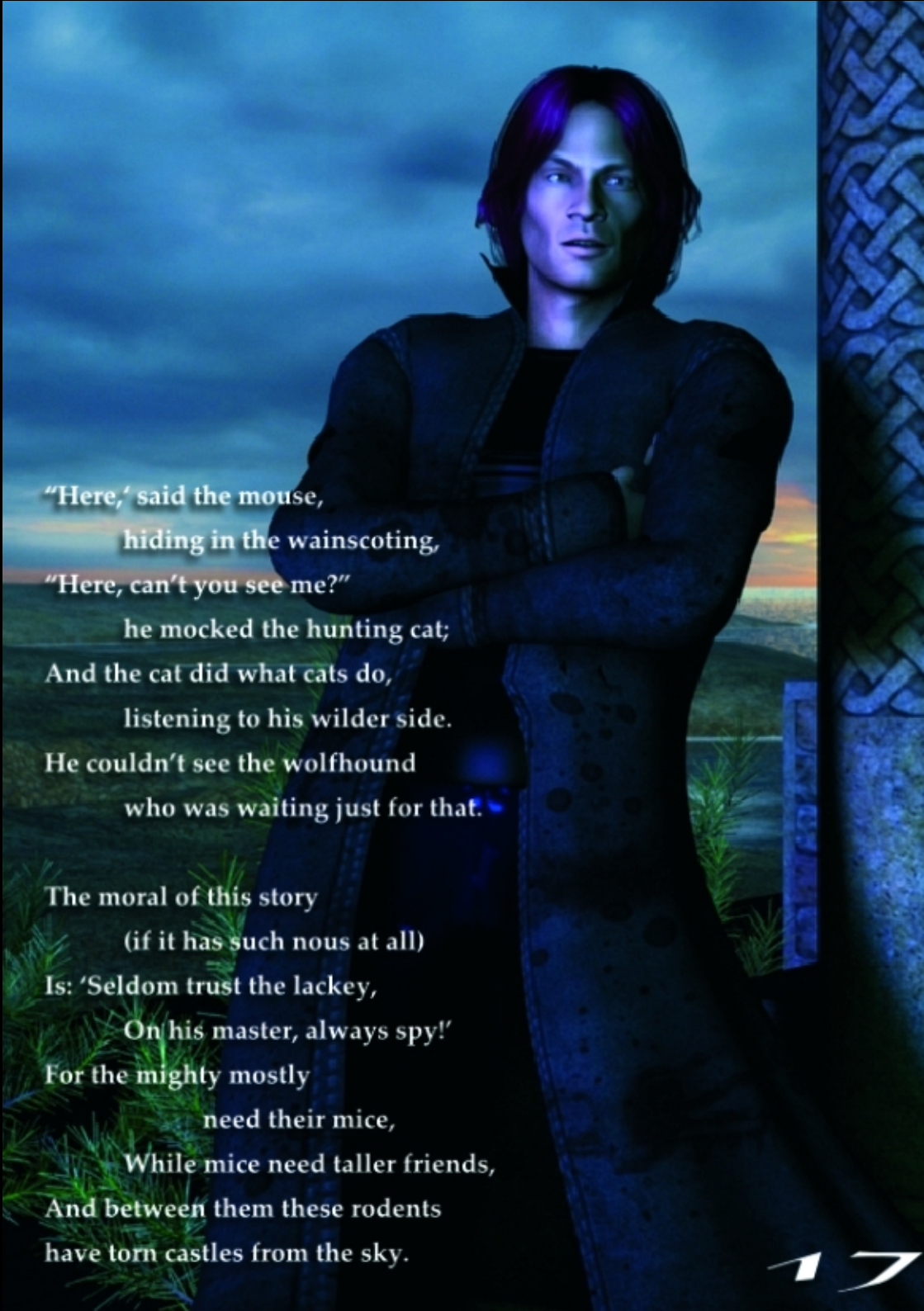
Boyhood's restless dreams robbed me
Of the land from which I sprung!
One smile, I beg, from one old heart
Who smiled when I was young!

A man with dark hair, wearing a bright orange long-sleeved shirt and dark trousers, stands on a circular stone platform. He is looking to his right with his left hand on his head. The platform is part of a larger, ornate stone structure with several pillars and a decorative frieze. The background is a misty, greenish landscape with trees and a cloudy sky.

A half-drawn sword
in a shadowed nook,
A face half-seen
and a sidelong look,
A strange little bottle
of a liquid, green,
A whispered word
and a note that's been
Tacked to a door
in the dead of night,
Not even a knock
to say who'd write
Secrets of statecraft --
dangers and lies:
For this is the realm
where princes and spies
Rework the future
like molding in clay,
And a thousand lives
can be lost in a day
With charts gone missing --
or secrets to "share" --
This is Destiny's Forge,
... and mortals beware.



When I set out, my mother said
(as nearly as I can recall),
"The world is wide,
So you be as wise
In spring as you were in fall
The moon grows round,
She shrinks back thin,
The tide runs low and high --
So fortunes change,
But as you range,
If your dreams should ever die
Consider this:
There's no real bliss
In reward without endeavor.
So forge your fame and
Make your name
One they'll sing about forever."



"Here," said the mouse,
 hiding in the wainscoting,
"Here, can't you see me?"
 he mocked the hunting cat;
And the cat did what cats do,
 listening to his wilder side.
He couldn't see the wolfhound
 who was waiting just for that.

The moral of this story
 (if it has such nous at all)
Is: 'Seldom trust the lackey,
 On his master, always spy!
For the mighty mostly
 need their mice,
 While mice need taller friends,
And between them these rodents
have torn castles from the sky.

When they came in the night
The old man was dead --
Winter and old age'd
 had their way.

The Thane of the Valleyfolk
In fear then hung his head --
For, sure, it was his people's
 bleakest day:

Without any voice
To sing runes to the sky
The dragon Fafnir would
 swift wreak Hel!
Then out of the shadows
Crept a shy little girl,
And of her -- what a tale
 there's to tell!

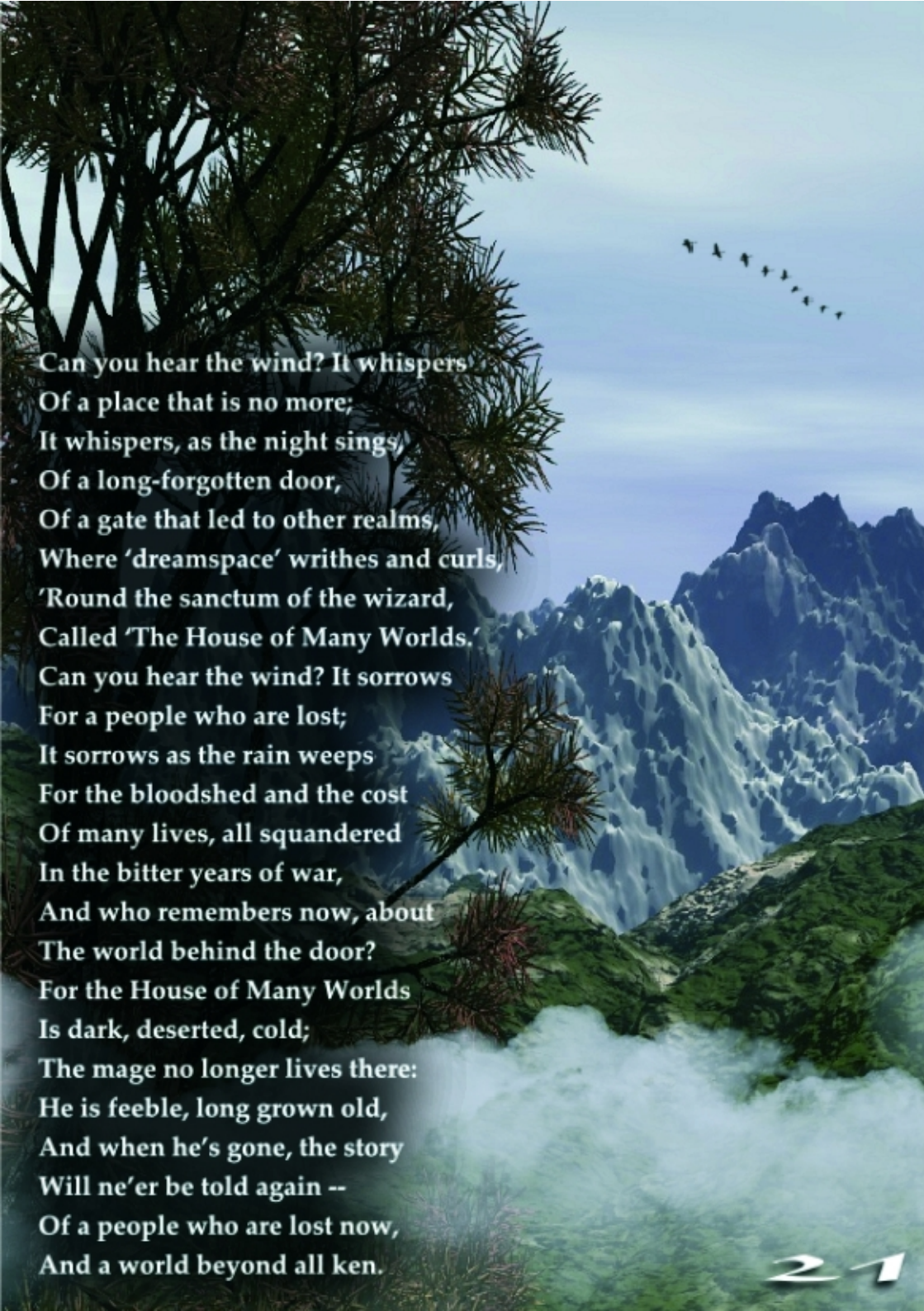
For she was Elbecca,
Whom nobody knew,
Save that Ewan, the Thane's
 guard, had caught her
Just a moment before
She spellbound them all...

Aye: she was
-The Runsinger's Daughter.






Here spins the future,
The past is a skein
Of threads both tangled and free;
There spins forever —
The future is far
From set or decided, and three
Truths, say the Old Ones,
Are graven in stone,
For captain, king and for colonel:
Life's but a verse,
The Soul is the song,
But only the wind is eternal.



Can you hear the wind? It whispers
Of a place that is no more;
It whispers, as the night sings,
Of a long-forgotten door,
Of a gate that led to other realms,
Where 'dreamspace' writhes and curls,
'Round the sanctum of the wizard,
Called 'The House of Many Worlds.'
Can you hear the wind? It sorrows
For a people who are lost;
It sorrows as the rain weeps
For the bloodshed and the cost
Of many lives, all squandered
In the bitter years of war,
And who remembers now, about
The world behind the door?
For the House of Many Worlds
Is dark, deserted, cold;
The mage no longer lives there:
He is feeble, long grown old,
And when he's gone, the story
Will ne'er be told again --
Of a people who are lost now,
And a world beyond all ken.

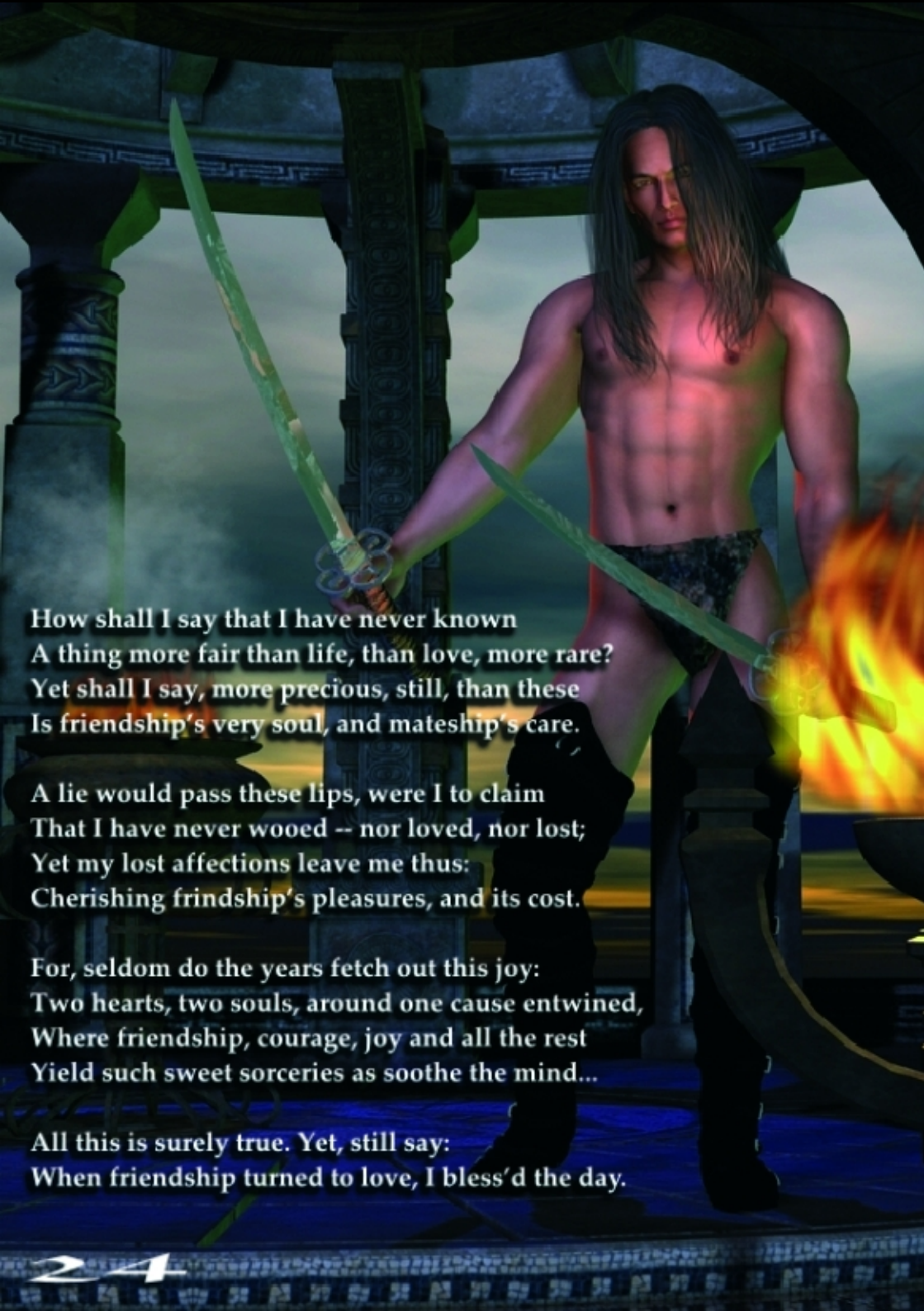
At the moment of birth
The gods touched your soul,
And this is the mark you will carry:
Warrior, hunter, mother or scribe,
From the hour of birth,
so don't tarry!
Listen, just listen --
your heart will reveal
The life it is longing to strive for!
Don't bother envying
what others have --
Another's lot's nothing to cry for.
What you *were*, what you *are*,
what you shall *be*:
These are the things
that are reckoned
Vital as breath to the life
you will live
When into this world
you are beckoned --
For the gods of your fathers
see over the heads
Of your siblings' bold revolution --
Already they've seen
your life's winter's eve,
And it's *there* you'll make
your contribution!





The wind in the west brings
the smells of the sea --
Of harbors, of ships and the brine;
And, smelling its scent, how oft I recall
The sting of the wind, and how fine
Was the freedom to roam,
to live and to love,
When the sea and the wind
were my trade --
The faraway places and strange,
unknown lands ...
I've grown old, but the memories don't fade.
I recall every line of the face I once loved;
In dreams do I still hear him sing,
Though he has been gone all
these twenty long years
And, on my hand, only his ring
Proves to young doubters:
I once had a love --
Even I! For, once I was young ...
'Cross the landscapes of youth
our fires burn bright,
And even when that song's been sung
For all of the rest, while the silver sets in,
As Fate has her way with us all,
Nothing can tarnish the joys of the past,
The vast, golden range of recall.

Jade 2010



How shall I say that I have never known
A thing more fair than life, than love, more rare?
Yet shall I say, more precious, still, than these
Is friendship's very soul, and mateship's care.

A lie would pass these lips, were I to claim
That I have never wooed -- nor loved, nor lost;
Yet my lost affections leave me thus:
Cherishing friendship's pleasures, and its cost.

For, seldom do the years fetch out this joy:
Two hearts, two souls, around one cause entwined,
Where friendship, courage, joy and all the rest
Yield such sweet sorceries as soothe the mind...

All this is surely true. Yet, still say:
When friendship turned to love, I bless'd the day.

A woman with long brown hair, wearing a red hooded cloak and a dark, laced-up top, stands in the foreground. The background shows a town at night with a church steeple and buildings under a dark sky. The overall mood is mysterious and somber.

The Voice of the South Wind

I woke in the night to the sound of a cry
Though the house was all quiet, and so was the sky –
And then spoke the south wind – spoke just to me:
“Go down to the river, float down to the sea,
“For there shall I wait ... how long have I yearned
“For the home I forsook and the love that I spurned.”

Long before dawn was a gleam in the east
I slipped through the dark streets, to speak to the priest.
He stood in his robe, half asleep at the door;
He told me the voice was a dream, nothing more –
And part of me longed to believe he was right,
Though part of me knew, in the hush of the night,
The south wind had spoken – aye, spoken to me...
And the little boats beckoned me down to the sea.

So I gathered my cloak and I hurried on through
To the old wooden pier, where the kingfishers flew –
The tide was going out; it carried me down
Past reed beds and mud flats, away from the town,
To the great sandy cove with the smugglers’ caves,
And up on the clifftop, the mariners’ graves –
For it’s a tradition, that when sailors go free
They’ll only find rest in the sound of the sea.

There, soft in the dawn, I thought the sea cried,
And I knew without asking ... someone had died.
But who could it be? What soul did I know
Who would speak on the south wind, and call to se so?

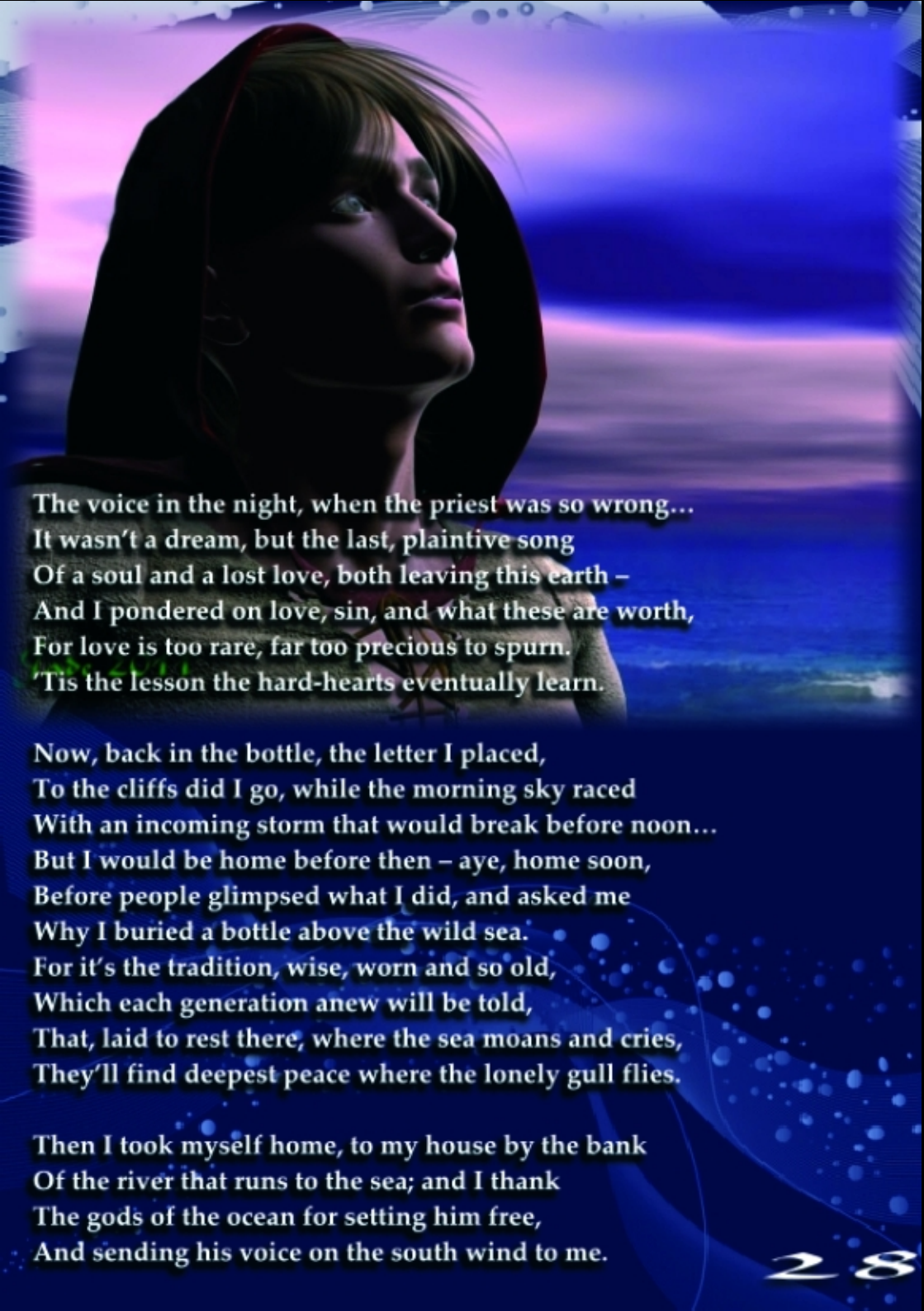
The boat rocked; the tide turned – I heard a soft tap
Down at the waterline, where the waves lap –
Of course I reached over; my fingertips found
A shape made of glass, with a slim neck, all bound
In wax to be watertight, safe from the sea ...
A bottle. A message. A message for me?

Stormy and purple the dawn broke that day;
The tide turned and carried me back, 'long the way
Where luggers would tie up, and fishing boats drowsed
While the crewmen came up to us, drank and caroused.
The sunlight grew brighter, though cold as the tomb.
And then did I see, in the lessening gloom,
A paper, rolled tight in the bottle, safe, dry –
A message for me, like the south wind's thin cry
Which woke me from sleep ... and the priest was not right:
It was no dream in the last of the night.

Just as the sun crossed the line of the trees,
Rippling the water, a chill, cutting breeze,
I broke off the wax and tapped out the sheet
Of paper contained in the bottle, so neat –
And there in the dawn light, stormy and dim,
I read the few lines of writing from him –
From the man who had gone to the sea, years ago,
Whose message had found me, and whom I should know...

"The sea is my bastion," he said. "I'm going home
"After too many years throughout which I did roam
"Cross oceans and islands too strange to relate,
"Which have brought me at last to the seaman's bleak fate –
"For the storm is upon us; there's ice all around,
"And all the world shakes with the furious sound
"Of winds and white water; but I am at peace
"For I'm bound for the place where the silence has lease...
"Just one thing I ask for, before I go down:
"To give this last message; then, pleased shall I drown.
"I left my old homeland, compelled by the need
"To leave you before I could sow ruin's seed.
"I ran from the town, leaving no thinnest clue
"That I ran for the sake of a love I felt. You.
"For the love that I felt was my sin and my shame –
"There's no place for sinners, and you're not to blame.
"So the sea was my refuge, the ships and the mates...
"And now we go down, for our destiny waits,
"And the sea is my haven; my voice is the wind,
"The deeps are my homeland, and though I have sinned
"I bid you, remember the boy with red hair
"Who fled from the village, at harvest time there."

All at once, now, I knew him – remembered him well,
The lad with red hair and such secrets to tell!
But secrets like these are kept close to the breast –
So I'd never known; was the sea for the best?
He thought so, but now I was filled with regret
For the chance that went begging – I'd never forget
That the one who had loved me with life's final breath
Had taken that love away, e'en to his death.
He had gone with a cry in the wind, and this word
In a castaway bottle for the one who had heard

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a dark hood, is shown in profile, looking upwards. The background is a dramatic sky with shades of blue and purple, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

The voice in the night, when the priest was so wrong...
It wasn't a dream, but the last, plaintive song
Of a soul and a lost love, both leaving this earth –
And I pondered on love, sin, and what these are worth,
For love is too rare, far too precious to spurn.
'Tis the lesson the hard-hearts eventually learn.


Now, back in the bottle, the letter I placed,
To the cliffs did I go, while the morning sky raced
With an incoming storm that would break before noon...
But I would be home before then – aye, home soon,
Before people glimpsed what I did, and asked me
Why I buried a bottle above the wild sea.
For it's the tradition, wise, worn and so old,
Which each generation anew will be told,
That, laid to rest there, where the sea moans and cries,
They'll find deepest peace where the lonely gull flies.

Then I took myself home, to my house by the bank
Of the river that runs to the sea; and I thank
The gods of the ocean for setting him free,
And sending his voice on the south wind to me.

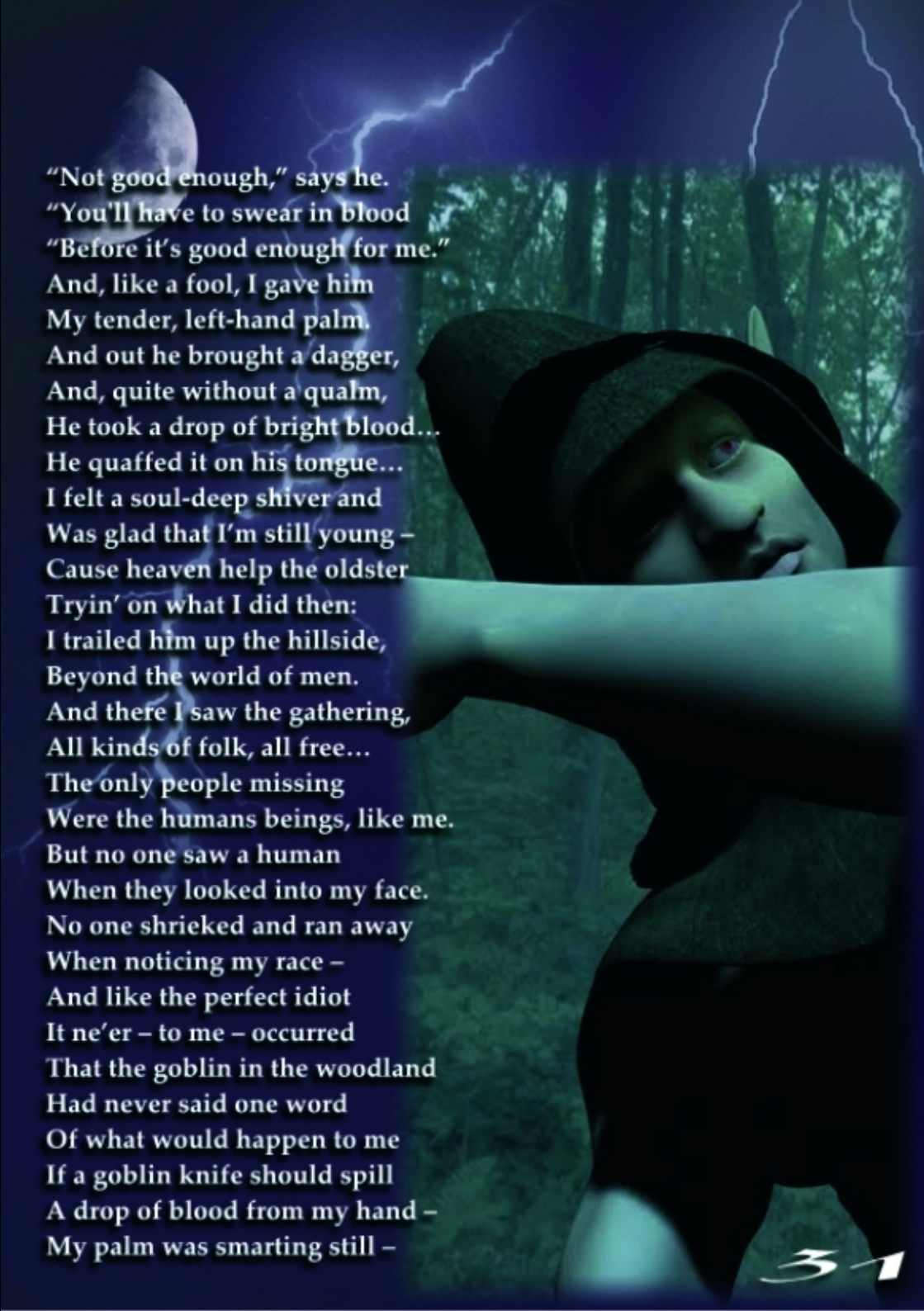


On the Full Moon of September

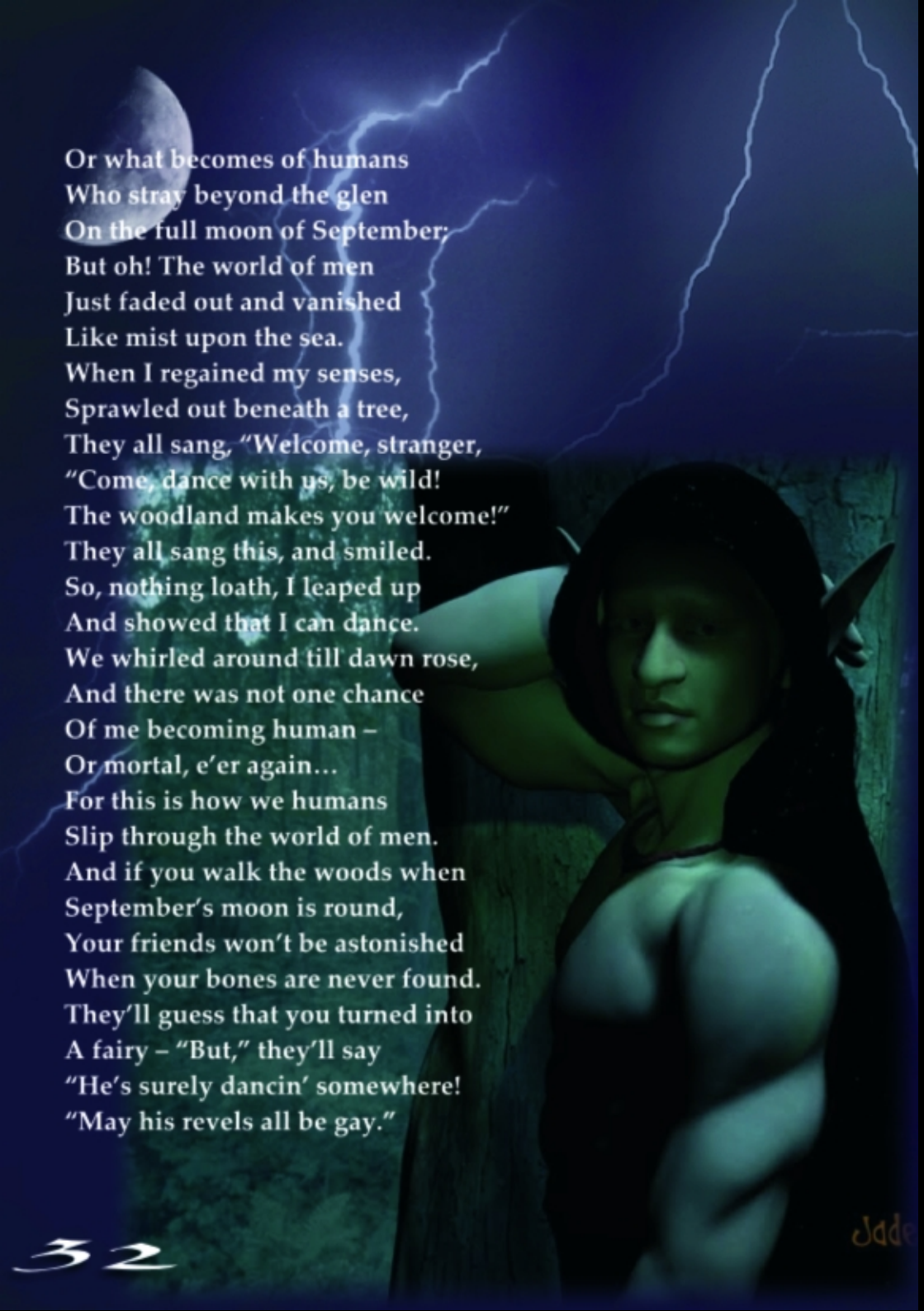
One night I went a-roaming –
I braved the woods, so dark.
My friends swore I was crazy;
I thought it such a lark.
Up came the full moon – silver –
The trees all crowded round,
And as I tiptoed through them
I thought I heard a sound...
Upon my heel, I spun, fast,
All wide-eyed, full of dread.
If I'd had the sense I was born with
I'd be tucked up safe in bed,
Not roaming in the wild wood
With a jump at every crack,
Spinning – who's that behind me?
Always looking back –
Till there, at last, I saw him,
Leaned up against a tree,
With his long, green pointed ears...
And he was looking right at me.
Says he, "You goin' my way?"
Says I, "Not half a chance."
Says he, "Now, that's a damn' shame,
"Cause I'm going to a dance.



"Tonight's the night they all come –
"The faer, trolls, goblins too."
Says I, "So, which are you, then?"
And he said, "Which are you?"
I told him I was human.
He shrank back, full of fear.
I never though being human
Would be seen as quite so queer,
But this one was a goblin –
I saw him clearly, then,
His green skin and his long ears,
His pointed hood – again
I said, "I'm just a human,
"A long way from my bed.
"I went a-roaming. Got lost."
He peered at me and said,
"Well, if you can forgive me
"For being goblin-kind,
"I s'pose I can forgive you
"For bein' human. Mind –
"You'll have to swear an oath, now,
"Ne're to tell a soul
"That on the full moon of September
"Out comes every troll –
"Goblin, pixie, brownie,
"Faeire – all the crowd,
"To dance, all wild and carefree,
"Obnoxious, rude and loud."
"All right," says I, "I promise."



"Not good enough," says he.
"You'll have to swear in blood
"Before it's good enough for me."
And, like a fool, I gave him
My tender, left-hand palm.
And out he brought a dagger,
And, quite without a qualm,
He took a drop of bright blood...
He quaffed it on his tongue...
I felt a soul-deep shiver and
Was glad that I'm still young -
Cause heaven help the oldster
Tryin' on what I did then:
I trailed him up the hillside,
Beyond the world of men.
And there I saw the gathering,
All kinds of folk, all free...
The only people missing
Were the humans beings, like me.
But no one saw a human
When they looked into my face.
No one shrieked and ran away
When noticing my race -
And like the perfect idiot
It ne'er - to me - occurred
That the goblin in the woodland
Had never said one word
Of what would happen to me
If a goblin knife should spill
A drop of blood from my hand -
My palm was smarting still -



Or what becomes of humans
Who stray beyond the glen
On the full moon of September;
But oh! The world of men
Just faded out and vanished
Like mist upon the sea.
When I regained my senses,
Sprawled out beneath a tree,
They all sang, "Welcome, stranger,
"Come, dance with us, be wild!
The woodland makes you welcome!"
They all sang this, and smiled.
So, nothing loath, I leaped up
And showed that I can dance.
We whirled around till dawn rose,
And there was not one chance
Of me becoming human –
Or mortal, e'er again...
For this is how we humans
Slip through the world of men.
And if you walk the woods when
September's moon is round,
Your friends won't be astonished
When your bones are never found.
They'll guess that you turned into
A fairy – "But," they'll say
"He's surely dancin' somewhere!
"May his revels all be gay."

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