

Excerpt from CHILDREN OF THE MIST a sequel to STARQUEST

Guided by Tamarith, Vidarh stopped before the first and largest cave. He would need some form of illumination. From his pack he drew a torch, which he lit and wedged into a crack in the rock. Unsaddling the pony, he turned it loose. The animal, descended from stock genetically engineered to withstand the harsh conditions, and brought with the first settlers to Niflheim, was fit and hardy. It would have no problem foraging for itself until his return.

With a resolute set to his shoulders, Vidarh retrieved his torch and made his way into the cave. Just inside the mouth, he found a hollow behind a rock in which to hide the saddle and bridle. At least it would be safe and dry there, so long as no hungry rodent decided to nibble at it. He strapped on his pack, containing a change of clothing and a few personal items, and set off along a narrow passageway at the back of the cavern.

Tamarith directed him along the various twists and turns of the labyrinth. At first, the going was easy. The walls of rock gave off a soft, diffuse luminescence, augmenting the light from his torch. After walking for so long he began to think the tunnel he followed led nowhere, the luminosity grew stronger, and the passage opened out into a large amphitheatre. The light reflected back from the walls revealed seats, formed out of pale green stone, arranged in tiers forming a semi-circle. At one end was a pool, shimmering in the soft light. Multi-colored stalactites glistened like jewelled candelabra from the roof of the cave. At the far end was a high dais flanked on each side by another passage. Vidarh paused for only a moment to take in the beauty around him. He was familiar with the Conference Chamber of the community of Gladsheim. His mind had been there many times but this was the first time he had physically entered the place. Instructed to take the left fork, he progressed along the labyrinths, noting the downward slope of the passage. Occasionally, when he came to a branch in the tunnel, he would stop and listen to Tamarith's voice in his mind as it guided him along the right path.

You don't have far to go. I will keep sending you the directions. You should be near the river now.

Yes. I hear it up ahead.

Be careful. We had heavier than usual snowstorms last winter. With the coming of spring, the melting snow and ice has swelled the volume of water.

Vidarh made his way along the tunnel, partly guided by his telepathic link with Tamarith, and partly by his own senses. Eventually it widened out into a large cave, through which the underground river roared as it cut its way through the mountain. On the shingle of the boulder-strewn shore, several small boats bobbed against their moorings. After ensuring his pack was securely fastened around his waist, he climbed into one, and lashed the torch to the prow. He cast off, and took up the paddle. The river bore the craft along at a tremendous rate and it needed all his skill and attention to save the craft from dashing

against the rocks. He'd heard about the fabled river of Mimir, but this was not the tranquil stream of his imagination. The walls still reflected a phosphorescent glow. Vidarh noticed several gigantic, human-like statues on the banks as he passed, but had no time to contemplate or admire them. Rounding a bend, he came upon a wall of water ahead, cascading from the roof in a fury of white froth. The torrent boiled and raced. He gritted his teeth as he headed into the maelstrom. There was no way he could control the boat's frantic motions as it heaved and bucked like an unbroken colt. He threw down the paddle, gripped the sides of the vessel, and sent a desperate message through the ether.

Tamarith, I'm in trouble. Pleaseâ€”send me images of your location, quickly. I need to know what it looks like where you are.

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