

The Cleansing of Darnuth Keep  
by Kelly D. Tolman

Chapter One

I pulled up a bucket of water from our well out on the old farm. My father built it a few kilometers east of Dunston near a low rocky hill where he could defend it easily if needed. In the spring when the buds and shoots gave new life I often roamed the hills in search of adventure. Summer came early, and the sun pounded hotter than even mamma could remember. Drought had turned the farm into a worn down shell of nothing. Our few cattle died during the cold but too dry winter. Crops refused to grow. Nothing had a will to stay alive out there, not then. Despite our losses, I always found the farm a nice place.

We needed the bucket of water for Corbetta, my little sister, who slept. I knew she was sick, probably dying. Mamma sent me to get the water as much to help Betta as to get me out of the way.

I brought the water back and sloshed the bucket onto the table in the back room of our house. Once it had been a rather fine mansion. Now it was two rooms, one where we slept and received guests and one where we ate. The fire two winters before had burned everything. Without money we could only repair so much.

"Do you want me to get some tyrnwood," I asked her.

"No, I don't want you going out anywhere." I never saw her frightened, or at least I never noticed it before, but lately mamma seemed frightened a lot. Then her voice softened. She tried to coax me out of going. Her weathered face was gentle most of the time. "It's getting dark, son. It may not be safe." Her jet-black hair, just gray at the temples, hung to her waist, and her green eyes looked at me full of love and tender concern.

"I'll be careful," I protested. "I'll take the bow. Besides, I won't go far."

She relented with a sigh. "Leave the bow, Colter. You won't be able to use it in the dark." I think that's the one thing I remember best about mamma. She always had common sense. Others tell me about how their mother could cook one thing or another, but my mother had sense. So I left, out into the fading sunlight to find a handful of tyrnwood and hope it would help.

Tyrnwood flourishes in the late summer. Midsummer had not yet reached us and the plant was still hard to find. But I knew

where to look. More importantly I knew where to look without hurting my feet. I owned no shoes to wear day-to-day then. I used a pair of my father's shoes for special times, but not for scouting tyrnwood.

Across the valley I saw the faint light of the nearest farm as they settled in for the evening. Their farm suffered like ours, though they hadn't yet lost their livestock. Although one large ranch ran cattle near Kerby a few kilometers further west, the farms near Dunston clustered closer to the village. Our farm ranged farthest out, where my father cleared land for himself and built a buffer between the wild and the rest of the valley.

A patch of tyrnwood by a dry creak bed liked to come up early each summer, and I could follow the path easily in the moonlight. Tylos blessed my efforts. It may have been the rising full moon, or just some lucky guess, but I spotted a plant and pulled it out gently. Then I heard the distinct but still distant snap of a twig.

Under the light of a full moon on a farm with no animals, that twig meant something unfriendly must be out there. Though only a boy of fourteen summers, I had sense not to drop the tyrnwood and skill not to make more noise than necessary. No ranger of the south could have made a faster, more effortless trip back to the house. I knew every rock and shrub near our farm and I loved every meter of it.

We hung a tattered blanket at the back of the house in place of a door. We built the new room after the fire consumed most of the old house. One room from the older part of the house, the brick house as we called it, remained in tact but ugly from the fire. Once my mother welcomed wealthy guests in the great hall, and served wonderful parties. Now, with burned out doorways boarded up, it served as a place to sleep and talk while my mother tried to explain away our misery.

Mamma watched me come in and read my face instantly. "There is something out there," I said. "It moves on two legs. I'm sure."

"Give me the tyrnwood, and get the bow and your father's spear."

We kept my father's spear in a creaky old chest in the great hall. My sister slept on the bed in one corner, sick and hot with fever. I dug out the weapons and waited. I heard my mother bolt the sturdy original door to the front of the house. She waited silently. We had no door between the two rooms, and I could see by the light of the embers of the dying fire out to the shadow of the blanket at the back of the house. A trail behind the house led into the low hills of the eastern empire. Beyond the partial walls my father had started to build, stretched a wild expanse only lightly patrolled by imperial soldiers. Since my father's death, the paths leading to our door had grown more dangerous each winter.

As I crouched in the darkness, waiting for the unknown, I concentrated on trying to breathe silently for the first time in my life. I had played hide and seek with other village boys, but this time the danger was real and I held a bow in my hands. I noticed a slight movement in the shadows, some flicker of starlight out of place. Although I didn't hear anything out of the ordinary, I drew and fired an arrow in one smooth motion. From a very young age my father taught me to hunt and shoot, but I was too small to pull the bow to its full length. The arrow did less damage than I expected.

The creature screamed out in pain and anger and lashed about with horns and claws. It paused long enough to glance around the room. Then it caught my scent because it charged into our home with one arm dangling uselessly at its side. I tried to get the half-spear into my hands but fumbled in the dark and it rolled away. In the next instant the beast lunged and pinned me to the ground. I could smell the foul breath, like rotten meat and vomit, closing in all around me.

Somewhere in the darkness mamma screamed and for the briefest moment the beast turned its attention away from me. I kicked and pushed and managed to grab the spear, but in the darkness and fright I couldn't tell the sharp end from the blunt and had no idea how to attack with it anyway. I thrust what I hoped to be the point, but it quickly snatched the spear from my hands and I heard it clatter to the floor. In desperation I threw up my arms, and it began lashing at me with its horrible claws, rending my arms, shirt and chest. I heard another scream, or maybe two, in the dark. Then I felt the great weight of the beast suddenly collapse over me. It stopped scratching and biting, but I felt I would be smothered. In the darkness I heard my mother crying and calling my name.

"I'm all right mamma," I said, though I'm sure I sounded awful. "I'm a bit scratched up, but I'm all right."

"I had our knife hidden," she said. "Oh, Colter, I thought you were dead. It was lashing and growling."

"I'm okay. I'm alive." To my own astonishment and I'm sure to my mother's, I was indeed alive and only badly scratched instead of bleeding to death. We dragged it outside, into the cool dark night and prayed to Tylos to save us from any more harm.

"Was that a Kaarum?" I asked. I had heard stories, everyone has heard stories, but I had never seen one.

"Yes, but they haven't been heard of in this part of the empire in many winters, not since your father went to war. You were just a little boy then, and Betta wasn't born yet."

"Will there be more of them then?"

"Not tonight. Kaarum hunt in packs, or alone, didn't your father teach you that?" I remembered he had, but I knew better than to say anything. "Now get some rest. Tomorrow Master

Wilder is coming, and I think we should go into Dunston with him. The village council will want to hear about this."

Terror gripped me through the night. Even after the crickets started again and the warm summer night washed over me I felt alone and exposed. I held back the tears that night by clutching my father's spear and fell asleep in my mother's arms. It is right for a boy to be frightened. It is good. Nobody should live in a world where there is so much evil that children aren't afraid of it anymore.

I woke up with a poultice on my arms and a bandage on my chest. The sun had risen long hours before. "Get up sleepy head," Betta said. She had a ribbon in her hair and bounced as merrily as if nothing had happened the night before and as if she had never been ill.

"I see the tyrnwood worked," I said, and mamma smiled.

"You found an excellent plant. Now, get up and fetch some more water."

I hurt to move, but boyish pride kept me going. I dragged back a bucket and mamma proffered me some tea in one of our many chipped cups. "You'll need your strength Colter, drink it."

"When is Master Wilder coming?" I asked.

"Around mid-day. Are you hurt anywhere else?" Her eyes and voice were full of unusual concern and tenderness. I knew then that she worried about more than just my cuts.

"Just my arms," I replied.

"Drink your tea. The tyrnwood will help you." She checked the poultice as I drank the tea. We had no honey or beet sugar, so the drink tasted bitter and thick in my throat, but the warm sensation that covered me from head to toe rested both body and mind.

"I had such an awful dream," commented Betta in her childish, ever cheerful voice. "There was screaming and darkness, and I was afraid for you Colter. I kept calling and calling, but you had gone and couldn't hear me. Then I felt warmer and then I woke up and mamma was here."

"It was just a dream dear," said mamma.

"Oh, I know that, mamma," replied Betta. "I'm not scared anymore. I just thought it was a strange dream."

"Not too strange." I showed Betta my arms and torn shirt. "You probably woke up partly during your fever. Mamma and I killed a Kaarum last night"

"Did you really?" Her eyes grew as big as saucers, her curiosity insatiable. "Can I see it?"

I laughed because she seemed so happy, and she laughed and giggled as we went to the back of the house. The carcass was cold now and a few flies had gathered around it. I pulled out my arrow and cleaned the sticky black blood from the point. I could still use the unbroken arrow. Somehow it didn't feel much different from a deer or any other animal I had hunted. The creature wore some kind of hardened armor over its rough black

hide. The head was shaped like a dog's head, but with horns like an ox and eyes more like a great cat. Hard sandals with tight leather thongs padded the broad black feet but didn't hide the twisted yellow toenails.

"Sure is ugly," commented Betta. Then she went back into the house.

I took advantage of the hours before Master Wilder came to scout the farm for signs of Kaarum. I followed the trail for a few kilometers north and east before circling back to the south. I found the spot where the tyrnwood grew, and pocketed a few additional leaves. A game trail ran south across the road. The road lead to Havensod. The trail continued over to a stream and onto the only other free hold in the valley, Master Trakkin's farm. The rest of the farmers rented from the wealthier men in the region.

I nearly reached the stream when I heard movement along the trail. Any meat I could catch now would help, though I doubted I would find anything very fat so early in the summer. I quietly stepped into cover behind a stunted pine tree and waited. After a few moments I saw a tangle of deep auburn curls emerge from the creek bottom.

"Hello, Anaria," I called as I stepped from behind the tree. "I hoped you were a deer."

"Denan has a fever, so ma sent me to find some tyrnwood, but I don't think there will be any this early. I haven't seen any deer either." Anaria often roamed the wild in trousers like any of the farm boys, though her father generally disapproved. Her homemade moccasins showed signs of wear, but I knew they were far more comfortable than my bare feet. She always kept a fresh flower over her left ear, just like her mother. That day she had a yellow and purple pansy. As the only neighbor anywhere near my age, we had explored much of the valley together despite her father's dislike of my father's adventures and reputation.

I dug the leaves I had gathered earlier out of my pocket. "I found these further up, on our place. You can have them if you want. We're going to town later, so they would probably just spoil anyway."

She took the leaves and smiled. "Thanks, Colter. Pa's going to town later too. I'll see if I can go along."

"You haven't seen any strange tracks, have you?" I asked.

"No, not that I would notice anyway. You read sign better than I do," she said.

"A Kaarum came to our house last night," I said. Anaria looked more frightened than I intended. "Don't worry, we killed it. I just wanted to know if you had seen anything out here."

"I think I better be getting home," she replied. "I don't think ma would want me out if she knew about the Kaarum."

"If you get a chance, come to the Waystop. I think that's where we'll be." We waved goodbye, and I turned home. I

hurried, knowing I didn't have much time before mamma expected me back.

I heard Harrim Wilder's voice before I saw him. Deep, booming, friendly, ever ready to engage a visitor, that voice marked the man. He was as grand a figure as his voice, tall, two meters at least, and bulky. The man could consume half a lamb in a sitting if the mood struck and I had watched him drink more wine than the rest of the village combined during festivals. Generally considered handsome by the women, his hair, though graying, curled black and thick and his well-tended beard made for an imposing presence. His inn, the Waystop, served the finest food and drink found in the region. I knew him as a generous and forgiving man, willing to take a loss himself rather than see another hurt.

I entered quietly, and left the rabbits on the table in the back room that served as kitchen, dining hall, and porch.

"Ho, Colter," bellowed the innkeeper. "Come in and tell me of your adventures in the night. What's this talk of Kaarum so far south in the empire?"

"One attacked us last night. Mamma and I killed it. There isn't much to tell." There really wasn't much to say about it. I had done no more than stay alive, and that by more luck than skill.

"Are there any more? Did you see any signs?" His voice was earnest, but steady.

"Nothing. I retraced all the way back to where I first heard it, and followed its trail another kilometer out. I didn't see anything. It trailed down from somewhere north of the valley across the wild. I couldn't say where."

"Good, that is very good. I don't think the village is prepared to handle an attack."

"You don't really believe there is any danger of that?" asked my mother.

"I don't know Lelda," said Harrim. "Times have changed again, for the worse it seems, or maybe not." He raised a brow and gave me an odd sort of look that told me he knew something I did not. Whatever he knew, my mother was better at keeping it away from me. Only later, many winters later when time made such things moot, did I realize the pain my mother endured in those winters to keep me from my destiny. But destiny is not to be cheated, nor bargained with, nor spurned. It can only be accepted and fulfilled.

In that moment of silence between my mother and the innkeeper I read some of that pain.

"Put on your boots," my mother ordered. "Get out the clean shirt and trousers."

"Yes, yes, of course," joined Harrim, returning to his usual jovial tone. "See, your sister is all dressed up. Look how pretty you are Betta. What a lovely dress. Oh, and bows and ribbons in your hair. Doesn't the yellow look lovely?"

Betta really did look her best. Of course with just six winters, she was excited to be noticed by anyone. I preferred to chat and play with her rather than to dwell on the events of the night.

"Bring your spear, Colter, and your bow," he advised. "You never know when you will need them." The road to Dunston remains to this day one of the safest, least interesting roads in the empire, but I obeyed.

## Chapter Two

I expected to walk to town, but Harrim had driven not just a wagon, but the coach he saved for special days. He invited me to ride on top and help drive, and I did so gladly. As we passed the turnoff to Trakkin's farm I looked down the road in hopes of seeing a friendly face, but saw no one.

When my father lived, we visited Harrim's Waystop at least once a five market. The friendship between Harrim Wilder and my father stretched back into their childhood. The large two-story brick inn towers above the other buildings in the village. Local legend recounts that generations ago the Wilders trafficked in exotic herbs with the darkunders, and after growing wealthy Harrim's grandfather had settled in Dunston with his ill-gotten wealth in a place the empire would not come looking. True or not, most in the village didn't worry since the inn grew in popularity until it attracted buyers for crops after good summers and for crafts after bad.

The small collection of farms surrounding a small collection of huts surrounding the Waystop still bears the name of Dunston in honor of the first settler's horse. The blacksmith owned a nice house, and the miller built a home of brick near the river, but nobody else was able to use more than mud walls to keep them warm. During the midsummer festivals we all danced and sang. Sometimes we joined with Kerby for the harvest celebration. Sometimes they joined with us. Weddings, funerals, births and the rites of Tylos each became an affair for the entire village, and more often for both Dunston and Kerby.

The first dog barked a warning as we came within fifty meters of the first house, and several others took up the cry as we trundled into the village. Jans and Lora, children of Master Tintelbar, who kept the general store darted into the street and back again, playing. I could not make out the faces of the boys at the far end of town who kicked a pig's stomach around. They were still too young to work the fields and had managed to escape early from their daily chores.

Betta waved at Lora, and she waved back. "Can I play with them?" she asked.

"Not now," replied mamma. "You will get your dress dirty. Besides, I think I will need your help with dinner."

I looked around but didn't see Anaria or anyone else close to my age. Ton and Wess would still be in the fields for a few more hours while their sisters worked at home. A slow breeze cooled the streets as we pulled around to the back of the inn. Harrim pulled the coach to a stop and jumped down. He handed me the reins before helping my mother and sister.

"Put the coach away and take care of the horses, Colter. See they get a good rub down," he said.

I didn't see Achard, the servant that usually did the work around the Waystop, though I hardly expected him. Every time we visited the Waystop Harrim gave his servant the day off. The work kept me busy and out of trouble, and I enjoyed the change. I found another team of horses already stabled as well as a large black stallion with imperial livery. I tended these as well, knowing that Achard would have done the same in my place. As the sun began to set I heard the workers returning from the field. I piled on the last of the hay and went to see if I could find a friendly face.

Lyekal, a tall young man with broad shoulders that had yet to acquire the strength of his father, the smith, also watched the workers returning from the fields. He noticed me and crossed the street with a smile. His hands and face were black from the forge. I sat down on the front steps of the inn, and he joined me. "I thought I heard Harrim's carriage," he said. "Pa didn't let me come and look. Jans says he saw an imperial soldier ride in earlier."

"His horse is in the stable. I haven't been inside yet," I said.

"Pa says there's war coming in the north. The Eastern Watch is recruiting again. I want to join if I can. Dunston's got nothing for me," he said.

"Your dad won't like that," I replied.

"All he does is work. Even ma says he works too much," said Lyekal.

Wess, a boy about my height, but a few winters older came along the road carrying a bundle of firewood across his shoulder. Most of the villagers had straw colored hair they cropped short in summer, like Lyekal's, but Wess wore his black hair to his shoulders. His family came from the west about the time my father left on his second adventure. He dropped the bundle next to us and sat on it. "It was a hot one today," he said. "How's your crop looking Colter? I've not had a chance to get out your way."

"Mostly burned to dust," I replied. "We've a few patches of barley that will see us through the winter if we get some rain."

"The whole valley used to be green through the entire summer," said Wess. "I remember when we came we could fish in that stream that disappeared after the earth moved."

"Pa says time will change soon enough," said Lyekal. "I don't think so. I'm not staying anyway. Your of age now, Wess. Why don't you join up with me?"

"You've been talking the soldier for two winters now. You know your pa won't let you," replied Wess.

"I'll be of age in a five-market," replied Lyekal with a snort. "Kyven Halfspear isn't the only hero around here. I've plans for myself."

Betta found me loafing there. "Mamma says its time to help with supper." I glared at her and she stuck her tongue out at me. I smiled back and we laughed. I waved to my friends and headed inside.

"Serve the captain," ordered mamma. "Bring him what he asks for, but mix the wine with water if he wants more than a second cup. There's no point making him drunk, and we've business to tend to tonight. There is also a pair of cloth merchants who will likely ask for more than Betta can manage herself, so you keep an eye on them as well."

Despite her warnings, the captain ate quickly and quietly, and though he finished the second cup of wine he did not ask for more. He hardly spoke a word, and buckled on his sword immediately after eating. "I'd hoped to see more of the men. Is there a tavern in this village?" he asked.

"Sometimes they gather at the smithy after supper," I replied.

He nodded and I watched him walk through the front door. The merchants complained about the weather as they ate, and I could not help but miss the livelier days when my father brought us here to celebrate. Mamma disappeared with Harrim into his private dining room while Betta and I ate in the kitchens. Afterwards we sat together on the front porch of the inn, laughing and listening to the sounds of the village. Lyekal walked towards us from his father's smithy just down the street. He had replaced his smile with a scowl.

"Pa's being unfair," he complained. "Captain Torbridge is looking for recruits. He'll take anyone willing, and they pay too. Not one of the men wants to join and I can't. I tell you I'm leaving as soon as the council declares me of age."

"I like it here," said Betta. She laughed. "I think you would look silly with a spear. You're too skinny."

"What do you know?" he sneered. "You're just a little girl."

Betta stuck out her tongue. "None of us knows anything about the world," I said. "I've been to most all the farms around Dunston and Kerby. I even went to Havensod a couple of times before pa died, but I don't remember it much. I've hunted as far north as the Wynnle, or at least the west fork, and south past Trakkin's."

"I've never even been that far," said Lyekal. "I hate this place."

Down the street we saw the men starting to leave the smithy. "I don't think your captain is making any friends," I said. I stood up and took Betta by the hand. "Time for bed. Maybe your pa will change his mind."

Later that evening, Harrim invited me into his private dining room, after I had already stuffed myself of course, where he and my mother dined privately. My mother dressed in the most beautiful scarlet, and she set her hair beneath a lace cap, very unlike anything I had seen her wear in the summers since my father died, but very much how I remembered her from before. Harrim served a table as grand as I have seen any innkeeper set, and far grander than many a nobleman, for the platters and cups were gold and silver, and even I knew the wine came of no common vintage.

"Come in and sit with us, my boy," said Harrim cheerfully. "You're of an age now when you should sit with the men, not the boys. Take some wine." I refused the goblet for I sensed something amiss. I never ignored that sense. "Suit yourself then..."

"Colter," interrupted my mother. "We have some wonderful news to share with you."

"'Em, right," and for the first and only time I believe that I saw Master Wilder slightly embarrassed. "Are you sure you wouldn't like some wine? No? Ok, well, Colter, as you know I fancy your mother. I have for some time, but now that your pa's been gone so long."

"Harrim has asked me to marry him," said my mother. Her face beamed like a girl again, and I could tell a great weight had lifted from her. "Isn't it wonderful? It's the most wonderful thing that could happen for us. No more digging and scratching and starving on that god-forsaken farm."

There is something truly awful about being reminded how pointless your hard work is, especially when you already know it. I hated the work, and I hated starving. I despised having bloody feet and sores, but I loved the land. "I like the farm," I muttered.

"Of course you don't have to leave the farm," said Harrim, once again cheerful. "Betta of course will come here and live with us, you are welcome, naturally, if you want. You're a man now, old enough to choose what you want."

"Of course, that's right," agreed mamma with a smile and a laugh. "We will be married within a market, and then it's all yours anyway, to do with as you like. You can work it or rent it or sell it. I am sure Harrim will help you set up any trade you wish. Won't you Harrim?"

"Of course, my dear. He's a hard worker and bright. What do you have to say, Colter?"

The truth is I didn't have anything to say really. Honestly nothing at all, but I think that is the first time I discovered how to lie, or at least how to conceal my emotions, which is

better than lying. "This is truly wonderful." I smiled and I laughed. "Now I wish I hadn't eaten so much already since this calls for a celebration." We all laughed and talked and once again mamma became the lady she had always been.

Harrim kept a great water clock in that private room, and after glancing at it a few times he invited me to take a walk with him. Mamma said, "Go on son, I'm afraid there will be more news and more decisions to make tonight."

Harrim grabbed a lantern and led me to a path behind the Waystop that wandered into the hills south of town. Usually the land there is green and grassy, now the hills were brown and dry. The night had taken on a cooler tone, and I caught the scent of summer rain on the breeze. "There will be rain," I commented. "That will help the farm through the summer."

Harrim didn't seem to notice my remarks, but he put a massive arm around my shoulders and guided me off the main path into a little grove of trees just outside of town. I was neither tall nor large, and Harrim was both. We must have looked an odd pair in the lantern light.

"You do understand the need for this marriage," he said.

"Yes," I confirmed. "I am happy for you both."

"I am glad to hear it, although I know that your thoughts are undoubtedly more complex than that. In time I hope to be able to help you through some of those complexities, but in the meantime I want you to understand that I know I can never replace your father, and that life at the inn can never replace life at the farm. Your mother is practical."

"She has sense," we said at the same moment and we both laughed.

"Yes, she has sense," continued Harrim. "Enough to go for all of us. The only thing she didn't have sense about was your father."

I jerked away instinctively and searched his eyes for the humor, but found only sincere sadness. I couldn't find a way to respond or express the hurt I felt in his words.

"Colter, please, just a little further," he pleaded. And we continued into the trees. "Your mother loved, still loves, your father more deeply than I have ever known a person to love another, but she loved him too much, more than she should have."

"More than he deserved, you mean," I replied. I was angry, resentful, a boy.

"No, not more than he deserved. More than he could handle. More than he could return. Let me show you. Let me explain."

We reached a small clearing in the trees where the starlight sprinkled down to the ground in soft wisps over the buzzing insects. A large stone dominated the clearing. It was circular in shape and rounded on top, perhaps a meter and a half high at the center and two meters in diameter. The moonlight danced over the stone and it seemed to begin to glow with a soft inner light as we approached.

"Kyven brought a number of treasures back with him when he returned from his adventures. This is one he brought back the first time, before he ever married, before you were born. Take a look."

The stone now definitely glowed with a soft green light and wisps of green vapor began to slip off the surface of the stone into the air and over the ground. Wherever the vapors touched the grass, it turned one shade further from brown to green until within a few short moments the entire grove appeared vibrant and green again, as if just after a spring rain.

"The stone is tied to the will of the gods, Colter. It brings life and prosperity when we follow their will and death and plague when we do not."

"So, what does this have to do with me?" A naive question, one I suspected I knew the answer to, but I needed to hear it.

"When I said 'we' I really meant 'you.' You need to follow the will of the gods. In order for your father to retrieve the spear of Udelf and defeat the demon lord of the hordes of Kaarum, he made a pact with Tylos to forever obey and serve. That is why he left again after completing his first adventure. But it nearly broke your mother's heart. She waited in agony those winters while he was gone. You were born and grew in prosperity and the plantation prospered in those days. Then he returned. Something about that final journey changed him. He never confided all of the details to me, but I knew that he was hurt beyond casual notice."

"He was wounded in battle. That's what he told me," I said.

The innkeeper looked at me. A deep sadness covered his face. "Yes, he was wounded, but not so much from battle as from heartbreak. He came home to your mother, his one true love and forsook his adventuring ways, and he began to wither. You see, he was compelled to hunt evil."

"But he gave it up for mamma," I finished his thought. I began to understand at that moment. It was only a beginning, but an unfortunate sad beginning, like swallowing tyrnwood prepared without sweetening for the first time. I stared at that stone and the wonder I felt at seeing the green vapors turned to loathing and fear of the unknown.

"It started working again today," said Harrim. I had guessed as much but I didn't need to say it. "The council is going to meet today to decide how long you will be permitted to stay in the village. Then you will have to take up where your father left off."

I admit I cried. "I'll send your mother for you." He left me there to cry out the last vestiges of my boyhood alone in the thin lantern light. So I did, and as my teardrops fell on that warm, inviting stone my fears turned to curiosity and my loathing into longing for the wide world. Some part of me enjoyed the thought of finding glory and riches, of standing on my own against a Kaarum rather than hiding frightened in a corner. And

some part of me wanted to simply wake up in the morning and go back to my parched fields to try to grow a crop for the autumn harvest.

## Chapter Three

My mother found me there sitting on the stone, knees curled up to my chest, but no longer crying. She looked beautiful to me then, more like the woman my father must have married. The gray seemed to have gone from her hair, and there was lightness to her step such as I had not seen in a long time. I also saw deep sadness. "Now you know why I kept so much from you," she said. "We all hoped that the curse would not pass to you."

I nodded. She hugged me, and I hugged her back, and together we walked back to the inn.

Deltra, the village seeress was just leaving the inn as we entered. She looked older than the trees in the forest, but her grip felt firm when she grabbed me. She peered into my eyes in that way that mad old women do to young boys when they've something important to say. But she didn't say anything. Instead she released the grip and pulled me into a soft compassionate hug. Amid the smell of dried herbs and old clothes I felt great tenderness.

"You've raised a good son, Lelda, he has his father's strength," said Deltra.

"I've done what any mother would," answered mamma.

"I've seen others do less. Watch the wolves in the council. Trakkin hasn't forgotten that you chose Kyven," said Deltra.

"I don't imagine that he's happy I've chosen Harrim this time, either." Mamma smiled and Deltra chuckled.

"He doesn't know yet. He's a brute, but his daughter has a kind heart and his son is a good worker. There is hope for them," said Deltra. "Go on inside, lad." She pushed me through the door to the back dining room.

Farmer Trakkin sat next to Harrim, idly toying with a goblet of wine. Across the table Lyekal's father, Master Handor frowned and contemplated the ceiling. His wrinkled brow and graying hairs reflected the general ill humor of the room. Master Tintelbar looked kindly as I approached. He always seemed patient with his children, and I knew he had given my mother food and supplies during the past winter without asking payment. I did not often speak to Rilpost, the miller. His children had grown and moved to Kerby, though I heard he was a fair man to trade with.

"Sit down, lad," invited Harrim. "You know why you're here."

I sank into a solid chair that suddenly felt larger than the room. The thick table was bare except for their goblets and a mostly empty bottle of wine. The fire felt suddenly very warm. I placed my hands on the table to keep them from moving.

"You know of your father's curse, then?" asked Trakkin.

"Yes, sir," I replied.

"Then you'll be off in the morning," he said.

"Gently," warned the smith. "You'd not be sending your own lad off so easily."

"Nor without accounting for his property," said Harrim.

"What property?" asked Trakkin. "He owns nothing that I know of, not that the farm is worth anything."

"You've offered a tidy sum more than once for such a worthless piece of land," said Rilpost with a laugh. "Kyven always got the best of every deal." The miller winked at Trakkin, and the farmer's face flamed red.

"Be that as it may, the land is his mother's," said Trakkin.

"No," said Harrim. "Lelda became engaged to marry today, so the property either passes to her new husband, or to her son, if we agree that he's of an age to own it."

"He's not of age," said the smith. Even I could see that he thought of his own son as he spoke.

"Who's the man?" asked Trakkin. "How do we know he's fit?"

"Any man she chooses over you would be fit," said Rilpost.

"Lelda always made up her own mind. You seem to forget you once admired that in her."

"I'm fit," said Harrim. "As Rilpost said, Lelda makes up her own mind. You're not the only one that asked her before Kyven came back." Harrim appeared at the edge of anger, but he relaxed and took a breath. "I say he's of age now. He's been managing the place since Kyven died."

"He's a whelp," said Trakkin.

"My vote's against yours, because tonight I don't like you," replied the miller. "Let Tintelbar decide."

"He's younger than normal," said the storekeeper. "If he's old enough to go into the world then he's old enough to inherit, and man enough to deserve it. He's of age."

"I'll help you settle the business side of it," said Harrim.

"And line your own pockets in the process," said Trakkin.

"Any other day and I'd call on my right as a free man to make you defend those words with a blade," said Harrim.

"Tintelbar will witness the contracts just as he always does. I see no profit in this. Kyven Halfspear deserves better than to have his only son sent packing by a lot of cowards. I've never been ashamed of anything I did before."

"Nor I," said Handor. "Were it not for Deltra I would say we are in the wrong."

"Halfspear brought his own curse with him, and he can keep it. This is the justice of the gods, not our choosing," said Trakkin. "You leave in the morning, boy."

"Where?" I asked. My voice felt small.

"Anyplace you like so long as its elsewhere," replied Trakkin.

Harrim scowled and his fist doubled on the table. "That captain is looking for men," suggested Handor. "My own Lyekal wanted to join up. I'm sure he'll take him."

"The cloth merchants need a driver," said Tintelbar. "They mentioned it earlier. Though I don't know how far they are going or how long they would keep him."

"It's your choice, Colter," said Harrim. "We'll see you properly on your way."

"I'll see the captain in the morning," I answered.

"I think we can round up Kyven's old gear," said Handor. "I believe his old sword is hanging in your shop. His armor is in a trunk at home."

"Be here at dawn," said Harrim. "You'd best donate something as well, Trakkin, or I'll see to it all water to your place is cut off before the end of summer."

My mother showed me to a bed where I fell quickly to sleep. I tossed and turned until the first workers began moving in the streets before sunrise. I pulled on my father's boots and joined my mother in the kitchen.

"You best eat a good breakfast." She passed me a bowl of eggs and a chunk of bread. "You'll have a busy morning after you talk to the captain. I'll put a few things together for you. I found your father's old pack that he found in the north. Now go and find Harrim."

Alongside Harrim I must have seemed no more than a bit of a twig. Harrim was polite as usual, but came quickly to his point. "We've found a recruit for you, Captain," Harrim said.

The captain raised a brow and cracked a half smile. "I've seen a dozen able bodied men since I came here," he replied. "I'm glad to see at least one volunteer. I would hate to come back and press for conscripts." The captain was a tall, lean man with thick black hair. His tall riding boots were polished. His belt was well oiled, his scabbard spotless. At his side hung a longsword, and a dagger was thrust in his belt. A thick scar ran across one cheek, and the top of his left ear was missing.

"We have all served our emperor," replied Harrim curtly. "I myself have born a spear in battle."

"Pray you don't have to again." The captain menaced. "Now, who is this recruit?"

"None other than the son of the great Kyven Halfspear." Harrim beamed proudly. "Here he is. Stand up straight boy."

I stood straight, but I knew I was somehow failing inspection. There wasn't much I could do. So I resolved to wait.

Harrim was an excellent haggler. "Show him your scars, lad, go on." I obeyed. "See, he's a good lad, and already blooded. Just the other day he took down a filthy Kaarum in the night by himself. You know where you are don't you, Captain?"

The captain looked unconvinced and unimpressed. "Of course. I'm in a dung hole somewhere in the provinces."

"My friend, you mistake badly." Harrim's voice reached a peak of excitement. "This is where it all started. This was Kyven Halfspear's home, where he grew and played as a child. And his boy may be young still, but time cures that, and there's more meat on those bones than not. He can hunt and track."

"Ok, innkeeper, I hear you, now let the lad speak for himself. What is your name?"

"Colter Halfspear."

"Where did you get the scars?"

"Fighting a Kaarum in the dark at my farm."

"Can you ride?"

"Yes, sir."

"Can you use a sword?"

"No, sir, but I can learn?"

"A spear?"

"No, but I can learn."

"A bow?"

"Yes sir, best shot in the village." Technically that was a slight exaggeration on my part since there were two or three who could match my skill on any given day, but I figured it was alright since they didn't live exactly in the village and weren't actually in the village at the moment.

"Anything else to say for yourself?"

"I can read and write, and I can do as I'm told."

He gave me a last searching look from top to bottom and mused over the fresh scabs on my arms. "He'll need mail, a sword, a spear, food, a horse, a bow, and money. I'll take him, but he needs to be outfitted properly or my command will send him home, and wages and food can be slow coming, especially for new recruits. I don't know what he's done to you to run him out, but you better have him ready when breakfast is over."

Torbridge was wise, well more cunning than wise I suppose. But he could see through Harrim, even I knew that. I don't think I ever did thank him for taking me on, though he probably thought it little kindness indeed. Still, a Halfspear is not passed up lightly and he was cunning enough for that.

"Go and see Handor," said Harrim. "He's got some of the things you will need. I'm off to see Tintelbar. Meet me there."

Lyekal skulked around his father's workshop as I approached their home. He pretended not to notice when I waved at him. Master Handor greeted me warmly. "I found your father's sword, and sharpened it. It's a remarkably good blade, far nicer than anything I could make. I never learned to fold steel like that. I've an old chain shirt as well. It won't fit you, but it's

yours anyway. When you find someone who knows armor he can help you mend it properly."

When I turned to leave Lyekal followed me. We met Wess as he began his trek to the fields. "You've all the luck," said Lyekal. "I've begged forever to go, and now the whole village is giving you a send off."

"They say a wizard visited the council last summer and warned them, but I thought it was all just talk," said Wess.

"It's real enough," I said. I felt my stomach sinking with each step and each word. All around me the faces that I knew so well became a mix of sad smiles and discontent frowns. Harrim handed me a bundle filled with new clothes and a traveling cloak. The new boots fit my feet better than my father's had, but the cloak was far too large. I strapped the sword across my shoulder where it hung uncomfortably for all to see.

I found mamma in the stables, holding the reins to one of Harrim's finest stallions. Her eyes were red and glazed from the tears she had held back all morning.

I know I told her that I would be all right, that Tylos would protect me just as she had protected my father, but the words offered little comfort. The impossible suffering of a parent I could never understand.

"I suppose you will land yourself in every kind of trouble imaginable," she warned me. "You know how to write, so write me a letter now and again. I've no time to warn you about swindlers and drunkenness and women and all the vices of the world, but follow your instincts. Follow your senses, and you'll come out fine. Do as the captain orders, that much at least you know. If there is one other piece of advice I could give it would be to not act like the rest of the soldiers. Remember Colter, you're a farmer."

Now I felt the tears welling up in my eyes. I knew I couldn't cry. I was going to meet the captain again soon enough and he would certainly not stand for it. "I'll remember I'm a farmer," I said, and for the last time she embraced me.

Harrim waited for me outside when I led the stallion to the front of the inn. "You've provisions to last a solid five market, lad. Your mail and camp kit are packed. And here, take this." He handed me a small money pouch that jingled with coins. "Consider it an advance on the rents of the farm. You'll need it, so be frugal."

I grasped the innkeeper's arm and thanked him the best way I knew how. Harrim was one of those men that can honestly be called good, and it was my sorrow to leave him behind.

"Good luck then," said Wess.

"I'll be joining you soon," added Lyekal.

"I've not agreed with your father, but I wish you luck," said Trakkin as he extended his hand. I shook his hand and looked him in the eyes.

"I'll do my best," I said.

Anaria handed me the fading pansy from her hair. "I'll miss you," she said. "The tyrnwood helped my brother."

"Hop to boy," growled Torbridge. "We've a steady ways to go today."

I wasted no time mounting and following, but despite his hard tone, he set a relatively easy pace. The pace picked up a little later when the thunderheads began to roll in. The drought in the valley was breaking, and already the whole valley seemed to breathe a sigh of relief to see me go. A few hands waved farewell, but most continued their day with little more than a glance our direction.

"My father recruited your father the same way that I did today," said Torbridge as we rode. "I was already an officer then, but we never met."

"He didn't talk much about his experiences with me," I replied.

"The emperor repays faithful service generously. My father won lands and title for his bravery in the wastelands north of the Great Crown. In time I will expand his holdings. The peasants here don't understand the great things of the world. You've an opportunity to make a name for yourself as well. I expect you'll want to match your father's fame at least," he said.

I didn't know how to answer him, so I kept quiet. We passed my fields and I knew there would be no harvest for me that fall.

"Stay close, and you can learn a thing or two about the world from me," said the captain. "There's more waiting for you than dying grain."

The road west from Dunston to Havensod is as straight as an arrow and as easy to follow as any road in the empire, perhaps the only road built with any sense. Torbridge's camp waited for us at the west end of the valley a few kilometers past my farm. We reached that camp early in the afternoon.

The camp consisted of a corporal who actually wore a uniform and five scraggly recruits in homespun clothing. One man had black skin and hair and dressed in a colorful blouse and trousers. His thin, handsome limbs moved with the same practiced grace that the captain showed. I guessed he must be a darkunder, though I had never met one in person before. The other four men appeared to be farmers or peasant workers. Each carried a short spear and a grim, helpless look.

The darkunder must have caught me looking to see if his ears were really pointed (which they were) because he observed with a wry smile, "That's quite the little knife you've strapped to your back." His accent sounded thick and strange to me. I had to concentrate to understand his words.

"It was my father's," I said.

"So we've got us a hero," he scoffed. "Look boys, a regular hero, packin' a pretty knife." Others laughed and I could feel him baiting me just like other farm boys would do at festival.

What a child. Even then I could see it. "And nicked your pa's pony as well, eh." He gestured to my horse. "Did you run off, huh? Off for glory?"

"My father is dead," I answered truthfully. There was no need to hide that. "I didn't run away."

"Got a bit of a temper too, eh lads." The man chuckled.

"Leave off, 'arry," said another man, older with thin graying hair and a long nose. He dressed in simple garb and had the familiar worn look of a drought beaten village farmer. "The boy's business is his own. No one has asked which constable you're running from."

"I'm an honest man," replied Harry with a wink. "As honest as they come I am. Besides I was just jokin'. Givin' the boy a welcome. See no harm done." Harry held out a dark hand of welcome and I shook it. The grip was firm, but there was gleam in those dark eyes that I later learned to recognize as a warning. Then it was only a feeling, a kind of sense that made me nervous, but I was willing to play his game and not make any enemies just yet. "Stick with Harry and I'll show you the life boy. Never mind old Jarkin there."

Jarkin gave a great harrumph, reminiscent of many of the other farmers back home. "That one's trouble, son. Stick to your work if you want my advice, and steer clear of the darkunders. If 'arry's your real name then I'm a 'orse." Jarkin let out another harrumph and strode away to help with the work.

"Darkunder is a fine kingdom," retorted Harry. "I'll do my service to the empire and show you the strength of the far southern realms."

"Then do your service a bit quicker and a bit quieter," interrupted the gruff voice of Torbridge. "Get a move on. There will be plenty of time for chatter later. We'll walk all night if we have to, but I want to be back to the main camp by nightfall. There have been reports of Kaarum in the area."

Despite the captain, Harry kept up a constant stream of chatter as we broke camp. More than once Jarkin rose to the darkunder's bait. I was the only recruit who owned a horse, armor, or a weapon other than a half spear. The others had answered the summons more to escape their lives, either of poverty or crime than to serve the empire. My hopes for glory as a soldier began to dwindle with each step.

## Chapter Four

Even summer rain can be cold and miserable, especially if you are caught in it afoot and in the dark. My companions trudged in silence once the sun began to set, and I caught more than one envious look from my perch on the horse.

"Perhaps the hero would lend us a ride on the pony," said the darkunder as the rain dripped from his nose.

"If you gambled less you could have a mount of your own," said Jarkin.

"My mother told me the same thing once," replied Harry.

"A wise woman for sure. You would have done better to leave your spear and stay closer to home," said the farmer.

A sudden noise startled my horse in the fading light. I had just enough time to guide my horse out of the way as something leapt out of the shadows. "To arms! To arms!" I heard someone calling. I managed to pull out the spear and turn my horse. I wasn't sure what had attacked us until I charged. The distinct and awful smell of the Kaarum hit me full force. They say that smells can remind you of so many different things. They can take you back to a place of your childhood or give you the same feeling you had on your wedding day. The smell of vomit always reminds me of that moment, when I first charged down a Kaarum in the rain. Naturally I fouled the attack, but not as horribly as one might suppose. I had been riding since before I could walk, so fighting from the back of a horse felt almost like play. I hadn't counted on the weight of the beast, or the power of my horse. I skewered it thoroughly enough, but then forgot to let go of the spear, and it was a simple matter of leverage. In an instant I found myself sprawled in the mud.

I looked up in time to see one of my companions cut down by the horns of a Kaarum. I tried to turn my head, but froze in place, transfixed by the moment. The first time you see death, if you ever see it, is something you never forget. A sharp bull's horn ripped through his throat and sent him gurgling and choking into the mud. I struggled to my feet and retrieved my spear. The creature snarled at me, and the scents and sounds of battle rushed through my brain like a tidal wave. I screamed and charged, lost to the rushing energy of the battle. The Kaarum turned and lashed at me with its claws. Though I had no real skill with the spear, Tylos protected me. The Kaarum

overextended its stance in the mud, putting it off balance. The claws reached my arms, but then it slipped and I stabbed it without difficulty.

There were only two Kaarum left then and five of us. They didn't have sense or knowledge of how to surrender, and Torbridge had no intention of taking prisoners. Naturally they panicked. Harry and Jarkin were at least experienced, if not professional soldiers and Torbridge handled his blade expertly.

"Are you hurt, boy?" Torbridge wasted no time getting to the point after the battle.

"He cut my chest, sir," I replied, my breath short and painful.

"Break out a light," ordered the captain. "Come here, boy. Let's see what happened. And you. Where are you hurt?" he barked at Jarkin.

"My arm, sir," replied the farmer. "I fumbled the rotted spear. It's been too long, sir."

The captain chuckled a little in his grim way. "You'll get plenty of practice soon enough. I'm glad you at least knew how to hold the blasted thing. Take off your shirt, boy, let's see the damage."

"You ride well," commented the corporal. I believe that was the only thing he ever said to me. I never saw him after the battle of Havensod.

"I can ride," I replied. "I lost my spear."

"A sword is a better weapon," commented Harry, with a smirk. "You've a nice blade. You should have used it."

I admit I would have risen to Harry's bait that time. I was ready to attack him. I hate killing. I hate spears and swords and everything they do to men, even then I hated it, but I hate feeling useless even more. I at least wanted to be able to say I didn't need to use it, not that I couldn't.

Torbridge intervened. "The boy's alive," he said. "He took down two. You're a grown man, Darkunder, and this is not the first battle you've faced. You killed one, and his charge saved your skin. You owe the boy your life if you value it."

I think Torbridge actually may have had a soft spot somewhere in his battle-scarred heart. He tended my wounds with efficient hands. What the bandage lacked in beauty it made up for with comfort.

"You should have worn your mail shirt," he advised me. "And you should let go of the spear when you skewer it like that or you will be pulled down every time."

"Yes, sir," I replied. "I'll try to remember."

"Don't try," said the captain sternly. "Either do it or next time you will die." Some of the soundest advice I received from anyone of a military persuasion. "There is no room for error in battle. I fought the Kaarum in the north and trailed them to the west. I've seen many good men who were careless for only an instant cut down."

"Yes, sir," I said.

He glanced around, and spoke so that only I could hear. "I didn't know your father, but I know he didn't allow mistakes in battle. Your life is more important than you know so be careful what you do with it. Stay out of the way until you learn to handle that spear properly. You're no good to anyone dead."

The darkunder watched the conversation closely, but said nothing to me about it. If anyone else cared they said nothing. The reality of death and loss sapped the spirit from everyone.

We gathered the human dead and tied each one behind a saddle. I didn't like the idea of walking through the mud so that a corpse could get a ride, but I knew better than to argue. Harry changed his own worn boots for a slightly better pair that one of the dead men had worn. We dragged the bodies of the Kaarum into the woods away from the road and piled them on top of each other. I put on my mail shirt while the others tried to clear away the mess of the battle.

We rode into camp about two hours after sundown. The sentries slouched in the rain and barely offered a protest as we passed. A few dozen soldiers slept in shabby tents or crouched in shelters hastily built from the forest. I saw only a few other horses and a team of oxen near some wagons.

"You've come in late," said one of the sentries. "We expected you earlier."

Torbridge ignored the man and rode ahead. Harry whispered, "Kaarum." The soldier stiffened in response, but didn't ask any more questions.

"You two take the dead over there." Torbridge pointed at a wagon at the south end of camp. "Daven will look after them. We can bury them in the morning." Harry and Jarkin dragged them off and Torbridge turned to me. "Daven's tent is over here, follow me. You're to stay with him. Do you understand?"

"Yes," I replied.

Torbridge parted the flap to Daven's tent without asking or waiting. A stout man with graying hair and a clean shaved face rested on a cot. He looked up as we entered and waited patiently for Torbridge to explain himself. "We brought some dead," said the captain. "The boy's been hurt. I want you to look after him for a few days. He can help you with whatever you need." Torbridge parted the tent and left without another word.

"Come here, boy," said Daven. "I suppose you have a name, though doubtless Torbridge has forgotten it if he ever listened in the first place."

"Colter Halfspear," I replied with a yawn. I rubbed my eyes, and the movement sent a spike of pain across my chest. I winced instinctively.

Daven looked at me closely. "No, I suppose he wouldn't forget that name. Very well, let's have a look at your wounds."

Reluctantly I pulled my shirt off. Blood had seeped through the bandages, but I felt more tired than hurt.

"At least the man knows how to dress a wound," said Daven. "I am a priest of Tylos, in case you haven't guessed. I know you country folk see us seldom enough. I am going to offer a prayer of healing. Then you can rest while I see to the dead."

He softly chanted, so low that I could not make out the words as he gently removed the bandages. He passed his fingers a hair's breadth from my wounds, and as he did a tingling itch erased the Kaarum scratches. My flesh repaired itself beneath his hands, and the smell of indistinct flowers replaced that of blood and sweat. I felt both rested and healed.

"Remarkable," said Daven. "Tylos must have something very special for you. In time I hope you find it."

In the morning our portion of the army marched north to join the main army commanded by lord Kelsin. A few days south of Havensod recruiters ran out to gather in those hapless souls who would rather face certain death with the possibility of food than certain starvation. I learned a great deal in those few days from Daven, who tended my wounds and kept me company while I watched the army gather.

"This ragtag lot will need all the help of Tylos," said Daven as we marched along.

"Don't you think our army is strong enough?" I asked.

"Drunroust, the imperial regent, has failed to maintain the army here in the east. Anybody can slip through the borders these days," he said.

"What will happen when we find the Kaarum?" I asked.

"Only Tylos knows that, but I'm sure it won't be pretty," he replied. "Three passes lead out of the Northern Crown, one near Darnuth Keep, one near Dynwater, and one in a small gap where the Shadowspine Mountains split from the Northern Crown. The Kaarum pour out in massive hordes every few winters through one of these openings and if they escape unchecked they ravage across thousands of kilometers in the empire pillaging all they find. The Eastern Watch, as the regent calls his army, has orders to ambush and contain any attempt at the Shadowspine pass."

"How many of them are there?" I asked.

"I don't know, lad," he answered. "I've never fought the Kaarum before, though my father did. Usually they have very large armies. We will march north to Havensod, and join another army before continuing north until we find the Kaarum."

My days of rest were short lived. Lord Kelsin rode into camp at a thunderous charge. He was a tall, young man who reflected the image of knighthood. He kept his breastplate polished brightly, and rode a white stallion that tolerated nothing from other horses. To my surprise he came directly to Daven's tent, but rather than speak to the priest he questioned me. Torbridge escorted the priest out of the tent.

"I understand you saw Kaarum as far south and west as the village of Dunston," he said.

"I killed one at our farm near there," I replied.

"Kyven Halfspear was your father?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why did you join the army? Who sent you?"

"The village council decided," I said. "I'm not sure why." I couldn't admit that nobody wanted me at home anymore, and I didn't really want to talk about my father. My answers seemed to satisfy him, though he said little and I couldn't tell exactly what he thought or felt.

Lord Kelsin left the camp as quickly as he had appeared. Anyone who could, watched him exit the officer's tent and then gallop away north. Then Torbridge found me and told me, "You've been given a new assignment, specifically by Lord Kelsin."

Daven watched as I followed Torbridge to a wagon that smelled of soot and sweat, apart from the rest of the camp. I wanted to ask what was going on, but decided to be quiet. The captain had little patience and much on his mind.

"Remember what I've told you. Keep out of trouble. Iven will teach you a trade if you do as he says. I've no time to explain, and there are too many ears about. Be patient. Everything will become clear in a few markets," he said.

I nodded though I didn't really understand. He seemed genuinely concerned about me, though I felt something worried him.

An enormous man with dark tan skin and a round bald head worked rhythmically beating a piece of iron on an anvil. He had more bulk and more muscle than any other man I have met. I had no doubt he could crush my bones with one hand. He stood covered from head to toe in soot and grime, and the look on his face as we approached reminded me of my mother after Betta chipped another of her cups.

He scowled at Torbridge and scowled at me and growled in a voice like a bear. "Is that the best you can do Torbridge?"

"It's the best I've got and the best you'll get. Now mind your manners. He's been wounded and is under lord Kelsin's protection."

"Kelsin's pet are you?" he asked me as Torbridge left. I felt in that moment that I had been trapped in a pit with a hungry dragon to be toyed with until he decided to consume me. "Scratched up by the Kaarum?"

I showed him my scars. I opened my mouth to talk, but his scowl cut me short again.

"Scratched or not, pet or not, if you're lazy I'll whip you red." He saw that I understood. Torbridge rarely took the time to understand the soldiers in camp, and if he had he probably never would have left me with Iven. The blacksmith harbored no love for anyone born into a title and even less for a man unwilling to work the day through. To him Kelsin was both. Fortunately for me, I was neither. "Stow that lot in the wagon, Scratch," he said, indicating my weapons. "Then take off that ridiculous shirt. We'll fight no fights here, not on my watch.

You can be a prancing pony for the mighty lord another day. Hop to lad! Get your rubbish into the wagon, and mind you don't touch my tools!"

I nearly jumped out of my skin in my scramble to please him. At every turn I found something new to be done. A war is a prosperous time for an armor smith, even for a blacksmith who can sharpen swords. For a master like Iven, it is simply demanding.

I knew the use of some tools already. Before he died my father kept a busy shop at the farm. Only for a difficult job would he seek the help of the smith, and I aided him at every task. I had never known the drone and ache of hard repetitive labor, and Iven's introduction was hard and fast.

"I know you can fetch and carry, Scratch, but I need more than just a pair of hands just now. I need your back and your mind as well. In a few days we'll move the war north, and without the proper tools we'll need more time than we're given."

He had a small furnace suitable for turning small blooms of iron which he taught me to load with the raw metal. I fetched the coal and worked the bellows until the fire was just the right temperature. He carefully beat the iron blooms into thin plates, which we cut into wire suitable for pulling through plates prepared with small holes for the purpose.

His mastery of the hammer amazed me. He allowed me to try my luck, and I quickly learned that time and the weight of the hammer were my enemy. I sweated and ached at each day's end.

"Put your back into it Scratch," he bellowed. "It's the fire what'll end the war, not the metal. Even filthy beasts can dig it up, Scratch. Anyone can dig. But can they melt it, cure it, purify it and beat it into something useful? I can do that much Scratch, but only if you give me that blasted fire."

I pumped as hard as I could, but his words rang a constant melody. "By Tylos, Scratch, don't you know the fire needs air. Blast it! Pump boy, pump."

When the fire wasn't burning I found myself busy at a dozen different tasks. Without the right tools we were unable to pull the wires properly and Iven eventually gave up and pounded each one by hand. I wound the wire around rods and cut the rings for making mail. I was no stranger to work. I had worked many summers on the farm, but there is a difference when you have a hot meal and someone to talk to when you come in from the field. After endless hours at the grindstone nothing waited for me but Iven and more chores. Fatigue and sore limbs were my constant companions.

"At home I've the tools for making fine wire," said Iven. "Though the work is hard it goes much faster and the line doesn't break nearly as often. Here I've no proper furnace. No real tools. Hardly the means to harden steel for a proper blade. No man should be made to work in such conditions. If ever I get my hands around Kelsin's neck he'll never start another war unprepared."

But as hard as I labored Iven drove himself harder. I blazed the fire, but his hammer beat a constant rhythm that could be heard throughout the camp. No one approached his wagon unbidden because there is a certain respect that can only be earned by truly being the master of one's domain. The size of the holding does not matter, but the sure knowledge that you are truly its master means that others simply know. Even Torbridge treated the smith with respect. Most of the other soldiers simply feared him.

## Chapter Five

Once the young son of the lord of a small holding required his sword be sharpened. He brashly approached Iven and demanded, "My sword needs work, see to it."

"Put it with that lot," Iven grunted. "It will get its turn with the others."

The noble had not heard of Iven, and had not learned his manners, and replied, "Perhaps you do not understand. I require it immediately."

"Perhaps, you are deaf, blind and stupid," said Iven. His tone was matter of fact.

"You are mistaken."

"No mistake. It is obvious that I gave you instructions, obvious there is a great deal of work to be done, and obvious you cannot reach the conclusion that you will have to wait your turn. If you can't see the obvious, you must be blind. My wage is the same no matter whose blade gets done first."

In that moment I discovered that Iven actually knew how to fight, though I saw it seldom enough. That noble drew his dull sword and threatened my master. Iven brushed the sword aside with his hammer with one swift, masterful stroke, and grasped the man in his great arms. Then he lifted him like a child and tossed him head over heels.

On it went, Scratch this and Scratch that until blisters had broken through my calluses and every bone ached to move. Then finally, mercifully we received the order to move out. At least I believed it was mercy that let me stay in a wagon all day. After all, we couldn't very well build a fire.

Crack! For the hundredth time Iven's leather thong snapped across my knuckles. There is more to armor and weapons than simply beating metal as I discovered. Even without furnace and fire we had plenty of work. Hardened leather breastplates needed repair or needed fastening together. At home my mother quilted to keep us warm in winter. Now I quilted thick padding, carefully stitching tight seams. Often recruits brought pieces of old armor which needed repair. Tools needed cleaning. And again crack! Iven could spot the tiniest flaw with my work and he disliked shoddy craftsmanship. "Do it right, Scratch. Lives depend on it," he bellowed again.

When we reached the main camp I hoped for liberation and a reprieve from the constant work. A pair of familiar faces greeted me as we unpacked the wagon with Iven's tools. Lyekal waited with a sword I had seen hanging over their mantle in Dunston. Behind him Wess leaned against a long spear, watching the swirl of recruits.

"Ho, Colter," called Lyekal. "I see you haven't managed to escape the forge. That's not a job I would return to for all the money in the empire."

"You best not let Iven hear that," I replied. I cast a look in my master's direction, hoping he would not be cross for me pausing to talk to my friends. "I see your father finally let you come."

"We heard the council said you were of age," replied Lyekal. "After that there was nothing they could do. Both Wess and I are older than you, and Wess has been on his own since last winter anyway."

"I though you were going to farm, Wess," I said.

He looked at me for the first time, and I saw the frown in his eyes. "I couldn't pay Trakkin's rent."

"He's a hard man," I agreed.

"First time in four summers the place looked to have a good harvest and he turned us out. My sister went with a merchant traveling west. He paid Trakkin the rent in exchange for her services. I either joined up or became Trakkin's slave."

Two markets of marching did nothing to lighten my master's disposition. "I've told you a thousand times, every chink, Scratch! Is that armor you would wear into battle with a thousand angry beasts trying to kill you?"

I had learned by then that his ranting was mostly rhetorical, and largely for his own amusement. In truth he was much softer than he let on, for though he cracked my fingers and let on when I made a mistake, he never did whip me as he warned. When we made camp north of Havensod he gave me a full night of rest and said, "Use the sleep, lad, for tomorrow the real work begins. The lads will begin dying soon!"

True to his word, the real work began in earnest. We joined the main camp where thousands of soldiers waited and trained to battle the Kaarum. Our small force suddenly became a large bustling, noisy clash of shouts and drills. Many of the recruits had never held a weapon before, and of those who knew something of fighting, only a very few had ever seen a Kaarum. For me my drillmaster was the forge and my weapon the bellows. "Hotter!" yelled Iven. "Hotter and higher!"

Though the new furnace was a little more to Iven's liking, and he now had a half dozen experienced apprentices, I still had no time for rest. I labored along with the others, churning out lengths of wire, or casting bronze blades. We filled canvas bags with rings cut for mail. The grindstone sent a constant shower of sparks. I learned the art of turning a spear shaft on the

large machine powered by driven oxen. Iven finished each piece personally. Into each long shirt he beat his particular mark, four brass rings, each inscribed with the names of his sons.

The moment we finished a blade a soldier snatched it. We made spears for the footmen, swords for officers, and lances for cavalry. I quickly decided I could live perfectly happy never seeing another weapon again, and that spear poles would better serve as bean trellises. Swords had no use whatsoever beyond decorating the mantle, and they were ugly enough at that. Iven showed me a secret that few armor smiths understood.

"After the mail is done, we bake thus, in hot coals and peat. Then it gets a bath in vinegar. This will make it harder and yet tougher. It is a trick I learned at home which I've not seen another do. With time and tools I could show you how to make such beautiful breastplates of blue and gold as to cause even that pimple Kelsin to blush. I've done work for the emperor himself, and all the great lords. You'll notice that Kelsin's armor doesn't fit him quite right. That piece I made for his father, and his pride won't let me alter it. The weight of it will throw him off in battle. Mark my words. Before they finish spilling blood he'll wish for my hammer."

Often the most difficult part of soldiering is the dread of waiting for danger that may come at any moment. The hours pass slowly when there is little to do but drill and watch the horizon for enemies. Iven had little patience for those whose hands remained idle. Most of the soldiers had no motivation to do anything beyond follow directions. "Look at that lazy lot, Scratch. They wouldn't know a day's work if it hit 'em with a hammer." I'm certain he meant for it to be his hammer, though gratefully there were no more interruptions by uncouth young nobles.

Though Iven never scolded me for talking with Lyekal or Wess so long as my work didn't slacken, I knew he disapproved of the smith's son. Both of them practiced hard, but even my untrained eye could tell that they hadn't the time to achieve the skill of a true battle. Lyekal never tired of hoping for glory.

Within a five market, virtually every scrap of metal in the region had been accounted for. The work began to slow, and once more I found myself sleeping long enough to do more than drone through another day. I had learned to take pride in my work by then. I gained satisfaction looking at something I made with my own two hands being carried about and used by someone else.

"You've done well by me Scratch, now let's see about that shirt of yours, and bring that pig poker with you too."

I can still feel the excitement of working on my own armor for the first time. In later winters it became more drudgery than anything, until finally it was simply a routine that happened everyday. My weapons were already excellent and needed no work beyond the time to sharpen and polish them properly.

"Not much work to be done with it," said the smith with a frown as he held up the mail. "Pretty shoddy work if you ask me. It's not even been welded together. But it should at least fit you proper. Stand straight and let me get a measure." He took my measurements and then watched as I started the pattern. Of course I had already been through it a dozen times, so there was really little left to learn. He surveyed the blade on the spear and took a moment to grind a small dent.

"Once you've got the pattern together, I'll show you how to do the welds. Now sharpen it up Scratch, and work on those chinks. I don't suppose you'll ever need 'em, but it's worth having just the same."

I sat working on my armor by the light of a lantern at the end of the wagon when a man rode into camp on a great, fat, speckled gray horse. He was a large man, well over two meters tall (even without the hat) with flowing black hair streaked with gray and a beard that reached to his waist and below. He kept the beard tucked into a great black belt that stretched around his middle, holding up sky blue trousers over a startling yellow shirt. He covered himself with a thick green cloak and topped his head with a wide-brimmed green hat whose point bent slightly to the right. Larger even than Master Wilder, larger than Iven, yet he sprang from the horse as lightly as a young squirrel and tipped his hat to me.

"Good evening, young master," he said as pleasantly as if we were enjoying the mid-summer's festival together.

"And a good evening to you, sir," I replied.

"I see the young still catch themselves up in these travesties." His eyes danced as he spoke. "Take the advice of an old man and go home."

"I'm sorry, sir, but I can't," I replied. To this day I do not know what drove me to say that. Perhaps it was his tone or manner, but I felt angry and sad and above all lonely. I had no home.

"What then? Can't? Won't? Ha! Who are you?" His tone was mischievous but I felt pacified.

"Colter Halfspear, sir, but here they call me Scratch."

"Scratch, ho, ho!" he bellowed so loudly I thought the entire camp would wake. "That's just grand. Halfspear's son relegated to Scratch." He laughed so hard tears came to his eyes. Just as suddenly as it started, the laughter stopped. His face turned serious, and I caught a look such as when my father told me something he didn't want my mother to know about. "Now listen to me Scratch. Tomorrow is going to be a bloody day that won't soon be forgotten in these valleys." There was earnestness in his voice that transfixed me to him, a depth in his eyes that captivated me. His strength of will bound my attention. "Stick close to Iven, do you understand?"

"No sir," I replied. I hadn't really thought of doing anything else, but I really didn't understand this fellow at all.

"Don't leave the blacksmith's side, not for a moment, not if demons themselves try to tear you away. I'll be back afterwards, and perhaps then you'll understand." Then he smiled at me. It was a kind smile, the first kind smile I had seen since leaving home, and I trusted it. "Yes, I think perhaps we will meet again." Then, just as quickly as he had appeared he parted the flap to Lord Kelsin's tent and entered.

I listened at a safe distance from the tent, watching the lanterns extinguish around the camp. Only a few words escaped from the secret council, mostly the brash tones of the enormous stranger. The camp had changed in the last few days. A nervous air buzzed around us, and my curiosity itched until I wanted to be a part of the great plans for the coming battle.

I stayed awake nearly all of that night, both to finish my armor and to see if the stranger would re-appear. His horse had not been stabled, and I was half tempted to do the job for him. My armor fit nicely after a few hours of steady work, and I was sure it would pass Iven's closest inspection. Just as I finally began sinking into sleep, the stranger grabbed me and pulled me wide-awake. "Remember, Halfspear, stay with the smith and trust not to fools," he whispered. I hardly understood his words in the darkness, but he persisted. "You've friends and enemies all about you, and no time to sort them out. If you value your life and the legacy of your father you'll keep away from the valley tomorrow and stay close by Iven." He vanished into the darkness with a flurry, and I slipped into a deep slumber.

I woke late the following morning. I had grown used to the movement of the wagon through endless nights and days, but only the other soldiers marched away while we waited. After so much labor I found Iven's stillness disturbing. Though his hands continued repairing a small tear in his coat, his face was calm and blank.

"Rest easy," he said. "The wounded will be back soon enough. Then our work will begin again, and the work of others."

I put on my mail and grabbed my spear. After all I was still a soldier in the imperial army, though I didn't feel like much of a soldier and Iven laughed as he saw me. "You've done fair work with the shirt Scratch, though you'll not need it today."

"Where is the battle?" I asked.

"Why would you be asking about that trifle?" responded Iven. "You've no need for battles."

"Just curious."

"You'll not be going near it Scratch, not if I can help it." The smith's voice had taken on his usual tone of brute finality.

"I don't want to see it," I said truthfully. "I don't even like fighting." I think I wanted to know more where it was so that I could run away from it than to be able to get to it.

"Really?" asked Iven. "You've got a lot of hardware for a lad that's not looking for a fight."

"It was my father's," I answered. "Except for the mail, that was given to me when the village sent me away."

"On second thought, perhaps you should see the battle," said Iven with a queer glint in his eye. "Not close up, but close enough. Seeing men cut down may help you understand the foolishness of all this. There's a spare pig-poker in the wagon, and a helmet. Hop to it then Scratch, the day's not getting any longer!"

With spears in hand we climbed a hill just north of the camp. At the top we looked down into a small valley where the two armies had met. The great black hosts of the Kaarum crushed against a stalwart wall of defending spearmen at the center, and around the edges horsemen galloped, pressing the dark army in against the middle ranks. I found Lord Kelsin quickly. His great white horse and shining armor sparkled in the mid morning light. Wherever he rode the men rallied and more than once a shout of courage erupted in his trail. Before him enemies fell back. For the moment the imperial army held the upper hand. The battle raged back and forth, like a swirling mass of insects seeking furiously to destroy one another.

The seemingly endless hosts of Kaarum slowly began to take their toll on the soldiers. Though their claws and horns could not reach past the long spears and shields of the army, their sheer size and great numbers steadily created an advantage. Then, suddenly, like a thunderclap, a wave of fear surged across the valley, spreading panic on both sides. An enormous dark figure on a great black reptile descended onto the battlefield from a hill across the valley. The huge deformed lizard sported gnarled horns and white sharp fangs. Wherever it went men fled in terror. The rider, clothed in a sable cloak, and bearing a long lance with a sword slung across his back urged his troops to battle.

Now the battle turned quickly against the imperial forces. The Kaarum rallied around their leader who spread terror like a plague across the field. On the opposite side, Lord Kelsin also struggled to bring hope and order back to the battle. With his bodyguard he made a drive deep into the Kaarum lines, pushing them back. But to his folly Kelsin overextended, and enemies cut down his rearguard. Stranded in the midst of his enemies, he struggled to return to safety. Before he could find a way out, the enemy warlord sped forth his troops, and I hid my face as they carried Kelsin from his horse and he became lost beneath the dark mass of fighting.

The battle turned into a rout. Soldiers and officers alike fell back beneath a wave of panic. Without regard or sense of direction men turned and ran for any perceived safety. The flight of the soldiers was speedy but disorganized. The Kaarum crowded them together on their flanks, spreading confusion and disorder among the inner ranks.

Then it happened. A rumble like a thousand rushing waterfalls rose suddenly. The ground beneath the feet of the Kaarum began to erupt in violent explosions, creating massive sinkholes and throwing howling beast-men into the air. The entire length of the valley began to boil with the noise of a thousand thunderstorms as the earth hurled boulders into the air and they slammed back down again. Everywhere open pits sucked the Kaarum into the ground or explosions tossed them into the sky or crushed them beneath falling stones. The ground trembled. I fell to my knees. Soldiers lost their footing and many were sucked down with the violence and crushed with the Kaarum. Panic swept over the valley carrying with it all remnants of sanity. Men cut one another down just to be the first to escape the noise. Peasants pulled nobles from their horses. Even Iven tripped and fell eventually.

Of the many horrible memories I have, this is one of the most potent. I vomited endlessly. My loathing for violence redoubled. That experience transfixed in my mind forever the desire to keep armies apart.

## Chapter Six

Torbridge rode up a few minutes after the rumbling stopped. His horse's eyes rolled wildly with fear and exhaustion. A few soldiers straggled behind him. "You'd best come with us if you want to stay safe," he ordered. But Iven just laughed.

"And what will you do that I can't?" The smith planted his feet and mocked the captain. "Go on Torbridge, go rally the peasants back in Havensod."

"You, boy, come with me!" It was more of a plea than an order. I think that was the first time I started to realize that my name had real meaning to people in the wide world. He moved to grab me, but I recoiled and he turned and rode away screaming, "Fools!"

In the valley below a few more eruptions shook the plain before the earth everywhere let out a great sigh. Straggling bands of Kaarum wandered north while straggling bands of soldiers wandered south. The great Kaarum warlord lies buried deep in the earth now along with Lord Kelsin. Bent and broken corpses littered the valley floor along with the scattered remains of weapons and wagons. I clutched my spear and retched again.

"Best use of a spear I've seen in a long time," commented Iven.

"I agree," said a voice I didn't recognize until I turned around. There stood the stranger from the night before, quietly surveying the valley. His face was as cold as stone, but his wrinkles made it look like he was smiling even in the face of such destruction.

"Everywhere you go death follows, Pascalli," said Iven. "Not even Kaarum deserve to die like that."

"At another time I might debate that point with you," replied Pascalli calmly. "For now let my work speak for itself. There is no question how I feel about the Kaarum or their masters or their servants."

"And what of the men?" The smith screamed back. It is a testament to me of the gravity of the violence I witnessed that Iven would lose his temper. Passionate as he was, I never knew him to blink an eye at seeing a man crushed or burned or have a limb cut off. "They have done nothing."

"I came to warn them, my friend," replied Pascalli calmly. "Would there be more alive if I had let the Kaarum slaughter

them? Would there be less suffering if I had waited? I tried to keep them back but I could not."

"That is no way for a man to die." Iven sulked.

"And I am sorry you witnessed it. You should have waited by the wagon. One of you at least has the sense to do as they are told. Scratch, my boy, come here." Of course I obeyed. I had done nothing more than obey since leaving home. "Let me see." He looked into my eyes in a way that only Pascalli could look. I felt as if he were searching my soul, looking for some spark of fate that he could ignite. I tried to hide it, and the harder I tried the wider his grin grew until he chuckled and said, "So it is true after all."

"What's true, sir," I asked.

Again Pascalli chuckled. "A fool's dream, that's what. Now no more nonsensical questions until you are old enough to not understand them properly. Where are your things? Where is your horse?"

One thing about Pascalli that I always found interesting was his way of constantly asking questions but always refusing to answer them. For example, when I asked "Where are we going?"

He replied, "Ha, and what sort of silliness is that. I might just as well ask what you mean by that. Where are we going now? Nowhere. We are eating lunch right here. Later today? South, generally. Perhaps to Havensod and perhaps not. To Darnuth Keep. Ultimately? Who knows? Where are we going in life, you might just as well give up on that one. In fact, I would suggest you give up asking altogether until you are a bit older, say two hundred or so. Just keep your eyes and ears open and the answers will come when you need them."

"Who are you?" I persisted.

"I see you won't be satisfied without a few answers at least," he said. He smiled broad and laughed as if the battle never happened. "I've nearly forgotten what it is to be curious and ignorant." If he saw my frown he ignored it. "My name is Pascalli, at least that is what I am generally called. I am a wizard. To some I am The Wizard. To others I am other things, both better and worse. You may call me Pascalli or master, for I will continue the training that Iven has started."

"What do you want with me?" My head reeled with unanswered questions.

He laughed again. "That is a question with many answers, most of which you could not possibly misunderstand correctly. Let us say simply that you and I share the same goals, and a part of the same destiny. I fight the Kaarum. More specifically I seek to destroy them utterly. You will help me. In time we may even succeed. At the moment it does not matter. The fact that Harrim Wilder finally saw fit to thrust you upon the world is at least a sign that things may begin to right themselves." He saw the question in my eyes. "How I know the innkeeper and why are not questions I shall answer at the moment. Nor shall I bother

with the dozen other you would conjure if I didn't stop you. At the moment I want lunch."

Between Pascalli and Iven existed a kind of quiet alliance that teetered on hatred but was held together by contempt of both the Kaarum and the injustice of men. I could plainly see that Iven trusted the wizard as he trusted no other man, but that he liked him no better than Torbridge. I found myself drawn to his smile, but a silent warning in my mind told me to tread carefully.

Though the Eastern Watch largely destroyed the Kaarum that day, they suffered tremendous losses. Many soldiers deserted following the destruction and the surviving officers spent the next markets searching for them or hunting the starving pockets of Kaarum. Pascalli had several loose ends to tie up in Havensod, most of which had little to do with me. He had contracted the help of a group of people very much unknown to me, and as I gathered unknown to anyone in the empire. First, however, Iven, Pascalli and I returned to Havensod. While I still remained a soldier in the imperial army and I remained Iven's charge, Pascalli directed our affairs now and I am certain he didn't take more than one eye off of me for longer than an instant.

Havensod is a favorite home for merchants, travelers and rogues. Most towns of any size are wonderful to visit, but Havensod has a peculiar kind of warmth about it that welcomes travelers. Inns, taverns, warehouses, shops, bazaars; all of the wonderful places a city should have mixed with the earthy roots of the farmers that built it. The few remaining old families who made Havensod their permanent residence were very old indeed and still mingled their blood with gentleman farmers in the surrounding region. The new permanent families were likewise very few in number and included wealthy merchants tired of their travels but still hungry for news of the world outside. Everyone else visited but never stayed. Shops changed owners almost as quickly as turnips, and the merchant selling beads one market would be gone the next only to return in a five market or a summer peddling pots or rugs. Of all the major cities in the empire, only Havensod openly welcomed foreigners, though few rarely crossed the eastern mountains or made the long trek from the south.

In those days alliances had yet to be forged with the kingdoms across the Shadowspines, and the Darkunders remained under suspicion. Havensod provided a sort of door to the empire for such folk. Pascalli bundled me into the back of the wagon and we entered the town just as dusk fell on the highway. "Here your name is Buck," he told me. "Don't you forget it. No mention of battles or Kaarum here, do you understand?"

"Yes," I mumbled, not really understanding.

"You are a servant in my employ for about the last thirty markets. I treat you harshly. If anyone asks questions, show them your scars and mumble something about me beating you."

A question started in my throat but he cut it off.

"I've neither time nor inclination to explain. Suffice to say that you are in real danger while in Havensod and that Iven and I are your only friends. Now in you go and keep your head down."

Pascalli chose for our lodging one Blue Dragon inn. The place tickled my nose slightly with the odor of refuse behind the smoke and ale. Pascalli pulled the wagon around behind the inn and hopped out. "Stable the horses. Then bring our gear up to my room," he growled.

I jumped to obey. Iven returned to the local guard headquarters and left me alone to unload everything. Apparently Pascalli gave orders that I was to do the job myself since none of the inn's servants lent a hand. I did not finish until late into the night, and when I did Pascalli sent me off to find a corner to sleep with the servants. I collapsed in an exhausted heap on a pile of dirty straw and fell instantly into a deep slumber.

What seemed like only moments later a hard boot brought me painfully to my senses. I expected to see the tall form of Pascalli looming over me in the dark before dawn, but instead a greasy man of medium build with dirty blond locks hanging about his chin leered at me.

Master Horroffen, the owner of the Blue Dragon, did not care for my intrusion upon his establishment and reminded me at every turn.

"Whip him soundly if he's lazy, Jakand," he warned the greasy cook. "I'll not have any loafers in my place."

True to his orders, Jakand kicked me whenever a foul mood took him or if he thought me too slow. He took to calling me Lazy Nob and relegated me to a corner with even less straw than before.

"Up and earn your keep." Jakand's voice sounded slightly raspy and clearly not content. I pulled myself from the ground, blinking stupidly. "The wood needs split as Jon's left it undone again. Now get."

"Where?" I stammered. By now I was getting used to being ordered around by people I didn't know.

"In the back, stupid." I noticed his knee bending slightly as he readied another kick and I scampered away to work. I split the wood and sharpened the axe on a stone in the barn. I neither saw nor heard Pascalli, though I knew he must be close by as no one had called for the horses or wagon.

At the Waystop guests were infrequent except after harvest when the merchants came, and the times I helped Harrim I could do any task at my leisure. The Blue Dragon was crowded with travelers from many places, and their demands filled not only my

time, but kept the four regular servants busy as well. Jon never spoke to me except to give me another task though I guessed from Jakand's manner that to take pity on me would cause him trouble.

"Vergha has taken ill," said Jakand the following morning. "You'll help Laural with the cleaning until she is better." Vergha, the older woman who cleaned the rooms looked as fit and healthy as ever. Her hand moved as quickly as any young girl's when I stole a crust of bread for my breakfast, and her string of curses betrayed the strength in her lungs as I darted from the kitchens. Jakand liked her, however, and I knew there would be no peace if I displeased either of them.

I found Laural on the second floor sweeping dust from the corners. "Jakand sent me to help," I said.

She smiled back and looked at me through greasy bangs that got into her eyes. Although certainly older than me she seemed at once both younger and more mature. A hint of lighter color showed beneath the dirt and grime covering her hair and face. I saw a freckle or two where she wiped the dirt from her nose. I knew I must look little better, and pushed the hair back over my ears.

"Start over there," she said. She pointed at a pile of rubbish in the corner. "I brought a bin up with me. You can find an extra broom in the kitchen if you're brave enough to go back down there."

I laughed a little. "Not just now. Vergha's not in a pleasant mood this morning."

"Or any morning," agreed Laural.

I didn't mind the work even though many of my old friends would have considered fit only for a woman. Laural made the place feel almost pleasant. We worked through the day, exchanging lighter conversation than I had enjoyed since arriving at the inn. By evening I was tired, but content with the day's work.

When a rough hand shook me awake in the middle of the night I thought Jakand had found another torture. I didn't expect to see Pascalli smiling back at me. He held a finger to his lips and motioned for me to follow him out of the kitchens. In the opposite corner Jon stirred a little in his sleep, but resumed his rhythmic snoring as I joined Pascalli in the alley behind the Blue Dragon.

"Where have you been?" I demanded in the loudest whisper I could manage.

"I believe my affairs are my own," he said through stern brows. "Some may argue that I need a keeper, but I reserve the opinion that you are not the person for the job." His lecture tone melted quickly. "I'm sure you've had a time of it. Jakand was always a bit of a brute, and far too dull for my taste. I hope he hasn't handled you too badly."

"I'm alive," I said. "The work isn't bad, and he's slow with his kicks in the afternoon. Will we be leaving soon?" I tried to make the question sound as pitiful as possible.

"Not soon enough for your liking, I'm afraid." I frowned and stared at the feet. I hadn't noticed the chill air in the alley until then. "Don't sulk. Another day, maybe two and we'll be on our way. I just wanted to see that you were alive and let you know I hadn't forgotten. Have you seen any imperial troops?"

"No. I've only seen merchants and a few travelers. I haven't talked to any of them as Jakand doesn't like us to speak to the guests," I replied.

"Technically you have deserted your post, so I don't think you should strike up a conversation with anyone who might recognize you at the moment," he said.

"You're nothing but trouble," I said.

"Most people I know would agree with you." He smiled, and his eyes softened. "You will have to trust me, Scratch. Tomorrow I'll speak with Torbridge or whoever they've left in command. I'll have it sorted out soon enough. In the meantime, be careful who you talk to. There are plenty of scoundrels around who intend you harm." He handed me small packet wrapped in a bit of cloth. "I saved bit of food which I'm sure will taste better than the swill Jakand usually passes around."

I took the food. "Thanks," I said. Despite the circumstances, I felt I could trust him. "Have you seen Iven?"

"He's doing well. He returned to his post at my suggestion. At the moment he is rather worried about you. It will do him good to know that you are safe, though perhaps not as comfortable as you would like," said Pascalli.

"Will he be coming with us?" I asked.

"Probably," replied Pascalli. "Now off you go, and be quiet. I'll fetch you as soon as I can."

In the morning I resumed my chores, though my heart felt a little lighter after Pascalli's reassurances. Laural found me splitting wood. I was glad for her company. She had washed her face and hair, and her freckles showed clearly in the morning light.

"It must me a festival day," I commented. "You look fit to celebrate."

"Any change is nice," she replied. "This place wears you down until there's hardly anything left. I'd like to leave the Blue Dragon forever."

"What's holding you here?" I asked. "Surely you've kin somewhere who would take you in."

"My father owed Master Horrofen for the rents on his shop. When the time came to pay he offered me instead. Five winters of service. If I had the money I could buy my way out, but where could I get any money? I've nowhere to run even if I dared try." The helplessness in her eyes echoed the emptiness of her voice as she spoke. "You'll be moving on soon enough, though, won't you?"

I hesitated, unsure if she had overheard my conversation with Pascalli or if she was just guessing. "I hope so," I said. "Jakand's boot is getting uncomfortable."

"He's a pig," agreed Laural. We shared a laugh at the man's expense. "Do you think your friend could take me with you?"

"You should have been sleeping," I said.

"You shouldn't make so much noise when you walk." She countered.

"I only met him a few days before we came here. I don't know where we're going or when. If he has plans, he hasn't told me about them. You can ask him what you like."

Pascalli appeared before dawn the following day, before most of the guests had risen, and even before our work had really begun for the day. I heard his voice booming from the common room. "Horrofmen, I require my baggage. All of it now, including the bit that walks. Have my team sent around immediately. I must be off at once."

Horrofmen poked his head into the kitchens long enough to point a finger at me and jerk a thumb towards the stables. "Best get your horses ready, boy."

Laural caught my sleeve as I walked out. "Come on," I said. "No harm asking."

Pascalli met us at the stable. "Get the horses, lad. Don't bother with the girl. We've enough baggage already."

"Please, sir, I can cook and mend," said Laural.

Pascalli looked at her more kindly than I expected. His voice was gentle, but firm. "Where we go you cannot come, child. I know Horrofmen for his black heart and unyielding ways, but do not give up hope too quickly. Help is often just a moment away. I cannot help you today, but another may come along just when least expected. Hop to, Scratch! Don't forget your pack!"

What an idiot I must have been. I loaded my pack onto the wagon, and as I did I remembered the money Master Wilder had given me. I waved at Laural, and she came to help. "It isn't much, but it should be enough for a start," I said. "I've no use for it." I handed her the coins, and tears formed at the corners of her eyes. She tried to speak, but turned away and darted inside.

"Now then, lad, let's be off. We've much work today," said Pascalli.

## Chapter Seven

I thought we would point the wagon towards one of the many city gates, but instead we drove to the old fort near the center of town where the Eastern Watch kept their command. Though the town came alive early with farmers and artisans already preparing for a busy day in the city's sprawling markets, the fort seemed abandoned. All around the noise of the city erupted almost at once, while the old fort waited in silence, like a skeletal crown on top of a low hill.

The fort gates stood open, and the sentries merely waved and nodded at Pascalli as we approached. Inside only a few soldiers were visible. Across the yard I heard Iven's hammer ringing against the anvil. I could just make out his broad shoulders working in the cool morning air.

"Lord Armos is waiting for you," said a man I did not recognize.

Pascalli nodded towards Iven. "Fetch the smith as well. He'll be needed this morning," said Pascalli. The man hesitated. Obviously he knew how little Iven liked to be disturbed when working. "Tell him I sent you, and you may have better luck." Pascalli winked and laughed to himself. The soldier reluctantly turned towards the forge. "Once we're inside, speak only if spoken to. A great deal may be said today, none of which you should either understand or concern yourself with at the moment. However, I would like you to remember what goes on. Above all, pay attention to the faces you meet today, for they won't soon forget yours."

I followed the towering wizard into a low building with thick stone walls. A soldier escorted us down a narrow hallway to a small room at the back of the fortress. A little sunlight filtered in through narrow windows near the ceiling, but the real light came from two dusty lanterns hanging from the ceiling.

Two men waited inside. I recognized Daven. The friendly priest seemed genuinely delighted to see me. "I'm glad to see you again, Colter. We lost a lot of men in the battle. None of us knew what happened to you."

I caught the wizard's eye and held my tongue. "I am Lord Armos," said the other man. His graying hair rested on the armor covering his broad shoulders. His cares weighed heavily, causing him to stoop slightly when he stood or walked. His voice sounded

tired, but still carried the firmness of a man used to giving orders. "Pascalli says that you have entered into an apprenticeship with Iven. Is this true?"

I didn't know anything about it, but I guessed that Pascalli must have arranged it. "Yes, sir," I replied.

Pascalli presented a document. I recognized my name but not the paper. Iven opened the door and stepped inside. I felt crowded between the two massive men.

"I see you've taken an apprentice," said Armos. "Usually we like to be informed of these changes beforehand. We hoped you would continue with us, but I am sure you want to rejoin your family."

"That's right, sir," replied Iven. "I've a home and forge in Anascrag that are missing me. The boy has already learned a lot. He proved himself a solid worker, and I can use his help."

"Imperial law frees you from service so long as you have been accepted by a master of Iven's status. We'll need another witness." He opened the door and spoke quickly to the soldier who stood guard outside. "Captain Torbridge has become invaluable since the battle. He's assisting me here now, though we're shorthanded and most of the officers spend more time in the field than usual."

Armos returned to his seat and motioned for the rest of us to sit down as well. Daven filled wooden goblets with wine while we waited for Torbridge.

"It is a pity that so many died in the battle," said the priest to no one in particular. "Lord Kelsin has been greatly missed."

"He wasn't a bad man." To my surprise Iven spoke. "I never agreed much with him, but he didn't deserve such a death."

"You saw it then?" asked Armos.

"The lad and I watched from a hill," replied the smith. "War is a gruesome thing, but nobody should suffer the terror those men faced before they perished. It's no surprise so many deserted. They'll not want to face the Kaarum again if there's risk of that happening again."

"I am sure the effect was equally potent on the Kaarum," said Pascalli. "They will not venture south so easily again. Not only are their numbers largely dwindled, but even their powerful masters will not be able to force them out until they are on the brink of starvation."

"How long will that take?" asked Daven.

"A few summers, possibly longer," replied Pascalli. "I've not visited their broken land in many winters, so it could also be sooner."

"The Eastern Watch cannot recover in time," said Armos. "I hope you are wrong."

The wizard's eyes flickered and the corners of his mouth tightened slightly. "This would not be the first time you hoped I was wrong." His words cut the old general, and he slouched in

his armor. "I doubt you've anything to worry about." Pascalli's tone brightened. The stern edge left his voice. "They will try the west next, unless I miss my guess. After they exhaust the wilderness north of the wall they will find Anascrag."

"There's a ray of hope for us, then," said Daven. He smiled. "This heavy talk does nothing to cheer any of us. I've no head for battle, or for politics. Pass round the wine again. Besides, Colter is to be congratulated. An apprenticeship such as this will be very valuable for him."

"What will be valuable?" I recognized Torbridge's voice from the doorway.

"Young Halfspear has entered into an apprenticeship," said Armos. "We need you to witness the discharge."

Torbridge glanced around the room. If he guessed any of Pascalli's mind he didn't show it. He scarcely glanced at the document before adding his signature to the bottom. "You can collect your wages with the quartermaster." He left the room as abruptly as he came. Armos added his signature and handed me the paper.

"Listen to your master, boy. He's a man who knows the world and the men in it. You're free to go." Lord Armos returned to his chair and sighed heavily.

Iven took me by the shoulder and guided me from the room. Pascalli followed us to the wagon. "I'll meet you at the drover's after you've collected his wages and your gear. They brought in some wild horses to break for the army a few markets back. I've a feeling they'll have some surplus, and we'll need extra mounts."

As Iven took me to the quartermaster I noticed how few soldiers garrisoned the walls. A line of women waited outside another low building, some of them carried or led small children. They stood in near silence, many of them weeping. "They've come to check the lists of the dead, and collect their husband's wages" said Iven. "They call it the widow's due, but only half will ever see it. Without a body their claim can't be proven, and they'll write him down as a deserter. The sorrow of those men buried in the valley will continue for many winters to come."

"They'll starve," I said.

"Or worse," said Iven. I wondered at his statement, but held my tongue.

Iven loaded a heavy pack onto my shoulders before taking an even larger load for himself. We struggled beneath the weight down the hill and to the north edge of town where wide corrals held stock for sale to the slaughterhouses or the stables. We found Pascalli haggling with a much smaller man over the price of horses. In the end he traded the wagon and more money than he cared to spend for seven strong horses bred in the mountains.

"Your mother knows something of horses, I believe," said Pascalli. "Did she ever teach you anything about them?"

"I could ride before I could walk," I replied. "These are good horses if you plan on a long journey over rough ground. I know the mountain breeds. They have heart and endurance, but they can be hard to break. They've short legs, so don't bet on winning a sprint."

"You've a keen eye, lad," said the gentleman selling the horses. "I can use an extra hand if you're interested."

"The lad's spoken for," interrupted Iven gruffly.

The man nodded. "The name's Tondo, if you change your mind. I drift between here and Dynwater, though I'm usually further north during the summer." He tipped his hat and smiled. "Pleasure doing business with someone who understands it."

We mounted and Pascalli led us toward the city gates. As we left the drover I noticed a familiar wagon pull up. Farmer Trakkin dismounted, and I saw Anaria idly toying with a flower in her fingers. I caught Pascalli's sleeve and pointed in their direction.

"You'll only bring them trouble if they see you now," said the wizard. "Torbridge made a point of ignoring you, but you should know he hasn't forgotten your name or face. As soon as he's able he'll send word to those who care that you've left the army and Havensod. Your father left a name in the world that draws the attention of men with power. Before winter comes they'll be looking for you, and no apprenticeship will keep you safe then."

After Havensod I began endless days of practice with sword and spear and bow. Pascalli carried an enormous oak shaft he would brandish when rancor took him, but he also hid a sword beneath his cloak. Iven preferred his hammer over anything else, but he relented long enough to show me the proper use of my father's spear.

"Hold it thus," he told me. "And watch your footwork." He usually said that after I tripped again. "You're feet give you control. Don't rely on your eyes or hands. Your legs and hips are the power, not your arms. You're scrawny as a chicken, lad. You can't expect to beat me with strength alone."

"Then how can I win?" I asked. I didn't want to kill the smith or anyone at all, but my desire to learn grew insatiable.

"Play to your strengths. You've speed and nimble feet. Never force a blow you can draw me into, and don't try to stop a blow you could just as easily avoid altogether," he said. I listened carefully to the smith and each day tried to improve upon the last.

I soon discovered that Pascalli had truly mastered many skills. In addition to my daily or twice or thrice daily efforts with weapons, he taught and drilled and forced me to recite from memory arithmetic, poetry, and the solutions to complex problems. In many ways, traveling with those two was akin to being locked in a room with two over-cautious tutors from dawn until dusk. Of course usually tutors did not also have you doing the cooking and

cleaning and tending the fire. I don't mean to say that they treated me harshly. They merely kept me busy. I certainly had no time to be homesick or to cause trouble.

The days began early and ended very late. We did not push the horses too quickly, though Pascalli had a definite direction and course in mind. We traveled almost due east, but slightly north out of Havensod directly into the Shadowspine Mountains. After the first day we left the highway where it continued east and slightly south towards a pass that led out of the empire.

"We are in the wild now," advised Iven. "You best keep your wits about you, Scratch."

"I've been in the wild before," I replied quietly.

"Of course you have," said Pascalli, slightly condescending. "I'm sure your father did his best to get around your mother's preoccupation with your safety." I gave him a sour look, but he only smiled back. "Have no fear. You will have plenty of opportunity to learn." When he caught my look of exasperation, he added, "There is no skill so great that it cannot be improved. We need meat and healing plants. One thing you do not do well is cook, and since you once expressed an interest in learning, I shall teach you. For that we shall need some herbs and plants of which you may not be entirely familiar."

"I already know about herbs and plants and things," I said.

"I'm sure you do," he said dismissively. "Now ride on out and see if you can bring down an elk or buffalo."

"Wouldn't a deer be enough? There are only three of us," I suggested.

"We need more than just meat," he replied. "A bear or tiger would be good, though I doubt you will see one. Fat and furs will see us through the winter." He gave me a mysterious grin. "Of course if all goes well we will have other resources for the winter. Still, we better plan for the worst."

"We'll need to move higher into the mountains if you want to find game that large," I said. "It's too hot this low."

He smiled back at me. "Of course, Scratch, you lead the way. Take us north and east until we reach the head of the Dustwater." I thought he was joking, but after a moment I realized he actually expected me to pick out our trail.

Under my leadership we progressed slowly. I turned out to be a less proficient tracker than I had expected, though not as bad, I think, as Iven had guessed. My father taught me as much as a young boy could learn, and I stayed alert to the hints Pascalli dropped each day. After three days we finally came upon a small stream that flowed icy cold from the mountains. "I see you've finally found it," chuckled Pascalli, and my ears burned. "Why not rest a while," he suggested, although it was only mid-day. "This is a branch of the Dustwater. We can follow it upstream until it joins the main river. Perhaps the smith can catch a fish for our supper and you can show me that trick you do with the spear again."

The trick he referred to was the one where he disarmed me and sent me sprawling head over heels. I felt in no mood to be bruised again. "I need to check for animal sign," I said.

"Good idea, I'll come with you," said the old wizard. I expected Pascalli to do little more than be a nuisance, much less offer any real help. To my great surprise he proved to be both much more expert than myself, and a much kinder teacher than I had hoped.

"Shhh, Scratch," he breathed. "See, there, the path of a small snake where it has crossed to get water. And there, that broken twig is fresh, only a few minutes. A mountain buffalo most likely, there haven't been any sign of bear."

Sure enough it only required a few moments of careful looking to spot a clearer set of tracks among the softer ground near the water. We found a medium sized bull grazing near the stream.

"Do you know where to shoot?" asked Pascalli.

"Yes, I replied," as I pulled my bow. My aim was true, and the arrow found its mark just behind and a little below the shoulder. I drew and loosed a second arrow when the first one didn't drop the mountain buffalo. After a moment though, it stumbled and fell over. I had never before killed anything quite so large and felt a mixture of emotions as I watched the blood ooze from its nose. Slaying something so great and beautiful felt both wonderful and horrible.

"You begin skinning it," said Pascalli. "I'll get Iven."

We had a wonderful feast of fresh meat that evening, the first I had enjoyed since leaving Dunston. We scraped and cured the hide. We carefully jerked the rest of the meat. Pascalli took the time to show me the proper technique for curing the hide while we rested and gathered our strength.

"We'll need at least two more hides like this by the end of summer," warned Pascalli. "Three or four would serve us better."

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"Not that again," laughed the wizard, and Iven added his own rough chuckle. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, why do we need so many hides if there are clothes and blankets we can buy?" I said.

"That should be obvious even to you," replied the wizard. "There is a strong possibility that we will spend the winter in the mountains without access to other resources. You have much to learn before you can take up your father's destiny."

"What do you know about my father?" I asked.

"More than you," replied Pascalli with a wink. He saw the hurt and anger in my eyes. "No need for that. I mean no harm. I know a great deal about many people. Your father was a great man and he left you a great responsibility. Can you understand that?"

"I can do what needs doing," I said.

"Then find us meat and hides before we have to go to ground for the winter. Before you know it your real work will begin and you've not long to prepare for it. You will take up Kyven Halfspear's work, and I mean for you to be fully prepared when you do."

I brought down another buffalo and three elk before the first snow, and for the first time in several markets Pascalli seemed content. Then one day Pascalli told me to take the rear. I had lead long enough. At first I felt that I had somehow disappointed him with my performance. I must have taken too long or not properly followed the river. I quickly realized he was looking for a specific place, one that I could not possibly know about. He guided us higher and deeper, beyond the farthest homesteads. Eventually I lost the path entirely though I did my best to watch our back trail. Pascalli taught me to pick out landmarks so that if I ever rode the same trail twice, either coming or going I would be able to find my way. Despite his training I admit I could not keep the path clearly in my mind. He guided us for more than two markets. In the dead of winter we entered a cave deep in the mountains far beyond the known passes of men.

We had already consumed much of our meat. Iven complained more than once about the lack of fuel for his pipe. Pascalli waved away our concerns lightly. "We'll soon have more than we need I'm sure, though you may not like what you get. Tomorrow we'll enter the realm of the Veldmen. They'll see us through the winter safe enough."

## Chapter Eight

True to his word, Pascalli led us to the base of a high cliff overlooking the sprawling mountains. All around us snow glistened in the sunlight and a chill wind bit at our ears and noses. A wide cave opened into the side of the mountain and disappeared into blank darkness beyond.

As we rode into the cave, the sunlight began to disappear and the footing became dangerous for our horses. We dismounted and Pascalli instructed me to light a lantern he had brought along for just this purpose. "We won't need it long, but the light is better than that of a torch. Mind your feet now."

We trudged into the blackness. I had never before ventured underground, or explored any cave. Truly the depths of the earth hold many great mysteries, but finding them requires both courage and skill. Fear gripped my throat as I guessed at the shadows and echoes just out of sight.

"Relax, boy," advised Iven. "You're making enough noise to wake the entire mountain."

I realized then that I had scuffed my feet something awful on the floor and that with each step I sent sand and small pebbles skidding out of sight. I quickly began to move more lightly and consciously tried to relax.

"Yes," agreed Pascalli heartily. "Be careful with your horse. He is not used to this. Step where I step. The ceiling is going to slope down here very soon. There are also traps set in the floor so be careful where you go or we may all regret having chosen this path."

I thought about reminding the wizard that I had not chosen any path in particular but thought better of it. Instead I concentrated on keeping my horse, which was apparently terrified of being underground, from bolting. After what I would estimate to be close to an hour Pascalli stopped and asked me to bring up the lantern closer. In front of us a passage sloped steeply down into the earth. To the right, a large stone painted with blue letters gave some warning that I could not decipher.

Pascalli spoke in a language I did not understand and a rumbling voice similar to Iven's when he was angry answered him. I recognized our names given during the exchange but could gather nothing further. Then the voice disappeared and Pascalli said, "We are to wait here for a while. The guards need to verify that

we are who we say we are. In any event I expect we should make ourselves comfortable."

The Veldmen returned a few hours later to find us lounging on their doorstep. Each of them carried a short spear or halberd finely crafted with blades polished to perfection. About them their armor moved seamlessly and silently, a trick of their skill and mastery that mankind can only dream about. Their hair and beards varied in color from deepest red to fiery golden. The tallest of them stood a full head and a half shorter than me. Pascalli spoke on our behalf in their deep rumbling language and we followed them into their realm.

Fear and wonder stilled my heart as I followed the dark path into the mountain. The path led simple and straight, though I guessed they had built safeguards along the way. Though the tunnel did not turn, we often changed sides as we walked along the corridor, and our guides often paused to listen before continuing.

They brought us into their city, a bright cavern carved from living rock lit by cunning lanterns and mirrors. "My lord Vrashnil, I have come to pay what I owe in return for your services at the battle near Havensod," said Pascalli.

"You come slowly, Black Wizard," replied Vrashnil. His voice rang loudly through their city. He held obvious contempt and thinly veiled mistrust for Pascalli. "The race of men broke the world, and still we wait for you to put it back together again. You show little reason for us to trust you. Four cycles to Moalthor you promised. I say five. Much time has passed."

"I offer ten from the boy," replied Pascalli.

Vrashnil laughed a hollow laugh and smiled. "You bring us a gift. Do you betray him as you betrayed the darkunder? Will you leave him here while you wander the wide cold world or do you expect our welcome?"

"For Iven and myself I offer two cycles in exchange for food and comfort through the winter," said Pascalli. "The boy travels with me of his own will. He can decide for himself how he feels about me."

"Your payment is generous. Two cycles each," agreed Vrashnil.

One of the guards took me by the arm and began to lead me away. Pascalli stopped him. "You've sold me as a slave," I said. I felt the anger burning in my face.

"Yes and no," replied Pascalli, as cheerful as a summer's day. "Ten cycles works out to about a hundred days, more or less. They do not count time as you and I. The time will pass rapidly enough."

"A slave is still a slave," I said.

"You will be asked to work, but the work is no more difficult than what have already done. Iven and I will also work. Most likely you will be asked to assist one of the smiths. Pay attention. Keep your eyes open. There are things here that

you cannot learn anywhere else. I did not sell you into slavery, so much as buy you an education I could not otherwise give you."

The resentment in my heart did not die as they led me away. They took me to a large forge where several Veldmen labored. A stout fellow with a thick beard looked me over with disapproving eyes. He said something in their language, and by his tone I could tell he was not happy. The guards left us and I immediately began to discover the secrets of mastering any craft.

Torsith ruled his forge and those who worked and served there with infinite patience and painstaking care. The Veldmen do not measure time by the rising and setting of the sun, but rather by the sleeping and waking of a person. Each waking moment for the first twenty days or so, Torsith directed everything I did. He refused to speak my language, but he patiently explained the words of their tongue many times each day until I understood what he wanted. I gathered fuel for their fires, fetched tools, and watched as they crafted the most intricate works of metal and stone I had ever seen.

Precision clocks, the like of which are not found anywhere in the empire, sound the rising each morning. Each person, no matter their station performs their duties tirelessly. About twenty hours later the clock tells of the time to sleep, and all work stops. Every ten days, or cycle as they call it, the Veldmen rest from their labors and offer their rites to the god Moalthor from whom they received the gift of fire and the knowledge of the forge.

Despite Pascalli's reassurances, I found the work far more difficult, especially at first, than anything I had ever done before. To the Veldmen, work is life. One lives to work. One joys in it, and receives fulfillment from it alone. A master smith may spend a hundred hours crafting a piece to perfection simply to melt it down again and start over just for the sheer joy of working. Rest and recreation have a time and place among the Veldmen, but the rites of Moalthor carefully regulate these diversions.

On feast days to Moalthor I was given time to visit my companions, though at first I barely had energy talk. Iven appeared as tired as me but Pascalli always looked as fresh as though he hadn't lifted a finger. During the rest of the cycle I saw them only rarely. If an errand took us to another place of work we could chat for a short moment. Otherwise we took our leisure with the Veldmen.

"I don't understand how you manage it, old man," said Iven as we lazed near a glowing coal fire.

"The trick is understanding perfectly the task you have been given," replied Pascalli. "After a few more lifetimes you will come to understand it the same way I have. Besides, they do not have me swinging a hammer or shoveling coal. Vrashnil is much more interested in the knowledge I have not chosen to share with the rest of the world."

"That I can understand," replied the smith. "The machines they have here are beyond my grasp. I've never seen the like. They mix alloys of iron and other metals that I had not seen before. I understand the forging of steel, and how to mix bronze as well as a half dozen different ways to weld and pull wire, but nearly all of it is done by hand with hard labor. I've never seen iron wire turned so neatly. All of it so uniform with no kinks or breaks along the line."

"Open your eyes, then," said Pascalli. "There's nothing magic about it. No mysterious secret. By and large it is the power of coal and steam that turn their engines. They've a better annealing process than you have, and they understand that lime makes a better lubricant for wire than the oils you are accustomed to."

"I watched Torsith repair the automatic hammer he uses," I said. "There is a cylinder inside a cylinder, and a number of wheels that turn when the cylinders move. Or perhaps only one of them moves. That is what makes the motion for the hammer."

"You've a keen eye, lad," agreed Iven. "Perhaps you can help me make drawings of the machines when we leave." After that I tried extra hard to learn the ways of the Veldmen and understand exactly what Torsith and his apprentices did.

I ate at the forge, drank while gathering ore, and slept again near the warm coals. After completing his two cycles of service Pascalli managed to convince Vrashnil that I should spend half the day every-other day at the equally rigorous torture of training my spear with the Veldmen guards who spent their entire lives learning the use of the weapon and perfecting that skill.

"The Barak-dun may come," said Pascalli. "The boy has some skill with his spear and you may find his help welcome. Besides, your guards could use the practice against our foreign fighting style."

At times I thought of the wide world above ground. I thought of my farm and family in Dunston. I even wondered at times what Laural might be doing, if she ever escaped the Blue Dragon. I felt caught in a dream hidden from the sun. When I mentioned this to Pascalli he laughed quietly.

"You're beginning to change, Scratch," he said. "One day you'll look into a stream and not recognize who you've become."

The many markets of practice with Iven and Pascalli as we journeyed in the wild prepared me well for my time with the Veldmen guards. After only two more cycles their captain allowed me to train with the regular guards. Many times I thought I would collapse from the exhaustion, but a healthy draught of a wine they make from fungus brought me back to my senses so that I could finish the day.

"The Barak-dun, or people of stone as they call themselves, may attack during the winter," warned Pascalli as we rested during Moalthor's holiday. "They are intelligent creatures,

similar in many ways to the Kaarum, but much more organized and dangerous."

"Where do they live?" I asked.

"They have many tunnels and caves throughout the mountains, though generally farther north. I believe they may have a loose alliance with the Kaarum far beyond the Northern Crown."

"What do they look like?" I asked. Pascalli had a way of exciting my curiosity.

"Like short yellow or green, hairless men. You will have no trouble recognizing them."

Some sixty days into this nightmare, just as my body had adjusted to the rhythm of the work and rest, the Barak-dun attacked the city as Pascalli had foreseen. As an honorary member of their guard I came immediately to defend a tunnel at the far end of the city. All lights extinguished at once. Though I have never found a creature that can see in such absolute darkness, the Veldmen have ears and noses as keen as a dog's. I neither heard nor smelled the enemies approaching, but I felt the soldier next to me tense and I knew they were upon us.

At the captain's order someone struck a small spark for light and we all leapt into action. The Barak-dun fought viciously according to their nature. They had tipped their spears with sticky venom gathered from fungi. A companion next to me fell instantly after a cut in the shoulder during our ambush. He clutched in agony at the burning, bleeding flesh. To my own surprise I summoned the discipline to ignore him for the moment and sent my father's spear into one target's chest. Their armor appeared to have been scavenged from fallen enemies for it did not seem to fit properly, and offered little protection against our far superior weapons. My height and reach gave me an unexpected advantage that I quickly put to good use.

I am glad to say that the battle ended on a victorious note for the most part. Unfortunately two of the wounded were dragged away when the Barak-dun retreated.

"What will happen to them?" I asked Pascalli as we counted the missing.

"The Barak-dun will sacrifice them to Wolfar," replied Vrashnil sadly.

"Can't we do something?" I asked. "If we hurry we can still catch them."

"You are willing to try to find them?" asked Vrashnil. "Why?"

"We can't just abandon them." I didn't know what else to say. I had never before considered leaving a comrade behind.

"Who will join him?" asked the king. "Who will bring our brothers back?"

Pascalli immediately offered his services, as did Iven. "I shall not have you wandering these great halls unsupervised," snorted Pascalli indignantly. Of the Veldmen, only their High Captain, Lagathin offered his spear.

By Lagathin's calculations the Barak-dun would again celebrate their holy sacrifices in four days. The Barak-dun did not often build their own tunnels, but rather used natural caverns or stole the tunnels of the Veldmen. Unless they had made some new route, Lagathin could track them without a problem. I had no idea how we would enter their holding unnoticed and leave again with the prisoners.

I don't know what sort of a leader I made on that silly adventure, no-one ever bothered to tell me if I did well or not. Pascalli offered no suggestions, insight, or help of any kind other than to say, "We'll need plenty of luck."

Three days later we sneaked up on the Barak-dun guards. Apparently the Veldmen did not have a practice of making war in return because the guards were lazy to the point of absurdity. Even when they clearly heard Iven stumble in the passageway, they argued amongst themselves rather than sending someone to find us. Those four we dispatched unawares and without trouble. The hundreds inside their village remained a distinct problem.

Not much burns underground, at least not without some planning and forethought. I did not have an amazing plan, but the one I put together on the spot worked reasonably well. For flammables we had a certain quantity of oil, some alcohol, some fungus from which the oil was derived, and four corpses. I am not proud to say that I defiled the dead, not even the dead of a race as foul as the Barak-dun, but I did. We lit the bodies into a full blaze and each of us dragging one charged into the city. Then we cast them aside, careful not to smother the flames and in the confusion looked for our captive comrades. Such a smothering ruckus and echo I hoped never to see or hear or feel again. The odor overwhelmed the senses, causing Barak-dun women and children to flee in terror and agony and even their stoutest warriors to vomit. Aided by the cover of smoke we escaped detection until our wise captive companions found us. At the first sound of confusion they had run from their captors, who merely stood guard with spears and had not bound them for lack of ropes or chains. Together we made a final run to the exit and kept sprinting lest the sure pursuit overtake us. Veldmen are a stout race but not one for winning contests of speed.

Such a tale among the Veldmen had not often been told before, and Torsith made me recount it again and again as I returned to the forge. Vrashnil rewarded us all handsomely with any trinkets we desired and told Pascalli that his debt had been repaid more times than could be counted. I replaced my chain shirt with one of much finer quality, such as would turn the blades of most spears and swords without taking the least dent or scratch. At Torsith's forge I learned the strength of patience and the value of steady effort. Under Lagathin's careful eye my skill with the spear developed into a love of tactics in motion. Though I took with me a pocket full of gold and silver and enough memories to fill a lifetime, the greatest treasure I realized

came from the knowledge Pascalli so carefully bought with my labor.

I blinked stupidly when I first stepped back into the cold sunlight. Though winter still gripped the high lands, I knew that lower down spring must be close. Torsith's forge melted into a kind memory as I mounted my horse once more. I breathed in the fresh mountain air and pointed my horse after Pascalli.

"Back at it, then Scratch," said Pascalli. "A boy never grew into a man by blinking away the sunlight."

After the Veldmen, Pascalli took a more focused approach to my training. Each day we focused on specific topics rather than fill my head with generalities. "We're returning to the realm of men. You will need to learn how to deal with men as men if you wish to survive."

"How?" I asked.

"Practice, of course." The wizard winked. "We've a great many roads to travel before we reach our destination. Between now and then we'll find many ways for you to learn."

## Chapter Nine

Pascalli picked a trail south and west. At first I thought we might return to Havensod, but we veered west long before we came that far south. The snow in the mountains made travel difficult and slow. We were careful not to work hard enough to break a sweat lest the chill wind freeze the perspiration to our skin. As we came lower the weather warmed quickly until we found the snow beginning to melt into spring runoff.

Iven woke me early the morning after we broke the snowline. "Your training resumes now, lad," he said. "We're past the danger of freezing, so time to work again." He pointed at Pascalli who stood by with the long sword he hid beneath his cloak.

"I'm certain you favor that spear, and I'll show you a trick or two in time, but the sword is a gentleman's weapon and it's time you began to learn," said the wizard. I began to retrieve my sword, but he stopped me. "Not yet." Iven handed me a stick with the bark removed. "Stand here facing me and mirror my motions. First the stance, then the forms, and eventually the footwork. When you've mastered that you can hold a real blade."

Though I had seen plenty of drills and understood the basics of any blade, Pascalli treated me as a complete novice. He corrected the tiniest flaw in my posture or position until I felt I knew nothing of fighting at all. Each day I practiced before the sunrise and each evening after we made camp. Coupled with the practice I followed the daily routine of cooking and maintaining the camp, although Iven helped when Pascalli wasn't watching.

"The day will come when neither Iven nor I will be here to watch you," warned Pascalli. "It will take us at least until next summer to reach Darnuth Keep. You've only until then to learn what takes most men many winters."

As I drilled the forms and mimicked his footwork, Pascalli recounted the great stories of the empire and the lands beyond. At first I found them entertaining, but I soon learned he wanted me to memorize them as well. As we rode along I retold dozens of battles until my head filled with names and places beyond reckoning.

We struck west and south, until we reached a low valley with a few scattered homesteads. We had managed to find enough game

to sustain us, and Pascalli did not wish to see anyone just yet, so we took turns watching the darkness at the edge of camp.

"The Eastern Watch, or at the very least the local governors will be looking for us," said Pascalli as we warmed ourselves from the chill mountain air. "I don't want you to be found just yet."

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because they will try to rob you of your destiny, my boy," he replied more firmly than I expected.

"What do you care about my destiny? So far you've done nothing but use me as a servant," I said.

Pascalli laughed. He always laughed at the least expected moment. "True enough Scratch. Right you are. Trapped between two old men with nothing but concern we've smothered the life out of you. Still, we've our reasons for expecting so much from you."

"What kind of reasons?"

"The kind you'll not understand," he said. He saw the disappointment and hurt in me. "I'll explain what I can," he said after a moment. "Your father left his quest unfinished."

"I know that," I replied.

"He bargained with Tylos, a bargain that cannot be broken. I'm going to see that you fulfill that bargain," he said.

"And I don't get a choice?" I said.

"Every man has a choice, except those whom the gods have chosen. I'll not promise to be an easy teacher, or to make you comfortable. Torbridge and the fools he serves would do that, and by so doing they would leave you unprepared. Tylos will demand her service, just as the Veldmen demanded theirs. The governors and regents will bicker and squabble. Some would raise you to lead their armies, others would have you killed or imprisoned," he said.

"What will you do with me?" I asked.

"I will take you to Darnuth Keep when you are ready. There you can begin to do the work that I cannot do," he answered.

"Enough of the heavy talk," Iven said suddenly. "We're still in the wild, and some of the wildest wild there is, so stay alert." I perked up my ears and listened, but there was nothing beyond the sounds of night and our fire popping lazily. Too much pitch in the wood.

"Right you are, my friend," said Pascalli with a laugh. "Wake me for my watch." Pascalli wrapped himself in his blankets and dozed off quickly. I looked into the shadows or watched the stars, careful to keep my eyes away from the fire where the light would momentarily blind me in case of an emergency.

"Where are you going, Iven?" I asked him. I had never before thought to ask what he planned to do or why he was with us. "I know you hadn't meant to stay with Pascalli all this time."

"Fair enough, lad," he answered, and for the first time his voice was soft, not just a whisper, but gentle as a warm blanket soothing out the cold. "I hope to go home to a family I've not seen since nearly a winter before Havensod. I've a wife, Whinnie, and though my boys are grown men now, I miss them. I left things unsettled in my haste. My forge is missing me."

"You speak of your forge as a person," I said.

"In a way it was for me. I was younger than you when I first learned the trade. Barely old enough to wipe my own nose. I nearly broke my back a time or two, but I learned early on to watch the masters at work. I had a place in Dynwater for a time until I earned a commission with Lord Nandurak of Anascrag."

"When he died I fell out of favor, but I kept the place. It is the finest shop in the empire. I had four apprentices there besides my four sons who have also learned the trade. The garrison at Anascrag has the best tools for making war anywhere in the empire, except perhaps for the Veldmen. I developed a kind of armor connected with steel plates so light and perfectly balanced a man properly fitted can stand on his head in it and yet it can turn even arrows." He seemed lost as he spoke, and I knew he remembered better times.

"Why did you leave?" My curiosity was insatiable, but I think that night it came as a relief to the smith.

"Pascalli appeared in Anascrag and asked me to travel east to help the army. I knew Pascalli when I was your age, when I was apprentice to Master Steelhander the armorer to the emperor. I learned my trade from the best, and much of that has passed to you. My sons know well the basics, but I've yet to show them some of the tricks to folding steel. I'd like to pass on that trick the Veldmen do to cover one metal with another under water. But I've sense to listen to the wizard, and my Whinnie had sense enough of duty and love for the land to let me go. So now I'm here, like you far from home in the wild."

"I hope you get to go home soon," I said. I know I wanted to say more to him, to take advantage of that one tender moment, but I saw something in the darkness moving, a flicker of reflected eyes and a deep shadow. The shape appeared too large for a wild cat, too large for a dog even, but slanted and unlike a bear. I turned to Iven, but he had seen it as well and put a finger to his lips then knocked an arrow. I did the same and edged closer to the fire where Pascalli slept.

A faint smell of brimstone tingled my nose as I nudged the wizard awake. I heard Iven move in the shadows and I knew that whatever waited out there could tell exactly where we hid. Whatever it was moved with absolute silence. The eyes had disappeared, but now the smell grew subtly stronger, or at least more definite, but I couldn't locate it with only a smell.

"It's over there," whispered Iven as he pointed to a patch of darkness between two tall pines. I looked but couldn't see anything more than shadows. Very little starlight filtered down

to us and the moon was less than half full. Iven drew back his bow and loosed an arrow in that direction.

Suddenly a shrieking scream of a girl or woman ripped through the night. Terror clutched at my heart, and I watched, transfixed as a jet of fire erupted from the shadows towards our camp. At the last instant I had enough instinct left to jump into the bushes and out of the way of the flames. On the heels of the fire came a bellowing roar and screech, like a great bear cackling in the wind. Again a woman's scream broke the air, this time more clear.

"It has someone," called Iven. "Whatever it is, it has a prisoner." For a man who had sense and cunning around a forge, Iven sometimes lost his head in the heat of battle. He plunged recklessly after the beast, whatever it might be, brandishing his hammer. In my recklessness and youth I followed without hesitation, eager to not be left behind. Pascalli continued to snore peacefully even as the camp around us began to burn. Wizards have a way of ignoring trouble that isn't great enough for them to have an interest in, and I trusted he could manage quite well without us.

By the light of the burning tree behind me I saw the back of a horse, or at least what appeared to be a horse. In that quick moment I shot an arrow, trying at least to wound the creature and slow it down. It's hard to say, and Iven often argued with me later that it was actually his arrow that wounded the creature, but at least one of us must have. I don't see how he could have hit it since he fired into complete darkness, while I had a clear shot. I know I didn't miss. Maybe we both hit it. My shot was answered with another spout of flame and more growls, though more distant and the fire was much easier to dodge this time. The woman had taken up a constant whimpering now, but even with that we were only able to track it a few hundred meters before darkness swallowed it and we lost the trail.

Angry and tired, we made our way back to camp. "Did you see that, lad," commented Iven. "I hit it a clean shot there. A bit tricky with all the fire, though."

"I think I hit it," I replied. "I had a clear view of the hind end. Did you see the woman?"

"No, but I'm sure she's alive. I only hope she's still alive in the morning." His tone was grim.

"Do you think it will be safe to track? What if there are more of them?" I hoped I didn't sound as frightened as I felt. Chasing things in the dark was brash and bold, but now that my blood had cooled I didn't think it wise to pursue more trouble than I needed.

"Safe or not, I'm going after it," said the smith. "Somewhere that woman has a family who wants to know about her. If she's alive then she deserves better than being a meal to some fire breathing beast. If she's dead, she deserves a proper ritual."

"Who deserves a proper ritual," rang the familiar voice of Pascalli when we reached camp. "I see you've left me here to burn while you went for a hike."

"I tried to wake you," I said, but obviously he was already angry beyond consolation. I looked around the campsite. The fire had not spread to other trees. The early spring dampness had held back the potential blaze, though I knew that in dryer weather the entire mountainside could have burned.

"You I can understand," he said to me. "You are still young enough to be excused for foolishness." He turned to Iven. "But you have no business being a fool."

"My business is my own," replied Iven gruffly. "My neck is my own to risk. Whatever it is, it has a captive, and I mean to rescue her."

Suddenly Pascalli's eye's lit with the knowing sparkle that they always did when he came upon some secret joy. "Oh, ho, a woman is it? Ho, ho, ho, indeed. And what would you do with her if you caught her?" He was laughing now almost uncontrollably. "Keep her in a sack? Trade her for a bag of meal?"

Iven merely glared at the wizard and squeezed the haft of his hammer until I felt certain it would crack. "I hunt at first light," he said. "Come or stay as you will." The smith grabbed his bedroll and flung it down, in an instant he pretended to sleep.

"Oh, I'll come," said Pascalli. "I should like to see the entertainment." He gave me a wink. "Besides, I think our young charge will want a hand in the fun, and he's a much better tracker than you." Seeing that he could not goad Iven any further, Pascalli gave up. "I'll take watch then, you two will need your rest."

I didn't sleep much after that. It's hard enough to sleep on rough ground on a cold night, even after you've done it for a long time, but I was still shaken and more than a little excited. When the first light began to appear with the melting shadows, even before the sun crested the peaks, Iven had roused himself and began searching for the trail. I at least took the time to eat some dried meat and saddle my horse properly. Whatever we were following wouldn't go on foot, and I saw no use charging off unprepared. Even when hunting the wild pigs and goats that roamed near my farm at home we never went far without horses and provisions. I could see that Pascalli had tried to warn Iven, not just goad him.

"You'll need this," I called. I handed Iven the reins to his horse and gave him a strip of meat. Pascalli rode close behind, smiling as if nothing had happened the night before.

"Rain may be coming," he commented. "The summer will be wet."

"Good, then the crops here will do well, if they can be planted early enough." In the back of my mind I knew he was

telling me that we had only so much time before all tracks and signs washed away. "Stay close, and look for blood."

We followed the blood trail easily. At least one of us had wounded it, but we couldn't tell who had done the damage as neither of our arrows turned up. At one point the creature must have fallen over, but the trail continued from the broken undergrowth. We tracked it up a steep slope towards a rocky outcropping. Other signs of the animal became more apparent as well. It had stripped several trees of their bark, like a bear will do to sharpen its claws. The marks stretched much higher than a man could reach and cut far deeper than any bear I had ever seen. Many of the smaller trees leaned over from its exertions, and birds did not sing in the place. Boulders and broken stones covered the top of the outcropping, and the trees on all sides were either broken, burned, or simply didn't grow. The beast would know of our approach, if it didn't already. I guessed that it lay concealed among the rocks, waiting.

"I don't suppose you could just blast the beast," suggested Iven to Pascalli when I pointed where the trail lead.

"I imagine I might, given time and a few Veldmen resources which I do not have on my person," replied Pascalli.

"No use," I said. "It's likely resting now, but we would never get close enough without an attack, and anything like the Veldmen blasting powder would surely ignite if it sprays fire again."

"Scratch, my boy," cried Pascalli, as if in sudden surprise. "You've learned more sense in less time than I had ever hoped. Now if I could only convince you two to leave off this nonsense altogether I might believe you'll live a long life."

"Hush," chided Iven.

"Hush yourself," said Pascalli. "It already knows where we are."

He pointed to a small bird head, like an eagle that that peered over the rocks in our direction. The head was attached to some kind of reptilian neck, which I could not identify accurately from fifty meters.

"It's a long shot but I think I can hit it," I said, drawing my bow. Iven grunted his assent and Pascalli remained quiet for once, so I took the shot. The arrow flew straight and true, a much better shot than I had anticipated. Shooting birds can be tricky, especially without the proper ammunition but I trusted to luck with what I had. The arrow pierced the head and split it in half.

As the head fell apart, the neck began to flail wildly about as an ear-piercing screech shattered the air. A second eagle's head rose up out of the rocks, followed by an enormous bull's head. The creature jumped out of its hiding place and took cover behind rocks opposite us.

"After him boy," bellowed Iven, and we charged up the incline as I fished for another arrow.

We reached the top and were greeted, not by a fierce melee of angry horns, but by the beast's enormous horse rump, which erupted in a spout of searing flame. "Look sharp lad," cried Iven as he dodged the fire. I managed to guide my mount to safety just in time, but the heat singed my hair slightly.

The creature took advantage of that moment to whirl around and face us with its horns. The eagle head rose up and let out a scream like a woman in distress, and the great bull head snarled and roared like a bear. I had just enough presence of mind to shoot my arrow before grabbing my father's spear. The arrow clattered harmlessly off of the creature's skull. I aimed for the eye, but some instinct must have warned it to move and a last second twitch cost us a great deal of trouble.

Iven wasted no time jumping from his horse and wading in brandishing his hammer, until the beast reared up on its hind legs, showing powerful claws attached to lion-like fore-limbs. That move caught the smith off-guard. I had no intention of getting off my horse so easily. When it turned its attention to Iven I charged in with my short spear. The second eagle's head must have noticed my move, for it positioned again to shoot fire. I sent the spear to stop the fire before it had a chance to burn us, and drove it as deep as I could. Now the beast roiled in pain and anguish. Some wisps of smoke and few small flames escaped. It began to lash about in every direction, seemingly unable to fight or run away. The screaming, so much like a woman being tortured wailed at us. More out of pity than anger or fear I cut off the eagle head with my sword and then plunged it to the hilt into its heart.

Steam rolled out of the neck of the eagle's head and some flames boiled past the bull's tongue. My spear's handle was forever blackened after that, but it was still as sturdy and strong as ever.

Pascalli rode up lazily after the fight complimenting loudly, "Well done, very well done indeed. You see, you didn't need my help at all." He surveyed the corpse with a knowing eye. "I see you've found your lost damsel, my friend."

"You knew, didn't you," accused Iven angrily.

"I know a great many things," replied Pascalli calmly. "I guess a great many more. You were in no real danger from that thing. No danger that could not be mended if chance fell the wrong way. I thought Scratch might enjoy the exercise."

"What was that thing?" I asked.

"A leftover from the breaking. In ancient times misguided wizards spawned such things and when their masters perished they escaped into the wide world," he said.

The creature had a small cave in that outcropping of rock, and from the top of that outcropping a person could stand and look over the entire valley below. The smoke of a homestead drifted into the clear sky from the valley. This marked the first habitation we had seen in since leaving the Veldmen to

travel in the wild. Pascalli insisted that we look into the creature's lair, but he didn't want me to do it.

"It may have young, or it may have treasure, and as you said Iven, it may have a prisoner. If there are more of them in there I should like the comfort of knowing you two are not in my way. You two can wait out here or head down to the homestead. I'm sure that if you take the carcass with you they will be very much obliged and possibly offer us supper."

## Chapter Ten

The day was still very young, and it seemed a simple thing to drag the carcass off the mountain. Iven and I lashed the remains of the beast between our horses and headed down the hill. We went perhaps only a half a kilometer or so when I spotted a broken branch that intrigued me.

"What do you make of this," I asked Iven. He glanced over it, but I could tell he wasn't sure.

"Could be anything," he said.

"Here, you take this." I handed him my rope. "I want to follow this trail a little ways. Unless I am mistaken, that looks like a footprint."

It may have been the thought of a decent meal, or perhaps just a desire to get off that mountain, but Iven consented and left me to wander the wild by myself. I followed that trail alone. It wasn't difficult, and within a matter of a few meters I determined that indeed they were footprints, and I was reminded of Pascalli's warning about rain.

I followed the trail another kilometer before I saw a girl of perhaps ten or eleven summers with long chestnut hair. She must have heard my horse and feared the beast had returned because she panicked and ran. Her blue dress, much nicer than those most farmers' daughters wore was torn and muddy.

"Wait!" I called. "Stop! I've come to help."

At the sound of my voice she stopped and fell down tired. Her right arm had been badly cut, but the bleeding had stopped. "Take it easy. I can help with those wounds." I gently bandaged her arm and gave her a piece of dried meat to chew on. I carefully lifted her onto my horse. "I'm Colter. What happened?"

"That thing tried to eat me," she replied. Tears of relief and exhaustion streamed down her face.

"Everything will be fine. What's your name?" I asked.

"Brevedia, but everyone calls me Brevia. Is it still out there?"

"We killed it, my friends and I. Are you alone?"

Her mood brightened as I pointed the horse out of the mountains toward her farm. "My brother came with me to pick the early berries, but we didn't find any. We lost sight of the

farm. Then it found us. It dragged us both into the woods, but I managed to get away. I don't know what happened to Brorick."

"I haven't seen him." Something in my heart told me that Pascalli had found his remains.

She consumed every scrap of food I offered her. Breva lived at a farm a few kilometers beyond the first one, where Pascalli and Iven had gone, but I would have time to catch up with them if we hurried.

"What are you doing in the mountains?" she asked as we rode.

"We are riding to the western empire. One of my friends has a family in the west," I said.

"Mamma says that only ruffians and outlaws ride in the wild, but you don't seem like an outlaw."

"I'm not an outlaw, at least not that I know of." We laughed together, but in the back of my mind I wondered about Pascalli's warning that imperial soldiers might be looking for me.

The milk cow looked healthy and strong, but the farm felt far too quiet as I rode up. I smelled a wisp of smoke from the cooking fire, but no sounds or signs of movement beyond. Even the chickens rested dolefully beneath scrubby bushes. Breva had fallen asleep on the ride. I shook her awake when we reached the house.

"Mamma!" she shouted. "Papa, I'm home! I'm home!"

As if struck by lightning, the entire farm erupted with her tiny cries of joy. The farmhouse door flew open and a haggard looking man with a worn hat and dirty trousers stepped out. Behind him a plump woman with a thick bun of graying brown hair edged her way out.

"Brevedia, Brevedia, my dear!" she cried as she flung her arms around her daughter. "We thought you were lost forever, come and hug me my sweet."

I thought they would smother the poor girl with their hugs and kisses and joy. It was a long time before anyone noticed me, and I finally decided to keep to my plan and leave when her father addressed me.

"Come inside, lad, for a moment and rest. You've brought life and meaning back to us. You've brought our Breva home. Jiora, fetch something to eat for the lad."

Jiora promptly ushered me into the house and placed a fresh baked loaf of dark bread and a bowl of butter before me. I had not tasted such fare in many long markets, and I ate like a starving man.

"You've been in the wild a long time," observed the farmer. I noticed he had a sharp, thinking mind. "I'm Delvin. We came here to homestead before the Kaarum came south."

"My friends call me Scratch. I've been traveling since the battle with the Kaarum near Havensod," I replied. "Did you hear about that?"

"Yes, we heard. A lot of soldiers were missed afterwards," he said. "Scratch is an odd sort of name."

"I didn't desert," I replied, perhaps a little too defensively.

"Of course you didn't desert," said Jiora. "Not that it would matter if you had. I'll agree that Scratch is a funny name for such a handsome lad, but it's none of my affair where a person gets their name. They handled that battle something awful. My brother was lost there, and not a copper penny did they give her for the widow's due. He was a right honorable man, too."

"I've made no accusation, son. You've done a noble thing today. We're forever in your debt," said Delvin. "Why don't you stay here tonight? It's getting late for travel."

"I'm sorry for your loss. I was apprenticed shortly after the battle. It's my master and his friend who will be waiting for me," I said.

"You are welcome to stay," offered Jiora. "If they use the road they will have to pass this way on their way out."

"I don't want them to worry. I'd like to find them before dark."

"At least take some food with you," suggested Delvin. "No point wandering the hills on an empty stomach."

"Take the rest of this loaf," suggested Jiora. "Breva will fill your canteens at the well. Run along girl! I know we put up extra cheese that's aged just right by now."

"I'll fetch one for him," said Delvin. "Find Brorick's jacket. He won't be needing it, and the lad's buckskin looks the tatters."

Jiora handed me her son's jacket and a tear caught in her eye. I hardly felt I could accept the gift. "It will do me good to see you in it," she said. "You look nothing like him, but I imagined he would grow to be something like yourself."

Brevedia brought me my canteens and horse and hugged me tight. She held me the way Corbetta did when she was frightened. "You saved my life. I've never been so frightened of anything."

"You're home now. No point worrying about what's done." She noticed the scars on my arms and stared at them. "Now you know why they call me Scratch. Stay in sight of the farmhouse, and do as your pa and ma say."

I left them with their daughter in the late afternoon sun and headed towards the farm where I knew my companions would be waiting. I barely left the little road that wound away from the farm when a group of four horsemen approached. I noticed something familiar about the way their leader held himself and decided to see who they were. As we drew closer I noticed Torbridge's crisply clean uniform. He led three imperial troops toward Delvin's farm. He didn't recognize me at first. I had grown up a great deal. I wore my new mail comfortably, and though the sword was still strapped across my shoulder, it fit

there properly. I now moved more like a soldier and less like a farmer. The most striking change though, would have been the length I added to my legs.

Behind him rode Lyekal. The smith's son also carried himself like a soldier now. I noticed a new scar on his chin only slightly visible beneath the stubble he grew to cover it. The sword at his belt was one of the many we had turned out prior to the battle of Havensod. Most likely he had scavenged it from an officer who no longer could use it.

"Hallo!" called Torbridge and I slowed to greet them. I must have made an instinctive motion to my bow because his next words surprised me. "You've no need to draw against soldiers of the empire, lad. Can you direct me to the farm of Master Delvin?" I pointed back the way I had come and then he recognized me. "Scratch, my lad, I'm amazed to see you alive and well. His lordship the governor requests your company." He motioned to his soldiers to surround me and I offered no resistance.

I saw no point to struggling. I couldn't fight all of them, and I knew that Pascalli and Iven were relatively close. When they missed me they would come and get me. "Hello, captain," I said. "Hello, Lyekal. I'm glad to see the army has treated you well." Lyekal avoided my eyes and kept quiet.

"I've been sent to help some farmer that complains about missing chickens," muttered Torbridge. "Do you know anything about it?"

"They were also missing their children," I replied. "I found their daughter this morning. We killed the creature earlier. You've nothing left to do here."

"It's too far to ride back tonight. Where can I find this farmer?"

I turned my mount and they followed me back to the farmstead. Delvin stepped onto the porch to watch us. I let Torbridge take the lead as we approached.

"We've had reports of chickens killed in the area," said Torbridge. "I understand the creature was caught and killed."

"That's right," said Delvin. "You've arrived too late to save my son, though the young master brought back our daughter."

"We'll need to stay tonight," said Torbridge. "We can stay in the barn. Bring supper when it's ready."

Delvin nodded. "Is the lad to stay as well?" he asked.

"Dunroust, the imperial regent has requested his company," replied the captain. "We're to escort him to Havensod."

Delvin nodded again, but his eyes jumped to mine and I knew he didn't trust the captain's story. "We've just prepared a meal. Come inside and join us."

We took the horses into the barn and stabled them carefully. Torbridge had lost none of his exactness for his personal care and grooming. His boots shined as brightly as ever. Most soldiers of the Eastern Watch dressed only as well as they could

afford. Most seldom shaved or even bathed. Except for a bit of stubble on their faces Torbridge's men appeared as groomed as courtiers. I followed them slowly back into the farmhouse.

"I've found the bowls we keep for special guests," said Jiora. "I see you've traveled far, captain. Would you and your men care for some of our blackberry wine? Delvin put it up himself a few summers back. We don't often get visitors here."

"Thank you," said Torbridge. "I'm sure we will be delighted."

"There's only so much as can go around, I'm afraid, my dear," she said to Delvin. "Just enough for the soldiers."

"Not to worry, love. Summer will be here soon enough and I shall make some more."

The meal passed peacefully though the conversation was strained throughout. Torbridge saw that I received water, though his men finished the last drop of the wine.

"Have you heard anything of Wess?" I asked Lyekal as we finished the meal. "I've had little news since the battle."

Lyekal glanced at Torbridge, but the captain seemed caught up in his wine. "We were separated when the fighting started. We were among the first ranks to meet the Kaarum. Most were killed in the initial attack. Others became stranded in the middle. Only a few escaped when the ground began to swallow everything in sight. Nobody has seen anything of Wess. He was presumed dead or deserted, which is the same thing."

"Any news from Dunston? I've not had a chance to visit," I said.

"Neither have I," replied Lyekal. "I left for good. Soldiering is good work, and profitable too when it comes to that. I've set by a few coins and I've a girl in Havensod now. You were a fool to leave. Word is you're wanted now."

"That's enough, corporal." Torbridge cut in. "Scratch's business with the lord regent is not your business, nor is it mine. He is our guest. I see you're still riding the same horse you bought in Havensod last summer."

"We had no time or chance for breaking new mounts," I said. I felt he was hunting information, but I had little enough to tell. "I've been busy these past markets."

"Of course," replied Torbridge. "Learning a new trade is hard work. How is Iven? I see you are alone at the moment."

"He'll be along to fetch me soon enough," I said.

"I thought he would take you straight home to Anascrag. He seemed anxious to return to his forge."

"We had business to settle here first. An old debt." Torbridge raised a questioning eyebrow. I knew he didn't believe me, but he remained curious. "I've learned a fair amount in our travels, though. The forge can be cruel master." I looked into Lyekal's eyes. "It can also be very profitable."

"As I've explained to the corporal, there is always profit in war," said Torbridge. "Courage and a steady hand will always bring honor and glory to those strong enough to overcome."

"I don't see the good that comes from men dying," I said.

"There is more to fighting a war than killing. You've an opportunity to see that now. Havensod was horrible. I won't deny that, but it was also a chance for those strong enough to survive. I've the ear of the regent now, and the means to help you become a great man if you want it."

"You and your men must be tired," interrupted Jiora. "See they're already nodding. You'll want to make an early start, no doubt. There's plenty of room in the barn, though the hay's not as fresh as one might like. With all the trouble we've had, a few chores remain unfinished."

Torbridge remembered his manners. "Thank you my good lady. You've served us better than I would ever have imagined. I am certain we will be perfectly comfortable in the barn and I hope the intrusion will not be too great."

After consuming far more than the farm could afford, the soldiers wandered into the barn. One by one they drifted off while I looked into the mountains, wondering what had happened to Pascalli and Iven. In the morning the soldiers continued to sleep long after I awoke at my usual time before the sun began to stir. I wandered over to the farmhouse and found Delvin waiting for me.

"They should sleep until mid-day at least," explained Delvin.

"He'll be angry when he finds out," I warned. "Thanks for your help."

"You've given us life and purpose again, my boy. If ever you need a friend, you can find one here."

He brought out my horse and saddle. Jiora met me with a bit of bread and butter to take with me. She hugged me as she would her own son and kissed me on the forehead. "Come back again when you have a chance, my dear," she said.

Pascalli and Iven met me only a short way along the road.

"Iven told me you chased something into the brush. I'm glad it didn't eat you." He laughed.

"Delvin and his family are nice people," I replied. "But Torbridge came looking for the creature. He's still sleeping in their barn."

"I imagine it won't go well when he wakes up," said Iven. "That man has ambitions, and you're a key to some of them."

I noticed that the smith led a mule, and it had been packed with a couple of bags. "You bought supplies?" I asked.

"The beast had a small treasure," replied Pascalli. "Iven and I have put aside a share for you, and the farmer was generous enough to sell us a few things."

"I would like to leave some with Delvin. Torbridge has

already taken more from them than they could afford, and without their son, planting will be hard."

"I'll swing back around later," said the wizard. "I don't think you should see Torbridge again just now. You've done well, Scratch, but let's not push luck beyond its limits."

## Chapter Eleven

We left Delvin's farm and turned east and north back into the mountains. We made every attempt to hide our tracks, and I learned a few tricks from Pascalli that I hadn't known about throwing off pursuit. "As you know, tracking is more about knowing where your quarry is likely to go than just randomly looking for sign," said the wizard. "So to avoid capture you have to stay a step ahead of the pursuit and gage his ability to understand your motives as well. It will do you no good to think three or four steps ahead of your pursuit if he can't manage to even guess your next move."

"What do you think Torbridge will do?" I asked.

"He will watch the roads to the west, at least as far as he can. It won't take him long to figure out that we've gone into the mountains, but he knows we will have to come out sooner or later so he will watch the frontier and the settlements. He won't risk his men in the mountains while the snowline is so low. When the snow melts, if he hasn't had word he may send men to find us. Our trick will be to get out of the mountains and into territory where your face and name aren't connected. We need news of the wide world, and soon. I'd hoped they would forget you during the winter, but it's beginning to look like that hasn't happened."

Pascalli kept us moving until well after nightfall. Though we kept below the snowline, night came hard and cold. We found a sheltered place between two tall pines that cut off the wind. One of the wide trunks served as a reflector for our small fire. We huddled around it in the darkness, careful not to look directly into the flames and listened to the sounds of the forest.

"The farmer gave me some chicory root," said Iven. He tossed some of the dried grounds into a pot of water over the fire. "I've missed it since we ran out."

"I used to gather it back on the farm. Mamma taught me to dry it and roast it. Most evenings we sat listening to her read to us from the books that survived the fire," I said.

"Your mother is a wise woman," said Pascalli. "No doubt she taught you much about the world beyond Dunston. She has relatives in Havensod. Some distant cousin, I believe, is a minor dignitary to the regent. They were delighted when she

married your father, though later he displeased them greatly by retiring to Dunston."

"Will we be going on to Anascrag now?" asked Iven. His eyes betrayed his hope and anxiety.

"Not yet, my friend," replied Pascalli. "Scratch needs to learn to handle that spear a little better before I risk him that close to danger." The smith seemed unconvinced. "Lord Trelsin is a relative to Dunroust. Not only that, they are friends."

"So we can't return to Anascrag until Trelsin dies?" said Iven in disgust. "There must be another way."

"Of course there is another way," replied Pascalli, his tone curt. "Time is our ally at the moment. The Kaarum will not recover for many markets, at least I hope they don't, but until the last little bands are eliminated in the east the minds of the nobles will continue to dwell on war, and when they think of war they will think of Halfspear. Eventually their enthusiasm will die down and their minds will turn to other matters, like the Festival of Spears."

"They haven't held the festival for five summers," said Iven. "It may never happen again."

"It will happen," replied the wizard. "I am sure of that, and when it does we will return to Anascrag. I hope that we can return before it happens, but not long before. Last summer already there was talk of it Dynwater, but the threat of the Kaarum changed any plans. It won't be long before the plans begin again. Then their minds will forget our young charge, and Anascrag will be a safer place."

"I still don't like it," grumbled the smith. He wrapped himself in his blankets and soon slept peacefully. I drank my chicory and watched the stars. Despite the danger and possible pursuit I felt at peace. I wanted to see Anascrag and the west. I wanted to do what my father hadn't done.

Pascalli shook me awake before the first sunlight thought to creep over the mountaintops. We saddled our horses and broke camp in the quiet darkness without bothering even to build a fire to take the edge off the chill. Pascalli and Iven were quiet and I followed their example. We cut sharply north. I wondered why we made no attempts to hide our trail until the first drops of rain began to fall.

Pascalli pushed us faster until we came to a steep rocky incline that sloped into a narrow canyon. Our horses left little sign on the slippery rocks as we followed it down. Within moments all hints of our passage would be wiped away. A small stream wandered along the bottom of the canyon, full with spring runoff. The water would be icy cold from the glaciers higher up, and if the rain continued it could quickly swell to a dangerous roar.

"Keep to the side," warned Pascalli. "After a few kilometers the canyon branches north and south. Assuming they try to track

us at all they will probably not find the canyon. If they do, the stream should be full enough they won't follow."

"Assuming it doesn't flood us in the process," grumbled Iven.

"Then we best make haste," agreed Pascalli.

By early afternoon we found the north fork of the canyon and left the stream. Already it had swollen beyond the limits of safety. All of our tracks would wash away before nightfall. The canyon eventually turned west again and opened into a wide valley. We found shelter in a clump of trees near the mouth of the canyon and decided to wait out the rain.

"A little further west is a road," said the wizard with a smile. "Merchants will be moving north with grain and south with wool. Our faces won't be known this far north, and we'll be well away from the more aggressive pursuit."

"Somebody's bound to recognize you or the lad sooner or later," said Iven. "You've a face to remember."

"As long as we stay in the north there is little risk of that. Nobody knows Scratch, and most commoners think I'm merely a myth. We'll stay off the imperial highways if that will make you feel better."

The rain let up before nightfall, and we were able to dry our clothes and enjoy a warm meal. By morning even Iven had recovered some of his higher spirits, and Pascalli led us to the road with a cheerful laugh and broad smile. We waited only a short while before a pair of wagons headed north drifted into view. A small man with a nervous manner drove the first. He stopped short when he saw us.

"'Tis a free road you're blocking," he called.

"We've no desire to impede your journey," replied Pascalli. "Indeed, if you fear thieves this spring then perhaps we can help you. My companions and I are also headed north and would gladly offer you our protection."

"You've the look of thieves about you," replied the man. "No honest man rides a mount as fine as yours."

"I never said we were honest men, only that we travel north," said Pascalli. "I usually find safety in numbers."

"Depends on the company." The man smirked. He scowled and carefully looked each of us over. "I'm Angry Gim Hammers. You can ride as far as Larston." The young man driving the wagon behind him watched us carefully though he didn't speak.

We rode alongside the wagons at an easy pace. Pascalli seemed content with their company and the course they set. I rode beside the second wagon, not wanting to interfere with the conversation of my elders. I noticed a longbow behind the seat and a quiver of arrows. The driver kept a long knife at his belt. Gim wore a similar knife, and I was sure more weapons waited hidden in his wagon.

"In the east everybody travels armed," advised Pascalli when we camped. "Nobles may have better weapons, but every man carries something. The law is rare and you have to learn to

solve your own problems out here. In the west the old kingdom has better control. Here the land is still young. Keep your eyes open."

When we reached Larston I felt the tension lift a little and was glad to leave Gim. I expected Pascalli to push on again right away, but instead we took rooms at a boarding house and settled in to wait. Iven still carried enough tools to turn his hand at nearly any task and offered his services as a tinker to pay our rent while Pascalli looked after my training. Each day we rode out before dawn to practice with my weapons. We always rode a wide circle around the village, scouting the local farms and area. Afterwards I helped Iven with his chores. Pascalli spent most of his time eating, drinking, and visiting with the locals.

Though Iven's contempt of Pascalli's manner was visible, the wizard didn't seem to mind. In the evenings I often sat at his table, or nearby as he played dice or cards or swapped stories with the townsfolk. He never let me join any game, though at times he showed me his tricks for winning or losing as the occasion required.

"What are we waiting for?" I asked, one evening as we returned from the tavern.

"An opportunity, and news," he replied. "It was still early in the season for much traffic, but soon more merchants will take to the roads. I've let word get out that we are looking for work. News travels quickly, though you may not guess it. Every sword for hire has a story behind it. Even Gim will have told others about us by now. Torbridge is still looking for us, though it seems word has gotten around about how he treated Delvin. He won't get any help he can't buy or force through his own troops. That gives us a bit more room to work. We should be able to hire on again soon enough."

"Do you think Torbridge will ever give up the pursuit?" I asked.

"No, not while he lives. In Darnuth Keep, if we survive it, we'll be free from the empire for they've no hold there, but it is a place even more wild than this. You won't be safe this side of Anascrag."

The next day we saw six wagons drawing close to the village from the south as Pascalli and I returned from our daily practice. "They'll be carrying food or silk north. Most of the food comes from the west. They'll trade it for gold or tools or furs to take to the south," said Pascalli.

We rode out to greet them. The wagons did not pause at our approach though a man clad in mail rode out to greet us. "You must be Pascalli," said the man in armor. "My name is Imat. A cousin of mine said a fat man and a boy were loafing about up here waiting for the caravans to start."

"Your cousin was right." Pascalli smiled and laughed. "I see you come fairly well supplied, but Nysang and his men are

rumored to be waiting further north. A few extra spears can't hurt."

"Nysang is a pig, but nobody's made him squeal yet. They say he has nearly a hundred men riding with him now. The rotted Kaarum gave every worthless beggar an excuse to turn thief and the rotted empire gave all of them swords to do it with. I've a dozen solid men. Is it just you two, or can I expect any more help in Larston?" asked Imat.

"We've one companion," replied Pascalli. "He's a stout fellow and not to be trifled with in or out of battle. I would advise against taking on anyone else at Larston. Erich the Bald is waiting at Radston. If the stories are true he has something personal against Nysang. He may be valuable to have along."

"He's a greasy one Erich. Slipped through more hangmen's ropes than anybody. You seem well informed," said Imat.

"I keep my eyes open," replied the wizard.

"Good, you'll need them. We'll water the oxen and horses and do a little trading in Larston. Tomorrow we push on. That dung pile Angry Gim beat us to the best of it already."

"His load was small," said Pascalli. "You may need to travel a bit further than expected, but you should still get your price. Nobody else has come this way."

I watched mutedly as they discussed their business. The dozen men Imat spoke of carried a mixture of weapons and armor fragments scavenged from previous battles. Their mounts were better than those generally used by villagers or even soldiers. The men were rough and hard. They eyed us curiously, especially Pascalli who seemed to have usurped a position of greater importance without passing their approval.

Imat directed the affairs of the guards and watched over the wagons, but Darman, a small easy-going man owned the wares and made the final decisions. For the most part Darman ignored Iven and me, though the smith proved more useful to the caravan than the rest of us. Iven often repaired pieces of equipment, and each time I served as his assistant, learning a bit of his craft each day. We passed through a few tiny villages on our way. At each we traded only a little. At one of these we added Erich the Bald to our number.

"Pay attention to Imat," warned Pascalli. "He's a strong leader and you can learn from him. Watch how he handles his men and learn to do the same."

"What about Erich?" I asked. "Imat listens to him."

"Good job, Scratch. I hoped you might notice that. Erich's a shrewd fighter, and wise enough to avoid the attention of Darman. Watch them both, but take the older warrior's advice if he gives it. He hasn't lived this long through foolishness."

Each day before we began moving and after we stopped, Pascalli worked with me on my spear. Though the other guards often observed our practice they rarely said anything about it. Only Erich the Bald ever interrupted us.

"You're too nervous, lad," he said one day. "Stop thinking about winning or losing the fight. Stop thinking about the forms. By now you know how to hold the thing and where to put it. Let your mind relax and let your body enjoy the movements."

I thought to ask him to explain himself, but hesitated. I tried to apply his method, but failed. Later, as he sat alone with his drink I approached him. "I can't do it," I said.

He looked into my eyes, and though his own were bloodshot and weary with drink and travel, even I could see the cunning and desire to survive that he tried to hide. "You'll learn," he said. "The old windbag says you've been blooded, so you've sense enough to handle yourself, but you'll not reach your father's greatness without losing your fear." He caught the question in my eyes and stopped me before I could ask. "I rode with your pa, almost from the start. You'll never be able to hide from those who knew him well. You've the same face, and the same fears. Learn to keep your fears someplace else and you'll see improvement."

I went away confused but less uncertain. Pascalli continued to push. I had little time to myself. Though my thoughts sometimes returned to my farm or the places I had known since, I had no opportunity to dwell on them. Then, one day our scout didn't return.

Imat corralled the wagons immediately and personally verified that each person was properly armed. The bandits were no fools. They knew we couldn't wait for long and that they outnumbered us. We spent one night in silent anticipation before Darman convinced him we had to continue on. Imat's concession was to travel slowly and place each rider for maximum mobility.

The attack the following morning happened swiftly and with precision. Only Imat's careful planning preserved the caravan. A hail of arrows fell over us before nearly a hundred men on foot charged into us. The few who kept bows in the wagons returned fire quickly. A man to my right took an arrow to the chest and our little group swung out wide to flank the attack and draw away a part of their force.

Across the road Erich waded into the battle. He whirled an enormous spiked chain with horrible accuracy. Men fell away from him wounded or frightened as he cleared a wide path for his allies. His face was calm and his voice steady as he shouted orders to nearby guards.

Imat directed yet a third group with precision, flanking the attack opposite my group. Though the outlaws outnumbered us severely, the guardsmen were all veterans of at least a few close battles and handled themselves without fear. A few, like myself became disoriented at times and had to rely on the careful direction of the experienced leaders. Others threw themselves at the enemy with a passion and bloodlust I had never before seen.

Despite being afoot, Erich the Bald reached Nysang first. The bandit leader was a large man, nearly as large as Pascalli.

He wore thick furs that did not completely hide the many scars on his arms and legs. He used a great axe with brutal efficiency, and was alone responsible for most of our losses that day. He caught Erich's chain with the axe and ripped it from the smaller man's hands as if plucking the hide from an ear of corn. Undaunted, Erich stepped in and drew a short, broad stabbing sword forged after the manner of the old empire.

They threw themselves at each other with the precise, trained fury of men who knew not only combat but their opponent's mind and will. All around them the battle slowed as men focused on the display of single combat. Blows fell and were countered on both sides. Erich used speed beyond what his old legs seemed capable. Nysang growled and lunged, receiving a vicious gash on the right arm for his efforts. Quickly Erich stepped aside and past the larger man before he could raise his guard again. By the time the axe was ready, the sword drove home, and with one breath the outlaws fled into the woods.

Our numbers had been cut in half, both of guards as well as servants and drivers. Darman asked for volunteers among the guards to drive wagons, and Iven offered my services. We stayed with the caravan until we reached the silver mines east of Dynwater in the lower parts of the Northern Crown. Darman made a fair trade in both coin and bullion, and he agreed to keep us on as he returned south to seek yet more profit before he could return to Havensod to buy an inn and retire in comfort. We rode with him for several markets, listening to news of the wide world and sharing the caravan's troubles.

Each day I learned a little more from my companions, until Pascalli no longer hovered over me at every turn. Erich left us shortly after turning south. "If ever you return to the east, lad, you'll find me wandering here. I'll gladly share my fire with Halfspear's son."

As summer faded into autumn we found ourselves west and south of Dynwater, but not so far west as Anascrag. "I'll be turning east again," said Darman. "I've furs and coin and food enough to set a tidy profit. I've no love for the regent or his pig Torbridge, but Havensod is a place that holds my heart. I know you can't follow me all the way, but I'd be obliged if you could ride that way at least for a market or two."

Pascalli nodded and smiled. "For a few markets. We'll need a safe place to winter. Word is the Festival of Spears will be held next summer. In the spring I mean to go to Anascrag."

"Then we'll go south first, and leave you where the weather is less dangerous and the people more friendly," agreed Darman. "I've a cousin who often travels east to west and back again. You may have the luck to fall in with him along the way."

We passed the winter wandering from village to village as tinkers and mercenaries. Though few of the common folk had use for a sword or spear, anybody who could mend a wagon wheel or shoe a horse was welcome. When the snows began to fall few

merchants traveled the roads, but those who did welcomed our company for our names and faces were known among the people of the wild lands. Often when we entered a new tavern or inn, the name of Scratch slipped out and someone would call for an account of our battle with Nysang.

By spring Iven had given me a razor sharp steel knife to use for shaving. "Beards are for dishonest men and nobles, which is usually the same thing," he said. "Keep your face clean and people will know you've nothing to hide."

Pascalli laughed and tugged at his own beard. "Believe what you want, my friend. Styles come and go. When I was a boy a beard was a symbol of power and prestige. Today it is more a matter of preference. It's time we turned north again and began looking for Darman's cousin. The Kaarum will be scouting south again by now, and we've business in the west."

## Chapter Twelve

Pascalli knocked my blade out of my hand for the fifth or sixth time straight and sent me sprawling into the dust with a brutal kick. I dragged myself to my feet again and retrieved my weapon. I looked up to see my master watching an approaching group of wagons. "Dust yourself off Scratch, and go and offer our services."

We were out of work again and as usual I obeyed. I can only imagine the sight I must have made. I didn't cut my hair in those days so it must have been scraggly and down to my shoulders over dusty mail. My unwashed face could hardly make a strong impression, and my boots bore testament to the many kilometers we covered. I strapped on my bow, mounted my horse and rode to greet them. Pascalli warned me to always prepare for danger when meeting someone new along the highway. As casually as possible I removed an arrow before approaching too closely. I was in no mood to fight.

Master Baghorn, the wagon master was a short, round man dressed in a comfortable silk tunic. I never knew a less cheerful man, though men obsessed with wealth seldom are. His voice made a rather nasally sound whenever it erupted in a tantrum, and that same nasally tone would creep in when involved in a particularly exciting business deal. Four wagons comprised the train and two tall men in shining mail with long spears guarded each one. Immediately I realized that getting work from this gentleman would require more than simply asking.

"Hello," I called.

Master Baghorn called a halt and signaled to one of his guards to come forward. The guard stood a full head taller than me and had a thick muscular build. He wore a thick black mustache and well-groomed hair cut short. The pommel of his sword was polished brightly, and he carried a small shield with a blue heron's crest strapped to his arm. I had no desire to confront a nobleman or indeed to make any enemies at all.

"You come armed," indicated the wagon master. I noticed then that he also had a rapier dangling at his side. He was a fat man, but I knew that his girth could be covering many winters of strength and muscle. He scanned me quickly, and I knew he saw more than just my dirty clothes and unkempt hair. The yellow

silk blouse and black trousers sparkled nicely in the spring sunlight.

"I come to offer my services and the services of my companions if you wish it, my lord." At least I hoped to sound courteous. That was one thing mamma taught me that even Iven couldn't pound out.

"You've a sweet tongue for a rogue and ruffian," replied the guard. His voice was as gruff and direct as his words. "Be gone before we slit your throats and turn you in for the bounty."

"I've come in peace," I replied. "We mean you no harm, and have only come to offer help. I see you've men enough, but the passage west has grown more dangerous this winter. There is always safety in numbers."

"There is never safety with a rogue," answered the guard. "We've wasted enough time with you already. Move out of the way before I toss you from that horse."

Our dialogue was suddenly interrupted by a voice of practiced calm. "Stand aside, lad, let the real rogues have their claim." A man dressed in silliest courtier fashion with a black hardened leather doublet and with bow at the ready had crept up quietly to the side of the road. He wore a black and silver blouse with matching trousers. He covered his head with a dark green hat over a set of shoulder-length dark brown locks. He hid his face behind a black veil from the nose down, but the dark eyes seemed to search everything at once. What I remember best about him, however, were the buckles on his shoes and the voice that slipped like silk from his tongue. "Leave now, boy, and you'll not be hurt. The rest of you, throw down your weapons. I am Quivain Blackhand, and my lads have you surrounded."

My eyes met those of the guard leader, and I knew instantly he would not back down, and I nodded. "To arms!" he shouted as he charged Quivain.

Arrows sailed into the wagons, and Master Baghorn whipped his horses into action. I loosed an arrow and caught one of the enemy bowmen in the throat. Arrows sailed towards the wagons as they attempted to charge past the bowmen. I wheeled my horse and charged into a pack of outlaws on one side of the road. Two guards joined the battle on my side while the rest divided their attention between engaging bowmen on the opposite side and helping move the wagons along. The skill of the mercenaries was fair, and they made a reasonable match against the outlaws, but I realized they lacked the experience of being whipped daily by a wizard who claimed nearly a thousand winters of practice. To my delight I found the battle turning in our favor, and had just managed to frighten away the last of the outlaws on our side of the road when a distant rumble and sinking in my stomach told me that something dreadful had happened.

Quivain, now engaged in mortal combat with the guard leader, burst out in a gale of laughter as the rumbling began. I wheeled

my horse and drove to help the guard, but I arrived too late. Quivain stuck down his opponent and retreated into the woods.

"After the wagons!" I called, confident someone would follow. I learned a hard lesson when I charged headlong to save the wagons. As an intruder no one knew yet if they could trust me, so I chased down a wagon train alone while the surviving guards weighed their options far behind me.

My horse shied back in fear when I discovered the source of Quivain's confidence. There is a great deal of magic in this world, and some of it is wild, running its own course, tied to nothing at all. This sort of magic can take many forms, and without a wizard to direct it or dominate it such a force can be very difficult to stop. The magic had entered the very earth, pulling itself into a great moving swirl of rock and rubble that blocked the road.

This thing, whatever it was, swirled some four meters high, lashing out with stones and dirt. An enormous dust devil had been raised and I felt nearly blinded by the stinging in my eyes. Master Baghorn attempted to turn his wagons about, but the road was far too narrow for that and finally he had to abandon his seat to dodge a stone that soared towards his head and crashed into an unlucky oak. The horses on the lead wagon kicked and neighed in terror, threatening to topple the wagon and all its contents. I tried the direct route first, and charged. My effort proved to be a complete shambles. I did manage to force whatever energy held it together to waver a little, but poking my spear into a swirling mass of dirt was quite difficult and I believe very dangerous. Afterwards I realized my actions were extremely foolish. Sand and dust battered me head to toe and at each moment I had to dodge rocks the size of my head or larger. After only a few seconds of that nonsense, I retreated a short distance to contemplate my next move.

At the time I was too busy trying to stay alive to notice that everyone else had already abandoned the wagons and were fleeing back along the road. Pascalli and Iven stayed to watch, and at one point I think I may have heard the smith yell something like, "Scratch, you fool, get out before your head comes off!" But I didn't come out of my determined rage until I heard Quivain's mocking laugh.

"Keep at it, little hero," he laughed.

There was an element of pride and foolishness that made me want to quiet that mocking voice, but much more than that I felt angry at the person who had attacked the innocent. I wheeled my horse and charged. I don't know that he expected such a vicious attack, and I doubt he seriously considered my abilities at arms a threat of any kind. Only at the last instant was he able to dodge my spear just enough to avoid being skewered completely, although I caught his arm, just below the armpit. I felt the bone crush and let the spear go. The momentum of my charge and

the weight of the spear dropped Quivain to the ground where he laid gasping and cursing.

Charging Quivain did nothing to stop the earth creature's onslaught.

The horses and wagons had now managed to back themselves out of danger. The guards had decided to round up stray outlaws, while the drivers and servants cowered. I stood alone against the creature while Pascalli and Iven cheered from the side of the road. Once more I tried the direct approach, which this time seemed to infuriate the thing. After a few moments, Pascalli lit a pipe and sat to enjoy his smoke. I decided to wear it down by charging in and dancing quickly out, but this turned out to be a very bad idea as the end result was that I became tired rather quickly while it simply raged on. Finally, distraught and angry, my horse weary and lathered, I dismounted and walked over to Pascalli.

"I've tried everything I know," I sighed. He gave me a bemused smile. I was exasperated and screamed, "These people need our help. Can't you see that?"

"I thought you were doing excellently," he said, his tone completely condescending. "For a minute there I think you almost had it." He winked. "Now, why don't you try using your brains for once, instead of that silly pig poker, which by the way you should probably retrieve?"

"I don't know what else to do," I said. "I've tried everything."

"Obviously you haven't tried everything," said my master, now using a tone that I recognized as the precursor to his short temper. "It is still here."

"Do you have any suggestions," I asked, as politely as I could.

"Look at the situation, my dear silly lad," he replied, again as merrily as if we were picnicking. "The answer is readily supplied."

I looked hopefully at Iven who merely shrugged and ducked as a rock hurtled suddenly towards us.

"It's getting angry now, Scratch, you better hurry!" admonished Pascalli.

I could have turned and rode away but something drove me to finish the fight. There was nothing really holding me there. With Quivain wounded and the outlaws routed, simply turning around and finding another road could easily avoid the danger. Even victory was nearly pointless. Little could be gained by conquering this foe. It guarded nothing really. It wasn't evil. It simply happened to be in my path. Backing away from such a challenge, particularly with Pascalli goading me never entered my mind.

Reckless youth will have its way. Once more I charged in, only to find the same results. My whole body was caked now with thick layers of dirt and grit. It would take me a full market to

get all of the sand and dirt out of my clothes and ears. Finally I decided there must in fact be a better way, and I looked around. There, on the ground, bleeding and pale lay Quivain, whom I had forgotten in my haste.

I dismounted and looked to his wound. The hurt was very bad, but not mortal. Always while in the wild I had remembered to practice my little lore of herbs and roots, and Pascalli had an uncanny ability to know precisely the use of everything we passed. To my great delight the wizard answered those questions as freely as if he felt it a challenge to see if I would ever weary of tapping the well of his knowledge. In truth I never tired of learning the lore of the woods. I often collected seeds when the season was right, and wherever we traveled I tried to gather more so that when at long last we came to some rest I would be able to plant a little garden. Quivain's luck dictated that I have some bloodsap I had collected only a few days earlier which I applied gingerly.

His determined grimace mocked me as I performed my little surgery. I picked out the shards of bone and stopped the bleeding with the bloodsap. When I asked if he had a clean cloth for a bandage he produced a fine silk handkerchief. After a few long moments I had reduced the danger of gangrene and substantially increased his comfort.

"Light me a pipe, lad," he asked, his tone no longer jeering. He indicated a pouch at his side. I did as he asked, finding both pipe and fuel inside, as well as a few coins a necklace and a ring. I had gold enough of my own, but I was curious why a man of his obvious vanity would refrain from wearing the jewelry. "You've a skilled hand at surgery," he said when his pipe was lit.

"I'm sorry I haven't got anything to ease your pain," I replied. "I'm sure there are roots in the area, but it would take time to find them, and I still need to deal with your rocky friend."

Sometimes a realization comes upon us with such force it literally changes us into a different person. I believe that as soon as the words escaped my mouth I had such an experience. How stupid could I be! I went chasing hopelessly after the servant when clearly the master was at hand. So the lesson, or at least part of the lesson that Pascalli tried to teach me I learned. The situation required more thought than action, and perhaps more skill with words than with swords.

Quivain seemed to guess my thoughts, though I imagine it was not difficult for him to do so. "At least you've discovered that killing me will not stop it. Although it might have saved you some trouble anyway." He winked. There must have been something special in his pipe for he no longer seemed to be in pain.

"I'm not going to kill you," I replied. I was now tired and frustrated and confused, but determined to get my answers from him. "I just put you back together again. All I want to do is

clear the road." The words were out before I realized how pathetic they must have sounded to someone like Quivain.

He laughed. He laughed a mocking laugh that bit at my heart with its spite. "The road will be clear in time," he said. "Why not just go around?"

I didn't really have an answer, but I said, "Because I don't want to. Now either make the thing go away or tell me how to do it."

"Or what?" he asked, his tone incredulous. "You won't kill me, you already said that, and I won't be threatened. You may take me prisoner, but I promise you'll regret it everyday if you do, not that I wouldn't escape, of course."

"I have no use for prisoners," I answered. "What would I do with you?" He rolled his eyes at this question, and started to speak, but I cut him short. "I can't turn you in for bounty," I said quickly. That statement surprised him.

"What? Why not?"

I squirmed a little in my mind, and I felt my face flush. "Because imperial agents are looking for me," I said. His eyes widened with a surprise that even this master rogue could not conceal.

"Surely, lad, you jest. I've traveled many a road with many a rogue and few I've known to attract the ire of the emperor. Most do little more than stir up trouble for a minor lord or lady now and again."

"I'm not sure if he's angry," I said. "The emperor I mean. He just wants to talk to me and I don't want to talk to him, that's all. Now look, why don't you clear that thing off the road and you can come with us for a while. I can guarantee you'll be safe from anyone looking for you as long as you're with us, and you will be free to leave whenever you want." I was certain he would think me mad. I could tell he was seriously considering his options, but at last he agreed.

"Very well, lad, I agree." His eyes sparkled dangerously, and he put forward the hand from his undamaged arm. As I took it, he said, "Now fetch me a horse and I'll see about old rocky."

By now the forest for several meters in all directions had been vigorously damaged by the raging tumult. Branches and rubble lay strewn everywhere I looked. The caravan had now managed to gather itself together and was preparing to move out the way they just came. Finding an extra mount turned out to be less difficult than I first imagined. Quivain's outlaw band was well outfitted, and I turned up a stray in just a few moments. I didn't see how it happened, but by the time I returned with the horse, the rumbling stopped, and now the quiet felt nearly deafening. In place of the whirling mass of earth and stone was a patch of road as smooth as anyone could desire. Though signs of rubble and broken trees remained, the road and all the dirt had returned to make the pathway straight. A cry arose among the caravan at the silence and they turned to investigate.

Pascalli stood up as I led Quivain to where he had waited patiently for me to put an end to the trouble. "I'll have that ring, Master Blackhand," he said. "It's not yours on any account, and I certainly wouldn't want it falling into the wrong hands."

"Who are you and what are you talking about?" Quivain looked from Pascalli to me. His eyes betrayed both confusion and anger. "What's this all about?"

"No games, Quivain, and do not attempt to play the fool with me. I have a genuine fool to watch over daily," he directed his eyes at me. "Knowing the difference is a sort of specialty of mine. The ring," he repeated.

"Who are you," Quivain asked. His tone was direct and all pretenses gone.

"I am the master of all that was broken. You've a trinket in your pocket that will bring you grief in the end, and I am glad it has fallen to me." Pascalli towered over the smaller man, and though his words rolled out calmly they held an air of authority.

"If I refuse?" inquired the rogue.

"You cannot," said Pascalli as bluntly as I had ever heard him say anything. "You will give or I will take." He uttered the last phrase with a finality that could not be missed.

Quivain conceded. He took the ring from his pouch and tossed it at Pascalli. "Anything else, while I'm giving things away?"

Pascalli snatched the ring from the air and it quickly disappeared to one of his many pockets. "You've nothing else of worth," he replied. "Unless you value your life, which I doubt." Then he turned to me. "I see you finally managed to think your way out of that mess, though by the look of you it was a hard lesson to learn and one I hope you don't forget."

"Of course not," I grumbled.

"I imagine you promised this person you would let him tag a long whether I wanted him or not?" Pascalli had resumed his usual merry tone, and I couldn't tell if I was in any real trouble or not.

"Yes, well, I told him he could travel with us. I didn't see any harm in it," I said.

"I'm sure you didn't," replied Pascalli. "I do see the harm, or potential harm, as well as the potential good. However, it is another lesson you will be able to learn all on your own, and in due time. But you still haven't done what I asked you to do before this entire mess started. Go and get us employment with that caravan before they decide to leave us all behind. I should like to speak with the merchant. There is news of the wide world I want to hear. Off you go Scratch, and take your prize with you." He pointed to Quivain who followed me as I mounted my horse and rode back to the caravan.

## Chapter Thirteen

Confused amazement turned to quiet trepidation on the faces of the caravan workers as I approached. I doubt that my dirty face would help my cause, and though I saw no point in Pascalli's request, I knew better than to appeal his decision. "My companions and I are still interested in traveling with the caravan," I said as I surveyed their situation. Three of their workers were bandaged, as were two of the four remaining guards. One of the horses had been killed by a rock, and wheels on two wagons had been replaced. I could not tell what, if any, of their cargo had been damaged, but I was sure that at least part of what they carried was lost. Master Baghorn, though undamaged, had clearly been shaken by the trouble.

"You've an interesting choice of companions," he replied, pointing at Quivain.

"He is no longer a threat to you," I commented. "I am sure he will repay any damages he has caused, though the price of a life cannot be regained." A thought came to me, bold as it was, and I said it before Pascalli could stop me. "Did any of those who died have a family?"

"No, we lost only a few guards, and to my knowledge they were lone men in this world."

"Then I will fill their contracts, without wages, and gladly fill it a second time at the same price until the cost of their loss is mended or until you tire of my company." I tried to speak fairly and with confidence.

"You, alone?" asked Baghorn.

"I can speak only for myself," I replied. "The actions of my companions are their own to answer, but they will certainly want to travel with me. Surely you will want to hire them. I can speak for their skill. The bald one is ferocious with a hammer when moved to anger, and the tall one is master of both blade and staff."

"What about him," he said, pointing at Quivain. "He is an outlaw and deserves to hang."

"That is true, but I will not turn him in," I replied. "I am not his judge and I do not have such need of gold as to break my promise that he would go free if in turn he would surrender and give up control of that magic."

Knowing full well that the routed bandits could return at anytime, and seeing himself in a desperate situation, he finally agreed. "But Quivain is not to touch a weapon, or even get near one while in my camp. I hold you responsible for that!"

"If you know me, or my companions, you know we will do as we say." The man made me angry, but I tried to keep my calm.

Baghorn looked more closely at me. "I'd heard that a wastrel boy and a pair of vagabonds may be wandering these roads. You've the look of a scoundrel. I don't care what happened up north. Here I don't know you."

"Fair enough," I replied.

"The regent in Havensod has a long arm. Torbridge's men are patrolling farther west now that the nobles are moving towards Anascrag. I don't need any trouble." I could understand Baghorn's concern, and in a way I appreciated his bluntness.

"I see you've managed well enough," said Pascalli. "I see a bit of Imat rubbed into you. Keep both eyes on Blackhand. He's a rogue to the last."

"Spoken like a man who's either betrayed or been betrayed by someone as close as his own mother," observed Quivain. "I'd not trust you to cook my dinner."

"And well you shouldn't," replied Pascalli. "I know more of poisons than even your old master ever learned, and he learned from some of the best. You are not my responsibility, but the boy is. Cross me and we'll have words. Cross him and we'll cross swords."

"I owe the boy my life, though as you observed I hardly value that. It is at least worth the respect of an honest man, however. I'll do as he says."

True to his word, Quivain caused me no trouble, and I was able to learn much from him. Although his tongue was ever spinning a web of silky deceit, as I listened I learned not only how to discern the truth, but my own tongue gradually added some softness. "A glib tongue and quick mind are of more worth than a thousand swords, Scratch," he said. "Don't let the world sell you anything else, for it's just a lie." He called himself Blackhand for the gloves he always wore. Although he certainly had a different name recorded on some book in a temple, to the world he was Quivain Blackhand. Only to his mother and perhaps to a lonely priest was he known by something different, and if his story is to be believed, she did not share her life with his for more than a few brief moments.

The caravan consisted of four wagons, the five remaining guardsmen, my little company, Baghorn and his wife and four small children, and their three servants. According to custom, the mercenaries kept themselves apart from Baghorn's family and close servants. The merchant had a daughter, but she was too young to be of much interest to any of the men. In the evenings the men often gathered together to play at dice. Quivain joined their games, though I can't say where he found the coin to start.

"You use old tricks," I observed to him after watching him play. "Sooner or later they will catch on, and then you'll have trouble."

He winked. "The slow ones won't, and the quick ones played their own tricks," he replied. "It's an old game. Tomorrow they'll see what else I know until the wise learn that I lose only when I want to. The rest will keep playing because they win sometimes and the thought of beating me will eat at them. I could teach you a few tricks if you'd like."

"I've no use for cards or dice," I said. "What I need to know I've already learned."

"A fool's statement," he replied. "Any man can learn more." He looked over at the girl who served as Baghorn's cook and maid. We could not see her face from where we sat. "What do you see in her?" he asked.

"She's a cook," I replied.

"Yes, but what do you really see?"

"She's been cooking for some time. She knows her business. She doesn't care much for Baghorn, but she's polite enough about it."

"Not bad," agreed Quivain.

"What do you see?" I asked.

"She's got a bit of coin tucked beneath her skirt. It's not much, but it's enough she doesn't want anyone to know about it. If you listen careful you can hear it, and the folds of her skirt cast an awkward shadow sometimes. This is her first caravan job, and will likely be her last as she uses borrowed tools. You can't see it now, but she's a lively smile that hides a past she won't share with you or me. You can see the scars on her hands from where she came from before though she tries to hide them beneath riding gloves whenever she can. She also keeps a small blade in her left boot. The boots don't fit properly, as you can see by the track, which you've noticed but not mentioned. If invited to gamble I would say she refuses, not out of propriety, but because she's learned the truth of gambling. It's unlikely she has the experience to avoid a properly laid swindle, so if you want her money that would be the tactic to try."

"You've a shrewd eye. Everyone is an opportunity for you," I said.

"Everyone and everything. There are more tricks than dice or cards. Think on it." He slipped into his borrowed blankets and left me to dwell on his words. I glanced again at the girl, and realized a familiarity in her movements. She turned her head and I recognized the freckles, though they had faded considerably.

"Good evening, Latural," I said. Her hair caught a bit of the firelight and reflected back soft red and yellow. She had exchanged her shabby maid's dress for riding skirts that fit her snugly and for a blouse cut far too low for mamma's approval. "I'm glad to see you found a way out of the kitchens."

"I'm still a maid," she winked and laughed. Her voice sounded musical and light now, with no hint of the misery from before. "I still cook and wash and clean, but at least I see something of the world now."

She had a knowing smile that could have been pretense, but I believed she at least felt she had outgrown her former self. We chatted a while about Havensod and people we knew. She was so much happier, a completely different person.

"You're bigger," she said. "I hardly recognized you." Suddenly she changed the subject. "I've never seen anyone fight like that before. Of course I've never really seen more than a few scuffles at a tavern or inn, but that was exciting. I was terrified, of course, and after we were separated from the guards I thought we were lost for sure."

Few people in my life had looked at me with anything more than a condescending smile or derisive glance. Her girlish grin and compliments stilled my heart and tongue. I could feel the heat rising to my face. "I think I was more angry than afraid. Pascalli didn't lift a finger to help, and he could have stopped it anytime he wanted," I said

"I'm glad he didn't," she replied, her voice coy, as she winked. "I was terrified, but you showed great courage."

Baghorn expected me to direct all of the guards' activities, which turned out to be much easier than anticipated. Pascalli and Quivain both had a hand in my training as a leader while Iven became less vocal with each passing day. Of all the guards, only Bracken seemed to resent our intrusion. He was a strong, experienced fighter who understood the value of strength and little else. He deferred to my direction because Pascalli and Iven did, though I could tell he had little confidence in me.

Baghorn directed the caravan north and west to trade with the towns west of Dynwater but not so far north as the Northern Crown. Though the profits would not be as large, further east the roads would be more dangerous. Quivain privately counseled me to avoid some places where he knew outlaws preyed. I relayed this information to Baghorn, but was careful not to mention Quivain's name.

Each day I talked with Quivain, and he showed me tricks he knew about understanding people and learning not only where they hid their gold but how they might hide other secrets. Pascalli often joined these conversations.

"A person is many things," observed Quivain. "We present ourselves to the world so that others might accept who we are. We hold things back in hopes that they won't guess the dark truths we all hide, our fears and desires. Strip away the veils and you can reach the heart of a man."

Pascalli laughed. "Aye, but not the heart of a woman. That requires something altogether different."

Quivain laughed with him. "Right you are, old man, but one step at a time for the lad. He's barely learned to walk. Let's not make him run just yet."

We guarded Baghorn's caravan for many markets. Laural and I renewed our friendship, and I passed that summer as happily as any in my life. The caravan stopped once near a beautiful lowland lake just a little east of Anascrag. Beneath the moonlight I shared my first real kiss.

"Where will you go after Anascrag?" asked Laural.

"The Kaarum are regaining their strength. That's what Pascalli says. We are going to meet them at Darnuth Keep," I said.

"Then what? Get killed?" She sounded incredulous.

"It is my destiny to destroy them," I said. I felt the words roll out mechanically.

"We make our own destiny in this life. You can be a great man in this world, Colter. Pascalli isn't concerned about what's best for you."

The truth of her words struck a chord in my heart, but they also opened my mind to the growing realization of my own feelings. "He may use me, but Pascalli is doing what he believes is best for the world. Nobody understands how important that is better than he does. And I have my father's curse to fulfill. I will make things right with Tylos."

"I don't want to stay with the caravan. Take me with you," she said, her eyes betraying her desperation. "Baghorn's a bully and a fool, and I'll never see anything slaving for him."

"There's more than money out there," I said, trying to sound both wise and comforting.

"Easy for you to say. You have a full purse and a sword to take you wherever you go." A bit of her character I had overlooked before was now coming out.

"I haven't any money," I said, though I did have some savings left from earlier adventures. "I committed to work for Baghorn for nothing in exchange for Quivain's life. And I go where Pascalli takes me anyway. I don't have much choice what I do."

She looked horrified, those amazing eyes flared with anger. "You what? You mean you're slaving for that fat slug in order to save that rogue! I was better off scraping pots for Jakand. You amaze me. And to think I let myself like you!"

I turned from prince to pauper in a few short minutes, at least in her eyes. She left me there by the lake to nurse my stunned pride and to try to figure out what had happened. I did have some gold, not much, but I knew that anyone more interested in your money than yourself was not someone to chase after. That didn't mean I didn't think about it more than once. I believe she meant for me to chase after her, that she had played her last trick to get me to abandon Pascalli and seek glory and wealth on

my own. Unfortunately for her I was much too simple to see her game and too inexperienced with people to understand.

I resumed my duties with the caravan, and dedicated myself to training with Pascalli. He seemed pleased that I no longer spent time with Laural, and yet concerned at the same time.

"Your better off without that one, lad," said Iven once. "She's the worst kind."

"What kind should I look for?" I asked.

I don't think he expected that question, and he wasn't prepared to answer. His bald pate turned red, and he muttered something under his breath. Pascalli overheard us and erupted into laughter.

"That, my boy, is something you may well have to discover for yourself. We are just old men who manage our way through life the hard way. This much I can say. Ask yourself what you want, truly what you want from life, and then seek the person who wants to share that with you. Peasants give themselves to each other just to survive and produce enough brats to run their patch of land. Nobles marry to create alliances and preserve their dynasties. Neither is often happy. Most live miserable lives. The few, the lucky, are those who can choose their own way in this world. That choice is before you, and will always be there."

I didn't notice Quivain join us. "They're right, lad. She doesn't know that she doesn't want what she wants right now. In time she may come around, but she'll hurt herself and anyone near her long before that day comes."

"You don't make sense," I observed.

"I will one day," he replied.

Though I avoided Laural, and she avoided me, Quivain struck up a friendship with her that I did not expect. The two spent time together each night. Often she sat with him, watching him at dice, though I knew she cared little enough for the game. In his turn he spoke less and less to me.

"I told you to keep both eyes on him," said Pascalli when I spoke to him about it. "Now I think you should keep your eyes on your duties with Baghorn. What becomes of Quivain is his own affair. The caravan has come farther north than I expected. The Kaarum may have begun sending scouts, though it is still early to say. Don't forget Torbridge either. I doubt the man can reach this far, but I can only guess at the friends he may have made without my opposition in the courts. I've been too long away from the nobles. Politics is a nasty business, and changes with the wind."

## Chapter Fourteen

We turned south again, and Baghorn seemed in good spirits after acquiring more wool than anticipated. The weavers of Anascrag would pay handsomely for the quality we brought. As the markets passed, Pascalli mentioned his fears of the Kaarum again.

"They've had time to learn what happened in full at Havensod. They know we're watching. It's only a matter of time before they attack again," he warned.

Baghorn also wished to reach Anascrag, where he had a home and shop, but seemed in no hurry. "The nobles won't have arrived yet, and they're the ones with the gold. If I return now my wife will spend all my profits before the festival even draws close. You've filled your contract. You're free to go if you wish. The roads should be relatively safe now, and the wagons will be cumbersome for most robbers to think of stealing."

"We'll see you through to Anascrag," I replied.

Pascalli began scouting ahead after that. He seemed preoccupied, though I could not guess his mind. I even talked of nothing but his home. I drifted into the routine of daily work. The burdened wagons made only slow progress while we labored over the narrow roads which no one bothered to maintain.

Pascalli pulled me aside after returning from his scouting venture one evening. "I found the trail of Kaarum."

"How close?" I asked.

"A few hours, I would guess. They were heading south ahead of us, but they could easily double back or circle around again. They're avoiding the road, of course, but that means little." He seemed more concerned than I expected. "I think they are scouting in force. Either that or this group has been lost a long time since Havensod. I counted a dozen tracks, but I'm sure there are more."

"We better position ourselves for an attack, then," I suggested. "They will be scavenging for food. It won't take them long to realize that we're here."

We explained the situation privately to Baghorn. His face betrayed his alarm, though he kept his voice as calm as he could. "I've never heard of so many out here without their full army close by. If they've come down from the mountains again we've no chance at all."

"True enough," agreed Pascalli, but he winked. "They are either lost or scouting in force. I am certain any army is still hiding in the mountains. Though they will most certainly attack us if they find us, we have sufficient men here to save ourselves if we are smart about it."

"I've no head for battle," conceded Baghorn. "If we're to live, then I suppose we'll have to trust your judgment and hope for the best."

He left us to organize the defenses and answer the questioning faces of his wife and servants. Pascalli looked at me expectantly, but I had no plan to offer. I glanced around the camp, quickly recounting the number of wagons, people, and livestock.

"The stream to the west will make approach from that direction difficult," I said aloud as I thought through the plan. Pascalli smiled in response, but didn't interrupt. "We can effectively block the road north and south with the wagons, which leaves the east open."

"They are not highly intelligent creatures, and will likely take the easiest path, so they should choose the east, though they are also very unpredictable," said Pascalli.

We bedded down for the night with the sure expectation of attack. Bracken and I shared the first watch. Iven lay near the wagons at the south edge of camp, but I knew he would sleep only lightly if at all until his turn at watch. Pascalli lay closer to the fire, but he also would likely not be asleep despite his pretense. Among the others nerves might keep some of them from their rest, but any experienced soldier steels sleep when offered the chance.

Though a veteran of many fights, Bracken still held little respect for any other man's sword. He loafed near the fire, keeping the altitude's chill at bay. In the distance a lone wolf cried out in the darkness. The sound echoed false, and I strained my ears for any other sound from the darkness. Bracken emptied his pipe into the fire, sending the sweet fragrance of the western leaf he favored across the camp.

"There's nothing out there but wind and crickets," he grumbled. "You jump at everything."

The creak of leather rose above the muffled shift of leaves in the darkness. I drew an arrow and fired at a shadow blocking the reflection of the stars. "They're coming," I cried.

My shout opened the attack as if my voice had the power to drive them forward. Dark animal shapes poured into the camp from the east and south. Bracken whipped his sword free and leapt to cover the space between the wagons blocking the south end of the camp. Someone behind me fired an arrow as I loosed a second shot. The first Kaarum reached the camp and I dropped the bow in favor of my spear. As expected, Pascalli met the attack at my side, his sword beating the familiar rhythm against the horns and claws of the Kaarum.

I set my spear against a charge and caught my enemy below his guard. The spear tore free, and I let it fall. As I drew my father's sword I glanced south to see Iven crushing into another with his hammer. I looked quickly to Quivain's blankets, but they were empty. Baghorn handled his rapier expertly. He closely guarded his wife and daughter while the servants struggled with cooking knives and logs from the fire.

Desperately, like wild cats forced into starvation, the Kaarum threw themselves at us. My warning had given us just enough time to bring our weapons into play, but they outnumbered us almost two to one. Two drivers fell to the onslaught. Their attackers tried to drag them back into the forest rather than face continued danger. Pascalli chased them down while I retrieved my bow. All around me, the frightened faces stared in disbelief at the remains of violence.

"Drag the Kaarum into the woods," I said. "Let the scavengers have them if they can stomach them. Who's hurt and who can help?"

"Only a bit of a scratch here," said Bracken. "I think the drivers got the worst of it."

"We're all right," said Baghorn. "I don't see Laural."

"Quivain is also missing," said Pascalli as he added fuel to our dwindling fire.

"I'll get a shovel," offered Iven. "You can worry about the rogue another day. If the Kaarum dragged him off then I say good riddance. If he bolted then it's the same."

"I'll have me a look," said Bracken. "I don't fancy Laural would slip off without at least telling me."

"She's gone," said Pascalli. "Her bag is missing, and so is the pack Quivain won at dice just two markets back. Their trail will be easy enough to follow when the sun rises, if you've the inclination. They've taken a pair of horses as well, though, and they'll have several hours start."

"I knew he would bring nothing but trouble," grumbled Baghorn. "You should have killed him when you had the chance."

I opened my mouth to respond, but Pascalli spoke first. "We are not the masters of life and death. Scratch did what he thought best, and his thinking kept you alive tonight. Any evil that comes of this will hurt him harder than you, that much is certain. If it's the price of horses that concerns you, we'll pay." He drew a bag of coins from within his cloak. He slowly counted them over to Baghorn. "We'll drive your wagons to Anascrag, but the pace will double. I've no concern for your profits or the welfare of your caravan, though I respect the boy's judgment there. I've business in the west that cannot wait."

Bracken watched the coins drop into the merchant's hand and followed the bag as it disappeared again into Pascalli's cloak. He caught my eye and turned quickly to help Iven with the dead.

I moved to help restore order to the mess but Pascalli pulled me aside.

"By winter the Kaarum will be forced to move. Already some are willing to try the wilderness away from the main body. When the food disappears entirely on the other side of the mountains they will be forced out. Time is growing short." The earnestness in his eyes frightened me a little. I relied on his calm reassurance to bolster my own bravado.

"How long will it take us to reach the keep?" I asked.

"We've many markets ahead of us yet, and tasks to perform before we get there. We can reach Last Gate by the end of summer if nothing more than expected goes wrong. Any later than that and we may have trouble surviving the winter."

If Bracken had resented my presence before, he now openly challenged even Baghorn's judgment. If we hadn't needed all the men to help with driving the wagons and handling the stock, I'm sure Baghorn would have dismissed one of us on the spot. We pushed the oxen south as fast as we dared, stopping at villages only long enough to rest, rather than hunt additional profits. Baghorn seemed convinced that his luck had finally run completely dry, and his only hope of avoiding ruin lay behind the gates of Anascrag and his own home.

Like Bracken, I wondered how or why Laural would disappear without any warning. We found their trail easily enough. They kept to the road, heading south, but the wagons had no hope of catching them. Quivain struck east at the first branch of the road, and we heard nothing more of the pair. In addition to the horses, they had taken food and supplies for a long journey, for which Pascalli agreed to recompense the caravan. "Your luck's not as bad as you might believe, Baghorn," said the wizard. He smiled and slapped the merchant on the back. "You'll come through all this with a tidy profit, and a wealth of experience free of charge."

"Experience is never free, and usually more costly than it's worth," replied Baghorn, only slightly reassured by the fresh coins in his pocket.

As we neared Anascrag, traffic increased substantially. Merchants mixed with adventurers and nobles, all beginning the gathering for the Festival of Spears. Although each individual noble retained his or her own guards, the blue and white uniforms of the imperial troops became commonplace. They patrolled the highway more regularly, keeping peace and offering comfort to the nobility.

One carriage in particular caught my eye. The wheels were narrow and taller than most, and the gold inlay covered nearly the entire vehicle. "Is that the emperor's," I asked Pascalli.

"No, lad. Narnal hasn't attended the festival since he won the crown many winters past. That crest, the two-headed hawk is the family of Taradurk. Lord Taradurk is regent over the entire western empire."

"This is the east," I said.

"His family is wealthy, powerful, and well-connected to the emperor. They often visit Dynwater."

The carriage curtain slipped aside briefly and I caught a glimpse of steel gray hair atop a solid frame. A moment of recognition seemed to pass between Pascalli and the man, but he pulled the curtain shut again and the carriage rambled past the caravan.

Though it was a large city by the standards of the empire, Anascrag carried the feel of a village still. The people decorated the open plazas and small houses with late blossoms and painted their homes and shops brightly with every color. Shopkeepers plied their wares with simple patience rather than yelling. Children played behind houses and in the streets, where wagons and people alike meandered with unhurried steadiness. Anascrag was a slow, self sufficient, unimposing city that captured my imagination and memory.

Iven brightened the moment the spires of Anascrag's cathedral to Tylos became visible. Every moment his impatience grew, until I thought he would burst. We had not entered a large city since Havensod, and my experience there was unimpressive to say the least. I hoped there would be a clean inn with food I did not have to cook and a bed I could sleep in.

A large stone wall surrounds Anascrag, and that wall is visible for many kilometers in all directions across the vast wheat fields surrounding the city. Above the wall towers the great cathedral to Tylos. City guards patrol the walls regularly, and the four city gates, one for each direction of the compass, close at night. Admittance to the city is regulated but generally casual. The center of the empire is a mix of many cultures, and Anascrag's cobblestone streets and alleys hold a variety of secrets from many places despite the unassuming look of it all. The city guards demanded our weapons until Pascalli produced letters of writ certifying his status as lord of Gratterskeep and my status as his knight and personal guard. At the time I thought Pascalli was merely passing off a lie so that we could remain armed. I later discovered, as will any historian, that Pascalli was indeed lord of Gratterskeep and that he had the authority to call me his knight and to allow me to bear arms for his protection. Being lord and knight respectively, brought us much improved status in the city.

Anascrag is divided into a number of districts, each bearing certain restrictions according to social status. As a farmer, for example I would have been relegated to some of the outer portions of the city while most of the middle and all of the inner portions were closed. Peasants and slaves could not pass out of the districts near the city walls without permission. In the middle of the city wealthier merchants and lesser nobles mingled, while the innermost portions were reserved for the wealthy nobles and the royal family who governed the city and

surrounding lands. As a noble, however unimportant, Pascalli could be allowed access to some of the finer inns and services, and as his servant I was allowed many of the same privileges. Because we arrived late that first night, we decided to take up lodging at an inn closer to the outskirts, in one of the artisans' districts, close to where Iven lived.

Iven departed the caravan the moment we passed the city gates. Baghorn frowned as he left, but said nothing. "We'll help you unload your wares, if you wish," offered Pascalli.

"Not at all," replied Baghorn good-naturedly. "I've servants already for that." He paid the guards and dismissed them with a smile. "It's good to be home again. Good luck to you."

I watched the caravan disappear, waiting for Pascalli to make up his mind. "We'll spend a night at an inn I know. Iven needs time to settle in again."

The smells of the place nearly overpowered me. Women, painted grotesquely, danced to idiotic tunes strummed out on over-zealous instruments. The western empire is famous for the class distinction, and all women of a certain profession are painted to disguise their true identities and class. Anascrag is a mixture of east and west, especially among the poor created mockeries of both sides.

Bracken stumbled into the place half-way through our meal. He smelled of liquor and swayed as he walked. The leer in his eye spoke of trouble, but I hoped he would seek it elsewhere. He planted himself less than a meter from my chair and growled. "I'm done with you whelp." I can't say what else he may have added after that. His boot connected with my jaw, and a cracking white light flashed across my eyes followed by darkness.

The familiar sound of Iven's hammer already rang out a welcome to all who passed by early in the morning. I arrived somewhat later in the day, but my spirits rose immediately when I recognized the familiar tune.

"Have you eaten yet, Scratch?" he asked. His face broke into a larger grin than I had ever seen.

"No, sir," I replied.

"Then go inside and get some breakfast from Whinnie. I expected the old man would send you my way, and judging from the way you look he's been up to his old tricks again." I gave him a shrug and headed into the house. "Mind you don't take to long," he called after me. "I've a bellows here that needs attention!"

Whinnie was as plump and kind a person I have ever met. Her hair, once blonde, was now streaked with gray. Her face, though kind and still happy was lined from worry about husband and children. Every moment her hands moved, constantly cleaning or mending or cooking, for the work never ended. Opposite I suppose in many ways to my mother who never appeared to do much, as a lady should, but who always kept a spotless house. My mother appeared weak, thin, frail, but stood in battle and faced down

anyone foolish enough to cross her. Whinnie, larger and stouter than most women, had the strength of enduring rather than conquering.

She gladly took me in, and for a few short days became a second mother to me. "Scratch is not a proper name," she said straight off. "I'm sure my thick skulled husband has long forgotten your true name, but I'll not be calling a child something as unseemly as Scratch. What's your true name, child?"

"Colter Halfspear," I said. "I don't much care for Scratch. It's just what Iven called me when we first met, so everyone else does too, and I'm supposed to be traveling in secret." I felt again during those days that I was again the child, again the boy who never left his village. I felt I could stay and enjoy and be loved again, and maybe, just maybe the curse wouldn't follow me.

"You're not traveling now, Colter," she replied. Her voice was soft and gentle, more soothing to me than the balm she rubbed over my bruises. "We've no need for secrets here, but if you want to keep some for a rainy day, you go right ahead." She gave me a wink and a smile. "Now I imagine that my ever-loving, demon driven, forge-master told you to join him at the bellows. There will be none of that as long as I am mistress of this hovel. You've journeyed thousands of kilometers only to find a wicked ambush at the hands of a conspiring wizard, whatever his intentions were. Today, and until the wizard decides to fetch you, you can rest and maybe even think of home."

I admit I had tried not to think much of home in all my journeys. I asked for pen and parchment, and she had none, for she did not write and had no use for them. I still had some money and when I asked for directions to a shop, she put it out of my head quickly and instead offered to go and buy them for me. That is when I posted my first letter. Master Baghorn knew of a merchant seeking profit in Havensod by way of the smaller villages. The merchant agreed to deliver my letter.

True to her word I did not lift a finger while a guest in Iven's home. I thought he would be angry with me loafing about, or just watching him idly at the forge. He was a changed man. A thousand worries vanished from his face. His sons are older than me, and had already married, though they lived close by.

"I've an idea of how to build some of those machines the Veldmen used," said Iven as he idly swept the floor of his shop. His home and workshop sat next to the canal that ran through the artisan district, and a small waterwheel powered some of his machines. "My wire puller needs repair anyway, and I'd like to try it with steam this time."

"Sounds like a fine idea, but you'll need lime I think if you want to pull it that fast," I said.

"Your right about that, though I think I know where to get it. I've a bit of coin laid by from our travels. If you've finished your letter home, I'd find it a favor if you could find those old drawings we made and sort them out for me."

I found our sketches in the half un-packed bags, and worked easily. Iven's home was large, and the balcony upstairs offered a view of the street where I could watch the colorful traffic of the city. The university of Anascrag stood on a low hill not far from the shop, and students and nobles frequented the road. Further out the dome of Tylos' temple dominated the center of the city. I counted three palaces in the northern half of the city, with the largest occupying a hill in the northwest.

Pascalli knocked on the door just about supper time some two markets later. My gear had been repaired, my horse replaced, and he even supplied me with new clothes and a new hat. I accepted the gifts, reluctantly, and he saw the question in my eyes. "You'll look the ragtag again soon enough, don't worry about that. In the meantime we've other matters to attend to which require a slight change of appearance."

"When do we leave?" I asked.

"As soon as you finish your meal," he replied, and winked at Whinnie. "I'm sorry to call so late, but I've not had a chance to drop by sooner. Could you spare a bowl of porridge for an old man?"

"Sit down, at once," scolded Whinnie. "You leave him and take him as if he were baggage. Porridge it will be for you and nothing better." Despite her warning, Whinnie served the finest they owned.

Iven seemed a little detached while we ate, and I wondered a bit at his silence. Afterwards he found me to help me pack the few things I owned. He brought me my father's spear, newly sharpened.

"Do as Pascalli asks," he counseled. "He still has a mean trick or two up his sleeve, and many hard lessons left for you, but only because he loves you Colter." He never used my proper name, and for a moment I thought he had said something else.

"I'll miss you," I admitted, though I felt odd saying it aloud.

Iven harrumphed, but nodded. "You'll have little enough time to think of anything, least of all me. But you're always welcome back here. Remember that. You've friends along the way, though maybe no home to go to. Sooner or later that wizard will turn you loose on the world, just don't forget who your friends are then."

"I won't," I replied.

"And don't get mixed up with anymore silly girls."

"I won't."

"Or knaves."

"I won't."

"And by Tylos keep your blade sharp and your armor clean." The smith seemed as full of advice as I had ever known him.

"Do you know where we are going?" I asked.

"It doesn't really matter. You've a future and greatness ahead of you. Already you've done more than most men dream. Keep your head and remember the forge you came from."

Iven hugged me tighter than Whinnie as I said goodbye, and wept as only a father can who is sending off a son who may never return. Whinnie filled my pack with sweet cakes and carefully packaged treats for the journey.

"I've little to give you that you might need," said Whinnie. "There is a nice man who collects strange herbs, and he's given me some bloodsap and a few leaves of tyrnwood. It isn't much, but it may be useful." She gave me a packet of the herbs wrapped in a small cloth.

"Come along, Scratch," said Pascalli. "We've a bit to do yet today."

I followed the old wizard up a winding lane towards the center of the city. We passed houses and shops which grew larger and larger. The finely combed fields of the wealthy sprawled across the upper portions of the city, and I saw private guards in red and gold livery watch us suspiciously as we rode.

"Don't bother speaking when we arrive," said Pascalli.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"To see one of the nobles." I wanted to know who and why, but restrained the question. "She has information that we can use."

Pascalli reigned his horse at a tall wrought-iron gate and pointed to a thin rope attached to a brass bell. "Let them know we're here, Scratch."

I rang the bell vigorously and almost immediately a man with a soft green surcoat embroidered with an eagle emerged from a small guardhouse near the gate. Beyond the gate, a narrow carriage path cut through a short-cropped lawn until it reached a wide patio in front of an enormous house.

The guard reviewed us cautiously. Pascalli tipped his hat and smiled, but said nothing. "You are expected," said the guard at length. "If you will ride to the house, Jorgon will see to your horses."

"I thought Jorgon had given up his duties," said Pascalli with a smile.

"He couldn't bear to be with his wife that much and came back within a market." The guard chuckled. "He still complains as much as ever, but he only half means it these days."

A surly gray bearded man took our horses when we dismounted at the house, and before we reached the door it opened. "Go directly to the dining hall," instructed a stocky young woman.

A woman with gray hair restrained by a series of pins and crowned with a small green hat waited for us at the far end of an enormous oak table. Her eyes commanded the entire room. A young woman waited silently behind her. The surface of the table reflected the hanging candelabra.

"Leave us, Maris," said the old woman. The girl moved silently past us and closed the dining room door. "You may sit, if you wish."

I glanced at Pascalli who winked back and smiled broadly. I pulled out one of the several enormous chairs and sat as quietly and still as possible.

"The estate has changed little since I was here last," said Pascalli with a smile.

"You come too seldom, my friend." She turned her eyes on me. "You are Kyven's boy? What is your proper name?"

"Colter," I replied.

"Colter was my father's name," she said. "My name is Lady Dairtha. I am a cousin to the Taradurk's though from what I've heard that won't mean anything to you. Your father was a good friend once upon a time. I was sorry to hear that he had died."

"We can't stay long," said Pascalli. "The Kaarum are already moving. By winter they will reach Darnuth Keep and begin to breach the passes. If we don't stop them there they will ravage across the East again."

"With the Festival coming we won't be able to recover," replied Lady Dairtha.

"Which is why I need to know how dangerous the roads are in the west," said Pascalli.

"Avoid the highway. The Taradurk is not well. His son's will not trust you the way he did." She seemed lost in thought as she spoke.

"Zaban has solid judgment. I'm less worried about him than Favisham," said Pascalli.

"Favisham is pressing hard to carry the festival this time. He has poured everything into raising a whelp of sufficient strength. You won't need to worry about him until after the festival. All his attention is here, and his agents are few and weak outside of Shellburg," said Lady Dairtha.

"Please warn Narnal that the kaarum will return. Three winters, no more, and they will try the eastern passes again. He must continue to prepare," said Pascalli. He stood up and motioned for me to follow.

"So quickly? Not even to break bread with me?" she asked.

"Look kindly on the lad when he returns," said Pascalli.

"If he returns," replied the lady. Then she broke into a smile. "I will be waiting."

I think I expected Anascrag to be a dangerous place for us. I knew that the ties to the emperor were strong, and it was simply not possible for us to have wandered so long and word not reach the authorities. "Don't you think we've stretched our luck staying here so long?" I asked Pascalli.

"Sure enough, lad, but we've more than a few friends about," he said. "Now ride just behind me. Keep your eyes open and your mouth closed. The nobility may not be aware of your presence but

most will certainly recognize me. I'd like to slip out of the city without drawing attention to ourselves, if possible."

## Chapter Fifteen

When we passed the gates of Anascrag I felt I had stepped into a vast ocean of grain. Everywhere, in every direction, kilometers of wheat, barley, or rye stretched green or golden with the ever-present wind blowing at our backs or into our squinting eyes. The highways cut wide and straight between the larger towns and cities while less well maintained roads meandered to the villages and large farms. Imperial guards monitored checkpoints and patrolled the roads with greater frequency and precision than anywhere in the east. Bricks and clay built nearly every building for both peasant and noble, though some of the wealthy had imported timber from the south or east.

"In the east, the vast tracts of wild land are largely unexplored except by the wild roaming adventurers," explained Pascalli. "In the west the governors build great walls, hundreds or even thousands of kilometers long to block out the unknown. The Anascraggers call it the land beyond the wall, but it once was the very great kingdom of Tuland. Every young Tulandish man serves his time patrolling those walls or the great highways or filling some other lesser post in the imperial army. Adventuring, or doing anything out of the ordinary, is not only frowned upon, but requires exact, defined permission from the proper authorities. Acting without authority or outside of class boundaries can mean severe punishment or even death. They will make some exceptions, Scratch, because you are clearly an uncouth easterner, but only a very few. Do as I say, when I say it and all will be well."

"I'll do my best," I said.

"Of course you will." Pascalli smiled. "Keep your wits about you. The regent, here in the west holds more control over the local lords than the regent in the east. If he has chosen to find us for the emperor he will succeed."

Almost as quickly as we exited Anascrag we joined a road going north towards the mountains rather than west towards the sea. A great wall runs north from the western gate of Anascrag and then after a few hundred kilometers it turns west and runs near the base of the mountains to the sea. Along the wall, centuries ago, many villages sprang up to support the guard towers and the many imperial troops who constantly patrol and

repair the wall. Many acres of grain surround each village, far more than meets the needs of the local peasant population.

When I asked Pascalli he replied, "It goes to the Empire, Scratch. Just as the gold of east goes west, and the copper and tin of the south comes north."

"What comes from the north," I asked plainly.

Pascalli let out his familiar laugh and replied with a grin and a wink, "Nothing of great worth."

"What do you mean," I pressed. "The emperor is there in Dynwater, right? Isn't that where the imperial army is?"

"As I said, nothing of great worth," answered Pascalli with less laughter in his voice than usual. He must have noticed my look of dismay and disbelief. "That is not to say that there aren't a great many wonderful things in Dynwater. Many great artisans and artists, poets, architects, and engineers practice and study there. There is a magnificent library and a huge collection of artifacts from before the breaking. Much knowledge, much pomp, much wealth. But you did not ask me what you could find in the north, only what comes out. None of that, or at least very little of it, ever comes out. And Dynwater is only one city. The rest of the north is the Northern Crown and it is wild, a place where wild things thrive and out of it come the Kaarum. So, as you can plainly see nothing of great worth comes from the north."

Such as it was I could clearly see the truth in what he spoke, though I sensed there was more to it.

Once out of Anascrag we set a brisk pace north. Each day Pascalli ensured I completed my practice with my weapons, and he continued to expand my mind with stories and puzzles he had learned through the centuries. I was keen to learn more about defending myself without weapons, and after a few days of constant badgering Pascalli consented to teach me. "Fighting is fighting," he said. "In general you will find that the principles are mostly the same. Use your feet to get a better position and strike when able. As always, the power comes from the hips and legs. You have to put your whole body into a strike, not just your fists or feet."

"What happens when they sit on me?" I asked, after being tripped for the sixth time one day.

"There are ways of dealing with a larger opponent on the ground, but you must always be wary that they may have a hidden knife or sap. Indeed, if you are confident they are unarmed it is often easier to handle a larger foe on the ground where their longer limbs do not give them the advantage of reach."

I discovered that grappling with an enormous man in dirt and rocks was not terribly comfortable and consented after a few short markets that I knew enough to at least stabilize myself until I could bring a weapon into play.

"We will continue this portion of your training when we have a proper chance," said Pascalli with a twinkle in his eye. "I've

a notion it will be rather important to your future, but now is not the time."

The remainder of our days we spent much as always, hunting when possible, or at the very least daily practice with the bow as we walked. Pascalli would pick a target and if I did not spot it quick enough, pull and loose, he would rap me sharply across the shoulder with his staff.

"Again you've got yourself killed," he would mutter. "Now off and fetch that arrow." If ever I reached the mark before his staff reached his, he would often say, "Good lad, now that's one more life you can spare for another day. Now off and fetch that arrow."

Once, as I rode out to find my arrow, I met a patrol of imperial troops. "Hold, boy," their leader called. He was a stout man with thick bones that rode easily in the saddle. His uniform, though clean, showed wear around the edges. Tulandish soldiers did not wear beards, but he had a bit of black stubble on his face, and I noticed they carried tents and bedrolls. I stopped and waited. Pascalli slowly rode up to join me. "Hunting is a privilege of the nobility. Perhaps you have not learned proper manners in the east," said the soldier. His voice was gruff and betrayed his impatience.

"Better manners than you, I see," replied Pascalli. "This is my servant and knight, Sir Lanseg. I am Lord Pandrake of Gratterskeep. I believe it is the custom to properly identify any person before issuing a challenge. Fetch the arrow, Lanseg."

I continued my search for the arrow as Pascalli handed the soldiers his papers. I retrieved the arrow and rejoined the wizard. "Your documents are correct," said the soldier. "We don't get many eastern nobles this far north, please excuse my rudeness. The bandit Edelo Cheshk has been raiding through these parts again, so we are closely watching anyone with a weapon."

"I'm glad to hear it," said Pascalli with a broad smile. "I know hunting for sport can be a tricky business in the west, but Lanseg and I were hoping to get something. If there are bandits in the area, perhaps you would offer us some protection, at least until we reach the next village?"

The soldier hesitated. "Captain Induresk, at your service," he said as he forced a smile. "We would be happy to escort you to Enbeck-thrull. We can reach it tomorrow afternoon."

"We are not merchants, but we will pay for your services," offered Pascalli. At the wizard's words, Induresk showed a genuine smile. "I expect you don't get the opportunity to make an extra coin too often so far from Shelsmor."

"Only too true, my friend," agreed the captain. "The few authorized mercenaries that come through here take most of the merchants' business. Few of the local nobles are willing to pay for a service the regent offers them freely."

Induresk rode with three other soldiers, all of them tired from their extended patrol. They guided us toward a more

traveled road where we would be able to move faster. Just as the sun began to set I spotted a patch of bent wheat field. I dismounted and investigated on foot. When Induresk noticed that I had fallen behind he called a halt.

"What have you found, my young friend," he called. "If you've found a pretty girl hiding in the grass, you'll let us know." The soldiers laughed as I looked for prints in the dry ground. When I found what I was looking for I waved to Pascalli. He joined me, and Induresk followed him.

I pointed to a shallow hoof-print in the ground. "So a horse has been through here, what does that matter?" said Induresk. "We came this way a few days ago, and there are farmers and merchants about."

"It's not a horse," I replied. "That is a cleft hoof."

"So a farmer lost a goat. Let's get moving. I want to find a better place before the sun completely sets," said the captain.

"Lanseg has experience in these matters, captain," said Pascalli. "I believe he is telling you that there are Kaarum in the area." I nodded my agreement. "How many, and how far?"

"Three. I can't say how far, but they were going southwest, through the fields. I would guess they came through this morning or last night," I said.

"How far to the closest farm or village in that direction?" asked Pascalli.

"Two days on a good horse," answered Induresk.

"The sky is clear, so they will travel at night by the light of the stars and moon. You can come or stay as you please, captain, but we need to catch them before they reach the farm," said Pascalli.

"We thought Edelo Cheshk was raiding the area. How could the Kaarum get past the wall?" said Induresk.

"The wall is very long," answered Pascalli. "A small band like this might sneak past unnoticed. Edelo may still be nearby, but he certainly won't pillage as recklessly as the Kaarum."

We rode after them as fast as we could without losing their trail. In the wide-open fields, they had few options for covering their tracks, and even in the dim light of the stars I had little trouble following them. We stopped and rested the horses a few hours before dawn, though I knew we didn't have much time before they reached another farm.

"They need rest just like us," assured Pascalli. "I also don't think they will attack the farm or village during the day, so we may have some time."

"You seem to know these beasts well," observed Induresk.

"They ravaged through the east two summers ago. We both fought them then," replied Pascalli. "We know them well enough."

The horses smelled the Kaarum before we saw them, and broke their stride. Three black shapes rose out of hiding under the afternoon sun to ambush us on all sides. I shot one before it could charge, but the other two reached the horses with lightning

speed. One Kaarum pulled a soldier from his saddle and they began to grapple in the hip-high grain. Under cover of the wheat, I couldn't get a clear shot at the Kaarum, so I dismounted and charged with my spear. I reached the Kaarum before it could land the fatal blow, though it had already opened a horrible gash in the man's side. Behind me Induresk wielded his cutlass expertly and came to the aid of his companion as quickly as he could.

"Let's take him to the farm," I suggested. "They should be better equipped to tend his wounds than we are."

"That gash is deep and bleeding fast," said Induresk. "He won't last the hour it will take to move him."

"Do you still have any bloodsap?" asked Pascalli. "It will slow the bleeding long enough to stitch him together."

I cut away the torn cloth with my knife. "There is some in my bags," I said. "Give me your canteen." I cleaned the wound as quickly and efficiently as possible while Pascalli brought the bloodsap. "If you have anything to numb the pain, give it to him, Induresk."

One of the soldiers produced a bottle of strong-smelling liquid and passed it to Induresk. The soldier choked a few mouthfuls down before I turned him on his side and went to work. My hands trembled as I pulled needle and thread. The bloodsap checked the flow enough that I could see to work, but I could tell from his paleness and labored breathing that he had lost a great deal of blood.

"As fine a field surgery as I've seen," said Induresk when I finished. "Only Tylos can say if he will live or not, but you've at least given him a chance."

I nodded my thanks and sank back into the soft grain to rest a moment. "We'll ride on to the farm as soon as you're ready," said Pascalli. "We can find help there. We may be able to bring back a wagon to move him."

"You've no need to do that my lord," said Induresk. "I can send one of the others."

"True, but time is pressing. Unless things are different here than I have come to expect, the peasants will give us less trouble than you. Rest some and eat while you wait. With luck we'll make it back before nightfall."

Our faces, and my unwashed hands quickly told the tale of our emergency when we reached the farm. "I'll have Alld hitch the wagon," said the farmer, a thin man with a graying beard. He wore a simple straw hat to ward off the sun, but he carried himself with dignity. "You two come inside and tell us what happened."

We gratefully dismounted and followed his wife into a simple building designed for comfort and efficiency. She offered us goat's cheese and bread, which we accepted gratefully. "You keep a fine home, my good lady," said Pascalli with his usual smile. "Thank you for offering us some comfort." We recounted our story

as the servants prepared the wagon, and Kimlt, the farmer, listened with more than idle curiosity.

"They will be amassing in the north, then," said Kimlt. "I've not seen them for many winters, but when I was a boy they came through the west once. The nobles did nothing to stop them until they had ruined all the fields for many kilometers."

"They attack swiftly," said Pascalli. "If they come, it will be in the dead of winter this time. You would be wise to send word to those who will listen to take care where they secure their winter supplies."

We worked late into the night bringing the wounded soldier carefully into the farm. Induresk and his men pitched their tents in the farmyard, while Pascalli and I slept in the barn. Despite the rigors of the previous night, I found myself restless early the following morning. "We need to reach the keep soon, don't we," I said to Pascalli.

"Yes, lad, we do, though not as soon as you may think," he replied. "The Kaarum won't come south until they need to. Rebels and strays forage south throughout the summer, and scouts report any weakness that can be found."

"I still think we need to move on," I said, and Pascalli nodded his agreement.

Pascalli left a few coins with Kimlt before we left as payment for what the soldiers would eat during their stay. The farmer thanked us heartily, and filled our bags with bread and hard cheese. Induresk rode with us a short while to put us on the straightest path. "You've shown uncommon kindness, my lord Pandrake," he said as he took his leave. He hesitated a moment. "I only half believed the word that the wandering Pascalli had returned, and I never believed that Halfspear's son would come this direction. I'll send word to see that you aren't bothered, though there are those who will ignore me." He handed Pascalli a sealed paper. "Give this to the soldiers at the next check point and you should be able to travel a little more freely."

I enjoyed the ride north immensely. The Tulanders treated us with respect and I learned to enjoy their customs. The Tulandish word for place was thrull, and usually the place was called after some great ancestor. In every village we were required to take the finest rooms in the inn and served the finest food (all of course paid for with the finest gold). In the east we would have been merely another pair of rag-tags, and could easily have passed for such in the wild and continued unnoticed from village to village.

Tulanders in general have very dark or black hair, though a few have lighter tones. We reached Enbeck-thrull sooner than expected, and Pascalli directed us to a large inn near the center of town. "Go get us lodging," he ordered, and I went inside without hesitation.

"My lord Pandrake requires a room for the night," I told the portly man who ran the place.

"My daughter, Emmha will show you the way," he said. "Do you need stabling as well?"

"Two horses. We haven't much baggage." A little girl, perhaps six or seven emerged to guide me to the rooms on the second floor. Her light brown hair seemed so out of place. It reminded me of my sister, and of Laural. I wondered how Laural fared since I left her. When I saw the girl's face I realized that I missed the friends I had left behind.

The lord mayor of the village, a small, balding man whose thin dark hair hung below his shoulder in the back sat at dinner with my master the first evening we were in town. I believe, had Pascalli not warned me very carefully beforehand, that I would have probably caused us a great deal of trouble that night.

I can still see the mayor's skinny face and sallow eyes that darted in every direction as he consumed every bit of food in sight.

"I'm sorry that the pheasant is a little dry," mentioned the mayor to my master with a glance at the uneaten portion on Pascalli's plate. His voice carried a tone of anxiety mixed with contempt. "I don't know why the innkeeper chose to serve this. There are far better delicacies to tempt the appetite here."

"Yes, it is quite disappointing," replied the wizard. "Take it away," he said and nodded to me. I had personally witnessed Pascalli positively inhale cooking much worse than that on numerous occasions, after all he did eat my cooking, and I knew something was amiss. I respectfully bent to take the dish and caught a stern look, which I knew meant I should pay attention, but which the lord mayor took to mean that I had better return with something more pleasing.

"Perhaps some dumplings, my lord," suggested the mayor. "Our cook is famous for the sauce. I believe you will find it very good."

"Thank you," replied Pascalli. "Please find something better to drink."

The lord mayor rose and I followed him to the kitchens where he met with the innkeeper. "What is this filth you serve?" he bellowed. "Do you not know I could lose my head for displeasing the nobility?" He grabbed the dish I held and flung it at the man. Then he stormed into the kitchens. Curious, I followed, which seemed to please him a great deal as he now had an audience. Quivering, the innkeeper followed us.

The cook was an ancient man whose wrinkled but stern glance commanded his domain with ease. At first he seemed little more than annoyed at the interruption, barely glancing up from his work until the mayor forced himself.

"What kind of trash do you think you are peddling here?" he hollered, instantly bringing all eyes to himself. For a moment I felt the cook would attack the man, but instead he slowly turned and folded his arms quietly. "That food is not fit for swine. I

am serving a great nobleman whose tastes are far beyond the ordinary."

The cook just stood there, looking almost amused but clearly without the fear that would perhaps have sated the mayor's petty temper. "His lordship demands dumplings, and your finest mead." The mayor glanced around at the frozen figures. "Get moving!" he shouted. When no one moved he took a step and pushed the nearest servant, a young girl. She scampered into a corner and the mayor backhanded the cook harshly. The old man stumbled back from the force of the blow but regained his composure quickly. When he raised his head a bead of blood formed at the corner of his lip and it began to swell.

"As you wish, lord mayor," he said quietly, and turned back to his work. Instantly the rest of the kitchen staff began working furiously. The mayor went back upstairs to the fine dining room and I returned a short while later with a bottle of mead.

The master cook himself presented the next course. The dumplings tasted exquisite. Light pastries steamed perfectly with a balanced blend of meats and vegetables. Served with a delectable currant sauce whose particular zest I could not discern for the spices of the region were unknown in the east. The old man managed to catch Pascalli's eye as he served the remainder of the meal. The mayor treated him with cold scorn. "Pray, dear fellow, that this is better than your last concoction," he commented.

Pascalli picked indifferently at the presentation, and sipped the mead with quiet reservation. The mayor fidgeted nervously, but obviously did not wish to break the silence. The cook stood impassive, watching the scene unfold from the shadowy candlelight.

"This is the best the provinces have to offer," said Pascalli to me with a slight nod to his plate. I did not know what to say so I held my tongue. Pascalli seemed to approve, and he continued, "I had hoped for better."

"It's that fool of an innkeeper," muttered the mayor angrily. "He does not know his place. I shall deal with him."

"How long have you been lord mayor here?" inquired Pascalli, almost casually.

"Twenty winters," responded the mayor. "In all that time I have never been so disappointed."

"Then you have obviously had plenty of time to deal with the innkeeper," cut in Pascalli. His tone was darker now, not quite threatening but certainly ominous. "I am quite sure the innkeeper did not process this mediocre mead," he suggested.

"No, of course not," defended the mayor. "It is not a local brew. Ours is generally much better, but it has been a bad winter."

"Naturally," replied Pascalli incredulously. "That would explain the filth in your streets as well as the lack of

discipline of the village guards. Our papers were not even requested when we entered the village."

"The captain of the guard is not under my command," said the mayor, growing a little defiant.

"And it is just as well that he is not, as you have set a poor enough example." Pascalli was definitely angry now. "I noticed that your own house does not seem to have the same problems as the rest of the village. The trees there are quite green, and the fruit quite ripe. I wonder why you would put us here with these mediocre lodgings when it is quite obvious that your own estate is much grander."

"I had simply thought you would be more comfortable here." The mayor's lie was obvious but inescapable.

"It is quite obvious to me that we will not be comfortable here," replied Pascalli. His words carried an air of blunt iciness that left the mayor quite breathless. "I am still quite hungry, and very tired, and very much in need of a bath."

"Of course I shall expect you presently," was all he could manage as he rose.

The meal and entertainment that followed at the mayor's villa were rather disappointing, that is to say the entertainment the mayor intended to provide. Pascalli, however, was still feeling quite the rascal and for some reason really wanted to harass the man. The following morning he insisted on seeing the entire estate, and spent a considerable amount of time examining the personal larders, orchards, and fields of the mayor.

"Quite impressive," he said to the mayor as we went into the village that afternoon, and the mayor positively burst with pride. I believe he was somewhat deflated later when the village guard came calling in search of goods that had been illegally withheld or confiscated and which rightfully belonged either to the village or the provincial regent.

"I believe he meant to bribe us in the end," said Pascalli as we left Enbeck-thrull a few days later. The village council found him guilty of theft and hung him in the village square.

"The place seemed peaceful. I don't understand why they were so happy to see him hang," I said.

"That is the way of petty tyrants. In their own way they can be more dangerous than bad kings. A man may see his king once in a lifetime, but he must live everyday with his local lord or mayor. Stamp out the oppressors when you can, Scratch, but do so carefully."

"I'll try to remember that," I agreed.

## Chapter Sixteen

After Enbeck-thrull we kept even more to the wild if possible. I understood that the villagers would surely spread the news of such interesting events far and wide for winters to come, and that the Lord of Gratterskeep would be long remembered there. Such notoriety could only attract the attention of the local lords and eventually the regent.

We reached the northern wall and turned west. Here the villages appeared less frequently, and we spent many nights beneath the endless stars. In those days I took my watch alone as Pascalli slept. It was not unusual for him to share a portion of my watch, or for me to share a portion of his, as it is a very lonely business traveling in the wild.

One night beneath the canopy of stars I sat considering the fate that had dragged me from home. I found the fragment's of Anaria's flower in the bottom of my pack and missed the farm and everything I had left behind. My father's bow and spear waited within reach of my hand, but he had not taught me their use or history.

"Tell me about my father," I asked Pascalli.

"Halfspear was not the name he was born with," answered the wizard. "He accepted that name in honor of his skill with weapons. After his first battles he returned home an orphan, so the name stayed and he has passed it on to you."

"I only knew him as a farmer," I said.

"A man may be many things and yet remain a mystery to those who love him best. I knew him as a soldier and a leader of men," said Pascalli.

"What does that make me?" I asked.

"It doesn't make you anything?" Pascalli laughed. "Your father chose to become a farmer. You have chosen to follow me, and I will train you to be a soldier and a hunter and a dozen other things. In the end you will be whatever you make of yourself, or whatever Tylos makes of you."

"What will that be?" I asked.

"You're full of questions tonight. Nobody knows the mind of the gods, lad. I'm going to get some rest. Wake me before you not off."

Pascalli wrapped himself in his blankets. I felt unusually awake as questions raced through my mind. Somehow I wanted to

prove that I could be more than a farmer, and yet a part of me wished only to return to Dunston and live a peaceful life.

Suddenly I felt warmth about me, not just simple comfort, but actual heat, as if surrounded by gentle flames, and a light shone over me such as that of the high-noon summer sun. Around me, the camp glowed white, and the sweet fragrance of dew-covered grass filled my nostrils. Then She stood before me, her feet just above the grass. Though I felt no breeze, her hair rippled in ever-changing locks of purest red and gold, swirling about her perfect face. Her skin appeared as white as the undiscovered snow. She wore a shimmering robe of palest blue or silver, so bright was the light that my mortal eyes could not tell. When she spoke, her voice was as the gentle spring rains, both soft and soothing but so strong it held my very soul captive.

"Colter, son of Kyven my beloved champion, do not fear." Although I was quite startled, I do not believe I was afraid but those eyes of blue fire impressed upon me her great power. "Be not dismayed for your father. He has earned his reward and rests with me. The tasks he chose to leave unfinished were his to leave."

I could not speak although my mind raced with a thousand questions. I wanted so much to know about myself, about my future, about my family, about Pascalli. Much of what went through my mind was no more than the innocent ramblings of youth, but there were other burning important questions.

"Do not trouble your mind and heart for the future, my child. Your choices will also be your own to make, and you will know what they are when the time comes. I have come now to the realm I broke so long ago that it may begin to heal, and that through you the healing may begin should you choose it. Do not fear, for if you stand by me then none may thwart you though the way will not be easy even until the day you pass into my eternal realm."

My thoughts turned to Pascalli and the breaking and to Darnuth Keep, and I knew instantly she could tell all my thoughts.

"Follow the counsel of the wizard, for his task is great and he has much to do before his curse can be lifted. He will never again betray me, and his heart and mind are ever upon the task at hand. Look not to the past for the answers, my child. None before you have done what must be done, only look at what you have. I have sent others to aid you, and in time even others will find you. When the calamities foretold begin to unfold they will flock to the banner you will raise."

"And if I don't want to," I thought. I instantly felt a pang of regret for even thinking such cowardly things.

"Do not fear men." Her voice, though I could not hear a change, felt firmer, stronger, and more potent. "Do not fear death. Do not fear the future. Know that I am with you always through fire and pain and darkness. When the demons of Hieron

gather against you and summon their allies here to defeat you, I will stand by you and your spear will shine with my power."

"How am I to know what to do? Where to go?" Now I longed to serve but I still did not understand my full purpose.

"That will come in time. Follow your feelings and you will know. I will be with you always."

Then as quickly as She had appeared She was gone. I found that I was kneeling in the grass staring into the stars. I blinked. The odor of dew and spring rain still hung heavy in my nostrils. I sat back, my mind a whirl of wonder and hope. Pascalli stirred in his sleep, and I realized that the first rays of dawn were just edging their way over the horizon.

I didn't say anything to Pascalli right away about my experience. He allowed me to choose my own time for the telling, although I am sure he knew something had happened as soon as he saw me that morning. "I'm sure you have more questions than answers now," he said when I finished the tale. "That is usually what happens when we learn something important."

"She said that you are cursed, but that I should do what you tell me." There were indeed a hundred questions, but I didn't know which were safe to ask, so I thought I would try to hardest first.

Pascalli paused. I felt that I had hit upon a nerve, but then he chuckled. "Yes, my boy, I am the most cursed man in the world, and well I deserve it. Perhaps one day you will come to understand the full depth of who and what I am, but I doubt it. After so many centuries I am barely beginning to understand." His chuckle ended and then he shook his head. Sadness passed across his face like I had not seen in his face before. "The world was not always as it is. Before the breaking, magic flourished everywhere and in everything. The most common of villages, and in those days there were many more villages and towns and cities, had magic to help their crops grow and to heal sick animals."

"But the most powerful magic was reserved for great men of learning and study. We, that is to say I and some of my closest associates, delved deeply into the very powers that create and mold life in this world. We developed mastery over the elements, over the basest of creatures, and eventually over death. Or at least our power extended mostly over death, for our lives expanded beyond that of the average man. But with such great power came great greed and lust."

"There are those in the world now, just as there were then, who believe that power that is not used is not really power. That is a lie, Scratch, a very cunningly crafted lie that leads only to pain and misery. For a time I believed it. When we reach Darnuth Keep you will see much of the results. In short, some of my comrades attempted to use magic to twist life to serve their basest whims. Through intrigue and through open warfare they established their petty kingdoms. Eventually we divided

more or less into two groups, and then we went to war. On the one hand there were those who sought to preserve magic and use it only to enhance, heal and build. On the other side were those who wished to use it to create their own version of life. They would abuse it to suppress, curse, and build after their own image."

I couldn't help but ask, "How did the war go?"

"Better you should ask which side I was on, first," said Pascalli. "Each point in its proper order."

"Very well," I said. "Which side were you on?" Only after the words were out of my mouth did I realize that there were so many possible meanings to the question.

"I was on the wrong side," responded the wizard.

"You mean you were with the evil wizards?"

"No, I mean that both sides were wrong and that I was too slow to realize my mistake. But for your information I was indeed the leader of what you would consider to be the evil wizards, although we were not so much evil as mistaken. And since we won, we would hardly consider ourselves evil. Generally only those who lose the great wars are considered the bad or evil enemy, as the victors get to write history."

"So you killed all the good wizards?" I asked bluntly.

"Always so black and white with the young," he replied. He had an air of irritability now, and I knew I should listen more and talk less. "Of course we killed them. They were our sworn enemies. And in the process both sides killed millions of innocents and ruined the lives of countless others. We took this world from a state of beauty and grace to a state of near constant warfare, and we broke our goddess' heart. She warned us, but we did not all heed the warning. Instead some of us thought we could undo what had been done, yet others thought that now we had a fresh world that we could reshape to fit our own desires just as we had wanted."

"We built massive fortresses and in them began experimenting. One by one we turned out abominations and fancies and wonders. And one by one we began again to be envious and covetous of the power that the others held. We no longer shared our secrets with others, and for a generation hid ourselves from each other and the world. Then, as if by common consent, we resurfaced and went again to war against each other."

"In the wake of that final war, we broke the world. That is to say we drove the Veldmen forever from the surface. We destroyed the long memories of the Darkunders. We shattered the spirits and histories of all the races of men. We destroyed civilization, and we destroyed each other. I say we, only because I did not stop them from what they did. There were three of us who saw the folly of it before it completely unfolded, and we petitioned to Tylos to save the world, but she was as slow to hear us as we had been slow to obey her. When the war subsided she finally appeared."

"The three of us met together with the victor of that horrible war. Then Tylos appeared and she told us that the ability to create new magic had been taken from the world. We could no longer control the elements or create new abominations. We were saddened, but also understood. Then we were all cursed to repair what we had done and charged to make the world whole again. Three of us readily agreed, but the last, who had come only to demand our surrender saw this as his opportunity to cement his place as ruler of the world and returned with his army to his fortress."

"You see, Scratch, he knew that even though he could not continue to experiment, he could still use the tools he had, and he knew or at least he believed that we did not have armies sufficient to resist him. Tylos cursed us three again, charging us that as long as he lived neither we nor the world would see any rest. What this means, in part, Scratch, is that I cannot age, or even become ill as long as he is alive, but it also means that neither can he. My other two companions were lost shortly after when we used our remaining resources to stop his armies, and for these hundreds of winters I have been trying to find a way to stop him."

He did not continue. I knew he was allowing me to absorb everything he was telling me. "Then my father was helping you also, wasn't he?"

"Yes, Scratch. He was a very brave man."

"But he loved my mother too much to finish it, didn't he," I said. I didn't know what to feel about it.

"Yes, my boy, he did. But you must not hold that against him. Didn't She tell you that it was his choice?" The wizard looked at me kindly. "Do not worry if you will fail like your father because he didn't fail. And do not worry about being less than your father because in the end he didn't succeed. So either way you can do no worse, even if you quit now. You've already proven to me that you've got what's necessary to finish this, so you may as well try it."

That rare compliment put my position in perspective in an odd way. I began to understand my purpose in that moment. As we continued west I often thought of my experience and Pascalli's story but answers came only very slowly.

At some point between villages, far to the west, but not yet as far as Darnuth Keep, my horse threw a shoe and forced me to beg the use of a forge at a remote farm. The farm was large enough to almost be a village, and we were sure our luck would be good. Naturally events didn't go quite as expected. The good man of the farm was willing enough to accept our gold, but explained that their smith had died, and no one else knew the art for some kilometers around. I explained that I could do the work myself if only they would lend us the forge, at which point he became both intrigued and much friendlier.

"You see, Galin, the smith, was murdered just two days ago, and we've not had word back yet from Daturk-thrull if their smith can come and do some work here, or if his apprentice is ready or willing to come," said master Tarkin.

"I don't imagine anyone would be willing to take his place until the murder is solved," I said. "Can you tell me what happened?"

"Well, no, actually." Tarkin scratched his head and shrugged. "I would love to, but the truth is none of us knows. Galin just went into the woods for a bit of an evening stroll down by the creek and never came back. In the morning we found his body."

"How did he die? Do you know what killed him?"

"There were three wounds, one on the back of his left leg, one in the heart, from the front, and one on his right shoulder, all deep cuts like those from a dagger. There was a rumor a few markets back that Edelo Cheshk's bandits may have returned to the area, but there aren't any signs of a struggle, and he was a large strong man who would have at least hurt one of them. I'm assuming there were more than one since one man would have had to be very skilled to take Galin like that and not get the same in return, armed or not."

Pascalli, who had listened quietly to our conversation interrupted. "We will offer your farm some protection until a new smith can be found. Young Sir Lanseg has the ability to act as smith for a short while. He was once apprentice to a very great smith. Although his specialty is weapons, he can handle horseshoes just as well."

Once again I found myself laboring at the forge. This time I gave direction to a boy even younger than myself. The work became a pleasant distraction to the questions that had plagued me earlier. I discovered for the first time in my life the true wonder of being master of a small domain and I found I was happier then than at any time since leaving the farm. Pascalli seemed to disappear for the next two days until a new rider appeared on the farm. She was a young woman, perhaps two or three summers my elder dressed in rich hardened leather and sporting a solid bow for hunting. At her side hung a traditional Tulandish cutlass. Her hair fell dark and straight from beneath the solid metal cap atop her head.

Too rich for a bandit, too surly for a beggar, I knew instantly that she was trouble. She moved with an enchanting, self-assured grace that immediately drew attention from all within eyeshot. I, however, did not notice her immediate arrival. Tulath, my assistant pointed her out.

"You there," she called to the first person she met. "Go and fetch me the master of this farm."

Before turning back to my work I noticed that her horse did not quite walk properly. I knew that it had cast a shoe and would be lame if not properly tended soon. Sure enough she rode

directly towards the forge. She stopped short of the shop and dismounted.

Tulath began to step aside when I ordered, "Mind your fire, we've work yet to finish." I did not bother to look up from the plow-blade I was mending.

"You there," she called. I knew she would be angry, I had known enough of her breed to smell them a kilometer off. "My horse has cast a shoe. You will replace it at once."

Tulath had slackened his pace at the bellows. "Mind your fire," I ordered. My voice was more gruff than intended. I glanced up long enough to look her over. "That hoof will need a day or two of rest before it can be worked. Stable your mare and I'll take care of her when I've a chance."

"I am in haste. I am Dina, third daughter of the house of Taradurk; you will not keep me waiting." She was brandishing her horsewhip rhythmically.

Pascalli had told me of the Regent Taradurk who served as lord over all the west, but the lessons of Iven were cast more solid into my soul than any fear of a title. "Surely the daughter of Taradurk knows when a horse is lame," I replied. She swung with the whip, but the blow never connected. She had not expected my reaction, and in one swift move I stepped inside of her wide swing and grabbed her wrist. Then with a hard jerk I flung her over my shoulder and sent her sprawling on the ground beneath her horse.

"You will die for that, peasant," she said icily.

"Not at your hands," I replied coolly. "And if you had the brains of your horse you would have realized I am not a peasant."

A moment of doubt quickly flickered across her eyes. I was certain she did not entirely believe me.

"He speaks the truth, daughter of Taradurk," said a voice I had not heard the last two days. Pascalli wandered up next to her horse and was examining the leg.

"Who are you?" she blurted. "Why should I believe you?"

"Better you should ask what truth I was referring to," he replied. I immediately burst out in a laugh and turned back to my work. "You see, my dear Dina, he has, after all, told you several things, all of which are true, and you seem rather obstinate about not believing any of it. And my name is Lord Pandrake of Gratterskeep, not that it will do you much good." His voice was unusually kind though slightly condescending. He extended a hand to help her to her feet. She took it cautiously, and together they followed Tarkin into the farmhouse.

## Chapter Seventeen

I worked at the forge until late in the evening. I found Tarkin, Pascalli, and Dina just finishing a fine meal. "Sit down, lad," invited Tarkin. "You've worked yourself over-hard since you came. I can never repay such kindness. Enjoy some of this roast."

I knew that I smelled of the forge and that my unwashed face must have appeared rather unruly to Dina. I became conscious for the first time of how graceful she truly was. She had tied her hair in a tight knot at her neck. Her eyes were a penetrating shade of jade, almost like a cat's that still glared at me across the table. In her boots she stood as tall as me. I noticed that she kept her cutlass and bow close by.

"I believe that you have not been properly introduced," said Pascalli casually. "This is my knight and protector, Sir Lanseg." She nodded. "And this is Dina, third daughter of Lord Taradurk." I bowed deeply, remembering my manners.

I had not learned to speak with much grace and I felt my cheeks flush, so I did the only thing my mouth was good for and stuffed it with food.

"Her ladyship has come to avenge the loss of the blacksmith, Sir Lanseg," said Tarkin. "She is a very great hunter of evil, both of men and creatures." The farmer seemed genuinely excited about the arrival of that surly girl. "She was just telling us of a particularly nasty creature. Please continue."

"There really isn't much more to it," she replied. "We came upon them just after dawn and slew them quickly."

"What sort of creatures were they?" asked Tarkin.

"Beasts that walk like men, with horns and claws. One had the head of a dog, the other the head of a goat. Both were covered in black fur and scales."

I opened my mouth to say Kaarum, but caught Pascalli's eye and stuffed it with food instead.

"When was this?" asked Pascalli.

"Two markets ago, near the great wall," she replied.

"Do you hear that Lanseg?" he said. I nodded. "We will have to make haste. We must be at our destination before winter arrives and already the hills grow dangerous."

"After we solve the murder," I said bluntly.

"Oh, of course," he continued casually. "We were just discussing the matter when you arrived. I have done some scouting, and I believe we will be able to take care of that problem without too much trouble in the morning. Then it will be a small matter for the farm to find a new smith and we can be on our way."

"Where are you going?" asked Dina.

"Why, to Darnuth Keep, my dear," said Pascalli as casually as if we were taking a summer stroll to go fishing. My jaw dropped. My fork dropped. I did not have the presence to even hide my surprise my stuffing my mouth again. Winters now of traveling in secrecy and he just spouted it off.

"You are joking of course," replied Dina, her voice betraying her shock. "That place is haunted, filled with deadly evil beasts. Legend has it that it was cursed from the breaking and can never be made whole again."

"Never is a very long time," said Pascalli. "Despite the dangers we are going there. I am surprised at you, Dina, frightened of mere stories when you have yourself fought and conquered evil. I should think you would want to come with us." Now I really was struggling to keep myself composed. The last thing I wanted along was a silly girl who couldn't take care of herself, let alone help out in a tight spot. But my fears were unfounded.

"I have other duties," she replied. "I am not always free to chase my quarry or to follow fools into darkness."

"Of course," replied Pascalli, and as far as we were all concerned the matter was closed. The conversation turned to more mundane topics until I drifted to sleep at the table from exhaustion.

The morning found us looking for over-sized gopher holes. "What we are looking for, are holes about this large," described Pascalli very carefully. He held his hands apart to form a circle about the size of my head. "They will be surrounded by the burrowed out dirt, and probably by a sort of yellow slime or yellow dirt. I have already marked three of them, but there should be a few more, possibly as many as ten or twelve."

"What do we do when we find them," I asked.

"Just mark them with a stick, like this, and a bit of cloth." He handed each of us a few strips of cloth. "Whatever you do, do not put your hand or foot inside one of these holes! The creatures inside can be very dangerous, as you will soon see."

As Pascalli had guessed, the work was relatively quick and easy. Both Tarkin and I had experience hunting vermin of this sort in the fields, so we knew what signs to look for. Dina learned quickly what we were searching for, and in less than an hour we had all nine burrows marked.

Pascalli gathered us together with several of the other farm workers. "Now for the fun part," he said. Each of you put a

generous amount of this powder down a hole, all except one hole, which Lanseg and Dina will watch with their bows." He passed a generous round of reddish powder to eight different willing parties. "When I give the signal, put your torches to the powder. Mind you be careful, and if you see any creature coming out of the hole run back away and call out for assistance."

"What are we to do?" asked Dina.

"Shoot them as they come out, of course." Pascalli winked. "I did say this was the fun part, didn't I. Oh, but be careful not to get bitten. I believe you will find that they move spectacularly fast when frightened, and their venom is quite deadly."

Just as planned, eight torches set off fire and smoke in unison and a few short seconds later out crawled seven enormous lizards. I call them lizards but truly they were more like giant centipedes with lizard-like heads. They sported just one vicious fang, almost like a horn. Their mouths opened with rages of fear, pain and anger as they emerged, and their bulbous eyes blinked in the morning sun. One by one we shot them with our arrows as they emerged. Most of them required more than one shot to stop. They had some inner desire to keep moving, to keep attacking that went far beyond normal instinct. The last one very nearly reached Dina's legs before I put an arrow through its eye. She gave me a grudging thank you, and turned to survey the situation.

After a few moments, the fury was over and I began skinning one of the creatures. "What could you possibly want with that," asked Dina, a look of disgust on her face.

"New boots," I suggested, indicating my worn footwear. I'm not sure what made me continue, "I can make a pair for you if you'd like." The words seemed to escape my lips before I knew I was even speaking.

She looked at first taken aback, and then wary, then replied, "I'm sure you'll be long gone before you can finish them. Besides I have business."

"Then I will send them to your father as a trophy of his daughter's triumph." To my surprise there was no note of mockery in my voice. She had done very well that day and I did want to make up.

"Thank you," she stammered. I believe that was the first time someone had sincerely complimented her in her life, if not, it was certainly the most powerful. She was used to the idle prattle of hangers-on and the expected kindnesses of servants.

"Taking trophies already I see," interrupted Pascalli. "Wonderful. I could use a new belt, but mind the fangs and let me know if you see any of their eggs."

"I'll be careful," I grumbled. "The hides are already spoken for."

"Oh well, another time then," responded Pascalli cheerfully. "Ho, Tarkin, come see what we've managed." The farmer was

already halfway to us of course. "Now mind you that we may not have gotten all the eggs. If we didn't you'll see a few young come out in one or two markets. The young will be looking for mice or frogs, whatever they can get. I suggest you set some traps around the burrows at night. Go ahead and plug as many as you can."

I returned to the forge for the next few days while we waited for a new smith to arrive, half sulking, half worrying that everything would not be in order soon enough. During that time I scraped and cured the hides, which were covered in tough, but workable silver-gray scales. Dina left to take the message to Daturk-thrull and I did not expect her to return. Four days later she did return, leading a wagon carrying the apprentice to the smith of Daturk-thrull and his new bride and all their belongings. He was glad to find a shop ready and waiting. I reluctantly let him take his rightful work.

"We'll be off then, bright and early," said Pascalli to Tarkin when he saw the wagon. "Our work here is finished and we have tarried over-long I think."

Tarkin was overjoyed at the success, so much so that he gave us a wagon and filled it with food, a new tent, extra blankets, anything we could ask for. Leaving that farm felt like leaving my own farm all over again. My heart nearly broke for I had come to love Tarkin as I loved Master Wilder, and the servants were like my friends from Dunston.

The next morning, as we left Dina rode up alongside the wagon. "Imperial guards will not harass you while I am with you," she said. "I can make your trip go much faster I think, if you will consent."

Although she spoke to Pascalli, she cast me a glance, and his eyes followed hers. "What do you think, Scratch, my lad, can you handle a finicky lass such as this?" I think her jaw must have broken it dropped so hard. I know I at least cracked a smile, though I probably laughed as Pascalli's habit was wearing onto me.

"I've no doubt she'll want no help from me, but she's welcome in my camp," I replied, meaning it.

"Good boy," said Pascalli. We rode on, and Pascalli took his matter-of-fact tutor tone with Dina and for once I had a bit of a rest from the old man. "You'll understand, my dear, that we have been traveling incognito for several winters now, so our names are generally not our own. The lad you can call Scratch, or whatever you deem appropriate". He cast me a sidelong glance. I shrugged. "Me, you will call Pascalli, or Master." She looked horror struck. She opened her mouth to speak but he cut her off. "Your father calls me Master Pascalli and I will take no less from his third daughter."

"You know my father?" she asked incredulously.

"Of course, silly girl," he laughed. "Why else would he call me Master? Either way I would thank you to not betray our

presence here in this part of the empire until we are north of the wall and well into the wild. Are you planning on coming into the wild with us, my dear?"

"I, uh, I don't know," she stammered.

"I shall take that as a yes, for you have already shown that you intend to do this foolish thing. Very well, just don't give out our real names and all will be well. After Darnuth Keep, assuming there is an after, you may do as you please."

"Must I take orders from him?" she asked, her voice full of dread, indicating me.

"Must you?" laughed Pascalli. "I should certainly think not." I rolled my eyes. "He is my charge, and I shall decide when it is time for him to give orders, which is rare enough and not yet with lives as important to our purposes as yours. You are your own spirit, child, free to do as you please. But I can say this much for Scratch. He's a good lad and he won't lead you astray which is more than I would say for nearly any other man you could find."

"He's not a man," she grumbled.

"No, he's not, and you are not a woman," he replied. Her face burned red. I thought for a moment she would ride away, but she didn't. "Stick with us and you will turn into one." His voice was not a promise, but a warning.

The journey to Last Gate, as the village guarding the north gate into the wild is called, took some two markets, perhaps a day or two more. During this time Pascalli seemed driven to verify that I had learned anything in the last two winters. Although we kept up a maddening pace in his rush, each moment of it he prodded me to recount all he had taught, especially of the plants and creatures of the wild.

"We will be without civilization for a very long time," he warned. "For much of that time you will be on your own, Scratch. Worse, you will be required to feed all of us, provide meat, especially fat, for the winter, and hides. You are responsible for the safety of Dina, or you will be when I am not around. We have much to do before the snows begin to fall, and now we will find out if you have been paying attention at all during our travels."

"I can take care of myself, Pascalli," said Dina. "I don't need anyone watching me."

Pascalli grinned, but he didn't quite laugh. "Of course, but I will feel more comfortable knowing Scratch has learned at least something."

Dina kept to herself when she was not busy navigating us along the road or rushing us through an imperial checkpoint. I finished her pair of boots by working under the stars or moon, and she accepted them with cautious gratitude, but I did not see her wear them. She spoke almost always to Pascalli, although I could tell there were a thousand questions burning behind her

eyes. Pascalli continued to train me day after day with both sword and spear. Dina took little interest in my lessons.

"You can join us if you like, my dear," offered Pascalli. "I'm sure your brothers showed you the use of the cutlass, but a little practice never hurt."

"The bow is my weapon," she said to Pascalli. "The weapon of a true huntress."

"I can shoot," I said, even though she was not looking at me.

"My family trains the greatest archers in the land. I learned to hunt when I learned to walk."

I really wanted to bring that prideful chin down, just once. "Pick a mark," I suggested.

"I've no need for childish games," she replied.

"Too true," agreed Pascalli, but with a wink in my direction. "We've no time for such frivolity just now."

A few nights before we reached Last Gate we camped just off the imperial highway. Dina volunteered to take an equal watch with the rest of us, but I woke up early out of habit and joined her. Alone, in the dark, with the fire burning low I saw her eyes mix with confusion.

"What is it?" I asked. I hadn't often spoken directly to her since Tarkin's farm. Pascalli kept me busy. He was probably trying to keep us separated for a while in case there was any lingering animosity. I tried to smile. "I know you have a lot of questions. I'm not going anywhere."

"Who are you?" she asked. "I have heard of Pascalli before, although I thought he was just a legend, but who are you?"

"Colter Halfspear," I replied.

"Son of -"

I cut her off. "Kyven Halfspear. Yes."

Her face filled with a kind of wonder I had never really noticed before. "If I had known," she began, "I would have--"

Again I cut her off. "You would have been wrong. I was born the son of a farmer." I did not look at her as I spoke, but I could feel her eyes on me. "I did not know my father well. I was born in a village in the eastern empire. I left behind my plow with the most bitter remorse. I hate fighting. I hate killing. Sometimes I think I hate Pascalli, but the truth is I would be lost without him."

She sat quietly for a time, not daring to ask anymore questions.

"Do the boots fit properly," I asked, more to break the silence than anything. She didn't answer. "I'm glad you came along, it's nice to have someone besides that old windbag." She chuckled a little, and then after a few moments went to sleep.

In the morning I noticed that she was wearing her new boots, though she still had not decided if I was safe to speak to.

## Chapter Eighteen

Midsummer's day of the eighth winter after Kyven Halfspear's victory under Narnal marked my first midsummer away from home while I was still under the tutelage of Captain Torbridge. Two winters later I had managed to stay alive long enough to write another letter home. Though I didn't expect the letter to arrive, I sent it east with a grain merchant traveling to Anascrag. Though I had certainly added length to my legs and outgrown the clothes my mother sent me away in, even I could see the real growth had little to do with size.

My arms and back became strong under the daily strain of work and practice. I knew how to read strangers and the value of holding my tongue. I could read a trail and trusted myself in any circumstance. In spite of all the changes I still often wondered about my father, and about the curse he left me. We had few chances to find books along the way, but Pascalli encouraged me to read anything we found, and listen to the stories told by locals.

"How long has it been since you came through Last Gate?" I asked Pascalli the night before we reached the gate.

He winked at me before lifting his eyes and staring off into the horizon. "I come this way now and again to check the pass, though never through the gate. You will be the first to come with me since the breaking."

"Didn't my father ever come this way?" I asked, surprised.

"No, Scratch." He said, very simply. "His business would have brought him here eventually, but he left the path before that."

I understood.

Dina was not with us that final night. She went ahead with the wagon to make preparations at the guard post. I imagine that she wanted to spend at least one night in the comfort of a bed, but I am sure she also knew that I at least would want to have some time alone to sit and think. Dina did not speak to me much, not until we reached Darnuth Keep, and when she did she had taken to calling me Scratch, just as Pascalli did. Some part of her could not let go of the fact that I had been raised a farmer.

"Who was the demon my father slew?" I asked Pascalli quite suddenly enough to startle myself.

"You've heard the tales," replied Pascalli. "Surely you know the story by heart."

"I want to hear it from you," I said firmly. "You know the truth, and I feel that you owe it to me."

"I owe you nothing," replied Pascalli in a sharp tone that sent a shiver through my spine. He was not angry. After a pause he smiled and set me at ease. "I will give you freely what you ask. I think it may help you."

"As you well know there are a number of deities, each struggling for power over our world. But they are bound by the will of mortals to choose for themselves their destiny. Though they may tempt us, we ultimately have power over ourselves. Some servants of the dark deities have tempted mortals to invite them into this realm to wreak havoc in return for greater power. One such demon was invited here by a powerful Kaarum shaman who made a pact with this demon lord."

"At first we thought it was just another incursion of Kaarum coming down from the north. As usual I headed them off, and sealed the pass, but they broke through and the empire had to raise an army in great haste. Your father was recruited in much the same way that you were. He was literally begging for food when they came looking for conscripts and he just came along."

"I did not actually meet your father until much later in his career. He was very astute, and very skilled at the art of war. By surviving long enough he rose through the ranks until he commanded a small company. About that time I finally managed to discover the presence of an unnatural force, though I could not tell what was behind it. At Narnal's direction I gathered volunteers. Your father was the first to offer his spear."

"I led them over the Northern Crown, and into the land of the Kaarum. He brought us out again, by his wits and cunning and sheer force of will. At every step we were hounded. I was not prepared to face a demon and it forced me to flee. The first time in so many hundred winters Pascalli fled a battle. I think that Tylos visited him during that time of our separation and told him of the spear of Udelf and of its power over the demon. I cannot tell you of your father's adventures to retrieve the spear because he went alone and he returned alone. When he returned he no longer needed armies to fight his battle. He no longer needed me. Indeed his power far surpassed my own."

"The war fared poorly for the empire. Many thousands of Kaarum had gathered along the wall north of Anascrag. There he came and began destroying them. Then, in the middle of the commotion a great blackness appeared. The demon rolled out its weapons of darkness only to be repelled by your father's courage and light. Men and beast fell on both sides from the shock. Finally he thrust the demon down and broke its link to our world."

"Your father did not speak for many days after that. He never told me what he felt or endured. The spear of Udelf had

lost its power. It is the weapon you now bear, now no more than a bit of metal on the end of a pole. He went home, although I believe only I knew where his home was."

I realized as he spoke that I was crying. So many questions still fluttered in my mind. Suddenly I felt very much like a child and I chided myself. Now I should be a man.

"You haven't told me why killing the demon wasn't enough to satisfy Tylos," I said.

"That is because I don't know," answered Pascalli.

Confusion rocked my senses. Pascalli knew everything. He knew the names of little children he could not possibly have ever met before. He knew how long rocks had sat undisturbed in lonely mountain passes and when the last rabbit crossed a given path or when it was likely to return again.

"What do you mean you don't know?" I asked.

"Just that. I can only guess. I did not become aware of the curse Kyven endured until well after he returned to the imperial service. Only then, winters later, did he confide in me, and it was I who told the village council at Dunston after he refused." He caught the fire in my eyes and cut me short. "Do not be angry with me. I tried to save him from himself, and I have done my best to save you as well. Judge me later, when you've learned enough to judge me properly. I'm not a saintly man, but at least I know my purpose and I haven't yet wavered from it."

"Well, if you don't know, can't you at least guess?" I asked.

"Anyone can guess," he said. "In this situation guessing wrong could mean throwing this world into darkness."

"But you've already guessed, haven't you," I mocked.

"Yes I have," he said sharply. "You are going to prove me right or wrong, and I hope before it is too late." He waited for me to ask the obvious question but I did not give him the satisfaction. "Very well, my guess is that somehow one of the other gods has managed to allow magic to be controlled again in this world and Tylos wants it remedied."

"But how can that be true?" I said incredulously. "If magic could be controlled again, then you should be able to do any sort of miracle, shouldn't you?"

"We are talking about guesses, aren't we?" he scoffed. "Of course the way we learned may not be the same way that magic is controlled today. Tylos may still hold enough power to keep mine from returning. I don't fully understand the extent of Tylos' curse on me. Take the priests of Tylos, for example, their ability to heal wounds is clearly magic, but it nothing of the sort that I understand. Their power comes directly from Tylos. They have no power to actually do any healing. It is entirely up to our Lady."

"I thought it was just automatic," I replied. "I was healed back near Havensod."

"Yes, I heard about that," said Pascalli. "Quite remarkable actually. Most of us are not healed automatically, and then it is usually just enough to keep one from dying. Your experience was unusual to say the least. Either way, there was no control present."

"Oh, well, yeah," I said. "Well how did you used to control it, in the old days I mean? If I wanted to make a pig fly, for example, what would I have to do?"

"You mean short of building a catapult?" laughed Pascalli. I laughed with him, and our hearts grew suddenly lighter. "Come with me. Now look over here, you see this leaf." He held up a broad oak leaf, clearly dead. "Now try to do as I say, although I don't expect any results as I have already tried it myself a thousand times since I first came on this theory and it didn't work. Look at the leaf, concentrate on its shape, form, color, smell, texture." He waited for me to concentrate, which I did as hard as I possibly could. I tried to take in every aspect of the leaf, although I must admit it very quickly grew tedious. He set the leaf on the ground. "Now concentrate on the air around the leaf, how does it move, how does it taste, smell, sound." I did as he asked. I tried to remember each time I had ever walked through a forest, every time I had played with a fallen leaf or tossed an acorn aside. "Now, listen for the voice of the leaf and the voice of the air, like a murmured whisper in a language you do not understand coming from far across the mountains. Do you hear it?"

I listened for a moment and had opened my mouth to say "No," when I caught a faint something, like the wind blowing through the boughs of a great tree, but it was coming from nowhere. I knew it came from the leaf. "Yes," I said.

I did not see Pascalli's reaction. I had not broken my concentration. The intensity of the leaf's calling seemed to grow as I yearned to understand it. I bent my thoughts and will towards it. Pascalli's voice quivered as he spoke. "Reach out with your mind and heart and ask the leaf to lift. Ask the air to push it."

I asked, I concentrated, and suddenly the leaf began to hover a few centimeters off of the ground. My jaw dropped. My concentration shattered.

"I don't believe it," said Pascalli.

"Was that magic?" I asked, dumbfounded.

"It wasn't a catapult," he replied, his tone somber.

We sat, both of us staring at the leaf for a long time. I wondered what it meant, how it was possible, and if Pascalli would teach me more. I can only imagine the thoughts he had as the full realization of the power of the curse he had been given settled on his mind.

"At a glance I could have destroyed a forest," he mumbled bitterly. The look in his eye burned with a hatred that sent shivers down my spine. I had never before seen him filled with

dread or indignant anger. That moment was the only one in which I feared for my safety while in his presence, but the moment passed quickly. "Matters have changed, Scratch," he said with a finality that brought me quickly to attention. "Now you must become fully my apprentice, at least for a short time, until I can find a more suitable master, which I am afraid may not be possible. Clearly Tylos thrust you upon me to break my heart again." He winked. "On a more serious note, if it is possible to be more serious, I must take you even more into my confidence now. First, you must not share this experience with anyone, ever."

I already knew that much, and had not intended to tell anyone anyway.

"Second, you must understand that this means that the enemy can use magic."

That too was obvious.

"Also that these enemies, for there will be more than one of them, will have had probably eighteen or nineteen winters more than you to learn magic. That is to say that there is at least one Kaarum shaman in this world who has been practicing magic since before you were born." He seemed completely distracted as he spoke.

"What does all this mean for us here and now," I finally asked him. "Are we still going to Darnuth Keep?"

"Yes, my boy, oh yes," he replied. "We very much need to get there, now more than ever. You've managed to get a decent handle on that pig-poker, but unfortunately I won't have time to really train you up properly in case of a real duel. Pray, lad, pray. In the meantime our plans do not change, other than you will have to work extra hard." He caught my resigned sigh. "I don't mean cooking and cleaning, Scratch, although there will be plenty of that to go around. You'll find that these old hands can be useful sometimes, and we've a third pair now. I hadn't counted on using magic until now, so you'll have to learn to deal with that before you're really ready."

We rode into last gate early in the morning. The mud houses looked golden gray in the reflected sunlight. Smoke from cooking fires drifted through the still sky. Though a few dogs called out to each other, only our slow wagon stirred the streets. The village seemed as undisturbed by time as by our small intrusion. The enormous wall, built centuries before, loomed like a large dark hand over even the tallest of the buildings. A wide, worn highway wandered north and stopped abruptly at the enormous black gates. Soldiers sat idly atop the parapets, smoking pipes and watching our approach.

Getting the guards of Last Gate to open their ancient charge proved to be much more hassle than anticipated, but Pascalli took it all in with a laugh. Listening to Pascalli haggle with the gate captain did nothing to ease the building sense of dread inside me.

"The Last Gate has not been opened in over a thousand winters," said Garret, leader of the guards. "Our law strictly forbids it."

"I know the law," said Pascalli. "By the light of Tylos, I made the law. I closed the gate. By the demons in Hieron I made the wall." His eyes were a blaze of fury that quelled the other man. "Now open the gate or I will, and for good measure I'll leave it open too. Send word to your master that a ragtag named Pascalli has run off with a bandit and the daughter of the great Taradurk through the Last Gate. Have me hunted if you dare, but do not impede me today."

In the end Pascalli had his way of course. Only the very stubborn and stupid could repel him for long. The great iron gears, whose teeth were each larger than a man rolled painfully along a course they had not traveled in a millennium. A small crack, just wide enough for our wagon, and then they lurched and yelled and slammed shut, leaving us in silence to face a path that no longer led anywhere.

"I had hoped to go on ahead," said Pascalli. "There is much to be done before winter, but I dare not delay your training Scratch." He surveyed the broken, overgrown land ahead. The foothills of the Northern Crown lay covered with thick shrubs and tall unhindered timber. Finding a path for the wagon would be both cumbersome and slow. "We'll try it this way for a day or two and see how it goes. Once there was a very great highway that ran through here, perhaps it has survived the test of time."

Only long summers of hard labor would uncover the remains of that ancient thoroughfare. We managed to stumble on an occasional brick, but that was more inconvenience than help. The wagon proved to be utterly useless and an even worse hindrance than first thought. After two days the decision became clear. Either we abandon the wagon and make haste to Darnuth Keep or we keep battling the wagon and risk reaching our destination after the first snows. Either way we would be faced with a lack of critical food-stores.

"Well, what shall it be children?" he asked, though I am sure he guessed our thoughts.

"Ride while we can," I answered.

"I am a huntress," said Dina. "We can hunt food when we get there."

"Perhaps we can," said Pascalli. "If there is anything fit left to eat in these parts. So be it. Pack all of the grain and blankets, the salt, sugar, gear, and as much of the dried meat as possible. We'll walk if we have to, but we must make haste."

Something picked up our trail almost immediately after crossing the Gate. I imagine that our entrance into that solitary territory disturbed a great many creatures. I knew that a skillful hunter tracked us nearly from the beginning. A shadow would move, or occasionally a leaf shuddered against the wind behind us or off to one side. Never close enough to hear, always

near enough to make me very nervous. Pascalli also knew immediately that we were being tracked. Only Dina appeared oblivious. The first day Pascalli tried to get me to concentrate on the air while we rode, attempting to repeat the same lesson as before. The lesson proved a complete failure as neither of us could divert enough of our attention away from our followers.

## Chapter Nineteen

We lit no fires. Dina complained about this the first night, until I warned her that we were being watched. At first I think she wanted to argue the point until Pascalli nodded his agreement with my assessment. "Don't be foolish," he whispered. "He may be a farmer, lass, but he knows the wild."

After we abandoned the wagon I did not see any signs for two more days. I thought that whatever was following us had lost interest.

We huddled together for warmth, our backs to each other taking turns nodding off in the night. I saw a flicker of luminous green in the dark. Then it disappeared. An eye most likely, reflecting the dim moonlight. I gently prodded Pascalli and Dina. Pascalli prodded back. He also had noticed something, a shadow perhaps. Dina breathed in sharply and jerked her bow up off her knees. It must have been her sudden move that drew the attention of our attackers because they concentrated on her.

The attack came sudden and precise with all the cunning of a master bandit. Four shapes blacker than the darkness came at us, their pale green eyes the only warning a split second before fangs and claws tore into us. Dina's arrow caught one in the chest, while mine found a mark in the throat. Behind me I heard Pascalli crack his staff hard into a third. The fourth had caught Dina across the chest with a claw and she fell hard onto the stony earth.

I knocked and loosed a second arrow without hesitation, before it could either flee or attack someone else. The creatures were similar in body to the tigers of the east, with cat-like claws and long tails, but I did not understand the elongated bear-like faces and fangs. Neither bears nor cats hunted in packs, and certainly they would not take unknown prey like this.

"They are not entirely animal," said Pascalli. "Look."

Before my eyes the dead began to shed portions of their furry skin. The faces melted into something almost human, black like the monkeys of the south, but still with the pale green eyes.

"What evil is this?" asked Dina between painful breaths.

"A remnant from the breaking," I answered. "This is why we have come, to make things right."

Fortunately, Dina's wound was not as serious as it could have been. The claws had cut cleanly enough, but I knew that I would not be able to see the source of infection and sickness until after it started. I found my bag of herbs and began cutting bandages.

She still did not trust me, and when I moved to help her she shied away. "I will be fine," she said. "I am not hurt badly."

"That is something for the healer to judge," I said. The teeth or claws had rent her leathers and I could clearly see the wounded flesh beneath. "We do not know these creatures. There may be poison in the wound. It needs to be properly cleaned anyway to prevent sickness."

"I wish we had a proper surgeon," she said.

"Scratch has experience enough with mercenaries and outlaws," said Pascalli. "I'm sure he can manage to stitch together a lady."

I had never before laid eyes upon a woman's breast, and I daresay that I was very glad for the dim, shadowy light of the one candle Pascalli allowed me to work by. I discovered that she was very beautiful, although I had never really thought about it much. I treated the wound with much more care and tenderness than I believe I had planned, and I am sure she was grateful for that care in the end. I had a bit of tyrnwood that I used to make a poultice to deaden the pain and soak any poison. I am sure that in the cold night air my indelicate fingers did not feel pleasant, and I regretted not having something better for the pain. Three cuts ran around the edge of her left breast, claw marks, and all three required stitches. Afterwards we bundled her in several blankets and sat back to back watching over her the rest of the night.

Once again the wonders of tyrnwood proved useful. By morning Dina practically bounced out of the blankets. Though her arm was still too weak from the torn chest muscles to properly manage a bow, she willingly helped with chores she had complained about only the day before.

After that incident Pascalli pushed us harder to reach Darnuth Keep. All thought of practice or training of any kind vanished. For the first time in what seemed forever I did not rise each day to be soundly beaten by a solid oak staff. Pascalli knew that we would need the protection of the battlements as well as a base from which to hunt and gather supplies for the coming winter. Dina had often hunted for sport with her father and brothers but was unused to surviving in the wilderness without the comforts of her station. She did not know how to cook, though most of our food at the time was cold. She did not find sleeping under the stars comfortable and did not understand that we would be easy prey inside of tents.

"I don't think Dina is made for the wild," I observed to Pascalli on evening. "I don't know if she is strong enough to make it out here."

"Don't judge her too swiftly Scratch. There's a strength there that you don't see yet. Remember all that you've done and seen since leaving home. There were times I wondered about you," he said.

"I'll do my best," I murmured.

Pascalli smiled at me. "A friend is a friend and a good friend even better. She's a part to play yet. Give her time. Someday you may come to understand the sacrifice she has given to join us. She has freely left behind much that others would struggle their whole lives to gain. We'll reach the keep in another day. I'll be relying on your help when we get there. Make sure your head is clear."

My first impression of Darnuth Keep remains forever implanted into my memory. The great towers, like icicles rise triumphant from the mountainside. True to the name, the towers are constructed of ancient clear-white crystal that shoots into the sky like diamond. A winding, narrow road that has remained undamaged cuts a path up the edge of Mount Hansfor. After hours of labor in thinning air we turned a final sharp corner and saw it rising both ominous and beautiful over the valley and pass bellow. The Hansfor River begins atop the mountain and runs swiftly down, cascading over steep falls before it fills the lake in the valley and races south and west towards the empire and the sea.

"Our destination," said Pascalli thoughtfully as he scratched his beard. "Perhaps not a destination," he contradicted almost immediately. "Perhaps a starting point." He seemed to be lost in his own world for a long moment, until Dina began moving her horse forward. "You're right, there's no point standing outside. After all I'm sure we're expected." He winked and grinned viciously.

As though time did not exist in the valley or on that mountain, the gates stood tall and clean against the autumn sun. At least three times the height of a man, the polished white crystal of the main gate seemed impregnable at first.

"How do we get in," asked Dina. I was glad she had asked the question, though it echoed my thought.

"By walking, child, of course," replied the wizard. "Unless you have learned to fly, which I doubt."

I managed to fake a cough in order to stifle my laugh, but Dina gave me an angry glare anyway. Pascalli lead us very close to the wall and over to a path, just wide enough for one horse to go at a time. The path ran directly beneath the battlements with the sheer face of the wall on one side and a steep slope up the mountain on the other. I observed that although an army might attempt to approach the fortress from behind, the steep edges sloped just enough that the best they could hope for would be to

slide down to the path we now walked where they would be crushed by boulders or burned with oil from the parapets.

At the very back of the keep waits a door just large enough to admit a horse, if it is not a large horse and it is not carrying a great deal of bulk. Pascalli produced a key and opened the door and we began the time consuming task of unloading our horses to get them through the door. The door leads through a dark tunnel to another door, which opens into Darnuth Keep.

Many dozens of buildings without roofs lined the barren streets of the lowest level, bearing silent testament to the greatness of the city's past. Small doors opened directly into small rooms within the outer city wall. I estimated that the wall spanned some thirty meters across at the top. The ancient city guard must have had their barracks either in the low buildings near the wall or in the small rooms inside. Not a single stair or ladder of any kind graced the sheer surface outside of the wall, the only way up or down came from the inside. Many pools and fountains still danced in the setting sun as we entered, and I felt as if the ghosts of an age long past laughed at us through the water.

"At last, a bath," said Dina.

"Yes," agreed Pascalli. "Though the water will likely be icy cold."

"No fires then," I suggested.

"Here in the lower city we probably haven't been spotted yet, although to be perfectly honest I'm not sure what or who watches the surface these days." Pascalli once again seemed distracted, as if calculating a difficult sum in his head.

"I would very much like a warm meal and a warm bath," said Dina.

"At what cost," I said sharply, though she had not been speaking to me.

She turned abruptly to face me. "I am not your charge," she said. Needles seemed to pierce me as she spoke. "I do not need your counsel."

"It seems, my dear boy, that the lady will not be denied her pleasantries," said Pascalli. His tone neither mocked nor condoned, but simply stated a fact. "Go and fetch some water, Scratch, and dig up a pot for heating it. I should like some proper dinner as well, see what you can do about that, lad, if you don't mind."

I opened my mouth to disagree when I saw Dina's look of triumph, but shut it again quickly. "Will you at least help with the fire," I asked.

"Sorry Scratch," he said. His voice was suddenly quite serious. "I'm off scouting for a bit. There are plenty of dry timbers around that should burn well enough. Seasoned wood burns the best." I grabbed my spear and started towards the nearest building. "Find a place with half a roof if you can," called Pascalli behind me. "Don't get into trouble."

By then I absolutely fumed inside. Dina proved to be a hindrance in every possible way. She outright demanded I build a separate fire for her in a separate building where she could heat water and bath herself properly. She did not move a single finger to help. I realize now that once again Pascalli was giving me a simple test of self-control. The danger of our situation was no less now than before, but I guarded the camp alone.

Rather than use two buildings, I waited until Dina seemed content and then built our cooking fire just in front of the abandoned house she had chosen. I stacked our gear just outside the door and began preparing a stew of dried meat and herbs. Dusk already began to drift over us as I began to light the fire, and the shadows seemed to bring with them a quiet that even stilled the tinkle of running water. Dina hummed an unfamiliar but content tune from within the house. My stew simmered very quietly. I heard the soft scrap of something on a stone.

I crept as quickly as I dared, making no noise and grabbed my bow. Finally, after what had seemed like ages of practice I could move almost silently when the need arose. I peered through the depths of darkness for the enemy that surely stalked either my fire or Dina. Dina would have no weapons, and even an unintelligent attacker would deem her the easier target. I went inside the house.

I heard Dina finish her humming and fumbling around for a buffalo hide. She saw me against the light of the fire and shouted. "Scratch, get out of here! I'm bathing." When I didn't move she became really angry, and I think she reached to find something to throw at me. Truthfully I couldn't say what she did because at that moment I caught the movement in the shadows along the roof that I had been looking for. I loosed an arrow, and a piercing shriek, very similar to Dina's, tore into the night. Something large and black fell into the building and growled in pain. I sent a second arrow past Dina and into the enormous black cat.

"Supper is ready," I said, and turned and walked out.

Dina came out a few moments later, her hair still wet. I offered her some food, which she took silently. I knew that it was not in her nature to apologize, especially to a person of my class, but to me that did not excuse the resentful anger in her eyes. I could not conceal my own anger and rather than fumble my way through a conversation I did not want to have, or through silence too awkward to bear I went into the house and began skinning out the beast.

In the east we have several kinds of tigers, but the largest is smaller than the variety of black mountain cat I killed that day. That breed is not only larger, but generally more aggressive and very dangerous to hunt. With the absence of humans for so long they had begun to range all across the Hansfor

valley. The hide made a surprisingly thick and warm coat, and the meat turned out to be both tasty and plentiful.

I was still hungry so I cut some steaks and added them to our meal. Dina immediately showed her disgust.

"We do not eat beasts of prey," she said.

"Then it's going to be a long and hard winter for you." The voice was not mine, but Pascalli's. "I see that we had one visitor tonight. I had rather hoped for more, but we take what Tylos gives."

"You mean you used me for bait?" said Dina indignantly.

"No, child," said Pascalli. "I simply let you have your way. If you do not like the consequences of thinking and acting for yourself then perhaps you should heed the advice of someone more experienced than yourself. Mind, Scratch, don't burn those steaks. I feel as if I could eat a horse."

"And you may have to," I chided. "If we don't find safe pasture for them."

"I wouldn't worry too much about that if I were you," said Pascalli. "This city is not all stone. There are wonderful pastures on the upper levels."

"Are they safe," I asked. Dina had retreated into the house again to get another blanket.

"Much safer for the horses, but perhaps less safe for us. Tomorrow we will go up and find a place for a more permanent camp."

"One with a proper roof," I hope, said Dina as she rejoined us.

"A perfect mansion," said Pascalli. I expected his usual wink, but his face was serious. "There are several up there, and you may choose any you like, though you may have to ask permission of the current occupants."

"Do people still dwell here, then?" she asked.

"People, my dear?" replied Pascalli. "Certainly not. At least not in the way you and I think of them."

"I am not afraid," said Dina. "I will fight when the time comes."

"The time has already come," said Pascalli. "I know you can use that stick of yours, but it will be useless against those who dwell in the noble houses of Darnuth Keep. You cannot hope to take residence there by fighting."

"Then how?" she pleaded.

"By following and trusting," he answered.

I know that she did not like his answer. Few people could truly appreciate Pascalli's way of avoiding a question. "I'll follow you," said Dina. "So far you've not shown me the glory I want. I don't know if I can trust you."

"Oh, ho," laughed Pascalli. "Not to worry, not to worry at all." Now his eyes took on the devilish gleam that meant he had her trapped. "You see, you've neither to follow or trust me one

bit, for I've not the ability to set one foot along the path we tread without help."

"What? Then who? What are you talking about?" she seemed both scared and confused, and I admit that by now I was just as confused though I knew better than to voice my opinion.

"Scratch, my boy, you'll take good care of us, won't you," said Pascalli. I half expected to hear his familiar laugh, but somehow I knew in my heart it was true. "I'm relying on you in the morning to start what your father never came to start, and in return I'll see you finish it alive or I'll die trying."

Though I had experienced many wonders, frights and even battles, there is no greater adventure than having the life and trust of another person placed in your hands, especially when it is the life of a person you love and respect as deeply as I did that old wizard.

Dina's face sank instantly.

"Dina, you and I will keep watch tonight," said Pascalli. "Scratch is short of rest and will need his strength."

"Opening a gate can't be that difficult," said Dina.

"I can keep my watch," I protested.

"Of course you can, lad, but tonight there is no need," he said. "No more arguments from either of you. There is more to entering the upper circle than just opening the gate. Just leave a knife, Scratch, so I can start scraping that hide and go inside. Now Dina, I don't know that you've ever scraped a hide before so come here and lend me a hand. I know that the Taradurks keep a master tanner, but here we will make do ourselves with what we have." I fell asleep to the cracking of the fire and the gentle muttering of Dina complaining beneath her breath.

## Chapter Twenty

The following day proved tiresome and cumbersome for me in too many ways. Pascalli accompanied me through the city to gate at the highest level. The lowest level of the city spans a great semi-circle out from the mountain with the back wall running straight as an arrow and cutting deep into the mountainside. A wide highway opens from the main gate and takes a straight course up, through six wide tall gates to reach the palace proper. At each level a terrace is cut into the mountain and a wall holds back the earth and gives a place for troops to watch the city. The first four gates hung open wide. The gentle archways, unchanged by time, invited me in. The fifth gate, however, stood closed.

"That doesn't look any different than the lower gates," observed Dina.

"Of course not," said Pascalli. "You didn't expect it to be on fire, did you? I've not dared pass that portal yet, and that should be warning enough for both of you. The lower levels bear no malice, for they were homes for common folk who largely fled during the breaking. But the fifth level was home to many nobles. They swore by their lives and souls, in a sacred vow, that no unclean thing would dwell in their homes or disturb their rest. As a sworn enemy of this place once upon a time, I at least, will not be welcome until they are pacified."

"And you expect me to make them happy," I replied.

"I hope you can," he said, though his tone did not reassure me.

"Exactly what am I to do?" I asked.

"I don't know," said Pascalli. "I have a number of guesses, but I think you would be better off asking them than me. There is no magic sealing the gate, but you can't open it from the outside. Take a rope and hook. I brought it for a purpose. You will end up scaling the wall I'm sure. Now off you go."

Scaling the wall proved immensely difficult. There are no footholds in the polished stone and only a very few places where a steel hook has any hope of catching. After nearly an hour of trying to lock the hook in place, my arms and back ached. Finally it caught but I no longer had the energy to pull myself up using only my arms. I sat to rest and chew on a piece of

dried meat. From somewhere inside I thought I heard dull laughter.

After a long rest I scrambled up the rope. I pulled the rope up behind me thinking to find a more secure place to tie it off. For a few minutes I wandered the top of the wall, looking for such a place but to no avail. Then I realized all I needed to do was push open the gates. From the inside, the inner city walls were really nothing more than a high stone fence reaching to about my chest. From the outside, below they appeared to be both tall and thick because of the earth packed behind. I followed the wall and found the guardhouse near the tunnel that led to the gate.

My hand had reached to pull the lever when I spotted a movement from the corner of my eye through the guardhouse window. I turned to look but could see nothing. Instantly my bow was at the ready. I had cover from the guardhouse but only a limited view. I could not cover both the window and the door while simultaneously attempting to manage the lever. I decided to deal with whatever was out there before trying my luck with the gate.

Stalking a large animal through a dense mountain forest has both advantages and disadvantages. I had become familiar after living off the land so much with how to be patient and how to use cover. I noted the direction of the wind, and generally kept my eyes open. Here in this desolate city, with no trees, only windswept stones and sunlight, I discovered a new sense of dread. After emerging from the guardhouse I immediately felt exposed. Whatever was out there could see me, though I saw nothing.

I paused to listen. Nothing. I crossed the street where I could keep my back to the wall of a tall house. I glanced up briefly to see dark vacant windows staring like ancient faces down at me. Again something moved. But I heard nothing. It moved very fast. I thought it was white, perhaps the edge of a robe or dress.

I crept along the edge of the wall slowly and silently, watching both where I had been and where I was going. I reached a point where I could clearly see the corner of the building opposite me where the movement had been. I crossed the street and crept slowly to that corner. I was not surprised to find nothing but an empty alley. Whatever it was left no tracks, no sound, and no signs of any kind. I dismissed all of this without thought for I also moved without much sound and I had been careful to leave no tracks, though it appeared that I moved considerably slower.

Whatever it was had only one way to go so I entered the alley and quietly picked my way to the end. Again I saw nothing at first, but while studying the area my eye caught motion once more. I played this game over and over throughout the morning until I knew well the lay of much of the inner circle. My prey had taken me from the wall up to the palace gates and back again until I found myself just outside a temple to Tylos.

Tired, thirsty and hot from my long work I decided to give the chase a rest. I tried the main door to the temple and found that the seasoned wood and iron opened as easily as if the hinges had been oiled and mended that morning. I found a cool, shady corner and sipped water quietly. I bit off a piece of meat and chewed it thoughtfully, planning my next move. Whatever else might be out there I had not accomplished my goal. I had neither discovered nor discussed my desires with this citadel's former occupants. The gate remained closed.

Quite suddenly the temple door slammed shut as a great gust of wind rushed past on the street. Again the low laughter I thought I had heard before teased my ears, but this time much clearer, though still distant as if from within a vault.

At first I thought to open the door again and continue my earlier chase, or at least return to the gate and try the lever. When I stood up I felt differently. I had never been inside a real temple to Tylos before and I felt compelled to offer Her some prayer or oblation before leaving. I did not know the proper ceremony, but I managed to find the offering pit at the top of a small dais. Sunlight poured in through a high opening in the domed top. I found a small pile of cedar left stacked from centuries before and lit it in the pit. All I had with me were a few herbs for cooking and a bit of dried meat. I put them on the fire and then knelt. Raising my hands and staring into the sky, I offered a prayer to my goddess.

"Who are you to bring sacrifices to this house of holiness," asked a sinister voice from behind me. Hatred poured from the voice like acid. My blood ran chill. My bow lay beside me, out of reach. My spear waited back at camp. Even if I tried, I knew I would not have time to draw my father's sword and bring it into play. Very slowly I stood up and turned around.

I had prepared to say my name, but my heart froze as I looked into the pale dead eyes that stared unflinching back at me. Once a fat priest, now the flesh had faded into nothing by thin gray whiteness and the wispy hair drifted into smoky etherealness from behind a once balding pate. The dead eyes had no pupils, only rolling cloudy orbs above a clear-white face. As I looked into those eyes I saw not only the depths of fear, anger, and pain, but also the walls and decorations of the temple. Weapon or not, this foe I could not destroy in battle. I could not speak for a long time for it held me transfixed in anguish with its stare. The creature appeared to be waiting, but for what I could not tell.

As if in response to my thoughts the temple door opened and slowly a procession of other smoky-white entities began to file into the large worship hall. Though many seemed still to be dressed in clear or white versions of their earthly clothes, most had torsos and legs that faded into wispy nothingness with only faces and arms bearing their human resemblance. Slowly I began to understand. The eyes of long dead nobility focused on me and

the simple offering I had made to my goddess. Though they barely filled the hall a quarter of the way, the procession ended and the door closed behind them as suddenly as it had opened. I felt at once trapped, frightened and exhilarated.

I stood, a mere spectator, as events beyond my control unfolded. I suddenly felt the chill in my blood give way to warmth that encompassed my entire body. The bright, snowy light I had seen only once before suddenly surrounded the offering pit and began to fill the entire chamber. Against that brightness the angry spirits became nearly invisible. The threatening eyes recoiled in confusion and awe. The majestic, sublime and simple voice addressed them.

"Give way now, my loyal children for the time has come for the world to be healed again. Your vow to protect my holy place is fulfilled, come now and enter my rest."

Just as suddenly as it had appeared the light began to fade, but behind me my little fire flared into life beyond its means. One by one the specters moved forward. I stepped aside though they now seemed oblivious of my presence. Each in turn entered my fire, and as they did it flared up until the last, the deadly priest that first addressed me vanished in its heat and the fire died suddenly into cold black ashes.

For the briefest moment I stared about into the encroaching darkness. I found that I was covered in sweat and grime from the day's labors and from the intense heat of the fire. I could not separate the confusion swimming in my head. Clearly Tylos wanted me for something, but there, alone in a forsaken dead city I could not have guessed my future.

Much later, long after dark I reached our camp. I approached silently, for that had long become my habit and found them guarding a little fire. Dina jumped in surprise and fear when I stepped from the shadows but Pascalli merely smiled and quipped, "I see you've done well lad."

"Is there any hot food," I asked, for I felt my strength had all drained away. Something about those garish faces seemed to have stolen the life from my limbs.

"Not yet, though we got some meat today," winked Pascalli. Dina will cook." Dina glared at the wizard and clearly meant to refuse. I shrugged and went to find their kill, but Pascalli called me back. "Sit down, Scratch. By the look of you I'd say you've seen death, or worse. Now go one girl, I'm sure you can manage."

I found a comfortable spot out of the smoke near our fire and waited. Dina retrieved a scrawny rabbit, which Pascalli helped her prepare. After they had it roasting she looked me over, and with some hesitation asked, "What happened?"

I didn't mean to ignore her, but I couldn't begin to describe anything. Pascalli gave her a disapproving look, but said nothing.

"Is there some secret?" she asked. I sensed the frustration in her voice. "I feel like I have a right to know what's going on. I'm out here too, you know!"

I turned away from her, numbly staring into the flames, but I quickly found that too horrible as my mind kept conjuring images of the dead as they walked into a different fire.

"There are some questions, which cannot be answered," said Pascalli. "There are some questions that should not be asked."

Dina glared, rolled her eyes and sighed.

"Did you at least open the gate?" she asked.

I did not answer, I was still lost in thought, but Pascalli brought me to my senses. "I believe the young woman asked a question," he said.

I didn't care for his tone, but then I didn't much care for the conversation. "It's open," I said simply.

Pascalli forced me to eat before going to sleep. I ate mechanically, tasting nothing. Dina had never before cooked during our journey together, so it should have been a memorable moment, but it was lost to me. I saw the hurt in her eyes as I ignored them both, but lacked the strength of will to respond.

"Whatever evil remains we will have to face ourselves," I mumbled. "The dead have gone, but they left their work behind."

So many of my memories have been lost in the well of time, but I can never look at a fire without seeing the dead or recalling the night of nightmares that ensued. If Pascalli or Dina asked me more that night, I didn't answer. I drifted into exhausted oblivion, chased by the images of the dead. For days and nights afterwards I slept only fitfully, and Pascalli did not let me stand watch alone.

## Chapter Twenty-One

With autumn fading quickly into winter I hunted each morning and then returned to skin and cure hides and smoke meat for our winter store. So many supplies had been left behind that we needed blankets, clothes and food. The cold mountains would have to provide our needs for the coming winter.

Dina handled her bow expertly, though she lacked my experience in the wild. At first we hunted separately, scouring the valley and mountain near the keep. Each day Dina grew a little more frustrated as I found more success. Pascalli suggested after a few days that we would be much safer hunting together while he worked on his preparations. Whatever he prepared for the Kaarum he did not explain to us.

We set out together, and I immediately noticed the noise she made as we walked. At first I ignored it, hoping she could learn by watching, but eventually I realized she needed help. "Let's rest a bit," I said. She didn't want to stop. "We won't find anything this morning."

"How can you be so sure?" she asked. "This game trail is fresh."

"The trail is fresh, but you aren't," I replied.

"I'm not tired," she said, frowning.

"You move like you are tired. And I know that I am tired," I said.

"You haven't been yourself since you opened the gate to the inner circle. You don't cook anymore, and you never join us at the fire in the evening anymore." I didn't expect to feel any concern in her voice, and the comfort surprised me. "What's wrong?"

"I saw horrible things." I know tears came to my eyes, but I did my best to hide them and keep my voice steady. "I don't really want to talk about it."

"Will you at least tell me why you always find more game than me?" she asked. "My father taught me to hunt when I was only a girl, but I'm not having any luck here."

"Hunting for sport is not the same as hunting when your life hangs on your skill. You are too nervous. You make a lot of noise, and you miss the small details. You have to know not only to look, but to see and understand." I hoped I didn't sound like Pascalli lecturing, but I knew I did.

"I would like to move the way you do. I always wanted to be better than my brothers. They have glory and honor already, but I will have to earn mine," she said.

"I don't know anything about glory, but I know that you don't need to hunt like me to earn respect. You have a strength that is all your own. You gave up your life to be with us. I can respect that," I said.

For the first time, I think she smiled at me. Although she never mastered everything about the wild, she put her heart into it with each step. Later that day we found two Kaarum, which we shot at a safe distance before they caught our scent. I learned to forgive what I viewed as her shortcomings, and she began to overlook mine. Such friendships are bought hard and dear, and only come with time and trial.

"What will your family do when you return?" I asked her as we sat around the fire. I needed something to take my mind away from the flames.

"I don't know," she replied. "My family has a great responsibility to the emperor. I met him once, you know."

"Who?" I asked.

She laughed, the sort of laugh I expected from Laural. "The emperor, silly. I lived three summers in Dynwater, learning the ways of the courts. I know well my duties, and so does all my family. My father may not be able to let me live if I go back. Certainly he can no longer claim me as a daughter."

"Why not? All you did was cross a gate," I said.

"I aided you. There are some in Dynwater, and other places, who do not want you wandering free."

"I haven't seen or heard from my mother or sister since I left the village. I don't know if they are still alive, though I hope they've had an easier time than I have."

"You'll see them again someday," she reassured me. "Maybe one day we can visit them together."

"And maybe you will introduce me to your family." We laughed away our fears. I came to know that her great resentment of me stemmed only from fear of my father's legend. Together we found game and gathered nuts and roots while forging a bond tempered through hardship.

Pascalli did not forget any of my other duties. At times Dina hunted alone, scouting only the fringes of the city, or stayed in camp preparing stores for winter. On those days she stayed because Pascalli kept me busy with my training and my learning. The daily efforts with sword and spear were redoubled, but he added to this meditation and serious practice with magic.

"Living matter is the most difficult to master," explained Pascalli. "So we will begin with that which was never alive, or at least only alive so long ago that it has no memory of itself. That is to say it has no intelligence." He held up a pebble. "Begin with that."

I looked at the pebble. It seemed rather ordinary and uninteresting.

"Remember, you must focus. Find its voice and the voice of the element you want to use to control it. You have proven you can listen to the air, which is the easiest, go ahead and lift the pebble."

So I began each day lifting the pebble. Eventually Pascalli moved me on to not just lifting the pebble but having it fly in circles or other patterns, and eventually to keeping it hovering over my shoulder as I moved around the camp. Controlling magic can be very tiring, and long before the first snows fell I had already grown weary of my daily routine.

Still Pascalli proved relentless. Each night when I returned he checked that the stone had not fallen. Then he introduced me to the other elements. "There are many elements all around us, and many kinds of energy. Understanding magic means understanding all of these things and bending them to your will. Take fire, for example. It is all around us, but you must ask the air to give it to you. The same is true of water and of lightning and of the force that causes things to fall. Concentrate on your stone again, but this time try to find the voice of fire within it."

I concentrated. Instead of the usually wispy voice of the air I could hear a low rumbling, crackling whisper like a very distant forest fire.

"Now ask it to warm the rock."

I found that I was not surprised when the pebble grew intensely hot.

"Very good," said Pascalli. "You did not break your concentration. From now on you will use magic to light our campfires. Also practice collecting water from the air into your canteen as you hunt. I do not expect miracles yet, but time is short and you will soon be tested."

When the first flakes of snow trickled from the sky Pascalli ordered us to stop our hunting efforts. By then we had a large stock of supplies in one of the smaller mansions in the citadel. We still had not entered the palace proper, which Pascalli seemed to regard with both dread and curiosity.

"Now then," he began, using his lecture tone. "The time has come for us to begin in earnest one of the many reasons we came here. That is to say the main reason I came here, though you two are of course involved. As you both know, the Kaarum have sent their scouts through this valley. It is one of the few passes open during the winter though they have not tried it in many summers because the wild beyond it is both dangerous and unrewarding. The passes to the east are much better. Unless I am very much mistaken they will be forced to send their army through the valley this winter. They will wait until the lake is frozen over and until their own supplies of food far to the north

have nearly dwindled until they are forced to hunt for plunder. We have come to stop them here."

"How are we going to do that?" gasped Dina. "Three people against thousands of Kaarum do not make good odds."

I had to agree, but I knew from the twinkle in the wizard's eye that he had a plan. "There once was a time, young lady, when I alone could have stood against them without bothering so many markets in advance to prepare. Should time prove to be on my side, I shall prepare young Scratch here to do the same. In the meantime trust that this old bag of bones has a plan larger than his belly."

Clearly Dina was not taken in by his smile. Pascalli ignored her glare and continued.

"There are ample supplies of certain minerals in the mountain, which I have been constantly mixing and preparing. Scratch, you may recall that the Veldmen make such powders from time to time to help delve. We shall place quantities of these powders in strategic locations around the valley and when the Kaarum arrive they will explode causing all of the snow to fall from the mountain on top of them. With any luck the frozen top of the lake will also give way and in one swift crack we'll have them all."

Naturally I thought he had lost his mind, but I had the good sense to hide it. Dina, however, exploded in a short-lived fit of incredulous rage. She was right, of course, there were far too many ways the plan could go wrong, but I knew Pascalli too well to really doubt him much. Besides, I had done crazier things already.

The next markets passed quite uneventfully. With Dina's help I tied skins of animals filled with very smelly powder to poles three to four meters tall all around the valley. Pascalli had both Dina and I make arrows by the dozen and practice firing them with their tips dipped and lit on fire. Of course wherever I traveled I had that stupid pebble following me, and lighting arrows with magic quickly turned into a tedious chore.

The snow began to deepen, and the edges of the lake began to freeze. Pascalli warned that it would not be safe to try to catch anymore of the enormous trout for the ice was thin and unsafe but the water could not be reached without walking on it. We built two watch points outside of the walls where Dina and I could reach the poles with a long arrow shot. Pascalli had a signal fire ready to go atop the city wall. With our poles safely planted and our winter stores in, all we could do was watch and wait.

I had long lost the reckoning of days and markets though I know it must have been sometime after the midwinter festival. Needless to say we did not celebrate. Pascalli saw to it that day and night someone watched over the valley, and sure enough one evening just as the gray sun began to slip over the mountains Dina called to us from the city wall.

We all took our positions without questions. Pascalli warned us that the shock might upset some of the keep's current occupants and we should be on the lookout for creatures running out of the valley and out of the keep. "Especially watch out for what might be inside the palace. We've not ventured in there yet, but you can be sure it is not friendly."

The Kaarum approached like a cold, slow, black snake. Though I knew that their masters drove them on with whips at a running gait across the ice and snow, to me, sitting on my frozen perch the minutes seemed to pass like hours. Much to my surprise and chagrin as the black army entered the narrow valley their pace slackened. They moved carefully. Clearly they knew that some armed resistance had taken at least a few of their scouts. I looked to the place where the signal fire would light. Nothing. My heart sank more as the night began to surround us. If they intended to move in the night my toes would surely freeze from staying still so long, but I had no choice. I had a tiny flame concealed in a little earthenware pot scavenged from an abandoned home. I moved it between my toes and waited.

The troops in the lead slowed and came to a halt. At first I did not understand, but then I realized that they had encountered terrain more difficult than anticipated. Some markets back at Pascalli's behest Dina and I had struggled to fell trees and drag them with our horses across the road. Covered with two or three meters of snow, the debris would make it dangerous and difficult even for the supply carts on runners. Soldiers on foot could not move through the valley without risking a nasty fall that could easily break a limb. Troops began to pile up behind. Confusion ensued with Kaarum moving every direction but forwards. Suddenly the signal fire flared.

Almost as one, the entire army shouted in collective panic. I lit my arrow in my tiny flame and loosed it at the first target. I knew by memory where each lay and did not need even the little bit of starlight that now filtered through the thin clouds. My first arrow struck and I lit the next. Before I could shoot a second arrow an enormous explosion rocked the valley. I did not know if my second arrow found its mark because just after I let it go a second explosion shook the valley. I found my last target and fired.

If there were more explosions I could not say because in the next moments the entire valley became one continuous rumbling tumult. I grabbed my earthenware jar and scrambled to the relative safety of the abandoned city. All around the snow had begun to fall off of the teetering mountain peaks dumping thousands of tons of white death onto the army below. Somewhere I think I heard the cracking of the ice in the lake, but I can't be certain. The morning found a valley floor covered in white mounds where the night before an army had tried to cross.

I am glad that I could only catch faint glimpses of crushed bodies in the dark and that the massive avalanche drowned their

screams. Death is horrible, even for the Kaarum. When spring arrived, bringing new life, we found a valley floor littered with bones and rot and old gear. The deep valley lake covered much of the destruction and smell, but for a long time afterwards the marks of our triumph remained.

The shaking of the avalanche startled the entire city, including the palace. Pascalli's counsel to keep up our guard proved wise. Dina and I both returned to the city wall about the same time. We had opened the city gates, knowing that the Kaarum would not attempt to get in, but we had not really planned on facing down enemies trying to get out.

A dog, perhaps the size of a pony, surprised us in its terror. The scales along its torso, like those of a fish, glittered slightly in the starlight. It cracked a long, bony tail like a whip. The enormous jaws growled in unmistakable anger and fear. Yellow eyes darted everywhere in panic.

We pulled up short. I took a step backwards slowly, giving it plenty of room to pass. Dina did the same, but her hand moved too quickly to her quiver. Before I could warn her, the beast had already decided she was a threat and lunged. It grabbed her arm in its teeth and flung her like a doll. I had a brief second to knock my own arrow, but the point bounced harmlessly off of the creature's natural armor. I'm sure I panicked. Dina had the good sense to lie still and it turned its attention on me. I found my father's spear and dropped my bow. It would not be useful in this fight.

Though wide enough for several horses, the area in front of the gate did not leave a great deal of room for maneuvering. I circled carefully, waiting for an overwhelming lunge. I tried to put myself between it and Dina, but it seemed to sense my tactic and feinted. I parried with a jab to the snout, but it pulled back in time. Clearly this thing, whatever it was, had experience fighting and understood much more than the average wild animal.

Although I managed to hold my own for several more minutes, I am reasonably sure that in the end Dina and I would have met a rather unpleasant fate had Pascalli not been curious about us. Suddenly I heard his voice, booming like thunder from atop the city walls. "Use your blasted magic, boy! I've not spent my life blood training you to watch you waste it away like this."

I will admit that I felt stupid, and to this day feel a little guilt that I did not think of the idea myself, an idea that could very well have saved Dina some pain. Of course the entire time my rock still flickered about me as it always had. I think the rock, more than anything had caused the creature to hesitate when it attacked me. I quickly focused on the rock, begging it to blaze to molten heat and sent it effortlessly into the dog's eye. I had expected it to burn and frighten the creature, but instead the rock's intense heat actually melted

through the eye and burned into its brain. It dropped dead at Dina's feet.

"Now that's much better, lad," said Pascalli. "Best get inside quick, and take it careful with her arm."

## Chapter Twenty-Two

We hurried inside and found an abandoned house. Through the windows I watched several more creatures scurry past out the main gate and off into the deepening darkness.

In the dead of winter I found myself holed up with an irascible wizard and a lame huntress. Dina's arm had broken. Pascalli complained bitterly to me. "Why didn't you think, boy? It's a fight for your life. There are no rules. I wanted into the palace by now, but we can't leave her alone, and we can't bring her along like this."

We had taken refuge in a large mansion near the palace. With little else to do except eat and sleep, Pascalli quadrupled my training. Every chore imaginable he required that I perform by magic alone, without the aid of my hands. Though I had often dreamt as a child of being able to simply wish the dinner pots would clean themselves, I found that asking them to do it was equally rigorous. Catching the right voices among the myriad swirls of so many different elements proved nearly impossible. At first I managed by conjuring water and having it slosh around the same as I would by hand, but Pascalli pointedly dismissed this idea. "Use the meat between your ears, Scratch. You've magic now, do something interesting."

I now realize that no matter what I could have invented there would have been no pleasing that old man, but at the time I scrambled through idea after idea. By the first signs of spring I had become adept at lighting fires and manipulating water and air. I mastered causing small objects to fly, but I had difficulty with anything larger or heavier than a stone the size of my fist.

Pascalli also invented a new, rather disturbing game that truly annoyed me. At odd moments he would toss a stone at me, and I either stopped it with magic or took a lump. As if that game weren't bad enough, it quickly progressed to a knife aimed at an arm or leg and eventually my more vital parts. He began encouraging Dina to do the same with her free arm, which she did far too willingly for my pleasure. I am sure that had time permitted we would have progressed to stopping arrows or some other nonsense, but Dina's arm took time to heal.

After some ten markets Dina's arm knit completely and the weather had turned enough for Pascalli to finally venture a visit

to the palace. To my great dismay, however, he did not invite me. Instead he said, "Scratch, my lad, I shall need some supplies. Now I've done some looking and turned up a coin or two, and there's bound to be more about. Go down to Last Gate and see what you can buy. What's more, see who you can entice into joining us here. The city is open now, and I think we can begin to breathe some life into it."

I set off with Dina back down the mountain towards Last Gate. Going down seemed much easier than coming up. No enemies pursued us, though in the hills and forest remained a constant danger filled with many strange creatures from the breaking. Our horses delighted in the journey for they had not much exercise in many markets. Dina also acted as gay as any young lass for she was returning alive, though a certain dread did still shadow us. For my part I knew that Pascalli had brought me to the city for a reason that remained as yet unaccomplished. I believe Dina still wondered about her station with her family.

The guards at Last Gate saw us approach easily a kilometer before we reached the wall. Even in the distance we heard someone call into the town, though the words were muffled. A small crowd gathered atop the gate to watch us, and I felt a stirring of pride as they gaped in disbelief at our approach.

Naturally, Garret, the gate captain assumed we were returning in failure. "I see you return one windbag less," he said with a commanding voice. "These gates are closed by imperial law."

Dina stood up in her stirrups and I'm sure was prepared to invoke her father's name, but I motioned for her to relax.

"The Lord of Darnuth Keep does not leave his domain without a steward," I replied. "My tutor and friend is safe and well, I assure you, preparing my palace for my return." I must admit at the time I had meant merely to bluff my way through a closed door. I had no idea how near the truth I really hit. "I have come to seek parlance with the imperial regent and to negotiate a treaty to our mutual benefit. Let us pass."

There were no more replies from the guard towers, only muttered voices beyond my hearing. The gate opened and we passed inside.

The village of Last Gate had swollen over the winter with the news of the three strangers who forced their way through. Swarms of rogues and adventurers all in the guise of merchants crowded the streets peddling anything that passed the guards' mandates. These merchants brought with them their servants and slaves, and the commotion attracted the attention of yet other visitors. In particular many members of the local nobility lent their curiosity. The moment that drove home the importance of our situation most poignantly happened when Dina suddenly reined her horse in and dismounted. She dropped to her knees before a haughty man some eight or ten winters my elder. He rode a tall black stallion with his hair tied back in a topknot after the

fashion of the western nobility. I knew at once from his manner and his eyes that this must be a brother. I waited, facing him silently.

He ignored his sister and instead spoke to me. His shirt and pantaloons were finest silk, and the cutlass at his side had a hilt worked masterfully. I caught the distinct clink of mail and knew that he was protected and surely trained to fight.

"You have broken our law," he said flatly. His voice carried a deadly steel that I knew came from a life of giving orders.

"That is impossible," I replied. A slice of anger pierced his eyes. "I am Colter Halfspear, Lord of Darnuth Keep. There is no law here that binds me." After watching Pascalli for so long I had developed a bit of pomp for bullying. This man, Dina's brother, however, was not a man to be bullied, especially not by an un-bearded youth such as myself.

"You will give me your weapons, now," he said. "Then my court shall decide your fate."

"I know your law," I said. "It is the emperor's law. You cannot take my weapons, and you should not try."

Soldiers had now surrounded us. I began to have some second thoughts about my situation, but I had gone too far to back down. Pascalli had beaten too much pride into me. I couldn't give it away.

Suddenly Dina spoke, and for the first time her brother paid her attention, "Zaban, you must not try it. He is who he says he is." She had not raised her head, and I'm sure the muddy streets made her knees quite uncomfortable.

Zaban's steely eyes turned into a scowl. "Come with me," he said, relenting slightly. "We have much to discuss. You may retain your weapons for the present." He did not fear me. That much I could read in his eyes. I believe he saw the wisdom of avoiding conflict despite my forced breach of custom.

He still did not speak to Dina, even as we paraded, with imperial guards on either side through the streets to a large camp just outside of town. His personal tent dominated a small village of tents that housed his many servants and personal warriors.

Pascalli had warned me of the formality of the courts of nobility, particularly in the west. I don't believe he had planned for me to be introduced just yet, but I was determined not to disappoint. Zaban, to be sure, leaned heavily on formality and custom. His personal guard kept a tight line, much better than typical soldiers, and their gear was polished bright enough to make Iven smile. I suddenly realized how haggard I must look, dressed in home-cut buckskin with wild hair Dina cropped with our crude tools. Though I groomed my horse better than anyone I knew and I tended my weapons and armor as only one whose life depends on it, I had seen too much wear for too long.

I felt deeply out of place as Zaban took his seat on a sturdy chair in one of his tents. I stood holding my spear in one hand with my saddle bags over the opposite shoulder. He motioned for me to sit on a silk cushion a few meters away, and a servant brought a second for Dina. I decided to try my luck and trust to Pascalli's teaching. I refused the cushion. If I expected to be taken seriously I knew I needed to establish my position right then.

"I am Lord of the lands north of the wall, I do not sit on the ground with common servants," I said. I felt extremely uncomfortable. It felt like a lie, as far as I knew it was a lie, but something inside spurred me on.

Zaban nodded and immediately a servant took the cushion away. A moment of silence thundered between us until a suitable chair appeared. I unbuckled my sword, un-slung my bow and laid them together with my spear at my feet. Then I bowed low and said in a humble voice, "I thank the son of Taradurk for his hospitality and welcome of a stranger in his land. Please accept my humble service while I am permitted to tarry, and accept a small token of gratitude." I opened one of my saddlebags and tossed a small sack of gems at his feet. Then I took my seat.

"You come from a great journey, which we must hear in length," he replied. "Your gift is generous and unexpected. Your tongue is courteous when you let it be." He paused. His eyes betrayed an inner turmoil. "We have much to discuss, son of Halfspear, and much to decide. As regent of these lands I commend your bravery, but the emperor will decide your fate."

I noticed Dina reel as Zaban stated his position as regent. I also understood. She was now as much an orphan as I, and probably as unwelcome at home.

"First we will eat, and then we will discuss the matters before us," said Zaban.

Servants brought trays piled with delicately prepared meats and savory sauces. From these trays Dina served each of us. I noticed she offered me first choice, which caused Zaban to raise a questioning eyebrow. Through silent gestures she guided me through the formalities of the meal. I patiently waited for him to resume the conversation.

"The Lord Taradurk passed into the immortal realms this winter," he said. "His third daughter failed her duties. I have come to find her and learn the path she has followed." Zaban spoke to me, careful to keep his eyes from his sister.

"Dina has been a great help to the Lord of Darnuth Keep," I replied. "Without her aide the Kaarum would once again have rushed past my borders unchecked to ravage the lands of the empire." I noticed the approval in Dina's eyes as I spoke, and felt a thrill creeping into my heart.

"This alliance with the realms of the north is unexpected," said Zaban. "Is she to continue in your service?"

"Such a show of friendship would mark a great alliance between our peoples," I said. "I would be honored to have such a lovely lady grace my court."

The discussion became almost instantly lighter. I watched a heavy weight lift from Zaban's eyes. He embraced his sister and I saw how deeply the difficult situation pained them both.

"The emperor has not issued any formal decree, so there is nothing to stop me from recognizing the sovereignty of Darnuth Keep. Lord Favisham, among others, would have you stopped here, but I won't risk my sister to satisfy his whim."

"Thank you," said Dina.

"Time will tell if this is a wise decision or not. You made a hard choice. Colter has given you a chance to retain some sense of status and respect among your friends and family," said Zaban.

"We have plans to fully rebuild the city," I said. "We have come to purchase supplies and find people willing to join us."

"I won't stand in your way, though others will. I came here to find Dina, and now that I've spoken with her I can return to Shelsmor. My advice to you would be to return as quickly as you can to Darnuth Keep. You won't have much trouble finding people to join you, but be careful who you take. The western lords have servants and spies even here. If they choose to make trouble for you I won't be able to stop all of it."

"We'll be careful," I said.

Zaban smiled and the conversation turned to Dina's family. She wept as he recounted their father's funeral. He listened intently as she told him of our adventures together. For a while I sat, forgotten, as they renewed the family bonds that she had strained.

"After you have rested, you will both join me for dinner. In the morning I will say goodbye," said Zaban as we closed our discussion.

"We would be delighted, my lord," I replied.

Zaban prepared a tent for each of us where we could bath and rest. He sent me a new fine silk shirt and sturdy comfortable trousers. I welcomed the opportunity to relax, but I knew that I would have to use caution in order to understand the regent's full intentions. A servant summoned me to join the dinner party about an hour later.

Dina appeared in a black silk dress and greeted me as I entered the tent. A large emerald necklace graced her throat. She had pinned her hair high on her head, exposing her strong, elegant neck. She smiled and guided me through the formalities. "Many of my father's closest advisors are here. Zaban's position is difficult. Be careful not to offend him or those who are with him here. Pascalli is right that we need additional people at the keep in order to make it grow and hold our position."

I smiled back and nodded. "I'll do my best," I promised.

Though I heard music playing as we entered, it stopped when Zaban saw us. He motioned for us to approach, smiling broadly at his sister. "My lords and ladies, I present lord Halfspear, conqueror of Darnuth Keep." Most present were able to mask their astonishment, although a few surprised gasps and several incredulous glances floated around the tent. "The lady Taradurk, also of Darnuth Keep has joined him in his conquest. Tonight we welcome them as allies against the Kaarum." He started applause that others hesitantly followed. I followed Dina's lead and bowed and smiled.

Dinner saved me from enduring difficult questions as Dina carefully steered nearly everyone away from me. Her skill at managing people shined in a way I had not previously appreciated. Her second brother, Yunath, seemed more reserved about accepting my position. Dina did not try to avoid him.

Yunath was shorter than his brother, with a slightly more powerful build, but he shared the same green eyes of the rest of his family, and the same straight dark hair. "Zaban says that you stopped the Kaarum at the pass near Darnuth Keep," stated Yunath.

"That is why we went there," I answered. "It should take them several winters to recover, at least that is what Pascalli says."

"Pascalli visited our house when I was a child. He showed no respect to our family or our traditions. I do not think he will do what is best for the empire," said Yunath.

"He will do what is best for the world," I said. I noticed Dina's gently concerned look and did my best to change the subject. "Winter is just ending. The time for planting will come soon. We will need a good crop to help us build life into the city again."

To my surprise Yunath smiled. "You are right. Now is not the time for heavy talk. Nor is it the time to breed mistrust. Zaban is not a fool, though he has made exceptions for his sister."

The rest of Dina's family had stayed in Shelsmor. I know that she especially missed her sisters. Mostly military men accompanied Zaban this far north, though a few of them brought along their wives. After a short time I read the disappointment in Dina's face.

"I'm sorry your sisters couldn't come," I told Dina.

"Niersa should be here," she said. "One of us always waited on my father, no matter where he traveled. First it was Sorla, my oldest sister, then Tiarna, and then me. When I left to find adventure Niersa must have taken my place. She should be here. Zaban doesn't have any daughters old enough to do it yet."

"You'll see them again," I said. "As soon as everything is in order I'm sure we'll have a chance to come south again."

"I hope so, but I feel as if I won't."

I didn't pay much attention to the soldiers who attended that dinner. Dina seemed content to be surrounded again by people who hid their true intentions behind smiles and borrowed emotions.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

Yunath and Zaban spoke privately with Dina before they parted company the following morning. I waited quietly outside, watching the troops prepare to move south. The village felt suddenly empty as we watched the long lines of soldiers march south. "We best be about our business," said Dina as the line disappeared in the distance.

"We've much to do if we want a good harvest," I agreed. "Is everything all right with your family?"

She looked at my face but didn't respond for several seconds. "Things have changed between my brothers. We didn't win the support expected at the festival. Yunath wanted to use me to help make an alliance with the east. The emperor is growing old, and already some of the powerful houses are talking of war."

"I don't know anything about that," I replied. "I just want to build a home again."

"Building a home takes more than hands and bricks," she said. "It also takes planning, and if it comes to it, blood. Torbridge has grown in influence in the east. He's managed to garner favor with Lord Favisham, regent of all the eastern lands. Favisham is very close to the emperor. We'll need to make the city strong before he decides to act. We need to prepare, not only for the harvest, but for what may come after."

Dozens of opportunistic and desperate folk had risked their lives already to see if the rumor that someone had opened the gate was true. I had little difficulty finding souls willing to return with me, souls hungry for land and chances of their own where they could leave behind shattered pasts and missed opportunities.

The village had a few taverns, and the largest seemed to be the gathering place for most of the outsiders. I decided we should try it first. Inside I found an unexpected smile.

"You've come a long way, lad," said Master Delvin. "We heard rumors that you had traveled west. Is it true that there is land to be had in the north?"

"We didn't expect to find much here," added Jiora, her face breaking into a wide smile. "A chance to start over is just what we need."

"Yes, there is plenty of land for those willing to work it," I said. "What happened to your farm?"

"Some lord or other found out about my helping you and sent troops to arrest me. We led them a bit of a chase, but they gave up soon enough. We had some trouble getting through Anascrag, but the eastern lords have been pushing to get their troops west since you came, and the festival had all their attention. The empire's a hotbed of confusion right now."

"I'm glad you made it," I said, and smiled. "We'll need all the good men we can get. Are there any others with you?"

"My family, of course. I've a brother as well. He brought his family too. Most of the rest I've seen are ruffians and rascals, though no doubt we can find some as know how to work," said Delvin.

"Hello, Scratch!" A familiar voice suddenly called over the din of people. I turned and saw Laural waving at me from across the room. She wore a new silk blouse but the same tight riding leathers I had seen her in before. I waved back, conscious of Dina's questioning look.

"I see you've traveled a lot," said Delvin.

"She's a friend from before I came west," I said. Laural crossed the room. Half a dozen rough men watched her movements, and I remembered my fight with Bracken.

"I see the rumors were true after all," said Laural with a smile. "I knew you were crazy, but even I didn't figure you would try anything this wild. I hear there's land up there. I know a few men looking to ride with you."

"If they are willing to work they are welcome," I said. I caught a sidelong glance from Delvin. "We need farmers, Laural, and skilled workers. If they can handle a spear there will be a chance for that too, but don't expect gold. I'm planning on building a city, not tearing it apart."

"It's a dangerous city," said Dina. Her eyes drew into a scowl. "You may find it less hospitable than you expect."

Laural winked and smiled. "I can handle myself. Don't worry. We'll make out all right."

The final tally added up to nearly a hundred people, with more women and children than I had expected. Most of the men came to escape the law, but I knew that would be the case. Men don't leave a comfortable life without good reason. Delvin's daughter, Brevedia was now growing into a fetching young woman, and she took to Dina like a sister. Dina proved invaluable at organizing the group. I hadn't realized how much I relied on Pascalli's judgment until then.

We bought horses, food, and tools all at higher than expected prices. The village was not prepared for the demand, but I wasn't willing to take any risk of running short before harvest came. Without a manageable road, we would have to pack everything on horses or mules, which meant I needed men who could

handle them without trouble. A few of the less pleasant men who joined us came only because I needed the help with the teams.

It took us four days to gather everything together with everyone working as hard as they could before we were ready to leave. As Garret ordered the gate shut behind us I knew that some of us would not reach the keep. We had only two others who were experienced in the mountains apart from Delvin and me. Thorn, an old scout for the Eastern Watch rode with me and learned the trail quickly. His companion, a Darkunder called Twoleaf, kept mostly to herself, though I noticed she watched the mountains and didn't miss a trick.

Ten days into the journey Thorn pointed out footprints left by a very large creature. The claws resembled those of a bear, but the impression in the ground was much bigger and deeper. The next day Twoleaf showed me some of its dropping, which were shaped more like a horse rather than bear scat. I ordered the fires to be kept burning all night after we found two large pine trees that had been mauled where the beast went to clean its claws. The marks reached a full meter higher than I could touch standing on my toes.

"Keep your families close together," I warned the men. "Keep near the light, and don't put out the fires. Whatever it is, it won't be afraid of men. No man has been through here in centuries. I'm hoping it's just curious and passes us by."

Every group naturally has those who dissent or who seek to push the boundaries of the leadership as far as possible. Laural approached me alone. "Some of us want to ride ahead. We're moving too slow. Carns and Talbot can find the way easy enough."

"We need to stay together as much for safety as anything else. The trail can be tricky to figure out further north. Besides, I don't think you want to find Pascalli alone in the city," I said.

"I don't think we want to wait," she replied.

"You've been warned. I won't stop you. I will do what I can to help you when you run amuck, but I will not enjoy finding your carcasses," I said.

Two men and Laural left the main party the next day. Two days after that we found three boots and one badly mauled and now bloating horse. I made a quick scouting effort and found a second dead horse as well as the trail of the third. The beast's tracks clearly followed the third horse.

I don't know if I made the best decision, but I felt the wagons would be safe for a day or two without me. Something inside of me told me I had to hunt this menace even if I could not save the last rider.

"Lead the others ahead to the city," I told Dina, though I dreaded parting company. "That last rider could still be alive."

"That's Laural's horse," she observed. A frown crossed her face. "She is too careless." I sensed that something about Laural's manner bothered Dina deeper than she would say.

"I can't let her die out there," I said.

"Just come back," she replied. I did not expect the tenderness in her voice. "I'll worry while you're gone."

"Thorn should be able to find the trail easy enough. Just keep heading north. I'll catch up in a day or two."

I sent Thorn back to lead the wagons and headed deeper into the forest alone. I followed the trail all that day and into the night, until exhaustion demanded I stop for at least some few moments. I found a sheltered spot with my back to a tree surrounded by high rocks. I dozed for only a moment when the sound of something enormous moving off to my right in the darkness startled me awake. My first thought was that an elk or mountain buffalo grazed nearby looking for bits of early spring grass. Then my horse cried out in terror. I saw an eye catch a moonbeam and drew and fired an arrow on reflex. For once Pascalli's training paid off and I caused the shaft to burst into flame as soon as it left the bow. The fiery arrow showed me an enormous fanged boar's head atop a body twice the size of the largest shaggy brown buffalo I had ever seen. The legs ended in enormous bear claws.

The shaft bounced harmlessly off of the thick skull, though the fire singed the fur slightly. I had done little more than attract its attention. My horse bolted. I dropped the bow and stood with spear in hand against a giant far beyond my expectations.

A wizard cannot communicate with the elements without concentration and focus. Pascalli forced that lesson home day after day. Everything else must fall to silence and oblivion except the voices of the elements. Staring at that angry boar's head with those enraged, hungry eyes melted my will. I felt my grasp on my courage slipping. Never before had I truly known such fear, the kind of fear that causes a man to forget everything else and only want to hide himself from the entire world. I felt I could not breathe, and I tried to take a step backwards. I stumbled on the rocks and fell, though I did not hurt myself beyond a few minor scrapes.

For my own part I had given myself up for lost. My heart would not allow even the thought of survival. Providence, however, gave me a second chance. Suddenly a distant whimpering cry broke the air. "Help! Someone, please! Help!" caught my ear. The beast also heard the cry, though its gaze did not leave me. Such a simple cry filled me with a wild desperation beyond any normal courage I could muster. I might be able to let myself go, but nothing in me could ignore the suffering, however well deserved, of another person.

Though many would call me foolish, even courage drawn from misplaced ideals can work wonders. I came to my senses with indignant rage. On instinct I summoned all of the magic I had practiced and conjured a violent whirlwind between the creature and myself. A little startled, but hardly frightened it let out

a low grunt like a bear and lowered its tusked head. I regained my footing and brandished my spear. The enormous animal lunged through the swirling dust and debris and I retreated behind my tree. I pelted it with as many small stones as I could control, infusing each with hot fire. Annoyance turned to rage and the beast again lunged for me. I darted aside again, but realized that this game could only end in disaster for me. I threw my spear so that it lodged high in the trunk of the tree and jumped to reach a lower branch just in time to avoid a wildly swiping claw. Without waiting to see what my adversary would do I climbed high enough to retrieve my spear.

Suddenly the tree shook with the force of an earthquake. Far below me the boar's head raised and backed away. Quickly it lowered again in preparation for a second run at the tree. The impact nearly knocked me loose even though I braced against the trunk with all my strength. I felt the roots creaking beneath me. A bird's nest dislodged and bounced off of my shoulder. Twice more the giant boarger, as we later came to call these beasts, charged the tree, but the sturdy pine held. I thought for a moment that I had escaped when it gave up that strategy. My joy quickly turned to desperation when I realized it had clearly dealt with treed quarry before. It circled around, ignoring my constant ineffective onslaught of molten stones until it reached a point of high rocks. Then, with all the agility of a cougar it leapt into the tree, shaking both root and limb. I clung wildly to the upper branches as the tree swayed precariously under the heavy pressure. To my amazement the tree did not snap, though the trunk bent sharply. Fortunately the boarger had not landed quite high enough and did not manage to get a decent foothold. Branches snapped beneath its weight as it slowly slipped back down the trunk. I felt the tree right itself, but I knew it could not withstand a second onslaught of that force.

Angrily the boarger growled at me, its vicious mouth fuming over gore-stained tusks. I took a breath, whispered a prayer to Tylos, yelled insanely and dropped spear first towards the boarger's mouth. I poured every bit of energy into the tip of the spear until the shaft burned my hands, but I did not let go. I cannot say if fate, luck, or skill guided my hand, but the spear point entered the beast's filthy maw and drove the shaft in more than half way. I bounced off of the creature's head, but it managed to take a vicious swipe with one enormous claw. My buckskin shredded instantly, but the chain links beneath held. The force of the blow sent me sprawling across the rocks. I knelt, covering my head for safety.

The boarger howled and screamed and clawed at the weapon protruding from its face. I drew my sword and cautiously slashed at the thick hide. My weapon glanced away harmlessly. I need not have worried, though, for the spear had done enough damage already. The boarger trampled into the woods, bleeding and

ignoring me. I trailed it until it collapsed. Though it still breathed, I tightly gripped my spear and pulled it free, setting the creature into a fit of rage and blood. I did not stay to watch it die, but instead returned to try and track down whoever had called out for help.

With a clear starry sky to guide me and a sufficient dose of excitement to keep me awake I quickly tracked the hoof prints I had been following to a dead horse. From there I followed a set of footprints to a tree whose bark had been seriously damaged. My entire encounter had taken place less than a hundred meters from the end of the chase. I looked up and found Laural, pale and frightened, staring back at me in disbelief. Though my horse had bolted in fright I managed to find it quickly enough and Laural slept behind me as we rode to rejoin the wagons.

I cannot say the remainder of our journey passed without incident, but at least we did not lose any more lives. Laural had been wounded when her horse was killed, though not beyond my skills to mend.

"There are many strange beasts around," I commented to her as I applied a poultice. "I am sorry that you were injured."

"But you warned me, didn't you," she replied defiantly. Her eyes mocked me, but somehow I didn't care.

"Yes," I replied, and to my surprise my voice was soft and kind rather than condescending. "I am not angry that you didn't listen. I want these people to have a safe life, but we aren't safe yet. I need the courage of everyone, especially those brave enough to challenge the wild on their own."

She smiled weakly at the compliment, though a bit of doubt still clouded her eyes. "I should have stayed in Dynwater," she muttered, though I don't think she meant for me to hear.

"Is that where Quivain left you?" I asked, though I immediately regretted it.

"Yes," she spat. "That filthy spawn of Hieron cheated me of my half of the reward." Her face turned immediately bright red. I guessed that she had said something she hadn't meant for me to know.

"What reward," I pressed, though I guessed already the answer.

Her eyes flickered a moment as she contemplated a lie. "We had information for the emperor," she said quickly.

"Very valuable information if the notorious Quivain Blackhand is willing to risk his life for it. I am amazed they did not hang him." I said.

"I wish they had," said Laural angrily. "A full pardon he asks. The regent in Havensod offered ten thousand imperial gold coins and he says, 'I only wish to have my name.' What dung."

"Ten thousand, just for a little information," I prodded. "I had no idea my name was so valuable."

Her cheeks burned, both from anger and guilt. To my surprise she began to weep. "I am so sorry, Colter. I didn't

know, I didn't understand." I felt something melt inside me though somewhere in the back of my mind I worried this might be some trick. "Can you forgive me," she sobbed.

"There is nothing to forgive," I said. "Quivain would have done his worst with or without you. At least you're not back at the Blue Dragon." I chuckled, and she smiled a little.

So I learned that Quivain had betrayed me, though Pascalli had long before warned me he might. Any return to the east would be barred, and perhaps my journey through the western realms as well. I understood Zaban's desire to arrest me better. I realized how strong Dina's influence over her brother must be.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

When the towers of the keep first appeared through the forest canopy a stir of murmurs rustled through our group. Excitement and fear covered less powerful emotions, but all were affected in some way.

"Hardly looks touched by time," commented Delvin.

"Keep to the group," I warned. "The lower levels are still very dangerous. Wild animals and other things still stalk the streets. There are homes and land waiting in the higher areas, but it will take work to clear them."

The city gate stood open as we approached. Pascalli watched us from the parapet overlooking the highway and waved a cheerful greeting. Twoleaf seemed surprised to see the wizard, though she didn't say anything.

Pascalli appeared delighted that I had returned with a sufficient number of folk eager to make new lives for themselves. "This is quite a start, Scratch. Before long you'll have yourself a proper domain." I had no interest in having anymore domain than the farm back in Dunston and I told him so. "Oh, Scratch, my boy, I'm afraid you've long outgrown your farm," he said. "One day, perhaps, you shall return there, but when you do I think all you will find is sorrow."

During my absence Pascalli spent a great deal of energy clearing out a living space within the palace. Most of the chambers, he explained, were unoccupied and left largely undisturbed, but many others had become the homes to the distorted remnants of ages past.

"There is something else that I was not expecting," he said, his voice very grim. "I am not sure what it is, but the door to the lower levels, the area where the ancient wizards kept their magical secrets, is open but shrouded in darkness."

"Have you been down there?" I asked.

"Not yet," he winked. "I think it is something you will have to handle. Destroying the Kaarum is important, but clearing the evil from this place is why I brought you here. We should not delay any longer."

I gave each family a house of their choosing, the order of choice by lottery. We allotted land according to profession and family size such that those who could produce food for us in the coming months had the most. I gave those who continued to

demonstrate interest only in treasure the choice between establishing trade with the empire and systematically clearing the city building by building of unwelcome guests with a regular share of the profits to keep for themselves. I knew that most would not survive, but under Dina's watchful eye I hoped they would at least do more good than harm. Laural found a sword and joined them, though her experience could hardly match any of them.

Our labor returned quick rewards. Though many of the fields in the valley had become overgrown and tangled, those nearest the city remained relatively clear and we were able to plow and plant these quickly. Within only a few markets' time, we managed to settle all of the families into new homes. Though we continued to rely heavily on wild game for food, we planted gardens in the upper levels, and the fresh supplies from the south helped us all feel as if we were truly making homes rather than just camping in the wild.

Holding a spring celebration for so many people so far from the homes they had once known proved a strange experience for all involved. Everyone looked to me as not just a leader but also a king, though I had little experience organizing social affairs. "Let the women handle it," advised Delvin. "Jiora's already decided how it should be done, and I know Dina has her own ideas as well. Nod and smile, and you'll be a happier man."

We cleared the great hall at the palace and danced to tunes remembered from all across the empire. We used more of our flour and sugar than any of us felt was prudent, but nobody complained. The poor from every land love music and the old stories put into song. Delvin produced a small fiddle, and Jiora convinced me to teach Brevedia the dances we had danced in Dunston. Laural pulled me into a lively jig whose beat I did not recognize, but which was easy enough to learn. Twoleaf played the tune from her home in the far south, where none of the rest of us had ever visited.

As I sat and rested a new voice sprang up, slowly, but without effort. All eyes turned as one and fixed upon Dina as she startled our hearts with a slow but not quite melancholy song. She sang my father's story as the great musicians in the imperial courts had sung it, though with unexpected passion and sorrow. At my side Laural turned and tried to ignore the song, but I felt myself drawn not only to the haunting music but also to the singer. Though she wore no stately dress, she could not hide her noble heritage. I watched and knew and felt and could not turn away from her.

Pascalli drew me aside after most of the settlers had gone. The only item of real interest we found in that time, aside from a few forgotten gold coins, were a pair of small gold rings, set with diamonds. They had been left untouched on the thrones in the great hall. He pressed the rings into my hand. "They belong to you now," he said. After a moment he added, "The time has

come, Scratch, for you to come with me below. There are some evils that should not linger a moment longer than required, and this city holds some very ancient travesties."

"Just us," I asked.

"Bring anyone you like," he responded. "I suggest you place your trust carefully. Remember our journey will take at least a five market, perhaps two, and the city will not rest in your absence. Some of the wilder ones may try to take advantage of our absence."

I formed a small council to govern the city in my absence. Dina, who had been acting as my steward in everything, already seemed the natural choice to continue governing. Laural had also showed incredible energy and remarkable intelligence and had done very well leading a small group in the efforts to drive creatures from the city. She did not wish to sit in counsel. Instead she wanted to join me. "I would rather seek glory with you than stay here tending sheep," she put it. I didn't see the glory in going down a dark staircase to almost certain misfortune. On the farm we called that idiocy. Master Delvin agreed when I asked him, though he admitted he did not feel adequate to the post. I left the fortune of the city in their hands, hoping for the best. Halfway through spring with most of the planting completed I entered the darkness.

Once more, but not for the last time, I felt that I was leaving behind a home and family forever. I would miss Dina, and her eyes spoke the silent fear that I might not return to the sunlight world. In a way she was right, for I did not return the same young man as when I entered. Often as we hid in the silent darkness, resting, my thoughts returned to her. Indeed, I believe it was the memory of her face that saved me in my most difficult moment. Darkness has the power to change a soul either for great evil or great good. A man cannot pass through shadow unchanged, either he will shrink or grow.

The staircase seemed innocent enough. Behind a larder in a back corner of the castle stands a large hardwood door, neither oak nor of any wood I recognized. The door is very dark, nearly black in color. A large gold knocker in the shape of a dragon's head hangs in the middle. Circling the knocker in gold Darkunder runes are the words (roughly translated) "Davmandius' magical laboratory, enter those who would lose themselves." I came to learn much later that the phrase "lose themselves" could have many meanings, from the simple "perish" or "die" to "be changed" or even "find meaning". I am certain that Davmandius thought himself quite witty with the phrase's many meanings. Probably he meant it a warning for others and a promise of new knowledge for himself.

Beneath Darnuth Keep lies a vast maze of passages and chambers, each originally built with a purpose long forgotten. Long since, those passages were covered in darkness and lost to human memory. We found them still and quiet. Fear gripped the

occupants as they battled a silent war for survival in a place with few resources. I recognized immediately that we would be short of water and food without luck.

"You will probably need to try to gather water from the air," suggested Pascalli. "As for food, we have some and the rest will be luck."

The absence of light was unimaginable. Though I had lived with the Veldmen, delved in their caverns and dwelt underground for a long period of time, I did not expect that darkness. The thick blackness surrounded, smothered, threatened to completely consume us. I had no idea that such dreadful horror existed. The feeble glow of our lantern did little to push back the shadows.

Our first encounter came upon us suddenly. Though my senses were sharpened from long summers of careful travel and study I was not prepared when an unseen attack suddenly hit our lantern and I found myself facing an unknown foe in complete darkness. Not only was I completely blind, but whatever danger waited ahead of us came silently.

True horror grasped me. I felt as helpless as a babe. At my side Pascalli made no move, no sound. With great care and a steady motion I brought my spear to bear. I gripped the shaft and as I did a calm fell over me, for I had trained many times blindfolded or with my eyes closed. In that moment I closed my eyes and shut off the world of sight. I took a deep breath, slowly. Quite suddenly I caught the scent of our attacker.

Though it feared our light and could hear our every move, after long winters of solitude the beast no longer recognized its own scent, which reminded me of the smoke from burning buffalo chips.

The attack on the lantern had been sudden and precise, but there was no immediate follow up. I surmised that it had thrown or shot something at the lantern, and therefore must move closer. I took a half step backwards and away from Pascalli, putting a little distance between us.

I concentrated for but a moment, to beg the air to make a slight breeze so that we might be upwind of our adversary. Almost instantly the air gently began moving past my face, and I caught that odor again. Also on that breeze I caught a faint whisper of breath, more nasally and louder than Pascalli. If I could hear the breathing it must be very close now.

With a prayer to Tylos I thrust my spear in the direction of the sound, hoping Pascalli would not be in the way. The wizard, who was more adept than myself at stumbling in the dark, had created even more space between us, and just as I thrust I heard the dull thump of his staff connecting with something. My spear caught flesh, but any damage done was hard to assess, as my enemy remained utterly silent.

"Make a light," said Pascalli. "If they are any still alive they will know where we are anyway."

"The lantern is broken," I replied.

"Use your head boy," retorted Pascalli. "Or better yet use magic and that silly rock of yours. Heat it up enough to glow."

By now I was so used to Pascalli's remarks that I didn't waste any time on anger. Instead I heated the rock until it glowed a dull red, though I sent it to hover an arms length away from me in case anything should try to attack it the way they had struck down the lantern.

By the dim light of the stone I could tell that the lantern had been hit with a small rock, probably a piece of rubble from some fallen wall. I said as much to Pascalli, and he replied, "Petrified dung."

I don't know that he saw my incredulous look in the half-light, but I held my tongue. The attack destroyed the lantern beyond repair. Not far away lay the body of one attacker. Its body was covered with green scales, and the short, squat creature reminded me of the Barak-dun. But it did not bleed red, but rather a green slime oozed from its wounds, and its eyes reflected a pale yellow.

"There will be more," said Pascalli. "This kind is capable of breeding."

Naturally Pascalli was right. Whatever those creatures were, they had multiplied tremendously in the darkness, and at every turn for what seemed like an eternity we crept along step by step expecting yet another attack. They huddled in the shadows, afraid of any light we brought, and attacked without warning.

Although we found many lanterns hung along the walls or from the ceiling most of them had been broken long before. The lamps were supplied with oil by some intricate system of pipes, but without wicks or shades, most could not function. Those that we could use we lighted, leaving a dim trail behind us.

"It will take a long time to clear this area this way," I complained at some point.

"We aren't here to clear the cellars," stated Pascalli. "We've much more important business at hand."

"And what would that be?" I asked.

"There is a curse upon this place, which does not belong here. Surely you have felt it," he replied.

I had felt something malevolent since we entered the darkness. The lamps we lit gave off far too little light, and I was becoming more discouraged with each step.

"How will we lift the curse," I asked.

"How should I know," laughed Pascalli. "I've never been here before."

I'm certain he winked at me in the darkness. I only half believed him, but because I had never known him to lie, I decided we were in more trouble than I had first guessed.

A mixture of the scaly green-blooded creatures we had first encountered, and a more tame variety of twisted animals occupied

the first rooms. At least one boarger had ventured into the darkness, and a few large cats. In general the animals left us alone so long as we did not bother them. We would have time to come back and trap them or hunt them if we needed to later.

I can but imagine the countless hours that must have been spent carving and building these vast corridors. By comparison, the castle above us was a relatively small dwelling. The complex of tunnels and rooms loomed nearly as large as the city above us. Here and there water had been channeled down to run into pleasant fountains. These were always closely guarded, and our brief moments of respite were hard won against those who protected their way of life.

We discovered that a second city had indeed been built in the depths beneath Darnuth Keep, probably as much for protection from invasion as anything. We managed to piece together enough of the layout to recognized residences and community areas as we stumbled about hoping to find clues.

Although we faced trials at nearly every step, not everything in those dangerous dungeons was horrible. The initial rooms were merely larders and cellars beyond which lay the great underground city. Within the city, buildings were marked with pillars, usually with a family name or crest, but often these marks had been removed. Remnants of ancient artwork, either of stone or crystal still decorated many homes. Some vast crystal gardens remained. Untended in centuries they had formed a wild beauty unmatched by human skill or imagination.

The open spaces of the city proved to be both more dangerous and at the same time easier to navigate. Many portions of the city were lighted, either by glowing fountains, iridescent mushrooms, or patches of moss that grew like ghostly lawns emitting a soft red or yellow light. None of the living, moving inhabitants ever carried a light, so we naturally followed suit, hesitant to attract attention. We moved about very carefully in the city, trying not to betray our presences in that foreign world. Fortunately the remaining inhabitants of that place were equally wary. Nothing moved about without great silence, and we often witnessed violence between various unsavory creatures.

In the center of that city lies a great fountain surrounded on all sides by a wonderful garden of strange and exotic mushrooms. At all times the water of that fountain glows with a soft green or blue light. We later determined that the shifting color matched the strength of the sun, green for day and blue for night, but to us at that time it was simply a beautiful refuge in an otherwise unfriendly and very dangerous place. At regular intervals the fountain shot a wild spray high into the air that would fall down in a radiant shower of sparkling light. The pool at its base was perhaps a meter in depth and six meters across. All around the courtyard stones had been worn smooth from the falling water drops, and a few tiny channels had been worn where the water collected on its way to the hidden drain. Most of the

local inhabitants seemed afraid of any light, and we found the relative calm of the place a welcome respite from our journey.

I felt lost in another world as I sat, resting beneath the stalk of a mushroom as tall as a tree. Everything around me bathed in a pale green light. As usual the quiet seemed to stifle even my thoughts. The only sounds I heard were the rippling of the water and my own breathing. My family seemed so far away, a world, a lifetime in the past. I pulled my knees to my chin, holding in my body's warmth, though it was not particularly cold. In my right hand I held my spear. As always, my sword was buckled across my shoulder. I still preferred to use my spear, but Pascalli had ensured I thoroughly understood the use of the sword. My bow lay beside me. In addition I hid a balanced throwing knife in each boot, and my hunting knife was tied down in a scabbard on my left. My weapons were so much a part of me that I hardly noticed them, but I never took them for granted.

A few meters away Pascalli sat, smoking a pipe, and taking in his surroundings. "Where do you think we should go now, Scratch?" he asked. His voice was a muffled whisper, but I knew the sound would carry a great distance in the empty darkness.

"If I knew what we were looking for, I might have an idea," I replied. Then I rested. My dreams were fitful, almost nightmarish. The smothering darkness made me all around uneasy. I felt an unseen power watching me with hatred, beckoning me to enter some as yet hidden trap.

Later I woke and traded with the wizard. As Pascalli rested, a few creatures came to drink at the fountain. I remained still and silent, careful to always keep our scent away from possible danger. Once, a large lion attacked one of the scaly green creatures and killed it. As the lion dragged away its meal, a little pouch fell to the ground, and I heard the distinct jingle of coins.

That there would be treasure here I did not doubt, though at the moment I had no use for gold. When I moved to retrieve the pouch, one of Pascalli's eyes opened, but he did not try to stop me.

The pouch held an assortment of coins that I did not recognize. In addition I found a few bits of bone and hide, as well as a small piece of iron poorly shaped into a half moon with a spike in the middle.

Since Pascalli had awakened, I tossed him the piece of iron and asked. "What do you think that is?"

"Think," laughed Pascalli, with a wink. "I do not think it is anything. Rather I know exactly what it is, although how it came to be here, or perhaps the better question would be why it came to be here is more of a mystery."

"Well what is it?" I asked as my frustration mounted.

"It is the symbol of Delvor, an ancient evil god who delights in bloodshed and pain." His face darkened as he spoke. "I fear the evil here may be more potent than I first imagined."

"Well, whatever those creatures are," I said. "They are at least intelligent enough to worship. And at least some of them understand the value of money. All of them that I have seen were wearing nothing more than a loincloth, but this one had a sort of robe."

"Which suggests what?" prompted Pascalli, his eyes gleaming slightly in the darkness.

"My guess is that this one was a priest of some kind. This means that either these creatures came here at the direction of an evil outside force which knows how to organize, or that they were already here and then enslaved and corrupted by such a force. It also suggests that they have some central leadership, as well as a temple or shrine of some kind."

"Very well done, Scratch, you've come a long way." Pascalli's rare compliment seemed genuine, and I admit a grin slipped onto my face. "So, if we want to find the source of the curse, what do you suggest?"

"We should either look for the temple or the treasury," I said. After a moment of thought, I added, "Although they are probably the same place."

"Lead on," replied the wizard. "I think we've risked too much time resting in one place already."

Naturally I had no idea where to go. In essence we were following the same wild chase we had been following before, but at least now we had a clue. I decided to try to backtrack the creature's approach to the water. It had to live somewhere, and I figured that the more organized groups would be living somewhere in larger numbers. They would probably use the large city buildings, and it would likely be reasonably close to water.

Pascalli agreed with my reasoning, but was hesitant to make a light to track with. "Telling the world we are coming may not be the best course of action," he argued. "We know they outnumber us, and after our recent attacks they are probably already looking for us."

In the end he consented. We didn't really have any other options. "But only until we have an idea which direction it came from," he cautioned. "I still don't want to walk into an ambush."

Telling direction beneath ground was never a great strength of mine, but I had made a few mental landmarks. Pascalli had brought some paper and ink, and I began making a crude map, using the fountain as a reference and judging which way we had come. I called the entrance stairs 'south', and put the fountain as 'north'. In any event, the tracks went off in the direction I had decided was west.

Determining where the creature had come from turned out to be a rather simple affair, as our dim light showed the tracks merging onto a small path that headed generally westward.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

Judging distance in that half-light was intolerably difficult. I imagine we followed the path for less than a kilometer, but truthfully we judged time and distance only by the changes that happened to our surroundings and by the degree of weariness our bodies felt.

A distant scrape of something hard against the stone brought us up short.

Ahead and to the left grew a small grove of giant mushrooms, a few of them shedding a dim orange glow, while to our right was nothing but blackness. I called a gentle breeze to blow our scent behind us, away from the sound, and Pascalli and I took cover behind two of the larger stalks.

I am sure we made no sound while we moved, but I knew better than to rely solely on sight and sound. After a moment of tense waiting, the breeze brought the unmistakable scent that constantly surrounded the scaly green lizard-like bipeds. A group of three slowly emerged from the black shadows. Their animal faces reflected dimly in the mushroom light. Each carried a short spear in one hand, and it was obvious from their slow, calculated movements that they were searching for something.

Cautiously, I willed the breeze to change slightly. I did not want them to wander downwind of us. The instant they caught our scent we would have to fight.

I had planned on hiding and waiting for them to pass, but as they drew nearer Pascalli suddenly leapt from hiding and set about them with amazing speed. His staff was a whirlwind of motion, and they were caught by complete surprise. He had cracked two skulls before they turned to face him, and the third was down before its spear could even be brought into play.

"There is no point trying to hide from a group this small," he said. "Search them. There may be more clues."

Obediently, I began rifling through the pouches and pockets, ignoring the stench they brought. Each carried a small earthenware jar of water as well as a small packet of either fungus or dried meat. "Just food and water," I said.

"They were hunting for something," replied Pascalli. "Either us or food."

"Either way we are closer," I said. "We should probably avoid the path as much as possible. There will be more of them."

"Very well, but we will let none of them escape that we find," replied the wizard. "Fear is a great tool, and if enough of these things disappear to unknown enemies they will take the defensive and stop venturing out. The less they know about us, the better."

The patches of giant fungus slowly became a forest though which the stone path meandered carelessly. Though there was little undergrowth like we would find in a forest above the ground, we moved at an excruciatingly slow pace. Each sound carried too far for comfort, and neither of us trusted the black mushrooms as safe.

We dispatched two more groups of the creatures as well as a large lion. We cut the lion into strips, risking a little light to work by. "We need food," I complained.

Pascalli nodded his agreement. "We can risk a day to jerk some of it, though the smell may attract predators. I don't know how much longer we will be down here."

The dried out mushrooms burned poorly, and they gave the meat a bitter taste, but at least it would no longer spoil. Though the ceiling was high, the smoke still clouded and smoked more than we wanted, and I eventually had to use magic to create a breeze to carry it away from us.

"Blow it back the way we came," suggested Pascalli. "No point giving any more warning than we need to whatever lies ahead of us."

Eventually we saw another glowing fountain ahead of us and to the left. This one was much less impressive than the water we had rested near, but its glowing bubbles remained a thing of beauty. Careful to make no sound, I took out my canteen and motioned to Pascalli. He nodded his agreement, and handed me a second canteen.

The lizard scent wafted suddenly very strong as I approached the water. I slipped quietly back into the shadows to watch. Several small patches of moss glowed dimly around the pillars that marked the buildings in this area. The sound of shuffling feet brought us up short, and we waited in silence for the sound to pass. Two quiet figures came to the fountain and filled large earthenware pots with water. Their manner was casual, even careless, and they hissed to each other in a strange whisper, like the wind in summer grass.

They filled their pots and turned to leave. I waited just long enough for them to turn their backs before approaching the little lake. I quickly filled my own vessels. Pascalli startled me as I turned to leave.

"We have to follow them," he whispered. I nodded and handed him his water bottle.

Careful to keep downwind, we followed them as they carried their burdens back to a tight cluster of dwellings. All of the buildings on the north side of the fountain seemed to be occupied, and a wide street ran from the fountain north through a

passage between dwellings. We held to the shadows, moving as silently as possible until we reached the street and passed the first open stone houses. Then we found a quiet alley, and sat to rest and wait.

I am not sure what Pascalli expected to see, but I was waiting for one or more of the creatures to come along that looked or acted differently from the rest. In the meantime I was content to learn their habits and rest my tired feet.

Without exception each family dwelling had a large patch of glowing moss somewhere near the marking pillar. By this means we were able to discern which pillars marked homes, and which marked public buildings. Several times two or three came out for water, returning with their pots sloshing gently, but on the whole the place was very quiet. They spoke to each other with a muffled hissing language whose sound carried only a short distance.

After a short period of hiding we determined that nobody in the area knew of our presence. Pascalli signaled to me that he wanted me to take the first watch, and he drifted into silent sleep. When he woke some time later I had no recollection of how much time may have passed, and I had not seen anything of interest happening. I reluctantly lay down in the shadows and drifted again into uneasy sleep.

Pascalli woke me with a nudge, and I followed the direction of his pointing finger. A robed figure was moving north along the street, deeper into the occupied city.

We avoided the light of the mossy gardens as much as possible, and followed the creature. The dwellings had no windows, but they also lacked doors, each having but one opening to the street with no covering. Our greatest risk would be that we might be spotted as we passed on of these openings, but we had to match the pace of our quarry. Fortunately the chase did not last long. The main street ran in a straight line due north, and for some reason all of the locals were keeping indoors. The street ended in a wide courtyard featuring another small fountain and a wide lawn of glowing moss. The robed figure climbed a short set of stairs that made a porch before entering a large doorway.

Unlike other areas we had found so far, the courtyard was entirely lit due to the large spread of glowing moss and the large glowing mushrooms. We paused in the shadows just outside the courtyard. None of the surrounding buildings seemed to be a residence. Several creatures were talking around the fountain, or just inside the various buildings. All told, I counted twenty-one. To my surprise I saw that only two of them had visible weapons, they stood lazily guarding the entrance to the building we presumed to be the temple. The guards carried only the same shabby spears that we had encountered before. The rest of them appeared completely unconcerned about any kind of danger.

Crossing the courtyard would take several seconds at least. Pascalli pointed to my bow and then to the guards. I prepared an

arrow carefully, taking my time, and set a second arrow close by where I could reach it instantly. Once the attack began we would have very little time. I loosed the second arrow while the first was still in flight, not waiting to watch my arrow pierce the left guard's throat. We withdrew immediately to the shadows while confusion engulfed the courtyard. Two of them ran to check on the guards while the rest scattered to the cover of the other buildings.

I wasted no time killing the two that remained in the open, daring any of the others to venture out.

"Send a firestone ahead of us into the temple," said Pascalli. "They already know where we are."

I heated my stone as hot as I could, and sent it into the temple. When it reached the doorway Pascalli sprinted into the courtyard with me at his heels. We paused long enough to push the bodies out of the way, and followed the dim red glow of the stone inside.

For the first time I felt neither fear nor nerves as I entered a battle. I performed as ordered without hesitation. Either the winters of travel with Pascalli or the unrelenting days of strain in the darkness had edged cold calculation into my heart. I saw my movements clearly, as if watching another person.

The guards we had slain appeared to be all of the immediate fighting force. The temple itself must have originally been dedicated to Tylos, for its general construction and layout followed the pattern of all her temples, but it had long since been desecrated. The symbol of Delvor had been cut prominently into the back wall above the altar, and the place stank of rotting meat. Behind the altar I noticed a small pile of coins mixed with bones, but I was not hunting treasure or trophies. We saw two exits from the main hall, one directly at the back of the room, and a side door to our left.

"Which way?" I asked.

"You're leading," responded Pascalli sardonically.

"To the back then," I replied. I hated when Pascalli chose moments like this to make me think. "What are we looking for anyway?"

"A way out," said the wizard.

Pursuit could not be far behind, and they would certainly outnumber us. We hurried into the next room to find the priest waiting defiantly with his spear. As he hissed a warning, I sent the red-hot stone immediately to its eye, but he ducked at the last second. His movements proved futile, however, as I crossed the room in two quick steps and thrust my spear into its chest.

"Search the room for clues," suggested Pascalli. "Go ahead and pocket any coins you find. We'll need money to buy more supplies with when we return to the top."

I turned up a handful of ancient coins, and a hidden lever in the back corner.

"Don't just stand there," commented Pascalli. "Pull the thing."

It didn't occur to me until much later that the lever might be trapped or guarded. In any event, we proved lucky, and a hidden staircase opened behind the back wall.

The lanterns that hung from the ceiling in this portion of the temple remained intact, a strong indication that the lizard creatures had not come here, at least not often. As we proceeded from place to place we lit each one. The ceilings and walls of this lower section were highly polished so that the light reflected much further than expected, giving the place an almost pleasant feeling after being in near total darkness for so long. I squinted dumbly into the new light for several moments, waiting for my eyes to adjust. Then I just stared dumbly as if I had forgotten light altogether.

"I almost forgot what light was," said Pascalli lightly.

The main passageway split off after a very short while with a hall to the left and a hall to the right. Doors were visible only to the left.

"Left or right?" I asked. Pascalli simply shrugged, and I led us down the passage to the right.

The corridors and rooms beneath the temple of Delver were completely free of dust and debris. In the underground city almost everything left footprints or other sign as they passed through the fungus gardens that allowed us to track or be tracked. Here the place appeared locked in time. No sounds broke the silence, other than our soft steps and gentle breathing. I wanted to voice my opinion about these changes, but didn't dare draw attention to us in the thick quiet.

The door we found, for the corridor ended quite suddenly, had been intricately inlaid with gold and silver lettering of the same kind found at the entrance to the cellars. I studied the writing silently, waiting for Pascalli to explain.

"It just says, study," said the wizard. "Although it's obvious this is a place of more importance than others we have visited."

I studied the door a moment longer. "Do you think it's safe?" I asked.

"No," he replied firmly. "Especially not after the noise we've been making. But you've no choice. Open it and be prepared."

I wanted to suggest that he open the door instead. I always seemed to be opening doors or charging in first, but I relented. To my surprise, it was locked or bolted.

"Definitely important, though it might be a trap," said Pascalli. "Did Blackhand teach you how to pick a lock?"

"He explained it once," I said. "I've never had a chance to practice, and I don't have the tools he described."

"I've the tools you need here," replied the wizard. "I shall guide you. No time like the present to learn."

As I took the tools, I wondered why Pascalli hadn't taught me before.

"It takes a thief to catch one, or so the saying goes," said Pascalli. "Or you can't cheat an honest man, or something. At any rate, I've picked up a few tricks like this over the winters. Just remember that there are easier ways of getting rich than breaking into treasuries."

"I've no intention of breaking into anything," I replied. "As far as I can tell gold only brings trouble."

Pascalli laughed long and hard, and a sudden comfort came over the both of us. His humor had brightened considerably in the light, and I began to feel as if we were finally nearing the end of that dark journey.

After several minute of painstaking effort and considerable noise, I managed to get the mechanism to move.

"Very good, Scratch," said Pascalli when he heard the click. "Now hold onto that spear and let's see what's inside."

## Chapter Twenty-Six

I was rather nervous about what we might find, and also somewhat let down. The room was essentially a library. Shelves lined the walls, packed with neatly arranged books. My first thought was that Pascalli would have me reading them for the next hundred winters whether I felt inclined or not. There was a sturdy table and two padded chairs. A lit candelabrum adorned the table, and lit lanterns hung from the ceiling in each corner of the room shedding a remarkable brilliance. In the center of the room an amazing life-like statue of white and blue marble gazed back at us.

The statue was an angelic figure, bold and strong, arrayed for battle with both spear and sword. I could just see the edges of great wings folded at his back. The face held an expression that I found both stern and defiant. His polished armor reflected slightly in the brightness of the room, and I found myself reminded of lord Kelsin as he charged into battle, though this figure far out measured Kelsin in both nobility and strength.

Pascalli gave me a soft nudge and I stepped into the room. "Take a look around, Scratch," he suggested. "Be careful, there is something odd here."

I crossed the room and reached to touch a book. As I reached out, a voice suddenly spoke. "The secrets of this place are the master's alone." The voice was strong, deep, and carried a hint of stone grating against stone. Of all the sounds a person can hear, hearing a sound such as the world has not known in a thousand winters may well be the most remarkable.

I immediately withdrew my hand and spun around. On reflex I brought my spear into a defensive position. Across the room Pascalli bolted the door, and laughed, "It appears you've found a new friend, Scratch."

The statue, which had been facing the door, now stared at me. It raised its spear for a thrust.

"Only the master may touch the treasures of this place," said the statue.

"Who precisely is your master," asked Pascalli, his tone carrying only a hint of arrogant mockery.

"Silence, Betrayer!" boomed the statue as it spun with lightning speed to face the wizard. "My parlay with you will come soon enough."

To my shock, Pascalli held his tongue. Something about the statue's tone hinted at recognition of some kind between them. It turned to face me again.

"Who are you that comes with The Betrayer into my master's realm?" it asked. I felt an icy edge to its tone.

"I am Colter Halfspear," I replied, and then as afterthought I added, "Lord of Darnuth Keep."

"Show your tokens," he said.

I admit I was at a loss. I had no idea what it could be looking for, and I began to stall by fumbling in my pockets for anything.

"Surely the master has his tokens," said the statue coldly. Pascalli caught my eye and mouthed the word rings, and encircled one finger with his other hand.

"Yes, of course," I stammered. "Right here in my pocket." I pulled out the pair of rings we had found in the great hall. I held them out for the statue to examine.

"Then you have not yet taken a bride," he said. I blushed slightly and put the rings back in my pocket. "You should wear your tokens proudly. I will not ask for the medallion, for she has it." He lingered for a moment at the unnamed enemy. "Nevertheless, you will prove yourself by test of battle."

With no more warning, he sprang to the attack. I quickly discovered that I was very much outclassed. His movements were perfect and inhumanly fast in every way. Although I could now slip effortlessly through the forms that Pascalli had drilled into me, I could not match the speed, strength, or accuracy of this opponent. I felt the spear torn from my grip, and he hooked my off-balance heel with his foot. As I fell, his spear point followed, stopping a hair's breadth from my throat.

"The young master is truly skilled," it said with a humility I did not expect. "I am Golgaron, arms master of the Legion of Davmandius." He extended a hand and helped me to my feet. Though the hand was hard as stone, it was not cold. I could feel the life inside him.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"I guard the secrets as Davmandius commanded," he replied.

"How long have you been down here?" My curiosity was boiling over.

"I do not know," he said. "Only one other has opened that door since Davmandius left. Time has little meaning for me." He turned to face Pascalli, raising his spear again. "Explain yourself, Betrayer."

"I prefer Pascalli, or wizard," he replied. "Many things have changed since Davmandius died. I am a friend of your master."

Golgaron turned to me. "Is this true, master?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. "He comes as a friend and ally. I have a lot to learn, Golgaron. Tell me what has happened here."

Pascalli and I sat at the table, grateful for the chance to rest in a quiet, warm place, and shared a simple meal of dried meat and water while Golgaron explained.

"During the last war, Davmandius brought me here to guard this place. He warned that its secrets must never fall into the hands of his enemies. Then he left and did not return. I felt him die, but that was long ago. Then she came?"

"She?" I asked. "Who is she?"

"Asmordreda," replied the statue.

"The concubine of Delvor?" asked Pascalli incredulously.

"Yes."

"That is very bad news," said Pascalli, his face far more serious than I had ever seen it before. He saw the questions in my eyes and did not wait for me to voice them. "She is a very powerful demon queen. How she came to this world I can only guess."

"She arrived shortly after the death of Davmandius, and has been spawning her children ever since. I feel their desecrating hands all over this once fair temple."

"We killed a few on the way in," I explained. "There are still a lot left, though." I frowned. It was going to be a long fight to get out of there. "Please go on."

"She tried to come in here only once, but I killed many of her children and faced her as well. She was not able to destroy me, but I have been a prisoner here as I cannot allow her to reach these secrets."

"By now she will know or guess that we are here," I said. "What do you think she will do?"

"She will wait," said Pascalli. "She will want Golgaron to leave here. She will expect us to fight, and she will know who wins, and then she will strike the weakened victor."

"I see that The Betrayer has a cunning mind," said the statue. "You were a most fitting opponent for Davmandius."

"That was an old battle, and long ago," replied Pascalli, his voice tired and suddenly very sad. "A victory I shall ever regret."

"What happened," I asked, but immediately regretted the question.

To my great surprise Pascalli answered without hesitation. "The last battle Golgaron refers to happened when those of us who no longer wished to follow the old code of magic rebelled against those who held to the ancient traditions. The battle began the breaking. I used cunning and artifice to lead the traditionalists into a trap. I was known ever after among wizards as The Betrayer, even by my closest friends."

"Did you know Davmandius well?" I asked.

"He was my brother." Pascalli stood up and faced the books, and we did not talk of those sad things again.

After several minutes, during which I think I must have dozed, Pascalli said. "You must find the secret Golgaron is guarding, Scratch. Asmordreda must be defeated."

Time seemed to stand still in the study. We ate, we rested, we slept, and we searched, but we had no way to mark the passage of days or hours.

During this time I discovered that Davmandius had created Golgaron as a sort of weapon practice machine, but that the statue grew in intelligence and ability over the winters until he had a life of his own.

"Davmandius was a great weapons master," said Pascalli. "His skill became so great that many came from all lands to learn from him. In order to share that skill he poured all of his knowledge into Golgaron, until he had created an unstoppable killing machine, and the perfect practice partner. You will practice each day with him now." He gave me a wink. "And let the old man have a rest."

The library contained a number of books detailing techniques for applying elemental magic, combat and strategic information, as well as mathematics, history and scientific experiments. As I feared, Pascalli kept me studying for hours on end. The tedium of constant study, practice, and study nearly drove me mad. We had packed enough food for several markets, but had not used much of it since arriving at the underground city, choosing instead to live off the edible fungi, moss or animals. A natural spring and a sort of indoor latrine were available in a small adjacent room, and Pascalli seemed perfectly content to remain imprisoned until we found some sort of answer.

My thoughts often returned to Dina, and to the city above. I longed to be plowing my own fields, and to hunt beside her again. She was the kind of friend you find only once in a lifetime, perhaps twice if you are lucky. I ached for our journey to be ended.

"There is nothing in these books that I do not already know," said Pascalli in exasperation.

"Then obviously the secret Golgaron is guarding has nothing to do with them," I retorted. We were both ornery from the confinement. I had meant the remark to be sarcastic, but Pascalli cracked a smile for the first time in a long time.

"I do believe you are right," he said.

"Uh, I am," I asked.

"Davmandius was trying to protect this place from me," said Pascalli. He gave a furtive glance to Golgaron, and added, "Or people like me. He had no idea about Asmordreda, although I imagine he would want her kept out as well. Which means that whatever he was protecting had to be something utterly powerful, something magical. There would be no point guarding these books from wizards, I have a similar collection at Gratterskeep."

"Golgaron, do you know what it is you are guarding, or where it is?" I asked.

"No, master," he replied. "I was brought here and commanded to guard."

"Search the room," suggested Pascalli.

"You search it," I retorted. "I've already done that, in detail." For emphasis I showed the book on the nature of water I was supposed to be studying.

"It's not in there," he said grumpily.

"There is nothing here but books," I replied. "Besides, if he meant the secret to be guarded from you, then shouldn't you be looking for it? I wouldn't even recognize it if I found it."

"Right you are Scratch, my boy, right you are. You go ahead and enjoy your reading. I'll have a look around."

As intrigued as Pascalli seemed with our new companion, I was put off a great deal by the wide berth he gave Golgaron, and put off even more by the fact that no matter what I asked the great statue immediately complied. I was completely unused to servants, and I had the uncomfortable feeling that the statue expected me to know a great deal more about my position than I did.

"Golgaron, what exactly did Davmandius order you to do?" I asked.

"He brought me here and said, 'stand and guard my secret. Do not let the forces of darkness take it at any cost.' Then he left," answered the statue.

"Sounds like a wizard," I said sardonically.

"Indeed," replied Pascalli. "A most worthy puzzle."

"Where does that leave us?" I asked.

"Right here," laughed Pascalli. "The same place you've been for several markets."

"I mean, what then in this place could Golgaron possibly be guarding, and note that he said secret, not secrets, so whatever it is there is only one of it," I said.

"Of course, so it is not, as we determined, the books," continued Pascalli. "Though I think you would do well to keep studying them." I wilted, but the hint of a wink in his eyes let me know he was only half serious at the moment. "What else is there?"

"Some shelves, a table, two chairs, and of course Golgaron," I listed, yawning.

"Right," agreed the wizard. "Also, of course there is the room itself."

"Right," I agreed, but only half-heartedly. We had been through a similar debate already, and I was bored to the point of insanity. "I don't think it's these chairs, they look comfortable enough, but after a while it's easy to find the hard spots. The table is out too, nothing there but solid wood. That seems to narrow it down to either Golgaron or the room itself."

"Or something Golgaron knows," said Pascalli.

"He already said he doesn't know the secret," I replied.

"Perhaps he doesn't know that he knows," said the wizard wryly. "Davmandius poured a great deal of knowledge into him, and he has seen much that has changed the world."

"So you think he's the secret. He's been guarding himself for thousands of winters and didn't know it?" Some part of me found the thought amusing.

"No, I don't," said Pascalli. "It is possible. I admit that I did not know what happened to Golgaron, I wasn't even sure he still existed until we came here, but his existence before the breaking was hardly a secret."

Pascalli seemed to grow thoughtful again, and I was nodding off into my book. "Time for more practice," he suggested. "You are getting sleepy."

My muscles resisted. I had not worked so hard in a long time, and I dreaded the exacting drills that Golgaron imposed. Sparring with the statue could be physically brutal as he fought without fear and without tiring.

"You learn quickly, master, but your thinking is too narrow," he said. "Knowing and understanding your forms is crucial, but you must learn to approach combat in a broader sense. It is not enough to combine moves into fluid movement with an exact chain, but you must plan your kill from the very first feint."

"What do you mean? How can a feint kill someone?"

"The feint does not kill," he replied. "You feint, or you thrust, and it forces me to move. I have very few options with how I can parry or dodge. You already know those options, so you calculate the strength of your thrust and then calculate my positioning in order to avoid that thrust. Then calculate the positioning you will need for your next move, and so carefully you draw me into a vulnerable position."

"You are talking about mere fractions of centimeters in split seconds," I replied. "That's impossible."

"It was possible for Davmandius," he said flatly.

"It is also possible for me, though I admit I am not as good as my brother," said Pascalli. Something in his tone hinted that he was not just speaking of weapons.

"If Davmandius was always thinking ahead, then couldn't this all be some trap," I said. "Couldn't he have just left Golgaron here guarding nothing at all? Maybe that's the secret."

"Possible, but unlikely," agreed Pascalli. "Davmandius would not lie. Nor would he employ his most trusted servant to guard nothing more than a lie."

"Then let's try a different tactic," I said. "Think back to when Davmandius was around. What did he have, or was rumored to have, that you would have wanted, or that he wouldn't have wanted you to have?"

"I think a better question would be what did he know that he didn't want me to know," said Pascalli.

"Same thing, but have it your way," I replied

Pascalli merely looked annoyed. "Fair enough. I would say that there are two things we wouldn't want me to know about. One would be that he knew how to defeat those who opposed him, utterly. The other would be that he had found something even more dangerous than me, which he wanted to keep hidden from the world because he was afraid he could not control it. Golgaron is neither of those things, so that rules him out."

"That leaves us looking for a powerful weapon designed to destroy wizards," I said, again falling into sarcasm.

"Or the key to such a weapon." Pascalli's eyes brightened as he spoke. "There was a rumor, a bit of research we all took as nonsense by a young and rather inexperienced wizard about something he called 'The Key to the Stars' that was supposedly an incredible source of power. Nobody really took him seriously, but Davmandius had a way of rooting out the most obscure knowledge."

"What is the key anyway?" I asked. "Do you know what it looked like?"

"All I know is that it is an object designed to forcefully channel the energy of the heavens into a wizard's control," said Pascalli.

"I don't understand," I admitted.

"The most potent kind of magic is the magic that the gods wield," he said, assuming his lecture tone. "That priest of Tylos who healed you did so using that magic, but only because Tylos willed it so. The key to the stars is supposed to call that magic and force it to your will, allowing for unimaginable power. But the key was supposed to be contained in a chamber, a small room activated by certain controls."

"So maybe this is the room," I said.

"No, it doesn't fit anything I read about his research, and surely you would have felt that kind of power. More likely a critical controlling component is here," he said.

"Or the key to a key to the key," I said.

"What?"

"What if the critical component was somewhere else, and all that could be found here was the knowledge of that component, which could then be taken to the chamber?" I impressed myself with my own deduction. "Golgaron, come here."

The statue came and stood beside me. I fished out my rings and held them up to his breastplate. On it the crest of Darnuth Keep was engraved, an inverted triangle with diamonds at the points of the base and a circle at the tip. I held the rings up, and one diamond in each matched the diamonds in the crest.

"The final token is the medallion," said Golgaron. "You will need to defeat her to get it."

"No wonder she did not return," said Pascalli. "You did not have the rings as she expected. At some point during your battle she must have guessed what the crest means. Davmandius obviously expected Golgaron to defeat anyone who entered here. I wondered

why we hadn't seen the crest anywhere else in the palace or even in the city. In any event, we hold the keys, and she is likely waiting for us in the chamber itself." With a wry smile he added, "Never keep a lady waiting, Scratch. We've tarried here long enough."

Knowing that a person has a key is one thing. Knowing what the key goes to is something else. Perhaps most important, however, is the will to use it for its intended purpose knowing full well the consequences.

I held no illusions that facing Asmordreda would be a simple affair. Pascalli's grim demeanor served as ample warning to the serious nature of our dilemma.

"Do you know how to defeat her?" I asked Pascalli, contemplating our options.

"No, but we might get lucky." He chuckled grimly. "We'll need luck."

I failed to see the humor, but I suppose that after centuries of seeing so much of the world one begins to find something funny with everything.

"The power of the Key can destroy her," said Golgaron. "She cannot be defeated with mere weapons of steel."

"So we just walk up and ask her to hand over the amulet?" I asked. At this point sarcasm had become my only lifeline to sanity. "Please Miss Asmordreda, could you just hand that over so we can blast you to oblivion?" Now it was my turn to laugh. I laughed a hollow, dry laugh, but I wanted to cry.

"We could try that," agreed Pascalli with mock seriousness. "Or we could take it from her."

"Sure, you hold her I'll grab the amulet," I said.

"We might not need the amulet at all," he said.

"We still have to activate this Key of the stars, don't we?" I asked.

"Of course, but we may not need to actually be holding the amulet to do so," replied Pascalli. "I've no idea how this works, but the three keys may only need to be in the chamber, not necessarily held by the same person."

"Wouldn't that give everyone in the chamber access to the same power?" I asked.

"Maybe." Pascalli's reply did not comfort me. "Perhaps only those holding the tokens will have access to the magic. It doesn't matter. We don't have any options anyway. I think you'll find that simply doing what needs to be done is often challenge enough."

"I'm not here for the excitement," I said. I gathered the last of our food and refilled our canteens. "I'll finish what needs doing so that we can go home."

"That is an excellent plan," agreed Pascalli. "I look forward to a bit of rest myself when this is all over."

"She waits," said Golgaron. I knew he sensed something about our enemy that neither Pascalli nor I could understand.

Somebody had taken the effort to extinguish all of the lanterns in the corridor outside of the study. They remained functional, however, so we took the time to light them again. Really there was no point fumbling around in the dark when the enemy already knew we were coming.

Golgaron took the lead. "I know where she is hiding," he said. "I have no need for light."

"That sounds like a good idea to me," I agreed. I had no intention of being the first target for a surprise attack.

"I see you've inherited some of your mother's common sense," replied Pascalli. "No point getting killed if you don't have to. Davmandius didn't spend so much of his life crafting Golgaron to see his talents go to waste."

Despite our preparations, the first ambush surprised me. Golgaron dispatched the three enemies before I became aware of the attack. Although I had spent hours practicing with him, his efficient brutality and effortless violence still surprised me. The fourth spawn of Asmordreda attempted to flee, but my fire stone burned through the scaly hide into its spine.

"Perhaps Golgaron should scout ahead," suggested Pascalli. "He could clear the path for us with less danger while we light the lanterns."

I agreed, and we sent the statue to clear the corridors back to the hidden door at the temple. We found the secret doorway shut and the lever to open it had been jammed in some way.

"We're trapped," I said. "We only have a few days of food left."

"There may be another way out," smiled Pascalli. "It doesn't look like any more of them will be coming down anytime soon," he added.

With my hope diminishing, we moved carefully into the other corridor. The brief scrape of stone on stone alerted us to the second ambush. I expected another rush of Asmordreda's children, but instead a sudden force extinguished the lanterns, and I was left momentarily blinded while the sounds of battle sprang up in front of us. I am certain that without the aid of Golgaron in that corridor we never would have survived. I had not yet mastered the elements sufficiently to instinctively maintain our lighting. It took me several seconds to locate a lantern and light it again, and in that time the battle had nearly ended.

Golgaron still faced one skeletal figure, though it could not hold off the statue's merciless onslaught for more than a few seconds. The creature's pale skin clung to its bones, as though no muscle or sinew held it together. Its vacant eyes stared listlessly into space, and I knew that it needed no light to find us. A second creature of the same type lay at our feet, its chest and skull crushed, apparently from the butt end of Golgaron's spear.

"Do you know what they were?" I asked Pascalli when it was over.

"Some sort of minor demon," he replied. "Creatures from another world."

"How did they get here?" I asked.

"That is a very good question," responded the wizard. "One which I am sure will be answered before we are through."

We faced a half dozen or so more ambushes, but Golgaron proved an unstoppable force. The corridor made no branches, and there were only a few rooms to either side before we finally reached a stout wooden door. The door itself was indistinguishable from any other in the place, but an out of place silence gripped the area, and our light seemed to disappear as we approached it.

"No question we've found something powerful," observed Pascalli casually. He didn't bother to whisper, and I believe I detected a hint of a grin on his face. When I scowled at him and held a finger to my lips, he responded. "They already know where we are. We've been making a racket out here for hours. I'm sure they heard us long before this." He broadened his grin and sinisterly added, "There are other methods of detecting us besides listening."

When I reached for the handle, Pascalli stopped me. "Just because the end is near does not mean we need to rush into it unprepared," he warned. "We've been at this for nearly a day now, I think, and we will need all of our strength to confront Asmordreda. We can leave Golgaron here to ensure that nothing leaves that door to surprise us while we, or more specifically you, get some rest. As I recall there is a snug little room not too far back."

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

I didn't realize how much our journey had taken out of me until I sat down on the chill stone floor in the darkness of that little room. The tension of constant vigilance and the repeated attacks had taken a toll of exhaustion. After only a few minutes I felt stiff, and I drifted into a dreamless sleep. Pascalli woke me after a time and asked me to heat some water with magic in an upturned helmet salvaged from one of our ambushers.

"We may well starve to death afterwards, but if we're going to our doom I'd rather die with a full belly." He chuckled as he added the last of our dried meat to a soup he was making.

"I'd rather not die either way," I said, rubbing life back into my chilled limbs. The room felt more humid than I remembered. "I've forgotten what a real bed feels like," I said. "I think I've almost forgotten what the stars look like. I can barely remember even the comfort of an honest tree root in my back all night."

"Yes," agreed Pascalli. "We've been down here too long." His voice suddenly brightened. "Have no fear Scratch, my lad. We'll be through it soon. We've found what we came looking for after all. Just one cranky demon and all will be better here." He winked, and I felt no comfort. Though we had been through many tight spots already, my confidence wavered. "Eat. Everything will be better after a hot meal and some rest."

I admit I hadn't realized how much I missed hot food. When a body doesn't get real cooking for so many markets the first taste is like eating for the first time all over again. I confess that the little stew we made with the last of our trail rations was no dish fit for the emperor, but at that moment I found it nothing short of miraculous. I ate, and then slept, warmed by the hot food, then ate the final bits.

"She will certainly be ready for us," said Pascalli. "Golgaron will not be able to help you." He seemed saddened and serious as he continued. "I won't be much use either. I have no idea if she knows what we are planning. I don't even know what she might know or guess about the Key to the Stars. Golgaron and I will handle any help she may have left, but you will essentially have to face her alone."

"And do what?" I asked.

"Trust to your wits and luck," winked the wizard. "Though, if I were you I'd trust my luck more than my wits. I've seen where your thinking gets you."

The wizard's jibe did little to raise my hopes, but still I could not help but feel that somehow we had the upper hand. We had entered her fortress, destroyed the guards, and now sat on the verge of victory. I felt only too deeply the delicate thread that held us from the brink of destruction.

"No point waiting here," I suggested. "Food's gone, and I've slept enough for both of us."

"Good lad, Scratch, no time like the present to face your destiny," responded Pascalli. "I've no idea what will happen when that door opens, but I think it will be best if you put on both of those rings, one on each hand."

I fished out the rings and slipped them on as we headed down the corridor. Golgaron stood as impassive as ever a few meters from the door. He made no motion as we approached, but the old statue rarely moved, except when provoked to battle.

"Anything new," I asked.

"Nothing, master," he replied.

"Good," I said. I wasn't so sure what was good about the situation, but I felt in a much more positive mood. "On my signal, Golgaron hit the door and go left. Pascalli will follow and take the right. I'll enter last."

"Be sure to make a light first thing," advised Pascalli. "The lanterns here in the hallway will probably go out instantly, and I will need the light to fight with. Whatever happens to Golgaron or me, ignore us. Things may not be as they appear in there. Find a way to activate the Key quickly, and then use the power of the Key to send her back. Unless I am mistaken, she has managed to open a gate to another world in there. We must close that."

I nodded my understanding and we took our positions. Golgaron leveled a kick at the chamber door that shook the foundations of the walls. From inside the room we heard an angry cry, but the door held.

"She has sealed it with magic," said Golgaron. I slumped back into the shadows.

"Can you break it?" I asked.

"With time," he said. "She cannot hold it forever."

I pointed to the door and Golgaron kicked it again. Once more the door trembled with the force of the impact, and we could hear something grunting as if fighting off a great pressure from inside, but the door held. Our careful planning seemed to lose weight with each blow on the wood. Golgaron beat the door at least a dozen times more before it finally gave way, the timbers shattering under the combined forces of his blows and the magic that held the door shut.

As the door flew apart, the lanterns in the hall immediately went dark. I heard Golgaron rush into the room. I hesitated

only a split second to concentrate on the lights before following Pascalli inside.

The room measured no less than ten meters round, with only the one door. A large chandelier with dozens of candles dominated the mirrored ceiling. An enormous circular pattern of blue tile stretched across the center of the floor. A large golden copy of the triangular crest with a point toward the door adorned the middle of the circle. Asmordreda stood directly in the middle of the triangle.

I freely admit that I was not prepared for that confrontation. I had steeled myself to face the kind of horror that would spawn the grotesque lizard creatures and that would consort with demons of the sort we had fought all along the way, but I was not prepared to face her beauty and majesty.

No hint of the previous struggle touched her face. If I expected a demonic apparition with grotesquely revolting features I could not have been more mistaken. No horns. No fangs. No claws. She stood arrayed in a mix of tight fitting red leather and sashes. Her beautiful locks of coal black hair braided like tempting snakes about her shoulders. Except for the hint of a red glow behind her pupils and the overwhelming sense of power, she appeared no different than any other beautiful woman. Her otherwise creamy skin held a faint hint of green. A short, broad-bladed sword hung at her belt.

I stood for a moment, transfixed. I had known some pretty girls, but at that tender age I had never before seen such an overwhelmingly beautiful woman, and certainly not such a magnificent personality. She captured my attention and my imagination. For several seconds I waited, unable to fully take in the room, or even to notice my companions.

"Who are you to enter my domain unbidden?" her voice rang out firm and commanding, yet somehow alluring at the same time. I felt compelled to answer, but for the moment I was too overwhelmed to speak.

"Be wary, boy," I heard Pascalli speaking hoarsely. He sounded small and insignificant. His voice seemed distant and weak.

I had no answer for her. I stepped one foot cautiously into the blue circle, my spear lowered. An unknown fear gripped at my heart, not the fear of pain or of death, but the fear of being completely lost to myself and the world. Part of me wanted to lose myself, to let go of my own will and subjugate myself to the dominating influence that stood before me. I felt my spear slip from my fingers and clatter noisily on the stone.

"Fight it," I heard a voice echo, as if from beneath water or from a deep cavern.

My second foot crossed the blue circle and searing pain burned through my hands where the rings touched my skin. I felt my body burning, as if consumed by a raging fever. Sweat poured from my brow. For the first time I noticed the gold medallion

hanging at Asmordreda's neck. The medallion burst into light, and I glanced down at my hands to see the diamonds on the rings shining with powerful energy. Before me the demon's confidence wavered. I saw the burning amulet at her neck, and I knew that she felt the same pain that coursed through my body.

Suddenly the circle around us burst into light and a shimmering translucent blue wall of energy surrounded us. Dimly I could see Pascalli struggling in a fight with foes I had not before noticed. Golgaron stood transfixed to my left, apparently unable to move before the awesome power of the chamber. A second wave of pain rushed through my hands and body. The sounds of my scream were swallowed up by Asmordreda's cries as she grasped furiously at the amulet around her neck. Her confidence and majesty waned, and her beauty seemed to begin to slowly melt away.

A great wind suddenly whipped at my face. Swirling torrents of light and energy began to race through the circle, buffeting both of us. The ground trembled. I felt transfixed, unable to force myself to push through the agony. Though I could dimly see Pascalli battling, no sounds crossed the barrier. What had Pascalli told me to do? My mind raced against the pain, grasping at memories that should not have seemed so distant. Send her back. I had no power beyond my hopes and my will. Send her back, the thought came powerfully.

I held that thought, and suddenly she staggered, as if struck by some unseen force. A thin trickle of black blood appeared at the corner of her mouth. She bellowed with animal rage as she lunged at me, her soft white fingers suddenly becoming razor claws hungry to tear my flesh.

"No!" I shouted, and held up my hand. She stopped short, as the force of my will created a barrier between us. "Go back!" I said, and swung my hand as if to push her away. The force of energy struck her, and she fell to one knee. Her perfect skin had begun to slowly dissolve away, revealing a scaly black hide beneath, though her body retained its perfect proportions.

"Never!" She lashed back, swinging one hand with a backhanded blow that sent a ripple of energy my way.

I raised my left hand to ward the blow, and with my right hand grasped a bolt of fire as it roared past, using its momentum to spin me around, out of harm's way and then redirecting it at my adversary. The fire caught her directly in the chest, and she flew back from the force of impact, slamming into the translucent barrier.

"You cannot win, child," she hissed. Her voice had lost all of its charm and majesty. "No mortal weapon can destroy me." Her hair had become a tangle of writhing serpents. Her eyes flared with red fire. She struggled to her feet. As she did, she clawed at the energy around her with both hands, preparing a new attack. A massive force caught me suddenly in the chest and lifted me from the ground. As I slammed into the barrier behind

me, I heard something crack. The acrid smell of smoking hair suddenly surrounded me, and I felt hot charges like lightning shooting down my back.

I slumped to the ground, rolling weakly away from the barrier. I cannot truly describe the heavy despair that overcame me then. My weaknesses and failings seemed to be spread before me like cards on a table, each to be measured and counted. What a foolish boy I felt. That I should stand before one of the great powers in our grand universe seemed ludicrous. Across the circle Asmordreda crouched. Though disheveled and shaken her incredible sense of power had not completely disappeared. The outward mantle had largely crumbled, but she still carried a sinister alluring beauty that I no longer felt the strength to resist.

"Join me," she whispered. Her voice carried an icy, dangerous tone, but her manner did not threaten so much as invite. "This chamber holds the key to the universe. Together ..." somewhere her voice faded.

I lost my sense of space and time. I felt my mind drifting into nothingness. Asmordreda stood now, speaking to me, beckoning, but I could not hear her words or see her clearly. The fire from the rings burned my hands until my fingers curled into twitching balls of agony. I felt a fiery pain in my chest. I coughed, and the spasm caused me to vomit. In my delirium I saw the blood mixed with bile and knew that I was bleeding inside. Death was certain. Few recover from such wounds, and only with careful care and expert attention.

At my feet I saw my father's spear. Dumbly I grasped it in my hands. My fingers felt wet and slipped a little as I used the spear to lift myself from the ground.

As I stood, suddenly everything zoomed into clarity.

"Don't be stupid," she said. "You can't kill me." I saw her raise a hand to throw another bolt of energy, and I waited.

Time slowed. I saw her hand come down, and in my mind I knew it was a useless gesture. I saw the energy form, heard it resisting her will but compelled by the power of the chamber, and I understood. With my mind, I reached out and told the energy to stop. The bolt dissipated. Asmordreda stood confused, angry.

I willed my body to become whole. I felt and heard the elements within my flesh crying their resistance. I asked them to ignore the natural order of death and return my organs to their proper function. They obeyed. I ordered the burning in my hands to cease, and it stopped. A rush of power such as I had never felt consumed me. I saw with absolute clarity the world around me. I heard the breathing of Pascalli as he cowered in a corner, overwhelmed by the surging power of the chamber.

"Give me the amulet," I said. I did not recognize my voice for the power that it carried. Asmordreda cried out in horror and rage as the amulet suddenly tugged at her neck, pulling her towards me. She clawed at it, tried to pull it back, but it

burned her hands. The searing power of it scorched her neck. She cried out in agony until she finally pulled her head away and the amulet flew to me.

I put the amulet around me neck and suddenly the entire room filled with blinding white light. The circular barrier vanished with a thunder-crack. At the back of the room a swirling circle of blue energy played against the wall. Within its depths I saw vast angry mountains behind a horde of demonic enemies.

"Go back," I ordered and pointed to the portal.

"Never," she spat.

She raised her hands in fury and began to call for help or power, but to no avail. "Go back," I ordered again, and with my mind I pushed her unwillingly through the portal. Screaming, she was dragged, her claws leaving deep scratches in the stone, into a world of demons. She disappeared into the blue depths.

"Colter," I heard a small, insignificant voice. "Destroy the portal." I looked around, and saw Pascalli in the corner pointing at the gate to another realm. He seemed so much smaller, like a child. "You must destroy the portal," he repeated. "Remember the plan." He begged. He sobbed. "Remember who you are."

Who was I? No longer a child, I held all the power of the universe in my hands. What did I need with him? What of the Kaarum? I could destroy them if I wished. What of Dina, my mother, my sister? They were beneath me now. Even the emperor had no power to rival mine. With a glance I willed the portal closed. I did not need it.

"You must give it up, boy," said the voice again. "It wasn't meant to be." I turned to face the wizard. I felt contempt, but no malice. "Look into the future. This is not your destiny."

Of a sudden my mind filled with visions of battles. Great armies of men surged against my might, but I flung them away carelessly. I destroyed them as a child might kick down an anthill. The horror of it overwhelmed my senses. Still the power of the chamber coursed through me, the power to save, to grow.

A thought came unbidden. A memory of our farm when I sat after a long day toiling in the fields hoping beyond hope for a crop at the end of the season. I heard and knew and felt the elements around me, and I missed the mystery and longing to see things grow of their own will and nature. Though I could bend the world to my will, I could not love it in the way I had once loved it. I saw my mother and sister, Dina, Iven, all those I loved fleeing from me. A part of me scorned them, reveling in my own majesty. A greater part of me hated it.

I took off the amulet, and held it in my left hand. "Get out!" I said to Pascalli. When he did not move I grabbed his arm and pushed him to the door. "Get out while you still can!" Golgaron quickly followed the wizard, and I found myself alone.

I went to the center of the circle, and raised the amulet high. As I flung it to the ground I willed the earth to swallow it. The chamber rumbled as a crack opened in the floor. I turned and fled the chamber, running as fast as my tired legs could carry me. Behind me the chamber collapsed, and I was thrown to my face by the wind and dust.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

Sometime later I woke as Pascalli brushed dust from my clothes and armor. My bones ached. My hands and neck felt raw, and breathing was painful and difficult.

"You've bruised your chest somehow," said Pascalli. "I didn't get all of the details of what happened in there. You've been asleep for nearly an hour."

"Are we safe?" I asked.

"You did well, my boy," said Pascalli when I could finally stand. "We're safe enough for now."

"I survived," I said.

"Which is more than the opposition can say," replied the wizard with a wink and a smile. "And you rid the world of a power that was never meant to be."

I smiled to myself. "Perhaps," I admitted. I looked around. The end of the corridor had collapsed completely. Rubble piled to the ceiling. "Any idea how to get home?" I asked.

"Several," replied the wizard. "However if you would like to get there without starving to death then I'm afraid I may come up a bit short."

"I was afraid of that," I said. "At least I had one good hot meal." I looked around again, and asked, "Where's Golgaron?"

"He's in the study. He said he'd wait for you there."

We found the statue waiting for us in the center of the room, silently guarding the books he had guarded for centuries. For a few markets afterwards I had difficulty breathing, and my hands turned numb from time to time. I remembered only portions of the visions I had while in the Key to the Stars, but often bits of knowledge came to me unexpected. The voices of the world sounded clearer to me than before. I slipped the rings from my hands and put them carefully into my pocket.

"Are you hurt, master?" he asked.

"A little," I replied. "It's not serious. Do you know how to get back to the palace?"

"There is a secret way that Davmandius used," said the statue. "There is a staircase hidden here in the study that emerges in his chambers."

"Lead on," I said, "I'd like a warm meal and a real bed again."

We emerged from the depths of the dark stairs at night. I yearned for the touch of wind against my skin and the change of smells carried by the summer breeze. After so many markets in

isolation my skin had turned as pale as snow, and the starlight dazzled my eyes. I noticed my own body odor when we reached the fresh air and realized how long it had been since I bathed after passing through so much blood and mire.

"I think you'll find the palace feels differently now," said Pascalli. "Your time below will have changed you. I think you will also find that those we left behind have changed."

"I nearly forgot their faces," I replied. "I don't want to go back down there for a long time."

Pascalli laughed softly. "I'm afraid you may not have a choice in that. There is still a great deal of work to be done here. Danger and loneliness may create one kind of a man. Building a town makes another."

No servants dwelt in the Palace before we entered the darkness, for Pascalli had deemed it still too dangerous, though I had slept there from time to time. The silent dark corridors seemed a welcome relief, though I longed to see my friends again.

"I would like a bath," I told Pascalli.

"And a shave," said the wizard. "I will find us some clean clothes and soap. I wonder if the bath house is still in order."

Pascalli left for the baths, leaving me alone with Golgaron.

"Much has changed since I have been gone," observed the statue. "These halls were filled with laughter and happiness." His tone showed no emotion. I do not believe he felt the same way about things as a person usually does, but I knew that he did not like what he saw.

"There will be laughter here again," I promised. "I'll need your help to make that happen."

"I am your servant," he replied.

"Then I would like you to go each night, into the upper halls of the palace and drive out or slay the evil creatures that have come here. When that is finished, go into the city and clean it out as well."

"Yes, master. Will you continue your training?" He asked.

"Yes, everyday," I replied. "Train me as you would train any of Davmandius' generals or sons. This is my home now. I would like to defend it properly."

"Then we will begin at dawn." He left me alone and hurried into the upper portions of the palace. Somebody had gone to great pains to clean the chambers and halls. Not only had the baths been repaired and put in order, but the royal apartments were clean and furnished. The place felt more a home than I remembered it, and I could not help but compare it to the burned out house on the farm.

I found Pascalli and bathed and put on fresh clothes. Pascalli produced a shirt and trousers, clearly made by a fine tailor. I do not know where he found them. "It will take your body a few days to re-adjust to a regular day and night," Pascalli told me. "It will be easier if you stay awake tonight

and all day tomorrow. I think I will look around the city a bit and see what has changed."

"I hope they finished the rest of the planting," I said.

"I'm sure they finished that much. Twoleaf already had plans to clear herself a plot beyond the walls. We'll need industry to establish trade. I don't think Delvin has given much thought to reopening the mines or harvesting the timber that grows so freely, but Thorn promised to scout the old traces for me. The city will need all of these things and much more if you want it to survive." He caught the distracted look in my eyes. "We can talk about all of these things tomorrow. Let your mind rest for now."

I did not feel tired, only lonely. I was also curious about the city. I really had no idea how long we had been absent, but I did not feel like wandering around alone. A small garden is hidden away behind the palace, planted with ancient oaks and wildflowers. Although it had not yet been fully restored, I found it beautiful. I went there when I felt like thinking. That night I wandered out to greet the stars. The moon showed only a sliver in the sky, but the stars twinkled brightly and the night felt warm. I found an open place and stared up, thinking. Some memory of the Key returned, and I looked down quickly.

I smelled her before she spoke, though I had not seen her in the shadows. "The summer nights are beautiful here," she said.

I stood for a moment, drinking in her scent, my eyes closed, trying to forget my journey. "No more beautiful than you are to me," I said, turning to face her.

Dina had changed little. The air of confidence and responsibility weighed a little heavier on her. She did not carry her bow, but her face remained the same as I remembered.

"In many dark moments I missed you," I said, and pulled her close. I held her tight, and she wept into my shoulder, sobbing away the grief and longing.

"Some of them have given up hope that you would survive," she said. Then she smiled. "Here you are, looking none the worse for wear."

I chuckled a little, and then coughed as my chest hurt, and smiled back. "Hardly unscathed," I said. She frowned, and curiosity leapt to her face. "Some other time," I cautioned. "Much has happened. Much that I cannot explain, and that I do not wish to remember."

We talked the night away beneath the stars and trees. I did not wish to dwell on the dark times or discuss the violence we had faced. Instead she told me of the city. Many buildings had been repaired, crops planted. They were clearing the land around the lake, erasing the carnage of the Kaarum. Some of the adventure seekers had disappeared with a small treasure, all they could pack. The loss of horses would be worse than losing the gold. "We have plenty of gold." She laughed. "But nothing to spend it on."

"Yes," I agreed. "There is more treasure below. I want to build the city. I want to make this a place where people can live. We can cut timber and send it south along with furs. Our gold will buy equipment, tools, everything we need. This is my home now. I want to build it into something we can be proud of."

"And is the lord of Darnuth Keep to have a lady?" she asked, her eyes sparkling in the starlight.

"A fitting question." Laural stepped from the shadows. The moonlight highlighted the paler tones of her hair. Laural wore a tight fitting buckskin vest. I noticed for the first time a tattoo on her upper left arm. Something in her eyes betrayed a change I had not previously recognized. "I saw the wizard and thought I might find you here. We've had a fair bit of trouble since you've been gone."

"At least I had a good rest," I replied. My tone was more than slightly condescending. Dina pulled away from me slightly. She stared at Laural with steely anger.

"You've no business here tonight," said Dina.

"Neither have you," replied Laural. "The palace belongs to the king alone."

"Then at least I have the right to be in my own gardens," I replied. Laural stopped short, avoiding my eyes. "I also presume I can have guests if I choose."

"I'm sorry," replied Laural. "We are all curious about what happened. Everyone has been on edge lately."

"No doubt a great many tragedies trouble you, young ladies," said Pascalli. Laural jumped at the sound of his voice. "I am certain that Delvin has not allowed either of you the freedom you would have preferred, though I imagine you have still found ways to create mischief. I do not think you will find Scratch in the mood to deal with your squabbling at the moment."

I found Pascalli's intervention both reassuring and annoying. Though I felt refreshed simply breathing clear air again, my mind felt tired. "You are right. I don't need arguing right now."

Pascalli began to usher the women out of the garden when I caught Dina's hand. The wizard noted my motion and wrapped an arm around Laural's shoulder. "Have you ever seen a crystal garden?" I heard him ask Laural as they left.

"You asked me a question," I said to Dina when we were alone. I slipped one of the matching rings from my pocket. "In the darkness you brought me hope. I want to share that hope with you now, and forever."

Somewhere in the starlight our lips met, and I pulled her into an embrace I hoped would never end.

THE END