

The Unsuspecting Mage

Book One of The Morcyth Saga

Brian S. Pratt

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Above all others, this book is for my children; **Joseph, Breanna, and Abigayle**. I would like to thank my **brother**, who took the time to read the entire work and make critical criticism. I would also like to thank my **mother**, without whose steadfast belief in me and hard work, this work would never have been completed.

Thank you.

After *The Unsuspecting Mage*, check out a preview for:

Fires of Prophecy

**Book Two of
*The Morcyth Saga***

Chapter One

Having your nose in a book may be a great way to spend your spare time unless you do it to the exclusion of everything else. You get up, grab a book, then read until night comes when you're forced to put it down for sleep. Oh sure, you have the occasional interruptions in the pattern like eating and school but such things must be tolerated. James Reese was a young man in his senior year of high school who did just that. Unless something of dire importance demanded his attention, he would be found lying upon his bed deep within a current, favorite book. He saw nothing wrong with spending every available moment reading.

Reading to him was grand adventure, offering new ideas and kept him out of trouble. His main interest was fantasy-adventure books, though he did dabble in an occasional sci-fi so as not to get burnt out with fantastical worlds. Every book he ever read filled shelves which lined his walls. Now pushing over five hundred titles, it was the one thing he took the most pride in.

An obtrusive knock brought him back from the middle of a particularly exciting battle. "James," came his grandmother's voice from the other side, "breakfast is almost ready. Get ready or you are going to be late for school."

Unable to continue, he read another three paragraphs until reaching a break, then carefully inserted a well-worn bookmark and placed the book gingerly on his nightstand. He's read it

before. Many of his books have been read several times over the years, and most were still in very good condition. Those who knew him best believed that he cared more for his books than for anything else. There were times when he thought they might be right. Some of his friends kidded him when they saw him deep within a book he had read before.

“Don’t you ever get tired of reading the same book over and over?”

James just grinned and shook his head. “Nope.” Then he invariably asked, “I suppose you haven’t ever watched the same movie more than once?” Having made his point, they left him alone.

He grabbed a shirt and a pair of jeans from off the floor that didn’t look too dirty and got dressed. After slipping on his shoes, he slung his ever-present backpack over his shoulder and left the room.

The mouth-watering aroma of scrambled eggs, bacon and biscuits filled the house. His grandmother was busy in the kitchen where she put the finishing touches on breakfast. “Have a seat. It will be ready in a minute.” His grandparents raised him for the past five years, ever since his parents were killed by a drunk driver.

At the table, his grandfather read the morning paper. So intent was he on an article that he failed to notice his grandson taking his place at the table. James had some trepidation about disturbing his grandfather. For the last few months, his grandfather had been encouraging him to find a job. Almost daily, he pointed out ads in the paper that he felt James might be interested in.

It was his senior year and the summer was almost upon him. He knew he needed to make some decisions about his future but had never been that great when trying new things. Some called him antisocial; he thought of himself as merely non-social. He didn’t hate being around others, he just preferred time to himself with his books.

The noise of James setting his backpack on the floor drew his grandfather’s attention. James silently groaned as his grandfather leaned over to show him what was sure to be another ad that more than likely would fail to be of interest. It turned out to be anything but.

Local Teen Missing

Seth Randle, a teen from Haveston, was reported missing when he failed to return home Wednesday evening. The police have issued an Amber Alert and teams of volunteers are busy combing the local area. Thus far they have been unsuccessful. He was last seen on Wednesday afternoon on his way home from Haveston High School where he is currently enrolled as a senior. If you have any information please call 911...

“Isn’t he one of your classmates?”

“Yes, but I don’t know him very well. He’s on the football team and is well liked by everyone. Hope he’s okay.”

Further conversation was forestalled by the emergence of his grandmother from the kitchen bearing a platter filled with eggs and bacon in one hand, and a pan that held a dozen biscuits in the other. James eagerly took charge of the biscuits and deftly transferred one to his plate then set the warm pan on the table. He helped himself to a big portion of his grandmother's blackberry jam. It won 2nd place at the county fair last year; old Widow Jones took 1st place. His grandmother claimed that Widow Jones put too much sweetener in her jams and that is why she won every year. About to take a bite, he heard her say, "James, let's say grace first." She had that look in her eye. He gave her a sheepish grin, and set the biscuit on his plate, folded his hands and bowed his head for prayer.

His grandfather prayed. "Dear Lord, please bless this food to our good, watch over us and guide us. And *please* help James find a job! In Jesus' name, Amen."

"Leave the boy alone, John," his wife chided as she placed her napkin in her lap. "He'll find one when the good Lord is ready." She turned her attention to James. "Make sure to find one that you will be happy with. There is nothing worse than spending your life at a job that is dull and lifeless. One should come along when the time is right. Now hurry and eat or you will be late for school again."

He stuffed his mouth with eggs and bacon. "I better eat on the run, then." He tucked several biscuits in a napkin and placed them in the top of his backpack. Her biscuits, especially when warm, were hard to resist. "Thanks for another award winning breakfast," he said before he gave her a peck on the cheek, and then headed for the back door.

"Don't forget your lunch, it's by the door."

"Got it!" he hollered as he stuffed it in his backpack.

Once out the back door, he grabbed his bike, hopped on and quickly made his way down the road toward school. Haveston High wasn't much more than a mile away and it only took him a few minutes to arrive.

Police cars, both marked and unmarked, were in and around the parking lot. Two officers stood amidst a group of students while three officious looking men in business attire entered the office.

He pulled into the bike rack, grabbed his chain and secured his bike. His best and only friend Dave arrived as he pushed the lock closed. He parked his bike in the adjacent slot.

"Hey, did you hear that Seth is missing?"

James glanced to his friend and nodded. "Yeah, I saw it in the paper this morning. Wonder what happened to him?" He spied a nearby policeman.

Approaching the officer, Dave asked, "What's going on?"

"We're questioning students about Seth Randle. His mother said he's been missing since Wednesday evening. Would you boys know anything about it?"

"No," replied James, who shook his head. "We barely knew him."

"That's right," Dave added.

The officer handed each a card bearing pertinent contact information. "If you see or hear anything that might help us locate him, please call."

"Sure."

James glanced at the card. "If we hear anything we'll be sure to let you know."

Heading to class, they couldn't help but wonder what happened to Seth.

The rest of the day, all anyone could talk of was Seth. They had an assembly before lunch where they were told the facts that surrounded his disappearance. Evidently, he had headed downtown after school and that was the last anyone had heard from him. They were given the standard lesson on strangers and what to do in emergencies, the basic "Don't talk to strangers" lecture they had for years.

Lunchtime found James and Dave in their regular spot in the lunch room. Both were brown-bagging it but Dave was not very enthusiastic about his lunch. He produced a poorly wrapped sandwich. Turning to James, he held it up.

"How about a trade? My mystery meat for whatever your grandmother made?"

James removed a six inch homemade hoagie from his sack and smiled. "Not on your life, bud. My stomach isn't that strong. Besides, after all these years of your mom's infamous cooking, you should be used to it by now."

Taking a bite, Dave replied, "I suppose so. No use in subjecting another to this stuff."

Hearing a sigh from his friend, Dave looked over to see James looking at a small piece of paper.

"What's the matter?"

"I thought I had gotten off easy this morning. You know how my grandfather always mentions jobs he thinks I would like?" When Dave nodded, he continued. "Well, instead of pressuring me about it this morning, he slipped one in with my lunch." He gazed at the ad as he bit off a good-sized portion of his sandwich.

After another bite he said, "This one is at least interesting, if a little odd."

"What do you mean?"

James offered him the ad. "Here, read it."

Dave wiped his hands on his pants, and took the ad:

Magic! Real Magic! Ever wanted to learn?

We require someone with intelligence and a disciplined mind. Those well versed in fantasy novels and role playing games a plus. May need to travel. Only those of good character need apply. No appointment necessary. For preliminary interview, drop by at:

1616 Commercial Ave
Room 2334
Haveston, CA

"That is different, I'll give you that," affirmed Dave as he handed the ad back. Putting it in his wallet, James asked, "What do you think?"

Pausing for a moment to think while he finished a mouthful of food, Dave replied, "Well, it is right down your alley. You have read more books than I could even hope to get through, and we play D&D every once in a while. Maybe you should look into it. You've always said you would like to travel and see the castles of England; maybe this will be your chance. It sounds like some traveling magician or something."

"Yeah, you're right. Maybe I'll go down tomorrow and see what it's about. If nothing else, it should please my grandfather and maybe get him off my back, at least for a day or two." Taking another bite of his hoagie, James pondered the ad, thinking it might be worth looking into.

Pointing off to the right Dave said, "There's Alyssa. You should go invite her to the dance next week. I know you have a thing for her."

James took a brief glance her way and sighed. "I haven't quite worked up the nerve. I've tried twice, but my mouth gets all dry and I can't find the words. I'm afraid I'll look like an idiot."

"You need to get out of that room of yours more. Stop spending so much time in there alone with your books and start living a little more in reality. She's nice and I believe still available."

"I know. Maybe I'll ask her Monday."

"If you ask her at all you mean." Dave's attempts to bring him out of his room met with very little success, but he kept trying.

Once they finished eating, the boys left the lunch room and made their way to the chess room where they spent the rest of their lunch break role playing. James usually ran the game since he enjoyed making the campaigns more than Dave did. Back in his bedroom he had a whole collection of campaigns that had never been played. He liked designing them more than playing them.

Dave on the other hand preferred to be the character or characters. He played a thief and a mage who were currently trying to find the third ring of Xanak, the god of fire.

James set up his godwall and removed the dice and papers from his backpack. He always kept meticulous notes during his campaigns. Dave got his papers, dice, and the player's rulebook. Once everything was ready, they began.

"Your mage and thief had infiltrated the Red Rogue's Lair," he began giving a brief recap of where they left off the day before. "You had just found a flight of stairs and began to descend."

"On to fame and fortune!" Dave exclaimed with a grin. "My thief is checking for traps as they go down the steps."

James nodded. "No traps were found. Upon reaching the bottom step, you discovered a long hallway stretching far into the darkness ahead. A sound could be heard coming from out of the dark, and it seemed to be coming toward you..."

The rest of the day went along pretty much as usual; classes, including the dreaded PE class that he was on the verge of flunking. He simply was not much into sports or anything else that required one to sweat. His gym teacher told him he needed to show more enthusiasm for the physical side of life, but his teacher's arguments did nothing to sway him. It's not that James was fat or anything, he actually appeared quite fit. He just didn't go for the active side of life.

After school at the bike rack, Dave informed him that he planned to accompany him to the interview. For moral support, as he put it.

“You don’t have to come with me, you know.”

“I know. But you stand a better chance of following through if I do.”

James secured the chain beneath the bike seat then glanced to his friend. “Are you afraid I am going to chicken out or something like that?”

Dave flashed him a grin. “As a matter of fact, yes, yes I am!”

“I plan on catching the 512 at 9. If you’re serious about coming, meet me at the bus stop.”

“I’ll be there.”

“Okay, see ya tomorrow!” With that, James hopped on his bike and headed for home.

At dinner, he told his grandparents about his decision to go to the interview.

“Now remember, James,” his grandfather said, “when you are at an interview you are interviewing them as much as they are interviewing you. Never settle for conditions that you are not going to like. Be assertive.”

James nodded his head. “I will. I don’t plan on making any decisions on the spot. I am simply going there to find out about the job and how much it pays. It sounded interesting.”

Showing concern on her face, his grandmother said, “Be careful while you’re there. The last place anyone saw poor Seth was heading into town. Watch yourself.”

“Please don’t worry about me, I’m almost eighteen. Plus, Dave plans on coming along. I’m sure that between the two of us, we’ll be able to handle any situation.” Knowing that it was love that prompted his grandmother’s concern, he gave her a reassuring hug.

A little after dinner, James was in his room reading when a rap upon his door brought him out from a deep dungeon fraught with danger.

“Yes?” he hollered without ever removing his eyes from the pages of the book.

“James. You should come and see this.” It was his grandfather.

“Now what?” he mumbled. Slipping his bookmark within the pages, he set the book on his nightstand and made his way out to the living room. There he found his grandparents raptly watching the news.

“Another person is missing,” his grandmother said. “This time a girl.”

Interest piqued, James sat next to her on the couch.

An image of a young woman who looked to be in her teens was pictured behind the reporter. The newsman went on to say that this was the second person to come up missing in the past week. There were no leads, no connection between them. They came from different cities in the same area and disappeared without a trace. The report continued with interviews of family members of the two missing teens.

“This is serious,” his grandfather said. “You need to be extra careful tomorrow when you are downtown.”

“I will,” James assured him. He watched the report on the missing teens until the reporters began repeating themselves. Then he returned to his room where he resumed his position upon his bed and picked up his book.

He found it difficult to concentrate on the story. After realizing he read the same paragraph three times he decided that it was a lost cause and returned the book to the nightstand. Thoughts and worries about the interview tomorrow made him far too nervous to be able to concentrate on reading. The ad continued running through his mind,

...well versed in fantasy novels and role playing games...

...may need to travel...

It sounded exciting.

Maybe Dave was right. It could be a traveling magician.

Different theories and thoughts ran through his mind until it was time for bed. After crawling beneath the covers, he set the alarm for seven thirty before he switched off his reading lamp. He lay in the dark, and enjoyed the cool air as it drifted in through the window above his bed. Eventually, sleep triumphed over tomorrow's worries and he was able to fall asleep.

It felt like he had no sooner fallen asleep than his alarm went off. Hitting the off button, he rolled onto his back and tried unsuccessfully to keep his eyes open. He was simply way too comfortable and almost didn't have the energy to pull the covers off and get the day going. His sense of responsibility eventually overcame his laziness and he managed to drag himself out of bed. Also, Dave would never let him hear the end of it if he left him waiting at the bus stop.

After a quick shower, he threw on some of his better clothes. Not his church clothes to be sure, but ones good enough to look nice. Once he was dressed, he took his backpack and emptied his role playing paraphernalia onto his bed. He put a clean handkerchief in his backpack along with the book he was currently reading. Pausing a moment, he decided to take the two candy bars that laid in the pile on his bed and placed them inside as well. Shouldering his ever present backpack, he opened the door and went to see about breakfast.

Sausage, eggs and biscuits were already on the table. His grandparents were nice enough to wait for him before eating. "My, don't you look nice," his grandmother said.

Coming to the table, he gave her a grin. "Thanks. I better eat on the run, or I might miss my bus." He threw together two sausage, egg, and biscuit sandwiches, wrapping them in a napkin. His grandmother's "Good luck, James!" followed him through the door.

He hurried down the road to the bus stop where he would catch the 512, managing to finish his breakfast on the way. Dave was already there.

"Good morning," offered a cheerful Dave. He always had been a morning person, which usually irritated James.

"Good morning yourself," growled James somewhat moodily. He definitely was not a morning person.

Keeping an eye out for the bus, Dave said, "I hear they have a new laser tag area at the arcade. Want to try it after your interview? The loser pays for lunch."

"You're on, I can almost taste the burgers now," boasted James as he, too, kept a lookout for the 512. When he saw it turn the corner he announced, "Here it comes." Picking up his backpack he readied to board the bus. The 512 came to a stop and they waited a moment while an elderly woman departed. Showing the driver their passes, they moved to the back of the bus and took

their seats. The 512 would take them most of the way. They would transfer to the 33 for the last leg to Commercial Avenue.

When the bus pulled out of the stop, Dave glanced to James. “Nervous?”

“A little. I’m glad you decided to come along; it’s partly the reason I am even here. When I woke up this morning, all I wanted to do was lay there. But knowing you were going to be at the bus stop waiting for me, helped get me out of bed.”

“I thought so, that’s why I’m here,” Dave grinned. He was glad he could help his friend.

“You know,” Dave began after a few minutes, “you didn’t have to go and kill my thief that way.”

Feigning indignation, James asked, “What do you mean? Is it my fault the guy had an IQ of a turnip? He never should’ve rushed in like that. He was greedy.”

“Maybe. But I’ve been playing him for over a month now. He was all the way to level five.”

“Oh well, that’s life.”

As they got closer, James turned quieter as he dwelled more upon the upcoming interview. Dave made a couple of attempts to get him interested in further conversation but his mind really wasn’t on it. Finally, Dave gave up and they rode the rest of the way in silence.

When the Park and Ride was announced where they needed to transfer to the 33, James grabbed his backpack and pulled the cord. When the bus pulled in, they disembarked and went to a nearby water fountain for a drink.

Dave glanced at his watch. “About five minutes before the 33 shows up.”

The 33 did a loop through downtown and passed right down Commercial Ave. Going over to Berth 4 where they would board, James and Dave stood in line behind several other passengers. Dave nudged James when he saw a pretty girl wearing short shorts and a snug t-shirt, but James was too preoccupied with his interview ahead to pay much attention. The mere thought of the interview made his stomach do flip-flops.

Once the 33 arrived, they boarded and took the last leg to Commercial Ave. Had James been alone, he would have stayed on the bus. But since Dave was there, he pulled the cord as a tall building bearing the numbers 1616 came into view.

The bus pulled to the curb at the next stop half a block away. Butterflies were congregating in James’ middle as he stepped to the sidewalk and turned toward 1616 Commercial.

Dave slapped him on the shoulder. “Come on. It won’t be that bad.”

James gave him a half-hearted grin and nodded. The butterflies in his stomach were turning into vampire bats.

Passing through the front door, they crossed the lobby en route to the elevators and Dave pressed the UP button. While they waited, Dave noticed James looking at the building’s list of businesses. When he moved to join his friend, James glanced at him,

“There’s no listing for 2334.”

Dave shrugged and said, “Maybe they just moved in and haven’t had time to get the sign adjusted.”

“You’re probably right. Or maybe they don’t want to advertise who they are. That way if they are well known and rich, the applicants won’t know to ask for more pay.”

Shaking his head, Dave says, "You and your conspiracy theories. You always think someone is playing an angle or something."

Shrugging, James just smiled.

Ding!

The elevator door opened and they entered along with several others. James pressed the button for the 23rd floor. It took a few minutes before they arrived as the elevator made several stops to allow people on and off. By the time they reached the 23rd floor, they were the only ones remaining. Another ***Ding!*** and the door opened. Stepping out, they turned down the hallway to their right and came to the door marked 2334.

James paused at the door. He turned to Dave. "Should I knock or what?"

"Naw, just go on in."

Marshalling his courage, James opened the door and entered. Dave followed right behind. The room was empty except for several chairs and two end tables, each boasting a neat pile of magazines and a couple of books. Across the room a door stood closed; it bore a sign saying *Private* in bold letters.

"I guess we should sit down and wait."

Dave glanced at the door. "How are they going to know that we are here?"

"There's probably an alarm to let them know someone's here. Somebody will likely be out in a minute."

Looking through the material on a nearby table, James failed to find anything of interest, so he crossed the room to the table next to the door marked *Private*. Lying atop the other reading material sat a small brown book with a peculiar design inscribed in gold leaf upon the cover. Intrigued, he picked up the book but quickly let it go when the contact resulted in a shock of static electricity. The book hit the edge of the table and tumbled to the floor. It landed on its edge and a piece of paper slipped out.

The paper was folded in half. Curious, he picked it up and opened it.

"Welcome and thank you for coming. Glad you found the book. If you would read the first page and then walk through the door, we can begin the interview. If you brought anything with you, feel free to bring it along."

James picked up the book and looked at it with increased interest. He turned to Dave and showed him the book and letter. "Look at this." When Dave joined him, he handed him the letter. While Dave read, James said, "That's a dumb way to start an interview. What if I had never found the piece of paper? I could've been sitting out here for a long time!"

Dave looked up from the letter and shrugged. "You're right. This guy must be some kind of an eccentric or something. In the ad, he mentioned role playing games. Maybe in his mind this is some kind of test."

Nodding agreement, James sat in one of the chairs and opened the book to the first page.

Underlying Principles of Magic

The practice of magic is quite simple and basic. Magic is the process by which an individual taps into the reservoir of strength, or power within himself, and manifests it into changes of the world around him. Each individual contains the ability to manipulate this power. Some have the ability to do very little while others can literally bring down mountains.

Looking up from the book, James turned to his friend. “Unless I am mistaken, this book is going to explain the workings of a magic system. Not Houdini type, but more along the lines of Merlin or Gandalf. It’s talking about using the power within you to manipulate the world around you.”

“Weird. This guy must be a nut,” Dave joked.

“Yeah, but character or not, a job’s a job.” Turning back to the book, James finished the first page quickly. Closing the book, he climbed to his feet and the vampire bats returned in full measure. He glanced to the door marked *Private*. Sighing, he turned to his friend. “Wish me luck.”

“Luck!” replied Dave, and gave his friend an encouraging thumb’s up.

Slinging his backpack over his shoulder he gathered his courage, tucked the book under his arm and headed for the door. Pausing momentarily, he took a few deep, soothing breaths to calm his nerves, then opened the door and stepped through.

The crunch of dried leaves beneath his foot, coupled with the scene before him brought him to a stunned and sudden stop.

A meadow nestled within a forest of trees stretched before him. Birdsong filled the air and the wafting of a gentle breeze only added to the impossibility of it. Off to his right warbled a babbling brook that cut its way through the heart of this pastoral scene.

He remained rooted in dumbfounded shock as his brain tried to make sense of what he saw. He turned to ask Dave if he was hallucinating, but instead received another surprise. The doorway he had just passed through was no longer there. Instead, a stand of trees rose majestically to the sky not ten feet away.

Did I just cross over into the Twilight Zone?

Unable to believe what his own eyes told him, he rubbed them and then looked around the clearing. Trees swayed in the gentle breeze; birds soared against the backdrop of blue sky above. The soft trickling melody of the stream as it crossed the meadow gave this place a surreal feel.

Movement out of the corner of his eye drew his attention to the far side of the stream near a fallen log at the edge of the forest. What he saw nearly convinced him that he had lost his mind. Sitting atop the log was a strange little creature; about four and a half feet in height with skin a dark-greenish color. Wearing a blue vest and a crazy felt hat, it looked out of place in such a pastoral scene. Intelligence peered out from behind eyes of yellow and they stared right at James.

I’m having a hallucination. This can’t be real!

Unsure what to do, he walked through the grass of the meadow toward the creature. He paused at the stream in wary apprehension when he saw the creature hop off the log and get to its feet. When no hostile action was forthcoming, he leaped across the water and walked the few remaining feet until stopping before the creature. Staring into those yellow eyes nearly unnerved James completely. Somehow, he summoned the courage to say, "Hello."

To his utter astonishment the creature replied with a coherent "Hello."

James' eyes widened in surprise. "You can talk?"

Putting hands on hips, the creature's expression transformed into one that could only be considered sour. "Of course I can talk. Any intelligent creature can talk. But not many have anything worthwhile to say."

Before James got out his next question, the creature said, "*Where am I?* Was that to be your next question? You're not where you started out, boy. My master has set me here to get you started and that is all I intend to do. I am not here to hold your hand or wet-nurse you, do you understand?" The creature gave him an intent look as it waited for a response.

Nodding his head, James replied weakly, "I think so."

"Good. Now listen up and listen well, for I am here to tell you some things and I will only tell you once."

The creature held up a finger. "First of all, magic works here. Read the book you have in your hand. It will help you get a handle on it. Your survival may well depend on it. Scratch that. Your survival *will* depend on it."

"Secondly, you can't go home, at least not right now. Don't try. We won't stop you, but take it on faith that the way is simply not open to you."

"Lastly, get your sorry butt to the village of Trendle."

With that, the creature leaped backward into the air, and with a faint popping noise, disappeared.

James ol' boy, he thought to himself. *You're screwed!*

Chapter Two

His mind whirled as he attempted to come to grips with the enormity of the situation. *There has to be a rational explanation!* The forest surrounding the meadow appeared like any forest that might exist back on Earth; pine trees, birds singing in the distance, insects buzzing here and there; normality. Nothing strange, except for the little detail that there was no way he could have

arrived at such a place by stepping through a door. This was something straight out of one of his books.

The ad said “traveling.” Well, I have traveled. The ad also said that being well read in fantasy novels and experience with role playing games would be a bonus. Thinking of the little creature just encountered, James saw the logic in that as well. Such a background might enable a person to more willingly accept these odd occurrences. *Provided of course, that all this was real.*

Okay, let’s take this one step at a time. What actually happened to you? You were on the 23rd floor of an office building, stepped through a door and then found yourself in the middle of this meadow talking with an odd looking little creature. Have you lost your mind?

After taking a quick mental check, he decided insanity was not the culprit. But could an insane person tell? No odd thoughts or urges ran through his mind. No hallucinations, unless this meadow and that creature could be considered as such.

He ran his fingers across the grass. *Feels normal.* He again took in his surroundings. Everything looked and felt quite real. *So, if this **is** real, then what happened?* A breeze ruffled his hair which only added to the sense that all was real. He closed his eyes and took deep breath, held it for a second, and then slowly exhaled. Opening them again, he found the meadow unchanged. He didn’t really expect that to change things, but it was what everyone did who got into these sorts of situations.

I’m not in the Twilight Zone. I don’t see Rod Sterling over to the side talking to the viewers. At this point, he would hardly be surprised if he did. Then if this place is not a hallucination, it has to be real!

Holding up the book acquired in the waiting room, he took a much more interested look at it than before. An odd design was embossed on the cover, and the book held only a few pages. *Think, James, think! Let’s for the moment consider the possibility that all this is in fact real. What now? You were brought here for some purpose; that goes without saying. Why else would that little creature have been “sent” here to deliver the message? Could this be for your benefit? Probably not; it never is.* James reflected on various books read over the last several years. Some dealt with this sort of thing and if memory served, the main character rarely had a fun time of it.

For the sake of argument, let’s suppose this is in fact, a true guidebook on magic. And let’s further suppose that since I was brought here and told to bring it with me, then it stands to reason that I should be able to gain some benefit by the information contained within. Why else would they have bothered? And who exactly are “they?” Realizing some questions would have to wait, he opened the book and reread the first couple paragraphs. Two sentences grabbed his attention:

Rhyme and meter are the most effective forms of spell construction.

Maintain a visualization of the effect you wish to produce.

Sounds easy enough. What the heck, let's give it a try. Best to keep it simple. He spied a small stick lying on the ground. Concentrating, he created a visualization of the stick rising off the ground. *Now for the words...*

***Little stick that I have found,
Float three feet off the ground.***

Mimicking the action of a dozen different wizards from literature and film, he raised his hand toward the stick and spoke the incantation. With the utterance of the first word, an odd sensation developed deep within his body. Sort of like water rising behind a dam. The growing pressure was not an entirely unpleasant feeling. The utterance of each word caused the pressure to build. As soon as the last word was spoken, the dam broke and power surged forth. He could almost see magic flowing from his outstretched hand to the stick, though it was probably just his imagination.

The stick slowly rose. It reached nearly a foot off the ground before he became so excited at the effect that his concentration broke and the stick fell back to the ground with a clatter.

I DID IT!!!!

James ol' boy, you are one amazing wizard!

Cavorting with jubilation, he raced over and examined the stick which just a moment before had been floating in the air. He hesitantly reached out and touched it. Seeming normal, he picked it up and examined the wood more closely but didn't see anything out of the ordinary. Feeling a little cocky, he quickly formulated another set of words, visualized the effect he desired, then tossed the stick into the air yelling,

***Stick who once on the ground did lie,
Stay your course there in the sky!***

His verse wouldn't win any poetry contests; but then, at the moment he was more into functionality than artistry. This time he was determined to maintain the visualization. With the utterance of the last word, the power once again surged forth. The stick's flight came to a sudden halt at eye level. As it floated motionless, James controlled his excitement so as to maintain the visualization and not disrupt the spell.

He came to the stick and grinned while walking around where it hovered. Moving his hand over and under the stick, as a magician might do to prove to his audience the absence of supporting wires, he encountered nothing. He then reached out and placed his index finger upon its wooden surface. The stick moved the barest of a fraction, but otherwise maintained its position. Placing his hand under the stick, he ceased concentrating upon his desire for the stick to remain motionless in the air and it dropped into his hand.

"Yes!"

Quite pleased, he smiled at his success. *I could get to like this.* Then sadness came over him when he thought of how his grandparents were going to feel when he didn't come home. *I may*

never make it home. Oh my God! What about Dave? He saw me go through the door. How will he take it? I guess the best he can, that's all any of us can do.

Reaching into his backpack he removed one of the candy bars he had brought along and munched on it while contemplating his next course of action. *Savor it while you can. No telling how long it will be before you can get another.* Then the reality of his situation sunk in. *What am I going to do for food? Shelter? Toilet Paper???* The thought of using leaves didn't bother him half as much as it had before that one camping trip with his dad oh so long ago. He smiled wistfully at the memory.

Realizing that leaning against the log wasn't going to improve his situation; he finished the candy bar and then took a really good look around the clearing to determine by which direction he should leave the meadow. Other than the stream, there was naught but trees and more trees. Each direction looked as densely forested as another.

By the position of the sun, it was a little after midday. This surprised him as it had only been mid-morning when he and Dave departed the bus on Commercial Avenue. *Maybe time works differently here?*

One of the things that little creature had said was "to get your sorry butt to the village of Trendle," wherever that may be. The forest looked unforgiving, lacking even the most rudimentary type of path. He would have to forge his way through a tangle of underbrush when he left.

Trendle. *It would've been more helpful if he would have at least told me which way to go!* Sighing, he pulled a quarter out of his pocket, **Heads- North or South, Tails- East or West.** He flipped the coin in the air and let chance be his guide. He grabbed the quarter on its descent, flipped it on the back of his hand and looked. Tails. East or west then. Taking the coin one more time he tossed it up into the air. Heads- East Tails-West. This time he allowed the quarter to fall to the ground and come to rest. **Tails. West it is.**

Determining where West was by the position of the sun, he shouldered his backpack. A touch of excitement mingled with fear and apprehension. Sure, he had no clue where he was or even if he would ever find his way home. But beneath such a beautiful blue sky on a warm summer day, things didn't seem quite so bad. He had worked magic hadn't he?

En route across the meadow to the forest's edge, he spied a sturdy branch lying upon the ground. After removing the smaller twigs and branches, he soon held a stout walking stick. Turning back to the forest, he paused upon reaching the edge. His excitement dimmed as he stood there about to enter an unknown world. *What lies beyond these trees? What secrets may be hidden within? Beneficial ones? Or those less so?* Taking a deep breath, he pushed a tangle of undergrowth out of the way and entered the forest.

Using the walking stick to clear a path, he forged through a tangle of bushes lining the edge of the clearing only to find more beyond. James had always liked being in the woods, even ones as overgrown as this. Time spent in the outdoors had always brought him a peace that could never be found in a city or around other people. His dad used to take him camping in forests similar to this one when he was little. Good times.

James soon realized that this forest was nothing like the tame camping areas his dad had taken him. For one thing, this one had no paths. The bushes and trees had become an entangled mess, forcing him to push his way through, often with painful results. Walking across the uneven ground soon had his ankles aching. Bleeding from a myriad of scratches and scrapes, his feet protesting, the adventure was soon over and all he wanted to do was go home.

An hour into the forest, a growl from his stomach reminded him that his last meal had been some time ago. Within his backpack still remained a single candy bar. Not wanting to consume the last of his food, he sighed and left it where it was, much to the loud protestations of his stomach.

Time passed as he continued his way through the forest. The sun gradually made its descent toward the horizon. The shadows grew long. In the deepening gloom, his imagination turned the surroundings into a veritable host of frightful beasts. Every sound made him jump, every shadow contained a monster. After the sixth murderous beast bent on his destruction turned out to be an old stump overgrown by a bush, he figured the time had come to find a place to hole up for the night.

But there was no place. All about him was nothing but trees and more trees. Sleeping upon the ground held little interest as he didn't want to be awakened by a hungry carnivore. He turned his attention to the upper boughs and located a sturdy one forming a crook with the truck that had accessible lower branches. Climbing had never been one of his strengths, and it took several attempts before he made it off the ground. He reached the limb where he would spend his first night in this world and settled into the crook. Leaning his back against the trunk, he tried to get comfortable and failed miserably.

The forest descended into a place of haunting shadows and mysterious noises as the night gradually deepened into darkness. Hungry, scared and exhausted, he clung to the tree. His body hurt from hundreds of scratches received from pushing through obstinate bushes all afternoon. The throbbing from his feet and ankles lent another level to his misery. Shifting position often, he simply couldn't find any that was comfortable. It was not long before his bottom began to hurt then grow numb, which forced him to continue moving about in a fruitless attempt to alleviate his discomfort.

In the tree scared and alone, the light gradually faded away around him. For the first time he truly knew what it meant to be alone. The intricate canopy of leaves prevented even the smallest glimmer of starlight from filtering through. He sat in the dark, with head resting against the bole of the tree and listened to the sounds of the forest. Off in the distance he heard the passage of some large creature as it made its way through the underbrush. Not long after that, from off in another direction came the sound of two animals fighting. Hoping nothing found him in his perch, he hugged the tree even harder.

I want to go home!

Tears of loneliness and fear rolled down his cheeks. Somehow, though long in coming, he fell asleep.

Howrrrrrrrr!

Startled awake, teeth chattering from the cold, James was hit with the realization that he hadn't been having a bad dream after all. Another howl brought him fully awake. Off in the distance came the sound of a wolf pack on the hunt. With every howl, the fear that he might be found caused him to grip the tree even tighter. Face pressed tightly against the bark, his eyes darted to and fro in an attempt to pierce the shadows of the forest and see those that hunt the night. All the while he silently prayed to remain undetected.

The darkness of the night was alleviated somewhat by slivers of moonlight that had somehow managed to breach the thick forest canopy sporadically in the distance. The sparse rays gave the forest an aura of ghostly light. Perched in his tree, James remained still and quiet while he listened to the hunting pack.

Minutes passed and it was soon apparent that the hunt was taking them toward his tree. Fear such as he has never known sprung to life within him. Suddenly their cries altered, and became more intense, large bodies crashing through the underbrush straight toward his tree. A moment later, three dark shadows raced through the darkness not far below his feet.

“Get away! Help Me!”

Cries of terror from off in the distance split the night. *They're not after me!* Relief at not being their target was followed quickly by shame at being glad it was someone else. For a fleeting moment he considered doing something to help, perhaps shouting for the man to climb a tree. But fear stilled his tongue. He did not want to die.

Off in the distance, he caught sight of the man racing through a patch of moonlight. Hot on his heels, two wolves followed a split-second later

Tears streamed down his cheeks as the man's fearful cries for help sounded once more. A bloodcurdling scream; then the night turned deathly silent. James shook with fear and shame; fear that he might be next, shamed by his own cowardice.

There was nothing I could do! Had I gone to help, I would have been torn to shreds as well. Getting little comfort from such selfish reasoning, he pressed his face against the bole of the tree and tried to think of home as he attempted to shut out the sound of the wolves. Sometime later, he heard the wolves howl as they raced off through the forest. As the woods grew quiet once more, he tried to keep his imagination from replaying the scene of the man's grisly death. Sleep, when it did come, was filled with dreams of moonlight and wolves.

The morning sun woke a very tired, cold and sore James. The events of the night before showed him that to remain in the forest would mean his death. *I gotta get out of here. No more pussyfooting around, I have to cover ground before night comes!*

Making sure the forest floor held no menacing predators, he made his way from the tree. He then took care of his morning business, realizing that plant leaves were not a good substitute. His mind then turned to food, or rather his lack thereof.

Nearby stood a bush bearing little pink berries. In his starved state, they looked delicious. Walking over, he picked one. Holding it between his fingers, the thought occurred that the berry may very well be poisonous. He contemplated his chances of survival if it was; they weren't good, but the growling of his stomach could not be denied. Figuring one wouldn't kill him, he

put it in his mouth and bit into the firm flesh of the berry just hard enough to squirt forth a small measure of its tart juice. Not very ripe but not entirely unpleasant either. Chewing it slowly, he waited to see if there would be any unpleasant reactions. When none materialized, he swallowed.

Picking several more of the riper ones, he wrapped them in a leaf before putting them in his backpack. If he didn't get sick in an hour or two then he would eat the rest.

Recalling the events of the night before, he wondered if the man killed by the wolves might have something that may be of use. James grabbed his walking stick and headed in that direction, not looking forward to what he would find. It wasn't long before he came to a scene out of an old slasher movie. Bones littered the ground; blood was everywhere. The man's clothing had been shredded.

Horror took hold of James as his gaze fell upon the remains of the poor guy's jacket. The letters *H-A-V-E-S*... were still discernable across the remaining portion of the jacket's back. It looked very much like a letterman's jacket from his high school. Using the end of his walking stick he turned the torso over. Stitched in gold lettering upon the left breast was the name "Randle."

His legs gave out and he dropped to his knees. "Oh, Seth." Shrieking, he cried, "There was nothing I could do!" Guilt and shame at his weakness last night left him shaking and wracked with sobs. *I should have done something!* Would the knowledge that it was Seth being pursued by wolves made any difference? Ashamedly, he realized it wouldn't. *Coward!*

"Though there was nothing I could do for you last night, there is something I can do for you now." With that, James grabbed a rock and dug a hole, a grave for his former classmate. It took him some time since the ground was firmly packed, but he excavated a cavity large enough. He then set about the grisly task of gathering Seth's scattered remains and laid them in the grave. When the job was complete, James covered Seth with dirt then made a cairn of stones. Tying two sticks together with vines for a makeshift cross, he hammered it into the ground with a stone at the head of the cairn.

Taking a moment, he said a few parting words before picking up his backpack and walking stick. Taking a deep breath in an attempt to settle his shaky nerves, he set out once more westward. Hopefully, he would come across this Trendle before the wolves picked up his scent. The woods no longer brought him peace as they had yesterday. Wariness and dread filled him today.

As he forged through the unyielding brush, James thought about what it meant that Seth had been in this world too. Could he have gone to the interview just as James had? And if so, were there others? Thinking back to the newscast the night before taking that fateful trip to Commercial Ave, he realized there could be at least one other person that had passed through the door marked "*Private*;" a girl. *Could there be still more?*

After jumping for a third time at the loud cry of a nearby bird, James came to the conclusion that he was going to need more than a walking stick if the wolves should return. Judging by his slow rate of progress through the forest, it was unlikely that he would break free before night came again, and he might not remain unmolested.

He thought about his walking stick, and how it was in many ways like a spear, he got an idea. Pausing for a moment, he opened the book on magic and made sure he understood what he must do. First, he formed a visualization of his desired outcome, and then put the words together. He leaned his walking stick against the side of a tree, took three steps back and said:

*As straight and true as a spear can be,
Filled with the strength of an old oak tree.
Make it sharp, to penetrate steel,
And perfectly balanced for user to feel.*

With the last word came the surge of power from deep within. He watched as the walking stick slowly changed, and became the mirror image of his visualization. Its surface smoothed, the end on the ground was rounded off while the other end came to a very fine point. When the spell ran its course, where the walking stick had been, now stood a dark brown spear.

James waited a moment to ensure nothing else might happen, such as the spear exploding or something equally unpleasant. When nothing did, he stepped forward and tested the sharpened tip with his finger. He jerked his hand back as a drop of blood welled out. *Sharp, I hardly even gave it any pressure.* Feeling somewhat better for having a weapon, he took the spear and once again set off toward the west.

What about armor, magical shields, spells of protection? As handy as having those would be, James simply didn't wish to push his luck as far as magic went. *I'm new at this. Keep it "Simple Stupid."* Besides, he hadn't the faintest idea how to create something like that. He didn't know enough about how to make a suit of armor, so how could he create one with magic?

As a Dungeon Master, he had forever stymied his players when they had attempted to use wish rings. When they wished for a million gold pieces, they would receive a million gold pieces fused together, usually in a very remote locale. If they wished for a suit of +100 plate armor, they would receive it. But when the armor was two feet thick and weighed a ton, it didn't do much good.

No, he figured to come at this magic business slowly, gradually growing in proficiency over time. He only hoped this world would allow him such a luxury.

Late in the morning, he came upon a small clearing. He paused at the edge and spied several rabbits. His stomach had been grumbling for the past hour. Those berries hadn't done much to satiate his hunger. As he gazed upon the rabbits, a memory of when his father had once caught and cooked a rabbit during one of their camping trips made it even worse.

Knowing that his skill rating with a spear was probably somewhere near zero, he came up with a spell to help his aim. As he held his spear and prepared to throw, he quietly said:

*Spear of mine please strike true,
Strike the rabbit and go right through.*

As the last syllable was spoken, he took aim at the nearest rabbit, drew back his arm and threw. When the spear left his hand, he again felt the surge of power. The spear flew unerringly through the air to impale the rabbit. True to the words of the spell, the tip of the spear passed completely through the rabbit and embedded itself deep in the ground. The attack caused rabbits to scatter in all directions. In no time, the clearing was deserted save for the lone, dead rabbit.

Yeah, Baby!

Excited, James ran to the rabbit, and watched as it kicked in its death throes. It took some doing to pull his spear from the ground. Next time, he may have to alter his wording to have the spear only kill the rabbit, not pass all the way through. But what's the difference, he had done it!

Once the spear came free, he turned his attention to the rabbit. Gazing at it, he suddenly realized he hadn't a clue what to do now. His only experience with this sort of thing was during the one camping trip in which his dad had caught and skinned one. *Didn't dad use his knife to remove the skin?* James wished he had spent more time watching and less time skipping rocks on the water.

The only thing he had that could be considered sharp was the spear which would be of little use in skinning a rabbit. Looking around the clearing, he spied a hand-sized stone. Striking it against a larger one, the smaller stone split in two. One half had a semi-sharp edge; it should work.

Very carefully he used the rock to slice off the head and feet. Feeling slightly nauseated, James took the rock and slowly peeled off the skin. The rock was definitely not the best tool for the job but he eventually had a rabbit ready for the spit.

His blood soaked hands reminded him of Seth, and a shudder ran through him, his gorge rising. *Steady boy, don't let the past rattle you. You did the best you could for him.*

Placing the carcass on a layer of leaves, James used dirt to rid his hands of much of the blood before gathering kindling. After clearing a site for the fire, he stacked the wood together then placed bits of dried moss beneath.

***Moss I placed under the wood
Ignite so I can cook my food.***

Hokey though his wording was, they proved effective. The moss began to smoke, then burst into flame. He kneeled and gently blew on the flickering flame, coaxing it higher until the kindling caught. Satisfied that the fire would continue on its own, he gathered several sticks to create a makeshift spit.

Once it was set and the fat from the rabbit began dripping into the fire, he relaxed against a tree trunk. Every once in a while, the far off cry of a wolf echoed through the trees. His fear of being discovered spiked each time. He definitely did not wish to spend another night in the trees, but what choice did he have?

The wolves were remarkably like the ones he would find in a forest back home. In fact, all the animals he had seen so far had been very Earth-like. If it wasn't for the little creature and the fact that he could do magic, he might very well have been back home on a campout.

He and his dad had gone camping several times. There were some of his best memories of his parents. They would go up around Yosemite and backpack, do the nature thing. His dad would catch fish and they would have a fish fry. When they returned home they would tell his mom about all the fish they had caught, both real and imagined. She would then say how proud she was of her little man.

What would dad say if he could see me now? I'm starting a bit rough but I have food and a weapon, as well as my health; I'm managing.

"You're doing fine, Son," his dad would say.

"I wish you were here with me, Dad. I don't remember all that you tried to teach me. I sure miss you."

"You're alive, James, be happy. You're in a bad situation but you're making the best of it. I taught you self-reliance and I'm mighty proud of you." His father stood there with a smile, the smile he always wore when James did something he especially liked.

With a tear in his eye James walked over to his father and gave him a hug. His father returned the hug warmly.

Crash!

Startled out of his daydream, James found the spit that once held his lunch burning in the fire, while his dinner ran away in the mouth of what looked like a small dog. *Stupid, daydreaming fool!* Lurching to his feet, he raced after. Running under bushes and around trees, the dog quickly out-paced him and was gone, along with his lunch.

"Damn!"

Returning to his fire, James took his spear and looked around the clearing for more rabbits or an acceptable substitute. Nothing! His yell and chasing the dog had scared everything away. *No use sitting around here!* Using his foot, he put out the fire, covering it with dirt. Grabbing his backpack, he stalked off with self-deprecating recriminations running through his mind, and a fierce growl in his belly.

No more than half an hour went by before he found, killed and began roasting another small animal. Not sure exactly what it was, it looked like a squirrel but the size of a small cat. This time he kept his wits about him and remained alert for any scavengers who might happen by.

The aroma of roasting meat made his stomach cramp. Impatient for the meat to be done, he removed it from the fire when it had cooked "enough." Taking the meat to a nearby tree, he sat with his back against the trunk and proceeded to eat.

As he bit into the roasted meat, the juices ran down his chin. *Never has anything tasted so good. Of course, I've never been this hungry before in my life. Wonder what grandma would do with this if she was here?* Thinking of his grandmother's cooking brought back the feeling of homesickness.

It seemed like he had just started when he stripped the last of the meat from the bone. He felt much better once he had something more substantial than berries in his stomach. A nearby stream provided the opportunity to cleanse his hands and face, as well as a much needed drink.

He also washed the blood off his “skinning” stone and placed it in his backpack. More than likely, he would need it again.

Refreshed, he grabbed his backpack and spear and set out once more in search of Trendle. If it wasn't for the possibility of meeting the same fate as Seth, he would be enjoying himself.

The nearby stream flowed in the general direction so he decided to follow. There was less of a chance of being turned around if he used it as a guide. Also, it might eventually lead to civilization. Streams lead to rivers, rivers to lakes and ponds. And where there was water, there were usually people.

Berry bushes lined the streambed and each held numerous berries. After eating a dozen or so he gathered a number of the ripest ones and wrapped them in a leaf before placing them in his backpack.

The rest of the afternoon proceeded in a manner similar to the morning; forging through inhospitable undergrowth bent on barring his way at all cost, relieved only by all too infrequent clearings. He did encounter one meadow that was rather extensive boasting two fair sized pools. Both were crystal clear, and in the afternoon sun, he could clearly see their bounty of dark-green fish with twin red stripes near the tail.

An hour before nightfall, the land began a more downward slope that ended at an abrupt drop. The stream flowed over the edge to cascade down the uneven surface in the guise of a small waterfall to form a small pond thirty feet below. An area to the right of the water would make an ideal campsite. With the wall of the drop at its back and flanked by the pond on one side and a large fallen tree on the other, it would provide a modicum of shelter through the night.

He first tossed his spear to the clearing below, then worked his way down the side of the drop. Once at the bottom, he rested his pack against the backdrop and gathered wood for the fire. After collecting a sufficient quantity, he took his spear and set out in search of game. It wasn't long before another rabbit met its end. Back at camp, he used his skinning stone and prepped it for the fire.

Using the same spell as before, he soon had the fire burning merrily and placed the rabbit upon the spit. Sitting there with the waterfall sprinkling into the pond twenty feet away, he listened to the fat pop and crackle as drips fell into the fire. He felt good. Another day without mishap. He was getting the hang of this world, the magic hadn't been too difficult, at least not the simple spells he had attempted.

Turning the rabbit occasionally for an even cook, he relaxed and enjoyed the peaceful interlude. The aroma from the meat was wonderful. He got up and walked over to the pond. It was a clear, sparkling blue. Kneeling at the edge, he took a good long drink. The water was so pure and crisp that he doubted there could be anything like it back home.

With the sun descending below the treetops, night was fast approaching. Returning to the spit, he checked the rabbit and saw that it was not quite ready. He grabbed his backpack and removed the berries gathered earlier. He unwrapped them and popped three in his mouth; he then set the others aside to have with the rabbit.

By the time the rabbit was fully cooked and the outer skin a dark brown, shadows fully enveloped the campsite. He took the rabbit off the spit and settled down to eat with a gusto only starvation could provide.

Once satiated, James discarded the carcass far from the camp to prevent it from drawing predators. On the way back, he gathered more wood, having no wish to freeze through another night. With the sun down, a chill crept into the air. Keeping a fire going all night would bring him comfort and hopefully safety from curious animals.

Stoking the fire, he settled down to sleep. Lying on his back and wishing for a blanket, he stared at the night sky and watched as it deepened and the stars came out. Events of the past two days played through his mind. It would be hard to credit the truth of it all if he hadn't lived through it. What happened to Seth now seemed like a bad dream, one from which there would be no awakening.

Magic was real. He wondered how much he dared attempt. In the role-playing world, magic was fraught with dangers, especially for those unschooled in its use. The book on magic gave very little actual instruction in how to work it; mainly just theory and suggestions.

He grinned about the little ditties he threw together for his spells. How simple and unimaginative they were. Not at all like the flowing, poetry variety of spells found in his books. *But they had worked, hadn't they? And wasn't that all that really matters?* The book hadn't said anything about increasing the effectiveness of a spell by upgrading the wording used.

A wooden spoon is just as effective when eating soup as a silver one.

Not sure exactly where he had heard that little piece of home-spun advice, but it certainly fit the situation.

Sleeping near the fire provided him with a sense of security he lacked the night before. The soft sounds of the waterfall commingled with the fire's crackle and pop eventually lulled him to sleep.

He woke shivering several times during the night and put more wood on the fire to keep warm. The coming of dawn found him frozen and his fire dead. Chilled to the bone, teeth chattering and breath misting in the morning air, he stirred the coals and discovered a few embers still aglow. The addition of small twigs and moss sparked a flame. After adding several larger pieces, James soon basked in the fire's warmth.

Clouds rolled in during the night. It looked like rain might be in the offing. James was less than happy since rain would only add to the discomfort. Sleeping on the cold, hard ground left him with a sore body and a crick in his neck. The few remaining berries made an inadequate breakfast. What he wouldn't give right now for his bed back home and his grandmother's pancakes and bacon. Sighing, he popped the last berry in his mouth and stood. With a final glance to the cloud-filled sky above, a sigh, he then set about continuing his quest for Trendle. His backpack over his shoulder; he made due with the spear as a walking stick. He left the pond and waterfall behind to follow the stream as it made its way through the trees.

James encountered more of the berry bushes throughout the morning. It was fortunate that they grew in such abundance. As the day progressed, breaks in the forest canopy allowed glimpses of the gathering clouds. Near mid-day, thunder rumbled off in the distance. Shortly afterward, another stream joined the one he followed, increasing its width and depth.

When the grumbling of his stomach told him it was lunchtime, he took a break at a small clearing at water's edge. After making a fire, he waded into the stream with his spear, this time looking for a fish to fry. Using a variation on his hunting spell, James soon had a large fish impaled upon the end of his spear. Pleased, he returned to camp and in no time had it roasting over the fire.

The forest continuously grew darker and darker as the thunder crashed ever closer. *Unless I want to walk in a downpour I better find shelter.* When the fish was ready James ate it quickly, though this time he saved half for later. He wrapped what was left in a leaf before putting it in his backpack. After extinguishing the fire, he set a quick pace downstream looking for shelter to wait out the storm.

He came to an area where the trees thinned out somewhat. He spied a ridgeline off to the south, a little over a hundred yards away. There looked to be an opening at the base of the ridge that might be a cave.

As he moved toward the promise of shelter, a drop of rain landed upon the tip of his nose; more soon followed. Hurrying quickly, he sped his way through the trees, hoping to beat the rain. Just as he entered the clearing before the cave, there was a brilliant flash of lightning followed instantly by a thunderous crack and the heavens were unleashed. Torrential rain pelted him the last few feet before he gained the shelter of the cave. Relieved at not being at the mercy of the elements, he turned about and glanced to the rain coming down in what his grandma always called a "gully washer."

The cave was dark but the intermittent flashes of lightning revealed how it extended deeper into the hillside. Relief turned to wariness as his imagination filled the shadows of the cave's farthest recesses with carnivorous beasts. He gripped his spear and moved closer to the mouth of the cave.

It's just your imagination working overtime, James ol' boy. What you need is a fire to dispel the shadows and put your mind at ease.

The thought of sitting all night in the dark was not something he wanted to contemplate. A glance to the torrential downpour that still hammered the earth made it clear that any firewood would be soaked and unusable.

Maybe a spell to make a glowing orb?

Working out the spell didn't take very long as spell formulation was becoming easier. Concentrating to maintain the visualization, he said:

***Glowing orb to dispel the night
Bright as a hundred watt light.
From you no heat need I feel
Go and travel as I will.***

With the last word, he stretched out his hand and a glowing orb, cool and firm to the touch, formed on his hand. He smiled in satisfaction and placed the orb on a nearby stone. Unlike his previous spells, after the initial surge of power, there remained a very slight draining of power. *Guess the orb needs a continual source of power, like a light bulb, in order to keep working.*

With the orb's illumination filling the cave, he noticed many bones lying scattered across the floor. *Must be the lair of a predator, or used to be.* Not feeling secure until ensuring that he was definitely alone, he took the orb and held it aloft as he moved deeper within the cave. It didn't extend much farther and the end was soon reached.

Aside from a collection of bones twice that of what had been encountered near the entrance, it was deserted. From the lack of animal musk and no fresh kills, James deduced that the cave hadn't seen an occupant for some time.

Feeling better, he returned to the front of the cave and concentrated on the orb, dimming its light so it was not quite so bright. Reaching into his backpack, he took the fish left over from lunch and sat by the cave's entrance. Pulling out the book taken from the waiting room, he read more as he ate. A lot of what it said made sense. It wasn't a textbook on magic, just an overview to get started.

By the time he was done eating, daylight had faded. Behind the clouds, the sun was nearing the treetops. Yawning, he realized just how tired he was. Replacing the book within his backpack, he made ready for sleep.

One of the things mentioned in the book was how it took a mage's concentration to keep a spell active. It occurred to him that when he fell asleep, the orb would very likely go out. Not wanting to wake to complete darkness, he worked on a spell that would enable the orb to continue glowing all night, even while he was asleep. Coming up with the words, he concentrated on his desired effect and then cast his spell.

***Glowing orb,
Soothing light,
Maintain thyself,
'Till morning's light.***

With the final word, he again felt the surge of power, but this time it felt as if he was being sucked dry. Unable to halt the outpouring of power, he felt a tremendous amount pouring from him, the effect of which left him greatly weakened. Gasping as his knees buckled, he dropped to the floor and panted heavily until the spell ran its course. Dots danced before his eyes as he fought to retain consciousness.

The battle was touch and go for a few anxious moments, but he managed to refrain from passing out. Lying on the cave floor with barely the strength to keep his heart beating, he came to the realization that there may be a limit to what he could do with magic.

The orb sat on the rock next to him, still glowing, unchanged. The constant, minute draining of power felt earlier was now gone and the orb no longer required his concentration to keep

going. Happy that he managed the spell but not about the effect on him, he realized he would need to be more careful in what he attempted before it killed him.

His strength slowly returned, and when he felt able, crawled to his backpack. He pulled it beneath his head and finally gave in to the weakness.

Awakening in the middle of the night, it took some time before he became aware as to what awakened him. When his eyes finally focused, dread overcame him as he realized that he was no longer alone in the cave. A wolf had entered and stood not three feet away, sniffing the glowing orb. Visions of meeting the same fate as Seth brought panic. Hoping to scare the wolf away, James concentrated and said very softly:

***Orb of soft soothing light
Flash to brilliance bright.***

The orb flashed momentarily into a brilliantly, blinding light. At the same time, James sat up and let out a savage, primal scream as he waved his arms wildly. The wolf jumped two feet off the ground, turned and raced out of the cave with a yelp. That spell, so soon after weakening him earlier, left him light headed and dizzy.

Using his spear to steady himself, he managed to get to his feet and look out into the night. There in the rain he found a dozen pair of glowing eyes staring back at him. Using what little strength he had left, he held his spear aloft and yelled at the wolves, but they failed to react.

Now what? He leaned upon the spear for support. *You're in a pickle for sure.* Still drained from the earlier spell, he didn't feel like he could afford to do much magic. *Can't make myself any weaker or I won't be able to defend myself should that become necessary.* Thinking for a second, he reached down for a small stone, and as he prepared to throw, said,

***Little stone, little stone
With speed of a bullet
Hit that wolf's hide
And go right through it.***

With the last word he threw the stone at a pair of eyes. There was a crack in the air as the stone shot forward in a sudden burst of speed. A loud, sickening thud along with the sound of snapping bones told the tale as a pair of glowing eyes vanished. The rest of the pack broke their immobility. Yelping and howling, they fled into the night.

Dots danced before his eyes; James sat and rested his head on his knees, panting. *Too much. No way can I do any more.* If the wolves came back tonight he would be a dead man for he had nothing left. Remaining awake turned out to be an exercise in futility. He was simply too exhausted. Trusting to fate, he lay down with head on backpack and quickly passed out. Sometime in early morning, the rain stopped, and when the first rays of sunlight entered the cave, the glowing orb vanished.

A rustling near his head startled him awake and he sat up quickly, fearful that the wolves had returned. He discovered instead a small dog similar to the one that had made off with his dinner earlier. The animal looked straight at him, still and unmoving.

“Boo!” James cried loudly frightening the dog, and caused it to run from the cave.

His head felt like it was about to crack open and he was quite shaky. Using his spear for support, he climbed to his feet and shouldered his backpack. At the mouth of the cave, James searched for any indication that the wolves were still in the area. It was with much relief that he found the clearing vacant. He did, however, see the one he killed and the hole in its chest where the stone had struck. To his utter shock, the back half of the wolf had been blown away by the force of the impact. Sorrow for the wolf came over him even though he knew the wolf, if given a chance, would have had him for a late night snack. Keeping an eye open for any of its pack-mates, he made his way back toward the stream and continued westward.

The rains had swollen the stream. Its water rushed pell-mell over rocks in its bed. More berry bushes provided a morning snack as well as sufficient quantities to resupply his pack. His strength slowly returned throughout the morning and by noon, the headache and shaking had vanished.

He continued to follow the streambed. Sometime after noon, motion from downstream brought him to an abrupt halt. A shiver coursed down his spine upon spying a wolf standing amidst the trees, watching him. He bent over and picked up several stones, placing all but one in his pocket. Looking back toward where the wolf stood, he readied to throw the stone, but the wolf was gone.

For the next several hours, wolves could be seen amidst the trees, pacing him along his side of the stream. Every time he paused to take one out with a stone, the wolves melted back into the forest. Their intermittent howls were a force of fear and he quickened his pace.

By this time, the stream had swollen to twice its size; several tributaries having joined with it. The stream was now more of a river, with a width in places that exceeded twenty feet.

James encountered another large tributary cutting across his path. Standing upon a grassy knoll on the far side, a wolf stared James down. Reaching into his pocket, James took a stone and cocked his arm back to throw. Forming a visualization of the stone striking the wolf with great force, he repeated the incantation used back at the cave and threw.

Before the stone flew from his hand, the wolf let out a spine-chilling howl. Several answering howls erupted from the trees all around and broke his concentration resulting in the ruination of the spell. Without the power of magic behind it, the stone flew wide and landed in a bush several feet wide of the mark. Wolves burst from behind bushes and trees.

James turned and fled toward the river. Their growls and snarls gave swift speed to his flight. The wolves closed fast and his flight was cut short as he was forced to turn toward them, spear held out. Swinging the weapon to and fro, he was momentarily successful at keeping the wolves at bay.

“Back!” he shouted, fear tingeing his voice with hysteria.

Doing his best to ward off their attacks, he backed slowly until his feet entered the coolness of the water's edge. A wolf darted in and only a quick thrust of the spear prevented the animal from sinking its jaws into his leg. Over a dozen wolves were arrayed before him along the shoreline. For the moment they appeared content to merely watch as he backed farther into the river. The coldness of the water and the terror of being torn apart kept him from maintaining the calm needed to formulate spells.

Two steps, three, he slowly put distance between himself and the wolves. At step number four, as if by some unseen signal, the wolves rushed him en masse. He spun with his spear, using it like a quarterstaff. For a time he managed to strike the onrushing wolves with the broadside of the spear. He managed to stab a few; but they were beginning to wear him down. He still had not fully recovered from the night before.

With his legs slowly losing feeling due to the coldness of the water, his footing became treacherous. He slipped on a loose stone under the water. Having to thrust his spear into the riverbed to remain upright he was unable to maintain his defense.

Seeing its chance, one wolf rushed in and nipped him on the leg, tearing a three inch long gash just below the knee. Blood flowed freely from the wound and the pain was intense. With the wolves now smelling blood, James was certain this would soon be his end.

He regained his balance and thrust with his spear at the wolf that bit him, driving it back. His swings became ever increasingly slower and less powerful. Never having been athletic, his arms quickly lost the endurance to wield the heavy spear.

A large wolf leapt for his throat and James brought the spear around just in time, piercing the wolf's chest. Though dead, the wolf's momentum carried it forward and slammed square into James, knocking him backward into the water. The wolf's dead weight settled upon him and nearly prevented him from raising his head above the water.

In panicked desperation, he struggled to remove the wolf but it was far too heavy for him to move in his weakened state. Three more wolves entered the water and moved in to finish him. Barely able to keep his head above water, James struggled to remove his spear from the dead wolf. As the spear came free, a growl drew his attention to a wolf less than a foot away. Even as he swung the spear point toward the wolf, he knew it would be too late. The wolf leaped...

Thwock!

An arrow took the wolf in the side. Mortally wounded, the beast thrashed in the water.

Looking over his shoulder, James stared across the stream in disbelief to where a man stood with bow in hand. Another arrow grazed the side of a second wolf that had been coming in for the attack.

"Come on. ***Move!*** Stay there and you're going to die."

With the prospect of surviving this ordeal once again a reality, renewed strength filled his limbs. Taking hold of the wolf pressing him into the water, he gave out with a mighty groan and the carcass came free. As the dead animal sank beneath the surface, James used the spear to aid in gaining his feet.

A wolf's painful cry heralded another arrow having found its mark as he waded through the water toward the far side. His wounded leg only made traversing the slippery, rock-filled bed

more difficult. Though progress was slow, James reached the shallows just as his leg gave out altogether.

Letting fly another arrow, the man put an arm under James' shoulder and helped walk him from the river.

James gave his benefactor a weak "Thanks" before collapsing into unconsciousness.

Chapter Three

Disoriented upon awakening, his first thought was that he was laying abed back in his room after coming out of a particularly vivid dream. Unfortunately, reality set in and memory returned; and so too did the pain. *It wasn't a dream.*

The room bore little resemblance to the one where he spent the majority of his time the last few years. The walls were fashioned of lengths of timber set horizontally like in a log cabin. There was very little in the way of furnishings, merely the bed, a night stand and a chest with clothes folded neatly across the top. His spear and backpack rested in the corner next to the chest with his clothes. *Clothes?*

Lifting the covers, he discovered that he was naked as the day he was born; the only exception was the bandage that covered the wound on his leg where the wolf had bitten. Not sure how he came to be in this place, he did vaguely remember someone at the edge of the stream who helped him fight off the wolves.

Daylight filtered through a small window in the far wall. The soft pink tinge in the sky beyond indicated that sundown must be approaching. *Or could it be dawn?* Beyond the window came the sound of wood being split with an axe. A slightly off-key whistled tune accompanied the chopping.

Lying quietly, he listened to the *whack, whack, whack* for a short time before the chopping stopped. Footsteps were then heard making their way around the cabin. From the other side of his bedroom door came the squeal of hinges in need of oiling, followed by the thudding of wood being dumped into what James envisioned was a wood-box.

After an anxious moment of silence during which he strained to hear what was going on, nervousness filled him when footsteps started coming toward the door to his room. He listened with growing trepidation as they drew closer.

Will he be friend or foe? Praying for the one who approached to be counted among the former but fearing he may be of the latter; James glanced toward the spear leaning against the wall. For

a split-second, he contemplated going for it, but then the footsteps stopped just outside the door; the opportunity had past. He watched with apprehension the turning of the door handle.

In walked the man who had been at the river. Seeing James awake, he paused just within the door and gave him a disarming smile.

“Finally awake, I see. You slept all night and through most of this day. I bet you’re hungry. Yes?”

He was in his mid forties, about six feet tall with brown hair, and quite muscular. Nothing fat about him, he was in very good shape. Dressed in woodsman’s attire, he had a clean if not stylish appearance. Earlier apprehension was soon alleviated by the man’s friendly demeanor.

James gave him a nod. A loud rumbling from his belly answered the question. After a moment of silence, he asked, “Where am I? And who do I have to thank for my life?”

“As to where you are, you are here, in my cabin. My name is Ceryn and I am the Forest Warden in these parts. It was lucky I came along when I did. That wolf pack would have had you for dinner for sure.”

“Ceryn?” James said, hoping to have pronounced the name correctly. “My name’s James. I appreciate you saving me.”

Ceryn’s grin widened. “Glad I was there to help. You can rest for a little while longer. Supper’s cooking and will be a few more minutes before it is ready.” He gestured toward the clothes upon the chest. “I cleaned them a bit, washed out the worst of it. If you have the strength and wish to get dressed, you can join me in the other room. If not, I’ll bring a bowl in here.” He waited for James’ reaction. When none was forthcoming, he mumbled, “Strangest clothes I’ve ever seen,” then turned and without another word closed the door as he left the room. Soon, the sounds of what James’ grandfather called pattering could be heard coming from the outer room.

Not really having the energy to leave the comfort of the bed, but not wanting to eat dinner naked beneath the covers either, James gingerly sat and swung his legs over the edge. The movement caused the throbbing in his leg to increase. He remained sitting for a few moments to gather his courage before braving the pain and stand.

It’s not going to hurt that bad.

Coming to his feet proved how wrong he was. The pain was the worst he’d ever felt in his life. It took every ounce of fortitude and willpower he possessed to cross the ten feet to where his clothes lay. As soon as he came within reach of his spear, he took it and used it for support. Doing so did much to relieve his discomfort.

He found that his clothes had indeed been cleaned. He proceeded to dress himself in his “strange clothes.”

Once clothed, he brought his backpack to the bed and sat. He took inventory of what remained of his meager possessions. Everything was there except the book explaining the workings of magic. He did a visual search of the area where his backpack had been, but failed to find it. It occurred to him that he could possibly have lost it during his flight from, and subsequent fight with, the wolves. But that didn’t seem likely. The backpack had been closed tightly throughout the ordeal and remained closed now. *Could Ceryn have taken it?* James didn’t want to believe that of his benefactor, but what did he really know about the man?

Deciding to take things one step at a time, he returned his pack to the corner. He hobbled across the room with the aid of his spear, opened the door and peered through to the outer room.

Beyond he found a room three times the size of the one in which he awoke. In the center sat a wooden table with three chairs. One wall held several shelves containing plates and other cooking equipment. Set against another section of wall was a simple wooden desk atop which papers lay in haphazard fashion. An inkwell sat near the stack of papers with a quill lying beside it.

The bow that saved his life hung near the desk along with a quiver of arrows. On the side of the bow opposite the quiver was a sword and shield, both of which had the look of having been well used.

Attention drawn to the opening of the door, Ceryn spied him and gave a nod as the Warden continued slicing vegetables. He indicated the table with a jerk of his head. "Have a seat. This will need to cook a little longer."

Hobbling to the table, James looked longingly toward the stewpot simmering upon a hook over a gently burning fire in the fireplace. The mouthwatering aroma caused his stomach to growl. Taking a seat facing Ceryn he said, "I haven't had a good meal for a while."

Ceryn grinned and chuckled. "Whether this will be good or not, you'll have to decide." Finishing with the preparations, he dropped the sliced vegetables into the stew pot. Then moving to the counter, he filled two mugs from a pitcher and brought them to the table.

James took one, looked within and sniffed uncertainly.

"It's just ale, lad. You look like you could use some." Giving him a wink, Ceryn tossed back his mug and took a deep draught.

Bringing the mug to his mouth, James hesitantly took a sip. When the liquid hit his tongue, he had to admit it wasn't bad. A little strong for his taste, but not worse than some of the stuff he had tried at Dave's. Glancing to Ceryn, James noticed that he was being scrutinized.

"I suppose you have a lot of questions?"

"Yes, a couple. But your business is just that, your business. You seem a nice enough lad. You needn't feel obligated to tell me anything more than what you want." Ceryn set his mug on the table and then returned to the stew pot where he stirred it with a large wooden spoon. "Can't let it burn."

"That's what my grandmother always said, too." Remembered times sitting in his grandmother's kitchen while she cooked made him a little homesick.

"She must have been a nice woman, a good cook maybe?" He cast a look to James and received a nod in reply. Returning his attention to the pot, he stirred the stew a few more times. Once satisfied that it wasn't in any immediate danger of burning, he set the spoon on the counter and returned to the table. Grabbing his mug, he downed the rest of it.

"She was the best. Sometimes there would be little in the house, yet she could whip up the most wonderful dinners." Memories of fine meals made his stomach growl loudly.

"It'll be just a few minutes longer."

"Where am I exactly?"

A surprised look came over Ceryn. "You mean you don't know where you are?"

“Not really.” After taking another sip of the not-entirely-unpleasant ale, he added, “I’ve been lost.”

The Forest Warden studied his face a moment before answering. “You are near the Kelewan River, not far from the township of Trendle. The forest I found you in is called The Dark Forest of Kelewan. Nothing really dark about it unless you come here ill prepared. It’s my job to help people in trouble, like yourself, and if need be get a crew to clear the roads when a tree falls and blocks the trails.”

“I am very glad you were there for me. Those wolves were after me ever since the night before. I took out one that had wandered into my camp and the others seemed to have it in for me ever since.” Pausing for another sip of ale, he then asked. “How far is it to Trendle?”

“About a day and a half’s walk. In your condition you’ll never make it. You will need to rest at least until tomorrow. I’m heading there in the morning and could take you if you like.”

“I’d appreciate that, thank you.”

James was warming to this Ceryn. A rather genial chap, his easy speech and relaxed demeanor put James at ease.

Ceryn went to inspect the stew once again. Using the spoon to take a taste, he nodded approvingly and removed the pot from the fire. After setting it on the table, he crossed to the shelves and selected two bowls and a pair of smaller, wooden spoons. Returning to the table, he handed one of each to James.

Following Ceryn’s lead, James dipped his spoon into the stewpot and proceeded to fill his bowl. The stew had a thick gravy and contained many different vegetables, some unfamiliar, with a little bit of meat. While he filled his bowl, Ceryn fetched a loaf of bread. Using his belt knife, the Warden removed off two thick slices and handed one to James.

Breaking off a corner, James dipped the bread into the stew’s gravy. When the gravy-covered bread hit his taste buds, his salivary glands went into overdrive. *This tasted great!* He took up his spoon and eagerly scooped as much meat and veggies as the utensil could hold. “Oh, man,” he mumbled appreciatively as he chewed. The meat was flavorful without being tough and the veggies were soft yet still firm. Eating with gusto, James soon emptied his bowl and was scooping a second helping out of the pot.

“Hungry?”

James realized that he was starting his second bowl while Ceryn still had yet to finish his first. Slightly embarrassed at being a glutton, he replied, “Either I am totally starving or this is the best stew I have ever had!”

Ceryn chuckled. “Maybe it’s a little bit of both. Eat as much as you can hold, you look like you could use it.” Scooping out another helping, the Forest Warden re-filled his bowl and then cut another section of bread for himself and James.

Once the meal was over and hunger had been satisfied, Ceryn took the bowls and spoons outside to the river and washed them. Once finished, he set them on the shelf. He then placed a lid on the stew pot before moving it onto a side table.

Night had fallen by this time; the only light was that from the fire. Ceryn settled into a chair and pulled out his pipe and filled it from a pouch. He set a smoldering stick from the fire to it and puffed several times. He leaned back in his chair as pipe smoke began to encircle his head.

James brought a chair and sat next to the Warden. The warmth coming from the flames felt good and quickly relaxed him. He watched the flames dance as they consumed the wood, and thought how his life had changed over the past few days. From home, to the woods, and now a friendly Warden's home, he couldn't help but wonder what the next day would hold. Though thoughts of the past two days and what may lie ahead occupied his mind, he had a hard time keeping his eyes open. Repeatedly, his head drooped to his chest only to suddenly jerk back up.

Noticing his problem, Ceryn offered him the bed he awoke in earlier, an offer James was not able to refuse. After thanking his host, he used his spear again as a crutch and made his way to the back room. Climbing into bed, he thought to himself, *Lucky to have found Ceryn. Not many would have taken a stranger into their home and fed them. I owe him a lot.* A few lingering thoughts about what the next day might hold were all that he managed before sleep took him.

Thud!!!

The bedroom door crashing open startled James out of a deep sleep. Sitting bolt upright, he turned bleary eyes toward the doorway. Three sword-wielding men wearing worn, mismatched pieces of armor entered and did a quick look around. Upon seeing him, one of them hollered out the door, "There's another one in here, a lad hiding in the bed. Ceryn lied!"

From outside came the reply. "Bring him out. We'll take care of both of 'em."

One of the men headed toward the bed.

The man took him roughly by the arm and hauled him to his feet. Pain from his wound shot up his leg as his foot hit the floor. Crying out, he was given little sympathy as he was propelled through the door with a shove. James stumbled into the front room, his injured leg protesting with every pain-filled step. Another rough shove from behind pushed him toward the door leading outside. Despite the throbbing in his leg, he somehow made it through without falling.

Not far from the front of the cabin were two more men with drawn swords standing next to a bound body on the ground. As James was pushed forward, he discovered the captive to be Ceryn. He was relieved to see the Forest Warden turn his head and glance silently at him. At least Ceryn was still conscious and alert. One of the men who had taken him from the cabin pulled his arms behind his back and bound them together painfully tight. Once his hands were secured, he was shoved to the ground next to Ceryn.

"Don't move and keep your mouth shut!" one of the four sword-wielding men commanded.

James glanced at the man and nodded.

Seeing that James planned to cooperate, the guard grunted and then turned to his partner.

With their captor's attention, for the moment, focused elsewhere, he scooted closer to Ceryn until they were less than a foot apart. "Who are they?"

"Outlaws. They're mad because I brought one of them in and was executed. He killed two women who were traveling through here a while back."

"What are they going to do with us?"

“They’ll probably torture and kill me. You...” Ceryn paused as one of the guards glanced in their direction. When the guard again focused his attention elsewhere, he continued. “You they may kill or they may take you south and sell you to the slavers. Sorry, lad.”

An outlaw a little larger than the rest and bearing a tattoo of a snake on his left forearm stormed over to Ceryn and kicked him in the side. “I told you to be quiet! Another word and I’ll cut out your tongue.” To emphasize his point he kicked Ceryn hard in the side twice more before walking off.

Two outlaws continued to stand guard over them with their swords drawn and ready. James leaned closer to Ceryn and in a barely audible whisper asked, “Are you ok?”

A sleight nod of Ceryn’s head was his only answer.

“I’m going to try and loosen your bonds.”

Ceryn met his gaze and shook his head. “Too risky.”

“Just be ready.”

Their gazes met and there must have been something in James’ eyes for Ceryn nodded.

Concentrating on envisioning their bonds coming apart, James whispered:

Ropes that bind me and you

Come apart in pieces two.

James felt a slackening in the rope binding his arms together as the fibers parted. Ceryn gave him a look full of surprise as his wrists were once again free.

Whispering so only Ceryn could hear, he said, “Now for the outlaws, be ready.”

The Warden paused only a moment before nodding. He understood.

Looking around he searched for something that could be used to hurt, maybe even kill the outlaws. His gaze came to rest on the fire and an idea took shape. Speaking softly, he cast his spell.

Fire that’s hot

“Hey, the boss said no talking.”

Ignoring him, James continued,

Fire that’s bright,

The guard took a step toward him. “I said to shut up or I’ll shut you up.”

Send balls of flame

“Ok, you asked for it” Taking two more steps, the guard reached his side, and prepared to kick him in the head.

Before the guard could complete the maneuver, James looked him in the eye and shouted:

To burn outlaws this night!

At the final utterance of the spell, magic streamed from him as the fire erupted in an explosion of shooting fireballs. The outlaws had only a moment to realize their danger. One such fiery projectile nearly singed James' hair as it slammed into the man standing before him. The resultant explosion knocked the outlaw back and showered James and Ceryn with sparks. Similar bursts flared throughout the area.

The spell used far too much of his unreplenished reserves, draining what strength he had, caused him to lose consciousness. Ceryn saw James pass out but couldn't take the time to determine if he was okay.

Screams of pain and confusion filled the night. Rolling to the side, Ceryn kicked out with his foot and brought a guard whose clothes were afire to the ground. He deftly avoided the flames as he took possession of the guard's sword. Upending it, he plunged it through the man's chest, pinning him to the ground.

Quickly getting to his feet, he placed a foot upon the dead outlaw's chest and pulled the sword free. A nearby guard cried out as his hair ignited and went up in flames. Moving toward him, Ceryn struck out with his sword and an outlaw's head went flying. The head hit the ground and rolled like a flaming ball until it came to a sizzling stop.

Another outlaw lay smoldering on the ground. Still another raced through the forest, a pillar of flame in the darkness. The man's screams echoed through the night. Scanning the area for any others who may have escaped James' flaming attack, Ceryn found no sign of the leader. Counting those taken out by the fireballs, he realized two of the leader's henchmen also remained unaccounted.

Returning to James, he found him still breathing but was unable to rouse him. Using one hand, he grabbed his shirt and dragged him toward the cabin. With his other, he retained the bloody sword which had taken out two of the outlaws. He didn't get far before the man with the tattoo appeared from the direction of the river. Behind him walked the remaining two outlaws, only one seeming to have emerged from the attack unscathed.

"Ceryn," the tattooed man shouted, "I'm going to gut you and let the animals eat your entrails while you're still alive to enjoy it. And then I'll cut the heart out of that demon damned mage." Covered in burns, clothing charred nearly beyond recognition, he made a frightening sight. The tattooed man came for Ceryn while the other two moved to flank him.

Knowing they would follow him and ignore James as long as he was unconscious, Ceryn left him on the ground and approached the outlaws with sword at the ready. Three to one would be bad odds in a normal situation but after what James had done to them, the outlaws would be slowed by the pain.

Ceryn feinted at the one on the right; out of the corner of his eye he saw the one on his left coming in to his exposed flank. When the one on the left sliced toward Ceryn's head, Ceryn dropped to the ground and rolled toward him, striking a serious blow to the outlaw's thigh,

opening an artery. The Warden leaped back to his feet as the outlaw gave out with a cry and dropped to the ground.

The leader came in with a swift thrust aimed at Ceryn's chest which he deftly blocked. He was forced to jump back when Ceryn counter attacked with a slice to the leader's leg. Unable to avoid his attacker, Ceryn's sword opened up a shallow cut on the tattooed leader's upper thigh.

Seeing an opening created by Ceryn's attack, the remaining henchman leaped in and thrust. Ceryn twisted just in time and managed to receive only a small cut along his shoulder. Ignoring the pain, he feinted at the leader and then came back with a backhanded slice which caused the henchman to stumble backward and trip over the outlaw writhing on the ground, doing his best to keep his life's blood from leaving his body.

Seeing his chance, Ceryn pressed the leader who was becoming weakened from the loss of blood and the trauma of having been burned. *Slash, block. Block, slash.* He needed to finish the leader before the remaining henchman regained his feet and rejoined the battle.

Ceryn sliced at the leader's head, at the arm, the head, back and forth. The leader successfully blocked each of Ceryn's maneuvers.

"Ceryn, you cannot win. I am the better swordsman!"

Undaunted by the taunts, Ceryn doubled his efforts.

Having regained his feet, the henchman moved to rejoin the battle. Ceryn saw him approaching and with a burst of speed and skill, continued his attacks upon the leader.

The henchman pressed Ceryn hard, which gave the leader time to drop out of the battle to catch his breath. The henchman hammered away. *Hack, hack, slash;* his attacks had very little skill, trying to bull his way through Ceryn's defense with naught but brute strength.

Using skill acquired through dozens of conflicts, Ceryn successfully blocked each of the attacks and began to understand the rhythm of the henchman's attacks. *Hack, hack, slash. Hack, hack, slash.* Timing it just right, he blocked the next two hacks and when the henchman came in with the slash, Ceryn dropped under the incoming blade and thrust with his own sword, taking the outlaw upward through the chest. Ceryn kicked out with his foot to dislodge the outlaw from his blade and turned to find the leader coming straight for him, a wild look in his eyes.

With a primal scream, the leader charged. Wielding his sword in both hands, he brought it down with all his strength, attempting to hew Ceryn in half. Striking the leader's sword, Ceryn succeeded in deflecting it away, throwing the leader off balance. Ceryn kicked out with his foot and connected with the leader's knee. With satisfaction, he heard the bone snap. Off balance and with his knee broken, the leader cried out in pain. He twisted and dropped face first to the ground. Moving to finish it, Ceryn sliced through the leader's back and severed the spine.

Paralyzed, the leader stared with hate filled eyes at Ceryn as the blood flowed out of him first bringing unconsciousness, then death.

Panting, Ceryn wiped the sweat from his brow as he surveyed the battlefield and found only smoldering, dead outlaws. He tossed the sword down and returned to James. He lifted him off the ground and carried him into the cabin where he laid him upon the bed.

Waking the next morning, James found a blood-soaked Ceryn next to him. Checking to make sure the Forest Warden was still alive, he discovered that most of the blood staining Ceryn's clothes was not the Warden's. Even though he had a head that felt like it was being used as an anvil, James managed to rise and investigate the situation outside.

The area in front of the cabin was a scene of carnage. Bodies littered the ground and blood was everywhere. His respect for the swordsmanship of Ceryn was high. He moved from one outlaw to the next. Not finding any that still lived, he returned to the cabin and built a fire to ward off the morning chill. Not with magic for after last night he could not even think of magic without his head hurting. The spell with the fire had been far too draining. In fact, it had almost killed him. He was determined to refrain from using magic for the time being, at least until he regained some of his strength.

He finally got a good fire going. He hung the remnants of last night's pot of stew over the flames. Taking an empty jug, he hobbled with the aid of his spear to the river and filled it with water. Once back in the cabin he filled a bowl and located a somewhat clean cloth. He brought them into the bedroom and began cleaning the blood off Ceryn.

Not long after beginning, Ceryn awakened. His unexpected grabbing of James' hand startled him and nearly caused James to spill the contents of the bowl.

"I can take care of this myself, I'm not that weak."

Smiling, James replied, "Just returning the favor. You saved our lives out there last night."

"I think we both deserve credit for still being alive." Sitting up, he swung his legs over the edge of the bed. "You have many surprises about you, yes?" Coming to his feet, he headed for the door.

"I suppose I do."

James grabbed his spear as he accompanied Ceryn to the river. His leg still hurt badly, but with the aid of the spear, was able to make it without it worsening. Changing the subject, James asked, "Who were those guys last night?"

Ceryn knelt at the water's edge and commenced to wash the blood that stained his hands and arms, something he was far too tired to do the night before.

"The leader's name is, or was, Garrett. Some called him Garrett the Snake after the tattoo of the green serpent on his arm. His little band of cutthroats had been raiding this area for a couple years, but no one has ever been able to stop him, until now. There's a reward for taking him down. I've no use for it, and since you saved us last night, you can claim it."

"Uh, thanks, but I wouldn't feel right about taking all of it."

Turning his head, he glanced up at James. "Take it. If you don't, it'll just be used to fatten some administrator's purse. I'm sure you could use it." After removing all traces of blood from his exposed skin, he got back to his feet and returned to the cabin. Once inside, he inspected the cook pot and used his big spoon to stir it. A sniff and taste later, he pronounced it ready. Removing it from the fire, he carried it to the table.

James lent a hand by taking the bowls and spoons from the shelf, plus a couple of mugs and set them on the table. While he served the stew, Ceryn poured the ale and they set to eating.

After Ceryn finished his first bowl, he looked at James and asked, "So, you're a mage, eh?"

“In a matter of speaking. I’m sort of new at it.”

“New or not, that was some spell you cast, with the balls of fire. Quick thinking. You would be good to have on one’s side in a fight.”

Reddening slightly under the praise, he shook his head. “Not too good if I pass out before it’s all over.” He still felt ashamed at his weakness of the night before. He felt like he let Ceryn down when he needed him most.

“Now don’t you belittle what you did. Your actions turned the tide in our favor and without your efforts, this morning would have found us dead or wishing we were.” Ceryn let James take a second helping and then scooped out the rest for himself.

James thought about what Ceryn had said, and came to admit that there might be some merit to it. Feeling slightly better, he downed the rest of his ale and let out a loud belch.

Ceryn chuckled. “After we finish here, I’ll hitch my horse to the wagon and take you into Trendle.”

It wasn’t long before their bowls were empty. Ceryn glanced to James and said, “Just rest here while I get the wagon ready. I’ll bring it around front. We need to bring in the bodies if you’re to receive the reward.” Heading out the door, he made his way to the corral behind the house. In a few minutes he had his horse hitched to the wagon and brought it around to the front.

With a strength belying his wounds, one by one he gathered the bodies of the outlaws and placed them in the wagon. After the last outlaw was in, he used a tarp to cover the grisly scene and returned back inside to inform James it was time to leave.

James hobbled to the bedroom where he gathered his few belongings, and carried them out to the wagon where Ceryn waited for him. Tossing his backpack to the Warden, he asked, “You didn’t happen to see a book lying on the ground when you rescued me from the wolves?”

Catching the backpack, Ceryn shook his head. “No, but I wasn’t looking for one either. I was more interested in saving your life. Why? Was it important?”

“Yeah, it was.”

“Too bad. I doubt if we could find it now. If you lost it during the last fight with the wolves, then it’s in the river and no telling where it would be now.”

With a helping hand from Ceryn, James managed to climb onto the wagon and took his seat next to the Warden. “I guess you’re right.” He felt bad about losing the book, but realized there was little that might be done about it now. No sense bemoaning what can’t be changed.

With a flick of the reins, Ceryn got the horse moving. They pulled out onto the dirt lane that led from his cabin. After a short ways it met the main road which ran along the Kelewan River on its way to Trendle.

Not far from where they turned onto the road they found where the outlaws had picketed their horses. Pausing for only a short time, Ceryn gathered the horses and tied them in a line behind the wagon. Once secured, he returned to his seat and got the wagon moving.

For a time they remained quiet as James took in the beauty of the area. To his right was the rolling Kelewan River, well over fifty feet across and flowing smoothly. The sun filtered through

the trees and banished the morning chill. It made way for a warm summer day. The birds flittered to and fro and called out in a multitudinous chorus.

“How far is Trendle?”

“About a day’s ride. We should be there by nightfall.”

Glancing at James, he added, “I probably should warn you that mages are not well thought of in these parts. Some bad things happened a while ago and, well, let’s just say that the people haven’t forgotten. They don’t much trust strangers at all, really. It takes them a while to warm up to anyone. They’re good people, just wary.”

“I can understand that. I’ll try not to give them reason to distrust me.”

“There’s a family who has a farm just outside of town. If you like, I could take you there and see if they’ll let you stay with them while you’re recuperating.”

“Yes, I’d like that. I’m a pretty quiet person who tries not to be a bother to anyone.”

Ceryn nodded and chuckled. “I’ve noticed that about you. After we deliver the bodies to the Town Hall and talk to the mayor, we’ll head out there.”

Nodding, he agreed to the plan. “How much of a reward is there for Garrett and his band.”

“I believe five hundred gold pieces for Garrett and another hundred for each of his henchman,” he replied after giving it a moment’s thought. “If I’m remembering that right, you should get eleven hundred gold pieces, a tidy sum. You can also have your pick of their horses too if you like. The rest will go to the town where they’ll be auctioned off at the end of the month.”

Eleven hundred gold pieces and a horse! James couldn’t believe his good fortune. *My situation is getting better and better.*

“I don’t know too much about horses.”

Ceryn eyed him with surprise. “Truly?”

James nodded.

“Well then, don’t worry, I’ll pick one for you. One that’s not too temperamental.”

“Thanks, I would appreciate that.”

For the rest of the trip, they rode in silence. James dozed on and off, still not completely over the previous day’s exertions and last night’s magical feat. Later that evening when the sun had sunken low in the sky, Ceryn directed his attention to the road ahead. Nestled in among the trees along this side of the river were several wooden buildings. Ceryn nodded when he looked questioningly at him. Trendle.

Chapter Four

As they passed through Trendle's outlying area, the countryside transitioned from forest to tilled lands with crops growing tall in the summer sun; farmers were hard at work. Some took notice of Ceryn and hollered a greeting. Most times he only smiled and waved back, though if they were close enough he might offer a few words.

"You seem to be popular."

Ceryn nodded. "I've been the Warden in these parts for a little over a score and a half years. I know just about everybody within fifty miles."

A little girl ran toward them across one of the fields. Seeing her approach, Ceryn slowed the wagon, brought it to a halt and waited. When she reached them, she said, "My daddy was wonderin' if you'd be stopping by while you're in town?" Dirt streaked her face but could not hide a smile that would brighten even the darkest day.

"Tell your daddy I'll be along after dark, I have business in town I need to see to first. Also, tell him I will be bringing a friend."

She glanced to James and nodded. "Ok. Bye." She turned abruptly, and raced back across the field where a group of farmers were cutting stalks of grain the old-fashioned way, with scythes.

"Why don't they use tractors?"

Ceryn turned a quizzical eye upon him. "What is a tractor?"

"It's a..." About to reply, he thought back to everything he had experienced and seen the last few days; horse-drawn wagons, swords; Ceryn's cabin. Perhaps this world didn't have any such modern conveniences such as tractors, or cars for that matter. Probably still in the midst of the pre-industrial age.

"Oh, never mind."

Ceryn got the wagon moving by the time she returned to the farmers. One paused to lean down to hear what she said, then waved to Ceryn. James saw him speak to the girl and watched as she headed off at a run toward a farmhouse in the distance.

"That's Elizabeth, the daughter of the family I mentioned earlier. She's going to grow up to break some man's heart someday. Her father's name is Corbin. His family has worked these fields for over five generations. Good, solid people they are."

Coming to the town proper, James found Trendle not to be a major metropolis. Rather, it was a small farming community with a handful of multi-storied buildings surrounded by smaller ones. As the townsfolk took notice of their approach, many waved a greeting while others came forward to say hello.

An aged man hollered from the front of the town's general store. "What brings you into town, Ceryn?"

"Garrett the Snake and his men paid me a visit last night. Thought I'd introduce them to the mayor."

The old man eyed the line of riderless horses strung out behind the wagon. "Got them all yourself?"

"No." Slapping James on the shoulder, he added, "James here helped."

Grateful for the praise, James still felt slightly uncomfortable by suddenly being the focus of so many people.

One man came behind the wagon and lifted the tarp to reveal the bodies beneath, “Looks like you got the whole bunch. What happened?”

“Can’t talk now, have to take ‘em to the mayor. I’ll be by the Squawking Goose later and I’ll tell the tale then.”

As they continued on their way, people gathered in groups to share the latest gossip about Ceryn and Garret the Snake. James heard his name being mentioned more than once.

As they trundled their way through town, James noticed how the townsfolk stared at him. Not in an unfriendly way, more like he was a curiosity. “Why are they staring?”

Ceryn looked up and took in the way everyone was gawking. “Aside from being a stranger, it’s probably your odd attire. It’s like nothing seen around these parts.” He waved at several of the onlookers. “Pay them no mind; they’re just curious is all. Not much ever changes around here and new people are always the talk of the town. By tomorrow morning they’ll have several stories circulating about you, none close to being the truth I’d imagine.”

“Great.”

Seeing the despairing expression on James’ face, Ceryn chuckled.

News of their coming must have raced ahead for a man dressed in attire finer than anything James had yet seen since entering this world, stood waiting at the top of the stairs before the largest building in town. Several others, also in attendance near the building, watched as James and Ceryn approached what the Forest Warden explained was the Town Hall.

“That’s the mayor. He’s an honest man but at times can be a bit stubborn and headstrong.” As they drew near, the mayor descended the steps. Coming to a stop, Ceryn waved a greeting. The mayor returned the salutation

“What are you doing in town? Got too lonely out there with just squirrels to keep you company?”

Laughing, Ceryn replied, “No, John. Actually we have business with you.” Hopping from the wagon, he gestured for the mayor to join him at the rear. Flipping back the bloodstained tarp, he revealed the corpses. He took hold of one arm and turned it to exhibit the snake tattoo.

He nodded and cast an approving glance at Ceryn. “So, Garrett the Snake is dead? You do it all by yourself?”

“No.” With a nod he indicated James who still sat on the wagon, “Had some help. If he hadn’t been there, I’d be dead right now or wishing I was.”

After giving James a once-over, the mayor said, “There’s a bounty on their heads.” He returned his attention to the bodies lying in the wagon. “Looks like you got Garrett and six of his henchmen.” Turning once again to Ceryn he gestured to the line of horses tied to the rear of the wagon. “Are these their horses?”

Ceryn nodded, “Yes they are. I would like you to give the bounty to James. I owe him my life. The horses are the town’s, according to our agreement, with the exception of one that James will take for his own.”

The mayor looked up to James and gave him a grin. "I guess we can't begrudge one for the man who saved our Warden and helped to terminate a long-standing threat to our community."

Moving down the line of horses, Ceryn untied a brown stallion with white patches from the others and led it to a hitching post near the Town Hall steps.

"James, this one is yours."

Using his spear for support, he came down off the wagon and hobbled over to stroke the horse's neck. The horse allowed the touch with a snort and brief shake of its head. James was delighted with the choice that Ceryn made.

The mayor turned and motioned for them to accompany him. "Come inside and we'll get this matter settled." Hollering in a very unofficial manner to two men standing nearby, the mayor said, "Marin, Josh, take the wagon around back and unload the bodies. Put the horses in the stable." Confident that his orders would be carried out, he led Ceryn and James up the steps and through the front doors.

They crossed a large open room before ascending another flight of steps to the second floor. They entered a hallway that ran the length of the building, ending at a set of double doors. The mayor led them to the double doors, opened them and then preceded them into his office.

The room was officially decorated. The most prominent feature was a large desk with a high-backed chair, both masterfully crafted. Two smaller chairs sat before the desk. Several shelves contained dozens of large, expensive looking books. On another wall rested a long shelf bearing expensive looking knick-knacks.

Sitting in the big chair behind the desk, the mayor indicated for Ceryn and James to sit in the two before him. He then pulled out a piece of paper, vellum really, and dipped a quill into an inkwell and proceeded to write out a payment voucher that James could take to the local bank to receive his reward. It was for eleven hundred gold pieces, just like Ceryn had thought.

Handing the paper to James he said, "Son, you've done this town and this area a service that has needed doing for some time. Take this and our gratitude for a job well done." Coming to his feet, the mayor extended his hand toward James who quickly shook it before taking the reward voucher.

"Now Ceryn, how long do you plan to be in town?"

"I'll be leaving in the morning. First though, I want to take James to Corbin's and see if he'll let him recuperate there. He needs a place to hole up while his leg heals."

The mayor cast a concerned look to James. "I do hope it's not too bad? When James shook his head, the mayor's concern turned to cheerful. "Good, good." Coming around the desk, the mayor said to James, "Hope you enjoy your stay here."

"It seems a very nice town, Sir," he replied as he worked with the spear to come to his feet.

Turning to Ceryn, the mayor clapped him on the back and walked with him and James to the door. "Going to be at the Squawking Goose?"

"After a while. I told old Gyn that I would be there to tell what happened; and squash any wild rumors that are already making the rounds about James."

"Most likely," laughed the mayor. "I'll see you there if I can get away."

"I hope so." He indicated to James that it was time to leave.

Once they left the office, James asked, “He doesn’t seem too busy, why wouldn’t he be able to get away?”

Ceryn chuckled. “It’s not the town’s business that will keep him away tonight, but his wife. She thinks that because he is the mayor, he shouldn’t mingle with the ‘common people.’ He has to sneak out just to visit with his old drinking buddies.”

They found Ceryn’s wagon out front, the bodies of the dead outlaws removed and most of the blood stains rinsed out. Ceryn untied James’ horse from the hitching post and secured its tether to the back of the wagon. Meanwhile, James worked his way up onto the wagon and waited for Ceryn.

Ceryn climbed up to take his seat, and grabbed the reins, flicking them to get the horse moving. Turning the wagon back around the way they came, he headed through town on the way to Corbin’s farm.

The sun was nearing the horizon and the streets began to empty as everyone had either gone home or was headed there. A few lone people walked the streets, stragglers from the marketplace or shopkeepers on their way home after closing for the day.

Several waved a hello to Ceryn, or called out a greeting. Ceryn answered back in his usual cheerful manner. They left the town behind and turned down a somewhat well-maintained dirt road. The sun was just dipping below the horizon when they turned off the road and entered a dirt lane, at the end of which sat a welcoming-looking farmhouse.

No sooner did they start up the lane when two dogs appeared. Barking with tails a-waggin’, they greeted the new arrivals. Shortly after the onset of barking, the front door opened and two little girls emerged, racing down the lane toward them. James recognized one as Elizabeth. The other could only be her sister, a younger version. A shout from the other side of the doorway brought them to a halt.

“Ceryn, Ceryn!” the girls hollered. The two dogs raced in circles around the wagon, barking and jumping. In the doorway stood a man with the look of having been hard at work in the field all day. James figured it to be their father, Corbin.

“Good evening, Master Farmer,” Ceryn greeted with a slight nod of his head as he brought the wagon to a stop.

“Master Farmer indeed,” snorted Corbin, then broke out with a smile. “Ceryn, it’s good to see you again. I heard you brought in Garrett the Snake?” To the dogs he yelled, “Cyne, Tor, quiet!” They ceased their barking and confined their actions to racing between the wagon and the house.

Climbing from the wagon, Ceryn replied, “It was Garrett the Snake and his band. They came for me last night and if it wasn’t for the aid of James here, we’d not be having this conversation.”

Nodding approvingly to James, Corbin said, “Any friend of yours is welcome in my home. Won’t you both come in?”

James started to get off the wagon when the dogs came and jumped up in friendly greeting. “Down, boys!” Corbin yelled. The dogs backed off and gave him room to come off the wagon. Corbin noticed how he used his spear for support and favored the leg where the wolf had bitten him. “Are you alright, son?”

James nodded his head, "Yes. I had a run-in with a pack of wolves in the forest. If it wasn't for Ceryn, they would have had me for dinner."

Corbin looked over to Ceryn who nodded agreement. "There's a story there or I'm a three legged dog. But that can wait for later."

"Devin!" Corbin turned his head and hollered back into the house. A lad of about fourteen emerged. "Take Ceryn's wagon and the horses and see to their care." The lad nodded and took the reins as he led Ceryn's wagon around back.

James found the house to be a homey, well-cared for country home. A woman was in the kitchen area, working on dinner. Corbin entered after James and said, "That's my wife, Mary. Have a seat at the table, dinner should be ready shortly."

James took a seat and the girls quickly moved to sit on either side of him. Ceryn just smiled.

"Corbin, I've got a favor to ask of you."

"What?" the master of the house replied, as he took his place at the head of the table.

"James is injured and a stranger to these parts. I would consider it a personal favor if he could use your spare room to recuperate for a week or so. His leg is not well enough for traveling."

The farmer turned a thoughtful look upon him.

"I would help out where I could," James offered. "I could even pay if you like."

"I'm not one who allows strangers to stay in my home, Ceryn. But you've saved my skin on several occasions, so I suppose I could make an exception here." Keeping his attention focused on James, Corbin said, "We're not rich here, you'll get just simple fare. If you wish, you can stay with us. Though should you give us any problems, you'll be out the door and on your way. I'll not have trouble in my house. Do we understand each other?"

"Yes sir, we do."

"Fine." Turning toward the kitchen he hollered, "How much longer till dinner, woman?"

"It's coming now," Mary said as she emerged carrying a platter loaded with roasted chicken and vegetables. She set the platter in the center of the table and then turned to Corbin, "If you holler like that at me again, Master Farmer, you can go eat with the hogs for all I care." After fixing him with a stern glare, she returned to the kitchen. In spite of the bickering, James had the feeling that they really cared for each other.

About this time, Devin returned. He took his seat at the table, opposite James.

"Where are you from?" asked Elizabeth's sister. "You sure have funny looking clothes."

"Don't bother the boy, Cyanna," her father chided. "It's not nice to ask questions like that."

"That's okay," James assured him. Turning to Cyanna he said, "I'm from a small town like this one that's far, far away." He gestured to his clothes, "And this is what we wear where I come from."

"Do you miss it?" she asked, casting a quick glance at her father who didn't say anything about her questions. They didn't seem to bother James.

"A little. You always miss your home," he replied wistfully.

As Mary placed the last of the food on the table, she took her seat and Corbin announced, "Enough questions, let's eat."

Baked chicken, some vegetables, and bread; simple as Corbin had said, but very good and filling.

While they ate, Corbin had Ceryn relate the tale of the outlaw attack. In deference to James, he glossed over the parts that magic played. He also toned down the gory details, respecting the sensibilities of the girls and Mary. Devin listened intently, asking many questions about the fighting.

During the tale, James was startled when his leg was unexpectedly thumped. The dogs had taken their positions beneath the table. James noticed that Corbin and his family tossed bones and other scraps to them. The dogs spent the meal happily, and noisily, gnawing away. James even caught Cyanna magnanimously sharing a few of her vegetables as well.

When dinner concluded, the men retired to the living room for a smoke and a cup of ale. Ceryn came to James and took his leave. "I'm heading down to the Squawking Goose. I promised to tell the story of the bandit attack. You'll be fine here. Corbin's a good man, if a bit grumpy at times."

"I heard that!"

"Of course you did, I said it for your benefit." Smiling, Ceryn continued, "If I don't see you when I return afterward, take care." With that he extended his hand and James shook it.

"Goodbye, Ceryn. Thanks for all you have done for me."

"I'd say we are even. I saved your life, and now you've saved mine." Ceryn said goodbye to Corbin and his family. He then headed out the door to the stables where he readied his horse for the ride into town.

Mary and the girls showed James to his room where he found his backpack and spear already resting in a corner. Devin must have put them there when he took care of the wagon. The room was rather small. James sat on the edge of the bed and found it quite soft and comfortable. The furnishings were sparse, with a bed, nightstand and a squat three legged stool. There was also a small chest for clothes positioned at the foot of the bed. James reclined on the bed and relaxed. A window above his head allowed a soft breeze to waft in and soon lulled him to sleep.

Long before he had any desire to shed the veil of sleep, an annoying rooster beneath his window began to crow; making a general nuisance of itself. The insistent crowing prevented him from returning to sleep. Every time he was about to fall asleep, the rooster would crow and startled him back to consciousness.

Sighing, he realized that further sleep was simply impossible with that racket going on outside. He lay in bed for some time hoping the rooster would stop, but the annoying bird seemed content to crow all morning long. Exasperated, he finally gave up completely and sat on the edge of the bed. Feeling better for the full night's sleep, but wishing the rooster had picked a spot farther away to greet the morning, he got out of bed and made his way to the window. It was a little rooster. It cocked its head to one side and looked up at James out of one eye as if to say *"Yes? You want something?"*

"Shoo!"

As if in spite, the rooster crowed one last time before it walked away.

It looked to be the beginning of a beautiful, summer day. The sun had already risen a good distance over the horizon and he spied Corbin and Devin out in the nearby field hard at work. The faint odor of bacon was in the air and his stomach growled. Starving, James made his way from his room.

He found Mary shelling peas at the table where they had dinner the night before. She glanced up as he emerged. "Feeling better?"

About to answer, he waited as a yawn that could not be denied expressed itself. "A little." His leg did throb, but not nearly to the degree it had yesterday. It must be on the mend.

"We thought it best not to wake you. Ceryn came by earlier and picked up his wagon. He left for home an hour ago." Taking another pod, she cracked it open and emptied the peas into a bowl already half filled. "Corbin and Devin are out in the field, as is Elizabeth. Cyanna is around here somewhere. Are you hungry?"

The growl from his stomach was all the answer she needed. Smiling, she said, "I know how to fix that." She tapped the chair next to her. "Sit here and I will bring you something." She set down the empty pod before disappearing into the kitchen, returning shortly with a plate full of biscuits and a small jar of jam. She placed the plate in front of him and then returned to the kitchen. When she emerged, she bore a skillet containing eggs and potatoes from breakfast. She scraped the rest onto his plate. "The eggs may be a bit cool since they've been ready for a while."

Cool though they were, they were very good. He put a hearty helping of jam on his biscuit and took a bite. The taste brought back the memories of his grandmother's biscuits and produced a touch of homesickness.

"Good breakfast, it reminds me of home."

Returning to her peas she smiled at the compliment. "Ceryn said he found you lost in the woods, almost ready to be killed by a pack of wolves?" More a question than statement, she cast him a glance as another pod split under her expert hands.

"That's true, he did. If it wasn't for him I'd be dead."

"How did you get in those woods in the first place, if you don't mind my asking?"

Not sure what to say he settled for, "It's kind of hard to explain, really. I don't exactly know how I got there to tell you the truth." It was the truth in that he couldn't tell her exactly, but he did have a few unsubstantiated theories.

"Poor boy. Will you return home once your leg heals?"

James nodded. "I intend to, but I may stay around here, at least for a while." Finishing the last of the breakfast and feeling very satisfied, he sat back and watched her extract peas from the next couple of pods. She had a large pile of them yet to shell. "If you like, I could help with that. I used to help my grandmother."

"That would be nice, thank you."

Rising, she removed his dirty plates and brought him a bowl. Placing it before him, she divided the pile of peas. She gave herself the larger portion, and then they began shelling in earnest. He felt good about his progress, his bowl filling at a steady pace. Soon his hands were shelling like a pro. His pile was nearly reduced by half when Cyanna came in with the dogs

trotting beside her. Spying James shelling peas with her mother, she sat in the chair next to him. The dogs took position on the floor beneath the table.

Mary kicked at the dogs and exclaimed, "Outside you two!" The dogs hopped up and raced out the door. "They'd stay in here all day if I let them."

James gave her a grin. Taking another pod he split it open, deposited the peas into his bowl, then reached for another.

"Would you like to see the pond out back?" Cyanna asked. "It's got lots of ducks in it."

James looked at Mary. "Don't be too long, lunch will be ready in an hour or so. Thank you for your help, James."

He had just enough time to blurt out a quick, "Thank you," before Cyanna grabbed his hand and pulled him toward the door.

Unable to go as fast as she would like due to his leg, she encouraged him to walk faster with a firm, steady pull on his arm. "If we don't hurry, the ducks will be gone before we even get there." Once out the front door, the dogs ran to join them.

She gave him the grand tour of all the things to be found on their farm; pointing out the chicken house, the dog houses, and everything else a little girl was interested in.

When the pond with the ducks came into view, he agreed that there were a lot of ducks on the water. There were several different species, none exactly matching any he'd seen back home. But ducks are ducks. They found a good spot to sit, relaxed and enjoyed watching their antics.

James got comfortable nestling against the side of a tall tree. Once settled, Cyanna sat right next to him. He couldn't help but smile.

"When I was little, my father would take me camping near where I grew up. We would hike a long way through the mountains, sometimes taking as much as two days before reaching our campsite. Often, we would camp near a lake and it always felt like we were the first people to have ever been there. We watched the geese as they came in to rest on their trip south."

"Where is your father now?"

"Dead. He's been gone for some time now."

"That's sad."

"Sometimes I really miss him. But he's never really gone, not as long as I keep him alive in my memories."

"Mama and papa are never going to die. They said so."

James smiled at her innocence. "That would be good."

"And I'm never going to leave them, ever." The look in her eyes said she meant it wholeheartedly.

"Later on you may change your mind. Just enjoy the time you have with them now." Enjoying the peace and quiet, he changed position and lay flat on the ground. Far above, clouds drifted lazily across the sky. Cyanna laid her head next to James' and over the course of the next hour, they alternated between finding different shapes in the sky and watching the ducks.

Their quiet morning was eventually interrupted when Cyanna's mother called them in for lunch. James felt it was far too soon since he last ate, but realized that the family had eaten much earlier than he. Though not really hungry, James allowed Cyanna to help him to his feet and back

to the farmhouse. The smell of fresh baked bread reached them long before they neared the house.

Corbin and Devin had already returned from the field. They stood at the well in the front yard, and washed the dust and dirt from their hands and faces. As James and Cyanna approached, a rider came at a gallop up the lane.

“Corbin!”

Drying his hands on a towel, Corbin turned toward the rider. “What’s the good word Lor?”

“The mayor has called an emergency council meeting for this evening. He wants all members there an hour before nightfall.”

Corbin frowned. “What’s this all about?”

“He didn’t say, only that I notify all the members and to do it fast.”

“Tell the mayor I’ll be there.”

“I shall.” He gave Corbin a nod and then turned his horse about. “I’ll see you tonight.” With that he prodded his horse into a gallop and was off.

Corbin watched Lor depart for a moment then turned to James. “If the mayor is sending Lor to summon the council members for an emergency meeting, there must be trouble afoot.”

“What do you mean?”

“The council only meets once, maybe twice a month to discuss the area’s business, so this can only be bad news.” He turned to Devin. “You’ll need to finish the south field by yourself, I’m heading into town after we eat and I may not be back until late.”

Nodding, Devin entered the house with Cyanna to tell their mother the news. “It would be best if you remained here too.”

“I understand,” James replied.

After the meal, Corbin kissed his wife goodbye and headed into town. Devin took Elizabeth to the south field while James helped Mary with chores that his leg would allow.

Late afternoon rolled around and Mary began the preparations for dinner. She sent him to the well for water. He hobbled out the door with spear in one hand and a bucket in the other. He reached the well and began drawing water from deep below. Devin and Elizabeth appeared, looking tired, sweaty and dirty. He took a ladle and offered them a drink.

“Thanks, James,” Elizabeth said, taking the ladle. Devin didn’t say much, simply went to the basin and proceeded to wash off the dirt and grime from his face and hands. James filled the bucket and carried it back to the house.

He gave the water-filled bucket to Mary, then proceeded to set the table. After that, Mary thanked him for his help and suggested that he rest until dinner. “It will take a few minutes longer before dinner will be ready. We wouldn’t want you to overtax your leg.”

It was throbbing something terrible. Nodding, he took his seat at the table to wait dinner.

Once she deemed the stew ready, Mary brought it to the table and called the others.

“Shouldn’t we wait for papa?” Cyanna asked as she took her place next to James.

Mary shook her head and spooned stew into Cyanna's bowl. "Your papa said not to hold dinner, that he would not be home until after dark." She turned her attention to Devin. "Would you please slice the bread?"

Devin took the knife and removed sections, passing them around.

Bread and stew seem to be the mainstay of meals in these parts; first Ceryn, now Mary. Of course, Mary's was by far the superior of the two.

Near the end of the meal a horse was heard approaching from down the lane. Cyanna bolted out of her seat and rushed to the window. "It's Papa!" she exclaimed happily, then ran for the door.

"Cyanna!"

Ignoring her mother's cry, she threw open the door and vanished outside. A moment later, the dogs were heard barking to greet their master's return.

Mary walked to the open doorway. The look she sent outside was filled with both gladness and worry. She stepped aside to allow Corbin to enter with Cyanna hugging him around the middle. By the look on Corbin's face, whatever the meeting with the mayor had been about, it hadn't been good.

"Devin, take care of my horse, please."

"Ok, Papa." Taking a last big bite of stew, he took a slice of bread as he headed out the door.

As Corbin took his seat at the table, Mary filled a bowl with stew for him. "What happened?"

"The Empire has done what we have feared for so long. It has launched an assault on Madoc."

"No," Mary gasped.

Corbin took a bite and nodded. "I'm afraid so. They have already pushed several hundred leagues north and have laid siege to the town of Saragon. The Madoc Council sent runners to Castle Cardri for assistance. One passed through and gave the mayor forewarning."

"Are we in danger?"

"Not at present. Their attack seems to only be against Madoc so far. Though if Madoc falls, the Kingdom of Cardri will most likely be next."

"What does the mayor wish us to do?"

"Right now there is nothing we can do. It is the middle of summer and harvest is not far off. We cannot spare anyone. However, if the situation worsens, and they feel Cardri will be threatened, I'm sure levies will be summoned."

Elizabeth wrinkled her nose in confusion. "A levy, Papa?"

He nodded. "It's where they summon all able bodied men for service. I don't think we have much to be worried about, Devin's still too young and they don't enlist girls for fighting."

"What about James?" Cyanna asks.

"James, I'm afraid, would be a prime candidate." Glancing to James, he continued. "I don't think you have much to worry about at the moment. If the war does come here, it is still a ways off."

James didn't like what he was hearing. He definitely did not want to go into the army, especially in an age where doctors used leeches and hard liquor was the only pain killer.

Thinking of documentaries that described the Civil War caused a cold shiver to go down his back. No matter how bad it had been then, here it would be worse.

“The main thing the mayor wants us to do is to keep our eyes open for strangers and people asking a lot of questions. They could be spies scouting for the Empire.”

Cyanna turned wide eyes to James. “Are you a spy?”

“What?” Startled, he almost choked on the mouthful of stew.

“Cyanna!” her mother scolded. “That is not the sort of question you ask a guest in your home.”

Withering under the stern glare of her father, she said quietly to James, “Sorry.”

“That’s okay,” he replied. “And I’m not a spy, just someone who has lost his way.”

“That’s good,” she said. “I mean, good you’re not a spy.”

“Who’s not a spy?” Devin asked as he entered through the door and returned to his seat at the table.

“James,” Cyanna answered.

Her brother glanced to their guest with much more interest than previously. “Is he supposed to be one?”

“No,” Elizabeth joined in, “he is not.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“The problem,” their father interjected, “is people who only hear the end of a conversation.” He glared at his children, quieting them in a way only a father can, and then flashed James a smile that lasted only a second.

Corbin stood and stretched. “James, let’s take a walk. That is, if your leg is up to it?”

Surprised by the request, James came to his feet. “I can make it. The pain is not so bad anymore.”

“Good, then come along.”

Motioning for James to follow, he headed for the front door. As they exited, the dogs ran behind Corbin as he and James made their way to the stables.

“I wanted to talk with you privately. Ceryn told me everything about your time with him. I know you’re a mage.” Holding up his hand, he stopped James from commenting. “I’m a pretty good judge of people and I don’t get any feelings of evil about you, so your being a mage doesn’t bother me. I haven’t told anyone else and as far as I know, only Ceryn and I am aware of this.

“But there was more than The Empire’s thrust into Madoc that has the mayor concerned. We’ve known the Empire has been on the verge of attacking for several years. What preparations could be made, have been.” He reached down and scratched Tor’s head.

“No, what I wanted to talk with you about has to do with something else. Several nights ago, Hern, a farmer that lives a few miles out of town near the Forest’s fringe disappeared. The day before, he asked a neighbor for help in getting rid of a stump in his field. When the neighbor arrived, he discovered Hern’s front door open. There was no sign of him outside, so the neighbor went inside to investigate. Hern was not there either.

“The table had been set for dinner. His plate was clean, as if it had just been removed from the shelf. A bowl of stew sat on the table; it hadn’t been touched. The neighbor then rushed outside

calling Hern's name but never received an answer. Both inside and out, there weren't any signs of a struggle.

"So far, no sign of Hern has been found though the entire area has been scoured. Those living closest claimed they hadn't seen or heard anything strange the night before."

James glanced uncertainly at his host. "What does this have to do with me?"

"Nothing directly, but let me finish, please." Getting a nod from James he continued.

"Last night, another went missing, this time a small boy. He went to fetch water from the well and failed to return. When his parents went looking for him, they found the pail on the ground by the well, but no sign of the boy. The boy's family lives on the edge of the forest like Hern, though about two or three miles farther down the road. I was hoping that there would be some way you might help find them?"

"I'm not sure what help I can be, Corbin. Despite what Ceryn might've said, I am still pretty new to this whole magic business. I will think on it and see if I can come up with some ideas."

"We would be grateful with whatever aid you could give."

James thought for a bit. *Whenever detectives try to solve a case, they always examine the scene of the crime.* "Maybe we could ride to Hern's place in the morning and have a look around. Maybe something would turn up."

"Ok, then. First thing in the morning. We better be getting back before Mary sends one of the young'uns to see what's going on."

James agreed. They returned to the house where Mary was readying the children for bed. With a round of goodnights and several kisses, they headed to their rooms. James took his leave of Corbin and Mary and went to his room as well. He remained awake most of the night, working to come up with some way to help.

Chapter Five

The following morning looked to be another sunny, summer day. Above stretched an expanse of crystal blue, broken only by a few high clouds. Coming out of the east, a breath of wind eased the heat of the day.

Corbin informed Mary about his plans to take James into town to see about the reward money. He told her not to wait lunch for them as they would eat at the *Squawking Goose*.

At the barn, Corbin grabbed a saddle and tossed it upon his horse's back. As he cinched the underbelly straps, he noticed James looking very confused at a Gordian knot of straps in his hand. Turning it every which way, he seemed at a loss as what to do next.

“What’s wrong?”

“Well, I’m sort of embarrassed to admit it but…,” Then his face turned a shade red. “I’ve never saddled a horse before. In fact, I’ve never even been on one. They kind of scare me.”

Laughing, Corbin said, “That’s hard to believe.” Seeing the redness of James’ embarrassment, he sobered and came over, taking the tangled mass of straps and buckles. “Here, let me show you what to do. If you’re going to own one, you’d better learn what to do and how to care for it.”

Embarrassment turned to relief. “Thank you.”

Corbin started by having James become acquainted with his horse. First, he had him gently stroke the face and neck, letting the horse know that he was a friend. Corbin then retrieved a carrot from a nearby bin and handed it to James.

Taking the carrot, James offered it and the horse readily ate it out of his hand. Smiling, he continued petting the horse on the side of the face as it ate. Soon he wasn’t quite as nervous.

Corbin then instructed James in the proper placement of saddle and tack. He allowed James to do the work so he would better learn what to do. When James finished, Corbin rechecked the tightness and placement of every piece until satisfied that it had been done properly and would not loosen.

Once James’ horse was ready, Corbin had him do it all over again with his. This time, James managed to do it a little faster with fewer mistakes. Once Corbin was again satisfied that everything was either done right or had been corrected, he instructed James on the proper mounting technique. Despite his stiff and sore leg, James managed to mount his horse in only two attempts. When he was up and not in immediate danger of falling off, Corbin mounted his horse and started showing James the various nuances in guiding a horse. He showed him how to use the reins and his knees to move in the desired direction. James was a quick study and soon had a basic understanding of controlling his horse. Corbin had him take the lead as they exited the barn.

In front of the house stood Corbin’s wife Mary and Cyanna who were there to see them off. Corbin waved goodbye and made his way down the lane. After several feet, he realized that James hadn’t followed. He glanced back and found him trying to get the horse to move.

James flicked the reins but the horse merely stood there. “C’mon, boy.”

The horse snorted and turned its head to look back at him.

Feeling slightly embarrassed with everyone watching, he continued his efforts with little success.

“Kick him gently in the sides.”

He glanced to Corbin.

“You have to show him that you are in charge.”

James nodded and gave a gentle kick. The horse snorted, but otherwise remained still. He looked to Corbin.

“Harder.”

“All right.” Then to his horse, he said, “Sorry to have to do this, but you’ve left me no choice.”

He brought his feet outward, then jerked them into its sides. The horse lurched forward.

“There you go,” Corbin praised as James flew by.

Barking erupted behind him as the dogs gave chase which only made the horse go faster. Terrified and holding on for dear life, James felt himself slipping to the side. His scream of terror echoed across the fields.

“Tor! Cyne!” Corbin yelled as his horse bolted forward to catch up with James. “Back home! NOW!”

The dogs broke off their chase and glanced toward their master with tails between their legs.

“Home!”

Ahead, he saw James tip even more precariously to the side. At the speed James was going, it was likely he might suffer serious injury if he should fall. Kicking his horse in the sides, he raced forward.

“James!” he hollered as the distance narrowed. “Hang on!”

Just as James began to lose his balance altogether, a hand reached out to snag his backpack. Giving out with an incoherent scream, he fell. But instead of slamming to the ground, he was pulled to the side of Corbin’s horse. Corbin brought them to a halt and lowered a shaky and trembling James to the ground. The aftereffects of terror turned his knees to jelly and he dropped in a most undignified manner to the ground.

Corbin pulled up next to him. “Are you okay?”

He looked up with embarrassment. “Yes.”

“You really weren’t lying about never having been on a horse before.”

James shook his head. “No, I wasn’t.”

Looking back toward the house, Corbin saw Mary and Cyanna as they ran down the lane toward them. Waving that everything was okay, he hollered, “He’s fine. Get on back.”

James’ horse had continued quite a ways before it came to a stop. Corbin left James on the ground to get his nerves under control while he went to fetch the errant steed. Returning, he dismounted and then helped James up.

“Now, let’s get you back on and we’ll work on those commands again,”

Again, James had a hard time getting his horse to go, but after a little coaching from Corbin, managed to get it moving without breaking into a mad, terrifying gallop.

Once he felt confident James would not face another wild ride, Corbin mounted and they headed into town. Throughout the ride, he instructed James in the nuances of controlling his horse and the proper care and feeding of it.

Hoping to retain at least most of the wisdom Corbin imparted, James paid close attention while he concentrated on keeping his balance so he wouldn’t fall. He rode as close to Corbin as he could, scared to death that the horse would take off, leaving him in the dirt.

After what seemed a very long time, they arrived at the outskirts. Townsfolk out in the early morning offered greetings to Corbin, waving as they passed.

They followed the road through the center of town until reaching a two-story building which bore a sign by the door depicting three stacks of coins sitting upon a table. Corbin rode to the front and dismounted.

He glanced to James. "This is Alexander's. He is the local money lender and the one to see about your reward." He moved to James' side and offered a hand with dismounting.

James swung down from the saddle. Dismounting, as James learned, was far easier than mounting. They secured their steeds to the hitching post and headed for the door.

Alexander's place was a single, modest-sized room with three armed guards. Two stood on either side of the entrance while the third was positioned next to a door at the opposite end of the room. Along the same wall was an opening with a counter.

Upon seeing them enter, the guard positioned next to the door said, "Good day, sirs. If you will wait just a moment, I shall let him know you are here." With that, he opened the door and disappeared into the back. A short time later, a man dressed in fine clothes appeared, followed closely by the guard who closed the door behind them.

The man's demeanor was warm and friendly. He crossed the room and extended his hand. "Corbin, how are you doing? Are your little ones well?"

Corbin took his hand and shook it. "They are doing well, as am I." Gesturing to James he added, "This is James. He is the one that is here to see you."

His attention turned to the farmer's companion and appraised him with a cursory glance. "How may I be of service?"

James handed him the letter from the mayor.

Alexander scanned the missive. "Ah, yes, the reward for Garrett the Snake and his men. Heard the story last night at the *Squawking Goose*. The mayor said you would be coming by. What would you like to do about it?"

"What do you mean, 'do about it'?"

"Well, I could give it all to you now, but that would be far too much for you to carry. Or, you could set up an account and I would keep it safe and secure for you until such time as you need to withdraw it."

"Sort of like a bank?"

"Bank?" Alexander asked in confusion.

James nodded. "You know, a place where you deposit money, get loans, stuff like that."

"Uh, yes. Just like that." Alexander glanced questioningly toward Corbin who shrugged and mouthed, *He's not from around here*.

Oh, he replied in the same silent, discreet manner.

James considered what he needed and realized he didn't have the faintest idea. Whenever he ran characters during role playing, he liked to have fifty gold pieces. It was a tidy sum and wouldn't impact his encumbrance too severely, and should more than suffice for his immediate needs.

"I think I'll take fifty gold pieces and set the rest up in an account."

"Very good, sir. If you will wait but a moment, I shall return with your coins and the papers to set up your account." With that he made for the door. The guard closed it after he passed through.

James and Corbin waited only a few moments before Alexander appeared at the opening in the wall with a leather pouch, along with three papers. He motioned James to the window and

opened the pouch. Gold coins spilled onto the counter as Alexander proceeded to count them with James, ensuring that the count was accurate. Once satisfied the number of coins was correct, he had James place the coins back into the pouch. Alexander then took the papers and pointed to a line. "You need to make your mark here. This says you are entrusting us with your money, until such time you request it to be withdrawn."

James took the papers and to his surprise, could read them. He looked them over and signed on the line.

Alexander took the papers. "Thank you, sir. I am certain that you will be pleased with the level of service that my establishment will accord you and your money."

"Thanks to you as well, Alexander," James replied, then turned to Corbin, "Shall we go?"

He nodded. "Goodbye, Alexander."

"Goodbye, Corbin. Hope to see you again soon." Alexander disappeared to the back.

Corbin led the way where the horses waited outside. James mounted on the first attempt and gave Corbin a smile of triumph.

"Now, to Hern's farm."

James nodded. "Lead on."

They headed their horses back through town and left by a different road. James rode with more confidence. He didn't feel in danger of tipping to the side and his horse responded well to his directions. The difficulty experienced earlier did not return.

Once past the outskirts of Trendle, Corbin asked what he planned to do once they reached Hern's place.

"I'm not really sure," James admitted. "It's likely there will be nothing I can do."

Hern's farm was several miles from town. His fear of riding now diminished, James enjoyed the ride through the farmland. Riding the horse gave him a sense of freedom that he never felt before. He figured it to be what driving a car for the first time must have been like. His grandparents had never felt comfortable with him driving. They managed to forestall any attempt he made to get his license. He wondered what they would think of him now. A touch of homesickness returned, but the sun on his face and the freedom of riding a horse soon had him cheerful once more.

From the main road, they took a small lane which led toward a line of trees in the distance. Soon, a small home with a barn out back and corral to the side came into view.

"Is this it?"

Corbin nodded.

James slowed and gave the vicinity a closer look. Everything appeared normal. He made a quick loop around the house with Corbin following and failed to discover anything that indicated the fate of Hern. Returning to the front, James brought his horse to a halt and stared at the open front door. He then closed his eyes to see if he could feel anything weird, like a residual trace of evil or magic. He didn't.

Yeah, like I'd know what that would feel like even if it was here, he mused to himself as he opened his eyes and dismounted.

"What do you think?"

James shrugged. "Don't know. Let's check out the inside."

He and Corbin dismounted and entered the front door. They found the insides as Corbin had described with dinner still on the table, though by now it was pretty ripe. There was no sign of a struggle or anything. It looked like he just got up and walked away.

Returning outside, James considered the problem;

Corbin wants me to find where Hern is. How can I locate him? How did they do it in all those books I read? Clairvoyance, Clairaudience, Esp., not sure how to go about those. When you need to find something you use...you use...a compass? Could I fashion a magical compass to point out the direction of Hern's whereabouts? The image of a tracker having his hound sniff an article of worn clothing sprang to mind. *That might just work.*

"I think I may have an idea. Let's go to the barn and see if I can find material to fashion a compass."

"What's a compass?"

"It's an object used to find things," James replied. "Back where I come from, they would use it to always point north. That type of compass doesn't require magic."

"Why would you care where north is?"

"It was used by sailors when they had no sun or stars to steer by."

"That would make sense."

Reaching the door to the barn Corbin opened it and stepped back, allowing James to enter first.

Once inside, James scanned the interior to see what materials were available. Stacked neatly in one corner were a dozen narrow posts. He took one with a diameter that measured roughly three inches. Motioning for Corbin to join him, he asked, "Could you cut a smooth, half inch section off of this one?"

"Sure," he said and took the post. He carried it to a workbench where a rack of tools hung on the wall. Corbin took down a saw and extended the end of the post over the edge of the workbench. "Do you want it off the end or should I remove the end first, then cut a section?"

He rubbed his finger over the end, and found it rough and cracked. "Maybe you should take the end off first. I'll need it smoother than that."

"All right." He removed the unusable portion. Once it dropped to the ground, he started on the piece as James requested.

While Corbin worked on the post, James looked through the post pile and found another that had a slightly wider diameter than the first. When Corbin finished removing the section from the first post, he asked him to saw a similar piece from the second.

He gathered a few more items that might be useful in compass construction. James returned to the workbench and waited for Corbin to finish. When Corbin was done, he removed the unused portions of the posts from the workbench. He then brushed away the sawdust from the workbench, and put the two freshly-cut pieces on it. Stepping aside, he made room for James.

James picked up the smaller of the two and showed it to Corbin. "Is there a way you can drill a hole through this? It needs to be slightly bigger than one of these nails?" He gestured to a pile of nails on the workbench.

Corbin searched the tools above the workbench, nodded and took one down. The tool reminded James of a screwdriver but the end was fashioned like a drill. Taking the piece of wood, Corbin used the tool to bore a hole. Once the hole was the size James required, he blew off the excess debris and handed it back.

James examined it. "Perfect. This will do fine." He placed both pieces of wood on the workbench, then created a vision of what he wanted to accomplish. Releasing the magic, he said:

***Can't have even one little groove,
Make both sides perfectly smooth.***

At the completion of the spell, he watched the surfaces of the two pieces shift. They became smooth as glass.

"Unbelievable," Corbin exclaimed from behind his shoulder. "I've never seen anything like that." He reached out and ran his finger over the now-smooth surface. "Sure, I've heard of magic but have never seen it done before."

"It's not as easy as it looks." Turning back to the workbench, he checked to ensure both pieces were smooth. He set the smaller piece upon the larger and centered it. A nail was placed in the hole of the smaller piece. Removing a hammer from the rack on the wall, he gently tapped the nail until the head was almost touching the wood. Satisfied, he flicked the outer edge of the smaller piece and watched it spin on its axis.

Using a piece of charcoal, he then drew a radial arrow on the surface of the top piece. "It's finished," he announced and showed it to Corbin.

The farmer looked at it skeptically. "It is? What will it do?"

"Just watch." Hoping this worked, he held the bottom piece securely. He again released the magic:

***Near or far, dead or alive,
Finding Hern, do I strive.
Compass mine, this I say,
The shortest path, point the way.***

The intense surge of power at the completion of the spell took James' breath away. Before it subsided, he feared that he might have made a deadly underestimation of his abilities. But the drawing of power came to an end. Ever so slowly, the top piece rotated until the charcoal arrow pointed in the general direction of the forest.

"Hern's that way."

There was still a minute drawing of power being taken from him. James figured that like the orb back in the cave, such a drawing must be needful to maintain the spell.

"Are you sure?" Corbin asked, skeptically.

“Pretty sure. Only one way to find out.” He got up from the workbench and made his way from the barn. Outside, the charcoal indicator continued pointing toward the forest. Whenever James turned the compass, the charcoal arrow indicated the same direction; toward the forest.

Moving forward, James came to a stop at the forest’s edge then glanced to Corbin. “Shall we find him?”

Corbin had the look of one who would rather be somewhere else. His eyes lingered for a moment on the forest. He licked his lips, glanced to James and nodded. “Yes, though let’s be careful.”

“Oh, you can bet on that.”

Following the compass, they made their way between the outer layer of trees.

An hour of tangled underbrush, fallen trees, and uneven ground later, they arrived at a break in the forest where stood an old, abandoned house. Once finely crafted, the two-story dwelling now had one of its walls partially collapsed. The yard and surrounding area were overgrown with brush and small trees. The arrow of the compass pointed toward the house.

James didn’t relish the idea of entering the house. There was something about it that made his skin crawl. Hoping the compass might point to a destination in the forest beyond, he walked around the side. Unfortunately, the compass swiveled as he moved, with the arrow always aimed at the house.

“It says Hern’s in there.”

Corbin made no reply.

Glancing at his companion, James saw Hern’s expression turn worried.

“Something wrong?”

“If this is the place I’m thinking of, it has a bad history.”

“What do you mean?”

“It happened three score years ago. A stranger arrived in Trendle and purchased a claim for land within the forest. Said he wanted to get away from city life and find peace and quiet. He contracted several of the townspeople to build his house,” Corbin gestured toward the building, “this house perhaps. The construction took nearly a year and once finished he moved in. After that, no one saw much of him. He kept to himself, rarely coming to town and then only to buy supplies.

“It didn’t take long before rumors began surfacing about this man.” He cast a glance to James. “Strangers, especially ones that keep to themselves, are grist for the rumor mill.”

James nodded. From what he had already experienced in his short time in Trendle, he knew exactly what Corbin meant.

“Anyway, one afternoon several boys decided to come and spy on him, to see what he was about. When they arrived, they crept close to the house and peered through a ground floor window. One climbed a tree to better see inside. They saw the man sitting cross-legged on the floor; a circle encompassing a five pointed star, a pentagram as the townsfolk later discovered, was drawn on the floor not five feet in front of him. At each point of the pentagram burned a candle. The boys said it looked as if the man was in some kind of a trance, and that he was chanting.

“Moments passed as they listened to the unfamiliar words; then the air above the pentagram began to flux and swirl. At that point, the chanting changed, intensified. From within the flux and swirl appeared the shape of an inhuman creature. It slowly took shape, growing more solid with every word the man uttered.

“The boy on the branch clung transfixed as he watched the unfolding events. When the creature was almost completely formed, the branch upon which he lay gave out with a loud *crack* and broke, throwing him to the ground. The end of the branch smashed through the window to the room wherein the man sat.

“The boys claimed that just after the window shattered, they heard a monstrous roar from the other side. The man shrieked in terror before being abruptly silenced. The boys ran as if demons were after them, which was probably not far from the truth. When they returned to town, they went straightaway to the Town Hall and told their story to the mayor, who immediately dispatched a party of armed townsfolk along with the priest to investigate.

“When they arrived, no trace of the man could be found. They did find the pentagram on the floor, with four of the candles having burned down to nothing. The fifth laid on its side, shards from the broken window lay around it. It is believed that when the window shattered, the glass flew and knocked over the candle, which broke the holding spell, allowing the demon, that’s what the priest said was most likely being summoned, to break free and take the man. The priest stated that there didn’t seem to be any traces of evil remaining in the house. But just to be sure, he cleansed the house from top to bottom before departing.”

Glancing at James to gauge his reaction, Corbin continued. “The people hereabouts avoid this house, they think it’s haunted. Whether by the spirit of the man or by the demon he summoned, no one is sure. Every once in a while, a hunter will come across this place and tell of feelings of foreboding, or of hearing strange noises. If Hern is in there, I would hate to guess what that would mean.”

“I agree, but we need to see if we can find him. That missing boy may be in there as well. We can’t just leave them,” James said with surprising determination. “Should they still be alive, they are going to need our help. If we’re careful, maybe we could get in and out real fast. See if we can find them.”

“Quickly then,” Corbin agreed uneasily. As James led the way into the house, he followed close behind.

The front room was dark and shadowed with narrow streams of light filtering through the windows. A fine layer of dust covered everything. Grass and small plants sprouted through the myriad cracks which marred the floor. Spider webs filled the corners and draped between bits of old furniture.

As they pressed inward, a sense of foreboding settled over James. He tried to shake it off, but the feeling only grew as they followed the compass toward a hallway leading deeper into the house.

The left side of the hallway had partially collapsed. The debris made for treacherous going. In one place they stooped quite a bit to make it past a section of collapsed ceiling. As they made

their way through the rubble, light filtered through the broken and cracked areas above creating an eerie atmosphere.

Not far past the caved-in ceiling, they came to an opening on their right. It was a flight of stairs which led to the second floor. Though rubble-choked, James figured that they could make it through should the need arise. As he looked up into the darkness, he definitely hoped the need would not arise!

Moving past the stairwell they reached another doorway. It was the last accessible one before the hallway became impassable due to the collapsed second floor. Peering cautiously around the corner, James looked into a room, one that had somewhat been spared the ravages of time that the rest of the house had suffered. A five pointed star lay inscribed on the floor. *That must have been where the demon was summoned.* Doing a quick scan about the rest of the room, he failed to find anything unusual. He stepped through the doorway and entered. Corbin followed close behind.

Walking to the pentagram, James gestured toward the broken glass near one of its point. "This must be where the shattered window broke the Spell of Holding." Scanning the area for bloodstain failed to reveal any. He picked up one of the broken shards. It was cool, but didn't feel odd or strange. He tossed it back to the spot where it had lain.

"Maybe we shouldn't stay any longer," Corbin said nervously. There was a definite fearful tremble in his voice. "It doesn't look like we're going to find them."

"Perhaps." Glancing at his compass, James was surprised to see the pointer going round and round in a clockwise direction. "That's weird." He showed the spinning pointer to Corbin.

"What does it mean?"

Shrugging, James replied. "Haven't a clue. I told you I was new to magic." Discontinuing the spell, he placed the compass in his backpack. He then looked to Corbin and was about to suggest they search elsewhere, when a slight flicker from the pentagram caught the corner of his eye. He quickly turned his head, but it was gone.

Corbin noticed his movement. "What?" he exclaimed, eyes darted quickly about the room.

"Thought I saw something." Turning his head so the pentagram was just at the edge of his peripheral vision, the flickering reappeared. This time he held his gaze steady and continued to look at the pentagram from the corner of his eye. After a few moments, he realized that what he originally took as a flash was actually a steady, slow pulse; barely discernable in the shadows.

"Curious."

"What is?" Corbin, agitated, looked between James and the pentagram.

"I can see a slight pulsing coming from the pentagram. Though I can only see it when it's in my peripheral vision."

"Pulsing?" Fear was even more apparent in the farmer's voice. "Let's get out of here." He edged toward the exit.

The feeling of foreboding was now quite strong. "Yeah, that might be a good idea."

Corbin led the way, and entered the hallway. James followed closely. The foreboding grew. They passed the stairway leading to the second floor, then came to where the hallway ended.

Just before Corbin passed from the hallway into the outer room, James grabbed his arm and jerked him back.

“Look.” Whispering softly, he directed the farmer’s attention toward the open front door.

Two silhouettes approached. Unable to make out distinct features, they could tell that one was adult size while the other was smaller. Moving his mouth next to Corbin’s ear, he whispered, “Let’s return to the stairs and hide.”

Corbin nodded and started backing down the hallway.

Being as quiet as possible, they returned to the stairs and ascended a short ways until the hallway could no longer be seen. Holding still, they awaited the approach of whomever, or whatever it might be.

James was sure that the sound of his heart, which felt like it was trying to beat out of his chest, would surely give them away. They didn’t have long to wait before two sets of footsteps entered the hallway. He held his breath, his heart beating wildly in fear as the footsteps drew closer, and then passed by the front of the stairwell. They continued toward the room at the end of the hallway where the pentagram lay.

James whispered to Corbin as he made to return to the hallway, “Stay here, I’m going to see what they’re doing.”

“Are you crazy? I’m getting out of here. If you’re smart, you will too.” With that he brushed past James, moved quickly down the hallway and out the front door. Once free from the house, he broke into a mad dash as he raced into the trees.

Though he knew he should leave too, James had an undeniable need to know what was going on. Slowly and quietly, he made his way through the rubble to the entrance of the room. As he approached, a subtle, pulsating dark blue glow began to emanate from the room. Steeling himself, he peered around the corner.

Two individuals stood motionless before the pentagram. A small vortex pulsated with a dark blue radiance in the air above it. A feeling of horror washed over James at the sight, yet was unable to turn away.

The taller of the two began to chant; the unfamiliar words were painful to the ears. The smaller one, who looked to be a young girl, snapped out of her lethargic trance at the utterance of the first word. With a scream, she tried to flee and only made it a step before the taller one seized her by the hair and held her fast. At the touch of the taller one, the ability to run seemed to drain from the girl. Unable to do anything else, the girl stood there and cried.

From the vortex, a shimmering wave stretched forth and made contact with the girl. A soul wrenching scream tore from her throat. Her traumatized body shook as pulses traveled along the wave from the girl to the vortex. Memories from a campaign in which he played a druid surfaced, James reacted without thought. As more screams came from the poor girl, he summoned the magic to him and said:

***Forces of Good, forces of nature,
Give me your aid this day
Sever the bond, free the girl***

Course of evil to stay!

Tendrils of power sprung to life and converged from all directions at a point somewhere deep within him. From there it surged outward from his outstretched hand and arced toward the shimmering wave. A blinding explosion like a mini-super nova flared when the two powers met. Once the dots ceased dancing before his eyes, he found the wave from the vortex gone and the girl sagged unconscious in the grip of the evil's minion.

Hatred and malice erupted from the vortex. As it washed over him like a tide of filth, James sensed that the evil in the vortex now focused upon him.

The evil's minion turned toward James, letting go of the young girl who collapsed.

Wariness turned to shock as he discovered the evil's minion to be a girl that looked a little younger than him. She was dressed in blue jeans and a black shirt; he was further dumbfounded when he spied the words *San Francisco* written across the front. *She's from home!*

Her eyes glowed with an inhuman intelligence; her face twisted in an expression of pure evil. Wielding a dagger in one hand, she chanted words whose very utterance set James' skin crawling.

"I'm from Earth, too!"

But her expression failed to change.

"We can help each other."

Unresponsive, she moved toward him and her chanting continued.

Out of the corner of his eye he caught sight of a change in the swirling of the vortex. Taking his eyes from her for a moment, he glanced quickly to it. A shiver went through him when he found the vortex beginning to coalesce and take shape.

The chanting from the girl suddenly stopped and a dark cloud exuded toward him. The sight of the miasmic cloud caused him to dart backward out of the room but the cloud moved faster. He held out his arm as if to ward it off, but instead felt excruciating pain.

It engulfed his arm; welts formed and fire raced along his nerve endings. A scream escaped him as more of his body came in contact with the toxic cloud. Somewhere amidst the agony, he found the strength to cry:

Soothe and heal

No pain to feel

Power coursed through his body and reduced the pain to a dull throbbing. The black cloud dissipated when the power behind the spell was exhausted. The features of the girl were contorted, misshapen and twisted by the evil which controlled her. She continued advancing toward him.

Thinking fast, an idea came. James glanced at the floor and cast:

Stone like pudding

Soft and slick

***Entrap her feet
Then harden quick.***

Her next step touched the floor then sank beneath the surface. As if unaware, she continued forward with the other; it too passed into the stone of the floor. Once both feet had sunk past the ankles and halfway up the calf, the stone solidified, encasing her feet. Her legs kept moving as if trying to bring her toward him, but the stone of the floor held her fast. She started chanting another spell.

Taking a small stone from the rubble littering the floor, he cast the same spell used when he killed the wolf. He threw the stone. It ricocheted off an invisible shield which surrounded the girl. *Ping!*

Her chanting raised an octave and there was a disconcerting prickling of his skin. He reached down for another stone. Borrowing from his druid's repertoire of spells, he drew his arm back and said:

***Forces of Good, forces of nature,
More aid do I need.
Pierce the shield, through the heart
The power of good, succeed.***

Again a multitude of power tendrils flowed into him, met in the center, and surged outward as he hurled the stone. When the stone connected with her protective shield, there was an intense flash of light. It passed through and struck her in the chest, exploding out her back. She slumped lifelessly forward to the floor, settling at an awkward angle, her legs still encased within the stone floor.

Tired, exhausted and drained, James turned toward the pentagram and the evil coalescing above it. The swirling vortex had now almost completely formed into something inhuman in aspect and malignant in nature. The glowing red eyes of the creature were fixed upon him and hatred rolled over him like the outflow from a sewer. Somehow, he knew that he must find a way to close this portal between worlds before the creature manifested completely. He modified another of his druid's spells:

***Forces of Good, forces of nature,
Hearken to me one last time.
Seal the rift, the passage to close,
And let victory at last be mine!***

One last time he felt the influx of multiple tendrils as they suffused him with more power than ever before. The power was so intense that it felt as if his nerve endings were being seared raw. In his mind's eye he visualized the portal and the power of the evil fighting to keep it open. Even in his worst nightmares he never imagined such malignant hate and evil existed. His mind's eye

concentrated on the portal, directing the magic in drawing it close. The power continued flowing into him, and then out toward the portal.

Wave after wave of malignant hate struck him like physical blows. Each nearly caused him to falter. Somehow, he managed to remain focused. He continued to direct the magic to close the portal.

Just before the portal was no more, a final surge of unbelievable malignancy blasted into him and knocked him back several steps. Strengthening his resolve, he threw everything he had at the portal. The evil fought but could not keep the portal open. It shut and the evil was no more.

With the ending of the spell, the tendrils of magic vanished. He had little time to enjoy his victory. Completely drained and exhausted, his eyes rolled into the back of his head, and he passed out, collapsing to the floor.

When consciousness returned, he awoke disoriented with a headache that threatened to split his skull wide open. Others were in the room, but he had a hard time focusing, so couldn't make them out.

"James, are you all right?"

The voice sounded familiar, but his mind couldn't quite put a name to it. Unable to utter more than an incoherent grunt, he shook his head. He felt pressure against his lips followed by a trickle of water. After a couple of swallows, his vision cleared. He managed a weak smile as his eyes finally focused on Ceryn.

"Thought...you...home," he managed to get out.

"Thought I went home?" When James nods, Ceryn shook his head. "No. I was visiting a friend and was at the Squawking Goose when Corbin came running through the front doors screaming of demons.

"When he told us what was going on, we hurried out here." He gestured to a man by the pentagram. "I dragged our priest along just in case. When we saw the devastation, we thought we would find you dead. Imagine our surprise that you weren't."

His mind couldn't make sense of what the Warden was saying. "Devastation?"

Ceryn nodded. "Devastation like I never would have believed. Trees shriveled in a massive swath with this house at the center; many animals, too."

"How?"

"We thought you might be able to tell us."

James just shook his head.

Another man knelt by the pentagram, the little girl in his arms. Sobs came from him. James thought at first she was dead, but then the man noticed him looking their way. He wiped tears from his eyes, smiled and said, "Thank you. I don't know how I can ever repay you for saving my little girl." His sobs were those of gladness, not sorrow.

The priest walked over and addressed Ceryn. "The girl is fine, if very weak. She will be fine after a few days rest I would think." Turning to James, he added, "You could do with a little rest yourself, young man" With that, he returned to the girl and her father and talked quietly with them.

Another man entered the room and walked to Ceryn. “We found Hern and Joshua upstairs, both dead. Looks like they were sucked dry somehow. Their bodies are being loaded onto the wagon and then we’ll take them back to town.”

“Very well. Thank you for your help.” The man shook Ceryn’s hand and turned to walk out the door.

The father helped his daughter to her feet. With the priest lending an arm, they managed to get her moving. They made their way slowly out the door and disappeared down the hallway.

Ceryn and Corbin helped James stand. He glanced at the older girl whose feet were still encased in the stone floor. “What are you going to do with her?”

“Leave her for now,” Ceryn replied. “We plan to return tomorrow and the priest will thoroughly cleanse the house. Then we will raze it to the ground.”

They assisted him across the room, but not before he took one last look at the girl and the words *San Francisco* on her shirt. She must have been that girl the news had said went missing the night before he left for the interview. He wondered how she had come to such a state. *Will his fate be similar?* Shuddering at the thought, he left the room.

Out front, he paused to survey the devastation of which Ceryn had spoken. Mouth agape in horrified shock, his gaze took in the great expanse of trees lying in twisted, dried tangles or shattered altogether. Not a single living thing was in evidence between the manor and where the forest began some half mile away. A carpet of splintered wood lay around the house and the carcasses of small animals as well as birds were in evidence.

Thinking back to the battle and recalling the myriad tendrils of power that had answered his call, he understood. *Forces of Good, Forces of nature. I did this. My spell called on nature and nature responded.*

Keeping such thoughts to himself, he allowed Ceryn to bring him to a roan mare and assisted him in mounting. He rode in silence while they led him through what once had been a living and thriving ecosystem. His mind had a hard time coming to grips with what he saw, what he had done.

Upon reaching Trendle, Ceryn parted company as he needed to confer with the town council about what happened at the old abandoned estate.

James was in a daze, and had been since they left the devastated area. He merely nodded as the Warden took his leave.

Corbin took him home.

Chapter Six

Over the next two days James took it easy, sleeping through most of the first, only awakening when Mary brought a plate of eggs and potatoes. During breakfast of the second day, he spied the girls peeking through the doorway. Their giggling alerted their mother who immediately shoed them away. "Let the boy eat in peace!"

"Rest," she said. "It's the best thing for you."

He nodded and closed his eyes.

As she passed through the doorway, James heard Mary berate her girls again for bothering him. Apparently they hadn't shoed very far. He couldn't help but grin. He had come to like Corbin and his family. They had definitely done everything they could to make him feel welcome while he stayed with them.

The redness and welts caused by the black cloud had all but disappeared. He felt much better after having rested the day before. He managed to fall asleep again and remained so until Mary brought lunch. The sound of her approaching his bedside prompted him to open his eyes.

In one hand she carried a bowl of soup and in the other, a cup of water. When she saw he was awake, she asked, "How are you feeling?"

"Better," he replied as he sat up.

She set the glass of water on the nightstand, then handed him the bowl and a spoon.

The aroma coming from the soup made his stomach growl. He took the spoon and eagerly scooped out a portion. "Very good."

Mary beamed at the praise.

Taking a seat on the edge of the bed, she inspected his injuries. "We were worried. Corbin said that when they found you, he thought you were dead."

He gave her a grin. "I can imagine."

"Sad about Hern; and Joshua, he was a joy to have around," she said sadly. "At least you were able to help Leanna."

"Is she alright?"

Mary nodded. "Her father says that she is much more subdued than what she used to be. Our priest thinks after some time has passed, she will gradually regain much of her youthful exuberance." A pause, then... "She used to be such a happy girl."

"After what she went through," began James. "I can imagine it taking some time for her to recover."

She sighed and nodded. "Yes. We are just thankful she is alive."

His bowl was soon empty. She took it, and as she left the room, told him to get more sleep.

He lay in bed for a while but sleep was unattainable. It wasn't long before he concluded that he was not going to fall asleep any time soon. Thankfully, the throbbing in his head which was unbearable the day before had now subsided to a dull ache. He started to think that he might enjoy living again. Tired of being stuck in bed, he decided to get up and stretch his legs, wobbly though they were.

Moving slowly, he swung his legs over the bed and attempted to stand. When he gained his feet, dizziness came on abruptly and he had to sit down on the bed. He held his head in his hands

to calm the dizziness, and the slight increase in pain. He took several deep breaths. The dizziness subsided after a minute or so, and he again attempted to get to his feet. He managed it without the sudden onslaught of dizziness and worsening of his headache. Feeling only slightly dizzy and unsteady, he refused to give into weakness and shuffled to the chair where his clothes were and got dressed.

Once he was dressed, he walked out into the front area. He found Mary sitting at the table mending a pair of trousers. "Where is everyone?" he asked, coming to the table.

"The kids are out in the fields, and Corbin went to the house to help the others raze it to the ground." She put the trousers down and eyed him. "Can't sleep?"

Shaking his head, he replied, "Not tired. I'm feeling much better too. Your soup really hit the spot. I think I'll take a little walk to stretch my legs and get some fresh air."

"Cyanna's outside playing with the dogs." As she picked up the trousers, she added, "If you should see her, tell her I would like her to come help me."

"Sure will," he agreed and went outside. He looked for Cyanna but there was no sign of her or the dogs.

Enjoying the warmth of the summer sun, he decided to find a comfortable grassy spot near the pond where he could sit and relax. The ducks had since traveled on, so he just laid back and watched the clouds go by, enjoying the peace and quiet. The warm sun soothed his weary body. Before he even realized it, he fell asleep.

Plunk! Plunk!

The sound of stones striking the pond's surface awakened him. Thinking Cyanna had joined him, he opened his eyes and glanced over to greet her. The whimsical greeting he was about to say died on his lips. Not three feet away sat the little creature with the blue vest and crazy felt hat he met when he first arrived in this world.

"Awake, are we? Enjoying yourself?"

Not sure how to respond, he replied, "I've had better days than the last few."

The creature chuckled. "I'm sure you have. But you've done well. My master is pleased."

Curious, James asked, "Just who might your master be?"

"I haven't been directed to tell you that as yet."

Plunk!

Another struck the water, sending ripples across the surface. Holding up his hand, the creature said, "Nor have I been given permission to answer any of your questions."

Reaching into his vest pocket, the creature removed a silver medallion on a chain and tossed it to him. "This is for you. Consider it to be a gift of sorts."

James caught the medallion. He examined it and found one side had a raised pattern that looked like a stylized star. Turning it over, James discovered the back to be smooth, without design.

"What is this?"

"Like I said, a gift. Though should you desire, you may give it away or sell it, though I'd advise against that at this time. You may need it later on."

Plunk!

“What do you mean, ‘later on’?” James did not like the prospect of what that phrase foretold.

“Later on, as in a future time,” explained the creature with a grin.

“What am I supposed to do now? Obviously I’m here for some purpose. Would you care to enlighten me?”

“Just do what you feel is right and I’m sure everything will turn out for the best.”

“Yeah, and if I think it feels right to toss this medallion into the pond, should I?” he demanded irritably. He wanted some answers, not all this cryptic stuff.

“Not supposed to answer questions, remember?” The creature stood up, “You should be fine. I’ll see you later on.” With that, he hopped in the air and disappeared just like he had before.

James stared at the spot where the creature had just stood for a moment before lying back on the grass. He examined the medallion more closely and mulled over his choices. The design looked to be the same as the one that had been on the cover of the book he inexplicably lost back in the forest. The loss of that book still bothered him. He could sure use it now.

He wondered, again, why he was in this world, not to mention what forces had brought him there. It was difficult to believe that it was for nefarious reasons. The creature had told him to “do what you feel is right.” Hardly the advice one would expect a minion of evil to give. But still, one never knew.

He wasn’t sure how long he spent mulling things over. But before long, he heard Mary’s voice calling everyone to dinner. Coming to his feet slowly, he made his way back to the house. He put the medallion around his neck for safekeeping and tucked it inside his shirt. When he returned to the house he didn’t mention the little creature or the medallion.

That night after dinner as he tried falling to sleep, he couldn’t stop thinking about the medallion and why it was given him. *There must be a reason*, he insisted. *There must!* Sometime before drifting off to sleep he concluded that answers needed to be found for the many questions that plagued him. He also believed that the answers would most likely not be uncovered in the sleepy village of Trendle.

Early the next morning he found Corbin and family eating breakfast.

“Good morning all,” he said as he approached the table.

“Feeling better this morning?” Corbin asked.

Mary brought a plate for James and he helped himself to the eggs and biscuits. “Much better, thank you. It was probably Mary’s cooking that did the most good.” James flashed her a smile.

He sat quietly at the table, absentmindedly picking at his eggs and biscuits while trying to come up with the right words to say.

“Something on your mind, James?” Corbin asked. “You seem a bit preoccupied, barely even touched your breakfast.”

Realizing that he had been pushing his food around, he said, “Well, as much as I have enjoyed your hospitality, I think it’s time for me to be moving on. I wondered if you could come into town with me and help me select traveling gear?” He took a bite of his eggs while waiting for Corbin’s reply.

Corbin eyed him for a moment, then nodded. "I guess I could do that. Where are you planning to go, if you don't mind my asking?"

"I'm not sure where anything is in this area. Where is the nearest major city?"

"The closest city of any size is Bearn. It lies two days south along the Kelewan River. Three days further you'll find Castle Cardri out on the coast. It's our capitol. A week's ride to the east is Trademeet, a bustling city where merchants of many nations meet. It lies at the foot of the mountains separating Cardri and Madoc."

"Do you think Castle Cardri would have a library or something that I could use?"

"Most likely. Though it's unlikely you would be permitted inside. Only nobles or known scholars are allowed entry. Or so I hear."

"Well, it wouldn't hurt to try."

He finished his breakfast and together they went to saddle their horses. James did a decent job this time, proud that he hadn't required Corbin's help. He climbed into the saddle, and directed his horse out of the barn. The kids were there with Mary as he neared the house. She came up to him and handed him a sack filled with bread, dried meat and fruits. He took the sack and gave her his heartfelt thanks.

Devin brought out James' spear and backpack. James grabbed the backpack but told him to keep the spear. "I don't think I will need that. You keep it."

Devin smiled and nodded, admiring his new spear.

He looked to Mary. "I appreciate your hospitality and have enjoyed being here more than you know."

"Goodbye, James; and be careful."

"I will," he assured her.

With a chorus of goodbyes, James turned his horse and followed Corbin down the lane. Looking back he saw Elizabeth and Cyanna still waving goodbye. He raised a hand and waved back, then turned and caught up with Corbin. The dogs followed, barking and jumping until the end of the lane. He and Corbin rode side by side as they continued on into town.

Upon approaching the outskirts they saw a column of soldiers marching eastward along the main road.

"Who are they?"

"Cardri soldiers," Corbin replied. "They must be headed east to reinforce Dragon's Pass. The siege is still raging at Saragon, at least that's the rumor. If it falls, the Empire may swing our way. Doubtful, but best to be prepared."

"I suppose so."

Once the soldiers passed, they made their way to Alexander's. They found Alexander at the counter dealing with an elderly woman. They waited a few moments until she concluded her business.

When she was done and turned to leave, James stepped to the counter. Alexander grinned at his approach. "Why, it's James. How may I be of service?"

"I'm leaving town so I need to withdraw the rest of my money."

“Very well,” Alexander said. “A thousand gold pieces is a lot to carry around with you. If you prefer, I could give you a letter of account. Such a letter would be honored by any money lender in Cardri. It would be less bulky than a chest full of coins that any robber would surely take an interest in.”

“That sounds like a good idea. Give me another hundred gold to take with me and the rest in a letter of account. That should last me until I get to Cardri.”

“You’re heading to the city of Cardri then?”

James nodded. “I plan to head in that direction.”

“My brother has a money lender establishment in Cardri,” he explained. “I’m sure he would be more than willing to cash this for you. You can find him in the merchant’s quarter of the outer ring.”

“I’ll look him up when I get there.”

“Very good. I shall be but a moment.”

Alexander disappeared into the back. It didn’t take long before he returned with a pouch of coins and the letter. Together they counted the money. Both verified that James was indeed receiving the correct amount.

Handing the pouch and the letter to James, Alexander said, “Protect this letter carefully. If you lose it, you’ve lost your money, understand?” James nodded that he understood. “And if you see my brother, tell him all is well here.”

“I will be sure to do that,” James assured him. After signing a few papers that stated Alexander was no longer responsible for his money, he and Corbin left.

Next to Alexander’s was the Chandlers’ Shop where a variety of equipment and supplies for travel were sold. Inside, they found items like bags, cloaks, and belts, displayed throughout the shop. An open counter lined most of one wall and a portly man stood behind it.

When they entered he said, “A good day to you, Corbin. How may I help you?”

“Not for me, Burl, but for James.”

Burl’s eyes widened as he appraised Corbin’s companion. “James? Not the same James who rescued Jake’s little girl?”

James nodded, “I guess so. I need some equipment.”

“What are you looking for?”

He described the items he thought he was going to need. Then Corbin and the chandler proceeded to tell him what he would really need, including several sets of clothes. Together, they compiled a list of travel essentials. When asked how much for the lot the chandler replied, “Jake came in here yesterday and told me that if you wanted anything, that I was to charge him for it. He said it was the least he could do to repay you.”

Turning to Corbin, James looked questioningly at him.

“While you recovered, he stopped by to talk to you but we thought it best not to disturb your rest,” he explained. “He said he wanted to repay you in some way. I explained that you would need equipment and supplies when you left, seeing as how you didn’t have anything when you arrived. He must have come down here and set this up with Burl.”

“That’s right, he did,” agreed Burl.

“Okay, I got it.” Collecting his new equipment he said to the chandler, “Thank you for your help.”

“You are most welcome.”

With arms full, he exited the shop and began packing and redistributing his new acquisitions upon his horse until he had a balanced load. As he got ready to mount, Corbin stopped him.

“Here.” He offered James a knife in a simple leather sheath. “This has been collecting dust the last few years and I’d like you to have it. You will need it more than I.”

He took the knife, pulled the blade from the scabbard and found the metal well-polished with a sharp edge. He reinserted it into the scabbard and hooked it on his belt. Once his belt was buckled securely around him, he positioned the knife’s scabbard in a comfortable position. Having it on his hip made him feel pretty darn good.

“Thanks, Corbin.” He reached out his hand and shook Corbin’s. “I appreciate all that you’ve done. I’ll drop by if I’m ever back in the area again.”

“You are always welcome,” Corbin told him. “You take care now.”

James mounted, turned the horse in the direction of the south road and cantered out of town.

Traveling down the road along the Kelewan River was peaceful and enjoyable. The road had been well maintained and made for easy riding. It was a clear and sunny day with a slight breeze, too warm for more than a shirt. James rode along and covered the miles quickly. According to Corbin it was two days to Bearn. As the day progressed, he passed several travelers, some alone and others as a group. Late in the morning he encountered one caravan with ten wagons and about as many guards. The teamsters waved as he passed, while the guards only glared. The lead wagon was not the same flatbed as the others, but a wagon covered with a deep blue canvas. A four horse team pulled it, which made him think of the covered wagons in the old western movies.

The wagon was being driven by a young lady who looked about sixteen. On the seat next to her sat an older man, most likely her father. As James pulled abreast of the wagon, the lady said, “Good day to you, sir.”

Smiling his most charming smile, he replied, “And a nice day to you too, ma’am.”

The man looked him up and down. His expression suggested that he found James somewhat lacking. He nodded a greeting but didn’t say anything.

“Where are you bound?” the lady asked him.

“South to Bearn, then perhaps to the coast,” he replied. “By the way, my name is James.” He gave her a slight bow.

“I am called Celienda.” Gesturing to the man next to her she added, “This is my father, Meredith.”

Bowing slightly, this time to her father, he gave his respects. “Are you heading to Bearn?”

“Oh, yes. Our home is there but we transport goods to various towns, depending on the markets.”

“Could you perhaps tell me of a good inn where I might stay? I have never been to Bearn.”

Thinking a bit, she said, "The Flying Swan is good and well priced. The owner is a friend of ours by the name of Jillian. If you should stay there, tell him Celienda sends her wishes."

"I will, and thank you for your help. Maybe we'll run into each other while I am there?" suggested James with a grin. Her father gave him a cold look that said such was not likely.

"You never know," responded Celienda with a cheerful smile.

He gave them another slight bow, and said, "May your travels be profitable and safe." He sped his horse up to a canter and pulled away from the caravan.

"Fare you well, James," he heard Celienda call after him. It didn't take long before they vanished in the distance behind.

When the sun reached its apex, James stopped to let his horse graze while he had a bite to eat. He found a shady spot not far from the river, removed the sack Mary gave him and settled against the bole of a tree.

His posterior had been complaining for the last hour from the saddle, but he would have to get used to being in the saddle all day. In this world, it seemed to be the preferred mode of transportation.

While he ate, he thought how peaceful and calm it was by the river. Pulling the medallion from beneath his shirt, he again contemplated the design upon its face. Questions and still more questions with very few answers. He sighed, replaced the medallion beneath his shirt and finished his meal.

The rest of the afternoon was a repeat of the morning, except that the pain in his bottom grew more pronounced as the day wore on. When the sun was but an hour away from the horizon, several buildings appeared in the distance. Two looked to be houses or storage sheds while a third stood two stories tall with smoke coming out of the chimney. Another long building sat behind it.

As he drew closer he made out a sign of a river turning a bend which hung in front of the large, two story building. *Must be an inn*. Since night was quickly approaching, he figured this would be a good spot to stop. He secured his horse to the hitching post and entered.

The smell of unwashed bodies and smoke took his breath away. His eyes started to water and he could barely breathe. Pausing there in the doorway for a second, he slowly acclimated to the stench. Looking around he noticed several tables in the common area. One was unoccupied. A long bar ran along the wall. To the rear of the room a stairway climbed to the second floor.

Fortunately the unoccupied table was near an open window. He took a seat which enabled him to sit with his back to the wall so he could view the entire common room. He leaned his head against the wall near the open window for the fresh air coming through. He didn't have long to wait until the serving girl came over.

"Hi, I'm Melinda. What can I get ya?"

"What do you have?"

"There are two choices for dinner," she explained. "Mutton stew or roast beef. The stew is two coppers, the roast beef three. I'd take the roast beef. Some have said the mutton is a bit on the tough side."

"I'll take the roast beef then, and some ale. How much for a room? I also have a horse."

“A silver a night and two coppers for the stall. If you need feed for your horse, that’s another copper.”

Reaching into his travel purse, he pulled out two silvers and handed them to her. She took them and said, “I’ll be right back.” She walked to the man behind the counter and his coins changed hands. The man handed her back several coppers and she gave him his change.

“The stall for your horse is the third from the right. If you need feed for your horse just give a copper to Ferric when you stable your horse. He’s the stableman.” Gesturing to the stairs, she added, “Your room is up the stairs; second on the left.”

Despite being in close proximity to the window, he couldn’t stand the stench in the common room any longer. “I’ll take care of my horse first then retire to my room,” he explained. “Would it be possible for my meal to be delivered to my room after I’m finished settling in my horse?”

“Certainly,” she said. “When you return from the stable, let me know and I’ll bring it up myself.” She gave him a wink and knowing smile before walking to another table where a customer was signaling for her.

James hurried out the door into the cool refreshing evening, taking a couple deep breaths. *Haven’t these people ever heard of baths? I suppose I better get use to it. They’re not very hygienic here.*

He untied his horse and led him around the side to the stable. He found a man filling the feed bins in several of the stalls. “Are you Ferric, the stableman?”

“That’s me. What can I do for you?”

“Melinda said I was to have the third stall from the right.” Digging into his travel purse, James handed him a copper, “This is for feed.”

Taking the copper, Ferric took charge of James’ horse. The stall was roomy and filled with clean straw. At the rear was an area for storing the tack and saddle. James took down a brush hanging on the wall and proceeded to brush his horse’s coat. When he finished, Ferric arrived with a pail of feed.

“He’ll be fine,” assured Ferric as he poured the grain into the feed bin. “My room is at the end of the stable so I can hear if there is any trouble. Should trouble or a problem arise, I will send for you.”

Giving him another copper, James said, “Thank you.” He turned to his horse, patted him and said, “I’ll see you in the morning.” With one last rub along the neck, he left the stable and headed for the inn.

James signaled to Melinda upon his return, indicating that he would like his dinner brought up. Nodding, she finished with a customer and hurried into the kitchen.

He climbed the stairs and found a long hallway which stretched the length of the building. Four doors lined each side and an oil lamp burned at either end. The flickering of the small flames did little to banish the growing shadows. Coming to the second door on the left, he opened it and went inside.

The room was somewhat dark. The window faced east and the sun had begun dipping below the horizon. A single candle sat in a candlestick on the middle of a small table. He tried a simple spell to light the candle’s wick.

***Candle wick,
Light quick.***

A barely perceptible surge of power flew from James and the wick burst into flame, giving off a comforting light. He set his backpack and travel bags in the far corner and then sat on the bed. It was sort of soft with a few lumps. The sheets and pillows were stained and not entirely clean. The room, though small, didn't feel cramped. Aside from the bed there was a small table with two chairs.

Getting up from the bed, he opened the window to let in fresh air. He found that it overlooked the stable and courtyard below. The window now open, the noise from the common room was more pronounced. It was not long until he heard a knock.

Opening the door, he found Melinda carrying a tray of food balanced on one hand with a flagon of ale held in the other. He took the tray and set it on the table. She brought his ale and asked if there was anything else he would like.

"No, not right now, thank you."

"I'll be back in a while to remove the tray." With that she left him to his dinner.

The roast beef was surprisingly good, not too tough and a little juicy. The half loaf of bread that came with the roast beef was somewhat fresh, with a hint of nuttiness about it. It didn't take him long to finish the meal. After sopping the last bit of juice with a chunk of bread, he stretched out on the bed. He lay there awhile, thinking about the last few days and where the next ones would take him.

Knock! Knock!

Not wanting to get up, he hollered, "Come in."

The door opened and Melinda entered. "Is there anything else you require?"

"Nothing, thank you."

Coming over, she sat on the bed next to him, "Are you sure there is nothing else that you want?" She put her hand on his leg and gave him a look that left little doubt what else was available.

With the state of personal hygiene that he had seen since coming to this world on his mind, he said, "No, not tonight I'm afraid."

She got off the bed and gave him a disappointed look as she went to gather the dinnerware. "I'll be around all night if you should change your mind." Turning, she walked out the door, closing it behind her.

James got up and hurried to secure the lock. He blew out the candle and then got undressed before crawling into bed. He fervently hoped there would be no biting bedbugs as he slowly drifted off to sleep.

The morning dawned bright and sunny. The sunlight came through his window and awakened him from a dream of home. Getting up, he quickly dressed and gathered his things. He then

headed downstairs for breakfast. There were a few people eating. He made his way to the same table where he sat the night before.

It didn't take long before he was enjoying a breakfast of ham steak, potatoes and eggs. While he ate, he noticed two gentlemen at a table in the midst of a friendly conversation. One was in his mid-forties and the other was a younger man, perhaps early twenties. They looked like father and son, both dark haired and dressed well.

James noticed another man sitting alone at a table in the corner. He wasn't eating, just having a drink. He soon realized that the man in the corner was taking an unusual interest in the two men. His clothes were a bit ragged and his face unshaven, his hair uncombed. His eyes never stayed on the two men for any length of time, but James noticed that they returned to rest upon them often.

Finishing his meal, James sat back and took his time with his drink. Wondering what the man in the corner was up to, he relaxed and waited. Sipping his ale, it was almost gone when the two men finished their meal and headed out the door to the stables. James saw the man's attention completely focused on the two men. As they exited, the man got up and followed them out.

Curious, James peered through a door to see what was going on. The two men entered the stables, while the single man made his way to a window on the side of the stable and looked inside. The man glanced through the window and then quickly looked around the courtyard. James ducked from the doorway and then peered around again a second later. He saw that the man was walking around to the stable door where he slipped inside.

James hurried across the courtyard to the stable's door. Coming from the stables he heard hushed voices, unable to make out the words. Nearing the entrance, he began to make out what was being said.

"...Now!" said a menacing voice.

"Here, take it! Just don't hurt us." James recognized the voice of the older of the two gentlemen. Watching cautiously, he saw the older man handing a purse to the robber. The robber stood with sword drawn, the point scant inches from the chest of the younger man. Taking the purse, he gauged the weight of the coins then placed it inside his tunic.

"Thank you, gentlemen," the robber said. He began backing slowly toward James, his sword still leveled at the two men.

James quickly looked around and saw a pile of broken boards next to the stable. He took a two foot piece and then stood ready to wallop the robber as he exited.

He heard the robber come closer. When he judged that the robber was close enough, James swung the board with all his might and felt a soft thud as it connected with the back of the robber.

The man stumbled forward from the force of the unexpected blow, his sword sailing out of his hand. His foot caught on something and he lost his balance. Falling to the floor, he quickly rolled and regained his feet, knife drawn.

The two men, though surprised by James' attack, drew swords and advanced on the robber. The robber realized his advantage was lost and left his sword on the ground. Making a quick leap through the side window, he hit the ground on the other side.

“Thief!” the older man yelled. The younger man started running for the door where James stood and gave chase to the robber.

James glanced toward the robber as he gained his feet and for a short second, their eyes locked. He could see the hate behind those eyes, directed at him. Then the robber ran to a saddled horse tied to the hitching post. The younger man rushed through the door and raced after, but not fast enough before the robber mounted his horse. Spurring him to a gallop, the robber quickly raced between the buildings and was soon out of sight.

The older gentleman came to James and held his hand out, “Thank you, sir.”

“You’re welcome. I’m just sorry he got away.” Taking the hand, he shook it.

Holding up the pouch, the man said, “When you struck, our money fell from his tunic. We are in your debt.”

“Did you know him?”

The younger one replied, “No.” Looking at the older man he asked, “Have you seen him before, father?”

“No. But I’ll know him if I ever see him again.” Looking around, the father stared at the courtyard, empty except for themselves and James. No one had bothered themselves to come and give aid when he called “Thief!”

“I guess we are lucky not all people are cowards. My name’s Renlon, this is my son Kinney. We’re headed north if you would care to travel with us.”

Smiling at the offer, James shook his head. “No thank you. I’m on my way south to Bearn. My name’s James.”

“Well, James, if you are ever in Illion, you are welcome to our hospitality. We own and operate an iron mine and smelter. Maybe you have heard of us, Renlon’s Iron?”

“No, sorry, never heard of it. I’m new to the area,” he explained. “I will definitely stop by should I be that way.”

Digging into his purse he handed James two gold coins. “Here, take this with our gratitude.”

Taking the gold, he said, “Thank you.”

Placing the gold with his other coins, he went to check on his horse. Finding him having been well cared for, he saddled him and walked him to the hitching post near the front of the inn. He returned to the inn to gather the belongings he left by the table. Leaving the inn, he spied Renlon and his son and waved goodbye. James soon put the inn far behind as he continued his way south.

On the road again..., he began singing one of his favorite songs. Spirits once again high, he brought his horse to a trot and exhilarated in his freedom. No demands, no tests, no grandparents pushing him to get a job. *What could be better?* The rest of the day went by uneventfully. Long before Bearn appeared on the horizon, the untamed countryside turned into farmland with hardworking farmers out in their fields. By the time Bearn finally appeared in the distance, evening was only a couple of hours away. *Two days, just as Corbin said.*

He found Bearn to be much larger than Trendle. The city stretched for over a mile to the east of the river and probably half as much on the west. A large bridge spanned the river near the center of the city and a smaller one further to the south.

An encircling wall gave the city a measure of security and protection. The road passed through a gate in the north wall which allowed entry into the city. Several guards at the gate maintained order, occasionally pulling aside travelers and asking questions. As James approached, one came over and stated, "Welcome to Bearn. Please state your name and reason for visiting."

The guard looked bored, as if he had asked this question a thousand times today.

"My name is James. I am just passing through, though I plan on staying the night at the Flying Swan. Maybe a day or two at the most."

The guard nodded, made a quick notation on a piece of paper, and then waved James on through.

On the other side, merchant stalls lined the street, each with a loud proprietor enticing passersby to buy their goods. Some stopped to inspect the goods while others pointedly ignored them as they attempted to get by without being hassled.

Several street boys came up to James, each pitching where they could take him.

"Come with me, sir. I can take you to the prettiest girls in town," one lad offered.

"His girls are the ugliest," yelled another. "Come to Banif's and you'll see the best."

Holding up his hand for quiet, James asked, "Can one of you take me to the *Flying Swan*?"

Several hands flew into the air and he pointed to one of about thirteen. The boy headed off with James following close behind.

The boy took him down several streets and then headed west, crossing over the big bridge seen earlier. The boy occasionally glanced back to make sure that he hadn't lost him. They arrived at a building bearing a colorful sign depicting a white swan in flight over a lake. The boy stopped in front of the *Flying Swan* and said, "Here you are, sir."

James reached into his pouch and took out two coppers and tossed them to the boy. Catching the coins the boy seemed satisfied. "Do you need more help sir?"

"Not right now and thank you for your help."

"If you ever have need of a guide while you're here, come to the gate where we met. My name is Miko."

James considered the offer. "Maybe tomorrow morning you could meet me here. I have a few things I need and maybe you could help me find what I require?"

Smiling, the boy replied, "Ok! I'll be here, bright and early."

"I'll see you then, Miko."

The boy turned and scampered back into the crowd. In a flash he was gone.

Nice boy, James thought to himself. He tied his horse to the hitching post and walked into the *Flying Swan*.

Chapter Seven

The *Flying Swan* turned out to be a nice, clean place. In fact, it was the best he'd seen since coming to this world. He could tell it was a cut above the *Bend in the River*, the inn where he stayed the night before. Curtains draped the windows and candelabra hung from the ceiling. Each table bore a clean, white tablecloth and the employees presented a neat, tidy appearance. One, a man of middlin' years and dressed slightly better than the rest, noticed his entrance.

"Welcome to the *Flying Swan*, good sir," he said with a friendly smile.

"Thank you. I met a traveler on the road and she said this would be a good place to stay while I am in Bearn."

"Of course, of course, the reputation of the *Flying Swan* is well deserved." Smiling broadly he said, "And who might I thank for such a recommendation?"

"A lady trader by the name of Celienda."

"Ah, little Celienda," he nodded. "Yes, I know her and her father well. They are old and dear friends. How were they?"

"They were well and she said to tell Jillian that she sends her wishes."

"I am Jillian and I appreciate the deliverance of her message. We do have several nice rooms available. The ones on the bottom floor go for a silver a night and the ones on the second are a silver and three coppers."

"A room on the second floor would be perfect," he relied. "Perhaps one with a window overlooking the river?"

"I have one that would suit you. Do you require a stall for...a steed?"

James nodded

Motioning for a lad of about fourteen years, Jillian said, "Elren will take you and your horse to the stables. It's another three coppers for your horse, but that does include grain."

"That will be fine." Turning toward Elren, he gave the lad a nod.

Elren returned James' nod with a slight one of his own and then preceded him out the front door.

As James turned to follow, Jillian said, "When your horse is settled in, I'll have someone show you to your room."

Nodding his understanding, James followed Elren outside where he untied his horse and followed the lad around back through a gate, into an enclosed rear courtyard. "We lock the gate at night to prevent thieves from making off with the horses," he explained. "I sleep at the rear of the stable for added security."

"Thieving a problem in Bearn?"

"No, not really," replied the lad. "But why take chances?"

The stables were just as nice and well kept as was the inn. The lad led James to the stall and assisted with removing the saddle and tack. The lad then produced a pail of grain and began brushing out his coat. He saw that his horse would be in good hands. James returned to the inn where Jillian gave him a key with the number ten engraved in a small, iron disc attached to it.

Waving over a small boy, Jillian had him show James to his room.

“Follow me, sir,” the boy said as he took James’ bags. The boy walked to the stairs and led him to the second floor. The first door on the right was number ten. The boy opened it and held the door open for him.

James passed into the room at which time the boy set the bags on the floor and waited expectantly for a tip.

James dug a copper out of his purse and handed it to the boy. “Thank you.”

“Will there be anything else?” the boy asked as he pocketed the coin.

“What time is dinner?”

“There is always something available. The full menu is available an hour before sunset until late.”

“Thank you.”

The boy nodded and closed the door as he left.

The room was comfortable and clean. He was pleased to note two windows, one in the wall opposite the door and another in the wall overlooking the river. The bed was larger as well, and soft.

There was a table with two chairs, a nightstand and a picture of a swan in flight on the wall. An upright closet with two doors sat along the left wall for his convenience. James opened the doors and found a rod with several hangers. He put his bags in the closet and then relaxed on the bed. Tired from the day’s travel, his eyes grew heavy.

Music came from downstairs, drawing him from a particularly nostalgic dream of home. The sun had set and the room was dark. What light there was came from the moon and lamps along the street. He felt very relaxed but the grumbling of his stomach could not be denied. With the music filtering up through the floorboards, he rose and made his way through the shadowed room to the door.

The light of a single candle positioned in the middle of the hallway barely reached the door to James’ room. He removed the key from his pocket and locked the door, then placed the key in an inner pocket before going down to the well-lit, crowded dining area.

A man sat on a small, corner stage and played what looked to be playing something similar to a guitar. His voice was very good and the tune rollicking. Finding an empty table, he sat with his back to the wall so he could better watch the bard. The song reminded him of folk music, something from one of the old Errol Flynn movies he and his grandfather used to watch together. A touch of homesickness came over him.

“Good evening, sir.”

Brought out of his song-induced reverie, he saw a young woman standing in front of his table. “Yes?”

“What can I get for you this evening?”

Oh, a serving girl. “I’ll take the house special and some ale.”

“Our mulberry wine is pretty good if you would care to try that instead?”

Feeling a bit adventurous, he nodded. “Ok, I’ll try that.”

“I’ll have the wine over in a second, but the special will be a bit longer.

“That’s fine; I’m not in any hurry.”

James sat back and enjoyed the bard’s music. The first song having finished, he was already into the first chorus of one with an uplifting tune, a good beat and a catchy chorus. He tapped his finger to the rhythm.

His server brought a glass and a bottle. She opened the bottle and filled his glass with the dark red liquid. Setting the bottle on the table, she smiled at him and then moved to wait on another person.

Holding the glass for a moment, he lifted it and enjoyed the aroma of the wine. It had a strong berry scent. He took a small sip and the wine’s flavor burst in his mouth, sweet and mellow.

Man that’s good! Downing the rest, he poured himself another. This time he intended to take his time drinking it.

The bard finished his song to a rousing applause. Bowing to their admiration, he started a ballad of love, soft and slow. His server brought a large platter with a whole, stuffed goose. The goose had been roasted to a golden brown. The stuffing steamed with an aroma of nuts and honey. Encircling the goose was an assortment of varying vegetables, all well-cooked and soft to the touch. She also set a basket with several rolls next to the platter along with a bowl of gravy.

“Here you go, sir. Do you require anything else?”

Taking out his knife, he said, “No thanks, I think I’ll be fine for a while.” Looking around, he noticed that people were using their hands, spoons and knives to eat. Apparently forks were not the custom.

“If you need anything, just catch my eye and I’ll be over,” she said before returning to the kitchen.

James set to his meal with a hearty appetite. The goose was fantastic. The skin was crisp and the flesh juicy without a trace of pink. The rolls had a mouthwatering aroma. This was perhaps the best meal he had since coming to this world.

During the course of the meal, the bard played several more songs before taking a break. James spied a bowl sitting at the edge of the stage. From the glint of metal inside, he realized that it contained several coins. During the break, several patrons walked over and dropped in more. *Tipping the bard.* Digging into his pouch he came out with a gold and walked over, dropping it into the bowl. His was the only gold among the coppers and a couple silvers. He returned to his table and resumed his meal.

Soon the bard took the stage and started with another fast-paced song. He had the crowd singing along with him. Everyone was having a marvelous time. Someone soon shouted out, “The Story of Deagan.” Others shouted agreement and the bard set into a serious ballad about a man on a quest, who slew the bad guy, rescued the damsel and finally died. Thunderous applause

erupted at the end; shouts for other favorites bombarded the bard until he began another. He continued singing requests throughout the night, with only an occasional break for a drink and to rest his voice.

Having finished his meal, James leaned back and listened to the bard. The server cleared off the dirty plates, leaving him with his bottle of mulberry wine and the glass. The music was good and listening gave him more of an understanding about the people of this world. Without even realizing it, he finished the bottle and then signaled for another. She brought it over. Tipping her a copper, he poured a glassful, sat back, and enjoyed an evening of music.

Knock! Knock!

Coming awake, James started to get out of bed when a pain likely to crack open his skull erupted from behind his forehead. He collapsed onto the bed with a groan. Grabbing his pillow, he placed it over his face to block out the blinding, knife-pain inducing sun that came in through the windows.

Oh my God! I'm going to die.

Knock! Knock!

"Sir," came a voice from outside the door. "Are you in there?"

James croaked, "Go away and let me die in peace."

"Sir, there is a boy here who claims you requested him to meet you here this morning." The voice wouldn't go away. "He says his name is Miko."

So this is what a hangover feels like? Upset stomach, headache that won't quit. Why do people ever drink? Then he realized he was in bed. *How did I get here?*

The last thing he remembered was getting the second bottle of wine and listening to more of the bard. He carefully removed the pillow from his face, squinted through eyes that would barely open and looked down at himself. He was still in his clothes, a bit wrinkled and smelling the worse for wear.

"Sir, what should I tell the boy?" intruded the painful voice.

"Have him come in," replied James. "And if it wouldn't be too much trouble, could you send up something to eat and drink for the both of us?"

"Very well, sir," replied the voice. "I'll send the boy up with your food." James heard footsteps depart from his door and move down the stairs.

Sitting up slowly, James looked at the table and the bowl of water and towel resting upon it. *They must have known I'd need to clean up a little.* He made it to the table and plopped down in one of the chairs. Wetting the towel, he washed his face and neck and started feeling better. His headache continued to throb, but it receded a little. He checked, and with relief, found the medallion still around his neck beneath his shirt.

Knock! Knock!

"Sir, I brought your food and the boy."

Rising unsteadily from the chair, he used every bit of furniture between the table and the door for support as he crossed to open it. With eyes barely opened, he looked upon one of the waiters from last night carrying a plate of food. The boy Miko stood next to him. "Come on in," he

croaked in a voice barely above a whisper. "Just put it on the table." He reached into his pocket and handed the waiter a copper.

"Thank you, sir," the waiter said, pocketing the coin. "Will you need anything else?"

"Not right now, thank you."

The waiter bowed slightly and left the room.

James gestured to a chair at the table and said to Miko, "Go ahead and have a seat. Help yourself to the food; there should be enough for both of us."

With little hesitation, Miko took a seat and grabbed one of the plates off the tray. He shoved an entire biscuit into his mouth, then quickly spooned a mound of eggs on his plate. He then proceeded to eat with great enthusiasm.

James took his seat at the table and joined Miko in helping himself to the breakfast. He had barely taken his second bite before Miko finished his portion, and was looking longingly for more. "Go ahead, take as much as you want," James told him. "Did your parents even feed you this morning?"

"Ain't got any," answered Miko.

"You don't have any family at all?"

Between mouthfuls of food, Miko explained, "Got an aunt somewhere up north, but she don't care nothing about me."

"That's too bad."

"I can take care of myself," Miko boasted. "Don't be needing nothing from nobody,"

"After we eat, we'll get started on those errands."

Talking through a mouthful of eggs, Miko asked, "Like what?"

"I need to buy some things, like parchment, ink and something to carry it all in so it won't get messed up."

"Know a place across the river on the south side. It's in the Temple District. Brockman's, it sells stuff like that to the temples and scribes." Looking at James, Miko asked, "How much you gonna pay me to show you?"

Smiling, James replied, "I'll feed you while you're with me and a silver a day." Seeing the boy's eyes open wide, he asked "If you think that will be okay?"

Nodding vigorously, Miko said, "No one's ever given me that much before. Thanks!"

"No problem, just don't do me wrong."

"Oh, no sir, I won't," Miko said earnestly. He snatched the last of the biscuits and tried to slather more jelly on it than the biscuit would hold. With jelly dripping off most of the sides he stuffed it into his mouth. Seeing that James is also finishing the last traces of egg on his plate, Miko used his arm to wipe the excess jelly off of his face and got to his feet. He stood patiently while James finished.

"I was wondering if there was a place that cleans clothes. Maybe even a bathhouse nearby?"

Thinking a bit, Miko said, "The people here at the inn would probably get it done for you. They might even supply a bath here in your room. Some of the better inns do that."

"I hadn't thought of that," James exclaimed. "Thanks, you're already coming in handy."

Miko beamed at the praise.

Knock! Knock!

Miko crossed to the door and opened it. The waiter walked into the room. "If you are done, sir, I can take your plates back to the kitchen."

"Go ahead, I think we're done. Oh, and could I have my clothes cleaned today while I am out?"

"We can take care of that for you, sir," agreed the man. "Just leave what you wish cleaned on the table. Then on your way out let one of us know and we will come and collect them. They should be returned to you by this evening."

"Excellent, thank you. Also, is it possible to have a bath here in the room?"

"Yes, we do have tubs that we can bring in for the guests," explained the man. "Would you like one now, sir?"

"No, I can wait till tonight. How much notice do you need to get it ready?"

"Very little, just let us know."

Gathering the last of the dishes, he walked to the door and left. Miko closed the door behind him.

"What do you want a bath for anyway?"

"Feels good, you don't stink and you stay healthier," replied James. "Haven't you ever had one before?"

"Naw, don't like 'em," Miko said emphatically. "Fell in the river once, though."

Miko waited patiently while James changed out of his dirty clothes and put on a clean set he purchased back in Trendle. He looked at himself in the "native attire." Admiring himself, he thought, *Not bad*. He folded and placed his dirty clothes on the table and grabbed his backpack. He indicated to Miko that it was time to go. He followed the boy out the door, locking it behind him.

Downstairs, he informed a member of the staff about his dirty clothes and arranged for their cleaning. Turning to Miko he said "Let's go." James went out the door, following Miko. They entered a street filled with people.

Miko led him through the throng. After a short distance, they came to the bridge they crossed the day before. They soon arrived at the Temple District. Several large buildings that had the look of temples lined the street on both sides. Some were made of simple stone and wood while others were quite impressive with ornamentation and delicate architecture.

Passing the temples, Miko stopped in front of a modest shop with a single door and window. He opened the door and held it for James. "This is Brockman's." James entered and Miko followed right behind.

Many shelves lined the walls, stacked with reams of paper, quills, and ink bottles. Ten tables were spaced about the shop, several having men copying manuscripts. He peered over the shoulder of the nearest. The scribe had a good, artistic talent. The page was beautiful with multiple colors and flourishes highlighting the script.

"Welcome, good sir, to *Brockman's Manuscripts*."

James turned to find a man who smiled warmly.

"I am Brockman," the man said, extending a hand in greeting.

James shook his hand and asked, "You copy manuscripts?"

The scribe nodded. "Many nobles pay for copies of important works so they may have them in their personal libraries." Motioning to the man whose handiwork James had been admiring, he said, "For instance, Lord Beleron had contracted for a copy of the Story of Beltine for his daughter. It is a favorite storybook among nobles these days."

"That is very good work."

"Nothing but the best from *Brockman's Manuscripts*. What can I help you with?" Standing patiently, Brockman looked at James expectantly.

"I need a kit containing paper, ink and quills that I may take on my travels," he explained. "What would you suggest?"

"I may have what you need," Brockman said, "follow me." He led James to one of the shelves and pulled down a wooden box.

Brockman opened the box and James saw it was exactly what he wanted. It had holders for inkwells and even an enclosed compartment for quills. There was also an open area where unused sheets of paper were stored. It reminded him of a briefcase, only bulkier.

"Would this be to your liking, sir?"

Taking the case, James saw that it was not as heavy as he expected. "Yes. I think it will suit me just fine. I would need to purchase the ink, quills and parchment as well."

Brockman launched into an explanation of the various items he carried. James hadn't realized there were so many different types of each. He finally settled on three bottles of ink, two black and one red. He chose a set of ten quills, half fine points and half broad points. Selecting parchment took the longest time, for there were even more choices. There was thin parchment, but it wouldn't hold up long. Very high quality parchment that would last a lifetime but cost a gold a piece. He finally decided on something in-between, not too thick but would last for a while.

Brockman told him how much for everything. James dug into his pouch and handed over the requested amount. Brockman took the money and said with great enthusiasm, "Thank you, sir. Would you like me to have it delivered for you?"

James nodded. "Yes. I am staying at the *Flying Swan*."

"Very good, sir, I'll have it over there this afternoon."

Once they were out of the shop, Miko gave him a disapproving look. "You didn't even haggle with him!"

"Haggle?"

"Yes, *haggle*. Didn't you think he seemed just a little too happy when you handed over the money?"

"As a matter of fact, he did."

"That's because you paid almost twice what the stuff was worth!"

James glanced to the door of *Brockman's Manuscripts*. "I've never haggled before."

"Never haggled...?" Miko stared incredulously at him. "Just where do you come from that doesn't require haggling?"

"A long, long ways I'm afraid. I guess I'm going to have to get the hang of it."

“Yeah,” agreed Miko. “And if you don’t, you ain’t gonna have any money left after a while.”

James mulled over Miko’s words. He came to the conclusion that there needed to be changes in the way he did things. He needed to adapt to this place and their customs. *When in Rome...*

“Where to now?”

Glancing around, James asked, “Does Bearn have a library?”

“The only libraries belong to the nobles,” Miko explained. “They ain’t gonna let you use them. Why do you need a library anyway?”

“Oh, I just like books.”

James missed his collection of books back home. Seeing the books the scribes were copying brought back some of the homesickness that James had begun to get over.

“Is there a candy shop in town?”

“What’s candy?” responded Miko.

“Just something I used to like back when I was home,” James explained. “How about a bakery or pastry shop?”

“There are a couple of bakeries. One is famous for its tarts.” He looked expectantly at James and a light entered his eyes when James nodded.

“Let’s go. We’ll see just how good those tarts are.”

Miko took the lead. They were soon out of the temple district. After making several turns and walking down a couple of streets, they stood outside a shop emitting a mouthwatering aroma. On the outside of the shop was a sign with a loaf of bread cut in half.

Inside they found a wide variety of breads and pastries. A fat lady in an apron was currently helping another customer so he waited patiently, spending the time looking over the various selections.

When the customer was done, James stepped to the counter.

“Welcome, welcome.” Her demeanor was warm and friendly.

Patting Miko on the back he said, “My friend tells me that you are famous for your tarts and I have come to see if he was correct.”

Beaming, the lady responded, “We do have the best tarts in town. Many of the nobles will only purchase from us because of the superior quality in all that we do.” She took a tart slightly oozing with red filling from one corner off the counter. Breaking it in two, she gave each half. James was impressed with the rich berry flavor of the filling and the flakiness of the crust.

“This is very good.” Looking at Miko, he saw him nod approvingly. “Give us a mixed variety of a dozen please.”

Beaming with pride, she took a sack and placed thirteen tarts of varying color and size within. She handed him the sack saying that it would be a silver and three coppers.

Miko nudged James in the side, who looked down. Miko silently mouthed, “*haggle.*”

James looked back to the lady. “Eighteen coppers.”

Miko nodded approvingly.

“A silver two coppers,” countered the lady.

“A silver,” James offered.

“Done,” the lady agreed. Handing over the silver, James and Miko left the shop eating their tarts.

“Did I do it right?” James asked.

“You did okay. With a little practice you can get them down even further.” Finishing off his first tart, Miko looked at James obviously wanting another. He gave him one more saying the rest would be saved for later.

They strolled down the street eating their tarts, when a group of boys a little older than Miko approached from down the street. Feeling a tug on his sleeve, he looked at Miko who said, “C’mon, let’s go this way,” and began dragging him down a side alley.

As they left the street, Miko paused to glance around the corner at the group of boys worriedly.

“What’s wrong?”

Miko turned back to James. “Uh, nothing.” He took James by the hand and hurried him down the alley.

“Then why are we moving so quickly?” Miko was walking fast, nearly at a run and he was doing his best to keep up.

“It’s a shortcut.” He tried and failed to keep his voice calm and nonchalant.

“To where?”

“Wherever you’re going.”

The group of boys entered the alley behind them. Seeing them, Miko released James’ hand and broke into a run. James ran along behind Miko, not sure what was going on.

“There’s that sewer rat!” One of the boys hollered. Looking back, he saw the group racing after them.

“You’re dead, Miko!” shouted another.

“Friends of yours?” James asked. Running, he worked to keep pace with the rapidly accelerating Miko.

“No and we don’t want them to catch us either.” He led James down another, much narrower side-alley. By this time Miko was in a dead run. Dodging around corners, they tried to lose them, but James realized that they would never be able to shake them.

Racing around another corner, Miko abruptly came to a stop. They had run into a dead end. A door in the left wall stood ajar; Miko pushed through with James right behind. James glanced back and saw the boys turning into the alley, almost upon them. He slammed the door shut and put his weight against it. He no sooner got the door closed when he felt the boys slam against the other side. It groaned under the impact, but with him leaning heavily into it, the door held.

Looking around the dirty little room, he saw nothing that would help to keep the door shut. Miko had already rushed through the opposite door, leaving James alone. It didn’t take him long to realize that he would not be able to hold the door against the combined weight of the boys.

“Open that door!”

“You’re not getting away from us,” another screamed.

James frantically pressed his weight against the door with all his might. Cracks formed in the wood from the relentless pounding of the boys.

An idea came to him. He concentrated and then said:

***Door of wood have the strength of steel,
Allow no entry for those who would kill.***

James felt the familiar surge of power as he completed his spell. Maintaining his concentration and visualization of his desired affects, he gradually reduced the pressure he exerted on the door. Once he was confident that the spell was in affect, he turned and practically tripped over Miko, almost causing him to lose his concentration.

Miko stared at him wide-eyed and a little fearful. "You a mage!"

"Save it for later," James insisted. "This isn't going to hold for long. Let's get the hell out of here."

As they left the room, James said, "I thought you ran out on me."

Looking hurt, Miko replied, "I didn't know you weren't following me. When I did, I came back."

Passing through the doorway, they entered a smaller room, dirty and smelling like an outhouse. James realized with trepidation that there was neither a window nor a door except for the one they just came through.

"Over here," Miko hollered.

He began moving garbage out of the way and revealed a trap door, concealed by the debris that covered the floor. The smell filling the room left little doubt as to where it led. Miko opened the trap door and began descending the ladder into the hole. He almost laughed when he noticed the disgusted expression on James face. "Do you want to stay up here?"

"No," replied James, doing his best not to breathe through his nose as he moved to the opening. When Miko climbed to the bottom, James began his descent into the dark opening of the sewers.

Chapter Eight

The odor assaulted James' senses. His eyes watered and he could barely breathe. Only the threat of the boys breaking down the door and doing them bodily harm convinced him to climb down. He took a deep breath, held it, and then set a foot on the ladder. His foot slipped on the slime that coated the rung which only nauseated him further. Cautiously, he descended.

His hands became slick from the slime. Upon reaching the bottom, he slipped on a slimy patch of floor. Losing his balance, he tumbled backward into the stinking, oozing muck.

The fall into the stream of nastiness broke his concentration, which caused the spell holding the door closed to fail. The sound of breaking wood filtered its way through the opening above as Miko helped him to his feet. They proceeded quickly down the dark sewer tunnel. Thoroughly nauseated, James tried to scrape as much of the filth off him as he could but only managed to spread it even more.

They proceeded along the stream of filth for a ways before pausing a moment to see if pursuit materialized. James watched the faint light coming through the trapdoor. He was sure the boys would be descending after them. They remained quiet for several seconds but didn't see or hear anything.

"I don't think they followed us," he whispered to Miko.

"No, I didn't think they would. Not many come here who are not invited."

James turned a quizzical gaze upon the boy. "Invited?"

"Yeah, there's a gang that claims the sewers as their own and anyone who comes down here is fair game. Everyone knows not to invade their territory."

"So why did we?"

"It seemed the better choice at the time."

Grabbing Miko, James asked, "And just who were we running from anyway?"

"They're a bunch of petty thugs. They think I fingered them on a job they pulled last month. I didn't but word got around that I was the one and they've had it in for me ever since."

"I see. Anyway, we need to find our way out of here." He cast his light spell and the glowing orb appeared which brought a startled gasp from Miko. Using the orb to illuminate their way, he said, "Let's go," then indicated for Miko to take the lead.

They came to a junction where a smaller branch of the main sewer entered. Miko continued down the main passage. Another hundred feet brought them to a ladder which led into the darkness above.

Grabbing Miko, James pulled him close to the rungs and said, "Look, these rungs are clean which means they must be used regularly. It could be a way out." He gestured toward the ladder. "Climb up there and see where it leads."

"There's only one group of people who would be using these rungs regularly," Miko explained, "and they don't like unexpected guests."

"Maybe. But we need to get out of here before they discover us."

Understanding, but not too happy about it, Miko grudgingly went up the rungs. He returned shortly. "There's a trapdoor but I can't get it opened. It must be barred or locked from the other side."

"Alright, let's go down a little further and see if there's another way out,"

Leaving the ladder behind, they continued following the main passage, passing several lesser tunnels. Each received a cursory glance before they continued on.

It wasn't long before the water level began to rise and soon was to their calves. They slogged their way through a progressively thick layer of unidentifiable flotsam; James refused to allow himself to contemplate what floated upon the water.

When the water was thigh-deep, they came to the blockage. It was a body. By the looks of it, it had been here for a while. The flesh was in an advanced state of decay and infested with maggots. Two rats were having a meal on the corpse's exposed thigh. They squealed and scampered away as James approached.

Ready to throw up, James stepped over the corpse and hurried down the tunnel. Once they had covered some distance, he recovered his composure, but still felt a little green.

"I hear you see a lot of that down here," Miko explained. "People come up missing and their bodies wash out through the sewer's outflow into the river."

"Let's hope the next ones won't be ours."

They passed two more offshoots, the smallest ones thus far. The second one was barely wide enough to squeeze through. It was not much more than a wide crack in the wall. It looked like it might have been created during an earthquake or something similar.

They traveled a short distance further past the small passages before a light appeared in the distance ahead. James quickly canceled his light spell, which plunged them into complete darkness.

"Think that's them?"

"Probably," Miko replied.

James grabbed him by the arm and started to slowly back away. He ran his hand along the wall until encountering the wide crack. He stopped and said, "I think we can squeeze in here and hide until they pass."

Miko went in first. It was a little snug for the lad but he made it with little problem. James followed and had a much more difficult time, squeezing and scraping until he was a few feet from the tunnel. He paused and watched the sewer tunnel and the gradually brightening light. It was not long before they heard the footsteps of several men.

As the men passed, the light of their torch revealed him for just a second. Had any of the men glanced into the crack, he would have been discovered. But then a second later the man carrying the torch moved on and he was again hidden in the shadows.

"...saw something down here."

"You're seeing things, Dink."

"Keep quiet and look sharp," still another commanded.

There were five men. The one in the lead carried the torch. The men continued further down the sewer and soon the light faded until only darkness remained.

After darkness had reigned supreme for a minute or two, James cautiously made his way out of the crack to the sewer tunnel. A glance down the way the men had gone revealed nothing but darkness. Fairly certain that no one would see, he brought his orb to life on his palm. Turning to comment to Miko about their narrow escape, he realized Miko had not followed. Holding his light close to the opening, he peered within the crack and whispered, "Miko. They're gone."

From the opening he heard the boy's voice. "There's a room in here and another passage leading from it. It may be another way out."

"All right, I'm coming in."

Squeezing back through the narrow opening, he worked his way to Miko. At one point he started to panic when the crack narrowed and he became stuck. Taking several deep breaths to steady himself, he managed to wriggle past the narrow section, leaving only a small bit of skin behind, and came through to the room Miko found.

The illumination from his orb revealed a small room, one that looked to have once been used as a storage room. Barrels and boxes lay stacked around the room, all of which had a thick layer of dust. He examined the floor and saw the only footprints that disturbed the dust were the ones he and Miko made. The single exit was a small, narrow hallway which led into darkness.

"Doesn't look like anyone has been in here for a long time."

Miko nodded. "Yeah, I wonder who used it." He investigated several boxes and barrels but failed to come up with anything worthwhile, just old clothes long past the time when they were serviceable. Looking at James he said, "Nothing."

James found an old lantern in a box, and placed his glowing orb inside. Now the light from the orb illuminated even better. He crossed the room to the passage leading away and shined the light down it. It extended further than the light could reach.

"Wonder how far it goes?" Miko asked.

"Don't know," he replied as he moved into the hallway. It continued for well over a hundred feet before ending at a flight of stone steps leading up. He directed the light toward the top and saw a trapdoor in the ceiling.

He made his way up the steps to the trapdoor. He pushed against it and managed to raise the wooden door a crack. Amazed at how much strength it took to raise it even that far, he set the lantern down and braced for a second try.

Lifting with all his strength, he managed to raise the trapdoor far enough to allow light from the lantern to pass through. Beyond was another small room, this one as untouched as the one below. No one had been in this area for a very long time.

With another grunt of exertion, he raised the trapdoor several more inches, just enough for Miko to scramble through.

The boy climbed to the other side and added his strength to lift the trapdoor. Raising it a height where James could pass through, he grunted, "Can you hold it?"

"If you hurry," Miko grunted.

James grabbed the lantern and slipped through to the room beyond. There he found a barrel firmly attached to the top of the trapdoor, perhaps in order to hide its existence and keep this way secret. He set the lantern down and helped Miko close the trapdoor since he didn't want it slamming down hard and alert whoever might be around.

The room had stone walls on three of its sides, with a wooden one on the fourth. A door stood closed in the wooden wall. More dust covered barrels and boxes lined two of the walls. A quick search showed some old cloth that had long since deteriorated.

Intrigued by the hidden rooms, James wondered where the end of it would lead. He went to the door and put his ear to it. Hearing nothing, he cautiously opened the door and found a dark, narrow passageway extending to the right and left. The lantern's light revealed footprints in the dust, an indication that someone had been through here recently. Upon closer examination, he found the foot prints headed in both directions.

Entering, he shined his light first down to the right, then the left. The walls on both sides were constructed of wood. It looked as if they were standing in a secret passage that might connect to several rooms. Miko entered the hallway and shut the door. James noticed that he couldn't tell where the opening of the door they just came through was. It looked like a solid wooden wall with no apparent openings.

Whispering, he said to Miko, "Now I can understand why those rooms have been unused for so long. This secret door must have been forgotten. Let's see if we can figure out how to open it before we go any further. I'd hate to not have a way out of here if things go bad."

Nodding in agreement, Miko took the lantern and kept watch for anyone who might approach while James examined the wall to see if he could find the opening mechanism. He felt for grooves or indentations that would indicate a trigger. He checked for any loose floorboards and didn't find any. Returning his attention to the wall, this time taking more care in his search, he discovered a small knothole. It was a little loose, but it didn't move when pressed. He found two others that were just as loose and tried pressing all three at the same time. As he applied pressure, they simultaneously sunk into the wall about a quarter of an inch. A barely perceptible click was heard as the door swung open on a silent hinge.

"How'd you figure that out?"

Smiling with great satisfaction, James replied, "I've read stories about stuff like this. It isn't too hard if you know what to look for." *Also, years of role playing games and designing dungeons doesn't hurt either*, he added to himself in satisfaction.

Shutting the door, he turned and headed down the right hand passage, one direction being as good as another. He kept the light dim as he wanted to locate cracks of light coming through the walls, looking for other secret doors. Ten feet further down, they reached a juncture. They were faced with the choice of continuing straight or taking a very narrow stairway up.

James inspected the footprints in the dust and saw that the majority of the tracks followed the corridor straight ahead, while only a small portion continued up the stairs. He decided that following the main body of tracks would most likely lead to a main exit, and continued down the passage past the stairs.

After another ten feet or so, he detected a faint outline of light in the shape of a door to the left. Pointing it out, he whispered, "Looks like another secret door."

Agreeing, Miko said, "Look," as he pointed to the tracks they'd been following. "Most of the tracks end here. This looks like a well-used entrance to the secret passage."

"I think you are correct."

He used the lamp to inspect the wall and found a simple latch that kept the door closed. He paused to place his ear against the door. Not hearing anything, he slowly lifted the latch and gently pushed.

He peered out and took a quick look around. He found the room empty. James opened the door wider and stepped into the room, signaling for Miko to follow. Miko closed the door behind him.

The room looked to be a richly furnished den. The door they came through was a life-sized portrait that had been hinged to the wall, concealing the secret entrance. A large mahogany desk and chair dominated the room, with a large picture window in the wall behind it. Across the room sat a brick fireplace, cold and unused. Several shelves lined the walls with many books and other knickknacks. From the looks of this room, the owner was quite well-to-do.

The only other exit from the room was a door to the left of the portrait. Indicating the door, he whispered, "See if you can see or hear anything." While Miko checked the door, he walked to the window to see if it could be opened. A simple lock kept it closed and could be easily opened. Outside spread an expansive lawn area which extended from the house to a high stone wall. There didn't appear to be anyone in the vicinity. He whispered to Miko who still peered out the door, "Anything?"

He shook his head. "Nothing. All's quiet."

"Good. Let's get out of here."

"I'm for that," agreed Miko. "They would take us for thieves for sure."

He waved Miko over. "There's no one in the yard so maybe we could make it over the wall before anyone realizes we've been here."

"Maybe," agreed Miko as he gauged the distance between the window and the wall; a hundred feet of open lawn, at least. "It's a long run."

"Look there," James pointed toward the right, over by the wall.

Miko saw a tree growing close to the wall. "Think we could climb that tree and get over the wall?"

"It's our best shot," nodded James.

He took one more look to make sure that the area remained clear. He opened the window and helped Miko through to the ground below. He then followed Miko out and quietly swung the window closed. They crouched in the bushes beneath the window as they scanned the area for others. Once certain the area was clear, they headed out quickly and quietly for the tree.

They took no more than three steps when from above them on the second floor, a voice cried out, "Guards! Intruders!"

A well-dressed man stood at an upper story window. James and the man's eyes locked for just a second before. "Run!" he yelled and bolted for the tree.

"Guards! They're heading for the wall!"

Stealth no longer a concern, James and Miko made a mad dash across the grounds. Two sword-wielding guards emerged at a run around the corner of the house. Seeing James and Miko, they moved to intercept. "Stop!" one yelled.

Miko reached the tree first and leaped for a lower limb. He grabbed it and swung up. James threw his backpack over the wall. Not as nimble as young Miko, he had difficulty getting into the tree.

Reaching down for James, Miko yelled, "Take my hand!"

James reached up and took hold. With Miko's help, he got up onto the bottom limb. From there the rest of the way was easy. They made their way to the top of the wall just as the guards reached the base of the tree.

Swords struck as they passed from the tree to the wall, but they were out of reach.

Swinging over the wall, they dropped to the ground. James looked for his backpack and found a small boy rummaging through it not two feet away. His back was to them.

James came up behind him and grabbed the boy by the shoulder.

Startled, the boy dropped the backpack as he jumped a foot in the air. Turning, he saw James and Miko. Before James said a word, the boy bolted and disappeared into the crowd.

James took his backpack and turned to Miko, "Get us out of here!"

"This way," Miko said as he raced into the crowd with James close behind. The people continued going about their business, as if two men leaping over a wall was an everyday occurrence. James expected at least one of the bystanders would have tried to hinder their escape or at the very least to have shouted a warning to a constable that something odd was occurring. But no cry arose from anyone. They quickly made it out of the area.

They found a quiet alley, and ducked inside to catch their breath. "Do you think they'll send the watch after us?" Standing at the mouth of the alley, he peered around the corner for any sign of pursuit.

"I don't think we have to worry about the town watch getting involved," replied Miko. "That was Lord Colerain's estate we were in. In fact, it was Lord Colerain who was shouting out the window for the guards."

"Why wouldn't he call for the town watch?"

"He has his own guards, and nobles like to take care of things themselves. It would be a loss of face if he were to come to the town watch for help. Since we didn't take anything and there was no damage, it's unlikely that he'll do anything. Of course, if he comes across us, then he may seek revenge."

"Alright," said James. "Let's just get back to the *Flying Swan*."

Miko soon had them back at the inn. It was a tribute to the lack of sanitation of this world that they could come into an inn from the sewers and no one said a word. James told one of the workers to bring two tubs to his room.

"Two?" Miko asked apprehensively.

"Yes, two," answered James. "You smell like the sewer."

Leaning close to James, he sniffed. "Actually, I wasn't the one to fall in, remember?"

James replied, "Try it; you may never get another chance."

"Alright, but I'm not going to like it."

James emptied his backpack and laid the contents on the floor. A knock at the door heralded the arrival of two tubs carried in by four young boys. It didn't take the staff long to fill them with steaming hot water. One servant brought two small bowls of a powdery substance, and set one by each of the tubs. When James looked questioningly at it, he was told that it was soap. He told one of the workers to come back in a few minutes to gather his clothes and backpack for cleaning.

After the workers left, he stripped and climbed into one of the tubs. The water was hot but not uncomfortable. Leaning back, he relaxed and let the tensions of the day melt away. Settling in, he looked over to Miko. "Come on, it feels really good." Reaching down, he scooped out some of the soap and proceeded to scrub off the sewer gunk.

Not convinced, Miko got undressed and hesitantly came to the tub. He gingerly stuck one foot into the water and then pulled it out fast, "It's hot!"

"Of course it's hot," James replied, slightly amused. "The hot water helps you relax more. Once you get in you'll get used to it."

Putting a toe in the water, he worked the rest of his foot and then his leg in. Once he realized the water was not going to scald him, he put in the other foot and slowly immersed himself. He sat there for a minute, at first not happy. As he became accustomed to the water's temperature, he relaxed and began to enjoy the experience.

One of the workers returned to take James' clothes and backpack. He dropped off two large towels. James asked if the clothes could be done by nightfall as he planned to leave in the morning. The worker told him that they would rush it through.

He grabbed more soap and continued to scrub himself clean. *This is the first bath I've had in a week*, he thought to himself. He had always liked baths. Back home he would soak until the water was cold and his skin became like the texture of prunes.

He looked to Miko who seemed to enjoy his first bath. When he saw James using the soap, he scooped some out and copied him, rubbing it over his skin.

Knock! Knock!

"Come in," James shouted.

A worker entered bearing a package. "This was just dropped off for you from Brockman's." He placed the package on the table, turned and left the room.

"What do you need that stuff for anyway?" asked Miko, referring to the writing materials.

"I plan on keeping a journal. And who knows how else it may come in handy." *Like a spell book*, he added silently. He had come to the conclusion that he needed to create spells so in an emergency he would have ready access and wouldn't have to take the time to think one up.

He stayed in the tub until the water began to cool, then got out and dried with one of the towels. Miko got out and soon both were dressed once more; James in the last of his clean clothes and Miko in his dirty ones.

"That wasn't so bad, now was it?"

"It was ok," Miko replied with a grin. "I could get to like it."

Miko leaned over the pile of items on the floor, curious about the stuff from James' backpack. He picked up the homemade compass that James had fashioned earlier in Trendle during his search for Hern. He held it up, looked over to James and asked, "What is this thing?"

"Just something I made a while back. I used it to find something."

"How does it work?"

"I use a spell and it shows the direction of whatever I ask it to find," James explained. He took it and pointed to the charcoal line. "This will point in the direction of what I am trying to find."

"Wow," said Miko. "Can you have it find something right now?"

“No,” he answered as he placed the compass back on the floor. “Magic is not something you should do just for amusement.”

Disappointed, Miko gave him a regretful look.

James grabbed his coin pouch and pulled out two silvers and handed them to Miko. “Here. You really helped me today and I appreciate it. Let’s go downstairs and I’ll buy you dinner before you leave.”

Miko opened the door and heard James say, “Here, you can have these as well.” Turning, he saw the bag of tarts.

“Thanks.” He put the small sack inside his shirt for safekeeping.

They went down to the common room and found a table near the rear. A minute or two later the girl came over to see what they wanted. It was still an hour or so before dark, so the evening crowd hadn’t yet come in. Only a couple of people shared the room with them. Once they gave their order, she returned to the kitchen.

“So, where are you going from here?”

“I’m planning to head south, maybe as far as Castle Cardri.”

The girl returned with their food and a bottle of the mulberry wine James had liked so much the night before. Tonight however, he planned to limit himself to only one bottle. He had no desire to experience another hangover. The memory of this morning forestalled any such attempt.

It didn’t take long for the room to fill. The bard from the night before returned and took his place on the stage to a roar of applause and shouts of joy. After a short bow, he began a rollicking song that soon had the crowd clapping along with the rhythm. James enjoyed the music as much as he did the night before. He saw Miko listening with rapt attention.

The next song was a slow, sad ballad of two lovers torn apart due to the difference in their social standings. The story ultimately ended in tragedy. Miko finished eating and sat back as they enjoyed the show. They remained there for several hours listening to the music and talking until James could no longer put off the fatigue threatening to claim him.

“Miko my friend,” James said through a yawn, “I’ve really enjoyed your company, but I’m off for bed.”

Miko got up and said, “Good night then. If you pass this way again, ask the boys by the gate for me and I’ll find you.”

James offered his hand. “I will.”

Miko gave his hand a shake and headed for the door, making his way through the crowded room.

James watched Miko until he exited before getting to his feet. He went up to his darkened room. He lit the candle with his spell, and it filled the room with a soft glow. He found his clothes and backpack cleaned and placed on the table. He took the items on the floor and placed them into his freshly cleaned backpack. The pack had only a faint odor of the sewer. He repacked his clothes. When his belongings were ready for travel, he blew out the candle, crawled into bed and it wasn’t long before he fell asleep.

Chapter Nine

Knock! Knock! Knock!

Insistent and unrelenting pounding woke James in the dead of night. Half asleep, he got up and stumbled his way through dark shadows to the door.

Knock! Knock!

Just as he reached the door, he heard Miko say in a loud whisper “James, wake up.” There was tightness, a sense of urgency in his voice. “Wake up and open the door!”

Undoing the lock, James opened the door and stepped back as Miko rushed past. The boy quickly shut the door and threw the bolt. “You gotta get out of here!”

“Why?”

“Remember me saying that nobles like to settle things themselves?”

“Yeah, I remember.”

“It seems Lord Colerain, whose estate we were chased out of this morning, has discovered who it was at his estate today and where you are staying. I overheard a conversation between an agent of Lord Colerain and a group of men who hire out for this type of job. He wants you taken so he can find out why you were there.”

“When?” He hurriedly began throwing clothes on.

“I didn’t wait to find out.” Miko paced nervously. “I came here as fast as I could to warn you. It’ll be soon I think.”

“I better get out of the city now,” James decided. “I planned to leave in the morning anyway.” Now dressed, he grabbed his backpack and handed his other pack to Miko. He moved carefully in the dark as he made his way to the door where he slid back the bolt. He peered down the hallway in both directions.

It was dark and quiet as a tomb. They left the room and made their way to the stairs, where they descended quickly and quietly to the ground floor. The common room was dark and deserted; the small amount of light that came through the windows cast an eerie pall. The floor boards creaked with every step. James thought for sure they would wake the entire inn by the time they reached the door leading to the stables.

He paused a moment at the window looking out over the rear courtyard. Shadows moved near the stables. Some broke off and approached the inn, heading for the door near where he stood. Only the dark of night prevented him from being seen by those approaching. Turning about, he silently indicated for Miko to head to the front. They made it halfway before the front door swung inward.

James immediately ducked under one of the tables, and pulled Miko with him. They kept silent and watched several man-shaped shadows enter while two more came in from the stables.

The two groups met at the base of the stairs. James heard whispers but was unable to make out the words. Four shadows headed up the stairs, while two remained in the common room, just a few feet from where James and Miko were hiding.

From upstairs came the sound of a door opening. The inn was silent for a few seconds and then the door closed. The four shadows returned down the stairs.

“He’s not up there,” one whispered.

“We can’t stay here,” another responded.

“Rolin,” the first one said, “tell the boys at the stables we’re out of here.”

“Right.”

A shadow detached and made its way out the back door.

“Let’s go,” the first voice said, “we’ll find him eventually.” The men then turned and walked quietly out the front door.

James waited for several minutes before he emerged from under the table. “Check the front door.”

Miko nodded and went to peer through a window by the front door while James checked the back.

James didn’t see anybody in the courtyard by the stables so he quietly went and checked with Miko.

“Anything?”

“They left in two parties, one to the right and another to the left,” replied Miko. “I think two of them ducked into that alley across the street. They may be there as a lookout to see if we show up.”

“Probably.”

Miko glanced to James nervously. “How are we going to get out of here?”

“I’m thinking.” He considered the situation for a moment before a plan came to mind.

He pulled Miko close so his voice wouldn’t carry. “When I tell you to, I want you to close your eyes tight and keep them closed until I tell you to open them again. Do you understand?”

“Why?”

Sounding impatient, he said, “Just do it! I don’t have time to explain, okay?”

“Alright,” agreed Miko, though he didn’t sound very sure.

James formulated a spell and directed Miko to look down the street. A small, dimly glowing ball appeared. It rolled toward the alley where the men waited, coming to rest in front. Two men detached themselves from the darkness as they came to inspect the glowing sphere.

“Close your eyes,” James whispered. Then James silently counted to himself, “One, two, three...” and closed his own eyes, turning his head away. The glowing ball flashed into a blinding brilliance that lasted only a second.

“I’m blind!” shouted one of the voices coming from the alley.

When the light disappeared, James said, “You can open your eyes, let’s go.”

They hurried through the front door and left the inn. Even though their eyes had been closed, spots still swarmed in their vision.

The two men who were across the street continued to cry out. One had even fallen to the ground, holding his eyes.

Miko looked at his companion with no small amount of awe. "What did you do to them?"

"I just ruined their night vision is all," chuckled James. "Maybe I gave them a headache as well, I'm not sure. They should realize that nothing serious was done to them when their vision readjusts again to the dark. I don't think I did anything permanent, though it's possible." He paused, and then asked, "Now, what's the best way out of town?"

"The main gates will most likely be watched. Maybe the river. We could take a boat and drift downstream."

"I don't like stealing but we may have no choice. To the river then."

Miko led the way quickly with James close on his heels. It wasn't long before they heard the sound of several men coming up quickly behind them. James and Miko picked up their speed, and broke into a run for the river.

Cutting first across one street, Miko then darted down another. Glancing back over his shoulder, James saw that the men were gaining. The outlines of those in the lead were more pronounced. A glint of metal revealed a naked blade in the hands of one.

From up ahead Miko shouted, "Come on, I found a boat."

Looking forward to where Miko called, he saw moonlight reflecting off the water. Not far from the water sat a shack. Between it and the river sat a small rowboat; Miko had already begun pushing the rowboat toward the water. As James approached, the door to a nearby shack opened and two men emerged. Both wielded clubs.

"Get away from our boat!" one yelled as they advanced.

"We'll kill you if you try to take it," the other threatened. Brandishing his club, he menaced James with it.

Seeing their pursuers coming up fast, James said, "I'll buy it!"

The club wielding men paused as they drew closer to James. One asked, "How much?"

"Ten golds," James offered as he pulled out his pouch.

"Ten!" one man exclaimed incredulously. "You've got yourself a boat." They lowered their clubs and one held out his hand for the money.

The rowboat reached the water and Miko jumped inside and grabbed the oars. James didn't even bother to count out ten golds, merely threw the money pouch toward the two men. He pushed the boat farther out into the water before jumping in. Once the boat cleared the sandy bottom, Miko pulled hard on the oars to put as much distance between them and the shore as possible.

The two men started congratulating themselves on their good fortune until they saw James and Miko's pursuers, swords gleaming in the starlight. They turned fast, and raced back to their shack where they slammed the door shut.

Thunk!

Something embedded itself into the side of the boat, "Get down!" James yelled. They crouched low in the boat, trying to stay below the edge for protection. He peered over the side and found the tail end of a crossbow bolt protruding from the wood. Somewhere on the shore the crossbowman took aim again, but the bolt splashed into the water several feet away.

Their boat drifted toward the middle of the river as they put more distance between them and the men on the shore. Their pursuers ran along the shore in an attempt to keep pace, the crossbow firing in regular intervals but failed to find its mark. One broke away from the group and raced up a side street back into town. The boat continued to outdistance the men as it was carried along in the fast current. Realizing they would never catch the rowboat, the men broke off their pursuit.

With the threat from the crossbowman gone, James had Miko move out of the way and took his place between the oars. "I think we made it," he said with relief as he commenced to row.

"Maybe," doubted Miko, "but we're not out of the city yet." He pulled the crossbow bolt out of the side of the boat.

"That was close," he said as he showed it to James.

James nodded, put his back into it and rowed with great diligence.

"Think they've given up?"

"Doubt it," Miko answered, "they probably went for horses."

"You're probably right."

James angled the boat toward the shore opposite the one the men had been on.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm letting you out," James explained. "There is no point in you continuing. They are after me, not you. I wouldn't want you to get hurt on my account."

"No way," objected Miko, "I'm coming with you. Besides, it won't take them long to figure out that someone had to warn you about them coming for you. Who else in this city could have done it but me? I'm dead once they make the connection. I've gotta come!"

"You could end up in far more danger being with me."

"What do you mean?"

"It's kind of hard to explain."

"Look," pleaded Miko, "I've got nothing here. I beg for a living, take menial jobs for little pay. Life with you can't be any worse than what I have already lived through."

James gave in to the desperation in the boy's voice. He turned the boat once more back toward the middle of the river.

"Thank you," Miko said, with relief in his voice.

"Well, we'll see if you still thank me later on."

The river took them to a large span of wall that arched over the water. Miko informed him that they were almost out of the city. The wall extended several yards into the river either side before arching overhead. When the boat neared the wall, they became very quiet and still, not wanting to draw attention should anyone be around. They remained motionless and slowly drifted under the wall.

From the wall above came the sound of footsteps. Once through to the other side, James glanced up to see one of the city guards. He had a heart-stopping moment when the guard

glanced their way. He must not have seen them for his gaze left the river and the guard continued his beat along the wall.

James sighed quietly with relief. He watched the guard until the current drew them away and the wall disappeared in the night. He waited until they had floated far enough for the lights of the city to fade. Then he took his place back on the bench. With an oar in each hand, he maintained a rhythm that had them speeding along.

He and Miko rowed in hour intervals throughout the rest of the night until daybreak. Each tried to sleep while the other rowed. When the sky brightened with the morning sun, James woke found to find Miko no longer rowing. Instead, the boy was slouched upon the bench fast asleep with the oars still gripped in his hands. Despite the lack of human direction, their boat had managed to maintain its position near the middle of the river. He glanced to Miko just as a loud snore escaped the boy. He didn't bother waking him. Instead he scanned the riverbanks for any sign of their pursuers.

The east bank had a road running parallel the shoreline. To the west the land was primarily farmland, with the occasional orchard of fruit-bearing trees. A grove of trees approached which looked to be apples or some similar kind of red fruit. Hungry, James slipped one of the oars out of Miko's hand and used it as a rudder to bring them to the shore.

The motion of the boat changing direction awakened Miko and James pointed out the approaching fruit trees. "Thought we could do with a little breakfast."

Squinting to see through the morning sun's glare, Miko grunted agreement. James did a good job directing the boat, beaching where the grove began. He hopped out of the boat and secured it with a rope that was found coiled in the bottom. Miko joined him and they made a quick search of the immediate area. When no one else turned up, they helped themselves to some fruit.

James located an apple-like fruit that appeared to be ripe and removed it from the branch. He bit into it, and found that the fruit had a taste similar to apples, though the skin was slightly thicker. He filled his backpack as he ate.

Miko picked an armful and took them to the boat and dumped them in the bottom.

"James!"

He turned to see Miko running toward him and pointing across the river.

A single horseman sat watching them. In the man's hands was a deadly looking crossbow. Motion from farther down the west bank drew their attention; seven riders rode with all speed downriver.

"They must be heading for a bridge to cross further south. Any idea how far it would be?"

Miko shook his head. "Got no idea. I don't know much of what lies outside of Bearn."

"Doesn't matter I guess. They'll be here soon enough."

James watched the departing riders until they passed from sight. He looked to the crossbowman where he sat and watched.

"He's there to keep an eye on us and to keep us from crossing I'd wager."

Rolling the apple he had in his hand, a course of action sprang to mind. Glancing up and down the road to make sure no travelers approached from either direction. He moved closer to the river and cocked his arm back to throw.

“You don’t think you’re going to hit him, do you?” Miko asked incredulously.

James smiled. “Just watch.” Speaking the words of a variation of his stone spell, he threw.

The apple arced through the air, and to Miko’s surprise, picked up speed. Even though the man attempted to avoid the hurled fruit, the apple altered its course accordingly and nailed him in the side of the head. Miko was stunned when the rider tumbled from his horse.

James waited for several seconds to see if the man would get up. When the rider remained unmoving on the ground, he headed for the boat. “Let’s hurry.” He motioned for Miko to get back in the boat.

“Hurry where?” Miko asked as he climbed in. He was careful not to step on the apples lying across the bottom as he took his seat.

James pointed to the opposite shore. “Over there.” He grabbed the side of the boat and pushed it out into the river, jumping in once the bottom cleared the shore. Then took the oars and rowed hard. He worked to reach the shore where the unconscious man lay.

When the boat ran aground not far from the man, James said to Miko, “See if he’s alive. If he is, tie him up. Also, make sure the horse doesn’t get away. We’ll need it.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to hide our trail,” he replied and unloaded the boat.

Miko went to the man and discovered that he was not dead, just unconscious. He used a coil of rope found on the man’s horse, and bound him at the ankles and wrists. Satisfied the man would not escape, he turned to find James standing motionless at the water’s edge. About to ask a question, he stopped when he realized James was concentrating on the boat and was in the process of casting a spell. Miko took the reins of the horse and walked quietly to see what he was doing.

The sudden movement of the boat startled him. It rocked back and forth a moment then slid off the shore and into the water on its own. Mouth agape, he watched in wonder as the boat floated across the river toward the opposite shore. It inexplicably moved against the current and finally ran aground. The boat didn’t stop moving until it rested far enough up the beach that the river wouldn’t pull it back in. When the boat came to a stop, James ended the spell and abruptly sat down.

“You okay?” Miko asked, worried.

James saw the concern on his face. He smiled to reassure the boy. “Magic isn’t easy you know. It takes a lot out of you. I’ll be fine, just need to rest a bit.” He nodded toward the man. “How’s our friend doing?”

“You knocked him out with that apple and he’ll probably have a big bruise on his temple for a while, but I think he’ll make it.” He took a water bottle off the horse, and handed it to James, “Thirsty?”

“Yeah.” He took the bottle and had a long drink. Once he had his fill, he handed it back. “Fill it up again, we need to get going.”

Miko took the bottle over to the river and refilled it. Then he gestured to their captive. “What shall we do with him?” Kill him?”

“Good heavens, no,” James exclaimed. “I wouldn’t kill someone unless my life depended on it. We’ll have to take him with us for a ways and then let him go.”

“Why do we have to take him with us?” he asked as he secured the bottle to the saddle.

“We can’t leave him here to tell his friends we’re on this side of the river. When they return and find the boat still on the other side, I’m hoping they will believe that we are still on that side, trying to escape cross country.”

James heard a groan from their captive. He went and squatted down next to him.

The captive opened his eyes, glancing first to James, then Miko. He flashed Miko an ugly look and tried to move but couldn’t, his arms and legs had been tied. Testing the bonds proved them strong and secure. He settled back down on the ground, all the while keeping an eye on his captors.

“Not sure what to do with you.”

The man gave James a foul look. “Not sure where to dump my body you mean.”

“You’re not going to die today,” James reassured him, “at least not by my hand.”

The man didn’t look convinced that he would be permitted to live.

“We know Lord Colerain hired you and your friends to catch me, perhaps even kill me.”

Seeing no change in their captive’s expression, he continued. “Just what were you going to do to me if you would have caught me?”

“Why should I tell you anything?”

“Your cooperation could mean the difference from being left where someone can easily find you, and being put somewhere...,” James paused for effect before saying, “remote.”

“Come on, Torin,” Miko said, “what difference could it make now? We know you’re after us and who hired you, so you might as well tell.”

His face turned grim. He turned his attention to Miko. “I always knew you to be a squealer, Miko, ever since you ratted out Harry’s bunch.”

Indignantly, Miko replied, “I never ratted him out! I didn’t even know what was going down until the news hit the streets.”

“Yeah, yeah, you’ve been singing that tune just so Harry wouldn’t kill ya.”

James waved both to silence. “That doesn’t matter anyway. Miko, secure our equipment on his horse and let’s get out of here before trouble finds us.”

James took out his knife and leaned closer to Torin. Torin’s eyes widened, in expecting to be stabbed or cut. James grabbed the rope that bound the captive’s legs, and cut the rope in two. He threw the pieces over to Miko who put them in a bag on the horse.

“You’re going to have to walk.” When he made no move to rise, James added, “Unless you would rather to be dragged behind the horse? Your choice.”

Torin nodded and James helped him to his feet.

James removed another long rope from the saddle. He secured one end around the rope that bound Torin’s wrists and the other end to the saddle. Miko took up position behind Torin with the knife, just in case. James grabbed the reins, and they made their way south.

They didn’t travel far before a small grove of trees appeared off to the east. James left the road and headed for the grove. Once there, he untied Torin and had him sit with his back to one

of the trees. He used the long rope to secure him, then tore off a strip from Torin's shirt to use for a gag.

"Don't worry, I plan to let someone know that you are here, but not until nightfall, tomorrow at the latest. If I were you, I would hope your friends don't 'delay' me. You should be free sometime tomorrow."

Getting up, he said to Miko, "Let's go." James took the reins and led the horse back to the road.

An hour or so later, several buildings appeared by the river. A thick rope spanned the water, ending at another set of buildings on the far side. In the middle of the river they saw a flat ferry with four men and three horses. One man pulled on the rope, slowly moving the ferry to their side of the river.

"James," Miko said, "those are Torin's buddies. Your trick with the boat must not have fooled them, because they're coming back."

Waiting near the cluster of buildings on the other side were the rest of their pursuers, awaiting their turn to cross. The men on the ferry had not seen them yet. James led the horse off the road toward the east. He mounted then helped Miko up behind him. They got the horse up to a fast run and cut cross-country.

Cutting eastward through an open field, James continued for a little over a mile before angling more to the south. Once certain pursuit would not soon develop, he slowed their pace.

They continued south while steadily angling their way west, hoping to eventually intersect with the road. When the road finally came into view, they were relieved to find it deserted; they headed toward it.

"How long do you think they will continue the chase?"

"I doubt if they'll continue very far," Miko responded. "They're just local ruffians. Like me, they've seldom been out of the city."

"Let's hope so."

He reached into his backpack and pulled out a couple of apples, handing one to Miko. Once they reached the road, they continued south all the while eating apples and casting glances over their shoulders for sign of pursuit. James didn't know what he would have done should the pursuit materialize. He was glad he didn't have to find out.

As nightfall approached, they discovered a likely place to make camp. It was sheltered within a small copse of trees near the river. Within was a small, cleared area where half a dozen men could have camped comfortably. "I guess this spot must be used quite frequently," he said, indicating a ring of stones that encircled the charred remnants of an old campfire.

"Must be."

James tied the horse to a low branch and turned to Miko. "Get a fire going and I'll see if I can't scare up some fish for dinner."

"How?"

"How are you going to make the fire, or how will I scare up some fish?" James quipped.

"How you are going to scare up some fish?" Miko asked. James' attempt at humor was lost on the lad.

James found a five-foot branch lying on the ground. "I'll just go out to the river and get one." He took out his knife and sharpened one end.

"Oh," Miko said. "Uh, good luck."

"Thanks," James replied. On the way to the river he tried to remember the spell he used to catch fish the last time.

Miko got the fire started and soon had a fair blaze going. He looked out to the river where James stood motionless in waist deep water. The point of the stick was held a few inches above the water. Seconds passed. Then, with a quick downward thrust, James plunged the stick into the water and held it there for several seconds. When he brought the stick out of the water, a large fish was impaled upon the end.

Casting a triumphant glance to Miko, he raised the fish and flashed a grin.

"Not bad."

Coming out of the water, James replied, "Beats a pole and hook."

In no time he had the fish cleaned and roasting above the fire.

Night had fallen completely by the time the fish had been reduced to little more than bones. Satiated and contented, James lay near the fire and gazed up at the stars. He hadn't noticed it before, but the constellations that he knew as a boy were no longer there. A sigh escaped him, he truly was a long way from home.

"What are you thinking about?"

James didn't respond right away, then said, "Just that I'm a long way from home and may not be back for a long time, if ever."

"How far away are you?"

"I don't know, farther than you can imagine"

Miko turned toward James. "What made you leave?"

"I didn't realize I was until it was too late."

"What do you mean?"

Before he could answer, the sound of an approaching rider came from the road.

"Hello the fire," a man's voice cried out. "Can a weary traveler share your camp this evening?"

James came to his feet, and tried to pierce the dark veil of night to see who approached. "If you mean no trouble," he shouted back, "then you are welcome, stranger."

As the horse and rider entered the light from the campfire, James discovered the man was the bard they so enjoyed from *The Flying Swan*.

"A bard is always welcome," James said.

"I've found that to be true, yes," the bard agreed as he dismounted.

James offered to help remove the saddle and tack. The man refused with a thank you, saying that he could do it himself. Once his horse was secured near theirs, he joined them by the fire. James offered him some of the apples since there was little fish left.

"Thank you, sir," he said, taking the proffered apples. "My name is Perrilin."

"I'm James," he replied, "and this is Miko. We enjoyed your music at *The Flying Swan* last night and the night before. You're an excellent musician and singer."

“Thank you. It is always good to make the acquaintance of someone who appreciates music.” He took a bite of apple then reached into his tunic and pulled out a flask. After taking a long drink, the bard offered it to James who declined. Miko didn’t turn down the flask when it was offered to him; he took a small sip before giving it back.

“Where are you headed?”

“I have an engagement at an inn in Cardri,” Perrilin replied.

“We’re headed to Cardri as well. Would you like to join us?”

“I would like to, but must decline. My engagement starts the day after tomorrow and I must make all speed. And since you only have the one horse between you...”

“Perhaps not.”

“Which inn will you be performing at?” Miko asked.

“*The Inn of the Silver Bells*. I’ll be there for a week at least. After that, who knows?” Tossing the apple core to the river, he sat back and grabbed his mandolin and asked if anyone would mind if he practiced. James shook his head, Miko of course was eager to hear him play. Perrilin began by tuning his instrument. James placed a couple pieces of wood on the fire to keep it bright and cheery.

The first song was fun and lively with a quick tempo. James soon found himself tapping his knee and by the end of the song, sang along with the chorus. The next was slower and a bit sad. “This one is usually for the ladies.” As the song progressed, James saw why. There was a lot of stuff about love and sorrow, things ladies liked to cry about.

When that song was over Perrilin said, “Now, how about one of you singing a song and I will accompany you?”

Miko shook his head “no” and seemed to shrink within himself.

James considered the request and then said, “I doubt if you would know any of the songs I do.”

Perrilin reached into his pocket and pulled out a silver, “I know one thousand, four hundred and thirty-five songs. If you can sing a complete song that I do not know, I shall give you this.”

James smiled. “You’re on.” He settled back, took a couple of deep breathes and then began to sing:

“Oh give me a home where the buffalo roam and the deer and the antelope play. Where seldom is heard, a discouraging word and the skies are not cloudy all day.”

After the first verse and chorus, Perrilin accompanied James on his instrument. By the third, he sang with the chorus. When James finished the song, Perrilin tossed him the silver. “Here you go. I have never heard that song before. Would you mind if I give it a try?”

Flattered, James said, “Sure, go ahead.”

Perrilin began to sing. From the first note uttered he put the rendition James had done to shame. He sang it straight through, never once faltering. He used the same inflections and melody that James used with only slight modifications. When the last note faded into the night he asked, “How did it sound?”

Miko sat in stunned awe. "You were great."

"You are truly a great bard," James exclaimed. "I can't believe you were able to repeat back the song after only one hearing."

"Part of the job," Perrilin said. "Now, I have a couple of questions."

"Okay."

"Just what are buffalo and antelope?"

Smiling, James explained and also clarified the other different words that were unfamiliar to the bard. While their discussion went on, Miko lay down near the fire and drifted off to sleep. They continued well into the night. He tried not to let on to Perrilin that he came from a different world, just from a faraway land.

When Perrilin was finally satisfied that he understood the song, including all the words and phrases, he put his instrument away. "I think it is time for me to call it a night. Thank you for the song. Maybe I will use it from time to time." He lay near the fire and soon the soft sounds of contented snoring reached James just before he, too, nodded off to sleep.

Chapter Ten

James woke to find Perrilin gone. He laid there for some time watching the sun rise and the sky turn blue. Thoughts of the last few days played across his mind; narrow escapes, flight, and magic. Life in this new world certainly wasn't going to be mundane and boring. He couldn't make up his mind whether or not that was a good thing. Edging toward a good thing, he got Miko up and made for travel.

Miko took a sizeable bite of an apple then said a moment later, "He sure left early."

"I guess he was in a hurry to make Cardri this evening. And don't talk with your mouth full. I can hardly understand you."

"Sorry," Miko said, swallowing. "Hope we can make it there tonight, too."

"I don't think we'll make it before tomorrow at the earliest. Maybe if we had another horse we might, but not by foot."

James took the reins as they exited the copse of trees. They made their way back onto the road, and headed south.

Miko wasn't very happy at the prospect of walking for another two days, but had little choice. The day was nice, the weather had been cooperating, and their spirits were high. It seemed Miko had been correct about their pursuers' unwillingness to stray too far from Bearn; pursuit was not forthcoming.

As the morning progressed, the sun steadily climbed higher into the sky. The temperature rose quickly, forecasting a very hot summer day. A breeze blew out of the southwest and allayed the worst of the summer heat. James was delighted.

Throughout the morning they made good time, pressing onward with only one short rest break. The road was rather deserted. The only other souls they encountered were one lone traveler who drove a wagon drawn by a pair of mules, passing by on his way north; and a couple of fast riders who overtook them on their way south.

The skyline of another fair-sized town on the opposite side of the river appeared on the horizon a little after noon. An aged bridge spanned the river allowing traffic to reach the town. They asked a traveler who had just crossed over the bridge and learned the city was named Collington. Since they had no money left after their flight from Bearn, they continued past.

Evening found them still on the road with no inn in sight. There were few sizeable copses of trees in which to shelter. They found a spot near the river and made camp. Being exposed to those passing by made James slightly uncomfortable. Whenever a rider rode past, James thought Lord Colerain's men had found them; but each time it was merely someone going about their business.

While Miko readied the fire, James searched for a stick suitable for fishing. One tree boasted a fairly straight length of limb. Once sharpened, he carried it into the river. Twice he entered the river and twice he emerged with a fair sized fish impaled upon the stick's end.

As day gave way to night, another campfire sprung to life some two hundred feet further north on their side of the river. A short time later, another appeared across the water, fifty feet or so to the south.

"Must be common to make camp along the river."

He strained to see who was on their side of the river. The deepening dusk proved too dark to make them out.

Miko nodded. "Even near Bearn. Some would rather avoid paying for inns."

"Not me." James turned back to his young companion. "I would have to be pretty desperate, or short on coins, to give up the comfort of a bed."

Miko laughed "I wouldn't trade a bed for the ground if given the choice either."

James chuckled and returned to the fire. He and Miko spent time getting to know one another better. "What was it like growing up on the streets?"

Miko's face lost much of its joviality as painful memories surfaced. "It wasn't easy. Always being hungry, the older boys would take what you had and leave you with nothing. After a while you knew who your friends were, who you could count on to watch your back." He then grew quiet, as he stared into the fire for several seconds. "You also knew who to avoid."

"Like those boys who chased us into the sewer?"

"Yeah. If you got on the bad side of the wrong people, you wound up dead." He grabbed an end of a small stick, and poked at the coals. "What about you? What's it like where you come from?"

"Like here for the most part." *What can I tell him that he would believe?* "People are people no matter where you go. Some good, some bad."

“I suppose so.”

They traded tales as the night wore on. James had grown to like this lad from the streets of Bearn. As he related tidbits from his past, James spoke of his parents, grandparents, Haveston, and school. Talking of home didn't elicit feelings of homesickness as it had before. Rather, they comforted him and brought him peace. When the fire burned to coals, they settled in for sleep.

The night passed uneventfully. Both woke a little stiff from sleeping on the ground but well-rested. James got up and walked around, trying to work the kinks out of his back. They weren't nearly as bad as those during his first two nights in this world. He fervently hoped that come this evening he would be in a bed. Sleeping on the ground would never be something he enjoyed. Every time when he thought he found a comfortable position, a new rock would make itself known, forcing him to change position yet again.

Miko got the horse ready while James went to the river and refilled the water bottle. He glanced around as he waited for the bottle to fill. Several people stood in the water a hundred feet upriver. By the looks of it, they were doing their morning business. Revulsion overcame him as he looked at the river flowing past those people, toward him and into his water bottle. Visions of dysentery ran through his mind. Disgusted, he stood up and poured out the water.

Across the river and another group filled earthen jugs with the river's water. He knew it was water that could very well be carrying bacteria and waste products from the people and animals further up the river. He then realized that any and all water, all things drinkable, could originate in the same unsanitary and parasitic-infested place.

He remembered a special he saw on the Discovery Channel about parasites and how they got into your system and took up housekeeping. Disgusted, he decided he had to do something.

Miko walked to James and asked, “Are you ready?”

“Ready for what? Diarrhea?”

“Diarrhea? What are you talking about? No, are you ready to get going?”

“I'm not going anywhere until I can figure out how to get some clean water.”

Miko examined the water flowing past. “Looks clean; you can see all the way to the rocks on the bottom.” In truth, the water did flow smoothly and the riverbed was clearly visible beneath.

James directed the lad's attention to the people getting out of the water. “They just fouled it.” Then he pointed toward the people filling water bottles and jugs downstream. “Those people down there are unaware of the contamination that may be making its way into their drinking water.”

“Contamination? What do you mean?” His expression clearly showed his confusion.

“It's hard to explain. Let's just say that contamination is something that can make you sick.”

“If you say so,” Miko said uncertainly.

James once again filled the bottle, then found a spot several feet away from the water's edge. He sat and placed the water bottle on the ground before him. Miko sat opposite him and waited quietly to see what he was up to.

A minute or so went by before James began to cast a spell. He concentrated on the purity of the water; and had the impurities collect on the sand beside the bottle. Miko watched and was

astonished when a wet spot formed on the ground. An almost miniscule lump of brownish goop formed on the wet spot. It gave off an unpleasant odor. When James finished the spell, he brought the bottle to his nose and sniffed. Satisfied, he took a sip and a smile crossed his face. He handed the bottle to Miko who hesitantly brought it to his mouth. His eyes widened. "Never tasted water like that before." He took another drink. "Best I ever had!"

"I doubt if anyone here has had water like this. That's the way water tastes like where I come from, most of the time anyway."

James took a small stick and poked the brown goop. "This is what was in the water, the stuff that makes you sick. There are several ways to do this without magic but we don't have the time or facilities to do it properly." He took the water from Miko, emptying it with a long drink.

James filled the bottle once more, then sat down and purified it with his spell. Miko watched in wonder as the brown goop formed once more on the ground. Finished, he packed the bottle away and returned to the road. They headed south once more.

As the day progressed, the road became ever more crowded. Long convoy-like caravans, riders, walkers, and farmers going about their daily routines. Few gave them more than a passing glance.

Hours later, Miko sniffed the air and looked sidelong at James. "What's that smell?"

"It's the sea."

The salty smell had grown stronger over the last hour though they still were unable to see it. Hills had grown from the flatlands and for the last several miles James had expected to see the sea whenever they crested a hill.

Close to midday they topped a rise and Cardri appeared before them. Beyond the city stretched a great expanse of ocean that extended to the horizon. Cardri was by far the largest city that James had seen since he came to this world. It stretched a mile or two on both sides of the river.

On a hill a little inland from the harbor, but still within the city proper, arose a great castle. Shining white in the morning sun, it was an imposing sight. It had many towers and a great keep surrounded by a high formidable wall. Atop the highest spire of the tallest tower a flag bore the crest of the Cardri line. It fluttered in the breeze.

James looked to Miko and chuckled. Miko stood with mouth open, in obvious awe of the place. He reached over and closed Miko's mouth which snapped him back to the here and now. He looked at James and smiled, a little embarrassed.

"Pretty impressive, eh?" They headed down the hill.

"I'd say. I always heard it was big, but had no idea. I always thought Bearn was big, but this makes Bearn look like a farming village."

"It's the capital. I'm sure it's also a major center of trade for the entire region. It would have to be big." Moored in the harbor were dozens of ships of varying sizes, many buzzing with activity as sailors and porters loaded and unloaded cargo.

The outlying buildings began a good two hundred yards from the outer wall. Cardri had three defensive walls that divided sections of the city. One encircled the castle proper and several large buildings which comprised the Castle Area. The second encompassed a much larger area and

protected the homes and businesses of many merchants and wealthy individuals. The third was the outer wall and the primary defense for the city. Almost two miles in circumference, it boasted towers spaced at regular intervals; half held siege equipment such as catapults.

Despite the awe inspiring length of the outer wall, it still wasn't large enough to encompass Cardri in its entirety. Originally it may have been, but over the years, buildings sprung up along the outside. Primarily comprised of poorer dwellings, many were obviously taverns and inns that catered to those in need of accommodations. The poor and slovenly outward appearance of most would have kept James away unless he was very desperate.

The gate through which the road passed held two portals. One that was large enough to accommodate wagons and merchants; and a smaller gate for those on foot or horse. James and Miko moved to the line at the gate for people.

Beggars lined the road, most missing limbs, eyes, or inflicted with some other deformity. James was saddened and felt bad that he had to reject their pleadings for help.

As the line drew closer to the gate, James noticed that unlike Bearn, the guards here were not asking questions of travelers. This allowed the line to advance quickly. They took notice of everyone however, but beyond that scrutiny allowed all to enter unchallenged. The wall itself was about fifteen feet thick. As he passed through, he discovered murder holes in the ceiling where defenders could drop rocks or oil on attackers caught inside.

Once through to the city proper, the state of the buildings improved over those outside, though in James' opinion they were still on the poor side. That made sense since closer to the castle meant a higher social standing.

Miko visibly relaxed in these surroundings. As a city boy, he had been out of his element on the road. But now that he was once more within a city, he felt at home. As he walked down the street, he felt the heartbeat of the city, the ebb and flow of its life.

As they made their way through the crowded and noisy streets, James observed that the majority of the buildings in the outer ring were businesses with attached living areas. Inns and taverns were most in greatest abundance closer to the gate; some were still scattered about here and there as they moved deeper into Cardri.

They continued to follow the main street until James found what he was looking for. It was a two story building with a sign hanging beside the door that had three stacks of coins sitting on a table. He recognized the symbol as identical to the one hanging outside Alexander's shop in Trendle.

He went to the building and secured the horse to the post. "I've got business here," he said. "You better stay here and keep an eye on our stuff till I'm done."

"Okay," he said, then took a seat on the steps.

James went to the door and entered. A bell announced his arrival. The interior was remarkably similar to that of Alexander's. Four guards turned their attention his way. Not seeing him as a threat, they went back to being disinterested, though they remained aware of his actions.

A man poked his head out of the window in the far wall and gave a welcoming grin. The man was the spitting image of Alexander.

"Good afternoon, my good sir. My name is Thelonius. How may I help you today?"

James took out his letter of account from Alexander and approached the window. Are you the brother of Alexander who lives in Trendle?"

His face brightened. "Why, yes I am. Do you know him?"

"I did have the pleasure of meeting him on two occasions." He handed Thelonius the letter of account. "When he gave me that letter he asked me to tell you that 'all is well'."

"Ah, that is kind of you to deliver his message." He scanned the letter. "I assume that you are here to open an account?"

James nodded. "I also would like some coins as my trip down took all I had."

"Have you decided how much you will require?"

"I was thinking perhaps fifty golds," James replied. "Say, with five broken into lesser currency."

"Very good. I shall be right back with your coins and the papers for you to sign to set up your account." He then ducked his head back into the room, and returned a short time later with a sack of coins and several papers.

Thelonius emptied the coins onto the counter and together they counted them, making sure the total equaled fifty golds. Once counted and both satisfied with the count, James signed the papers.

Taking the papers, Thelonius asked, "Is there anything else I may assist you with?"

"As a matter of fact there is. Could you perhaps direct me to the *Inn of the Silver Bells*?"

"*The Silver Bells*, eh?" Thelonius responded. "You can find it further toward the castle, past the second wall on Long Street. However, you may wish to stay elsewhere. It is quite expensive. It caters mainly to visiting nobles and the wealthy."

"Could you recommend one that would be nice but not too dear?"

Thelonius gestured to the right, "There is one down the street called *The Dancing Squirrel*. It is well kept and the rooms are fairly priced."

James extended his hand. "Thank you."

He took the hand, and shook it warmly. "You are welcome. Should you ever need my assistance in the future, please call again."

James tucked the sack of coins inside his shirt and exited. Miko sat on the steps, idling away the time watching people passing on the street.

He turned as he heard the door open and came to his feet when James appeared.

"There's an inn down the street the fellow inside said would be a good place for us to stay." Untying the horse, he led them down the street to the right. They didn't have very far to walk before James spied the inn that bore a sign with a dancing squirrel.

Miko waited outside with the horse while James went inside to get a room. The door opened onto the common room, and off to the side sat a long bar. To James' surprise and amusement, he found a rather large, fat man who stood on top of the bar, trying to coax a yellow cat out of the rafters.

"Come on kitty, kitty," the man said to the cat. He had a bowl in his right hand and passed it under the cat to entice it down for a treat.

"Ahem," James cleared his throat to make his presence known.

Startled, the fat man dropped the bowl. It hit the edge of the counter and fell to the floor. The sound of shattering pottery told its fate. The man turned with face red in embarrassment. He gave the cat a last look of exasperation; then climbed down off the bar.

“How may I help you today?” he asked as he approached.

James looked up at the cat. “I was about to ask you that same question.”

“Oh, that damn cat. She always gets up there and then expects me to get her back down. Sometimes I think she does it just to annoy me.”

“Cats are that way I understand,” James replied, slightly amused.

“Yes, well, I’ll deal with her later. How can I help you?”

“I was hoping you might have a room available for me and my companion. Thelonius down the street said this would be a good place to stay.”

“He did, did he? I do have several rooms available. How long will you be staying?”

“Perhaps a couple days, maybe longer. I also need a stall for my horse.”

“It’ll be two silvers a night for a room on the ground floor and an additional two coppers if you would prefer to be on the second floor. For your horse, another three coppers a day and that includes food and exercise.”

The price seemed a bit exorbitant, but then he was in the capital city so what else could he do? “I’ll take the one on the second floor.” He handed over seven silvers. “I’ll take the room for three days and let you know if I need to stay longer.”

The man took the money and walked with James to the bar where he opened a cupboard. Inside were rows of hooks with room keys. He removed one and handed it to James, “You are in seventeen, top of the stairs and fourth on the left.”

“Thank you.”

“You are welcomed, young man. I hope you enjoy your stay.”

“I’m sure I will.”

As he headed to the door, he glanced back to find the man climbing back up onto the bar to coax his cat down from the rafters.

Chuckling, he went outside and told Miko they would stay here for a few days. They untied the horse, and headed around back to the stables.

A large, muscular man was back by the stable shoeing a horse. When he saw them he said, “Just a minute.” He took another nail, hammered it into the hoof, and secured the shoe in place. The man put down the hammer and inspected the shoe, making sure it was secure and even. Nodding, he let go of the hoof and turned toward James and Miko.

“Yeah?” he asked in a surly tone. “Something I can help you with?”

James showed him the room key. “Just need a stall for my horse.”

“Got one,” he said as he gestured over his shoulder, “second from the front.” As if that ended the conversation, he turned back to the horse he had been shoeing. He took the other fore hoof and a file from off a nearby work table and began to even out the rough edges.

James led his horse into the stable and found the stall, second from the front. It was clean and roomy with shelves that lined the rear wall. Once the horse had been properly cared for, they

grabbed their things and exited the stable, making for the inn. The man was still shoeing the horse and paid them no mind whatsoever.

They entered the inn and went upstairs where they found room seventeen. They were pleased to discover two beds, which brought a smile to Miko's face.

"No floor tonight," he said as he placed the bags on the room's small table. He then crossed over and reclined on the bed closest to the door. "I could get to like this."

James took the bed closer to the window. He placed his backpack in the corner, and when he laid back on the bed, literally sank three inches into downy softness. "You're right. I could definitely get to like this. It's far superior to any bed I've slept in for quite a while."

Before he became too comfortable to get out of bed, he got up and went to the window. They had a good view of the inner city and castle's spires. The castle was very majestic, and reminded James of those he had read about. He seriously doubted if there were any tours of this castle he could take.

Judging by the position of the sun, he figured they had close to two more hours until dark. He turned to Miko. "I'm going to explore before dinner. Want to go?" But Miko had already fallen asleep. Leaving him to sleep, he headed off on his own.

Down in the common room, the innkeeper sat at a table with the cat in his lap, stroking its back. "Finally got her down I see."

"She does task my patience from time to time," he said, continuing to pet the cat. "But I don't know what I'd do without her. She was my wife's you know, before she died. She's all I have left to remind me of her."

"My name is James."

"I am Inius, and this is Furball."

"I'm going to see some of the city before dinner. If my friend Miko should wake before I return, could you tell him where I've gone?"

"If I see him, I'll let him know."

"Thank you."

Outside, the street remained fairly crowded with people scurrying about their business. One direction being as good as another, he took off to the right. He gazed at the sights and perused goods offered by the various merchants.

The shops that lined the street had wares displayed on tables out front in the hopes of enticing people to buy. Most had a very loud hawker, shouting the merits of whatever it was they were selling.

One such place was a seller of amulets. The man assured anyone who walked by that his amulets held powerful magic. Some would ward off evil, others to cure warts, and even ones to entice the charms of the one you love.

James slowed as his gaze lingered over several of the more interesting amulets on display. He soon realized his mistake as the man, seeing him exhibiting even the slightest interest in his amulets, came over and attached himself like a giant leech.

"Sir, you've come to the right place."

He moved into such a position that James was forced to stop or run into him. Holding up a small, well-worn amulet he said, "This amulet was charmed by an ancient wizard, and it will keep evil spirits from causing you harm."

"No?" he said when he saw that James was not interested in that one. He held up another in the shape of a heart. "This charm will make any lady you desire fall madly in love with you."

James looked closely at the amulet, thinking he could make out teeth marks indenting one edge of the heart. "No, thank you." As the man extolled the virtues of yet another of his amulets, James held up his hand. The man ceased extolling its wondrous and miraculous virtues.

James reached into his shirt and pulled out the medallion the creature gave him back in Trendle. "Do you have one with a design like this?"

The man took a close look at the medallion and shook his head. "No sir, I do not." Then he grabbed another one of his amulets that he said would bring great wealth to whoever wore it.

Disappointed, he put the medallion back inside his shirt. As the hawker began regaling him with the virtues of yet another, James realized he was not likely to get away without buying one. He pointed to an amulet at random. It was a plain circular one of metal, bearing three dots which formed the points of a triangle with connecting lines.

Seeing the amulet that James had pointed to, the merchant said, "That one is indeed precious. It comes from very far away and is said to have been the property of a powerful sorceress," he said with conviction as he held it up for a better view. "It was said that this amulet protected her from harm for as long as she wore it."

"What happened to her?"

"Her lover tricked her into taking it off and then killed her," he explained. "Only two silvers, good sir, and you too will be protected as she had been."

"Five coppers," James countered, "and I'm just buying it to get away from you."

"Sir," the merchant exclaimed tragically, "you would ruin me, starve my wife and children. Surely an amulet as powerful as this must be worth a silver and twelve coppers."

"Perhaps, ten coppers," James offered. "Hopefully it won't turn my skin green or give me a rash."

"How can you possibly put a meager price on such wonderful protection?" the man protested vigorously. "A silver six coppers, and that will bring curses upon my head from my wife for having given it away."

"Seventeen coppers," James said, "and I'm getting ready to walk." As he began backing away, the hawker's face turned frantic at the possible loss of a sale.

"A silver, good sir," he pleaded. He practically screeched as he stretched his hand holding the amulet toward him as if to keep him from leaving. "Surely the protection must be worth at least a silver!"

He paused as if to think. "A silver it is then." He reached into his pouch, tossed the man the coin.

The merchant snatched it so fast that the eye had a hard time seeing the move. He handed the amulet to James. With a friendly grin, the man gave a slight bow. "Thank you good sir and may a thousand blessings be upon you."

James took the amulet and put it in his pocket. "You're welcome."

He hadn't taken two steps before the voice of the amulet seller once again joined the cacophony of his fellow merchants. Each tried to out-shout the others in the hopes of luring those who passed by to their stalls.

From the amulet seller, he headed further into the city. Where those closest to the gate were noisy and boisterous, the ones farther in were calm and quiet. These were the businesses that the people of the city used on a more regular basis.

There were chandlers, butchers, and shops for every need. These were well-established, long time businesses known by the locals. They did not need the noise to attract customers. James enjoyed the more peaceful environment, no longer worried that pausing before something of interest would cause someone to attach himself to him like what he experienced with the amulet merchant.

One sign drew his attention. It was a large pie with steam radiating off it. *Must be a bakery. Maybe they have tarts.* The memory of those in Bearn prompted him to enter. His stomach growled as a mouthwatering aroma wafted through the open door.

"Hello," a young man said as he put down a broom and approached the counter. "What can I do for you this evening, good sir?"

"Do you have any tarts?"

"Yes, sir. My father makes the best tarts in Cardri. Our apple tarts are especially good."

"Okay, I'll take six of those." Wanting some variety he asked, "Would you have a specialty, something that you do better than anybody else?"

"Yes we do, sir," the young man replied as he took apple tarts from behind the counter and placed them into a bag. "We are especially proud of our crumb cakes. It is a secret recipe handed down from father to son that's been in our family for generations. Would you like to try one?"

"Sure," agreed James. "How big is it?"

"Wait a moment and I'll show you."

He set the sack of tarts onto the counter and passed through a door into the back. The young man returned with a medium sized cake, very similar to a cinnamon swirl crumb cake that his grandmother made. "It is a silver for the cake and another six coppers for the tarts."

He handed over two silvers and the young man gave him his change. He was glad Miko wasn't there to get on him about not haggling. He didn't like doing it, unless it was with someone he didn't care for. He hated to admit it, but haggling with the amulet merchant had been a little fun.

While waiting for the cake to be put in a box, James looked at all the other delectables and then glanced outside. A carriage passed by, drawn by two identical white horses. Intrigued, he came closer to the window to get a better look.

"Oh my god," he whispered as a shiver ran up his spine. There was the same man who had yelled at them when they were being chased from Lord Colerain's estate. Lord Colerain was here in Cardri!

He ducked away from the window to not be seen. Once the carriage passed, he collected his baked goods and with a quick goodbye left the bakery.

The light began to fade as the sun neared the horizon. The street was not nearly as crowded as before, though many were still out and about. He walked fast, but didn't run. He did not want to draw attention. *The Dancing Squirrel* came into view ahead. He entered the common room, turned toward the stairs and raced to the second floor.

He opened the door to find Miko lying on the bed, bound and gagged. He dropped his sack of tarts and rushed over to his young friend. He drew his knife to cut the bonds. Miko was trying desperately to say something through the gag.

"Hang on, Miko. I'll have you free in a second."

Just as he brought the knife close to cut Miko's bonds, from directly behind him he heard the creak of a floorboard. Then a blow to the head and darkness took him.

Chapter Eleven

Pain in the back of his skull beat a steady rhythm. Lying on what felt like a cold dirt floor, he opened his eyes to darkness. An attempt to rise found his legs and arms bound. Slowly, so as not to aggravate his headache, he sought a crack of light that might indicate a way out, but none was to be found. *Either I'm blind or in a hole in the ground.*

"Miko, are you there?"

"Oh, thank the gods."

Miko's muffled voice came from the dark and somewhere not far to his right. "I feared you were dead. You were out for a long time."

"Where are we?"

"I don't know. They put a hood on me before they took us. After that, we were loaded in a wagon and I think they covered us up. I was told to be quiet or they'd slit my throat." He paused a moment, "I'm not sure how long they had us in the wagon before we stopped. I'm pretty sure we're inside a building. They brought us down stairs and dumped us in here. That was hours ago. I tried to wake you when we got here, but you didn't respond."

"Were they the ones who we encountered after leaving Bearn?"

"I didn't recognize any of them. Why?"

"Lord Colerain's in town. Perhaps our being here and his being in Cardri are related. I can't think of any other reason for us to be in this situation."

"You're probably right. What are we going to do?"

“Did you mention to anyone that I can do magic?”

“No, I haven’t said anything since they surprised me back in our room.”

“Then let’s hope they don’t find out. It may be the edge we’ll need to get out of here.” James concentrated and cast his light spell. The effort aggravated his headache. The light revealed they were in a root cellar. Sacks, along with several boxes, were stacked against all the walls save one. That one had an old wooden door; it looked to be the only way out.

He saw that Miko was also bound, with the hood still covering his head. A quick, visual search of the room revealed a little hand trowel, similar to what his grandmother used in her garden. It was wedged in-between two sacks. He slowly made his way across the floor and maneuvered to grab the handle. Twisting sharply and rolling away failed to dislodge it. The trowel was wedged too tightly and the handle slipped from his fingers.

Placing his feet against one of the sacks trapping the trowel, James pushed with all his strength. The sack toppled and hit the ground, spilling grain and freeing the trowel. He slid over to it and grabbed it. Turning the blade against the rope binding his hands, he sawed.

“What’s going on?” Miko asked from behind the hood.

“I found something that may cut the rope.”

Fibers grudgingly parted beneath the dull blade.

“Can’t you use magic?”

In dire need of an aspirin, James replied, “I’d rather not.”

Time passed as fiber by fiber gave way.

“Got it!”

With hands free he easily severed the rope binding his legs, then moved to Miko and removed the hood.

“Thank you,” he said when the hood came off. “It was getting hard to breathe.”

“No problem.”

Once Miko was free, James went to the door. Applying gentle pressure revealed it to be locked. Using his orb, he examined the door closely. From this side there was no way to manipulate the lock. Hoping it to be a simple latch and hook, he slid the trowel between the door and the jamb then moved it upward until meeting resistance. A little more pressure produced a faint click as the latch came free. He pressed lightly on the door. It was dark on the other side.

Taking Miko’s hood, he put the glowing orb into it and closed it until only a small opening remained that allowed very little light to come through. Signaling for Miko to remain quiet, he opened the door slowly. The light from the hood revealed a flight of wooden steps leading up. The door at the top had light radiating through the cracks.

“Looks like they’re up there,” he said as he turned back to Miko. “How many were there?”

“I saw four.”

“Let’s hope they didn’t invite any friends along and maybe we can get out of this.” As he started up the steps, he said, “Stay here for a second. I’m going to see how many we have to deal with.”

Miko remained by the foot of the steps.

James took the steps slowly, trying to minimize their creaking. He placed his feet as close to the edge of the wooden steps as possible. Cautiously, he made it to the top; voices came from the other side.

“Just how long are we supposed to wait?” one whiney voice asked impatiently.

“We were told to wait and wait is what we’re gonna do!” another voice commandingly told the first.

“Yeah, stop yer whining, Elz,” another added derisively. “We’re making enough off this.”

“Alright, alright,” Elz said, “I’ll wait.”

The sound of shuffling cards came from the other side. After listening for a moment, he returned to Miko and told him what he overheard.

“I don’t like this, James,” Miko said. “If there are three up there, then where’s the fourth? And is he the one they’re waiting for?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t want to be here when whomever they’re waiting for arrives.”

“Yeah,” Miko said, “we better get out of here fast.”

James returned to the cellar where they had been dumped, and took a quick inventory. He found little of use, just grain and seeds. The boxes however gave him an idea and he pried three small boards off a broken one. He used the trowel again, sharpening one end of each. He handed the trowel and the hood with the glowing orb still inside to Miko, then carried the sticks as he climbed to the top of the steps.

He paused a moment. Hearing the three men talking as they played cards, he turned his attention to the door. The door was secured by a sliding bar. Fortunately, there was a handle on this side. He slowly slid it until the end came free.

He thought about what he was about to attempt and it made his head ache even worse. A few calming breaths... *Okay, James, you can do this.* He readied his sticks, and formulated the spell he planned to use. Once he had it, he nodded to Miko who indicated that he was ready. With one final deep breath, he kicked the door open.

It slammed against the wall and startled the three men, causing them to leap from their seats. They turned in surprise to see him framed in the doorway. One drew a sword as the other two drew knives.

James took the three sharpened boards, and threw them in their direction. As they flew across the room, words of a version of his spear spell issued forth. Magic surged and took hold of the sticks. With incredible speed and accuracy, they impaled each man in the chest. He had but a moment’s satisfaction before pain erupted in his head.

As James burst through the door and cast his spell, Miko followed him into the room. He carried the trowel in one hand as a weapon and held the hood with the glowing orb in the other. Movement from the far side of the room caught his eye just as James launched the three sharpened sticks. A fourth man, who had been resting upon a cot, sprang to his feet. Wearing nothing but shirt and pants, he drew a sword from the sword belt looped around the back of a nearby chair and advanced.

Before the man had the chance to take two steps, he came to an abrupt halt when his partners were struck down by the sticks. Afraid to face one capable of such a thing, he turned to flee for

the door. But then James succumbed to the effort of casting the spell and crumbled to the floor. With only Miko left, the man stopped his flight. He eyed James' immobile form on the floor for a moment before turning a look full of malice upon Miko.

Miko held the trowel out before him threateningly. In a voice filled with fear, he said, "I...I am a great wizard too! A...and if you don't throw down your weapon, I...I...I will cast the fires of hell at you."

The man snorted and advanced toward Miko. "Go ahead, kid, burn me. I dare you." He took another two steps toward Miko who did nothing but stand there menacing him with the trowel. "Thought not."

As he came closer, Miko grabbed the open end of the hood with his left hand. With his free hand, he held the other end and said with all his might, "Fires of hell, burn him!" He swung the hood toward the man and let go with his left hand. The hood opened and the glowing orb sailed out, straight toward the man's head.

He backpedaled and held up his arms, screaming as if the fires of hell truly were coming for him.

Knowing he only had a few seconds, Miko advanced with speed and struck with the trowel, just as the orb hit the man in the head and harmlessly bounced off. With the strength of desperation, Miko thrust the trowel into the man's belly which cut through the shirt. The slash opened a long gash causing his innards to slip free. Tripping over his own guts the man fell to the floor. Not dead, but in great pain, he watched Miko take a knife from one of the fallen men at the table and come to his side.

"If you tell me who hired you I'll make it quick."

The man replied weakly, "I don't know who it was." He nodded to one of the dead men, "Carl there made the arrangement. He said that someone wanted you captured alive. Once we had you, he went and made contact to find out what they wanted us to do with you. When he came back, he said that someone would come this evening to collect you and that we'd get paid when he arrived. That's all I know, I swear!"

True to his word, Miko made it quick, ending the man's pain. He wiped the knife on the dead man's pants, got up and returned to where James laid unconscious on the floor. He checked James' breathing and was relieved that he still lived.

Miko shook him gently. "James, are you okay?"

Coming to, James gasped and held his head. Intense pain warred with consciousness.

"What?" he asked dazedly.

Miko took him by the arm and encouraged him to stand. "Come on, we got to get out of here."

Memory returned.

Miko assisted him to his feet. The effort to stand produced black spots that circled before his eyes. With Miko's help, he made it to a chair and sat down.

"See if there's something to drink."

Pain ripped through his head and he felt as if he was about to black out again. He closed his eyes, and took a few slow, deep breaths.

As Miko searched the room, James looked at the three dead men with boards protruding from their chests. Then he noticed the fourth man; throat slit and entangled in his own intestines.

"Found some ale by the looks of it," Miko said as he returned. He held out a bottle.

James took it, hesitantly sniffed it and then drank some. It was ale, if a bit stale; it did help to further ease the headache.

"Thanks, that helped," he said then indicated the dead man with a nod of his head. "You did that?"

"Yeah," Miko smiled with pride.

"Good work," James congratulated. "We need to get out of here, but not before we take care of some things." He got up and moved toward the men killed with the sharpened boards. He removed the board from the closest dead man's chest. "I don't want anyone to know I can do magic. Collect the other two and put them in a sack with the trowel, we're taking them with us."

"Why bother?" Miko asked as he grabbed a sack. He took the blood-stained board from James, and then removed the ones from the other two placing all three into the sack.

James picked up the sword that belonged to the gutted man, and stabbed one of the other three through the place where the stick had impaled him. "I want anyone who sees this to think that we were rescued, that we didn't get out by ourselves. That way in the future we may have an edge in a similar situation." He went to the other two and stabbed them in a similar matter. "I doubt if forensic science has evolved very far around here for someone to be able to tell that they were not killed by a sword."

"Forensic science?" asked a confused Miko.

"It means the study of a crime to tell what actually happened."

"Oh," responded Miko. "Why would that be important?"

Finished, James placed the sword back into the hand of the man on the ground. Seeing the orb lying off to the side, he canceled the spell and caused it to disappear.

"Knowledge is power," he said as he proceeded to each of the four men, searching their pockets. Some coins and two small gems were in the pocket of one man at the table. He found the medallion the little creature had given him around the neck of another. He found his other amulet in the third impaled man's pouch with several coins.

He put the medallion around his neck and tucked it inside his shirt. The other amulet, coins and miscellaneous valuables went into his pouch. He turned to Miko, "What people know determines what they do. The better your information, the more effective your course of action will be. And if your information is wrong, it could lead you into actions which may be a waste of time or even cause you problems. Understand?"

"I think so," he replied, not sounding very certain.

"Regardless, let's get out of here before someone comes by."

James moved to the door and opened it slowly, peering out. Still very dark, the street was illuminated by the light that spilled past him through the door. The street appeared deserted. He stepped out into the night, and quickly closed the door after Miko exited. Once again the street plunged into darkness.

They proceeded down the street a little ways, and came across a refuse pile heaped against the wall of a building. Sure no one was watching, they pried up the pile and placed the sack with the sticks beneath the stack of junk. Satisfied that the evidence was well-hidden, they continued on their way.

A shadow watched from the darkness as they made their way from the refuse pile. It disengaged from the dark once they were gone and crossed to the refuse pile. It rooted around for several moments before standing, the sack containing the bloody boards in hand. The shadow then took it as it hurried after James and Miko.

James soon realized that they were on the outside of the outer wall, in the poor sector. They moved down the road at a quick pace, and were soon at the gate which led back into the city. The smaller gate for travelers stood open, brightly illuminated by several torches. The two guards on duty turned to look back through the gate into the city at the sound of an approaching horse. A rider appeared, and signaled to the guards as he left the city.

James and Miko hid in the shadows as the rider appeared. Miko gripped James' arm as he pointed. "James, that's one of the guards who chased us from Lord Colerain's estate."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely." There was no missing the certainty in his voice.

The rider passed through and turned down the lane that led out of the city.

James started for the gate when Miko suddenly stopped him. Turning toward Miko he heard him say, "If we go through the gate now, then Lord Colerain's men might discover we're back in the city."

Considering it a moment, he nodded. "What should we do?"

"Find a place to hole up for the night and then come in with the crowd in the morning."

"Where do you suggest we go that won't leave us robbed or dead by morning?"

"Out of town a ways," he suggested. "Perhaps down by the river."

"Alright," agreed James, "let's do it."

They moved down the street until arriving at a junction with another road that headed away from town. Turning onto it, they continued until the outer buildings of Cardri could no longer be seen. Off the road to the west sat a field of tall grass wherein they made their camp.

The shadow, still following, watched from the road. Once certain they were down for the night, it left and headed back to town.

Morning dawned to another sunny day. James' head still throbbed, but nothing like it did last night. The back of his head still bore a tender lump.

The road to Cardri already held a decent amount of traffic. They joined those making for the gates. The guards paid them no notice; they were simply another set of anonymous faces.

Once back at the Dancing Squirrel, they went to their room where they found most of their belongings except for the tarts and crumb cake that their captors had taken.

"What do we do now?" Miko asked, settling down on the bed.

“We do what we came here to do and get out as soon as possible.”

“And that is?”

James took out his medallion and showed it to his young companion. He indicated the design on the face. “I want to find out if this design has any special meaning.”

Miko looked closely at it and asked, “Why? What’s so special about it?”

“I can’t really explain, but let’s just say it’s something I need to do. I also want to keep the fact that we’re investigating this medallion a secret, okay?”

“Sure, I understand,” Miko agreed, intrigued by the secrecy. “If you like, I could see if there is any place around here where you could do that. Someone like me could get around without arousing suspicion. I’m just another of the street brats.”

“Okay, but be very careful,” James cautioned as he gathered the rest of their baggage. “Lord Colerain may yet have other plans in the works for capturing us. I still can’t believe he’s still after us just because we were trespassing.”

“That’s the way with some nobles,” Miko explained. “Especially, Lord Colerain. I once heard of a boy who on a dare threw a tomato at his carriage as it passed through town. Two days later, the boy disappeared. It was never proven that Lord Colerain was the one who took the boy, but that’s the general belief.”

“Sounds like someone we need to stay clear of,” he said. “We’ll move to the Silver Bells, the inn where Perrilin said he was engaged to play. When you find out anything, meet me there.”

“Alright,” Miko said as he opened the door. “I’ll see you there.”

Once he was alone, James changed into a clean set of clothes then went down to the common room. Inius sat quietly by the front window as he looked out into the street. He wore a sad expression.

“Something the matter?”

“Furball is missing,” Inius replied. “She was here last night when I locked up, but I haven’t seen her since.”

“That’s too bad,” consoled James. “I’m sure she’ll turn up.”

The innkeeper sighed. “I hope so. She’s all I have left of my Eliena. Of course, I have grown fond of her, too.” He noticed James carrying his belongings. “Leaving?”

“Afraid so,” James replied as he handed over the room key. “Something’s come up and I need to go. You can keep the advance for the next two days. I really enjoyed your inn and your people.”

“Thank you,” he said. “If you are ever in Cardri again, I hope you will stay with us.”

“I’m sure I will. And if I should see Furball, I’ll get her back to you.”

“I would appreciate that,” Inius said as he continued to stare out the window.

James exited to the stable and found that his horse had been well cared for. He patted him on the side, “They treating you well, boy?”

“Of course they are,” a voice answered. Turning, he saw the surly stableman from yesterday. The man’s disposition apparently was little improved. The man carried a bale of fresh straw.

“Good day to you,” James greeted cheerfully, stepping aside as the man pushed past to deposit the straw in the next stall.

"I suppose it may be," the man replied. "You leavin'?" He grabbed a pitchfork and spread the straw across the floor.

"Yes, heading out today."

The man looked at James over the stall wall, made a grunting noise and walked out.

"Friendly sort of chap, eh?" he asked his horse. The horse snorted for an answer. "I agree," he said as he finished securing his bags. He then mounted and rode from the stable. He kept an eye out for anyone taking a special interest in him. Since last night he intended to keep on guard, and watch for anyone who might be following him.

When he arrived at Cardri's middle wall, he found a single, wide gate that gave entry where there had been two in the outer wall. The gate busy with many people passing through, though not nearly the crowd that had bottlenecked the outer one. James grew nervous as he approached the gate for the guards gave him a close scrutiny. But when he came to the gate to pass through, they didn't stop him.

On the other side he found the streets to be much cleaner. The buildings slowly made way for residences and estates. A broad thoroughfare ran left and right from the gate which extended further into the city. A man walked by carrying several packages, making deliveries. James hailed him, "Excuse me."

The man paused and turned toward him. "Yes, sir?"

"I was wondering if you could tell me where I might find the *Silver Bells*?"

Pointing down the street to the right, he said "That way, you can't miss it."

"Thank you," James said as the man continued on his way.

The buildings along this route were very well kept and the businesses were of a higher quality as well. Rather than taverns and the more mundane shops he found in the outer area, there were more craftsmen such as goldsmiths and artisans.

After several blocks, he came upon a very nice, three story building. It had a set of four bells which hung in front; they looked to be made of silver. They made a melodious sound with the breeze. *Must be the Silver Bells. Can't be real silver or they would have been stolen by now.* He tied his horse to the post out front, grabbed his backpack and climbed the four steps to the door that stood open at the top.

He walked inside and immediately saw that this was an upscale establishment. Pictures hung on the walls as well as various pieces of sculpture set in small alcoves placed strategically around the common room. White cloth draped the table, and not a stain was in evidence.

A man saw him enter and approached. "Can I help you, sir?"

"I hope so. I am looking for a bard by the name of Perrilin. He said he might be engaged here."

"He was."

"Was? He told me he would be here for a week."

"Yes, he was going to be" the man explained. "But the city watch came in last night and took him away in the middle of his performance. You can find him at the city jail I would think."

"Do you know why they took him?"

“No, they didn’t bother to inform us. Miss Gilena was very put out that they disrupted her place in such a way. They didn’t even wait until he was finished, just dragged him off the stage right in the middle of a song.”

“Too bad,” said James. “I happen to be in need of a room and a stall for my horse. I have a boy with me; he’ll be by after a while.”

“The rooms are a gold a night,” the man explained, “and another silver for your horse. Meals are extra.” He gestured to the far side where a lady stacked glasses. “That’s Miss Gilena. She can get you set up.”

“Thanks for the help,” he said gratefully then walked over to Miss Gilena.

“Excuse me, ma’am.”

She turned and said, “Yes, how may I help you?”

“Looking for a room and a stall for my horse.”

She looked him up and down with an expression that bordered on snooty. “It’ll be a gold a night and another silver for your horse.” The expression on her face clearly said that she didn’t think he would take the room, much less afford it.

James pulled out two golds and two silvers and handed them to her.

Her mood changed abruptly at sight of the coins. Where disdain once reigned supreme, smiles and cheerfulness now ruled. She snatched the money from his hand. “Welcome to the *Silver Bells*, good sir.” She reached beneath the counter and brought forth a room key. “We have one room left. It’s on the third floor, top of the stairs, all the way at the end on the right.”

He took the key. “That will be just fine, thank you.”

“The stables are out back. Gunther should be there and he will find a stall for your horse.”

“Appreciate that,” he said gratefully. “There is a young boy with me by the name of Miko who will be here a little later. Could you direct him to my room when he arrives?”

Certainly.”

“Thank you.” With that, he headed out the front and collected his horse.

James took his horse around back and found Gunther who soon had his horse settled in. He took his belongings and returned to the inn where a boy assumed the carrying of the bags then showed him to his room. Once there he held the door open, allowing James to enter first.

The boy set the bags down by the bed and then looked at James, not making any move to leave.

James pulled out a couple coppers and handed them to the boy who pocketed them and promptly left, shutting the door behind him.

James settled onto one of the beds and yawned. Deciding to relax until Miko arrived, he laid there for a time, mulling over the events of the past few days. Though worried about Miko, exhaustion soon overcame him and he fell asleep.

Chapter Twelve

Miko opened the door and found James fast asleep. Quietly, he began closing the door slowly until a mischievous grin spread across his face. Realizing such an opportunity may never repeat itself, he opened the door wider and slammed it shut with all his might.

Wham!

He watched in amusement as James jumped two inches off the bed and fell over the side, landing on the floor with a thud. Smiling to himself, he sat at the table while a startled James flashed quick glances around the room.

When his gaze settled upon Miko and the way the boy grinned, his eyes narrowed. “Did you have to do that?”

“No,” replied Miko before his grin turned into a full blown smile. “I guess I didn’t, but I couldn’t help myself.”

“Don’t ever do that again,” James said sternly, and then mellowed. He couldn’t help but smile.

“I’ve got good news,” said Miko, “and bad news.”

“What’s the good news?”

“There is an archive located near the castle, past the inner wall. Supposedly it has hundreds of books scholars come from near and far to research.”

Now off the floor, James came to the table and took a seat. “And the bad news?”

“There may be a small problem with gaining access to it.”

“What sort of problem.”

“Well first of all,” Miko began, “only those with business *in* the castle area are allowed *within* the castle area. If you try, they will at best turn you away, at worst take you in for questioning.”

“I see,” said James. “What else?”

“Since the Empire has attacked Madoc, their security has been doubled. Anyone caught there without a reason will be treated as a spy and taken to the castle’s dungeon for questioning.”

“Alright,” James said, “it sounds like the place I need to go. Any ideas on how to get in there?”

“No,” replied Miko shaking his head. “Maybe Perrilin will have an idea.”

“That’s another problem,” James explained. “He was taken by the city watch last night and most likely is in jail.”

“Great,” said Miko, “now what are we to do?”

“After lunch, I plan to go to the city jail and find out what is going on. Until then, I suggest we adjourn to the common room and see what there is to eat.”

Never one to turn down food, Miko quickly agreed and went downstairs with James who carried the ever-present backpack. Coming into the common room, they found an empty table

next to a window overlooking the street. It wasn't long before a girl came to take their order. In less than a minute, she returned with two big steaming bowls filled with chicken stew, a loaf of bread, and two foaming mugs of ale.

Miko ate with his regular gusto, while James took his time, savoring each bite. Between, and during, mouthfuls of stew Miko offered to ferret out what those on the streets might know about Lord Colerain's presence in the city. James would find out about Perrilin.

"Try to draw as little attention to yourself as possible," James cautioned. "We don't need any more surprises."

"Not to worry," Miko assured him as he put a last bite of stew-soaked bread into his mouth, "I'll be careful." He hurried across the common room and disappeared out the door.

James finished his lunch while he gazed out the window, watching Miko walk down the street until he was lost amidst the crowd. He downed the remaining dregs of ale and came to his feet. Shouldering his backpack he made for the door. He headed further into the city to find the jail and discover what happened to Perrilin. It was not long before he spotted a city constable and questioned him as to the whereabouts of the city jail. The constable gave him directions and he was quickly on his way.

The city jail was within the second wall near the gate that led to the castle, not far from where he was now. The jail was an imposing three story building with only the barest slits that passed for windows on the ground floor. A very solid door stood ajar at the top of three steps, so he went up and walked inside.

As he entered, he saw a man wearing a constable's uniform sitting behind a desk reading one of many papers stacked neatly before him. The sound of James entering drew his attention. Setting the paper down he asked, "Can I help you?"

"Yes," replied James as he came to a stop before the desk. "A friend of mine was brought in by the city watch last night and I was wondering if it would be possible to talk with him?"

The constable looked him up and down then asked, "And just who might your friend be?"

"His name is Perrilin, a bard."

"There's been no one brought in with that name."

"But I had heard that several constables came to the *Silver Bells* last night and dragged him away right in the middle of his performance."

"Yeah, I heard about that," the constable replied. "Nevertheless, he's not here, sorry."

"Where can I find him?"

"Don't know," the constable replied. He held up a hand to forestall any more questions. "I am not privy to all that goes on. I just know he's not here and I don't know where he would be."

James looked at the constable in quiet frustration. He knew there would be no more forthcoming help. After a moment, he turned about and left the jail.

He walked across the street to an alley and took a moment to make sure he would not be observed. He reached into his backpack and removed the compass he had made earlier in Trendle. Using a variation of the spell he used while looking for Hern, he watched as the pointer indicated a direction down the street. He had thought for sure it would point toward the jail.

He turned in the direction indicated by the compass and proceeded down the street. Eventually he reached a dead-end against the inner face of Cardri's middle protective wall.

The pointer continued to indicate Perrilin's position to be somewhere on the other side. James quickly made his way to the gate and passed through Cardri's middle wall entering its outer ring. From there he once again allowed the compass to lead the way.

He walked down several streets and passed around various buildings. His search stopped again as he came up against the inner surface of the outer wall. There was no denying the truth of what the compass was telling: Perrilin was somewhere outside of Cardri. Making his way to Cardri's main gates, James left the city.

The compass led him through the buildings built outside the city's protective wall, to the outskirts of Cardri. When he reached the last building before entering the countryside, the compass still directed him on.

James contemplated returning to the inn for his horse, but discarded that idea. Moving out, he entered the countryside with the plan to continue on until an hour before nightfall. If he didn't come across the bard by then, he would return to the inn and set out on horseback the following day.

Out of the crowded city, he progressed much faster. Hours of trudging through fields found him cresting one of the many rolling hills that dotted the area. He paused when a farmhouse came into view. The compass directed him toward the abandoned looking building.

The farmhouse had seen better days. One side of the roof sagged precariously and the front door sat slightly askew. Only the lower hinge still attached it to the door frame. The ground surrounding the house was choked with weeds and appeared not to have been tended by anyone for quite a while. Behind the house sat a barn in slightly better shape, though still appeared to have fallen to disuse.

Despite the look of abandonment, a small plume of smoke made its way from the farmhouse's chimney. The faint sound of horses could also be heard from the barn. James quickly returned back down the hill until he no longer cast a silhouette against the afternoon sky. He kept low as he carefully made his way around the farm, doing his best not to be observed. As he circled the farmhouse, he watched the compass. As he moved, so did the compass, continuously pointing toward the structure.

Satisfied that he knew where Perrilin was, he found a safe place amidst tall grass where he could keep an eye on the house. The sun was low in the sky. He hadn't realized that his trek had taken so much time, but it seemed that sunset was not far off. He settled into his hiding place and waited for dark. When darkness came he would see what he could do. Guards on legitimate business of the city would have taken him to the jail. The fact that he was taken here could only bode ill.

He kept an eye on the farmhouse for the next hour until the sun set and the light faded. Just as the sun dipped below the horizon, a man emerged through the front door and made his way toward the barn. *This was no farmer!* The man had the look of a street tough and carried a sword at his hip. James watched through the tall grass as the man entered the barn. Before he could

make up his mind whether or not to investigate, the barn door swung open and the man headed back to the farmhouse.

What is going on? he wondered. And should he even get involved? If it wasn't for his need to enter the Royal Archives, he would have turned around and gotten out of there. But he needed information, and it appeared Perrilin might be his only avenue through which he could get it. Plus, he liked the bard. During the evening they spent together on the road he found him to be friendly and good-natured. He couldn't leave without finding out what was going on. Things did not feel right. He settled down in the grass once more, and waited for the night. In darkness he could find out what was going on. He made himself comfortable, and waited.

Now dark, the barn was quiet as he approached. He peered through an open window and discovered six horses. Leaving the barn, he carefully made his way to the side of the farmhouse, doing his best not to stumble over anything in the dark. He carefully looked through one of the windows where light emerged.

On the other side he saw an empty room with a single doorway on the opposite wall. The light coming through the window originated from the room on the other side of the doorway. It looked to be the main room of the house. Four men took their ease on a couch and a couple of chairs. A fifth man stood in the middle of the room with his back to James.

The man stood there for several seconds before he stepped to the side. James gasped in shock to discover the man had been standing in front of a chair. And bound to the chair was the object of his search. Perrilin.

The bard looked the worse for wear. His left eye was swollen shut and his torn shirt was red with blood. James watched while the four men joked and laughed but he could not make out what was said. The fifth man returned to stand before Perrilin and said something. Perrilin didn't respond, he simply sat there and stared with a defiant look. The man said something else. Then he struck the bard across the face, snapping his head to the side.

Perrilin brought his head back up and continued to stare defiantly at his tormentor while blood dripped from the corner of his mouth. The man who struck Perrilin walked over to the fireplace and pulled out a red hot poker. He then stood in front of Perrilin where he held the poker a few inches from the bard's face. He gave Perrilin a moment to contemplate the red-hot poker, then the man spoke once more.

James hurried to the front door and picked up several stones along the way. Steeling himself, he paused a moment as he reached the door. Taking a few deep, calming breaths, he laid his hand upon the door. Words issued forth as he cast a spell, and at the utterance of the final word, the door exploded inward. Wooden shards flew everywhere.

The men turned to see James standing in the doorway. He cast another spell and two stones flew with magic-induced speed, striking captors in the chest before they had time to react. The stones exploded through their backs in a grisly display, embedding into the wall.

The one who had threatened Perrilin reacted first and threw the hot poker at James. He then drew his sword and advanced upon him. The remaining two fled and were soon out of sight.

James dodged to the side in order to avoid the thrown poker. He took his last stone and cast his spell, throwing it at the approaching man. By a stroke of ill-fated luck, the man moved his sword at just the right time; the stone struck the blade and snapped it in two. He threw his broken sword to the ground, drew his dagger and charged.

James did not want to withstand the charge of this bull of a man as he came straight at him. Instead turned and ran outside, into the darkness. Once beyond the reach of the light and into the shadows, he turned abruptly and quickly made his way back toward the side of the house.

He reached the side of the house just as the man raced through the doorway. The man tried to determine where James had gone, but his eyes had yet to adjust to the dark. James' breath froze in his lungs as the man's eyes roved over the very spot where he hid. Then turning abruptly, he headed for the other side of the house.

Not able to believe his luck at not being seen, James backed away from the door, all the while keeping against the side of the house. He planned his next move. To cast a spell would require him to give away his position as he spoke the words. But he might not have much choice if he wanted to survive this encounter.

Suddenly, the sound of footsteps came toward him from out of the dark. He held still against the side of the house and remained absolutely quiet, hardly daring to breathe.

Not more than a foot away, he discerned a shadow in the form of a man's silhouette. The shadow slowly made his way past where James hid in the dark. The light from the stars reflected off the bare blade of a sword. The man came to a stop, his head cocked first to one side and then the other as he listened to the night.

Without warning the sword struck. James dodged the blow and jumped to the side as the blade came within inches of where his head had been only a split second before. Losing his balance, he hit the ground and rolled quickly away. The man turned toward the sound as he rolled, advancing quickly, sword poised to strike.

James rolled several more times, and then came to a stop on his back. Looking up, he saw the man almost upon him. The moonlight glinted off the bare metal raised to end his life. In a moment of panic he thrust his hand toward the man, and a mental picture flashed of the man flying through the air away from him. He shouted, "Away!" Feeling a surge of power, the man was picked up and flung away. He struck the side of the house and smashed through to the other side. The force of the impact shattered bones and pulped flesh. The man was not a pretty sight.

The jagged hole in the side of the house spilled light onto where James lay on the ground. Getting to his feet, a crossbow bolt embedded itself in the ground where his chest had just been. He looked around and saw the man who had been interrogating Perrilin framed in a window, winding a crossbow to fire again. Placing another bolt in place, he once more aimed it at James.

He pictured the crossbow in his mind and envisioned its crosswire snapping. Without even vocalizing the words of a spell, he let thought guide the magic. He let loose a surge of power. *Twang!* The crosswire broke. Snapping back, it caught the man across the right side of his face. He cried out in pain, and the crossbow fell as he disappeared back into the house.

A quick scan revealed no other men in sight. Moving stealthily, James made his way over to the hole in the wall and peered in around the edge. Only the dead man was visible. Ever so

carefully he climbed through the hole and made his way into the room. There he came to the dead man's side and took his knife. Now with the added confidence of having a blade in hand, he cautiously approached the doorway which led to the main room wherein Perrilin was being held.

Perrilin was still bound in the chair. Head lolled forward, the bard looked dead but for the gentle rise and fall of his chest. James waited for a second and made sure the last two men were not around.

A noise caused him to turn. One of the captors climbed in through the hole in the wall, sword at the ready and coming at him.

James visualized the knife flying and striking the man. He let loose with the power and threw. Guided by magic, the knife sailed through the air and struck the man in the center of the chest, puncturing the heart. His sword fell from his lifeless hand as his body lurched backward through the hole, and came to land on the ground outside.

On the brink of exhaustion due to all the magic he'd thrown around, James leaned against the wall for a second to catch his breath. He kept an eye out for the remaining captor. Suddenly, he heard the sound of a galloping horse. Rushing to the hole in the wall, he looked outside just in time to see the remaining captor. As he rode past, their eyes locked and James saw a red welt oozing blood running from his hairline to his jaw, crossing over the right eye. Their gazes held for a moment longer before the man was swallowed by the night.

James returned to the main room and came to Perrilin. "Are you alright?" he asked as he started to untie Perrilin's bonds.

Perrilin raised his head to see who spoke. He was quite surprised who it was. "No," he replied, "but I'll live."

"Who were these guys?"

He removed the rest of the bonds and helped Perrilin to his feet. A little unsteady, he required James' help to remain upright.

Perrilin didn't answer right away. Instead he looked at the men lying dead on the floor. "Did you get them all?"

"No, one got away on horseback," James replied. "It was the man who had been questioning you."

"Then we need to leave before he returns with others," Perrilin managed to say just as his knees buckled and once again sank into unconsciousness.

James struggled to carry him out to the barn. There he laid him down in the straw while he saddled two of the horses. Once saddled, he attempted to rouse Perrilin, but was unsuccessful. He lifted him from the straw and placed him across the saddle on his stomach. He then proceeded to secure him with rope to prevent him from falling off on their return to Cardri. Once satisfied that Perrilin was secured, he mounted another horse and took the reins of Perrilin's. Leading him from the barn, he headed in the general direction of Cardri.

It didn't take nearly as long to return to town as it had when he left in search of Perrilin. As the lights of the city appeared in the distance, a groan came from the bard. Perrilin began to stir. He brought the two horses to a stop, dismounted and went over to the bard. He was conscious with his eyes open. "Can you ride?"

Perrilin nodded.

Taking a moment, he untied Perrilin and helped him upright into the saddle. Once he was sure Perrilin was alert enough to ride without falling, he remounted and they continued on into Cardri.

During their approach to the outskirts of the city, James realized his dilemma. How would he get Perrilin into Cardri without anyone knowing? If the guards at the gate recognized Perrilin, or just reported that someone in his condition passed through, then the hunt might be on.

He slowed his horse as he pondered the situation. They reached the outlying buildings, and after traversing several blocks, the gate came into view. It was well lit and two guards stood vigil.

Agonized over how to get in, he suddenly heard the sound of drunken singing coming from the intersection of streets ahead of them. James reined up some distance away and waited to see what was going on. Around the corner appeared four rather drunken men, singing and sharing bottles as they staggered up the street. Their destination seemed to be the gate into the city which gives him an idea.

“Oh my god, Reggie,” one of the guards said to his partner. “Would you look at what’s coming down the street?”

“Looks like they had a good one tonight.”

“Yeah, one of them can’t even walk,” the first guard laughed.

The two guards looked on in amusement as the six men, one who needed to be supported by two of his companions, staggered through the gate into the city. They watched as the group meandered down the street and were soon out of sight but not out of hearing. Their off-key caterwauling echoed through the night.

Once past the guards, James quickly disengaged himself and Perrilin from the drunks. They made their way through the streets to the second gate, ducking into alleys whenever a patrol of the city watch came by.

They finally reached the second gate and found two guards on duty. Both looked rather bored but otherwise alert. James watched from the shadows of an alley for a while, but no opportunity to get through presented itself. Perrilin rested against the wall of the alley, passing from conscious to unconscious and back again as James considered his options.

With no other options, he reluctantly scanned the area to make sure no one approached before he began. He concentrated on a visualization of the guards becoming tired, then drifting off to sleep. The power welled up and flowed toward the men. The flow of power was subtle; it took a small amount of time to work its affect. Soon, the men began to yawn and their eyes started to blink. First one then the other slumped and drifted off to sleep.

James helped Perrilin, bearing much of the bard’s weight as they made their way through the gate. They passed within a foot of the sleeping guards. Once past the gate so as to not be noticed, James stopped the spell. The guards failed to reawaken. He did not want them to get into trouble on his account.

He left Perrilin sitting against the side of a candle maker's shop while he returned to the gate. He picked up a small rock and tossed it toward the sleeping guards. It banged into the wall then ricocheted off the head of one. Startled, the guard woke up, realized that he had been asleep and got up fast. He noticed his partner nearby and kicked him in the leg to wake him. His task done, he returned to Perrilin and with the bard still leaning heavily upon him, they headed for *The Silver Bells*.

When they reached the inn, the common room was still packed with the evening crowd. Above the voices and the occasional laughter wafted the sound of a bard or minstrel. He went around to the back and found an area steep in shadow where he left Perrilin.

"I won't be but a moment," he told the bard. The only reply Perrilin gave was a nod.

Moving as unobtrusively as possible, he walked in through the back door and quickly made his way to the stairs and up to his room.

He opened the door and found Miko fast asleep. Coming over to him, James shook his shoulder. "Wake up, I need your help."

Startled to wakefulness, the boy bolted upright. When he saw James standing over him he relaxed somewhat. "I was getting worried about you."

"Sorry about that," James replied. "I found Perrilin and he's downstairs." Holding up a finger he said, "No time for questions. I need your help getting him up here. He's pretty badly hurt." As he led Miko from the room he added, "We need to get him up here without letting anyone know that he's here."

"How are we to do that?"

"Just follow my lead," James told him.

Miko gave an affirmative nod and then followed him down the stairs and through the back door. James was relieved to find the bard where he had left him. He and Miko managed to get Perrilin to a standing position, and with an arm around each of their necks, they helped him to and then through the back door.

As they entered, Miss Gilena happened to walk by. She stopped when she saw them, her face turning into a frown. With a disapproving look, she moved toward them and asked, "What is going on?" Her expression indicated her suspicion that they were up to something.

"Just a friend who got the tar beat out of him is all," James explained.

She turned her gaze first onto James, then Miko. When her eyes turned on the man between them, her expression changed from one of suspicion to that of shock. "Is that...?"

Discovered, James nodded.

A quick glance about found no-one nearby. She waved them forward and said, "Hurry and get him to your room. I'll be up in a few minutes with some food and water."

"Thank you," said James, greatly relieved.

She only nodded in reply then hurried to the kitchen. They helped Perrilin up the stairs and into their room. They put him in the bed furthest from the door. Miko lit the candle on the table which gave the room a little light. They pulled the covers to his chin to better hide him should someone unexpectedly enter. They had just finished with Perrilin when a single knock sounded on the door followed right after by Miss Gilena entering the room. Bearing a tray of food and a

pitcher of water, along with several towels tucked under one arm, she closed the door with the heel of her foot.

“What happened?” she asked as she came to the bard’s bedside. She handed Miko the tray of food and poured some of the water into a nearby basin, then wetted the end of a towel. She sat on the bed next to Perrilin, and used the damp towel to clean the dried blood off his face.

“I found him being held in a farmhouse several miles out of town,” James explained. “They were beating him up pretty bad and were about to begin using a hot poker. I managed to get him out of there.”

“I thought he was arrested by the city watch?”

“Apparently not,” he explained. “I went by the jail first, but they said he was never brought in.”

They both looked toward the sleeping bard. James wondered what Perrilin had gotten himself into.

After cleaning him up fairly well she said, “You will need to get him out of those dirty clothes and clean the rest of him as well. In the morning, I will bring clean clothes for him.” She got up off the bed then said, “If he wakes, try to get him to eat and drink, at least drink if nothing else. I need to be downstairs and if you should require anything, send the boy down to *me*,” she emphasized by pointing to herself, “and I shall get you what you need. Understand?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Good. Now I’ll leave you to it,” Miss Gilena stated as she left the room.

“What now?” Miko asked after the door closed behind her.

“I guess we better get his clothes off and get him cleaned up like she said,” James answered as he removed Perrilin’s shirt.

“No, I mean about gaining access to the Royal Archives.”

When he removed the shirt, he was angered at the many shallow cuts and bruises that marked the bard’s chest and back. The cuts were obviously the source of the blood that stained his shirt.

“They sure did a number on him, didn’t they?” Miko asked as he too examined the bard’s injuries.

“Yes they did,” agreed James. He took another towel and dipped it into the basin. He was careful not to reopen the wounds which had begun to heal. He gingerly removed the rest of the blood and dirt.

“I think we will need to wait until he wakes before we do anything further about the Archives,” James said. “We’ll lay low until tomorrow and then when he awakens see if he can help us. Hopefully he will be awake by then.” Once he had cleaned the wounds, James laid him back into the bed and replaced the covers up to his chin. Then he sat with Miko at the table.

Miko looked longingly at the food piled upon the tray. James said, “We may as well eat it, though let’s leave some for him should he awaken.”

As they ate, James asked Miko if he found out anything about Lord Colerain’s business in Cardri.

“It seems not much is known around here about Lord Colerain,” he explained between bites. “However, I did find out some things about a Lord Kinderling.” He saw the lack of understanding

on James' face. He explained, "Lord Kindering is who Lord Colerain is staying with while he's in town. I did find out that much."

"Ah, okay," James said, "go on."

"Apparently, Lord Kindering is very wealthy. He has many different trading concerns all over Cardri and some even extending into the various kingdoms neighboring us." Looking at James he added, "He even has businesses inside the Empire, or so it's said."

"Interesting. Did you find out what his connection with Lord Colerain was?"

"No, nobody seemed to know much about that," Miko answered. "However, some that I talked with seemed to think that this Lord Kindering is on the shady side. Rumors have surfaced about dealings with slavers and smugglers."

"Oh?" prompted James as he finished the last of his share of the meal.

"Couldn't find out the particulars, but it seems he is not one you would wish to cross."

"Sounds that way," James concluded. Seeing that Miko was done with dinner, he said, "Why don't you try to get some sleep. I'm going to be up for a while."

Miko didn't argue, he went over and plopped down on the bed. As he lay there, he watched James take the traveling case with the writing material in it and placed it on the table. "What are ya gonna do?"

James removed a piece of paper, an inkwell, and one of the finely pointed quills. "I'm going to jot down some notes about what's going on and different things. Just go to sleep and don't worry about it."

"No problem there," he said sleepily. He watched James until drifting off to sleep.

James opened the inkwell and placed it near his paper. He grabbed the quill and dipped it into the inkwell. Ready to write, he brought it to the paper to begin writing. When the quill touched the paper, a big glob of ink flowed off the quill. It made a great big mess.

This may be harder than I thought, He dipped the quill into the ink again, scraping the excess off before he brought it to the paper. This time, he took his time and managed to do a fair job. Though the letters were a bit smudged and fatter than they should have been, he could make out what was written. He spent a little more time practicing making various letters and shapes until he was satisfied.

He put his practice sheet to the side and took out a fresh one. He proceeded to make notes about magic and the various spells he had tried along with their effects. He wrote about how the magic made him feel, the effect it had on him, and other observations.

...It would seem that I don't really need to use rhyme and meter to produce magical effects. I simply need to have a mental picture and a willingness to do magic, and then it happens. Perhaps the words are simply to help the novice practitioner maintain the mental picture as you do magic. Then once you grow in ability...

...the spells that continue in their effect, like the orb, seem to need a continual draw of energy from the caster in order to maintain the effect. Once you stop the flow, it ends. I have also noted that if you cast a continually active spell, yet don't want the continual draw or the required

mental concentration to maintain it, then the power used is much greater, and much more physically draining than the others. I believe this is due because it draws all the magic required for the duration of the spell at the time you initially cast it. Need to find a way to lessen the impact of those types...

When his eyes began to droop and the yawns came with greater frequency, he set the quill down. He inspected his writing and was satisfied even though it was uneven and the letters were not formed properly. At least it was legible. With more practice, he was certain to get better. More yawns escaped while he closed the inkwell, cleaned his quills, and laid out his manuscripts to dry. He then came to the bed that Miko was sleeping on and settled down beside him, nudging him to move over a bit. When he at last had enough room, he reached to the table, snuffed out the candle and quickly succumbed to sleep.

Chapter Thirteen

James was the first to wake despite having been the last to bed. Miko snored two inches from his ear and it was too much for him to take. Once it grew light James got up. At the table he inspected the notes he made the night before. Aside from a few globular letters his ink and quill had produced, he was quite satisfied. A tentative touch revealed the ink had fully dried, so he gathered his notes. He placed them back into the traveling case along with the rest of the writing materials. With Miko and Perrilin still asleep, he went down to the common room where he found one of the serving girls and arranged for breakfast.

Returning to the room, he went to Perrilin's bedside and sat next to the bard. Despite his best efforts, he awakened Perrilin. "Good morning," James said. "How are you feeling this morning?"

Perrilin looked around the room, a little disoriented, unsure as to where exactly he was. Not sensing any immediate threat, he considered James' question. "I'm alive," he replied. "Other than that, not too good."

"They did quite a number on you last night. You are lucky I came along when I did." He lifted the blankets to inspect the bard's injuries. Some were in the process of healing properly while others were a little red and inflamed. Using a clean towel and some water from the basin, he gently wiped away the little bit of seepage that had oozed overnight from several of the cuts.

"I'm glad you did," he said, flinching slightly in pain as James ministered to his wounds. "How did you happen to be there?"

“I was looking for you,” he explained. “When I was told you had been arrested, I went to the jail only to be told you had never been brought in. Did some looking around and wound up where you were being held.”

Perrilin digested that for a moment then asked, “How did you find out where I was?”

“Well, let’s just say that lately I’ve been fairly good at finding people when I need to,” he replied, avoiding all mention of magic.

He knew the bard was not entirely satisfied with his response but accepted it at face value for now. “What did they want with you anyway? It looked as if they were interrogating you and were even going to start using torture to get what they wanted.” Once the dried, and not so dried blood had been removed from the wounds, he used a dry towel and dried him off before pulling the blanket back up.

“I think you will be okay,” he assured Perrilin. “May need a few days rest to heal properly.”

Perrilin looked at him for a second before he asked, “Why did you want to find me?”

“I had hoped you could help me with something,” James said as he placed the towels and basin back on the table.

“Like what?”

“Gaining access to the Royal Archives.”

Surprised, Perrilin asked, “Why?”

He pulled the medallion out from beneath his shirt and showed the design to Perrilin. “I want to discover if there is any significance to this design. I have been led to believe that it may be important in some way. I don’t suppose you recognize it?” Taking it from around his neck, he handed the medallion to Perrilin.

Holding it close, Perrilin took a good look at the design before he handed it back to James. Shaking his head no, he replied, “I’m sorry, no. I don’t recognize it.”

James replaced the medallion around his neck and tucked it inside his shirt. Just then came a knock on the door, which startled Miko awake. James glanced over to him as he sat up in bed, rubbing his eyes. He opened the door just a crack to find two serving girls. One carried a tray with several plates of food, and the other had a pitcher and two mugs.

He took the tray and placed it on the table, then returned for the pitcher and mugs. “Thank you,” he said and gave them each a copper for their trouble. As their footsteps disappeared, he closed the door.

Perrilin sat up in bed and Miko was already sitting at the table with a heaping plate full of food. “I hope that’s for him.” James said to his young companion.

“Uh, of course it is,” he replied a little embarrassed. He handed the steaming plateful to Perrilin. Sheepishly, he began to fill another for himself.

James sat down and started to pile food on his plate.

Perrilin took several bites and then said, “As to whether or not I can help you gain access to the Royal Archives, I am sure I can help you with that. You see, the Archive Custodian is a friend of mine and I am sure that if I request it, he will permit you to research that design. He may even help you if he’s not otherwise occupied. After all, I do owe you my life and I always repay my debts.”

Looking intrigued, James asked, "How would we go about it?"

"I shall write a letter of introduction explaining what you wish to do," he explained, then gestured to Miko. "Your young friend there would then need to run it to the gate leading into the castle area." To Miko he said, "Tell the guards that you have a letter for the Archive Custodian and then either they will escort you to him, or more likely have you wait while they send someone to the Archives with the letter. Then it would be up to my friend Ellinwyrd to decide whether or not to grant you access."

Excited at the possibility of access to ancient tomes, he quickly finished his breakfast and cleared a spot on the table where he placed his travel case. Opening it, he removed a piece of paper, quill and an inkwell, then closed the case once more and set it aside.

He waited as patiently as possible while Perrilin finished his meal. James then brought over the traveling case so Perrilin could write the letter to his friend.

Perrilin took pen in hand and when finished, requested wax to seal the letter. James lit the candle on the table and brought it to him. Perrilin held it at an angle so the melting wax would drip onto the letter. When he had applied the desired amount he gave the candle back to James. He took one of his rings and made an imprint in the wax.

He handed it to James and said, "Here you go." Then to Miko, "Make sure you do not break the seal. Once you reach the gates, do whatever the guards tell you to do."

"I understand," Miko said as he took the letter from James.

"Be careful," James said to him.

Understanding, Miko left and shut the door behind him.

The door hadn't been shut for two seconds before they heard a knock, immediately followed by the door opening to admit Miss Gilena. It seemed she did not feel the need to await an answer before she entered.

She bustled into the room, and her eyes zeroed in on the bed where Perrilin was. With concern in her voice she asked, "How are you feeling?" Then she made her way to his bedside with the promised clothes tucked under one arm.

Smiling a reassuring smile as she approached, he said, "I will live, though I'm sore from head to toe. James has been very helpful."

Turning to James, she said, "Thank you for rescuing him last night." Then she handed him Perrilin's clothes.

"It was a pleasure, I don't much care for those who use torture," he replied, taking them and setting them upon the table.

Looking at Perrilin with worry in her voice she asked, "Torture?"

Perrilin patted her hand to calm her worries, "They were just about to start when James arrived and got me out of there."

"Thank goodness you came along just when you did," she said. Without asking, she pulled down his covers and inspected the injuries. Perrilin felt a little uncomfortable at her mothering, especially in front of James. Satisfied that they were healing properly, she replaced the covers. "It looks as if your wounds are on the mend," she announced, relieved that they were not worse.

"I can't stay. I merely wanted to see how you were. If you need anything, let me know." That last question was directed more toward James than the injured bard.

Perrilin responded, "We will and don't worry, I'll be fine."

"I always worry about you," Miss Gilena said before returning to the door. She cast one more worried look in his direction and then quickly left the room.

Looking over to James, Perrilin said, "She's a good woman, but she frets too much at times."

"That's probably true of most women when they care about someone."

"Care about? Me?" Perrilin asked as if such a thought had never occurred to him. An odd expression passed over his face as he considered the possibility. Soon though, the demands of his healing body asserted themselves and his eyes closed, he drifted off to sleep. James grew restless and impatient, waiting for Miko to return. He idled the time away at the window while he looked at the people passing on the street below. He reminisced about the times his grandmother, while waiting for someone at the airport, would like to do nothing more than sit and watch people. She would make up the most outlandish stories about who they were and what they were about.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

Snapped out of his reverie, he opened the door. One of the workers from downstairs stood before him, holding a long, thin box.

The boy said, "This was just delivered for you."

"Thank you," James said as he took the box, wondering who could possibly have sent him something here.

Once James had the box, the boy turned and departed. James placed the package on the table. He stood there for a moment staring at it, thinking.

"Is something wrong?" Perrilin asked, now awakened from the knocking.

"This package was just delivered to me," he explained, "but I haven't bought or ordered anything that would be delivered."

"Interesting," commented Perrilin. Intrigued, he pulled back the covers and slowly brought his legs up so he sat on the edge of the bed. Despite the pain the change of position caused, he was more interested in this unknown and inexplicable package.

James took the package and opened it. Inside he found something long, wrapped in a dirty cloth. He undid the cloth. Immediately, his eyes widened and an audible gasp escaped him. To his complete shock, he found one of the boards that he used to kill their captors the other night. The ones they had hidden in a pile of refuse.

Seeing the expression on James' face, Perrilin asked, "What is it?"

He held the blood-stained board up for Perrilin to see, "I don't know how they found this, or even how they could've possibly connected it to me."

"What does it mean?"

"It's a long story but I guess we have the time," James began. He then related the events that started with being chased into the sewers of Bearn. The story continued with the string of events culminating with the battle in the house where they escaped their captors. He avoided

mentioning magic and told only the bare bones of the attack culminating with three dead men and boards protruding from their chests.

“As we left, we hid these boards in a pile of garbage. I was sure no one was around, but I guess I was wrong. Somehow, someone must have seen us put them there, took them, and now has tracked us here.”

“That’s quite a story,” Perrilin said. “I have heard of Lord Colerain, though have never met him. He is rumored to be a nasty one to cross.”

“Yeah,” he agreed, “I’ve heard that too.” He removed the cloth from out of the box, and searched for a note, or anything else that might shed some light on all this. “Question is, what is it that they want?” After searching the box thoroughly, he said, “They didn’t leave a note.”

The cloth which had been used to wrap the board was on the floor. Perrilin noticed something and said, “James, look at the cloth itself.”

Picking it up, James used both hands to spread it out. There *was* writing on it.

Where these were buried, one hour

It was written in what looked to be charcoal. He showed it to Perrilin.

“I guess they want to meet you where you buried them, in one hour,” Perrilin assumed.

“That’s how I see it, too.”

“Are you going to meet with them?”

“I think I should,” he replied. “If their desire had been to cause me trouble with the city watch, guards would have been here instead. I should be all right.” He wrapped the board with the cloth and then put it inside the box. “If Miko returns before I do, have him wait until I get back.”

“I will,” Perrilin assured him, “and be careful.”

“I have learned a lot about being careful since coming here,” stated James, as he left the room and went downstairs. Miss Gilena was in the common room straightening chairs.

She turned at his approach, “Is anything wrong?”

“Everything is fine,” James reassured her. “I just need to step out for a short while. I left him upstairs and he’s sleeping again.”

“Rest is the best thing for him now.” She looked somewhat more relaxed knowing that Perrilin was doing well.

“There was a package delivered to my room a few minutes ago. You wouldn’t have seen who dropped it off?”

“No, it was probably given to one of the staff,” she answered. “They wouldn’t have bothered me for something like that. Why?”

“Just curious is all. Thank you for your time,” he said, turning and heading for the door.

“Goodbye to you, James,” Miss Gilena said.

He left the inn and trekked through the city and out to the poorer section. *Hope I can remember where I buried them*, he worried to himself. *It was pretty dark and I was preoccupied at the time.*

One street looked like any other. He finally came across a refuse pile in an area that looked somewhat familiar. He wasn't sure if he had found the right spot or not, but he thought so. The area was fairly run down, with lots of bums and beggars hanging around up and down the street. After a few minutes he began to feel very self-conscious. He was a stranger standing by himself in such an area. He definitely stood out among the other residents and began to draw their attention.

Three young men eyed him from down the street where they stood. Being under scrutiny like this started to wear on his nerves, making him jumpy. He definitely did not feel safe here. The three young men began to walk in his direction.

He was nervous but needed to meet the person who sent the note. He stood his ground and waited while the men came to him. He had his magic if nothing else.

As they approached, two of the young men fanned out, leaving the third to approach while they flanked him.

"Can I help you gentlemen?" James asked, trying to keep his voice calm.

"Maybe," one said as he pulled out a knife, "you could help by giving us all your coins." The other two drew their knives and gestured menacingly toward him. James suddenly realized that the many people who had been loitering in the area earlier had all but disappeared. He and the three toughs were practically the only ones remaining on the street, which could not be a good sign.

James backed away until he pressed against a wall.

"Look man, we don't want to hurt you, we just want your gold," another one told him.

"You don't want his money," a voice came from behind them. The three toughs turned to see a well-dressed man in his middle years approaching with sword drawn.

"We don't want any trouble with you," the first tough told the newcomer, menacing him with his knife.

"Then you better leave before I reach you," the man said, unimpressed. All the while he maintained the same steady pace forward.

The three toughs looked to each other. They realized their knives would be no match for a swordsman so they made a break for it down the road. The newcomer sheathed his sword.

"Thank you, stranger," James said with relief as the man drew near.

Waving away the comment, he said, "Are you here to meet someone?"

"Yes I am."

"Then follow me."

He turned toward the direction from which he came. "This isn't where I expected to find you. You are lucky you weren't killed, this is no area for strangers."

"Yeah, I gathered that," James replied. "Where are we going?"

"Someone wants to meet with you, just be quiet and follow me." The man continued down the street and then turned down another to the left. They soon came to a dilapidated building where the man walked up to the door and opened it. He then gestured for James to precede him inside.

He entered a poorly lit hallway. The man told him to continue to the second door on the left. James reached the door and was directed to enter.

When he opened the door, light from the other side bathed the hallway. Passing through, he entered a well-lit room where he found three men. Two were most likely guards since they were dressed similarly to the man whom had escorted him. The third man sat behind a table with a single, empty chair situated across from him. He gestured for James to sit in the empty chair.

James nervously crossed the room, looking around as he took a seat. He heard the door close behind him as the two guards took up positions around the room while the man who had brought him remained by the door.

He returned his attention to the man sitting across the table. Middle-aged with hair beginning to grey about the temples, the man held an air of command. The single scar that ran along his left jawbone did little to diminish it. He reached down to the floor beside him and brought up the hood containing the remaining boards. "You know about these?"

"I wouldn't be here if I didn't," James replied nervously.

"It would seem that the other night, four people died in a house not far from here. Two others were seen leaving that very same house around that time. Those same people were also observed to go and bury these in a refuse pile not too far from here. Interesting, wouldn't you say?" The man sat back in his chair and looked at the reaction his words were having.

James shifted nervously in his chair. His eyes flicked from the man, to the boards and back again, but he didn't say anything.

The man continued, "Now, we know that the people who died in the house were under the orders of someone working on behalf of a Lord Colerain from Bearn, whether they knew it themselves or not. What we want to know is why Lord Colerain has an interest in you?"

"You're not with the city guards?"

Laughing, the man replied, "If we were, you wouldn't be here now would you?"

"No, I suppose not. Why this interest in me?"

"Anything of interest to Lord Colerain, interests us," the man answered.

James pointed to the boards. "What do you plan to do with those?"

"Probably throw them away," the man replied. "They were merely instrumental in gaining your attention. Now, why does he have this interest in you?"

"I really don't know," James explained. "For some reason he's been after me since Bearn. I was unfortunate enough to accidentally be on his estate several days ago. He saw me there and ever since has been trying to get hold of me."

"So he is after you because you are a trespasser?" he asked with disbelief. "You don't really expect me to believe that do you?"

"As far as I know, that is the reason," James repeated emphatically. "I swear it!"

The guard who escorted James whispered into the man's ear. The man's eyes widened slightly and then he slowly nodded. He sat back a moment and appeared to be considering something. "I believe you."

"Just who are you?" James asked, more confident now that it seemed they meant him no harm.

"Who we are is no concern of yours," the man said. "How did you manage to kill those men?"

"Me and my friend took them by surprise and killed them," replied James.

“Hmmm...” the man said, “doesn’t seem likely, but then again, they are dead and you are here. You can go. Just be careful, Lord Colerain wants you in a bad way it would seem.” He motioned to the guard who brought James in, and said, “Orrin, see that James is escorted to the city gates.”

James suddenly realized that the man said his name. *How does he know me?*

“Yes, sir,” Orrin said. He turned to James, “Let’s go.”

Once they left the building, James asked Orrin, “Who was that?”

Orrin didn’t offer a reply as he escorted him down the road toward the gates into the city proper. He tried several times to engage Orrin in conversation but the man remained quiet, not responding to any of James’ questions or comments.

Just before they arrived at the gate, Orrin said, “This is where I leave you.” He abruptly turned about without so much as a goodbye.

“Bye, Orrin,” James said as Orrin went down the road. “And thank you.”

James entered through the gate and followed the now somewhat familiar streets, until he was back at *The Silver Bells*. When he entered the room, discovered Miko had already returned.

Miko handed James a letter, “When I got to the gate, they had me wait while a guard delivered Perrilin’s letter to the Archive Custodian. I sat there and waited for about an hour before they returned with this and told me to get out of there.”

James turned the letter over and saw that it had a wax seal that bore the imprint of a feather. Perrilin glanced at it when James showed him the seal. “That’s his seal alright, no one else would dare to use it but him. Go ahead and open it.”

James broke the seal. They quietly waited as he read the letter. “He says to come this afternoon to the Archives for a meeting,” he announced, then looked up at the bard.

“You will find him a very nice fellow; if a bit of a stickler where his books are concerned.”

Smiling, James added, “Yeah, I know someone like that too.”

“Did you meet with whoever sent the package?” Perrilin asked.

“Something going on?” Miko interjected.

Turning to Miko, James explained. “Just after you left, a package was delivered. Within it was one of the boards that I used to kill those guys the other night.”

“How did someone get those?” Miko asked anxiously.

James summarized his meeting with the man for Miko and Perrilin. “So I am not too sure just who they are, or why they are concerned with the goings on of Lord Colerain. At least they seem to hold no ill will toward me however, for which I am grateful.” Just then his stomach rumbled loudly and he realized he was quite hungry.

“Miko, go downstairs and have them send up some food. I’m starving and want to eat before I go meet with Ellinwyrd.”

“Alright,” Miko replied, “I’ll be right back.”

“So what do you plan to do about Lord Colerain?” Perrilin asked once Miko had left.

“I don’t know. Hopefully I’ll find out what I need to know at the Archives and then can get out of here before he locates me again. I wish I knew why he was so interested in me. If I did then maybe I could get him off my back.”

The door opened as Miko returned. "They will send it up in a few minutes," he told them, as he took a seat at the table.

"Thanks." Turning back to Perrilin, James said, "Speaking of troubles, just what kind of trouble did I save you from last night?"

"I was wondering if you were going to ask me about that again. As much as I owe you, there are simply some things better left unsaid. Suffice it to say that those men from whose hands you rescued me are not interested in anything or anybody other than themselves and their own concerns." When he saw the look in James' eye he went on, "What you don't know can't be tortured out of you."

"I think I understand," he assured him. "Are you still in danger from them?"

"If they knew where I was, perhaps. They most likely wouldn't try anything again so soon, especially since you wiped out that group."

"I didn't get all of them," James admitted. "Unfortunately, one of them escaped on horse back."

"At least you got me out of there alive."

Just then a knock was heard at the door. Miko opened it and took the food from the server, not letting him enter. They needed to preserve the secrecy of Perrilin's presence at *The Silver Bells*. He then closed the door and placed the tray upon the table. He placed several pieces of baked chicken and some bread on a plate before handing it to Perrilin. He then started in on his own share.

Not much was said over lunch, each one deep in thought about recent events. When James finished eating he got up and grabbed his backpack. Miko came to his feet and started to get ready to accompany him.

James placed a hand on Miko's shoulder. "I need you to stay here and take care of Perrilin. I'm sure I'll be fine by myself."

Miko was disappointed at not being allowed to go to the Archives. He said, "Okay," but was none too happy about it.

"Bye, Perrilin," he said on his way out the door. "You too, Miko. I'll see you when I get back."

With the letter in his pocket, it didn't take him very long before he reached the gates to the castle area.

As he approached, one of the guards saw him coming. "Halt! Declare your business."

James showed him the letter from Ellinwyrd. The guard took notice of the symbol of the Archive Custodian at the bottom and said, "Wait here a moment." Turning to a younger guard he said, "Run and see if the Archive Custodian is expecting a visitor." As the other guard ran off, the first one turned back to James and said, "Just be a moment, sir. Can't let anyone in without authorization."

"I understand," he replied.

While he waited for permission to enter, he looked out over the castle complex, excited about being so close to a real castle. He saw several buildings bordering the street that led from the gatehouse where he waited, and through the opening between them rose the castle itself. Majestic

and grand were the words that came to mind when he saw it. It had tall, shining towers and an imposing central keep; all quite impressive.

The guard returned in the company of a boy who wore a tabard bearing the king's coat of arms. The guard said, "If you will follow the page, sir, he shall lead you to the Archives."

"Okay, and thank you," James told the guard who only nodded in reply. Turning, he followed the page as he was led into the castle area.

Chapter Fourteen

He marveled as the page led him past the many majestic buildings. He was completely awed in their presence. For one who had long desired to visit England and the castles of the British Isles, this was a dream come true. In stark contrast to the imposing edifices, the people they encountered were rather ordinary. Perhaps he had inflated expectations of those who resided in such places, but aside from their clothing, men and women alike were rather common in their appearance. Not the bigger than life aura about them the movie industry led one to believe they possessed.

He nodded to several, even offering a 'hello' to one grim individual who wore richly attire. All that was given back was indifference, if they even took the time to glance his way. Despite the cold reception, he was ecstatic to be in such close proximity to a real, bona fide, castle!

Their path took them down a short lane passing between two stone structures which had to have been at least four stories tall. It opened onto a courtyard with a magnificent four-tiered fountain amidst many beautiful flowering plants and bushes. Situated upon pedestals, statues and sculptures rose above the flowering bushes. James noticed several young ladies talking and laughing on a pair of benches near the fountain. One in particular, with flowing auburn hair, made James' heart skip a beat when he spied her. *What a vision of beauty!* His eyes lingered on her for a second too long, for she turned and their eyes meet. About to turn his gaze away, he stopped when she smiled. Then she waved.

James waved back, feeling a little weak in the knees. He awkwardly stumbled into a bush bordering the walkway. The unexpected obstruction caused him to trip and tumble. Red-faced and feeling the fool, he quickly got back to his feet. The laughter of the girls by the fountain only worsened his feeling of embarrassment. Ears burning, he felt like curling up and dying right there. He hesitantly looked to the auburn-haired girl only to find her smiling. Her sweet smile left his pride at least somewhat restored. He gave her a quick, shy smile and then hurried to catch up with the page who had almost reached the other side of the courtyard.

“Who was that girl by the fountain?”

The page paused to glance back, “Which girl?”

Pointing, he said, “That one.”

“Oh, that is the Princess Allende,” the page replied.

A Princess! A real honest to goodness princess, and she smiled at me! When they reached the edge of the courtyard, he looked back and saw Princess Allende still watching him. She waved at him one more time. Smiling a crooked smile, he waved back and left the courtyard hurrying after the page.

Out of the courtyard, he was led down another avenue until they arrived at a medium- sized building made of stone, with a single large wooden door which stood open at the top of several steps. Leading James up the steps and in through the door, the page took him down a hallway. They continued past several doors until coming to a pair of double wooden doors at the end. Upon each of the doors was engraved the same symbol that had sealed the letter Ellinwyrd sent. The page tapped upon the door and from within came a muffled, “Enter!” at which the page opened the door and stepped to the side, motioning for James to enter.

The room was cluttered with papers and books that lined every surface including the floor. It was not at all what he had expected of a place called the Royal Archives. An elderly man sat behind a table, bent over a large book laid out before him. A shaft of sunlight streamed in over his shoulder from the window illuminating the pages. Hearing the door open, he looked up to see James enter. “Thank you Berin, you may go now.”

The page bowed to Ellinwyrd, and then left as he closed the door behind him.

Ellinwyrd motioned for James to come forward. “Please, sit down.”

James walked toward the table, having to step carefully around several books lying abandoned on the floor. “Thank you, sir, for taking time to see me,” he said as he took the seat.

Ellinwyrd closed the book in front of him. “The letter that was delivered to me did not give any names but bore the seal of a friend.” He looked intently at James and asked, “Can you name him?”

“Perrilin the bard wrote that letter on my behalf.”

Nodding agreement, Ellinwyrd said, “I heard that he was taken by the city watch the other night. How is it that he is with you now?”

“I came across him in an abandoned house outside of town,” he explained. “There were several men there who had him tied to a chair and were beating him pretty badly. I stopped them and brought him back to town.”

“Is he well now?” Ellinwyrd asked, obviously concerned.

“He’s still sore from his ordeal, but claims he will live. He’s resting in a room at *The Silver Bells* even as we speak.”

Ellinwyrd chuckled, “That sounds like him. We’ve been friends a long time now and I hate to see him get into these situations.”

“Situations?”

“Always something happening when he is around,” Ellinwyrd said. Waving his hand dismissively he continued, “But enough about him, what is it that you think I can help you with? The letter stated you thought there was something in which my help may be needed?”

James removed the medallion from around his neck and handed it across the table to Ellinwyrd. “I had hoped you might know if this design held any sort of significance?”

Ellinwyrd brought it closer and took a good look. After a minute of examination, he said, “It looks familiar, but I can’t quite remember why.” He contemplated the design a moment longer, then turned it over and examined the smooth back side, rubbing it with his thumb. “What can you tell me about it?”

“Not much really,” he answered. He hoped he wouldn’t have to tell him the exact circumstances by which he acquired it.

“Hmmm...” Ellinwyrd got to his feet and walked to one of the many shelves in the room with the medallion still in hand. He picked up one book, flipped through the pages briefly before returning it to the shelf and then chose another. “It seems that I remember seeing this in one of the older tomes, perhaps one dealing with...” he began to explain before trailing off. Removing a tome with aged, yellow bindings and cracked by the march of time, he nodded to himself and then brought it back to the table. “This may be it. This tome relates the history of various religious orders in the area, both those currently popular and others that have fallen out of favor.”

He placed the book between them. Carefully opening it, he said, “There used to be other religions around than there are now, but for one reason or another have disappeared.”

“Disappeared?” James asked. “How can a religion just disappear?”

“Perhaps disappear is not quite accurate.”

Looking up from the book and glancing across the table at him, he said, “You see over time, some religions are no longer sought after by the common man. Their temples close, people no longer wish to be priests of that religion, so the religion, sad to say, fades away.” He returned his attention to the book, and continued to flip through the pages. Every once in a while would pause when he came to a drawing, stopping only long enough to compare the diagram on the medallion to the one in the book. When it proved not to be a match, he continued on.

“Have there been many religion’s to fade away?”

“I would think so,” he said. “Though how many is hard to say.” He turned to another page and brought the medallion closer for a comparison. “I think we may have found it.”

“Really?” said James excitedly. He leaned across the table to get a better look at the picture. “What does it say?”

Ellinwyrd handed the medallion back to James and silently read the section in the book relating to the design on the page. “There is not very much here, just a paragraph,” he said, moving the book closer to James. “This is the symbol of the god Morcyth. The man who wrote this did not know very much about those who believed in Morcyth, simply mentioning that it was an ancient religion whose priests were scholars and teachers.” He turned several more pages but found nothing further. He closed the book.

“Have you heard of this Morcyth?” James asked him.

Nodding, Ellinwyrd responded, "A little. His influence waned over five hundred years ago I believe, though I am not sure why. I do know his priests were good, always helping everyone they came into contact with." He looked questioningly at James and asked, "One wonders how you came to be in possession of a medallion bearing the sign of a god whose priests have not been seen for over five hundred years?"

James shifted in his seat under the eyes of Ellinwyrd "It was given to me."

"Oh?" Ellinwyrd said as he arched one eyebrow questioningly.

James was not sure why, but felt that he could trust him. "It's a rather long, unbelievable story." He paused a moment, gauging how much he should tell, then realized he would have to trust someone. "I was not born in this world." He looked to see the reaction his words were having.

"Truly?" asks Ellinwyrd, intrigued but somewhat skeptical. "What world were you born upon?"

"We call it Earth," he explained. "It's very similar to this one, but with many differences. One of the major differences is that magic doesn't work in my world."

"Fascinating," Ellinwyrd said, then prompted James to continue.

James related the tale of how he answered the ad and all the events from the time he entered this world until the time the god, or whatever that little creature was, gave him the amulet. He further explained how he came here to Cardri, how he hoped to discover the meaning of the amulet, and how he hoped in some way to shed light on all this.

"An interesting tale," Ellinwyrd said. "It seems strange that you were brought to our world and not told why."

"I agree," James said. "All I was told was to do what feels right."

"And it felt right to tell me your tale?"

"I feel I can trust you with it," James explained. "Odd, but you're the first one I've met in this world that I've felt that way about. Even Ceryn doesn't know the whole story." He looked to Ellinwyrd and asked, "I hope that I am not mistaken?"

"Oh no, your story is safe with me," Ellinwyrd assured James. "I can understand where secrecy about this might be the prudent course of action at this time."

"Having heard my tale, what would you propose I do now? Should I go in search of Morcyth? And if so, where do I start?"

"You are the only one who can answer that," Ellinwyrd said. "You were told to do what feels right. Does going in search of Morcyth feel right?"

He considered the idea a moment, then said, "I still feel that I need to know more, so I guess it does. Where would be a good place to start?"

"I am not sure," he admitted. "Morcyth in his heyday was fairly widespread, with local temples in almost every major town. I believe I read somewhere that the central temple to Morcyth had been located in the Kingdom of Madoc, somewhere around the Sea of the Gods."

"Sea of the Gods?" James asked. "Where would that be?"

"As you may be aware, the Silver Mountains lay along Cardri's eastern border," he explained. "On the other side you will find the Kingdom of Madoc. In the central area of Madoc sits an

enormous body of freshwater called Sea of the Gods, with many cities lining its shores. Quite likely, one of those cities once housed the central temple to Morcyth,” continued Ellinwyrd. “However, which one eludes me.”

“Well at least that’s a start,” James acknowledged.

“One slight problem however.”

“What would that be?”

“In case you haven’t heard, the Kingdom of Madoc has been invaded by the Empire from the south. Travel there will be difficult at best. The Empire is currently besieging the town of Saragon, some hundred or so miles south of the Sea.”

“I heard about that,” he admitted. “Is there any way to get there without running into the Empire’s forces?”

“There are two passes that allow travel between Cardri and Madoc which would not take you near the fighting, at least where the fighting is right now. One is the Merchant’s Pass, just east of the city of Trademeet. That one is the most direct path to the Sea and is still some distance north of the invading forces so should be relatively safe. The other one is the Dragon’s Pass. It lies further north past the Forest of Kelewan. It would be the safer of the two but will take you many days out of your way.”

“I see,” said James. He stretched his hand across the table to Ellinwyrd and then continued, “I appreciate you seeing me and being so helpful, but I must be going. I still have many things to do before I set out in the morning.”

He motioned for James to sit down. “Don’t be in such a rush. Maybe I can help you further on your quest.” He walked to a table with many books upon it. He picked up one and brought it back to the table.

“I have been meaning to send this to a colleague of mine who maintains the Great Library in the City of Light, which lies on the southern shore of the Sea of the Gods. His name is Ollinearn. From time to time we send each other copies of books and manuscripts that are of interest.”

He took a large sheet of paper and proceeded to wrap the book tightly, inserting the corners within the folds until he had a nice, secure package. He took a lit candle and dripped wax over a seam, then pressed his ring into it, making his sign. Satisfied, he handed it to James.

“If you would be so kind as to deliver this,” Ellinwyrd said as he got a quill, ink and paper out. “I will write him a letter asking him to help you in any way he can.”

“I would be glad to.”

Ellinwyrd took but a moment to write out the letter, then rolled it up and placed his seal upon it. He handed the letter to James saying, “Give this and the book to him and he should be willing to help.”

“Thank you for your help. I will be sure to give him the book and letter when I arrive at the City of Light.” James stood as he held out his hand.

Taking it, Ellinwyrd said, “I am glad I could be of some help. Should your travels bring you back to Cardri, please feel free to stop by for a visit. I would dearly like to hear more about you and your world.”

“I will,” James assured him, and then turned toward the door to leave.

Before he took two steps, Ellinwyrd stopped him by saying, "Just a moment, you require an escort to pass through the castle area." He tugged on a decorative hanging rope, and Berin, the page who had previously escorted him, entered.

"Berin, please escort this gentlemen back to the gate."

"This way, sir," Berin said.

"Goodbye, Ellinwyrd."

"Have a safe journey, James."

James exited, following Berin along the same path that they had taken to the Archives. Entering the courtyard with the fountain, he sadly discovered that the Princess Alliende was no longer there. He would have dearly loved to see her one more time.

As he followed Berin, James realized how late it was. It didn't seem as if he had been in there all that long. When he arrived at the gates, Berin took his leave, "Good evening to you, sir," and then returned to the castle area.

He needed to get some errands done before he left in the morning. He found Thelonius' shop. Entering through the door, the ever present guards looked him over, while the other went into the back to fetch him. The guard reemerged from the back not long before Thelonius made his appearance at the window.

"Good evening to you, James," he said, greeting him with a smile. "How may I help you this evening?"

"I wish to withdraw two hundred gold pieces."

"Let me get the coins," he replied. "I shall be but a moment." He soon returned with a tray of coins and two small empty pouches. They counted the coins, and when they had made sure there were two hundred golds worth, he put the coins into the two pouches and handed them to James. He then produced a paper which James signed, signifying that he had withdrawn two hundred golds.

Thelonius asked, "Is there anything else I may do for you?"

James picked up the sacks of golds and said, "Not right now, no, this is all I needed. Thank you."

"A good evening to you as well, sir," Thelonius said before he returned to the rear of the shop.

One of the guards held the door as he left with a sack full of coins in each hand. Walking down the street back to *The Silver Bells*, he realized that having pouches filled with gold coins in plain view may not have been the most intelligent thing he had ever done. He didn't observe anyone follow him, and quickly made it back to the inn and straight to his room.

There he found Perrilin asleep and a bored Miko, looking out the window.

"How did it go?"

He set the two sacks of gold coins in the corner, then took a seat at the table. "It went well" He took out the medallion and showed it to Miko. "This is the symbol of a god named Morcyth whose influence waned over five hundred years ago. He didn't know much more than that. However, Ellinwyrd did mention the area around a body of water called the Sea of the Gods where the central temple to Morcyth had been located. He couldn't remember exactly where."

“In the morning, I plan to head that way, taking the road through the Merchant’s Pass and cross over into Madoc. It’s my hope to find this temple or perhaps someone who can further enlighten me about Morcyth.” He glanced to Miko and said, “You needn’t feel that you have to accompany me, this could be dangerous.”

Looking hurt, Miko replied, “Haven’t I been a big help so far?”

“Yes, you have”

“Then I want to come along,” he insisted. “You are about the only friend I have and if I can help, then I want to.”

Seeing that Perrilin was awake and had been listening in on the conversation, James looked to him for help. “Would you please tell him that traveling to a kingdom at war is not the best of ideas?”

Miko looked anxiously to Perrilin as the bard carefully considered his answer. “Though there may be dangers, Miko is old enough to make his own decisions and has proven quite helpful thus far. From all I have gathered, he has been someone you have been able to trust and count on. That is a rare thing to find.”

Miko beamed at the praise while Perrilin continued. “A lengthy venture should never be attempted alone and there are too many possible situations you may find yourself in where you may need someone with you, such as if you get hurt. Also, he has been quite good at ferreting out information in the city which could prove most useful since you are in search of information. And...”

“Okay, okay, I’m sold.” He held up his hands in surrender. He turned to Miko and said, “If you are going with me then we will need to get you a horse in the morning. We won’t make much time with you walking or us riding double.”

Miko’s eyes lit up. “My *own* horse? Can I pick it out?”

Smiling at his exuberance, James said, “We’ll let someone who knows horses pick it out, okay?”

“Alright,” Miko agreed.

“Now go downstairs and see if you can arrange for a couple of baths here in the room. Also have dinner sent up.”

“Okay, James,” Miko said, practically skipping out of the room.

Perrilin chuckled from the bed, “He sure is happy.”

“Yes, he is,” James said. “I hope he still feels that way later on down the road.”

“There is some strength in that boy,” Perrilin observed. “I think you could do worse in traveling companions.”

“I suppose so. Are you going to be alright?”

“I’ll be fine,” he said. “Miss Gilena will allow me to stay here for a while, at least until I’m much better.” Lowering his voice he said, “Actually, I’m pretty much okay now, just a bit stiff and sore. But I like the attention.” Smiling, he lay back on the bed.

“Enjoy it while it lasts.”

Miko returned saying that the baths would be up shortly and that dinner would follow. They didn’t have long to wait until there was a knock on the door. Miko let in the staff bearing the

tubs. To James' surprise they brought in three, not two that he had expected. Mystified, he looked to Miko who was blushing slightly. "Three?"

"One for each of us," he said slightly embarrassed. "Well, I kind of liked it last time. I didn't think you would mind."

"Mind?" James replied. "Of course I don't mind." Laughing at Miko's expense, James related to Perrilin the circumstances of the last time they had a bath. "But I thought we were to keep Perrilin a secret?"

"Miss Gilena said that she has talked to her staff and if they want to keep their jobs they better be quiet about the whole thing. She feels that they will keep the secret, at least for a while."

They waited while the staff brought in buckets of hot water. Soon the tubs were filled and towels were laid out. Miko was the first undressed and submerged in the tub. James asked Perrilin if he needed any help but the bard refused, saying he could manage to get undressed and into the tub himself.

James climbed into a tub filled with hot, soothing water. The heat suffused every muscle and sinew, slowly taking away the aches.

A knock at the door was immediately followed by Miss Gilena who walked into the room. She saw the three of them relaxed in the tubs. "Comfy are we?"

"Yes we are," Perrilin replied. "Perhaps you should come back when we are less exposed?"

Waving away the comment, she closed to the door and said, "There's nothing here I haven't seen before, so don't you be worrying about my delicate sensibilities. I just came to see how you were doing."

"I am fine, thank you," he assured her. "Just need a few more days rest and I'll be as good as new." He glanced at James and gave him a look that said, 'Don't say anything.'

"Miss Gilena," James said, "Miko and I will be leaving in the morning. Our business here in Cardri is done. We are going to need a second horse for my friend and I wondered if you knew of a place where we could purchase one?"

She thought for a moment. "Lufer sells horses outside the walls near the river. He's honest and usually has a fair selection."

"Thank you. I'll be by later this evening to settle what I owe you, after dinner."

"Don't worry about it," she said. Then she looked toward Perrilin. "Consider it a reward for rescuing him."

"Thank you again."

"Well, since all is well here I must go, this place won't run itself," she announced as she left.

They relaxed in the tubs for a while longer, until the water began to turn cold. Once out, they sent Miko down to get the staff to remove the tubs. It was a long process since first they had to remove the water before they were light enough to be carried out.

Shortly after the last tub was removed, their dinner arrived. It was larger than the previous with two whole chickens, a big platter of vegetables, and three loaves of bread, James didn't think they would finish it all, but Miko proved him wrong. He continued to be amazed at just how much that boy could eat.

That evening, while Perrilin rested, James and Miko went down to the common room to enjoy the evening's entertainment. The bard who performed for the patrons was enjoyable, though in James' opinion, not even close to being in Perrilin's league. Still, they had a good night and when he caught Miko yawning, they headed upstairs to sleep.

Chapter Fifteen

Early the next morning, Miko again requested breakfast to be sent up to their room. By the time the food arrived, he and James had everything packed and ready for travel.

Along with breakfast, Miss Gilena provided them with travel rations; dried beef, a half wheel of cheese, and several loaves of bread.

"I hope you find what you are looking for," Perrilin said to James while they ate.

"I really don't know what I am looking for," he replied, "I have questions but very few answers. I don't even know if the questions I am asking are the right ones. I just know I need to be doing something."

"I know the feeling."

"What will you do?"

"Probably enjoy the hospitality here for a while and then go back on the road," he replied. "I don't like staying too long in one place. I prefer to travel and see what there is to see."

James asked, "What about Miss Gilena? She really likes you, you know?"

A wistful look came over him. "I like her too, but it's not in my plans to be tied down to one place. I know that is what she would demand if we were to become serious. I am content to be her friend, at least for now." He took another bite and continued, "Later on, who knows?"

They finished and Miko gathered James' bags. James shook hands with Perrilin, "Try to be more careful in the future. I may not be around next time."

He smiled and returned the handshake. "Let's hope there is no next time. Good travels to you both. I'm sure we will meet again sometime, someplace." He turned to Miko, "You take care of him."

"Oh, I will," he replied in all seriousness.

Opening the door, James let Miko precede him out into the hallway and then closed the door. They made for the door to leave the Inn. Downstairs they found a handful of people in the common room as they headed out the back door on their way to the stable.

They found Gunter distributing feed for the horses.

“Good morning; sirs,” he said as they entered. He took a moment to pour feed for one of the other horses before he came to them. “How may I be of service?”

“We are leaving today,” James replied, “I’m here to collect my horse. Did he give you any trouble last night?”

“Of course not, sir. He has been well behaved the entire time. He’s a good one, he is.”

“That’s good,” James replied as he reached his horse’s stall.

Once he saw that he would no longer be needed, Gunter resumed distributing grain to the rest of the horses.

In no time the horse was saddled and ready for travel. With a friendly wave of goodbye to Gunter, they left the stable.

“Come again,” Gunter cheerfully hollered after them.

The streets were quite busy for so early in the morning. They decided to lead the horse instead of riding as travel through the crowd was slow at best. They slowly walked along the congested streets until finally passing through the gate which led into the outer ring.

After traveling several blocks, from out of nowhere a rock struck James on the side of the head. Luckily it was a small rock and only caused minor stinging. He looked in the direction from which the rock originated and saw several boys. They stood near a building, looking up into the eaves overhanging the front of a store. One threw another stone at something hidden up in the eaves. The boys laughed as an animal cried out.

Curious, James looked up into the eaves to see what they were throwing rocks at. To his amazement he found a furry, yellow cat meowing pitifully as it clung to the eave for dear life.

“I think we may have found Furball,” he told Miko. “Run to the *Dancing Squirrel* and find Inius. Tell him to hurry and get here before she runs off again.”

Miko turned and cut through the crowd.

The boys laughed, enjoying the sport of tormenting Furball. Another boy threw a small stone and struck the beam not two inches from the terrified cat.

“You almost got him that time,” one of the boys said.

“I’ll knock him off this time,” another boasted. He picked up a stone and prepared to hurl it up at poor Furball.

James grabbed the boy’s arm. “That’s enough of that. Leave the cat alone.”

The boy turned and confronted James, his buddies gathering in behind him. “We ain’t hurtin’ nuthin’ mister,” he said. “Just having some fun is all.”

“Yeah!” one boy chimed in. “After all, it’s just a cat.”

James looked at the boys disapprovingly, “Being mean is never acceptable, even to animals.” Pointing to Furball he said, “That cat up there is scared and frightened, but you boys think it’s just fun. One of these days you may be in a similar situation where you are being tormented and can’t get away. Then you will understand what you were doing here today.”

Not looking very convinced, one of them said, “Come on, guys, let’s go somewhere we can have some fun.”

Several of the other boys replied, “Yeah,” as they stalked off down the street.

James looked up at Furball who was still hung on for dear life. "Its okay, Furball," he said soothingly to the cat. "Inius will be here shortly." He waited several more minutes with Furball before Miko appeared with a concerned Inius who followed close behind.

When Inius saw Furball, his face showed the relief he felt at seeing her alive. Coming up to James, he said, "Thank you for finding her for me."

"We just happened by and saw her up there," James explained. He left out the part the boys had played. "We thought you might want to come and get her."

"Furball!" Inius said to the cat, "you come down here right now." The cat seemed to relax at the sound of Inius' voice, but she wasn't making any move to come down.

Looking around for something to stand on, James found an old unused crate sitting in a nearby alley. He set it beneath the beam where Furball clung, carefully climbed up onto it, and hoped the crate would hold his weight. By this time, a small crowd had gathered to see what was going on.

Reaching up, he tried to grab her off the crossbeam, but Furball laid her ears back against her head and emitted a deep, warning growl. When his hand came too close, she swiped at it with her claws and scored two long scratches along the back of his hand.

"Furball, stop it!" Inius yelled at the cat.

James muttered a curse as the scratches began to well blood. He heard the people around him chuckle at his misfortune. He even heard some of the observers making wagers as to whether or not he'd get the cat down.

He realized that the number of onlookers had grown. Again he turned his attention to Furball and very slowly reached up to get her. When the cat again started a deep growling in her throat, he withdrew his hand and the growling stopped.

Muttering grew from the crowd and James noticed several of the bystanders had exchanged coins. Obviously some had bet he wouldn't get the cat on that try.

"Just knock it down with a stick!" a bystander yelled.

"No!" countered Inius. "Don't hurt her."

James saw the innkeeper's concern for Furball. "Don't worry," James assured him, "I'm certain that we can get her down without hurting her."

He silently began to cast a spell. It was a spell of soothing, of trust, and when he was ready, he released the power and reached up to Furball. This time she didn't growl, she simply looked at him as he gently took hold of her around the middle. Lifting ever so gently, he removed her from the crossbeam.

He maintained the spell as he stroked Furball's back and listened to her contented purr. As he handed Furball down to Inius, the crowd broke into a cheer and more money changed hands.

"Here you go," he told Inius as the innkeeper took Furball from him.

"Thank you so much." Then to Furball he said in a firm tone, "You've been a bad kitty," then stroked her back.

"Maybe you should put a tag on her so people will know she's yours should she run away again."

"A tag?" Inius asked.

“Yes,” he replied. “A little metal disk attached to a leather collar around her neck with the sign of the *Dancing Squirrel* on it. So if she runs off again, people will know where to bring her back, or at the very least notify you as to where she was last seen.”

“A good idea,” he said, considering it. “I may just do that.”

“Goodbye, Inius,” James said. Then he scratched Furball between the ears and said, “You too, Furball.”

“We are both very thankful to you. Next time you are in town, you may stay with us free for a few nights.”

“Thank you, I may take you up on that.” He then took the reins from Miko as they headed down the street to Lufer’s.

The remainder of their trek through Cardri was uneventful. They passed through the outer gate without any further delays. They took a side street through the outlying buildings in the general direction of the river. Soon they found three buildings set together with a corral containing several horses and mules in the back.

“This must be the place,” Miko said.

“What was your first clue?” James joked as they approached the hitching post by the front door.

“Clue?” Miko asked not understanding.

Amused, James replied, “Never mind.” Securing their horse to the post, the two of them entered the front office which was currently unoccupied. Voices came from out back which led them to two men, an older gentleman and a younger one, who stood near the corral.

“Going to need to procure another dozen by fall,” the elder one said.

“I agree, father,” replied the younger. He then noticed James and Miko emerge from the office. “What can we do for you?” he asked. The older man turned to face the visitors.

“Would one of you be Lufer?”

The father stepped forward slightly. “I’m Lufer. How can I help you sirs today?”

“Miss Gilena said that we could get a good horse for my companion,” James explained, gesturing toward Miko.

“What are you going to need the horse for?” Lufer asked. “Travel or farm work.”

“We will be heading to Madoc.”

“We have many fine horses available and for friends of Miss Gilena we will make sure you get the best we have. Follow me,” he said. He went to the corral gate and opened it, allowing James and Miko to enter first.

“We have a mare here,” he said as he came to a chestnut colored horse. “She’s three years old and in good physical shape. Very gentle,” he stressed, “not one easily spooked.”

James looked at Miko who didn’t seem too impressed by the mare. He had his gaze set on a black stallion with eyes that dared anyone to come within striking distance so he could bash in their skull.

“I think the mare will be fine,” James said to Miko’s disappointment. “Look,” James said to him, “that stallion would most likely kill you as not.”

As if the stallion understood what was being said, it stomped its foot and snorted.

Miko still looked longingly at the stallion, but realized he had no choice in the decision. After all, a horse was a horse.

“Would you be interested in a pack mule as well?” Lufer asked. “If you plan on a long trip, your horses will do better without a lot of extra weight. A pack mule can carry much and they are very durable.”

“How much for both?” he asked, realizing that a mule might not be such a bad idea.

“Sixty-five golds for the mare and another twenty-five for the mule.”

Miko’s eyes bugged out at the cost. “Why so much?” he blurted out.

“With the war going on over in Madoc,” he explained, “there has been an increase in the demand for horses, especially from the Horsemaster up at the Castle. He’s been procuring many in anticipation of war with the Empire.”

“Oh,” said Miko, “that sort of makes sense.”

“Yeah, supply and demand,” James reasoned. Then he launched into haggling for the actual price of the horse and mule. He didn’t enjoy the process but seemed to be getting the hang of it. He worked the price down to eighty golds for both and they went into the office where he counted out the money. Luckily the price also included a saddle and all the required tack for the horse and mule.

He also bought several days’ worth of grain and two ponchos for inclement weather. Lufer suggested hoods for the horses so in emergencies they could keep them calm. James agreed and added three of those to the bill. Once their bags were repacked onto the mule, they mounted and headed out, having said goodbye to Lufer and his son. James had the lead rope for the mule tied to the rear of his saddle where a loop had been attached.

Miko was in high spirits, sitting tall in the saddle on his very own horse even if it was a mare. James went over the various commands that he’d need in order to guide the horse. It didn’t take too long before Miko had the basics down and was able to control the horse adequately.

Following directions Perrilin had provided, they took the road east out of Cardri, hoping to make Trademeet and the Merchant’s Pass in a little under a week. The day was young and the heat of the summer sun was beginning to warm the air.

Still within sight of the city, there were many other travelers on the road, including some caravans that they soon overtook. They made good time and it was not long before they had left most of the other travelers behind. Once Cardri disappeared behind them, foot traffic had dwindled to almost nothing.

According to Perrilin, the first main city wouldn’t be for two days. It sat at a crossroads where another main trading route intersected theirs on its way north. The city was called Willimet and they would need to replenish their provisions there, especially grain for the animals.

About the time the sun was high overhead, the road made its way past a small grove of trees several hundred feet off the road. Within the grove they spotted a pool of water. They decided to allow the animals time to graze while they partook of the noon meal. The leafy boughs of the trees afforded them some shade from the sun; the water was still cool and appeared clean.

James dismounted first and let his horse free to graze by the pond. He watched as Miko dismounted slowly, amused by the stiffness that was showing in his movements.

He saw James grin. "What's so funny?" he demanded as he stiffly walked to the pack mule having the bag containing their rations.

"Are you sore?" he asked with mock concern. He handed Miko his share from the sack before taking his own.

"You know I am," he said as he took his food. "And it's not funny." He sat down and began to eat.

"I know," James agreed sympathetically. "I went through the same thing when I first started to ride. In fact, I still get sore, just not as bad."

"Glad to know it gets better," Miko said.

"Oh it'll get worse before it gets better," James informed him. "It's just something that will take time for your muscles to grow accustomed to."

While they ate, they watched a caravan travel west on its way toward Cardri. James counted twenty-seven wagons and an accompaniment of twenty horsemen. They seemed far enough away from Cardri that the only traffic on the road was the caravan and the occasional rider. All the foot traffic had long since disappeared.

James relaxed against the trunk of a tree, and reveled in the peace and tranquility of the area. A gentle breeze, just strong enough to cool yet not stir up the dust, gently flowed through the trees. They spent a full hour in the cool shade until he could no longer put off returning to the road.

He remounted and watched with some sympathy as Miko slowly and stiffly climbed back into the saddle. He remembered his own sore posterior when he had first learned to ride. They made their way to the road and turned their horses east toward Willimet.

An hour later the road became devoid of fellow travelers. During one such lonely stretch, Miko noticed a solitary rider several hundred yards off in the distance. "James," he said as he brought his horse alongside, "there's someone to the north, pacing us."

"I know," he replied. "He's been there for the last ten minutes."

"What are we going to do?" asked Miko nervously as he again glanced toward the rider.

"Not much we can do. Fortunately we are in open territory so if any more show up we will have warning. Besides, we don't even know if he has any interest in us at all. It could be just a coincidence that he is pacing us."

"You don't really believe that do you?"

"No," replied James, "but it is a possibility. Until we know for sure, we will continue toward Willimet and deal with it should something happen."

Another ten minutes went by when Miko noticed a second rider had joined with the first. "James, there's another one."

Looking north, he nodded. "Yeah, looks like it."

"You seem pretty calm," Miko observed.

"Will the situation improve if I get nervous and all freaked out?"

"No," replied Miko.

"Okay then," James said. "I might appear calm but I am quite concerned about what may be developing."

“Like what?”

“Like an ambush,” he replied. “This could be another attempt by Lord Colerain to capture or kill us. But who knows, it may simply be bandits or highwaymen who see two lone riders from whom to score some quick booty.”

Nervously, Miko scanned the horizon in all directions. “James! Behind us!” Miko exclaimed excitedly when he saw riders back there.

James turned and saw three more approaching at a gallop. He looked toward the ones to the north, and saw them turn their way as they broke into a gallop. “Let’s go,” he said. He kicked the sides of his horse and quickly raced across the road at a fast gallop. Miko did the same a split second after.

They flew down the road trying to outdistance their pursuers. Out of the distance ahead, three more riders appeared, racing toward them from the east. South was the only direction free of riders trying to intercept them. He turned his horse in that direction and they left the road, racing through the tall grass. James fervently hoped that neither horse would put a hoof in a gopher hole, which would prove disastrous.

As if on cue, two more riders appeared in the distance to the south before they had gone more than twenty feet from the road. Realizing they were surrounded and unlikely to escape the trap, he scanned the area for somewhere to make their stand. He saw a small hill to the southwest an idea comes to mind. He turned his horse and raced for it. When he reached the hill he quickly dismounted, and gave Miko his horse’s reins. “Get those hoods we got at Lufer’s and cover their heads, fast. Whatever you do, don’t let go of their reins.”

“What are you going to do?” Miko asked as he pulled the hoods out of the packs.

“You’ll see. No time to explain, just stay close to me.” James looked around at the approaching horsemen. Their approach had slowed now that James and Miko had stopped atop the little hill. They moved to completely encircle the hill. Three of them had crossbows and were in the process of winding back the crossarm.

Scared, Miko watched as the men continued to tighten the noose. Holding firmly to the reins, he kept the now-hooded horses and mule close to the top of the hill. He looked toward James and saw that his eyes were closed in concentration. The breeze that had been blowing gently began to slowly increase in strength. Clouds moved unnaturally fast as they rushed toward them from every direction.

The approaching men continued to tighten the circle. One of the crossbowmen loosed a bolt but the wind blew it wide. They advanced without seeming to care, or perhaps they just failed to notice what was going on in the sky above them. The gathering clouds smoothed out until it looked like one big, dark blanket extending in all directions. All at once the wind suddenly stopped and the world became ominously quiet.

The sudden cessation of wind caused the men to slow their advance. They began to understand that something strange was happening. Suddenly, the clouds above them commenced to swirl. Miko looked on in frightened awe as a section of the swirling clouds descended toward them, the center of which was open and clear. It rapidly slammed all the way to the ground, and enveloped the men.

The wind whipped around the hill in a frightening mass of flying debris and deafening sound. As he stood amidst the relative calm upon the hilltop, Miko held tight to the horses. He tried to keep them from becoming frightened amidst the noise around them.

From within the tempest he heard the cries of men and horses being ravaged by the savage wind. Suddenly, one of the riders was flung from the storm and slammed into the ground a few feet from him. Miko looked closely at the man and saw that his body was broken and lifeless. Truly awed by what James had done, he held tightly to the reins and watched as the storm continued to gain in intensity. He looked straight up and saw what appeared to be a tunnel going all the way through the storm to the blue sky at the other end.

Not long after that, the storm began to dissipate. The swirling mass surrounding the hill thinned and then faded away. The clouds broke apart until the clouds resumed their normal course through the sky. Amazed, Miko looked at the grassland surrounding the hill and could see how wide the storm had been. It started at the base of the hill. The grass had been ripped and torn by the force of the winds in a swath several hundred feet wide all the way around. Scattered throughout the area were horses and men, all lifeless and broken.

When the winds finally receded, James' knees buckled and he collapsed. Miko rushed over, relieved to find that he was only unconscious, not dead. Unable to rouse him, he gently laid James out comfortably and got a blanket to use as a pillow for his head. Once he'd taken care of James, he removed the hoods from the horses and pack mule, letting them loose to graze.

Miko sat next to James, and waited for him to regain consciousness. All the while he kept an eye on the horizon for any sign of other unwelcomed visitors.

It wasn't until just before sunset that James began to stir. Cracking an eye open, he discovered Miko had already started a fire and made camp with the horses picketed nearby. A groan escaped him which drew Miko's attention. The boy came to his side bearing a water bottle. With Miko's help, James sat up slightly and took the bottle. He drank deeply before handing it back.

"Thanks," he said shakily, lying back down.

"You're welcome. Are you going to be okay?"

"Maybe," he replied. "I feel totally exhausted and have a splitting headache."

"Your storm seems to have taken out all the riders who were chasing us."

"Good," he replied. Groaning, he raised his hand to his head as he tried to soothe the pounding behind his forehead.

"Just what did you do?" Miko asked "I've never seen anything like that before."

He looked at Miko through heavy-lidded eyes. "It's called a tornado. They are quite common where I come from."

"How did you do it?"

"It's rather hard to explain," James explained. "Luckily, I remembered a show I saw about tornadoes."

"Show?" he asked. "What's that?"

Wondering how to explain television, he just said, "It's something from where I come that helps you learn things."

"Oh, okay," Miko said, not really understanding.

“Have you searched them yet?”

“Who?” asks Miko. “The dead riders?” He looked out at the scene that surrounded the hill with undisguised revulsion at the thought of going near the dead men.

“Maybe there will be a letter or something on them that can tell us who sent them and why,” explained James, the final words all but unintelligible.

“No, I haven’t,” Miko answered before realizing that James had already fallen asleep. He knew how important this was to James so he got up and went through the grisly task of searching all the dead bodies, both men and horses for anything that might tell them what they needed to know. He returned a half hour later with an armload of saddlebags, pouches and one of the crossbows along with a brace of bolts. He set the saddlebags and pouches on the ground near James which caused him to awaken once more.

Now rested enough that he wouldn’t immediately succumb to sleep, he propped himself up on one elbow and gave the pile of saddlebags and pouches a once-over. Then he noticed the crossbow in Miko’s hand. “What are you going to do with that?”

“I don’t know,” Miko replied, “but it might come in handy.”

“Maybe it will,” agreed James. “Just don’t shoot your eye out,” he added, and then he giggled.

Miko didn’t understand why James should find shooting his own eye out to be so incredibly funny.

Calming down, James returned his attention to the bags and pouches. The pounding in his head had diminished to a tolerable level.

While James went through them, Miko took out some of the food that Miss Gilena had given them. When both had food and drink, he sat down next to James and ate as he watched James inspect the pouches.

James divided their contents into three piles. One contained coins, gems and jewelry, another useless junk, and still another was for papers. He placed a stone on top of the papers to keep the wind from blowing them away.

When he finished with the last pouch, he said, “Take the money and put it in with ours.”

“Okay, James,” Miko replied, getting up to do it.

While Miko put away the valuables, James read through the papers. All but one he crumbled up and tossed into the fire.

Seeing he has kept one, Miko asked, “Why did you keep that one?”

“This one is an order from someone called Korgan to someone named Vorim. I can only assume that this Vorim lies out there somewhere,” he said, pointing to the dead bodies that surrounded the hill. “It’s basically an order to capture and interrogate us. A person named ‘Cytok’ is interested in finding out who we are working for. They were also to find out the names of any other agents that we may be in contact with.”

“Why did they come after us?”

“Who knows?” replied James. “When I rescued Perrilin, one of his captors managed to escape on horseback. I guess they found out that I was the one that helped him. So, since they didn’t get Perrilin, they went after me, probably assuming that I work with him. It seems our friend is more than the simple bard he claims to be.”

“Wonder who this Korgan is and why he’s after Perrilin?”

“We’ll have to ask Perrilin about that when we see him next,” James said. “First Lord Colerain, and now this Korgan. Wonder if they are working together?” He sighed at the fact that though he had been in this world such a short time, he had acquired some rather deadly enemies. He folded the paper and put it in with his other papers. He yawned and once he had finished dinner, he reclined on his makeshift bed. Miko gave him another blanket and soon he was off to sleep.

Unable to sleep himself, Miko sat up awhile. He put a couple of sticks of wood on the fire, to keep it going while he thought about everything that had happened to him since he first met James. James told him that it might be safer not to travel with him, and that had definitely turned out to be true. But James was the only person who had ever treated him nice, and as more of an equal, at least most of the time, than anyone. He decided that no matter what, he would stay with him as long as James would let him. He set several more sticks on the fire before settling down to sleep.

Chapter Sixteen

With a city guard hot on his trail, he raced through the streets of Bearn. Clutched tightly to his chest was a loaf of bread that had until just recently, been on display in front of a baker’s shop. Still warm and emitting a most mouthwatering aroma, it would likely be the only meal he would have this day. Unless of course he was caught.

Usually he took more care when purloining food. Those in his situation had to keep from being noticed by the authorities. For once they became known as thieves, life became all the harder.

Miko never wished to be a thief. His life being what it was, he was forced to steal from time to time merely to survive. The odd job that came along never paid much. As often as not, he would be forced to relinquish his coins to the older kids or suffer a beating. Life on the street was not easy.

“Stop!” the guard yelled. “Thief!”

A glance over his shoulder revealed the guard had closed some distance and was gaining fast. Up ahead loomed the dark mouth of an alley and he bolted toward it. Dodging around a servant girl with a basket full of fruit, he reached the alley and shot inside.

A form emerged out of the shadows before him. Unable to stop in time, he struck the emerging shadow dead center.

“What the hell?” a voice cried as a boy several years Miko’s senior was knocked to the ground only to have Miko land atop him.

“Miko!” another boy shouted.

Before he knew what was happening, Miko was pulled off the older boy, his hard won bounty ripped from his hands, and a poorly shod foot kicked him in the side.

Just then, the guard appeared at the mouth of the alley. “Stay right there!” he commanded. Drawing his sword, he was about to step into the alley when the group of older boys took off. As they disappeared into the shadows, one of them cried, “Thanks Miko!” to the laughter of his fellows.

“Stop!” the guard ordered but the boys were gone. Then he turned his attention to Miko. “It’s the axe man for you, boy.”

Miko knew what ‘axe man’ the guard meant. Anyone caught in the act of stealing would lose a hand, even if it was a loaf of bread. For not yet being of age to shave, he would most likely lose his left as a lesson while leaving him his right in order that he may still be a productive member of society after having seen the error of his ways. Unable to face such a future, he bolted.

The guard’s foot lashed out and tripped him before he could take two steps. “Oh no you don’t,” the guard said as Miko’s head slammed into the alley’s wall. Landing in a pile of refuse, he squirmed away but the guard placed his foot against his back, pinning him to the ground.

“No use struggling,” the guard said, laughing. “You ain’t getting away.”

Noooooooooooo!

He came awake in a cold sweat, heart beating fast. Miko sat up and was about to bolt when realization sank in. It had only been a dream. The familiar sight of their horses and mule, as well as James lying still asleep nearby gave him a small measure of peace.

Glancing over to James’ sleeping form, he calmed himself. He thought, *And you thought coming with you was dangerous!* What he had gone through in his travels with James was nowhere near as bad as his previous life had been. At least with James, he was treated as an equal of sorts.

The caw of a bird drew his attention to where several fought over something small. No sooner had one stolen the prize from another, than that bird lost it in turn. He rubbed the dream-sweat from his forehead, and panicked when he removed his hand and found it smeared with blood.

“James!” he shouted. “I’m bleeding!”

Startled out of a deep sleep, James raised his head and looked over to Miko. All vestiges of sleep vanished when he found a scene that sent chills down his spine. Forehead darkened with blood and a hand to match, Miko sat not far away with wide and frantic eyes. He stared at the boy’s blood-smeared hand. Alarmed, James hurried over.

As he knelt to inspect Miko’s forehead, he said, “Now just calm down, it doesn’t look like it is still bleeding.” He put his hand on the ground for balance and squished something soft and a little bit nasty beneath his palm. Quickly lifting his hand, he discovered a small, bloody mass mixed in with the dirt.

“Miko, look!” he said as he picked up a stick.

He bent over to look at it more closely. James poked at it and then turned it over. Miko watched, and when the object was revealed to be a human eye, he lost it. He bent over, retching, and expelled what little his stomach held. Disgusted, James flipped the eye out of camp.

A dark form swooped out of the sky, and in a deft aerial maneuver, snatched the eye before it hit the ground. James threw the stick at the bird who adroitly avoided the missile. As it flew away, two other black birds gave chase.

“It hit me in the head!” Miko said once he stopped vomiting.

“Relax,” James said as he headed over to the nearest horse. “You’ll live.”

Water bottle in hand, he rinsed the blood off his hand and then gave it to Miko. While Miko cleaned himself, James gazed around the immediate vicinity. Groups of the black birds were massed upon the dead men and horses, feasting. His gorge rising, he quickly made ready to travel so they could leave this place behind.

Miko helped him while both did their best to ignore the feasting around them. When they were finally ready to ride, Miko was the first in the saddle and raced past the clumps of birds with eyes closed, not stopping until they were no more than black specks on the horizon.

“Are you going to be okay?” asked James.

“I’m better now that we left that behind us,” he replied, still a little pale.

“I know what you mean. Better them than us though, eh?”

“Yeah, I suppose so.” Miko still felt a bit green, but after a few minutes felt better.

The rest of the day went by without incident. They arrived at the outskirts of Willimet shortly before sunset. The first building they came to boasted a sign with a man sleeping on a bed. Figuring it to be an inn, they stopped out front where James left Miko with the horses as he walked to the front door. Before he drew near, it opened unexpectedly.

A man emerged reeking of some unknown unpleasantness. His hair was matted and the original color of his clothes was lost beneath an accumulation of stains and grime. His odor was so strong that James was forced to hold his breath until the man passed. Once the man had moved some distance away, he took a hesitant breath. Though the man’s stench was still present, it was no longer so overpowering.

Stepping through the doorway, he again was forced to hold his breath. The inside of the inn reeked just as badly as the man. Nasty was the word that came to mind when he glanced around the inn and toward the common room. Some tables had yet to be cleared of the remnants of the noon meal though it had been over for many hours. Smoke from the kitchen created an unpleasant haze that only heightened James distaste.

A skinny man of average height with greasy black hair spied him standing in the foyer. Wiping his hands on an apron that quite possibly had never been washed, he crossed over to greet him. “Need a room?” he asked, and James could almost see the green, putrefied odor coming from the man as he talked.

James turned his head slightly to try to get away from the sickening smell. “No,” he quickly replied while he tried not to breathe. “Just seeing if my friend was here,” he lied. “Thanks

though.” He made a hasty exit through the front door, and took a deep breath once outside. He informed Miko that they would *not* be staying there that night.

“What was wrong with it?”

Getting back on his horse he replied, “It was filthy and nasty. The one person I saw stank and I fear he may have been the cook.” The thought of eating anything produced in a place of such disregard for cleanliness made him slightly sick.

“I’m sure there are others here, it’s a fair sized town,” commented Miko.

“I certainly hope so. I’ll sleep under the stars again before I stay in a place like that.”

They found another inn further into town. This one looked to have a fresh coat of paint and the grounds were well-maintained and orderly. “I think this may do nicely,” he said with satisfaction. It was a stark contrast to the earlier place.

“I hope so,” added Miko, “it’s starting to get dark.”

James dismounted and said to Miko, “Stay here and I’ll see if they have a room available.”

“Alright,” Miko replied.

He handed Miko his reins, went up the stairs and entered the inn. This one had a smoky haze similar to the other inn, but at least it smelled of wood smoke and cooking. Overall, the place looked to be a better choice. A man greeted him, “Welcome to the *Apple Tree Inn*. How can we help you tonight?”

A friendly greeting, with a neat and clean common area. *Yes*, he thought to himself, *I think this will do.*

“My friend and I require a room,” he said, “and stalls for our animals.”

“How many do you have?”

“Two horses, and a mule.”

Nodding, the man said, “Yes, we do have room for you. It will be a silver a night for the room and another four coppers for the stalls.”

James handed over the money and received a room key in exchange. “It’s off the common room.” He pointed toward a side hallway, “All the way down and on the left. It’s the quietest room we have.”

“Thank you,” James said, “I appreciate that.”

He and Miko took their animals around back, and got them settled into the stable. They took their bags, and returned to the inn where they found their room at the end of the hallway. Two beds again, which made Miko happy. They put their bags next to their respective beds before they headed back to the common room.

They enjoyed a quiet dinner of roast fowl, bread and ale. After downing the last of his ale, James said, “I think I’ll go for a walk” He glanced to Miko, “Like to come with me?”

“Sure, okay,” Miko agreed. “Maybe we could find some more tarts?”

“You never know,” James replied, smiling at his friend.

They left the inn and strolled through the streets. During their walk they got propositioned by several women, all of who looked rather skanky to James.

After turning down the fifth offer of cheap sex, Miko said, “There’s something I’ve noticed about you.”

“What’s that?” asked James.

“You are never with a woman. Don’t you like them?” Miko inquired. “Or is it because you were mutilated?”

“I like women, most definitely,” he replied, and then came to a stop. Turning a quizzical look to Miko he asked, “What do you mean ‘because I was mutilated’?”

Looking a little embarrassed, Miko said, “Well, when we took our baths the other night, I couldn’t help but notice that a part of you had been cut off.”

“What are you talking about?” James asks confused. Then it hit him, he was circumcised. He started laughing and said, “What you are referring to was done when I was born. It’s a custom with my people that when a boy is born, such is done to him.”

Looking aghast, Miko asked, “What for?”

“It’s the common belief that if it’s removed then there will be less chance for infection during his life,” answered James. “In fact there is one religion back home that mandates it.”

“I’m glad I wasn’t born there,” Miko stated with conviction, unconsciously covering himself.

“There are times when I wish it hadn’t been done to me too, but there’s not a whole lot I can do about it now. But rest assured, it still works as well as anybody else’s and it doesn’t affect my desire for sex.”

“Then why don’t you go after the women?”

“I was raised to believe sex is not a casual thing,” he explained. “And it’s definitely something you should never pay anyone to do. Also, there are certain diseases that you can get from such activities that really mess you up bad, even kill you.”

“The boys I used to hang around with, whenever they got hair between their legs, started going after the girls”

“Yeah, I knew guys back home that were like that too,” admitted James. “But you should always do what you think is right, no matter what others may think or do.”

James resumed walking and Miko was silent for a while, thinking about what was just said. They eventually arrived at the main marketplace which was still surprisingly busy even though night had already fallen. Several performers were scattered around. One was a juggler who had several different objects coursing through the air simultaneously. Next to him sat a chair with a knife that sat half on and half off the seat. At one point the juggler added the knife to the dance of items in the air with an upward kick of his foot. As it flew up, the onlookers oohed and ahhhed. When he caught and incorporated it within the pattern of the other items, they erupted in applause. Several tossed coins into a hat resting on the ground.

They watched as the juggler kept all the items airborne. Twice people tossed other objects which he also incorporated into his aerial display. Miko was completely fascinated by the man so they stayed there for a little while to watch. By the time they moved on, the juggler had seven items in the air and didn’t look like he was going to stop anytime soon. James gave Miko three coppers to drop in the hat.

As they made their way through the marketplace, they stopped to observe other performers, though none were as talented as the juggler. While they paused to watch a fire breather, James noticed a small tent almost hidden in a dark corner of the market. Inside sat a woman at a table.

Before her atop the table rested what looked to be a crystal ball. *She looks just like a fortune teller right out of an old movie*, he thought to himself. Curiosity got the better of him.

"Miko, I'll be over there," James said as he pointed toward the small tent.

"Alright," Miko acknowledged. "I'm going over to watch the monkey." He pointed to where a man had a monkey doing tricks and wearing a funny little outfit.

"Don't get lost," James said before he made his way through the crowd and entered the tent.

"Close the curtain so we may have some privacy," the woman said to James. She indicated a chair across from her. "Come, sit down and I'll look into your future."

He unhooked the curtain and let it fall, then walked to the chair and sat.

"Place your hands upon the table, next to the ball with your palms up." She rested her hands upon his and said, "Now look into the ball and make your mind blank, let it drift as it will."

He stared into the crystal ball, but all he saw was the crystal ball.

"You must relax," she told him, as she gave him a reassuring smile. He did his best and slowly his mind cleared, and his body relaxed.

She stared into the ball as she said, "I see a great future for you, one of power and fame."

"Really?" he asked as he peered more intently into the ball but failed to see anything.

She looked up and said, "The ball does not lie. Now, gaze deeper within its depths."

He stared into the ball as she said, "I see love and happiness for you." When he looked up to her she met his eyes and said, "And not too far away."

"She looks to be a daughter of a rug maker," she said. She looked up to see his reaction. Then she quickly added, "Or possibly a horse trader."

"Where can I find her?"

"Back home," she said. "Where you were born."

Fake! He thought to himself. *There aren't any such back where I come from.* "Thank you," he said, then began removing his hands from the table.

Suddenly, her hands shook and she clenched his tightly, preventing him from pulling them back. "I can see that you have come a great distance and not by choice."

From deep within the ball, a deep red color blossomed. He relaxed and waited to see where this would go, he was intrigued by the show if not the accuracy.

"You have many questions," she said, her voice becoming more distant, "and few answers. You are on a quest, a quest for answers."

A chill ran down his back. She was hitting closer to the mark now. The deep red color continued to grow and started to slowly swirl throughout the ball.

"I see a long road but you are not alone, another walks with you," she said, her voice changing, growing harsh and raspy. "He will be the key, a lock must be opened."

Nervous, he hesitated. He was on the verge of leaving yet drawn to see what would happen.

The red swirl churned faster and a subtle pulse could be seen coming from the orb. Gasping, her body jerked. Her hands tightened around his in a grip of surprising strength. He tried to free his hands but was unable to break away. Her grip grew uncomfortable.

Looking at her he saw that her features had changed subtly, yet unmistakably. With a voice growing less human she said:

***With the star, seal your fate,
A giant knocks upon the gate.***

Her voice rose in volume and pitch, and the throbbing red vortex in the ball swirled like a maelstrom. The pulsing continued to grow and became much more pronounced with each word she uttered.

***Pillars of Flame dispel the night,
Out of darkness, blossoms a light.***

Her grip on his hands became painful. With her eyes wide, the pupils rolled back into her head, her visage now completely unnerved him. Scared, he wanted nothing more than to break free. Struggle though he might, her grip on his hands was simply too strong.

***A friend's wrath you shall feel,
Destroy the land so it may heal.***

The crystal of the ball was now completely infused with red and the swirl was no longer apparent. Now a solid red, it pulsated, keeping in time with the words being spoken by the woman.

Return the lost, stones to dust,

The table began to vibrate, the pulsating grew more pronounced, actually bathing the entire tent in an eerie pulsating red glow. In a voice that sounded as if it was being stretched to its limit, she cried:

Remember... in all... your heart... to trust!

She screamed as the crystal ball exploded, sending shards in all directions. Several scored along his arms and face. At the shattering of the ball, she fell backward and released the iron grip she had on his hands. Her chair tipped over backward and the woman hit the floor, not moving.

James came around the table and saw that she still lived, but was unconscious. Amazed, he discovered a streak of white going through her black hair that hadn't been there before. Droplets of blood welled from the many spots on her arms and face where she had been struck by the shattering ball. He lifted her from the floor and carried her to a pile of pillows in the corner of the tent and tried to make her comfortable. When he had her settled, he looked around the tent at the shards of crystal everywhere.

He began removing the shards from her skin when her eyes flew open. "Who are you?"

“You were telling me my future,” James replied soothingly so as not to alarm her. “You must have gone into a trance or something. Then suddenly the ball exploded and you fell over unconscious.”

“That has never happened to me before,” she said, frightened. She looked around at the scattered pieces and broke down into tears. “What am I to do?” she wailed. “I have no ball! How am I going to get people to come in here? How am I to live?”

“I am sure you could still make it work,” James assured her. “There are many different ways in which to tell people’s futures.”

She didn’t look convinced. “But seeing in the ball is what I am known for. They won’t believe in me if I try another way.”

“Can you get another one?”

“They are hard to come by and expensive. This one cost me over fifteen golds,” she said, sobbing again.

He reached into his pouch and pulled out fifteen golds and gave them to her. “Here, take this.”

Taking his coins, she again started to cry only this time in gratitude. “Oh, thank you, how can I ever repay you?”

“Just help others, that is all I ask.”

He looked around at the shambles that was her tent. “When the tale gets around that while you were reading someone’s future, the ball shattered and that white streak manifested itself in your hair, you may have more business than ever before.”

She reached up and touched her hair. “A white streak?” she asked incredulously.

He touched her hair above her forehead and said, “Yes. It starts here and goes all the way back. Makes you look mysterious.”

She pulled some of her hair down before her eyes and looked at the white strands. “Mysterious?” she said as she started to calm a bit.

“Will you be alright now?”

“Yes,” she said. “I think I may.”

“Then I must go,” he said. “Thank you for the telling.”

“You are welcome, sir,” she replied. “Was it helpful? I don’t remember.”

“It didn’t make a lot of sense,” he said, “but who knows with such things?” He pushed aside the curtain that shielded the entrance. Outside he found Miko still watching the performing monkey who now rode a wagon being pulled by a small dog to the laughter of the bystanders.

When he reached Miko’s side, the boy saw his face in the torchlight. “What happened to you?”

“Oh, I just had my fortune told and there was a little accident,” he explained. “I’m okay, nothing to worry about.”

Turning back to watch the monkey, Miko said, “This little guy is amazing, he can do all kinds of tricks.”

“I’m sure he can, but maybe it’s about time we head back to the inn.”

“Alright,” he agreed. “But what about those tarts?”

"I almost forgot." Glancing around the market, James searched for a bakery but couldn't make one out. "Let's walk around and if we don't find one, we'll head back to the inn, agreed?"

"Agreed." Miko led the way. Though they failed to find a bakery, they came across a man who sold what reminded James of a cinnamon roll. Instead of cinnamon it had a red jelly spread across the top and in the middle. They bought six and headed back to the inn. Eating as they went they both agreed that they were delicious and ended up eating them all before they made it back to the inn.

With the words of the fortune teller still echoing in his mind James had trouble falling asleep. *'Another walks with you, he will be the key, a lock must be opened'*. That had to be a reference to Miko. But what lock will he open? He's not a thief.

The rest of it didn't make much more sense:

***With the star, seal your fate,
A giant knocks upon the gate.
Pillars of Flame dispel the night,
Out of darkness blossoms a light.
A friend's wrath you shall feel,
Destroy the land so it may heal.
Return the lost, stones to dust,
Remember in all your heart to trust.***

I'm sure it will make sense after it would have been useful to know, he reasoned. After wrestling with it, he finally succumbed to sleep.

Early the next morning, they gathered their things and headed down to the common room. They discovered the lower floor of the inn swarming with people. The buzz of conversation flowed throughout the room like a hive of excited bees.

"...I didn't believe it myself at first..."

"...lucky to be alive if you ask me..."

"...simply incredible, you should see her..."

Spying one of the serving girls, James caught her attention. "What's going on?"

Giving him a surprised look, she said, "Haven't you heard? Serenna's ball exploded during a foretelling last night."

"Oh really?" he asked. "Is she alright?"

"She's fine," replied the serving girl, "though her face and arms were struck when the ball exploded. No one knows what happened to the person for whom she was doing the foretelling." Suddenly, she noticed his face and the numerous fresh puncture marks. She looked at his arms and saw matching wounds there as well. "You?"

"I'm afraid so, but let's not make too much out of it, okay?" he asked. "I would just like some breakfast."

“Sure thing,” she said as she backed away then turned and headed toward the kitchen. On the way she paused to whisper to another serving girl who glanced over at him with a wide-eyed expression. The other serving girl then turned to another person. Soon the conversations quieted as word of his appearance spread. Fearful looking eyes took in the wounds which dotted his face and arms that had been caused by the shattering of the ball. James began to feel a little self-conscious beneath such scrutiny.

“Wonder why such a reaction?” Miko asked.

“Don’t know,” he replied. “Let’s just eat and get out of here fast.”

“Yeah, it’s getting kind of creepy.” Taking a seat at a small table in the corner of the common room, they waited for the serving girl to appear.

When their meal arrived, the girl set it on the table then backed away fast. Wishing for nothing else but to rid themselves of the watchful crowd, they ate their meal quickly. Most saw that James was not behaving out of the norm, and they soon returned to their conversations.

James couldn’t help but notice the way everyone cast glances their way. After a bit, he also noticed that the crowd seemed to be getting larger. Over in the corner were several youngsters talking amongst themselves. One girl from the group, who couldn’t have been more than twelve, was given an encouraging shove from another. She timidly made her way to his table. She stopped several feet away and asked nervously, “Can I ask you a question?”

James said, “Sure, what would you like to know?”

With eyes wide and a slight tremble in her voice she asked, “Is it true that a demon came and Serenna had to fight it off or it would have eaten your soul?”

“What?” he cried incredulously.

“You didn’t tell me that part,” Miko said.

“That’s because it never happened.” Turning to the girl he asked, “Just where did you hear that story?”

“Everyone is talking about it,” she said. “They say you made a pact with the demon and that it was coming to collect!”

“That’s absurd!” he replied. Then he noticed how every eye in the inn was directed his way. From their expressions, it was clear they had heard the same thing.

Standing up, James faced the crowd and raised his voice saying, “Despite the rumors you may have heard, there was no demon and I have never made a pact with one.”

“But I heard the story from Serenna herself,” one lady said from the crowd. “She’s been telling it all morning.”

“Oh, we’ll just see about that!” He grabbed his things and said, “Miko, we’re leaving.” They went to the stable to collect their horses and mule. Curious onlookers followed and watched as they made ready to ride. It was with great relief when they mounted and left the courtyard. A few attempted to follow but he kicked the side of his horse and quickly left them behind.

Drawing near the marketplace, they found it packed with people. They slowly made their way forward, forcing their way through at times, to the grumblings of those they pushed aside. The marketplace wasn’t much better as a mass of people filled the entire area, all faced toward

Serenna's tent. James carefully maneuvered through them. Standing on a wagon in front of her tent, she spoke to the crowd, the white streak in her hair a stark contrast against the black.

"...its scaly foot had him pinned to the floor, a seven foot sword dripping with fire was raised and ready to cleave him from head to toe. '*Your soul is mine*' the fiend cried." The crowd collectively caught their breath, with several women actually fainting dead away. "Not knowing what else to do, I cried, 'Fiend be gone' and threw my crystal ball." Pausing for effect she dramatically reenacted the throwing of the ball. "When it struck, the demon cried out in pain. Why, I don't know. The crystal shattered, spraying shards in all directions." Using her hands to direct their gaze to her face, she continued. "Many of the shards struck me, causing great pain." Members of her audience let out with an 'ahhh.'

"The shattering of the crystal in some way caused the demon to return to its realm." A cheer arose from the crowd. "The poor man, who had come to me for help, lay there, whimpering with fear." Her voice softened, "'Mama, is that you?' he cried as I came close. Not knowing what else to say I replied, 'Yes it is, dear.'"

James saw everyone hung onto every word Serenna was saying. Some of the women were openly sobbing with tears streaking their face. Even the men were visibly moved.

"I held him there, blood still welling from my wounds, pain throbbing in my face and arms, yet still I held him. He slowly came to his senses and at first did not know where he was, 'Where am I?' he asked. 'You're safe, that is all that's important now,' I assured him. He suddenly jumped up, fear again in his eyes and ran out of my tent. I called for him to return, so that I might help him, but he did not heed me."

The audience applauded. James would have been moved by the story too, if he hadn't known it was just a bunch of lies. Feeling slightly offended, he continued toward her.

Her attention drawn to the presence of a rider approaching, she recognized him. "There he is!" she cried as she pointed toward him. The crowd as one turned their attention upon him, the marks on his face and hands were quite visible. They were a match to the ones she herself bore.

"It is him," uttered many whispered voices throughout the crowd.

"I am glad you are now safe," Serenna said, loud enough for the crowd to hear.

"That's quite a story," James said, raising his voice loud enough to carry across the marketplace. "But not quite true, is it?" Turning to the crowd he continued, "There was no demon..."

A scream ripped through the marketplace. With a crazed look in her eyes, Serenna screamed again then cried out to the crowd, "The demon has taken this man's soul for his own. Do not hearken to him." She pointed an accusing finger at James.

His line of thought was broken by the unexpected shriek; he began to formulate his next rejoinder.

"Uh, James," said Miko staring at the crowd.

"Not now, Miko," James said, trying to come up with a counter to what Serenna had just said.

"James," he said again with a slight tension and a sense of urgency to his voice.

James looked back toward Miko and then the crowd. The crowd stared at him in a less than friendly manner.

“Be gone demon!” Serenna cried out. “Bother not our city!”

“Maybe we should go,” Miko suggested nervously.

The crowd grew more edgy. Fearing it could easily transform into a mob, he nodded and they turned to proceed back the way they had come. The crowd parted for them as they left. Every eye was on him as they made their way from the marketplace. As they left the area, they heard Serenna once again speak to the crowd though they were no longer able to make out the words. The crowd within the marketplace cheered loudly to something that she had said.

James shook his head and led them out of the city. Once again they headed east toward the Merchant’s Pass.

Chapter Seventeen

Riding out of Willimet, they remained quiet for some time. Miko worried about his friend who had fallen into a dark, brooding mood. After the outskirts of town were no longer visible, James suddenly stopped his horse in the middle of the road and cried, “That bitch!”

Miko stopped and looked back toward him saying, “Don’t take it too much to heart.”

“What? What did you tell me?” he yelled, and turned his attention on Miko. “Not only was that story a complete lie, but she forced me out of there so I couldn’t even reveal it for the lie that it was. And after I gave her fifteen gold pieces to get a new crystal ball because I felt sorry for her.” He looked down the road toward town and yelled, “I want my money back!”

“Now just calm down,” Miko said as he brought his horse close to his friend. “There was not much you could have done, not with that crowd believing everything she said.”

James gave him an ugly glare, but Miko continued anyway. “Just why are you so mad? Because you were made out to be a wimpy momma’s boy in front of the crowd? So what?”

James turned his horse around and began heading back toward Willimet.

Miko quickly rode past, and then turned to block him.

“Get out of my way,” James growled.

“No,” Miko told him, “I won’t. And you’re not going to go back there either, not with the way she had worked up that crowd. You’ll never have the chance to get close to her.”

“Look,” he continued while James listened, “let’s finish what we set out to do. Go and find this temple. Then afterward we can come back to deal with her if you still want.” Seeing James considering his words he added, “Remember, we have to make it to the City of Light before Saragon falls and the Empire advances further north.”

James stared at him for a second, emotions playing across his face, then he slowly nodded. "Alright, we will deal with her should we come back this way." They resumed their trek east toward Trademeet.

Miko breathed a sigh of relief as his friend turned about. He got his horse moving and hurried to catch up. He wasn't sure what more he could have done had James been set on returning to Willimet.

For the rest of the day, Miko rode in silence while James brooded about the way he had been treated and how she drove him out of town. His mood gradually improved and by late afternoon he realized that going back truly would have been the wrong decision, maybe even a costly one.

Sunset found them still on the road in the middle of nowhere with naught more than grass and rolling hills as far as they could see. Just before the sun dipped below the horizon, they made camp atop a nearby hill.

After supper while they relaxed around the fire, James heard a rumble off in the distance. "Looks like a storm may be coming in."

"Great," moaned Miko as he stared toward the horizon. Shortly, flashes of lightning began to appear. "What are we going to do?"

"Get wet I suppose, not much else we can do," James said as he stared out across the grasslands. Except for the occasional tree, there was nothing that could be used for shelter.

Pointing off in the distance where two lone trees grew Miko said, "We could take shelter under those trees over there. At least we could stay dry a little bit."

James shook his head. "Not in a thunder storm. Lightning could hit the treetops and travel to the ground where we would be. People have died from being struck by lightning, I would rather get wet."

Miko looked longingly at the shelter the trees would provide, but trusted in James' judgment and stayed put. "Maybe it won't reach us until tomorrow."

"Maybe," James said not sounding as if he believed it. "There's a good way to tell, though." "How?"

"Watch the storm and when you see a flash of lightning, start counting slowly. Stop when you hear the rumble of thunder. Do it every time and at the same speed. If you are able to reach a higher number the second time, then it's moving away from you. If on the other hand, your count is short before hearing the rumble, it's coming toward you."

Miko watched the storm and waited for a flash of lightning. **Flash!** "1... 2... 3... 4... 5... 6... 7... 8." **Boom!**

Miko looked over toward James who said, "Now, if your next number is a 9 then the storm is moving away, if it's a 7 then it's coming closer."

"What if it's the same?"

"Then it's most likely moving across the horizon, neither toward nor away from you."

"That makes sense," Miko said and once again looked toward the storm. **Flash!** "1... 2... 3... 4... 5... 6... 7... 8... 9" **Boom!** Smiling he turned toward James, "It's moving away!" he exclaimed happily.

“Maybe,” conceded James. “However you should wait a few minutes before trying it again, some storms cover a wide area and the lightning could appear within different areas of the same storm.”

Miko sat anxiously by the fire, and counted to himself in-between flashes. “James,” he said after several minutes of counting.

“Yes?”

“Couldn’t you do magic to make the storm not come over here?”

“I don’t know, maybe. But that would be selfish of me.”

“Selfish?” asked Miko. “What do you mean?”

“If I were to move that storm so it passed us by, then I could also be moving it away from farms that desperately need the rain for their crops to grow. That could cause hardship on people for my own comfort. No, I refuse to influence the weather for so selfish a reason as that.”

“Not many people consider others before themselves”

“I found that to be true where I come from too,” James agreed. “You have to live by your principles, in all things. If you don’t, then there is no limit to how far you may stray.”

“Yeah, I can understand that.”

Flash!

James looked over at Miko silently counting till the crack of thunder.

Boom!

“What’s the count?”

“Still 8,” he replied, looking relieved. “Looks as if it’s going to miss us.”

“Whether it will or whether it won’t, we need to turn in,” James said as he threw a couple more logs on the fire to keep it going further into the night. “We still have a long ways to go.”

Miko settled down in his blanket, drawing it over him as he watched the storm. James thought about Willimet and how Miko probably stopped him from doing something stupid. It wasn’t long before Miko began to snore. He looked over toward the storm, watching the lightning as it flashed in the night, still concerned about it moving his way. Finally, he drifted off to sleep.

The morning dawned dark, the sun unable to pierce the dark clouds that stretched from horizon to horizon. Their blankets were damp from a light sprinkle during the night. The thunder storm had long since passed, for which Miko was very grateful. They took just enough time for a quick breakfast, and were soon on the road.

Shortly after they headed out, a light rain began to fall. They broke out their ponchos acquired some time earlier in Cardri.

The rain continued on again off again all morning. The cloud cover remained constant, with nary a break to allow the sun through. A little before noon, the rain increased until it became a steady downpour. The road turned into mud, and the ditch running alongside became a small stream.

“I hate the rain,” complained Miko. “Can’t we find someplace to wait it out?”

Glancing around at the endless grasslands extending in all directions, James asked, “Where would you like to start?”

Looking sullen, Miko hunkered down in his poncho and stayed quiet.

With no great desire to stop in the rain, they ate their meal in the saddle. They stopped only long enough to give the horses grain and a break from their weight. Later on as the day progressed, James noticed a caravan stopped in the road ahead. By the number of wagons, it was a big one.

"Maybe we could ride in one and get out of the rain?" Miko suggested, looking hopeful toward James.

James shook his head, "They would be too slow and I seriously doubt if they would let strangers in with their goods."

As they approached the caravan, things looked a bit odd. First of all, the wagons weren't moving. As they drew closer, James saw why; none had any horses.

"Trouble."

"What are we going to do?"

"See if we can render aid. They may have been hit by bandits," James said as he quickly brought his horse toward the end wagon. "Keep your eyes open and holler if you see anything."

They found the driver slumped over, with two arrows protruding from his back. Cautiously moving alongside the wagon train, they made their way toward the lead wagon. More dead drivers appeared, either slumped over on their wagons, or lying upon the ground next to them. Near the center of the column they came across twelve slain guards, testimony to a battle which had raged there. Their bodies were hacked and stabbed, many having been pierced with arrows.

Proceeding on, they continued toward the lead wagon where they discovered a man who must have been the master in charge of the caravan if his fine clothes were any indication. Six arrows protruded from his lifeless body and his hand still gripped the stock of a crossbow. He hadn't gone down without a fight.

A smashed chest sat on the ground by the wagon, its top broken open. James looked inside only to find it empty. "Looks like it was bandits that hit them. Check the bodies, see if anyone is alive."

Moving back down the caravan, they went about the grisly task of searching for survivors. They checked dead body after dead body and began to think that there was no one still alive. It wasn't until they reached the middle of the caravan where the guards laid slain upon the ground that Miko yelled, "James, over here! We've got a live one."

Hurrying, James reached him just as Miko turned the man over onto his back. It was one of the guards. A large bump protruded from the guard's forehead, which appeared to be his only wound. Suddenly, the man's eyes fluttered open and he tensed up when he found James and Miko standing over him.

"We are not going to hurt you," James said reassuringly. "We are not with those that attacked you."

"Who are you then?"

"My name is James." Pointing to Miko he continued, "And this is Miko."

"Name's Rylin." Propping himself against a wagon wheel, the man looked around at the carnage. "Is there anyone else alive?"

“You are the only one we have found so far,” James replied. “It looks as if they took the horses and smashed open a chest by the lead wagon.”

“Damn bandits,” he cursed and started to rise.

“Hold on there,” James said as he tried to keep him down. “You have a nasty bump and you need to take it easy.”

Knocking James’ hand away, Rylin climbed to his feet where he wavered unsteadily. He brought his hand up to his head and felt the bump. “I don’t care,” he said and then headed for the lead wagon. As he passed wagons, he gave the dead drivers a cursory look before continuing to the next.

Upon reaching the lead wagon, he stopped when he spied the dead merchant lying on the ground and quickly scanned the area. Turning to James and Miko he asked, “There were two women with us, the merchant’s wife and his daughter. Did you see them?”

James shook his head. “No, all we found were dead guards and drivers.”

“That’s right,” Miko agreed.

“The bandits must have taken them,” he said as he climbed up onto the wagon and scanned the horizon. “Damn, can’t see anything in this rain.” Rylin then collapsed into the driver’s seat with a sad, stricken look on his face.

“We could try and find them,” suggested James. “When did they hit your caravan?”

“It was about an hour after we started moving this morning,” he paused, thinking. “Their attack came fast and not long into it, I was knocked from my wagon and must have hit my head on a rock. After that, I don’t remember anything until I came to with you standing over me. How long was I out?”

“It’s a little after noon now, so probably a couple of hours. If they took the time to loot and steal the valuables, not to mention the time removing the horses from their harnesses, then they couldn’t have left too long ago. Perhaps we could catch up with them.”

“How? The rain has washed away any tracks that could have told us which way they went.”

“Miko,” James said, “go get my compass please.”

Miko raced down the line of wagons to where their horses waited and quickly returned with James’ homemade compass.

“What is that gonna do?” Rylin asked, curiously hopeful.

“With your help, tell us which way they went,” he explained. “Now, if you could find something that one of the women used to wear, or had with them often?”

“Why do you want that?”

“If I have something of theirs, it will help me to locate them.” Seeing that Rylin still failed to comprehend, James added, “With magic.”

“You don’t look like a mage.”

“I can’t do it without something of theirs,” James said, getting somewhat irritated at the man. “Are you going to help or not? You’re wasting time we can ill afford to lose.”

Getting up, Rylin rummaged around inside the wagon and returned with a green scarf. “Sheila, the merchant’s daughter, used to wear this often. Will it do?” he asked as he handed it down to James.

“Let’s see,” James replied as he took it.

Wrapping the scarf around his hand, he nestled the compass within it. Closing his eyes he concentrated, thought of the owner of the scarf and wanting to find her. He let loose the power and the compass swiveled to the south, away from the road and into the grasslands.

Showing it to Rylin he pointed in that direction and said, “She’s that way.”

He stared off to the south. “Is she alive?”

“It doesn’t tell me that, just where she is,” he responded. “Even if she’s dead, we can still deal with the bandits.” Turning to Miko he said, “Bring our horses.” Miko hurried to comply and soon returned with the three animals.

As he and Miko made ready to ride, Rylin asked, “What about me?”

“Get on behind Miko,” James said, trying to ignore the look the boy flashed him. Once Rylin had mounted, James turned his horse in the direction indicated by the compass. “Let’s ride quickly and see if we can catch them.” Without waiting for a reply, he kicked his horse into a gallop and they raced off the road into the grasslands with James leading the way.

The rain steadily worsened, increasing until it was a heavy downpour, reducing visibility to mere feet. It didn’t take long before the ground began to show signs of the bandits’ progress. The grass was increasingly trampled and the rain-soaked earth began to show hoof prints. No longer needing his compass, James put it away and concentrated on the trail before them.

“We must be gaining,” he said when they pulled alongside.

“Yes, I believe you are correct,” agreed Rylin. “How far behind do you think we are?”

“Not sure,” admitted James. “Though I’ve never done any tracking before, I doubt if we are too far.”

Not understanding Miko asked, “How do you know?”

Pointing to the trail they were following, James said, “The rain hasn’t had enough time to be able to remove the signs of their passing. Therefore, they can’t be too far ahead.”

“That makes sense,” Miko said looking at the signs of the bandits passing.

“If this rain continues as it is, we may end up riding into them before we even know they are there,” said Rylin.

“That’s a chance we’ll have to take,” James replied. A moment later, he came to a stop and dismounted. He picked up several stones and placed them in one of his pockets.

“What do you need those for?” Rylin asked.

“Ammunition,” James answered, grimly.

“Ammunition?” asked Rylin, “What’s that?”

“When we catch them,” James explained as he swung back into the saddle, “you’ll see.”

Mounted again, they set off after the bandits. Another hour passed and the rain continued its relentless downpour. The trail became clearer and more distinct now that they had narrowed the gap. Even with the torrential deluge, they had little trouble making it out.

Then, from out of the rain ahead came a woman’s scream. “Sheila!” shouted Rylin. Kicking their horses into a gallop, they raced forward hoping to arrive in time.

No sooner had James reached a full gallop, than indistinct shadows appeared out of the rain before him. Unable to stop, he rushed headlong into the bandits’ camp, knocking down two

before he even realized they were there. As the bandits hit the ground, his horse slammed into the side of a tent and the unexpected impact vaulted him from the saddle. He hit the tent and it collapsed beneath him.

“To arms! Intruders!”

James rolled and cleared the side of the collapsing tent, gaining his feet. He looked around and saw men running toward him with swords drawn. Reaching into his pocket he pulled out the stones. With magic directing his aim and adding velocity, one missile struck the nearest attacker square in the chest. The bandit looked in startled surprise at the hole before he collapsed to the ground, dead.

Three more men bore down on him so he turned and ran, keeping distance between them. He concentrated, then stopped suddenly and spun quickly toward his pursuers, casting his flashing light spell. The brilliance of the flash caused them to pause just long enough for him to throw three more stones in quick succession, taking them out.

“To me!” he heard a commanding voice pierce the air. “To me!”

A clash of metal off to his right signaled Rylin’s entry into the battle. Following the sound, he found the caravan guard hard pressed as he battled two bandits. Using his last stone, he nailed one of them in the side, dropping him to the ground. Rylin stepped back a moment and glanced over to see James, who was but a shadow in the rain. He acknowledged him with a nod and then continued the attack on the remaining bandit.

James moved in the direction from which the commanding voice had earlier called out. Darting around another tent, he spied a group of men heading toward him. One was covered in armor and wielded a long sword, obviously the leader. They headed toward the sound of Rylin’s battle with the bandit.

He waited too long. One of the approaching bandits saw him as he stood by the tent and hollered, pointing him out to the others. The leader yelled for them to charge and they surged forward, swords drawn.

Seeing a dozen men bearing down on him, James ran, angling away from where Rylin was battling. He hoped to give him time to finish his opponent before help arrived.

Another shape materialized out of the rain and he prepared another spell. Then he realized it was Miko leading the horses and mule.

“Are you okay?” Miko asked before he saw the raging, sword waving men emerge out of the rain behind James.

“Get the hell out of here!” James yelled, and then turned to face the men. He concentrated on the ground near the leading edge of the attackers and let loose a massive surge of power just as the men entered the targeted area.

Crrrrumph!

The ground erupted, throwing men, mud and rocks high into the air. James cried out at the pain caused by unleashing so much power at once. He dropped to his knees, but refused to give in to unconsciousness.

Surveying the damage through the rain and falling mud, he saw most of the men were unmoving. From behind the scene of carnage, three men, including the leader, walked around the

crater. Coming toward him cautiously, the men gained confidence when they saw him on his knees.

James grabbed a stone from off the ground as he climbed to his feet and faced the approaching men. "Stand back!" he yelled, putting more strength and confidence in his voice than he really felt. "Lest you wish to die."

"You're the one to die, mage," the leader said as he continued his approach, a smug smile upon his face. "You can't have much left in you after that, not if it left you on your knees."

Coming off his knees through a sheer force of will, James stood straight and tall, praying that they wouldn't collapse. "Die then," he yelled. He threw the stone at the leader while he cast his spell. There was no familiar out- surge of power and the rock bounced harmlessly off the leader's armor. His magic had been all but depleted and the effort to draw on the little remaining to him caused dots to dance before his eyes.

Laughing, the leader said, "Take him boys." His two men came at James as he tried to flee. But his weak legs gave out and he dropped to the ground. Turning, he saw his death coming at a run.

Thwock!

A crossbow bolt flew out of the rain to strike one of the men in the shoulder, spinning him backward. The bandit cried out in pain as he hit the ground. James saw Miko throw down the crossbow and draw his knife. Miko came to James and stood before him.

The other bandit, seeing who it was that shot his partner said, "I'm going to gut you boy. You're going to die slow and painful."

Miko stood ready and didn't back down. James could see that the boy's legs were shaking. He was scared to death, but still held his ground.

A fast-moving shadow emerged from the pouring rain and slammed into the man approaching Miko, knocking him to the ground. Rylin quickly regained his feet and slashed down, catching the bandit in the neck, practically severing his head from his shoulders.

Roaring in rage, the leader rushed Rylin and launched into a series of blows, causing him to retreat in the face of such an onslaught. Rylin successfully blocked the leader's attacks, doing all he could just to hold his own.

Hack! Hack! Slash!

It was soon obvious that Rylin was outclassed. The leader was by far the better swordsman and he was protected by armor where Rylin was not.

Miko approached the battle in an attempt to help the caravan guard, but only received a back-handed cut for his efforts that slashed open his upper left arm. Out of commission, he backed away from the fight. He tore a strip of cloth off his shirt and used it to stem the flow of blood, tying it as tightly as possible.

James watched Rylin blocked blow after blow, never once able to go on the offensive. The two combatants moved around the camp, the leader able to have Rylin go in any direction he wanted simply with the pattern of his blows.

"James, what are we going to do?" Miko asked, blood still leaking from under his makeshift bandage.

“I’ve no strength left in me.”

Miko extended his right hand toward James and asked, “Can you use mine?”

Looking at Miko through the rain, James said, “I don’t know what that would do to you. It may kill you.”

Miko glanced over at Rylin then said, “He’s not going to last much longer. If we don’t do something soon, we’ll all be dead.” He reached over and took James by the hand. “Just do it!”

Nodding, James concentrated, envisioning the power flowing from Miko into him and then through him. He looked at the battle where Rylin, obviously exhausted, was having greater difficulty in blocking the leader’s blows.

Suddenly, Rylin cried out as the leader scored along his side opening a shallow cut. The leader shouted in triumph, “Aha!” when he saw the blood from Rylin’s wound. Blow after blow the leader rained down upon him, continuously pushing him backward.

The leader maneuvered Rylin close to the man Miko shot with the crossbow who still laid upon the ground. The man, though in pain, reached out and grabbed Rylin’s ankle which caused him to lose his balance. Rylin stumbled and fell. The leader saw his chance and raised his sword to finish it.

Feeling the power flowing from Miko to him, James released it and felt it being sucked out of his friend at an alarming rate. Miko’s eyes rolled to the back of his head and then he slumped unconscious to the ground. James kept a tight hold of his hand so the contact wouldn’t break. He directed the power to the upraised sword of the leader, increasing the disparity of polarities between the sword and the clouds above.

Flash! Boom!

A giant bolt of lightning flashed from the sky to strike the end of the sword. The resulting explosion blasted the leader into the air. The bandit on the ground was charred as both he and Rylin were lifted into the air and tossed several feet away.

The leader, when he hit the ground, no longer moved. Wisps of smoke drifted upward from his body and a hissing sound could be heard where the rain came in contact with the heated metal of his armor.

James was relieved to find that Miko was still breathing. He then made his way to Rylin.

“What was that?” Rylin asked, a little shaky. He, too, smoked in several places.

“Lightning,” James replied a bit shaky himself. “Are you okay?”

Rylin gave himself a once-over and said, “I think so. Is it over?” He pressed his hand over the cut in his side to stem the flow of blood.

“I don’t see anyone but us moving, so I think it is”

Helping Rylin to his feet, James said, “My friend is over there,” pointing to where the boy lay in the grass. “He’s out, but alive.”

“Thank goodness,” Rylin sighed, leaning on James for support. “Now, let’s find the women.”

They returned to the collapsed tent where the battle started. There they found a lump under the canvas, and it wasn’t moving. Thinking the worst, they pulled back the tent and uncovered a bandit. The man’s neck was bent at a wrong angle, obviously broken, and his pants were down around his ankles.

Rylin quickly scanned the camp through the rain but saw nothing other than the dead bandits. "Sheila!" he cried. "It's Rylin! It's safe, they are all dead."

James looked around as well and soon saw two silhouettes appear out of the rain, coming toward the camp.

"Sheila!" Rylin cried and ran to them, James followed.

The women, though shaken and upset, seemed to be alright. Sheila was wrapped in a blanket and her mother had her arms around her. She had a lost look about her.

Rylin turned to her mother and asked, "Is she okay?"

"One of the bandits was just about to have his way with her," she explained. "He had stripped her and was...about to..." overcome with emotion, she stopped. Getting hold of herself, she continued. "Then something hit the side of the tent, knocking it over."

Rylin put his arm around her to offer comfort when her eyes suddenly widened at something behind him. She looked as though she was ready to bolt. Seeing her reaction, Rylin turned around expecting an attack but only found James walking toward them.

"It's okay," Rylin assured her. "This is James, he helped rescue you."

Relaxing somewhat, she said, "Thank you for helping us."

"You're welcome. I hope you and your daughter will be okay."

"I think we will," she said. "It may take some time for my daughter to get over this, but she will. She's a strong girl."

"Maybe we should put the tent up again," James suggested, "so the ladies can have shelter?"

"No," the mother said adamantly. "We will not stay in that tent. Besides, we need to see about our caravan."

"How?" Rylin asks. "The horses are gone."

She shook her head and said, "Our horses were taken by several of the bandits to the south while this group continued this way. If we can get them back, then maybe we can bring in our caravan to Trademeet and salvage something from all this."

Seeing the doubt in Rylin's eyes, she continued, "With my husband dead, we need the money from those goods to survive."

"James!" Miko's cry interrupted the conversation.

"Over here!" James hollered back. Shortly they saw him approach through the rain.

"Oh, you're hurt!" Sheila cried out when she became aware of Rylin's blood soaked shirt. "Let me help you." Taking him by the hand she led him to a tent that still stood and rummaged around, coming up with several strips of cloth. Removing his shirt, she inspected the cut and decided it was not too deep. She then wrapped the cloth around his side tightly, and secured it with a knot.

"Thanks, ma'am," Rylin said when she was finished.

"That should do for a while. Just be careful from now on, okay?"

"Alright, ma'am, I will."

Sheila found her clothes in the tent and with her mother's help, got dressed while everyone else looked the other way.

While Sheila dressed, James said to Rylin, "Miko and I can go after the bandits and see if the horses can be recovered, though I will need to rest for an hour or so before I leave. I pretty much wore myself out during the fight."

"Perhaps I should go with you as well," Rylin offered.

James shook his head. "You need to stay with the ladies and watch over them. You can defend them better than either Miko or me. And we certainly don't want to leave them alone and unprotected."

Rylin glanced over to the mother who agreed with the plan. "Alright, but how will we know if you are successful?"

"If we are, we'll take them back to the road and meet you there," James explained. "Take the bandits' horses with you and if we don't come back, use them as best you can to get the caravan to Trademeet."

"Those are not draft animals," the mother said, looking at the nearby picket of horses.

"Better than nothing wouldn't you say?" James countered.

"I suppose so," she agreed, though not entirely happy about the situation.

"Miko," James said, "search all the bandits, especially the leader. See if there is anything that may tell us why they are here."

"What do you mean?" Rylin asked as Miko rummaged through their belongings and inspected each of the dead bodies.

"The leader seemed too professional to simply be a bandit," James explained. "Also, if they were merely bandits, why did they split their forces and send the horses south? It just doesn't feel right to me."

"I see your point," Rylin acknowledged.

While Miko searched the dead, Rylin and James tied the bandit's horses in a line, bridle to saddle. Three saddlebags were found to be filled with gold and other valuables.

"This must belong to the ladies," James guessed when he saw the fortune, "taken from their caravan."

"Most likely," Rylin agreed.

The rain began to lessen though still a constant nuisance. Miko returned from his search and said, "Couldn't find anything on anyone. There was some paper on the leader but it is ash now, couldn't make out any writing."

"Alright, let's get our stuff and we'll go look for the horses," James told him. "Also, let's take the tent with us; it may come in handy should the rain continue."

"Alright, James," Miko said as he turned to the tent in the mud.

Rylin, having already assisted the ladies to mount, came over to James and said, "Thank you for your help in rescuing them."

"We couldn't just leave them to their fate," he replied. "I hope Miko and I are able to get the horses back for you."

"So do I," he said. "We'll wait on the road for a day or so before continuing on toward Trademeet. If you manage to get them, try your best to find us."

“We’ll find you,” James assured him. They walked to Rylin’s horse and James gave him a hand mounting.

“Goodbye, ladies. We’ll see you in a couple of days.”

As Rylin got the line moving, the mother said, “Thank you again, James. I can’t begin to express my gratitude for you helping Rylin to save us. Should you ever need anything, the House of Ellinize will help you.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” He stood back a bit and waved as they moved northward to where the caravan sat abandoned.

Miko waved to them as they began to leave. “Everything set?” James asked him.

“Yeah, I got the tent on the mule.”

“Then let’s go.”

“*What is that?*” he asked as they approached the horses. On the back of the pack mule was the tent all right, but it looked like it was stuffed and tied up there without any effort made to compact it.

He looked over at Miko and asked, “Never folded a tent before?”

Shaking his head, Miko answered, “No, I’m a city boy.”

James untied it from the horse, and then laid it on the ground. “Here, give me a hand and I’ll show you how to do it properly so it will be a much smaller package to handle.” Having never folded this particular type of tent, it took him a couple of tries. They eventually got it down to a manageable size and secured it on the mule.

Then they mounted and rode after the other band of bandits.

Chapter Eighteen

The rain lessened throughout the morning until shortly after noon, when it stopped altogether. Then when the sun broke through the clouds, it brought much welcomed relief to the saddened pair. James and Miko maintained a quick pace as they tried to catch up with the remaining bandits.

They picked up the trail about mid-afternoon when they encountered a swath of grass that had recently been trampled. “I think we found them”

“Looks like it,” Miko agreed. “What are we going to do when we find them?”

“Play it by ear.” James gazed toward where the trampled grass led. “We won’t know what our options will be until we do.”

“I suppose,” he said. “Are you feeling any better?”

“Some,” replied James. “I should be recharged somewhat by the time we find them.”

“Recharged?”

Chuckling, James clarified, “It’s a word from where I come from. It means that I will be able to do magic again.”

“Oh, that’s good”

A large group of tents with a makeshift corral set off to one side appeared out of the horizon not long before dusk. The number of tents indicated a far larger group than they had anticipated. James had them enter a copse of trees from where they would be able to observe what was going on inside the camp, yet still be far enough away so they wouldn’t be discovered.

“I think those are the horses,” Miko said, indicating the herd inside the corral.

“You are probably right,” agreed James. “But this is a far larger group than I anticipated. It looks like an army camp.”

Glancing questioningly to James, Miko asked, “How do you figure?”

“Several things,” James replied. “First of all the tents are lined up uniformly, in rows with the larger tents in the center. Second, they have patrols walking a perimeter around the encampment,” he pointed out three men who walked around the camp at distinct intervals.

“What do we do now?”

Thinking for a second, he replied, “Not much we can do, but it’s beginning to look as if the ladies will not be getting their horses back. Unless you think we should go down there and ask for them?” Seeing the look of apprehension on his face, he couldn’t help but add, “Or attack?”

“Good heavens, no!” Miko exclaimed. “They’d kill us for sure.”

“Most likely,” agreed James. “We’ll hang out here for a while and see what’s going on.”

“Why?” Miko asked. “I mean if we are no longer planning on getting the horses back, what’s the point of staying here longer than we need to?”

“You see, Miko, I hate leaving things unanswered, and there are still several questions I’d like answers to.” James leaned back against a tree and opened a saddle bag, took out a handful of travel rations to munch on while he watched the camp. He handed some to Miko.

“Like what?” Miko asked between bites.

Considering the question while he chewed, James replied, “If that is an army of some kind, whose is it? I doubt if it belongs to Cardri. After all, why would the bandits take horses that they stole to them? And if it isn’t, why are they here in the first place?”

“Mercenaries, maybe?” Miko suggested.

“Perhaps, though it doesn’t feel right,” James said. “Look at it like this. Suppose the bandits that sacked the caravan and those over there are part of a much larger force. Remember that Madoc is under siege and has requested Cardri’s aid. What if these are working under orders from the Empire to sow fear here in Cardri? What would the result be?”

“I don’t know,” admitted Miko.

“If the stability of Cardri is in question, then the king would be unlikely to send a large force to help Madoc against the Empire. After all, he needs to care for his own first.”

“But wouldn’t the Empire run the risk of going to war with Cardri if they are found out?”

“Most definitely,” agreed James. “This brings me back to the questions that need answers.”

“So we are to just sit and wait?” Miko asked, not liking it.

“For the moment, yes,” James replied, turning his attention back to the encampment.

Miko watched for a while before asking, “Why do you care?”

Glancing over to Miko, he asked, “Care about what?”

Pointing to the encampment, “Them. I mean, after all what does it have to do with you?”

“What do you mean?”

“You are not from here, why does it matter to you?” Miko clarified.

“Some of those down there did a horrible thing when they killed all those people at the caravan,” explained James. “I would wish to hinder them for no other reason than that. Besides, people of good conscience must not stand idly by while bad people do bad things.”

“I understand,” Miko said, “I think.”

Smiling, James said, “Trust me, we are doing the right thing.”

They watched until the sun began to settle closer to the horizon. Three horsemen soon emerged from the camp, riding hard to the north. Inside the camp, they saw activity as the tents started to come down.

“Looks like they are breaking camp.”

“Now what?” asked Miko.

“As much as I would like to know what those in the encampment are doing, I think we should go after the riders,” he said. He quickly mounted his horse to follow them once they rode past. Miko moved to mount his as well. They waited, hidden in the trees as the men first came abreast, then moved past, their hiding spot not more than a hundred feet away. Once they were well past, James and Miko emerged from the copse to set out after them.

James felt in his pocket to make sure his stones were there. He was glad to have picked them up earlier. Maintaining a good pace, they kept a discreet distance behind the riders, just within visual range.

“Looks like they’re heading for the bandits’ camp where we rescued the women,” James hollered over to Miko.

Miko agreed.

Suddenly from up ahead, horns blared and they saw the three riders turn and head back toward them at a full gallop. Coming into view behind them was a line of uniformed horsemen.

James brought his horse to a stop and dismounted.

“What are you doing?” Miko asked anxiously.

“Going to slow them up a bit.” He handed Miko his reins. “Here, hang on to this for a second.” He then faced the riders who were coming fast.

Concentrating, he took one of his stones and threw as he cast his spell. It flew unerringly toward the rear rider and struck dead on, knocking him from his horse.

He took another stone and did the same to a second rider. This time the rider’s foot caught in the stirrup and was dragged for quite a distance before the horse came to a stop.

By this time, the remaining rider realized James and Miko were there and made straight for them. James threw a third stone and this time nailed the horse not the man. The horse crashed to the ground and threw the rider free.

The man hit the ground at a roll and was on his feet not far from them. He looked at James and then back at the rapidly approaching cavalry. The man reached into his shirt and put something into his mouth. A second later he gripped his stomach and fell to the ground.

“What happened?”

“He poisoned himself,” James explained. “Guess he didn’t want to be taken captive.” They waited until the cavalry approached.

“Stay where you are!” one of the men commanded. Several held lances and lowered them, covering James and Miko. The riders encircled the pair, leaving an opening to allow another to pass through their ranks. This rider was an older man, with hair slightly gray at the edges. His uniform was of better quality than that of the others. *Must be an officer*, James thought to himself.

“Now, who might you two be?” he asked as he drew close, looking down at them.

James answered, “My name is James and this is my friend, Miko.”

When he heard their names, he nodded and said to one of his men on his right, “Lieutenant, see to the dead riders and send out scouts. I want to know where they are and fast.”

“Yes, sir,” replied the man next to him who began to bark out orders.

The leader dismounted. “Greetings, James, I am Captain Varos of the King’s cavalry.” He extended his hand and James shook it. “So, would you happen to know someone by the name of Rylin?”

“As a matter of fact we do, Captain,” James replied. “We helped him rescue two ladies from bandits earlier.”

“Thought you might be them. We ran into him and the ladies back at the caravan. They said you had gone in pursuit of another group of bandits who had taken off with their horses.”

Nodding, James said, “That is correct. We found them, but they met up with a larger band and any chance of recovering the stolen horses was gone.”

“Oh? How many were there? Where did you see them?” he asked intently.

“There were over fifty men and their camp was further south, about ten miles or so,” James explained. “They broke camp about the time we started to follow these here.” He gestured to the dead men. “I think the main body was probably going to head south, though I am not positive.”

”Lieutenant!” the officer bellowed.

The lieutenant approached, “Sir!”

“These men say their encampment was about ten miles to the south and that they broke camp not too long ago, possibly heading south. Send scouts to have a look and have the men ready to ride in five minutes.”

“Yes, Captain!” the lieutenant saluted and proceeded to carry out the orders.

Another rider came up and saluted, “Captain, we searched the bodies but found nothing on them. One looks like he was poisoned.”

“Very good,” the captain replied and the man went back to his duties. “Poisoned?” the captain asked.

“When I knocked his horse down with a rock, the man came to his feet. He glanced at you and your men coming and then reached into his pocket and ate something. Shortly after that he fell over dead.”

“Too bad, I would have liked to have questioned him.”

The lieutenant returned and reported, “Captain, the men are ready.”

The captain mounted. Turning to James he said, “Thank you for your help.” To his men he said, “Let’s ride!” and they raced southward at a gallop.

Watching them ride out of sight, Miko asked, “Should we follow?”

“I don’t think so.” He glanced at the dead bodies and then mounted his horse. Miko did the same. “There is likely to be a battle when they meet and I would rather not be around when it happens.” They headed northward until the early evening.

Once the light faded, they made camp. After a quick dinner of rations they watched the night sky slowly darken, until only the light from the fire remained. The stars formed a brilliant pattern in the heavens above.

“Look!” Miko cried out as a shooting star left a blazing trail across the night sky, slowly dissipating into nothingness. “That’s an omen.”

“Hardly,” James rebutted. “That is simply a rock falling out of the sky, hitting the atmosphere and the friction caused by its speed through the air burns it up which causes a blazing trail.”

“What?” Miko asked with a confused look.

Chuckling, James said, “It’s just a rock falling out of the sky. There is nothing mystical about it.”

“I don’t know,” Miko insisted. “They are supposed to herald that something of import is about to happen or has.”

“For who?” James questioned.

“I don’t know, somebody somewhere I suppose,” Miko reasoned. “It’s got to mean something.”

James said, “Not everything has to mean something. Sometimes things occur and that is all there is to it. I am sure that something somewhere is happening to someone that could be called extraordinary. But I am sure that it would be happening even without a sign from above.”

“Don’t you believe in signs and omens?”

“No, not really,” James explained. “Everything has an explanation, if you just know all the facts about it. It’s when you see only part of whatever is happening that you create mystical and often implausible meanings behind them. I know that rocks are flying through space out there all the time and that they do occasionally fall from the sky, creating a blazing trail across the heavens.”

Not convinced, Miko argued, “The gods are always sending omens and portents. We just have to be alert and understand them when they happen.”

Thinking about magic and the things he had seen since coming to this world, he said, “Perhaps you do have a point, and I’ll concede that it may actually be a sign sent from above for

a specific purpose. But since we have no way to know what, where, or who, I doubt if it's going to do us much good."

"I suppose you're right about that," Miko agreed. Changing the subject, he asked, "Are we going to see how Rylin and the women are making out?"

"I think so," James replied. "At least we will tell them what is happening with their horses. They may get them back if the Captain is successful in battle. At least he knows who they belong to."

"Do you really think there will be a battle?" Miko asked.

"Perhaps," James answered. "The Captain can't just let them get away with attacks on civilians within their borders, so if he thinks he can win the day, then I'm sure he will attack. And if not, then who knows what he will do, maybe send for reinforcements so he *can* launch a successful attack. We may never know."

"Think we'll find what you're looking for over in Madoc around the Sea of the Gods?"

"I really don't know," James said, "but it is all I have to go on. Hopefully we can find out something more in Trademeet before we head through the pass. Maybe someone there will have some recollection of hearing a story or tale from their grandparents about it. We'll see."

James went to the fire and added a few more sticks and then returned to his blanket. "We better get some sleep, we have a ways to go tomorrow and I'm tired." He pulled the blanket over him to keep away the coolness of the night.

"Good night, James."

"You too, Miko." They lay there for a while, just listening to the night until slowly drifting off to sleep.

Chapter Nineteen

Early the next morning found them on their way to the road where they originally found the raided caravan. After several hours of riding, it appeared in the distance but without any sign of the caravan.

"Maybe we came to the road in a different spot," suggested Miko.

James looked down the road in both directions. "But which way?"

"Can't you just do that compass thing and find out?"

"Probably," James replied, turning to him, "but it might be better if I didn't use magic for a while. I'm getting kind of worn out." Thinking for a bit, he made his decision, "We'll head in the

direction of Trademeet and if we don't find them, then at least we will be headed in the right direction."

"I suppose we could leave a message for them there, letting them know what's going on," said Miko.

"Good idea, we'll do that," he agreed. They turned their horses east and set off at a canter, slowly eating away the miles.

Around noon they reached the spot where the caravan had been raided. Yesterday's rain hadn't removed all traces of the blood that still marred the ground from the bandit's attack. A hundred feet or so off the road raised a mound of fresh turned earth.

James indicated the mound. "Must be where they buried the bodies of the guards and drivers."

"Looks like it. Guess they managed to hook the bandits' horses up to the wagons and are on their way to Trademeet."

"Hope so. It shouldn't take us much longer to catch up."

Riding fast, they left the battle area and hurried down the road. They didn't get far before a lone rider appeared on the road approaching them from the east. When he drew near, James slowed and greeted, "Good day to you, sir."

The man slowed as well and stared suspiciously at James all the while resting his hand upon the pommel of his sword. "Good day to you as well," the man replied, not relaxing his grip on his sword.

"We were wondering if you could tell us if you had seen a caravan further down the road, heading east?" he asked. "There would have been a man and two women in charge of it."

"Aye," the man replied. "I passed a caravan some time earlier this morning. It had an escort of the king's soldiers with it, if that be the one you're referring to."

"Yes, that's it."

"They are perhaps two hours away, maybe more."

"Thank you sir, you've been a great help." James said in acknowledgment as he nudged his horse into motion. "Have a safe journey."

Once out of earshot Miko asked, "Not a very friendly sort, was he?"

"Alone in the middle of nowhere is not a place to be too trusting," James explained. "Especially when you are outnumbered two to one."

"At least he let us know they're not too far ahead."

"Yes, hopefully we will catch them by nightfall," James figured.

"That would be nice. Sheila was kind of cute."

Looking over at him, James warned, "You better not let Rylin hear you say that."

"Why? She *is* cute," Miko replied defensively.

"I agree that she is cute. However, I believe Rylin is in love with her and you wouldn't want him to mark you as a rival for her affections."

"I'll admire her from afar," Miko stated. Seeing the look on James' face he added, "Silently."

"See that you do," he said, with a little extra emphasis on the word *do*.

They continued to make good time and shortly before sunset a large camp with many wagons and tents appeared alongside the road ahead. When they drew closer, Rylin emerged from the bustle of the camp to greet them.

“James! Miko! How glad I am to see you,” he exclaimed. He shook James’ hand with enthusiasm.

Dismounting, James said, “Sorry we were unable to retrieve your horses, but the bandits joined with a larger force and we couldn’t risk it.”

Joining the conversation, Miko said, “Captain Varos took off after them, though. He may return the horses to you.”

“So you ran into the Captain, did you?” Rylin asked. “He was kind enough to offer us an escort into Trademeet and then set off after the bandits. We told him you may be around.”

Walking their horses into camp, James saw Sheila and her mother, Shawna, getting the wagons positioned and the horses taken care of. Some of the soldiers were lending their aid in getting everything situated properly. They tied their horses near the wagons and walked to where the ladies were busy removing the last of the tack from the horses.

“Sheila!” Rylin hollered as they approached. She turned at his call. Placing the tack on the wagon, she said, “Mother, Look! James and Miko are back.”

Pulling a saddle from the back of a horse, Shawna gave them a smile before placing it on the wagon. Giving the horse into the care of one of the soldiers, she came over to them, saying, “We weren’t sure whether or not we would see you again. I’m glad you made it back safely.”

“We ran into some unforeseen problems,” James said.

With concern on her face she asked, “Like what?”

“The bandits had met with another group and together, were a force too strong for us to be able to do anything. We decided it was too risky to try to retrieve your horses.”

A man in uniform with a commanding presence walked toward them from the soldier’s area. As he approached the group, Shawna said, “James, Miko, this is Sergeant Mindol.” Turning to the sergeant, she said, “These are the two who were going after the bandits and attempted to recover our horses.”

“I was wondering who the newcomers were.” Extending his hand toward James, the sergeant said, “Good evening to you, sir.”

Taking his hand in a firm grip, James said, “Good evening to you as well.”

“Did you catch up with the bandits?”

“As I was telling them, we did but they had joined with a larger force,” he explained. “We were on our way back when we encountered Captain Varos and told him what was going on. He led his men south and I believe was going to attempt to overtake the bandits.”

“He’s an outstanding captain,” Sergeant Mindol stated. “I am sure he will be able to handle any situation he may run into.”

“He did seem rather capable,” Miko joined in. “Didn’t seem the sort to waste any time.”

“That sounds like him,” Sergeant Mindol agreed. Nodding to the ladies, he said, “I just wanted to know who the newcomers were. I must go and see to my men. If you will excuse me?”

“Of course, Sergeant,” Shawna replied.

Sergeant Mindol gave her a nod then returned to his men.

As she watched him go, Shawna said, "I am glad that Captain Varos could spare him and his men. It makes me feel so much safer, especially since all of our guards were killed."

"I am sure we will see you safely to Trademeet," Rylin assured. He looked to James for his agreement but he was unable to give it.

"I'm afraid that Miko and I must continue our journey in the morning," James explained. "You shouldn't have any troubles now that you have a professional armed guard escorting you."

"Yes," Sheila interjected as she took Rylin's arm, "I am sure we have all the protection my mother and I could want." She placed her head on his shoulder.

Rylin looked a little uncomfortable at the attention, but not altogether unhappy with it either.

Shawna's face turned dark as she looked at the way her daughter was acting. She said crisply, "Sheila, go and start dinner for us please."

Lifting her head off Rylin's shoulder, she replied, "Yes mother." She gave Rylin's arm one last squeeze before she went to the wagon and started to gather the items needed for dinner.

Looking a little embarrassed, Rylin said, "I should check on the horses." After a slight nod to Shawna, he headed to where the horses were picketed.

Stepping closer to Shawna, James said, "I take it you don't approve of what is developing between Rylin and your daughter?"

She gave James a sharp glance which seemed to say, 'It's none of your business,' then said, "I don't think a hired guard is a suitable match for my daughter, no."

"What would be?" James asked.

Seeing her expression darken, James hurriedly continued, "I mean, Rylin has already proven he would lay his life down for your daughter. Any other man you couldn't be sure if his words of love are for her or her money."

Her expression softened slightly as she considered his words.

"Rylin would always be there for her and her for him. You've seen them together, he loves her and she him. There can be no better foundation for a relationship than that."

"Maybe," she said, "but what kind of life is it to be married to a man like that? She should be married to a noble, so she can have servants to make her days easier for her than mine have been for me."

"Would you have wanted an easier life if it meant not having been with your husband?"

Smiling a sad smile, she answered, "No, I wouldn't. In fact, my mother was dead set against me marrying him, but I was in love." Sighing a little, she continued, "We snuck out one night and got married in the next town."

"Oh, you should have heard my father erupt when he found out what I had done," she said with a wistful laugh. "We stood our ground and after a while, they came to understand that we were meant for each other."

He motioned to the campfire that Sheila had built, "It looks like she's her mother's daughter."

Shawna discovered that Rylin had found his way to where Sheila was preparing the meal. He sat not far from her as he sharpened his sword while she sliced vegetables for the stew pot. Sheila wore a smile and had a glow about her that only being near the one you love could bring.

Miko had found his way over there as well. He tried to engage them in conversation, but was completely ignored.

As she turned toward James, he saw that she now had a look of understanding, “It won’t be easy for them, especially her.”

“Since you will always need guards for you caravans,” James explained, “why don’t you make him the lead guard and you’ll always have him near. She wouldn’t have to worry about what he was doing, or if he was getting hurt.”

“Perhaps you are right,” she conceded, making her way to the campfire.

Miko returned to James and said, “No one is paying me any attention over there.”

James continued to look at Sheila and Rylin as he said to Miko, “They only have eyes for each other.”

“Why don’t we travel with them all the way into Trademeet?”

“The wagons will slow us down. Besides, I want to find that temple quickly. There’s a war over there and if it should move north, I would like to be done with what I need to do before it gets there.”

“Then I hope we can find it fast.”

“So do I,” agreed James, “so do I.” He then joined the others by the fire.

After supper, they settled down around the campfire. Rylin and Sheila sat together, sharing a blanket. Shawna’s gaze was no longer one of disapproval, but a wistful one, remembering when she was young and in love with her dearly departed husband.

The strumming of a musical instrument from the soldiers’ area reached them through the night. They decided that an evening of music was exactly what they needed, so they made their way over and joined them. One of the soldiers had an instrument like a mandolin and played a quick, lively tune. He accompanied it with a deep bass voice, not nearly the caliber of Perrilin’s, but still pleasant to the ear. The soldiers made room for them and they spent the rest of the evening listening to the music and socializing.

In the morning after breakfast, James and Miko said their goodbyes and headed down the road.

Chapter Twenty

James and Miko made good time as the terrain continued to be primarily flat plains. After the first hour, the land became increasingly more cultivated, with occasional farms and orchards

lining the road. Farmers were out in the fields working their crops. Some waved a friendly greeting as they passed, though most simply ignored them.

A little before midday, a town of some size appeared further down the road. As they continued toward it, James spied an orchard of fruit trees. A family of three generations was hard at work harvesting its fruit. The baskets filled with reddish-yellow fruit were stacked on a nearby mule-drawn wagon. James slowed and left the road to approach them.

As he neared, the family noticed his approach but continued to gather their fruit. An older gentleman, probably the farmer's father, walked over to greet him.

"Good day to you, sirs," the old man said in a friendly manner.

"A good day to you too. I was wondering if you could tell me the name of the town that is up the road," he asked, pointing to the town on the horizon.

"That is Lornigan," the man explained, "the agricultural center for this area." He eyed James and Miko warily but relaxed somewhat when all they seemed to want was information. The family behind him, though they cast repeated glances their way, continued harvesting.

"Lornigan?" questioned James. When the old man nodded, he said, "Thank you."

"Any time, good sirs."

"I don't suppose you would part with some of your fruit?" James asked. "Maybe just four or five?"

The man's face broadened into a smile and he said, "Of course sir, it'll be only a copper." While James dug a copper out of his pouch, the man went to the wagon and picked out six of the fruits. He then brought them back and handed them over as he took the copper.

"Six?" James asked. "I only wanted five."

"I know" the farmer said, "but six is what a copper is worth and I wouldn't want to cheat you." He gave James a wink, "Besides, since there is but the two of you, six is easier to divvy up than five."

"I appreciate that," James said as he handed three to Miko. Eyeing the fruit longingly, he said, "And thank you for allowing us to purchase them."

"No trouble at all, sir," the man assured him. "Actually it happens quite often. There are many travelers on the road to Lornigan. It's the last large town before the long road to Trademeet."

"Would you know of a place in Lornigan where we could get a bite to eat?"

"Certainly. Try *The Grinning Specter*." When he saw the look on Miko's face, the man continued. "Don't let the name bother you boy, there's nothing scary about it. The food there is good and fairly priced. You'll find it along the road a little after you enter the town. Look for the sign with the smiling ghost."

"Thank you, we'll do that," James said appreciatively. "You have a good day," he said as he turned his horse toward the road.

"You too, sir," the old man replied.

Finishing his first fruit, Miko said, "Thanks."

Smiling, James said, "No problem. Fresh fruit is hard to come by at times. Besides, you never know what you are going to find out by talking to the locals." He took a bite and enjoyed the sweet firm flesh of the fruit. "Reminds me of a nectarine."

“Nectarine?” Miko asked.

“It’s a popular fruit from where I come from,” he explained. “My grandfather always had some in the house whenever they were in season.”

“They are good,” agreed Miko, as he bit into his second.

They continued on toward Lornigan, munching on the fruit as they gradually approached the outskirts of town. Overall the buildings here had been kept up well, though a few did show signs of age and neglect. The usual hawkers were there to greet them as they passed the first several buildings. They crowded around and tried to get James and Miko to buy their goods, but when they showed little interest, they backed off a bit. Despite the lack of interest from James and Miko, some did continue to exclaim the virtues of their wares to the annoyance of both.

Passing several more buildings, they came to a three story structure with a sign out front upon which was painted a grinning ghostly apparition. “This must be the place,” James said.

“Yeah,” agreed Miko, “not what I expected though.”

Turning to Miko, he asked, “And just what were you expecting? A creepy, scary place?”

“Sort of”

James chuckled, “Never let the name of a place give you the wrong impression.”

They hitched their horses out front and went inside. The interior of the place was neat and clean, with a good aroma of cooking food that came from the kitchen. Most of the tables were filled with midday eaters. Several servers scurried from table to table, delivering their orders and otherwise being helpful.

James spied an empty table to the side and they made their way through the crowd. James sat with his back to the wall, and signaled to a server.

“Good day, gentlemen,” greeted the server. “How may I help you today?”

“What’s the special?”

“Today we have a roast goose with lemon sauce that is extra good,” he replied. “Or you can have the chicken stew. The goose is five coppers and the stew three, each comes with a half loaf of bread.”

“I’ll have the goose,” James replied, “and some ale.”

The server turned to Miko, “And you?”

“I’ll have the goose as well,” Miko told him.

James handed the coins to the server who then headed off to the kitchen to see about their order.

While they waited for their meals to arrive, James watched eight men dressed in uniforms enter and head their way. They took the table next to theirs.

A serving girl took their orders. When they were done placing their order, the leader said, “And make it fast, we need to leave quickly.”

“Yes, sir,” the girl replied and hurried back to the kitchen. She returned quickly with a tray carrying eight large bowls of stew and four loaves of bread. Another girl accompanied her with eight mugs and a pitcher of ale. The soldiers set to with gusto, not taking the time to talk to one another, just intent on their meals.

“In a hurry?” James asked.

“You could say that,” the leader replied between bites of stew. “We need to be to the Merchant’s Pass as soon as possible.”

Curious, James asked, “Why?”

The leader broke a chunk of bread off the loaf and dipped it into his stew before he shoved it in his mouth. “The siege of Saragon is going badly we hear. We’re on our way to the Pass to inspect the defenses in case the Empire’s army decides to wander in that direction.”

“Are you worried that we may be attacked?”

“Not really,” he said. “Madoc is putting up stiff resistance and it’s unlikely that the Empire will have the additional manpower to attack us directly. I hear they don’t have the inner stability that would enable them to release more troops for battle.”

“You mean they must keep the bulk of their troops inside the Empire to keep it together?”

“Not the bulk to be sure,” he replied. “But I hear they need troops to keep some of their more recalcitrant provinces in line. If they were to pull too many north to fight Madoc, or us, then the southern and eastern sections might become rebellious and cause them no end of trouble. Of course, I am just repeating barrack’s gossip. I don’t *know* any of this to be true.”

“If they are so unstable,” James asked, “then why push into Madoc?”

Shrugging, the leader said, “Who knows? Maybe things have changed that has freed up a large section of their armies, no way to really know. I am sure we have spies within the Empire that may know, but I doubt if that knowledge would become available to the general population.”

“True,” James agreed.

“One thing for sure,” the leader continued, “it has strained relationships between Cardri and the Empire. We are not at war with them, but I hear that we are helping Madoc in these dire times with supplies and possibly some troops, though that is only rumor.”

“Do you think we would go to war with the Empire?”

“Not unless directly attacked, I wouldn’t think so. Cardri has a fair sized army but nothing compared with the might that the Empire could put into the field. Now keep in mind, the troops they are keeping in their southern territories to keep rebellion in check, would be released to fight if we were to enter the conflict. The only hope Madoc has is if they overextend themselves and one or more of their southern territories were to think this would be a good time to rebel. Not likely to happen, but you never know.”

“Thanks for the information,” James said. “Maybe we’ll see you again. We’re planning on taking the Merchant’s Pass over into Madoc.”

“Then you had better hurry,” he replied. “From what I understand, if Saragon falls then the Pass is to be closed and all traffic diverted north through Dragon’s Pass.”

“Why would they close it, if we’re not at war with them?”

“For safety,” the leader replied. “With both sides having armies in the field, it wouldn’t do to have our citizens traveling through the middle of it.”

“You have a point.”

Finishing the last of his meal, the leader said to his men, “Let’s get going, we’ve got a long way to travel before this day is through.”

His men finished the last of their stew. A couple of the soldiers took the remaining loaves with them, putting the bread in travel pouches that hung on their belts. As the leader got up to leave, he paused a moment and said to James, "If you are going over Merchant's Pass, be careful. If the Empire finds you there, they will treat you as spies most likely. Good luck to you both."

"Thank you and safe travel to you and your men."

The leader nodded and then headed for the door. His men had already exited the inn. "I guess we should make this quick," he said to Miko.

"I agree," the boy replied, "but do you still think it's a good idea to travel into Madoc? After all, you really don't know where what you're looking for is."

"The risks have increased, but I still feel that I need to get over there and try to find the answers." Looking at the expression on Miko's face, he continued, "Don't worry, we'll be extra careful. If we stick together, we should be okay."

"I hope so," Miko said, not very convinced.

"We should be going, though. Trademeet is still a couple of days away," James said as he got up. Like the soldiers, he too placed the rest of the bread in his backpack for later. Miko followed him out to the horses. They mounted and headed through the streets of Lornigan. When they came to the junction Perrilin mentioned, they took the northern leg to Trademeet.

Not far past the last building, they came across a large open market consisting of dozens of tables and booths stocked with items for sale. Having never seen a market situated outside of a town, he hailed a passerby. "Excuse me."

The man looked up at James, "Yes?" he asked, in a tone that made it clear he was being bothered.

"Could you tell me what that is over there?"

The man looked at James like he was an idiot, "That's the summer market." He then started on his way again.

"Sorry, just one more question."

"What?" the man asked, slowing his pace but not coming to a full stop.

"Why is it outside the town?"

"Because that's the way it is, the way it's always been for as long as anyone can remember. When the weather gets warm, they set up out here until it gets cool again." This time the man quickly walked away, wanting to get away from bothersome questions.

"Friendly chap wasn't he?" Miko observed.

"Some are just that way."

Indicating the market, Miko asked, "Are we going over there?"

"I don't think so," James answered, "I was just curious."

"Oh," grunted Miko.

They made their way through the crowds going to and from the market area. By the time the market faded from sight, the level of travelers had dropped to a very few, allowing them to make better time. The further they progressed from Lornigan, the more wild and uncultivated the countryside became until they were once again out in the unpopulated grasslands. They

proceeded on, making as fast a time as their horses would allow, stopping only to rest their horses and have a bite to eat.

By the time they stopped for the night they were both fatigued. Miko could hardly walk for the stiffness and pain in his legs. "I thought this was supposed to be getting better," he complained, "but it seems to be getting worse."

Feeling sorry for his friend, James consoled him by saying, "It takes a while to toughen up the muscles and get them used to hugging a horse's flank. Give it time. We rode hard today so you had little time to get off and stretch."

A brilliant sunset off to the west painted the clouds red and orange. To the east was a range of tall mountains. "Seems a long way to those mountains," observed Miko.

Looking eastward, James said, "Yes it does. From what Perrilin said, those are the Silver Mountains and Trademeet will be at their base, near the entrance to Merchant's Pass."

"How long do you expect it will take us to get there?" he asked as he set about readying supplies for dinner.

Thinking for a moment, James replied, "At the pace we set today, hopefully by tomorrow night."

"I should be good and stiff by then," Miko moaned.

Grinning, James said, "Probably."

James was awakened during the night by cries coming from Miko. He looked over to his friend and found him tossing and turning in his sleep. Several more times throughout the night, James was again awakened by the tossing and turning of Miko.

In the morning as soon as they were both up, James asked Miko how he had slept.

A tired Miko looked at James with bloodshot eyes. "I couldn't find a comfortable spot. My legs and butt kept hurting and every time I did fall asleep, I had a dream about being on a horse for so long that my legs fell off."

Laughing, James said, "I'm sorry."

"Yeah," replied Miko, "I'm sure you are."

"No, really I am," assured James, who broke out laughing again.

His laughter was infectious and soon Miko smiled as well.

"Now let's get going," James said as he saddled up his horse.

Miko put the food away and readied his horse. He was not quite as stiff as he had been the night before but there was still a hitch in his get-along. It was not long before they were both mounted and headed to Trademeet.

All day, the cloud covered mountains continued to grow in the distance; snow-covered peaks appeared amongst the cloud cover. *Must be pretty high to still have snow*, he thought.

A couple hours before sunset they made out the outline of a large walled city at the base of the mountains.

"Trademeet," Miko said.

"Looks like it," James agreed. "We should make it before nightfall."

"Hope we can find an inn and are able to get a bath."

James started laughing. Miko looked at him and he just laughed harder.

“What’s so funny?” Miko asked, not getting the joke.

When he finally calmed himself enough to talk, he explains, “I was just remembering how you used to view baths that first time. I practically had to force you into one,” and then he started laughing all over again.

Smiling too, Miko said, “I’m just hoping it will help soothe an ache or two.” Then he started to laugh as well.

“I am sure we can get a room and have a bath,” James assured him. “I would like one too.”

They hurried toward the city and the wall gradually grew before them as they drew closer. At the gate they were waved through by a couple of bored guards and entered the city.

Several blocks later they came across an inn that James considered acceptable. The sign outside depicted an ocean shoreline with a sun dropping below the horizon. James left Miko outside with the horses and mule and to see about getting a room.

“Welcome to *The Setting Sun*,” a man said as James entered. “What can we do for you this evening?”

“A room for the night and a place to stable two horses and a mule.”

The man, thin and gangly with a cheerful presence replied, “Not a problem, sir. We have several available and plenty of room in our stable out back to accommodate your steeds. It’s only a silver a night, but that also includes dinner.”

“We’ll take it. I have a traveling companion,” James replied. “Can I get a room with two beds maybe?”

“Certainly, many of our rooms come with two beds so that will be no problem,” assured the man. Extending his hand he said, “My name is Porlen. I own and operate *The Setting Sun*. Settle in your steeds out back and then I’ll get you set up with your room.”

“Thank you, I’ll do that.” He then returned to Miko.

They led the horses around the side of the inn to the courtyard where several people were hanging around. A boy of about ten or eleven disengaged from the group. He helped them find stalls and got their horses and mule settled in. Once all were taken care of for the night, they took their travel bags and went inside the inn through the back door. There they found Porlen behind the counter, straightening up.

He looked up as they entered. “Got ‘em settled?”

“Yep,” James replied.

“Good, good.” Handing him a key he signaled a boy who took their bags. “Ritchie here will show you to your room. Dinner will be served in about an hour. You might want to come down early, we sometimes get pretty crowded and it may be hard to find a table once we start serving dinner.”

“Thank you,” James said, “but is it possible to have dinner in our rooms?”

“Not a problem,” Porlen assured them. “I’ll send Ritchie to your room when it’s time and he can get you what you need.” Turning to Ritchie, he said, “They are staying in number seven.”

Ritchie said, “Follow me,” and then led them to their room on the ground floor, just down the hall off the main dining area.

Ritchie held the door open, allowing them to enter first. He placed their bags on one of the beds and then stood there waiting. James fished a copper out of his pouch and gave it to the boy.

Ritchie looked at it, not entirely happy with the fact it wasn't a better color, and then left the room.

"Guess he wanted more?" suggested Miko.

"Probably," agreed James. "Maybe they get more here. I'll give him a little extra next time."

In no time at all, Miko was stretched out on a bed, "Not as comfortable as the ones in Inius' place, but it'll do."

James sat on his bed and saw what he meant. It was firm but still comfortable.

"This place doesn't cost as much as his did either," James explained. "You generally get what you pay for."

"I suppose," Miko answered, then broke into a big yawn.

James took out his travel case and put it on the table. He removed several sheets of paper, a quill and a bottle of ink.

From the bed he heard Miko ask, "Gonna do some writing?"

"Yeah, just want to jot down some notes of what's been happening," he replied from the table. "Rest yourself before dinner, okay?"

When no answer was forthcoming from Miko, he realized the boy had already fallen asleep. Smiling at his friend's expense, James uncorked the bottle of ink, and dipped his quill and began to make notes about the last couple of days.

He wrote down some of the high points on the conversation between himself and the leader of the soldiers he had talked to the day before. Once he had that written down to his satisfaction, he took a separate sheet and made some notes about magic.

...during the battle when we rescued the girls, Miko offered to let me use the power in him to augment my own depleted magical powers. It worked fine, however there arose in me a moral dilemma. I feel it wrong to do this without asking, that it would be an aberration or evil if it was done against someone's will...

...the tornado I brought down almost killed me. I understood what to do, or thought I did. Having seen documentaries on television helped me to shape and control it. If I keep doing over-the-top magic like that it's going to end up killing me...

...I have found that the more I do magic, the easier it is to get the desired results, and the less weakened I become afterward. Maybe it's like building up muscle and endurance, the more often you do it, the better you can handle it...

...still don't know why the book told me that spells had to be in rhyme form and spoken. Maybe it's just the easiest way, and once you get used to the process, are able to evolve beyond it...

A knock interrupted his writing. He put the pen down and got up to see who it was. Ritchie was there, telling him that dinner was being served and would like to know what they wanted. James ordered for himself and his sleeping friend.

“Wake up,” he said as he shook Miko’s shoulder, startling him awake. “Dinner’s going to be up in a few minutes.”

Miko yawned, then went to the table where he sat to await the arrival of the meal. James removed his writing implements and moved the notes to a side table where they could dry undisturbed. It didn’t take long before there was another knock on the door.

James let in Ritchie who set the platter of food on the table. Another boy accompanied him with a pitcher of ale and two mugs. James gave Ritchie two coppers and the boy seemed more satisfied this time.

Before they left, James asked, “Is there a chance we could have two baths sent to our room after dinner?”

“We can do that, though it will be another four coppers for each of the baths.”

“Very well,” James said. “After you have taken the plates when we’re done, bring ‘em on in.”

“Very well, sir,” Ritchie replied. “I’ll let Porlen know.” Ritchie and the other boy exited.

James ordered the roasted duck with steamed potatoes. It was very good and Miko definitely enjoyed it, going through it in his usual ravenous way. James made sure to take an extra helping before he was even done with his first, before Miko ate it all.

No more than five minutes after the last bite was eaten, Ritchie again came to the door and took away the dirty plates and mugs. Shortly after that, two medium size tubs were brought in and filled with hot, steaming water. One of the girls asked if they would like her to stay to ‘help’ them.

“No, thanks,” James said. “I think we can manage on our own.”

“Okay,” she replied, a little disappointed. “We’ll be back later to remove the water and baths.” She then left the room and they undressed, settling into the warm water.

After a few minutes, James asked, “Is it helping relieve your aches and pains?”

“Ohhhhhh, yeah,” Miko answered very contentedly. “I can’t believe that I ever thought baths were dumb.”

“Tomorrow we’ll leave and take Merchant’s Pass over the mountains into Madoc,” James stated. “Better enjoy this while you can, it may be the last one that we will be able to have for a while.”

“I will,” Miko replied, “don’t worry about that.” He sunk down into the tub until just his head showed. He had a very contented expression on his face.

James relaxed in his tub until the water turned cold and forced him out. Once both were dressed, Miko went downstairs and let one of the workers know they could take the tubs out.

They relaxed upon the beds as the workers removed the water, pail by pail. Once the level of the water had been sufficiently reduced, two of the larger lads came in to carry out the tubs.

Alone once more, the weariness of the day set in and sleep could no longer be put off. James blew out the candle and sleep quickly took them. Miko didn’t thrash around in his sleep this night, as the soak in hot water had left his legs feeling much better.

The following morning they arose to the dawn of another sunny summer day. They dressed and headed downstairs for breakfast, bringing their belongings with them.

They found a table in the dining area and were soon enjoying a hearty breakfast of ham steak and potatoes. Suddenly the front door slammed open and a man ran into the inn looking around. When he didn't see the owner in the common area he hollered out, "Porlen!"

Porlen hurried in from the back and seeing the man standing there, asked him, "What is it, Jacob?"

"Saragon has fallen!" Jacob exclaimed excitedly.

"Fallen? When?"

"A rider just came down from the Pass," Jacob replied. "He's headed to Castle Cardri to tell the king what's going on. They say that they're going to be closing the Pass sometime this afternoon."

James and Miko looked at each other as they heard the news.

"The Pass is going to be closed?" exclaimed an astounded Porlen. "It's hasn't been closed in over a hundred years."

"I know," Jacob replied. "They said it would only be temporary until they see what the Empire's going to do. They don't want people traveling out there in the middle of a war. They said that anyone who plans on taking the Pass better make it there as soon as possible."

That's all James needed to hear. He got up and said, "Miko we're leaving, go get the horses ready."

Miko raced for the stables.

James went to Porlen, "How much to settle the bill?"

"Are you leaving us already?"

"We got to make it to the Pass before it closes."

"Better be careful over there," Porlen warned, "the Empire isn't known for its kindness to strangers." He went to the counter and totaled the charges. James gave him the money he owed.

"We don't intend to get that close to the Empire's forces," he explained. He returned to the table and gathered his things, then hurried to the stables where Miko had their horses ready.

James secured the bags onto the mule and then walked the horses outside. They quickly mounted and then exited the courtyard. They followed the road in the direction of the Merchant's Pass as quickly as the crowded streets would allow.

The townspeople were all talking amongst themselves, exchanging the news of the fall of Saragon and the closing of the Pass. There was anxiety in the air and a little bit of fear as well. Many were nervous and none were sure what may or may not be happening.

As they got closer to the gate that led to the road that wound through the Pass, the crowds became thicker and thicker. The people didn't necessarily want to go over the Pass, they were just interested in finding out what was going on. The road became increasingly congested. Soon an announcement was made that only those who wished to travel the Pass were to be on the road so they could reach it before the Pass closed to all traffic.

Most people heeded the announcement and the road became less congested which allowed them to make better time. It took over an hour to get to the entrance to the Pass. It was a trip that should have taken ten minutes normally, but had taken longer due to all the lookiloos, as his grandmother would've called them.

Several merchants had set up stands hoping to get the people going through the pass to buy their wares. One in particular interested James so he made his way over and paused to inspect the goods.

Upon seeing James approach, the merchant picked up a couple of the jackets he was selling and began extolling their merits.

James tried on one of the fur lined jackets, soft and very warm. The outside was leather and looked as if it would repel water.

"Does this jacket shed water?" he asked the merchant.

"Oh yes, good sir," he said. "My jackets are the warmest and driest you can find anywhere. If you plan to cross the Pass, then you will need them. The summit is very cold, especially at night."

"How much for two?"

"I could part with two of these fine jackets for a mere six gold".

From behind him he heard a gasp from Miko. He turned to find Miko shaking his head, telling him that it was too expensive. James gritted his teeth and set to haggling with the man. He finally worked him down to three gold and seven coppers. He had Miko try one on and soon found a jacket that fit him.

After handing over the money, they packed the jackets onto the mule and mounted up.

"Why do we need those?" Miko asked. "It's hot."

"It may be hot here, but when we reach the top, we may well be glad to have them," James explained. "The mountains get cold when the sun goes down even in the summer, you'll see." Getting their horses moving again they continued on their way to the Pass.

The road continued over a bridge and then toward the mountains. It entered a gorge that over the centuries had been carved out of the rock by a large river. Running alongside the river, the road could be seen as it extended further into the pass until the gorge turned and disappeared into the mountain.

When they crossed the bridge, they found the river below was flowing strong and fast. The temperature dropped noticeably when they were over the river due to the coldness of the water coming out of the mountains.

A hundred feet or so beyond the bridge, off to the side was a makeshift barricade that would be used to close off the Pass. There was no actual gate to close, just a squad of guards and barricades to keep everyone out. When they came near to the actual entrance to the Pass, a sergeant was there telling all who planned to pass through to Madoc that they "will be able to return back through the pass from Madoc until the Empire's forces have been sighted. Once the Empire's armies have been seen, the Pass will be closed and no more traffic will be allowed to enter from Madoc. It will open again when the situation on the other side of the mountains becomes less unstable and dangerous to travelers."

Some upon hearing this turned back but there were still more that continued on despite the dangers. One lone caravan braved the trip, causing a bottleneck at the entrance. The caravan master moved his wagons through two at a time, causing the foot and horse traffic to bog down as they made their way around the slow moving wagons.

James and Miko took their place in line. After what seemed like a very long time, they made it to the entrance, and began making their way around the wagons. As they passed the guards, James looked behind them and saw another dozen or so people waiting their turn to enter the Pass. The guards brought up the barricades and it looked as if they intended to close the Pass after the last of the stragglers entered.

They carefully made their way around the caravan and then headed deeper into the Pass.

Chapter Twenty-One

The road through the Pass was the main artery for trade between Madoc and Cardri and wide enough to accommodate three wagons abreast. The surface of the road, while not perfectly smooth, was firm and level with minimal ruts and potholes.

As they left the entrance to the Pass and followed the road around the bend, the panoramic view of the gorge unfolded. They paused to take in its grandeur. On either side the gorge rose up to dizzying heights with the river cutting through the middle. Cascading down the opposite side, several waterfalls added additional splendor. The road followed the river for nearly a mile before it began the ascent up to the higher elevations. With many a twist and turn, it occasionally vanished from view only to reappear once more further up the mountainside. Straining their vision, they could barely make out where the road ultimately disappeared into the clouds.

“We’re going there?” James heard Miko exclaim incredulously.

“It’s not so bad,” he reassured his friend. “Caravans come this way all the time, so I’m sure we will have little difficulty.” Nudging his horse forward, James continued down the road forcing Miko to keep up or be left behind.

Before the road began its ascent from the river, they came upon a fellow traveler driving a wagon loaded with goods. “Excuse me,” James said as he came abreast of the wagon.

The man turned his head toward the pair. “Yes?”

“How far is it to the other side of the Pass?”

“Two days on horseback,” the man said. “Most caravans make it in about four to five, depending on the load they’re carrying.”

“Is there any place along the way to stop and eat?” Miko asked.

“No son, there isn’t,” he replied. “However, there is a way stop near the top where travelers are able to rest for the night before making the descent on the other side.”

“Appreciate the information,” James said.

“You’re welcome.”

James nudged his horse and they resumed their quick pace, leaving the man and his wagon behind.

“Are we going to spend tonight at the way stop?”

“I would think so,” James replied. “If we make it that far before it gets dark that is.”

Once the ascent began, the road climbed at a steady, though at the moment, not an overly steep pace. It ran along the right side of the river, following the water’s path as it flowed through the gorge. At times the river roared to life when it made its way through an area of rapids.

As they progressed deeper and deeper into the Pass, the mountainside to the right of the road became increasingly steep as its vertical slope increased. Waterfalls grew plentiful as the warm summer weather melted the snowpack in the upper elevations.

Being a city boy, Miko had never seen waterfalls and was quite impressed by their beauty and power. He paused by one as he dismounted to fill his depleted water bottle. When he placed the bottle in the waterfall, he quickly snatched his hand back when the water hit his skin.

“What’s the matter?” James asked, startled at his reaction.

Miko looked at James, “It is cold!”

Laughing, James explained, “Of course it’s cold. The water is coming from snow melting high up in the peaks.”

“Oh,” he replied, feeling slightly embarrassed not to have known that. He gritted his teeth and placed his bottle back into the falling water, and filled it. Then he secured it back to his saddle and remounted. Looking at his hand, he found that his fingers were a little red from the icy water. He marveled at the water as it cascaded down the side of the mountain. He watched it until it disappeared from view.

They passed the occasional wagon or traveler as they progressed. It wasn’t long until they heard a steady, loud roar from up ahead.

The mountainside on their right abruptly fell away, revealing a tall narrow gorge with a majestic, powerful, three tiered waterfall. The water, after collecting in a pool at the base of the falls, crossed under a bridge and cascaded down the mountainside to the river below.

The sound of the falls was deafening as they crossed the bridge that spanned its outflow. Its thundering reverberated through them as they paused a moment to marvel at this wonder of nature.

“Ain’t that something?” James hollered, trying to be heard over the roar of the falls.

“Yeah!” he hollered back. While they paused on the bridge, the spray wafted over them and it felt good, cooling them from the heat of the day.

“James, look!” exclaimed Miko as he pointed to the pool at the base of the waterfall.

Three deer drank from the pool. They both enjoyed the sight of the deer, but it was time to move on. As they left, Miko turned his head several times to capture the beauty of the waterfall and the deer until the scene disappeared behind trees and rocks.

The travelers they encountered were few and far between, all either on individual wagons or part of small caravans. None were very talkative as they had far too much on their minds, worrying about conditions on the other side of the mountains, and whether or not they would find safety.

The further into the Pass they went, the more the road climbed away from the river. Though still able to hear the rapids as water crashed over rocks below, it had been steadily growing fainter and fainter as they progressed to the upper elevations.

Upon reaching where the road widened into a scenic overlook, they stopped for a short break to give the horses a rest and to have a quick bite to eat. Miko moved to the edge of the overlook and gazed down to the river below. Having never looked down from such a height, he was almost overcome with a sudden fear of heights. Assailed by vertigo, he backed away quickly until there were several yards of road between him and the edge.

“Are you okay?” James asked as he handed him a portion of their rations.

Miko took the food James offered. “It’s just that we are so high. I didn’t realize we had climbed so far.”

“It is deceiving,” James admitted. “While you are climbing, it doesn’t seem like your ascent has been all that dramatic, until you look down. Then it sort of hits you all at once. I remember it happened to me once when my family took me to Yellowstone.”

“Your family took you to go see a yellow stone?” asked Miko confusedly.

“Not a yellow stone,” corrected James, “but a place called Yellowstone. It’s where people went to get away for a while and have fun.”

“Oh,” replied Miko.

After their break, they remounted and resumed scaling the pass. They came to a section of the mountain that leveled into a plateau. The plateau extended for several miles from the gorge until it ended and the mountains resumed their rise. About a quarter mile off the road further back on the plateau sat a large structure in ill repair. It stood four stories high with windows only in the uppermost section of the walls. A large door loomed open, slightly ajar.

“Must be an old keep,” James guessed. “Maybe a garrison was once stationed here.”

“Could be,” agreed Miko. “It doesn’t look as if anyone has been in there for a long time. Wonder if it’s haunted.”

“Don’t tell me you believe in ghosts?” James asked, slightly amused.

“Of course not,” asserted Miko. “It’s just that the place looks creepy.”

“I would love to see what is inside,” admitted James, and then let out a big sigh. “But we better make the best time we can, while we can. No telling how long we will have before we run the danger of encountering the Empire’s armies once we get through the mountains.”

“Good idea,” agreed Miko, slightly more enthusiastic than the occasion called for. “We better hurry along” he urged. With that he kicked the flanks of his horse and continued down the road, putting distance between himself and the old keep.

Grinning at his friend, James hurried to catch him. The plateau area with the abandoned keep was left behind.

The rest of the afternoon passed with more waterfalls, though none were as spectacular as the three-tiered one. About mid-afternoon, the sun fell behind the high mountain peaks to the west and the air turned chilly. Over the next hour, the temperature dropped rapidly. Soon they pulled on the new jackets they bought in Trademeet.

"I see what you mean," Miko said as he put on his jacket.

"About what?"

"About how cool it gets up here after the sun goes down."

"My grandfather taught me to always be prepared," said James. "He used to say 'It's better to bring a jacket you'll never need than to need the one you left at home'."

"Wise man your grandfather," commented Miko, now warm and comfortable.

"Yes, he was. But you know when they are giving you these little gems of wisdom, you seldom see the value of it at the time and often see it as being a big nuisance." James sat in thought for a while before he broke out in laughter.

Miko asked, "What's so funny?"

"I was just remembering when I came to realize the value of that particular gem," he said as he began to explain, but then paused for a moment.

"And what happened?" Miko prompted him.

Smiling at the memory, James said, "Well, it was summertime and we planned a trip out to the coast. San Francisco was the name of the city. Now, my grandfather was telling me that I should bring my jacket, that I may need it. But it was really hot where we were and I couldn't see the need of it. We arrived at the city and decided to go see Alcatraz. That's an old prison situated on an island in the middle of the bay. I got on the ferry that was going to take us over there, and froze."

Smiling, Miko enjoyed hearing about James' little goof-up.

"I told my grandfather that I was cold. But he just smiled and called it a lesson learned. We stayed on that island for what seemed like a long time and I froze the entire time. I was miserable, my nose was running and I was shaking. When we finally returned to the mainland, I made a beeline to a seller of hot clam chowder and grabbed me some.

"I'll never forget that experience and I will never be caught again without a coat, not if I can help it." Finished with the story, James rode along in silence for a while, reminiscing about home.

Shortly, he noticed the smell of wood smoke. He looked for a plume that might indicate a forest fire, but didn't see anything. The smell steadily increased as they continued, when he realized that they must be approaching the top of the summit. He had been smelling smoke from many campfires.

Cresting the top of the Pass, they came to the way stop. They were surprised at how many people were camped there. A contingent of soldiers was also there, keeping order.

One of the soldiers broke off from his fellows and approached, holding up his hand to have them stop. "Sorry, but the way stop is bursting to capacity with more coming in all the time," he explained. "You two will need to camp a little further back down the road."

"Why?" James asked. "What's going on?"

“Refugees from the fall of Saragon,” the soldier explained, indicating the people at the way stop. “They’ve been pouring through the Pass for the last day or so. We made a temporary camp here for them and will keep them here until we know what is to be done with them.”

“Why not allow them to go on into Trademeet?” Miko asked.

“Those are the Captain’s orders and he didn’t explain himself to me,” the soldier replied.

“No problem,” James told him. “We can camp a little further back down the road tonight and then continue over in the morning.”

“Sorry,” he said, “but we just got orders that no one is to be allowed down the east side of the Pass until further notice.”

“What?” James exclaimed. “Why?”

The soldier, tired of explaining, said, “Like I said before, that’s the Captains orders and he doesn’t explain them to me.” Having said all he intended to, he turned around and headed back to the camp.

“Now what are we going to do?” Miko asked.

James gave Miko an exasperated look. “Would you stop asking me that!”

“Alright, alright,” he replied.

“Let’s go back down a ways and find a campsite. Maybe we can think of something.”

They found a widening of the road with sufficient room to make camp and not be on the road. James sent Miko to gather firewood before it got dark while he staked out the horses and got them ready for the night.

Miko made three scavenging trips before he collected a sufficient store of firewood to last throughout the night. James got the fire going and had dinner started before the light completely faded. While sitting around the fire eating dinner, two men appeared from the direction of the way stop and approached their campfire.

“Hello,” one said.

“Good evening, gentlemen,” James replied, and then waited to see what they would do.

They approached a little closer to the fire. James saw that they were eyeing their food hungrily. He said to them, “Would you two care to share our fire this evening? We have enough.”

“Yes, we’d like that,” the other man said. “But we actually came to see if you could spare some for our families. You see we fled Saragon when it fell with nothing but the clothes on our backs.”

“Certainly,” James said, “if you don’t have too many,”

The taller of the two men almost broke down and cried while the other said, “Thank you very much.” Turning to the taller man he said, “Silas, go and bring ‘em over.”

Silas headed back toward the refugee camp. The man said, “My name is Bellon. I was a farmer before the Empire’s army sacked our city.”

“How did you get out?” Miko asked.

“When the Empire overran the walls, it was total chaos,” Bellon explained. “People fled in every direction trying to get out. My grandfather used to be a smuggler way back when he was a younger man and once showed me an old route into the city that he said no one, not even the

Governor knew about. Silas and I found it and used it to get our families out past the walls. The tunnel ended in a pile of old stones a dozen yards from the river, almost two miles north of the city.”

“We were past the enemy lines and ran all night and all day, hiding whenever we heard someone approaching. We did that until we saw Madoc’s soldiers coming from the City of Light. We waved them down and told them where we were from and what had happened. They told us to head here, saying we could find refuge and safety.”

“Remarkable story,” James said. About that time, Silas returned with the rest, two women, an older boy and two smaller children. All had the lost look of those who have had their lives torn asunder.

James stood when the ladies approached. “Welcome. You are welcome to stay here the night if you wish. We don’t have a lot of food, but what we do have we will gladly share.” Turning to Miko, he said, “Get the rest out of the bags and pass it out. They look as if they could use it.”

The two families situated themselves on the ground around the campfire and waited for Miko to distribute the food. There was enough to go around, not enough to stuff their bellies, but sufficient to still their hunger.

“By the way, my name is James and this is my companion, Miko.”

“We sure thank you for this, James,” Silas said. “The kids were getting hungry and the food that the soldiers distributed ran out by the time we made it to the front of the line.”

“I don’t think they had planned on this many making it here,” Bellon said. “They said a caravan was on its way from Trademeet but wouldn’t be here until later tomorrow or possibly the day after.”

“We passed a large caravan coming this way early in the morning,” Miko told them. “It will most likely be up here sometime late tomorrow.”

“That’s good news,” Silas said.

“James and I plan on going on through the Pass to Madoc in the morning,” Miko told them.

James gave him a look that said, ‘Don’t tell strangers our business.’ Miko had the good sense to blush at his mistake.

Silas’ wife said, “You mustn’t go there!”

Holding his wife’s hand, Silas said, “I agree, it’s not a good place to be right now.”

“Well, we don’t plan on going anywhere near Saragon,” James said.

“Still, the Empire’s men are terrible foes,” Bellon stated.

“Why are they so terrible?” Miko asked with apprehension.

Bellon looked at him and said, “They kill just for the pleasure of it. If they can capture you, you become their slave and they take you back to their Empire to sell you at auction. When Saragon fell and we were running through the streets to get to the smuggler’s route, we saw the slavers taking people, tying their hands behind their backs and stringing them in slave lines. If they were too old or an invalid, they just slit their throats, leaving them to lie in the street and bleed to death.”

Bellon’s wife put a hand on his arm, shook her head and indicated the children. “Oh, sorry, maybe this is not the time or place to be talking about such things.”

“I think I get the idea,” James said, understanding. “But there is not much we can do, we have to go.”

“If you must go,” Silas said, “then stay as far to the north away from Saragon as you can. No one was sure if the Empire would stop at Saragon or push further north.”

“We will, I promise,” he assured them. He turned his attention to the vacant-eyed younger children. “Now who would like to hear a silly song about a bunny?”

They perked up at that, at least the younger two did. One of them said very timidly, “I do.”

So James began to sing. “Little bunny Foo Foo hopping through the forest...” While he sang, he pantomimed the little bunny hopping along with the rest of the cast of characters.

For the remainder of the evening he sang all the old silly songs he once sung as a child and even threw in a couple of poems. The children sat in rapt attention and after the first two songs, began to smile a little and even clapped along. The adults, seeing life return to their children, clapped along as well with tears in their eyes.

Eventually, James’ voice cracked and he had to stop for a while. Miko, surprisingly, began a song about a lord who couldn’t find his slippers. It was a silly song, but one that the children had heard before because they sang along with him after the first chorus.

The rest of the night was full of singing and silly tales. For a time at least, the memories of what happened and what their futures might hold were forgotten. All that mattered this night was that they had brought joy back to the children.

The following morning when the sky began to lighten, even before the sun rose over the mountain peaks, James and Miko made ready to get through the Pass.

Silas, Bellon and their families gathered around, shaking hands. Silas’ wife even went so far as to give James a kiss. “Thank you so much for last night,” she said with tears in her eyes.

“I wish you all well,” James said as he mounted his horse with Miko following suit. James reached into his shirt and pulled out a bag of coins, tossing it toward Silas who caught it. “Take this and start a new life.”

“We can’t accept this,” Silas said and made to hand it back.

“No, you keep it,” James said, refusing to take it. “I have plenty of money. What good is it if you can’t use it to help out your fellow man?”

“How can I ever repay your generosity?”

“Before the year is out, help two people who are less fortunate than you,” James explained. “Also, ask them each to help two people within a year. Start a chain of giving, who knows where it might lead.” When all was ready he and Miko mounted up.

“We will,” said Bellon. The rest of the adults agreed.

James reached down and shook hands with Bellon and Silas, “Good bye now, and good luck.”

“May the gods speed you on your way,” Silas said.

“And be careful,” his wife added.

With a final wave, James and Miko headed toward the summit and into Madoc. Behind them, James heard one of the little girls begin to sing, “Little bunny Foo Foo...” With a tear beginning to well in his eye, he hurried along toward the way stop.

They didn't get far before they were once again challenged by a soldier, a different one than the day before. "Travelers are not allowed beyond the way stop."

"We can take care of ourselves," James assured him.

"Be that as it may, my orders are clear. No one, and I mean no one, is to be allowed to endanger themselves by traveling into the Madoc area." He stood and barred their way, staring at them.

"What if we just ride around you and go anyway?"

"Then the soldiers further east will stop you," the soldier explained. "If you persist, they will arrest you and place you in jail for your own safety until you realize that it's not safe for you to go there."

"Damn!" James muttered under his breath. Turning his horse around, he headed back toward the west. As they returned, they found that Silas and Bellon had already returned to the refugee area with their families.

James glanced at Miko who was looking at him with a questioning look on his face. "Don't ask me!" he said.

"I wasn't," Miko replied innocently. "I am simply waiting patiently to find out what we are going to do now." Smiling, he looked at James.

"I don't know. I certainly don't want to waste the time backtracking all the way to Trademeet and then go north through the Dragon's Pass. That will add days to our travel time."

"Why don't you use that compass thing of yours," suggested Miko.

"It might just be time to do that," James agreed. "Good idea."

Miko beamed at the praise. They returned to the spot where they spent the night. They dismounted and James removed the compass from his backpack.

He sat as far from the road as he could with his back to the rock wall. Motioning Miko over he said, "This may take a while, so make sure I am not disturbed. And remember, we don't want anyone to find out I can do magic, alright?"

"Alright," agreed Miko as he took his position a little closer to the road.

James settled down and held the compass in his hands on his lap, beginning to tap into the magic. He concentrated on finding a way through the mountains that he and Miko would be able to travel, one which will avoid the soldiers who patrolled the road. He concentrated harder and harder and then felt the magic surge forth when he released it. To James, it felt as if the magic was expanding from him in a spherical radius, causing ever increasing amounts to be drawn from him while searching every nook and cranny of the mountain for the elusive path.

The spell continued to draw large amounts of power from him. After a short time, he started to feel the effects. His head throbbed and his breathing became more labored. Yet still the spell wasn't finished. He had not yet found a path through the mountains.

Suddenly, the flow of power eased as the powers began to merge and flow in a more singular direction like a pack of dogs that caught the scent of a fox. Then all of a sudden it was over and the needle of the compass pointed westward, back toward Trademeet.

Opening his eyes, James saw where the compass pointed and sighed.

Miko heard him and asked, "Did it work?"

“Yes,” James replied, “but it’s pointing back the way we came.” He showed the compass to Miko.

“Is it directing us toward Dragon’s Pass?”

“I don’t know, though we may have little choice.” Getting up, he had a sudden dizzy spell and briefly lost his balance. Miko saw him falter and put James’ arm around his shoulder. After a few steps and several deep breaths, he began to feel better. He then removed his arm from around Miko’s neck. “I’m okay. It’s passed.”

“Too big a spell again?”

James nodded. “I think so, but I seem to be better able in handling the effects.” He mounted his horse and they turned to follow the direction indicated by the compass.

Several hours later and still following the compass, they arrived at the plateau where the old abandoned keep stood. When the keep came into view, the compass swung toward it.

“Great!” James heard Miko exclaim when he realized where the compass pointed. “Somehow I knew we’d be going in there.”

“I had my suspicions too,” James admitted. Thinking the way may be further down the plateau and not at the old keep, James angled them to go around its left side. But when they passed the entrance, the compass turned and pointed toward the opened front door.

He showed the compass to Miko with a grin. Shrugging, he turned his horse toward the entrance and dismounted. James peered through the slight opening made by the door being ajar, but couldn’t make out anything in the dim light.

Turning back to Miko he said, “Let’s secure the horses around back and then investigate. We don’t want anyone coming by and helping themselves while we are in there.” They walked the horses around to the back where they secured them. James took his backpack and they returned to the entrance. He paused a moment then asked Miko, “Want to go first?”

“No,” replied Miko, a little nervous.

“Alright then, I’ll go first.” James stepped up and slowly made his way through the doorway, passing into a poorly lit room. He made his glowing orb and the light from it revealed a large room with several doors and two hallways that led from it. The compass indicated they should take the hallway directly opposite the door.

He walked to the hallway. As he entered, the light from the orb revealed something large lying across the floor not three feet from where he stood. As he moved closer he discovered it was a dead body in the latter stages of decomposition. The clothing on the man, at least he thought it was a man, was in pretty bad shape but looked as if it had been of good quality.

Miko saw the dead body illuminated by the orb and gasped. “James, we shouldn’t be in here,” he said with a tremor of fear in his voice. “Let’s find another way.”

“Don’t be scared,” he said reassuringly. “It’s only a dead body.” He leaned down and grabbed a stick. He began to poke through the dead man’s clothes. “Most likely this was a merchant traveling through the Pass that ran afoul of bandits and they dumped his body in here. See, look, there is no purse on him, nothing at all of value.” James used the stick and turned the head. “And look,” he said indicating the back of the head, “it’s cracked like someone hit him in the head with something hard.”

“Maybe the bandits are still here?” Miko said worriedly, looking around.

“Not likely,” he replied. “If they were still using this place, they would hardly have left a dead body rotting in the hallway. They would have dumped it out back where they wouldn’t have had to walk over it and smell it.”

“I suppose you’re right,” admitted Miko, though still not very reassured.

“So relax, we’re going to be okay.”

“If you say so,” Miko replied halfheartedly.

Leaving the body behind, they continued down the hallway, passing two doors before coming to a halt before the third.

“Why are you stopping?”

“It’s indicating that we need to go through this door,” he explained. He tried the handle but found it locked. He handed the compass and glowing orb to Miko before throwing his weight against the door. With a crash, the door burst in, breaking off a two foot section of the doorjamb in the process. His momentum carried him a little ways through the door where he stumbled and fell. He rolled down a flight of stairs and came to rest at the bottom. Bruised and scraped but otherwise unhurt, he got to his feet.

At the top of the steps he saw Miko illuminated by the glow from the orb looking down at him. “Are you okay?” the boy asked.

“Yeah,” replied James, “come on down. But be careful, I might have broken a few of the steps during my fall.”

Being extra careful, Miko took it one step at a time, skipping over a few broken ones. He finally made it to the bottom.

It was a small room, only about ten feet by maybe twelve. The only exit was the door at the top of the stairs. The room itself was empty except for the dust that had accumulated over time.

James retrieved the compass from Miko and sure enough, it was still pointing the way. This time it indicated the direction they needed to go was through the wall. Pointing to the wall indicated by the compass, he said, “It says that we are to go this way.”

“Another secret door like in Lord Colerain’s estate?”

Nodding his head, James replied, “I think so, give me the orb for a second.” Holding out his hand, Miko passed him the orb.

He did a thorough inspection of the wall and failed to find anything that looked like it could be a trigger to open the secret door. He then moved to the adjoining walls, searching for some trigger or other mechanism that could possibly open a secret door.

Miko looked around and noticed a design on the floor, partially hidden by the accumulated dust. “James, look at this.”

James knelt to take a closer look. Brushing away the dust he discovered a square shaped stone engraved with a design of a circle within a circle within a circle. He applied pressure to it but nothing happened. Getting to his feet, he had Miko step on it while he pushed on the wall but nothing happened. “Maybe there are others we need to release first,” he theorized. “Look around for any more similar designs.”

Miko discovered a second one on the wall about midway up the stairs. This one was a single circle. Excited, James said, "If there is one with three circles and another with just the one, then there may be another with two. And hopefully by pressing them in the correct order, it'll enable us to open the secret door."

"Makes sense," agreed Miko.

They looked but failed to find two circles, one in the other. "I don't think there is one here," Miko said after they had searched for a while.

"There has to be," he insisted. "It wouldn't make any sense otherwise." He got on his hands and knees to closely examine the floor inch by inch.

"But we've examined all the walls and floor over and over," Miko went on. "There is no such design here."

Standing up suddenly, James looked at Miko, "You're right. We have searched all the walls and the floor, but we haven't looked at the ceiling." He turned his gaze upward and sure enough, there was the design with two circles, one inside the other. "I knew it!" he exclaimed excitedly.

"Miko, go and press firmly on the single circle."

Miko cautiously made his way up the stairs and pressed the circle, "Now what?"

"Toss the piece of the doorjamb that I broke off down to me."

Miko found the broken doorjamb, and tossed it down to James.

Catching it, James raised it up toward the double circle in the ceiling. Holding it steady, he put the end against the design and pressed firmly. Miko by this time had made it back down the stairs.

James lowered the broken doorjamb and let it drop to the floor. He walked to the triple circle on the floor and pressed on it with his foot. Suddenly, a section of the wall began to swing inward, creating a three foot wide by five foot tall opening.

He brought the orb close and discovered the opened door revealed a narrow passage which looked to have been carved out of the mountain.

As James looked down the passage, the door began to close. Finding no way to keep it open, he backed out. He turned back to Miko. "Let's go back up and get our things from the horses."

"You mean we're leaving them up there?" Miko asked incredulously.

"Our way lies through there," James said, pointing toward the secret door. "And I seriously doubt if the horses will be able to make it. Besides, can you think of a way to get them safely down that broken flight of steps?"

"No, I can't," Miko admitted as he glanced to the steps in question.

"Okay then, so let's go and get what we are really going to need and hide the rest, just in case we manage to come back this way again." He carefully climbed back up the stairs, trying to place his weight evenly so as not to cause another step to break. Miko waited until he had made it to the top before following.

They walked back through the hallway, past the corpse and through the front door. Around back they found their horses and mule just where they had left them. James grabbed the jackets. They took everything off the horses and mules, tying them loosely so that if they didn't return, they would be able to break free.

In several trips, they managed to haul all their equipment and the tack down into the little room at the bottom of the stairs, secreting it under the steps. As they brought in the last load, James saw the supply caravan they had passed the day before trundling along the road on its way to the refugee camp.

He stashed the last of the equipment under the steps and said, “Unless someone comes down here, our stuff should be safe.”

Miko agreed. “It’s too bad we have to lose the horses.”

“I know, but we have money to buy new ones and we’re pressed for time.” He took out his traveling scribe case and placed it on the stairs, opening it.

“You’re not taking that with us are you?”

“No,” James responded, “I just want to take the notes I have written.” He removed the note-filled parchment and rolled them tightly, placing them in his backpack. Closing the case, he placed it with the rest of the equipment under the steps. He turned to Miko and asked, “Did you get the money?”

Miko patted one of the bags over his shoulder and said, “Right here.”

“Okay, looks like we’re ready. Go push the circle by the stairs and we’ll get going.”

Miko climbed up the stairs and pushed the circle on the wall. James used his makeshift stick and pushed the double circle on the ceiling. He then went and stepped on the triple circle on the floor. The secret door swung open and James took the lead. He held the glowing orb as he passed through the doorway and into the tunnel.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The tunnel was quite narrow, just wide enough to accommodate them side by side and barely tall enough to pass without ducking. Once through the door, it swung closed again, shutting tight. The orb gave them sufficient light to see, illuminating the tunnel deeper into the mountain.

James handed his things to Miko and then searched the area near the door looking for the hidden mechanism that would allow them to reopen it from this side. After several minutes of fruitless searching, he gave up. “Let’s hope that we don’t need to come back this way in a hurry,” he said to Miko, taking his things back.

“Yeah,” agreed Miko nervously, “let’s hope that.”

With his packs properly situated, James headed down the tunnel. Ten feet or so from the door, they came across a bundle of torches. Miko removed his knife and cut the ties that held the bundle together. Taking several, he placed them in one of his bags.

James looked at him questioningly. Miko just shrugged and said, "You never know."

Nodding his approval, James turned and led them further into the mountain. The tunnel continued for some time before it opened onto a subterranean cavern. The orb's light revealed many stalactites and stalagmites. The play of shadows gave the cavern an eerie feeling. From all around came the steady drip, drip, drip of water coming off the stalactites.

"Wow," Miko said, awed by the extraordinary rock formations revealed by the orb's light. The light revealed further marvelous, breath-taking sights as they wended their way through the cavern. Many of the walls were quite brilliant with bright, contrasting colors. Miko stopped briefly to touch one.

"Pretty impressive isn't it?" James asked, coming up behind him.

"I've never seen anything like it in my life. How did all this get to be here?"

James indicated one of the stalactites hanging from the ceiling, "Water drips through cracks in the ceiling and runs down one of those stalactites."

Miko looked at him, confused.

"Stalactites are what the ones from the ceiling are called and stalagmites are the ones rising up from the floor," he explained. "Over a very long time, hundreds and thousands of years, the continual passage of water left minerals behind. Over time, they harden to form the structures you see here." *He could almost hear Mr. Perkins, his ninth grade science teacher in the back of his mind going over the chapter on caves and cave formation.*

"Amazing," Miko said as he rubbed one. "It's hard as rock."

"It is rock," James explained. "Over time the minerals come together and form the rock."

"Hard to believe," Miko said in wonder. "Wouldn't have if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes."

"Come on, we need to get going." James hurried Miko along as they made their way further through the cavern.

In pools and scurrying among the rock formation they encountered many strange animals in this subterranean world, most pale in color. In one large pool, Miko noticed little dots of light moving below the surface.

"James," he hollered, "come here, you gotta see this."

James knelt down, and looked into the water. Seeing the little dots moving around, he said, "It's probably just small fish."

"Fish?" Miko asked incredulously. "With lights?"

Assuming a tone similar to that of Mr. Perkins, James explained, "When there is a total absence of light, fish and other animals will often produce their own."

"How?"

"That; I don't recall," he admitted. "I just know they do." Had it not been for Susie Hampton who had sat at the desk next to him, he probably could have answered Miko's question.

"That is so weird," Miko said, as he watched the dots flitter around.

"Yes it is," James said. "Now, can we please hurry through here without all the stops?" He continued on, making Miko catch up or be left behind in the dark.

The cavern continued on for another several hundred feet before they reached an open chasm that cleaved the cavern in two. It looked as if the mountain had pulled apart some time in the past, leaving a rift over a hundred feet wide. A wooden bridge in poor repair spanned the gap. Some of the boards were missing and others were badly cracked. The rickety bridge looked as if it wouldn't support their weight.

James checked his compass, indicating that their path continued across the chasm. He showed it to Miko.

"You've got to be kidding!" Miko exclaimed. "There's no way that's going to hold when we cross. We'll be dropped into whatever is down there." He moved to the edge and looked down, but saw only blackness. "We'll die!"

"There's no other way to go," James told him. "We can't go back, so we have to go forward. Besides, I haven't seen any other passages we could possibly have taken."

Miko gave him a defiant look and stood his ground.

"Okay scaredy pants," James said mockingly, "I'll try it first. If it will hold up for me it should hold up for you."

"But what will I do if you fall and die?" With a wild look he shouted, "I'll be trapped here!"

James came to Miko who was shaking slightly in fear at being left alone. James tried to calm him, "Look, I won't ever leave you like that, but someone has to go first and see if it is safe."

Miko gave him a look that could only be called pitiful. "Alright," he said in barely a whisper.

James cast a short spell and the orb floated up and hovered above and a little behind his left shoulder, following him as he moved. He walked to the bridge and took hold of the single rope handrail on the right; the one on the left had long since fallen off. He placed his left foot gingerly on the first board as far to the edge as possible and eased his weight onto it. Once the board supported his weight, he looked to Miko and said, "See, it's going to hold." Then he took his right foot and placed it on the next board.

Slowly, he repeated the process, board by board, until he got about mid-span. Suddenly, a board broke in two, causing him to lose his balance as his foot went through.

"James!" Miko screamed.

He caught himself on the handrail, preventing himself from falling. Turning slightly, he waved back to Miko to let him know he was fine.

Once his nerves settled and his heart stopped racing, he stepped over the broken board and tested the next before he trusted it with his weight. He was relieved when the board held firm. He continued on as he tested each and every one until he finally made it to the other side.

Once safely on the cavern floor, he hollered over to Miko, "I made it!" *made it...made it...made it*, his voice echoing throughout the cavern. "I'm sending the orb back so you can use it when you cross." *cross...cross...cross...* Concentrating, he made the orb float across the chasm to Miko. He had the orb settle over Miko's left shoulder and kept it there.

"Okay, now it's your turn," *turn...turn...turn...* he hollered. "Just keep your feet to the edge of the boards and they will hold your weight better." *better...better...better...*

Miko approached the edge of the bridge and hesitantly set his foot on the first board. When he realized it would hold his weight, he moved his other foot cautiously to the next, making sure to

keep his feet as far to the edge of the board as possible, just as James had said. Both hands clutched the handrail in a grip only fear of imminent death could produce.

Slowly, board by board he made his way across the bridge. When he reached a board that didn't look as if it would hold his weight, he stepped over it and placed his foot on the following board. It was a stretch, but he made it with no problem.

When he was about a third of the way across, he placed his foot on a board and heard a loud cracking. Realizing the board was about to break, he took his foot off and paused on the bridge. The next board was broken as well, only half of it remaining. Now he was faced with a gap of two boards. He looked at it wide-eyed, paralyzed with fear.

Seeing Miko stop, James hollered out to him, "Come on Miko, it's not much further."
further...further...further...

"The next board is cracking," he hollered, "and the one after that is broken in two. I can't make it!" *it...it...it...*

"Yes you can, just calm down," James said trying to reassure him. "Put your feet on the side beneath the handrail and scoot your way down to the next board!" *board...board...board...*

Working up his nerve, Miko did what James advised. He placed one of his feet on the side, then the other. Sliding slowly, he made his way past the board that was cracking and then past where the next one was broken in two. When he was close enough to the next good board, he cautiously set a foot on it and sighed with relief when it held his weight. Once again he slowly made his way across the bridge, one board at a time.

It seemed an agonizingly long time, but he eventually made it to the other side. James stretched out his hand and helped him the last few feet.

"Great job," he said, patting Miko on the back. "I knew you could do it!"

Miko's knees began to shake and he all but collapsed on the ground before he fell over.

"I guess now would be a good time for a rest break," James said as he opened a bag searching for food. When the bag containing the food came up empty, he realized they had given all their food to the families last night. "Uh, oh."

Miko looked at him, "What?"

"We're out of food."

He wrapped his arms around his legs, resting his head on his upraised knees and groaned, "Great! Now we're going to starve to death."

Giving him a look of annoyance, James said, "You know, you're awfully negative sometimes. We are not going to starve to death. It takes days for that to happen and we should be out of here by then or at least found something to eat."

Miko just looked at him for a second and then stretched out on the ground, not saying anything.

James allowed him to rest for a few minutes to calm his shaky nerves before getting him up and pressing onward.

The cavern continued past the chasm for another hundred feet until it narrowed and ended at another passage. This new passage was as narrow as the previous one and the sides were wet

with water that seeped through cracks in the rocks. The floor of the passage had a thin coating of algae which made for a slippery surface.

As they followed the passage, the water that seeped through the cracks began to create a small flow that ran along one side of the passage bottom. It grew until the passage abruptly came to an end where the water flowed over the edge and down toward an unseen bottom. They had come to another subterranean cavern. How big it was and how far from the bottom they were was uncertain. The orb's light failed to illuminate the cavern in its entirety.

The drop-off extended almost vertically to an unknown depth. Standing at the opening they felt a slight breeze blowing from the cavern and into their passage. A narrow flight of steps has been carved out of the rock and descended into the darkness below.

"Wonder what's down there?" James asked. Placing one foot onto the uppermost step, he held the glowing orb out as far as he could. The light didn't illuminate very far and all they could see were the narrow steps that disappeared into the darkness below.

"I don't know," Miko replied. "I hope we can get out of here soon."

"I'd like that too," James agreed. "Be careful, the steps may be slippery." He took another step and began to descend the steps. He moved carefully because the water that flowed from the passage cascaded over the first six steps before moving off.

They didn't descend very far before they noticed the sound of a distant waterfall coming from somewhere below. Soon after that, mist began to float upon the air. The further they descended, the louder it became until the sound was practically deafening. They were unable to see where the sound originated as the light from the orb didn't extend quite that far. The stairs ended at a stone platform carved out of the wall of the cavern.

Upon the stone platform, sitting on a wooden rack was a small boat that looked as if it could seat four people comfortably. Mounted on the wall next to the boat were two oars resting on several pegs. At the edge of the platform flowed a fast moving underground river. It disappeared through a wide tunnel in the wall. Its ceiling seemed barely high enough to allow adequate clearance for the boat let alone any passengers.

Upstream to the left, they heard the crash of the mighty waterfall as it plummeted down, forming the river somewhere out in the dark. The mist from the waterfall filled the cavern, leaving everything slightly damp.

"Looks like we ride from here," James said as he went to inspect the boat. He took a second to figure out the best way to remove it from the wooden rack without wrecking it.

Motioning for Miko to help him, he took one end of the boat while Miko took the other and together they gently lifted it off the rack, setting it slowly upon the platform.

Miko leaned close to James so he would be able to be heard over the thunder of the falls and asked, "Think it'll float?"

"I hope so. I really don't fancy getting in the water and swimming through that tunnel."

"What do we do if it sinks?"

"Stay afloat and swim as best we can, I guess," James said. "But the wood looks sound, even if it has been down here for a long time." He whacked the side of the boat with his hand, showing Miko that it still had some strength and durability left.

Miko looked dubious, but held his tongue.

James removed the two oars from the wall and placed them inside the boat. Then he grabbed his backpack and placed it inside as well.

Miko followed suit and placed his bags inside and then they slowly worked the boat to the edge. The end of the platform gently sloped downward until it was only a few inches from the top of the flowing water. James eased the boat into the water, all the while maintaining a firm grip to keep it from being pulled away and vanish through the tunnel. He signaled with a jerk of his head for Miko to get in.

Miko shouted, "Don't let go!" and climbed into the boat, sitting down in the rear of the two bench seats.

James concentrated on the glowing orb and it took position at the stern. He looked at Miko and hollered, "Now, when I get in we'll each take an oar, and use them to keep us away from the walls and anything else that may pop up in front of us." James waited until Miko gave him a nod, indicating that he understood. He then pushed the boat out and jumped in yelling, "Stay down and watch your head!"

The boat moved out from the platform a little as James settled into the front seat and took an oar. Then the current grabbed hold of them and shot them toward the tunnel, picking up speed rapidly. They began going faster and faster until they passed from the cavern and into the tunnel. The ceiling was only about six inches from the top of their heads. James placed the oar back into the bottom of the boat as he quickly realized that if he were to use it against the sides of the tunnel, at the speed they were going, it would be ripped out of his hands.

They both scrunched down as far as they could and held on for dear life. Luckily, the current was keeping them a comfortable distance from the sides of the tunnel, so they had little worry about hitting it. The walls rushed past in a blur and James heard faint sounds coming from Miko, not sure whether he was crying or laughing.

James was scared to death and loving every minute. *This sure beats any log ride I've ever been on!* Letting out a cry of enjoyment, he gripped the sides tightly and rode on. Rushing headlong into the unknown, the possibility of being killed at any moment was an exhilarating rush for him.

They began to hear a change in the sound of the water. It was getting slightly louder and the tunnel was growing narrower, causing the boat to increase in speed. Fortunately, the tunnel was still sufficiently wide to accommodate the boat. Then all of a sudden the ceiling of the tunnel opened up and the river went over a steep, ten foot drop.

At the speed they were going, the boat flew out over the waterfall, becoming airborne. A scream of terror came from the back of the boat as they sailed through the air, but James dared not look back to see if Miko was okay, for fear of falling out. Unable to contain his excitement, he let out a scream of his own, "Yeeeeee Haaaaaa!"

Wham!

The boat slammed against the surface of the water, almost spilling them out. James regained his breath after it had been knocked out of him from when they hit the water. The boat slowed as

it floated upon the placid water. He looked around and realized that they were on an underground lake.

Turning to Miko, James said excitedly, "My god! Was that some ride or what?"

"Yeah," said Miko miserably. "It was great."

"Oh, come on!" James exclaimed. "Where I come from people would pay top dollar to go through that, again and again."

Miko just looked at him like he was insane and shook his head.

His lack of enthusiasm somewhat dampened James', but he could still feel the thrill of their amazing ride. Grabbing the oars, he turned to face Miko and rowed in the direction the boat was currently headed.

To Miko he said, "Keep a lookout behind me and make sure I don't run into anything."

Miko nodded and kept an eye out.

After rowing for a few minutes, Miko pointed behind James and said, "There's something in the lake ahead."

He glanced over his shoulder and saw a small island poking out of the surface of the water directly in their path. He turned the boat a little to the right and they sailed around the island, which wasn't very large, and continued on their way. For a brief moment he had visions of riddles and rings.

He rowed a little longer before Miko yelled, "James, there's light coming from up ahead!"

Looking over his shoulder, he saw a small patch of light in the distance ahead. He angled the boat toward the light and rowed harder. "Maybe it's the way out?"

"I hope so," Miko replied. "I want to get out of here!"

Pulling on the oars with renewed vigor, he rowed toward the patch of light, which continued to grow as they approached. When they drew close, they saw that it was an opening in the cavern wall which allowed a small stream wide enough to accommodate the boat to flow through.

"Should we take it?" James asked, knowing the answer even before he heard it.

"Yes!" exclaimed Miko.

James grinned and headed for the opening. As they got closer, they saw trees and bushes on the other side. Excited, Miko gave a whoop and hollered as they entered the sunlit world, leaving the underworld behind.

The stream flowed steadily and smoothly through a tangle of trees and undergrowth. It was barely deep enough for the boat to keep from scraping the bottom. Twice, they became stuck when the boat ran aground. Using the oars, they pushed off the bottom until they were once more in deeper water and the boat was able to float free.

It wasn't far until the trees opened up and they realized they were at the bottom of the gorge. Through the trees ahead they saw where the stream would soon join the river as it flowed on its way into Madoc. Having no more need of the glowing orb, James canceled the spell.

As they joined the main river, they looked up and could barely make out the road that they had been on earlier in the day, way up the side of the mountain. "Hard to believe that we were way up there just a few hours ago," Miko said.

James looked at the shadows on the mountain and realized that they had been in there far longer than a few hours. "I think that we were in there most of the day," James corrected him. "Judging by the shadows, it's more likely early evening. We left the way stop just after sunup."

"Guess that's why I'm so hungry," Miko said, looking at James.

"Let's find a spot for a brief camp and we'll see what we can do about that." He maneuvered the boat to the center of the river and let the current take them. He sat back a bit and rested his arms, tired from all the unaccustomed rowing.

The river made a turn up ahead and on the inner side of the bend, there was an open area. As likely a spot as any to make camp, James used the oars to bring them closer. When they drew near, he signaled to Miko. They both leaped from the boat. James kept hold of the side until he regained his balance.

Miko on the other hand didn't fare nearly as well. When he jumped from the boat, his foot slipped on a submerged rock and he fell headlong into the icy, cold water. He started splashing and yelled, "James! Help me!"

James steadied himself and said, "It's not deep, just stand up."

Miko's thrashing calmed. With a face red with embarrassment, he stood, realizing he was only in a couple feet of water. Dripping wet and frozen, his clothes were soaked through and through. And with the sun behind the mountains, there was little to help him get warm.

With the bedraggled Miko's help, they got the boat far enough up onto the riverbank so the current would be unable to drag it away. By the time the boat came to rest, Miko was shivering quite badly and his teeth had begun to chatter.

Seeing his predicament, James collected driftwood and stacked it together. He used a fire-starter spell, igniting the wood. He placed larger pieces on top and soon had a fair-sized fire going. Miko got close, holding his red hands as near the flames as he could stand.

Now that Miko's plight was improving, James searched the area until finding a stick approximately three feet long. He took his knife and sharpened one end to create a makeshift spear. Once finished, he waded into the river and patiently waited for a fish to swim by.

Miko shivered by the fire, its warmth slowly seeping back into his body. Not far off in the river, James stood motionless, his face a study of concentration as he searched the water for movement. Then in one quick movement, he thrust the stick into the water and pulled out a large wriggling fish impaled upon its end. He brought his catch over to the campsite and used his knife to gut and scale the fish. Then he used the same stick used to catch it to roast it over the fire.

"How long are we going to stay here?" Miko asked after sitting quietly listening to the spit and sizzle of juices as they dripped from the fish into the fire.

James turned the fish before answering. "Probably not until after dark and our clothes are a little drier," he replied. "I want to get through the gorge and past any patrols that Cardri may have at the other end of the Pass before daybreak."

"Isn't it going to be dangerous riding the river in the dark?"

"Probably, but if we keep our wits about us and listen for any changes in the sounds of the river, then we should make it through."

"Once through, do we head for the City of Light?"

“That’s right,” answered James. “Unless of course the Empire’s army is in our way. Then we’ll just have to see what choices we have and we’ll go from there.” He took the fish off the fire and inspected it, deciding that it still needed more time. He put it back over the fire to cook longer.

“The first town we come to, we’ll see about getting a couple of horses. We’re going to need speed if we want to keep ahead of the Empire’s forces. Hopefully, they will not venture into the same area where we are planning to travel.”

“Yeah, let’s hope so,” agreed Miko.

Checking the fish one more time, he decided it was fit to eat. Grabbing a couple large leaves from a nearby plant for makeshift plates, he divided the fish and handed Miko his share. While they ate, the sunlight dimmed, the sun sank lower and lower behind the mountains. By the time they finished eating, the first stars appeared in the sky. Miko announced that his clothes were fairly dry.

Anxious to leave the Pass behind them James said, “Let’s get going and pray we are not seen as we exit the Pass.” He used a stick and scattered the fire, kicking dirt over it until it was completely out.

They pushed the boat to the edge of the river until it floated, and then Miko hopped in. Once seated with the oars at the ready, James gave the boat a final push as he jumped in and they floated out onto the river. Miko extended the oars and guided them toward the middle of the river. Once the boat was in position, they allowed the current to carry them downriver.

The night deepened until only the light from the stars illuminated the river. They kept a vigilant lookout ahead of them, as well as listening for any changes in sound that might indicate rapids or a possible waterfall. Riding an unknown river in the dark made James uneasy, but he felt the risks would be worth it if they could make it through the Pass undetected.

As fortune would have it, a quarter-moon peaked over the tops of the mountains. It gave them just enough light with which to spot rocks jutting from the surface. After floating for some time, they made their way around a bend and James realized the river was growing wider. He began to relax, as that usually meant a gentler ride and less chance of coming across any rapids.

They drifted along for another hour or so when Miko whispered, “James, up ahead.”

Snapping awake, he realized he dozed off for a few minutes. Ahead they saw lights from several fires on the shore to their right. Silhouettes of many men moved among them.

“It must be the checkpoint at the end of the Pass,” he whispered to Miko. “Let’s be quiet so they won’t know we are here.” Taking the oars he slowly edged the boat over to the left side of the river, putting as much distance between them and the men on the shore as possible. He positioned them as close to the far shore as he dared. They stayed low in the boat and watched the men on the shore as they floated silently by.

Wisps of conversations drifted from the camp, but they were too far away to make out what was being said. There looked to be about fifty men around those fires and most wore armor. From what was revealed by the flickering campfires, it looked like they had constructed defensive fortifications across the road.

“I doubt if that would hold out anybody,” Miko whispered as they drifted past the end of the encampment and come to the fortifications.

“So do I,” he agreed. “Maybe it’s just to delay an attacker until they get further back into the mountains. Though from what we’ve heard, it’s unlikely the Empire will move against Cardri, at least not for a while.”

They drifted until the fires from the encampment could no longer be seen. The silhouette of the mountains against the night sky showed that they, too, were beginning to drop away, becoming rolling hills. Deciding that they were far enough away, James brought them to the northern side of the river, opposite to the side the encampment was on.

Beaching their boat among a patch of bushes, Miko helped him pull it further up the shore away from the water and hid it. “Let’s get some sleep before the sun comes up. Then we can see where we are and decide whether to follow the river or continue overland.”

Miko lay down near the boat beneath a large bush with reddish, purple flowers. Using one of the bags for a makeshift pillow he said, “Sounds good to me.”

James got comfortable in the shelter of another of the flowering bushes and soon both were asleep, exhausted from another long day.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The morning dawned sunny and clear. The temperature had already risen quickly, foreshadowing the hot day to come. Once awake, James peered from beneath the bush to discover where the river had brought them. Off to the west rose the mountains they passed through the day before, still close enough to be imposing. On the opposite side of the river stretched a road matching its course as it made its way from the mountains. On this side, grass covered hills rolled northward with a scattering of the occasional tree.

“Looks like if we stay on the river we’ll continue to follow the road for a while.”

“Good,” replied Miko. “I would just as soon not walk.”

“Me too. Let’s get the boat back onto the water and see if there’s a town where we can get a couple of fast horses.”

Putting their things back in the boat, they pushed it to the water’s edge where Miko hopped in first. James pushed the boat out onto the water before he jumped in. As the boat floated from the shore, Miko took the oars and brought the boat to the middle of the river. Adding his efforts to that of the current, he kept a steady rhythm with the oars as they moved along.

They hadn't gone far before a column of dust came into view rising in the east. It was the result of hundreds of men marching eastward along the road with a wagon train trailing along behind.

When James realized they would shortly be drifting past an army on the move, he took the oars from Miko and brought them to the north shore, beaching their boat. "Think that's the Empire's army?" he asked Miko after they got out.

"Could be," he replied, staring at the men in the distance. "Hard to tell from here."

"I think it would be wise to assume they are the Empire's for now," James suggested. "We better leave the river and head overland."

Miko took the bags from the boat. "Yeah, let's hurry and get out of here." He looked back at the soldiers. "Wonder where they're going?"

"Don't know, but we better find some horses soon or we'll never get ahead of them and beat them to the City of Light." He picked up his backpack, slung it across his shoulder and set out to the northeast. He angled slightly more north than east to put distance between them and the soldiers.

While they walked, James kept an eye on the ground and gathered several fair sized stones, placing them in his pocket.

Miko saw what he did and asked, "Expecting trouble?"

"Never know," he replied as he bent down to pick up another, "but it's best to be prepared."

"Wish I still had my crossbow," Miko said, thinking of the crossbow left under the stairs with the rest of their things in the abandoned keep.

They traveled for no more than half an hour when dozens of people appeared on the horizon. Some were running but all were making the best speed they could. Several had small children in tow, others were burdened with bundles either tied to their backs or carried in their arms.

"Must be refugees fleeing from another town the Empire has taken," James guessed. "Or is about to."

"What'll we do?" asked Miko, obviously concerned as he saw how the refugees were headed their way.

Behind the fleeing people and riding hard to overtake them were six riders wielding clubs. As the riders reached the stragglers, they struck them in the head, felling them. Then they left them as they raced to the next fleeing refugee.

Behind the riders rolled three wagons, each trailing a line of naked people, both men and women of varying age. Out in front of each wagon walked two people who, when they came to a felled refugee, slapped or hit them until they regained consciousness. They were then pulled to their feet, stripped of their clothes and had their hands tied behind them. After that they were taken and added to the line of naked people behind the wagon.

"Slavers!" James said in disgust. He watched as a woman carrying a baby was felled by a blow to the head. As the woman collapsed, the baby flew out of her arms and struck the ground; its cry was heart-wrenching. The mother didn't lose consciousness and crawled to her baby, wrapping her arms protectively around it. In a vain attempt at escape she tried crawling away. When the wagon arrived, one of the men pulled the baby out of her arms. James heard the

woman's scream as she hung onto her child. The man struck her across the face with the back of his fist and ripped the baby from her arms. With the mother's pleas falling on deaf ears, the man returned to the wagon and handed the baby to someone inside. He then returned to the wailing woman, and dragging her by the hair, took her to the rear of the slave line trailing behind the wagon. There she was stripped and put in line with the others.

"James!" Miko said as he pulled on his arm insistently, "we have to get out of here!"

Shaking his head, James said, "No." He turned his head to look at Miko and said, "You don't have to stay." Turning back toward the oncoming horsemen, he reached inside his pouch and readied several stones in his left hand. He then took one in his right and started walking toward the horsemen.

"Crap!" he heard Miko say behind him as the boy followed him into battle.

One horseman fast approached a man who carried a bundle on his back. The man looked back and saw the horseman almost upon him. Tossing the bundle aside, he broke into a run. The horseman raced forward and raised his club to bludgeon the man to the ground. Suddenly, something struck the rider in the chest, went through his leather armor and blasted out the back. He looked at his chest for a moment in disbelief before he toppled off his horse. Death took him before he hit the ground.

Another saw his partner fall and cried out, alerting the other riders. He hooked his club to the saddle and then drew his sword. He looked for whoever it was that had killed his partner. Seeing James standing defiant when everyone else fled, he kicked his horse and charged straight at him, sword raised to cut him in half.

James cocked his arm and let fly another stone, striking the charging rider through the forehead and blasting out the back of his head. Like a rag doll, the rider fell from his horse.

"Miko," James said over his shoulder, indicating the horses of the fallen riders, "don't let them run off; we'll need them. Also, search the dead riders for valuables or any papers." Not looking to see whether or not Miko did what he asked, his attention remained focused on the four riders racing toward him, swords raised.

James concentrated and let the magic flow.

Crumph!

The ground under two of the charging riders erupted, throwing debris, horses and riders into the air.

James turned to the remaining two riders who were almost upon him and threw another stone, catching one in the chest, creating a hole as it exited. James jumped to one side, and rolled on the ground when the remaining rider struck down at him with his sword. He felt it pass as it came within inches.

The rider turned and tried to trample him with his horse's hooves as he lay on the ground.

James rolled out of the way quickly and then tried to stand. One of the horse's hooves clipped him in the side of the head, knocking him down, causing the world to spin wildly.

He saw a blurry horseman with sword raised, ready to finish him off. Sure that his time had come, James was surprised when two other blurry shapes jumped up and grabbed the rider, pulling him off the horse.

Another blurry shape came over and asked, "James? You okay?"

"Yeah," he replied as he sat up, recognizing Miko's voice. "The horse clipped me in the head. Be okay in a few minutes, I hope."

"Thank you!" a woman cried as she knelt down, putting her arms around James and giving him a big hug.

As his vision began to clear, he saw many people around him, all expressing their gratitude. He then realized they were the people who had been fleeing the oncoming slavers. Miko stood there with two horses, smiling broadly.

The two riders who had been knocked off their horses by the erupting ground had been torn to pieces by the refugees. Several people walked toward him from the dead bodies, each wielding a bloody knife or stick.

"We need to free the people in the slave lines behind the wagons," he said, trying to get up.

"Already being taken care of," a man said as he pointed to four horses racing toward the wagon. Riding each was a man who earlier had been fleeing for his life. Now with a sword in their hands and vengeance in their hearts they rode to free their neighbors and friends. Others followed on foot to give what aid they could.

James regained his feet and looked at all the faces. Some smiled but others had seen too many horrors to ever smile again. "Where are you from?"

"Pleasant Meadows," answered one woman. "It's further downstream where the road crosses the river. The Empire was seen last night headed in our direction and everyone fled." She looked at James and said, "I guess we were fortunate to flee this way."

Many people around agreed.

James looked off toward the wagons and saw that two had already been liberated. The people in the slave lines were being untied and led this way. The four riders closed fast on the remaining wagon, engaging the two men on foot as they tried to make a stand. One rider was struck and fell from his horse while the remaining riders struck and killed the last of the enemy.

"You better make as best time you can before the Empire sends scouts out this way and discovers what has happened," James said. "If you follow the river toward the mountains, you'll find an encampment of soldiers at the beginning of the Pass. They look to be friendly. You definitely don't want to be here when the Empire shows up."

James motioned to Miko and he brought over the horses, giving him one. James swung up on the horse and looked at the people that surrounded him. Miko mounted as well.

"Good luck," he said to them, "and God speed!"

"Where are you going?" asked one of them.

"City of Light," Miko replied, getting a stern look from James.

"You mustn't go there!" one man insisted. "The Empire will surely not stop until they take the City. It is the key to the entire southern region of Madoc."

"He's right," another interjected, "their forces are swarming this area, looking for anyone they can enslave. You'll never make it."

"I appreciate your concern, but we must." Turning to Miko he said, "Let's go," as he headed his horse toward the northeast. The people surrounding him made way and soon they were galloping across the hills with cries of gratitude following them.

When they'd traveled a ways and were out of sight of the people they just aided, James stopped his horse and confronted Miko. With anger in his voice he said, "You never, *NEVER!* tell anyone our business unless I tell you it's okay to do so. Do you understand?"

Withering under James' stern glare, Miko said defensively, "But who are they going to tell?"

"How about the Empire for one! If those poor souls back there get recaptured, the Empire is going to want to know what happened to their men." Pointing back the way they had come he continued, "One of them is bound to tell them who it was and where we are going. What someone doesn't know can't be tortured out of them!"

"I don't think they know our names," Miko said in his defense.

"True, but they know what we look like and they know where we are going." Shaking his head, he continued, "Miko, you need to learn when to talk and when not to. Our lives could very well depend on it." Pausing for a moment, he looked in Miko's eyes to see if he'd gotten his point across, "Okay?"

Feeling like he'd let his friend down, Miko hung his head and said, "I'm sorry. I'll try to do better."

"Don't say try," James replied kindly, "try means you expect to fail." He put his hand on Miko's shoulder, gave him a smile and then turned his horse and kicked it into a gallop.

Miko silently vowed silently to himself not to let James down again as he raced after his friend.

Figuring the Empire's forces were to the east and south, James headed even further to the north. The terrain slowly turned from hills to a rolling plain, tall grass waved in the summer breeze.

They made good time for several hours, when Miko suddenly yelled, "James, look!" as he pointed to the south.

Off in the distance, column after column of soldiers marched northeast. The dust they kicked up could be seen for miles.

"They must be headed for the City of Light," observed Miko. "Think it's the same ones we saw earlier?"

"Doubt it," stated James. "We'd better hustle if we're going to reach the City of Light and still have time to get out before they arrive."

James angled them now almost due north and they rode quickly until the soldiers were no longer visible. They then went no more than a couple more miles when out of the north appeared a score of horsemen headed south, right for them.

James immediately veered to the east and brought his horse to a gallop, trying to put distance between them, hoping to remain unobserved.

Looking over his shoulder, he saw the riders turn to give chase. From behind he heard Miko cry out; his horse had put a foot in a gopher hole and snapped its leg. Crashing to the ground, Miko was thrown off the horse and sailed through the air before landing hard upon the ground.

James quickly raced back to where Miko scrambled back to his feet. Reaching down, he swung the boy on the horse behind him. Looking northward again he saw the horsemen approaching fast. He kicked his horse in the side and they raced toward the east, the riders continued to follow.

“James!” Miko hollered. “They’re gaining.”

“I know,” he replied. “We’re not going to outrun them, not riding double.” Regardless, James continued to ride hard, prolonging the inevitable.

Miko started shaking James’ shoulder, “James, I don’t think they’re the Empires’ soldiers.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” Miko responded. “Their uniforms are different than the ones we saw marching earlier.”

“Madoc’s?” James asked over his shoulder.

“Could be. They’re not from Cardri.”

James slowed his horse to a canter then turned to face the oncoming riders, finally bringing them to a stop. They dismounted and waited for the riders to approach.

The riders slowed their advance to a trot. When they reached James and Miko, they encircled them while two men with crossbows took aim and waited. One rider, an officer by the embroidery on his uniform, came forward. “Who are you and what business do you have in Madoc?”

“Then am I safe in assuming that you are not of the Empire?” James asked.

“That is correct,” the officer replied. “Now answer the question!”

“My name is James and this is my traveling companion Miko. We are on our way to the City of Light with a package to be delivered to the Great Library.”

“What package is so important that it requires you to pass through a war zone?”

Shrugging, James said, “I don’t know, only that the Custodian of the Royal Archives in Cardri requested that we deliver it.”

The officer signaled for his men to stand down and the crossbowmen to lower their weapons. “Let me see this package.”

James reached into his backpack and brought it out, the seal of the Archive Custodian clearly visible. He handed it to the officer.

The officer took the package, gave it a cursory examination. The seal he studied a bit more carefully, then handed it back. “Okay, so you have a package bearing the seal of the Royal Custodian, but there is no proof that you are the couriers.”

“Well, no, that’s true,” James admitted. “But I assure you that we are.”

Miko nodded his agreement.

“I don’t have the time or the manpower to deal with you right now,” said the officer, “so I will take you at your word. A spy from the Empire would have a more plausible reason for being here than that. Now,” he continued, looking intently at James, “on your way from the Pass, did you see anything of the Empire’s forces?”

James told him of the columns of men they saw before leaving the river.

“Damn,” the officer exclaimed, “we were hoping they hadn’t yet moved that far. What else?”

His men crowded around to hear what James had to say. “We ran into people fleeing the fall of a town called Pleasant Meadows,” he explained, though he left out the part he played in their escape. At the mention of Pleasant Meadows, several of the men cursed and James could see anger and sadness appear on many faces.

“And then not too long ago we saw a second army heading northeast.”

“Dire news indeed. You may go on your way, though be careful. If Pleasant Meadows is taken then they are most likely continuing up the road to the City.” Pointing east the officer said, “They will be using the road due east of here, so it would be best if you were to make almost due north and hope to swing around them.”

“Thank you, sir,” James said, and then looked over to Miko’s horse on the ground, in great pain. “What about our horse?”

The officer looked at the animal and then gave a signal that was followed by two crossbow bolts striking it, one in the head and the other in the chest, bringing an end to its pain. “Hate seeing a horse suffer so,” he said. Then to James he continued, “Can’t spare one for you, sorry. You’ll just have to make do with what you have.”

He signaled his men and then mounted up. “Good luck,” he said before he and his men rode off toward the south at a gallop.

“Grab your stuff,” James told Miko. “We’ll have to ride double, at least until we can acquire another horse.”

Miko collected the few bags he had and took them to James’ horse where he secured them behind the saddle. James mounted, then reached down a hand and Miko swung up behind him. “Still better than walking, eh?” he said as they headed northward.

“A little bit,” Miko replied. “How far do you think the City is from here?”

“I’ve no clue. Maybe a couple days, maybe more if we have to detour around any of the Empire’s forces.”

They made good time, even riding double. The ground leveled off until it was fairly flat, with tall grass swaying in the summer breeze. They continued their course for another two hours until they saw an unusually large congregation of birds off to the east. Curious, James angled in that direction to take a closer look.

They found close to fifty of the Empire’s forces, dead and bloating in the sun. The birds squawked and took to the air as they came near. The smell of rotting corpses was nauseating so they kept their distance.

“Looks like the Empire took a beating.”

“Good!” Miko exclaimed. “Serves them right.”

They circled the field of battle for a ways but failed to find anyone other than the Empire’s men. “Either Madoc was really fortunate or they took their dead with them,” James reasoned.

“Yeah,” Miko agreed, “the losers tend to stay where they fall unless their rotting corpses will bother someone.”

Not seeing anything else of interest, James once more turned and made speed northward.

During the ride, Miko eventually nodded off, head lying against James' back. He dreamed of his life before James when he lived on the street and had no one to trust. In some ways he was glad to be gone from there, but in others he missed his old life. No one was ever trying to kill him, at least not seriously.

Deep in a dream about him and a friend filching fruit from a merchant's stand, he was startled out of his reverie by the sudden motion of James jerking his arm forward. "What's going on?" he asked sleepily.

James pointed off to the right where he had dropped a rabbit with one of his stones. "I figured it was time for dinner." He then broke into a smile as he added, "Didn't mean to wake you."

"Wasn't sleeping," Miko exclaimed defensively, "just thinking is all."

James grinned knowingly. "Let's take a short break and have dinner."

Miko swung down, with James following. While James got the rabbit ready for dinner, Miko made a fire from some of the dried grass and small sticks in the area.

James watched him as he put the fuel for the fire together. "Make sure you have a bare area around the fire, we don't want to start a wildfire."

"Wildfire?" Miko asked.

"If you catch some of the grass on fire, the wind can blow it along and before you know it the entire grassland is aflame"

"I'll be careful," Miko said as he struck flint and made a spark. He then blew gently to coax it into a flame. He gradually added more fuel.

James noticed with worry at the smoke rising like a signal to all in the area that they were there. "We better eat fast and leave before someone comes to investigate."

Miko glanced at the smoke rising like a beacon, "Should I put it out?"

"No, just use the driest grass you can find and that should minimize the smoke," James replied. "Besides, we need to eat or we'll be too weak to defend ourselves in an emergency."

James found a fair-sized stick and impaled the rabbit upon it, using it as a skewer to cook the rabbit. When the rabbit was done, he extinguished the fire by kicking dirt over it until the smoke stopped.

They ate in silence, all the while keeping watch for anyone approaching. Once finished, they remounted and proceeded on again, riding quickly until it grew too dark to see. They made camp, staking the horse out near them.

"We'll take turns keeping watch."

"Alright," agreed Miko. "Do you want me to go first?"

"No, I'm not that tired," he replied. "You go ahead and sleep. I'll wake you when it's your turn."

Miko settled in and was soon asleep.

James watched the stars overhead, marveling how different they were from the ones at home. At midnight he woke Miko for his turn.

"Now don't fall asleep," he told Miko who had a hard time keeping his eyes open.

"Don't worry," Miko assured him, as he stifled a yawn, "you just get some sleep." He began to pace around the camp, keeping himself awake.

James listened to Miko's steps for a few minutes before sleep took him.

As the sky brightened, James awoke to find Miko asleep a few feet away. Shaking his head, he nudged him in the side with his foot. "Wakey, wakey, sleepyhead."

Miko's eyes shot open and he quickly sat up, "I fell asleep!"

"Yes, you did," James said to him. "Luckily nothing happened, this time. Let's get going."

Feeling bad, Miko got the horse ready. Soon they were mounted and making good time northward.

They kept alert for others on the plains. Once during the late morning they had to veer farther to the north when they encountered a force over three hundred strong marching from the southeast. They pushed the horse hard for a short time to put distance between them, only slowing down to a canter once the forces vanished from sight.

They came across forces on the move later in the afternoon, but this time they were coming from the northwest going generally eastward. "Must be reinforcements on their way to the City of Light," observed Miko.

"I think you are right," James agreed. "Still, let's give them a wide berth, we don't want to be mistaken for the Empire again."

They backtracked half a mile before they proceeded to the northwest for another two miles. Once they put Madoc's army behind them, they turned more easterly. Keeping a hurried pace, they pressed on for several more hours.

When the sun dipped toward the horizon, a great body of water appeared to the east. A road ran along the shoreline upon which streamed many people from the south. Most were on foot while some rode in wagons or pulled carts. Those on foot carried bundles while the wagons and carts were filled to overflowing with belongings.

Coming to the road, James inquired of one traveler, "Where are you coming from?"

The man looked up at James with a face totally lacking in hope or joy, "The City of Light," the man replied despondently.

"It's fallen already?"

Shaking his head, the man said, "No, at least not when I left. But those you see here didn't want to stay and be there when the Empire besieged it."

"It is certain then that they mean to take the City?"

"That's the rumor."

"Then the Empire hasn't yet reached the City?" James asked anxiously.

"I don't think so. They said our army was going to engage them in the field before they could reach the City. With our allies and mercenaries, they hope to stop them before they get that far."

"How far is the City from here?"

"It'll probably take you a day on horseback," he replied. "I've been on the road two days, headed for relatives up north."

"Thank you for your help."

The man continued on his way.

"Still a ways to go," Miko said.

James said, "But at least we're close, and unlikely to run into the Empire's forces along the way. Unless they are already besieging the City of Light by the time we get there."

"Let's get as much distance behind us as we can before dark," Miko suggested.

"Good idea," James replied. He looked at the sinking sun. "We probably only have a couple of hours left anyway."

They continued down the road. The other travelers were all going in the opposite direction; they were the only ones foolish enough to be going south. James and Miko had little trouble making their way through the people who moved aside when they saw them coming.

Once the sun was close to the horizon they made camp near the water's edge amidst a group of trees. James took a long stick found near a tree. He waded out into the lake and returned with a fish for dinner.

Both were ravenous. They hadn't eaten since the rabbit the night before. Once the fire was going well and the fish was cooking, they sat back and watched the people on the road as they passed by. A few glanced in their direction but none approached.

After they ate, James had Miko take first watch. When asked why he replied, "Maybe you'll stay awake better if you take the first one."

Miko set his mind to not falling asleep again this night.

Seeing that Miko understood he continued, "Wake me around midnight, sooner if you think someone is approaching."

Nodding, Miko said, "You can count on me."

"I hope so," James said. "Don't let me down."

"I won't," he replied. "You just get some sleep. I'll stay alert and keep the fire going."

Lying down, James contemplated again the wisdom of going to a city that will most likely be under siege. He felt that this was something he must do, though it scared him to death. *Get in, get out*, he told himself as he drifted off to sleep.

"James! Wake up!"

Startled out of sleep, he bolted upright and looked around the campsite. Miko sat by the tree where two men held him, one with a knife to his throat. A third man came toward him, a long sword in hand.

"Stay right there," said the man who approached, "and your friend won't get hurt."

James remained still and the man slowed his pace once he saw that James would cooperate.

"Lim, get the horse," he said to one of the two men holding Miko, while still approaching James.

Lim released Miko and walked to the horse. The other remained with Miko, his knife still held to the boy's throat.

The man with the long sword came toward James and raised the point to rest against James' chest. "Give me all your gold."

James removed his coin pouch and handed it over to the man who looked inside. Smiling at the coins and gems he saw, he said to his partners in glee, "Looks like we hit the jackpot this time!"

They both grinned and laughed at their good fortune.

James concentrated and formed a spell, then released the magic. From the direction of the lake behind him, a squishing sound began as if someone walked in boots full of water. From out of the darkness lurched a slow moving man- shaped glistening, shimmering form.

The man guarding Miko saw it first and let out a cry of fear.

The man with the long sword looked up from the contents of the pouch and saw it approach. Letting out a startled cry he backed away, not realizing that he had just removed the sword from in front of James' chest.

James waited until the man backed up several feet. He quickly bent over and picked up a stone. In one fluid motion he arched his arm back and threw it at the man guarding Miko. Distracted by the sight of the water creature the man failed to see it coming and the stone pierced his chest. The light in his eyes quickly vanished as he slumped to the ground, dead.

Rolling away from the man with the long sword, James maintained his concentration on the creature. It continued its advance, steadily closing the gap.

Eyes wide in fear, the man raised his sword and struck but it had little effect. The sword simply passed through the water.

Seeing one of his partners lying dead and another battling a creature that was unaffected by the sword, Lim screamed in terror and raced off into the night, leaving his partner to his fate.

The man turned as the water creature lurched forward and touched him on the arm. Unable to break the contact, the man watched in horror as the water from the creature spread along his skin, moving to envelope his entire body in a thin, watery layer.

Miko stared in frightened awe as the man became completely cocooned by the creature. Gasping, the man's mouth opened in a vain attempt to breathe. Water from the creature flowed into his lungs and he spasmed as he choked. Finally, his eyes rolled up and he collapsed.

When he hit the ground, the water from the creature lost its integrity and splashed away.

Gasping from the exertion of having maintained such a spell, James almost passed out but somehow retained consciousness.

Miko closely examined the man killed by the water creature. He turned to James. "He's dead!"

Nodding, James sat there and tried to keep the world from spinning.

Miko took James' pouch from the man's hand and brought it over. "The other man fled into the night."

"That's okay," said James. "I doubt if he'll be back anytime soon."

"What was that thing?"

"I suppose you could call it a cross between a water elemental and the blob," James replied. "It's something I cooked up a while back for a game a friend and I used to play. It was almost more than I could control though, it kept trying to lose cohesion and break apart."

"Whatever it was, it sure was impressive," Miko said. "It sure scared them."

"That was the idea." He laid back and could feel himself beginning to slip back into sleep. "Miko, you're going to have to keep watch till morning," he told him, yawning. "I'm not going to be able to stay awake."

“That’s okay,” he replied. “You go ahead and rest, I doubt if I could sleep now anyway.” James closed his eyes and quickly fell asleep.

Miko dragged the dead men out of camp but not before going through their pouches and removing anything of value. Once the camp was cleared of dead bodies, he began to walk a patrol to stay awake. He managed to remain awake until morning.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The following morning, James woke with a terrific headache and a mouth as dry as a desert. He discovered Miko still awake. He had remained so throughout the night.

Upon seeing James rise, Miko brought the water bottle with some berries he gathered earlier. “Feeling okay?” he asked his friend, concerned.

“No, but I’ll survive.” Giving him a reassuring grin, he told Miko that he would be fine. He took the water bottle and drained most of it. He popped the berries in his mouth one at a time while he gazed out over the water. Soon his headache had been reduced to a manageable throb.

Miko had the horse ready for travel by the time James finished and felt ready for travel. He extended his hand and aided James in getting to his feet and then onto the horse. He swung up behind him and rested his head against his friend’s back. Though exhausted from having stood watch the entire night, he felt good about not letting him down again.

They returned to the road and headed for the City of Light. James felt Miko slump against him and begin to snore. He did his best to make him comfortable and to ensure that he wouldn’t fall.

The number of travelers had dramatically increased since yesterday. More families were on the road. Many small children rode in the back of wagons or walked beside their parents. When asked, they told him the City had not yet been besieged when they left.

As the day progressed, groups of riders appeared to the west as Madoc patrolled the area. The closer to the City, the more frequently they appeared.

Miko roused several times during the morning, but lapsed back to sleep after taking a quick look around or answering the call of nature.

Prior to midday they passed through a small fishing village which was not much more than a couple of main buildings with huts and houses surrounding them. The people there, though concerned about the Empire, hadn’t yet evacuated their homes. Many still went about their business as usual. Several fishing boats were out on the water.

One of the buildings was a store and James made a brief stop to replenish their supply of rations. The only food left was dried fish and day-old bread. The throngs of people coming through had taken everything else. He bought two days worth at exorbitant prices. The lady wouldn't even haggle, saying that if he didn't buy it, someone else surely would before the end of the day.

They returned to the road, eating the dry fish and stale bread. None of it was very tasty but at least it filled the void. The road passed through other villages, about one every five miles or so, and the number of closed and vacated buildings increased as they drew closer to the City of Light. The number of people on the road also steadily increased with more and more refugees fleeing the approach of the Empire.

As the shadows grew longer with the closing of the day, a great walled city nestled against the edge of the Sea appeared in the distance ahead. A formidable wall surrounded it and many ships were anchored in the harbor. When asked, a passerby confirmed that it was, indeed, the City of Light. Hundreds of buildings spread outward from the wall, though many had the look of being deserted, likely in anticipation of a siege.

Travel was slow as a veritable exodus was fleeing the city. In the surrounding fields many farmers worked to save what crops they could. Some fields were on fire to prevent the Empire from benefiting from the grain.

Cavalry ran patrols throughout the countryside, and the walls of the city bristled with many men. "It's going to take a while to break this city."

"Yeah," agreed Miko. "It looks impressive, bigger even than Cardri."

"It's not just those already here," James said as he pointed over to the harbor. "But the Sea enables them to receive fresh supplies of men and equipment should they need it."

The gates were jammed with people and wagons, going both in and out. An entire squad of the city guard patrolled the gates attempting to maintain what order they could. It took a while but they made it through the throng to the gates where one of the guards questioned them about their business in the city.

When James told him of the package they were delivering and showed it to him, they were waved on through into the city.

They made their way carefully from the gate, forging their way through the mass of people trying to leave. After inquiring as to the whereabouts of the Great Library, they made their way further into the city. Following the directions, they arrived at the Library in little time.

The Library was an impressive structure, at least four stories tall and a hundred yards wide. Outside the entrance sat many wagons in the process of being loaded with books and manuscripts brought from within the Library.

A man supervised the distribution and packing of the books and manuscripts. "Easy there!" he yelled at one man who tossed several books haphazardly into a wagon. "Those are hundreds of years old; you must treat them with care." The man mumbled an apology and then returned inside the Library for more.

James dismounted and walked to the supervisor. "Excuse me."

The man directed two men carrying a chest to place it in the last wagon, then turned to James. "Yes?" Then to another man he yelled, "Not in there, take it to the front wagon!"

"I was wondering if you could direct me to Ollinearn."

"He is very busy," the man said to James. "He does not have time to see anyone today." Spying a man walking out of the Library with books stacked on top of delicately rolled scrolls, he rushed over and berated the man, taking the books off the scrolls that were being crushed.

James followed him and said, "But this is important, I have a delivery from Ellinwyrd in Cardri."

"Ellinwyrd you say?" the man asked as he actually looked at James for the first time.

"Yes, Ellinwyrd," James acknowledged. "He asked us to deliver a book for him." He reached inside his backpack and brought out the package, showing it to the man.

The man took it, saw Ellinwyrd's seal and then handed it back. "Very well. You will find him in the back preparing the last of the books for travel." Seeing another man not treating *'his books'* properly, he left James standing there. He rushed to the miscreant where he instructed the man on the proper way to handle aged books.

James signaled for Miko to remain by the horse as he entered the Library.

Inside he found shelf after empty shelf where books had sat until recently. If the number of empty shelves was any indication, they must have already transported a staggering amount of books and other related items.

From a door in the back another man emerged carrying a box filled with books. Figuring this to be where Ollinearn was, James passed through the doorway. There he found a wizened old man directing three helpers packing books and manuscripts.

"Carefully now, Yorn," the old man said kindly. "They must be packed just right if they are to survive the journey." He patted the young man on the back and turned to see James walk through the doorway. "Yes?" the old man asked. "Can I help you?"

"Are you Ollinearn?"

"Yes, I am he"

James held out the book and offered it to him, "Ellinwyrd sent me to give this to you."

Ollinearn took the package, glanced at the seal upon it, and then removed the wrapping. He looked at the book a moment then glanced questioningly at James; "He sent you here to deliver this book?"

"Yes, sir."

He motioned for him to follow. "Come with me." To his helpers he said, "Continue with these, then we shall finish with the histories."

"Yes, sir," one of the helpers said.

Ollinearn exited the room through a small door in the back and walked down a small hallway. Near the end he opened a door on the right and entered.

As James followed him inside he saw it was a small study with a desk and three chairs. Ollinearn went around the desk and sat. He gestured to a chair across from him and said, "Please, sit and be comfortable. My apologies for not offering any refreshments, but things around here are in a state of confusion."

“It’s alright, I understand.” James assured him.

Placing the book between them on the table, he said, “Now, I find it strange that Ellinwyrd would have sent you here to deliver this book.” He looked at James for a response.

“Why?”

With a wave of his hand he said, “It’s a book of little consequence, quite common really. It’s hardly worth sending someone through a war zone to deliver. In fact, I have two copies.”

James produced the letter Ellinwyrd had written and handed it to Ollinearn. “He did send this as well”

Ollinearn took the letter, broke the seal and then read it. After he’d finished reading it he looked to James. “He asks that I aid you any way I can; very strange.”

“Why would that be strange?”

Placing the letter on the table he said, “He has never made such a request before. In addition, he makes no mention of your need.”

“I am in search of the god Morcyth,” James explained. “Ellinwyrd believed that the last temple to him was located somewhere around the Sea of the Gods and that you would be my best chance of finding its whereabouts.”

“Morcyth?” he asked. “Are you a historian?”

“Nothing like that, no,” James replied. “I am on a quest of sorts and this is where it has led me.”

“Hmmm...” Ollinearn mused as he sat back in his chair and thought. “We have several books detailing Morcyth and his religion; though most of those are already on their way to a safe area north of the Sea.”

“Is there anything you can tell me?”

“There are a few books that have yet to be packed for shipping which deal with religious history and related subjects.” He brought his hands together and continued, “But we are very busy and do not have much time before the Empire knocks on our door. I am afraid that I will not have the time to spend in searching for the information you are after. I am sorry.”

James reached inside his shirt and pulled out the medallion, showing it to Ollinearn. “This medallion was given to me.” He took it off and placed it on the table before him. “I wasn’t told anything about it, but have learned that it has something to do with Morcyth.”

Ollinearn reached out to the medallion and looked to James questioningly. When James nodded, he picked it up and examined it closely. “I know this,” he said as his fingers traced the medallion’s design. He looked up to James, “Maybe I’ll find the time to help you after all. Follow me.”

Still holding the medallion, Ollinearn led James out to the hallway and returned to the room where his helpers were finishing packing the few remaining books. When they entered the room, he said to one of the men, “Pack as quickly as you can, I will be occupied for a short time.”

“Where will you be?”

“Back with the histories,” he replied. “I shouldn’t be too long.” Taking a candelabrum with several lit candles, he led James through another doorway and down a long sloping hallway. They passed several doors. Many were open and James saw room after room of empty shelves.

Ollinearn came to the final doorway, the only one which remained closed. Opening it, he preceded James into a room where the light from the candelabrum revealed dozens of neatly stacked books lining many shelves around the room.

"This is where the books chronicling the history of this region are stored," he explained. "They are not of any great importance, so were to be packed last." Turning to James he added, "Which may prove to be providential." He motioned to a table against a side wall, "Please rest a moment while I find the book I believe has a representation of this design."

James sat and watched as Ollinearn closely examined one book after another. He finally pulled one off the shelf and brought it to the table. Placing the candelabrum on the table, the old man took a seat and set the book down between them.

"This book was written four hundred years ago by one of my predecessors," he explained as he began to turn the pages. On the second page was a picture that showed the exact same design as was on the front of the medallion, Ollinearn held up the medallion next to the picture and compared one to the other. "As I thought," he said as he handed the medallion back to James. "This design on your medallion is called the Star of Morcyth."

"Star?" James asked. *'With the star, seal your fate.'* A cold shiver ran down his spine, as a line from Serena's prophecy sprung to mind.

"Yes, it was the symbol of the religion, and was embossed on all important artifacts. There must be some significance as to why you carry it."

"That's what I am trying to find out."

He read a little more then said, "The writer tells of a conflict between two major religions nearly half a millennium before this was written."

"The church of Morcyth was one and the other was...", he paused as he took a moment to read the passage. "Ah yes, here it is, Dmon-Li. That was the other one."

"Dmon-Li?" James asked questioningly. "I've never heard of it."

Ollinearn looked up from his book, "Not too surprising, unless you come from the south. It's widely worshiped still in many parts of the Empire. In fact, I believe it has influence with the Emperor as well but do not know for sure."

"What kind of god is Dmon-Li?"

"You see, where Morcyth was a god of good whose main tenets taught teaching and learning, Dmon-Li's followers thrived on chaos and warfare. His priests often were great warriors, given great strength and skill that was used to foment wars and conflict."

He read several more passages. "It seems at some point, Dmon-Li set about annihilating Morcyth's priests. His warrior priests began hunting them down one by one until only a few were left." He continued to read as he related the tale. "It says here that there came a time when all had been slaughtered save a very few who made their way to the High Temple." He paused a moment and then looked up at James. "Here in the City of Light."

"The High Temple was here?" James asked excitedly. "Here in the City of Light?"

"Apparently so," Ollinearn affirmed. "It seems that the last of the priests of Morcyth gathered together at the Temple while the High Priest began a period of fasting and prayer. Most likely to find a resolution to the problem of Dmon-Li. The book doesn't give the exact reason."

“Did anything come of it?”

Referring back to the book, he said, “There are no specifics just that when the period of fasting ended, the priests all left the High Temple and as far as the author of this book knew, were never seen again. He goes on to say that they left everything behind, taking very little with them.”

“That’s it?” James asked. “It doesn’t say where they went?”

Ollinearn flipped through a couple of more pages, scanning the writing, “No, it doesn’t. It does say that over time the temple was looted and was finally destroyed during a great quake that brought down most of the city in the year 2322, two hundred years prior to the writing of this book.”

“Does it say where the temple had been located?”

“No, it doesn’t,” Ollinearn replied as he continued to examine the pages. “Here may be something,” he said, making eye contact with James. “It says that the last High Priest was born in the city of Saragon. Maybe he returned home.”

“Possibly,” agreed James. “But the Empire now controls it and from what I hear to venture there would be very unwise right now.”

“True, true,” nodded Ollinearn. He read a little bit further. “That is all there is about Morcyth and your medallion.” Closing the book he came to his feet. “I hope I have been able to help you further your quest.”

“Yes, thank you,” replied James. “You have been most helpful.”

Ollinearn took the candelabrum and motioned for James to precede him out the door. He then led James to the main library area. “Good luck on your quest. I really must have the rest of these books packed before the ship sails.”

“I understand and thank you again,” he said and then moved to leave through the front door, where Miko waited with the horse.

“Did you discover what you needed to know?” Miko asked expectantly as James approached.

“I’ll tell you later,” he said. “Let’s find a place to eat and then get out of here before the Empire shows up.”

“Good plan,” said Miko.

They traveled through the crowded streets until they saw an inn. Not wanting to leave their horse out front where someone fleeing may try to help themselves to it, they went around back and secured it out of sight before they went inside.

The inn was deserted save a lone serving girl who sat near the front window watching people make their way to the gates to get out of the city.

She failed to take notice of them until James said, “Excuse me.”

Startled, she jumped from her seat, “Sorry, I didn’t hear you come in. What can I do for you gentlemen?”

“Are you open for dinner?”

“Yes,” she affirmed, “we are, though there is limited choice. You see, we are leaving first thing in the morning.”

Taking a seat near the front window he said, "Just give us two large helpings of whatever you have and some ale."

Before she went to the kitchen she paused and said somewhat guiltily, "That's going to be three silvers, each."

"What?" James asked incredulously.

"That's outrageous!" Miko blurted.

Looking embarrassed, the girl said, "Sorry but that is what I am told to charge today."

James nodded his head and said, "Here," as he handed over six silvers. Then he added, "I understand."

Looking relieved the girl took the money and went into the kitchen to get their food and drinks.

"How could you pay that much?" Miko asked as the girl disappeared into the kitchen.

Shrugging, James said, "We're unlikely to get anything cheaper," he gestured to the people going by outside, carrying bundles or pulling carts. "Besides, we're lucky to be able to get anything at all. I'm surprised they're even open."

They relaxed as they waited for their food. James watched the people; mother's carrying babies alongside fathers pulling carts loaded with belongings and children. "Kind of makes you sad doesn't it?"

"What does?" asked Miko.

"The senseless destruction that war brings," he explained. "The ones who always pay the price of another's greed is the simple man who just wants to go about his life, take joy in his family, and find peace at the end. They didn't ask for it, don't understand why it's happening, but theirs are the lives ruined, turned upside down, families destroyed."

"I see what you mean," Miko said, reflecting on James' words.

The girl returned from the kitchen balancing a platter with heaping slices of meat smothered in thick gravy in one hand and a pitcher of ale with two mugs gripped in the other. She sat it on the table and then returned to the kitchen only to emerge with a large loaf of bread. "Here, this is extra," she said as she put the bread on the table. "We'll probably just throw it away anyway."

Taking the bread James said, "Thank you."

Smiling, the girl pattered around the room, wiping down tables and keeping busy.

Starved from having little food the last couple of days, it didn't take long before they completely devoured their meal.

"Would you like anything else?" she asked when she came to remove the dinnerware.

"No nothing," James replied. "That was very good."

Miko nodded his agreement as he let out a loud belch.

"Glad you liked it," she said, heading back to the kitchen with the dirty platter.

"Feel better?" James asked Miko as he relaxed into his chair.

"Much better," he said contentedly, patting his stomach.

They rested a little longer as they allowed their food to digest. Continuing to watch the people going by, James spied a little girl running away from her mother, giggling and laughing, unaware of the gravity of the situation. Her mother called her back but the girl kept running around, as if

it was a game. The girl would slow down and her mother would almost get her only to bolt off through the crowd again.

The mother was getting extremely agitated and James felt sorry for the girl when her mother finally got hold of her. The little girl deftly avoided her mother's attempts and raced through the crowd, giggling and laughing. She dodged a cart and ran into another of the mass of people on the street.

The little girl didn't even realize she'd bumped into someone until he grabbed her by the arm. She looked up to see the face of a man with a patch over the right eye and a long angry welt that ran from his hairline to his jaw.

She looked like she was about ready to scream when her mother came. Words were exchanged and the man let go of the girl. The mother dragged the child away, obviously upset and yelling at her.

James went cold when he saw the man. His memory flashed back to a man with a crossbow in a window and the snapped crosswire that had caught him in the face.

"Miko!" James said. "I think I see the man who escaped when I rescued Perrilin."

"Are you sure?" he asked as he too got to his feet.

"Pretty sure," James replied. "You see, his crossbow wire had snapped catching him in the face, along the right eye." Pointing to the man in the road, he said, "And that man has a welt running in about the same area." He then moved to the front door and left the inn.

"Goodbye," they heard the serving girl say.

As Miko followed James out the front door he asked, "What are we doing?"

"I want to follow him and see what he's up to."

"I thought we were leaving?" Miko asked nervously. "You know, before the Empire gets here?"

"We are, this should only take a few minutes."

Not happy about these turn of events, Miko said, "I hope so," and continued to follow James as he followed the man.

They kept him in sight as he continued down the street, then turned right at a main intersection. They briefly lost sight of him when he turned the corner. They hurried to the edge of the building and peered around it, again catching sight of him as he made another turn down a smaller side street. Running, they entered the side street and saw him walking down the road.

The road led to the docks where a veritable mob of people tried to gain passage on the few vessels remaining in the harbor. All the ships had armed guards keeping the people at bay. Near the far end of the dock, in the opposite direction the man was going, a riot was in progress at the base of a gangway leading onto a ship. James saw guards using clubs and swords on the people as they surged toward the gangway.

"There he goes," Miko said as he directed James' attention back to the matter at hand. The man had just entered a warehouse standing back from the docks. It looked well maintained but closed at the moment. Seeing a window in the side of the warehouse, they quickly made their way to it and peered inside.

Within they saw the man talking to two men in uniforms of the city guard. They saw him hand a small vial to one followed by a small sack, possibly heavy with coin.

James heard a noise behind him. He quickly turned, but something struck him hard in the side of the head and everything went black.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Gasping, James came to as a bucket of water deluged his head. Next to him Miko sputtered as he was treated similarly. His eyes opened but his vision was blurry. The side of his head throbbed immensely from where he had been struck. He tried to move but found himself tied to a chair with his arms secured behind him.

“Who are you?” he heard someone ask.

He looked around with far less than his normal 20-20 vision, trying to see who spoke when a strap came from behind and struck him in the side, wrapping around his chest. He cried out from the pain inflicted and that was when he realized his shirt had been removed. An angry red welt formed across his skin from the strap.

When his eyes regained their focus, he saw the man with the patch over his eye step before him. The pain in his head exploded once more when the man grabbed his hair and yanked his head back. “Now,” the man asked, his gaze boring into James’ with his one good eye, “who are you?”

“James,” he gasped, “my name is James.” He faltered on the edge of consciousness from the pain, and started to feel like he was about to throw up.

The man let go of his hair and asked, “What were you doing at the window?”

Fighting back nausea, James tried to think of a good reply when *Thwack!* The strap again scored along his side, and created another red, swollen welt.

“We were casing the place!” Miko yelled out from the chair next to his.

Turning his attention toward Miko the man exclaimed, “You expect me to believe you are a couple of thieves?” He signaled the person behind Miko, and Miko cried out as the strap gave him a less than gentle caress.

“Well?”

“In all the confusion of everyone leaving town,” Miko explained, “we thought we could score big.”

Looking at Miko intently, the man considered what he said.

“When we saw that there were people in here, we decided to find another place with no one around and that’s when someone struck us from behind,” Miko continued, trying to sound sincere.

“Perhaps.”

He walked to a table upon which their bags lay. He reached into James’ backpack and pulled out the small amulet that James had picked up in Cardri. He dangled it in front of James and asked, “Then what are you doing with this?”

James had to squint in order to focus his eyes well enough to make out what was being shown. “I bought that from a street merchant some time ago,” he replied when he finally made it out.

Thwack! The strap hit him again, causing him to cry out.

“He’s telling the truth!” Miko exclaimed from the chair next to him. “He just bought it to get away from the merchant.”

Thwack! A red welt formed across Miko’s chest. “When I want you to talk,” the man said to him, “I will tell you.”

A side door opened and the man looked toward the door. Another walked in and came over, quietly talking with their interrogator. Whatever he was told didn’t make him very happy. After a few more moments of exchanging words, their interrogator said to their guards, “Keep an eye on them until I get back.” Angrily he turned and stalked out the door with the other man right behind.

James leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes, trying to relax, hoping the pain in his head would go away.

“James,” Miko whispered, “you okay?”

Unable to answer, he just silently shook his head.

James sat there with his eyes closed for several minutes before he heard a door open and close, then the sound of footsteps coming toward him. Opening his eyes, he was afraid that it was ol’ One Eye again. When he saw who it was, he blinked a couple of times and decided he was either dreaming or having hallucinations. For there walking toward him was Mickey Mouse.

He looked to his guards and they appeared not to notice the new arrival, even when Mickey walked right past one of them. “I’ve gone crazy,” James moaned aloud.

“No,” Mickey replied as he reached up and removed his head, “you’ve not.” When the head came off, it revealed the little creature who already came to him twice before.

James laughed, though he was not sure why.

“Come on,” it said. “Let’s go.”

“You’re rescuing me?”

“No,” the little creature replied, “just borrowing you for a while.”

“Why?”

“You can’t stop asking questions can you?” the little creature said to him.

Unsure how to reply to that, he remained quiet.

“C’mon, get up,” the creature told him.

“I’m tied,” James said.

The little guy looked at him silently, impatiently tapping one foot.

To show the little guy he couldn't get up, James tried to stand and before he realized it, he was standing.

Putting his Mickey head back on, the little guy turned and motioned for James to follow as he returned the way he came and exited through the door.

Following him outside, James stopped suddenly and stared in absolute dumbfounded silence. "I know this place."

"You should," the little guy replied. "You've been here often enough."

"Mommy, mommy!" a little girl squealed with delight as she ran over to the little guy in costume. "It's Mickey!" She gave Mickey a big hug and posed while her mother took their picture.

Mickey patted her on the head as she turned to him and said, "Bye, Mickey!"

"This is Disneyland!" James said incredulously, staring down Main Street USA, with Sleeping Beauty's Castle at the end.

"Yeah," the little guy said. "I love this place." He walked toward the heart of Disneyland and kids came to him, giving him hugs and had their picture taken.

"How do you know about it?"

"I get around," Mickey replied. "Besides, those of us who gravitate to what you call good, are drawn to such focal points in the universe."

"Disneyland is a focal point?" James asked, astonished.

"Think about it. What happens whenever someone mentions it? Those around them feel good, instantly. See a picture of it and you smile. That makes it a remarkable place, there are few like it anywhere." He paused to have his picture taken with several children, their mother simply aglow with happiness.

"Everyone here on Earth knows of it and they continually direct good thoughts toward it. It's almost a beacon in the night for those who can see it."

"But why bring me here?"

The little guy paused and glanced back at James before more children requesting a photo op could appear. When they were done he asked, "Would you like me to send you back?"

"No, not right now," James replied hastily. He was suddenly aware that his headache was gone as was the pain from the welts. Also, even though he was bruised, possibly bloody, and without a shirt, no one seemed to give him a second thought.

"Ah, look," the little guy said as he bent over to pick up something lying on the ground. He showed it to James, "Someone's lost their wallet." He walked toward one of the many workers and handed it to her, saying, "My shift's not over for a while, can you take this to Lost and Found?"

"Sure, not a problem," the girl said as she put the wallet in her pocket and then walked away.

"Sad when something gets lost," he said to James. "When you lose something, you always hope an honest person will find it and work to get it back to you. All too often though, you never see it again. Such is life."

"I suppose it is," agreed James, not sure where this was going.

From up ahead, a group of teenage boys came running around the corner, hell-bent on getting to the next ride before their Fast Pass expired.

"No running in the park," the little guy yelled.

"Up yours, Mickey!" one of them hollered as he swung around him and plowed right into James.

Pain erupted in his head and when he moved to get up, realized he was back in the warehouse strapped to the chair. Though his headache had diminished somewhat, the pain of the welts across his stomach and chest on the other hand still throbbed angrily with every beat of his heart.

"James, thank the gods you're finally awake!" Miko whispered with relief. "I was afraid you weren't going to."

The room seemed darker and there were several lit torches in sconces around the room that weren't there earlier. "How long was I out?"

"A couple of hours or so," he replied. "I'm not entirely sure. Night has fallen."

"Was it all a dream then?" he mused to himself.

"Was what a dream?"

"Never mind, I'll tell you later." Looking around he found there were still only the two guards that were there earlier. "We need to get out of here before ol' One Eye returns," he whispered to Miko.

"I think that would be a good idea too," he agreed. "Magic?"

"I'll try," James said and then tried to concentrate but the throbbing in his head made it nigh on impossible. He tried something simple and concentrated on one of the torches on the wall that was situated over many old crates and broken containers. The area looked to have been the dumping spot for anything that broke or was unusable.

As James concentrated on the torch, it slowly rose from the sconce. He concentrated hard, focusing his will through the pain and inch by inch it continued to rise higher until the bottom was no longer within the sconce. Gasping from the effort, he had it move a little to the side and then released the magic, allowing it to fall amidst the crates and boxes below.

At first it looked like nothing was happening but then smoke started to rise from where the torch had fallen. "Now what?" Miko asked, watching as the smoke grew thicker and thicker.

"We wait," he replied. Soon the flames rose above the broken wooden crates.

One of the guards took notice of the smoke. He turned toward the growing flames and yelled, "Fire!" The other guard saw the flames licking the sides of the wall and both ran over to try to prevent it from spreading.

James tried to wield the magic to break their bonds but his head was too muddled with pain to adequately concentrate. When he saw Miko look at him, he just shook his head no.

Miko, realizing that James had done all he could, began to rock his chair back and forth until he toppled over. He then squirmed around and eventually worked free of the ropes. Keeping an eye on the guards, who by now fought a roaring fire, he untied James. Once free, and with the guards preoccupied with the fire, they hurried to the table where their belongings were and retrieved them.

The door on the far side suddenly swung open and ol' One Eye entered, coming to a surprised stop at seeing them with belongings in hand. "The prisoners!" he yelled, drawing his sword and racing toward James and Miko. The guards joined the chase, giving up on the fire which by this time burned out of control. It now covered most of the wall and had almost reached the rafters.

James and Miko raced for the far door and reached it before anyone could get close. Bolting through it, they quickly lost themselves in the crowd outside. They didn't get far before people noticed the fire consuming the warehouse

"Fire!" they heard someone shout, after which it became total pandemonium. The crowd surged in panic as they tried to get away from the flames. People shouted, and those who fell were trampled by those behind.

James glanced back to the warehouse and saw ol' One Eye standing at the door looking through the crowd for them. "Move!" he hollered when Miko paused in front of him to avoid being knocked off his feet by a group of frightened people in flight. Pushing him forward, they raced down the street away from the warehouse, dodging through the panicked crowd. After putting some distance between themselves and the fire, James grabbed Miko by the shirt and pulled him through a door into a dark and empty warehouse. They shut the door and sank down against the wall to rest as they listened for pursuit.

Miko scooted closer to James and whispered, "Maybe we should rest here for awhile, at least until you're a little better."

James nodded his head and leaned against the wall, trying to get comfortable. The adrenalin rush he experienced when they escaped from the warehouse was quickly wearing off.

"I'll keep watch if you want to get some sleep."

Closing his eyes, James lay down on the floor and soon soft snores told Miko that he'd fallen asleep.

Miko worried about his friend as he sat there in the dark. He listened to the noise outside, the sounds of people running and screaming. He remembered back to the times before he met James when he would sit in the dark, hoping not to be found by the constables or some street tough. He smiled at his memories, even though not all of them were good ones.

He sat in the dark for quite some time. The only light was from the fire that came in through the window. He went to it and peered. Several buildings adjacent to the flaming warehouse had caught fire; crews worked to put it out. Though it still raged, it looked as if they had managed to stop it from spreading.

Suddenly, horns sounded in the night, dozens and dozens of them. The people out in the streets stopped what they were doing and raised their heads for a moment, listening to the horns as they blared all over the city. Then all hell broke loose when people erupted into motion. They raced in different directions, bumping into each other. Some got knocked down and trampled by the panicked mob while others cried out in search of loved ones.

Feeling this may be too important to allow James to continue sleeping, he gently shook his friend, rousing him. "James!" he whispered urgently, trying to wake him up.

Consciousness was slow in returning. His head still throbbed and he was unable to shake sleep's hold.

“What?” He asked groggily, trying to retain his tenuous hold onto consciousness.

“There were horns sounding,” Miko whispered to his friend.

“Horns?” James asked, slurring his speech.

“Yeah, lots of them. Then it got all weird outside.”

James looked at him, giggled a little and then lapsed back into unconsciousness.

“Damn!”

Realizing his friend would probably be out for some time, he made his mind up to get some food and find out what was going on. Making James as comfortable as possible, he slipped out the door and joined with the people outside.

He hailed one passerby. “What’s going on?”

Looking at him like he was addled, the man asked, “Didn’t you hear the horns?”

“Yeah, but what does that mean?”

“It means the Empire’s forces have been sighted nearing the city and the gates have been sealed and barred. The only way in or out is by ship but some idiot set fire to a warehouse near there and took out a good portion of the docks before it could be put out.”

“What are we to do?”

“What are you, stupid or something?” the man asked incredulously. “We’re under siege, boy! Not much to do but wait it out and hope for the best.” Shaking his head, the man walked away, mumbling about the idiots of the world.

Miko made his way to a market of sorts that sprung up near the docks. Merchants were selling all kinds of items including food. Miko purchased a loaf of bread for the exorbitant price of a silver and a half for one small loaf. When he tried to haggle, the man said, “Pay it or go away”. Knowing James would need it, he bought the loaf as well as a jug of ale for five silvers.

“Extortion, that’s what it is,” he muttered as he made his way back to the abandoned warehouse. To his relief, he found James exactly where he left him, undisturbed and still softly snoring. He sat next to him and ate a little of the bread for himself, drinking a small portion of the ale to wash it down. Then he settled in to keep watch for as long as needed.

He managed to stay awake through the night, keeping watch over his friend. When the morning sun lightened the sky, to his immense relief, James stirred.

Moaning with the pounding in his head, he sat up and laid his head in his hands in the hope of keeping it from bursting apart. “Oh my god,” he moaned, “What I wouldn’t give for some aspirin right now.”

“We don’t have any of that,” replied Miko, wondering what an aspirin was. He offered the bread and ale to James. “But we do have this.”

James slowly nibbled on the loaf and drank most of the ale. “How long have I been out?” he asked between bites.

“All night,” Miko replied. “And I’ve got bad news.”

James looked at him questioningly as he ate the rest of the bread then finished the ale.

“Apparently sometime last night the Empire’s forces were sighted nearing the City,” he explained, pausing a moment to see what effect his words were having.

“Go on,” James prompted him.

“And they’ve shut the gates, no one is allowed in or out. We’re under siege!”

“I was afraid of that. When I’m done we’ll look around the City and see if we can figure our way out of here.” He went to the bags and dumped everything out.

Miko looked oddly at what he was doing.

“We’re getting rid of everything but the most important stuff,” he explained. “One bag each.” They sorted through what they had and finally winnowed it down to just enough items to give each of them half a bag. James took the money and divided it equally between them.

When he handed Miko his half he said, “Just in case we either get separated or one of the bags gets lost.”

Miko understood and put the money pouch in his bag.

“Now,” James said as he got shakily to his feet, “let’s go see what’s happening.” He went to the door and peered out the small window next to it. Seeing no one in the vicinity he opened the door and they made their way quickly into the street. Smoke still rose from the charred remains of several buildings and about a third of the wharf area.

“Man what a mess,” James exclaimed, shaking his head.

“At least we’re alive.”

“True,” agreed James.

They walked down the street, away from the smoldering wreckage. They heard the sound of horns outside of the walls along with the whisk of arrows fired by the defenders atop the walls. All the townspeople were strangely absent, the streets vacant of the usual mass of people.

As they continued along a member of the city guard took notice of them and said, “No one is allowed on the streets. You will have to return to your homes.”

“Alright,” James responded, “we didn’t realize.”

The guard stood there and watched as they turned around and headed back the way they had come. After going a ways, they turned down a side street and James came to a stop. “Damn!” he swore. “I hadn’t figured on there being a curfew.” He stood for a moment before saying, “Makes sense though.”

“Should we go back to the warehouse?”

“Probably would be the best thing to do. I doubt if they are going to breach the walls anytime soon,” he reasoned. “So we’ll try again tonight when we are not so conspicuous.”

They returned through the streets to the warehouse where they discovered a stairway along one wall that led to the roof. Hoping to get a good view of what was happening in the city, they climbed to the roof.

They had a fair view of the city, the outer defensive walls rose higher than the warehouse’s roof. Several thousand men lined the walls as archers fired arrows down at the attackers. A crossbow bolt struck one of the archers and he plummeted off the wall, landing with a thud on the street below.

The roofs of many buildings throughout the city had a number of people upon them as well, others having the same idea as they. Looking toward the remaining docks, James saw a ship disembarking soldiers and supplies. With the curfew in effect, there was no longer a mob at the

docks, fighting to board the approaching ships. However there were several squads stationed in and around the dockside just in case of trouble.

“James, look!” Miko said as he pointed to five wagons making their way toward the dockside. They saw that the wagons were loaded with many boxes and crates. An old man sat on the lead wagon, “I guess Ollinearn finally got his books packed. Glad he’s going to make it out of the city.”

“Maybe if we could get to him, he would take us with him?” Miko asked, looking hopeful.

James gazed out over the city at the many squads patrolling the streets between Ollinearn and them. Turning to Miko he said, “I doubt if we’d make it that far.”

Feeling disappointed and mad, Miko watched as Ollinearn trundled to the docks and began to load the last of his books on to one of the waiting ships.

The clash of swords drew their attention to a section of the wall close to where they stood. Several attackers managed to gain the wall and reinforcements were running to beat them back.

The fighting on the wall was fierce, but the attackers were outnumbered and it wasn’t long before the last one fell. A cheer rose from the defenders as the wall was once again secure.

“That was close.”

“I’d hate to be up there,” said James, as men removed the dead and wounded. They simply tossed the enemy soldiers over the side to land on their comrades below.

The rest of the day progressed pretty much the same. The Empire’s army stormed the walls and the defenders fought back. Occasionally the attackers gained a foothold on the wall only to have the defenders cut them down, securing the wall once again. There were two brief respites in which the attackers withdrew, regrouped and then commenced their assault all over again.

They took turns sleeping while the other kept watch and by the end of the day, James felt much improved.

As the sun sank toward the horizon, horns blared from the field as the attackers withdrew. When it became apparent that no attack was imminent, the men on the walls rotated off in shifts for meals and rest.

People emerged from their homes and the streets grew crowded. Many made their way to the Keep to see about loved ones who had manned the walls.

“It seems the curfew has been lifted while the assault has stopped,” observed James. “This may be a good time for us to see about getting out of here, if that’s even possible.”

“Do you feel better?”

“Some,” James told him. “My headache is only a dull throbbing now.” He felt the bump on the side of his head. “I think the swelling’s gone down. Being able to rest for a day has done wonders.”

They came down off the roof, grabbed their bags and left the warehouse to merge with the people now back on the streets. They made their way toward the docks and found that the east side had been cordoned off, watched by several squads of the city guard. They were told that area was for unloading supplies and men.

James led them to the western side of the docks where a mass of people had gathered. A man stood upon a wagon addressing the crowd. “...are going to come and help evacuate the City.

They will pull up to the dock and at that time, in an orderly fashion, those at the head of the line will board quickly. Anyone, and I do mean *anyone*, who causes trouble or becomes a nuisance will be dealt with severely.”

Looking behind him, the man on the wagon saw the first of the rescue boats pulling up to the docks. He raised his hands to get the crowds attention. When they’d quieted he said loudly, “The first boat is here and more are on the way.” He signaled to a squad of guards on the docks and said, “Start loading.”

When the crowd heard that, they surged toward the docks, pushing and shoving to be first on the boat. “Do not push!” the man said to the crowd, “the boats will be coming all night long and as long as needed to get everyone out.”

One man pushed an old lady down and ran for the boat. A guard saw him and moved to intercept. The man fought with the guard, but was soon clubbed senseless. “Take him away,” the man on the wagon yelled. Raising his voice even further he added, “He will be the *last* one allowed on the boats!”

When the people heard that they became a bit more orderly and soon a line formed as they waited for the first boat to fill. Other boats out on the Sea waited their turn to approach the docks to aid in the evacuation.

“Let’s get in line,” James said. “Looks like we’ll make it out of here after all.”

The boats were those of private citizens from neighboring cities. None were able to carry a lot of people, but slowly and surely, the line continued to move.

The sun dropped behind the horizon and torches were lit to provide light for the people and the arriving boats. At one point a boat loaded with evacuees sailed from the docks and no new boat took its place. Several minutes passed and still no other boat approached to continue the evacuation. A low murmur developed within the waiting crowd.

The man got back up on the wagon and addressed the increasingly restless people. “Do not worry!” he yelled out over the crowd. “They will return when they have dropped off their passengers at a safe port. More boats than what you’ve already seen are on their way. They must travel from cities farther out, but they will come!”

The crowd quieted and settled in to wait. Several more hours passed and more boats appeared to take on passengers and then quickly set sail, making room for the next one in line.

Ta-TOOOOO Ta-TOOOOO

The sounds of many horns came from the eastern wall, as well as faint sounds of swords exchanging blows. The crowd around James and Miko grew restless and the look of fear was on many faces.

A rider approached at a gallop and halted near the man who addressed the crowd. “My lord!” the rider cried out to him, “the enemy has breached the city!”

“How?”

“Someone poisoned the men at the gate and released the lock!”

To the guards the man yelled, “To the east gate!” as he jumped from the wagon and broke into a run. The guards fell in behind.

When the crowd heard that the enemy was within the city, all thoughts of orderly evacuation vanished. As one, they surged forward toward the boat that was currently loading passengers. They swarmed over it, knocking each other out of the way and into the water. A knife flashed and a woman screamed as she fell into the sea. They overloaded the small pleasure craft past its limits. The mass of people upon the boat caused it to tip, spilling everyone into the water as it sunk to the bottom.

The other captains waiting in line to pick up refugees, after having witnessed what just happened, turned their boats around and sailed away. They were not willing to risk their boats or their lives with the panicked mob.

The people on the dock cried out for them to return but to no avail. Then absolute panic set in as they realized that rescue was no longer forthcoming. People jumped into the sea and tried to swim while the majority of the people just ran in every direction, trampling many of their neighbors.

James and Miko flowed with the mob until they could dart down a side alley. "What are we to do now?" Miko asked, fear evident in his voice.

"Maybe we can swim out around the walls and past the armies."

Miko brightened at the idea. "Let's go!"

They made their way through the press of the crowd until they came to the water's edge. The sea was full of swimming bodies, many having the same idea as James. They got ready to enter when screams came from farther out in the water.

Crossbow bolts struck those in the water, killing all who tried to escape. James could barely make out dozens of enemy crossbowmen lining the shores, firing at the helpless people in the water.

"Not this way," he said and they raced off into the city.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The fighting increased as the enemy gained more ground within the City. People fled in every direction. None seemed to know where to go. James and Miko raced through the streets, staying clear of the fighting.

Fires within the city cast an eerie glow to the night. The enemy had gained a foothold upon several sections of the walls; crossbowmen rained bolts down upon the defenders.

"This is going to be over soon," he told Miko as they paused for a moment, trying to decide the best direction to go.

“How did they get inside so fast?” Miko asked. “Everyone said that it would take weeks to breach these walls, maybe longer.”

“Remember the rider who came up while we were waiting to board the boats?” James reminded. “He said they were poisoned and I have a good idea who was behind it.”

“Who?”

“Ol’ One Eye. When we were looking through the window to the warehouse he was giving a vial and sacks of coins to someone. My guess is that the vial contained poison that was used on the guards at the gate.”

“Very good,” said a voice behind them.

Turning, they saw ol’ One Eye standing there with a dozen enemy soldiers, three of whom had crossbows aimed straight at them.

“Greetings again, gentlemen,” he said. “Move wrong and you’ll have a bolt through you.”

“How did you find us?” Miko asked.

While his men tied their hands behind their backs, he said, “Fairly easy actually. I saw you in line at the docks waiting to board one of those damn boats. I set a man to watch in case you left. When the panic started, it was easy enough to follow and catch you.”

“Why bother with us?” James asked.

“I have my reasons,” he replied and then set off with them in tow toward where the fighting was fiercest. Heading for the east gate, they had to duck down alleys whenever soldiers of Cardri raced past.

It was easy for James to use magic to break the bindings that held their hands. When Miko felt his bonds part, he almost let the rope slip to the ground, but fast thinking kept him holding on to it to prolong the illusion that they were still bound.

Miko glanced at James who winked at him and then continued to follow their captors. A group of defenders emerged at a run from a side street ahead with no effort in trying to maintain formation. It was a complete rout; enemy soldiers emerged behind them and gave chase.

One Eye had them duck into another alley, letting them pass. James glanced further into the alley and found that it opened on another street farther down. He indicated for Miko to look back to the main road. When Miko looked he saw a small glowing ball rolling toward their hiding place. He closed his eyes and remembered the last time at the inn back in Bearn.

“What the hell is that?” one of their captors asked.

“Shoot it,” One Eye said.

One of the crossbowmen fired a bolt and when the bolt connected with it, the ball exploded in a brilliant flash of light.

James and Miko, having kept their eyes closed, only partially lost their night vision. They shoved out against the men surrounding them, causing them to trip and fall over themselves in their blinded state. James grabbed Miko’s shoulder and directed him to the other end of the alley.

Behind them arose cries of “I’m Blind!”, “Can’t see!” and One Eye yelling, “Don’t let them escape!”

They raced from the alley and turned down the street, making for the western side of the City. With the enemy pouring through the eastern gate, to the west was their only hope of escape.

Dodging around a corner to avoid an approaching group of enemy soldiers, they suddenly found themselves in a market square where a dozen small children had sought refuge. From the other side of the square, a dozen of the enemy appeared.

James pulled Miko against the side of the building and into the shadows. He watched the soldiers enter the square and quickly took note of the children. Then to his horror, they attacked.

Without thinking, James reacted and the ground under the charging soldiers erupted, throwing bodies in every direction. More soldiers entered the square behind the others. Coming out of the shadows, he yelled to the children, "Come on! This way!"

The children saw him and the older boys got the younger children moving toward him. "Let's go! Move it!" he yelled as the soldiers entered the square, circumventing the hole he had blasted in the street.

The soldiers saw the children and raced to catch them, their swords drawn. James reached down, picked up several rocks and began to fell soldiers, using magic to give the stones speed and accuracy. One after another the soldiers went down, but still they came, their numbers steadily increasing.

The children finally reached James and with Miko in the lead, they fled down the side street. At the next crossroad, Miko hesitated, asking, "Which way?"

One of the older boys said, "This way!" pointing to the right, down a street with several tall buildings bordering it.

Miko looked to James who nodded and they headed in that direction, running as fast as the littlest could go.

James realized that the soldiers would catch them if he didn't slow them down, so he yelled to Miko, "Find someplace to hide, I'll find you." He stopped and turned to face the oncoming soldiers as Miko led the children away.

A bolt flew past his left ear, shaking him up, but he steeled himself and concentrated on the buildings that bordered the street. When he released the power, the buildings exploded outward from both sides, crashing into the soldiers as they passed between them. The rubble blocked the street so James, with head throbbing from that last spell, turned and tried to catch up with his friend.

He glanced at the outer walls of the City as he ran and saw the enemy now had complete control. The fighting throughout the City diminished as the defenders realized it was a hopeless cause and they began to surrender.

James raced down the street when a squad of enemy soldiers emerged from a side street, blocking his path. They saw him and one yelled, "Stop! Stay right where you are!"

Not heeding the command, James ducked in through a doorway and found himself in a laundry. Racing past the empty tubs he located the back door and came out in a very small alley, wedged between two tall buildings.

He ran down the alley as the soldiers entered the laundry behind him in pursuit. Light illuminated the alley from an open doorway up ahead and the sound of men's laughter came from the other side. He ran toward it and raced inside.

There in the middle of the floor were two enemy soldiers holding a girl down on the floor while a third tore off the remainder of her clothes.

Anger blossomed like a red hot sun inside him and he released a surge of power which picked up the men, and slammed them into the wall. Their bodies hit with such force, they smashed through the thin wall and fell lifeless onto the street on the other side amidst the rubble.

The girl looked up and saw James coming toward her. Screaming in terror, she got to her feet and ran out into the night.

James bolted through the hole in the wall just as the pursuing soldiers entered behind him. "There he is!" one shouted.

He made his way around the dead men lying amidst the rubble and flew down the street, enemy soldiers in hot pursuit.

James was winded, with only the fear of dying keeping his feet moving at all. His breath came in gasps and a pain grew in his side. He saw the soldiers gain on him. Fear of being caught gave him a burst of adrenalin but it was short-lived.

Ahead, the road came to another intersection where a squad of the Empire's soldiers marched through. From behind, a pursuing soldier yelled, "Stop him!" to those in the intersection. One of the crossing soldiers saw James approach. He yelled to his commander and the squad turned into the alley, blocking his only escape.

James came to a halt, trapped. Panting for breath, he paused for just a moment to regain some of his strength.

The soldiers, seeing James stop, slowed their advance. "Come on," one of his pursuers said, all cocky. "There's no use running. You've got nowhere to go."

James directed the magic, causing the ground under his pursuers to explode outward, throwing bodies into the air.

From the group coming from the intersection, he heard, "He's a mage!" Two crossbowmen from the group let fly bolts at him as the remaining soldiers rushed forward.

With a wave of his hand, he created a barrier that deflected the arrows harmlessly to the side. Concentrating hard, he cast a spell. The effort brought black spots to his eyes and his pulse pounded from the power being used.

Magic flowed into the rubble littering the alley from when the ground erupted. Pieces were drawn together and in no time, a stone creature was formed. A body of stone, given life by magic, shuffled toward the soldiers who struck ineffectively at it with their weapons. It swung its arms and when it hit, bones shattered.

It positioned itself between the soldiers and James, repulsing every attempt the soldiers made to get past. Realizing that they'd be unable to get to James, they retreated to the intersection where they disappeared around the corner. The creature followed as far as the alley's entrance before it came to a stop.

James' head was pounding. This last spell had taken everything he had, and then some. His strength and energy were all but depleted. He leaned against the building and sagged to the ground, on the verge of passing out. Spots filled his vision as consciousness waned. The last

thing he saw before slipping away was a young man who dropped to the ground and then walked toward him.

Epilog

James awakened in a small dark room with only a single candle for light. The room looked like an old storage room with many boxes that lined the walls. An old tapestry hung upon the far wall, obviously having seen better days. He was on a blanket on the floor with another one covering him; his backpack sat beside him. He looked around and saw four people, two who weren't much more than kids. Two were young men in their late teens, the oldest being around nineteen, the other slightly younger. The other two were girls. One couldn't have been more than sixteen while the other was slightly older.

As he sat up, they glanced in his direction, gathering closer to see what he would do. "How did I get here?"

The younger of the girls timidly replied, "Jiron found you and brought you here."

"You a mage?" the younger boy asked.

He looked at each in turn and said, "Sort of, I suppose."

"Cool," he exclaimed.

The older teen stepped a little closer and said, "I watched you when you fought those soldiers. That stone creature was something else."

Remembering, James smiled and said, "Yeah, that was Rocky."

"Rocky?" asked the older girl.

"That was what my friend always called him," James explained. "Never thought I'd actually see him in action though."

"When Jiron moved you," the younger teen said, "Rocky fell apart into a pile of stones and dirt."

Nodding, James sat and then said, "Just where am I and who are you?"

"This is our hideout," the older teen said. "We stay here from time to time." Pointing to himself he said, "I'm Jiron and this here is Tinok," indicating the younger teen. Then he pointed to the older girl, he said, "That's Delia and the other is Cassie."

"My name is James and I thank you for getting me out of there." He paused a moment then said, "Exactly what is happening out there?"

"The Empire's forces have completely taken over the City," explained Jiron. "Most of the younger people are being rounded up and taken south to be sold as slaves. Anyone caught on the

streets runs the risk of being killed or captured. Some of the older folks are being left alone, but anyone they think could cause them problems is being dealt with, one way or another.”

“How long have I been here?”

“We brought you here yesterday and you’ve been asleep ever since,” explained Delia, the older girl. “It’s now night again, so a little over a day.”

Miko! James thought. *What happened to him?* As he sat in the cellar alone with the four teens, sadness overcame him as the possible fate of Miko ran through his mind. Reaching into his backpack, he pulled out his compass and cast a spell to locate him.

The needle swiveled and pointed the way. Then the needle moved slightly, indicating that Miko was on the move. “He’s alive!” James cried exuberantly.

“Who’s alive?” Jiron asked.

“A friend of mine who got separated from me during the attack. It looks like he is on the move.”

“If he was in the City last night and on the move now,” Jiron said, “then I would hate to think what that might mean.”

“What?” asked James apprehensively.

“He’s probably been taken captive and is being marched south to be sold as a slave.”

James thought of the last thing he had said to Miko, *‘Find someplace to hide, I’ll find you.’* With grim determination, he intended to do just that.

The Morcyth Saga

continues in

Book Two

Fires of Prophecy

To keep updated on the latest happenings with Brian S. Pratt, be informed when new releases become available, or to ask questions and have discussions with the author and other readers, visit and ***Like*** the author’s

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Following is an excerpt from *Fires of Prophecy*

(first three chapters)

Prologue

“Find someplace to hide, I’ll find you.”

Miko glanced back and saw James turn to confront the oncoming soldiers. His desire to stay to help his friend was strong, but he knew that he’d be more of a hindrance. His first duty was to help the kids get away. Turning back, he found the fleeing children far ahead, turning down a side street. He hurried to follow, trying to catch them before they moved too far ahead.

Rounding the corner, he saw the last few children turning another corner, even further ahead than before. Running as fast as he could, he reached where they had disappeared around the corner. Almost losing his balance from taking the corner too fast, he came to a sudden stop. The kids were nowhere in sight.

Crumph!

“James!” he cried, glancing back at the cloud of smoke and dust rising to the sky. Torn between his duty to the children whom he’d lost and to his friend, he stood there a moment in indecision. Finally making up his mind to return to help his friend, he turned around and raced back to James.

As he rounded the second corner, a billowing cloud of dust engulfed him. After a moment, the dust cleared to reveal a large pile of rubble blocking the street; several buildings had collapsed. Amidst the rubble were bodies of Empire soldiers, crushed to death beneath large sections of the toppled buildings.

“James!” he cried out again, but received no answer. Looking frantically around, he couldn’t see him anywhere. Scared and alone, he raced back again along the path he and the children originally took in an attempt to find someplace to hole up until James found him. Whenever he reached an intersection, he paused before entering and carefully peer around the corner. Making sure no enemy soldiers were there, he would race toward the next intersection.

As he raced to find a place to hole up, he caught glimpses of enemy soldiers moving on adjacent streets. Panic took hold when enemy soldiers emerged from a cross street not far ahead. He ducked into a side alley and threw himself behind a broken crate just as the soldiers passed by. ***He had to get off the streets!***

Once they were past, he tried opening one of the doors in the alley and was relieved when it actually opened. Pulling it open quickly he made to enter when a vase smashed into the door next to his head. “Get out!” a woman shrieked wildly. He quickly ducked as another pot came flying

at him. The pot struck the door and ricocheted into the street making an awful clatter. “Out!” the woman screamed again as she readied another projectile.

Slamming the door closed, Miko raced down the street, panicking. From up ahead, a door opened and a man poked his head out to look up and down the street. When he noticed Miko, he opened the door wider and yelled, “This way!” motioning for Miko to quickly come inside.

Miko sprinted forward, his panic subsiding. When he reached the door, the man opened it further for him to run inside. His anxiety decreased rapidly when he passed through the door and was safely inside.

The man closed the door and Miko began to say, “Thank you...” but stopped suddenly when he realized the man was advancing on him with a knife. A quick survey of the room revealed other men with bared knives and swords. Dread filled him when he saw a dozen or so people, both men and women along with a few children, seated on the floor along one wall. To his astonishment, they were completely naked with hands tied behind them.

“Strip!” the man from the door ordered. Miko, panic ready to consume him, remembered the slavers they fought on their way to the City of Light. Shaking his head in disbelief, he backed away. Another from behind grabbed him and with the help of two men, proceeded to strip him, using their knives to cut away his clothes. He struggled to resist, but only received blows for his effort.

Shortly he found himself sitting naked on the floor next to the others, his hands secured behind his back. His clothes were tossed upon a pile of other torn and cut clothes in the corner. The little boy sitting next to him started to cry and the woman on the other side of the boy tried to comfort him but to no avail. The boy’s cries grew louder and louder until one of the men came over and struck him on the head, knocking the boy unconscious.

“You bastard!” the woman yelled.

The man turned to her and backhanded her across the mouth. “Shut your mouth! Open it again and I’ll slit your throat!” He drew his knife and menaced her with it, then sheathed it as he walked away, laughing.

The woman scooted closer to the boy and did her best to comfort the unconscious child. Miko saw tears streaming down her face.

“Here come some more,” the man by the door told the others. Opening the door partially, he stuck his head out and yelled, “Over here!” while he waved whoever was out there to come inside.

A man with a woman and two kids ran inside. He began to express their gratitude when the woman saw Miko and the others sitting on the floor; she screamed. Realizing their danger, the couple grabbed their kids protectively.

“Strip!” the man by the door commanded.

The father paused momentarily as if his mind couldn’t understand the order, then launched himself at the man by the door. He threw a fist but the blow was easily blocked. The slaver struck back with the hilt of his knife, clubbing him in the side of the head. The father stumbled backward from the blow, dazed. Two of the other slavers grabbed him and proceeded to cut his clothes away.

The woman screamed as others grabbed her and the children, tearing them apart. Soon, all four are sat against the wall with the others, arms securely tied behind their backs. They tried to talk amongst themselves, to comfort the children but were quickly silenced by the slavers.

Several times over the next hour, that scene was replayed as more people rushed into the room seeking safety only to end up captured.

There finally came a time when the man at the door turned to the other slavers and said, "I don't think there are anymore out there." To those they captured, he said, "Alright, get up."

Miko found it hard to rise when your arms were tied behind your back. Using the wall for leverage, he made it to his feet and stood there waiting while the others got up.

One remained seated against the wall. A slaver went to the man and kicked him. "Get on your feet. Now!"

The man leaned to the side then toppled over. The slaver checked him and then turned to the one by the door. "He's dead." Then he turned a hard gaze toward another slaver. "You hit him too hard and cracked his skull."

The slaver being accused just shrugged. "Oh well, happens sometimes."

His gaze darkening, the man by the door said, "Next one you kill, you're paying for. I don't intend to lose money because of a heavy handed thug."

"Thug?" the man asked, his face turning red in anger.

"Yes, thug," he replied. "Now, let's get 'em lined up and back to camp." He locked gazes with the man until he backed down and joined the others in tying their captives together in a line.

Miko was tied in line between two children. Once they were all secured in line, the man took the lead and they headed out the door.

The sun was already beginning to rise above the horizon as they left the building. Miko squinted in the glare, eyes unaccustomed to the light after having been in a semi dark room for hours.

One of the women began wailing and crying. A slaver used a whip across her shoulders, "Silence!" When the whip struck she cried out all the harder with pain and shock. After two more blows of the whip she tried to muffle her cries and the whip stopped.

Miko just looked on in shock at the red lines across her shoulders and back. He kept his head down as he plodded along, doing his best not to think about being paraded through the town naked. The enemy soldiers they passed hardly gave them any attention, except for a few calls to the ladies in the group.

After moving down several streets, their group joined with another slave line and together they made their way to the southern wall. More and more of the enemy's soldiers appeared. When they drew close to the gate, the head slaver brought them to a halt and had them wait while he talked with the guards. After a few words were exchanged, the slaver shows them a letter and they were allowed to pass.

Outside the walls, teams with carts filled with the dead pushed and pulled them to a large, communal grave where the bodies were deposited. Soldiers were everywhere, a veritable forest of tents covered the area outside of the gates. When they passed a tent where several men stood in line outside, Miko heard the cries of several women coming from within.

One of the smaller children asked, "Mama, what's that lady crying about?"

The woman, trying to hide the tears in her voice replied, "She's just sad dear," her voice beginning to crack. "That's all it is, don't worry about it."

Then a slaver came and whipped both saying, "No talking!" When they remained silent, he returned to his position next to the line.

Out away from the encampment was a large area with many wagons and strings of people tied in lines just as they were. The only difference between those people and Miko's group, is that those people had clothes. The males wore a cloth wrapped around their loins while the women had very short dresses; all a drab brown.

When Miko's group arrived, they were taken to an open area nearby where they were told to stand and be still. The lead slaver moved to a nearby wagon and began removing garb similar to what the other slaves wore and handed them to the other slavers. The slavers then took the garb and tied it around the men, and with the women they untied their hands before putting it on them. Miko felt somewhat better for having his privates covered. All the captured people visibly relaxed once they were dressed and covered.

Several of the slavers then moved to another wagon where they took crossbows which they held ready to prevent anyone from trying to escape.

One of the slavers climbed onto the bed of a wagon and faced the newly arrived slaves. "Sit down and rest," he told them. "This may be the last chance you'll have for a while. No talking and anyone causing trouble will be dealt with." He glanced around at the faces looking up at him a moment then jumped off the wagon.

Miko did the best he could with his hands tied behind him and managed to make it to the ground without falling. He sat there, looking back to the City that's now securely in the hands of the Empire. All that kept him from totally losing it was the belief that James would find him.

Over the next hour, several more slave lines arrived and joined the rest. There were now over a dozen different lines trailing behind several different wagons. With each line that arrived, several of the guards grabbed crossbows and joined their fellows in keeping watch.

At one point shortly after Miko arrived, a slaver moved down each line and untied the hands of the men and boys. Once they are all untied, another slaver mounted the wagon and addressed them. "We will be passing out food and water shortly," he announced. "Don't waste any, it's the last you'll see until tonight. Your hands shall remain free, but if you make trouble, they will be secured again. If you try to escape, you will be shot. This is the only warning you'll be given."

Once the slaver finished, others moved down the lines, giving each captive a small cup of food and allowing them a single drink from a ladle. When Miko got his, he ate the food ravenously, even though it tasted pretty bad. He drank all the water and was about to ask for more when a girl of about sixteen in another line held out her cup to a slaver and asked, "Can I have more?"

The slaver came to her and slapped her hard across the face, "Impertinent slave! You take what we give you and be happy that you were given anything at all."

The girl cried, "I'm not a slave!"

Those slavers standing within ear shot broke out laughing. The slaver who had come over and slapped her said, "You are now," and laughed at her.

The girl broke out in hysterics and the man again slapped her across the face. "You shut up or it'll be worse for you." He grabbed her by the hair and pulled her head back so her eyes stared into his. "Do you understand?" he asked with an expression that said, 'The only answer better be yes.'

Tears streaming down her face, the girl nodded. The man released her hair and walked away. She sat there, sobbing to herself quietly.

Miko looked around and saw that until that moment, some of the people who were tied to the line hadn't come to that conclusion yet, that they were slaves. Some murmured amongst themselves, others started crying. One of the slavers shouted, "Slaves only speak when spoken to, break this rule at your peril!" The people quieted down until only muffled sobs could be heard. Several slavers came and collected the food cups that had been handed out.

An older slaver walked from the City and spoke with one of the others for a moment. After they were done speaking, the older slaver returned to the City of Light. The one he spoke to turned to the slaves. "Everyone on their feet!"

Miko quickly got up as did most of those around him. Several others, either through stubbornness or not understanding, remained on the ground. Those that failed to stand quickly enough for the slavers were whipped until they were up and standing.

The one that ordered them to their feet announced, "When slaves are told to do something, they do it quickly and they don't ask questions. A slave who doesn't learn that rule, tends not to survive very long."

Miko realized that the man who'd been giving them orders was the lead slaver for this group. He hadn't noticed it before, but the man's clothes looked slightly superior to the others.

The lead slaver got up on a wagon and with a nod of his head to the driver, it moved out, pulling the line of slaves behind it. Soon all the wagons were rolling, each leading a line of slaves.

Marching under the hot sun soon had Miko exhausted and extremely thirsty. Only after they'd been on the road for a couple hours did a slaver pass down the line, allowing each a single cup of water. No one dared to ask for more. This repeated every two hours until they stopped for the night.

While Miko ate the small amount of food given him, a woman's voice was heard coming from within the group of slaves. "Where are you taking us?"

"Who said that?" one of the slavers demanded. With whip raised, the slaver rushed to where the voice originated, looking from face to face in an attempt to determine who dared break the silence. Unable to find the source of the question, he looked around and said, "The Slave Markets of Korazan." After a moment's pause to let that sink in, he added, "Where you will be auctioned off to the highest bidder, to spend the rest of your lives as slaves." Laughing, he went back by the fire and resumed eating his meal.

"Oh, James," Miko sighed quietly. "Find me!"

Chapter One

James woke to find the two boys no longer there. The two girls sat in a distant corner huddled together, and talked in hushed voices. He stretched and sat up, asking, "Where are Jiron and Tinok?"

Startled, Delia and Cassie ceased their conversation and looked in his direction. "They're out looking for Jiron's sister," Delia explained.

"She was separated from us during the attack," added Cassie, her yellow hair shimmered in the candlelight.

"Do you think it's wise for them to be about with all the soldiers in the city?"

"They'll be alright," Delia assured him. "Jiron knows how to keep hidden when he needs to."

Cassie nodded in agreement.

Worried about the boys, but even more worried that they may lead someone here, he tried to relax. Resting his back against the wall, he realized there was nothing he could do about it now but wait.

He still felt weak and a little drained from the battle two days ago. Even though he had two good nights of sleep and food, he still felt a little shaky. His stomach growled. "Is there anything to eat?"

"Oh, yes," Cassie said. She went to a sack sitting against the wall. She pulled out bread and cheese, then brought them over to him along with a bucket of water.

When she set the bucket down, she said, "Sorry, but there are no cups."

James smiled and replied, "That's okay." He took the bread and cheese from her and removed his knife from its sheath to slice off a chunk of cheese. He only had to scrape a little bit of mold off with his knife.

While he ate, Cassie returned to Delia and they resumed their conversation. Both would occasionally stop talking and cast glances his way, then when they realized he noticed, quickly turned their heads away.

Sighing, James tried to ignore them. *Miko, what's happening to you?* A question that's never left his mind. Though feeling better and stronger, he's still a little too shaky to attempt to go after him. Upset with his own weakness, he knew that all he can do right now is to quickly regain strength.

About that time, Jiron and Tinok returned through the collapsed hallway. Earlier, he had taken a look and found it choked with stone and wood from when the building above had collapsed some time in the past. A small tunnel had been cleared through the debris, wide enough to allow people to pass in single file.

Several feet down the passage, a stone stairway extended to the ground above, emerging in a corner of a park. From what Jiron told him, the opening was overgrown with bushes and grass, effectively hiding the entrance from anyone passing by.

Several years ago, Jiron had been playing in the area and stumbled upon the opening. Excited about finding a secret place, he decided to keep the knowledge to himself. Later, when he and Tinok became close friends he brought him here. Only because the Empire had showed up had they allowed Cassie and Delia to come.

When Jiron had stumbled upon him during his battle with the soldiers, he was out trying to find his sister who earlier had become separated. When he saw James fighting the enemy and had actually driven them off, he decided to save him and bring him here. As far as Jiron knew, no one else had ever been down here in the years they've been using it for their secret clubhouse.

Delia saw them first and got up asking, "Any luck?" Cassie stood with her and they went over to them as they entered.

With a look of disappointment, Jiron shook his head. "No, and I looked everywhere."

Cassie laid a hand on his arm. "I'm sorry."

He came over to James and asked, "Can you help find her?"

Shaking his head, James replied, "Not unless you have something of hers I can use?" The look on Jiron's face told him that he didn't.

Feeling bad for the boy, but unable to help, he said, "She may still turn up."

"I doubt it," Jiron said, defeated. "I went every place that she would've gone and she wasn't there. I can only assume that they found her and she's but one of the thousands of slaves they captured."

"Slaves?" James suddenly interrupted. "Where are they being kept?"

"They had a big encampment outside the walls," Tinok said, "but sometime yesterday, they took them south."

"South?" James asked.

"Yeah," Tinok replied. "Looks like they are taking them to the Empire. Your friend is most likely with them." He looked over to Jiron and added, "As Tersa may be as well."

"Can't we do anything?" asked Cassie.

"Like what?" asked Tinok, "Chase after and rescue them?" He looked at her incredulously, "They have hundreds of guards, not to mention their entire army occupying the city. It would be suicide!"

Jiron had been studying James' face while the others had been talking. When James glanced over at him, he asked, "You're planning on going after your friend, aren't you?"

"Yes," James replied, nodding, "just as soon as I feel better. Miko is a smart kid, he knows I'll find him. He'll do what he needs to in order to survive until I get to him."

"You're crazy!" Tinok exclaimed. "You're going to get yourself killed!"

"Perhaps," James said, "but I'll not leave him to his fate. He wouldn't be in this situation if it wasn't for me."

"What do you mean?" Delia asked.

"I came to the City of Light to find out all I could about Morcyth, a god that used to be popular around here a long time ago. You wouldn't by chance have ever heard of him, have you?"

They all four shook their heads no.

"Anyway," he continued, "Miko tagged along despite my attempts to warn him of the dangers. I had found out some info from Ollinearn, the Keeper of the Great Library here in the City. We were on our way out when the Empire's forces showed up and then things just went from bad to worse."

"The last thing I told him was, 'Find a place to hide, I'll find you.'" James finished his bread and cheese then cupped his hands together as he drank water from the bucket. Resting back against the wall once more, he glanced at the four faces staring at him.

"I'll go with you," Jiron stated.

"What?" Tinok exclaimed in disbelief. "You can't be serious."

"You'll be killed!" Cassie cried, her fear for Jiron evident.

"How can I leave her in the hands of slavers?" Jiron replied. "I'm all she has left in this world and I'll not rest until either she's free, or I'm dead!" Turning to James he said, "So, when do we leave?"

James considered the request. He may not be at a hundred percent magical capacity, but sitting here while Miko was taken farther away gnawed at him something terrible. "Alright, we'll go tonight." He turned his attention to Jiron. "Can we get out of the City unobserved?"

"I don't know. There are hundreds of troops stationed within the walls and thousands more on the outside. It looks like they plan to defend and hold the City. Both inside and out, there are many patrols and they've been doing routine sweeps of the houses, looking for anyone else still in hiding."

Delia laid her hand on Jiron's arm and said softly, "So, you truly intend to go after her?"

He looked into her eyes and said, "I have to."

"Then I'll go with you," she said, her emerald eyes revealed the fear she tried not to show.

"That wouldn't be wise," Jiron replied. "You will probably die or be taken as slave if we fail."

"What chance do I have here?" she asked. "With the Empire's forces occupying the town, what chance do any of us have if we stay? It's only a matter of time before they find us. We can't hide indefinitely."

"I'm coming too!" Cassie declared.

Tinok just looked at them as if they were crazy. "Well, I'm not staying here alone, better count me in as well."

James sat in thought for a few seconds while they stood there, staring at him. He turned to Jiron. "Can you get supplies? Food, water and other travel gear?"

Jiron nodded. "Food will be no problem. We have quite a bit already stashed here as it is."

"We will need packs, each of us," James said.

"Should be able to," he replied. "Anything else?"

"Probably, but can't think what at the moment."

To Tinok, Jiron said, "Come on. We have some shopping to do."

Delia hugged Jiron. "Be careful."

"You too," Cassie said with arms tight around Tinok. Both young men looked both embarrassed and pleased.

"We will," Jiron assured them.

Tinok gave Cassie a peck on the cheek, then turned a little red.

She smiled shyly and disengaged her arms.

The boys entered the tunnel and the girls watched until they could no longer be seen.

"I've got to rest if we're going to do this tonight," he told them. "I'm still not over the effects of the magic I used during the battle." He then laid down and used his backpack for a pillow.

The girls went to the far side of the room and conferred quietly among themselves, allowing him quiet so he could rest.

A gentle shake awakened him and he opened his eyes to discover Delia kneeling beside him, hand on his shoulder. "James," she said, "wake up."

"What?" he asked, sleep still addling his mind.

"It's night," she explained, "and they haven't returned."

Coming awake quickly, he sat up and looked around, Jiron and Tinok were nowhere to be seen. "How long have they been gone?"

"Several hours," Cassie replied from where she stood behind Delia. "He said they would be back before it got dark. I'm worried."

Concerned himself, James said, "Let me take a look outside and see if I can tell what's going on."

"Be careful," Cassie warned.

"I will," he assured her. "I'll take a quick peek to see what the situation is like."

The girls accompanied him to the passage and watched as he made his way through the rubble to the stairway.

The passage was fairly choked with debris, he couldn't believe they managed to drag him through here unconscious. At the stairs, he had to step carefully so as not to dislodge any of the rocks and stones, the entire area seemed very unstable.

Nearing the top, he saw starlight filtering through the bushes that had overgrown the entrance. He reached the top and slowly and cautiously, peered through the bushes to see what was going.

The bushes were located within a corner of a city park that was bordered by several buildings. Little more than a small grassy area with trees, people could take their ease among the greenery from the worries of the day.

With only starlight to see by, James couldn't make out much more than vague shadows, but it didn't look as if there was anyone around. He scanned the area for several minutes before returning back down to the room.

"Didn't see anything."

"What are we going to do?" Cassie asked, fear in her eyes.

"I'm sure they're okay," Delia stated with conviction. "They know the area and Jiron is good at evading people when he wants too. They may have had to take a longer route to return, or hole up and wait until they can once again move without being seen."

"I hope so," Cassie replied.

"I doubt if we could make it out of here without him," said James. "We're going to have to wait until either he comes or we're sure that he isn't. So let's settle down and get comfortable, it could be a while."

The girls went back to their usual place, this time with James accompanying them. They broke out some of their supplies and had a little snack while they waited for the boys to return.

"So," began James, "are you two their girlfriends?"

Delia laughed and Cassie blushed slightly. "I grew up with Jiron," Delia explained. "We are very good friends. When he realized the Empire's soldiers were within the walls, he came and found me. Cassie just happened to be with me, and I wouldn't go unless she could come too. She's my best friend. He tried to locate his sister, but there were just too many soldiers on the streets. So we headed here as quickly as we could. When we got here, Tinok had already arrived and we've been here ever since."

"Do you think Jiron can actually lead us out of here?" James asked.

"If anyone can get us out," she said confidently, "he can. That boy knows every street and hideaway in the whole city."

"Let's just hope they make it back," he said wishfully.

"They will," Delia said, her confidence in Jiron unwavering, "you can count on it."

They talked for a while until James heard noises coming from the passage. All three looked with both hope and trepidation to the entrance of the passage and held their breath. Then, Jiron and Tinok stepped into the room, carrying four backpacks filled with stuff.

"Told you," Delia said to James. Then to Jiron she asked, "What took you so long? You had us scared to death you weren't going to make it back!" She stared him down with hands on hip as he walked over to them.

"Sorry about that," Jiron apologized, as he handed her a backpack.

"Yeah," Tinok said, "we had to lay low for a while. They brought in extra soldiers and are still in the process of searching houses." He handed his extra pack to Cassie.

"Seems they know there's a mage here somewhere, and they want him bad," Jiron commented as he looked toward James. "We overheard some talk about it."

"Is this going to hamper our efforts to get out of here?"

"Shouldn't think so," Jiron explained. "I don't think they've blocked the way I was planning for us to take."

"And what way is that?"

"Can't really explain it," he replied. "But trust me, the way should still be open."

When Cassie slipped on her backpack, she groaned under its weight. "What's in here?"

"Dried beef, water bottle, and other essentials," he explained. "There are also some extra clothes, just in case."

Once everyone had on their packs, Jiron led the way through the passage, with James right behind. Tinok brought up rear with the girls in between.

They waited at the bottom of the stairs while Jiron made sure it was safe. "It's clear," he whispered back down after scanning the park. "Come on up."

James climbed the steps with the girls close behind. He reached the top and joined Jiron outside while they waited for the others.

"Now where?" James asked.

"Just follow me and stay close."

He had them hug the wall while they made their way toward the street at the end of the park. As they approached, the sound of marching came from further down the street.

"Now what?" James quietly asked.

Speaking to all of them, Jiron whispered, "Stay silent and close to the wall, they should march right past without even noticing we're here."

Standing still and quiet, they pressed themselves against the wall and waited. Soon, the first soldiers appeared from the left and marched past the park. Jiron's plan was working, not one soldier even bothered to look their way.

Aaachew!

As one they turned to Cassie in disbelief as a very loud sneeze escaped her.

Immediately, the closest soldiers stopped and turned at the sound. They saw them, partially illuminated by the few torches a couple of the soldiers held. For a moment, both merely stood and stared at each other. Then Jiron yelled, "To the tunnel! Move!"

As if that was the catalyst everyone needed, all hell broke loose. They turned and raced back toward the stairs as the soldiers gave chase.

Crumph!

At the stairs, James turned and let loose with a powerful spell and the ground erupted beneath the advancing soldiers; dirt and broken men were flung in the air. Several soldiers had been in advance of the area that exploded and were now almost upon him.

In a panic, James pushed out with the power, literally tossing the onrushing soldiers backward, across the pit just created, where they collided with their comrades.

"The mage!" came the cry as more soldiers rushed toward the park; starlight reflected off their swords.

"James! Come on!" he heard behind him. Turning, he saw that Jiron had the others already inside the tunnel and was motioning for him to follow.

James flew down the stairs. "What do we do now?"

"We're trapped," Jiron explained. "There's no way out!"

When James entered the room, Cassie was in tears; Delia held her. She looked to James and cried, "I'm sorry!"

"It's okay," he assured her, though in his own mind he was not nearly so forgiving.

Tinok stood at the tunnel entrance, listening for pursuit. He turned and said, "They're coming." Suddenly two knives flashed into his hands. Jiron took up position next to him and two knives appeared like magic in his hands as well.

He looked to Tinok and said, "Are you ready?"

"Yeah," Tinok replied with an evil grin. "Let's get it on!"

They stood to either side of the doorway, James waited with the girls a little ways back.

Suddenly, an enemy soldier leapt into the room, sword out. Tinok moved forward to close with him. The soldier saw him and struck with his sword. Tinok easily deflected the blade with one knife while following through with a thrust with the other, sinking it to the hilt in the man's chest. The soldier slid lifelessly off the blade as another entered the room.

Jiron took this one and almost as fast as Tinok, dispatched him.

"You're getting slow, Jiron," Tinok said as he closed with the next one to emerge. Knives flashed and another body hit to the floor.

The next soldier to come through carried a shield along with a sword and closed with Jiron. Jiron deflected the thrust of the sword with one knife as the shield came round and crashed into his chest, causing him to take a step back into the room to regain his balance. The soldier advanced on him when all of a sudden one of his legs gave out and he crashed to the floor. Tinok had hamstringed him from behind as the soldier closed with Jiron. Jiron pressed the soldier as he laid there on the floor, blocking a cut from the sword and avoiding the shield. He got inside the man's defenses and slit his throat. He looked up to see Tinok battling another.

"Don't need any help," Jiron said to Tinok with a grin.

"Sorry," Tinok replied, "I'll try not to save your life next time." His knives flashed and another soldier fell to the floor.

For a moment there was a pause as no more soldiers came through the opening. Tinok turned to James. "Alright Mr. Mage, you got any ideas?"

James suddenly realized that he had been watching the fighting, awestruck at the relative ease in which they dispatched the soldiers instead of figuring a way out. Red-faced, he began pondering the situation instead of wool-gathering.

Another soldier entered, a veritable giant of a man. Standing easily a head taller than either Jiron or Tinok, covered in armor from head to toe, with a long shield on his left arm, he entered the room and moved to engage Jiron.

The man's sword was enormous and Jiron was unable to get inside his defense. The blows from his sword packed enormous power and when Jiron blocked a slash aimed at his midsection, his knife was knocked from his hand, the impact leaving it tingling.

Tinok was unable to go to his aid as he fought with another soldier, this one of a more regular size but carrying a shield. The soldier pushed Tinok back as another soldier entered the room.

James concentrated on the passageway leading to the park and released the power. The ground shook and rumbled. Then from the passage leading from the room, they heard a roar as the roof of the passageway collapsed, crushing those still within. A dust cloud belched forth into the room as Tinok and Jiron battled the three soldiers that made it in.

The bull of a man pressed Jiron, who now only had one knife and was reluctant to close with him. Staying just out of reach and stalling for time, he hoped Tinok could finish with his two and come to his aid.

James scanned the room for ammo but the only stones were the ones near the collapsed passageway, and he was unable to reach them due to the fighting.

He tried to come up with a spell he could use that wouldn't kill Jiron as well as the soldier, when Jiron fell to the ground. The man raised his sword to finish him off. Cassie screamed.

Seeing his chance, James released the power. Unseen forces grabbed the giant of a man and slammed him against the wall; bones cracked. He hung there a moment until the spell subsided then slide to the ground. The tapestry that had once hung on the wall, fell with him, covering him as if it was his death shroud.

James turned to Tinok as one of his attackers fell back, the man's tunic under his left arm now red as his life's blood flowed from him. Tinok easily parried a series of attacks from the remaining soldier, before slicing him across the forearm, causing him to drop his sword. He twisted and with his other knife, came in and thrust between the ribs, piercing his heart.

As the last attacker fell, Tinok turned to Jiron, "You okay?"

"Yeah," he replied, flexing his hand. "My arm's a bit numb but the feeling is starting to return. You?"

Shrugging, he said, "Got a couple cuts, but nothing major." He turned to James, "Now what? With the passage blocked we got nowhere to go."

"I don't know," he admitted, "let me rest a second and we'll see what I can come up with."

They sat while James considered the options. Delia went to see about Jiron's arm but the knifer just waved her away. "I'm fine." He then walked over to the large man. "I've never seen anyone so large."

"I thought he had you for a second there," Tinok said. He picked up Jiron's knife where it had fallen and handed it to him.

"Me, too," agreed Jiron as he took the knife. Turning to James he said, "That was sure some spell you used. Why did you wait so long?"

"I am new to this magic business and as long as you were in close contact with him, I couldn't do it without possibly hurting you as well."

Nodding, Jiron glanced back at the giant. Then his eye caught something on the wall, behind where the tapestry had hung. "Look at this!" he said, waving everyone over.

Engraved into the wall was an indentation in the form of the Star of Morcyth. When James saw it, he unconsciously grabbed the medallion through his shirt.

"Wonder what it is?" Cassie asked.

"I don't know," admitted Jiron. "Strange how we never noticed it before."

"It's the Star of Morcyth."

They turned toward James and Delia asked, "The star of what?"

"The Star of Morcyth," James repeated. He took out the medallion and showed it to them. Looking around at Jiron and Tinok's hideout as if for the first time, he said in awe, "And this must be part of the High Temple of Morcyth that was destroyed centuries ago."

He removed the medallion from around his neck and went to the wall, placing it within the indentation. It was a perfect fit.

From the wall behind them, they heard the sound of stone scraping on stone. Turning, they discovered a section of the floor sliding over to reveal a staircase leading down.

"I'll be damned," Tinok said.

"Maybe it's a way out," suggested Cassie.

"Don't know," said James as his glowing orb appeared in his hand. "But there's only one way to find out." He went to the opening and descended the steps.

The rest glanced at each other and then followed him down.

Chapter Two

Fourteen steps took them down to a hallway that ran for a hundred feet before ending at a door. There they found another indentation, similar to the one in the room above them, carved into the door. Taking the medallion, he placed it within the indentation and the door silently swung open.

The first thing they noticed open was a four foot tall, white marble pedestal standing in the center of the room. Centered on top of it was a small, raised platform which looked to be made entirely of crystal.

James entered the room and a soft glow sprang to life, growing until it spread to every corner. It emanated from the very walls themselves. The room was octagonal in shape, with no discernible exit except the doorway they just passed through. The walls were unadorned, just plain stone, the floor simply dirt. The only thing of interest in the room was the pedestal.

"James," Delia asked as she crossed into the room after him, "what is this place?"

"I don't know," he replied. "I've never been here before."

When Cassie entered, she went to the pedestal, looking closely at the crystal platform on top. She ran a finger over it and said, "Remarkable."

"What?" Jiron asked as he joined her.

"Oh, just never saw such a large piece of solid crystal before," she replied, still fascinated by it.

Jiron turned to James and asked, "Do you think there may be another way out of here?"

Shrugging his shoulders, he said, "Maybe, after all the High Priest would have wanted a way to get out in emergencies." He examined the walls and floor. Remembering his and Miko's time back in Merchant's Pass, the ceiling as well, but to no avail.

"It looks like something rested upon this platform," Cassie announced.

They came close and she explained. "Here, in the middle," she indicated the center of the crystal platform, "Doesn't it look as if something could have rested in there?"

James closely inspected it and saw a place where something might have at one time rested upon it. There was an open space within its center in the shape of an inverted pyramid. "Wonder what it could have been?" Pressing down on the platform, he halfheartedly expected something to happen and was disappointed when nothing did.

He turned from the pedestal and once more resumed the search for a hidden door.

"What are we looking for?" Delia asked.

"Something that will trigger a release and open a secret door," James explained. "Of course, there's no guarantee that there will be one."

Cassie, still intrigued by the crystal platform, tried to lift it up and it easily lifted off the pedestal. "Look!" she cried excitedly.

Everyone turned at her cry and saw her with the crystal platform in her hand. James rushed over and looked where the platform had been. There again was the indentation in the shape of the Star of Morcyth. Removing his medallion, he set the face of it within the indentation.

The pedestal sank silently into the floor, while at the same time a section of the wall across the room from where they entered, began to rise into the ceiling. The opening revealed a crudely formed tunnel leading away into darkness.

To Cassie, James said, "Replace the platform." Then to the rest, "Let's hurry, no way to know if it will close again on its own."

They hurried toward the tunnel and when Cassie replaced the platform, the section of the wall slid once more back down toward the floor as the pedestal began to rise. She ran quickly to get to the passageway before it closed completely and had to duck her head in order to clear it as she passed through.

Darkness closed in upon them when the wall slid closed. James made his glowing orb which provided ample light to see the passageway. Taking the lead, he followed it for several hundred feet, until it came to an end. There they found an old wooden ladder leading up out of sight, into the darkness above.

Jiron stepped toward the ladder. "Let me check it out." He disappeared into the darkness above while the others waited at the bottom. A minute passed and then from above they heard him say, "Come on up, it's safe."

James climbed up first with the girls following and Tinok bringing up the rear. Upon reaching the top, he found that they were in another deserted basement. He looked around as the rest made their way up, and saw Jiron at a door fiddling with the lock.

Coming to him, he asked, "Locked?"

Without halting what he was doing, Jiron said, "Yeah, but I should have it opened in a sec."

Jiron used two small, thin, metal tools on the lock. A moment later there was a 'click,' and Jiron opened the door.

"Good job," congratulated James.

"Thanks," he replied. Opening the door, Jiron stepped through, followed closely by James.

On the other side, they emerged into a deserted alley, wedged in tightly between two buildings. "Do you know where we are?" James asked.

"I think so. If I'm right, we aren't far from where we can get out of the city."

"I hope you're right," James said as he followed him down the alley.

Following the alley, they came to where it opened upon another, slightly larger one. Jiron held up his hand for them to wait as he peered around the corner. He then stepped into the larger alley and signaled for them to follow.

He headed left, hugging the side as they made their way carefully and quietly to where the alley intersected with a main thoroughfare. He had everyone stop and then motioned for James to come closer. "Look down there," he whispered.

Jiron directed him toward a gate. "Yeah?" he asked.

"Earlier when I was out, I saw some workmen repairing it," he explained. "I think they damaged it during the attack and may not have had the time to fix it. If we act quickly, we should be able to get through before anyone realizes we're no longer in our hideout back at the park."

"You may be right," James acknowledged. "Once they realize we're loose, we won't stand a chance of sneaking out." There didn't look to be any guards in the vicinity by the gate.

"No guards," Jiron said. "I think they're arrogant in their own superiority. They probably don't believe anyone would be foolhardy enough to try to sneak out with thousands of troops stationed around the city."

"What's on the other side of the gate?"

"A large courtyard that separates this gate from the one leading out of the city."

"What if that gate is shut and locked?" James asks.

"Last night they left it open," Jiron explained. "My guess is that they see no reason to keep it closed because there is no one to keep out."

"Yeah, who would be stupid enough to come visit?"

"Exactly," Jiron agreed. "Last night, there were horses picketed in the courtyard that we may be able to appropriate if they're still there."

"Alright," James said, "you sold me. Let's not spend the night here jabbering. Let's get the heck out of here!"

"Follow me," Jiron said as he took one last look around and then cautiously made his way toward the gate. The rest quickly followed until they were huddled by the gate. Jiron pulled and it swung open, squeaking slightly on rusty hinges.

He pulled it just far enough to allow them to squeeze through and held it there until everyone had made it to the other side. He followed the last person through and closed it again until it once more appeared shut.

James looked around the courtyard but the horses that Jiron had mentioned were no longer there. The courtyard was not completely empty either; four cook fires were spaced around the courtyard, groups of soldiers stood gathered around each. Pulling Jiron close, he said, "There is no way we're going to make it across without being seen."

"Maybe we need a distraction."

"Like what?"

"I don't know," Jiron shrugged, "what can you do?"

"How about a big explosion with lots of fire and noise?"

Jiron broke into a grin. "I think that will do."

“All right, you three wait here and I’ll be right back.” James slipped back out the gate and ran up the street several blocks where he entered a vacant building.

After several minutes, Jiron saw him coming back and held the gate open for him. “You okay?” he asked when he saw how he was not walking quite straight.

“The spell took a lot out of me,” he said, pausing before passing through the gate. “I should be okay in a little bit.” He then passed through. Jiron once more shut the gate.

They waited several minutes and nothing happened. They waited several more and still nothing happened.

Jiron glanced to James and asked “Are you sure you...”

Crumph!!!!

The concussion of the blast knocked them down and a giant plume of fire reached toward the sky. Several buildings surrounding the explosion collapsed from the sheer force of the blast. The soldiers in the courtyard were knocked off their feet and James heard cries of shock as they saw the sky light up with fire. Once they regained their feet, they raced off toward the sound of the explosion, leaving the courtyard empty.

“Damn!” Tinok said as the fireball arched high up to the sky.

“Let’s go,” James said and Jiron took the lead as they raced out into the courtyard. His legs were a little shaky but managed to keep up the pace. Debris hailed down upon them as they made for the gates; dirt and stones pelted them as they crossed the courtyard.

Delia cried out when a sizeable stone struck her left shoulder, knocking her to the ground.

Tinok came to her aid. “Are you okay?” he asked as he helped her to her feet.

“Not really, but I can make it,” she replied with determination as they hurried to follow after the others.

When they reached the gates, they discovered a section missing, allowing easy access to the outside. They passed through to the other side, where they paused momentarily as men raced toward the city from all over the countryside in response to the blast.

Staying close to the wall, they hid in the shadows as they worked their way away from the gates. Jiron grabbed James’ shoulder and said, “Look, over there.” He pointed to a section of the enemy’s camp off to the south.

Scanning the direction Jiron indicated, James saw several horses tied to a tree near a group of tents. ***Fortune!*** And they were saddled. A large campfire burned in a pit near them, bathing the entire area in light. They had to make their way through a portion of the camp in order to reach them.

“With everyone running to see what’s up in the city,” Jiron said, “we should be able to get the horses with little trouble.”

“Let’s hope so,” James said apprehensively. “If anyone’s looking when we enter the light, we could have problems.”

“We’ve got little choice,” Tinok said when he joined them. “We’ll never get far on foot.”

Turning to Tinok, James said, “Jiron and I will get the horses, you stay and protect the ladies until we return.”

He waited for Tinok’s nod, then he and Jiron raced for the horses. When they got close, they saw that there were seven horses. They slowed and approached more cautiously when they neared the area illuminated by the fire. They edged around the fringe of the light, trying to get as close to the horses before entering the light and risk being seen.

When they could hold off no longer, James scanned the area and saw that no one was in the vicinity. Signaling Jiron, they hurried over and began untying horses as fast as they could.

The horses made noise as they hurried about their work and all of a sudden, the flap of the closest tent opened and a man peeked out. “What are you doing with my horse?” he asked with an edge to his voice. He exited the tent and approached them. He wore a plain cowled robe with the hood thrown back revealing shoulder length red hair. His eyes were dark and James saw anger smoldering behind those eyes.

James glanced to Jiron and they came to the same decision. Jiron’s knives flashed in the firelight as they sprang to the ready. James took a stone from his pocket and casting his spell, unleashed the magic as he threw it at the approaching man.

The instant before the stone left James’ hand, the man flicked his wrist. When the stone neared him, it hit a barrier and ricocheted away into the night.

Startled by the ineffectiveness of the stone, James hesitated a moment, trying to understand what had just happened.

“The mage!” the man shouted, then his eyes got a calculating look.

Jiron launched himself at the man, knives flashing in a whirling pattern. As if he was dealing with an annoying fly, the man waved his hand.

James felt a prickling along his skin as he watched Jiron being lifted off the ground and thrown a dozen feet away. Understanding came, *He’s a mage too!* James directed his magic to the ground under the mage’s feet and let it flow.

Crumph!!!!

The ground exploded upwards with incredible force. When the dust cleared enough, James saw that the man still stood, untouched. A three foot diameter of ground remained undisturbed beneath him.

“Is that the best you can do?” the man asked with contempt, words heavy in accent. He swirled his hand and it glowed red then he flicked it at James. A red light left the hand and streaked toward him, striking him hard in the chest, knocking him backward to the ground.

As the mage made his way through the crater that surrounded him, he said to James, “I was expecting more of a challenge, how disappointing.”

James laid there unable to breathe, gasping as he tried to take in a breath. He saw a knife fly through the air out of the dark toward the mage, but it hit an invisible protective shield and bounced harmlessly away.

Once the mage cleared the crater, he gestured with both hands while staring intently at James. Suddenly, James' legs cramped. He felt muscles knot and twist bringing much pain. He cried out and in desperation cast a spell, one he used many times back home, role playing. Such was the power of the spell that it used the remaining power within him and left him weak, barely able to move.

The approaching mage chuckled as he saw a clear, shimmering bubble appear, floating in the air between them. "What's that suppose to do?"

He cast another spell and the bubble sparkled as if fireflies were contained within. The mage's face lost its look of confidence and began to exhibit worry. The sparkles increased in luminosity as the man's face slowly turned to a look of confusion.

Jiron came to James' side. "Are you okay?"

Exhausted from the spell, he gasped, "Will be." The effect of the mage's earlier spell dissipated and the pain in his legs subsided. Jiron turned to the mage and with knives ready. James grabbed his arm as he started toward the mage, stopping him.

"Don't touch him or the bubble."

"Why?" Jiron asked.

Shaking his head, he replied, "No time to explain, we've got to get out of here. Now!" he shouted, then lapsed into unconsciousness and sagged to the ground.

Jiron turned to the mage who was shaking his head with a look of horror as he stared into the bubble; the sparks within continuously grew in size and intensity. "No!" he cried in terror, suddenly dropping to the ground. The bubble became brighter and brighter by the second.

From out of the darkness, Tinok and the girls came running toward them. "Get the horses!" Jiron shouted as they approached.

"What's that?" Cassie asked as she made to approach the bubble.

"Get away from it!" Jiron yelled. "James said not to touch it."

He hollered to Tinok. "Help me get him on a horse." When he came over, they lifted James up and quickly secured him onto the horse with some rope.

Delia mounted and then looked back to the mage who by now whimpered in terror. His hair, once a vivid red had turned grey. He began to shrivel in upon himself like a grape having spent too much time in the sun.

Jiron mounted and said, "Tinok, stay next to James and make sure he doesn't fall." He turned his horse toward the southwest. "Stay close and maybe we can survive this." He glanced over to the bubble; the sparks had grown until they now filled the entire bubble with a white light whose intensity was painful to look upon. The mage on the ground no longer moved and appeared dead.

Kicking his horse in the side, Jiron rode through the camp, the others close behind. Out of the darkness, several men suddenly appeared. Holding on tight, he rode straight through them, knocking them over. He looked back toward the bubble, and the light was now extremely bright, illuminating a large portion of the camp. He saw dozens of men running toward it, one of whom is wearing a cowed robe just like the mage had. They raced through the tent area and reached the far side of the camp.

They passed soldiers but none seemed to notice, all eyes were turned to the now brilliantly bright light. The guards at the fringe of the camp took notice of their approach and command them to stop. A crossbow bolt flew past, nearly striking Tinok as they raced through. They fled into the dark grasslands to the southwest of town, leaving the guards behind. They didn't get far before...

Schtk!

They look back at the sound. Everyone held their breath in anticipation of what may happen. Then...

Boooooooooom!

A giant explosion engulfed the camp, ten times the force of what they experienced when that building blew earlier. They felt the concussion wave as it washed over them. Fortunately they were far enough away that it didn't hit them with enough force to do anything, just caused their horses to miss a step. They paused and looked back at the camp, or rather what was left of it.

Reaching toward the sky was a massive tower of flame, the roar from which could be heard even though they were now far from it. Its base covered most of the camp. It was unlikely anything survived.

They sat in awe as the flame punched through the clouds and then slowly dissipated, slowly sinking back to the ground.

"By the gods!" Cassie exclaimed.

They glanced at the unconscious James and then to each other. Tinok asked, "Just what have we gotten ourselves into?"

"I don't know," Jiron replied, shaking his head as he glanced again at James. "I don't know." Kicking his horse, he led them out into the grasslands.