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## DARK LAIR TRILOGY **WYVERN** Book One

## **DJO'BRIEN**

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## DJO'Brien DARK LAIR TRILOGY

### **WYVERN**

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Dedicated with love to my wife and children.



First and foremost my family, without whose support none of this would be possible.

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## **Prologue**



AMBERLAY STOPPED THE horse and stared back at the mountains. Watching the flashes of light flaring and dying, a testament to the desperate fight taking place filled her with sorrow.

Artatan, her love, and Grifwen the dwarf mage were standing alone in the pass, holding back the Karesh search party, giving her the time needed to escape.

Tears dripped from Amberlay's cheeks. She would have been by his side at

the end but for the babe kicking wildly in her womb.

The Benteer Mountains of Northern Jarro were bitterly cold even in summer. It was now midwinter and a shroud of snow covered the peaks and passes between, magnifying the moonlight, lending the dark a gentler twilight hue. With a heavy heart, she spurred the horse on. Struggling through deep clawing drifts, an hour sped quickly by before the pass opened onto the lower reaches of the mountain from where she could see for many miles out into the flat grasslands of the Northern Plain. All was still and dark, a lone pinprick of light miles away offering the only sign of habitation.

The muscles of her lower back and groin contracted, making her grip the horse's mane and gasp for breath. At length, the pain passed, and she continued on. The flashes on the mountain top were growing dimmer now; his strength was

ebbing. She knew it would not be long.

There was little hope of concealing her tracks in the deep snow; her only hope now lay in finding sanctuary. The Karesh were relentless; they'd tracked them from Timberland North, and all the many miles between, all the way out to this lonely and desolate place. Untiring, ruthless, remorseless killers in league with the enemy of all, they would show little mercy.

The horse was at the last of its strength. Leaning forward, Amberlay placed her hands on the sides of its neck. A gentle light flowed, refreshing and energizing tired muscles, sore limbs. The horse leapt forward, its strength

replenished.

The light of the dwelling was closer though still far off, and she could just about make out a last weak flash of light high up in the pass. With her head hanging low, she urged the horse onward, away from the mountains, and away from Artatan. The more she rode, the more the pains returned with vigour, pulsing, squeezing, and robbing her of breath.

Sweat trickled down her brow and back causing fingers of steam to rise and

quickly dissipate, she felt no cold.

Away from the slopes, the snow depth was lessening, and she hurried the horse to a trot. The pains were coming regular and strong; she was running out of time.

THE CONVENT NESTLED peacefully in the solitude of the northern hills. The sisters here were self-reliant, their lives dedicated to prayer and inner contemplation.

It was very late, and Mother Superior Thronso was seated at her desk finishing a letter to the head of the order. The rest of the nuns lay fast asleep in their beds.

Loud banging at the main door startled the Mother Superior, her head snapping up, her eyes hard and piercing. 'Whoever could it be at this hour? We

are not expecting any visitors,' she muttered to herself.

Picking up a candle, she rose from her seat and cautiously walked out into the dark, cold hallway outside her office door. More urgent banging followed. She arrived at the door just as two other nuns appeared from their cells, looks of concern painting their faces.

Sister Magilla even looked frightened. 'Whoever could it be at this late hour,

Mother?' she asked, wide eved, her hands covering her cheeks.

'There's only one way to find out, Sister. Open the door!' ordered the Mother Superior.

'But Mother, what if it's a beast, or worse?'

'Beasts of nature don't knock at doors, child. Now open it and let's have a look at this late-night caller!'

Magilla pulled back the bolt and eased the door open. Amberlay fell inward onto the stone floor of the hall, curling herself into a ball, gripping at her stomach. She was having strong contractions.

The veins of her neck bulged, and her face was a deep red.

Magilla screamed as the body of the young woman suddenly appeared at her feet.

'Hush, Sister!' admonished the Mother Superior. 'Can't you see that it's a woman? And in the last stages of labour, by the look of her. Quickly now, help me bring her into your cell, and make certain you bolt this door again.'

The two nuns helped Amberlay into the warm bed that Magilla had only

recently vacated.

The Mother Superior turned to the second nun. 'Sister Odetta! Go wake, Sister Freena, and tell her we urgently need her expertise. Then bring hot water and towels. Go now, quickly!' She said, ushering the young nun out of the room and closing the door.

Magilla was standing awkwardly to one side, fidgeting with her hands.

'Don't just stand there like a nincompoop, Sister. Get the girl some drinking water!' ordered Mother Thronso.

Magilla jumped, then nodded, and opened the door to leave.

'And bring a big basin while you are at it! And bars of soap!' she called after Magilla's retreating back.

Still curled up, Amberlay was grunting and gasping for air.

Mother Thronso knelt beside the bed rubbing the young woman's forehead. 'Easy, child, you will be all right now. Everything will be just fine. You're safe here with us. Don't fret, now.'

Sister Freena burst through the door. She was heavyset, and of middling years, well used to tending the sick and delivering babies in the small villages of the district. 'I came as soon as I was told, Mother,' she blustered. 'Do you know how much time there is between contractions?'

'About two minutes, Sister.'

'Then she is almost ready,' Freena acknowledged, pulling back the blankets covering Amberlay.

THREE HOURS LATER, a baby's cry echoed through the halls of the old nunnery. The Mother Superior was cleaning the child as Sister Freena tended to the patient. Amberlay smiled as the boy was finally placed into her arms. She kissed his head, her tears flowing.

'Congratulations, my dear; you have a healthy son. Have you chosen a name for him?' asked Mother Thronso.

'Yes... Brinn. After his grandfather,' Amberlay said, stroking Brinn's wispy black hair. Her tears dropped onto the baby's face, making him blink and turn away.

'And what of the father, my dear? Who is it we should contact?'

Amberlay looked up at the faces of the smiling nuns. Magilla was cooing at the baby and Freena was pouring a glass of water for her to drink. 'I can't thank you all enough for what you have done to help me.'

The nuns all smiled and nodded. 'There is no need to thank us,' Freena replied, handing Amberlay the glass. 'It is a blessing that you came to us.

Amberlay smiled, but it was clear that she had something on her mind.

'Please don't be offended, but I would like to speak to Mother Thronso alone,' she said.

The two nuns simply straightened and nodded their acceptance before leaving the two women alone.

Amberlay looked down at her son's face again. His eyes were deep brown, almost black just like those of Artatan, but his hair was like her own, raven black. She managed to tear her gaze from her boy's face at last, looking up at the Mother Superior, taking in a deep breath.

'As you can see, Mother, I had no choice but to come here to you. But I'm afraid to say that I have put you all in great danger.'

The old nun's face became serious. 'How so, child?'

'Creatures of the dark, even now, track me here to this place. They will show little restraint if they arrive and find me here.'

The Mother Superior did not appear fazed. She waved her hand as if to instantly dismiss any notion of danger. 'Our walls and doors are strong and not easily breached,' she voiced. 'Besides, we have witnessed times of conflict before; we are more prepared than you might know, so please do not fret, child.'

'Your doors will not be a hindrance to those that follow,' said Amberlay. 'They will smite them in a trice. Because of this, I must leave your midst immediately; I could never forgive myself if they were to hurt you on my account.'

'That's preposterous! You are in no condition to travel! And what of the newborn? He will not survive the cold. The babe must rest awhile here, and build strength. I beg of you, give it a few days at least.'

Amberlay hugged Brinn close to her and kissed his head again, fresh tears falling. 'Will you take him into your care, Mother? I wouldn't ask if I were not at my last. Whence I go, he cannot travel.'

'Is there no other way, child? What of the baby's father?'

'Dead upon the mountain, his head a trophy hanging from a Karesh saddle.'

The old nun sat back on her haunches for a moment. 'I would argue, but I see the truth of your words in your eyes. I am sorry for your pain that is so clear to see. But you have my word; I will protect your babe as if he were my very own.'

Amberlay's body shook as she wept. 'Thank you, Mother.'

RUMMAGING THROUGH HER saddlebags, Amberlay handed the old nun two bags of gold coin of unknown mint. Then she donned her armour, belted on her sword, strapped a quiver of many arrows to her back, and finally, grasped a bow in her left hand.

She was transformed, a warrior's steel shining in her eyes.

'I go now, Mother, and shall not return. Love him as I would have.'

The Mother Superior held Brinn in her arms, holding him close to her bosom to prevent the chill air from seeping into his tender bones. She nodded, no words coming forth.

She appeared every inch maternal, already so protective of her small charge. Amberlay took a strange gold medallion of a crouching panther from her bag, and placed it inside the baby's blanket. 'For when he comes of age.'

'I understand. He will be safe; have no fear.'

'There's one thing more that you must do for him, Mother. I am sorry to ask for more.'

'By all means, child, speak it. Nothing is too much trouble for the babe.'

'They will smell my scent emanating from his skin and come here. You must bring him into your deepest cellar; surround him with herbs and strong-smelling flowers. Thorn-root would be best since they cannot abide its fragrance. You must do this as soon as I leave.'

'I will see to it.'

Amberlay bent down and kissed her son one last time, then sprang up into her saddle. 'I will lead them a merry dance, and extract a heavy price, before I am done.'

'Go with the blessings of the gods, child. I hope we will meet again.'

'Not in this life, Mother.' Turning the horse, she rode out of the courtyard and into the hills, and never returned.

OVER THE FOLLOWING weeks, farmers found many grave mounds along the route she had taken. Some were opened and discovered to contain the bodies of foul-looking wicked creatures never before seen in the lands of Jarro. But Amberlay was never seen again.

High up on the mountain, a Karesh chieftain was leading what was left of his company back across the Benteer Pass. Tied to his saddle were three heads, one a dwarf while the others were not. The young lovers were together again.

# 01Revenge



### LORD DARRIK'S FORTRESS

Year 540 Mur-ro

The walls of the Keep were a miserably cold and lonely place to be, especially at night when every shadow and dark corner warned of hidden dangers.

Drizzly rain was falling up and down the walkway, swirling and twisting in

the wind until it seemed to be coming from every direction at once.

Gaf hated sentry duty, he hated it with every fibre of his sinewy old body. He had been in Lord Darrik's employ for ten years, and before that, an infantryman

His many battle wounds had long since healed to leave ragged scars, little badges of honour, each one with its own story to tell. And tell them Gaf did,

Tales that would grow in magnitude and splendour depending, that is, on how much ale had been consumed and, of course, on who was listening at the time of

He would finally retire in six months' time, and the master had graciously said he could have the little cottage down by the river rent free, in thanks for his vears of good service.

Gaf nodded. The master was a fair man, but harsh too when needed, such as the time he'd caught him asleep on duty. At the time, he hadn't been with Darrik

long, barely a year.

Recalling it, sweat moistened his brow. 'Kicked me all the ways down the length o' the parapet an' down them steps to the dungeon, an' personally locked me in the cells. Bastard!' he mumbled, quickly followed by a sheepish look over his shoulder in panic at his own words.

Satisfied he was truly alone, a long slow breath escaped his lips.

'There really weren't a need for it. A simple warnin' would have been enough. An' on top o' that, accusin' me o' bein' drunk too! Drunk? Not me. Okay, so I had a few nips, but only to ward off the cold,' he mumbled, then reddened as the truth screamed a bitter protest somewhere in the back of his mind.

A week in the cells peeling potatoes for the cook was the punishment, but once served, no more had been said about it. Darrik didn't brood on a one-off mistake as long as the necessary lesson had been learned. 'No, when all were said an' done, his temper aside, the Master's a good man to soldier for.' Gaf nodded again in recognition. 'Though he's been dark o' late for the loss o' his new young wife. A pretty one were that lass. One o'the prettiest I ever seen. The menfolk was always talkin' about her. Such a tragedy though, the way she went. Some say she slipped. Then again, some say she jumped. As fer me, I don't know what to make o' it all. Grimbal the blacksmith said he heard she were pushed. Shame really.

'Anyways, such a loss, an' so young an' all. Much too young for the master, I would've thought. She weren't more 'an twenty. So how much older is he? Let me work it out. Let's see. He's somewheres atween fifty and sixty. So how much's 'at?'

Gaf tried counting using his soaked fingers. 'Ah, damnation!' He shook his head in frustration. He wasn't much good with numbers that went higher than twenty. 'It's too much anyways! I knows 'at much,' he said a bit too loudly.

It was time to walk the wall again. Every fifteen minutes, up and down he would go. Up and down, up and down. Sometimes, he was in a world of his own, going through the motions of the walk, seeing precious little.

There really was no shelter from the rain tonight, but he couldn't get much wetter than he already was. So, with a little grunt, Gaf pushed himself upright and away from the tower wall against which he had been leaning for support.

'Oh, me achin' bones!' he grumbled, hefting up his shield and spear. 'If I

didn't know no better, I'd swear these damn things is gettin' heavier.'

The gusts were stronger the farther away he went from the tower's protection, causing him to squint against the stinging droplets when he did dare to cast his eyes upward.

'Bout 'nother hundred paces to the next tower, I wager. Then a quick rest an' back again,' he muttered, shaking his head forlornly. 'An' I'm soon to go to home, to me bed, though that'll be cold tonight an' all. An' I'll need to warm it first. Fair soaked to the skin I am, to the very skin an' bones of me. A man would be fortunate not to die of the terrible shivers on a night like this,' he complained.

He walked and he whined, stomped and cursed under his breath, steam rising as he spoke into the darkness, tiny wisps rising and dissipating. 'No, I sure ain't gonna miss tramping these walls on cold wet nights like tonight,' he muttered,

stepping along in long-practiced cadence, without missing a beat.

Gaf didn't notice the first sign of danger, a light scraping noise followed by a heavy meaty thump against the outside of the Keep wall. To his credit, he did hear the second meaty thump, stopping him dead in his tracks. Years of military training rushed to the fore as he snapped into action, shield raised and spear lowered in one fluid movement.

'Who goes there?' he shouted rather weakly. 'Who's that in the night?'

No one answered. The wind and rain gusted past his ears, momentarily impeding his hearing, as the gathering drips ran down his chapped pink cheeks to fall with a regular beat from his chin.

'I said, who goes there?' he commanded again, but louder this time and with more conviction. Show yourself now, friend, or face the consequence. Last chance!'

Gaf's heart was pounding so loudly that it could no doubt be heard in the very bowels of the fortress.

Again, his query went unanswered.

Gaf glared at the crenelling, his mind painting a picture of enemy troops clambering up the height on long spindly ladders. He paused, thinking through his next move.

I could shout an alarm to the watch sergeant below and the whole garrison would be on the walls in seconds. But what if it's yer bloomin' imagination, ya old toad? He thought.

Gaf edged slowly towards the outside wall on the balls of his feet, trying to

see over the rim, but to no avail. 'Damn yer short arse!' he growled.

Well, it was just no use; he still couldn't see anything beyond the wall's thick rim.

Inching forward, he finally reached the edge and with shield up and spear held aloft, he quickly looked over the side. Half expecting to see a ladder full of enemy soldiers, he gritted his teeth and put on his most fearsome snarl. But there was nothing. Rainwater coursed freely down the outside of the wall into the blackness of the night, way beyond his ability to see.

'Nothin', you bliserin' idiot!' he chided himself. 'There's nothin' there.' Just then, Gaf noticed a movement to his left out of the corner of his eye, a strange dark mass that seemed to be attached to the very stone of the wall. The mass

moved, a head peering up.

Gaf didn't get a chance to scream as a fist cracked his jaw, dropping him to the wet stone floor. He would get to dream for a few hours. The shadow slunk over the wall and dragged the guard's unconscious frame into a dark corner, where it tied him up.

'Sleep well, friend,' the shadow whispered, then smiled, patting the old soldier's head. Brinn Thronso had been born with extraordinary abilities. He could scale any building, possessed incredible eyesight even at night, and had

been blessed with unnatural strength and agility.

The army found good use for those fine attributes, and Brinn had become a member of the most feared and respected group of soldiers in Jarro. The Pathfinders were legendary, and he was their best. They had changed his name. Now, he was simply known as Panther.

Whether it was assassinations, spying, or simply killing enemy soldiers, the Pathfinders were the elite. Blending into their surroundings, they could strike stealthily to carry out any designated assignment, extracting themselves with little trace. They were sword masters, experts in hand-to-hand combat, and fiercely loyal to the king and to each other.

But tonight, Panther was not acting on orders.

Tonight, it was personal.

Brinn crept noiselessly along the upper wall of the Keep and down the winding stairs toward the guards' sleeping area. Finding the room vacant, he opened the door and carefully peered out. The corridor was empty and dark with no sign of life.

Turning right, he headed for the stairs to the lower level and just as he was about to descend, two heavily armed soldiers came tramping up towards him. In a flash, he scampered up towards the ceiling, wedging himself in the darkened corner at the joining of two walls.

Seeing nothing, the guards passed by oblivious to his presence; as they disappeared from view, he dropped down and descended the stairs towards Darrik's private chambers.

Oil lamps lit the way, one every ten paces or so. Keeping his back to the wall,

Brinn eased his way along, quenching the lamps as he went.

'Much better. Nice and dark, just the way I like it,' he whispered. Coming to a bend, he pulled out a small mirror and carefully adjusted it so that he could see around the corner. 'Good, there's the door to the master bedchamber, and not a guard in sight.'

Slipping the mirror back into his pocket, he quietly crept down to the door. Placing his right ear against it, he listened. The sound of snuffling snores carried

through the heavy wood.

Trying the handle and finding it locked, he retrieved a lock pick from his belt,

and probed the workings.

This is where the skill comes in, he thought. It only took a few seconds as the door lock wasn't a particularly good one. A two-year-old could have opened this with a swaddling pin. Not really much of a challenge at all, he thought, slightly disappointed, slipping easily inside.

On the bed lay a fat balding man in his mid-fifties, snorting and snoring in a deep sleep. By the dresser lay an empty wine jug. Brinn saw the man's face clearly in the flickering half-light of the dying fire. It was Lord Darrik, Defender

of the North, cousin to the king.

Brinn's blood rose, staring at the pig responsible for taking his woman.

*My beautiful Sherii*, he remembered. A large lump formed in his throat, he forced it down deep inside, turning his heart to black marble, cold and hard.

Clamping his hand over Darrik's mouth, the Defender of the North immediately awoke and tried to fight off his attacker, but Brinn had inhuman strength. Outmatched and powerless to resist, Darrik quickly surrendered.

'Do you know who I am?' asked Brinn, forcing Darrik's head down into the

coarse blankets.

Even with Brinn's hand clasping his chin, Darrik shook his head vigorously.

'I am going to remove my hand. If you call out, you die! Is that clear?'

Darrik nodded his understanding.

Brinn removed his vice-like grip but kept his hand close to Darrik's mouth.

'Who are you? What do you want of me? If it's money... I'm not a rich man, but you can have whatever I've got,' whined Darrik. 'Just tell me what you want and it's yours.'

'I don't want your filthy money, you scum-sucking toad!'

Darrik blinked in shock at Brinn's venomous tone.

'The king would pay a mighty ransom for my safe return. I-I am his cousin. He would not forsake me. After all, we are family.'

'If you mention the king again, I will tear out your tongue with my bare hands! Do you hear me?' Brinn hissed.

'I don't understand,' whined Darrik. 'What then is it that you want of me?'

Brinn remained silent for a long moment, staring blankly at the dying embers in the fireplace. 'What I want, you cannot give.'

'Why then are you here?'

'I'm a lonely traveler of the night, come in search of answers. Give them to me and I will be gone.'

'Answers to what? Tell me. I will happily help you, my friend.' Darrik was feeling a little more relaxed and sat up in the bed.

'To life and death, I have recently lost a loved one.'

'Ah, then we are kindred brothers. For I have also had a loss, you see. My wife, she also passed recently.'

'Really? Please tell me more. It may help me in my grief.'

'It's a tragedy. She... Well, she jumped from that very window there.' Darrik pointed to the long slit window in the wall.

'A sad loss. How many years were you together?'

'Oh, not long. It was our wedding night,' Darrik said, laughing nervously.

'How truly terrible. Were you in the room when she jumped, *friend?*'

'Why, yes, I was, but not conscious, you understand. It had been a very vigorous night.' Darrik winked.

'Of course. It was your wedding night after all. She must have been very... enthusiastic?'

'No, not really. But some wenches need a firm hand. You know the type. You would do likewise I think, eh friend?' He laughed again, mainly in fear this time.

In a movement that was nothing more than a blur, Brinn drove a knife into Darrik's mouth right up to the hilt, pinning his head to the ornate wooden headboard.

Darrik died with a look of shock and fear frozen on his face.

Brinn looked into the dying man's eyes, watching as the last sparks of life slipped away. 'No, I would not,' he whispered at last.

Pausing, he looked at the window for a long moment, and then left.

# 02 Stolen

#### 541 MUR-RO

An alliance of eastern nations under the leadership of Sulan Al-Imri was sweeping west, subjugating all before it. The western nations of Amaran and Anvar had already fallen and Jarro was next in line, in a war that had raged for almost fifteen years.

E'Ben was neutral but Prince Raltu, heir to the throne, had been secretly negotiating behind his ailing father's back; his price to aid Jarro being marriage to its beautiful Princess Megan. Though unhappy about the arrangement, King Fredrik Elamere had little choice.

He desperately needed E'Ben's army and if that was the price, so be it.

Both Jarro and the Eastern Alliance armies were locked in a death grip from which only one side could emerge victorious.

With two hundred lancers of her personal guard assuring her safety, Princess Megan's carriage sped along the Deel to Roat road on her way to a meeting with the heir apparent of E'Ben. A terrible weight had been placed upon her young shoulders. This meeting had to be a success, the fate of tens of thousands of her countrymen's lives depended on it.

'Column, halt!' ordered Colonel Artam. Thirty years of military experience had given him a sort of sixth sense about situations, and he didn't like what he was presently feeling. Not one little bit. It was his responsibility to convey the princess to the town of Em'Ber, just inside the E'Ben border, and back home again safely.

'Sir, orders?' a voice just behind his left shoulder inquired. It was Major Udal, a tough and competent officer new to the battalion, hand-picked by Artam himself.

Ahead, the road cut through the densely wooded hills known locally as The Belt, running in a semi-circle east and west of Deel. Of course, they could always circumvent the hills, but it would mean backtracking for twenty miles, adding another day to the trip. Not an option, Artam decided.

'Major, something's not right. Take a patrol ahead and scout the way. The column will follow at a safe distance.'

'Sir!' Udal snapped off a crisp salute and wheeled away. 'Captain Ilan, Lieutenant Kallen, with me! First twenty-five, by the twos, forward!' Ulam bellowed.

He set off at a trot, immediately followed by his twenty-five-man patrol, pristine in their gleaming ceremonial breastplates.

Artam waited until the patrol was almost out of sight before ordering the column to advance along the road which meandered into a wooded valley.

'That's where I would do it,' he mumbled to himself, shuddering at the thought of being attacked in such a desolate and lonely place. 'It's the ideal place for an ambush.'

The polished black exterior of the carriage reflected the mid-afternoon rays, highlighting the gold leaf and trim of the royal coat of arms on its delicately engraved doors.

Inside, Princess Megan Elamere and companion Lady Anabel N'Dhun sat wearily looking out of the windows at the unending and seemingly unchanging

view.

'Thank goodness we're moving again. We've been cooped up in this carriage for so long, I can no longer feel my bottom,' Anabel moaned. 'How much farther

do you think it is to the town of Em'Ber, Your Highness?'

Megan stared blankly out of the window, lost in thought, her mind firmly fixed on her meeting with the Prince Regent of E'Ben. She had met him once before and cared little for him, finding him memorable for all the wrong reasons. He was small, not particularly good looking, and boorish. Besides that, he also treated his court officials and hangers-on in a rude, offhand way, and was far too fond of hunting and drinking.

He was not the type of man she normally would have accepted as a suitor, but

these were not normal times, and she was faced with no choice.

Her father had made it clear, Jarro was in serious trouble, and the war was not going well. Too many lives had been lost and now there was no one left to replace them. If the situation did not change soon, the front line would collapse within six months. The consequence did not bear thinking about: Al-Imri would wreak a terrible revenge on Jarro for resisting for so long. He was a fanatic with a lust for conquest, a man who had gathered his great army and set them loose against Jarro, the only free nation still unwilling to submit to his rule. They would not be happy until every city, town, and village lay as smouldering rubble, and the survivors sold at the slave markets of Mabak-Var.

'Highness...?'

'What's that? I'm sorry, Anabel, I was miles away. What were you saying?'

'I was just wondering how much farther it is to the town?' Anabel smiled, flicking her long hair back from her face. She was an exceedingly pretty young woman with long blonde hair like Megan's, though it was not quite as lengthy or full, and she had blue eyes to Megan's green. At a distance, it was hard to tell them apart, but up close, there was no comparison.

Megan had a stunning natural beauty and was also kind and good-hearted.

But she could be as sharp and hard as steel if the need arose, being her father's daughter, and a worthy heiress to the throne. 'Another half day. Ten hours at least,' answered Megan.

'Oh, divine heaven, no! Say it's not so. I don't think I can take much more of this jiggling about,' huffed Anabel, stuffing another perfume-scented cushion under her bottom.

'It's best to keep your mind busy, Ana. Read your book or watch the scenery.'

'My book is dull, and the scenery is twice so. Except—' she stopped. 'Except for that handsome captain of the guard back there.' She winked, and craned her head to try to get a better view of the young man riding close to the carriage in all his sparkling finery.

'Hmm, sits his horse well, don't you think, Meg?' The young women were cousins and had been friends since childhood, so when alone, their conversation

had that natural informality that closeness brings.

'You're a bawdy letch, Anabel N'Dhun!' squealed a laughing Megan, hitting her friend with one of the many cushions that were lying about the carriage.

'Whatever do you mean, Highness? I'm simply an admirer of good form and

military correctness!' Anabel retorted, with feigned indignation.

'Hmm, of course you are.' Megan gave Anabel one of her, *I don't believe a word you are saying*, looks.

'Big strong thighs, I bet.' Anabel grinned mischievously and shrieked as she

ducked another flying cushion.

The column slowly made its way along the wooded road. It was not very wide, and the trees on either side were close-packed, causing an unnatural darkness. Sweet-smelling pine-sap infused the tranquil air with a rich, succulent, fragrance. An eerie silence had descended, making the itch between Artam's shoulder blades insufferable.

Something was definitely amiss and he didn't like it one little bit. The road wound on and on, turning each new bend he expected to see the patrol returning to report on what lay ahead. But there was still no sign, and he was getting concerned.

Midges and black fly swarmed the troops and their horses, driving both to distraction. The air was thick with them, offering simply no refuge from the biting little pests as the torment continued unabated.

'Gods be damned, but they are the devil's own creation,' swore Captain Mor,

feverishly slapping his face and neck.

'This? This is nothing! Just a momentary inconvenience. You should have been with us in Gantu in 511.' Artam smirked. 'Six months of pure hell, trekking through swampy hellholes, cleaning out slavers and pirates. The midges and mosquitoes attacked in military formation. Battalion after battalion. Great big black clouds—' His words were cut short by the impact of a crossbow bolt. Artam flew backwards over his horse's rump and onto the ground. The first volley killed half of the troop. All around, his men were dying. It was a massacre pure and simple.

The bolts, at such close range, sliced through the lancers' breastplates like glowing embers through parchment. The normally deadly efficient lancers had been trained to fight at the gallop and in open country, not on a small, confined,

heavily wooded road.

All of the officers were either dead or mortally wounded, Artam lying in the ferns at the side of the road, watched in horror as his men were systematically cut to pieces.

The sergeants tried to rally those still left standing and sallied on foot but now

heavily outnumbered, they were easily beaten back.

A few brave men tried to turn the carriage around so that the princess might escape. But one of the horses was killed, stranding the coach diagonally across the road. The last thing Artam saw, just before he died; was a bear-sized man with a big black beard, dressed in dark leather armour and furs, stepping from the undergrowth and roaring in triumph. Artam lay on his back, looking up at the swaying branches of a pine tree, feeling his life slipping away. His last thoughts were for his princess, and the shame that he felt at having failed her. *You old* 

*fool!* he thought. *Should have gone the long way 'round.* 

### 03

#### **Treason**



MAJOR ANTILLUS BROK was a tough and uncompromising commander who led his men from the front and could generally be found in the thick of the most frenzied fighting. Fierce grey eyes beneath thick greying hair set him apart from

most, while few held his steely gaze for long.

Those who knew, likened it to the cold fixed glare of a large predator, a snow leopard or a half-tame wolf. A strong square jaw and heavily built shoulders gave pause to even the toughest. If that was not enough, a deep frown now darkened his normally dour countenance, further twisting his features far beyond what could be described as human.

He should have been at the front with his men, but instead he was making for the Pathfinder headquarters in Kan-Ta by order of General Chael.

The message he'd received had been short and succinct:

Return to headquarters immediately. Bring three of your best men.

Signed,

General Drogo Chael.

Something must be seriously wrong to drag him and three of his best men all

the way back to the capital when every man was needed at the front.

Fewer than forty-eight hours and four horses later, here he was loping up the steps of the Pathfinder officer barracks. The guards at the main door, resplendent in their Pathfinder dress uniforms of green and blue, snapped to attention as he approached.

Just behind them stood the officer of the watch. 'Good evening, sir. Can I be

of assistance?' inquired the lieutenant.

'Evening. Major Brok to see General Chael. I'm expected.' Brok handed over his identity papers and orders to the young lieutenant.

'Very good, sir. Everything seems to be in order. The general is waiting for

you. Do you need directions?'

'I know the way.'

The lieutenant saluted again and opened the door.

Chael's office was up the stairs and to the left. Outside its solid grey doors stood two sentries. Brok walked to the door, the two men snapping to attention as he turned the brass handle and pushed the door open. Inside, the general's secretary was sitting at his desk. He immediately stood and saluted as Brok entered the room.

'Sir, it's good to see you again.' Sergeant Mangra had served under Brok until he lost a leg.

'Sergeant, it's good to see you too. It's been a while,' Brok replied, casually returning the sergeant's salute.

'Yes, sir, almost three years since this.' Mangra rapped his knuckles against

his leg, its dull report echoing like raindrops on hollow wood. 'I got the Silver Falcon for it, sir.'

'Indeed, and well deserved. In fact, I recommended you for the Falcon with gold arrows. But I suppose they only give those to men who are *severely* injured in the line of duty.' Brok couldn't hide the smirk. 'Perhaps if you'd lost both...'

The sergeant knew his old commander was gently ribbing him and there was no offence intended. 'Thank you, sir. In fact, I've been thinking of requesting a posting back to the front. I fancy another crack at getting those gold arrows,' Mangra replied with a laugh. 'If you'll just take a seat for a moment, I'll let the general know you're here,' he added, pointing to a line of chairs against the wall.

Brok sat and crossed his legs.

The sergeant opened one side of a set of burnished oak double doors. 'Major Brok to see you, sir.'

There was a muffled response.

'You can go in now, sir,' the sergeant said, holding the door open and closing it behind Brok after he had entered the general's office.

'Antillus, it's good to see you again.' The general walked over and warmly grasped Brok's hand.

'Ànd you, sir.'

'Care for a brandy, Major?' Chael asked as he sauntered towards a well-stocked drinks cabinet.

'Thank you, sir.'

'I imagine you've had a long trip,' remarked the general. 'Take a seat, I'll bring it over.'

'Yes, sir. The roads have been busy of late. Many are abandoning their homes

and fleeing to the west. It would seem bad news travels quickly.'

'Indeed. There's little cheer these days. You can't blame them really, can you? I'd do the same in their shoes, if I'm honest.' Chael passed a half-filled brandy glass to his friend and sat on the edge of his desk. There was a short silence. 'How bad are things at the front?'

'Very bad.'
'Go on.'

'The troops are surviving on half rations and have been doing so for a year. We have few or no supplies, and sickness stalks the rear areas like a ravenous beast. Cholera is so rampant that the injured men feel they are better off staying on the lines rather than chance going to the aid stations. The enemy is getting stronger, while we get weaker. Even the Pathfinder battalion is filled with new young faces, fresh out of training. They are doing what they can, in all fairness. Most of the old guard are dead or crippled. Frankly, it's a complete mess, sir. We need a miracle.'

Brok downed the brandy in one gulp and stared at his feet.

Chael shifted uncomfortably on the desk. 'I knew it was bad but, let's just say, you know how to paint a picture, and it's not a pretty one.'

'No, sir, it's not.'

The general stared silently into his brandy.

'Sir?

'Yes, Major.'

'If I may be direct. Why was I ordered back?'

The general took a deep breath before he too downed his drink. 'What I tell you now is a supreme secret. What you hear next must go with you to your grave. Understood?'

'Yes, of course.' Brok sat up in his seat.

'Three days ago, a diplomatic mission to E'Ben was attacked on the Deel to Roat road, by Gantu slavers. The reason for the mission, to finalise a treaty that would ally E'Ben and Jarro. Prince Ralto and Princess Megan were to be married, thus uniting our two nations under one banner. Princess Megan is missing, believed captured by the marauders.

'Prince Ralto, to his credit, has mobilised his army and shut down all border crossings into Anvar from E'Ben. But we suspect that the raiders have retreated north into Gantu through the Benteer Pass. Though we have no proof at present,

we strongly suspect that Sulan Al-Imri is involved.'

'I see! And my mission?'

'To find Princess Megan and rescue her, or failing that... kill her.'

'Sir?' Brok visibly recoiled.

'She cannot fall into the hands of the enemy, and if she does, all will be lost. The king is weak when it comes to his daughter.'

'Am I to understand the king knows nothing about this?'

'We have a higher responsibility to our nation, Antillus. Al-Imri is renowned for his callous disregard for life, his followers living in abject fear of his displeasure, for it is without cause or rational. All perceived slights are strictly punished beyond merit or sanity, and doubly so for those thought to openly defy him. There would be little mercy shown if we capitulate. Every man, woman, and child would be put to the sword; it would be genocide. We cannot allow them to use the princess as a weapon against us.'

'General, this is treason!'

'Yes, it is, Major, but for the greater good.' Chael could see that Brok was close to walking out. 'If it were in your power to save your people by sacrificing your princess and you refused, would that not also constitute treason?'

Brok stood and walked over to the window, his mind ablaze.

Chael walked over and stood beside him. 'We've been through much together, you and I, Antillus. I remember when you were a spirited and eager second lieutenant under my command,' he said, then paused. 'I would not entrust this mission to anyone else. There's simply too much at stake.' Chael shook his head sadly.

Outside the barrack walls, the city spread out into the distance, the street-lamps winking on here and there in slow progression in preparation for the fast-approaching night. Brok felt trapped. On one hand, his heart demanded loyalty to the Crown, while on the other, his head agreed with the logic of Chael's argument. He stood for a long time before finally speaking.

'Okay, I'll do it.'

'Thank you, Antillus. Believe me, I'm as unhappy as you that it comes to this.'

'Wait, General, I have a condition.' The general blinked. 'And that is?'

'I want Brinn Thronso released from prison.'

'That could be difficult given the circumstances. After all, he murdered the

king's cousin.'

'Panther may be the only chance we have of getting her out alive. Either he is in, or I am out. I will use any means at my disposal to return her safely. Now it's your turn for the hard call, General. So what's it to be?'

Chael mopped his brow before answering. 'Fine, I'll see what I can do.'

Brok turned to leave.

'Antillus, one thing more.'

'Your men cannot know of the second part. They must never know that the princess may have to be... well...'

'General, if they did, they'd gut me and leave me for the crows. And who could blame them?' Brok opened the door and left.



## 04From Bad to Worse



AS MEGAN'S HEAD CLEARED, her eyes opened to profound darkness, finding herself inside a container of some kind. The sides were concave, and the air stank of stale wine. As her eyes regained focus, a small air hole, emanating a shaft of pale light, confirmed she was indeed inside an empty barrel. The constant rocking motion led her to believe that she was most likely on a wagon of some sort. Outside the confines of her tiny prison, she could hear muffled voices.

Gagged, and with her hands firmly tied behind her back, there was nothing

The voices were those of her captors, so there was little point in drawing their

attention. Sleep encroached again.

Groggy, half aware that she was awake again and staring blankly ahead, her mind returned, the memories of the last few days hazy at best. They were drugging her, that much she remembered. Every day offered the same routine; the wagon would stop, the sound of approaching voices followed by a blast of fresh air as the lid was removed.

Then, she would be dragged out, fed, watered, and allowed to relieve herself, the regimen always finished off by the forced consumption of a foul-tasting brown liquid.

The drug was powerful, causing her to vacillate between being comatose, to mindless delirium or semi-consciousness, and back again in a constant unending loop.

On the few occasions in which clarity returned, her world was a confusing blur of twisting unfocused images before sleep swept back in to take her again.

Some days were better than others.

Some days, she could remember the ambush, remember seeing those brave men dying. Those images were vivid, comprising so much blood, so much noise, the cries of the wounded and the panicked squeals of terrified riderless horses, careering left and right. Sensing the fear and smelling the blood, every one of them galloping for their lives, followed, all too soon, by that terrible quiet.

In her mind, she had imagined battles lasting for hours with gallant soldiers fighting backwards and forwards, and heroes rushing to the fore, slaying all in their stead. Reality was very different. One minute, she was safely surrounded by handsome men in shining armour, ready to die at her command. A short few

minutes later, they were all lifeless bloodied heaps.

Then there was that huge bear of a man with his wiry black hair and bushy beard, laughing as he dragged them out of the carriage. Tears slipped down her cheeks at the recollection, and she didn't try to stop them.

Thankfully, sleep returned to drag her down; this time, she welcomed it.

A heavy jolt made the barrel sway, and she banged her head hard against its side. It really hurt, but at least she was awake again. It could have been minutes, hours, days; she wasn't certain as there was no way of knowing how long she had slumbered; knowing only that it was cold, her legs were numb and lifeless, and her knees were jammed right up under her chin.

They had placed something soft on the bottom for her to sit on, but it made

little difference; she was still in agony.

The wagon was no longer moving. Rough deep voices drew closer, and she felt movement as someone jumped on board. After a few seconds of fumbling, the lid was opened, inviting cold fresh air to wash over her face. Megan inhaled the refreshing coolness that felt so good, intoxicating, offering a promise of life.

Stars twinkled in the night sky overhead, her eyes slowly focusing on those

tiny little pearls, so high and free.

A shadow loomed; there was a face looking down at her. It was the bearded man from the ambush, and he was grinning. Her heart sank.

'Come on, Your Highness, out you come.'

He bent down, removed her from the barrel, and placed her on the bed of the wagon. Anabel had also been released, and was lying curled in a ball, eyes firmly shut.

With one hand supporting Megan's head, the bearded man slipped a blade between her bonds to sever the cords, allowing the blood to return back into her hands and legs in a joyous tingling rush.

She was as weak as a day-old babe, but free at last from the hateful ropes.

He looked at her for a moment, drinking in her beauty and perfect form. 'You're a pretty one, aren't you? We could have a lot of fun together, you and me.' He bent closer, smelling her neck and face, and ran his hot fetid tongue up her cheek, his breath a rancid mixture of tobacco and spicy food, a foul expulsion, odious and repugnant.

Megan cried out in disgust and tried to pull away but had no strength. She weakly punched the side of his head, but he just laughed. He stank of wine, stale sweat, and other vile odours, and she was completely powerless to resist his

intentions.

'Leave her!' boomed a deep powerful voice from somewhere behind the giant.

He turned slowly and looked. 'I wasn't goin' to cause her no mischief, m'lord. Just Grik's way of funnin', sir. No harm done.'

The hairy brute released Megan and jumped down from the wagon bed in one quick movement. 'Just getting her out for you as ordered. An' there she is, with not a hair touched on her pretty little head,' he said, his black-toothed smile failing to conceal his anger.

'Tend your troop, Grik. I will speak with her alone.'

'Yes, Lord Alsheer.' Grik nodded, banging a fist against his chest, fear tremoring his tone.

Megan could see why. Lord Alsheer had a strangely menacing look. He was tall but not broad, and his eyes were as black as a demon's heart. They had no pupils, just inky black emotionless ovals under hairless brows. Megan noticed he had no hair at all anywhere on his face or on his head. Though the greater portion of his bulbous head lay hidden beneath the shadow of a dark cowl, his skin had a corpse-like deathly white quality.

A cold shiver ran the length of her spine. Evil was at hand.

'Sincere apologies, Highness, for this rudimentary mode of transport. But we are short of fineries at the moment, you will understand. That will be remedied when we reach our destination.'

'And what is our destination?'

'All in good time, Highness. For now, know that escape is pointless. You are no longer in your homeland, and your only hope of survival lies in accepting your situation. Out there in the wild, there is only death... or worse, for you.'

'But sir, my friend needs help, she's sick.'

'Just a side effect of the sleeping potion; it will wear off soon. Now eat and

drink and we shall speak again another time.'

Alsheer clapped his hands, turned and walked away. One of his men hurried up with a tray of food and a jug of water and placed them on the rig bed beside Megan's feet.

Splashing water on Anabel's face caused her to open her eyes but only briefly, Megan held a cup up to her friend's lips, encouraging little sips as she

began to wake.

Glancing around the campsite, she watched as men moved here and there with familiar purpose, some preparing food, others tending horses. They had stopped for the night by the side of a small stream.

There was very little she could see in the darkness, but the land felt alien.

Alsheer had spoken true, and she somehow knew that they were no longer in Jarro.

'Oh, my head,' groaned Anabel.

Megan raised the cup to her friend's face again and for the first time, noticed that Anabel's hair was different. Her long blond locks were gone, chopped back into a rough bob and dyed black. Her own hair was the same. Gone too were their fine clothes, replaced by roughly made breeches and shirt. Her face reddened at the thought of having been stripped and redressed by male hands while unconscious. At a distance, they would look like two boys or young men. Very clever, she thought. A strangely dressed slightly built man approached. 'Good evening, Your Highness. I am Karem Toriz, and I have been assigned to you by Lord Alsheer for both your comfort and protection. My lord felt it prudent to ensure you have someone at hand to watch over you while we travel these barbarian lands.' Karem gave a quick nod in the direction of Grik and his men.

'Are these not Lord Alsheer's men?' asked Megan.

'Heavens no, Your Highness. Slavers and pirates, most of them. They would cut your throat in a blink if there were an inkling of profit in it.'

'Your clothes are strange to my eyes. Silks and satins I see, but of a different

cut.'

'They would look strange to your western eyes,' he nodded. 'It is a style best known in the east, my homeland, before I was called to serve the Great One.'

'Lord Alsheer?' asked Megan.

'No,' he answered smiling. 'Lord Alsheer also serves the Great One.'

'Exactly who is this *Great One?*' asked Anabel, finally coming fully awake. Karem's smile was warm. 'Some say he has been sent by the gods to unite the

world and bring peace, happiness, and tranquility to all.'
'And his name?' Anabel raised an eyebrow.
'Why it is Sulan Al-Imri of course. Lord of the east and south; and soon, the

The women looked at each other in silence. Things had suddenly gone from bad to worse.

## 05 **Old Friends**

X

'HERE IT IS, MAJOR, and I had a hell of a time getting it!'

It was late, the sparsely illuminated city reduced to a dapple of lantern glow islands against a sea of black. General Chael could move surprisingly quickly for a rotund mid-sixties desk warrior. Bounding the steps two at a time, he ran the length of the stairway leading from the palace, holding a scroll in one hand. Chael handed Brinn's release papers to Major Brok.

'How did he take it?' asked the major.

'Not very well, as you can imagine. At one point, I thought he was going to have *me* thrown in jail for the asking alone. The king's a hard man to cajole.'

'Thank you, General. Now we have a fighting chance.'

'Don't thank me yet. He is being released, on condition, into *your* custody. *If* the mission is a success...

That is, if you bring the princess back alive, Panther gets a full pardon and reinstatement into the Pathfinders with full rank and privileges restored.'

'And if we fail?'

'He is to be returned to the capital to finish his sentence in full.' 'What happens if he refuses to return?'

'He would be labeled an enemy of the Crown and hunted mercilessly.'

Brok smiled to himself.

'You seem amused.'

'It's nothing, General, just a soldier's humour,' answered Brok.

'Indulge me.'

'Well, you see, if we fail... the Crown will cease to exist.' Brok mounted and rode away.

Chael stood rooted, speechless, and alone.

THE OTHERS WERE WAITING as agreed by the prison's main gate. The Pathfinders were an irreverent bunch at the best of times. Military pomposity was despised and mostly overlooked in the field, each man earning respect by deed. That was the Pathfinder way.

Captain Martam Brand was simply known as Tam.

A tall, slim South Jarro landowner with dark blond hair and a fair complexion, Tam had joined the Pathfinders after losing the family estate in a game of cards. He was fast of hand, good with a sword, and could run at speed for many miles.

Sergeant Polom Matby was an extremely large and muscular farmer's son. When his father's only horse had died, it was Lom who'd taken over pulling the plough, and that was the way of it for years until his father scraped together enough money to get a new horse. Lom was not the quickest or brightest, but he could crush granite if properly motivated.

Sergeant Ingram Rattiger was small and slim, a ferret of a man, a born pickpocket and a ruthless assassin with an affinity for knives. Rat was not a man

you would want walking behind you day or night.

Brok dismounted, walked to the main entrance of the prison, and rapped on the wicket door. A small window opened, revealing a bloodshot pair of eyes and the crushed upper portion of a badly broken nose. 'I'm here to collect a prisoner,' he informed the guard.

'That so? Any chance you could be a tad more specific? There's quite a few in here, you know. Any chance of a name?'

'I'm here for Brinn Thronso.'

There was a pause. 'Did you say Thronso?'

'Yes, by order of the king.'

Brok passed the prisoner release scroll through the window slot. A longer pause followed.

'You'll have to wait, I've just sent for the warden,' said the broken-nosed one. Ten minutes slowly passed, finally the wicket door opened and a roundbellied warden stepped out wearing a coat over his nightshirt.

'Major, I must protest; this is most irregular. Do you realise what time it is? I was in my bed, for pity's sake!' the fat man moaned.

'Apologies, warden, but time is an issue.'

'Well, this is an outrage. I have a good mind to make a complaint. Dragging me out of bed at this hour!' he said, squinting, his bleary eyes still struggling to adapt to the light.

'Be my guest. To my knowledge, the king has not taken to his bed as of yet; though he is short to temper at the moment, or so I'm told. We can go there right now, and you can place your petition before him personally,' Brok said, beginning to turn away.

'The king, did you say?'

'Yes, warden, the king. The man who signed the release form that you are holding in your hand. King Frederick. The King of Jarro!' Brok roared at the stupefied warden.

'I do apologise, Major. I—I will release him at once, of course. I am the king's loyal servant,' he stuttered, red-faced and flustered.

With a curt nod, he turned and almost tripped over in his haste to get away.

Long moments passed before the warden reappeared, followed by two extremely large guards; between them hung an emaciated figure dressed in black. His manacled wrists and ankles were skinned and bleeding, his dark shoulder-length hair matted with dirt. To nicely finish off his particular look, an unkempt beard graced him from nose to chest. The guards let go, and he slumped to the ground.

Brok knelt and turned the prisoner over onto his back. It was Brinn.

The year in jail had obviously not been an easy one. A nasty black and purple bruise was covering much of the left side of his face and his left eye was swollen shut. Brinn smiled in a crooked fashion, belched, and passed out.

A waft of stale wine assailed Brok's nostrils, 'This man is drunk. How in the...?' Brok looked up at the warden who was already backing away towards the safety of the door.

'It was the only way we could keep him... contained, let's say. He smashed up three cells and put six of my men in the sick house.'

'So you pacified him using alcohol? For how long?' Brok was visibly angry now.

'All day and night. Usually, until he passes out, however long that takes,' the warden replied, giving a helpless, palms-up gesture.

'What I meant was, how long has this practice been going on? Days, weeks...?'

'Oh, I see. About ten months, roughly speaking. Give or take.'

Brok stood.

The two guards retreated back inside the prison door, quickly followed by the warden who briefly stopped before shutting it. 'Oh, and before I forget, you'll need these, Major.'

A set of keys came flying through the air.

Brok snatched them, knelt beside his friend and unlocked the manacles.

The warden quickly shut the door but opened the little window slot. 'Glad to have been able to help you, Major. All's in order, so a very good night to you,' he added, before quickly closing the window again.

'Bit jumpy, wasn't he?' said Tam in his drawling South Jarro accent.

'Give me a hand here, will you?' Brok struggled trying to lift the dead weight of the still unconscious Brinn.

'He's out cold, sir. Ain't nothin' wakin' him this side of the Summer Festival, by the looks,' said Rat.

An old horse-trough caught Brok's eye, and he winked at Tam. Five strides and they were there. 'Get ready to run,' he cautioned.

On the third swing, the unconscious body cleared the lip of the trough,

disappearing beneath its frigid contents with a loud plop.

A cascade of water shot upward and outward like a steaming jet from an erupting geyser. Brinn's arms and legs flailed, left and right, up and down, in a vain attempt to gain purchase. After what seemed like an age, he finally grabbed hold of the hand pump's spout, and with great effort, rolled out onto the ground on his hands and knees, coughing and sneezing.

'What in the Seven Halls of Hell?' he finally managed to blurt as his vision cleared and his wits returned in one painfully blinding moment. On seeing the familiar faces of his comrades, he smiled. 'Took you long enough,' he said, spitting a large glob of horse water onto the ground. He stood, and with a quick shake of his head, staggered forth to greet them.

'Yes, awfully sorry about that, old boy; we've been a little preoccupied lately.

War does that, 'Tam grinned and picked Brinn up in a bear hug.

The others gathered around, back-slapping and laughing. A man of few words, Lom remained on his horse. Brinn reached up and clasped forearms with him as all warriors do. Lom nodded, leaned forward a little, and farted loud and long.

Ah, that one was a, good to see you again, fart. I recognize the tone.' Rat

announced smiling.

Lom also smiled and, nodding his approval, farted again, but just a little one this time.

'Sorry to be a bore, but time presses. We'll have time enough for this on the road,' said Brok.

Brinn eyed his old commander. 'What's up?' 'It's a long story. I'll tell it as we travel.' 'Which direction?'

'Gantu.'

'Leave me a horse; I'll catch you up.' Brinn carefully touched his bruised face.

'What gives?'

'I have something to take care of first. That conniving toady warden still has my gold medallion.' Panther sprang at the prison wall and was quickly over. Soon, muffled cries of alarm and conflict marked his progress through its inner halls.

# 06 **Dark Deeds**



THE OFFERING STARED blankly ahead, a pretty young thing, and pure as was required, prepared for days in the correct way by the temple priests. She would fast, bathe in scented waters, and be anointed with holy oils by her attendees in preparation for the joining ceremony.

Only then would she be allowed to eat and drink a small amount. The water was drugged, but the girl would be so dehydrated, she would not notice its subtly

bitter taste.

As Prolat, it was Aalil Dulva's job to bring her to the temple, a simple task she would not resist, her mind almost blank now. It was a long walk from the bowels of the citadel to the Joining Chamber, flickering torches lighting the way through dark and empty corridors.

Once the seat of the old kings of Anvar, Mabak-Var would now play host to a new master. Sulan Al-Imri intended making the city his bastion in the west. Now, with the exception of the Great One's personal guard and priests of his

temple, the castle lay empty.

The large arched double doors of the Joining Chamber came into view. Beside the doors stood two priests resplendent in black robes with red sash. Each holding a large black candle before them, cowls hiding expressionless faces.

In perfect coordination, a large bronze gong was struck as the door opened and the procession moved forward. Priests of the order lined both sides of the aisle of the ancient throne room. As the sound of the gong died away, they chanted the prayers of transference. The gong reverberated once more and as its shuddering oscillation abated, the chants returned yet again.

The slow walk continued, the girl staring blankly.

Ahead stood the Great One, Sulan Al-Imri, waiting patiently at the altar at the upper end of the hall; arms tucked inside the sleeves of his black robe, face hidden in the shadows of his hood. Another deep shuddering boom filled the chamber as the gong was struck again.

The girl was placed on the alter face up. The chanting increased in volume

and rhythm as the Master stepped up to the dais.

Al-Imri stared down at the young girl, her eyes the most beautiful blue. Extending his arms to the roof, he called upon the dark god Badur to bless the ceremony. Aalil noticed something strange as the sleeves of his master's robes slipped back, exposing his arms.

The skin looked coarse and dry.

Al-Imri placed his hands upon the young girl, and a shimmering haze formed. When finished, the girl was dead, her body reduced to a shriveled, deformed husk. The gong boomed once again, and the chants returned as the Great One turned and slowly retreated to his private chambers. His body was recharged, new energy coursing his veins, euphoric satisfaction etched upon his revitalised countenance.

But it would not last long. It never did. A few days perhaps, at most.

These young women were somehow lacking in the strong essences he needed to sustain himself. Better candidates were required; a pure heart and body was not enough. She also needed to be strong of mind and spirit. With that, he would get a month; if she had royal blood, he would get three, the old bloodlines being the strongest.

Aalil followed Al-Imri into his private chamber and shut the door. 'It went

well, Great One?'

'Yes, to a point. But I am disappointed with you, Prolat. Standards have dropped, and the quality is not what it once was. I require better!' he snapped. 'These wretches suffice for the time being, but they are deficient, lacking any measurable reserves of spirit. Have you scoured the land?'

'Yes, Great One, but it is a difficult task. The royal blood is all but gone and the nobles hide their daughters. They serve now only through fear. At least the

commoners are still compliant.'

Al-Imri balled his hands into tight fists. 'Then perhaps it is time the nobles were taught a lesson!' he snarled. 'One they will not easily forget!'

IT WAS A COLD MORNING in the Hyrnn Forest, twenty miles north of Kan-Ta. Running his left hand over his chin, Brinn stared into the small mirror, examining his whiskerless face with a degree of satisfaction. It felt good to be free of the thick, unkempt beard.

The bruising had somewhat subsided, and he could see out of his left eye

again, though it was still an unsightly mix of black and blue.

They had travelled for most of the night and made satisfactory progress, only stopping late on to rest the horses and grab a few hours sleep. Satisfied with the results, he placed his shaving razor back in its pouch and stowed it with the rest of his belongings.

They were still in Jarro, so there had been no need to set a guard while they

slept. That would soon change, he knew, harder days lay ahead.

But for now, the company slept soundly.

The forest was quiet. It was that transitional time, just before dawn, when night creatures sought their burrows and day creatures ventured forth. Somewhere to his left, he could hear a family of field mice scratching and chewing in the hollow of a fallen tree.

High up in a giant spruce, a large barn owl scratched its head, stretched, and fluffed itself. The black of night was slowly giving way to lighter shades as morning paled the eastern sky. Brinn rose and quietly walked towards the dying fire. Brok's eyes opened as he approached.

'Sleep well?' inquired Brinn.

'So-so.'

Brinn threw a few fresh sticks on the fire. Flames and sparks gently rose, and the wood crackled in the heat. 'What's the plan?'

'Simple. Get up to Gantu and try to pick up her trail.'

'You make it sound easy.'

'Nothing's easy, as you well know.'

'What are we up against?'

'We think it's predominantly slavers, though not confirmed. At least we know they were involved to some degree.'

'Attacking a heavily armed escort's not usually their style.' Brinn sat down,

peering into the flames.

'No, that's true. Hired muscle, most probably. The puppet-masters remain hidden at present. Ten to one, that trail leads east.'

Brinn still stared into the flames, lost in thought.

'Brinn, I was sorry to hear about Sherii. She was...' Brok trailed off.

Brinn nodded but didn't reply, the pain all too evident in his eyes. A long silence followed before he finally spoke again, 'I hear things are bad at the front. Is it as bad as they say?'

'It's worse than you can imagine,' said Tam, as he yawned and peeled his blanket back. 'Can't last much longer. We're already beaten, but just too proud, stubborn, and stupid to admit it,' he added, his shoulder-length dark blond hair falling forward hiding much of his rugged good looks.

Brinn stared into the flames again, unconsciously running a finger along the

ridge of a small scar on his neck. 'How are Brasco and Bull?'

Tam sighed. 'Dead,' he replied.

'What about Tunbro?'

'Crippled. He lost an arm and a leg last month.' 'Most of the old troop are gone,' added Brok.

Another long silence ensued before Brinn spoke again. 'What about Sergeant Preem? Surely that old war-horse is still alive?'

'Well actually, yes, he is. Except it's Captain Preem now since his commission. Last I heard, he was in the northern section of the line.' Brok threw two logs onto the fire. Again, the flames and sparks shot skyward with a crackle.

'I've missed so much. It's hard to believe they're all gone.'

'But at least the best are still here, eh?' Rat was finally awake and sitting up, stretching his arms. 'What you think, Lom?'

Rat smacked Lom's backside, causing the big man to grunt and break wind.

'He agrees whole-heartedly.' Rat grinned mischievously. 'I'm starving. What's for breakfast?'

HYRNN WAS A VAST FOREST stretching northward from the city of Kan-Ta to the middle of Jarro, and eastward from the coast to Archer's Way. Its dirt roads were never busy, most folk doing their damnedest to avoid the place since it had a reputation for being a bit on the lawless side. Nothing major, just the odd murder or hold-up, its isolation a draw for those with a reason to hide: deserters; bandits; criminals. It was a foolish man who travelled these roads alone.

Towering ash and oak reached skyward, knurled twisted pillars beneath a swaying roof of green. The myriad intertwined branches and leafy carpet combining to block most of the available light, rendering the forest floor a dark sombre quality.

Brinn was front man, and a little ahead of the others when he suddenly stopped his horse, raising his hand for the others to halt too. His skin prickled.

It felt as though suspicious hidden eyes were watching from the gloom. He listened carefully but heard nothing beyond the normal forest chatter of the

squirrels and birds.

Despite Brinn's signal, Brok spurred his horse, stopping beside him. 'What is it?' he whispered, surveying the track ahead.

'Not sure yet. It could just be my imagination.' 'Did you see or hear something?'

'More a feeling,' he said, scanning the trees for any indication of danger.

Under Brok's orders, the others fanned out and searched the brush, while Brinn was sniffing the air.

It had a strange quality, like that metallic smell often left behind after a

lightning strike. He couldn't quite nail it down.

After a few more minutes, he gave the signal to move forward, and they set off again, checking all around as they went. The road forked a little farther ahead, marking the turn-off for Gallo. Between the two roads sat a white-haired old man clutching a knurled blackthorn walking stick. His long grey handlebar moustache drooped well past his bare chin. His robes were dirty and had signs of having been repaired on more than one occasion.

Behind him, a mule stood tethered to a tree. Brinn stopped his horse and stared down at the stranger, the old man did not move or speak but stared back

intently.

'Greetings, old—'

'You're late!' the old man growled, cutting Brinn off mid-sentence.

Brinn looked at Brok, but the big man shrugged.

'Late for what, old timer?' asked Brinn.

'You were supposed to be here ten minutes ago!' A frown creased his wrinkled old brow.

Brinn scratched at his head in confusion. 'I'm afraid you have us at a disadvantage, old man,' he said, glancing at Brok again. 'Why are you waiting for us, and how did you even know that we were coming?'

'No time for questions now! We have many miles yet to travel today. I can explain as we go.' The old man rose, untied his mule, and dragged him out onto

the road.

Brinn was amused and perplexed by this rather eccentric old fellow.

'He's lost his marbles,' Rat suggested, having come forward to better see the hold up.

'Explain yourself or eat our dust; we don't have time for riddles!' insisted Brinn

'Don't be ridiculous! All in good time.' The white-haired old man belly-flopped onto the mule and slowly, and very awkwardly, pulled himself onto the saddle.

'Enough of this!' Brinn rankled, spurring his horse into a gallop.

'Not too fast, boy. Bru will not be able to keep up!' The old man said extending his stick, making a small ball of light flash towards the young warrior.

Brinn flew backwards and landed with a sickening thump on the hard ground.

Tam raised his bow, loosing a shot at the wizard. But the arrow deflected as though it had struck an invisible wall, shooting instead straight up into the sky.

The rest of the Pathfinders immediately went for their weapons.

'Hold, friends! I mean you no harm! I am here to help you.' The wizard held

up his hands in supplication.

Brinn wheezed and huffed as he sat up. It felt as though he'd been gut-kicked by the old man's mule.

The enchanter dismounted and walked over and extended a hand. 'I am Balzimar,' he greeted and smiled. 'I was sent by Askert, the king's high wizard.'

'To what end?' asked Brinn.

'To lend a hand, boy, what else?' Balzimar huffed, blowing the ends of his long moustache forward in exasperation.

# 07 **A High Cost**



#### THE FRONT LINE

Southwest Anvar

Captain Benjamin Preem inspected both men and ramparts under his command for the fifth time that morning. The bulwarked collection of palisade-topped earthworks and booby-trapped trenches, ran in a meandering line from the Kilgorn Marches in the north to the Anvil Mountains in the south. Constructed in haste over a number of years as the war slowly turned against Jarro, it was a poor make-shift substitute for a real defensive fortification.

His orders were clear, hold for as long as possible and give the enemy the impression that the lines were fully manned which, of course, couldn't be further from the truth.

More than half of the army had been stripped away and sent to the rear to Eastgate, a stone bulwark built in ancient times to defend Jarro against the numerous and bloody incursions by Anvar, their aggressive and militaristic neighbour. The soldiers had not been removed in one mass exodus; that would have been foolish, and no doubt would have encouraged an all-out attack by the enemy.

No, it had been carried out in dribs and drabs, a few men from one battalion and a few more from another over a number of weeks, and generally under the cover of darkness.

It had been relatively quiet in his sector due, in part, to unexpectedly heavy rain sweeping down from the north. Rain was the defender's friend, dampening the attacker's enthusiasm, the mud produced capable of stopping cavalry in its tracks. But now that ally had deserted them as well.

The sky was clearing and the ground in front of the wooden palisade was quickly drying. Preem knew that it wouldn't be long before an attack was mounted. His men could sense it too, an uneasy quiet having settled all along the rampart.

Out in no-man's land, hundreds of dead bodies lay strewn in groups and alone, evidence of the last attack a few days earlier.

The smell was hellish, fattened flies swarmed all over the bloated bodies now that the rain had gone, attracted by the stench of putrefying flesh. It was a disgusting and disturbing sight to the uninitiated, but a normal fact of life for Preem and his men.

A bugle call far off in the distance confirmed his worst fears, soon followed by the familiar *thump-thump* of the war drums. The enemy were not yet in sight, but he knew they were on the way. Fear was etched on the faces of his men.

'Hold fast!' he roared. 'They die as easy as the next man!'

Fear and panic gripped the defenders' hearts as the first lines of enemy soldiers crested the distant rise. 'Easy, men. I know you're anxious to be at 'em.

But seeing they've gone to all this effort, 'tis only polite we let 'em bang out a last tune or two, unmolested.'

A ripple of laughter ran along the palisade. Preem smiled. The spell had been broken, and the dread had dissipated. Now his men could function as soldiers should, calm, efficient, merciless. He raised his looking-glass and immediately recognized the dark-armoured battalions of Anvar heavy infantry. But there were also uniforms of the east, men clad in white with odd oblong shields and impossibly curved swords, riding strange beasts that looked like horses at a distance but up close had funny long necks and a clumsy gait. Preem hid his concern; his men were going to need all of their courage today. 'Archers ready!'

Everyman with a bow pointed an arrow to the sky.

'Hold!'

The enemy stepped along in perfect time to the *thump-thump* of the drums. The men of Jarro stood fast against the human tidal-wave that was threatening to engulf them.

'Hold!' ordered Preem, standing with sword arm raised.

They were half way across now, the drumbeats becoming louder. Preem could make out individual faces and could see detail, those who had hastily shaved before battle and those who had not. It was time. 'Loose!' he ordered, making a chopping motion with his outstretched sword, watching as hundreds of arrows took flight. 'Reload!'

The archers automatically nocked a fresh arrow on their bows and pulled the strings tight, facing skyward.

They stood with faces to the heavens, awaiting the order to release.

'Loose!'

A second projectile wave took flight, darkening the sky with its heavy pall of murderous rain. 'Reload!' Out on the field, men died as volleys of arrows struck home.

'Loose!' he ordered again and again.

Outside the palisade, the body count increased. Finally, as if tormented beyond the limits of endurance, they charged, running forward like men possessed into a hail of arrows and spears, slipping and sliding on pools of blood and screaming with hot frenzy.

Ladders appeared and were placed against the walls. Above them, Preem and his men fought valiantly to throw back the horde. Men scrambled up, only to be hacked to death on reaching the top. Below, more died as they were crushed to death, pinned against the wooden wall by the weight of numbers of their own comrades trying to get forward.

Preem saw that the odds were against them, there were just too many attackers and too few defenders. It was only a matter of time before they would finally gain control of the rampart. He gave the order for buckets of pitch to be poured down on top of the enemy.

The ground became slick, soldiers slipping and sliding in the ooze, some leaving behind their gunge-laden boots that had become stuck. All along the lines, the order was repeated and then fire was added with deadly effect. The flames exploded upwards and outwards, the highly flammable liquid igniting, searing and roasting everything it touched.

The screams of the dying carried for miles as thousands of men were instantly turned into human torches. The army of the east broke and ran, leaving behind their dead and wounded.

A great cheer went up among the defenders. They had won the day, but the cost was high.

Now, too few remained to hold the line. It was time to retreat.

### 08 **Order Restored**



AT LEAST THEY WERE out of the barrels now, and able to breathe clean fresh air. It was good look around at the countryside for the first time.

The wagon rattled along the dirt road surrounded front and back by Grik's men.

Karem sat beside the driver. He was a likable sort of follow, even if he did work for the devil incarnate. It was he who had decided there was no longer any need for the blindfolds or bindings, allowing the two girls to sit in the middle of the wagon surrounded by barrels.

The land was strange to Megan, yielding no familiar landmarks from which to get a bearing. Anabel was no wiser, but guessed they must be on the far side of the Benteer Mountains. If she was correct, it meant they were in Gantu.

Gantu was a lawless and uncivilized place from the stories she had heard. Populated mostly by slavers, pirates, and warlords, it was a place where a friend today could be an enemy tomorrow, and everything had a price. Grik pulled his horse in beside the wagon.

'A fine mornin', ladies,' he smiled, showing his bad teeth.

The girls said nothing.

'I thought you might want some water,' he said, holding up a water-skin for them to see. 'No thanks,' Anabel said, scowling.

'How about you, Princess? Help you to wash the dust of the road out of your mouth?' he offered, his smile widening, exposing even more rot.

'I'm fine,' Megan replied without looking at him.

'What's the matter? My water not good enough for the likes of you?' His smile evaporated.

The girls said nothing.

Grik was getting more than a little red-faced. 'Well...? My water not good enough, is that it?' he asked again.

'We don't want any water,' Megan finally said, hoping he would take the hint and leave.

'Is that so?' he sneered. 'Well now, me little beauty. Maybe there's somethin' else I can give you,' he said, leaning in closer so that his voice didn't carry. 'I might just tell Alsheer to keep his gold and choose me own payment.' He was looking directly at Megan as he spoke.

She looked away in disgust, a shudder of revulsion running through her body. Grik spurred his horse to a canter, laughing loudly as he went.

'He's vile!' Anabel said quietly. 'We're going to have to watch that one. He makes my skin crawl.'

'And mine,' agreed Megan. 'I don't know which is worse, Alsheer or Grik.'

'Different sides of the same coin if you ask me,' said Anabel.

'I wish I had a knife,' Megan absently mumbled. 'You wouldn't need one for him.'

'What do you mean?'

'A bar of soap would probably finish him off. The sight of it would give him a heart attack.'

The two girls giggled quietly into their hands. It was good to laugh again if only for a moment.

'What's so amusing?' asked Karem, turning around in his seat.

'Nothing much, just girl talk, certainly nothing we could share with you.' Anabel grinned. Karem smiled politely and turned away.

IT WAS WELL AFTER MIDDAY when they stopped for a break beside a fast flowing stream. Karem was busy giving orders to various members of the small band of Alsheer's personal guard, which gave the girls a chance to walk down to the water's edge to clean up. The water felt good after the onslaught of hours of heat and dust on the road. Grik's men sat about eating, throwing dice, and a few watering and feeding their horses. Megan noticed a black carriage pulled in farther up the road; ornately decorated and looking much like the carriages used by the royals and nobility back in Jarro.

The windows were completely blacked out, making it impossible to see inside. Karem walked quickly up to its door and briefly conversed with whoever was inside. After a few moments, the carriage turned around on the road and headed back in the direction from which they had just come.

The girls sat down by the stream and dangled their feet in the refreshing waters.

'Well-well! If it isn't my two most favourite little water lilies.' Grik was grinning down at the two young women.

'Oh, go away, you hairy donkey!' growled Megan.

'Ain't no way for a fine lady to be talkin' when I'm just bein' friendly.'

'What do you want?' she snarled, turning her back to him.

'Polite conversation for a start.' Grik took hold of Megan's arm and lifted her up to face him.

Megan tried to get away, but he was impossibly strong.

He slipped his free arm around her waist and pulled her close, grinning evilly. 'And then somethin' more,' he added, as he leaned forward, forcibly kissing her.

Megan thought she would be sick. She punched and kicked but couldn't get him off. Grik's men stood laughing and cheering. He stank of every filthy odour she could imagine and others that she didn't want to think about.

Just when she thought she would pass out, Karem arrived.

'Leave her be!' Karem smacked Grik across his enormous back with a large, bleached white piece of driftwood that shattered on impact.

Grik released Megan and turned his attention to Karem, the slaver towered over the demure Eastlander. It was a very uneven fight, and it wouldn't last long.

'Leave him alone!' shouted Megan.

Grik just smiled down at the little man.

'Lord Alsheer's orders were clear; the females are not to be molested in any way.' Karem seemed oblivious to his perilous predicament.

'Where is he then? Far as I see, you're on your own, little mouse. Be a good little mouse now, won't you? Squeak off and find yourself a bit o' cheese, and

don't be makin' a nuisance of yourself.' Grik was toying with the smaller man.

Karem looked a little uneasy. 'My lord is temporarily away. For now, my voice is his and you will heed *my* commands.'

'Or what?' he said, shoving Karem. 'I suppose *you're* gonna stop me, ain't that right, *mister mouse?*' Grik was really enjoying the chance to show off in front of his men.

Karem grabbed Grik's wrist and twisted his fat fingers backwards in one movement. Grik dropped to his knees and cried out in pain. A kick to the chest sent the big slaver flying backwards through the air as though launched from a catapult. He landed with a large splash in the middle of the stream, stunning Grik's men into slack-jawed silence.

Grik resurfaced, gasping for air and crying out in shock as cold ice-melt water numbed him to the bone.

Karem casually turned to the two girls. 'If you are ready, ladies, please return to the wagon as we must be on our way.'

Grik struggled to the shoreline completely soaked, his eyes a mixture of awe and fear. Karem looked at him, sniffed, and walked away. One of Grik's men forgot himself and began laughing. Grik, infuriated by the humiliation, kicked him as hard as he could up the backside. The laughing stopped.

## 09 **Dark Emissary**



IT WAS A FINE, BRIGHT, sunny day, the kind that made the heart soar. By the time they had reached Archer's Way, Balzimar had become an accepted member of the group.

Brinn still wondered how the wizard had found them so easily but decided it

was a question for another time.

They had crossed the river Duree by using the ferry at Lampike and were now crossing the Great Northern Plain that stretched all the way from Duree to the snow-capped Benteer Mountains, the northernmost boundary of Jarro. After that, they would be in hostile territory.

There was very little conversation while on the move, all lost in their own thoughts. Balzimar rode at the very back of the group, Brinn didn't really know what to make of the odd little man sitting as he was atop his mount, his legs folded as though meditating, while simultaneously playing a melancholy tune on a small white flute.

Brinn marvelled at the feat of balance, the mule's reins lying untouched across its saddle. The animal didn't seem to need its master's guidance and happily followed the horse in front, stopping and even turning when required, without so much as a word from the bony little man on his back. The mage was a strange looking fellow. Scraggy unkempt grey hair, thinning badly near the crown, was sticking out every which way.

His long grey moustache drooped down either side of his mouth and well past his chin, and his bright grey eyes had an almost luminous quality, especially at

night.

After hours traversing the grassy plains, the Benteer Mountains were at last in sight. Snow covered their high peaks year-round. It was a vast range; stretching eastward from the Agento Sea and all the way around E-Ben's northern borders before swinging south towards Anvar. There was only one way through them to Gantu: via the Benteer Pass.

The plain had been devoid of trees, but they soon began appearing in ones or twos, and later, as the ground began sloping upward to the foothills, the numbers quickly increased until they were surrounded once more.

With night drawing in, Brok decided it was time to make camp. Finding a sheltered spot beneath a leaning boulder, they unpacked the animals' cargo.

A small stream flowed nearby and Rat soon had a fire going and was happily cooking.

As the first stars began to appear in the darkening blue sky, Brinn took some food up to Balzimar, who was sitting in his usual cross-legged position on top of a large boulder, playing a soft sad tune on the flute.

'I thought you might be hungry,' Brinn said, offering the food to the wizard.

'Thank you, my boy. Please join me... Sit for a while.'

The site was elevated, the first steep rise on the mountain's southern base.

From up here, Brinn could see back in the direction from which they had come. He stared back across the tips of the trees and the northern plains of Jarro, imagining that on a clear day, they might even be able to see all the way back to the Duree.

Balzimar started playing soft notes that were strangely soothing. Brinn took a deep breath, and exhaling quickly.

The sad tones ceased. 'Your heart is heavy,' said the wizard.

'We carry a heavy load, old man. Much rests upon the outcome.'

Balzimar smiled. 'I was referring to the past rather than the future.

'Brinn's brow furrowed, and he looked at the wizard.

'She was not part of your future... not in this lifetime,' Balzimar added.

Brinn was startled by the comment. 'And what would you know of it, wizard?'

'I know it's time for you to let go. Let go of the pain. The powers that bind us have other plans for you.'

'You speak in riddles. Say what you must, old man, but at least speak plainly!'

'I refer to your lost love, to your pain, and your guilt.'

'You seem well informed for someone I've only just met. Has Brok been flapping his mouth? If he has, I'll—'

'No. He's not betrayed any confidence, nor have any of the others.'

'Then how, old man?' Brinn was getting extremely angry. The old wizard had caught him unawares.

'We *adepts*, have the ability to—'

'What...? See the past? Any fool can do that... A coin or two in the right hand usually does the trick! Cross a palm with silver or gold, and many wonders come to light. The Anvars have a good name for it: jaw grease they call it,' growled Brinn.

The wizard smiled again. 'But what about knowing without being told?'

'You're not making sense.'

'Let me explain. Our past and our future are spun like an invisible web all around us. As we move through life, each of us is moving along our own individual strand on the web.'

'Okay, I can follow that,' Brinn said, nodding.

'For those who have the ability, the web can be touched.'

'Is that so?' Brinn was sceptical. 'Well, if that's the case, cast me a prediction; tell me if this mission will be a success.'

'If only I could,' Balzimar said, chuckling. 'How much easier things would be. But no'—he shook his head—'it's not that specific. We can feel the strong emotional events in a life, both past and future. Though I have to add, future predictions are not rigid, not definite. They are more a guide to possibilities.'

'You're starting to lose me,' Brinn said, scratching his chin in annoyance.

'The future's not solid; because we have free will, we each impact upon the whole, and can change the future by our actions in the present.'

'What's the point in seeing the future if there's a chance that it could change and be something completely different by the time you get to it?'

Balzimar chuckled again. 'Well, I have to admit, you make a good point. But

I would much rather have this ability than not.'

'These *events*, do you see them clearly?'

'No. Merely shadows and impressions, but enough to feel your pain and guilt.'

Brinn remained silent for a few moments, then his eyes watered. 'I should have been there for her. She was a lady of the court, but she might as well have been a lowly slave for all the good it did her. Those who are powerful pull our strings and we perform as required, chattel for their amusement. He knew she was betrothed, knew how much we loved, knew I was at the front. But with a wave of the hand, she was given to a degenerate she loathed by order of the king!'

'It was outside of your control; we are each naught but pawns in the great plan. Only the powers that bind us see all the pieces of the puzzle,' said Balzimar.

'Spare me the sermon! I can't—' Tears were already forming in Brinn's eyes.

'You can. I can help you, if you let me.'

'How?'

'Give me your hands and shut your eyes.'

The wizard clasped Brinn's hands tightly and closed his eyes and after a short time, Brinn saw the events leading up to the murder of Darrik as clear as if they were happening that very minute. Then suddenly, those memories were gone, replaced now by the smiling face of his beloved Sherii. They were standing in a beautiful garden surrounded by the most wonderful flowers. She put her arms around him, and they kissed. It felt good to hold her again. Then she stepped back and smiled. 'We will meet again, beloved,' she said, touching his cheek tenderly. 'I release you.'

Brinn's eyes opened with a start. 'Lies!' he said. 'Lies and manipulation! The anger returned, and he pulled his hands away.

'No, not a lie, Brinn. It was as real as day follows night.'

'Mark me, old man,' he said, jabbing a finger into the old wizard's chest, 'keep your meddling to yourself. From now on, tend to your duties and let me tend mine. There's a job at hand, so concentrate on that and *that* alone!'

'Nonsense, my boy; if I did that, nothing would ever get done.' Balzimar smiled.

'My past is not open for discussion... Am I making myself clear?'

'Yes, of course'—the wizard shrugged—'you make yourself perfectly clear but whether it makes an ounce of difference remains to be seen. Be mindful you walk a precipice; one wrong step and you may fall.'

'Well, so be it. It's my road to travel, and I'll do it my way.' There was an odd silence.

'There's something else,' Balzimar announced rather nonchalantly. 'It would seem that you have been endowed with some very interesting, if dormant, gifts.'

'Again, give up the riddles, old man.' Brinn shook his head.

Balzimar smiled. 'I could sense it when I touched your hands just now.'

'Sense what?'

'Magic, my boy! It rages through your veins like a torrent.'

Brinn's mouth opened but his brain had turned to mud.

'Yes indeed! The *vision-dream* must have triggered something deep within.' With a shrug, Balzimar returned to playing the flute.

WITH DARKNESS FINALLY creeping over the camp, Brinn took the first watch, the others settling down for the night. Clouds rolled in from the north, blocking out the light of the Twins, a brace of moons locked in tandem, destined to wander the sky as a pair. He was in his element; nothing would get close enough to the camp to harm them while he stood watch. At least that would normally have been the case, but tonight, a deadly new adversary was stalking them.

The Moorg—a creature born of evil and controlled by an emissary of the Dark—crept undetected towards the campsite. Alsheer watched with malevolent satisfaction as the monster inched closer. 'This will be over quickly,' he chuckled. 'Pathetic wretches! Death approaches, be not concerned, sleep on.'

The warlock wove a sleeping spell and gently placed it over the camp.

The Moorg padded silently on, its powerfully built shoulders tensing and relaxing with each carefully placed step. The overlapping scales of its heavily armoured skin changing colour and hue to blend with the undergrowth. It stealthily approached without notice, undetectable to the human eye. Tensing back-muscles twitched and quivered as it readied to pounce. A silent snarl lifted lips, exposing razor-sharp fangs, dripping warm saliva onto black-taloned forepaws. It was excited at the thought of the kill. Pale luminous eyes pulsed faintly to the beat of its pounding heart.

Brinn was overcome, his mind locked in a hazy waking dream of Sherii and happier times, his eyes and ears oblivious to death's approach. The Moorg was ready, and Brinn felt a little tickle between the blades of his shoulders but

shrugged and returned to thoughts of lost love.

The Moorg crouched. The first one to die would be the sentry. That was how he had been trained and that was how it would be executed. The beast sprang and silently flew through the air at Brinn's exposed back, but a sudden explosion of blue light struck the beast in the chest. The blow pushed it sideways, forcing it to one side causing it to miss Brinn completely.

'To arms!' ordered Balzimar. 'We are under attack!'

The spell was broken. The Pathfinders were instantly out of their blankets and standing ready with weapons drawn. The Moorg was winded but quickly recovered. Scrambling to its feet, it roared at the stunned men. Larger than a horse, the monster bellowed with anger and frustration at being denied the kill. With a rolling gurgling growl, it charged.

Brok managed to leap out of the way before it was too late.

Tam and Rat grabbed spears and used them to stop the creature getting too close. The Moorg lashed out, its sharp claws narrowly missing the two warriors.

Balzimar loosed another blue arc, knocking the beast backwards. Lom ran at the monster with his war hammer in hand and slammed its head with all of his strength.

The Moorg reared and with one swipe of its enormous paw, knocked Lom backwards.

Brinn sprang through the air, landed on its back, and sank his sword deep into

the creature's neck. There came another gurgling roar as the Moorg reared and bucked, catapulting Brinn through the air. Landing hard, he rolled, back onto his feet in one movement.

The monster roared again and as he did, Tam thrust a spear deep inside its gaping mouth, black blood spraying out in all directions. The Moorg rose again onto its hind legs, quickly turning and crashing into Rat and Tam, sending them tumbling away in a flurry of flailing arms and legs. Brok loosed an arrow, but it simply ricocheted off the creature's tough hide.

The Moorg circled, looking for a weakness. Three of its prey were down, but three still stood. Balzimar looked tired. The beast could sense the wizard's fatigue, its devilish eyes narrowed and with a bound, it leapt into the air and

sailed towards the helpless man.

Balzimar tried to summon his strength, but there simply wasn't enough time. In a blink, he would be dead. Brinn screamed a warning to the wizard and pointed at the leaping monster. As he did, a column of flame shot from his outstretched hand, incinerating the Moorg mid-flight. There was a sudden white blinding flash, and then nothing but quiet darkness.

The creature was gone; particles of black soot the only remains, drifted down all around the encampment. In shocked silence, all faces turned toward Brinn. He stared at his still outstretched hand, not really believing what had just

happened.

Balzimar walked over and gently moved Brinn's arm down by his side.

'It seems, my boy, you have more than a little ability after all,' he commented. Brinn looked shocked.

Rat ran to Lom's side. The giant man was unconscious but alive.

'What part of hell did that thing come from?' Brinn finally managed to ask. 'And how did he get so close? I didn't even know he was there; he crept right up, and I didn't hear a damn thing.'

'Moorg are a construct of the Dark; twisted mindless creatures, bred to kill by Karesh Warlocks.' Balzimar looked out towards the darkness. 'He was a long

way from home. And not alone,' he cautioned.

Farther up the slope, Alsheer was making good his escape. The outcome of

the fight had come as a shock.

'These are most unusual men,' he muttered. 'Especially the one dressed in black. Such power! And he can mask it!' There had been no hint of his abilities until he unleashed, and then for the merest instant, it was like an erupting volcano. But when he stopped, it was as if he had no power at all. Alsheer was confused.

Magic, or the ability to wield, could be sensed by those familiar with the Arts. He had sensed the wizard easily but did not fear him. Yet this other had power equal to, or perhaps greater, than that of the Master.

This was indeed troubling. Fear gripped him. It was time to be prudent. He quickened his pace, scolding himself for being taken unawares. Next time, he

would not fall prey to it.

As the ash finally settled, there came an eerie silence. Brinn looked around at his friends.

There were unspoken questions on those faces, questions for which he had no

answers. But he knew who did. He looked at Balzimar. 'Old man, we need to talk!'

### 10 **Hidden Dangers**



THEY SEEMED TO BE HEADING in a northerly direction as far as Megan could figure. The land was getting wetter, and there were more streams and rivers to cross every day.

On the third day, they entered the lowlands. Here, the terrain became swampy, and the air was filled with insects of every description. Evenings were the worst, black fly and mosquitoes drove them to despair. The girls took to hiding under their blankets until nightfall when there was, at least, some respite.

Karem did his best to make the journey comfortable but there was nothing that he could do about the insects. Everyone was suffering. There had been no sign of Alsheer since their first encounter, and Megan was glad of it. He was more creature than man, and of dark intent.

The journey was arduous but bearable. Grik had kept his distance since his humiliating dunking, and that was welcome. Megan caught him sneaking a look from time to time, but generally, he stayed at arm's length through fear of what Karem might do to him, she suspected.

A desperate resignation had come over the two young women. There really was no realistic chance of escape now. Even if they did manage to get away from their captors, where would they go? They were hundreds of miles from the nearest help, surrounded by miles of snake and croc-filled swamp. Not to mention the myriad of other hellish biting, sucking, crushing, and stinging things that lurked there.

At one point, early on, it had crossed their minds to try. Karem seemed to sense it and gently pointed out that their guard's duty now was to protect rather than confine. That put a completely new perspective on the situation.

It was soon after, just past sunset as the camp settled in for the night, that Anabel noticed those awful red eyes on the outskirts just beyond the farthest campfire glow.

The girls were sitting with Karem chatting about his homeland when Anabel let out a scream. They all saw those ghastly things. Karem seemed unusually unperturbed.

Sleep was hard to find that night. Imagination could be a bad thing at times. In reality, their worst imaginings were probably not far from the truth.

RED EYES WAS WATCHING the camp again tonight, as he did every night. These creatures were getting far too close to his nest, and fear was slowly giving way to anger. His mate would roost and watch over the hatchlings while he hunted, ever wary of these creatures. He tried to keep away from the taller ones with the sharp pointy sticks, the ones that looked vigilant and dangerous. No, he was looking for something that would not pose too much of a risk. One of the mules or horses would do, or perhaps one of the fatter Two Legs, the ones that did not carry those long sharp weapons. He had encountered those sticks before, and they had caused him much pain. Two Legs hunted in packs and would attack

if they knew that he was close.

It was important to have a silent kill. His life depended upon it. Red Eyes silently slid through the murky water, quietly watching the camp. These creatures were stupid. They had strayed far too close to the water's edge, and they did it over and over, making the same error each time, far too brazen for their own good. Red Eyes saw others hungrily watching them too. Knowing better than to cross him, big crocs moved away when they saw him approach. They retreated and left him to reap the spoils.

Ahead, two of the smaller Two Legs were washing themselves by the shore. Red Eyes slipped closer. They were unaware of his presence, but they were small and thin, fragile like spindly twigs. Not much meat on them, and almost pointless as a meal. They were just snacks. He deduced that they were probably the females of this species because they were so much smaller than the ones with the sharp sticks. He stopped to survey. They looked weak, almost emaciated,

there would be little fight in them.

If he could get them both, they might provide a small meal to tide him over. He slid even closer, able to smell them now, his stomach juices gurgling.

Hunger drove him on. Red Eyes had eaten Two Legs before and they tasted good, their pallid flesh was tender and sweet. He slid closer still. It was worth

the gamble.

He hesitated, checking for the stick carriers; there were none. He moved into a position to attack. The females were still washing as he tensed, ready to strike. But just before he did, they moved away. He could follow but feared the light from the fires that hurt his eyes.

Disappointed, he moved on. Farther along, he came across another Two Legs. It had come close to the water's edge and was ejecting yellowy fluid from its lower body into the swamp.

Red Eyes slid up to the bank, the Two Legs was swaying backwards and forwards.

In one quick grab, Red Eyes made his kill without too much noise. The ones with the sticks had not heard. He was glad, and swam to deeper darker waters, away from prying eyes, to better enjoy his meal. It had been a successful night. Now his young would feast.

AS THE MORNING DAWNED, the camp became a hive of activity with cooking and washing and all manner of preparation for the day's travel. When all was ready, Karem escorted the girls to the wagon. As they settled down on their blankets, Anabel noticed three riderless horses being tethered to the back. Karem was sitting beside the wagon driver again.

Anabel tugged on the back of his jacket. 'Karem?' 'Yes, my lady?' he answered as he turned.

'I've noticed that you seem to be missing some men today,' she observed, glancing towards the riderless beasts.

'Ah yes. We have lost three since entering the swamp.'

'Deserters?' Anabel asked hopefully.

'No,' he nonchalantly answered turning back to face the road.

Both women looked at each other in horror, drew their legs up until knees

touched chins, and sat there hugging them tight. They had truly entered hell.

THE ROAD HAD BECOME a twisting half-submerged trail through the mangrove, a place in which it was quite easy to become irretrievably lost in the miasmic thickets with one misplaced step. Truculent green encroached on all sides like an ever-shifting maze, underpinned by slow-moving rivers and stagnant bogs. The air reverberated with the incessant buzz of swarming, invasive insects, arms and faces were in constant peril from the ravenous little bloodsuckers. Karem gave the women a salve to ease the itch, which helped a little.

Hour after torturous hour they travelled on, twisting and turning, left then right, forwards then backwards. It was unending. After a few hours, the girls had lost all sense of bearing and direction. The heat was draining, causing sweat to drop from every pore as the humidity soared. Overhead the sun blazed, the sparse puffball clouds occasionally crossing its molten face provided little in the way of respite. The slavers, under the added weight of weapons and armour, slouched with dejected resignation in their saddles, while all around, hungry eyes watched them pass, waiting patiently for an opportunity to strike.

All it would take was one slip, or even perhaps something as trivial as carelessly straying too close to the water's edge. Then powerful jaws would lunge and grab, twisting, tearing, pulling the victims beneath the murky water in

a frenzy of splashing and blood.

Foliage covered the surface of the swamp, pretty water-lilies and cress forming a perfect green blanket to obscure all that lay beneath.

There were splashing noises, but it was impossible to see what had caused

them, little ripples on the surface giving hint to a direction.

Low-hanging branches were another worry. They had already lost one man to snakebite earlier that morning. The creature had looked like a thin green branch sticking out from the side of a low-hanging limb, but by the time the man realised his mistake, it was too late.

He died quickly but painfully with foam bubbling from his blue-lipped mouth. His slithering assassin was quickly decapitated with a well-aimed sword-

swipe.

By late evening, they came to a patch of raised ground, an oasis in an ocean of slime. It had been cleared of much of its vegetation in times past, leaving just a small stone perimeter wall encircling a dilapidated stone house. The roof was gone but the walls were strong. Outside the perimeter wall, a moss-covered jetty had a half-submerged canoe moored to its side. Within its protective walls there lived all manner of swimming insects and tadpoles.

The inside of the house was clean but empty. In one corner, an iron cook pot sat, leaning against the wall and rusted through, a gaping hole where its legs had

once protruded.

'We will camp here tonight, ladies. Why don't you pick a side?' said Karem.

'Very funny,' huffed Anabel.

Karem smiled and clapped, following which two of his personal guards entered and immediately set about making the room more hospitable.

A fire was soon blazing in the hearth, and the addition of blankets and pillows

helped to make the stone-slabbed floor a little more comfortable.

Outside, the sky was quickly darkening as night approached. Megan felt somewhat reassured at having solid walls all around as she lay down and casually stretched. Anabel lay beside her and snuggled in against her back.

For the first time since entering the swamp, the girls were feeling a little safer. Grik's men were cooking and drinking in the courtyard outside; the worst was over for them. They would soon be back home, and with a pocket full of gold to boot.

Spirits were high and the mood relaxed. As darkness fell, watching eyes reflected the campfire's light, yellow spheres winking on and off as curious heads popped up out of the slime to look at the newcomers, then bobbed down again, curiosity sated, out of sight until the next time.

But one pair of eyes did not hide, staring with unblinking intensity at the gathering on the island, coldly analysing, seeking to exploit any advantage offered.

Filled with anger and hate for the arrogant interlopers, those eyes were the deepest red.

# 11 Ruby Red Wine



THE TWO GENERALS SAT in the fover of the one-time council chambers of Mabak-Var, now Sulan Al–Imri's throne room. They had ridden for days to get back to the capital. It was not wise to dither when summoned by the Great One. General Gambri was Overlord and supreme commander of the army, and his second in command General Imrit sat beside him. Both were nervous. They were bearers of bad news and unsure how their master would take it.

Gambri was sweating profusely, though not from the heat. It was taking all of his willpower to stop himself from shaking. It was hard to hide even the slightest tremor while wearing full body armour as the steady rattle of clanking metal betrayed even the most stoic countenance.

The double doors of the throne room opened.

Both men stood with helmets tucked under their arms. Aalil Dulva walked through and beckoned them to his side. 'The Great One, Sulan Al-Imri, Bringer of Peace and Protector of the Weak, will see you now. Be ever contrite in his almighty presence,' said Aalil.

The two men bowed as they entered, their eyes remaining fixed on the floor

in reverence as they approached the throne.

It was only allowed to look upon the Great One when directly addressed. Aalil walked slightly ahead with languid, precisely measured steps, his purple, crimped velvet gown swishing left and right across the polished black granite floor-tiles with pendulous rhythm. At the foot of the dais, he stopped and bowed in one fluid sweep and announced the two generals. 'Begging your indulgence, Great One. Overlord Gambri and General Imrit request an audience. They come as instructed by your Divine Magnificence.'

His soft and undulating voice sang the words with dispassionate tone. Al-Imri was wearing his customary black habit, a sign of his vow of modesty. The hood was up, hiding his face in its swathes of voluminous fabric and gloomy interior. 'Overlord Gambri, it is good to see you,' Al-Imri voiced. 'It has been some time since we've spoken in person.' He nodded at Gambri, managing the faintest smile.

'Thank you, Great One. As ever, it is a wondrous pleasure to be in thy presence.' The Overlord gave a quick look up as he spoke, and then back down as if he believed the Great One's gaze might smite him dead should he linger too long on it.

And of course, you too, General Imrit.'

'Thank you, Great One. I am humbled in thy presence.' Imrit briefly looked up, and when he had finished speaking, back down again, just as Gambri had done.

'And how is your family, Overlord? We see far too little of them at court since beginning the purification of the West.'

'They are in good health, Great One, thank you,' answered Gambri.

'That is good to hear, yes indeed. Family is so important, don't you agree, Overlord?'

'Yes, I do, Great One. They are the foundations upon which all is achieved.'

'Yes, well put, though I should say that community is the absolute foundation... family second." He stared, seeing Gambri momentarily shrink as if he had been slapped for insolence.

'Great One, I apologise. That is what I meant, of course,' groveled Gambri.

'Our foundations,' continued Al-Imri. 'Yes, sound and firm familial foundations are essential for every endeavour. I believe you have a daughter if memory serves?'

'Yes, Great One. Her name is Emir.'

'Do I know her husband?' asked Al-Imri.

'She is unwed, Great One, though well sought after according to my wife,'

Gambri said, allowing a small nervous smile to cross his lips.

'Still a maiden then? Good. They are the best years of youth, before responsibility burdens the shoulders and lines the face. A time of freedom that all too quickly recedes, I'm afraid.'

'Truly, Great One. And may I say, your wisdom lights the dark.'

'Indeed.' Al-Imri was not one to eschew flattery. There was silence for a few moments as he contemplated further. 'And how goes the war?' he inquired. 'We have been hearing disquieting stories of late.'

'It goes well, Great One. The enemy are weakening, and we have advanced on all fronts. It will only be a matter of months before we finally crush them.'

'Oh! That's so good to hear, and very reassuring, Overlord. You see, Prolat, it is obvious now that the stories we have been hearing of great losses are all untrue!' Al-Imri turned toward Aalil Dulva as he spoke.

Gambri's face went sickly white as drops of sweat ran freely down his brow.

'Is that not so, Overlord?' Al-Imri's voice was cold. It was a leading question, the answer already known.

'Great One—'Imrit interrupted in a pleading voice.

'Hold your tongue before I make you wish you had!' hissed Al-Imri, dropping his mask of serenity.

Imrit immediately looked down to his feet, wishing a hole would open and end his terror.

'Well, Overlord, is that not so?' Al-Imri's tone had lowered to a menacing purr.

'No, Great One.' The Overlord wrung his hands nervously.

'No, they are not true, Gambri?' Al-Imri asked.

'They *are* true, Great One,' the Overlord answered, swallowing hard, his face awash with sweat and fear.

'Explain!'

'The last attack was most costly, Great One, since they used pitch and other flammables. It was unexpected. The ramparts were made of wood. It was an act of insanity, catching us unawares! It's simply unheard of. Our troops could not escape in the crush. It was a disaster.'

'How many did we lose?' asked Al-Imri in a flat tone.

Gambri looked at his feet. 'Over twenty-five thousand, Great One.'

'Twenty-five thousand!' The Lord of the East was staggered. 'Why so many?'

'It was a coordinated strategy along the entire front line.'

Al-Imri shook his head disconsolately.

'No-one could have predicted this, Great One,' Gambri pleaded.

'And the enemy?'

'They have retreated to a new defensive line.'

Al-Imri sat rigid on his throne staring at the two men.

'You must understand—' Gambri stopped mid-sentence.

'Silence!' hissed Al-Imri, as he stood, extending his arm toward the general.

Gambri's eyes bulged as he struggled for air. Sweat ran out of every opening in his armour and his face was a picture of agony.

General Imrit jumped back in horror as Gambri suddenly burst into flames and fell to his knees. He did not cry out. In a matter of seconds, his body had disintegrated into blackened cinders.

When finished, Al-Imri sat down heavily. 'Congratulations, Imrit, you are promoted to Overlord. Gambri's lands and possessions are yours. Now get out of my sight!'

The shocked general quickly backed his way down the aisle, bowing as he

went, out of the double doors at the end and was gone.

Al-Imri sat thinking for a few moments. 'Send our condolences to Gambri's family, Prolat. There will be a state funeral of course. Invite them here to the citadel. You can make the arrangements.'

'Yes, Great One,' answered Aalil as he nodded and bowed.

'They will need comforting during this difficult time. Both his wife and daughter. What was her name again?'

'Emir, Great One,' answered Aalil.

'Ah yes... Emir. I look forward to offering my condolences, in person. We will let Gambri's fate and the of his family serve as a lesson to all of the nobles. I think you will find them a little more compliant afterwards, Prolat. I am of a mind to found a new Order. One with a more... *feminine* leaning.'

'A sisterhood, Great One?'

'Yes, a sisterhood,' he said, then paused. 'They will be called The Black Veil.'

'Will there be certain criteria to be met upon joining, Great One?'

'Purity will be the strictest requirement, of course.' Malevolent laugher rolled from his sneering lips. 'Inform the nobles of their responsibilities with regard to the new Order. I expect full and enthusiastic support. Anything less will be dealt with most severely.'

With a flick of his hand, Al-Imri dismissed the Prolat. He waited patiently until the room was empty, then rose a little unsteadily from his throne. There was a price to using his newly acquired powers. The Warlock had promised that this weakness would pass given time, that he would become increasingly stronger with each use of the Dark Arts. He longed for that. It was a joyous elixir and he wanted more. Much more. Enough was never enough.

The need coursed his veins, blackening his soul like an all-consuming fire

against which he was powerless to act. But now, he felt tired.

It was a long walk to his sleeping chamber, the corridors deserted as he shuffled along. Tapestries and paintings lined the walls, kings and queens of old,

their stern disapproving eyes silently watching him pass. He paid them little heed, intent now on reaching the solace of his room and attaining the chance to rest and recuperate.

The castle was cold and dark, a damp musk tingeing the air. A winding stair led up to the next floor, flaming torches lighting the way. With a great effort, he slowly climbed the worn granite steps and at the top, entered a corridor and turned left.

There was a large room on his right, a banquet hall. Once filled with light, music, and laughter, it now lay unused, abandoned. A light film of dust covered tables and chairs, the logs in the fireplace now home to a family of mice. They watched as the Lord of the East passed silently by.

Turning left again, he arrived at another set of stairs and again trudged wearily upward. Distorted shadows, cast by flickering torches, danced along the curved inner wall. They shied away before growing anew at his approach and passing; rising up like misshapen monsters before receding, only to rise again with each passed flame.

Reaching the top and turning right, his bed-chamber was on the left. Two guards immediately snapped to attention as he approached. He opened the door and entered.

The room was warm, heated by a log fire licking yellow flames up a sootblackened chimney. Food and wine were in place upon a table to his right. But he had no interest in them for the moment.

Lying on the bed, staring blankly at the ceiling, was a young peasant girl. Her hair, the colour of ripe golden wheat just before harvest, lay splayed across the pillow like a golden sunburst.

Her eyes, as blue as the deep Agento Sea, were moist but unresponsive to any stimulus. Al-Imri walked around to her side and sat. He would have taken much pleasure in the pretty little thing in his youth, but those feelings were long dead. All that he wished for now was her sweet essence, he could feel it on her soft ivory skin as he tenderly caressed her face.

Placing a hand either side of that beautiful face, he began to drain her of her life force. He smiled and closed his eyes as the energy surged into his body. It felt so good.

After a few moments, he stopped. He had his fill, for now. He didn't require all at this time, just a good portion. He would save the rest for tomorrow.

He looked down at the young woman's face.

She was still alive, and still pretty, but now looked twenty years older than she had just a few moments earlier. The Lord of the East stood and walked to the table upon which the food rested. Roast duck, whey bread, and ruby-red wine. He felt suddenly quite hungry.

 $\times$ 

#### Instruction



BRINN STOPPED HIS HORSE and glanced around. They were in the high pastures of the Benteer Mountains on the Gantu side. Southern Gantu was mainly made up of pestilent swamps, the perfect hiding place for rogues and murderers. Far below them, beyond the foothills, the swamp sprawled out in every direction, half obscured under smoky fog. Fresh tracks in soft mud were proof that a large party had just come through the pass. At least one hundred men, he estimated, plus two or three wagons.

Brok reined his horse in beside Brinn. 'Is that them?' he asked, looking down

at the freshly made tracks.

'Yes.'

'How far ahead?'

'Three or four days.'

'Good. We've made up some time. The wagons will slow them.'

'It's probably too late,' Brinn commented, looking down at the swampy hinterland.

'Why?'

'You ever tried to track through swamp? It's a nightmare. We'll need a lot of luck, and even then, it'll be near to impossible. A guide with local knowledge would be a big help.'

'A guide's out of the question, but we do have a network of informants up here. They could point us in the right direction.'

'It sounds like you have something in mind.'

Brok almost smiled. 'Yes, as a matter of fact, I do. We'll make for Ash. It's what passes for a town in this mire. I have a contact there who could be of assistance.'

'Lead the way; I'm at your service.' Brinn smiled sweeping his hand forward in the direction of the swamp.

Brok led the group down through the mountain pastures, into the foothills. After a day's hard riding, they arrived at the start of the wetlands. Muddy roads were leading off in three directions but only one had fresh wheel ruts. The sun was setting quickly as they set up camp for the night. Rat excavated a small pit for a fire and rations were handed out.

The Pathfinders settled down for the night, Lom and Tam taking first watch as the sun disappeared below the horizon.

Brok lobbed some dead wood onto the fire and turned to Brinn. 'From the signs, it looks like they're heading towards Ash all right, so that's good. You know, I'm starting to believe we have a fair chance of finding them.'

'I'd say we have more than a fair chance,' Balzimar said, sitting beside them and fumbling in his belt pouch.

'How so, old man?' asked Brinn.

'Well, you see, we have this little thing to help us.' Raising up his hand,

Balzimar revealed a flat round stone half the size of his palm.

'A pebble's going to help us?' Brok looked unconvinced.

'That's correct. Well, it's more than a mere common rock, of course,' said Balzimar.

'Oh, of course,' Brok said, looking bemused.

'It's a seeker stone; very rare, these. Took me eighty years to get my hands on this one. Found it among the belongings of a particularly nasty darkspawn that I... er... dispatched, but that's another story.' He winked.

'What does it do?' asked Rat.

'Exactly what it's supposed to do. Seek, of course, you numbskull!' the wizard retorted.

'Seek what?' Rat looked a little peeved at being rebuked.

'Whatever you are seeking!' Balzimar's eyebrows knitted together to become one on his furrowed brow.

'How does it work?' asked Brinn, diverting the conversation before things got too heated. 'You place it in your palm like so, with the arrow pointing to your heart,' the old wizard explained, placing the stone in the centre of his palm. A small white arrow had been painted onto the surface at one end, pointed towards the wizard's heart. 'Then you simply have to think of the thing you are seeking. Simple, eh?' he said, grinning happily.

'Here, let me have a go.' Rat grabbed the stone before Balzimar could react and placed it onto his palm with the arrow facing his heart as instructed.

'Nothing's happening!' Rat looked annoyed.

Balzimar grabbed back the stone and slapped Rat's open palm with his blackthorn stick.

Rat shouted in pain as the barbs pierced his skin. 'What in the name of Badur's black heart was that for?' Rat scowled, placing his injured hand under his armpit to help ease the hurt.

'For your lack of manners, oaf!' Balzimar rapped Rat's shin with the stick for

good measure.

Getting up, Rat hopped around on one leg, swearing oaths. 'You old goat! If you weren't here to help, I'd—' Rat grabbed the hilt of one of his knives and pulled it free from its scabbard.

Both Brinn and Brok went to intervene but then stopped and began to laugh.

For instead of a knife, a flower was clasped in the wily fighter's hand.

Balzimar smiled up at the confused man. 'Why thank you, Rat. I accept your apology.' He said, leaning forward and deftly taking the flower from Rat's hand. 'But next time, you must ask before touching. Clear?'

Rat was so shocked, he forgot all about the pain. 'Cl... cl... clear,' he finally managed as he backed away, scratching his head while muttering something about seeing how Lom was.

'So where we?' asked Balzimar after Rat departed. 'Ah yes, the seeker stone. Now what I didn't get a chance to say before was that the user needs to be able to access the power *within* in order for the stone to work.'

'The power within the stone?' asked Brok.

'No-no! The power within yourself. Your essence.'

'What essence?'

'Your power, your life force, your essence!' answered Balzimar.

'I'm not sure that I follow,' admitted Brok.

'How can I explain...?' Balzimar scratched his bald patch. 'You see, there is more to a man, *or woman*, than can be seen with the eye. Beyond the mere flesh and blood that you can touch and see, there is also our driving force. It's invisible to the uninitiated of course, but, believe me, it does exist, and can be very potent. Though no two people have the same strength, all have it just the same.'

'What's its purpose?'

'It binds the individual into a whole.'

'I'm lost,' Brok said, shaking his head.

'You've heard of the spirit, have you not?' asked Balzimar.

'Yes, of course.'

'Well, it's the spirit, and more. It is everything that you are. It binds you and gives you strength. Not the physical kind but the strength that makes a man do good, rather than evil, though it be the harder option.'

'I see.' Brinn nodded. 'Is this... essence... where magic comes from?'

'No. But it's the first step along that road. Control of your inner power is the key that unlocks the door to a greater source. Put simply, good essence opens the door to the Light, while bad essence opens the door to the Dark. But beware! Once a side is chosen, and its door is unlocked, there's no going back. Beyond that threshold, the adept will find pooled, limitless, reservoirs of good or evil throughout existence and time. As you can see, it is the quality of your soul that determines from which side you draw.'

'Can you show me how it's done?' asked Brinn. 'Yes, if you're sure you want it.'

Brinn thought for a moment. 'Yes, I'm sure. I definitely want it.'

'Very good.' Balzimar smiled. 'Steady yourself. You are about to enter a whole new world.' He placed the seeker stone into Brinn's upturned palm.

Brok felt uneasy. He didn't understand magic and was quite happy to leave it. He stood and left the two men to their mutterings. As he left the circle of light that the small fire cast, he looked back at Brinn. The stone in his hand was floating and turning in the air all by itself.

Balzimar looked pleased and patted Brinn on the shoulder. Brok shook his head and turned away. 'I'll go find Tam,' he said, walking off, leaving the two men to their instruction.

As he carefully picked his way through the darkness, Brok wondered where Tam had got to. It was a half-moon's night, more than enough light to guide his way. Ahead lay a few large rocks and a single beech tree. Brok gently edged closer, trying to sneak up on Tam.

He liked to practice whenever possible, so his boots made no sound as he crept along. He could sense that Tam was close, probably hidden in the rocks.

The moons peeked between two passing clouds, and for a moment, Brok caught sight of a shadowy figure leaning against one of the larger boulders. 'Got you,' he whispered, crouching, ready to spring on the unsuspecting man from behind.

'No, you haven't,' came a voice.

Brok got a fright. The voice had come from somewhere over his head. As he looked up, Tam appeared from a large shadow high in the branches of the tree, smiling broadly, with bow in hand and arrow nocked. The figure against the rock had been Tam's cloak and hat, cleverly made to look like a sentry.

'Just thought you might like some company,' Brok blustered.

'Mmm.' Tam slid down, crossed to the rocks, and sat.

Looking up at the sparsely clouded night sky, he sighed. 'It's a good night for snagging.'

'Snagging?' Brok was confused. 'What's that?' he asked, sitting beside Tam.

'What?' Tam looked bemused. 'You city boys, never heard of snagging?'

'Afraid not, care to explain?'

'It's using a snag-line with a loop or hook on the end to pull Gupfish out of the water. We used to do it all the time back home, me and my friends. There was a big old, deserted quarry near where we lived.'

'And that really works?'

'Sure enough does. If we had the time, I'd show you.'

'I'll take your word for it.'

'Biggest one I ever caught was the length of a man. Damn thing nearly pulled me under. They can get pretty big.' Tam stared off into the night. 'My friends saved me that night. Snag-line got wrapped around my leg. I just couldn't get free, and he was taking me down. It took four of them to drag that monster out of the water, and me with it.'

Tam pulled his hair back from his face. He looked tired. 'We were close though, like brothers if you know what I mean.'

Brok nodded.

'We all joined up at the same time, felt so proud marching through the town with all of our neighbours cheering and shouting at us like we were heroes.'

'Where are your friends posted now?'

Tam cleared his throat and lowered his head. 'Like so many, they're gone. I'm the last.'

'The war's been tough all 'round, I give you that.' Tam straightened his back. 'I know. It sure has.'

They sat in silence. Overhead, a shooting star whisked across the sky. In an instant, it flared and was gone. Crickets and frogs clicked and croaked in the darkness as a deep fog crept across the undergrowth, obscuring all in its path.

### 13

### Sanctuary

THE FIRE CRACKLED IN the old hearth, its warmth and glow giving comforting solace to Megan as she prepared herself for sleep. Overhead, the stars winked down from a cold dark sky. She lay on her back looking up, cocooned in thick, soft woolen covers. The roof, now long gone, gave her a wonderfully clear view of the frosty heavens above. The first tendrils of wispy fog passed lazily across her vision, obscuring, in gradual ebb, the light of some of the dimmer celestial orbs. Drowsy warmth filled her, dragging her hooded eyelids down. She surrendered with welcome relief to her need for sleep, allowing her weary eyes to gradually close.

The firewood gave a loud crack and sprayed small sparks, her eyes shot open again at the sound. Above the open roof, the fog was thickening; more stars had disappeared, lost from view behind an ever-expanding opaque shroud. Again,

her eyes began to close.

She was warm and comfortable snuggled beneath her blankets, Anabel lying beside her. She could feel the warmth of Anabel's back. In the other corner, Karem sat snoozing against the wall, the blanket enwrapping his body pulled tight in clamped fists beneath his chin.

One of his men sat beside the fire, feeding it with small twigs and pieces of

dry wood. Megan's eyes closed, and the world slipping silently away.

Outside, Grik and his men lay huddled, sleeping in little groups around large log fires. Small though it was, it was apparent from the relaxed atmosphere that even the toughened slavers were much happier to be inside the protective boundary-wall of the complex.

With a few hefty logs thrown across the entrance to keep unwanted guests out, the wall provided adequate protection from the worst dangers inherent in the

swamp.

The fog density was increasing at an alarming rate. The sentries watched, with growing fret, as the steadily thickening haze overwhelmed the land. In a matter of minutes, it had slipped silently in, stifling breath, numbing extremities and any exposed flesh.

The ponderous flow covered everything with a clinging pervasive damp. It was eerily quiet in the surreal gloom, even the normally cacophonous frogs and

crickets had gone strangely silent.

Grimp was sent to guard the northern end of the compound. He was a low-sized stocky man with a scar that ran right across his face from his left temple to just below his right ear. He had long stopped caring about his ruined looks.

A toughened outlook was a staple when growing up in the wilds, and besides, he enjoyed the way people instinctively got out of his way whenever they saw him coming. The scar made him look fierce, and for that alone, he deemed it an asset.

He oft times bragged about how he had gotten it in a bar-brawl in Gantu-

Prime, facing down three men. He chuckled to himself. 'Well... a farm accident when I were twelve don't quite garner the same kind of awe from an audience,' he mumbled.

Respect and fear were important in this tough land. When a wrong look could get your guts spilled, reputation was everything, even if most of the time, it was built on lies and exaggerations. The fouler a man's persona, the better his chances of avoiding trouble.

That was a simple but accurate decree, and one that had kept him alive in many dangerous situations. Few wished to tangle with a man who looked as

though he had been through several wars.

He was feeling tired, so he leaned heavily on his spear for support, blankly staring into the milky wall of fog. A shiver ran up his spine. There could be anything out there crawling towards him and he wouldn't see it until it was too late.

He hopped from one foot to the other trying to warm himself. Behind him, in the camp proper, he could make out the light from the three fires around which the others were huddled. Some were already asleep. He could hear their snores quite plainly and was tempted to sit, but decided against it. If Hraaj came out to check, he would get a beating. Worse still if it was Grik. He shivered again, remembering what Grik had done to Mirank when he had caught him dozing on duty. 'Held him down with those big bear paws of his. Mirank struggled but it was no use. I remember his screams like it was yesterday, when Grik sliced them ears off.'

Grimp took his weight off the spear and struck a more alert pose, while unconsciously fingering at one of his ears.

Grik was a bad one all right. You even had to watch him with your pay. He'd jip his own men if he could get away with it, and that just ain't right! thought Grimp, shaking his head.

It was getting colder now, and the fog was wetting him through. A large splash broke the silence, coming from somewhere out in front of his position.

It was hopeless; he couldn't see a thing, he craned his head as far forward as it would go, trying to better see, for all the use that it did. Turning his head left and right, he listened carefully.

The silence was unnerving, it thundered in his ears, creating an ominous atmosphere. 'Probably a croc catching dinner,' he finally said, trying to comfort himself. What else could it be in this hellhole? Snake, maybe? he thought, having heard stories about the big snakes that lived in the most remote parts of the swamp. One of Lanwigg's favourite tales too—how back in his home village, they'd found a snake so big it had gobbled up a man and his horse together.

And when they caught him and opened him up, the man was still sitting atop

his mount as though he was just going for a jaunt.

Grimp chuckled to himself. *Lanwigg's a lying bag of pus most of the time, but at least he can spin a good yarn*, he thought. There was a crack of snapping wood out in the gloom. Grimp was feeling a little exposed, so he took two paces back from the waist high wall.

The fog swirled past him as he strained his eyes trying to see farther out into the gloom. The billowing mist gathered itself into monstrous shapes that looked on the verge of attack before dissipating into transparent wisps. It was maddening, his palms felt slick and his heart was pounding in his ears.

A dark shadow rose from the murk. Grimp took a step forward, afraid his eyes were playing tricks with him again. There was a darker area within the general mass of foggy gloom, which seemed to be moving very slowly. As the fog thinned, two hideous red eyes bored into his soul.

In that terrible instant, Grimp's heart filled with terror as his trembling legs sank ankle-deep into treacle. His terrified mind rebelled and ran careening away to the darker trackless recesses of his brain, while his gaping mouth issued a silent scream.

An enormous serpentine head emerged from the fog, hanging ten feet in the air, supported by a muscular body. It was a mixture of yellows and greens, except for a single black stripe running from the tip of its snout, right over its head and down its armour-plated spine.

The Wyvern lurched forward on powerful legs. Grimp finally managed a

scream just before he was torn apart.

The camp became a flurry of movement as men scrambled for their weapons, running left and right in utter confusion. No one seemed to know where or who the enemy was, the thick fog reducing visibility to a few short strides.

Grik tried to organise those closest to him, but others ran past and disappeared

into the gloom, never to return.

The Wyvern was quick for such a large beast, using the covering fog well, killing randomly, picking off those foolish enough to stray too far from the main group.

The screams of the dying filled the air. He would make them pay for straying too close to his nest, and for the stinging wounds he had suffered at their hands

in the past.

The stick carriers would pay. He hated them, and now, they would die. His forked tongue flicked out. He could smell the Two Legs all around. With a roar of defiance, he announced himself, his sinuous tail scything through a line of men, sending blood and entrails exploding outward, showering those slavers still gathered around Grik in chunks of blood-drenched offal. Some broke and ran in mindless panic, tripping over dead bodies and discarding weapons without care as they fled into the darkness.

Karem shook the girls awake at the first sounds of attack. 'Quickly, we must flee this place!' The two women were still half asleep and looked confused. Outside the stone walls of the little house, a thunderous roar shattered the silence.

'What was that?' Anabel grabbed Karem's sleeve.

'It's a Gwergar.'

The two women looked blankly at him.

'A swamp-dragon. In the west they are called Wyvern. It's been tracking us for days,' he added.

'A dragon! Oh, sweet divinity, are we going to be burned alive?' asked Anabel, terror etching her face.

'No, Gwergar are not fire breathers. They are water dwellers, but just as deadly none-the-less.

Hurry ladies, we must make good our escape before it is too late.'

The women scrambled from their blankets and followed Karem out into the fog. The ground in this place was a mass of dead and dying men, severed limbs littered the ground, and the mud was slick with blood. Five of Karem's personal guard were waiting.

'This way, my lord,' beckoned a tall Eastlander.

'Quickly now ladies, stay low,' Karem instructed as he led them towards his men.

Out in the courtyard, Grik and his dwindling band of slavers were fighting for survival. There were only fifteen left alive, forming a circle back-to-back, spears pointing in all directions like the spokes of a giant rimless wheel.

The Wyvern lunged forward out of the mist, grabbing one man by his torso. He screamed in agony and terror as razor-sharp teeth sliced through his leather

armour.

His comrades jabbed and stabbed with sword and spear, but the dragon's scales were like steel. Again, the monster disappeared into the fog, taking the screaming man with him; there was a sickening crunch and the screaming stopped.

They could hear the monster as it moved, its deep rasping breaths echoing all around, but of the beast itself, they saw nothing. It was a game, and they were playthings to be toyed with. Grik noticed one of the heavy crossbows lying on

the ground not far from where they stood.

'You!' he said, pointing to one of his men. 'Get me that crossbow!'

The poor follow looked petrified and didn't budge. Grik kicked the man hard in the back and sent him sprawling along the ground toward the weapon. There was movement in the fog. A dark shadow darted quickly from right to left.

'Pick it up, you worm!' roared Grik.

The man fumbled with the weapon, which was covered in blood and slick to the touch. As he stood to run back, a giant head appeared through the fog, looming over him. The Wyvern grabbed hold and dragged the slaver backwards into the murk.

The crossbow slipped from his hand and dropped back down into the ooze.

'You!' Grik picked another reluctant volunteer. 'Get me that piggin' weapon!'

The slaver didn't wait to be kicked. He took off, running at a sprint and picked up the crossbow. But just as he began to run back, the dragon burst from the fog behind him and charged towards the small knot of men, sending them flying in all directions.

More died in a blur of teeth and claws. Grik lay in the mud, stunned, the creature standing over him biting and slashing anything that moved. Some

managed to scramble away, but most lay dead.

Its eyes blazing red, the dragon looked down at the one who had led the other stick-carriers. Grik turned his face away, not wanting to see the killing blow. Beside him in the mud lay the crossbow. He rolled and grabbed up the weapon, loosing a shot at the dragon's soft neck. The bolt breached the smaller scales there, puncturing the flesh. The dragon reared backwards, roared in pain, turned, and disappeared into the mist.

Grik knelt on the blood-soaked ground and listened as the beast crashed

through the undergrowth, the sounds of snapping wood getting fainter the farther it fled.

A mile up the trail, Karem led the women away from the scene of the massacre. As their small party struggled through the foggy darkness, knee-deep in sticky ooze, Anabel was struggling to keep up. In the rush to escape, the others had't noticed that the deep mud was quickly sapping her strength and she was steadily falling behind. Stopping to catch her breath, she leaned against the roots of a large mangrove tree. Ahead, the others kept on moving.

Anabel filled her lungs to call out, but before she could, a strong hand

clamped her mouth shut and dragged her backwards into the undergrowth.

The others, hearing no sounds of alarm, continued on. Within a few short steps, the fog encroached, and they were gone.

### 14

# Eastgate



THE NEW DEFENSIVE LINE was much reduced, sandwiched as it was between the Anvil Mountains to the south and the Kilgor Marshes of mid-Jarro. The marches were an impassable quagmire of quicksand and sinkholes located along the middle swath of the eastern border. The Eastgate bulwark bridged the hill and scrub-filled land between. Three hundred years had passed since Hummak the Great, High King of Anvar, had tried to circumvent the wall by crossing those fetid wastes. He failed miserably and lost more than half of his army in the dismal retreat to Anvar. The stone walls, dikes, and earthworks of Eastgate had successfully protected Jarro from Anvar aggression for four hundred years, and now, it would be put to the test once again against the largest army the world had ever seen.

Thousands of retreating men now clogged the road to Eastgate. Captain Preem and his two hundred Pathfinder cavalry would be among the last to enter

the gates.

He accepted this dangerous duty as he always did, with steadfast grit.

Someone had to protect the stragglers and wounded, and who better than the Pathfinders?

Thus far, the retreat had gone well and they were almost within sight of the wall.

They would be fighting on home territory for the first time since pushing back

Al-Imri's rampaging hordes during the early years of the war.

Though not very picturesque, the low tree-lined hills and scrubby grassland that made up The Velt mirrored the lands of south-western Anvar precisely. So alike were they, that an unaccustomed traveler to the area could be forgiven for being unable to tell them apart.

Preem peered up at the sky. The clouds were back again, low and dark. He prayed the rain would hold off for another day or two. The road to Eastgate was hard-baked clay and stone, and a heavy downpour would turn it into mud in a very short time, reducing the already pitifully slow column to a snail's pace. They had burned the bridge at Farrow, and that at least should buy them some time. Thankfully, the River E'Ben was in full flow and would provide a formidable obstacle to cross, slowing the Eastmen's advance considerably.

Preem looked back over his shoulder, seeing his two hundred horsemen stretching back into the distance, enveloped in a cloud of orange-brown dust. Beyond them, the empty hills stretched on to the horizon. Though surrounded by friendly troops, he felt exposed, and there was an itch in the middle of his back, the same feeling that he got whenever danger was close.

Death's bony fingers rested lightly upon his shoulder, and he recognized their familiar cold touch. They were being watched. He could feel hidden eyes appraising every weakness. He faced forward again. One hundred heavy pike were bringing up the rear of the retreating column, at least half with an injury of

one kind or another. They looked tired and bloodied.

His own men sat hunched in their saddles.

There had been no time for rest since the retreat had started, travelling day and night without stopping once. Those who tried to stop were kicked by the sergeants until they got up. The shout of, 'Rest in Eastgate or Hell!' rang out all along the road, an effective spur to flagging minds and bodies.

A ripple of noise ran the length of the rearguard. Preem turned but saw nothing through the haze of dust. Suddenly, one of the senior sergeants came galloping towards him from the back of the line. Preem pulled his horse to one

side and turned to face him.

'Sir, beg to report!' the sergeant wheezed, trying to catch his breath. 'Dust clouds to the rear.'

'Cavalry?'

'Hard to know, sir, but most likely.'

'Damn!' Preem cursed under his breath, pausing while thinking.

The road was bordered on both sides by wooded hills causing a natural funnel. Spurring on his horse, he ordered his men to follow. They quickly rode to the head of the line of heavy pike. The officer in charge was a young lieutenant.

'Lieutenant!' called Preem.

The young dark-haired officer ran to the captain's side and saluted. 'Sir?'

'We've got a problem. My scouts have spotted dust to the rear, most likely cavalry.'

'Sir, my men are at your disposal.'

Preem looked along the line of bedraggled pikemen. 'How many can you muster? Mind you, no heroics, Lieutenant. I only want those who are fit enough to fight.'

'Yes, sir. Somewhere in the region of seventy, I would guess. The rest are just

too far gone to be of use.'

'Good, it will have to do. Form a loose line behind my men, across the neck of this road,' Preem ordered, pointing to the narrowest point of the funnel.

'Yes, sir!' The lieutenant saluted and half-turned away, but then turned back to face Preem with a confused look. 'Excuse me, sir. But did you say *behind* your men?'

'Yes, Lieutenant. What's the problem?'

'It's just that... Well... the normal position for heavy pike is in front of the cavalry, sir.'

'That's correct. Position your men as ordered, Lieutenant. But space them wide enough apart so that there's enough room between each man for a horse to pass.' Preem wheeled away from the young officer and called two of his sergeants to his side.

'Sergeant Brasko, you take fifty men to the woods on the left flank. Sergeant Fruro, you take fifty to the woods on the right. Keep out of sight until you hear the call for a charge. Then come out and hit the enemy from behind. Is that

clear?'

'Perfectly clear, sir.' Brasko nodded.

'Okay then, go!'

The two men sped off, shouting orders for fifty to follow each, and quickly

disappeared into the undergrowth. Preem took the remaining one hundred and stretched them across the road. Behind them, the seventy heavy pike crouched out of sight in the long grass. All was ready. Ahead, the dust cloud was getting closer.

'Lieutenant, when I give you the order, you may form your pike, but not before I give it. Is that clear?'

The young lieutenant lay on the ground just behind Preem. 'Yes, sir. At your order, sir.' he confirmed.

Staring ahead, Preem adjusted his helmet to fit more snugly as five hundred light cavalry of Al-Imri's eastern army came into view one thousand yards in front. Immediately seeing Preem's one hundred horsemen blocking their way, they stopped and surveyed the scene.

Officers wearing golden breastplates ordered over-eager men into a rough line ready to charge. Preem could hear their drums thumping and strange eastern horns wailing as they built themselves up into frenzy. At first, they came forward at the walk, their officers to the fore of the dark mass, waving curved swords and shouting. Then they began to trot.

The line wavered a little as small clusters of men, unable to contain themselves, lurched ahead of the main body.

They were closer now, almost six hundred yards. Preem looked over his shoulder at the retreating column on the road to Eastgate. They hadn't gotten far, less than half of a mile, he estimated. They would be helpless against an attack from the rear. Thousands would die if he failed. He looked back at the steadily advancing eastern cavalry, able to see faces now, looking excited at the prospect of battle. One or two were standing upright on their cantering steeds. They were truly amazing horsemen. Then they charged, galloping wildly towards his waiting line of men.

Preem snarled, 'Swords!'

The Pathfinders unsheathed swords and stood ready for the onslaught, the Eastmen were only three hundred yards away. Then two hundred. Blood curdling screams filled the air, the ground shaking with the thunder of hooves. One hundred yards.

Preem could see wild-eyed frenzy on their grim faces. Fifty yards. They powered forward, swords pointing, leaning out over their horses' necks.

Preem roared at the top of his voice, 'Retire to the rear!'

The Pathfinders spun as one and looked to be running away from the charging enemy cavalry. The Eastmen lost all composure, sensing an easy victory. The enemy was fleeing the field. With a joyous roar, they prepared to follow and slaughter the cowards.

Preem stopped his horse. 'Pike forward!' he roared.

The hidden pikemen stood and quickly formed an impenetrable wall. The charging eastern cavalry couldn't stop and ran straight into them. In a matter of moments, the charge had turned into a confused mass of horses and men, those at the front of the charge all dead.

Men and horses still fell dying as the skilled pikemen moved forward, jabbing and sticking any who tried to pass. The cavalry at the back of the host could not see what was happening and pressed forward into the backs of the middle ranks, who, caught between the dead in front and those pushing from behind, floundered and turned in confused circles.

Preem knew it was time. 'Bugler, sound the charge!' he shouted.

At the sound of the shrill bugle call, Preem's one hundred cavalry charged forward into the fray, hacking and slashing at the confused and demoralized Eastmen. At that same moment, Sergeants Brasco and Fruro emerged from the woods on either side of the battle and charged into the exposed flanks of the foe. That was the final straw. What was left of the eastern cavalry turned and fled, and the battle was won. The men of Jarro stood and cheered as their enemy, now few in number, retreated back across the valley and out of sight.

It had been a great victory against heavy odds.

Brasco and Fruro approached Preem. 'They won't be back in a hurry, sir,' laughed Brasco.

'How many did we lose, Sergeant?' asked Preem.

'Twenty-two dead, thirty wounded, sir.'

'And the pike?'

'Thirteen dead and eighteen wounded, sir,' answered the young lieutenant of pike.

'My compliments to both you and your men. That was an admirable job of work,' Preem praised the young officer.

'Thank you, sir.'

'What's your name, Lieutenant?' 'It's N'Dhun, sir. Aaron N'Dhun.'

'I will mention you and your men in my report. Thanks for the helping hand,' Preem said, half-smiling and saluting.

The young man returned the salute. 'It was an honour, sir.'

Preem wheeled his horse away, followed closely by his two sergeants. They made their way through the dead bodies and riderless horses to a point where they could watch the enemy soldiers retreating, just in time to see the last traces of them before they disappeared behind the far-off hills.

'Think they've had a belly-full,' Brasco said.

'And good riddance too,' countered Fruro. Preem sat staring after the enemy soldiers.

'N'Dhun? Isn't that the name of the king's cousin?' asked Fruro.

'That's right. General Markas N'Dhun,' affirmed Brusco.

'Wonder if that lieutenant is any relation, sir?' Fruro asked, leaning towards Preem.

'It's possible,' answered Preem.

'Might be him that's givin' the good report 'bout us, if his dad's the general.' Fruro said. 'Could be medals all round 'fore the night's out,' he suggested, slapping Brusco across the shoulder.

Preem just kept staring ahead. Happy that the enemy cavalry would not be returning, he turned his horse around and headed back towards the rest of the troop.

'What you think, sir?' Bout the medals, I mean?' asked an excited Fruro.

Preem looked at the sergeant and then back to his front. 'They can keep the medals. I'd settle for a wash and some hot food.'

'Ya. Now's you mention it, a hot meal would just about clean the slate,' Fruro

agreed, laughing as he fell in behind his captain.
'By the twos, forward,' ordered Preem. The Pathfinder rearguard fell smartly into formation and set off at a slow walk behind the departing pikemen.

#### 15

#### **Hard Lessons**



'NO, NO! YOU'RE trying too hard! It must flow naturally.' Balzimar was getting irritated by his new pupil. At first, it seemed that Brinn would take to his newfound gift with ease. He could manage to levitate the seeker stone easily enough, but then it just spun aimlessly in his hand. Balzimar was perplexed. If he hadn't been a witness to Brinn's power, he would have sworn that the young man had no more than middle-to-low ability to wield. He snatched the stone out of Brinn's hand. 'Blisters!' he swore.

'Hey!' objected Brinn. 'I thought I was getting somewhere then.'

'Now listen to me,' continued the wizard. 'Still your mind and take a deep breath.'

Brinn followed the now all-too-familiar instructions.

'Close your eyes and focus on your breathing. Yes, that's it, very good.' Balzimar placed the stone back onto Brinn's upturned palm. 'Feel the contours of the stone resting on your hand.

Concentrate on its weight. Feel the pressure that it exerts as it sits there in the middle of your palm. Now make it rise.'

Brinn felt a little tickle in the middle of his palm and the stone rose.

'Excellent! Now, keeping your mind relaxed, I want you to think of Major Brok, and ask the stone to point the way.'

The stone quivered, jerked a quarter turn, stopped, and began slowly revolving without stopping. Balzimar groaned and grabbed up the stone again.

The others sat a distance away, watching the lesson but trying not to be too obvious about it.

'How's he doing?' asked Tam, returning from saddling his horse.

'Not so good, unfortunately,' remarked Rat.

Lom cleared his throat. 'He can manage to raise the thing without too much ado, but that seems to be as far as it goes,' he said, picking at his teeth with a thin piece of stick.

'Hmm, not too much call for that sort of thing in our line of work,' Tam smirked.

'No, not really,' agreed Rat. 'Make a good livin' at the county fair. Though he might have to learn to juggle or do a card trick, or somethin' as well. The stone would run fair flat after a couple of shows.'

Lom stifled a laugh, and Brok smiled.

'Saw a fella' once that could balance a whole pile of rocks on his head,' Tam said as he sat down. 'I couldn't believe it.'

'What's so good about that?' asked Rat, scrunching up his forehead.

'I don't mean three or four, more like ten or more. He'd just get the audience to pick up any rocks or stones lying about. They'd fling them up into the air and he'd get underneath and catch them on his head.'

'Now that, I would pay to see,' laughed Rat. 'Where-abouts was this fella?'

'Back home,' said Tam. 'He doesn't do it anymore though. Tried to catch a big rock one day and brained himself. Hasn't been right since.'

Rat laughed so loud he fell backwards off the log on which he'd been sitting.

THE MORNING SUN HAD just peeked above the horizon. The provisions were packed away and the horses stood ready. They had camped on the border of the great swamps the night before. It was obvious in which direction the slavers had gone since there had been no attempt to hide the tracks. That worried Brok. They were either supremely confident or incredibly stupid. More than likely, they did not expect to be followed so quickly. After all, it had been only just over a week since the ambush.

Brok sat watching Brinn's feeble attempts to make the seeker stone function. He still didn't know what to make of what had happened the night they were attacked by the Moorg.

Magic was alien to him. He feared it. It was not for him, preferring the feel of

a sword in his hand, or the hilt of a well-balanced throwing knife.

He stood and stretched his cold muscles. 'Tam, I want you on point this morning. Lom, you guard the rear.

No more than fifty paces! I want you both close by if there's trouble.'

Both men nodded and went to their mounts.

'Hey, Wiz', we're leaving,' Rat called to Brinn.

Brinn was so deeply engrossed in his task that the words slipped unheard past his ears. The seeker stone had slowed and was making gentle turns on his palm.

'Brinn! It's time to go!' Rat called again. But still there was no reply. He

picked up a pebble, took aim at the back of Brinn's head, and threw.

Brinn turned and swatted the pebble back towards a completely surprised Rat, striking him on his forehead, knocking him back over the log on which he'd been sitting.

The seeker stone on Brinn's palm was pointing in Rat's direction. 'At last,

progress!' exclaimed Balzimar, clapping his hands.

Rat lay on the ground, looking up at the grey-blue sky. There seemed to be little sparkles whizzing all about wherever he looked, a garish red lump was beginning to rise in the middle of his brow.

THE HUMIDITY WAS STEADILY rising as the day wore on. The heat caused sweat, and its pungent odour was like a dinner call for the multitudes of tiny flying biters.

The Pathfinders had been trained to ignore heat, cold, and pain.

But, even so, mosquitoes were a torture hard to ignore for very long, and this was something for which they had not been trained. All the face and arm slapping in the world would not deter them, presenting an impossible fight against an untiring enemy.

All but Balzimar were soon driven to the brink of madness. The old wizard struck his usual cross-legged pose atop Bru, remaining untouched by the flying nibblers as did, it seemed, the mule. The old man puffed happily on his pipe as Brinn pulled his horse alongside.

'Mind if I join you, old man?'

Balzimar moved the pipe to one side of his mouth. 'Course not, my boy.'

'Hope you don't mind me asking but, well, you've never really explained why you were sent?'

'Simply put, I was sent to give you all a fighting chance.'

Brinn looked confused. 'There are no better warriors in the west than here in this band.'

'I don't doubt that. In fact, if truth be known, I would happily stake my life on it.' Balzimar shrugged.

'Then what are you talking about?'

Balzimar drew deeply from the pipe and blew a long stream of smoke into the air. 'There's more at work here than your run-of-the-mill, flesh and blood scoundrels. You've come to realise that, I know. Especially after what has transpired.'

Brinn looked up the trail for a long moment, and then turned back to the wizard.

'How did he do it? I can sense when I'm being stalked; call it what you will, but I just know.' He paused. 'He almost had me. If not for you, we'd all be dead now.'

'Don't be too hard on yourself. He almost got past my defences too.'

'It was unnatural. He left no sign,' Brinn continued, shaking his head.

'He wasn't alone. He was being helped.'

'How?'

'There was something else out there in the darkness. Something evil.'

'Another Moorg?'

'No. It had an altogether different feel to it. Far worse than the Moorg. Darkspawn.'

'Darkspawn? No—impossible! They no longer exist.'

'Well, darkspawn or no, it was good at the Arts. It covered that beast's approach and eased it past most of my defences.'

'Most, but not all, thankfully.' Brinn acknowledged.

'Nevertheless, it's for this reason, I was sent. There are forces at work here that are beyond the control of mortal men.'

'Who sent you?'

'Askert.'

'The king's mage?'

'The king's High Mage, from the Council of Mages,' corrected Balzimar.

'And what did he tell you?'

'Just that he felt a need to send me. He wasn't sure himself; it was just a feeling.'

'Thank the gods for Askert's gut then.'

Brinn went to spur his horse on but stopped. 'You used the seeker stone to find us back in the forest, didn't you?

Balzimar smiled and winked.

'I'm glad you're here, old man,' he said, then with a flick of his heels, his horse trotted off towards the front of the group.

THE SWAMP WAS CLOSING in all around. At times, it was hard to see the trail, and to any other it would have been a near impossible task. But these men

were Pathfinders, easily locating the route the convoy had taken. As the sun finally began to set, they came across a four-day-old campsite. Brok grinned. They were on the right trail, and catching up.

From now on, they would have to be very careful.

#### 16

### **Swamp Fever**



MEGAN WAS BEREFT, CRYING until she could cry no more at the loss of her friend. Karem's men tried to backtrack through the swamp at first light, but there was no sign of Anabel, the search only stopping when one of the soldiers was taken by a crocodile. It was hopeless, Megan saw the look of resignation in Karem's eyes. Though he did not say it outright, she knew what he was thinking. Anabel was dead. At midday, Karem finally called a halt to the search.

'Please, Karem,' begged Megan. 'One more hour, please. I beg you.'

'I am truly sorry, Highness. We have done all that we can. It is far too dangerous to continue.' Karem spoke softly, and with regret. 'We cannot afford to lose any more men.'

'If we go farther south perhaps?' Megan pleaded.

'No. It would simply be a waste of time. We need more men if we are to perform an adequate search. We will go to Ash, from there I can organise a search party.'

'But she needs our help now, Karem, please!'

'I'm sorry. We have done all that we can for the time being. There is always the chance that Grik may have found her. She may already be on her way to Ash as we speak,' Karem replied, before turning and walking away to speak quietly with his men.

Megan flopped down onto the mud of a mound that was the closest thing to a small island in this midst of this water-choked hellhole. Her world had just suddenly imploded. As bad as the whole experience had been, she'd always had Anabel's company for reassurance.

Now, she felt completely and utterly alone.

The muscles of her chest and stomach ached and her eyes were red raw. It was the first time that she had lost a close friend, and it had delivered a grievous blow.

Karem walked back over to Megan and extended his hand, 'Come, Your Highness, it is time.'

Megan clasped his hand and stood, as Karem's men took up protective positions in front and behind. With spears as their only protection against the crushing jaws lying in wait all around. They moved slowly forward as a group as the hours ticked by.

This was the hottest, most punishing time of day, but there was little option but to keep walking. The longer they spent in the wilderness, the greater the danger.

Megan stumbled on, assisted by Karem.

It was mid-afternoon, the heat was suffocating and the strength-sapping humidity soaring. The small quantity of fresh water that they carried was used sparingly. Megan's mouth felt coarse and dry.

She had lost far too much moisture; her tears had come at a heavy price.

Staring blankly at the ground, her tired mind wandered, her steps becoming erratic. Tripping over a protruding root, her body no longer had the strength to compensate for the imbalance and she crashed to the ground with a thump. Blackness engulfed her.

'Your Highness!' cried Karem, as he tried, but failed, to stop her fall. Clearing her splayed hair away from her face, he felt her forehead. 'She has fever.

Quickly, make a stretcher. We must carry her the rest of the way.'

Karem looked worryingly at her limp body. 'Hold on, Megan. You must be strong. The master needs you alive,' he whispered.

Lashing a cloak between two spears, they made a stretcher and carried her for hours.

It was with great relief that they finally found the raised dirt road leading toward the town of Ash. As the sun began to set, they looked for a suitable campsite.

Megan was burning up. Karem tried to get her to drink as much water as possible, but she only managed to swallow a few small sips during brief lucid moments. It would not be enough. Karem knew she needed a healer, and quickly. A smaller track led off the main road, and as they were still many miles from Ash, they would have to take a chance on it.

If the smaller road led to a village, they may find a healer there.

The track was narrow, and low-hanging branches hindered their progress.

It was an act of desperation, Karem knew it, but hoped that his gamble would pay off.

The light was fading, rendering it more and more difficult to see the trail.

Sucking mud and fetid water lay on either side. This was not a good place to have to spend the night, being far too close to the water's edge for comfort.

It was just before the last sliver of daylight abandoned the land to blackness, that one of the soldiers noticed a glow in the distance. They struggled on through the ever dimming light, tripping over unseen branches and rocks before finally entering a clearing.

A small hut sat atop a piece of high ground, a tall plume of smoke billowed from its chimney and there was light shining from its single window. They had made it, but only just.

Karem called out to the occupants. The door creaked open, and a bent old woman stood glaring at them in the twilight.

'Hello. We are in need of aid and saw your light from the distance.'

'What be the problem?' The old woman looked sceptical.

'My friend is very sick. She has fever. We are in need of a healer.'

'Pfftt... a healer?' Not around these parts,' she snorted, reaching for an oil lantern beside the door and walking down the rickety porch steps towards the stretcher. 'I done a bit of healin' meself in past. I'll have a look if you like. It's as good as you'll get in these parts. I'm Gwen.'

'Please do, and thank you, Gwen,' Karem replied.

Kneeling beside Megan, the old woman felt her brow. 'Aye, she be burnin' up. Bring her inside, will ye? Can't do naught out here in the black. And mind you be careful liftin' her. She's enough without you addin' to it an' makin' old Gwen's job harder,' she scolded, leading the way into the shack with the lantern.

Inside, the one-roomed hut was sparsely decorated, a large, lumpy-mattressed bed taking up most of one end, two armchairs and a table the other. A fire crackled in the corner, giving off welcome heat. It was a neat and tidy room with few luxuries, but cosy regardless.

'Up on the bed,' she ordered.

Karem's men gently lifted Megan onto the bed and covered her with blankets.

'Now, as for you lot, ain't enough room in here for you all, so outside with you. You can camp near the shack.'

'Thank you for your help,' said Karem, as he turned to leave.

'You have the look of nobility 'bout you... Penny says I'm right,' she said, sticking a bony finger into Karem's chest.

'I'm a lord as such, at least I am in my homeland.'

'Ha! Knew it. Not much fal-dals roun' here, me lord. But you're welcome to a comfy armchair if you wants it.'

Karem smiled. 'Thank you, it would be most welcome.'

'There's a chicken coop and veggie patch 'round back of the house. Tell your men to help 'emselves. But leave the big red hen; she's me best layer.'

'Thank you, Gwen.'

GWEN MIXED ROOTS AND bark and made a hot drink, spending most of the night getting Megan to sip small amounts of the concoction. From the way that Megan screwed up her face after each sip, it looked to be a bitter brew. Gwen also had a stew on the boil, which to Karem tasted better than a banquet at any of the eastern kingdoms' high tables.

He slept for a few hours as best he could on the armchair, just before dawn he awoke with a jump. 'How is she doing?'

Gwen had pulled a chair over beside the bed to better watch over Megan. 'She be fine. Fever's broke,' she said, touching gentle fingertips to Megan's brow

Karem thought for a few moments. 'What are you doing out here all alone, Gwen?'

Gwen sat back in the chair and looked over at Karem. 'Husband was a croc hunter,' she said shrugging.

'Where is he now?

'Where most of 'em ends up... belly of a croc,' she replied with a wide grin.

'I'm deeply sorry,' Karem apologised, 'I didn't—'

'Ha! 'Twas a long time ago, so I'm long over it. Anyways, he was fond of the drink... an' usin' his fists. Didn't know it at the time, but that old croc probably did me a kindness in the end.' She nodded, adding a conspiratorial wink.

'Even so, it must be a lonely life out here all by yourself?'

Gwen shrugged again. 'It's me home, an' I got all I need. Couldn't see meself in one of dem towns like Ash or Briar, y'know? Too many busy-bodies wantin' to know all the ins an' outs of yer business. No, thank you!' she added, shaking her head. 'I'm happy as I am. I bothers no one, an' no one bothers me.'

Just then, Megan groaned and stretched.

'Well, there ya are now, dear. How you feelin'?' asked Gwen.

'Like someone cut my head off and sewed it on backwards. Oh!' she groaned,

reaching up and gingerly feeling her temple.

'That be the Aldberry Root, dear. It's good for when you're ailin', but it

leaves you feelin' a mite kicked.' Gwen laughed.

After a stout breakfast, they were all feeling a lot better. Gwen furnished them with one of her husband's maps and they also purchased one of his old shallow-draft boats.

The water was deeper out here away from the road, so they would be able to use the waterways to get them to Ash.

Karem paid the old woman handsomely and thanked her for her aid. As early morning sun peeked over the far-off horizon, they said their goodbyes and set off for Ash.



# 17

# Saved by the Devil



ANABEL HAD FOUGHT AGAINST the hands that held her, but a swift punch had ended her struggle. When she finally came to, she was being carried over someone's shoulder, her hands tied behind her back. She was also gagged with some kind of filthy cloth.

They were still in the swamp, she could see the muddy water swirling around

the man's legs as he struggled against the pull of the sticky mud.

A voice called out from somewhere behind, 'Easy, Lagnu, don't drop her. Want me to take her for a bit?'

'I'm okay. We're nearly past the worst of it, anyways.'

Anabel managed to catch a glimpse of the second man, he was one of Grik's slavers. A cold shiver ran through her body; Grik and his men were vile animals, lacking even the most basic elements of decency. The man carrying her had become stuck and was finding it hard to free himself from the mud. Under any other circumstances, she would have found this amusing. But under this particular circumstance, it was deeply frightening. The vile sticky blackness could easily suck both of them under in a matter of moments.

'Give us a push, Frenn! Bloody mud's partial to me boot.'

Frenn duly obliged and pushed the man free of the ooze. The ground became more solid.

Anabel could breathe again, releasing the breath she had been holding for some time.

'How much farther to the trail?' asked Frenn.

'Not far now, lad; few minutes should do it.'

'Don't know why you bothered with her. She's more trouble 'an she's worth,' Frenn said.

'Told you I'm not leavin' without bein' paid, and she's me pay.'

Frenn scratched his head. 'What you mean?'

'She'll be worth a bit over in the ports. Get a pretty penny for her over there, I will. They always be lookin' for fresh meat for the brothels,' Lagnu said, patting Anabel's bottom. She wanted to scream but managed to stay silent.

'But what about the gold that Karem fella owes us? You're not lettin' that go,

are you?'

'I am. I wants to get as far away from that lot as I can. Had nothin' but bad luck since we signed up with 'em, an' I mean to start changin' it right now.'

'S'pose you're right. Leastways, you were right about scarperin' last night.

D'you think anyone else got away?'

'Not sure. Don't think so. Last I saw, that thing was makin' minced meat of 'em all.'

'Even Grik?'

'He was in the bunch all right.'

'Damn!'

'Thought you hated him?' Lagnu asked.

'I did! But the blaggard owed me,' Frenn said, kicking a rotten branch in anger. 'That's the end of that, then.'

'At last! Here's the trail,' said Lagnu.

'I knew you'd get us out,' said Frenn, laughing. 'How much farther to Ash?'

'Too far for today, leastways. It'll be dark in a few hours. Better make camp while we still have light.'

'I'll get a fire goin'; we can dry off a bit,' Frenn said, as he began searching for kindling.

Lagnu gently placed Anabel onto a dry patch of ground, taking an uncanny amount of care with her given the circumstances. 'You can stop pretendin' now. I knows you're awake.'

Anabel opened her eyes and looked at the slaver. His black hair was receding, and a leather patch covered his left eye. A ragged scar ran all the way down his forehead and disappeared under the patch before reappearing again, and continuing down his cheek.

His one good eye was as dark as his soul, and his sneering grin exposed yellow broken teeth. He looked hungry, but not for food.

Frenn, a slim weasel type, was gathering a pile of sticks into a bunch on the ground when he noticed Lagnu hovering over Anabel. He smiled. 'How fresh does she have to be then?'

Lagnu grinned, staring into Anabel's terrified eyes. 'She's a looker, so I s'pect we'll still get a fair price even if she's *mostly* fresh. Not premium, mind, but fair enough all the same.'

Frenn laughed and rubbed his hands in glee. Just then, there was a crack of snapping twigs. Both men froze. The light was beginning to fade, and it was hard to see farther than a few yards in any direction through the thick foliage.

More cracking sounds followed, but louder now.

Whatever it was, it was getting closer. The men stood and drew their swords.

A dark figure lurched out of the gloom, the slaver's jaws hung open at the sight of Grik standing before them, still carrying the crossbow.

'Boss, you're alive! I mean...' exclaimed Frenn.

Grik coldly eyed the two men. 'What happened to you two last night?'

'We... arr... umm...' stuttered Frenn.

'Got knocked senseless,' interrupted Lagnu. 'When we come to, we got lost in the fog. Been trampin' about tryin' to find our way ever since. You know how it is.'

Grik looked at Frenn. 'That the way of it?'

'Aaa... aye, that's it, boss... Been loster 'an a fish 'n the desert.' Frenn grinned nervously.

'What ye got there?' Grik pointed at Anabel, still trussed and gagged.

'Oh her... we come across her last night. She tried to make a run for it in the confusion. We was bringin' her back to Ash. Knew we'd meet up with you there,' answered Lagnu.

Grik walked over to Lagnu and stood so close to him that their faces almost touched.

He stared into the slaver's only good eye. 'Good... Well done,' he growled.

'Ye did a good job, the both of ye.'

Lagnu was beginning to sweat nervously. 'Thanks, boss. Thought it was for the best.'

'Cause, you know, a few of the boys ran last night! Can't blame 'em, I s'pose. Well, now I thinks on it... I *can* blame 'em! An' if they turn up, I'll be blamin' 'em personal, like. Know what I mean?'

Lagnu and Frenn looked ashen faced.

'Now, let's have a look-see at what you caught.' Grik smiled as he walked over and knelt beside Anabel. 'Let's get this gag out the way first. Is it you, my pretty?' he asked, removing the gag and pulling Anabel's hair back from her face.

'Get your vile hands off me, you pig!' shouted Anabel.

Grik was momentarily surprised by the sudden outburst. 'No, 'taint my pretty. Shame. And how are you this fine evenin', Lady Anabel?'

'I was happier amongst the snakes and crocodiles!' 'You have spirit, I like that,' he grinned.

'Untie me and I'll show you spirit, you hairy brute!'

'You know, I believe you would too.' He smiled, gently stroking the side of her face. Anabel turned her head and bit his thumb. Grik screamed. 'Aagh! You vicious wench!' he roared as he pulled his hand away.

Anabel kicked out and caught Grik across his ribs. Grik jumped back, away from her blows while still cradling his wounded hand.

'She's a bit of a wild-cat, boss,' Frenn said.

Grik shot the man a murderous look.

Frenn suddenly found great interest in examining his boots.

Grik released a chuckle. 'She is that. Packs a wallop too for such a small parcel.'

'Want me to open your present for you, boss?' Lagnu leered, pulling a wicked curved knife from his belt.

Grik turned and looked at Lagnu. 'Touch a hair on her head and I promise I'll gut you from gullet ta gizzard!' There was bile in Grik's words.

Lagnu stopped smiling and quickly returned the knife to its scabbard.

Stepping closer to the two slavers, Grik snarled, 'I'll make it plain so's there's no confusion.

Touch her and ye die. Understood?'

'Yes, boss.' They both nodded.

'The deal was to deliver 'em to Ash unharmed, or no payment. And I mean ta get me gold.

Come between me and that, and ye'll rue the day ye first drew breath. Ye get me?'

'Okay, boss. We didn't mean nothin' improper like.' Frenn squirmed as he spoke.

Grik looked sternly at Lagnu.

'Course, boss. We'd never touch her,' he answered quickly.

'Good! Now get that fire goin'. It'll be dark afore long, an' I'm feelin' the chill already.'

X

# 18 **Briefing**



KING FREDRIK ELAMERE of Jarro stood looking out of the great arched window of his private chambers, his face contorted by a worried frown. The news from the front had always been bad of late. He had grown used to it and, to date, had been able to bear it with strength and tenacity. But the loss of his beloved daughter seemed to suck the life out of the once vibrant monarch, the pain was simply too much to tolerate.

He was losing interest in the essential affairs of state, seemingly withering by

the day.

A fire crackled in the hearth. Overhead the mantle hung a painting of his late wife Queen Rosalynn. The king glanced up at the painting. Megan was so like her mother.

He sighed heavily. Behind him, two of his most senior generals, Markas N'Dhun and Drogo Chael, stood patiently awaiting his counsel. The news rarely changed. A retreat here, a tactical withdrawal there. He turned and walked back to the large mahogany table in the centre of the room. On it lay a map of the whole territory.

He paused and looked at the markers showing the positions of the various battalions. Eastgate was home territory. They were running out of space and men too, he acknowledged. 'How goes the recruitment, General?'

'It goes well, sire. We've press-ganged all of the available men from fourteen to sixty, from here to Aberlyn,' answered Markas N'Dhun, the king's cousin on his mother's side.

'How many?'

'About five thousand, sire,' answered N'Dhun.

'Only five thousand!' the king exclaimed. 'That won't even cover our losses for the last two months!'

'True, sire, but they are a willing bunch, and eager to get to grips with the enemy,' said Chael.

The king stared at the map again and at all the markers apportioned to the enemy divisions. 'Cradle and cane' he said, shaking his head solemnly, 'is that what we are reduced to now?' he mumbled.

'Sire?' said N'Dhun.

'Nothing, General, just thinking aloud. How goes the training?'

'As well as can be expected, sire. It may take a little longer than normal to get them into shape, but they are making progress,' said N'Dhun.

'How long before they can take the field?'

N'Dhun glanced at Chael. 'The formal training has only just begun, sire. Weapons and armour have been distributed and billets assigned—'

'Ĥow long, General?' interrupted the king. 'You have evaded giving a

response.'

'A month to six weeks, at least.'

'Six weeks!' bellowed the king. 'Six weeks is an eternity! Time runs short, General! Or are you working to another man's clock, perchance? By mine, six weeks is many weeks too late!'

'Sire, some are at a more advanced stage of training than others. We could send perhaps one thousand to the lines in three to four weeks if needed,' offered

N'Dhun. 'I mean, it's not ideal even then, but if pushed...'

*'Pushed?* If *pushed?* Let me tell you, I shall be doing some *pushing* of my own if it should take that long!' He huffed, turning his back for a moment, smacking the table-top with a large leather-bound book. To say he was displeased would have been a gross understatement. "Fine. Make it so. But only if they are truly ready. I don't want you sending half- trained men to their slaughter. Lights above, that's the last thing we need! But I can't say I'm pleased by the news.'

The king leaned over the map once more, his eyes straying from the battlefield toward the swamps of Gantu and beyond. 'Has there been any further

news on the whereabouts of the princess, General Chael?'

'Our spies confirm that she was definitely taken into Gantu, sire.'

'For what purpose? Ransom? Revenge? And by whom?' the king growled, thumping his fist down again.

'That's harder to presently ascertain, sire,' answered Chael.

'Then I suggest you find out!' the king shouted. 'I don't care if you have to break a thousand heads, or hand over the keys to the treasury! Do whatever it takes to find my daughter and bring her home safely!' Tears filled the old monarch's eyes. 'Do you understand, General?'

'Yes, sire, I do. We have...' Chael hesitated.

'Our best men are on her trail, sire,' interrupted N'Dhun, hoping to be a calming influence. 'All possible measures are being exercised. They will be found, sire. Worry not.'

'Best men indeed. I hope you're not referring to that murdering cutthroat,

Thronso.'

'He is but one of a group, sire.'

'I'm afraid I do not hold as high an opinion of the man as you, Markas. It will take more than a back-alley assassin to remedy this situation, I feel.'

'If I may speak plainly, sire?' said Chael.

'Indeed, General, speak your mind.'

'Begging your pardon, but Captain Thronso is more than a back-alley assassin. He has twice won the highest bravery honour in your service. Before his fall from grace, that is.'

The king's face was getting redder yet again, and looking on the verge of exploding a second time.

'But more importantly, sire, the group is being led by one of our very best officers,' interrupted N'Dhun once more, trying to dissipate the growing tension.

The king looked crossly at the general. 'And that is?' 'Major Antillus Brok of the Pathfinder battalion.'

'Brok...? Ah yes, I remember him! A fine officer. Led the charge at Tremblo Ridge if memory serves.'

'That's correct, sire. You presented his citation personally.'

'Yes, a fine fellow indeed,' affirmed the king. 'Well, at least we have one

good man on whom we can rely. Thank heavens for that small grace.

The king walked over to the fireplace and looked dreamily into the flames. He stayed there for a moment before speaking. 'Well, I ought to tell you that we've had news from Prince Ralto of E'Ben. It seems his father, King Mallik, is poorly and not expected to last much longer.'

'Did he make any mention of aid, sire?' asked N'Dhun.

The king kept looking into the flames as he spoke. 'With regards to the kidnapping of the princess royal, he sends his deepest regrets.'

'And what of the alliance? Will he join us?' inquired Chael.

'I'm afraid there too, he is also *most* regretful, General. It seems, gentlemen, we are on our own. General Chael if you would please excuse us, I would like to speak with General N'Dhun alone.'

'Of course, sire. I'm yours to command.' Chael bowed and pressed a fist

against his chest in salute, before turning and leaving the room.

As the door closed, the king turned to his cousin. 'I've not forgotten about Anabel in all of this, Markas. I just wanted you to know that.'

'Thank you, Fredrik.'

'I gave clear orders. Anabel is as dear to me as my own daughter. The same effort will be made to bring her out safely, cousin.'

'I suspected as much.' Markas nodded, but a wave of relief washed across his

face nonetheless.

'How is Agnest taking it?' asked the king.

'Like any mother would... Badly.'

The king nodded and looked down at the floor, his sadness evident. 'Have you heard from Aaron lately?'

'He's with his battalion at the front. The last that we heard, he was doing well.'

'This war, Markas...' The king shook his head sadly. 'If I could stop it by giving my life, I would call it a small price and do so willingly. But I fear the enemy's plan is darker than we know, and his goals far beyond our understanding. This much I do know. He is spurred by more than lust for conquest alone.'

'Sire, even if your life were the only price, your men would fight to the last

rather than pay it. My King, we are yours unto death.'

The old king smiled and nodded. 'Thank you, Markas, my loyal friend.'

'Now, sire, with your permission, I will look to my new recruits. I'll make them a force of which you can be proud.'

The king nodded.

Markas turned and left the room.

The king returned to the map on the table and to the fetid swampland that was Gantu. He wondered where she was in that hellhole, and if she was still alive. He quickly banished that thought. An image of a crouching black panther entered his mind, he smiled, and for some unknown reason, felt a little better.

At least now, there was hope.



ASH, A LARGE FORTIFIED town of over three thousand inhabitants, was a staging post on the slave road from the western port cities of Rigby and Gantu-Prime; to the slave markets of Kirtuk in Amaran, and Mabak-Var in Anvar. Here, in excess of half of the town was given over to holding pens for the storage and feeding of captives.

A rough-hewn log wall encircled the entire settlement, while tall wooden towers, filled with armed guards, spaced every two hundred yards or so, offered a precaution against escape rather than fear of attack. Megan was glad to finally

place her feet on solid ground.

They'd tied the boat up at one of the many jetties on the southern wetland approach and were slowly making their way towards the centre of town. Dangerous-looking men walked the streets or gathered in small groups,

boisterously talking and laughing.

The roads were brown mud, latticed by wheel ruts, hard baked in the heat of the summer sun. There were three large taverns spread about the town. The Mangrove was the best, by Ash standards at least. Karem arranged for rooms there for the night, allowing Megan her first proper wash in days. The window of her room was barred, this was a most inhospitable place indeed.

She suspected the room was used for *special guests*, ones who required a little extra watching. Karem had her clothes cleaned and returned while she washed

herself using a small basin of warm water.

Megan quickly dressed and ate the food placed on the table by her bed.

The evening shadows were beginning to lengthen when a scullery girl entered, lit the lamps and prepared the fire in the corner. The girl was plump and not very attractive. Her clothes were worn and dirty and she seemed a very timid sort.

'Hello,' said Megan.

The girl looked up and nodded, but turned back to lighting the fire.

'What's your name?'

The girl looked towards the closed door before speaking. 'I'm Treena, Ladyship,' she said quietly.

Megan saw how nervous the girl was.

'What's the matter, Treena? You are as timid as a mouse, if you'll pardon my saying so.'

"I'm not s'posed to talk to you, Ladyship,' she whispered. 'I'd get a lickin' if

they heard me. Even if you speak to me, I mustn't speak to you.'

'Oh, I see,' said Megan, sitting down on the end of her bed. 'We could keep our voices low, so they won't hear, if you like?'

The girl looked back over at the door again before turning back to Megan. 'I s'pose, but we'll have to be quick, m'lady, I'm expected downstairs in a minute.'

'Thank you, Treena.' Megan paused then whispered, 'What's this place

called?' 'Why, it's Ash, m'lady.' Treena looked surprised at Megan's lack of knowledge.

'Is there a magistrate or sheriff in the town?'

'Not as I know.'

'Who is in charge?'

'The slavers, ma'am. Only them. They own the whole place. This here's a slaver town.'

Megan slumped backwards. 'And where are the nearest government officials?'

'Government... Don't know about all that, m'lady. Maybe Gantu-Prime. All I know is there's none out here, not in the wilderness.'

The door opened, and Karem entered the room. Treena finished up lighting the fire and left.

'I trust you are comfortable, Highness?'

'Yes, thank you.'

'You have been fed adequately?'

'Yes, I have been, thank you.'

'Is there anything that you require?'

'Yes. You can tell me what is being done about Anabel? You promised to organize a search party.'

'That has been taken care of, as promised. On the morrow, a large party will go and retrieve the wounded and dead.'

'And search for Anabel?' Megan pleaded.

'Of course, Your Highness. They will conduct a thorough search for survivors.' Karem paused. 'On another matter; my master, Lord Alsheer, has returned and will join us for the next leg of the trip, accompanied by two hundred of his best light cavalry. So, please, rest soundly, Your Highness. As you can see, your safety is of paramount importance to my master.'

'And where will the next leg take us?'

Karem smiled as he backed out of the door. 'I will inform my master of your query.'

'Čan you not answer the question yourself?'

'It's not my place. But I will convey your question at an opportune moment. Lord Alsheer's time, you will understand, is constrained by recent events.'

'When will you ask?' Megan pressed.

'Later, after sunset. He is much too busy at this precise moment.' Karem was still smiling that fixed smile of his as he closed and locked the door.

Just before the door had closed completely, Megan saw one of Karem's men standing guard just outside in the hallway, keeping a very close eye on her.

Karem walked down the hallway and entered his room. The curtains were closed tight, shutting out the last of the evening sun. The only light was coming from the crackling fire in the corner. A hunched figure sat in one of the large armchairs, his pupil-less eyes as dark, deathly, and emotionless as those of a coiled serpent.

'Master, the princess has been made as comfortable as is possible in this wallow.'

'Good. We'll not stay overlong here. As soon as she has had some rest, we

will be leaving this place for Shan-Tu.'

'I will make the arrangements.' Karem nodded.

'Thank you. Is there any news of the others from the group?'

'A search party is to be sent to the site of the attack at first light.'

'What are the chances of survival?'

'Slim, master. The creature was... efficient. It was a most regrettable incident.'

Alsheer gave a hissing inhuman laugh. 'Yes, regrettable, but it has worked to our advantage, has it not? Truly, a most fortunate occurrence,' he said, and again laughed. 'Though a great pity about Lady Anabel, it must be said.'

'It was a disappointment, master, and unforeseen.'

'It would have been nice to produce her as well. It would have been... a considerable bonus, let us say. But at least the princess is in our keep. That is the most important thing.' He nodded. 'Now that Grik and his men are dead, there will be no financial demands.' Another hissing laugh followed.

Karem stood with head bowed in front of Alsheer. 'When do you wish to leave for Shan-Tu, master?'

'Let her get a few hours sleep first, Lord Toriz. But we will make haste before midnight. I want to be away from this place as quickly as possible.'

Alsheer gazed off into the distance as if thinking of some unknown terror. In his twisted mind came the image of a black panther, its white fangs bared. He shook his head to clear the image. 'Midnight, Lord Toriz, and not one minute later!'

'Of course, master. I will attend to it at once.' He said, exiting the darkened room and quietly walking down the corridor, stopping for a brief moment to listen at Megan's door. The sound of deep, sleep-induced breathing emanated from the room. 'Good. Sleep now. You will need your strength in the coming days,' he whispered. Content, he continued on down the corridor, down the stairs and out of the main door of the inn. The night was fast approaching. He quickened his step; time was precious.

He disappeared into the growing gloom, about his master's business.

#### 20

#### Ransom



THEY REACHED ASH AFTER a day long trek in sweltering heat. Grik had storage pens and quarters in the town. He clamped his rough and weighty hand around Anabel's arm and forcibly marched her into his private chambers. Inside the cramped room was a large bed covered with animal furs, a table, and a couple of uncomfortable-looking wooden chairs.

A single slit window allowed natural light to brighten the pervading gloom.

There was a second door in the back wall, which he walked Anabel to, opened the lock, and pulled back a long iron bolt. Shoving the door open, he pushed her inside and closed it again behind her, plunging her into the inky darkness.

She listened to his heavy steps retreating as he walked away, a heavy thud resounded as he closed the outer door and locked it shut. She could hear his deep

voice thundering orders to his men, placing guards in position outside.

Fumbling around in the darkness, she found the far wall and slid down onto the floor with her back pressed against the coarse wooden planks. Her eyes strained to focus in the pitch black. Only the merest crack of light shone through a gap at the bottom of the door, gloomy shapes forming as her vision slowly adjusted.

A noise from farther back in the gloom made her heart jump.

'Please don't be afraid,' said a female voice, 'I'm a prisoner too,' the woman added. 'It seems we are cell mates.'

'Who are you?' asked Anabel.

'My name is Merrith.'

A dark, vaguely human, form shuffled towards her and took hold of Anabel's hands. The figure led her to a bed at the back where they both sat.

'And what is your name, m'lady?'

'How did you know that?' asked a shocked Anabel. 'How did you know that I was highborn? Are you a seer?'

'No.' Merrith laughed. 'Nothing quite so mystical. It's your hands. Much too soft for a commoner. And manicured nails are rarely found on milkmaids or field hands.'

'Oh, I see!' she said, reassured. 'I'm Anabel.'

'Good to meet you, Anabel, though we can't rightly see each other.'

Anabel laughed.

Merrith's outline was beginning to take form as Anabel's eyes became accustomed to the low light. She could just make out Merrith's face and long hair. 'Have you been here long?'

'About eight weeks. I was captured along with others from my village.'

'What happened to the rest of your people?'

'Still in the slave pens or gone to the markets,' she said, her somber tone conveying despair.

'That's truly awful. I had heard that slavery was common in Gantu, but never

really let it sink in, I'm ashamed to admit.'

'It's all too real. The people have become so accustomed to it that the Freemen now accept it without question. Any who try to fight back are quickly beaten into submission, and afterwards paralysed by fear.'

'Freemen?' asked Anabel.

'The farmers, hunters, and villagers of the hinterlands. Most are migrants looking to escape the corruption and squalor of the over-populated port cities. It's sad. They thought that coming into the wilds would provide them a better life. But in the end, they were walking right into a trap. The government actively encourages resettlement and then abandons them to fend for themselves, knowing that they will end up in the slave markets of the east.'

'How can the people accept such an abhorrent thing?'

'It's easy. The slavers are well organized and brutal. Any village that tried to rise up would be crushed. Some have tried and paid the price.'

'Then why stay?'

'Where would they go? West to the ghettos of Gantu-Prime or Rigby? Perhaps north, to the slave plantations? The south is quicksand and impenetrable swamp filled of all kinds of nightmarish creatures. And the eastern border, if you were lucky enough to make it that far, is the very centre of slaver activity.'

'Oh, my goodness! Are there any who might stand and fight?'

'Some, but not many. It's rumoured that escaped slaves have set up a community deep within the swamps and are gathering strength before returning. But that story has been told for far too many years now. It's more a dream than reality, I suspect.'

'I hope you're wrong, Merrith. Sincerely, I do. No one should have to suffer this. It's an outrage that must be stopped.'

IT WAS GETTING LATE, the sun having long set as Grik made his way towards the Mangrove Inn. His mood was sullen at the loss of so many of his best men. They could easily be replaced as there were always men available for hire in Ash. But that was not the point. It was an imposition, and someone would have to pay dearly for it. He mounted the steps to the door.

The inn was always open for business, day and night. The warm yellow light shining through the curtained windows and the sound of raucous voices attested

to the fact.

He opened the door and walked in. Heads swivelled to look. Some acknowledged him, others turned back to their conversations. Karem was eating at a table in a quiet corner of the room. Grik approached and sat without asking if he could.

'It's good to see that you survived.' Karem smiled.

'No thanks to you. I saw ye slink off while we were all busy dyin'.'

'My instructions were to protect the females at all costs. I was simply doing my job.'

'And not a very good job you did. I come across one of 'em out there in the wastes.'

'Lady Anabel? You found her? Is she alive?'

'Oh, she's prime. Tucked up safe and sound.' Grik smiled, exposing the ruined black stumps that filled his mouth.

Karem scanned the room. 'Where is she? Lord Alsheer will be pleased to hear

of her return.'

'She's safe for now. You'll get her back when I've the gold 'at's owed me.'

Karem dabbed a napkin to his mouth. 'Of course. I will arrange it at once with Lord Alsheer.'

'Well now, that's fine an' regular of ya. I've a free hour to kill, so why don't we go see him now? Get it all tidied up nice an' proper.' Grik grinned malevolently.

'Why not indeed?' Karem replied, smirking coldly back. 'If you will follow me upstairs. Lord Alsheer has lodgings here. He will, I'm sure, be more than happy to compensate you for the excellent job that you have performed.' Karem rose and slid his chair away from the table.

'We'll see on that score,' Grik said. 'Maybe not quite so happy when he's heard me out,' he mumbled so that Karem couldn't hear.

Karem led the way up the stairs and stopped outside Alsheer's door.

'Wait here!' he ordered, glancing at Grik. 'I will inform Lord Alsheer that you wish to speak with him.' He said, entering the dark room and closing the door behind him.

After a few moments, the door opened again, and Karem beckoned Grik to enter. It was dark but for the flickering light of the fire. Alsheer was sat in a comfortable looking armchair, before him was a round table. 'So good to see you again, slavemaster. Lord Toriz has informed me of the terrifying events that took place in the swamp. A very unfortunate situation indeed.'

'Yes, terrifyin', m'lord, it was a hellish thing to behold! I lost a lot of good

men to that beast.'

'Yes, very unfortunate, and unforeseen. Even the best of plans cannot cover all eventualities.' Alsheer waved his hands in an all-encompassing gesture.

'An' you'll get no belly achin' from me on the subject as long as I'm properly

compensated, of course.'

'I see,' Alsheer said, as a wooden chest rose from the ground and landed gently on the table. The lid opened by itself; it was full of gold coins. 'I believe our agreement was two thousand gold crowns, was it not?'

Grik's eyes bulged at the sight of the gold and his greedy hands began to sweat. 'At's right, m'lord.' Grik pulled his eyes away from the glinting coins. 'But I've extra costs to cover now that were never part of the deal.'

Alsheer clasped his hands together and rested his chin on them. 'Go on.'

'Well now, m'lord. I lost a lot of men an' equipment in that there swamp.' Grik's palms were getting very slick but not from looking at the chest of gold.

He had suddenly realized what a dangerous situation he was in.

Alsheer did not move. 'I'm listening, slavemaster, please continue. What

price, in your estimation, would adequately cover your losses?'

'Well, you see, m'lords.' Grik looked pleadingly from Alsheer to Karem, and back to Alsheer again as he spoke. 'There's all them widows now, 'at has to be compensated. Children without fathers 'at's needin' support 'til they can look after 'emselves, you understand.'

'And again, what amount would cover their... loss?'

'Five thousand gold pieces, m'lord.' Grik swallowed hard, as a solitary bead of sweat trickled slowly down one side of his face.

Alsheer said nothing for a moment. 'You do realise, I assume, that I could

take Lady Anabel by force and leave you penniless.'

Grik looked back and forth from Karem to Alsheer. 'Oh, you're talkin' 'bout them two hundred cavalrymen of yours camped outside the town,' Grik said, fixing Alsheer with a resolute stare. 'You see, m'lord, it's Ash counsel policy to watch all newcomers to the town environs. Be assured that there are five hundred men surroundin' your force at all times, though ye can't see 'em. No, that would just be plain rude. So, at any time of me choosin', I could have 'em wiped clean. If you know what I mean.' Grik's smile was almost apologetic.

Alsheer sat back into the chair. 'I do. But I'm afraid you will have to wait until I return to my fortress at Shan-Tu. The two thousand before you is all the

coin that we carry at present.'

'We'll call it a down-payment, m'lord.' Grik smiled, leaning forward to lift the heavy chest.

'It is agreed then. I will send the rest upon arrival at my stronghold. Lord Toriz will go with you now and escort Lady Anabel back here.'

'No, m'lord, that plan won't float.'

'How so?'

'Well, there's no tellin' that you'll send the rest of me coin if you get back to Shan-Tu, now is there? Don't get me wrong, m'lord, I'm not tryin' to say you're dishonest. Perish no!' Grik looked between both men again nervously. 'It's just good business to have a trump when you need one.'

'And Lady Anabel is your trump?' added Karem.

'In a matter of speakin' Lord Toriz.' Grik nodded. 'An' please have no worries about her safety, m'lords. She is the most protected woman in the whole of Gantu at the moment. There are fifty of me best men watchin' over her as we speak. No one will get within a hundred paces of her without them knowin', mark my words, Lord Alsheer, not a hundred paces.'

There was a twinkle in Grik's eye. His veiled threat had been acknowledged.

'It seems, slavemaster, that you are a most resourceful man. You have been... grossly underestimated. I may have use for your abilities again sometime.' He paused. 'Very well. Though you drive a hard bargain, consider it agreed. The money will be sent as soon as we reach Shan-Tu.'

'Thank you, m'lord. I'm at your service whenever you call,' Grik said, making a little bow but then looked up. 'For a fair price of course,' he added and

laughed.

Of course,' acknowledged Alsheer, wearing a grimace of discomfort.

Grik walked to the door with the chest of gold, while Karem held the door ajar.

'One thing more, slavemaster. If the girl is harmed in any way'—Alsheer paused to emphasize the point—'I will return here with an army and... How did *you* put it? Ah yes... Wipe you clean! Is that clear?'

'Às crystal,' Grik acknowledged. 'Worry not. We'll care for her like she were

one of our own.'

As Grik left the Mangrove through the back door, he couldn't stop a little smile crossing his lips. The whole thing had worked out really well for him. Now that his men were dead, he didn't have to share the two thousand gold crowns. And on top of that, he was due to receive another three thousand. This called for a celebration. A jug or two would be welcome, he decided. 'Steady on now. Get the money safely home first,' he cautioned himself.

If the locals knew that he had two thousand pieces of gold on his person, he would have been torn to pieces in the rush. It was time to be sensible. He stuck to the shadows all the way back to his quarters, stopping regularly to check over his shoulder. Meanwhile at the main gate, a carriage sped through, and away from town, its strangely blacked-out windows preventing curious eyes from seeing the occupants, one of whom was a sleeping princess.

#### 21

## The Smell of Death



WHEN THE PATHFINDERS finally arrived at the slaver campsite where the attack had occurred, four wagons were parked on the island. The drivers were busy loading bodies, and parts of bodies, onto the back of each. There were also armed guards searching through the reeds on the edge of the swamp. The Pathfinders hid and watched. It would not be a good idea to be seen coming from the Jarro direction at this time. The kidnappers would be on the lookout for any who might follow, and these men were most likely in their employ.

It was midday before the fully laden wagons finally left the scene.

Brinn crept back toward the others. He'd been spying on the search party from behind thick undergrowth near the edge of the mound. 'That's it, they've gone,' he announced as he jumped up into his saddle. He led the group up onto the raised ground to the dilapidated house with the stone perimeter wall. The smell of death still polluted the air, and there was still a copious amount of blood and body-parts, of both men and horses, littering the ground.

'This is a pretty sight,' announced Brok.

Brinn got down and examined the tracks in the dirt. 'There was a hell of a fight. Here, a group made a last stand,' he said, pointing to the spot in which Grik had rallied his men. Then he walked over to the old cottage and looked inside. 'The women were kept in here, but they were removed and brought in this direction.' He pointed along the edge of the swamp and away from the main battle.

'Who attacked them?' asked Tam.

'More a case of *what* attacked them,' interrupted Rat, pointing at a set of large claw prints gouged in the damp soil.

Brok examined the prints. 'Never seen its like before.' He shook his head. 'Whatever it was, it was big.'

'It's a Gwergar,' announced Balzimar.

'A what?' asked Rat.

'A Gwergar. And a rather large one too by the look of those tracks,' added the little old wizard, leaning down from the saddle to get a better look.

The others looked at each other with blank expressions.

'Would you care to elaborate, old man?' Brinn finally asked.

Balzimar sat back into his saddle and blinked rather comically. 'But, of course. You'd not have come across this type of creature before; I do apologise,' he added, then he snuffled and nodded but said no more.

'Do we have to drag everything out of you one piece at a time?' growled Brinn.

'What?' asked Balzimar, looking blankly back at Brinn. Then he grinned bashfully as he realised they were all awaiting a proper explanation. 'Oh, er... So sorry, of course. It's a sort of flightless reptilian of the Wyvern family.'

'Wyvern... ain't that a dragon?' asked Lom, scratching his head.

'Excellent, Lom, that is correct! Very good indeed. It really depends from where you hail,' added Balzimar very matter-of-factly. 'I suppose the appellation *Wyrm* is better known in the east, as is Wyvern. Though I've heard it called Wyrm in the north also. Now, down south—'

'Dragon will do just fine!' interrupted Brok, looking more than a little exasperated. 'Now, what are the chances of this thing returning anytime soon?'

'Ôh, I think we're pretty safe. They hardly ever attack humans without just cause.' Balzimar smiled.

Lom looked around at the bits of human offal littering the ground. 'Hey, Rat, did he just say they don't attack humans?'

'Hardly ever.' Rat gave a nod, grinning mischievously.

'Well, that's good to know. I was getting kinda worried there for a moment.'

'You said flightless. I thought dragons could fly?' asked Tam.

'Most do. But like everything else, there are variants. The Gwergar like water and swim rather than fly. They are among the smallest of the Wyrm species, but don't let that fool you. What's lost in girth is compensated for by aggression. It's a fascinating study really—'

'And we can't wait to hear more. But for now, I think we'd better get a move on. We've wasted enough time already,' growled Brok, turning his horse back onto the trail towards Ash.

'The group with the girls headed into the swamp,' announced Brinn, pointing into the dense undergrowth.

'Chances are, they looped around and back onto the trail farther up?' said Brok.

'Very likely,' agreed Brinn.

'Then we should be able to find their returning tracks somewhere along the road,' reasoned Brok.

'It's possible. Or they could still be lost in there.' Brinn pointed into the swamp's dense interior.

'What does that stone of yours say, old man?' asked Brok.

'It points in that general direction,' he said, pointing into the swamp. 'But if you take out all the twists and turns of the road, then Ash also lies in that direction. The choice is yours.'

'Thank you.' Brok smiled then mumbled so Balzimar couldn't hear. 'A bloody great help you are.'

'Not at all, my boy.' Balzimar grinned, quite oblivious to Brok's annoyance. Brok stepped down from his horse and handed the reins to Rat.

'Carry on up the road, slowly. We will catch up with you before nightfall.

Brinn, Tam, with me. It's time we got our feet wet.'

As the three men trudged into the mire, Rat gathered up their horses and tied them together so they made a line behind him as he rode. Leading the little column was Bru, Balzimar's scruffy mule. Balzimar was sitting atop the animal's back with his legs crossed and tucked under his body as usual.

Lom rode up beside Rat as they moved along and whispered, 'Hey, Rat!'

'Yup.'

'What does 'appellation' mean?'

Rat shrugged his narrow shoulders. 'Dunno, Lom. Something to do with

apples I s'pose.'

Lom scratched his big forehead looking befuddled. It was a long while before he spoke again. 'I like apples, 'specially the big juicy red ones.'

'Do you? Me too.' Rat smiled, trying hard not to laugh.

BRINN AND THE OTHERS arrived back onto the road come late evening, having followed Megan's trail in a large curving arc through the swamp. Night was fast approaching by the time they found the camp that Rat had set for the night. Brok sat and pulled off his mud-caked boots, the others following suit. They were soaked through and hungry. The small fire was welcome.

'Find anything, sir?' asked Rat.

'Lots of bugs. And quite a few leeches.' He blanched as he placed a hot twig from the fire against one of the numerous bloodsuckers attached to his legs.

'The trail wandered about for a bit, but returned to the road as expected,' said Brinn.

'Are the ladies still alive?' asked Lom.

It was Brinn's turn to wince as he removed the charred body of a half-incinerated leech from his calf. 'Hard to know. The tracks were unusual. Eight entered the swamp but only five came out.'

'Don't make sense. Why drag 'em all the way here to kill 'em? They could have done that back in Jarro,' Rat mused.

'True, but that would depend on who now leads the group,' countered Brinn. 'If the leader died back at the house, there's no guarantee that the women will remain unharmed.'

'They're still alive. If they were not, then the seeker stone would not react. And it points north. Which means that one or both are still alive,' added Balzimar.

'There were other tracks too. Two others followed the group for a time, and it looks as though they were carrying something heavy when they stopped,' said Tam.

'How do you know that?' asked Balzimar.

'Easy... One set of prints was set deeper in the mud as they moved away,' drawled Tam.

'Did you follow them?' asked Balzimar.

'That's why we were so late getting here,' Brok answered, leaning forward to warm his hands on the fire. 'We found a day-old campsite. But then the trail led back onto the road. The first group followed a small track that veered off to the left of the main road. It led to a house. The old woman was cooperative after we explained what had happened in Jarro. They're heading to Ash in a boat.'

'So, all roads lead to Ash, it seems.' Balzimar smiled, puffing on his pipe. 'It seems that way. Can you tell us anything about the place?' asked Tam.

'It's been some time since my last visit,' answered Balzimar, 'but I imagine it's the same now as it was then. It's a medium-sized town used for penning slaves during roundups. Men for hire come and go so it should be easy for you to get inside.'

'We'll split into two groups. Balzimar and Brinn will enter the town with me, and the rest of you stay hidden outside,' said Brok.

'There's safety in numbers, wouldn't it be better if we all went in together?' asked Rat.

'Normally, I'd agree, but three extra bodies against three thousand won't make that much of a difference. I would prefer to have you on the outside in case we need to be rescued later. On top of that, a smaller group will not attract as much attention.'

'That makes sense,' agreed Tam.

'Tam, in my absence, you are in charge. If something goes wrong and we don't return, the decision to continue, or not, with the mission, will rest with you,' said Brok.

Tam looked grim but nodded in agreement. 'Understood, sir.'

'Now unless there is anything else?' Brok looked around at the faces of his men. No one spoke. 'Good. Then I suggest we get some sleep. I'll take first watch.'



# 22 **Bal-Karesh**



HIDDEN FROM THE EYES of men, a dark evil was gathering strength. High on the desolate slopes of the Wyvern Mountains lay the black-walled fortress of Bal-Karesh. Mawk, a green-hued, Karesh chieftain, stood on the upper gantry of a round tower, patiently awaiting the arrival of his master, Ultor Halfbreed, supreme warlock, dragon knight, and lord of Bal-Karesh.

As the Twins slipped behind a blanket of grey, the tower was plunged into darkness.

The wind died away and a shroud of ethereal silence blanketed the surround, muffling all sounds to a barely discernible murmur. Huge wings cut through the quiet with rhythmic pulse as a black dragon hovered and landed on the flat granite roof of the tower.

A figure dressed in black robes slid down from the beast's back and walked towards the hunch-backed chieftain.

'Welcome back, Master,' purred Mawk, bowing low. 'We have missed your wisdom and guidance.'

'How goes our *undertaking*,' asked Ultor, all hints of a countenance hidden by the darkness of his hood, save for the dirty grey beard divided in two by leather cords, spilling freely from the cowl.

'It goes slowly, Dark One. Our numbers are still too few.'

'Walk with me.' Ultor headed toward the steps to the lower floors. 'What is the delay?' he asked, his voice bearing a deep rasping quality.

'Breeding is slow, Dark One. Gestation takes a month, but when the females are out of season, there is nothing that can be done,' Mawk pleaded.

'I have given thought to this... problem. There is a chemic that can be used. I have found an elixir that will make the females receptive to multiple joinings.'

Mawk grinned. 'That would be beneficial to all. But the young will still take two years to fully mature. Even with increased productivity, this, I think, will be a problem.'

'The elixir increases the rate of growth of the young. They will mature to adult in two months.'

'Two months? This is a miracle! How did you come by this knowledge?'

Ultor stopped and turned. 'Trial and error. Many have died in its development.' He continued on down the steps and through a door at the end that led to the lower courtyard.

Mawk had to run a few steps to catch up with the long strides of the quickly moving warlock. 'You are truly the master of all, Dark One. When can we expect delivery of the elixir?'

Ultor stopped again and turned to the darkspawn chieftain. 'It will have to be manufactured here. I will instruct your chemics on the extraction process.' Ultor answered, before striding off towards the gates of the fortress.

Two huge heavily muscled Karesh warriors, their dour faces staring blankly

ahead, gave salute as he approached.

Again, Mawk had to run to catch up, his malformed feet skipping across the cobblestones as he pranced along in an ungainly lope.

'What is this *extraction process* that you speak of, Dark One?'

Ultor slowed a little to allow the squat, pig-faced chieftain a chance to keep pace. 'The elixir is to be found deep within the human brain. Once removed, the subject is devoid of all feeling and emotion.' Light from a nearby torch caught the warlock's eyes, making them glow like orange cinders, exposing his flat wide nose and protruding overbite. 'Not unlike the walking dead. One human will produce enough elixir for three of our brethren. A satisfactory rate of exchange, I feel; their bodies will feed the growing host.'

The wizard walked over to the large double doors at the main entrance to the fortress and ordered them to be opened. The two Karesh guards grabbed hold of the massive iron bar keeping the door shut, sliding it back out of the way and

pulling the doors open.

'Even so, Dark One, how will we acquire such a large quantity of humans

without alerting them to our presence?'

'I have taken care of the matter. Behold!' Ultor pointed through the open doors toward the barren expanse stretching out before the fortress. Ten caged wagons came trundling up the rocky road, carrying hundreds of human slaves. 'This is just the beginning.'

Mawk's eyes bulged with excitement. 'Your Will shall be done, Dark One. We rise!' He shouted, throwing his arms upward in jubilation and capering with

glee.

As the first wagons passed through the gates, Ultor turned away, leaving Mawk to see to the caging of the prisoners. Crossing the courtyard, he climbed the stone steps leading to the main citadel, finding a locked set of double doors barring the way to his council room. With a touch of his finger, the lock clicked as the enchantments dissipated.

The doors swung open. Torches instantaneously flared and ignited on both sides of the room, flooding the cold interior with yellow light. Ultor strode up the central isle. Dark granite columns lined the way, supporting a high vaulted

ceiling.

At the far end stood his throne, a symbol of both his prominence and power over all of Dark Kind. He entered and quickly walked to its base. Beside the throne lay a small brass gong on a gilded table. He struck it once, sat and waited. After a few scant moments, several Karesh attendees entered, bowing low in cowed subservience.

'You called, Dark One?' asked a tall green-hued Karesh servant.

'I would speak with the chemics,' rasped Ultor.

'Yes, Lord. At once,' answered the servant.

'Also, bring me food and an offering. There should be a suitable candidate amongst the new arrivals.'

'Yes, Lord. Do you require a male, or a female?'

'Either will suffice once the appropriate criteria are met.'

The darkspawn servant bowed scuttled off.

Ultor rose and walked to his private rooms. The interior was a lavish mix of

multi-coloured carpets and gold-embellished furniture. In the centre, on a plain silver stand, stood a beautifully crafted crystal circlet. Set in a bed of gold and trimmed with sapphires and diamonds, it overshadowed all other splendours, making them seem tawdry and bland by comparison. He picked it up and placed it upon his head. The jewels glowed softly, and a vision began to form in his mind.

'Master, you called?' came a familiar voice. 'How goes your mission, Lord Alsheer?'

'I have the princess in my care. The Lady Anabel is momentarily in the hands of others. But that will soon be rectified, my master.'

'Good, you have served me well.'

'There is more, master.' 'Continue,' Ultor rasped.

'There is one who follows. He has power, master. He can wield like no other I have seen.'

'A High Mage perhaps? It makes sense that the Counsel of Mages would send an adept.'

'He is unique. His power is immense. But with a difference. I could not sense him before he unleashed.'

Ultor thought for a moment. 'Then tread carefully. When you have reached the safety of Shan-Tu, I will contact you again with instruction. The princess is key, if the prophesies are to be fulfilled.'

'I understand, master. I will not fail you.'

Ultor removed the circlet and placed it back on the stand, feeling most troubled. A vision exploded in his mind. He was alone and in darkness. Stretching out his arms, he pawed the languid air, feeling nothing but void. Two luminous yellow eyes stared from the black, unflinching, merciless, cold. With a shake of his head, he returned to the present.

With renewed fret, he strode decisively toward the door with an urgent need to consult the scrolls. This was a worrisome occurrence. He would also consult the seers. An answer would be found.

As he exited his private rooms, the Karesh chemics, escorted by a guard, were filing into the throne room.

'I have brought the chemics as ordered, Dark One,' announced the guard.

'I have no time for them now. There are questions that need immediate answers. I will speak with them another time!' Ultor walked past and out the double doors and was gone.

The guard glared at one of the chemics. 'The master has spoken. Remove yourselves!' he hissed pointing towards the door. When the room was empty, he curled up in a small alcove in the wall, in readiness for when his master called again.

X

#### 23

# Making a Stand

IT WAS FINALLY MORNING, and Anabel could see natural light seeping under the gap in the bottom of the door. She was tired, and sleep had been hard to find. Grik had been drunk and in very high spirits when he'd returned in the early hours. Grinning lasciviously, he had removed Merrith from the cell, and winked at Anabel as he locked the door again.

Anabel was distraught for her new friend.

It was an hour before Grik's loud snores reverberated through the structure, but Merrith did not return to the cell, leaving Anabel tossing and turning for the rest of the night.

It was just after dawn, and the heat was already beginning to rise in the cramped little room. She could hear Grik coughing and groaning as he awoke, no doubt feeling the effects of all the wine he'd consumed the night before. The shuffle of feet heralded an approach to the door of her cell. It opened, the light-burst momentarily blinding her.

When her eyes adjusted, she saw Merrith standing at the door beckoning her to come out.

Anabel's heart sank when Grik appeared behind Merrith's shoulder.

'Come on now, m'lady, we've no time to lose. There's many a mile to travel today, so out you come,' said Grik.

Anabel shielded her eyes as she finally ventured out into the light.

Merrith didn't look at her; she kept her head bowed, her face hidden behind her long dark-brown hair. Merrith's delicate hands were bunching and pulling the material on the front of her grey smock until it twisted into a conical swirl.

'A very good morn to you, m'lady,' Grik said, beaming. 'I hope you slept well; you'll need your strength for the comin' journey.'

'Where to?' she asked.

'To me stronghold in Briar. A much more befittin' place for a valuable prize such as yourself.' He grinned and slapped Anabel's bottom.

Anabel spun and punched him, as hard as she could, into the mouth. Blood exploded from a ruptured lip, and bits of rotten teeth clattered along the wooden floor. Grik reeled backwards in shock, but before he could recover, Anabel kicked him between his legs, dropping him like a man run through. Merrith, who was standing to one side with hands pressed against her cheeks aghast, quickly covered her mouth to keep from laughing out loud.

Grik was making a gasping, whining sound, crumpled in a ball at their feet.

Merrith smiled broadly, stood beside Anabel, and whispered, 'Are you a warrior?'

'No, I just played a lot of Tackball when I was growing up.'

'Tackball?' Merrith looked confused.

'It's a boy's game, and a bit rough.' Anabel replied.

Merrith looked back down at Grik, who was still curled up and making funny

sounds. 'Can you teach me how to play?'

'Just as soon as we get a chance.' Anabel nodded.

IT WAS FIFTEEN MINUTES before Grik stopped rocking backwards and forwards, and thirty before he could speak again. His threat to kill Anabel, as soon as he regained the use of his legs, didn't hold the usual menace due largely to the higher pitch of his voice. He eventually regained composure, but instead of killing Anabel, as he had promised, he looked curiously wary of her; always keeping a good leg length away.

As the girls finally left Ash, it was aboard a caged slave wagon.

Grik rode at the front of the twenty-five man column, seeming ill at ease atop

his horse and constantly shifting his body weight as if in pain.

The young women took much comfort from this and Merrith snickered whenever he winced. By late evening, they had left Ash far behind, the landscape was different here: they were finally away from the swamps of Southern Gantu; now the ground was solid and the foliage unusual. Though still in the wetlands, they were at least away from the mud and mire of the swamp. That night after eating, they both slept inside the wagon. It was uncomfortable, but better than sleeping outside on the cold ground.

Lying on the bed of the rig, Merrith turned to face Anabel. 'Thank you for

what you did today,' she whispered.

'He had it coming. Was that the first time, that he...?'

Merrith pulled her blanket up under her chin. She was beautiful, slim and petite with big oval brown eyes and full lips. 'No, he... *selected* me, soon after I was captured,' she explained, a few tears slipping down her face.

Anabel gently stroked her cheek and fixed a stray strand of hair. 'Stay strong,

Merrith. We'll get out of this somehow, I promise.'

Merrith smiled sadly. 'I have nothing left to be strong for,' she added as more tears flowed.

'What about your family? Mother...? Father...? Husband?'

'All taken. I'm not even sure if they're still in Ash. By now, they could be anywhere from here to Mabak-Var,' she said, pulling up the rough blanket and wiping her tears away with it. 'Whenever I close my eyes to sleep, I remember Kern's screams as they beat him to death.'

Anabel continued to gently stroke the top of Merrith's head. 'Who's Kern?'

Merrith's teary eyes peeked over the top of the blanket. 'My... my betrothed. Oh, Anabel, how could they do that to him?' The tears were flooding down Merrith's face. 'Perhaps it's just as well, how could he ever look at me again after days like today? I feel so... dirty.'

'Oh, my poor Merrith, this is none of your doing. Kern would love you all the more, I'm quite sure of that.' Anabel took hold of Merrith's face in both hands.

'Kern loved you, and don't you ever forget that.'

'Do you really think so?'

'I wouldn't say it if I didn't believe it,' Anabel encouraged.

Merrith threw her arms around Anabel and hugged her. 'Thank you, Anabel. Please be right.'

'I am. I feel it in my soul. And I'll tell you something else'—Anabel lifted

Merrith's face up to look at her—'that animal Grik will have to crawl over my dead body to get to you again. And that's a promise.'

Merrith smiled and wiped away the last of her tears. 'How about you? Is there

anyone special in your life?'

'Yes, lots. They were all special in their own way.' Anabel grinned.

Merrith shot up onto her elbow. 'Tell me more. How many suitors did you have?' she asked, smiling through still wet eyes.

'Oh, quite a few. Though they all lacked that special... something.' Anabel lay

on her back, staring at the wooden ceiling of the wagon.

'I know what you mean.' Now, it was Merrith's turn to stare off blankly. 'Kern had that, something. Strong but sweet. And the dreamiest eyes.'

'Sounds a catch.'

'He has a brother. I could introduce you.' Merrith giggled. Then the smile slowly faded.

'Had a brother,' she corrected, lying down. The moment was gone as reality

returned.

There was silence for a long time as they settled down to sleep.

'Anabel, are you asleep?'

'Not quite,' answered Anabel drowsily.

'Thanks again.'

'You're welcome. I enjoyed it... Very much.'

### 24

### **Password**



IT WAS LATE EVENING, and Balzimar was standing close to his mule on the dirt road leading to the main gates of Ash. He was using Bru as a large shield against prying eyes as he examined the seeker stone.

'East or west, which is it?' hissed Brok.

Balzimar scratched his head as he looked at the stone turning left, then right, and back to the left again, in a continuous loop. 'This is strange indeed. It seems to be trying to point in both directions at once.'

'Maybe it's broken,' offered Brok.

'Nonsense! I just need a little time to focus,' Balzimar huffed, clearly getting very irritated by Brok's foolish comment.

The wizard closed his eyes.

The stone continued to flick left and right, but faster now. 'This is infuriating. It's never done this before. It really makes no sense at all,' he said, shaking his head.

'Never mind, we'll use the old-fashioned way. We have a spy up here who may well have helpful information. Goes by the name of Ortor Drass. We'll need to make contact,' said Brok, remounting his horse.

'Where can we find him?' asked Brinn.

'He's the inn-keep at The Winsome Wench. We'll make for there. Keep your wits about you; it's not a good place for tongue slip.'

Brinn and Balzimar mounted and followed Brok through the wooden gates and into the town. Other than a perfunctory glance, the wall-guards paid them little heed, Ash being a busy place with lots of comings and goings. The streets were little more than stone and clay and the buildings were square or rectangular, flat-roofed, boxes constructed using untreated logs.

The men they passed looked dangerous, mostly human but now and again, there were dwarves, and always in groups of three or four.

If it was possible for Ash to have a poorer quarter, then they seemed to be heading into it. Every second building had semi-clothed, half-starved women outside, bidding any who passed to enter. Farther along, a small crowd had gathered to watch a knife fight between two very large drunken slavers. It didn't last long, much to the disappointment of the crowd.

After a few more streets and a couple of turns, they arrived at The Winsome Wench Inn. A stable was attached to its side, the eager stable-hand standing by the corral door took charge of their horses for a few pennies. Brok led the way into the smoke-filled interior of the inn. It was busy inside, most of the tables looked to be occupied by cutthroats and ruffians.

The patrons scanned the newcomers as they entered, but curiosity sated, quickly returned to their drinks and conversations. Brok walked to a table in the corner which by the look of it, had been recently vacated. Empty tankards and plates littered its top.

Soon, a portly woman, neither fair nor ugly, came to remove the crockery and take their orders.

'What's in the pot tonight?' asked Brok.

'There's roast mutton, or mutton stew,' answered the woman, looking mightily bored.

'Any soup?' asked Balzimar.

'Yup, mutton soup.'

'Seems you have a glut of mutton to shift. Did the bar-keep get a good price on herd of sheep?' Balzimar joked.

The woman straightened her back and looked oddly at the three men. 'You're not in Rigby or The Prime now, mister too good for mutton! You want feedin' or not?'

'Three stews and three tankards of ale,' interrupted Brok.

'Fine.' The woman glowered. 'Oh, I'm afraid the good silverware is out for cleanin', will the iron cutlery do?' she sneered as she looked at Balzimar.

'Humph.' Balzimar blew through his moustache in disdain. 'You have a singular wit, my dear.'

The woman turned and left to get the food and drink.

'Exactly which part of *mind your tongue* did you not understand, Master Wizard?' whispered a clearly annoyed Brok. 'We need to keep a low profile. You're not on a casual jaunt now. One slip could end up getting you skewered, and us with you! So, from now on, I'll thank you to keep your mouth shut from here on.'

Balzimar reddened as much as a wizard could, which was to say that the tip of his nose changed to a darker shade of pink.

'What does this Drass look like?' asked Brinn.

'I don't know, but there's a password. Only he will understand what it means,' answered Brok.

On the other side of the bar, a dwarf was playing cards with three humans, and he was winning by the sounds of his raucous peals of laughter.

He was quite obviously drunk. The others at his table did not look to be enjoying his exuberant joviality, their sour unsmiling faces were dark with anger.

The waitress came back with the food, placing three steaming plates of stew on the table, followed by bread, cheese, and three tankards of ale. 'Need anything else? Some clean napkins perhaps?' she asked, looking at Balzimar with false concern.

'Yes, as a matter. Is Ortor Drass about?' asked Brok.

The woman straightened and frowned, thinking they were about to raise a complaint. 'Why do you want Ortor?'

'I have a message for him from his cousin. He asked us to look him up when we passed through.' Brok sounded genuine.

The woman looked over her shoulder towards the bar. 'He's pretty busy now. Maybe if you tell me, I can pass the message on to him later.'

It was obvious she remained unconvinced that she was not in trouble.

'That's fine. Just tell him that Cousin Jared sends his respects and hopes that the bottle of Monarch Red that he sent last time was a good vintage.'

'Monarch Red? Never heard of it,' she said, scrunching up her face.

'I'm just the messenger, lady. I'll tell him myself if you point him out.'

'No, there's no need, I'll tell him. Eat your food and enjoy.' She walked off, looking a little flustered.

More peals of raucous laughter came from the dwarf as he placed his hand

over a pile of pennies in the centre of the table and scooped them up.

Brok didn't look at the dwarf, he was too preoccupied with watching the serving woman instead. She was speaking to a fat-bellied man behind the counter of the bar, and it was clear she had passed on the message correctly. Brok saw a slight change on the man's face, and he quickly looked over in their direction.

Drass immediately walked towards them, smiling broadly. 'How is Cousin Jared? It's been far too long since we last met.'

'He's in good health but wondering how you fare? We will be returning in the morn. If you have a message, we'll be glad to see he gets it.'

'In fact, I do. I have some premium Dwarf Ale that I want fetched to him if it's no bother?'

'Not at all.' Brok replied.

'It's just out the back here. If it's not too much of an imposition leaving your food for a moment?'

'Lead the way.' Brok looked from Brinn to Balzimar and smiled. 'I'll be back shortly. Leave my plate alone!'

It was a ruse for any unwelcome ears, and seemed to have worked. After a quick glance around, Brinn was happy that no-one was paying them any attention. Instead, the inn's denizens seemed far more interested in the drunken dwarf on the other side of the room.

'Ah-ha, that's me again!' said the laughing dwarf, placing his cards down.

The men at the table threw their cards down in disgust, then stood and left. The dwarf threw his arms up in the air in mock surprise. 'What's the matter? Ye're not stopping now, are ye?' he bellowed. 'Had enough, have ye?' He laughed again. 'Well don't that beat all,' he slurred and burped, then scooped all of the pennies into his pouch and tied it onto his belt.

He stood, scraping his chair loudly along the floor.

'Well now, good and gentle folk of The Wench. I bid ye all a goodnight, at that!'

He staggered backwards a little as he flourished his arm about in a drunken salute. 'Ye have been most accommodatin', but alas, it's time that I—' He burped, regurgitated a little of the ale he'd been swamping, and looked to be having trouble focusing. 'An'... I good night ye indeed,' he finished. He bent down, picked up a wide-bladed broadsword lying at his feet, and staggered towards the main door of the inn.

After spending a minute trying to figure out how to open the door, he finally raised the latch and pulled the giant door open. Still smiling, he stepped forward, promptly tripped over the threshold and out into the fast approaching night with a clatter.

The door closed behind him with a thud. Conversations quickly returned to normal.

'He's had a skinful,' said Balzimar.

'I don't think his card-playing friends have taken kindly to losing their money.' Brinn nodded in the direction of the three men who had been playing cards with the dwarf. They were huddled in deep conversation, and after a moment, they stood, drained the last of their ale and left through the back door.

'Old man, stay here! Tell Brok, I won't be long.' Brinn stood to leave.

'You should stay out of it. It's not our concern,' advised Balzimar.

'I just hate seeing a drunken man being taken advantage of. It's a recent quirk.'

'I hope you know what you're doing. You heard what Brok said about keeping a low profile.'

'Don't worry, I'll be discreet.' He smiled as he left.

Outside, it was getting darker. Brinn looked first one way and then the other, but there was no sign of the dwarf or the men. He walked a little way up the road and heard muffled noises coming from an alley between two buildings. As he turned the corner, two of the men were right there, holding the dwarf down. One of them had a blood-smeared broken nose. The third man was picking himself up from the ground. It was obvious from the wound on his head that he'd also taken a blow. A glint of metal shimmered in his right hand. He had a knife.

'That's enough, let him go!' ordered Brinn.

The man with the knife turned to face him. 'Mind your own business, 'less you want a taste!' he said, holding up the blade for Brinn to see.

Brinn walked a few steps closer. 'Last chance. Just walk away now and nothing will come of it,' he warned.

The one with the knife turned and looked over his shoulder at his two partners, then turned back, smiling. 'Some just don't know when ta walk on by,' he said, shaking his head as he took up a defensive pose, holding the knife out in front.

'You can keep the money. I just want my friend,' said Brinn.

The dwarf struggled harder on hearing the offer. One of the men had a hand clamped over the dwarf's mouth, so that the only sounds he could make were

muffled grunts.

'Too late for that,' he replied, shaking his head. 'I've had to listen to that wind-bag all evenin', crowin' 'bout how he was king of the dwarves, laughin' an' smellin' the place up while he cheated us out of our money. So 'less you're lookin' to join him, you'd best back on up the alley right now.'

The man had an insane glint in his eye. Brinn knew he wanted more than the

dwarf's money. He shook his head. 'Can't do that.'

'You've had fair warnin',' he said, lunging at Brinn, trying to stick him with the knife.

Brinn side-stepped and grabbed hold of the cutthroat's wrist with one hand while quickly kicking him into the stomach. The man doubled over and as he did, Brinn bent the trapped arm back and shoved the knife into the assailant's throat. The body didn't drop immediately, it remained upright for a few seconds, gently shaking, before finally collapsing in a heap onto the ground. The dead man's friends looked on spellbound by the speed of the kill.

Then one of them threw the dwarf's moneybag onto the ground and they both

ran for their lives in the opposite direction.

'Thanks, stranger. That was a noble thing ya did.' The dwarf had sobered up quite considerably.

'Glad to help out a fellow traveler.'

Just then, alarm bells began ringing all around the town.

'My name is Helfwen. It seems our friend here was well connected. We'd better make ourselves disappear,' said the dwarf, looking around. But when he turned back to face Brinn, no one was there.

'A ghost, that's what he is! A ghost-man!'

Helfwen looked up and down the alley, but he was alone. He bent and retrieved his moneybag, then scurried away to the safety of his lodgings. It was time, he decided, to put some distance between himself and that body lying in the dark.

Brinn returned to the inn where Brok and Balzimar were sitting at their table, waiting. Brok didn't look happy as Brinn took his seat. 'Where were you?' he asked gruffly.

'Just getting some air. It's nice out, this time of night.'

'It's okay, you can drop the pretence; the wizard told me where you went. I suppose the alarm bells are all your fault?'

'Just doing a good deed. Nothing amiss with that, is there?'

'And dropping us in pig-muck because of it,' growled Brok, banging the table.

'He was practically helpless. I couldn't just turn my back and ignore what was going to happen. I have trouble enough sleeping at night as it is. Tell me you wouldn't have done the same.'

Brok bit his lip, and then nodded. 'Possibly.'

Brinn sat back, smiling, self-satisfied at the answer.

'But more than likely, *I* wouldn't!' Brok's eyes blazed. 'Knowing the danger we're in, and the cost if we fail. So, wipe that stupid smile off your face and give me your word that from now on, the mission comes first!' hissed Brok, trying to keep his voice low so that the other patrons wouldn't hear.

The smile slowly dropped from Brinn's face. After a moment, he spoke,

'You're right, I'm sorry. It won't happen again.'

Brok nodded. 'Okay, subject closed. Ortor informs me that the girls are no longer together. According to his sources, Princess Megan was taken to Shan-Tu by a Lord Alsheer, and Lady Anabel to a town called Briar by a slaver called Grik.'

'Aha!' interrupted Balzimar. 'That's why the seeker stone was flip-flopping all over the place. Of course. It makes sense now.'

'What are you babbling about, old man?' asked Brinn.

'When we were trying to locate the ladies earlier, I assumed they were still together. So, I focused on finding the direction of both women at the same time. Which explains why the stone was going backwards and forwards. It's because they were in opposite directions.' Balzimar looked very pleased with himself. Then slowly, his smile faded. 'But on a more serious note, I know something of this... Alsheer. He's a darkspawn lord of renown and not to be trifled with.'

'What do you know of him?' asked Brok.

'We have contested in times past. He's guile-some and treacherous, and a

wielder of the Dark Arts. We'll have to tread carefully.'

'It just gets better and better, doesn't it?' sneered Brok.

Ortor came over to their table. 'There's trouble in town. A senior member of the Council of Slavers has been murdered. The town watch is combing the streets, turning out every inn to find those responsible. Apparently, they have witnesses. Quickly... follow me into the back room.'

Just as they entered the back rooms, the town watch burst in through the front door.

Almost as fast, Ortor was leading the three men to the back door and out into the stables where their mounts stood ready. 'I took the liberty of having them saddled. Follow Brundel, he'll get you out of town safely. I'll deal with the town watch and buy you some time.'

Brundel was the stable-hand they had met earlier.

'Thank you, Ortor; the king will know of your part in helping us if we ever get back,' Brok said.

'Never mind all of that... You just get those girls back to Jarro safely.' Ortor gave a Jarro chest thump salute and returned to the inn.

Brundel was a good guide. Brinn suspected it was not the first time the stablehand had been called upon to help those wishing to leave town unnoticed. They slipped down back alleys and side streets, and soon arrived at a small back gate. The guard was given two gold crowns, and their way was cleared to leave. Brundel watched them briefly from the shadows of the gate. When he was satisfied they had safely escaped, he returned to the inn.

Inside, the din was already starting to quiet as the town watch settled in for a few free drinks, compliments of the house.

### 25

## **Lost Memories**



THE INSIDE OF THE CARRIAGE was illuminated by an ornately decorated

brass oil-lamp.

Thankfully, it provided a reasonable amount of light; if not for this, the interior would have been grim, its tiny blacked-out windows making it impossible for Megan to tell if it was day or night. Directly across from her sat Karem, and to his left, Lord Alsheer. Megan had been drugged again. Her last memory was of lying on the bed back in Ash. She sat up and yawned.

'Ah, you are awake, Your Highness,' Karem said,

'Do you really have to keep doing that to me?'

Karem was puzzled by the statement. 'Pardon me, but... do what, Highness?'

'Drug me. The last I remember I was having a bit of a stretch on my bed after eating a nice meal, and now this!'

'Apologies, it will not happen again. You have my word. Besides, we are almost at our destination, and once there we can all relax a little more with no further need for trickery.'

'And what *is* our destination?'

'You can direct that question to Lord Alsheer when he has finished his meditation.'

Alsheer was sitting perfectly still, his eyes closed tight.

His skin looked even paler and sicklier than normal in the dim lamp-light. 'Why are all of the windows blacked out?' asked Megan.

Karem smiled, casting a look towards Alsheer, seeing if he was awake or not. 'My Lord Alsheer suffers from a rare skin disorder and burns easily in direct sunlight. It is a family trait, passed down through the generations.'

'How unfortunate. He could do with some colour; he looks horribly ill.'

Karem nodded, 'This trip has been both long and arduous for all concerned.

But there are excellent physicians where we are going.'

'Oh, that's good. How far is it to... What's the name of the place?' she asked softly. Karem laughed. 'Your tenacity is to be admired, Highness. But as I have stated before, you can address that question to Lord Alsheer personally. Just as \_\_\_\_.'

'I know! Just as soon as he has finished his meditation,' huffed Megan. 'How long did I asleep, this time? I trust you are permitted to tell me that at least?'

Karem nodded. 'Somewhere around twelve to fourteen hours.'

'That long!' Megan looked more than a little shocked.

'It is a long and unpleasant journey, you have been saved many dull hours of monotonous travel.'

'What about Anabel? What about the search? You promised!'

'It has been conducted. Lady Anabel is safe and in good spirits.'

'She is! Oh, thank the gods! I've prayed so much.' Megan covered her face with her hands as relief swept over her, the raw emotions watering her eyes.

'She has been transported to Ash and will join us at a later date.'

'Transported to Ash, with whom?'

'Master slaver Grik, I believe.'

'Not that... reprobate! Turn the carriage around, Karem! You can't leave Anabel in his filthy hands!' Megan leaned forward and grabbed Karem.

'Her safety is assured, Highness. Lord Alsheer has seen to that. Lady Anabel will not be harmed in any way. Grik has been made fully aware of the consequences of any, shall we say... *transgressions*, on his part.'

'Do you really believe, he can be trusted?'

'No. But he is smart enough to know it would be unwise to cross Lord Alsheer. He knows full well that there is no hole deep enough nor mountain high enough to which he can run, that is beyond my master's reach. And besides, it is in his interest to keep her safe. She is of great value to Grik. He will not risk losing his reward. Rest assured, your friend will not be harmed.'

Megan sat back on her cushioned seat. She was not completely convinced but knew that the carriage would not be turned back no matter how much she protested. The interior was lavishly decorated, and similar in design to the carriage in which they had been ambushed. Those memories came flooding back now. It felt so long ago, almost another time altogether.

She felt somewhat emotionally removed from the event, but that could have been a side effect of the drugs, she admitted to herself. 'Is it day or night?' she finally asked.

'It is somewhere around mid-afternoon.'

'So late already? Well, when can we stop? I need to stretch my legs.'

'We have many miles to travel before we will stop, Your Highness. Time is pressing and we are behind schedule.'

Megan looked at the blackened windows, feeling trapped. 'Tell me about yourself. It will help to pass the time and keep my mind off my legs,' she said.

'What would you like to know?'

'What did you do before the war?' 'I was Lord Protector of Devaa.'

'Devaa?'

'It's a city on the borders of the Myrrymas Desert.'

'Is Devaa nice?'

'Oh yes. I think it is beautiful. But very different to the green lands of Anvar and your homeland Jarro. Devaa is hot with an abundance of sand, but beautiful nonetheless.'

'We have sand like that in Jarro, along the coast.'

'No, it is a different kind of sand. It is produced by heat, not water.'

'Oh, I see. Do you have a wife in Devaa?'

'Yes, I do.'

'How long is it since you were last home?'

Karem's smile faltered. 'You know, to be honest, I haven't thought about that for such a long time,' he said with a puzzled look.

Megan shrugged. 'What's her name?'

Karem looked at Megan strangely as if struggling with a memory that just would not come. 'It's funny... I can see her face.' Karem's brow was deeply furrowed as he struggled to remember.

Alsheer leaned forward and stretched out an arm towards Megan, his black eyes boring into her soul. The world slipped away as she fell into darkness.

# 26

# **Divide and Conquer**



THE CAMPSITE WAS LOCATED in a large group of hawthorns a mile or so west of Ash. Its thick blanket of green leaves providing cover from unwelcome eyes on the, much-travelled, road into town. Tam was standing guard and waved as they approached, while Brok quickly scanned the area. It was a good site for a camp. A barely perceptible half-smile curled the ends of Brok's lips on catching sight of the small stream burbling and splashing across moss-covered stones no more than twenty paces from the circle of sleeping mats. Tam had chosen well, he thought. It was fast approaching midnight and the wind had picked up, dark clouds rolled in angry procession across the sky. The air smelled of rain, a small fire sat crackling in the middle of a freshly excavated pit. The men gathered around and sat.

Tam spoke first. 'Find out anything interesting, sir?'

'They've been separated. The princess has been taken to a fortress farther north by a darkspawn lord called Alsheer,' answered Brok.

'And Lady Anabel?' continued Tam.

'West, to a town called Briar.'

'So, which one do we rescue first?' asked Rat.

'Both,' answered Brok. 'We'll need to divide into two groups. I'll take Brinn and Balzimar with me and go after the princess.'

'And the three of us, Lady Anabel,' finished Tam, nodding his agreement.

'Correct. Now, I know this reduces our chances, but these orders come directly from the king.'

'Where exactly is this town?' asked Rat.

Brok looked at the little man. 'Just keep to the western road for a day or two, and you can't miss it.'

Tam nodded again. 'What are our orders when we get there, sir?'

'Well, that's just it... there are none. This delightful twist has kicked us right where it hurts most. Just do the best you can to secure her release and get her back to Jarro. The details I leave to you. One thing more... If you succeed, she is to be conveyed directly to Jarro, clear? That means there will be no attempting to rejoin with us. You get that poor girl home as quickly as you can. You're on your own from now on, but I know my men.' Brok looked at the three men in turn. 'There are none I would send in your stead.'

'We won't let you down, sir,' Lom confirmed.

Brok smiled and nodded. 'According to our source, she's in the hands of a slave boss called Grik. Now be careful dealing with this brute, he has quite a reputation around these parts. Any questions?'

'Why were they split up?' asked Rat.

'At this point, we don't know. It could simply be to make it harder for a successful rescue attempt. But whatever the reason, we'll be trying to get them both out. Any more questions?'

There was silence.

'Okay, get some sleep. Tam, can I have a word in private?'

'Of course, sir.'

The two men walked off some distance into the darkness.

The first drops of rain began to crackle amongst the dead leaves on the forest floor as a cold northwesterly wind bent bow and branch beneath its growing strength.

'Have you any questions, Tam?'

'No, sir, my orders are clear.'

'Good. I'm sorry it's come to this, but I have little choice. Stealth is your only ally and best hope of success. Get in and out as quickly and quietly as possible.'

'Yes, sir. We won't let you down. This time next week, we'll be crossing the Benteers.'

'I know I don't have to tell you the importance of this mission, Tam. That poor girl is in the hands of the very worst kind possible. Her world has been turned upside down. I only hope we're not too late.'

'We'll make it our business to ensure we're not,' growled Tam.

Brok smiled. 'Good man!' he said, slapping Tam's shoulder. 'Now let's get some sleep.'

THE NIGHT WAS COLD and wet, and it passed slowly. In the morning, the two groups went their separate ways, not knowing if they would ever see each other again. By midday, the weather was getting worse as Brinn and the others passed Ash; the town looking deserted in the heavy deluge. Even the sentries were huddled inside their watchtowers, seeking shelter from the late summer storm.

The bad weather was a lucky turn for the three men as they slipped by unnoticed.

By late evening, the worst seemed to have passed and the rain had reduced to a persistent drizzle. After the claustrophobic closeness of the swamps, the open plain, dotted here and there with clumps of isolated forest, was a welcome change. They found sanctuary in just such a copse. Large knurl-trunked beech trees towered high overhead forming a protective blanket that deflected the worst of the rain. Nestling in the roots of one particularly large tree, they ate their cold rations by a very small fire. The sun had only just gone down when a rustle out in the darkness of the forest floor brought them to full alert.

Drawing weapons, they patiently waited.

'Ho, in the camp! No need for alarm! I'm alone! Your fire looks invitin'; may I join ye?' called a gruff voice.

Brok stepped forward with bow in hand and arrow nocked. 'Come out so we can get a look at you, but slowly, and no sudden movements!' he ordered.

A squat and solid-looking dwarf dragging both a horse and a bundle-laden mule behind him appeared from behind the bole of a large tree a few paces off.

He came forward, holding up his free arm in supplication. 'Easy now, big fellow; no need for alarm, I be friendly enough.' He smiled. 'Good night to ye. Nice to see you again, master ghost. I was beginnin' to think I would never catch you up.'

Brinn recognised the rough features of the drunken dwarf he'd saved in Ash.

'And a good night to you. What brings you this way? It seems we are destined to keep meeting, you and I.'

The dwarf tied his horse and mule to a large fallen branch lying near the

Pathfinder's horses, walked over, and sat by the fire.

The others joined him after they were satisfied that he was truly alone.

'Indeed it does. But well now, you didn't really give me a chance to thank you last time. So, I felt duty-bound to find you and give you my thanks, proper like. I made a point of tracking you down so as I could do just that.'

'You came all this way just to say thank-you?' Brinn frowned, disbelieving

the tale.

'That and to offer this.' He stood and extended his arm.

Brinn instinctively clasped it.

'I owe you a life debt. So you see, my sword-arm is yours 'till the debt's paid.' He shook Brinn's arm vigorously and sat back down.

Brok looked perturbed but Balzimar just smiled and said nothing.

'And what if I say that we're even and there's no debt to pay?' asked Brinn.

'Wouldn't life be a lot easier if things were that simple? But, alas, 'tis not for you to say, lad.

'Tis for me to decide when honour's been satisfied.' He grinned broadly, up

into Brinn's face.

'I sense no deception,' interjected Balzimar.

The dwarf grinned and patted Balzimar's leg, nodding in agreement. 'You see, lad, my purpose is true. Now, will I be ridin' with ye, or a bit behind? Either way, I'll be within earshot in the event a chance offers for a settlin' of the balance.' His smile was infectious.

'But you don't know our purpose. You could be put in harm's way,' cautioned Brok.

'Whatever the purpose, 'tis of no import. By the laws of honour, your purpose is now mine as well, don't you see? Short of conspirin' with the Dark League, of course. I have to think of my place in the afterlife after all.' He laughed. 'Roasting over a spit for all eternity's a good deterrent there,' he added, beginning to laugh even louder.

Brinn looked at Brok and shrugged. 'Welcome to the group. By what name do

you go?'

'Well, as I said last night, 'tis Helfwen. Helfwen of Timberland. You'd have

heard it if you'd stuck around a little longer back in Ash.'

'Then we bid you welcome, Helfwen of Timberland.' Brok sneered aggressively, giving Brinn an angry glance before regaining his composure. Brok's sarcastic tone was lost on the dwarf, who sat grinning from ear to ear, quite oblivious to the none-too-subtle jibe.

'Welcome indeed, Helfwen,' added Balzimar.

Again, the dwarf grinned and nodded in approval.

'Now then,' he said, wagging a stumpy finger in the air, 'shall we celebrate the accord with a few drops?'

Brok simply shook his head in exasperation.

Helfwen spent a few hours telling of his adventures in the west, how he had made and lost a fortune twice over, and of his time up in the frigid north and the strange fierce people he had met there. But now, he was on his way back home to the forests of Timberland, back to his family and a chance to claim what was rightfully his: the crown of the Timberland dwarves.

'You're a king?' Brok looked unconvinced.

'Strictly speakin', 'affirmed Helfwen, 'I was first in line, but my uncle usurped the throne at my father's death. I was only a lad at the time and no match for a battle-hardened warrior.'

'What happened?' asked Balzimar.

'I was banished to the wilderness. He wanted me dead, but my grandmother stepped to my defence. They settled on exile for life.'

'Ĥow long is it since you've been home?' asked Brok.

'Near enough twenty year at a guess.'

'I can't see your uncle being all that happy at your reunion. What happens

when you finally turn up?' asked Brinn.

'No, he won't. 'Specially not after I stake my claim. It'll mean death for one of us. First off, there'll be a gatherin' of the council to decide the legitimacy of my claim. But that's a formality, considerin' they all know who I am.'

'What then?' asked Brinn.

Helfwen grinned. 'A Baelram! A fight to the death! Winner takes the crown!' Helfwen laughed and drummed his thighs in excitement.

'You welcome this?' asked Balzimar.

'I do. I have a bellyful of wonderin'. I want to go home, to feel the soil of the Timberland woods under my feet again. Aye. Either underfoot, or o'er my dead body, one or the other.' Helfwen took a long drink from a jug he had retrieved from his packs and passed it to Brinn.

Brinn took a swig of the concoction, and coughed as it scorched him from lip to tonsils.

The burning fluid surged past his throat, all the way down his gullet before finally causing minor eruptions in his stomach.

'Aye 'tis the good stuff all right! That's pure dwarf brandy,' said Helfwen,

laughing.

'I hate to dampen the mood, but we're in enemy territory so these tall tales will have to wait for another time,' interrupted Brok.

'I'll take the watch,' announced Brinn, trying to cool his burnt lips with the water-skin.

'I look forward to hearing more about your travels, especially up north. You must tell me everything,' said Balzimar, smiling warmly. Wizards are always in the market for strange tellings and new information about unknown parts.

'And I'm the very dwarf to tell. Just fill my belly and uncork a jug and I'll spin you a tale that'll curl your ears.' Helfwen laughed again for it was true. Dwarves loved story-telling almost as much as going to battle. And stories of battle were their most favoured of all.

They settled down to sleep.

Helfwen took a little longer than the others to find a comfortable position, huffing and grumbling for long minutes before finding one.

Then he sighed rather loudly and finally closed his eyes.

Soon, all that could be heard were Helfwen's soft snores and the rustling of

the leaves in the branches overhead.

# A Delightful Diversion



GRIK PULLED UP BESIDE the wagon and slowed his horse to a walk. 'There she be, ladies. That be Briar,' he announced, pointing up the road.

Not quite as large as Ash, Briar looked to have had a similar architect. It had been constructed using the same untreated, roughly-hewn logs, producing identical flat-roofed houses, and a palisade running all the way around the perimeter of the town.

'She's not much to look at, mind, but she's all mine. I have three hundred men-at-arms. Here, my word is law,' he said, thumping his chest, feeling very proud of himself, his brazen grin clearly showing the newly acquired gaps in his teeth.

Spurring his horse, he rode ahead to the front of the column.

'Here, my word is law,' Anabel mimicked, pulling a face that had Merrith crying with laughter. 'He makes good the argument for why men shouldn't lay with beasts.'

Merrith doubled over. 'Please stop, Anabel, he'll hear me,' she squealed through clamped fingers.

As they entered through the town gates, the squalor became apparent. If Ash had been bad, then Briar was much worse. Ragged scrawny-limbed townspeople with down-cast eyes trod the streets. The slavers were in the fullness of health and walked about with an arrogant swagger, pushing and abusing any unfortunates foolish enough to stray too close.

Grik's quarters were situated on an elevated site in the centre of the town, surrounded by a hastily erected wooden fence. The captives were driven into the courtyard. Grik barked orders to his men and rode back out of the compound. The guards brought the two women into the house and locked them in an upstairs room that had one large bed, a table, and a wooden chair.

'Not exactly sumptuous, is it?' mused Anabel.

'No, I don't think comfort was a priority,' agreed Merrith, looking around.

Anabel walked to the small window on the far wall and opened it to allow some air into the stuffy room. The frame swung out a full ninety degrees before thudding noisily against the iron cage enfolding the window's outer casement. The town stretched around them in a semi-circle.

There was no structure to the layout, the dwellings erected in a haphazard way without planning or fore-thought. A myriad of small dirt roads and dark alleys corralled the houses into irregular groups. A pungent smell of filth and decay hung heavily throughout.

To the rear of the town, Anabel could just about see the slave pens, up to three thousand people imprisoned together, awaiting transfer east or north. They looked wretched, and either sat alone or in small groups, mothers hugging children, husbands hugging wives.

Anabel's temper rose. She grabbed and pulled one of the iron bars and to her

surprise, it moved a little. The building was old, and the window frame rotten.

She froze. Had anyone noticed, she wondered?

Looking around the compound, she saw the guards still in idle conversation at various points along the nearby walls. There were no ringing bells or shouts of alarm. She tugged on a second bar, and it also moved. She smiled and stepped away from the window.

Waiting for nightfall, the women took turns trying to loosen the bars further. One would stand listening at the door, while the other would keep working the bars backwards and forwards, freeing them a little more with each pull. Near midnight, Merrith heard heavy footsteps approaching. Anabel closed the window and they both jumped into bed.

A bolt was thrown back, and the door opened as Grik entered. He had come for Merrith. 'Girl! Wake-up!' he whispered harshly.

Anabel rose onto an elbow and glared at him, placing a protective arm across Merrith. Grik held up his lamp, on seeing the murderous look in Anabel's eyes, he hesitated.

Rubbing his bushy black beard and split lip, he stepped back out of the room and bolted the door shut.

Anabel listened to his retreating footfall until satisfied he was truly gone, then allowed her staunched breath to escape in a long, slow release.

Merrith hugged her tightly in thanks.

By dawn's approach, one of the bars was loose enough to be pushed aside while the second was close to breaking free. Anabel arranged them so they looked untouched, and both women returned to bed. Somewhere outside, a cockerel announced the arrival of the new day with a raucous crow. The townsfolk stirred and slipped from their warm and comfy beds, their weary hands groping for lamps in the predawn dark. Anabel and Merrith, exhausted by their endeavours, dropped easily down into sleep. Two hours later and with a hefty thud, the door bolt opened and a portly, grey-haired elderly woman entered with a tray of food. 'Come on now, me lovelies, time to get up. Come on, me sleepy-heads, wake up now!' she called cheerily.

With her hair a jumbled mess of tangled knots and waving strands, Anabel

just about managed to raise her head from the pillow.

'Good morn, dearie. I've brought you a bit of food to give you a nice breakfast,' the old woman said, smiling again, and lifting the tray up for Anabel to see.

Anabel nodded. 'Thank you,' she croaked, trying to gather her senses.

'My-my, dearie; you look terrible, if you don't mind me sayin'. Are you coming down with something'? Here, let me feel your temperature,' the woman cooed in a soft, caring voice. She stepped forward as if to place a hand on Anabel's forehead, but Anabel politely declined.

'Oh, no... Really, I'm fine,' Anabel answered. 'It was just a very long trip, that's all. I'm afraid a hard wagon-bed does not lend itself to a good night's rest.'

'Of course. And there's me, cluckin' on at you like an old roostin' hen. Do forgive me, dearie. My name's Rosa. And I'm sorry I went to grab at you with me rough ol' hand.'

Anabel eased herself out from under the blankets, smiling. 'Please, don't

worry about it.'

But she was indeed a sight to be seen; she had slept in her clothes, now they were a bundle of creases, and her hair was like a nest. Thankfully, the woman didn't bat an eve.

She was sweet and grandmotherly, placing the tray down on the table and beginning to unload the dishes. The two steaming bowls of porridge, bread, cheese, and jam reminded the women just how hungry they really were and they tucked into the food with relish.

'Goodness, you *are* famished. Didn't you sup last night?' asked Rosa.

'No,' answered Anabel. 'We didn't manage to eat at all. That brute, Grik,

forgets that people need food to survive.'

Well, that's just not good enough, if you ask me.' Rosa shook her head disapprovingly. 'I'll have a word with my grandson about it. Did you know that he runs this whole place?' she said, making a sweeping motion with both arms as if implying her grandson managed the world.

Anabel looked up. The old woman stood smiling blankly back at her. 'Your

grandson is... Grik?' asked Anabel, taken aback.

'Who? No-no-no!' the woman said, shaking her head dismissively. 'Never heard of no Grik, dearie. My grandson... Fengrik... Fengrik Sprightly.

Anabel blinked the sleep from her eyes. Her face paled as the penny dropped.

'What does Fengrik look like?'

'Oh, you can't miss him. He has big broad shoulders and black whiskers. Takes after his father, he does. Doesn't look much like me, bless his soul.'

'Am I delirious for lack of sleep or did she just say that Grik's name is *Fengrik* Sprightly?' whispered Merrith, looking as though she was on the verge of another bout of hysterics.

Anabel gave her a gentle kick under the table. 'Yes, we know him, Rosa,'

Anabel replied.

Rosa looked confused. 'Know who, dearie?' she asked, scratching her head.

'Fengrik,' said Anabel.

'You know, Fengrik?' Rosa asked, looking excited.

'Yes, Rosa, we know him,' answered Anabel.

'He's my grandson, you know.' Rosa smiled broadly. 'He runs this whole place all by himself. Clever lad, he is. I'm very proud of him.'

It quickly became obvious that the poor old lady was easily confused. The girls chatted politely to Rosa as they ate, needing to repeat themselves on more than a few occasions.

While Rosa was distracted, Anabel slipped the breadknife down into her breeches. It was sharp and she had to be careful not to slice her leg open as she shoved it down.

They also kept the extra bread and cheese and stowed it beneath their blankets.

'Well, it was so nice talking to you girls, but I must be about my duties now,' Rosa finally said, loading the empty dishes onto the tray.

As she got to the door, she turned. 'I must tell my grandson about you two lovelies. It's about time he settled down and found himself a nice girl.'

Anabel and Merrith smiled and nodded politely, unsure what to say. 'I, er...

thank you,' said Merrith.

Rosa closed and bolted shut the door, a bemused but excited smile still adorning her face.

IT WAS ALMOST MIDNIGHT. Grik sat in his strong-room, counting his gold for the second time that day. He loved the feel of the cool heavy metal in his hands, the coins shimmered in the flickering yellow lamplight, bright and golden

like evening sunlight on calm waters.

He scooped up a double handful and let them trickle through his fingers. He was a rich man now and would soon be even richer. The hard work of recent years was finally paying off and he could now retire to Gantu-Prime in luxury. 'No, that's not true,' he corrected, but it soon would be, just as soon as that final payment was made. He grinned, raising the whiskey jug to his lips again. He had been drinking all evening, and now, the room was beginning to move of its own accord. He enjoyed the disjointed dance unfolding before him.

He wanted company and remembered Merrith, smiling again; but the smile dropped as an image of Anabel's angry face appeared from the mists of his inebriated mind. Deciding against the idea, he drained the contents of the jug,

then hiccupped and burped.

The room was spinning even faster now. He tried placing the coins back into the wooden chest that he used to store his gold, but missed and dropped half a handful to the floor. 'Ah. Blast!' he swore, eyeing the dropped coins. His gaze returning to the gold stacked in neat columns of ten covering most of the table at which he was sitting.

It was no use. His bleary, overly moist eyes struggled to focus as the chest began a slow undulating circular movement that gained speed the longer he stared. With an effort, he tried to get out of the chair but discovered that his legs no longer worked. He collapsed back down and fell forward, passing out across the table-top, sending more coins flying in all directions. Soon, the sound of his raucous snoring reverberated through the house.

ANABEL WAITED UNTIL she was sure Grik had gone to bed. There was no point attempting the escape too early. If he came into their room, as he'd done the night before and discovered them gone, all the effort would be for nothing. So, they waited and listened for his approach. It was well past midnight before she was happy that he wasn't coming. Both women slipping out of bed, Anabel removed the knife, and her stash of food, from beneath the mattress.

She looked out of the window and scanned the sleeping town below. Apart from a number of small brazier fires on the perimeter wall and the odd street lamp, the town was dark. With great care, she gently opened the window and pushed the bars apart. There was just enough room to slip through.

Tying the blankets together, they made a rope and secured it to the leg of the bed.

It was basic but would suffice, Anabel squeezed through the opening in the bars. Clinging tightly to the rope blanket, she slid down to the lower level of the house.

Merrith soon followed. They were now on the flat roof of the lower tier and inched along, carefully feeling their way to the edge and peered over.

Below them, a flatbed wagon was parked against the side of the house. Anabel lowered herself down as far as she could, before dropping onto the back of the rig. Merrith followed but had Anabel's shoulders to stand on as she lowered herself.

There was light shining through a slit between two of the logs that made up the east wall of the house, Anabel pressed her eye against the little opening. Inside, she could make out a small room filled with boxes and trinkets. There, sprawled across a table in the middle of the room, lay Grik, the slaver's comatose body surrounded by hundreds of gold coins.

Anabel's eyes opened wide at the sight of the gold, and she was momentarily transfixed by the scene. A tug on her sleeve from Merrith dragged her back out of her reverie.

Anabel showed Merrith the gold.

'It seems he's gotten his payment. I just hope he chokes in his sleep,' hissed Anabel.

'Anabel please, we have to go,' pleaded Merrith.

Anabel nodded and they left the wagon.

The stock fence around Grik's house was not sturdily built, the wooden poles were strapped together with rope that was rotten and easily cut.

Once a few had been loosened, they were able to slip through to the town proper, and quickly disappearing into its warren of dark streets. Anabel had a rough idea of where the main gate was, but it still took the best part of an hour to find it.

One guard stood watch leaning against the side wall, partially obscured by the dark.

Anabel saw his feet sticking out from the shadows just before the two women blundered straight into him. They hid in an alley behind some empty barrels.

'Now what do we do?' asked a wide-eyed Merrith.

'Hang on, let me think,' answered Anabel, biting a thumbnail. 'We need a distraction.' Anabel leaned forward and ripped Merrith's dress along its seam, exposing one of her legs up to the thigh.

'Hey!' objected Merrith.

Without stopping, Anabel reached over and undid four buttons on Merrith's blouse.

'Will you please tell me what you're doing?' asked a bemused Merrith.

'You, my dear, are going to be our distraction. And a mighty pretty one at that. If this doesn't scramble his brains,' she said, pointing to Merrith's plunging neck-line, 'then *this* will.' Anabel held up a large lump of wood.

Merrith smiled. 'You could have explained before tearing at my clothes. What do you want me to do?'

<sup>3</sup>Just walk past him and smile, and let nature do the rest. When he's hooked, bring him over here.' Anabel hefted the piece of wood and made a swiping movement with it.

Merrith swayed out of the alley and over past the main gate. The guard stood out from the wall as she approached.

As Merrith passed by, he went to walk after her, 'Hello there, pretty. Haven't seen you around here before. What you doing out by yourself, an' it being so late

an' all?'

'I'm visiting my uncle on the other side of town. Just needed some fresh air; the night's hot, and his house is so stuffy.'

Merrith placed her hand on her neck and ran it down towards her ample chest. The guard's eyes bulged. 'It's not safe outdoors at night; didn't your uncle

warn you, missy? There's all kinds of bad people out here of a nighttime.'

'Well, he did say something about it, but he can't keep me cooped up like that all the time. It's not natural. A woman needs some freedom.' Merrith allowed her hand to fall against his chest. 'You know what I mean, don't you? A woman likes to feel free...'

The guard swallowed nervously, his brow beginning to form small droplets of sweat.

'You see! You're hot too. It's just so clammy tonight,' Merrith said, smiling seductively, simultaneously gathering her long hair into a ponytail with both hands.

'Perhaps your clothing needs to be a little... looser, if you get my drift. It's getting steamy all right,' he agreed, stepping closer.

'I know a nice dark alley just back over there that we could go to. To help us cool off.' She smiled, a wicked twinkle in her eyes.'

Her voice was soft with a more than slight suggestive lilt to it.

'Well...' He quickly scanned the local area for watching eyes. 'I'm not s'posed to leave my post, you see,' he said, but his mind was already ablaze.

Merrith stepped back. 'Oh well, I don't want to get you into trouble, never mind.' She smiled again. 'Forget I said anything. Perhaps some other gentleman might, umm, help me out. I'll go look for one.'

The man stepped after her speedily, hot on her tail. 'No! Don't go,' he said, quickly looking about, making sure they were really alone. 'Look, miss, I could spare a few minutes. I mean, it's not like someone's goin' to run off with the gate, now is it?' He ran his free arm around Merrith's waist, pulling her close, trying to kiss her.

Merrith leaned back, away from his lips. 'Not here! My uncle might see. We'll have more privacy over there.' She pointed towards the alley.

The guard nodded and followed closely behind as she sashayed back across the forecourt towards the shadows.

As they rounded the corner, Merrith led him past the barrels and turned to face him. He grinned down at her and went to step closer, wearing a lascivious grin.

A heavy blow knocked him senseless, sending him flying face down into the filth.

The girls opened the gate just wide enough to get out, then promptly closed it behind them. 'Now where do we go?' asked Merrith, nimbly fastening her blouse buttons again, trying to make herself decent, though with her dress seam torn the way it was, that was impossible.

'Anywhere but here,' answered Anabel, stealing away into the darkness.

Her heart was racing; she really hadn't expected to get this far, that alone was a victory.

As her mind cleared, the enormity of their achievement began to sink in.

They had succeeded against all odds. They had escaped.
As they fled blindly into the night, not caring in which direction, Anabel knew it would be harder to stay free. But she was determined to do just that, no matter the cost, for as long as humanly possible.

### 28 T. D.

# **Shan-Tu Province**



MEGAN AWOKE WITH A start. It was morning, and she was lying atop a feather-filled mattress on a lavishly decorated four-poster bed. A heavy quilt was covering her body. In a moment of panic, she lifted the lace-trimmed border and peered beneath, sighing with relief.

Her wrinkled travel clothes had not been removed. She still wore the trousers

and top that had been placed on her at the start of the journey.

Sitting up, she looked at her surroundings. The room was richly decorated, its ornate furniture would not have looked out of place in a baron's manor or royal palace. A finely gilded dressing table with matching chair rested against the far wall. Easing herself out of the bed, she sat looking down at her bare feet. Feeling a little lightheaded, Megan watched with some amusement as the floor-tiles turned and twisted in a stomach-churning waltz.

There was a water jug and glass beside the bed, which she filled and drank from several times. The spinning gradually began to slow. Just then, the door opened and a middle-aged woman walked in, holding a dress in her hands.

'Good morning, Highness,' she said, curtsying before Megan. 'My name is

Audreen. I am your handmaid.'

Megan took a moment to compose herself. 'Handmaid? Where am I?' she finally asked.

'You are in Arakur, the fortress of Lord Alsheer.'

Megan got up, walked over to the ornately designed lead-glass window, and looked out. She was in a castle tower, one of four that cornered the inner Keep. A secondary outer stone wall surrounded the fortress. Guards with shouldered spears paced the parapet.

Audreen cleared her throat. 'Beg pardon, Highness? There's a hot bath awaiting you in the next room if you care to freshen up. I have also taken the

liberty of providing a change of clothes for you.'

Megan suddenly felt the urge to bathe as never before; this activity had been the last thing on her mind during her ordeal. But now, the very mention of the word had breached a dam, an almost primal urge to wash away both dirt and memory gripped her to her very core.

She needed to be clean again, even if it was the very last thing that she did before death, she would at least die happy. She followed Audreen through a set of double doors to the adjoining room. The bath was carved from a single piece of white marble and filled with hot scented water. Wisps of jasmine-imbued steam drew her closer with a gentle unspoken promise of deep relaxing relief.

Megan quickly undressed and stepped into the warm caressing liquid, a feeling of warmth and relaxation coursing over and through her body. Her skin tingled at the water's soothing touch. A long sigh escaped her, and she closed her eyes.

Audreen left her alone to properly enjoy the moment. After a suitably long

soak, Megan dried and dressed herself. The dress fitted well but was of a fashion

not seen for fifty years.

Memories of her childhood came flooding back. Her grandmother had worn a similar type of dress, as had all of the women of that generation. It was a little tight fitting but flattering all the same. Her hair was returning to its natural blonde as the last of the dye washed out, but it was still very short. Megan touched it wistfully. It was beginning to curl just as it had when she had been very young. She pulled one of the curls straight but when she released her grip, it shot back into a spiral. She had so hated them when she was young, but now, she didn't mind at all. In fact, she had to admit that they looked quite flattering.

Audreen entered the room and curtsied.

'You don't have to keep doing that, you know,' said Megan.

'But, Your Highness, it is befitting your status,' she said blushing.

'When we're alone, a simple nod of the head will suffice.'

'Oh, I don't know, Highness,' Audreen said, looking back at the door. 'Lord Alsheer would be displeased.'

'Well, he's not here now. And besides, all that knee-bending makes my head hurt.' Megan said.

'As you command, Highness.' Audreen caught herself half way down into a full curtsy and flushed. Then she stood, and nodded as instructed.

'There, you see. Much better!'

'Begging your pardon, Your Highness, but Lord Toriz has asked that you join him at breakfast. He awaits you in the main dining hall.'

'Can you show me the way please, Audreen?'

'Of course, Your Highness. If you are ready, please follow me.' This time,

Audreen remembered to just nod, though a little woodenly.

The dining hall was in the centre of the Keep and it took a good ten minutes to reach it from the tower. Karem had donned his most formal dining clothes, mostly colourful silks with a smattering of jewels sewn into the fabric. He looked very dashing. He gave Megan a most audacious flourish and bowed deeply as she entered the hall. 'Welcome to Arakur, Your Highness! Lord Alsheer's palace in the independent province of Shan-Tu.'

Megan returned his formal salute with a curtsy and slight nod of the head. 'I

only wish it could be under friendlier circumstances.'

Karem smiled in his usual way. 'We are all prisoners of circumstance, Your Highness. We move as we are placed in the great game of life.'

He walked to her side and held the chair at the top of the table for her to sit.

Megan sat with grace and poise. 'But don't we ultimately have free will, my lord? Surely, the path through life is one of our own choosing.'

'That is correct in most cases, Your Highness. But alas, not all. There are times when a *calling* takes precedence over one's own selfish interests, especially when that path is preordained.' Still smiling, Karem took the seat to her right.

'I thought that only holy men were *called*. You speak of vocation, surely?'

answered Megan.

'There are all manner of callings, Your Highness. But please, I keep you from your breakfast. Perhaps we can delve deeper into this most interesting of topics

at a more convenient time,' he said, reaching over and offering Megan some bread from a platter.

She took the hint. That conversation was over, she thought for a moment before speaking again. 'The last time we spoke, you mentioned your homeland. What was your city called? Pardon my manners; my mind has drawn a blank.'

'There is no slight, Highness. It is oft times difficult to remember such things during times of strife. And unfamiliar names are difficult, even during convivial moments. It was Devaa. I really must find the time to return soon. It has been quite a while since my last visit.' He looked away and wistfully stared out of one of the large ornate windows lining the wall of the dining hall.

'To see your wife?'

He blinked and shook his head. 'Yes, it would be good to see her again.'

'Forgive me, Lord Toriz. But you seemed to be having trouble remembering her name on the last occasion that we spoke.'

'Really? How odd. I have no recollection...' His eyebrows rose.

'We were chatting in the carriage and when I asked your wife's name, you couldn't remember.'

His tone grew serious. 'Really? I fear you must have misunderstood. How could I forget something like that? Her name is Shareema. Light of my eye and owner of my heart,' he said, smiling. 'I assure you, I could never forget her name. That would be simply impossible,' he said, laughing.

Megan was confused and wondered if she *had* been mistaken. After all, when Alsheer rendered her unconscious, it was quite possible her memories could have been scrambled too. The recollection of being rendered unconscious in the carriage returned. 'Why did he do that?' she mumbled.

'Why did *who* do what, Your Highness?'

Megan snapped back to the present. 'Oh I'm sorry... just some idle thoughts,' she covered. The conversation remained cordial and non-specific throughout the meal. Karem kept smiling throughout. 'You will be glad to hear that you have the freedom of the whole castle. You may come and go as you please during the day. But at night, you must return to your room.'

'Really? How wonderful,' she said rather glumly.

'I must leave you for a few hours, but Audreen will tend to your needs. All you have to do is ask.' He smiled and nodded, pushing back his chair to stand. 'If I may be forward, there is an excellent library on the next level. You may find something there to help pass the time.'

'Thank you. Just one more question, Karem.'

'Of course, Highness. What is it?'

'Where is Lord Alsheer? I would have thought that he would have joined us at breakfast?'

'Ah yes. I have been instructed to offer his apologies on the matter. Urgent business has unfortunately drawn him away for the moment. But rest assured he will speak with you when he returns later tonight.'

'How tiresome for him.'

'Lord Alsheer is a man with great and numerous responsibilities,' answered Karem, clicking his heels together. 'Until later, Your Highness.' He bowed and walked out of the door just as Audreen walked in.

Megan rose and strode to the large fireplace at the end of the room. Something troubled her, but it was hard to put a finger on it. She stared into the yellow-orange flames, lost in thought. Audreen came to her side and Megan's mind returned. 'Audreen, Lord Toriz mentioned something about a library on the upper level. Could you show me how to get there please?'

'Of course, Your Highness. It's this way.' Audreen answered, walking back towards the door of the dining hall. Megan followed closely behind, lost in

thought.

### 29

# A Wolf in Bard's Clothing



BRIAR WAS A FLURRY of activity; mounted patrols could be seen riding off in all directions. Tam lay in the cover of some long grass on a hill over-looking the slaver town. He could see a large, bearded man pointing and shouting orders, but the distance was too great to hear what he was saying.

'If I were asked to put money on it, I'd say that's our man,' offered Rat, lying

close beside Tam, holding a spyglass to his eye.

'He fits the description all right. Fond of shouting, isn't he?' said Tam, staring coldly at Grik.

'He doesn't look very happy, does he? His face is all red,' added Rat.

'No,' agreed Tam. 'Not one of life's cheery early risers, I would guess, he has the look of a man who likes a swig or two.' Tam closed his spyglass and crawled away from the crest. Rat followed. Lom was a little farther down the rise, holding the horses. When they reached him, Tam placed the spyglass back into his saddlebag.

'What'd you see?' asked Lom.

'It's a medium-sized town with lots of activity,' answered Tam.

'Any sign of the girl?'

'No, but that means little. She would be confined. Probably inside that big building with the fence,' reasoned Rat, glancing at Tam.

Tam nodded. 'Makes sense, though I didn't expect there to be quite so much

activity. Something's up.'

'D'ya think they're on to us?' asked Rat.

'Could've gotten word from Ash,' said Lom.

'If they had, why then send patrols out along the western approach? Small patrols, no more than five men per group, to boot. It just doesn't add up. If I were this fella Grik, and I knew that there was going to be trouble, I'd just sit tight and set an ambush. The last thing I'd do is send my men blindly skittering off in all directions. Unless'—Tam scratched his head, thinking— 'it's something else entirely.'

'What do you want to do?' asked Rat.

'Our answers are down there in that town. A busy tavern could be of benefit. Unclamping a stiff jaw requires guile and a certain amount of lubrication.' Tam grinned.

'Do we go now or wait until after dark?' asked Rat. 'There's no *we* about it. I'm going in alone.'

'But—' Rat didn't get a chance to finish his protest.

'A lone rider stands a better chance of slipping in and out unnoticed. I want you both out here if anything happens to me.' There was steel in Tam's tone.

Both men looked crest-fallen.

'In the mean-time, *we* need to move. I'd like to be riding into town from a westerly direction when I approach. They'll be naturally suspicious of anyone

coming from the east. We'll have to detour around the outskirts.' Tam placed his foot into his stirrup and heaved himself onto his horse.

THEY ALMOST BLUNDERED into one of Grik's patrols near the southern boundary of the town. But Rat's sharp ears and a thick clump of scrub saved them. By late evening, they had found a suitable hiding place in an island of spruce trees. Tam left to see what he could find out. Approaching the town, he noticed that one of the gate sentries had a bloodied bandage wrapped around his head. The man was eyeing him closely.

'Good evening, friend.' Tam waved.

'What's so good about it?' snapped the guard.

'It's a bright evening, the sun is warm upon my back, and I've reached this delightful town where, I hope, there is food and a bed for the night for a weary traveler on the dusty road.' Tam beamed a gregarious smile at the sour-faced guard.

'Some are easily pleased, I s'pose,' growled the guard.

'What, if I may ask, is the name of this sanctuary in the wilderness?'

"Tis *Briar*," answered the guard, scrunching his nose, looking at Tam as though he'd lost his marbles.

'How apt,' said Tam, chuckling. 'And do tell, is there by chance a tavern or hostelry located within?'

'There are two, The Mucky Jug and The Lash 'n' Chain.'

'And which of these two fine establishments would you recommend, good sir?'

'For you,' he snorted, looking at Tam like a fox eyeing a chicken, 'it'd have ta be The Jug.'

'Why so? Is the Lash and Chain an inn of disrepute, if you don't mind the question?'

'An inn of what? D'ya know somethin'? You talk right queer, fella!'

'Humble apologies, kind sir.' Tam gave a simple bow and placed his hand over his heart. 'Being a bard of some renown in the western ports; there is, I admit, a flow to my speech that would be alien to wilderness ears.'

The guard looked as if he had suddenly sucked on a sour gooseberry. 'Just heed my words 'n' stay away from The Lash, that's where the slavers like to drink. An' your kind ain't welcome. You wouldn't last a minute in there!' He spat to one side to drive his point home.

'Oh!' exclaimed Tam, in a rather shrill voice. 'Thank you for the warning. I shall indeed heed your sound advice.' Tam smiled and nudged his horse forward through the gate and into the town. As he left the bewildered guard behind, he was glad that Rat and Lom had not been present to witness his performance.

'Won't last the night,' snorted the guard as he watched Tam disappear out of sight around a bend in the road.

When Tam turned the corner, he relaxed and his eyes hardened, in an instant, his countenance changing from western fop to hardened mercenary. Townsfolk hurried to get out of his way, no one daring to make eye contact. To their eyes, he was simply another sword-for-hire slaver, not to be trusted or crossed. After ten minutes, he stopped outside the inn and tied up his horse. The sign

overhanging the porch squeaked as it moved in a weak breeze.

Tam looked up and read, *Lash 'n' Chain Tavern*. He had found it. Three rough-looking slavers came out of the building and looked him over as they passed. One gave a brief nod, then turned away and continued walking. They never harassed their own kind; Grik had strict rules about in-fighting. Tam mounted the steps and entered the gloomy interior where there were few customers this early in the evening. He took a table in the darkest corner and ordered food and drink from a slim-hipped serving woman in her mid-twenties.

'Is it always this quiet here?' asked Tam as she took his order.

'God's no! You're just early is all. Give it an hour or so, an' it'll kick off.'

'Any work hereabouts?'

'If you don't mind workin' for the slavers, then there's always work.'

'Who should I see?'

'Probably Grik. He runs the whole place.'

'Thanks for the help. What's your name?'

'It's Nelli,' she answered.

Tam picked up her hand and kissed it. 'Thank you, beautiful Nelli,' he said,

giving her his warmest smile.

Nelli flushed and touched her hair. 'Thank you kindly, sir,' she gushed. 'I'll just go and see to your food.' As she backed away, she found it hard to drag her eyes from Tam's chiseled features.

'Oh, one last question if you don't mind, Nelli?' 'Course, anything,' she cooed.

'Where will I find this... Grik fella?'

'His house is the big one on the hill. You can't miss it.' She said pointing out of the dirty window beside the main door.

'You won't find him there now. Beggin' your pardon for the interruption but I couldn't help overhearin' you chattin' to Nelli,' said a tall, skinny, balding man in his sixties. 'I'm Grendle Braxton, proprietor of The Lash,' he said, nodding in

deference.

'Is he away on business?'

'No there's been some big hubbub this morn. From the dribs and drabs I've heard, there must have been a breakout by some slaves. Upshot is Grik and most of his men are out combing the countryside. So, there's no use in traipsing all the way up there to the house. Leastways not 'til you see his men start to come back later tonight.'

'Do you know how many escaped?'

'No.' The old man shook his head. 'It's just as I said, we only hear what his men say when they come here at night to drink.'

Tam nodded. 'Thank you, Grendle.'

'No bother at all. Hate to see you wastin' good boot leather. May as well keep the weight off 'til the morn at least.'

'And stay here drinking and eating, you would advise, no doubt.' Tam smiled. The innkeeper grinned sheepishly. 'Well, we won't refuse the business, that's for sure,' he said, laughing as he walked back towards the bar. 'An' there's comfortable rooms upstairs if you need a place to lay your head.'

'I'll keep it in mind,' said Tam, nodding.

Nelli arrived back with his food and ale, all smiles as she placed the tray down on the table. She had fixed her hair and added a brightly coloured flower to her bun. Tam smiled back and winked. Nelli almost lost the run of herself, her face immediately flushing a vibrant red. She giggled uncontrollably like a lovesick teenager all the way back to the kitchen.

As the night wore on, the tavern began to fill up with more and more slavers. Tam heard several ask Grendle who the stranger was. They quickly lost interest when they found out he was looking for work and would be meeting up with Grik in the morning. Soon, Tam was forgotten about completely and faded into the shadows of his dark corner, drinking, smoking, and listening. Finally, he heard something that made his ears prick up.

'I ain't never seen him this bad afore,' said a weasel-faced slaver near the bar.

'Well one of 'em was his bed warmer. So maybe that's why,' offered a second, taller slaver with a patch over one eye.

'Nah! More like it was that high-born strumpet we been lumpin' about for weeks,' said Weasel.

'Shush your mouth! You heard what he said he'd do if he heard we blabbed,' whispered Eye Patch, looking furtively about to see if anyone was listening. 'We're the only ones knows about her, an' we got extra coin for our pains to seal the deal. So, we got no complaints. He done right by us, did old Grik.'

'I ain't complainin'. I'm just sayin' that he wouldn't get this worked up for no

bed warmer, is all.'

'I dunno.' Eye Patch shook his head. 'She were a fair piece o' work when we seen her on the way here from Ash. Very nice, she was. Well put together.' Eye Patch scrunched up his face and made squeezing motions with his upturned hands.

'Nah, my money's still on it bein' that Jarrian whore. Must be a good reason if he's still got her with him. The deal was to get 'em as far as Ash. Weren't no mention of bringin' 'em here, far as I recollect,' whispered Weasel.

'Whatever the reason,' glowered Eye Patch, "tis the boss's. An' the way he paid us double, we got no right questionin' the whys. So, keep your trap shut 'fore you land us in a bog hole with our innards out.'

'I'm just sayin'—' countered Weasel defensively.

'You said enough,' interrupted Eye Patch. 'Now swamp that drink, 'cause we're leavin'!'

'But why? The night's only half done,' pleaded Weasel.

"Cause now, I've a bellyache from listenin' to you. An' we needs outta here

'fore you spill any more from that big gob of yours.'

Weasel looked annoyed but did as he was told, following Eye Patch through the crowd and out of the main door. Tam got up from his table and quietly followed them. Weasel was staggering just a little and Eye Patch roughly grabbed his shoulder to straighten him up as they walked along the dark street.

Tam walked up behind them, resuming his foppish bard impersonation. 'Good night to you, gentlemen. I was wondering if you could help me? Dolt that

I am, I seem to have lost my way and cannot find my accommodation.'

Both slavers turned and looked at Tam with shock and surprise. 'What's that you say?' asked Eye Patch.

'I'm so sorry to have to bother you, gentlemen. Being unaccustomed with your fine town and hampered by the dark, I'm afraid that I've become irretrievably lost. Could I trouble you for directions?'

The slavers glanced at each other quickly. 'Sure we could help you, friend.

Whereabouts you stayin'?' asked Weasel.

'Back that way, I think.' Tam looked over towards his right. 'It's called The Mucky Jug, of all things,' he laughed.

Eye Patch grinned and nodded. 'Sure, we can help you, friend. Fact, we're headin' that way now. We can... drop you, if you like?'

'I would be forever in your debt if you could.' Tam gave a polite little bow. 'Thank you, gentlemen.'

They led Tam through many small streets and finally down an alley, which they had promised was a shortcut to the inn. After a few moments, the alley came to a dead end. Tam stood staring at a dirty wall. There was nowhere to go but back the way they had just come.

He turned and saw that his newfound friends were grinning malevolently, unsheathing long curved knives. Tam stepped back, holding up his hands as if to plead.

'Steady now. What's this about?' he asked with a quiver in his voice.

Eye Patch stepped closer. 'It's about your money-purse. And your life. We wants both.'

Eye Patch jumped at Tam and tried to stick him with his knife, but Tam swiveled out of the way and kicked the knife from the man's hand, sending it high into the air.

In a quick double movement, Tam kicked him into the side of his knee, smashing the cartilage, and as the thug dropped, he grabbed him in a headlock and finished with a quick twist. There was a perceptible crack as the neck snapped. Weasel stood with his mouth open in shock. In a flash, the point of Tam's short-sword was pressing hard against the skin of his throat. Tam released the lifeless corpse, allowing Eye Patch to slide to the muddy ground.

There was a clatter of metal as Weasel dropped his knife. 'Please, sir,' he

pleaded in a whimpering voice. 'Twas *his* idea, I swears it!'

Tam backed him up against the far wall, shoving the blade of the sword harder against the man's skin. As blood trickled from a small wound where steel met flesh, the slaver's eyes bulged and filled with fear.

'Tell me about the girl that Grik brought here.'

'What girl?'

Tam punched Weasel hard into the stomach. He doubled over, gasping for air. Tam grabbed his coat and hauled him back up against the wall. 'Lie again and I will finish you!'

'I'm sorry,' gasped Weasel, his resolve crumbling. 'Please don't hurt me. I'll tell! I'll tell, I swear!'

'Go on,' growled Tam.

'Well, you see, there were two ladies brought here, sir. Which one do you mean?'

'The lady from Jarro.'

Weasel's eyes widened even more. 'How'd you know 'bout her?'

'I grow tired of asking questions,' snarled Tam, as he slammed Weasel against the wall.

'She's gone,' cried Weasel. 'Escaped last night. Grik's in a lather about it. He's had the whole company out looking for her since early morn'.'

'Did they find her?'

'No. Not as I know. Some are still out lookin'.'

'Was there any sign?'

'South, towards the swamp as far as I know. By Hag's Mire.'

'Hag's Mire?'

'They say there used to be a witch there in times past.' Weasel laughed nervously.

'There, you see.' Tam released the man's tunic. 'That wasn't so hard, was it?'

'No, sir, it wasn't.' Weasel grinned.

Tam quickly drew his blade across Weasel's throat and walked away. The dying thug tried to scream but the only sounds he could manage were a gurgle and a cough as he began to drown in his own blood. Frenn tripped over Lagnu's body, as he fell to the ground, clutching his severed artery in a futile attempt to stem the flow. His vision blurred and cleared again, and he saw the spirits of the many unfortunates he had murdered during his life.

They stood in a circle, smiling down upon him as he struggled in vain to prolong his life. Then his heart stopped beating and he fell shrieking into

darkness.

The guard on the main gate had changed by the time Tam passed back out. The new man didn't bat an eye as the lone horseman left. After all, his concerns were for those trying to enter the town. Any wishing to leave could do as they pleased.

# 30 **The Hook**



ALSHEER'S CAVALRY HAD a red trident painted onto the front of their black leather cuirasses, making them easy to see even across long distances.

Brinn and the others had to spend the daylight hours hiding from their numerous patrols since it was impossible to make directly for the citadel without being seen. As a result, they were being shunted in an ever more westerly direction, constantly having to adjust their course to compensate for the shift, adding days to the journey.

Balzimar had said little since entering the land of his old foe, needing to use large amounts of energy to shield his approach. Shielding was one of the first disciplines that Initiates had to master; the world of magic could be a dangerous

place for the young or foolish.

Leechers abounded and could suck both the life and the magic from the very bones of their victims, leaving the unfortunate victims no more than desiccated husks.

Leechers were an abomination and servants of evil, filled with hatred for all that was good.

They gained power not by years of study and practice, but rather by stealing the knowledge and magical energy of other adepts. Alsheer was a leecher of old, now grown into something even more vile and perfidious, a shadow knight and darkspawn lord.

Long had it been since Balzimar had last contested this villainous foe. He wondered now what he faced at the end of this long road, and whether he would withstand that test again. He blew through his long whiskers, making them flutter like grey streamers in a strong wind.

They set a cold camp that night, it being far too risky to chance a fire so close to enemy eyes. They were a good way inside the forest that ran the length of the western border of the tiny independent barony of Shan-Tu. The sun would soon be going down and they would be leaving the protection of the trees for the open plains.

It was twenty miles to the next cover, and it would be a close-run thing to get there before morning light exposed them. Shadows lengthened and the forest fell silent, as Brinn quietly led the group to the edge of the woodland where the trees thinned and the grassland first encroached in preparation for the dash. He crouched on one knee, holding his horse's bridle and staring out into the vast plain ahead. Nothing moved for miles.

Leaves gently rustled overhead in a soft breeze and bats swooped and chirped as they hunted prey in the late evening twilight. The sun finally dipped below the horizon, as the land surrendered to night's inexorable approach. Overhead, the first stars appeared in a dark blue sky turning ever darker along its eastern fringe.

After waiting a further twenty minutes, Brok decided it was dark enough to move. By midnight, they had travelled eight miles.

Overhead, the Twins were yielding just enough light to navigate the rolling hills.

The open plains stretched on, wild long-grass in mellow moonlight-kissed silver tones covered the undulating surface in all directions, their long stalks sadly waving unrequited farewells to the line of riders passing indifferently by.

Two hours later, the group crested a small hill, and their hearts sank.

The campfires of two separate patrols, with no more than a mile distance between, lay directly ahead, their flames flickering like yellow demonic eyes in the dark. It was far too risky to go around. To do so would take many hours, and they would not make cover before dawn. There was no option but to quietly ride through the narrow space between the camps and hope that their luck held. Which it did, and they safely reached the scrubby ground near the boulder-strewn base of the Whitecap Mountains just as dawn approached.

The Whitecaps, or Hook Mountains to those living in the frigid north, ran in a semi-circular hook from the middle of eastern Gantu before turning north along the border with Timberland North. A circle of large boulders, with a fast-flowing stream nearby, begged to be a campsite if ever a piece of land could speak. Being well hidden from view and shielded from the worst of the constant cold air wafting down from the frigid mountain-tops, they settled down to eat and rest. Both Brok and Brinn climbed higher up the slopes of the mountain to get a better lay of the land.

'There it is,' said Brok, pointing east. 'Between the two largest slopes.'

Brinn squinted and easily saw the sheer walls of Arakur. 'Those walls look impressive.'

'Think you can handle it?'

'It's a tough one,' Brinn acknowledged, with a nod of the head. 'But it shouldn't be a problem.'

'We'll follow the line of the mountains. They'll provide us with good cover all the way there,' Brok said, pointing the way along the base of the mountain range. 'I just hope we're in time.'

'We've lost days trying to avoid the patrols,' said Brinn.

'Couldn't be helped. We'd need an army to make a direct approach.'

'True.' Brinn shaded his eyes and pointed towards the plain stretching out before the fortress. 'We may need one yet.' A long line of cavalry was riding two abreast, heading towards the border with Gantu.

'Where do you think they're off to?' asked Brok.

'I don't care. If it means there'll be fewer of them to worry about when we get to the fortress, that suits me just fine.'

The two men stood watching the column wend its way along the road toward Ash until it disappeared behind a screen of trees.

HELFWEN HAD GATHERED a store of dry sticks so that they could light a fire after dark. The rocks would give plenty of cover and it would be nice to have a hot meal for the first time in days. They settled down to try to get some rest in shaded nooks among the jumble of large rocks.

Above, the morning sun peeked through little gaps in the low-hanging clouds, warming cold, tired limbs, and partially drying sweat-moistened clothes.

Sleep was hard to find, but not impossible. The night had been long and exhausting and soon, the sound of heavy breathing filled the hollow. Brinn watched over them as they slept. He didn't feel fatigue like the others, another gift that he simply accepted.

Lighting his pipe and inhaling sharply, he propped his back against a large rock for support. He would catch an hour's respite later when the others were

awake.

Overhead, an eagle soared, hunting rabbit or hare. The great bird made lazy circles as it scanned the prairie for a victim. There would be empty mouths to fill back in its nest.

It dived and made a kill, then took to the air again, carrying a rabbit in its talons, soaring higher and higher until it disappeared behind the grey-white slopes of the Whitecaps.

Brinn's sensitive ears probed out beyond the confines of the camp looking for any sounds that might warn of approaching danger. But there were none.

He relaxed, enjoying the crisp morning air and the taste of his pipe.

THE DAY CREPT BY AND darkness fell once more. After eating a quick hot meal, they set off again in the direction of the citadel, Brinn riding ahead to scout the way. There was no moonlight tonight. Though the Twins were obscured behind a thick blanket of dark cloud, Brinn was unhindered by the deepening dark, his keen eyes easily finding the safest path.

The pitch of the land began to rise, patches of spruce helping to cover his progress. Cresting a final hill, the fortress of Arakur came into view; they had

finally reached their destination.

Getting down from his horse, he sat and waited for the others to arrive.

Arakur sat atop a flat shelf at the base of Mount Itris, an impressive five hundred feet above the plain below. A winding road rose from the flatlands to a portcullis in the outer wall.

In turn, the fortress' curtain wall rose to a height of over fifty feet above the lip of the rock shelf. The Keep was separate, consisting of four round towers with adjoining walls, one tower on each corner of a square structure.

Armed guards patrolled both the Keep and the perimeter wall. After an hour, the others caught up with Brinn.

Brok approached and crouched beside him. 'What do you think?' he asked.

'Difficult, but not impossible. The left side of the front perimeter wall comes right out to the edge of the cliff,' answered Brinn.

'How do you want to approach this?'

'It's going to be a slow climb. The only advantage is that the guards won't be watching that side too closely because of the sheer drop there. I'm betting they think it unclimbable. Their focus will be on the main gate and the road leading up to it. There's a small group of trees near the base of the slope that will provide adequate cover; I can start from there.'

'Damnation! How can you see that? I see nothing but darkness!' said Brok.

'Take my word for it. It's just to the left of the road.'

'Okay, I'm listening, what's your plan?'

'By the time we get to the copse, it will almost be sunrise.'

'Not a good time to attempt entry to a heavily guarded fortress,' Brok acknowledged, nodding.

'Correct! We'll have to wait until tomorrow night,' said Brinn.

'How long will it take you to get up there?'

Brinn shrugged. 'Depends on the rock face. The fortress walls aren't really too much of a problem; it's the climb up to them that provides the real challenge. It's going to be slow, make no mistake. The last thing we need is a minor avalanche announcing our presence.'

'But what about the rest of us?' exclaimed Helfwen, suddenly arriving beside Brok. 'Climbing up a sheer mountain face might be the easiest thing in the world

for you, but I don't exactly have the sure feet of a goat.'

'The rest of you can use the road. There's a group of boulders about one hundred paces from the gate. Hide there. A handy diversion should help to draw the guards off. When they've gone, I'll drop a rope over so you can climb up.'

'It's simple and direct. I like it,' said Balzimar.

'The simple approach isn't always the correct one. We're going to need more

than a pinch of luck to get away with it,' snorted Brok.

'Well, sprouting a pair of wings and flying up there aside, I don't see an alternative,' said Balzimar. 'And besides, I've every confidence in my apprentice.' Balzimar smiled at Brinn.

Brok nodded. 'It's agreed then.'

Balzimar and Helfwen both nodded their agreement.

'Come on. We'd better get a move on if we're going to get down to those trees before morning,' said Brok, leading his horse down the trail. The others followed. Brinn gave one last look at the rock face, then slowly turned and walked after his friends.

#### 31 **Sweet Dreams**



IT WAS A PITCH BLACK night, with heavy clouds blotting out the moons and stars alike.

Their first hours of liberty were spent falling into dinks and hollows in the uneven ground or getting caught up in the sharp spines of razorthorn bushes, not exactly the exultant dash for freedom Anabel had envisioned.

By morning, they were no more than three miles from Briar and completely exhausted by the effort. A large hollow tree offered secure shelter from probing eyes come first light. Crawling inside, they were able to safely get some much-needed rest.

Several patrols passed their little hiding place, but they remained undiscovered. Anabel was able to climb up the inside to a higher point to have a look around. They would later realize the old tree had saved them from being recaptured on that first morning.

Grik's men were everywhere. Mounted patrols passed by throughout the day.

They would have been easily discovered if they had been forced to hide in the open. Anabel climbed back down to where Merrith was sitting.

'See anything?' asked Merrith.

'There are patrols everywhere, but we should be safe here.'

'I still can't believe we actually did it.' Merrith said, shaking her head.

'I would pay Grik's weight in gold to have seen his face when he realised we were gone,' Anabel laughed.

'Now that would be worth the price to see,' Merrith said, nodding her agreement.

'Still, we're going to have to keep our wits if we want to stay out of his hands. And we need food. The small amount that we have won't last long.'

'I don't care! I'd prefer to starve than go back there. I would welcome death before submitting to him again.' Merrith drew her knees up to her chest and hugged them tightly.

Anabel put her arm around Merrith and pulled her close. 'We're safe for now; this tree is the last place they'll think of looking for us. By tonight, most of the patrols will have moved on.'

'What then? I mean, where do we go from here? I would suggest my village, but it's just so far away. And besides, there's probably nobody there after the last raid.'

Anabel thought for a moment. 'The swamps.'

Merrith recoiled a little. 'You can't be serious. That's certain death! '

'We won't survive long out in the open. We've been lucky so far, but our luck won't last forever. At least in the swamp, we can get lost in the thickets and if we make it through, Jarro is on the other side.'

'Lost is exactly what we'll be. And soon after, eaten. Merrith was shaking her head forlornly.

A silent pause followed before Anabel spoke again. 'It's either that or give up now and save ourselves the sore feet and empty bellies.'

Merrith put her chin onto her knees. 'I can't do that either,' she said, shaking her head. 'Perhaps we'll be lucky and meet a handsome fisherman who'll come paddling to our rescue.' She gave a weak smile.

Anabel smiled too. 'Or a battalion of Jarro lancers, sent north to bring us home,' she said, squeezing Merrith's shoulder.

'Is there really no other way?' Merrith asked.

Anabel shook her head. 'We need to get away from the locals hereabouts. No doubt Grik will post a reward and our descriptions. When that happens, we become fair game for all. The seclusion of the swamp offers our only realistic chance of escape.'

'But there are so many dangerous things in there.' Merrith visibly shivered at the thought.

'There are worse things than death,' Anabel answered gravely.

Merrith nodded. 'I know, and you're right. But I freely admit I'm hoping for another alternative to spring to mind by some miracle.'

'We make our own miracles, Merrith.' There was steel in Anabel's eyes. 'We'll be fine, you'll see. And besides, if it's a choice between the swamp or Grik, then the swamp wins every time.'

THEY SLEPT FITFULLY throughout the rest of the day, and by late evening, they had left the tree and began moving again to the south. Around midnight, the moons were peeking through the clouds, welcome friends lighting the way. Later, they stumbled across a dirt track that seemed to be heading in a southerly direction.

It would be a risk to use it, but Anabel had decided it was a risk worth taking.

They made better progress on the trail, expending far less energy. The miles quickly began to roll by, so that by dawn, they could see a hazy fog on the horizon, a sure indication that the swamp was close. Finding a new hiding place under the red-hued thorns of a bloodthorn thicket, they slept the day away.

As darkness fell again, they continued the journey, and by the next dawn, they had reached the edge of the swamps. Dense green foliage immediately closed in, concealing them from inquisitive eyes. They didn't stop walking come daylight as there was no longer a need to hide.

The patrols would not catch them now unless it was wholly by accident. Keeping to dry land, the two women stayed as far from the murky water as possible. The food had long run out, so they continued on empty stomachs. As the heat soared, Merrith looked on the verge of fainting. Anabel decided it was time to stop for a quick rest in the shade of a stunted willow. After ten minutes, they were both sound asleep.

Anabel awoke with a start to Merrith pulling on her arm to rouse her. The sound of a wonderfully melodic voice singing an enchanting, inviting song, filled the air.

Anabel thought it was the most beautiful sound she had ever heard, a female voice that sang of harvest, dancing, and true love, all the good things of life.

'Where is it coming from?' whispered Merrith, her eyes aglow in wonder.

'I think it's coming from that direction,' answered Anabel, pointing towards a

group of willows farther ahead.

The leaves of the trees hung on long stringy branches that drooped all the way to the ground, just like an emerald screen. Anabel led Merrith to the spot and pulled back the curtain of green. Inside was a shady grotto of overhanging branches and intertwined leaves. A group of diminutive crystal-winged fairies were busily setting a table brimming with the most delicious looking food. There was beef, ham, and turkey, all carefully sliced on platters, and surrounded by plates of all manner of sweet-smelling, steaming-hot vegetables.

Anabel's mouth watered, and her stomach growled at this wonderful sight.

'Oh good, you're awake at last. As you can see, we've been preparing a welcome feast for you,' said a beautiful, long-haired fairy girl, indicating the table loaded with food.

'Is this feast for us?' asked a clearly confused Anabel, noticing for the first

time that the fairies were hovering in the air just above the ground.

The fairy giggled. 'Why of course; who else could it be for?' she answered. Her hair constantly changing colour, first brown, then blond, and now red. "Tis our custom to welcome newcomers to our realm by feasting thus,' she said, pulling out a chair for Anabel to sit.

The banquet was magnificent, with easily the most delicious food Anabel had ever tasted. The wine fizzed and tantalized her taste-buds, both stimulating and relaxing her mind at the same time. The fairies were attentive and friendly, buzzing about fetching and carrying more food and drink, singing beautifully as they went about their work.

Anabel looked at Merrith, but Merrith did not return her gaze.

Instead, she was busy manically stuffing handfuls of food into her already overfilled mouth. With the main course finished, the fairies brought cakes and biscuits and a multitude of sweet things, Anabel could not contain her joy, feeling as though she could explode with happiness. One of the cakes looked exactly like the one she'd had for her tenth birthday, the same shape and colour, and when she looked closer, it also had ten little candles on it. *How odd!* she thought.

She got out of the chair and leaned closer to the cake.

And there on the top, written in pink icing, were the words *Happy Birthday*, *Lady Anabel*. Anabel slumped back into her chair and sat staring at the cake. Something was wrong. Merrith was smiling broadly, continuously shoving mounds of food into her mouth.

'This is wrong,' said Anabel.

'Would you like some beef, or perhaps some fish?' asked the smiling fairy.

'Something's wrong,' insisted Anabel.

'Nothing is wrong. Just tell us what you would like, and we will get it for you. Eat, drink, and be happy, for all is well,' said the fairy in a soothing tone.

Anabel reached for Merrith and tugged on her blouse sleeve. 'Merrith, there's

something not right about this... the cake...'

Merrith looked at Anabel and smiled. 'Nothing's wrong, my Little Bunny,' she said as she leaned over and tweaked Anabel's cheek. 'Now eat your food.'

'Little Bunny?' Anabel repeated the words, thinking. 'That's what my father

used to call me when I was little! But how could you know that?'

Merrith just smiled, shrugged, and continued eating.

'This is bizarre! How can the birthday cake from my tenth birthday be here now? And how did you know my childhood nickname was Little Bunny? There's just no way you would know that,' said Anabel, her voice rising an octave.

'Are you unhappy with the food? Is there something else you would like?' asked the smiling fairy.' Perhaps some cake. Would you like some cake, Anabel?'

'What did you say?' asked Anabel.

The table and fairies vanished for a moment, replaced by swaying leaves and branches. Merrith was lying on the ground covered with large leeches. Just as quickly as that vision had appeared, it disappeared. The crystal-winged fairies and table returned, and all seemed well.

'Would you like some cake, Little Bunny?' asked the fairy again.

Anabel's mind relaxed and her skin tingled. It felt as though she was slowly drifting in a soothing pool of warm dark water. Somewhere in the background, a distant voice was saying something. What's that...? Speak up...! I just can't make it out, she thought.

The relaxing warmth swept back in, soothing her even more. It felt so good. Again, that intrusive voice came back, but it was louder this time. Again, she listened, but just as before, it faded away again into quiet. Her body felt warm and safe as it floated on those warm waters that were gently caressing away all of her aches and worries.

And my birthday cake had been perfect, she thought. Just the way I'd wanted it. But then her mind rebelled. Something is wrong! Something is very wrong! She couldn't quite grasp it.

The answer was tantalisingly close, yet still just out of reach, cruelly tormenting her. She knew if she could just find the answer, she could sleep happily. So, what was the question again? she thought. Oh yes... the cake. There's a problem with the cake... isn't there? Now... what is it? She fidgeted. Then, the answer suddenly came. 'I'm not blistering ten anymore!' she screamed and sat up.

The fairies and the table disappeared, and she was back under the stunted willow. Merrith was lying beside her, and they were both covered in giant black slimy leeches, wrist thick from gorged blood. She screamed and frantically brushed the bloodsuckers from her skin.

Merrith awoke when Anabel screamed and when she saw the horrid bloodsuckers covering her arms and legs, she screamed as well. They both sprang to their feet and ran from under the tree, screaming and brushing manically with their hands as they went.

After fifty paces, they stopped and regained composure, both breathing heavily. Circular bite wounds and drips of blood marked their flesh where the suckers had been attached.

'What under the Light were those things?' shouted Merrith.

'No idea! But whatever they were, they were making a meal out of both of us,' answered Anabel.

Merrith shivered violently. As they moved off, a pair of hidden eyes watched them. A well-built man with dark hair and a scraggy short beard stepped out in front of them to block their way. Merrith screamed again in shock.

'I'm sorry to have frightened you,' he said, holding up a hand. 'Please forgive

my clumsy approach. I came as soon as I heard your screams.'

'What do you want?' asked Anabel.

'To offer assistance to fellow escaped slaves.'

'What makes you think we're slaves?' Anabel asked cautiously.

'You have the look of the hunted. I had it myself once; it's never forgotten. I can take you to a place of safety. You will find sanctuary there.'

'What's your name?' asked Merrith.

'It's Marka.'

'Thank you, Marka. It's fortunate for us that you were passing,' said Anabel.

Marka smiled. 'I wasn't passing. We watch the borders of the swamp, in case the slavers attack. They are less than lenient with escaped slaves.'

'Are there others out here?'

'Yes, deep in the swamp in a place the slavers will not find them. We call it Haven; I will take you there. You can eat and sleep; you have the look of needing both. Please follow.'

Marka smiled warmly. He had a plain but kind face, and they were happy to trust him as he led them deeper into the green morass.

### 32 **Lifting the Veil**

Litting the ve

'YES, MY MASTER! I CAN hear you.' Alsheer stared blankly ahead as images and sounds formed in his mind, the pendant around his neck pulsing red in the darkness.

'I have consulted the oracles with regard to this illusive man of power,' said Ultor in his rasping guttural voice.

'What do the oracles advise, Master?'

'They are unclear. There are vague hints, wistful glimmers in a sea of fog, but little of substance. Our true adversary will come out of the north as we have always known, not the west. That remains unchanged.'

'What is your counsel? The princess is safely confined here at my citadel.'

'His *emergence* is troubling and unforeseen. He may pose no real danger, but I feel somewhat unsettled by the matter.'

'It may be of little concern, Master. My stronghold will not be easily breached.'

'Nevertheless! It may be prudent to bring the princess to Bal-Karesh sooner rather than later.'

'I will make the arrangements tonight, Master. It will be a long and arduous trip, and will, I suspect, need meticulous preparations.'

'Do nothing! I will send my dragon Garnak to collect her. If this man is as powerful as you fear, it may be prudent to act quickly. It will not take the dragon long to traverse the distance between. Stand ready for his arrival!'

'Thy wisdom transcends, Master. The princess will be ready when he arrives.'

'What news of Lady Anabel?'

'I have dispatched my men with orders to escort her here. I expect her arrival within the week, Master.'

'Very good. You have served me well. It will be remembered.'

'To serve is reward enough, Master.'

The images faded in Alsheer's mind, and he was once again alone in the darkness of his chambers. It was still early morning, and he would not be able to venture out until the sun had fallen. He picked up and rang a bell that lay on a small round-topped table at his side.

Shortly, a balding low-sized man with one sightless white eye and a pronounced limp entered the room.

'Find Lord Toriz. I wish to speak with him,' ordered Alsheer.

The servant bowed low, turned, and limped off on his errand. Alsheer rapped his fingers, impatiently, against the armrest of his chair. There was some organising to be done, he acknowledged to himself with a curt nod. Events were gathering speed with unknown consequences. *I do not like that!* he thought. *Not one little bit!* 

MEGAN ENTERED THE GREAT library flanked by Audreen, the room was large and its ceiling high. Rows of book-shelves lined the walls, some even

forming long aisles across the width. There were thousands of books of every shape, size, and colour here, while three large, ornately leaded windows, in the far wall, suffused the room with natural sunlight. Audreen walked to a fireplace at the end of the room and proceeded to light the fire. Soon, warm air removed any lingering chill. Cushioned armchairs and even an exquisitely carved desk stood nearby for comfort.

Audreen left Megan to wander the dusty rows of shelves alone.

Megan picked out one book with potential, a romantic tale of lost love. She cradled the book in the nook of her arm and continued down the line in search of something better.

By the third aisle, a mouldy red tome caught her eye. The words on the spine read, *Maps of Northern Myrrymas*. *Year 515 Mur-ro*. She realised that she could find Karem's home city herself by using the maps, a sudden curiosity gripped her.

She pulled the book out and shoved the love story back into its place, bringing the map book over to the table and opening it. The maps showed the entire Myrrymas Desert and all of the cities and towns situated there. All of the great cities of the desert kingdom were boldly displayed. But there was no sign of a city called Devaa anywhere along the border with Anvar.

Megan sat back into one of the chairs. 'There must be some mistake,' she whispered.

Going back to the shelf where she had first found the map book, she quickly found five similar books all dated roughly one hundred years apart. Megan opened the book dated 417 Mur-ro, but still there was no mention of Devaa.

The next map was dated 312 Mur-ro, but again nothing.

Then she noticed an oasis simply referred to as *The Ruins*. The next map book was dated 219 Mur-ro, and there, finally, she found the city of Devaa, shown to be in the same location as the oasis marked *The Ruins* from the later map. 'This is most peculiar!' she muttered.

She spent more time looking for books on the history of the Myrrymas, finally finding what she had been looking for in a book titled *The Spice War of 229 to 245 Mur-ro*.

Devaa had been completely destroyed in the year 242 Mur-ro when a southern faction led by a clan chief called Imir Ramashef had attacked and destroyed the northern faction, then led by Overlord Karem Toriz. Megan's eyebrows rose as she read the name.

'How is this possible?' she mumbled, slowly closing the book. Karem had always spoken of Devaa in the present tense, as though it still existed.

'Why would he do that?' she said aloud.

'Do what, Highness?' said a deep voice.

Karem had entered the room and was standing just behind her. She had been far too engrossed in the books to hear his approach. Megan jumped and gave a small gasp. 'Karem, I wasn't expecting—' she blurted.

'Not expecting to see me again so soon, judging by the look on your face,' he said, laughing at her expression.

'I was just so caught up in my book,' she lied.

'Don't you mean books?' Karem pointed to the table and all of the map books

lying there. He picked up one and read the title. 'So... you are checking up on me, I see!' He smiled.

'Not really, no. I'm just curious about your homeland. You make it sound like such a beautiful and exotic place.'

'It is. Perhaps one day, you will do me the honour of visiting.'

'That would be wonderful, Karem. What was your city called again?'

Karem frowned. 'It's Devaa, Your Highness. You appear to have great difficulty remembering that.'

'I do, don't I? For some reason, I just can't seem to make the name stick,' she said, batting her lashes and feigning naivety. 'Would you mind showing me where it's located on the map?' Megan handed him the map dated 515 Mur-ro.

'It would be a pleasure.' He took the book and opened it on a map of Northern Myrrymas. After looking for a few seconds, his brow creased. 'This is very unusual. The cartographer seems to have missed it completely. It should be right here,' he said, pointing to a blank expanse of desert.

'Oh really?' said Megan, watching him closely. 'Perhaps it's in this one.'

She handed him the map book for 417 Mur-ro.

Karem flipped the book open on the Northern Myrrymas but again, Devaa was nowhere to be found. 'This is an outrage! I could accept a one-off mistake, but now... The error has been repeated.' He became red-faced as he grabbed up the next map book marked 312 Mur-ro.

'Impossible! This is completely unacceptable!'

His voice was harsh. His words, laced with indignant spite, hissed like rain on hot coals. Megan saw that his reaction was sincere, a wild confusion burning in his eyes.

'Please sit, Karem. I have something to show you.'

Karem looked at her in bewilderment for a moment before slowly sitting.

Megan opened the map of the Myrrymas dated 312 Mur-ro. 'Karem,' she cleared her throat before continuing. 'Your city has not been deliberately overlooked. It's marked on this map.'

'I'm afraid you are mistaken, Your Highness! Look!' He pointed at the portion marked The Ruins, then looked at Megan as though vindicated. 'You see! It should be right there, but there's no sign of it!'

Megan opened the final map dated 219 Mur-ro. 'Here is your city.'

She pointed at the mark indicating Devaa; it was right there, on the final map. 'Ah! At last! I told you it was there,' he said, smiling and looking moderately

placated. 'This is also Devaa.' Megan was pointing at the map that showed *The Ruins* 

Karem shook his head. 'No, no! You can plainly see that the city has been

omitted.'

Megan took a deep breath before continuing, 'The part of this map marked as The Ruins used to be Devaa. I'm so sorry, Karem, but Devaa was destroyed almost three hundred years ago,' she explained, handing him the book on the history of the Spice War.

Karem read the opened page. He looked utterly confused. 'No, it cannot be! I was there only six months ago! This is preposterous! My wife is with child; we were right there, together! I remember it. I remember!' Tears welled, and his voice cracked, strange, fragmented memories came flooding back. He saw an image of his city in flames, and his house as charred rubble. The inhabitants, bloodied and horribly burnt, lay dead upon the ground.

'This cannot be!' he cried, his voice shaking, looking utterly confused. He

stood and quickly walked from the room.

Megan stared after him as he slammed the door.

The maps lay scattered on the floor.

### 33 Hag's Mire

A RICKETY OLD CART came slowly trundling along the dirt road, pulled in jerking movements by a dejected, half-starved mare. Its ill-fitting wheels rumbled and growled at every bump on the hard-packed, rut-gouged track. One wheel had clearly been taken from a larger wagon as a makeshift replacement, giving the rig a comical lopsided tilt. On board the cart sat a skinny old farmer. His weather-beaten face, worn and heavily lined from long days of outdoor toil, lay half-hidden in shadow beneath a large floppy hat. He was chewing tobacco and humming an unknown tune, oblivious to the world around him.

Tam pulled his horse out in front of the approaching cart and held up his hand. The farmer looked surprised and pulled on the reins, bringing the cart to a stop

'Hail, friend,' said Tam.

'Hail, stranger,' said the farmer, eyeing Tam carefully.

'I'm new to these parts and rather hoping you might be able to give directions.'

The farmer leaned to one side and spat a black globule out onto the grass on the verge. 'I think I can help you out, friend.' There was a cunning glint in the old man's eye. 'For a price, anything can be had. What do you offer me for my troubles?'

Tam fished out a silver piece from his pocket and flicked it into the air towards the farmer.

Catching the coin, the farmer tested it with a quick bite to make sure it was genuine. 'No offence, stranger, but it pays to be doubly sure 'round these here parts.' He grinned as he placed the coin into his breast pocket. 'Now, what would you have me tell you?'

'How do I get to Hag's Mire?'

The old man sat back and eyed Tam curiously. 'What do you want with that cesspool?'

'I paid for answers, not questions!' Tam looked stern.

'Okay, okay! I'm just askin'. No need to get huffy. Now, let me think,' he said, lifting his tattered old hat and scratching his head. 'Best way is to stay on this here road for about a mile or two. Then you come to a track off to the left. Just follow that and it brings you right into Hag's Mire. You can't go wrong.'

Tam nodded and nudged his horse forward, passing around and behind the old farmer.

The old man turned as Tam passed. 'It's not a place I'd go to willingly, young fella!' he shouted after Tam. 'Full of God knows what. You mind your step!'

Tam said nothing and continued on up the road.

The farmer sat back down and shook the reins, making the horse resume its slow walk. Then leaning to the side again, he spat once more onto the grass verge. 'Bloody fool!' he mumbled to himself. Patting the pocket containing the

silver half-crown, he smiled, and began humming his tune again.

Rat and Lom, who'd remained out of sight during Tam's conversation with the farmer, now emerged from their hiding place and quickly caught up to him. The road was deserted but there were signs of recent use. Freshly gouged hoof prints covered the hard baked dirt.

Rat looked down at the tracks. 'Seems we're not the only ones going this way. 'Bout five I reckon. Two hours ago, at most.'

'We'll have to keep sharp,' agreed Tam.

Lom cleared his throat. 'What about waitin' for nightfall?'

'Have you ever tried to find sign at night?' asked Tam.

Lom looked abashed. 'Oh yeah. Might be hard.'

'Try impossible. Unless you have cat eyes.' Rat grinned mockingly.

'Wonder where the others are now?' Lom asked, swiveling on his saddle and looking east.

'Hopefully,' answered Rat, 'on their way back to Jarro with the princess.'

AFTER AN HOUR, THEY came to the track that the old farmer had described. Hoof prints showed that at least one of the search parties had turned off the road and were riding towards Hag's Mire. Tam turned his horse onto the trail, the midday sun causing a shimmering haze. Heat, floating up in undulating waves, bent and distorted the land beyond fifty paces in any direction. Tam suddenly stopped his horse and dismounted.

He dropped to one knee and was staring intently at the ground.

Rat leaned forward on his saddle and craned his neck. 'Find something?'

'Footprints. Two sets.'

'Could be slavers,' offered Rat.

'No,' answered Tam. 'Too small. Two females.' He smiled. 'They came this way.

Look to be heading south along the road,' he said and quickly remounted.

They followed the tracks for the rest of the day, even finding the thorn bushes beneath which Anabel and Merrith had slept only days earlier.

By late evening, they were getting closer to the swamps, the ground was getting damper, and the foliage had changed. Large cypress marked the border to the wetlands like an army of wading giants, while pools of semi-stagnant water appearing on either side of the elevated road. Tam spent most of his time staring down at the ground, searching for tracks. It was not an easy task trying to pick out the light imprints left behind by two slightly built women.

Engrossed by the task, he was completely oblivious to the sudden arrival of five slavers cantering around a bend on the road just ahead.

Rat was the first to see them. 'Tam! Company!' he warned.

Tam raised his face and saw the dark-clothed men fast approaching. The slavers unsheathed their weapons as they came near. Tam turned his head towards Rat and Lom.

'Wait for my move,' he whispered.

'What have we here? State your business?' growled a strong-looking man with black hair. A wicked scar crossed his cheekbone and continued back toward his badly disfigured left ear, his pockmarked face was mottled and greasy.

'Just passing through,' answered Tam.

'Where to? There's nothin' in these parts 'cept snakes, crocks, an' leeches.'

'We're making for Ash. Hear there's a call for sword hands, and the pay's good.'

The large man laughed. 'You're a bit off if you're lookin' for Ash.'

'Really? How so?' asked Tam, feigning concern.

'Ash is farther east. You're headin' south, right into the swamp,' he said, simultaneously casting an envious eye over Tam's weapons and horse.

'Damn! We must've got turned around in the dark,' said Tam. 'How far to

Ash from here?'

The big man was shaking his head. 'This don't smell right. What's your real purpose, stranger? No one comes this way, lessin' they're on the run or wrong in the head.'

'It's a simple case of—'

'Simple nothin'! You're lyin' to me, friend!' He lifted his sword threateningly and placed it against Tam's throat. The other slavers surrounded the three men on all sides. "Sides... I don't like the cut of ya! That head's a mite too full of itself for my likin',' he remarked, jabbing the point of the sword into Tam's neck. 'Think I'll trim it down to size. I like your tack though, and the horse will fetch me a bit when I sell it.' He grinned evilly, showing several gold teeth.

Tam knocked the sword away and withdrew his two short swords with shocking speed. Rat let loose a volley of knives, causing three slavers to plummet from their horses, clutching at the hilts sticking from their chests. Lom reached behind his head and brought out his war hammer in a long arc that

smashed the skull of the fourth slaver on contact.

There was a crunching sound as the head disappeared into the neck, blood and brains spraying out in all directions. Tam knocked the weapon from the last slaver's hand with a swipe of his sword, placing the blades crossways against his neck. The slaver looked shocked, his eyes bulged, and his mouth hung open.

'What was it you said about my head?' asked Tam. The slaver looked

terrified. 'Please I—'

'That was it. You thought my head needed trimming. Isn't that correct?'

'Please!' he begged, holding his wounded hand.

Tam jerked the blades away in a double scything movement and the head sliced off. Tam returned the swords to their scabbards.

A small man holding a spear and wearing rusting armour stood out from behind a tree farther along the trail. He walked towards them. 'Good evening, gentlemen. If my guess is correct, you are no friends of slaver scum?'

Tam looked him over. He was well fed but his equipment was, at best, poor. 'What of it?' 'We have need of men like you. Men who know the ways of fighting. We don't have much money, but what we have we would gladly give for your help.'

Tam shook his head. 'I'm sorry. We have business of our own to attend.'

'If it entails the swamp, perhaps we could help each other?'

Tam thought for a moment. 'What are you doing out here alone? And who are the *we* of whom you speak?'

The man smiled. 'I'm not quite alone,' he said, making a beckoning motion

with his hand. Twenty men rose up from the foliage all around. 'We are free slaves. The swamp is our home.'

'Perhaps there *is* something you can help us with after all.' Tam smiled.

'Speak it.'

'We seek two women not long escaped from Briar. Have you come across them?'

The man took a step back and frowned. 'Why do you seek them? You're not working for the slavers; of that I'm sure. Not after what we've just witnessed.'

'No, we do not.' Tam hesitated. 'It's for their protection. But that's all I will

say.'

'Well, I'm sure you understand, I'll need more than your word.'

Tam frowned and straightened his back. 'One of them is from Jarro. We were sent by her relatives to return her safely home.'

The little man squinted suspiciously. 'A fine boast, but where is your proof?'

'Her name is Anabel N'Dhun.'

'And I need more than just a name. The slavers could have given you as much.'

Tam bit his bottom lip. He would have to take a leap of faith. Reaching into his tunic, he pulled out a green Pathfinder cap, the Jarrian royal crest decorating its peak. 'I don't expect many soldiers of Jarro have come this way.

This is my proof. It is all that I have.'

The little man took the cap and looked it over. He then brought it over and showed it to some of the other free slaves. There was a long debate amongst them before he finally returned. 'If you agree to be bound and blindfolded, we will bring you to her.'

'You have her?'

'Yes. But you will have to be disarmed. Some of the men are wary of you.' The little man looked around at the slavers' bodies. 'We'll take you to Haven. You'll find her there.'

Tam nodded. 'Agreed,' he said and began handing over his weapons.

'She is most unusual, your countrywoman.'

'How so?'

'We have lived here in the swamps for years, free of the torment of the slave pens in Briar and Ash. We were happy to look out for ourselves and stay hidden. Then Anabel arrived, and now, the whole camp is alive with talk of reclaiming our lands, our lives, of freeing all slaves. A *most* unusual woman.' He smiled and shook his head as he took Tam's weapons.

Tam hesitated as he passed over the last item. 'Well, she comes from good stock. Her father's a general.'

'He is? Well, his daughter would make a very fine general too. If they ever let women lead armies, that is,' he laughed.

The other free slaves stripped the dead bodies of all their weapons and armour, and once completed, submerged them in a deep bog a short way off the road. By the time they were finished, there was no sign of the conflict that had taken place. The sun would be down soon.

Tam gave one last look over his shoulder before they entered the foliage. There was no sign of their passing. A blindfold was placed over his eyes,

obscuring his view as they entered the swamps of Gantu once again.

AFTER A TWO DAY TREK, they arrived at the free slave town of Haven. Raised above the muddy waters of the swamp on wooden stilts, with rope bridges hanging between; Haven was a ramshackle mix of dirt-smeared wooden houses of varying sizes and shapes. Anabel had quickly organized the

inhabitants upon arrival, and the town was now a flurry of activity.

Blacksmiths were hard at work making rudimentary weapons and armour, while men and women trained for combat in every available free space. Anabel stood on the porch of a large building that looked like some sort of meeting hall, talking to two men and pointing at a map. Tam and the others were presented to her. 'Beggin' your pardon, Lady Anabel. But we came across these here men on the border. They say they're countrymen of yours, sent to bring you home,' said the small man whose name Tam had found out was Kristaf.

Anabel eyed them suspiciously. 'Really. From which part do you hail?' she asked.

'Southern Jarro, m'lady,' answered Tam.

'What proof do you have?'

'He has this, m'lady,' said Kristaf, handing over the Pathfinder cap.

'This is not sufficient proof!' she snapped. 'A trophy perhaps, taken from its true owner's body no doubt.' She was glaring at Tam defiantly.

'Then you should ask me something that only a real Pathfinder would know the answer to,' offered Tam.

Anabel thought for a moment. 'The commander of the Pathfinders is General N'Dhun. Where is his command based?'

'Begging your pardon, m'lady. But General N'Dhun, though a very fine officer, is not the commander of the Pathfinders. Our commander is General Drogo Chael. I believe your father, General Markas N'Dhun's command is based in Kan-Ta. Close to the palace of his first cousin, and our liege, the king.'

Anabel gave a small smile. 'You seem to be well versed, sir.'

Tam bowed low. 'Captain Martam Brand at your service, m'lady. We've come to bring you home.'

Anabel stared at him for a confused moment, and then looked around the compound at the worried, fearful faces of the slaves to whom she had given purpose and renewed hope. In that instant of clarity, she realized where her duty now lay. 'If you had found us a week ago, I would have gladly come with you, Captain. But now, it's completely out of the question.'

'My lady?' Tam looked both shocked and bewildered.

'These people need my help... *our* help,' she corrected. 'I refuse to stand idle and allow the injustices I have witnessed to continue. No, Captain, I will not be returning with you to Jarro. Not, at least, until every slave in Briar and Ash has been freed!'

Tam stared open-mouthed for a moment. 'We are under strict orders from the king, m'lady.'

'The king would understand. I am determined to stay and help these people. As I see it, you have two choices. You can return to Jarro empty handed, or...'

'And the second?' asked Tam.

'You can stay and help us.'

Tam scratched his chin. 'It would seem that we have no choice at all, m'lady, for we cannot return without you. Therefore, we are at your command!' He placed one hand over his heart and inclined his head.

Anabel grinned. 'Good! We need help with training. What can you do?'

'Both of my men were drill sergeants at the Pathfinder training camp, in the past.'

'Excellent! Get them started right away. There's no time to lose. When you've carried out your assignment, report back here to me for further orders.'

Tam saluted. 'Yes, ma'am!' Turning on his heel, he strode away. Anabel walked into the meeting hall and closed the door behind her.

'What now then?' Lom whispered to Rat as they followed after Tam.

'Time to dig out me arse-kickin' boots,' answered Rat.

## 34 **A Painful Truth**



BRINN ARRIVED AT THE perimeter wall of the fortress after a long, slow, six-hour ascent. Dark clouds had blocked the moons entirely. Night's heavy cloak of darkness advanced and retreated in thrall to torchlight flicker. Using a padded grapple line, he pulled his muscular body up the sheer surface with ease and slipped silently into the shadows on the far side. Three nearby guards stood idly chatting around a brazier, hands outstretched towards the flames to ward off the chilled night air.

To approach along the exposed walkway would be folly. Fighting back the impulse to attack, Brinn carefully looked about for a safer route. In the opposite direction, the wall curved in toward the western side of the citadel while at the far end, a set of wooden stairs gave access to the courtyard. Staying in the shadows and keeping low, he slowly made his way there and quietly crept down the steps into the darkness below.

The courtyard was dotted with structures large and small; covered, and uncovered wagons of varying size and design were parked in neat rows along the western wall.

The Pathfinder darted, unseen, from cover to cover until he was within a quick dash of his intended destination on the far side of the curtain wall gate.

Crouching between the last two wagons, he readied himself for a final sprint across open ground to a long, low building serving as stables for the garrison's mounts.

Running on silent feet, he gained unseen the shadows beside the building. To his left, stone stairs led up to the top of the rampart. Silhouetted by the orange glow of a second brazier, and with backs to the courtyard, two additional sentries stood silently warming cold hands over licking flames. A third had turned and was walking away from his companions with the measured, automated steps of a seasoned garrison sentry.

Brinn needed a diversion to clear the way. Staying low to the ground, he scrambled on hands and knees. The stable door groaned a petulant protest as he eased it open and looked inside. Rows of stalls stretched off into the darkness, many filled with dozing horses.

Directly across from the door, a large cubicle filled to the roof-beams with hay and oats provided a tempting target. Grabbing a nearby oil lamp from the wall, he threw it onto the hay. Yellow flames jumped high and quickly spread.

Turning away, he ran back to his hiding place in the dark shadows at the base of the curtain wall. There, he waited. Bright flickering light and smoke issued from the half-open stable door. The horses whinnied and kicked in panic as the flames and heat quickly spread.

'Fire! Fire!' cried one of the sentries on finally seeing the flames, his voice momentarily echoing back and forth across the vast silent fortress. Soon, answering shouts relayed the call to action, quickly followed by the beating rhythm of leather on stone as many booted feet approached the quickly spreading conflagration. Sentries, abandoning their posts in panic, ran past Brinn's hiding place to help fight the flames. No one noticed the shadowy figure gliding silently up the stairs to the ramparts. He dropped his rope over the wall and tied it off.

Brok was the first to reach the top, quickly followed by Balzimar and finally, Helfwen. 'What was the delay? I thought you must have been captured,' said Brok.

'Had to persuade the guards to leave the wall. It took some time to arrange.'

Below, in the courtyard of the fortress, the men of the garrison were hard put to quell the quickly spreading flames. A long line of soldiers had formed from the well at the yard's centre, all the way to the stables, each man passing waterfilled buckets with one hand, retrieving an empty bucket with the other in continuous exchange. Others removed horses using doors farther along the structure. Unnoticed, the four intruders made their way along the parapet of the curtain wall to a wooden stairs at the end of the eastern side, and down into the courtyard.

The fire was burning fiercely, and growing as sparks ignited dry wood and straw in other parts. 'Seems my diversion is growing out of hand. We'd better move quickly before it spreads too far,' said Brinn, walking towards a set of steps leading down into a walled furrow, and to a heavy oak door in the eastern wall of the Keep itself. 'We should be able to gain entrance through here. If luck is with us, this leads into the dungeon,' he said, gently rapping his knuckles on the door.

Brok shoved the door with his shoulder, but it didn't budge. 'We'll need a ram to get it open,' he said.

Balzimar, perhaps you can do something?' asked Helfwen.

'No! I cannot help in this,' he said, shaking his head. 'It's simply out of the question. You may as well run along the ramparts waving your arms and shouting insults while baring your backside!' The wizard blew his long grey whiskers out in contempt at the suggestion. 'The outcome would be just the same, *He* would know the very instant I wield, and that would be the end of us. No indeed! This little problem will have to be solved without my help, I'm afraid.'

'Let me try,' said Brinn, taking Brok's place at the door. Brinn slammed against the door with all of his strength, but the door still refused to budge. He tried again but made little impression.

Stepping back, he kicked the door in frustration. 'It's like granite!'

'We'll have to find another way in.' Balzimar shook his head.

'Wait! I want one last go.' Brinn looked determined and took a few steps back to get a good run up. Thundering forward, he slammed his shoulder into the hard wood once again. There was a loud thud as muscle and bone made contact with rigid obdurate timber.

But even now, the door would not yield.

Instead, Brinn was thrown backwards onto his backside with a loud grunt. He sat there looking up at the door for a second. Then, growling in frustration, he lashed out and kicked it. As the heel of his boot made contact, a small circle of

blue light flashed. The door imploded with a loud crack, shredding into thousands of small splinters.

'No!' cried Balzimar. But it was already too late.

Deep inside the fortress, Alsheer stood up from his chair in alarm, immediately sensing the strong magic that had destroyed the dungeon door. 'The enemy are upon us! Call out the guard! Call out the guard!' he shouted.

Yet more men poured out onto the courtyard, but chaos reigned. The fire was out of control and threatening to spread to the Keep itself. Alarm bells pealed, adding to the furore, but confused men ran to help with the fire rather than search for intruders.

'Quickly! Get inside!' ordered Balzimar, shoving Brok towards the now empty doorframe. Mildly dazed by the concussive recoil of the imploding door, Brinn was hauled to his feet and dragged inside the Keep by Helfwen. Fearing they had been discovered, the four men stood waiting in the darkness for the sound of fast approaching feet. But the only sounds that came to their ears were the shouts for more water from the beleaguered men outside.

Luck was indeed on their side. They remained undetected.

The dark passageway ended in stone steps leading down into the bowels of the fortress. Here, the walls were slick with moisture. With careful steps, they slowly groped their way along through the dark, arriving at a junction, finding a solitary lamp burning on the opposite wall.

Balzimar reached up and unhooked it from its retaining nail. 'The dark may not affect you, my lad, but the rest of us need the comfort afforded by a little

illumination,' he said, winking at Brinn as he passed him by.

They took the left passage, a musty smell of damp and rot tinged the air. Most of the cells were empty and those that were not held skeletal remains. A low cough pricked Brinn's ears, and he went to investigate. There was a barred window set high in the door of one of the cells. Looking inside, he could see the outline of a man curled into a ball on a wooden cot against the far wall. Chains adorned his hands and feet. Brinn pulled back the iron retaining bolt and opened the door. Light from Balzimar's lamp spilled in, filling the small room.

The prisoner shielded his eyes against the sudden brightness. 'Come to finish me off? Well, the answer is still the same. I will not yield to *you*, nor your dark master! And never will!' the prisoner wheezed, his chains clinking as he moved

to sit up.

'We don't have time for this!' said Brok, pulling at Brinn's sleeve.

'We can't just leave him here to rot!' protested Brinn.

'This is not our affair! And time's wasting!'

'It's plain that you're not one of the Snake's men. But if not, then who are you, and why have you come?' asked the prisoner, squinting from behind his

upturned palm.

Brinn looked down at the prisoner's bruised face. 'Quiet with your questions. Just be glad that we're here and willing to help. Our purpose is our own. Let it be enough to know that we consider it unsporting to leave you to your fate, trussed like a boar at a feast.'

Brinn walked over to the man's bunk and lifted the heavy chain attached to the wall through an iron ring behind the man's head. Putting his boot against the wall, Brinn pulled with all of his strength. The muscles in his arms and neck began to bulge and his face reddened.

'Are you insane? That's heavy gauge iron. You would need the strength of a

horse to pull it from the wall!' exclaimed the prisoner.

Small beads of sweat trickled from the furrows creasing Brinn's forehead. Joining together into larger droplets, they ran freely down the sides of his cheeks and dripped onto the front of his shirt. The chain creaked as one of the links weakened, cracking open with a loud metallic ping. The prisoner's jaw went slack.

Brinn unhooked the chain from the wall clasp and slid it free.

'Your strength is without equal, my friend,' he said, staring in awe. 'My name is Alli Mustaraf. I offer you my hand in friendship.' Alli held out his hand to Brinn.

'Your name... You hail from the east?' asked Brinn.

'Yes, but do not judge me on a compass point. Know that there is good and evil in every corner of this world, south to north, west to east.'

Brok snorted with disdain.

'Yes, my newfound friends, even there!' Alli nodded, a wry smile upturning his lips. 'No doubt you are surprised to hear this.' He looked into each man's eyes in turn. 'Is it so surprising that men of honour would stand against the Dark even in the Blasted Lands?'

Alli smiled at the derogatory term often used by men of the west when describing the east. 'Some of us remained untainted by the hand of evil and fought against it unto our doom. Some fight still, though you in the West know it not. We suffer in silence 'neath tyranny's crushing fist. As you see.' He lifted his hands and showed his chains. 'Will you not now take my hand offered in kinship and thanks?' he asked again.

Brinn eyed the man closely and seeing there was no deception, he nodded and gave a half smile. 'Gladly.'

'Time's wasting, come on!' growled Brok.

'He's right,' Brinn said to Alli. 'We must move quickly. Have you enough

strength to carry yourself?'

'I freely admit, I'm a little weak. They thought to starve me into submission,' Alli snorted. 'I will be fine.' He tried to stand but wavered and trembled under the strain.

'I'll look after him,' offered Helfwen. 'I'll make sure he keeps up.'

'Every lost second swings the advantage to our foe!' interrupted Brok again.

'Major Brok is correct. We really should get a move on,' agreed Balzimar.

Brinn nodded. 'Follow me.' Exiting the room, he walked ahead, leading the group up the narrow passageway running the dungeon's length. Helfwen brought

up the rear, supporting Alli.

After several dead ends, Brinn finally found a stairway to the upper levels of the fortress; a tar-blackened door barred their way on the upper-most step. Brinn took the steps two at a time and put his hand on the heavy iron handle. Placing an ear to the dirt-smeared wood, he carefully listened, a chilling silence greeted his sensitive ears. Gingerly turning the handle, he winced as the locking mechanism made a very audible metallic click just as it released.

Thankfully, the door had been left unlocked. Brinn slowly inched it open and peered through the small crack. As he did so, two guards ran past, intent on some other urgent task. Blissfully unaware of the immediate proximity of a sudden and very violent death; they ran on with tunnelled view, completely oblivious to the dirt-smeared profile peeking through the door slit.

Brinn stopped and held his breath, expecting the worst. But as the seconds ticked by, they did not return and there were no shouts of alarm. He exhaled

slowly with relief.

Brinn stood silently in the dark of the frame, patiently waiting. There were no other sounds.

He opened the door and quickly stuck his head out, peeking first left, then

right.

The corridor was empty, rugs decorated the floor and tapestries the walls. Flickering wall lamps effused warm shimmering light, making shadows dance

and jig to whim.

Drawing his sword, he stepped out into the hallway, quickly followed by Balzimar and Brok. Helfwen and Alli struggled through last. The passage led into a great hall. An enormous rectangular dining table, made from burnished oak, filling the centre of the room. Twenty matching high-backed chairs lined either side along its length. Pillars of marble ran the course and rose in continuous polished majesty to the sweeping vaulted roof overhead.

The near-end wall held an oversized mantle supported on its extremes by two large grotesquely misshapen statues of tortured souls, half consumed by demonic

fire.

Its large unused hearth lay black and cold between. At the farthest end, a lavish marble stairway rose to the upper levels from the centre of the room.

Alsheer stood on the top step, blocking their way. Balzimar stepped forward

with hands on hips, the others standing directly behind.

'It has been some time since our last meeting, wizard!' Alsheer's words were harsh and spite-filled. 'I hope you have learned humility since then,' he sneered, contemptuously.

'You will find I have learned a great many things since that time. More,

perhaps, than you may be expecting!'

Alsheer gave a hissing laugh. 'I see you still hold fast to your over-confidence. Good. This time, I will make sure you pay in full for your folly. And I see you have brought others here to die at your side.' He scanned the faces looking up at him. 'Lord Mustaraf, you willingly join ranks with these fools? Stand aside now and you will be spared their fate!'

'Never, snake! I would rather die than yield again to your evil.'

'Well spoken. Fitting last words from a blockheaded buffoon such as you. Have you any message, you would like me to convey to your family after your demise?'

'None that I would want delivered by your vile breath!' Alli broke free from Helfwen's grip and rushed forward, swinging the broken chain attached to his wrist like a mace.

Alsheer grinned and waited until he was half way up the stairs before letting loose with a blast from his hand. Alli flew backwards through the air, landing

with a crash on top of the grand table, sending dining chairs flying. On his barked command, Alsheer's soldiers came streaming into the hall from hidden

alcoves all along the room's length.

The Pathfinders, supported by Helfwen, sprang into action. Though outnumbered ten to one, they easily cut a swathe through the palace guard. Alli recovered quickly and joined in the slaughter. Snatching a fallen sword from a dead guard, he entered the fray, lashing out with his chained left hand and slashing and stabbing with the sword in his right.

Balzimar climbed the first steps of the marble stairs, oblivious to the battle taking place all around, his mind and will now completely focused on his ancient

foe.

Alsheer eyed Balzimar and a sneering grin crossed his lips. 'Fool! Did you not learn from our last encounter? You are outmatched. It seems another lesson is required to prick your failing memory. I will enjoy this... very much!'

Red lightning streaked from his palm towards the wizard.

But Balzimar's blue shield held firm, though his knees buckled a little from the force of the attack. Alsheer paused momentarily to summon his strength anew. As the lightning shaft dissipated, Balzimar struck back with a bolt of his own. Now it was Alsheer's turn to shield or be incinerated. But as had happened with the Leecher, Balzimar could not sustain the attack for long before exhausting himself. This was how the contest continued, each seeking a weakness in the other, attacking and defending and attacking again in an unending cycle.

Brinn and the others had beaten the guards back into a corner and were quickly finishing off the last few. Alsheer, shocked at the ease with which his men had been dispatched and his plan foiled, hesitated. With a barking grunt, he unleashed a double strike, one from either hand, but instead of attacking Balzimar as expected, he instead directed his last reserves of energy down into the marble stairs. Great chunks of stone flew towards the grey-moustached wizard, knocking him off his feet, and a thick cloud of obscuring milky-white dust filled the air.

As it began to clear, Alsheer had disappeared.

Dust and confusion had covered for the cunning darkspawn lord making good his escape.

Alsheer hurried, unseen, away from the scene of battle and up the smooth worn steps of the round tower towards the roof of the citadel. There, he found the dragon patiently awaiting him. The princess lay unconscious, strapped to his scaly back.

She had been bound into a stiff leather bag, her face uncovered and in plain view through a small window of interlaced wicker bars. Several soldiers stood guarding the precious cargo.

Alsheer called to the captain in charge. 'Take your men and hold the stairwell,

Captain! The enemy is at hand!'

The captain saluted and ran off to carry out his orders.

Alsheer stepped closer to the dragon. 'It is time to flee this place, dark friend.' He patted the side of the beast and placed his foot into the stirrup in readiness to mount.

Karem appeared from out of the darkness. 'Leaving, master?' he asked.

'Lord Toriz, where have you been? I summoned you to my side many hours ago, but you did not heed my call. Why?'

'I have had much to think about. Many things have become clear to me.

Many memories restored. Many lies... laid bare!' He scowled.

'You speak in riddles. Come to me now so that I might clear you of these unnecessary burdens.' Alsheer extended his hand towards Karem.

Karem walked over towards the dragon and stopped in front of the great beast, his hands hidden from view behind his back.

'Come! Time is short and our enemy is upon us!'

'Like the time the enemy stood before Devaa?' asked Karem.

Alsheer looked surprised. 'What do you mean?'

'I know the truth. At last, my mind is free of your manipulations. You have used me and used my people for your own purposes. And now, as before, you run to save yourself!'

Alsheer sneered. 'I have given you life and power beyond imaginings. Don't speak to me of manipulation! You willingly gave yourself to my cause in the beginning. It was much later, after the tide had turned, that your pitiful conscience infected your mind with doubt and guilt. Without my intervention, you would have long ago ended your pathetic existence.'

Karem's head dropped, tears welling in his eyes. 'What have I done? My people? My homeland? My family? All gone! Left to rot. Carrion for the scavengers... I should have been with them at the end and shared their fate.'

Alsheer climbed up into the saddle and looked down. 'I give you this one last chance. Climb up here behind me and persist in my service and I will continue to reward your loyalty. As I always have.'

Karem looked up. Heavy tears running freely down his face. 'All I have ever loved is dead and gone, and I have become a servant of evil. But no more!'

'You are a fool! You would turn your back on power and immortality?'

'Gladly!' snarled Karem. 'I want only one... gift. The power to turn back time, and expose you for the vile snake that you really are!' Karem raised his hand up over his head. In it, he held a knife made of black obsidian, hardened in the belly of the earth and imbued with dark magic.

He plunged the blade into the dragon's chest.

Garnak rose onto his back legs as the blade sank deep into his body, his roar thunderous, shaking the very walls of the citadel to their foundations. The dragon lashed out, knocking Karem to the ground, his broken body sliding to a stop against the wall of the parapet.

The beast laboured as it tried to gain some height.

It was mortally wounded but still managed to take off and was flying erratically away as Brinn and the others finally arrived on top of the fortress.

'We're too late!' cried Helfwen.

They watched as Alsheer tried to keep control of the dying beast. The dragon dropped suddenly, sending Alsheer plummeting from his back.

The dragon regained itself and corrected its fall, but the darkspawn lord went spinning through the air and landed with a splash in a river some miles away.

Garnak, now riderless, began to turn away to the southeast, he banked and

began a slow northeasterly descent into the forests of Timberland.

The last sight of him was as he disappeared into the mist beyond Lake Myre.

'Did I kill him?' wheezed Karem, a steadily growing pool of blood gathering around his head.

Brinn and Balzimar went to his side. 'What happened?' asked Balzimar.

'I saw the truth at last! Megan helped me,' he said, holding up the handle of the blade. 'It snapped off in his chest.'

Balzimar took the broken knife. 'It's an obsidian blade! The only handheld weapon capable of piercing dragon scales.'

Karem smiled. 'The princess?' he asked, coughing up blood.

'We'll find her. Have no doubt,' said Balzimar.

'She was... my friend,' he wheezed, then coughed again. 'I wanted to help her.'

'You have helped her. Alsheer fell from the dragon's back. The beast is mortally wounded and will not fly far before death takes him.' Balzimar smiled.

'Tell her... Karem is sorry.'

'We will, friend,' Balzimar said, patting the dying man's arm. 'Is there someone we can contact for you, some family perhaps?'

Karem smiled and blood trickled from his mouth. 'No... my family... awaits me. At last, I am going home.' His head slumped back, and the light left his eyes.

After a few moments, Brinn and Balzimar stood and looked off towards the east. 'What now?' asked Helfwen.

'We make for Trinn, West Lakeside,' answered Balzimar, 'and find a ship. After that, who knows?'

'Gods protect her, wherever she lands,' added Brok.

'Let's make haste. We have far to travel and the sooner we get started, the sooner we get there,' said Balzimar as he walked back along the rampart to the tower stairs.

X

# 35 **Preparations**



THE EASTGATE BULWARK had been adequately strengthened due to the Engineer Corps' tireless, around-the-clock work long before the final decision to retreat had been given.

They had performed a minor miracle in returning the ancient defences to a semblance of working order in the scant time allotted. Captain Benjamin Preem stood surveying the section, on the northern flank, that he had been ordered to defend.

Preem, an extremely competent officer, was not afraid to countermand a bad order if he felt it necessary. It was a trait that routinely got him into trouble with his immediate superiors, but one that equally garnered unfailing loyalty and respect from his men.

The Jarrian army was now a battered shadow of its former self. Weakened battalions merged to create new formations, and morale was extremely low.

Preem watched as a patrol returned from a scouting mission to Farrow; it was obvious from the horses' lathered sides that the news the patrol carried was urgent.

They rode quickly to the main gate in the centre of the line, and once inside the fortification wall, the five-man patrol continued on to General Braken's pavilion without stopping.

Preem watched from his perch on the gantry. The officer dismounted and ran to the general's tent, and was immediately ushered inside.

'What do you think?' came a voice from over Preem's shoulder.

Lieutenant Aaron N'Dhun had been transferred to Preem's command after their combined rearguard action on the Farrow Road. Preem had requested the transfer personally.

Preem glanced at Aaron. 'Not good.' 'How long before they get here?'

'That depends on how good their engineers are. Farrow Bridge will take time to rebuild.'

'Parts of the river are still fordable, on horse-back at least. Why would they wait for the bridge?'

'They'll need to bring up supplies to feed the army, and siege weapons to attack the fortifications. They'll need that bridge in prime working order to mount any kind of serious attack. Fully laden wagons don't float so well. They make poor boats.'

'Agreed, but they could make a push in advance of their main force just to test our defences.'

'That's why we are doubling the guard starting from now,' answered Preem.

Aaron smirked, 'I'll make the arrangements, sir,' he said, saluted and left.

Soon, a runner came galloping towards the bulwark from the direction of the general's pavilion. The soldier stopped his horse near Preem and called up to him, 'Sir, all officers to the general's tent for a briefing.'

He saluted and continued down the line, stopping every so often to inform other officers.

Within the pipe-smoke filled tent, most of the officers were standing around a

map table in the centre.

Ah good, Captain Preem. We have news of the enemy's movements,' announced General Kolo Braken as Preem entered. 'Our scouts have been monitoring the enemy from afar for the last few weeks. It seems they have finally begun to cross the River E'Ben in force over the last few days.'

'Have they repaired the bridge, sir?' asked a barrel-chested colonel on the table's far end. 'No, not yet. Their main force is still bottled up on the far side. But most of the cavalry and a substantial portion of the light infantry have made

it across.'

'If we attack now, we could catch them off guard, sir,' offered a major to Preem's left.

'That *is* an option. But one I am loath to commit to,' said Braken.

'It's time for bold action, sir,' insisted the major. Others nodded in agreement. 'We won't get a second chance like this. We could pin them against the river and crush them while they are divided.'

There were more voices joining the chorus of approval.

The old general shook his head as he looked around at the many eager faces surrounding him.

'Captain Preem, you haven't as of yet voiced an opinion. Do you agree with this call for action?'

Preem took a deep breath. 'If this had been six months ago, sir, then I would have said yes, most definitely. But we are not the force we were six months ago. To attack now would be folly. We would lose more than we would gain.'

'That's absurd, General!' argued the major to mumbles of support from some

other officers.

General Braken held up a hand to silence the dissent. 'Please go on, Captain.'

Preem looked into the faces around the table. 'Have you looked into your men's eyes of late? They are exhausted. The forced march back to Eastgate has sapped more than strength. The morale of this army hangs by a finger. If you take them out again, I fear it will be to their doom.'

'Nonsense! My men stand ready to follow any command I give,' protested the major, eyeing Preem angrily. There followed more loud protests from his

supporters.

'Please, gentlemen!' interrupted the general. 'I need to hear from all sides in order to make a sound decision.'

'What portion of the enemy's army has crossed the river, sir?' asked another officer.

'It's hard to put a figure on it, but we estimate about one-third. No small amount, given the size of their force.'

Yet more mumbles as some of the officers discussed the events among themselves.

'I still think we have been given a kingly opportunity, sir,' insisted the major.

'It would take three days to march to Farrow Bridge!' growled Preem. 'Across open country. I assure you the enemy is not stupid! He will have eyes on

us, watching our every move. He would know of our approach long before we came into view. And by the time we did finally reach him, we would find

ourselves facing more than one-third of his army!'

'Thank you, gentlemen. You have given me food for thought. I have to agree with Captain Preem on this occasion; in that we are much weakened. I fear our men do not have another forced march in them at present. And besides, the enemy can afford to lose a third of their army, whereas we cannot. My decision is made. We hold our position.'

'Can we expect any more replacements, sir?' asked a colonel.

'Yes. General Chael will be arriving with one thousand men sometime this week.'

'Only a thousand, sir?'

'More will follow in the weeks ahead. I'm informed that new recruits are in the process of being trained as we speak. They will be transferred as soon as it is viable. But for now, we must make do with what we have. Make good the fortifications and continue all repairs. We're here for the long haul. Requests for replacements or materials should be processed through Colonel Myrak. Thank you for your input, gentlemen. That is all for the time being. We will speak again as the situation unfolds. You are dismissed.'

The officers snapped to attention and saluted. As they were filing out of the tent, the general turned to look at Preem. 'Captain Preem, could I have a word with you in private please?'

'Yes, sir.'

The major who'd advocated an attack on the enemy scowled at Preem as he passed him by. Braken waited until the other officers had left the tent. Colonel Myrak closed the flap as the last one exited, then picked up an item from a small table at the back of the tent and handed it to the general.

'That was quite a remarkable job on the Farrow Road last week, Ben.'

'Thank you, sir.'

'We need first-rate officers as never before. I believe you came up through the ranks, is that correct?'

'Yes, sir. I was a private in Captain Thronso's platoon.'

'Captain Thronso? Ah yes! A good man. I remember him. Fearless!'

'Yes, sir.'

'It gives me great pleasure to give you this, Ben.' Braken handed over a small box.

'Sir?' Preem took the box and opened it. Inside was a set of golden hawks, the insignia of a major.

'I'm promoting you to major. Congratulations.'

'Thank you, sir. But there are others who also deserve mention.' 'Yes, I've seen your report and medals will be forthcoming.'

'I would like to recommend Lieutenant N'Dhun for promotion to captain, sir.' Braken nodded. 'You can inform him yourself when you return to your post. Now if you will excuse me, Major, there is much to be done.'

Preem saluted and left the tent and as he reached the bulwark, Aaron N'Dhun approached. 'Sir, I've doubled the guard as ordered. I was wondering if there was anything else that you required?'

'Yes... change your insignia to reflect your new rank, Captain.' Aaron looked bewildered. 'I don't follow, sir.'

'We've been promoted.'

Aaron's smile broadened. 'How nice. Thank you.'

Preem nodded, walked over to the front of the wooden palisade and stared east, out across the Velt.

'What's the word on the enemy's movements?' asked Aaron.

'Eager, eh?' Preem half-smiled, while resting his elbows on the top of the rampart. 'Well, you'll be glad to know it won't be long 'til they're knocking on our door. Though the bridge is slowing them for the moment.'

'How much time did we buy?

'A week, maybe two.' Preem squinted and raised a hand to shield his eyes against the sunlight. There was a sudden glint, as if light had reflected off metal, way off on the horizon to the east. He stared at that place for a long time. 'Then again...!'

### 36 **Farrow Bridge**



THE NORTHERN RAINS had finally abated, causing the river's flow to reduce from a torrent to merely fast flowing. Construction engineers scrambled in fervent haste to construct a new bridge across the River E'Ben, a few had already been lost to the rushing waters. Men and wagons jammed the roads for miles, awaiting the order to cross. A black marquee overlooked the site from a nearby hill. Sulan Al-Imri's personal guard, dressed from head to foot in black satins with matching black leather armour, ringed the tent. Inside, the Lord of the East was in council with his generals. They stood before him with bowed heads and trembling hands.

His mood was sombre. He sat in a plainly carved chair set upon a wooden dais. 'What news is there of Harrahash? Has it arrived from the east yet?' he

asked.

'Alas no, Great One. The weapon has only now passed the eastern borders of Anvar, and will not be here for weeks yet,' answered Overlord Imrit.

'A pity, I would have liked to have it here for the attack on the wall they call

Eastgate.

'It cannot be helped, Great One,' continued Imrit. 'It takes much time to transport the parts. 'I am told they are not easily moved.' His intertwined fingers nervously tensed.

For long moments, Al-Imri said nothing, content to just stare at the tops of the many down-cast heads. Finally, he turned toward Imrit. 'How much longer must

we wait, Overlord? These delays tax my patience,' he growled.

Imrit looked up and cleared his throat before speaking. 'The river has been a terrible hindrance to progress, Great One. It has, as can be seen, only just recently reduced to a more reasonable rate of flow.'

'And what is the estimated time to finish?' Al-Imri pressed.

'I have brought the senior engineers to better explain the technicalities of the project, Great One. I am merely a soldier and, I fear, not familiar with the intricacies involved.'

Al-Imri's face, apart from his mouth, lay hidden inside the dark shadows of his cowl. 'No, but I see that you are well versed in the art of keeping your skin, Overlord. Perhaps a career in the diplomatic corps would better suit your particular... *skills*.'

Imrit swallowed nervously and kept his face turned down.

'Who among you, then, will throw light upon this catastrophe for me? Speak up!'

A fat-faced engineer cautiously looked up and spoke. 'I—I am chief engineer for the construction, Great One. And this is my subordinate,' he said, indicating to the man standing beside him.

'I see. Then tell me why, after so much time, has the bridge not yet been completed?'

'There have been difficulties, Great One.' His pleading hands waved back and forth in front of his bloated stomach. 'As the Overlord has explained, the river \_\_\_\_'

'I do not want excuses!' hissed Al-Imri, cutting him off. 'I can provide a mountain of excuses for myself, thank you very much! I want facts! The river's size does not concern me.'

'But we've lost many men trying to ford the gap, Great One—' continued the terrified engineer.

'And, of course, you replaced them and continued!' Al-Imri interrupted yet

again.

'Well, no, not exactly, Great One. I saw little gain in wasting further lives when it was simply a matter of waiting for the flow to reduce naturally. I thought it was better to wait until conditions improved.' He was vigorously wringing his

hands as he spoke.

Al-Imri stood and kicked away the cushions upon which his feet had been resting. 'You, decided to stop work for the sake of a few of your men!' he shouted. 'You decided to stop my army until conditions improved! And what's infinitely worse is that you did it so that your band of insignificants could loll about playing dice while every day lost is a day the enemy further bolsters his defences! So that when we do *finally* cross this river and attack, they will be rested and re-equipped and we will lose many more men precisely because of this delay! Because of you!'

He was roaring into the chief engineer's face, simultaneously jabbing his

finger into the man's chest.

The officer of engineers dropped to his knees. 'Mercy, Great One! I only

thought\_'

'Well, stop all the thinking! Thinking is pointless! At least, yours is. Anyway, I disagree! You gave little, if any, thought to the consequence of your actions! *That* is the problem! You incompetent imbecile!' roared Al-Imri. 'And because of your incompetence, instead of losing a few now, we will lose thousands later!' He screamed even louder than before, making flecks of spittle fly from his mouth and spray across the petrified engineer's face.

'Please, Great One—'

'Guards!' called Al-Imri.

Two burly soldiers entered the tent.

'Put this dolt's head on a pike so that others might learn from his mistakes!'

The guards dragged the screaming man out, his pleading voice trailing off into the distance. The ringing sound of an unsheathed sword was followed by the crunch of steel against bone. The engineer's begging voice stopped mid-cry.

A terrified silence filled the tent, men fearing to breathe lest they caught Al-Imri's vengeful eye. Nothing, save the rattle of shaking armour, disturbed the

quiet.

'Let this be a lesson to you all. I will accept no further excuses and give you one week from today. If my army is not marching down the Farrow Road by that time, I will replace you to the man. Now get out!' he roared.

The tent emptied quickly, leaving Al-Imri standing alone, shaking with temper. He placed his hand over a bracelet on his left wrist and it began to glow.

'Master!' he called.

In his mind, a swirling fog cleared and a vision of Ultor appeared. 'You have

news, disciple?' Ultor's voice rasped.

'Yes, my lord. We are delayed yet again. But I have taken matters into my hands. We will strike a mortal blow soon. The west will be ours. Nothing can stop us now.'

Good. Your tidings lift my gloom. A sense of foreboding grips me. Garnak is long overdue from Gantu, and Lord Alsheer does not answer my call. I fear

something's amiss.'

'Lord Alsheer would not be overthrown easily, my lord.'

'Yes, you are correct. He will resolve any difficulties that have occurred. I

will wait, perhaps, a little longer for his commune.'

'There is another matter, master. The sickness grows stronger. My skin burns, even on the coolest of cloudy days, and my eyes have turned black and shun the light. I am in need of your aid to free me from my torment.'

'The sickness is pervasive, disciple. A cure cannot be administered over so

vast a distance as lies between us. But even so, some relief may be had.'

'Yes, yes, anything, master. Ease the burning so that I might better function. It has become hard to bear. I scorn daylight hours and seek only the solace of the night's soothing breath.'

'Your work is almost at an end, disciple. Soon, I will welcome you to Bal-Karesh and free you of your burdens. When the west falls, your salvation will be

at hand.'

'And immortality?' asked Al-Imri.

'Assured.'

Ultor's image became a beam of bright red light. Light that eased Al-Imri's pain but dragged him farther into the Dreadlord's employ.

When it was over, he slept on his bed of cushions in the darkness of his tent. Outside, men clambered to finish the bridge, now relentlessly driven by officers wielding whips.



ALL OF THE INHABITANTS of Haven over the age of fifteen were required to train for combat. That included all of the women; Anabel insisted on it. Both she and Merrith were the first to arrive on the training ground every morning and the last to leave come sundown.

Training in the heat of the swamp was exhausting but rewarding, and it was heartening for Anabel to see the look of hope rekindled on the faces of the exslaves.

The men were trained with pike and heavy sword and the women in bow, crossbow, and half sword, with both sexes practicing unarmed combat together. Anabel excelled in this, and had her own unusual techniques derived from her tackball experience. She showed amazing strength for such a petite young woman and was easily the equal of many of the men.

Days passed quickly into weeks, and the Haven Defence Force was renamed the Free Slave Army. Numbering just under five hundred, they were a motley mixture of men and women old and young, armed with assorted weapons and armour. Though their appearance gave them a rag-tag disorganised look, that perception could not have been further from the truth. After weeks of drilling under the watchful eyes of Tam, Rat, and Lom, their movements were precise, and their actions honed.

They could move as one and attack or defend as a group with cohesion and flexibility. Late one evening, Anabel took Tam aside.

She sensed that there was little more that could be done to prepare the exslaves for the coming fight. 'I just wanted to thank you for your help, Captain. You've performed miracles in a very short time. And because of that, we are now finally ready to fight.'

'Glad to have been of service, m'lady. They're as ready as they will ever be. All they lack now is experience.'

'They'll have that soon enough,' Anabel said, glancing towards a group of practicing men and women. 'How will they fare when the time comes?'

Tam shrugged. 'Each in his or her own way. Hopefully, the training will be enough to get them through. Failing that, perhaps the fear of getting kicked up the backside by Rat and Lom.' He smiled. 'One is as good as the other in a fight, I dare say.'

'I've given much thought to our next move and decided that we should attack Briar first,' said Anabel.

'What's your reasoning?'

'It's a natural first step.' Anabel folded her arms and cupped her chin between the forefinger and thumb of one hand.

'The town is held by no more than three hundred slavers, surely a more than manageable force for our small army to handle.'

'Yes, but they'll have the advantage of the town walls to hide behind,' Tam cautioned. 'Not if we attack them from inside and outside at the same time. A small force should be able to hold the gates open for the main body of the army.'

Tam nodded. 'Agreed. I think, perhaps, ten men should suffice.'

'Once we are through the gates, the advantage is ours.'

'I will lead the gate team,' said Tam.

Anabel looked startled by Tam's statement, she instinctively placed her hand

on his arm. 'I would prefer if you chose another for that task!'

Tam's bicep flexed on contact. It was round and solid, his skin warm yet soft to her touch. Anabel's face immediately flushed, and she quickly removed her hand. 'I mean... your leadership...' she stuttered, 'may be needed outside the walls if the gate should not be won.'

Tam's smile broadened. 'Anabel,' he said, their eyes meeting. 'There's nothing wrong with your tactical ability or your leadership. I have served under many excellent leaders in the past, and you are easily their match. And besides, you'll have Rat and Lom with you to help coordinate the main attack. Capturing the gate is crucial to success. And that's why *I* need to be there.'

Anabel nodded. 'Of course!' she said, rather more forcefully than she had wished to. Calming herself, she continued in an almost normal tone, 'You are our military expert, Captain. If you feel this is necessary, I will, of course, back that

decision.'

'Thank you for your concern.' Tam touched her arm.

Anabel flushed from ear to ear. 'You're welcome. I'm concerned for all of the men who will be tackling the gate. It will be an incredibly... um... dangerous job of work,' she said, backing away and stumbling over an uneven plank on the porch before righting herself. 'I have a lot of organising to do.' She pointed over her shoulder towards the door of the hall.

Tam was still smiling. 'I will refine the battle plan and return with my conclusions, m'ladv.'

Anabel was halfway inside the door. 'Yes that's great. Let me know when you have it finalised.' She said, closing the door and sliding down the inside, holding her hands up to her face.

Merrith was sitting at a table nearby as Anabel came into the hall. 'Anabel, are you alright?' She enquired, running to Anabel's side and crouching beside her.

'I'm fine. I just need to hide in here for a year, maybe two. Then I'll be just dandy,' she said, one eye peeking through the splayed fingers of her hands.

'Did something happen?'

'Yes, I made a complete ass of myself in front of him.'

'In front of who?' asked Merrith. Then, suddenly realising to whom Anabel was referring, she gasped. 'Oh no! Tell me what happened!'

'Oh, nothing significant apart from the fact that I turned into a stuttering, stumbling fool when he touched my arm.'

'Why-ever did he touch your arm?' exclaimed Merrith.

'Well, I suppose, plainly speaking, because I touched his arm first. But I didn't mean to!' Anabel grabbed Merrith's hands as she spoke. 'It just sort of happened.' Her face was still clearly and deeply red.

'Then it's safe to assume that your feelings have been noted?'

'Yes! No! I don't know...!' She said, thrusting her hands back up to her face

and shaking her head.

'Come on.' Merrith smiled, placing a reassuring arm around Anabel's shoulder. 'Let's get you off of this cold floor. It's really not all that bad; I'm sure there is no cause for embarrassment. And besides, last thing we need is for someone to walk in here and see you curled into a ball. It paints a very bad picture.'

'You're right! They need a leader with a will of steel. Not some ninny who

goes weak-kneed at the first sign of a handsome face.'

'Even if that face is chiseled perfection?' cooed Merrith.

'Gods!' Anabel threw her head back. 'He *is* handsome, isn't he?' she gushed. Then they both giggled like teenagers at their first ball.

IT TOOK FIVE DAYS' hard march eastward through the swamps to get within striking distance of Briar. It would have been much faster to go north onto the Coast Road, but they would have been easily observed on the open ground, and the slavers warned of their approach. Now, as they crept forward in the dark, they had the element of surprise. The army was poised and ready to strike. Tam and his group had gone ahead days earlier and were already positioned inside the town. It was midnight when Tam approached the main gate. Two guards were standing with spears resting against their shoulders by a brazier, down at ground level. Three more loped back and forth on the gantry overhead, one of the guards was eyeing him closely as he approached.

'I was just wondering if I could get a light for my pipe?' asked Tam. 'I saw

your fire from a distance.'

'S'pose so,' said the lower-sized, pug-nosed guard, punctuating his acknowledgment by spitting on the ground to one side.

The taller sentry was looking at Tam oddly.

'I know you, don't I?' he asked, pointing at Tam.

'Not that I'm aware.'

The guard's mouth hung slack as he searched his memory. 'I do. I bloody swear it! But from where?'

Tam reached down, took a small, half-scorched stick from the brazier and lit his pipe. 'Maybe I just look like someone you know. Happens more than you'd think.'

'That's it! You're that queer talkin' bard fella! Now I remember ya! How comes your talk's changed?' It was the guard Tam had spoken to the last time he was in Briar. 'Come to think on it, Grik was looking for you after the last time you was here. Seems two of our men got found face down just about the time you went missin',' the guard said, levelling his spear at Tam.

'Fraid you're mistaken, friend,' insisted Tam.

'Look, I mightn't be no good with names, but I don't never forget a face. Ain't that right, Pogar?'

He glanced over at the smaller guard to his right.

'At's right enough.' The other sentry nodded.

'Now, s'pose you hand over 'em there weapons an' then we'll go an' you can

sing one o' your songs for the boss. How's 'at sound, poet?' His laugh had the wheezing quality of a heavy pipe smoker.

'Of course. I'd be happy to. Most delighted.'

Tam pulled out the two half swords strapped across his back and offered them hilt first to the guard. As the man stepped forward to take the weapons, Tam flipped them into the air. They spun a couple of turns and then the hilts landed back in Tam's hands. Tam was grinning.

'What's your—?' was all that the man said before the tip of the sword pierced his throat.

Pogar cried out in panic before Tam could close the distance. Up on the gantry, a large bell pealed loudly shattering the night's silent calm. Tam killed the second guard with ease just as his men leapt from the shadows and climbed up onto the palisade walkway to silence the bell.

The three guards up there were quickly overpowered but by then, it was far too late. Frenzied shouts of alarm, accompanied by the sound of running feet, reverberated down back alleys and streets throughout the town. Tam opened the gates, slowly pushing them apart.

Outside, Anabel gave the order to attack and the five hundred free slaves

charged.

The fight was on. The Free Slave Army broke cover, emerging from a line of scrubby trees and bushes a furlong's distance from the town. As one, they attacked on swift legs across the uneven ground. Neither the water-filled ditches nor the tangle of flesh-shredding brambles that littered the expanse would stop them now.

By the time the army had covered that long span, Tam was the only man left standing from his original group. A nasty gash on his forehead was dripping bright blood down the side of his face, while around him lay twenty cadavers.

He was in mortal combat with four slavers and tiring quickly. He slipped and went down on one knee, disappearing from Anabel's view just as the army poured through the gates. They charged into the town of Briar, hacking down any who stopped to give fight.

The free slaves unleashed their fury on the men who had destroyed their lives, wiping them out in less than an hour's bloody fighting. After the hostilities had ended, Anabel was carried aloft on the shoulders of her victorious army to cries

of Lady Anabel! Lady Anabel!

There was shouting and rejoicing on every street of the town, even the normally timid townsfolk came out of their homes; overjoyed at their sudden and unexpected deliverance.

Anabel led a large group to the slave pens and personally smashed the lock on the gate. At first, the people inside stared blankly at the new arrivals. It took a little time to convince them that all was well and to allay their fears. But allayed they were to the rapturous sounds of cheering and tears of joy. Throughout all of this, Tam was still missing.

Anabel ordered a search of the town, but it was to no avail. It was still dark and there was much confusion in the furore at the battle's end.

Anabel took ownership of Grik's house since he had fled the battle, escaping sometime during the last stages of the fight.

It was late when Tam, unaware that he had been posted as missing, made his way there to report on the army's losses. With his brow covered by a makeshift bandage, he entered and found Anabel sitting beside a distraught old woman.

'My Lady,' he saluted. 'I've made a rough count of our casualties. I thought

you would want to know how—'

Anabel stood up and ran to him, throwing her arms around his neck and kissing him passionately. Tears openly flowed down her sodden cheeks.

'I'd thought you dead!' She sobbed into his neck.

Tam placed his arms around her and hugged her tight. 'No, my love,' he said, caressing her hair as he held her. 'I was delayed by the street fighting.'

'But we couldn't find you after the fight was won!'

'A few of the last hold-outs refused to go quietly. It took some time to convince them.' He tilted her head back and looked into her wet eyes for a long moment. Then he kissed her.

The old woman smiled. 'Now why can't my Fengrik find a nice girl like that?' she wondered aloud, then turned away and stared mindlessly out of the window.

Outside on the streets, the merry-making continued as the townsfolk of Briar enjoyed their first hours of freedom. The party lasted all night and a good portion of the next day as well, to the delight of all involved.

# 38 **Replacements**



GENERAL DROGO CHAEL led one thousand raw recruits along the Gallo to Eastgate road. The men were tired and dispirited after their arduous ten-day forced march from Kan-Ta, three hundred miles to the west. Dust blasted and exhausted, the procession trudged wearily forward in perpetual step. Bruised but unbent, the proud Jarrians continued forcing cramped and blistered legs and feet to the threshold of endurance and then far beyond in the name of king and country. The sporadic situational reports reaching Drogo from Eastgate did little to lift Chael's flagging spirits, however. The enemy had finally repaired Farrow Bridge and crossed the River E'Ben. The long-awaited offensive had started, and losses were high, as expected.

To the front of the column, in the far off distance ahead, plumes of black smoke billowed skyward like grotesque undulating pillars, Chael blanched at the sight.

Twisting downwards from low-lying clouds like the raking fingers of some giant celestial hand, these tapering harbingers of doom marked the road's end, carnage unleashed with solemn finality. Wagons, filled with wounded and dying men, passed by in an unending stream, heading in the opposite direction. They were making for the relative safety of the walled city of Gallo some twenty miles behind the lines. Many of those unfortunate men would not make it even that short distance. Burial parties dotted the road's verges, busily interring the discarded dead.

As soon as the hole was deemed large enough, the bodies were heaved in ten or twenty at a time, and then quickly covered over.

The general, riding imperiously at the head of the file, had seen it all before and sat impassively rigid upon his sauntering horse, whilst behind him the recruits eyes boggled and stomachs retched at the horrific scene, their first sight of death and mutilation beyond count.

Gone, in that instant of sobering clarity, were the drill sergeants depictions of heroic battle, replaced instead with shattering lucidity by the sombre realisation that life was a precious gift enwrapped in an all too fragile vessel.

For the common man and woman, war was fear, pain, broken dreams, and lost potential. They would soon find that out, most simply praying for the courage to face death with dignity— and above all else, to not let their comrades down when that terrifying test presented.

Ahead, trailing a cloud of brown dust, a rider came galloping at speed up the road. Skidding with dramatic flair to a sudden halt in front of the general, the young man saluted.

'Sir, I bring orders from General Braken! He requests that you come with all haste to the front!'

'What's the situation?'

'We still hold Eastgate, sir. But the last attack almost broke the line. We need

your men now!'

'Is the enemy attacking at present?'

'No, but they look to be massing again. The general feels another attack may be imminent.'

'Tell the general that I send my complements and that we will be on the field shortly.' 'Yes, sir!' The young dispatch rider saluted, wheeled his horse around,

and galloped at speed back in the direction from which he had come.

General Chael swiveled in his saddle and looked behind at his men. 'Men, I know we have come a long way already today, but needs must! Our comrades are hard-pressed and require our aid urgently! Forward, at the double!' He waved his arm in a wide arc over his head and pointed down the road towards Eastgate.

With the clinking chink of metal against metal, the long column of foot soldiers jogged after the general's trotting horse. It took twenty minutes to reach the bulwark, the replacements were immediately sent to bolster the centre of the line. Now, raw recruits were standing shoulder to shoulder with battered and bloodied veterans. Outside the walls, on the open plain, thousands of enemy soldiers lay dead. So closely packed were the fallen, that it was difficult to see the grass and dirt of the ground upon which they lay.

Hundreds of ladders and grapples littered the battlefield.

There too were burning siege engines and the smouldering husks of hidecovered battering rams. The air was a putrid mix of burning tar and scorched flesh.

It was a scene of utter devastation. Judging by the scale of loss alone, the replacements would have been forgiven for thinking that the war had been won, and that they had arrived too late to join in a famous victory. If that was indeed the case, then that false hope was quickly dashed. As across the bloodstained divide on the far side of the plain, wafting on the acrid breeze, came the rhythmic pulse of beating drums.

Marching shoulder to shoulder in tight well-drilled ranks, the eastern army stepped into view, the relentless host filling the land from horizon to horizon.

Blood drained from already pallid young faces at the formidable sight. Stomachs rebelled, bowels slackened, and bulging eyes gaped in fearful awe, at the eastern horde venturing forward as one. With swords unsheathed, the Jarrians stood unbowed, defiant. At last, the wicked test, long fret, was at hand. There would be no resit, no undoing. To pass meant life, and failure... death. As the defenders began praying to their deities of choice, the strangest thing happened, the enemy columns stopped moving. A lone rider broke free from their ranks, bearing a flag of truce. He rode towards the main gate and stopped.

A young Jarro cavalry officer rode out to meet him and the two conversed for the shortest time. The officer then galloped at great speed towards General Braken's pavilion, bearing a message. He then returned with the reply. The enemy rider nodded, wheeling his mount about.

On reaching his own ranks, he disappeared out of view.

Moments later, the news that there was going to be a day-long truce rippled up along the line of defenders. It was time to bury the dead; there would be no further fighting today.

As the Eastmen retired, their fluttering pennants dipping lower with each

retreating step, a rider came galloping along the Jarrian line, blowing a wellpracticed refrain upon his bugle, the signal to stand down. Chael left the recruits and made his way over to the commanding general's tent. There, General Braken was sitting at a folding table as Chael entered the canvas room.

He looked tired and old beyond his sixty-two years, a tray of half-eaten food had been pushed to one side. Braken stood and smiled as Chael walked in. 'Drodo! It's good to see you, my old friend,' he said, as they shook hands.

'How're Nellis and the children?'

'They're fine, Kolo. Thank you for asking. I sent them to her father's estate out on Jarrolan. Thought they would be safer out there.' Drogo had married late, and his wife was young. The children, a boy and girl, were both under ten years old.

'Good idea! Mind you, we may all be out there before long, the way things are going! Please, take a seat,' he said, indicating the spare seat before his desk.

Chael sat, crossed his legs, and rested his clasped hands on his rotund

stomach. 'How bad is it?' he asked.

'We're holding our own for the moment. They are taking heavy losses to our moderate. But the odds are heavily stacked against us. Simply put, they're wearing us down,' the old general said, as he sat down, his careworn face betraying the turmoil within. He had the haggard look of a man who hadn't slept properly in an awfully long time.

Chael pulled a pipe from his pocket and proceeded to fill the bowl with

tobacco. 'A matter of time, you say. How long do you estimate?'

'We lost eight hundred today. Not all dead of course, but may as well be if unable to fight. You came in the nick of time, Drogo.'

'How strong have the attacks been?' He asked, placing the pipe into his

mouth and offering the tobacco pouch to Braken.

Braken took the pouch and retrieved his own pipe. 'That's just it! They were just probing us for the first few days.' He picked out a wad of tobacco and filled up his pipe. 'Today was the first real assault. They came at us with everything they had.

'But you held, Kolo, you *held!*' Chael twisted a piece of paper into a tight

spiral and lit the end from Braken's desk lamp.

'Only just. I really thought they were through at one point. They managed to take a small section of the wall but were quickly beaten back. It was a close run,

Drogo,' he said, shaking his head. 'Too close.'

'Well, we've been through this sort of thing before, you and I.' Chael smiled, placing the lighting paper over the bowl of his pipe and drawing happily from the stem. 'And no doubt we'll go through it a few more times before this all ends.' He spoke without removing his lips from the pipe. 'They haven't beaten us yet, my friend! And if you don't mind, I think I'd like to keep it that way a little while longer,' he added, handing Braken the lighting paper. 'Now, where's that bottle of dwarf brandy you always keep tucked away for special occasions?'

Braken grinned. 'It's good to have you here, Drogo. The bottle's in the map drawer, top left,' he said, pointing towards a battered-looking chest of drawers standing against the wall. 'The glasses are in the compartment below.' He added,

placing the flaming parchment across the bowl of his pipe and inhaling.

CAPTAIN N'DHUN WAS inspecting the replacements, finding most were either very young or very old, all looked terrified. He passed along the walkway with a happy grin and a cheery word for each one, never-the-less, back-slapping and joking was exchanged in friendly banter. The veterans showed the new men what to do and explained what to expect when the battle was joined. In exchange, the new men gave out news from home. As night closed in, each man received a nip of rum to lift his spirits and stave off the cold; it was good for morale and helped fight infection.

By nightfall, most of the bodies outside had been carried away for burial, and Major Preem joined Aaron on the gangway. They stood looking out into the

darkness of the plain.

'It's a dark one tonight,' said Preem finally.

'I took the precaution of setting up listening posts,' said Aaron. 'I hope you approve, sir.'

'Well done. Pays to be cautious. How far out?' 'Three men every fifty paces for three hundred.'

'Good. That should be enough to give fair warning. Might be best to stagger shifts as well. Every second man, four hours apiece. Last thing we need is to be caught with our breeches down.'

'I'll pass the order along, sir.'

'Aaron...' Preem looked sombre. 'There's been news from home.'

'What news?'

'It's your sister. I'm afraid she's been kidnapped. She's been missing for some time now.'

Aaron's back stiffened. 'Missing...? How? What happened?'

'She was with Princess Megan somewhere near E'Ben when they were attacked. That's as much as I know.'

'Gods no!' Aaron punched the wooden palisade. 'I'll apply for leave!'

'Aaron! Keep your head, man! What possible good would that do? Time and distance are against you. Where would you even begin to look? And besides, a team of our best have already been dispatched. For all that we know, she may already be on her way home. I know it's hard, but you'll have to place your trust in the king, and in the men tasked with bringing them back home.'

Aaron looked forlorn. 'Who has been sent?' he asked after a long pause.

'Some of our very best... believe me,' Preem said, patting Aaron's shoulder, 'I know them personally. They're a tough, resourceful bunch.'

Aaron relaxed a little. 'I hope so. Hard as it is to bear, you're right about one thing,' he said, gritting his teeth. 'I wouldn't even know where to begin looking.'

'Of this be assured.' Preem grinned. 'Those responsible will not go unpunished. That I can guarantee. But, in the mean-time, if you still need to vent your spleen, just remember, there will be enemies aplenty clambering to get to your sword come the morn.'

Aaron grinned malevolently. 'Good... I'll be waiting!'

X

## 39 **Raw Fish**



MEGAN HAD ESCAPED INJURY when the dragon's ruptured heart stopped beating and his lifeless body finally crashed to earth. She awoke sometime after, cocooned within a leather bag firmly secured to the dead creature's back. Small birds chirped and sang as they swooped and soared overhead through the crisp morning air. Perplexed by the devastation manifested on the forest floor below, they dived and squawked in persistent call in a futile attempt at driving off the unwelcome interlopers. It took Megan the best part of an hour to finally get free from her rawhide prison. Taking a few unsteady steps away from the beast's carcass, she turned in a full circle in the vain hope of finding some hint of which direction she should take.

She was in the middle of a forest of tall spruce. As though manufactured to exacting specification by some unknown hand, each tree looked to be of identical shape and size to its surrounding neighbours. She scratched her head in frustration, for apart from the long gouge of broken trunks and snapped-off branches where the dragon had crashed to the ground, there was little in the way of a view through the close-packed boles.

She started walking in no particular direction, having decided that one course was as good as the next when completely lost. With the idea of putting as much distance as possible between herself and the dragon's body before nightfall; she fought her way through a myriad of flesh-reefing branches and ankle-twisting roots.

Still confused and disorientated, her last memories before waking in the forest were of Alsheer's menacing face as he entered the library at Arakur. The rest was a confused jumble of disjointed events. Alsheer's ominous black eyes, an outstretched hand, then darkness.

There was no recollection of the dragon or of how she had come to be placed in the bag upon its back. She had many questions, but few available answers.

The forest opened out, making for easier travel.

Now that she was away from the site of the crash, nature seemed more at ease, the forest looking pleasant in the bright rays of morning sunlight.

Birds were singing and squirrels chittering with carefree abandon as they went about their business heedless of the passing outsider. The air smelt warm and fresh, the sweet scent of pine-sap lingering like perfume wherever the sunbeams warmed the vast expanses of wood. If not for the events before, it could almost have been a leisurely walk in the Kan-Ta palace gardens. Megan inhaled nature's perfume, feeling calm and happy to be free of the darkspawn at last.

After walking for endless hours, she came upon a deserted cabin in a small clearing.

Weeds choked the footpath and surrounding space, a long time having passed since it was last touched by caring hands. Except for a dilapidated bed with a

soaked-through mattress, the cabin was empty. Dry wood sat in the fireplace and an abundant supply lay beside.

A little way into the forest, a small quick stream burbled and splashed over rounded stones and reed-covered rocks. Megan washed herself and filled a bucket to bring back to the hut. There was no food in the cabin, but she had

spied small fish gathering in a clear shallow pool.

After a couple of unproductive hours thrashing the water in a vain attempt to catch one, she hit upon a better solution. By tying discarded rope to the bucket handle, she was able to scoop a few small fish out of the shallows. It really wasn't much of a meal, she acknowledged to herself, but it was better than going

hungry.

The fire was an altogether tougher problem. She had seen how men could start a blaze by scraping flint and metal together to make sparks. The flint was beside the fireplace, together with a small piece of rusting metal. But no matter how many sparks she created, she was not able to get the fire to catch. It had looked so simple when she'd seen others doing it, but now found that it was one of the hardest things she had ever tried to do.

After three hours of constant scraping, she gave up, collapsing onto the ground on her back.

Turning her head, she looked hungrily at the three dead fish.

Raw fish, she decided, was better than no fish at all. Her first bites of the oily flesh made her gag a little, but hunger pushed her on, and soon there was nothing left but the bones.

Sitting back against the wall of the hut, she glanced around the single-roomed hovel. There really wasn't much to see apart from the mouldy bed. The walls, floor, and roof were constructed of hand-cut pine planks, taken, she had no doubt, from the ample supply of trees surrounding the clearing. She ended her quick inspection back at the dark fireplace, and suddenly noticed a small trickle of smoke issuing from the twigs.

She rushed over and blew gently, as she had often observed the maids in the palace doing, on the smoky wood. A flame caught, and the wood began to crackle.

Placing extra small twigs on top helped the flames to quickly spread.

She sat back and smiled, feeling quite proud of herself. Time will always flit illusively by for the contented mind. Megan lounged for hours, just watching the orange-yellow flames dancing in the grate. It was already late evening, and the sun was beginning to dip below the horizon.

She sat enjoying the warmth of the fire that she had created.

Thus far, fortune had been kind. She had found shelter and warmth, and her belly was full.

Well... full-ish. Not bad for a young princess alone in an unknown forest, she thought.

Lying back on the dusty floor, she allowed her eyelids to drift slowly down, as the fire radiated heat that warmed her through. It wasn't long before sleep took her back on a weightless dream to the palace gardens of Kan-Ta.

All the while, shadows lengthened, and night's dark cloak swept slowly in.

IN THE DARKNESS OF the forest, a creature of mal-intent stirred and sniffed the air, a whiff of smoke tinged the breeze. It could only mean one of two things. A forest fire, but there hasn't been one in more than fifty years... or a campfire! The beast decided there was too little smoke for a forest fire, but just the right amount for a campfire. It drew back its lips into a knowing grin, causing saliva to drip unchecked over its yellow rancid teeth. A campfire meant there was a human. And a human meant a tasty supper was waiting to be claimed and devoured.

She cackled softly to herself as she picked her way through the shrubs of the forest floor, the wispy strands of grey on her almost bald head fluttering in the soft breeze.

Ahead she saw the outline of the hunter's cabin. She remembered him, a fine strong man. She had used him for a time in her youth to staunch her lust, finding him masterful and virile. He had endured weeks of agony before the killing blow and final release.

She laughed again at the memories revived, at his bright blue eyes so soft and chewy. His marrow so sweet. The hag pushed the bushes apart and stepped into the opening.

The door was closed, but warm light flickered in the window. She carefully pressed her face to the glass. There was a young woman lying asleep on the floor.

She smiled; it was almost too easy. If she hadn't already gorged, she would have butchered the sleeping form where it lay. But a better plan came to mind.

The hag went to the door and pulled back the latch.

The door creaked as it opened, Megan stirred at the sound and sat up. A dark hunched figure stood framed in deepest shadow. Megan wiped the sleep from her eyes, and when she looked again, the shadow seemed to have gotten taller.

A middle-aged woman with raven-black hair stood proudly in the doorframe, her features illuminated by the light from the fire. She was clear-skinned and handsome, after a fashion.

'Well, what do we have here?' the woman cooed.

Megan sprang to her feet in shock. 'I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to trespass—'

'Trespass?' the woman said and laughed. 'You're not trespassing, dear! This old shack's laid empty for many a long year! What brings you all the way out here, and all alone?'

'I'm lost.' Megan remained cautious and unwilling to elaborate.

'Good an' proper lost by the looks of it. Well, you can't stay in this damp hovel! Best be coming back to my place 'til we can sort out what's best to do with you, eh?'

'Thank you. You are most kind. I hope it's not an inconvenience.'

'Not at all, my fine girl. And I bet you haven't eaten proper either, have you? Well, I've a stew on the boil that'll remedy that little problem. And in the morn, we can tackle the bigger ones. How's that sound?'

'Mighty good. My name is Megan.' She smiled with relief.

'Pleased to make your acquaintance, Megan. I'm Silvene.' She said, placing a comforting arm around Megan and leading her out of the door and along an overgrown track leading into the forest.

Silvene led Megan for what seemed like miles through the darkness.

At last, they came to an oddly shaped cottage with a rickety old round tower just behind. Megan felt a cold chill run up her spine, the same chill she felt whenever she had entered the haunted wing of the palace. That same feeling of dread. That intangible feeling that danger was at hand, making the hairs on her nape prickle. She shivered unconsciously though the night was warm.

'You're perished to the core, you poor thing,' Silvene said rubbing Megan's

shoulders to warm her up. 'Let's get you inside, my dear... for a bite!'

#### 40

### A Party in Briar



'MOVE YOURSELVES! THIS isn't a jog to the inn! Faster! Faster!' screamed Rat, kicking out at one of the stragglers' backsides.

Rat was supervising the daily exercises with a group of new recruits. It consisted of ten laps of the town perimeter followed by an hour of aerobics. Lom was busy teaching hand-to-hand combat with a second group while Tam was giving crossbow and sword instruction to a third. Briar was a hive of activity. In the two weeks that had passed since taking the town from Grik and his slavers, the Free Slave Army had grown to over four thousand.

The almost three thousand initially freed from the pens at Briar were being added to on a daily basis by a constant stream of new arrivals and volunteers.

News of the rising was spreading fast, and a continuous flow of men and women were arriving at the town's gates to join in the fight. The town was on full war alert.

All supplies were confiscated by the new administration, and promissory notes issued to the grumbling store owners and farmers for them to be paid when victory was assured.

Road-side forges manufactured basic weapons and armour, and defensive ditches had been excavated around the length of the town's perimeter.

Anabel looked after the logistics, making sure the operation worked as effortlessly as possible. Merrith was always by her side, helping in any way she could

Tam was the first to notice the returning patrol. They came over the last rise to the east at full tilt, sweat lathering their horses 'necks and sides. The three men stopped momentarily at the outer defence ditch but were quickly passed through by the sentries and made straight for Tam's training area. They pulled up in a cloud of dust and assorted debris.

The lead man's chest heaved as his lungs laboured for breath. 'Beg,' he gasped. 'Beg to report, sir!'

'Report!' ordered Tam, throwing a worried glance towards the other two similarly exhausted riders.

'They're comin', sir!'

'Who's coming?'

'It's Grik. I'd recognise his big mutton head from a mile away.' He grinned. 'An' he's brought every slaver in Ash with him by the looks of it.'

'How many men does he have?'

'Over two thousand.'

'Nearer three,' offered one of the other men.

The first nodded in agreement. 'Could be as high as that.'

'Where are they now?'

'No more 'an a couple of miles by now.'

Tam thought for a moment. 'Okay, well done. Water your horses and return to

your companies.'

The patrol saluted and left.

Tam ran to Anabel's headquarters and burst in through the door. 'The slavers from Ash are coming in force! Grik is leading!'

Anabel stood. She had been sitting at a table, writing orders for the army kitchens to organise food for all of the new arrivals. 'How long before they get here?'

'They'll be here in an hour. Two at the most.'

It took thirty minutes to organise the army, the palisade was filled to overflow with a thousand archers. Pike, sword, and axe men formed up between the outer defence ditches and the town wall. Stakes were driven into the ground just in front of the pikemen and sharpened to help break up the attacking force. Wearing silver chain mail armour specially adjusted to fit her small frame, Anabel walked up and down the line. Carrying a short sword in one hand, she stood before her frightened inexperienced army. 'Friends!' she shouted. The army fell silent.

'You know why we are here today. I don't need to remind you of what those men have done to you, your loved ones, friends and neighbours, in the past,' she said, pointing east towards the approaching slaver army. 'Take heart for the day of your retribution is at hand. We stand here shoulder to shoulder in defiance and shout, never again! Never again! Come to our swords now so that judgment may be pronounced! The people have risen, and justice will be done! To the vile and corrupt, we say hearken to our cry and feel great fear. We stand unafraid. Harbingers of death!' she roared.

The army threw their arms up and chanted as one, 'Death! Death!' They jabbed the air with their weapons as the lines of mounted slavers rode slowly into view.

The slavers were a mixed bag. Grik had gathered every slaver, bully, and sword-for-hire within ten miles of Ash. Over-confident and eager for blood, they made a rough line two hundred horses wide and fifteen deep. Once ready, and with little regard for the forces aligned against them, they charged. There was no cohesion to the throng. They simply came forward in one unwieldy mass, thundering across the open space, screaming wildly in manic joy.

The defenders continued to chant, jabbing the air with their weapons, as the horses quickly crossed the divide. The riders didn't see the defence ditch until it was too late.

Some tried to pull up on spying the sharp stakes lining the bottom, causing those behind to crash into their backs. Tam looked over his shoulder to the archers lining the palisade.

'Loose! Reload! Loose!' he barked.

The first volley overshot the quickly moving horses, but the second caused havoc in their tightly packed ranks. Men and horses screamed as arrow points found unprotected flesh.

Grik broke through with a large group of his men in the centre of the line.

Pikemen lowered pikes and spears, and advanced. The horses trampled and kicked, and the slavers hacked with sword and axe, devastating the inexperienced newly-trained troops who cracked and ran under Grik's ferocious attack. Another volley of arrows thinned the slavers' ranks farther on the eastern

approach to the town, but close up, they were gaining momentum.

Tam was in the second defence line and quickly recognised the danger, stepping forward and turning to face his men. Terror-stricken, they stood unmoving with bulging eyes and mouths agape, horrified by the slaughter taking place.

They were close to running. If they did, Tam knew, it would be the end.

'Remember!' he roared. 'Remember what you have suffered at their hands!'

There was a short silence, then one man roared in defiance and ran forward towards the oncoming horses. When others saw him charge, a great shout went up.

The terrible fear immobilising the free slaves lifted, and the Free Slave Army attacked, synching into Grik and his men with immeasurable venom, unleashing their anger in a frenzy and making the astonished slavers recoil in shock. Grik managed to fight his way out of the centre of the melee and fled the field, followed by the remainder of his force.

A last volley of arrows flew from the walls of the town at their retreating backs, killing and maiming still more. The free slaves danced and shouted as their one-time tormentors ran away, leaving hundreds of their dead and wounded scattered across the field.

In a matter of minutes, it was all over, and the battle won.

Anabel turned to Tam. 'Give the order... no prisoners.' Tam looked a little startled. 'The wounded...?'

'Our resources will not stretch to tending the enemy fallen. Kill them!'

'As you wish,' Tam said, looking troubled.

Anabel saw Tam's indecision. 'Would you have us make them well so that they can continue their villainy at a later date?'

'It's just... Well... We should be above this.'

Anabel looked at Tam with tenderness in her eyes. 'Tam, we're at war. We must fashion these people—farmers, shopkeepers, ex-slaves—into iron. Without that strength, we are lost as we very nearly were. It's time to put aside any pretence to humanity. They can return to it when the fight is won.'

Tam nodded. 'I'll see to it.'

Anabel placed her hand on his arm as he went to leave. 'Our enemies will hear of this and fear us all the more. It's a weapon. And we will use every weapon at our disposal to win this fight. By this small evil, my love, a greater good may be served.'

Tam smiled. 'I've heard similar words before. You're beginning to sound more and more like your father as time goes on,' he said, placing his hand over hers. 'You're right. I'm not overjoyed by the prospect, but I'll see to it.' He walked off gathering some of the officers to him as he went.

Anabel's stomach turned, and her knees suddenly felt as though they were going to buckle.

Merrith came running up, carrying a bloody sword and with a small gash on her shoulder. 'We did it! I can't believe we did it!' she whooped.

Merrith was supposed to stay by Lom's side and out of harm's way during the battle, according to Anabel's orders. But it was obvious from her dishevelled appearance that the young woman had also seen some of the fighting. 'I got one!

The big lummox was so shocked when I threw myself at him, screaming like a maniac!'

'How did that happen?' Anabel looked a little cross. 'I told you to stay with

Lom, and away from the fighting, Merrith!'

'I did... well, at first. But there was so much going on, we sort of lost track of each other. Next thing I know, I'm screaming and running with all the rest when the slavers almost got through. It was... amazing, Anabel! I was so frightened, but so angry! I wanted to kill them all, and didn't care if I had to do it all by myself!'

'Well, I think we've had just about enough blood-lust for one day.' Anabel frowned. 'I don't know about you, but I need a wash.'

'Oh, that sounds good,' agreed Merrith, seeing the blood and dirt on her arms and torso.

As the two women began walking back towards the main gate, a crowd quickly gathered and cheered as they approached. Two strong men lifted Anabel up and everyone called her name. The chant of 'Queen Anabel!' was soon echoing throughout the town much to the delight of the throng. There was no stopping them; no matter how much Anabel protested, they insisted on calling her Queen Anabel, the first queen of Gantu.

The procession continued around the whole town, getting larger and larger as people ran to join in the celebration. Food and ale appeared, as a party atmosphere ensued.

Anabel never did reach her bath that night.

It was late when she finally managed to collapse onto her bed, mentally and physically exhausted, while outside on the streets of Briar, the party continued into the small hours.

# 41 Fog of War

IT WAS A COLD DAWN, a blanket of thick white fog came rolling in ominous flow across the scarred and pitted battlefield towards the Jarrian defences at Eastgate. Deep and impenetrable, the heavy mist obscured flora and foe alike in its suffocating embrace. Preem scanned the horizon but could see little beyond the first few paces of the fast-encroaching shroud.

At his side, Aaron shivered, stamped, and blew through his hands. 'Weather's

changing,' the young officer remarked.

Preem did not reply, his eyes fixed on the horizon. There had been a lull in the fighting for two days, and he felt uneasy. 'Did you double the guard?' This was the third time since midnight that Preem had asked.

'Yes, sir, as ordered,' replied Aaron patiently.

The fog was billowing and turning as it rolled inexorably towards them. 'Notice anything odd about that?' Preem nodded in the direction of the fog.

Aaron looked out across the plain. 'No, sir. Just looks like normal fog to me.'

'Then why does it make me itch?' asked Preem.

'That's probably just the lice.' Aaron grinned.

Preem gave a half smile. 'No. It's a different sort of itch, the sort that makes you turn and check over your shoulder down a deserted backstreet.'

'Oh... I see.' Aaron took a closer look at the fog and shrugged. 'Looks pretty standard,' he added. 'White, fluffy, billowing, fast moving.'

'What did you say?' asked Preem.

'White and fluffy?'

'No after that.'

'Billowing?'

'Keep going,' he growled.

'Fast moving?' Aaron shrugged.

'That's the one! Now look at the flags along the wall.'

Aaron looked at the flags hanging limply against their poles along the bulwark. 'There's no wind!' he finally exclaimed.

'Not a breath. So, what's moving that?' Preem pointed at the wall of white now half way across the plain.

Aaron looked from Preem to the fog and back again. 'Orders, sir?'

'Wake the men... but do it quietly!' he warned. 'Pass the word up the line to stand to.'

Aaron saluted. 'Yes, sir!' he said in a loud, clear voice as he turned away.

'Captain!' hissed Preem.

'Sir?' Aaron spun on his heel. 'Quietly!' whispered Preem.

Aaron nodded and went along the line, shaking the men awake, informing the other officers of the need to stand to. Inside five minutes, the whole command was awake and standing ready.

General Chael arrived beside Preem and peered out into the fog. 'What is it, Ben?'

'Don't like the look of it, sir. There's no wind, but that fog is breaking all

sorts of records getting over here.'

'Good point. Damnation!' he swore. 'I hate fog! It can be your friend in the morning and your enemy by noon. Of course, it's no use to us in this fixed position. The enemy knows exactly where we are but the courtesy's not returned. Damnation! I'll send for the mages who arrived from Kan-Ta yesterday. Perhaps they can do something to lift this confounded veil.'

Preem saluted as the general went off to organize the wizards. The fog was almost touching Eastgate's wall by the time they arrived on the battlements.

Using enchantments, they summoned a gentle breeze to push back the white haze, and at first, the plan worked. The fog began to retreat but then, quite suddenly, it stopped moving. The Jarrian wizards looked to be struggling. Sweat streaked down their brows and their arms trembled as though straining against some vast invisible weight.

Preem turned to the nearest adept. 'What's happening?'

The wizard was grunting under the strain. 'Someone is trying to stop us. Our efforts are being deflected.' He grimaced as he fought against the unseen force.

The struggle went on for long minutes. As the fog moved closer to the battlements, Preem noticed an acrid smell to it. 'It's smoke!' he exclaimed.

Just as the smoke threatened to overflow the palisade, it began dissipating, the Jarrian mages were winning the struggle against their hidden adversaries.

As the veil thinned, the defenders could finally make out the lines of approaching enemy soldiers.

They were already half way across the Eastgate plain when the concealing smoke lifted.

Out in front of the troops were large cauldrons billowing white smoke atop open-backed wagons drawn by teams of shaggy-maned work horses. Black-armoured Anvar regulars tramped the centre ground, their long dark spears held rigidly aloft, bristling in the morning light like a multitude of slender flame-blackened trunks in a fire-ravaged forest.

Flanking the Anvars, on either side, marched the soldiers of the east. Wearing white linen armour, and matching white turbans, their light apparel was in stark contrast to that worn by their heavily armoured allies. For weapons, they carried round wooden shields overlaid with ornately decorated brass plate, and curved scimitar swords. To the rear of the advancing mass of foot troops, regiments of cavalry, both horse and camel, loped in casual step.

Spread evenly through the vast approaching horde, five wooden towers lumbered across the uneven surface in lurching jolts. Fitted with wheels, they moved in tandem with the army, each trundling monolith, pulled along by its own retinue of fifty broad-backed men.

From a distance, they closely resembled siege weapons, but as they neared the Jarrian defence line it became apparent they were more akin to enormous pulpits.

Wooden stairs led up to a three-sided box, and in each pulpit stood a man wearing black robes with hands extended: Al-Imri's darkspawn warlocks.

The last of the smoke cleared; the ruse had failed.

The Anvar war drums thundered into life, quickly followed by the wailing cry of shrieking horns and clashing cymbals. The clamour was deafening, striking

fear into the hearts of those men hearing it for the first time.

The Eastern Host had assembled for battle. As one, they moved forward, flying flags of all shapes and sizes in step with the terrible thump of their drums. The darkspawn mages high up in their platform roosts were unleashing lightning bolts and fireballs. The stone and wood of the bulwark cracked and burnt as it erupted skyward in burgeoning clouds of smoke and flame. Men thrown backwards ablaze, flying through the air like human incendiaries, came crashing to the ground as blackened unrecognisable husks of ash. After a moment's confused pause, the Jarrian wizards reciprocated. White hot arcs of death streaked down from outstretched hands, ripping through the ranks of advancing troops with flesh-scorching hellfire. The wizards gave vent to their fury and cut jagged flaming lines though the neatly formed rows of advancing men. Screaming figures, engulfed in flame, lay writhing on the ground in unbridled agony. Some ran a few short steps before collapsing and dying in a ball of flame and

smoke, their once pliant flesh now hard as cinder on bodies burnt to blackened crisp.

But the enemy came ever forward, their lines remade anew, replaced by a

seemingly inexhaustible supply of men.

The defenders' arrows filled the sky with their opening volley, at first arching up, and inevitably down. The razor-sharp barbs sliced through light armour with relative ease, finding holes and gaps where none would have thought to look, rending flesh and smashing bone.

Hundreds lay dead or dying, their white robes now stained red.

The black-robed darkspawn mages, out of range of the deathly rain, unleashed a second fusillade of red fireballs into the defending troops waiting along the bulwark gantry.

Again, flaming bodies flew skyward in violent instant death. Wood splintered

and stone cracked as before.

Streams of blood covered the walkways, and veterans grabbed panicky raw recruits, forcing them to stand before the onslaught. A second volley of arrows from the defenders killed two of the lightly armoured Eastmen for every one of the heavily armoured Anvars.

This price of passage, paid for in pain and blood, was readily accepted with implacable zeal. It was indeed a high price but for good reason.

Now, at last, the Eastmen were close enough to use their small curved bows and slings.

A thousand arrows arched through the air towards Eastgate, men ducked and hid behind shield and overhang, behind wall and door. They screamed and fell in pain and anger, some taking multiple hits, turning first left and right as more arrows found their mark, others killed outright via a single lucky shot to the face or neck.

Acrid black smoke rising from burning wood and flaming flesh drifted down the length of the wall, then the Jarro archers let fly a third volley.

The Eastmen saw the sky darken, and their hearts fell, their light armour offering little protection against those heavy shafts.

They stopped and cowered beneath small shields of little use.

By the time the order came to attack, their numbers had reduced by half. The rush for the wall was supported by arrow and sling. Ladder-men were prime targets for the defenders.

Few of the originals made it as far as the wall, but there were always replacements willing to fill the boots of the dead. Chain-link grapples, another favourite of the east, seemed to be carried by every second man leading the assault.

They offered little hope of defence for the user upon reaching the top but were useful for getting extra troops up onto a wall once a bridgehead had been won.

With the heavy ladders in place, the battle was joined, hundreds of men scrambling up the roughly hewn steps, killing and dying in a bloodlust frenzy on reaching the top.

Boiling oil and pitch were poured from above onto the milling host and again,

the flames rose high, roasting all in the ensuing inferno.

All, that is, but for one section near the main gates. Fearing they would set the wooden gates alight, the defenders had left a gap. The enemy troops seized upon the chink and more ladders were produced and thrust against this weak point. Two large handheld rams appeared through the melee and were put to work, beating a rhythmic tattoo against the wooden doors.

Inside the Eastgate wall, men scrambled to strengthen the creaking timbers by thrusting heavy wooden beams upright against the doors to brace them against the blows.

Meanwhile, overhead on the gantry above the doorway arch, others fought to stem a tidal wave of bodies pouring up ladders in unending flow.

In the midst of tangled bodies and severed limbs, on the gantry way, a small knot of Anvars were gaining ground. Preem led ten of his men onto the breach, arriving just as the semi-circle of the heavy infantrymen were threatening to form a bridgehead.

Preem knew if they gained a foothold, all would be lost.

He crashed headlong into a giant Anvar soldier, sending him crashing back into three of his comrades. Two were knocked backwards over the wall and fell to their deaths, impaled on the spears of their comrades mustering below.

A gap had opened in the defensive ring, allowing the Jarrians to pour in. Hacking and slashing, they beat the enemy soldiers back into a tight semi-circle.

Preem was locked in a battle of strength on the ground with the enormous man he had toppled. The Anvar's biceps were almost as large at Preem's thigh muscles.

He grabbed Preem by the throat and squeezed, cutting off his air. Close to passing out beneath the giant's crushing grip, his strength ebbing fast, Preem groped with his free hand for a weapon that he could use. His fingers touched something cold. He grabbed hold and swung with his last reserves, catching the man across the face with a severed arm.

Blood exploded from the big man's broken nose, and he fell back holding his

face. Preem kicked out with both legs and caught the Anvar under the chin. A crack sounded as his head smashed against the stone of the wall, and he slumped to the ground unmoving.

The Pathfinder jumped up and retrieved his fallen sword. There were only five Anvars left alive on the rampart. They died quickly, their ladders soon pushed away as a triumphant cheer erupted from the defenders. Arrow and stone

peppered the bulwark in angry riposte.

Preem staggered backwards clutching his chest and the stem of the shaft embedded there. Strength drained from his body and pain filled the void. The world began to spin. His eyes rolled in their sockets as he collapsed, unconscious, onto the bodies of the fallen.

The boisterous cheering faded as the ladders quickly returned.

Below, in the archway, the great door was weakening, the timbers starting to separate, as gaps momentarily appeared with every blow of the ram's head.

The large oaken gate was the only section of the Eastgate bulwark not aflame.

'They have us in a twist, Kolo.' General Chael came walking towards General Braken through the smoke.

'It's not good, Drogo,' agreed Braken.

'What do you want to do now?' asked Chael.

'I'm open to suggestions. A miracle would be welcome.'

'Can't help you there, my friend.' Chael smiled. 'Used up all my miracles years ago.'

Braken grinned and looked back at the weakening door, seeing his men still feverishly working to brace it against the battering rams. 'Take half of the army. I'll hold here for as long as I can. Retreat to Gallo. Its walls are broad and will provide good defence.'

'You won't stand a chance once that door gives. You know that!' warned Chael.

Braken looked at his old friend and smiled.

'When you tell the king, make me sound like a hero of old.'

Chael sighed heavily. 'Goodbye, my friend,' he said, holding out his hand.

Braken clasped it. 'I hope you get back to Nellis and the kids, Drogo.'

'Thanks, Kolo.' He squeezed his friend's hand tightly. 'I'll be doing my damnedest, old friend.'

'Good. Now get out of here before I have you court-martialed!'

Chael nodded, took a few steps away, then stopped and turned. 'Kolo!' he called after the retreating general. 'You *are*'—he nodded—'just like a hero of old. And I've been proud to call you friend.' He turned away and disappeared back into the smoke.

Archers peppered the Eastmen with arrows from the palisade. It was impossible to miss in the crush at the gate as thousands of Anvar and eastern soldiers gathered, waiting for the moment the door would shatter. The thunderous pounding getting louder with each swing of the heavy rams, General Braken lined up his heavy troops, pike and axe men, at the door.

They would hold to the last man, giving the archers as much time as possible to kill as many of the enemy as they could from the ramparts above. The archers would hold the upper level and Braken would hold the gate.

There was a loud crack as one of the large iron hinges supporting the door broke free from its mooring, chunks of stone flying left and right from the ferocity of the blow.

A second hinge shattered, and the door crumpled inwards. The two armies met in a savage crush in the arch of the doorway, bodies heaping high as no quarter was given or asked.

The fight lasted for one whole murderous day.

By the end, Braken and all of his men lay dead. Eastgate was awash with blood and broken bodies, thousands lying dead or dying in the mud. An eerie silence descended. Come nightfall, Al-Imri walked the battlefield, counting the high cost of victory. Eastgate had fallen, and Jarro was at his mercy. But the victory was bittersweet. He had lost half of his army to attain it.

#### 42

#### Free at Last



THE RATIO WAS ALMOST four to one in favour of the Free Slave Army. For the six hundred lost, over two thousand slavers lay dead, an incredible victory. The celebrations had lasted for the best part of two days, after which Anabel decided something had to be done about burying the thousands of bodies. Most ended up being thrown into the defence ditch and covered over.

The dead horses were dragged together, as best they could, and burnt. Black

smoke filled the air all around Briar.

The army rested for a week, tending wounds and mending armour; training continued for new arrivals. By the end of the week, they had replenished their losses and, thanks to the dead slavers, most now had a horse and new weapons. Only those with battle experience were allowed to take part in the push towards Ash. Anabel and Tam led the column with Merrith and Lom just behind. Rat had remained in Briar to continue training the recruits and to help defend the town. As they approached Ash, Anabel decided to split the army.

Merrith and Lom would take five hundred and circle around to the east to block off any attempts at escape. The bulk of the army, for the assault, would

stay with Anabel.

It didn't take long for them to get into position. Ladders and ropes were placed to the front and a large tree was cut down to make a battering ram.

'The army is ready, Your Highness.' Minda Grendar, a captain recently

promoted after the battle of Briar, saluted.

Anabel squirmed in her saddle, ill at ease with her new title.

Tam saw her discomfort, his lips betraying a coy smile. 'With your permission, Highness— he bowed—'I will make preparations for the assault.'

Anabel flushed, but remained stoic. 'Very well, General. Carry on.'

Now it was Tam's turn to squirm at his sudden promotion. He nodded awkwardly and saluted before heading off down the line.

Anabel smiled as he left. 'Can't take your own medicine can you, mister?' she

said, suppressing a laugh.

The town walls were constructed of wooden logs just like those at Briar, and just as poorly maintained. Slavers lined the parapets. One, much larger than the rest, boasted a thick black beard.

Two hours had passed since Merrith and Lom had left. Anabel decided it was time enough for them to get into position. Dismounting from her horse, she walked to the front of the army, and drawing her sword, she turned to face them. 'You have enjoyed the delights of breathing free air! And decidedly sweet it is!' She said, nodding. 'Inside that town'—she pointed at Ash with her sword tip—'five thousand men, women, and children lie shackled, beaten, and abused! 'Five thousand brothers and sisters of ours, penned like cattle ready for mart! You know what that is like! You know that pain! You know that humiliation! Today, we put an end to this scourge, this abomination, forever!'

The army cheered and chanted, 'Death! Death!' They jabbed the air as they had during the battle of Briar.

Inside the town, the slavers shriveled. Some tried to leave the ramparts, but Grik roared and cut one down with a swipe of his sword. 'Anyone else moving off this podium gets the same!'

The slavers reluctantly returned to their posts.

Tam lowered his sword and the army rushed forward. Arrows peppered the ground, and many fell, but regardless, the wall was reached. They thrust ladders against the sides of the palisade and eager soldiers rushed up. The gate was battered by the ram, breaking apart after only a few short swings. The slavers ran in panic, leaving their posts in droves. Grik fled down the main street. The fight quickly degenerated into a series of quick skirmishes.

The slavers were beaten back by the sheer ferocity of the attack.

The erstwhile victims unleashed pent-up unbridled venom on their tormentors that simply could not be matched by the demoralised slavers.

Many simply mounted their horses and fled via the lesser gate to the east of the town, Grik among them. They ran blindly into Merrith and Lom's detachment and most were killed. Grik managed to get away, but his horse was wounded and died not far from the trap.

Merrith sent her soldiers out to search for him.

'Let him go. He can't do much on his own,' said Lom. He and Merrith had become separated from the rest of their soldiers up a wind burnt ravine.

'You don't understand, Lom. I have to see him dead.'

'He won't last long afoot. Let the buzzards and snakes have him.'

Merrith pushed ahead. 'I'd never sleep soundly again if I thought he'd escaped. Him, above all the rest,' she said, scowling.

The ravine wound around first left, then right.

Scrubby bush and scrawny trees lined the walls with loose rocks all along its floor. The horses could go no farther through the dense prickle-bushes, so they dismounted and walked.

Merrith was the first to see the fresh drops of blood spattered across a rock and pointed them out to Lom. They both drew weapons and continued carefully.

As they slipped through some particularly thick undergrowth, they were suddenly caught in a rockslide, boulders and large stones came crashing down all around them.

Lom managed to protect Merrith with his large frame by shielding her from the worst of the slide. By the time it had stopped, Lom was half buried, and Merrith slipped out from beneath his great bulk.

'Is he dead?' came a voice from overhead.

Grik was standing on a large boulder looking down on them.

Lom's face ran with blood from a wound on the top of his head. His eyes were closed and his body limp. Merrith gingerly stood, covered in dust. She didn't answer.

Grik grinned and scratched his beard, a ragged gash on his forehead was caked in dried blood. 'Missed me, did ya? That why you come lookin' for me?'

He jumped down and walked towards Merrith.

She took a step backwards. 'There are two horses at the entrance of the

ravine. Take one and go.'

'Let's not be so rash, my pretty. Two horses, you say? You know, I have to admit since you went, them others just never fired me blood like you. Me bed's not been the same since.'

He leaned forward and grabbed Merrith's arm, pulling her close. 'I think you missed me too even if you won't admit it. You like a man who knows what he wants, and takes it.'

He kissed her roughly.

Merrith squealed in disgust as terrible memories came flooding back.

Grik threw his head back and laughed, then grunted and looked down, seeing the hilt of a knife protruding from his belly. He looked at Merrith, his mouth opened, but no words came out.

Merrith stepped back, away from him.

He tried to follow but the strength left his legs and he crumpled to his knees.

Merrith's face was filled with fury. 'Never again will you put your filthy hands on me or any other woman, you pig!' She grabbed hold of the hilt of the knife protruding from Grik's stomach and pulled it free. Grik grunted and tried to stem the flow of blood with his hands.

But Merrith slashed the knife across Grik's face from chin to brow, causing his left eyeball to implode. The big slaver shuddered once and slowly toppled backwards, sending a plume of dust flying skyward as his limp body slipped over the edge of a weed-filled crevice and disappeared from view. Merrith dropped to her knees and cried.

Behind her, Lom groaned and moved. His eyes fluttered open. Merrith scrambled to his side and wiped the dust from his face.

Lom smiled weakly. 'You okay?'

Merrith leaned down and kissed his forehead. 'I'm better than okay,' she said, smiling happily into his face. 'I'm free.'

#### 43

#### **Retreat**



GENERAL CHAEL STOOD at the window of his quarters in the ministerial district of Gallo. From here, he could see the whole of the metropolis, but more importantly, the walls and beyond.

Gallo was only a couple of scant days' hard walk from Eastgate, and a next obvious target for Al-Imri. Despair gripped the hearts of the demoralised

defenders.

Most had been at Eastgate and knew what was coming. The rest could sense the air of doom and were equally downcast. Chael turned to face his three senior officers. He looked relaxed and at ease. He held a folded piece of paper.

'Gentlemen, why so gloomy? The plan worked perfectly.'

There were confused looks on the faces of the three officers. 'Which plan was that, sir?' asked Major Heranno.

'The plan to hold Eastgate for at least one month to give the king the time to

train and equip a new army.'

Chael smiled through the lie. His face looked calm and happy, a trick long mastered.

'Forgive me, sir, but we've heard of no such plan,' said Captain Frombs.

'Well, that's not surprising, Captain. It was strictly secret. As a key ingredient in duping the enemy and catching him off-guard, secrecy, you will understand, was essential. Only a handful were informed.' Chael held up the folded parchment. 'I have just received word that the king is almost ready. He just needs us to hold here for two to three weeks at the most. Then he will sweep up from Kan-Ta and attack the Eastmen from the south, catching them completely unawares.' Chael laughed loudly.

'This is fantastic news, sir!' Captain Grimt said excitedly, taking a small step forward.

'But, sir,' interrupted Frombs, 'the city's defences are in a very poor state. The wall has long been in need of upgrading, and many of the catapults are in dire need of repair,' he said, pointing out of the window.

'Something you will rectify over the coming days, I'm sure, Major Frombs.'

'Beg pardon, sir... I'm only a captain.'

'Not any more. The king is aware of your sterling work. Both in the defence at Eastgate and the retreat to Gallo.' Chael looked into each man's face in turn. 'Therefore, you are all promoted one rank. Congratulations, gentlemen, on a job well done!'

The three men looked at each other in shock, clearly happy. Chests automatically rose and shoulders squared in response.

'I will see to the repairs personally, sir.' Frombs beamed.

'Gentlemen, we have a lot of work to do to get ready for this coming fight. The king needs time, and we are going to make sure that he gets it. Also, we need officers, so promotions are the order of the day. Lieutenants to captains,

sergeants to lieutenants, etcetera. I will leave the details to you.'

'Should we keep the news of the king's plan from the men, sir?' asked Heranno.

'No. The time for secrecy has passed. Let them know what they're fighting for, Colonel.

It'll put fire in their bellies.'

'Yes, sir!' Heranno grinned.

'I want all repairs concluded by tomorrow morning, gentlemen. Can I count on you?'

The three officers jumped to attention and saluted. 'Yes, sir!'

Chael returned the salute and smiled. 'Now if you will kindly excuse me, I'm going to sit here and enjoy a hearty breakfast. Colonel Heranno, I place you second-in-command. I expect an hourly report. Thank you, gentlemen; you are dismissed.'

The three men turned and left the room, clearly enthused by the general's news. Chael smiled until the door closed behind them. His smile faded, and he walked over to the fireplace. The orders were still in his hand. He opened them and read once more.

Most loyal friend,

We have had news of our most grievous defeat at Eastgate. The terrible loss of life lies heavy upon me.

Defend Gallo to the best of your ability, or negotiate the city's surrender. I leave that decision in your capable hands. You may save some by means of the latter.

I have decided that my place is here in the capital, and it is here that I shall breathe my last.

Thank you for your years of loyalty and service.

May the gods help us all.

Fredrik, King of Jarro.

Chael let the letter drop down onto the flames, the edges turning black and igniting. It only took a minute for it to be reduce to a black crisp. Taking hold of a poker, he broke up the charred remains until there was nothing left, and placed the poker back onto its holder.

The sound of far-off drums came to his ears, drawing him back over to the window.

Away to the east, the first lines of Al-Imri's army were appearing through the hazy heat. It would take days for them to arrive in sufficient numbers to be able to mount an attack.

The siege weapons would take even longer.

He placed his hands behind his back as he stood watching the lines of soldiers coming into view. Below, on the walls and streets of the city, exciting news was

spreading like wildfire. The King had raised an army and would soon be here to rescue them.

Chael watched as women hugged each other and anyone who passed close by.

He felt a pang of guilt.

But, if die they must, better that it's with a sword in hand and a defiant heart, than meek as frightened sheep by the butcher's knife. Anything is better than that. Only question now is, how long can we stave off the inevitable? He thought.

He turned, walked back to his desk chair and wearily sat.

DUST, KICKED UP BY a passing column of lancers, washed over the open-backed wagon carrying those too badly injured to walk. A nurse bent low over Preem's wound to shield it from getting dirty. After a few moments, the dust cloud passed, and she sat back. Preem's eyes fluttered open for the first time in days. He tried to speak but his mouth and throat felt coarse and dry.

'Here you are, Major, take a sip of this,' the nurse said, raising his head and placing the nozzle of a water-sack to his lips. The warm liquid poured into his

mouth and down his throat.

He coughed and pain shot through his body from the wound in his chest. He feebly pushed the sack away with the back of his hand. 'How long?' he managed to say.

'How long for what, Major?' asked the nurse.

'He wants to know how long he was out for,' answered Aaron, lying nearby, a heavily blood-soaked bandage adorning his right leg. 'Isn't that right, sir?'

Preem looked over at Aaron. 'What happened?'

'After you took that arrow, all hell broke loose. They were coming up those ladders so fast it was hard to keep them back. But we did.' He smiled. 'I fished you out from under a bundle of dead Anvars. One of them was a giant or at least he had been.'

Preem propped himself up with a little effort. 'What happened to you?'

'Got sliced with an axe. Right down along the thigh muscle. Nurse said it was a clean wound. Apparently, I have particularly hard bones, so the blade glanced off,' he answered, winking at the nurse. 'I should be dancing again in no time at all.' He looked back at Preem. "Fraid you'll have to find yourself a new runner for a bit, sir. At least until I heal.'

'He's being modest, Major. I heard he dragged you out from under all those bodies and stood over you to protect you until the wall was retaken. That was how he was injured, or so your men say,' said the smiling nurse.

'Seems like you're always around when I need you most. Thanks.' Preem

nodded to Aaron.

'Well, we're running low on good officers. I just didn't think we could afford to lose you just yet,' he said, grinning.

'What happened after I blacked out? Do we still hold Eastgate?'

Aaron's grin melted. 'No. Eastgate's fallen,' he said somberly. 'I didn't see it myself. We were shipped out together in the hospital wagons before the end. Half of the army held, half retreated, some to Gallo and the rest of us to Kan-Ta.'

'How long was I out of it?'

'Four days. Now lie down before you do yourself more harm!' scolded the

nurse.

Preem looked annoyed but did as he was told and lay back. 'How long before I'm up and about, nurse?'

She looked at him, trying to estimate his recovery time based on past experience. 'Three or four weeks at least,' she surmised. 'Depending on how good a patient you are, of course.'

'Three or four weeks!' Preem propped himself onto an elbow, wincing with

the pain as he did. 'That's out of the question!' he protested.

'At least that long!' said the nurse crossly. 'But, of course, it also depends on the grade of healer that you get at Kan-Ta. Some patients seem to resist healing magic, while others thrive. And it also depends on whether or not you do as you are told. Now lie back down and stop moving or you'll open that wound again!'

She gently pushed his head back and lowered him into a prone position.

Preem huffed as he lay back. 'How far to Kan-Ta?'

Aaron idly picked at his bandage. 'About two days, depending on the volume of traffic. There are a lot of very frightened people clogging up the roads west.'

Preem put his hand to his forehead and rubbed away the sweat.

Overhead, a flock of birds swooped and turned as they chased flies. There was no time now to bury the dead. Their rotting, fly-covered, bodies littered the sides of the road, thrown without care from the constantly moving hospital wagons.

## 44 Battering Ram



TAM HAD GONE ON A WIDE arc as far as the northern plantations, freeing all of the slaves found there and warning the plantation owners of the change in policy in New Gantu. That was the name given to the half of the country now controlled by Anabel's Free Slave Army. Slavery was abolished and any who wished could come and join the uprising, which in effect meant that virtually all of slaves found there were returning with Tam to Ash so they might join up.

The army had ballooned to a respectable twenty thousand in the fortnight since the Battle of Ash, so named by those who had taken part in it. The story of

the battles of both Ash and Briar were favourites around the campfires.

Training was going well, closely supervised by Rat.

As for Lom, he was only just back on his feet after the rockslide in the ravine. It would have killed a lesser man, but Lom's great bulk and muscle had saved him and protected Merrith, who repaid his sacrifice by spending much of her time by his bed, tending his every need while he recovered.

She told Anabel briefly about what had happened, keeping it free of any great detail.

Anabel wisely decided not to push the issue, knowing that Merrith would tell her in her own good time. That aside, things were quiet.

Anabel sat alone in her new quarters in Ash.

This house was the largest in town and owned by its biggest slave trader, a villainous man called Ortor Magnast. He had been away on business in Gantu Prime while the battle was taking place, thus escaping the slave's wrath.

Anabel had positioned herself in Ortor's old office behind his mahogany desk, one that had born witness, she had no doubt, to many injustices. Its meticulously varnished surface was now hidden under the pages of numerous reports. Ranging in scale from numbers of new recruits, or quantities of food in storage facilities, to lists of weapons found or manufactured.

But her mind was elsewhere; she gently pushed the papers away and sat back, looking out of the window beside her desk.

Outside in the yard of the house were Ortor's stables.

Here, the stable-hands were feeding and cleaning Ortor's private collection of horses. Anabel watched with interest as a huge dray horse was led out of its pen. It was an enormous animal boasting muscular shoulders, flanks, and rump, a veritable giant of the horse world.

Drays were mostly used for pulling heavy loads, which in Ash had meant wagons filled to bursting with slaves heading to market. There were hundreds of similar animals in stables all over the town. Anabel drummed the table-top while looking at the great beast.

A knock on the door made her jump as her mind suddenly returned. 'Come in!'

'Sorry to bother you, Your Highness, but I thought you would want to

know...' It was Agnast Farley, a heavy-set woman in her mid fifties, one of Anabel's helpers.

'Yes, Agnast, what is it?' Anabel had given up trying to correct Agnast about

her title. In the long-run, it was just easier to let her say it and be done.

'Some of General Brand's men are back, ma'am. They're just coming into town now. Some say they have up to ten thousand with them.'

Anabel hurried to stand at the mention of Tam's name, but the smile that had been so quick to her lips soon faded. 'Did you say, he has ten thousand with him?'

'Yes, Your Highness. The column stretches for miles north. I expect it'll be days before the flow stops.'

'Thank you, Agnast. Let me know when the General is here.'

As Agnast closed the door, Anabel placed her hands on the top of her head. 'Fire and water! Ten thousand more! How are we going to feed them all?' There was another knock on the door.

'Come in!'

Agnast peeked her face around the door again. 'So sorry, Your Highness, but you did ask me to tell you when General Brand was in Ash.'

'He's back?' Anabel almost gushed but caught herself at the last moment.

'Yes, Your Highness. He's back and... Well, he's here. He's out here in the hall. Says he's lookin' to see you. Shall I let him in?'

'Of course, Agnast, please do.'

Agnast held the door open and sternly looked Tam over. 'Fine, she can see you now, General. But Her Highness is very busy, so you'll have to be quick about it.' Agnast almost scowled at Tam in a protective mother sort of way as he passed her by.

'Thank you, Agnast, that will be all,' said Anabel, struggling not to smile.

Agnast looked at Tam sternly one more time before closing the door.

As the door clicked shut, Anabel threw herself into Tam's arms and kissed him. 'Gods, I've missed you!'

Tam ran his arms around her waist and lifted her up so that her legs dangled, without removing his lips from hers. 'I missed you too,' he finally managed to say between kisses.

After a few more tender moments, they sat by the window holding hands. The sun was high, bathing the room in warm sunlight.

'I believe you've had a very successful trip. Agnast informed me you freed over ten thousand. Is that true?'

'Probably more.' Tam nodded. 'Some of the owners tried to stop us, but after we made examples of the ringleaders, the others just slipped away.'

'How are we ever going to feed so many?'

'It may not be a problem for long,' said Tam looking a little worried.

'How so?'

Tam squeezed her hand. 'While I was up north, I received information from runaways. The western slave lords are raising an army against us.'

'It was bound to happen,' Anabel said, shaking her head. 'But surely, the peasants will refuse to enlist.'

'We are painted as murderers and looters with a lust for blood and gold.'

'Liars and twisters!' Anabel hissed.

Tam shrugged. 'They are politicians and know how to prey on the fears of the poor and ill-educated. We will be painted as enemies of all, and our message of peace and freedom will be lost in the din of their war drums.'

'We must try to get our message across.'

'To whom would you have it sent? Regardless, none would now listen, not while their masters have their ears.'

'So, does it come to this? Do we have to make war on those we are trying to help?' Anabel looked desperate.

Tam nodded. 'It's unfortunate, but we must first remove the pawns to get to the king.'

'And who might he be?' asked Anabel.

'Ortor Magnast is the man leading the consortium of slave traders and pirates holding the reins of power in Gantu. And he is the one who will lead their army against us.'

'And how large is his army?'

'Ten thousand regulars, thirty thousand casual.'

Anabel's chest slumped. She had expected a confrontation but never on this scale; it was beyond her ability to comprehend. 'So many,' she mumbled. 'They outnumber us almost two to one.'

'That will reduce further. Our numbers are growing all the while.'

Half of them untrained and untried!' snapped Anabel.

'As they were at Briar and Ash. Take heart, my love, you're a far more capable leader than you realise. Those people out there would walk through the fires of the Underworld were you at their head. And so would I.' Tam placed his hands on her shoulders. 'Battles can be won or lost even before an army takes to the field. It's not a question of size; it's one of heart.'

Anabel stared back at him for a long moment, then hugged him. 'You're right,' she said, then whispered so Tam couldn't hear. 'I so hope you are right.'

As Anabel hugged Tam, she was absently looking out of the window into the stable yard. The dray was being watered and a stable boy was brushing its coat. Anabel had an idea. 'They're such wonderfully powerful beasts.'

Tam saw that she was looking out at the dark-coated dray. 'Yes, they are,' he agreed. 'Built for long days of work on the farm.'

'How many do we have in Ash and the surrounding area?'

'I don't know, but I imagine it would be a few hundred. Why do you ask?'

Anabel pulled away from Tam, and walked over to the window, folding her arms. 'I have an idea. Send for the best blacksmiths that we have. I want to discuss something with them.'

'What do you have in mind?'

'What do you call the thing that's used to break down castle doors?'

'A battering ram,' answered Tam.

'That's right. Well, I have an idea for making one. But not for breaking down doors. Our ram will break up whole armies.'

Tam gave her a side-long look and scratched his head. 'Care to elaborate?'

'Not just yet. I need to speak with the smiths first. But if what I'm thinking can be done, then you, my love, will be one of the first to know about it.'

She smirked knowingly, as she continued to look out of the window. So lost in thought, she didn't even notice Tam leaving the room.

#### 45

#### **Footnote**



THE CITY OF KAN-TA finally came into view. Built on the brow of a large rocky hill, it towered over the flat plains all around. The King's Tower—Kan-Ta in the ancient tongue—sat at its apex from which on a clear day the Agento Sea, far to the west, could be seen. It was the original fortress from which the old kings of Jarro ruled and some even claimed it as the original seat of the founding father, King D'hun Jarro. Kan-Ta boasted three concentric walls. The first and nearest to the Keep enclosed the royal quarters. The second enclosed the diplomatic precinct and homes of the nobles, and the third, the city itself. Outside the third wall, and ringing the entire complex, was a deep moat of sticky mud and water. Four enormous gates graced each wall, offset by ninety degrees from the previous so they were not directly opposite.

The hospital wagons were given priority, but even so, it took hours to travel

the last few hundred yards to the eastern gateway.

The roads leading to the city were jammed with carts and coaches of all

shapes and sizes as terrified people fled before the invading Eastern Horde.

Preem had propped himself up against the side wall of the wagon in which he was being transported. The wagon, originally packed with injured men at the start of the journey, was now less than half full. These few were the survivors of the harsh trip, while the rest lined the roadsides all the way back to Eastgate. Aaron sat by his side, scratching at his bandages.

'Leave it alone!' scolded the nurse for the umpteenth time.

'I'm sorry, but the itching is driving me to distraction.'

'That means it's healing. Now leave it alone before you open it up again!' she said, slapping the back of his hand.

Aaron pulled his hand back and feigned being hurt by the blow. 'Ouch! She's

stronger than she looks.'

Preem half smiled. 'Serves you right.' He looked at the nurse. 'He does it to

get some attention from you.'

'He'll get all the attention he wants when we get inside the city. Especially from Matron,' she snarled at Aaron, 'if he keeps pulling at his dressings like that!' She smiled and slapped Aaron's hand again as it strayed back down towards his wound.

Aaron drew his hand back, pouting. 'I think she's going to miss me,' he said to Preem but loud enough to carry to the young nurse's ear. 'Isn't that right, nurse?'

The nurse gave him an exasperated smile. 'Of course, I will. Like I'd miss a septic boil!' She grinned, before turning away to check her other patients.

Aaron looked out across the plain to the north. Sunbeams glinted on metal as thousands of boys and men trained in the open. He nudged Preem and nodded towards the tent city on the outskirts. 'Recruits.'

Preem looked unimpressed. 'Not even enough to adequately garrison the city.'

'But welcome all the same. We might hold,' said Aaron.

'With what? The remnants of the battered Eastgate army, and a few thousand raw recruits. Wake up! This war ended at Eastgate. It just hasn't sunk in yet.'

Aaron sat back heavily. 'So, what's to become of us?'

'The same thing that happens whenever a people are defeated. We become a footnote in someone's history book.'

'That's not really helping my morale.'

'Sorry. I was never much good at spinning fairy tales. But if we are going to be snuffed out, if this is truly the end, I'll face it as I've always done... swinging with both fists.'

'Sounds kind of glorious the way you put it.'

'It's just as important to die well as to live well, in my book anyway.'

The wagon interior went dark as it passed under the arch of the gateway leading into the city. They were finally home.

SULAN AL-IMRI SAT BROODING in his tent. It was late evening, but he still could not venture forth. The brightness hurt his eyes and filled him with pain. Aalil Dulva stood in one corner of the black marquee at a table laden with food, preparing a light meal for his master.

Al-Imri fidgeted in his chair, unable to find comfort. He stood and irritably paced the length of the interior, hands folded into the sleeves of his black robes. Black eyes peered out from the darkness of his hood, scanning the doorway for signs that the sun had finally set.

The shadows lengthened as the sun dipped below the horizon. He ventured closer and looked outside. It was bearable, just. Great piles of bodies were heaped together into grotesque mounds and set alight. East men and west burned as they had died—together.

Eastgate was quiet now. Gone were the war drums and the cries and shouts of battle, replaced by the crackle of fire and of marching feet as his army set out for the walled city of Gallo. Victory was a sour brew. He had won and lost at the same time; Jarro lay at his feet, true... but at a terrible cost. Half of his army lay on smoking mounds, a staggering number that should have been bothering him more than it actually did.

But the longer the war dragged on, the less he mourned the losses. *Any* loss if he be honest. His heart was hardening; he could feel it blacken by the day. The sickness that controlled him was progressing, his master's interventions stemming rather than reversing the process.

He gained momentary relief, but no release from the pains that racked his body and twisted his mind.

Åalil placed a platter of food on a small table beside Al-Imri's chair. 'Some food and wine, Great One. You have not eaten properly in days. You must keep your strength.'

Al-Imri turned and sent the table flying with a wave of his hand. His mastery of the dark power was growing. That was one benefit, at least, since the sickness had come upon him. 'I hunger not... for that,' he rasped. 'Bring me an offering.'

Aalil showed no outward sign of emotion and simply bowed before leaving the tent. Within moments, a guard entered, holding a frightened teenage girl, her face smeared with dirt and her clothes dishevelled. Al-Imri extended an arm towards her and beckoned her to him. She shuffled stiffly as though sleep-walking until she stood before the Lord of the East.

'Do not be frightened, child. You will feel no pain.' He placed his hands upon her face and a foggy mist formed. Outside the tent, two of Al-Imri's personal guards stood at attention looking straight ahead. The tent flap was closed but did not completely obscure the pulses of light coming from within. After a few short moments, Al-Imri called for Aalil Dulva. The high priest entered and quickly left again, holding a small bundle wrapped in a blanket.

The first stars twinkled in the darkening blue as night finally rolled in. Al-Imri sat smiling in his chair. Hunger pangs watered his mouth. Now, at last, he

could eat.



THE GARRISON WAS TOO preoccupied with the quickly spreading fire to notice the small group of men sneaking from shadow to shadow. Arakur was flame and smoke as they slipped over the wall and away into the darkness. Hours later and miles away, Brinn turned in his saddle for one last look. There was still an orange glow in the roots of the mountain where the fortress lay. The sky to the east was turning from black to dark blue as morning's light fast approached.

'May it burn 'till there's naught but ash and blackened stone,' snarled Alli,

pulling his mount in beside Brinn.

'How did you come to be his prisoner?' Brinn asked, nudging the horse forward as he spoke.

Alli kept abreast. 'Alsheer came to my land Falaq many years ago, a liar and manipulator supreme, bringing a new dark religion that beguiled and ensnared our hearts and minds.

'The nobles were his first target; once they had fallen into darkness, the rest was easy. Sulan Al-Imri became his most devoted advocate, and foremost pupil. I too fell under his spell, I am ashamed to admit. He can distort and bend the mind until there is nothing left but the false reality that he creates. We shunned the old gods and built temples to Badur, God of the Underworld. In the end, I was adrift in a hazy dream. And while I lolled, my lands were stolen, my people enslaved, and I, usurped.'

'Why did he bring you to Arakur?' asked Brinn.

Alli shrugged. 'As a reward for regaining myself,' he said, chuckling. 'He was most unimpressed and took it as a personal affront. My death was to be lingering and painful.'

Balzimar was close and overheard what Alli was saying.

'Take heart, Lord Mustaraf. You are one of very few who have bested his control. I know that creature well, having contested with him across many lands. His power is not to be underestimated. You stand among an elite few. Take pride in that for it is a prideful thing.'

'Thank you, Karakiere. Your words comfort my soul, but my heart is cold and heavy for the woes visited upon my people... because of my weakness in the face of evil.'

Balzimar smiled. 'It's been long since I was called by that name, it's a most welcome sound to my ears,' he replied.

'I was but a small child, in my father's arms, when you last trod the eastern paths, but I have not forgotten.'

Brinn turned and stared at Balzimar, a funny look on his face as though seeing the old wizard for the first time. 'Old man, you never cease to surprise.'

Balzimar blew out his long grey moustache and grinned. 'I've had a colourful

life.'

'Colourful doesn't get close by the sounds of it. It wouldn't surprise me in the

least to hear you'd invented a few new colours of your own along the way.'

'The war between light and dark has raged long and been hard fought. Even my long endeavours were preceded by others of my order, and at my finish, will be taken up anew by those yet to come. It's been so since the world was young. The fight continues, and it *will* continue until the last second of its final day.'

'What will you do now, Alli?' asked Brinn.

'Perhaps I can make amends for my blindness. Assuming, of course, my people will embrace me, and forgive me for the fool that I was,' he said, sighing.

Balzimar cleared his throat. 'It's a long road from here to Falaq. And one, I'm afraid, we cannot journey. But we will not abandon you just yet. Our road is yours for a bit, and then we will see you well equipped for your homeward leg.'

'You have already done so much for me, my friends. I feel ashamed that I

have no means to repay your kindness.'

'There is no debt to repay. We are brothers against the Dark, and so bound by our common cause. You would have done likewise in our stead.' Balzimar nodded.

'Nonetheless, should you have need of me, I am yours for all time.'

Brinn looked at the eastern lord. 'We are always in need of new friends, Lord Mustaraf.

May we live long enough to see peace between West and East.'

Alli placed his hand over his heart and inclined his head. 'It is my dearest wish.'

THE ROAD DOWN FROM the mountains was rough and strewn with rocks and branches, twisting down left then right as steep mountain tracks always do. A direct route being ill-advised on a sharp incline and could only lead to injury or worse. At length, they came to the lower reaches of the Whitecap Mountains to a place known as Gorn Falls, the crashing water here a magnificent sight. White water cascaded over a precipice and down into a rounded basin far below; from whence a roaring rush of white froth started a fast-flowing, deep river that rolled all the way down to Lake Myre, on the western approaches to Timberland.

The Gorn River dissected Timberland, north and south, on its western side, though it was hard to see the divide through the dense foliage of the vast forest.

Helfwen's eyes glistened at the first sight of his homeland.

'Has it been long since your last visit?' asked Brok, riding beside Helfwen at the head of the group.

'Too long, lad. I should have made the trek long before this.'

'From what you have told, your return will not be a happy reunion.'

'No, that's true. But I had to come. This is my home.'

Helfwen gave a broad wave of his hand and inhaled deeply. 'Can ya smell the sweetness of the air? I've found no place to rival it in all my years of travel.'

Brok looked across the tops of the trees. They were still high enough up on the lower slopes of the mountains to get a good view across the green ocean lying ahead. 'Quite impressive,' he admitted, nodding, 'though I thought dwarves lived in mountains, or down mines.' 'Then you've not travelled much. I'm a Timberland dwarf though I have nothing against mining. It's good honest toil. But give me the forests anytime over it.'

'Seems I have much to learn about dwarf ways. I had you fixed as stone workers and ore miners.'

'And wood-carvers, lad. Great forts made of oak, the wood seasoned and treated until it is harder than granite. Yes, we are keepers of the forest, planters and harvesters. Our wood-craft is coveted by the eastern lords, much of it traveling that way through the great river that meanders twixt here and the lands beyond the eastern reaches of the Amaran Mountains.'

Brok glanced over at Helfwen. 'What awaits you when you return?'

'My birthright... or death. Either will do in my present mind.'

'And if it's the latter?'

'Then it's the latter.' Helfwen shrugged. 'Least my bones will lie in home soil. I would settle for that.'

'What of your uncle? I don't imagine he will just step aside and let you walk back in to take the throne.'

Helfwen squinted across at Brok. 'No he won't, at that. But I'm not the light-boned sprat I was when he kicked me down the street all them years ago. Got a good laugh from all his hangers-on too.' Helfwen looked to his front. 'It'll be a bit more even this time around. I've learned a thing or two about stayin' alive while I was away.

That could be an eye-opener for him.' Helfwen grinned.

'What are your plans for when you win?'

Helfwen looked at Brok with eager eyes and a huge toothy grin. 'Then we'll have a celebration feast to end all!' He laughed loudly. 'Roast meat of every kind that would make you drool for a week. Wine, ale, and brandy 'til you feel your eyes a-bobbin' in your skull. And music that will drag the bones from your flesh in the rush to the dance hall,' he said, leaning across, slapping Brok's shoulder in excitement.

'Let's hope you win. I love a good party.' Brok smirked.

Helfwen laughed even louder than before, his deep-chested guffaws ringing through the woodland.

It got darker and cooler as the group entered the woods. Massive oaks towered overhead, their heavy limbs full to bursting with green leaves of varying size. A narrow path ran along the river's southern bank and through the edge of the forest. It made for an easier trek, so that by nightfall they had travelled quite a few miles from the falls. That night, for the first time in many weeks, they had a generous-sized campfire. Helfwen produced his jug of dwarf brandy and Balzimar his flute and before sleep, even stern-faced Brok had sung a song.

It was a good release of tension. By midnight, loud snores resonated through the undergrowth as all but one slept. Brinn sat staring into the darkness, as ever on guard.

X

## 47 Justice



ANABEL SPENT HER DAYS in secret discussions with several of the best blacksmiths, so much so that Tam hardly saw her. Whenever he asked, she would fob him off with, 'You'll see soon enough!' Well, that day had finally arrived, and it was just as well. Tam was fit to explode. It would have only taken one more, 'You'll see soon enough!' to light his fuse.

Anabel was so excited that her hands trembled as she blindfolded him, leading him through the house and out into the stable yard, stopping now and

again to make sure he couldn't see.

Finally, after many tenuous steps and a few bruising collisions with stray chairs and tables, they stopped moving. Tam could feel a gentle breeze on his exposed skin, so he knew that he was outside the confines of house. There was a sharp tug on the blindfold, and his eyes were momentarily blinded by the sudden light.

'Ta-daa!' Anabel said excitedly.

It took a moment to refocus, but when his eyes finally did, Tam saw an incredible sight before him. The dray horse was covered from head to foot, including the legs, in sturdy but flexible armour. A large steel blade shaped like a bird's wing had been draped over the animal's front shoulders. Sweeping from a central point on the chest, the blade carried on down either flank of the horse like the outstretched wings of a diving bird of prey.

Except that these wings had sharpened leading edges meant to kill and maim.

Atop the horse sat a rider strapped into a special high-backed saddle and wearing the same flexible armour as his mount. The horse's armour was painted red, yellow, and black in the design of a snarling dragon.

Tam's jaw dropped open. 'What in the name of—' was all he managed.

'Isn't he wonderful!' Anabel beamed.

Tam took an involuntary step backwards. 'Well, if it's shock you're after, you've succeeded. My heart missed a beat, and I know that it's only a horse. Granted, a very, very big horse. But a horse all the same.'

Anabel squealed with joy and jumped up and down. 'That's just the reaction I

was hoping for.'

Tam kept staring at the dray. The armour was an unusual design of interlaced metal disks overlapped like roof tiles and secured onto a bed of mail armour. The primary weapon was the formidable-looking wing blade which could be used to cut a path through enemy troops using brute force and momentum. The rider carried a wicked-looking, double-sided axe, secured firmly to one wrist by means of a leather cord and in the other hand a shield. The horse would cause terrible carnage amongst tightly packed formations. Tam was stunned by the brilliance of Anabel's idea, the armour providing an almost impregnable skin around the animal.

Its size strength and speed, along with the wing blade, would make it a

virtually unstoppable killing machine. 'I'm at a loss,' Tam finally blurted.

Anabel laughed aloud again. 'It took ages to get the design right. Merrith came up with the idea for painting the armour, which was a masterstroke if you ask me.'

'It does finish it off rather well. But regardless, this beast would frighten the life out of all but the manically insane, painted or not.' Tam ran his hand along the edge of the blade. It was razor sharp. 'We could use him to frighten Ortor's peasant irregulars.'

Anabel laughed again. 'Not just this one, General. So far, we've fitted out ten. By the end of the week, it will be fifty. And in a fortnight, one hundred and

fifty!'

Tam's jaw dropped open again. 'You certainly know how to turn things to your advantage.'

'Well, like you are so fond of saying... I'm my father's daughter.'

THE WEEKS PASSED, AND Ortor's army approached the outer environs of Briar. The battlefield was a wide open plain nestled between rolling hills. Ortor's army lined one set of hills and Anabel's the other. Ortor had placed his slaver and pirate consortium troops to the centre of his formation while his peasants and irregulars held the flanks. Anabel hid most of her army on the back slopes of the hills on which they found themselves, giving Ortor the impression that he was facing no more than five thousand freed slaves. Emboldened by his seemingly unbeatable advantage, he attacked using his ten thousand regular troops in a full frontal charge. Across the divide they came running in wild abandon, confident of an easy win.

Anabel's army stood fast, pikes to the front. Ortor's cavalry, in their eagerness, had pulled ahead of his foot soldiers. Ortor, mounted on a white stallion, watched from the safety of his own lines. Two thousand heavy cavalry rushed towards Anabel's pike and axe men; veterans all of Briar and Ash, they flinched not. Archers let fly, men and horses fell. Up the long rise they came, more arrows, more death. Now fewer than half left alive.

At one hundred paces, heavy crossbow stepped out from behind the pike and

leveled their weapons. At twenty yards, the order to fire rang out.

As one, the well-drilled crossbow troops stepped back behind the wall of pike, the volley ripping through the remaining cavalry like a giant invisible scythe. Fewer than two hundred exhausted horses finally made it up the hill and crashed into a wall of pike.

Anabel gave the signal, and the drays were loosed.

They came from behind her army like rumbling thunder, one hundred and

fifty charging steel-encased dragons.

The attacking enemy foot soldiers stopped and stood, staring in disbelief. A woeful cry rose from the ranks of the peasant irregulars and some even turned and ran. The drays' heavy hooves shook the ground, men wept openly and dropping their weapons in fear.

The horses cut through the packed lines as though not even there, leaving dead and dying in their wake. Many were beheaded or cut in two as they made

contact with the birdwing blade.

The survivors turned and fled, the massacre complete.

The Free Slave Army crested the brow of the hill and showed its full strength.

Ortor Magnast's peasants turned and ran for their lives, leaving the field in defeat. Anabel scanned the sea of dead bodies and spotted a white-horsed rider being hauled from his saddle by his own men on the far hill. When they dispersed, the figure lay unmoving on the ground. Ortor Magnast and the slavers' reign of terror was at an end.

Gantu Prime opened its gates to the victorious Free Slave Army.

Anabel, escorted by Tam, led the victory parade to the hall of governors, the seat of power in the land. Inside the grandiose pillar-lined building awaited all of the political heads and faction leaders of Gantu, all, no doubt, hoping to garner favour with the new head of state.

They had seen it all before. It was simply a matter of kowtowing for a while, or so they thought. Keep their heads low until the dust settled, then when things had quietened sufficiently, after the initial furore, they would find a way to get back into business. It was all part of the game. After all, business was business. The new ruler would come to understand the game too, in time.

Anabel mounted the steps to the gilded throne and sat. Beside her stood Tam. Her soldiers lined the walls and held the door.

An officious looking man stood at the front of the assembled crowd and bowed. 'May I be the first to raise a cheer to the new monarch of Gantu. All hail, Oueen Anabel!'

The crowd stood and cheered as one. 'Hail to the Queen! Hail to the Queen! Hail to the Queen!'

Anabel looked unimpressed. The crowd shuffled in anxious anticipation, unsure what should be done next. The officious man bowed low and knelt, the rest following his example. 'What are your commands, my Queen? Your humble servants await your decrees.'

Anabel stood and walked closer. 'You are the administrators of the city?'

'Yes, my Queen. We have come to pledge allegiance to the Crown,' answered the officious one.

'You, who have for so long held power in this place,' Anabel shouted, 'are here today to give allegiance to me... your new Queen! You, politicians, bankers, businessmen who have held sway here in this place... have come to beg the indulgence of the Crown! Is that not so? You, who had the power and influence to make changes for the good, but instead preferred evil... have come now to grovel for your worthless lives!'

A soft murmur rippled through the crowd. False smiles dropped and cheeks turned white as blood drained from powder-puffed faces.

'You are the root of this great evil! But no longer! No longer will you be allowed to feast whilst others starve. No longer will your dark deeds rule the lives of the poor and defenceless! Your time is at an end, and you will not be missed!' Anabel looked around at all of the terrified faces. 'Here then are my decrees! Your land, property, and possessions are hereby forfeit to the Crown, to be used to fund schools and hospitals for the poor. The institution of slavery is abolished and henceforth punishable by death! I am of a mind to release you but I know your kind too well. You cannot be trusted not to make trouble in the

future. Therefore...! For crimes against the people, and for supporting and upholding the institution of slavery, you are all hereby sentenced... to death!'

There was a great uproar from the assembled crowd as her words sank in. Anabel nodded to Tam. The city's elites were led away to the gallows, begging for mercy. After long moments of hysterical shouting, the room finally emptied. Anabel sat back on her throne and cried.

Tam placed his arms around her and softly held her until the sobbing stopped.

'I hate this! Oh Light, what have I become? What gives me that right to judge them when in my heart, I know that I'm no better? It haunts me if the truth be known. All of the blood spilled. The terrible things carried out at my behest. It never leaves me.' She shook her head forlornly. 'Don't you see, Tam? Deep down, there's no difference!' she said, her eyes filling again.

'You're wrong!' said Tam. 'If you have a flaw, it's that you care too much.

Even now, you worry for those who do not deserve your concern.'

'If I let them live, we'll be up to our eyes in rebellion for the rest of our days. You see that, don't you?' It was more a statement than a question.

'You don't have to convince me, my love. As a very wise person once said,

'By this small evil..."

'—a greater good may be done,' she added, smiling through the tears as she finished his sentence and hugged him.

Tam squeezed her tight. 'And a great good has been done this day. You've freed a nation.'

X

#### 48

### As Blue as the Deepest Sea



MUCH OF THE CITY OF Gallo lay in ruins, but the fortifications still held firm. The defence of the city had bled the enemy of thousands of troops. But now, Al-Imri was content to sit back and wait for the siege engines to make a breach. Trebuchets pounded the outer defences, but their small missiles bounced harmlessly off the thick walls without effect.

Chael had asked the defenders to hold for three weeks. They had now held for four, and there was still no sign of the king or the promised relief. There were unspoken questions on the faces of his men. Questions Chael could not answer.

He was running out of time and excuses, knowing that soon, all would be moot. Al-Imri's men were busy building a trebuchet ten times larger than all the rest.

Once finished, there was no doubt that the walls would crumble. By the fourth day of the fifth week, the great machine was ready, the massive arm was pulled back and loaded.

An enormous rock, half the size of a peasant's hut, flew through the air. The defenders held their breath.

It landed short and hit the ground in a plume of dirt and debris just outside the great double doors of the main gate into the city. It took the best part of an hour to reload the monster.

Then, a second massive clump of rock came hurtling through the air.

There were gasps all around as the missile overshot the gate and demolished three rows of houses just beyond, sending brick and dust flying in all directions.

The men lining the walls fidgeted nervously as the hour passed quickly. A third great lump of stone came flying. This time, there was no mistake.

The projectile struck one of the large support towers holding the main gate in position, the tower simply disintegrated into a pile of rubble. The gate wavered for a moment, before collapsing backwards into the forecourt. The way was clear.

A shrill horn sounded the attack, and there was little the defenders could do to stop it. The Eastmen poured into the city, wreaking a terrible revenge on the terrified population.

The fighting continued in hastily barricaded streets and houses, but the outcome was never in doubt, as bit by bit, the defenders fell back, savaged on all fronts by a remorseless enemy.

In a matter of hours, it was over, the plaintive cries of women and small children now replacing the ardent clamour of battle. The Lord of the East waited until late evening before making an inspection. As he entered the Hall of the Kings in the royal quarters, which was the seat of power in the kingdom, he stopped briefly to savour the moment. With resolute stride, he continued towards the king's throne.

Aalil Dulva trailed along, submissively cowed behind his victorious master.

There was a strange hush in the hall, the statues of the old kings scowling

disapprovingly down upon the two approaching figures.

Al-Imri stood before the golden throne, sitting imperiously upon a pedestal of three concentric stone circles. Raising his arms aloft, the heavy stone slabs slid back to expose a rectangular niche beneath.

Inside lay a jewel-encrusted box over-meshed by the dust and cobwebs of an

age.

The Lord of the East stretched forward his hand and removed the box from its hiding place. The lid was not locked, and he flipped it open. Inside lay a blue tear-shaped diamond as big as a man's heart. An evil smile crossed his lips as he shut the container again and turned on his heel. 'I will be returning to Mabak-Var tonight. Make the arrangements,' he hissed.

'As you wish, Great One.' Aalil bowed. 'And what of the war?'

'I leave it in the hands of Overlord Imrit. The Jarrians are all but finished. It is a task in which, even, he cannot fail to succeed. I have important matters to attend to in the east.'

Aalil bowed again. 'As you command, Great One, so shall it be.'

Al-Imri swept past his chief priest, and head councilor, and returned to his tent outside the city. Sitting alone with the jeweled case on his lap, he concentrated. The bracelet on his wrist glowed and a vision of the warlock, Ultor Halfbreed, came to his mind.

'Do you have it, disciple?'

'I do, master. It rests upon my lap even now. Pure like when the world was new, and as blue as the deepest sea.'

'A job well done. Bring it to me at Bal-Karesh and receive your just reward.'

'If I may ask, master, how goes the search for the other crystals?' asked Al-Imri.

'The red we already have, but the green so far eludes us, though our allies search night and day,' said Ultor.

'And is there news of Lord Alsheer?'

'No. I fear something has gone awry. There is no word and I sense him not. Neither has Garnak returned with the Jarrian princess. I grow concerned.'

'That is grave news, my master. For without the Key, the crystals are useless.'

'We may yet find a replacement. I will examine the prophecies anew. The west has been crushed; that, at least, is a comfort. You have done well, disciple, and your reward awaits you.'

'My wish is to serve.'

'I look forward to our meet,' said Ultor, as his image began to fade.

'Tarry a while longer, I beg, master; there is one thing more I would ask if you will permit?'

The image returned in full. 'Speak it.'

'The pains...!'

'Your suffering grows beyond bearing. I will ease them for you.'

After the healing, Al-Imri slept as he always did. Using a specially modified coach with blackened windows, he set off for his citadel in Mabak-Var.

The coach was a master-stroke, the idea having come to him in his sleep one day. Now, he could travel long distances even during daylight hours, without fear

of the burning light.

Reclining, he marveled at the simplicity of the remedy and silently wondered why he'd not thought of it before.

## 49 **Trapped**

AS THEY ENTERED THE clearing, Megan felt unnerved. A big black raven sat on a perch near the front door, eyeing her silently as Silvene guided her through a myriad of broken utensils and discarded odds and ends strewn about the garden. The cottage had a thatched roof that looked to be sagging, close to collapse, in the middle. At the far gable, a crooked chimney billowed black acrid smoke. Megan suddenly felt very unsure, she hesitated.

'Come now, dear,' Silvene said, squeezing Megan's shoulders. 'You'll feel

much better after a bite to eat,' she added, gently pushing Megan forward.

Megan allowed the black-haired woman to usher her along. At the door, the raven turned on his perch, keeping his beady eye on her as she passed.

Silvene led Megan inside, the smoky air stank of mould and old rot. The interior was dirty and unkempt, rubbish and broken bric-a-brac filling every available space.

A single chair was placed near to the fire over-which hung a steaming black pot.

'Sit down, dear. It won't be long now.' Silvene walked over to the fireplace and lifted the lid of the pot. 'Nearly done. Hope you like stew?'

Megan sat on the only available chair. 'Yes... I mean, yes, thank you, Silvene.

I could eat anything. I'm so very hungry.'

'Good, good, nothing like a bit of want to make a meal taste all the sweeter.' Silvene was looking at Megan oddly.

'Yes, I suppose you're right,' agreed Megan, feeling her guts twist in growing alarm. 'Do you live here alone?' Megan decided it was better to keep the conversation flowing.

'Yes... I prefer the quiet. No busy-bodies around, prying into things. Looking where they shouldn't... asking questions they won't like the answers to.' Silvene opened the pot and ladled out the stew into a big, cracked bowl. 'You know the type, dear,' she said, smiling as she handed over the steaming bowl.

'Yes, I understand.' Megan agreed, taking the bowl.

'I used to live in a city once. Though 'tis long ago now,' Silvene said, staring wistfully out of the dirty window, 'but 'tween you an' me, if I had to choose, I much prefer the peace and quiet of the forest.'

'It can't be that long ago, surely. I mean... you're a young woman.'

Silvene's eyes fluttered. 'Well yes, you're right of course, my dear. I meant it seems like such a long time ago. Time goes slowly when you live alone.' She shrugged.

Megan sipped the broth. It was overly salty but welcome.

'You were lucky I found you when I did. There's wolves and bears here abouts, as well as other less than savoury creatures. I suspect it wouldn't have been long 'till they'd gotten your scent. Yes, you're lucky to have met old Silvene.'

'Unless you have somehow managed to hold back the years, you are the youngest old woman that I've ever met,' said Megan, absently between sips.

Silvene's head snapped up. 'What do you mean?' Her hand touching her face,

as she peered into the dirty old mirror hanging over the mantle.

'Please, I meant no offence. I just, well... you have the air of someone who thinks herself old when you are plainly not.'

Silvene relaxed and laughed. 'Oh, I see. You'll have to forgive my

snappiness, dear. Solitude brings out the kinks in a body.'

Megan nodded. 'You're a stronger woman than I. I don't think I could bear the loneliness. I need to have friends and loved ones close at hand.'

'An' what do *you* know of it?' snapped Silvene angrily. 'There was a time when men courted me from far-off lands. I danced at the grandest balls, an' dined on the finest fare. What do *you* know of it? You know *nothing!*' Silvene's face was scarlet and the veins on her temple bulged.

Megan sat rigid in her chair, stunned by this sudden rant. 'I apologise,

Silvene. My comment was not meant to offend.'

'You, with your high an' mighty airs. Well, what's it got you so far, eh? I'll

tell you what it got you! Lost! That's what it got you!' shouted Silvene.

Megan froze. She wanted to say something but was afraid if she did, Silvene would find fault in it and continue ranting. Silvene was pacing up and down in front of the fireplace like a rabid bear, picking up items from the mantle and placing them back manically.

'The stew was lovely,' Megan finally said.

Silvene looked down at Megan but kept pacing back and forth.

After a time, she seemed to calm, and wrung her hands as she walked. 'It was...? You liked it?' She nodded, looking distracted.

'It was wonderful,' lied Megan.

'Not as good as those high and mighty tables you're used to, I'll wager,' she barked again.

There was insanity in her eyes, but at least the pacing had slowed.

'Just as good, if not better,' Megan placated.

'Ha! Just as good... That's what she said!' She was nodding. 'Just as good,' Silvene repeated.

'Oh yes, it's delicious. Perhaps you could spare some more?'

'More, you say!' Silvene was constantly nodding as she spoke. 'Getting a little greedy now, aren't we? You spoilt little brat!' she snarled, her voice raising in volume again.

Megan froze as she held up the bowl.

Silvene looked at the empty vessel and nodded again. 'Okay then. But just a morsel! There's others that needs to eat, you know!'

She grabbed the bowl and ladled out more stew, handing it back to Megan.

'Th-thank you,' stuttered Megan.

Silvene's mood changed again, her face all bright smiles and friendliness.

'Oh, you're welcome, dear. Now if you want more, just ask. Try a piece of bread to go with it. I made it myself.' Silvene was smiling happily as she opened a bread bin and offered the contents to Megan.

Megan gingerly removed a piece of bread and took a small bite.

'My, but don't you have the appetite of a sparrow, dear? Come on now, get that inside you before the hunger makes you sick.'

Megan ate the food and said little more.

When she was finished, Silvene took the bowl from her hands.

'There you go, that's more like it. Bet you're feeling much more yourself now, eh?'

'Thank you for your hospitality.' Megan smiled warmly. 'I really should be getting along now. I have such a long way to travel.' Standing, she took a few tentative steps towards the door.

'You won't get very far in the dark, dear. Not unless you have cat's eyes,' Silvene laughed, touching Megan's arm in a friendly way. 'No, you'll have to stay the night, I'm afraid; there's no question about it.' Silvene lit a lamp and held it up. 'This way, dear, follow me.'

Silvene led Megan out of the door and around the back of the cottage to the base of the tower. It had the look of being a very old structure indeed, much older than the cottage now nestled at its feet. Two crumbling ivy-covered walls jutted from its sides at perpendicular angles; the left-over fragments of a long-forgotten building, its former use now lost to the fog of time and fading memory. A stone staircase wound up the outside, and cracked, moss-covered slates clung defiantly to its round storm-battered roof.

Silvene led Megan up the stone steps to a splintered door at the top. 'This will have to do I'm afraid, dear. I hope you don't mind.'

Silvene pushed the door open. It creaked wide on rusting hinges. Inside the small round room was a single bed, chair, and table. 'It's perfect,' lied Megan.

She'd decided to make a run for it just as soon as Silvene left her alone.

The raven-haired woman smiled and nodded towards the room. Megan reluctantly stepped into the tower and Silvene slammed the door shut. There was a click as the door was locked from the outside.

Megan ran to the door and tried the handle, but it was no good. She couldn't open it. 'Silvene, what are you doing? Open the door!'

There was a small crack between two of the door planks. Megan pressed her eye to the gap, just in time to see the back of an old woman with grey, wispy hair disappear around the corner, cackling softly.



#### DAY 1

'They must have begun arriving after nightfall,' General Markas N'Dhun said, scanning the horizon to the east of Kan-Ta using a spyglass. Out on the plain, the first divisions of Al-Imri's army had arrived. As morning broke, they were already in position outside the walls of the city.

'Clever. A forced march in silence, and in the dark.' The general nodded. 'It's

confirmed then... Gallo has fallen,' said Colonel Martis.

'No direct verification, but it doesn't look good. No messenger pigeons for almost a week. And now this.' N'Dhun pointed with the spyglass towards the enemy lines. 'Okay. Put the city on siege notice. Troops to the walls.'

'Yes, sir!' answered Martis, saluting. He turned and hurried off.

Out on the plain, lines of cavalry were cantering across from east to north followed by newly arriving battalions of heavy foot soldiers. The Kan-Ta to Gallo road was packed with enemy soldiers of every kind for as far as the eye could see.

A cold wind whipped down from the north, unfurling the king's flag on the top of the tower; emblazoned upon it, the tower of Jarro in red on a green background. N'Dhun sighed deeply, absently wondering how much longer it would fly over the ancient city.

By midday, the whole plain from east to north was filled with soldiers. To the rear of the main body, engineers were constructing mangonels and trebuchets.

He'd seen enough.

Putting the spyglass into its leather case, he left the tower and made his way down to the war room where King Fredrik Elamere stood poring over maps of Jarro. Markas closed the door behind him and walked across the marble floor, his spyglass tucked under one arm.

'I know... You don't have to tell me. I haven't gone blind or deaf yet.' The king didn't lift his head as the general walked up and stood beside him. 'The

inconceivable is upon us, Markas. Who would have thought it?'

'We're not done yet, sire. There's a sting in our tail still.'

The king looked up and smiled, his face looked drawn and worn, dark circles framing red sleep-deprived eyes. He hauled himself upright and placed a hand on Markas' shoulder. 'They'll find us a tough old nut to crack.' He nodded. 'They're not the first to try, you know. Anvar tried and failed many times, in the old days, before Eastgate was built. We can do it again, bring honour back to the land of Jarro as in the days of yore.'

Markas knew that the king was close to collapse. He hadn't slept properly since Eastgate had fallen, and steadfastly refused all such suggestions from his

physicians.

'You really should get some rest, sire. I don't expect any trouble until

tomorrow. They'll spend most of the day manoeuvring into position.'

'Thank you, Markas, but I'm fine, really. I managed a few hours earlier.'

It was a lie and Markas knew it. If he didn't do something soon, the king would be unable to function as he needed to in the coming days.

'Do you mind if I help myself to a glass of wine, sire? I could do with washing the morning dust from my throat.'

'Help yourself, you know where to find it.'

N'Dhun walked to an ornately carved side table, and filled two glasses, slipping sleeping powder into one. 'I thought you might join me, sire,' he said, placing the glass beside the king.

'Thank you. You know, I was wondering if a sortie in force would be in order.

Might give them a bloody nose right from the off. What do you think?'

'It may be better to hold position, for the time being, sire. Let's not be too hasty before we know what we are facing.' Markas sipped his wine and watched the king poring over the map again.

'How about a raid on the supply train? It must be stretching for miles from

here to Gallo.'

'Another excellent suggestion, sire. But if I may suggest letting the enemy commit first, when he least expects, we could perhaps catch him off guard by raiding his supplies.'

raiding his supplies.'

The old monarch raised the wine glass and drank a few sips. He walked to a large leaded-glass window overlooking the city. 'They're relying on me, Markas... Poor souls. Relying on their king to somehow turn defeat into victory.'

Markas didn't reply.

'I'm ashamed that I've brought us to this,' he said, a quiver in his voice.

'You bear no blame, sire. You did all that was asked and needed of you. None could fault your actions.'

'I can, Markas! If only I'd been a better warrior... a better leader, like the kings of old. Like Dhun Jarro. Now *there* was a king. A king of kings. He would know what to do in this deathly hour of need. He would send them to flight all the way back to their tents in the Blasted Lands. He would know!' The old king struck the wall beside the window with an angry fist.

'Not even the great Dhun Jarro could have gained victory here, sire. In the end, it's about numbers... They have more.'

The king put a hand to his forehead and wavered a little.

'Sire, if I may suggest, a little rest.'

'Yes, I think you are right, General. I suddenly feel the need...'

Markas placed his glass down on the table and walked over to the king. Offering his shoulder as support, he led the old king to his bedchamber and placed him into bed.

As he exited the room and gently closed the door behind him, the sound of the exhausted monarch's snores were deepening.

Back out on the Royal Tower, Markas stood watching the massing enemy formations with trepidation, hoping he had been correct in his assumption that they would not attack until the morning. He spent most of that day watching.

#### **Day 12**

'Stand fast! Hold them! Hold them!' roared Major Preem atop the third wall.

Plumes of smoke still rolled skyward from the blazing merchant's quarter. Most of the shops and warehouses were afire. The army of the east was at the walls again for the second time that day, the bodies of their fallen comrades littering the battlefield leading up to the city walls. The crenelling had been shattered at several points, exposing the defenders to retaliatory fire from the attacking troops.

Projectiles of all kind swept backward and forward, killing and maiming indiscriminately. Trebuchet missiles smashed, with unrelenting rhythm, against the outside of the walls in the hope that a breach could be forced. But still, the Jarrians held firm.

Preem leaned heavily on his blood-stained sword, exhausted by the day's fighting. The enemy was pulling back at last.

Trumpet calls echoed across the battlefield as the Eastmen were recalled to

'They just never learn, do they?' Aaron N'Dhun grinned, kneeling to catch his breath.

'Not likely to at this stage,' mumbled Preem.

'I think the odds are getting better. What do you think they are now?'

'Somewhere around ten to one,' Preem answered in his deadpan way.

'You see, I knew it was better.' Aaron smiled.

'Check our losses and let me know,' said Preem.

'Will do, sir.'

Preem walked back up the parapet. Many of his men lay dead, killed by arrow, crossbow bolt, or crushed by falling stone. The bodies were being removed and replacements were filling the gaps left by the dead. Their total losses in the last twelve days numbered close to three thousand.

He estimated the enemy losses at over twenty thousand.

He stopped and looked out across the battlefield to where the enemy camp lay. They were busy building an enormous trebuchet, and by the looks of it, they had almost finished.

He shuddered to think what kind of damage it would cause, but then forced that worry from his mind. 'Take each day as it comes, Ben,' he mumbled to himself.

A runner came trotting up onto the walkway and stood before Preem at attention. 'Sir, you are ordered to report to General N'Dhun at the second wall,' the soldier said, saluting.

Preem nodded and half-saluted in return. The second wall was more elevated than the third, being built higher up the hill. Preem found the general surrounded by several senior officers.

'Sir, you ordered me to report.' Preem saluted.

'Ah yes, Major Preem, thank you for coming so promptly. Please walk with me.' The general walked away from the other officers to a quieter part of the wall. 'I hear good things about you, Major.'

'Thank you, sir. Just doing my part.'

'No need for modesty, I've observed you in action over the last number of days, and I'm quite impressed.'

Preem nodded.

'I'll come to the point. There's a mission. It needs a man with your particular *skills* to lead it. I'm hoping you'll agree.'

'Of course, sir. What needs to be done?'

'I have to be honest with you, Ben. You may not come back from this one.'

'Now you really have my attention.'

'Good man.' N'Dhun nodded. 'Take a look out there,' he said, pointing out across the battlefield. 'Do you see that monstrosity they're building?'

'The big trebuchet?'

'Yes. That beast will level the walls, the city, and the rock on which it stands, unless we do something about it.'

'What did you have in mind?'

N'Dhun signalled one of the other men on the wall to join them. He was a low-sized slim man with a short grey beard. He wore a hooded cloak of deepest red.

'This is Askert, the King's High Mage,' said N'Dhun. 'Askert feels he can help us fix our little problem.' He turned to the small man. 'Why don't *you* explain, Askert?'

'It's simple, get me close to the weapon and I will obliterate it.'

'Can't you do it from here?'

'If I could, we wouldn't be having this chat.' He sniffed, looking a trifle irritated.

'How close do you need to get?'

'Within touching distance.'

Preem blew sharply through his lips. 'You don't get much closer than that.'

'It will take a tremendous amount of my energy to destroy an engine so big. I need to be right beside it. It simply cannot be helped.'

'But if you're that close to it when it comes down, won't you get injured?'

'We must all make sacrifices, Major.' The wizard sniffed again.

Preem nodded and looked at the general. 'Okay then. When do we go?' The general smiled. 'Tonight.'

#### **Day 13**

Past midnight, Preem and five handpicked men slipped out of the city through a sally-port in the northern end of the wall. At their centre was the king's mage Askert. Dressed as Anvar regulars, they would journey in a north-westerly direction and try to slip around behind the enemy lines. The trebuchet was located to the east of the city, so they would have to swing around in an extended arc to reach it. A long journey for six men afoot.

Concealed by the dark and the low, recessed, bank of the moat, they scurried from cover to cover in an effort to get behind the enemy lines unseen.

The snap of breaking twigs somewhere behind them in the darkness brought the group to a sudden halt. Preem unsheathed his knife and crept through the long-grass towards the sound.

A dark shape was crouched near the base of a prickle-bush. Preem waited until it moved, then pounced. The two men rolled around in the grass and through the bracken, each struggling to overpower the other, firelight from the

nearby eastern army campfires glinting off their blades.

Preem managed to get on top, forcing his knife down towards the other's throat when the clouds parted, momentarily bathing them in pale moonlight.

'Aaron! What the blazes are you doing here?' exclaimed Preem on seeing his

subordinate's face.

Aaron was gasping for air after the wrestling contest in the grass. 'Thought... thought you might need an extra pair of hands,' he wheezed.

'You fool! I could have killed you in the dark. You should know better by

now.'

'You didn't give me much choice, sneaking off like that without me.'

'I'm just following orders. And *you* should be doing likewise!'

'Breaking heads on the wall has lost its appeal. This looks a bit more exciting. Besides, you need me along to drag you out of the mire when the need arises.' He grinned.

Preem shook his head. 'We'll have to get you some new clothes. Pathfinder

green's not too popular out here.'

Aaron looked down at his clothes. He still had his Jarro uniform on.

'Stay in the centre of the group beside the wizard. If we get stopped, we'll say

you're a prisoner.'

By first light, they had made it to a string of low hills to the north-west of the city. It was a quiet area of the battlefield, most of the action taking place at the eastern gate. Here, they could finally stop to catch breath and rest.

THE SUN ROSE AS IF called by the wail of eastern clarion. Bugles and trumpets welcomed the new day with an ear-shattering whine, no rhyme or order to the noisy cacophony; the orchestra seemingly content with any sound issued from the long-stemmed instruments, just as long as it was loud. The familiar thump-thump of the war drums soon followed, in answer to the squealing high-pitched noise of trumpet and cymbal. The opening chorus to a nightmarish opera of death and destruction. The battalions formed into their ranks, line after line of spear and sword. The heavy armoured troops took their places at the front, and lightly armoured to the rear, a sea of colours as diverse as the many nations represented by the host.

There too, were the conquered western nations of Amaran and Anvar, their dark steel-plate armour in contrast with the white linen armour preferred by the

armies of the east.

Horse and camel cavalry were drawn up in neat squares to the rear of the battle with little to do but patrol the hinterland and protect the supply route. This was a war of siege, of men afoot with spear and sword, and of missiles and machinery built to destroy walls and fortifications. The walls of the city, restocked with fresh troops, patiently awaited the inevitable rush. The parapets bristled with men four lines thick from crenels to end, the full width; rows of archers farther back awaiting patiently the order to support.

And then it came, a trumpet call louder than the rest, the signal to attack.

In a rush, they came forth, Anvars and Amarans to the fore, a tidal wave of screaming men crossed the killing grounds without care for life or limb. Once more, the sky grew dark as arrows flew. The Eastmen saw them rise, knowing

that soon, those stinging shafts would be among them, killing and maiming without mercy, without preference.

Men fell, first skewered, then trampled underfoot by comrades unable, or unwilling, to stop in their frenzied stampede to gain the walls. A second volley took flight, then a third and fourth, a deathly storm as constant and heavy as the rains of winter.

Men fell screaming, none stopping to give aid to the fallen. It was a simple choice. Run or die.

The moat was packed already with rotting bodies and being half-filled with rock and stone from previous attacks, no longer provided an obstacle of any importance.

The soldiers easily crossed and shoved their wooden ladders against the city's outer wall.

Volleys of crossbow bolts flew. Time and again, men would get halfway up only to die by spear or rock. Those who gained the heights met shortly with sword and axe, their hacked bodies thrown back over the battlements, falling on the heads of those still massing below.

There were too many defenders for the Anvars and Amarans to overthrow.

The parapet ran red with blood flowing out over the battered wall through cracks in the destroyed crenelling, and down the outside plaster in long red streaks, to puddle beneath the feet of the surging mass of attackers. Wounded men cried for friends or loved ones as overhead, the storm of arrows neither stopped nor slackened. Bodies heaped in mounds at the wall's base, caused obstruction to freshly arriving troops.

Boiled oil seared flesh and scorched eyes, turning the ground to mud. The attack slowly ground to a halt, a shrill horn-blast putting an end to the madness. The Eastmen turned and retreated across the open plain, peppered all the way by ceaseless arrow-fall.

They had failed, yet again.

THE EXHAUSTED TROOPS came filing back to the staging area.

Here, Colonel Mysharrif stood watching the tired faces of his returning men. To his left, the trebuchets began firing at the walls again now that the attack had failed, their missiles far too small to cause any serious damage to the Kan-Ta defences, but little else could be done until *Harrahash*—Wallbreaker—was ready. He walked over to Seban Rashnan, the captain of engineers in charge of constructing the beast.

'How much longer must we wait?'

The captain bowed low as his superior approached. 'Not long now, Colonel.'

'Do you know how many men we've lost trying to scale those cursed walls? Twenty-three thousand! *Twenty-three thousand* in less than two weeks! If it continues like this, we'll be bled dry!' he screamed, striking the captain with his riding crop.

Seban fell to the ground and the colonel kicked him where he lay. 'Mercy! Mercy, I beg you! The roads, my Colonel. They have been full of troops and supplies. We had great difficulty getting all of the parts here. The last pieces only arrived today.'

'Cease your whining, dog! If it is not ready by midday, then *you* will be the first missile it fires.'

'Oh please, my Colonel. It's not my—'

'Midday, cur!' screamed Mysharrif, kicking Seban once more before he left.

The captain of engineers sat on the grass, watching the colonel leave. The soldiers filing past tried not to show that they were watching what happened. Any officer was capable of having them flogged or beheaded. Even a lowly captain of engineers.

Seban slowly stood and dusted down his uniform.

Peering up at the sky, he estimated it was four hours before midday. He swallowed hard and ran back to where his men were fitting the last pieces of the huge machine together. 'Get your lazy backsides moving! I want this finished!' he shouted, at no-one in particular.

There was a flurry of renewed activity around Harrahash, thanks in main, to Seban running around with a large stick hitting all and sundry. By eleven thirty, the massive arm was secured, and a team of pullers was lowering it down into firing position.

Colonel Mysharrif approached still looking red-faced.

Seban ran towards the colonel, bowing as he ran. 'It is ready, Colonel! Harrahash awaits your command.'

Mysharrif eyed the cringing man.

'So... you have finally finished?' he said, standing with legs apart and hands on hips before the worried captain. 'And before midday too. Pity. The men would have enjoyed seeing you fly.' He grinned.

Seban didn't know whether to laugh or cry, his head bobbing loosely up and down in terrified reverence, his lips frozen in a pained smile. 'Yes, as ordered, Colonel'

'Good. Now we shall see how strong those walls really are!' Mysharrif guffawed.

The first missile fell miserably short. Mysharrif scowled at Seban. The captain almost fainted but managed to hold himself together long enough to order a reload.

The second missile smacked right into the wall with a terrible shudder as the vast lump of stone made contact with the twenty-feet-thick outer wall, lumps of masonry showering the defenders for hundreds of paces away from the impact site. A sudden hush fell across Kan-Ta.

Three more times, Harrahash hit the same spot and by nightfall, a large crack ran right up the wall and across the walkway.

All lights were doused in the city as the people huddled in fear.

General N'Dhun stood watching from the second wall as the last great lump of rock slammed into the outer defences.

The king appeared at his side. 'How goes it?' N'Dhun glanced over.

'It could be better, sire.'

The king nodded. 'How much longer do we have?' The general exhaled deeply. 'Sometime tomorrow.'

'I see,' the king said, looking at the outer wall for a long time before answering. 'Get the citizens to the second level, Markas. Do it tonight!'

'But, sire, what about accommodation?' he asked.

'It will be made available. The royal tower has many empty rooms and halls. If you need me, I'll be in the temple, praying.'

'Yes, sire. I will see to it.'

The king walked back down the walkway and down the stairs to his waiting carriage, leaving the general to his thoughts. High up on the King's Tower, the wind picked up and unfurled the flag of Jarro. It flapped between open and closed in the growing gusts. A storm was coming.

#### **Day 14**

'Halt! Who goes there? Friend or foe?' came a voice from the twilight.

'Another picket-line,' Preem whispered. 'Friend! Patrol returning with prisoners!' he yelled.

As they walked into the clearing, three sentries stepped forward with spears

levelled.

'Easy, men.' Preem gave a friendly wave to the enemy soldiers as they approached. 'I'm Major Amras of the Anvar Heavy Foot. We caught these two trying to slip through our lines,' he said, indicating Aaron and Askert.

'Where are you bringing them?' asked a tall slim Eastman with dark hair and

urgent eyes.

'Central Command, for interrogation.'

'What're you Anvars doing all the way back here? Most of your lot are over by the eastern gate.'

'On our way back there now. Started tracking these two last night. It took a while to catch them up. They seemed to be in a hell of a hurry.' He grinned.

The sentry eyed them suspiciously.

'Listen,' said Preem nonchalantly. 'You would be doing us a great service if

you would drop them off for us. We haven't eaten since last night.'

The sentry stiffened. 'I'm sorry, sir, but we can't leave this post. I'm afraid we can't help. Central Command is over there. It's no more than two miles on hawk's wings.' He pointed off towards the southeast.

'Are you sure you can't help us out? We'd be forever in your debt.'

'Afraid not.' The sentry's face hardened.

Preem nodded and turned. 'Suppose we'll have to eat later. Let's go,' he said, walking past the sentries and into the eastern encampment.

As they passed by, Aaron heard the sentries mumbling to each other.

'Told you what these westerners were like, didn't I? Always looking for someone else to do *their* work for them.' The first guard scowled after Preem as he spoke.

Aaron suppressed a smile.

Once inside the sprawling camp, they kept to the fringes, away from any officers and from the bulk of the army. It took the best part of the morning to work their way around to the eastern side of the city. When they arrived, there was a lot of activity around the big trebuchet.

'Looks like they're getting ready to use it,' mumbled Preem. 'We could rush

them, I suppose.'

'Rushing in would be of little use. I need sufficient time at the machine to

build my power,' said Askert.

'So that's out of the question then,' said Aaron.

'We'll have to wait for nightfall,' said Preem. 'Let's have a good look around. We need to come up with a plan, and we need to get you out of that Jarro uniform.' He nodded toward Aaron. 'We can't keep walking around in circles with you sticking out like that. Wouldn't be long at all before we attracted unwelcome attention.'

Most of the eastern army were on the plain before the city, so there were a lot of empty tents to the rear. It didn't take much looking to find one large enough to accommodate them, and they even found a spare Anvar uniform for Aaron.

They sat and waited for night to fall.

AT FIRST LIGHT, HARRAHASH had resumed its bombardment. The first huge boulder crashed into the wall with a sickening thump. By late afternoon, a large V-shaped chunk of wall had collapsed out into the moat, and by early evening, the wall was close to total collapse.

Colonel Mysharrif beamed with delight at Seban.

Seban smiled back elated to finally be in Mysharrif's good graces. The colonel nodded, and Seban released the firing mechanism, sending a rock flying. It sailed through the air and crashed through the final few feet of wall, sending stone, rock, and dust flying in all directions. As the dust settled, a gaping hole forty feet wide, where the missile had smashed through, was visible. At the sight of the breach, the last of the Jarro defenders retreated to the second defence wall, abandoning the empty city to the Eastern Host. The unbreakable had been broken. The Eastmen charged across the divide and entered the city.

As night fell, they looted and pillaged the empty houses and shops but were mindful to stay far enough away from the archers lining the second wall. New fires sprang up by the minute. It seemed the host would extract revenge even from wood and stone.

'IT LOOKS CLEAR, COME out.' Aaron was standing outside the tent, holding the flap open.

The others followed him out into the darkness. After walking a short distance, the city came into view. Flames billowed high into the night sky, silhouetting the outermost wall. The breach was obvious even from this long distance. They stood horror-stricken for long minutes.

'Is it over? Have we lost?' asked Aaron.

Preem scanned the rest of the citadel. 'No. Look!' He pointed. 'The king's flag still flies over the tower. But their hearts will be low. Let's give them something to cheer. It's time to bring down that monstrous machine.'

Celebrations rang throughout the eastern camp, men were dancing and drinking at the fall of the first wall. There were few guards posted around the giant trebuchet, and those who were had their eyes fixed on the flames consuming parts of the city. It was an easy job to remove them from around the huge weapon.

Askert crawled in under the structure and placed his hands on the massive beams. 'You must leave now, Major. I'll wait until you get clear of the area.'

'What are you talking about? We'll wait for you,' said Aaron.

'You don't understand, Captain. I won't be coming back. This is as far as I go. Now, if you don't mind, I must gather myself. You have ten minutes to get as far away as you can.'

'You're right, I don't understand—' Aaron shook his head.

'What I am about to do will generate so much energy that I will not survive its release! Please go now; you have little time as it is!'

Seeing the look of resignation on Askert's face, Preem nodded and turned to

his men. 'We're leaving.'

They ran through a sea of tents on the outskirts of the battle without meeting anyone. In the darkness, they became divided until by the end, there was only Preem, Aaron and one other man left. Back at the trebuchet, Askert's body was

beginning to shake as the power within grew.

He was sucking in all of the energy that his small frame could hold. He opened his eyes and bright light shone from them like a beacon. He smiled and light shot from his open mouth, and squeezed through the openings under his fingernails. He lifted his head to the heavens and spoke. 'Only now, at the end, do I truly see. I had no idea! It's so… *beautiful!*' There was a loud thunderclap, and the trebuchet flew apart in a blast of blinding white light.

The large timbers of the weapon were ripped apart and utterly destroyed. East and west stood staring in awe at the explosion of light and noise that turned night to day in an instant. As the light faded, large pieces of the siege weapon came crashing back down to the ground. As the explosions roar ebbed away, all was still and dark once again. A raucous cheer rose up from the citadel as the Jarrian

troops capered and laughed at the deadly machine's destruction.

There was nothing left of the trebuchet, only a blackened hollow in the dirt marking where it had once stood. Preem and Aaron were thrown to the ground in the blast as debris and tents flew past their heads. After lying on their backs for a few moments, they finally fought their way out from beneath a pile of wreckage and stood looking back at where the weapon had been.

'If I live to be two hundred...' Aaron looked bewildered.

'You don't see that every day, that's for sure,' agreed Preem.

'Should we check to see if Askert is alive?'

Preem just looked at Aaron and raised his eyebrows.

Aaron nodded in resignation. 'What do we do now?'

Preem shrugged. 'See if they'll let us back inside.'

Aaron looked at Preem as if he had just gone insane. 'How do you propose to do that?'

'Well, we're dressed as Anvars... I was planning on just walking back.' He shrugged.

'And what about our own troops? They'll likely pickle us before we get close

enough to shout stop,' said Aaron.

'I didn't say it was without risk,' Preem answered, as he walked off toward the broken wall.

'Insane!' Aaron mumbled.

Preem's long strides were bearing him away at such a quick rate that Aaron had to run to catch up.

#### **Day 22**

The Last Day

The city had been stripped of all valuables. Anything that couldn't be easily carried away was destroyed. The clarion calls sounded assembly and the Eastmen rose again to the cry. The second wall had withstood every attack, but the defenders were much weakened now. One last big push by the enemy was all that was needed and the wall, and the war, would be lost. Robbed of their great siege engine, the Eastmen had to rely on manpower alone. General N'Dhun stood atop the foremost gate, helmet under arm.

The Jarrian troops lined the wall with bow and sword in hand awaiting the inevitable rush. A gentle tap on the shoulder made the general turn. There, in his

full battle armour, stood the old king.

'Sire, there's no need—' the general began.

'Where else would I be, Markas? It's time for *all* to fight... or die.' The general smiled. 'It will be good to stand by your side, my liege.'

Within short minutes, a throng of enemy soldiers came running through the streets towards the battered wall, some carrying ladders. With remorseless zeal, they threw themselves at the battlements, hacking and slicing, stabbing and cutting.

Fresh waves of arrows and spears cut men down mid-stride. A bridgehead was won and held. More men poured up from behind. The stout-hearted Jarrians faltered and were beaten back. In their midst, a silver-haired king stepped forward with vigour not remembered since youth. 'To me! To me, men of Jarro! For the people! For the Crown! For the memory of D'hun Jarro! Attack!' He leapt forward, swinging his sword, killing left and right.

His men, heartened by their king, surged forward again in a frenzy outstripping that of the enemy, pushing them back bit by bit until the battlement was re-won. As the enemy broke and fled the Jarrian frenzy, the king fell backwards, a crossbow bolt protruding from the centre of his chest. General

N'Dhun ran to the king's side and held him gently in his arms.

'Alas it's my end, Markas. I regret I'll not be here for the final blow. But my people could not be in better hands.'

'Nonsense; it'll take more than one Anvar bolt, sire. A day's rest, and a jug,

and you'll be back to your best.'

The king smiled through bloodstained teeth. 'Protecting me even now, sweet Markas. I have many regrets, but one above all. I couldn't save my dearest Megan. I would give anything to know that she is safe. Anything!'

There was a commotion amongst the troops standing on the parapet. Some

were looking and pointing towards the north.

'I have dreamt of her... She told me...' He coughed. 'She told me to pray to the North Wind, our salvation is at hand. The dragons... The dragons will come on swift wings... and the land will be cleansed.' His eyes closed. He was gone.

Markas hugged the king's body as bitter tears gathered and dripped onto his friend and mentor. He cared not who saw.

As the murmurings grew louder, Markas finally looked up. His men were looking out over the battlements and pointing north.

He gently laid the king's body down and stood to see what they were looking at.

The Eastmen were streaming out of the city after the failed attack, but that was not the cause of the furore. To the north, along the hills of the Northern Plain, a great army had gathered.

At its head was a young blonde-haired woman dressed in silver armour. By her side, a sandy-haired man in mail. And at their backs stood five

hundred dragons of red, yellow, and black with wings spread wide.

Anabel's eyes welled with bitter tears at the sight of her burning homeland. Through gritted teeth, she gave the order to attack. They swooped on the Eastern Horde like an avenging storm cutting a swathe through their startled ranks. The massed army cried as one, 'Death! Death!' And led by the golden-haired woman, they charged.

The Eastmen fled in terror. Many did not get far.

#### 51 Trinn

THE GORN RIVER LED them down to Lake Myre. The trees were less dense, closer to the lake, a product of the logging industry for which the area was famous. The lake was such a big expanse of water that one would be forgiven for thinking it an inland sea.

There was no sign of the far shore, just water all the way to the horizon.

Brok and Helfwen led the group down into Trinn, a small town inhabited by dwarves and men. The buildings were made of interwoven logs, the wood treated in an unusual way.

The bark had been removed and the normally white flesh of the tree stained the deepest brown come red. The road wound down into the centre of the town

and on to the port where many boats and ships lay at anchor.

After a brief word with the Harbour Master, Brinn returned to the group. 'Your passage has been booked, Alli. The ship's moored over there,' he explained, pointing out a large three-masted ship, off to the right. 'It will drop you on the southern end of the lake, and from there, you can make your way to Amaran and home.'

'You are my brothers. I will never forget you.' He hugged each in turn. Alli turned to Brinn. 'I hope we will meet again soon. I long for it already.'

They clasped forearms.

'As do I. Farewell, and safe home.'

Alli nodded, turned, and left. They stood watching him lead his horse up the gangplank and onto the ship. The sails were unfurled, and the plank and mooring ropes retrieved. It began to move, at first very slowly, but quickly gathered speed as the wind filled the rigging. Alli stood aft and waved. As the ship slipped beyond view, the Pathfinders turned and headed back towards the town. Brinn stopped his horse and turned in his saddle to look back out across the lake.

Brok stopped beside him. 'You seem troubled.'

Brinn kept staring at the large body of water, lost in thought. 'I have the strangest feeling...'

'I don't follow.'

Brinn shook his head. 'I can't explain it, even to myself. My skin prickles when I look across.'

'I expect you're eager to be on the far bank. Our Princess is out there somewhere off to the east, alone, frightened, and in need of our help. It's nothing more than that.'

Brinn turned to face Brok. 'Perhaps... Yes, you're right.' He nodded. 'After all, what else could it be?'

'My point exactly.'

They spurred their horses and quickly caught up with the others.

Helfwen was making for an inn. A ship to the eastern bank was sailing at first light on the morrow. Tonight, at least, they would drink, eat, and laugh.

#### End of Book One



I WOULD JUST LIKE TO take a moment to personally thank you for reading Book One of the Dark Lair Trilogy. I do hope that you are enjoying the story, and that perhaps you will continue to read on as the story continues.

Book Two – Maelstrom- will be released sometime around the middle of

2024 with book three to follow soon after.

If you enjoyed Wyvern, I would really appreciate it, so much, if you would leave me a review on Amazon. Reviews are essential for all indie authors, as we do not have the financial clout of the big publishers and therefore completely rely on you for your support.

Thanking you in advance, for that support, and above all else hoping that

you enjoyed the book.

With Heartfelt Thanks, DJO'Brien



# Dark Lair Trilogy Book Two Maelstrom

Heave -ho, me hearties, heave-ho.
Furl sail and run for home.
Twixed thunderous cloud and rising tide.
And mind the Maelstrom, berth her wide.
Or rest yer bones to windward side.
To ne'er again see smiling bride.
Heave-ho, me hearties, heave-ho.
("The Widow's Wheel."Ballad, circa 325 Mur-ro.)
Release date: Mid 2024

For more info please check out my website for story updates, or even just to say hello. All are most welcome. :)

https://www.dj-obrien.com